

MARIANNA in Conspiracyland – Full Series Transcripts

Episode 1 – Entering Conspiracyland

MARIANNA SPRING: The small town of Totnes in Devon is known for its warmth and open mindedness. Gong baths and healing crystals. But something has gone awry.

BEN PIPER: I've been shouted at in the street. I've been accosted and had cameras shoved up my nose, and had people drive their cars at me.

MS: A fault line has emerged between the minority who've been drawn in by disinformation laced with hate, and those who are fighting against it.

GEORGINA ALLEN: It's been a bit upsetting to have a town where hippies, who you thought were friends of yours, have crossed very quickly, with only the smallest of encouragement, over to the far right.

MS: This series is about the local people at the core of the conspiracy theory movement.

NATALIE: I and others here have spent so much of our time trying to save humanity, trying to wake them up, trying to help them.

JASON LIOSATOS: If I was angry, I'd be going . . .

MS: No, I'm just asking you.

JL: I'm not saying that. That would be angry.

MS: It's about those behind a conspiracy theory newspaper that seems to be driving it. Do you think that calls for action in the paper for people to take action to do something could result in action that is not peaceful?

DARREN NESBITT: Of course. I mean, you know, people make their own decisions, and they need to be responsible for their own actions.

MS: And the threat it could pose to society in the UK and beyond.

Speaker 5: So many crazy stories have been spread so far and wide that it's hard to see this ending well.

MS: I'm Marianna Spring, the BBC's Disinformation and Social Media Correspondent. And in this podcast series I'm venturing into Conspiracyland, a reality that gets curiouser and curiouser and has infected towns like Totnes across the UK. I'm investigating the conspiracy theory media here in Britain and the radicalisation that appears to come with it. Its followers hold a range of different beliefs, which many would never act on. But there are others whose views seem to be becoming more radical. At the extreme end, we've seen conspiracy theory driven riots at the US Capitol and a coup attempt foiled in Germany. But what's happening in the UK? I have plenty of time to look about and wonder, what is going to happen next? For BBC Radio 4, this is *Marianna in Conspiracyland*. I arrive in Totnes on a rain-soaked Tuesday. But even with the clouds overhead, this town, full of independent shops and art galleries, is still bustling with life. I walk through the market square past stalls, busy with quirky clothes that reflect what I can only describe as the town's unashamed sense of self. I'm here because the conspiracy theory movement that boomed during the pandemic has taken hold in the town, and a motivated minority continue to hand out a mysterious conspiracy theory newspaper called *The Light*. It's one that keeps coming up in my investigations and seems to be particularly divisive here. Someone who knows about the paper is the editor of rival news website, *The Totnes Pulse*. He's called Peter Shearn.

PETER SHEARN: So yeah, we've been here a while, we moved down from Bristol.

MS: I meet him at his home, nestled in one of Totnes's, sloping streets. He makes me tea. Oh thanks so much.

PS: That's not yours. That one's yours.

MS: Thank you. We sit down across from a mantelpiece populated with Totnesian knickknacks, a Margaret Thatcher nutcracker and a Jesus on wheels.

PS: Yeah, this is . . . it's not the tidiest of living rooms, but there you go.

MS: What are the values of the people here in Totnes? What matters most?

PS: I think there is community. If you did a word cloud, I'll bet community comes up very high on that list. The amount of people that know each other. For example, if I'm going down the high street down to the bottom, I won't make it to the bottom without having a couple of conversations. And I think that is one of the things that really appeals to people.

MS: I'm actually here to learn about something else. I want to talk about *The Light*, which, as a fellow newspaper editor, Peter can shed some light on. *The Light's* tagline is *The Uncensored Truth*. It opposes traditional media and thinks journalists like me are lying about what's happening in the world. Peter boots up his tablet and reads me an article from the online version.

PS: 'People often ascribe failures and disasters to incompetence, greed and corruption. While these play a part, there is a plan in place to continue to degrade everyone's standard of living to the point where we will be grateful for handouts, a universal basic income, because they've killed off all the jobs and don't want to be lynched.' Excuse me. What's . . .? That's a strange narrative, isn't it? What do . . .? And who are 'they', by the way?

MS: The paper looks professional. It's well put together, in colour, with lots of images. It's a mixture of wellness type articles, *How to Detox Naturally*, and *Pioneers of Frequency Medicine*, which Peter says go down well with some locals. But its content features a lot of disinformation, and, as you can hear, alludes to sinister cabals of powerful people who are purposefully trying to control you and do you harm.

PS: 'And while 9/11 will cause endless debate (by design)' Oh, I see. So they're implying that 9/11 was a conspiracy. Here we go. Pandemics. This is the one that really worked for them. '2020 – 2022 saw the real-life playout of Hollywood movies, *Contagion* and *Outbreak*. They also gamed out the whole scenario with Event 201 in October 2019.'

MS: Going through these articles, it's like reading another language. They are jam packed with conspiracy lexicon.

PS: '. . . SPARS 2025 document from 27 . . .' see, I've lost the will to live. It's hard to read.

MS: Peter tells me the conspiracy theory paper is handed out for free in the centre of town by committed readers and volunteers, and every month its followers march down the high streets, encouraging others to get involved in the movement. And it's not just Totnes. *The Light* seems to have groups dedicated to handing it out in Stroud, Barrow in Furness, Brighton, and the Wirral. *The Light's* main channel on Telegram, a messaging app with large conspiracy-oriented groups, has over 18,000 members and its distribution channel several thousand, highlighting the locations all over the country where it's shared. And Peter worries for the reputation of his beloved freethinking town.

PS: I don't think it does us any favours being considered as dangerously crazy, as opposed to just a little bit crazy.

MS: To learn more about the impact this conspiracy theory newspaper is having on the town, I tracked down Ben Piper, the former mayor of Totnes, and Georgina Allen, a former deputy mayor. We meet in a church on the High Street and their friendship is immediately apparent.

GEORGINA ALLEN: Don't make that face. I'm really sorry, Ben.

BEN PIPER: I'll just butt in and forget what I was saying.

GA: (*laughs*) I'm really sorry, I totally did that.

MS: Georgina was quick to spot *The Light* being circulated during lockdown.

GA: It was very much something that other people had created elsewhere, and then, you know, marketed as the community newspaper – the fears and concerns of Totnes, which was absolute nonsense. It was clearly nonsense.

MS: Ben says he became a key target for the conspiracy theory movement in the town because of his role enforcing coronavirus restrictions. He fears the harassment he experienced has been exacerbated by publications like *The Light* paper, which featured him.

BP: I was described as ‘The cowardly Mayor of Totnes’, and I was like, ‘Come here and look me in the eye and tell me that.’

MS: It’s impossible to prove that people acted directly in response to content in *The Light*. But Ben says the publication and wider movement seemed to play some role in stoking this hate against him.

BP: I’ve been shouted in the street. I’ve been accosted and had cameras shoved up my nose and had people drive their cars at me. I just happened to be standing on the side of the road and a guy just swerved his car. He was parking, but he swerved it straight at me. I had to jump out of the way. And this was somebody I’d known for years, who I considered a friend. I’ve had peculiar phone calls in the middle of the night and it’s like, ‘Who are you?’ ‘Oh, well, you don’t know me, but I know who you are.’ You know, the personal, emotional cost of this kind of divisive manipulations of politics. I’ve lost people who I’d known for years and years and years and years.

MS: Tensions really escalated when an almighty row broke out with the council. Some local conspiracy theorists who go by the name the New World Alliance, a group central to the movement in the town, attempted to book the Totnes Civic Hall as the venue for a conference of Truth Speakers. Members of the group also hand out *The Light*, and Georgina had become well aware of the conspiracy theories it promoted, but also the kind of ideologies it platformed. One article defended a man called Graham Hart, who was jailed for 32 months for, as the judge put it, ‘spreading

racial hatred due to his anti-Semitic slurs on his radio show'. Another article was written by John Hamer, a Holocaust denier.

GA: I knew these people and I knew what they represented. I knew how their tactics worked. So did, you know, most of the rest of us on the Town Council? So we were really alarmed really quickly. You can't let those things happen. You can't just say, 'Freedom of speech, let it happen. It'll be fine.' Because, you know, the people involved were extremely nasty.

MS: Georgina took more of a detailed look at the posts from the scheduled speakers, and she also looked at posts from the local people involved with the conference. She noticed how they too were promoting anti-Semitic ideas online. So she made up her mind.

GA: I said that these are not people we should be allowing to speak in the Civic Hall in any way whatsoever. There are Jewish groups and religious diversity groups in the South Hams, who began to write into us in great alarm, it's the exact opposite of what Totnes and we should all be about.

MS: Georgina and Ben think those drawn into this movement have been preyed upon by activists that push publications like *The Light*.

GA: So we began to get people who, you know, openly identified as QAnon. Occasionally came to the Town Council meetings, were very charming, and actually, you know, admitted it was recruitment. That's how they described it to us. So with that background, that these people are (*words unclear, 'used to it'?*) have a sort of small community here anyway, that they were primed, they were the perfect people to start whipping up emotions and fears about the pandemic, as a recruitment process, as I see it, too, for the far right.

MS: For Georgina and Ben, this paper from outside Totnes has been part of what has drawn people in the town towards a new way of thinking. They compared two separate visits from Carl Benjamin, a former UKIP candidate who ran a YouTube channel called Sargon of Akkad before it was suspended by the platform. He first

appeared in Totnes with a former Breitbart editor, Milo Yiannopoulos, a man associated with the far right. At the time, a local group in Totnes condemned Benjamin's use of rape threats and racist tropes, as well as engagement with white supremacists.

GA: Obviously, the whole of Totnes would have come out against them, which we did. It was a clear, like, old fashioned standoff on the market square. We had sort of, you know, (*unclear, sounds like 'Akon Sakkad' – means 'Sargon of Akkad'?*) and his mates, who all look quite heavy, standing on one side and shouting about freedom of speech, and then the whole of Totnes on the other side shouting at him to go away. A year after the pandemic, the same guy came back with another mate and half the people who previously had stood up against him were now with him, because they'd all been recruited into his way of thinking. So nothing was more important than freedom of speech. So suddenly, these guys who we had all at once, you know, only a couple of years previously absolutely understood as being on the wrong side, people were now slightly conflicted in standing with him and yelling at us. So for me, it's been a bit upsetting to have a town where hippies, who you thought were friends of yours, have crossed very quickly, with only the smallest of encouragement, over to the far right.

MS: Georgina and Ben are worried that what the conspiracy theory media is doing is something akin to radicalisation, causing a committed minority to adopt radical positions on political or social issues based on disinformation. In our conversation, a name comes up, Jason Liosatos. He's an artist based in Totnes, but also seems to be one of the key people in this movement. I wonder if he'll speak to me.

JASON LIOSATOS: This system is horrible, and the system is slavery. That's what it is. Don't get angry? You should get bloody angry.

MS: That's next time on BBC Radio 4's *Marianna in Conspiracyland*.

Episode 2 – Down the Rabbit Hole

JASON LIOSATOS: The system is rotten at the core. It's a Frankenstein's monster system that's perpetuating slavery. It should be crushed to its knees. It should be deleted.

MS: I'm watching a video entitled *My Big Rant About the Cost of Living and Parasitic Government*. A man with a swept back ponytail is talking from a makeshift studio, filmed against a white wooden background. He's furious.

JL The system's horrible. And the system is slavery. That's what it is. Don't get angry? You should get bloody angry.

MS: It's not the only video on his website. Another is entitled *Jab Justice – Stop the Jab and Climate Fear*. And another saying *No to the Digital Identification Slavery*. All are focussed on the idea we are being constantly tracked and trapped in order to control us. This man's name is Jason Liosatos. He's an artist and he's one of the people I've been told is key to Totnes's conspiracy theory movement. His videos seem to be popular both in his Devon hometown and also across the world. I want to understand the ideas some in the movement subscribe to, and the ways the conspiracy theory media spread them. I wonder what he can tell me about *The Light*. I'm Marianna Spring, the BBC's Disinformation and Social Media Correspondent. And in this podcast series I'm venturing into Conspiracyland, a reality that gets curiouser and curiouser and has infected towns like Totnes across the UK. I'm investigating the conspiracy theory media here in Britain and the radicalisation that appears to come with it. Its followers hold a range of different beliefs, which many would never act on. But there are others whose views seem to be becoming more radical. At the extreme end, we've seen conspiracy theory driven riots at the US Capitol and a coup attempt foiled in Germany. But what's happening in the UK? I have plenty of time to look about and wonder, what is going to happen next? For BBC Radio 4, this is *Marianna in Conspiracyland*. Jason's gallery, tucked away at the top of Totnes's High Street, is not a place that screams conspiracy. When we walk up to the gallery, he's deep in conversation with a fellow Totnesian.

