



AGE OF CONSPIRACY

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➔ Logline

‘Age of Conspiracy’ (WT) takes a closer look at the world of conspiracy theories. Various protagonists, scientists and public characters, will explore the impact and history of conspiracy theories, which represent the dark side of the Enlightenment.

These modern religions claim to bring order and meaning into our present world of confusion.



Synopsis

Suddenly conspiracy theories are everywhere, and everyone is talking about them. Every day, thousands of people are doing research in the dark web for 'forbidden knowledge'. B-listers inform their fans about their fight against world conspiracy. Long forgotten celebrities regain popularity by spreading crude theories. Protestors wear huge paper 'Qs', a secret sign of their conspiracy sect. Even heads of state are using Twitter to gossip: 'Fake, manipulation, conspiracy'.

The world wide web connects average citizens to a scene that has always had a great sense of mission, but never had the technical possibilities to unfold. ..until now.

Google's, YouTube's and Facebook's algorithms boost conspiracy theories. Likes represent success. It's only a matter of clicks until a video or an article with confusing theories will be everywhere.

The Internet has become Alice in Wonderland's rabbit hole. With every click, truth seekers of all kind are getting more and more drawn into a fantasy world of conspiracy theories.



In 'Conspiracy Land', HAARP is a weapon for weather control, which has caused Hurricane Katrina. Commercial airliners drop chemicals to make people sick, infertile or homosexual. The Bilderbergers are a circle of secret conspirators who decide the fate of the world at their annual meetings. The British Royals are an ancient race of reptiloids. They have lived among humans for thousands of years and they are able to change shape. It is an exciting world and it is full of secrets.

Especially in times of a pandemic, which demands discipline and perseverance from citizens, rumors about the coronavirus are particularly dangerous. Conspiracy theories range from simple denigration to absurdism: Bill Gates is suspected of world conspiracy; others question the existence of the disease. Still others blame the radiation from 5G mobile phone towers for the COVID-19 outbreak in Wuhan. Therefore, activists around the world set mobile phone masts on fire.

Are we living in the Age of Conspiracy? Crazy theories are flooding the Internet. Platforms like YouTube and Facebook or confusing chat programs like Discord offer unexpected possibilities to conspiracy theorists and their supporters to share their theories. A race for truth, which fact-checkers and journalists seem to be losing.



It is not the first time that technology has accelerated the spreading of conspiracy theories. Before the Age of Enlightenment, conspiracy theories hardly occurred at all.

Rumors, exclusively spread by governments and the educated, about secret and harmful changes were used by the powerful as a secret weapon to dominate others. After the invention of the letterpress, this “knowledge” made its way into a broader public. Along with knowledge came conspiracy theories.

Conspiracy theories have been on everyone's lips since the 17th century. Technical innovations made it possible to spread knowledge further and further.

But the Internet surpasses everything that had ever existed before. A single smartphone user can reach an audience of millions. Entire conspiracy subcultures meet online. Conspiracy theorists become popstars and multimillionaires – thanks to hundreds of thousands of fans.



Popstars of Fake News



In the past, conspiratorial world narratives were printed in limited editions by obscure publishers and reached just a very small readership. Thanks to the Internet, publication is no longer an obstacle. Now, conspiracy theories can reach millions.

Conspiracy theorists are mushrooming all over the world. In Great Britain, former sports reporter David Icke is spreading stories of shape-shifting reptiles which secretly control the world. In Germany, singer Xavier Naidoo addresses his fans and spreads theories inspired by the American Alt-Right movement. Kopp Verlag, a German publishing house, makes a fortune by selling books on esotericism, occult phenomena, and conspiracy theories. Among the Top 10 most visited German news sites is now 'KenFM', a platform run by former radio presenter Ken Jebsen. Mixing activism and investigative journalism he regularly feeds his fans with new conspiracy theories.

The king of conspiracy theorists is most likely Alex Jones. For more than 20 years he has been spreading his stories. Formerly over the radio. Then he built a private media empire, based on his website 'Infowars'. Alex Jones is no longer a nobody. He is a star. In 2018 his site was visited 1.4 million times at an average – per day. His YouTube channel used to have 2.4 million subscribers and 1.6 billion clicks before it got shut down. Jones, a self-proclaimed resistance fighter against evil of all kind has a reaches more people than some major newspapers, such as Newsweek and The Economist . Conspiracy theories as mass entertainment.

