

The End of the World

Conspiracies and the Paranormal in America (Part II)

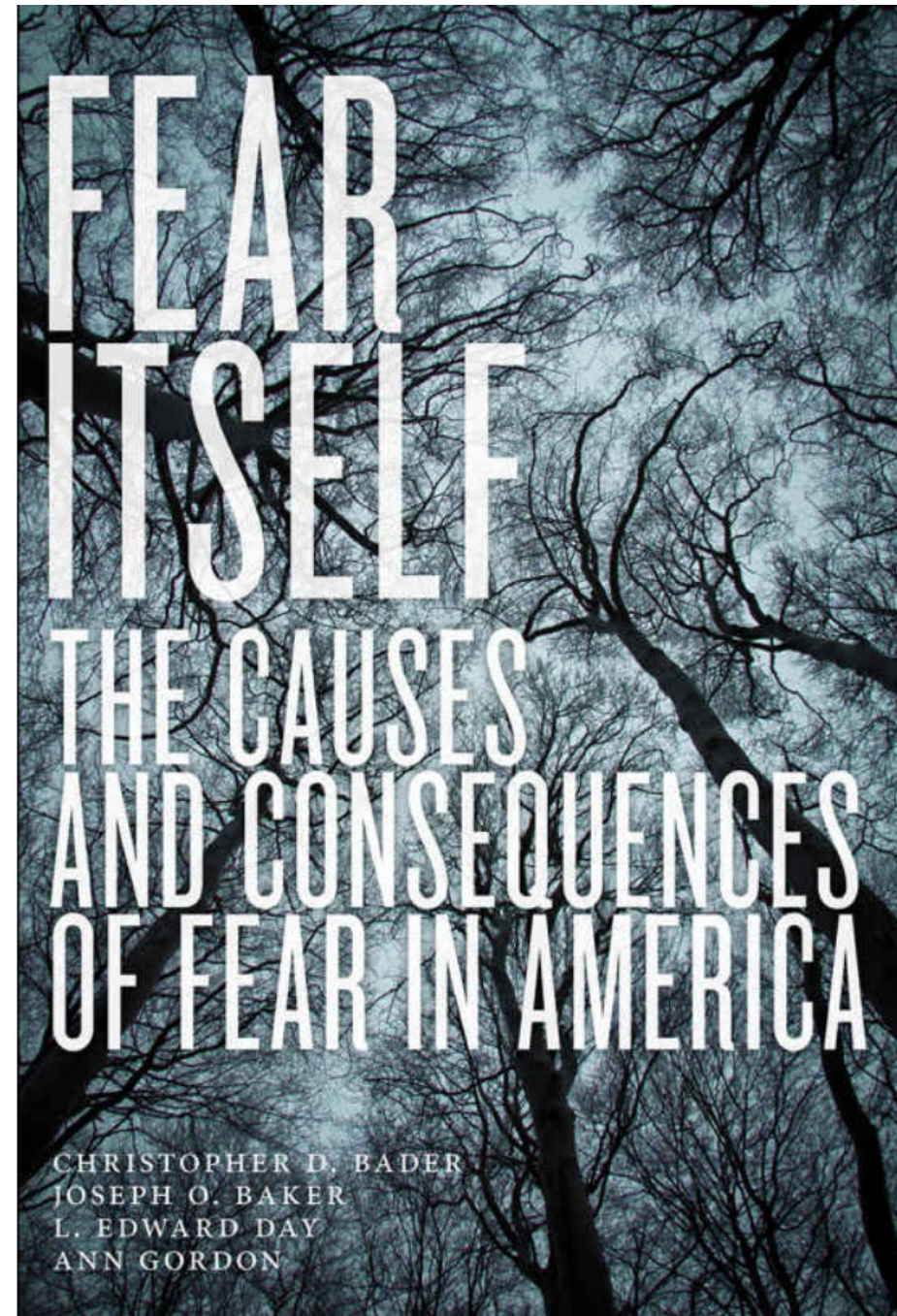


Week 5 Lecture | Professor Crews
RELS 357 W

As Christopher Bader, Joseph Baker, L. Edward Day, and Ann Gordon make clear in their 2020 book *Fear Itself: The Causes and Consequences of Fear in America*, researchers are just now beginning to gain a better understanding of precisely how fear shapes and informs American cultural beliefs and actions.

