Laura PAVIN: Cynthia Wang is a clinical professor at Kellogg. And she thinks conspiracy theories are fascinating.

They're also a good excuse for her to talk about Josie and the Pussycats...the movie.

Cynthia WANG: It bombed in the theaters in the early 2000s, but supposedly this is a cult classic because it gets into conspiracy theories. So I definitely recommend it."

PAVIN: There's this one scene in the movie where the villain, played by Parker Posie, is showing a bunch of executives around this massive headquarters filled with computers and teams of people controlling every popular trend in the world

[Clip from Josie and the Pussycats]: Fiona: "We decide everything: From what clothes are in style to what slang is in vogue." Employee: "Feathered tank tops, matching pants…kind of a *Buffy* meets *Chicken Run*." Next employee: "Feathers are the new rhinestones."

PAVIN: Obviously, this is satire and pretty ridiculous. But Wang says it shares a theme with real conspiracy theories—that some nefarious force is controlling the world in some way.

[music]

COVID-19 has fueled an explosion of these kinds of theories. And like a moth to a flame, Wang wanted to dig in.

WANG: I just find that so fascinating!

PAVIN: Welcome to the Insightful Leader. I 'm multimedia editor Laura Pavin. This episode, how did we get so many COVID conspiracies? And how can we talk to the people that believe them? The answer matters because...conspiracies are bad for societies that depend on trust in established institutions and scientific solutions.

But while there's no easy answers for how to move forward, there are some things you can do--as a friend, neighbor, colleague, or leader.That's next.

[music]

PAVIN: So...how did we get to this place...where conspiracy theories about COVID are so rampant? You know...the ones that say 5G caused it...or that Bill Gates invented it? Wang and a team recently did a meta-analysis, combing through a bunch of different

research on Covid-19 conspiracy theories, and conspiratorial thinking in general. And from that, they came up with this framework for understanding what has happened.

WANG: One of the things is that conspiracies coalesce around places of uncertainty.

PAVIN: Take for example the current pandemic.

WANG: COVID-19 has just driven so much uncertainty on so many levels. Think about the lockdowns, the mask mandates, your health outcomes. You don't know what's going to happen tomorrow.

PAVIN: Wang actually did several studies a few years back...that found a measurable, psychological difference between people who do and don't believe in conspiracy theories. People who are less likely to believe in them...tend to feel like their future is in their control. Whereas people who are more likely to believe conspiracy theories...feel like they have to protect themselves from a future that's out of their control.

WANG: When people lack that control, what happens is that they basically perceive things in the environment in order to regain feelings of control. And a key thing about conspiracy theories is that they provide this wonderful sense of certainty.

PAVIN: And that's because they provide an easy-to-understand narrative for what's happening. One example that Wang gave us was the conspiracy theory that there were microchips being put in the COVID-19 vaccine so that the government or corporations could track your movements. Now this is clearly pretty far fetched.

WANG: But what's interesting about this is that it provides a very clear and compelling story. That's a much more comforting story than saying, I don't know if these vaccines really work. I don't know if I'm going to get a side effect, which would you prefer? You would probably prefer one that gives you a lot more certainty and gives you a clear path forward of how to behave.

PAVIN: These theories are like comfort food. They're a tempting way to make sense of the chaotic world around you...but they're bad for all of us.

[Music Cue]

PAVIN: Without a doubt, people spent a LOT more time online and on social media during the pandemic. Wang and her team wanted to see if this did, in fact, kick up the number of conspiracy theories floating around.

WANG: We kind of had dual hypotheses going in being like on one hand, maybe the internet helps reduce conspiracy theories because you can have this really great reliable information to draw from.

PAVIN: Right, because there IS a lot of fact-based information online about COVID and the vaccine. So...maybe people could fact-check themselves.

But...surprise surprise...that didn't happen.

WANG: There's this one study that we quote in our paper that talks about false rumors on Twitter moved six times faster than the truth. It just means that this kind of conspiratorial content it's just running so much faster.

PAVIN: And because it spreads quicker than fact-based-info...people find it! And they cling to it.

WANG: We're motivated to find certainty. And so you have these intuitions and then they're kind of reinforced via the stuff that you find that supports your arguments.

PAVIN: So there's a ton of confirmation bias happening.

Something else that Wang pointed out was that our current political climate exacerbates this issue.

WANG: Another just very, very difficult thing these days is to, is the fact that a lot of these conspiracies are based in a kind of dislike for the other group. And with outgroup hatred there is a lot of conspiratorial thinking.

