

DEMOS

CONSPIRACY LOOPS

FROM DISTRUST TO CONSPIRACY
TO CULTURE WARS

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Sophia Knight, Professor Clare Birchall and Professor Peter Knight.
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HEALTHIER DIGITAL ECOSYSTEM

This project is part of Demos's programme on a *healthier digital ecosystem*. With digital technologies changing our world at an ever faster pace, we advocate for a healthier information environment with an internet and trustworthy technologies that are designed, developed and deployed to protect and promote democratic values and human rights. In Conspiracy Loops, we dig deeper into conspiracy theories as not merely a problem of our online information ecosystems, but a phenomenon which flourishes in the context of broader deficits and structural drivers in our political, economic, and media environments.

INTRODUCTION



Because the left doesn't just fight at the ballot box and seek a mandate for their agenda when it is election time; their agents are only too active in public and private institutions and what we have come to know as the administrative state and the deep state. [...] And not only will the left-wing elites work with their counterparts in nations like the U.S. and the U.K. – but they will be aided and abetted by our enemies in China, Iran and Russia, all of whom would like nothing more than to see Western societies undermined from within."

– Former Prime Minister Liz Truss, Fox News, 21/02/2024¹

Following her overtly conspiracist remarks at both the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) and on Fox News, the former prime minister Liz Truss was widely condemned across the political landscape, including by members of her own party. Despite the swift dismissal of her comments, this kind of dog-whistling to conspiracy theories is not the exception. Instead, it is symptomatic of our political moment.²

Conspiracy theories are commonly thought of either as harmless, outlandish nonsense picked up by elderly family members through social media, or ticking timebombs sown by hostile foreign agents to destroy our democracy. The truth is more complicated.

Building on decades of research from Professor Clare Birchall of King's College London, and Professor Peter Knight of the University of Manchester, we are proposing a new framework for understanding the origins and democratic implications of conspiracy theories. This framework will enable greater understanding and better policy making to address the real drivers and dangers of this increasingly prominent phenomenon.

We argue that conspiracy theories are a symptom rather than the cause of a collapse of trust in civic institutions. They emerge from a context of broader deficits and structural drivers in our political, economic, and media environments. In cases such as Truss's controversial remarks, we see these powerful pre-made narratives being increasingly weaponised by political actors in service of a 'culture war'.

We call this dynamic the 'conspiracy loop' – a self-perpetuating feedback loop in which conspiracy theories are generated and disseminated.

Conspiracy theorising takes hold in a climate of democratic distrust, as individuals and communities seek meaning or explanations for the events in their own lives and the world around them. These theories are amplified by various forces, from the structures of social media platforms to the financial self-interest of conspiracy influencers. Political actors are increasingly latching onto grassroots conspiracy theories and amplifying them as a way of promoting existing positions in the 'culture wars'. These conspiracy theories then become fuel for ugly political fights between factions, further reinforcing the climate of suspicion and distrust that provides fertile ground for conspiracy theories to take root.

¹ Fox News, February 2024. <https://www.foxnews.com/opinion/im-former-british-prime-minister-believes-west-doomed-unless-conservatives-do-this>

² The Guardian, February 2024. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/feb/24/far-right-trying-to-infiltrate-low-traffic-protests-campaigners-warn> Institute for Government, February 2024. <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/comment/islamophobia-and-antisemitism> Sky News, February 2024. <https://news.sky.com/story/labour-candidate-fell-for-online-conspiracy-theory-about-hamas-attacks-shadow-minister-says-13069951> BBC, March 2024. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cnk593139n2o>

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY CONSPIRACY THEORIES?

CONTEMPORARY DEFINITION

Conspiracy theories are usually thought of as an easily identifiable set of bizarre beliefs, ranging from faked moon landings, flat earth, chemtrails, the Kennedy assassination, and aliens to 9/11, the Illuminati, and the death of Princess Diana. However, recently conspiracy theories incorporate more mainstream political issues, such as immigration, climate change, elections, and pandemic mitigation measures. This trend of 'incorporation', wrapping an existing conspiracy theory around current events, predates the pandemic. However, institutional distrust and perceived government overreach during the pandemic – from lockdowns and mask-wearing to vaccinations – acted as a catalyst for conspiracy theorising. There was a shift from event-based conspiracy theories towards an increasing insistence on 'super conspiracy theories', such as 'the Great Reset'.³

Rather than merely a false explanation of a specific topic, conspiracy theories can instead be

understood as a sensemaking framework, resting on three key assumptions: nothing happens by accident, nothing is as it seems, and everything is connected.⁴ This framework is often deeply embedded in an individual's sense of self and group identity. Conspiracy theories are not simply pieces of false information which can be fact-checked and corrected.

While we can point to particular rhetorical features common to many conspiracy theories – apocalyptic and emotive language, demonising of imagined enemies, challenging received wisdom, a sense of superiority in being one of the few in the know – it can be difficult to always clearly distinguish conspiracy theories from more legitimate forms of interpretation and critique.⁵ As an epithet, the term 'conspiracy theorist' can be used to discredit an opponent, or distract from difficult political debates.

