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# ACTIVATING LESSON SCENARIO
# developed as part of the project

# 'INNOVATIONS IN SCHOOL EDUCATION'

# TOPIC

# "Conspiracy Theories – How to Recognise and Defend Against Them?"
# (Characteristics of Conspiracy Narratives and Their Impact on Social Attitudes)

## 1. Lesson objectives

The student:

- understands what conspiracy theories are,
- can identify their characteristic features and distinguish between a conspiracy theory and reliable information,
- knows the mechanisms of creation and spread of conspiracy theories,
- understands their impact on social attitudes and the decisions of individuals and groups,
- develops critical thinking and the ability to recognise manipulation in online content.

## 2. Target group

Primary school students

## 3. Teaching methods

- Brainstorming
- Mini-lecture with examples
- Group work (analysis of conspiracy narratives)
- Guided discussion
- Individual reflection
- Creating a joint list of rules for defending against conspiracy theories

## 4. Teaching aids / sources

- Projector or interactive whiteboard
- Set of cards with short descriptions of example conspiracy theories (fictional and real, but neutral)
- "10 Signs of a Conspiracy Theory" card
- Flipchart, markers, sticky notes
- Educational and fact-checking websites:
  - EU: https://edmo.eu
  - EUvsDisinfo: https://euvsdisinfo.eu
  - Poland: https://demagog.org.pl
  - Czech Republic: https://manipulatori.cz
  - Slovakia: https://infosecurity.sk
  - Ukraine: https://www.stopfake.org

## 5. Lesson procedure (45 min)

### 1. Introduction – Is every secret a conspiracy? (5–7 min)

### 1. Activating students' knowledge (brainstorm – 2 min)

- The teacher writes the words "conspiracy" and "conspiracy theory" on the board.
- Students share their associations – these may be:
  - specific keywords (e.g. "secret", "hiding the truth", "secret agreements"),
  - examples of well-known conspiracy theories (e.g. about aliens, hidden medicines, secret government experiments),
  - emotions associated with such stories (e.g. fear, curiosity, anger, uncertainty).
- The teacher writes responses on the board, creating a mind map showing the diversity of students' associations.

### 2. Guiding questions for a short conversation (2–3 min)

- Have you ever heard a theory that "someone is hiding the truth from the world"? What did it sound like?
- Why do people believe in stories about secret agreements between governments, companies, or famous people?
- Is every "strange story" we find online a conspiracy theory? How can it be distinguished from a simple rumour or genuine information?
- How do you feel when you hear such a theory – curious, scared, angry?

The teacher may give a neutral example:

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"In one country, a story circulated that the government was adding sedatives to drinking water to control people. No evidence was ever found, but many people believed it and began drinking only bottled water."

A short conversation shows students that conspiracy theories arise in many areas of life and evoke strong emotions, even without facts to support them.

**3. Teacher's commentary – factual information (2 min)**

- A conspiracy theory is a story or narrative according to which a group of people acts secretly to hide the truth or harm others, often without presenting reliable, verifiable evidence.
- Conspiracy theories:
  - exploit emotions – fear, anger, a sense of threat, the need to find culprits;
  - appear especially in difficult times – during crises, pandemics, wars, or social change;
  - can strongly influence people's behaviour, even if completely false (e.g. lead to protests, hostility towards other groups, rejection of science or medicine).
- Not every secret is a conspiracy: sometimes a lack of information or incomplete data results from mistakes, ignorance, or privacy protection, not from "hiding the truth from society."

**2. Mini-lecture: What are conspiracy theories and how do they work? (10–12 min)**

**1. Definition of a conspiracy theory (2 min)**

- A conspiracy theory is a story or explanation of an event, situation, or phenomenon that assumes the existence of a secret group of people acting covertly, manipulating society, hiding the truth, or trying to harm others – usually without presenting strong, confirmed evidence.
- Such theories:
  - often sound sensational and evoke strong emotions (fear, anger, distrust),
  - promise "mysterious knowledge" that "ordinary people" allegedly cannot access,
  - easily reach audiences because they give simple answers to difficult questions ("someone is to blame for everything bad").

**2. Characteristic features of conspiracy theories (4–5 min)**

1. **Lack of credible sources**
   - Authors cite anonymous "experts", "secret documents", or "insiders" that cannot be verified.

- Sources are often dubious websites without facts, scientific research, or confirmations.

