



# Addressing conspiracy theories

What teachers need to know



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## Acknowledgements

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# Introduction

Conspiracy theories are spreading around the world causing significant harm. They form the backbone of many populist movements and core elements of violent extremist ideologies, often serving as entry points to radicalization processes.

The complexity of conspiracy theory narratives and the psychological mechanisms that underpin belief make challenging them very difficult. Experts from around the world who study conspiracy theories have produced a solid knowledge basis for why people believe in them as well as for strategies to prevent and counter them.

Little of this knowledge has permeated to education environments so far. This document is a first introduction for educators, working in and outside of formal schooling, on how to identify, prevent and address conspiracy theories in education settings. It seeks to provide educators with key definitions and essential knowledge

## Conspiracy theory:

The belief that events are being secretly manipulated by powerful forces with negative intent. Typically, conspiracy theories involve an imagined group of conspirators colluding to implement an alleged secret plot.

to grasp the complexity of the phenomenon and alert learners about the key characteristics and harmful effects of conspiracy theories for a first, immediate response. To support educators in this endeavour, this document outlines strategies to prevent the belief in conspiracy theories as well as to engage with learners who already believe in them.

This document builds on UNESCO's #ThinkBeforeSharing social media campaign, which was jointly launched in 2020 with the European Commission in cooperation with Twitter and the World Jewish Congress to respond to the growing spread of conspiracy theories during the COVID-19 pandemic. Aiming to respond to the specific needs of educators, campaign materials have been expanded and adapted in close consultation with international experts and teachers from nine countries worldwide.

## Conspiracy theories can be found virtually everywhere, even where you would least expect them:

BBC News reporters, for instance, revealed the presence of conspiracy theories on non-English language Wikipedia entries on climate change. The online encyclopedia is one of the world's most visited websites.<sup>1</sup>

## Why this document?

Conspiracy theories flourish in troubled times. Nowadays, they seem more prevalent than ever, gaining visibility online and seeping increasingly into mainstream discourse.

While most conspiracy theories seem implausible and some even amusing, they can seriously impact societies, eroding trust and social cohesion. They also underpin many hateful ideologies and violent extremist ideas.

Consequently, action is needed to minimize the damage caused by conspiracy theories. One important step is raising awareness and developing people's critical thinking, so that they are less vulnerable to being misled. Educators, whether in formal or non-formal education, can play an important role in pre-empting conspiracy theories by alerting learners about their existence, building learners' resilience to techniques and rhetoric commonly used to spread them, and by equipping them with media and information literacy competencies. Educators can also help to limit the dissemination of conspiracy theories by responding to them when they are shared among learners or within the wider school community.

This document seeks to support educators, both in and out of school, with primary, secondary and higher education-age learners by<sup>2</sup>:

- Providing explanations of why conspiracy theories are so popular and how they cause damage.
- Helping educators and learners to distinguish between real conspiracies and conspiracy theories, and to identify the red flags of conspiracy theories.
- Sharing strategies that may develop people's resilience to conspiracy theories.
- Providing practical advice on when and how to have a conversation with learners who believe in conspiracy theories.
- Helping teachers create a classroom climate that is conducive to respectful dialogue, open discussion and critical thinking.

<sup>1</sup> Silva, M. (2021), Climate change: Conspiracy theories found on foreign-language Wikipedia, BBC, <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-59325128>

<sup>2</sup> This guide is based on the Conspiracy Theory Handbook by Stephan Lewandowsky and John Cook. It is further informed by UNESCO's work on media and information literacy, preventing violent extremism, addressing antisemitism and addressing hate speech. A list of resources is included at the end of this document.

## How do conspiracy theories link to other types of false information?

### Misinformation:

is false or misleading content shared without harmful intent though the effects can still be harmful, e.g. when people share false information with friends and family in good faith. Any conspiracy theory can be considered misinformation if shared without the direct intent to cause harm.

### Disinformation:

is false or misleading content that is spread with an intention to deceive or secure economic or political gain and may cause public harm. Conspiracy theories that are intentionally spread to cause harm and polarize society can be considered disinformation.<sup>3</sup>

### Hate speech:

can be “any kind of communication in speech, writing or behaviour that attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language with reference to a person or a group on the basis of who they are (i.e. based on their religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, colour, descent, gender or other identity factor)”<sup>4</sup> The belief in conspiracy theories can motivate or be used to justify hate speech. Outright racist or antisemitic conspiracy narratives often include strong elements of hate speech.

### “Fake news”

is defined as a subset of disinformation that is false or misleading information presented as news. While the term “fake news” is now used ubiquitously to disparage any unwelcome information, the term originally referred to false or distorted news stories which are usually sensationalist, designed to be widely shared and generate revenue. “Fake news” can be used to support conspiracy narratives. “Fake news” can also be considered disinformation as it is generally spread with a clear intent to influence public opinion.

### The earth is flat and Michelle Obama is actually a lizard?

These claims seem so far removed from science and logic that it is easy to dismiss them as a joke. They are actually linked to widespread conspiracy theories. Hundreds of thousands of people from around the world follow online communities linked to the “flat earth” conspiracy theory, so many that they even call themselves by a common name, the “flat earthers”. For them, their beliefs are not a joke. People believing that the earth is flat or that prominent people are actually aliens in form of lizards have something in common: they feel that they are part of a big lie and that this lie exists for a reasons that they cannot discern, but will harm them eventually.

<sup>3</sup> European Commission (2020), European Democracy Action Plan, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=COM%3A2020%3A790%3AFIN&qid=1607079662423>

<sup>4</sup> United Nations (2019), Strategy and Plan of Action on hate speech, [https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/advising-and-mobilizing/Action\\_plan\\_on\\_hate\\_speech\\_EN.pdf](https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/advising-and-mobilizing/Action_plan_on_hate_speech_EN.pdf)

# Why do people believe in conspiracy theories?

The reasons why some people are attracted to conspiracy theories are complex. There is no single driver. Rather, different motivating factors come into play.<sup>5</sup>

## Empowering when feeling powerless.

When people feel vulnerable, isolated, or alienated from politics and economic power, they are more prone to believe in conspiracy theories. Paradoxically, the belief that there is an evil plan to control events gives people a comforting sense of control and agency because it allows them to project their fears onto an imagined enemy. Believing in a conspiracy theory can be empowering. People who believe in conspiracy theories will experience a feeling of acceptance within communities of fellow conspiracy theorists and may develop a sense of superiority over those who do not believe in the conspiracy theory.

