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New resources to counter COVID-19 conspiracy theories through critical thinking and empathy

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UNESCO, in cooperation with the European Commission, Twitter, and the World Jewish Congress, is launching a series of easily accessible and comprehensive visual learning resources to raise awareness of the existence and consequences of conspiracy theories linked to the COVID-19 crisis. The resources also address how to recognize conspiracy theories, understand what drives them, refute them with facts and respond effectively to those who are spreading them.

The COVID-19 pandemic has unleashed a parallel pandemic of dangerous misinformation and rumours in the form of conspiracy theories, including far-fetched explanations of the origins of the virus, how it can be cured and who is to

blame for its spread. Conspiracy theories undermine science, facts and trust in institutions, and pose an immediate threat to individuals and communities.

There have always been conspiracy theories, but the pandemic underway has proved to be a particularly fertile ground for their spread. They are part of a wider trend of increasing hate speech, and increased racist, xenophobic, and anti-Semitic attacks, which also target LGBTQ communities.

UNESCO Director-General Audrey Azoulay underlined the dangers of misinformation and rumours in relation to the pandemic and other issues. "Conspiracy theories cause real harm to people, to their health, and also to their physical safety. They amplify and legitimize misconceptions about the pandemic, and reinforce stereotypes which can fuel violence and violent extremist ideologies," she said.

The infographics, available in Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian and Spanish, will be widely disseminated on social media via the hashtag [#ThinkBeforeSharing](#), [UNESCO MIL CLICKS social media pages](#), and through the European Commission's [website](#) on fighting disinformation.

Věra Jourová, Vice President of the European Commission for Values and Transparency, said: "Disinformation and conspiracy theories harm the health of our democracies – this has been made very clear in the context of a global pandemic. Citizens must be equipped with useful tools to recognise and debunk them. To support citizens, public institutions need to work together and with digital platforms, media professionals, fact checkers and researchers, as the European Commission and UNESCO are doing."

The visual learning resources complement UNESCO's work on Media and Information Literacy (MIL) and related [educational graphics](#) produced as part of the Organization's COVID-19 response. They draw on the expert advice of Professor Michael Butter, author of the [Guide to Conspiracy Theories](#), as well as Stephan Lewandowsky and John Cook, authors of the [Conspiracy Theory Handbook](#).

As part of the launch of the resources, Prof. Butter stressed the important role of education: "There is by now a lot of evidence that shows that people who have been taught what conspiracy theories are and how they work are much less receptive to them. It's easy: education is key."

Mr Lewandowsky affirmed the fact that conspiracy theories may be viewed as light-hearted, but can be dangerous, saying that "conspiracy theories have adverse consequences on society. This is especially true during a pandemic, when belief in conspiracies can harm or even kill people. It is therefore essential for the public to be informed about how to spot conspiracy theories so that they can be ignored."

The campaign is undertaken as part of UNESCO's work in [Media and Information Literacy](#) and to counter hate speech, and supports its programmes on [Preventing violent extremism through education](#) and [Global Citizenship Education](#).

Download, like, and share these learning resources so that we can all engage in peer education on these topics. Get ready to celebrate [Global MIL Week 2020](#) (24-31 October) under the theme, Resisting Disinformation: Media and Information Literacy for everyone, by everyone.

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