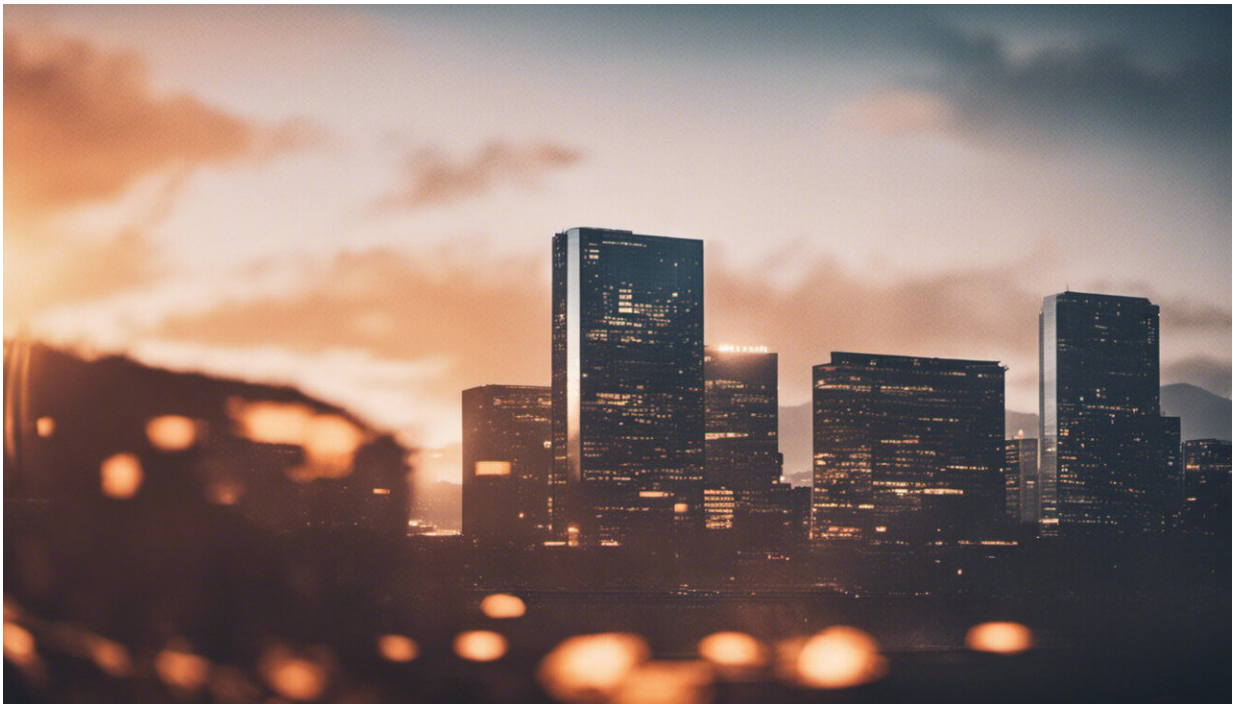


Opinion: Conspiracy theories aren't on the rise—we need to stop panicking

June 20 2023, by Magda Osman



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Several polls in the past couple of years (including from [Ipsos](#), [YouGov](#) and most recently [Savanta](#) on behalf of Kings College Policy Institute and the BBC) have been examining the kinds of conspiratorial beliefs people have. The findings have led to [a lot of concern and discussion](#).

There are several revealing aspects of these polls. As a researcher, I'm mainly interested in what claims are considered conspiratorial and how these are phrased.

But I'm also interested in the [widespread belief](#) that [conspiracy theories](#) are apparently on the rise, thanks to the internet and social media. Is this true and how concerned should we really be about conspiracy theories?

One of the common claims that is presented as conspiratorial that consistently appears in these polls concerns the causes of [climate](#) change. In 2008, Ipsos [presented the claim](#) "climate change and [global warming](#) is a [natural phenomenon](#) that happens from time to time" and 42% of the UK agreed. In 2021, [this was rephrased](#) as "climate change is not due to [human activity](#)" and 14% agreed.

For YouGov, 8% of the UK population in 2021 [agreed that](#) "the idea of man-made global warming is a hoax that was invented to deceive people". The new Savanta [survey](#) found that 18% of the UK population [disagreed with the statement](#) "human-caused climate change is real and is a threat to people and the planet".