## Explaining unlikely events.

When highly unlikely or momentous events happen, most people find mundane explanations unsatisfactory.<sup>6</sup> A lack of an explanation can have a similar effect. A conspiracy theory can satisfy people's need for a significant event to have a similarly significant cause. For example, the disappearance of Malaysia Airlines Flight 370 in Southeast Asia in March 2014 prompted many conspiracy theories about the imagined secret involvement of various agencies and governments for political purposes.<sup>7</sup>

## Compelling narratives.

Conspiracy narratives are often more engaging and more accessible than official accounts. Complex phenomena are boiled down to simple explanations that are easier to understand. Conspiracy theory content is often crafted on eye level with those who believe in them. It uses simple language, videos and images that trigger emotions and are more relatable than elaborate scientific texts or complex news stories.

## A pattern of thinking.

Conspiracy theorists rarely believe in only one conspiracy theory, but rather develop a complete worldview. Conspiracy theories follow a common structure: they feature a group that orchestrates a secret plot, a hidden agenda or goal, a cover story to hide the conspiracy and a proxy group that helps implement the conspiracy.<sup>8</sup> This pattern can be easily transferred from one conspiracy theory to another, making people who believe in one conspiracy theory more susceptible to believe in several.

## How do conspiracy theories take root?

Conspiracy theories often start as a suspicion. People may begin by asking who is benefiting from an event or situation and use this question to identify an assumed group of conspirators. Any "evidence" is then adapted to fit the theory. Once they have taken root, conspiracy theories can grow quickly and are difficult to address.

## Conspiracy theories are a global phenomenon.

The 2020 YouGov-Cambridge Globalism Project analyzed the belief in common conspiracy theories in 21 countries. It revealed that conspiracy theories linked to climate change denial, the COVID-19 pandemic and secret world control were popular in all countries, with sometimes overwhelming results: 78% of survey participants in Nigeria, 59% in Mexico, 56% in Greece, 55% in Egypt and 19% in Japan believed a single secret group of people who controlled world events.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>5</sup> CREST Research (2019), Conspiracy Theories: How Are They Adopted, Communicated, And What Are Their Risks?

<sup>6</sup> Kovic, M., & Fuchslin, T. (2018). Probability and conspiratorial thinking. *Applied Cognitive Psychology*, 32, 390–400. doi:10.1002/acp.3408

<sup>7</sup> Langewiesche, W. (2019), What really happened to Malaysia's missing airplane, *The Atlantic*, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2019/07/mh370-malaysia-airlines/590653/>

<sup>8</sup> Jigsaw (2021), 7 Insights from Interviewing Conspiracy Theory Believers, <https://medium.com/jigsaw/7-insights-from-interviewing-conspiracy-theory-believers-c475005f8598>

<sup>9</sup> YouGov (2020), Where do people believe in conspiracy theories?, <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/international/articles-reports/2021/01/18/global-where-believe-conspiracy-theories-true>

## Why are conspiracy theories popular?

Conspiracy theories have existed for centuries. At times, they were widely accepted patterns of thinking, which lost credibility with the rise of social sciences in the twentieth century.<sup>10</sup> In recent years they have gained increasing visibility online and renewed popularity as “counter narratives” to official accounts and positions by governments and experts. They have favoured the emergence of populist movements and developed into vehicles for violent extremist propaganda and hate speech.

### Strategic conspiracy theories

Most conspiracy theorists genuinely believe their theories are true and share related information to warn and inform others. For others, the truthfulness of the claim is not important. Rather, they deliberately use conspiracy theories to provoke, manipulate or target people for political or financial reasons. One strategy is using conspiracy theories to dispute mainstream political interpretations. Their attractiveness and easy transmission, particularly over social media, offer a low-cost and readily available method for governments, political actors and in the most severe cases violent extremist groups to disrupt political systems and agendas. They can service as a means for mobilizing otherwise disaffected or disenfranchised citizens. Conspiracy theorists often use such narratives to claim minority status and to establish feelings of victimization.

### Amplified by social media

Not only does social media allow the unfettered spread of misinformation, but also research shows that fact-checked false information spreads faster and farther online than information that turns out to be accurate. The social effects of sharing conspiracy theories are also an important factor. Studies have revealed that people are more inclined to share false conspiracy theories than accurate information, because of the higher social engagement (e.g. comments, likes) that they can generate.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Butter, M. (2020). The nature of conspiracy theories

<sup>11</sup> Vosoughi, S., Roy, D., & Aral, S. (2018). The spread of true and false news online. *Science*, 359, 1146–1151. doi:10.1126/science.aap9559 and Ren, Z., Dimant, E., & Schweizer, M. E. (2021). Social Motives for Sharing Conspiracy Theories. Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3919364>

# How conspiracy theories do damage

**Most conspiracy theories are not mere oddities or amusing outlying opinions. They foster and reinforce harmful thinking patterns and exclusive worldviews that can damage societies in many ways:**

## Target groups.

Conspiracy theories favor “black and white” thinking and can be used to target entire groups perceived as the enemy behind a real or imagined threat. They identify an enemy and a secret plot that threatens peoples’ lives or beliefs and sparks a defense mechanism, which can fuel discrimination, be used to justify hate crimes, and can be exploited by violent extremist groups. These negative sentiments can be extended to groups associated with the conspiracy theory, such as assumed “allies” of the conspirator. Perceived “out-groups” of society are especially prone to be targets of conspiracy theories. This includes people of different origin, religion, or sexual orientation. For example, believers in the deeply antisemitic and racist “Great Replacement” or “White Genocide” conspiracy theory claim that a “Jewish elite” is planning to “eliminate” the native European population by orchestrating an influx of non-white immigrants. While an important target of this conspiracy theory are Jews, it likewise promotes racist stereotypes and anti-Muslim hatred.<sup>12</sup>

### Patterns of conspiracy narratives:

Conspiracy theorists provide an array of “evidence” that they claim supports their theory. They join the dots between unconnected events and people, suggesting falsely that nothing happens by accident. They evoke a secret plot that questions reality and implies that nothing is as it seems. People who believe in conspiracy theories divide the world into good and bad, which usually results in scapegoating people and groups.

