

# Conspiracy theories nowadays - Summary of the Workshop for the IYM 2020 (09/25/2020)





# Structure

1. What are conspiracy theories?
2. Important facts and variations of conspiracy theories
3. Why are conspiracy theories attractive to some people?
4. Why do people spread conspiracy theories?
5. Why are conspiracy theories dangerous?
6. Reacting to conspiracy theories?
7. Literature recommendations



# 1. What are conspiracy theories?

**Conspiracy theory (definition based on Aaronovitch, 2010; Byford, 2011; Coady, 2006; Dentith & Orr, 2017; Keeley, 1999, Nocoun & Lamberty 2020):**

“Conspiracy theories” are attempts to explain the ultimate causes of significant social and political events and circumstances with claims of secret plots by powerful groups or persons. These actors want to harm the people with their activities and hide their real goals towards them.

**Conspiracy theories could accuse any group perceived as powerful and malevolent!**



# 1. What are conspiracy theories?

## **Conspiracy theories must be distinguished to:**

- Conspiracy beliefs (belief in a specific conspiracy theory, or set of conspiracy theories)
- Paranoia

## **The difference between a conspiracy theory and a real conspiracy**

In the conspiracy theory the conspiracy is the base for all further considerations! It's not necessary to prove the conspiracy.

## **Three core aspects of conspiracy theories (by Michael Butter)**

1. Nothing happens occasionally
2. Everything is connected
3. Nothing is what it seems



## 2. Important fact and variations of conspiracy theories

### **Important facts about conspiracy theories and their supporters**

- Conspiracy theories are not a new phenomenon in history and used to be the official and public opinion for a long time
- Even nowadays conspiracy theories are not only believed by few people in societies
- The internet is not responsible for the spread of conspiracy theories in general, but helped that some of these „theories“ and fakes could reach millions of people and facilitates the networking of supporters of conspiracy theories
- Conspiracy theories can not only be found in the right-wing extremist scene

### **Variations of conspiracy theories (by Michael Butter)**

1. Event-Conspiracy-Theory (e.g. Moon landing)
2. System-Conspiracy-Theory (e.g. communists, Jews)
3. Super-Conspiracy-Theory (e.g. jewish-bolshevik conspiracy, Reptils)

# 3. Why are conspiracy theories attractive to some people?



## Main reasons why people belief in conspiracy theories (based on Butter and Nocun/Lamperty)

1. Compensation of a experienced loss of control
2. The wish to be someone special
3. Conspiracy theories give a broad explanation and sense offer
4. Purpose giving ideology
5. Gives ability to act
6. Identifys the offenders
7. Relief function (Explanation for personal frustations/Legitimation for acting)
8. The wish to know how the world works
9. Wake up from the slumber of the masses
10. Boredom



## 4. Why do people spread conspiracy theories?

### **Main reasons for spreading conspiracy theories (by Michael Butter)**

1. Many conspiracy theorists think that they do a service for humanity
2. Political instrumentalization (e.g. by “ Hamas “: The Protocols of the Elders of Zion )
3. Profit generation
4. Entertainment (e.g. Illuminati movie)



## 5. Why are conspiracy theories dangerous?

### **Main reasons for the danger of conspiracy theories (based on Nocoun/Lamberty)**

1. Scientific studies prove that individual tendency to believe conspiracy theories correlates with a higher approval of violent acts or the own use of violence
2. Conspiracy theories are an accelerator for radicalization
3. Conspiracy theories can be used to legitimize violence against others and protect the own group from criticism
4. Near all terrorist and extremist groups use conspiracy theories to call up their members
5. Conspiracy theories have a negative impact on the democratic discourse because they defame instead of differentiate

# Talking back!

## When-Who-What



- Do I feel **safe**? Do I have the **capacity** right now? How do I assess the situation?
- What **perspective/position** do I have in this situation?
  - motivation behind statements (triggers)
  - desires / hierarchy
- My **relation(ship)** to the other person? (Stranger, parents, dangerous person etc.)
- Is there an **audience**? What are the **consequences**?
- Do I want to give the person/argument a stage? Do I rather address other persons? (Sender, audience, affected person)



If a constructive discussion  
seems possible...

# 1) Factual argumentation

(Data, numbers, facts, logic etc.)



- Stay calm, stay focused
- Breaking up perceived **groups** (e.g. „the muslim“), calling out **over-simplifications**
- Inquire!
  - Request **specification** of what is meant
  - Show **respect** and appreciation
- Ask for **sources** and state your own
- Set clear **boundaries** if necessary
- Include potential supporters

## 2) Moral argumentation

(humanity, values, basic rights, laws etc.)



**Pro:** I can evoke **empathy** („Imagine being in this situation yourself...“)

**Con:** Not everyone shares your set of values!

→ Be careful! Don't impose your values on the other person.  
Don't claim moral superiority!

# General tips to keep in mind



- Be clear about who you want to address (discussion partner, audience, affected person etc.)
- Expectation management. You're part of a **pedagogical process**
  - Often impossible to convince someone of the opposite
  - **It will take time**, don't give up too easily
  - plant a seed of **doubt**/ stand your ground/ show understanding
- Don't keep it to yourself. **Share** experiences with trusted persons.
- **Stay critical!** Including with yourself!



## 7. Literature recommendations

1. **Butter, Michael (2020):** The Nature of Conspiracy Theories, Polity Press, Cambridge.
2. **Douglas, Karen M./Uscinski, Joseph E./Sutton, Robbie M. et al. (2019):** Understanding Conspiracy theories, in: Political Psychology , Vol. 40/1 (2019).

Homepages for fact-checking:

<https://www.snopes.com>

<https://www.psiram.com/>

Homepage with articles about responses to the rising tide of polarisation, hate and extremism of all form:

<https://www.isdglobal.org/>