

From flat earth to the lying media

Why conspiracy theories are a problem and
what parents and professionals can do about it



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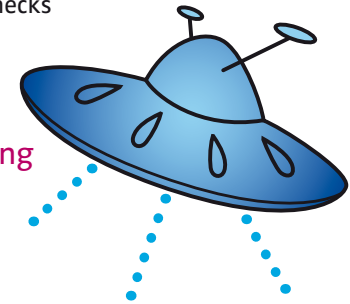
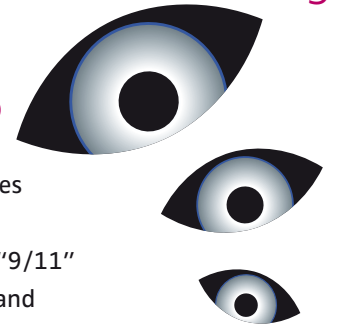
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Introductory remarks

Foto: StMAS / Elias Hassos



Dear parents, conspiracy theories appear to offer simple explanations, especially in difficult times. They appeal especially to young people and attempt

to divide society with their friend-enemy scheme. Knowing the alleged solution to all of the world's problems is tempting for some young people. That is dangerous, since conspiracy theories exclude and defame people. It is how extremist groups in particular try to sow discord – also with anti-Semitic conspiracy tales, for example. They allege that Jews are striving for world domination and that the State of Israel is to blame for all the evil in the world.

It is therefore our task to make our children strong, so strong that they quickly see through conspiracy theories, lies and fake news and do not let themselves be taken in by extremist groups.

I wish you an informative read – and that the new brochure will help you with your children in everyday media use.

You can find more information about conspiracy theories and prevention projects on our ministry's website: www.radikalisierungspraevention.bayern.de/AktiongegenVerschwoerungsmythen

Ulrike Scharf

Bavarian Ministry for Family, Labour and Social Affairs

Foto: BLM / Gaby Hartmann



Conspiracy theories or selective disinformation are as old as humanity itself. What is new is how it is spreading on such a massive scale and at such speed

since the age of digitalisation. During the Coronavirus crisis, this trend intensified or at least became more pronounced as new "theories" about the virus emerged. Many conspiracy theories are characterised by hatred and propaganda, fear and violence. They are often based on an extremist or anti-Semitic ideology. Doubts and fears are stoked, xenophobic feelings are kindled. Conspiracy theories arouse or reinforce radical attitudes, feelings of hatred or a propensity to violence and are therefore a problem. This is true both for our society as a whole, but especially for children and young people. The majority of cases concern media content that can impair or endanger their development, especially when they relate closely to their everyday lives. The same is true of some fake news, though a balance must always be struck with freedom of expression, which is also a valuable asset.

And even if some of this seems to be absurd and therefore harmless at first glance, it is often easy to stray onto a more dangerous path, especially in a global network like the Internet. Some people are unintentionally and gradually drawn into a general conspiracy belief that they may find difficult to escape from again.

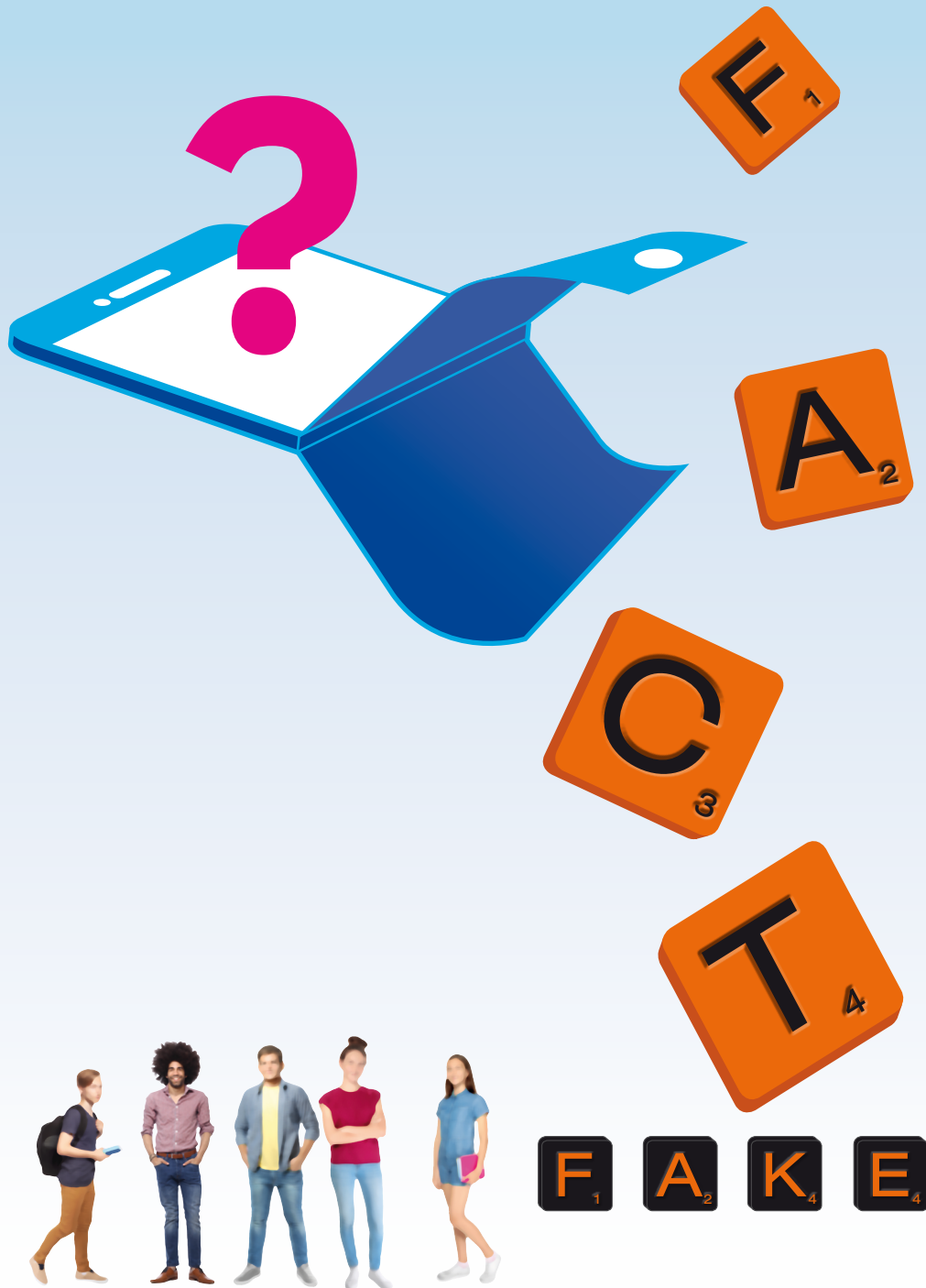
This brochure aims to raise awareness among parents, professionals and other interested parties; it was produced in tried and tested collaboration between the "Bayerische Landeszentrale für neue Medien (BLM)" and "Aktion Jugendschutz Bayern". It describes popular conspiracy theories and provides examples of fake news. It explains why these may be problematic for children and young people. And it makes various practical suggestions for how to deal with them.

