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TEXT 1

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New Media & Society

Conspiracy theories in online environments: An interdisciplinary literature review and agenda for future research

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Abstract

Research on conspiracy theories in digital media has grown considerably in recent years. As a result, the field of research has become more multidisciplinary and diverse. To bridge disciplinary boundaries, identify foci of analysis and research gaps, this study provides an interdisciplinary systematic literature review (2007–2020), analyzing current research on conspiracy theorizing online, both quantitatively and qualitatively. Findings show that the majority of studies lack a definition of conspiracy theories and fail to conceptually delineate conspiracy theories from other forms of deceptive content. We also found that while the field employs a variety of methodological approaches, most studies have focused on individual, “mainstream” social media platforms, “Western” countries, English-language communication, and single conspiracy theories. We use the findings of our review to remedy conceptual and empirical shortcomings and to provide suggestions on how to move forward in research on conspiracy theories online.

Introduction

Conspiracy theories—defined as alternative explanations of historical or ongoing events claiming that people or groups with sinister intentions are engaged in conspiratorial plotting (Uscinski, 2018)—have permeated online communication (Wood and Douglas, 2015), news media coverage (Waisbord, 2018), popular culture (Bell and Bennion-Nixon, 2000), and political rhetoric (Mede and Schäfer, 2020), among other fields.

For a long time, conspiracy theories were perceived as harmless phenomena that were “silly and without merit” (Keeley, 1999: 109) or only existed as “soft” beliefs” (Sunstein and Vermeule, 2009: 220) that people quietly kept but rarely acted upon. Profound changes in the media and platform ecosystem and particularly the advent of social media platforms, which have enabled faster communication about and dissemination of conspiratorial narratives, have changed this, however. Thus, the last few decades have seen a plethora of “high-profile conspiracy

theorizing” (Uscinski, 2018: 233) around topics such as vaccination, climate change, the 9/11 attacks (Mahl et al., 2021), or, most recently, the COVID-19 pandemic (Zeng and Schäfer, 2021).

As a result, research on conspiracy theories in digital environments has grown across disciplines and become more diverse in terms of concepts, analytical approaches, and method(ologie)s. Against this backdrop, the contribution of this article is twofold. First, we systematically review research on conspiracy theorizing in online environments across disciplines to synthesize existing knowledge and to identify limitations and blind spots. Second, this synthesis provides conceptual and empirical building blocks to inform future research.

[...]

In recent years, triggered by the advent of digital technologies, the visibility of conspiracy

theories has increased. The architecture of online environments, such as technological affordances of social media platforms, has facilitated the dissemination of conspiratorial narratives, for instance, by circumventing traditional and institutionalized gatekeepers. This allows conspiracy communities to emerge and grow over time. In turn, the increased visibility of such content encourages more individuals to publicly share their support and to connect with like-minded people (cf. DeWitt et al., 2018). These shifts in digital ecosystems have led to the emergence of a new research field: information- and communication-related studies interrogating the interplay between conspiracy theorizing and digital media, that is, online (news) media, social media platforms, and instant messengers (e.g. Theocharis et al., 2021; Tingley and Wagner, 2017).

A closer look at scholarship on conspiracy theories online points to two constituting

characteristics. First, a multitude of disciplines contribute to the research field. Research on conspiracy theories in digital environments can be roughly grouped into two strands: on the one hand, studies analyzing why people hold conspiracy beliefs and how digital media affect such beliefs (e.g. Allington et al., 2020; Mancosu and Vegetti, 2020), and on the other hand, studies interrogating how conspiracy theories are communicated online (e.g. Bruns et al., 2020; Mahl et al., 2021). Both research strands correspond very well with the core research interests of various disciplines such as sociology, psychology, communication science, and beyond. In addition, the wealth of conspiratorial narratives around topics as diverse as science, medicine and public health, the environment, terrorism, political, or cultural affairs underlines that the growing interest in conspiracy theories online is not bound to specific disciplines.

[...]

