



CHALLENGE 5: PEOPLE FALL FOR CONSPIRACY THEORIES

HOW TO DEAL WITH MISINFORMATION AND DISINFORMATION
DURING PUBLIC HEALTH EMERGENCIES

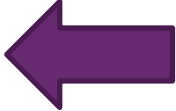
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LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Describe the characteristics of conspiracy theories
2. Understand why they are persuasive and potentially dangerous
3. Get familiar with strategies to correct misinformation

MISINFORMATION AROUND COVID-19

Categories:

- Misinformation about where the virus comes from 
- Misinformation about how the virus spreads
- Misinformation about symptoms and treatments
- Misinformation about how authorities are responding to the crisis

(Wardle 2020)

CONSPIRACY THEORY

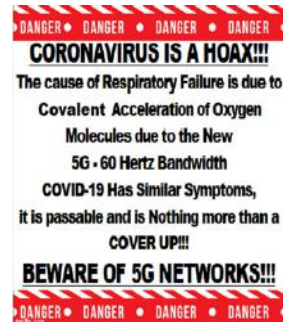
A belief that an event or situation is the result of a **secret plan** made by **powerful people** (Cambridge Dictionary)

Examples:

- The virus was created as a bioweapon for political and economic gains by the Chinese government
- The virus was intentionally manufactured and purposefully spread by Bill Gates to earn money thanks to the development of a vaccine
- The virus doesn't actually exist, but is a plot by the globalist elite to take away our freedoms
- The pandemic is a cover up plan for mass chip implantation under the pretext of a mandatory vaccination against covid-19
- A "deep state" of America's elite is plotting to undermine the president Trump and Dr. Anthony Fauci (CDC) is a secret member

Funding Vaccines

Bill Gates putting billions into COVID-19 vaccine research, factories



CHARACTERISTICS OF CONSPIRACY THEORIES

1. Low in facticity
2. Immune to evidence
3. Expression of the same mindset
4. Re-interpreting randomness
5. Victim & Hero

(Lewandoswky & Cook 2020; Lobato et al. 2014; Wood et al. 2012)

1. LOW IN FACTICITY

- Not supported by evidence that withstands scrutiny
- Often include **pseudoscientific beliefs** and reject well-established science (see module 6)
 - Example: the idea that a virus can spread via 5G network

Covid-19 = 5G Consequences.

Öffentliche Gruppe · 1.614 Mitglieder

Gruppe beitreten

Info Diskussion Mitglieder Veranstaltungen Medien

Über diese Gruppe

5G LAW PASSED while everyone was distracted... - S.893 SECURE 5G AND BEYOND ACT OF 2020 -

Signed into law 118-129 on 3-23-2020, that will speed up the installation of 5G and protect profits!

Children had to be out of schools for the covert installation. Parents are you seeing what's happening? 😡😡

5G is 10,000 times the strength of 4G and uses the same frequency as a military weapon.

❌ Symptoms of 5G radiation sickness include:

❌ shortness of breath,

❌ passing out,

❌ cold and flu symptoms,

❌ fever,

❌ increase cancer risk,

❌ foggy thinking,

❌ eye pain,

❌ nightmares,

❌ nausea,

❌ vomiting,

❌ diarrhea,

❌ headache,

❌ dizziness,

❌ disorientation,

❌ weakness,

❌ fatigue,

❌ hair loss,

❌ bloody vomit and stools from internal bleeding

❌ infections and

❌ low blood pressure

repost repost repost AND PLEASE SOAK UP ALL THE SUNLIGHT

YOU CAN TAKE IN, for your protection from these intense radio

frequencies. Weniger anzeigen

2. IMMUNE TO EVIDENCE

- Even absence of evidence for a theory becomes evidence for the theory: **The reason there's no proof of the conspiracy is because the conspirators did such a good job covering it up**
- Example: You cannot use scientific facts to counteract the theory that Covid-19 was created in a lab for profit because people believing it will reply that scientists are paid by pharma industry and are therefore corrupted

3. EXPRESSIONS OF THE SAME MINDSET

- Conspiracy theories are specific expressions of the **same mindset / worldview**: authorities are deceiving the public
- **Hyper-skepticism** and **suspicion** towards any official account (“something must be wrong”)
- Acceptance of all narratives that **reject the “official” narrative** (e.g. climate change is not manmade, 5G causes cancer, vaccination cause autism) **even when contradictory** (e.g. the virus was created in a lab and the virus is caused by 5G)

Example of hyper-skepticism and suspicion: Plandemic

Filmmaker Mikki Willis “I don’t know, to be clear, if it’s an intentional or naturally occurring situation. I have no idea. But **it’s too fishy.**”



4. RE-INTERPRETING RANDOMNESS

Belief that **nothing occurs by accident**

→ Random events (occurring at the same time) are re-interpreted as being caused by the conspiracy

Example: The increasing number of people on 5G cellular networks led to a spike in the number of infections → **It happened at the same time, this does not mean that one caused the other!**

5. VICTIM & HERO

- Conspiracy theorists perceive and present themselves as the **victim of organized persecution** → “Share it before it’s deleted/blocked!”
- They see themselves as **those who dare to tell the “shocking Truth”**

CORONAVIRUS THE SHOCKING TRUTH 5G INTERVIEW WITH DAVID DUBYNE AND MARK STEELE



Dr Gunk posted in TGZ
26w ago • 7.6K

Award



Today I “learned” that the nose wire in a face mask is actually a 5G antenna.