Conspiracy theories are closely related to concepts of mis-, dis-, and malinformation but they have their own distinctive history and appeal.⁶

³ The 'Great Reset' was initially a genuine concept from the World Economic Forum, to adapt capitalism to include environmental concerns. However, the term has become attached to a far-ranging conspiracy theory, in which the global elite are plotting world domination by means of mass surveillance, forced vaccination and the erosion of individual liberty. See Birchall, Clare, and Peter Knight, 2022. *Conspiracy Theories in the Time of Covid-19*. <https://www.routledge.com/Conspiracy-Theories-in-the-Time-of-Covid-19/Birchall-Knight/p/book/9781032324999>

⁴ Barkun, Michael, 2003. *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America*. <https://www.ucpress.edu/book/9780520276826/a-culture-of-conspiracy>

⁵ Birchall, Clare, and Peter Knight, January 2023. 'Has Conspiracy Theory Run out of Steam?'. <https://kclpure.kcl.ac.uk/portal/en/publications/has-conspiracy-theory-run-out-of-steam>

⁶ Wardle, Claire, and Hossein Derakhshan, 2017. <https://edoc.coe.int/en/media/7495-information-disorder-toward-an-interdisciplinary-framework-for-research-and-policy-making.html>

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Many instances of genuine conspiracies – secret plans by individuals or groups to do something harmful or unlawful – can be found throughout history, as can examples of what we now call conspiracy theories – theories about such plans existing, complexly and deeply embedded in our political and social institutions.

The term 'conspiracy theory' comes from Karl Popper's critique of 'the conspiracy theory of society' in the aftermath of WWII.⁷ Popper's 'conspiracy theory' was a specific criticism of what he viewed as an intellectual error and it was these negative connotations that were echoed by the next generation of sociologists and historians. Richard Hofstadter's concept of the 'paranoid style' of politics is an example of the consensus which had emerged: conspiracy thinking was a mistaken and potentially dangerous way of understanding the world.⁸

From the outset, the term 'conspiracy theory' was meant to be pejorative, designating a pathological and dangerous tendency in politics that needed to be contained. As a result, this can function as a highly subjective accusation.

7 Popper, Karl, 1972. *Conjectures and Refutations*. Pigden, Charles, March 1995. 'Popper revisited, or what is wrong with conspiracy theories?'. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/004839319502500101>

8 Hofstadter, Richard, November 1964. 'The Paranoid Style in American Politics'. <https://harpers.org/archive/1964/11/the-paranoid-style-in-american-politics/>

WHAT DRIVES BELIEF IN CONSPIRACY THEORIES?

There is a vast body of research and commentary which aims to identify the drivers of belief in conspiracy theories, as well as potential interventions. Three commonly discussed drivers are foreign disinformation campaigns, social media, and individual psychological factors. Though all of these factors play a role in the spread of conspiracy theories, each of these areas tend to ignore the broader underlying context from which conspiracy theories emerge, and the grassroots nature of how they develop and spread.

1) Online disinformation campaigns conducted by powerful foreign forces

In the wake of both the Cambridge Analytica scandal regarding the Vote Leave campaign for Brexit, and revelations of Russian interference through micro-targeted advertising in the US presidential election of 2016, there has been an overwhelming increase in the attention paid to conspiracy theories, misinformation, and disinformation by academics, politicians, and media institutions.⁹

The implication is often that Brexit would not have happened and Trump would not have been elected if there had not been online manipulation that brainwashed voters. However, although there is evidence of foreign interference and manipulated influence in both cases, the impact on voter behaviour has been at times overstated.¹⁰ Focusing on foreign interference alone can be a distraction from understanding the reasons behind the significant levels of domestic support for Trump and Brexit in their respective countries.¹¹

While there has clearly been an increase in the intensity and reach of foreign disinformation campaigns in the age of social media, this is neither as unprecedented, nor as devastatingly effective as sometimes imagined.¹² Where conspiracy-infused disinformation campaigns have arguably been more successful is not in spreading any particular false piece of information, but in sowing discord and doubt as part of a populist attack on all established truths and institutions. Rather than only emerging from state-run propaganda campaigns, disinformation is now multidirectional;¹³

9 Uscinski, Joseph, et al, July 2022. 'Have beliefs in conspiracy theories increased over time?'. <https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0270429> The Guardian, February 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/feb/13/trump-era-conspiracy-theories-left-right> The Standard, February 2021. <https://www.standard.co.uk/news/uk/qanon-conspiracy-theories-anti-vaxx-b918159.html>

10 The New Statesman, 2020. <https://www.newstatesman.com/long-reads/2020/10/how-cambridge-analytica-scandal-unravelling>

11 Joseph Rowntree Foundation, August 2016. <https://www.jrf.org.uk/political-mindsets/brexit-vote-explained-poverty-low-skills-and-lack-of-opportunities> Olivas-Osuna, José Javier, et al., July 2021. 'Place matters: Analyzing the roots of political distrust and Brexit narratives at a local level'. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/gove.12545>

