

Great Falls Forum: Battling conspiracy theories is all about listening

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By Steve Collins

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Many people believe all sorts of things that are not true, from charges that Barack Obama wasn't born in the United States to the Royal Family's alleged involvement in the death of Princess Diana to the notion that 5G phone towers somehow cause COVID-19.

For Stephanie Kelley-Romano, a rhetoric professor at Bates College, these sort of conspiracy theories are fodder for academic research that seems ever more crucial with every passing year.

Her solution to combating their spread is largely to listen to each other more and to encourage people to learn from reliable sources.

Because "we're in a scary time," people are especially vulnerable to explanations for events that run counter to the facts presented by experts, the media and the government, she said Thursday during an online Great Falls Forum.

"In times of uncertainty, conspiracy beliefs rise," she said. When people feel left out and disempowered, Kelley-Romano said, "they are going to look for some sort of explanation."



Bates professor Stephanie Kelley-Romano talks about conspiracy theories during a Great Falls Forum talk on Thursday. *Screenshot from video*

She said it's important first, though, to understand that conspiracy theories are not the same as misinformation. For example, somebody can mistakenly believe that vaccines cause autism without necessarily adopting a conspiratorial framework for their thinking.

In Kelley-Romano's formulation, "A conspiracy theory is a belief that there is a secret plan by a group to do something unlawful or harmful for some larger 'evil' motive."

Conspiracy theorists, who run the gamut from family members to former President Donald Trump, "capitalize on a lack of trust" in what officials have to say in order to gain some advantage from creating a "nefarious reason" that isn't true, she said.

Figuring out how to help believers find their way to more reasoned discourse isn't easy.

Kelley-Romano said it's difficult for everyone these days to figure out what's true and what's disinformation. Many of the old standards for sorting out the facts, she said, have given way to new pathways for exploitation that undermine traditional ones that once offered authority and "a sense of security."

She said that despite her training and knowledge, even she can sometimes "start to fall" for conspiracy theories and "start getting creeped out" at the thought that something she's heard could be true.

When that happens, she said, she steps back and thinks it through, searching Google for more information from reliable sources and finding someone who expresses "the exact opposite perspective" on the same issue.

"Constant vigilance is really important right now," Kelley-Romano said.

Trying to counter conspiracy theories is difficult, she said, because people come to have a firm belief in them.

The best thing to do in response for most is polite talk.

"We just need to listen to each other," she said. "More conversation. More is better for me, all the time."

It doesn't help to lecture people about why they're wrong, she said. The real solution takes longer. It's to amplify reputable sources, encourage critical thinking and help people break out of the echo chambers that social media encourages.

Kelley-Romano said she worries about the polarization of politics and the way conspiracy-minded talk undermines the types of discourse that support democratic decisions.

Teaching media literacy is crucial in the long run, she said, to help people avoid falling victim to the spread of fake talk of conspiracies.

She said her students give her hope that the future will be better.

The Great Falls Forum is sponsored by the Lewiston Public Library, the Sun Journal and Bates College. Its next scheduled talk features Maine Registered Guide Earl Brechlin on March 17.

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