

Follow the white rabbit

Unfollowing the White Rabbit – Countering Conspiracy Theories



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The 2021 Nobel Peace Prize has been awarded to Maria Ressa and Dmitry Muratov for their efforts to safeguard freedom of expression.

Nobel Peace Prize 2021: Maria Ressa and Dmitry Muratov

“The battle for this generation will be the battle for truth.”

(M. Ressa)

This lecture

- How to identify a conspiracy theory
- Countering conspiracy theories in the classroom



Conspiracy theories and COVID-19: The mechanisms behind a rapidly growing societal challenge



Study for the Swedish Civil Contingency Agency MSB (2021)

- <https://www.msb.se/sv/publikationer/conspiracy-theories-and-covid-19--the-mechanisms-behind-a-rapidly-growing-societal-challenge/>
- the **ongoing crisis** (COVID-19) we are placed into
- that the pandemic also has released an '**infodemic**': dis- and misinformation related to COVID-19 is disseminated globally, accelerated by social media and different political agendas
- that **conspiracy theories occupy a particular position** in this infected infoscape since they are effective means to provide with explanations to big events (such as the pandemic)
- that we need to discuss **threats to democracy** and the necessity of strengthening **psychological defence**
- **The report has 4 parts:**
 - (1) COVID-19 and conspiracy theories
 - (2) What are conspiracy theories? (definitions)
 - (3) Identifying conspiracy theories and who believes in them
 - (4) Responding to and countering conspiracy theories



Involvement in educational projects

- Special issue of *Grundskoletidningen* (3:2021), Swedish journal for Y1-Y9-education
- Consulting Malmö City Council, Sweden in school project countering Antisemitism
- Lecture presented for organizations/teachers in tertiary education ("folkhögskola")
- Many requests from individual teachers at different schools and educational levels of what to do when conspiracy theories are expressed in class / how to teach about conspiracy theories

On a shoestring:

- ⇒ it is a complex area with many pitfalls
- ⇒ there is no 'one-fits-all'-approach
- ⇒ source criticism, critical thinking and increased media literacy is not sufficient to fix the problem
- ⇒ WHY?

A working definition of the term 'conspiracy theory'

A conspiracy theory expresses and communicates the idea that events and their causes *do not happen by chance*, and that the world which is affected by these events is *divided up into two spheres*: a sphere of (evil) conspirators and (good) victims of their plot. *The plan* for the conspiracy has been prepared and is being (or has been) implemented *in secret* with the intention of harming others, and those carrying it out move within an invisible/dark/secret area *unobserved*. The conspiracy theory often blames or demonises those who are said to be guilty. It is also fuelled by the idea that society/the world is approaching its downfall.

The conspiracy theory seeks to imitate scientific reasoning and establish what is *true and false*, but it also tries to explain *what is right and wrong* or good and evil.

THE 'BLACK BOX' OF CONSPIRACY THEORIES.

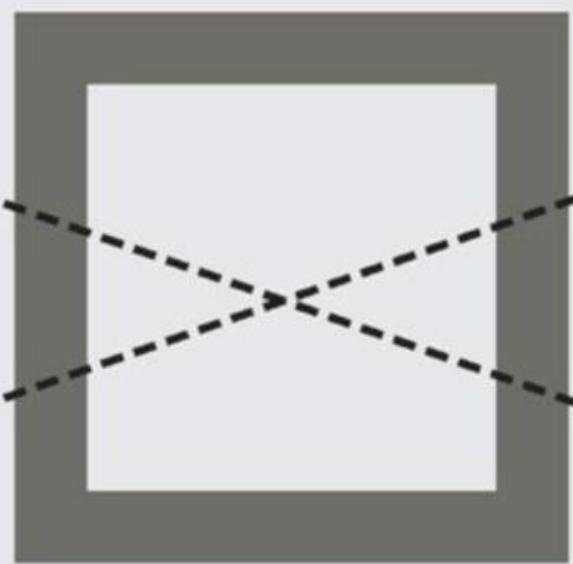
? CAUSE/input

EFFECT/output !

Why is it happening?

