

OPINION

TAKE A BREATH

Achieving almost any change in the world requires people to agree to work together towards a common end. In the original sense of the word, any such agreement constituted a conspiracy. But in modern usage two elements are added, making a conspiracy a secret agreement to do something wrong or illegal. So a conspiracy theory becomes a theory that a bad thing is happening because bad people are secretly agreeing to bring it about: not an uncommon occurrence. The term tends though to be a pejorative one, applicable only to theories promoted by other people.

The word 'conspire' comes from the Latin for 'breathe together'. Does this mean a coded message about a plot involving contagious respiratory disease has been hiding in plain sight all along? Probably not. Any viable conspiracy theory must contain some verifiable grains of truth, but usually these are buried deep in the basement of a tottering edifice of speculation.

On the side of scepticism, there are always practical issues to consider. No-one with any project management experience believes in the perfect execution of large-scale co-ordinated plans. Relatedly, it's very hard to keep secrets that lots of people are in on. Such considerations make it very hard to believe in chemtrails or a flat Earth.

On the other hand (the one not holding Occam's razor), lurid conspiracy theories can make great distractions from what is really going on. During the cold war, people were covertly encouraged to interpret odd sights in the sky as UFO incidents involving extraterrestrial aliens, which governments were concealing. This not only diverted attention from sightings of classified new aircraft, but also conveniently discredited those making all such reports as cranks. It seems that the real conspiracy (or one of them at least) was a secret plan to promote wacky-sounding ideas about aliens and UFOs for political ends.¹

Such disinformation tactics are much more sophisticated today, and no longer require state-level resources. This makes it more important than ever to ask where new theories come from, and what those unleashing them might stand to gain.

The Gates of Hell?

Social media is a perfect incubator for conspiracy theories, and never more so than now. Locked-down seekers after hidden truth have flooded the web with a seemingly endless stream of breathless theories about the present situation. This is happening at a moment when millions (perhaps even some readers of this magazine) are spending far more time than usual in highly charged online environments. Some of the tales they stumble across will be true, but more often than not 'following the money' leads to surprising and unsavoury destinations. When questioning the mainstream, it's important to keep one's critical faculties intact.

Early claims that the whole thing is a hoax and no-one is really dying faded as people gained first hand experience of someone close to them getting sick. Next came claims that 'they' are lying to 'us' about the virus to cover up for the fact that something else is making people sick. One prominent theory is easily disposed of: 5G technology is unnecessary and no doubt dangerous under some circumstances, but it's not causing the virus deaths. There's no 5G in Iran, and not much even in the UK. Burning down phone masts won't help.²

Perhaps then there is a virus, but it's been created and/or released deliberately? One widespread theory suggests a conspiracy by a 'globalist elite' to reduce the human population of the planet for their own benefit. Bill Gates has become a prime suspect here, because of his sprawling foundation's lucrative role in efforts to create and distribute a Covid-19 vaccine.³ Gates has far too much money, and uses it to buy illegitimate influence, not least over the World Health Organisation. Global health policy should not be made by plutocrats, and there are certainly plenty of questions to answer before endorsing any kind of compulsory global vaccination, never mind one with added data-tracking content.

But no-one wanting answers to such questions will get them by spreading spurious accusations that Gates wants to kill billions of people by deliberately injecting them with toxic substances. This idea first surfaced in 2017, after he argued that vaccination helps reduce population levels by reducing child mortality rates, leading women to have fewer children, and that this would be a good thing because population reduction helps combat climate change. (He was trying to present himself as the man saving the world not only from disease but from climate change too.) Old quotes to this effect have been packaged and reframed to make it appear that Gates is now literally plotting mass murder.⁴

Other variants of the depopulation theory cast a broader shadowy global cabal of 'ecofascists' as the villains. The idea of Gates as an eco-fanatic should surely be absurd enough to make anyone smell a rat here, but apparently not. All this is a major distraction from the fact that like other tech billionaires, he will profit handsomely from the pandemic's rapid acceleration of plans for 'online everything'. As reported elsewhere in this issue, there's a great deal of what Naomi Klein calls 'disaster capitalism' going on right now.⁵

Environmentalists are also targeted by theories which focus not on the virus but on measures taken to combat it. Evil members of a global socialist plot against freedom have apparently shut down the world economy in order to satisfy their extreme environmentalist fantasies and destroy capitalism once and for all. The UN is sometimes identified as the centre of this particular conspiracy, whose promoters often recycle old climate denialist framings of 1992's *Agenda 21* as a covert plan for world domination.⁶



Odd messages like those displayed here by anti-lockdown protesters in Chicago often originate in murky corners of social media.

Coming back to Big Pharma, obviously vaccine companies have dollar signs spinning in their eyes. This is a dream commercial opportunity for them. But it's also a golden opportunity for some equally unscrupulous 'anti-vaxxers' with scores to settle and books to sell, as well as discredited theories to push.⁷

So what is this blizzard of disinformation concealing? Studies of online 'information ecosystems' reveal close connections between all these theories and shady but well-funded forces, primarily in the US, seeking to shrink government, scapegoat non-white minorities, and ensure Trump's re-election. Some want to precipitate a 'second civil war'.⁸

Conspiritoriality

Their efforts appear to be succeeding to an alarming degree. Even in the UK, previously left-leaning alternative types are being suckered by deceptive internet memes into thinking that standing up for freedom means backing Trump in his heroic battle against the Deep State and the wicked UN.

This is only possible only because such ideas connect with existing legitimate feelings of injustice. There is after all more than a little truth in the suggestion that a tiny ruthless elite is running the world for its own benefit. Direct and indirect effects of the pandemic look set to greatly aggravate inequality both within and between countries. Resisting this, as ever, requires solidarity and clear-sighted political analysis.⁹

In part because of a reluctance to see the world in political terms, some people of a spiritual bent are particularly susceptible to conspiracy-based propaganda about the virus.¹⁰ Back in 2011 researchers were already describing a rapidly growing 'conspiritoriality' movement, fusing

two core convictions ... 1) a secret group covertly controls, or is trying to control, the political and social order, and 2) humanity is undergoing a 'paradigm shift' in consciousness. Proponents believe that the best strategy for dealing with the threat of a totalitarian 'new world order' is to act in accordance with an awakened 'new paradigm' worldview.¹¹

This demographic is now surprisingly large, and firmly on the marketing radar. All kinds of products and political ideas can be very effectively sold to people with this combination of beliefs, simply by packaging the message as a tip-off revealing 'what they don't want you to know'. This might be worth bearing in mind next time a cosmically inclined friend tries to persuade you of something implausible.

Of course, none of this affects the grassy knoll issue, or the curious way those towers went down.

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