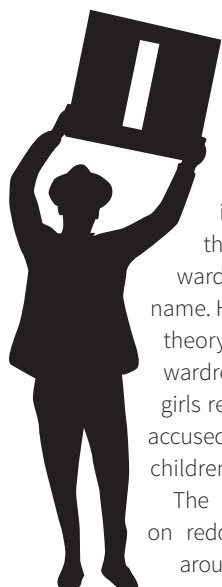


Conspiracy theories and citizenship education

Jeremy Hayward

This article builds on our previous journal on ‘Information Disorder’ (edition 51) with some specific ideas about tackling conspiracy theories. It underlines the need for a nuanced range of strategies to engage in critical media literacy.



In the summer of 2020, a bizarre story reached the MSM (mainstream media). The online furniture seller, Wayfair, was being (falsely) accused of trafficking abducted children in expensive wardrobes. It was indeed true that Wayfair sold expensive, industrial-sized wardrobes, with each style having a different girl's name. However, some believers in the *QAnon* conspiracy theory had matched some of these wardrobe names to those of young girls reported missing in the USA and accused the company of trafficking the children via the wardrobes.

The wardrobe conspiracy started on reddit forums but spread rapidly around the world via Instagram and Facebook (where recent research suggested that false stories/disinformation are six times more likely to be liked and shared than the truth).

But who would believe such a crazy idea? It turns out that growing numbers do. The Covid pandemic gave rise to some other well-publicised conspiracies (Covid being caused by 5g masts, Bill Gates putting microchips in the vaccines). The more established conspiracy theories have also incorporated the Covid pandemic into their stories of hidden agendas and the result is that someone researching Covid vaccinations can suddenly find themselves falling down a *QAnon* rabbit hole. You may know some of these people.

QAnon is a recent conspiracy theory which has a number of loosely fitting beliefs - one of them being that wealthy elites regularly traffic young children and use them in satanic rituals, which includes harvesting their blood for health benefits. Other beliefs include the idea that Trump was waging a war with these elites and was about to expose them all in an event known as the ‘storm’. The Capitol rioters of January 6th included many who were spurred on by this conspiracy.

In the UK, the *QAnon* conspiracy is not widespread, but it is growing and is more popular with younger age groups. In a recent report by Hope Not Hate (entitled *QAnon in the UK: The Growth of a Movement* Lawrence & Davis, 2020) most of the two thousand adults surveyed had not heard of *QAnon*; however, there was some support for several of the claims associated with it, particularly amongst younger people, with 35% of 18-24s agreeing with the statement “*Secret Satanic cults exist and include influential elites*”.

In the UK, the *QAnon* conspiracy is not widespread, but it is growing and is more popular with younger age groups. In a recent report... 35% of 18-24s agreed with the statement “*Secret Satanic cults exist and include influential elites*”.

What has this got to do with schools and citizenship teachers?

All teachers have a duty of care and there are, of course, child safety concerns with those who fall deeply into conspiracy thinking. Many extremist groups have conspiracy theories as part of their ideology (see the *great replacement theory* and the far right).

Often explorations of the internet and social media in schools have a personal safety and PSHE focus (safety, bullying, grooming). These are very important lessons, however it can be argued that the rise of conspiracy and disinformation is not just a personal safety issue but is now a public crisis and one that threatens the future of democratic states.

Teaching critical media literacy and resistance to conspiracy/disinformation is not only in the interest of the student, but may also be essential

for a healthy democracy.

The rise of disinformation and conspiracy theory during the pandemic was troubling. In the UK alone 159 5g phone masts were attacked, while NHS staff and health workers have been physically and verbally abused and stand accused of faking the pandemic. Many individuals refuse to be vaccinated, all because of disinformation and conspiracy. As a response to this, UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) have funded research into the spread of disinformation and as part of one project I was asked



to prepare guidance for schools on how to respond to conspiracy theories in the classroom. This guidance is now completed and available to download on the ACT website.

Young people and conspiracy. What do we know?

