Understanding and Overcoming Conspiracy Theories: What Emergency Managers Need to Know

Ohio Emergency Management Conference
April 14, 2021

Joseph E. Uscinski
Associate Professor
Political Science
University of Miami
What will I discuss for the next 30 minutes?

• Conspiracy Theories
• Misinformation
• Why believed?

• The prevalence of conspiracy theories and misinformation
• Disaster conspiracy theories and misinformation
• The consequences for emergencies
• Overcoming dubious ideas
• Other stuff!
Politics, Religion, and Conspiracy Theories

• No offense intended!
• Power and truth are difficult topics
• Real conspiracies do happen
• Everyone is guilty of believing and spreading
• I am not one of “them”
Defining Our Key Terms
Conspiracy
FORD GIVES PARDON TO NIXON, WHO REGRETS ‘MY MISTAKES’

U.S.-Bound Plane With 88 Crashes in Sea Off Greece

All on T. W. A. Flight From Tel Aviv Are Believed Dead—Wreckage Is Sighted

By the Associated Press

ATHENS, Sept. 8 — A Trans World Airlines jet bound for the United States with 88 persons aboard crashed today in the Ionian Sea off Greece. The Greek Civil Aviation Authority said there appeared to be no survivors.

T.W.A. said that the Boeing 707 fell from an overcast sky after the pilots reported that an engine had failed. Flight 841 originated in Tel Aviv, stopped in Athens and was scheduled to make stops in Rome and New York. The airline’s Tel Aviv office.

Richard M. Nixon. President Ford speaking at the White House yesterday.

PAIN EXPRESSED

Ex-President Cites His Sorrow at the Way He Handled Watergate

By Everett B. Holles

SUN CLARENCET, Calif., Sept. 7—President Ford’s pardon for Richard M. Nixon evoked today from the former President an expression of “regret and pain at the anguish my mistakes over Watergate have caused the nation and the presidency.”

Within 10 minutes after the presidential pardon was announced in Washington, Mr. Nixon’s statement was released at his Casa Pacifica estate, Calif.

NO CONDITIONS SET

Action Taken to Spare Nation and Ex-Chief, President Asserts

By JOHN RIBBERS

WASHINGTON, Sept. 8—President Ford granted former President Richard M. Nixon an unconditional pardon today for all federal crimes that he “committed or may have committed or taken part in” while in office, an act. Mr. Ford said was intended to spare Mr. Nixon and the nation further punishment in the Watergate scandals.

Mr. Nixon, in San Clemente, Calif., accepted the pardon, which removes him from federal
Conspiracy Theory
EXPLOSIVE PROOF FOUND IN DOCUMENT RELEASE
THIS COP KILLED KENNEDY
- UNDER ORDERS FROM CIA!

- Lee Harvey Oswald never fired a shot
- Real assassin killed another cop who realized what he’d done
- His wife was waitress for Jack Ruby
Infinitely Sized Bucket

- Constantly expanding
- New ones developed constantly
- Accuse anyone, of anything
- All events and circumstances attract them
- Median dies on the vine
What isn’t Included

• Supernatural claims
  • Demons, ghosts

• Paranormal claims
  • Aliens, ESP

• Cryptozoological claims
  • Bigfoot, Nessie, Chupacabra

• Must have small group, working in secret, for own benefit, at expense of common good, undermining bedrock ground rules...
Misinformation
• False or misleading information that is shared, whether it is intended mislead or not

• Disinformation is false or misleading information intentionally spread, often for political purposes

• Fake news is designed to imitate real news, but lacks fact-checking, editorial functions, designed to mislead
Hollywood executives are “blood-thirsty Satanists” who “ritually abuse children in the industry”, according to Macaulay Culkin, who claims he only got out alive because he was a “smart, suspicious kid” and he “got too famous to be killed like some of the other kids.”

“You learn very early to recognize which of them want to abuse you, and which of them have even darker tastes,” Macaulay Culkin said, explaining that “the worst of them wear shoes made out of the skin of children that they ritually murdered.”

Speaking on radio in Paris, France, Culkin said “Have you seen leather products made from human skin? It has a very unusual, distinctive look. I learned at a very young age to identify it.”
BREAKING! SOURCES TELLING ME THAT A BODY DOUBLE WAS USED WHEN HILLARY "LEFT" CHERSEAS APART.
Africa Confirms 3rd Ebola Victim Rises From the Dead, Releases Picture of First “Ebola Zombie” Captured

For the first time in human history, confirmed footage is captured of a man who scientists watched die from Ebola then only several hours later, regain life and rise from the dead.

