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Citation for published version (APA):

Birchall, C., & Knight, P. (2022). Do Your Own Research: Conspiracy Theories and the Internet. *SOCIAL RESEARCH*, 89(3).

Citing this paper

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Clare Birchall and Peter Knight

Do Your Own Research: Conspiracy Theories and the Internet

Author Accepted Manuscript

Social Research, vol. 89, no. 3

What difference has the internet made to conspiracy theories? In the wake of recent episodes in the United States—from birtherism to the “big lie,” from QAnon to the COVID-19 “infodemic,” and from the “great replacement” to the “great reset”—the default assumption is that the internet has created an unprecedented spread of conspiracy theories. It seems commonsense that the internet in general, and social media in particular, has increased the volume and virality of conspiracy theories, leading to fears that polarized conspiracism threatens to undermine trust in impartial media, objective science, and even democracy itself. But is that actually the case? If some commentators have raised the alarm that the internet has changed everything in the realm of conspiracism, others have adopted the contrarian position that the internet has changed nothing. Neither claim is ultimately convincing. What this essay will make clear is the necessity of asking different kinds of research questions to understand how the internet has shaped the form and function, the production and consumption, and the causes and consequences of conspiracy narratives.¹

INFORMATION WANTS TO BE FREE

In an influential article from 2007 (admittedly before the full flourishing of Web 2.0 and social media), the philosopher Steve Clarke made the surprisingly optimistic prediction that, although

¹ This article is focused on the United States. The role that the internet plays in promoting conspiracism in other nations and regions is even less well understood, not least because what counts as a conspiracy theory changes in different political and media regimes. Looked at one way, the definition of a conspiracy theory is fairly straightforward: it is the belief that an undesirable event or state of affairs is the result of a small group deliberately plotting in secret. However, this bare-bones definition (what might be called a “theory of conspiracy”) does not tell us much about what is interesting or distinctive about conspiracy theories. Instead, we need to include other elements into a “family resemblance” definition, including argumentative assumptions (e.g., intentionalism, deception, connectedness), typical rhetorical features (e.g., apocalypticism, Manicheanism, occultism, melodrama), social/political function (e.g., othering, scapegoating, going against received wisdom), and epistemological status (seeing historical events as always the result of a secret conspiracy even when the evidence does not justify it).

the internet might temporarily lead to an increase in the volume of conspiracy talk, in the long run it would have the opposite effect. His argument was based in part on the observation that “there are calls to establish conventions regarding the reliability of information on the internet,” leading him to conclude that “there seems to be in principle no reason why such conventions could not be established and why these could not achieve general acceptance” (Clarke 2007, 170). Clarke’s hope that conspiracist misinformation will fade away in the online marketplace of ideas is bolstered by his conviction that there is a “high level of critical discussion on the internet,” which will entail conspiracy theories becoming (in terms adapted from Imre Lakatos) a “degenerating research programme” (170). The hope of Clarke and other early pundits was that the internet would enable robust criticism of conspiracy theories, with real-time fact-checking enabled by instant access to all the world’s information. However, the cyberlibertarian rallying cry from the early years of the internet that “information wants to be free” cuts both ways. On the one hand, it held out the promise that those peddling conspiracy theories would no longer be able to get away with making plausible-sounding claims, because everyone now had an infinite encyclopedia at their fingertips. On the other hand, the hope of many countercultural hackers and conspiracy theorists was that all the hidden information of states and corporations could now be leaked, exposing conspiracies and crimes for all to see. Neither of these optimistic scenarios has panned out. Shit-posting, trolling, and the monetization of controversy have undermined Clarke’s fantasy of a Habermasian digital public sphere. Likewise, the sheer volume of information online means that important revelations can be lost in the “infoglut” (Andrejevic 2013).

A GOLDEN AGE OF CONSPIRACY THEORIES

With the “perfect storm” of the pandemic and the election in the United States in 2020, there were many headlines about “a golden age of conspiracy theories” (e.g., Stanton 2020). Few would challenge the idea that the internet has led to a significant rise in the volume of conspiracy theories and the velocity with which they circulate in the online sphere. It is thus not surprising that three-quarters of Americans believe that social media (and the internet more generally) are to blame for the spread of conspiracy theories (Enders et al. 2021). Yet measuring this “qualitative shift in quantity” (de Zeeuw and Gekker 2022) is easier said than done. First, it is important to recognize that there are several potentially distinct elements within the overarching claim: an increase in the production, the distribution, and/or the consumption of conspiracy

theories. In addition, platforms do not always make it easy for researchers to measure certain activity.