The underlying research in the book comes from the annual Chapman University Survey of American Fears (2014-2019), one of the most in-depth sociological study to date looking at a wide range of American fears, what informs these fears, and how these beliefs are affected by everything from race and gender to social media usage and paranormal beliefs.

As they note in the introduction, the goal of the study was to understand “the patterns and consequences of fear” and “what kinds of Americans are afraid of certain things and how those fears are related to other beliefs and behaviors.”



We have already explored some of the initial findings about fear in America, so today I want to turn to the links between fear, conspiracy theories, and the paranormal. As our authors suggest, there are powerful links between fear and conspiratorial thinking, a dynamic amplified by belief in the paranormal and evil. This constellation of ideas is referred to by our authors as **conspiratorial Gnosticism**.

Some of you may be familiar with the Gnostics and Gnosticism from learning about early Christianity and the so-called Gnostic Gospels, a series of ancient religious texts discovered in Egypt in the 20th century.

“For our purposes, the defining characteristic of Gnosticism was its focus on the discovery of *hidden* knowledge and hidden “Truth,” a perspective that describes the conspiratorial mindset.

As our authors suggest, “The designation of a set of ideas as a “conspiracy theory” necessarily marks the belief system as deviant, unconventional, and subcultural. Something effectively given this name is stigmatized knowledge.”

A moral panic is similar to a conspiracy theory except that the beliefs are held by those in power, rather than by stigmatized outsiders, highlighting the importance of who has social power.

Our authors outline 4 key characteristics of what they call **Conspiratorial Gnosticism**:

- Conspiracy theories contain a “kernel of truth” which makes them appear more legitimate.
- A conspiratorial worldview allows you to see “hidden Truth” and understand the story behind the story.
- Conspiracy “spirit guides” present a complex web of hidden truths that provides a new social identity.
- Conspiracy theorists must be on the defensive against plots and evil forces that seek to silence them.

The authors of *Fear Itself* sum up this archetypal conspiracy narrative as follows:

“What you think you know and have been told about the world is an illusion. This is the Great Truth. Everywhere, talking heads and tweeting twits are spinning lies, denying Truth, and trying to advance their own evil agenda. But once you know the Truth, deceptions hiding in plain sight are revealed. Wake up! Fight back!! Otherwise, the unthinkable will happen, and everything you know and love will be destroyed. The Awakened are our only hope.”

