

Washington Square Citizens League
 Discussion Forum
 7:00-8:30 pm, Monday, January 9, 2023

**Disinformation: What is it? How is it transmitted? Why do people believe it?
 And what can be done to counteract it?**

A lie gets halfway around the world before the truth has a chance to get its pants on.

-- Winston Churchill

Just for fun, take this headline awareness test BEFORE reading further:

In last column, rate accuracy:

1=Very accurate; **2**=Somewhat accurate; **3**=Not very accurate; **4**=Not at all accurate

#		Do you recall seeing this HL?	If yes, rate accuracy (1-4)
1	Melania Trump's Girl-on-Girl Photos From Racy Shoot Revealed		
2	Pope Francis Shocks World, Endorses Donald Trump for President, Releases Statement		
3	Barbara Bush: "I Don't Know How Women Can Vote" for Trump		
4	Donald Trump Sent His Own Plane to Transport 200 Stranded Marines		
5	Donald Trump Says He'd "Absolutely" Require Muslims to Register		
6	FBI Agent Suspected in Hillary Email Leaks Found Dead in Apparent Murder-Suicide		
7	Trump: "I Will Protect Our LGBTQ Citizens"		
8	Donald Trump Protester Speaks Out: "I Was Paid \$3,500 to Protest Trump's Rally"		
9	I Ran the CIA. Now I'm Endorsing Hillary Clinton		
10	FBI Director Comey Just Put a Trump Sign on His Front Lawn		
11	Donald Trump on Refusing Presidential Salary: "I'm Not Taking It"		

The world according to my college roommate:

Recently, I've been communicating with John, my college roommate at Oberlin. John was a star football player and really nice guy. He studied chemistry and had a successful career in the chemical business; he made frequent trips to other countries, including China. Our respective paths led us in different directions, politically as well as geographically. Our missives have come to resemble a latter-day bull session, reminiscent of freshman year. Here's a smattering of his beliefs that I have gleaned from several years of emails. For the most part the words are his, with minimal editing on my part:

- I can see global warming. I just don't believe it's caused by man.
- Joe Biden is cognitively impaired and a major embarrassment.
- The great unsinkable ship Titanic America has hit an iceberg and is sinking fast.
- The Russian dossier was created and paid for by Hillary to deflect attention from her emails.
- Hillary Clinton tried to steal the White House tableware.
- 75% of hybrid owners do not purchase a second hybrid.
- Over the lifespan of a wind turbine you never recover the amount of energy required to produce the original turbine.
- As you might guess, I watch Fox News religiously, and sometimes watch ABC. I will not read the New York Times.

I'm sure you're as curious as I am as to how a college-educated person (from one of the most liberal schools in the country) could end up adopting these views. This nagging question stimulated my interest in this topic.

I'm sure you hear a lot of disinformation as you read or listen to the news. **Q1:** Can you think of an example you've seen or heard?

Are these statements “dis-“ or “mis-“?

- **Misinformation** is false or inaccurate information—getting the facts wrong.
- **Disinformation** is false information which is deliberately intended to mislead—intentionally making the misstating facts. (Am Psych Assoc)

Here are a few real-life examples relating to Covid, vaccines, the January 6 insurrection, and anti-Semitism. **Q2:** Are these statements disinformation or misinformation?

- “Athletes are dying from Covid-19 vaccines.” Senator Ron Johnson, a Republican from Wisconsin, spread the falsehood in an [appearance](#) on the conservative podcast “The Charlie Kirk Show.” “We’ve heard story after story. I mean, all these athletes dropping dead on the field, but we’re supposed to ignore that,” Mr. Johnson said. Sen. Johnson’s statement is false.

- Both Gov. Greg Abbott of Texas and Gov. Ron DeSantis of Florida blame the surge of Covid cases wrought by the Delta variant on migrants. There is no evidence to support this.
- On August 9, 2021, Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene said on Twitter, “The FDA should not approve the covid vaccines.” She said there were too many reports of infection and spread of the coronavirus among vaccinated people, and that the vaccines were “failing” and “do not reduce the spread of the virus & neither do masks.” Twitter suspended her account for one week. Her claim is false; in fact, the opposite is true.
- On YouTube, a video of the World Trade Center on fire was used as a backdrop for an argument that Jews were responsible for the terrorist attacks on the towers 20 years ago. Anti-Semitic disinformation is on the increase.
- Fox News host [Tucker Carlson](#) spread an unfounded theory that the F.B.I. organized the Jan. 6 siege on the Capitol. Clips of Mr. Carlson’s argument circulated widely on social media, accumulating millions of views and getting shared by Republican members of Congress like Rep. Matt Gaetz of Florida and Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene of Georgia.
- On May 3, 2021, Michael T. Flynn, a former national security adviser, [suggested on Sunday](#) at a conference organized by followers of the QAnon conspiracy theory that a Myanmar-style military coup was needed in the United States. A day later, Mr. Flynn denied ever promoting the idea. News stories and videos covering Mr. Flynn’s call for a coup gathered 675,000 likes and shares on Facebook and Twitter. His denial, in comparison, collected only around 61,000 likes and shares. (Recall Winston Churchill’s comment at the top of this packet.)
- In April 2021, people who oppose Covid vaccinations have spread a claim that is not only false but defies the rules of biology: that being near someone who has received a vaccine can disrupt a woman’s [menstrual cycle](#) or cause a miscarriage. The idea is that vaccinated people might shed vaccine material, affecting people around them as though it were secondhand smoke. In reality, this is impossible.

