Session 7
COVID-19 / Mass media & misinformation

30228 - Sociology of conspiracy theories - summer-term 2023

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COVID-19 conspiracy theories

Imhoff, R., & Lamberty, P. (2020)

Research interest

- How do conspiracy beliefs affect behaviours?

"Specifically, we tested whether conspiracy beliefs claiming that the pandemic is a <u>hoax</u> are linked to a weaker support of <u>containment-related behavior</u> compared to perceiving the pandemic as <u>human-made</u> which should be linked to a stronger support of <u>self-centered prepping behavior</u>." (Imhoff and Lamberty, 2020, p. 1110)

Mechanisms

- Conspiracy mentality → distrust in science and medicine

- Conformity vs. Need for uniqueness

- Hoax belief vs. Bioweapon belief

Measures

- COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs: hoax & human made

- Pandemic related behaviors

- Threat perception

- Conspiracy mentality scale

- Conservatism

Measures (Table 1: Factor analysis)

Pandemic-related Behaviors	Study 1 (United States)		Study 2a (United States)		Study 2b (UK)	
1. Disinfecting hands after being outside		.783		.704		.375
2. Avoiding social contacts		.744		.716		.700
3. Washing hands after being outside		.740		.715		.715
4. Avoiding crowds		.725		.840		.643
5. Not touching the face while being outside		.660		.741		.477
6. Staying at home in quarantine		.614		.591		.448
7. Stocking up on food	.457	.558	—	—	—	—
8. Stocking up on sanitary items	.492	.541	.485	.317	.442	
9. Buying weapons for defense and security purposes	.702		.751		.396	
10. Stocking up on petrol and oil	.723		.812		.372	
11. Buying equipment for water storage and water purification	.685		.810		.530	
12. Withdrawing available cash from my bank account	.662		.777		.479	
13. Wearing protective face masks out of the house	.625		.729		.576	
14. Invest in stock market	.474		(.690)			
15. Using alternative remedies like homeopathy or essential oils	.506		.766		.479	
16. Searching information by alternative media online	.530	.312	.483		.418	
17. Spreading information online	.519		—	—	—	—
Eigenvalue (% of variance)	2.54 (14.09)	4.98 (27.66)	4.88 (32.51)	3.06 (20.37)	1.71 (11.39)	2.32 (15.46)

Results (study 1)

on the two conspiracy belief scales and added political orientation.[1] In line with our predictions, believing that COVID-19 was a hoax was a strong negative prediction of containment-related behaviors such as handwashing and keeping physical distance, $B = -0.345$, $SE = 0.063$, $p < .001$, whereas believing in a human origin of the coronavirus was not, $B = 0.049$, $SE = 0.060$, $p = .413$. Self-reported conservatism had no prediction above and beyond these, $B = .050$, $SE = .047$, $p = .286$. The local effect size of COVID-19 hoax above and beyond the other predictors was thus $f^2 = .133$.

For self-centered prepping behavior, the pattern was less clear-cut as it was uniquely associated (as expected) with conspiracy beliefs about human creation of the coronavirus, $B = 0.217$, $SE = 0.063$, $p = .001$, but not with the idea that COVID-19 is a hoax, $B = 0.087$, $SE = 0.066$, $p = .187$, or conservatism, $B = 0.067$, $SE = 0.049$, $p = .173$. Thus, even claiming that COVID-19 was not worse than a common flu was associated with self-reports of behavior characterized as over-

Results (study 2, US)

Table.S2

Results of the Stepwise Regression Analysis in Study 2a (US) for recommended pandemic behavior

Block of predictors	Model 1				Model 2				Model 3			
	B	*SE*	β	*p*	*B*	*SE*	β	*p*	*B*	*SE*	β	*p*
Block 1: Conspiracy Theories												
COVID-19 Hoax	-.448	.052	-.601	< .001	-.473	.052	-.634	< .001	-.302	.052	-.405	< .001
SARS-Cov-2 Human-Made	.080	.052	.106	.129	.045	.053	.060	.395	-.009	.050	-.011	.863
Block 2: including political orientation												
Political Orientation					.098	.035	.158	.005	.066	.032	.107	.041
Right-Wing Authoritarianism (RWA)												
Social Dominance Orientation (SDO)												
Block 3: control variables												
COVID-19 Threat									.320	.042	.367	< .001
Openness (Big 5)									.031	.061	.025	.611
Conscientiousness (Big 5)									.287	.068	.224	.000
Extraversion (Big 5)									-.122	.058	-.103	.036
Agreeableness (Big 5)									.067	.062	.054	.287
Neuroticism (Big 5)									.019	.059	.017	.753
Age									.008	.005	.072	.131

Note. $N = 288$.

