

The Sandy Hook Conspiracy carries more questions online than originally asked

With the Sandy Hook defamation trial coming to closure, we are left with the verdict that Alex Jones will have to make an additional payment of \$473 million in punitive damages, caused by the lies he had spread regarding the 2012 Sandy Hook school shooting massacre. Jones will find himself paying roughly \$1 Billion to the plaintiffs. This outcome has struck the media as not only shocking, but well deserved. North America was put on notice as Adam Lanza slaughtered 6 adults and 20 children in cold blood. As soon as this tragedy occurred, conspiracy theorists did not hold back in having a say on what they believed reality was. The lies that were spread online did not only act as a 'salt in the wound' type of action. Jones had caused multiple people following his conspiracy website "InfoWars" to harass the families that were affected by the massacre. The damage was strong against family members who had lost their loved ones. Online conspiracy theories have the potential to cause serious harm, but the argument that this is only a case of "freedom of speech" still stands.

Nowadays, the public beliefs on mainstream news can toss and turn depending on where you find your sources. This is one of the main culprits to why so much emotional damage was done to the families of Sandy Hook. Conspiracy theories are on a wider spectrum of belief nowadays. *Dominik Stecula*, an Associate Professor of Political Studies at Colorado State University who took time for an interview over Zoom suggests that;

"Prior to the internet right now, it was a frowned upon thing to believe this kind of stuff. Now, conspiracy theories are more mainstream. United States politicians along the lines of Donald Trump and other right-wing political figures are open about their connections with far right wing figures like Alex Jones".

The more open and mainstream it becomes to follow these outlandish theories, the more lines get blurred between what reality is. The issue we find ourselves in now, is that many readers of these theories get too caught up in the beliefs without questioning it. With public influencers, and now right wing politicians aligning themselves with these beliefs, the influence becomes dangerous.

"There's a big difference between a politician talking about something vs some guy on YouTube talking about it. Especially when it comes to a conspiracy theory, or something as radical as one, which is one of the reasons why conspiracies are less frowned upon nowadays", Stecula states.

The Sandy Hook conspiracy theory was brought to light by Alex Jones, there is no question about that. When looking back to the author of the theory itself, James F. Tracy was the originator of the hoax. Tracy is an exiled professor from Florida Atlantic University. After losing his job from making the Sandy Hook hoax claims, the exiled professor went on to create his own blog titled "memoryholeblog.org". The blog was in use for less formal commentary and to speak on political matters Tracy had opinions on. With free speech being an argument from the other side, Tracy believes that free speech has taken a turn for the worse. A phone call interview that lasted approximately 20 minutes gave some insight into his view upon the current trending topic. He states that *"It's obviously bad in the U.S, the left side of the political spectrum can't win an argument, so they have to resort to censorship"* (Tracy). Without necessarily blaming Jones for the hoax, he says that *"He [Alex Jones] has never done any actual reporting on it, he's just interviewed people. So, I don't know what he's done wrong"*. He goes on stating that *"this is a way for the United States to get around the first amendment. Now people will be able to say 'you can't say that because it hurts my feelings'"*.

As a result of the defamation court case that Alex Jones had found himself losing, it should be an unarguable fact that the damage he had done to the families was costly for everyone. The emotional damage was severe for the plaintiffs and may never be recoverable. Online conspiracy theories prevail as dangerous to society, but when they are taken too far out of hand, the question now is; who will take responsibility when actions are taken too far? By claiming that this is not fully Alex Jones's fault, we are left with more argumentative, long lasting endings than this story had originally objected to.