

The social impacts of conspiracy theories

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Credit: Sebastian Bartoschek

As a global population we are awash with conspiracy theories. But what effect do these really have on the public as we go about our day-to-day lives, asks a team of Cambridge researchers.

Elvis is alive, the Moon landings were faked and members of the British Royal Family are shapeshifting lizards.

Not only that: 9/11 was an inside job, governments are deliberately concealing evidence of alien contact, and we are all being controlled by a

sinister, shadowy cartel of political, financial and media elites who together form a New World Order.

As a [global population](#) we are awash with conspiracy theories. They have permeated every major event, across every level of society; from the French Revolution to the War on Terror. In doing so, they have attracted devotees in their millions; from lone survivalists to presidential nominees such as Donald Trump – who claimed Ted Cruz's father had links to Lee Harvey Oswald and, by inference, to the murder of President John F. Kennedy.

But what effects do conspiracy theories really have on the public as we go about our day-to-day lives? Are they merely harmless flights of fancy propagated by those existing on the margins of society, or is their reach altogether more sinister? Do runaway conspiracy theories influence politicians, decision-makers and, by extension, the public at large? And what effect has the advent of the internet and mass, instant communication across social media platforms had on the spread of conspiracy theories around the world?

Since 2013, a team of Cambridge researchers and visiting fellows has been examining the theories and beliefs about conspiracies that have become such an enduring feature of modern society. Conspiracy and Democracy: History, Political Theory and Internet Research is a five-year, interdisciplinary research project based at CRASSH (Centre for Research in the Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities) and funded by the Leverhulme Trust.

The project brings together historians, political theorists, philosophers, anthropologists and internet engineers as it seeks to understand what additional factors must be at work for conspiracy theories to enjoy such prevalence in the 21st century.

Professor John Naughton who, along with Professor Sir Richard Evans and Professor David Runciman, is one of the three project directors, explains: "Studying conspiracy theories provides opportunities for understanding how people make sense of the world and how societies function, as well as calling into question our basic trust in democratic societies.

"Our project examines how conspiracies and conspiracy theorising have changed over the centuries and what, if any, is the relationship between them? Have conspiracy theories appeared at particular moments in history, and why?

"We wanted to counter the standard academic narrative that conspiracy theories are beneath contempt. We were anxious to undertake a natural history of theorising, to study it seriously from a 21st-century context."

Despite the onset of the digital age, Naughton and his colleagues do not believe that the internet has necessarily increased the influence of conspiracy theories on society as a whole. Indeed, research suggests that although the spread of conspiracy theories is often instantaneous in the digital world, so too is the evidence to debunk them.

Likewise, the team's work so far suggests that online, as in life, we largely surround ourselves with people of like-minded views and opinions, effectively partitioning ourselves from a diversity of world views.

"The internet doesn't make conspiracy theories more persuasive, it actually seems to compartmentalise people," adds Naughton. "We more efficiently come into contact with those who hold similar views, but we also mostly end up working in echo chambers. That's the way the internet works at the moment – especially in social media: you end up somewhere where everyone has the same views.

"The effect is a more concentrated grouping of opinions, and that's the same for everything else, not just conspiracy theories. I follow 800 people on Twitter. Not one of them celebrated Brexit. I was in an echo chamber."

Dr Alfred Moore, a postdoctoral researcher on the project, adds: "The question of the effect of the internet is a really interesting one. How far can the emergence and success of today's populist movements be explained in terms of technological changes and especially social media? My first instinct is to say a little bit, but probably not much.

"Technologies have made it less costly to communicate, which means it's easier to find, talk to and organise supporters without the financial and organisational resources of political parties. Both Corbyn and Trump make heavy use of [social media](#) as an alternative to a supposedly biased 'mainstream' media and the influence of their parties. It also demonstrates how the internet can promote polarisation by making it easy for people to find information they agree with and to filter out everything else."

For those reasons, Naughton and Moore believe that some of the most famous conspiracy theories – such as David Icke's theories about shapeshifting reptiles or feverish claims about the death of Princess Diana – are not particularly dangerous as they don't appear to generate tangible actions or outcomes in the real world. In fact, the Conspiracy and Democracy team question whether these silos effectively disable the capacity for many conspiracy theories to take a firm hold in the public consciousness or threaten our democratic processes.

"A lot remains to be done in researching the history, structure and dynamics of conspiracy theories, their relationships with real conspiracies, and the changes they have undergone through time," adds Evans. "You might think that conspiracy theories cause anxiety and

depression among ordinary people, and undermine trust in our political institutions and the people who run them, but there are plenty of other reasons for this lack of trust apart from conspiracy theories.

"The debate goes on, but it's not a case of [conspiracy theories](#) threatening democracies. By themselves, such theories may reinforce political suspicion and prejudice but they're not the origin of it. On the whole, I think it's fair to conclude that the scale of the threat is pretty limited.

"Some varieties, like antisemitism, can cause huge damage, but others are pretty harmless. Does it really matter that some people think the [moon landings](#) were faked? In the end, few people believe we are ruled by alien lizards."

Provided by University of Cambridge

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