There is very little research on young people and their belief in disinformation or conspiracy theories. However, this is an area that is starting to be explored and recent research by Jolley et al. (2021) suggests that interest in conspiracy thinking starts to develop around the age of 14 and may even peak in late adolescence (in terms of the numbers of people believing in conspiracy theories). How deeply conspiracy beliefs are held at this age is not clear. A student putting forward a conspiracy theory may be doing so for a range of reasons: perhaps as part of a role as an alternative thinker, an outsider or even a disruptive student. The belief itself may not be firmly held.

Adolescence is also a time when young people seek broader answers, play with different identity roles and sometimes have anti-establishment feelings, in addition to it being a time of anxiety. All of these elements may be factors in drawing young people to conspiracy theories/disinformation.

Even if jokingly suggested, such beliefs can be harder to change if they are held/repeated for long enough to become ‘identity forming’ (think about people’s views on Brexit, or even supporting football teams). Much of the guidance in the document draws on research from political science that suggests our *reason* may not be the driving force for our beliefs, particularly when the beliefs are well established. Luckily, this is not likely to be the case for many young people, and teachers may be able to play an important role in keeping students open-minded and suitably sceptical about conspiracies/disinformation.

At the Institute of Education, we recently conducted research into extremism in the classroom. *Taylor et al. (2021)*. As part of this research, we surveyed around one hundred teachers asking about the extreme views they had encountered in the classroom. The most frequently encountered were conspiracy theories, with over a fifth of the teachers encountering these fairly regularly. Nearly 90% have encountered them at some point.

In interviews, teachers were concerned about the possible increased exposure of young people to social media and disinformation during lockdown and noted the loss of the physical classroom as a space to discuss ideas (and presumably challenge misconceptions).



Image courtesy of Joel Muniz from Unsplash

Anecdotally, I have spoken to several teachers in the last few years who are concerned about students being drawn into conspiracy theories. Previously the concerns had all been with male students constantly raising the Illuminati conspiracy, but most recently a teacher was concerned with a group of girls that had become obsessed with QAnon. The extent of conspiracy beliefs amongst young people is not known. It is not likely to be widespread - however disinformation and conspiracy are on the rise.

Should we treat conspiracy theories/disinformation as all being false?

Whilst it is true that people do secretly conspire to do wrong (the Volkswagen emissions scandal, the Salisbury poisonings) the fact that people *believe* in conspiracies is not a good enough reason alone to treat them as open issues for the purposes of teaching. After all, some people harbour racist views and we would not teach from a position that racism is an acceptable position to hold. Most of the conspiracies that teachers are likely to encounter are the common ones, that do not have credible evidence.

Climate change is a useful case study to think about. There are two essential claims:

- a) that it is happening & b) that it is caused by human activity

Forty years ago, a teacher might address these issues as open - looking at arguments for and against. Until the last ten years or so,

How frequently have you encountered extremist views in the classroom?				
	Fairly regularly	A few times	Once or twice	Never
Conspiracy theories	20.8	36.5	19.8	11.5
Extremist views on women	4.2	24.0	34.4	26.0
Homophobia	10.4	31.3	36.5	11.5
Islamophobia	5.2	24.0	32.3	27.1
(Other forms of extremism encountered included Racism and Far Right extremism & Anti-Semitism)				



Image courtesy of the blowup from Unsplash

this was also the position taken by the BBC. Anytime the issue of climate change was in the news, the BBC would invite a scientist or campaigner to talk about the issue, but would also invite a climate sceptic to put forward their (non-evidence based) ideas. This approach, of treating a debated issue as being completely open, became problematic as more and more scientific evidence pointed towards climate change. The 'BBC balance' method seems to only give two options, treat an issue as closed or treat it as entirely open. This dichotomy has placed classroom teachers in a tricky position over the years (although less so now, as the evidence is insurmountable). So should a) and b) be taught as open issues or entirely closed?

