

Inquiring Minds topic - 7 July 2017

Ed Thomson, Moderator

CONSPIRACY THEORIES

The Constitution of the United States guarantees our right to speak or write whatever we wish with modest limits such as the prohibition of shouting "FIRE" falsely in a crowded theater. What about other communications which may be false?

Was the Sandy Hook killing of children faked? Was the Holocaust faked? Were the Moon landings faked? Was the AIDs epidemic caused by the CIA? Have reptiles from elsewhere in the universe taken over earth? These are just a few of the claims that have been made according to Time Magazine. These claims include the assertion that powers beyond our control have caused these stories or events.

The internet has provided unparalleled opportunities to make claims which may be wholly false. If they are false, what can anyone do about them?

Attached is an article by Maggie Koerth-Baker. She makes reference to Alex Jones. Mr. Jones has been the subject of an interview by Megan Kelly on NBC very recently and also the subject of an article in the New York times Review of June 18, 2017. Mr. Jones appears to make a handsome living from the propagation of these stories. I quote from the New York Times article by Charles J. Sykes: "Alex Jones, the conspiracy trafficker who runs the website Infowars, believes that Sept. 11 was an "inside job" and that the massacre of children at Sandy Hook was faked." Mr. Sykes believes that Megan Kelly enhanced the standing of Alex Jones by her interview and that he should have been left as a "marginal figure on the paranoid right".

Let us consider -

What are your "favorite conspiracy theories?"

Should a false theory or story be ignored?

How should a false theory or story be confronted?

Should one stand up to a hate seller on principal?

Why Rational People Buy Into Conspiracy Theories

 nytimes.com /2013/05/26/magazine/why-rational-people-buy-into-conspiracy-theories.html

MAGGIE KOERTH-BAKER

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In the days following the bombings at the Boston Marathon, speculation online regarding the identity and motive of the unknown perpetrator or perpetrators was rampant. And once the Tsarnaev brothers were identified and the manhunt came to a close, the speculation didn't cease. It took a new form. A sampling: Maybe the brothers Tsarnaev were just patsies, fall guys set up to take the heat for a mysterious Saudi with high-level connections; or maybe they were innocent, but instead of the Saudis, the actual bomber had acted on behalf of a rogue branch of our own government; or what if the Tsarnaevs were behind the attacks, but were secretly working for a larger organization?

Crazy as these theories are, those propagating them are not — they're quite normal, in fact. But recent scientific research tells us this much: if you think one of the theories above is plausible, you probably feel the same way about the others, even though they contradict one another. And it's very likely that this isn't the only news story that makes you feel as if shadowy forces are behind major world events.

"The best predictor of belief in a conspiracy theory is belief in other conspiracy theories," says Viren Swami, a psychology professor who studies conspiracy belief at the University of Westminster in England. Psychologists say that's because a conspiracy theory isn't so much a response to a single event as it is an expression of an overarching worldview.

As Richard Hofstadter wrote in his seminal 1965 book, "The Paranoid Style in American Politics," conspiracy theories, especially those involving meddling foreigners, are a favorite pastime in this nation. Americans have always had the sneaking suspicion that somebody was out to get us — be it Freemasons, Catholics or communists. But in recent years, it seems as if every tragedy comes with a round of yarn-spinning, as the Web fills with stories about "false flag" attacks and "crisis actors" — not mere theorizing but arguments for the existence of a completely alternate version of reality.

Since Hofstadter's book was published, our access to information has vastly improved, which you would think would have helped minimize such wild speculation. But according to recent scientific research on the matter, it most likely only serves to make theories more convincing to the public. What's even more surprising is that this sort of theorizing isn't limited to those on the margins. Perfectly sane minds possess an incredible capacity for developing narratives, and even some of the wildest conspiracy theories can be grounded in rational thinking, which makes them that much more pernicious. Consider this: 63 percent of registered American voters believe in at least one political conspiracy theory, according to a recent poll conducted by Fairleigh Dickinson University.

