Conspiracy Theories

Misinformed publics or wittingly believing false information?

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Introduction

The question of Truth – with a capital T – takes center stage today. Ever since the tumultuous year of 2016, when Trump rose to power in the US and the Brits decided to leave the European Union, academics and public commenters seriously started to worry about the rise of various forms of ‘untruths’ in our (online) public domain. In addition to fake news and mis/disinformation, much attention in such discussion is paid to the popularity of conspiracy theories in this so-called post-truth era. The idea that the world is not as it seems and that official explanations provided by mainstream epistemic institutions (media, politics, science) are untrustworthy has great resonance today. Both political elites and ordinary people in various countries in the world interpret current and historical affairs along conspiratorial schema and play with the tropes of collusion, deceit, and manipulation. But who are these people? What do they actually believe? Why are these ideas so popular nowadays? How do they circulate in today’s complex information landscape? And should we do something about them? This chapter goes into more detail about all these questions by discussing the various ways conspiracy theories play a role in contemporary societies. Moving away from persistent stereotypifications, it draws on empirically grounded social-scientific analyses and aims to offer better insight into a politically contested and highly moralised cultural phenomenon. Conspiracy theories exist in various times and places, and such differences are relevant for their understanding (Butter and Knight 2020: Section V). The focus of this chapter is therefore on the contemporary situation in (Western) Europe and the United States.

Definitions: slippery concepts and rhetorical weapons

Misinformation and conspiracy theories are often mentioned in one breath, signifying the false or dubious content post-truth is all about, but what do these two concepts actually share? Misinformation is usually defined as ‘false or inaccurate information’, which seems pretty straightforward and often is: blatant lies and clear falsehoods are easily spotted. However, the history and sociology of fact-checking, societies’ most established effort to identify misinformation, shows the complexity and the interpretative work involved in this business (Graves 2016). It is often not that easy and unequivocal to separate true from false information; truth knows many
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shades of grey, after all. Although institutionalised fact-checkers generally abide by professional standards and clear procedures to identify misinformation, their work remains human and is thus subject to social, cultural, and ideological influences. On a more abstract level, then, it can be argued that truth and its opposites are products of societal power (Fuller 2018). What misinformation is becomes what is defined as such, and this perspective highlights definitional power: who is capable of coining certain forms of information as false (Becker 1967; Schiappa 2003)?

This necessary move from an essentialist to a relational definition rings even more true for conspiracy theories (Harambam 2020b, 34–35). Again, at first glance, it may seem obvious what they mean: explanations of events that involve the nefarious covert actions of some people. Such literal definitions, however, do not adequately cover what is commonly meant by conspiracy theories. After all, the official explanation of what happened on 9/11 – the plot of 19 angry Arab men hijacking planes to attack the US – would then qualify, but that is generally not seen as a conspiracy theory. Instead, doubts about this official narrative and accusations that the CIA, Mossad, or high officials in the US government are behind the attacks are seen as conspiracy theories. It thus makes more sense to define conspiracy theories as those ideas challenging official narratives (Coady 2006, 2–3). Moreover, because ‘a view becomes a conspiracy theory only because it has been dismissed as such’ (Knight 2000, 11) and is thus defined ‘by [its] discursive position in relation to a “regime of truth”’ (Bratich 2008, 3), it is imperative to foreground the definitional practices, and their socio-political context, that discard certain forms of knowledge/thought as conspiracy theory (Harambam 2020b, 18). Obviously, there are some substantive qualities that most conspiracy theories share (Barkun 2006; Byford 2011; Douglas et al. 2019; Sunstein and Vermeule 2009), but these alone cannot account for what is commonly meant by them: delusional, irrational, paranoid, militant, dangerous, and mostly untrue explanations of reality (Dentith 2018; Thalmann 2019).

Both misinformation and conspiracy theories are slippery concepts and never neutral but intimately tied to cultural interpretations and societal power relations. What we regard as misinformation or conspiracy theories is thus never merely descriptive, but historically situated and performative. Because of the stigma associated with both terms, defining or calling something or someone that way has clear rhetorical effects. As Husting and Orr brilliantly show, using the conspiracy theory label allows the interlocutor to ‘go meta’, sidestepping the content and gaslighting the opponent, and works as a routinised strategy of exclusion (2007). Misinformation and conspiracy theories are thus powerful rhetorical weapons in public battles for truth and authority as they sweepingly discard both content and author from legitimate political debate (Bjerg and Presskorn-Thygesen 2017; Harambam and Aupers 2015). But these terms also have longer-lasting political consequences, since what becomes tainted with the conspiracy theory stigma will be off limits and subject to self-censorship by journalists and academic scholars alike (Hagen 2020; Hughes 2020; Pelkmans and Machold 2011).

