Journal of Information Technology & Politics

The future of conspiracy theory scholarship

Inga Trauthig, Zelly Martin, Alice Marwick & Samuel Woolley

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

The future of conspiracy theory scholarship

Inga Trauthig ⓘ*, Zelly Martin ⓘ*, Alice Marwick ⓘ, and Samuel Woolley ⓘ

ABSTRACT

The rapid proliferation of conspiracy theories has become a global concern, fueled by digital platforms and emerging technologies like generative artificial intelligence. These theories often attribute societal and environmental phenomena to secret, malevolent groups, offering simplistic explanations for complex crises like climate change, global pandemics, or political instability. Their spread is amplified by influential figures, social media affordances, and state propaganda, leading to harmful consequences: they endanger lives, target marginalized communities, and erode trust in institutions. This special issue, *The Future of Conspiracy Theory Scholarship*, explores the socio-technical dynamics behind conspiracy theory production and dissemination across diverse global contexts. By examining motivations, transnational trends, and the role of technology, the contributors reveal how conspiracy theories exploit systemic mistrust while reinforcing polarization and oppression. Moving beyond Western-centric frameworks, this issue emphasizes the need for interdisciplinary, localized approaches to address the societal harms of conspiracy theories and develop pathways toward mitigating their impact. We build upon current understandings and conceptualizations of conspiracy theories to argue that while conspiracy theories may indeed further systemic oppression of marginalized communities, the act of conspiracy *theorizing* may also offer community and power to people who feel – or are – marginalized in society, particularly in the digital realm.

Introduction

Today it seems that every major event is followed by a swirl – and sometimes a storm – of conspiracy theories. Rumors start in niche corners of the internet: in Telegram private chats, closed Facebook groups, and anonymous message boards. They then develop and proliferate widely, even becoming trending topics that dominate social platforms and news headlines (Birchall, 2021; Hoseini et al., 2023; Peeters & Willaert, 2022; Zeeuw et al., 2020). The floods in North Carolina following Hurricane Helene in September 2024, the wildfires in Los Angeles in January 2025, and the inordinately heavy rains in the United Arab Emirates and Oman in April 2024 were terrible environmental disasters. All were accompanied by a deluge of conspiracy theories.

Conspiracy theories are false claims that a group of powerful actors is secretly responsible for some social phenomena (Douglas et al., 2019; Keeley, 1999; Stockemer & Bordeleau, 2024). This is contrasted with conspiracies, in which a group of powerful actors is actually responsible for some

social phenomena (Douglas et al., 2019; Keeley, 1999; Pigden, 1995). Across the world, believing in conspiracy theories is not isolated to any one political ideology, nor does it occur only amongst the fringes of society (Bergmann, 2018; Blanuša, 2024; Oliver & Wood, 2014). Researchers have demonstrated that the boundaries between left- and right-leaning conspiracy theories are blurry, for instance in conspiracy topics like anti-vaccination and spirituality (Chia et al., 2021; Griera et al., 2022).

The people who start conspiracy theories may be obscure, but their messages are often picked up and spread further by individual or group actors with much greater reach (Birchall et al., 2024). In the United States, radical political actors like Alex Jones claimed that the Los Angeles fires were "part of a larger globalist plot to wage economic warfare and deindustrialize the United States before triggering total collapse" (O'Sullivan, 2025). Elon Musk, the world's wealthiest person and owner of the social media platform X, responded with a single word: "True," before later deleting his post (Griffing, 2025; O'Sullivan, 2025).

Conspiracy theories are also created by state actors to consolidate power. For instance, Tunisian President Kais Saied spread conspiracy theories about the Tunisian judiciary to cultivate power for himself and silence his political opponents (Kahlaoui, 2024). In each of these cases, social media platforms afforded wide reach for conspiracy theory messaging. In the digital age, we urgently need to better understand *how* conspiracy theories spread, *who* spreads them, the *topics* associated with them, and the *role technology and people* play in facilitating them.

This urgency underpins this special issue, "*The Future of Conspiracy Theory Scholarship*," edited by Zelly C. Martin, Inga K. Trauthig, Alice E. Marwick, and Samuel C. Woolley. While there is a breadth of research on conspiracy theories, particularly within the disciplines of cultural studies, philosophy, political science, and sociology (Butter & Knight, 2020), we argue that conspiracy theory scholarship demands connection across different epistemological bubbles of researchers and, indeed, across different polities, socio-cultural understandings, and geographies.

Technology's role in spreading conspiracy theories

Conspiracy theories existed across populations long before the internet, but the advent of social media platforms has increased their reach. The "persistence" of user-generated content, as well as its "replicability," "scalability," and "searchability," allow conspiracy theory content to both "stick around" online and spread further than in the pre-internet era (Boyd, 2011, p. 46). Algorithmic curation that prioritizes the most sensational content to foster engagement intensifies this problem (Hao, 2021; Kuncoro et al., 2024). Platform-facilitated globalization allows localized conspiracy theories, like that of QAnon in the U.S., to spread across the world, as in Australia (Jones, 2023), Brazil (Silva, 2024), and Europe (Hoseini et al., 2023).

Digital media further play a role in the proliferation of conspiracy theories in that search results related to conspiracy theories are less likely to debunk conspiracy theory content in countries with low levels of press freedom and weaker democracies (von Nordheim et al., 2024). Crucially, scholars have found that conspiracy belief is higher in countries outside of the West where democracies are weaker, like Nigeria, South Africa, and Turkey (Cordonier et al., 2021). The mainstreaming of conspiracy theories through digital media is thus anything but an exclusively Western phenomenon.

Emerging technologies accelerate concerns related to the spread of conspiracy theories, rumors, and even coordinated attempts to influence others. Generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) allows for rapid-fire generation of text, images, and videos, requiring little to no money or technical know-how (Brewster, 2024). The potentials of this technology for conspiracy theory producers are manifold, and have indeed already come to fruition, as in deepfakes purporting to show election fraud in Slovakia (Devine et al., 2024), a bogus surrender by Ukrainian President Zelensky (Conger, 2022), and AI-generated junk news stories targeting English-speakers with anti-U.S. sentiment and pro-Chinese ideals (Satariano & Mozur, 2023).