We hope you find this magazine informative and we are sure you will find it contains useful suggestions for everyday media life with children and young people.

If nothing else, we want to use this brochure to take a stand against extremism and anti-Semitism and for solidarity, empathy and mutual respect in our society.

Dr. Thorsten Schmiede

President of Bayerische Landeszentrale für neue Medien (BLM)



1 Confronting conspiracy theories in everyday life

We all know them

In some way or other, we all encounter conspiracy theories in everyday life or in the media – for example:

- ▶ You are chatting with neighbours on the street and are suddenly confronted with the claim that the Corona-virus vaccination is life-threatening and even fatal in two out of every three cases.
- ▶ At lunch with colleagues someone starts to get worked up about “the lying press” or “the lying media”, claiming it is one-sided and manipulative and that its reports are dictated by the government.
- ▶ A relative you haven’t heard from in a long time suddenly writes long emails to family mailing lists claiming that the earth is flat and climate change is a lie – complete with further reading recommendations and Internet links.
- ▶ Mailboxes are filled with leaflets from political groups using radical words and pictures to warn against the “mass immigration of illegal invaders” and “the great replacement”, planned by secret powers, primarily by “world Jewry”.

CONSPIRACY THEORIES, FAKE NEWS ETC. WHAT IS MEANT BY THIS?

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Conspiracy theories are based on the assumption that evil forces plot in secret to harm others. The term conspiracy myth is often used, too. In any case, such theories have nothing to do with science. Much is invented or lines are blurred between fact and fiction.

However, there are followers who sincerely believe in such myths and spread conspiracy narratives or conspiracy ideologies, as they are also known, out of a sense of conviction.

Real conspiracies do still exist of course. But unlike conspiracy theories that cannot be accounted for and that remain in circulation for an indefinite period of time, real conspiracies are eventually exposed, for example by journalists, and usually end up in the public domain.

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Fake news is deliberately “falsified news” disseminated in the media and on the Internet, primarily in social media networks. Its creators use it to achieve certain goals, such as to spread their own political convictions. It may also be based on economic, financial or criminal intentions. An intention to deceive always lies behind fake news. The aim is to unsettle, influence or manipulate people.

Fake news is supposed to look like real news, but contains falsified claims and/or images.

Conspiracy theories and fake news are linked, for example, fake news can encourage the emergence of conspiracy narratives or be embedded in them.

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According to the German dictionary “Duden”, the term **“disinformation”** describes “deliberately false information for the purpose of deception”. But it is also used frequently as an umbrella term for conspiracy theories and fake news.

What all of these terms have in common is that they refer to media content that cannot be trusted and that can cause harm. Something that people should bear in mind when confronted by it.

What is it like for children and young people?

Many young people also come into contact with fake news and conspiracy theories, for example, in the media.

According to the JIM (Youth, Information, Media) study from 2021, more than half of all respondents aged between 12 and 19 years reported that they had encountered extreme political views and conspiracy theories on the Internet. 47 % noticed insulting comments, for example, in social media networks, and almost 50 % had experienced fake news.

Children are also confronted by problems and risks in the media, primarily digital media such as the Internet.

However, the latest KIM (“Children, Internet, Media”) study does not contain anything to indicate that media content in the form of conspiracy theories or fake news is already an issue among children. Since the Coronavirus pandemic, however, it can be assumed that young people have also noticed types of disinformation in their everyday lives – directly or indirectly from siblings, parents or friends. Families everywhere experienced significant restrictions and pressures during this time. Intense and

controversial discussions about the pros and cons of measures therefore took place and still continue. This is especially true when children are affected (keyword: “masks”, “tests”, “vaccinations”).

Simple answers are sought to difficult questions. And conspiracy theories and fake news can easily be misunderstood as simple answers.

Conspiracy theories have been around for a long time

Conspiracy theories are nothing new. They have been around for a long time.

However, there is at least a sense that they have become more widespread because of the Internet. And this trend has been further exacerbated by the Coronavirus pandemic. Conspiracy narratives and their followers have become more visible as a result. The virus and its handling in politics and society has therefore led to fears, worries or crises for many people – and in times of crisis people tend to turn towards conspiracy theories.



2 Examples of conspiracy theories and fake news and how to recognise them

Conspiracy theories at a glance

Many conspiracy narratives seem so absurd at first glance that they may not be taken seriously – for example, when it is claimed that the earth is flat or extraterrestrial lizard people want to take over our planet. In other cases, though, they can lead to speculation: True or not?

So what are the popular conspiracy theories and how can they be recognised?

Well-known conspiracy theories (selection)

“9/11”

Rather than Islamist assassins, the arms industry or the US government itself was allegedly responsible for the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on 11 September 2001 in the US.

“The Reptiloids”

Reptilian aliens (“reptiloids”) allegedly want to infiltrate humanity to take over the Earth. They are said to be especially prevalent in high-level political and business circles, etc. Politicians like Angela Merkel, Barack Obama or Hillary Clinton are in reality not human, but “reptiloids”.

“Chemtrails”

Contrails from airplanes in the sky are actually said to be chemicals used to influence or poison people and/or the climate.

“Reichsbürger” (literally, “citizens of the Reich”)

“Reichsbürger” believe in the continued existence of the historical German Reich. They do not recognise the existence of the Federal Republic of Germany and reject the legal system and representatives of the FRG, often violently. They do not feel bound by the applicable laws.

