**The WIRED Guide to Online Conspiracy Theories**

Everything you need to know about George Soros, Pizzagate, and the Berenstain Bears.

RADIO



<https://media.wired.com/clips/5bb529331db42174c41211c0/1080p/pass/2018-10-03-WIRED_Conspiracy_V3.mp4>

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Humans are pattern seekers. It’s how we’ve always made sense of the world: Our ancestors wouldn’t have survived if they hadn’t realized that plants tend to flourish after rainfall or that sabertooth tigers tended to eat them. But sometimes we’re just a little too good at finding meaning in the noise, occasionally unable to separate real patterns from those of our own imagining. These days, your pattern matching skills will help you find Waldo, but they are also why celebrities’ faces keep popping up on tortillas. At their most paranoid and byzantine, these pattern-matching misfires are called conspiracy theories: unfounded, deeply held alternative explanations for how things are—often invoking some shadowy, malevolent force masterminding the coverup.

Conspiracy theories thrive on the internet, but that’s certainly not where they were born. The Flat Earth Society has existed since the 1800s, and people have been speculating about which people are secretly living or dead at least since 68 AD, when Romans [weren’t convinced](https://scholar.princeton.edu/sites/default/files/Nero%20Reconsidered_0.pdf) their arsonist emperor Nero had actually committed suicide. But conspiracies and the digital world do mesh well, probably because they scratch similar itches in our not-quite-domesticated psyches. Internet culture runs on people sinking huge amounts of effort into obscure and seemingly pointless undertakings. And conspiracy theories are to people what an unsupervised toddler is to a bored border collie: It may not look quite like a sheep, but when you nip at its ankles, your brain sure feels like it’s doing its job. The combination of the endless internet and your pattern-hungry brain has managed to spread webs of red string farther than was ever before possible.

**What's a conspiracy theory? It's an unfounded, deeply held alternative explanation for how things are—often invoking some shadowy, malevolent force masterminding the coverup.**

On the web, it’s often hard to distinguish real conspiracy theories from gleefully ironic acts of collective world building—and either way, speculating about which celebs are immortal vampires and which are secretly lizards is mostly harmless fun (and excellent meme fodder). But because many dark and usually racist pre-internet conspiracies have found new homes on the web, you’re always a digital hop and a skip from the mind-bending alternate universes controlled by many of the same people responsible for our fake news crisis.



The History of Online Conspiracy Theories

The kind of conspiracy theories that wreak havoc on the internet have knowable ancestors: the conspiracies that erupt every time there’s a significant advance in communication technology. Take mass printing. *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* is a fictitious pamphlet cooked up in 1903 to spread the idea that a ghoulish Jewish cabal was bent on overthrowing the virtuous (Christian, white) nation state. Thanks to the high-speed rotary printing press, the conspiracists were able to slip it into libraries across Europe, and because people trusted their libraries, it was believed. The result: populations turning a blind eye to Russia’s Jewish pogroms, and, later, to Nazi concentration camps. Around the same time, the (also anti-Semitic) Dreyfus affair used newly cheap and reproducible lithographs to spread anti-Jewish imagery.

Then came the radio. People heard ghosts in its crackles and echoes. Enigmatic “number stations” have fascinated conspiracy theorists since World War I. (There’s a station called [the Buzzer](http://www.bbc.com/future/story/20170801-the-ghostly-radio-station-that-no-one-claims-to-run) that’s been broadcasting a continuous pulse since the 1970s—conspiracy fans think it might be part of an automated Soviet doomsday project, and that the world will end when it goes off the air.) Television was subjected to the same kind of scrutiny and symbol hunting: In the 1940s, some thought Tom and Jerry was [Nazi propaganda](https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/tv-radio/2017/01/top-children-s-tv-show-conspiracy-theories); footage of the moon landing has been checked and rechecked for evidence of fakery for decades.