PAVIN: Over the last two years we've seen the pandemic become more and more politicized, whether it's Democrats vs Republicans or people just looking for someone to blame. And when people are divided like that they're even more likely to look for information and communities that affirm their argument.

[Music Cue]

PAVIN: Okay, this all sounds pretty bad…

We've seen that when people are faced with uncertainty and lack a sense of control, they can be more susceptible to conspiracy theories. And...unfortunately….looking for information online, especially from social media, can make it easier to confirm biases. On top of all that, we're polarized, making us even more likely to glom onto information that supports our beliefs, even if it's bad information.

So is there anything that the collective we as a society — and even you as a business leader — can do about this?

WANG: This is a huge debate these days, but you know, Donald Trump being taken off of Twitter, things like that, that's one way that people have thought about breaking up these what we call echo chambers, right? So the echo chambers, where people go into these little groups, and basically, these conspiracy theories get reinforced.

PAVIN: So...content-restriction could be one avenue. Former President Donald Trump was banned from Twitter after the company deemed that his Tweets glorified violence and promoted conspiracies about the election. Others have also been banned for spreading similar conspiracies--and several tech companies are attempting to restrict conspiracies and misinformation about the pandemic or vaccines too. But any kind of censorship can be pretty controversial … especially here in the U.S.

WANG: Of course, talk about individual freedom, that that can be very, very hard for that part. Usually, we're taking people's liberties away, right? So you know, and of course, once we restrict some content, there's always new ways for this stuff to pop up no matter where you're going.

PAVIN: Another option is something that Wang refers to as "pre-bunking"

WANG: So you basically try to inoculate people before they're exposed. So even before they get exposed to a theory, start saying, Hey, why don't you think about this a little bit more deeply. And that has been shown to have some positive effects.

PAVIN: So "pre-bunking" sounds a bit like predicting the future...but Wang says this would basically mean...on a macro-level, we find ways to increase our society's science literacy. Or we find ways to get accurate information to people quickly, BEFORE a conspiracy even has the chance to cross their computer screen. Or it could mean making people more aware of the persuasive tactics conspiracy theorists use to spread ideas.

Unfortunately, this pre-bunking strategy doesn't really work to deprogram people who are already very entrenched in a conspiracy theory.

WANG: Once you hit that conspiracy, if you don't have anything that prevents you from thinking about it more deeply beforehand, unfortunately it's really, really, really hard to wean people off of it.

PAVIN: So if you're someone with a friend or family member — or a colleague! — that is already knee deep in some conspiracies, how can you start chipping away at those? It's a hard question, but Wang's research might give us a direction.

[Music Cue]

PAVIN: What you won't want to do, Wang says, is push them deeper into their conspiratorial beliefs.

WANG: What I do see as counterproductive is when I see online people derogating the other side because of their opinions that just once again, puts up those defenses, right? So on an individual level, if there is a way to gain that trust, and actually ask a lot of questions, it goes back once again, to this idea of deeper thinking. Can you tell me a

little bit more why you think that? Maybe say I see your point about x? Have you thought more about this other thing, right?" Maybe they can start being a little bit more open to that and open to your opinion.

PAVIN: Tell people they're dumb or delusional, and that's a good way to turn people off to anything else you're about to say. But if you listen and TRY to understand where these beliefs come from...and you ask thoughtful questions, you may be able to get those defenses down. And that could be the beginning of a path towards change.

And here's another idea...and it could be a bit of a long-shot, but it comes down to helping the people around you feel more in control. Wang has some studies from a few years ago...and they show that helping people feel more in control...in that very moment...can make them less susceptible to conspiratorial thinking. So leaders might do little things, like setting extra clear expectations with their teams--always good practice anyway--or thinking through how they frame new policies... to chip away at uncertainties. It's no silver bullet: there is no silver bullet. But that doesn't mean it's not worth doing.

WANG: I think, in general, over time, once people feel more in control, that's one way to see these specific conspiracy theories start diminishing.

[Credits]

PAVIN: This episode of The Insightful Leader was written by Andrew Meriwether. It was produced by Laura Pavin, Jessica Love, Fred Schmalz, Emily Stone, and Maja Kos...and it was mixed by Andrew Meriwether. Music for this episode is by Cue Shop. Special thanks to Cynthia Wang. As a reminder, you can find us on iTunes, Google Play, or our website. If you like this show, please leave us a review or rating. That helps new listeners find us. We'll be back in a couple weeks with another episode of The Insightful Leader.