

4.10

CONSPIRACY THEORIES AND FAKE NEWS

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Introduction

On 30 October 2016, nine days before the final vote in the U.S. presidential elections, Twitter user @DavidGoldbergNY posted a message – ‘Rumors stirring in the NYPD that Huma’s emails point to a paedophilia ring and @HillaryClinton is at the centre. #GoHillary #PodestaEmails23’. Seven days later, on the wake of election day, the hashtag #pizzagate emerged and, within hours, absolutely false rumour was disseminated all around conservative, pro-Trump sectors of social networks. When the shocking morning of Donald J. Trump’s victory arrived, more than 6000 re-tweets attracted traditional media to the claim (Fisher *et al.* 2016). The tweet was the foundation of a news-related conspiracy theory that claimed an existence of a Democrat-run paedophile network tied in with the highest ranks of the party, if not Hillary Clinton herself. The theory was based on the interpretation of some cryptic emails found in the hacked account of John Podesta, Clinton’s campaign chief, and allegations that similar cryptic texts show up in the investigated case of Anthony Weiner (unfaithful husband of Hillary Clinton’s closest aide, who digitally flirted with underage teenagers).

As Kline deconstructed the case later (Kline 2017), he had found in #Pizzagate both very archetypal elements of conspiracy thinking and propagation and a very new and distinctive specificity of this modern ‘urgent’ conspiracy theory. Metaxas and Finn (2017) used the dedicated investigative service *Twittertrails* to detail this innovation: The #Pizzagate theory developed within an isolated, pro-Trump echo-chamber that took ‘rumour’ for reality and never challenged neither a source nor an idea of such wild accusations (see Chapter 4.1). Fuelled by partisanship, the conspiracy theory grew in the minds of Trump supporters who were ready to believe – and support through dissemination – every lie if it could harm the Democratic candidate, even after the elections were over. When, after a few days of isolated ‘boiling’, #Pizzagate broke out to a broader media distribution, the theory already had thousands of ‘adepts’ who amplified every text that referred to #Pizzagate regardless of its polarity to its main narrative claims (fact-checking and even official denials were amplified, with acid comments, as much as ‘supporting’ opinions – including false and even fictional, created by jokers and pranks). First of all, the whole story was a complete fake. Even wildest conspiracy theories address as a rule some existing problems (or facts or beliefs), while providing believers with a false plot narrative explaining the allegedly true ‘nature of events’ (Knight 2001). The #Pizzagate scandal

took instead a complete fabrication as a starting point, offering a real narrative (candidate of Democratic party wanted to win the elections) as foundation of supposed vicious actions. As Cohn (1977) observed, conspiracy theories develop in societies at a moderate pace as they 'collect and process what the adepts assume an evidence to support the plot'. His observations on conspiracy theories (1960–1970s) indicate that 'established plots' usually develop two–three years after a certain 'trigger event' that ignites the original author or authors of a theory. On Twitter, the circumstances of massive linking to sources – real, fake, purposely falsified – contributed to the fact that the #Pizzagate theory took off in days.

Normally, conspiracy theories can be considered as '*slow streams*' flowing in a shadow zone of human communication, as developers and believers process and co-produce 'evidence' and recruit/cultivate those who come along conspiratorial scripture occasionally. But, one day, a 'slow stream' has the potential to turn into a flood when some mass media outlet unwittingly or intentionally propels the narrative, typically with political intentions. In #Pizzagate, the model worked upside down: Political intention to defeat the Democratic presidential candidate produced a fabricated news scandal that seemingly was intended as a watershed of partisan approval. Unlike the type of classic conspiracy theories, detailed development and actualisation of a conspiracy theory was happening along (not prior to, as normal for conspiracy theories) with its distribution and not for years before the actual watershed in opinion emerges. The fake story received a falsified development due to highly partisan sentiment and made it into mass media coverage particularly because it was spreading like wildfire on social media – a mutually reinforcing relationship between 'old' and 'new' media (Šlerka, Šisler 2018: 61–86; see also Chapter 4.9 of this volume). Because the initial audience of the conspiracy theory was critical, if not negative or even hostile, to mainstream media, the debunking and fact-checking of a wild claim worked contrary to expectation: The conservative, anti-Clinton base perceived any rebuttal as a cover-up, which in turn reinforced and intensified the transmission of the original conspiracy theory. But, #Pizzagate lived on and it consumed a whole year of efforts by media, fact-checkers, analysts and academic writers to exterminate the cause (it continues to flame irregularly but far from its original calibre at the wake of Trump's victory). Thus, the so-called #Pizzagate scandal provides us with a distinct example of interconnections between studies of long-known conspiracy theories and an emerging area of 'fake news' studies.