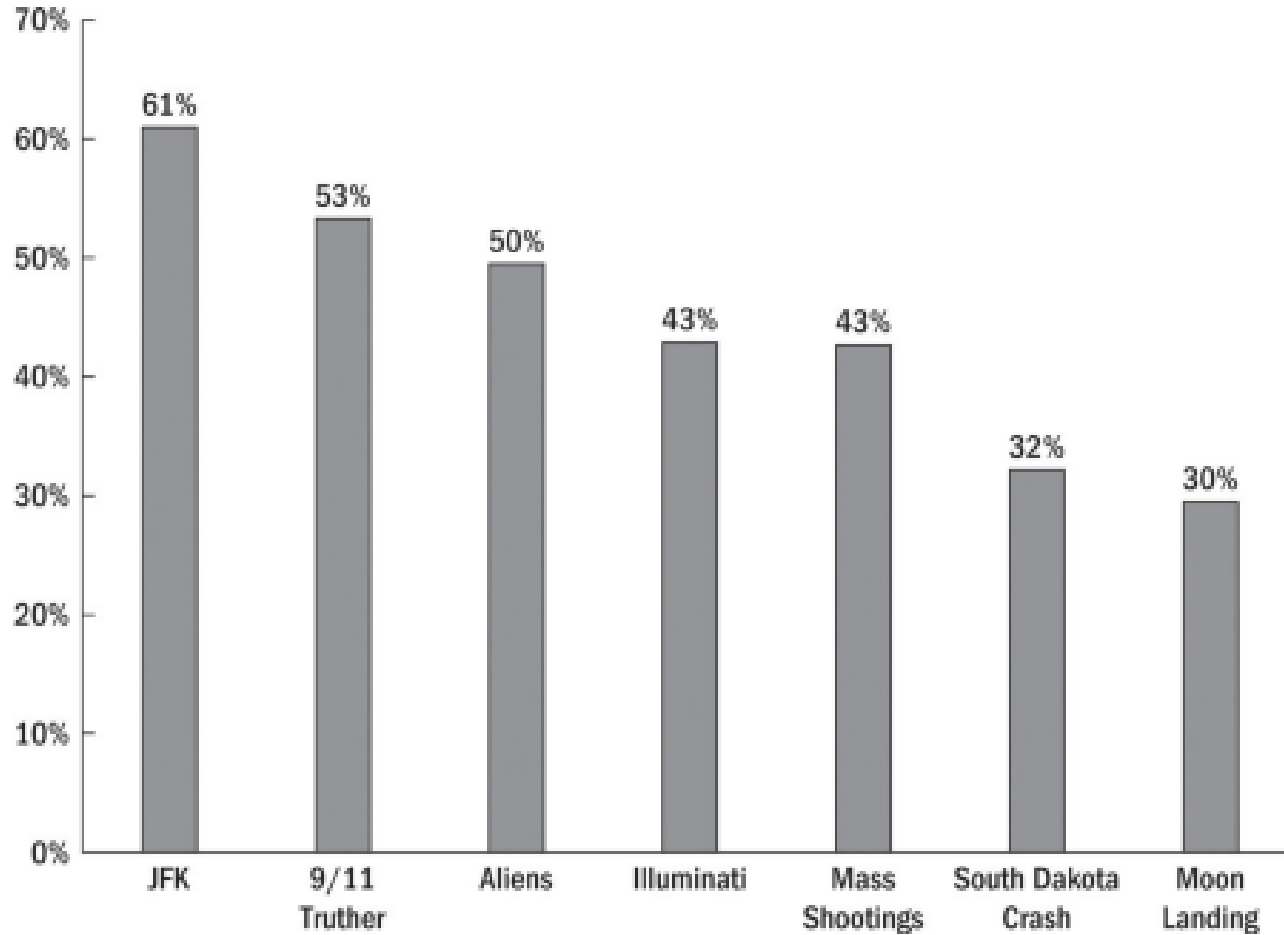
All of us are familiar with some of the most popular conspiracies, such as UFOs and JFK's assassination, but as our authors suggest, the depth of conspiratorial belief in American is strongly tied to our levels of fear and our underlying belief systems, most clearly those involving religious evil and the paranormal.

As our authors note, “The popularity of conspiracy theories is at least partially due to the fact that they are effective cultural schemas for *making sense of the world and providing an identity narrative of dignity and moral action.*”

This is especially true for the die-hard conspiracy theorist who believes they alone have the “Truth” and everyone else has been duped into believing lies and misinformation, so much so that it is virtually impossible to break through the conspiracy bubble they have created around themselves. Our authors describe this as a self-sealing monologic where “the absence of evidence is evidence of the power of the conspirators. There is no escape from such reasoning.”

Perhaps most importantly, the authors suggest the issue in American is no longer if we believe in conspiracies, but rather which conspiracies we believe. As the PBS Frontline documentary for this week suggests, we are the United States of Conspiracy. The authors of *Fear Itself* called this Conspiracy Nation.

Conspiracy Nation



As the authors note, more than half (50%) of survey respondents believed in 4 or more conspiracies. 16% believed in all 7 conspiracies, while 24% rejected all 7.

