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By Taylor Lorenz

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In Pittsburgh, Memphis and Los Angeles, massive billboards recently popped up declaring, “Birds Aren’t Real.”

On Instagram and TikTok, Birds Aren’t Real accounts have racked up hundreds of thousands of followers, and YouTube videos about it have gone viral.

Last month, Birds Aren’t Real adherents even protested outside Twitter’s headquarters in San Francisco to demand that the company change its bird logo.

The events were all connected by a Gen Z-fueled conspiracy theory, which posits that birds don’t exist and are really drone replicas installed by the U.S. government to spy on Americans. Hundreds of thousands of young people have joined the movement, wearing Birds Aren’t Real T-shirts, swarming rallies and spreading the slogan.

It might smack of QAnon, the conspiracy theory that the world is controlled by an elite cabal of child-trafficking Democrats. Except that the creator of Birds Aren’t Real and the movement’s followers are in on a joke: They know that birds are, in fact, real and that their theory is made up.

What Birds Aren’t Real truly is, they say, is a parody social movement with a purpose. In a post-truth world dominated by online conspiracy theories, young people have coalesced around the effort to thumb their nose at, fight and poke fun at misinformation. It’s Gen Z’s attempt to upend the rabbit hole with absurdism.

“It’s a way to combat troubles in the world that you don’t really have other ways of combating,” said Claire Chronis, 22, a Birds Aren’t Real organizer in Pittsburgh. “My favorite way to describe the organization is fighting lunacy with lunacy.”

At the center of the movement is Peter McIndoe, 23, a floppy-haired college dropout in Memphis who created Birds Aren’t Real on a whim in 2017. For years, he stayed in character as the conspiracy theory’s chief believer, commanding acolytes to rage against those who challenged his dogma. But now, Mr. McIndoe said in an interview, he is ready to reveal the parody lest people think birds really are drones.



Mr. McIndoe rallying protesters outside Twitter's headquarters in San Francisco last month. Madeline Houston

“Dealing in the world of misinformation for the past few years, we’ve been really conscious of the line we walk,” he said. “The idea is meant to be so preposterous, but we make sure nothing we’re saying is too realistic. That’s a consideration with coming out of character.”

Most Birds Aren’t Real members, many of whom are part of an on-the-ground activism network called the Bird Brigade, grew up in a world overrun with misinformation. Some have relatives who have fallen victim to conspiracy theories. So for members of Gen Z, the movement has become a way to collectively grapple with those experiences. By cosplaying conspiracy theorists, they have found community and kinship, Mr. McIndoe said.

“Birds Aren’t Real is not a shallow satire of conspiracies from the outside. It is from the deep inside,” he said. “A lot of people in our generation feel the lunacy in all this, and Birds Aren’t Real has been a way for people to process that.”

Cameron Kasky, 21, an activist from Parkland, Fla., who helped organize the March for Our Lives student protest against gun violence in 2018 and is involved in Birds Aren’t Real, said the parody “makes you stop for a second and laugh. In a uniquely bleak time to come of age, it doesn’t hurt to have something to laugh about together.”

Mr. McIndoe, too, marinated in conspiracies. For his first 18 years, he grew up in a deeply conservative and religious community with seven siblings outside Cincinnati, then in rural Arkansas. He was home-schooled, taught that “evolution was a massive brainwashing plan by the Democrats and Obama was the Antichrist,” he said.

He read books like “Remote Control,” about what it said were hidden anti-Christianity messages from Hollywood. In high school, social media offered a gateway to mainstream culture. Mr. McIndoe began watching Philip DeFranco and other popular YouTubers who talked about current events and pop culture, and went on Reddit to find new viewpoints.

“I was raised by the internet, because that’s where I ended up finding a lot of my actual real-world education, through documentaries and YouTube,” Mr. McIndoe said. “My whole understanding of the world was formed by the internet.”

By the time Mr. McIndoe left home for the University of Arkansas in 2016, he said, he realized he wasn’t the only young person forced to straddle multiple realities.

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Then in January 2017, Mr. McIndoe traveled to Memphis to visit friends. Donald J. Trump had just been sworn in as president, and there was a women’s march downtown. Pro-Trump counterprotesters were also there. When Mr. McIndoe saw them, he said, he ripped a poster off a wall, flipped it over and wrote three random words: “Birds Aren’t Real.”

“It was a spontaneous joke, but it was a reflection of the absurdity everyone was feeling,” he said.