Framing effects

Each poll varies considerably in how the claim is phrased, either by explicitly referring to it as a hoax, or as not caused by humans or being natural. But we can also consider the same issue another way.

The UK Savanta survey found that 74% of the UK public agreed that climate change is a threat to the planet. The Ipsos UK survey, meanwhile, found that [84% of people](#) in 2022 were concerned about climate change "sometimes referred to as global warming".

What I've demonstrated can be viewed as a common cognitive

psychological phenomenon called framing, which can influence how we draw conclusions. For example, imagine being told a meat product is 75% lean or 25% fat. Even though both mean the same thing, depending on what the focus is, the former product [will be viewed more favorably](#).

The Savanta survey results are a good example, because the same claim "human-caused climate change is real and is a threat to people and the planet" was supported by 74% but also rejected by 18%.

What this raises is the question, is it good that 74% are supportive, or is it bad that 18% reject it? Given that it is typically hard to get 100% agreement, what is an acceptable level of agreement on any one thing?

Clearly, before we panic about any one claim, we should look at the results in both ways—and also in all the ways the topic wasn't framed. People's beliefs are complex, and cannot always be captured neatly in a survey.

We should also think deeply about why people believe in a certain conspiracy theory before we dismiss them as crazy, and whether in fact it is a conspiracy, or just skepticism, or actually a valid belief.

To the latter point, one claim of particular interest to me is that the "media or the government adds secret mind-controlling technology to television broadcast signals". As a US survey [recently found](#), in 2013, 15% agreed with this, and in 2021, 17% agreed.

This may sound shocking, but in many of the studies that I [have recently conducted](#), when asking people to reveal the ways in which they think they are being manipulated (a sort of mind control) in their day to day lives, [the media features quite heavily](#).

But, according to my research, there isn't anything particularly

conspiratorial about their views. Priming techniques—using a word or image to change someone's behavior without them being conscious of it—are [widely used](#) by public and private sectors to influence behavior. That's despite the fact that [the evidence for their effectiveness](#) isn't exactly strong.

The point here is that the claim that mind-control technology is used clearly sounds conspiratorial—it could mean a brain implant.

But if by mind control what is actually meant are psychological techniques such as priming or "nudging" used to manipulate behavior, then this is a scientific claim that has spawned thousands of psychological studies. And a survey typically won't clarify what people take "mind-control" to mean.

A rise in conspiratorial beliefs?

Some 58% in the Savanta poll believe conspiracy theories are higher today than 20 years ago. This worry is also reflected in a wealth of [academic surveys](#) conducted on [the role of social media](#) in [propagating conspiracy theories](#).

So is belief in conspiracy theories on the rise? A recent study [tried to answer this](#). In short, it did not find that there was a significant rise in the magnitude of beliefs in different claims.

The exact same phrasing of the 50 claims was compared in surveys conducted on the US population between 1966 to 2021. On the subject of climate change, 37% agreed in 2013 that global warming was a hoax, in 2021 this dropped to 19% agreement.

For other comparisons, 50% in 1966 agreed that more than one man was involved in the assassination of US President John F. Kennedy,

compared with 56% agreed in 2021. When it comes to UFOs, in 1995, 49% agreed that the government is keeping information from the public showing that they are real—and that aliens have visited the Earth. In 2021, 50% agreed.

What we see here is that rates of agreement haven't fundamentally changed over time, apart for when it comes to [climate change](#), and in this case views that it is a hoax have in fact dropped. This only goes to show that we need to be careful about any [moral panic](#) that is attributed to the internet, and especially [social media](#) activity making situations worse.

While it might seem intuitive to draw a connection between what happens online and the beliefs that [might motivate behavior offline](#), we are still mostly drawing this connection based on correlational rather than causal evidence.

Clearly, belief in conspiracy theories is complex. What this tells us is that we have to be careful about how quickly we reach for panic buttons.

Ultimately, panic can lead to self censoring as any concerns, doubts and skepticism are equated to conspiratorial thinking. This is not a healthy way to go. And it makes it more difficult to reach out to those with violent or seriously concerning views with convincing arguments and evidence.

This article is republished from [The Conversation](#) under a Creative Commons license. Read the [original article](#).

Provided by The Conversation

Citation: Opinion: Conspiracy theories aren't on the rise—we need to stop panicking (2023, June

20) retrieved 29 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2023-06-opinion-conspiracy-theories-rise-panicking.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.