A logo for a tv show

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Library Extension Project

Program Idea: Conspiracy Theories

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Description: Activity/game

Target audience: Ages 10+

Objectives:

To learn skills to identify and debunk conspiracy theories. Players will learn media literacy tools (that they can also use IRL!) to help them win an interactive, analog game.

Program details:

**Option A** – Conspiracies and Debunking Game – requires two teams

Overall description: Hang a blank poster board or cork bulletin board on which conspiracy claims can be pinned or taped. Use a marker or string to connect ideas or debunks.

Divide attendees into two small groups. One group will be conspiracy creators, the other group is made of conspiracy debunkers.

Conspiracy creators will research 3-5 conspiracy theories and find articles or images related to each conspiracy. The team places each of its chosen conspiracy theories on a sticky note on the map.

Conspiracy debunkers begin looking for factual information that debunks the theories. They respond with articles or images that contradict or provide evidence that the claim is untrue.

Both teams use the string or draw lines to connect ideas and “support” or “evidence” to prove or debunk each claim.

Details

1.First, show this short video on spotting bogus claims on the internet: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fm0LwscDYHs>

2.Review these tips on figuring out if information is true or not:

a. Consider the source. Is the website or person posting this information honest and trustworthy?

b. Read beyond the headline. Sometimes, the headline has nothing to do with the actual article!

c. Check the author. Did a real person write this?

d. What’s the support? Are several different and credible sources of information given?

e. Check the date. Is it current or repurposed from a different time and perhaps place, too?

f. Is this a joke? Could the site be a parody or satire to get a laugh out of folks?

g. Check your biases. Confirmation bias leads people to put more stock in information that confirms their beliefs and discount information that doesn’t.

h. Consult experts. Go off the website or webpage and see what credible news sites have to say about it.

3. Select from the conspiracy theories offered in the Printables (see below). Each has a claim that is unverified or untrue. Feel free to propose theories other than the ones suggested.

4. Assign participants to a pro-conspiracy theory team and an anti-conspiracy theory team. Set a timer for 15 minutes (or use best judgment based on age of participants) to create a sense of urgency to fact checking the claim. To add drama to the game, present the theory in a sealed envelope marked TOP SECRET. At the count of 3, both teams open their envelope containing the same conspiracy theory.

6. Participants should use computers and phones to find information to support or debunk the theory. Yellow sticky notes should be used to write the names of sources of information as pro or con (eyewitnesses, organizations, experts, etc.), and blue sticky notes used for “facts” that support or refute the theory. Pink sticky notes are questions/claims that simply cannot be resolved.

**Option B:** Tabletop Role Playing Game (TTRPG)

Each player will get to determine what kind of “character” they will be (mainstream reporter, social media content creator, media literacy educator, blog author). The characters will be on a “quest” to defeat an “Alex Jones” type monster. Their tools will be the tools of media literacy. The presenter would have the option of being the game master (if the participants are inexperienced with this type of game) or just being an assistant.

Materials needed: Option A: Poster board or bulletin board (36”x24”); yellow, blue and pink sticky notes; pencils/pens, wi-fi, computers or smartphones, conspiracy claims (in Printables), booklist (in Resources).

Option B: wi-fi, computers or smartphones, dice, game tokens, character sheets (in Printables), booklist (in Resources).

Suggested runtime: 1 hour to 1½ hours

Youth adaptation or extension activity/Adaptation for adults: All ages. Librarians can veto/screen conspiracy theory choices from teens and engage with them while they do research. Example: Avoid QAnon, Sandy Hook or Lizzie Borden, etc.

Unique Space or Personnel Needs: One facilitator to make sure everyone stays on track with research; a space that has a table and area to facilitate discussions that would not disrupt other patrons with passionate conversations; if using the TTRPG option, the facilitator needs to have some knowledge of how to run a TTRPG.

Resources: “Republic of Lies: American Conspiracy Theorists and Their Surprising Rise to Power” by Anna Merlan; “Awful Archives: Conspiracy Theory, Rhetoric, and Acts of Evidence” by Jenny Rice; “The Resonance of Unseen Things: Poetics, Power, Captivity, and UFOs in the American Uncanny” by Susan Lepselter

Printables: Option B Character Sheet (below)

A yellow and brown logo

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