

What conspiracy theories have in common with fiction – and why it makes them compelling stories

December 18 2019, by Philip Seargeant



Credit: Samson Katt from Pexels

In an era dominated by "fake news" and disinformation, conspiracy theories are coming to play [an increasingly influential role](#) in modern

politics. During the recent impeachment hearings in the US, for example, former National Security Council official Fiona Hill [warned](#) that "fictional narratives" pushed by Russia were undermining American security.

But what's the difference exactly between a conspiracy theory and a legitimate news story? Does "fictional" in this sense simply mean fabricated? My [ongoing research](#) suggests there is more to it than this—something which can explain why conspiracy theories can gain such a powerful hold over the public imagination.

The narrative that Hill was referring to in her impeachment testimony is what's known as "Crowdstrike", a [conspiracy theory](#) named after a US cybersecurity company, that alleges it was Ukraine rather than Russia that [hacked](#) the Democratic National Committee's email server in 2016, and that Ukraine, along with the Democrats, subsequently went about framing Russia for interfering in the election.

A day after Hill's testimony the US president, Donald Trump, again trotted out precisely these same allegations in an [interview](#) with the TV show Fox & Friends. In doing so he made a string of assertions which are provably false. Reports from both the [US intelligence community](#) and [special counsel Robert Mueller](#) have, after all, concluded that it was Russia who actively interfered in the 2016 election, while there's no evidence of Ukraine having any part in it.

As [Hill noted](#), the whole Crowdstrike theory seems to be a clear "effort to legitimise an alternative narrative that the Ukrainian government is a US adversary, and that Ukraine—not Russia—attacked us in 2016".

Powerful forms of narrative

Conspiracy theories are used in disinformation campaigns in two main

ways. On the one hand, the simple act of citing them can be a way of legitimising views you don't like. For instance, the British journalist [Carole Cadwalladr's investigations](#) into various shady tactics used by the Leave campaign in 2016 EU referendum are regularly dismissed as nothing more than [conspiracies](#) by her enemies.

But conspiracy theories are also used as counter-narratives to confuse the actual nature of events and, in doing so, push a particular ideological view of the world.

It's worth noting that all explanations operate as a type of narrative. A [basic dramatic narrative](#) has three steps to it: (1) a person embarks upon a (2) journey into a hostile environment which (3) ultimately leads to self-knowledge.

This same basic structure applies to explanations: (1) you want to discover some information; (2) you find a way of discovering it; and (3) your world is changed as a result.

But, as [recent research](#) I've been doing shows, there are several ways in which conspiracy theories draw directly on elements of storytelling that are found in fiction rather than factual narratives.

As in fictional narratives, all the elements in a conspiracy [theory](#) are linked through clear lines of cause and effect. There's a reason for everything and, if that reason isn't immediately forthcoming, it's because it's being purposefully hidden as part of the conspiracy. This differs from real life of course, where events often include large amounts of happenstance, inexplicable phenomena and a general murkiness and confusion.

Same story

Then there's the way that [conspiracy](#) theories are all underpinned by the same basic archetype: what the writer [Christopher Booker](#) calls the "overcoming the monster" story. In this, a single or a small group of rebels take on the overwhelming forces of a corrupt and malevolent establishment which is threatening the wellbeing of society.

Crowdstrike slots snugly into this formula. Corrupt forces within the political establishment (in this case the Democratic Party) are presented as betraying the will of the people—represented by the election of Trump in 2016. The ongoing impeachment process against the president therefore threatens the welfare of the US as an independent democratic nation. As the political theorist [Jan-Werner Muller](#) has noted, this type of [conspiracy theory](#) is structurally embedded in the logic of all populist movements in the way their leaders regularly argue that the will of the people can only be denied through underhand and corrupt ways.

Conspiracy theories always fixate on a very simple story which acts as a fable for their overarching worldview. They usually take an issue of real significance—such as foreign influence in domestic elections—but, in order to explain it, they latch on to one succinct story which bypasses the complexities and messiness of real-life phenomena and instead satisfies the logic of their overarching ideological narrative.

For Trump's supporters, the Crowdstrike story feels true because it's another example of the establishment's great witch hunt against him. As a story, it also has a coherent logic which the expanse and messiness of the facts lack. So, in both these ways, our familiarity with the way the world is mediated via fiction helps cast doubt on the way the world actually is.

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