Conspiracy Theories about Conflict

Challenges for Academic Research

Dr Eileen Culloty

DCU | Institute of Future Media & Journalism

Conspiracy Claims about the Syrian Conflict

Was Syria chemical attack a HOAX? Shock theory claims Assad DID NOT gas his own people Daily Star, UK

Ron Paul: 'Zero chance' Assad is behind the 'false flag' chemical attack in Syria

EXPOSED: The White Helmets – AlQaeda with US funding

White Helmets 'staging fake attacks' in Syria? We sort fact from fiction

The Dirty War on Syria: Professor Anderson Reveals the "Unspoken Truth"

Evaluating Conspiracy Claims

No agreed typology for understanding different conspiracy claims (Douglas et al. 2019)

How plausible is the claim?

What is the knowledge base for countering the claim?

Many claims are inherently subjective: e.g. "political truth is never neutral, objective or absolute" (Coleman 2018)

Debunking Conspiracy Claims

Is debunking effective?

Effects may be short-term (Kuklinski et al. 2000)

Perceptions of source credibility (Nyhan, Reifler, & Ubel 2013)

Levels of concern about the issue (Nyhan & Reifler 2015).

Facts can be debunked, but are facts the issue?

Intuitive thinking styles (Pennycook & Rand 2017; Wineburg & McGrew 2017)

Low cognitive ability (De keersmaecker & Roets 2017; Fiedler 2018)

Motivated reasoning (Lewandowsky et al. 2012; Flynn, Nyhan, and Reifler 2017)

Epistemic, existential, and social needs (Douglas et al. 2019)

Debunking Conspiracy Claims

Those who question the trustworthiness of experts and take personal responsibility for investigating the issues have a positive understanding of their actions (Hobson-West 2007; Versteeg, te Molder, and Sneijde 2018).

They see themselves as goodcitizens who take the time to investigate issues, citizens who are willing to think for themselves rather than blindly accept the supposed authority of experts.

The Digital Context of Conspiracy Culture

21st Century "conspiracy culture" (Aupers 2012; Barkun 2006; Bratich 2008)

Democratised access to content production and distribution (Jenkins et al. 2016)

People often fail to recognise content sources on social media (Newman et al. 2017)

People have limited news and information literacy (Newman et al. 2018)

Social platforms amplify sensational content (Sharma et al. 2017; Vosoughi et al 2018)

The Online Dissemination of False Claims

Push Strategies

Receptive Audiences

Trend Velocity

Content is pushed out and amplified by disinformation actors.

Key Issues
Automated Bots
Troll Farms

People share content that triggers cognitive and emotional reactions.

Key Issues
Human Biases
Network Biases

Aided by media influencers, content propagates naturally within the network

Key Issues
Appropriate Detection
Appropriate Intervention

Academic Public Engagement

Large gaps between scientists and the general public (Funk & Goo 2015)

 Evolution accepted by 87% of scientists but only 32% of public

 Safety of GM food accepted by 88% of scientists but only 37% of public

Academia has wrestled with it's own 'post-truth' problem

 In Defence of Objectivity (Collier 2004)

 In Defence of the Enlightenment (Torodov 2006)

Academia has been transformed through marketisation

 Pressure on traditional values and practices (Henkel 1997; Marginson 2000)

 Many academics work in precarious conditions in which public engagement is not rewarded (Allmer 2018)

Conclusion

Debunking addresses instances of conspiracy culture, but not the underlying issues

Academic interventions may be more useful targeted at broader issues:
- Public understanding of science
- Critical literacy
- Information literacy
- Regulation/standards for digital media

Provenance