Even more concerning than these relatively easy-to-detect computational propaganda campaigns is the extent to which the proliferation of AI-generated content will lead to increased distrust in the news, as corporations and lone wolf actors create shoddy AI content that masquerades as journalism and fact (Dupré, 2024). We are beginning to experience, as the writer Cory Doctorow (2024) puts it, the "enshittification" of online content and products, such as Google preceding legitimate search results with often-inaccurate GenAI summaries and advertisements. Ultimately, AI-generated content will exacerbate our crisis of institutional trust, in which the integrity of *all* content will be called into question. As U.S. Republican National Committee Member Amy Kremer implied about a GenAI image she shared on X, the truth value of content may become less important than whether it resonates with people's underlying beliefs. Kremer said, "I don't know where this photo came from and honestly, it doesn't matter. … I'm leaving it because it is emblematic of the trauma and pain people are living through right now" (Helm, 2024).

The platformization of conspiracy theories is of particular concern for this special issue. Meaning, these articles engage with the ways in which

platforms and digital technologies facilitate, amplify, and spread conspiracy theories. This special issue thus advances research on conspiracy theories, as well as scholarship in the field of information technology and politics (ITP). Past research has provided meaningful insights into individual tendencies and belief in conspiracy theories (Douglas et al., 2019; Harambam, 2020; Pilch et al., 2023), but the field of ITP can provide a deeper understanding of how internet technologies fortify beliefs in and contribute to the spread of conspiracy theories. ITP research like in this special issue highlights that conspiracy theories have sociotechnical and political dimensions, and are fundamentally related to political power. With this the special issue contributes to existing scholarship in ITP, which has examined the role of social media in sociopolitical phenomena, such as the rise in populism (He et al., 2025), the spread of misinformation (Herasimenka et al., 2023), and people's doubts about election integrity (Ahmed et al., 2024).

The articles in this special issue deepen understandings of each of these issues – and others – by examining their connection with conspiracy theories. Articles in this special issue examine a diversity of political issues and digital technologies in a variety of country contexts. Yet across all articles, a key finding emerges: just as the ubiquity of social media and digital technologies democratized the ability to create propaganda (Woolley, 2023), digital media have allowed nearly anyone to create, spread, and amplify conspiracy theories – from state actors to individuals.

Through a diversity of both platform and country case studies, this special issue thus advances scholarship on conspiracy theories, as well as the ITP field writ large. Rather than seeking to mitigate conspiracy theories from a Western, universal, or top-down standpoint, this special issue puts forth that differing modes of knowledge production from various disciplines and methodologies provide the best path forward toward effective policy recommendations. In this special issue, academics from a variety of disciplines uncover conspiracy theory production and spread throughout Africa, Asia, Australia, Europe, and North America.

Conspiracy theories' sociopolitical consequences

Conspiratorial claims are harmful in three primary ways. First, conspiracy theories can literally threaten life. In the wake of recent U.S. environmental disasters, people spread the baseless claim that Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) employees would take possession of people's property if they evacuated, so people should stay home – in dangerous conditions – to protect their property (Jingnan, 2024). People also threatened violence against FEMA employees following such loaded rumors. Second, conspiracy theories regularly target already marginalized communities, like immigrants and people of color, senselessly blaming them for unrelated societal or environmental ills (Hagen & Joffe-Block, 2025; Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2025). In such circumstances, these improbable assertions can further marginalize, dehumanize, and threaten minority communities. Third, conspiracy theories increase an already worsening distrust of institutional authorities, like governments, aid workers, and journalists (Kim & Cao, 2016; Sutton & Douglas, 2020; van Prooijen et al., 2022), even as they respond to existing social distrust (Birchall et al., 2024).

Policymakers are aware of these challenges yet struggle to address them. In the United Kingdom, online conspiracy theories were central to Axel Rudakubana's descent into violence, culminating in his stabbing of three young girls in July 2024. In the aftermath of this tragic event, Prime Minister Keir Starmer stated that "terrorism has changed" from lethal, systematic organizations to "acts of extreme violence by young men in their bedrooms" accessing material online (BBC, 2025). Online conspiracy theories also catalyzed the racist riots across the country that followed the stabbing (Spring, 2024). A prominent British conspiracy theorist called for mass deportations on YouTube, based on false claims that the perpetrator came to the U.K. crossing the British Channel via small boats (Quinn, 2024). Speculations on smaller anti-immigration channels on Telegram quickly moved to reach broader audiences on X, where millions of users were presented with false, hateful claims that mobilized them into real-world violence (Spring, 2024).

In the U.S., conspiracy theories are increasingly present in mainstream American political discourse. During the COVID-19 pandemic, numerous elected officials and news organizations spread spurious claims about masking and vaccines. Others regularly assert that clandestine political forces conspired to "steal" the 2020 election from President Trump.

Yet the proliferation of right-wing populist conspiracy theories is indeed a global phenomenon, as evidenced by scholarship examining these conspiracy theories in Africa (Cordonier et al., 2021; von Nordheim et al., 2024), South America (de Sá Guimarães et al., 2023), and various European countries (Malešević et al., 2024). Globally, the socio-political implications of conspiracy theories can be immediate, such as sparking political violence (Amarasingam et al., 2022), but they can also be more prolonged, such as worsening societal tensions, polarization, and the degradation of democratic institutions (Sutton & Douglas, 2020).

To advance new epistemologies and imaginaries in the study of conspiracy theories, this special issue consists of eleven articles examining conspiracy theories in a variety of country contexts from varying social science paradigms. Our hope is that the articles in this special issue will deepen existing understandings and help to develop counterprograms against negative aspects of conspiracy theory – those often antithetical to human rights and democracy.

Yet even as conspiracy theories may have disastrous effects, people at times become conspiracy theory adherents or producers for benevolent reasons. As such, the authors in this special issue illuminate both *the harms* of conspiracy theories, as well as how the practice of producing and engaging with conspiracy theories, or what we term "conspiracy theorizing," can generate *community* for those seeking to *challenge power*. Given this special issue's particular emphasis on platformization of conspiracy theories, authors then provide new insights into the *role of social media* in conspiracy theorizing. Finally, authors provide *paths forward* in both studying and mitigating conspiracy theories.

