



COMMON READING DISCUSSION GUIDE
*Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth
on Issues from Tobacco Smoke to Global Warming*
Class of 2024

1. Who is the intended audience for *Merchants of Doubt*, and how can you tell? Oreskes and Conway themselves are both historians of science. In this book, are they speaking primarily to fellow historians? to politicians? scientists? business leaders? students? environmental activists? the general public? Do they seem to be addressing primarily an American audience, or a global one? Are they addressing readers who already believe in the global significance of climate change, or readers who remain skeptical of climate change science?
2. Throughout the book, Oreskes and Conway carefully trace the doubt-merchandising strategies deployed by the scientists, think tanks, and corporations behind various misinformation campaigns. For example, they show that such campaigns often rely on fear tactics: the campaign against disarmament encouraged public fear of Soviet weapons capabilities, while misinformation campaigns on environmental issues tend to paint scientists as alarmists unnecessarily frightening the public. What other doubt-merchandising strategies consistently recur throughout the book? What, in your opinion, makes these strategies so effective?
3. After reading this account, what do you feel are the most important steps that we—as individuals, and as a community—should take to combat these kinds of misinformation campaigns? In their epilogue, Conway and Oreskes urge us to trust scientific expertise—and to conduct research to ensure that we know who holds this expertise. They also urge us to adopt a “new view of science” that does not demand absolute proof (266). What concrete actions can we take to apply these recommendations as individuals? What will it take to apply these recommendations on a national scale in the United States?
4. As Oreskes and Conway repeatedly point out, peer-reviewed scientific findings tend to appear in scientific journals with limited circulation; meanwhile, counternarratives promoted by the likes of Singer and Seitz regularly appear in more mainstream media. While Carl Sagan’s *Parade* article on nuclear winter and Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* both reached large public audiences, the conclusion to *Merchants of Doubt* clarifies that these are exceptions: for a whole host of reasons, many scientists resist engaging with broad audiences. What is the responsibility of scientists when it comes to educating the public about climate change, or about any of the other environmental and health issues covered in the book? Do scientists bear a responsibility to speak directly to the public, particularly when misinformation is being spread? If so, what forms of media should they use to reach non-academic audiences?
5. Although many of the book’s events took place before the rise of the Internet in the 1990s, Oreskes and Conway acknowledge its power in their conclusion: “The Internet has created an



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information hall of mirrors, where any claim, no matter how preposterous, can be multiplied indefinitely” (240). *Merchants of Doubt* itself was published ten years ago; since that time, a meteoric rise in social media usage has continued to change the way that information—and misinformation—is communicated. What is the social media “coda” to the history that Oreskes and Conway illuminate here? How has social media altered, complicated, or extended their “story about fighting facts, and merchandising doubt” (9)?

6. You are reading *Merchants of Doubt* in the midst of a global pandemic, one that again highlights the power of doubt-mongering against scientific evidence. In the name of liberty, protestors across the United States have resisted mask-wearing and social distancing despite the evidence that these measures reduce the spread of COVID-19. What is it like to read this book right now in 2020? Have Oreskes and Conway informed your perspective on the polarized reactions to the pandemic, particularly in the United States? If not, why not? If so, in what ways? If Oreskes and Conway were publishing a new edition of the book this summer, what might their introduction say?
7. Through their own careful research and close reading, Oreskes and Conway repeatedly show the ways in which misinformation campaigns manipulate data to fit a desired narrative. What lessons, if any, might you take from this book into your own academic research at Harvard? Are there research strategies that you might consider borrowing from Oreskes and Conway?
8. While the focus of our summer common readings is climate change, Oreskes and Conway notably embed their climate change chapter in a much larger historical account of scientific doubt-mongering that begins with the tobacco industry misinformation campaigns of the 1950s. What does *Merchants of Doubt* accomplish, that another kind of book on climate change—a scientific text, a novel, an economic account—could not? What are historians like Oreskes and Conway uniquely positioned to bring to conversations about climate change? Are there limits to what historians can accomplish?
9. Relatedly, are there audiences whom you feel would be less convinced by this book’s climate change arguments than others? If so, is there another kind of book that these audiences would find more convincing?
10. Would you recommend *Merchants of Doubt* to other readers—friends, relatives, classmates? Why or why not?