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The Conspiracy Theory Handbook

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Distinguishing between real conspiracies and conspiracy theories

Real conspiracies do exist. Volkswagen conspired to cheat emissions tests for their diesel engines. The U.S. National Security Agency secretly spied on civilian internet users. The tobacco industry deceived the public about the harmful health effects of smoking. We know about these conspiracies through internal industry documents, government investigations, or whistleblowers.

Conspiracy theories, by contrast, tend to persist for a long time even when there is no decisive evidence for them. Those conspiracy theories are based on a variety of thinking patterns that are known to be unreliable tools for tracking reality. Typically, conspiracy theories are not supported by evidence that withstands scrutiny but this doesn't stop them from blossoming. For example, the widespread belief that the 9/11 terrorist attacks were an "inside job" has persisted for many years after the event.¹ Decades after the fact, a vast majority of Americans believe that the government covered up the truth about the JFK assassination.²

Conspiracy theories damage society in a number of ways. For example, exposure to conspiracy theories decreases people's intentions to engage in politics or to reduce their carbon footprint.³ In order to minimise these harmful effects, *The Conspiracy Theory Handbook* helps you understand why conspiracy theories are so popular, explains how to identify the traits of conspiratorial thinking, and lists effective debunking strategies.

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Conventional vs. Conspiratorial Thinking

Actual conspiracies do exist but they are rarely discovered through the methods of conspiracy theorists. Rather, real conspiracies get discovered through conventional thinking—healthy skepticism of official accounts while carefully considering available evidence and being committed to internal consistency.⁴ In contrast, conspiratorial thinking is characterized by being hyperskeptical of all information that does not fit the theory, over-interpreting evidence that supports a preferred theory, and inconsistency.

Conventional Thinking	Conspiratorial Thinking
Healthy skepticism	Overriding suspicion
Responsive to Evidence	Over-interpreting evidence
Strives for Coherence	Contradictory

Actual conspiracy	Imagined conspiracy
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Why are conspiracy theories popular?

A number of factors can contribute to people believing and sharing conspiracy theories.⁵

“People who feel powerless or vulnerable are more likely to endorse and spread conspiracy theories.”

Feeling of powerlessness

People who feel powerless or vulnerable are more likely to endorse and spread conspiracy theories.⁶ This is seen in online forums where people’s perceived level of threat is strongly linked to proposing conspiracy theories.⁷

Coping with threats

Conspiracy theories allow people to cope with threatening events by focusing blame on a set of conspirators.⁸ People find it difficult to accept that “big” events (e.g., the death of Princess Diana) can have an ordinary cause (driving while intoxicated). A conspiracy theory satisfies the need for a “big” event to have a big cause, such as a conspiracy involving MI5 to assassinate Princess Diana.⁹

Explaining unlikely events

For the same reason, people tend to propose conspiratorial explanations for events that are highly unlikely.¹⁰ Conspiracy theories act as a coping mechanism to help people handle uncertainty.

Disputing mainstream politics

Conspiracy theories are used to dispute mainstream political interpretations.¹¹ Conspiratorial groups often use such narratives to claim minority status.

Social media amplifies conspiracy theorizing

Social media has created a world in which any individual can potentially reach as many people as mainstream media.¹² The lack of traditional gate-keepers is one reason why misinformation spreads farther and faster online than true information¹³, often propelled by fake accounts or “bots”¹⁴. Likewise, consumers of conspiracy theories have been found to be more prone to “like” and share conspiracist posts on Facebook.¹⁵ A recent analysis of tweets about the Zika virus found that the number of propagators of conspiracy theories was more than double that of debunkers of those theories.¹⁶

How conspiracy theories do damage

Mere exposure to a conspiracy theory may have adverse consequences, even among people who don't subscribe to the conspiracy theory.^{3,17,18,19,20,21} To illustrate, exposure to a conspiracy theory about the political manipulation of unemployment data reduced trust in government services and institutions, including those unconnected to the conspiratorial allegations, such as local schools or the Food and Drug Administration.¹⁷

