



Press Release

Tackling conspiracy theories needs tactics as varied as the theories themselves

University of Tübingen researchers analyzed 6 million social media posts as part of a European research project on online conspiracy theories

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An international project investigating the form, content and consequences of online conspiracy theories has found that in German-speaking countries, such theories often originate locally and have come to form a complex ecosystem of alternative news websites, print media and parts of the political spectrum. This is one of the key conclusions of the Researching Europe, Digitalization and Conspiracy Theories project (REDACT), which wound up in October 2025 after a three-year collaboration between researchers across the continent. The part of the study covering Germany, Austria, and Switzerland was led by Professor Michael Butter from the English Department at the University of Tübingen. King's College London coordinated the project, which involved regional teams in the United Kingdom, the Baltic States, the Balkans, and central Europe.

The Tübingen research team found that not all conspiracy theories are equally dangerous. "However, the German-language debate on conspiracy theories is often alarmist and one-sided. This sometimes has a negative impact on the many projects aimed at combating conspiracy theories," says Michael Butter.

Not the same as disinformation and fake news

A conspiracy theory is an attempt to explain a fact or event as a conspiracy, in other words, as the actions of a person or persons pursuing goals that are contrary to the interests of the general public. Conspiracy theories have a long history in German-speaking countries, but had been pushed to the margins of society by the mid-20th century, only gaining mass exposure once large numbers of people began using the internet. The REDACT project took a close look at one of today's most widespread theories, the Great Replacement theory, which claims the existing population is being replaced by mass immigration.

"Conspiracy theories shouldn't be lumped together with disinformation and fake news," says Michael Butter. "They aren't simply misinformation that can be corrected by facts. Conspiracy theories have an identity-forming effect on those who believe them, giving them a sense of belonging." As a result, followers of conspiracy theories are very attached to them.

Researchers in the REDACT project first identified keywords which led them to posts on common conspiracy theories. They then collected six million relevant posts from the social media platforms Twitter/X, Facebook, Instagram, and Telegram from the years 2019 to 2024. "We initially analyzed these using quantitative methods, then qualitative ones, including methods from literary studies that capture the meaning of the text in all its nuances," says Mara Precoma, a doctoral student on the project.

How are we combatting conspiracy theories?

In their home countries, the regional teams also conducted interviews with members of various organizations dedicated to combating conspiracy theories and disinformation. These included government institutions, such as the Federal Agency for Civic Education in Germany, as well as initiatives and associations advising and supporting family members and friends of people who subscribe to conspiracy theories. The interviews sought to analyze the scope of the work and the measures these organizations implemented.

Butter says there is no single model to fully explain conspiracy theories; nor is there a universal recipe for containing the damage they cause in society. "Our analysis of the issue in German-speaking countries showed that some improvement is needed in the framework of institutions working to counter conspiracy theories and in their efforts. Some projects are based on outdated assumptions, but most importantly, they receive funding that is too short-term and inflexible, and they have to spend too much time on reports and bureaucracy," he says.

Butter and Precoma have set out recommendations for tackling conspiracy theories, emphasizing the need for tailored approaches: models or solutions from other countries should not be adopted uncritically, the researchers say: "It is also important that the adoption of a conspiracy theory should be seen as a symptom of a complex social situation, not as its cause." "If we want to combat conspiracy theories, we have to identify and address the underlying causes," says Precoma, adding: "In Germany, many projects against conspiracy theories target high school students. Similar programs should now be developed for other types of schools and for older people, as they are particularly susceptible to conspiracy theories."

"The University of Tübingen sees it as its mission to examine socially relevant topics. Research such as that conducted in the REDACT project makes an important contribution to understanding the mechanisms behind social phenomena and developing effective strategies for open, fact-based communication," says University of Tübingen President, Professor Dr. Dr. h.c. (Dōshisha) Karla Pollmann.

Details at:

REDACT – Researching Europe, Digitalisation and Conspiracy Theories

<https://www.kcl.ac.uk/research/redact-researching-europe-digitalisation-and-conspiracy-theories>

Publications:

Report on Conspiracy Theories in the Online Environment and the Counter-Disinformation Ecosystem in Austria, Germany and Switzerland

Verschwörungstheorien online und Projekte gegen Verschwörungstheorien in Deutschland, Österreich und der Schweiz

<https://redactproject.sites.er.kcl.ac.uk/project-reports/>

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