the power of unreason conspiracy theories, extremism and counter-terrorism

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This paper is the first in a series of policy papers on emerging themes in extremism and terrorism by Demos. These papers focus on under-researched dimensions of extremism, and do not present an exhaustive answer, but suggest new avenues of study. Future papers include the role of women and gender in extremist movements, and methods to de-glamorise al-Qaeda.

This paper examines the role of conspiracy theories in extremist groups. Numerous studies have considered a variety of factors that encourage extremism: ideology, grievance, poverty, religion, and social networks. The role of conspiracy theories, defined as accounts of events as the deliberate yet concealed product of a powerful few, regardless of the evidence, has been ignored. This study is the first attempt, as far as we are aware, to research this subject and should be viewed as such.

We have conducted new analysis of the literature, ideology and propaganda of over fifty extremist groups from across the spectrum: religious, far-right and left, eco, anarchic, and cult-based. The groups are or were active over the past 30 years, and are drawn mainly from the United Kingdom, Europe, and the United States. We have focused primarily on extremist groups that have become violent[1] although we have included a small number of extreme groups that hold socially problematic views, such as those based on racial supremacy.

Our analysis shows that conspiracy theories are widely prevalent across this extremist spectrum, despite the vast differences in the extremist ideologies themselves. For far right groups, the concept of Zionist Occupied Government (ZOG) – that a small cabal of Jews controls world governments – is central to both ideology and propaganda. For al-Qaeda and other radical Islamist groups, the conspiracy tends to be a generalised Judeo-Christian-Capitalist quest to destroy Islam. Far left and anarchist groups propagate a Marxist-inspired bourgeois conspiracy of 'international financiers', or 'global elites', which they sometimes believe is leading toward a 'New World Order' of a unitary, totalitarian world government. Cults, on the other hand, tend to believe in conspiracies that are

targeted against their specific group or movement. It is striking that there is considerable overlap and fusion between many of these conspiracies, even across groups that exist at opposite ends of the ideological spectrum. [2]

Sometimes the boundary between a well-defined conspiracy and a general account of events and power where society develops structures of control to favour the powerful over the weak is fuzzy. Indeed, some conspiracy theories can in some cases have a grain of truth to them, or be based on some facts, and then be wildly exaggerated. Many far left groups for example believe in a Marxist structuralist view of the world, where financiers, international bankers, or multilateral institutions hold unaccountable, inordinate power to maintain the status quo. Sometimes this world-view tips into a more precise conspiracy with clear, nefarious human intention, sometimes it stops just short. Sometimes there may even be some grounds for such a belief. The consequences, however, are often the same: pointing to forces beyond our control, articulating an enemy to hate, sharply dividing the group from the non-group and, sometimes, legitimizing violence.

The frequency of conspiracy theories within all these groups suggests that they play an important social and functional role within extremism itself. This does not mean that conspiracy theories are the proximate cause of extremism or violence. There are many extremist groups that do not believe conspiracy theories as far as we can tell, such as the Real IRA or the Unabomber. Conspiracy theories are not a necessary condition for extreme beliefs or action. Equally, conspiracy theories do not always lead to extreme or violent behaviour. There are many peaceful, even moderate groups that believe conspiracy theories such as '2012' ecological groups who believe that in 2012 the world as we know it may end, or the 9-11 truth movement.

While it is not possible to demonstrate direct causal links between conspiracy theories and extremism, our findings suggest that the acceptance of conspiracy theories in contexts of extremism often serves as a 'radicalizing multiplier', which feeds back into the ideologies, internal dynamics and psychological processes of the

group. They hold extremist groups together and push them in a more extreme and sometimes violent direction.

This happens in three ways. First, conspiracy theories create demonologies of 'the other' or 'the enemy' that the group defines itself against. Second, they delegitimise voices of dissent and moderation by casting them as part of the conspiracy. Finally, they can encourage a group to turn to violence, acting as rhetorical devices to portray violence, both to the group itself and their wider supporters, as necessary to 'awaken' the people from their acquiescent slumber.

More broadly, conspiracy theories drive a wedge of distrust between governments and particular communities. Conspiracy theories - such as those that claim 7/7 or 9/11 were 'inside jobs' - demolish the mutuality and trust that people have in institutions of government, with social and political ramifications that we still don't fully understand. This can especially hinder community-level efforts to fight violent extremism. A more long-term threat is that extreme and violent groups could start to form new alliances based on shared conspiracies – as has already happened with the National Anarchist movement and various far right overtures to al-Qaeda. Moreover, extreme groups may be able draw on a larger counter-culture of conspiracies as a pool of possible recruits.

Therefore, fighting the ideology of extremist groups, a central component of counter-terrorism strategy since 2001, should also target the myths, lies, and conspiracies that are part of it. However, attempts by government to factually refute them often inadvertently give them legitimacy. We recommend a small number of interventions focusing on making government institutions more open, and investing more resources in enabling people to think critically, rather than government confronting conspiracy theories directly.

• The government's "Prevent" agenda should focus more on programmes that encourage critical thinking and deconstructing propaganda. More generally, the Department for Education and Skills should review how far the education system equips young

people with sufficient digital literacy to navigate false and 'counter knowledge' on the net. There is an alarming increase in the amount of information that young people are consuming and trusting on the net. It is not clear they have the critical faculties to navigate the many bogus claims they encounter. While government cannot tell people what to think, they can help teach people how to think. Our education system must equip young people with the tools to discriminate credible information from its many imposters.

- As a part of the review of counter-terrorism powers, the government should consider if greater transparency could be introduced in counter-terrorism work. Some specific interventions should be introduced to that end, such as annual public intelligence reports produced by the new National Security Council, more maximum disclosure policing, increased openness in court proceedings in major terrorism cases, and continued focus on good community relationships in counter-terrorism policing. Counter-terrorism agencies are inevitably the target of conspiracy theories because of the secretive and sometimes coercive nature of some of their work. For both resource and security reasons, much of what the intelligence agencies do must remain secret. However, there are some opportunities for greater transparency in counter terrorism work.

- It is very difficult for government to effectively fight conspiracy theories that have already gained a foothold in extremist groups. Civil society must play a more proactive role in confronting the lies and myths of conspiracy theories when they find them. Fighting conspiracy theories is something that, by definition, is almost impossible for government to do; but civil society groups do have credibility to do so more effectively. In addition, the public sector cuts means government capacity to respond will be necessarily reduced.

Key groups and associated conspiracy theories

The conspiracies listed below are by no means comprehensive. As noted above, there are several moderate groups we might have included. The literature of a number of other possibly problematic (although not necessarily terrorist) groups was reviewed, without identifying significant conspiracy theories, including the Animal Liberation Front, the Earth Liberation Front, English Defence League, ETA, Hizb ut Tahrir, various 'hacktivist' collectives, King Mob, Armed Free Love, AntiFa, Action Directe, the Anarchist Federation, Black bloc, Red Action, the Continuity IRA, the Fire Revolutionary Cells and the Real IRA.

Some 'lone-wolf' terrorists who had publicly attempted to justify their actions, such as Ted Kaczynski, the 'Unabomber', were included. In addition, there were a number of groups who expressed conspiracy theories although did not appear to be extreme in the sense defined above, including 2012 environmentalist groups, the Church of Euthanasia, and MOVE.

Every effort has been made to ensure that the conspiracies listed below were in official documents or speeches of the group in question. However, given the nature of these groups, sometimes it is hard to determine how far a publication or speech represents official ideology rather than an individual member or leader's personal view. We have tried to make such distinctions clear.