Nevertheless, in recent years and especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, many alarming-sounding figures have been bandied about. A report by the Center for Countering Digital Hate in July 2020, for example, found that anti-vaccination accounts (many of which promote conspiracy theories) on the main English-language social media platforms had a combined total of 58 million followers. A study of the most popular, conspiracy-minded anti-vaccination accounts on Instagram found that the number of followers of these accounts increased fivefold during 2020 (BBC 2021). Facebook (in response to public pressure) announced that by August 2021 it had removed 20 million pieces of misinformation related to COVID-19 and vaccines (Pertwee, Simas, and Larson 2022). Within a week of its release, the conspiracist online video *Plandemic: The Hidden Agenda behind COVID-19* had been viewed more than 8 million times on YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, and it was liked, commented on, or shared 2.5 million times on Facebook alone (Frenkel, Decker, and Alba 2020). These headline figures of the volume of conspiracist misinformation are dramatic, but they are rarely framed in comparative context of either the overall information landscape or an individual's overall media diet. The scale of online activity is indeed overwhelming—500 hours of content are uploaded to YouTube every minute, and 500 million tweets are posted every day—but what percentage of that torrent of creation is conspiracist is not easy to determine. A typical data-intensive study (Gerts et al. 2021) of COVID-19 conspiracy rumors on Twitter, for example, began with a dataset of 120 million COVID-related tweets (representing only a small fraction—roughly 1 percent—that researchers are allowed by the platform to access of the total daily “firehose”). It was then filtered down using various machine-learning techniques to a subset of 1.8 million tweets that were relevant to the four main conspiracy theories they were tracking. This sampling suggests that only 1–2 percent of COVID-19 talk on Twitter was overtly conspiracist. Likewise, according to one large-scale study, there might be an excess of information about COVID-19 circulating online, but misinformation and disinformation are not winning out (Broniatowski et al. 2021). Although anecdotal and journalistic accounts during the pandemic repeatedly noted the seeming omnipresence of conspiracy rumors on people's social media feeds, one study from April 2020 found that only a minority of respondents in its survey had come across a lot of misinformation concerning COVID-19 (Nielsen 2020). However, as

other surveys showed, young people and the less well-educated come across more significant amounts of misinformation, because they are the demographic groups most likely to get their news and information from social media (Allington and McAndrew 2021).

Many data analytic studies of specific conspiracy theories and individual platforms have found evidence of significant increases in the volume and reach of conspiracy misinformation (Mahl, Schäfer, and Zeng 2022). Yet these findings tend to be framed in alarmist fashion. Although it is shocking, for example, that Donald Trump as the incoming president appeared on Alex Jones's show, it must also be noted that Jones's Infowars website does not make it into the list of the top 1,000 most visited websites in the United States (Uscinski, DeWitt, and Atkinson 2018, 117). It thus remains far from clear whether conspiracy theories and related forms of mis- and disinformation are drowning out other ideas in the online landscape, whether new media has significantly overtaken legacy media, whether people end up believing in the conspiracist misinformation they encounter, and, finally, whether belief in these ideas translates into behavior. Although it is thus unclear whether conspiracy speculation has increased since the advent of the internet (and social media in particular), conspiracy theories have become far more *visible* as matters of political concern. The number of articles by journalists and academic researchers warning about the prevalence and consequences of conspiracism has increased considerably in the last two decades, even if the number of conspiracy theories has not.

THE ETERNAL RETURN OF CONSPIRACISM

Much of the recent surge in research and commentary on conspiracism focuses on worrying statistics about the volume of online misinformation and level of popular belief in conspiracy theories (with the former often taken as evidence for the latter). During the pandemic, for example, an array of opinion polls produced alarming headlines that approximately 10 percent of people believe that COVID is activated by 5G radio waves, 20 percent believe that the vaccine contains a microchip, and 30 percent believe that the pandemic was planned in advance. Likewise, much has been made of findings that three quarters of Republicans believe that the 2020 presidential election was stolen (Cillizza 2021). Surveys show that half of Americans now believe in at least one conspiracy theory—and, researchers note, if enough examples are added to the questionnaire, that figure reaches 80 percent or more (Smallpage et al. 2020). Reversing earlier analyses of conspiracy belief as a product of a bizarre or delusional mindset, many