“Flat earth”

According to this legend, the earth is not spherical, rather is shaped like a plane or disc. It is argued that something is only “real” if people can perceive it with their own senses. The pretence of the earth as a sphere is supposed to have originated from the addiction to power and prestige of a global elite, who wanted to use it to keep people away from God.

“Staged moon landings”

The American landings on the moon in 1969 to 1972 allegedly did not take place, rather were staged by the US space agency NASA and the US government. Everything is supposed to have been shot by NASA in a film studio.

“The Great Replacement”

“The Great Replacement” is said to be a secret plan aimed at replacing the white majority population with Muslim immigrants. Right-wing extremists use this myth as a battle cry.

“The Great Reset”

Conspiracy followers have reinterpreted the World Economic Forum’s actual proposals for changing and making the economy more sustainable after the Coronavirus pandemic, referred to as “The Great Reset”, into the conspiracy narrative “The Great Reset – The Great Upheaval.”

According to the theory, a global financial elite is planning a new world economic order and justifying this with the Covid 19 pandemic.

“Lügenpresse / Lügenmedien” (literally, “lying media”)

Newspapers, TV stations, etc. are accused of deliberately spreading misinformation in order to influence and manipulate people in a one-sided way.

“Climate change hysteria”

According to this myth, man-made climate change and a climate crisis do not exist; this has simply been invented by researchers to spread hysteria and panic and to obtain funding.

“New World Order”

According to the “New World Order” (NWO) myth, a secret, global elite wants to take control of all mankind. This is based on the belief that the world is controlled by an authoritarian, transnational world government. Depending on the variant of the conspiracy narrative, the US government, the Israeli secret service, illuminati, freemasons, extraterrestrials or the supposed “Jewish world conspiracy” are suspected to be behind it.

“QAnon: Ritual killings of children”

QAnon (also known as “Q” for short) is a conspiracy ideology that originated in the United States in 2017 and whose following has also grown significantly in Germany since the Coronavirus pandemic. “Q” is the synonym for a person or group that poses as a pro-government whistleblower and claims that a secret elite (“Deep State”) rules the world from underground. Children are kidnapped and tortured in order to obtain “adrenochrome” from their blood as an intoxicant and rejuvenating agent for the rich and powerful.

“Conspiracy theories about infectious diseases”

Conspiracy theories about infectious diseases are not new and are repeated almost with every new emerging disease. Witches or Jews were blamed for the plague in the Middle Ages, the immunodeficiency disease AIDS was described as an invention of the pharmaceutical industry and Ebola was bred as a bioweapon in the laboratory. Many of these earlier conspiracy narratives have now also resurfaced in connection with COVID-19. One of the claims is that the Coronavirus is a pretext to strengthen the pharmaceutical lobby, to reduce the world’s population or even to be able to control it by implanting a chip during vaccinations.

Overview based on information from the Bayerisches Landesamt für Verfassungsschutz (BayLfV, “Bavarian Office for the Protection of the Constitution”), the “Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung” (Federal Agency for Civic Education), the “Landeszentrale für politische Bildung Baden-Württemberg” (State Centre for Political Education Baden-Württemberg), and klicksafe (see list of references, pages 41/42)

The overview clearly shows: **Conspiracy theories** have **typical characteristics**, which generally allow them to be recognised:

- Negative underlying mood, often characterised by fear and anger
- Suspicion that something bad is happening in secret (motto: “nothing is what it appears”), belief in a secret plan driven by evil forces that want to deceive or harm people
- Casting doubt on politics, the state, science, the media, etc.
- Searching for and denouncing “manipulators” or “culprits”
- Division of the world into “good” and “evil”, “victim” and “perpetrator”, “below” and “above”
- Illogical passages, gaps, contradictions
- Reinterpretation of counterarguments or proof to the contrary to support the conspiracy belief (“closed world view”)
- No indication of sources or use of dubious sources

This shows: Even if some conspiracy theories seem to be harmless at first glance, the fact that they are mainly spread today via the Internet and social media means that it just takes a few clicks to go from believing in a “flat earth” or “lizard people” to being convinced of a “lying media”, an “evil secret government” or a “Jewish world conspiracy”. It is easy to become really entangled in such a “closed world view” and difficult to find a way out again. Because conspiracy narratives can also lead to radicalisation and increased willingness to use violence, this is a serious problem.

CONSPIRACY THEORIES

WHY DO PEOPLE BELIEVE IN THEM

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- Conspiracy theories seem to offer simple answers to difficult questions, complicated situations or bad events in the world. In this way they can give their supporters something to hold on to, even if they do not provide any real, sustained help. Conspiracy narratives therefore spread especially quickly in times of crisis.
- The conspiracy belief can provide a sense of relief and offer justification for own actions.
- It makes conspiracy believers feel "special" to belong to a minority that alone knows the supposed truth – in contrast to the "gullible" majority.
- Some conspiracy followers see themselves as missionaries in the name of good. They want to do a service for humanity or they feel good thinking they are educating others and taking action against perceived wrongdoers.
- If someone believes in one conspiracy narrative, they are quite likely to also believe in others.

Fake news at a glance

Fake news and conspiracy myths are not the same but are closely related. Fake news can therefore be a feature of conspiracy narratives or can lead to their emergence and people then actually believe in them. Both are forms of disinformation.

Fake news often relates to topics such as "diseases" (Coronavirus etc.), "migration", "climate", "environment and economy", "politics" "police" and "Europe" (see <https://correctiv.org/faktencheck/>).

Typical examples of fake news

FAKE on the topic of the Coronavirus: During the Coronavirus pandemic, the headlines were dominated by claims that, based on the latest data, Covid-19 vaccinations would not actually help, rather kill people. Or the assertion that the Ex-Pfizer Vice President was of the opinion that a Coronavirus child vaccination would be murder. It was also suggested that the Coronavirus vaccination and lockdown would lead to a targeted population reduction.

FAKE on the topic of climate change: Some media sources question the existence of climate change and claim that it is a fallacy or lie. Or the suggestion is spread that the real goal of the Greens is a climate dictatorship leading to a new world order.

FAKE on the topic of migration: It is claimed that the refugee crisis is actually a planned population replacement. Another theory is that a global pact on migration would lead to tyranny.