The advent of 'fake news' as a communicative praxis

The concept of 'fake news', along with a more eloquent term describing the same subject ('post-truth'), emerged within the political and academic debate alongside the U.S. presidential campaign in 2016. The term 'fake news' itself had been occasionally used by academics and journalists years before, however, the modern version of 'fake news' became a complex subject of discussions and research after 2016. In general, it is rare that a new concept of academic analysis makes its way into popular culture and day-to-day language. Within just a couple of years (2016–2018), the usage of the term spiked. According to the Elsevier Scopus database (of scientific abstracts and citations), 'fake news' as a subject or keyword has been used in nine and ten articles indexed in 2015–2016; in 2017 the number of publications jumped to 239, in 2018 it peaked at 568 and in 2019 (as of July 2019) already there have been 313 mentions of the term. A similar pattern could be spotted on Google Trends: While search interest index in 'fake news' barely surfaced before October 2016, it then could be found among the Top-100 searches in January 2018. The modernity and complexity of the subject – along with political connotations – turn 'fake news' into a research topic in various disciplines: While most references are found in communication studies and political science, researchers from fields as diverse as military strategy, health studies

or economics strive to comprehend a recent term and apply it to already known or newly discovered issues in their domains.

In this context, we argue that conspiracy thinking plays an important, if not a crucial, role in the advent and proliferation of the so-called ‘fake news’ phenomenon and vice versa regardless of what particular attribution we use. Zonis and Joseph (1994) suggest that conspiracy theories are ‘commonly defined as explanatory beliefs of how multiple actors meet in secret agreement in order to achieve a hidden goal that is widely considered to be unlawful or malevolent’. ‘Fake news’, meanwhile, comes in many forms and attributions: As (1) intentionally deceptive communication practice by rogue actors who falsify, forge, distort or invent information for the public (see, for example, Peters *et al.* 2018: 3–12), as (2) a concept of adversarial (to politician, ideology or country/nation) mass media that ‘lies’ to the public or ‘conceals truth’ about a particular policy, politician, cause, country or any other entity (Kalb 2018).

At least in part, both facets of ‘fake news’ attribution commonly exploit all or partial features of the conspiracy theory logic: For attribution (1), conspiracy theories work as a fertile ground of deception and falsification; for attribution (2), the narrative mechanics of a conspiracy theory is applied to an invented vicious ‘plot’ against a public figure, idea or even country. Also, we argue that ‘fake news’ and conspiracy thinking create a loopback cycle as the former constantly provides an input to well-known conspiracy narratives by inventing and distributing lies (or any other form of deception and disinformation) that conspiracy theory peddlers immediately appropriate and include as a ‘proof’ to whatever they believe in and what they want others to believe.

The mechanism of interaction between ‘fake news’ and conspiracy theories

‘Fake news’ surfaced as a research subject before 2016. Among other cases, it played a central role in regards to the information conflict and disinformation campaigns/influence operations preceding and during the actual annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation and the occupation and insurgency in Eastern Ukraine. However, we intend to concentrate on 2016 and beyond, since it was then the term finally was formed and inquiries could be conceptualised. While the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign was the first where digital technology played a significant role (and contestants had dedicated teams for this purpose), it was the very first major political event in which digitally distributed information and narratives played an equal, if not a prime, role in the formation of public opinion (as compared to ‘traditional’ media) and, possibly, consequently also affected voting and electoral behaviour.

Obama’s victories in 2008 and 2012 are often attributed to clever use of social networks by the candidate and his political team. For the 2012 campaign, social media was the tool that drove voters to traditional media and campaign events, assisted mobilisation and rectification of campaign messages (Richardson 2017), while, in 2016, social media became a central battlefield. Americans (and some malign foreign actors) turned to social networks like Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, as well as collective communication tools like Reddit, 4Chan and other similar instruments, in an attempt to determine the outcome of the presidential elections. Television and organised mass media (formerly known as newspapers, news agencies and magazines) could therefore not ignore the debate on social media. Abstaining from proper protocols and routines of source criticism and objectivity, or blindsided by partisanship, most influential mass media amplified false, malaise and even adversarial messaging that – at least in part – was targeting a core value of organised mass communication, public trust and reliability.

