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Conspiracy and fake news, media criticism and media education: reflection in the class-room

Who doesn't know these pictures?
Uncountable news like these currently circulate through the Internet and social networks. The terms "Fake News" and "Conspiracy Theories" have experienced a significant increase in popularity in recent years, not just since the US presidential election campaign.

For a long time the term "Fake News", the Anglicism of the year 2016, and the term "Conspiracy" have found their way into our everyday language and pop up in many different contexts.
But what do they mean? What significance do they have, especially in the field of education? And what possibilities are there to expose them as such?

I want to get to the bottom of these questions in the course of my presentation and therefore have created the following structure:

1. Conspiracy Theories
1.1 Concept and Typology
1.2 Relevance and Impact
2. Fake News
1.1 Definition
1.2 Causes and Consequences
3. Influences on schools
4. Prevention and Measures

Let me tell you about a specific class-room situation that happened to me last year as a teacher:
A student of a vocational school class asked me during the lesson if I knew that the white stripes in the sky left by planes were poisonous substances spread by the government and the pharmaceutical industries to make us infertile and sick?

The myth of the so-called Chemtrails is only one of many circulating conspiracy myths of our time. But what are we actually talking about?

A conspiracy myth or a conspiracy theory is an attempt to explain a state, an event or a development through a conspiracy, i.e. through the purposeful, conspiratorial work of a small group of actors for a mostly illegal or illegitimate purpose.
The term conspiracy comes from the Latin word "concordant", which means everything is interrelated. It is assumed that a small secret group of conspirators wants to control or destroy a country, a race or the world.
These groups are often organized hierarchically, which means that there are several levels of conspirators and a concrete leading figure. An alternative world model is constructed in which "nothing is as it seems".

The basic assumption always is the one that history and human destiny can be planned and controlled over a longer period of time and that any random or self-organizing processes don't exist.

Basically, there are two different types of conspiracy theories: on the one hand, a conspiracy from the outside, i.e. a group that does not belong to one's own, for example a foreign country. On the other hand there is the conspiracy from within, which seems to be the most popular one in recent times. Here, it is assumed that an internal conspiracy is taking place from either "above" e.g. by the own government, or "below" e.g. by feminists or socialists.

Within, you can find three different types of narrative constructions:
1. Event conspiracy theories (moon landing, 9/11, Kennedy assassination)
2. System conspiracy theories (Communists, Jews, Illuminati, Reptiloids, CIA etc.)
3. Super conspiracy theories (conglomerate of 1 and 2; Jewish-Bolshevik world conspiracy, communist world conspiracy with Illuminati)

At this point, at the latest, similarities on the subject of "cults" become apparent. A not inconsiderable number of providers of religious and ideological offerors also emerge in the context of conspiracy theories. I am not only talking about the classical groups here, but also about offers in the field of esotericism or coaching. These groups or offerors take advantage of people's desire to find meaning, explainable world affairs with victim-perpetrator constructions and elements that form identity. They hereby offer explanatory models that reduce everyday fears and create a sense of belonging. This attraction is favored by a general political mistrust, for example in the case of "Snowden", or prominent role models in every day's media reception.

Are these only theories of supposed madmen, a small handful of people within our population, who have nothing better to do than to think about such seemingly ridiculous stories?
In April 2019, the Friedrich-Ebert-Foundation published the results of its survey based study. According to this most recent study, 45% of respondents believe in secret organizations that have a great influence on political decisions. A third believes that politicians and other leaders are just puppets of other powers and a quarter believes that the media and politics are in cahoots together.

Let me come back to my opening story, in which I told you about the student and the Chemtrails. I tried to understand how he would come up with such a claim. So he took his smartphone out of his pocket and said "Yes! Look at this!" referring to a Facebook page.
Social networks play a part that must not be underestimated. They are easily accessible, often written in youth language and correspond to the call for being vogue. Newspapers or printed media are simply out fashioned. That means, kids most likely come frequently in contact with "News" or "Stories" like this:

"Fake News" is the term that immediately comes to mind when we look at this headline. The Anglicism of 2016 describes a deliberately and manipulatively spread false report with various intentions. It is about political propaganda, emotionalization and deliberate disinformation. The consequences of "Fake News" have become evident several times within the past 5 years. For example, a false tweet about an alleged explosion in which Barack Obama was supposedly injured caused a stock market loss

of 130 billion US dollars in 2013. Another recent example is the "Pizzagate"-Affair, a false report during the American presidential election campaign in 2016, according to which Hilary Clinton was involved in a child porn ring, which had its seat in a pizza place in Washington DC. As a result, a 28-year-old man armed with a rifle attacked the restaurant to free the children that were held there.

The boundaries between "Fake News" and "Conspiracy theories" are blurred. One common ground however is the claim of the big "media conspiracy". According to a survey conducted by the University of Mainz in 2016, 26% of the population agreed with the statement that the media and politics work hand in hand to manipulate the public opinion. 19% affirmed the statement that the German population is systematically being lied at by the media.

At this point, it becomes clear why social networks play such an important role. Here, no editor decides on what is published, information is easily accessible, can be spread quickly and is written in a simple and concise way. The dangers of the exclusive use of this source to obtain information are obvious. Social networks can become echo chambers and filter bubbles, where mainly people with similar views exchange their opinions and no reflection of one's own point of view through external criticism is possible. The supposed knowledge of a "new world view" is neither regulated nor scientifically controlled.

Often, the main problem is the lack of media competence when dealing with the seemingly inscrutable Internet. The educational mission of the school as a public institution plays a major role here:

- Pupils should learn to distinguish between conspiratorial and non-conspiratorial explanations
- They should gain an understanding of the human ability to act and general social processes
- They should develop media and historical competence
- Students should learn to distinguish serious from dubious sources
- Students should learn that Google search results are also an expression of our personal preferences
- Students need to learn how the Internet works and generates meaning
- They should practice being system-critical

These competences are trained in class by the central component of media education in Baden-Württemberg.

Today media education is one of the key qualifications that young people need to have in order to act appropriately in our media society. After all, children and young people grow up with new information and communication technologies, but without automatically understanding them. Accordingly, media education in schools must promote media and communication skills in a variety of ways.
This includes the following areas:

- Choosing and using media services
- Own design and distribution of media contributions
- Understanding and evaluating media designs
- Recognition and processing of media influences

- Reviewing and assessing the conditions of media production and distribution

The 2016 educational plans introduced media education in Baden-Württemberg as one of six overarching guiding perspectives. In addition, a basic course in grade 5 teaches the basics of media competence on which students and teachers can build in further school years. Furthermore, while learning with, through and via media, the protection of minors from harmful contents, is also given central importance.

The guiding perspective of media education and the basic course on media education are based on eight areas of competences which are taken into account in school teaching in an integrative way:

- Media society
- Media analysis
- Information and Knowledge
- Communication
- Production and presentation
- Youth media protection
- Informational self-determination and data protection
- Information technology basics

Teaching tools include checklists and concrete procedures for the critical examination of media texts and sources.

Lesson plans or worksheets which take all that into account could look like this:
Examples of the subjects History/Politics and German

These are just a few examples of how teachers can integrate the topic of media in their own lesson planning.

Dr. Michael Butter, professor for American Studies, notes:
"We certainly have <u>fewer</u> conspiracy theories today than we did 200 or 300 years ago, but we also have <u>more</u> than two or three decades ago."

Therefore, it is essential to train students in how to deal with the media so that they can critically question and examine news or religious and ideological offerings and their explanatory patterns. These contents do not only promote imparting general knowledge, but rather protecting children and young people from the dangers associated with Conspiracy theories and Fake News.