JL: Good to see you. Lots of love, all right, see you soon. This is my little place, you know.

MS: It's amazing.

JL: Yeah. This is like a little sort of, erm . . . how would you say? It's like a bit of a hub in Totnes, you know, it's a bit of a meeting place for people to come and have chats and meet up.

MS: The gallery is light and airy. Every inch of the walls is covered with his paintings, large abstract canvases bursting with colour, watercolours of rippling seascapes and several portraits of cows. Having watched his videos, I'm surprised by how warmly he welcomes me – almost like an old friend. How would you describe Totnes to someone who's never visited the town before?

JL: It's lovely living in Totnes. It's a quirky little place, and that's why I like it. I suppose because I'm quite quirky and I fit in, you know. And there's all sorts of different people here, you know, thinking all sorts of things.

MS: Jason, at first glance is very, well, Totnes. He moved here from Wales eight years ago and championed sustainable living alongside his artwork. But like other people in the UK, the pandemic changed Jason's life and perspective. When we were chatting on the phone, I think there was something you said to me that really stood out. You kind of said, 'Oh, before the pandemic, I wanted the world to be a sort of happy place, but I became more aware of the bad during the pandemic and of the bad stuff that I felt I needed to talk about.' And I guess I wonder if you could talk me through the way that the pandemic has changed or intensified your views and your approach?

JL: I just think it accelerated and magnified how people have felt within themselves, because let's be honest, people were locked in their houses, literally. I mean, how amazing is that? If you'd have said that years ago, you'd never believe that people would do that.

MS: Jason has many of the hallmarks of a political activist, but he doesn't see it that way.

JL: I'm sort of, in one sense, I'm a political atheist. Without being too controversial, I've never felt that whoever you vote for makes much difference. It's always concerned me, almost like different wings on the same bird, if you like. And that's not to be a conspiratorial thing. It just seems to be true. Tomorrow, whoever gets in, it's the same thing again and again and again. And people are struggling to pay their bills. It's always bothered me that people aren't more comfortable. I mean, people say to me, 'Jason, you're looking for utopia.' Well, yes, I am. I'm looking for a beautiful thing. Life for people on the planet.

MS: At this point, Jason seems to me like someone who is politically frustrated and concerned about issues, like the cost of living crisis, which are affecting the lives of those around him. But then it starts to become more extreme and shifts beyond the pandemic. It's about sinister plots that are trying to control our way of life and cause us harm.

JL: To be honest with you, I think they're using it as a Trojan horse to bring in the Great Digital Cashless Reset, which is coming now. And it seems to be coming in fast. And it worries me. I hate to talk about this like I'm a conspiracy theorist. I'm not. I'm a realist. I look at facts. Yeah?

MS: The Digital Cashless Reset conspiracy theory that he's referring to here is one that suggests that governments and banks are plotting to control access to your money, and therefore also you. I'm reminded of how frequently conspiracy is muddled up with a range of views and hides in the most unsuspecting corners of communities like this one. There's no prototype for a conspiracy theorist. They can be a doctor, a nurse, a teacher, or an artist. Have you noticed an increase in the number of people that are interested in the kinds of ideas that you talk about and the videos you make?

JL: Tremendously. Exponentially. I've never known anything like it. More and more people write to me now. We've got literally queues of people now saying, 'I

want something different.' I think there's a hunger for questioning the usual narrative.

MS: But while what Jason is describing is a utopic ideal where people reject society and join together in peace, some of his online rhetoric is very different in tone. In his videos, he rallies about the battle between good and evil on the planet and encourages followers to take action. 'Let us not wonder how to do it, but do it then wonder how we did it,' he explains. And at the time of this interview, despite telling us he was a political atheist, he was running for local office with the Heritage Party. The Heritage Party describe themselves as socially conservative, opposing gay rights, abortion access and rejecting severe punishment for hate crimes. Jason says he doesn't support all of the party's views. And it's not just through political parties that Jason has found people who share his beliefs and concerns. There's the conspiracy theory newspaper too, that same paper I've been investigating, *The Light*.

JL: It was a bit enigmatic, really, because it sort of popped up from nowhere *The Light* newspaper. I've got to tell you, I've always wanted to do a magazine and a newspaper, that's been one of my dreams to have a newspaper or magazine. Someone told me who was the editor of it and their names and everything, and I was going to get them on my show, but I didn't. I know most of the people around here that give *The Light* newspaper out. They banned it from being put through doors, I think, didn't they, in Totnes? Yeah, they did. I was told they're not allowed to put them through doors anymore, you know?

MS: Who decided that?

JL: I don't know, you know. I'm not sure who decided that. It might have been the ex-mayor who called me a . . . he called me 'evil incarnate'.

MS: The controversy around *The Light* paper seems to be linked to lots of what's happened in Totnes in the aftermath of the pandemic, and it's not hard to see why. Its pages and its Telegram channel defend and promote far right figures. There are articles that condone the use of force against aggressors, the government and whoever else they oppose. There's rhetoric about wars and battles and calls for

journalists, politicians and medics to be put on trial for crimes against humanity over the pandemic. Those deemed to be the worst offenders would face the death penalty. I wanted to know if Jason agreed with any of this.

JL: You know, I'm not all about hanging them from lampposts and . . . but I am about change. And I think if we can create new systems, independent of the old ones that are . . .

MS: Like a whole new society?

JL: Really, that's what we're looking at. I think we're at a time now, we're at a turning point where we've got to realise that each person individually and collectively, the decisions we make now, even tiny ones, they create the future. And we're not careful enough about that, clearly, otherwise we'd be living in almost a utopia on the planet. And it is possible, we're the midwives, for a new world that wants to be born.

MS: While he says he's an advocate for peaceful change, I find frequently that hate and anti-Semitism in particular come hand-in-hand with the conspiracy theories he talks about. Hateful tropes are woven into their fabric. They look for a bad guy, and more often than not, it's the powerful Jewish globalists who they believe play an instrumental role in what's happening. Long before COVID, Jason was accused of promoting anti-Semitic conspiracies online. Before, when we first spoke and you said, 'Grill me, grill me.'

JL: Grill me.

MS: So I'm going to grill you.

JL: Grill me.

MS: I just wanted to ask you about some of the comments that you have posted online. So one, for example, in December of last year.

JL: Oh, God.

MS: Where you said, 'The Jewish chosen ones, superior to all other races, especially blacks. Let's send some of the boats with migrants from the shores . . . to the shores of Israel and make some nice mixed-race to dilute the Israeli arrogance.'

JL: *(short laugh)*

MS: That's anti-Semitic.

JL: No, it's not. That's not anti-Semitic at all. I could have said it about any other country. The reason I chose Israel to use as an example for that – and I'll expand on it to prove it's not anti-Semitic – I was using them and . . . often, the Israeli arrogance, generally, like they're the untouchable chosen ones. Okay. Now, if you look at religion, you might say, 'Well, they are the chosen ones.' So the reason I used that example, 'Send the boats over there and see how they feel about it,' was a good point, because they'd never, ever, ever accept that, because they wouldn't want to dilute their . . . their species like that. Okay? And I used that as an example, a radical example, because I knew it would make a point that I was trying to make, yeah?

MS: Can you see how people would find that offensive, though?

JL: Maybe some people would find that offensive, but sometimes you've got to make examples to make a point.

MS: The mood in the gallery shifts. Jason is visibly agitated by my question, fiddling with coins in his pocket. If this isn't anti-Semitic, in Jason's view, I challenge him. 'Well, what is?' The extremity and violence of his answer really shocks me.

JL: Anti-Jewish? Get a big knife and stab someone who's Jewish or Israeli going, 'I hate Jews and Israeli. I hate Jews and Israelis.' That would be anti-Jewish and anti-Israel.

MS: I mean, that would be murder.

JL: Yeah, it might be murder.

MS: As he speaks, Jason makes a stabbing motion with his hands. Jason says he's had no involvement in attacks targeting locals in Totnes, and there's no evidence he's acted violently on the basis of his beliefs. In the days running up to meeting Jason, I'd spotted a post circulating online, advertising a rally scheduled to happen right here in Totnes. I noticed that the rally that's happening this weekend and the monthly rallies have often used that word 'revolution'. What can you tell me about the people who attend those rallies and where they kind of place themselves within the community here in Totnes?

JL: Right. I know most people here and I love them all so dearly, you know. There's less people at the marches now, as you know, because people said, 'Oh, well, you know, let's not bother.' Stephen, down in Arcturus Clinic, Stephen Hopwood, he's a really good man.

MS: Stephen Hopwood. He's the man who was involved in setting up the New World Alliance, a group central to the conspiracy theory movement in Totnes. He also seems to be one of the people more closely linked to this mysterious, slickly produced paper, *The Light*. I found videos of him handing it out on the High Street. I've learned lots from artist Jason about the beliefs of the people associated with this movement, but maybe Stephen can tell me more about *The Light* paper. The only way to find answers in Conspiracyland is to track down who's behind all of this. Step by step. We'd really like to try and speak to Steven Hopwood. I don't know whether you'd be able to introduce us to him, or . . . ?

JL: I'll contact him and ask him for sure, if you leave me a number, I will do that.

MS: I wonder if there's any room for me at his upcoming march. Do you worry about anger and vio— do you worry about that translating ever into violent action?

STEPHEN HOPWOOD: No, I'm not angry, I'm frustrated. So, again, you're trying to label me as angry. If I was angry, I'd be . . .

MS: No, I'm just asking you, I'm just asking you . . . That's next time on BBC Radio 4's *Marianna in Conspiracyland*.

Episode 3 – Trestle Tables for Truth

MS: It's a golden Saturday in Totnes, and it's only if you look hard that you'll start to spot the clues. Beyond the bustling market, with stalls selling fudge and intricate embroidered blankets, environmental activists with leaflets and fluorescent orange jackets, you'll spot a bundle of newspapers piled on the pavement, and plastic yellow signs being propped up against walls, one reads. 'If you haven't been banned from social media, you ain't been posting causes for concern.' Another, 'You are the carbon they want to reduce,' and 'The BBC and media are lying to us all.' And then you spot a man. He's hooking up a microphone ready to speak to a crowd.

STEPHEN HOPWOOD: Hello. BBC, welcome.

MS: This man is Stephen Hopwood, one of the leaders of the conspiracy theory movement in Totnes. People are gathering here to march down the High Street protesting against vaccines, climate change policies, the cost of living crisis, and journalists like me. To my surprise, he's invited me to come along. And so I find myself at the very heart of Totnes's movement. And they're far from my biggest fans. I'm Marianna Spring, the BBC's Disinformation and Social Media Correspondent. And in this podcast series I'm venturing into Conspiracyland, a reality that gets curiouser and curiouser and has infected towns like Totnes across the UK. I'm investigating the conspiracy theory media here in Britain and the radicalisation that appears to come with it. Its followers hold a range of different beliefs, which many would never act on. But there are others whose views seem to be becoming more radical. At the extreme end, we've seen conspiracy theory driven riots at the US Capitol and a coup attempt foiled in Germany. But what's happening in the UK? I have plenty of time to look about and wonder, what is going to happen next? For BBC Radio 4, this is *Marianna in Conspiracyland*. As I've been looking into Totnes's conspiracy theory movement, Stephen Hopwood's name is one that's come up. He runs a place called the Arcturus Clinic offering alternative medical treatments. Stephen Hopwood trained as a doctor, but he's no longer registered with the General Medical Council, which means he can't practice medicine in the UK without

supervision. I arrive at his clinic to meet him after artist Jason put me in touch. There's a cordial atmosphere, but also some noticeable tension. But the room eases a little, as he starts to joke during our sound checks.

SH: Hello, good afternoon and welcome. This is the BBC.

MS: The floor in his practice room is covered with layers of patterned rugs and his shelves are full of books on Chinese medicine and herbal remedies. I first want to know about the group he was involved in setting up during the COVID-19 pandemic.

SH: The New World Alliance is just a local group of people that are raising questions and having concerns. We don't claim to have definitive insight into the absolute nature of reality. That would be an unreasonable claim to make. But as I say, what we do understand is that there are gross contradictions to the government and mainstream narrative, and evidence that we've been lied to.

MS: Like many in the world of conspiracy, Stephen's beliefs begin from a place of political and scientific concern. But his views then move quickly beyond the realm of evidence. And I find myself engaged in a conversation about the pandemic I've had many times over.

SH: The vast majority of the evidence does not substantiate that the vaccine is safe or effective. So effective at what? Effective at prohibiting transmission? Is that what you mean by effective?

MS: Stopping people getting really poorly?

SH: Well, perhaps. But, you know, if you look at the reality, of all-cause mortality . . .

MS: My challenges don't convince Stephen to see things differently. In the reality he inhabits there appears to be more than just abuse of power or corruption or greed. Instead, there seems to be a deliberate and orchestrated plan to limit people's freedom. I want to ask Stephen about the sources he does trust. Tell me a bit about the newspaper that you mentioned that you hand out?