psychological studies of conspiracism now view it as widespread in the population and connected to common cognitive biases. The implicit assumption in many of these surveys is that belief in conspiracy theories is reaching proportions that are potentially damaging to society. There are two problems here. First, they tend to find correlation rather than a clear causal connection between internet/social media use and conspiracy belief. Second, and more importantly, it is far from certain that belief in conspiracy theories has increased in recent decades, which undermines the implied claim that the spread of conspiracism is connected to the growth of the internet. Some researchers have suggested, contrary to received wisdom, that we are not living in a “golden age” of conspiracism, with the implication that the internet has not made a significant difference to conspiracy belief (Uscinski and Parent 2014). It is true that belief in individual conspiracy theories was higher before the internet than in the present, with belief in JFK assassination conspiracy theories, for example, as high as 80 percent in the 1990s in the wake of Oliver Stone’s film, but by the 2010s that figure had declined to 60 percent (Knight 2007). Although these figures might be discounted because they involve comparing results from surveys with different methodologies, some studies that have repeated the same questions over a decade-long span have found no evidence of any increase in belief (Uscinski et al. 2022). If anything, their results suggest a slight decline over time.

This survey-based research provides a strong counterargument to the commonly held conviction that the internet has caused a dramatic increase in conspiracy belief. However, it is not without its problems. There is not room here to consider some of the thornier issues with measuring belief in conspiracy theories through opinion polls, not least the possibility of trolling responses to the polls. Yet even if consistent and accurate longitudinal survey data were available, it is important to recognize that not only what counts as a conspiracy theory has changed over time, but also the meaning and significance of conspiracy belief have also altered considerably. In the late eighteenth century, for example, belief that historical events were the result of a secret plot—rather than the inscrutable workings of divine providence—were a sign of a sophisticated, Enlightenment rethinking of the nature of causality. From the Declaration of Independence to George Washington’s “Farewell Address,” the rhetoric of conspiracy was not necessarily evidence of the “paranoid style” (Hofstadter 1964) among the nascent nation’s leaders, but a politically compelling way to make sense of current events. As Michael Butter (2014) has demonstrated, until the twentieth century many mainstream American politicians and

writers framed their arguments in terms of secret plots and designs. The stoking of populist fears about countersubversive minorities and imagined infiltrating enemies—be they Catholics, Native Americans, Jews, African Americans, gays and lesbians, or communists—has been a recurrent strand of American politics. Conspiracy theories only became delegitimized and stigmatized when social scientists like Richard Hofstadter began to identify “conspiracy theory” and the “paranoid style” as dangerous pathologies of mass political movements, from Nazism to McCarthyism (Thalmann 2019). In short, conspiracy-minded explanations of historical causation were far more central to American politics in previous centuries than in the present, perhaps with the exception of Trump’s rise to political power through his barrage of tweets insinuating conspiracy theories. Any claims to the unprecedented prominence of conspiracism in the age of the internet therefore need to be revisited in the light of this longer history.

MADE FOR CONSPIRACY THEORY

Even if data from surveys and an understanding of the longer history of conspiracy thinking in the United States temper the claim that we are witnessing a golden age of conspiracism, there are nevertheless convincing reasons conspiracy theories might flourish on the internet. The internet makes it much easier for conspiracy theorists to connect with like-minded people and develop a sizeable audience and community. When we (and other cultural studies scholars) first started researching American conspiracy culture in the 1990s, much of the research involved visiting obscure bookstores, ordering hard-to-find items via mail-order catalogs of conspiracy esoterica, and attending occasional Kennedy assassination buff conventions.

The advent of the internet means that there is now a low barrier to entry for those who want to publish their ideas to a wide audience. The traditional gatekeeping functions of publishers and editors have been increasingly bypassed. The ease of producing professional-looking digital conspiracy content with readily available software became apparent with *Loose Change*, a homemade documentary about 9/11 made on a laptop and with a shoestring budget in 2004 by college dropout Dylan Avery. It was the first hit of the internet age (Butter 2020). If the production of conspiracism became easier online, the same can be said for its consumption. Most conspiracist content is freely available, and although some people do become so heavily invested that conspiracy thinking takes over their lives, both online and offline, research has shown that for most people conspiracy theories and related forms of misinformation spread because of the

ease of sharing and liking without even necessarily reading the content or considering its accuracy.

