Infodemic

Infodemic: COVID-19 Conspiracy Theories

Sep 30, 2020 —

Welcome to the blog for the Arts and Humanities Research Council funded project, “Infodemic”. Why “infodemic”? The Director General of the World Health Organisation has warned that “we’re not just fighting an epidemic; we’re fighting an infodemic. Fake news spreads faster and more easily than this virus, and is just as dangerous.” The WHO defines an infodemic as an “overabundance of information—some accurate, some not—that makes it harder for people to find trustworthy sources and reliable guidance when needed.” Conspiracy theories about the origin, spread and implications of COVID-19 have become a notable genre within this “overabundance of information.” Moreover, the pandemic seems to have arrived into and exacerbated a perfect storm of social media virality and political-cultural polarisation.

This research grant was awarded as part of the UKRI’s rapid response call for projects that tackle urgent questions regarding all aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic. As a team, our expertise very much lies in the humanities – in cultural

pandemic. As a team, our expertise very much lies in the humanities—in cultural studies, cultural history, critical theory, and the digital humanities. Working across these fields, we will address the political, cultural, communicational, and epistemological dimensions of the current crisis by focusing on not only conspiracy theories as a particularly sticky form of misinformation, but also the platforms on which they circulate. By providing a clear-eyed analysis that cuts through some of the hype and hysteria surrounding the proliferation of coronavirus conspiracy theories, we will be able to make more convincing recommendations about how to combat the most harmful forms.

Knight and Birchall have worked on a productive EU comparative research project before and it's clear that work comparing the place and function of conspiracy theories in different regions is clearly needed. However, the focus of "Infodemic"—a relatively fast turn-around, small project—is on English language conspiracy theories only. While the political contexts of the UK, the US, and to a lesser extent the EU will be our primary focus on this occasion, many Covid-19 conspiracy theories have spread globally, albeit displaying local adaptations.

Our blog will serve as a space for us to situate COVID-19 conspiracy theories and new media platforms within social and political contexts, respond quickly to new developments in the conspiracy landscape, announce the findings of our data-led projects, publish our analyses of particular case studies, and discuss the interventions of our project partners: the Institute of Education at University College London, Sense about Science and First Draft, as well as Density Design. Ultimately, this blog is the experimental notebook for a forthcoming academic book on COVID-19 conspiracy theories.

While there are five core members of the research team—Peter Knight from Manchester University; Clare Birchall, Liliana Bounegru, and Jonathan Gray from King's College London, and Marc Tuters from the OILab at University of Amsterdam—the nature of data research means that there are far more collaborators than we can name here. As well as our Research Assistants, Sean O'Brien and Fabio Votta, and our Research Associate, Emillie de Keulenaar, we have a multitude of student collaborators taking our courses and Winter/Summer Schools and working on different sub-projects throughout the year. We will be sure to credit these students where possible. In addition, having been involved in a number of research networks and projects on conspiracy theories, including the EU COST-funded Comparative Analysis of Conspiracy Theories in Europe, we very much consider ourselves to be working in a wider network of conspiracy scholars.

Knight and Birchall will be conducting macro conjunctural analyses and micro close readings of particular case studies. Bounegru and Gray are collaborating with First Draft and the Public Data Lab to produce a follow up to their Field Guide to Fake News specifically on COVID-19 conspiracy theories. They will be reaching out to journalists, providing what they call "recipes" that can assist in the writing of investigative pieces about coronavirus conspiracy theories. Tuters and his team at the OILab will be collecting and analysing data scraped from various social media platforms as well as monitoring the flow of conspiracist ideas between mainstream platforms and the "deep vernacular web" (anonymous forums and image boards like 8kun and 4chan). The OILab has already held one data sprint with students (over the Summer of 2020). It conducted preliminary research on our growing database and produced two reports—one on different conspiracy camps and another on the deplatforming of COVID-19 conspiracy theories. We will be drawing from and building on these in the coming months.

