

PROJECT CENSORED

The News That Didn't Make The News

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PRESS CONTACT:

Lorna Garano

lornagarano@gmail.com

510-759-6655

Does UNESCO's campaign to stamp out Covid-19 conspiracy theories really help stop their spread?

A Project Censored national judge and noted media scholar and critic questions their approach.

Fair Oaks, CA—UNESCO recently published an [online toolkit](#) to help the public stop the spread of conspiracy theories about Covid-19. Urging readers to #ThinkBeforeSharing, the organization provides a suite of infographics designed to identify and stem the spread of conspiracy theories. The concerns about the mis- and dis-information regarding the virus are legitimate, and UNESCO offers some helpful hints and useful content, but when it comes to equipping the public with real tools to evaluate claim it falls short. “UNESCO’s approach is more likely to deepen confusion rather than edify,” says Nolan Higdon, a Project Censored national judge and noted media scholar and critic.

Higdon is available for interview. Here is just some of what he can discuss.

- **The UNESCO approach overly simplifies the concept of a “conspiracy theory,”** claiming that it is “the belief that events are secretly manipulated behind the scenes by powerful forces with negative intent.” At a micro level this ignores the traditional definition of “theory.” Worse, it ignores that whistleblowers, including Daniel Ellsberg and Julian Assange, have shown definitively the powerful *have* secretly conspired to promote a self-serving agenda. We need a more nuanced definition that takes into account this reality.

- **It promotes unquestioning appeal to authority.** Readers are urged to respect the opinions of experts, but who qualifies as an expert and what happens when experts disagree? These questions aren't addressed.
- **There is zero discussion of the economic, social, and political contexts that nurture conspiracy theories.** Rather, we are urged to see them as the malicious rumors that have no connection to larger societal realities.
- **Nowhere do they address the legitimate reasons citizens have for mistrust of government,** and how we can distinguish between healthy skepticism and the cynicism that allows conspiracy theories to flourish.
- **The urge us to “prebunk” claims without sufficient content knowledge.**
- **Media literacy education is the solution.** Mis- and dis-information about Covid-19 and other issues of public health and safety is no doubt a danger, but the best defense against it is arming the public with media literacy skills that allow them to discern quality information from lies, manipulation, bad-faith arguments, and poorly reasoned positions. These skills allow individuals to reflexively demonstrate empathy and critical inquiry in all situations, not just when they think there is a conspiracy theorist in their midst. Unfortunately, the UNESCO toolkit provides a simplistic “dos and don'ts” approach instead of education.

ABOUT NOLAN HIGDON

NOLAN HIGDON is a national Project Censored judge. He is an author and university lecturer at Merrill College and the Education Department at University of California, Santa Cruz. Higdon's areas of concentration include podcasting, digital culture, news media history, and critical media literacy. Higdon is a founding member of the Critical Media Literacy Conference of the Americas. He is the author of *The Anatomy of Fake News: A Critical News Literacy Education* (University of California Press, 2020). His most recent publications include *Let's Agree to Disagree: A Critical Thinking Guide to Communication, Conflict Management, and Critical Media Literacy* (Routledge, 2022) with Mickey Huff and *The Podcaster's Dilemma: Decolonizing Podcasters in the Era of Surveillance Capitalism* (Wiley, 2021) with Nicholas Baham III. Higdon is a National Judge for Project Censored. In addition, he has been a contributor to Truthout and Counter-Punch; and a source of expertise for The New York Times, San Francisco Chronicle, and numerous television news outlets.

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