

# Handout

Title of activity	Debunking Conspiracy Theories					
-------------------	-------------------------------	--	--	--	--	--

Related modules	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>
		X				

## Appendix 1: Conspiracy Theories

#ThinkBeforeSharing

### CONSPIRACY THEORIES

## What are they? Why do they flourish?

**BE WARNED: THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC HAS SEEN A RISE IN HARMFUL AND MISLEADING CONSPIRACY THEORIES. IT MAY BE DIFFICULT TO RECOGNIZE THEM OR KNOW HOW BEST TO DEAL WITH THEM.**

- 1

**What are they?**

→ The belief that events are secretly manipulated behind the scenes by powerful forces with negative intent.
- 2

**Conspiracy theories have these 6 things in common**

- 1 An alleged, secret plot
  - 2 A group of conspirators
  - 3 'Evidence' that seems to support the conspiracy theory
  - 4 They falsely suggest that nothing happens by accident and that there are no coincidences; nothing is as it appears and everything is connected.
  - 5 They divide the world into good or bad.
  - 6 They scapegoat people and groups.
- 3

**Why do they flourish?**

→ They offer an explanation of events or situations which are difficult to understand and bring a false sense of control and agency. This need is heightened in times of uncertainty like the COVID-19 pandemic.
- 4

**How do they take root?**

→ Conspiracy theories often start as a suspicion. They ask who is benefiting from the event or situation and thus identify the conspirators. Any 'evidence' is then forced to fit the theory.

Once they have taken root, conspiracy theories can grow quickly. They are hard to refute because any person who tries is seen as being part of the conspiracy.
- 5

**Why do people spread them?**

→ There are different reasons: Most believe they are true. Others deliberately want to provoke, manipulate or target people for political or financial reasons. Beware: They can come from many sources e.g. internet, friends, relatives.

With thanks to Michael Butter, co-author of the COMPACT Guide to Conspiracy Theories, and John Cook and Stephan Lewandowsky, authors of The Debunking Handbook and The Conspiracy Theory Handbook.

THE FIRST STEP TO PREVENT CONSPIRACY THEORIES IS TO KNOW THAT THEY EXIST. BE AWARE. STOP THE SPREAD.

European Commission

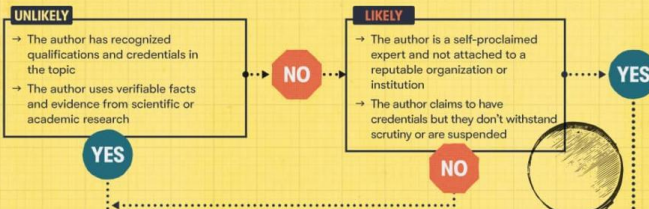
#ThinkBeforeSharing

## CONSPIRACY THEORIES

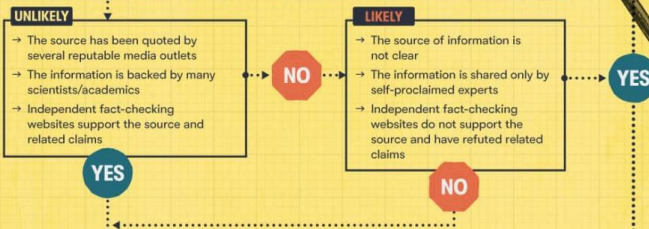
### Is this one? Check before sharing

**BE WARNED: THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC HAS SEEN A RISE IN HARMFUL AND MISLEADING CONSPIRACY THEORIES. IT MAY BE DIFFICULT TO RECOGNIZE THEM OR KNOW HOW BEST TO DEAL WITH THEM.**

#### Check the author – who is writing this and why?



#### Check the source – Is it reliable and reputable?



#### Check the tone and style – Is it balanced and fair or sensationalist and one-dimensional?



#### What is a real conspiracy?

Real conspiracies large and small DO exist. They are more often centred on single, self-contained events or an individual like an assassination or a coup d'état. They are unearthed by whistle-blowers and the media, using verifiable facts and evidence.



#### Looking for A REAL CONSPIRACY?



In 2006, the U.S. District Court in Washington DC (USA) ruled that major cigarette companies were guilty of conspiracy. For decades, they had hidden evidence of health risks attached to smoking to promote higher sales.

—LA Times, 2006

With thanks to Michael Butter, co-author of the *COMPACT Guide to Conspiracy Theories*, and John Cook and Stephan Lewandowsky, authors of *The Debunking Handbook* and *The Conspiracy Theory Handbook*.



CHECK YOUR SOURCES.  
WHEN IN DOUBT, DON'T SHARE.  
STOP THE SPREAD.



European Commission



Co-funded by the  
Erasmus+ Programme  
of the European Union



#ThinkBeforeSharing

## CONSPIRACY THEORIES

# Prebunking and debunking



BE WARNED: THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC HAS SEEN A RISE IN HARMFUL AND MISLEADING CONSPIRACY THEORIES. IT MAY BE DIFFICULT TO RECOGNIZE THEM OR KNOW HOW BEST TO DEAL WITH THEM.

STOPPING THE SPREAD OF CONSPIRACY THEORIES IS CHALLENGING. THERE IS NO ONE-SIZE-FITS-ALL APPROACH. IT DEPENDS ON THE LEVEL OF EXPOSURE. PEOPLE WHO FIRMLY BELIEVE IN CONSPIRACY THEORIES ARE EXTREMELY DIFFICULT TO REACH.

### Level 1: Low exposure to conspiracy theories



#### PREBUNKING - Empowered people are more resilient:

- Warn people early on that conspiracy theories exist
- Encourage rational thinking, questioning and fact-checking
- Alert people about the arguments behind the most common COVID-19 conspiracy theories and the key traits of conspiratorial thinking - suspicion of official accounts, immunity to contrary evidence, reinterpreting random events as part of a broader pattern.

### Level 2: High exposure to conspiracy theories



#### DEBUNKING - Facts and logic matter

##### DO's:

- ✓ Focus on the facts you want to communicate, not the myth you want to debunk
- ✓ Choose your target - the author, source or logic behind the conspiracy theory
- ✓ Always state clearly that the information is wrong, before quoting a conspiracy theory
- ✓ Provide a fact-based alternative explanation
- ✓ If possible, use visual aids to back your argument

##### DON'Ts:

- ✗ Don't focus on the conspiracy theory first. Don't reinforce it
- ✗ Don't overwhelm with information

With thanks to Michael Butter, co-author of the COMPACT Guide to Conspiracy Theories, and John Cook and Stephan Lewandowsky, authors of The Debunking Handbook and The Conspiracy Theory Handbook.



KNOW HOW TO TAKE ACTION.  
STOP THE SPREAD.



European  
Commission



Co-funded by the  
Erasmus+ Programme  
of the European Union