## Reduce trust in public institutions.

Conspiracy theories erode trust in public institutions, which can lead to political apathy and polarization. Research in the United States has shown that people who were exposed to conspiracy theories linked to the manipulation of federal elections experienced higher anxiety and expressed less support for democratic institutions and norms.<sup>15</sup>

## Fuel violence.

Conspiracy theories polarize society and may fuel violent extremism. They are used as a recruitment mechanism as well as to justify violent extremism. According to research from the think tank Demos, violent extremist groups use conspiracy theories across ideologies for at least four reasons, including (i) to demonize out-groups, (ii) to victimize in-groups, (iii) to delegitimize voices of dissent and moderation, and (iv) to encourage a group to turn to violence allegedly for self-defense.<sup>13</sup>



### Case Study: Human impact of antisemitic conspiracy theories

Conspiracy theories can result in real-world human impacts. Antisemitic conspiracy theories such as those promoted by the forged document “The Protocols of the Elders of Zion” are used to target Jewish individuals and communities.<sup>14</sup> This conspiratorial form of antisemitism reproduces century-old antisemitic prejudice by alleging that Jews and Jewish groups are in possession of considerable wealth, power, and influence and use it for duplicitous means.

For example, the mass shooting in 2018 of 11 Jewish people at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh was motivated by conspiracy theories that George Soros, the Jewish billionaire known for contributing to liberal causes, was secretly controlling the Honduran migrant caravan, a dwindling group of about 4,000 refugees heading towards the US-Mexico border, as part of a wider scheme to “replace” the white American population.

## Reduce trust in science.

Conspiracy theories erode trust in scientific institutions, scientists, and scientific data. Conspiracy theory belief can drive people to defy public health guidelines and put others at greater risk of exposure to deadly diseases. For example, during the AIDS epidemic in South Africa, it was commonly believed that AIDS was part of a neocolonialist plot to continue to exploit the continent and foster African dependence on Western medicine.<sup>16</sup> Exposure to conspiracy theories about climate change has also been found to decrease people’s intentions to reduce their carbon footprint.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>12</sup> ADL, The great replacement: and explainer, <https://www.adl.org/resources/backgrounders/the-great-replacement-an-explainer>

<sup>13</sup> Barlett, J., Miller, C. (2010), The power of unreason: conspiracy theories, unreason and counter terrorism, [http://www.demos.co.uk/files/Conspiracy\\_theories\\_paper.pdf](http://www.demos.co.uk/files/Conspiracy_theories_paper.pdf)?1282913891

<sup>14</sup> ADL, A Hoax of Hate: The Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion, <https://www.adl.org/resources/backgrounders/a-hoax-of-hate-the-protocols-of-the-learned-elders-of-zion>

<sup>15</sup> Albertson, B. & Guiler, K. (2020), Conspiracy theories, election rigging, and support for democratic norms, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/2053168020959859>

<sup>16</sup> Dickinson D., Myths or theories? Alternative beliefs about HIV and AIDS in South African working class communities. *Afr J AIDS Res.* 2013 Sep;12(3):121-30. doi: 10.2989/16085906.2013.863212. PMID: 25860318.

<sup>17</sup> Jolley, D., & Douglas, K. M. (2013). The social consequences of conspiracism: Exposure to conspiracy theories decreases intentions to engage in politics and to reduce one’s carbon footprint. *British Journal of Psychology*, 105, 35–56. doi:10.1111/bjop.12018



# Distinguishing between real conspiracies and conspiracy theories

Actual conspiracies do exist and it can be misleading to dismiss all alleged conspiracies as baseless theories. Both the process of revealing a real conspiracy and the emerging belief in conspiracy theories start with suspicion. This makes it even more important to know and understand the difference between “real conspiracies” and “conspiracy theories”.

Real conspiracies are generally less elaborate and much smaller in scale than conspiracy theories. They are more often centered on a single, self-contained event or individual occurrence with a clear target like an assassination, scandal or Coup d’État. Such events rarely work out to plan and often have unintended consequences. They are often unearthed by whistle-blowers, government investigations, internal industry documents and the media, using verifiable facts and evidence. In contrast to real conspiracies, conspiracy theories are not based on decisive evidence, lack logic, follow complex narratives and may build on existing myths and prejudice. Making the distinction requires identifying the telltale traits of real conspiracies versus conspiratorial thinking.

Real conspiracies get discovered through conventional thinking—healthy scepticism of official accounts and carefully considering available evidence and alternative explanations, while being

committed to logical consistency.<sup>18</sup> This approach stands in stark contrast to conspiratorial thinking, which is characterized by being overly suspicious of any information that conflicts with the theory, over-interpreting evidence that supports a preferred theory, and inconsistency.

## Good Practice

To identify conspiracy theories, Media Animation, a media literacy resource center for French-speaking Belgium, produced the online course ‘Théories du Complot’. Through videos and exercises, the course trained learners to differentiate between rumour, disinformation and conspiracy theory, and analyze conspiratorial arguments and the audiovisual elements of a conspiracy theory video, before inventing their own conspiracy theory, and reinterpreting news videos from the perspective of a conspiracy theorist. By parodying a conspiracy theory, learners develop a practical understanding of the mechanics of conspiracy theories and differentiate between real conspiracies and conspiracy theories. Find out more: <https://theoriesducomplot.be/>

Conventional thinking		Conspiratorial thinking	
<b>Healthy scepticism</b>	Doors in the Watergate building are manipulated, so they won’t close. Perhaps somebody is trying to gain access to the building?	<b>Overriding suspicion</b>	Birds are everywhere. What if government manipulated them to spy on me? Nobody would notice!
<b>Strives for coherence</b>	The police find evidence of an attempted burglary and arrest five people. The FBI establish links to the Election Committee of the Republican party.	<b>Over interpreting evidence</b>	If this is the case, perhaps birds are not even real? What if they are actually robots? I can see them sit on power lines all the time. This might be evidence that they use them to charge their batteries!
<b>Responsive to evidence</b>	The investigation reveals a systematic cover-up of the crime by the administration of then United States President Richard Nixon.	<b>Contradictory</b>	If birds are fake, how can it be that I can still eat eggs? The government must produce replicas and place them in supermarkets to cover up their conspiracy!
↓	↓	↓	↓
<b>Actual conspiracy</b>	The Watergate scandal was a conspiracy orchestrated by the administration of United States President Richard Nixon in the lead-up to his re-election in 1972. <sup>19</sup> The scandal led to his resignation as president in 1974.	<b>Redundant conspiracy theory</b>	The “Birds Aren’t Real” conspiracy theory is a made-up conspiracy theory, which was created in 2020 to illustrate the pattern and absurdity of conspiratorial thinking. It has gained online popularity with over half a million followers on social media. <sup>20</sup>

Source: Lewandowsky, S., & Cook, J. (2020), p.3. *The Conspiracy Theory Handbook*.

