

WHY DO PEOPLE BELIEVE FAKE NEWS?

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YOU don't have to look online for long to find all sorts of fake news. It includes what are known as 'conspiracy theories' – wild ideas that ignore basic facts, science and evidence. To learn more, we spoke to Dr Daniel Allington, a senior lecturer at King's College London and an expert in the social science behind why people believe in conspiracy theories. **WHY DO PEOPLE FALL FOR CONSPIRACY THEORIES?**

Conspiracy theories are often crazy, making out that the truth is some kind of cunning cover-up.

Dr Allington says one of the main reasons people believe in conspiracies is because they're deliberately designed to sound like really good stories. Even though men have landed on the moon six times, decades later there are still lots of people who believe the landings were faked and filmed in a studio on Earth. Saying NASA made it all up and pulled the wool over the whole world's eyes might be a good story, but you have to ignore reality and evidence for it to make any sense.

ARE CONSPIRACY THEORIES DANGEROUS?

The moon landing example is pretty harmless, but when conspiracy theories involve vaccines or the new coronavirus, it can mean that people stop listening to medical advice that could save their lives.

"For example, there is a small group of people who believe that COVID-19 is caused by the introduction of 5G [a new, faster version of mobile internet]," says Dr Allington. "Because they blame 5G, they're not wearing masks, they're not social distancing. Some people have even set fire to mobile phone masts in protest.

"In a series of surveys earlier this year, we looked at what people believe about COVID-19, where people get their information from about it, and whether they are following the Government guidelines. We found that people who take their information from social media are more likely to believe in conspiracy theories about COVID-19.

"The people who believe in these conspiracy theories are also less likely to be following guidelines. Someone who believes that the symptoms of COVID-19 are caused by 5G is more likely to have gone outside with possible symptoms than somebody who doesn't believe that. We have clear evidence that people who believe in these false stories are more likely to behave in a way that puts themselves and others at risk."

WHAT EFFECTS DO CONSPIRACY THEORIES HAVE?

Conspiracy theories are dangerous because it means people point fingers in the wrong direction, and this can lead to persecution [cruel and unfair treatment of a group of people].

"The main example of this is Nazi Germany," Dr Allington says. "Adolf Hitler claimed that all of Germany's problems were caused by Jewish people, which is why Germany carried out the Holocaust [the murder of six million Jews during World War Two]. The Nazis believed that, although the Jews seemed to be powerless, they were secretly in control of everything." Anti-Semitism (hatred of Jews) has been creeping into conspiracy theories for hundreds of years, with false accusations that Jewish people are secretly running the world. It's

also still shockingly common to see people spreading the conspiracy theory that the Holocaust didn't happen. Germany and more than a dozen other countries have made Holocaust denial illegal.

HOW DO WE KNOW CONSPIRACY THEORIES AREN'T TRUE?

Dr Allington says that in order for most conspiracy theories to be real, "you would need thousands and thousands of people working together for the conspiracy, without one of them spilling the beans. People just aren't like that – people talk.

"It's just impossible to keep anything that involves thousands of people a secret. Not even prime ministers or presidents can control everything to the level that conspiracy theorists say they do.

"When problems happen, people want an explanation that feels right to them, but this can mean ignoring real problems."

HOW DO WE STOP THE SPREAD OF CONSPIRACIES?

In the UK, the Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO) was set up to prevent lies being published in newspapers; Ofcom is an organisation that does the same for television. But on social media, there's no IPSO or Ofcom to step in when people are spreading misinformation and lies.

A tip from Dr Allington: "If you're seeing something only on social media, and you're not seeing it in newspapers or on television, then it's probably wrong. There's just not the same level of journalism there. So, you should make sure that you're getting your news from reputable sources."

If you want to find out more about how to spot conspiracy theories and fake news, your teacher can get First News' free Special Edition, Making Sense Of The News, at first.news/fakenews.