Evaluating Conspiracy Claims as Public Sphere Communication

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Abstract: Conspiracy theories have become a ubiquitous feature of contemporary culture. From a communication studies perspective, conspiracy theories undermine democratic communication by misleading the public. However, the normative concept of a democratic public sphere also upholds the values of giving visibility to diverse perspectives and facilitating reasoned debate. Thus, academics can acknowledge the harms of conspiracy claims while being open, in principle, to their potential contribution to public debate. The challenge, of course, is to evaluate the public sphere implications of conspiracy claims; implications that may be difficult to ascertain and may change over time as new evidence emerges. This position is elucidated through an analysis of the conspiracy claims found in mainstream and alternative media coverage of the Syrian conflict. Much of the debate centres on ideas about the trustworthiness and impartiality of journalists and experts whereby efforts to establish the facts are superseded by received ideas about the credibility of sources. Ultimately, the Syrian conflict indicates that conspiracy claims can be valuable for the public sphere provided there are impartial actors willing to investigate conspiracy claims and provide clarification to the public.

Keywords: conspiracy theories, public sphere, digital media, Syrian War,

Introduction

Aided by digital media, conspiracy theories have become a ubiquitous feature of contemporary culture. Popular conspiracy theories assert that commercial aircraft spread chemical agents to control the weather; that a Jewish elite is intent on displacing Europe's white populations; and that medical cures are suppressed by the pharmaceutical industry. More recently, the Covid-19 pandemic brought an onslaught of conflicting reports, hoaxes, and conspiracy theories. The World Health Organisation (WHO) called it an 'infodemic': an overabundance of accurate and inaccurate claims that left many people confused about what to believe. Scholarly interest in 'conspiracy culture' (Auspers 2012; Byford 2011) is now heighted by wider concerns about the post-truth era of political debate (Bennett and Livingston 2018; Lewandowsky, Ecker, and Cook 2017) and the online spread of

disinformation (Wardle and Derakhshan 2017). Unsurprisingly, a sense of crisis has become entrenched among policymakers, scholars, technologists, and others (see Farkas and Schou 2019).

Within communication studies, conspiracy theories are frequently discussed in conjunction with other digital media phenomena such as 'fake news', hate speech, and ideological polarisation. Given the corrosive impact of these phenomena on democratic societies, conspiracy theories are often characterized for their negative impact on the public good. Put simply, conspiracy theories are considered harmful because they mislead the public and thereby undermine public communication and democracy. In contrast, some philosophers argue that conspiracy theories may be beneficial for holding authorities accountable (Dentith 2016) and, as such, may be recognised as an essential component of democratic discourse (Moore 2016). Applying this view to the Syrian conflict, this article examines how conspiracy claims intersect with contemporary media practices.

Communication studies has much to offer for conspiracy theory researchers. After all, contemporary conspiracy theories typically develop and gain support through digital media. Moreover, the discipline has been challenged to develop new concepts and methods to address a rapidly changing communication environment in which digital technologies have destabilized the authority of experts, the status of truth, and the influence of traditional mass media (Pfetsch 2018). By focusing on the production, distribution, and reception of digital content, communication scholars provide insight into the blurred distinctions between public knowledge and private opinion (Van Zoonan 2012); the bias of digital media production in favour of sensational and extreme content (see Benkler, Faris, and Roberts 2018); and the dynamics that influence the spread of false information (Sharma, Yadav, Yadav, and Ferdinand, 2017; Vosoughi, Roy, and Aral, 2018).

The above research areas are important for contextualizing the visibility of conspiracy theories including the conspiracy claims surrounding the Syrian conflict. They also complicate the means through which public debate occurs. In the mass media era, journalists and mainstream news outlets exercised a near monopoly over the flow of public information. Now, they compete with an array of alternative news outlets including dedicated conspiracy theory outlets as well as new media actors such as those specialising in leaks and whistle-blowing (e.g. Wikileaks) and citizen journalism investigations (e.g. Bellingcat). Each of these actors play a key role in shaping public sphere debates about conspiracy theories.

Although definitions of the public sphere vary, most posit the following normative conditions: that diverse opinions and perspectives are made visible to the public; that disagreements are negotiated through a process of reasoned argumentation; that public debate is free from domination by vested interests; and that there is equal access to participate in public debates (Curran 1996; Dahlberg 2018; Habermas 1974).

