POLICY | brief

Why Misery Loves Company: The Rise of Conspiracy Theories and Violent Extremism

By Raul Rios

Introduction

QAnon, the great replacement, chemtrails and 5G causing Coronavirus, are among some of the recent conspiracy theories which have become increasingly associated with extremist groups (specifically far-right extremist). Of growing concern among authorities, is that the subscribers of the latter and other conspiracy theories may be at risk of becoming radicalised or in some instances compelled to carry out acts of violence as a result of narratives and belief peddled by them. In the recent past, these horrible acts have included those such as the Pittsburgh synagogue shooting in Pennsylvania, where the perpetrator believed in a white genocide conspiracy theory (Lind, 2018), or the Hanau terrorist attack where the attacker was a subscriber of several different conspiracy theorists blog posts (Emberland, 2020). In this regard, Gilles de Kerchove, the EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator, expressed in an interview with the West Point Sentinel on August 2020 that "the potential future rise of new forms of terrorism, rooted in conspiracy theories and technophobia, is a cause for concern" (quoted in Pantucci, 2020). Throughout the last decade, researchers across several fields, policymakers and decisionmakers have started to take conspiracy theories and the role they play in inciting and fuelling violence, including acts of violent extremism and terrorism much more seriously.

The aim of this policy brief is to provide an overview of some key research recently published examining conspiracy theories and their possible links to violence, particularly violent extremism. The research cited is meant as a starting point for policymakers and decision-makers (yet without claiming to be fully exhaustive). Second, this policy brief seeks to highlight some of the key trends and dynamics between conspiracy theories and the acts of violence associated with them, by looking at how one may influence the other. The policy brief concludes by suggesting a series of recommendations for policymakers and decision-makers to consider when developing new policies to tackle extremist groups which have integrated conspiracy theories promoting violence into their milieus or narratives.

Conspiracy? An Act Versus a Theory

Misinformation, obfuscation of the facts and ever-shifting narratives, are commonplace when dealing with conspiracy theories and their subscribers. Therefore, it is important to clarify the difference between an act of conspiracy versus a conspiracy theory. First off, legal definitions as to what exactly constitutes a criminal act of conspiracy vary according to civil and common law regimes and on a state by state basis. Criminal laws concerning acts of conspiracy tend to exist in most countries in

Europe as well as the United States (Stenson, 2006.). The main legal elements key to a crime of conspiracy, are the *actus reus* (guilty act; required in most jurisdictions to prosecute) and *mens rea* (guilty mind) (UNDOC, 2018). In its most basic legal definition, an act of conspiracy consists of two or more individuals who plot to commit a criminal act and then carry out the act.

However, throughout the literature additional elements are often included in the definitions of what constitutes a conspiracy. Elements such as, the power status of the conspirators or group (political or social), their ability and capacity to execute the conspiracy, and how widespread and far-reaching the conspiracy are. For example, Douglas et al. (2019) define a conspiracy as a "secret plot by two or more powerful actors" (citing Keeley, 1999 and Pigden, 1995). Whereas Uscinski et al. (2016), define a conspiracy as a "secret arrangement between a small group of actors to usurp political or economic power, violate established rights, hide vital secrets, or illicitly cause widespread harm". As for the definition of a conspiracy theory, Oxford dictionary defines it as "a belief that some covert but influential organization is responsible for an unexplained event". In the academic literature, the definition of a conspiracy theory tends to vary to some extent and often include specifically defined concepts or elements. Douglas et al. (2019) define a conspiracy theory as "attempts to explain the ultimate causes of significant social and political events and circumstances with claims of secret plots by two or more powerful actors." Similarly, Sunstein and Vermeule (2008), also include in their definition of conspiracy theory a group of "powerful people". Another common component found in definitions of conspiracy theories is their degree of harmfulness or malevolence (Oliver and Wood, 2014).

