

## Case study 14: Birds Aren't Real – tackling polluted information with the absurd

Birds Aren't Real is a Gen-Z satirical conspiracy theory that all the birds in the US are drones. It was started by Peter MacIndoe in 2017.<sup>435</sup> The theory outlines that every bird was massacred by the government and replaced by drones to spy on the American public. The Birds Aren't Real community attends protests and shares videos and photos online. Unlike other conspiracy movements, the followers of the movement know that it isn't true. The purpose of the movement is to highlight polluted information, poke fun at the absurdity of many conspiracy theories, and ultimately spark a discussion about the things we see and sometimes believe online.

The movement sought to build credibility, hiring an actor to play an ex-CIA agent confessing to the conspiracy, confirming bird drone surveillance, and creating a history of the movement tracking back to when birds were removed from the sky in the 1970s. Birds Aren't Real has some of the hallmarks of other conspiracy theories, for example government collusion and a mass cover-up, but pushes these things to the extreme and the absurd. As one of the members there from the beginning, Connor Gaydos, outlines, "If anyone believes birds aren't real, we're the last of their concerns because then there's probably no conspiracy they don't believe." But there are those that do. Some outside the organisation believe the conspiracy, with a local news outlet even reporting on the conspiracy as fact. The movement and the content, much of which has gone viral on social media, especially TikTok, is aimed at ensuring people question what they see online when the information seems more credible than Birds Aren't Real.

Birds Aren't Real, while satire, highlights some important lessons when understanding polluted information. Some people have such significant mistrust in institutions and the government that they are primed to believe scenarios that support this bias. It isn't simply enough to present other information, especially for those with deeply ingrained and held beliefs. The website and movement highlight how easy it is to make things up and present them as evidence. The Birds Aren't Real movement had an actor play an expert claiming to have evidence to back up the movement and wrote a fake history of the movement, both things that add perceived credibility and that other people and movements can do online. The Birds Aren't Real movement highlights the importance of equipping young people, and adults, with media and information literacy and digital citizenship skills to navigate and dismiss polluted information. Peter McIndoe reflects on the way that protestors are treated, and how this treatment reinforces the sense of community within the activist group<sup>436</sup> providing insights upon which to further research methods to pre-bunk conspiracy theories.

## References

435. Lorenz, T. (9 December 2021), *The New York Times*, Birds aren't real, or are they? Inside a Gen Z conspiracy theory. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/09/technology/birds-arent-real-gen-z-misinformation.html>
436. McIndoe, P. Birds aren't real. Presented at: Nobel Prize Summit 2023: Truth, Trust, and Hope, Washington DC (2023).