There is insufficient scope to examine how conspiracy theories intersect with each of these conditions; not least because there are enormous differences in the plausibility of different conspiracy claims and in the intensity of endorsement among the people who espouse them. The important point is that the articulation of conspiracy claims may sometimes form part of a healthy public debate by raising questions about potential corruption and by exposing those claims to investigation and argument (Dentith 2016; Moore 2016). Crucially, the value for the public sphere is predicated on this openness to evidence and scrutiny and the existence of actors, such as journalists, who will conduct impartial investigations and provide clarity to the public.

The challenge then from a communications perspective is to negotiate the parallel roles conspiracy theories can play in democratic society: they may be harmful in misleading the public or they may be constructive in contributing to public debate. To complicate matters,

these roles may change over time as new evidence emerges. In the case study described below, I analyse claims and counterclaims about the Syrian conflict to demonstrate the shifting contexts of conspiracy claims. Arising from this, I conclude that scholars need not adopt a position on conspiracy claims per se, but on the contribution of those claims to democratic debate. To contextualise this argument, the following section outlines the case for evaluating the plausibility of conspiracy claims and draws on an important distinction between the articulation of conspiracy claims (i.e. making claims for public consideration) and the articulation of conspiracy thinking (i.e. affirming conclusions irrespective of the evidence).

Understanding Conspiracy Claims

Conspiracy theories have been studied from philosophical, psychological, and socio-cultural perspectives. These disciplines provide valuable insights into the phenomenon including philosophical insights into the reasoning errors that typify conspiracy thinking (Cassam 2019; Cohnitz 2017; Denith 2014; Keeley 1999); psychological insights into the cognitive and individual-level factors that influence conspiracy endorsement (Berinksy 2017; Goertzel 1994; Grzesiak- Feldman 2013; Miller, Saunders, and Farhart 2016; Swami et al. 2011; Wood, Douglas, and Sutton 2012); and socio-cultural insights into the role of conspiracy theories as a means of contesting power and fulfilling social and political needs (Auspers 2012; Byford 2011; Fenster 2008; Harambam and Aupers 2017; Van Prooijen 2019; West and Saunders 2003).

There are also notable differences between these approaches. Philosophical and psychological researchers tend to dismiss conspiracy theorists as harmful, irrational actors and rarely investigate the purported evidence put forward in support of conspiracy claims (Leander 2014; Uscinski, Klofstad, and Atkinson 2016). In contrast, socio-cultural approaches are highly attuned to the context of claims, but sometimes appear to idealise the intention behind

4

conspiracy claims. For example, Byford (2011: 3) argues that conspiracy theories are a "means of articulating an opposition to the forces of international capitalism, globalisation, America's military and political supremacy, and the more general rise of a transnational political order". From a public sphere perspective, both approaches may be appropriate depending on the context of individual cases. To evaluate individual cases it is helpful to begin by clarifying the differences between a conspiracy, a conspiracy theory, and conspiracy thinking.

Conspiracy Theory and Conspiracy Thinking: A *conspiracy* concerns "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" (Uscinski, Klofstad, and Atkinson 2016: 58). In other words, a conspiracy is an act that advances the interests of a select group while working against the common good. Such acts are only recognised as conspiracies because they have been exposed. Consequently, it is not controversial to call the Watergate scandal a conspiracy because the facts were verified and exposed by investigative journalists. It follows that there may be many conspiracies which have yet to be exposed.

A *conspiracy theory* presents a causal explanation for events by alleging the existence of a conspiratorial act. For example, some conspiracy theorists conducted investigations to 'prove' that the 9/11 terror attacks were false-flag operations coordinated by the Bush administration. It is possible, however unlikely, that an administration insider might one day come forward with compelling evidence to substantiate this claim. In this scenario, people who had considered the conspiracy theory *plausible* would find their suspicions confirmed. In contrast, those who fully endorsed the conspiracy theory will have gained little because they reached the correct conclusion based on conspiracy thinking rather than evidence. In other words, *conspiracy thinking* assumes a corrupt conclusion without evidence because. As Barkun

5

(2006:4) observes, such thinking is typified by three maxims: nothing happens by accident; nothing is as it seems; and everything is connected.