As ‘fake news’ became an instant sensation after Donald J. Trump’s victory, academics started to look for approaches and to develop definitions for it. Philosopher Axel Gelfert (2018)

addressed the problem of definition, suggesting that it is possible to frame the broader subject to 'deliberate presentation of (typically) false or misleading claims as news, where claims are misleading by design'. Earlier, communication and network scientist Ciampaglia (2018) suggested that 'fake news' is a central component in what he calls a 'disinformation pipeline' – a broader set of 'human actions, algorithm flaws and perception biases that deceive people and have a goal to avert (or at least influence) their rational behaviour'.

The difficulty in exploring 'fake news' academically derives from a vague list of connotations that had been applied to the phenomenon during the political discussions of recent years. The subset of meanings associated with 'fake news' depends on many factors, but political views and affiliations with a particular political party are dominant (Schulz *et al.* 2018). In the U.S.A., President Trump and his allies in media characterise unfavourable coverage of his term as 'fake news'. To the contrary, liberal media and politicians attribute the label of 'fake news' to false, manipulated and misleading information Trump himself uses extensively.

Yet, it seems possible to trace a close relationship between fake news and the application of conspiracy theories in modern politics. As we know from conspiracy theory research, both the design of such theories and dissemination routes of conspiracy theories have strident political shadows (Fenster 2008). Historically, many conspiracy theories are developed and disseminated as a component of propaganda and political warfare: It is a very useful and powerful way of highlighting the threat of the 'Other' to the community that shares the conspiratorial notion, besides of other versions discussed in literature (Knight 2003). To picture the connection between both phenomena and explain the interconnectedness, we should concentrate on specific features of 'fake news' and 'conspiracy theories', leaving aside the political interpretation of the later term. For this, we suggest understanding 'fake news' as Gelfert defined it and fully incorporated into a modern Internet communication method, from websites to social networks to messengers. It has to be specifically noted that both conspiracy theories and fake news emerged as a confluence of political warfare and features of selective exposure to communication, but they differ in many ways while constantly staying interconnected and mutually reinforcing. For most conspiracy theories, (what are considered as) 'facts' are important (and even 'sacred') as they construct an interpretational frame that conspiracy theories communicate to their believers in particular ways. The same assembly of selected (and purposely curated) facts may fully indoctrinate a believer or provide him with a mental/conceptual framework that allows further development of conspiracy theories. Sometimes conspiracy theories development requires fabrication of facts (either forgeries or creative yet biased retelling of something real – like 'the Dulles Plan' in Russia).

The 'Dulles Plan' is, in fact, a rant by a vicious character in a 1960s novel written by Anatoly Ivanov, fantasising how the U.S.A. is waging a secret war against the Soviet Union using tools of psychological, ethical, sexual and behavioural subversion. It merely resembles some – at the time – declassified or even public U.S. documents, like George Kennan's 'Long Telegram', N.S.C. Directive 10/2 (1947) and 162/2 (1954), which outlined a political analysis of the relationship between the U.S.A. and the Soviet Union. But, the so-called 'Dulles Plan' is fictional, wrapped into scary, cynical and offensive language adapted to the taste of the Soviet reading public at the time. A few years after its initial publication, many Soviet propagandists and conspiracy theory peddlers were referencing the 'Dulles Plan' as something real. Noticeably, the 'Dulles Plan' narrative has some 'facts' in the background (there were actual N.S.C. and Congress documents that suggested P.S.Y. warfare against the Soviets), while clearly the interpretation of these facts is more important together with all the other elements of 'creative forgery'. So, in logical terms, conspiracy theories necessarily collect a matrix of facts of different quality (from indisputable to fringe, from hard data to forgery) and then operate this matrix (or parts of

