



## OPEN ACCESS

EDITED AND REVIEWED BY  
Tobias Eberwein,  
Austrian Academy of Sciences (OeAW), Austria

\*CORRESPONDENCE  
Matthew N. Hannah  
✉ hannah8@purdue.edu  
Christopher T. Conner  
✉ chris.conner@missouri.edu

RECEIVED 08 August 2024  
ACCEPTED 27 August 2024  
PUBLISHED 05 September 2024

CITATION  
Hannah MN and Conner CT (2024) Editorial:  
Paranoid publics: conspiracy theories and the  
public sphere. *Front. Commun.* 9:1477887.  
doi: 10.3389/fcomm.2024.1477887

COPYRIGHT  
© 2024 Hannah and Conner. This is an  
open-access article distributed under the  
terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution  
License \(CC BY\)](#). The use, distribution or  
reproduction in other forums is permitted,  
provided the original author(s) and the  
copyright owner(s) are credited and that the  
original publication in this journal is cited, in  
accordance with accepted academic practice.  
No use, distribution or reproduction is  
permitted which does not comply with these  
terms.

# Editorial: Paranoid publics: conspiracy theories and the public sphere

Matthew N. Hannah<sup>1\*</sup> and Christopher T. Conner<sup>2\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Purdue University, West Lafayette, IN, United States, <sup>2</sup>University of Missouri, Columbia, MO,  
United States

## KEYWORDS

conspiracy theories, communication studies, sociology, information studies, internet  
studies, media studies

## Editorial on the Research Topic

### Paranoid publics: conspiracy theories and the public sphere

*“Chatter amongst those in control has begun. They know we know which means the public will know.”*

- Q

Conspiracy theories have become a seemingly unavoidable aspect of both online and offline life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Although most individuals now have vast resources for information access and retrieval, we are still susceptible to explain historical events through paranoid delusions about secret plotters controlling our lives. National tragedies, unexplained phenomena, and major historical events spark a flurry of online conspiracy theorists “simply asking questions.” Conspiracy narratives bleed from the dark corners of the internet and into the mainstream via social-media platforms, family gatherings, and other interpersonal relations. Openly embracing these ideas used to be a closely guarded secret, for fear of public censure. Today these ideas are now broadcast on nightly television newscasts. Tucker Carlson, before he was terminated from Fox News, for example, routinely championed the white-supremacist “Great Replacement” conspiracy theory, which posits that elites are deliberately replacing white people with migrants (Bond, 2023). Former American president Donald Trump appeared at a CNN town hall for his 2024 re-election campaign and repeated his now-familiar mantra about the 2020 elections being stolen despite promises to stop spreading such lies publicly (Lowell, 2023). Online and offline communities bleed into one another, and ideas espoused on social media become offline ideologies, which affect personal relationships and public discourse: we are facing a public crisis caused by bad information.

Although conspiracy theories have been a prominent aspect of American public and political life since the nation’s founding (Walker, 2013; Uscinski and Parent, 2014), they have become more visible and easily transmissible through social-media platforms (Cinelli et al., 2022). If the internet represents the contemporary public square, a space in which public discourse happens, the rise and spread of paranoid and delusional conspiracy theories through a fully networked society represents a challenge to the notion of a fundamentally reasonable public sphere (Papacharissi, 2002). In the wake of the 2016 U.S. presidential elections, the online public sphere underwent a fundamental transformation in which the trolling *jouissance* of the chans (Phillips, 2015)—imageboards in which anonymous individuals post about any

number of topics from anime to porn to conspiracy theories—gave rise to QAnon, a repackaged antisemitic conspiracy theory for the internet age. While the conspiracy theory itself is nothing new, as a social phenomenon the speed of its spread, additional layers of complexity added to it, and the power it holds over others is nothing short of fascinating—especially because of Q's eschatological predictions consistently failing to materialize. Instead, the particularities of the QAnon mythos have produced a widespread conspiracism extending far beyond the actual QAnon community into the broader public consciousness (Muirhead and Rosenblum, 2019; Sommer, 2023). Conspiracy theories have now become a mainstream form of public discourse, such that even ostensibly non-politicized topics such as vaccine usage during a global pandemic are debatable by common citizens doing their own “research” (Birchall and Knight, 2022). In such a flooded information zone as the internet, citizen investigations can aspire to the same authority as any other official information source.