12 Karpf, David, December 2019. <https://mediawell.ssrc.org/articles/on-digital-disinformation-and-democratic-myths/#.XhDQjYRCzGQ>.twitter Coppock, Alexander, et al., September 2020. 'The small effects of political advertising are small regardless of context, message, sender, or receiver: Evidence from 59 real-time randomised experiments'. <https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/sciadv.abc4046>

13 Tuters, M. D. & Noordenbos, B., 'Ambient propaganda on pro-Kremlin "WarTok": From unidirectional influence to multidirectional imitation' [draft manuscript]

instead of trying to convince an audience of a particular 'alternative truth', the aim is to disorient, destabilise, and delegitimise trust in science, media, and democracy.¹⁴

A more accurate understanding of the situation is that disinformation is increasingly participatory and circular.¹⁵ Grassroots conspiracy communities and domestic conspiracy influencers are usually responsible for the creation and initial spread of conspiratorial narratives. In some cases, these narratives are then amplified by opportunistic foreign agencies.¹⁶

EXAMPLE: QAnon AND TRUMP

QAnon is a decentralised political movement based around a set of conspiracy theories, a combination of established tropes and new material, which emerged from the posts of an anonymous 4chan user in 2017.¹⁷ At the core of the movement is a belief that Donald Trump is secretly fighting against 'deep state' elites, who are trafficking and ritually sacrificing children.

The theory has at times been amplified by Trump himself, as well as some of his political allies.¹⁸ In addition, we have seen some effort from international disinformation actors to further spread QAnon theories.¹⁹ This example demonstrates a common cycle: conspiracy theories emerge organically from grassroots conspiracy movements, then are amplified and weaponised opportunistically for political gain by both domestic and international actors, further stoking distrust and providing fertile ground for new conspiracy theories.²⁰

2) Social media (particularly 'the algorithm')

The initial optimism about the internet as a force for the democratisation of access to information and the removal of gatekeepers has long since evaporated. Now, the general consensus is that this same democratisation has created an unprecedented spread of conspiracy theories and misinformation that threaten to undermine trust in impartial media, science, and even democracy.

There is an aspect of truth in this bleak picture – the internet and social media have made it much easier for conspiracy theorists to connect with like-minded people and build a community.²¹ In addition, there is a low barrier to entry for those who want to publish their ideas to a wide audience, bypassing traditional gatekeeping institutions of journalism, publishing, science, and medicine.²² In this way, the technical structures and financial incentives of the internet lend themselves to the circulation of conspiracy theories.²³

However, the rise of conspiracism is part of a much larger, and much longer, overturning of established hierarchies of knowledge and scepticism towards official accounts.²⁴ Some of the motives behind this shift are themselves deeply democratic, such as a decline in deference to authority, and the championing of lived experience.²⁵

Particular features of the internet have helped promote the spread of conspiracy thinking, but the internet is not the cause of its rise. Similarly, social media has accelerated and intensified existing problems, but it is not the root cause of them. Looking at the overall information ecosystem, mainstream politicians and mainstream media are as important as new media in spreading conspiracy theories.²⁶

14 Rosenblum, Nancy L., and Russell Muirhead, April 2019. *A Lot of People Are Saying: The New Conspiracism and the Assault on Democracy*. <https://press.princeton.edu/books/hardcover/9780691188836/a-lot-of-people-are-saying>

15 de Wildt, L., and S. Aupers, June 2023. 'Participatory Conspiracy Culture: Believing, doubting and playing with conspiracy theories on Reddit.'. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/13548565231178914>

16 Institute for Strategic Dialogue, October 2021. <https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/20211014-ISDG-25-Climate-Lockdown-Part-1-V92.pdf>

17 Anti-Defamation League, May 2021. <https://www.adl.org/resources/backgrounder/qanon>

18 Media Matters, August 2019. <https://www.mediamatters.org/twitter/fbi-calls-qanon-domestic-terror-threat-trump-has-amplified-qanon-supporters-twitter-more-20> The Independent, March 2021. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-politics/boebert-gop-qanon-congress-democrats-b1819868.html>

19 Graphika, August 2020. https://public-assets.graphika.com/reports/graphika_report_interpreting_social_qs.pdf The Soufan Center, April 2021. https://thesoufancenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/TSC-White-Paper_QAnon_16April2021-final-1.pdf

20 Peeters, S., et al., 2023. 'A Fringe Mainstreamed, or Tracing Antagonistic Slang between 4chan and Breitbart before and after Trump'. <https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.1515/9789048554249-009/html>

21 Birchall, Clare, and Peter Knight, 2022. 'Do Your Own Research: Conspiracy Theories and the Internet'. <https://doi.org/10.1353/sor.2022.0049>.

