



A RAYUELA workshop on scientific
misinformation and conspiracy
theories in the Platon-Polar Star
Summer School 2021



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The RAYUELA Project

- Children aged 5 to 15 spend more than 15 hours online in a typical week,
- 50% of all children aged 11 to 16 have faced one or more of the most common risks on the Internet (cyberbullying, sharing personal data with strangers, exposure to content that encourages children to harm themselves, inappropriate online content and the possibility of the radicalization online)
- 51% of EU citizens feel little or not informed at all about cyber-threats
- 86% of Europeans believe that the risk of becoming a victim of cybercrime increases rapidly



The RAYUELA Project

- The European RAYUELA “**empowerRing and educAting YoUng pEople for the internet by pLAying**” project is a three-year research project (duration from October 2020 to September 2023 - H2020 Secure Societies program of the European Union)
- **The main objective** of the RAYUELA research project is to provide public administrations, EU citizens and, especially, young people and their environment (parents and educators) with valuable information and recommendations to prevent and fight cybercrime.



The RAYUELA Project

- In the first part of the work which covers the first year of the project, a rigorous research will be carried out on the psychological, anthropological and sociological factors that influence cybercrimes such as cyberbullying, online grooming, trafficking, the spread of misinformation and deception
- Based on the results obtained, in subsequent parts of the work an interactive adventure **video game** will be developed in which players will face different situations, making progress according to the decisions they make.
- The video game will have a preventive purpose to educate young people about safe use and risks of the Internet.
- It will also allow the data obtained through the platform to be analysed to find out if there are certain profiles more likely to commit or suffer from some of these cybercrimes.



Misinformation and CTs

- CTs as crazy beliefs by paranoid folks: False
- Belief in conspiracy theories is very widespread, the product of normal human psychology, and extremely influential and dangerous.
- The human brain did not evolve to process complex info, but to assess threats in the African savannah.
- It pays to believe that there are threats out there and groups that about to get you.
- If you hold such beliefs (in the savannah), you may survive the next real threat, but if you don't believe there are is a danger somewhere, you will die.
- Natural selection favoured the conspiratorial mindset.



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Misinformation and CTs

Lets look at biases: A cognitive bias is a systematic error in thinking that occurs when people are processing and interpreting information in the world around them. It affects the decisions and judgments that they make.

- **Proportionality bias**, a belief that major events have major causes.
- **Intentionality bias** makes us assume that events are planned by somebody or something.
- **Confirmation bias** means we seek out evidence that supports our beliefs.
- **The illusion-of-understanding bias** makes us overestimate our knowledge of how things work.



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Misinformation and CTs

- Conspiracy theories can be emotionally reassuring.
- CTs provide truthful-sounding explanations for events that otherwise seem inexplicable and random.
- CTs are powerful tools in defamation/blaming campaigns.
- CTs “make sense”. They offer unifying explanations of unrelated events.



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Basic features of CTs

- The political element/agenda underlying a CT
- The anti-establishment element
- The explanatory pattern: targets of conspiracies and how; who is to gain?
- Who benefits from the spread of a CT? Politically and/or financially
- Who ends up harmed by the spread of a CT?
- Could someone end up feeling emotionally safe when believing a CT?



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Try out this exercise on Miro

We have been working on a challenge of Disassembling Conspiracy theories based on the ideas discussed in the previous slides. The challenge is created by using the Miro board application. Follow the instructions and try to discover the basic “ingredients” of one of the conspiracy theories in the red box.

Miro board link: https://miro.com/app/board/o9J_l7oWJRo=

References

The Peritia project. (2021). *Quassim Cassam on Conspiracy Theories. The PERITIA Public Lectures [Un]Truths*. <https://peritia-trust.eu/watch-quassim-cassam-on-conspiracy-theories/>.

Lawton, G. (n.d.). *Conspiracy theories*. New Scientist. <https://www.newscientist.com/definition/conspiracy-theories/>.

The instructions

1. Each team picks one or two Conspiracy Theories.
2. Start with the instructions in the circle at the centre.
3. Then move from A to F trying to explore each element of the CT
4. Pick-up a yellow sticky note from the panel on the right.
5. Add your team's name at the top: try to be imaginative and funny (e.g. "the seekers of true science")
6. Add your ideas/answers for each block (A-F) (Don't worry if you can't get some or something is repeated in two categories)
7. Key point: from A to C you are asked to "believe" in your chosen CT and and come with statements that support such belief (e.g. "The global elite is forcing us to...". From D to F you are asked to work as an investigator and explore particular elements of a CT.
8. Check example

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- Project webpage: <https://www.rayuela-h2020.eu/>
- LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/company/rayuela-h2020>
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