

# PS3390G: Misinformation and Conspiracy Theories

Department of Political Science – Western University, Winter 2023  
Thursday 2:30-4:30pm, SSC 3026

Instructor: Dr. Mathieu Turgeon (mturgeo4@uwo.ca)  
Office hours: Monday 12-2pm or by appointment

## Course description

This course offers a close look at the varying forms of misinformation (i.e., wrong information) like fake news, with a special attention given to conspiracy theories (as we will see, there are subtle differences and not all conspiracy theories and rumours are misinformation). It explores why people accept, hold, and communicate falsehoods, unsupported beliefs, rumours, fake news or conspiracy theories, by examining the psychological and political determinants of misinformation and conspiracy theory beliefs. The course also addresses the consequences associated with holding misinformation and conspiracy theory beliefs, for the self and the society at large. The course also asks how unsupported beliefs can be corrected and how to inoculate people against such falsehoods. We end by discussing misinformation and conspiracy theories about climate change and health, two important issues with significant individual and societal consequences.

## Class organization

Classes will start with a lecture and be followed by class activities, organized in small groups (see below). Six times during the semester, classes will start with a short quiz about the assigned readings (see below).

## Course text

The required text for this course is:

Van Prooijen, J.W., 2018. *The psychology of conspiracy theories*. Routledge.

The book can be acquired at the bookstore or online at the following [link](#).

Other readings are available electronically through Western Libraries.

## Course assessment

Students will be assessed as follows:

- **Class participation (15%):** students will be placed into small groups of 4-5 students. Each group will be responsible to prepare 3 questions for class discussion for each week they are responsible. The questions should be posted at least 24 hours before class meets in the Forums on OWL, that is, no later than Wednesday at 2:30pm. The

questions have to be related to the current week's assigned readings. They should address theoretical, methodological and/or empirical aspects of the readings. Questions can also be about the implications for individuals or society at large. I will select 5 of these questions and give students 20 minutes to prepare answers in class. Then, I will randomly ask groups to present their answers. Each group will only have to answer one question per class. See the Excel spreadsheet in the Resources tab on OWL to learn about your group members and the weeks you are responsible to prepare questions for class discussion.

- **5 reading quizzes each worth 3%, total 15%:** I expect students to do all the required readings. To ensure that students keep up with the readings, I will apply six reading quizzes during the semester. Quizzes will take place at the very beginning of class. For your final grade, I will count your five highest scores. There will be no make-up for quizzes under any circumstances. Don't be late!
- **Individual term paper 45%:** Students are required to produce one final essay of about 2500 words. The essay should identify a conspiracy theory from the Canadian landscape or from abroad. The essay should consist of four parts. The first part serves to define the conspiracy theory selected (and its possible variations). Students need to demonstrate, following the definitions of conspiracy theories covered in class, why it constitutes a conspiracy theory. Second, students should identify how the selected conspiracy theory is being circulated (or has been circulated). Students will need to provide as much detail as possible about the means used to circulate said conspiracy theory. In the third part, students should address the possible consequences of believing in such conspiracy theory from an individual perspective but also for society at large. Finally, students should propose concrete means to combat the spread of the conspiracy theory and how to correct the beliefs of those who believe in it. Students should submit a first draft of the paper on OWL by February 9 (11:55pm) that includes a complete version of the first part, that is, the identification of the conspiracy theory selected, and a plan for the other three parts of the essay. This first draft is worth 15% of the final grade. Students are encouraged to use a mix of sources, including academic papers and books but also any other relevant sources like news stories, documentaries, podcasts, etc. Note, however, that the final paper should rely on a minimum of 6 academic sources, excluding the ones from the assigned readings. The final version of the paper is due on OWL no later than April 6 (11:55pm). No late essay will be accepted. The final version of the paper is worth 30% of the final grade.
- **Final exam (25%):** Students will be given a cumulative exam during final exam week. See the final exam schedule from the Registrar's office. The exam will consist of five short-answer questions.

