Are Conspiracy Theories All Bad?

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Intro:

The United States has a long tradition of conspiracy theories – a reflection of a widespread suspicion of powerful groups secretly undermining democratic society.

Though some are fueled by discrepancies in the official accounts of certain events, many conspiracy theories persist despite strong evidence to the contrary. Why is there such a strong predilection toward these narratives? What role does this kind of skepticism play in society?

Yes: The Negative Social Impact of Conspiracy Theories

*Karen Douglas, a professor of social psychology at the University of Kent in England, studies the psychology of conspiracy theories and their potential consequences for society.*

Were the moon landings a hoax? Are governments hiding evidence that aliens have visited earth?

Conspiracy theories are often seen as laughable, and the people who believe them are considered paranoid but usually harmless individuals.

But while many conspiracy theories may indeed be harmless, recent psychological research suggests that some of the social consequences of conspiracy theories deserve more serious attention.

My colleague Daniel Jolley and I found, for example, that people who were exposed to anti-government conspiracy theories were less likely to want to vote than those who had read information refuting conspiracy theories. In a similar study, we found that people who read about climate change conspiracy theories (versus those who read anti-conspiracy material and those who read no material about climate change) expressed less intention to take action to reduce their carbon footprint. In another investigation, we found that reading about anti-vaccine conspiracy theories reduced people’s intentions to vaccinate, compared with those who viewed arguments refuting conspiracy theories, or those who read no material about vaccination.

In each case, conspiracy theories decreased social engagement because they left people feeling powerless, and there is also some evidence that conspiracy theories might influence people without them knowing it.

Some level of healthy skepticism is undoubtedly important for individuals, and citizens cannot be expected to agree with everything they are told. Some conspiracy theories may even be useful in allowing people to question social hierarchies and discover new information for examination and discussion.

But many conspiracy theories seem to be dangerously subversive, undermining people’s confidence in established positions on topics such as climate change and vaccination. They appear to threaten the social systems that people rely upon and encourage inaction where it cannot be afforded. But the question remains: why are conspiracy theories so appealing to so many people?

No: The Powerless Wield No Legitimacy

*Harriet A. Washington, the Shearing fellow at the Black Mountain Institute, is the author of "Medical Apartheid: The Dark History of Experimentation on Black Americans From Colonial Times to the Present" and "Deadly Monopolies: The Shocking Corporate Takeover of Life Itself -- and the Consequences for Your Health and Our Medical Future."*

In the early 1970s, Students for a Democratic Society, those noisy radicals given to university disruption, spouted conspiracy theories. So did the Black Panthers.

Their rallies left college campuses, including mine, littered with screeds decrying our government’s secret medical and surveillance programs, but I gave their ravings little credence. How could these guys, who couldn't put together grammatical sentences and had never taken a history course, evaluate the truth of such claims, or the provenance of their Xeroxed documents?

From the Latin word "conspiratio," which means "breathe together," conspiracies emanate from those who work closely and in secret for a purpose that, as the philosopher Jeremy Bentham interpreted it, is evil, unlawful or both. But “conspiracy theorist," with its implications of irrational paranoia or the inability to accept the chaotic nature of catastrophe, is an even worse label that sabotages all credibility.

Yet some conspiracies are real, such as Nixon’s Watergate cover-up or the "Tuskegee syphilis study," in which hundreds of black men were duped into a U.S. Public Health Service study between 1932 and 1972 that secretly withheld treatment from them and monitored them as they died.

Only in 2005 did I discover that both the Black Panthers and the Students for a Democratic Society had denounced this study in protests that I had ignored, years before the lawyer Peter Buxtun blew the whistle in 1972.

Scholars like Jay Katz at Yale and Allan Brandt at Columbia revealed the true horrors of the program, and the weight of their authority helped spur public outrage. But the poor and marginalized, with no such authority, are dismissed, unheard and shrugged off as “conspiracy theorists.”

