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UN Education Agency Launches War on ‘Conspiracy Theories’

UNESCO is training and recruiting teachers as a key part of its global effort to combat what it considers problematic information and ideas

By Alex Newman September 5, 2022 Updated: September 7, 2022

The [United Nations](https://www.theepochtimes.com/t-united-nations) Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, better known by its acronym, UNESCO, is escalating its global war on ideas and information it considers to be “misinformation” and “conspiracy theories.”

According to the Paris-based U.N. education agency, which released a [major report](https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000381958) on the subject for educators this summer, conspiracy theories cause “significant harm” and form “the backbone of many populist movements.”

Among other concerns, conspiracy theories “foster and reinforce harmful thinking patterns and exclusive worldviews,” the report said.

They also “reduce trust in public institutions” and “scientific institutions,” which can drive people to violence or decrease their desire to “reduce their carbon footprint,” UN officials argued in the document.

While “all conspiratorial thinking threatens human rights values,” the document says without elaborating, some conspiracy theories are more dangerous than others.

In some cases, teachers are even encouraged to report their students to authorities.

Examples of “conspiracy theories” cited in the report include everything from widely held and respectable beliefs such as “climate change denial” and “manipulation of federal elections” in the United States, to more far-fetched notions such as the “earth is flat” or “Michelle Obama is actually a lizard.”

“There are plenty of crazy thoughts on the Internet, many of which are patently false,” explained Citizens for Free Speech Director Patrick Wood. “The only thoughts being ‘corrected’ are those contrary to the globalist narrative. This proves that the focus is on protecting their own narratives and nothing else.”

“UNESCO joins a censorship cartel that now includes the European Union, the U.S. government, the World Economic Forum, social media giants like Facebook and Twitter, and notably, Google,” Wood told The Epoch Times. “Anyone who does not parrot the globalist narrative is by default considered to be a ‘conspiracy theorist.'”

At the heart of the global program to combat these ideas and theories are teachers and schools, according to the U.N. agency. Also central is the battle online and in the media, UNESCO documents explain.

The latest strategy was unveiled at UNESCO’s “International Symposium on Addressing Conspiracy Theories through Education.” Held in late June in Brussels, the summit brought together academia, governments, civil society, and the private sector to promote “joint action” against conspiracy theories and those who believe or spread them.

The plan includes strategies to prevent people from believing in conspiracy theories in the first place as well as tools for dealing with those who already believe them.

Several experts on propaganda and free speech, however, warned that the U.N. effort represents a “dangerous” escalation in what they portrayed as a global war on free speech, free expression, questioning official narratives, and dissent more broadly.

“What they mean by ‘conspiracy theory’ is any claim or argument or evidence that differs from the propaganda pumped out by the government and media,” warned New York University Professor of Media Studies Mark Crispin Miller, who studies propaganda and government misinformation.

“I can’t think of anything more dangerous to free speech and free thought—and, therefore, democracy—than this effort by the U.N., which has no business telling us what’s true and what is not,” Miller told The Epoch Times. “That distinction is not theirs to make, but ours, as free people capable of thinking for ourselves, and unafraid of civil argument.”

**The Global War on Conspiracy Theories**

Official efforts to clamp down on “conspiracy theories” and “misinformation” are not new. In fact, Western governments—including the U.S. government—have for years been leading the charge.

In 2010, the U.S. State Department, with help from its “Counter Misinformation Team,” published “[Conspiracy Theories and Misinformation](https://web.archive.org/web/20100206065533/http:/www.america.gov/conspiracy_theories.html)” on America.gov claiming to debunk various “conspiracy theories.”

More recently, the Biden administration has also turned its focus to “conspiracy theories.” Last year, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security repeatedly suggested that belief in widespread voter fraud or alternative views on COVID-19 and public health measures represented a major terrorism threat to the United States.

While the Biden administration’s proposed “Disinformation Governance Board” appears to have been shelved for now following a public outcry, the U.S. government has been working closely with technology giants to suppress speech surrounding election fraud, Hunter Biden’s laptop, alternative views on COVID-19, and more.

National Public Radio, a tax-funded operation, has published numerous pieces over the last month echoing UNESCO’s talking points about the alleged danger and prevalence of conspiracy theories in schools and beyond.

Outgoing senior health official Dr. Anthony Fauci has chimed in recently, too. “What we’re dealing with now is just a distortion of reality, conspiracy theories which don’t make any sense at all pushing back on sound public health measures, making it look like trying to save lives is encroaching on people’s freedom,” he said on MSNBC’s “The Rachel Maddow Show” on Aug. 22.