SH: It's a newspaper called *The Light* magazine. It's not religious. It's not far right. That's absolutely not the case. Not far wrong either. It's a newspaper that raises and asks questions.

MS: Stephen's argument for political accountability and in favour of freedom of speech are made clearly. But when I've read through *The Light* and its Telegram channel, although there are some mundane articles and posts, some controversial names come up. Those include far right figures and groups accused of pushing hate: Patriotic Alternative and its leader, Mark Collett, and bloggers like Lasha Darkmoon, who writes in the paper that people should be able to question the Holocaust. What's your response to accusations that a paper like *The Light* actually pulls people into more extreme and far right ways of thinking and ideologies?

SH: Yeah. Well, the word 'extremism' is interesting, when you have movements with governments and corporations and NGOs like the World Economic Forum that are moving us more and more into a totalitarian state where freedom is diminished. Then freedom becomes an extreme point of view in relationship to totalitarianism. So yes, in a sense, you could quite easily label us as extremist, because we are in favour of freedom.

MS: Do you know much about the team who are behind *The Light*? The editor or the people that work there?

SH: Not a great deal no. Darren, Darren, I think, Smith, I think his name is?

MS: It's a name I bank for later, and one we'll be coming back to. Stephen's next patient had arrived, and I say my goodbyes, but not before I receive an invitation. He's open to me coming to the rally they organise where they hand out the conspiracy theory newspaper.

SH: Yeah, we normally get there about a quarter to eleven.

MS: Quarter to eleven, great, and we'll come and we'll kind of . . .

SH: Hello. BBC, welcome.

MS: From conversations I've had with local Totnesians, these monthly rallies are largely peaceful, and Stephen tells me he's had no involvement in any attacks targeting locals in Totnes. When I'm at events like this, though, they always seem tense. I'm one of the villains of this conspiracy theory movement. Once we've arrived, Stephen starts setting up a tripod and camera, saying, if we're filming then he's filming too.

SH: I want to film it. If you want to talk to me, I want to talk to you. Okay?

MS: Eventually, around 30 people have gathered. Most of them are above the age of 40. As I begin to speak to Stephen, they crowd around. Tell me a bit about the march that's happening today. What's it about?

SH: Well, it's exercising our rights, so we start to have a good look at the whole spectrum of things that are affecting us in our society – the banking industry, the wars, the pharmaceutical industry, world government bodies that are now dictating and taking away our national capacity to make decisions.

MS: But as the conversation develops, the topics echo those found in the pages of *The Light*, and we end up in the realm of well-trodden conspiracy theories.

SH: 9/11, you know? That's another reason why we're here. You know, how do you dematerialise three buildings made from steel and concrete into ultra fine dust, all within ten seconds? You can't do that without high explosives. That's just a fact.

MS: There's a lot of evidence that 9/11 was very much a horrible terror attack that claimed a lot of people's lives.

SH: Yes, of course it was. And there's a lot of evidence to suggest that those buildings came down in a way that differs from the conventional narrative.

MS: I asked Stephen what he makes of some of the less than peaceful rhetoric shared by conspiracy theory groups, mainly on the messaging app Telegram.

SH: Well, it's nothing to do with me. Just because some person has a belief or says something, it doesn't mean that somebody else believes that.

MS: Stephen's face becomes redder. He's increasingly animated. His voice rises and his stance is firm. He's talking not so much to me as to the crowd. You do seem quite angry, and I have this sense that there's a lot of anger in the movement.

SH: I'm angry with you for your misrepresentation. I'm angry with you for your editorial policy being dictated to by government and corporations. I'm angry with you . . .

MS: That's not true. Do you worry about – because you are angry – do you worry about anger and violence.

SH: I'm frustrated.

MS: Do you worry about that translating ever into violent action?

SH: No, I'm not angry. I'm frustrated. So again, you know, you're trying to label me as angry. If I was angry . . . I'd be going . . .

MS: No, I'm just asking you . . .

SH: . . . 'You're a fucking bitch or whatever,' I'm not saying that. That would be angry. This is just talking in an animated way, because, you know, we have an intense moment and I'm going to communicate clearly to you. I'm not, you know, angry, I'll give you a nice hug at the end. You know, I'm a nice chap, you know, that.

MS: The supporters gathered around us applaud.

NATALIE: Well done, Stephen.

MS: I go over to speak to one woman who's helping lay out the signs for protesters to hold. She's wearing a black cap embroidered with bright white writing that reads Wake Up Devon. It's the name of the group she's a part of. Another one that makes up the conspiracy theory landscape in the Southwest of the UK. So for someone who can't see it, could you describe that poster for them?

N: Yeah. So it's, 'All your spending will literally be monitored forever.' And we've got the big red eyes watching you. Right, 'Human-caused climate change is pseudoscience and fraud.'

MS: What about the scientists who have lots of evidence that . . .

N: Yeah, so you've got scientists that have got lots of evidence, but you've also got lots of scientists that disagree with. The planet's actually . . .

MS: They are in the minority.

N: The planet's actually cooling down. It's not heating up. And we haven't got enough CO2. It's the gas of life, it makes everything grow. It is being used because it is about restricting our movement.

MS: This just isn't true. For Natalie, *The Light* paper is a source she now turns to for information. What would you say to allegations that something like *The Light* has promoted far right ideas or promoted Holocaust denial or anti-Semitism? What would you say to that?

N: I'd say we're the least far right people you could ever meet. We care about humanity. What we do is – I'm going to get emotional . . . I and others here have spent so much of our time trying to save humanity, trying to wake them up, trying to help them. Lost our families, lost our friends. And we still stand in our truth, because we know it is the truth. I'm sorry. It's upsetting me, sorry.

MS: That's okay. That's okay. Natalie's emotion catches me off guard. It's raw and fearful. I hear over and over again about the fracturing of relationships and families, but Natalie almost signals a new extreme. No one's ever burst into tears to me at any of these protests. She seems so genuinely convinced of these plots that she's terrified. I don't think she sees the links to hateful ideologies a paper like *The Light* has, which makes it all the more worrying. I see Natalie, now clutching a megaphone, make her way to the front of the procession.

N: Cash is freedom. Use it or lose it. The government is planning to introduce programmable, digital money.

MS: As the group makes its way through town and Natalie's warnings fill the air, there are people on the fringes handing out *The Light* paper. There's a somewhat mixed reception from those on the street. Some are confused.

UNNAMED MALE: What are they claiming that climate change is a hoax and everything? Yeah, I'm just very surprised to see that in Totnes, to be honest.

MS: But there are also several people taking the paper, reading the front page, and tucking it under their arm.

UNNAMED MALE 2: I've taken the papers and the flyers, because I'm in agreement with these people.

MS: I pick up a copy myself, and in the middle of this edition is a double page spread about the paper and its funding. It features a big colourful pie chart suggesting the paper is paid for by pre-orders, subscriptions and advertising. That name Darren, the editor, comes up again. And it's not just *The Light*. There's a list of foreign papers in Ireland, Australia, Canada and Germany that seem to be linked to it. So what motivates the man behind this conspiracy theory newspaper? Do you think that calls for action in the paper, for people to take action to do something could result in action that is not peaceful?

DARREN NESBITT: Of course. People make their own decisions, and they need to be responsible for their own actions.

MS: That's next time on BBC Radio 4's *Marianna in Conspiracyland*.

Episode 4 – The Conspiracy Theory Newspaper

DARREN NESBITT: My name's Darren Nesbitt. I'm a musician from Manchester, and about ten years ago I woke up, or realised the fact that we were living in an entirely deceptive world.

MARIANNA SPRING: Finally I've found him. The editor of *The Light* conspiracy theory newspaper. We're sitting opposite each other in a pub just outside of Manchester, which is Darren's home turf. He's agreed to speak to me if I also agree to be interviewed by him. This feels unusual, but it's becoming more of a trend. I'm more than happy to answer any questions about my journalism. So both our teams are setting up microphones and cameras.

DN: But we're getting ready for the media handicap.

MS: What's the media handicap?

DN: Of today's horse race (*laughs*)

MS: I'm Marianna Spring, the BBC's Disinformation and Social Media Correspondent. And in this podcast series, I'm venturing into Conspiracyland, a reality that gets curiously and curiously, and has infected towns like Totnes across the UK. I'm investigating the conspiracy theory media here in Britain and the radicalisation that appears to come with it. Its followers hold a range of different beliefs, which many would never act on. But there are others whose views seem to be becoming more radical. At the extreme end, we've seen conspiracy theory driven riots at the US Capitol and a coup attempt foiled in Germany. But what's happening in the UK? I have plenty of time to look about and wonder what is going to happen next. For BBC Radio 4, this is *Marianna in Conspiracyland*. Darren, the editor of *The Light*, is bald with a beard. He's dressed in a relaxed way with a white T-shirt emblazoned with the name of his guitar string company. He's animated and a little flustered, loading clips to show me on his laptop. Copies of *The Light* paper and his extensive notes surround us on the table. I clutch my questions in my lap. And then our interview duel is underway. His views are quickly apparent. He talks about many

of the conspiracy theories that populate the pages of *The Light* and its Telegram channels. It's a bit of a conspiracy bingo.

DN: So if CO2 causes global warming, where's the warming? . . . I went to university. I watched 9/11 – aluminium planes can't cut through steel buildings. It was obviously a demolition . . . because we need to create a pandemic and create fear in people's heads . . . it's a great big marketing scheme, (*fades out*)

MS: For many I talk to, the pandemic was their gateway into this Conspiracyland. But while it does seem to have energised Darren's views, that wasn't where it started. I'm always interested in what informs people's beliefs and who they are. Have you always been sort of interested in these kinds of topics, or was it really the pandemic that changed your view?

DN: No, I've been awake for ten years, so no, I was a complete believer. I've always been sceptical of government and corporations and what have you, but not to the extent that it is now. The difference now is I've done ten years of re-education, reschooling, research, rereading everything. I like learning about things. It was great to be able to go back and revisit all the things that we've been told, whether it's science, history, geography, cosmology, you name it . . . health, etc., etc. And it should be exciting to people. We don't have to accept what the BBC tell us. We don't have to accept what, you know, the official narrative is. So the question is, why do you always conflate opposition to the government with online abuse and extreme views held by a tiny minority? Don't you think that you're overexaggerating both the number and threat from those fringe thinkers of society?

MS: Okay. Thank you for your question. I wholly disagree with that statement, and I also disagree that I do that. I always endeavour to separate very legitimate and reasonable concerns and questions that people have from the more extreme views and ideas that are contrary to evidence, in fact. Darren tells me the paper prints at least 100,000 copies a month at a cost of around £20,000. It's then distributed to around 30 self-appointed hubs across the UK. At those rates, *The Light* will cost around £240,000 per year to make. That's a fair bit of money, which Darren says

comes from subscribers and advertisers. This financial commitment from a portion of its readers also suggests a commitment to some of the worldview the paper pushes. And as we've found, while some of the content is mundane, some of it could be a gateway into something more extreme. The paper has been criticised for links to figures who are considered far-right figures or anti-Semitic figures. What's your relationship with these groups?

DN: I don't have any relationship with them.

MS: Why do you allow them in your paper?

DN: Because if they write good articles on topics that are useful, topics that are interesting to people, then we should have them. We believe in free speech. Free speech means hearing from people that you don't necessarily agree with, or even whose ideas – or some of whose ideas – abhor you. Yeah? There's the difference between speech and incitement, yeah? And that's where it ends. So you can talk about anything you want. People should be free to talk about any idea and let the market decide.

MS: As an editor, do you feel responsible for what you put? Because I do think that there's a certain amount of editorial responsibility that we all talk about. How do we make sure that we are giving our readership accurate and fair information, but also that we are not promoting hate or hateful ideas or anti-Semitism.

DN: Well, we don't promote hate or hateful ideas.

MS: But you have.

DN: No, we haven't.

MS: So there are examples in the paper itself. You've recommended books by someone like Eustace Mullins, who's a white supremacist. You've defended Graham Hart . . .

DN: Eustace Mullins is not a white supremacist, he's a historian.

MS: But he's specifically written books, including ones like *The Biological Jew* and *Adolf Hitler – An Appreciation*.

DN: Okay. I've not read that book. Okay. I've only read . . .

MS: But he is someone who . . .

DN: I, I . . . we've recommended his book on the Federal Reserve.

MS: Yes, exactly.

DN: Okay.

MS: But he is a figure who you've described him as a renowned author in *The Light*. He's a figure who's written several books and who is known for promoting views that are in line with white supremacy, and that are offensive to Jewish people, that are anti-Semitic, that promote hate. So do you realise how, by endorsing a figure like that, it could expose your readership to, kind of, further hate and nasty ideas that they are promoting? Why would you include those people?