Isaiah 28:19-20

19 Your dead shall live; their bodies shall rise.

Ganta, Liberia – Officials in Liberia have released the first confirmed image of a captured Ebola victim who rose from the dead. The name of the victim has not been released by officials.
Infinitely Sized

- Constantly expanding
- Anything wrong or misleading
Why Believe Conspiracy Theories and Misinformation?

Real question is why do people believe anything

Lots of reasons!

“Conspiracy Theory” is a big bucket

“Conspiracy Theory” is also just one of many kinds of dubious ideas
Why Believe Conspiracy Theories and Misinformation?

- **Group Attachments:**
  - Motivated Reasoning
  - Elite Cues
  - Political groups, Racial, Religious, etc...

- **Latent Dispositions:**
  - Partisanship/Ideology
  - Conspiracy Thinking
  - Denialism

- **Information Environment:**
  - Social Media
  - Legacy Media
  - Government Leaders
  - Friends, Family, Social Groups

- **Imagination**
- **Personalities**
  - Anti-social traits
Measuring Dispositions

**Conspiracy Thinking**
- Much of our lives are being controlled by plots hatched in secret places.
- Even though we live in a democracy, a few people will always run things anyway.
- The people who really 'run' the country, are not known to the voters.
- Big events like wars, the current recession, and the outcomes of elections are controlled by small groups of people who are working in secret against the rest of us.

**Denialism**
- Much of the information we receive is wrong.
- I often disagree with conventional views about the world.
- Official government accounts of events cannot be trusted.
- Major events are not always what they seem.
- Partisanship and Ideology Measured with standard questions
Basic Model of Information Reception

Information + Dispositions = Belief
Dispositions

Partisanship/Ideology  Denialism  Conspiracy Thinking
The Type of Conspiracy Theory

- Partisan or Ideological content, cues, or circumstance
  - Birtherism
    - 1%
    - The “other side” cheated
    - COVID Exaggerated
  - Rothschilds/Freemasons
    - Vaccines
    - GMO Dangers
    - Holocaust exaggerated
How Many Believe Conspiracy Theories?
Everyone...

- Infinite number of conspiracy theories
- Can’t poll them all
- Even limited numbers of items on surveys lead to large majorities
- 23 items in March, 91%
- If we asked a hundred items, then likely everyone
- No “us” and “them,” except by matter of degree
Numerous Whacky Theories During COVID-19

- Bill Gates, George Soros
- 5G Technology spreading viruses
- Microchips, Vaccine Trackers
- Big Pharma Scam
- Doctors Faking Patients
- QAnon: Mole Children – Wayfair Children

Fact check: 35,000 “malnourished” and “caged” children were not recently rescued from tunnels by U.S. military
COVID Truthers’ New Freakout: Being Forced to Eat Bugs

Conspiracy theorists now think sustainability is the groundwork that elites will use to eventually micromanage the smallest aspects of our lives in a post-pandemic hellscape.

Mark Hay  | Published Feb 9, 2021 4:38 PM ET

“...A number of American conspiracists seem to believe Chinese anal swabs will inevitably come to the U.S., become mandatory, and usher in a totalitarian dystopia.”
## COVID-19 Conspiracy Theories and Misinfo

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conspiracy/Misinformation Belief Question</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. The number of deaths related to the coronavirus has been exaggerated. <em>(Deaths)</em></td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. The threat of coronavirus has been exaggerated by political groups who want to damage President Trump. <em>(Threat)</em></td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Coronavirus was purposely created and released by powerful people as part of a conspiracy. <em>(Bioweapon)</em></td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. The coronavirus is being used to force a dangerous and unnecessary vaccine on Americans. <em>(Vaccine)</em></td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Ultra-violet (UV) light can prevent or cure COVID-19 <em>(UV Light)</em></td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. The coronavirus is being used to install tracking devices inside our bodies. <em>(Tracking)</em></td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Hydroxychloroquine can prevent or cure COVID-19 <em>(Hydroxy)</em></td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. COVID-19 can’t be transmitted in areas with hot and humid climates <em>(Hot/Humid)</em></td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Bill Gates is behind the coronavirus pandemic. <em>(Gates)</em></td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Putting disinfectant into your body can prevent or cure COVID-19 <em>(Disinfectant)</em></td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. The dangers of 5G cellphone technology are being covered up. <em>(5G)</em></td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Voter Fraud in 2020

