

Justyna LIPIŃSKA<sup>1</sup>

## CONSPIRACY THEORIES AS AN EXAMPLE OF DISINFORMATION IN THE NETWORK

Conspiracy theories have been with people since their inception. The tendency to conspiracy thinking is related to many human cognitive mechanisms that greatly affect our perception of reality. Drastic and sudden events, especially those taking place on the international arena, are an impulse to plot intrigues in order to explain them and understand their causes. Anxiety and fear caused by uncertainty and a low level of trust, both in politicians and experts, are responsible for attempts to question the socio-political order and generally accepted explanations. The aim of the article was to present the phenomenon of spreading disinformation in the form of conspiracy theories on the Internet. The research problem was the question of which societies believe the most in the truth of selected conspiracy theories. The research methods used were: literature analysis. Diagnostic survey, the techniques were: text analysis and a survey with a questionnaire.

**Keywords:** disinformation, fake news, conspiracy theories.

### 1. THE MECHANISM OF THE FORMATION OF CONSPIRACY THEORIES

Researchers have found that some cognitive (epistemic) beliefs can explain belief in conspiracy narratives. Cognitive beliefs are a person's individual ideas about knowledge and its acquisition. For example, some people rely primarily on their intuition (which may not be a problem at first), but are not very interested in backing up their hunches with solid evidence. According to Jan Philipp Rudloff, assistant professor at the Department of Psychology of Communication and New Media at the University of Wuerzburg, who conducted the research in 2022. He and his colleagues wanted to find out what cognitive beliefs people believed in conspiracy theories about the coronavirus pandemic had. For this reason, they surveyed over 2,000 people, people from Germany and the USA. They noted that opinions have essentially the same value, regardless of the scientific evidence, which may support one thesis much more strongly than the other. In the study we can read

Those who place a high value on their intuition and little on solid evidence, and who believe that what counts as truth is predetermined by those in power, are especially susceptible to fake news and conspiracy theories (*Dlaczego wierzymy w teorie spiskowe?*, <https://thefad.pl/aktualnosci/teorie-spiskowe-2/>).

The study also answered the question: do people with pronounced “dark personality traits” have a greater tendency to the cognitive beliefs described by Philipp Rudloff, and

---

<sup>1</sup> Justyna Lipińska, DSc, PhD, Associate Prof., The Faculty of Management and Command, The War Studies University, I. gen. A. Chruściela „Montera” 103, 00-910 Warszawa-Rembertów; e-mail: j.lipinska@akademia.mil.pl. ORCID: 0000-0001-8233-6971.

therefore to believe in conspiracy theories and fake news? Thus, our tendencies and susceptibility to believe in theories conspiracy is influenced by our personality and knowledge.

People with strong narcissistic features like to be in the center of attention, people with a clearly outlined Machiavellianism attach particular importance to status and power. Psychopathy, on the other hand, is characterized by risk-taking and excessive impulsiveness. The more important the dark personality factor is, the more likely someone is to believe conspiracy narratives, explains the study. The scientist was not surprised by this discovery, because it was rather predictable. These types of people have a greater aversion to pro-social behavior, which is not primarily about their own benefit and gaining an advantage. Keeping a distance, wearing a mask or staying at home does not seem to be necessary with the appropriate cognitive beliefs.

The importance of appropriate cognitive beliefs may explain why the very content of conspiracy theories is so easily replaceable. The pandemic, the war in Ukraine, and the climate crisis can serve as their basis. Cognitive beliefs develop in childhood. In this way, the difference between opinion and fact could be explained in school lessons using accessible language. The lack of knowledge in some people makes them unwilling to accept it. For them, every opinion is worth the same. Research, however, shows that this problem affects a minority. Most people care about evidence and understand the difference between opinions and facts (*Dlaczego wierzymy w teorie spiskowe?*, <https://thefad.pl/aktualnosci/teorie-spiskowe-2/>). Conspiracy theories and fake news accompany big, new, often shocking events that act as a trigger for us. In this case, it is a pandemic, previously it was, for example, the death of Princess Diana.

When abstract news reaches us, some begin to wonder if it is not the so-called. conspiracy of the mighty of this world. The problem is the so-called information bubbles we live in. Algorithms give us the information that interests us most. Those who believe in conspiracy theories will be suggested just such content (*Dlaczego wierzymy w teorie spiskowe?*, <https://www.polskieradio.pl/10/5367/Artykul/2501465,Dlaczego-wierzymy-w-teorie-spiskowe>).