the matrix) in order to construct a range of acceptable results that prove, suggest or at least hint on a real presence and threat of the conspiracy. The logical flaw here is not the theory itself but using it as both a predicate and conclusion; facts are collected and organised with an ontological valence of importance for the initial conspiracy theories (and all evidence to the contrary is ignored or discounted). In case of fake news, this flawed but (internally) logical process is excluded. For the creators of fake news, the goals are more important than a supportive matrix of facts (if necessary, a certain fake news producer will just invent an event, a person, circumstances or connections). As noted above, conspiracy theory is a much older issue in human communications and, possibly, a much older social and communications phenomenon. Belief in conspiracy is rooted in specifics of human nature, thinking and group dynamics. Conspiracy theories are narrative creations of the human mind, and their existence is rather natural as they are invented to explain societal events that otherwise are either too complex or too obscure. As research consistently demonstrates (Douglas *et al.* 2019), conspiracy theory uses a fact or an interpretation of a fact or both combined as a starting point (i.e. 'Jews are proportionally small ethnicity [fact] but they own a disproportionate share of national wealth [interpretation]'). Then, instead of providing a rational inquiry that could have presented an approval, denial or explanation for this hypothesis, conspiracy theory suggests that the [fact] may be explained with an existence of a covert plot [theory] to achieve and maintain perceived reality [interpretation]. Only after the [theory] is established ahead of rational inquiry, the creator(s) of a conspiracy theory begin their 'research' that discovers additional [facts] that support [interpretation] and therefore approve [theory]. Because this logical process resembles (or imitates) the natural method of deductive inquiry, it can captivate or impose an opinion to otherwise rational human consciousness without scrutinising its inherent epistemic insecurity. There are scores of distinctive details or narrative techniques that are commonly used in conspiracy theories while being in rare occurrence in other explanatory storytelling. Conspiratorial narratives normally rely on the receiver's capacity to contextualise [theory] and serve selected [facts] as they offer 'optics' providing the respective view. For conspiracy theories, factuality is an important feature. While some historical conspiracy theories in the past had a fabricated source of 'facts' (*The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* is the most common example), falsification is not a permanent feature: Storytellers in the conspiracy domain rely on power and explanatory attractiveness of their narrative, xenophobia or selective exposure much more than on forgeries or outright false sources. Characteristically, the conspiracy theory narrative is crafted (intentionally) – similar to a religion or cult – to attract followers over time, as it offers a lasting explanation of societal or historical 'facts' that bother people diachronically (economic or ethnicity-based inequality, suppression of or by a particular group, diseases-related continuity, etc.). 'Fake news' is, to the contrary, a short-lived eruption in communication (primarily, digital mass media communication). Unlike the case of conspiracy theories, outright deliberate fabrication is central to 'fake news', whether it happens in a form of lie (invention of non-existing event, fact or even person who is the source of information), manipulation with context or meaning or a substitution of a fact (that may or may not be real) with someone's opinion that claims this fact to be real. Neither [fact] nor [theory] are important for 'fake news' producers – because they intentionally discard and disregard factuality as they can 'sell' their production only to the consumers who already subscribed to one or the other partisan narrative theory. In 'fake news', [interpretation] is central, whether it comes in a form of plot, narrative or even opinion; all other elements could be just invented or falsified as they 'sell' the story to those interested because of the applicable (or politically comforting) [interpretation].

Using the same apparatus we applied to describe the narrative of conspiracy theories, we can broadly describe 'fake news' procedure as this: [A fabricated fact] put into [fact]-based news

agenda with an [interpretation] serving political, economic or social interest of the narrator, sometimes serving as confirmation to a [theory] that may take a form of policy, or strengthen an existing biased narrative (including but not limited to [conspiracy theory]). So, the procedural difference of ‘fake news’ is its reliance on existing bias rather than – in the case of conspiracy theories – framing the bias itself; also, where conspiracy theory relies on contextualisation by their addressees, ‘fake news’ substitutes it with opinionated and manipulated context (usually, by connecting [a fabricated fact] with a current hot news agenda topic(s) using authority (either real or invented or appropriated)).

Unlike conspiracy theories, ‘fake news’ are not crafted to sustain over time, although there are some ‘fake news’ narratives that tend to develop into more robust and sustainable conspiracy theories (#Pizzagate could serve a good example). They imitate the nature of the time-sensitive media cycle – a daily routine of mass media consumption, whether on traditional platforms or digital networks of distribution, and blend into this dynamic process as an integral part of their communication strategy. Both phenomena make use of each other: Developing conspiracy theories benefits from crafted ‘fake news’ items that fit their narrative, while ‘fake news’ fabricators commonly refer to known conspiracy theories as conceptual frames, as if they validate their interpretations, biases and false contextualisation.

