

The lure of the conspiracy theory

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Was Princess Diana the victim of drunk driving or a plot by the British royal family? Did Neil Armstrong really walk on the moon or just across a film set in Nevada? And who killed President John F. Kennedy - the Russians, the Cubans, the CIA, the mafia... aliens? Almost every big event has a conspiracy theory attached to it. The truth, they say, is out there - but where exactly? Perhaps psychology can help us find at least some of the answers.

Whether you are a dyed-in-the-wool conspiracy theorist, a confirmed anti-theorist, or somewhere in between, one thing's for sure: conspiracy theories pervade modern culture. Thousands of films, talk shows and radio phone-ins are built around them. US lecture tours from prominent theorists such as radio host Alex Jones can draw audiences of tens of thousands, while books raking over the evidence sell millions of copies worldwide. The internet documentary *Loose Change*, which claims that a CIA plot lay behind the 9/11 attacks in New York and Washington, is approaching its 10-millionth download.

Belief in conspiracy theories certainly seems to be on the rise, and what little research has been done investigating this question confirms this is so for perhaps the most famous example of all - the claim that a conspiracy lay behind the assassination of JFK in 1963. A survey in 1968 found that about two-thirds of Americans believed the conspiracy theory, while by 1990 that proportion had risen to nine-tenths.

One factor fuelling the general growth of conspiracy beliefs is likely to be that the internet allows new theories to be quickly created, and endlessly debated by a wider audience than ever. A conspiracy-based website built around the death of Princess Diana, for example, sprang up within hours of the car crash that killed her in 1997.

So what has been the impact of the growing conspiracy culture? Conspiracy theories can have a valuable role in society. We need people to think "outside the box", even if there is usually more sense to be found inside the box. The close scrutiny of evidence and the dogged pursuit of alternative explanations are key features of investigative journalism and critical scientific thinking. Conspiracy theorists can sometimes be the little guys who bring the big guys to account - including multinational companies and governments. After all, some conspiracy theories turn out to be true. Take the Iran-Contra affair, a massive political scandal of the late 1980s. When claims first surfaced that the US government had sold arms to its enemy Iran to raise funds for pro-American rebel forces in Nicaragua and to help secure the release of US hostages taken by pro-Iranian groups, it certainly sounded like yet another convoluted conspiracy theory. Several question marks remain over the affair, but President Ronald Reagan admitted that his administration had indeed sold arms to Iran.

Exploiting fears

On the other hand, there is a dangerous side to conspiracy theories. During the cold war, they arguably played a part in sowing mistrust between east and west. For canny politicians or campaigners, conspiracy theories can be a good way of exploiting people's fears by promulgating rumours that are difficult, if not impossible, to disprove.

Such beliefs can have a far-reaching impact on people's lives. For example, over 20 per cent of African Americans believe that HIV was created in a laboratory and disseminated by the US government in order to restrict the growth of the black population, according to a series of [studies](#) by Sheryl Bird at Oregon State University and Laura Bogart at Kent State University in Ohio. The people who believe this theory also tend to be more sceptical of government health messages that condoms can stop HIV transmission. These are chilling findings, especially considering that although African



Americans constitute only 12 per cent of the US population, they account for nearly half of the nation's AIDS cases.

Unfortunately there has been little research carried out into what kind of events trigger conspiracy theories, who tends to believe them, and why. We do know, however, that people who believe in one theory are more likely to believe in others: there is a good chance that someone who believes the moon landings were faked will also believe that JFK was killed by a second gunman from the infamous grassy knoll.

There are some variations in who believes what, though, as shown by an as yet unpublished study I carried out recently in the UK with psychologist Chris French at Goldsmiths College, London. We found that beliefs in JFK conspiracies are highest among people aged 36 and over, while those between 20 and 35 are most likely to see a conspiracy behind the 9/11 attacks. Surprisingly, perhaps, the youngest age group - 19 and under - are least likely to endorse any theory.

One possible explanation of these findings is the phenomenon known as "flashbulb memory" - the recall of a sudden event, often shocking and international in scale, that affects individuals on a personal level. This type of memory is more easily formed when individuals are between 20 and 35 years old, so for different generations there are certain events - the assassination of JFK, space shuttle Challenger exploding on take-off, the death of Princess Diana - that tend to trigger flashbulb memories. Some of these iconic, shared events can provide fertile ground in which conspiracy theories are sown.

Age is not the only demographic to influence conspiracy beliefs. Several US studies have found that ethnic minorities - particularly African and Hispanic Americans - are far more believing of conspiracy theories than white Americans. In our recent UK study, we found a similar race effect, coupled with an even stronger association between income and belief levels. People who describe themselves as "hard up" are more likely to believe in conspiracies than those with average income levels, while the least likely to believe are the well off.