Extremist Group[3]	Conspiracy
Religious Extremism	
Al-Qaeda inspired groups	A Christian-Zionist-apostate Muslim or Zionist-Anglo-Saxon-Protestant coalition wages a crusade against "God, his messenger, and Muslims".[4] National boundaries are an American conspiracy to divide and create internal divisions within an otherwise united Muslim people.[5]
Anti-Abortion Extremists (Army of God, Lambs of Christ)	Freemasons control the world economy through manipulation of paper currency. A secular humanist conspiracy to take God out of Society. Many conspiracy theories have close affinity with American far-right militia movement: allegations of ZOG and One World Government, and reference to 'Jewish bankers', and an international financial elite.[6]
Body of Christ/Attleboro Cult. Refused the use of all medicine, and two children members died as a result.	That government, religion, education, science, the arts, medicine, commerce/banking are all controlling tools of Satan.[7]
	A belief that Jews, blacks,

Christian Identity A racist religious philosophy that maintains non-Jewish whites are "God's chosen people" and the true descendants of the twelve tribes of Israel. It spans neo-Nazi, KKK, survivalist and militia-based organizations.	Communists, homosexuals and race-traitors have seized control of the United States.[8] The Dual Seedline doctrine within Christian Identity states that Jews are the literal descendents of Satan.[9]
Hamas	Excerpts from the Protocols of the Elders of Zion are included in the Hamas charter, as Article 22 of the Hamas constitution.[10]
Jewish extremism (Gush Emunim, or Bloc of the Faithful). An Israeli messianic and political movement committed to establishing Jewish settlements in the West Bank.	Examples of one leader, Noam Federman, stating that leftist conspirators (the Attorney General, the secret services, the media) in control of the secular Israeli state want to take control of Israel and create a new state religion - 'Israelism' - rather than Judaism, and will take all steps necessary to do this.[11]
Islam4UK A proscribed radical Islamist group, offshoot of al-Muhajiroon.	Specific cases of the British Government consciously seeking to destroy Islam.[12]
Nation of Islam Beliefs include: God will bring about a universal government of peace, the original race of black men is superior to white, Allah has returned as W Fard Mohammed (the founder), intermarriage between races should be	Various conspiracies of Jewish control by current leader Louis Farrakhan, leader of the Nation of Islam who is on record saying: 'they [the Jews] control Black intellectuals, they control Black politicians, Black preachers, Black artists – they control Black

prohibited.	life. I'm not against Jews, I'm against control by any group, of us...'[13]
World Church of the Creator, or Creativity Movement Avowedly non-violent white supremacist group although seventeen of its members have been involved in acts of racial violence.[14]	ZOG[15], Medical profession is a cartel and government controlled hoax,[16] all forms of medicine are poisonous to the body, impending Racial Holy War.[17]
Cults	
Aum Shinrikyo A Japanese new religious cult founded in 1984 and notorious for the 1995 sarin gas attacks on the Tokyo subway. The group's ideology is the product of an idiosyncratic interpretation of Christianity, Buddhism and Yoga by its founder and charismatic leader, Shoko Asahara.	Conspiracy between the Japanese government, the United States, and the Jews existed to gain world domination. [18]
Nuwaubians, classified by Southern Poverty Law Centre as a Black supremacist hate group.	The leader's literature includes conspiracy theories, 'ufology', the extra-terrestrial origins of the humanity, extra-terrestrials control Hollywood, Illuminati, anti-group conspiracies.[19]
Peoples Temple A religious group founded by Jim	A US government wide conspiracy against the group, which involved the CIA and

Jones in 1955. It became notorious for the 'Jonestown incident', where, on 17-18 November 1978, 918 people, including 270 children, people died at the group's headquarters after drinking cyanide-laced flavor aid. They also shot and killed Leo Ryan (a serving US Congressmen) and 3 journalists.	defectors from the Peoples Temple.[20]
Far Right	
Afrikaaner Nationalism	The Illuminati, composed of international financiers, created a surrogate passive black government that could be easily controlled. This could only be brought about by the destruction of Afrikaaner nationalism.[21]
Aryan Nations White Nationalist neo-Nazi group from the United States.	ZOG, New World Order, a 'liberal-Marxist-homosexual-Zionist coalition' covertly censors and disrupts the activities of the Aryan peoples. [22]
British People's Party The party is committed to British fascism, British nationalism, white separatism, distributism, and the implementation of the 'Fourteen Words'. Martyn Gilleard, convicted in 2008 of making a bomb, was a member.	ZOG.[23]
Combat 18	ZOG, Protocols of the Elders of

A violent neo-Nazi organization originating in the UK.	Zion, belief that elections are rigged.[24]
Imperial Klans of America (Ku Klux Klan) and allied organizations (Southern White Knights, Alabama White Knights, Texas Knights, etc). Imperial Klans of America remains a force on the radical racist American right. Estimated to have 110 Chapters – or 'Klaverns' – and 4000- 5000 members.[25]	America is threatened by non-white minorities ZOG and New World Order. 'Unholy coalition of anti-White, anti-Christian liberals, socialists, feminists, homosexuals, and militant minorities have managed to seize control of our government and mass media . . .' [26]
Racial Volunteer Force A splinter group of Combat 18.	ZOG, Protocols of the Elders of Zion, Holocaust myth.[27]
Timothy McVeigh & far right US Militia Groups 'Militia groups' is an umbrella term for the many US paramilitary groups that claim the right to bear arms under the Second Amendment of the US Constitution. It includes the Michigan Militia, the Montana Militia, the Missouri 51st Militia, the North American Volunteer Militia, the Minnesota Minutemen Militia, and the South Carolina Militia Corps. The groups are united in the belief that the Federal Government is hostile to their freedoms.	Big government, affirmative action and gun control are driven by ZOG. Turner Diaries, One World Government, imminent UN forces about to invade America, the creation of FEMA concentration camps, the confiscation of guns from all American citizens, imminent imposition of marital law.[28] [29]

Far Left	
Angry Brigade A militant left-wing anarchist group, they were, before al-Qaeda, the last 'home-grown' terrorist group on the British Mainland. They conducted a series of small-scale bombing between 1970 and 1972.	Angry Brigade communiqués present the action of the 'bosses' as a coherent and conscious attempt to emasculate the working classes. [30]
Anti-Globalisation extremism The movement's adherence to the principle of 'leaderless resistance' makes it difficult to identify statements attributable to the movement as a whole.	Many of the most extreme post-2000 anti-globalization narratives personalise and intentionalise the process of globalisation, and describe it as the result of the conscious machinations of the powerful few. Some portray these powerful few to be international financiers, some 'money Jews'. In America, there are allegations that an anti-globalisation website - Anti-Globalisation Action Network- is a front for the neo-Nazi National Alliance.[31]
Red Army Faction (RAF) Founded in 1970, a Communist 'urban guerrilla' group engaged in what they claimed to be an anti-imperialist struggle against the 'fascist state'. Responsible for 34 deaths before their disbandment in 1998.	Malevolent authorities use economic means to oppress the people. Horst Mahler, founding member of the RAF, at his 1970 trial in Berlin: 'You charge me with conspiracy ... but you yourself, the gang of General Motors, Ford, Armco, General Electric, ITT, Siemens, AEG, Flick, Quandt, BASF, Springer,

	Unilever, United Fruit, and certain others - the transnational consortia of capital, all together the imperialistic "monopoly capital" are the most monstrous criminal association in history.... Exploitation and repression are globally organised.' [32]
Revolutionary Sect group Responsible for the shooting of the investigative journalist Socratis Guiolias.[33]	They claim not to be in politics, because of the bias of the status quo: 'We are not in politics, we are in armed struggle. In all these decades, political parties, judicial and executive powers have exposed the interests of the status quo they work for. The time for analysing is over....' [34]
Other	
Anti-technology extremism (neo-Luddites, Anarcho-primitivists) Advocate a return to 'non-civilised' ways of life, based on an anarchistic critique of civilisation and development.	Some members claim that there may be an explicit or implicit organisation of intellectuals, technologists, technocrats, intelligentsia, technophiles, and other such intellectual elites who push a radically pro-technology, pro-scientific, anti-natural, anti-environment, dehumanising, anti-freedom agenda.[35]
Committee for Liquidation of Computers (CLODO) They committed their most major terrorist attack in 1983 when they firebombed the Sperry-Univac	Believe that the computer is the favorite tool of the dominant. It is used to exploit, to put on file, to control, and to repress.[36] [37]

Company in Toulouse.	
Pamyat A Russian ultra-nationalist organization founded in the 1970s, the group has been dormant throughout most of the 1990s, but reactivated in 2005. Its aim is to lead the Russian people in national spiritual revival.	ZOG, Protocols of the Elders of Zion, Jews blamed for triggering the Russian revolutions.[38]
National Revolutionary Faction Promotes a radical anti-capitalist and anti-Marxist 'anarchist' agenda of autonomous rural communities within a decentralized, pan-European framework.	New World Order.[39]
Woden's Folk They believe in the restoration of Anglo-Saxon heathenism and opposition to multi-cultural society	Mythology of Ragnarok, last Avatar, final battle.[40]

INTRODUCTION

We live in an age where the moral authority of our elected representatives has been seriously eroded and the actions of the state treated with unprecedented cynicism.[41]

People ask of events *cui bono* – who benefits? Conspiracy theories often supply the answer. Today, it seems that one is considered naïve to believe things happen by accident, that things can in fact be as they appear, events sometimes unconnected.[42]

Conspiracy theories are distinguished from other accounts of events in two important ways. First, they are an effort to explain an event by reference to the 'machinations of powerful people, who have also managed to conceal their role'.[43] In such conspiracies, world events are orchestrated by the conscious and deliberate actions of a small number of powerful people following their hidden, nefarious, agenda to the detriment of the people.