## 2. BADANIA YOUNG-CAMBRIDGE GLOBALISM PROJECT

Research conducted by the YouGov-Cambridge Globalism Project, involving more than 25,000 people in 24 countries, looked at different attitudes towards conspiracy theories in different parts of the world. The total sample size was: France=1085; Germany = 1009; Sweden = 1038; Denmark = 1170; Spain = 1035; Italy = 1023; Greece = 1045; Hungary=1012; Poland = 1035; UK = 1062; Australia = 1076; US = 1004; Canada = 1127; Brazil = 1117; Mexico = 1092; Turkey = 1041; Egypt\* = 1009; Saudi Arabia = 1005; Russia = 1228; India = 1212; China = 1026; Japan = 1155; Indonesia = 1473; Thailand = 1004; Kenya = 1017; Nigeria = 1057; South Africa = 1159. Field work was undertaken from August 4 – September 21, 2021. Surveys were conducted online. For markets marked with \*, figures have been weighted and are representative of the 18+ online adult population. For other markets, figures have been weighted and are representative of the 18+ adult population. There is a margin of error due to different sample sizes and different response distributions. For a sample of 1000 it is +/- 3% with a confidence level of 95%. When reporting results for subgroups, the margin of error will be higher than for the entire sample,

for example up to +/- 6% for 300 subgroups. The study asked questions about the authenticity of the events depicted.

Here is a list of questions and answers that outlines the most and least credible conspiracy theories, and lists the countries most and least likely to believe in them.

**2.1. A single group of people who secretly control events and rule the world together, outside of official rule.**

The theory that a single group of people who secretly control events and rule the world together, outside of official governments, had the highest average level of belief in all 24 countries out of a list of 12 popular conspiracy theories. The greatest support for this theory was particularly widespread in Kenya, Nigeria and South Africa, with 72%, 69% and 61% respectively. Another 17% of Kenyans, 22% of Nigerians and 27% of South Africans said they did not know about it: it could be true or it could be false (Figure 1) (<https://yougov.co.uk/topics/international/articles-reports/2022/02/08/what-conspiracy-theories-did-people-around-world-b>).

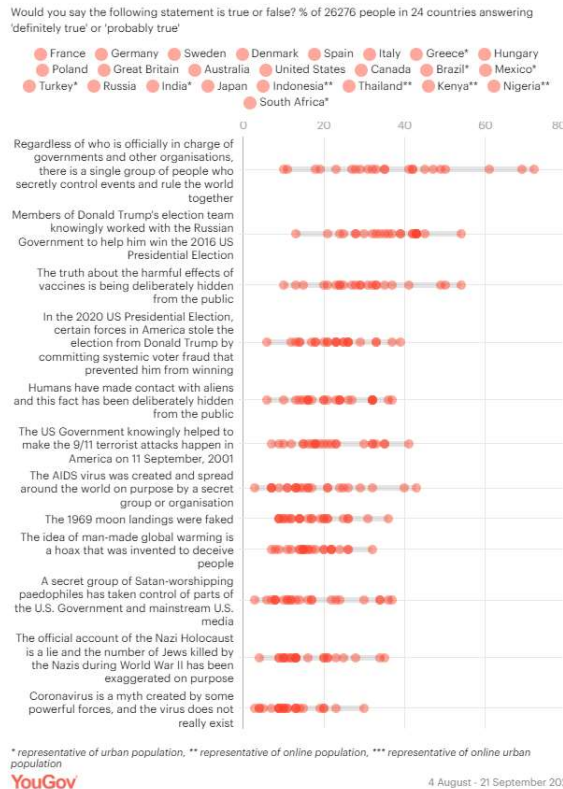


Figure 1. Which conspiracies do people around the world believe in?