This special issue thus answers calls to expand understandings of conspiracy theories beyond Western epistemology (Mahl et al., 2022) to contribute to a fuller conceptualization of "conspiracy-believing" (Parmigiani, 2021). Informed by extant scholarship on conspiracy theories and the papers in this special issue, we thus build upon current understandings and conceptualizations of conspiracy theories to argue that conspiracy *theorizing* can simultaneously be harmful and generative. While conspiracy theories may indeed further systemic oppression of marginalized communities, the act of conspiracy *theorizing*–that is, producing and engaging with conspiracy theories – may also offer community and power to people who feel – or are – marginalized in society, particularly in the digital realm.

Conspiracy theorizing harms: state propaganda

Scholars in our special issue examined conspiracy theories and their adherents from different normative perspectives, yet it is critical to note that authoritarian governments utilize conspiracy theories as propaganda to accumulate power over their citizens. There are indeed democratic dangers that stem from conspiracy theories. Bashirov, Akbarzadeh, Mamouri, and Yilmaz provide further insight into the weaponization of conspiracy theories by state propagandists. In their examination of Egyptian propaganda on Facebook and YouTube, they found that historical narratives about U.S. intervention in Egyptian politics and Egyptian allyship with Russia are now mobilized by conspiracy theory producers. Conspiracy theory content about a secret plot by the U.S. to destabilize the Egyptian economy worked to frame Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi's regime as "legitimate and patriotic" while "discredit[ing]...[the] opposition as traitors, criminals, or foreign agents."

Similarly, Zituo Wang, Zhu, Zuo, Jiang, Lei, and Zhuoyu Wang uncover that out-group national identity strategies are more effective in fostering engagement with conspiracy theory content than in-group national identity strategies on Douyin (TikTok's Chinese counterpart). When content producers emphasized "dissatisfaction or hostility toward entities outside of China" as opposed to "favoritism or support of China," the videos received more engagement in the form of likes, comments, and shares. Blaming the U.S. for the COVID-19 pandemic appears more galvanizing to

users than relying upon support for Chinese national identity, in line with the strategy deployed by Chinese state media (Wang et al., 2024). Given that Douyin allows for "the dissemination of ideologies sanctioned by the Chinese government," this research provides critical insight into the ways in which state propagandists might mobilize particular social media platforms in service of manipulating their publics.

Conspiracy theorizing as community-building

Although conspiracy theory belief has been widely studied (de Wildt & Aupers, 2024; Harambam, 2020; van Prooijen, 2020; van Prooijen & van Vugt, 2018; Vogler et al., 2024), comparatively little is known about why people become conspiracy theory *producers*. Indeed, "conspiracy-believing" can at times be a response to feeling displaced in the public sphere, and perhaps even an attempt to reconfigure a sense of community and recognition (Parmigiani, 2021).

Through interviews and ethnographic fieldwork, Grusauskaite provides insight into the understudied community of those who not only believe conspiracy theories but actively produce them through "a form of conspiracy micro-celebrity." In examining the communities of conspiracy theory producers on YouTube, Grusauskaite finds that media, including radio, television, and the internet, motivate people to seek further information about conspiracy theories. Micro-celebrities who use "a self-presentation technique in which people view themselves as a public persona to be consumed by others" (Marwick, 2015, p. 333), were integral to this engagement, informed by their "pre-existing worldviews." Yet, it was finding a community of other conspiracy theorists, including conspiracy micro-celebrities, that encouraged people to move from consumers to producers of conspiracy theory content. Social media then afforded the opportunity for these nascent producers to brand themselves such that they could cultivate their own audiences. Their newfound identity of "believer and truth-seeker" strengthened their ties with their followers and their mentors, allowing them to craft an "authentic self" to further their micro-celebrity status.

Hannah provides a conceptualization of the process of becoming a conspiracy-theory believer – "pill epistemology." He argues that what was once "an aberration from a healthy functioning democracy" has, in the digital era, proliferated such that "paranoia, delusion, and extremism are simply social media phenomena" and have become "an essential feature of political discourse online." He outlines four stages of the transition to full conspiracy-theory believing: "awakening," "becoming," "behaving," and finally "communicating," in which a conspiracy theorist finds their community of fellow believers and engages with them. This phase – communicating with one's conspiracy community – is central to becoming a conspiracy theory producer oneself.

Conspiracy theorizing as challenging power

The desire to believe in conspiracy theories may stem naturally from systemic oppression given that they "resonate when groups are suffering from loss, weakness, or disunity" (Uscinski & Parent, 2014, p. 132). People from all identity groups believe and produce conspiracy theories (Bost, 2018), even as the stereotype of "the conspiracy theorist" is a "white, working-class, middle-aged man" (Drochon, 2018, p. 344). Indeed, for marginalized groups, conspiracy theories may be a natural reaction to the invalidation of their embodied experiences (Bogart et al., 2021; Dozono, 2021; Ngai, 2001). Conspiracy theories might also be rooted in socio-political factors including the existence of *actual* conspiracies and the production of conspiracy theories by the state and the media (Gray, 2010Nattrass, 2012; Reid, 2023).

This special issue aims to push the boundaries of conspiracy theory studies to deepen understanding of how conspiracy theories can offer a feeling of empowerment to their adherents (Halafoff et al., 2022; Mahl et al., 2022; Marwick et al., 2022), even as they may result in harms. Andrejevic, O'Neill, and Mahoney's article engages with this difficult tension in the analysis of Australian scam ads, which offer "access to the secret of instant wealth in the form of a fictional cryptocurrency trading platform that generates money automatically through algorithmic arbitrage." In this case, what masquerades as "commercial populism" – and thus

a form of power for the economically disadvantaged – indeed works to uphold the extant neoliberal order by dampening collective political action in favor of individual success through "magical thinking," all supported by "online, profit-driven platforms."