This alone is insufficient because some conspiracies have turned out to be true. Our institutions and governments *have* deceived the population to advance hidden and unstated interests. Well known examples include Operation Northwoods in 1963, where US Joint Chiefs of Staff discussed (but never implemented) manufacturing a Communist Cuban terror campaign in Miami as a *casus belli,*[44] and the CIA involvement in a *coup d'etat* against the democratically elected Chilean leader Salvador Allende in 1973.[45] More recently, at the time of writing, an investigation has revealed that the UK government, the police and the Catholic Church conspired to keep a priest's involvement in the Claudy bombings secret.[46]

What distinguishes conspiracy theories from genuine efforts to uncover actual conspiracies is that a conspiracy theory *is not the most plausible account of events based on the available evidence.* David Aaronovitch points out they attribute secret action that 'might far more reasonably be explained as the less covert and less complicated action of another.'[47] This is driven by the fact that the conspiracy theory is also unremittingly skeptical of any 'official'

account of events, whatever the evidence. According to conspiracy expert Michael Barkun, such theories are predicated on the idea that 'any widely accepted belief must necessarily be false.'[48] Taken together then, we define a conspiracy theory as an account of events as the deliberate product of a powerful few, regardless of the evidence.

Conspiracy theories have become a mainstream cultural phenomenon. Well known conspiracies have sprung up around almost every major cultural or political event of the last century: the causes of the two World Wars, the assassination of John F Kennedy, the Moon landing, the death of Princess Diana, nuclear tests, major discoveries, and economic collapses. They are especially prevalent in relation to terrorist incidents. In 1995 it was claimed in the House of Commons that crucial evidence associated with the Lockerbie bombing was a CIA plant.[49] The 2004 Madrid Train bombings have been blamed on a plot by ETA, members of the Moroccan and Spanish intelligence services, the *Partido Socialista Obrero Español* (Spanish Socialist Party/PSOE) and the media group Prisa (publisher of *El Pais* newspaper and the radio network *Cadena Ser*).[50] Films such as *Ludicrous Diversion* and *Mind the Gap* suggest the 7/7 bombing was a 'false flag' operation.[51] The 2008 Mumbai attacks, too, were alleged to be a false flag operation conducted by 'Hindus and white men'.[52] Most notoriously and influentially, the '9/11 truth movement' has questioned the official accounts of 9/11 and has become a large and growing political force.

The conspiracy theories themselves have some structural consistency and often overlap significantly, but are usually tailored to each group or individual that believes them. Generally, conspiracy theories can be divided into a number of different classes:

Conspiracies of control
These uncover the secret 'real' power relationships in the world. They argue the world, the nation, the state, the media, or the establishment sits under the control of a unitary body of collaborators. The identity of this controlling cabal is often a product of the group's own signature prejudices. For neo-Nazis it is

ZOG, for Anarchists international financiers, for al-Qaeda the capitalist West, and for anti-abortion extremists, secular humanists. Concepts like the Bilderberg Group, the Illuminati, and Freemasonry are common in these theories. Sometimes these theories state that the eventual aim of this group is one world government, known as the New World Order.

Plots against the group

Often emerging from conspiracies of control, groups can construct more specific theories of attempts by this elite group to destroy the group itself. These can be direct, such as the infiltration of secret police into the group, or indirect, such as the coordinated use of the media to misrepresent and discredit the group's ideology.

Specific event theories

A group's interpretation of specific events is usually influenced by their belief in conspiracies of control, and sometimes from a belief in a concerted campaign against the group itself. Events like major terrorism arrests and attacks are understood by how they advance the hidden interests of the conspirators.

Complex or supernatural conspiracies

There are a number of conspiracy theories that, due to their complex interaction with other forms of 'counter-knowledge', defy easy categorisation, such as 'ufology', the occult, and David Icke's shape-shifting lizards. According to Michael Barkun, the last twenty years has seen these different types of conspiracies merge: anti-Semitic conspiracies are now commonly found in ufologist literature for example.[53]

Surveys show that very large numbers of people believe conspiracy theories.[54] Regards recent terrorist attacks, for example, according to a variety of opinion polls, a third of all Americans consider it "very likely" or "somewhat likely" that government officials either allowed, or actually carried out the attacks on 9/11.[55][56] In the Muslim world, an even greater proportion – as high as 80% - believe American and/or Israeli governments carried out the attacks.[57] In the UK, nearly a quarter of British Muslims surveyed in a 2006 survey did not believe the four men identified as the

perpetrators of the 7/7 attacks were responsible.[58] The belief is so widespread that, astonishingly, al-Qaeda's second-in-command, Ayman al-Zawahiri, criticized Iran for propagating the 9/11 conspiracy, explaining that Iran wanted *itself* to 'cover up its involvement with America.'[59]

Despite its force as a social phenomenon, there has been little serious study of conspiracy theories, although this is beginning to change.[60] Existing research suggests a number of quite different reasons why people believe conspiracy theories. Conspiracy theories exploit a lack of trust in the official producers of knowledge. In a complex, highly specialised world most of us rely on experts for our answers. Without familiarity with the expert's specialism, however, we have no personal way of verifying their claims. We must trust in their competence and integrity, and that of the wider system in which they operate. John Hardwig calls this 'the novice/expert problem.'[61] Conspiracy theories, by painting experts as in some way complicit, tell people that you don't need to rely on expert testimony or technical specialists, but your own eyes and reason.

This, then, is a form of empowerment. As an attack on the establishment, on the status quo, conspiracy theories 'ideologically address real structural inequalities.'[62] The consumers of conspiracy theories are also the producers. They spread virally, through actual and virtual social networks via 'peer-to-peer' word of mouth and home made videos, premised on the rejection of mainstream producers of knowledge.[63]

There is something innately human about them. As Brian Keely has argued, conspiracy theories are alluring because they offer a grand, complete, unified explanation that can account for everything as human intention. The alternative, an absurd, unpredictable world is far too frightening.[64] Indeed, 'by supposing current events are under control of nefarious agents, conspiracy theories entail that such events are *capable of being controlled*.'[65] They are attractive to 'believers seeking the refuge of humanist certainties in a post-humanist age.'[66]

Recent research by Cass Sunstien has identified that they are, at

core, a group phenomenon. He argues that 'information cascades' and 'group polarisation' make people more susceptible to them. Simply put, this means that people tend to agree with whatever they think the rest of the group thinks. This is in order to protect and improve their reputation, or through the force of the corroboration of one point of view. This thesis is clearly inspired by Solomon Asch's famous conformity experiments.[67]

This new interest in conspiracy theories is welcome. However, the majority of this work is directed at *why* people believe conspiracy theories. The literature is almost entirely silent on the implications of this belief. We believe that there are potentially significant implications for social and political action. However, in this paper we focus on one specific subcategory, which is the role conspiracy theories play in extremist propaganda, ideology, and action.

