



BELIEVE IT OR NOT?

Conspiracy theories are coming out of the shadows

with a new look and a new purpose. Where's the sweet spot between

healthy scepticism and scared of everything, asks Amy Molloy

In the 12 days before Kate Middleton announced her cancer diagnosis, the internet's conspiracy theorists really showed their colours. After that photoshopped picture was released, social media was divided into people who believed the Princess of Wales had indeed been "experimenting with editing" and the amateur sleuths who thought they knew better.

Over the next week, the hashtag #whereiskate? was reposted and liked millions of times across multiple platforms, along with #katebodydouble – a nod to the theory that a "Kate" seen at a recent event was not the princess. Theories included that the royal couple had split up, she was in rehab, she'd had a facelift, and she was in a coma.

Of course, now we are assured that none of these were correct. In January 2024, Middleton had undergone abdominal surgery, which led to a cancer diagnosis and a course of chemotherapy. Yet, even this announcement was not enough to stop the rumour mill. Kate's video message was AI-generated, according to sceptics; it's all part of a Russian plot to destabilise the British government. Others took a shot at her illness, claiming that if she does have cancer it was caused by her Covid-19 vaccine.

You might assume the gossip was confined to a shady corner of Reddit, but it was not. Millions of people on the world's biggest social-media platforms were trading conspiracy theories as if they were beauty tips.

This was just the latest in a long line of conspiracy theories, covering everything from celebrities and sporting events to global warming: Taylor Swift is involved in a covert plot to influence the American election; climate change is a hoax, as is the coronavirus; a popular shopping site is child-trafficking kids disguised as expensive furniture.

Even your childhood toys aren't safe. According to conspiracy chatter, eating Play-Doh can cure cancer – but Big Pharma doesn't want you to know about it (please don't try this at home, people!).

Even as I write this, I want to add a disclaimer: if you're reading this article in five years' time and all the above have been proven true, I never said they were false. Like you, I don't want to look like a fool – and that's how conspiracy theories get you.

As Tess Wilkinson-Ryan, a professor of law and the author of *Fool Proof*, says, "Our fear of being seen

as a 'sucker' shapes our selves and the social order." In other words, we would rather believe the worst-case scenario than risk being the "idiot" who didn't see it coming.

Of course, conspiracy theories are nothing new. According to research published in the journal *Memory Studies*, there have been two big spikes on record – in 1900 and during the late 1940s. Both have been linked to times of "fast technological progress" and global conflict. Ah, that sounds familiar.

It's less that conspiracy theories are on the rise, and more that they've moved from the fringes into the mainstream. The question is: why are we all so willing to believe we're being lied to?

'SOFT LAUNCHING' CONSPIRACIES

It probably won't surprise you to know that the coronavirus was a popular time for conspiracy theories. A survey by the YouGov-Cambridge Globalism Project found a significant number of people across the world (including Australia) believed in one or more theories about the virus, whether it was to do with its cause, the goal or the cure – but the problem is that it didn't stop there.

For many people, Covid-19 was a gateway to the conspiracy world. There is research to suggest that people who believed in a coronavirus conspiracy theory are more likely to embrace other conspiracy theories in the future.

It helps that conspiracy theories have become more socially acceptable and, dare I say, fashionable. There's even a phrase for it: pastel QAnon. While QAnon is the conspiracy movement that claims a cabal of Satan-worshipping celebrities and billion-

aires run world politics, pastel QAnon describes the soft, pleasing aesthetic used by some influencers to spread conspiracy messages.

But there are also emotional upsides. Believing in conspiracy theories can apparently give people a sense of meaning and direction, especially during a crisis.

In a culture where celebrities can be super-spreaders of conspiracy theories and you can buy an "Australia doesn't exist" T-shirt in 18 different colours, it's easy to get swept up in the conspiracy trend. But of course, there is a very dark downside.

Melbourne psychologist Carly Dober has seen

"OUR FEAR OF BEING SEEN AS A 'SUCKER' SHAPES OURSELVES AND THE SOCIAL ORDER"

– Prof. Tess Wilkinson-Ryan

What Kate did ... After her long absence from the public eye, the decision by the Princess of Wales to doctor this photo threw petrol onto the already-blazing conspiracy inferno.



a “sharp uptick” in female clients who are impacted by conspiracy theories. “Women of all ages and backgrounds,” she says. “Women who I wouldn’t have necessarily thought would have engaged with that kind of content.”

