Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories

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Introduction

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Conspiracy theorists are highly suspicious of modern media. Was the moon landing in 1969 actually filmed in a Hollywood Studio by the famous director Stanley Kubrick? Do video clips of celebrities like Rihanna, Beyoncé or Justin Bieber contain hidden messages to sell the New World Order to an ignorant audience? Should we trust our perception of reality when, in fact, our senses are increasingly dependent on media images? Indeed, media is everywhere and, according to Couldry and Hepp (2017), media participation is no longer an individual choice: Particularly with the Internet, social media and interconnected smartphones, they argue, we are entering a new phase of ‘deep mediatisation’ that overarches every domain of life. In a similar vein, Mark Deuze comments, ‘we do not live with, but in media’ (2012: xiii). This immersion in our media environment motivates ‘agency panic’ – the core assumption underlying conspiracy theories that social systems are controlling our minds (Melley 2000). The popularity that the Matrix metaphor enjoys in the conspiracy milieu is then not surprising (Harambam 2017): The world is considered by conspiracy theorists to be staged, mediatised, manipulated and hyper-real to conceal the real truth. Are we, like Neo in the movie The Matrix (1999), already living in a virtual reality produced by evil alien powers? Conspiracy theorists suggest that we are.

And yet the relation between media and conspiracy theory is highly ambivalent. Conspiracy theories are not only formulated about and against media; they are themselves prominently featuring in media and are rapidly transmitted and transformed through media. This, then, is the underlying assumption of this section of the handbook: Conspiracy theories are deeply mediatised. Indeed, their advocates may be highly suspicious of mass media-effects but they, simultaneously, depend on media to formulate and communicate conspiracy theories to a larger audience. Conspiracy theories can be latent assumptions or unstable rumours. But, often, they are manifest ideologies, worldviews or narratives that are self-consciously written down in books, used to develop a dramatic detective novel or produce a film script for a paranoia thriller; posted as a message on Facebook or turned into a vlog on YouTube. Such media texts, in turn, provide valuable sources to empirically study conspiracy theories in academia. Particularly in disciplines like history, sociology, ethnology, anthropology, cultural studies, media studies, literary studies, media texts are used to analyse the nature and meanings of conspiracy culture in rich, empirical detail. Notwithstanding the relevance of such studies on text, they often disregard the influence of the medium on the message. Consequently, literature, film, games or social media are seldom
analysed in terms of their media-specific traits and the way these shape the content, form and transmission of conspiracy theories.

This section taps into these two aspects of the mediatisation of conspiracy theories. The first question addressed in the contributions is: What genres, themes and types of conspiracy theories are featuring in media texts and how are they related to the time/culture in which they are produced? From this perspective, media texts featuring paranoia, secret plots and conspiracies are often studied as sources to understand the nature of conspiracy theories in a particular historical and social-cultural context. Media texts are models ‘of’ and ‘for’ society – they both reflect and shape the public imagination and are hence good material to study the (transformation of) conspiracy theories. Pivotal here is the work of Fredric Jameson arguing that contemporary conspiracy theories in literature and (science) fiction are, essentially, ‘cognitive maps’ to represent modern systems that have become too complex to represent, or even ‘to think the impossible totality of the contemporary world system’ (1991: 38). Whether such ‘cognitive maps’ are elaborated in written theories, film scripts or visual schemes on the Internet – they allegedly function to make sense of the (post)modern institutional environment (e.g. Knight 2000; Melley 2000). In this respect, sociologist Luc Boltanski (2014) discusses the birth of the ‘spy novel’ in the U.K., France and other Western countries in the nineteenth century and ties it in with the emergence of the modern state, industrialism, capitalism and the social sciences. The day-to-day confrontation of ordinary people with this complex institutional environment, he argues, generated ontological uncertainties about the ‘reality of reality’ and nagging questions such as ‘Where does power really lie, and who really holds it?’ (Boltanski 2014: xv–xvi). The spy novel, but more recently books, films or series like The X-Files, Homeland or House of Cards, exemplify these uncertainties. Notwithstanding their fictitious nature, such media texts are valuable sources for scholars to study the public imagination about conspiracies and its relationship with Western society, where institutions are increasingly powerful, yet structurally evasive; omnipresent but principally opaque and, essentially, impossible to represent or control for ordinary citizens.

The different chapters in this section, then, first of all study conspiracy theory as/in media text and assess their meaning in historical and social-cultural context. The chapter by Astapova (4.1) already demonstrates that verbalised conspiracy stories about the Other – varying from alien tribes, ethnic groups or nations conspiring against the ingroup – are continuously re-invented and adapted to a local context. In sermons, letters, pamphlets distributed in eighteenth-century France, religious conservatives and ‘Enlightened’ liberals were imagining conspiracies about one another, as McKenzie-McHargh and Oberhauser (4.2) demonstrate, while conspiracy fiction, popularised in nineteenth-century England, was primarily preoccupied with the invasion of the nation-state, as Carver shows (4.3). Whether through verbal stories, letters, literary fiction or television, media texts thus channel particular, local, time-confined anxieties about conspiracies of an alien Other. That such anxieties about a fixed Other are transforming over time is demonstrated by the contributions of Melley (4.4), Caumanns and Önnertors (4.5) and Butter (4.6). Melley depicts the problem of agency and epistemic certainty in twentieth-century American fiction, Caumanns and Önnertors point to the networked nature of visualised conspiracy theories in modern art, whereas Butter demonstrates the shift from a straightforward representation of conspiracy to self-reflexive negotiations of conspiracy theory in movies and television shows over the last 50 years.