<sup>18</sup> Lewandowsky, S., Lloyd, E. A., & Brophy, S. (2018). When THUNCing Trumps thinking: What distant alternative worlds can tell us about the real world. *Argumenta*, 3, 217–231. doi:10.23811/52.arg2017.lew.llo.bro, <https://www.argumenta.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Argumenta-Stephan-Lewandowsky-Elisabeth-A.-Lloyd-Scott-Brophy-When-THUNCing-Trumps-Thinking.pdf>

<sup>19</sup> Washington Post, The Watergate Story, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/watergate/>

<sup>20</sup> Sanjay, S. (2020), Inside The Online Movement Which Believes Birds Are Government Spy Drones, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/xg8p4n/birds-arent-real-they-are-government-spy-drones>

# How to identify a conspiracy theory?

## Seven Traits of Conspiratorial Thinking

Misinformation spreads like a virus and conspiracy theories are especially contagious. We can stop conspiracy theories from spreading through understanding the techniques used to deceive. Awareness of the telltale traits of conspiratorial thinking is the key to distinguishing between real conspiracies and baseless conspiracy theories. This section lists the seven traits of conspiratorial thinking.<sup>21</sup> The more a theory possesses these traits, the less plausible it is and more likely to be a conspiracy theory.



Contradictory



Overriding Suspicion



Nefarious Intent



Something Must Be Wrong



Persecuted Victim



Immune to Evidence



Re-interpreting Randomness

Source: Lewandowsky, S., & Cook, J. (2020), p.6. *The Conspiracy Theory Handbook*.

### 1. Contradictory

The underlying belief driving conspiratorial thinking is commitment to the idea that the official account must be wrong. One result is that conspiracy theorists are attracted to multiple ideas that conflict with the official account, even if those ideas are mutually contradictory. One study found that people who believed the conspiracy theory that Princess Diana of Wales (1961-1997) was murdered were also more likely to believe that she faked her own death.<sup>22</sup> Conspiracy theorists are so committed to disbelieving the official account that it does not matter if their belief system is incoherent.



#### Case Study: Climate change denial

Climate change denial and conspiratorial thinking go hand in hand. Conspiracy theories are the most common response from climate change deniers when presented with information about climate change.<sup>23</sup> The different arguments seen in climate disagreements often contradict each other, such as the simultaneous claims that temperature cannot be measured accurately but global temperatures have declined.<sup>24</sup>

### 2. Overriding suspicion

While it is important to have healthy scepticism when assessing claims and information, conspiracy theorists take this to extremes, exhibiting nihilistic levels of scepticism towards institutions, scientific information and official accounts. A telltale red flag of conspiratorial thinking is extreme scepticism of scientific data. This overriding suspicion prevents the belief in anything that does not fit into the conspiracy theory.

### 3. Nefarious intent

Conspiracy theories often include villainous conspirators, whose motives are assumed to be nefarious. This is part of the reason why conspiracy theories are engaging and attractive to some people, employing compelling narratives of evil villains and assuming agency and intent to explain random events. Conspiracy theories never propose that the presumed conspirators have benign motivations.



#### Case Study: Covid conspirators

Bill Gates, the co-founder of Microsoft, is one common character in conspiracy theories about the COVID-19 pandemic. Mr. Gates, as an advocate for vaccination, features in COVID-19 conspiracy theories that wrongfully suggest that he has a nefarious motive for implanting microchips in people's bodies.

<sup>21</sup> Lewandowsky, S., & Cook, J. (2020). *The Conspiracy Theory Handbook*, <https://www.climatechangecommunication.org/conspiracy-theory-handbook/>

<sup>22</sup> Wood, M. J., Douglas, K. M., & Sutton, R. M. (2012). Dead and alive: Beliefs in contradictory conspiracy theories. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, 3, 767–773. doi:10.1177/1948550611434786

<sup>23</sup> Smith, N., & Leiserowitz, A. (2012). The rise of global warming skepticism: exploring affective image associations in the United States over time. *Risk Analysis: An International Journal*, 32(6), 1021-1032.

<sup>24</sup> Lewandowsky, S., Cook, J., & Lloyd, E. (2016). The "Alice in Wonderland" mechanics of the rejection of (climate) science: Simulating coherence by conspiracism. *Synthese*, 195, 175–196. doi:10.1007/s11229-016-1198-6, <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11229-016-1198-6>

#### 4. Something must be wrong

The driving force behind conspiratorial thinking is the rock-solid belief that the official account is based on deception. Consequently, new information or arguments may cause conspiracy theorists to abandon specific parts of their theory when they become untenable, but the underlying conviction that “something must be wrong” does not change.



##### Case Study: The ‘Plandemic’

The “Plandemic” conspiracy theory video went viral in 2020 and has been seen by millions of people. The documentary claims that COVID-19 was artificially created to benefit the production of vaccines. But when the documentary maker Mikki Willis was asked if he was sure that COVID-19 was intentionally started, his reply was “I don’t know, to be clear, if it’s an intentional or naturally occurring situation. I have no idea.” Though details of the conspiracy shifted, his believe in the COVID-19 conspiracy did not.<sup>25</sup>

#### 5. Persecuted victim

Other common characters in conspiracy theories are heroic victims - the theorists themselves. Conspiracy theorists see themselves as victims of organized persecution. Simultaneously, they also believe they are brave heroes fighting against the odds to bring down the all-powerful conspirators.

