

When the Press Meets the Conspiracy

Does the news promote conspiracy theories? We matched current news coverage against 100+ theory signatures, classified the stance of every match, and mined eight years of global coverage. The answer is more interesting than yes or no.

SignalWatch · Mainstream-Press & GDELT audit · White Paper

The question

Search a major newspaper's archive and you will find article after article about QAnon, the Great Replacement, the stolen election, the COVID lab leak. So is the press *promoting* these theories? We can answer this precisely. SignalWatch maintains signatures for 100+ conspiracy theories; we matched current news articles against them — deliberately bypassing our conspiratorial-language filter, so that plain newsroom prose can match — and then asked a language model to classify the **stance** of each match: is the outlet **asserting** the claim (advocacy), **debunking** it (critique), or merely **covering** it (neutral)?

Finding 1 — Matching is not endorsing

Across **346 matches** spanning 18 outlets, only **39 (11%)** actually assert a believer claim. The overwhelming majority — **251 (73%)** — are neutral coverage: reporting, explainers, and opinion that *mentions* a theory without endorsing it. A news outlet matching a conspiracy signature is, most of the time, simply journalism doing its job.

Match ≠ Endorsement

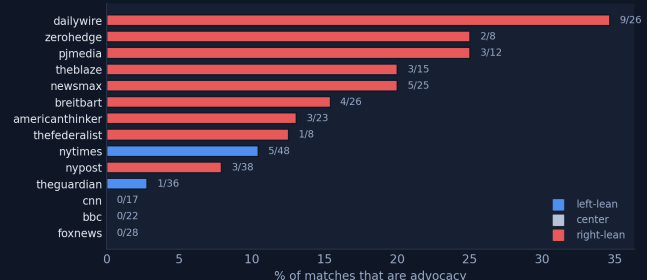
When a news outlet “matches” a conspiracy theory, what is it actually doing?

346 signature matches across 18 outlets · stance-classified · SignalWatch mainstream-press audit

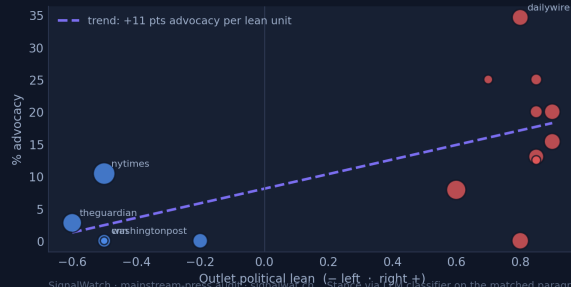


Only 39 matches (11%) actually assert a believer claim. 251 (73%) are neutral coverage.

Who is actually asserting the claims

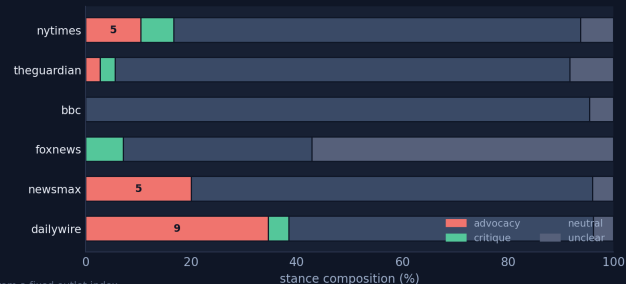


Advocacy rises with right-lean



SignalWatch · mainstream-press audit · signalwatcher.com · Stance via Lstm classifier on the matched paragraph; lean from a fixed outlet index.

Same theories, different intent



Match ≠ endorsement: stance of all matches, advocacy rate by outlet, the lean→advocacy relationship, and stance composition for six representative outlets.

Finding 2 — What the Guardian and New York Times links actually were

The two outlets with the most matches are exactly the ones you would expect to cover conspiracy theories heavily: the New York Times (48 matches, 5 advocacy = 10%) and the Guardian (36 matches, 1 advocacy = 3%). Here are real examples — the actual headlines that tripped each theory's signature:

