

Correspondence

COVID-19, conspiracies and manufactured consent

ABSTRACT

Questions about what comes next for the coronavirus disease 2019 pandemic have been posed by the editors to everyone except those who proliferate conspiracy theories. Conspiracy theories have consequences for public health. Making these dangers known can initiate discussions on public trust. The problem is that the pressing concerns of the pandemic have enabled manufactured consent to be a suspicious thing known of the propaganda model more than ever. Although such a model can be put into question, the public must also be able to practice empathy and true choice so that asking and responding to the questions at hand considers a responsibility to public health.

Keywords trust, true choice, manufactured consent, COVID-19, conspiracies

The editors recently forwarded that the important questions of ‘what next and how, if and when will all this end’ are what everyone is asking—everyone, excluding the “conspiracy theorists and naysayers.”¹ Conspiracy theories vary, starting from the creation and purpose of the virus as a ‘biological weapon’,² to others being the treatment of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) as non-existent, a plot by big pharmaceutical companies, and a manipulation by the wealthy elites. These theories often operate on spotting propagandas based on a generalized conception of Herman and Chomsky’s take on Lippmann’s *manufactured consent*.

Though there are positive upshots for conspiracy theories (e.g. providing a common marginal view, space for debate, transparency, and an attempt to understand the situation), and they fill epistemic, existential, and social needs, conspiracy theories are not harmless. They have negative consequences for ‘political engagement, political behavior, climate engagement, trust in science, vaccine uptake, civic behavior, work-related behavior, intergroup relations, and more recently the COVID-19 response’.³ In the Philippines, some marginal discussions led to community spreading through social media about eating bananas as the cure for the virus, resulting in the emptying of banana stalls, at some point, in the market. There was also the talk of the virus not surviving the hot temperature of summer, even among academic circles. And then there was the practice of ‘tuob/suob’ (steam inhalation) as a perceived treatment for COVID-19. The Department

of Health and World Health Organization (Representative Office for the Philippines) then clarified and warned the public about recommending unproven statements about curing the disease.⁴

As the internet and social media are filled with conspiracy theories, believing in them is ‘consequential’ because they ‘have a real impact on people’s health, relationships, and safety’.⁵ Conspiracy and misinformation beliefs are associated, for instance, with higher feelings of depression.⁶ Acknowledging that ‘the dangers of such conspiracy theories for public health and our ability to navigate a path away from the current pandemic are real’,⁷ it might be political to engage with the health risk of such epistemological claims into what Donald Rumsfeld calls ‘known knowns’ i.e. as things that we know that we know. The effects involve less institutional trust, undermining the dispositions and regulations on the mitigation of the spread of COVID-19.⁸ Such effects are suspicious of the missing portion of Rumsfeld’s take, which is the ‘unknown knowns’—things that we do not know that we know—as ideological mechanisms that cover what is supposed to be known and breach public trust in institutions, governments, and those who influence their decisions. Making the dangers of believing in conspiracy theories known as justified and true initiates further critical interrogation.

The spaces of information like social media can open up not just democratic but diverse and yet embracing practices

of public trust. Information of all forms circulates under machine learning in which scrolling down one's newsfeed means going over algorithmic data from one's consented preferences. Mobile apps are relatively imposed for contact tracing, even if digital refugees are not quite considered in the tallied numbers (save for some manual contact tracing practices in churches⁹). As data are becoming the new oil in the economy, the ramifications of trust from the public, as well as the digital sphere, can be more critical to the consent one broadly construes in the consequentialist position of privatized filtered media—the consequence of 'creating a world of virtual communities built by advertisers and based on demographics and taste differences of consumers . . . not to create or service a public sphere'.¹⁰ This consequence directly corresponds to the manufactured consent of the public that daily consumes media information. The problem is that this model provides a platform for vested interests—both from public and private institutions—and these can undermine public trust in the information forwarded by them.

Discussions that engender trust can push for transparency, especially in technological solutions, to veer from a manufactured consent model.¹¹ The crucial idea about the model, however, is that it 'describes forces that shape what the media does; it does not imply that any propaganda emanating from the media is always effective'.¹² Policies that encourage participation in the distribution of public goods such as vaccines may adopt a communication model that operates on manufactured consent but this promotion, despite having in mind a transparent exposition, requires a citizenry that cooperates out of strong senses of community¹³ and hence, of empathy and true choice. Social media literacy that critically interrogates conspiratorial thinking can advance talks about risks in public health emergencies.¹⁴ That being said, the models of communication within the pandemic are guides that must enable the community to engage with public health as a matter of concern and responsibility. True choice, especially when coupled with empathy for the community, cannot be manufactured but must be a result of a deliberative engagement from asking the right questions. The vital questions of what is coming and how this will all end should be answered by those who have made true choices.

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