Jones mainly focuses his interest on what he calls the 'New World Order'. He also produced a documentary film about it which is titled 'Endgame'. From his point of view, a global elite has conspired against the majority. Part of this elite are the Freemasons, Bilderbergers, the Atlantic Bridge, the American Catastrophe Management Agency FEMA and the military-industrial complex. These conspirators manipulate history, commit murders, stage wars and carry out terrorist attacks under false flags. According to Jones, leaders of the world are a bunch of satanic pedophiles, possessed by demons. And their aim is a genocide. Only 500 million people will survive and are going to be confined in reservations. Having done so, the world leaders can live a happy life in the most beautiful places on earth. They will genetically transform themselves into supermen and ultimately expand into space.

Millions of loyal followers believe in Jones. But he probably has more profane interests than enlightening mankind. His theories of allegedly staged school shootings foil all efforts of 'Gun Control' in the USA. His online shop offers products to protect from threats he has made up. This kind of business has made him a multimillionaire.

Before they split up, Alex Jones was a passionate supporter of Donald Trump. His election recommendation for the then presidential candidate reached millions of fans. When Jones interviewed him for his show, Trump showed no fear of contact towards the community of conspiracy theorists.

This is no coincidence. For Trump, conspiracy theorists as more than just potential voters. He himself is one of them.



With Donald Trump, a proven conspiracy theorist has become president of the United States. He is supported by a dedicated community.

He uses Twitter to share his reality with the general public. It is proven that he spreads lies and conspiracies of all kinds. For his most fanatical followers, Trump is the long-awaited heroic fighter against all evil.

This group is called QAnon, founded by a Reddit user called 'Q'. Q claims to be a senior government official, who reports on the president's fight against the 'Deep State'. The Deep State is said to be a Satanic conspiracy. A group of high government officials and Hollywood stars kidnap and abuse children. They remove their organs in order to obtain an anti-aging drug. From QAnon's point of view, Hillary Clinton, George Soros, Barack Obama, famous Hollywood actors and singers are amongst the conspirators. They are bestial Satanists. The political enemy is turned into a monster.

We will probably never know whether Trump really believes in these theories or if he just skillfully exploits the delusion of his fans. But consequences are real: In 2016, for example, armed Edgar M. Welch stormed the pizzeria Comet Ping Pong in Washington. He wanted to free the children who were allegedly being held there in the basement by Jo Podesta and Hillary Clinton. On another occasion, a group called 'Veterans on Patrol' searched a homeless camp because they expected it to be a hidden children's sex camp. In another incident, a man blocked the Hoover Dam with his shielded truck for about 90 minutes. He demanded the release of certain reports, which according to Q had been withheld from the public.

In 2019, Frank Cali, a member of the Mafia, was gunned down in New York by 24 year old Anthony Cornello. In court, Cornello's lawyer explained that his client was a supporter of Q's theories: for him Frank Cali was a member of the great conspiracy against Trump.

For QAnon even the coronavirus is a scam. To fight COVID-19, the group is recommending Miracle Mineral Solution, a dangerous, bleach-like substance that can cause kidney failure. Several deaths can be attributed to this practice. QAnon has become more than just an association of conspiracy theorists. It is a sect that reaches deep into American society. In 2018, a patch displaying a Q was spotted on the jacket of a member of a SWAT team. The Q narrative can be found across the globe. Stars like Xavier Naidoo in Germany and Robby Williams in England share it online.

Why is the USA so vulnerable to conspiracy theories? Alex Jones operates there. Conspiracy theories about the murder of Kennedy or crashed UFOs in the Nevada desert originate are common knowledge in the US. Here, people who believe in a 9/11 conspiracy are gathering under the title of 'Truthers'. Since the 1950s, theories about 'black helicopters', 'Men in Black' and 'chemtrails' have been rising. Whereas post war Europe remained mostly quiet.



Answers can be found in the history of the USA. Persecuted Protestant sectarians brought freedom of religion from abroad. Being able to believe whatever you want, is one of the most important pillars of the American nation. This does not include classical religious communities only. Therefore, it is no coincidence that sects like the Mormons (founded by a con artist) or Scientology (coined by a science fiction author) originate from the USA. Freedom of belief used to be a great achievement, which promised a new beginning to religiously persecuted from all over the world. But in the 21st century, its dark sides have become apparent. Especially Scientology and its doctrine of a galactic tyrant feature more than just one parallel to modern conspiracy theories.