Tactical conspiracy theories

Conspiracy theories aren't always the result of genuinely held false beliefs. They can be intentionally constructed or amplified for strategic, political reasons. For example, there is evidence that the Russian government recently contributed to the spread of various political conspiracy theories in the West.^{22,23}

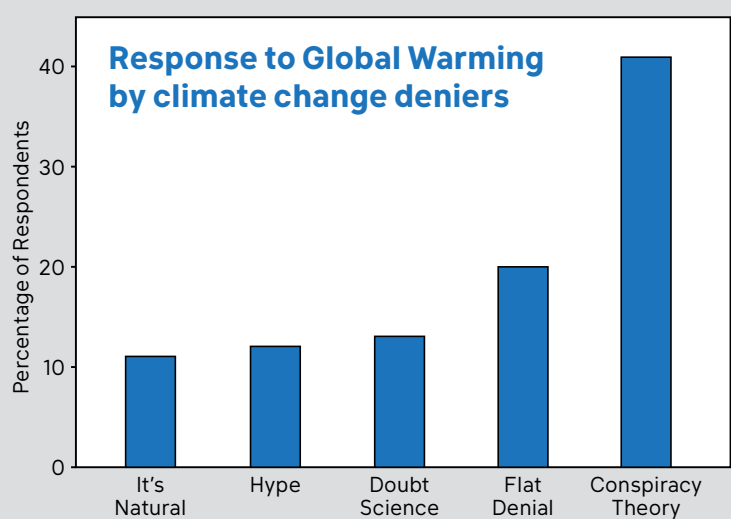
Conspiracy theories may be deployed as a rhetorical tool to escape inconvenient conclusions. The rhetoric of climate denial is filled with incoherence, such as the simultaneous claims that temperature cannot be measured accurately but global temperatures have declined.²⁴ Incoherence is one attribute of conspiratorial thinking, but it does not follow that climate denial is irrational—on the contrary, denialist rhetoric is an effective political strategy to delay climate action by undermining people's perception of the strength of scientific evidence.

In confirmation, people selectively appeal to a conspiracy among scientists to explain away a scientific consensus when their political ideology compels them to do so—but not when the scientific consensus is of no relevance to their politics.²⁵

Conspiracy theories may be deployed as a rhetorical tool to escape inconvenient conclusions.

Climate denial and conspiratorial thinking

Rejecting the scientific consensus that humans are causing global warming is often the result of conspiratorial thinking rather than a careful weighing of scientific evidence.²⁶ When climate deniers are presented with information about climate change, their most common response is conspiratorial in nature.²⁷ However, climate denial isn't just associated with climate-themed conspiracy theories—rather, people who deny climate science are more likely to endorse conspiracy theories in other topics as well.²⁸



Smith & Leiserowitz, 2012

CONSPIR: The seven traits of conspiratorial thinking

There are seven traits of conspiratorial thinking²⁹, summarized (and more easily remembered) with the acronym **CONSPIR**:



Contradictory

Conspiracy theorists can simultaneously believe in ideas that are mutually contradictory. For example, believing the theory that Princess Diana was murdered but also believing that she faked her own death.³⁰ This is because the theorists' commitment to disbelieving the "official" account is so absolute, it doesn't matter if their belief system is incoherent.

Overriding suspicion

Conspiratorial thinking involves a nihilistic degree of skepticism towards the official account.³¹ This extreme degree of suspicion prevents belief in anything that doesn't fit into the conspiracy theory.

Nefarious intent

The motivations behind any presumed conspiracy are invariably assumed to be nefarious.³¹ Conspiracy theories never propose that the presumed conspirators have benign motivations.



