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The  
Economist

EDUCATIONAL  
FOUNDATION

# CONSPIRACY THEORIES IN THE NEWS



1 - HOUR LESSON

## TOPICAL TALK HEADLINES

If you like this resource, find more at [bit.ly/TopicalTalk](https://bit.ly/TopicalTalk).

Topical Talk provides free, weekly resources that build students' critical-thinking, speaking and listening skills through inspiring discussions about the news.

### ABOUT THIS SESSION

**Objective:** to discuss why conspiracy theories are more common in times of crisis, why people spread them and how they should be debunked.

**Key questions:** what are conspiracy theories? Why is it important to challenge conspiracy theories? How should the media report about conspiracy theories?

#### Before the session you will need to:

- Print the **TEACHER Instructions**
- Print and copy the **STUDENT Chat mat**, enough for one between two
- Print the **Posters**

### THIS SESSION DEVELOPS

#### Sustainable Development Goal

For more information, look here:

[sdgs.un.org/goals](https://sdgs.un.org/goals)



#### Skills



**STEP 5**  
I speak effectively by using appropriate language



**STEP 14**  
I listen critically and use questioning to evaluate different perspectives



**STEP 5**  
I explore complex problems by analysing the causes and effects



**STEP 3**  
I generate ideas when I've been given a clear brief

# TEACHER INSTRUCTIONS

## TOPICAL TALK HEADLINES

### ACTIVITY ONE

Tell students that three people in the group have been told that they are secretly aliens (you should not actually tell any students they are aliens). Ask students to make a group that is as big as possible without including the aliens. The biggest group at the end wins – but any group that contains an alien loses.

After five minutes, ask the students who are aliens to raise their hands – obviously none will! Read **KEYWORD 1**. Reveal the truth: nobody in the group is an alien. **Ask:**

- How do conspiracy theories make people feel? For example, what if you wrongly believe that someone else is dangerous? What if someone wrongly believes that you are dangerous?
- How can you tell if something is a conspiracy theory or the truth?
- What might happen if someone believes a conspiracy theory over the truth?

### ACTIVITY TWO

Read the information on the *Chat mat* aloud. Students should complete the activity in pairs. Share.



### ACTIVITY THREE

Have the *Posters* in a pile. Reveal one and read it aloud. **Ask:** what do you think about this? Share. Repeat for all *Posters*.

Split the group into four teams and give each a *Poster*. Give teams time to discuss what the consequences of this person's actions might be. Share. Students should decide together which two situations are the most problematic.

**Challenge:** what should the consequence be if you share a conspiracy theory? Should everyone receive the same consequence? Why / why not?

Stick the *Posters* in four corners of the room.

Read **KEYWORD 2**.

Read the first action to debunk conspiracy theories on the *Chat mat*. Students should discuss the pros and cons of this in pairs then move to stand by the *Poster* that this action would help to prevent or challenge. Share. Repeat for the remaining actions. Together, students should decide which action is the most effective overall. **Ask:** do people always realise they are spreading conspiracy theories? Does this make them easier or harder to debunk?

**Challenge:** if anything were possible, what else could be done to debunk conspiracy theories?



### SPEEDY SKILLS REVIEW

Give students two minutes to work through the **SPEEDY SKILLS REVIEW**.



### ACTIVITY FOUR

Choose three volunteers to stand at the front of the class and read the statements. Students should stand up and make a line behind the student they agree with the most. Choose students in different lines to share their reasons. Give them the chance to swap lines if they can explain what changed their mind.

# STUDENT CHAT MAT

## ACTIVITY TWO

Read this paragraph. After each sentence, take it in turns to answer the question: why?

Conspiracy theories have existed throughout history, although they are more popular in times of crisis. The covid-19 pandemic started a new wave of dangerous conspiracy theories that led to the spread of wrong information – and the internet has made this easier than ever before. Conspiracy theories linked to covid-19 have caused

people to distrust each other and led to protests and bad decisions about medical treatment. Teachers have reported a rise in students believing conspiracy theories and believe that schools should do more to stop this.



## ACTIVITY FOUR

*"The media should not report about conspiracy theories at all."*

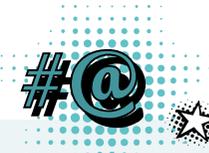
*"The media should report about all the details of a conspiracy theory to show what some people believe."*

*"The media should report that a conspiracy theory exists and then debunk it."*

## E TOPICAL TALK HEADLINES

### ACTIVITY THREE

#### ACTION #1



Some social-media platforms have consequences for people who share conspiracy theories. They might delete their posts, suspend their accounts or flag misinformation. For example, Facebook has 15,000 moderators that take down misinformation and in January 2021 Twitter suspended 70,000 accounts linked to a conspiracy-theorist group.

#### ACTION #2



Fact-checking websites report when wrong information has been shared – but there is no guarantee that people who see conspiracy theories will check them. The number of fact-checking websites worldwide grew from 145 in 2016 to 341 in 2021.

#### ACTION #3



News-literacy lessons should be taught in all schools to help people learn how to spot fake news and misinformation.

#### ACTION #4



Journalists should make sure their reports are thoroughly checked so that they are truthful and unbiased.



### KEYWORDS

**1) CONSPIRACY THEORY** = a belief that a powerful person or group of people are secretly linked to a sinister situation or event. These beliefs are usually wrong.

**2) TO DEBUNK** = to show that something is not true.

### SPEEDY SKILLS REVIEW

Which of the following skills is most important for spotting conspiracy theories? Which is the most important for debunking conspiracy theories?





*I recently shared a conspiracy theory about the person who is my main opponent because it made them sound dangerous. I talked about it in one of my speeches and shared it on social media.*

**MAYA**

**THE POLITICIAN**

# PAUL

## THE SHOP ASSISTANT



*I like talking about the news with customers and sharing things they tell me. I trust what they say because they have no reason to lie to me.*



*I told my university students about a conspiracy theory in class. It might not be true... but they deserve to know just in case.*

**RAJ**  
**THE LECTURER**

# SARA

## THE JOURNALIST

*I wrote about a conspiracy theory and its consequences because I think it's important to share what other people believe - even if they are wrong. My article was shared and read by thousands of people.*