DN: Well, because the book itself is well worth reading. Now you're . . . all you're doing here is guilt by association. Guilt by association.

MS: Okay, so what about someone like Graham Hart? So the paper directly defended Graham Hart. He was sentenced to 32 months in prison for making anti-Semitic remarks on his radio show. And in the article about him, there was no mention of those comments, it was suggested that it was just a conversation. But he said things like, 'Jews are filth, they're like rats, and they deserve to be wiped out.'

DN: Yeah, that's pretty harsh stuff.

MS: Yeah, well, why defend someone like that?

DN: We didn't.

MS: You did.

DN We defended his right to say it.

MS: Some of this rhetoric is also on the Telegram channels linked to the paper, with over 18,000 members. *The Light* shares content from UK far-right groups there, including Patriotic Alternative, promoting rallies, and posts talking about the replacement of white people and asking people to #getinvolved. And they share content from an extreme group called Alpha Men Assemble, offering military style training to anti-vaccine activists. Darren tells me the channel is run by several people, and that he doesn't directly control it. But his name features as a sign off on some of the posts. Are you concerned about some of the content, so like, for example, there's a neo-Nazi propaganda film, *Europa – The Last Battle* that's been published on the channel. And there's lots of use of things like 'globalist end game' and 'globalist cabal'. This posts from Tommy Robinson. There's posts from Alpha Men Assemble.

DN: It's social media, anybody can post anything.

MS: But those are reshared by *The Light* on their Telegram channel. Whoever's in charge of the channel is directly, sort of, retweeting those, effectively, posting them in the group.

DN: Okay. Again, we . . .

MS: How do you feel about that?

DN: We believe in the free sharing of information and people can make their own minds. They're all adults. Yeah?

MS: Telegram has not responded to the BBC's request for comment about why it has allowed *The Light* and other conspiracy theory papers to share violent and hateful rhetoric. Many people I've spoken to for this investigation are concerned about the effects calls to action associated with the paper and wider movement could have. That includes researchers at King's College, London. They carried out a survey of more than 2,000 people weighted to be representative of the UK population. One of the things we've been looking at is the way that calls to action

can have an impact on people. And there's some research that's conducted by King's College, it asks people about whether they attend rallies, whether they attend rallies opposing lockdown measures or opposing vaccinations, whether they oppose government and media and misinformation. And of the people who attended those rallies, across the board, an average of 61.5% of people said that they think violence is justified at those rallies. What do you think about that? Do you think that violence is justified?

DN: I don't, I don't agree with violence. I don't think that we need to be violent in any way, shape or form. I'm a very big proponent of peaceful non-compliance.

MS: Do you think that calls for action in the paper for people to take action to do something could result in action that is not peaceful?

DN: Of course. I mean, you know, people make their own decisions, and they need to be responsible for their own actions.

MS: There seems to me to be a bit of a disconnect between, you know, saying that you . . . you don't want violence, you know, you want to be peaceful, and you don't want it to be like that. But then some of the ideas that are connected to individuals who've featured in the paper, or post on the Telegram, you know, they are. And it just . . . it surprises me if that's what you think, why you don't say, 'There's no place for violence in our movement,' and so we don't include these kinds of people in the paper, and we don't allow them to share their posts on the Telegram channels.

DN: Because I might be wrong.

MS: So you think violence is justified?

DN: No, I don't. But I might be wrong.

MS: There are quotes I've read in the paper, for example, one that says, from the most recent edition, 'I condone the use of force only to defend against aggressors, which necessarily means I'm 100% anti-government, since government is always an

aggressor. And if that makes me an extremist because I want you to have more freedom than you want for yourself, then so be it.' What do you think of a quote like that? Do you endorse violence against the government? Is that what that is?

DN: That's not what he's saying.

MS: So what's he saying?

DN: He's talking about self-defence.

MS: But in what situation would you employ that?

DN: If the government said, 'Right, we want to take your property,' or you know, 'You have to come and lockdown,' you know, 'You have to leave your house and come to a vaccination centre.' I don't know. It could be a gazillion different scenarios.

MS: Throughout the interview, it feels like Darren is playing a bit of a game with me. He condemns violent action and then gives cryptic answers, which seem to contradict that. He's written articles and shared posts online with similarly ambiguous references about 'coming for those at the top' and how 'the time is coming for some kind of punishment.' Ultimately, I can't know whether he actually agrees with some of the rhetoric and people he publishes. What I can conclude is that he's willing to publish this kind of content, regardless of the harm it could cause. As our three hours of talking comes to a close, I have one final question for Darren. Has this conversation and meeting me in person changed your impression of me?

DN: Only slightly. I was expecting, you know, a smart, bright journalist full of energy.

MS: Thank you. Quite a positive note to finish on, you'd think. But days later, a poem appears on Darren's Facebook with a picture of me attached. It reads, 'Her name is Marianna Spring. Shilling for cash is her thing. In disinformation, she finds inspiration. Her eyes light up and go ka-ching.' In the post attached, he says I plan to discredit him and the paper by association with people promoting hate,

disinformation and anti-Semitism. It feels as though I've gone deeper into a parallel universe and flicking through *The Light*, I'm drawn to the pages of adverts. You can find holiday homes to rent, clinics to attend, tarot readers for hire, even blankets that claim to prevent damage from radiation. I want to track down the people behind these businesses that pay *The Light* for promotion. Without them, the whole thing may not be financially possible. How did they come to be a part of it? Part of a movement where some are willing to call for the execution of journalists, politicians, and others who they believe are complicit in sinister plots. Do you think people here should be hanged?

IAN MCNAUGHT: If it is to be found that people are guilty of crimes against humanity, then, yes.

MS: That's next time on BBC Radio 4's Marianna in Conspiracyland.

Episode 5 – Follow the Money

MARIANNA SPRING: I'm flicking through one recent edition of *The Light* paper, not to read the articles this time, but to look at the adverts that populate its back pages. After my face-to-face encounter with the paper's editor, Darren, I have more questions for the people involved in funding this paper. His advertisers. There are jewellery makers, tarot readers, water purifiers, alternative clinics, even blankets that claim to protect against radiation. These are businesses based all around the country. I tried to speak to several but have no luck. I'm met with silence, sometimes anger and last-minute cancellations. And then I spot one for some holiday cottages available in Glastonbury, a town in the southwest of the UK, where the paper seems to have a committed readership. A man called Ian owns these cottages and I've managed to get him on the phone from Glastonbury.

IM: It's a unique place. You've got goddesses here, you've got wizards, you've got . . . you name it, they're all here.

MS: But what can he tell me about advertising in the paper and the alternative universe it can be a gateway to for some of its readers? Because it's not just wizards and magic. Ian is even willing to call for the execution of journalists, politicians and others if they are complicit in these sinister plots. Do you think people here should be hanged?

IM: If it's to be found that people are guilty of crimes against humanity, then yes.

MS: I'm Marianna Spring, the BBC's Disinformation and Social Media Correspondent, and in this podcast series I'm venturing into Conspiracyland, a reality that gets curiouser and curiouser. I'm investigating the conspiracy theory media here in Britain and the radicalisation that appears to come with it. Its followers hold a range of different beliefs, which many would never act on. But there are others whose views seem to be becoming more radical. At the extreme end, we've seen conspiracy theory-driven riots at the US Capitol and a coup attempt foiled in Germany. But what's happening in the UK? I have plenty of time to look about and

wonder what is going to happen next? For BBC Radio 4, this is *Marianna in Conspiracyland*.

IM: Hi. My name's Ian McNaught. I'm a property developer. I'm currently renovating some barns down in Somerset, near Glastonbury, to turn into a retreat.

MS: I grabbed the opportunity to speak to Ian, even if it is on a crackly phone line from his kitchen in Glastonbury. Some other advertisers have dropped out last minute after agreeing to do an interview. Others wouldn't speak to me at all. Ian gives me an insight into the world he's created in this southwestern town.

IM: We're not going to run the retreats. We're more looking for people like yoga instructors and various other healthy alternatives, lifestyle things to do retreats here, really. We've got yurts, tepees as well, so we just supply all of the infrastructure, and they do their own thing. We're working mainly on the gardens at the moment. We've just planted 50 different fruit trees and 30 different types of berry.

MS: Very nice. What's your favourite thing you've planted?

IM: Ooh, a Japanese weeping cherry blossom.

MS: Ian travelled the world. He tells me he's visited Myanmar, Sierra Leone and Peru. But now he's making roots in this quirky town, and it's not hard to notice the parallels between here and a certain place in Devon that listeners of this podcast will be very well accustomed to. Tell me a little bit about Glastonbury. What's it been like living there?

IM: It's an eye-opener. It's a unique place. You've got every type of alternative person and the opposites to it as well. You've got all the alternative health people, the alternative people into the crystals, and the alternative healing. You've got goddesses here. You've got wizards You name it, they're all there.

MS: Wow. What do the goddesses and wizards get up to?

IM: *(laughs)* You don't want to know what they get up to.

MS: Ian seems really open to answering my questions. It's not always easy talking to people because they don't like the BBC very much and their trust in it has really gone. Do you ever worry that sometimes – and I notice this – that there can be people within the movement, you know, people who read *The Light*, for example, who are more likely to be, I don't know, a bit more combative or a bit more hateful in the kind of the way they talk to people like me?

IM: Some people do have that reaction, because they're feeling a little bit persecuted. If you are an un-vaxxed person, you had huge amounts of persecution for two years. It puts people's backs up and it makes people wary.

MS: Before COVID-19. Ian was a Conservative voter, but during the pandemic lockdowns, he turned away from mainstream political parties and traditional media towards YouTubers and independent publications. This included *The Light*, a paper he's so committed to that he's advertised his business in it. Why did you decide to advertise in the paper?

IM: Well, I met some people who have a drop-in centre in town, and they distribute the magazine. And they seem to have a really nice ethos about what they got up to. So yeah, I just started reading *The Light* and, as I say, it appeals to alternative thinkers and the like, and that's the sort of people we're trying to attract.

MS: When it comes to *The Light* and the advertising, yeah, how do you go about putting an advert in the paper? How does it work?

IM: You phone them up and they're a really nice lot of people, actually. They make it very easy. You send off your proof and they do it for you. I've communicated with the editor a couple of times. As I say, they're very nice people, I've communicated with the lady there a few times. They're only a small outfit, as far as I'm aware.

MS: Ian says he paid just over £200 for three months of advertising. And I've heard from others that the larger, more prominent spaces for adverts in the paper cost several hundred. *The Light* was the ideal place for Ian to target the specific

audience he's interested in attracting to his cottages. This is perhaps revealing about how *The Light's* content has succeeded in speaking to some parts of the wellness community. Featuring articles like 'How to Detox Naturally', 'Pioneers of Frequency Medicine, and 'The Health Benefits of Magnesium.'

IM: And we've actually had quite a good response. You know, we've got quite a good lot of leads from it, and we've also had some bookings from it as well, which is nice.

MS: Do you worry that that's some of what could be in the paper, could be misleading or wrong? You know, how do you know what to trust in the paper and what you still kind of want more answers about?

IM: I think they do have a lot of integrity, that's someone does sort of shine through with them. Regarding the truth of the articles, I think that they're generally . . . they're well written and they're well-considered. It's just sometimes it can be they're just coming from the other side of the argument, which can make it look odd sometimes.

MS: In Ian's view, some of the articles are trying so hard to challenge what they call 'the mainstream narrative', they can shock people. He doesn't agree with everything and everyone the paper promotes. But Ian does explain his reasons for trusting some of its content over a reporter like me.

IM: The BBC – and I don't mean you personally – has a conflict of interest in that you receive money from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and they're the people that need investigating. Do you feel there is a conflict? Or you don't, do you?

MS: So I get asked about that quite a lot, actually. And, you know, the BBC is *huge* and there are lots of different bits of the BBC. And so the money from that Foundation actually goes to a different part of the BBC that's not BBC News. It's called BBC Media Action. And it's almost like a sort of charity arm of the BBC. So, I mean, I can only talk about my reporting and my journalism, but that doesn't pay for me. It doesn't pay for any of the work I do. And it's certainly never been anything

that's kind of come into conversation or consideration when I've been reporting on stuff.

IM: That is good to hear.

MS: I get the sense that maybe there's a part of Ian that could have his faith in traditional media restored, and it's a reminder of the real concerns and questions that erode that faith in the first place. Is there a way for people to feel like their frustrations are being listened to, that they are being accepted within society, that they're being listened to and understood? What do you think is the best solution here?

IM: Transparency. For the BBC to get back to how people viewed them in the 1950s, 60s and 70s, they've come out ahead of the curve on this, because if they don't, they're going to never, ever, regain the trust of the people worldwide.