Can public opinion polls be disinformation?

This was new one to me. Am I a conspiracy theorist if I perceive something pernicious in the pro-Republican polling process? Q3: What’s your reaction to this recent article?

The ‘Red Wave’ Washout: How Skewed Polls Fed a False Election Narrative

<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/12/31/us/politics/polling-election-2022-red-wave.html?smid=nytcore-ios-share&referringSource=articleShare>

By [Jim Rutenberg](#), [Ken Bensinger](#) and [Steve Eder](#), Dec. 31, 2022, NYT

Senator Patty Murray, a Democrat, had consistently won re-election by healthy margins in her three decades representing Washington State. This year seemed no different: By midsummer, polls showed her cruising to victory over a Republican newcomer, Tiffany Smiley, by as much as 20 percentage points.

So when a [survey](#) in late September by the Republican-leaning Trafalgar Group showed Ms. Murray clinging to a lead of just two points, it seemed like an aberration. But in October, [two more](#) Republican-leaning polls put Ms. Murray barely ahead, and a third [said the race was a dead heat](#).

As the red and blue trend lines of the closely watched RealClearPolitics average for the contest drew closer together, news organizations reported that Ms. Murray was suddenly in a fight for her political survival. Warning lights flashed in Democratic war rooms. If Ms. Murray was in trouble, no Democrat was safe.

Ms. Murray's own polling showed her with a comfortable lead, and a [nonprofit regional news site, using an established local pollster](#), had her up by 13. Unwilling to take chances, however, she went on the defensive, scuttling her practice of lavishing some of her war chest — she amassed \$20 million — on more vulnerable Democratic candidates elsewhere. Instead, she reaped financial help from the party's national Senate committee and supportive super PACs — resources that would, as a result, be unavailable to other Democrats.

A similar sequence of events played out in battlegrounds nationwide. Surveys showing strength for Republicans, often from the same partisan pollsters, set Democratic klaxons blaring in Pennsylvania, New Hampshire and Colorado. Coupled with the political factors already favoring Republicans — including inflation and President Biden's unpopularity — the skewed polls helped feed what quickly became an inescapable political narrative: A Republican wave election was about to hit the country with hurricane force.

In reality, Democrats in each of those states went on to win their Senate races. Ms. Murray clobbered Ms. Smiley by nearly [15 points](#).....

The misleading polls of 2022 did not just needlessly spook some worried candidates into spending more money than they may have needed to on their own races. They also led some candidates — in both parties — who had a fighting chance of winning to lose out on money that could have made it possible for them to do so, as those controlling the purse strings believed polls that inaccurately indicated they had no chance at all.

[Note: Most articles in this packet have been edited for brevity.]

John, my college roommate, sent me this article without any attribution of source. The report was widely circulated among conservatives.

Q4: Is the following article persuasive to you? Why?

NASA comes out with a long-known report.

Tuesday 19 July 2022

NASA admits that climate change occurs because of changes in Earth's solar orbit, and NOT because of SUVs and fossil fuels. For more than 60 years, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) has known that the changes occurring to planetary weather patterns are completely natural and normal. But the space agency, for whatever reason, has chosen to let the man-made global warming hoax persist and spread, to the detriment of human freedom.

It was the year 1958, to be precise, when NASA first observed that changes in the solar orbit of the earth, along with alterations to the earth's axial tilt, are both responsible for what climate scientists today have dubbed as "warming" (or "cooling," depending on their agenda). In no way, shape, or form are humans warming or cooling the planet by driving SUVs or eating beef, in other words.

But NASA has thus far failed to set the record straight and has instead chosen to sit silently back and watch as liberals freak out about the world supposedly ending in 12 years because of too much livestock, or too many plastic straws.

In the year 2000, NASA did publish information on its Earth Observatory website about the Milankovitch Climate Theory, revealing that the planet is, in fact, changing due to extraneous factors that have absolutely nothing to do with human activity. But, again, this information has yet to go mainstream, some 19 years later, which is why deranged, climate-obsessed leftists have now begun to claim that we really only have 18 months left before the planet dies from an excess of carbon dioxide (CO²). The truth, however, is much more along the lines of what Serbian astrophysicist Milutin Milankovitch proposed about how the seasonal and latitudinal variations of solar radiation that hit the earth in different ways, and at different times, have the greatest impact on earth's changing climate patterns...

But rather than embrace this truth, today's climate "scientists," joined by leftist politicians and a complicit mainstream media, insist that not using reusable grocery bags at the supermarket and not having an electric vehicle are destroying the planet so quickly that we absolutely must implement global climate taxes as the solution. "The climate change debate is not about science. It is an effort to impose political and economic controls on the population by the elite," wrote one commenter at the Hal Turner Radio Show. "

N.B. Hal Turner uses internet and radio broadcasts to float conspiracy theories and hate speech.

Many people forwarded this article and added their own comments. Here's one:

"NASA has announced that CO-2 emissions have zero to do with climate change. It is solely caused by Earth's changing positioning as it orbits around the sun. Game Over."

