CREST Centre for Research and Evidence on Security Threats

Why do people adopt conspiracy theories, how are they communicated, and what are their risks?

Perspectives from psychology, information engineering, political science, and sociology.

FULL REPORT

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Karen Douglas, Robbie Sutton, Aleksandra Cichocka, Jim Ang, Farzin Deravi, Joseph Uscinski and Turkay Nefes

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This report provides a comprehensive and interdisciplinary review of the existing conspiracy theory research. It focuses on three specific areas. First, it covers the psychological, political and social factors associated with heightened belief in conspiracy theories. That is, what factors predict conspiracy belief? Second, it explores the ways in which conspiracy theories travel across interpersonal relations, through traditional and new media, and on social media. That is, when, how, and why are conspiracy theories communicated? Third, the report considers the risks and rewards associated with conspiracy theories in areas such as politics and science. More information about the project can be found at: https://crestresearch.ac.uk/projects/conspiracy-theories/

About CREST
The Centre for Research and Evidence on Security Threats (CREST) is a national hub for understanding, countering and mitigating security threats. It is an independent centre, commissioned by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and funded in part by the UK security and intelligence agencies (ESRC Award: ES/N009614/1).
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INTRODUCTION

Conspiracy theories are more than just conversations in the local pub about who might have killed Princess Diana, or whether 9/11 was an inside job. In recent years, conspiracy theories have been tied to extremism, radical politics, and terrorism. Conspiracy theories have also driven people to eschew mainstream science and medicine, putting both the environment and society's health at risk. Conspiracy theories have also been closely linked to prejudice and racial violence. Historically and across the globe, conspiracy theories have played prominent roles in witch-hunts, revolutions, and genocide.

In this report, we focus on the social and political factors that trigger belief in conspiracy theories, how conspiracy theories are communicated, and what kind of risks they may entail. We present a uniquely interdisciplinary perspective on these issues.

First, we explore the extant literature addressing belief in conspiracy theories, focusing on the psychological, political and social factors that correlate with heightened belief. That is, *what factors predict conspiracy belief?*

Second, we examine the ways in which conspiracy theories travel across interpersonal relations, through traditional and new media, and on social media. That is, *when are conspiracy theories communicated, through what means and in what forms, and what are the motives for these communications?*

Third, we consider the risks and rewards associated with conspiracy theories. In other words, *what is the relationship between conspiracy theories and prejudice, the rejection of science and medicine, and radicalisation and extremism? How do conspiracy theories contribute to these and other social ills?* To buttress this discussion, we assess the opposite side of the ledger and denote the benefits gained from conspiracy theories and for the people who believe them.

1. DEFINITIONS AND MEASUREMENT

Before we begin our review of the literature, it is prudent to define our terminology. Given that terms like *conspiracy* and *conspiracy theory* are sometimes used as pejoratives, and can evoke strong emotional responses (Husting & Orr, 2007), we intend our terminology in the most neutral way and without a loaded connotation. Also, because *conspiracy theory* and its variants are commonly used, their definitions vary widely across usage. This has led to controversies about the term's use, its definition, and its origins. To name but two examples, some argue that the term *conspiracy theory* was created by the CIA to discredit JFK assassination conspiracy theories (meaning the term itself is part of a conspiracy to cover up crimes); others suggest that alternative terms should be used, such as *state crimes against democracy* (or *SCADs*) (deHaven-Smith, 2006, 2010, 2013).

We define the term *conspiracy* as a secret arrangement between two or more powerful actors to usurp political or economic power, violate established rights or agreements, hoard vital secrets, or unlawfully alter government or other institutions (Keeley 1999; Pigden, 1995; Uscinski & Parent, 2014). Conspiracies, such as Watergate and Iran-Contra do happen, but because of the difficulties inherent in executing plans and keeping quiet, they tend to fail (Dai & Handley-Schachler, 2015; Grimes, 2016; Keeley, 1999; Popper, 1972). The doping scandal currently surrounding the Russian Olympic and other competitive sports teams is a recent example. When conspiracies fail (or are otherwise exposed), the appropriate experts deem them as having actually occurred (Levy, 2007).

Having defined *conspiracy,* we next define the term *conspiracy theory* as an attempt to explain the ultimate causes of significant social and political events as secret plots by two or more powerful actors rather than as overt activities or natural occurrences (Aaronovitch, 2010; Byford, 2011; Coady, 2003; Douglas & Sutton, 2008; Keeley, 1999; McCauley & Jacques, 1979; Nefes, 2015; Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009). The conspirators could be foreign or domestic governments, non-governmental actors, corporations or other economic institutions,

scientists, religious and fraternal organisations, or any other group perceived as powerful and malevolent. Indeed, conspiracy theories have been characterised as political narratives that describe power relations as being secretly manipulated by influential actors (Nefes, forthcoming). Popular conspiracy theories suppose that the 9/11 attacks on the New York Twin Towers were an 'inside job' and that climate change is a hoax orchestrated by scientists to secure research funding. Other conspiracy theories propose that Jewish people control world banking and political affairs, and that the European Union is a conspiracy to deprive nation states of their power.

So, while a *conspiracy* refers to a true causal chain of actions and events, a *conspiracy theory* refers to an accusatory perception that may or may not be true. Telling the difference is sometimes difficult, and epistemologists have yet to settle on a standard test by which to distinguish them (Buenting & Taylor, 2010; Clarke, 2002, 2006, 2007; Coady, 2003, 2006; Keeley, 1999, 2003; Shermer, 2010; Uscinski & Parent, 2014).

Another term we will use throughout this report - *conspiracy belief* - refers to a person's belief in a *specific* conspiracy theory, or a *specific* set of conspiracy theories. For example, about 60 per cent of Americans continue to believe that the CIA killed President John F. Kennedy. About 20 per cent of Americans believed that Barack Obama is hiding his non-American birth (e.g. Pasek, Stark, Krosnick, & Tompson, 2015), and another 28 per cent believed that the Bush administration lied about the destruction of the Twin Towers (Angus Reid, 2006). In the run up to the 2016 European Union membership referendum in the UK, about 46 per cent of those intending to vote leave believed that the vote would be tampered with (YouGov, 2016). Many of the social scientific studies on conspiracy theories focus on conspiracy beliefs. For example, McCauley and Jacques (1979) examined JFK assassination conspiracy beliefs, Douglas and Sutton (2008) examined conspiracy belief about the death of Princess Diana, and Furnham (2013) examined beliefs in conspiracy theories about big business.

Another suggestion made more recently by scholars is that there may be such a thing as a *conspiracy mindset*. This general idea stems from the most robust finding in the literature to date - that people who already believe in particular conspiracy theories are likely to believe in others. In other words, the most reliable predictor of belief in conspiracy theories is belief in other conspiracy theories. Goertzel (1994) argued that each conspiracy belief adopted by an individual reinforces their other conspiracy beliefs and makes them more receptive to conspiracy theories that they may encounter later. There is not necessarily any underlying belief system involved - it is enough that the conspiracy theories reinforce each other. However, other researchers argue that there may be such an underlying belief system that ties conspiracy beliefs together. This idea follows from the research of Wood, Douglas and Sutton (2012) who showed that people were likely to entertain contradictory conspiracy theories about an event to the extent that they endorsed an underlying belief that something (it is not necessary to know what) is being covered up. That is, another belief underpins both conspiracy beliefs.

It has been argued further (e.g., Imhoff & Bruder, 2014, following Popper, 1996) that a tendency toward conspiracy thinking can also be viewed as a more general political ideology. Other researchers (e.g., Brotherton, French & Pickering, 2013; Imhoff & Bruder, 2014; Lantian, Muller, Nurra & Douglas, 2016) have devised scale measures to capture such a general tendency toward conspiracy thinking rather than referring to specific events such as 9/11 or the death of Princess Diana. The terms that scholars use to refer to a more general conspiracy mindset also include *conspiracist ideation, conspiracy ideology,* and *conspiracy worldview*. People are said to vary on a continuum of a conspiracy mindset (i.e., they are not simply conspiracy-minded or not, but generally somewhere in between).

The core concepts in the study of conspiracy theories are thoughts and beliefs, and this should certainly be the case given that psychologists and public opinion scholars are carrying out much of the current research. The problem is that such thoughts and beliefs are difficult to observe directly. One may believe that some powerful group of actors are plotting against the public, but if that belief were not expressed in some way, it would be socially meaningless. *Conspiracy talk* or *conspiracy discourse* expresses ideas through speaking, writing, or other means and seeks to discuss or spread conspiracy theories. Researchers often measure beliefs and thinking by asking respondents (through surveys) if they believe in particular conspiracy theories or by asking questions that tap into conspiracy worldviews.

Surveys, however, often tap 'non-opinions,' in other words beliefs about a topic that a person has not thought that much about and that may not otherwise ever be expressed.

Another way to assess conspiracy thinking or beliefs is through available public statements. For example, Wood and Douglas (2013) surveyed online comments made by people who both believe and disbelieve conspiracy theories about 9/11, Lewandowsky Oberauer and Gignac (2013) gathered online comments rejecting published scientific research, and Uscinski and Parent (2014) examined letters to the editor of *The New York Times* over a significant time period. Such studies are important because they capture beliefs that are held sincerely and strongly enough to be expressed publicly, and therefore avoid the problem that surveys have of capturing non-opinions.

Finally, a *conspiracy theorist* refers to a person who believes in a particular conspiracy theory or has a strong conspiracy mindset. In the literature the term *conspiracy theorist* sometimes refers to a person who propagates conspiracy theories professionally (e.g., Alex Jones, David Icke) or to people who advocate strongly for a conspiracy theory (e.g., former Florida Atlantic University Professor James Tracy who claims that the 2012 killings at the Sandy Hook elementary school in Connecticut, USA were a hoax, or Piers Corbyn who claims that climate science is a fraud), or to anyone who believes in any conspiracy theory.

Just the labels *conspiracy theorist* and *conspiracy theory* can neutralise and de-legitimise a person or idea by signalling that they are out of the bounds of rationality (Hall 1970). This often leads people to deny that their ideas are conspiracy theories even though they clearly qualify. It has also led most researchers to avoid any reference to the word *conspiracy* or the term *conspiracy theory* in their studies (but see Wood, 2016 who found that people did not believe in ideas less if they were referred to using the term *conspiracy theory*). Their bad reputation also leads conspiracy theories to be sometimes muted, or merely alluded to, in open public discourse. However, some people have less hesitation in expressing conspiracy theories than others. Given the impersonal and sometimes anonymous nature of the Internet, conspiracy talk seems to have found a stronghold online, in anonymous forums, on social media, and on YouTube. The easy availability of conspiracy discourse may lead to downstream negative effects for society, with people acting based upon the ideas they are exposed to (Douglas & Sutton 2015, Jolley & Douglas 2014b, van der Linden 2015). We will cover this research in the third part of this report. For now, we discuss the psychological, social, and political factors that are associated with conspiracy belief.

SECTION SUMMARY

Conspiracy theories attempt to describe significant social and political events as the secret actions of powerful groups. The term conspiracy thinking can be distinguished from other associated terms such as conspiracy and conspiracy thinking. Conspiracy theories can be measured using varied research methods such as surveys, and through the coding of archival data such as online comments.

2. WHY DO PEOPLE ADOPT CONSPIRACY THEORIES? PSYCHOLOGICAL, SOCIOLOGICAL, AND POLITICAL FACTORS

2.1 PSYCHOLOGICAL FACTORS

A large body of research to date has concentrated on the psychological factors that increase the likelihood of a person endorsing a conspiracy theory or theories. In this section, we will draw together research from different disciplines, and research conducted in different regions of the world, in order to understand who might adopt conspiracy theories in specific contexts. Specifically, we demonstrate that conspiracy belief has been associated with a variety of existential needs, personality traits and cognitive attributes. We then discuss conspiracy belief as the product of what is thought of as a conspiracy mindset.

2.1.1 EXISTENTIAL NEEDS

There is a vast amount of evidence that certain existential needs drive people to endorse conspiracy theories as a way to achieve a stable, confident, and accurate understanding of the world. Studies have demonstrated that conspiracy belief is associated with feelings of powerlessness (Abalakina-Paap, Stephan, Craig, & Gregory, 1999; Pratt 2003, Zarefsky 1984), lack of control (Whitson & Galinsky, 2008; Leman 2007), feelings of uncertainty (van Prooijen, 2016; van Prooijen & Jostmann, 2013), and existential anxiety (Newheiser, Farias, & Tausch, 2011). For example, psychologists Whitson and Galinsky (2008) asked participants to recall an incident in which something threatening happened to them. Half of the participants were asked to recall such an incident where they did not have control over the situation and the other half were asked to recall such an incident when they did have control. Afterwards, participants reported the likelihood of perceiving conspiracies in four fictional scenarios in which they could (vs. could not) attribute outcomes to coordinated efforts of a group of individuals. Participants in the low-control condition were more likely to perceive conspiracies than participants in the high-control condition. This indicates that conspiracy theories might help people deal with feelings of low personal control by helping them to identify a meaningful interrelationship among a set of related stimuli. On the other hand, allowing people a sense of control appears to reduce conspiracy belief (van Prooijen & Acker, 2015).

Further research suggests that conspiracy belief might be especially strongly related to lack of socio-political control. For example, psychologists Bruder, Haffke, Neave, Nouripanah, & Imhoff (2013) demonstrated a relationship between what they called conspiracy mentality (i.e., the underpinning conspiracy mindset we referred to earlier), and low feelings of control in the socio-political domain (see also van Prooijen and Acker 2015). Furthermore, research demonstrates that conspiracy beliefs are correlated with alienation from the political system and anomie - a feeling of personal unrest or alienation (e.g., Abalakina-Paap et al., 1999; Bruder et al., 2013; Goertzel, 1994). Conspiracy belief may then allow people to come to terms with their existential problems, enabling them to regain some of the psychological goods that they have lost (Franks, Bangerter & Bauer, 2013). Overall, this literature suggests that conspiracy theories might increase in response to political events and circumstances that make people feel threatened, uncertain and out of control (also see the findings of Uscinski and Parent, 2014 that we will discuss shortly). Indeed social scientists Parsons, Simmons, Shinhoster, Kilburn (1999) have demonstrated that conspiracy beliefs are associated with a belief that the economy is getting worse.

