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CREATING CONSPIRACY BELIEFS

Conspiracy theories are spread more widely and faster than ever before. Fear and uncertainty prompt people to believe false narratives of danger and hidden plots, but are not sufficient without considering the role and ideological bias of the media. This timely book focuses on making sense of how and why some people respond to their fear of a threat by creating or believing conspiracy stories. It integrates insights from psychology, political science, communication, and information sciences to provide a complete overview and theory of how conspiracy beliefs manifest. Through this multidisciplinary perspective, rigorous research develops and tests a practical, simple way to frame and understand conspiracy theories. The book supplies unprecedented amounts of new data from six empirical studies and unpicks the complexity of the process that leads to the empowerment of conspiracy beliefs.

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CREATING CONSPIRACY BELIEFS

How Our Thoughts Are Shaped

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To our families for their inspiration and unconditional support.

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Preface

What is a conspiracy belief, and how is one created and sustained? How does a narrative that both harnesses and justifies recipients' general anxiety increase susceptibility to the belief in a hidden plot that powerful agents have orchestrated to harm the believer? Or do anxious feelings from other sources (e.g., one's mood) create a predisposition to think about conspiracies? What is the role of social networks and media in trafficking such accounts to susceptible individuals? How do psychological and sociopolitical influences play out?

In *Creating Conspiracy Beliefs*, we use survey, experimental, and social media data to test the utility of a theory of psychological and sociopolitical influences on conspiracy beliefs. Our objects of interest range from hoary beliefs that Barack Obama was not born in the United States and assertions that the dangers of vaccination have been covered up by self-interested agents to beliefs about the existence of a deep state within the American governmental bureaucracy bent on subverting the presidency of Donald J. Trump, first by engineering his impeachment, later by undermining his efforts to bring the COVID-19 pandemic under control, and finally by preventing his reelection.

Our theoretical framework acknowledges psychological and sociopolitical influences that have been looked at in past research on conspiracy beliefs, including anxiety (e.g., an anxious mood), the need for closure, and the motives that arise from feeling isolated and disenfranchised. More important, however, is our goal of describing the proverbial "elephant in the room" for conspiracy theories, how these non-falsifiable beliefs spread through social interaction and are validated by others in like-minded communities. When thoughts of conspiracy are socially shared, what are their sources? How do discussions with other people and exposure to media contribute to creating these beliefs? What is the influence of media, and is their influence enhanced by feelings of anxiety in their audiences? Do the media contribute to this anxiety as well?

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The book draws on data from three cross-sectional surveys and one longitudinal panel. Collectively, these surveys investigated distal psychological and sociopolitical predispositions, anxiety, and the important social and media influences at play. The first three surveys tested beliefs in four conspiracy theories, all involving secret activities by a powerful individual or group:

1. Barack Obama was not born in the United States; he faked his birth certificate to become president (for an analysis of the theory, see Politico, 2011).
2. Undocumented immigrants voting illegally prevented Republicans from winning the popular vote in 2016 (for more information, see Business Insider, 2018).
3. The US government created the HIV epidemic by experimentally injecting the virus in people of African descent (see Heller, 2015).
4. The MMR vaccine causes autism, but this link has been covered up by the US government (see Eggertson, 2010).

Each of the surveys examined psychological and sociopolitical precursors of beliefs in the theories as well as the role of anxiety and media. The longitudinal panel concerned the belief that unelected state officials have conspired against Donald J. Trump by illegally undermining his candidacy and presidency. This survey, which examined the role of feelings of anxiety and media exposure, was conducted while the United States Congress determined whether he should be impeached, and, after impeachment, convicted and removed from office. An experiment gauged the causal impact of anxiety focused on the conspiracy theory that 5G technology caused the COVID-19 pandemic (Satariano & Alba, 2020).

We also obtained 407,697 relevant, publicly available tweets from the United States (i.e., 391,935 tweets with hashtags and keywords) alluding to conspiracy theories and 15,762 tweets, including their hashtags and keywords, that attempted to debunk some of them. This study involved the theories we just listed, the deep state theory, and an additional set of the following science relevant conspiracy theories:

1. Lizard aliens hybridized with humans who now secretly occupy positions of power ("The reptilian elite," 2020)
2. The earth is flat, but an elaborate deception explains the popular belief that the earth is not flat ("The Flat Earth Society," n.d.).
3. "Chem" trails, as the condensation ("con") trails from airplanes are labeled, are evidence of large-scale, secret spraying with pesticides to

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control the population and modify the environment (Fraser, 2009; Van Assche et al., 2018).

4. Agenda 21, a secret United Nations plan to control population growth, is in effect, in violation of American sovereignty (Dickson, 2017).

Our social media analyses were used to determine the degree to which conservative, liberal, and mainstream media account handles (i.e., @[username]) disseminated these theories online, and whether the anxiety-inducing content of the material contributed to this dissemination.

The book is organized around a set of theoretical principles that guided our review and empirical research. The appendix describes all methods and our samples. An online supplement contains the research instruments, as well as the data and code used in our analyses.

Our work is indebted to a number of books that deal with specific conspiracy theories or areas of inquiry. These include *UFOs, Conspiracy Theories, and the New Age* by David G. Robertson (Bloomsbury, 2017), *I Heard It through the Grapevine* by Patricia Turner (University of California Press, 1993), *Conspiracy Theory and American Foreign Policy* by Tim Aistrope (Manchester University Press, 2016), and *Textual Conspiracies* by James Martel (University of Michigan Press, 2011).

In the substantial body of existing scholarship on conspiracy beliefs, five books have special relevance to our arguments. *Conspiracy Theory in America* by DeHaven-Smith (University of Texas Press, 2013) provides a thorough theoretical analysis of the intellectual development of conspiracy theorizing. Particularly impressive is his attempt to conceptualize the "conspiracy theories" as a mechanism to bring state crimes against democracy (SCAD) to light.

American Conspiracy Theories by Joseph E. Uscinski and Joseph M. Parent (Oxford University Press, 2014) develops an impressive general theory of why people believe in conspiracy theories. According to them, these include conspiratorial predispositions, ideologies, group identity, and loss of political power. While their model concerns factors that we carefully incorporate when possible, these factors are not the sole focus of our book. Instead, we argue that conspiracy beliefs emerge from the intersection of anxiety and specific social influences, which, in the case of many of the beliefs we explore, include those circulating in the conservative media (e.g., Fox News, Breitbart, and InfoWars).

Like our work, *Empire of Conspiracy* by Timothy Melley (Cornell University Press, 2000) argues that fears and anxieties are drivers of

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conspiratorial beliefs that are expressed in many venues including film, fiction, sociology, political writing, and self-help literature. To this understanding, we add the general argument that anxiety and conspiracy theorizing cut across areas and, in particular explore the creation of the content of *specific* beliefs and why some ideas take hold and others do not.

A Culture of Conspiracy by Michael Barkun (University of California Press, 2013, 2nd ed.) discusses how conspiracy theories seek to reveal the real loci of power. To that insight, we add the argument that anxiety and other psychological and sociopolitical factors increase susceptibility to conspiracy beliefs.

In *Conspiracy Theories*, Mark Fenster (University of Minnesota Press, 1999) makes the important argument that by raising the alarm about threats to democracy, conspiracy theories serve a social and political purpose. We agree both that conspiracy theories are not always marginal and pathological and that some suspicion about the government and the powerful may be beneficial for democracy.[1]

[1] There is also an interesting, general audience, brief book by Jan-Willem Van Prooijen (2015).

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