Applied rigidly, these principles are a recipe for paranoia. Yet, a more relaxed understanding of their application provides a useful heuristic for thinking about the world. After all, it underpins the work of investigative journalism, which is guided by questions such as 'who benefits?' and 'where does the money go?'. Moreover, there are good reasons to suspect that powerful groups - especially political and corporate elites - are acting in ways that are contrary to the common good. Moreover, "the exposure of real conspiracies since the 1970s has strengthened the plausibility of even the most far-fetched theory" (Auspers 2012: 24). Following a succession of major revelations - from the Iran Contra affair in the 1970s to the mass surveillance conducted by the US National Security Agency in the 2000s - it would be extremely naïve for an informed citizen to conclude that powerful actors are not worthy of suspicion. It is in this context that we can begin to assess the endorsement and plausibility of conspiracy claims.

Endorsement of Conspiracy Claims: To advance a more nuanced understanding of conspiracy theories, it is necessary to move past the dismissive characterization of all conspiracy theorists as paranoid extremists. While some certainly merit this description, it does not reflect the diverse nature of conspiracy endorsement. There is an important difference between the "crippled epistemology" (Hardin 2002) of conspiracy thinking and concerned skepticism about the powerful. Consequently, there are many cases in which the boundary between a ('paranoid') conspiracy claim and a ('legitimate') critique is hard to define (Harambam and Aupers 2015; Huneman and Vorms 2018).

A degree of skepticism is generally considered a positive trait for democratic citizens. In fact, teaching scepticism about official narratives and media content is a common feature of

media literacy programmes and academic critiques of power; although this approach is also criticised for leaving students with a simplistic mistrust of elites (see boyd 2017; Van Zoonan 2012). Nevertheless, research has shown that people who espouse conspiracy claims often see themselves as model citizens who are willing to think for themselves rather than blindly accept the authority of experts (Hobson-West 2007; Versteeg, te Molder, and Sneijde 2018). Similarly, Imhoff and Bruder (2014) found that conspiracy thinking is linked to an attitude of prejudice towards the intentions of powerful groups and, in some scenarios at least, a positive desire for social change. As noted, there are many compelling reasons to be suspicious of the powerful and the freedom to ask questions of the powerful is a fundamental condition of a functioning public sphere.

An important, additional consideration is the status of marginalized groups; groups that have been denied access to and equal representation in the democratic public sphere. For example, Washington (2006) forcefully argues that the history of covert, medical experimentation on African Americans makes conspiracy claims about medical-treatments a plausible consideration for that community. As these conspiracy claims are the product of historical corruption, we may recognise them as an imperfect means of challenging authority and highlighting historical injustice. Although the claims are flawed, making them visible in the public sphere and understanding the motives and concerns of their exponents is imperative for a democratic society.

The Plausibility of Conspiracy Claims: If it is accepted that the difference between conspiracy thinking and concerned skepticism is one of degree and that some conspiracy claims may be valuable for democratic debate, then it is necessary to investigate the merits or perceived plausibility of specific conspiracy claims rather than make assumptions about a general category of conspiracy theories. Regarding plausibility, there is clearly a pronounced difference

between the claim that the British royal family are reptilian humanoids (as proposed by David Icke) and the claim that 9/11 was a false-flag operation (as proposed by the 9/11 Truth movement). The former is a peculiar and unreasonable claim because there is no scientific evidence to suggest the possible existence of shape-shifting reptilians. In contrast, the latter is at least physically possible. It is also conceptually plausible insofar as its proponents can cite evidence of historical false-flag operations and construct arguments about motives based on statements by leading Bush administration figures such as references to the potential benefits of a "catastrophic and catalysing event" (PNAC 2000:51).

Some conspiracy claims are absurd because there is overwhelming evidence against them. For example, it is relatively to disprove the theory that the earth is flat (Whittaker 2017). In contrast, conspiracy theories about contemporary events are often much harder to disprove because the facts have not gone through the same, lengthy process of institutional confirmation. Moreover, they concern political truths rather than scientific truths and "political truth is never neutral, objective or absolute" (Coleman 2018: 157). In other words, the conclusions people reach are bound up with ideological assumptions. In these instances, there may be considerable value in opening-up conspiracy claims to public scrutiny and debate.