A recent investigation suggests, however, that conspiracy theories may also in some cases buffer people from threats to the social system in which they live. Jolley, Douglas and Sutton (2017) first asked participants to rate the extent to which they agree with a set of common conspiracy theories (e.g., “The British government was involved in the death of Princess Diana”; Douglas & Sutton, 2011), and general notions of conspiracy, like

the idea of a conspiracy mindset (e.g., "The government is involved in the murder of innocent citizens and/or well-known public figures, and keeps this a secret"; Brotherton, French & Pickering, 2013). They were also asked to rate their satisfaction with the status quo using Kay and Jost's (2003) general system justification scale, including items such as "In general, I find society to be fair". Results revealed that both types of conspiracy belief were associated with higher support for the status quo. In other words, the more people believed in both specific and general conspiracy theories, the more satisfied they were with the social status quo.

In the next study, Jolley et al. (2017) exposed participants to either a system threatening narrative (e.g., "*These days, many people feel disappointed with the nation's condition. Many citizens feel that the country has reached a low point in terms of social, economic, and political factors*") or affirming narrative (e.g., "*These days, despite the difficulties the nation is facing, many people feel satisfied with the nation's condition. Many citizens feel that the UK has reached a stable point in terms of social, economic, and political factors*"). Jolley et al. found that participants who had read the system threatening narrative were more likely to endorse conspiracy theories, which provides experimental support for the link between justifying the status and conspiracy belief. In a third study, participants were exposed to conspiracy theories (vs. control) at the same time as the system threat manipulation, and it was found that exposure to conspiracy theories increased satisfaction with the British social system after it had been threatened. In a final study Jolley et al. found that this effect was mediated by the tendency for participants exposed (vs. not exposed) to conspiracy theories to attribute societal problems relatively more strongly to small groups of people than systemic causes. These findings suggest that by blaming tragedies, disasters and social problems on the actions of a malign few, conspiracy theories divert attention from the inherent limitations of social systems.

2.1.2 PERSONALITY TRAITS

Psychologists have linked belief in conspiracy theories with a series of personality traits. For example, conspiracy belief is linked with the need to validate one's image. Specifically, Cichocka, Marchlewska, and Golec de Zavala (2016) demonstrated that the endorsement of conspiracy theories is associated with narcissism – an exaggerated self-view accompanied by the need for external validation (Freud, 1914/2012; Fromm, 1964/2010; Raskin & Terry, 1988). Narcissists believe they are extraordinary but they are also extremely preoccupied with how others perceive them (Horvath & Morf, 2009; Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001). This fosters a tendency to be paranoid - that is to think that others constantly seek to undermine you (Feningstein & Vanable, 1992). General paranoia about others' malicious intentions contributes to the more specific conviction about social and political conspiracies (Brotherton & Eser 2015; Darwin Neave, & Holmes 2011). Indeed, in three studies conducted with American MTurk workers, Cichocka, Marchlewska, and Golec de Zavala (2016) showed a positive association between narcissism and conspiracy belief, and that this effect was driven by increased paranoid tendencies of narcissists.

Beyond this, studies have shown that several other traits correlate with conspiracy belief. These include boredom (Brotherton & Eser, 2015), anxiety (Radnitz & Underwood, 2015; Grzesiak-Feldman 2013), need for cognitive closure (Leman & Cinnirella, 2013), non-clinical delusional thinking (Dagnall, Drinkwater, Parker, Denovan & Parton, 2015), Machiavellianism (Douglas & Sutton, 2011), belief in paranormal and supernatural phenomena (Oliver & Wood, 2014a; Drinkwater, Dagnall & Parker, 2012, Darwin et al., 2011; Bruder et al., 2013), schizotypy (Barron, Morgan, Towell, Altemeyer & Swami, 2014; Darwin et al., 2011, Bruder et al., 2013; van der Tempel & Alcock, 2015; Swami, Pietschnig, Tran, Nader, Stiener & Voracek, 2013), maladaptive personality traits (Swami, Weis, Lay, Barron & Furnham, 2016), and some of the Big Five personality traits (Bruder et al., 2013).

2.1.3 COGNITIVE PROCESSES

People may believe conspiracy theories for *epistemic* reasons, or in other words as a response to the frustration of the need to have a stable, confident, and accurate understanding of the world. This need may be frustrated by factors such as lack of education and access to credible, consistent and comprehensive sources of information (Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009). But conspiracy theories may also take root because of perceptual biases and heuristic forms of thinking that lead to inaccurate inferences from available information. Supporting this idea, conspiracy belief

has been linked to a range of cognitive tendencies.

First, conspiracy belief has been linked to the conjunction fallacy, which is an error of probabilistic reasoning whereby people overestimate the likelihood of co-occurring events. In the classic study of the conjunction fallacy by Tversky & Kahneman (1983), participants were presented with information about a woman called Linda (that she was a bank teller and active feminist). They were then asked to rate the likelihood of the single events occurring, and the likelihood of the conjunction of the two. Participants who rated the conjunction as being more likely than either of the singular statements have committed the fallacy since a conjunction cannot be more probable than one of its constituents. Brotherton and French (2014) conducted two studies with British and other European participants where they tested the association between conspiracy thinking and the number of conjunction violations made in a variety of contexts (neutral, related to paranormal phenomena, or related to conspiracies). In the first study, they found that regardless of the context of the conjunction, people scoring high in conspiracy thinking (measured by the extent to which people believe in real-world conspiracy theories; Douglas & Sutton, 2011), committed more conjunction errors than those who scored lower. The second study showed similar findings with a more general measure of conspiracy thinking that did not refer to real-world events, akin to the conspiracy mentality we have referred to elsewhere (Brotherton et al., 2013).

Other researchers have shown that one's own personal willingness to conspire is associated with conspiracy belief. Douglas and Sutton (2011; Study 2) primed participants with a sense of their own morality by asking them to think and write about a time when they helped someone in a time of need. Participants were then asked to rate their agreement with real-world conspiracy theories (e.g., "The attack on the Twin Towers was not a terrorist action but a governmental conspiracy") and also to rate the extent to which, if they were part of the system responsible for the event, that they too would have conspired (e.g., "If you were in the position of the government, would you have ordered the attack on the Twin Towers?"). The logic is that if people think of themselves are morally upright individuals, they will be less likely to see themselves as the type of person who would conspire, and therefore, by projecting their own morality onto others, would view the conspiracies as less likely. The study supported this hypothesis. The effect of primed morality on belief in conspiracy theories was mediated by personal willingness to conspire. On the flipside therefore, some people may believe that "they conspired" because they think "I would conspire".

Conspiracy belief has been found to be associated with other cognitive biases and tendencies. For example, Swami Voracek, Stieger, Tran and Furnham (2014) found that lower levels of analytic thinking predicted conspiracy belief. Douglas, Sutton, Callan, Dawtry and Harvey (2016) found that hypersensitive agency detection - the tendency to attribute agency and intentionality where it does not (or is unlikely to) exist - predicts conspiracy belief (we will come back to this in a later section; see also Brotherton & French, 2015; van der Tempel & Alcock, 2015). McHoskey (1995) found that conspiracy belief may be in part a product of biased assimilation - accepting information that confirms one's views and scrutinising information that disconfirms one's views. Other cognitive processes linked to conspiracy belief involve a tendency toward accepting epistemically unwarranted beliefs (Lobato, Mendoza, Sims & Chin, 2014), a quasi-religious mentality (Franks, Bangerter and Bauer 2013), lower levels of intelligence (Stieger, Gumhalter, Tran, Voracek & Swami, 2013), perceptual and attentional biases (van Elk, 2015), and belief in the paranormal (Darwin et al., 2011). Finally, related to the idea of biased assimilation, Sunstein and Vermeule (2009) argue that conspiracy thinking is symptomatic of a "crippled epistemology" - i.e., ignoring evidence that challenges one's views and excluding dissenting voices.

We should note that not all studies measuring the link between psychological traits (discussed in the previous section) and conspiracy belief, and also cognitive processes and conspiracy belief, have found significant relationships. For example, Dieguez, Wagner-Egger and Gauvrit (2015) found that people with low priors for randomness did not engage in conspiracy theorising more than those with a higher priors for randomness, meaning that conspiracy theories may not necessarily derive from the cognitive process of seeking simple explanations for a complex world. Further, Oliver and Wood (2014) found that ignorance is not associated with belief in conspiracy theories, meaning that cognitive capacity or intelligence may not necessarily lead to conspiracy theorising. Diverging findings may be due to researchers' use of different conspiracy belief measures, the nature of the respondent sample, or by

the time period and geographic context of the studies. We should also note that publication bias might lead to the publication of studies that find a relationship between these traits and conspiracy theorising over those that do not.

2.1.4 CONSPIRACY MINDSET

As we mentioned earlier, some scholars argue that there is such a thing as a conspiracy mindset - that belief in conspiracy theories (or general notions of conspiracy) can be predicted by belief in others. These connections between conspiracy beliefs may be symptomatic of a more general, underpinning predisposition toward conspiracy thinking which may be measured by asking individuals to respond to questions about general ideas of conspiracy (e.g., that governments hide information from time to time) rather than specific conspiracy theories (e.g., that Princess Diana was murdered by MI6).

Traditional theories of public opinion that incorporate predispositions into explanations of information reception (Berinsky, 2007, 2009, 2015a; Zaller, 1992) have become valuable in understanding conspiracy theories, particularly in the American context (Uscinski, Klofstad & Atkinson, 2016; Uscinski & Parent, 2014). The basic argument is that two people with different ideologies will interpret the same information differently (Jerit & Barabas 2012; Kunda, 1990; Lodge & Taber, 2013; Taber & Lodge, 2006). Many studies have alluded to an underlying conspiracy mindset that makes some people more likely to interpret events and circumstances as the product of conspiracies (Oliver & Wood 2014a; Stieger et al. 2013; Swami et al., 2013).

This argument finds support from traditional theories of public opinion in the political science literature that incorporate predispositions into explanations of information reception (Berinsky, 2009; Zaller, 1992). In writing about information, predispositions, and opinion, Zaller (1992, p. 6) argues that "Every opinion is a marriage of information and predisposition: information to form a mental picture of the given issue, and predisposition to motivate some conclusion about it." He goes on to state (p. 22) that "[Citizens] possess a variety of interests, values, and experiences that may greatly affect their willingness to accept – or alternatively, their resolve to resist – persuasive influence." Just as citizens interpret events and circumstances with their underlying predispositions (i.e., partisanship, political ideology; Berinsky, 2007, 2009, 2015a, Campbell et al., 1960; Zaller, 1992; group membership, Carey, Nyhan, Valentino & Liu, 2016), citizens also interpret information with their underlying view about how much conspiracies determine events and circumstances (Brotherton, 2015; Brotherton et al., 2013, Bruder et al., 2013; Dagnall et al., 2015; Imhoff & Bruder 2014; Lantian et al., 2016; Swami et al., 2011; van der Tempel & Alcock, 2015; Uscinski & Parent, 2014).

There are differing mechanisms that have been theorised for driving perception in line with preconception, but perhaps the most durable idea is that of motivated reasoning (Kunda, 1990). People resort to motivated reasoning when they are presented with facts that contradict their predispositions, and they will interpret new information in such a way as to not disturb their previously held worldviews. Scholars in the American context most often observe this phenomenon in conjunction with partisanship (Lodge & Taber, 2013).

Motivated reasoning has also been observed with conspiracy theories. People's conspiracy beliefs tend to coincide with their political and other worldviews (Hartman & Newmark, 2012; Nyhan, 2010; Miller, Saunders & Farhart, 2015; Oliver & Wood 2014a; Uscinski et al., 2016; Uscinski & Parent, 2014). Partisans in the USA tend to endorse conspiracy theories that demonise their opponents rather than those that accuse their own side of any wrongdoing (Claassen & Ensley, 2016; Miller et al., 2015; Oliver & Wood, 2014a). Those who hold new age beliefs are more likely to believe in Da Vinci Code theories (e.g., the idea that Jesus's progeny is alive today) while devout Catholics on the other hand are less likely to accept the idea that Jesus fathered a child with a prostitute (Newheiser et al., 2011).

In a survey experiment in which researchers attempted to convince Americans of a media conspiracy, results showed that only very few people could be convinced. Specifically, only non-partisans with a strongly conspiracy mindset were affected by information suggestive of a conspiracy (Uscinski et al., 2016). Republican participants were already likely to believe that the media was conspiring against them (this is a long-standing Republican belief), and Democrats were already likely to not believe that the media was conspiring against them (Democrats typically view

the media as an ally and trust more news outlets than do Republicans). Only non-partisans with a general conspiracy mindset were willing to engage with the new information and adopt the conspiracy belief.

The findings by Uscinski et al. (2016) have broad implications. Returning to the Birther and Truther theories, despite their popularity in the media, at their apex these theories only polled about 25 percent each (Cassino & Jenkins, 2013). Only conspiracy minded Republicans believed in the Birther theory, and only conspiracy minded Democrats believed in the Truther theory; this limited each theory to about 25 percent of the populace. In order for a conspiracy theory with a political element to overtake the nation, it has to get people to accept that their own party is behind a conspiracy. This is a difficult task. For example, during Watergate when information suggesting a conspiracy came to light, many Republicans refused to accept a conspiracy had taken place until well into the hearings. While it is potentially unhealthy that partisans are so willing to view their opposition with such suspicion, the upside to this is that partisanship also limits the possibilities for conspiracy beliefs to overtake public opinion and/or policy. Partisans are less willing to adopt conspiracy theories that accuse their own coalition, and as such, conspiracy theories with embedded partisan or ideological cues are often largely concentrated on one side or the other.

