

Conspiracy Theories in Times of Pandemics: Risks and Disinformation

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Conspiracy theories are a mainstay in the information economy. They are parallel discourses that draw from factual events but modify them just enough to offer answers to deep-seated preoccupations of many people. During the 2020 Covid-19 pandemics, several conspiracy theories about the origin of the SARS-COV-2 virus, about the effects of the virus on people, and about potency of Covid-19 have emanated from China, the West, and in some case communities and subgroups in the United States, such as Blacks. These conspiracies have impaired the authorities' responses against the pandemic with the public and the media while polarizing and politicizing Covid-19. This poster presents data based on class lectures.



CONSPIRACY THEORIES ARE A FORM OF DISINFORMATION

One challenge of researching and covering conspiracy theories is that they often border concerns related to surveillance. When one studies surveillance, one has to be careful not to fall or step into conspiracies. Conspiracy theories start from the same base material as surveillance but diverge subtly. Traditional surveillance studies (Andrejevic, 2007; Lyon, 2008) emerge from critical approaches and a literature informed by authors such as Foucault (1975). Conspiracy theories exist in a continuum next to satire, news parody, fabricated news, digital manipulations, propaganda, advertising, and public relations (Tandoc Jr., Lim, & Ling, 2018).

The ideological underpinning of conspiracy theories and their advocates often sprung from both Marxists and libertarian approaches. One way to differentiate conspiracy theories from legitimate inquiries into surveillance is the propensity of the former immediately jump to extreme cases of state control and the worse scenarios. There are often very little nuances nor any other causes considered for questions raised by conspiracy theorists.

In the words of Ulrich Beck's risk society (1992), conspiracy theories focus on man-made threats that people have about postmodern societies. For Beck, the risk society is one way of understanding the post-modern world we live in where people worry about various societal man-made risks like the environment, economic mayhem, epidemics, overpopulation, and so on (1992).

According to Beck (1992) the pervasive discussion of risks in the media and the public sphere creates fear and uncertainties in people. Thus, non-experts often voice their concerns and share their own spin on things regardless of warnings and "official discourses" from authority figures such as the media, scientists, law enforcement professionals, and politicians (Bubendorff, Rizza, & Prieur, 2019). In doing so, conspiracy theorists can frame (Goffman, 1974) news events and fake news before experts, authorities, and the media have verified available stories (Bubendorff, Rizza, & Prieur, 2019). Social media is also an easy way to spread fake news that can then become conspiracies.



PANDEMIC-RELATED CONSPIRACY THEORIES

Blacks Don't Get Covid

This is not a conspiracy theory in the sense that one group was targeted and hurt. It was nonetheless a fake claim that could have done much harm before it was properly dismissed and criticized in Black-led media and community leaders.

5G deployment is correlated with SARS-COV-2 infections

This theory was widespread and related with political events in Western polities where criticism of 5G technologies and of Chinese provide Huawei were intertwined. This conspiracy continues on social media even though it has been debunked many times.



They Spread the Virus

A conspiracy theory linking the spread of the coronavirus to 5G wireless technology has spurred more than 100 incidents this month, British officials said.

Contact tracing apps use are encouraged by governments to control and monitor the population

This conspiracy theory was intertwined with genuine questions about the privacy and confidentiality of data obtained through contact tracing apps. This conspiracy theory flourished thanks to the confusing global messaging on mitigating measures to contain the pandemic and the constant sabotage of prolific persons such as President Donald Trump.



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