Fake news not only exists in text form, however. Photos, videos, graphics or memes (small media contents disseminated online, for example, pictures with short text) can also be an element of fake news. It is not uncommon for pictures to be used that originate in different contexts and have nothing to do with the content of the "news". Sometimes, the photos themselves are also changed or manipulated.

Fake news generally also has **typical characteristics**, that allow it to be identified:

- Frequent dramatisation and scandalisation of events
- Frequently lurid headlines and an agitated, highly emotional language style with exaggerations, abbreviations and exclamation marks
- Serious appearance: the appearance of serious news is often portrayed, where fake news comes across in a supposedly credible news style or imitates journalistic formats. For example, it is presented in the form of news stories in a studio or sources are quoted which, however, are either not serious or not appropriate. Fake news is also sometimes circulated by bodies that sound serious, but are not.
- Form of question: fake news is sometimes also introduced in the form of questions. Asking questions basically works well at first and looks like a critical examination of a topic. But the questions are often not real, rather are leading questions. Such questions steer thoughts and answers in a certain direction from the outset and therefore have a manipulative effect. Asking provocative leading questions is a frequent trick used by fake news in order to spread false claims in the world disguised as questions.

Fake news is usually easy to verify by fact checks and can therefore be quickly exposed (► see page 33).

③ Why can conspiracy theories and fake news be a problem especially for children and young people?

Studies show that many young people are exposed to fake news and conspiracy theories in the media – for example in social media networks. Many conspiracy narratives address topics that also affect children and young people in particular and play a major role in their everyday lives. This can become a problem for them.

Examples from youth media protection

► Coronavirus

There is no shortage of conspiracy theories and fake news about the Coronavirus. There is a joining of forces here to some extent by conspiracy believers from different areas. The topics here include the supposed dangers of wearing masks, testing and vaccinating. These are a few examples: Wearing masks causes self-poisoning, there are dangerous chemicals on the test strips used for swabbing, vaccinations are dangerous, the government wants to use them to harm people.

The Coronavirus crisis has left its mark on the lives of children and young people. All have been personally affected by the pandemic, all have experienced stress and pressure. This has led to great uncertainty, worries and distress among parents and children. And when media content is added to this, which fuels fears and doubts and creates stereotypical images of the enemy, the effect can become more intense. Lurking behind such claims also is a fundamental rejection of the state, government and central principles of our free and democratic basic order. What's more, fake news and conspiracy narratives in relation to the Coronavirus are often presented in the style of news. This makes it harder for children and young people, in particular, to differentiate between fact and fiction, which can intensify fear and uncertainty.



► QAnon: "Ritual killings of children"

The conspiracy legend of the US movement QAnon is based on the assumption of a secret government in the US that abuses and murders children and drinks their blood as an intoxicant and rejuvenating agent. Children are depicted here as victims. Kidnappings and extreme acts of violence, from torture to killings, are described in sometimes extreme words. In addition to this, there is a connection with right-wing extremist and anti-Semitic ideas.

If children and young people are exposed to this conspiracy narrative, it can cause them significant anxiety and distress. It is often conveyed in a supposedly serious news style along with personal reports from high profile followers of QAnon. This makes it difficult for children and young people in turn to differentiate between reality and fiction.

► „Lügenmedien“ (literally, "lying media")

Conspiracy narratives often claim that the "Lügenmedien" are at play. The media is controlled by the state or "by the system" and deliberately spreads untruths. Such a claim can do a lot of damage, because it calls into question the freedom of the press and therefore underlying principles of our free and democratic basic order. The media plays a significant role in the lives of children and young people today. The "Lügenmedien" myth can make them insecure in forming their political opinion and in their belief in democracy. The terms "Lügenmedien" and "Lügenpresse" are typical slogans of the right-wing extremist scene and were also used in this way in the past.

Conspiracy myths and fake news can be frightening

The examples show that conspiracy myths often involve media services in which other people are attacked, insulted, devalued or excluded. Such media content is frequently bleak and characterised by threat scenarios, fear, anger, hatred and violence. This can express itself, for example, in anti-Semitism or Xenophobia and even racism. Such content can make children and young people anxious and upset them. The same is true of certain fake news.

Children and young people need special protection

Media content is never the sole cause of people's attitudes or behaviours. But it can have a compounding effect. This applies to all of us, but especially to children and young people. They are still developing and still forming their values and their view of the world and people. They therefore often need special protection, in respect of media too.

Particular attention must be paid to "at-risk" adolescents in at-risk groups. These include, for example, children and young people from families where there is already a conspiracy mentality or a tendency to violence that they may have grown up with. Problematic media content can have a particular effect in this respect. It can further intensify existing attitudes. However, youth media protection also has to take special account of children and young people who are left to their own devices and get no support and guidance when it comes to media usage or who are set no boundaries when it comes to the media.

Youth-friendly presentation and cool role models are especially attractive

Children and young people seek guidance everywhere, also in the media. They are particularly interested in media offerings that closely relate to their living environment and everyday lives, that they can identify with, and that provide them with role models. Role models from the worlds of music and sport, in particular, but also the Internet, such as YouTube stars, influencers etc. play a major role for adolescents. If conspiracy ideologies and fake news are presented by such stars and in a manner that appeals to youth, then this is especially attractive for children and young people.

Proving the effect of media is not necessary when it comes to protecting minors from harmful media

In terms of youth media protection, there is no requirement to prove that some media content can have a negative impact on children and young people. Even the presumption of this is enough for providers to have to take measures to protect youth.

When it comes to fake news in particular, this means: fact checks do not have to be done first to prove that fake news actually exists. Media content, therefore also fake news, has an immediate impact as soon as it is encountered. The key factor in terms of the effect of fake news on adolescents is therefore its design, its content in images, text or sound, which can frighten and cause uncertainty.

But the uncertainty can be particularly significant and far-reaching if fake news is believed to be reality.

Striking a balance between protecting minors from harmful media and freedom of expression

It is nonetheless always important, especially with conspiracy myths and fake news, to balance the protection of minors from harmful media with other major legally protected rights. This is primarily the case for freedom of expression which, just like youth protection, is a precious asset. In many cases, the balance weighs in favour of youth protection, in others freedom of expression.

9/11 –
Great Replacement –
Jewish World Conspiracy –
Great Reset –
Climate Change Hysteria –
QAnon: Ritual Killings of Children –
Lügenpresse –
Reichsbürger –
New World Order –



④ What do conspiracy theories have to do with anti-Semitism?