2. **Very simple and emotional explanations**
   - Complex phenomena like pandemics, climate change, or economic crises are explained as deliberate actions by "bad people".
   - Instead of facts, strong emotions are used – e.g. "they want to destroy us", "the world is in great danger".
3. **Division into "good and evil" – us vs. them**
   - Conspiracy theories create a simple picture of the world: a "group of villains" working in secret, and the "victims" ("we, ordinary people").
   - Anyone who disagrees with the theory is suspected of being part of the conspiracy.
4. **Irrefutability**
   - Every denial of the theory is treated as "proof that the conspiracy is real".
   - If a scientist, journalist, or politician says the theory is false, supporters claim "they are part of the hidden plan".
5. **Recurring patterns**
   - Regardless of the topic, similar motifs appear:
     - "secret elites control the world",
     - "governments hide the truth",
     - "corporations destroy people for profit",
     - "the media lie to conceal something".
   - These stories often circulate for years in different versions; only the details change.

*(Neutral example: "There is a secret plan to control the weather via satellites, causing floods and droughts to destroy agriculture." – No evidence, anonymous sources, emotional message.)*

**3. Mechanisms of spreading conspiracy theories (3 min)**

- **Social media:**
  - Conspiracy theories spread quickly because sensational content gets more clicks and shares.
  - People react emotionally before checking whether information is true.
- **Lack of trust in institutions:**
  - In times of crisis, people often lose trust in governments, the media, doctors, and scientists.
  - Conspiracy theories fill the gap in understanding the world by offering simple, but false, answers.
- **Information bubbles and algorithms:**

- Social media platforms show us content similar to what we have already viewed.
- If we click on one conspiracy theory, the algorithm starts suggesting more, reinforcing false beliefs.

*(The teacher may ask: "Have you noticed that when you watch one video about mysterious theories on YouTube, more and more of them appear in the recommendations?")*

**4. Impact of conspiracy theories on society (2–3 min)**

- **Spreading fear and distrust:**
  - People start suspecting everyone around them, losing faith in scientific facts and public institutions.
- **Undermining scientific knowledge:**
  - Rejecting vaccinations, medicine, and research due to false beliefs.
- **Social polarisation:**
  - Conspiracy theories divide people into "believers" and "non-believers", leading to conflicts in families, communities, and even entire countries.
- **Dangerous decisions:**
  - People may take harmful actions, such as using unsafe "alternative therapies", avoiding treatment, or using violence against groups deemed "guilty".

**5. Summary of the mini-lecture (1 min)**

- Conspiracy theories often arise from fear and uncertainty, but rely on rumours and speculation instead of facts.
- They can be harmful to individuals, social groups, and entire nations.
- The best defence is critical thinking, checking facts in credible sources, and caution with sensational online content.

**3. Group exercise – "Is this a conspiracy theory?" (15–20 min)**

**Purpose:**
Developing critical thinking skills, recognising conspiracy narratives, distinguishing facts from unsubstantiated stories, and learning ways to verify information.

**Group division:**
Students work in teams of 3–4 to analyse content and compare opinions.

**Materials:**

- A set of 4 short narratives (2 facts, 2 fictional conspiracy theories).
- "10 Signs of a Conspiracy Theory" card – a checklist to help identify false narratives.

- Analysis table (printed or on A3 paper/flipchart).

**Example set of narratives:**

1. **Story 1 – Fact:**

"Last month in Nova Park city, a new public library with 20,000 books and computer access for residents was opened. The project was funded with local and European funds."

2. **Story 2 – Conspiracy theory:**

"According to anonymous sources, the world government plans to introduce microchips into all new passports to track citizens 24 hours a day. The truth is being hidden from the public, and the media are silent on the matter."

3. **Story 3 – Fact:**

"According to a World Health Organization report, last year flu cases in Europe decreased thanks to widespread vaccinations and public hygiene campaigns."

4. **Story 4 – Conspiracy theory:**

"Several bloggers revealed that large food companies add secret substances to popular fizzy drinks that allegedly influence people's thoughts and make them easier to manipulate. No one has officially confirmed this, but 'industry friends' claim it is true."

**10 Signs of a Conspiracy Theory (for students)**

1. Lack of credible sources or reliance on anonymous "experts".
2. Mysterious, undefined group of culprits ("they", "secret elites", "world government").
3. Strong emotional language (fear, anger, threat).
4. No evidence, but statements made as if certain.
5. Overly simple explanations for complex problems ("it's a plot against the people").
6. Impossible to refute ("those who don't believe are part of the conspiracy").
7. Content sounds too sensational or implausible to be true.
8. Sources only reference each other (no independent confirmation).
9. Promise of "secret knowledge" available only to a select few.
10. Story repeats known patterns from other conspiracy theories (secret plans, hidden truth, controlling people).