#### 6. Immune to evidence

The overriding suspicion of conspiracy theorists makes it extremely difficult to change their mind and convince them that their theory is wrong. This is because any evidence you present that shows a theory is false is re-interpreted as being part of the conspiracy.<sup>26</sup> This can manifest in several ways. If there is no evidence to support a conspiracy theory, that only proves how effective the conspirators were in hiding their activities. Conversely, if there is strong evidence against the conspiracy theory, the conspiracy theory is subsequently expanded to include the source of the evidence as being part of the theory.



##### Case Study: Amazon Forest Fires

During the 2019 Amazon forest fires in Brazil, many claimed that the satellite images and videos of fires in the Amazon were fake and the forest was not burning. Despite being presented with evidence, some people believed that the images were instead staged by conspiring NGOs, foreign governments and indigenous peoples, in an attempt to place the Amazon under the United Nations’ authority.

<sup>25</sup> Allen, M. (2020), I’m an Investigative Journalist. These Are the Questions I Asked About the Viral “Plandemic” Video, <https://www.propublica.org/article/im-an-investigative-journalist-these-are-the-questions-i-asked-about-the-viral-plandemic-video>

<sup>26</sup> Bale, J. M. (2007). Political paranoia v. political realism: On distinguishing between bogus conspiracy theories and genuine conspiratorial politics. *Patterns of Prejudice*, 41, 45–60. doi:10.1080/00313220601118751

## 7. Re-interpreting randomness

Pattern detection is a common feature in conspiracy theories, where random, unrelated events are weaved into a broader, interconnected pattern where nothing occurs by accident.<sup>27</sup> Any perceived connections are imbued with sinister meaning. For example, a random fact such as intact windows in the Pentagon after the 9/11 attacks was re-interpreted as evidence for a conspiracy because if an airliner had hit the Pentagon, then supposedly all the windows would have shattered.<sup>28</sup>

### Good practice example: the Twitter '5G - COVID-19 prompt'

Twitter launched a search prompt in partnership with the government of the United Kingdom to respond to misinformation about 5G and COVID-19. The prompt directs users searching for information about 5G and COVID-19 to authoritative sources of information and informs them that the UK government has found no evidence of a link between the two.

### Patternicity:

The tendency to find meaningful patterns in meaningless noise.<sup>29</sup> Humans are hardwired to detect patterns in randomness, whether it be shapes in clouds or human faces in Martian rock formations.



### Case Study: 5G causing COVID-19

The conspiracy theory that the COVID-19 pandemic was caused by the 5G mobile phone network is based on another form of pattern detection — mistaking correlation for causation. Just because two things happen around the same time, we are prone to assume one causes the other. Fifth-generation wireless network technology (5G) started rolling out in 2019 — the same year that the COVID-19 pandemic began. This coincidence has led some to conclude that 5G caused COVID-19. There is a danger of mistaking correlation for causation when two things can appear connected because of an extra factor. Conspiracy theorists compare maps of COVID-19 outbreaks with maps of 5G networks to argue the two are linked. But COVID-19 outbreaks are also correlated to population density. Highly populated regions also happen to be where more 5G towers are going up.<sup>30</sup>

**Learning about the characteristics of conspiracy theories is an important step towards building resilience against them. You can help spot and resist conspiracy theories by exposing their tactics. Exposing the techniques of conspiracy theorists is key to preventing ourselves and others from being misled.**

<sup>27</sup> Barkun, M. (2003). *A culture of conspiracy: Apocalyptic visions in contemporary America*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

<sup>28</sup> Swami, V., Chamorro-Premuzic, T., & Furnham, A. (2010). Unanswered questions: A preliminary investigation of personality and individual difference predictors of 9/11 conspiracist beliefs. *Applied Cognitive Psychology, 24*(6), 749-761.

<sup>29</sup> Michael Shermer (2018), Patternicity: finding meaningful patterns in meaningless noise, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/patternicity-finding-meaningful-patterns/>

<sup>30</sup> Lajka, A. (2020), Maps do not show link between coronavirus and 5G wireless, <https://apnews.com/article/archive-fact-checking-8758210339>

# Addressing conspiracy theories: what can educators do?

## 1. Check your own beliefs and biases

Nobody is free of biases or fears that can open the door to believing in a conspiracy theory.

As a first step towards addressing conspiracy theories, educators should reflect on how media and information reach them, and the biases that may motivate them, using these six questions:

Similar questions can also be shared with students to prepare conversations related to conspiracy theories.

- 1 What are my fears, beliefs and values? How do they affect my decisions and how I interact with people?
- 2 Do I have prejudices? Why?
- 3 Do I feel disadvantaged? In what way and for which reason?
- 4 Do I feel the need to blame somebody else for my personal misfortune? Why?
- 5 How do I choose my sources of information?
- 6 Has this recently changed, e.g. since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic?

Similar questions can also be shared with students to prepare conversations related to conspiracy theories.

## 2. Building resilience against conspiracy theories

Trying to limit the spread of conspiracy theories is more productive and effective than trying to undo the damage with someone who already believes in conspiracy theories. This section focuses on pre-emptive measures to build resilience against conspiracy theories.

### Good Practice

UNESCO's media and information literacy (MIL) framework enhances learners' competencies to examine and compare information from various sources to evaluate its reliability, validity, accuracy, authority, timeliness, and bias. It helps learners to recognize prejudice, deception, or manipulation.<sup>31</sup> Thinking critically and being informed about conspiracy theories is key to challenging them.<sup>32</sup>

The #ThinkBeforeSharing campaign empowers social media users to stop the spread of conspiracy theories by learning how to identify, debunk, react to and report on them.

This campaign by UNESCO and the European Commission is jointly implemented with Twitter and the World Jewish Congress.