Anti-Semitism features in many conspiracy theories

Many conspiracy theories – if not all – involve dislike or hostility towards the Jewish population in some form or other. A central feature of conspiracy theories is seeking to blame others for grievances in order to exonerate oneself and justify one's own actions. Evil powers are suspected of acting to the detriment of others by furtively pulling the strings in the background. People of Jewish faith are a common and long-standing stereotypical image of the enemy.

Anti-Semitism in codes and ciphers

Many people are not aware that a large percentage of conspiracy theories are at least partly anti-Semitic. That's because the anti-Semitism is not always obvious. "The Jews" are not always openly named as an enemy. Instead, hatred towards Jews may be covertly present and manifest itself in the form of "codes" and "ciphers". Typical codes for "the Jews" include, for example, "the Rothschilds", "the Zionists", or "the American East Coast Elite".

There are also many different versions of the same conspiracy theories. And among others these often include an anti-Semitic variant.

Examples: from the “Jewish world conspiracy” to “9/11”

► Legend of the “Jewish world conspiracy”

The old myth of the “Jewish world conspiracy” or “world Jewry” – that Jews allegedly want to take over the world – is openly anti-Semitic. The “**Protocols of the Elders of Zion**”, first published in 1903 by authors who are unknown to the present day, was a document that allegedly proved the plans of influential people of the Jewish faith to take over the world. Although the document quickly emerged as fabrication, it remained popular. The National Socialist regime in Germany in the Third Reich used the “Protocols of the Elders of Zion” as a basis of legitimacy for anti-Semitic measures and even the murder of millions of Jews throughout Europe. The myth of the “Jewish world conspiracy” continues to exist in current variants and merges with other conspiracy theories. For example, it can be found in the **legend of “The Great Replacement”** where it is claimed that Jewish people allegedly controlled the immigration of Muslim migrants into Europe in order to replace the Christian population of Europe for a Muslim population.

► QAnon “Ritual killings of children”

While not apparent to everyone at first glance, elements of the conspiracy theories within the QAnon movement are

anti-Semitic. Behind the myth that a secret elite torture and kill children to obtain an intoxicant and rejuvenating agent (adrenochrome) from their blood lies a variant of the **ritual murder legend from the Middle Ages**.

This legend claimed that people of Jewish faith murdered small children for religious rituals. The mysterious “QAnon” or “Q” also continually refers in its communications to Jewish people – such as “the Rothschilds”, where the Jewish banking family is used to denote “the Jews” – as alleged conspirators.

► 9/11

An anti-Semitic variant also exists among the conspiracy theories about the attacks on the World Trade Center on 11 September 2001 (9/11), all of which are based on the assumption that the masterminds were not Islamists. According to these theories, the Israeli secret service and/or the Jewish Rothschild banking family were behind the attacks. The alleged proof is the false claim that there were no Jews among the almost 3000 victims.

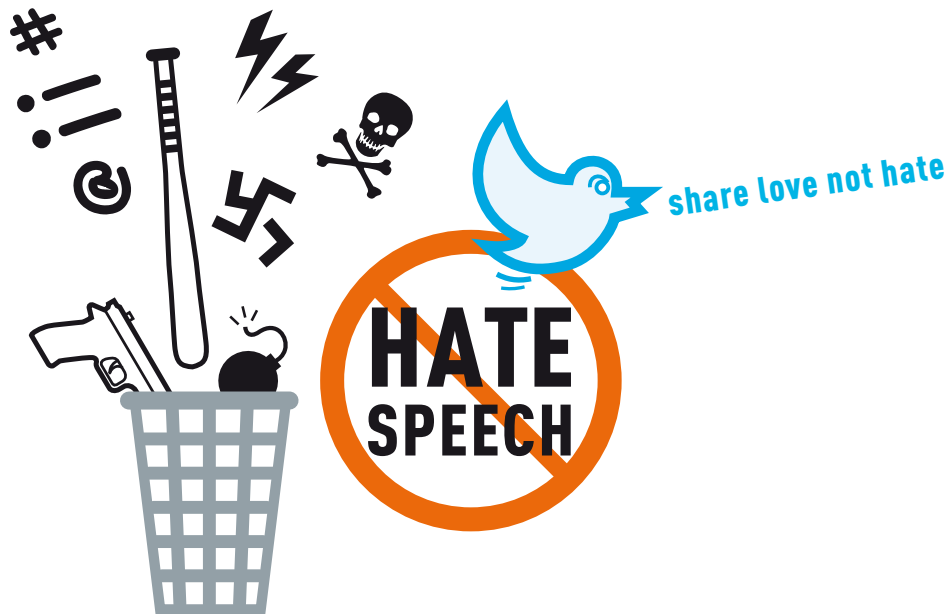


Conspiracy belief can intensify feelings of hatred and readiness to use violence

Belief in conspiracy theories can intensify radical attitudes, feelings of hatred and readiness to use violence among some people and can contribute to actual assaults and violence against population groups, e. g. Jews. Conspiracy theories are therefore associated with real danger.

At the same time, it is worth remembering that not all conspiracy theories are anti-Semitic, or that not all conspiracy believers are anti-Semitic or extremist.

But: Because the narratives are closely interwoven, people can be drawn into a fundamental conspiracy belief even through seemingly harmless myths and become followers of conspiracy theories that have anti-Semitic, racist and extremist elements.



5 What can be done to combat conspiracy theories and fake news?

Prevention is important

Dealing with people who believe in conspiracy myths is not easy, especially if they are already deeply embedded in a belief in conspiracies and if they have withdrawn or become radicalised to such an extent that they are no longer “reachable”. It can put family ties and friendships to a serious test or even destroy them.

But it can also be prevented to some degree. The media, and especially social media and messenger services, play a significant role in the dissemination of conspiracy narratives and fake news and in the emergence of conspiracy beliefs. It is therefore important to support children and young people in their use of media and to prepare them and create an awareness of the possible pitfalls. The following can help here:

Note

For readers of this brochure who are interested in the links mentioned, we recommend that you download the digital edition at

<https://bayern.jugendschutz.de/de/material/index.php>

You can then quickly and conveniently access the relevant pages on the Internet with just one click and get further information.