Something must be wrong

Although conspiracy theorists may occasionally abandon specific ideas when they become untenable, those revisions don't change their overall conclusion that "something must be wrong" and the official account is based on deception.^{24, 30}



Persecuted victim

Conspiracy theorists perceive and present themselves as the victim of organized persecution.²⁹ At the same time, they see themselves as brave antagonists taking on the villainous conspirators. Conspiratorial thinking involves a self-perception of simultaneously being a victim and a hero.



Immune to evidence

Conspiracy theories are inherently self-sealing—evidence that counters a theory is re-interpreted as originating from the conspiracy.^{31, 32, 33} This reflects the belief that the stronger the evidence against a conspiracy (e.g., the FBI exonerating a politician from allegations of misusing a personal email server), the more the conspirators must want people to believe their version of events (e.g., the FBI was part of the conspiracy to protect that politician).



Re-interpreting randomness

The overriding suspicion found in conspiratorial thinking frequently results in the belief that nothing occurs by accident.³⁴ Small random events, such as intact windows in the Pentagon after the 9/11 attacks, are re-interpreted as being caused by the conspiracy (because if an airliner had hit the Pentagon, then all windows would have shattered³⁵) and are woven into a broader, interconnected pattern.

The self-sealing nature of conspiracy theories means that any evidence disproving a theory may be interpreted as further evidence for the conspiracy. This means that communication efforts need to clearly differentiate between different target audiences. If conspiracy theorists re-interpret evidence to mean the opposite, then they require a different strategy to those who value evidence. The following pages look first at communication strategies for the general public, then for conspiracy theorists specifically.

Protecting the public against conspiracy theories

Reducing the spread of conspiracy theories

An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. Efforts should therefore focus on protecting the public from exposure to those theories, by inhibiting or slowing the spread of conspiracy theories. For example, sharing of conspiratorial climate-denial posts on Facebook was reduced by a simple intervention that encouraged people to ask four questions about material before sharing it:³⁶

- Do I recognize the news organization that posted the story?*
- Does the information in the post seem believable?*
- Is the post written in a style that I expect from a professional news organization?*
- Is the post politically motivated?*

When efforts to contain the spread of a conspiracy fail, communicators must resort to strategies that reduce the impact of conspiracy theories.



If people are made aware of the flawed reasoning found in conspiracy theories, they may become less vulnerable to such theories.

Prebunking

If people are preemptively made aware that they might be misled, they can develop resilience to conspiratorial messages. This process is known as **inoculation** or **prebunking**. There are two elements to an inoculation: an explicit warning of an impending threat of being misled, and refutation of the misinformation's arguments. Prebunkings of anti-vaccination conspiracy theories have been found to be more effective than debunking.³⁷

Fact-based and logic-based inoculations have both been successful in prebunking a 9/11 conspiracy.³⁸ This indicates some promise in logic-based prebunking, given the seven tell-tale traits of conspiratorial thinking (remember CONSPIR?). If people are made aware of the flawed reasoning found in conspiracy theories, they may become less vulnerable to such theories.

Debunking

There are various ways to debunk conspiracy theories, some of which have been shown to be effective with people who are unlikely to endorse conspiracy theories, such as university students or the general public.

Fact-based debunkings

Fact-based debunkings show that the conspiracy theory is false by communicating accurate information. This approach has been shown to be effective in debunking the “birther” conspiracy which holds that President Obama was born outside the U.S.²¹ as well as conspiracy theories relating to the Palestinian exodus when Israel was established.³⁹

Source-based and empathy-based debunking

Source-based debunking attempts to reduce the credibility of conspiracy theorists whereas empathy-based debunkings compassionately call attention to the targets of conspiracy theories. A source-based debunking that ridiculed believers of lizard men was found to be as effective as a fact-based debunking. In contrast, an empathy-based debunking of anti-Semitic conspiracy theories that argued that Jews today face similar persecution as early Christians was unsuccessful.⁴¹