CONSPIRACIES AS A 'RADICALISING MULTIPLIER'

This paper aims to understand the role conspiracy theories play in extremist groups, particularly those that turn violent. 'Extremism' is a relative term, meaning someone or some group that expresses significant dissent from prevailing norms. It is not necessarily a bad thing. We have limited the focus to extremist groups where violence is a defining part of their ideology; where members have conducted violent acts against individuals or the state; those currently classified as terrorist organisations or purporting problematic social views, such as racial supremacists.

In order to examine the role of conspiracy theories in these groups, we conducted a study of over fifty extremist groups – violent and non-violent – looking at their literature, websites, announcements and propaganda, in order to ascertain the prevalence of conspiracy theories. Where possible we used primary sources, and where that was not possible, we reviewed secondary literature about the group in question.

The results are surprising. Members of a large number of very different extremist groups frequently, collectively and prominently hold conspiracy narratives, even if the theories do not constitute its 'official' ideology.

The most commonly held conspiracy theory was variants on ZOG, the belief that Jews secretly control major world governments. It is prominent in almost all openly Neo-Nazi or White supremacist groups including The Order, Aryan Nations, Imperial Klans of America, Combat 18, and held by Martyn Gilleard, former member of the British People's Party.

Islamist groups share some of this ideology. Al-Qaeda's ideology is founded in its opposition to a perceived Zionist-Anglo-Saxon-Protestant anti-Muslim coalition, while excerpts of the forged *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* are included in Hamas' constitution: 'they [Jews] were behind the French revolution, the communist revolution...with their money they were able to control Imperialistic

countries and instigate them to colonise.'

In the major cults we examined, the conspiracy was more personalized. Aum Shinrikyo (responsible for the 1995 Tokyo Sarin gas attacks) and the Peoples Temple (who committed mass murder and suicide, and murdered a US Congressman and journalists in 1978) both claimed that they were the personal victims of a widespread conspiracy aiming to destroy the group, which spurred them into pre-emptive defensive action.

It is of note that the far left appear to be less wrapped up in conspiracy thinking. Their adherence to a Marxist-inspired structuralist view of history denies human intention as the primary force of historical change. Although their narratives share much of the anti-Establishment sentiments of conspiracy theories - ideas that society develops structures of control to favour the powerful over the weak, the rich over the poor - they tend not to identify individuals, or deliberate human intention, as the wellspring of this oppression. The consequences, however, are often the same: pointing to forces beyond our control, articulating an enemy to hate, sharply dividing the group from the non-group and, sometimes, legitimizing violence. Nonetheless, there were some examples of a general Marxist critique of bourgeois-controlled society developing into something more conspiratorial. Prominent members of the National Anarchists are recorded as believing various aspects of Zionist Occupied Government and New World Order ideas. The last example of homegrown domestic terrorism in the UK other than the IRA was the radical Situationist left wing anarchists, the Angry Brigade. Their communiqués burst with conspiracy, which appear more than a Marxist critique of capitalist society:

Communique 7: ...THEY shoved garbage from their media down our throats. THEY made us obscure sexual caricatures, all of us men and women. They killed, napalmed, burned us into soap, mutilated us, raped us. It's gone on for centuries. Slowly we started understanding THE BIG CON [their capitalisation].

Communique 9: We are slowly destroying the long tentacles of the

oppressive state machine…bureaucracy and technology used against the people…to speed up our work, to slow down our minds and actions, to obliterate the truth. [68]

Conspiracy theories are not limited to violent groups and individuals. Non-violent extremist groups also share elements of this conspiratorial mindset. There are examples of Jewish extremist groups which believe 'leftist' conspirators are trying to destroy the Jewish religion, while one group – Christian Identity – believes the 'dual seedline' doctrine which states that Jews are conspiring with Satan to control world affairs. Others are more outlandish and bizarre. There are several 2012 prophesies, such as Rik Clay's belief that the London 2012 Olympic logo spells the word Zion, that the map of the Olympic site reveals biblical significance, and Prince William will emerge during the games to create the New World Order.[69] Woden's Folk – a racial identity Heathen group – is another example of a group combining conspiracy theory with racial identity.[70]

There are other examples of ideas that revolve around accusations, half-truths and myths but are not quite conspiracy theories. For example, MOVE – an anarcho-primitivist group involved in a police shooting in 1985 in the United States – spoke of government corruption and blamed all the world's ills on technology.

By comparing the literature from a variety of extremist groups, some broad patterns emerge. The fact that all of these groups appear to share a common view of the world suggests a common dynamic. Interestingly, intelligence agencies have long been concerned about far-right, far-left, and even al-Qaeda inspired groups forming tactical anti-establishment or anti-authority alliances. National Anarchism for example is, according to its leaders, a political position that is beyond left-right, based on a dichotomy of centralized or decentralized power and has brought together elements of both far left anarchism and far right racial supremacy.[71] More disturbingly in 2005, Kries, the leader of the US White Supremacist Aryan Nation, publically invited al-Qaeda to join him in an anti-Semitic, anti-Government alliance.[72] Alliances between far-right secular extremists and religious extremists are

certainly nothing new.[73]

It would be premature to suggest that conspiracy theories can in any way predict the emergence of violence. Rather, we believe they are one of a number of factors that can lead to extremism, and can turn extremism to violence. It is our contention that the presence of conspiracy theories is a 'radicalising multipler', which magnifies and exacerbates existing dynamics of extremism in three ways:

1   They exacerbate demonologies – 'the other' or the enemy – that the group defines itself against.

2   They delegitimise and condemn voices of dissent and moderation as being part of the conspiracy.

3   They are a spur to violent action: a rhetorical device to justify the killing of innocents, often to 'awaken' the people from their acquiescent slumber.

We discuss each in turn.

In-group/out-group dynamics and demonizing the outsiders

The first multiplier relates to the way conspiracy theories demonise outsiders. Accusing outsiders of perpetrating nefarious conspiracies hardens a sense of identity and collective minority against outsiders. It inspires a tendency to overestimate external scrutiny of the group and attribute everyone else's behaviour to it. This is called 'sinister attribution error' or 'paranoid cognition' in which a small close-knit group of co-believers is locked in an existential struggle with an 'out-group', consisting of everyone else. [74]

It is possible that through this self-aggrandizing siege mentality, conspiracy theories also reinforce a process called group polarisation. Groups acting in these conditions of self-imposed exile end up thinking and doing things that group members would never think or do on their own: group-think.[75] Like-minded people, after discussing, confirming and validating each other's position, all end up taking a more extreme position than before they started to talk. This phenomenon has been found in hundreds of studies.[76] If views are reinforced, people become more confident of holding a more extreme position.[77]

At its most extreme, this may increase the likelihood of violence against non-group members. Social psychology research has noted how the creation of 'in-group/out-group' distinctions and dehumanizing potential targets is an important step to violence. This has been recorded between warring groups, such as in the 1994 Rwanda Genocide (and Peoples Temple).[78] Certainly Israeli-Arab relations cannot be helped by the widespread conspiracy theories recycled by some Arab media and groups: that Israelis are dumping aphrodisiac gum in Gaza 'to corrupt the young'[79], that the Boxing Day Tsunami was the result of an Indian nuclear experiment with American and Israeli help[80], or, indeed (propagated by none else than the Grand Mufti, Ali Gom'a) that Israelis eat Matzo with human blood.[81]

Core to al-Qaeda's ideology is the excommunication of almost the entire world, and then a self-imposed exile from this excommunicated society.[82] Al-Qaeda consequently sees itself as 'a tiny colony of true believers who are surrounded on all sides by enemies and on whose shoulders rests the fate of humanity'.[83] Similarly, in an interview, Charlie Sargent, the leader of Combat 18, said that its aim was to withdraw as much as possible from society and create a National Socialist state within Britain itself. One of Combat 18's publications stated that: 'The inner cities are lost. We must realise this and take our only real option – converge as many of our people as we can in the Homeland area and gradually take control of it and run it on strict Aryan-only lines.'[84] In a similar way, other White supremacist movements often portray 'the establishment,' usually the government, as actively seeking to destroy the white race. They present themselves as the only buttress against this assault. The Ku Klux Klan, for example believes that the United States media is "bent upon its [The United States] destruction and a One World Order."[85] Similar dynamics were at play with both Aum Shinrikyo and the Peoples Temple.

