

# Innuendo and pointing suspicion in news coverage can fuel conspiracy theories

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Innuendo and hinting at fake information in news coverage is enough to fuel belief in conspiracy theories, new research shows.

Implication alone can significantly increase belief in false facts, according to a new study.

Experts have said the results show news outlets should be quicker to correct inaccurate [information](#) published or broadcast, and be more cautious about who they invite to provide analysis.

University of Exeter academics Benjamin Lyons, Vittorio Merola and Jason Reifler conducted the study with around 1,000 participants last month. The findings were presented at the AAAS conference in Texas.

Professor Reifler said: "This study shows it is easy to spread conspiracy theories. Debunking appears to work—but only up to a point. As a result, media companies need to be cautious about the guests they invite on air or feature in their publications. When guests imply a conspiracy, journalists should push back to the extent they can. Having lived in both the US and the UK, my experience is that UK journalists do a better job at this than their US counterparts. But, there is always room for improvement."

Participants were asked to read a mock newspaper article. They were divided into five groups: one received information which explicitly promoted a [conspiracy theory](#), another was given the same information

together with the facts which debunked this myth. Another group was given information which implicitly hinted at a conspiracy theory, and another had the same facts which debunked it. There was also a control group. All respondents received debunking information at the conclusion of the study.

The participants in the group with "explicit conditions" read an article with explicitly false information - the Zika epidemic in Brazil was caused by the release of [genetically modified mosquitoes](#) by a subsidiary of a pharmaceutical company that was hoping to profit from a future vaccine.

In reality, genetically modified mosquitoes were released after the outbreak as a way to control the spread of Zika, and the company involved does not stand to gain from selling Zika-related pharmaceutical products. The article attributed this false information to "concerned citizens" and said the motive was profit from the vaccines developed by pharmaceutical parent company.

The implicit information given included a quote from a Brazilian politician rhetorically asking "who benefits?" from the sale of the [pharmaceutical products](#).

Professor Reifler said: "The results of the study are intriguing—both explicit and implicit information without debunking increases conspiracy beliefs, compared to the control conditions. While explicit information leads to a greater increase in conspiracy beliefs, implying a conspiracy also leads to an increase, albeit a smaller increase. Fortunately, the debunking information brings conspiracy levels back to the same level as the control. Unfortunately, the debunking information does not reduce [conspiracy](#) beliefs below the level found among participants in our [control group](#)."

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Provided by University of Exeter

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