Making use of available services and materials

There are many good services and materials on conspiracy theories and fake news to support children and young people in their everyday media usage, for example:

- ▶ **Website and materials offered by “klicksafe – EU initiative for more safety on the net”:**
www.klicksafe.de/verschwörungstheorien und
www.klicksafe.de/themen/problematische-inhalte/fake-news/,
 incl. klicksafe info sheet on “Identifying conspiracy theories”,
 “klicksafe fake news quiz” and much more
- ▶ **Videos on conspiracy theories and fake news from “Aktion Jugendschutz Landesarbeitsstelle Bayern”, on the YouTube channel of aj Bayern:**
www.youtube.com/channel/UC3ZnDyrmKH3OK8q0FBDwkbQ
- ▶ **Services offered by state media authorities, e.g. “Landesanstalt für Medien NRW” (Media Authority of North Rhine-Westphalia):**
www.medienanstalt-nrw.de/themen/desinformation.html
- ▶ **Bayerische Landeszentrale für neue Medien (BLM):**
www.blm.de/verschwörungstheorien,
 Topic “Conspiracy theories and fake news”
- ▶ **Services offered by the “Stiftung Medienpädagogik Bayern”:**
 e.g. parents’ evenings hosted by the foundation’s Bavarian Media Education Speaker Network on the topic of “Fake news and disinformation” (for parents of primary school children aged between 10 and 14 years):
www.stiftung-medienpaedagogik-bayern.de/Projekte/Medienpaedagogisches_Referentennetzwerk_Bayern/161_Angebot_im_Ueberblick.htm

- ▶ **Services offered by the “Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung” (www.bpb.de) and the “Landeszentrale für politische Bildung Baden-Württemberg”, e. g. Landeszentrale für politische Bildung Baden-Württemberg (lpb):**
 Classroom handout: “Machs klar! Politik – einfach erklärt: Verschwörungs-‘Theorien’... nicht nur zu Corona” (for teachers and students at secondary schools):
www.lpb-bw.de/verschwörungstheorien
www.lpb-bw.de/machs-klar
- ▶ Other possible points of contact can be found in “Information on further reading” on page 36.

Strengthening information literacy

Prevention on the topic of disinformation also means strengthening the information literacy of children and young people. This can be done quite easily, for example, by viewing and discussing age-appropriate news together with children. Good children’s news shows include, for instance, the nightly TV program “logo!” on the ARD and ZDF children’s channels; also available in the media library and suitable for children of advanced primary-school age. The same is true of the children’s radio programme “KiRaKa”, shown daily on WDR 5 or online in the livestream, which also contains news, among other content. Other news shows for children can also be found via child search engines on the Internet such as “Blinde Kuh” or “fragFINN”.

Acting as a role model for children and young people

Prevention also means acting as a good role model for children and young people: in relation to media usage, dealing with

conspiracy ideologies and fake news, but also more. It includes using media in a discriminating manner and setting media rules in the family that everyone should adhere to as far as possible. It can also include finding ways to deal with conspiracy beliefs in the family and among acquaintances or colleagues, by listening to others while remaining true to yourself. It can be helpful to practise argumentation training or counterspeech, for example at school or in the context of youth activities. This can offer young people a possible way to respond to conspiracy narratives in their circle of friends or among classmates – with the help of adults if necessary. However, being a role model also means conveying very basic positive values such as empathy, helpfulness and respect.

Tips for conversations with conspiracy believers

- Ask questions, for example:
Why do you think that? What makes you think that?
- First listening properly to the discussion partner, even if this is difficult
- Try to see things from the other person's standpoint
- Do not attack or devalue, remain as factual as possible; show emotions, if necessary, at the very outset
- Stay on topic and do not let yourself be diverted
- Find common ground but still take a stand if you feel your boundaries are crossed
- Remember: Freedom of expression also means resisting contradiction and counter-opinions – and this applies to both sides
- If none of this helps: Adjourn the conversation and continue later



If you come across conspiracy myths and fake news in the media, the following may prove useful:

With fake news: Carrying out fact checks

Fact checks can help to expose and refute parts of conspiracy narratives. They are primarily helpful, however, with fake news, which is generally easily verifiable and refutable. Fact checks can also prove to be a good approach with older children and young people, but not typically for younger children. Good places for fact checks include, for example:

- „ARD-Faktenfinder“ on the news program “Tagesschau” (ARD)
www.tagesschau.de/faktenfinder/
- #Faktenfuchs from the regional public service broadcaster “Bayerischer Rundfunk”
<https://www.br.de/nachrichten/faktenfuchsfaktencheck,QzSlz13>
- „Mimikama“ (www.mimikama.at), from the Austrian association for education on Internet abuse
- CORRECTIV – Recherchen für die Gesellschaft (<https://correctiv.org/faktencheck/>), donation-based research centre in Germany

Reporting media contents

If you notice problematic media content in relation to conspiracy narratives and fake news or other such content, you can report this to various bodies. Responsibility for private broadcasting (television or radio) and Internet providers in Germany lies with the German **media authority**. Tip-offs from the general public are important for its work.