Synergy and distribution

Yet, we argue that one of the most important connections between conspiracy theories and ‘fake news’ lies in the field of distribution and transmission, not content or intent. As Burkhart explains (2017), in historical perspective, ‘fake news’ is a recurring phenomenon that complicates every technological shift since Gutenberg invented movable type and early newspapers and pamphlets arrived. In the 1800s, fabrication of news stories became a common tool in electoral politics, in the U.S.A. in particular – the whole 1828 campaign was flawed with outlandish claims and fabricated stories that both candidates, Andrew Jackson and John Quincy Adams, propelled against each other in media. It was reinforced by the anti-Masonic conspiratorial discourse of the so-called Morgan Affair (Önnerfors 2017: 18). Until the arrival of media ethics and legal regulation that insisted on impartiality of public information, falsification and other typical tools of the craft of ‘fake news’ were important to state actors, publishers and even broadcasters as amplification resources. Even if rebuked later, false and fabricated stories could greatly enhance copy sales or viewership.

Further development of media communications, especially after 2007, when social real-time networks assumed their role of ‘mass self-communication’ (a term coined by Manuel Castells), provided ‘fake news’ with a considerable and expanded playground. With millions and even billions of users, loose regulation and various psychological ‘trust mechanisms’ that compliment or substitute trust in media sources, networked communities are a fertile soil for deception and manipulation. For traditional media, brands and reputations with a developed audience is an asset. For ‘fake news’ producers, nothing of this kind counts – as the only aim is maximised distribution and audience exposure (regardless of whether it follows a political aim or just an economic or ideological one). Viral effects are also a goal within its own right (as people may seek other goals as futile as self-promotion or bare curiosity) – and in absence of regulation no one could effectively prevent social network users from producing falsified content and, thus, as ‘prosumers’, crossing the border between consumers and producers (see Chapter 4.8; Önnerfors 2019). In order to explore the development of the interaction between ‘fake news’ and conspiracy theory production, distribution and consumption, it should be noted that, prior to the spike of popular and scientific interest in the phenomenon of fake news, academia has coped

with the challenges posed by disinformation and deception from multiple angles. This has included classic rumour theory, organisational psychology, narrative theory and folklore, among others (Allport, Postman 1947; Tamotsu 1966; Shibutani 1966; Mullen 1972; Rosnow 1980; DiFonzo *et al.* 1994; Bernardi *et al.* 2012; see also Chapter 4.1 in this volume). Thus, it is logical to gain valuable insights from these various interdisciplinary research approaches in studying rumours, urban legends, formation of political opinion and mass culture (Oliver, Wood 2014), as well as the spread of cyclical public panics and hysteria, in order to apply and combine them with new observations pertaining to the emerging field of ‘fake news’ analysis.

As noted above, the distribution mechanism of fake news relies heavily on the pre-existing individual or group biases on the part of the intended or targeted receivers and subsequent consumers of fake news and conspiracy theories. This mechanism closely resembles the well-researched mechanics of rumour transmission and proliferation (Campion-Vincent 2017). These employ so-called ‘informational’ and ‘conformity cascades’ that in turn rely on creating an initial ‘critical mass’ of consumers accepting the false or misleading information for fact due to the lack of direct access or understanding of issues discussed and subsequently conforming to the ‘accepted wisdom’ of crowds, once the viral ‘snowball effect’ has kicked in (Sunstein 2014: 176). When the outcomes of these cascades are coupled with the dynamics of group polarisation (Sunstein, Vermeule 2009), where ‘members of deliberating group predictably move toward a more extreme point in the direction indicated by the members’ pre-deliberation tendencies’, the environment for ‘cross-pollination’ between ‘fake news’ and conspiracy theories is ripe for exploitation (Sunstein 2002: 176).

In such environments, producers and proliferators of ‘fake news’ and conspiracy theories, whether instinctively or deliberately, exploit their potential in regards to weaponised propaganda features within the existing ‘echo chambers’ in pursuit of multiple political, economic or psychological goals. These can range from political character assassinations and attempted market manipulations to wedge driving, outgrouping and self-serving ends motivated by psychological motives. Such motives include relationship maintenance, coping with uncertainty and self-enhancement, or ‘copy cat behaviour’ (Bordia, DiFonzo 2017: 87–102; Bauman 2017: 30). In pursuit of satisfaction of these motives, and in order to further their individual or group political, economic, social or cultural agenda, the proliferators of fake news, wittingly or not, exploit the propaganda potential of the dynamic interaction between disinformation and conspiracy theories.

