

A world map is shown in a dark blue, textured style. Overlaid on the map is a complex network of white lines connecting numerous small white dots, representing a global network or data flow. The map is centered on the Atlantic Ocean, with North and South America visible on the right and Europe and Africa on the left.

# GUIDE TO CONSPIRACY THEORIES

COMPACT  
[Comparative Analysis of Conspiracy Theories]



**COMPACT [Comparative Analysis of Conspiracy Theories]** is an EU-funded COST Action research network of 150 scholars from across Europe who are investigating the causes and consequences of conspiracy theories. For more information: [www.conspiracytheories.eu](http://www.conspiracytheories.eu)

**Author:**

COMPACT Education Group

**Acknowledgements:**

Michael Butter, Ela Drajekiewicz, Asbjørn Dyrendal, Jaron Harambam, Daniel Jolley, Olivier Klein, Peter Knight, Péter Krekó, Stephan Lewandowsky, Claus Oberhauser

**Design:**

Peter Knight

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A full-length version of the recommendations section ("The Conspiracy Theory Handbook," authored by Stephan Lewandowsky and John Cook) can be downloaded from <http://sks.to/conspiracy>



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## 1 Understanding conspiracy theories

Conspiracy theories – the belief that events are secretly manipulated behind the scenes by powerful forces – exist in all modern societies. Over the past twenty years, their significance and popularity has been increasing steadily, especially online. Some conspiracy theories may be harmless entertainment or a sign of well-founded scepticism. But at times they can be dangerous. They can lead to a loss of faith in medical and scientific expertise, to political disengagement, and even to violence. Conspiracy theories are therefore a challenge for a broad variety of stakeholders. This short guide provides an overview of the phenomenon.

### 1.1 What is a conspiracy theory?

Conspiracy theories assume that nothing happens by accident, that nothing is as it seems, and that everything is connected. In other words, they claim that a group of evil agents, the conspirators, is secretly orchestrating everything that happens. They usually present the imagined conspirators as enemies of the people. Conspiracy theories thus firmly divide the world into good and evil, into Us vs. Them, leaving no room for doubt or complexity. They claim that you need to look beneath the surface to detect the actions and intentions of the conspirators, who make great efforts to hide their wicked purposes. Conspiracy theories also usually see themselves as subverting received opinion. The assumption is that if you dig deep enough, you will find hidden connections between people, institutions and events that explain what is really going on. These assumptions put conspiracy theories at odds with the modern social sciences which stress the importance of coincidence, contingency and unintended consequences. Conspiracy theories suggest that historical events are always the result of deliberate plotting, rather than impersonal social forces and structural effects. However, conspiracy theories usually do not spring from nowhere. Often they are responses – albeit simplified and distorted – to genuine problems and anxieties in society.

### 1.2 Are conspiracy theories the same as fake news?

No, but they are often treated as identical in public discussions of fake news. Strictly speaking, however, there are differences. First, not all fake news claims that a sinister plot is going on. Second, the producers of disinformation know that they are spreading lies. They do so intentionally to create confusion, mobilize their audience, or smear opponents. By contrast, the vast majority of those who articulate conspiracy theories genuinely believe what they are saying. They are convinced that they are helping to reveal the truth. However, there also those who spread conspiracy theories that they do not necessarily believe in themselves in order to make

money and/or to achieve certain political goals. Especially in the age of the internet, some people have profited from spreading conspiracy theories that they most likely do not fully believe in themselves. Likewise, populist politicians often use conspiracy theories strategically in order to mobilise their followers. In these cases, conspiracy theories and fake news are indeed identical.

### **1.3 Was the term “conspiracy theory” invented by the CIA?**

There is a conspiracy theory that claims that the CIA invented the term “conspiracy theory” to disqualify criticism of the official version of the Kennedy assassination. It is true that a claim that is labelled a “conspiracy theory” usually implies that it has no foundation in reality, that it does not warrant further discussion, and that those who believe in it have a blurred perception of reality and might even suffer from severe psychological problems. The term thus is a potentially powerful insult. However, the CIA did not invent the term. The phrase is first used in its modern sense shortly after World War II by the philosopher of science Karl Popper, and since the 1960s it has been increasingly used in everyday discourse.

