

Need for answers: conspiracy theories and other religions

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Powerful or powerless, understanding or full of incomprehension, ruler or subject; two sides of the same coin. Still at home, I scroll through my Facebook “news feed”, in which “explanations” about the current crisis clearly “polarize”. One pole stands for (scientific) analysis, with which I’m acquainted. The other pole stands for thinking in conspiracies, which is close to magical thinking and belief in Santa Claus to me.

Interestingly, those who think they know little seem to be ruled by conspiracies from an invisible but supreme elite. But the other group, in which I include myself, is now also on the side of lack of knowledge. At this moment, no one knows what the impact of the Corona crisis will be. What will our lives and world look like after this crisis? We're not even sure if we'll survive. My faith is centred on science, and factually verifiable news. My allergy lies in fake news and conspiracies. But - I have to admit - I also find the conspiracy theories and conspiracy theorists in my Facebook friends group extremely interesting, I watch every post carefully. This is a life observation into how belief and belief systems work.

What “we” all have in common - both science and conspiracy thinkers - is that we don't know how it ends. People at “my pole” believe in knowledge. We give the full stage to scientists that know most about viruses. In our “news” virologists are suddenly also economists, ethicists, mathematicians, psychologists or any other discipline, because knowledge is power. On Dutch current affairs programs, virologists and medical microbiologists pop up everywhere, and we are interested in everything they know, even what music they listen to or what movies they watch. Little by little, other disciplines are asked to provide insight into both the course, characteristics and consequences of COVID-19 disease, and the effects and consequences of the corona crisis locally and worldwide. Slowly discussions are becoming more multidisciplinary. Many 'news' facts, when only virologists were assigned the power of knowledge exchange, do not seem to be entirely correct afterwards.

Fake news

But this doesn't make yesterday's news fake news. Does it really matter whether the virus comes from a market in Wuhan or from a lab? There are labs all over the world, most of the time very beneficial at a very small risk: although nowhere intended, in principle it can go wrong anywhere. In our technological world, even viruses can go viral extremely quickly and efficiently, through (air) travel and the needs of travel and encounters fuelled by social media and other information technology. Now it's no longer allowed to touch each other, while people have a natural need for skin contact (skin hunger). Hugs cause our oxytocin levels go up, our cortisol levels to drop and our immune system to work better. This kind of knowledge is sidelined in social distancing. But we have to manage with the knowledge that we have. After all, in an uncertain future, all knowledge is still insufficient. We all have to rely on beliefs, and some engage in conspiracy narratives about villains and heroes, others give room to the scientific disciplines closest to the observed crisis. Again, what we have in common is that we are all ruled by the crisis.

Polarizing may be a logical consequence, but it's certainly not helpful. Of course I understand that everyone wants to regain control of the situation. However, sacrificing transmissions towers, or even human scapegoats to satisfy our need to understand, crosses every line. But it is easy to understand that in their conspiracy theories people try to regain control of a reality that is beyond any understanding. It's actually also quite cheap to dismiss everything as superstition and fake news, it doesn't meet our scientific standards. We must try to understand each other. After all, we rulers and subjects constantly change roles and are interdependent. Let's give each other a hug!