#ThinkBeforeSharing

## CONSPIRACY THEORIES

# Is this one? Check before sharing

**BE WARNED: THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC HAS SEEN A RISE IN HARMFUL AND MISLEADING CONSPIRACY THEORIES. IT MAY BE DIFFICULT TO RECOGNIZE THEM OR KNOW HOW BEST TO DEAL WITH THEM.**

### Check the author – who is writing this and why?

**UNLIKELY**

- The author has recognized qualifications and credentials in the topic
- The author uses verifiable facts and evidence from scientific or academic research

**YES**

**NO**

**LIKELY**

- The author is a self-proclaimed expert and not attached to a reputable organization or institution
- The author claims to have credentials but they don't withstand scrutiny or are suspended

**NO**

### Check the source – Is it reliable and reputable?

**UNLIKELY**

- The source has been quoted by several reputable media outlets
- The information is backed by many scientists/academics
- Independent fact-checking websites support the source and related claims

**YES**

**NO**

**LIKELY**

- The source of information is not clear
- The information is shared only by self-proclaimed experts
- Independent fact-checking websites do not support the source and have refuted related claims

**NO**

### Check the tone and style – Is it balanced and fair or sensationalist and one-dimensional?

**UNLIKELY**

- The author does not shy away from exploring complexity, including different perspectives
- The author is prepared to acknowledge limits to their knowledge
- The tone is objective, factual


**NO**

**NO**


**LIKELY**

- The author presents their information as the only valid truth
- The author raises questions instead of providing answers
- The author demonizes whoever they assume is behind the alleged secret plot
- The tone is subjective, emotionally charged
- Emotional images or anecdotes are used to illustrate the message

**YES**



**OK TO SHARE**




**DON'T SHARE**

### What is a real conspiracy?

Real conspiracies large and small DO exist. They are more often centred on single, self-contained events or an individual like an assassination or a coup d'état. They are unearthed by whistle-blowers and the media, using verifiable facts and evidence.

**Looking for a REAL CONSPIRACY?**



In 2006, the U.S. District Court in Washington DC (USA) ruled that major cigarette companies were guilty of conspiracy. For decades, they had hidden evidence of health risks attached to smoking to promote higher sales.

—LA Times, 2006

With thanks to Michael Butter, co-author of the *COMPACT Guide to Conspiracy Theories*, and John Cook and Stephan Lewandowsky, authors of *The Debunking Handbook* and *The Conspiracy Theory Handbook*.

<sup>31</sup> UNESCO's programme on media and information literacy, <https://www.unesco.org/en/communication-information/media-information-literacy>

<sup>32</sup> UNESCO (2020), #ThinkBeforeSharing - Stop the spread of conspiracy theories, <https://en.unesco.org/themes/gced/thinkbeforesharing>

## Prebunking conspiracy theories

“Prebunking” helps to prevent the spread of conspiracy theories by addressing the problem in more general terms. Prebunking exercises do not focus on one conspiracy theory specifically, but may alert for the existence of conspiracy theories in the context of specific topics (e.g. COVID-19), against specific groups (e.g. Jewish communities) or for general strategies and rhetoric used to spread them (e.g. scapegoating).

### Prebunking aims to:

- Warn learners early that conspiracy theories exist.
- Encourage rational thinking, questioning, and fact-checking.
- Alert learners to the arguments behind the most common conspiracy theories, manipulation techniques and the key traits of conspiratorial thinking.

### Inoculating against conspiracy theories:

Prebunking is also sometimes called “inoculation”. Psychologists have proven that weakened forms of harmful information, carefully introduced and framed, can help to strengthen the resilience against wider harmful messages, much like a vaccine.<sup>33</sup> There are two elements to an inoculating message. First, an explicit warning of an impending threat of being misled. Second, counterarguments that refute the misinformation’s arguments.

### Good Practices: Prebunking apps and games

The Cranky Uncle game teaches players how to identify misleading rhetorical techniques in misinformation. As well as taking advantage of interactive gameplay, the game also uses cartoons and humour to engage players. Educational resources and classroom activities accompanying the game are available at [www.crankyuncle.com](http://www.crankyuncle.com).

Similarly, Cambridge University’s Go Viral! game, developed in collaboration with media agency DROG and the UK Cabinet Office, raises awareness about some of the most common strategies used to spread false and misleading information about COVID-19. Understanding these tricks strengthens resilience against them.

The game is available at [www.goviralgame.com](http://www.goviralgame.com).

In India, WhatsApp shared “10 easy tips” to identify fake news with users to address the spread of disinformation on the platform. The tips encouraged users to “Question Information That Upsets You”, to “Check Information That Seems Unbelievable” and brought to users’ attention that “Fake News Often Goes Viral”.<sup>34</sup> These simple rules were found to have helped individuals evaluate the credibility of sources and identify indicators of problematic content.

In Germany, the Amadeu Antonio Foundation has created an online generator for made-up conspiracy theories. The generator allows online users to create their own conspiracy narrative, while sensitizing for the most common key words associated with conspiracy theories linked to COVID-19.

Learn more: [www.amadeu-antonio-stiftung.de/glaubnichtalles](http://www.amadeu-antonio-stiftung.de/glaubnichtalles).

### Example: Preventing Holocaust denial

A common antisemitic conspiracy theory is that Jews have invented or exaggerated the genocide of the Jewish people during the Second World War for their own benefit (e.g. to receive compensation). When teaching about the Holocaust you may want to inoculate learners against this conspiracy theory by:

- Stating from the outset that the Holocaust is one of the most well-researched and documented events in recent history and by presenting learners with historical documents and sources.
- Alerting for the existence of claims that seek to deny or distort the history of the Holocaust. Stress that these claims are false and contradict the aforementioned facts.
- Explaining how these claims are linked to antisemitic prejudice (e.g. false claims of Jewish greed for power and wealth).

Learn more about Holocaust denial and distortion:

[www.againstholocaustdistortion.org](http://www.againstholocaustdistortion.org)

### Educators can prebunk conspiracy theories in two ways:

Logic-based inoculation:

Explain the misleading techniques or flawed reasoning employed in conspiracy theories. For example, teach learners about the seven traits of conspiratorial thinking to help learners spot the same misleading techniques when navigating information online and offline.

Fact-based inoculation:

Explain to learners how the conspiracy theory is false by communicating accurate information. This approach is most effective before learners have begun conspiratorial thinking.

### Are you working with learners in primary education?

Keep it simple! As with any complex and sensitive topic, it is important not to overwhelm. Adapt the tone and content to examples they are familiar with. Stick to the following three steps:

- Explain that a conspiracy theory is based on wrong information.
- Explain that it is important to not make assumptions based on wrong information.
- Nurture their interest in scientific learning and research.