Building Blocks of a Conspiracy Theory

At the very minimum, all conspiracy theories share three key components. The first is the existence of a secret plot or covert action, which has taken place either at the regional, national or global level. The second component is a group of conspirators portrayed as powerful. They are often identified as belonging to the opposition and are at the helm of the conspiracy. The third key component found in conspiracy theories is a particular group who are used as scapegoats, blaming them for all that is wrong within their societies (i.e. Jews, Muslims, Romani, intellectuals, LGBTQI, etc). While, these three points form the foundation of mostly all conspiracy theories and are key to identifying them, they might also share other components. In their research, van Prooijen and van Vugt (2018) point out five components of conspiracy theories; deliberateness, secrecy, coalition, threat and pattern. Conspiracy theories, also tend to have a Manichean or dualistic world view where there exist a good vs. evil, or a them vs. us component (Oliver and Wood, 2014). Yet, another important aspect is that conspiracy theories tend to be "self-sealing" and extremely "resistant to correction" (Sunstein and Vermeule, 2008).

In the case of newer conspiracy theories particularly QAnon, they are not only seemingly resistant to correction and self-sealing but are able to adapt and evolve to new counter-narratives or contradictory information. Indeed, QAnon has increasingly begun integrating aspects of other theories, such as 5G and Coronavirus, anti-vaccination theories and more recently #SaveOurChildren. A conglomeration of several theories continues to appeal to their subscriber base (Doward, 2020). Interestingly, the fact that QAnon subscribers believe in multiple unrelated conspiracy theories at once, it is not necessarily an uncommon phenomenon

(see Wood, Douglas, & Sutton, 2012). Moreover, A recent survey examining the relationship between QAnon and conspiracy beliefs in the US showed that only a small percentage of QAnon subscribers believed in all the theories associated with QAnon (Schaffner 2020). But of some concern among researcher, is that the latter form of conspiracy integration found in QAnon could be novel and might be indicative of QAnon subscribers moving towards creating a form of both online and offline collective identity (see Gaudette et al., 2020). The components outlined above are among the most highlighted throughout the literature. This is not meant to be an exhaustive list of components.

Subscribing to Conspiracy Theories

While international actors such as UNESCO (2020) and the European Commission (2020), have launched campaigns in order to counter misinformation arising from conspiracy theories and alert citizens on key issues, many still fall prey to conspiracy theories. Vital to understanding the dynamics which exist between conspiracy theories and violent extremism is understanding which demographics are the most susceptible to the narratives espoused by them. Indeed, conspiracy theories have increasingly found a following among certain populations in both Europe and the United States. In Germany, a recent survey found that about a third of respondents believed that a secret cabal is running the world (Deutsche Welle, 2020). In the United States, a PEW Centre study (2020) found that approximately a third of Americans surveyed believed that the coronavirus was intentionally created by scientist. In the UK, around a tenth of those surveyed believed that 5G Communication towers are spreading the Coronavirus or radiation (Rosenbeck et al., 2020). Social media and other online sites such

as reddit (see Scrivens, Davies, Frank, 2020) or voat.co (see Blackburn et al., 2020) have also helped to propagate conspiracy theories at an alarming rate. Somewhat concerning is the fact that in one survey 7% of the respondents (n=4,057) thought that QAnon (which is a conspiracy theory itself) was a trustable source of information, whereas a sixth of respondents surveyed said they "trust QAnon at least some of the time" (Schaffner 2020).

But why do individuals decide to subscribe to conspiracy theories? Multidisciplinary research examining what drives individuals (mainly in the United States and Europe) to believe in conspiracy theories has been increasingly carried out in the last decade. The research indicates that individuals who are the most susceptible to conspiracy theories include those with a basic level of education (associated with "cognitive complexity" see van Prooijen, 2017), individuals who are socially marginalized or isolated, who feel unsure about their job security (van Prooijen and Douglas, 2017), those with low income levels, and those who agree that violence is a legitimate means of solving social or political problems (Drochon 2018, citing Uckinksi and Parent 2014). In addition, the type of democratic political system (i.e. direct democracy versus representative) seems to have no direct impact or influence among conspiracy subscribers, who tend to already heavily suspect or reject their political system altogether. (Hugo Drochon, 2018).

