The Spread of Conspiracy Culture from the Margins of Society to the Mainstream

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**Abstract**

In our confused and chaotic world, which is saturated with political and social turmoil, uncertainty and anxiety are appearing with increasing frequency. Conspiracy culture meets the existential need of people for a sense of security and control over these situations. The question arises as to how the conspiratorial worldview spread from the margins of society to the mainstream, and became accepted by segments of the wider public, especially political ones.[[1]](#endnote-1) For example, Donald Trump, former president of the United States, was described as a “conspiratorial candidate” during the 2016 election. He disseminated conspiracy theories for his political needs during his tenure, using the Twitter network and its algorithm platform. This article examines whether this technology enables the conspiratorial worldview to spread to the mainstream of society, or whether there are other factors and processes involved.[[2]](#endnote-2)

Keywords: Conspiracy, Algorithms, Culture, Politics, Uncertainty, Chaos, Technology

**Introduction**

Conspiracy theories can be found in a variety of research fields, including philosophy (Pauly, 2020), history, political science, social psychology and sociology, or in examining racial minorities or conspiracy communities such as the Reddit Community, which is also a site for social news (see also Douglas el al., 2019; Uscinski, 2018). These theories are a radical response to doubts about the validity of scientific knowledge and the conduct of government in national societies and in the media. The writer Franz Kafka described the existential state of humans in a distorted world of confusion and disorientation, in which many certainties have been undermined. He revealed the horror that comes from the fact that identity, reality, and truth are not agreed upon, but are controversial concepts that prevent people from imagining any cohesive human order. Images of loss can be found in Kafka’s works such as *The* *Metamorphosis* (Die Verwandlung, 1912), *The Trial* (Der Process, 1925) and *The Castle* (Das Schloß, 1926), whose protagonists are trapped in a labyrinth of indifferent and bureaucratic laws, and whose lives are ruled by terror and irrationality.

Against the background of conspiracy theories, narratives of anxiety and cognitive and existential paranoia have developed and been debated in the social sciences since the 19th century. These are considered to be constitutive narratives in the creation of culture. Many metaphors are used to describe conspiracies, such as memes, which according to Richard Dawkins (2016) constitute “units of cultural transmission” or “units of imitation and replication”, with a meaning similar to that of a “cultural gene”. The metaphor of viruses also raises the idea of an infection that exploits its infiltration of culture to allow specific elements to penetrate and infect its DNA.

These metaphors and narratives help explain the phenomenon of conspiracy in online media, and especially the role of social networks (Marino & Thibault, 2016). Like the urban legends and rumors that describe and even warn against conspiracies, they serve as causal explanations but do not address the factors that influenced their transition from the cultural fringe to the center of contemporary culture. The increased use of the Internet as a technological platform for distribution of information since the late 1990s, has intensified the development of conspiracies and promoted their distribution. However, no clear evidence has been found that these technologies were the cause of the shift in the position of communication theories.

One technological tool is the digital “mediascape”, which allows cultural content to be produced, supported, or suppressed, updated, distributed, and accessed via the Internet. This technology allows for rapid updates via a variety of social media sources, such as email, Facebook, Twitter and Short Message Service (SMS). However, no research findings have indicated that mediascape platforms have caused this movement.

In contrast, Twitter allows users to store information and update followers and can be used as an accelerator of political power. For using this interface, former US President Donald Trump was described as a “conspiracy candidate” during the 2016 election campaign. During his tenure, he prolifically used Twitter as a means for spreading conspiracies, and a tool of ongoing communication to a wide audience (Anderson, 2017). This increased the loyalty of his supporters, who saw him as a fighter against the enemies of the ‘deep state’, which was trying to control its citizens by imposing the mandatory vaccine against the Coronavirus.

Nevertheless, it is difficult to argue that the use of Twitter by an individual, even a president, is a significant factor in the spread of conspiracy theories from the margins of culture to its center. We would like to argue that algorithms may be the main factor in this phenomenon, when they are techno-gothic, combining digital technologies with a gothic culture[[3]](#endnote-3) that believes in dark forces and social degeneration. Today, gothic culture is not something from science fiction, but is expressed in the surging belligerence and violence in society.

1. The term ‘marginal culture’ (similar to ‘subculture’) refers to a minority group that shares many values ​​with the general culture but whose worldview differs from it. Barkun (2013, 2016), who specializes in research on monstrosities, discusses marginal conspiratorial worldviews related to mysterious legends. He describes conspiratorial thinking in mainstream American culture (“birther” theory about Barack Obama’s origins, the Oklahoma City bombing, and the US government’s involvement in 2001 terrorist attacks). According to a Pew study, nearly 30% of Americans believe that the Coronavirus was created by humans in the laboratory, and about a quarter of those surveyed said they believe it was created on purpose (Romano, 2020). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. I thank Uri Horowitz for his important comments on the draft article and Gilat Iron-Behar for the linguistic editing. The content of the article is my sole responsibility [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Gothic culture is attributed to the culture of a Germanic tribe that infiltrated Western Europe in the fourth century, and carved out a kingdom from the remains of the decaying Roman Empire. The term “gothic” has acquired a derogatory meaning something that is contrary to conventions, has a barbaric style (Baddeley, 2002, 2017) that consists of dark elements such as enjoyment of the despicable and the perverted. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)