It should be noted that this particular potential is key in the process of ‘weaponization’ of disinformation (Pynnöniemi, Rácz 2016) and is of specific interest in the domain of classic and contemporary information and psychological warfare, mass manipulation and propaganda studies (Ellul 1973; Snegovaya 2015; Linebarger 2015 [1948]; Woolley, Howard 2018). In line with their multiple earlier findings (Cialdini, Goldstein 2004), individual proliferators of ‘fake news’ and conspiracies, in similar fashion to their state-backed propaganda counterparts, in their pursuit of specific desired outcomes, when attempting to reach of maximum targeted audience exposure and catering to the above-mentioned own psychological motives, consciously or not, attempt to modify the perception, cognition and behaviour of their addressees (Mackay *et al.* 2011; Jowett, O’Donnell 2018). Such attempts are clearly detectable when scrutinising the key features and elements of #Pizzagate’s ‘urgent’ conspiracy theory, one based on the ‘explosive’ example of ‘fake news’, where the intent was determined to be a modernised version of a classical reputation damage and political character assassination manoeuvre aided by the prowess of contemporary social media. In essence, the #Pizzagate scandal is a highly illustrative contemporary example of the chain reaction effects in the framework of dynamic interaction between ‘fake news’ and wider conspiracy theory utilisation in the pursuit of satisfying political

partisan agenda. However, the inclusion of conspiracy theories supported by proliferation of ‘fake news’ and amplified by social media and subsequently weaponised against political opponents are not a recent novelty in Western (see, for example, Walker 2013) or non-Western political traditions (Yablokov 2018). Whether adversarial political opponents are engaged in continuous search of Barack Obama’s ‘original’ birth certificate (Warner, Neville-Shepard 2014) in order to reveal his ‘true’ origin, or in a completely different context are tuned into a constant mode of exposing the purported ‘agents of perestroika’ (Yablokov 2018: 50–79) accelerating the pre-meditated Soviet collapse, the fusion between ‘fake news’ and complex conspiracy theories emerge as one of the favourite tools for fierce partisan political combat in West and East alike.

Complementation and reinforcement

In our discussion regarding the mechanism of interaction between ‘fake news’ and conspiracy theories, we have described the difference between the two phenomena in regards to factuality, interpretation and framing. In differentiating between the different aspects of the respective phenomena, it was possible to determine that the major difference in mode of engagement of ‘fake news’ and conspiracy theories lies in reliance on existing biases, as opposed to the process of conceptually framing specific biases, as in the case of conspiracies. In other words, the production and proliferation of ‘fake news’ is not concerned with factuality and theory at all, as the centrality of their potency is grounded in the producers’ and consumers’ interpretation and subsequent intended perceptual, cognitive and behavioral changes. Despite the observed procedural differences of the respective discussed phenomena from the standpoint of communication theory, we argue that these interact together rather well, in terms of complementation and reinforcement. We refer to this dynamic in the context of political partisanship, as ‘cross-pollination’, where ‘fake news’ has the ability and potency to transmit conspiracy theories in a rather rapid fashion. The net effects of such transmission are greatly amplified by the low-barriers to entry and the speed of reproduction over multiple mediums located in the digital domain (Önnerfors 2019). Key drivers for this process of ‘cross-pollination’ are the deliberate search for exploitation of their potentials for amplification of existing ingroup polarisation (Schulz *et al.* 2018) and signalling for ideological supporters in on- and off-line mobilisation.

In addition to these, the dynamic interaction is exploited for purely utilitarian political purposes. Namely, as non-factual (invented or distorted) information in the form of text, sound or altered image carrying elements (so-called ‘deep fakes’) – providing cognitive cues or reinforcing well-established conspiracy theories that provide ‘alternative’ explanations of observable political facts. Events or adversarial political behavioral patterns can quickly be appropriated, as a ‘rhetorical weapon’ with a potent capacity for lasting destruction of public and private reputation. These drivers allow us to gain insights into the mechanics of what we have earlier referred to, as a ‘loopback cycle’, where the non-factual and/or distorted information is incorporated into existing or emerging conspiratorial narratives, as a form of a ‘factual evidence’ pointing to the veracity of the claims of the producers and distributors of disinformation. In sum, it could be argued that the process of ‘cross-pollination’ is beneficial to both kinds of disinformation entrepreneurs, as the complementation and reinforcement of ‘fake news’ and conspiracy narratives allows for advancement of the agenda of professional or amateur disinformation entrepreneurs and desired outcomes on the side of their intended (and often unintended) targeted audiences.

