Conspiracy Theories
as a Way to Manipulate Public Consciousness

Political Science
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Definition

A conspiracy theory

- “makes reference to hidden, malevolent forces seeking to advance some nefarious aim”
- is not necessarily untrue
- contradicts “a commonly accepted explanation for the same phenomenon”
- ceases over time and becomes history or a well-known fact (The Washington Post)
Popular conspiracy theories

Conspiracy Theories

- Apollo: 50%
- JFK Assassination: 11%
- Elvis: 13%
- 9/11: 14%
- CIA and AIDS: 3%
- Princess Diana: 2%
- None of them: 4%
- Not sure: 2%

harperpolling.com
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conspiracy Theory</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Takers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>JFK was killed by conspiracy</td>
<td>51 percent</td>
<td>160,096,160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bush intentionally misled on Iraq WMDs</td>
<td>44 percent</td>
<td>138,122,178</td>
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<tr>
<td>Global warming is a hoax</td>
<td>37 percent</td>
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<td>Aliens exist</td>
<td>29 percent</td>
<td>91,035,072</td>
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<tr>
<td>New World Order</td>
<td>28 percent</td>
<td>87,895,931</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hussein was involved in 9/11</td>
<td>28 percent</td>
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<td>A UFO crashed at Roswell</td>
<td>21 percent</td>
<td>65,921,948</td>
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<tr>
<td>Vaccines are linked to autism</td>
<td>20 percent</td>
<td>62,782,808</td>
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<tr>
<td>The government <em>controls minds with TV</em></td>
<td>15 percent</td>
<td>47,087,106</td>
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<tr>
<td>Medical industry invents diseases</td>
<td>15 percent</td>
<td>47,087,106</td>
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<tr>
<td>CIA developed crack</td>
<td>14 percent</td>
<td>43,947,966</td>
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<td>Bigfoot exists</td>
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<td>Obama is the Antichrist</td>
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<td>The government allowed 9/11</td>
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<td>34,530,544</td>
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<td>Fluoride is dangerous</td>
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<td>The moon landing was faked</td>
<td>7 percent</td>
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<td>Bin Laden is alive</td>
<td>6 percent</td>
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<td>Airplane contrails are sinister chemicals</td>
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<td>15,695,702</td>
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<td>McCartney died in 1966</td>
<td>5 percent</td>
<td>15,695,702</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lizard people control politics</td>
<td>4 percent</td>
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<tr>
<td>Country</td>
<td>Al-Qaeda</td>
<td>U.S. govt.</td>
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<tr>
<td>--------------------------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indonesia</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Korea</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>17%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Taiwan</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>3%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nigeria</td>
<td>71%</td>
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<td>Kenya</td>
<td>77%</td>
<td>4%</td>
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<td>Jordan</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>31%</td>
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<td>Egypt</td>
<td>16%</td>
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<td>Turkey</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>1%</td>
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<td>Palestinian Territories</td>
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<td>9%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ukraine</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>15%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russia</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Great Britain</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Climate change conspiracy theory

Response to Global Warming by climate change deniers

- It's Natural
- Hype
- Doubt Science
- Flat Denial
- Conspiracy Theory

Percentage of Respondents
JFK conspiracy theory

Most Americans Believe JFK Conspiracy Theories
US public's beliefs about the assassination of President Kennedy

Belief in JFK conspiracies has dropped in recent years
Americans’ beliefs about President John F. Kennedy’s death

- 61% Others were involved
- 33% One man killed JFK

1967: New Orleans D.A. claims widespread cover-up
Multiple people were involved

2003: ABC News documentary supports single-bullet theory
One man killed JFK

Annual average of polls
Source: FiveThirtyEight

Source: FiveThirtyEight
People also believe in these...

The 1969 moon landing was...
- **83%** Real
- **14%** Staged

How often do ads contain subliminal messages?
- **65%** Frequently
- **19%** Sometimes
- **15%** Hardly ever/never
Conspiracy theories appear as

- cognitive biases
- false pattern recognition
- entertainment
How do the theories spread?

→ Personality traits and characteristics:
  ● paranoia
  ● cynicism
  ● mistrust
  ● feelings of powerlessness
  ● anxiety
  ● uncertainty

→ Demographic factors:
  ● lower levels of education
  ● extremes in terms of political orientation

→ Upbringing

→ Rejection of science
The nature of people’s beliefs in the theories

- are based on general and simple ideas instead of specific ones
- have a tendency towards inanimate objects
- have common traits in things that resemble each other

When strange events happen, which do you usually believe?

- 69% The simplest explanation
- 21% The most mysterious explanation
The consequences of conspiracy theories

... are extremely negative. People become less eager to take action in different areas of life, including:

● taking care of their own health
● the political system
● the improvement of the surrounding environment

Conspiracy theories:

● reduce trust in the government
● create a gap between the government and science
● devalue people as a part of the society
The need for conspiracy theories

People are most prone to start believing in conspiracy theories when they:

● feel out of control
● are anxious
● feel powerless
● find their needs threatened
● do not want to accept the real world
● need mental comfort
People feel the need for being controlled

Due to this, conspiracy theories:

● can be used as a method of manipulation
● depending on the content, motivate or discourage to do something
● misinform and encourage to take wrong actions

There is a significant relationship between “the human need for control and the tendency to believe in conspiracy theories” (Douglas, Sutton, & Cichocka)
How to remain conscious

- Do not be seduced by simplicity
- Be smart to doctored images
- Accept one’s own ignorance
- Look beyond the bubble
- Be curious
- Consider
- the opposite

It is possible to reduce one’s belief in theories by:
- teaching people about counter arguments
- making fun of the idea of conspiracy theories
References