THIS IS THE REUTERS FACT CHECK COMMENT ON THE ABOVE:

REUTERS FACT CHECK, JULY 7, 2022

Fact Check-NASA did not announce that climate change is only driven by variations to Earth's orbital position relative to the sun

The National Aeronautical and Space Agency (NASA) did not announce that climate change is only driven by the Earth's orbital position around the sun, despite viral posts claiming this that have been shared by users in June 2022. Social media users revived an already debunked claim that the Milankovitch Cycles - Earth's slight shifting of position relative to the sun over geological time - can disprove anthropogenic (human-caused) climate change.

A spokesperson for NASA similarly told Reuters that the scientists are "confident Earth's recent warming is primarily due to human activities — specifically, the direct input of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases into Earth's atmosphere from burning fossil fuels or other anthropogenic activities."

The theory centers around the Earth's cyclic variations in position in three categories that stretch from cycles of 10,000 years to over 100,000 years. "The global warming that we've seen over the past century has been breathtakingly rapid, geologically speaking."

Q5: Was this an effective rebuttal?

Most Americans Who See Fake News Believe It, New Survey Says

An exclusive Ipsos poll conducted for BuzzFeed News found that 75% of American adults who were familiar with a fake news headline viewed the story as accurate.

Craig Silverman & Jeremy Singer-Vine, BuzzFeed, Posted on December 6, 2016

Respondents were shown a series of headlines (see page 1 above) and asked:

Do you remember seeing this headline? If yes, how accurate is it?

N=3015 adults, including a cross-section of political leanings and demographics. Subjects were shown a series of actual headlines (some real and some fake) and asked if they had seen each. If they report having seen it, then they were asked to rate the accuracy of the headline. (Reference the survey you completed at the top of the packet.)

Then subjects were asked: What are your major sources of news? (top 4 mentions)

CNN	27%
Fox News	27%
Facebook	23%
New York Times	18%

(Top 4 mentions only)

83% of Facebook users felt the fake news headlines they recalled were accurate. Recall that this study was conducted in 2016. There are many more sources for fake news now.

Nearly one-third of participants recalled seeing at least one of the fake headlines. Keep in mind that information (and disinformation) can spread exponentially through forwarding, “liking”, and retweeting. **Q6:** What is the power of a headline?

And that takes us to the next topic.

HOW DISINFORMATION IS TRANSMITTED

Donald Trump (live, on TV, and through his twitter account)

Trump’s false or misleading claims total 30,573 over 4 years

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/01/24/trumps-false-or-misleading-claims-total-30573-over-four-years/>

Analysis by Glenn Kessler, Salvador Rizzo, and Meg Kelly, January 24, 2021, Washington Post

When The Washington Post Fact Checker team first started cataloguing President Donald Trump’s false or misleading claims, we recorded 492 suspect claims in the first 100 days of his presidency. On Nov. 2 alone, the day before the 2020 vote, Trump made 503 false or misleading claims as he barnstormed across the country in a desperate effort to win reelection.

This astonishing jump in falsehoods is the story of Trump’s tumultuous reign. By the end of his term, Trump had accumulated 30,573 untruths during his presidency — averaging about 21 erroneous claims a day.

What is especially striking is how the tsunami of untruths kept rising the longer he served as president and became increasingly unmoored from the truth.

Trump averaged about six claims a day in his first year as president, 16 claims day in his second year, 22 claims day in this third year — and 39 claims a day in his final year. Put another way, it took him 27 months to reach 10,000 claims and an additional 14 months to reach 20,000. He then exceeded the 30,000 mark less than five months later.

Q7: What has happened to Donald Trump’s media impact since leaving the White House?

Watching Only Fox News Makes You Less Informed Than Watching No News At All

Insider, May 22, 20122

Media outlets such as Fox News and MSNBC have a negative impact on people's current events knowledge while NPR and Sunday morning political talk shows are the most informative sources of news, according to Fairleigh Dickinson University's newest PublicMind survey.

Researchers asked 1,185 random nationwide respondents what news sources they had consumed in the past week and then asked them questions about events in the U.S. and abroad. On average, people correctly answered 1.6 of 5 questions about domestic affairs.

Because the aim of the study was to isolate the effects of each type of news source, they then controlled for variables such as other news sources, partisanship, education and other demographic factors.

They found that **someone who watched only Fox News would be expected to answer 1.04 domestic questions correctly** compared to **1.22 for those who watched no news at all**. Those watching only "The Daily Show with Jon Stewart" answered 1.42 questions correctly and people who only listened to NPR or only watched Sunday morning political talk shows answered 1.51 questions correctly.

Q8: What is the significance of the Fox study result?

Qanon

<https://www.nytimes.com/live/2020/2020-election-misinformation-distortions>

Feb. 24, 2022, [Tiffany Hsu](#)

[41 million Americans are QAnon believers, survey finds.](#)

More than a year after Donald J. Trump left office, the [QAnon conspiracy theory](#) that thrived during his administration continues to attract more Americans, including many Republicans and far-right news consumers, according to results from a survey released on Thursday from the Public Religion Research Institute.

The nonprofit and nonpartisan group found that 16 percent of Americans, or roughly 41 million people, believed last year in the three key tenets of the conspiracy theory. Those are that Satanist pedophiles who run a global child sex-trafficking operation control the government and other major institutions, that a coming storm will sweep elites from power and that violence might be necessary to save the country.

