

HOW THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC DETERMINED THE AMPLITUDE OF CONSPIRACY THEORIES

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ABSTRACT

In difficult situations as covid-19 crisis, people try to find explanations in order for their mind not to be in an alert state anymore. The new pandemic did not spread only the SARS-COV-2 virus, but also it spread a lot of misinformation and disinformation, a lot of fake news and plenty of conspiracy theories. Even if before covid-19 there were this kind of theories in which some people strongly believed, after the start of the pandemic, the covid-19 conspiracy theories increased and also they determined harmful actions in the society. This paper presents the most popular conspiracy theories and what are their common ground. Most of the theories are not new, they are just updated and created based on instant connections between new events. This study presents a literature review on different explanations on why the covid-19 conspiracy theories are more popular. It takes into consideration lack of critical thinking together with the biased minds and presents cognitive dissonance as a possible cause. At the same time, the fear of the unknown at high intensity influenced the belief in these theories. The lockdown during the pandemic determined plenty of people to spend more time online which determined the rise of misleading information. It cannot be denied that the bad management of some authorities had some influence. In the end, some conspiracy believers have some mental models already formed that are fertile ground for these theories. What can be a solution for this phenomenon to decrease?

Keywords: Covid-19, conspiracy theories, critical thinking, disinformation, fake news

INTRODUCTION

The new virus pandemic was a shock for everyone in this world. Now, more than never the world was easlily connected and this contagious disease spread quickly. But this was not the only thing that became viral. In the same connected world, conspiracy theories spread almost at the same pace with the real virus causing dangerous effects. Based on fear, based on the bad management of some authorities, these kind of theories began to rise among people.

Even though the human kind drives a long battle with the new virus, we can talk about another battle between scientists who give their energy and their knowledge to find explanations and cure for this disease (and not only) and average people who just have an opinion based on unverified information on the

Internet. The problem is that these people do not believe in specialists' epistemic authority and they take dangerous decisions. In the following part, the article will present explanations which intend to clarify why the conspiracy theories raised in amplitude and why the number of believers in such theories appears to be higher than before the pandemic.

POPULAR CONSPIRACY THEORIES

Before digging into the reasons on why some people believe more in conspiracy theories than in God, it is necessary to review the types of the theories and the content that promotes conspiracies during covid-19 pandemic. Some narratives are old and now are brought to life again, other narratives are new, creating connections between recent events. However, even the new theories have a common old background that is well set in our collective consciousness.

Conspiracy theories have a common ground on which they build their narratives. Usually they come with explanations for different events and the cause of the events is seen as a group of few powerful people that either fully control the events, either have a big part of influence in triggering those events [1]. The narratives born out of this base usually present the situation as black and white, they split the world in two: the powerful bad people who want to control the good wick people that are more numerous, but easy to manipulate. When the covid-19 pandemic started, it was quite easy and predictable that most theories will blame the small group that rules the world for the creation of the virus. However, it is unpleasant and quite alarming that there is a such a big number of people that believe them.

One of the most popular conspiracy theories that still lives on the Internet pages (and sadly not only) is the one which states that the virus was accidentally slipped out of a laboratory with the accountability of a group of powerful people, some more specific defined as World Health Organization. With this virus spread in the world, they will have the reasons to impose mandatory vaccination. With this vaccination they will somehow control the whole world population. This theory tries to support an old theory that is still alive among people, the one stating that vaccines are harmful and are causing autism.

It all started with a later proven falsified study run by Andrew Wakefield whose results were showing that there is a causal connection between MMR vaccine and autism [2]. During the first years after the publication, the vaccination rate dropped significantly, but even after the retraction of the study and the official accusations of fraud, there were plenty of people who continued to believe in it. They found explanation saying that Wakefield told the truth and the others attacked him because of it. The anti-vaxxers movement began to have more and more followers, but it all started to roll like a snowball when the covid-19 pandemic began. Now, the conspiracy believers found sense and connection between the narrative of mandatory vaccination and this shocking and unexpected

pandemic of a new virus. While some theories refer to the ones to blame for SARS-COV2 as being 'them', 'a group of wealthy people', other theories are more specific naming Bill Gates or George Soros for it.

Another known conspiracy theory is the one stating that 5G network is causing coronavirus. Trying to find a reason for this unexpected situation, some people made a connection between the updated mobile network and the new virus. In the past, almost at every step of the evolution of technology there was a resistance movement claiming that what's new will harm the population. The coincidence this year was that in the same time with the installation and the ongoing approval process of 5G, it happened to be a pandemic of a new virus. The mind of conspirationists created connections with almost everything just to prove their belief even if there is no scientific base.

However, this theory caused some believers to take harmful actions as protests against the implementation of 5G, physical and verbal attacks on telecoms engineers while they were doing their job or even setting fire to 5G masts [3]. In this way, these theories become dangerous since they continue to have believers who are not just sharing a post on Social Media, but decide to take action and do harm without understanding the magnitude and the effects of what they are doing. They believe they are heroes who save the world, but they are the ones who can be a threat.

