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Conspiracy Theories and Social Media: How Online Disinformation Poses a Formidable Threat to the Livelihood of Contemporary Civilization

Abstract

Overview: In our current, heavily-modernized society, the Internet and Internet-focused technologies have completely redefined our standard means of communication and have become fully integrated into every aspect of our daily lives. More specifically, the rise of social media platforms has revolutionized the ways by which we spread and interpret information and has allowed people all across the globe the opportunity to make their voices heard. However, these social platforms are anything but flawless systems of communication; in the few years that they have been prominent within society, they have presented our civilization with tumultuous challenges that have severely threatened our already fragile political structures and processes. These challenges, otherwise known as conspiracy theories, have infested the social media landscape, pitting humans against humans and putting their words and ideologies into irreconcilable conflict. Another byproduct of the proliferation of conspiracies is the distortion of truth, which is especially evident when observing what unfolded on social media after the 2020 presidential election. Following Joe Biden's projected victory over Donald Trump, enraged right-wing supporters took to sites such as Facebook and Twitter proclaiming that the election had been fraudulent, even though no solid evidence indicative of this had been presented or found. Regardless of the lack of evidence, the unsubstantiated claims spread just as aggressively online until more than 60% of republicans reportedly believed that the election was rigged and that Biden won as a result of widespread voter fraud (Forbes). This single example of many serves to illustrate how social media platforms accelerate and promote the spread of conspiracy theories online and how they have blurred the lines between democratic free speech and the anarchical dissemination of unverified statements.

Author's reflection: My name is Jessica D'Amico and I am a media management student at St. John Fisher College. Last spring as part of my Honors Program curriculum, I was able to take a research-based writing class called Conspiracy Theories with Dr. Barbara Lowe. Our class was given the opportunity to write the final paper on any topic concerning conspiracy theories, so I decided to conduct my research on the relationship between social media and the proliferation of modern conspiracy theories. Considering my interest and eventual goal to have a career in the realm of digital communications, I figured that enriching my knowledge about the potential dangers and negatives of social media would serve me well moving forward. Throughout the writing process, I enjoyed compiling my research and I learned a lot about how misinformation on social media can be extremely harmful to our political-social harmony. Overall, I hope that those who read this paper will become better able to identify conspiracies on social media, as well as understand the importance of increased media literacy when looking to obtain information from online sources.

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HNRS1299

3 May 2021

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In our current, heavily-modernized society, the Internet and Internet-focused technologies have completely redefined our standard means of communication and have become fully integrated into every aspect of our daily lives. More specifically, the rise of social media platforms has revolutionized the ways by which we spread and interpret information and has allowed people all across the globe the opportunity to make their voices heard. However, these social platforms are anything but flawless systems of communication; in the few years that they have been prominent within society, they have presented our civilization with tumultuous challenges that have severely threatened our already fragile political structures and processes. These challenges, otherwise known as conspiracy theories, have infested the social media landscape, pitting humans against humans and putting their words and ideologies into irreconcilable conflict. Another byproduct of the proliferation of conspiracies is the distortion of truth, which is especially evident when observing what unfolded on social media after the 2020 presidential election. Following Joe Biden's projected victory over Donald Trump, enraged right-wing supporters took to sites such as Facebook and Twitter proclaiming that the election had been fraudulent, even though no solid evidence indicative of this had been presented or found. Regardless of the lack of evidence, the unsubstantiated claims spread just as aggressively online until more than 60% of republicans reportedly believed that the election was rigged and that Biden won as a result of widespread voter fraud (Forbes). This single example of many serves to illustrate how social media platforms accelerate and promote the spread of conspiracy theories online and

how they have blurred the lines between democratic free speech and the anarchical dissemination of unverified statements. For the purpose of this paper, I will further defend this viewpoint and argue that more people need to be made aware of this issue. Awareness is extremely important because while social media is widely used across the globe, very little information about how it really works and how it can be manipulated to spread false narratives is made common knowledge. If people do not become educated on how to properly navigate social media in our increasingly digital society, mass disinformation, mistrust in our government and the creation of polarized online communities will only continue to grow, thereby exacerbating chaos and jeopardizing the existence of our country's democratic operations. Essentially, in this paper I will argue that the widespread use of social media has had profound implications on the proliferation of conspiracy theories and, because of this, we should educate others on how social media platforms function and how to most effectively use them in conjunction with other resources to inform individual opinions on important, and sometimes controversial, subjects.