The impression of a conspiracy waged against the group or its interests served as proof of the importance of the movement itself. For Aum, their view that the world's leading economic and military powers felt the need to gang up on Aum was further proof of its

importance. Members, particularly the leadership, began to transform how they saw themselves. Rather than being a small, marginalised and insignificant group, they began to see themselves as the 'key to world salvation, the heroic force of good and absolute truth against which the USA and its cohorts felt compelled to act.'[86]

Discredit criticism of the group

The second radicalizing multiplier is the way conspiracy theories are used to discredit dissenters, defectors and moderates. One of the greatest threats to the cohesion of extremist groups is criticism from former members and friends and family of current members. From the perspective of the group – especially the leaders – it is vital to discredit such voices quickly and comprehensively. In the groups we examined a common ploy was for group leaders to accuse critics of being patsies, even disinformation agents working on behalf of the conspirators.

The media – the omnipresent critical voice – is often the target of such attacks. This is because of what is known to psychologists as the 'third person effect', which describes a tendency for people to believe that the media has a larger influence on others than themselves.[87] In the *Turner Diaries,* considered to be the bible of Neo-Nazi ideology both in the United Kingdom and United States, the White supremacist 'organisation' saw any negative story as part of a state controlled smear campaign, 'to convince the public that what we are doing is terrible.'[88] Indeed, Jewish control of the media is a theme that runs through numerous conspiracy theories, not just those popular in extremist groups. Although the English Defence League is certainly not a Neo-Nazi organization, they frequently claim to be the victims of 'a state sponsored smear campaign used against us from the onset by the state controlled political elite media machine.'[89] Perhaps the best known example is the defection of Dr Fadl, one of al-Qaeda's leading theologians, who recently criticized al-Qaeda from an Egyptian prison. Ayman al-Zawahiri, al-Qaeda's number two, responded by suggesting that Dr Fadl's revisionism was forced upon him by the Egyptian government. The case of Dr Fadl is, in reality, rather awkward because it is not unusual for undemocratic governments to force faked confessions.

At the very least, though, it highlights the way that groups discredit dissenters.

The smear tactic is used more generally when extremists and moderates come face to face. Previous research by Demos found that in many al-Qaeda inspired cells in Europe, it is common for members to brush up against a wider group of non-violent members of the same community, who would try to act as a moderating influence. The cells usually immediately cast these people as part of the system, working for the government and the infidel.[90] Ed Hussein and Maj Nawaz, the two former Islamist founders of the Quilliam Foundation, a counter-extremist think tank, are consistently accused by more extremist groups of doing the bidding of the infidel (UK) government. The British People's Party – an ultra-nationalist party – for example claims that:

The British People's Party will, in the fruition of time, PROVE there is another road - a tougher road - but one which will achieve real victory. We stand assailed on all sides at the time of writing, not just by ZOG's puppets but also by fellow patriots who say our traditional no-compromise stance will give them a bad name.[91]

The publication *Blood and Honour Field Manual,* an influential guide for UK Neo-Nazi groups also contains similar attacks on 'ZOG´s media moles'.[92] In a similar vein, when the BNP defector Alby Walker decided to stand against BNP deputy-leader Simon Darby in the General Election, he was accused by the group of a long-term friendship with an MI5 agent who was tasked with penetrating the National Front.[93]

There are clearly varying degrees with which conspiracy theories can be used to defend the group. This discrediting tactic is most effectively deployed against the most dangerous critics that all extremist groups must deal with: defectors. When a number of individuals left the Peoples Temple, the leader, Reverend Jim Jones, convinced the remaining members that the defectors had been compromised, and were now part of the government conspiracy to infiltrate and destroy the group. Bizarrely, Jim Jones even planned to make a movie about the conspirators, which he

assumed to be both the CIA and defectors. Members refused to respond to the defectors' phone calls and criticisms about the group's activity, even from their own family members.[94] In Aum Shinrikyo, defectors were explicitly painted either as spies seeking to spread news of Aum's activities to the movement's enemies or as renegades who would spread false rumours and stories about what went on at Aum's commune at Kamikushiki.[95] Two rival factions of Combat 18, for example, both accused the other of working with the police.[96]

CONSPIRACIES AND THE TURN TO VIOLENT ACTION

In extremist groups, the step to undertake violent action is a big one. Understanding how and why some groups and individuals take that step is the most important question in terrorism studies.[97]

Conspiracy theories can help us understand the turn to violence. Most extremist groups that become violent present the move as the necessary and only option available to them, because: the group is under attack; its goals are unattainable through peaceful means; or there is some sense of impending, apocalyptic doom and a response is needed urgently. Marc Sageman, one of the world's leading al-Qaeda experts, believes this distinguishes terrorists from non-violent extremists: that they lose faith in other channels of dissent.[98]

Conspiracies add to the sense that violence is the only remaining option. Al-Qaeda consistently protests that it is waging a defensive, reactive jihad against a Western conspiracy to humiliate the Muslim *Ummah*,[99] while anti-abortion extremists defend themselves in court using a doctrine of 'defensive violence', articulated in Paul Jennings Hill's 'Defensive Action Statement' manifesto: the 'lethal force [is] justifiable provided it was carried out for the purpose of defending the lives of unborn children.'[100] Defensive violence is only necessary because of the collusion of man in 'Satan's current attack (the abortionist's knife).'[101]

Further evidence is provided from Aum Shinrikyo. It was only following a failed attempt to run for the 1990 election that Shoko Asahara (the leader) began to publicly espouse that there was a grand conspiracy against the group. It was at this time that the group began to direct its attacks outwards in the form of Sarin attacks. Ian Reader, an Aum expert, notes 'the "conspirators" against Aum had become the vague and ill-defined enemy and the "other" against which the sacred struggle was to be fought. They included the USA, the Japanese government and various Japanese religious movements, such as Soka Gakkai, and various vaguely defined groups such as the Jews and the Freemasons.'[102] It is also

notable that the Peoples Temple, originally a non-violent group, began discussing violence when Jim Jones began telling the group that they were subject to a widespread and persistent conspiracy aiming to destroy their movement. Members became persuaded that, being subject to attack from such a destructive and evil enemy, fighting back was the only option – a legitimate defence. By the mid 1970s, the Peoples Temple was becoming a military establishment. The group, like Aum Shinrikyo, began to believe they were engaged in a life or death struggle.[103]

In some groups, the perceived existence of a conspiracy adds a sense of urgency to the generalized notion that the group has no alternative options. The Oklahoma bomber, Timothy McVeigh, was a well-known conspiracist who produced videos detailing the government's siege at Waco where 26 people died, and handed out pamphlets with titles like 'U.S. Government Initiates Open Warfare Against American People'. What prompted him to action was that he thought the United Nations was imminently going to take over the US. Similarly, Richard Poplawski reacted to the arrival of police responding to a routine domestic disturbance on April 4 2009 by killing three officers and wounding a further two. He was influenced by a belief in anti-government conspiracy theories related to imminent gun confiscations, citizen detention camps, and a Jewish-controlled 'one world government.'[104]

Conspiracy theories may also exaggerate and entrench the idea of 'vanguardism' in the minds of group members. Vanguardism has been one of the most consistent attributes of violent extremist groups over the last century. Most powerfully expressed by Lenin in *What is to be done*? it is a strategy to confront the counter-revolutionary hostility of the establishment, and circumvent the inertial apathy of the masses.

It places emphasis on a small, committed, tight-knit group of revolutionaries as the central agents in a struggle conducted on behalf of many others. Its use stretches from the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 to the Maoist Chinese Communist Party in the 1930s and 1940s, the 1970s Cambodian Khmer Rouge, German

Baader-Meinhof Gang and Red Army Faction. Most terrorist groups existing today are inheritors of this tradition, and direct organisational descendents of Lenin. Al Qaeda statements from the mid-1990s through to the present indicate that they continue to see themselves and their followers as the vanguard of an international Islamic movement.[105]

Vanguardism invokes *propagande par le fait*, spectacular acts of resistance and defiance to jolt people from a self-perpetuating slumber. Vanguardist groups believe the masses they represent are benighted: due to false consciousness, overt government indoctrination, control of the media, or an oppressive education system, most people cannot see the real 'truth' of their enslavement. It follows that the greater the conspiracy, the greater the act required.