<sup>33</sup> Cambridge University Social Decision-Making Lab (2021), Pre-bunk tactics reduce public susceptibility to COVID-19 conspiracies and falsehoods, study finds, <https://www.cam.ac.uk/research/news/pre-bunk-tactics-reduce-public-susceptibility-to-covid-19-conspiracies-and-falsehoods-study-finds>

<sup>34</sup> Guess, A. M. et al. (2020), A digital media literacy intervention increases discernment between mainstream and false news in the United States and India, [www.pnas.org/content/117/27/15536](http://www.pnas.org/content/117/27/15536)

## Debunking conspiracy theories

Another, and perhaps better known, approach to addressing conspiracy theories is “debunking”. It focuses on dismantling a specific conspiracy theory to show that its argumentation is flawed and its message false.

Debunking can be learned. It goes hand in hand with general critical thinking, research skills, and media and information literacy. Learners need to be encouraged to critically examine information they consume. They need to know where to turn to for reliable and fact-checked information and learn techniques to fact-check themselves. There are various ways to debunk conspiracy theories, some of which mirror the approaches described in the prebunking section:

**Fact-based debunking** shows how misinformation is false by researching and explaining facts. This approach has been shown to be effective in debunking the “birther” conspiracy theory which falsely holds that former U.S. president Barack Obama was born outside the United States.<sup>35</sup>

**Logic-based debunking** explains the misleading techniques in misinformation. For example, pointing out vaccination research that has been conducted by independent, publicly funded scientists is effective in refuting conspiracy theories about the pharmaceutical industry.<sup>36</sup>

**Empathy-based debunking** compassionately calls attention to the targets of conspiracy theories and the potential of conspiracy theories to cause harm and violence.

**Source-based debunking** discredits those who spread conspiracy theories, leading learners to distance themselves from them. This approach does not work on firm believers of conspiracy theory.

Source: Lewandowsky, S., & Cook, J. (2020), p.9. *The Conspiracy Theory Handbook*.

### Empowerment

When people feel threatened or lacking control, they are more prone to conspiratorial thinking. Two ways to cognitively empower learners are to encourage them to think analytically rather than intuitively and to ensure that they feel heard and accepted. Learners feel more empowered when they perceive that decisions are made fairly and transparently and when they have a voice in decision making.

### The Dos and Don'ts of Debunking

#### DOs

- Focus on the facts you want to communicate, not the myth you want to debunk.
- Choose one target — the author, source or logic behind the conspiracy theory to not overwhelm.
- Always state clearly that the information is wrong before quoting a conspiracy theory.
- Provide a fact-based alternative explanation.
- If possible, use visual aids to back your argument.

#### DON'Ts

- Don't focus on the conspiracy theory first. You may inadvertently reinforce it.
- Don't overwhelm with information.

### Good practices to strengthen critical thinking:

The Adventures of Literatus is an educational game for teenagers that helps to find, analyze and verify information, and distinguish fake and reliable news. It is available in Armenian, English, French, Georgian, Polish and Russian.

Learn more: [www.media.am/literatus/#en](http://www.media.am/literatus/#en).

The Media and Information Literacy Coalition of Nigeria (MILCON) has established media and information literacy (MIL) clubs in all regions of the country to enable an increasing number of students to be creatively involved in MIL training.

Learn more: [www.milcon.org.ng](http://www.milcon.org.ng).

<sup>35</sup> Warner, B. R., & Neville-Shepard, R. (2014). Echoes of a conspiracy: Birthers, truthers, and the cultivation of extremism. *Communication Quarterly*, 62, 1–17. doi:10.1080/01463373.2013.822407

<sup>36</sup> Schmid, P., & Betsch, C. (2019). Effective strategies for rebutting science denialism in public discussions. *Nature Human Behavior*, 3, 931–939. doi:10.1038/s41562-019-0632-4

### 3. Address conspiracy theories when they arise

The most effective counter to conspiracy theories is to prevent people from believing in them in the first place, but how do you change the mind of somebody who already believes in a conspiracy theory? The first thing to recognize is that this is an extremely challenging prospect. Many conspiracy theorists are deeply convinced of their beliefs. Their whole worldview is centered on them and they typically believe in more than one conspiracy theory. You may be able to encourage learners to fact-check information and use critical thinking, but you will not be able to tell them what to believe. Related conversations will require empathy, affirmation and patience.

#### Parent-teacher relationships

The belief in a conspiracy theory rarely comes out of nowhere. Especially young learners are likely to repeat what they hear at home or from close peers. This is an additional challenge. For example, teachers addressing QAnon conspiracy theories in the United States reported that conversations around this issue disrupted parent-teacher relationships and led to assumptions that teachers were part of the “liberal elite”, making it more difficult to change their students’ minds. Should this be an issue, teachers may ask their supervisor or school director for support, e.g. through a mediated conversation with parents, in absence of the student.<sup>37</sup>

#### When and how to address conspiracy theories

Learners usually share conspiracy theories spontaneously, sharing their support or fascination with a particular belief. These moments can be difficult for educators to handle and they risk disrupting lesson time. While educators may wish to address the learner in the moment, it may be preferable to prepare for the conversation to avoid pushing the learner further away. To prevent other learners developing an interest in the conspiracy theory, it is important that you do the following:

- 1 Acknowledge that you have heard the statement.
- 2 Express that, to your knowledge, the statement is not backed by authoritative information and calm the situation to prevent the statement from causing fear or distress among other learners (e.g. in case of a conspiracy theory linked to the COVID-19 vaccine, state that the vaccine has been scientifically proven to be safe).
- 3 Depending on the severity of the statement, point at the potential harmful consequences of the statement (e.g. state that it is important to get vaccinated to curb the pandemic).
- 4 Announce that you will have a separate conversation to address the topic, ideally indicating a date and time, so the person who has shared the conspiracy theory feels heard and taken seriously.