While underlying ideologies and values clearly affect how information is interpreted, they do not, however, account for the larger context in which political and media elites 'cue' the masses by helping them connect information and issue positions to their underlying ideologies and values (Zaller, 1992). Partisanship is one pathway in which elites connect information to ideology for the masses. Specifically, parties are organisations with networks of elites who have the ability to reach the masses with their agendas (religion, for example, can also provide a similar organisation of elite opinion leaders.) While larger institutions will have a larger reach, smaller institutions (e.g., alternative news sources, trusted friends, small groups) can affect the opinions of those who trust them (Berelson, Lazarsfeld & McPhee, 1954). The influence of elite cues interacting with the masses' underlying predispositions explains why partisans hold differing issue preferences, differing views about what conspiracies might be in play, and who the 'good guys' and 'bad guys' are in both policies and in conspiracy theories (Kahan, 2013; Zaller, 1992). If elites organise mass opinion and elites are divided on an issue, then the masses may be divided on the issue as well.

Conspiracy thinking can be thought of as a bias against powerful and authoritative actors which leads people to accuse those actors of collusion and of misleading the public (Brotherton et al., 2013). It may occupy its own dimension of opinion and be separate from right-wing or left-wing attitudes. Indeed, some studies suggest it is spread evenly across political ideology and partisanship in the USA (Uscinski & Parent 2014, Uscinski et al., 2016, Oliver & Wood 2014a) although others (van Prooijen, Krouwel & Pollett, 2015) do show that conspiracy belief is greatest at the political extremes.

An underlying predisposition toward conspiracy thinking (i.e., the idea of a conspiracy mindset) may explain why in an information environment in which information about and 'evidence' for conspiracy theories is widely available, the number of conspiracy theories each person believes in varies greatly (e.g., Goertzel, 1994; Miller et al., 2015; Oliver & Wood 2014a, b; Uscinski et al. 2016). It may explain why people believe theories that are logically contradictory (i.e., believing Osama Bin Laden is still alive but also believing he was dead before the raid on his compound; Wood et al., 2012). Finally, it may explain why authoritative information is often unable to dissuade people from their conspiracy beliefs (Nyhan, 2010; Nyhan & Reifler 2012; Nyhan, Reifler & Ubel, 2013). A person demonstrating a weak conspiracy mindset will be harder to convince of a conspiracy theory than a person with a strong conspiracy mindset.

Researchers have yet to determine the factors that may drive such a conspiracy mindset. Some suggest that political socialisation may play a role, much the way many researchers argue that partisanship and ideology are determined by processes occurring during one's formative years (Campbell et al., 1960, Ehman, 1980; Jennings & Markus, 1984; Niemi & Hepburn, 1995; Searing, Wright & Rabinowitz, 1976; Travers 1983; van Deth, Abendschön and Vollmar 2011). Avery (2006) points to the role of socialisation in driving conspiracy thinking when examining the distrust of government rampant in the African-American community in the USA. It could also be that

psychological factors such as schizotypy and delusional ideation overwhelm socialisation processes and drive underlying conspiracy thinking (Dagnall et al. 2015; Darwin et al., 2011; Swami, Chamorro-Premuzic & Furnham, 2010). In any case, social scientists have devoted little effort to tracking the development of what might be characterised as conspiracy mindset, but such longitudinal studies could shed light on how it develops. For example, Swami, Furnham, Smyth, Weis, Lay and Clow, (2016) found that stressful life events (i.e., serious illness, injury, or assault) predict belief in conspiracy theories.

We should also note that people could come to conspiracy beliefs without underlying conspiracy thinking playing a role. For example, if people were told by trusted sources (e.g., teacher, parent, TV programme, YouTube) that a conspiracy was afoot, those with little information on the topic would likely take such assertions at face-value. For example, many studies show that exposure to materials espousing conspiracy rhetoric induce conspiracy beliefs (Banas & Miller, 2013, Butler, Koopman & Zimbardo, 1995; Einstein & Glick, 2015; Jolley & Douglas, 2014a, b; Kim & Cao, 2016; Mulligan & Habel, 2013; Stempel, Hargrove & Stempel, 2007). A study investigating conspiracy theories surrounding the kidnapping of Austrian 10-year old Natasha Kampusch, who escaped eight years later (e.g., "The police paid little attention to some evidence… which points to a cover-up") found that the more people had been exposed to media content about the kidnapping, the more likely they were to believe in conspiracy theories about the kidnapping (Stieger et al., 2013). In short, people can come to believe in a conspiracy theory in the same way people come to hold many non-conspiracy views - by accepting information from trusted sources (Zaller 1992). We return in depth to the social transmission of conspiracy theories in Section 4 of this document (how conspiracy theories are communicated).

2.2 SOCIOLOGICAL FACTORS

2.2.1 GROUP MEMBERSHIP

Conspiracy theories can also be linked to specific ways of identifying with social groups. Groups, in this case, can include nationalities, political parties, ideological orientations (e.g., the right), racial designations (e.g., Asian), age demographics (e.g., senior citizens), and geographic designations (e.g., British), among many others. Social identity theory argues that people's social lives involve their membership of a variety of ingroups and outgroups, and behave in invidious ways because such categories - even when they are based on very minimal intergroup differences - furnish identity and self-esteem (Tajfel, 1981; Sherif, Harvey, White, Hood, & Sherif, 1961). Even where there is little evidence to suggest it, group identities can push people to view their own group as upright and virtuous while opposing groups are viewed as biased and nefarious (Kinder & Kam, 2010). This may be exacerbated when groups perceive a large distance between themselves and opposing groups (Henderson, 2009).

Most conspiracy theories involve convictions about a powerful and evil outgroup that secretly tries to harm one's own group (e.g., Uscinski & Parent, 2014; van Prooijen & van Lange, 2014). Therefore, it is probably not surprising that the way people feel about the social groups that they belong to can be associated with their perceptions of other groups' intentions. However, psychological research shows that not everyone who cares about their group would necessarily see other groups as conspiring against the ingroup. A conviction that others conspire against one's group is more likely to emerge when the group thinks of itself as undervalued or underprivileged. Thus, they are linked to defensive ways of identifying with one's social group. This is captured by the concept of collective narcissism (Golec de Zavala, Cichocka, Eidelson, & Jayawickreme, 2009) – a form of ingroup identification that reflects a belief in the ingroup's greatness associated with a conviction that others do not acknowledge the ingroup's worth enough. Because collective narcissism is linked to increased sensitivity to signs of validation, it increases perceptions of threats to the in-group's image from outgroups. This can further stimulate endorsement of intergroup conspiracy theories (Cichocka, Marchlewska, Golec de Zavala, & Olechowski, 2016).

In a study conducted in Poland by psychologists Golec de Zavala and Cichocka (2012), national collective narcissism predicted endorsement of conspiracy stereotypes of Jews. Further psychological research in Britain conducted by Cichocka, Marchlewska, Golec de Zavala, & Olechowski (2016) demonstrated that national collective narcissism was associated with the endorsement of conspiracy theories about Russian

involvement in the Smolensk crash of 2010 in which the Polish president and officials died. However, mere identification with the national group without the narcissistic component predicted *lower* likelihood of endorsing these conspiracy theories. Another study in the same paper by Cichocka and colleagues conducted with American participants demonstrated that collective narcissism was unrelated to the endorsement of conspiracy theories that assumed involvement of members of own social group (such as one's own government, as would be the case in for example in some 9/11 conspiracy theories). Overall, research shows that conspiracy explanations of intergroup events are linked to social identity that fosters the need to validate and restore the undermined image of the ingroup.

This type of social identity is more likely to be prevalent among members of low status groups. Indeed, research shows that members of low-status social groups are more likely to endorse conspiracy theories than members of high status social groups (Abalakina-Paap et al., 1999; Crocker, Luhtanen, Broadnax, & Blaine, 1999; Goertzel, 1994). For example, psychologists Crocker et al. (1999) demonstrated in the American context that Black Americans (compared to White Americans) were more likely to believe in conspiracy theories about the American government conspiring against Blacks. A survey conducted by social scientists Parsons et al. (1999) examined the prevalence of conspiracy theories among 715 African Americans in Louisiana, USA. Results indicated high prevalence of conspiracy belief in the community. For example, almost 67 per cent reported that the government is not telling the truth about AIDS, 47 per cent of the respondents believed that the government promotes drug use in Black communities, and 45 per cent agreed that allowing guns on the street is intended to eliminate Blacks.

It is probably not surprising that historically disadvantaged groups believe that powerful groups act against them. Some outgroup conspiracy theories sometimes turn out to be true (e.g., the Tuskegee Syphilis scandal which we discuss at a later point) and beyond this, disadvantaged groups have to explain their lowly status. Indeed, people are generally more likely to believe in conspiracies against their own group. Thus, although not tested, Whites, rather than Blacks, are more likely to believe that members of other races are conspiring against Whites. The studies by Parsons et al. (1999), like others (e.g., Goertzel, 1994) are largely interpreted as evidence that disadvantaged groups are more susceptible to conspiracy theorising, but may just as easily be interpreted as showing that groups in general are susceptible to believing in conspiracy theories that cast them in the role of victims.

One of the predictors of belief in conspiracies with malicious intent (such as promotion of drug use and perceptions of AIDS as genocide) in Parsons and colleagues' (1999) survey was being a victim of police harassment in the past. Follow up studies by Simmons and Parsons (2005) demonstrated that belief in malicious conspiracy theories among Blacks were associated not with being personally victimised, but rather being a victim of racial discrimination. Thus, belief in outgroup conspiracies can be fuelled by the conviction that one's social group is being victimised and treated unfairly. Psychologists Bilewicz, Winiewski, Kofta and Wojcik (2013) demonstrated in a sample of Polish participants that a conviction that their nation has been victimised more than other nations was positively correlated with the endorsement of the conspiracy stereotype of Jews - the belief that Jews are a deceptive enemy who secretly conspires to overpower other groups (Kofta & Sędek, 2005). Similarly, psychological research by Mashuri & Zaduqisti (2014) conducted in Indonesia demonstrated that beliefs that Muslims have been victimised by Western people was associated with belief in conspiracy theories suggesting that Western intelligence services instigated terrorism in Indonesia.

Situational threats and crisis situations can also increase the likelihood of strong group attachment to foster conspiracy beliefs (van Prooijen & Douglas, 2017). In one study, psychologists Kofta, Sędek, & Sławuta (2011) threatened the ingroup image by reminding Polish participants of their ingroup's past crimes against Jews. They found that this manipulation subsequently increased the endorsement of conspiracy stereotypes of Jews. Mashuri & Zaduqisti (2014) also demonstrated that threat to the ingroup strengthens the effects of chronic (as well as temporarily induced) Muslim identification on conspiracy beliefs about Westerners instigating terrorism. Further research demonstrated that this association is driven by the perception that Western countries might threaten and weaken the unique Muslim identity (Mashuri & Zaduqisti, 2015; see also Mashuri & Zaduqisti, 2013; Mashuri, Zaduqisti, Sukmawati, Sakdiah & Suharini,

2016). Taken together, findings from research on the role of social identification highlight the fact that feelings of being undermined and threatened in the context of international relations can facilitate the development of conspiracy theories that serve to justify groups' disadvantaged position. In the end, a conviction that other nations conspire against one's own can help excuse the ingroup's disadvantaged position. The risk is that it can lead to a lack of acceptance of responsibility for the ingroup's own wrongdoings (e.g., - involvement in terrorist activities).

2.2.2 DEMOGRAPHICS

Some studies have attempted to chart the social characteristics of those prone to conspiracy theories. In the USA, Uscinski and Parent (2014) found that higher levels of conspiracy thinking correlate with lower levels of education, lower levels of income, and outsider political status (i.e., those on the current 'losing' side). Other investigations point in particular to the link between conspiracy belief and lower levels of education (e.g., Bird & Bogart, 2003; Goertzel, 1994; Oliver & Wood, 2014a). Two recent investigations have attempted to explain this relationship. First, Douglas et al. (2016) demonstrated that the tendency to attribute agency and intentionality where it is unlikely to exist mediates this relationship. In two studies, participants completed an online survey in which they were asked to report the extent to which they thought nonhuman animals, natural entities, and technological devices, have intentions and free will. Douglas and colleagues found that participants with higher education levels were less likely to attribute these qualities beyond humans, and that participants who believed in conspiracy theories were more likely to do so. Crucially however, the relationship between education and conspiracy belief was explained in part by the relationship between each of these factors and the tendency to attribute agency and intentionality to nonhumans. Perhaps therefore, education reduces the tendency to over-attribute agency and intentionality and that the appeal of conspiracy theories is therefore reduced for those with higher levels of education. Psychologist van Prooijen (2016) further examined the link between education and conspiracy belief, finding support for two additional mediating factors - greater feelings of control, and a general doubt that complex problems may have simple solutions. Although neither of these examinations have established a causal link between education and conspiracy belief, they suggest that education may provide people with a set of cognitive and affective 'skills' that may enable them to disrupt the influence of conspiracy theories.

In the case of income, much less is known about what may cause the link, but it could be that employers shun conspiracy theorists, or that conspiracy theorists shun higher paying establishment jobs. In the case of political outsiders, again, much less is known. Uscinski and Parent (2014), and Simmons and Parsons (2005), both find that elites and masses are equally likely to traffic in specific conspiracy theories. However, there are too few comprehensive and representative surveys, particularly outside of the USA, that look at the demographics of conspiracy theorists and non-conspiracy theorists.