This finds clear expression in the *Turner Diaries*. The hero of the story, Earl Turner, while ruminating over his movement's strategy to wake the White man, complains:

What is really precious to the average American is not his freedom or his honour or the future of his race, but his paycheck. He complained when the System began bussing his kids to Black school 20 years ago, but he was allowed to keep his station wagon and his fibreglass speedboat so he didn't fight.[106]

Tom Metzger, the head of the Neo-Nazi group the Insurgent frequently refers to 'the White population,' his population, who 'just want their beer and television and go back to sleep'[107]. Tom Gilleard, a member of the British People's Party who was convicted in 2008 for making a bomb, wrote in a notebook recovered by police that 'time has come to stop the talk and start to act...I am so sick and tired of hearing nationalists talk of killing Muslims, of blowing up mosques, of fighting back, only to see these acts of resistance fail to appear.'[108]

In these examples, a powerful Jewish conspiracy is presumed to keep them down, and therefore spectacular operations are required

to awaken them. Combat 18's *Blood and Honour Field Manual* demonstrates the group's belief that conspirators are ready to fight back:

Certainly it [National Socialism] arouses hatred and animosity and sparks off a vicious counter attack from our enemies in the Zionist Occupation Government. But ZOG will sabotage and try to wipe out ANY threat to its tyrannical rule, be it overt National Socialism or populist patriotism.[109]

Certainly, al-Qaeda's hope was that 9/11 would 'help the [Islamic] nation to wake from its slumber.'[110] From the opposite end of the political spectrum, the Angry Brigade were inspired by the philosophy of Radical Situationism. Their decision to blow up Biba Boutique on Kensington High Street in 1971 also aimed to shake the masses. The target was chosen very carefully as a producer of bourgeois culture keeping the working class enslaved through unnecessary consumerism.[111] The National Revolutionary Faction, part of the National Anarchist movement, recommend the book *Toward a Citizens Militia*, which is a direct exposition of Leninist revolutionary vanguardism.[112]

The notion that the group is fighting for the good of its people – whether the working class, the Muslim Ummah, the White man, or whoever – helps groups that commit violence sidestep an inevitable moral difficulty they face: sometimes their violence will harm the people they professedly wish to free. For al-Qaeda, this is particularly acute because the Prophet Muhammed went into great detail about restraint and caution on the battlefield.[113] From 1998, al-Qaeda was especially concerned that the killing of innocents, especially fellow Muslims, would harm their support base, a concern which subsequent polling of Muslim majority countries suggests was well founded. Al-Qaeda proactively sought legal and religious opinion to justify the killing of innocents. Recovered al-Qaeda emails, on this topic, typically read:

Dear highly respected _____

...I present this to you as your humble brother ... concerning the

preparation of the lawful study that I am doing on the killing of civilians. This is a very sensitive case—as you know—especially these days ...

[Our] questions are:

1- Since you are the representative of the Islamic Jihad group, what is your lawful stand on the killing of civilians, specifically when women and children are included? And please explain the legitimate law concerning those who are deliberately killed.

2- According to your law, how can you justify the killing of innocent victims because of a claim of oppression?

3- What is your stand concerning a group that supports the killing of civilians, including women and children? [114]

> Al-Qaeda's justification for 2001 was very similar to that of the Groupe Islamique Armée in Algeria: that any individual or group seen as complicit in efforts against the Islamists was fair game. Innocent civilian casualties (insofar as there were any) are an unfortunate consequence of the greater good.[115]

> Very similar justifications are found in white supremacist or patriot/militia movements. Timothy McVeigh, who also had to account for the deaths of small children among his 168 victims, still saw his actions as striking a blow for liberty: 'I am sorry that these people had to lose their lives. But that's the nature of the beast. It's understood what the human toll will be.'[116] The Turner Diaries presented it in a more detailed way:

There is no way to destroy the system without hurting many thousands of innocent people – no way...but we are all completely convinced that what we did is justified, but it is still very hard to see our own people suffering so intensely because of our acts. It is because Americans have for so many years been unwilling to make unpleasant decisions that we are forced to make now which are very stern indeed. And is not that the key to the whole problem? The corruption of our people by the Jewish-Liberal-Democratic-Equalitarian plague which afflicts us...[117]

The Racial Volunteer Force – a violent splinter group of the British neo-Nazi group Combat 18 – has 12 principles. Number 10 reads:

WE BELIEVE our every thought and action must be - will it help promote White Victory? Every matter and issue, whether political, philosophical, religious or racial, must be viewed through the eyes of the White man, and exclusively from the point of view of the White Race as a whole. We must realise that we are now in a dire and crucial crisis in the life span of our race, and we must dedicate ourselves to securing White Victory at all costs, no matter what price or sacrifices required.

When the ends begin to justify the means, civilians become collateral damage – an unfortunate but inevitable consequence of the great battle being waged. Accepting this premise is surely a vital step towards committing acts of violence.

Damaging Mutuality and Trust

Perhaps the broadest impact of conspiracy theories is on the relationships between the government and the communities it serves. Through the promotion of cynicism, mistrust and suspicion conspiracy theories help create the tears in the social fabric that extremists exploit.

Trust plays a vital role in facilitating transactions between people, enhancing cooperation and coordination. Public trust in governing institutions is an essential prerequisite of a healthy democratic society. As Will Hutton said 'trust knits society together and makes it possible for people to get on with their everyday lives. Without it, society would become impossible.'[118]

Conspiracy theories can undermine trust in the institutions and people that it indicts. Whilst some form of skepticism is, of course, usual and healthy, conspiracy theories inspire a generalized, knee-jerk cynical mistrust.[119] As one academic has argued 'the certainty of conspiracy theory [lies in] its utter lack of trust: the only thing of which one can be truly certain is the deception with which rulers rule.'[120] Conspiracism is not only distrust, but also an irrational distrust – the inflexible, unfaltering tendency to act in a suspicious manner, irrespective of the situation.[121]

The key is whether belief in such ideas results in changes in people's political and social attitudes. One famous study has tried to do this by examining the effects of exposure to Oliver Stone's 1991 film *JFK*, which alleges that the assassination of JFK was a conspiracy. The film 'significantly aroused anger'. Importantly, the researchers found that viewing the film was associated with a decrease in viewer's intention to vote and make political contributions. It is possible therefore that conspiracy theories seep into the wider, more general political judgments that people make, and may encourage greater apathy: the logical result of a feeling of powerlessness.[122]

The feeling of mistrust is most acute when it comes to counter-terrorism and security measures. It is in relation to counter-terrorism and security that the level of trust in the State and its agents is vital. Research has consistently shown that successful counter-terrorism policing depends on a positive relationship between the police and the community it is trying to work with.[123]

Confronting 'homegrown' al-Qaeda inspired terrorism is a case in point. It requires cooperation with Muslim communities. Yet it is in these communities that problematic conspiracy theories are particularly prevalent. In the now infamous 2006 Dispatches survey of British Muslims around half believed that 9/11 was a conspiracy between the CIA and Israel. One put it: 'for all we know, Bush and Bin Laden could be sitting in a room together right now sipping champagne.'[124]

Every arrest of a terrorist, or terrorist attack, becomes yet another confirmation of a nefarious plot by Western Governments. The former Scotland Yard deputy assistant commissioner Brian Paddick said that the torrent of rumours about 7/7 was harming relations between Muslims and the rest of Britain.[125] Professor Innes' work has found that many Muslims distrust police and are reluctant to inform on extremists. This is a problem worsened by conspiracy theories and creates further difficulties for community level policing. [126]

RECOMMENDATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This research is a first attempt to place conspiracy theories within the broader set of ideologies, propaganda, and processes of extremist groups. It is not comprehensive. While there are important exceptions, on balance we believe conspiracy theories are an important component of propaganda used by extremist groups to recruit, explain the state of the world, identify scapegoats, and encourage the shift from peaceful to violent activity. More generally, we believe that belief in conspiracy theories by large numbers of the population can harm government citizen trust, with particular relevance for counter-terrorism work. A more long-term threat may even be extremist and violent groups forming new alliances. There are signs of this already. The National Revolutionary Faction for example is bringing together both the far-left and far-right, as well as various anti-globalisation and pagan-inspired groups who are united by an anti-capitalist and anti-establishment ideology.[127] Moreover, extreme groups may be able to draw on a larger counter-culture of conspiracism as a pool of possible recruits.