MS: What would that look like, kind of regaining that trust?

IM: I think it's taking the difficult questions that are out there and actually debating them.

MS: Ian's interest in *The Light* began with concerns about pandemic restrictions, but he also thinks the vaccine may have been part of a sinister plot to purposefully harm people. And since then, some of the rhetoric associated with the paper and the wider conspiracy theory movement has become more extreme. Ian brings up a concept I've seen in the pages of *The Light*, its Telegram channel and also more widely on social media. It's the idea people should be tried for crimes against humanity over the pandemic, sometimes referred to as Nuremberg 2.0.

IM: I know that a lot of people would like to see justice. You have to have a full investigation. And then if you have the investigation and you have the criminal trials, and you try these people if they committed these crimes, and if they're found guilty, then they face the punishment for a crime against humanity, which is well known.

MS: In the 1945 Nuremberg trials, members of the Nazi Party were held accountable for their actions during the Second World War. After those trials, several people were executed by hanging. Who do you think are guilty of crimes against humanity? Doctors or journalists or politicians or . . . ?

IM: It's whoever decided to issue an untested – it had no animal testing, it had no clinical trials – and not only that, it was a new type of drug. So it was an experimental drug. And they released that to the population, and then for some unknown reason, they then turned round and said, 'You can mix this one with that one, and that one with this one,' on experimental drugs. No one knows what goes on. You're asking for a nightmare.

MS: Do you think people here should be hanged?

IM: If it's to be found that people are guilty of crimes against humanity, then yes.

MS: I think some people would be quite surprised to hear that.

IM: Why?

MS: I don't know, we don't really hang people anymore.

IM: Yeah, but if people have gone round and killed – this is what is alleged, depending on who you're listening to – if they've, alleged, killed and maimed hundreds of thousands of people, surely that's a crime against humanity, that's not something we can tolerate to have those sort of people living in society, surely?

MS: Ian tells me that in general he isn't a supporter of capital punishment, but he says it would be justified if those sinister plots to harm people with the vaccine had really happened. He fears that without it there would be mass uprising and violence. Various claims he makes about the COVID-19 vaccines just aren't true, and it's those claims being used to justify this kind of punishment. I've been targeted with messages calling for me to be tried at Nuremberg 2.0, or to be punished violently somehow because of my reporting. There's a big difference between supporting these ideas and actually acting on them in any way. And not everyone who is a part

of this movement would support them. I want to know whether any of this rhetoric has resulted in real physical action. And when I've been investigating the wider conspiracy theory movement online, I've come across some videos of journalists being attacked in Germany. Germany has its own conspiracy theory newspaper, which we believe is linked to *The Light* in the UK. So I want to talk to people over there to find out more about the risks posed by the movement here. What would be your advice for the UK?

JORG: Take it seriously. Organise demonstrations, and try to give them less space, what they are doing. It's not journalism, it's more or less extremism.

MS: That's next time on BBC Radio 4's *Marianna in Conspiracyland*.

Episode 6 – German Conspiracyland

MS: I've come to Berlin to meet journalist Jorg, who's been covering the conspiracy theory movement in Germany.

J: What happened is, I saw a big rally behind me and then a group of people saw me and attacked me immediately. I'm falling down, and they tried to steal my mobile and they hit me on the . . . on the chest.

MS: He's been attacked several times by protesters, some of whom he says seem to be linked to the movement here. And he's not the only one. Jorg says he's heard from other journalists who've experienced similar. The latest figures from Germany show attacks against journalists have risen sharply since the pandemic. When investigating *The Light* conspiracy theory newspaper in the UK, I noticed it describes a German publication called *Democratic Resistance*. Jorg says the German paper plays a key part in the movement over here and accuses it of contributing to aggression directed at journalists.

J: It is a threat today, especially for democracy and freedom of press and they want to change, more or less, the political system.

MS: So what can Germany tell us about what might happen in the UK? I'm Marianna Spring, the BBC's Disinformation and Social Media Correspondent. And in this podcast series I'm venturing into Conspiracyland, a reality that gets curiouser and curiouser. I'm investigating the conspiracy theory media here in Britain and the radicalisation that appears to come with it. Its followers hold a range of different beliefs, which many would never act on. But there are others whose views seem to be becoming more radical. At the extreme end, we've seen conspiracy theory driven riots at the US Capitol and a coup attempt foiled in Germany. But what's happening in the UK? I have plenty of time to look about and wonder, what is going to happen next? For BBC Radio 4, this is *Marianna in Conspiracyland*. I arrive at a building on the bank of the river in Berlin to meet Jorg, who's squeezing us in between meetings. He's the managing director of a big union here in the country.

J: We take care of the working conditions for journalists, and in general, the freedom of the press.

MS: In his job, he's watched up close how the conspiracy movement has evolved in Germany. It's a movement that shares many of the hallmarks of the UK's. It intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic and has transcended traditional political divisions of left and right. Jorg tells me that the movement has reduced in terms of numbers since restrictions were lifted. Rallies that were once attended by thousands are now attended by more like dozens of people. But those who remain are very motivated and they are changing their focus.

J: They are more or less pro-Putin activists today. They want to change the democracy's values. They want to change, more or less, the political system. We will see what happens in the next year, in the next two years. If (*sic*, 'Will') this kind of movement change into a terror organisation? I don't think so. So the main problem is disinformation.

MS: The conspiracy theory newspaper in Germany called *Demokratischer Widerstand* – Democratic Resistance, and their Telegram channel share conspiracy theories and hateful rhetoric, some similar to *The Light* paper in the UK. Could you just describe to someone who doesn't speak German or who's never read the paper . . .

J: Yeah.

MS: . . . what is in the paper? What is it like to read?

J: So the newspaper is not working on the level as other newspaper. So in Germany we have a not so nice word for this. We say to this kind of newspaper, Käseblut and the meaning is, it's paper where you can wrap your cheese or your fish or whatever. So as a journalist's union, we say these newspapers and editors are not working on the level, as other editors. They spread disinformation. They slur politicians and other journalist colleagues.

MS: Darren, the editor of *The Light* in the UK, told me he speaks to the publication and its editor Anselm Lenz two or three times a year, and he's published content endorsing the publication. The German paper refers to *The Light* as its 'partner paper', and to its 'colleagues' at the publication, describing how they're internationally connected. I've tried repeatedly to speak to Anselm, but I've had no luck so far. There are some clues about him online. He lives in Berlin and the paper seems to be an important part of his life. So what motivates him? You describe him as right wing now, but he, I think he would describe himself as left wing, or maybe no wing?

J: Yeah, the left wing movement is on the way to the right wing side. So he's one of these guys.

MS: Jorg suggests that Anselm's political journey, as he sees it, from the left to the right, is part of a larger trend within the movement in Germany. And he also says the rallies associated with it have become more hostile, to journalists in particular. Official figures show that Germany has seen a big jump in physical attacks against journalists since the pandemic, reaching a record of 320 in 2022. Many of those attacks happened while journalists were covering demonstrations linked to extremist groups, and more than 60 reportedly happened at anti-lockdown and conspiracy-related protests.

J: I stand at a lot of demonstrations till today, and to see the aggression and the frustration of them, it's really a problem. And you'll find a lot of people in Germany who are thinking on the same way.

MS: Jorg says this intimidation has included groups from the broader movement, posting maps online, highlighting where media buildings are when rallies are on.

J: They've said, 'Okay, there is the editor's room. There's the newspaper.' And it was a big threat for the media houses because it's more or less, they explained, 'Okay, you can go to them.' We have a lot of colleagues who have tried to protect their private life. They have to take care of their names. They cannot go on digital public like other persons. They cannot put their private life on Instagram like other

persons. They have to secure their address that nobody can know where they are living.

MS: I tell Jorg about how in the UK some members of this movement call for journalists to be tried for war crimes over their involvement in these alleged sinister plots. He's noticed this rhetoric associated with the German paper and movement, too. Tell me about when you were attacked two years ago. What exactly happened?

J: So there was a big rally in Berlin, and I have a lot of come together with other journalists. And I was on the way to the centre of Berlin, together with another journalist. And what happened is, I saw a big rally behind me. Then a group of people saw me and attacked me immediately.

MS: How did they attack you?

J: They tried to stop me as I'm riding on the bicycle, and they tried to stop me once. And it was the second time I'm falling down and they tried to steal my mobile and they hit me on the chest.

MS: Was that scary?

J: Yeah, it's a problem. But every victim of violence has his own history. And I have these kind of attacks on a lower level, four weeks ago, more or less, and I was attacked on a left wing, radical left wing demonstration.

MS: Jorg says he and his colleagues have experienced aggression while covering demonstrations organised by both radical left-wing groups, as well as those on the right. One incident he describes to me involves another journalist who attended a rally linked to the Democratic Resistance conspiracy theory newspaper. She alleges she was hit by someone at that rally, and I've seen the video of that attack. Jorg says the profile of protesters has changed. Older people seem to be increasingly inspired by disinformation.

J: We have a long culture of violence on demonstration. The new thing is that these more or less elderly people, 50 plus, from the middle class, are going in the

street and fighting against the political system, fighting against the press. And that's a new thing. And they cross the border to attack the police and to attack journalists.

MS: I'm interested in something else, too. In December 2022, there was an attempted coup by a group called the Reichsbürger. They believe the current state in Germany is illegitimate and want to return to the Second Reich. This was the old German empire from 1871 until 1918, when Germany changed from a monarchy to a republic. On social media, this Reichsbürger group seem to be a part of the wider conspiracy theory movement that boomed during the pandemic in Germany. How is the Reichsbürger movement linked to the Coronavirus anti-lockdown movement, the one we're talking about? Is it a part of it?

J: Yes, they were a part of it. And nowadays, 2023, they're going on their own rallies, sometimes they are gathering together, but not so much as 2020, 2001, 2002 (*sic, means 2021, 2022?*) But the Reichsbürger was one of these movements are found together with left wings, with right wing extremists. But it was a wide mixture of extremists in one rally.

MS: Germany has its own conspiracy theory newspaper, which we believe is linked to *The Light* in the UK. So I want to talk to people over there to find out more about the risks posed by the movement here. What would be your advice to the UK?

J: Take it seriously. Organise demonstrations and try to give them less space (*omits 'in'?*) what they are doing. So it's a danger, especially for the conspiracy theories and all these things. It's not journalism, it's more or less extremism.

MS: I've just left the union building and I've headed into a square in the centre of Berlin, and I'm reflecting on that conversation I had with Jorg, because I think sometimes it takes stepping outside of this Conspiracyland I've been exploring to really understand the risk that it poses. And I'm a journalist who receives a lot of online abuse from these kinds of activists. But what you're Jorg was describing, you know, is physical attacks, a real increase in hostility that's very, very scary. And I think there's a lot we can learn in the UK from the movement and paper here about our own paper and movement. I do just want more answers. I've received a message

from someone called Marcus, who seems to suggest that, having written for the paper here in Germany, he no longer wants to be a part of it. And I'm going to meet him and see what he has to say.

MARCUS: I cannot give my name for that newspaper anymore. You cannot ask the question, 'Is it okay to get a death penalty for those who made these COVID measures?' What are you doing?

MS: That's next time on Radio 4's *Marianna in Conspiracyland*.

Episode 7 – After an Attempted Coup

MARCUS: You cannot ask the question, 'Is it okay to get a death penalty for those who made these COVID measures?' What are you doing? I cannot give my name for that newspaper anymore.

MS: This is Marcus. He's talking about a conspiracy theory newspaper in Berlin, one that we know *The Light* paper in the UK is in contact with. Marcus used to be a columnist at the German paper called *Democratic Resistance*. Now, he's contacted me because he's worried about the direction the paper and its editor are taking. Do you think he is an extremist?

M: His wording is, at the moment, the wording of an extremist, yes.

MS: And how would you define an extremist?

M: Everyone who brings people in a position where they at least could think about getting violent.

MS: But Marcus's opposition is not straightforward. There are some aspects of the wider conspiracy theory movement that Marcus still wants to defend.

M: The problem is I don't like this term 'conspiracy theory' because it's psychological warfare, and that's my problem with big parts of mainstream media. You have the one story, and I have to raise my voice against this.

MS: So what can insiders tell me about the German movement, the paper there, and how this all links to the UK? I'm Marianna Spring, the BBC's Disinformation and Social Media Correspondent. And in this podcast series I'm venturing into Conspiracyland, a reality that gets curiouser and curiouser. I'm investigating the conspiracy theory media here in Britain and the radicalisation that appears to come with it. Its followers hold a range of different beliefs, which many would never act on. But there are others whose views seem to be becoming more radical. At the extreme end, we've seen conspiracy theory driven riots at the US Capitol and a coup

attempt foiled in Germany. But what's happening in the UK? I have plenty of time to look about and wonder, what is going to happen next? For BBC Radio 4, this is *Marianna in Conspiracyland*.