The World Economic Forum, which has become a lightning rod for criticism around the world over its “Great Reset” agenda, is also working to counter ideas it labels misinformation and conspiracy theories.

“Key to stopping the spread of conspiracy theories is educating people to be on the lookout for misleading information—and teaching them to be suspicious of certain sources,” senior WEF writer Charlotte Edmond wrote two years ago in [a piece for the organization’s website](https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/09/conspiracy-theories-prevent-spread-covid-19-unesco/).

The U.N. has been central to the global effort. Indeed, the new program is actually an extension of a 2020 initiative by UNESCO and the European Commission dubbed [#ThinkBeforeSharing](https://en.unesco.org/themes/gced/thinkbeforesharing) to combat conspiracy theories online.

That effort included urging citizens to post links to fact-checking services and even report journalists who may be engaged in conspiracy theorizing to “your local/national press council or press ombudsperson.”

In an October 2020 World Economic Forum podcast on “Seeking a cure for the infodemic,” U.N. global communications chief Melissa Fleming boasts of having enlisted over 100,000 volunteers to amplify the U.N.’s views and squelch competing narratives.

“So far, we’ve recruited 110,000 information volunteers, and we equip these information volunteers with the kind of knowledge about how misinformation spreads and ask them to serve as kind of ‘digital first-responders’ in those spaces where misinformation travels,” the U.N. communications chief said.

The revelation came after years of U.N. and governmental efforts to quash what it describes as extremism, misinformation, and more on the internet. In 2016, the U.N. Security Council launched a “framework” to fight “extremism” online on the heels of a [program from the previous year to battle “ideologies”](https://news.un.org/en/story/2015/09/510462-growing-threat-violent-extremism-demands-unified-response-un-chief-tells-summit#.Vgz-vyuzlzi) that could lead to violence.

But the fresh UNESCO efforts in education signal a dramatic escalation in the battle—especially in the targeting of school children.

**Combating ‘Conspiracy Theories’ at School**

Education and schools are at the center of the new UNESCO plan to combat conspiracy theories.

“The fight against conspiracy theories, and the antisemitic and racist ideologies they often convey, begins at school, yet teachers worldwide lack the adequate training,” said UNESCO Director-General Audrey Azoulay about the new effort. “That is why today, UNESCO is launching a practical guide for educators, so they can better teach students how to identify and debunk conspiracy theories.”

Beyond working through education, the U.N. agency also hopes to expand its efforts to combat the spread of what it refers to as conspiracy theories in the realms of press and social media.

“This builds on the wider work we’re doing to strengthen media and information literacy to better prepare learners to navigate a world of algorithms, artificial intelligence and invasive data collection,” added Azoulay, who served in the French government as a member of the Socialist Party before taking over the UN education organization.

The UN strategy for fighting conspiracy theories in education lists a number of major objectives for educators.

These include teaching teachers how to “identify and dismantle conspiracy theories,” how to develop students’ “resilience to conspiracy theories,” and how to tell the difference between a “real conspiracy” and a “conspiracy theory.”

One of the ways offered for educators to determine the veracity of information is to check fact-checking services, which have come under repeated criticism in recent years for being highly politicized and often inaccurate. Many of the services are funded by individuals, such as billionaire founder of Microsoft Bill Gates, who UNESCO says are frequently the target of conspiracy theories.

The document also contains multiple strategies for combating conspiracy theories. To fight “harmful information” among students, for example, UNESCO urges teachers to engage in what the agency describes as “prebunking.”

“Prebunking is also sometimes called ‘inoculation,’” the report reads. “Psychologists have proven that weakened forms of harmful information, carefully introduced and framed, can help to strengthen the resilience against wider harmful messages, much like a vaccine.”

When students believe in ideas because of parental influence, teachers are instructed to seek help from school officials and consider a “mediated conversation with parents.”

If a student were to express concerns about the COVID-19 vaccine, teachers are instructed to “state that the vaccine has been scientifically proven to be safe” and “that it is important to get vaccinated to curb the pandemic.”

It was not immediately clear whether the relevant section of the UNESCO document was written before public health authorities in the United States and around the world began acknowledging that the COVID-19 injections do not prevent infection from or transmission of the CCP virus that causes COVID-19.

In some cases where conspiracy theories involve alleged hate or discrimination, teachers are urged to consider reporting students to “safeguarding authorities or safeguarding officers.”

