



THE GAME BETWEEN MYSTERY AND SCIENCE: UNDERSTANDING AND REFLECTIONS ON CONSPIRACY THEORIES IN THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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ABSTRACT

Research purpose

At the end of 2019, the COVID-19 epidemic swept the world. The source and transmission channel of the virus could not be quickly understood. In the case of unclear information, there will be a variety of "conspiracy theory" views in the network environment, endangering the order of public social opinion. By analyzing the report "Conspiracy Theories of COVID-19" published by Chinese Wikipedia, this study summarizes the common characteristics and causes of conspiracy theories to provide referential measures and suggestions for eliminating conspiracy theories.

The research methods

This study mainly adopts the research methods of frame analysis and semantic analysis. The study found the conspiracy theories in the COVID-19 outbreak are primarily related to political factors, and all occurred in the early stage of the epidemic. These conspiracy theories are "unfalsifiable" and have a unified narrative framework, which satisfies people's curiosity and has a stable audience. Major emergencies provide context for conspiracy theories, social media platforms offer an intermediary for their spread, and people's curiosity makes conspiracy theories widely believed.

Research originality

There is much research on spreading rumors in public emergencies, but few on conspiracy theories. The study of conspiracy theories alone is significant to governing the world's public opinion order and constructing a community with a shared future for humankind.

Keywords: conspiracy theory; COVID-19; media strategy; governance path



At the end of 2019, COVID-19 broke out nationwide, with Wuhan as the center in China. All provinces, municipalities, and autonomous regions have initiated first-level responses to major public health emergencies. Soon after, epidemics broke out in many countries in the world.

Due to the sudden occurrence of the epidemic, and the source and development of the virus cannot be quickly disclosed to the public, In the absence of a clear understanding of the complete picture of the incident, various "conspiracy theories" will appear in the online public opinion environment. "Conspiracy theory" refers to a way of attributing major social and political events to the conspiracy of powerful and malicious groups or organizations (Karen M. Douglas. Ang, F.Deravi,2017). Conspiracy theories are based on the narrative of social group psychology, which can often justify themselves, and it is difficult for the public to distinguish between true and false. These "conspiracy theories" are challenging to differentiate between their actual and wrong viewpoints, and at the same time, they can evoke the public's curiosity. They have been widely disseminated on Internet platforms, and different versions have been derived, quickly triggering public panic and leading to a series of public opinion crises. At the same time, it also brings new challenges and reflections to media practitioners.

Part 1: Analysis and combing of the 14 conspiracy theories in the COVID-19

In this COVID-19 outbreak, due to people's lack of detailed understanding of the virus and the complex and changeable network environment, many versions of "conspiracy theories" have the soil to breed and spread. The Chinese Wikipedia website released a special report on "Conspiracy Theories of COVID-19". The report mainly summarizes 14 typical "conspiracy theories" that have aroused social attention during the development of the epidemic.

This study adopts the methods of frame analysis and semantic analysis to read the "Conspiracy Theories of COVID-19" report one by one, refine its core views, and summarize its common features.

(1) Political factors are inextricably linked to the emergence of conspiracy theories

Adam Enders, an assistant professor at the University of Louisville who studies how conspiracy theories affect politics, had noticed before the outbreak that conspiracy theories are increasingly being weaponized for political purposes. In these fourteen conspiracy theories, China and the United States have repeatedly issued statements on Twitter and in various media interviews regarding the new crown virus's source. President Donald Trump believes that the new crown virus started in China and called the virus a "Chinese virus." The Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs responded, expressing firm opposition and strong condemnation of Trump's remarks, believing that this is stigmatization of China through the use of the new crown virus. In addition, Russia once said on social media that the United States was the source of the new crown virus, and later that the virus



was the United Kingdom or Latvia. Some observers suspect the Russian propaganda's purpose is to confuse European citizens by spreading disunity and distrust.