## Topics and readings

### Week #1 (January 12): Course Introduction

Review of syllabus and class organization.

## **Week #2 (January 19): Political misinformation**

1. Jerit, J. and Zhao, Y. 2020. "Political misinformation." *Annual Review of Political Science*, 23(1), pp. 77-94.
2. Vraga, E.K. and Bode, L., 2020. "Defining misinformation and understanding its bounded nature: Using expertise and evidence for describing misinformation." *Political Communication*, 37(1), pp.136-144.

## **Week #3 (January 26): Fake news and rumours**

1. Tandoc Jr, E.C., Lim, Z.W. and Ling, R., 2018. "Defining 'fake news' A typology of scholarly definitions." *Digital journalism*, 6(2), pp.137-153.
2. Berinsky, A.J., 2017. Rumors and health care reform: Experiments in political misinformation. *British journal of political science*, 47(2), pp.241-262.

## **Week #4 (February 2): Conspiracy theories**

1. Douglas, K.M., Uscinski, J.E., Sutton, R.M., Cichocka, A., Nefes, T., Ang, C.S. and Deravi, F., 2019. "Understanding conspiracy theories." *Political Psychology*, 40, pp.3-35.
2. Prooijen, J.W., 2018. *The psychology of conspiracy theories*. Routledge. Chapter 1.

## **Week #5 (February 9): Social media and misinformation**

1. Freelon, D. and Wells, C., 2020. "Disinformation as political communication." *Political Communication*, 37(2), pp.145-156.
2. Rhodes, S.C., 2022. "Filter bubbles, echo chambers, and fake news: how social media conditions individuals to be less critical of political misinformation." *Political Communication*, 39(1), pp.1-22.
3. Enders, A.M., Uscinski, J.E., Seelig, M.I., Klofstad, C.A., Wuchty, S., Funchion, J.R., Murthi, M.N., Premaratne, K. and Stoler, J., 2021. "The relationship between social media use and beliefs in conspiracy theories and misinformation." *Political behavior*, pp.1-24.

## **Week #6 (February 16): Who believes in misinformation?**

1. Flynn, D.J., Nyhan, B. and Reifler, J. 2017. "The nature and origins of misperceptions: Understanding false and unsupported beliefs about politics." *Advances in Political Psychology*, 38, pp.127-150.
2. Van Bavel, J.J. and Pereira, A., 2018. "The partisan brain: An identity-based model of political belief." *Trends in cognitive sciences*, 22(3), pp.213-224.
3. Pennycook, G. and Rand, D.G., 2021. "The psychology of fake news." *Trends in cognitive sciences*, 25(5), pp.388-402.

## **Week #7 (February 23): \*\*\*Spring reading week. Enjoy the break!\*\*\***

## **Week #8 (March 2): Who believes in conspiracy theories? I**

1. Prooijen, J.W., 2018. *The psychology of conspiracy theories*. Routledge. Chapters 2-5.

### **Week #9 (March 9): Who believes in conspiracy theories? II**

1. Oliver, J.E. and Wood, T.J., 2014. "Conspiracy theories and the paranoid style (s) of mass opinion." *American Journal of Political Science*, 58(4), pp.952-966.
2. Uscinski, J., Enders, A., Diekmann, A., Funchion, J., Klofstad, C., Kuebler, S., Murthi, M., Premaratne, K., Seelig, M., Verdier, D. and Wuchty, S., 2022. "The psychological and political correlates of conspiracy theory beliefs." *Scientific reports*, 12(1), pp.1-12.
3. Brashier, N.M., 2022. "Do conspiracy theorists think too much or too little?" *Current Opinion in Psychology*, p.101504.