Similarly, psychological factors which may determine the susceptibility of individuals to believe in conspiracy theories include feelings of uncertainty or powerlessness (van Prooijen and Douglas 2017 as well as the impression that they lack any control or self-agency in their lives (Whiston and Galinsky, 2008). Moreover, Douglas, Sutton, and Cichocka (2017)

stipulate that people are drawn to conspiracy theories when they "promise to satisfy important social psychological motives". Likewise, for conspiracy theories to be adopted by potential subscribers, they must already align with that individual's predispositions (Douglas et al., 2019). It is also understood that political ideology plays an important role. The more extreme an individual's political beliefs and inclinations are or become (i.e. far-right or far-left), the more likely they are to subscribe to conspiracy theories or thinking (Douglas et al., 2019). Another commonly discussed factor is that subscribers of conspiracy theories suffer from "crippled epistemologies". A crippled epistemology is the notion that an extremist, conspiracy subscriber or even cult member, will only trust information that they received from their ingroups (usually the extremist group or closed network they belong to) and reject all other informational sources (van Prooijen, Krouwel and Pollet, 2016). As a result, such of this limited informational intake, they tend to "know very few things, and what they know is wrong" (Sunstein and Vermeule, 2008).

While the research conducted thus far helps to create a better understanding of why individuals believe or subscribe to conspiracy theories, the relationship between conspiracy theory and extremist violence is much harder to gauge.

The Relationship Between Conspiracy Theory and Violent Extremism

Recently, conspiracy theories have increasingly become associated with the modus operandi of several extremist groups and violent extremist. UNESCO Director-General Audrey Azoulay, has expressed concerned that during the COVID-19 crisis conspiracy theories have served to "amplify and legitimize misconceptions about the pandemic, and reinforce stereotypes which can fuel violence and violent extremist ideologies" (UNESCO 2020). While believing in conspiracy theories does not necessarily mean that an individual will become a violent extremist or choose to carry out acts of violence, they have been linked to violent intentions (Douglas et al., 2019). The research analysing and examining the dynamics between conspiracy theories, radicalisation, extremism[1] and violence is limited. Further research is needed in order to better understand the synergies between these varying phenomena and establish casual links.

Bartlett and Miller (2010), provide the first, and perhaps one of the most detailed analysis carried out thus far, looking at the relationship between conspiracy theories and extremist groups. Their analysis looks at how 50 different extremist groups integrated conspiracy theories as part of their ideologies and propaganda efforts. They argue that a conspiracy theory serves as a "radicalising multiplier" and identify three key dynamics commonly associated with extremist groups. These dynamics (multiplier effects) are: the "demonologies of 'the enemy' that the group defines itself against"; the "delegitimatizing the voices of dissent and moderation"; lastly, "they encourage a group or individuals to turn to violence" (Bartlett and Miller 2020). The dynamics they observed are in line with the recent research findings outlined throughout this policy brief, particularly the psychological effects which conspiracy theories tend to have on subscribers. Sunstein and Vermeule (2008) also provide an interesting inference. They infer that the restriction of not only civil right and liberties (lack of legitimate ways of

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[1] For an in-depth overview of the definition of these terms See: Schmid, A. P. "Radicalisation, De-Radicalisation, Counter-Radicalisation: A Conceptual Discussion and Literature Review", The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague 4, no. 2 (2013). DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.19165/2013.1.02

addressing grievances), but also of information, are influential factors which justifies the rise of conspiracy theories (i.e. possible radical rhetoric and extreme anti-government positions) and therefore possible or eventual violence (Sunstein and Vermeule 2008). As Hugo Drochon (2018) points out, "conspiracy theories appear not to be the cause of disenchantment with democracy but rather its symptom, which has to do with political and economic disenfranchisement." This could indeed be an interesting dynamic to explore, considering that lack of civil liberties, perceived injustices and belief of misinformation are all common tenets of conspiracy theories and have been argued to lead to violent extremism (van Prooijen, Krouwel and Pollet, 2015 citing Midlarsky, 2011).

Another concept explored in the literature, is that of political extremism (albeit non-violent). In their study, van Prooijen, Krouwel and Pollet (2015) explored how political extremism at both sides of the political spectrum are associated with an increased tendency to believe in conspiracy theories. They conducted four empirical studies on the socio-cognitive process that yielded a strong association (quadratic; U-shaped) between political extremism and conspiracy beliefs as a result of "a highly structured thinking style that is aimed at making sense of societal events" among political extremist. Moreover, both sides of the political extreme, regardless of ideologies, share similar, "underlying psychological" process, supporting previously made observations on this relationship (van Prooijen, Krouwel and Pollet 2015). At times, despite ideological divides among extremist, conspiracy theories can converge when it comes to the targeting of certain groups. As pointed out by Bartlett and Miller (2010) and van Prooijen, Krouwel and Pollet (2015), Jewish people tend to be targeted by far rights groups through theories such as Zionist Occupied Government, by far-left

groups through theories based on "international financiers" and by Islamic extremist who claim Jewish people are conspiring to "destroy Islam". Unfortunately, not much more research exploring these different dynamics is available. Indeed, of priority should be research seeking to explore the relation between self-radicalisation and conspiracy theories, which has unfortunately been a consistently present factor in so called "lone-wolf" terrorist and extremist attacks. In addition, research looking at how extremist group use conspiracy theories for recruitment purposes should also be promoted.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