22 Demos, December 2023. <https://demos.co.uk/research/drivers-of-digital-discord-how-news-media-and-social-media-drive-online-discourse-and-pathways-for-change/>

23 Birchall, Clare, and Peter Knight, 2022. 'Chapter Seven: Infrastructural Design and Disinfo Capitalism', *Conspiracy Theories in the Time of Covid-19*. <https://www.routledge.com/Conspiracy-Theories-in-the-Time-of-Covid-19/Birchall-Knight/p/book/9781032324999>

24 Pew Research Center, September 2023. <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2023/09/19/public-trust-in-government-1958-2023/> King's College London, March 2023. <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/news/uk-has-internationally-low-confidence-in-political-institutions-police-and-press>

25 Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy. <https://iep.utm.edu/fem-stan/>

26 Haber, Jaren, et al., December 2021. <https://misinfoforeview.hks.harvard.edu/article/research-note-lies-and-presidential-debates-how-political-misinformation-spread-across-media-streams-during-the-2020-election/>

EXAMPLE: TUCKER CARLSON AND THE '4CHAN TO FOX TO TRUMP PIPELINE'²⁷

"I know that the left and all the little gatekeepers on Twitter become literally hysterical if you use the term 'replacement,' if you suggest that the Democratic Party is trying to replace the current electorate, the voters now casting ballots, with new people, more obedient voters from the Third World [...] But they become hysterical because that's what's happening, actually! [...] Let's just say it, that's true!"

– Tucker Carlson, on Fox News, 08/04/2021²⁸

The 'Great Replacement' conspiracy theory centres on the idea that patterns of immigration and demographic change in the US, and other Western nations, are being deliberately manipulated by left-wing elites to increase the proportion of voters of colour, in order to increase votes for left-wing political parties.²⁹ This theory draws on a long history of racist and anti-semitic tropes, including Enoch Powell's 1968 'Rivers of Blood' speech.³⁰

Tucker Carlson's endorsement of the 'Great Replacement' was one of many similar instances in his time as a host on Fox News when he amplified this and other conspiracy theories.³¹

3) The psychological and demographic profile of individual 'conspiracy theorists'

Popular depictions of conspiracy theorists usually show a white male loner typing away in a basement. While some prominent conspiracist voices online fit this profile, the reality is more complicated. For many women, the anti-vaccine community has introduced them to wider conspiratorial narratives. Within these groups, mothers have often been susceptible to QAnon, as the theory plays on existing anxieties surrounding child trafficking.³² Some communities of colour, many of whom have historical reason to be sceptical of the medical establishment, have also been susceptible to anti-vaccine conspiracy theories that incorporate race-specific narratives, such as conspiracy theories about vaccines causing sterility in black communities.³³ Overall, despite popular misconceptions, conspiracy theories are a universal phenomenon.³⁴

While conspiracy beliefs have previously been seen as the result of individual pathologies, many social psychologists and political scientists have moved away from this view. Surveys repeatedly show that belief in conspiracy theories is quite widespread among the population – at least half of people in the UK and the US believe in at least one conspiracy theory.³⁵ Though these surveys are sometimes presented in alarmist fashion, with the implicit assumption that belief in conspiracy theories is reaching unprecedented levels that are damaging to society, it is far from clear that that is the case. The underlying psychological mechanisms of conspiracy belief, such as cognitive bias and magical thinking, operate on a spectrum, and most individuals share some of the traits to varying degrees.³⁶

Instead, it makes more sense to consider the predictors of belief in conspiracy theories at the society level. Emerging research shows some understandable variables: in general, the more unequal, corrupt and polarised a society, the higher levels of conspiracism.³⁷

27 NPR, April 2023. <https://www.npr.org/2023/04/25/1171800317/how-tucker-carlsons-extremist-narratives-shaped-fox-news-and-conservative-politi>

28 The Independent, April 2021. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-politics/tucker-carlson-fox-white-supremacist-b1829366.html>

29 Birchall, Clare, and Peter Knight, 2022. 'Do Your Own Research: Conspiracy Theories and the Internet'. https://kclpure.kcl.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/176915617/Birchall_and_Knight_Do_Your_Own_Research_AAM_version.pdf

30 Southern Poverty Law Center, May 2022. <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2022/05/17/racist-great-replacement-conspiracy-theory-explained> The New Yorker, November 2017. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/12/04/the-french-origins-of-you-will-not-replace-us>

31 The Guardian, May 2022. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/may/18/cpac-conference-budapest-hungary-viktor-orban-speaker?ref=upstract.com&curator=upstract.com>

32 The Atlantic, August 2020. <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2020/08/how-instagram-aesthetics-repackage-qanon/615364/> POLITICO, February 2021. <https://www.politico.com/newsletters/women-rule/2021/02/26/the-women-of-qanonand-where-they-go-from-here-491921>

33 Cénat, Jude Mary, et al., February 2024. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/jmv.29467>

34 van Prooijen, Jan Willem, and Karen M. Douglas, August 2018. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6282974/>

35 Oliver, J. Eric, and Thomas J. Wood, March 2014. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/ajps.12084> The Guardian, November 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2018/nov/23/study-shows-60-of-britons-believe-in-conspiracy-theories>

36 The MIT Press Reader, July 2022. <https://thereader.mitpress.mit.edu/the-powerful-role-of-magical-beliefs-in-our-everyday-thinking/>