The emergence of conspiracy theories is strongly influenced by international relations, individual countries' populism, and partisan disputes. It has become a tool for a particular political party to achieve a specific political goal.

(2) The generation and spread of conspiracy theories are primarily during the large-scale outbreak of the epidemic

These fourteen major conspiracy theories appeared between late January 2020 and March 2019. This period coincides with the rising period of the epidemic. The number of people infected daily is increasing rapidly, and news websites are occupied by epidemic information. News such as "Wuhan lockdown," "air-borne virus," "infected people will have gastrointestinal discomfort in addition to respiratory symptoms," etc., constantly refresh the public's understanding and knowledge of the virus. Many psychological factors that trigger conspiracy theories have also been strengthened, and negative emotions such as fear, pessimism, and unknown have spread rapidly.

This sudden media imbalance provides a context for the emergence of conspiracy theories. In a state where people's consciousness is biased, the views of conspiracy theories satisfy people's curiosity and desire for "truth." They are gradually being used on social platforms, forming a stream of public opinion. On the contrary, in the later stages of the epidemic, due to the normalization of the epidemic and the gradual comprehensiveness of people's awareness of the virus, conspiracy theories seldom appeared, and the spreading effect was significantly weakened.

Part 2: The general characteristics and formation mechanism of conspiracy theories

From the above research and combing of the "Conspiracy Theories of COVID-19" published on the Chinese Wikipedia website, the specific characteristics and reasons for the conspiracy theory have gradually become clear.

(1) Specific characteristics of conspiracy theories

1. Relying on the original ecological event, it is "unfalsifiable."

Conspiracy theories refer to the attribution of significant social and political events to the conspiracy of powerful and malicious groups or organizations behind them. Judging from this definition, the opinions it conveys can be called a rumor. Conspiracy theories are indeed a variant form of rumors. Rumors refer to fabricated and disseminated statements that differ from facts or are even contrary to the facts under the premise that the audience is not explicit or suggestive of fiction. From the authenticity of speech, conspiracy theories and rumors have the same roots, and neither have complete authenticity.



However, there is an essential difference between conspiracy theories and rumors; that is, they cannot be falsified. Rumors are usually fake facts and can be proved to be false, while conspiracy theories are based on actual ecological events. They mainly use the asymmetry of information to forge the "truth" behind the facts, which are difficult to prove as false. Either the evidence against the conspiracy theory or the allegation of insufficient substantive evidence can be another piece of evidence for conspiracy theorists to support their ideas.

2. It is mysterious and satisfies people's desire for peeping and curiosity about the unknown truth

Conspiracy theories are often speculations and fabrications of major events. Due to their complexity and importance, it is difficult for ordinary people to understand the "truth" in the first place. From a psychological point of view, the more ambiguous people's cognition of an event, the stronger the need for information. Suppose the suddenness or complexity of the event itself causes the audience to lack information, and the official explanation is lagging or unclear. In that case, the emergence of conspiracy theories claiming that a mysterious and powerful force caused the incident can just be accepted by people (Ting Zhang,2020). Driven by specific interests, conspiracy theorists attribute the occurrence of significant events to a carefully planned conspiracy behind them. And these conspiracies happen to satisfy people's desire for truth and curiosity and fill in the lack of information in their hearts. At the same time, out of a kind of "satisfaction and pride superior to others" of knowing the truth of the incident, people are willing to share these mysterious and dramatic stories with others through social platforms. So, conspiracy theory views quickly attract people's attention and derive more and more absurd versions in the process of dissemination to dispel people's sense of fear and the unknown in the face of emergencies.

