

FEATURE

Teach the Conspiracies

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It was a fine spring day in May when I entered the Max Beckmann School in Frankfurt, Germany, to talk with teens about conspiracy theories as part of a U.S. State Department public affairs program. “Which ones were they familiar with?” I wondered.

“Well, there’s the Illuminati and the chemtrails, just off the top of the hat,” the high school student smiled shyly when asked about his familiarity with conspiracy theories. Another student chimed in, “Then there’s the question of who killed JFK—some people say it was the government. And some people think that Jesus and Mary Magdalene were lovers and had a child!”

Within minutes, these German high school students could recognize more than a dozen conspiracy theories that they were at least a little bit familiar with, including the possibly faked moon landings and evidence of aliens in Roswell, New Mexico. One girl talked about “birtherism,” explaining that Donald Trump had espoused a theory that former President Barack Obama was not a U.S. citizen. Another wondered, “Is the idea that vaccines cause autism a conspiracy theory?” and one girl noted, “Some people even think global warming is a hoax.”

At this high-profile school with high-performing students who were fluent speakers of English, some boys were clearly attracted to the entertainment value of conspiracy theories, while other students thought the theories were all rather silly. But they were riveted by the discussion, exhibiting high levels of attention toward a topic that clearly captured their interest. Before this session, none of the students ever had the opportunity to talk about conspiracy theories in a school classroom. “It’s not something we generally talk about in school,” one explained.

Rising on the Horizon: Conspiracy Theories

It’s indisputable: disinformation, hoaxes, propaganda, and hyper-partisanship are increasingly global phenomena. Educators, librarians, policymakers, and community leaders are wondering about the implications of the changing information landscape. Anyone can publish and promote anything, and increasing political polarization is being combined with feelings of powerlessness, disillusionment, apathy, and indifference to truth in a way that may compromise the future of our democracy.

With the rise of so-called “fake news” comes renewed visibility for conspiracy theories, defined as beliefs rooted in us-versus-them thinking. Conspiracy theories may be seen as a special type of disinformation, defined as false information that is intended to mislead. Conspiracy theories embody the idea that a group of people make secret agreements and take actions to accomplish malevolent goals (van Prooijen 2017). As Michael Barkun (2003) has expressed, conspiracy theories fundamentally proclaim: nothing happens by accident, nothing is as it seems, and everything is connected.

All over the world, the range of conspiracy theories and their visibility are increasing, say experts, in part because of the rise of digital and social media.

“Conspiracy narratives are more common in public discourse than they were previously,” said Eric Oliver of the University of Chicago (Suhrie 2014, 1). It seems that even the use of the term has broadened in recent decades. Today many forms of generalized mistrust of authority have come to be labeled as conspiracy theories, including concerns about digital privacy, algorithms used by

search engines, and controversies about medicine and health. In times of anxiety and insecurity, conspiracy theories can be reassuring because there is a clear identification of evil through simplifying the world into villains and victims.

Conspiracy theories are “sticky.” Due to human information-processing norms, people who believe in a conspiracy may receive social reinforcement from other like-minded individuals through online echo chambers (Sunstein 2014). People who believe one conspiracy theory are more likely to believe others. Sadly, once a conspiracy theory is believed to be true, it can be difficult to displace. Researchers who have studied medical conspiracy theories find that 37 percent of Americans agreed that the Food and Drug Administration is intentionally suppressing natural cures for cancer because of pressure from drug companies. People who believe in medical conspiracies are less willing to follow traditional medical advice, such as using sunscreens or vaccines, and are more likely to use alternative treatments like supplements (Oliver and Wood 2014).

Research is beginning to shed light on the power of conspiracy theories. One finding shows that even a single exposure to a conspiracy theory can have effects on people’s attitudes and anticipated behaviors; exposure causes people to have increased feelings of powerlessness and disillusionment. In one experimental research study, subjects who were shown a conspiracy theory video claiming that climate change was a hoax were significantly less likely to think there is widespread scientific agreement on human-caused climate change. They were less likely to say they would sign a petition to help reduce global warming, less likely to give money to a political candidate, and less likely to use energy efficiency as a selection criterion when buying



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a light bulb or household appliance (Jolley and Douglas 2013).