Considering the Text 1, please, answer the questions 1-7

1. The paper published at New Media & Society addresses the conspiracy theories in online environments. Which is the method?
 - (a) a critical analysis of the literature
 - (b) an interdisciplinary systematic literature review**
 - (c) the paper just consider the amount of paper published between 2007 and 2020
 - (d) interview with 12 experts from the Communication field
 - (e) none of the above.
2. The paper claims some findings, which one is NOT cited in the abstract?
 - (a) Most studies have focused on single conspiracy theories
 - (b) Most studies have addressed the phenomena in English-language
 - (c) Most studies have focused on linguistic elements**
 - (d) Most studies have focused on “mainstream” social media platforms
 - (e) Most studies have focused on “Western” countries
3. Considering how the authors characterize the conspiracy theories, which alternative is FALSE?
 - (a) Alternative explanations of ongoing events
 - (b) The digital media ecosystem was a turn point in the conspiracy theories history
 - (c) Conspiracy theories introduce new explanations for the most important political events
 - (d) Scholars wants to know how conspiracy theories are communicated online
 - (e) Humans beings always understood how badly conspiracy theories is for social life**
4. In the following statements about the paper, identify which is/are TRUE:
 - I - The visibility of conspiracy theories has increased in recent years.
 - II - The online spread of conspiracy narratives is not faster because the platform`s filter bubble.

III - The technological affordances of social media platforms has facilitated the dissemination of conspiratorial narratives.

- (a) I, II
- (b) I, II, III
- (c) II
- (d) I, III**
- (e) III

5. About the academic attention on conspiracy theories, identify which statement is FALSE:

- (a) The research field has received contribution from a lot of disciplines
- (b) Some studies analyzes why people hold conspiracy beliefs
- (c) Communication is the only discipline studying conspiracy theories at online platforms**
- (d) Medicine and public health also has interest in the conspiracies theories
- (e) Some studies analyzes how conspiracy theories are communicated online

6. Consider the sentence: “A closer look at scholarship on conspiracy theories online points to two constituting characteristics”. How could we best understand “closer look” in this sentence?

- (a) closure
- (b) proper clothing
- (c) closed look
- (d) analyze in more detail**
- (e) locked

7. Consider the sentence: “Research on conspiracy theories in digital environments can be roughly grouped into two strands”. What is the best definition of “roughly” in this sentence?

- (a) approximately**
- (b) terribly
- (c) raw
- (d) ferrous
- (e) animalistic

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TEXT 2
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THE NEW YORK TIMES | OPINION
THOMAS L. FRIEDMAN

Putin’s War Is a Crime Against the Planet
Sept. 27, 2022

There was no good time for Vladimir Putin’s unprovoked, idiotic invasion of Ukraine. But this is a uniquely bad time. Because it’s diverting worldwide attention and resources needed to mitigate climate change — during what may be the last decade when we still have a chance to manage the climate extremes that are now unavoidable and avoid those that could become unmanageable.

Unfortunately, what happens between Ukraine and Russia does not stay between Ukraine and Russia. That’s because the world is flatter than ever.

We have connected so many people, places and markets to so many other people, places and markets — and then removed so many of the old buffers that insulated us from one another’s

excesses and replaced them with grease — that instability in one node can now go really far, really wide, really fast.

That is why I've argued that Russia's attack on Ukraine is the real World War I. Two-thirds of the planet's people can now watch it on their smartphones, and virtually everyone has been or will be touched by this war economically, geopolitically and, maybe most important, environmentally.

The best way to appreciate that is by talking to people who live in some of the world's most remote ecosystems. I'm talking about Indigenous communities residing deep inside, and protecting, the world's remaining forests, particularly the megaforests free of roads, power lines, mines, cities and industrial agriculture. These intact forests — from those in the Amazon and Congo River basins to ones in Canada, Russia and Ecuador — are the world's life-support system. They sponge billions of tons of carbon dioxide out of the atmosphere, generating oxygen, filtering freshwater to drink and generally strengthening our resilience against the pressures of climate change.

