

Conspiracy theories in digital environments: Moving the research field forward

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Abstract

In the past few years, the discussion of conspiracy theories has embroiled researchers, politicians and the public alike. During the COVID-19 pandemic in particular, the term ‘conspiracy theory’ became a buzzword in the news media, public communication and everyday discussions. The pandemic also demonstrated that conspiratorial narratives disseminated online are not benign, obscure and eventually harmless ideas, but can mislead policy making, hinder crisis relief and public health efforts, or undermine trust in institutions and science. Factors contributing to the prevalence of conspiracy theories are complex and include psychological as well as socio-political factors. This special issue focuses specifically on the role of digital media and how they shape the dissemination and mitigation of, as well as research on, conspiracy theories. The special issue includes 13 research articles by authors from 11 countries and regions, which provide timely insights into the phenomenon of conspiracy theories with cross-cultural and cross-platform advances.

Keywords

Conspiracy theory, conspiracy theorist, digital environment, social media

Introduction

Conspiracy theories, according to most established definitions (Douglas et al., 2019; Keeley, 1999; Sunstein and Vermeule, 2009), are explanations of events or phenomena that challenge established

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accounts and instead refer to the machinations of powerful actors or secret societies. In academic research, especially in the fields of philosophy (Clarke, 2002; Keeley, 1999; Pigden, 1995), social psychology (Douglas and Sutton, 2008; Leman and Cinnirella, 2007) and political science (Dean, 1998; Gray, 2008; Heins, 2007), conspiracy theories have been an established subject of research for decades. In analyses of public communication, conversely, conspiracy theories have long been neglected and underresearched.

However, in the past few years, the discussion of conspiracy theories has embroiled researchers, politicians and the public. During the COVID-19 pandemic in particular, the term ‘conspiracy theory’ permeated public life and became a buzzword across news media and daily conversations (Fuchs, 2021; Willingham, 2020). As demonstrated by COVID-19-related conspiracy theories, conspiratorial narratives are not always benign, obscure and ultimately harmless ideas. They can be detrimental to society, for example, when they mislead policy making, hinder crisis relief and public health efforts, or undermine trust in institutions and science.

As discussed in the scholarly literature, the reasons behind the prevalence of conspiracy theories are manifold and complex. While certain individuals exhibit personality traits that make them more prone to believing in conspiracy theories (Goertzel, 1994; Swami et al., 2011), societal crises have been shown to increase the belief in conspiratorial narratives (Uscinski and Parent, 2014). In addition, phenomena such as the rise of populist politics or the emergence of science-related populism (Mede and Schäfer, 2020) have catalysed conspiracy theories. More recently, scholars have increasingly examined how digital communication technologies can exacerbate and complicate the phenomenon of conspiracy theories. For instance, media and communication scholars seek to measure and explain the prevalence of various types of conspiracy theories online (Bruns et al., 2020; Jennings et al., 2021; Zeng and Schäfer, 2021) and examine regulatory measures implemented to mitigate this so-called *conspiracy theory culture* on varied digital platforms (Ferreira, 2020; Horta Ribeiro et al., 2021; Papakyriakopoulos et al., 2020).

Despite the rapidly growing research interest, scholarship can clearly benefit from further diversification and from integrating more heterogeneous research perspectives. A recent systematic review by Mahl and colleagues (2022) demonstrates that, on the level of geo-location and language, prior studies of conspiracy theories online strongly focused on Western democracies and Anglophone content, neglecting non-Western countries, the Global South and countries in which English is not the dominant language. Regarding the analysed platforms, Mahl and colleagues (2022) demonstrate that studies of conspiracy theories on digital media focus predominantly on major Silicon Valley platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and YouTube and not, for example, on non-Western platforms. In addition, methodological innovation is needed to fully leverage the potential of digital data for conspiracy theory research, such as tools/dictionaries built to conduct automated content analyses of conspiracy theory-related content. To bridge these gaps and better balance the research field, we invited an international and disciplinarily diverse group of scholars to contribute to this special issue. In the end, 13 research papers contributed by authors from 11 countries and regions were included. These studies investigate conspiracy theories across various digital platforms and political systems using a range of innovative methods.