The QAnon movement, which the F.B.I. considers to be [a potential terrorist threat](#), centers on an anonymous author whose online messages, signed Q, fueled the spread of the reality-warping ideology. Mr. Trump also figured in the conspiracy theory as someone who was recruited by top military officials to use his presidency against the shadowy liberal cabal. The conspiracy theory was amplified and spread [on social media](#).

After Mr. Trump lost the 2020 presidential election, QAnon was expected to be hobbled without him. But it has persisted despite that and despite efforts by [tech platforms](#) to staunch its spread. [Forensic linguists](#) have also tried to unmask and defang the anonymous author who signed online messages as Q.

Robert P. Jones, a social science researcher with decades of experience, said he never expected to be dealing with serious survey questions about whether powerful American institutions were controlled by devil-worshipping, sex-trafficking pedophiles. To have so many Americans agree with such a question, he said, was “stunning.”

Among Republicans, 25 percent found QAnon to be valid, compared with 14 percent of independents and 9 percent of Democrats. Media preferences were a major predictor of QAnon susceptibility, with people who trust far-right news sources such as One America News Network and Newsmax nearly five times more likely to be believers than those who trust mainstream news. Fox News viewers were twice as likely to back QAnon ideas, the survey found.

Most QAnon believers associated Christianity with being American and said that the United States risked losing its culture and identity and must be protected from foreign influence. Nearly seven in 10 believers agreed with the lie that the 2020 election was stolen from Mr. Trump.

Alex Jones

In 2015 I found myself in NYC in a conversation with a theatre professional who said: “The Sandy Hook shooting was a hoax. They hired actors to come in and staged the whole thing.” I was so shocked I barely knew what to say. This guy worked professionally in the arts and seemed to be reasonable in other ways. He followed up: “You can find it on the Internet.”

We now know that these stories were created by Alex Jones of Infowars. According to the Anti-Defamation League:

Online and on the air, Jones breathlessly and stridently champions a litany of absurdities. To wit: the tragic massacre at Sandy Hook elementary school was a hoax perpetrated to curtail Americans’ gun rights; 9/11 was an inside job perpetrated by the U.S. government; the high school student survivors of the Parkland, FL, school shooting were “crisis actors” paid by the Democratic Party and George Soros; and juice boxes “make kids gay.”

President Trump has promoted a number of repeatedly disproven conspiracy theories advanced by Jones, including claims about President Barack Obama's birthplace and allegations that millions of illegal immigrants voted in the 2016 presidential election.

Q9: What motivated Jones? Was it simply money? Ego? Power? Something else? And why did so many people believe his stories? Infowars reached over 3 million unique readers in February 2020 alone.

China

Dec. 22, 2021, [Davey Alba, NYT](#)

[Pro-China misinformation group continues spreading messages, researchers say.](#)

Two years ago, researchers uncovered details about a disinformation network that made a coordinated effort to push Chinese government messaging outside the country. Now, a separate research group says the network is still at it, despite efforts by social media companies to stop it.

More than 2,000 accounts continued to spread Chinese propaganda in the last year, according to a [new report](#) from the disinformation research group Miburo. They have promoted such falsehoods as the [denial of human rights abuses in China's Xinjiang region](#), where the Communist Party has carried out repressive policies against the Uyghurs, a Muslim ethnic minority, and [Covid-19 misinformation](#), like the conspiracy that the U.S. military developed the coronavirus as a bioweapon.

The accounts point to a “well-resourced, high-skill actor that keeps reappearing,” said Nick Monaco, the director of China research at Miburo. He added that the timing and messaging of the posts in the network aligned perfectly with public messaging put out by the Chinese government in the last year.

Miburo said it was difficult to determine whether the influence campaign was organized by the ruling Communist Party or if some accounts were by nationalist citizens. But “[knowing who pressed the enter key](#) is less important” than the implication of a well-known actor spreading Chinese propaganda “at a high volume on international social media networks,” Mr. Monaco said in a blog post about the campaign.

Q10: What should be done with China (and Russia) regarding the Internet? Should we retaliate? How?

Russia

Russian disinformation spreading in new ways despite bans

By DAVID KLEPPER August 9, 2022, AP

WASHINGTON

(AP) — After Russia invaded Ukraine last February, the European Union moved to block RT and Sputnik, two of the Kremlin’s top channels for spreading propaganda and misinformation about the war.

Nearly six months later, the number of sites pushing that same content has exploded as Russia found ways to evade the ban. They’ve rebranded their work to disguise it. They’ve [shifted some propaganda duties to diplomats](#). And they’ve cut and pasted much of the content on new websites — ones that until now had no obvious ties to Russia.

NewsGuard, a New York-based firm that studies and tracks online misinformation, has now identified 250 websites actively spreading Russian disinformation about the war, with dozens of new ones added in recent months.

Claims on these sites include allegations that Ukraine’s army has staged some deadly Russian attacks to curry global support, that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy is faking public appearances, or that Ukrainian refugees are committing crimes in Germany and Poland.

Some of the sites pose as independent think tanks or news outlets. About half are English-language, while others are in French, German or Italian. Many were set up long before the war and were not obviously tied to the Russian government until they suddenly began parroting Kremlin talking points.

Q.11 Why do people believe disinformation?