The contemporary public sphere is thus both fragmented and, at the same time, aggregate; moreover, the various shards have become equally viable as competing public spaces due to the ubiquity and scope of platforms, which have become de facto public spheres in the information society (Hassan, 2008; Çela, 2015). The complexity of such a networked public sphere has only increased since 2016 and produced a “multiverse” of public spheres, which exist simultaneously within various internet echo chambers and enclaves but which interface with one another through ideological and political eruptions. Furthermore, these various public spheres vie for legitimacy and authority even when they are paranoid, delusional, and conspiratorial, and there seems to be no official mechanism to expel them from public consideration as legitimate alternatives (Habermas, 2022). The question thus remains whether a normative public sphere against which competing modes of publicness can be measured is even possible today.

The essays in this cluster address the various aspects of the public sphere in the age of conspiracy theory. Each author maps different contours of the “paranoid publics” that structure our democracy. From the prevalence of conspiracy rhetoric within alternative health spaces (Conner) to the impact of conspiracy theory on public health (Pinazo-Calatayud et al.), from

conspiracism in public spaces such as libraries (Greer and Beene) to the symbolic logic of conspiracy theory (Hughes), the articles in this cluster provide important new perspectives on the public impact of conspiracism. As de Zeeuw theorizes in his contribution to the cluster, “The resulting *weaponization* of digital public sphere imaginaries complicates attempts to recuperate the idea (I) of a digital public sphere as a solution to a ‘polluted’ information environment.” The contributions to “paranoid publics” thus reveal the dangers of complexities of a coherent publicness in the era of social media and increasing extremism. We may soon discover that an increasingly extreme conspiracism has become the normal mode of engaging the world.

## Author contributions

MH: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. CC: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

## Funding

The author(s) declare that no financial support was received for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

## Publisher's note

All claims expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of their affiliated organizations, or those of the publisher, the editors and the reviewers. Any product that may be evaluated in this article, or claim that may be made by its manufacturer, is not guaranteed or endorsed by the publisher.

## References

- Birchall, C., and Knight, P. (2022). Do your own research: conspiracy theories and the internet. *Soc. Res.* 89, 579–605. doi: 10.1353/sor.2022.0049
- Bond, S. (2023). *How Tucker Carlson Took Fringe Conspiracy Theories to a Mass Audience*. NPR. Available at: <https://www.npr.org/2023/04/25/1171800317/how-tucker-carlsons-extremist-narratives-shaped-fox-news-and-conservative-politi> (accessed April 25, 2023).
- Çela, E. (2015). Social media as a new form of public sphere. *Eur. J. Soc. Sci. Educ. Res.* 2, 195–200. doi: 10.26417/ejser.v4i1.p195-200
- Cinelli, M., Etta, G., Avalle, M., Quattrocioni, A., Di Marco, N., Valensise, C., et al. (2022). Conspiracy theories and social media platforms. *Curr. Opin. Psychol.* 47:101407. doi: 10.1016/j.copsyc.2022.101407
- Habermas, J. (2022). Reflections and hypotheses on a further structural transformation of the political public sphere. *Theor. Cult. Soc.* 39, 145–171. doi: 10.1177/02632764221112341
- Hassan, R. (2008). *The Information Society: Cyber Dreams and Digital Nightmares*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Lowell, H. (2023). *Trump's Team Revels in Town Hall Victory as CNN Staff Rages at 'Spectacle of Lies'*. The Guardian. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2023/may/12/trump-town-hall-cnn-staff-rages> (accessed May 12, 2023).
- Muirhead, R., and Rosenblum, N. L. (2019). *A Lot of People Are Saying: The New Conspiracism and the Assault on Democracy*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press. doi: 10.2307/j.ctv941trn
- Papacharissi, Z. (2002). The virtual sphere: the internet as a public sphere. *New Media Soc.* 4, 9–27. doi: 10.1177/1461444022226244
- Phillips, W. (2015). *This Is Why We Can't Have Nice Things: Mapping the Relationship between Online Trolling and Mainstream Culture*. The Information Society Series. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. doi: 10.7551/mitpress/10288.001.0001
- Sommer, W. (2023). *Trust the Plan: The Rise of QAnon and the Conspiracy that Unhinged America*. New York: Harper Collins.
- Uscinski, J., and Parent, J. (2014). *American Conspiracy Theories*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. doi: 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199351800.001.0001
- Walker, J. (2013). *The United States of Paranoia: A Conspiracy Theory*. First edition. New York: Harper.