### **1.4 How do conspiracy theories work?**

Since they assume that nothing happens by accident, conspiracy theorists usually ask, “Who benefits?” from a particular event, such as 9/11, or development, such as the refugee crisis. A conspiracy theory often makes the leap from the idea that a particular group might have benefited from an action to claiming that group must have secretly planned to bring it about. Conspiracy theorists then resort to one or both of two rhetorical strategies. Some of them articulate their theory by explicitly trying to provide evidence that confirms their position, while ignoring all counterevidence. Others proceed more indirectly by trying to poke holes into the official version of events. The latter strategy has been particularly prominent in the western world in the past decades because conspiracy theories often set themselves up as a challenge to received wisdom (things are more complicated now that, for example, the US president openly engages in conspiracy speculation). The rhetoric of “just asking questions” allows conspiracy theorists to deny that they are actually spreading conspiracy theories. However, their questions are usually designed to leave the conclusion that there must have been a conspiracy.

### **1.5 What’s the difference between conspiracy theories and real conspiracies?**

There always have been and there always will be real conspiracies. However, real conspiracies – plots and schemes whose existence has been established beyond reasonable doubt – usually differ from the conspiracies imagined by conspiracy theorists in several ways:

- Successful real conspiracies are usually event conspiracies. Compared to the typical scenarios of conspiracy theories, they have a clear and rather modest goal such as a coup d'état or an assassination. Some conspiracy theories also revolve around specific events, but many others are “system” or superconspiracy theories. They tend to claim that specific groups such as the Freemasons or the Illuminati have been secretly plotting throughout history, or they claim that different groups, for example the Jews and the Communists, are secretly collaborating in a master plot to control all events.
- Real conspiracies usually involve a limited number of people who participate knowingly or unwittingly in the plot. Conspiracy theories, by contrast, often claim (sometimes by implication) that hundreds or thousands of people have been involved in the alleged plot and cover up. This is the case even in seemingly simple examples of single events, let alone extravagantly complicated superconspiracies supposedly lasting centuries. Faking the moon landing or an inside job to pull off the 9/11 attacks would have required thousands of helpers who worked perfectly together and kept silent until today. Such scenarios are highly unlikely, if not impossible.
- Finally, real conspiracies usually have unintended consequences. They lead to outcomes not foreseen by the conspirators. Conspiracy theories, by contrast, usually claim that everything goes according to the conspirators' plan. They hardly ever leave room for unintended consequences. The assassination of Julius Caesar in 44 BC is an example of a typical conspiracy. He was killed by a group of about 60 senators. As real conspiracies go, this is already a rather large group. Compared to what most conspiracy theories claim, however, it is tiny. The conspiracy achieved its short-term and modest goal: Caesar was killed. However, it proved counterproductive with regard to its more grandiose long-term goal, the preservation of the Roman Republic. It sparked a civil war that eventually led to the establishment of the Roman Empire.

## 1.6 Who believes in conspiracy theories?

In the past, belief in conspiracy theories was often associated with paranoia and other psychological problems. And while some individual conspiracy theorists might well be paranoid, belief in such theories is far too wide-spread to be explained in terms of abnormal psychology. Some recent polls have even found that the majority of citizens in Europe and the US believe in one or more conspiracy theories. Psychological research, however, has found that people who feel powerless or have trouble accepting uncertainty are particularly prone to believing in conspiracy theories. Some studies have also found that the likelihood of believing in conspiracy

theories decreases with the level of education. However, research shows that believers come from all ethnicities and walks of life. Most studies also do not find any significant difference between men and women. However, male conspiracy theorists often are more visible and outspoken. The reason for this might be that conspiracy theories are a way to deal with the widespread crisis of masculinity in the western world.

### **1.7 Why do people believe in conspiracy theories?**

Conspiracy theories are attractive because they fulfil important functions for the personal, social and political identity of those who believe in them.

- Conspiracy theories make the world meaningful because they exclude chaos and coincidence. They also make the world intelligible because they provide a simplistic explanation for political and social developments. They are a strategy for dealing with uncertainty and resolving ambiguity. It is easier for some people to accept that a group of evildoers is secretly pulling the strings than to face the possibility that there is nobody pulling the strings and that sometimes things just happen. In this way, conspiracy theories fulfil similar functions to religion, providing both an explanation of how the world works and a sense of personal identity and purpose. Conspiracy theories are thus often associated with a tendency towards esoteric beliefs or “magical thinking.”
- Conspiracy theories blame people rather than abstract forces for political events and developments in society. They are an important tool for what the social sciences call “othering”: they allow their believers to identify scapegoats and draw a firm line between “us” – the victims of the conspiracy” – and “them” – the conspirators. In this way, conspiracy theories can forge strong communal feelings. By the same token, they allow those who believe in them to signal their group membership. For example, by expressing anti-vaccination conspiracy theories, people may indicate that they are part of the community that believes in alternative medicine and follows an alternative life-style.
- Conspiracy theories relieve those who believe in them of responsibility. Since powerful conspirators are blamed for everything that happens, the believers themselves cannot have had any impact on events and developments.
- Conspiracy theories allow those who believe in them to distinguish themselves from the mass of people. Since conspiracy theories have come to be a stigmatized form of knowledge in the western world in recent decades, it is no longer socially acceptable to believe in them. Those who believe in them can nevertheless take comfort from the idea

