

How to Spot COVID-19 Conspiracy Theories

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The COVID-19 pandemic is a fertile breeding ground for conspiracy theories. When people suffer a loss of control or feel threatened, they become more vulnerable to believing conspiracies. For example, the Black Death in the 14th century inspired anti-Semitic hysteria and when cholera broke out in Russia in 1892, blame fell on doctors and crowds hunted down anybody in a white coat.

How do we avoid being misled by baseless conspiracy theories? Conspiracy theories are identified by telltale thought patterns. Learning these patterns is key to inoculating ourselves and society against the corrosive influence of conspiracy theories. The seven traits of conspiratorial thinking are:

- C**

Contradictory
- O**

Overriding suspicion
- N**

Nefarious Intent
- S**

Something Must Be Wrong
- P**

Persecuted Victim
- I**

Immune to Evidence
- R**

Re-interpreting Randomness

Anticipating upcoming conspiracy theories

Let's illustrate those thought patterns using some concrete examples.

One place we might soon see lots of conspiracy theories is the U.S. state of Georgia. This is because on May 1, Georgia began relaxing its social distancing measures, which experts expect will unfortunately lead to a spike in COVID-19 infections later in May. We expect that as the number of infections rises, so will the number of conspiracy theories that you might encounter in Georgia – for example, on your social media feed. In anticipation of this spike, we asked 42 Georgians to invent conspiracy theories that provide alternative explanations for the increase in COVID-19 cases.

Our respondents were very creative. Most conspiracy theories were political, but intriguingly, were as likely to point at Democrats ("the Democratic party would pressure the medical community to inflate numbers to make it look like a massive mistake of Republican governor Kemp") as they were to implicate Republicans ("The governor reopened things on purpose to infect the poor. He is trying to get rid of constituents who do not support him"). Political conspiracy theories can be used by either side of politics to undermine the other.

We use these invented conspiracy theories to illustrate the telltale traits of conspiratorial thinking:



Contradictory

Conspiracy theorists can hold incoherent beliefs, for example, believing that Princess Diana was murdered but also believing that she faked her own death. The conspiracy theorist is so committed to disbelieving the "official" account that it doesn't matter that their theory is contradictory.

Example: "The governor reopened things on purpose to infect the poor who needed to work to survive ... He is also taking the economic burden off of the government for unemployment."

Is he trying to make people sick and unable to work or reduce unemployment!? You can't do both at the same time!



Overriding Suspicion

Conspiratorial thinking involves overwhelming suspicion towards the official account. This extreme degree of suspicion prevents belief in anything that doesn't fit into the conspiracy theory.

Example: "The count is up due to medical professionals being pressured by the state to count patients as COVID when they either do not know or they tested negative. The state wants higher numbers to show the devastation of the virus."

13,000 doctors & 70,000 nurses in Georgia. Not a single whistleblower!?



Nefarious Intent

The motivations behind any presumed conspiracy are invariably assumed to be nefarious. We see this in conspiracies about climate change when people allege that routine data adjustments are actually NASA intentionally "cooking the books".

Example: *The government elite want to kill as many people as possible. With more deaths, they can potentially cement their seat in power for longer than would normally be allowed.*

Subvert democracy.

Murder citizens.



Something Must Be Wrong

Although conspiracy theorists may occasionally abandon specific ideas when they become untenable, those revisions don't change their overall conclusion that "something must be wrong" and the official account is based on deception.

Example:
"Using Georgia's early choice to relax measures was easy, because now other states will be afraid to relax their own measures seeing the influx of infections in Georgia."

*So Georgia relaxed measures in order for others to increase measures.
That's some three-dimensional chess!*



Persecuted Victim

Conspiracy theorists perceive and present themselves as the victim of organized persecution. At the same time, they see themselves as brave antagonists taking on the villainous conspirators.

Example: *"The Democrats have invented the coronavirus hoax so that they can eliminate wealthy older voters and therefore come to power during the election."*

Rich people under attack!

Another example of overriding suspicion.



Immune to Evidence

Conspiracy theories are inherently self-sealing—evidence that counters a theory is re-interpreted as originating from the conspiracy. The stronger the evidence against a conspiracy (e.g., investigations exonerate climate scientists from allegations of misconduct), the larger the conspiracy must be (e.g., the investigations into climate scientists were part of the conspiracy)!

Example: "Chinese conspirators against Georgia's leniency in the treatment of the pandemic have reintroduced the virus, which was, in fact, on a sharp decline in Georgia. Had the Governor Brian Kemp not tried to reopen the state so early, we wouldn't have been attacked by the Chinese once more."

If you don't like scientific facts, just replace them with an imaginary enemy!



Re-interpreting Randomness

The overriding suspicion found in conspiratorial thinking frequently results in the belief that nothing occurs by accident. Random events are re-interpreted as being caused by the conspiracy and woven into a broader, interconnected pattern.

Example: "The increasing number of people on 5G cellular networks led to a spike in the number of infections."

So? Baby Yoda came at the same time as COVID-19 – maybe he caused the pandemic!

Conclusion

While the eventual conspiracy theories may differ from the examples presented here, we can be confident they will still possess those same telltale traits of conspiratorial thinking. You can help spot and resist future conspiracies by exposing its tactics: Is the logic **Contradictory**? Is there an **Overriding suspicion** of official explanations? Some **Nefarious intent**? **Something must be wrong!** Is there a **Persecuted victim**? And does it sound like the narrative is self-sealing and **Immune to evidence**? It can't possibly be due to **Random** chance! Exposing the **CONSPIR** tactics will help raise awareness of the ways conspiracy theories distort the facts and is key to building resilience and inoculating ourselves and others from being misled, especially when we are most vulnerable: in times of crises and uncertainty.



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