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## **CONSPIRACY THEORIES, FAKE NEWS, AND MISINFORMATION**

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It is interesting to witness how, over the last 20 years or so, conspiracy theories, fake news and misinformation generally have risen to the top of the skeptic agenda. These are not new phenomena, but their escalation has no doubt been fuelled by the growth of the internet, in particular social media, digital technology that has hugely facilitated important areas of activity of everyday life, both desirable and undesirable. Political leaders, notably the current US President, have also played an active role; the Covid-19 pandemic and, in the UK, the Brexit referendum and its repercussions have also had their catalytic effects. To compound this unhappy state of affairs, we may throw onto the heap the growing realisation that too much research reported in our academic journals is unreliable to the point of being useless or worse, as well as ‘the replication crisis’, the failure to reproduce existing research findings—some influential, others of little consequence.

But do not despair! The fightback has been gathering momentum for some time and maybe 2021 will be the year the tide really started to turn; the departure, willing or assisted, of Mr Trump from the White House in January will be more than symbolic in this respect (*note 1*). The social media corporations have accepted some responsibility for content. Also, there is much on the internet about the growing dangers of misinformation and an abundance of fact-checking websites have been established in countries across the world (*notes 2 & 3*).

The need is to ensure that the public in general are mindful that there is a lot of blatantly false and ultimately quite dangerous information ‘out there’, much of it only serving the interests and perverted needs and prejudices of those promulgating this nonsense. People also need to be able to distinguish the dubious from the genuine.

It is gratifying that television and the national press (which in the past, and even now, has not covered itself in glory when it comes to disseminating ‘the truth’) are now much more cognisant of these issues. I restrict my reading of the national press to the *Times* and, on Sunday, the *Sunday Times* and the *Observer* so I can only really speak for these ‘posh’ newspapers, but of all the newspapers I know of, in my opinion the first two of these make the best reading for skeptics. I would especially commend Matthew Syed of the *Sunday Times* who this year began writing a regular column for that newspaper. He is definitely ‘one of us’ and extremely well-informed. You can find his column online (*note 4*) but to read it in full you have to subscribe (you can have a free trial first). David Aaronovitch, who, amongst other topics, writes on conspiracy theories (*note 5*) and has spoken at several Skeptics in the Pub venues, is a frequent contributor, as is Max Hastings who is extremely knowledgeable on military and political history, and well-balanced. Likewise, the business and economic correspondents, notably David Smith (*notes 6 & 7*), who writes from an evidence-based perspective. (*Can I have my cheque now Mr Murdoch?*)

On 28.11.20, the *Times* colour magazine included an article on Lyric Jain, ‘the 25-year-old from Staffordshire taking on the world of fake news and conspiracy theories’. Three years ago, Mr Jain set up a fact-checking company called Logically (*note 8*):

*It is a for-profit social enterprise with around 30 investigators and fact checkers working in its office in Brighouse, West Yorkshire, and 40 in India. As well as the scrutiny it undertakes for governments and companies, it runs a website and offers a browser extension that rates other sites’ credibility. It also has an app, which presents fact-checked news stories and flags up others “FALSE”.*

The following day, the *Observer* ran a feature in the ‘Science Tech’ section of their ‘New Review’ entitled ‘How to deal with a conspiracy theorist’ which is accessible online (*note 9*). It is written by David Robson, who has just had a book published on the subject (*note 10*). The author of the article lists ‘five ways to spot the holes in the logic’. Definitely worth reading.

Also, have a listen to the Full Fact Podcast of 19.10.20 entitled ‘The History of Misinformation’ (*note 11*):  
*We often think of misinformation as a modern problem. But its roots go back thousands of years. In this episode we explore the history of false information and track how it has developed into the ‘fake news’ climate we see today.*

Finally, if you like games have a look at Go Viral! (*note 12*) This is an online game developed by Dr Sander van der Linden and colleagues at the University of Cambridge aimed at ‘vaccinating’ people against fake news and conspiracy theories about Covid-19. The game puts the player in the shoes of someone spreading misinformation online and illustrates some of the common ploys. Dr van der Linden is quoted in the December 2020 issue of the *Psychologist* (the monthly periodical of the British Psychological Society) saying:

*The WHO has included the game in its mailing list and on their website and we recorded a video with the United Nations which they posted on their feed as well. At the end of the day, we are trying to help governments and international institutions combat fake news more effectively so it's been great to see a real appetite for more evidence-based communications.*

I gave it a try but found I am not nerdy enough to fully understand what is going on. Maybe younger or more tech-savvy players will be better placed to get more out of it.

The game was discussed on BBC Radio’s ‘Digital Planet’ on 20.10.20 (*note 13*). Incidentally, their broadcast on 3.11.11 is entitled ‘Who is most susceptible to fake news?’ (*note 14*).

#### Notes

1. Also, a good uptake of the Covid-19 vaccination should take the wind out of the sails of anti-vaccination campaigners.
2. <https://guides.lib.berkeley.edu/fake-news>
3. <https://tinyurl.com/qn3fxxr>
4. <https://tinyurl.com/ybrvtey7>
5. *Voodoo Histories: How Conspiracy Theory has Shaped Modern History* by David Aaronovitch, Penguin, 2010.
6. <https://tinyurl.com/yb8ep45l>
7. I recommend as an introduction to economics, his book *Free Lunch: Easily Digestible Economics* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition) Profile Books, 2012.
8. <https://www.logically.ai/>
9. <https://tinyurl.com/y32fnovm>
- 10 *The Intelligence Trap: How to Revolutionise your Thinking and Make Wiser Decisions*, Hodder & Stoughton.
11. <https://tinyurl.com/yx9xaddr>
12. <https://www.goviralgame.com/en/play>
13. <https://tinyurl.com/y8fs2j3d>
14. <https://tinyurl.com/yym78hje>