To navigate this, it can be useful to think of the teacher as a representative of the academic community. In this way a teacher can represent the thinking of the academic community, which is that the scientists are pretty much unanimous that climate change is happening and that it is caused by human activity. However, forty years ago this was not the case and a teacher may have reflected this split of opinion in the scientific community. By reflecting the views this way, the teacher is given more options than just a true or false. Over time the responses a teacher can give can evolve from *The scientific community is divided...*, *the majority of scientists...*, *the scientific community is unanimous...* Etc.

The 'BBC balance' method seems to only give two options, treat an issue as closed or treat it as entirely open. This dichotomy has placed classroom teachers in a tricky position over the years.

These references to the academic community give both nuance and accuracy. We have recently seen many extreme weather events. Scientists openly acknowledge that it is very hard to attribute one particular weather event to global warming, as extreme weather events have always occurred. But modelling suggests that the frequency and extremities of these events makes it highly likely that global warming is playing a significant causal factor in most cases. Giving answers like these helps to give

a more detailed account and portrays climate scientists as people who follow evidence and think in terms of probabilities rather than absolutes. This approach can also help build more confidence in scientists (often a target of conspiracy theories).

Indeed, climate change itself has been a major focus of disinformation and conspiracy theory. Climate change denial is often accompanied by fake claims about scientific and liberal elites collaborating for some dubious end. Again, a teacher should feel confident not to reflect denial of climate change that might exist among members of the general public, but to reflect the academic community. E.g. *"Yes, I know that some people deny climate change, but this is not based on evidence. The scientific community is*

in universal agreement that climate change is happening and is caused by humans."

Lessons from the US climate change debate

The climate change debate in the US has been particularly vitriolic. Research by Kahan (2015) suggests that the 'name-calling' element often involved has not been helpful. Calling people idiots, stupid, ignorant etc only serves to strengthen the belief. (Think of the online Brexit debate. The terms 'remoaners' and 'brexidiots' likely achieved nothing, other than strengthening resolve on both sides). Why might this be?

Try this thought experiment. Imagine all climate change deniers were ranked on both their strength of climate change denial and also the strength of their scientific knowledge. Do you think the strongest deniers would have the strongest or the weakest scientific knowledge? Intuitively, it might seem that the strongest deniers would have the least scientific knowledge, and the weakest deniers have the strongest. In fact, Kahan's research has shown that the exact reverse is the case. The strongest deniers have the strongest scientific knowledge.

This phenomenon has been attributed, in part, to something in political/social psychology known as the *backfire effect*. The more you research a topic, the stronger your belief becomes, even when the research goes against your belief. Again, go back to Brexit. All of the online discussion seemed to achieve nothing, other than strengthening beliefs. If a news article was published that seemed to support leave, those voting remain would spend cognitive resource arguing why this was wrong (and vice versa for an article that supported remain). Spending more time researching just served to strengthen existing beliefs, rather than changing them. This phenomenon is particularly strong for identity-related beliefs. In the US, climate change denial is broadly linked to political affiliation (with Republicans as sceptics/deniers). In this way, it is *identity related* (as is being pro or anti-vaccination). The tendency is for humans to spend cognitive resources (thinking/research) boosting ideas that support their sense of identity while rejecting ideas that go against it, so once a belief is linked to identity it is much harder to change.

Based on these ideas, Kahan suggests that the rhetoric needs to be taken out of the climate change debate. Calling people idiots is not going to change minds. It can strengthen the sense of an identity being under attack and in this way be counterproductive.

Discussing conspiracy theories with young people

A range of guidance has emerged in the last few years about how to have conversations with adult conspiracy theorists (see for example *The Conspiracy Theory Handbook*). Most of the guidance seems to take on board these ideas about identity and the backfire effect. If the belief is well established, then their sense of identity will be under threat and rational argument becomes very difficult.

A better approach is to try and find common ground. Perhaps by

repositioning both you and the conspiracy theorist as being open-minded critical thinkers. In other words, gently encouraging the person to also apply the scepticism (inherent in many conspiracies) to the conspiracy theory itself.