Contents: from scapegoating an exotic Other to popular critiques of societal institutions

The previously mentioned politics of defining notwithstanding, there are important themes and topics to discern in the vast and diverse world of what are labelled conspiracy theories (Harambam 2020b, 58–101). Barkun highlights three central characteristics: ‘nothing happens by accident’, ‘nothing is as it seems’, and ‘everything is connected’ (2006, 3–4). He continues to distinguish conspiracy theories by scope: singular dramatic events, systemic ones of structural deceit, and ‘superconspiracy theories’ (Barkun 2006, 6). The first detail murders of key political figures (JFK) and pop-star celebrities (John Lennon, Tupac Shakur, or Michael Jackson),
terrorist attacks (9/11, Charlie Hebdo), or various societal catastrophes (financial crises, wars, epidemics). The second category is about structural mechanisms of deceit: conspiracy theories about the way the pharmaceutical industries (inventing diseases and medications to keep people hooked on them instead of curing people) or monetary fiat systems (making money out thin air to enslave humanity with debt) work. The third are perhaps the most marvellous ones as they unite various singular conspiracy theories into one grand master narrative of deception. One popular propagator of such all-encompassing superconspiracies is flamboyant David Icke (Harambam and Aupers 2019). He is best known for his controversial reptilian thesis, in which our global elites are actually shapeshifting reptilian human-alien hybrids who secretly rule the world and combines New Age teachings with apocalyptic narratives about a coming totalitarian new world order (Barkun 2006; Ward and Voas 2011).

But what can we say about the substantive contents of conspiracy theories? Historically, conspiracy theories entailed allegations of societal subversion by three types of cabals that were seen as enemies of the dominant social order: secret societies (like the Illuminati or the Freemasons), powerful factions or interest groups (like the communists or the abolitionists), and the Jews (Harambam 2020b, 59–60). Such conspiracy theories advanced the notion that these societal outsiders were secretly plotting the demise of mainstream society and became objects of blame for societal misfortune (Pipes 1997). By scapegoating a concrete and identifiable enemy, this allegedly dangerous Other, such conspiracy theories bolstered collective in-group identities. This is what Knight calls ‘secure paranoia’ (2000, 3–4). They may engender a sense of peril, but as the cabal is made known and their sinister objectives made clear, such conspiracy theories paradoxically generate a state of reassurance, stability, and order. This type of conspiracy discourse has often been deployed by those in power in various countries and of various political affiliations to unite a troubled people through the construction of a dangerous enemy (Pipes 1997; Robins and Post 1997).

While such conspiracy theories live on in the rhetoric of Islamophobic Eurabia theories and in Russian and Eastern European conspiratorial fears of a progressive West endangering traditional values (Yablokov 2018), many contemporary conspiracy theories focus on the workings of our own societal institutions (Harambam 2020b, 66–81). Various scholars (Fenster 2008; Knight 2000; Melley 2000; Olmsted 2009) argue that conspiracy theories today are no longer about a demonised Other threatening a stable us, but rather, the enemy now comes from within. Indeed, most contemporary conspiracy theories advance radical suspicions about the workings of mainstream societal institutions (Aupers 2012). Based on a content analysis of popular conspiracy websites, Harambam distinguishes six main categories of conspiracy narratives: finance, media, corporatism, science, government, and the supernatural (2020b, 66–81). Besides the last one, most conspiracy theories thus have a strong institutional focus: they do not so much assume the conspiracy of a malign and manipulative cabal as articulate suspicions and discontent about the very way mainstream operations, routines, procedures, and formal legislations are institutionalised. More specifically, conspiracy theorists distrust, critique, and contest mainstream epistemic institutions and the knowledge they produce (Harambam and Aupers, 2015). As a result, conspiracy theories embody, par excellence, the unstable and contested nature of truth and knowledge in post-modern societies (Fuller 2018; Harambam 2020b).

