

HPS371 Essay 2

# Conspiracy Theories and the COVID-19 Pandemic

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## **Abstract**

There is something fascinating about conspiracy theories: they are believed by people of different demographic groups, political backgrounds, and societies. While conspiracy theories can be harmless and even entertaining at times, they can be dangerous for individual and collective well-being – especially when they become entangled with medical and public health topics (Stein et al, 2021). With the ongoing COVID-19 Pandemic, there is an increase in conspiratorial beliefs. Is this a coincident or are certain aspects of the pandemic beneficial for the spread of conspiracies? Through examining the strategies of conspiracy theories and aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic, it appears that uncertainties caused by the pandemic and the structure of the media are both highly possible reasons why conspiratorial beliefs increases during this pandemic.

## **Introduction**

There is something fascinating about conspiracy theories: they are believed by people of different demographic groups, political backgrounds, and societies. While conspiracy theories can be harmless and even entertaining at times, they can be dangerous for individual and collective well-being – especially when they become entangled with medical and public health topics (Stein et al, 2021). In the events of the COVID-19 pandemic, conspiracy theories appear to have gained evermore popularity, seemingly thriving in pandemic uncertainties. While most see the correlation between pandemic uncertainties and rise in conspiracies, I will argue that pandemic uncertainties and the structure of the media, is advantageous for the spread of conspiracy theories.

## **Conspiracy Theories and The Pandemic**

It is difficult to articulate characteristics of conspiracy theories, especially when there is an ocean of variant conspiracy theories for almost every topic. To set some focus, we will take a look at a recent giant of conspiracy theories – QAnon – a single conspiracy theory that seemingly combined a vast number of other conspiracy theories. Berkowitz, a game designer, has an interesting insight on QAnon, as it shares crucial similarities with fictitious video games aiming to create stories in alternative realities. According to Berkowitz (2020), an important characteristic

of QAnon is that it “grows on the wild misinterpretation of random data, presented in a suggestive fashion in a milieu designed to help the user come to the intended misunderstanding.” (Berkowitz, 2020). The reason why this method is so successful, is because people often experience the tendency to perceive a connection between random or unrelated things – this tendency is also known as Apophenia (Berkowitz, 2020). In short, the hinting and pre-seeding of conclusions fueled by apophenia is a key strategy for conspiracy theories.

Individual and public health is a major topic that relates conspiracy theories to the current pandemic. Health related conspiratorial claims ranges from stating that the pandemic is a hoax, to asserting that vaccines are actually the cause of the virus instead of being the cure. While it is difficult to measure the effects of these claims, there are undoubtable consequences to individual and public health (Stein et al, 2021). For instances, disbelief in the reality of the pandemic may lead individuals to protest against and violate protocols such as social distancing and mask mandates, which in turn can help the pandemic to spread; while anti-vaccine movements fueled by tropes and conspiratorial claims can prevent societies to reach herd immunity. Although conspiratorial thinking can easily occur under normal circumstances, it is unlikely that pandemic uncertainties does not help to generate more conspiratorial thinking and beliefs. Afterall, many of these conspiracies are unreasonably far-fetched with destructive consequences, and are unlikely to be widely accepted under normal circumstances.

### **Conspiracies in Pandemic Uncertainties**

Since early 2020, the drastic escalation of the COVID-19 Pandemic brought a time of crises to countries around the world. The pandemic not only brought the deadly SARS-CoV-2 virus, it created areas of uncertainties in all aspects of our lives. Early knowledge about the virus was limited and results produced by researches are often conflicted. The combination of danger and uncertainties brought about feelings of anxiety, stress, and powerlessness to many. As our narratives began to collapse, the future seems unknowable and uncontrollable; in turn, these feelings lead to the need of sense-making and a regaining narrative (Šrol et al, 2021).

Unfortunately, sense-making mechanisms can increase the likelihood of conspiratorial thinking. Not only does conspiracies provides a way of sense-making, an explanation to the cause

of the pandemic, and even who is to blame. In particular, a research done by Šrol et al (2021) showed that these feelings (anxiety and lack of control), are likely caused by lower trust in institutions' response to the pandemic and a higher perception of risk of COVID-19. However, the feeling of lack of control alone independently predicted endorsement of COVID-19 conspiracy theories (Šrol et al, 2021). Simultaneously, conspiracy beliefs are already associated with lower trust in institutions and lack of control, creating an escalating effect.