3. There is a unified format in the narrative framework, which weakens the judgment of the truth

The communication framework theory points out that using different narrative frameworks will produce other guiding effects for the same objective reality. With the increase in public emergencies, although versions of conspiracy theories have emerged endlessly and have different contents, they all have a unified narrative framework and logic: that is, they are used to attribute a certain political event or emergency to the conspiracy of the forces behind it, reflecting the sinister intentions of this hidden force(Zizhu Chen,2015). The focus of this narrative mode is to weaken the audience's judgment of the truth and intensify the people's dissatisfaction with the government. The elements in the incident that have not yet been officially confirmed are deliberately enlarged, stigmatized, and conspired through the use of many micro-narratives, multiple narratives, and fragmented narratives. It not only has a certain topicality but also achieves its primary purpose. After being widely spread on social platforms, this unified narrative mode of conspiracy theory



determines the public's awareness of real events, and then forms a public opinion storm, which traps the public in a certain negative and pessimistic mood.

4. Have a solid audience

In addition to conspiracy theory refers to unprovoked speculation about the occurrence of social events, it is also a cognitive method. This way of cognition always assumes that a major social event must have been carefully planned by some organization or interest group, and even extreme belief that there is a certain conspiracy behind every circumstance in life. In global history, various versions of conspiracy theories appeared on the Internet every time a significant event occurred. For example, the "Malaysian Airlines Lost Connection Incident" is considered to be the United States deliberately hiding its aircraft on an island to threaten China. With the increasing number of such particular and bizarre events in society and the rising cognitive imbalance in people's media-biased contexts, when there is a lack of official truth, the number of people who hold "conspiracy theories" will also increase. At the same time, the emergence of conspiracy theories not only satisfies people's need for "truth," but it also enables people to achieve a certain resonance in the process of dissemination and discussion and becomes an "emotional bond" that promotes the formation of groups. On the current Internet, we can also find many conspiracy theory websites. Many active people on these sites strongly show that conspiracy theory, a pseudo-scientific cognitive method, still has a solid market.

(2) The formation mechanism of the emergence and existence of conspiracy theories

1. The context of the conspiracy theory: the occurrence of major public emergencies

In major public crises, the audience may lack information and cannot quickly understand the truth due to the suddenness and complexity of the incident. In this case, conspiracy theories have an "opportunity." Its appearance satisfies people's expectations of the truth while simplifying complex events, creating the illusion that the truth can be known without analysis. Therefore, the emergence of conspiracy theories is often based on major public emergencies. It has a specific factual basis, and the two are mutual inducements. From the perspective of social semiotics, major public crises provide a concrete context for conspiracy theories and establish their basic viewpoint framework and emotional orientation.

2. The group motivation for conspiracy theories to be believed: people's "spiritual needs."

In psychology, there is a view called "simplicity preference," which means that in our "subconscious," we always use more straightforward concepts to construct our knowledge system and understanding of the world. The emergence of conspiracy theories rudely simplified complex



events, satisfying our "simplicity preference." At the same time, in sudden public incidents, people tend to have many negative emotions, such as fear of the direction and outcome of the incident and distrust of the official government. The emergence of conspiracy theories has just found an outlet for people's emotional catharsis while also greatly dispelling people's fear of the unknown. In addition, according to the characteristic that conspiracy theories are generally mysterious, their appearance also gives people sufficient mental stimulation and satisfies people's curiosity.

3. Intermediary for the spread of conspiracy theories: the rise and use of social platforms

With the acceleration of the Internet age, everyone has become a receiver and disseminator of information. Judging from the possibilities provided by technology, people have reached an unprecedented level of connection. However, the technical opportunity does not mean that people break the existing divisions of social class, values, standpoints, and culture. When people construct their social networks, although the scale of the network will increase significantly relative to the social circle, in reality, the heterogeneity may not increase correspondingly. Even if it is heterogeneous at first, the concept of "delete friends" is caused by disagreement. "It will also gradually make the circle of friends of many people return to homogeneity. Homogeneous social information sources will not necessarily expand people's horizons but will further narrow people's horizons, positions, and opinions, and people's preferences for informed choices will be strengthened (Lan Peng,2020). Therefore, during the epidemic, we have seen reposting articles from CCTV News and People's Daily in our circle of friends and reposting "conspiracy theories" about the new crown epidemic. In everyone's social space, personal preference for information prompts their views to form a collection.