Classic Internet Conspiracy Theories

* **The Berenstain Bears**
You remember reading the classic children’s books *The Berenstein Bears*, right? Wrong. Those bears weren’t Berensteins at all, but rather Berenstains. Some Berenstein truthers are so sure of their childhood memories they’ve become convinced they hail from an alternate universe—and photoshopped that pesky “ai” out of many an old snapshot to prove it.
* **Immortal Vampire Celebrities**
A number of old paintings and high-contrast, low-resolution daguerreotypes kinda sorta look like Nicolas Cage. And John Travolta, Michael Cera, Peter Dinklage, Eddie Murphy, and, most of all, Keanu Reeves. So obviously: Jack Black is really Paul Revere! Travolta can time travel, or he’s a vampire doomed to fight Cage forever! Reeves’ graceful aging is evidence of his immortality!
* **Jet Fuel Can’t Melt Steel Beams**
It’s often hard to tell where online conspiracy theory ends and meme begins, and that’s especially true of the 9/11 truther adage “Jet fuel can’t melt steel beams.” For the record the statement is technically correct—but beams don’t have to liquefy for a building to collapse. The phrase became such a popular comeback among conspiracy theorists (likely because it contains a kernel of truth, and refuting requires knowledge of the finer points of the structural integrity of steel) that it eventually morphed into a shorthand for the whole conspiracy theory mindset.
* **Modern Flat Earthers**
We are all victims of a vast “globularist” conspiracy spread by elites who don’t want you to know the truth: The planet is flat, gravity doesn’t exist, the moon and sun are the same size and orbit the north pole, and every single astronaut is a gosh darn liar. Why? Because the US faked the moon landing, duh. Why is Earth the only flat planet? It’s just unique! Why do objects fall if there’s no gravity? Listen, things just fall, OK?
* **Finland and Australia Don’t Exist**
Forget the existence of 30-some million Finnish and Australian citizens. The internet knows the real truth: Those people are actors and bots, and their countries don’t even exist. Finland, the theory goes, was invented by Japan and Russia after the Cold War to secure additional fishing rights for sushi-loving Japan. And as for Australia? The UK actually just offed those convicts rather than ship them halfway around the world.
* **The Very Bad No Good Large Hadron Collider**
We’ll admit it: Smacking subatomic particles together in an underground complex does seem like supervillain behavior. In the years leading up to the collider being turned on, many became convinced its experiments would open an Earth-gobbling black hole—and that the many delays in its construction weren’t due to its expensiveness, size, or mechanical complexity, but rather to time-traveling saboteurs trying to stop that black hole from destroying us all.
* **Seth Rich**
Democratic National Committee staffer Seth Rich was murdered in July 2016. The murder is unsolved, but law enforcement suspect Rich was the victim of a robbery gone wrong. Right-wing conspiracy theorists have a different idea: Rich was responsible for the DNC email leak, and Clinton campaign chair John Podesta had him assassinated.

With new technology comes new gaps in the public’s understanding of their world, and, for conspiracy theorists, new ways to manipulate those gaps. So the thing that makes the internet wonderful—that it is a near-endless, low-cost repository of information accessible by billions—is also what makes its so fertile for conspiracy. Early internet users were a generation trained on in-person and over-the-phone communication. Digital slang was in its infancy, the emoji that give context to chats didn’t exist, and users were faced with more information than they’d ever been exposed to before. Not only did you often confuse your peers with your ambiguous late-night typing, it was easy to wade into the web and emerge confused and overstimulated yourself.

Which brought forth communities united by laser-focused citizen sleuthing. In 1996, a spate of [anonymous word-salad gibberish](https://www.dailydot.com/society/markovian-parallax-denigrate-spam-mystery/) posts, all entitled Markovian Parallax Denigrate, flooded Usenet groups. Internet sleuths noticed that one of these messages seemed to come from controversial (and conspiracy-minded) antiwar activist Susan Lindauer, who claimed to be a CIA asset and to have reliable intel that 9/11 was an inside job. The conspiracy engines started turning and suddenly phrases like “refrigerate morphine napkin inland Janeiro nameable yearbook hark” were seen as the CIA’s digital-age take on the number station. At the same time, usenets devoted to Whitewater (a corruption probe focusing on Clinton real estate investments) sprang up and connected dots like Bill Clinton’s alleged cocaine habit, handwriting samples, and plane crashes to claim that White House deputy counsel Vince Foster’s suicide was [actually a murder](http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/tangled_web/1997/01/the_conspiracy_commerce_department.html).