Heřmanová provides further insight into how conspiracy theorizing can feel like challenging power in her ethnography of Czech and Slovak-speaking women on Telegram. Heřmanová found that these women see themselves as part of an "imagined community" grounded in "Slavic sisterhood." The idea of pan-Slavism, or "a political ideology that supposes cultural, linguistic and in some cases genetic similarity between Slavic nations and calls for solidarity and political unity of Slavs" was mobilized in Soviet Union propaganda and has reemerged following the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Yet these women understand pan-Slavic sisterhood as a feminist reaction to neoliberalism and the "enemy" of "Western capitalism," not unlike the tradwife community in the U.S (Mattheis, 2018). Heřmanová's research illuminates the ways in which conspiracy theory believing and producing occurs in reaction to "a shared sentiment of lack of safety, lack of voice in the mainstream society and expression of need for political organization," while at the same time working in service of state (in this case, Russian) propaganda.

The role of social media in conspiracy theorizing

A key element of current scholarship on conspiracies is the extent to which social media facilitates their spread (Enders et al., 2021; Theocharis et al., 2021) and/or allows conspiratorial knowledge-production to thrive (Marwick & Partin, 2022). The production, belief in, and spread of conspiracy theories are sociotechnical phenomena, in that they are galvanized by both extant political tensions and information technologies. Critically, both political power and technological power play a role in the proliferation of conspiracy theories, as they spread through the technical power of various media affordances, appealing to audiences by claiming to reveal a secret power behind a nefarious plot. In our special issue, the article by Pippert, Furl, and Marwick, as well as that of Koo and Chen, delve deeper into the phenomenon of online conspiracy theory production and spread to understand what in particular fosters greater engagement with conspiracy theory content.

Pippert and coauthors' research into conspiracy theory producers on TikTok lends support to the importance of community in galvanizing potential conspiracy theory adherents online. Through qualitative content analysis, the authors find that while conspiracy theory producers frame themselves as alternately "true believers," "entertainers," and "skeptical scholars," they build connection through commonality with their followers who largely respond with a "yes, and" rather than a "no, but" in what they call "generous epistemology." This allows conspiracy theories to proliferate as creators and commenters alike rarely shut down conspiratorial claims, instead encouraging viewers to do their own research, share their own experiences, and amplify conspiratorial ideas.

Koo and Chen found that amongst American proponents of the Stop the Steal conspiracy theory – that the 2020 election was stolen from Donald Trump – on Parler, in-group and out-group cues were used to foster engagement. Interestingly, this strategy was effective only in combination with moral appeals, either to the moral virtue of Trump and his supporters or the moral vice of Black Lives Matter and their supporters. Content producers used a combination of political (group cues) and technical (hashtags) strategies to foster greater engagement with their content.

Paths forward in conspiracy theory research and mitigation

In the current globalized digital world, conspiracy theories spread transnationally through digital technologies, such that political developments in one country inform the conspiracy theories in another. For the study of conspiracy theories globally, a Western point of view can lead to securitization, meaning that the "issue is dramatized and presented as an issue of supreme priority; thus by labelling it as security an agent claims a need for and a right to treat it by extraordinary means" (Buzan et al., 1998, p. 26). Treating conspiracy theory producers in this way may unwittingly further conspiracy theory production, given that

securitization furthers an establishment epistemology (Nyman, 2012), which conspiracy theory producers and adherents disavow (Marwick & Partin, 2022). Further, relying exclusively upon Western perspectives in the study of conspiracy theories can hinder uncovering local knowledge and idiosyncrasies in conspiracy theory production, spread, and reception.

Given these challenges in understanding conspiracy theories, Hu proposes that researchers take a holistic approach to studying conspiracy theories by combining network methods with cultural studies' examinations of power, to gain a deeper understanding of both the political power and technological spread of conspiracy theories.

Prior research demonstrates that where press freedom is lower, conspiracy theories proliferate more widely (Cordonier et al., 2021; von Nordheim et al., 2024). Authors in our special issue provide further insight into the relevance of free and reputable mainstream media in diminishing conspiracy theory belief and spread. Cejkova and Macková find that even amongst Czechs who are politically distrustful, as conspiracy theory believers often are (Barkun, 2003), trust in *journalists* lessens conspiracy thinking. In the U.S., Habel finds that consuming legacy media does the same. As such, it becomes clear that trustworthy, legacy media continues to hold immense power in slowing the spread of conspiracy theories throughout the world.

Conclusion and implications

Digital technologies and new communication strategies are amplifying, empowering, and extending the reach of conspiracy theories and their creators, with profound sociopolitical implications. As conspiracy theories become increasingly normalized in mainstream politics and campaigning, their adherents – whether knowingly or not – erode trust in democratic systems and human rights institutions. While Western nations and actors are not alone in exploiting conspiracy theories, they are increasingly using them as tools to attack marginalized communities and undermine pluralism. Conspiracy theories are behind efforts targeting diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) programs, vilifying immigrants, and demonizing the LGBTQ

+ community (Marwick et al., 2024). At the same time, tools like generative AI fuel computational propaganda campaigns and flood social media and search engines with unreliable and harmful content, further destabilizing trust and truth.

Around the world, people live in an era marked by economic uncertainty, political instability, climate change, and increasingly extreme weather events. These complex, interconnected crises demand collective action, significant resources, and systemic change – challenges that can feel overwhelming and insurmountable. Conspiracy theories, by contrast, offer simplistic and emotionally satisfying explanations for these complicated realities. Rather than confronting the daunting truth of climate change, for example, it is easier, and less emotionally devastating, to believe that a shadowy cabal of Satanists, Freemasons, or Western capitalists is orchestrating it all. In other cases, conspiracy theories thrive because of profound mistrust in governments, often fueled by historical abuses. For instance, the Tuskegee syphilis experiments, long dismissed as a conspiracy theory, were revealed to be horrifyingly true, leaving a lasting legacy of skepticism (Reverby, 2012). The same turned out to be true of apartheid South Africa's biological weapons program, Project Coast (Singh, 2008), and the assassination of Congolese Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba after the Congo was liberated from Belgium (Reid, 2023). These factors, combined with the complexity of modern crises, create fertile ground for the proliferation of conspiracy theories, which provide false certainty in an uncertain world.