Source: <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/international/articles-reports/2022/02/08/what-conspiracy-theories-did-people-around-world-b> za <https://docs.cdn.yougov.com/5pth7rkugw/YouGov%20Cambridge%20-%20Globalism%202021%20-%20MGLOB131%20CONSPIRACY%20THEORIES.pdf>

## 2.2. Donald Trump conspired with the Russian government in 2016

The theory that members of former US President Donald Trump's campaign team knowingly collaborated with the Russian government to help him win the 2016 US election came second on the list. The highest support for this theory was in Kenya. In countries that are generally more skeptical of other conspiracy theories, such as the UK, Sweden, Germany and France, and Denmark, people are less likely to believe that President Joe Biden stole the 2020 Donald Trump election by committing a systemic electoral fraud. This belief is highest in India, where 39% of the population say it is definitely or probably true, in Russia (37%), South Africa (33%) and America (33%) (Figure 2) (<https://yougov.co.uk/topics/international/articles-reports/2022/02/08/what-conspiracy-theories-did-people-around-world-b>).

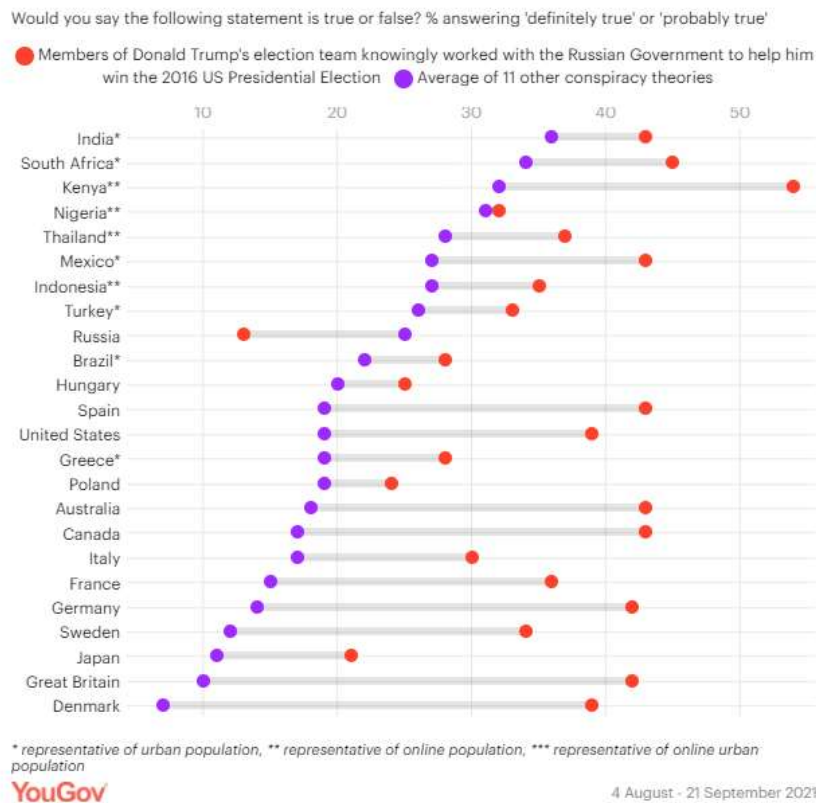


Figure 2. Countries that have lower average levels of belief in other conspiracy theories are more likely to believe that Donald Trump colluded with the Russian government to win the 2016 US presidential election

Source: <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/international/articles-reports/2022/02/08/what-conspiracy-theories-did-people-around-world-b> za <https://docs.cdn.yougov.com/5pth7rkugw/YouGov%20Cambridge%20-%20Globalism%202021%20-%20OMGLOB131%20CONSPIRACY%20THEORIES.pdf>

### 2.3. The Vaccine Myth

The vaccine myth has a high average support compared to other conspiracy theories. When it comes to the average level of belief in the 24 countries surveyed, the myth that the truth about the harmful effects of vaccines is deliberately hidden from the public ranks third on the list. Belief in this theory is highest in Kenya, Nigeria and South Africa (54%, 50% and 59% respectively say it is definitely or probably true) and lowest in Sweden, UK and Denmark (15% respectively, 13% and 10%).

In turn, the myth that the coronavirus is created by powerful people and that the virus does not really exist is the least credible message. Belief in this theory was highest in India, where 30% of Indians said they believed it definitely or probably true, and lowest in Japan (4%), Denmark (4%) and the UK (3%) (Figure 3) (<https://yougov.co.uk/topics/international/articles-reports/2022/02/08/what-conspiracy-theories-did-people-around-world-b>).