The second theoretical assumption that informs the chapters in this section, implicitly or explicitly, is that text should not be studied in isolation from the medium. The medium itself or, rather, the media-specific traits of written texts, films, series or social media, fundamentally shape the content and meaning of the text. In medium-centred theories (Meyrowitz 1994), most notable the work of Walter Ong (1982) and Marshall McLuhan, this general argument is
developed. ‘The medium is the message’, as McLuhan aptly summarised in Understanding Media (1964). New media technologies, he famously argued, both stimulate and amputate different human senses, and facilitate and limit particular repertoires of thinking, experiencing and acting. The shift from oral culture to ‘the Gutenberg Galaxy’ (McLuhan 1962) of print for a mass audience in the sixteenth century, he claimed, was as revolutionary as the visual ‘electronic age’ of television and film in the twentieth century. And we may wonder: What difference does the Internet make? The World Wide Web, as a medium of information and communication, structured a non-linear, hyper-textual, memetic, audio-visual, hyper-real environment (e.g. Deuze 2012; Shifman 2014; Couldry, Hepp 2017) and opened up a ‘participatory culture’ (Jenkins 2006) where all citizens are allegedly included in communication.

The second point is, then, that we should take such modes of transmission into account if we want to understand conspiracy theories. In addition to discussing the meaning of conspiracy theories as/in media texts, we thus focus on the transmission of conspiracy theories through different media forms. The second question addressed in the section is: What influence do different media forms have on the way we formulate, visualise, produce, transmit, consume and appropriate conspiracy theories? The question is approached from different disciplines – folklore studies, literary studies, media studies, cultural history, sociology, political sciences. The overarching set-up of the section is loosely historical, and the individual chapters highlight different modes of transmission. In summary, the section deals with the perennial word-to-mouth-dissemination of conspiracy theories (4.1), print culture in eighteenth-century France (4.2), the literary imagination of conspiracies in the nineteenth-century U.K. (4.3) and twentieth-century U.S.A. (4.4), visual culture and art (4.5), in television series and films (4.6), and on the Internet, as Aupers (4.7), Stano (4.8), Leal (4.9) and Avramov, Gatov and Yablokov (4.10) discuss.

In a Foucauldian sense, it is tempting to consider such historical modes of transmission as successive media ‘regimes’ motivating the formation of particular ways of speaking, acting and experiencing conspiracies in society. Indeed, there may be an elective affinity between modern print culture and linear, hierarchical schemes of causality representing conspiracies whereas the age of the Internet motivates the production of non-linear, hyper-textual conspiracy theories in which ‘everything is connected’ (Knight 2000: 208–12). And what influence does social media have on the form and content of conspiracy theories? Does its technological infrastructure turn conspiracy theories into concise Tweets of 280 signs maximum or un-reflexive chats in WhatsApp groups? Have they become open-ended memes that are transmitted on a global scale? Are such conspiracy memes constantly ‘circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the internet by many users’ (Shifman 2014: 41)? In any case, we need to be careful when considering different modes of transmission as successfully replacing one another in a linear, evolutionist and deterministic way; nowadays, different media forms complement, overlap and converge with one another. It is striking, in this sense, that allegedly ‘premodern’ word-to-mouth dissemination of conspiracy theories is not abolished but, rather, re-located to the Internet.

But there is another reason to avoid the pitfall of overly structuralist or deterministic interpretations of the medium on the message. The chapters show that modern modes of transmission – from mass print to the Internet – afford more democratic involvement, freedom and agency in the production and consumption of conspiracy theories. Print culture – the production, availability and dissemination of books, newspapers and libraries – opened up the public sphere where theories, including those about hidden conspiracies, were openly exchanged between members of the cultural elite. This popularisation and normalisation of the discourse increased with conspiracy in fiction, literature and film for the masses. The Internet, finally, provides the possibility for the audience to become (inter)active co-producers of conspiracy theories. Its non-hierarchical structure provides ‘amateurs’ the possibility to actively ‘decode’
mass media messages and to publicly express alternative conspiracy theories that compete with the truth claims of official experts, politicians, journalists and scientists. On the Internet, then, there is ample space for citizens to post, share, modify and appropriate conspiracy theories via Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and other digital platforms.

In conclusion, in this section on media and transmission, we aim to give an overview and analysis of the academic literature on media and conspiracy theories. Guided by the main assumption that conspiracy theories are deeply mediatised, all chapters deal, in one way or another, with conspiracy theories as/in media texts and their historical and multi-modal transmission through media. Although the chapters are essentially discussing the literature in a particular domain, this field is still new and developing. This section is therefore not only displaying the state-of-the-art but is also setting the agenda for future research: If we want to better understand the nature, meaning, shape and dissemination of conspiracy theories in contemporary Western society, we need to study them as a mediatised phenomenon.

References