Since the American Civil War, conspiratorial thinking has been influencing American politics. In 1790, the first major conflict between the established American parties was based on conspiracy theories. The list of absurd accusations escalated. Conservative federalists believed that their rivals cooperated with Bavarian Illuminati to prepare a French-inspired revolution in the USA. And Jeffersonians accused federalists of planning a coup in order to establish a new feudal state.

Since the beginning of their existence, protestant-dominated states have been 'Conspiracy Central', the heart of conspiracy theory thinking. This culture and a president, who is a conspiracy theorist himself, infuse seekers of truth all over the world with ever new impulses.

In Search of Truth

The most famous conspiracy theory originated in the USA. In 1963, the assassination of John F. Kennedy in Dallas shocked the whole world. Soon press and public started to discuss conspiracies.

There were too many inconsistencies in the official version of events – they still occupy historians today.

Construction of truth is a difficult thing, and it is often intermingled with questions of believe. The 'Warren Report', prepared by an investigation committee, confirmed the official version on JFK's death, but many mistrusted the result. At that time, 52% of Americans believed in more than one killer.



In 1976, 81% followed this theory. In 2017, still far more Americans believe in a conspiracy (61%) than in Oswald being a 'Lone Gunman' (33%).

It is one of the very few issues Americans can agree on: 59% of Hillary Clinton's voters and 61% of Donald Trump's voters are believing that behind the murder of JFK there lies a conspiracy.

Today we know that the CIA was trying to influence the media in order to strengthen the 'Warren Report'. A secret document (file number 1035-960) provided arguments and strategies for media representatives. They were supposed to call critics of the Warren Report 'conspiracy theorists'.

In 1979, ten years after the assassination of JFK, the United States House of Representatives Select Committee on Assassinations concluded that the Warren Report was indeed flawed and that a conspiracy could not be ruled out. So, if the official version never had been questioned, a wrong version of JFK's murder would have made it into the history books. Are conspiracy theories therefore just a collateral damage in the quest for truth?

Often, true stories sound like a conspiracy theory. For example, in 1990 an underground organization called 'Gladio' was discovered in Italy. It had been set up by the CIA after WWII. In case of a Soviet attack its members were supposed to terrorize the enemy as saboteurs and resistance fighters. This paramilitary croup is made responsible for several terrorist attacks. Other 'Stay-behind' units, as the CIA called them, were secretly active throughout Europe after WWII.

One of the first 'False Flag Attacks' was initiated by the Germans who needed an official reason to start WWII. And it was then the USA learned a lesson from. The Gulf of Tonkin Resolution was based on a made up attack by North Vietnam on US Navy patrol boats. And if prior to Operation Iraqi Freedom you had insisted on the fact that Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction were an invention by the US government, you most likely would have been called a conspiracy theorist.

So where is the line between conspiracy theory and reality? How do we agree on what is a fact or what obviously is fiction - in a world full of false reports, spin doctors and real conspiracies?

Modern times have become complicated. The world wide web is providing a constant and overwhelming stream of information. In this labyrinth of lies, inaccuracies, misinformation and speculation, many are longing for a clearly ordered world. This desire is the first step towards believing in conspiracy theories.

Conspiracy theories feel like a safe haven. They turn our confusing, multidimensional world back into the good old bipolar world of 'good' and 'evil'. The concept of 'evil' confirms prejudices, mistrust and often leads right into racist hatred.

Hate and Fear

Most conspiracy theories feature an external threat. In order to find someone to be held responsible for the world's problems these theories evoke images that promote or confirm hatred.

Any group can be identified as a possible threat to the world. People will follow their beliefs and therefore, any concept of the enemy will get confirmed in the end. Canadian psychologist Jordan Peterson for example strongly believes in a conspiracy of 'Cultural Marxists'. Transsexuals, women and homosexuals try to disempower men. Gender studies or modern pronouns are nothing but an instrument of socialism. At the moment, Peterson is making a lot of money by giving sold-out lectures. This eloquent conservative has become mentor to a primarily male audience feeling uncomfortable with modern diversity.

A major group in *Alternative fuer Deutschland* (AfD), Germany's right-wing populist party, assumes that the German government is conspiring against its own people. 'Germans of origin' are to be purposely replaced by Arab immigrants. This secret plan has been called 'The Great Exchange'.

Hate will always find scapegoats. Certain theories, such as '9/11' or 'chemtrails', come up with dozens of different culprits. Never mind, if Jews, Muslims, "the elites" or the Rothschild family are being held responsible by different followers of these theories. They will always come to terms with their counterpart as long as the central narrative of their theory itself is not being questioned.