OH MY GOSH!!!! SO WEARING THOSE STORE BOUGHT MASKS!!! OH MY GOODNESS 🤯🤯🤯 PLEASE PLEASE STOP!!! SHARE THIS LIKE CRAZY!! DON'T BUT THE MASKS!! MAKE YOUR OWN IF YOU HAVE TO!!

Whoa. 5G antenna inside the mask. You are killing yourself at the hands of your captors.



1:50 vorm. · 6. Juli 2020 · Twitter Web App

WHY DO PEOPLE FALL FOR CONSPIRACY THEORIES?

APPEALING

- People find it difficult to **handle uncertainty** and threatening events → Provide explanations
- People find it difficult to accept that “big” events can have an **ordinary cause** → Provide a “big” cause
- People **like to feel smart**, one step ahead of the others who blindly believe the official version → Make us feel like “the ones who don't fall for it”

(Franks et al. 2013)

...BUT MORE APPEALING FOR SOME PEOPLE - 1

Personality traits predicting belief in conspiracies:

- Fear and anxiety
- Need to have control over one's environment by finding explanations for unexplained events – especially when the event is both severe and self-relevant
- Paranormal belief (e.g. magical thinking, superstition), distrust in science
- Narcissism, high self-esteem
- Feeling of powerlessness, lack confidence

(Goreis & Voracek 2019)

...BUT MORE APPEALING FOR SOME PEOPLE - 2

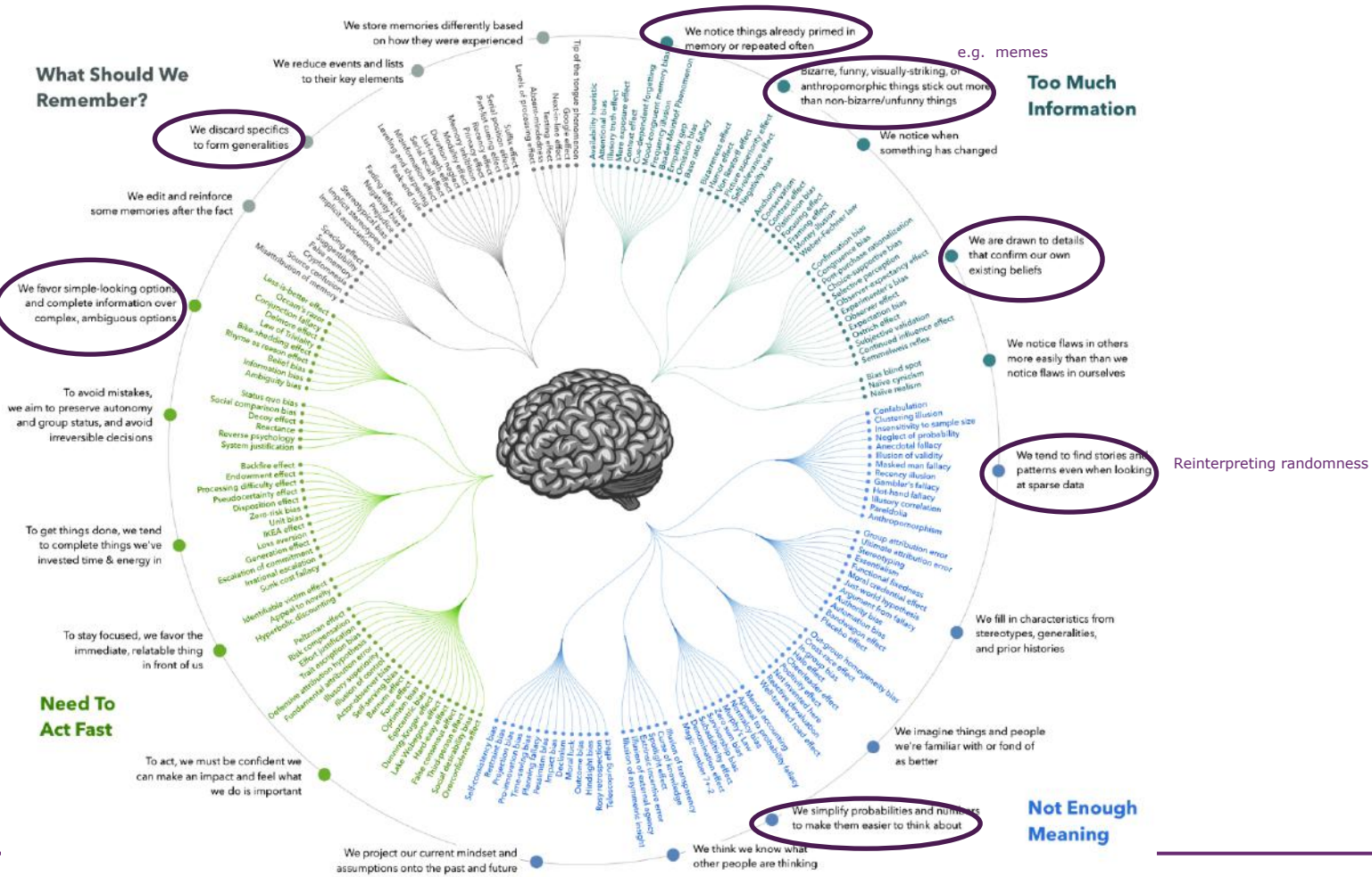
Social and political factors predicting belief in conspiracies:

- political extremism
- religiosity
- being part of an ethnic minority
- feeling disconnected from society (e.g. because of unemployment)
- low education

(Goreis & Voracek 2019)

TAKING ADVANTAGE OF OUR WEAKNESS: HEURISTICS

- People rely on **cognitive shortcuts** (=heuristics) to interpret complex information (e.g. scientific information)
 - **Confirmation bias**: tendency to seek out and value information that confirms our pre-existing beliefs while discarding information that proves our ideas wrong
 - **Anchoring bias**: tendency to consider the first piece of information we receive about a topic as the most reliable
 - **Fluency bias**: tendency to consider a piece of information more valuable because it is easier to understand → the power of slogans, simple theories, videos
 - **Framing effect**: we make decisions based on how information is presented rather than on content-based arguments



TAKING ADVANTAGE OF OUR WEAKNESS: TRUST

- People tend to **trust their networks** of friends and family for news
 - Most of the fake news and conspiracy theories circulate through **private chats and social media**
- When people receive news and information through their trusted networks, they are **less likely to check the sources and more likely to believe and share them**

TAKING ADVANTAGE OF OUR WEAKNESS: PROCESSING

- Most conspiracy theories circulate in the form of **visuals** – videos, memes,...
- We **process images faster** than texts and we are therefore **less likely to use our critical skills**

(Wardle & Derakhshan 2017; Potter 2014)

STICKING IN OUR MIND

This happens because:

- **repeated exposure** to conspiracy theories and fake news increases their **perceived accuracy** (Pennycook et al., 2018)
- wrong information is difficult to correct once it has **manifested itself in memory** (Lewandowsky et al., 2012)
- people **prefer to rely upon discredited information than not to have an explanation** (Ecker, Lewandowsky, & Apai, 2011)

Example: MMR vaccine: even long after retraction, studies show that many people still believe in the link vaccine-autism

(Swire, Ecker 2018)

DANGEROUS: IMPACT IN REAL LIFE

- In general: it **devalues and delegitimizes voices of science and expertise** (Baron et al. 2017)
- Medicine: people **do not engage in protective behaviors** (e.g. handwashing, social distancing, do not want to be vaccinated)
(Stanley et al. 2020)
- Policy level: **postpone political action** (e.g. lockdown, quarantine measures)

CORRECTING MISINFORMATION: GOOD PRACTICES

- Choose a **high-credibility source** (→ more persuasive)
- Create a **link with your audience**
 - e.g. avoid shaming those who share misinformation by saying “you’re wrong and I’m right” → they will stop listening to you;
 - e.g. be empathetic: show understanding for the fact that they are looking for answers, acknowledge that we are all doing it

(Swire, Ecker 2018; Lewandosky & Cook 2020; Wardle 2020)

CORRECTING MISINFORMATION: GOOD PRACTICES

- Consider the “**tipping point**”: When is it time to speak about a rumor? Reporting too early risks to amplifying it, too late and it will already be viral
 - How much engagement is it getting? Only within one niche community or across communities? Is it moving across platforms? Did an influencer share it? Are the media already reporting about it?
- **Minimize unnecessary repetition of misinformation** (e.g. avoid listing myths): people tend to remember the information and not that the information is wrong

(Swire, Ecker 2018; Lewandosky & Cook 2020; Wardle 2020)

CORRECTING MISINFORMATION: GOOD PRACTICES

- Provide an alternative narrative to **"replace" the wrong one** and to **explain why it is wrong**
- State if there is the **consensus of the scientific community** and if the theory is supported only by few (loud) voices
- Try **different debunking strategies**
 - e.g. provide accurate information; link to fact checkers; explain the misleading techniques or flawed reasoning; reduce the credibility of conspiracy theorists
- ...and be **creative in the format!**
 - e.g. develop online games to debunk misinformation, use videos instead of texts

(Swire, Ecker 2018; Lewandosky & Cook 2020; Wardle 2020)

TAKE HOME MESSAGE

- Conspiracy theories are **persuasive** because
 - they fulfill a **human need**: providing explanations for unexplained and complex events → sense-making
 - they **take advantage of our “weakness”** (e.g. cognitive biases)
- **Simply saying that they are wrong doesn't help**
→ Good practices

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