Personal note: I am seriously puzzled as to why people so readily believe disinformation, even when doing so runs against their own self-interest. For example, why do climate deniers deny the fact of global warming when doing so adversely affects their own health and welfare (more storms, storms, flooding) and the future of their grandchildren? Why do anti-vaxers cling to their beliefs when they or their children might (and actually do) die of measles, the flu or Covid? How did the simple act of wearing a mask become such a polarizing behavior? I’m curious as to your thoughts on this question. Meanwhile, here are some theories drawn from psychology.

<https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/psychology-qanon-why-do-seemingly-sane-people-believe-bizarre-conspiracy-ncna900171>

The psychology of Qanon: Why do seemingly sane people believe bizarre conspiracy theories?

The fear that evil forces conspire to hurt good people is deeply rooted in the human psyche.

By Jan-Willem van Prooijen, Associate professor, experimental and applied psychology, VU Amsterdam, Aug. 13, 2018, NBC News

A secret civil war is going on — or at least, it is in the minds of some U.S. citizens. At recent Trump rallies, people have been observed [publicly expressing support for “Q”](#): An anonymous person or group that claims to have access to top-level security information about a secret cabal of corrupt elites, intellectuals, left-wing politicians and celebrities conspiring to exploit and even enslave people. President Donald Trump, apparently, is one of the few people willing and able to fight this secret conspiracy, often referred to as “Qanon.”

If it sounds crazy, that’s because it is. The mostly right-wing conspiracy theory makes a series of mind-blowing allegations that include Democrat-run centers for pedophiles and Satanic cults. The theory first appeared on various online message boards like “8Chan,” where followers shared “bread crumbs” — clues — about the dark and powerful forces that supposedly run their country....

It would be tempting to dismiss those who believe such bizarre ideas as mentally ill. But in reality, conspiracy beliefs such as Qanon are neither pathological nor novel. Putting aside the fact that some conspiracy theories turn out to be true (e.g., Watergate is arguably an example of a real conspiracy), even fact-free conspiracy theories can be followed by people who otherwise behave relatively normally.

Widespread support for conspiracy theories is also not simply a symptom of our modern digital society. In the dark ages, witch hunts were based on the belief that young women gathered in the woods to conspire with the devil, and many traditional societies [still accuse enemy tribes of sorcery to harm or control them](#). The fear that evil forces conspire to hurt good people is deeply rooted in the human psyche.

I have [studied the psychological motivators of conspiracy beliefs](#) for many years. Based on my research, I believe there are three main reasons why people believe in theories like Qanon. First, **accepting one conspiracy theory as true makes it much easier to believe in other theories**. Studies from the mid-1990s found that [the single best predictor of conspiracy thinking](#) is the belief in a different conspiracy theory.

In a recent study conducted by myself, Karen Douglas and Clara De Inocencio, we further investigated why this could be the case. Our conclusion? Conspiracy theories reinforce a belief that nothing in the world happens through coincidence. This refusal to recognize the role of chance leads people to develop **a worldview in which hostile and secret conspiracies permeate all layers of society**.

Feelings of anxiety and uncertainty also help fuel conspiracy theories. Such emotions function as a psychological warning signal, leading people to try and make sense of societal events that frighten them. This helps to explain the widespread (and ongoing) speculation that followed impactful events [such as 9/11](#) or the [assassination of President John F. Kennedy](#). Together with Nils Jostmann and Michele Acker, we found that feelings of uncertainty, coupled with **the feeling that your life is not fully in your control** anymore, increases conspiracy thinking. Studies by others researchers [confirm that emotions reflecting uncertainty](#) — such as fear or worry — can increase conspiracy beliefs.

Ironically, however, conspiracy theories do little to reduce these negative feelings. On the contrary, conspiracy theories only exacerbate feelings of anxiety, laying the foundations for further theorizing.

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[Studies by a group of political scientists](#) revealed that Republicans are more likely to believe governmental conspiracy theories when a Democrat is president, while Democrats are more likely to believe governmental conspiracy theories when a Republican is president. Qanon is a more extreme example of a fairly consistent pattern: It has flourished among members of the fringe political right, and it selectively portrays prominent liberal figures as exceptionally immoral and dangerous.

To some extent, we may all occasionally perceive a conspiracy where there is none. But this makes it even more important to take this phenomenon seriously. Conspiracies can have real consequences — the [2016 Pizzagate incident](#) illuminates the dangers of believing in unsubstantiated online claims, even when they seem bizarrely implausible. In this case, the rumor circulating was that prominent Democrats, including Hillary Clinton, were running a child-sex ring out of a Washington D.C. pizzeria.

Going forward, helping citizens distinguish fact from fiction is going to be an increasingly important challenge. Debunking conspiracy theories when and where they appear is helpful, but it cannot just be the media or the political leadership who provide this information. We have to understand the psychological triggers and motivations if we want to mitigate the influence and potential dangers of this kind of thinking. Because the truth is that conspiracy theories will always thrive when people feel like they are not in control of their lives, and when significant tension exists between societal subgroups

Why smart people are more likely to believe fake news.

Research shows that smart people are more susceptible to fake news and conspiracy theories – but why?