that – unlike the rest of the population – they have woken up and understood what is really going on.

- At times, conspiracy theories can also channel social discontent and criticism, for example of how public institutions function. They can be a means of political contestation and a strategy to rebel against authority (for example, that of parents, teachers, or elites), even if they latch onto the wrong target.

## **1.8 How have conspiracy theories developed over time?**

Conspiracy theories as defined above are not an anthropological given. They first emerged in Europe during the late Early Modern period, with important precursors in ancient Greece and Rome. They were then “exported” to the rest of the world. From the late sixteenth until far into the twentieth century, conspiracy theories were an accepted form of knowledge that was believed and articulated by elites and ordinary people alike. Thus, conspiracy theories have not always automatically been counter-narratives. Often the official explanation of events was itself a conspiracy theory. In the western world, conspiracy theories appear to have undergone a process of stigmatization in the second half of the twentieth century that turned them from officially accepted into illegitimate knowledge. Outside of the western world, however, this stigmatization has not occurred. Accordingly, conspiracy theories are still considered legitimate knowledge in, for example, the Arab world or Russia, where they are articulated by experts, elected officials, the media and academics.

## **1.9 What’s the effect of the internet on conspiracy theories?**

We do not know yet if the internet has led to a massive or only a modest increase of belief in conspiracy theories. What is clear, however, is that it has made conspiracy theories more visible and far more easily available, and it has greatly accelerated their circulation. The jury is still out on whether the recommendation algorithms of platforms like YouTube quickly lead viewers down the rabbit hole of ever more extreme content, or whether increased “demand” for alternative narratives and conspiracy theories is more important than changes in the “supply” side. Research has shown that false rumours (about e.g. the Zika virus) spread far more quickly and widely than factual corrections. However, it is not clear whether circulating a conspiracy story necessarily implies endorsement of it; the rise of alt-right trolling has meant that conspiracy rumours are often spread in order to provoke a reaction, rather than out of sincere belief. Like all previous media revolutions, the rise of the internet has also had a significant impact on the form of conspiracy theories. Conspiracy theory videos on YouTube and other platforms are less dry than

the books and pamphlets of earlier times. Moreover, platforms like Twitter that restrict the number of characters for a single post have led to shift from conspiracy theories to conspiracy rumours, because conspiracy speculations are increasingly circulated without the kind of evidence and convoluted narratives that tended to accompany them in the past and in other media. Some commentators have therefore suggested that we are now seeing an increase of “conspiracy without the theory.”

### **1.10 Are conspiracy theories dangerous?**

Not all conspiracy theories are dangerous; many are quite harmless. The context matters: who believes what, in which situation, and to what effect? Moreover, those conspiracy theories that tend to be problematic can be dangerous in different ways.

- Conspiracy theories can be a catalyst for polarisation and violence. Since they identify a group, the conspirators, that is seen as responsible for all evil, those who believe in them may feel justified or even obliged to act against this group, its institutions or representatives.
- Conspiracy theories that challenge established medical knowledge – for example the claim that scientists are concealing the fact that vaccinations cause autism or that the HIV virus was manufactured in a biowarfare lab – can be dangerous because believers may refuse inoculation for themselves or their children or have unprotected sex.
- Conspiracy theories can lead to political apathy or fuel populism. People who believe that elections are a sham because the different candidates are controlled by the same evildoers are likely to either disengage from the political process, or to vote for populist parties that present themselves as the true alternative to a rotten political system.

### **1.11 How are conspiracy theories and populism related?**

Supporters of populist parties and movements appear to be particularly receptive to conspiracy theories, and populist politicians frequently employ conspiracist rhetoric. This is because both populism and conspiracy theory reduce the complex political field to a simple opposition: the people versus the elite, in the case of populism; and the victims of the conspiracy versus the conspirators, in the case of conspiracy theory. As an element of populist discourse, conspiracy theories offer a specific explanation why the elites act against the interests of the people. This account tends to co-exist within a populist movement or party with other explanations such as negligence or personal enrichment. Hence, conspiracy theories are a non-necessary element of

populist discourse and ideology, and they are not necessarily believed by everybody in the populist movement or party in which they are circulating.