While we will have more to say about the potential pitfalls of conducting polls about conspiracy theories in later posts, the figures hint at a largescale phenomenon. Polls in the US have shown that 30% of people think that the COVID-19 virus was created in a lab, while an Ofcom poll in the UK has shown that 40% of people struggle to know what is and what is not true about COVID-19. Conspiracy theories can undermine trust in medical and scientific authorities; they can even, on occasion, lead to violent action (for example, the vandalisation of mobile phone masts by people who believe in the theory that 5G radio waves are actually spreading the virus). This project will examine how and why conspiracy theories circulate in the online misinformation ecosystem. We will analyse which rumours of conspiracy have gained most traction, where they have come from, how they are transmitted, why people are attracted to them, what harms they may cause, and what, if anything, should be done about them.

We use the term "conspiracy theory" in this blog and the project's title but recognise that it is a highly contested term that raises more questions than it answers. There is, by now, a wealth of research on this term exploring its historical precursors and etymological roots, the pejorative connotations it holds and the way it is mobilised in ideological and normative ways and we will be engaging with this work in future posts. We begin with a definition of conspiracy theories as explanations of events that veer away from consensus reality or the official version to suggest that a conspiring group with malign intent is behind those events. (Of course, what counts as the "official version" or "consensus reality" is constantly shifting, particularly today when those in power often offer scientifically unproven "official" accounts!) We consider conspiracy theories to operate as a particularly sticky subset of misinformation (unwittingly false information), disinformation (knowingly false information), or fake news (false

information), disinformation (knowingly false information), or fake news (false information produced to maximize clicks for profit). It might be best to say that conspiracy theory constitutes a form of "problematic information"—Caroline Jack's umbrella term for a range of post-truth discursive phenomena.

We will explore all of this in later posts, but at this point we want to make it clear that we start from a position of knowing that we are all, to some degree, "conspiracy theorists." We all, that is, entertain some unfounded, speculative narratives and fears about the way power and politics operate. As academics who cut our teeth on a diet of literary and critical theory, we share with conspiracy theorists a taste for the "hermeneutics of suspicion," to use Paul Ricoeur's phrase. Because of this link that binds us to conspiracy theory in sometimes uncomfortable ways, we are not in the business of diagnosing or pathologising conspiracy theorists. We want to be mindful of the pitfalls of engaging with what Noortje Marres calls "a politics of demarcation." Spending time defending our own rational position risks not giving adequate thought to how we can, as Marres puts it, "develop new strategies to secure a central role for knowledge in public life." It also distracts us from the underlying causes of a turn to conspiracy theories.

Indeed, conspiracy theories, including COVID-19 conspiracy theories, often reflect genuine and legitimate concerns. The conspiracy theory that suggests COVID-19 was created in a lab, for example, might point towards historical examples of states exercising power over its citizens' bodies or perhaps worries about the stockpiling and use of biological weapons. 5G conspiracy theories might tap into the very real ways in which new technologies are enabling and legitimating invasive but quotidian forms of control and surveillance. And while any mention of a "cabal" or "global elite" can have disturbing anti-Semitic resonances, theories that fear such activity might also articulate suspicion of privilege and the myth of meritocracy, offering a Manichean narrative of class antagonism. As Alexander Galloway, after Fredric Jameson, puts it, "conspiracies are one of the few ways in which class and anti-capitalism—otherwise banned from mainline discourse—pierce through the ideological fog and imprint themselves directly on popular culture." Jeremy Gilbert has commented on how the deep mistrust of public institutions in COVID-19 conspiracy theories isn't so surprising when placed within the context of neoliberal free-market beliefs which have prompted the transformation of the state from that which might protect people from the worst excesses of capitalism to that which will sacrifice people to those worst excesses. This is not to say the conspiracy theories are "right," but that they tap into concerns about, and historical examples of, abuses of power. Sometimes paranoia is a "rational" response.

While we have reservations about approaches that only seek to pathologise or ridicule conspiracy theorists, we recognise that the pandemic, and the racially-charged, politically polarised "culture wars" which predate it, have produced a different, often more troubling, edge to conspiracy narratives compared to those that entertained us in some previous eras. (Remember the fun we had with Roswell UFO conspiracy theories in the 1990s?) Moreover, the stakes are that much higher during a pandemic in which the quality of information and knowledge can be the difference between life and death.