Perhaps it is not only that the internet eases the production and consumption of conspiracy theories, but also that it has a particular affinity to conspiracy theories. In an early reflection the anthropologist Kathleen Stewart suggested that “the internet was made for conspiracy theory,” perhaps even that the internet “*is* a conspiracy theory” because “one thing leads to another, always another link leading you deeper into nothing and no place, floating through self-dividing and transmogrifying sites until you are awash in the sheer evidence that the internet exists” (1999, 18, emphasis in the original). With its underlying architecture of hyperlinks, the World Wide Web (comparatively new when Stewart was writing) can make it seem to web surfers that “everything is connected.” As Michael Barkun has noted, there are three cardinal rules of conspiracy theory: nothing is as it seems, nothing happens by accident, and everything is connected (2013, 3–4). The structure of the internet thus seems to encourage a conspiracy theory mindset, or at the very least it makes it easy to construct websites that link together snippets of evidence and factoids into a grand theory of everything. This argument also suggests that the internet does not just make conspiracy theorizing easier to produce and consume; it changes the *form* of conspiracy theories, encouraging the creation of ever more baroque theories that claim to tie everything together into a single, overarching master narrative.

The idea that there is a built-in affinity between the internet and conspiracy theorizing is initially compelling, yet there are problems with this neat fit. For one thing, there are plenty of examples of highly interconnected conspiracy theories before the advent of the internet, from antisemitic narratives about imagined plans for worldwide domination by Jews, to diatribes that find un-American subversion by an unholy alliance of communists and homosexuals. But we also need to consider historical shifts. Indeed, the nature of conspiracy theories began to change in the 1960s with the imagined conspiracy no longer consisting of a small, tight-knit group of identifiable plotters but instead increasingly represented as a vast impersonal system—think, for example, of the military-industrial complex in Joseph Heller’s *Catch-22*. Conspiracy narratives (in both fictional and nonfictional registers) thus began to focus on the power of institutions such as corporations, government agencies, knowledge systems, and social networks. At the same time, the imagined conspiracy increasingly shifted from a more traditional hierarchy of power to a newer understanding of networked control (Deleuze 1992).

Yet the idea in these emerging modes of conspiracy thinking was not simply that power is now more diffuse, but that these networked systems of mass control and mass communication threatened to erode a sense of individual agency. Those abstract and impersonal systems paradoxically were often represented as if they were powerful, intentional individuals, with impersonal structure reimagined as personal agency (Melley 1999). In effect, then, the impersonal ideological forces of society were dramatized as if they were the product of personal conspiracy. Although interconnectedness and the tendency to see social structures as a conspiracy may be key features of some contemporary conspiracy theorizing, it is not plausible to attribute these shifts solely to the changing medium. Indeed, other scholars (as we detail below) have suggested that the style of conspiracy theories has indeed changed in the age of the internet, not to interconnectedness but to increasing fragmentation. Moreover, in comparison with when Stewart was writing in 1999, the internet today is less rather than more connected. The increasing use of encrypted messaging apps, paywalls, firewalls, and censorship in certain countries, and the existence of the deep web, dark platforms, and spaces not searchable by mainstream engines reduce the interconnectedness that is supposedly hardwired into the internet. Likewise, the experience that Stewart describes of “always another link leading you deeper into nothing and no place” has been joined (and perhaps replaced) by other forms of online phenomenology, such as doom-scrolling and up-next recommendations. Rather than simply asserting that the internet in the abstract was made for conspiracy theory, we need to focus on the specific protocols, design choices, and platform affordances that have enabled—and hindered—particular modes of conspiracism.

THE NEW CONSPIRACISM

In an important recent book, the political scientists Russell Muirhead and Nancy Rosenblum (2019) argue that there is now a “new conspiracism.” In their view, conspiracy theories have traditionally tried to make sense of things by providing order instead of chaos. Because appearances are deceptive, it requires acting like a detective to join the dots. Yet, they argue, in the last decade or so, roughly in tandem with the flourishing of social media, a new conspiracism has emerged that replaces explanation and evidence with mere assertion and rumor. This newer “conspiracy without the theory,” they suggest, finds its fullest expression in the tweets of Trump, who perfected the art of insinuating a conspiracy without ever providing much in the way of

detailed argument. Instead, the new conspiracism requires partisan affirmation and repetition over considered reflection, and it eschews elaborate narratives in favor of vague gestures and innuendo. The purpose of the new conspiracism, according to Muirhead and Rosenblum, is not to convince its audience of a particular alternative account of events, nor even to expose wrongdoing in order to (re)build a better world. Instead, the aim of this post-truth form of conspiracy theorizing is delegitimation, destabilization, and disorientation of objective journalism, scientific facts, and democratic institutions. Muirhead and Rosenblum do not insist that the internet alone has caused this crisis of trust, but they are clear that it has exacerbated the tendency, not least in the case of Trump’s use of social media: “For classic conspiracists, the internet is a source of dots and patterns—information that fills in the narrative and solidifies their explanation of events. For the new conspiracists, all the energy is directed at repetition and affirmation. Repetition is the new conspiracism’s oxygen and, it sometimes seems, its whole purpose” (32).