Not surprisingly, liberals and conservatives are equally susceptible to conspiracy theories. Fortunately, education seems to be a mitigating factor. Educational background is associated with lowered belief in conspiracy theories, with 42 percent of people without a high school diploma believing multiple conspiracy theories as compared with 23 percent of those with postgraduate degrees (Uscinski and Parent 2014).

Given how contagious conspiracy theories are, it would seem natural for school librarians and other educators to keep these potentially dangerous ideas far away from the minds of impressionable adolescents and young adults. But on the contrary, because of the increased prominence of conspiracy theories in our culture today, it's more important than ever to tackle the topic of conspiracy theories head on as an approach to building media and information-literacy competencies.

Approaches to Teaching Conspiracy Theories

High school librarians and teachers have long recognized that the topic of conspiracy theories is like catnip to adolescent readers, with television shows like *Decoded* and books like *The Rough Guide to Conspiracy Theories* (Rough Guides 2013) attracting the interests of teen boys and girls.

Can conspiracy theories be explored safely in schools without potential risk or harm? It's possible that talking about conspiracy theories in schools merely validates them in the eyes of some students. Because of time limitations it's possible that more complex issues and information about these topics will get short shrift. Some teachers and librarians insist that "quality first" dictates that conspiracy theories never be permitted to enter the classroom.

However, when teachers and school librarians make all the choices for students, students never get the chance to learn how to make good choices for themselves. Ernest

Morrell, a professor at Teachers College Columbia University, has argued that teachers and librarians can reinforce certain values within their libraries and classrooms, but at home students will be surrounded by media images and text presenting an often very different set of values. Learners need to practice how to be critical of popular culture (Morrell 2004). Where else will students get the chance to do this if not in school? For these reasons, some teachers and school librarians are capitalizing on teen interest in conspiracy theories to explore ideas about the constructed nature of authority and the importance of being a skeptical reader and thinker.

For example, at Arthur L. Johnson High School in Clark, New Jersey, Dave Fosco and Rebecca Russo teach a semester-long social studies class called "Conspiracy Theories throughout History." At the beginning of the semester students discuss:

- Why do conspiracy theories exist?

- Why do people believe in conspiracy theories and what attracts people to them?
- What trends and commonalities can be seen in conspiracy theories throughout history?
- What do conspiracy theories tell us about society, culture, and ourselves?
- What positive and negative impacts do conspiracy theories have on society?
- How can you tell if something is a conspiracy theory and evaluate it? What types of arguments are used?

“The major skill that this course develops is the practice of source evaluation,” said Rebecca Russo (2017). She works hard to teach students how to identify sources that are more and less credible.

It’s difficult to disprove a conspiracy theory. They “resist traditional canons of proof because they reduce highly complex phenomena to simple causes” (Barkun 2003, 7). Students in the class at Arthur L. Johnson High School are encouraged to use library databases and Google

Conspiracy theories create opportunities for rich discussion about how and why we decide what to believe.

searches to practice identifying different types of sources and to use a variety of strategies to research the author, purpose, and point of view. “It’s not good enough to just review the ‘About’ page,” notes Russo. To really understand the motives of the author, students need to search the author’s name and the organization or website. By using active reading comprehension strategies, learners engage with the content deeply enough to recognize the author’s purpose: Is the author informing about the conspiracy theory, promoting it, or debunking it? (Russo 2017).

Recognizing bias is an even more challenging competency. Russo notes that her tenth-, eleventh-, and twelfth-grade students need guided practice to learn how to recognize bias in informational content. Before she sends learners out to find sources on their own, she gives them short news stories from All Sides <www.allsides.com>, a free website that offers partisan news coverage of current events from left, center, and right perspectives and fights polarization by helping learners understand

how to recognize bias. Russo’s students must read and summarize articles and then look for clues in the use of language and images that betray the point of view of the author or news organization. “I want source evaluation skills to transfer,” said Russo, noting that students get better at recognizing bias when they practice this skill with a broad variety



of real-world informational content, especially content that students find themselves (2017). It's important to critically analyze not just library resources but popular content that is easily available, attractive, and entertaining, or that activates strong emotions.