In the following section, we will first provide an overview of the literature that reflects upon the relevance of researching conspiracy theories in digital environments. We will then discuss methodological opportunities and challenges for researchers brought about by digital communication technologies. In the last section, the articles featured in this special issue are introduced.

New dynamics of conspiracy theories online

Affordance of digital media

Alongside the individual and socio-political factors outlined above, the recent mainstreaming and flourishing of conspiracy theories online is also linked to dynamically changing platform and media ecosystems and to the affordances provided by new media and communication technologies. In the context of conspiracy theories, the technological affordances of these technologies can be discussed from two interrelated aspects: visibility and association (Treem and Leonardi, 2012).

Visibility: From a historical perspective, there is little evidence to prove whether conspiracy beliefs have become more salient in today's society (Uscinski and Parent, 2014; Van Prooijen, 2018). It has also been critically questioned whether and to what extent the emergence of digital media is the crucial causal factor behind the growth of conspiracy theories and the belief in them (Butter and Knight, 2015). However, it is evident that digital media has amplified the visibility of conspiracy theory-related content and promulgators. Historically, conspiracy theories mostly operated in what Aspren and Dyrendal (2018) described as 'socio-cultural niches' (p. 228) characterised by varying degrees of exclusivity and deviance. In such contexts, conspiracy theories are disseminated and consumed as esoteric discourses and amongst peripheric groups. In contemporary social media platforms, however, conspiracy theories are highly visible and have even become a commonly used rhetorical instrument in the mainstream public, political discourse and popular culture (see Albuquerque et al., 2022; Cheng et al., 2022; Guerrero Castro and Jaraba Barrios, 2022; in this special issue).

One way to explain digital media's amplification of conspiracy theories is to scrutinise their platform logics, which are 'the strategies, mechanisms and economies underpinning their dynamics' (Van Dijck and Poell, 2013: 3). Generally speaking, digital platforms' operations centre on attracting user traffic and engagement and, hence, incentivise and reward users based on the 'performance' of the content they share. This logic makes conspiracy theories appealing because they – compared to debunking and scientific information – are more viral, have longer lifespans and generate more user engagement (Bessi et al., 2015; Del Vicario et al., 2016; Papakyriakopoulos et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2021). Consequently, it comes as no surprise that algorithmic curation on social media often recommends conspiracy theories (Tufekci, 2018) and that conspiracy theories have become popular amongst attention-seeking content creators (Zeng and Schäfer, 2021).

Alongside attention, digital media also allows content creators to profit directly from conspiracy theories. The YouTube Partner Programme, for example, lets users derive revenue from advertising shown in conspiracy theory content (Ballard et al., 2022). Despite the platforms' attempts to demonetise conspiracy theory-related videos, some have managed to stay on the platform and in the programme (Ferreira, 2020), while others have migrated to alternative platforms with monetising programmes (Ballard et al., 2022; Zeng and Schäfer, 2021). More established conspiracy theorists, especially so-called *conspiracy entrepreneurs* (Barkun, 2013: 192), also use their own websites and apps to sell merchandise, publications or receive direct donations. A considerable portion of contemporary 'conspiracy theorists' may not wholeheartedly believe the conspiracy theories they promote themselves, but rather treat them 'as if they were true' (Knight, 2000: 48) for diverse reasons. Nonetheless, the economic aspect of digital media's affordance is a critical factor to consider when explaining such a phenomenon.

Association: Thanks to the connectivity granted by digital media, conspiracy theory believers can more easily identify and connect with like-minded individuals. Without the restriction of geolocation, communities emerge around conspiracy theory topics and, in some cases, even evolve

into transnational movements. The QAnon conspiracy theory, for instance – a vast encompassing conspiratorial narrative concerning US politics – has developed a global ‘fan base’ on varied social media and messaging apps (Hoseini et al., 2021; Greenwood, 2020; Ross, 2020).