37 Alper, Sinan, November 2022. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/ejsp.2919> Adam Troian, Jais, November 2022. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC10100481/>

In addition, conspiracy theories often draw on pre-existing grievances, fears and prejudices, both historical and present day.³⁸

EXAMPLE: RUSSELL BRAND'S JOURNEY INTO CONSPIRITUALITY

One of the notable aspects of conspiracy theories in the age of the internet is the rise of 'diagonalism' – a convergence between traditionally right and left-wing conspiratorial beliefs and communities.³⁹ This dynamic has been particularly salient in the emergence of conspirituality, and the link between wellness, vaccine scepticism and broader conspiracism.⁴⁰

Russell Brand rose to prominence as an outspoken left-wing comedian and commentator, with a strong anti-establishment leaning. Once sought out by the likes of former Labour Party leader Ed Milliband as a means of winning over younger voters, he is now widely viewed as a toxic figure.⁴¹ Numerous commentators have pointed out that his performance has always had a somewhat 'messianic' quality.⁴² However, this style took on a more conspiratorial dimension through the Covid pandemic, as he transitioned from 'Covid Sceptical to Everything Sceptical'.⁴³ As his YouTube channel started to drift into more conspiratorial themes, he began attracting a devoted conspiracy community.⁴⁴

Whether motivated by genuine belief or increased numbers of viewers, he has continued to deepen his engagement with outright conspiracy theories.⁴⁵ This has led to him forming strange alliances across the political spectrum, uniting with prominent right-wing figures such as Tucker Carlson and Ben Shapiro, against their common enemies of Big Pharma and the World Economic Forum.⁴⁶

38 Sims, J. Marion, January 2021. <https://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMp2035827>

39 Boston Review, January 2021. <https://www.bostonreview.net/articles/quinn-slobodian-toxic-politics-coronakspeticism>

40 Tuters, M, Apr 2023. 'The Conspiritualist'. https://mast-nemla.org/archive/vol4-no1-2023/The_Conspiritualist.pdf

41 BBC News, September 2023. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-66878459>

42 Times Radio, December 2022. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IDrUQCIsxj8>

43 Unherd, September 2023. <https://unherd.com/2023/09/confessions-of-a-russell-brand-superfan/>

44 Topinka, Robert, March 2024. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/14614448241237489>

45 BBC News, September 2023. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-66842630>

46 YouTube, "'Tracked by Agencies Employed By Moderna" - Russell Brand's Battle with Big Pharma', February 2024. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wliFaOw1SF4> YouTube, 'Russell Brand WRECKS Big Pharma for Ignoring Natural Immunity', March 2023. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q-8fLW8V7ik>

FOUNDATIONS OF DISTRUST DEMOCRATIC DISORDER

Foreign disinformation campaigns, the incentive structures of social media, and the disposition of individuals all clearly play a significant role in the creation and propagation of conspiracy theories. However, there is a danger in taking a view of this phenomenon that is too narrow, focusing on small technocratic attempted fixes instead of addressing the bigger picture.

Conspiracy theories flourish in the context of broader deficits and structural drivers in our political, economic, and media environments.

In the current context of economic stagnation and rising inequality, with the disparate and poorly understood impacts of emerging technologies on the horizon, it is not surprising that trust in politics is low.⁴⁷ Across the world, we see evidence that distrust in political elites often comes from legitimate grievances.⁴⁸ Countries with higher levels of corruption or lower levels of trustworthy media tend to have higher levels of conspiracy belief.⁴⁹ Furthermore, conspiracy theories often react to previous histories of official secrecy and conspiring, taking root in marginalised populations with a justified distrust of authorities.⁵⁰

At the same time, structural changes to our information ecosystems have reconfigured the information flows underpinning democratic societies.⁵¹ The rise of digital media and economic pressures on traditional media challenge our existing institutions, which are struggling to adapt.⁵² To understand the role of conspiracy theories in our information ecosystem, we need to shift away from a focus on conspiracy theories and disinformation as a solely online problem that can be tackled purely by removing bad information, or even through the regulation of the online environment as a whole.

Conspiracy theories and other forms of 'information disorder' pose significant threats to society.⁵³ But the root of information disorder is often disordered democracy.

47 Office for National Statistics, 2023. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/bulletins/trustinggovernmentuk/2023>

48 Altheide, David L., and Jennifer N. Grimes, December 2016. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/10.1111/j.1533-8525.2005.00029.x>

49 Adam@Troian, Jais, January 2023. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC10100481/>

50 The Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, March 2024. <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/news/ai-lies-and-conspiracy-theories-how-latinos-become-key-target-misinformation-us-election>

51 Jungherr, Andreas, and Ralph Schroeder, January 2021. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/2056305121988928>

52 Bell, Emily J, et al., 2017. <https://academiccommons.columbia.edu/doi/10.7916/D8R216ZZ> Nielsen, Rasmus Kleis, and Sarah Anne Ganter, April 2017. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1461444817701318>

53 Wardle, Clare, September 2020. <https://firstdraftnews.org/long-form-article/understanding-information-disorder/>

FROM DISTRUST TO CONSPIRACY COMMUNITIES TO CULTURE WARS

The conspiracy feedback loop emerges from a context of democratic distrust, where social, material and epistemic instability create cracks in our democratic infrastructure. When individuals and communities are unable to find meaning or explanations for the events in their own lives and the world around them, a space is opened up for alternative explanations. Influencers and political actors are increasingly latching onto grassroots conspiracy theories and amplifying them as a way of promoting existing positions in the 'culture wars'.