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**Tasks for groups:**

1. Determine whether each story is a fact or a conspiracy theory.
2. Mark the warning signs indicating a conspiracy theory (minimum 2 for each story).
3. Identify the emotions the narrative tries to evoke (e.g. fear, anger, distrust).
4. Write down how the information could be verified (e.g. using fact-checking portals such as Demagog, StopFake, EUvsDisinfo).

**Analysis table:**

**Story no. Fact or conspiracy theory? Warning signs (min. 2) How can it be verified?**

1

2

3

4

**Presentation of results:**

- Each group chooses one story and presents their findings to the class (2–3 min).
- The teacher moderates, asking other groups about agreement and additional arguments.
- Finally, the class creates a list of "How to recognise a conspiracy theory?" to remain on the board as the lesson summary.

**4. Discussion: Why do we believe in conspiracy theories? (8–10 min)**

**Purpose:**

- To make students aware that belief in conspiracy theories is often strengthened by emotions, lack of knowledge, or difficulty understanding complex phenomena.
- To understand how conspiracy theories affect societies and how their effects can be limited.

**Extended discussion questions:**

1. Why do some people more easily believe in stories about secret plots?
    - Could it result from lack of information or trust in the media?
    - Does it matter who tells the story (e.g. a famous person, influencer, friend)?
2. What emotions make such theories spread quickly?
    - Do we share content that scares, surprises, or outrages us more than calm, factual content?
3. Can conspiracy theories harm entire communities or countries? How?
    - Can they lead to distrust of doctors, scientists, governments?
    - Can they trigger conflicts between groups?
4. Why do even intelligent, educated people sometimes believe in conspiracies?
    - Is it just lack of knowledge, or also the desire for simple explanations to difficult situations?
5. How can we defend against them – what should we check before believing something?
    - Which sources should we compare?
    - Can we always find confirmation in scientific research or independent media?
6. Can conspiracy theories be completely eliminated from the internet?
    - What would be needed to stop such false content from spreading so fast?
    - Is user education or blocking false content more important?

**Additional activation:**

- The teacher may ask students for short examples they have heard online (without naming people or websites).
- Together they identify what elements made the story seem believable, even if it was probably false.

**Teacher's conclusions:**

- Conspiracy theories work because:
  - they answer the human need for simple explanations to complex questions,
  - they evoke strong emotions, making them more believable and shareable,
  - they exploit lack of knowledge or distrust of institutions and the media.
- The consequences can be serious:
  - weaken social trust, lead to conflict and polarisation,
  - undermine scientific facts, which can be dangerous (e.g. in health matters),
  - fuel disinformation used by interest groups or hostile states.
- How to defend ourselves?
  - check information in multiple independent sources,
  - use fact-checking portals,
  - ask experts or teachers for reliable explanations,
  - remember that not every sensational story is true, and simpler explanations are often the correct ones (Occam's razor).

**5. Summary and reflection (7–10 min)**

**1. Individual exercise (3–4 min)**
Each student writes answers (on paper or in their notebook) to complete these sentences:

- "I understood that conspiracy theories often arise when…"
- "The most suspicious thing about such stories is that…"
- "Before I believe something, I will check…"
- *(Optional)* "The emotions that most often come with conspiracy theories are… and I know they don't necessarily mean it's true."

The teacher may ask 2–3 students to read their answers (voluntarily) or collect anonymous notes to read selected reflections.

**2. Class discussion (2–3 min)**
Short teacher-moderated conversation:

- Which statements appeared most often?
- Is it easy to recognise a conspiracy theory, or can it be difficult?
- What will help us stay alert in the future when we encounter a sensational story online?

**3. Class work – creating a list of rules (2–3 min)**
On the board or flipchart, the teacher writes: **"5 Ways to Defend Against Conspiracy Theories"**.

Students suggest rules, which are written down and then together choose the five most important.

*Example list:*

1. Look for evidence in several independent sources, preferably confirmed by research or experts.
2. Avoid emotional messages without facts – if something scares or shocks you, pause and check it.
3. Ask: "Who benefits from this story?" – could someone have an interest in spreading it?
4. Use fact-checking portals (e.g. Demagog, EUvsDisinfo, StopFake).
5. Do not share unchecked content, even if it seems sensational or "secret".

**4. Teacher's conclusions (1–2 min)**

- Conspiracy theories are attractive because they offer quick, simple answers to complex questions and evoke emotions, but lack reliable evidence.
- They can harm individuals, social groups, and even entire countries, so it's worth developing the habit of verifying information.
- Critical thinking and healthy scepticism are the best protection against manipulation and false online narratives.