Yes: A Symptom of Mass Cultural Anxiety

*Timothy Melley, a professor of English at Miami University, is the author of "The Covert Sphere: Secrecy, Fiction and the National Security State."*

Belief in conspiracy theory is a cultural symptom, one that sheds light on the way people perceive power and public knowledge in our democracy.

First, the explosion of conspiracy theories since the 1950s is partly an expression of anxiety about mass culture. It is striking how few conspiracy theories refer to traditional conspiracies, in the original sense of a tight-knit plot. Far more often, conspiracy theories describe large shadowy organizations, corporate networks or communication systems. That is, conspiracy theorists attempt something like social theory, and their perennial concerns about diminished human agency and the growing power of large systems are hardly confined to the lunatic fringe.

Where the social theorist finds complex structural causes, however, the conspiracy theorist tends to find malevolent intentions. (Ebola disproportionately affects certain countries because of poverty, for example, not because the U.S. military deployed it as a bioweapon.)

Second, conspiracy theory has always expressed suspicion of traditional authorities — journalists, academics, government officials — and their power to determine “the official story.” But for all its cynicism, conspiracy theory embraces the ideals of the democratic public sphere. This is why it so often imitates professional history, journalism and academic work. The most sophisticated and durable conspiracy narratives are annoyingly resistant to debunking. (And even the most outlandish often do illuminate real injustices.)

Third, contemporary conspiracy theory is inseparable from the rise of a cold war security state committed to covert action and what President Dwight D. Eisenhower called “psychological warfare.” It is no accident that so many conspiracy theories concern the C.I.A. — which has been blamed for 9/11, the Sandy Hook massacre, the downing of Pan Am 103 and much more.

For all its operational secrecy, covert action is a subject of intense public fascination. Twenty-five years after the end of the cold war, the U.S. has 17 intelligence agencies employing hundreds of thousands of workers at a cost of some $70 billion per year — but most of our ideas about U.S. intelligence work come from the endless stream of melodramatic entertainment in movies and on TV. The public thus finds itself in a strange state of half-knowledge about U.S. foreign affairs. When “top secrecy” and “plausible deniability” are widely accepted ideas, is it any surprise that so many people believe political power is wielded by powerful, invisible agents?

Maybe: Conspiracy Theorists Have Suspicious, and Sometimes Paranoid Natures

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A lot of conspiracy theorists are neither ignorant nor ill-educated. On the contrary, they can be spectacularly well-informed, at least on the topics that interest them. (Try arguing with one; they probably know a lot more than you do.) Why, then, do they accept theories that are patently inconsistent with reality?

One reason involves their suspicious and in some cases paranoid natures. Want to know whether your neighbors will accept a particular conspiracy theory? Just ask them what they think about other conspiracy theories. Those who insist that the Apollo moon landings were faked are more likely to believe that the United States caused the 9/11 attacks.

Horrible events can make people who are scared and angry look for someone to blame.

In fact, people who embrace one conspiracy theory are also inclined to embrace another conspiracy theory that cannot simultaneously be true. In one study, people who said they believed that Osama bin Laden is alive and well were more likely to believe that he was dead before U.S. forces invaded his compound. The belief in a more central idea — that authorities are engaged in deceptive cover-ups — supports any number of skeptical theories, even leading suspicious individuals to disregard contradictions between them.

But conspiracy theories are not only a product of people’s natures. Social conditions matter. Horrible events — economic collapse, an assassination, a grievous loss of some kind — can make people who are scared and angry look for someone to blame, not least to assert a kind of mastery of the circumstances. The human mind is drawn to think that whenever something bad has happened, it is because someone bad wanted it to happen.

Conspiracy theories are especially likely to spread within isolated communities and social networks, including those online. Most people do not know the causes of horrible events, and so we tend to rely on those we trust. If a few people within a network — call them “conspiracy entrepreneurs” — point to an alleged conspiracy, others within that network might well follow them. After a while, people can become committed to that belief and treat official denials as yet additional evidence of conspiracy, leading to the conspiracists’ triumphant question: Why would they deny it if it weren’t true?