Rational reasoning about what is true/false

Ethical reasoning about right/wrong



Because

...

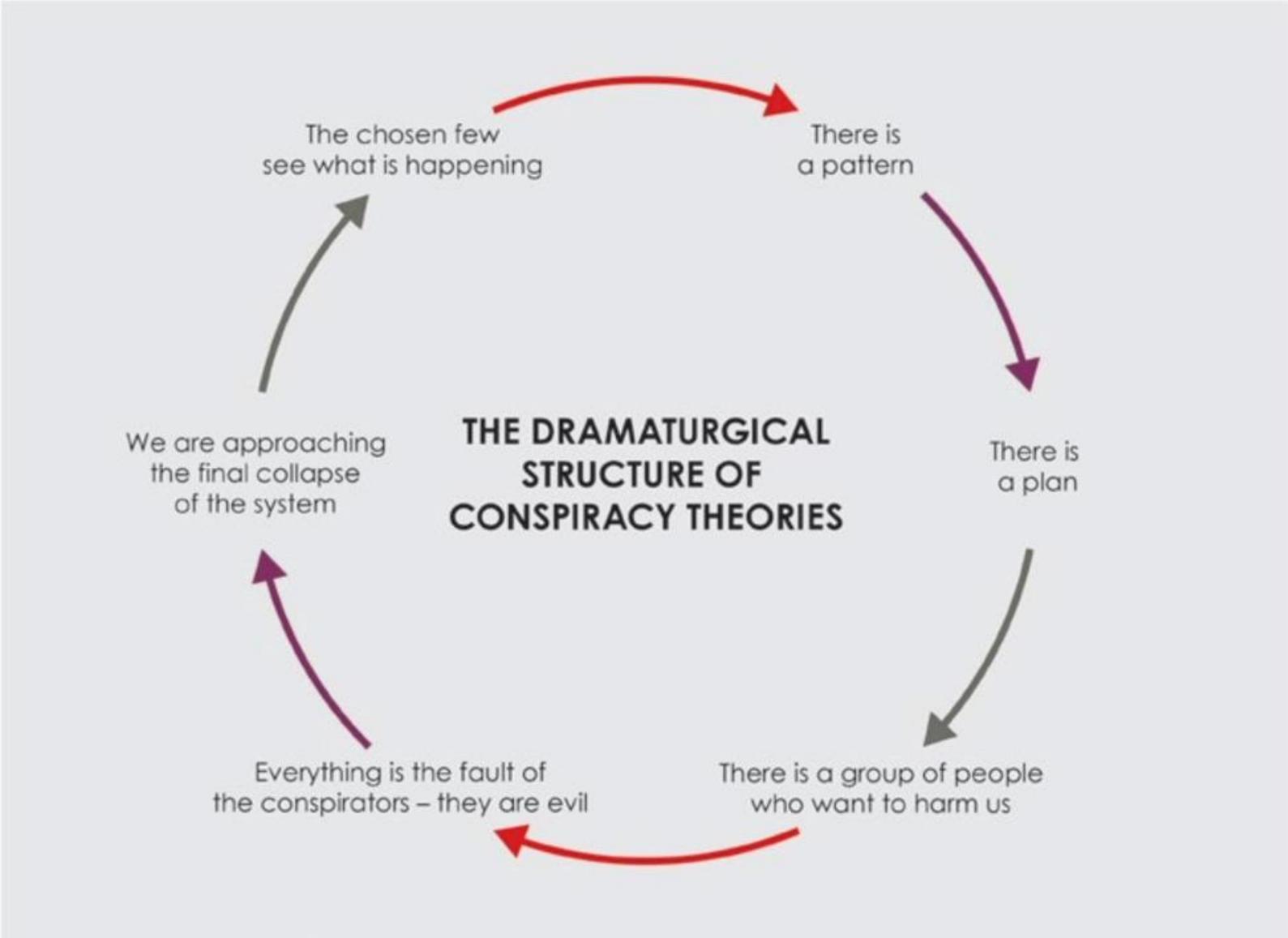
"causes are controlled not only by logical reasons, but also by moral motives"

