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Field Guide to the Conspiracy Theorist: Dark Minds

When does incredulity become paranoia? Radio personality and filmmaker Alex Jones believes an evil cabal of bankers rules the world.

by John Gartner, Ph.D.



Alex Jones is trying to warn us about an evil syndicate of bankers who control most of the world's governments and stand poised to unite the planet under their totalitarian reign, a "New World Order." While we might be tempted to dismiss Jones as a nut, the "king of conspiracy" is a popular radio show host. The part-time filmmaker's latest movie, *The Obama Deception*, in which he argues that Obama is a puppet of the criminal bankers, has been viewed millions of times on YouTube.

When we spoke, Jones ranted for two hours about FEMA concentration camps, Halliburton child kidnapers, government eugenics programs—and more. When I stopped him to ask for evidence the government is practicing eugenics, he pointed to a national security memorandum. But I found the document to be a bland policy report.

Jones "cherry picks not just facts but phrases, which, once interpreted his way, become facts in his mind," says Louis Black, editor of the *Austin Chronicle*, who knows Jones, a fellow Austin

resident. When I confronted Jones with my reading of the report, he became pugnacious, launching into a diatribe against psychologists as agents of social control.

Conspiracy thinking is embraced by a surprisingly large proportion of the population. Sixty-nine percent of Americans believe President John F. Kennedy was killed by a conspiracy, and 42 percent believe the government is covering up evidence of flying saucers, finds Ted Goertzel, a professor of psychology at Rutgers University at Camden. Thirty-six percent of respondents to a 2006 Scripps News/Ohio University poll at least suspected that the U.S. government played a role in 9/11.

We're all conspiracy theorists to some degree. We're all hardwired to find patterns in our environment, particularly those that might represent a threat to us. And when things go wrong, we find ourselves searching for what, or who, is behind it.

In his 1954 classic, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*, historian Richard Hofstadter hypothesized that conspiracy thinking is fueled by underlying feelings of alienation and helplessness. Research supports his theory. New Mexico State University psychologist Marina Abalakina-Paap has found that people who endorse conspiracy theories are especially likely to feel angry, mistrustful, alienated from society, and helpless over larger forces controlling their lives.

Jones insists he had a "*Leave It to Beaver* childhood." I couldn't confirm such an idyllic past. When I asked if I could interview his family or childhood friends, he insisted his family was very "private" and he had not kept in touch with a single friend. When I asked if I might look them up, he became irritated. He doubted he could "still spell their names," and besides, I'd already taken up enough of his time. "I turned down 50 or 60 requests for interviews this week," he wanted me to know.

The number sounded wildly inflated. Conspiracy theorists have a grandiose view of themselves as heroes "manning the barricades of civilization" at an urgent "turning point" in history, Hofstadter held. Jones has a "messiah complex," Black contends. Grandiosity is often a defense against underlying feelings of powerlessness.

Even well-grounded skeptics are prone to connect disparate dots when they feel disempowered. In a series of studies, Jennifer Whitson of the University of Texas and Adam Galinsky of Northwestern demonstrated that people primed to feel out of control are particularly likely to see patterns in random stimuli.

Might people be especially responsive to Jones' message in today's America, marked by economic uncertainty and concerns about terrorism and government scandals? "There is a war on for your mind," Jones insists on his Web site, infowars.com. He calls his listeners "infowarriors."

Information is the conspiracy theorists' weapon of choice because if there's one thing they all agree on, it's that all the rest of us have been brainwashed. The "facts" will plainly reveal the existence of the conspiracy, they believe. And while all of us tend to bend information to fit our pre-existing cognitive schema, conspiracy theorists are more extreme. They are "immune to evidence," discounting contradictory information or seeing it as "proof of how clever the enemy is at covering things up," Goertzel says.

Conspiracy theories exist on a spectrum from mild suspicion to full-on paranoia, and brain chemistry may play a role. Dopamine rewards us for noting patterns and finding meaning in

sometimes-insignificant events. It's long been known that schizophrenics overproduce dopamine. "The earliest stages of delusion are characterized by an overabundance of meaningful coincidences," explain Paul D. Morrison and R.M. Murray of the Institute of Psychiatry at Kings College London. "Jumping to conclusions" is a common reasoning style among the paranoid, find Daniel Freeman and his colleagues, also at the Institute of Psychiatry.

Indeed, there are no coincidences in Jones' world. In a scene from *The Obama Deception*, Jones dives "into the belly of the beast," the hotel where purported conspirators will be meeting. As he begins a telephone interview, the fire alarm goes off. "The bastards have set us up," he says.

Jones says that he has been visited by the FBI and the Secret Service but can't discuss the interviews. It may be that federal agents, in fact, wanted to evaluate whether he is a threat to the president. There's no reason to believe he is—but the same can't be said of his listeners. In 2002, Richard McCaslin, carrying an arsenal of weapons, entered the Bohemian Grove, a campground in California that annually hosts a meeting of the political and business elite. He told authorities he had been planning his commando raid for a year, after (he says) hearing Jones claim that ritual infant sacrifice was taking place there.

The "war" continues. In a video promoting *The Obama Deception*, Jones urges, "We know who they are. We know what they are. We know what has to be done."

John Gartner is an author and PT blogger. Read his blog now: [The Roving Psychologist](#).

Connect the Dots

How susceptible are you to conspiracy beliefs? Rate your agreement with the statements below, from **1=strongly disagree** to **5=strongly agree**.

1. For the most part, government serves the interests of a few organized groups, such as business, and isn't very concerned about the needs of people like myself.
2. I have trouble doing what I want to do in the world today.
3. It is difficult for people like myself to have much influence in public affairs.
4. We seem to live in a pretty irrational and disordered world.
5. I don't trust that my closest friends would not lie to me.

Answer key: 5-11: weakly, 12-18: moderately, 19-25: strongly (Adapted from a scale developed by Patrick Leman)

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