Christy Moran, Broward College librarian, uses a similar assignment with undergraduate students. In her seventy-five-minute activity titled "Evaluating Claims: Facebook Edition," learners determine the validity of a pseudoscientific claim, like the claim that the 9/11 terrorist attack on the World Trade Center was a conspiracy orchestrated by the U.S. government. Students find evidence to either support or reject the claim, explaining their conclusions and why they perceive specific sources to be credible (Moran 2017).

English teacher John Bradford and school librarian Anne Thiers at Creekview High School in Canton, Georgia, help students develop research papers on conspiracy theories as part of their work in American Literature courses (Thiers 2017). Bradford's unit on conspiracy theories takes about four or five weeks, and students construct a paper grounded in argumentative and persuasive rhetoric. With support from a LibGuide created by Thiers, students find three debatable points to write about, including merits and limitations of the conspiracy theory in question, and write a carefully structured eight-paragraph essay, using the Jane Schaffer structure for organizing sentences into paragraphs, and include properly formatted MLA citations. This approach to teaching writing teaches a paragraph-structure formula that includes a topic sentence, concrete

detail, commentary, and closing sentence.

"In this...town, I sometimes face a little pushback from students when I tell them that the *New York Times* is more credible than the *National Enquirer*," Bradford admits in a telephone interview. But as a result of their own search and inquiry processes, students learn to distinguish between high-quality sources and less-informative ones. He notes, "On the Internet, anyone can put up anything and make it look slick and professional. But my students learn to look for bias and investigate the sources of information because they're motivated and engaged—they want to learn more" (2017).

Proving a Conspiracy Theory

When I met with the German high school students, I talked about the reality that not all conspiracy theories are false. For example, for forty years, African Americans

with syphilis were left untreated so that researchers in a joint study by the U.S. Public Health Service and staff at John Andrew Hospital at Tuskegee Institute could document and research the progression of the disease. At the time, some in the African American community were suspicious about the declining health of the four hundred infected men, a decline that researchers told the subjects was caused by their “bad blood.” The infected subjects weren’t told they had syphilis or that it could be transmitted to spouses who then infected their babies. Men were encouraged to participate in the study by being given hot meals and free rides, and even when penicillin became widely available as a cure, the study continued.

Rumors about the dubious nature of the “treatment” given to these men circulated in the African American community, but only when researcher Peter Buxtun wrote a report comparing the Tuskegee study to Nazi experiments did things start to change. He confronted the

government with his accusations but was ignored. When race riots tore the nation apart in 1968, the national public health service took action to investigate. The health service commissioned a blue-ribbon panel of distinguished individuals from the fields of medicine, law, religion, labor, education, health administration, and public affairs. The panel found that the men had agreed freely to be examined and treated, even though there was no evidence that researchers had informed them of the study or its real purpose. Peter Buxtun then contacted a reporter from the *Washington Star* who wrote about the story on July 25, 1972. The news caused a sensation. People around the country were outraged to learn how racial bias had affected the medical treatment of these men and their families. Senator Edward Kennedy held congressional hearings, and new laws were established governing the ethics of human research (CDC 2016; Kerr and Rivero 2014).

The Tuskegee syphilis story shows how challenging it is to investigate a conspiracy theory, and it also illustrates the importance of whistleblowers, journalists, and government officials as they attempt to uncover the truth. School librarians can use the Tuskegee syphilis study to show the time, effort, and courage it takes to investigate a conspiracy theory to determine its validity. The story also illustrates how the process of accessing information and analyzing it leads people to create media to share what they learn, inspiring moral reflection, communication, and public action to address social needs.

Authority Is Constructed and Contextual

The rise of the Web and digital culture creates some new forms of authority. It is now possible to gain attention and authoritative status, not for one’s job title, responsibilities, knowledge, or experience, but for being first, fastest, and findable



Participants in the Tuskegee Syphilis Study (courtesy National Archives)

on social media, using personalized messages to connect to audiences and appeal to emotions. Today a YouTube celebrity like Alex Jones can be perceived to have authority through producing compelling videos quickly in response to current events. When messages like his become viral, they often gain popularity by exploiting people's sense of humor, curiosity, anger, disgust, or fear. Such content now drives the attention economy, where hoaxes, disinformation, and partisanship thrive.