METHODOLOGY – LITERATURE REVIEW ON EXPLANATIONS CONCERNING THE RISE OF CONSPIRACY THEORIES DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC

One of the first reasons for people believing in this kind of theories is the **lack of critical thinking**. This was a problem before the corona crisis and we can see its effects now in the pandemic world. If we have to define critical thinking, we can take into consideration the definition of Robert Ennis which states that critical thinking is rational thinking which influences what we believe and what we are doing [4]. Based on that, the individuals who believe this kind of theories do not have a logical and rational thinking. The paradox is that they believe they have it, they believe they have good arguments, but they are doing exactly the opposite of critical thinking.

A critical thinker must provide valid arguments for his reasoning, while the conspirationists use apparent arguments named as fallacies. Without some practice, the mind is easily tricked into believing it has valid arguments. A poor judgement will consider that the evidences are relevant, that the argumentation is a strong one and that the others are making mistakes. In the same time, a critical thinker accepts the fact that his reasoning might be wrong. We can notice a strong resistance and holding on the personal truth from the conspiracy believers. They will not take into consideration that they might not be right, that the other has better arguments. They will always believe they hold the torch of truth which is

very dangerous. A person who is not flexible in his opinions is far from being a critical thinker.

Lack of critical thinking is determined by unconscious cognitive biases. Cognitive biases are mental errors, mental shortcuts that are not rational and that help us live our daily lives [5]. Following the scope of survival, our minds formed some shortcuts that we cannot fully control. For example, familiarity bias on which we tend to notice and to believe the things we see more often or filling the gaps of a story when we do not have sufficient information just to give sense to the narrative are just a couple of biases that influence our actions.

A very good example of a cognitive bias that influences the belief in conspiracy theories is confirmation bias. This heuristic makes people search and consider only the information that confirms their prior beliefs [6]. In this way, if people already believe a bit in the anti-coronavirus theory, they will search for evidences that support their belief and they will notice the same kind of arguments. They will reject almost immediately any opposed opinion because they will find explanations in their favor.

Another plausible explanation for conspiracy believers is the **cognitive dissonance**. This concept was first presented by Leon Festinger which stated that people lay on the principle of consistency. When there is no consistency between our thoughts and our actions, the dissonance installs and it is quite uncomfortable [7]. When people meet opposed beliefs, they have to decide if they change their action and accept the new belief or if they continue to believe in what they already did and try to find other reasons to support it. The author tells the story of a fanatic group which believed that the world was ending on a certain date. Festinger was observing the group. At the date when the world was supposed to end, the whole group was praying. The end never came, and, instead of accepting they were wrong, they found arguments to support the same idea. They started to say that God forgave them because they were praying and that they are the chosen ones who saved the planet [7].

The same thing is applicable for the people who strongly believe in conspiracy theories about covid-19. They rejected any explanation from the scientists or from the authorities and every time an official position was presented, they found a counter argument to support their belief. In this way, there were new theories that were invented as 5G causing coronavirus or that the masks have a metal inserted in that is controlled by 5G.

Covid-19 conspiracy theories began to rise in amplitude also due to the **fear of the unknown**. Even if the pandemics are not new in this world, SARS-COV2 is an unpredictable virus and a lockdown was needed. The whole period, especially at the beginning, was characterized by intense emotions. Taken individually, some people who are better at emotional intelligence coped quite well, while other people let themselves controlled by the emotions. But if we talk

from a broader perspective, the collective manifesting of emotions was more intense and the rational part of the mind was quite drowned.

For a better understanding of how reason and emotions are activated during this pandemic we can take into consideration the analogy given by Jonathan Haidt. Our mind is composed of two parts: the emotional part which is seen as an elephant and the rational part which is the rider on the elephant [8]. The elephant is run by instincts and is the one that usually leads the action and the rider is the active, the aware rational part that shows to the elephant where to go. The problem is that when the elephant is quite intense activated, it gets scared and starts running without control. Well, in this pandemic we can say that the elephant took the control of people's thoughts and actions. The fear of the unknown, the fear of the disease made people not just to believe in conspiracy theories, but also to take actions as buying toilet paper and flour for an entire year.

A similar binary representation of the mind is the one given by Daniel Kahneman. The author wrote the book 'Thinking fast. Thinking slow' where he presents the two main parts of our brain: System 1 and System 2. System 1 is the rapid thinking, based on natural inferences, instincts and rapid reaction whereas System 2 is the rational part of our mind, the one responsible with calculations, but who needs time to process [9]. This pandemic happened so fast that people did not take the time to analyze it rationally. They did not even have the patience to understand why the scientists were making mistakes, and why they were giving wrong predictions. They were seeing these normal steps in research as reason to support that coronavirus is a fraud. For conspiracy believers System 1 or the elephant took the charge and won.

