

Are Conspiracy Theories a Force for the Good?

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The NSA spies on you. Before Edward Snowden leaked classified information in 2013, which confirmed this claim, many would probably have shrugged it off as a “mere” *conspiracy theory*. What about now? Is the theory that the NSA spies on you *still* a conspiracy theory, now that it is a widely held (and apparently well-evidenced) belief?

It seems common to think that it’s not. That Caesar was murdered by a conspiracy of Roman senators, or that 9/11 was the outcome of a conspiracy among members of al-Quaeda does not make these historical accounts *conspiracy theories*. For many, the latter requires that there is an element of speculation, perhaps paranoia in the belief of such theory.

Interestingly, most philosophers who work on conspiracy theories disagree with that common understanding of the term. They find it hard to identify features that make conspiracy theories an intrinsically bad explanation type, in part because some initially suspicious conspiracy theories (like, perhaps, the theory that the NSA is spying on you) later turned out to be true. Instead, these philosophers argue that “conspiracy theory” should be defined widely: *a conspiracy theory is the explanation of an event that cites conspiring agents as a salient cause*. Consequently, we are all conspiracy theorists. Everyone who believes that some historical event came about thanks to the successful secret collaboration of several individuals believes in a conspiracy theory and thus is a conspiracy theorist, and surely everyone believes this of some event.

Since some of these accounts are true and known to be true (e.g. that the assassination of Caesar was due to a conspiracy), believing in a conspiracy theory as such can’t be irrational or misguided. *In principle* then there is nothing wrong with conspiracy theories or belief in such theories. Of course, sometimes conspiracy theories are mistaken and sometimes they are believed on the basis of insufficient evidence, but that is the possible fate of every theory. There is nothing that makes conspiracy theories particularly irrational, doubtful or fishy, just because they are conspiracy theories.

Accordingly, attempts by psychologists and sociologists to investigate the psychological and social profile of conspiracy believers might be seen as nothing but a witch-hunt. In a recent public statement, a group of social epistemologists and sociologists (Matthew R. X. Dentith, Lee Basham, David Coady, Ginna Husting, Martin Orr, Kurtis Hagen, Marius Raab), even argue that such witch-hunt endangers our (development towards an) open society. In their paper, *Social Science’s Conspiracy-Theory Panic: Now They Want to Cure Everyone*, which was published last year by the *Social Epistemology Review & Reply Collective*, they say:

“[W]e believe that it is not conspiracy theorizing that is the danger, but rather the pathologizing response to conspiracy theories.

The antidote to whatever problems conspiracy theories present is vigilance, not some faux intellectual sophistication which dismisses conspiracy theories out of hand. It’s really quite simple when you think about it: conspiracy theorising is essential to the functioning of any democracy, or indeed any ethically responsible society.”

The argument behind it is that conspiracy theorising keeps the public in critical control of the people in power and might prevent the latter from doing serious harm. Such critically minded citizens should be interested in developing an even more open society with institutions that exercise mutual control, one might add, because that’s what makes conspiring much harder. So, is conspiracy theorising not actually a danger to our current political system, but rather a force for the good?

I believe that these philosophers and sociologists are right in thinking that the problem with (certain) conspiracy theories is not their *explanation type*, and that the fault of conspiracy theories needs to be identified on a case by case basis in the many ways in which people make mistakes when theorising. But from that it doesn’t follow that conspiracy theorising in a society is largely a force for the good or that we should welcome it in the interest of an open society.

On the contrary, *conspiracy theorising is a danger to the institutions of the open society*, and this can be shown on the basis of social epistemological considerations alone.

In any case, it can already be made plausible on the basis of empirical evidence. Have a look around at countries that were on a path to open, democratic societies with separation of power, freedom of speech, etc. and in which conspiracy theories have played a significant role in political campaigns that led to political change. The examples I have in mind are Turkey, Hungary, Poland, and the USA. In all these cases, the political change induced was then not at all towards a general strengthening of the institutions of open societies so that these could better exercise mutual control. On the contrary, the change was towards a mutilation of these institutions and a development away from an open society towards a closed society that displays elements of an autocracy.

Now, obviously, in all these cases there is a variety of factors that came together and led to the particular political development. I don’t want to argue that it is only due to conspiracy theorising that these countries got off the path to an open society. But I do want to argue that conspiracy theorising has been a causal factor in this process. There is an epistemological explanation for the turn these societies took.

To see this, reflect for a minute on the things you know and why you know them. Most of that knowledge stems from testimony. A lot of it stems from the testimony of people that you do not know personally but that you have trusted anyway because you realized that they have the relevant expertise on the matter. You get knowledge from reading the news, watching TV, reading books,

attending classes in college or school, talking to a physician or a lawyer. The fact that you attain *knowledge* on the basis of what you read, see, and hear there is due to the fact that the people that certain institutions (like the media, the universities, colleges, and schools) present as experts actually are experts.

Now, unless we have intimate insight into these institutions ourselves and know how journalists, scientists, lawyers, physicians, etc. work; how they are trained and selected and what track record they have of getting things right, we are typically not in a position to evaluate ourselves whether trust in these experts is justified. But then how do we realize their expertise? Well, typically we do that on testimony as well. You picked it up from people that you already trusted on a personal level - like your parents and others in your close vicinity - who told you that you can *also* trust these institutions and their experts. Your parents, or those others in your close vicinity had themselves then either direct personal reasons to trust specific experts (perhaps based on personal acquaintance) or also indirect reasons for such trust, based on the testimony of yet others.

For such networks of trust to lead to *knowledge*, this must somewhere bottom out in (collective) direct knowledge of the reliability of the procedures used to generate the knowledge in the first place. But, typically, most people do not have that direct knowledge.