How can we account for the link between race, income level and conspiracy theories? Theorists tend to show higher levels of anomie - a general disaffection or disempowerment from society. Perhaps this is the underlying factor that predisposes people more distant from centres of power - whether they be poorer people or those from ethnic minorities - to believe in conspiracies.

So what kind of thought processes contribute to belief in conspiracy theories? A study I carried out in 2002 explored a way of thinking sometimes called "major event - major cause" reasoning. Essentially, people often assume that an event with substantial, significant or wide-ranging consequences is likely to have been caused by something substantial, significant or wide-ranging.

I gave volunteers variations of a newspaper story describing an assassination attempt on a fictitious president. Those who were given the version where the president died were significantly more likely to attribute the event to a conspiracy than those who read the one where the president survived, even though all other aspects of the story were equivalent.

To appreciate why this form of reasoning is seductive, consider the alternative: major events having minor or mundane causes - for example, the assassination of a president by a single, possibly mentally unstable, gunman, or the death of a princess because of a drunk driver. This presents us with a rather chaotic and unpredictable relationship between cause and effect. Instability makes most of us uncomfortable; we prefer to imagine we live in a predictable, safe world, so in a strange way, some conspiracy theories offer us accounts of events that allow us to retain a sense of safety and predictability.

Other research has examined how the way we search for and evaluate evidence affects our belief systems. Numerous studies have shown that in general, people give greater attention to information that fits with their existing beliefs, a tendency called "confirmation bias". Reasoning about conspiracy theories follows this pattern, as shown by research I carried out with Marco Cinnirella at the Royal Holloway University of London, which we presented at the British Psychological Society conference in 2005.

The study, which again involved giving volunteers fictional accounts of an assassination attempt, showed that conspiracy believers found new information to be more plausible if it was consistent with their beliefs. Moreover, believers considered that ambiguous or neutral information fitted better with the conspiracy explanation, while non-believers felt it fitted better with the non-conspiracy account. The same piece of evidence can be used by different people to support very different accounts of events.

This fits with the observation that conspiracy theories often mutate over time in light of new or contradicting evidence. So, for instance, if some new information appears to undermine a conspiracy theory, either the plot is changed to make it consistent with the new information, or the theorists question the legitimacy of the new information. Theorists often argue that those who present such information are themselves embroiled in the conspiracy. In fact, because of my research, I have been accused of being secretly in the pay of various western intelligence services (I promise, I haven't seen

a penny).

It is important to remember that anti-theorists show a similar bias: they will seek out and evaluate evidence in a way that fits with the official or anti-conspiracy account. So conspiracy theorists are not necessarily more closed-minded than anti-theorists. Rather, the theorist and anti-theorist tend to pursue their own lines of thought and are often subject to cognitive biases that prevent their impartial examination of alternative evidence.

How then can we predict who will become believers and non-believers? My hunch is that a large part of the explanation lies in how individuals form aspects of their social identities such as ethnicity, socioeconomic status and political beliefs. The reasoning and psychological biases that create believers or their opposites are fostered by social origins. For conspiracy believer and non-believer alike, there is a kind of truth out there. It's just a rather different truth that each seeks.

Create the perfect conspiracy theory

Pick your adversary

A sense of anomie (dislocation from society and authority) fuels beliefs in conspiracy theories, so pick a big bad organisation of some sort - government or big business is ideal

For added spice, identify a shadowy, secretive society with implied links to your adversary: the more shadowy, the better

Choose your event

You'll need a big, contemporary newsworthy event around which to weave your theory

If it's a sudden, shocking visual occurrence of international import it is more likely to become a "flashbulb memory" for the masses. Your key conspiracy audience, most able to create such vivid "indelible" memories will be between the ages of 20 and 35

Develop your story

Construct your theory from carefully selected information that weaves together into a compelling story

If something doesn't fit, reinterpret it in line with your theory

Create uncertainty: question existing evidence or find new evidence that contradicts the "official" account

Prepare your defence

If someone highlights a gap or inconsistency in your evidence, don't be afraid to tweak your story, but keep the core conspiracy in place

You can allow the finer details of the theory to mutate, but always keep in mind the maxim - "they did it, I just have to find the proof that they did it"

Broaden the circle of conspirators to include those who question your position... "they're denying the truth - they must be involved too!"

Weblinks

[Iran-Contra Affair, Wikipedia](#)

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iran-Contra_Affair

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http://www.pc.rhul.ac.uk/web/about_us/pages/patrlema.html

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