## Suggestions for further reading

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## 2 Recommendations for dealing with conspiracy theories

### 2.1 Why are conspiracy theories so challenging?

Real conspiracies do exist, and they are typically revealed by whistle-blowers or media.

Conspiracy theories, by contrast, are attempts to explain a prominent event – even the entire course of history – in terms of the plotting of a powerful but hidden cabal. These conjectures are often highly speculative. Typically, conspiracy theories are not supported by evidence that survives conventional scrutiny, although the lack of evidence does not prevent a theory from blossoming. Communication efforts that seek to debunk conspiracy theories are challenging for at least two reasons:

- Contrary to the media stereotypes, people who engage with conspiracy theories are not all the same, and the role that conspiracy theories play in their lives can differ greatly. Sometimes, conspiracy theories can be a way of expressing opposition, or can be part of what creates a sense of group identity. We therefore need to understand why these beliefs matter to those who hold them.
- Belief in conspiracy theories is not usually the result of a lack of knowledge (after all, in the age of the internet we have easy access to unprecedented amounts of information). Often, conspiracy theories can't simply be "corrected" by providing additional evidence. Instead we need to understand more about why many people today feel resentment towards the very idea of expert knowledge.
- A defining attribute of conspiracy theories is thus that they are "self-sealing," i.e. people who strongly believe in conspiracy theories often interpret any attempt to provide contrary evidence as evidence *for* the conspiracy. Although sometimes conspiracy theories result from not much more than a general sense of scepticism ("this alternative version of events might be true, for all I know"), in other cases conspiracy theorists are so deeply invested in a particular world view that their beliefs can be very hard to debunk.
- There is evidence that mere exposure to a conspiracy theory can have adverse consequences, even among people who do not subscribe to the conspiracy theory (e.g. Einstein and Glick 2015; van der Linden 2015; Jolley et al. 2019).
- Conspiracy theories are also often associated with political extremism (van Prooijen et al. 2015) and disengagement.

These challenges suggest that communication efforts must differentiate between different audiences, and understand how conspiracy theories work in particular individual, social and

political contexts. There is no single, simple solution to the problem of conspiracy theories, and the following recommendations are therefore grouped by target audience.

## **2.2 Recognise that conspiracy theories are not irrational but political**

Although conspiracist talk is often characterized by flaws in reasoning, it does not follow that people who articulate or believe conspiracy theories are necessarily irrational. Instead there is evidence that conspiracy theories are deployed as a rhetorical tool to escape inconvenient conclusions, to bolster their sense of identity, or to promote particular political positions, including state-sponsored disinformation (Yablokov 2015). For example, climate change denial often involves holding mutually exclusive positions (such as the simultaneous claims that (a) temperature cannot be measured accurately but (b) global temperatures have declined; Lewandowsky et al. 2016). Logical inconsistency might be a common trait of conspiracy thinking, but dismissing climate denial as merely irrational doesn't explain why this belief matters to the people who hold it, and why they are so resistant to challenge on factual grounds.

## **2.3 Containing the spread of conspiracy theories**

Social media has created a world in which a person with no track record or reputation can reach as many consumers as mainstream TV and print media. Using digital media to counter the spread of conspiracy theories is under development but has not yet been deployed on a large scale. However, relatively simple psychological interventions are promising. For example, one study showed that the 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 (Lutzke et al. 2019):

- 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?

## **2.4 Inoculating against conspiracy theories**

Another way to protect the public is to alert them to the nature of conspiracy theories before they are encountered. This process is known as “inoculation” or “prebunking.” There are two elements to an inoculation: (1) an explicit warning of an impending threat and (2) a refutation of an anticipated argument that exposes the imminent fallacy. In one experiment involving anti-vaccination conspiracy theories (Jolley and Douglas 2017), the researchers found that when

people were inoculated by first receiving the anti-conspiratorial material, they were no longer adversely affected by the conspiracy theory. By contrast, if the conspiratorial material was presented first, the countering material was less effective. The conclusion is that it is vital to make people aware of the flawed reasoning that characterizes conspiracy theories. It must be noted, however, that inoculation only immunizes against specific conspiracy theories and not generally. We also need to remember that many believers in conspiracy theories are sceptical about the very idea of expert knowledge and rational argument.