While psychologists can't know exactly what goes on inside our heads, they have, through surveys and laboratory studies, come up with a set of traits that correlate well with conspiracy belief. In 2010, Swami and a co-author summarized this research in *The Psychologist*, a scientific journal. They found, perhaps surprisingly, that believers are more likely to be cynical about the world in general and politics in particular. Conspiracy theories also seem to be more compelling to those with low self-worth, especially with regard to their sense of agency in the world at large. Conspiracy theories appear to be a way of reacting to uncertainty and powerlessness.

Economic recessions, terrorist attacks and natural disasters are massive, looming threats, but we have little power over when they occur or how or what happens afterward. In these moments of powerlessness and uncertainty, a part of the brain called the amygdala kicks into action. Paul Whalen, a scientist at Dartmouth College who studies the amygdala, says it doesn't exactly do anything on its own. Instead, the amygdala jump-starts the rest of the brain into analytical overdrive — prompting repeated reassessments of information in an attempt to create a coherent and understandable narrative, to understand what just happened, what threats still exist and what should be done now. This may be a useful way to understand how, writ large, the brain's capacity for generating new narratives after

shocking events can contribute to so much paranoia in this country.

“If you know the truth and others don’t, that’s one way you can reassert feelings of having agency,” Swami says. It can be comforting to do your own research even if that research is flawed. It feels good to be the wise old goat in a flock of sheep.

Surprisingly, Swami’s work has also turned up a correlation between conspiracy theorizing and strong support of democratic principles. But this isn’t quite so strange if you consider the context. Kathryn Olmsted, a historian at the University of California, Davis, says that conspiracy theories wouldn’t exist in a world in which real conspiracies don’t exist. And those conspiracies — Watergate or the Iran-contra Affair — often involve manipulating and circumventing the democratic process. Even people who believe that the Sandy Hook shooting was actually a drama staged by actors couch their arguments in concern for the preservation of the Second Amendment.

Our access to high-quality information has not, unfortunately, ushered in an age in which disagreements of this sort can easily be solved with a quick Google search. In fact, the Internet has made things worse. Confirmation bias — the tendency to pay more attention to evidence that supports what you already believe — is a well-documented and common human failing. People have been writing about it for centuries. In recent years, though, researchers have found that confirmation bias is not easy to overcome. You can’t just drown it in facts.

In 2006, the political scientists Brendan Nyhan and Jason Reifler identified a phenomenon called the “backfire effect.” They showed that efforts to debunk inaccurate political information can leave people more convinced that false information is true than they would have been otherwise. Nyhan isn’t sure why this happens, but it appears to be more prevalent when the bad information helps bolster a favored worldview or ideology.

In that way, Swami says, the Internet and other media have helped perpetuate paranoia. Not only does more exposure to these alternative narratives help engender belief in conspiracies, he says, but the Internet’s tendency toward tribalism helps reinforce misguided beliefs.

And that’s a problem. Because while believing George W. Bush helped plan the Sept. 11 attacks might make you *feel* in control, it doesn’t actually make you so. Earlier this year, Karen Douglas, a University of Kent psychologist, along with a student, published research in which they exposed people to conspiracy theories about climate change and the death of Princess Diana. Those who got information supporting the theories but not information debunking them were more likely to withdraw from participation in politics and were less likely to take action to reduce their carbon footprints.

Alex Jones, a syndicated radio host, can build fame as a conspiracy peddler; politicians can hint at conspiracies for votes and leverage; but if conspiracy theories are a tool the average person uses to reclaim his sense of agency and access to democracy, it’s an ineffective tool. It can even have dangerous health implications. For example, research has shown that African-Americans who believe AIDS is a weapon loosed on them by the government (remembering the abuses of the Tuskegee experiment) are less likely to practice protected sex. And if you believe that governments or corporations are hiding evidence that vaccines harm children, you’re less likely to have your children vaccinated. The result: pockets of measles and whooping-cough infections and a few deaths in places with low child-vaccination rates.

Psychologists aren’t sure whether powerlessness causes conspiracy theories or vice versa. Either way, the current scientific thinking suggests these beliefs are nothing more than an extreme form of cynicism, a turning away from politics and traditional media — which only perpetuates the problem.

Maggie Koerth-Baker is science editor at BoingBoing.net and author of “Before the Lights Go Out,” on the future of energy production and consumption.