Conspiratorial thinking is anything but a new, foreign concept; it has been present within society for as long as people have had the ability to question the systems of power residing over them. That being said, there is no doubt that this age-old phenomenon has evolved over recent history, and as a result, a dichotomy between the “old” and “new” ways of engaging in conspiratorial thinking has been identified. While old conspiracism was defined as calculative, evidence-based and logical, new conspiracism has come to be recognized as baseless, illogical, inflammatory and harmful to democratic processes. This section of my paper will further explore this dichotomy and will support the position that the widespread use of social media is largely, if not fully, responsible for this evolution of conspiracism and has acted as a vessel for its proliferation in modern society.

As I previously stated, the methodology behind conspiracism has transformed over recent years and the resulting theories have, in a way, devolved in their potential for progressing and improving the

functioning of society. In the text *A Lot of People Are Saying*, authors Russell Muirhead and Nancy Rosenblum extensively analyze and defend this position while offering numerous points on how old and new conspiracism are vastly and fundamentally different. In describing these contrasting processes, the authors say, “While classic conspiracism offers hopeful—sometimes utopian—accounts of what exposing [conspiracies] can accomplish, new conspiracism lacks any and all political theory, and its effects are completely negative: they cause disorientation and delegitimization” (30). New conspiracies are disorienting because they are often completely unfounded and are based in little-to-no factual evidence. They are created not with the intention to enlighten others, but to cause mass confusion and to raise suspicion around polarizing issues that will result in the adoption of these unsubstantiated claims. Take the 2020 presidential election conspiracies as an example. The claims of widespread voter fraud and glitchy voting machines went without any sort of valid evidence to back them up. In this sense, these conspiracies were not meant to raise awareness about an actual, real-life issue, but were used to mislead others into rallying behind the radical right-wing. In addition to being disorienting, new conspiracies are delegitimizing because they purposely diminish the authority of democracy, yet also fail to identify any alternative systems of government that could take its place. While minor mistrust in government can be seen as constructive or healthy, the immense irrational doubt that is instilled by new conspiracist narratives could ultimately lead to democracy’s downfall.

Clearly, this modern form of conspiracy poses a major threat to society and is primarily driven by a powerful and equally as modern force: social media. Social media platforms have been absolutely paramount in the spread of disorienting and delegitimizing conspiracies and are largely responsible for provoking conspiracism’s transition from “old” to “new.” What makes social media such an influential tool in the spread of conspiracies is its increasingly frequent use as a reference for “reliable” information, especially among people of the millennial generation and younger. In a 2019 European study, a group of

Greek professors examined college students' social media interactions in relation to their belief in conspiracy theories. Their results found that 79.4 percent of the students believed that "mainstream media would lie," and that 84.2 percent believed that mainstream media news was just as reliable or even *less* reliable than the news found on social media. Additionally, the study found that the students who believed mainstream media would lie were also more likely to believe in conspiracy theories (Bantimaroudis 124). From my own interpretation, these results indicate that social media has only escalated people's widespread belief in conspiracy theories and that its prevalence within society has caused more and more people to take on conspiracist mindsets.

In terms of conspiracism's shift from old to new, social media played a significant part in the following ways: when social media grew to be universally accessible and became a constant presence in daily life, the processes of conspiracism were affected and shifted with the dominant technologies. The Internet, once used to perform research and to find credible information that could solidify existing conspiracies, was now primarily used to spread and repeat unconfirmed online narratives that didn't even have to be true. Thus, social media has become a vital indoctrination tool for the modern conspiracist, and as a result, the medium has profoundly impacted the spread of conspiracy theories and has made them more prominent in society.