As such, a response is required. The irony is that conspiracy theories are by their nature difficult for governments to rebut. The obvious response of producing information often fails because any refutation risks being taken as evidence of a cover up. After all, if there *is* a conspiracy by government, then it is reasonable to assume the government would hamper investigation into those affairs. As a result, as one expert points out, conspiracy theories are 'the only theories for which evidence against them is actually construed as evidence in favor of them. The more evidence piled up by the authorities in favor of a given theory, the more the conspiracy theorist points to how badly "They" must want us to believe the official story.'[128] The US State Department has gone to considerable effort to rebut 9/11 conspiracy theories, with little discernable effect, and the 7/7 Investigation has also failed to quell the growing conspiracy theories surrounding the event. [129]

Therefore, we recommend a small number of interventions focusing on making government institutions more open, and investing resources in enabling people to think critically, rather than

government confronting conspiracy theories directly.

Changing the milieu in which conspiracy theories are received

The last decade has seen an explosion in the circulation of false information, or 'counter-knowledge': misinformation packaged to look like fact. [130] Every day, from hundreds of sources, people are assailed by thousands of pieces of counter-knowledge. Yet, as Michael Shermer writes, 'as a culture, we seem to have trouble distinguishing science from pseudoscience, history from pseudo-history, common sense from nonsense.'[131] In an age of social media, peer-to-peer communications, and user-generated content, many of the established gatekeepers of knowledge – the peer reviewed journal, the traditional newspaper, the scrutinised book – have been undermined and not replaced. The limited research there is suggests that young people in particular are not being equipped with the personal critical abilities to discriminate between truth and its many imposters.

New research is finding that the way we are consuming knowledge online is affecting our capacity for 'deep processing' skills: inductive analysis, critical thinking, imagination, and reflection. Indeed, scholars at University College London found that students' research habits tended towards skimming and scanning rather than in-depth reading, with little time spent evaluating information for relevance, accuracy or authority.[132] According to OFCOM's 2010 survey of internet and web-based content, around a fifth of internet users in the UK do not think about accuracy or bias of information they consume on the internet, they simply use sites they like the look of.[133] Moreover, Ethan Zuckerman argues that one danger of on-line networking is that it can lead to people simply interacting with people who already share your opinion, creating 'filter bubbles': conversations of similar people running in parallel, but rarely conflicting with other conversations of different people.[134]

Rather than edit or censor the net, which is both impossible and undesirable, it is important to ensure that young people have the skills and critical faculties to navigate this information in a careful manner.

Recommendation:

The Communities and Local Government's counter-terrorism *Prevent* work must invest more resources in programmes that encourage critical thinking and deconstructing the propaganda on the internet.

Rather than telling people what to think, it is better to teach them *how* to think. In respect of al-Qaeda inspired terrorism, since 2005 the government has embarked on a difficult path of fighting ideology, often by promoting liberal or moderate Islam. This is contentious, and sometimes has limited impact. Government interventions on matters of ideology should aim to encourage young people to critically assess propaganda, lies and half-truths themselves. There are some examples of this such as the award winning *Digital Disruption* programme run by the youth innovation company Bold Creative. This teaches young people in East London how to critically assess the classic techniques of propaganda, such as assertion and video splicing.[135]

In respect of Muslim communities, it may be useful to stress the Islamic duty on seeking truth, and that such an edict applies to both official accounts and conspiracy theories. One important Hadith, found in Imam Ahmad through Abu Dharr al-Ghifari, reads: 'seek the truth, even if it is harmful.' The reality for many of the theorists themselves is that they are not neutral truth seekers, but are trying to father these theories and their personal careers are staked on it.[136]

Recommendation:

The Department for Education and Skills must review how far the education system equips young people to navigate false information and counter knowledge.

Despite dramatic changes in the scale and type of information that people access on-line, and the fact that the net has become the primary source of information for the majority of young people in the UK today, there is no part of the national curriculum dedicated to digital literacy. It is vital that young people are given the skills to

recognise the difference between, for example, trustworthy sources of information and user generated content.

There is increased focus in the secondary school National Curriculum on core capabilities to support young people to become successful learners, confident individuals and responsible citizens. The Curriculum stresses the importance of the development of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) skills, both because of the growth of internet and other forms of media, and the Leitch Review of Skills which underlined the need for the UK to maintain global competitiveness.[137] It is vital to ensure that critical thinking, deconstructing propaganda and assessing the trustworthiness of sites is the central component of ICT classes.

Security services and openness

Conspiracy theories are a reaction to the lack of transparency and openness in many of our institutions. The more open our institutions, the less likely we are to believe we are living in a conspiring world.[138] MI5 and other counter-terrorism agencies' lack of transparency has been a contentious issue for some time. The British government only admitted its existence in 1989, and since then small steps have been made towards de-classifying and de-mystifying its operations. The British public is not as willing to accept silence or minimalist official statements as it was a generation ago, and if it is denied answers it will look for them independently.

It is also becoming more difficult for security services to operate behind a veil of secrecy. The recent leaking of thousands of classified US intelligence documents to Wikileaks highlights mounting challenges, both in terms of the amount of information that can be released at speed (on July the 15th 920,000 documents were uploaded in seconds) and the digitisation of all documents and the size and complexity of organisations. One recent estimate suggests over 800,000 people have top-level security clearance in the United States for example.

Greater openness is important. Research suggests that providing people with more information can effectively stop some people

believing conspiracy theories as a logical reaction to this new information.[139] Nonetheless, it is important to not overstate the likely effectiveness of openness. Some people have what is known as a 'monological belief system'. This describes a noted tendency among conspiracists who, when faced with new explanations that threaten existing beliefs, simply assimilate even contradictory information into their belief system (this is not something that is not limited to conspiracy theories).[140] As such, we suggest some relatively minor reforms, which could help improve the openness of security services without compromising them. These recommendations may not debunk conspiracy theories that some people already believe in, but would prevent new ones gaining traction.

Recommendation:

As the government conducts its review of counter-terrorism powers, it should consider how the intelligence agencies and other counter-terrorism operations could be more transparent.

The intelligence agencies are the Security Service (SS or MI5), the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS, or MI6) and the Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ). There are other agencies which have an intelligence or counter-terrorism role, including the Joint Intelligence Committee, the Assessments Staff and the Intelligence and Security Secretariat at the Cabinet Office, and the Defence Intelligence Staff. Of course in many instances the extent of openness is rightly limited for security reasons. Moreover, there are considerable resource implications of greater openness, particularly to ensure documents and information for public consumption do not compromise current operations or individuals' identity. However, there may be areas where greater openness is possible, for example, earlier declassification of certain documents and reviewing the policy of naming only the head of MI5.

Recommendation:

There should be maximum disclosure in counter-terrorism cases.

In Northern Ireland, the policy of 'maximum disclosure' in providing families with everything known about the killings during

the Troubles, even if the police could not convict a suspect, was effective. This can be extended to counter-terrorism work too, through the use of trusted, security cleared community members. This already happens on an ad hoc basis in some local communities following terrorism arrests. It must be supported and scaled up. Providing information to trusted local individuals would enable them to counter conspiracy theories in their own communities.

Recommendation:
Make intelligence announcements more explicit.

