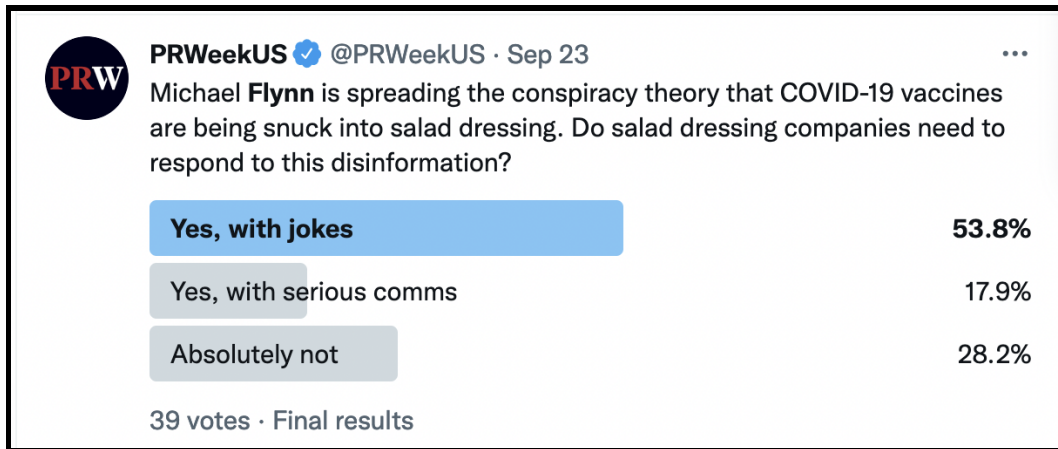


INTERVENTION

Debunking the Salad Dressing Conspiracy Theory

What kind of debunking is more effective?

Retired US Lt. General Michael Flynn who's been both National Security Advisory and a registered foreign agent working for the Turkish government, is promoting the conspiracy theory that COVID-19 vaccines are being put in your salad dressing. This exercise tests two different approaches to debunking a conspiracy, to determine which works better: facts or humor.



Exercise Part 1: FACTS

Investigate the origins and spread of the salad dressing conspiracy theory and find out

- What original piece of information was taken up, reinterpreted, and spread as a conspiracy?
- Who are key well-known figures spreading the conspiracy?
- Identify four mainstream news outlets that reported on the theory.

Create a conspiracy wall that charts the conspiracy from its origins to who and where it has spread based on the information collected.

Use post-its and markers, string and thumbtacks, or any other materials on hand to construct a conspiracy wall to show the links between people and ideas that make up this conspiracy theory. If working online, you can use the box and line functions in Google Draw to create a virtual conspiracy wall.

Exercise Part 2: HUMOR

Investigate salad dressing to find something suspect about it. For example, you could examine the ingredients list. What is Xanthan gum anyway? Look into origins and myths about salad dressing. Who was “Caesar,” and why did he think anchovies would be good on a salad? Especially look for connections that are invisible to other people.

Create a conspiracy wall that charts the conspiracy you’ve uncovered.

Use post-its and markers, string and thumbtacks, or any other materials on hand to construct a conspiracy wall to show the links between people and ideas that make up this conspiracy theory. If working online, you can use the box and line functions in Google Draw to create a virtual conspiracy wall.

Exercise Part 3: REPORT

Students share their conspiracy walls and report what they learned from their research and from their creative engagement. What is the factual story the conspiracy theory is based on? How ridiculous can you be when creating your own?

Discussion Questions

Having debunked a conspiracy theory in two different ways, what did you learn from each method?

Which approach would be more effective in debunking conspiracy theories for you? For other people you know? Which approach would be more effective in creating conspiracy theory literacy?

Does having the mainstream media report on a conspiracy theory debunk it or contribute to its spread? What should the mainstream media do about conspiracy theories? Should they report on them as facts, or should they use humor?

How should social media companies respond to conspiracy theories being distributed on their platforms?

Exercise Options:

- a) Students can work on their conspiracy walls individually, or in small groups.
- b) Break the class in two and have half of them do part 1, half do part 2, then report back to each other and discuss.
- c) Other emerging conspiracy theories can be used as the basis of this exercise.