David Robson, *The Guardian*

Mon 1 Apr 2019

Did you hear about the couple who decided to name their daughter Brexit? Or the fact that the regions voting “leave” also happened to be the areas afflicted by mad cow disease? How about the statement that smartphone radiation is causing brain damage and widespread insanity?

All these claims are false. You might think that you’d have to be stupid to believe this kind of stuff, but this is a serious misunderstanding of the way the brain works.

Psychological research shows that **misinformation is cleverly designed to bypass careful analytical reasoning**, meaning that it can easily slip under the radar of even the most intelligent and educated people. No one is completely immune. Indeed, there is now evidence that smarter people may sometimes be even more vulnerable to certain ideas, since their greater brainpower simply allows them to rationalise their (incorrect) beliefs. Fortunately, the research also offers us some strategies to overcome those biases.

Let’s begin by examining why some false claims stick. Various studies have demonstrated that many of us rarely give our full attention when reading new statements. Consider the following question, for instance: “How many animals did Moses take on to the Ark?” Norbert Schwarz at the University of Southern California has found that only around 12% of students answer correctly (none). (It was, of course, Noah’s Ark – not Moses’s.)

Particularly when a statement feels “fluent” (easy to process) and familiar, we tend not to focus on the details and instead go with the gist. Unfortunately, there are many simple ways that purveyors of misinformation can tweak the presentation of their claims to increase a statement’s fluency and familiarity.

One example is the use of imagery – photographs help us to visualise statements, which means they can be processed fluently – and therefore seem truer. We can see this with medical stories: people are more likely to believe a pseudoscientific claim if it has a brain scan alongside it.

Belief in Obama conspiracy theories was strongest among conservative Republicans with the greatest political knowledge.

Perhaps the most potent way of spreading misinformation is simple repetition; the more you hear an idea, the more likely you are to believe it to be true. That’s a serious problem

when a small but vocal community – of climate change deniers, say – are presented as talking heads on TV and radio.

In these ways, we can begin to see how misinformation can be engineered to bypass logical thinking and critical questioning. But do intelligence and education protect us against false claims? The latest research shows it partly depends on your thinking style. Some people are “cognitive misers”, for instance: they may have a lot of brainpower that allows them to perform well in exams, but they don’t always apply it, using intuition and gut instinct rather than reflective, analytical thinking. This thinking style is commonly measured with a tool known as the “cognitive reflection test” using questions such as: “If it takes five machines five minutes to make five widgets, how long would it take 100 machines to make 100 widgets?” The correct answer is five, but many otherwise intelligent people say 100 – the more intuitive response.

Studies from the US have revealed that people who score badly on these kinds of questions tend to be more susceptible to fake news, conspiracy theories and paranormal thinking. Those who score better, in contrast, tend to be less gullible, because they use their intelligence to analyse claims rather than relying on their gut feelings.

Not all fake news is created equal, though. Some stories may be faintly ludicrous, such as the family who named their daughter Brexit – whatever your background, you don’t need to believe it for it to support your worldview. But other stories may fit with your political identity far more tightly. And for these particularly emotive claims, intelligence and education may actually make you more susceptible to fake news, through a process called “motivated reasoning”. Consider the “birther” theory that Barack Obama was not born in the US. This has been debunked time and time again, but it became highly ingrained in many people’s political ideology. And greater brainpower did not prevent them from believing the story; indeed, it actually increased their credulity. A study by Ashley Jardina at Duke University in North Carolina, for instance, surveyed the views of the more conservative white Republicans – the kind of people who might have found the former president most alienating. It found that beliefs in the birther theory were strongest among the participants with the greatest political knowledge.

A similar pattern could be seen with the beliefs that Obama was a Muslim, and the claims that his healthcare reforms would lead to “death panels” that decided who lived or died. To make matters worse, more educated participants also seemed less likely to update their beliefs after they had been debunked; instead, they actually became more certain they were right. Somehow, their greater knowledge simply allowed them to dismiss the new information and harden their attitudes.

For any issue that strikes at the core of who we are, greater brainpower may simply serve to preserve that identity at the expense of the truth...

This new understanding of misinformation should change the way we go about debunking falsehoods. In the past, the assumption was that you could present people with the facts and they would eventually sink in. Instead, some experts studying misinformation now favour a form of “inoculation”. One of the most compelling

demonstrations comes from John Cook at George Mason University and Stephan Lewandowsky at the University of Bristol. Their aim was to find a way to protect people from common misinformation about climate change – including the fake petitions that show widespread disagreement among scientists about the true causes of global warming.

Rather than tackling the claims head on, Cook and Lewandowsky first showed the participants a report on the tobacco industry’s previous attempts to spread misinformation, which also included the use of fake experts to cast doubt on the scientific research that linked smoking to lung cancer. The strategy worked a treat. Having read about the tobacco industry’s tactics, the participants were more sceptical of the climate change petitions. Crucially this was true even of the more rightwing participants, who would have been naturally more inclined towards climate denialism.

Given the sheer prevalence of misinformation around us, I believe that ways of identifying misinformation, combined with critical thinking, should now be taught in every school. After all, it’s not just the fake political news that we need to avoid, but health scams and financial fraud. A firmer grounding in sceptical reasoning could help everyone – whatever their IQ – to use their intelligence to make wiser judgments.

<https://www.asc.upenn.edu/news-events/news/novel-theory-how-conspiracy-theories-take-shape>

Q12: What does the following article suggest about how disinformation takes root?