MS: I meet Marcus in a radio and music studio in downtown Berlin. He's dressed smartly in a light blue shirt. A lawyer and now an activist, he was energised by the issues thrown up during the pandemic, opposing the then possible introduction of mandatory vaccinations and lockdown restrictions. Have you always been someone that stands up for things, that raises your voice?

M: In the school, I did this. I did not like to do hold speeches or something like that, I hated it. I really, really hated it, yeah? But I was always someone who spoke out his mind.

MS: So Marcus began to attend Anti-lockdown rallies, first across Germany and then in Spain, Italy, Austria, and Belgium. It was a summer's day in 2020 when he met the editor of the Conspiracy Theory newspaper that had started in Germany.

M: Yeah, I met Anselm Lenz who is the face of this paper in July 4th, in Ulm, on a big protest.

MS: The paper is called *Demokratischer Widerstand* – the Democratic Resistance.

M: We did an interview on the stage and at that time it was, I think, a good newspaper. The language was loud and clear, but it was not radical or extremist or something like that. So, six months later, in January 2021, I started the column there.

MS: Marcus's weekly column for the German paper mainly criticised lockdown measures and vaccine policy. The paper, like *The Light*, has a mixture of articles, some mundane, but others featuring disinformation and conspiracy theories. Who were the other people working there? Were they like you? Like lawyers, doctors? What kinds of people have been writing for the paper?

M: Yeah, several lawyers, some professors, journalists, also good journalists, not people who are doing this for half a year, doing this for 20, 40 years, yeah?

Professionals. And activists, and a lot of people from the movement, yeah? Some were really good name in the public. (*sic*)

MS: On Telegram, the German paper refers to *The Light* as its 'partner paper' and talks about its 'colleagues' at the publication. Everything seems to inhabit the same universe. Marcus tells me how these conspiracy theory papers connect from the UK to Germany.

M: That's normal. You're doing it as the same job. And if you have a newspaper in Great Britain and you have one in Germany, then normally at one time you see each other and you talk to each other. Yeah.

MS: It was in the autumn of 2022, roughly 18 months after he'd started writing for the paper, that Marcus said things began to change. Even though many of the lockdown restrictions had been lifted by then, Marcus says the paper and the Telegram channel it runs began to ramp up its messaging.

M: The newspaper went more radical, and there were some posts in the Telegram channel, and after several posts where I said, 'Okay, it is not good, you cannot ask the question, is it okay to beat people wearing masks?' And later is, 'Is it okay to get a death penalty for those who made these COVID measures,' or what are you doing? Yeah?

MS: Marcus decided he didn't want to write for the paper anymore, and he couldn't understand why others didn't take more of a stand, too.

M: For me, the biggest problem is that the people who write in this newspaper do not say anything about it. I don't understand it.

MS: So they won't disavow it?

M: Yeah. Some of them should say, 'Okay, I'm a lawyer, I'm a doctor, I'm a journalist, I'm a professor. I cannot give my name for that newspaper anymore.' You cannot say, 'Okay, on Twitter I'm nice, and on Telegram, I say, "Kill them all".' this

doesn't work. And then you have to say, 'Okay, stop. I won't give my name for that newspaper.'

MS: Just before Marcus stopped writing for the paper, he noticed the violent rhetoric was accompanied by something else too – a flag of the Second Reich

M: *Demokratischer Widerstand* – the Democratic Resistance – has an email newsletter, I think, with 45,000 people. They posted a black, white, red flag, which is the flag of the second German Reich from 1871 till 1918. So it has nothing to do with the Third Reich and Adolf Hitler, but the so-called Reichsbürger. They use this a lot. And then I said, 'What are you doing? Why? Why do you banging for this framing of the mainstream media?'

MS: Marcus was unsure why the paper decided to feature the flag on its newsletter. As he says, it's one associated with that Reichsbürger group. They think the current German state is illegitimate. Marcus and another whistleblower I've spoken to suggest there's a link between the Democratic Resistance paper and the Reichsbürger. According to them, writers from the paper and one of its key donors met with members of the group. Some of the members of the Reichsbürger that they met were later arrested and charged over an alleged coup attempt in the country in December 2022.

NEWSREADER: 25 people have been arrested in Germany on suspicion of being involved in a plot to overthrow the government. 3,000 police were involved in raids on several properties right across the country.

MS: At the time, its members said they were prepared to kill to install a new leader in Germany, and prosecutors said the group was extremely dangerous. And it doesn't stop there. Multiple sources have also told me how the paper promotes far right groups, posting about them on Telegram and attending rallies together. That includes right wing group Freie Saxon, and the chairperson of the National Democratic Party of Germany, described as a far-right neo-Nazi political party. What does Marcus think motivates the paper's editor?

M: In his younger years, he was also left wing, I think also a Marxist. And Anselm tried try to this (*unclear, German word*) together, which means the left wings and the right wings going together against the middle, like we had in Germany in the 1920s and 1930s, the early 1930s.

MS: Do you think he is an extremist?

M: His wording is, at the moment, the wording of an extremist, yes.

MS: And how would you define an extremist?

M: Everyone who brings people in a position where they at least could think about getting violent.

MS: Marcus is convinced that the risk of harm offline from this motivated minority is low and that the coup attempt would never have worked. But the other whistleblower I've spoken to, who stopped writing for the paper back in 2021, is more concerned about a one-off act of violence. He says the paper is creating an atmosphere that is hateful and divided. He fears someone who is emotionally or psychologically unstable could be triggered to do something terrible. I asked Marcus about the alleged attacks on journalists that I've heard about. I've spoken to some people who attended a rally in March time here in Berlin, and who experienced – they were journalists from the media – who experienced hostility and some physical violence, too, from the protesters, who were linked to the paper. This was very recently. What do you think about that?

M: Unfortunately, there is a lot of . . . I'm not sure if 'a lot of', but there is some hatred against the mainstream media. It's not good to attack journalists. It's not good to attack the other side.

MS: He's exhausted by the idea they need to be tried and punished for supposed crimes against humanity.

M: This whole Nuremberg 2.0 bullshit – sorry for saying this loud and clear – I cannot hear it anymore. And I met with a lot of people from all over the world, in the

United States and New Zealand and Australia, it's very normal for part of the movement to . . . to say this, 'We need Nuremberg 2.0', and I say, 'Look, guys, no, you don't know what this means. You cannot compare this.'

MS: But while he is denouncing the paper, Marcus is still somewhat part of the wider conspiracy theory movement. He also runs his own Telegram channel, and his world view is clear when I'm talking to him. Do you think that in the movement now there has been a muddling of legitimate concerns or questions or fears that people have with, then, more extreme conspiracy theories or disinformation?

M: For sure, they have used real concerns about climate change or manmade climate change, about 9/11, about whatever. Yeah? And 20 years later, at some times the conspiracy theories are true, like Iraq war. They were no weapons of mass destruction, if we would have this interview, 2005, then I would be a conspiracy theorist, and 20 years later, yes, the people were right. So George Bush used this to make a war, yeah, which killed a lot of . . . a lot of people – and that's my problem with big parts of mainstream media. You have the one story. So you try to frame people. If somebody has another opinion, it's very easy to say, 'It's a conspiracy theory.' Our Western society is always good, and the others are always bad. No. I think the truth is something in the middle. But the problem is, I don't like this term 'conspiracy theory' because it's psychological warfare and it does not help.

MS: Because he's still on the inside and connected to various key people. There's more he can tell me. Marcus says Kremlin-linked figures in Russia have offered money to members of the wider conspiracy theory movement in Germany so that they continue to push divisive and pro-Russian disinformation. The people who have become more extreme or hateful or . . . you know, what's the solution? Is there a way of bringing them back, so that's not how they approach this?

M: Some people you won't bring back, but as long as they don't get violent, they play not a big role. The solution has to be bringing ordinary people to a point where they can speak to each other. We're living in a society where normally only people speak to each other with the same opinion, and that's a problem.

MS: I tried to reach out to the paper's editor and Anselm Lenz and to do an interview with him, but he refused. In his email response, he said I was a highly paid NATO and BBC propagandist and said I was a threat to him and his family. He also accused me of, 'slander of our friends of the great English Democratic Movement'. Marcus was willing to go further than others I've spoken to in disavowing violent rhetoric associated with a paper like this one, and suggesting you can't claim to be peaceful unless you denounce it. So what does all of this tell us about the UK? I'm turning to someone who is a bit of an obsessive about *The Light* paper for answers.

DR ROD DACOMBE: Conspiracy theories are appealing in the sense that there is someone to blame and identify, not just general vague people, but specific people who are to blame for what's going on.

MS: And that's on the next episode of Radio 4's *Marianna in Conspiracyland*.

Episode 8 – The Science of Conspiracy

MS: Hello. Hi. Nice to meet you.

RD: Hi, nice to meet you too.

MS: I'm in the centre of London meeting someone who is perhaps even more intrigued by *The Light* than me. His name is Dr Rod Dacombe and I meet him at the campus of King's College. He's a political scientist, and as he shows me around the grounds, it's clear he's a man with tons of enthusiasm.

RD: . . . like so many cool things. We have our own abandoned tube station.

MS: That is so cool!

RD: It used to be a shooting range down there on the platform. My favourite place to teach is the Anatomy Theatre. It's on, like, the seventh floor of that building.

MS: Oh my god!

RD: And there's a dumbwaiter that goes down to the basement.

MS: That enthusiasm doesn't just apply to historical quirks, but one of his primary research interests: conspiracy theories and their impact on democracy. An interest that led him to a certain conspiracy theory newspaper. How many hours do you think you've spent looking at copies of *The Light*?

RD: Far more than is healthy, I have to say.

MS: Rod and his colleagues at King's College conducted a survey for the BBC looking at consumption of alternative media like *The Light*, conspiracy beliefs, and views about action offline. What it uncovers about this Conspiracyland I've been navigating might shock you. I'm Marianna Spring, the BBC's Disinformation and Social Media Correspondent. And in this podcast series I'm venturing into Conspiracyland, a reality that gets curiouser and curiouser. I'm investigating the conspiracy theory media here in Britain and the radicalisation that appears to come

with it. Its followers hold a range of different beliefs, which many would never act on. But there are others whose views seem to be becoming more radical. At the extreme end, we've seen conspiracy theory driven riots at the US Capitol and a coup attempt foiled in Germany. But what's happening in the UK? I have plenty of time to look about and wonder, what is going to happen next? For BBC Radio 4, this is *Marianna in Conspiracyland*.

RD: I'm Rod Dacombe, I'm a reader in politics at King's College, London. I'm a researcher of democracy. And so I'm somebody who works particularly on the benefits of engaging in democracy. So I teach a course on conspiracy theories and democracy. And I really should have called it something less interesting, because I have like 150 students taking it and they're all really, really into it, and they're so lovely.

MS: I'm sitting across from Rod in a room that's a makeshift library. He wasn't always this immersed in Conspiracyland. Rod's research focus has long been democracy, but like so many of the people I've met, COVID-19 changed things.

RD: In my career, I've argued that democracy works better when people get involved, when they get information, when they form associations where they go along to marches and protests and mobilise themselves. And then around the time of the pandemic, I noticed that there were a group of people who were doing exactly this. Right? So this nascent conspiracy theory movement – mobilising against lockdown, against the vaccines and so on – were forming associations, they were getting information, they were mobilising themselves and going to protests. And I found myself saying, 'Well, these are all the things that I want, but not like that.'

MS: When did you first come across *The Light*?

RD: So this movement began relatively quickly. Pretty soon after the first lockdown started. And pretty early on, *The Light* seemed to be shared and talked about by people who were kind of deeply involved in the movement. So it's been there throughout. It's been one of the, kind of, the consistent factors in the movement, I would say.

MS: For Rod, there was a shift happening in the conspiracy theory movement, and in 2021 he wrote a paper about how *The Light* in particular was key to that. To understand that change, I'm reminded of something that Darren, the editor of *The Light*, said to me. He spoke about having been 're-educated', and Rod sees this proactive involvement and doing your own research as key to the movement now. Belief in conspiracy theory is nothing new. People have believed conspiracy theories for decades, for centuries. What makes this different? Is it different?

RD: Conspiracy theories are appealing in the sense that there is someone to blame and identify.

MS: Yeah.