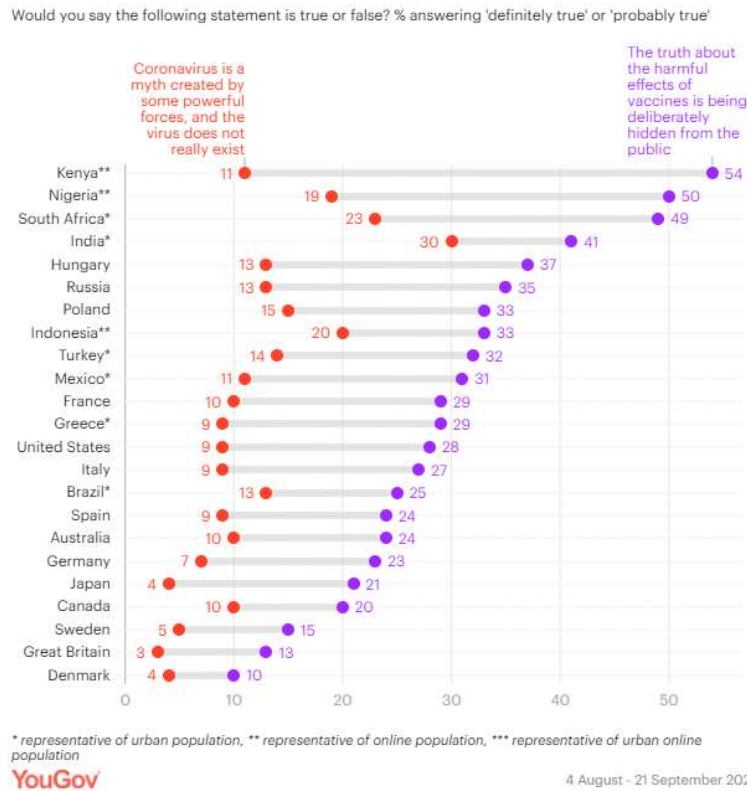


Figure. 3. In all countries, vaccine scepticism does not go hand-in-hand with believing the coronavirus is not real

Source: <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/international/articles-reports/2022/02/08/what-conspiracy-theories-did-people-around-world-b> za <https://docs.cdn.yougov.com/5pth7rkugw/YouGov%20Cambridge%20-%20Globalism%202021%20-%20OMGLOB131%20CONSPIRACY%20THEORIES.pdf>

**2.4. Opinion on countries with the highest and lowest levels of belief in conspiracy theories**

Of all the 24 countries surveyed, India had the highest average percentage of people responding “definitely or probably true” to the 12 conspiracy theories surveyed. The level of support for each individual theory ranged from a quarter (26%) who believe the 1969 moon landings were faked to a half (50%) who believe one group of people secretly rules the world together. South Africa, Kenya and Nigeria had high average support for conspiracy theories, but this is largely due to the high level of belief in the group of people who secretly collectively rule the world, mentioned above. The Danes had the lowest