Outlet	Headline	Matched theory	Stance
nytimes	Does U.F.O. Disclosure Threaten Faith?	Spielberg UFO Disclosure Psyop Theory	neutral
nytimes	The Real Reason Trump Never Stops Talking About Voter Fraud	Dead People Voting	neutral
nytimes	The Knicks Sprinkle Their Magic Over New York	Democrats Wanted the Knicks to Lose to Blame Tru	neutral
nytimes	Iran Found Trump's Bone Spur	October 6th Attack on Israel Was A False Flag	neutral
nytimes	The Verdict on Biden Is In	Trump Assassination Attempt was faked	neutral
nytimes	A Three-Step Plan to Undo Trump's Assault on Democracy	Stop the Steal	critique
nytimes	The Real Reason Trump Never Stops Talking About Voter Fraud	Bush Stole the 2000 Election	advocacy
nytimes	Todd Blanche Is a Dangerous Choice for Trump's Attorney General	Nick Fuentes as a Target of Persecution	advocacy
theguardian	Right now, we could be living through a hantavirus disaster. The world avoided that, and this is why Devi Sridhar	Pfizer Hantavirus Vaccine Side Effect	neutral
theguardian	Harvard and Bard face fresh questions from lawmakers over ties to Epstein	Epstein Files Conspiracy	neutral
theguardian	Labour's woes are like a slow-motion car crash – and Keir Starmer isn't even in the driving seat Marina Hyde	UK Muslim Grooming Gangs & immigrant-crime narra	neutral
theguardian	Norway's monarchy once seemed like a fairytale – recent crises have exposed its dark underbelly Magnus Nome	Epstein Files Conspiracy	neutral
theguardian	Pauline Hanson's speech 'shameful' and echoed 'rubbish' from rightwing figures in UK and US, critics say	Great Replacement	critique
theguardian	The rightwing counter-revolution is gaining ground – and Labour's softly-softly approach won't stop it Andy Beckett	Great Replacement	advocacy

Read them and the pattern is plain: an Iran-deal live blog, a Knicks-parade preview, a Fed-chair profile, an Epstein-hearing report. The theory signature matches the *topic*, not an endorsement. Even the handful flagged **advocacy** are artifacts — opinion columns whose prose overlaps a theory's wording (a voter-fraud column scored against “Bush Stole 2000”). That our own classifier mislabels op-ed prose as advocacy is itself the point: **topical relevance is not stance**.

Finding 3 — The contrast: where promotion actually lives

Flip to the partisan and fringe outlets and the picture changes. Advocacy climbs steeply with right-lean: **dailywire** 35% (9/26), **pjmedia** 25% (3/12), **zerohedge** 25% (2/8), **newsmax** 20% (5/25), **theblaze** 20% (3/15). And the headlines genuinely *advance* the narrative rather than report on it:

Outlet	Headline	Matched theory	Stance
dailywire	New Report Shows Muslim Grooming Game Scandal Is Way Worse Than You Think	Great Replacement	advocacy
newsmax	CNN Poll: Voters Trust No Single News Source	MAHA moms	advocacy
dailywire	New Report Shows Muslim Grooming Game Scandal Is Way Worse Than You Think	UK Muslim Grooming Gangs & immigrant-crime narra	advocacy
dailywire	The Story They Called A Conspiracy Until It Wasn't	UK Muslim Grooming Gangs & immigrant-crime narra	advocacy
dailywire	The Disturbing Call That Unraveled The UFC White House Terror Plot	Epstein Files Conspiracy	advocacy
thefederalist	Trump Should Cut Ties With Starmer Government Over UK Rape Gang Scandal	UK Muslim Grooming Gangs & immigrant-crime narra	advocacy
newsmax	GOP-Led States Move to Reshape Majority-Black Districts	Bush Stole the 2000 Election	advocacy
dailywire	Grooming Gang Survivor Speaks Out As Questions Mount Over Who Looked Away	UK Muslim Grooming Gangs & immigrant-crime narra	advocacy
breitbart	Sean Penn's Upcoming January 6 Movie Slammed as 'Woke Liberal Slop' Moments After Announced: 'It's a Flop Already'	Trump Mobile Palantir Surveillance Honeytrap	advocacy

These are not coverage. “The Story They Called A Conspiracy Until It Wasn’t” is an outlet *claiming vindication* for a narrative. The same signature that catches a Times news report catches a Daily Wire op-ed — but the stance classifier separates them cleanly.