2.3 POLITICAL FACTORS

There are also important political contributors to conspiracy belief. For example, research has examined the role of political ideology and partisanship. Nefes (2013, 2014, 2015a, 2015b, forthcoming) has shown that political parties accept or reject conspiracy theories that confirm their ideological perspectives. In a similar vein, people are more likely to believe that political opposition is involved in malevolent activity than their party's representatives (Claassen & Ensley, 2016). In the American context, Democrats are more likely to believe Republicans are involved in conspiracies, and Republicans are more likely to believe that Democrats are. For example, a public opinion poll conducted by the Fairleigh Dickinson University indicated that 64 per cent of Republicans, compared to 14 per cent of Democrats believed that President Obama is hiding important information about his background and early life – a conviction associated with the so-called 'Birther' conspiracy theory (similar difference was observed by political scientists Hartman & Newmark, 2012). On the other hand, 36 per cent of Democrats, compared to 12 per cent of Republicans, believed that President Bush knew about the 9/11 attacks before they happened – a core of the so-called 'Truther' conspiracy theory. Finally, the same poll found that Democrats were more likely to believe that President Bush committed voter fraud, and Republicans were more likely to believe that President Obama did. Overall, this findings suggest that political opponents are more likely to accuse each other of being involved in conspiracies, which might

be a reflection of the ingroup - outgroup mentality, and be especially strong when people experience a threat to their political faction or feel that it is being undermined in some way (see also section on sociological factors).

However, research demonstrates that certain political convictions are more strongly associated with conspiracy beliefs than others. Psychologists McClosky and Chong (1985) found that right-wing and left-wing radicals (compared to moderates) show signs of paranoid convictions about politics. Similarly, psychologists van Prooijen, Krouwel and Pollet (2015) demonstrated that conspiracy beliefs are most prevalent at the political extremes. In four studies in the USA and The Netherlands they found a quadratic effect – that is a 'U-shaped' function – such that conspiracy theorising was indeed strongest at the far political left and right (although somewhat stronger at the political right). Although it is unknown whether conspiracy theorising may be a result of political ideology, or vice versa (i.e., conspiracy theories may be more politically radicalising), or both, this research suggests that extremist behaviour may be a consequence of conspiracy belief. Uscinski and Parent (2014) and Uscinski et al. (2016) suggest that conspiracy thinking is close to even across political ideology and partisanship in the USA, with those belonging to third parties exhibiting higher levels of conspiracy thinking.

At the same time, there exists some evidence that conservatives are more prone to conspiracy theories than those to their ideological left. Several studies report stronger endorsement of conspiracy theories by conservatives, compared to liberals. Miller and colleagues (2016) compared levels of endorsement of typically conservative conspiracy theories, such as the belief that global warming is a hoax, and typically liberal conspiracy theories, such that the US government knew about 9/11. While conservatives were indeed more likely to endorse the global warming conspiracy theory, they are similarly likely to endorse the 9/11 conspiracy theory. In fact, among conservatives, high political knowledge and low political trust appear to exacerbate the endorsement of typically 'conservative' (that is ideologically congruent) conspiracy theories, while among liberals this is not the case - low political knowledge and trust were independently associated with liberals' endorsement of liberal conspiracies, but did not strengthen them.

Furthermore, several psychological studies (e.g., Bruder et al., 2013; Grzesiak-Feldman & Irzycka, 2009) reported a link between conspiracy beliefs and right-wing authoritarianism - a dimension of political attitudes characterised by preference for conventionalism, authoritarian aggression, and authoritarian submission to authorities (Altemeyer, 1981). Bruder and colleagues (2013) also reported a positive association between conspiracy beliefs and social dominance orientation - another political predisposition capturing individuals' preference for hierarchy and domination of higher-status groups over lower-status groups (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). Recently, Jolley, Douglas and Sutton (2017), have demonstrated that conspiracy belief may be associated with system justifying beliefs (Jost & Banaji, 1994) - the notion that people are motivated to believe that the social systems in which they live are fair and legitimate. Right-wing authoritarianism, social dominance orientation and system justification are all associated with right-wing political ideology, suggesting that right-wingers might be especially susceptible to conspiracy beliefs. In keeping with this view, analyses of the hard line conservative Tea Party movement in the USA suggest that it is wedded to conspiracy theorising (Barreto, Cooper, Gonzalez, Parker, & Towler, 2011; Berlet, 2012; Parker & Barreto, 2013).

How can these findings be integrated? One possibility is that although both extreme left and right-wingers are likely to embrace various conspiracy theories, this link is stronger at the right side of the political spectrum (as evident in findings of van Prooijen et al., 2015; see Figure 3 from his paper). In other words, although both extreme left-wing and right-wing ideologies might foster conspiracy convictions, right-wingers might be more predisposed to believe in conspiracies because they are also more likely to exhibit the personality predispositions that foster conspiracy mentality (such as needs to manage uncertainty; Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003).

Conspiracy theories are not only linked to political attitudes and preferences, but can also arise from specific political events. This is especially likely to be the case if such events stimulate psychological states that are linked to conspiracy beliefs, such as low political trust, feelings of powerlessness, uncertainty and unpredictability. For example, conspiracy thinking can be a result of political scandals. Political scientists Einstein and Glick (2013) demonstrated that

a high scandal political climate diminishes trust in government, which in turn results in higher levels of conspiracy belief, even in contexts unrelated to ongoing scandals. Conspiracy beliefs can also be strengthened by exposing participants to redacted documents related to the conspiracy theories. Political scientists Nyhan and colleagues (2016) demonstrated that providing people with documents associated with the conspiracy can reduce conspiracy beliefs. Specifically, redacted documents (which represent the joint effect of providing and hiding information) reduced or eliminated the effect of exposure to the information in the documents (compared to no information at all). Finally, conspiracy theories can be especially potent in times of uncertainty about politics. Psychologists Kofta and Sedek (2005) demonstrated that conspiracy theories portraying Jews as collective enemies predicted anti-Semitic attitudes in Poland in a week proceeding parliamentary elections, but not once the election outcome was known.

Yet another possibility is that conspiracy theories are more likely to be endorsed by those who do not hold political power (Uscinski & Parent, 2014). The study Miller and colleagues (2016) was conducted in the USA during Obama's administration, meaning that conservatives were on the 'losing' side at the time of the data collection. It could also be that the preponderance of liberal/left-wingers in social science (Cardiff & Klein, 2005) means that in some instances, these institutions focus on conspiracy theories held by the right but ignore conspiracy theories closer to home. There have been many studies of conspiracy theories held by the right (going back to Hofstadter, 1964), but few studies focusing on conspiracy theories held by the left (Douglas & Sutton, 2015). The end result is that the left is sometimes made to look sound and savvy while the right is made to look rather stupid.

Uscinski and Parent also note that conspiracy theories in their data tend to accuse those in power and their coalitions. When a Republican is president, the letters tended to accuse Republicans and big business of conspiring; when a Democrat was in office, the letters tended to accuse Democrats and socialists of conspiring. Uscinski and Parent also found that during declared wars and the Cold War, conspiracy letters tended to focus on foreign enemies more than during other times. The authors suggest that conspiracy theories are about power and threat. While many conspiracy theories may be fictitious, they speak to real perceptions of power. This is consistent with the argument that there is a strategic logic to conspiracy theories (Uscinski & Parent 2014):

Sharing conspiracy theories provides a way for groups falling in the pecking order to revamp and recoup from losses, close ranks, staunch losses, overcome collective action problems, and sensitize minds to vulnerabilities. Emerging groups, minor groups, and social movements will turn to conspiracy talk for similar reasons. Successful conspiracy theories can meet these goals because they have an infectious effect and function as mental inoculation. Conspiracy talk provides a unifying narrative of a terrifying enemy. Communicating conspiracy theories heightens alertness to avert tragedy. The tendency of conspiracy theorists to scapegoat, however reprehensible, channels anger, avoids internecine recriminations, and aims at redemption.

We can see this logic operating in many ways (particularly in the USA). When the Democrats won both the White House and Congress in 2008, popular conspiracy theories about George W. Bush, Dick Cheney, Haliburton, Blackwater, and 9/11 became socially inert and were replaced with fears of Barack Obama, faked birth certificates and socialist take-overs. When the Republicans regained some power by taking back the House in 2010, some of the conspiracy theory rhetoric - which for the previous two years had focused almost entirely on Democrats - began to implicate Republicans. In popular culture, the movie, *The Manchurian Candidate*, was produced twice in the USA - first in 1962 during a Democratic administration and during heightened tensions with communist countries, and again in 2004 during a Republican administration. In the early version the villain was communists; in the later version the enemy was big business.

SECTION SUMMARY

A variety of psychological factors predict the extent to which individuals will endorse conspiracy theories. Specifically, existential needs (e.g., need for power and control), personality traits (e.g., narcissism and Machiavellianism), cognitive factors (e.g., cognitive biases and intelligence), and an underlying tendency to mistrust and perceive conspiracies, all predict conspiracy belief.

Identification with one's own group can bring about suspicion concerning the actions of other groups. For example, people who have an inflated sense of their own group's importance tend to perceive more conspiracies against their group. Low-status groups appear more likely to perceive conspiracies against their group than high-status group members, and threat to the group can increase conspiracy belief.

Some demographic factors such as education level (lower education level is linked to higher conspiracy belief) also predict conspiracy belief.

Political extremism (and in particular right-wing ideology) is consistently associated with conspiracy belief. People tend to believe new conspiracy theories that align with their pre-existing political leanings. Other ideological variables such as right-wing authoritarianism, social dominance orientation, and system justification, predict conspiracy belief. There is some evidence to suggest that people on the losing side of political debates may be more likely to endorse conspiracy theories.

3. HOW ARE CONSPIRACY THEORIES COMMUNICATED?

The communication of conspiracy theories is of vital interest to anyone who wants to understand how they are spread, become established, and affect society and politics. In this section, we discuss why people communicate conspiracy theories, the media they use, and the way in which they communicate those theories.

3.1 MOTIVES TO COMMUNICATE CONSPIRACY THEORIES

What causes people to communicate conspiracy theories? The related research literature on rumours provides some clues. People share rumours for psychological reasons, including the desire to deal with anxiety, stress, and uncertainty, but also for social and political reasons, for example to make friends or display their insider status in a group (DiFonzo, Bordia & Rosnow, 1994). In the following paragraphs, we consider the psychological, social and political reasons that conspiracy believers have to share their ideas. One of the challenges in studying the motives to communicate conspiracy theories is to tease these apart from motives for believing in them. Since people tend to share ideas they believe rather than ideas they do not, the psychological, social and political factors that cause people to believe in conspiracy theories are almost guaranteed to shape the communication of conspiracy theories. A case in point is the evidence that Uscinski and Parent (2014) present to suggest that conspiracy theories are communicated in response to shifts in domestic power and the emergence of new threats in international relations. Uscinski and Parent also present evidence that conspiracy theories tend to be communicated by groups that are out of power. These findings imply that groups may engage in conspiracy talk strategically - to point out oncoming dangers and close ranks in the face of a looming enemy. More work like this, that tracks the emergence and dissemination of conspiracy theories over time, is much needed. For the purposes of this subsection, however, the research does not tease apart the forces that cause people to believe in conspiracy theories from those that cause them to share that belief. This is a difficult enterprise and as much as possible, we shall focus on research that focuses on communication per se. However, it remains important for the reader to bear this caveat in mind over the next few paragraphs.

Psychologists Raab, Ortlieb, Auer, Gunthmann and Carbon (2013) conducted a study in which they used a technique called 'narrative construction' to demonstrate how people build conspiracy theories. In this method, participants were handed a set of cards containing 'official' and 'conspiracy' information about the events surrounding 9/11 and were asked to use the cards to construct a plausible story of the events. It was found that roughly 17 per cent of stories could be classified as official, 53 per cent as a mixture of official and conspiracy, and 30 per cent could be classified as conspiracy. Therefore, when given the opportunity to communicate a story, the majority of communications contained some conspiracy content. Although based on this method, little can be said about the reasons why people chose conspiracy explanations, Raab et al. argue that conspiracy theories could be viewed as a way of constructing and communicating a personal set of values. That is, conspiracy theories could be viewed as a story of a person's beliefs and values and an expression of their non-conscious moral feelings. Conspiracy theories also allow people to communicate their beliefs to others.

A distinct psychological motivation, with a more social and political flavour, was identified by Franks et al. (2013). They argue that conspiracy theories spread as devices for making sense of events that threaten existing worldviews. They draw on social representations theory (Moscovici, 1961) to argue that conspiracy theories help groups to symbolically cope with threatening events by making abstract risk more concrete, and by focusing blame on a set of conspirators. Franks and colleagues argue that the spread of conspiracy theories therefore allows people to challenge abstract expert-dominated discourses about important events. They further propose that conspiracy theories are communicated as devices to cope with collective trauma.

In a more political vein, Sapountzis and Condor (2013) argue that conspiracy narratives are used to dispute dominant political and ideological assumptions. The researchers asked a sample of Greek political party members a series of questions in an interview. In the interviews, participants were encouraged to talk freely with occasional prompts concerning conflicts in the Balkans. The interviewers probed any mentions of Macedonia further and the communications were analysed by the researchers for accounts related to conspiracy theories. Results revealed that conspiracy narratives were typically used to challenge assumptions concerning Greece's majority status by "representing the political opposition as a consortium rather than a single out-group, by recasting the threat posed to Greece as a matter of realistic rather than symbolic competition, and by extending the historical frame of reference to encompass past and prospective future threats to the Greek people and the Greek state" (p. 731). Sapountzis and Condor argue that conspiracy theorising may therefore be used as a way to construct causal arguments about intergroup relations and to dispute dominant ideological assumptions about political legitimacy and social hierarchy (for a similar point, see Gosa (2011), discussed in a later section on conspiracy theories in music). Perhaps like online right-wing extremist groups (Douglas, 2007, 2008) the online communication and spread of conspiracy theories can stimulate support for the cause and motivate collective action.