Many of the women who book into her clinic, Enriching Lives Psychology, come to conspiracy theories via the wellness movement. They might begin with a mistrust of Western medicine or chemicals in cosmetics, but a deeper dive into conspiracies can see them rapidly spiral downwards.

“They might have lost partners and friends, their co-workers might have stopped talking to them, their sleep can be affected, and more often than not their internet use and participation in online spaces greatly expands,” says Dober.

One challenge is that conspiracy theories are “self-sealing,” meaning they’re designed to be impossible to argue against. If you don’t believe them, you are part of the problem. If you can’t see it, it’s because the People in Power don’t want you to – yet.

And then there’s the fact that some theories are proven true: Big Tobacco *did* know that cigarettes caused cancer; the US government *did* put poison in alcohol during Prohibition. Oh, and don’t get us started on aliens!

According to Dober, it’s about finding the sweet spot between healthy scepticism and scared-of-everything.

“Conspiracy theories can make you feel very unsafe in the world,” she warns. “When I’m working with clients, I’ll gently ask them how much time they are giving this subject. It can be quite confronting as they realise how many hours in the week they are giving to this theory, and how much it is taking away from other parts of their life.”

DOES THIS FRINGE SUIT ME?

Laura McConnell was raised in a coercive fundamentalist Christian group. An accountant by trade, she also works to support women who are leaving high-control and fringe groups, those whose extreme beliefs place them on the outskirts of society. Lately, she has begun working more with women who have been pulled into conspiracy-theory thinking. And she’s noticed a common pattern.

“It can occur when women are grappling with grief, loss, new parenthood or traumatic experiences,” says McConnell. “They find that their normal network isn’t supportive or they’re seeking reasons why a traumatic thing has occurred. Sometimes these reasons don’t exist and so they fall into conspiracy thinking.”

To make it trickier, it’s not uncommon to be pulled into a conspiracy group without completely believing in it. “Often people don’t believe all the rhetoric inside a group,” says McConnell. “But ultimately, the need to belong and to feel valued is more important than believing 100 per cent of the rhetoric.”

GETTY IMAGES.

Conspiracy theorists often share common traits. When people are anxious, they’re more likely to believe in conspiracies. They’re also more likely to fall into black-and-white thinking – categorising people, things or events as either good or evil.

New Zealand journalist David Farrier, who began exploring conspiracy theories during the pandemic, says the focus on them is not surprising after the past few years. “It’s a way to take control of the narrative,” he says. “If you’re living a life where you’re not particularly happy – where you see that you don’t have a lot of money and that society has given you a bad rap – you want to solve why that is.”

He likens conspiracy theories to an “alternative reality game” where people scroll the internet looking for clues and “aligning them with facts and coming up with theories”.

Which brings us back to #whereiskate?

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THE POWER OF ‘PRE-BUNKING’

One of the reasons conspiracy thinking is so hard to challenge is because you can’t easily fight it with logic. In fact, it’s been shown that counterarguments and fact-checking largely fail to change people’s beliefs once they have decided to believe in a conspiracy.

Instead, prevention seems to be key – warning people about new conspiracy theories before they jump onboard. A new wave of online influencers are using their platforms to “out” conspiracy theories before they go mainstream, “pre-bunking” claims so they don’t need to debunk them later.

American influencer Abbie Richards is a “misinformation researcher” who found a passion for pre-bunking after a talking to a guy on Tinder about conspiracy theories. Later, she created a “conspiracy chart”, rating theories from “grounded” to “detached from reality” – and it went viral.

Today, she uses social media to highlight emerging trends in misinformation, such as weather-manipulation conspiracies (expect to see TikTokers holding lighters under snowballs in an attempt to prove snow is fake). Other worrying trends, according to Richards, include “deepfake doctors selling sketchy health products via the TikTok shop”.

In an Instagram video, Richards points out that many AI videos are more than 60 seconds long, making them eligible to generate money through TikTok’s Creativity Program. “These aren’t deepfakes trying to convince you something is real, they’re deepfakes designed to tell stories that go as viral as possible – probably for profit.”

Which leads us to the moral of the story: follow the money. This is the advice of psychologist Carly Dober and what she suggests to clients. “I encourage people to follow the money when following a conspiracy theory or conspiracy influencers,” she says. “Watch what they say, and then watch what they sell. In my experience, people are mostly receptive to seeing the ways they’ve been manipulated – and this can be a relatively short chapter in your life.”