No: Conspiratorial Stories Have a Rich Tradition in Story Telling

*Annie Jacobsen is the author of "Area 51: An Uncensored History of America’s Top Secret Military Base" and, most recently, "Operation Paperclip: The Secret Intelligence Program That Brought Nazi Scientists to America.”*

Americans love conspiracies: For centuries, citizens have theorized about plotters among us scheming to collude, connive, oppress and withhold. Nineteenth-century conspiracies involved American Indians and New England Illuminati. Twenty-first century conspiracies involve aliens and mind control.

And the conspiratorial trend is growing. A 2006 Scripps poll found that 36 percent of Americans believe that it is somewhat or very likely that U.S. officials either participated in 9/11 or took no action to stop it. Last year, Public Policy Polling found 51 percent say the J.F.K. assassination was part of a larger conspiracy. A 2012 National Geographic survey found that 79 percent of Americans believe the government is keeping secret information about U.F.O.s.

I like talking to conspiracy theorists. As a journalist who writes about war, weapons and U.S. national security programs, the conspiracy theorists and I hold common ground on certain ideas — most notably, that the government is very good at keeping secrets. In my research and reporting, I’ve found that the most technologically advanced weapons programs are often the most jealously guarded (that is, until they’re declassified). Take the Manhattan Project. It employed around 200,000 people, had 80 offices and dozens of secret production plants including a 60,000-acre facility in rural Tennessee that pulled more electrical power off the grid than New York City did on any given night. And yet no one knew it existed until the end of the war. Even Vice President Harry Truman was kept in the dark — and he was in charge of the Senate committee to oversee how money was spent on weapons during the war.

Perhaps the real point is that it would be foolhardy not to assume that the government is up to secret things. And when you add to the mix the recent revelations about N.S.A. spying and C.I.A. torturing, it becomes clear that nefarious black programs are on the rise while truthfulness and transparency by government officials wane.

I think the preponderance of conspiratorial thinking is built on two important ideas, the first being that the U.S. government is powerful, secretive and willing to obfuscate. The second is a lot more simple and can be summed up by Joan Didion's evocative quote: “We tell ourselves stories in order to live.” People create narratives out of facts, sometimes disparate, so “the story” makes sense to them.

When skeptics look at conspiracy theorists they see pathology. When I look at conspiracy I see ancestry, a rich and powerful history of storytelling among like-minded groups of people. There have been powerful narratives among us since time immemorial and to me, modern conspiracy theories are a close cousin of science fiction. In conspiracies about aliens, mind control, the New World Order and the Illuminati, I see the works of H.G. Wells, Yevgeny Zamyatin, George Orwell and Aldous Huxley — storytellers whose powerful narratives are still in print, some even after 100 years. These are the stories we tell ourselves to make sense of how we live.

Maybe: Is It Nonfiction Disguised as a Novel?

*David Baldacci is the author, most recently, of "The Escape."*

In ancient times, people created a wide variety of mythological gods to understand what couldn't be explained. In modern times, people resort to conspiracy theories when they don't like the explanation. And often, conspiratorial thinking is prompted by a fear of the unknown. Like kids who see boogeymen in the dark, some adults search to blame shadowy figures for their fears without name.

Conspiracy theories play into the social fabric because they can superficially explain mysterious and sinister events, from the J.F.K. assassination to 9/11. And these theories give society a target to fight back at, shout at, point their finger at and say, “Aha, I knew it was you!” It's an attempt to rip the curtain off the puppeteer who is causing all the problems. And because we live in an “instant” information world, the zaniest of conspiracy theories can gain global purchase, which would have been unthinkable even 10 years ago. We have never been so well-informed in our ignorance.

Novelists are only bound by plausibility, and it seems that — in these turbulent, bewildering days when millions will subscribe to just about any conspiracy theory imaginable — I can write pretty much anything and people will think it was ripped from the headlines. I've received feedback from readers who think I actually write nonfiction disguised as fiction, that I must have a pipeline to the "real truth" somehow. Or that I have chronicled, in a fictional sense, something they always believed was fact anyway.

We don’t have to make up pagan gods for answers anymore. We can just consult social media or turn on the TV. It’s all right there.