

REALITY CHECK

Conspiracies: When are they likely true—or false?

Michel J. Gagné | November 2023



Introduction

Humans love to hear stories about secret plots and cover-ups. They intrigue us, shock us, confirm our deepest fears and beliefs, nourish our sense of moral outrage, give us antagonists to blame, and inspire us to “speak truth to power.” They are also quite frequently false, even when they claim to be based on proven facts. Consider the following examples:

- Medieval Jewish communities in Europe and Britain abducted Christian children to consume them in a bloody mock ritual of the Christian Eucharist.
- A Victoria, BC woman named Michelle Smith (aka: Michelle Proby) recovered repressed childhood memories of having been abducted, enslaved, and ritually abused during the 1950s by a global Satanic pedophile cult that forced her to perform cannibalism.
- The Avro F-105 Arrow, a state of the art cold-war interceptor that could fly at Mach 2, was fraudulently destroyed, along with its blueprints, to keep the Canadian Armed Forces subservient to the American military industrial complex.
- In the 1990s and early 2000s, a “detax” movement swept parts of Western Canada and Ontario with seminars telling Canadians that federal income tax was illegal, and that judges and politicians were conspiring against the “actual” constitution and also the 800-year-old Magna Carta in collecting federal income tax.
- President Franklin Delano Roosevelt had advance knowledge of the 1941 Pearl Harbor attack but let over 2,000 American servicemen die needlessly to draw the United States into the Second World War.

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- US President John F. Kennedy was murdered by a team of assassins commissioned, coordinated, and protected by the CIA, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the leaders of organized crime, the Secret Service, Texas oil men, President Johnson, the Warren Commission, and many others.
- The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, were an “inside job” planned by neo-conservatives inside the Bush White House to justify a pre-planned invasion of the oil-rich Middle East.
- For almost a century, NASA, the US Air Force, and their counterparts in other countries have been covering up known proof of extraterrestrial visitors and their alien technology.
- Real estate tycoon Donald J. Trump, after being blackmailed for sexual escapades performed in Moscow, conspired with the Kremlin to sabotage Hillary Clinton’s 2016 presidential election bid.
- The 2020 American presidential election was stolen by Democrats using systematic election fraud and rigged voting machines.
- Romana Didulo, the legitimate extraterrestrial “Queen of Canada,” urges her followers to stop paying taxes and utility bills, invest in her created “loyalty money,” adopt the principles of the QAnon movement, and perform acts of vigilantism (including citizens’ arrests and executions) against police officers, government officials, vaccine providers, and other “traitors” to her sovereign citizens’ movement.
- An international ring of pedophiles composed of Satanists, leading Democrats, Hollywood actors, and other influential liberals kidnapped thousands of unidentified children for the purpose of extracting adrenochrome from their brains.

These and many other conspiracy theories continue to be accepted as true by misinformed believers. They receive major attention in the news media, in social networks like YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram, and in documentaries, movies, and novels (which often suggest they are “based on a true story”). Though the emergence of electronic media has made it easier and faster for conspiracy theories to be shared widely, stories about deceptions and cover-ups are probably as old as humanity itself. Fortunately, there now exists a wide and well-researched body of research and investigation that debunks all of the above claims in detail (and countless others like them that emerge every year). But few people have the time, will, or energy to conduct a thorough and careful examination of any of these subjects, including the countervailing research. Also, few of us have the appropriate training and emotional self-discipline to avoid being misled by alluring conspiracy claims that we feel must be true.

We cannot deny that a wealth of evidence exists proving that actual conspiracies do take place frequently, from tax-evasion schemes to the Watergate Scandal to assassinations and coup d'états sponsored by numerous intelligence agencies (CIA, FSB/KGB, Mossad, VAJA, ISI, MI-6, DGSE). Indeed, some conspiracies are just part of the way humans try to cut corners to gain an advantage over their rivals (e.g., industrial espionage), and some are even done with good intentions (e.g., governments spying on others for national security purposes).