A billboard with a white background and a black border. The text "Birds Aren't Real" is written in a large, bold, black sans-serif font. Above the billboard, a row of approximately 15 small black birds is perched on the top edge of the structure. The billboard is supported by a dark metal frame with a cross-brace. The background is a clear blue sky with a few white clouds. The billboard is set against a backdrop of a clear blue sky with a few white clouds. The billboard is supported by a dark metal frame with a cross-brace. The background is a clear blue sky with a few white clouds. The billboard is set against a backdrop of a clear blue sky with a few white clouds.

Birds Aren't Real

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Mr. McIndoe then walked around and improvised the Birds Aren't Real conspiracy lore. He said he was part of a greater movement that believed that birds had been replaced with surveillance drones and that the cover up began in the 1970s. Unbeknown to him, he was filmed and the video posted on Facebook. It went viral, especially among teenagers in the South.

In Memphis, "Birds Aren't Real" graffiti soon showed up. Photos of the phrase's being scrawled on chalkboards and the walls of local high schools surfaced. People made "Birds Aren't Real" stickers.

Mr. McIndoe decided to lean into Birds Aren't Real. "I started embodying the character and building out the world this character belonged to," he said. He and Connor Gaydos, a friend, wrote a false history of the movement, concocted elaborate theories and produced fake documents and evidence to support his wild claims.

"It basically became an experiment in misinformation," Mr. McIndoe said. "We were able to construct an entirely fictional world that was reported on as fact by local media and questioned by members of the public."

Mr. Gaydos added, "If anyone believes birds aren't real, we're the last of their concerns, because then there's probably no conspiracy they don't believe."

Mr. McIndoe burning a Cardinals flag in St. Louis during a satirical protest of the baseball team's "pro-bird" logo in July. Madeline Houston

In 2018, Mr. McIndoe dropped out of college and moved to Memphis. To build Birds Aren't Real further, he created a flyer that shot to the top of Reddit. He hired an actor to portray a former C.I.A. agent who confessed to working on bird drone surveillance; the video has more than 20 million views on TikTok. He also hired actors to represent adult bird truthers in videos that spread all over Instagram.

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That same year, Mr. McIndoe began selling Birds Aren't Real merchandise. The money, totaling several thousand dollars a month, helps Mr. McIndoe and Mr. Gaydos cover their living expenses.



“All the money from our merch lineup goes into making sure me and Connor can do this full time,” Mr. McIndoe said. “We also put the money into the billboards, flying out members of the Bird Brigade to rallies. None of the proceeds go to anything harmful.”

To adults with concerns about Mr. McIndoe’s tactics, researchers said any harms were most likely minimal.

“You have to weigh the potential negative effects with any of this stuff, but in this case it is so extremely small,” said Joshua Citarella, an independent researcher who studies internet culture and online radicalization in youth. “Allowing people to engage in collaborative world building is therapeutic because it lets them disarm conspiracism and engage in a safe way.”

Mr. McIndoe said he kept the concerns top of mind. “Everything we’ve done with Birds Aren’t Real is made to make sure it doesn’t tip into where it could have a negative end result on the world,” he said. “It’s a safe space for people to come together and process the conspiracy takeover of America. It’s a way to laugh at the madness rather than be overcome by it.”

The effort has been cathartic for young people including Heitho Shipp, 22, a Pittsburgh resident.

“Most conspiracy theories are fueled by hate or distrust or one powerful leader, but this is about finding an outlet for our pain,” she said. She added that the movement was “more about media literacy.”

Birds Aren’t Real members have also become a political force. Many often join up with counterprotesters and actual conspiracy theorists to de-escalate tensions and delegitimize the people they are marching alongside with irreverent chants.

In September, shortly after a restrictive new abortion law went into effect in Texas, Birds Aren’t Real members showed up at a protest held by anti-abortion activists at the University of Cincinnati. Supporters of the new law “had signs with very graphic imagery and were very aggressive in condemning people,” Mr. McIndoe said. “It led to arguments.”

But the Bird Brigade began chanting, “Birds aren’t real.” Their shouts soon overpowered the anti-abortion activists, who left.

Mr. McIndoe now has big plans for 2022. Breaking character is necessary to help Birds Aren’t Real leap to the next level and forswear actual conspiracy theorists, he said. He added that he hoped to collaborate with major content creators and independent media like Channel 5 News, which is aimed at helping people make sense of America’s current state and the internet.

“I have a lot of excitement for what the future of this could be as an actual force for good,” he said. “Yes, we have been intentionally spreading misinformation for the past four years, but it’s with a purpose. It’s about holding up a mirror to America in the internet age.”