You learn from your physician that you should vaccinate your children because the benefits far outweigh the possible health risks this might pose for your children. You don't know what the evidence for that claim is, you don't typically check the data that your physician bases her recommendations on. And that makes sense: if presented with the empirical data and their statistical analysis, most people would be unable to see whether the data seems uncorrupted and whether the conclusions drawn from it are justified. They are better off believing their physician, because *she is the expert*.

In *her* judgment, to be sure, your physician will be relying on other expert testimony herself. The statistical methods she is using were developed and checked by statisticians who themselves used mathematical methods that *they* did not verify, etc. This division of cognitive labour in our complex societies is not just a matter of saving us valuable time. It is a matter of necessity. We cannot check all the interdependent knowledge claims in our society because it would be *impossible* to acquire all the expertise that we'd need for doing this.

So, on the one hand, our society with its division of cognitive labour and its institutions that train and systematically educate highly specialized and knowledgeable experts, and that provide incentive structures and selection processes which lead to reliable and trustworthy performance of these experts, generates a lot of knowledge. However, on the other hand, this does not by itself guarantee that everyone can automatically benefit from the generated knowledge. One needs to happen to stand in a number of stable enough personal trust relations of the right kind in order to be able to get oneself to trust in the output of these knowledge generating institutions.

After all, for all that most people directly know about academia, the media and the schools, and for all knowledge of facts they observed themselves and that

they can use in order to verify claims made by members of these institutions, this “generated knowledge” could all just be a major scam. Which brings us back to our conspiracy theorists.

In many of the contemporary problematic conspiracy theories, the relevant conspirators are many, if not all of the institutions that, in open societies, are supposed to exercise mutual control. Big pharma lobbies politicians and pays scientists and the media to convince everyone else that vaccinations are beneficial and pretty harmless to the recipient in order to make profit.

If you think you have reason to believe such a conspiracy theory, this has repercussions for your epistemic situation. Let us assume that you falsely believe that vaccination is harmful for the recipient but that this is covered up in the way and for the reasons described above.

The heuristic rules that the relevant institutions provide for the identification of expertise (e.g. having a scientific degree, being employed at such an institution, etc.) will then become useless to you (unless, of course, you’d see that the institutions react appropriately to the alleged fraud by firing corrupt scientists or journalists, which, of course, they don’t, since your theory is false). It will also impact the way you view the rest of the trust network. Those members of your family or your immediate vicinity who initially provided a pathway to benefit from the knowledge produced by the institutions of your society are now unreliable. You don’t need to think that they tried to mislead you, it is sufficient to think that they too have been misled. And indeed, if pressed on details of your new vaccination conspiracy theory they don’t have direct evidence that they can provide against it, right? So, they naively believed on hearsay, and you can now “enlighten” them.

As a result, however, you are cut off the knowledge generated in your society. Presumably you have a residual core of personal trust relations left. At least those relations with your fellow “truthers”, the people who put you initially in the know about the purported large-scale conspiracy that is going on in your society. Your interest will be that none of the institutions that have failed you will get in between you and those you personally trust. It will be rational for you to prefer an information flow architecture that gives you unfiltered and immediate access to information, coming from persons to which you (believe to) stand in a direct trust relation.

This is rational for someone who believes a false conspiracy theory, because for her it seems that the institutions that are meant to filter, mediate, or cross-check information, are all corrupt or broken. Note that even though personal trust is necessary to participate in the knowledge generated in your society, your trust in its institutions is not *completely* based on testimony. For one thing, you may have direct evidence that the experts in your society can’t be completely incompetent. Technology typically works and makes progress, occasionally things turn out the way that politicians promised such that you experience the consequences of that improvement yourself. But normally you also observe that when things go wrong, there are correcting mechanisms: journalists report, say, that scientists falsified their data, and politics and academia react properly. Studies are retracted, perhaps laws are changed in order to ensure higher standards, policies that were

based on the misinformation are changed, the scientists get punished or fired. Thus, in order to have trust in the institutions of your society, you don't need to believe that everything is always going well. But you need to believe that *when* things go wrong, the mutual control mechanisms of these institutions will detect and correct the mistakes, and you have occasionally evidence that this indeed happens.

Now, as we already noted before, in case that you believe a *false* conspiracy theory, none of this happens. The vaccination program doesn't stop, scientists just deny the allegations, politicians even discuss to introduce a formal duty to vaccinate in order to force vaccination sceptics like you to comply. You can directly observe that the system is broken. Why should you want corrupt institutions to become even stronger?

If you get someone who you personally trust into power – perhaps even into presidency -, you will not be interested in having that person's actions controlled by corrupt institutions. The influence of these institutions would need to be reduced, their political power limited, the swamp must be drained. It will be rational to prefer the destruction of (what actually are) institutions of the open society. That is precisely what we can empirically observe when open societies take an autocratic turn based on false conspiracy theories.

We started with the observation that conspiracies sometimes happen and that, therefore, belief in a conspiracy theory can't be irrational just because you believe that certain events are orchestrated by a conspiracy. Indeed, uncovering actual conspiracies in our society is important. Conspiracy theorising might occasionally be onto something, and when it is we need to know. So, shouldn't one conclude that conspiracy theorising is an important force for the good in our society? Shouldn't we tolerate the growth of false conspiracy theories as a harmless (and sometimes even somewhat entertaining) side-effect of an important control mechanism?

I have argued that this would be naïve. False conspiracy theories are dangerous for the institutions of open societies. They undermine and eventually destroy the trust network that is necessary for these institutions to perform their primary functions. As a consequence, their very existence may be put in question. It is thus necessary that we understand why (some) people are prone to believe false conspiracy theories even though the evidential situations for these theories seems objectively bad. This will require epistemological, sociological and psychological research on conspiracy theories and their believers. This is not a witch hunt.