So how can we know if a conspiracy claim is likely to be true? When should we view such claims cautiously? And when should we discard such claims altogether?

1. What is a conspiracy?

A conspiracy is a secret arrangement between two or more people with the intention of manipulating or taking advantage of others. It comes from the Latin *conspirare*, which literally means “to breathe together.” The term can technically apply to any type of secret pact (e.g., planning a surprise party) though it generally refers to a nefarious or illegal plot to hide or distort information, gain or maintain power under false pretenses, or circumvent legal, financial, or political rules for personal gain. Because conspiracies are secretive by nature, they are more often presumed than confirmed.

And because conspiracies are, by definition, secretive, they can be hard for casual observers to detect. Investigative journalists and law enforcement officials often stumble across conspiracies while investigating suspicious activities without knowing that the plot existed, or its full extent. For example, decades of sexual abuses that had been covered up by Catholic clergy in Boston were exposed in 2002 by *Boston Globe* reporters. Similarly, the Fundamentalist Latter Day Saints cult leader, Warren Jeffs, secretly orchestrated and took part in the sexual abuse of dozens of minors, something that was only discovered after a 2008 hoax phone call triggered a police raid of the group's YFZ Ranch in Eldorado, Texas.

2. What is a conspiracy theory?

To say that a conspiracy theory is “a theory about a conspiracy” is not very useful. Some conspiracy claims are more compelling than others, yet even conspiracy claims that are widely accepted by the public, such as that President Kennedy's assassin, Lee Harvey Oswald, had been recruited by the CIA, often turn out to be false.¹ Other, more implausible theories—such as that the CIA conducted illegal mind-control experiments on unwitting Americans, including its own personnel—sometimes end up being true.²

One of the first academics to discuss conspiracy theories as a concept was the Austrian philosopher Karl Popper. Conspiracy believers, he argued, assume that everything that happens is guided by a hidden hand. Their world is a “conspiracy theory of society”,

a deterministic philosophy of history that leaves no room to chance. This simplistic ideology serves as a template for aggressive political doctrines that mix fear, resentment, and utopianism to justify radical political change without the consent of the governed. It fuels political extremists and revolutionaries willing to use violence—usually fascists and Marxists—who hold that history operates as a series of predictable stages that can be hastened or extended by the will of the powerful or of the mobilized masses.³

According to British philosopher Quassim Cassam, conspiracy theories in their most popular forms are essentially a type of political propaganda that carelessly (if not malevolently) combine facts, unsubstantiated rumours, and discredited nonsense to stir up people’s moral outrage against a reviled person, group, or institution.⁴ Unlike the work of responsible historians, scientists, and forensic investigators whose employers generally demand a high level of evidence-based reasoning, the conspiracy theories that are promoted by online communities, sensationalist media, protest movements, and often by elected officials, are most often “implausible by design” due to the intellectual vices that give them shape: extreme cynicism, gullibility, intellectual laziness, malevolence, and self-interest, among others.⁵

3. Parsing actual, likely conspiracies from the unlikely and fantastical “conspiracies”

Conspiracies do exist. The Watergate break-in was a proven plot orchestrated by President Nixon’s closest aides. So were numerous CIA and KGB/FSB-sponsored political assassinations during the Cold War (and after), the Enron corporation’s attempts to defraud its employees, shareholders, and the state of California, and, more recently, the Volkswagen corporation’s secret manipulation of carbon emissions technology to circumvent environmental regulations.⁶ However, more popular conspiracy claims like the ones listed above (the Pearl Harbor attack, the JFK assassination, the 9/11 attacks, UFO cover-ups, and various “blood libel” mass murders), were not real conspiracies—or at least not the conspiracies offered up by conspiracists.⁷

The question then is how to analyze conspiracy claims, to determine the difference between actual or likely conspiracies and those that are unlikely and fantastical.