Muirhead and Rosenblum’s account of post-truth conspiracism is persuasive, but their case is overstated. Conspiracy theories have not been outpaced by mere fragment and rumor. In the online environment there are still many examples of highly elaborated conspiracy theories, even if the kernel of the narrative is quite simple. The “great replacement” and the “great reset” theories (respectively, that the White Christian majority is being deliberately betrayed in Western countries and that the globalist elite are planning to institute a one-world government to control the masses) are the current master narratives of choice in the online conspiracy-sphere that is pivoting from the pandemic to climate change. Many conspiracy theories are developed and embellished in the endless outpouring of lengthy monologues and interviews on YouTube channels. Although posts and discussion threads on social media are indeed usually short, fragmentary, and contradictory, they often link to longer-form websites, videos, podcasts, and books. Even Trump returned to more expansive—if still rambling—modes of conspiracism in his campaign speeches in the last weeks before the 2016 election as he sought to appeal more directly to his base (Butter 2020, 146–48) and again with a turn to a comparatively detailed—if increasingly unhinged—litany of accusations in the aftermath of the 2020 election. Focusing on individual tweets misses the way that conspiracy followers put together an overarching theory from different snippets of evidence and links, even if there remain internal inconsistencies in the jumble of fragments. In this way, conspiracy theorizing online can become an active, communal

process of interpretation and assemblage, with QAnon as the prime example of a born-digital conspiracy theory that has morphed into a convoluted set of overlapping narratives.

ECHO CHAMBERS AND FILTER BUBBLES

Several high-profile studies by academics and public intellectuals have claimed that the internet has not produced a utopian global public sphere in which all information is freely available. Instead, the argument is that conspiracy theories and other forms of misinformation flourish because people are now more likely to become trapped in digital “echo chambers” where they only engage with ideologically like-minded participants. This is coupled with the power of search engine results and recommendation algorithms on social media platforms to create a “filter bubble” effect, in which individuals only receive information that reinforces their increasingly blinkered worldview. The idea that the internet encourages conspiracist echo chambers and filter bubbles is intuitively plausible, and in broad terms there is considerable evidence from data analytics research and journalistic reportage that committed conspiracy theorists are reinforced in their beliefs and become increasingly isolated in online environments. For example, one study (Vosoughi, Roy, and Aral 2018) found that on platforms such as Twitter, false rumors and conspiracy theories spread far and fast, drowning out accurate information. Other researchers have found evidence of the way online spaces promote groupthink among a core of highly active participants (Geschke, Lorenz, and Holtz 2019). Likewise, in a series of studies of a large data set of conspiracy theory pages on Italian Facebook, the researchers found that orthodox science and conspiracy theories inhabit separate universes online, with confirmation bias and selective exposure making the polarization of views ever more pronounced (Del Vicario et al. 2016). In a similar fashion, sociological studies of the alt-right have demonstrated that conspiracist communities create and sustain an “alternative influence network” (Lewis 2018) in both mainstream venues such as YouTube channels and the “deep vernacular web” (de Zeeuw and Tuters 2020) of message boards such as 4chan and Discord.

However, what these studies show is that at most echo chambers and filter bubbles accelerate a process of often willful self-exclusion on the part of conspiracy theorists, rather than the technology pushing innocents “down the rabbit hole.” While there are indeed ways in which the social and technological features of the online environment increase polarization and reinforce existing worldviews, in a strict sense—especially if considering the population at large