Capitol Riot
### Table 1: Distribution of beliefs in voter fraud, stratified by partisanship.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Voter Fraud Belief Question</th>
<th>% Total</th>
<th>% Rep</th>
<th>% Dem</th>
<th>p-value for difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. If your preferred candidate does not win the presidential election, how likely do you think election fraud will have been involved? <em>(Somewhat/Very Likely)</em></td>
<td>42</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>0.824</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. In terms of voting this year, allowing ballots to be sent by mail will increase instances of voter fraud. <em>(Agree/Strongly Agree)</em></td>
<td>47</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. There is a conspiracy to stop the U.S. Post Office from processing mail-in ballots. <em>(Agree/Strongly Agree)</em></td>
<td>41</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. If he loses the election, Donald Trump will not willingly leave office. <em>(Agree/Strongly Agree)</em></td>
<td>49</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Some people currently have the fear that the 2020 election will be cancelled. How likely do you think this is? <em>(Somewhat/Very Likely)</em></td>
<td>12</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>0.008</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Total n=2,015; n=946, n=753; p-values from two-tailed tests of differences in proportions.
# Comparing March to October

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conspiracy Belief Question (label)</th>
<th>% Agree</th>
<th>Difference from March</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Overlap Items</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.) The one percent (1%) of the richest people in the U.S. control the government and the economy for their own benefit. (1%)</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>+2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.) Jeffrey Epstein, the billionaire accused of running an elite sex trafficking ring, was murdered to cover-up the activities of his criminal network. (Epstein)</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>+2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.) Donald Trump colluded with Russians to steal the presidency. (Collusion)</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>-1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.) The threat of coronavirus has been exaggerated by political groups who want to damage President Trump. (Threat)</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>+2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.) The dangers of vaccines are being hidden by the medical establishment. (Anti-Vaxx)</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>-2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.) The dangers of 5G cellphone technology are being covered up. (5G)</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>-3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.) Republicans won the presidential elections in 2016, 2004, and 2000 by stealing them. (RepSteal)</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>-7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.) Climate change is a hoax perpetrated by corrupt scientists and politicians. (Climate)</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>-3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.) School shootings, like those at Sandy Hook, CT and Parkland, FL are false flag attacks perpetrated by the government. (FalseFlag)</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>-5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Problems with Conspiracy Theories

- Can drive dangerous behaviors
- Can set people at cross purposes
- Can blunt ability of government to lead
- Can have downstream effects on trust
Disaster Conspiracy Theories

- 9/11 Inside Job: 35%
- COVID-19 Exaggerated: 30%
- Zika Virus: 20%
- Shootings Faked: 17%
- Government Hurricanes: 17%
Are Americans More Conspiratorial Now?
You’re Living in the Golden Age of Conspiracy Theories

The Trump era is a golden age of conspiracy theories - on the right and left
In many ways, no.
Flat or declining
Only in the sense that COVID-19 is new...
Qanon: Getting Bigger?
The Headlines about QAnon

Down the rabbit hole: how QAnon conspiracies thrive on Facebook

QAnon conspiracy blew up because of a bigger internet problem

How QAnon, the conspiracy theory spawned by a Trump quip, got so big and scary
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Poll</th>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Result</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emerson College Polling Voters n=1,458 US Registered Voters August 24-26, 2019&lt;sup&gt;1&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Are you a believer in QANON?</td>
<td>“Yes”: 5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ISD/Brian Schaffner n=4,057 US Adults September 18-20, 2020&lt;sup&gt;2&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Overall, do you have a favorable or unfavorable impression of QAnon?</td>
<td>“Very” or “Somewhat Favorable”: 7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civiqs n=14,203 US registered voters Sept. 10 - Dec. 15, 2020&lt;sup&gt;3&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Are you a supporter of QAnon?</td>
<td>“Yes”: 6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qualtrics October 8-21, 2020 n=2,015 US Adults&lt;sup&gt;4&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>I am a believer in QAnon.</td>
<td>“Strongly Agree” and “Agree”: 7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
What is the Role of the Internet?
Media Narrative

Conspiracy Beliefs Increasing

Social Media is the Cause
The Public Is Convinced

• In 2021, 73% believed that belief in conspiracy theories was “out of control.”
• 34% believed that the amount of people believing conspiracy theories was a “crisis.”
• In 2018, 59% of Americans believe that people are more likely to believe conspiracy theories more now than 25 years prior.
• 75% blame social media and the internet.
The Narrative

• Conspiracy Beliefs increasing
• Social Media Use is cause
  • Conspiracy Theory Content
  • Cheap & Easy Spread