Cassam makes a distinction between “theories involving a conspiracy” that are presented by responsible and properly-trained investigators, and “Conspiracy Theories” (with a capital C and a capital T) that rise out of rumour mills, echo chambers, or communities of ideologically driven amateur sleuths who engage in freestyle speculation but lack either a cohesive analytical framework, or experience in empirical research, or both. Responsible investigators formulate a conspiracy claim *after* they have exhausted other available explanations, while the untrained speculators *begin* their research with the assumption that reality is not as it seems and that an invisible hand is guiding events to a nefarious end (what philosophers call the “furtive fallacy”).⁸

An example of the former includes the 1975 US Senate’s Church Committee, chaired by Idaho Senator Frank Church, that exposed several illegal activities perpetrated by US intelligence agencies, including illegal surveillance, harassment of political dissidents, and mind control and assassination plots (i.e., on Castro, not Kennedy).

A clear example of the latter is the website *8chan* that served as an anonymous message board for QAnon followers to harvest and analyze cryptic secret messages left there by a supposed Trump supporter working in the “Deep State.”

Given that conspiracy theories come in all shapes and flavors and evolve constantly, assessing the veracity of each theory by the accuracy of their claims can be an onerous if not impossible task. Another way to assess the validity of a conspiracy claim is to consider whether or not the theory contains misleading logic. If the logical structure of the argument is deceptive, manipulative, or self-contradicting, then it matters little whether the information it contains is accurate; the very fact that it is misleading renders it unreliable and self-defeating. Here are some useful critical reasoning tools:

a) Watch out for fallacious logic

A fallacy is a statement or set of statements that contains misleading logic. It deceives the audience into accepting an argument that is logically inconsistent. Fallacies generally do this by manipulating people’s fears, desires, beliefs, or moral convictions (e.g., “If you care about your children, you should be concerned about Satanist pedophiles”); they distract the audience with alleged proofs that are irrelevant (e.g., “Isn’t it suspicious that munitions makers made billions of dollars from the Vietnam War?”); or they manipulate language by misusing terms, making simplistic and vague overgeneralizations, or changing definitions in mid-argument. (e.g., “Newspaper X intentionally reports ‘fake news.’”)

The following fallacies appear frequently in conspiracy theories:

- **CIRCULAR REASONING** (or “begging the question”): Beginning with a foregone conclusion (e.g., “9/11 was an inside job”) and then cherry-picking evidence that only fits that conclusion.

How to spot an unlikely conspiracy: Quassim Cassam’s Implausibility Factors

Cassam offers five criteria for separating plausible theories from implausible ones, based on the type of reasoning and evidence their authors use. The more of these criteria that apply to a given theory, the less likely it is to be true. False and misleading conspiracy theories tend to be:

- 1) **SPECULATIVE**, relying on conjecture and introspection to connect the dots between events and the people they hold responsible.
- 2) **CONTRARIAN** for their own sake, offering an alternative counter-narrative to challenge the “official” version of events. Rather than seek the simplest explanation, their goal is to bring down the reigning consensus.
- 3) **ESOTERIC**, resorting to imaginative, exotic, and far-fetched scenarios involving foreknowledge, advanced secret technology, hypercompetent foes, thought control, massive evidence-tampering operations, and fanciful tools of mass deception.
- 4) **AMATEURISH**, most often produced by persons with no recognized expertise in the domain of their research. They therefore contain many errors, oversights, and hasty generalizations that real experts would be quick to recognize.
- 5) **PREMODERN** in the sense that they are deterministic and hyperrational, failing to recognize the role of human free will, random chance, and accidents in the chaotic flow of history, and to instead blame powerful and invisible enemies.⁹