These forests and their Indigenous people were already under pressure from global economic forces, but Putin's war set off a cascade of negative effects: Russia is one of the largest fertilizer producers in the world. The largest oil exporter to global markets. And more than a quarter of the world's wheat is normally exported by Russia and Ukraine, providing bread for billions of people, as well as barley, sunflower seed oil and corn. Because of both the war and sanctions on Russia, shortages and prices on these commodities have spiked, increasing pressures all over the planet to strip more intact forest to drill for oil, plant crops for agribusinesses and create land for cattle grazing.

[...]

Considering the Text 2, please, answer the questions 8-10.

8. In the following statements about the opinion piece published at the New York Times, identify which is/are true:

- I - Putin should wait some years before invading Ukraine.
- II - The main problem is the chaos in the fertilizer chain production.
- III - The war would not be a real problem if the planet does not need the grains from Ukraine.
- IV - The war is also an environmental problem.

- (a) I, III
- (b) IV**
- (c) II, IV
- (d) III
- (e) III, IV

9. The author, Thomas Friedman, argues that we are watching the real World War I. What reason did he NOT say?

- (a) smartphones
- (b) geopolitics
- (c) atomic energy**
- (d) climate change
- (e) economy

10. Consider the sentence: “The best way to appreciate that is by talking to people who live in some of the world’s most remote ecosystems”. What is the best definition of “appreciate” in this sentence?

- (a) enjoy
- (b) understand**
- (c) taste
- (d) receive
- (e) evaluate

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TEXT 3

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Despite efforts to fight falsehoods, Brazil's tight election is threatened by dangerous lies

Murillo Camarotto - Sept. 23, 2022
Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism
(*This piece was edited)

Brazil is approaching yet another presidential election still puzzled by what happened in 2018, when the country confronted the destructive power of falsehoods turbocharged by the tools of the digital age. Lies and manipulation have always played a role in election campaigns. But the depths reached four years ago presented the country with a challenge that will have to be addressed in the coming decades.

Despite the initiatives of democratic institutions and independent news organisations, Brazil's efforts to tackle misinformation only scratch the surface of a formidable challenge. Although the leading digital platforms agreed with Brazilian courts to enforce tighter controls over the dissemination of disinformation, practical outcomes still remain uncertain.

Inspired by a project developed in the United States, a group of Brazilian researchers founded "Democracia em Xequê" (Democracy at Risk) in February 2021. The initiative is led by academics from federal universities and aims to combat any misleading content threatening the integrity of the national electoral process. They constantly monitor the information that circulates on the main digital platforms and produce periodic reports.

The project’s most recent paper warned that the agreements signed between the main social networks and the Brazilian courts “are still modest in the face of the challenges presented by the hostile posture and the repeated attacks of the President of the Republic, his entourage, and the digital ecosystem that supports him.”

In February, Google, Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Instagram, YouTube, TikTok and Kwai signed agreements with Brazil's Electoral Court and made a commitment to help tackle the spread of fake news. This commitment is based on reporting channels and the removal of false content. In June, a new and unexpected agreement was signed with Telegram, the favourite channel of Bolsonaro and his followers.

With no legal representative in Brazil until recently, Telegram spent months ignoring calls from Brazilian courts to debate its role in fighting misinformation. The company only decided to speak out after the Supreme Court threatened to suspend the use of the platform in the country. Bolsonaro was one of the first to rail against the measure. His official channel on Telegram has 1.4 million subscribers.

Bolsonaro and his followers often criticise fact-checking organisations for their ties with the newspapers and accuse them of having a staff composed entirely of leftists. In Bolsonaro's view, big news organisations and verification outlets are on the same side and against him.

"One mistake we made in the past was to imagine that the direct association with a renowned media outlet would lend us credibility. This did happen in the past, but today we realise that the brand impact may not have been so good," said Natália Leal, CEO of Agência Lupa, the first specialised fact-checking platform in Brazil.

Although on a much smaller scale, Bolsonaro is also a victim of disinformation produced and disseminated on leftist websites. One of the most common examples are the unfounded suspicions on the stabbing the president suffered in 2018, when he was still a candidate. When some of Bolsonaro's opponents' content is removed by the platforms, they also complain about censorship.