### **Week #10 (March 16): The consequences of misinformation and conspiracy theories**

1. van Prooijen, J.W., 2022. "Psychological Benefits of Believing Conspiracy Theories." *Current Opinion in Psychology*, p.101352.
2. Jolley, D., Marques, M.D. and Cookson, D., 2022. "Shining a spotlight on the dangerous consequences of conspiracy theories." *Current Opinion in Psychology*, p.101363.
3. Uscinski, J., Enders, A.M., Klofstad, C. and Stoler, J., 2022. "Cause and Effect: On the Antecedents and Consequences of Conspiracy Theory Beliefs." *Current Opinion in Psychology*, p.101364.

### **Week #11 (March 23): Correcting misinformation and conspiracy theory beliefs**

1. Ecker, U.K., Lewandowsky, S., Cook, J., Schmid, P., Fazio, L.K., Brashier, N., Kendeou, P., Vraga, E.K. and Amazeen, M.A., 2022. "The psychological drivers of misinformation belief and its resistance to correction." *Nature Reviews Psychology*, 1(1), pp.13-29.
2. Nyhan, B., 2021. "Why the backfire effect does not explain the durability of political misperceptions." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 118(15), p.e1912440117.
3. Compton, J., van der Linden, S., Cook, J. and Basol, M., 2021. "Inoculation theory in the post-truth era: Extant findings and new frontiers for contested science, misinformation, and conspiracy theories." *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, 15(6), p.e12602.
4. Prooijen, J.W., 2018. *The psychology of conspiracy theories*. Routledge. Chapter 6.

### **Week #12 (March 30): Climate change misinformation and conspiracy theories**

1. Druckman, J.N. and McGrath, M.C., 2019. "The evidence for motivated reasoning in climate change preference formation." *Nature Climate Change*, 9(2), pp.111-119.
2. Biddlestone, M., Azevedo, F. and van der Linden, S., 2022. "Climate of conspiracy: A meta-analysis of the consequences of belief in conspiracy theories about climate change." *Current Opinion in Psychology*, p.101390.
3. Winter, K., Hornsey, M.J., Pummerer, L. and Sassenberg, K., 2022. "Anticipating and defusing the role of conspiracy beliefs in shaping opposition to wind farms." *Nature Energy*, pp.1-8.

### **Week #13 (April 6): Health misinformation and conspiracy theories**

1. Bierwiazzonek, K., Gundersen, A.B. and Kunst, J.R., 2022. "The role of conspiracy beliefs for COVID-19 health responses: A meta-analysis." *Current opinion in psychology*, p.101346.

2. Pertwee, E., Simas, C. and Larson, H.J., 2022. "An epidemic of uncertainty: rumors, conspiracy theories and vaccine hesitancy." *Nature medicine*, 28(3), pp.456-459.
3. Krishna, A. and Thompson, T.L., 2021. "Misinformation about health: a review of health communication and misinformation scholarship." *American behavioral scientist*, 65(2), pp.316-332.

## **APPENDIX TO UNDERGRADUATE COURSE OUTLINES DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE**

### **Prerequisite checking - the student's responsibility**

"Unless you have either the requisites for this course or written special permission from your Dean to enroll in it, you may be removed from this course and it will be deleted from your record. This decision may not be appealed. You will receive no adjustment to your fees in the event that you are dropped from a course for failing to have the necessary prerequisites."

### **Essay course requirements**

With the exception of 1000-level courses, most courses in the Department of Political Science are essay courses. Total written assignments (excluding examinations) will be at least 3,000 words in Politics 1020E, at least 5,000 words in a full course numbered 2000 or above, and at least 2,500 words in a half course numbered 2000 or above.

### **Use of Personal Response Systems ("Clickers")**

"Personal Response Systems ("clickers") may be used in some classes. If clickers are to be used in a class, it is the responsibility of the student to ensure that the device is activated and functional. Students must see their instructor if they have any concerns about whether the clicker is malfunctioning. Students must use only their own clicker. If clicker records are used to compute a portion of the course grade:

- the use of somebody else's clicker in class constitutes a scholastic offence,
- the possession of a clicker belonging to another student will be interpreted as an attempt to commit a scholastic offence."

