

Europe finding common cause over conspiracy theories

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Credit: COST

With conspiracy theories moving from the fringes of society to inspiring political rhetoric and policy making, COST is helping a network of academics to study this fascinating subject in greater depth than ever before.

Conspiracy theories – the belief that events are secretly manipulated behind the scenes by powerful groups – have a long history and are more prominent than ever before. Opinion polls show that most people believe that the official versions of events like the assassination of JFK and 9/11 cannot be trusted.

Their significance has increased to the extent where [conspiracy](#) theories are being referenced by governments and politicians, yet the study of these theories is still in its infancy. The COST Action COMPACT—Comparative Analysis of Conspiracy Theories—is addressing the issue by uniting researchers and academics from across Europe.

"The aim of this Action is to provide a comparative analysis of [conspiracy theory](#)," says Dr Stef Aupers, chair of COMPACT's dissemination subcommittee. "It looks at different causes, manifestations and effects across countries, cultures, time periods, political systems and media regimes. We're developing recommendations and strategies for stakeholders confronted by the challenges that conspiracy theories present."

Pulling together the disparate strands of research into the subject is central to COMPACT's work, as Vice-Chair Dr Michael Butter elaborates.

"Synthesis is really needed, because conspiracy [theory](#) research is done in quite a number of disciplines. These disciplines often don't talk to each other, or they employ very different methodologies, so they arrive at very different results."

COMPACT is doing this by working with stakeholders like journalists, teachers and policy makers at a series of workshops across Europe.

Leaving a legacy is also an important facet of COMPACT's work, with Dr Butter revealing it will produce what he calls "a definitive handbook of conspiracy theory research—a huge encyclopaedia with entries by country, different types of theories and different periods."

Conspiracy theories are often localised to particular countries, but

COMPACT is helping improve understanding by putting a diverse array of interested parties into the same room to share ideas and working methods.

"Given the fact that research on conspiracy theories is generally local and, primarily, focussed on the US, the main goal of the Action is to compare and contextualize conspiracy theory in Europe," adds Dr Aupers. "COMPACT has helped to unite an emergent, by and large fragmented field of research. International scholars from different countries and disciplines—political science, sociology, media studies, cultural studies, history, social psychology and philosophy—are now recognizing that they are part of a bigger picture."

More information: Comparative Analysis of Conspiracy Theories (COMPACT): www.cost.eu/COST_Actions/ca/CA15101

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