In Denmark, intelligence agencies publish an unclassified assessment of their judgement of the threats facing the country. Currently, Joint Intelligence Committee assessments have been released at times, which seem to suit political expediency rather than public interest. The release of Joint Intelligence Committee assessments, should be regularised, codified, de-politicised, and made widely available. The formation of the National Security Council offers a good opportunity to do this. Therefore, the National Security Council should report annually to parliament about the threat to national security, and release an annual public facing report which should include the scale of the terrorist threat, the number of groups and individuals being monitored, and activities of the intelligence services that can be safely revealed.

Recommendation:
Change reporting of court proceedings and transcripts.

Each major terrorist arrest inspires conspiracy theories of a 'police stitch-up' at the local and national level. Yet the resulting trials are conducted according to due process, in public session, and are decided by a jury of citizens, not the authorities. A professional stenographer transcribes complex trials, but while trials are in public session, court transcripts fall into an exemption under the Freedom of Information Act.[141] Worse, the exemption is one that does not require consideration of the 'public interest test', where the harm is weighted against the public interest of release. Access to court and tribunal records is subject to the permission of the courts, and can only be obtained at the personal expense of several

hundred pounds.[142] In major terrorist trials, it is in the public interest to disseminate everything that happened in open court, and at public expense, redacted where necessary where there are overwhelming security implications for the protection of a witness or sources.[143]

Recommendation:
Security and policing agencies must continue to develop personal relationships with communities to build up trust.

Security and policing services in particular rely on having a trusting relationship in the communities they work in. But they are inevitably the targets of conspiracy theories because of the secretive or coercive nature of some of their work. Good relationships between police and communities can help to dismantle mistrust. Demos research on trust has found that people find it easier to trust people than 'faceless' institutions. Trust is often based on the quality of interactions between an individual and the staff of an institution, rather than the service the institution provides *per se.[144]* Strong and stable personal relationships are particularly important in building 'affective', or emotional trust: the feeling that the institution is intrinsically motivated to provide a good service. This is particularly true in security and policing services. They have to personalize interactions with the public, especially in communities where conspiracy theories are prominent and trust is low.[145] In contexts such as neighbourhood police teams, small 'partnership' groups with the authority to make decisions have been effective. In these, consistent interactions between the same people have allowed personal relationships to develop, along with mutuality and trust to grow and form common ground. There is therefore a strong case to develop similar partnership groups in communities where trust in this policy area, and the people responsible for developing it, is lowest.

The role of civil society in fighting conspiracy theories
It is very difficult for government to effectively fight conspiracy theories that have already gained a foothold in extremist groups. As noted, government lacks the credibility to do so, and attempts to do so may inadvertently give such theories more credibility. Moreover,

public sector cuts probably mean that available resources to directly fight conspiracy theories will be limited.

Recommendation:
Civil Society must play a more proactive role in confronting the lies and myths of conspiracy theories when they find them.

There are a number of independent civil society groups that currently work to fight various forms of extremist and terrorist ideology. It is important that they also confront conspiracy theories that are part of the ideology. Such groups have more credibility than the government to factually rebut them. This applies not just to active civil society groups, but society as a whole: community leaders and individuals for example should be ready and willing to rebut conspiracy theories head-on where they find them.

Opportunities for direct government confrontation
For obvious reasons it is extremely difficult for the government to infiltrate effectively closed networks of disinformation. However, *open* infiltration is possible in some limited instances.

Recommendation:
Introduce some limited, open infiltration of Internet and physical sites by government to introduce alternative information.

Government agents or their allies should openly infiltrate the Internet sites or spaces to plant doubts about conspiracy theories, introducing alternative information. Arabic speaking Muslim officials from the US State Department have participated in dialogues at radical Islamist chat rooms and websites to ventilate arguments not often heard among these groups: often with some success.[146] This could be of equal use in other types of extremist groups too. Planting seeds of doubt can have a powerful effect. The famous Solomon Asch 'conformity' experiments have demonstrated that when just *one* other member of a group disagrees with the group consensus all members are significantly more likely to resist the urge to conform.[147]

Future research

This paper has opened up many avenues for future study. We believe that the scale and extent of popular belief in conspiracy theories is worrying, and the social and political implications warrant further investigation from academics and other researchers. Some specific gaps in the literature are evident to us. We do not know how many people in the UK actually believe in the conspiracy theories, particularly among minority or disadvantaged communities. Baseline figures of this type would be helpful. Although there is some anecdotal evidence to suggest a generalised belief in conspiracies may harm trust in government and political engagement, the relationship between belief and action is far from clear.

Our research comes with a health warning. It is a first attempt to understand the relationship between conspiracy theories, extremism and violence. Far more detailed research is required to develop a deeper understanding of how these concepts relate to each other, and critically, what works in respect of stopping people believing them.

ANNEX: KEY CONSPIRACY THEORIES

The Bilderberg Group: An annual invitation-only conference involving influential individuals in politics, finance, business and the military. Due to the secretive nature of the conference – the sessions are closed to the public, and no minutes are released – it has become a key target of conspiracy theories alleging the creation of a New World Order.

'False Flag' Operations: Those that are deliberately and deceptively made to appear as if they were carried out by an entity other than the genuine one. The phrase originates from the idea of military units flying the wrong colours –a false flag – during combat.

Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA): An agency of the US Department of Homeland Security, FEMA is the target of conspiracy theories held by US militia and survivalist groups. The allegations allege, amongst others, that the US Federal Government will declare martial law as a precursor to the establishment of the New World Order. FEMA will house in detainment camps all those that are resistant to this takeover.

Freemasons: A fraternal society, founded in the sixteenth century, with around six million members around the world. It is, due to its secretive nature, the target of many theories alleging secret control of governments with the desire to install structures allowing global control.

Illuminati: An Enlightenment secret society, founded in 1776 that originally promoted free thought and democratic political theories. However, the term now exists within many conspiracy theories as a popular 'catch-all' descriptor of an anti-democratic, elitist, conspiracy for one-world-government. The term is often closely linked with the idea of a 'New World Order'.

New World Order: First used by world statesmen after both World Wars to describe a new, values-based approach to global governance, the term has become a very common byword in

conspiracy theories to describe a totalitarian world government. This New World Order is, these theories allege, the vehicle whereby a super-powerful and secret cabal will achieve global domination.

Protocols of the (Learned) Elders of Zion (often shorted to the Protocols): An anti-Semitic tract purporting to be the proceedings of a meeting of Jewish leaders with the intent of achieving global control by the Jewish people. First published in 1903, and itself a plagiarism of earlier political satire, the Protocols have a complex history of both direct use, and indirect plagiarism by a large and diverse number of different groups. It is widely considered to be, in its various guises, the most widespread conspiracy theory in the world.

Zionist Occupation Government (ZOG): A description of a state, used by many groups, to describe a Jewish cabal in secret control of a given state, or indeed the world.

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NOTES

1 We define 'turned to violence' as meaning either: currently defined as terrorist group in the country in question; where a significant number of members have been convicted for violent acts; where violence is openly part of the group's ideology and/or identity; or where the group itself has, or is known to have planned, acts of violence against the state or individuals.

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Conspiracy theories have become a mainstream cultural phenomenon. This paper considers the role they play in extremist groups and counter-terrorism work. It presents the first ever analysis of conspiracy theories in the ideology and propaganda of fifty extremist groups: religious, far-right and left, eco, anarchic and cult-based.

It is argued that conspiracy theories are a 'radicalising multiplier', which feed back into the ideologies, internal dynamics and psychological processes of extremist groups in three ways. Firstly, they create demonologies of 'the enemy' that the group defines itself against. Secondly, they delegitimise voices of dissent and moderation. And thirdly, they encourage a group or individuals to turn to violence, because it acts as rhetorical devices to portray violence as necessary to 'awaken' the people from their acquiescent slumber. More broadly, conspiracy theories drive a wedge of distrust between governments and particular communities which can hinder community-level efforts to fight violent extremism.

It is, however, difficult for government to tackle conspiracies. The paper calls for government institutions to be more open, investment to enable young people to think critically and recognise propaganda, and for civil society to play a proactive role.

This paper is the first in a series of policy papers on emerging themes in extremism and terrorism by Demos focusing on under-researched dimensions of extremism. Future papers include the role of women in extremist movements and methods to de-glamorise al-Qaeda.