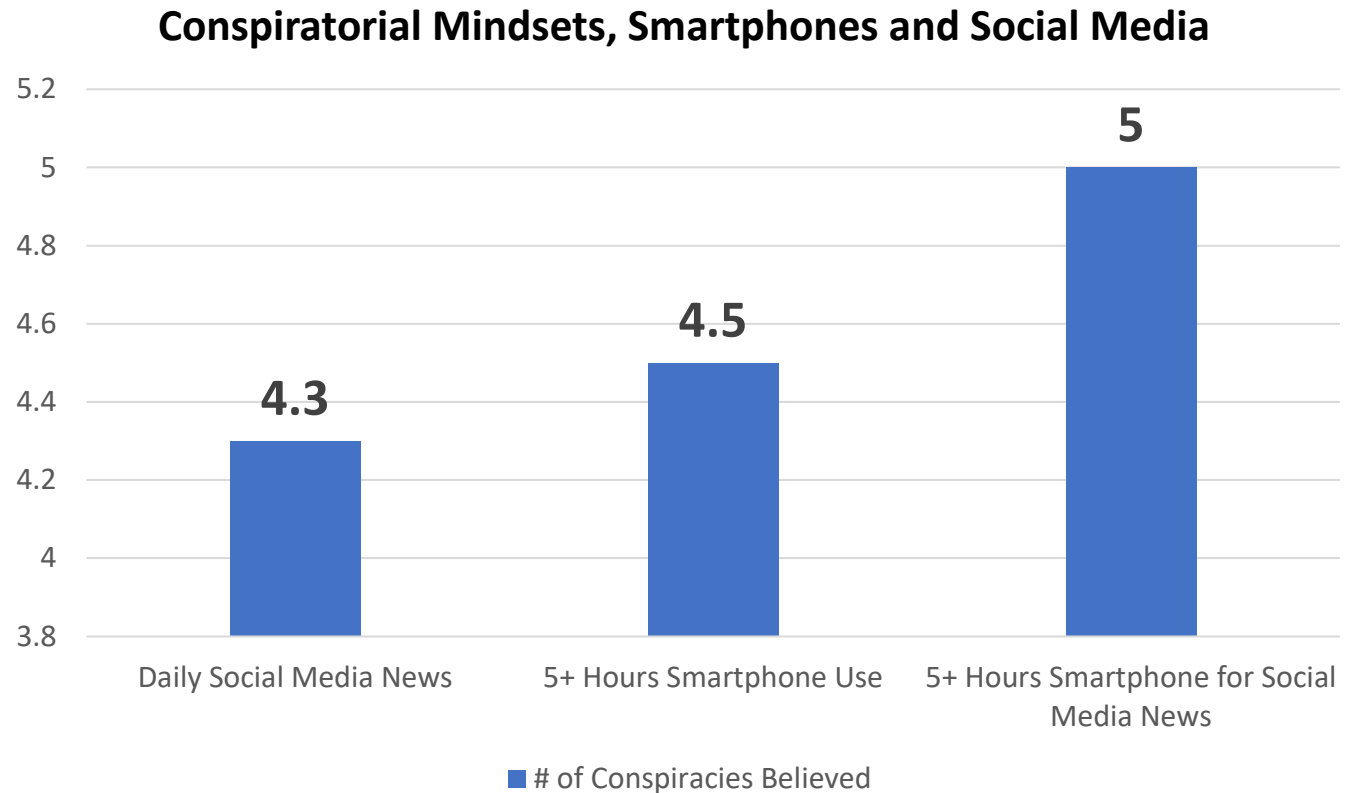
Those with high levels of fear were most susceptible to conspiratorial thinking, with a full 77% of those with high levels of fear believing in the fake South Dakota crash.

“It is quite clear that there is a tight, intimate connection between being fearful and being conspiracy-oriented.”

“The government is concealing what it knows about....” (2018 Survey of American Fears)

Media consumption trends are another important factor in conspiracy theories and fear. Americans who regularly watch daytime talk shows and crime dramas, and consumer hours of news via smartphones and social media, are both more fearful and more prone to conspiratorial thinking.