**Security and Confidentiality of Student Work** (refer to current *Western Academic Calendar* <http://www.westerncalendar.uwo.ca/>)

**"Submitting or Returning Student Assignments, Tests and Exams** - All student assignments, tests and exams will be handled in a secure and confidential manner. Particularly in this respect, leaving student work unattended in public areas for pickup is not permitted."

### **Duplication of work**

Undergraduate students who submit similar assignments on closely related topics in two different courses must obtain the consent of both instructors prior to the submission of the assignment. If prior approval is not obtained, each instructor reserves the right not to accept the assignment.

### **Grade adjustments**

In order to ensure that comparable standards are applied in political science courses, the Department may require instructors to adjust final marks to conform to Departmental guidelines.

### **Academic Offences**

"Scholastic offences are taken seriously and students are directed to read the appropriate policy, specifically, the definition of what constitutes a Scholastic Offence, at the following Web site: [http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic\\_policies/appeals/scholastic\\_discipline\\_undergrad.pdf](http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic_policies/appeals/scholastic_discipline_undergrad.pdf)

### **Submission of Course Requirements**

ESSAYS, ASSIGNMENTS, TAKE-HOME EXAMS MUST BE SUBMITTED ACCORDING TO PROCEDURES SPECIFIED BY YOUR INSTRUCTOR (I.E., IN CLASS, DURING OFFICE HOURS, TA'S OFFICE HOURS) OR UNDER THE INSTRUCTOR'S OFFICE DOOR.

**THE MAIN OFFICE DOES NOT DATE-STAMP OR ACCEPT ANY OF THE ABOVE.**

### **Attendance Regulations for Examinations**

EXAMINATIONS/ATTENDANCE (Sen. Min. Feb.4/49, May 23/58, S.94, S.3538, S.3632, S.04-097) A student is entitled to be examined in courses in which registration is maintained, subject to the following limitations: 1) A student may be debarred from writing the final examination for failure to maintain satisfactory academic standing throughout the year. 2) Any student who, in the opinion of the instructor, is absent too frequently from class or laboratory periods in any course will be reported to the Dean of the Faculty offering the course (after due warning has been given). On the recommendation of the Department concerned, and with the permission of the Dean of that Faculty, the student will be debarred from taking the regular examination in the course. The Dean of the Faculty offering the course will communicate that decision to the Dean of the Faculty of registration.

## **Absences from Final Examinations**

If you miss the Final Exam, please contact the Academic Counselling office of your Faculty of Registration as soon as you are able to do so. They will assess your eligibility to write the Special Examination (the name given by the University to a makeup Final Exam).

You may also be eligible to write the Special Exam if you are in a "Multiple Exam Situation" (e.g., more than 2 exams in 23-hour period, more than 3 exams in a 47-hour period).

**Note:** Missed work can *only* be excused through one of the mechanisms above. Being asked not to attend an in-person course requirement due to potential COVID-19 symptoms is **not** sufficient on its own. Students should check the Western website to see what directives for Covid are to be followed. Western has been and will continue to follow directives established by the Middlesex-London Health Unit. That directive will state whether students should or should not come to campus/class and any other requirements (e.g., masks are mandatory). Please check on your own and do not email the instructor, the Department Undergraduate Advisor/Coordinator or the Faculty of Social Science Academic Counselling Office.

## **Accommodation and Accessibility**

### **Religious Accommodation**

When a course requirement conflicts with a religious holiday that requires an absence from the University or prohibits certain activities, students should request accommodation for their absence in writing at least two weeks prior to the holiday to the course instructor and/or the

Academic Counselling office of their Faculty of Registration. Please consult University's list of recognized religious holidays (updated annually) at

<https://multiculturalcalendar.com/ecal/index.php?s=c-univwo>.