The question of ideology, rather than facts alone, is central to any conspiracy claims about social or political reality. As Coleman (2018:158) argues, "verifying the status of basic facts is one thing but questions about what facts mean and how they relate to reliable accounts of political reality cannot be reduced to the mechanics of automatic affirmation." Here, it is helpful to consider John Searle's (1995) distinction between institutional facts and brute facts. Brute facts are intrinsic features of physical reality; they exist independent of, and unaltered by, human observation. In contrast, institutional facts are interpretations that rely on social conventions and agreement for their truth-value. A brute fact becomes an institutional fact through language; specifically, the language of those endowed with the power to make

institutional declarations. That is, the bombing of a town remains a brute fact, but the institutional labelling of that fact - as a hoax, a false flag, or a war crime - requires institutional consent. The conspiracy claims and counterclaims surrounding the Syrian conflict concern both brute facts (what happened?) and institutional facts (what does it mean?). Much of the debate centres on ideas about the trustworthiness and impartiality of journalists and experts whereby efforts to establish the facts are superseded by received ideas about the credibility of different sources.

The Syrian Conflict

In 2011, Syria experienced a wave of opposition to the regime of Bashar Assad. The ensuing civil war engaged complicated geopolitical alliances. Put simply, a myriad of opposition groups and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) fought Assad while Kurdish forces, the US, and the Gulf League fought ISIS. Iran and Russia supported the regime while the US threatened to intervene against it. This multi-sided conflict produced heated debates about the legitimacy of all actors; the attribution of responsibility for causalities; and the response of the international community. Of central concern for this article are the disputes surrounding the use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime; specifically, in Ghouta in August 2013, in Khan Sheikhoun in April 2017, and in Douma in 2018.

As foreign journalists were banned from entering Syria, war reporters were heavily dependent on online footage created by Syrian activists (see Andén-Papadopoulos and Pantti, 2013; Sienkiewicz, 2014). Unsurprisingly, this prompted controversy about the transparency and independence of news sources (Mast and Haneggreefs 2015; Sienkiewicz 2014; Smit, Heinrich, and Broersma 2015). Veteran correspondents including Patrick Cockburn (2017) have suggested that Western news organisations "almost entirely outsourced their coverage to the rebel side". Cockburn is careful to note that this "doesn't necessarily mean that the reports

in the press about the devastating effects of shelling and bombing were untrue". The core issue is about the lack of standards for investigative reporting. Meanwhile, in the British press, critics of the official Western narrative were frequently dismissed as conspiracy theorists and stooges for Russian propaganda (Hammond, Al Nahed, & McCormack 2019).

Many of these critics argued that Western media outlets appeared to be facilitating regime-change propaganda akin to the media coverage prior to the 2003 Iraq invasion. Proponents of this view included British journalism professor Piers Robinson who co-founded the Working Group on Syria, Propaganda and Media to investigate media coverage. Operating from a very different ideological perspective, Russian propagandists, pro-Assad activists, and far-right populists also questioned the authenticity of Western media coverage (Flaherty and Roselle 2018; Starbird, Arif, and Wilson 2018). The Russian state-funded broadcaster RT advanced conspiratorial claims to legitimize Russia's foreign policies while delegitimizing the policies of the US (Yablokov 2015). Of course, there were also dubious accounts opposed to the Assad regime; a blogger posing as a 'Gay Girl in Damascus' received considered attention from Western media, but was untimely unveiled as a 40-year-old American man living in the UK (BBC 2011). It is against this backdrop that various kinds of expert questioned the visual evidence purporting to show the use of chemical weapons in Syria.

Social media evidence: On 21 August 2013, the Syrian opposition accused the regime of using sarin gas in an attack on Eastern Ghouta, a suburb of Damascus. The US and many of its allies blamed Assad while Assad and Russia accused the opposition of staging the attack to draw international condemnation and US intervention. Significantly, in 2012 US president Barack Obama had opaquely threatened to intervene if the regime crossed the 'red-line' by using chemical weapons. Thus, prior to any detailed analysis of the evidence, the issue of plausibility was the subject of much speculation among international relations experts and media

commentators more generally: was it plausible that Assad would risk US intervention and was it plausible that the opposition would try to provoke intervention?

The only evidence for the use of chemical weapons emerged from Syrian civilians and activists. This shocking footage depicted civilians struggling to breathe amid a sea of dead bodies. However, Russian authorities initially maintained that evidence for the attack was fabricated. To support this view, they cited an analysis by Agnes Mariam de la Croix, a Christian nun based in Syria. De la Croix argued that the victims were merely posing, but was later discredited for misunderstanding YouTube timestamps (Leander 2014). One month later, the UN produced a scientific report which concluded that the weapons must have been launched from regime held territory (United Nations 2013). In response, Russia's political leaders no longer questioned whether the attack had occurred, but did question the independence of the report.