RD: Not just general vague people, but specific people who are to blame for what's going on. I think what we're seeing isn't a growth in conspiracism. What I think we're seeing, though, is a qualitative difference in the kinds of conspiracy theories that people engage in. So it's less about giving information, it's more about asking you to engage, asking you to participate. I think the mechanisms through which that works is really interesting, but the outcomes are really important too, because they really do pull you in, down the rabbit hole, essentially, very quickly and very effectively. And one of the interesting things about *The Light* is that at the end of a lot of the articles, there were some, 'Hey, here are some sources for you to look up,' and, 'Hey, go find out for yourself.' Right? And invariably, they are sources that promote the conspiracy theory or give evidence to say that it's factual. I had a look through some of the early issues, and they have puzzles inside, usually towards the end of an issue, and they're kind of cross between a word search and a crossword. So I tried doing the puzzle and it was really difficult. It was really hard to do, because they were asking me a lot of things that I didn't really understand or hadn't really come across before. And so I Googled it and looked it up and kind of filled it out. And it was kind of cool, I was, like, beginning to complete it. And then I was like, 'Oh, that's really clever,' because what it actually made me do is go and research it, look it up, and it's a really interesting way, I think, of kind of pulling people in. And a lot of the kind of conspiracy theories that are promoted by people involved in the

Freedom Movement do something very similar, which is, 'You go and find out. You go through that process of revelation.' And that's a much more powerful, much, stickier way of bringing people into the movement.

MS: The conspiracy theory movement has some of the hallmarks of political activism. The difference is it's often based on disinformation, and *The Light* seems to be sceptical of the democratic process. In one piece, the editor says, 'Democracy in the UK is dead.' In another, a writer suggests that casting a vote 'waters the roots of evil,' that engaging in democracy is pointless and actually bad. What do you think about the attitude towards democracy in the paper and the possible impact that that could have?

RD: *The Light* does a lot of different things when it comes to politics and democracy in particular. So it has, in the past, promoted alternative political parties outside of the mainstream, with very little success, it should be said, electorally. One of the reasons that democracy works well as a political system, one of the reasons why it's continued over the last kind of hundred years or so, at least, to be widely accepted by almost everybody, is that it delivers results that you can believe in and you can trust in. So you have to have confidence that the vote that you cast in the last election actually was counted, and the result that came out was a fair amalgamation of everybody's votes. If you don't have that trust, if you don't have that confidence, you don't have confidence in democracy at all. And if enough people end up not believing in the integrity of voting and the integrity of democratic processes, then democracy cannot function.

MS: What does it want instead of that?

RD: Most often there isn't an alternative put across. Usually it is enough to rail against the system, to say that politics has been captured by elites and captured by some sort of shadowy figures. And that's enough just to leave it there, right? So yeah, there's not so much in terms of direct alternatives. But really, that's what conspiracy theories are all about, right? It's not about saying, 'Here's what I want,' it's about saying, 'Here's what's wrong, and I've diagnosed that problem.'

MS: On the extreme end we do know that attempts to undermine democracy can result in action. Think back to those scenes on 6th of January 2021, when more than 2,000 Trump supporters, some of whom believed the US election was rigged, stormed the Capitol, a government building. And that coup attempt in Germany too, which was motivated by a belief that the current state in Germany is illegitimate and was tied to the conspiracy theory movement there. What's happening in the UK? Could this kind of action ever happen here or not? There are some clues in the research that King's carried out, surveying over 2,000 people on their attitudes about conspiracy theories and the alternative media – that's media sources that differ from established types of media, like the BBC.

RD: We've done a nationally representative survey looking at conspiracy beliefs, so asking people about a range of different conspiracy theories that have emerged over the last couple of years that they might believe or not. We've looked also, though, at the kind of the alternative media landscape that goes alongside that. So we've questioned people's use of different kinds of media, whether they use mainstream media – so newspapers, television and so on. In terms of engagement with *The Light*, I think there was 14% of the people that we spoke to had heard of it. So of those, 62% of that 14% had actually read a copy. 40% were subscribers, so regularly had it delivered to them, and 51% helped distribute it. We found some really interesting things about the ways in which where you get your information from connects with the kinds of things that you believe and the ways in which use of alternative media in particular can motivate action, can be connected to the likelihood of you attending a protest, or to engaging in these kinds of activities, the things you're talking about, right? So if you got most of your news from alternative media, generally around 60% of those people thought that violent action at protests were justified. There is, built within these theories, demands, you know, inherent demands to do something, to take direct action. And that is in the process. And we shouldn't get away from this – occasional moves into either violence or some sort of violent direct action. Not everybody who goes to a protest is going to be brought in by this, in fact, most people won't, right? But some people will.

MS: To some extent that did shock me quite a lot. When I interview people who are part of this movement, when I've spoken to the editor of *The Light* paper, for example, or other people, they're very keen to emphasise to me that they are not about violence and that it's not about violence. It only takes one person to decide that they'd like to be involved and to take direct action for something bad to happen. Rod has noticed the increasing presence of individuals linked to far-right groups like Patriotic Alternative at conspiracy theory related rallies, some who attend these rallies will not agree or endorse their views at all. But Rod is concerned that others could.

RD: These explicit, extreme right ideas weren't present in an obvious sense in the early stages of the protest movement and weren't really present in *The Light*. And, you know, since they started in 2020 – and I've been along to a lot of these protests – what struck me about them is that they didn't really feel like a big, scary conspiracy theory protest at all, at least like 90% of the time. They really don't. They are joyous occasions. These are people who are basically friends, getting together, seeing each other, you know, regularly, talking about things that interest them. And there's an element of kind of anti-establishment orientation that is built into certain aspects of left-wing politics. The alternative health, the alternative medicine movement is there as well. I think the homeschooling movement. There is such a diversity of views there. But recently you've seen extreme right figures turn up at protests. You've seen them engage in the movement. And I suppose in some senses that's logical, right? Because this is a group of people who are willing to accept the kinds of explanation that would appeal to far-right figures. It's a movement that's continued, that's relatively popular, I mean, it's quite small, but you do get, you know, you get a few thousand people turn up at some of the rallies. So I can see there's a logical step that if you wanted to recruit people, that would be fertile ground to do it. Now, not everybody at those rallies is going to be brought in by this, right? From what I've seen, most of them aren't. But it would be an obvious place to start.

MS: It turns out it's not just academics like Rod who question the possibility of action offline. The UK's Head of Counter-Terrorism Policing, Matt Jukes, has told the BBC they are currently seeing evidence of conspiracy theories being interwoven with

extremism as part of the wider movement and says this connection is very much on their radar as investigators. 'Our casework is no longer restricted to clear cut terrorist ideologies, and we are seeing an increase in mixed, unclear and unstable mindsets in our investigations', he explains. It seems to me that it's the very small minority, deepest down the rabbit hole who we have to worry about most. That's not very many people, but it does only take one. So maybe the most important thing is escaping the rabbit hole before it's too late. Is there a way out?

TOBY: Over the last four years or so with my brother, he started with talking about the Flat-earth theory. He became closed off to the usual things he enjoyed doing, like watching and playing football, going to the gym, being around for family events, even just watching a film together.

MS: That's next time on BBC Radio Four's *Marianna in Conspiracyland*.

Episode 9 – People Like Us

MS: Do you know someone who fell down the rabbit hole? Maybe they remind you of some of the people I've spoken to from Totnes or Glastonbury. Or they share some of the beliefs promoted by the editor of *The Light*, the conspiracy theory newspaper. Over the course of this investigation, I've received dozens of messages from people worried about their loved ones.

ANNA: I've known my close friend for over a decade now, during the pandemic, I didn't see her at all . . .

TOBY: Over the last four years ago with my brother, and it started with talking about the flat-earth theory, at first, we laughed it off . . .

A: We met up for a coffee and I was shocked to hear that she believed that the vapour trails left by aeroplanes were chemtrails, that vaccines do cause autism . . .

T: . . . always angry now. Every single topic that we try to talk about was brought back to being a conspiracy or worse yet, evil, he never had any . . .

MS: It seems there's something different about the conspiracy theory movement that boomed during the pandemic that makes it more difficult to escape from, with people pushed towards ideologies they just wouldn't have entertained before. So is there a way out? I'm Marianna Spring, the BBC's Disinformation and Social Media Correspondent. And in this podcast series I'm venturing into Conspiracyland, a reality that gets curiouser and curiouser. I'm investigating the conspiracy theory media here in Britain and the radicalisation that appears to come with it. Its followers hold a range of different beliefs, which many would never act on. But there are others whose views seem to be becoming more radical. At the extreme end, we've seen conspiracy theory driven riots at the US Capitol and a coup attempt foiled in Germany. But what's happening in the UK? I have plenty of time to look about and wonder, what is going to happen next? For BBC Radio 4, this is *Marianna in Conspiracyland*. People reach out to me, concerned about their friends and family who've started believing conspiracy theories and relying on disinformation to form

their opinions. As pandemic restrictions disappeared, I thought those messages would peter out, but they haven't. Several who were in touch with me also say the person they know is still turning to conspiracy theory media, like *The Light*. For answers about why they're still falling, I turn to psychologist Karen Douglas.

KD: I'm a professor of social psychology at the University of Kent, and I've been studying the psychology of conspiracy theories for about the last 15 years or so, trying to understand why they appeal to so many people, and also what some of their consequences are for individuals and groups and societies as well.

MS: In this episode, I'll share two of the stories I've heard with you. Their names have been changed to protect their identities. These are people who want to help others in the same situation by speaking out about what's happened to them.

A: I've known my close friend for over a decade now. During the pandemic, I didn't see her at all.

MS: This is Anna and the story of her friend Millie. Millie's descent down the rabbit hole begins like so many others.

A: But it was during the pandemic that her views on vaccines really started to merge with other, less mainstream conspiracy theories. We met up for a coffee, and I was shocked to hear that she believed the vapour trails left by aeroplanes were chemtrails, that vaccines do cause autism, and it was the MMR vaccine that caused her brother's autism. And finally, she thought that maybe it could be the case that there's somebody controlling the global temperature to make it seem like global warming is worse than it is.

MS: What does psychologist Karen think about the way the pandemic compounded some people's existing beliefs?

KD: The pandemic itself was basically the best possible, most fertile ground for conspiracy theories to flourish. So you have a crisis situation. Everybody, pretty much, is affected by this situation we're isolated, we're kind of stuck indoors, we don't have this access to the social connections that we would normally have. People

are very worried and . . . and fearful. So there's a lot of psychological problems happening for people during the pandemic. People were interested in these conspiracy theories as something that was interesting and appealing to people, because they were looking for ways to try to reduce their worry and their fear.

MS: Anna thinks for her friend, it's a lot more about *why* Millie believes what she does, rather than the beliefs themselves.

A: I feel like the root of the issue is more based on a lack of trust in institutions and governments than it is about facts and reality.

MS: It seems to me that once you enter this topsy turvy reality, it can quickly colour your view on a range of issues, even when the entry point was genuine distrust and legitimate concerns. Do you think that once you start to view the world in that way, so you think that everything is part of a plot or being controlled in some way, is there a way out? Or is it much more likely that you will actually just end up subscribing to a whole range of beliefs? You know, once your world view has altered, can you come back from that?

KD: One of the features of this type of thinking that does mean that it's difficult to get out of because these ideas do reinforce one another. And also, when people have particular psychological needs that they're looking to have satisfied – so, for example, if they're feeling anxious and uncertain, they might look to conspiracy theories to try to alleviate those sorts of negative feelings. They worried about things that are happening around them, and so they might look to these conspiracy explanations to try to regain that sense of, basically, trying to feel less anxious and trying to feel a little bit more in control over the things that are happening to them.

MS: I remember something else that Anna said about her friend.

A: I know she's always had some alternative views on medicine.

MS: Things like wellness and alternative medicine seem to be quite popular amongst some of those who also believe in conspiracy theories. But I've also noticed how the political parties they prefer are quite varied. There are people who have

voted Conservative and who are more right leaning. There are people who are kind of more strongly affiliated with far-right figures and groups. And then there are people very much on the left, the kind of wellness community, people who affiliate with left wing or more anti-establishment groups. Does it surprise you that there are people from such a broad political spectrum who believe and engage with them?

KD: That's not surprising to me because there's actually quite a little bit of research now in psychology that suggests that people from more extreme political ideologies are more likely to believe conspiracy theories than people who aren't particularly committed to politics. There was an assumption for quite a long time that conspiracy theories were for people who were right wing, and right wingers believe conspiracy theories, and that's the end of the story. But it's actually not the case. So you find that people on the very extreme left and the very extreme right are the much more likely to believe conspiracy theories.

T: Over the last four years or so with my brother, it started with a sudden interest in religion and talking about the flat earth theory. At first, we laughed it off as a passing phase, like, who hasn't been interested in . . .

MS: This is Toby. His brother is someone else who's gone down the rabbit hole. At first it seemed harmless, but often those initial conspiracy theories can be a gateway into more extreme ideas, and they can start to really consume the person caught up in them.

T: He became closed off to the usual things he enjoyed doing, like watching and playing football, going to the gym, being around for family events, even just watching a film together. He stops consuming any kind of mainstream media, saying there's too much subliminal and evil messaging.