Conspiracy Feedback Loop

A dysfunctional pattern of amplification, weaponisation and denunciation.

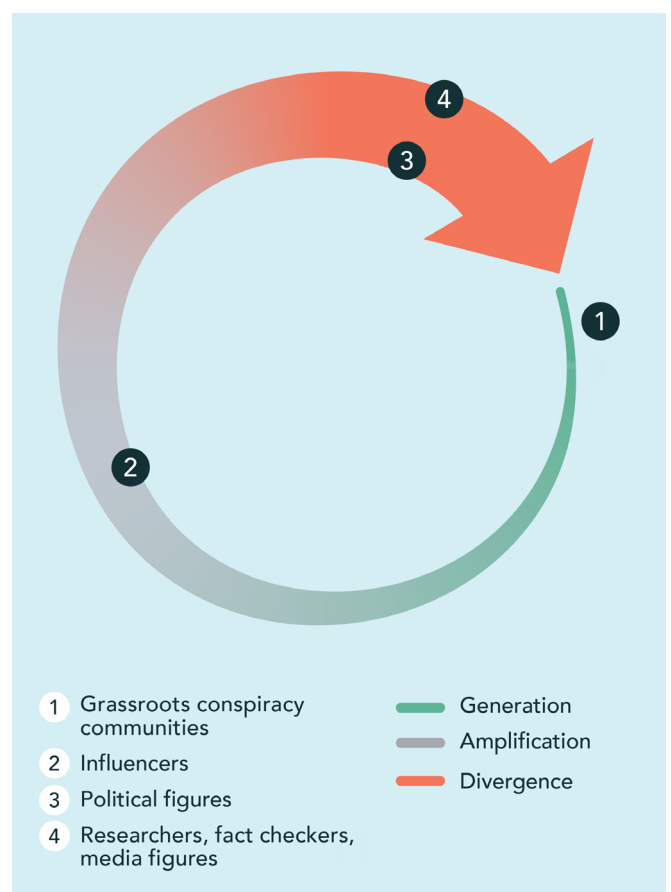
KEY ACTORS:

1. Grassroots conspiracy communities
2. Influencers
3. Political figures
4. Researchers, fact checkers, media figures

STAGES:

- A. Generation
- B. Amplification
- C. Divergence – denunciation and weaponisation

FIGURE 1
CONSPIRACY FEEDBACK LOOP



Grassroots conspiracy communities

Given the foundations of distrust in democratic institutions, many individuals are left wanting narratives that explain the struggles within their own lives, as well as what can feel like an unstable and changing world. For grassroots conspiracy communities, both on- and offline, conspiracy theories can provide a ready-made narrative for articulating potentially legitimate resentment, or for justifying identity positions already held by community members.⁵⁴

‘Do your own research’ is a rallying cry for these communities, providing members of the community with a means of engaging in the formation of collective, sensemaking narratives.⁵⁵ By understanding the dynamics of conspiracy communities, we can challenge the misperception that conspiracy theorists simply spread pieces of misleading information that alter individual beliefs. Instead, they are originators and active participants. Conspiracy communities are responding to an uncertain and unknown environment by creating their own meaning.

Conspiracy influencers

Occasionally, these theories are picked up by conspiracy influencers – on YouTube channels, podcasts, Substacks – and amplified to a larger audience. At this point, the communities from which the conspiracy theory emerged have little power over its direction. Some of the most avid promoters of conspiracism are engaged in this activity for financial gain. Prominent examples of conspiracy influencers include Alex Jones and David Icke, who learned to use the in-built affordances of the internet to turn what had been a cottage industry into a more industrial concern.

In the online world, many conspiracy entrepreneurs have created large audiences and monetised popular fascination with conspiracy theories. These influencers are often the first individuals to bring a conspiracy theory into popular consciousness. This kind of conspiracy content can take many forms, across both mainstream and fringe platforms, incorporating aspects of spirituality and wellness as well as more explicitly political material.⁵⁶ A common thread is the sale of nutritional supplements

and merchandise, which can be far more lucrative than the actual subscriptions to publications or livestreams.

Once on a wider stage, a conspiracy theory can become a political weapon in one influential set of hands, or an object of ridicule in another.

Political figures

Into this toxic mix of distrust and conspiracy enter politicians who, rather than addressing the issues of distrust, are tempted to play into the conspiratorial climate. Some political figures will opportunistically harness conspiracy theories, to access pre-existing communities of support and boost the power of their argument, such as in the case of opposition to traffic-curbing climate measures that uses the language of ‘15-minute cities’.⁵⁷

‘Culture wars’ rhetoric operates on the level of core values and fears; far more conspiratorial in tone and less fact-based than standard political discourse.⁵⁸ Once legitimate – though sometimes highly-charged – debates about topics such as digital currencies, urban planning, and paediatric gender treatment now get drawn into the vortex of conspiracy theorising, and are weaponised for political purposes.⁵⁹ This kind of dynamic was previously associated with populist figures internationally, but is increasingly part of the democratic landscape in both the UK and US.