Circulations: how conspiracy theories exist and travel in today’s media ecosystem

Conspiracy theories have been around for many centuries. They were transmitted orally, in written and visual forms, and later also in various printed documents (flyers, newspapers, and
books) as new technologies emerged (Butter 2014; Byford 2011; Pipes 1997; Thalmann 2019). While hard to precisely quantify, the internet proved a major game-changer in the form, quantity, speed of circulation, and general reach of conspiracy theories. The decline of traditional information gatekeepers accompanied a rise of various types of bulletin boards, independent and alternative news sites, and personal websites and blogs that published conspiracy theories online (Birchall 2006; Dean 1998; Knight 2000). This enormous democratisation of information was a key spearhead of the early internet utopians and similarly proved for many conspiracy theorists a great emancipatory force. For many people in the field, the internet was the information sanctuary to learn about facets of life that, in their eyes, had been hidden or obscured before but were now open for everybody to see (Harambam 2020b). In a typical ‘prosumer culture’ fashion, conspiracy theorists were producing, reading, sharing, editing, and bricolaging all kinds of textual and audiovisual information and (re)publishing it on their own websites. Much variety existed: from small individual do-it-yourself-style websites with simple text to professionally produced and sometimes cooperatively managed conspiracy theory websites boasting news articles and visually stunning documentaries attracting thousands of visitors per day (Harambam 2020b, 39–47).

The rise of social media and internet 2.0 radically changed again the way conspiracy theories are produced, transmitted, and consumed. Whereas older websites were rather static and unidirectional and people had to ‘go’ to conspiracy websites for information, the online media-ecosystem of today highlights hyper-connectivity, interactivity, and virality (Dijck et al. 2018). In addition to consulting articles and videos on conspiracy theory websites, people find such contents in their social media feeds and/or share them in closed messenger groups (Mortimer 2017). Conspiracy theories as such travel easily across different platforms, reaching different audiences. Given the different affordances of each platform, conspiracy theories take different forms now as well; next to mere text and video, we find today conspiratorial Twitter messages and playful memes as new conspiracy theory genres. At every step, people can frame, adjust, and contextualise conspiracy theory texts and visuals into new forms with which they change and recreate original meanings (Aupers 2020). However, powerful conspiracy theory actors remain influential, be they conspiracy theory entrepreneurs or social movements: for example, in the form of popular YouTube channels to which people subscribe or Twitter accounts they follow (Harambam 2020a; Starbird 2017).

In recent years it has become clear that the contemporary information landscape looks more like a complex war zone where various strategic actors fight for the minds and hearts of people with misinformation, troll factories, and invisible technological weapons such as bot(net)s and curating algorithms (Bennett and Livingston 2018; Wardle and Derakhshan 2017). Without actually knowing so, people would end up in ‘echo chambers’ of like-minded people due to the effects of ‘filter bubbles’ and ‘recommendation algorithms’ funneling people into extremist conspiracy theories (Flaxman et al. 2016; Sunstein 2018). While such understandings of people as gullible and passive recipients of misinformation are naïve and have been critiqued (Bruns 2019), much of the complex entanglement of human behavior, technology, platform business models, and (geo)politics that spurs the spread of conspiracy theories and misinformation online is still to be explored.

**Motivations: paranoid militants, cultural dupes, or witting activists?**

A central topic in studies on conspiracy theories and misinformation is the question of why people ‘believe’ them. One strand of scholars regards conspiracy theories as irrational behavior and thought and often discards them as such (Barkun 2006; Byford 2011; Pipes 1997; Sunstein
and Vermeule 2009). They build on Hofstadter, who saw it as unreasonable paranoia, overheated suspicion, and dangerous militancy (2012), and to Popper, who saw it as secularised remnants of an outdated religious worldview prioritising intent above chance (2013, 306). These two qualities of conspiracy theorists performing ‘paranoid politics’ and ‘bad science’ (Harambam 2020b, 12–17) live on in many contemporary discussions of contemporary populist leaders (Trump, Orban, Bolsonaro) and movements (Tea Party, 5 stars, AfD) that (allegedly) manipulate the public with inciting polarisations and false or alternative facts (Norris and Inglehart 2019).

A second group of scholars argue that it is neither fruitful nor possible to insist on the irrationality and falsity of conspiracy theories, especially if we want to understand their broad contemporary appeal and cultural significance. Such scholars take a more neutral stance to exploring the meaning conspiracy theories have for those engaging with them without condemning them as ludicrous and dangerous. Some argue that conspiracy theories bring back a sense of control as they explain inexplicable events and give meaning to complex, increasingly opaque and globalised systems (e.g. bureaucracies, capitalist systems, mass-communication technologies) (Aupers 2012; Dean 1998; Knight 2000; Melley 2000). From that perspective, conspiracy theories – half soothing, half unsettling – are a cultural coping mechanism to deal with a complex and uncertain world. Social psychologists make similar arguments by pointing to how conspiracy theories give back feelings of agency and control in disturbing or confusing situations in time (Douglas et al. 2017).