Conspiracy theory beliefs can be monological, meaning that, when one conspiracy theory is accepted, it becomes support and evidence for other conspiracy theories (Goertzel, 1994; Swami et al., 2011). Accordingly, the followers of one conspiracy theory topic often engage with other conspiracy theory topics. Such cross-topic connections in the online environment can materialise into a networked ‘coalition’ between communities revolving around conspiracy theories (Mahl et al., 2021). For conspiracy theorising, such an association is significant. To a large extent, the process of conspiracy theorising is a process of collective sense-making, for which crowdsourcing ‘evidence’ is important. Through liking and following, linking, tagging, conspiracy theory adherents collectively curate and crowdsource information to prove their claims (Zeng and Schäfer, 2021). Moreover, the existence of vocal, homophilious communities around conspiracy theories provides *safety in numbers* and, in turn, encourages more ‘silent believers’ to publicly promote conspiracy theories. This is because people are likely to openly disclose their unpopular opinions, such as conspiracy theories, when they see a bigger group with the same opinions (Dewitt et al., 2018). Such an effect is even more amplified when conspiracy theories are openly endorsed by high-profile and popular public figures.

Research conspiracy theories in digital environments

In early empirical studies of conspiracy theories, research data was primarily drawn from surveys, experiments and interviews (Butter and Knight, 2015). These methods are still valuable, especially in explaining individuals’ conspiracy beliefs and the motivations associated with propagating conspiracy theories. When the communication of conspiracy theories takes place in digital environments, however, it also provides new methodological pathways. Rather than solely relying on self-reported data, large-scale trace data and metadata can be used to investigate conspiracy theories’ propagators, content and impacts. For example, by employing temporarily indexed data from digital media, researchers can investigate developments and changes in conspiracy theory communication over time. Furthermore, digital media provides important insights into mass user-generated responses, sentiments and opinions about varied conspiracy theory topics. Relationship data, as displayed on followership, reposting and citing, allow researchers to conduct network analyses to reveal community structures and information cascades.

However, large-scale data from digital media also poses methodological challenges for researchers. Many conspiracy theories are conceptually ambivalent and analytically complicated. First, even though existing definitions share conceptual elements for understanding conspiracy theories, a comprehensive and consistent framework on how to operationalise ‘conspiracy theories’ is still lacking (Mahl et al., 2022). Second, conspiracy narratives are notoriously diverse and intertwined simultaneously. For instance, since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, a wide range of conspiracy theories have been proposed to explain the origin of the virus. These theories are intertwined (i.e. one can be the umbrella theory/spin-off theory/sub-theory of the other), competing or even contradictory (e.g. the Chinese bioweapon theory vs. the ‘plandemic’ theory). The conceptual ambivalence and *narrative convergence* (see Tuters and Willaert 2022, in this special issue) limit the application of computational techniques for automated content analysis. Correspondingly, a close qualitative reading and manual coding still play a dominant role in data analysis in existing studies of online conspiracy theories (Mahl et al., 2022). To fully harness digital data for further scholarship, both new heuristic and methodological approaches must be elaborated and tested. This

requires not only novel computational methods to facilitate data-driven analysis but also an analytical lens that allows nuance and an in-depth understanding of how conspiracy theories function in different contexts.

Data access is another challenge in researching conspiracy theories in online environments. Data related to conspiracy theories and conspiracy theorists is produced and recorded on a wide range of digital platforms. However, the extent to which such data is available for academic researchers varies significantly across platforms. As pointed out by many scholars (Bruns, 2019; Burgess and Bruns, 2015; Felt, 2016; Puschmann, 2019), platform- and social media-specific data access play a significant role in shaping academic research. Twitter's API, which provides researchers with structured data even though it is known to have shortcomings (Ruths and Pfeffer, 2014), has strongly contributed to the dominance of 'Twitter studies' in the field. This form of artificially inflated dominance of a few social media platforms is also evident in conspiracy theories (Mahl et al., 2022).

Finally, the dynamic changes in current platform ecosystems provide an additional challenge for researchers within (and beyond) the field. As mentioned before, in response to the major social media companies' crackdown on conspiracy theories, many conspiracy theorists have migrated to other platforms and social media, which are often more closed and under the radar. Unlike Twitter, Facebook and YouTube, data collection from these non-mainstream platforms is more technologically challenging. This created a barrier to academic research, making the data-driven study of such platforms more exclusive to tech-savvy researchers and resourceful institutions in the Global North (Dutta et al., 2021).