Annenberg School for Communication

Review by Michele W. Berger, *Penn Today*, Jan 21, 2022,

A novel theory on how conspiracy theories take shape

In a new book, *Creating Conspiracy Beliefs: How about Thoughts are Formed* (Cambridge University Press), Dolores Albarracín, Kathleen Hall Jamieson, and colleagues show that two factors—the conservative media and societal fear and anxiety—have driven recent widespread conspiracies, from Pizzagate to those around COVID-19 vaccines.

How do people come to believe in conspiracy theories? It’s a question Penn Integrates Knowledge University Professor [Dolores Albarracín](#) has been thinking about for decades.

As a social psychologist and communication scholar who studies attitudes, persuasion, and behavior, Albarracín has researched what happens when fringe ideas become consequential for society. “That’s what we’re seeing with conspiracy theories today,” she says. “Nobody can deny now that these are wildly impactful and really problematic.”

In a new book, “[Creating conspiracy beliefs: How our thoughts are shaped](#),” Albarracín and co-authors [Man-pui Sally Chan](#) and [Kathleen Hall Jamieson](#) of [Penn](#) and [Julia Albarracín](#) of [Western Illinois University](#) drill down into the phenomenon. Analyzing empirical research conducted on real-world examples of false plots—the alleged sex-trafficking ring Democrats ran out of a pizza parlor, the so-called deep state that undermined Donald Trump’s presidency—the team pinpoints two factors that have driven recent widespread conspiracy theories: the conservative media and societal fear and anxiety.

Can “facts” change someone’s mind?

Consider Pizzagate and Edgar Maddison Welch, who, in 2016, armed himself and entered Comet Ping Pong intending to stop the child abuse he “knew” to be happening in the pizza parlor’s basement by high-up Democrats—including Hillary Clinton herself.

“Even after he found no children, no abuse, he did not give up the conspiracy theory,” Jamieson says. “That tells us something very important, that there’s no evidence you can offer that would discredit a conspiracy theory. Any evidence you offer simply confirms the power of the conspirators to control your reality.”

For both health and political beliefs, conservative media are playing a large role in this process, according to Albarracín. “First, they are heightening anxiety in the population, which fuels conspiracy beliefs,” she says. “Secondly, they are directly injecting the content. So, if your media diet is mainly Fox News, then you’re more likely to also experience anxiety in the moment because of what’s being presented to you. The combination of the conspiracy stories and the content is powerful.”

“Once people have moved into full-blown conspiracy thinking, it’s hard to get them out.”

Why we fall for fake news: Hijacked thinking or laziness?

Fresh research offers a new insight on why we believe the unbelievable.

By [Kirsten Weir](#) Date created: February 11, 2020 APA

Have you heard? Nancy Pelosi diverted Social Security money to fund the impeachment inquiry. President Trump’s father was a member of the KKK.

Far-fetched as those statements sound, they were among the most shared fake news stories on Facebook in 2019, according to a report by the nonprofit organization Avaaz, which concluded that political fake news garnered more than 150 million views in 2019. And a study by Dartmouth University computer scientist Soroush Vosoughi, PhD, and colleagues found that fake news actually reaches more people and spreads more quickly than the truth ([Science](#), Vol. 359, No. 6380, 2018).

And that’s alarming psychologists and other behavioral researchers. “Fake news has important implications in politics, but also in areas such as health and nutrition, climate science, and financial information,” says David Rand, PhD, a professor of management science and brain and cognitive sciences at MIT. “The basic question from a psychological perspective is: How can people possibly believe this stuff?”

A frequent explanation is motivated reasoning — the idea that people’s cognitive processes are biased toward believing things that conform with their worldview. Hence, a liberal voter is

predisposed to believe unsavory rumors about President Trump’s father, while a conservative is more willing to accept that Rep. Pelosi would illegally divert public funds.

But research by Rand and colleagues challenges the idea that it’s our reasoning that is biased. “The dominant explanation for why people believe fake news has been that their reasoning is held captive by partisan biases—their thinking gets hijacked,” Rand says. His studies paint an alternate picture: “People who believe false things are the people that just don’t think carefully,” he says.

Time to think

Rand and Gordon Pennycook, PhD, an assistant professor of behavioral science at the University of Regina, in Saskatchewan, Canada, measured analytical reasoning in 3,446 American participants from Mechanical Turk. They found that higher scores on the reasoning test were associated with a better ability to distinguish fake headlines from real news headlines.

That was true even when the fake stories aligned with participants’ political preferences. The authors concluded that people are more likely to fall prey to misinformation because of lazy thinking than due to any conscious or subconscious desire to protect their political identities ([Cognition](#), Vol. 188, No. 1, 2019). In a replication study, Rand and his colleagues confirmed those results and showed the effects extend beyond blatantly false headlines to hyperpartisan headlines as well (Ross, R.M., et. al., [PsyArXiv](#), Published online, 2019). “People [who] believed false headlines tended to be the people [who] didn’t think carefully, regardless of whether those headlines aligned with their ideology,” Rand says.