Results (study 2, US)

Table.S3

Results of the Stepwise Regression Analysis in Study 2a (US) for non-recommended pandemic behavior

Block of predictors	Model 1				Model 2				Model 3			
	B	*SE*	β	*p*	*B*	*SE*	β	*p*	*B*	*SE*	β	*p*
Block 1: Conspiracy Theories												
COVID-19 Hoax	.252	.062	.261	< .001	.188	.056	.195	.001	.254	.053	.263	< .001
SARS-Cov-2 Human-Made	.412	.062	.423	< .001	.282	.058	.290	< .001	.216	.052	.222	< .001
Block 2: including political orientation												
Political Orientation												
Right-Wing Authoritarianism (RWA)					.617	.077	.380	< .001	.318	.075	.196	< .001
Social Dominance Orientation (SDO)												
Block 3: control variables												
COVID-19 Threat									.406	.045	.359	< .001
Openness (Big 5)									-.054	.065	-.034	.408
Conscientiousness (Big 5)									-.211	.070	-.127	.003
Extraversion (Big 5)									.126	.060	.083	.037
Agreeableness (Big 5)									-.026	.065	-.016	.693
Neuroticism (Big 5)									-.063	.060	-.044	.301
Age									-.016	.005	-.118	.002

Note. $N = 288$.

Mass media and misinformation

Bronner, G. (2015)

Why are conspiracy theories doing so well?

- CTs as cognitive products.

- CTs as non-conventional cognitive products that could not easily circulate on cognitive markets.

- → What has changed?

- Example: Charlie Hebdo attack conspiracy theories

Deregulation of cognitive markets

- Cognitive liberalism in Western democracies
- Massification of communication & gatekeepers
- Example: voltairenet.org Charlie Hebdo article

Voltairenet.org — Réseau Voltaire

LA UNE   RUBRIQUES   DOSSIERS   ARCHIVES   LIBRAIRIE   Lettre d'information   Chercher

UN 11-SEPTEMBRE FRANÇAIS ?

Qui a commandité l'attentat contre Charlie Hebdo ?

par Thierry Meyssan

France

Alors que de nombreux Français réagissent à l'attentat commis contre Charlie Hebdo en dénonçant l'islamisme et en manifestant dans les rues, Thierry Meyssan souligne que l'interprétation jihadiste est impossible. Alors qu'il aurait tout intérêt à dénoncer lui aussi une opération d'Al-Qaïda ou de Daesh, il envisage une autre hypothèse, beaucoup plus dangereuse.

Deregulation of cognitive markets

- Why do CTs profit unproportionally from the deregulation?
- Cognitive demagogy:
    - Mono-causality,
    - Manichean reasoning,
    - Revelatory effect.
- Power relations:
    - Highly motivated, well-organized groups,
    - Illusion of silent majority,
    - super opinion leaders.

Swiftness

- Increased speed and competitive pressure.
- Consistency and proximity to events of interest.
- Charlie Hebdo: Same day CTs.

Swarm effect

- Internet distribution:
  - reduced slippage,
  - narrative stability,
  - accumulation.
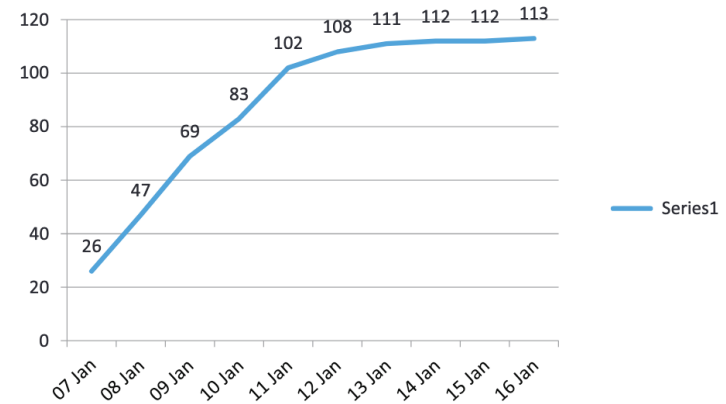- Multi-layered stacks of arguments / Fortean products
  - "blind collaboration"

Figure 1. Number of arguments day by day favouring the idea of a conspiracy. In all, 151 arguments were identified until 31 July 2015.