rather than the highly engaged—the echo chamber and filter bubble hypotheses are not accurate (Bruns 2019). Online communities are rarely completely homogenous or totally impervious to outside influence—nor are they necessarily any more isolated than conspiracy-dominated groups from the pre-digital era, such as the John Birch Society. The media diet of those seemingly sealed inside echo chambers is in reality quite varied. Seth Flaxman, Sharad Goel, and Justin M. Rao (2016), for example, examined the media diet of 50,000 US readers of online news via their web browsing history and found that, while there was indeed evidence of political polarization, it was not the result of a filter bubble in the strict sense because people often turned to mainstream media outlets in addition to their usual highly partisan news sources—even if they used those sources merely to provide “proof” of their existing theories. Several investigations of the main conspiracy theory forum on Reddit (Samory and Mitra 2018; Klein, Clutton, and Dunn 2019) found that the site indeed constituted a narrowly constrained opinion space in epistemic terms, but they also found that its community was diverse, stratified, and porous. What these studies reveal is that when an echo chamber does emerge online, it is not necessarily caused by the inherent structure of the technology itself but by a process of social self-selection by participants that is also visible in the offline world. Engaging with the enemy doesn’t make people any less partisan—if anything, it increases polarization (O’Hara and Stevens 2015). While some researchers (Vaccari et al. 2016) have now begun to consider how users in reality engage with a diverse range of digital media, most studies of echo chambers have tended to focus on a single platform, which can present a skewed impression of the actual experience of people’s online lives. There is thus a tendency in the research to ignore or downplay the complex ecosystem of online and offline media. In reality, Fox News is as important as Facebook in promoting conspiracist ideas (Benkler, Faris, and Roberts 2018).

THE RABBIT HOLE

Two high-profile articles in the *New York Times* (Tufekci 2018; Roose 2019) raised the alarm about the potential for YouTube’s “up next” recommendation algorithm to nudge users into ever more extreme content. The argument is that, fueled by the financial incentive of encouraging ever more divisive, emotive, and engaging content, the built-in structural logic of these platforms pushes users down the rabbit hole of radicalization, with conspiracy theories playing a central role in this process. Some recent research (Munn 2019; Ribeiro et al. 2019) has found partial

confirmation of the hypothesis that YouTube and other platforms provide a “pipeline” from “gateway” channels to more extreme, conspiracist worldviews. However, researchers have struggled to provide robust evidence of this phenomenon. They have been hindered first by the problem that the platform’s recommendation algorithm remains a black box, and second by the fact that YouTube continuously tweaks its algorithm, most notably in January 2019 when it responded to mounting public criticism in the wake of several mass shootings (the Christchurch mosque and the Halle synagogue, in particular) that had been influenced by extremist conspiracy theory videos online. In a longitudinal big data study of YouTube channel recommendations, Marc Faddoul, Guillaume Chaslot, and Hany Farid (2020) found plausible evidence that the change to the algorithm had indeed greatly reduced recommendations for conspiracy theory videos, but neither consistently nor by as much as the platform had claimed. In a similar vein, a recent study (Chen et al. 2022) based on paired behavioral and survey data from a representative national sample in the United States found that it is not the algorithm that is pushing people down the rabbit hole on YouTube, but the fact that people are already interested in extremist content and reach it via external links from channels they are subscribed to. However, an alternative way of interpreting the findings of this study is not that recommendation algorithms have little effect, but that YouTube has—temporarily at least—fixed its rabbit hole problem.

The key issue therefore is whether the underlying technical and economic logic of the internet *inevitably* leads to more extreme opinions, conspiracy thinking, and social fragmentation. The problem with the rabbit hole metaphor and other accounts of radicalization pipelines is that they rely on a technodeterminist account of media effects, with a tendency to focus solely on the brainwashing power of the algorithm, rather than a more wide-ranging analysis of ideas and communities. In a strict sense, then, the picture of the online world as dominated by filter bubbles, echo chambers, and rabbit holes is exaggerated, especially when the research is based on a single platform study rather than an analysis of the broader media ecosystem and the complex lives of those who inhabit it. Focusing solely on the influence of the recommendation algorithms diverts attention from how the dynamic processes of cultural meaning-making and community formation interact with the technological affordances of the various platforms and the wider media landscape. Some of the big data studies of online conspiracism in effect come dangerously close to creating their own conspiracy theory: they

conjure up the image of internet users as the passive, unwitting dupes of a powerful cabal of Silicon Valley tech firms pulling the strings behind the scenes.