While challenging, the scenario has improved since the last election. Most social platforms have begun to mark political messages as such, opened channels for users to report misleading content, and launched media literacy campaigns. WhatsApp, for example, has limited user's interactions to stop indiscriminate mass messaging.

Researcher Maria Paula Almada argues that misinformation is not under control yet. "We are talking about a process of spinning wheels, but the platforms have signed agreements and are adjusting the terms," she said in a phone conversation.

"We have seen less disinformation than in 2018, but a more present threat. Disinformation strategies have been sophisticated, with more content bordering between truth and lies. It is also information that is more linked to emotional issues, to desires, things that stir people," she said.

Considering the Text 3, please, answer the questions 11-15.

11. In the first sentence, the word "puzzled" has the same meaning as:

- (a) I spent hours reasoning out the solution to the puzzle.
- (b) Planning the camera shots can be like putting together a puzzle.
- (c) I'm still puzzled as to why she said that.
- (d) Scientists are puzzling over the results of the research.
- (e) None of the above.

12. The sentence below offers a good summary of the article:

- (a) One mistake we made in the past was to imagine that the direct association with a renowned media outlet would lend us credibility.
- (b) We have seen less disinformation than in 2018.
- (c) Inspired by a project developed in the United States, a group of Brazilian researchers founded "Democracia em Xequê".
- (d) Bolsonaro and his followers often criticise fact-checking organisations for their ties with the newspapers.
- (e) Brazil's efforts to tackle misinformation only scratch the surface of a formidable challenge.

13. In the following statements about the article, identify which is/are true:

- I - Disinformation strategies have been sophisticated as the leftist campaign has used the same tactics as the rightist.
- II - The deals signed between the main platforms and the Brazilian institutions are still not enough to prevent the spread of misinformation.

III - In the beginning, the fact-checkers thought that it could be a good idea to borrow the credibility of the legacy media.

IV - Bolsonaro is also a victim of disinformation produced and disseminated on leftist websites in a large scale.

- (a) I, II, III, IV
- (b) I, IV
- (c) II
- (d) II, III**
- (e) III, IV

14. The author points out that “in June, a new and unexpected agreement was signed with Telegram, the favourite channel of Bolsonaro and his followers”. Why is the deal considered unexpected?

- (a) Telegram has ignored the contacts from Brazilian courts for months.**
- (b) Bolsonaro was one of the first to rail against the measure.
- (c) Platforms don't like to accept the Brazilian courts' decisions.
- (d) Telegram wanted to follow the commitments signed by Google, Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Instagram, YouTube, TikTok and Kwai.
- (e) None of the above.

15. Based on the article, what are the main threats of the disinformation in the 2022 election?

- (a) The borders between truth and lies are blurred and the approach is more rational.
- (b) The borders between truth and lies are blurred and the approach is more emotional.**
- (c) There are no borders between truth and lies and the approach is more rational.
- (d) The borders between truth and lies are blurred and the approach is similar to the 2018 election.
- (e) The borders between truth and lies are very clear and the approach is more emotional.

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TEXT 4
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The audience and the telenovela: Transformations and resilience of spectatorship

Rosane Svartman

“Telenovelas and Transformation:
Saving Brazil's Television Industry” - Routledge, 2021
(*This chapter was edited)

In Brazil, broadcast television attracts tens of millions of people daily to watch telenovelas between 6PM and 11PM, interspersed with local and national news. More than a device, television is a set of behaviours and practices, a pact, in continuous negotiation, with the audience. More than an offer of content, television is an arena and a starting point for dialogue with the viewer – and it is the viewer who holds the final word.

Fiction by Vassallo de Lopes and Lemos (2019), in 2018 at least 60% of the audience was female in telenovelas aired from 6PM to 11PM on TV Globo. In that same year, 50.83% of the total population of Brazil was female. People from all socioeconomic backgrounds watch telenovelas, but a higher concentration of at least 48% of the audience is from C middle class. All age groups watch telenovelas, but there is a higher percentage of people above 35.