#### Establish a safe and respectful learning environment

Whether a discussion is pre-planned or not, it is very important for educators to facilitate the whole process through the development of a learning environment in which learners feel safe and respected. Learners are more likely to critically reflect on any conspiratorial beliefs if they believe their position, feelings, and perspective on the issue have been fairly considered, or if they believe that their ideas and positions are being critiqued or questioned, rather than the learner themselves. One way to build a community in the classroom is for educators and learners to develop together a list of ground rules to guide the discussion process. After all the rules have been proposed, only those agreed upon by the majority of the classroom should be adopted. These rules can be reviewed before and during any discussions.

#### Preparing for a conversation about conspiracy theories

- 1 **Inform yourself about the conspiracy theory, its key arguments and meta-narratives (e.g. scapegoating, fearmongering, etc.).** If it is a complex theory, focus on the key arguments and plan to frame the discussion in general terms, explaining what conspiracy theories are, how they mislead and why they may be harmful.
- 2 **Identify the level of harm:** is the conspiracy theory targeting particular groups or people? Is it undermining scientific facts with wider consequences for society? Is it linked to discriminatory rhetoric or ideologies?
- 3 **Develop a set of rules for the conversation** to share with your students before you begin. Make sure everyone will feel heard and respected.
- 4 **Allocate enough time for the conversation** and develop an exit strategy should it derail, ensuring that nobody will feel “cut off”.

<sup>37</sup> Scaachi Koul (2020), These Teachers Are Struggling To Pull Their Students Out Of A QAnon Rabbit Hole



## Strategies and considerations for a conversation with learners who believe in a conspiracy theory:

### Avoid ridicule

Try to understand why they believe what they believe. Aggressively deconstructing, ridiculing a conspiracy theory or focusing on beating the conspiracy theorist in an argument runs the risk of being automatically rejected.

### Affirm critical thinking

Conspiracy theorists perceive themselves as critical thinkers, while considering non-conspiracy theorists as gullible and duped into believing an official account. This perception offers an opportunity to connect with conspiracy theorists by appealing to the shared value of critical thinking, then encouraging them to apply this approach towards a more critical analysis of their theory, in line with the above-mentioned debunking exercises.

### Show empathy

Somebody who believes in a conspiracy theory may often be truly fearful and distressed. As the goal in a conversation with a conspiracy theorist is to develop their open-mindedness, you should lead by example by similarly being open minded. This can be demonstrated with an empathic approach, seeking to build understanding with the other party.

### Model respectful and civil behaviour

Learners will observe your behaviour and may modify their behaviour accordingly. Observe and remind learners of the discussion ground rules. Allow learners to finish speaking before another begins. Do not assign blame, openly disagree or chastise, but instead respectfully share accurate information and counterarguments from a variety of sources.

### 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. Check whether such messages are at your disposal, either online or within your community (e.g. exit programs for former members of violent extremist groups, etc.).

### Don’t push

Too much pressure might backfire. Focus on simple facts and logic instead of covering every detail. Instead, encourage open debate and questions. Leave learners time to process new information and logic-based arguments.

### Responding to hateful or discriminatory conspiracy theories

While all conspiratorial thinking threatens human rights values, conspiracy theories that propagate hateful or discriminatory messages may present an immediate harm to other learners, groups and communities. Although these conspiracy theories can be addressed using the tools and approaches listed above, educators may need to consider additional steps to address incidents of hate or bias involving conspiracy theories, or if educators are concerned about a learner’s susceptibility to violent extremist propaganda.

#### Respond promptly:

Offer immediate assistance as responses to hate and bias incidents must be both prompt and effective, and a delayed response may exacerbate the situation.

#### Evaluate the incident:

Determine whether it may be an indication of a deeper problem within the environment of the school or the conspiracy theorist’s situation that may require broader measures. Consider where the student has learned about the conspiracy theory, and whether it has been transmitted online, at home, among peers or within a community. In schools, involve the parent(s) and caregiver(s) of the learner(s) transmitting the conspiracy theory.

#### Refer to relevant policies:

Refer to anti-bullying or anti-discrimination school policies, if appropriate. Report to safeguarding authorities or safeguarding officers, only if appropriate. Be mindful of the possible consequences on learners and ensure that their cases are treated adequately and respectfully, avoiding further alienation or resentment that may push learners further towards conspiratorial beliefs.<sup>38</sup>

#### Start discussions:

Engage with learners about the conspiracy theory in question. However, reference to a specific victim or perpetrator should not be made without their authorization.

<sup>38</sup> UNESCO (2022), Building the defences of peace: A human rights and well-being approach to the prevention of violent extremism in schools

## Additional Resources

- **The Conspiracy Theory Handbook:**  
<https://sks.to/conspiracy>
- **The COMPACT guide to conspiracy theories:**  
<https://conspiracytheories.eu/education/guide-and-recommendations/>
- **The Debunking Handbook 2020:**  
<https://www.climatechangecommunication.org/debunking-handbook-2020/>
- **Guidance for UK Teachers produced by lecturers at University College London.**  
<http://www.teachingcitizenship.org.uk/resource/conspiracy-theories-classroom-guidance-teachers>
- **OSCE/ODIHR teaching aid “Addressing antisemitism through education: challenging conspiracy theories”:**  
<https://www.osce.org/odihr/441101>
- **European Commission toolkit “How to spot and fight disinformation”:**  
[https://europa.eu/learning-corner/spot-and-fight-disinformation\\_en](https://europa.eu/learning-corner/spot-and-fight-disinformation_en)
- **UNESCO guide on addressing antisemitism:**  
<https://en.unesco.org/preventing-violent-extremism/education/antisemitism>
- **UNESCO programme on media and information literacy:**  
<https://www.unesco.org/en/communication-information/media-information-literacy>
- **Debunking Holocaust distortion website:**  
<https://www.againstholocaustdistortion.org/>



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Educational, Scientific  
and Cultural Organization

# Addressing conspiracy theories

## What teachers need to know

This document is a first introduction for educators, working in and outside of formal schooling, on how to identify, prevent and address conspiracy theories in education settings. It seeks to provide educators with key definitions and essential knowledge to grasp the complexity of the phenomenon and alert learners about the key characteristics and harmful effects of conspiracy theories for a first, immediate response. To support educators in this endeavour, this document outlines strategies to prevent the belief in conspiracy theories as well as to engage with learners who already believe in them.

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