BOTS, TROLLS, AND RUSSIAN AGENTS

Since the US presidential election of 2016 and the subsequent Mueller report on Russia's interference in the election, there have been fears that Russian bot farms and trolls are spreading fake news, disinformation, and conspiracy theories. While there is now some persuasive evidence about the scale of online fake news promoted by organizations such as the Internet Research Agency (Howard 2020), there is less agreement about the extent to which pro-Kremlin agencies are spreading digital disinformation and conspiracy theories as forms of weaponized propaganda. The underlying suggestion is that Russia is in large part to blame for the seeming torrent of conspiracy rumors in the online environment. But what became obvious during the COVID-19 pandemic is that much online disinformation and conspiracism in the United States is homegrown, with Trump himself acting as a superspreader. Blaming shadowy Russian agents for infiltrating the American datasphere with devastatingly manipulative conspiracy theories is reminiscent of Cold War-era conspiracy theories about Communist brainwashing. Seeing conspiracy narratives as entirely "foreign" or merely "domestic" fails to grasp the complex channels of circulation between the two. For example, at the outset of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, conspiracy rumors began to circulate online that the war was a cover story to allow the Russians to destroy supposed US-run bioweapon labs in Ukraine, which (the theory suggested) had been responsible for manufacturing the COVID-19 virus and were planning to control the world's population by creating a series of pandemics, all part of the so-called great reset plan of the global elites, led by the World Economic Forum. The Ukraine-bioweapon conspiracy narrative first emerged on an obscure pro-QAnon/Trump Twitter account with the handle @WarClandestine; it was then picked up by Alex Jones's Infowars website and cascaded out across conspiracist networks on social media in the United States. Tucker Carlson and others on Fox News entertained the theory, which in turn meant it was adopted by some right-wing politicians, before being amplified by Kremlin-supporting media in Russia (who repeatedly used clips of Carlson on Fox News). Finally, it recirculated back into alt-right, pro-Putin circles on social media in the United States. What the case demonstrates is less the cunning deployment of a disinformation campaign by Russian agents than a vicious circle of

amplification, “participatory disinformation” (Starbird 2022), and opportunistic amplification between the margins and the mainstream, and the domestic and the foreign.

It would be naïve, however, to believe that there are not concerted campaigns of targeted disinformation carried out by Russia, even before the information war accompanying the invasion of Ukraine. There is considerable evidence, for example, of deliberate attempts by Russia to spread false rumors about COVID vaccines developed in Western Europe, presumably in order to enhance the shaky reputation of its own Sputnik vaccine (EUvsDisinfo 2021). The aim of much of this clandestine conspiracy-mongering—dubbed a “firehose of falsehood” (Paul and Matthews 2016)—is less to convince the target audience of a particular “alternative truth” than to sow doubt and cause confusion in a more wide-ranging fashion. It thus seems likely that “pollution of the information ecosystem” (Phillips and Milner 2021) is the ultimate goal of the kind of mass production of contradictory half-truths and conspiracy rumors that Russia (and, to a lesser extent, China) have championed. Yet the promotion of a post-truth form of doubt-inducing conspiracism is also the tactic of alt-right groups in the United States (Nagle 2017).

While this scattergun mode of disruptive rumormongering has reached a new scale in the age of the internet, the use of conspiracy narratives by the Russian intelligence agencies to promote internal confusion in the West is not new. Historians have shown, for example, how one of the main HIV/AIDS conspiracy theories that gained traction in the United States (particularly among African American communities)—that the virus was a bioweapon created in a US army lab—was initially spread as part of a Soviet and East German Cold War disinformation campaign via an obscure pro-Soviet newspaper from India and then painstakingly cultivated through a network of radio programs, journalists, and pseudo-scientific studies (Selvage 2019). Although there are thus historical precedents for the seeding of conspiracy rumors as part of covert “psy-ops” warfare, the scale and speed with which such narratives spread on the internet are of a different order of magnitude.

JUMPING THE SPECIES BARRIER

Another claim that is made for the difference that the internet has made to conspiracy theories is that there is now a much more direct link between online conspiracism and offline action. As the British journalist David Aaronovitch (2022) notes:

today many conspiracists link theory with action in a way they didn't in the past. Social media has proved not to be an atomising route to passivity but a spur to action . . .

Unpopulism [populism that the majority of people do not support] achieved its most dangerous expression at the Capitol last year. And it did so largely because, in the US, conspiracy theories had jumped the species barrier dividing mainstream politics from the semi-violent fringe. The endorsement by the Republican Party in 2016 of a presidential candidate who himself had given active support to conspiracy theories—notably the Obama birth theory—marked a crucial moment.