- **GUILT BY ASSOCIATION:** Ascribing blame to a person or group because they have some tenuous “connection” to a suspicious person or group. (e.g., “Lee Harvey Oswald’s uncle worked as a bookmaker for a mafia-connected businessman; the mafia therefore used Lee Oswald to kill President Kennedy.”)
- **FALSE DILEMMA:** To offer a forced choice between a limited set of options when other possibilities exist. (e.g., “The U.S. Air Force did not recover a weather balloon from Roswell in 1947, therefore it must have recovered an extra-terrestrial spaceship.”)
- **STRAW MAN:** Presenting an overly simplistic, weak, or distorted form of an opponent’s argument to make them look silly, (e.g., “The Warren Commission claimed that a single ‘magic bullet’ zigzagged and stopped in mid-air to cause President Kennedy’s neck injury and all of the injuries sustained by Governor Connally”). To present a convincing case, one must choose the strongest argument from the opposing side and try to disprove it, not simply attack a cheap substitute.
- **FURTIVE FALLACY:** the assumption that all events are guided by a hidden and malicious power. (“If the Democrats had not rigged the 2020 election, Donald Trump would have won.”)

b) Beware of anecdotal evidence

Conspiracy theorists often rely on their own emotions, intuitions, personal experiences, or those of others as proof for their beliefs. They also frequently cite second- and third-hand stories passed down by alleged witnesses who saw or heard something suspicious but whose experience is not corroborated. Anecdotal evidence is often a story or casual observation that cannot be verified and/or is based on too small a sample to be generalized¹⁰ (e.g., “The fact that no one in my family got sick proves that Covid-19 is not dangerous”; “Q believes that the Deep State rigged the 2020 election”; “Bystanders X and Y thought they heard gunshots coming from the grassy knoll.” Anecdotal evidence may not be false, and it may be a catalyst to further inquiry, but on its own it lacks credibility. This is why it is generally dismissed as irrelevant in court proceedings and scientific experiments.

c) Reject unfalsifiable claims

According to Karl Popper, a falsifiable theory is one in which evidence can be observed and tested using empirical (i.e., scientific) methods, and (if false) logically refuted.¹¹ Many conspiracy theories circumvent this standard rule of investigation by claiming that the evidence for a conspiracy has been hidden, destroyed, or manipulated to deceive others. But the absence of evidence is not proof of any wrongdoing—the absence of ‘evidence’ in fact could lead one to conclude the theory has no basis—and hoaxes and cover-ups anyway tend to produce their own claimed chain of evidence. One way to guard against false claims is not to accept

any “proof” that cannot be verified either by you or by an objective third party with the appropriate training and experience in that field and a strong reputation for truth telling. Academic peer review, testimonies given while under oath (subject to perjury laws), and formal courtroom cross-examinations can also serve as powerful filters against nonsense.

d) Use the *reductio ad absurdum* method

The *reductio ad absurdum* (“reduction to the impossible”) is a method of counter-argumentation used in philosophy, police interrogations, and courtroom cross-examinations. It consists in considering whether claim X, if correct, would lead to a logical contradiction, a scientific absurdity, or a ridiculous chain of events: “If X, then Y; but Y is absurd; therefore X cannot be true.” In other words, it allows us to demonstrate that a particular claim is impossible (or grossly improbable) because it strains our intelligence and creates more problems than it solves.

For example, many JFK conspiracy proponents claim that the Zapruder home movie, which helped the 1964 Warren Commission establish that President Kennedy was shot from behind, is a forgery. This allows conspiracists to maintain that there was a second shooter hidden on the infamous “grassy knoll.” But to produce such an elaborate forgery would have required:

- an entire team of professional editors who were operating in secret and either too evil or too afraid to speak a word of it for six decades (or a non-existent trail of dead bodies);
- dozens of falsified testimonies by assassination bystanders who never saw the Zapruder film but corroborated its contents during their sworn depositions;
- weeks to successfully orchestrate using 1963 film-editing technology, as well as a broken chain of custody between Abraham Zapruder who made the film, and LIFE magazine who purchased it and published its frames six days later (which is provably not the case);
- the falsification of a half dozen first- and second-generation copies of the film held by the FBI, the Secret Service, the Time-Life corporation, and Abraham Zapruder himself; and
- the complicity of hundreds of photographic experts who later studied the film, including Kodak’s Roland Zavada, who thoroughly tested it (along with Zapruder’s camera) and produced an elaborate report for the Assassinations Records Review Board in 1998 proving that the original film was not doctored.¹²