Political but not strictly partisan?

Obviously, such instrumentation that is readily available for exploitation in the framework of political combat makes both ‘fake news’ and conspiracy narratives highly attractive commodities sought after by competitive political actors, formal and informal organisations and networks. However, it could also be argued that the nature of the substance of ‘fake news’ in their capacities as ‘micro-stories’ (mini-narratives) are not necessarily always related or could be readily incorporated into larger, purely political, conspiracy narratives (i.e. non-political ‘fake news’, such as formerly published in magazines such as *Weekly World News* 1979–2007, on the border between cunning satire and intended deception). Nonetheless, it could also be claimed that non-political ‘fake news’ almost always could be politicised and thus indirectly related to politics, but not necessarily in immediate ‘hot’ political contests. In addition to these observations, a number of findings point out that the different extremes of the political spectrum engage, interpret and endorse different types of conspiracy theories, however members belonging to both extremes are prone to accept conspiratorial beliefs (van Prooijen *et al.* 2015). Yet, certain types of conspiracy theories that interact and, in turn, are supported by proliferation of non-factual based information appeal to political moderates, extremist partisans of both sides of the spectrum, as well as independents, simultaneously.

An illustration of the aforesaid variation would be the multiple variety of conspiracy theory narratives concerning climate change (Uscinski *et al.* 2017) and, specifically, the one concerned with so-called ‘chemtrails’, that is sometimes referred to as ‘solar and geoengineering’. ‘Chemtrails’-conspiracy represents the firm belief and preoccupation of certain social segments that certain government/s and subcontracted private corporations are engaged in massive covert climate control and weather modification via the so-called contrails left by passing aircraft in the sky that contain a mix of toxic chemicals or dangerous biological agents. The alleged motives for such covert governmental activity range from crude profit-making to an omnipotent and borderless global mind-control exercise, in other words a very real and massive plot that Daniel Pipes would consider a ‘world conspiracy’ (Pipes 1999).

The core of the conspiracy theory that is constantly supplied by freshly recruited civic activists and pseudo-scientific ‘evidence’ in forms of texts and images is centred on the idea that the spray of toxic chemicals and harmful biological agents by planes represents powerful covert control mechanisms over unsuspecting individuals worldwide. The adverse control effects over the clueless subjects is manifested via very direct and personal negative consequences that range from blood, respiratory sicknesses and psychological anomalies to food deprivation, famine and drought attributed to weather pattern alterations and the spread of harmful biological agents. In essence, the most commonly found ‘chemtrails’-narratives, backed by stories and images supplied by networks of ‘sky watchers’, represent a sample of experienced cognitive dissonance on behalf of the ‘awakened’ believers regarding man-made climate change, as well as complications connected to loss of agency (Bakalaki 2016). This dissonance is dispersed across the political left-right spectrum and illustrates how difficult it is clearly to attribute the belief in the ‘chemtrail’-conspiracy to a particular group of proponents. This ambiguity is accurately captured by Cairns, as she correctly observes that:

On the one hand, the chemtrail discourse chimes with concerns sometimes characterized as more traditionally ‘left-wing’ (for example, concerns with social injustice, corporate power and the environment); on the other hand, anxieties about ‘big government’ expressed in belief in the New World Order, climate scepticism, fears about limits to individual freedoms etc. chime with more ‘right-wing’ subject positions.

(Cairns 2016: 80)

In a similar fashion, in further search of clarity concerning this existing ambiguity in regards to political affiliation of the ‘chemtrails believers’ base, Tingley and Wagner find that:

[...] per the CCES results, chemtrails conspirators are not confined to generally extreme political beliefs. Neither ‘extreme’ Democrats or Republicans are more likely to subscribe to the conspiracy theory than ‘moderate’ ones [...]. However, further detailed analysis of online behaviour reveals an affinity of those tweeting about geoengineering toward other topics that could be grouped into more partisan extremist causes.

