

CONSPIRACY THEORIES

LA PROTESTS

As Los Angeles demonstrations against U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement raids continue, people online have accused billionaire George Soros and Democrats of planting brick pallets and orchestrating the protests.

CLIMATE CHANGE

According to the Misinformation Review by Harvard Kennedy School, climate change conspiracy theories are worldwide. In a cross-national sample, 18.69% agreed it was a hoax, and 29.51% were uncertain. Believers often accuse scientists of falsifying evidence and creating undue stress for personal gains.

ADDISON RAE

"In 2020, [Addison Rae] was in the Hype House, she was dancing, she was on TikTok, she was Charli D'Amelio's little sidekick," said senior Evie Stern. "Now you're performing with Troy Sivan, and Charli XCX. I don't know where she just gained pop star status, especially when it takes other artists in the industry decades to make it big. And you're just top charts and Spotify within a month? Somebody is pulling the strings behind the scenes. It could be the government, it could be aliens, it could be artificial intelligence."

BIRDS AREN'T REAL

Created by Peter McIndoe in January 2017, the theory posits that birds are government spies. This is a classic example of 'crazy' conspiracy theories.

OCTOPUSES

"I think octopuses are actually aliens," said junior Elizabeth Yuan. "They have so many skill sets that don't really make sense with other animals ... I think an asteroid landed on Earth centuries and centuries ago, and octopuses were trying to [explore] the Earth and figure out what other competing planets they have in the galaxy. The octopuses have a chip in their brain that connects them to the mothership ... Every time you eat octopus, everyone gets sick. COVID, I'm sure it was some sort of path from the octopus brain chips, and there's nothing we can do about that because it controls everything and there's contamination."

WHAT IS A CONSPIRACY THEORY?

- ❑ Has no expert-backed evidence
- ❑ Dismisses information that refutes the theory
- ❑ Difficult to trace the theory back to a single originator
- ❑ Blames powerful entities like governments
- ❑ May involve the supernatural or prejudice against a group
- ❑ Creates shocking, oversimplified narratives
- ❑ Takes advantage of vulnerabilities
- ❑ Involves complex grand plots
- ❑ Draws patterns from coincidences

WHY DO PEOPLE BELIEVE IN THEM?

Conspiracy theories serve psychological, emotional and social needs. They provide simple explanations for complex events, which helps people feel safe and in control during uncertain times. The communities that form around these shared ideas often have an "us" versus "them" mindset, defending their positions through victimizing or valorizing themselves.

"[If there's] a mistrust in their government or if they see something that's vague, [people] probably want to change the story in a way that satisfies them," said junior Selina Stevanovic. "If Anastasia [Romanov] survived, it would be an interesting story and it would be very inspiring, but history isn't like a happy storytelling ending that's satisfying."

These beliefs are further reinforced by cognitive biases. Proportionality bias assumes major events must have major causes, intentionality bias rejects the idea of accidents or coincidences and confirmation bias makes people notice only evidence that supports their worldview. Motivated reasoning entrenches this cycle, helping believers avoid cognitive dissonance while strengthening their commitment to the theory.

COVID-19

During the pandemic, there were claims that one, COVID-19 was a hoax and two, the Chinese government purposely spread the virus. A study by psychology professor Roland Imhoff et al. found that while the former mindset was "more strongly associated with reduced containment-related behavior," the latter was "related to an increase in self-centered prepping behavior."

EFFECTS

Conspiracy theories can create an enemy or "perpetrator" that people fear, causing them to respond with discrimination, be taken advantage of by terrorist groups or rationalize hate-based violence. They may induce doubts in science and medicine and indifference toward politics or extremism, putting democracy at risk.

"[Conspiracy theories] just instill a lot of doubt in people in power," said junior Marisol Solorzano. "They also, unfortunately, instill a lot of fear in the general public, because they are so exaggerated to make [the story] seem dramatized ... which intend to mislead people quite a bit. That's a real problem, and people just need to think a lot better when doing their own research, and not trusting everything that they hear."

PURPOSE

Conspiracy theories may be purposefully spread with political motives, such as to change public opinion. For example, President Donald Trump has supported multiple conspiracy theories relating to Barack Obama's citizenship and the Epstein files. On the other hand, he has been the target of many conspiracy theories himself. Most recently, people have theorized that the White House is concealing the president's health, leading to trending hashtags like "TRUMPDIED" and "TRUMPISDEAD" on X, formerly known as Twitter.

"At the same time, I feel like conspiracy theorists have a right to have those conspiracy theories," said senior Evie Stern. "Everyone's entitled to their own opinion, no matter how wrong it is, and honestly we need more free thinkers out there. The heliocentric theory started as a conspiracy theory, the Catholic church tried to shut them down ... Some conspiracy theories, at least most of the ones that I follow, I think it's just for [fun] and giggles. It's just fun to mess with people and ragebait."

HOW DO CONSPIRACY THEORIES SPREAD?

Conspiracy theories spread most easily during times of uncertainty, fear or social upheaval, when people are confused and anxious. They rely on simple, dramatic stories that blame powerful figures or organizations, using evidence from pseudo-experts. This creates communities around shared suspicion, making them slippery and hard to disprove, especially on social media. Algorithms promote sensational content, and echo chambers reinforce shared beliefs.

"Social media is just such a broad platform, and so many different people use social media," said senior Ethan Guo. "Because such a diverse population uses social media, it's really easy to express different views for literally anyone to voice their opinion, and suddenly they go viral, they get millions of views. And that's how a lot of conspiracy theories get traction."

Copy: Allinah Zhan, Helen McCloskey, Claire Dong, Angela Nguyen
Graphics: Allinah Zhan
Layout: Allinah Zhan

is the flat earth real o_o ?/??/?
Pythagoreas, Plato, and Aristotle were all wrong...

Is Elvis actually still alive?/!!

Are lizard people real?

The vaccine conspiracy theory: they cause autism?

The moon landing was fake!

Theory: the JFK assassination was orchestrated

The 5c conspiracy theory: planted by the government to control people?

"I saw this great TED talk [by McIndoe]," said junior Emily Ma. "People who didn't believe in that conspiracy theory would ... demean [believers], they would belittle them ... [Now believers] feel like these people are demonizing them. He was saying... it's so important to approach [people's beliefs] with an open mind and an empathetic standpoint."