This approach should work with students too. If a student does support a conspiracy theory, then hopefully this will not have been the case for too long. Making them aware of the dangers of conspiracy theories, warning them not to associate themselves too closely with the idea (for example by pointing out that many conspiracy theories are racist, or have racist elements) or trying to reframe their identity as that of a critical thinker may help to avoid the belief becoming too entrenched and identity forming.

Climate change denial is often accompanied by fake claims about scientific and liberal elites collaborating for some dubious end. A teacher should feel confident not to reflect denials of climate change that might exist among members of the general public, but to reflect the academic community.

Conspiracy theory in the classroom

There are two main ways that conspiracy theories may find their way into the classroom. A teacher might proactively explore the topic, perhaps as broader exploration of media literacy, or a pupil might raise a conspiracy theory as part of a different discussion. The guidance document on the ACT website focuses on these two routes.

Reactive strategies

If a student raises a conspiracy in the classroom, is it best to a) carry on the discussion, perhaps expose the 'crazy' ideas to the fresh air of scrutiny or b) close the idea down? Context is all important but our guidance suggests going for b) in most cases. Allowing a discussion to carry on may not always be effective. A student may have researched a topic in depth and have quick or well-rehearsed answers. And of course, repeating disinformation/conspiracies is spreading them. A discussion may also lead to the student becoming defensive which could entrench the view further.

Closing down should not just be seen as a form of censorship. Teachers close down off-topic discussions all the time and, even if the conspiracy is vaguely related to the topic, it likely to be irrelevant in terms of the learning outcomes of the lesson. So there is always a valid reason for needing to carry on with the lesson. In the guidance we suggest appropriate wording for this (remembering not to ridicule) but again, context is important.

Sometimes the student raising the idea may be doing so playfully; however, if you have concerns - or if a student has repeated this idea on a few occasions - then a chat outside/at the end of the class may be appropriate. The guidance has 'prompt' questions to help explore how serious the belief may be and gives logic-based arguments/counters to encourage the students to reposition their thinking to that of a critical thinker and to not become too attached to the conspiracy. If you have more serious concerns - for instance if the conspiracy is racist, or a student is messaging/being contacted frequently on forums - then seeking further help or even a chat with the school Prevent lead may be appropriate.

Proactive guidance

There are a range of free resources available for teachers to tackle issues relating to disinformation and conspiracy theories. ACT itself has developed some excellent materials. A list of these, together with links, is provided in the guidance. Most of the materials take a media literacy approach and it would seem there is a real need for this. Many young people do not gain their news from traditional media. But despite being raised with the internet, they may not be particularly good at spotting disinformation or fake news. A recent study (*Wineburg et al., 2020*) asked 263 U.S. university students to use online resources to evaluate the trustworthiness of two ‘news’ stories. One story was from a satirical website, the other was produced by a corporate lobbying group. Two thirds of the students did not discover that the first ‘news’ story was satirical and 95% were not able to identify the lobbying group that produced the second piece of ‘news’.

The different educational approaches to developing media literacy is an area that has been researched, particularly in the U.S, and effective methods include:

- **Active/creative.** This could involve creating a new conspiracy theory and then analysing why conspiracy theories appeal and how they spread.

- **Developing media literacy knowledge.** For example, understanding different types of media and how they work, exploring how they are regulated or not regulated
- **Developing media literacy skills.** How to spot signs of disinformation or fake news. Looking for common signs - for example being aware of how images are often recycled with faked headlines to create disinformation

- **Developing defensive strategies** (to stop the spread of disinformation). These often include mnemonics to help remember quick checks to run through before sharing/liking/or believing a purported piece of news/information.

Conclusion

Citizenship teachers are used to engaging in contemporary debate. This places them in an ideal position to spot the signs of conspiracy belief, and also to develop critical media literacy. As well as living through a pandemic, we are also living in an infodemic, bombarded by information of various quality and intent. A healthy democracy requires the ability to sort out the truth from the lies.