Others highlight the contested nature of truth and knowledge in post-modern societies and show how this ‘epistemic instability’ opens up a cultural space for conspiracy theories to thrive (Birchall 2006; Fenster 2008; Harambam 2020b). Mainstream societal institutions (media, religion, politics, and science) and the knowledge they produce are distrusted for they are (supposedly) corrupted by both dogma and material interests (Harambam and Aupers 2015) or because they don’t allow for ‘soft’ epistemologies (emotions, feelings, experiences, testimonies, traditions) (Harambam and Aupers 2019). Various new religious movements deploy conspiracy theories in their teachings as they do provide existential meaning in contrast to ‘cold’ rational institutions by explaining societal injustices along larger spiritual narratives of good and evil (Dyrendal et al. 2018). Social relations are important drivers of conspiracy theories too: people may express them to foreground their ideological group affiliation (Lewandowsky et al. 2017), or they are cultivated and enforced in social contexts such as ‘alternative’ schools or community centers (Sobo 2015). But conspiracy theories also channel discontent with mainstream institutions and represent populist challenges to the existing order (Fenster 2008; Harambam 2020b). While conspiracy theories thus operate in a cultural climate where various societal groups contest the epistemic authority of mainstream authorities (Fuller 2018), the reasons and motivations they do so greatly differ.

**People: suspicious minds or are we all conspiracy theorists now?**

Traditionally, conspiracy theorists were seen as people on the extremist margins of society, those radical paranoids Hofstadter spoke about, but given the contemporary popularity of conspiracy theories, this assumption is hard to maintain. Different scholars and disciplines say something about what kind of people believing in conspiracy theories. Social psychological research maps key personality characteristics of people scoring high on a ‘conspiracist scale’ (Brotherton et al. 2013), who would display certain personality traits (e.g. authoritarian, narcissistic), cognitive biases (e.g. confirmation bias and illusory pattern recognition), and more general psychological afflictions (anxiety, stress, uncertainty, exclusion, victimisation, anomie, cynicism, distrust, etc.) (Prooijen and Douglas 2018). Coupled together, such scholars highlight epistemic
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(understanding one’s environment), existential (being safe and in control of one’s environment), and social (maintaining a positive image of the self and the social group) factors as core identity traits of conspiracy theorists (Douglas et al. 2017, 2019).

Quantitative studies in political science measure the distribution of conspiracy theory beliefs across societal groups (Uscinski 2018). While many agree on the percentage of people endorsing one or more conspiracy theories (from 20 percent to almost a half the population, depending on the framing of the questions), their findings are less conclusive regarding the social and demographic factors correlating with conspiracy theory beliefs. Some argue that they cuts across age, gender, ideological conviction, religion, income, education, and ethnicity, whereas others found that conspiracy theorists were more likely to be male, unmarried, less educated, in a lower-income household, outside the labour force, from an ethnic minority group, not attending religious services, and perceiving themselves as of lower social standing than others (Douglas et al. 2019). Not surprisingly, conspiracy theorists showed higher alienation from established politics and lower levels of political engagement and are found on the more extreme, often populist, end of the political spectrum (Uscinski 2018; van Prooijen et al. 2015).

Qualitative scholars take a different approach to understand who conspiracy theorists are. In contrast to the aforementioned deductive-quantitative research favouring etic categories, qualitative studies focus on the emic, or self-perceptions of conspiracy theorists. Inspired by symbolic-interactionism and social identity theory (Jenkins 2014), they focus not just on how conspiracy theorists’ construct their own identities as ‘reflexive projects’, but also how they deal with their ‘stigmatized identity’ in everyday life (Harambam 2020b). For example, people actively resist their stigmatisation as ‘conspiracy theorists’ by distinguishing themselves from the gullible mainstream as ‘critical freethinkers’ (Harambam and Aupers 2017). Their ideas of self and other make three subcultural conspiracy groups apparent: activists, retreaters, and mediators. Harambam further distinguishes between conspiracy theory entrepreneurs, social movements, and individuals (Harambam 2020a). Other scholars follow marginalised or disenfranchised groups in society, such as African Americans, who deploy conspiracy theories to critique power, explain their marginal position, and garner momentum for resistance and uprising (Dean 1998; Fenster 2008; Knight 2000). Since conspiracy theorists cannot be seen as one of a kind, it is imperative to differentiate.

Mitigations: debunking, or what else to do with conspiracy theories?