Pandemic uncertainties cause lower trust in institutions when individuals perceive them as not doing the right thing. This often means making decisions with little regard of seemingly obvious conclusions. Thagard (2021) suggest that motivated inference is the most important factor of denial of evidence-supported causal claims about COVID-19. In brief, motivated inference is made through not only evidence, but also personal goals; motivated inference “is more than wishful thinking because people do not just believe whatever they want to believe but rather seek out evidence and arguments that support what they want to believe.” (Thagard, 2021, p.3). It is only too easy for motivated inferences to be made. In Canada and the U.S., the pandemic measures have mostly been inefficient; as mask mandates, social gathering restrictions, and border bans are lifted too early despite high possibility for another wave of infections. This not only applies to leaders; it also applies to the public as both are motivated to believe they still can exercise personal freedom without taking risks. Unfortunately, filling inductive gaps with personal beliefs are not epistemically justified, and ignoring evidence have led institutions to make mistakes. As many began to see more mistakes, the trust in institutions decreases.

Lower trust in institutions has always been a key tactic of conspiracies, but pandemic uncertainties only swing in their favour. Under non-pandemic circumstances, conspiracy theories are already armed with strategies to let their victims (most of whom likely experiencing a lack of control) lower trust in institutions and mainstream views. In brief, conspiracies feed users selected sources and tell them to do the research while not trust in others, tricking users into believing their guided apophenia while rewarding them with hits of dopamine and a sense of greater purpose (Berkowitz, 2020). During the pandemic, trust in institutions and feeling of lack of control are already lowered in comparison to normal circumstances. Thus, the pandemic uncertainties is a cause of increasing conspiracy theory endorsement during the pandemic.

### **Conspiracies in Relation to the structure of the Media, the Infodemic and Neoliberalism**

The role of the media is unneglectable to the spread of conspiracy theories. While the pandemic restricting face-to-face interactions, more attentions are pulled towards social media and online news for a variety of reasons. Social media can offer companionship and alternative perspectives; while news can provide important information regarding health and policies (Abbas et al, 2021, p.1919). However, not all is factual and useful in this sea of information, incorrect and misleading lure are also spreading misinformation. This abundant of both trustworthy and untrustworthy information is also known as the 'infodemic'. The infodemic makes finding trustworthy knowledge extremely difficult, which can also induce feelings of powerlessness (Weilderhold, 2020, p.275; Chichock, 2020). Both the confusion and the sense of powerlessness are opportunities for conspiracies to strike.

Furthermore, social media and various search engines have another secret weapon that induces bias into users' views – highly predictive algorithms. The primary purpose of these tools is to suggest personalized content, but it can induce bias in many cases. When an individual starts to look into conspiracy theories, their search histories are used to bring them more information relevant to those conspiracies. This cycle of feeding users information they are already exposed to tend to reinforce beliefs in those topics, regardless of whether they are conspiracies. This by-product of the media can easily polarize one's view and cause dangerous consequences. Although these predictive algorithms are just as effect under non-pandemic circumstances, the increased use of social media can only lead to more potential victims to go down rabbit holes of conspiracies.

How the media became this way was largely due to neoliberalism, the most influential political force today. The central elements of neoliberalism include emphasis on free markets; conservative political agenda; and minimum interventions on social reproduction (Warf, 2021, p.2). With generation more profit in mind, companies around the world are driven to draw more attention to their media, giving rise to the 24-hour news cycle and the insanely predictive algorithms. Neoliberalism is the main reason why the media structure is the way it is.

## **Conclusion**

Pandemic uncertainties have affected many aspects of our lives. The feelings of lack of control combined with a lower trust in institutions created a great opportunity for conspiratorial beliefs to take hold. The media has been inducing bias from before the pandemic, but this is further exploited by conspiracies when the pandemic brought increased attention to the media. Conspiracies was able to take advantages of this aspect of the media, along side lowering trust in institutions and increasing feeling of lack of control. Overall, the pandemic circumstance has given a significant advantage to the spread of conspiracy theories. Knowing the harm that may come from this, our net steps should be to evaluate how we can counter conspiracy theories, especially in times of crises.

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