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How Conspiracies Theories Affects the American People

Time and time again, stories of the past have shaped the way we walk and influenced the way we talk. Regardless of the validity of a story, history has proven that it is impossible to escape the allure of good and intriguing controversial stories that were blatantly untrue, but through word of mouth and mass validation, becomes real. The author of the book *United States of Paranoia*, Jesse Walker has shown that through countless historical events and redundant stories, conspiracy theories have been around since the dawn of the American civilization and have swayed the minds of the people into all sorts of direction, more damaging than it was good for the American society. Consequently, these conspiracies have caused great divide within groups of people, became a fuel to the fire existing between religions, has become a weapon of persuasion to support one’s own agenda, caused violence among those with extreme opposing political views, and ultimately, it has become a contagious paranoia that affects people’s lives.

There is a famous hilarious party game that requires more than ten individual participants (even more to be an effective game) that is called “Message Relay” or “Pass-it-on Charades”. This party game lines up all the participants in one file, facing forward such that each participant would turn around to receive a message once (via body gestures or charade) from the person behind them which will then be passed on as accurately as possible to the person in front of the receiver, and so on until it gets to the last person at the very front. As a spectator of the game, the passing along of the message in the form of charades changes little by little with each message relay. A simple strong foot stomp followed by a motorcycle driving rocking from left to right motion, becomes a synchronized foot stomp motion with a slightly different motorcycle gesture, then becomes a double stomp with added wrist motion but still mimicking a motorcycle ride, then the foot stomp were dropped and the motorcycle gesture became a sort of embarrassing dance step, then suddenly becomes a brief hand gesture simulating a perverted groping hands. Once the message has been relayed to the last person, it was then compared to the first person who received the message in which both the first and last person laugh at each other as they realized how far-fetched the message was when it was first received to when it concluded.

The game shows how one can fall prey to false information that has different variations through exchange of hands. A simple task being interpreted in a different way that blurs the original message drastically is very common among people with different perspectives and beliefs. Conspiracy theories aren’t too far from the party game thereof. As Walker puts it, “Conspiracy tales can change even more dramatically when a story leaks from one social group to another. Different people adopt and adapt these myths for their own needs, keeping the scaffolding of a story line in a place while changing the content.” (Walker, 17). Because of the communication gap, information is very susceptible to change that can cause misunderstanding not only among groups of people, but more so with people with different beliefs. These slight misunderstandings, as history suggests, can potentially snowball into a massive chaos and result into a damaging societal division, each believing they possess the truths.

“Religion, more often than not, always goes into the narratives of conspiracy theories. "With the new wave of worship came a new wave of paranoia." (Walker, 56). *The United States of Paranoia* portrays much about conspiracy theories being the fuel to the fire between different religions. As early as the sixteenth century, religion has been one of the main sources of conspiratorial tales that produces paranoia among its worshipers. American Indians back then were regarded by the Christian Europeans settlers as “the Devil’s pawns” (Walker, 24) due to their obscure “Satanic ceremonies” that conjured up the devil. Accusations such as this prove to be effective against groups of people outside of the accuser’s circle. It is safe to say the motive behind the Europeans’ accusations against the American indians is they want to gain control over them and the fact that they are in an actual war. And that spreading a conspiracy story about their alleged unknown demonic behaviors may gain influence outside of their circle, but obliviously produces unnecessary paranoia against the American Indians that negatively affect their lifestyle and how people view them as a culture.

Paranoia not only comes from certain groups of people, it is also “the fact that you think he’s out there trying to come in.” (Walter, 35). The media is another one that is to blame for the paranoia among people. Because of the newspaper and the unreliable word of mouth, Europeans thought the religious Indian Ghost Dance that they believe to reunite the living with the dead and a prayer for peace and prosperity was a ceremonial dance in preparation for war. Fast forward into today’s society, a lot can be said about fake news seeping through the minds of the public. Perhaps “fake news” is the modern day terminology for conspiracy theories. With today’s lightning fast travel of information that flies in your phones and computers within milliseconds, the margin for errors in the accuracy of information is astronomical. Political demagogues today use the power of the media to spin up stories to gain political advantage as 20% of the time, on average, people are inclined to believe fake news (Katy Steinmetz, Time). Moreover, even celebrities fell victim of these conspiracies. The sudden rise of an artist’s career after being in a rut for a long time must be the works of some spiritual ceremony or selling their souls to the devil right?. Rap artists like Jay-Z and 50 cent were assumed to have become a part of the Illuminati (a secret society founded by Adam Weishaupt that died out long time ago) that was responsible for their sudden massive success in the music industry. “tattoos, hand gestures, and video imagery all became fodder for fans determined to figure out which performers were initiates of the order.” (Walker, 329).

"As is often the case with paranoid perspectives, this connect-the-dots fantasy said more about the tellers' anxieties than it did about any order actually emerging in the world." (Walker, 307). More often than not, people create fantasies and connections out of thin air such as the famous prediction of the 9/11 incident in the twenty dollar bill, that when folded a certain way, would portray the twin tower burning which is strikingly similar to the photographs from the news. Coincidence? For some with a strong superstitious belief, paired with the paranoia around Illuminati and some other religious faith, this may come across as hard evidence or a legitimate spiritual sign from a superior spiritual being of an impending doom. Christians, among other religious groups, are frequent to believe these coincidences as a sign from the Almighty and create such connections as an opportunity to spread their beliefs.

Furthermore, big incidents like the 9/11 always sparks the public’s curiosity and warrants for commensurate reasoning. “Take the JFK assasination… the very idea that a lone gunman could cause such chaos was inherently unsatisfying so people, perhaps understandably, reached for a much bigger answer” (John Oliver). Consequently, conspiracy theories are formulated every single day, with some would strike you as appalling or ridiculous in a sense that it sounds absurd. We humans are great at connecting dots that were not there in the first place, and some of the made up stories are believable. So how are we supposed to tell the truth apart from theories?

# CONCLUSION

Most conspiracy theories under the lenses of science are undeniably questionable. But why do people still become hard believers of unwarranted stories that came out of nowhere? Jesse Walker and his book *The United States of Paranoia* tirelessly tell stories of how impressionable and gullible people can become in opposition of another group. Strong emotions and personal anxieties bridge the connections between their theories and reality. But, in spite of the damage it has done in the past, it made Americans more proactive and vigilant. It also teaches you to be critical and examine every information out there especially from the profiteering media and not take anything at face value. These day and age, it's easy to say that nothing that comes out of the news are hard truths about something but just mere manipulative information that influences our decisions, whether for marketing purposes or for political advantage. We all know someone who uses controversies to their own advantage, but do not personally invest into the topic as much as their ulterior motives. The social media or the World Wide Web today is bombarded with hoaxes and demagogues to the point we cannot even distinguish what is real from the others, as sometimes the more interesting always triumphs as more truthful regardless of its validity. So how can we tell the truth apart from the lies? As Billy Porter once said from the *LastWeekTonight* show, “Ya’ll got brains, use ‘em, use it like it’s the first roll of toilet paper in a brand new pack. Unsparingly and with gusto.” It is impossible to tell every news or story apart from hoaxes, we cannot control what is happening around us and what others might think of something as we all have our own opinions and personal experiences. Hence we should always be critical and ever-curious of what is happening around us and never believe anything without proper validation.

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