The Facts

• Not Increasing, mostly stable
  • When increasing, usually elites
• Full Stop: Can’t be a cause of a non-increase
  • People self-select into networks and content
  • People’s predispositions control what they believe
  • This stuff is all over legacy media
Plandemic Video

- Millions of views in spring 2020
- No change in beliefs
- Didn’t change minds
Popular Views Don’t Match the Data

- Belief in conspiracy theories not consistently going up
- Forces driving conspiracy theories exist regardless of technologies
- Political elites and legacy media still big culprits
- Previous decades may have been worse in belief and consequences

- We have libraries in our pockets...why do only unsavory ideas spread?
- 100 years of media effects research says information is not that impactful
- Little evidence online conspiracy theories/fake news affected 2016
- People still must access and then accept
An Optical Illusion?

• We can track these conversations now
• Elites engaging with this rhetoric more; Partisan politicians looking for scapegoats
• Journalists reporting this topic more now

• Don’t confuse observation with reality
• Don’t confuse elites with the mass public
• Don’t confuse media attention with actual levels
Study Finds ‘Single Largest Driver’ of Coronavirus Misinformation: Trump

Cornell University researchers analyzing 38 million English-language articles about the pandemic found that President Trump was the largest driver of the “infodemic.”
Are Conspiracy Theories for Political Extremists?
Depends on what we mean by "Extremist" and "Political"
Anti-Establishment Views Separate from Left-Right

- Manichean Thinking
- Conspiracy Thinking
- Populism
Anti-Establishment and Conspiracy Views
Findings: Two Dimensions

• Traditional Left/Right Identities:
  • Unrelated to conspiracy thinking, Manichean thinking, populism, attitudes toward violence, distrust
  • Might not be to blame for our current troubles
  • Even “extreme” pid or id don’t drive these problems
  • Explain very little in the way of conspiracy beliefs

• Anti-Establishment Views:
  • Comprised of Conspiracy Thinking, Manichean Thinking, Populism
  • Tied to Dark Triad triats
  • Associated with distrust acceptance of political violence
  • No associated with use of Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram
  • Associated with 8Chan and Reddit
So What?

- Stop blaming Facebook and Twitter
- Stop blaming traditional left-right identities
- Stop blaming parties and the internet

- Start blaming anti-establishment views
- Start blaming anti-establishment elites who activate these views into mainstream politics
To Conclude

• Conspiracy Theories can be troublesome
• We should work to keep ours and others believes tethered to best evidence
• Bad actions can spring from bad beliefs...especially true during pandemic
• More continuity than change
• Believing unsupported stuff is an old human problem
• Can’t be blamed on new technologies
• The mechanisms that drive these beliefs are longstanding
Disasters

- Provide clear concise information
- Expressing uncertainty is ok
- Debunk without highlighting or spreading
- Trusted leaders from various communities
- You won’t get everyone
Additional Resources...

- Conspiracy Theories: A Primer
- Mick West: Escaping the Rabbit Hole
- Brian Dunning: Conspiracies Declassified
- Rob Brotherton: Suspicious Minds
Thank You!

@joeuscinski
Are COVID-19 Conspiracy Theories New?
Not so much!

• Kennedy >9/11> moon landing
• Deep State?
• Aliens = non-events
• GMOs? Vaccines?

• Optical illusion
• Conspiracy theories about everything
• Some big events attract more than others
• Some small events attract more conspiracy theories than “bigger events”
• “Big event” is subjective, as is “big cause”
Are Republicans More Likely to Believe?
Data Tell a Different Story

• Some cts believed near equally by left and right
  • Jeffrey Epstein Killed
  • JFK Assassination
  • AIDS Spread on Purpose

• Some cts believed more by left than right
  • Trump/Russia Conspiracy Theories
  • Conspiracy Theories about Republicans, Corporations, 1%

• Mechanisms that drive conspiracy theorizing operate on right and left
  • Motivated Reasoning

• Conspiracy Thinking near even between right and left
We Need to Get the Causal Locus Right

- Governments across world legislating social media and internet content
- What if conspiracy theorizing and other unsavory ideas have not increased?
- What if social media is not the real problem?
- What if the real problem is the people doing the legislating?
The Data Tell a Different Story

The QAnon movement is not popular
Average rating on a 0-100 scale among those who could rate each

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>0</th>
<th>10</th>
<th>20</th>
<th>30</th>
<th>40</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hillary Clinton</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rick Scott</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bill Nelson</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marco Rubio</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donald Trump</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>QAnon movement</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>24</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fidel Castro</td>
<td></td>
<td>19</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>