According to the research of the Ibero-American Observatory of Television

Eneida Nogueira (Svartman and Nogueira, 2018), research director of TV Globo until 2017, ponders that several reports point out television as a companion for the viewer generating a dimension of “belonging”: the feeling that the viewer is part of society and is not alone since there is the notion of other viewers doing the same thing at the same time; television is a source of information to know what is happening outside the house; the next day, this viewer will have a repertoire in common with other people.

Even before the television set connected to the internet – or to the video game – the act of changing channels, turning switches on and off or performing tasks while a programme is being broadcast, among other practices, corroborates the arguments that the viewer is not and has never been passive. Moreover, there is no passivity in a viewer that relates the television text to their own experiences, readings and within their historical and social context, because every interpretation process is subjective and active.

The understanding of an active audience can be mistakenly associated only with the fan figure, with the notion that this is the viewer who interacts with the work ostensibly, producing content, for example. As already observed, the active audience engages with the story emotionally, associating the telenovela, for example, with secondary and

tertiary texts and interacting in various dimensions. Fiske (1987) remarked that there is a negotiation process between the content proposal and the viewer’s position. For him, in this negotiation, the power lies with the public.

According to Jenkins, Ford and Green (2013), the new interactive tools and platforms enable audiences to consume content initially produced for television and produce new content from it. The viewer currently manifests his or her opinion about audiovisual content in different social media, participates in discussion groups, and produces content derived from characters and narratives with unprecedented immediacy. The question is whether these opinions have had a higher resonance recently to the detriment of the influence the viewer has always had on telenovelas, expressed through focus groups or ratings, or access to customer services.

The production of content by fans, the amplification of the old “word of mouth”, with circulation in social media and interactive platforms is a phenomenon of the present, but academics differ on the real power of this connected audience. Exchanges between the viewer and the broadcaster – or the content producers – have always existed through the history of television, but social tools have deepened and amplified this practice.

Considering the Text 4, please, answer the questions 16-20.

16. The sentence “*The understanding of an active audience can be mistakenly associated only with the fan figure, with the notion that this is the viewer who interacts with the work ostensibly, producing content, for example*” can be correctly rewritten, preserving the same meaning, in one of the options below:

(a) Active audience is not just about highly engaged fans.

(b) The viewer who interacts with the work ostensibly is the notion that explains the concept of active audience.

(c) Producing content is the main aspect of the fan figure that represents the active audience.

(d) The understanding of an active audience is never related to content production.

(e) None of the above.

17. Based on the chapter, mark true (T) or false (F) in the following statements and then choose the correct answer:

() Television should not be understood just in a technological way. More broadly, television is a practice in frequent negotiation with the spectators.

- () The television connected to the internet is a turning point as the viewer is no longer passive.
- () Women, people from C middle class and adults 35+ represent the major percentages of the audience in telenovelas.
- () The new tools and platforms make the interaction with the audiences less real.

- (a) V, V, V, F
- (b) V, F, V, V
- (c) V, F, V, F**
- (d) F, F, V, F
- (e) F, V, V, F

18. What is the main goal of the chapter? Choose the correct alternative:

- (a) The aim is to present the main research on the audience in Brazilian telenovelas.
- (b) The chapter discusses the relation between production and television consumption.
- (c) The objective is to create a theory on active audiences.
- (d) The chapter argues that people from all socioeconomic backgrounds watch telenovelas.
- (e) In this chapter, the aim is to analyze the telenovela from the public's perspective.**

19. How can the dimension of “belonging” be explained? Choose the FALSE answer:

- (a) Television as a companion for the audience.
- (b) It brings a feeling that the person is part of society and is not alone.
- (c) The spectator builds a repertoire to criticize other people.**
- (d) Watching telenovela is also knowing what is happening in common life.
- (e) There is the subjective notion of other people doing the same thing at the same time.

20. The sentence below correctly demonstrates that there is no passivity in the audience:

- (a) The audience can relate the television content to their own social context.**
- (b) Academics differ on the real power of the connected audience.
- (c) Broadcast television attracts millions of people daily to watch telenovelas.
- (d) Television as a companion for the viewer generating a dimension of “belonging”.
- (e) None of the above.