Therefore, as many "conspiracy theories" are widely spread on social platforms, the entire public opinion environment has become challenging to distinguish between true and false. It is difficult for people to make correct value judgments and value choices. Some audiences will accept the views of conspiracy theories. Then driven by the convenient function of one-click forwarding on social platforms and the "superiority" psychology of knowing the truth, conspiracy theories are forwarded to a large field of public opinion by individuals, arousing more people's attention and secondary dissemination. People cannot extricate themselves from being immersed in it.

Part 3: Clarification of conspiracy theories

Although the content of different conspiracy theories in Covid-19 is different and the subjects involved are also other, they all negatively impact the public opinion environment and sentiment. Stifling conspiracy theories from their roots and restoring people's confidence in the government is vital in managing the epidemic. This article is based on the "relevant responses, investigations and rebuttals" of the 14 conspiracy theories listed in the special report "Conspiracy Theories of COVID-



19". It can summarize the effective clarification methods of conspiracy theories into four major areas.

(1) The media reports the truth on time and firmly grasps the initiative in setting the agenda

Looking back at the SARS period, China's mainstream media adopted blocking news and downplaying the treatment, which damaged the government's credibility and significantly reduced the audience's goodwill and trust in the media. Conspiracy theories affected regular social order during the outbreak. , Also planted the seeds for conspiracy theories in subsequent public emergencies.

With the rapid development of new media and self-media, everyone has become a receiver and publisher of information. In the face of public health emergencies, there is no circumstance for avoiding or blocking them. The mainstream media must ensure the public's right to know(Liang Zhu,2019). Only by disclosing the various data and results of the epidemic can the space for some criminals to create conspiracy theories can be effectively cut off. This is the fundamental prerequisite for preventing the emergence of conspiracy theories.

When it is impossible to prevent conspiracy theories from appearing at the source, timely dredging and rebuttal are effective means to control their widespread spread. Regarding conspiracy theories that appear on the Internet, the media should report scientifically, truthfully, and accurately within the shortest time possible, restore the truth of the incident, and overthrow the viewpoints supported by the conspiracy theories. For example, in response to the "Theory that Wuhan Virus Laboratory Makes and Leaks Viruses," Caixin interviewed Shi Zhengli, director of the Wuhan Institute of Virology, for the first time released an exclusive report on February 5. Respond to public opinion concerns from an official perspective and clarify the truth. On February 27, Caixin relaunched a report. Interviews with experts from Columbia University once again proved that the new crown virus is not man-made and responded to public concerns.

(2) Official agencies issue statements through the media to establish authority and credibility

In this Covid-19, many conspiracy theories involve different countries and regions due to the scope of the epidemic spreading to the world. Affected by the international relations between China and the United States, the debate on "Which is the origin of the virus in China and the United States" has the most significant impact and has also derived various versions of conspiracy theories.

In the face of such conspiracy theories that may have a complex impact on the international community, news reports alone are no longer enough to eliminate the discordant voices it brings. Therefore, national government departments need to respond from the diplomatic level. Many



countries pointed to China as the source of the virus on various occasions. In this regard, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson made it clear that this accusation was baseless in an interview with the media.

Therefore, in the face of conspiracy theories involving state relations, the government should respond promptly to eliminate the influence of conspiracy theories on the image of the country and promote global cooperation to fight the epidemic.

(3) The voice of opinion leaders affects the audience's value judgment

As the secondary relationship between the source of information and the public, opinion leaders play an essential role in communication. In the era of new media empowerment, prominent features such as opinion leaders' popularity, affinity, and persuasiveness have enabled them to achieve an idolized identity. The social capital and symbolic capital of network opinion leaders have been enhanced and gained the dominant power leaders(Qi Cai, Huidan Cao, 2014). "Opinion leaders" rely on their advantages in speaking rights to intervene in public opinion's impact on reality directly.

