

How Journalists Should Not Cover an Online Conspiracy Theory | The Guardian

By Whitney Phillips

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Whitney Phillips critiques the recent media frenzy over the conspiracy theory QAnon through the lens of communications scholarship. She notes that journalists, in their efforts to debunk or explain conspiracy theories, often end up reinforcing them. Phillips offers several strategies from recent communications literature for dealing with this conundrum.

Coverage isn't just about the coverage itself, in other words. How and whether to cover a story must also hinge on what the story might do, and whose interests it will ultimately serve.

In the case of QAnon, debunking and explainer stories can be interesting and helpful for readers who already believe the conspiracy is absurd; they provide those readers more information, greater contextual understanding, and a richer vocabulary for describing something they already know.

For other audiences, however, attempts to debunk and explain the intricacies of the story can have a very different impact. First, the people spreading the conspiracy couldn't ask for a better outcome; journalists covering the story help spread the narrative so much further and so much faster than it would have traveled otherwise. Participants in the QAnon narrative have giddily affirmed exactly this point; posts to the "Great Awakening" subreddit have outrightly thanked journalists for the coverage and for the resulting wave of new participants.

More concerningly, for those who sincerely believe the conspiracy to be true, or for those who may not be true believers but who do truly mistrust mainstream journalism, debunkings can actually serve to confirm the story – a logically valid conclusion to draw if someone believes that everything journalists say is a lie. (For more on this head-spinning complication, see [Alice Marwick's exploration](#) of why people share false narratives, and [Francesca Tripodi's analysis](#) of "alternative

facts” and news sources within conservative political thought).

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