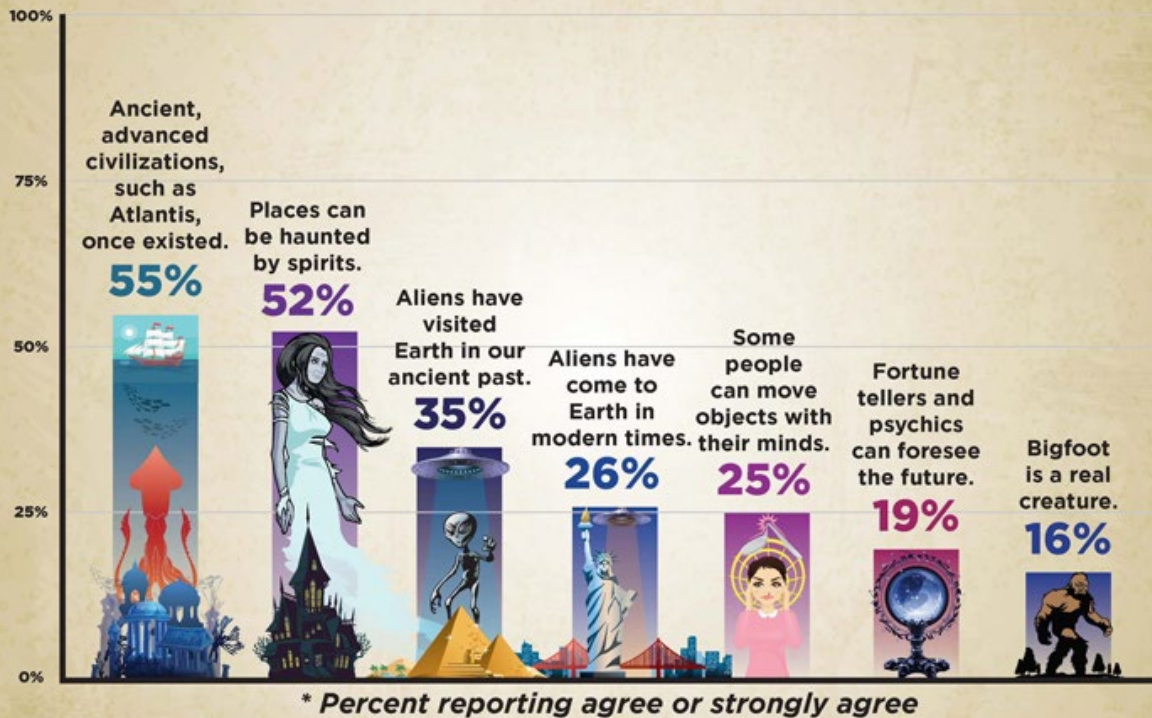
“Although we hate to sound like grumpy Luddites griping about “kids these days,” put your damn phone down and log off Facebook! It is bad for your brain; democracy, too.”



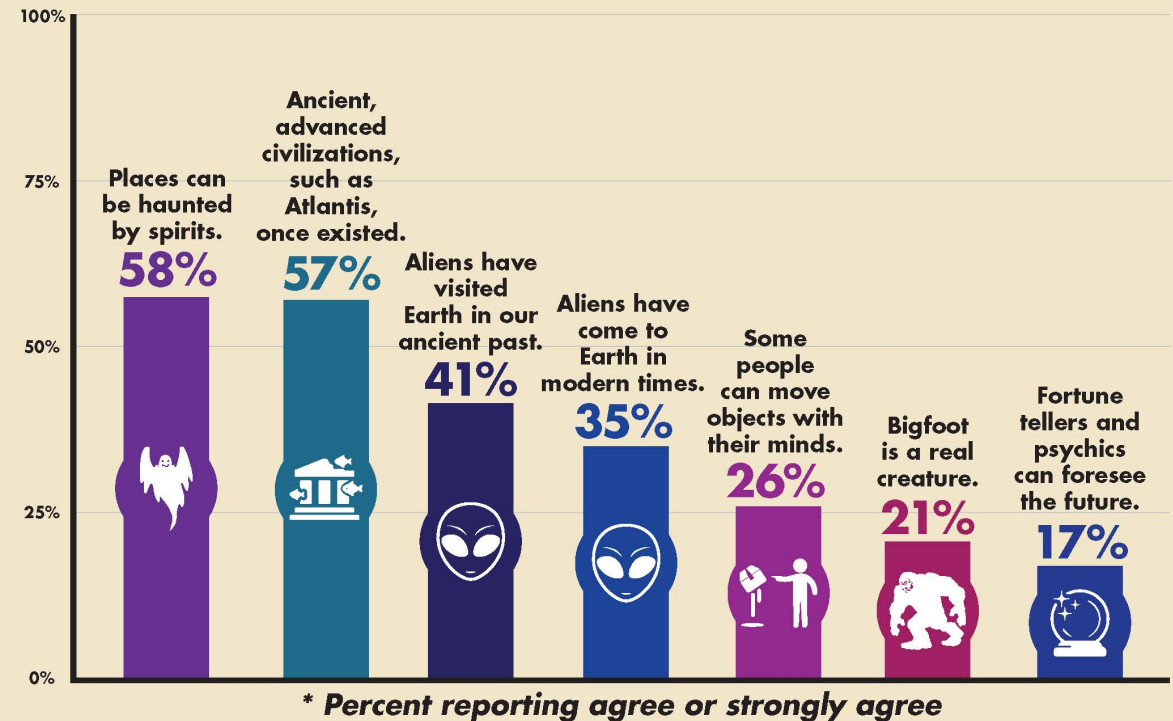
What the Survey of American Fears finds is that belief in supernatural evil (Satan) was one of the strongest predictors for people also believing in high levels of conspiracies (4 on average).