There is a growing consensus that conspiracy theories play an increasingly important role in influencing the behaviours of individuals and extremist groups intent on carrying out acts of violence. Indeed, it is highly likely that there is not only a synergy between all the different factors and components explored in the highlighted research, but a nexus between conspiracy theories, radicalisation and extremism. Ultimately, conspiracy theories may validate views among individuals and groups alike, that violence is a legitimate solution against perceived injustices, imminent threat or a common enemy. Also of concern, is that once conspiracy theory subscribers are committed to a course of violence, the chances they will deviate from this course on their own is unlikely. Even more so if they are part of a like-minded group. As Sunstein and Vermeule (2018) observed, phenomena such as crippled epistemologies, group polarisation and self-selection, will all but ensure that subscribers of conspiracy theories or members of extremist groups remain staunch followers. Of equal importance, is understanding the how and why conspiracy theories go beyond localized phenomenon and become widespread tools seeking to subvert

democratic values and institutions through the incitement of violence, hate and misinformation. Lastly, it is also important for policymakers not to fall into the trap of believing that there is a panacea to all these issues. Individuals are unique, so are their behaviours, traumas, experiences and their perception of the world and the reality around them. These factors must be considered as part of the equation and therefore possible solutions when tackling conspiracy theories and the violence they might be responsible for.

Pre-Conspiracy Theory/Initial Conspiracy Theory Circulation

- Relevant actors should map out in accordance with previous research findings, local risk factors and at-risk population and demographics in local or regional communities.

- Support research which seeks to map pathways or drivers, which encourage at risk and vulnerable individuals from crossing the line between adherence to conspiracy theories to violence as indicated in the policy brief.

- Ensuring that the at-risk population exposure's to misinformation, propaganda, and conspiracy theories are kept to a minimum through means of public-private cooperation with relevant and key online corporate actors.

- Creation and clarification of national legal instruments, and clarification of procedures for balancing the risk of violence and misinformation promoted by conspiracy theories with civil, human and fundamental rights, such as right to assembly and speech.

- Include Media Information Literacy throughout the secondary and tertiary education curriculums, including technical and vocational education and training (TVET) curriculums, as well as through other means of non-formal and non-traditional education and methods. The best

tool against conspiracy theories, misinformation and violent narratives is education, particularly the development of critical thinking skills and media literacy among individuals.

Conspiracy Theories Which Have Already Been Widely Circulated and Promoted

- Creation of an independent, non-political, expert based task force with direct communication and access to different stakeholders such as internet service providers, NGOs, local and federal authorities and social media companies in order to address conspiracy theories inciting violence.

- Pick and choose, through risk assessments and other methodologies, which conspiracy theories could potentially pose the greatest harm or threat if left unchecked; dedicate as much resources as possible to tackling those theories. It is not necessary to fully discredit a conspiracy theory, just to sufficiently delegitimize certain narratives to create doubts within subscribers.

- Government's should not respond directly to conspiracy; it is best to utilize third-party communication experts in counter-narratives to take on conspiracy theories (see Sunstein and Vermeule, 2008).

- Working through Public-Private Partnerships with Internet Service Providers, Social Media companies, local community leaders and traditional media outlets to discuss conspiracy theories and the narratives around them and prevent at-risk population from falling victims to them.

- In more vulnerable or at-risk population have targeted intervention by social works or community leaders, politicians and other important community figures to have a conversation with key individuals or identified leaders promoting conspiracy theories.

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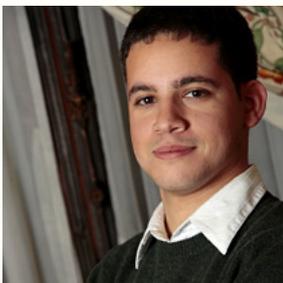
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