

Conspiracy thinking less likely with greater news media literacy, study suggests

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The more you know about the news media and how it works, the less likely you are to believe conspiracy theories – even ones you might find politically tempting.

That's the conclusion University of Illinois journalism professor Stephanie Craft and her research colleagues reached in a study being published next month in the journal *Communication and the Public*.

The researchers surveyed nearly 400 participants online in spring 2016 to gauge how their news media [literacy](#) – measured as a combination of news media knowledge and psychological traits connected with processing news messages – might relate to their endorsement of [conspiracy theories](#).

The researchers found that "individuals who give credence to [conspiracy theories](#) know comparatively little about how the news media work." They also found that "the greater one's knowledge about the news media – from the kinds of news covered, to the commercial context in which news is produced, to the effects on public opinion news can have – the less likely one will fall prey to conspiracy theories."

Craft believes their research is the first to make that connection. But what Craft found even more interesting, and encouraging, were findings that showed it applied even where conspiracy theories resonated with an individual's political beliefs.

The study asked participants about the strength of their belief in any of 10 conspiracy theories, split evenly between those associated with liberal and conservative perspectives. It also asked separate questions to determine participants' ideological beliefs.

The researchers found that liberals with higher news media literacy were less likely to believe any or all of the five liberal conspiracy theories – among them that the federal government knew about the 9/11 terrorist attacks beforehand, that Republicans stole the 2004 presidential election through voter fraud in Ohio, and that there's a link between childhood vaccines and autism.

Likewise, conservatives with higher news media literacy were less likely to believe five conspiracy theories commonly associated with conservatives – among them that Barack Obama was not born in the U.S., that global warming is a hoax, and that the 2010 [health care law](#) authorized government panels to make end-of-life decisions for people on Medicare.

Co-authors of the study are Seth Ashley, a professor of communication at Boise State University, and Adam Maksl, a professor of journalism and media at Indiana University Southeast. All three co-authors previously worked together to develop the measure of news media literacy used in the study and have done additional work on the topic.

The 397 participants in the survey were recruited using Amazon's Mechanical Turk system. Based on a measure of political ideology, 195 were identified as liberal, 126 as conservative and 76 could not be identified as either liberal or conservative.

Contrary to popular conception, believing in conspiracy theories "is not the sole province of the proverbial nut-job," the researchers write. Conspiracy theories "are almost by definition 'good' (i.e., enticing)

stories," and even reasonable individuals can buy into theories not supported by the best evidence, they note. "The power of a compelling narrative and one's pre-existing biases are often no match for conflicting information."

But given those factors and others that might play a part in conspiracy [theory](#) endorsement, Craft said she was encouraged to find that promoting greater news media literacy might have a small-but-significant effect.

"To the extent that we've hit on one thing that seems to matter in a nontrivial kind of way, that represents some sort of progress," she said.

It's also a piece "we can do something about," she said, rather than trying to change set beliefs, alter news habits or complain about "fake news."

Educators can promote news [media](#) literacy in schools, Craft said, and journalists can play a part "by being more open about how they do what they do."

"One of the tricky areas for people in the news literacy area is you want to encourage skepticism, you want to encourage people to be actively thinking about news, not just consuming it like candy," she said. "But there's kind of a fine line between being a skeptical [news](#) consumer and a cynical one, where the cynical one would just think, 'Oh well, they all make stuff up, they all do it, it's all wrong.' That doesn't serve anyone, either."

More information: Stephanie Craft et al. News media literacy and conspiracy theory endorsement, *Communication and the Public* (2017). [DOI: 10.1177/2057047317725539](https://doi.org/10.1177/2057047317725539)

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