Jamil and Rousseau (2011) conducted a discourse analysis of interviews with relatively small numbers of Pakistani parents living in Pakistan and Canada in the years following the 9/11 attack. Although studying 9/11 conspiracy theories was not an explicit aim of the research, the authors found that about 20 per cent of the interviewees spontaneously brought them up, and 80 per cent did so when explicitly asked to discuss the causes of 9/11. The majority of the 9/11 conspiracy theories suggested direct and active orchestration of the 9/11 attack by US authorities (making it happen), rather than passive complicity (knowing it was going to happen, and letting it happen anyway). These conspiracy theories were linked to a conspiracist understanding of the USA as a force that covertly interferes in the affairs of other countries, particularly in the Middle East. Parents discussed the lack of discernable meaning in the 9/11 attacks and in global wars involving the 'West' and Muslim forces, and suggested that it was difficult for them to explain geopolitical realities to their children in clear and understandable terms. Jamil and Rousseau suggest that conspiracy theories may provide them with one means to do this, while at the same time providing parents with a way of navigating the challenges of belonging to a group marked out as responsible for terrorist atrocities.

Sociological research has also considered how conspiracy theories play a part in political communication. Nefes (forthcoming) underlines that important social events, such as big scale protests, lead to the prevalence of conspiracy rhetoric. In Taiwan, after an assassination attempt on the Taiwanese President Chen Shui-bian in 2004 one day before the general election, conspiracy theories about the event were ubiquitous (Nefes, 2014). To understand the communication pattern of these accounts, Nefes (2014) conducted an online content analysis of people's comments on the assassination attempt. In particular, he coded the number of times each user expressed perceived threats and the number of times they proposed conspiracy theories. The analysis revealed that there was a significant correlation between these two factors. That is, perceptions of threat were associated with greater expressions of conspiracy theories. Qualitative analyses showed similar results and findings also showed that people proposed conspiracy theories in line with their political arguments. Nefes concluded that people therefore use conspiracy theories rationally to support their own political leanings and justify their own insecurities.

Nefes (2013, 2015a, 2015b) uncovered similar findings in his analysis of the communication of anti-Semitic conspiracy rhetoric in Turkey. Nefes (2013) conducted interviews with political party representatives of the four major political parties in Turkey. The interviews revealed that right-wing parties used conspiracy theories to express their ideological insecurities, but left-wing parties rejected these. Politicians may therefore accept or reject conspiracy theories based on their own ideological position. He also conducted interviews with conspiracy theory readers (Nefes, 2015a) and authors (Nefes, 2015b), which also showed that people propose and interpret the conspiracy theories rationally in line with their political perspectives. Further, using both quantitative and qualitative content analysis, Nefes (forthcoming) analysed the relationship between people's political views and online responses to the Turkish government's conspiracy rhetoric about

the Gezi Park Protests in 2013. The findings lucidly illustrated that political views of people predicted their acceptance or rejection of the conspiracy rhetoric. In short, these imply that conspiracy theories tend to be communicated about events that are perceived to be important and relevant to the political interests of people and groups. In other words, partisanship seems to be an influential factor on when the communication of conspiracy theories prevails.

Studies of political messages advocating conspiracy theories about the Islamisation of the UK (and Europe and the West more generally) articulate the political purposes for which conspiracy theories are used. Wood and Finlay (2008) conducted a discourse analysis of articles written by prominent members of the British National Party in the months following the London 7/7 bombings. They found that these articles promoted conspiracy theories about the intentions of Muslim immigrants to the UK. The gist of these theories are that Muslims want to change the demographic, religious and cultural character of the UK to establish an Islamic supremacy:

Thursday 7/7/05 was the day Britain woke up to the fact that it is at war. A ghost army of Islamic terrorists has assembled in our country with one aim – to wage war and inflict murder upon us until we surrender to them and an Islamic Fascist State is imposed upon us. (Barnes, 2005, cited in Wood & Finlay, p. 712)

A critical characteristic of the conspiracy theories promulgated in this literature is that they urge their audience to distrust even those Muslims who have outwardly integrated into British society. This conspiracist representation of integrated Muslims repudiates trust and the possibility of an inclusive, democratic, multicultural or even assimilationist politics. A key motif in conspiracy theories is that all is not what it seems, and in this case, the ability of conspiring Muslims to 'pass' as normal citizens, though more grounded in reality, is reminiscent of conspiracy theories that cast political elites as lizards in disguise (Icke, 2001):

The terrorists who attacked the tubes and bus in London on 7/7/05 were not long bearded, Hook handed, one eyed ranting lunatics in white robes handing out videos with beheadings …. They were your next door neighbour, the son of the chip shop owner down the street, Jaz down the road and the local supply teacher at the primary school. They drove Mercedes cars, dated your sister and integrated into mainstream British culture. And it was all a lie. (Barnes, 2005, cited in Wood & Finlay, p. 714)

Like the factitious conspiracy theories promoted by Black power advocates, these conspiracies weave truths (in this case, the existence of terrorist sleeper cells containing radicalised British nationals) into outlandish, broader narratives in which even moderate Muslims are inspired by religious writings to participate in an international plot to establish a global Islamist order in the UK. Barnes (cited in Wood & Finlay, p. 715) writes that "the real threat to us are the silent ones, the Cleanskins, who adopt our ways and pretend to be our friends until they are ready to destroy us". By casting even moderates as part of a conspiracy, the rhetoric is used to represent all Muslims as a potent threat to civic life and to justify radical, exclusionary politics - in this case the mass, forced deportation of Muslims.

The conspiracy theories advocated by the British National Party cast liberal Western leaders as foolish and naive but not actively part of a conspiracy to impose an Islamic supremacy. However, full-blown conspiracy theories about the Islamisation of Europe do cast Western political leaders and EU bureaucrats as active conspirators. These conspiracy theories have helped inspire extreme and terrorist actions such as Breivik's massacre of left-wing youth in Oslo (Fekete, 2011). Lee (2016) analyses these conspiracy theories about Islamisation as they appear in published statements by prominent figures in the so-called 'counter jihad' movement, which casts itself as the opposition to Islamisation. Lee finds that these conspiracy theories feature in counter-jihad communications, but are rarely used explicitly to justify extremist political action. Rather, they create the ideological conditions (fear of Muslims, radical distrust of political institutions) that are necessary for such actions. Further, Lee found that conspiracy theorising is a common enough but not a *routine* feature of counter-jihad communication. Lee suggests that routinely putting forward conspiracy theories may not be necessary for this movement, which can "more easily point to the actions (violent and non-violent) and statements of Islamist extremists" (p. 13). This suggests, more generally, that conspiracy communication is especially likely to occur, and especially felicitous for radical political movements

that lack solid evidence of coordinated malice by an identifiable enemy. Put differently, the overt existence of malicious agendas, tyranny, violence, and hatred may reduce the need to mobilise support for a political cause by postulating that such things lie in wait or in secret.

Leaving aside the advocacy of particular political objectives, research by the cultural anthropologist Allen (2016) suggests one other important possible communicative motivation for conspiracy theories. Allen examines the conspiracy theorising by rival Palestinian political factions in the occupied West Bank (i.e., Fatah and Hamas). In an analysis of political advertising, Allen suggests that conspiracist representations of each side reflect an underlying "semantic ideology" that communication, even in politics, should be sincere. Although Allen locates the power of this ideology in political issues particular to the West Bank, a similar concern for home-spun, emotional sincerity appears to have animated populist support for the Trump and Brexit campaigns, both of which were associated with conspiracy theorising, and which despite adverse performance in various fact-checking benchmarks appeared to draw strength from the relatively simple, forceful and apparently untutored, sincere language employed by key spokespeople. The carefully crafted, hedged and often evasive quality of conventional political discourse (Bhatia, 2006; Clementson, 2016; Mearsheimer, 2011) may strike contemporary audiences as evidence that politicians are concealing secret plots and agendas. Not only may conspiracy theories be evoked by the evasive and duplicitous nature of much political communication - by violating norms of politeness and epistemic caution in civil political discourse, open allegations of conspiracy may come across as a refreshing and ideologically important turn to sincerity.

3.1.1 THE INTERNET, SOCIAL MEDIA, AND CONSPIRACY THEORIES

There has been much concern about how specific communication media – mostly notably the Internet - may promote the spread of conspiracy theories. In this digital age, are conspiracy theories on the rise? Does the Internet allow conspiracy ideas to run rampant without moderation or correction? Whilst there is some suggestion that conspiracy theories may be flourishing in the age of the Internet (Morello, 2004), others suggest that it is not that straightforward.

For example, the philosopher Clarke (2007) argued that whilst the Internet may facilitate the spread of *more* conspiracy theories, this does not mean that it also helps the *development* of the conspiracy theories. That is, speeding up the process by which conspiracy theories are disseminated does not mean that the conspiracy theories develop more effectively and this speed of dissemination may even retard the progress of conspiracy theories into coherent arguments. Clarke (2007) draws on the example of the "controlled demolition theory" of the 9/11 attacks. This conspiracy theory asserts that three buildings in the World Trade Center (WTC1, WTC2 and WTC7), were prepared by experts for demolition and the planes that crashed into WTC1 and WTC2 were not causally related to their collapse. Despite a great deal of online discussion over several years, the advocates were yet to agree on even one specific version of the theory. Clarke (2007) argues that before widespread use of the Internet, this was not the case and conspiracy theories were better developed. He further argues that the Internet as a communication medium may be responsible for limiting conspiracy theories. Specifically, billions of potentially critical voices could shout people down for expressing marginal views. Advocates of conspiracy theories may therefore be reluctant to voice opinions for fear of being criticised.

Uscinski, Atkinson, and DeWitt (forthcoming) argue that for several reasons, the Internet may not necessarily be as big a boon to conspiracy theories as many think. First, in Western countries, websites with the most traffic are not devoted to conspiracy theories and conspiracy theory websites are not highly visited. Mainstream sources of news far outpace conspiracy sources in terms of reach and audience. Of course, there are many websites dedicated to conspiracy theories, but these sites are not sought out very often and it is likely that the only people seeking out conspiracy theories on the web are those that are already predisposed. Second, in terms of the online information environment, Uscinski and Parent (2014) looked at news and blog posts over the course of a year to see how the Internet discusses conspiracy theories. Of 3,000 stories discussing conspiracy theories, 63 per cent discussed the conspiracy theory(ies) negatively, perhaps with a pejorative slant or an attempt to disprove them. Seventeen per cent were neutral, and 19 per

cent were positive towards the conspiracy theories. Therefore, if one were to simply seek out news from the Internet, one would get a negative vision of conspiracy theories. Third, there is no evidence that people are more conspiracy now than they were prior to the roll-out of the Internet.

Finally, Uscinski et al. (2017) argue that conspiracy theories do spread on the Internet, but rarely in the ways popularly assumed. Conspiracy theories do not bounce indiscriminately from person to person through social media. Instead conspiracy theories tend to stay concentrated within the communities who already agree with them. Thus, it cannot be asserted that there has been an overall rise in conspiracy theorising, or that the Internet is responsible for such a rise in a straightforward way. Nonetheless, research is increasingly pointing to the crucial role of the Internet in fostering distinct and polarised online communities.

In one such study, the computational social scientists Bessi, Coletto Davidescu, Scala, Caldarelli and Quattrociocchi (2015) used publicly available Facebook data to identify two communities of Italian Facebook members who habitually interact with science content (numbering 255 thousand), and a three-times larger community of members who habitually interact with conspiracy content (numbering 791 thousand). These communities were highly polarised - just over 90 per cent of the comments by science users were on science content, and more than 99 per cent of the comments by conspiracy users were on conspiracy content. The conspiracy users were not only more polarised than science users, but more active (posting more comments, likes, and shares). Bessi also examined reactions to nearly 5,000 posts that deliberately parody conspiracy information (e.g., one post suggested that chemtrails - gasses allegedly distributed by commercial aircraft to influence the population - contained the active ingredient of Viagra).

They found that approximately 80 per cent of the comments and likes on these parody posts were from conspiracy users. This is evidence, if not definitive (since some comments may have been critical and some 'likes' ironic), that conspiracy users are uncritically engaging even with deliberately false, highly implausible material (see also Bessi et al., 2014). Highlighting the difficulties of rational and civil communication between polarised communities, Zollo et al. (2015) found that the sentiment of users' comments and posts became more negative as they became more active, and that the sentiment of communication threads between communities was especially negative, and became more negative as conversation threads persisted.

In a follow-up investigation, Bessi, Zollo, Del Vicario, Scala, Caldarelli, and Quattrociocchi (2015) examined the behaviour of Italian conspiracy users and found that they could be categorised according to which was their most dominant conspiracy concern: geopolitics (63 per cent of conspiracy users fell into this cluster), environment (18 per cent), health (13 per cent), and diet (6 per cent). As well as being more numerous, conspiracy users concerned with geopolitics were more persistent, posting comments on posts for much longer (e.g., over time spans of 800 days) than those concerned with other issues. Although conspiracy users reliably fell into these four clusters, the authors found that as overall engagement activity increased, it became increasingly likely (though relatively modestly so - around 12 per cent more likely) that they would engage with content across all four themes. As the authors put it, "Once inside a conspiracy narrative users tend to embrace the overall corpus" (p. 1).

Using similar data, Del Vicario et al. (2016) examined the Facebook sharing (a.k.a., 'cascading') behaviour of conspiracy and science users. They found that the rate of sharing of both science and conspiracy data peaked at around two hours after the original post, and most shares of both types of news happened within the first 24 hours. However, conspiracy news was shared two to three times more than science news. Crucially, the rate at which conspiracy (but not science) news was shared was positively related to the overall number of times it was shared. This finding indicates that the sharing of conspiracy (vs. science) information is akin to the transmission of rumours, which are assimilated relatively slowly and rely on social validation (i.e., many people sharing and appearing to believe them) than objective quality of evidence.

These findings support the suggestion made by scholars from a variety of disciplines that the Internet is important to conspiracy theories because it helps build and facilitate the activities of conspiracy communities. Arab and Islamic studies scholar Gray (2010) underscores that the Internet as an increasingly popular medium and the introduction of the non-state sponsored media in the Arab world enabled conspiracy thinking to be widespread. Sunstein and

Vermeule (2009) discuss the Internet's ability to link together people of like minds so that some users fall into self-sealing information bubbles. Klein (2012) argues that there has been a massive resurgence and transformation of racist communities since the advent of the Internet, providing a relatively unrestricted digital space that enables racist groups to spread propaganda and conspiracy theories to incite hate and encourage violence. Thus, the Internet has allowed subversive groups to grow, become legitimised, and their ideas to be brought into the mainstream.

