

Topics



Age category



15+

Group size



up to 25

Time



120 minutes

24 Not all theories are equal

Topics: **critical thinking,**
digital citizenship, media literacy

Recommended age group: 15+

Participant count: up to 25 participants

Activity duration: 120 minutes

Methods of education: group work, discussion, reflection

Aims of the activity:

- identify the characteristic traits of conspiracy theories,
- explain the purpose, the target group and the channel used for spreading an invented conspiracy theory,
- compare various conspiracy theories, look for the similarities and the differences,
- use the typical aspects of conspiracy theories while creating a conspiracy theory,
- invent a conspiracy theory based on a historical or current event(s),
- observe the various points of view of a certain phenomenon,
- analyse personal tendencies and thought processes while completing a certain task,
- understand the developmental process of conspiracy theories and disinformation.

Equipment:

- flipchart paper, markers, paper, coloured paper, post-it notes, pens,
- video projection technology devices (computer, projector, audio tech, etc.), internet connection,
- a printed copy of "The list of conspiracy theory components"
- variations: cards with topics we want to focus on/ cards with the names of social networks (where the theory would be posted).

Keywords: conspiracy theory, conspiracy, critical thinking, logic errors, manipulation

Activity process:

1. We begin the activity by playing a video presentation of one of the most infamous conspiracy theories, e.g. „The Earth is flat.“ (video hyperlinks are attached below)

„Flat Earth“ videos: National Geographic. *Flat Earth vs. Round Earth | Explorer*, Youtube.com [online]. Available at: <www.youtube.com/watch?v=06bvdFK3vVU>

Interez. *What would it look like if the EARTH WAS FLAT?*, Youtube.com [online]. Available at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FWWiOEFQeyY>>

2. We continue the discussion using the following questions:

- *What techniques do the video creators use to persuade the audience?*
- *Which conspiracy theories have you encountered?*
- *Why do you think these theories are created?*
- *What are the characteristic traits of conspiracy theories?*

The lecturer may write the answers down on the flip chart and add any information not stated by the participants: „*People tend to believe conspiracy theories because they are usually easily comprehensible, they're interesting and they offer an alternative misleading explanation of how the world around us works. Conspiracy theories are based on the assumption that nothing is a coincidence, appearances are deceiving, everything's connected, power is the main motivation. The human brain looks for causality in all happenings, even when there is no cause-effect (when an event is not a result of another event) and sometimes fails to draw the correct conclusion (logic errors). Signs of conspiracy theories include: mysteriousness, unspecified sources, plagiarism/falsification, inner inconsistency or contradiction, information flood, inconsiderate choice of facts, complicated constructs, etc.*”

3. We divide the participants into a few groups of 4 or 5 members and we ask each group to work together to come up with their own conspiracy theory.

4. We distribute the printed list of conspiracy theory components (Annex). Each group's task is to include 2 – 3 of the components into their own presentation. They may pick the components randomly (by drawing) or choose the 2 – 3 they want to use. The choice of topic and social network is also up to them (they decide where they'd want to present their entry (Youtube – a video, Facebook – text/photo, Instagram – image/story, TikTok – a short video, etc.) We let the groups work for 50 minutes.

5. During the first phase of the group work the participants choose the topic, define the target audience and the aim of their conspiracy theory. We ask the participants to remember that it's important to answer the following questions:

- *What event is your conspiracy theory based on?*
- *Who/which group strives to use a conspiracy to benefit another?*
- *What is the aim of your conspiracy theory?*

We recommend that the participants do not use any religious or ethnic group and to focus rather on other social groups to avoid social stereotyping. The conspiracy theories may be based for example on professional categories (farmers, teachers), age groups (seniors, teenagers), or even supernatural beings (animals, aliens, elves, etc.).

6. Afterwards the groups may proceed to work on their theories. We continue adding various steps to help them complete the instructions:

- We remind them to not forget to **come up with a story**. We ask what happens during the course of the story.

- Once the group defines their idea, the participants can begin to **implement the components** they chose. The conspiracy theory may also include the aspects we discussed during the initial phase of the activity.

- Based on the previously defined target audience, the groups decide on the **methods of presenting** their conspiracy theories to the public (they choose a social network and a type of presentation media – videos, reports, photos, images, text statements, etc.).

- When a group has their story made up, they need to think of how to present the outcome to the rest of the participants. We can let them use the computer/tablet, the projector, and speakers. They can also use their own tools and additional equipment (flip chart paper, pens, markers, coloured paper, post-it notes). We set a presentation time limit of 5 minutes.

7. Each group presents its output to the rest of the participants. We start a discussion about the invented conspiracy theories. The other participants can assess the presented outcome and describe:

- *What they did/didn't like?*
- *What they would change/improve?*
- *What impressions the other group's conspiracy theories made?*
- *How they would assess their own work?*

8. We summarize the theoretical basis of disinformation, conspiracy theories, and hoaxes. We can also describe the difference between a conspiracy and a conspiracy theory. This description can be found in the (Un)safe in the net handbook. We explain to the participants that the goal of this activity was not to learn how to invent a conspiracy theory but rather to show how easily and quickly it's possible to generate such news. This is because no facts are needed. At the same time, our aim was to highlight the aspects / components possibly included in conspiracy theories.

Final analysis:

- *How did you feel during the activity?*
- *What were the easiest and the hardest parts for you?*
- *What was the group work like?*
- *What did you realise during the activity?*
- *What components can we identify in conspiracy theories?*
- *What is your take-away from this activity?*

Activity variations:

- We can focus the activity not only on conspiracy theories but also for example on hoaxes, misleading information, *memes*, and the like.

- The topics can be defined in advance for the participants to use (e.g. vaccination, aliens, coronavirus, supernatural animals, canceling final high school testing, etc).

- Augmentation of the activity includes publishing the conspiracy theories. The participants choose the social network to create and share the post (a text post for Facebook, a photo or a story for Instagram, a video for YouTube, and a short video for TikTok). This possibility is suitable for multiphase education. The following session's time can be used to discuss the public's reactions to the posts shared by the participants. We conclude the activity with a request to delete the posts or to add a disclaimer explaining the post was a conspiracy theory created for educational purposes and what the goal of posting it was.

Source: *Déconstruire les théories du complot*. BePax, 2016. Available at: <<http://www.bepax.org/files/files/OUTILS/bepax-deconstruire-les-theories-du-complot-fiches-pedagogiques.pdf>>

WIKIPEDIA. *Conspiracy theory*. [sk.wikipedia.org](https://sk.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kon%C5%A1pira%C4%8Dn%C3%A1_te%C3%B3ria) [online]. [cit. 2020-12-10]. Available at: <https://sk.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kon%C5%A1pira%C4%8Dn%C3%A1_te%C3%B3ria>

VASLIN N., THERER S. *A kol. liaisons – a toolkit for preventing violent extremism through youth information*. ERYICA, 2018. ISBN 978-2-9199519-7-0

ANNEX

(cut)

List of conspiracy theory components:

- Use rhetorical questions,

- Story structure: historical introduction and a piece of shocking information near the conclusion,

- Use stereotypes,

- Use dramatic music, dark colors,

- Use shocking information,

- Use a statement of an anonymous speaker,

- Communicate with aggression and demonstrate a position of authority,

- Use impactful images,

- Use a voice recording and a disturbing tone,

- Use conditionals (e. g. they'd hide it, he would drown).