
BBC LEARNING ENGLISH

6 Minute English

How to talk about conspiracy theories

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Neil

Hello. This is 6 Minute English from BBC Learning English. I'm Neil.

Sam

And I'm Sam.

Neil

Tell me, Sam, do you think Neil Armstrong really landed on the Moon in 1969? I mean, that must be fake news! And who shot JFK? Surely the CIA were involved? Unless it was the giant lizards controlling the government!

Sam

Oh dear! It looks like reading online conspiracies has sent Neil **down the rabbit hole** – an expression used to describe a situation which seems interesting and uncomplicated at first but ends up becoming strange, confusing and hard to escape from. Luckily in this programme we'll be hearing some advice on how to talk to people who've become convinced by online conspiracies.

Neil

It seems that during times of crisis, as people feel uncertain and fearful, they actively look for information to feel more secure.

Sam

Nowadays this information is often found online, and while there are reliable facts out there, there's also a lot of misinformation.

Neil

Somebody who's the target of many conspiracy theories is Microsoft's Bill Gates and our BBC fact checkers have been busy debunking - or exposing – some of the more bizarre accusations made against him. But what strange behaviour has Bill Gates been accused of recently? That's my quiz question for today. Is it:

- a) being a member of the Chinese Communist Party?,
- b) being an alien lizard? or,
- c) being involved in the assassination of JFK?

Sam

They all sounds pretty silly to me but I'll guess b) being an alien lizard.

Neil

OK, Sam, if you say so! We'll find out the answer later. Now, I'm not the only one who's been doing some internet research. Ever since the outbreak of the Covid pandemic there's been an avalanche of online conspiracies linking Bill Gates to the coronavirus. Here's Marianna Spring, presenter of BBC World Service programme, *Trending*, to tell us more:

Marianna Spring

The Microsoft founder is a rich and powerful person and he's funded research into vaccines – that's why he's become a target. Some of the claims are **bonkers** – that he wants to use the virus as a **pretext** to microchip everyone in the world. Others say a vaccine would actually kill people rather than save their lives. These ideas are without any evidence. We should treat them with the **disdain** they deserve.

Sam

Some conspiracies claim that Bill Gates wants to implant microchips in people and that he's using the coronavirus as a **pretext** - a pretend reason for doing something that is used to hide the real reason.

Neil

Claims like these are described as **bonkers** – an informal way to say silly, stupid or crazy, and should therefore be treated with **disdain** - disliking something because you feel it does not deserve your attention or respect.

Sam

But while you might not believe such **bonkers** theories yourself, it's not hard to see how people looking for answers can get sucked **down** online **rabbit holes**.

Neil

So how would you deal some someone spreading baseless conspiracies about Covid vaccines or Bill Gates? The BBC's *Trending* programme spoke to Dr Jovan Byford, senior psychology lecturer with the Open University, about it.

Sam

He thinks it's important to separate the conspiracy from the theorist. The former, the belief, we have to dismiss, but the latter, the person, is more complex.

Neil

Here's BBC *Trending's* presenter, Marianna Spring, again to sum up Dr Byford's advice:

Marianna Spring

How do you talk to someone who's at risk of being sucked into **the rabbit hole**? First, establish a basis of understanding. Approach them on their own terms and avoid **sweeping** dismissals or saying, "you're wrong!". Try not to judge. And try to **get to the bottom of** the often legitimate concern at the heart of the conspiracy. Present them with facts and research. Try to do this neutrally. You can't force anyone to change their mind but you can make sure they have valid information.

Sam

While some conspiracies may be harmless, others are more dangerous. People thinking that vaccines will kill them might worsen the coronavirus situation worldwide, so we need to **get to the bottom of** these claims - discover the real but sometimes hidden reason why something happens.

Neil

A good way to engage people in discussion is to avoid **sweeping** claims or statements - speaking or writing about things in a way that is too general and does not carefully consider all the relevant facts.

Sam

And by doing so calmly and neutrally you might persuade them to reconsider the funny business Bill Gates is supposedly involved with.

Neil

Ah yes, you mean our quiz question. I ask you what Bill Gates has recently been accused of by conspiracy theorists.

Sam

And I said b) being an alien lizard. But thinking about it now, that seems pretty unlikely!

Neil

In fact the answer was a) being a member of the Chinese Communist Party.

Sam

OK. So today we've been hearing advice on how to deal with online conspiracy theories, some of which are totally **bonkers** – silly, stupid and crazy - or involve a complicated **pretext** – a pretend reason used to hide someone's true motivation.

Neil

These can be treated with **disdain** – dislike because they are unworthy of our attention or respect.

Sam

But with so many conspiracies online, it's easy to get lost **down the rabbit hole** – intrigued by a situation which seems interesting but ends up confusing and hard to escape from.

Neil

It's important to **get to the bottom of** these theories - discover the real but hidden reason behind them.

Sam

And to present people with the facts, avoiding **sweeping** – or over-generalised – statements.

Neil

That's all for this programme. Goodbye for now!

Sam

Bye bye!

VOCABULARY

down the rabbit hole

enter a situation which seems interesting and uncomplicated at first but ends up becoming strange, confusing and hard to escape from

pretext

pretend reason for doing something that is used to hide the real reason

bonkers

silly, stupid or crazy (informal)

disdain

disliking something because you feel it does not deserve your attention or respect

get to the bottom of (something)

discover the real but sometimes hidden reason why something happens

sweeping

something spoken or written about that is too general and does not carefully consider all the relevant facts