This new conspiracy climate cannot be divorced from either the political polarisation already mentioned, but also today's new media economy and ecology. To contextualise online conspiracy theories, therefore, means looking at the Internet in two ways. First, we need to consider the political economy of digital platforms and its relationship to "platform capitalism", "the data gaze", "surveillance capitalism", and the "ecology of attention". And second, we need to address the affordances for world-building, storytelling, networking, and mobilising, but also, scare-mongering, amplifying, and commodifying that are offered by different mainstream social media platforms as well as spaces characteristic of the deep vernacular web. The convergence of these political and digital contexts mean that it is high time to explore approaches and responses to conspiracy theory that encourage suspicion to be re-directed back onto not only conspiracy theory itself in a reflexive move, but also the largely self-regulated, tax-reluctant/avoidant, near monopolistic social media platforms as well as political actors that benefit from social atomisation and chaos. (And yes, we are aware that our analyses of power risk sounding conspiratorial themselves: something we will explore in later posts concerning the relationship between structure and agency.)

The questions we listed in our original research proposal, written early in the pandemic and infodemic, include the following:

1. Which conspiracy rumours (in English) about COVID-19 have gained most engagement and traction? Which ones are most significant in the UK?
2. Which social media platforms have been the most important vectors for the spread of these narratives and memes? Does each platform create its own distinctive conspiracy theory subcultures? How do conspiracy memes and narratives mutate as they spread from the margins to mainstream?
3. How are these coronavirus conspiracy theories transmitted? What is the comparative significance of state-sponsored channels of disinformation; influencers such as politicians and celebrities; opportunistic conspiracy 'entrepreneurs' and 'super spreaders'; and commenting/sharing at the grassroots level? How do the varying infrastructural logics and economic incentives of the different platforms affect the spread of conspiracist

incentives of the different platforms affect the spread of conspiracist misinformation?

4. Where do these COVID-19 theories come from? How do they relate to existing conspiracy theories, and how have they been adapted for this new context? How do they compare with conspiracy theories in previous pandemics?

These questions remain important and pressing, and other researchers and journalists have already started to tackle some of them. As we begin holding our regular team meetings, the questions we want to ask and the projects we want to undertake evolve and adapt in response to the almost hourly updates that we read concerning anti-lockdown activism taking place on and offline, the convergence of QAnon (and Q-adjacent) conspiracy theories with the vaccine hesitancy spectrum (as well as its spread to some surprising social media locations), the sudden release and sharing of certain conspiracist videos (such as "Plandemic" and its sequel), the breakdown of traditional political categories of Left and Right evident in the response to lockdown measures, and the continued weaponisation and/or cynically commercial employment of COVID-19 conspiracy theories. We are particularly mindful of the forthcoming presidential election in the US, as well as the ongoing Brexit negotiations between the UK and EU and will follow closely how these might be reflected in COVID-19 conspiracy theories. Our approach, therefore, is highly flexible—able to respond to unfolding events that appear in COVID-19 conspiracy theories—and anticipatory.

The Latin root of conspiracy is *conspirare:* to breathe together. It's the first thing one of us tells her students when they begin to study conspiracy fictions. She does so in order to encourage them to think about the intimacy, trust and understanding necessary for an actual conspiratorial group to succeed. With a highly contagious, sometimes fatal, respiratory disease circulating in our communities, it's not only legally dubious to breathe together in ways that conspiracies necessitate, it's also physically dangerous. Breathing together is the last thing we should be doing right now. (We hope deep state actors are wearing masks!) Turning to acts of sharing conspiracy *theories* rather than plots to conspire, the internet in general, and social media in particular, have allowed people who might otherwise have remained lone, marginalised voices to find and breathe with (at least remotely) fellow sceptics of consensus reality. They use the language of likes, shares, retweets, posts, memes, videos, comments, and blogs, giving oxygen to ideas that might, in pre-internet eras, have died out. It is perhaps a supreme irony that those who believe least in the reality and dangers of COVID-19 can maintain a safe distance through their preference for acts of digital confluence.

Under conditions that nobody could have wished for, COVID-19 has produced an extraordinarily potent “stress test”, a convergence of economic, health and political crises, for us to consider the astonishing hold conspiracy theories can have on the popular (and often populist) imagination.