→ courses of events are controlled by **evil intentions**

"a major effect must have a major cause"

→ **crises/scandals**

Explanations of causal connections



Conspiracy theories can be used

- ↓ *from the top down*: by political actors to reinforce power and to disparage political opponents
- ↑ *from the bottom up*: by those who feel (or are) powerless as a way to criticise power – or false use from those who claim to speak for the powerless
- ← *from outside in*: as part of information influence directed towards another state
- ← → *from inside out*: blame-assigning conspiratorial narratives that are directed towards other groups in order to assert one's own collective/cultural identity

The twelve elements of the conspiracy narrative



PATTERNS
– everything fits together



THE PLAN
– everything happens intentionally



THE PLOT
– a group of people have planned everything together



EVIL INTENTIONS
– someone wants to harm us



SECRECY
– someone wants to hide something from us



PROOF
– there are facts that prove the conspiracy



DUALISM
– everything is black or white



SCAPEGOATS
– it's someone else's fault



DEMONISATION
– the guilty are evil



THE COLLAPSE OF THE SYSTEM
– society is heading towards its ultimate end



THE TRUTH-SAYERS
– the good side has seen through the conspiracy



THE OCTOPUS, THE DAGGER AND THE PUPPET MASTER
– the imagery of conspiracy theories

SUSCEPTIBILITY TO BELIEVE IN CONSPIRACY THEORIES

COGNITIVE STYLE



PATTERNS
– everything fits together



THE PLAN
– everything happens intentionally



PROOF
– there are facts that prove the conspiracy



THE OCTOPUS, THE DAGGER AND THE PUPPET MASTER
– the imagery of conspiracy theories



THE TRUTH-SAYERS
– the good side has seen through the conspiracy

Who's information/knowledge do you trust?



Visualization

ACCENTUATED PERSONALITY TRAITS



THE PLOT
– a group of people have planned everything together



EVIL INTENTIONS
– someone wants to harm us

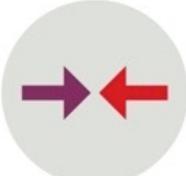


SECRECY
– someone wants to hide something from us



SCAPEGOATS
– it's someone else's fault

WORLDVIEWS AND VALUES



DUALISM
– everything is black or white



DEMONISATION
– the guilty are evil



THE COLLAPSE OF THE SYSTEM
– society is heading towards its ultimate end

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF CONSPIRACY THEORIES IN EUROPE

An interdisciplinary and international network to provide a comprehensive understanding of conspiracy theories.

HOME MEMBERS EVENTS PUBLICATIONS **EDUCATION** PROJECTS CONTACT

EDUCATION

EDUCATION

Empirical studies have shown that it is difficult to reach hardened conspiracy theorists with conclusive counterarguments. It is therefore particularly important to address those who are not yet convinced believers. One of the aims of the Action is to disseminate academic knowledge on conspiracy theories to the general public, and develop recommendations for journalists, policy makers and NGOs dealing with conspiracy theories in different contexts. We have also collected materials for educators that can be used in high schools, university classes and adult education.

SYLLABUS COLLECTION

The Action has assembled a collection of syllabuses that have been used in university courses in different disciplines. This collection is intended to serve as an inspiration for educators and to provide insight into different approaches to teaching conspiracy theories at university.

[more »](#)

GUIDE AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Action has produced a short guide to understanding conspiracy theories and offers recommendations on how to deal with them. The guide provides concise answers to questions such as what conspiracy theories are, what distinguishes them from real conspiracies, and what can be done about them.

[more »](#)

SAMPLE ANALYSIS

In cooperation with students of the University of Tübingen, the Action has produced a sample analysis of two sequences from the online documentary Loose Change (2006). The analysis can be used at all educational levels to teach students the skills to analyze conspiracy theories on the Internet and to identify the key strategies and tools that their creators use to disseminate their ideas.

[more »](#)

RESOURCES

In response to the increasing spread of conspiracy theories, it is particularly important to address young people and educate them about conspiracy theories, their mechanisms and dangers. This collection of materials is designed to help educators introduce students to the topic of conspiracy theories. It includes various links to debunking websites, simulation games and videos that provide an accessible and comprehensive introduction to the phenomenon.