Logic-based debunking

Logic-based debunkings explain the misleading techniques or flawed reasoning employed in conspiracy theories. Explaining the logical fallacies in anti-vaccination conspiracies has been found to be just as effective as a fact-based debunking: For example, pointing out that much vaccination research has been conducted by independent, publically-funded scientists can defang conspiracy theories about the pharmaceutical industry.⁴⁰

Links to fact checkers

Links to a fact-checker website from a simulated Facebook feed, whether via an automatic algorithmic presentation or user-generated corrections, effectively rebutted a conspiracy that the Zika virus was spread by genetically-modified mosquitoes.⁴²

Empowering people

Conspiracy thinking is associated with feelings of reduced control and perceived threat.^{6,7} When people feel like they have lost control of a situation, their conspiracist tendencies increase.⁴³ But the opposite also applies. When people feel empowered, they are more resilient to conspiracy theories.

There are several ways to “cognitively empower” people, such as encouraging them to think analytically rather than relying on intuition.⁴⁴ If people’s sense of control is primed (e.g., by recalling an event from their lives that they had control over), then they are less likely to endorse conspiracy theories.⁴⁵ Citizens’ general feeling of empowerment can be instilled by ensuring that societal decisions, for example by government, are perceived to follow procedural justice principles.⁴⁶ Procedural justice is perceived when authorities are believed to use fair decision-making procedures. People accept unfavourable outcomes from a decision if they believe that procedural fairness has been followed.^{47,48}

How to talk to a conspiracy theorist

While debunking conspiracy theories can be effective with the general public, it is much more challenging with people who believe the conspiracy theories. Rather than basing their beliefs on external evidence, conspiracy theorists' belief system speaks mainly to itself, and each belief serves as evidence for every other belief.⁴⁹ As a consequence, when conspiracy theorists encounter debunkings on Facebook, they end up commenting and liking conspiracist content within their echo chambers even more—debunking enhanced conspiratorial interactions.⁵⁰

Conspiracy theorists also have an outsized influence despite their small numbers. An analysis of over 2 million comments on the subreddit site r/conspiracy found that while only 5% of posters exhibited conspiratorial thinking, they were responsible for 64% of all comments. The most active author wrote 896,337 words, twice the length of the Lord of the Rings trilogy!⁵¹

Conspiracy theories are an inevitable ingredient of political extremism.^{52,53} Research into deradicalization therefore provides useful insights into how to potentially reach conspiracy theorists.

Trusted messengers

Counter-messages created by former members of an extremist community ("exiters") are evaluated more positively and remembered longer than messages from other sources.⁵⁴

Show empathy

Approaches should be empathic and seek to build understanding with the other party. Because the goal is to develop the conspiracy theorist's open-mindedness, communicators must lead by example.⁵⁵

Affirm critical thinking

Conspiracy theorists perceive themselves as critical thinkers who are not fooled by an official account. This perception can be capitalized on by affirming the value of critical thinking but then redirect this approach towards a more critical analysis of the conspiracy theory.⁵⁶

Avoid ridicule

Aggressively deconstructing or ridiculing a conspiracy theory, or focusing on "winning" an argument, runs the risk of being automatically rejected.⁵⁴ Note, however, that ridicule has been shown to work with general audiences.⁴¹

Final word of caution

Analyze what is being targeted before attempting a debunk. U.S. Government attempts to debunk "conspiracy theories" have repeatedly backfired in predominantly Muslim countries. One example is the failed attempt to blame the absence of Weapons of Mass Destruction in Iraq after the invasion of 2003 on Iraq's history of concealment. A more productive approach would have been to focus on the American inflation of poor intelligence.⁵⁷

It's also important to remember that real conspiracies do exist. But the traits of conspiratorial thinking (CONSPIR) are not a productive way to uncover actual conspiracies. Rather, conventional thinking that values healthy skepticism, evidence, and consistency are necessary ingredients to uncovering real attempts to deceive the public.

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