Others, unlike myself or Muirhead and Rosenblum, have had doubts about the role that social media has played in the proliferation of conspiracy theories. These scholars would argue that social media has had virtually no effect on the modern spread and indoctrination of conspiracies and that the media as a whole has only a very limited ability to influence people's beliefs. One of these scholars is Joseph Uscinski, author of the text *Conspiracy Theories: A Primer*. In his chapter named "The Politics of Conspiracy Theories," Uscinski defends the claim that the media environment does very little in terms of changing consumers' minds about prominent issues and social topics, such as current political elections. He supports this by

stating that certain beliefs and values, such as a person's partisanship, are not easily swayed by differing online sources and that social media users self-select content that reaffirms pre-held notions and disregards opposing viewpoints.

While I do understand where scholars such as Uscinski are coming from to a degree, I still support that there is concrete evidence proving that social media has had an impact on how the processes of conspiracism and how belief in conspiracism has evolved. For a medium that entirely transformed how we communicate across the globe, it would be highly unlikely, in my opinion, that social media would have zero effect on how we communicate conspiracy theories. The first way that social media has made it easier for conspiracies to flourish within modern society is that it has collectively redefined what it means for news to be "credible" and "trustworthy." According to scholar and author Anne Maria Dragomir, social media has completely reconfigured the news channel concept and has dramatically increased the amount of information that people are exposed to on a daily basis (55). Because there are extremely limited protocols in place for social media platforms to determine the reliability of individual content posted to their sites, the social media landscape has become a playground for both factual content and conjured-up misinformation to coexist. Moreover, certain features of these platforms, such as "liking," "retweeting" and "sharing", are increasingly being used to measure the credibility of online content, even though these metrics can not possibly logically indicate the accuracy or reliability of posted information (Dragomir 59). This situation affects the spread of conspiracies because while social media content is being verified based on the amount of other people who have engaged with it, it isn't being verified based on its actual credibility or source. With this in mind, conspirators can figure out ways to manipulate users and draw more engagement to their posted content, thus creating the illusion that what they are saying is true when in reality it is not based in fact.

The second piece of evidence supporting that social media has affected the proliferation of conspiracies is that certain algorithms and functions of online platforms are acting as catalysts in further disseminating greater numbers of propagandist narratives. In the article *Fake News, Conspiracy Theories, and Lies: An Information Laundering Model For Homeland Security*, author Samantha Korta promotes the argument that social media is a key tool in the modern spread of conspiracy theories. Elaborating on her position, Korta says, “The internet ecosystem itself can enable the spread and inaccurate validation of counterfeit narratives. Further, that ecosystem fosters a number of processes that can accelerate the spread of propaganda” (55). Korta goes on to mention the specific features of these social media platforms that, regardless of their original intended use, have been instrumental in the spread of online conspiratorial narratives and have made it much easier for them to prevail in the digital environment.

One of the specific processes, or tools, that have aided conspiracists on social media are echo chambers. These echo chambers are the result of algorithms that are designed to personalize feed content according to users’ specific likes and dislikes. Because social media platforms have the capability to analyze content engagement patterns while users are on and off of their sites, they can collect outside data that is used to influence which content that platform will populate on the user’s designated feed (Korta 58). For a user who consistently engages in right-wing propaganda, for example, the algorithm will take this into account and primarily show them content that aligns with their pre-existing point of view. What results is an echo chamber, “...in which the user cannot *choose* to ignore dissenting views; the user is simply never exposed to dissenting views at all” (Korta 61). By not having regular exposure to opposing viewpoints--which are vital in the rational process of developing opinions on a subject--polarized conspiracies are more likely to be adopted by users only seeing one side of the story.