(Tingley, Wagner 2017: 4)

These, and other similar results, demonstrate that specific conspiratorial narratives with related features that are connected to disbelief and anxiety, such as so-called H.A.A.R.P. (i.e. High Frequency Active Auroral Research Program) or 5G related conspiracies, the anti-vaxxer movement (i.e. belief in the link between vaccination and autism, ‘vaccine overload’, exposure to toxic elements, etc.), that are also highly resistant against factual scientific evidence, possess the ability to appeal across the political spectrum. They also suggest that it could be speculated that ‘fake news’ production related to simultaneous complementarity and reinforcement of these narratives for multiple purposes may act as ‘magnets’ for the proliferators of suitable types of spurious or misleading claims, which are presented as news, observations or validation. It could be further hypothesised that such interaction between conspiratorial beliefs and false claims, presented as authentic news, would concentrate on ‘complicated’ themes and ‘controversial’ topics with complex causality in the eyes of public opinion. Thus, the more obscure and complex the correlations and causality links are, in combination with neglect and arrogance by the political, economic, cultural and scientific elites, the higher the attraction to the producers and distributors of ‘fake news’ and conspiracy theories to offer ‘alternative’ explanations and supporting ‘evidence’. As this hypothesis might be valid in Western societies, where conspiracy theories gain traction mainly from ‘bottom up’ channelling suspicions towards their own government, it would be informative to test its validity in countries with illiberal and autocratic regimes of governance, as in the case of the Russian Federation under Putin, where we observe a reversed dynamic (Olmsted 2009). In other words, further research would be beneficial to explore the ‘top-down’ instrumentalisation of the conspiratorial discourse with a broad political appeal for the purpose of replacing the lack of coherent ideology, strengthening internal coherence, suppressing internal political dissent and reshaping national identity (Yablokov 2018: 192–3).

Conclusion

This overview attempts to theorise connection and interaction between conspiracy theories (as media phenomenon) and fake news (as both media and political phenomenon). While both subjects still have no finalised theory and remain in the centre of academic and expert debate, we consider that the analysis above provides sufficient contribution to research. We contend that both phenomena share similar transmission models, while they systematically differ in the nature of content. Conspiracy theories are created and developed under a condition of ‘fact-digging’, though subjective and ontologically flawed; outright fabrication is a supplementary and secondary tool. When a ‘factual base’ of a conspiracy theory is established, it is used to strengthen a narrative that may (or may not) be a political tool or even a component of political warfare. ‘Fake news’ on the contrary, are tools – created and fabricated to be an instrumental

part of political warfare or commercial scam that masquerades as political or pseudo-scientific or even entertainment media agenda. In this sense, ‘fake news’ represent a narrative ‘conspiracy method’ rather than a theory. Our research provides case studies, a theoretical discussion and an analysis that establish the foundation for an argument above open to further scholarly debate.

The suggested frame provides a non-contradictory distinction between the phenomena of conspiracy theories and fake news, and establishes connections, differences and synergies between the two. In this regard, we have argued that conspiracy theories have a vital role in the emergence and distribution of ‘fake news’ and vice versa, regardless of what particular attribution of the latter we use. In support of our argumentation, we applied the apparatus of description and classification of conspiracy theories to ‘fake news’, in order to distinguish and focus on the centrality of interpretation for this phenomenon and its further implications. Subsequent sections of our discussion concentrated on the mechanism of ‘cross-pollination’ between the two phenomena, as well as the implications of their synergy and distribution, as we argue that for the producers of ‘fake news’, distribution and outcomes in targeted audiences are of prime interest and importance. In the same line of thinking, we suggest that both phenomena interact rather well, as ‘fake news’ represent an almost ideal carrier of whole or partial conspiracies in certain cases, as they are instrumental in garnering political support, increasing polarisation and as they represent useful instruments for reputational damage. In conclusion, we discussed specific conspiracy theories with broad cross-sectional political and partisan appeal that attract non-factual and not necessarily strictly political disinformation, that subsequently is politicised. Our main suggestion is to apply the available conspiracy theory research apparatus (augmented by the insights gained from narrative theory, rumour and propaganda studies) towards a fuller scrutiny of the ‘fake news’ phenomenon. This approach enables further insights about its interaction with the conceptualisation of conspiracy beliefs in regards to specific topics and themes in different national, social and cultural contexts.

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