This is an area I will be researching further. If you have encountered conspiracy theories in the classroom and would be happy to have a conversation, then please feel free to contact me. 📧

The tendency is for humans to spend cognitive resources (thinking/research) boosting ideas that support their sense of identity while rejecting ideas that go against it, so once a belief is linked to identity it is much harder to change.

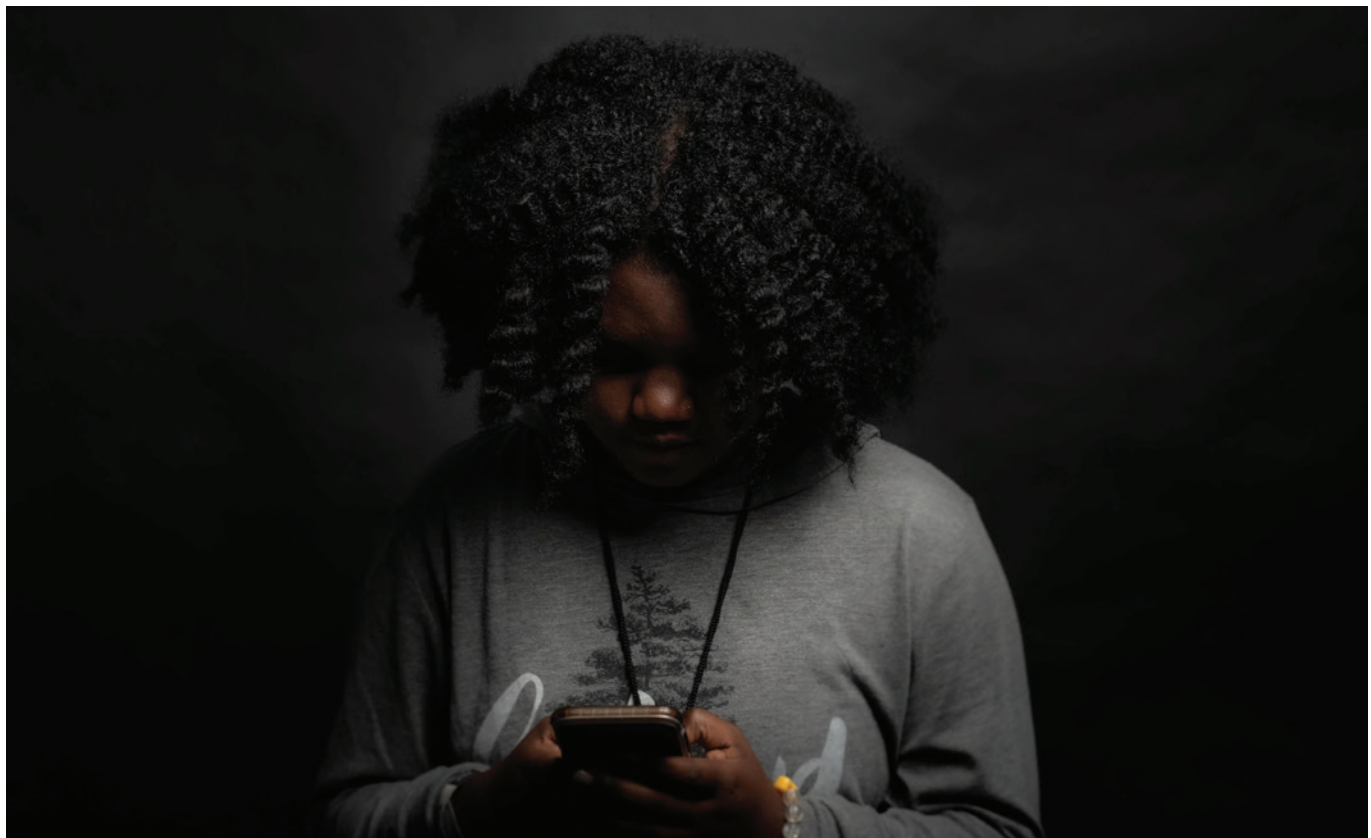


Image courtesy of Chad Madden from Unsplash

Conspiracies you might encounter

The Illuminati

A loose set of beliefs about a secret society who are running the world and aim to establish a 'New World Order' of totalitarian and authoritarian control. The original Illuminati were a group of intellectuals in 18th century Bavaria but the name was playfully co-opted, and the conspiracy created, by a writer for Playboy in the 1960s. Its iconography - a triangle with an outline of an eye at the centre - is often used in popular culture and many young people hypothesize about famous stars being part of this infamous, secret sect. Most recently, Beyonce and Jay Z are said to be members.

The Great Replacement

Beginning in France with the novelist and political commentator Renaud Camus, the Great Replacement is an Islamophobic conspiracy theory which originated with the idea that Muslims present a threat to French - and by extension white, Western - civilisation and culture. Having gained traction in the rest of Europe, believers proclaim that the white race is being systematically replaced demographically and culturally. For this reason, this conspiracy theory is popular with far-right movements and is white supremacist at its core.

Allowing a discussion to carry on may not always be effective. A student may have researched a topic in depth and have quick or well-rehearsed answers. And of course, repeating disinformation/conspiracies is spreading them.

QAnon

Originated in the USA in 2017 but has since gained global traction. Those who subscribe to QAnon believe that a satanic, cannibalistic cabal of paedophiles run a global sex trafficking ring. QAnon followers often subscribe to far-right ideologies and believe that Trump was appointed to enact a 'storm', where the paedophile ring (made up of Democrat politicians, Hollywood elites and government officials) will be exposed and arrested. Followers believe that a deep state agent named 'Q' is leaving hints - or 'Q' drops - for them online to reveal the details of the imminent 'storm'. Because believers are often far-right politically, many who subscribe to this theory believe in white supremacy and are deeply anti-Semitic and racist.

