Innuendo alone can fuel conspiracy theories, research shows

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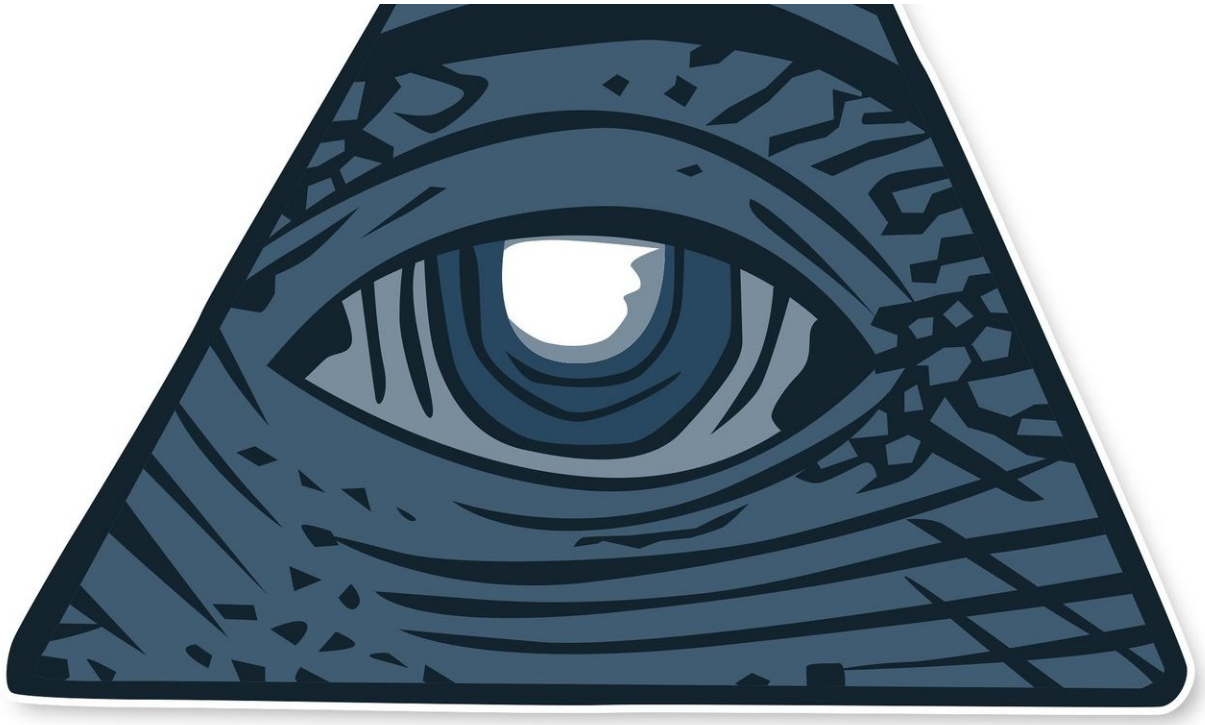

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Innuendo alone in news coverage can fuel belief in conspiracy theories, according to a new study.

Newspaper articles and TV and radio broadcasts which imply coincidences and connections are enough to lead people to believe false

information, experts have found.

The University of Exeter study shows conspiracy theories can be spread unwittingly as well as deliberately—for instance by quoting people who question the motives of institutions and corporations—a finding which has implications for how news outlets cover controversial topics.

Conspiracy theories suggested implicitly are especially dangerous because they are harder to spot and challenge. The study recommends journalists should avoid including "errant data" that may be misconstrued when there is uncertainty about facts during rapidly developing news events.

This implicit method of the spreading of misinformation has been largely overlooked until now. The study shows correcting false information is possible if the belief in the conspiracy theory hasn't become ingrained.

Dr. Ben Lyons, who led the study, said: "We have found conspiracy theories can be spread in an implicit way, for example if a newspaper article includes unrelated details that might be misconstrued. Because we naturally try to integrate all the information presented, stray details can spread conspiracy beliefs, even if the journalist has no malicious intent."

As part of the study 1,018 people from the USA were asked to read mock news articles about public health. One group read an article which quoted a group who explicitly alleged that the

Zika epidemic was the result of the release of genetically modified mosquitoes by a subsidiary of a pharmaceutical company in order to generate the need for vaccine, from which the parent pharmaceutical company would profit. The article also included number of pieces of information that implicitly supported those claims—such as the need for

a vaccine and the availability of funding for those who can solve the crisis, and details about the company's release of GM mosquitoes in Brazil prior to the Zika outbreak.

Another group was given a version which hinted at the conspiracy theory in an implicit way—which was found to influence their views—and a control group read an article which simply described the Zika epidemic.

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.

Conspiracy beliefs increased among both groups, although more strongly among those exposed to explicit cues.

Half the participants exposed to conspiracy theories were given a series of facts to read afterwards which corrected information in the article. The experiment showed these were effective in correcting the information, and readers were left with similar views about Zika to those in the control group.

Dr. Lyons said: "Misinformation about health is an increasing concern. We hope that this study helps provide a richer understanding of the transmission of conspiracy beliefs, particularly the media's potential role.

"The current 24-hour news cycle—with the resulting big appetite for commentators—may lead media to feature guests who make hints at false information, or a more nefarious story than current evidence supports. If so, implicit conspiracy cues are likely to persist within the current news environment.

"But we found you can correct beliefs based on factually incorrect

information, and this is probably especially true when people are new to the topic. But the timing of any correction is critical, as people are more likely to hold onto false beliefs as time goes on. An effective fact-checking should not be seen as a free pass, encouraging a kitchen-sink approach to reporting with corrections to follow."

Not Just Asking Questions: Effects of Implicit and Explicit Conspiracy Information about Vaccines and Genetic Modification is published in the journal *Health Communication*.

More information: Benjamin Lyons et al, Not Just Asking Questions: Effects of Implicit and Explicit Conspiracy Information About Vaccines and Genetic Modification, *Health Communication* (2018). DOI: 10.1080/10410236.2018.1530526

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