Finding 4 — Eight years of coverage: events drive the surges

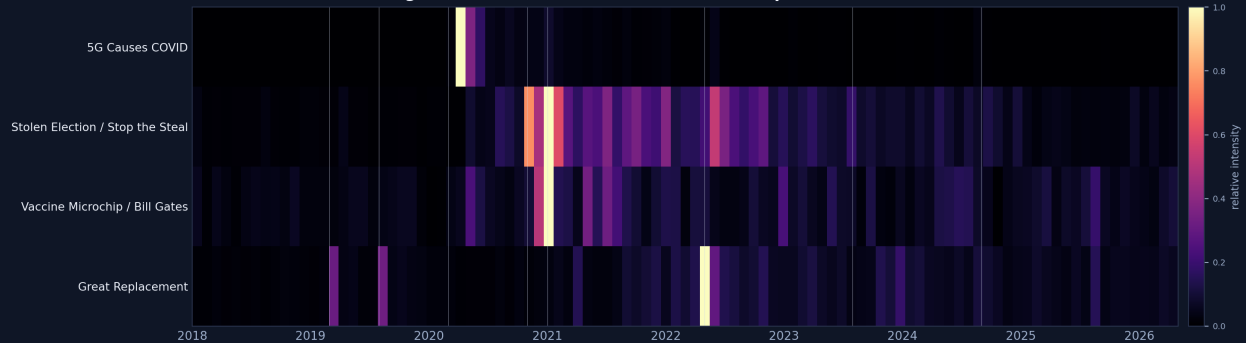
A snapshot of today's headlines can't show how these narratives move over time. So we mined **GDEL** — a global news index spanning hundreds of thousands of outlets — measuring each narrative's share of world news coverage, month by month, across 2018–2026. We sampled major conspiracy narratives of the era; 4 returned clean multi-year coverage curves (Great Replacement, Stolen Election / Stop the Steal, 5G Causes COVID, Vaccine Microchip / Bill Gates). The result is a fingerprint of the conspiracy-news cycle:

Eight Years of Conspiracy in the News

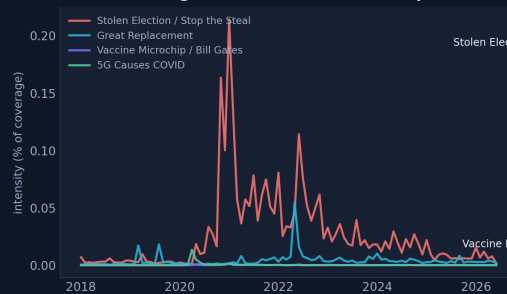
When major news events break, conspiracy narratives surge in global coverage — and each leaves a distinct fingerprint in time.

GDELT global news index · 2018–2026 · 12 narratives

Each narrative's coverage over time (row-normalized to its own peak)



Actual coverage curves — event-driven spikes



Total news footprint & peak year



SignalWatch · GDELT DOC 2.0 data mining · signalwat.ch Intensity = share of global monitored coverage matching the narrative query (coverage volume, not stance).

Conspiracy coverage in global news, 2018–2026 (GDELT). Top: each narrative's coverage over time, normalized to its own peak — the bright cells line up with real events. Bottom-left: actual coverage curves; bottom-right: each narrative's total news footprint and the year it peaked.

- **Coverage is event-driven.** Each narrative's peak aligns with a real-world trigger — 5G/COVID and the “stolen election” both cresting in 2020, the vaccine-microchip narrative in 2021, the Great Replacement surging around the 2022 mass shootings.
- **A conspiracy-news supercycle, 2020–2022.** The sampled narratives cluster into a tight three-year window — pandemic, election, vaccines, and replacement fears compounding — when conspiracy material saturated mainstream coverage as never before or since.
- **Spikes are sharp, tails are long.** Each narrative explodes at its event then decays slowly, leaving a low hum of coverage for years — the half-life of a conspiracy in the press.
- **Volume is coverage, not endorsement.** GDELT measures how much the world's press *discusses* a narrative — overwhelmingly reporting and debunking. The promotion signal lives in the specific outlets of Finding 3, not in raw coverage volume. (GDELT rate-limits constrained the live sample; the method scales to the full narrative set.)

What it means

- **“The news covers conspiracy theories” is true but misleading.** Coverage volume is dominated by neutral reporting and debunking; endorsement is rare and concentrated.

- **The promotion signal is real and measurable** — it just lives in a specific, identifiable set of partisan/fringe outlets, and it rises predictably with political lean.
- **Topical relevance $\neq$ stance.** Any keyword-only system (including ours, before the stance gate) will flag the Times and the Guardian as “conspiracy-adjacent.” Stance classification is what separates the newsroom from the megaphone — and it is essential for honest measurement.
- **Events, not outlets, set the tempo.** Conspiracy coverage is reactive: it surges when something happens and fades between events.

Method: news claims matched to theory signatures (bypassing the conspiratorial-language gate); stance via an LLM classifier on the matched paragraph (advocacy / critique / neutral / unclear); outlet lean from a fixed index. Eight-year trends from GDELT DOC 2.0 (coverage volume, not stance). Snapshot figures reflect the corpus at publication. © SignalWatch — free to use with attribution.