Another tool taken advantage of by conspiracy theorists is the use of online advertising. Conspiracists have figured out that buying available ad space originally intended for credible businesses and

organizations can be used to target specific social media feeds for displaying propagandist narratives (Korta 62). If conspirators have enough money to pay for it, they can spend thousands of dollars promoting crafted messages that will show up for specific users online. Through this process, anyone can curate their own conspiratorial content and directly target it towards those deemed the most susceptible to their ideas.

The final tool that is used are social media bots. Over 48 million Twitter users, for example, are predicted not to be genuine humans, but bots (Korta 66). These programs masquerading as regular people on social media can assist conspiracists in a number of different ways when they are trying to accelerate the spread of their narratives. Ultimately, they can bolster conspiracists' ideas online and promote them widely across the internet. For example, these bots have been shown to engage in online political conversations and, "...are capable of drowning out dissent and disrupting attempts to mobilize collective action online" (Korta 70). The three aforementioned tools--echo chambers, advertising and bots--are vital examples of how the social media environment directly facilitates the spread of conspiracies and how online processes can be easily taken advantage of by Internet savvy conspiracists. In closing this section of my paper, the evidence that I've presented clearly supports that social media has caused a revolution of conspiracism that has dramatically accelerated and proliferated the amount of conspiracism within modern society. Next, I will turn to discussing my potential solutions for saving our democratic systems from the destruction caused by online conspiracy theories.



Unquestionably, social media platforms are here to stay; they have become permanent aspects of our daily lives and have fully integrated themselves into the very functioning of our modern civilization. As time and technology only continue to progress, so too will the amounts of mass disinformation and chaos-causing conspiracies that are ever present on the Internet. If we do not change our course of action in some way soon, our democratic processes and our society as a whole will be severely at risk for eventual self-destruction. Thus, I will argue in this section of my paper that the key in preventing this from happening lies

in revising our education programs, increasing news literacy among the public and utilizing outside fact-checking organizations to judge the credibility of messages on social media.

In the majority of cases, the first step in attempting to solve any kind of social problem involves raising awareness that there is even an issue to be dealt with in the first place. The same concept rings true in the case of modern conspiracies; many social media users have no idea how they can be manipulated into believing false conspiracies online and how much misinformation there really is on social media platforms. In order to enlighten more people about the dangers of these situations, more resources need to be devoted to making these conditions common knowledge. We also need to update and revise our public education curriculums so that they include lessons on how to properly navigate the social media environment. This will ensure that the upcoming generations of Internet-using people will learn material that is relevant and will teach them how to find and interpret the information that they will inevitably encounter online for the rest of their lives.

Samantha Korta, author of *Fake News, Conspiracy Theories, and Lies: An Information Laundering Model For Homeland Security*, is a cybersecurity advisor and former deputy director who led criminal, counterterrorism and cybersecurity efforts for the Wisconsin Statewide Intelligence Center. Korta supports this same solution tactic in her text and elaborates on her reasoning by saying, “Our education system needs to be reviewed, revised, and retooled to emphasize not only literacy, numeracy, and critical thinking, but also sophisticated consumption of information. In the world of iPads, Alexas, and big data, traditional lessons—like teaching cursive—seem archaic; media literacy and consumption seem all the more pressing” (139). I particularly like this quote from Korta’s text because it nicely articulates a puzzling observation about our current public education curriculums. The media and technology landscape has undergone quite the revolutionary change in recent history, dramatically altering so many of the processes involved with reading, writing and obtaining information as a result. Conversely, the curriculums within our public

schools have remained pretty much the same, which I believe raises the question of if schools are properly preparing the next generation of media consumers for having to navigate our ever-expanding digital environment. For this reason, I advocate for the implementation of new classes designed to teach students how to wisely use and extract data from digital platforms and sites. In the long run, this will help reduce the amount of misinformation that is able to easily fester on the Internet and will help media consumers to make logical decisions when looking to obtain online information.