It thus proves difficult to regulate the spread of conspiracy theory content. While conspiracy theories often "constitute discriminatory speech against vulnerable individuals and groups," it can also be the case that marginalized communities' oppression is dismissed as a conspiracy theory when it is in fact true, as in the Tuskegee syphilis experiments and Project Coast (Matthews, 2023, p. 12). Further, as we have seen with legislation against disinformation around the world, too often these laws are used by authoritarian actors to consolidate their own power and silence political dissidents (Lamensch, 2024; Yücel, 2025). Social media companies claim to take action against harmful speech, but they remain committed to

protecting their bottom line, which often means promoting the most radical content (Hao, 2021; Kuncoro et al., 2024; Williams et al., 2025).

The authors in our special issue engage alternately with the questions of what drives someone to believe in conspiracy theories, how someone transitions from "merely engaging" with conspiracy theory content to producing it themself, what social media affordances foster further engagement with conspiracy theories, and what might be done to mitigate the continued spread of conspiracy theories across the world. With these insights, this special issue highlights how conspiracy theories can be systemically harmful, but also how individuals feel they benefit from engaging in conspiracy theorizing.

Authors in this special issue uncovered a wide array of sociopolitical motivations for engaging in conspiracy theorizing, as well as potential paths forward in mitigating conspiracy theory spread. They reveal that slowing the spread of conspiracy theories requires more than mere dismissal or removal of conspiracy theory content online, but also systemic and community interventions.

Technology platforms ought to adopt policies specifically tailored to conspiracy theory content. Meta's Facebook, for instance, failed to identify conspiracy theory content leading up to the January 6th attack on the U.S. Capitol (Silverman et al., 2022). Scholars in this special issue identify particular social media affordances and user strategies which facilitate conspiracy theory content online, which could inform future platform policy.

Within this special issue, strengthening democratic exchange and press freedom also emerge as crucial for weakening conspiracy theories. Civil society organizations and a free press are both main avenues for healthy democratic exchange which can help build resilience against the lures of conspiracies. To participate in this democratic exchange, media literacy efforts that are contextual and community-driven are beneficial in societies across the world. Further, responding to communities' feelings of disempowerment can be vital to minimize the spread and harms of conspiracy theories.

Finally, future research within ITP could continue and expand upon the scholarship in this special issue. Scholars could consider multimethod and interdisciplinary approaches to studying conspiracy theories, like those used and outlined here. While quantitative approaches can provide further insight into the spread of conspiracy theories across digital and geographic borders, qualitative research can provide a deeper understanding of individuals' diverse motivations for and epistemological approaches to conspiracy theorizing. Both lines of inquiry, in combination with theory from multiple disciplines, are necessary to deepen understanding of conspiracy theory production and believing. Further research on conspiracy theories in the majority world is particularly needed. Conspiracy theories are prominent in many countries of the majority world but little is known about the local dynamics of conspiracy theory production and believing, as well as how they correspond with structural dynamics related to ITP (such as internet penetration rates, trust levels in authorities, etc.) To advance understandings and develop counter actions that are more inclusive, insights into these dynamics are needed. The power of community emerged as a critical feature of conspiracy theorizing across these articles. How might these emergent online conspiracy theory communities, which foster connection and participation amongst their members, be repurposed to facilitate democratic engagement? Scholars in the ITP field should continue this line of inquiry, staying attuned to both the technological and sociopolitical dimensions of conspiracy theories and their production.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributors

Inga K. Trauthig is Research Assistant Professor in the Green School of International & Public Affairs at Florida International University. Her work assesses societal impacts of emerging technologies – particularly regarding social movements, shifting political power dynamics and related security implications (extremism, hybrid warfare). Her PhD is from the Department of War Studies, King's College London.

Zelly C. Martin is a candidate in the School of Journalism and Media and Senior Research Fellow at the Center for Media Engagement at the University of Texas at Austin. Her work examines mis/disinformation and conspiracy theories on emerging platforms, especially as they relate to political propaganda and reproductive rights.

Alice E. Marwick is the Director of Research at the Data & Society Research Institute and Research Associate Professor of Communication at UNC Chapel Hill. Her work investigates the social, political, and cultural implications of social media, currently focused on far-right conspiracies and disinformation.

Samuel C. Woolley is the William S. Dietrich II Endowed Chair of Disinformation Studies and an Associate Professor at the University of Pittsburgh. He is the author of four books and numerous articles focused on issues at the intersection of emerging technology and political communication. His Ph.D. is from the University of Washington.

ORCID

Inga Trauthig 🔟 http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8479-7894
Zelly Martin 🔟 http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4664-7155
Alice Marwick 🔟 http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0837-6999
Samuel Woolley 🔟 http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2619-7628

References

Ahmed, S., Wang, Y., & Tully, M. (2024). Perils of political engagement? Examining the relationship between online political participation and perceived electoral integrity during 2020 US election. *Journal of Information Technology & Politics*, *21*(4), 453–464. https://doi.org/10.1080/19331681. 2023.2275255

Amarasingam, A., Umar, S., & Desai, S. (2022). "Fight, die, and if required kill": Hindu nationalism, misinformation, and Islamophobia in India. *Religions*, *13*(5), 1–33. https:// doi.org/10.3390/rel13050380

Barkun, M. (2003). *A culture of conspiracy: Apocalyptic visions in contemporary America*. University of California Press.

BBC. (2025, January 20). *Axel Rudakubana: "A total disgrace" that Radukabana could buy a knife on Amazon aged 17 despite conviction, says Cooper. BBC News*. https://www. bbc.com/news/live/c9q7r4wpep0t

Bergmann, E. (2018). *Conspiracy & populism: The politics of misinformation* (1st ed.). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi. org/10.1007/978-3-319-90359-0

Birchall, C. (2021). The paranoid style for sale: Conspiracy entrepreneurs, marketplace bots, and surveillance capitalism. *Symploke*, *29*(1–2), 97–122. https://doi.org/10. 1353/sym.2021.0006

Birchall, C., Knight, P., & Knight, S. (2024). *Conspiracy loops: From distrust to conspiracy to culture wars*. Demos.

Blanuša, N. (2024). Populism and conspiracism in Croatia and their articulations among citizens from left to right. In M. Butter, K. Hatzikidi, C. Jeitler, G. Loperfido, & L. Turza (Eds.), *Populism and conspiracy theory: Case studies and theoretical perspectives* (1st ed., pp. 79–107). Taylor & Francis Group.