Researchers working in the field of radicalization and extremism have also observed an increasing tendency for online conspiracy-mongering to lead to real-world violence, in cases such as arson attacks on 5G cellphone towers during the COVID-19 pandemic, murders and assaults committed by QAnon believers, and mass shootings carried out by gunmen who left clear trails of online radicalization (Amarasingam and Argentino 2020). These and many other documented cases of ideologically motivated violent extremism strongly suggest that the internet played a role in spurring the perpetrators to action (especially in those cases where the event was livestreamed). However, in some cases we are witnessing forms of ex post facto justification through the logic of conspiracy narratives for passions and prejudices already reached. In addition, there are plenty of examples of conspiracy-motivated violent actions in times before social media, from the assassination of President William McKinley by Leon Czolgosz in 1901 to the terrorist bomb attack in Oklahoma City carried out by Timothy McVeigh in 1995. Other forms of mass media have enabled the spread of incendiary conspiracy narratives, such as AM radio shock jocks and VHS tapes distributed at gun shows among militia groups and neo-Nazis in the 1980s; after all, when he was arrested, McVeigh was carrying a copy of *The Turner Diaries*, a fantasy novel about a White supremacist violent insurrection. The medium may have changed, but the connection between conspiracism and violence is not in itself new.

IT'S ALL ABOUT THE GRIFT

A final claim that is made for the difference that the internet has made to conspiracism is that it enables and promotes the monetization of controversy. Those who identified themselves as conspiracy researchers in previous decades may have achieved acclaim within their community,

such as some of the more prominent authors and speakers in the JFK assassination network. But most of them did it out of political conviction and personal passion, with few of them making much money. Prior to the internet, most conspiracy theory was a cottage industry. But the potential for monetizing content online has created a number of conspiracy entrepreneurs, the most visible and successful of whom is Alex Jones (that is, until his recent declaration of bankruptcy, as a response to lawsuits brought by parents of children murdered in the Sandy Hook school shooting). Conspiracy entrepreneurs make money from the advertising revenue generated by their subscriber base on their YouTube channels, for example, but with campaigns by organizations such as Global Disinformation Index highlighting the association of corporate brands with problematic content and mass deplatforming since 2019 of violent right-wing, QAnon, and anti-vax content, that source of income can be precarious. Indeed, as the case of Jones demonstrates, conspiracy entrepreneurs have found that a more lucrative source of revenue is the sale of vitamin supplements and miracle cures on their websites, all of which is fueled by their stock-in-trade rhetoric of anti-expert and anti-elite populism. The spread of conspiracy theories online is also due—in addition to outright conspiracy-mongers—to often ill-advised posts by celebrities and influencers. However, despite the prominence of a growing cadre of conspiracy entrepreneurs and influencers, the vast majority of those who dabble in conspiracy talk online—even those who actively create content rather than merely share things they come across on their social media feed—are not doing it for money.

While the internet makes it much easier for individual conspiracy theorists to connect with audiences and to make money from promoting their ideas (and associated merchandise), the platforms themselves also benefit from spreading conspiracism. They permit—and algorithmically promote—hot-button topics like conspiracy theories not because the platforms value free speech in itself, but because they understand that controversy increases engagement and engagement increases advertising revenue. Conspiracy theory and related forms of misinformation and disinformation have proven to be a lucrative theme.

DO YOUR OWN RESEARCH!

The internet has not created a crisis of conspiracism in the United States. It has, however, contributed to an intensification of emerging trends and processes—such as polarization, populism, and post-truth politics—that were already visible. In the wake of the COVID-19

pandemic and the storming of the Capitol on January 6, 2021, there are urgent calls to tackle the proliferation of conspiracy theories and other misinformation online. Yet we need to understand the exact nature of the problem before leaping to any hasty interventions. Rather than taking an unprecedented torrent of conspiracy theorizing as a given, it is necessary to examine the specific ways in which the advent of the internet has changed the nature and function of conspiracism. This will involve paying attention to the particular histories of internet cultures, from early bulletin boards and websites to blogs, video channels, social media platforms, livestreams, and so on. In short, we need to historicize the internet, rather than taking it as a single, undifferentiated phenomenon. It will also be necessary to understand the political economy, social dynamics, and technological affordances of the different internet spaces, from Usenet to YouTube and from TikTok to Telegram. But the peculiarities of these platforms will only become visible by placing them in a longer history of new media forms. The significance of Alex Jones and his Infowars media empire needs to be seen alongside Tucker Carlson's straight-to-camera monologues on Fox News, which in turn need to be compared to the radio broadcasts in the 1930s of Father Coughlin, the firebrand antisemitic Catholic priest who used the intimacy of radio to stir up nativist resentment during the Great Depression. As well as using innovative data methods to map out the scale and scope of conspiracism in the online environment, it will be necessary to use ethnographic approaches to understand how the circulation of conspiracy theories in the digital sphere creates new forms of identity and community. In short, we will need to do our own research in order to understand how and why "Do Your Own Research!" has become the rallying cry of contemporary online conspiracy theorists.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This work was supported by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council (grant AH/V001213/1).

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