Many figures with varying kinds of expertise offered their own analyses of the footage instigating a protracted chain of reports, arguments, and counter-arguments. Efforts to verify and interpret the social media footage was undertaken by scientific, medical, human rights, and international relations experts. Consequently, the nature of expertise, including which field of expertise was most appropriate or most credible, became crucial to the debates (see Leander 2014). Notable here are the contributions of three people who would go on to play prominent roles in coverage of subsequent attacks: Theodore Postol, a professor of science, technology and national security policy at Massachusetts Institute of Technology; Seymour Hersh, an investigative journalist who won a Pulitzer Prize for his exposure of the 1968 Mai Lai massacre; and Elliott Higgins, a widely-praised citizen-journalist and founder of the open-source investigation outlet Bellingcat.

Following an analysis of *YouTube* footage, Postol concluded that the rockets were launched within a three-kilometre range and therefore Assad was unlikely to be responsible for

the attack. Bolstered by his status as an MIT professor and a ballistic missiles expert, Postol's views were reported in the news media including *The New York Times* (Chivers 2013). They were later cited by Hersh (2014) in an article for the *London Review of Books* which proposed that a Syrian jihadi group, aided by Turkey, most likely carried out a false flag attack to draw the US into the conflict. These claims were also reported by *Die Welt*. For his part, Higgins and his collaborators strongly contested these arguments by conducting their own investigations into the social media footage. Higgins demonstrated that the type of munitions used in the Ghouta attack could be seen in videos depicting the Syrian Army and that there was no video evidence of the opposition using these munitions. His views on the matter appeared in *The Guardian*, *The New Yorker*, *The Telegraph*, and *Foreign Policy* magazine.

Thus, in the months following the Ghouta attack, an ordinary citizen with an interest in news from Syria was confronted with contradictory claims from different experts across the news media. They were asked to consider competing theories of plausible motivations and, in reference to social media footage, to evaluate detailed arguments about chemistry, engineering, and the movement of weapons. What's important, however, is that the initial lack of certainty gave way to in-depth investigations into the conspiracy claims and produced compelling evidence to counter those claims.

Moreover, it should be noted that critiques of visual evidence are widespread among media and communication scholars. Chouliaraki (2015: 1326), a leading scholar of conflict and humanitarian media, observes that online footage raises inherent doubts "about the status of death images (are they authentic?), our relationship to them (what should we feel towards them?) and the power relationships within which they are embedded (who dies and how does this matter?)." Similarly, citing controversial footage of an American soldier shooting an Iraqi man, the filmmaker Erroll Morris (2004) argued that images are "physical evidence" which "provide a point around which other pieces of evidence collect. They are part of, but not a

substitute for, an investigation." As such, an evidence-based interrogation of the digital media footage was necessary for a functioning public sphere.

Conspiracy Narratives: By the time of the sarin gas attack on Khan Sheikhoun in April 2017, the same debates were more clearly inflected with conspiracy theories and two entrenched camps of media activists. In the four days following the attack, Twitter activity concentrated on two hashtags: #SyrianGasAttack was used by those accepting the view that the regime had used chemical weapons while #SyriaHoax was used by those claiming the attack was another false flag (White 2018). This hoax accusation was now tied to wider set of conspiracy claims concerning the White Helmets and mainstream media manipulation more generally. Starbird et al. (2018) identified a multi-layered "echosystem" that promoted these hoax claims. Pushed by Russian outlets such as *RT* and *SputnikNews*, the hoax claims were taken up and re-packaged by other actors including the conspiracy websites *Infowars* and *21st Century Wire* along with other sources advocating anti-imperialist, libertarian, and far-right views.

Importantly, those advocating the hoax view - including Postol and Hersh - were not necessarily pro-Russian although they were accused of fuelling Russian-back conspiracy theories (e.g. Monbiot 2017; Shachtman and Kennedy 2017). In a report for *Die Welt*, Hersh claimed that the strike on Khan Sheikhoun was the result of a conventional bomb not sarin gas, but his reporting faced criticism for relying on an anonymous US intelligence source (Bloomfield 2017; Massing 2018; Shalom 2017). Although journalists often cite anonymous sources, the practice is considered suspect; especially if the journalist fails to provide additional corroboration for the anonymous source's claims.

