


COMMUNICATION AND CRISIS MANAGEMENT

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PART 4: CONSPIRACY THEORIES AND FAKE NEWS



In this lesson, we will analyze, at basic level, the nature of conspiracy theories and fake news. We will try to analyze briefly how they start, how they work and what we can do to reduce their effects.

CONSPIRACY THEORIES

Almost every important topic related to our common, social, political life has one or more conspiracy theories with a large number of supporters.

Events taking place now around the world, promote emotions that push people believe in the existence of conspiracies.

Modern communication technologies also improve the spreading of Conspiracies and people that believe in conspiracies can regroup and keep in touch, which results in an increasing belief due to «**group polarization**» and «**conformistic cascade**»

People who believe in those theories often do that in search of «confirmations» and «simplifications» that gives them a semblance of **control** on their lives.

GROUP POLARIZATION AND CONFORMISTIC CASCADE

- ▶ For «group polarization» we mean a phenomenon that happens (due to a sum of cognitive biases) when a group that share same beliefs keep confronting each other on those beliefs.
- ▶ The result is that **the original beliefs strengthen up**
- ▶ For «conformistic cascade» we mean a phenomenon that happens (due also to a sum of cognitive biases) when a group grows up in number and other people join the same beliefs because «such a large group CAN'T be wrong»
- ▶ The result is that **the original beliefs grows up in number of followers.**
- ▶ **These two phenomenons are strongly related each other and tend to increase in a close circle**



IDENTIKIT OF A CONSPIRACY FANATIC

- ▶ The «most common» conspiracy fanatic usually have 2 or more of the following traits:
 1. **LOW LEVEL OF EDUCATION** – The low ability to analytical thinking lead to an increased probability of joining a conspiracy group
 2. **DESIRE TO FEEL SPECIAL AND UNIQUE** – it satisfies narcissistic needs, feeling superior to the others who «don't know what I know». More, others (inside the group) will have the perception of «someone who knows secret stuffs» giving him/her more consideration and/or attention
 3. **SENSE OF POWERLESSNESS** – The idea of a «superion» entity or a «secret and occult power» that will drive our lives and which is responsible of accidents or whatever is more peferable than something happened by chance, because it gives the false opportunity to «regain control» over it.
 4. **NEED FOR CERTAINTIES** – same as above, the uncertainty of life for many people is simply umbearable. Believing in conspiracy theories provide somehow a sense of understanding part (or all) of «the meaning of life», or however give a sense of «power control» on their lives.



FACTORS THAT AFFECT CONSPIRACY THEORIES BELIEFS

- ▶ **COGNITIVE**
- ▶ **EXISTENTIAL**
- ▶ **SOCIAL**

All these factors are in fact «needs» that almost everyone has to satisfy. The explanation of a fact (cognitive) is a need for knowledge, the sense of control and security is a need for existence and conveying a positive image of ourselves is a social need.

When fighting conspiracy theories we need to consider ALL of these factors.

More, due to conformistic cascade and group polarization, there is a high risk that an evidence **against** a conspiracy will become an evidence that **favor** it.

CONSPIRACIES VS. TRUTH

- ▶ Most conspiracy theories fail at all to satisfy the needs that fed them
- ▶ People who believe to those conspiracies just want to feel «safer» and able to «control» the situation, but it always end making them even more unsafe and uncertain, powerless and disenchanting
- ▶ That will lead to a lesser trust in government/authorities
- ▶ ...and again, on that fertile soil, new conspiracies will arise and grow up

THE MOST EFFECTIVE STRATEGY TO FIGHT CONSPIRACY THEORIES CONSISTS IN HELPING THOSE PEOPLE TO TRAIN ANALYTICAL THINKING SKILLS



MOST COMMON CONSPIRACIES ON COVID19 IN ITALY

- ▶ Here is a list of the most common and widespread conspiracies in Italy, related to the recent COVID19 pandemic. Unluckily, they have a large number of fan.
- 1. VIRUS DO NOT EXIST AT ALL
- 2. ESCAPED BIOWEAPON (this goes often together with 5)
- 3. COVID19 IS DUE TO 5G NETWORK
- 4. BILL GATES' FAULT
- 5. VIRUS ESCAPED FROM CHINESE LAB(s) – (this goes often together with 2)
- 6. VIRUS IS AN ALIEN SIGNAL



FAKE NEWS

- ▶ Fake news, also known as “junk news”, “pseudo-news”, “alternative facts” or “hoax news”, is a form of news consisting of deliberate disinformation or hoaxes spread via traditional news media (print and broadcast) or online social media.
- ▶ The worst of them are those which are built on the base of true information which is subsequently twisted, subverted or misinterpreted
- ▶ Even gossip is considered among fake news
- ▶ The purposes to spread fake news could be many
- ▶ The access to digital information and social media **STRONGLY** increased the spreading of rumors, gossip and fake news.



FAKE NEWS AND WMD

- Weapons of Mass Destruction
OR
- Weapons of Mass Distraction

?

Fake news is written and published usually with the intent to mislead in order to damage an agency, entity, or person, and/or gain financially or politically, often using sensationalist, dishonest, or outright fabricated headlines to increase readership.

Similarly, clickbait stories and headlines earn advertising revenue from this activity



FAKE NEWS AS A WEAPON

- ▶ There are evidences confirmed that US election 2016 between the candidate Clinton, who was in competition vs. the other candidate, Donald Trump, actually President of the USA were somehow «polluted» in the political debate by russian (or ukrainian) hackers by disinformation techniques*
- ▶ According to Oll, it seems that 70 countries use computational propaganda to manipulate public opinion
 - ▶ 48 of them practices a «formally organized» social media manipulation
 - ▶ 26 of them also use it as a tool for information control, suppressing public opinion and freedom of speech/press, discredit opponents

*report Oxford Internet Institute – «Global disinformation Order: 2019 global inventory of Organized Social Media Manipulation»



MASTER CBRNe



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Thanks for your kind
attention