## **Accommodation Policies**

Students with disabilities are encouraged to contact Accessible Education, which provides recommendations for accommodation based on medical documentation or psychological and cognitive testing. The policy on Academic Accommodation for Students with Disabilities can be found at:

[https://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic\\_policies/appeals/Academic Accommodation\\_disabilities.pdf](https://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic_policies/appeals/Academic_Accommodation_disabilities.pdf).

## **Academic Policies**

The website for Registrarial Services is <http://www.registrar.uwo.ca>.

In accordance with policy,

[https://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/policies\\_procedures/section1/mapp113.pdf](https://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/policies_procedures/section1/mapp113.pdf),

the centrally administered e-mail account provided to students will be considered the individual's official university e-mail address. It is the responsibility of the account holder to ensure that e-mail received from the University at their official university address is attended to in a timely manner.

During exams/tests/quizzes, no electronic devices (e.g. a phone, laptop, iPad) are allowed and must be powered down and stored out of reach.

**Scholastic offences** are taken seriously and students are directed to read the appropriate policy, specifically, the definition of what constitutes a Scholastic Offence, at the following Web site:

[http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic\\_policies/appeals/scholastic\\_discipline\\_undergrad.pdf](http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic_policies/appeals/scholastic_discipline_undergrad.pdf).

All required papers may be subject to submission for textual similarity review to the commercial plagiarism detection software under license to the University for the detection of plagiarism. All papers submitted for such checking will be included as source documents in the reference database for the purpose of detecting plagiarism of papers subsequently submitted to the system. Use of the service is subject to the licensing agreement, currently between The University of Western Ontario and Turnitin.com (<http://www.turnitin.com>).

Computer-marked multiple-choice tests and exams may be subject to submission for similarity review by software that will check for unusual coincidences in answer patterns that may indicate cheating.

If a course uses remote proctoring, please be advised that you are consenting to the use of this software and acknowledge that you will be required to provide **personal information** (including



some biometric data) and the session will be **recorded**. Completion of a course with remote proctoring will require you to have a reliable internet connection and a device that meets the technical requirements for this service. More information about this remote proctoring service, including technical requirements, is available on Western's Remote Proctoring website at:

<https://remoteproctoring.uwo.ca>.

## Support Services

Please visit the Social Science Academic Counselling webpage for information on adding/dropping courses, academic considerations for absences, appeals, exam conflicts, and many other academic related matters: [Academic Counselling - Western University \(uwo.ca\)](https://www.uwo.ca/academic_counselling/)

Students who are in emotional/mental distress should refer to Mental Health@Western (<https://uwo.ca/health/>) for a complete list of options about how to obtain help.

Western is committed to reducing incidents of gender-based and sexual violence and providing compassionate support to anyone who has gone through these traumatic events. If you have experienced sexual or gender-based violence (either recently or in the past), you will find information about support services for survivors, including emergency contacts at

[https://www.uwo.ca/health/student\\_support/survivor\\_support/get-help.html](https://www.uwo.ca/health/student_support/survivor_support/get-help.html).

To connect with a case manager or set up an appointment, please contact [support@uwo.ca](mailto:support@uwo.ca).

Please contact the course instructor if you require lecture or printed material in an alternate format or if any other arrangements can make this course more accessible to you. You may also wish to contact Accessible Education at

[http://academicsupport.uwo.ca/accessible\\_education/index.html](http://academicsupport.uwo.ca/accessible_education/index.html)

if you have any questions regarding accommodations.

Learning-skills counsellors at the Learning Development and Success Centre (<https://learning.uwo.ca>) are ready to help you improve your learning skills. They offer presentations on strategies for improving time management, multiple-choice exam preparation/writing, textbook reading, and more. Individual support is offered throughout the Fall/Winter terms in the drop-in Learning Help Centre, and year-round through individual counselling.

