

Understanding conspiracy theory

Conspiracy theory – the belief that a covert, influential agent has plotted an unexplained event – is by nature a social phenomenon. However, conspiracy theories can be used as a tool for spreading disinformation and propaganda with destabilising effects, as they have the potential to incite hatred and violence against a perceived enemy.

Narratives on steroids — definition and driving factors

The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) defines the term conspiracy theory as 'the theory that an event or phenomenon occurs as a result of a conspiracy between interested parties', specifically 'a belief that some covert but influential agency (typically political in motivation and oppressive in intent) is responsible for an unexplained event'. Contrary to the widespread [claim](#) among conspiracy theorists – that the CIA created the label 'conspiracy theory' in the 1960s to discredit those who questioned the official US narrative – the OED [dates](#) the earliest example of written use of the term back to 1909. Conspiracy theories can be narrated not only by social actors, but also by [governments](#) and extremist groups, who can use them as a [propaganda/disinformation](#) tool to mobilise opinions and attitudes with the aim of creating competing narratives that [undermine](#) trust in authorities, [democratic institutions](#) and mainstream media.

'That's what they want you to think': why conspiracy theories flourish

The suspicion that conspiracies occur is not necessarily paranoid: successful governance sometimes requires secrecy, and 'secretly collaborative and even collusive behaviour may enable political actors to achieve an agreed-upon end', as Jovan Byford [notes](#). Conspiracy theories sometimes contain a [grain of truth](#) that is exaggerated and propelled into a fabricated, popular narrative. However, in these '[narratives on steroids](#)' nothing happens randomly, as everything is tied to a large-scale plot, benefiting a malicious agent. Existing facts that counter the conspiracy theory 'facts' are dismissed with '[that's what they want you to think](#)', providing further imagined [evidence](#) that everybody is part of the suspected grand black-and-white plan, rhetorically organised to be seen as factual proof of a far-reaching battle between Good and Evil (the Other).

Some scholars [suggest](#) that insecurity and discontent can prompt a popular need for tangible scapegoats, and create a sense of belonging and identity among (groups of) conspiracy theorists. There are claims that conspiracy theories are particularly [popular](#) in authoritarian regimes, because they thrive on public distrust in mainstream media and government institutions. However, the US has a long tradition of conspiracy theories which continue to inspire similar narratives in other parts of the world. Some argue that information overload cause people to seek simplified explanations. However, many conspiracy theories seem far more complicated than the official version. As [Joseph E. Uscinski](#) asks: 'Which is more complicated, the suggestion that 19 terrorists boarded planes and crashed them on 9/11/2001, or that Bush, Cheney, the FBI, the CIA, Israel, all major news outlets, the NYPD, the 9/11 Commission, and Popular Mechanics magazine are all secretly conspiring together to ... deceive the public?'

New platforms boost the visibility of conspiracy theories

Conspiracy theories have seen a boost in recent decades. In particular the period after 9/11 saw an [increase](#) of them in the US, and there are similar trends in both the former Soviet Union and the Arab world. Although conspiracy theories have existed for most of recorded history, recent studies [suggest](#) that these alternative narratives spread faster on social media platforms than in traditional media or oral communication. For example, the latest version of the 9/11 conspiracy theory film Loose change (2009) — claiming that the events were an inside job — has been viewed over 4 million times on YouTube and has been released on DVD and web streaming.