When video and easily manipulable images became more common, the landscape got loopier. Admit it, you were fooled by a Photoshopped image or two back in the day. (Remember [Helicopter Shark](https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/shark-attack-2/)?) But you don’t need to start ’shopping to fall down a photographic rabbit hole. Love (or hate) a celebrity? With a few keystrokes, you can comb through just about every paparazzi photo ever taken of them and watch videos of their interviews and public appearances for hours on end until you’re positive there’s some funny business going on. An alleged aversion to pens and emoji-heavy Instagram captions convinced some that *Glee* star [Lea Michele can’t read](http://stylecaster.com/lea-michele-illiterate-conspiracy-theory/). A monomaniacal focus on Katy Perry’s eye and eyebrow shape has led some YouTubers to believe the singer is actually murdered child-pageant star JonBenét Ramsey [all grown up](http://www.nydailynews.com/life-style/conspiracy-theorists-claim-katy-perry-jonbenet-ramsey-article-1.2545246).

As internet access expanded, the massive scale of web conversation contributed to some weird delusions. Large groups innocently chatting about their childhoods have spawned some of the most enduring internet conspiracy theories. So many people are positive that they saw a [nonexistent movie called *Shazaam*](https://www.indiewire.com/2016/12/sinbad-shazaam-internet-conspiracy-theory-film-reddit-mandela-effect-1201762425/), in which comedian Sinbad supposedly played a genie. He has repeatedly denied ever starring in such a film. This collective misremembering is called the Mandela Effect because apparently heaps of people also remember Nelson Mandela dying in prison. (It’s also responsible for frequently misquoted movie lines like “Play it again, Sam” and “Luke, I am your father.”)

The same forces are at work on today’s internet, too. We may have GIFs and emoji to bring affect to our text-based messages, but, partly due to the internet’s irony-soaked culture, it’s still almost impossible to tell who is being serious. (This phenomenon is so prevalent that it’s entered the internet rule book and is now known as Poe’s Law, after a poster named Nathan Poe who was baffled by creationists and those parodizing them.) Poe’s Law is how jokes and memes jump the fence to become full-blown conspiracy theories on today’s internet. A decade ago, a [satirical post](https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/avril-lavigne-dead-conspiracy-theory/) citing some seemingly missing arm freckles and angsty lyrics, pronounced Avril Lavigne—like so many celebs before her—dead, and replaced by a dopplegänger named Melissa. In 2016, a quip about US senator Ted Cruz being the Zodiac Killer has blossomed into a mythology of its own, even though he was an infant during most of the killings. (Clues: Cruz sort of/not really looks like an old police sketch and has a slightly unsettling—perhaps serial-killer-esque, apparently—obsession with having a pantry well-stocked with cans of soup.)

Citizen sleuths—or, as some call themselves these days, citizen journalists—have only become more prevalent as access to information continues to increase. And sometimes these conspiracies do turn out to be true, like the Pixar connected universe theory, which links together dozens of Easter eggs, like recurring brand names, and split-second cameos to conclude that all Pixar films take place [in the same world](https://www.nbcnews.com/pop-culture/movies/pixar-s-one-world-theory-all-movies-are-connected-n708621). Disney finally confirmed the theory in 2017.

At the most bizarre and all-encompassing, you get the internet edition of the now centuries-old obsession with the Illuminati: a secret cabal of (sometimes alien, sometimes reptilian, sometimes alien-reptile) elites who control the world to suit their own ends by meeting in underground bunkers and operating a celebrity-murder and -cloning station headed by Queen Elizabeth II. Almost every major celebrity has been accused of being a member. Some have dealt with it skillfully by ignoring it. Others, like Facebook’s Mark Zuckerberg, who some believe to be an extraterrestrial lizard person because of his round eyes and awkward mannerisms, have played directly into conspiracy theorists hands by saying things like “I am not a lizard.” Which, of course, is what a lizard would say.

**Q Who? Tracing the rise of the baroque criminal-political conspiracy theory known as QAnon.**

**October 5, 2017:** President Trump makes an ambiguous comment about a military dinner being “the calm before the storm,” sparking conspiracist speculation.

**October 28, 2017:** An anonymous user who later claimed to be a high-level government informant writes a cryptic post bursting with far-right conspiracy bait about Hillary Clinton, Huma Abedin, and George Soros on 4chan’s infamous /pol/ board. The user is nicknamed Q, after the Department of Energy’s top-secret security-clearance level.