One recent study highlights a case in which ideas initially circulated among Internet rumour communities 'escaped' from the Internet and went on to influence mainstream media coverage. Rojecki and Meraz (2016) studied the life course of factitious rumours surrounding the two main candidates for the 2004 US Presidential Election. George W. Bush (who did not serve in Vietnam) was accused of using connections to dodge the draft and abscond from domestic military detail, while John Kerry (who later engaged in anti-Vietnam war actions) was accused of dishonourable conduct in the war). These 'factitious' Internet rumours wove a conspiratorial or cynical narrative web around a grain of truth. Some weeks and months later they eventually surfaced in mainstream print and TV media stories. The John Kerry story especially seemed to drive the mainstream media agenda. Rojecki and Meraz (2016) highlight the intermediate actors that facilitate the spillover from the Internet to mainstream media, including bloggers, interest groups, and politicised mainstream media outlets with a significant online presence.

3.2 ARTS AND MEDIA

As the study by Rojecki and Meraz (2016) illustrates, the Internet is far from the only medium in which conspiracy theories are aired. Mainstream news media expose people to conspiracy theories on a regular basis and appear to make them more receptive to this way of thinking (Stempel, Hargrove & Stempel, 2007; Stieger, Gumhalter, Voracek & Swami, 2013). Other media include film, in which there is a recognised genre known as 'conspiracy cinema' (Dorfman, 1980; Jameson, 1992) and television (Arnold, 2008).

As we shall see below (Section 5.1), exposure to conspiracy cinema increases receptivity to conspiracy theories (e.g., Butler, Koopman & Zimbardo, 1995; Mulligan & Habel, 2013).

Conspiracy theories can also be communicated through music. Corte and Edwards (2008) examine the content and political dimensions of White Power music (2008). This music sprung out of the Punk and Skinhead movements in the 1970s and contains lyrics and associated websites and literature that advocate the uniqueness and common destiny and interests of Whites (see also Pollard, 2016). It postulates that these are being diluted and undermined by internationalist conspiracies including the 'Zionist Occupation Government' (ZOG). The musical movement sees itself, as well as Whites more generally, as victims of conspiracies against it, and explains its own lack of commercial and political success as the result of multicultural conspiracies against it. Nationalistic parties and movements including the KKK, the UK's British National Party (BNP) and National Front (NF), Italy's Forza Nuova, Germany's National Democratic Party (NPD), and Sweden's New Democracy (NyD) have used the music in official recruitment and campaign messages.

Those purporting to represent the White community are not alone in using music to promulgate conspiracy theory for the purposes of racial identity politics. Gosa (2011) studies the role of hip-hop in conspiracy theorising, particularly as a way to explain and mobilise action against the perpetual disadvantages experienced by Blacks in the USA and across the globe. Gosa (2011) demonstrates that conspiracy theory is advanced at three levels - in the musical lyrics themselves, in interview statements by prominent hip-hop artists that are reproduced on TV, radio, magazines and academic books, and in ongoing interactions between hip-hop artists and their fans (e.g., in concerts and on blogs). Just as the contents of White Power music resonates with the racist conspiracy views in extreme right-wing politics, the conspiracy theories in hip-hop culture are fed, Gosa argues, by intellectual links to political ideas arising from prison culture, Black Muslim ideology, and the street literature of Black identity politics. Tellingly, indicating the cross-fertilisation of fiction, arts, and politics, the conspiracy theories uncovered by Gosa are influenced by books and films including the Da Vinci Code, and 'V' (which, before Icke, 2001,

portrayed a world in which the world is ruled by shape-shifting lizards in human form). Thus, prominent artists including Jay-Z and Kanye West are held to belong to a 'Hip Hop Illuminati', who "in exchange for record sales and stardom… agree to poison the minds of the black masses" (p. 194). This alleged Illuminati is associated with an ancient White supremacy plot in factitious conspiracy theorising that incorporates actual conspiracies such as the Tuskegee Syphilis experiments and objective historical and contemporary facts of racial oppression.

The promulgation in popular music forms of conspiracy theories to advance the cause of both White supremacist and Black identity politics highlights the adaptability and chameleonic quality of conspiracist thought. In both cases, conspiracy theories in music do not occur in isolation but are informed by formal and informal political organisations that, in turn, provide parallel channels for the further distribution and political usage of these ideas.

3.3 HOW ARE PRO- AND ANTI-CONSPIRACY MESSAGES COMMUNICATED DIFFERENTLY?

Thus far, we have considered why and where conspiracy messages are communicated. In the next paragraphs, we consider how they are communicated - what communicative, linguistic and persuasive devices are employed by adherents of conspiracy theories? This is an important question for at least two reasons. First, as Moran, Lucas, Everhart, Morgan and Prickett (2016) argue, any efforts to 'inoculate' audiences against the influence of conspiracy messages should be informed by the forms those messages are likely to take. Second, since conspiracy theories tend almost by definition to be less evidence-based, plausible and socially sanctioned than mainstream opinions, it appears that they are boxing above their weight in terms of the influence they exert on public opinion. This, in turn, suggests that their adherents may be using powerful or specially adapted communication techniques to build support.

Grant et al. (2015) examined the content of two pro-vaccination and two 'vaccine-skeptical' websites to examine what might make anti-vaccination communication tactics successful. They found that the official, pro-vaccination sites had very limited interactivity and focused on imparting accurate, evidence-based knowledge. In contrast, the vaccine-skeptical sites had links to both pro- and anti-vaccination material, creating the impression that both sides of the argument were being presented openly. In addition, the vaccine-skeptical sites were highly interactive, with spaces for community discussion, and oriented towards the creation of people affected (or think they are affected) by vaccination and surrounding issues. They also acted as repositories of vaccine information and resources. In sum, the authors argue that vaccine-skeptical websites are more effective in creating a non-hierarchical, personal, and ostensibly open-minded feeling, and providing the basis for community building, to achieve their ends.

In this respect, official websites advocating mainstream opinions may find themselves in a bind. Wary of discussion threads being hijacked by vociferous and actively engaged opponents, and of the damage that even fleeting exposure to conspiracy and fake science may do, which we will discuss later (Jolley & Douglas, 2014a, b), they may feel compelled to create online environments that allow only a monologue in which official, expert, evidence based advice is imparted to the public. Unfortunately, this format, and its divergence from the more egalitarian, collaborative, and community-based feeling of vaccine-skeptical websites may itself fuel the conspiracist view of elites as aloof and dictatorial.

In a similar vein, Kata (2010) analysed the contents of eight anti-vaccination websites (notably, 71 per cent of the content returned from a Google search of 'vaccination' was anti-vaccination). She found that six (three-quarters) of these sites explicitly postulated a conspiracy to hide information from the public. Although Kata did not compare these sites with pro-vaccine counterparts, she found that they employ a range of persuasive tactics that are unlikely to be featured by official websites. Echoing the personal, intimate quality of the vaccine-skeptical websites studies by Grant et al. (2015), these included emotive appeals (e.g., from parents who believed their children had been harmed by vaccines) and postmodern questioning of the privileged role of mainstream science as the arbiter of truth (see also Wood, 2016, for an analysis of the central role of questioning in conspiracy belief). Another feature of these websites was their appeal to scientific credibility - albeit by selective citation of frequently out-of-date

or discredited data - a feature that was also observed by Moran et al.'s (2016) less intensive analysis of approximately 400 websites.

A promising approach to examining the manner in which conspiracy theories are communicated online is text-based analysis. This methodology analyses the frequency of individual words that have been categorized by expert raters (e.g., as emotion words, analytic words, as indicative of authenticity). Faasse, Chatman and Martin (2016) applied this technique to 1500 comments on a pro-vaccination Facebook post by Mark Zuckerburg. The analysis revealed that anti-vaccination and pro-vaccination comments tend to use different kinds of language. Anti-vaccination posts used more analytical, but less authentic, less anxious and less tentative language. This indicates that online opponents, compared to proponents of vaccines use more authoritative, confident, assured and manipulative language.

A study by Wood and Douglas (2013) examined the comments made by 9/11 Truthers and their opponents on a large sample of comments from four mainstream news websites: ABC News and CNN from the USA, and *The Independent* and *Daily Mail* from the UK between July 1st and December 31st, 2011. At this time, there was a large volume of conspiracy-related articles given that it was the 10th anniversary of the attacks (see also Golo & Galam, 2015, discussed above). The majority of the comments were from a conspiracist position, again suggesting that conspiracy advocates are disproportionately active in sharing and disseminating their views online. More interestingly, the conspiracist and conventionalist comments used different communication techniques. Specifically, conspiracist arguments showed a tendency to spend more time arguing against the official explanation of 9/11 rather than offering any alternatives. Anti-conspiracy rationalists, on the other hand, showed the opposite pattern, advocating their own 'official' explanation more than arguing against the conspiracy position. They also used a more hostile tone. This hostile tone may contribute to the sense, among conspiracy believers, that they comprise a bullied, principled minority whose are the true rationalists and whose opponents are using orthodox levers of power and epistemic authority to cow them.

3.4 ONLINE DEBATES AND DEBUNKS

What happens when people encounter information that challenges their beliefs online - the sorts of information that rarely penetrates an online 'echo chamber'? Warner and Neville-Shepard (2014) used experimental methodology to examine the effects of exposure to pro- and counter-conspiracy information. Participants (undergraduate students in the USA, 43 per cent Republican, 32 per cent Democrat, 25 per cent independent) were exposed in the laboratory to an exclusive diet of materials supporting the (Obama) Birther or (9/11) Truther conspiracy theories. In findings resembling Jolley and Douglas (2014a, 2014b), which we discuss shortly, exposure to this diet of materials markedly increased support for conspiracy theories. In contrast, support for conspiracy theories was reduced to baseline levels when one third of the information presented debunked the conspiracy theories. This pattern of findings suggests two things. First, it suggests that echo chambers are crucial - indeed, people exposed to an exclusive diet of pro-conspiracy information are more likely, as a result, to embrace conspiracy theories. Second, it suggests that counter-conspiracy information can be effective, in principle, when it penetrates through to these people. However, it is important to note that these students were not chronically entrenched members of conspiracy communities prior to their participation in the studies. Debunking is likely to be less effective among chronically committed populations.

In this vein, a set of experiments in political communication by Thorson (2015) showed that even among student samples who are not necessarily highly committed, exposure to corrections of negative misinformation about political candidates undoes most but not all of the damage done to evaluations of those candidates. One of Thorson's experiments suggests that people are especially resistant to correction of misinformation about opposing-party candidates, because they adopt more or less conspiracist attitudes to the candidate (i.e., even if a specific factoid is corrected, they tend, in the words of one of Thorson's participants, to suspect that the besmirched candidate "might be covering something up", p. 16).

Of course, while the Internet has many places in which closed-minded and sealed-off communities can thrive, it also affords many opportunities to encounter

dissenting views and engage in debates. Even in the echo chambers of social media services such as Facebook, there is evidence that people do encounter challenging information, and that this can moderate their views. For example, the political scientist Bode and the communications scholar Vraga (2016) manipulated the 'related news' links that appear under fake news articles in Facebook feeds. When these contained corrections of the main news story, the participants were significantly less susceptible to the original misinformation. One such place is in the discussion boards accompanying news and analysis stories on the mainstream media. Golo and Galam (2015) examined online comments on 10th anniversary pieces about the 9/11 attacks published by two mainstream media sources, BBC and the Telegraph. Similar to Del Vicario et al's (2016) study of responses to online posts, Golo and Galam observed that communication threads progressed very quickly and were largely exhausted within 24 hours of the publication of the story. They found that for both media reports, the first 20 or so posts took issue with the (generally mainstream, anti-conspiracy) position of the journalists. Subsequent comments swung back towards the position of the original media report, until the conversation converged on failure to reach consensus and the average opinion position was neutral (i.e., pro- and anti- posts did not converge and were approximately equal in number). Golo and Galam (2015) found that rationalists (those opposed to conspiracies vs. in support of them) adopted a more hostile tone, and also found that posters who supported conspiracies did not change their opinions even when presented with very clear refutations (for similar findings see Wood & Douglas, 2015 discussed in the previous section).

Those with conspiracist and unorthodox views tend also to be very actively engaged in undermining efforts to communicate mainstream science-based messages. Edy and Risley-Baird (2016) used Google searches to find over 2,000 posts from various online sources that responded to debunking of anti-vaccination claims. The sources spanned mainstream news, advocacy websites, blogs and special interest websites. Their qualitative analysis showed that posters generated counterarguments to the debunks, "offering argumentative resources to [anti-vaccination] community members and reaffirming the community's solidarity" (p. 588). These were often conspiracist and demonstrate the ability of conspiracy theories to confront uncomfortable facts by absorbing them into part of the narrative. For example, one user commented as follows, in response to scientific evidence that disconfirms any link between vaccination and autism:

> *...why didn't you ask who actually did all the studies that 'proved' that there is no link between vaccines and autism? It would have been interesting to note that the pharmaceutical companies did them*

and another (both p. 598),

> *I'm afraid you don't have a very good understanding of the influence of money as the primary formative factor in what is called 'medicine' today.*

Public channels on streaming and sharing websites such as YouTube also offer opportunities for conspiracy advocates to share their views and encounter opposing information. Briones, Nan, Madden and Waks (2012) located and analyzed the content of 172 videos about the HPV vaccine on YouTube. They found that 49 of these videos suggested that HPV vaccines were ineffective, and 15 of them indicated a possible conspiracy involving the government, the pharmaceutical industry, and/or doctors. Videos that were negative toward the HPV vaccine attracted more likes, suggesting (like Bessi, Coletto et al., 2015) a disproportionate level of online activity by users with conspiracy and unorthodox views.