Thus, believing that the Zapruder film is a forgery leads to a mountain of contradicting evidence that would also need to be hoaxes to maintain the “faked Zapruder film” theory’s internal logic.¹³

e) Be skeptical of simplistic Hollywood-like “movie” narratives

Popular conspiracy theories and Hollywood fiction have a strange habit of borrowing themes and imagery from each other to create stories that their target audiences find plausible. If a conspiracy theory follows recurring narrative patterns found in the myths that support that conspiracy, it may indicate that the theory is more likely following a movie-like script instead of real-life evidence.

For example, Hollywood’s stories of UFOs and alien visitors have evolved over several decades to reflect the changing popular conceptions of alien beings (from tall, blond, elf-like space mystics who impart wisdom to carefully selected human oracles, to bulbous-headed “greys” who abduct unwitting civilians to perform grisly sexual experiments). They also evolve to reflect the changing moral concerns of each generation (e.g., the threat of nuclear war, the corporatization of health care, environmentalism, and neo-colonialism).¹⁴ In turn, UFO conspiracy theories borrow images and themes from Hollywood films and TV shows to help authenticate their claims to their audiences. It is a classic echo-chamber effect.

For narrative, stylistic, and profit-seeking reasons, Hollywood films oversimplify reality. They have an economy of characters, with clearly defined antagonists and protagonists. They exaggerate threats of imminent doom. They tap into our fascination with secret plots, evil psychopaths, futuristic technologies, saving children from harm, lone heroes who battle mindless crowds or powerful elites, and the triumph of the “little guy” (or, increasingly, the brave woman pushed to her limits) over a corrupt system. According to journalist Jonathan Kay, five basic recurring themes in conspiracy theories show them to be cut out of a Hollywood textbook, not based on objective reality.¹⁵ These are:

- **SINGULARITY:** “a single identifiable point-source of malign power,” or in other words, an ultimate puppet-master that can be blamed for a large set of random, accidental, or uncoordinated events (e.g., James Bond’s SPECTRE; George Orwell’s Big Brother in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*);
- **BOUNDLESS EVIL:** A callous enemy with subhuman or psychopathic traits, such as the desire to manipulate public opinion, destroy the world, commit genocide, or let scores of innocent people die (e.g., Batman’s Joker; *Psycho*’s Norman Bates);
- **INCUMBENCY:** the belief that the enemy has infiltrated all major institutions (government, banks, universities, the news media, religious institutions, etc.) and manipulates them to further its nefarious cause (e.g., Al Pacino’s character John Milton in *Devil’s Advocate*; the Parallax Corporation in Alan J. Pakula’s *The Parallax View*);

- **EXCESSIVE GREED:** the notion that the “evildoers’ plots revolve around a campaign to control some crucial substance” like petroleum, gold, ethnic purity, the life force of children, the creation of alien-human hybrids, free energy, and so forth (e.g., the fiendish interplanetary colonizers of James Cameron’s *Avatar* films).
- **HYPERCOMPETENCE:** Though morally degenerate, the enemy is nearly superhuman in its ability to destroy and manipulate evidence, keep secrets, deceive the public, predict the future, and use science-fictional technology (e.g., *Terminator*’s Skynet; *Harry Potter*’s Voldemort).

F) Use Occam’s Razor to cut away convoluted explanations

The principle of simplicity—called Occam’s Razor after the medieval scholar who popularized the concept—states that “plurality should not be posited without necessity.”¹⁶ Simply put, the theory with the fewest assumptions is most likely to be the correct one. Occam’s Razor is a general rule that plays an important role in scientific, forensic, and historical research. It exhorts us to prefer the hypothesis that best satisfies all of the *known* evidence without resorting to hunches and guesswork. While this principle is not foolproof, it helps us cut away needless speculation and ground our beliefs on verifiable facts. The more unproven assumptions, unfalsifiable claims, untested evidence, emotional reasoning, or unrepeatable experiments a theory must rely on to “connect the dots,” the more likely it is to produce faulty conclusions.

