

Nadia Brashier

Title: “Do Conspiracy Theorists Think Too Much or Too Little?”

Abstract: Conspiracy theories attribute important events to sinister, powerful organizations. Why do people believe that the Earth is flat or that NASA faked moon landings? On the one hand, conspiracy theorists appear to be “lazy thinkers” – they exhibit lower cognitive ability, intuitive thinking, and proneness to cognitive biases. But at least initially, these individuals do consider accuracy – they reject the mainstream explanation for an event, often in favor of a more complex account. The claim that the British government murdered Princess Diana, for example, is more complicated than the mundane reality that her driver was drunk. Conspiracy theorists also display extreme skepticism and actively seek out “evidence” for secret plots; this effortful processing can ironically reinforce conspiracy beliefs. I argue that cognitive effort fluctuates as people progress down rabbit holes and become entrenched believers. Understanding when elaboration backfires is crucial, as conspiracy beliefs are associated with political disengagement, environmental inaction, prejudice, and support for violence.

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