SECTION SUMMARY

People share conspiracy theories with others for a variety of reasons (e.g., to reduce the experience of anxiety and uncertainty, to respond to powerlessness and find a common ground with others against the authorities, and to dispute dominant political and ideological assumptions). They can also be used to deliberately encourage distrust of groups, as in the case of conspiracy theories about Muslims in British society, although they may not promote extreme political action.

It is a complex question whether the Internet and social media have increased the prevalence of conspiracy theories and the threats involved are therefore unclear. More conspiracy theories may spread than before,

but this does not mean that they are more complex or necessarily dangerous. It also does not mean that if there are many more conspiracy websites that they are visited a lot (although they are likely to be more accessible to those who want to read about conspiracy theories). Conspiracy communities online tend to be polarised, but a potential danger is that once within such a community, people may be more likely to adopt any coherent conspiracy theory and become more polarised in their attitudes.

Conspiracy theories make common appearances in film, television and in music. Conspiracy music may mobilise action amongst disadvantaged groups but also advance the agendas of extremist groups such as White power groups.

Non-conspiracy communication tends to occur via one-way channels (e.g., government bodies passing information onto citizens) whereas conspiracy communication is more interactive and less hierarchical. Further, non-conspiracy communication tends not to engage with conspiracy theories, but conspiracy communication attacks the official account.

The Internet has many places in which closed-minded and sealed-off communities can thrive, but it also affords many opportunities to encounter dissenting views and engage in debates.

4. WHAT ARE THE RISKS ASSOCIATED WITH CONSPIRACY THEORIES?

In this section we consider the potential risks that are posed by conspiracy theories, which is a topic that has received little research attention until recently. It is a common assumption that conspiracy theories are relatively harmless and trivial, and as we have mentioned earlier, the terms 'conspiracy theory' and 'conspiracy theorist' themselves tends to be viewed negatively, and resisted by conspiracy proponents (Bratich, 2004, 2008; Harambam & Aupers, 2016; Husting & Orr, 2007, but again see Wood, 2015, for evidence that people's receptivity to an explanation is not reduced when it is labelled explicitly as a 'conspiracy theory'). In many cases we would agree that conspiracy theories are harmless. For example, it is probably inoffensive for a small number of people to believe that lizards in human guise rule the world. In such cases, conspiracy theories are probably correctly viewed as trifling notions that only a small handful of people would ever believe, and are therefore of no danger.

However, everyone seemingly believes in at least on conspiracy theory or another. For example, political scientists Oliver and Wood (2014a) conducted four representative surveys of US society in 2006, 2010, and 2011. They asked respondents to indicate whether or not they had heard of a short list of conspiracy theories (e.g., "President Barack Obama was not really born in the United States and does not have an authentic Hawaiian birth certificate"), and to rate how strongly they agreed with the conspiracy theories. It was found that roughly 55% of the respondents agreed with at least one of the conspiracy theories. In other words, people appear willing to accept conspiracy narratives as valid explanations for social and political phenomena.

There is also evidence to suggest that once accepted, these ideas tend to endure. For example, political scientists Nyhan and Reifler (2010) asked participants to read mock news articles containing either misleading information about a politician, or misleading information with a correction. It was found that the corrections generally failed to reduce misperceptions and sometimes even increased the misperceptions. Further, Nyhan (2010) analysed debates over US health care reform between 1993-1994 and 2009-2010 under the Clinton and Obama administrations respectively and found that once conspiracy theories were make prominent in the media (e.g., that health care legislation under Obama was would result in senior citizens being directed to end their lives sooner), they were very difficult to refute. Psychologists Lewandowsky, Ecker, Seifert, Schwarz and Cook (2012) argue that pieces of misinformation like conspiracy theories are easier to accept that refute, and are often 'sticky', making attempts to debunk the information ineffective (see also Kuklinski, Quirk, Jerit, Schweider & Rich, 2000; Nyhan, 2010).

If many well-known conspiracy theories are popular and tend to stay in people's minds once they have taken root, what might some of their consequences be? Goertzel (2010) argued that conspiracy theories may be characterised as 'memes' that pass from one mind to another, and that such memes may be dangerous if they are used to discredit information for which there is scientific or legal confirmation. Indeed, some psychological research suggests that conspiracy theories may have a potentially significant impact on people's political, social, and health decisions.

4.1 ATTITUDE CHANGE

One of the first investigations of the effects of conspiracy theories demonstrated that they change people's attitudes. Psychologists Butler, Koopman and Zimbardo (1995) surveyed American adults at a cinema screening the Oliver Stone film *JFK*, which presented a conspiracy hypothesis about the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. Half of the participants were surveyed before seeing the film, and half were surveyed afterwards. It was found that the film significantly influenced endorsement of the conspiracy narrative. Those who had viewed the film were more strongly in favour of the idea of conspiracy than those who had not yet seen it. A similar investigation by political scientists Mulligan and Habel (2013) found that participants who had watched the outlandish conspiracy film *Wag*

the Dog, about how a government stages a fake war in a Hollywood studio, were more likely to respond positively to statements such as "How likely is it that a US president will stage a fake war in the future?" than those who had not watched the film.

Psychologists Douglas and Sutton (2008) corroborate these findings with respect to conspiracy theories about the death of Diana, Princess of Wales. They further investigated whether people are aware that their attitudes have changed as a result of exposure to conspiracy theories. To do so, undergraduate student participants were asked to read material highlighting conspiracy theories about Diana's death. They were then asked to rate how much they agreed with a series of conspiracy-related statements (e.g., "there was an official campaign by MI6 to assassinate Princess Diana, sanctioned by elements of the establishment") and were asked to answer the same question from the perspective of their attitudes the week before – i.e., to think about what their attitudes were before reading the material. A control group provided a baseline to examine real versus ascribed attitude change. Although their attitudes did change (i.e., the experimental group's attitudes were more strongly aligned with conspiracy theories than were the control group's), they did not perceive them to change. Specifically, they did not rate their retrospective attitudes significantly different to their attitudes after having read about the conspiracy theories. Psychological research has therefore shown that conspiracy theories are influential, perhaps even influencing people without their knowledge.

Research from political science also suggests that conspiracy theories can influence political attitudes. However, this may depend on people's existing predispositions. Specifically, Uscinski et al. (2016) embedded the word 'conspiracy' within a survey about the 2012 US Presidential election for half of the participants, and half did not receive this cue ("The media coverage in the lead up to the election was the subject of much discussion. Many believed that the media was biased due to a conspiracy/poor journalism. Do you believe the media was biased in favour or one of the presidential candidates?"). Results revealed that the inclusion of the media conspiracy cue only predicted belief in it amongst people who were already predisposed toward conspiracy thinking. Conspiracy theories may therefore influence people's attitudes, but the level of influence appears to depend on pre-existing attitudes and possibly other factors that remain to be investigated. Nevertheless, conspiracy theories do seem to be influential. What effects then, might they have on social and political behavioural intentions? Psychological, political and health researchers have also shed some light on these questions.

4.2 PREJUDICE

First, conspiracy theories have been linked to negative attitudes about groups. For example, psychologist Swami (2012) asked a sample of Malaysian participants to complete a scale of conspiracy belief, a scale specifically concerning anti-Jewish conspiracy theories (e.g., "Jews are attempting to establish a secret world government") and various ideological attitudes. It was found that belief in Jewish conspiracy theories was associated with anti-Israeli attitudes and also racism toward Chinese people. Further, psychologists Golec de Zavala and Cichocka (2012) found in a Polish sample that belief in specific conspiracy theories about Jewish domination of the world (e.g., Kofta & Sędek) were associated with more general anti-Semitic attitudes. In a Polish representative sample, Bilewicz, Winiewski, Kofta and Wojcik (2013) found that belief in the Jewish conspiracy was the best predictor of anti-Semitic behavioural intentions (e.g., legal discriminatory intentions against Jews; social distance toward Jews). Further, Imhoff and Bruder (2014) found that amongst a US crowdsourced sample from MTurk, a general tendency toward conspiracy theorising was associated with prejudice against a variety of high-power groups (e.g., Jews, Americans and capitalists). Finally, in a sample of white Americans, reports of negative contact with African Americans was found to be associated with expressed doubts about Barack Obama's American citizenship and his eligibility to be President of the United States (Barlow, Paolini, Pedersen, Hornsey, Radke, Harwood, Rubin, & Sibley, 2012).

This research suggests that in some cases, conspiracy theorising may at least in part be racially motivated and that some conspiracy theories may be a way of expressing prejudice toward particular groups. In further support of this idea, clinical psychiatrists Rousseau and Jamil (2008) conducted ethnographic research amongst Pakistani immigrants in Canada and Pakistani residents of Karachi about the events surrounding

the 9/11 attacks. They found that respondents in both countries overwhelmingly supported the conspiracy theory that the US orchestrated the attacks and that therefore Muslims were not responsible. Rousseau and Jamil argued that conspiracy beliefs reinforce the 'us' versus 'them' dichotomy. By questioning the official explanation, minority groups (and not just majority groups) reinforce differences between groups.

4.3 HEALTH-RELATED CHOICES

Conspiracy theories have also been linked to important health choices. Several correlational studies have shown that belief in health-related conspiracy theories is associated with the choice to use contraception and practice safe sex. Specifically, one conspiracy theory alleges that birth control is a form of genocide against African Americans. In a telephone survey of African American adults, medical researchers Thorburn and Bogart (2005) found that belief in this conspiracy theory was positively associated with negative attitudes toward contraceptive methods and less use of contraceptive methods. Another study testing a similar sample demonstrated that perceived discrimination and conspiracy beliefs both affected contraceptive behaviour (Bird & Bogart, 2003). A different conspiracy theory appears to have similar links with suspicion of contraception. This theory alleges that the CIA created HIV/AIDS to wipe out African Americans (see also Ball, 2016; Ford, Wallace, Newman, Lee & William, 2013). A telephone survey study by Bogart and Thorburn (2005) showed that not only was this conspiracy theory endorsed by a high number of respondents, belief in the conspiracy theory was associated with negative condom attitudes and inconsistent condom use (see also Bogart, Wagner, Galvam & Banks, 2010; Bogart, Galvan, Wagner & Klein, 2010; Hoyt, Rubin, Nemero, Lee, Huebner et al., 2010). Further, negative attitudes toward condoms have been found to partially explain the relationship between conspiracy beliefs and condom use (Bogart & Thorburn, 2005). These findings demonstrate that conspiracy theories may have harmful consequences for people's health decisions and behaviours.

Further evidence of the potentially negative health outcomes of conspiracy theories comes from experimental social psychology research. Jolley and Douglas (2014a) examined the influence of anti-vaccine conspiracy theories on vaccine intentions. In the first study, they asked a sample of British parents to rate their agreement with a set of anti-vaccine conspiracy theories (e.g., "Vaccines are harmful, and this fact is covered up"). They were also asked to rate how likely they would be to have a fictional child vaccinated against a made up disease. It was found that belief in conspiracy theories negatively predicted vaccination intentions, an effect partially driven by feelings of powerlessness, disillusionment, mistrust, and the perception that vaccines are dangerous. A second study experimentally manipulated exposure to conspiracy theories by presenting participants with common anti-vaccine conspiracy theories, arguments against the conspiracy theories, or no information (control). The same measure of vaccination intentions was used. Findings showed that participants who had been exposed to conspiracy theories were reluctant to vaccinate compared to the other two conditions, a difference partly explained by the perceived dangers of vaccines, powerless, disillusionment, and mistrust. Another study used focus groups and interviews to understand why some Romanian parents refuse to put their daughters forward for the HPV vaccination (Craciun & Baban, 2012). It was found that two of the keys reasons for not vaccinating were the perception that the vaccine is an attempt to reduce the world's population, and the perception that it is an experiment to allow pharmaceutical companies to make large profits (see also a field study of Pakistani parents by Khan & Sahibzada, 2016).

Oliver and Wood (2014b) demonstrated some of the general effects of medical conspiracy theories for people's health choices. They showed that people who endorse various medical conspiracy theories (e.g., "Health officials know that cell phones cause cancer but are doing nothing to stop it because large corporations won't let them") are less likely to engage with medical professionals (e.g., get annual physical examinations), are more likely to trust medical advice from non-medical people (e.g., friends, celebrities) and are more likely to choose alternative medicines (e.g., taking herbal medicines). Observations from medical professionals (e.g., Chung, 2009) further suggest that conspiracy theories exert an influence on the vaccination decisions of parents. Chung argues that the mistrust of parents toward medical professionals, governments and pharmaceutical companies further fuels conspiracy theories, as well as the vocal contributions of celebrities

who publicly condemn vaccination as unsafe.

However, it is important to note that there are often valid reasons why groups may be suspicious of health interventions. Health education researchers Thomas and Quinn (1991) provide an extensive discussion of the Tuskegee Syphilis study in which the US Public Health Service between 1932 and 1972 studied hundreds of African American men to monitor the progress of untreated syphilis. However, the men signed up for the study believing that they were receiving free health care from the government. Thomas and Quinn noted that the strategies used to recruit and retain participants for the study were similar to those being advocated for HIV/AIDS prevention programmes. It is perhaps no surprise that there still exists a great deal of mistrust amongst African Americans concerning the 40-year long Tuskegee study, and perhaps therefore also no surprise that this mistrust appears to hamper HIV education efforts and intervention within African American communities. Whilst it may be important to address the effects of conspiracy theorising on people's attitudes and health behaviours, it is also important to consider the historical contexts of particular problems and to address the underlying issues that make conspiracy theories plausible or convincing (see also Nattrass, 2013).