[more »](#)

CONSPIRACY THEORIES IN THE CLASSROOM

HOW TO DEAL WITH THESE ISSUES AS A TEACHER

Educational resources at
www.conspiracytheories.eu

(COMPACT – Comparative Analysis of Conspiracy Theories)

Countering Conspiracy Theories in the Classroom

- Occasioned by **triggers** in world politics: disasters, crises, conflicts, terrorist attacks
- **Questioning** of dominant explanations of issues in media, science and school => hierarchies of knowledge and privileges/power of interpretation (bottom – up)
- **Group dynamics** (inside <=> out): stereotypical narratives about 'us' and 'them' (the enemy collective) reinforcing cultural identity

Step 1:

- Is it a conspiracy theory? What is the source? Who is the sender and the addressee? Does it run contrary to the law and the values of the educational establishment? Is it a threat (direct or indirect)?

Step 2:

- How 'radical' is the conspiracy theory expressed? Is it a matter of 1) cognitive style, 2) accentuated personality traits or 3) worldviews/values? Make a risk analysis of your pedagogic work! What is potentially compromised?

Step 3:

- Who should counter the conspiracy theories? Immediate debunking (risky strategy)? Other subjects? Collaboration with other teachers? Plan carefully how you would like to respond in a pedagogically responsible way: source criticism, psychology, worldviews and values etc.

Countering Conspiracy Theories in the Classroom

(Anne Frank Foundation, The Netherlands)

- **Set boundaries:** do not accept hate speech potentially leading to violence or outright lies that contravene the values of the educational institution
- **Relate** to conspiracy theories as 'coded social criticism' and relevant to identity: identify conflicts of knowledge hierarchy and privilege of interpretation
- **Don't add fuel to the fire:** to disprove, debunk or discard conspiracy theories might lead to antagonizing the students and reinforcing their perception of teacher and school as part of the conspiracy
- **Question your own beliefs:** focus instead on teaching the methods of finding out valid truth statements and value judgments
- **Focus on the emotional appeal:** what has made the conspiracy theory attractive to the students in the first place? Why are they attracted by its narrative and the explanation it promises?

POOR WEAPON AGAINST PREJUDICE



Social psychology has taught us that facts make a poor weapon against prejudice. Prejudice – and conspiracy constructs – are emotionally charged points of view and opinions. Will you reach students by offering factual counterinformation and make them change their minds? Probably not. Almost everyone, young or old, suffers from the ingrained tendency to accept facts that support their opinions and to reject facts that contradict them.

Anne Frank Foundation 2020:

<https://conspiracytheories.eu/education/resources/reading-materials/>

DON'T!

- Don't be alarmed by a student's conspiracy story.
- Do not silence a student, unless they propagate hatred or violence.
- Refuting or undermining a conspiracy construct by providing factual counter-information is often counterproductive.
- Don't try to win the debate; instead, try to have the discussion.

DO!

- Try to find out where the conspiracy theory came from. What does this say about the student?
- Go on a search for the truth with your students. Be open and curious.
- Keep the balance; people can say or research as much as they like, but not all truth is relative.
- Find a format that questions thinking in terms of 'us versus them' or a format that encourages students to be open to counter-information and different perspectives.

Why not working with counter-narratives?



THE QUESTION MARK
– try to find the real cause



THE COMPASS
– learn to orientate yourself



THE HANDSHAKE
– do something together with others



THE PEACE SYMBOL
– most people do not wish you any harm



LIGHT
– investigate what frightens you



METHOD
– there are proven ways to find out what is true



COMPLEXITY
– there are always other perspectives



OWN RESPONSIBILITY
– you can make your own conscious choices



EMPATHY
– understand other people's actions better



THE FIRE EXTINGUISHER
– extinguish your fears



ACKNOWLEDGE OTHER VOICES
– no one person ever has the truth



THE KITTEN, THE FLOWER AND THE CAMPFIRE
– surround yourself with images of hope