Western University is committed to a thriving campus as we deliver our courses in the mixed model of both virtual and face-to-face formats. We encourage you to check out the Digital Student Experience website to manage your academics and well-being: <https://www.uwo.ca/se/digital/>.

Additional student-run support services are offered by the USC, <https://westernusc.ca/services/>.

## Plagiarism:

Students must write their essays and assignments in their own words. Whenever students take an idea, or a passage from another author, they must acknowledge their debt both by using quotation marks where appropriate and by proper referencing such as footnotes or citations. Plagiarism is a major academic offence." (see Scholastic Offence Policy in the Western Academic Calendar).

**Plagiarism Checking:** "All required papers may be subject to submission for textual similarity review to the commercial plagiarism detection software under license to the University for the detection of plagiarism. All papers submitted for such checking will be included as source documents in the reference database for the purpose of detecting plagiarism of papers subsequently submitted to the system. Use of the service is subject to the licensing agreement, currently between The University of Western Ontario and Turnitin.com (<http://www.turnitin.com>)."

**Multiple-choice tests/exams:** "Computer-marked multiple-choice tests and/or exams may be subject to submission for similarity review by software that will check for unusual coincidences in answer patterns that may indicate cheating."

Note: Information excerpted and quoted above are Senate regulations from the Handbook of Scholarship and Academic Policy. [https://www.uwo.ca/univsec/academic\\_policies/index.html](https://www.uwo.ca/univsec/academic_policies/index.html)

### PLAGIARISM\*

In writing scholarly papers, you must keep firmly in mind the need to avoid plagiarism. Plagiarism is the unacknowledged borrowing of another writer's words or ideas. Different forms of writing require different types of acknowledgement. The following rules pertain to the acknowledgements necessary in academic papers.

#### **A. In using another writer's words, you must both place the words in quotation marks and acknowledge that the words are those of another writer.**

You are plagiarizing if you use a sequence of words, a sentence or a paragraph taken from other writers without acknowledging them to be theirs. Acknowledgement is indicated either by (1) mentioning the author and work from which the words are borrowed in the text of your paper; or by (2) placing a footnote number at the end of the quotation in your text, and including a correspondingly numbered footnote at the bottom of the page (or in a separate reference section at the end of your essay). This footnote should indicate author, title of the work, place and date of publication, and page number.

Method (2) given above is usually preferable for academic essays because it provides the reader with more information about your sources and leaves your text uncluttered with parenthetical and tangential references. In either case words taken from another author must be enclosed in quotation marks or set off from your text by single spacing and indentation in such a way that they cannot be mistaken for your own words. Note that you cannot avoid indicating quotation simply by changing a word or phrase in a sentence or paragraph which is not your own.

**B. In adopting other writers' ideas, you must acknowledge that they are theirs.**

You are plagiarizing if you adopt, summarize, or paraphrase other writers' trains of argument, ideas or sequences of ideas without acknowledging their authorship according to the method of acknowledgement given in 'A' above. Since the words are your own, they need not be enclosed in quotation marks. Be certain, however, that the words you use are entirely your own; where you must use words or phrases from your source, these should be enclosed in quotation marks, as in 'A' above.

Clearly, it is possible for you to formulate arguments or ideas independently of another writer who has expounded the same ideas, and whom you have not read. Where you got your ideas is the important consideration here. Do not be afraid to present an argument or idea without acknowledgement to another writer, if you have arrived at it entirely independently. Acknowledge it if you have derived it from a source outside your own thinking on the subject.

In short, use of acknowledgements and, when necessary, quotation marks is necessary to distinguish clearly between what is yours and what is not. Since the rules have been explained to you, if you fail to make this distinction your instructor very likely will do so for you, and they will be forced to regard your omission as intentional literary theft. Plagiarism is a serious offence which may result in a student's receiving an 'F' in a course or, in extreme cases in their suspension from the University.

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Adopted by the council of the Faculty of Social Science, October, 1970; approved by the Dept. of History August 13, 1991