MS: Toby's relationship with his brother became more strained.

T: He's always angry now. Every single topic that we try to talk about was brought back to being a conspiracy or worse yet, evil.

MS: It seems like Toby's brother had found a whole new world to be a part of. How much is this about community, about finding your tribe or a group of people who support you?

KD: Some research does suggest that people are drawn to conspiracy theories when they do feel socially isolated. People who find groups of likeminded individuals online who believe in the same conspiracy theories that they do, there must be some level of, like, some nice feelings of social support. So you've joined a community. These people think the same way as you do. That could have the consequence of further isolating those people from other individuals who don't have the same views that they do, so that once their ideas become stronger, they become more distanced from other people's views. And so those communities can become a little more closed off. We've been doing some recent research on how conspiracy theories affect people's interpersonal relationships, and it seems to paint a very negative picture. If you have someone in your social network who believes in these conspiracy theories, then we have lower relationship satisfaction with these people. Even meeting new people, you don't necessarily want to chat with someone who believes in conspiracy theories, so they do have a negative effect on interpersonal relationships. And in close relationships within a family, it can be really, really terrible.

MS: The deeper someone falls, the nastier disagreements and arguments can become. It can be hard to have a constructive conversation, but that doesn't mean a row is the solution.

KD: People who believe in conspiracy theories tend to sort of see themselves as critical thinkers. They see themselves as being open minded people who are . . . who've seen the light and other people are in the dark. Crucially, they see themselves as people who do the research and do the deep thinking. Hostility and ridicule are something that's just not going to work, because these people feel very, very strongly about what they believe in. And so going in with these sorts of tactics is probably going to be unsuccessful. But for the family members themselves, it's difficult to cope with it, especially if they can't approach this person, they can't talk

to them about critical thinking, and they can't talk to them about where the information is coming from. Sometimes it's just not possible, because this person has just gone so far into the rabbit hole that they're . . . they're struggling to even speak to them.

MS: By this point, you might be thinking the escape from Conspiracyland almost never happens. And it would be fair to say I haven't heard from many who know someone that's made it out. But the only way to achieve the impossible is to believe it is possible. And Toby's message ended with some hope.

T: Now we're starting to see more and more of the old person, pre-conspiracy. I like to think it's because we as a family, like we listened, we argued as rationally as we could, but we never ignored him. We always reminded him he was loved.

MS: This seems like a possible blueprint for getting people out of Conspiracyland.

KD: If people are attracted to conspiracy theories to try to satisfy unmet psychological needs, then surely one way to help them not believe in conspiracy theories would be for them to have these psychological needs satisfied. So how do you make people feel less uncertain about the political climate that they're living in? How do you make them feel safer and more in control? And how do you make them feel more secure and happy in the groups that they belong to and feel that they're appreciated? People need to feel that sense of trust because that's what's missing for a lot of people who believe in conspiracy theories. So talk to them about the source of information. Talk to them about who's telling them this and how trustworthy and how reliable these sources are. I guess to try and get them to think a little bit about what they're saying and what they're sharing and whether or not they should share it.

MS: If you want to reach out about your experience of this or anything else about this podcast and investigation, email me on MariannainConspiracyland@BBC.co.uk. As we near the end of our time in Conspiracyland, I have one more stop to make. Right where we began in Totnes. Ultimately, this is about more than the individuals

immersed in this topsy turvy land laced with hate. It's about communities, democracies, society, and the threat this can pose to all of them.

GEORGE MOMBLOT: I think all the cards are in the air now. So many crazy stories have been spread so far and wide that it's hard to see this ending well.

MS: That's next time on BBC Radio 4's *Marianna in Conspiracyland*.

Episode 10 – A Risk That’s Impossible to Ignore

MS: The final episode in my journey through Conspiracyland. And I’m back where I started in the small Devon town of Totnes. I’m in a cosy, independent cinema cum community space nestled in the high street, and there’s an event on. It’s a screening of a film about climate change. There are activists doing their bit setting up before the film starts. You could say a typical night out in Totnes.

UNNAMED SPEAKER: And so usually we talk about radical power analysis and activism, or we go and hang out with the trees. But this is . . .

MS: I’ve come to meet some more locals here, including a prominent left-wing activist and journalist, George Monbiot. He’s a newcomer to the town, who’s written about conspiracy theories. So I want to get his view on the legacy left by the conspiracy theory newspaper, *The Light* and the wider movement that lingers here and all over the UK.

GEORGE MOMBLOT: I moved to this area a few months ago, mostly for the weather, obviously.

MS: For the rain.

GM: For the rain! Oh my God. Tourist information assured me that it only rains at night.

MS: George is energised by the community spirit of his new hometown, despite the rain, but he also recognises the shadier side I’ve been uncovering.

GM: What Totnes is renowned for is its new age culture. It’s very experimental, which at times has spawned some really interesting developments. But unfortunately, I see more and more people being sucked into that darker side.

MS: I’m Marianna Spring, the BBC’s Disinformation and Social Media Correspondent. And in this podcast series I’m venturing into Conspiracyland, a reality that gets curiouser and curiouser. I’m investigating the conspiracy theory media here

in Britain and the radicalisation that appears to come with it. Its followers hold a range of different beliefs, which many would never act on. But there are others whose views seem to be becoming more radical. At the extreme end, we've seen conspiracy theory driven riots at the US Capitol and a coup attempt foiled in Germany. But what's happening in the UK? I have plenty of time to look about and wonder, what is going to happen next? For BBC Radio 4, this is *Marianna in Conspiracyland*. Totnes has embraced its new celebrity. George is the keynote speaker at this event.

GM: Before I moved, I had a certain amount of trepidation because of its reputation. But then I met a series of people involved in amazing community activism, social entrepreneurship, and realised that though there is some crazy stuff here, it's not the only thing by any means. In fact, as I now know, it is quite a minority interest, though, it's very visible. Everybody notices the crazy stuff. But it's got a very rich and vibrant community. There's a lot going on and it's a beautiful place.

MS: As we're talking, the event is filling up. It's sold out, in fact, despite the rain. The activists in the room are chatty and industrious, handing out Just Stop Oil badges and posters and other merch. And then these, are the these the Just Stop Oil hi-viz jackets?

UNNAMED MALE: Yeah. I don't think there's a need to wear the hi-viz indoors.

MS: You never know.

UM You never know, you know, unless you're a fire marshal.

MS: The group campaign for more action on climate change through peaceful direct action.

GM: It's a very activist community. A lot of people involved in Extinction Rebellion and Just Stop Oil and Insulate Britain. Other campaigns like that. Also, a lot of local campaigns to try to protect the rivers from sewage pollution, to try to rewild

Dartmoor a bit. Totnes is associated with being a bit floaty, but actually there are a lot of people with a scientific background and who respect evidence here as well.

MS: Like so many people I've chatted to for this podcast, George has encountered the conspiracy theory media scene and *The Light* paper first hand.

GM: Oh my gosh, I've never seen such a concatenation of nonsense, like page after page of every bonkers conspiracy theory. It's like all collated into one newspaper.

MS: Where did you first come across it?

GM: When I moved here, I was walking down the High Street one Saturday morning and people said, George, George, come over here. And they were selling *The Light*. There was a table set up and they had piles of this magazine, and they were very friendly. They said, 'Oh, you're going to love this.' I said, 'Well, actually, I've already read it.' They said, 'What do you think?' I said, 'I think it's total rubbish.' So, 'Well,' they said, 'you must hope it is, because if it isn't, then things have got to a really dangerous situation, haven't they?' And I said, 'Well, yes, things have actually reached a really dangerous situation, but not because of the nonsense that's published in your magazine.' But I've become aware that it's become quite a big presence in certain parts of the alternative movement. And I do find that very alarming. Because there's . . . well, there's just such a lot of claptrap in its pages and misleading, misdirecting claptrap which can veer into some really nasty stuff. I mean, a lot of the themes that we're seeing now nowadays are recapitulations, in some ways, of the fascist themes of the 20th century.

MS: When I interviewed Darren, the editor of *The Light* paper, he denied this was the case. My conversation with George moves beyond *The Light* to his concerns about the wider conspiracy theory movement, how it transcends party politics and has shifted since the pandemic.

GM: I think if anything, it's intensified. And I've watched this with great alarm. And a lot of people suffered by losing work. They suffered in all sorts of other ways in

terms of loneliness, mental health issues. Huge numbers of people died who should not have died. But I felt that some people drew the wrong conclusions and that instead of focusing public anger on the government's failures to protect us, people turned their fire on public health measures. And that very quickly then hopped into a whole series of other issues. And it was almost as if the concern about lockdowns and vaccinations became a portal through which ideas were able to pass, often from the far right into the New Age alternative movement.

MS: Did that surprise you?

GM: I'd seen some aspects of this before. It wasn't entirely new to me. But yeah, the scale of it and the extent of it, absolutely. They surprised me. And one thing I would never have predicted was seeing or hearing hippies mouthing white supremacist ideas, repeating the QAnon conspiracy theory and stuff like this, claiming that Donald Trump was the victim of a conspiracy, and that the election was stolen. All these positions associated with the far right or the hard right. And to hear some of those issues being voiced by people who, who seek a better life, who seek a good life, that I found particularly disturbing.

MS: How do you think that those groups succeed in preying on people who are further to the left?

GM: I think the alternative movement is a very mixed bag and there's a lot of good in it. So many of the new ideas that have spread across society have come from the fringes. Society is like an amoeba. It moves from the margins, not from the centre. But there's also a side of the new alternative movement, which I find unfocused and lacking in intellectual rigour. There seems to be a remarkably low level of information about the real scandals going on. People are very easily distracted by fake scandals.

MS: What role do you think that social media has played in all of this? I guess particularly during the pandemic and afterwards?

GM: Well, it's a great amplifier of nonsense. That this term 'crank magnetism' that, you know, once, once you believe one crazy thing, it's like it opens the door a bit wider and more crazy things can flood in. And yeah, I mean, there is a worldview which is highly suspicious of people in power, and that's entirely well-founded. That's what democracy is based on. But that suspicion can tip over into paranoia, and it doesn't seem to matter where a conspiracy theory originates, it always seems to take you along a path towards the far right, because conspiracy theories are the far right's fuel. At the heart of far-right politics is scapegoating. It's transferring blame from genuinely powerful people to people who are much less powerful, including people who've got no power at all, such as asylum seekers, for instance, or entirely ordinary citizens who happen to be Jewish or Muslim or black, or women, for example. That's the whole trick of fascism. One of the results of scapegoating is that anyone who is a subject of a conspiracy theory, particularly one that becomes very popular, is at risk of violence. We have hundreds of years of history pointing us towards that conclusion. Sometimes I feel we're living in the upside down. It's become so confusing, so disorienting. It's as if you don't really know who anyone is anymore. That people who, who seemed genuinely nice and genuinely trying to create something better end up articulating some of the worst themes in human history and contributing to some of the most dangerous movements in the current political moment.

MS: I really do feel like I've been living in the upside down and I want to know what George thinks will happen next.

GM: I think all the cards are in the air now. So many crazy stories have been spread so far and wide that it's hard to see this ending well. I think this is now one of the most dangerous forces on earth, because it is so confusing and so disorienting. It makes it so hard for people to get a clear political view. And that means that it's then much harder to create coherent political movements to confront genuine oppression. And we do live in a time of great political oppression. All it takes is an effective demagogue to bring these people together and unite them under a far-right theme that still manages to appeal to people who don't identify themselves as

being on the far right. And in a way, I don't know why it hasn't happened already. I'm very fearful of the future in this country.

MS: I asked George if he has any wisdom for me as I leave Conspiracyland. What can we do to collectively bring people out of the rabbit hole and into reality?

GM: The only way we're going to counter these fictions is to tell a compelling story that is based on reality, but at the same time, inspires and unites people against the genuinely oppressive situation that we face. And until we do that far more effectively, the vacuum is going to be filled by scapegoating and conspiracy theories.

MS: I say goodbye to George and wish him luck with his speech. While at the event, I speak to some of the activists from Just Stop Oil, who in recent months have come under fire for their disruptive protest tactics. While their methods might seem radical, they tell me how much commitment it takes to keep their kind of activism peaceful. And they fear the conspiracy movement is just erupting and emerging without the discipline to ensure it stays non-violent. I felt the hate of the movement first hand, with abuse posted on social media by people linked to these conspiracy theory newspapers. And since our interview, the editor of *The Light* has referred to me as a propagandist for war criminals, child traffickers, and those who want to destroy society. Conversations and posts online suggest that I'll be featuring on the front page of both *The Light* and the German conspiracy theory paper. I'm waiting to see the reaction that triggers. What's my conclusion as I leave Conspiracyland? Well, that the inclination towards violent rhetoric and hate brings with it some sort of risk of action offline. A risk that's impossible to ignore.