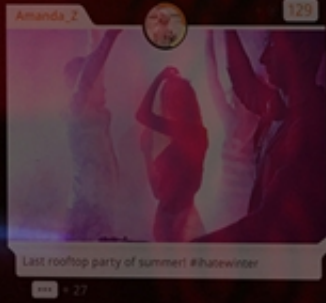
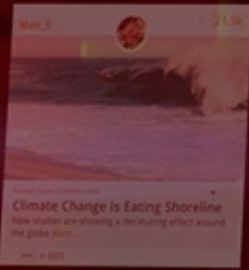
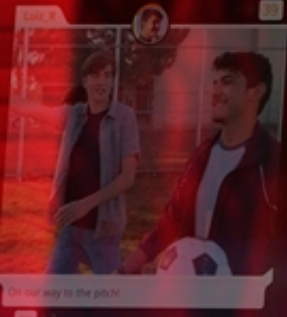
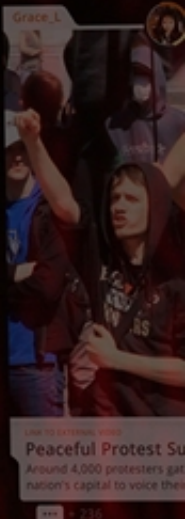
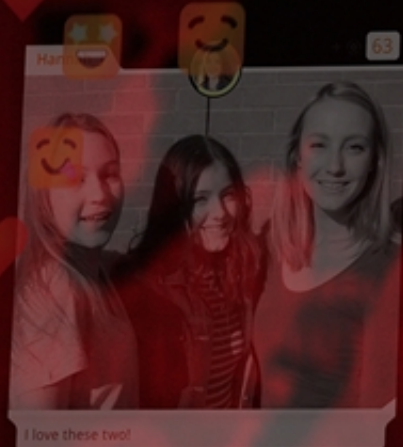
“Indeed, we found compelling evidence that the conspiratorial mind often involves a complicated mixture of fear, supernatural evil, and paranormalism.”

Paranormal Beliefs



Paranormal Beliefs





/the social dilemma



Conspiracy theory “spirit guides” are also proliferating in American today, with figures like new age conspiracy theorist David Wilcock and conservative media celebrity Alex Jones (InfoWars) leading the way.



David Wilcock and Alex Jones represent two strains of the American conspiratorial mindset that the authors of *Fear Itself* discuss. While there are some important differences in the two figures, as well as their target audiences, both share many common conspiratorial beliefs:

- Existence of a worldwide globalist conspiracy
- Secret occult rituals led by Satanic (Luciferian) worshippers
- Hidden “Truths” only they are aware of and are sharing with their audience
- Commitment to faithful resistance to tyrannical political/social/economic systems
- Proof of secret involvement by aliens/lizard people/other paranormal beings
- An approaching “mass awakening” which they are predicting or already predicted