Bogart, L. M., Takada, S., & Cunningham, W. E. (2021). Medical mistrust, discrimination, and the domestic HIV epidemic. In B. O. Ojikutu & V. E. Stone (Eds.), *HIV in US communities of color* (pp. 207–231). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-48744-7_12

Bost, P. R. (2018). The truth is around here somewhere: Integrating the research on conspiracy beliefs. In J. E. Uscinski (Ed.), *Conspiracy theories and the people who believe them* (pp. 269–284). Oxford University Press.

Boyd, D. (2011). Social network sites as networked publics: Affordances, dynamics, and implications. In Z. Papacharissi (Ed.), *A networked self* (pp. 39–58). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203876527-8

Brewster, J. (2024, April 12). *Essay | How I built an AI-powered, self-running propaganda machine for $105. The wall street journal*. https://www.wsj.com/politics/how-i-built-an-ai-powered-self-running-propaganda-machine-for-105-e9888705

Butter, M., & Knight, P. (2020). The history of conspiracy theory research: A review and commentary. In M. Butter & P. Knight (Eds.), *Routledge Handbook of conspiracy theories* (pp. 33–46). Taylor & Francis Group. http://ebookcentral. proquest.com/lib/utxa/detail.action?docID=6119629

Buzan, B., Wæver, O., & Wilde, J. D. (1998). *Security: A new framework for analysis*. Lynne Rienner Publishers.

Chia, A., Ong, J. C., Davies, H., & Hagood, M. (2021). *"Everything is connected": Networked conspirituality in new age media. AoIR selected papers of internet research*. https://doi.org/10.5210/spir.v2021i0.12093

Conger, K. (2022, April 5). *Hackers' fake claims of Ukrainian surrender aren't fooling anyone. So what's their goal? The New York Times*. https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/05/us/ politics/ukraine-russia-hackers.html

Cordonier, L., Cafiero, F., & Bronner, G. (2021). Why are conspiracy theories more successful in some countries than in others? An exploratory study on internet users from 22 Western and non-Western countries. *Social Science Information*, *60*(3), 436–456. https://doi.org/10. 1177/05390184211018961

de Sá Guimarães, F., Cordeiro Moreira, D., de Oliveira, D., Silva, I., & Raposo de Mello, A. C. (2023). Conspiracy theories and foreign policy narratives: Globalism in Jair Bolsonaro's foreign policy. *Latin American Perspectives*, *50*(1), 272–289. https://doi.org/10.1177/ 0094582X221147504

Devine, C., O'Sullivan, D., & Lyngaas, S. (2024, February 1). *A fake recording of a candidate saying he'd rigged the election went viral. Experts say it's only the beginning. CNN*. https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/01/politics/election-deepfake-threats-invs/index.html

de Wildt, L., & Aupers, S. (2024). Participatory conspiracy culture: Believing, doubting and playing with conspiracy theories on Reddit. *Convergence*, *30*(1), 329–346. https:// doi.org/10.1177/13548565231178914

Doctorow, C. (2024, January 30). My McLuhan lecture on enshittification. *Medium*. https://doctorow.medium.com/ my-mcluhan-lecture-on-enshittification-ea343342b9bc

Douglas, K. M., Uscinski, J. E., Sutton, R. M., Cichocka, A., Nefes, T., Ang, C. S., & Deravi, F. (2019). Understanding conspiracy theories. *Political Psychology*, *40*(S1), 3–35. https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12568

Dozono, T. (2021). Civic reasoning through paranoid and reparative reading: Addressing conspiracy theories within racialized and queer publics. *Theory into Practice*, *60*(4), 392–401. https://doi.org/10.1080/00405841.2021.1984098

Drochon, H. (2018). Who believes in conspiracy theories in Great Britain and Europe? In J. E. Uscinski (Ed.), *Conspiracy theories and the people who believe them* (pp. 337–346). Oxford University Press.

Dupré, M. H. (2024). *Meet AdVon, the AI-powered content monster infecting the media industry*. Futurism. https://futurism.com/advon-ai-content

Enders, A. M., Uscinski, J. E., Seelig, M. I., Klofstad, C. A., Wuchty, S., Funchion, J. R., Murthi, M. N., Premaratne, K., & Stoler, J. (2021). The relationship between social media use and beliefs in conspiracy theories and misinformation. *Political Behavior*, *45*(2), 781–804. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-021-09734-6

Gray, M. (2010). *Conspiracy theories in the Arab world: Sources and politics*. Taylor & Francis Group. http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/utxa/detail.action?docID=537888

Griera, M., Morales i Gras, J., Clot-Garrell, A., & Cazarín, R. (2022). Conspirituality in COVID-19 times: A mixed-method study of anti-vaccine movements in Spain. *Journal for the Academic Study of Religion*, *35*(2), 192–217. https://doi.org/10.1558/jasr.22390

Griffing, A. (2025, January 9). Elon Musk deletes tweet agreeing with Alex Jones the LA fires are part of a 'globalist plot' to trigger U.S. collapse. *Mediaite*. https://www.mediaite.com/news/elon-musk-deletes-tweet-agreeing-with-alex-jones-the-la-fires-are-part-of-a-globalist-plot-to-trigger-u-s-collapse/

Hagen, L., & Joffe-Block, J. (2025, January 10). *Why right-wing influencers are blaming the California wildfires on diversity efforts*. NPR. https://www.npr.org/2025/01/10/nx-s1-5252757/california-wildfires-dei-diversity-influencers-firefighters

Halafoff, A., Marriott, E., Fitzpatrick, R., & Weng, E. (2022). Selling (con)spirituality and COVID-19 in Australia: Convictions, complexity and countering dis/misinformation. *Journal for the Academic Study of Religion*, *35*(2), 141–167. https://doi.org/10.1558/jasr.22810

Hao, K. (2021, October 5). *The Facebook whistleblower says its algorithms are dangerous. Here's why*. MIT technology review. https://www.technologyreview.com/2021/10/05/1036519/facebook-whistleblower-frances-haugen-algorithms/