Conspiracy theories are generally seen as a societal problem much in line with misinformation, fake news, and other forms of (allegedly) false information in our public domain (Waisbord 2018). This is because access to quality information regarding various aspects of life, from politics to health, is of utmost importance for people in liberal democracies to form opinions and participate in public debates (Fuchs 2014). However, conspiracy theories are said to have more adverse individual and societal effects. Scholars argue that they can erode trust in governments and mainstream institutions, deny and discard scientific evidence, increase depression and alienation, inform dangerous (public) health decisions, incite or stimulate hatred and prejudice, create a climate of distrust towards experts and truth, increase radical and extremists behaviour, and decrease political participation (Douglas et al. 2019; Lewandowsky et al. 2017). While (some) conspiracy theories can be productive challenges to dominant societal hierarchies, may hold powerful authorities accountable, and can be an impetus for institutional change (Denitith 2018; Harambam 2020b), the list of negative consequences is long and serious. It is thus imperative to be more specific about which conspiracy theories pose such dangers, when, and how (Hagen 2020).
Academics, NGO’s, governments, and various other organisations initiate campaigns to combat conspiracy theories. Just as in the fight against misinformation, the most dominant mitigation strategy is debunking or fact-checking: showing the public that conspiracy theories are flawed understandings of reality would result in their no longer believing and trafficking in them (Krekó 2020). While it is obviously important to trace, highlight, and correct false information in our public sphere, the practical reality is more complex. First, it’s not always clear which (parts of) conspiracy theories are actually false, and proving them wrong involves much interpretative and investigative work (Dentith 2018; Graves 2016). Second, conspiracy theories are said to have a ‘self-sealing quality’: counterevidence is construed as part of the conspiracy (Barkun 2006; Sunstein and Vermeule 2009). Third, debunking strategies are rarely effective: people generally do not accept fact-checking corrections that go against their ideology or worldview or when they come from ideologically opposed societal groups (Harambam 2017). Paradoxically, debunking information may then even be counterproductive, strengthening original beliefs and increasing their reach (Lewandowsky et al. 2017). Other strategies, such as ‘inoculating’ or exposing the flawed rhetorical arguments and tropes of conspiracy theories, may be more effective (Krekó 2020).

An even bigger problem than the (un)truthfulness of conspiracy theories is perhaps their presence in today’s technologically saturated (social) media ecosystem (Bennett and Livingston 2018; Wardle and Derakhshan 2017). Spurred by troll factories, bot(net)s, and recommendation algorithms alike, conspiracy theories rapidly spread over the internet, reaching great audiences (Bounegru et al. 2018). Of particular concern are the (business models of) Big Tech companies: these have created an opaque information landscape, in which they exploit and expand information asymmetries to target (and sell) specific audiences based on inferred psychometric profiles (Gary and Soltani 2019). Given the powerful role these allegedly neutral platforms play in the proliferation of contentious contents online (Dijck et al. 2018), they are called to take action (Harambam et al. 2018). While resisting external regulations, they have committed in Europe to a ‘Code of Practice on Disinformation’ and increased their efforts to limit the spread of conspiracy theories via content moderation and adjusting recommendation algorithms. However, given unchanged platform business models and the aforementioned paradoxes and complexities that only aggravate when automated at scale, it is to be seen what these efforts will achieve (Gillespie 2018; Graves 2018). The broader question of how not to throw the baby (free speech and legitimate societal critique) out with the bathwater (disinformation) will continue to haunt platforms, academics, and legislators.

Future research: exploring the affective and playful dimensions of conspiracy theories

Research on conspiracy theories is mostly rather serious business. It features the causes and consequences of a cultural phenomenon that is generally regarded a societal problem and hence focuses (too) much on its dangers (Harambam 2020b, 216). This obscures the affective and playful dimensions that are just as much part of conspiracy theories. To close this chapter, some suggestions are offered for future research in this direction. First, scholars can explore how conspiracy theorising and the practical search for truth offer effects such as excitement and satisfaction. Fenster made an important point years ago about how ‘the rush and vertiginous feelings associated with discovering conspiracy’ induce ‘a sense of pleasure’ (2008, 14). Future research can substantiate this claim further in all empirical details: how do different people take pleasure in the sifting of clues and the ferreting out of hidden truths, and how does this affective dimension of conspiracy theorising empirically manifest itself in different ways? Second, scholars can investigate how people engage with conspiracy theories in playful or ironic ways.
Pointing to the ludic online hype of the Area 51 raid that quickly gathered millions of interested people on Facebook, Sobo argues for looking at conspiracy theories through the lens of play as another way to understand their contemporary popularity (2019). When playing, people feel free to experiment with wild thinking, imagine ‘what if?’ possibilities, and oppose opaque power without serious ramifications (Harambam et al. 2011). Humour, irony, and play are similarly important ways to show cultural capital to peers and build social networks. Conspiracy culture is full of playful references to popular culture, and conspiracy memes are a staple ingredient of today’s memetic culture online. It is about time that academics take seriously the playful sides of conspiracy theories as well.

References


