

# As elites arrive in Davos, conspiracy theories thrive online

By SOPHIA TULP today



NEW YORK (AP) — When some of the world’s wealthiest and most influential figures gathered at the [World Economic Forum’s](#) annual meeting last year, sessions on climate change drew high-level

discussions on topics such as carbon financing and sustainable food systems.

But an entirely different narrative played out on the internet, where social media users claimed leaders wanted to force the population to eat insects instead of meat in the name of [saving the environment](#).

The annual event in the Swiss ski resort town of Davos, [which opens Monday](#), has increasingly become a target of bizarre claims from a growing chorus of commentators who believe the forum involves a group of elites manipulating global events for their own benefit. Experts say what was once a conspiracy theory found in the internet's underbelly has now hit the mainstream.

"This isn't a conspiracy that is playing out on the extreme fringes," said Alex Friedfeld, a researcher with the Anti-Defamation League who studies anti-government extremism. "We're seeing it on mainstream social media platforms being shared by regular Americans. We were seeing it being spread by mainstream media figures right on their prime time news, on their nightly networks."

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## WORLD ECONOMIC FORUM

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The meeting draws heads of state, business executives, cultural trendsetters and representatives from international organizations to the luxe mountain town. Though it's always unclear how much concrete action will emerge, the meeting is slated to take on pressing global issues from climate change and economic uncertainty to geopolitical instability and public health.

Hundreds of public sessions are planned, but the four-day conference is also known for secretive backroom meetings and deal-making by business leaders. This gap between what's shown to the public and what happens behind closed doors helps make that makes the meeting a flashpoint for misinformation.

"When we have very high levels of ambiguity, it's very easy to fill in narratives," said Kathleen Hall Jamieson, who is the director of the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania and also studies misinformation.

Theories about influential global leaders are not new, she said, but scrutiny of the forum and its chairman, Klaus Schwab, intensified in 2020 in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic. [That year, the theme of the annual meeting](#) was "The Great Reset." The initiative envisioned sweeping changes to

how societies and economies would work to recover from the pandemic and build a more sustainable future.

Now, in increasingly mainstream corners of the internet and on conservative talk shows, “The Great Reset” has become shorthand for what skeptics say is a reorganization of society, using global uncertainty as a guise to take away rights. Believers argue that measures including pandemic lockdowns and vaccine mandates are tools to consolidate power and undercut individual sovereignty.

In a time of mounting anxiety, Jamieson says the public has become more susceptible to falsehoods, as conspiracy theories emerge as a tool to cut through the chaos. Researchers who monitor extremism say these beliefs are becoming more popular and more concerning.

At a rally staged on the grounds of an upstate New York church last fall, a photo of Schwab was displayed on the center of a large screen alongside other “villains” accused of threatening American values. The crowd of thousands had gathered in a revivalist tent at a [traveling roadshow](#) used as a recruiting tool for an ascendant Christian nationalist movement. Participants discussed “The Great Reset,” among a host of other theories, as an assault on America’s foundations.

The phrase was used more than 60 times across all programs on Fox News in 2022, according to one tally generated by [the Internet Archive’s TV news database](#). That’s up from 30 mentions in 2021 and about 20 in 2020. It was discussed most frequently on “The Ingraham Angle” and “Tucker Carlson Tonight.”

And in August, amid a [defamation trial](#) for calling the Sandy Hook Elementary School attack a hoax, Infowars host [Alex Jones](#) released a book called “The Great Reset: And The War For the World.” It’s described as an analysis of “the global elite’s international conspiracy to enslave humanity and all life on the planet.”

As the World Economic Forum has become intertwined with this narrative, a steady stream of claims have plagued the organization. While some people offer legitimate criticisms of the forum — namely that it hosts wealthy executives who fly in on emissions-spewing corporate jets — others spread unverified or baseless information as fact.

For example, a site known for spreading fabricated stories [falsely claimed last month](#) that Schwab publicly encouraged the decriminalization of sex between children and adults, using an invented quote and other baseless statements. Still, it drew tens of thousands of shares on Twitter and Facebook.

Meanwhile, the popular claim that the forum wants people to replace meat with bugs is a distorted reference to an article once published on the organization’s website. In another instance, a [widely shared post claimed](#) without evidence that the forum had “appointed” U.S. Rep. Kevin McCarthy as speaker of the House before the actual vote had taken place.

The concern, Friedfeld says, is that posts like these could introduce people to more fringe and dangerous conspiracy theories or even translate into real-world violence. Yann Zopf, head of media for the forum, says the organization has increased its monitoring of this kind of online activity and carefully watches for direct threats.

“Creating all that kind of stuff can generate enemies that people believe are responsible for whatever bad thing is happening in the world,” Friedfeld said. “Once that happens, when you believe that that things are happening in the world and a certain person or group of people is responsible for these attacks, all of a sudden, the idea of using violence to resist becomes more plausible.”

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