The radicalising effect of conspiracy theories

Fortunately, many conspiracy theories are harmless. That [14%](#) of the US population believe that their government faked the moon landing in 1969 has not resulted in politically motivated violence. However, other conspiracy theories have had far-reaching political consequences and claimed many lives. While there is no direct causal link between conspiracy theories and violent extremism, recent studies [suggest](#) that conspiracy theories on global power and influence (that may fall on fertile ground among groups feeling marginalised) can work as a radicalising multiplier which 'feeds back into the ideologies, internal dynamics and psychological processes of the [extremist] group'. Anti-Semitic conspiracy theories gave rise to Nazism, resulted in the [Holocaust](#) (the systematic killing of 6 million Jews) and continue to thrive today. Anti-Muslim conspiracy theories have also fuelled violence. Shortly before Norwegian right-wing extremist Anders Breivik murdered 77 people on 22 July 2011, he disseminated a 1 500-page manifesto, in which he [blamed](#) the 'cultural Marxist/multiculturalist elites' for destroying Europe by allowing 'millions of Muslims to colonise' the continent. Despite the fact that Breivik [admitted](#) the massacre, conspiracy theories related to the massacre [flourished](#), suggesting that the attacks were a 'false flag' operation to defame either Muslims or the right, committed by Mossad (in cooperation with the CIA and NATO); Muslims; or Freemasons.

New fuel for global rumour mills

The increase in the amount of information available on the internet can make it difficult for individuals to assess the origins and reliability of 'bogus claims'. Although real, implemented plots have a limited lifetime (see box), fact-resistant rumours travel fast and far on the internet, and regional variations often blend into one another.

Conspiracy theories are an [essential part](#) of **Russia's** disinformation campaign against and beyond Ukraine and are spread by a [well-oiled and fine-tuned](#) Russian state media machine and assisted by the state-sponsored web-brigades ([troll army](#)). According to the Kremlin narrative, the US installed a fascist 'junta' in Kyiv to destroy Russia. This narrative is complemented by a confusing stream of conspiracy theories on the downing of Malaysian Airlines 17, some of which [claimed](#) that the US endorsed the alleged Ukrainian downing of MH17, mistaking it for Vladimir Putin's jet in a plot to kill him.

In the **Arab** world, real Western [deceptions](#), such as the mythical 'weapons of mass destruction' that prompted the 2003 invasion of Iraq, have added new fuel to old anti-Western conspiracy theories. The Arab spring in 2011 prompted a new wave of such narratives, [alleging](#) that Western powers, led by the US, were 'realising their long-held aim of dividing and weakening the Arab and Muslim worlds'. The rise of 'Islamic State' (ISIL/Da'esh) sparked a new wave of theories, according to which the group was [created](#) by the US.

Most recently, the Brussels terrorist attacks on 22 March 2016 sparked a wave of anti-Western conspiracy theories that both **pro-Russian, Arab and white supremacist** conspiracy theorists can agree on – similar to the ones that [emerged](#) all over the world in the wake of the November 2015 Paris attacks. The conspiracist Canada-based, anti-Western and [pro-Russian](#) website [Globalresearch.ca](#) claimed that the Brussels attacks were a 'false flag' operation; a Western 'fabricated terror attack' with the aim of giving 'Washington and their vassals more arguments to invade Syria, Iraq, Yemen'. The German version of the white supremacist online encyclopedia [Metapedia](#) put out a similar claim, alleging that mainstream media are collaborating with Western government actors in a psychological operation designed to deceive the European public.

The limited lifetime of genuine conspiracies

In a January 2016 study '[On Viability of Conspiratorial Beliefs](#)' – aimed at counter-acting anti-science beliefs from gaining a foothold through quantifying the unlikelihood of large-scale cohesive scientific fraud – David Grimes created a model to express the probability of a conspiracy being either deliberately or inadvertently revealed. Parameters for the model were estimated from examples of known conspiracies. The factors included the number of conspirators, the length of time, and the effects of conspirators dying. One of the known conspiracies examined was the US National Security Agency's large-scale surveillance programme, PRISM, which involved 36 000 people and was revealed by Edward Snowden in 2013 after six years.

Grimes then looked at four alleged conspiracies, estimated the number of required collaborators and calculated the plots' viability. It showed that a faked moon landing (requiring 411 000 collaborators) would have been revealed in 3.7 years, that a climate change fraud (with 405 000 involved) in 3.7-26.8 years, a vaccination conspiracy (22 000 collaborators) in 3.2-34.8 years, and a suppressed cancer cure (714 000 conspirators) in 3.3 years.