**October 31, 2017:** A post titled “Bread Crumbs–Q Clearance Patriot” asks rhetorical questions about POTUS, Michael Flynn, Antifa, and others.

**November 2017:** Calling themselves QAnon or the Storm, Q's followers spread a grab bag of Trump-era conspiracy tropes—part Pizzagate, part Seth Rich—on 4chan and 8chan.

**November 1, 2017:** A screenshot of “Bread Crumbs” is posted to the r/conspiracy subreddit, where it racks up nearly 600 votes and more than 500 comments over the next two months.

**November 20, 2017:** Q posts are compiled and released on Google Drive as “The Book of Q.”

**December 19, 2017:** *New York* magazine publishes an explainer on the conspiracy, noting that the QAnon hashtag had been tweeted so many times it had become untrackable.

**March 30, 2018:** Roseanne Barr tweets support for the QAnon theory that President Trump is a mastermind saving children from pedophiles. Within a day, the post amassed more than 5,000 retweets and nearly 16,000 likes.

**March 30, 2018:** Twitter posts a Moment about Barr’s tweets. The Daily Beast publishes a QAnon explainer; the next day, CNN, Newsweek, and others follow suit.

**June 24, 2018:** YouTuber Praying­medic posts a video titled “Q for Beginners.” The video has racked up more than 380,000 views.

**June 29, 2018:** Snopes reports QAnon billboards appearing in Georgia and Oklahoma.

**July 23, 2018:** The Daily Dot interviews sellers of QAnon merchandise on Amazon, Etsy, and TeeSpring.

**July 31, 2018:** QAnon devotees attend a Trump rally in Tampa, Florida, holding "We Are Q" signs.

**August 24, 2018:** Prominent QAnon promoter Michael "Lionel" Lebron poses for a photo with President Trump in the Oval Office.

**September 12, 2018:** Reddit bans the main QAnon subreddit, r/­great-awakening, for “inciting violence, harassment, and the dissemination of personal information.”

At the most disturbing, you get Pizzagate: the widely debunked theory that a secret society of pedophiles ran a child-trafficking ring out of a DC pizzeria loosely connected to former presidential candidate Hillary Clinton. Pizzagate is a good example of a relatively new conspiratogenic process. Because these days the internet can foster conspiracy by shrinking your world rather than growing it: Between algorithmically reinforced filter bubbles and topic-focused communities, it’s easy to live your life almost wholly within a conspiratorial alternate universe. Speculation inside the Pizzagate echo chamber (which got even more echoey after proponents of the theory were kicked off more mainstream platforms like Reddit) eventually reached such a pitch that a believer drove across multiple states to fire shots within the pizzeria. Fortunately no one was injured.

But really, the worst is likely yet to come. We’re facing a complete crisis of digital trust. Theories about paid “crisis actors” pretending to be disaster victims are nothing new—the black children integrating schools in Little Rock, Arkansas, in 1957 were also accused of being paid shills—but these days, crisis actor conspiracies follow every protest, every riot, every shooting. Establishing what is real and what is fake is only going to get harder. New technology that relies on machine learning can manipulate video and audio to seamlessly simulate interviews and speeches that never occurred. Similar tech has been leveraged to create “deepfakes”—nonconsensual pornography in which a victim’s face is digitally grafted onto an adult performer’s body. It doesn’t take much imagination to see how this tech could be used by propagandists to spread misinformation about celebrities, world leaders, or, really, anyone. Seeing images hasn’t been believing for a while now, but with AI-enabled fakery, nothing will be.



**The Future of Online Conspiracy**

So how do these things actually get started, and how do we stop them? Take the idea that liberal Jewish billionaire George Soros is actually an evil puppet master bent on selling out the interests of the average American for his own ends. Soros has been cast as the 21st century Elder of Zion. And if you ask certain (typically, ultra-far-right) corners of the internet, he’s bankrolled everything from the Women’s March to mass-shooting crisis actors to Pizzagate to the Snopes articles debunking these claims, for little other reason than his being liberal, a billionaire, and, of course, Jewish. So how does a swath of the internet find that credible?