Moreover, Hersh's account of Khan Sheikhoun pushed the boundaries of plausibility. As Shalom (2017) explains,

> To accept Hersh's account requires us to believe that Assad and Russia never undertake unnecessary actions, that every respected NGO has compromised itself on behalf of Trump, that the UN and France are in Washington's pocket, that the [Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons] produces bogus reports, … and that even though many members of the military and the intelligence community are furious that Trump rejected and falsified evidence, Hersh could find no one willing to speak on the record (Shalom 2017).

As articulated by Shalom (2017), Hersh's reporting now typified conspiracy thinking insofar as it manifested "the unnecessary assumption of conspiracy when other explanations are more probable" (Aaronovitch 2009: 5). Hersh's motives and credibility were now exposed to scrutiny by his peers. Journalist Steve Bloomfield (2017) observed that "after decades of exposing lies told by the American government" Hersh appeared to operate on the assumption that his government is always lying. This allows him "to jump from the fact that America has denounced an atrocity to suspecting that it never happened" (ibid).

Postol, the MIT professor, also accused the US administration of relying on false information to justify airstrikes on Syria. Meanwhile, a source Postol had used for his Ghouta investigation had risen in prominence on social media, prompting some journalists to investigate her credibility and, by association, Postol's. The Syrian-Australian blogger Maram Susli (also known as Syrian Girl and Partisan Girl) advocated a pro-regime stance on Syria and endorsed conspiracy theories about 9/11 Truth, the Holocaust, and the New World Order (Mobiot 2017; Shachtman and Kennedy 2017). She became a regular Infowars contributor and appeared on far-right media with white supremacists including the leader of the Ku Klux Klan (ibid). With mounting reasons to suspect the claims and ideological motivations of Hersh and Postol, the public value of reporting their views without qualification diminished.

However, questions about the responsibility for the Khan Sheikoun attack, and the legitimacy of the US airstrikes, remained open in the news media. *Deutsche Welle* (Schultz

2017) reported division among EU leaders and noted the hesitation of Hans Blix, the UN Weapons inspector best known for his opposition to the US case for the invasion of Iraq. The article quoted Blix's unease with the lack of evidence: the "pictures of victims that were held up, that the whole world can see with horror, such pictures are not necessarily evidence of who did it" (ibid.). Where Blix merely expressed caution, others proffered alternative explanations. On the BBC's flagship current affairs programme, a former British ambassador to Syria speculated that the Khan Sheikhoun attack was the result of a conventional airstrike hitting a jihadi arms dump (BBC Radio 4 2017). Months later, *Newsweek* reported that US Secretary of Defence James Mattis admitted to a lack of evidence regarding the use of sarin gas by the Syrian regime (Wilkie 2018). In response, investigative journalists at Bellingcat continued to debunk these claims with counter evidence.

Leaked evidence: This pattern of claims and counterclaims continued to animate subsequent attacks including the chemical weapons attack on Douma on 07 April 2018. Russian media outlets again claimed the attack was a "false flag" operation. Six days later, prior to any official investigation, President Trump ordered a missile strike on a research centre and weapons facility in Syria. The Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) published its final report in March 2019 noting "reasonable grounds" that "the use of a toxic chemical had taken place"[1]. However, the credibility of this report has been subject to much speculation including criticisms leveled by experts working for the OPCW.

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[1] https://www.opcw.org/media-centre/news/2019/03/opcw-issues-fact-finding-mission-report-chemical-weapons-use-allegation

Ian Henderson, an OPCW ballistics inspector, claimed his views were excluded from the OPCW's final report. He argued that there was insufficient evidence to conclude that the missiles were dropped from aircraft, which opened the possibility that a source other than the Assad regime placed them there. His views were reported by a British columnist for the *Mail on Sunday* (Hitchen 2019).

Later in 2019, a second whistle-blower known as 'Alex' claimed that the OPCW had doctored its report to implicate Assad while also suppressing dissenting voices within the organisation. WikiLeaks published internal OPCW files to support this claim. Commenting on these revelations, journalist Robert Fiske (2020) noted that: "to the delight of the Russians and the despair of its supporters, an organisation whose prestige alone should frighten any potential war criminals is scarcely bothering to confront its own detractors".