Conspiracy theories reframe hatred as a virtue. They boost it and furthermore label it as a heroic struggle, an important and necessary instrument. The use of violence comes as a welcome consequence. This is a recurrent pattern throughout history.

As 17th century Freemasons questioned the social order by promoting freedom, equality and fraternity, the then-establishment, above all the Catholic Church, assumed a world conspiracy against the ruling powers. Hence, revolutionary events

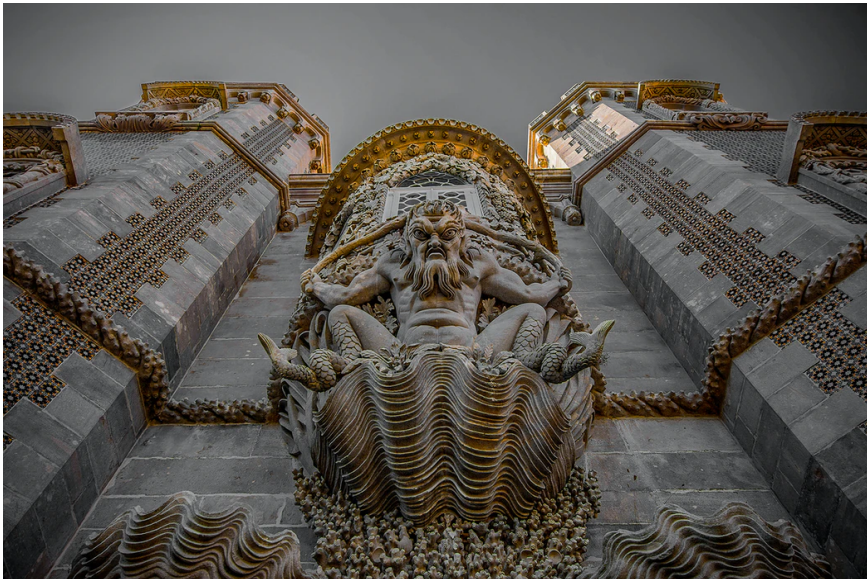
such as the French Revolution or the American War of Independence were blamed on the Order. Although it was rather a debating club than a secret society. Nevertheless, the organization was persecuted. Freemasonry was banned in several cities; members of the circle were murdered. Giacomo Casanova ended up in prison, partly because of being a Freemason. But he was fortunate enough to escape and finish his memoirs.

Until today Freemasons are struggling with stories that have emerged for the first time over 300 years ago. Hardly any great conspiracy theory can do without the 'Illuminati'. Dozens of deaths the Freemasons are being made responsible for: Mozart, Lessing and Schiller, German politician Uwe Barschel (how was found dead in a bathtub), and infamous right wing politician Jörg Haider from Austria, who died in a car accident. Others believe that a Bavarian, Adam Weishaupt, called himself 'George Washington' and went to America to start the American revolution. He was the leader of a masonic-like Order named 'Illuminati, Freemasons, who conspiracists refer to as 'Illuminati', are the most iconic group in the world of conspiracy theories. The masonic symbol of the pyramid with the shining eye can not only be found on every one-dollar bill. Nowadays, it is part of popular culture as well. What is long forgotten: this omnipresent hatred is based on rumors, which were planted by kings, popes and other authorities who refused to accept democracy.

Over the years, many people have been identified as the Freemasons' masterminds. Basically anybody who inspired the fears of conspiracy theorists was blamed and still is. In the Age of Counter Reformation, for example, it seemed to be clear to Protestant circles that the Jesuits stood behind the Order. The reason was fear of their Arch-Catholic enemy. Since the 19th century, however, Jews have increasingly been identified as world conspirators. Ever since, a growing number of anti-Semites has legitimized their hatred of Jews through conspiracy theories. Racists and fascists use conspiratorial narratives regularly to gain political influence. In these circles, the 'Protocols of the Elders of Zion' are still considered as a proof for a Jewish world conspiracy. The protocols claim to cite a secret conversation between Jewish conspirators. They were proven to be fake in 1921 –probably published by the Russian secret service at the

beginning of the 20th century. Nevertheless, until today many people use this pamphlet to justify their anti-Semitism to be mere self-defense.

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Pattern Recognition

History shows possible dangers of conspiracy theories. The Nazis, for example, used the 'stab-in-the-back myth', to call the Germans for resistance against the new, democratic government. They used the 'Protocols' to united the people against an imaginary enemy. These tactics are still popular and they remain a constant threat to a ll democratic societies.