Once conspiracy communities see mainstream venues and political figures sharing conspiracy theories, they may feel confirmed in their original distrust and speculation, becoming yet more entrenched. This sets the stage for further conspiracy-theorising in the future.

Researchers, fact checkers, some media figures

Once a conspiracy theory is being circulated by a political figure or prominent influencer, often opposing politicians, fact checkers, disinformation researchers and journalists will start to debunk the theory. This type of engagement ranges from responsible – such as highlighting the negative impacts of medical disinformation – to less responsible, including mocking believers of the theory.⁶⁰

54 van Prooijen, Jan-Willem, and Nienke Böhm, June 2023. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/19485506231181659>

55 Bastos, M., and M. Tuters, November 2023. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/20539517231215361>

56 Tuters et al., ‘Reactionary Sensemaking: Mapping the Micropolitics of Online Oppositional Subcultures’. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/20539517241235879>

57 The Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, April 2020. <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/types-sources-and-claims-covid-19-misinformation> Heiberger, Raphael, June 2021. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/19401612211015122>

58 Birchall, Clare, and Peter Knight, January 2023. <https://kclpure.kcl.ac.uk/portal/en/publications/has-conspiracy-theory-run-out-of-steam>

59 Birchall, Clare, and Peter Knight, 2022. Conspiracy Theories in the Time of Covid-19. <https://www.routledge.com/Conspiracy-Theories-in-the-Time-of-Covid-19/Birchall-Knight/p/book/9781032324999>

60 European Commission and UNESCO, Identifying conspiracy theories. https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/coronavirus-response/fighting-disinformation/identifying-conspiracy-theories_en

However, there is always a risk with conspiracy theories that the attention paid at this point may further amplify the conspiracy theory. The instinct from opponents to fact-check and debunk may play into narratives of 'the elite' or Liz Truss's 'deep state' censoring the truth, leading to further weaponisation and bolstering of the conspiratorial rhetoric. After all, they may argue, the conspiracy theory must be onto something if the mainstream media is so quick to dismiss it.⁶¹ Other supporters may be fully aware that the statements are not factually accurate, but they articulate a deeper feeling of truth which reflects their own lived experience. Fact checking is unlikely to shake this kind of belief.

A further challenge of the spread of conspiracy rhetoric into a wider realm of political discussion is that potentially legitimate critique is easy to dismiss as merely another conspiracy theory. Although there might be genuine reasons to be critical about some of the Covid lockdown measures, or actions of the World Economic Forum, the saturation of often implausible conspiracy theories about these topics made it much harder to voice legitimate concerns without sounding like a conspiracy theorist. In this context, labels like 'conspiracy theory' and 'misinformation' can be easily used to delegitimise valid fears. With conspiracy theorists focusing on the 'Great Replacement' narrative and the mainstream media, politicians, and fact-checking organisations ramping up potentially alarmist fears about the rise of online extremism, there is little space left for more nuanced discussions.

EXAMPLE: '15-MINUTE CITIES'

The explosion of '15-Minute Cities' from a relatively niche concept in urban planning, to a core component of the international 'Great Reset' conspiracy theory is a clear example of the conspiracy loop in action. The '15-Minute City' is a vision for urban planning in which people are no more than a 15-minute walk or bike ride from essential services such as doctors, schools, and shops. What started as an uncontroversial concept has amassed a dystopian image of state controlled movement.

The concept was initially picked up as an example of state control of citizens during the protests against Covid lockdowns, which served as a melting pot for various conspiracy communities. As the pandemic restrictions came to an end, this energy shifted towards a fear of 'climate lockdowns' imposed through traffic restrictions. The '15-Minute City' conspiracy theory quickly picked up traction in online conspiracy spaces.

Conspiracy influencers and climate denial lobbyists began to amplify the theory, with a notable example from controversial Canadian commentator Jordan Peterson.⁶² Many of these individuals blurred the line between conspiracy and legitimate critique, drawing on existing criticism of traffic control measures, particularly the potential for outsized impacts on the working class, who are more likely to be employed in trades reliant on transportation.

The theory has been the subject of extensive media coverage, often in a tone of bafflement or ridicule. As this conspiracist rhetoric moved from the fringes to the mainstream of politics in the UK, '15-Minute Cities' have become the subject of a culture war, in which the extremes of each side trade insults and caricatures, abstracted from the communities on the ground.⁶³ Following the Uxbridge and South Ruislip by-election, government policy has switched quickly from initially promoting traffic calming schemes, to now condemning councils for engaging in these same 'anti-driver' policies.⁶⁴

The collision of these technological, social, and political dynamics results in a self-perpetuating feedback loop, in which conspiracy theories emerge, are amplified, become fuel for ugly political fights and ultimately reinforce a climate of suspicion and distrust, generating fertile ground for more conspiracy theories to grow. In this context, the limitations of our current approaches become self-evident. Various technocratic attempts to fix the problem tend to focus on the symptoms, not the causes. Deplatforming conspiracy influencers has mixed results: while it can limit reach and revenue from ads, it can also backfire.⁶⁵ Ultimately, the conspiracy loop is a democratic problem, requiring a democratic solution.