While the integrity of the OPCW and its conclusions are now open to serious question, there is also no evidence to support the conspiracy theory explanation that Douma and the preceding attacks were the result of a 'managed massacre' and 'crisis actors'. Writing in 2018, the Working Group on Syria, Propaganda and Media already concluded that "observations favour a managed massacre rather than a chemical attack as the explanation for the Douma incident" (McKeigue 2018). The whistle-blowers revelations may provide ammunition for this view, but they do little to prove it.

Discussion and conclusion

The Syrian conflict has unfolded with pronounced epistemological uncertainty and against a backdrop of concerns about the intentions of states and the justification for international intervention. Recalling Searle's distinction between brute and institutional facts, the Syrian conflict was complicated by two key factors: evidence for the brute facts largely consisted of

digital media footage rather than on-the-ground verification and there was frequent hesitation within the international community regarding the designation of institutional facts. In this context, it is unsurprising that conspiracy claims played a prominent role in media coverage. Ultimately, exposing these claims and counterclaims to public scrutiny was valuable for the public sphere as it revealed the ideological dynamics influencing public perceptions of the conflict.

Viewed in their original context, the 2013 claims by Postol and Hersh merited public visibility. At this point, there was a fine line between conspiracy claims questioning the authenticity of official narratives and the journalistic imperative to also question official narratives. Moreover, their claims were not absurd insofar as they rested on plausible, and widely discussed, arguments about motive. In addition, Postol and Hersh put forward claims that could be subjected to verification and investigation. As such, their contributions stand in contrast to more obvious efforts to mislead the public by the Russian state, professional conspiracy theorists, and far-right activists.

Investigative journalists exposed Postol's and Hersh's claims to intense scrutiny. In the process, these journalists introduced a greater degree of certainty to the public debate about the conflict and overtime this certainty diminished the value of giving visibility to conspiracy claims. Consequently, the claims of Postol and Hersh in 2017, whatever their ideological motives, were more clearly equivalent to efforts to misinform the public. In retrospect, we may reevaluate their 2013 claims in light of this new information, but this does not detract from the value of debating and investigating those claims at the time. In effect, the debate that occurred across the news media typified a functioning public sphere: plausible conspiracy claims gained visibility through the news media, were subjected to scrutiny, and ultimately contested with evidence. Similarly, current claims about the integrity of the OPCW merit further investigation without the accusation that those who do so are conspiracy theorists.

It is impossible to consider the value of conspiracy claims for the public sphere without the role of investigative journalism to interrogate those claims. The disputed claims at the center of the Syria case presented complex arguments about ballistics and chemical residue; matters which are far beyond the expertise of most members of the public including academics such as the author of this paper. We may assume that most members of the public had neither the time nor the ability to evaluate these claims and, consequently, were likely to rely on received ideas about the trustworthiness of those putting forward the claims. The role of experts is notable feature of the case. Barkun (2006: 26) has argued that conspiracy theories are a form of "stigmatised knowledge" that is marginalized by the "institutions that conventionally distinguish between knowledge and error – universities, communities of scientific researchers, and the like" (ibid). In this case, however, academic experts such as Postol and Piers Robinson and high-profile investigative journalists such as Seymour Hersh were key exponents of conspiracy claims. This underscores the importance of journalists willing to interrogate claims and provide clarification to the public.

From a communication studies perspective, this paper has argued that conspiracy theorists can play a dual role within the democratic public sphere: they are potentially harmful in misleading the public and they are potentially constructive in advancing reasoned debate about important issues of the day. On this basis, I argue that academics do not have to adopt a position on conspiracy theories, but on the value of debating those theories in the public sphere. However, this is not an easy task as it is often difficult to ascertain the merits of different claims and the value of claims may change over time as new evidence emerges. Being open to the possible value of conspiracy theories is also difficult given what we know about the prevalence of disinformation campaigns, hate speech, and ideological polarization on social media.

However, being open to conspiracy claims is a long way from endorsing those claims and it does not preclude harsh critiques of the evidence put forward by conspiracy theorists upon whom the burden of proof is a heavy weight. Moreover, we may make distinctions between the plausibility of different claims and the credibility of their exponents in order to assess their potential relevance for the public sphere. Crucially, we must also consider the robustness of the news media in its ability to respond to conspiracy claims and to investigate the evidence. While journalists played a key role in interrogating claims about Syria, there is no guarantee that this will always be the case. Consequently, the position I advocate on conspiracy theories is highly relative to wider conditions in the media environment and may become untenable if those conditions no longer support robust interrogations of conspiracy claims.

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