The covid-19 has been another major public health emergency in my country since SARS. In such incidents, experts and scholars in virus research and medical health have become "opinion leaders" that people consciously believe. The views and words conveyed by these "opinion leaders" will directly affect the people's judgment and behavioral choices about the epidemic situation. In "The Theory of American Genetic Weapons," the Chinese civil-military website Xilu.com published an article that the virus was artificially synthesized by the United States and "can accurately attack Chinese." And those who hold this view think that the United States took advantage of the 7th World Military Games to launch the virus. In this event, American athletes won 0 gold medals and were accused of being "absent-minded," thus concluding that the US military athletes were US military biochemical soldiers. . This view quickly triggered panic on the Internet and unprovoked speculation about the relationship between the two countries.

In response to this voice, Zhang Wenhong, director of the Department of Infectious Diseases, Huashan Hospital, affiliated with Fudan University, said in an interview with the media that only Wuhan had the first outbreak in China. If it is spread from a foreign country to China, it should be the disease simultaneously in several Chinese cities, and there is no chronological order. He also said that the source of the virus is a sensitive issue, but there must be "conclusive evidence."

In this epidemic, in addition to conspiracy theories, there are rumors such as "a drug can treat the new type of coronavirus pneumonia." Experts and scholars will come forward whenever there are rumors to dispel the words and use scientific knowledge to solve the audience's doubts. According to data, during the epidemic, the number of users interested in medical treatment on Weibo increased by about 60 million, reaching nearly 16 times in the same period last year. Many



doctors and scholars with professional qualifications entered Weibo to share their professional knowledge and strengthen the confidence of the audience in epidemic prevention. It can be seen that the utterances of "opinion leaders" have a significant effect on conspiracy theories and rumors.

(4)Supplemented by necessary administrative means and exposed through the media

In the governance of conspiracy theories, through the three methods mentioned above and the intermediary role of the media and social platforms, a "public opinion intervention chain" of "news—reports-government—responses-comments by opinion leaders" has been initially formed. But from the perspective of network governance, raising the handling of conspiracy theories to the legal level is also a necessary auxiliary method. In recent years, China has successively promulgated "Internet News Information Service Management Regulations" and other laws and regulations related to cyberspace. Whether it is to create rumors on the Internet or spread rumors, you must bear corresponding legal responsibilities. This tells us that the Internet is not a place outside the law, and conspiracy theories will not survive long in cyberspace.

At the same time, the punishment of those who publish conspiracy theories can be appropriately exposed through the media, which will serve as a warning and deterrent to some criminals and enhance people's awareness of the rule of law.

Part 4: Concluding remarks

Conspiracy theories, a kind of "discourse system" that is becoming increasingly popular today, have brought harm that cannot be ignored to the regular social public opinion order and the cyberspace environment. Every conspiracy theory arises from the occurrence of a major public emergency. The public has a sense of unknown and fear due to the lack of understanding of the truth. At the same time, coupled with the lag of official information, conspiracy theories that attribute all the truth to conspiracies and mysterious forces are easily believed by the public to make up for the "blank" of the lack of information in the heart. In addition, under the intermediary effect of social platforms, conspiracy theories have quickly spread, thus forming a powerful public opinion force.

This article is based on the Chinese Wikipedia "Conspiracy Theories of COVID-19" analysis and found that the fourteen conspiracy theories that emerged in this epidemic are primarily affected by political factors and international relations. They all occurred during the rising period of the epidemic. When facing future conspiracy theories in public emergencies, we should give full play to the role of the media in disseminating information and guiding public opinion, reporting the truth, and issuing official statements and comments from opinion leaders. At the same time, exposing the results of administrative punishments for spreaders of conspiracy theories played a specific role as a warning.



Conspiracy theory views will continue to exist and spread in society due to their internal stable narrative framework and characteristics and the continuous stimulation of diversified events in the external world. The ethical issues of applying conspiracy theories during the epidemic need to be further studied by scholars so that we have a more precise and comprehensive understanding of conspiracy theories.

Related articles

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