It starts with the actual puppet masters: propagandists. In Soros’ case, that’s the Kremlin and American nativists whose aims are (maybe or maybe not) coincidentally aligned with Russia’s. Soros’ actual beef with both groups goes back many decades—he is a prolific funder of progressive political groups in both the US and in former Eastern Bloc nations. But really, the mythos of Soros the Boogeyman has very little to do with the man himself and everything to do with his supposed agenda: globalism. Russia wants to keep US influence away from its borders, and white supremacists and other purveyors of America First politics want a way to demonize their opposition. But they can’t just come out and say that.

**Elements of a Conspiracy Theory**

* **The Beautiful Mind**
Multiparagraph screeds (or very long YouTube videos) connect ever-unlikelier dots to come to a scandalous conclusion. Every conspiracy theory needs one of these to refer back to as a kind of digital holy text. Example: the Flat Earth Society FAQ page.
* **The Photo Comparison**
Photo collages are how conspiracy theorists try to prove that one of these things is (or isn’t) like the other. The subjects tend to be pixelated, shot from odd angles, or straight up photoshopped. Example: posts claiming the grieving families of children killed in mass shootings are crisis actors because they look similar to the parents of other slain children.
* **The Symbologist**
Of course, all these world-running secret societies need some way to communicate without being caught. Some conspiracy theorists specialize in spotting alleged secret symbols, and then posting guides so fellow sleuths can find the hidden meaning in that gesture, image, or hashtag. Example: the intense analysis of Jay-Z and Beyonce flashing triangle hand symbols representing the Eye of Providence and their Illuminati membership. Or, you know, [Jay-Z’s record label](https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/beyonces-illuminati-sign).
* **The Constant Contrary Comment**
For every article or post about a major celebrity or organization, political entity or issue, there is bound to be someone down there calling you an idiot sheep blinkered to the harsh reality of your sheeply life. Example: Seriously, just about every comments section. But especially on articles making wild claims like: “NASA has been to the Moon.”
* **The Alex Jones**
This form of conspiracy theorizing—which can occur in either video or text format, though it’s most common amongst YouTubers and guests on *Hannity*—needs no evidence to support its outlandish claims. It just needs fervor. They are so furious/hurt/scandalized/righteous about this thing you’ve never heard of but definitely should care about. You should be too. This thing is BAD. It’s SAD. It’s UNAMERICAN. That’s all you need to know. Example: Infowars, Trump tweets ending in WITCH HUNT!

Creating the illusion of populism, of being a true narrative put forth by everyday people who refuse to be hoodwinked anymore, is where their propaganda power lies. On the internet it is exceedingly easy to manufacture the illusion of popular support with bot armies and coordinated hashtag campaigns that can drive #soros and #globalism to the top of a platform’s trending topics. People who are conspiracy minded and distrustful of authority want to hear from people like themselves, and internet users’ record for being able to distinguish human from bot, earnestness from irony, genuine grassroots movement from Russian-led bamboozlement campaign is dismal.

What about folks who are a touch more skeptical? Well, credulity is context-dependent. A wild story you’d probably dismiss on a street corner sounds more plausible coming from a source you believe in. And slowly, over the past two decades, for both better and worse, the internet has won people over at the same moment that our collective faith in time-honored institutions is collapsing. Is it so outlandish to think the fluoride in the water supply is actually bad for you when stories about pharmaceutical companies paying doctors to endorse their products or Big Sugar funding organizations that demonize fat come out all the time? Even people who will dismiss what’s trending on Twitter may believe the headlines flitting across their screens—and, as you may have heard, the news ecosystem is flooded with Kremlin-linked fake news.

The internet also makes it easy to find pseudo-experts to lend credibility to your theory. As celebrities, Soros-truthers like Roseanne Barr and Infowars’ Alex Jones’ statements automatically carry authority (and hence, truthiness) for many, and social media gives them unprecedented reach. Even if you’re leery of celebrity endorsements, most people automatically trust people with PhDs and academic journal credentials. But between sketchy online journals willing to publish anything for a fee, sketchy professors willing to sound off on topics well outside their expertise for a fee, and the corporations and interest groups willing to pay them, it is very, very easy to get fooled. Propaganda experts call this “information laundering": By the time the information travels from propagandist to bot to veteran conspiracy theorists to authoritative spokesperson to *Hannity* to news articles from respected sources debunking the theory, the grimy manipulations of those first few cycles have already been washed away, drowned out by the volume of support and backlash created by the cycles following.