Another factor which caused the big number of people who believe in conspiracy theories is the effect of the measures took by authorities. Many countries were in a lockdown and people were spending a lot of time at home, surfing the web. In this way not only the consumption of the Internet has risen, but also the creation of the content which determined the existence of malicious information. Spending so much time online, the echo chamber phenomenon was even more present than before [10]. Scared people were posting every new theory they were seeing being posted by their friends on social media. The same kind of content was being posted again as a vicious circle and when the information was coming back in another form, people tended to believe that it was true. The **echo chambers** are very dangerous because people do not realize that they are in it. They have the sensation that the information is new, is right and comes from trustful sources. In fact, they are recycling the same ideas about covid-19 theories but which are presented in different ways.

In a strong connection with the time spent online we can consider the **lack of media and digital literacy**. These skills are a must in today's society, but unfortunately many people lack that even if the technology went quite far. Media literacy means the ability to recognize different type of media, to understand and

critically evaluate it and to produce it at a certain level while digital literacy refers to the ability to use digital tools, to differentiate trustful digital sources, to search the information and to create digital content [11]. It is known that conspiracy theories quite often are present on suspicious websites, they do not have an author, they are written in some shady specific ways. Some people believe them only because they appear on Social Media timeline shared by a friend. Lack of education in this area is seen now, that more than ever, covid-19 conspiracy theories are very present, are travelling the whole Internet and attract numerous views. The easiest way is represented by people who do not know how to differentiate a good information of a bad one, by people who do not check the sources they read, by people who do not understand how search algorithms work and by people who give credit to online information at the same level they do for TV information.

Another factor that contributed to people believing more and more in covid-19 conspiracy theories was the **management with flaws of authorities**. Indeed, it is a special situation which requires special measures. Most of the countries were not prepared for it. Lockdown was a general necessary measure which was not negotiated. Over the past months, different countries took autonomy and adapted the measures based on the specific situation. However, there was no perfect country who took perfect measures. Each decision has its advantages and disadvantages and nothing could please everyone. In the same time, the world is still fighting the virus, so the solutions are just temporary.

With this situation in mind, many people were not pleased and criticized their governments or even the world wide institutions as WHO. Lockdown was a shock causing a lot of stress. Besides that, this measure seriously affected different business areas as HoReCa, tourism or aviation. A lot of people lost their jobs, lost their companies and the rage against authorities increased. This situation made some people believe that the authorities worked with the ones who 'rule' the world in order to create this chaos. They transferred the authority of the state to control things for the safety of people to the idea of authorities controlling the whole world with the scope of harming it.

In the same time, some specific countries took measures that did not make too much sense and people who felt the lack of logic started to question and be suspicious of this pandemic. For example, in Romania, specifically in the city of Iasi, there was a regulation for the city transportation. In the buses and trams there were not allowed more people than the number of chairs to avoid overcrowding [12]. At first glance, it is an understandable measure. But people were obliged to take a seat (in order for the driver to hold account of the number) and in this way the social distance was not respected anymore. People were staying one next to each other, at maximum 10 cm distance while just wearing masks. Of course, a lot of people found this illogical and became suspicious.

The last but not least, another explanation for the outbreak of covid-19 conspiracy theories is that all the narratives from these theories were constructed on some **mental models** people already had. As van Dijk states in discourse theories, mental models are mental representations that are situated between the discourse and the society and which helps people create opinions and faiths about the world [13]. In some parts of the world, people have some mental models about the idea that most of the population is powerless and that there are other few smart and rich people that have the control of the entire population. This is most present in ex-communist or dictatorial countries but it is not a rule. While people have this in the back of their minds, it is quite easy for them to believe the covid-19 conspiracy theories in which is stated that this is a game made by the ones from the higher level.

In the same time, the new generations who do not have this kind of mental representations can create something similar if they are frequently exposed to this kind of information. Seeing every day that the `rulers` of the world carefully created this crisis situation, some day they might believe it (also the familiarity bias plays its role here). Even if before the pandemic the conspiracy theories seemed to be a bit funny, we can see now that they can have serious consequences that can harm people.

CONCLUSIONS

The covid-19 pandemic brought to the light good and bad parts of the society. One of the harmful phenomena is the rise of conspiracy theories. Even if the number of people is not yet alarming, still they are more people who believe them than before the pandemic. Some of them got more visible due to the time spent online, some of them are silently scared. But for sure this has to be a problem that can be solved only with education. As you probably experienced, talking to a conspiracy believer has no good end. They do not accept counterarguments and hold to their belief. But if people, governments, companies would invest more in critical thinking skills, in media and digital literacy, in education in general, maybe the future generations will not have people who set 5G masts on fire.

However, there is a strange part of this conspiracy theories phenomenon that still does not have many answers. There are people that are intelligent, that work in universities or on management positions in companies, that have basic critical thinking skills but who believe that covid-19 is a lie. From the explanations stated above, we can say that their elephant took the lead and that they let themselves overwhelmed by the emotions, but usually they are rational thinkers. What happened? Why there are particular cases that do not support the theory that conspiracy believers have a low level of education? These are some questions that still need research.

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