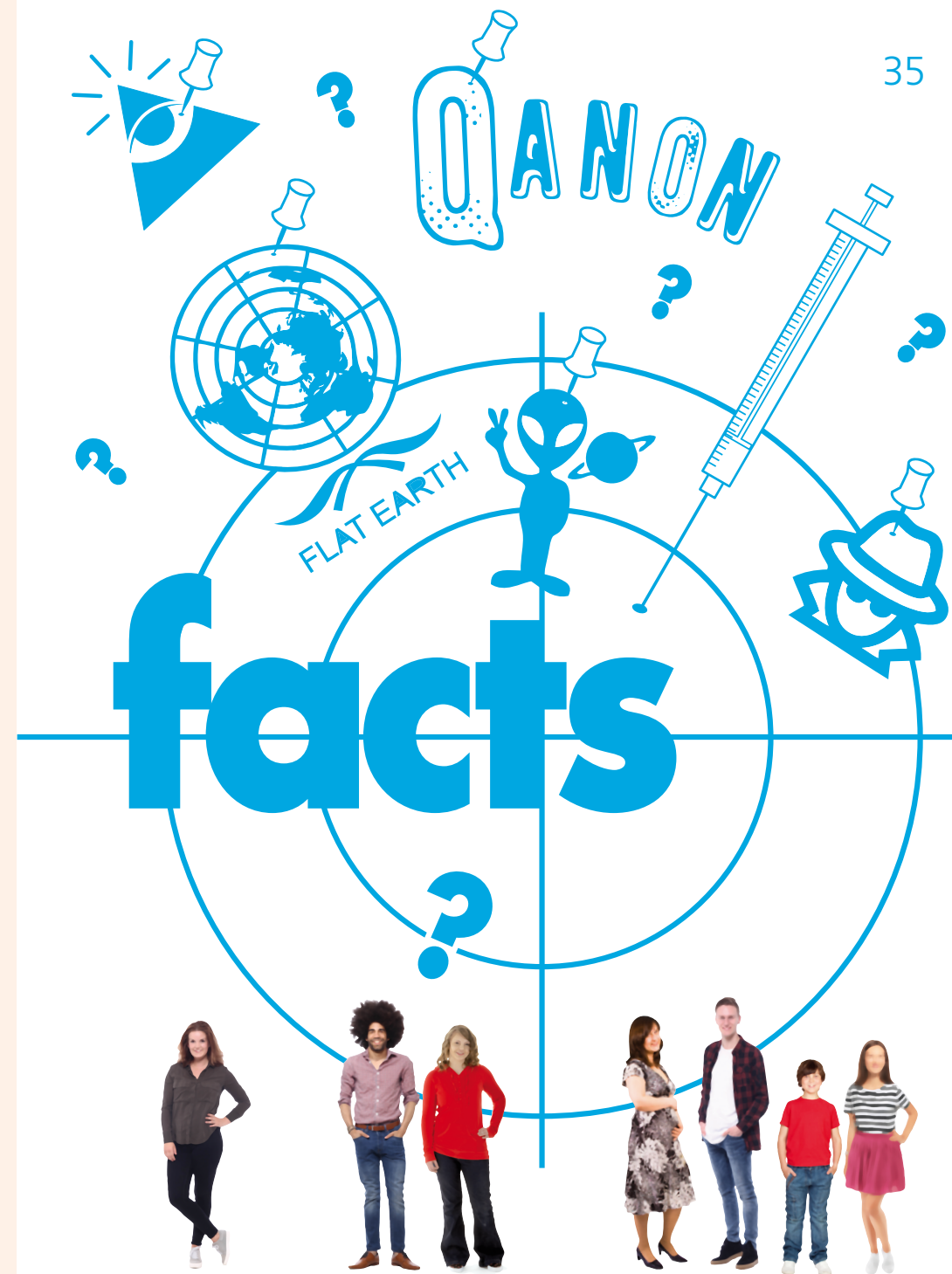
Possible contact points:

- **Kommission für Jugendmedienschutz (KJM)**
(Commission for the Protection of Minors in the Media);
this state media authority body can be contacted via email
at kjm@die-medienanstalten.de
 - **Bayerische Landeszentrale für neue Medien (BLM)**,
unter www.blm.de/service/beschwerde.cfm
oder per E-Mail an buergeranfragen@blm.de
- If criminal content is suspected, incidents can be reported
to the **police**.

Debunking and counterspeech: What is that?

- „**Debunking**“ means to expose, unmask or refute, and is a strategy used to rebut and disprove conspiracy myths. This can be done, for instance, with the aid of fact checks, by checking sources and using counterarguments. Debunking is primarily suited if you have already engaged intensively with a conspiracy story and are well acquainted with it.
- „**Counterspeech**“ is a strategy to confront hate speech. It therefore involves opposing and countering conspiracy narratives and fake news – also publicly if necessary.

Debunking and counterspeech are not a panacea for convincing conspiracy believers to change their minds. However, they are strategies for stopping or curbing them when it comes to disseminating conspiracy theories and at least for not allowing such myths to go unchallenged. This can be an important signal primarily for others who might be involved.





Further information

Advice and contact points



Aktion Jugendschutz Landesarbeitsstelle Bayern e.V.

AJ Bayern is the Bavarian expert institution for the educational protection of children and young people. It facilitates the transfer of knowledge between science and practice, develops innovative concepts and service offerings, trains and advises specialists, creates and publishes specialist literature and working aids and informs and creates awareness among parents and all those who live, work and spend their free time with children and young people.

► www.bayern.jugendschutz.de/



Bayerisches Bündnis für Toleranz – Demokratie und Menschenwürde schützen

The alliance advocates tolerance and the protection of democracy and human dignity and promotes these values. Right-wing extremism, anti-Semitism and racism, which threaten the individual, society and the state, are countered positively by the "Bayerisches Bündnis für Toleranz" through these values. The member organisations of the "Bayerisches Bündnis für Toleranz" fight right-wing extremist, anti-Semitic and racist attitudes, positions and actions, but not the people behind these ideas and activities.

► www.bayerisches-buendnis-fuer-toleranz.de/



Bayerisches Staatsministerium für
Familie, Arbeit und Soziales



Bavarian State Ministry for Family, Labour and Social Affairs: Prevention of radicalisation

A central focus of the Bavarian Ministry for Social Affairs is the prevention of radicalisation with the aim of strengthening young people against radicalisation and extremism. The principle can be described as "Prevention through empowerment". Prevention of radicalisation therefore focuses on strengthening

young people and their social environment against radical ideologies with a comprehensive understanding of protection. Young people themselves, but also their parents and professionals, represent important nodes in a "safety net". The guiding principles of radicalisation prevention are the cornerstones of peaceful coexistence in Bavaria: democracy, pluralism, freedom of expression, tolerance and equality. The most important tool is critical thinking.

Further information on the various prevention measures can be found on the homepage. The campaign against conspiracy theories "Aktion gegen Verschwörungsmythen" can be found here along with best-practice examples and information:

► www.stmas.bayern.de/radikalisierungspraevention/index.php

Bayerische Informationsstelle gegen Extremismus (BIGE)



Bayerische Informationsstelle
gegen Extremismus



The BIGE is an information and advice centre of the Bavarian State Government. It carries out prevention work nationwide against right-wing extremism, left-wing extremism, Islamophobia relevant to constitutional protection, as well as "Reichsbürger" and "Selbstverwalter" (literally, "citizens of the Reich" and "self-administrators"). It is the point of contact for citizens, communities and schools and offers a wide range of information and consulting services. The BIGE networks various institutions, including those in civil society, and contributes to an overarching exchange of information between all stakeholders. Employees of the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution and the police work together in the BIGE for this purpose. The BIGE is also responsible for the Bavarian Dropout Program, which offers extremists "help to help themselves" in leaving the scene.