Palestinian Hamas explicitly opposes Freemasonry. This fundamentalist militant organization has declared to consider the Protocols to be based on real events. At best, the American Old Right movement blames political opponents to be traitors of the American society. In the worst case, they are depicted as pedophile Satanists.

German right wing AfD politicians talk about something they call 'the Great Replacement'. 'Cultural Marxism' is an established term in the world of homophobic and sexist movements.

Why do people believe in conspiracy theories and how do we bring them back down to earth? For a long time, researchers have been trying to find out why conspiracy theories attract certain people.

Maybe, our survival instincts could be responsible. Our brain is capable of judging situations based on very little information. It is always looking for possible threats. Dark clouds can mean a thunderstorm. A certain smell means a gas leak. A certain noise means engine damage.

Certain brain characteristics can also influence positively the belief in conspiracy theories. The easier people are able to recognize certain patterns in random arrangements, the more likely they are to believe in conspiracy theories. Chemical causes have also been found. There is a direct link between high levels of dopamine and the chance of becoming a conspiracy theorist. The happiness hormone rewards the discovery of hidden patterns. Conspiracy theorists are literally doing research ecstatically. And the Internet plays an important role here. In the flood of information, it is so easy to create new links. Although actually, there are none.

Are we born conspiracy theorists? Or does a psychological component play a role? Two important elements are recurrent: doubt and belief.

I want to believe



In order to understand the structure of conspiracy theories, we have to search for their roots. Modern conspiracy belief dates back to the Enlightenment, but its origins are much older.

Precursors of modern conspiracy theories can already be found in ancient religious myths. Since the beginning of mankind, tricksters, deities and demons have been made responsible for the world's ills. The Germanic god Loki equals the Christian devil. Both share the same goal: the end of the world. They personify pure evil that acts in secret and finally leads to the apocalypse. This is the source of conspiratorial thinking, which can already be found in the Edda or in the Book of Revelation.

The connection between faith and conspiracy theories can also be found in the Middle Ages. Monks and priests are spreading rumors of certain sinister plans. This is the source of one of the first conspiracy theories creating a long-lasting enemy image: the Jews. In 1144, a monk named Thomas of Monmouth reopens an old murder case of a furrier's

apprentice in Norwich. He finds the culprits in the Jewish community. In Narbonne, as he analyzes in his work *The Life and Miracles of St. William of Norwich*, Jewish leaders met annually to fulfill a dark prophecy. If they killed one Christian child per year, one day they would get back their sacred land.

Monmouth's lie pays off. The victim becomes a martyr and his church wealthier. This business model is quickly copied by other priests. The result? Pogroms against Jews all over England until they are even banished from the island in 1290.

From the witch hunts to the Age of Enlightenment, the Church has always been a major protagonist and disseminator of conspiracy theories.

Ironically, nowadays those theories fill the vacuum left by religion. As the influence of the church starts to decline during the Age of Enlightenment because humankind is turning towards science and philosophy, the number of rumors about conspiracies of all kinds explodes.

This cannot be explained by modern distribution channels alone; conspiracy theories are inseparably linked to Enlightenment. Rationality and science result from it but also stories about sinister dark forces. This mutual relationship has accompanied humanity to this day. As knowledge about the universe keeps growing, the belief in religious phenomena, UFOs, esotericism and occultism is increasing. Especially in these areas, conspiracy theories are prevalent.

Faith and conspiracy theories are the result of people searching for meaning in a chaotic and confusing world. Since science has displaced religion, many are looking for a new spiritual orientation. This is to be found in fantastic stories about reptiloids disguised as humans controlling the world, UFOs that kidnap people or in a secret satanic cabal within the US government. The QAnon movement is fully aware of the impact of catchphrases like 'The Coming Storm' or 'The Great Awakening'. Taking the Book of Revelation as an example, conspiracists are longing for the decisive apocalyptic battle against evil. And they want to defeat it once and for all.

Dramaturgy

The film is character-driven, different protagonists are accompanied. We observe how they deal with conspiracy theories, explore, expose and try to understand them. The different stories complement each other and thus seamlessly connect the individual film chapters. Contemporary human stories are connected with scientific findings and reflected in historical events.

Possible Protagonists and Interviewees

James Alefantis: powner of a pizzeria called Comet ping pong in Washington, D.C.. Conspiracy theories claimed that children were being held in his basement by a satanic clique grouping around Hillary Clinton. After Edgar M. Welch's attack, he still receives threatening phone calls. With the new presidential election, Pizzagate becomes popular again in the Tik Tok era.