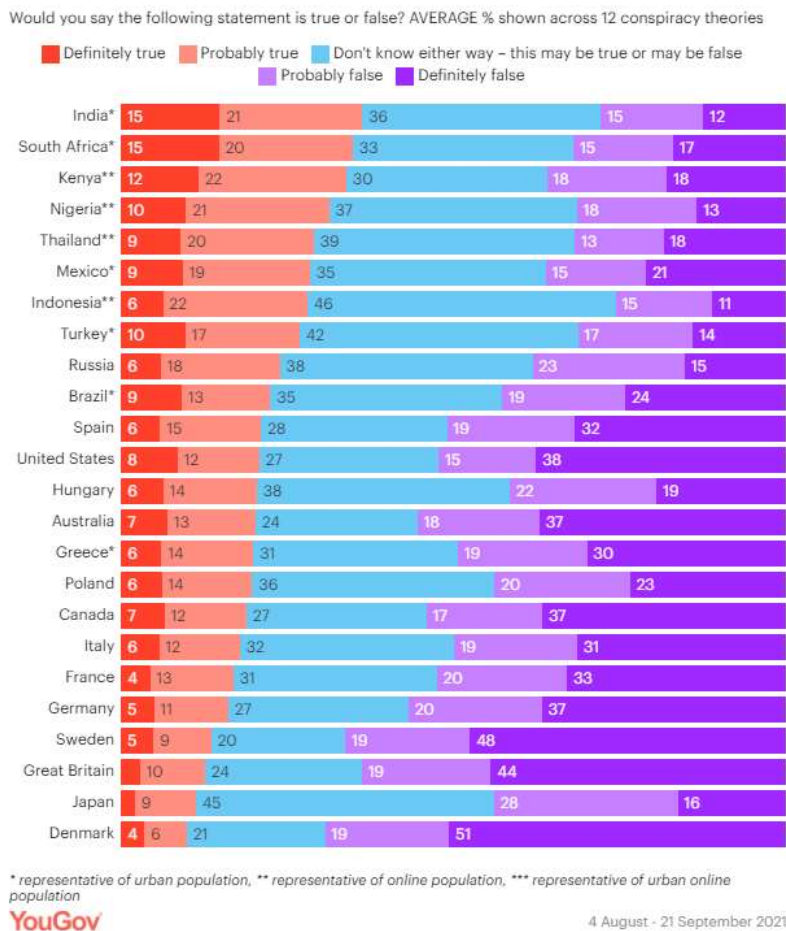


Figure 4. Out of 24 countries across the world, India has the highest average belief in 12 popular conspiracy theories - followed closely by South Africa and Kenya

Source: <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/international/articles-reports/2022/02/08/what-conspiracy-theories-did-people-around-world-b> za <https://docs.cdn.yougov.com/5pth7rkugw/YouGov%20Cambridge%20-%20Globalism%202021%20-%20OMGLOB131%20CONSPIRACY%20THEORIES.pdf>

percentage of people answering “definitely or probably true”. Japan also had a very low average level of support for conspiracy theories, although this did not translate to more Japanese people claiming that conspiracy theories are definitely or probably false. In fact, Japan ranked second behind Indonesia in countries where a high average percentage of people responded “I don't know any way – it could be true or it could be false” to conspiracy theories (Figure 4) (<https://yougov.co.uk/topics/international/articles-reports/2022/02/08/what-conspiracy-theories-did-people-around-world-b>).

### 3. CONCLUSIONS

The multitude of conspiracy theories functioning around the world can amaze. They appear with every significant event, such as a high-profile assassination attempt, a catastrophe, or the death of a famous person. Stories of secret societies and global conspiracies ignite the imagination of millions of people. Along with those quite probable, there are also completely absurd ones.

They have been functioning for years, but never before has their dissemination been as easy as now. This is closely related to the universality of access to information, i.e. mainly to the creation of the Internet. Now everyone can become a blogger, influencer or publicist, and thanks to their reach on Instagram, Facebook, You Tube or Twitter, they can reach an unlimited number of people.

Some conspiracy theories arise spontaneously as an attempt to regain control over the surrounding world. They make us feel powerless. It is easier to create your own truth than to move in a chaotic, amorphous space, being what truth is. Then you have complete control, you can't make a mistake, you can't be right. There is no need to analyze other points of view, motivation, because there are none. Unfortunately, some of this will sound like a conspiracy theory, it is itself a form of conspiracy. When people are fighting with each other, society is polarized because someone has cleverly set several groups against each other, they are easier to control because they are unable to unite.

### REFERENCES

- Dlaczego wierzymy w teorie spiskowe?* [Access: 15.11.2022]. Access on the internet: <https://thefad.pl/aktualnosci/teorie-spiskowe-2/>
- Dlaczego wierzymy w teorie spiskowe?* Access on the internet: <https://www.polskieradio.pl/10/5367/Artykul/2501465,Dlaczego-wierzymy-w-teorie-spiskowe>
- [https://demagog.org.pl/analizy\\_i\\_raporty/sposob-na-teorie-spiskowa-co-prowadzi-do-myslenia-konspiracyjnego](https://demagog.org.pl/analizy_i_raporty/sposob-na-teorie-spiskowa-co-prowadzi-do-myslenia-konspiracyjnego)
- <https://docs.cdn.yougov.com/5pth7rkugw/YouGov%20Cambridge%20-%20Globalism%202021%20-%20OMGLOB131%20CONSPIRACY%20THEORIES.pdf>
- <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/international/articles-reports/2022/02/08/what-conspiracy-theories-did-people-around-world-b>

DOI: 10.7862/rz.2022.mmr.19

*The text was submitted to the editorial office: December 2022.*

*The text was accepted for publication: December 2022.*