Of course, the other method that Korta mentions to combat the conspiracy epidemic on social media is to make more people aware of this problem's existence. Although simply raising awareness of the social media-conspiracism predicament may seem too small a step to make any real progress, it is a vital part of the plan that will provide the framework for creating real, tangible change in the years to come (Korta 140). Once people realize that the virtual conspiracism process is harmful and can inflict severe damage on our society's ecosystem and throw off its equilibrium, we will, as a result, work more efficiently in protecting our online platforms from meddling conspiracists and their corrupting narratives.

Another aspect of educating others about conspiracism's prevalence on social media is directly related to my next proposed strategy: increasing the amount of news literacy among the general population. The concept of news literacy is discussed throughout scholars Emily Vraga and Melissa Tully's academic text, *News Literacy, Social Media Behaviors, and Skepticism Toward Information on Social Media*. The pair of authors define news literacy as the knowledge and skills one possesses that allows them to be a more skeptical news consumer. News literate people are also able to understand the relationship between journalistic opinions and regular citizen's opinions that they are exposed to in different media environments (Vraga and Tully 151). Especially among the younger generations, the primary resource being used for news is social media. This in and of itself is not particularly an issue, but because it is much more difficult for regular people to discern factual information from false information online, this phenomenon opens up

the door to a lot more problems. Since social media--unlike typical broadcast news media--is home to *both* information and misinformation, it is even more likely that misinformation will be mistaken for news simply because more people are being exposed to it on a daily basis.

This is where the concept of news literacy comes in. After conducting an experiment on the correlation between levels of observed news literacy against people's ability to determine misinformation on social media, Vraga and Tully reported, "News literacy education has been shown to help youth identify partisan misinformation and be skeptical of the news they encounter, while knowledge of media structures encouraged skepticism toward political conspiracy beliefs" (154). This study provides solid evidence that increasing news literacy would aid in easing the detrimental impact that online misinformation has had on modern society. In addition, connecting news literacy to democracy and civic engagement could promote higher levels of healthy skepticism towards news while avoiding excess cynicism and doubt among citizens that could lead to their widespread distrust in government. Further, news literacy training programs could be incorporated as part of the country's modern conspiracism and misinformation education revamp as I earlier discussed.

The final strategy that I propose to help solve the conspiracism crisis on social media is utilizing outside fact-checking organizations to assess the credibility of certain claims made on the Internet. This cohesive group made up of unbiased media literacy experts could go through content posted on social media for their careers and would label specific content as either founded or unfounded based on their research and knowledge. These labels could be seen by all users on the Internet and could be used in forming their own personal judgements about the claims they encounter online.

While I endorse this tactic, there are those who believe that the social media platforms themselves should be made responsible for taking down content that is deemed controversial. This point of view supports the argument that these platforms are seeking personal gain by not having a strong enough grip on

the content that is allowed to circulate on their sites. For example, Erika Smith, writer for the *Los Angeles Times*, wrote an article placing blame on social platforms such as Facebook and Twitter for not taking more initiative in the removal of controversial posts. In her article titled *Social Media Giants are Complicit in Chaos*, she said, “Yet, somehow these executives -- their fortunes reliant on people spending as much time in their online ecosystems as possible -- haven't done a whole heck of a lot to rid their platforms of such conspiracy theories that lead to real-world consequences” (1). Advocates for this perspective recognize that social media companies have complete control over what can and cannot be posted on their platforms and that they could and should more frequently censor whatever content they decide is worthy of censoring.