**What Is a Conspiracy Theory?**

The document, titled “Addressing conspiracy theories – what teachers need to know,” defines **a conspiracy theor**y as: “The belief that events are being secretly manipulated by powerful forces with negative intent. Typically, conspiracy theories involve an imagined group of conspirators colluding to implement an alleged secret plot.”

The UNESCO report moves on to offer warnings about, and definitions for,

* misinformation,
* disinformation,
* hate speech, and
* fake news.

One term that is not defined in the document, however, is **the word “conspiracy”** itself. Most dictionaries define it as an illegal or immoral plot carried out in secret involving two or more individuals. [But] State and federal law-enforcement authorities charge large numbers of people with the crime of “conspiracy” each year.

In its short guide for telling the difference between “real” conspiracies and mere “theories,” the U.N. report divides the thinking into two broad categories.

The first, dubbed “conventional thinking” in the UNESCO document, uses Watergate as an example of a real conspiracy uncovered by following evidence and having “healthy” skepticism.

The other mode of thinking, labeled “conspiratorial thinking,” features a “birds aren’t real” theory that concludes birds are robots spying on people and the government creates replica eggs to cover it all up. This conclusion is reached as a result of “overriding suspicion” and “over interpreting evidence,” UNESCO said.

**In the real world**, experts say the line between conspiracy theory and conspiracy fact is far less obvious.

According to a 2020 YouGov-Cambridge Globalism poll cited in the UNESCO document, strong majorities believe in overarching “conspiracy theories” in many nations. Almost eight in 10 Nigerians, for example, said they believed in “a single group of people who controlled world events.” Almost six out of 10 Mexicans, 56 percent of Greeks and 55 percent of Egyptians believed that, too, the poll showed.

One of the reports at the center of the new UNESCO effort, “[The Conspiracy Theory Handbook](https://www.climatechangecommunication.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/ConspiracyTheoryHandbook.pdf)” by Stephan Lewandowsky and John Cook, also acknowledges that conspiracies exist and are not uncommon. **“Real conspiracies do exist,” the report admits at the start.**

1. “Volkswagen conspired to cheat emissions tests for their diesel engines.
2. The U.S. National Security Agency secretly spied on civilian internet users.
3. The tobacco industry deceived the public about the harmful health effects of smoking.

We know about these conspiracies through internal industry documents, government investigations, or whistleblowers.”

The U.N. documents also outline various reasons why people believe in conspiracy theories. These include feelings of powerlessness, coping mechanisms for handling uncertainty, or seeking to claim minority status. Evidence is not listed as a reason why people might believe in a conspiracy theory.

One of the “case studies” listed in the UNESCO document refers to Mikki Willis’s documentary “Plandemic.” Among other points, the film and the experts who are interviewed argue that COVID-19 may have been created in a laboratory for sinister purposes.

Reached by The Epoch Times, Willis slammed the U.N. and its effort to “indoctrinate” people.

“When I hear that the U.N. is now directing its indoctrination towards teachers, I become concerned about the well-being of our future generations,” he said, adding that the U.N.’s attack on “conspiracy theories” was an effort to stop the truth.

“The fact that they continue to use my film series as an example of what they’re fighting against says everything we need to know,” continued Willis, saying the vast majority of scientists now agree with key points in his film and yet “propagandists” keep trying to “perpetuate the lies.”

**Critics Sound the Alarm**

Multiple experts in the field of propaganda warned The Epoch Times that the UNESCO initiative was a major threat to free expression.

[Organisation for Propaganda Studies](http://propagandastudies.ac.uk/) Co-Director Piers Robinson said these kinds of developments are “extremely dangerous.”

“Basic principles of freedom of expression remind us that, because we can never be sure who is right and who is wrong, **all ideas and arguments need to be evaluated through a process of rational scrutiny and debate**,” Robinson told The Epoch Times. “Censoring arguments and opinions believed to be wrong means we risk censoring the truth.”

Explaining that these dangers have long been understood, Robinson quoted the great 19th-century British philosopher John Stuart Mill.

“First: the opinion which it is attempted to suppress by authority may possibly be true. Those who desire to suppress it, of course deny its truth; but they are not infallible,” Mill said. “All silencing of discussion is an assumption of infallibility.”

Robinson, who also serves as co-editor of Propaganda in Focus and sits on the executive committee of Pandemics Data & Analytics (PANDATA.org), also cautioned that powerful actors with large budgets would likely be involved in deciding what is true and not.