As the ACRL (Association of College and Research Libraries) standards note, "Authority is constructed and contextual," a statement that reflects the recognition that information resources are drawn from their creators' expertise and credibility based on the information need and the context in which the information will be used. According to the standard, "Experts themselves view authority with an attitude of informed skepticism and an openness to new perspectives, additional voices, and changes in schools of thought" (2016).

Back in my class with the German students, after discussing how disinformation and hoaxes can sometimes turn into conspiracy theories, students viewed and discussed a video titled "Google Censors Anti-Hillary Search Results" created by Mark Dice, a noted conspiracy theorist with over one million subscribers on YouTube. The three-minute video demonstrates how, in contrast to other search engines, Google autocomplete results do not include references to Hillary Clinton's health. Students used the digital annotation tool VideoAnt <ant.umn.edu> to comment on and critique the video. They recognized Mark Dice to be someone with a political interest in Donald Trump and that Dice was making money from the entertainment value of an anti-Hillary message. Students viewed the video carefully and paused to write notes, wondering whether the search engine demonstrations might have been conducted on different days or even different times of the year.

High levels of intellectual curiosity were activated by this activity. As

students viewed and discussed this video, students also began wondering more broadly about the possibility that Google may indeed "censor" search results. Was censorship even the right term, they wondered? Students wanted to learn more about how the autocomplete function works on search engines, sharing with one another bits of knowledge based on their lived experience. A couple of students were aware that different people might get different autocomplete results based on their search histories. Others wondered: Did different search engines use different "signals of quality" to produce autocomplete results? How was Google adjusting the algorithm for autocomplete? Should people be concerned about this type of bias? Why or why not?

As Silicon Valley platforms ascend to cultural dominance, digital conspiracy theories will undoubtedly continue to flourish. To teach the conspiracies, school librarians must set aside ideas about themselves as being gatekeepers of quality. We'll have to get into the weeds. We'll have to make time for students to search for content that is both "credible" and "incredible," helping them use nuanced and sophisticated criteria to distinguish between the two. As we find better and more creative ways to help people identify and confront hoaxes, disinformation, and conspiracies, we will have to encourage the exploration of a truly broad range of information, propaganda, and entertainment. We'll need to acknowledge both the destabilizing function of mistrust, suspicion, and fear, and the powerful moral and humanistic values activated by the search for truth. We'll all need to step out of our comfort zones to consider the role of conspiracy theories in an increasingly uncertain world.



Teaching the Conspiracies: Key Ideas

- 1 Conspiracy theories are entertaining because they embody the timeless allure of the mystery of the unknown.
- 2 Conspiracy theories are constructed by people, and they have an author, purpose, and a point of view.
- 3 Even brief exposures to conspiracy theories can increase their believability.
- 4 Whistleblowers, journalists, and government officials investigate conspiracy theories in an attempt to uncover the truth.
- 5 Composing critical commentary about conspiracy videos using digital annotation tools helps advance the development of critical-thinking skills.
- 6 Conspiracy theories resonate in an age of anxiety by simplifying complex and ambiguous realities and may contribute to destabilizing society and promoting

feelings of helplessness, disillusionment, mistrust, suspicion, and fear.

- 7 Conspiracy theories may also inspire people to access and analyze information and then create media to take social action, and through these actions embody the fundamental values activated by inquiry and the search for truth.



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Island where she directs the Media Education Lab <mediaeducationlab.com>. Among other books, she is the author of *Create to Learn: Introduction to Digital Literacy* (Wiley-Blackwell 2017) and *Copyright Clarity: How Fair Use Supports Digital Learning* (Corwin 2010). She has published over 150 scholarly and professional articles on digital and media literacy education, and offers the Summer Institute in Digital Literacy and other professional development programs to K–12 and college educators, librarians, and media professionals. Hobbs launched an educational website *Mind Over Media* <www.mindovermedia.tv>, a crowd-sourced gallery of contemporary propaganda for critical analysis. Reach her via Twitter @reneehobbs.

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