

# CONSPIRACIES!



FREE TO THE PEOPLE

What is a conspiracy theory?

To “conspire” means literally “to breathe together,” like to whisper. A conspiracy is for a group to plot in secret. A *conspiracy theory* is the belief that something we see has a hidden truth behind it—that’s it’s a plot and a lie.

What are some conspiracy theories? Have you heard of these ones?

- Moon landing didn’t happen
- JFK was killed by the mob
- Tupac is still alive
- Earth is flat
- The dark ages never happened
- All the 9/11 conspiracies (LIHOP and MIHOP)
- HIV was made by the USA
- Lizard People (David Icke)
- And of course, we’ve got coronavirus!
  - Chinese Lab
  - American Lab!
  - Detroit Red Wings Season
  - 5G towers

So these seem pretty silly. Why is this so important?

- Quantity due to information access
- They're almost always wrong
- Danger in politics. Conspiracy theories undermine confidence in institutions—not just government, but things like climate science. Especially with corona—lots of people said the threat was overblown, and then they helped to spread the virus.
- Dangerous for democracy, too. Undermining belief in democracy is a self-fulfilling prophecy: it's not perfect no matter what, but it's worse when people drop out altogether. That's why some countries spread those theories on social media.
- And of course, direct violence: The Nazi genocides in Europe, the witch hunts in early modern Europe, and anti-Catholicism in the USA.

So conspiracy theories have been around for a long time. Why do they hang on?

- One obvious reason is that there ARE real conspiracies—the Nazi theory about Jews was wrong, but then the Nazis really did conspire
- Explosion on social media
- Decline in governmental trust
- Each one breeds new ones—if you believe one theory, you're likely to believe more
- Conspiracy theories are hard to disprove—contradicting them confirms them.

Simplify complexity:

- Maybe the biggest reason: people *want* to believe them. They are reassuring, no matter how awful they are. The world is chaos, etc., and this means certainty.

So what can we do?

- Maybe you just know the facts
- Logical arguments: Ockham's razor. Invisible monkeys.
- The *Inception* technique: it's really lizards who want you to believe
- For short-term agreement: work within the coordinates without affirming them. “China invented global warming so we'd stop using FF.” vs. “Even if they were plotting against us, they'd *want* us to use FF.”

Let's not pretend it's only other people, though. Almost all of us believe in one conspiracy theory or another. We like to think *other* people make mistakes, but we're full of logical inconsistencies and problems too.

The best thing we can do is learn to think critically and constructively about information. That is a topic we'll develop throughout this series.

**Suggested Reading:**

Richard Hofstader, "The Paranoid Style in American Politics"

Robert Brotherton, *Suspicious Minds*

Michael Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy*

David Aaronovitch, *Voodoo Histories*

Joseph Uscinski and Joseph Parent, *American Conspiracy Theories*

Jesse Walker, *The United States of Paranoia*

**For a full list of book recommendations, visit:**

[www.carnegielibrary.org/staff-picks/navigating-information-fatigue-conspiracies/](http://www.carnegielibrary.org/staff-picks/navigating-information-fatigue-conspiracies/)

**Presenter Contact Information:**

Calum Matheson, PhD

Assistant Professor of Public Deliberation and Civic Life and Director of Debate

University of Pittsburgh Department of Communication

[matheson@pitt.edu](mailto:matheson@pitt.edu)

[www.comm.pitt.edu/person/calum-matheson-phd](http://www.comm.pitt.edu/person/calum-matheson-phd)