That process has been recycled and reconfigured for hundreds of years, and probably millennia. Trying to stop people from making up stories to support their own agendas by flagging problematic social media posts would be like trying to halt the tides with a well-placed sand castle. Because running underneath the success of all of this is a social ill that long, long predates the internet: prejudice. The Soros conspiracy theory and *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* before it (and tales of baby-eating, well-poisoning Middle Ages Jews before that) only work because people are suspicious—or really, fearful—of difference. The only antidote to such a time-tested, targeted strike is empathy and understanding. Fortunately, we have access to empathy engines centuries past didn’t have: relatively unfettered access to other (yes, global) communities, and something approaching democratic access to education. In other words, we have the internet.



**Learn More**

* [**Here’s One Way to Reform an Internet Conspiracy Theorist**](https://www.wired.com/story/reddit-conspiracy-theorist-study/?mbid=GuidesLearnMore)
There is really no arguing with a veteran conspiracy theorist. Any attempt to debunk their theories just gets incorporated into the theory itself—you’re either with the freedom fighters battling shadowy oppressors, or you’re part of the coverup. But a recent study, which analyzed 10 years of conversation and millions of posts on popular conspiracy subreddits, showed that that worldview takes some time to solidify.
* [**How Liberals Amped Up a Parkland Shooting Conspiracy Theory**](https://www.wired.com/story/how-liberals-amped-up-a-parkland-shooting-conspiracy-theory/?mbid=GuidesLearnMore)
Too often, outraged tweeters just call more attention to the thing they’re trying to pillory. That’s what happened to liberals scandalized by the far-right conspiracy theory that the outspoken high school students who survived the Parkland shooting were actually “crisis actors” hired to spread anti-gun propaganda. Repugnant? Absolutely. But the tsunami of criticism and debunkings just drove more people to the websites spinning that lie in the first place.
* [**YouTube Will Link Directly to Wikipedia to Fight Conspiracy Theories**](https://www.wired.com/story/youtube-will-link-directly-to-wikipedia-to-fight-conspiracies/?mbid=GuidesLearnMore)
Conspiracy videos do bonkers traffic on YouTube. But rather than confront their conspiratorial video creators, YouTube is outsourcing their fake news problem to Wikipedia. Yes, the understaffed nonprofit web encyclopedia whose articles are editable by just about anyone. What could possibly go wrong?
* [**Inside the Conspiracy Theory That Turned Syria’s First Responders Into Terrorists**](https://www.wired.com/2017/04/white-helmets-conspiracy-theory/?mbid=GuidesLearnMore)
The White Helmets are volunteer civilians who rush in wherever bombs fall on war-torn Syria. You’ve probably seen photographs of them pulling dusty children out of the rubble. Stand-up folks, right? Well, not according to the certain corners of the internet. Here’s how Russian foreign policy and American nativists teamed up to turn first responders into ISIS-saluting boogeymen.
* [**The Internet Protocols of the Elders of Zion**](https://www.wired.com/2017/03/internet-protocols-elders-zion/?mbid=GuidesLearnMore)
Some conspiracy theories long predate the internet, but few have as genuine a claim to antiquity as the idea that a cabal of sinister Jews is out to take over the world and/or eat your baby and poison your well with plague. The root of this conspiracy? Anti-Semitism. And despite all the time that’s passed since the Black Death, anti-Semitism and its chosen conspiracy theory formula are still alive and well—and taking over the internet.
* [**To Make Your Conspiracy Theory Legit, Find an ‘Expert’**](https://www.wired.com/2017/05/conspiracy-theory-experts/?mbid=GuidesLearnMore)Bots are an effective tool to create the illusion of vast popular support, but they won’t convince anyone a cockeyed theory is true—they just fluff the confidence of existing truthers. To win over skeptics, conspiracy theories need to create an air of legitimacy. But for theories held together by cobwebs made of coincidence and finger pointing, that can be hard to pull off. Unless, of course, you can find yourself an expert.

*This guide was last updated on October 4, 2018.*