4.4 ENVIRONMENTAL DECISIONS

Sociologist Goertzel (2010) makes a special case of conspiracy theories in science more generally, which includes HIV/AIDS conspiracy theories, Genetically Modified Food (GMO) conspiracy theories, and those concerning vaccines, but also climate change conspiracy theories. One recent survey showed that over a third of Americans agree that global warming is a hoax (Public Policy Polling, 2013), making climate skepticism very much a mainstream belief. In general, climate skeptics argue that climate change either is not occurring, or at least that humans are not the cause. More extreme climate skeptics assert that climate scientists are involved in data faking and fraud so that they ensure that they keep receiving research funding. In the UK the 'climategate' scandal concerning climate scientists at the University of East Anglia demonstrates the importance of beliefs about climate change and the lengths that people are prepared to go to (e.g., hacking emails) to attempt to discredit climate science. These conspiracy theories continue to resonate long after the claims were discredited (Anderegg & Goldsmith, 2014; Bricker, 2013; Jacques and Connolly-Knox, 2016; McCright & Dunlap, 2011).

Some recent research suggests that climate change conspiracies influence people's environmental intentions. Specifically, psychologists Jolley and Douglas (2014b) exposed a sample of British undergraduate students to a narrative about climate change conspiracy theories (e.g., that climate change is a hoax designed by climate scientists to obtain research funding), arguments refuting the conspiracy narrative, or no arguments (control). Participants were asked to indicate their intentions to engage in a range of climate-friendly behaviours over the next 12 months (e.g., "Do you intend to walk or cycle more than driving or using public transport?"). Results revealed that participants who had been exposed to the conspiracy narrative showed lower intentions to engage in the climate friendly behaviours, an effect partially explained by feelings of powerlessness, uncertainty and disillusionment. Although this research has not used behavioural dependent measures (e.g., whether people donate money to climate organisations, whether they actively reduce their carbon footprint), it suggests that conspiracy theories at least inform what people intend to do on important matters such as climate change and vaccination as discussed earlier.

It should be noted, however, that not all climate change conspiracy theories are anti-science. In fact, some of these conspiracy theories side with scientists against alleged governmental and corporate interference. Douglas and Sutton (2015) examined conspiracy theories on both 'sides' of the climate debate, and argued that whilst the most well known and debatably right wing climate conspiracy theories are anti-science, some of the more debatably left wing conspiracy theories are very much in favour of the scientific consensus, arguing that scientific evidence is being hidden or at least watered down. Specifically, some environmental groups suggest that solid, scientific information about climate change is being deliberately hidden for political reasons, as when information was omitted from the 2014 IPCC report about China's gas emissions. Other conspiracy theories cite support for the idea that large corporations with interests in the fossil fuel industry are suppressing climate science

findings. Such conspiracy theories receive much less airtime than the right-wing anti-science versions, and their consequences are therefore unexplored.

4.5 POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

Conspiracy theories have also been linked to political attitudes and behaviours. Specifically, in the same paper as described above, Jolley and Douglas (2014b) asked a different sample of British undergraduate and postgraduate students to read a narrative that either argued in favour of political conspiracy theories (e.g., examples of government involvement in political plots and schemes), or a narrative refuting the conspiracy theories. Participants were asked to rate how likely they would vote in the next election. Findings revealed that participants who were exposed to conspiracy theories, compared to those who were presented with refuting information, showed less intention to vote in the next election. This effect was partially explained by feelings of political powerlessness. Another negative outcome is decreased political trust – political scientists Einstein and Glick (2013) exposed samples of crowdsourced participants (from Amazon's Mechanical Turk) to conspiracy claims, or a narrative disputing conspiracy claims. It was found that exposure to the conspiracy theories negatively affected trust in government and institutions, even when the institutions were not connected to the allegations (see also Kim & Cao, 2016). Further, in the study by Butler et al. (1995) also described earlier, participants who had viewed the conspiracy film *JFK* showed lower intentions to engage in the political process by voting or making political contributions. Uscinski and Parent (2014) also showed that people who showed higher conspiracy mindset were less likely to register to vote, actually go out and vote, donate money to candidate, or put up political signs at their homes.

On the other hand, conspiracy theories may be associated with intentions to engage in political action against elites. Imhoff and Bruder (2014) examined conspiracy belief and intentions to act in support of a nuclear phase-out following the Fukushima nuclear power plant disaster in 2011, by showing an intention to engage in protests. Amongst a sample of German respondents, it was found that conspiracy belief was significantly and positively associated with the intention to engage in political actions in support of a nuclear phase-out. Conspiracy belief may therefore trigger behaviours aimed at challenging the status quo and those in power.

There is little research on how conspiracy thinking or beliefs alter other political opinions, excepting that of Lewandowsky, Gignac and Oberauer (2013) who showed that underlying conspiracy thinking drives people to reject climate science findings and other scientific findings. Uscinski and Parent (2014) do briefly note that there is great heterogeneity within parties and ideologies, and that some of this may be explained by conspiracy thinking. Support for the Iraq War came largely from Republicans, but there was dissent. When asked if it was a mistake to invade Iraq, 33 per cent of those showing a higher conspiracy mindset, compared to 15 per cent of those showing lower conspiracy mindset, thought the Iraq War was a mistake. Most Democrats, regardless of conspiracy mindset, were against the invasion of Iraq. This flipped when they looked at the Afghanistan War. Whereas George W. Bush 'owned' the Iraq War, voters saw Afghanistan as Obama's war. Similarly, dissent by Democrats was predicted by conspiracy thinking. When asked if it was a mistake to invade Afghanistan, 50 per cent of Democrats with high conspiracy predispositions said yes, compared to just over a third of those with medium and low predispositions. So conspiracy predispositions predict opinions that seem counter to the opinions associated with party or ideology, and this suggests that conspiracy thinking may short-circuit the messages going from party elites to party masses.

4.6 RADICALISATION AND EXTREMISM

It has also been argued that conspiracy theories can in some cases be radicalising. For example, UK think-tank researchers from DEMOS (Bartlett & Miller, 2010) argue that conspiracy theories may catalyse radicalised and extremist behaviour. Bartlett and Miller analysed the content of a broad range of extremist groups and found that conspiracy theories are not only prevalent throughout, but that there is a great deal of overlap between the conspiracy theories mentioned, even across extremist groups at opposite ends of the political spectrum (this evidence is consistent with van Prooijen et al.'s (2015) work linking conspiracy beliefs with political extremism - see the section on political factors). For instance, they found that anti-Jewish capitalist conspiracy theories were features of both right-

and left-wing extremist groups. Drawing conclusions from these findings, Bartlett and Miller argued that conspiracy theories play important social and functional roles for extremist groups. Specifically, they may be a "radicalizing multiplier" (p. 4) that contributes and reinforces the ideologies and psychological processes within the group. For example, conspiracy theories may fuel the perception that enemies surround the group, and in turn lead to hostile attributions for all of their actions. Extreme and violent behaviour may result from these thought processes. Bartlett and Miller argue that counter-terrorism strategies must therefore address the misinformation that groups believe when they subscribe to conspiracy theories.

More generally, conspiracy belief has been linked to violent intentions. For example, Uscinski and Parent (2014) conducted a US nationally representative survey, asking participants a broad set of questions. They separated participants who were more inclined toward conspiracy theories from those who were less inclined. Results showed that those who were more inclined toward conspiracy theories were more likely to agree that "violence is sometimes an acceptable way to express disagreement with the government" than those less inclined. High conspiracy believers were also found to be more in favour of lax gun ownership laws. Going back to an earlier study we discussed (Douglas & Sutton, 2011), it is also relevant here to remember that willingness to conspire was strongly associated with conspiracy belief. Sadly, the world is all too familiar with cases of people who have committed violence on the basis of conspiracy ideas (e.g., Timothy McVeigh, Anders Brevik) and of governments committing violence based on conspiracy theories and propaganda (e.g., Nazi Germany, Stalin's Russia). To explain the contemporary prevalence of conspiracy theories in the Arab world, Gray (2010) proposes that marginalisation of certain groups, such as Islamists, leads them to use conspiracy rhetoric. This was coupled with Arab states' elitism and failure of transparency, which increases the distance between the state and the societies, and their actual conspiratorial activities.

4.7 WORKPLACE ENGAGEMENT

Psychologists DiFonzo, Bordia and Rosnow (1994) discuss the detrimental consequences of "questionable information" such as rumours, in the workplace. They argue that despite appearing to be trivial notions shared around the water fountain, rumours can drain productivity, create stress in the workplace, reduce profits, and denigrate a company's image. Although rumours and conspiracy theories differ in one crucial element – that rumours do not necessarily imply the collusion of individuals and groups – some important parallels can be drawn. For example, both can reduce trust in authorities, both more often than not lack proof, and both are often relied upon when reliable information is not available, or endorsed in particular under conditions of some uncertainty.

Psychologists Douglas and Leite (2016) carried out an investigation of the effects of conspiracy theorising in the workplace. In one of their experiments, the researchers asked participants to read a workplace scenario and to imagine that this was their workplace. Half of the participants received a conspiracy scenario (e.g., about a leaked email suggesting that the management team are 'fixing' the pay budget to line their own pockets) and half were in a control condition. The researchers measured turnover intentions, organisational commitment and job satisfaction. Results revealed that participants who had imagined the conspiratorial workplace were more likely want to leave that workplace than those in the control condition. This effect was driven by lower feelings of commitment and lower job satisfaction. This pattern of findings was shown across three studies. Rather than being reserved for large, societal events of significant political importance, it seems that conspiracy theorising penetrates even the most fundamental parts of people's everyday lives (see also van Prooijen and de Vries, 2016, for similar findings in a correlational study).

4.8 POTENTIAL BENEFITS OF CONSPIRACY THEORIES

We would like to make a brief note about the potentially positive consequences of conspiracy theories. For example, psychological research has revealed that belief in 9/11 conspiracy theories tends to be associated with greater support for democratic principles (Swami,

Chamorro-Premuzic, & Furnham, 2010). Although this is a correlational finding and it is, therefore, difficult to establish if there is a causal relationship between these factors, it does suggest that there may be positive outcomes associated with conspiracy belief.

It has also been argued that conspiracy theories may allow individuals to question or challenge dominance hierarchies and query the actions of powerful groups. One positive consequence of these challenges could be that governments are encouraged to be more transparent (e.g., Clarke, 2002; Fenster, 1999; Swami & Coles, 2010). There is some anecdotal support for this idea. Specifically, Freedom of Information requests by conspiracist individuals or organisations have resulted in the declassification of many official documents such as the declassification of Project Blue Book – the U.S. Air Force's own internal investigation into UFO sightings – which came about due to the questioning of UFO enthusiasts (Clark, 1998). Conspiracy theories can also reveal inconsistencies in government or official versions of events (e.g., Clarke, 2002), may open up issues for discussion that would otherwise be closed (Miller, 2002), and may even uncover real conspiracies (Swami & Coles, 2010). Further, Franks et al. (2013) argue that conspiracy theories, rather than de-motivating individuals, may in some circumstances where a clear path to action is clear, mobilise collective action against elites.

Indeed, various scholars view conspiracy theories as results of people's and groups' attempts to understand social and political reality. For example, Knight (2001) understands conspiracy theories as symptoms rather than causes of social dysfunction and proposes that conspiracy theories could be seen as a part of a class-based alienation from contemporary neo-liberalism. Knight (2000, 2002, 2008) also points out that the postmodern erosion of the boundaries between real and paranoia, self and other is the root cause of the popularity of conspiracy theories. In postmodern eclecticism and playfulness, conspiracy theories seem to be a part of the zeitgeist. Spark (2001) agrees and accepts conspiracy theories as a part of the mainstream culture, which voice the discontent in contemporary politics. In parallel, Melley (2000, 2002) proposes that current everyday uncertainties create an agency panic, and anxiety about loss of autonomy, which provides the foundations for the prevalence of conspiracy theories. Further, Jameson (1992) claims that conspiracy theories function as cognitive maps for people to comprehend social and political realities. Others go still further and argue that since elites do engage in corruption and conspiracy, conspiracy beliefs may often be rational and a crucial instrument in holding authorities to account (Basham, 2003, 2016; Dentith, 2016a, 2016b). Singh (2016) argues that globalisation has resulted in the increasing power of informally rather than formally networked elites, meaning that conspiracist understandings of the world order may increasingly reflect political realities.

Therefore, although we have focused mainly on the harms that conspiracy theories may present for society, we would caution against a demonisation of conspiracy theories and the people who communicate them. Instead of doing society a disservice, they may be identifying issues in society that need to be repaired. In fact, both are possible - we can view conspiracy theories as harmful in some respects but also an important ingredient of democratic discourse (Moore, 2016a, 2016b).

SECTION SUMMARY

Conspiracy theories change people's attitudes – reading about conspiracy theories leads people to become more in favour of them, and people may not be aware that their attitudes have changed.

Although research is correlational and is, therefore, difficult to establish cause and effect, belief in conspiracy theories has been linked to prejudiced attitudes against outgroups, both high and low power.

Conspiracy theories have been linked to poor health choices, and research shows that medical conspiracy theories have at their core an underlying distrust of authorities and scientific expertise.

Research suggests that exposure to governmental conspiracy theories may lead to apathy and inaction, but other research suggests that although conspiracy theories may de-motivate people from taking normative political action (e.g., voting), they may promote actions aimed at challenging the status quo and those in power.

Belief in conspiracy theories tends to be highest at the political extremes and has been linked by scholars to the potential for radicalisation and extremism. Some evidence supports this idea in that conspiracy belief

has been linked to violent intentions and personal willingness to conspire. There are many examples of individuals committing terrorist acts on the basis of conspiracy ideas.

Conspiracy theories may also influence how people feel about their workplace.

There may also be benefits of conspiracy theories, such as encouraging government transparency.

5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Scholarly efforts to understand the appeal and consequences of conspiracy theories have yielded a diverse and interdisciplinary literature, which we have reviewed in this report. We have argued that conspiracy theories are much more than trivial notions and should be taken seriously for several reasons.

First, there are a variety of reasons why a person might adopt conspiracy theories, ranging from personality traits to satisfying complex social needs. Conspiracy theories are also communicated by many different means, satisfying a broad set of political, psychological and social motives. Finally, conspiracy theories have effects both for individuals and important societal institutions. Their risks (and benefits) are far-reaching and we argue that much more research needs to be conducted to fully understand the importance of this pervasive social phenomenon..

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