## 2.5 Debunking conspiracy theories

After containing and inoculating, debunking is the next best option. Research has shown that exposure to conspiracy theory increases historical misconceptions, but corrections with evidence decreases them (Nyhan and Zeitzoff 2017). With participants who are not committed conspiracy theorists, debunking has been shown to be partially effective, including:

- evidence-based counter-messages (Warner and Neville-Shepard 2014)
- rebuttal messages (Schmid and Betsch 2019)
- algorithmic and user-generated corrections (Bode and Vraga 2018)

However, other strategies have been less effective:

- Ridiculing conspiracy theories can significantly reduce acceptance of a theory but runs the risk of being automatically rejected (Orosz et al. 2016).
- The same is true for counter-messages that aggressively deconstruct or that focus on “winning” an argument (Schmitt et al. 2018).
- Showing compassion to those who believe in conspiracy theories is less successful (Orosz et al. 2016).

### Anti-vaccination conspiracy theories

In a large series of studies using representative samples of participants, Schmid and Betsch (2019) showed that conspiratorial denial of the efficacy and safety of vaccinations can be reduced by rebuttal messages. When an appeal to a profit-maximizing conspiracy between government and the pharmaceutical industry was left unchallenged, people’s intention to vaccinate and their attitude towards vaccinations declined significantly. By contrast, when the conspiracy was rebutted either by highlighting the misleading techniques employed by conspiracy theorists (e.g., by pointing out that much of the research in support of vaccinations has been conducted by independent, publicly-funded scientists), or by correcting false assertions (e.g., by emphasizing how vaccinations improve public health), then exposure to the conspiracy theory no longer had an effect. The study found that each rebuttal technique – pointing to flawed reasoning or providing facts – on its own was equally effective, but that a combination of both did not provide additional persuasive power.

## 2.6 Protecting the public against conspiracy theories

Since endorsing conspiracy theories is caused by feelings of reduced control and perceived threat (Uscinski and Parent, 2014), the following options make sense:

- If people's sense of control is primed (e.g., by recalling an event from their lives that they had control over), then their endorsement of a potential conspiracy theory is reduced (van Prooijen and Acker 2015).
- Citizens' general feeling of empowerment is improved when authorities are seen to follow fair decision-making procedures (van Prooijen 2018).
- People should be encouraged to think analytically, rather than rely on intuition (Swami et al. 2014).

## 2.7 When debunking fails: committed conspiracy theorists

Debunking is much more challenging with committed individuals who are devoted to one or more conspiracy theories. People who believe in one conspiracy theory often believe in many, as they view all history and politics through the lens of conspiracy. Online environments now create echo chambers and filter bubbles. One research study showed that those with firmly entrenched conspiracy beliefs who interacted with the debunking material ended up even more engaged within their conspiracy theory echo chamber afterwards (Zollo 2017). They were more likely to stop interacting with conspiracy news if they were *not* exposed to debunking. In these cases, debunking might well make things worse. In these online environments, individual posters can have a disproportionate influence, and can be hard to reach. A recent study (Klein et al. 2018) showed that on the main Reddit site dedicated to conspiracy theories only about 5% of posters were responsible for two thirds of all comments, with the most active author writing contributions that added up to twice the length of the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy.

## 2.8 Lessons from deradicalization programmes

Conspiracy theories are an inevitable ingredient of political extremism, and therefore research on deradicalization provides some useful insights into how to combat conspiracy theories among hard-to-reach and committed audiences:

- Trusted messengers are crucial. Counter-messages created by former members of an extremist community ("exiters") are evaluated more positively and remembered longer than messages from other sources (Schmitt et al. 2018).

- Approaches should be empathic and seek to build understanding with the other party. Because interventions rest on developing the participants' open-mindedness, the communicators must lead by example (Ponsot et al. 2018).
- People who hold conspiracist beliefs perceive themselves as critical thinkers who are not fooled by an official account. This perception can be capitalized on by messages that affirm the value of critical thinking but then redirect this examination towards the conspiracy theory (Voogt 2017).
- Analyse what is being targeted before attempting to debunk. For example, the U.S. government's attempts to debunk what it regards as conspiracy theories have repeatedly backfired, as in the case of the attempt to blame the absence of Weapons of Mass Destruction in Iraq after the invasion of 2003 on Iraq's history of concealment, rather than the inflation of poor intelligence by the American authorities (Aistrophe 2016).

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