

Session 8

Alt-right conspiracy theories / Populism

30228 - Sociology of conspiracy theories - summer-term 2023

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Recap

- COVID-19 CTs
 - bioweapon vs. hoax beliefs
 - containment-related behavior vs. self-centered prepping behavior
- Mass media:
 - Deregulation of cognitive markets
 - Swiftiness
 - Swarm effect

Populism and CTs

Bergmann, E., & Butter, M. (2020). Conspiracy theory and populism. In M. Butter & P. Knight (Eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories* (pp. 292–303). Routledge.

Populism

- What is it?
 - *Populus* (the people)
 - A political style, discourse or logic.
 - „a thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps, “the pure people” versus “the corrupt elite,” and which argues that politics should be an expression of the volonté générale (general will) of the people. (Mudde, Rovira Kaltwasser 2017: 6 [italics in the original])“
 - Manichean Worldview

Secondary elements of populism

- Against liberal democracy, not against democracy
- Homogenous idea of the people, no space for diverging opinions.
- Charismatic leaders (know the *volonté générale*).
- Dramatization, simplification, provocation
 - direct communication through social media
- Specific substance of right-wing populism

Populism and conspiracy theories

- Perspectives:
 - Shared characteristics
 - Possible functions of CTs in populism
 - CTs as an inherent element of populism
- Populist as successful in integrating CT believers and others.

Case studies

- How does populism work together with conspiracism?
 - Anti-immigrant politics in Scandinavia
 - Trump's conspiratorial populism

Pizzagate, QAnon and mainstreaming

Bleakley, P. (2021). Panic, pizza and mainstreaming the alt-right: A social media analysis of Pizzagate and the rise of the QAnon conspiracy. *Current Sociology*

Mainstreaming

“While there is an undeniable racist tenor to alt-right rhetoric, on- and offline, the crossover appeal of the alt-right has been possible through what Carolyn Gallaher refers to as ‘mainstreaming . . . [which] occurs when movements on the political margins try to expand their influence by making their views palatable to a wider audience’ (2021: 224).

The alt-right has achieved, to some extent, this ‘mainstreaming’ via a cultural process where taboo ideas are normalized and expressed through use of coded language which, though seemingly innocuous, has sub-textual meaning to initiated members (Zannettou et al., 2018).” (Bleakley, 2021, p. 5)

Pizzagate

- What are the *key claims* of Pizzagate?
- What is the *origin* of the theory?
- How is pizza gate connected to QAnon

Method: thematic analysis

- Tweets mentioning #Pizzagate + („trump“ / #QAnon / „satan*“ or „devil“)
- Key moments:
 - The 2016 election of Donald Trump as United States President (8 November 2016);
 - The attack by Edgar Maddison Welch on Comet Ping Pong pizzeria in Washington, DC (4 December 2016);
 - The date predicted by QAnon for Trump's 'coup' to take place, when many of the corrupt elite would be arrested (5 December 2018);
 - The suicide of Jeffrey Epstein (10 August 2019) and;
 - The banning of #Pizzagate tag by social media platform TikTok to limit the spread of misinformation (24 June 2020).

Results

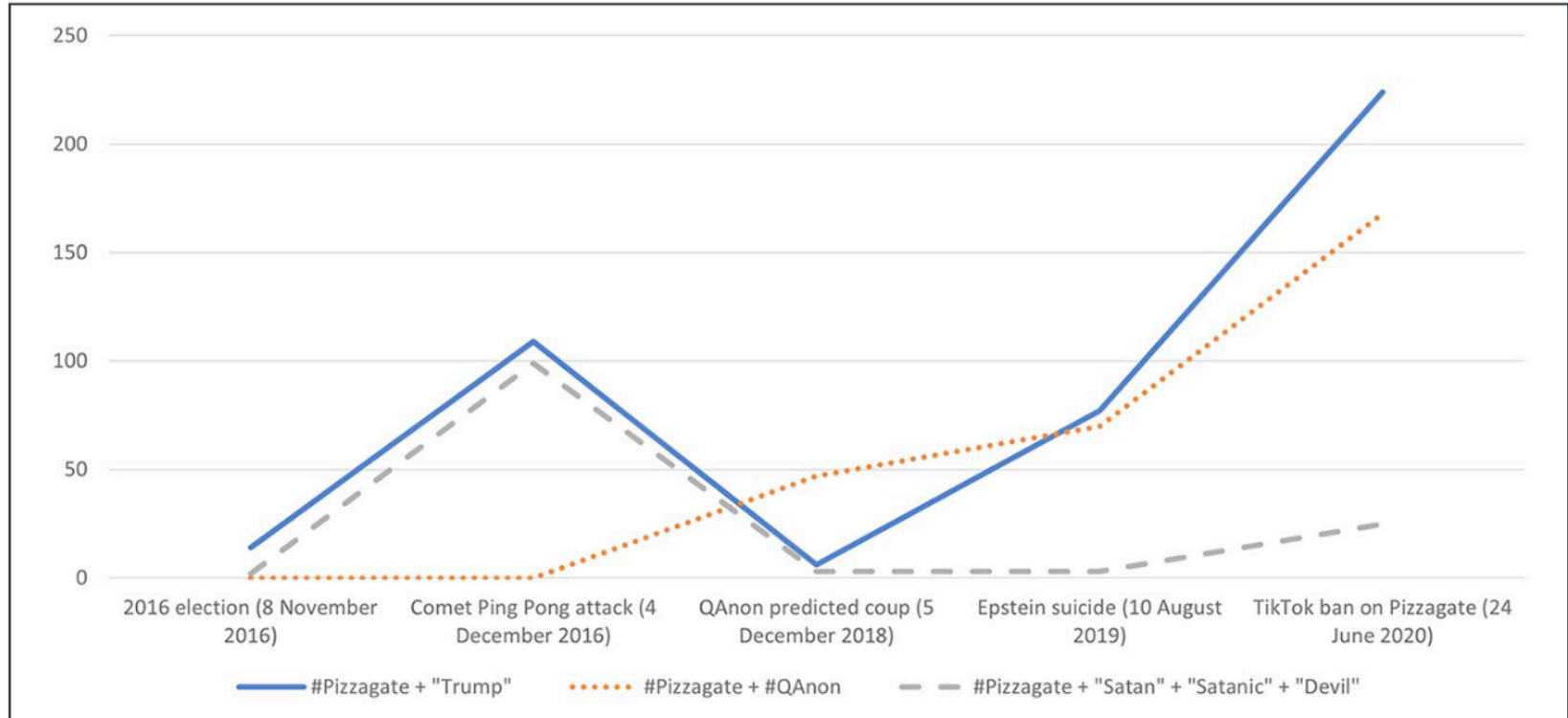


Figure I. Tweets using hashtag #Pizzagate (7 November 2016 to 25 June 2020).

Discussion questions

- Alt-right movements and populist at integrating conspiratorial narratives with mainstream ideas.
 - Why is this a phenomenon of the political right and are there counter-examples?
 - Under which conditions is this „mainstreaming“ a problem and how can it be countered?