Single events conspiracies

Many conspiracy theories centre around single events that either they claim didn't occur, or were not as they seem. These include the theories that Princess Diana was killed by the Royal Family, the moon landings were falsified by the US government, the Sandy Hook shooting was not real and performed by actors and 9/11 was orchestrated by the Bush administration and/or the CIA. Increasingly the broader framework theories such as Illuminati, Qanon, New World order (sometimes the protocols of the Elders of Zion) incorporate these events into their world view.



References

- Jolley, D., Douglas, K., Skipper, Y., Thomas, E., & Cookson, D. (2021). Measuring adolescents' beliefs in conspiracy theories: Development and validation of the Adolescent Conspiracy Beliefs Questionnaire (ACBQ). *British Journal of Developmental Psychology* 39 (3), 499-520
- Kahan, D. M. (2015) 'Climate-Science Communication and the Measurement Problem' in *Advances in Political Psychology*, Vol. 36(1) 1-43
- For example see *The Conspiracy Theory Handbook* <https://www.climatechangecommunication.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/ConspiracyTheoryHandbook.pdf> or advice from from Sense about Science <https://senseaboutscience.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Talking-about-Covid-Conspiracy.pdf>
- Lawrence D. & Davis G. (2020) *QAnon in the UK: The Growth of a movement* Hope Not Hate: Retrieved from <https://www.hopenothate.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/qanon-report-2020-10-FINAL.pdf>
- Taylor, B., Mills, M., Elwick, A., Pillinger, C., Gronland, G., Hayward, J., Hextall, I. & Panjwani, F. (2021). *Addressing Extremism Through the Classroom. A Research Report from the Centre for Teachers & Teaching Research*, London: UCL Institute of Education. <https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/10133809/>
- Wineburg, S. et al. (2020) *Educating for Misunderstanding: How Approaches to Teaching Digital Literacy Make Students Susceptible to Scammers, Rogues, Bad Actors, and Hate Mongers* Working Paper A-21322, Stanford History Education Group, Stanford University. Retrieved from <https://purl.stanford.edu/mf412bt5333>