Outline of articles

In line with the aforementioned current dynamics of digital environments, this special issue is dedicated to interrogating how new media technologies shape the dissemination, characteristics and mitigation of, as well as research on, conspiracy theories. In total, this collection includes 13 research articles that collectively provide timely insights into the phenomenon of conspiracy theories with cross-cultural, cross-platform advances. Thematically, these papers can be categorised into four groups: the first focusing on the diffusion of conspiracy theories, the second on individuals' engagement with conspiracy theories, the third on right-wing politics' interplay with conspiracy theories and the fourth on conspiracy theories during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Diffusion of conspiracy theories online

The opening article from Heft and Buehling (2022) – 'Measuring the Diffusion of Conspiracy Theories in Digital Information Ecologies' – provides an overview of how the prevalence and dissemination of conspiracy theories online can be empirically measured. The authors review and scrutinise the common methodologies used to measure conspiracy theories in digital environments. With a focus on computational techniques, the authors provide a thorough discussion of both their potential and their limitations. Following Heft and Buehling's (2022) methodological reflection, two empirical studies exemplify how the dissemination of conspiracy theory-related information can be studied across websites and across platforms.

Brügger's (2022) study – 'Tracing a Historical Development of Conspiracy Theory Networks on the Web: The Hyperlink Network of Vaccine Hesitancy on the Danish Web 2006–2015' – showcases how studying the historical development of hyperlink networks can help researchers understand the proliferation of conspiracy theories. To illustrate this, the author chose the case of vaccination-

related conspiratorial content on Danish websites. Employing network analysis, the author maps the ‘road system’ of how conspiracy theories travel on the web. Findings from this study reveal important historical trends in online communication about vaccination in Denmark.

The third paper included in this special issue – ‘We Love to Hate George Soros: A Cross-Platform Analysis of the Globalism Conspiracy Theory Campaign in Brazil’ – provides another study employing hyperlink analysis to study conspiracy theory propagation. In this study, [Santini and colleagues \(2022\)](#) investigated how conspiracy theories about George Soros are propagated across WhatsApp and Telegram. Whereas prior studies of George Soros-related conspiratorial narratives and other antisemitic conspiracy theories focus on the US and European contexts, this study reveals the growing popularity of such theories in Latin American countries. With insights provided by network analysis, the study also discusses the transnationally networked influence on the country’s online conspiracy theory ecology.

Individuals’ engagement with conspiracy theories online

The second set of articles discusses and explains individuals’ online engagement with conspiracy theories. The three articles included in this section provide nuanced reflection on factors associated with people’s belief in and dissemination and debunking of conspiracy theories.

[Schwaiger and colleagues’ \(2022\)](#) article ‘Mindsets of Conspiracy: A Typology of Affinities towards Conspiracy Myths in Digital Environments’ surveys Swiss populations’ conspiracy mindsets. Their results from a representative population survey show a robust correlation between individuals’ affinity towards conspiracy theories and the usage of Facebook Messenger and Telegram. Also focusing on explaining individuals’ engagement with conspiracy theories online, [Morosoli and colleagues’ \(2022\)](#) paper ‘To Convince, to Provoke or to Entertain? A Study on Individual Motivations behind Engaging with Conspiracy Theories Online’ integrates a cross-national perspective. The authors conducted surveys in six countries (Belgium, Switzerland, Germany, France, the UK and the U.S.) to understand the motivations behind individuals’ dissemination of conspiracy theories. The study finds that the primary motivation behind individuals’ online sharing of conspiracy theories is that they are convinced by the content. Findings from the study suggest that individuals engage online also to provoke reactions and for entertainment purposes.

In the third paper in this section – ‘WeChat Users’ Debunking Strategies in Response to COVID-19 Conspiracy Theories: A Mixed-Methods Study’, [Zhu and colleagues \(2022\)](#) investigate individuals’ engagement with conspiracy theories from a different angle. Unlike the first two articles that focus on individuals *disseminating* conspiracy theories, this study investigates factors associated with individuals’ practices of *debunking* conspiracies on WeChat, the most popular social media platform in China. Informed by data from interviews and questionnaires, the study illuminates the importance of cultural factors explaining people’s responses to conspiracy theories. For instance, the authors point out that Chinese people’s concerns about interpersonal relationships and family values, such as respect for seniors and the elderly, is one of the key factors contributing to people’s reluctance to debunk conspiracy theories from their social media networks.