An experimental study showed similar results. Rand, Pennycook and Bence Bago, PhD, at the University of Toulouse Capitole, in France, presented 1,635 American participants from Mechanical Turk with a series of news items. The stories — some true, some false — appeared as they would on social media, as screenshots that showed the headline, the source and the first few sentences of a news story. First, participants were asked to make a quick judgment about whether the news was real or fake while they were holding unrelated information about a visual pattern in their working memory. Then they saw the news item again, and could take their time mulling over the veracity of the story, with no time pressure, and no working memory load to carry. When people took time to think, they improved at discerning the truth, whether or not their political identity aligned with the news ([Journal of Experimental Psychology: General](#), Published online, 2020).

The takeaway, Rand says, is that people who scroll quickly through social media might be less susceptible to misinformation if they simply slow down to consider what they’re reading. “Our findings suggest that getting people to reason more is a good thing,” he says. “When you’re on social media, stop and think.”

Q13: Do you believe that taking more time to think would counter disinformation?

Role of personality

Is there a personality type that is susceptible to disinformation?

T. W. Adorno et al., *The Authoritarian Personality* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1950)
 Seventy years ago, the Authoritarian Personality studies attempted to "construct an instrument that would yield an estimate of fascist receptivity at the personality level." The researchers created a battery of questions that would measure respondents' position on the F-scale. A few of the questions are reproduced below:

#	Statement	Agree/disagree
1	Obedience and respect for authority are the most important virtues children should learn.	
2	What this country needs most, more than laws and political programs, is a few courageous, tireless, devoted leaders in whom the people can put their faith.	
3	People can be divided into two distinct classes: the weak and the strong.	
4	Most people don't realize how much our lives are controlled by plots hatched in secret places.	
5	The wild sex life of the old Greeks and Romans was tame compared to some of the goings-on in this country, even in places where people might least expect it.	
6	The true American way of life is disappearing so fast that force may be necessary to preserve it.	

The researchers identified 9 personality variables that were associated with authoritarianism:

Personality Variable
<i>Conventionalism</i> : Rigid adherence to conventional, middle-class values.
<i>Authoritarian Submission</i> : Submissive, uncritical attitude toward idealized moral authorities of the ingroup.
<i>Authoritarian Aggression</i> : Tendency to be on the lookout for, and to condemn, reject, and punish people who violate conventional values.
<i>Anti-introspection</i> : Opposition to the subjective, the imaginative, the tender-minded.
<i>Superstition and Stereotypy</i> : The belief in mystical determinants of the individual's fate; the disposition to think in rigid categories.
<i>Power and "Toughness"</i> : Preoccupation with the dominance-submission, strong-weak, leader-follower dimension; identification with power figures; overemphasis upon the conventionalized attributes of the ego; exaggerated assertion of strength and toughness.
<i>Destructiveness and Cynicism</i> : Generalized hostility, vilification of the human.
<i>Projectivity</i> : The disposition to believe that wild and dangerous things go on in the world; the projection outwards of unconscious emotional impulses.
<i>Sex</i> : Exaggerated concern with sexual "goings-on."

To be fair, over the years this research has been criticized for a number of methodological reasons. But the question of personality is intriguing.

Q14. Do you think the notion of personality is relevant to understanding why some people are susceptible to disinformation? Is there a “fake news” or “conspiracy” personality? What are the personality characteristics of such an individual?

This brings us to the final question:

Q15: What Can We Do About Disinformation?

We’ve already discovered, above, that once disinformation has taken root, it is very difficult to change a person’s mind. Even facts don’t seem to move the meter. Here’s an interesting study that offers a hint:

What Happens When Fox News Viewers Watch CNN Instead? _ YAHOO, APRIL 12, 2022

https://www.yahoo.com/now/over-700-fox-news-viewers-000923606.html?guccounter=1&guce_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuZ29vZ2xlLnNvbS8&guce_referrer_sig=AQAAAIQvacrHcqagAz4aF-HVr-Y3OwjTEm4tu6fHy0SnDAKM8mV5EmnG2WuFvUrZe0oMTElegsRT3D8KX0wCL1bEz0-eTVpRgtqfU_AV8rgAbMSEHpZGtewjUGsxM2voPF1_xcqAQIDZZFun1W7eLbOXvwgPofwPSxaoOfNhHTG4SUin

In the study, 763 Fox News viewers—who typically watched about 14 hours of Fox News a week—were paid to watch CNN instead for up to 7 hours per week during September of 2020, and paid extra to take quizzes on the news coverage they watched. The average participant was aged over 50 and the majority of the study sample identified as both 95% white and 92% Republican.

After one month of an altered media diet that included CNN, study participants showed notable changes in attitude. They were five percentage points more likely to believe that people suffer from long COVID, 11 points less likely to say it’s more important for the president to focus on containing violent protesters than on the coronavirus, and 13 points less likely to agree that if Biden were elected, “we’ll see many more police get shot by Black Lives Matter activists,” citing *Bloomberg’s* analysis of the study. Perhaps most notably of all, study participants were significantly more likely to disagree with the statement “If Donald Trump did something bad, Fox News would discuss it.” As a result, the study authors concluded that “watching CNN instead of Fox thus led participants to conclude that Fox engages in partisan coverage filtering.”

Q16: What can parents, teachers and professors, the mainstream press, public leaders, social media companies, the courts, and other institutions, do to counter the effects of disinformation?

Finally, the following headline is real (NYT, Dec. 2, 2022).

Alex Jones Files for Bankruptcy