**Glossary**

| Term | Definition |
|---|---|
| **Conspiracy theory** | A narrative assuming secret actions by a group of people hiding the truth, often without evidence. |
| **Emotional narrative** | A story that strongly appeals to emotions (fear, anger, distrust) instead of facts. |
| **Information bubble** | A phenomenon where an internet user sees mostly content matching their beliefs, reinforcing faith in conspiracy theories. |
| **Disinformation** | The deliberate spread of false information to manipulate audiences. |
| **Fact-checking** | The process of verifying the truthfulness of information based on credible sources and evidence. |

**7. Teacher's methodological guide**

**1. Examples and teaching materials**

- Use fictional or neutral, international conspiracy narratives to avoid current local conflicts or controversial political/religious topics.
- Use varied content formats illustrating how conspiracy theories work:
  - short headlines from gossip portals and blogs,
  - social media posts (Twitter/X, Facebook, TikTok),
  - film, podcast, or video excerpts presenting fictional conspiracy theory examples,
  - graphic "secret plan" chains often seen online.
- Prepare the "10 Signs of a Conspiracy Theory" card for students to make group analysis easier.

**2. Building a safe atmosphere**

- At the start, emphasise that anyone can sometimes believe a conspiracy theory because such stories are:
  - emotional,
  - simple and easy to remember,
  - attractive due to the promise of "secret knowledge".
- Assure students that the lesson's goal is not to mock or judge but to learn to recognise false narratives and protect against manipulation.
- Ensure participants don't ridicule each other's mistakes – instead ask: "Why do you think this content seemed believable?"

**3. Moderating the discussion**

- Encourage students to justify their answers and suggest possible evidence to support or refute a narrative.
- Use open-ended questions: "Why do you think so?", "How could this be checked?", "Are there other explanations?"
- Show that healthy scepticism is positive, and checking sources is a natural habit of a responsible media user.
- Respond to potentially sensitive content (e.g. religious, medical, political) neutrally, steering the conversation to analysing mechanisms rather than judging opinions.

**4. Variety of work forms**

- In addition to discussion and text analysis, use:
  - visual elements (post screenshots, "conspiracy scheme" graphics),
  - short drama scenes ("journalist asks theory author for evidence"),
  - quizzes or online educational games (e.g. Kahoot) to distinguish fact from conspiracy theory.
- You can introduce a quick "Fact or Fake?" activity where students decide in 30 seconds whether content needs verification.

**5. Educational goal of the lesson**

- Develop critical thinking, understanding how emotions and the desire for simple answers influence belief in conspiracy theories.
- Strengthen responsibility for online behaviour – what we share, comment on, and how we influence others.
- Build the attitude of a conscious and careful internet user who doesn't spread false information just because it sounds "mysterious" or "sensational".

## 6. Possible lesson extension

- **Mini-class project:**
  - In pairs or groups, students prepare a poster or infographic "How Not to Get Caught in Conspiracy Theories" to hang in class or the school hallway.
  - The poster may include rules for verifying information, a list of "warning signs", and short tips on how to respond to false narratives online.
- **Homework:** Find one sensational piece of content online and prepare a list of verification questions to ask before accepting it as true.

## 8. Scientific and educational sources

- **EDMO – European Digital Media Observatory**
  https://edmo.eu
  – analyses of conspiracy theories, their social impact, and tools to defend against disinformation.
- **EUvsDisinfo – project of the European External Action Service**
  https://euvsdisinfo.eu
  – database of false narratives, including conspiracy theories, reports on disinformation's impact on social attitudes.
- **UNESCO – Media and Information Literacy Curriculum for Teachers**
  https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000192971
  – educational programme on recognising disinformation and conspiracy narratives.
- **Poland: Demagog.org.pl**
  https://demagog.org.pl
  – analyses and debunking of popular conspiracy theories, fact-checking guides.
- **Czech Republic: Manipulátoři.cz**
  https://manipulatori.cz
  – educational articles on conspiracy theories, disinformation, emotional manipulation.
- **Slovakia: Infosecurity.sk**
  https://infosecurity.sk
  – reports on disinformation, promotion of conspiracy theories on social media in the region.
- **Ukraine: StopFake.org**
  https://www.stopfake.org

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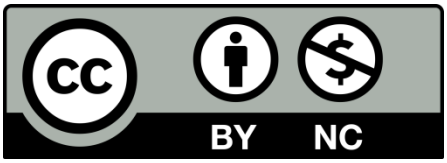
– examples of false narratives and conspiracy theories about current events, educational materials on verifying information.

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