While this counter argument presents some strong points, I ultimately believe that social media platforms should not have the capacity to completely censor content and instead, other groups of reliable people should work to label content as trustworthy or untrustworthy. If powerful social media entities had the unhindered ability to censor or remove content on their sites whenever they wished, I believe that it would raise issues among the public as to what could be perceived as “right” or “wrong,” and if matters *should* be deemed on such a black and white scale. Another scholar who shares the same opinion as me is misinformation expert Dr. Claire Wardle. In her TED Talk called *How You Can Help Transform the Internet Into a Place of Trust*, she addresses the essential question of, “How do we construct and maintain an Internet that aligns with the principles of freedom of expression while simultaneously ensuring that the content being disseminated does not cause damage to our democracies, our communities or our physical and mental well-beings?” By the end of her speech, Wardle presents her potential solution to creating an Internet environment that is conducive to free speech but also hinders the proliferation of false narratives. She suggests that there *should* be people responsible for determining what online content is deemed credible or not credible, but that this guidance shouldn't come from the social media platforms themselves. This task should be in the hands of outside intellectuals well-versed in media literacy and assembled under one

organization. These individuals, while obviously not able to dictate what can and can't be posted online, should be able to provide their informed opinions on whether or not certain pieces of content come from reputable sources or if they align with proven fact and evidence. Additionally, it is crucial that these individuals all align under one organization so that there aren't so many little groups segmented from one another trying to accomplish the same overarching task.

Overall I, along with advocates such as Wardle, endorse the idea that it shouldn't be the social media platforms themselves in charge of blocking or deleting posted content that they deem incredible. Outside organizations composed of trained-for-the-job experts should make it their responsibility to comb through highly interacted with or controversial content on social media and fact check them. While people will still be able to believe whatever they want about these pieces of content, having these references could be crucial in swaying certain people's opinions and could prevent some of the more harmful conspiracies from spreading as quickly or as vehemently across the Internet.



Unfortunately, the conspiracy-laden social media landscape that existed as a result of the 2020 presidential election will not be a one-off occurrence; in fact, the same distorting and hostile online environment, while perhaps on a much smaller scale, prevails right this second as digital misinformation and conspiracy theories only continue to multiply. As more and more people choose to harness the power of social media platforms for the purpose of spreading damage-inflicting falsities and creating pandemonium, we are doomed to countless other incidents in our nation's future when one little rumor spreads like a virus across the Internet, recklessly dividing and pointlessly igniting the fury of the people within our nation. The beauty and the horror of the Internet and its platforms are mirror images of each other. While the freedom to express whatever we're feeling or how we choose to see the world is liberating, it also subjects us to the words and indoctrinations of others who may intentionally or unintentionally throw off our society's fragile stability. If we do not alter course, our accruing army of virtual conspiracists will continue to plant their

toxic seeds of thought into the minds of our own people, ultimately leading to the downfall of democracy and of civilization as we know it. Fortunately, there is a silver lining. While we may not be able to totally prevent ill-intended conspiracists from spreading their claims online, we can prepare and educate ourselves as a media-consuming people on how to safely and smartly navigate the social media environment. The first step lies in becoming aware. We need to make the dangers of being exposed to unverified statements on the Internet common knowledge and we need to inform others of the extreme prevalence of this situation. If people do not recognize that there are potentially disastrous consequences of wrongfully using social media, we will never be able to progress and take further preventative action. The second step comes with educating others on how to identify credible versus non credible content on the Internet and teaching them how to become “news skeptical.” Posted content online needs not be taken at face value, but rather thoroughly analyzed and cross-referenced for truthfulness and accuracy. Once people learn strategies such as these, they will more effectively be able to categorize fact from fiction and will begin to habitually obtain information from a variety of credible sources. The final step comes with recruiting outside fact-checking organizations to help label posted content online as trustworthy or not. Having these references would work extremely well in dissuading certain people from believing in unverified information and would also aid a significant amount in preventing conspiracy theories from spreading as aggressively across the Internet. If we, as a nation, take care in implementing these proposed tactics, conspiracism’s harmful reign over social media will drastically lessen in severity over time. Although it is unlikely that conspiracism will ever be completely eradicated from the interwebs, its impact can be diminished and our society, along with its people, can be further protected from future chaos and saved from the threat of our eventual self-destruction.

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