According to Uscinski and Parent, “Conspiracy theories are often far more complicated than the official accounts they toil to refute” and frequently reason backwards from a fixed conclusion to a set of cherry-picked “proofs” and irrelevant factoids. This is why conspiracy theories often end up being far more convoluted than the “official stories” (i.e., the consensus of experts) they aim to debunk—explanations that too often resemble a Rube Goldberg machine (an unnecessarily complicated and absurd contraption) that only makes sense to those who already believe in the theory’s conclusion.¹⁷

The 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States are one example. Millions of Americans (and millions more people around the globe) were confused by the events of September 11, 2001, in which over 3,000 civilians were killed in four hijackings and intentional plane crashes perpetrated by 19 Saudi nationals trained by Al Qaeda, a jihadist terrorist organization most people had never heard of before.

Mistrust of the Bush administration, the CIA, the Pentagon, the state of Israel, and private military contractors (among others) fueled the creation of many conspiracy theories according to which the 9/11 attacks were an “inside job” involving hundreds, and possibly thousands of co-conspirators, including the Bush and Bin Laden families, Mossad agents, the Department of Homeland Security, NORAD, the mainstream news media, private demolitions contractors, the city of New York’s mayor, police, and

firefighters, the National Institute of Standards and Technology, Silverstein Properties, Inc., *Popular Mechanics* magazine, and many others.

It was unreasonable to believe that all these groups and individuals conspired together (and still do two decades later) to cover up their joint involvement in this massive “false flag” operation. Instead, enough evidence exists to explain Al Qaeda’s motive and involvement, the cheap and simple methods the hijackers used, the structural damage and collapse the buildings suffered, and the many suspicious irregularities (in the eyes of conspiracists) without having to expand the circle of suspects beyond the ranks of Al Qaeda.

The more that covert activities and hypothetical conspirators are needed to make a conspiracy theory make sense, the less plausible it becomes—especially when the “official story” requires fewer. This is why almost all experts in civil aviation, plane crashes, controlled demolitions, Islamic terrorism, counter-intelligence, and thermite incendiaries (allegedly used to bring down the World Trade Center buildings) who studied the details of this case have rejected the “inside job” theory, and why the 9/11 conspiracy theories became less fashionable not long after President Bush left office.¹⁸

Conclusion

Conspiracies do occur but *conspiracism* is rooted in emotional reasoning and the lack of critical reflection. It is ingrained in human minds and cultures and there is no indication that it will disappear soon. Further, given that humans are prone to conspire, it is hard to accept or dismiss all conspiracy claims without careful scrutiny, which can be difficult and time-consuming.

Fortunately, Western civilization has an over 2,000-year-old tradition of skeptical inquiry reaching back to the ancient Greeks and Romans, which has produced many critical thinking principles like the ones discussed here, all of which can help us objectively evaluate the truthfulness of claims and guard our minds against disinformation.

Electronic media, information fatigue, the increasing complexity of scientific knowledge, scapegoating and cancel culture, and a revival of populist politics all make such tools even more relevant today to ensure the long-term stability and flourishing of democratic societies. Conspiracy theories can inflame widespread mistrust of institutions and pollute public discourse and social relations. They can push their believers to neglect their civil responsibilities (e.g., by refusing to vote, pay taxes, or respect the law and public servants), to ostracise and shame those they disapprove of (e.g., through vitriolic public protests, cancel-culture, and the stymieing of public discourse), and even to lash out violently (e.g., the January 6, 2020, Capitol riots in Washington, DC).

Concerned citizens would therefore do well to heed the words of Thomas Jefferson, who wrote that “whenever the people are well informed, they can be trusted with their own government; that whenever things get so far wrong as to attract their notice, they may be relied on to set them to rights.”¹⁹ Of course, this also implies that a populace that does not struggle to remain well-informed and critical-minded cannot expect its political representatives to be any wiser than they are.

About the author

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