Harambam, J. (2020). *Contemporary conspiracy culture: Truth and knowledge in an era of epistemic instability*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429327605

He, K., Eldridge, S., II, & Broersma, M. (2025). The discursive logics of online populism: Social media as a "pressure valve" of public debate in China. *Journal of Information Technology & Politics*, *22*(2), 151–166. https://doi.org/10.1080/19331681.2023.2290515

Helm, L. (2024, October 9). *Politicians distraught over AI image of Child and puppy caught in Hurricane Helene*. Yahoo News. https://www.yahoo.com/news/politicians-distraught-over-ai-image-082316522.html

Herasimenka, A., Bright, J., Knuutila, A., & Howard, P. N. (2023). Misinformation and professional news on largely unmoderated platforms: The case of Telegram. *Journal of Information Technology & Politics*, *20*(2), 198–212. https://doi.org/10.1080/19331681.2022.2076272

Hoseini, M., Melo, P., Benevenuto, F., Feldmann, A., & Zannettou, S. (2023). On the globalization of the QAnon conspiracy theory through telegram. *Proceedings of the 15th ACM Web Science Conference 2023* (pp. 75–85). https://doi.org/10.1145/3578503.3583603

Institute for Strategic Dialogue. (2025). *Extremists seize New Orleans attack to spread hate, conspiracy theories and violent rhetoric*. Digital dispatches institute for strategic dialogue. https://www.isdglobal.org/digital_dispatches/extremists-seize-new-orleans-attack-to-spread-hate-conspiracy-theories-and-violent-rhetoric/

Jingnan, H. (2024, October 9). *How FEMA tries to combat rumors and conspiracy theories about Milton and Helene*. NPR. https://www.npr.org/2024/10/09/nx-s1-5146475/milton-helene-fema-rumors-conspiracy-theories

Jones, C. (2023). 'We the people, not the sheeple': QAnon and the transnational mobilisation of millennialist far-right conspiracy theories. *First Monday*, *28*(3), 1–19. https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v28i3.12854

Kahlaoui, T. (2024). Left-wing populist conspiracism: The case of Tunisia. In M. Butter, K. Hatzikidi, C. Jeitler, G. Loperfido, & L. Turza (Eds.), *Populism and conspiracy theory: Case studies and theoretical perspectives* (1st ed., pp. 181–196). Taylor & Francis Group.

Keeley, B. L. (1999). Of conspiracy theories. *The Journal of Philosophy*, *96*(3), 109–126. https://doi.org/10.2307/2564659

Kim, M., & Cao, X. (2016). The impact of exposure to media messages promoting government conspiracy theories on distrust in the government: Evidence from a two-stage randomized experiment. *International Journal of Communication*, *10*(2016), 3808–3827. https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/5127/1740.

Kuncoro, H. R., Hasanah, K., Sari, D. L., & Kurniawati, E. (2024). Algorithmic influence: Twitter's role in shaping public discourse and amplifying radical content. *Proceedings of the 2nd International Conference on Advance Research in Social and Economic Science (ICARSE 2023)* (pp. 549–553). https://doi.org/10.2991/978-2-38476-247-7_55

Lamensch, M. (2024). *Digital authoritarianism: The role of legislation and regulation* (Policy Brief No. 182). Centre for International Governance Innovation. https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep56962

Mahl, D., Schäfer, M. S., & Zeng, J. (2022). Conspiracy theories in online environments: An interdisciplinary

literature review and agenda for future research. *New Media and Society*, *25*(7), 1781–1801. https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448221075759

Malešević, S., Uzelac, G., Carol, S., & David, L. (2024). Plotting against our nation: COVID-19, nationalisms, and conspiracy theories in five European countries. *National Identities*, *26*(2), 141–171. https://doi.org/10.1080/14608944.2023.2288970

Marwick, A. E. (2015). You may know me from YouTube: (micro-)celebrity in social media. In P. D. Marshall & S. Redmond (Eds.), *A companion to celebrity* (pp. 333–350). Wiley. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118475089.ch18

Marwick, A. E., Clancy, B., & Furl, K. (2022). *Far-right online radicalization: A review of the literature.* The Bulletin of Technology & Public Life. https://doi.org/10.21428/bfcb0bff.e9492a11

Marwick, A. E., & Partin, W. C. (2022). Constructing alternative facts: Populist expertise and the QAnon conspiracy. *New Media and Society*, *26*(5), 2535–2555. https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448221090201

Marwick, A., Smith, J., Basnight, B., Boyles, D., Donnelly, M., Kaczynski, S., Ringel, E., Whitmarsh, S., & Yabase, C. (2024). Child-sacrificing drag queens: Historical antecedents in disinformative narratives supporting the drag queen story hour moral panic. *Women's Studies in Communication*, *47*(4), 459–479. https://doi.org/10.1080/07491409.2024.2396288

Mattheis, A. (2018). Shieldmaidens of whiteness: (alt) maternalism and women recruiting for the far/alt-right. *Journal for Deradicalization*, *17*(2018), 128–162. https://journals.sfu.ca/jd/index.php/jd/article/view/177.

Matthews, F. (2023). On the censorship of conspiracy theories. *Social Epistemology*, 1–14. https://doi.org/10.1080/02691728.2025.2449612

Nattrass, N. (2012). *The AIDS conspiracy: Science fights back.* Columbia University Press. https://doi.org/10.7312/natt14912

Ngai, S. (2001). Bad timing (a sequel). Paranoia, feminism, and poetry. *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, *12*(2), 1–46. https://doi.org/10.1215/10407391-12-2-1

Nyman, J. (2012). Securitization theory. In L. J. Shepherd (Ed.), *Critical approaches to security* (pp. 51–62). Routledge.