Roland Imhoff: The psychologist has conducted several experiments and interviews on conspiracy theories. He has come up with some amazing findings. Maybe we can accompany him or another scientist and show some of their experiments.

Stephanie and Kay Wittschier: A couple from Germany, who became believers because of 'inconsistencies' in the happenings of 9/11. Stephanie got deeply involved in conspiracy theories. This strained their relationship. Today, they are activists and run a blog, debunking conspiracy theories.

Robert Grimes: Professor at Oxford University, the physicist and cancer researcher has developed a formula: How long would it take to reveal a conspiracy if it was really happening? He has calculated that the fake moon landing would have been revealed after 3.68 years. The climate change hoax could only have been kept secret for 3.7 years. For Grimes, conspiracy theories are a serious danger and must be fought.

Edgar M. Welch: He raided the Pizzeria Comet ping pong with an assault rifle and is sometimes giving interviews. We will try to talk to him in view of the upcoming presidential election.

Michael Butter: Professor of American literary and cultural history at the University of Tübingen. He is a well-known expert on conspiracy theories.

Katharina Nocun: German-Polish influencer, activist and network expert. She has published a popular book on conspiracy theories. She deals with the scene a lot.

Amanda Robb: Journalist who researched the Pizzagate scandal for *Rolling Stone*.

Jonathan Kay: A well-known Canadian journalist who is interested in conspiracy theories. His second book 'Among the Truthers: A Journey Through America's Growing Conspiracist Underground' deals with conspiracy theories in American culture.

Kathryn Olmsted: Her third book, 'Real Enemies', explores the dynamic relationship between real government conspiracies and anti-government conspiracy theories.

Karen Douglas: Karen's research focuses on the belief in conspiracy theories. She investigates why conspiracy theories are so popular, who believes in conspiracy theories and why.

Shannon Odell: Popular neurologist who explains scientific connections in simple terms. She also examines how the brain is affected by conspiracy theories.

The Annenberg Public Policy Center: Since 1993, the initiative, managed by Kathleen Hall Jamieson, has been running FactCheck.org. They are checking statements and stories there. In the 'Age of Conspiracy', we are going to see how this 54-headed crew is working.

Chrissy Teigen and John Legend: Both were identified by Qanon as part of the Satanic conspiracy that has infiltrated the USA. Since then, the couple is terrorized online. Teigen has had to block over 1 million Twitter accounts.

Thomas Wannemacher: In 2011 the trained confectioner founded the association 'Mimikana'. They chase conspiracy theories and deconstruct them.

Ideas for further Protagonists

A **support group** for conspiracy dropouts.

A **sect commissioner in the USA**, who draws the connection between Qanon and other sects. He can possibly talk to dropouts or people seeking help.

Protesters who try to share their truths, preferably sympathizers of Qanon.

A **member of a family** who has at least one conspiracy theorist in their family. Will the family survive the ordeal?

A **neurologist** who researches the effects of conspiracy theories.

A **psychologist** who uses experiments to investigate the connection between the human psyche and conspiracy theories.

The everyday life of a **parascience magazine writer**.

A **conspiracy theorist** who tries to influence the public, preferably a supporter of the 'Truthers'.

Picture

'Age of Conspiracy' is told on different levels. They visually distinct from each other in terms of image design and coloring. The level of the protagonists makes use of the narrative camera of an observational documentary film. Sometimes situational, sometimes designed, but always emotionally close to the event. The colors are saturated and strong.

The scientific level ranges from set interviews to experiments. The camera is sober, clear and controlled.

The colors are a little paler. This depicts sobriety and seriousness.



On the historical level, we experiment and work with contemporary art. Depending on details and camera movement, it almost appears like a graphic novel.

This tripartition creates the guideline for the cinematic world of 'Age of Conspiracy'. It clearly distinguishes between fact and fiction.

In general, we use an essay-like, intuitive and modern style, which ties in with our cinematic success 'Propaganda'.



Auf einen Blick

Feature doc

1x90'

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Taglicht media ist Mitglied der Allianz deutscher Produzenten. Geschäftsführer Bernd Wilting ist Mitglied im Vorstand der Sektion Dokumentation und Mitglied im Gesamtvorstand.

Kontakt:

Bernd Wilting (bernd.wilting@taglichtmedia.de)