“This means allowing powerful actors to define reality and, as history shows, they will define reality in a way that serves their own interests,” he said. “This is all contradictory to democracy and, of course, the reason why freedom of expression is understood to be so important: we must be free to scrutinize and criticize those in power in order to guard against tyranny and abuse of power.”

Robinson also blasted the use of the term “conspiracy theory” as “deeply problematic,” saying it was a term often used to shut down discussion on serious issues and questions about powerful actors.

“If we value democracy and the ideas of freedom of expression and rational debate, UNESCO could do useful work on helping people of the world to think for themselves, and develop their own critical skills,” he concluded. “They should not be in the business of telling people what to think.”

Another expert on propaganda, environmental political theory Professor Tim Hayward at the University of Edinburgh, also warned that efforts to demonize and silence “conspiracy theories” was really an effort to pathologize dissent and inconvenient lines of questioning.

“Instead of reasoned arguments put forward by critics and dissidents being met with proper consideration and rebuttal, they are just dismissed out of hand; and the critics themselves are smeared with the name **conspiracy theorists**,” warned Hayward, who has written a number of peer-reviewed academic papers on the subject in recent years.

“Worse, of course, is that the general denigration of dissent is used to whip up moral panic about ‘disinformation’ and to try and justify increased censorship,” he added.

Hayward views the focus on education to combat “conspiracy theories” as particularly concerning.

“It is truly worrying when those responsible for the strategic communications challenged by dissidents get to infiltrate education systems and implant prejudices in favor of ‘official stories’ which are only official because they are backed by political authority rather than actual epistemic authority,” he said.

While Hayward cautioned that he was not necessarily accusing UNESCO of doing this, he warned that the organization and its programs needed to be watched as this was a troubling trend.

It would be better to teach children “the fundamentals of critical reasoning” so they can detect falsehoods on their own, he told The Epoch Times.

“You cannot reasonably identify disinformation or reject a ‘conspiracy theory’ unless you have a robust and defensible grip on what is reliable information,” he said, calling for “logical thinking” and “broad knowledge” to help people guard against disinformation from adversaries or even their own leaders. “That should be the focus of education.”

**Truth or Misinformation?**

The fresh push to quash “misinformation” and “conspiracy theories” online comes as the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and other federal agencies increasingly admit that much of what was labeled false [by the CDC] during the pandemic turned out to be correct.

For instance, today, the CDC admits that the COVID-19 vaccines do not prevent infection or transmission—an idea that was censored by multiple social media companies relying on government as “misinformation” as recently as a few months ago.

Also widely acknowledged by federal officials today is that the CCP virus may have, in fact, been created through “gain-of-function” research taking place at the Wuhan Institute of Virology in communist China. This, too, was blocked, censored, and labeled as misinformation.

Alleged conspiracy “theories” being ultimately proven correct is hardly a new phenomenon. Just this summer, Reader’s Digest published a list of “[12 Conspiracy Theories That Actually Turned Out to Be True](https://www.rd.com/list/conspiracy-theories-that-turned-out-to-be-true/).” The list includes everything from CIA mind-control programs and government spying to tobacco companies conspiring to hide the negative health effects of their products.

Despite the escalating UN concern about conspiracy theories and the claims that they are proliferating at an unprecedented rate, [new research](https://news.miami.edu/stories/2022/08/study-debunks-rise-of-conspiracy-theories.html) by the University of Miami suggests that is simply not true.

Critics, though, have repeatedly raised concerns about UNESCO’s leadership, and even those behind the new effort, including a number of individuals from autocratic nations and with ties to dictatorial regimes.

There [are numerous Chinese communists embedded](https://www.theepochtimes.com/beijing-takeover-of-united-nations-presents-existential-threat-to-us-experts_3349220.html) in the agency’s senior leadership such as Qu Xing, who serves as deputy director-general of the agency.

The agency itself has been regularly condemned for extremism by U.S. authorities, including by the Ronald Reagan administration when it withdrew from UNESCO.

The Trump administration ended U.S. membership in the controversial U.N. organization in 2018, citing

* anti-Semitism,
* “extreme politicization,”
* hostility to fundamental American values, and
* other concerns.

However, [as reported by The Epoch Times](https://www.theepochtimes.com/amid-scandal-and-ccp-influence-us-considers-rejoining-un-education-arm_4095313.html), **the Biden administration is seeking ways to circumvent federal statutes barring U.S. re-engagement in the global organization.**

None of the press officers, media liaisons, or spokespeople for UNESCO responded to requests for comment on the plan.

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