Oliver, J. E., & Wood, T. J. (2014). Conspiracy theories and the paranoid style(s) of mass opinion. *American Journal of Political Science*, *58*(4), 952–966. https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12084

O'Sullivan, D. (2025, January 13). *Soon to be out of a job, meta's fact-checkers battle a blaze of wildfire conspiracy theories. CNN.* https://www.cnn.com/2025/01/13/tech/meta-fact-checkers-wildfire-conspiracy-theories/index.html

Parmigiani, G. (2021). Magic and politics: Conspirituality and COVID-19. *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, *89*(2), 506–529. https://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/lfab053

Peeters, S., & Willaert, T. (2022). Telegram and digital methods: Mapping networked conspiracy theories through platform affordances. *M/C Journal*, *25*(1), 1–10. https://doi.org/10.5204/mcj.2878

Pigden, C. (1995). Popper revisited, or what is wrong with conspiracy theories? *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, *25*(1), 3–34. https://doi.org/10.1177/004839319502500101

Pilch, I., Turska-Kawa, A., Wardawy, P., Olszanecka-Marmola, A., & Smołkowska-Jędo, W. (2023). Contemporary trends in psychological research on conspiracy beliefs. A systematic review. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *14*, 1–19. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1075779

Quinn, B. (2024, July 30). *Misinformation about Southport attack suspect spreads on social media.* The Guardian. https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/article/2024/jul/30/misinformation-southport-attack-suspect-social-media-conspiracy-theories

Reid, S. A. (2023). *The Lumumba plot: The secret history of the CIA and a Cold war assassination.* Knopf.

Reverby, S. M. (2012). *Tuskegee's truths: Rethinking the Tuskegee syphilis study.* UNC Press Books.

Satariano, A., & Mozur, P. (2023, February 7). The people onscreen are fake. The disinformation is real. *The New York Times.* https://www.nytimes.com/2023/02/07/technology/artificial-intelligence-training-deepfake.html

Silva, E. C. D. M. (2024). New world order, globalism and QAnon communities on Brazilian telegram: How conspiracism opens doors to more harmful groups *arXiv: 2409.12983). arXiv.* https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2409.12983

Silverman, C., Timberg, C., Kao, J., & Merrill, J. B. (2022, January 4). *Facebook hosted surge of misinformation and insurrection threats in months leading up to Jan. 6 attack, records show.* ProPublica. https://www.propublica.org/article/facebook-hosted-surge-of-misinformation-and-insurrection-threats-in-months-leading-up-to-jan-6-attack-records-show

Singh, J. A. (2008). Project coast: Eugenics in apartheid South Africa. *Endeavour*, *32*(1), 5–9. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.endeavour.2008.01.005

Spring, M. (2024, July 31). *Southport attack: Did social media fan the flames of riot? BBC News.* https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cd1e8d7llg9o

Stockemer, D., & Bordeleau, J.-N. (2024). Conspiracy theories and their believers in an era of misinformation. *Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review*, *5*(6). https://misinforeview.hks.harvard.edu/article/conspiracy-theories-and-their-believers-in-an-era-of-misinformation/

Sutton, R. M., & Douglas, K. M. (2020). Conspiracy theories and the conspiracy mindset: Implications for political ideology. *Current Opinion in Behavioral Sciences*, *34*, 118–122. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cobeha.2020.02.015

Theocharis, Y., Cardenal, A., Jin, S., Aalberg, T., Hopmann, D. N., Strömbäck, J., Castro, L., Esser, F., Van Aelst, P., de Vreese, C., Corbu, N., Koc-Michalska, K., Matthes, J., Schemer, C., Sheafer, T., Splendore, S.,

Stanyer, J., Stępińska, A., & Štětka, V. (2021). Does the platform matter? Social media and COVID-19 conspiracy theory beliefs in 17 countries. *New Media and Society*, *25*(12), 3412–3437. https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448211045666

Uscinski, J. E., & Parent, J. M. (2014). *American conspiracy theories*. Oxford University Press.

van Prooijen, J.-W. (2020). An existential threat model of conspiracy theories. *European Psychologist*, *25*(1), 16–25. https://doi.org/10.1027/1016-9040/a000381

van Prooijen, J.-W., Spadaro, G., & Wang, H. (2022). Suspicion of institutions: How distrust and conspiracy theories deteriorate social relationships. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, *43*, 65–69. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2021.06.013

van Prooijen, J.-W., & van Vugt, M. (2018). Conspiracy theories: Evolved functions and psychological mechanisms. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, *13*(6), 770–788. https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691618774270

Vogler, D., Rauchfleisch, A., & Schwaiger, L. (2024). The system is corrupted, and the mainstream media is lying to us! Exploring the relation between affinity toward conspiracy myths and alternative news media usage. *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, *36*(1), 1–6. https://doi.org/10.1093/ijpor/edad044

von Nordheim, G., Bettels-Schwabbauer, T., Kleinen von Königslöw, K., Barczyszyn-Madziarz, P., Budivska, H., DiSalvo, P., Dingerkus, F., Guazina, L. S., Krobea Asante, K., Kuś, M., Lábová, S., Matei, A., Merkovity, N.,

Paulino, F. O., Petrovszki-Oláh, L., Serwornoo, M. Y. W., Valente, J., Wake, A., & Zakinszky Toma, V. (2024). The different worlds of Google - a comparison of search results on conspiracy theories in 12 countries. *Convergence*, *30*(6), 2267–2286. https://doi.org/10.1177/13548565231203102

Wang, Z., Kim, D., & Zhu, J. (2024). To live or not to live with it? Examining the cultivation effect of state media on support for the zero-COVID policy. *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, *36*(3), 1–11. https://doi.org/10.1093/ijpor/edae031

Williams, T. J. V., Tzani, C., Gavin, H., & Ioannou, M. (2025). Policy vs reality: Comparing the policies of social media sites and users' experiences, in the context of exposure to extremist content. *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression*, *17*(1), 110–127. https://doi.org/10.1080/19434472.2023.2195466

Woolley, S. (2023). *Manufacturing consensus: Understanding propaganda in the era of automation and anonymity*. Yale University Press.

Yücel, A. (2025). Hybrid digital authoritarianism in Turkey: The 'censorship law' and AI-generated disinformation strategy. *Turkish Studies*, *26*(1), 1–27. https://doi.org/10.1080/14683849.2024.2392816

Zeeuw, D. D., Hagen, S., Peeters, S., & Jokubauskaite, E. (2020). Tracing normiefication: A cross-platform analysis of the QAnon conspiracy theory. *First Monday*, *25*(11), 1–24. https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v25i11.10643