► www.bige.bayern.de/



Bayerische Landeszentrale für neue Medien (BLM)

The “Bayerische Landeszentrale für neue Medien” licenses and supervises – as one of 14 state media authorities in Germany – private radio and television services in Bavaria. Its central tasks include youth media protection in broadcasting and telemedia (Internet) and media education in Bavaria. The BLM publishes a variety of materials for this purpose, which are also available online.

► www.blm.de/startseite.cfm

Bayerische Landeszentrale für politische Bildungsarbeit



The “Bayerische Landeszentrale für politische Bildungsarbeit” is tasked on a non-partisan basis with promoting and strengthening the ideas of free and democratic political order in the consciousness of the general population. The primary goal is to contribute to tolerance and values-based education, to strengthen democratic competence and to promote political awareness. This includes, in particular, encouraging the political and voluntary involvement of the population and participation in political processes.

► www.blz.bayern.de/



Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung (bpb)

The “Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung” provides education and information on political issues for all interested citizens. Its task is to promote understanding of political issues, to consolidate democratic awareness and to strengthen willingness to participate in politics.

► www.bpb.de/



FLIMMO – Elternratgeber für TV, Streaming & YouTube

FLIMMO supports parents and families in everyday media education. Whether TV, media libraries, cinema, streaming or YouTube: FLIMMO provides an overview of what is currently running, helps with educational assessments for age-appropriate viewing and offers helpful tips for media use in the family. The guide is published by “Programmberatung für Eltern e.V.”. Members include ten state media authorities, the “Stiftung Medienpädagogik Bayern der Bayerischen Landeszentrale für neue Medien (BLM)”, and the “Internationale Zentralinstitut für das Jugend- und Bildungsfernsehen (IZI)” at “Bayerischer Rundfunk (BR; “Bavarian Broadcasting”)”.

► www.flimmo.de/



klicksafe

The EU initiative klicksafe aims to promote people’s online skills and to support them in their competent and critical use of the Internet with a wide range of offers. klicksafe bundles and develops relevant information offerings for safe, competent and self-determined Internet use. Target groups include, in particular, people who support children and young people in developing their Internet skills – from parents to teachers to multipliers

► www.klicksafe.de/



Landeskoordinierungsstelle Bayern gegen Rechtsextremismus (LKS)

The LKS coordinates various nationwide information and counselling services for right-wing extremist, anti-Semitic and racist incidents. It provides support and mediation for professional discussions and political education activities on these topics throughout Bavaria.

The LKS nationwide counselling network includes

► The Mobile Counselling Service against Right-Wing

- Extremism, which offers support throughout Bavaria in the event of incidents with a right-wing extremist, right-wing populist, anti-Semitic or racist background
- Parenting counselling for parents, relatives and friends of right-wing individuals as well as
 - The Betroffenenberatung B.U.D. as an independent association offering support for victims of right-wing extremist, racist and anti-Semitic violence
- www.lks-bayern.de/

Recherche- und Informationsstelle Antisemitismus Bayern (RIAS Bayern)



RIAS Bayern (Research and Information on Antisemitism) records reports of anti-Semitic incidents and supports victims of anti-Semitism in Bavaria. The office is located at the Association for Enlightenment and Democracy (VAD), is funded by the Bavarian State Ministry for Family, Labour and Social Affairs and works closely with the Federal Association RIAS. Based on the reported incidents and its own research, RIAS Bayern regularly produces reports on anti-Semitism specifically in relation to Bavaria, conducts educational and public relations work and thus contributes to the fight against anti-Semitism.

► www.report-antisemitism.de/rias-bayern/

Stiftung Medienpädagogik Bayern

The foundation is committed to promoting media literacy in Bavaria. It helps children, young people, parents and educational professionals find their way around the media landscape and promotes competent media use. Expert speakers can be booked for a free parents' evening on media topics by Bavarian educational institutions, such as kindergartens and schools, via the foundation's Bavarian Media Education Speaker Network.

► www.stiftung-medienpaedagogik-bayern.de/

Stiftung
Medienpädagogik
Bayern



Note

For readers of this brochure who are interested in the links mentioned, we recommend that you download the digital edition at

<https://bayern.jugendschutz.de/de/material/index.php>

You can then quickly and conveniently access the relevant pages on the Internet with just one click and get further information.



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Legal Notice

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Fasaneriestraße 17
80636 Munich, Germany

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Apothekergässchen 1,
86150 Augsburg, Germany

Photo credits

Illustrations: Georg Lange
Photos: shutterstock.com / Africa Studio /
Djomas / Gelpy / Monkey Business Images /
Rawpixel / Vibrant Image Studio

Print

Senser Druck, Augsburg, Germany

This brochure is financed by
the Bavarian State Ministry for Family,
Labour and Social Affairs



Bayerisches Staatsministerium für
Familie, Arbeit und Soziales

Conspiracy theories have been around for a long time. Their prevalence increased, however, during the Coronavirus pandemic or at least became more visible. And even if some of them seem to be harmless at first glance, more dangerous myths are never far away, especially in a global network like the Internet. Thus, one can quickly go from believing in a “flat earth” or “lizard people” to being convinced of a “lying media”, an “evil secret government” or a “Jewish world conspiracy”.

Many conspiracy theories are driven by fear and violence – and are often based on an extremist, anti-Semitic ideology. They are directed against science, governments or population groups, describe threat scenarios and create stereotypical images of the enemy. Conspiracy theories can thus fuel doubts and fears and reinforce or awaken radical attitudes, feelings of hatred or propensity to violence – also in children and adolescents who are still developing and are still forming their personality and world view. This often involves media content that can harm or endanger the development of children and young people. The same is true of certain fake news.

The aim of this brochure is to draw attention to this among parents, professionals and other interested parties and create awareness. The brochure describes popular conspiracy theories and provides examples of fake news, explains why these may be a problem for children and young people and makes everyday suggestions on how to deal with them. It also shows how some conspiracy myths relate to anti-Semitism.



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