61 O'Mahony, Cian, April 2023. <https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0280902>

62 Peterson, Jordan B., 2022. <https://twitter.com/jordanbpeterson/status/1609255646993457153?lang=en>

63 Spiked Online, 2023. <https://www.spiked-online.com/2023/02/23/its-true-the-climate-fanatics-are-coming-for-your-car/>

64 Forbes, 2023. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/carltonreid/2023/10/02/rishi-sunaks-attack-on-15-minute-cities-is-baffling-and-concerning-says-originator-of-concept/?sh=101274417dc0>

65 Grusauskeite, Kamile, et al., 'Reactionary Exiles. How Conspiracy Theorists Deal With Socio-Technological Exclusion' [forthcoming]

BREAKING THE FEEDBACK LOOP

There is now a considerable body of scholarship proposing strategies for tackling the perceived crisis of misinformation, disinformation and conspiracy theories. However, as demonstrated in our exploration of drivers of conspiracy belief, they often rely on a number of mistaken assumptions about the nature of the problem, focusing too exclusively either on individual psychology or the online environment. Existing interventions such as debunking and fact-checking, inoculation and prebunking, media literacy and analytical thinking training are necessary pieces of the puzzle, but none of these activities are silver bullets.

WHAT EXISTING APPROACHES TO ADDRESSING CONSPIRACY THEORIES SHOULD CONSIDER:

1. Identifying the kernel of truth

Conspiracy theories cannot simply be dismissed as paranoid delusions. Instead, these theories often resonate with genuine concerns, confusions and resentments, as well as societally entrenched forms of prejudice. For some individuals, paranoia is an understandable response to experiences of powerlessness. This may include drawing on existing tropes and fears in our culture, including prejudices we may have hoped had been relegated to the past.

2. Understanding specific conspiracy narratives, worldviews and identities

Conspiracy theories are not merely pieces of misinformation, but narratives embedded in social and political contexts. These narratives are not simply the result of a lack of information, or deliberately false information; instead, they are rooted in a worldview, tied to political identity. As a result, conspiracy theories are 'sticky', or resistant to refutation.

3. Situating conspiracy theories within the structural conditions that contribute to the attraction of conspiracy theorising

A fundamental question for those seeking to understand the appeal of conspiracy theories must be: Why do individuals not see the state and democratic institutions as trustworthy? The focus cannot only be on the paranoia of citizens, but should examine the trustworthiness – or otherwise – of institutions and political actors.

In order to tackle the **foundations of distrust**, democratic institutions need to build stronger relationships with communities. A forthcoming Demos report examines how Low Traffic Neighbourhood schemes were weaponised from a – sometimes controversial – local environmental policy into an international conspiracy theory.

In the context of decimated local news ecosystems and a lack of trust between citizens and local councils, we saw a familiar dynamic of conspiracy theories and culture wars. Our research identifies the pivotal role of local councils in building trust in democracy, providing tangible steps towards genuine citizen consultation and participation in decision making.

In order to tackle the environments in which **conspiracy communities** can grow, we need to consider how information environments can be incentivised to provide democratically important information. The structural conditions which enable conspiracy theories also include the design, political economy and infrastructure of platforms. To understand contemporary conspiracism, we need to examine how platform affordances and financial incentives shape online communication and, crucially, how they intersect with legacy media and the offline world. In our previous report, *Drivers of Digital Discord*, we proposed a radical shift from a social media paradigm driven by engagement alone, to a paradigm that would incentivise the production and promotion of information in the public interest.⁶⁶ By ensuring a fair, transparent and above all democratic means of achieving this change in incentive structures, we can take the first step to rebalance our information ecosystems towards a healthy mix of trust and scepticism.

However, online media should be considered as just one component of the whole media ecosystem and the conspiracy feedback loop, rather than a single supply pipeline or cause. A continued focus on narrow, digital-only interventions will not be enough to address this challenge.

In both the UK and overseas, political figures have weaponised conspiratorial rhetoric and tropes in **culture wars**. The individuals engaging in this behaviour are not just endorsing and spreading conspiracy theories, but are also further deepening distrust in democracy. As we have shown, this leads to an acceleration of the conspiracy loop, creating an environment ripe for the emergence and strengthening of further conspiracy theories.

Breaking the loop of conspiracy theories and culture wars requires a deep examination of the cracks in our democratic foundations, including the people most likely to get lost within them.

⁶⁶ Demos, December 2023. <https://demos.co.uk/research/drivers-of-digital-discord-how-news-media-and-social-media-drive-online-discourse-and-pathways-for-change/>

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