Right-wing politics and conspiracy theories

Moving away from discussing and explaining online conspiracy theories on an individual level, the third group of research included in the special issue continues making sense of today’s conspiracy theory phenomenon, with more focus on the societal level. More precisely, the following four

studies reflect on conspiracy theories' interplay with far-right and mainstream right-wing politics. In the first paper – 'You the readers will complete the list: The Castrochavismo Conspiracy Theory as Controversy' – Guerrero-Castro and Jaraba-Barrios (2022) discuss the political function of the Castrochavismo conspiracy theory in Colombia. Focusing on right-wing politicians' engagement with this conspiracy narrative on Twitter, the authors demonstrate that the Castrochavismo conspiracy narrative moves into Colombia's mainstream politics during electoral cycles.

Ekman's (2022) paper – 'The Great Replacement: Strategic Mainstreaming of Far-Right Conspiracy Claims', presents an in-depth case study of the Great Replacement conspiracy in Sweden. This paper presents case studies of three anti-immigration actors, focusing on how they engage with the Great Replacement conspiracy theory online. Qualitative findings from the study demonstrate that the political discourse concerning the Great Replacement theory is used instrumentally by centre and far-right actors. Also focusing on far-right movements, Schulze and colleagues' (2022) paper 'Far-right Conspiracy Groups on Fringe Platforms' studies conspiracy theories in the context of radicalisation. The authors conceptualise the prevalence of the conspiracy narrative as an indicator of radicalisation dynamics and study its temporal change among far-right movements in Germany. Through the quantitative content analysis of messages from German far-right movements' Telegram channels, the authors observe the increasing salience of conspiracy narratives over time.

Following the three empirical papers of conspiracy theories and far-right politics is a methodology paper – 'RPC-Lex: A Dictionary to Measure German Right Wing Populist Conspiracy Discourse Online'. Contextualised in contemporary German politics, Puschmann and colleagues (2022) introduced PRC-Lex, a computational dictionary to study right-wing conspiracy narratives. In the paper, the authors provide a detailed description of their approach to constructing and validating the dictionary and demonstrate its application with online comments related to conspiracy theories from alternative news websites and Facebook. The authors' efforts are a timely response to the emerging field of researching conspiracy theories online, in which methodological innovation is needed.

Conspiracy theories and COVID-19

The last group of papers included in the special issue features three studies of COVID-related conspiracy theories on social media. The first paper – 'Authority-led Conspiracy Theories in China during the COVID-19 Pandemic' – from Cheng and colleagues (2022), examines the Chinese government's role in spreading and amplifying conspiracy theories on Weibo, a microblogging service in China. Using topic modelling and textual analysis, the authors reveal rhetorical strategies and key themes in conspiratorial narratives endorsed by Chinese authorities. This study provides important insights into the specific political functions of conspiracy theories in authoritarian contexts. The second paper focusing on COVID-19-related conspiracy theories was contributed by Albuquerque and colleagues (2022). Their paper – 'Coronavirus Meets the Clash of Civilizations' – draws insights from the analysis of over 28,000 Facebook posts from Brazil. The authors found that mainstream politics and media played an important role in spreading COVID-19 conspiracy theories on social media. Both studies illuminate how authoritative actors and institutions utilise conspiracy narratives for political interests and demonstrate the connection between conspiracy theories and geopolitical tension.

The third paper in this group – 'Deep State Phobia: Narrative Convergence in Coronavirus Conspiracism on Instagram' – is from Tuters and Willaert (2022). The authors combined big data analysis and qualitative interpretive techniques to study conspiratorial responses to the pandemic.

Findings from the study of about 500,000 Instagram posts reveal the convergence of varied conspiratorial narratives, with the two dominant examples emerging from the data being QAnon and the Great Reset conspiracy theories. Developing on Romele et al.'s (2020) work, Tuters and Willaert (2022) showcase the application of 'digital hermeneutics' for researching conspiracy theories in digital environments. Although the case study itself is Anglo-American-centric, the paper offers a promising methodological approach to studying conspiracy theory with multimodal data in different social contexts.

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