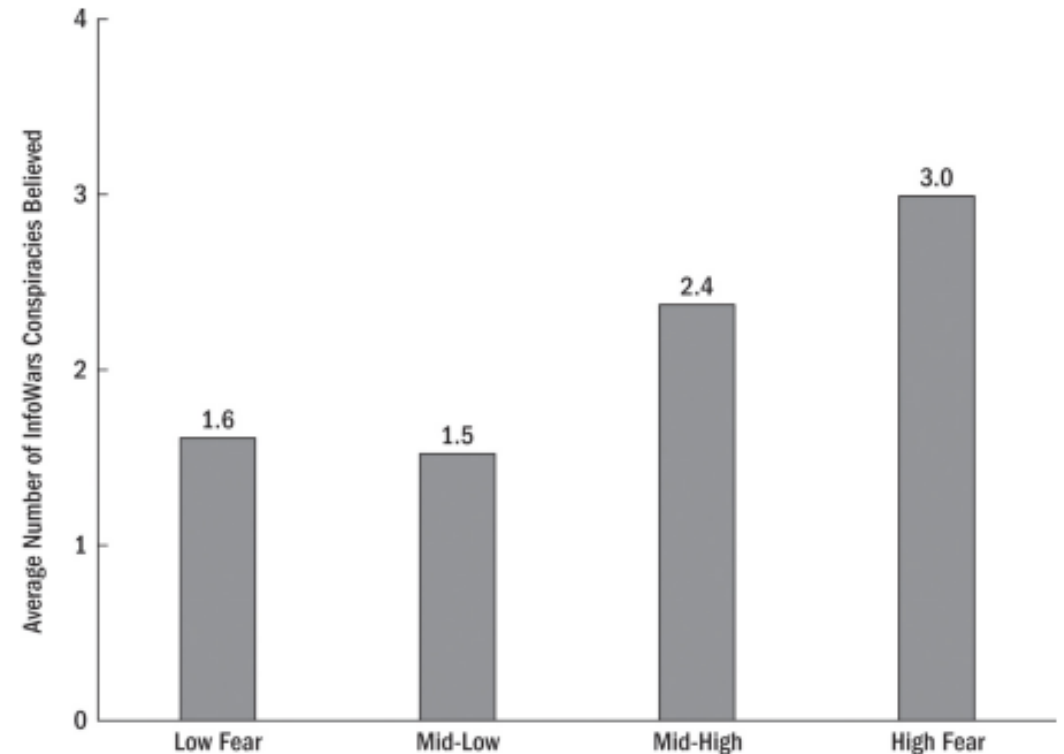
The authors argue “Wilcock’s history of the world gathers together almost all major conspiracy narratives into a single, super-conspiracy,” while Jones offers his audience “a form of secular apocalypticism” in which Jones and his followers “valiantly resist the forces of pure evil by forming resistance identities that defy and expose the New World Order.”

What makes Alex Jones particularly noteworthy is the widespread visibility and large following that he has garnered, in addition to his close ties and influence on President Trump, both through show guest appearances and via conservative political operatives such as Steve Bannon and Roger Stone.

The InfoWars YouTube channel drew 83 million views in November of 2016 during the last election and continued to garner wide viewership until being banned from all major social media platforms in 2018.

To better understand how Jones and his views have played into the rise of conspiratorial thinking in America the researchers constructed an “InfoWars Ideology” score. They found 4 key factors that led to potential support:

- Belief in Paranormalism
- High Levels of Fear
- Xenophobia (mediates conservatism)
- Belief that Satan causes Evil



If we put these different factors together the typical InfoWars supporter and viewer of Alex Jones has the following demographic profile, which as our authors note, is more or less what we would expect:

“So a young, white, poorly educated, xenophobic man is the prototypical audience member for Jones...Notably, gender was the strongest social characteristic predicting InfoWars beliefs, lending further credence to our analysis of Jones’s jeremiads as masculinist hero fantasies...fears about the federal government, foreigners, gun control, and the eclipsing of masculinist power in a multicultural world are all readily apparent.”



Alt-right movement leader Richard Spencer.

The authors of Fear Itself posit 3 key reasons for the increasing prevalence of conspiracy theories in the world today, from “fake news” and coronavirus conspiracies to worries about a New World Order.

- **Increasing spread, access to, and use of new media technologies**
 - Internet (Reddit, 4Chan, InfoWars.com)
 - Social media (Twitter, Facebook, TikTok, Instagram)
- **Changing political and cultural environment in a post-Trump America**
 - Trump’s open promotion of conspiracy theories
 - Political narrative focused on dismantling the Liberal “Deep State”
 - Promotion of populism and skepticism of elites/institutions
- **Growing economic inequality and expanding police/military/prison state presence**
 - Widening gap between 1% and rest of world
 - Increased technological surveillance and control
 - Increasingly militarized police state

“In such an alienating political, economic, technological, and cultural environment, is the appeal of narratives that preach awareness, autonomy, and agency really any wonder?”

Weekly Assignment Reminder

- Remember to check our class Blackboard regularly for updates, announcements, and other related class information...
- Have you done the weekly readings and watched any associated videos? Weekly readings are listed on the Class Schedule page.
- Complete the Class Activity #3, “When Disaster Strikes” exercise and weekly discussion post response. Initial post due **Wed, Sept 30** by end of the day, and peer response post due **Fri Oct 2** by end of the day.



SPOOKY