The Study of Conspiracy Theories

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Abstract

The study of conspiracy theories has undergone a drastic transformation in the last decade. While early scholarly treatments relied on historical cases and cultural analyses, more recent works focus on the individuals who subscribe either to specific conspiracy beliefs or to more generalized conspiratorial thinking. This shift in focus presents scholars with an opportunity to learn more about how and why conspiracy theories gain followers. But also, this new focus presents dangers which have yet to be fully considered by the psychologists, social-psychologists, and political scientists spearheading the research. In this essay, I highlight the potential benefits and pitfalls of the current scholarly agenda.

Keywords: Conspiracy Theories, Conspiracy, Paranoid Style, Public Opinion

The study of conspiracy theories and the people who believe them largely began with Richard Hofstadter's look into the "paranoid style" in the 1950s and 1960s (Hofstadter 1964). In the decades that followed, the study of conspiracy theories remained largely a domain of historians (Davis 1972, Gribbin 1974, Hogue 1976, Wood 1982). The 1990s saw a shift towards cultural critiques (Knight 1997, 1999, Melley 2000, Markley 1997), and the turn towards the new century ushered in a flurry of work from philosophers and epistemologists (Basham 2003, Clarke 2002, Coady 2003, Dentith 2014, Heins 2007, Keeley 1999, 2003, Pigden 1995, Raikka 2009). During this time, a few social scientists studied conspiracy theories (McHoskey 1995, McClosky and Chong 1985, Goertzel 1994, McCauley and Jacques 1979), but these studies tended to be one-off treatments unconnected to a broader research trajectory. Both the historians and cultural scholars treated conspiracy theories in a qualitative way, looking at historical episodes and broad trends. Scholars made little effort to better understand—at the induvial level— what factors drove people to believe in conspiracy theories, or conversely, what factors could "cure" people of their unwarranted conspiracy beliefs. This abruptly changed in 2008.

As the 1990s came to a close and the twenty-first century began, several events became the subject of much high-profile conspiracy theorizing. In the United Kingdom, the death of Princess Diana and the 7/7 attacks; in the United States, the contested election of George W. Bush, the 9/11 attacks, the global war

on terror, and the election of Barack Obama. The conspiracy theories that became attached to the aforementioned events appear to have motivated social scientists to invest a large amount of resources into studying conspiratorial theories at the individual level. I mention the UK and US specifically because the growing body of scholarship addressing conspiracy theories has largely, though not exclusively, emanated from British and American scholars.

Works by psychologists, social-psychologists, and political scientists have examined why people believe in conspiracy theories about Princess Diana's death (Wood, Douglas and Sutton 2012), the 7/7 Tube bombings (Wood and Finlay 2008), the 9/11 attacks (Swami, Chamorro-Premuzic and Furnham 2010), and Barack Obama's sudden rise to power (Pasek *et al.* 2014). Such works have motivated a larger number of social scientists to enter the field and to study beliefs in a wider range of conspiracy theories, as well as the behaviors that stem from such beliefs (Jolley and Douglas 2014, van der Linden 2015).

While most of the authors working on the topic do not directly refer to the conspiracy theories they study as pathologies, much of the work could be read that way. Many scholars refer to conspiracy theories as "myths," "false beliefs," "misinformation," and "rumors" (i.e., Berinsky 2015, Nyhan, Reifler and Ubel 2013, Lewandowsky *et al.* 2012). This should come as no surprise, the term, "conspiracy theory" and its variants are loaded terms. Conspiracy theories and the people who espouse them are often considered irrational (Husting and Orr 2007, Coady 2006).

The current research agenda appears to be most interested in learning how to dissuade individuals of their conspiracy theories (Bode and Vraga 2015, Lewandowsky *et al.* 2012, Nyhan and Reifler 2010, Nyhan *et al.* 2013, Thorson 2015, Berinsky 2015). As a scholarly pursuit, it is certainly worthwhile to better understand why people hold certain opinions and what information might change those opinions. As a scholar of public opinion, I wholeheartedly applaud this work. As a practical matter, there are certainly times when we need to convince people of truth, and having the tools to do so can save lives. For example, if a category 5 hurricane was approaching, the government would require the tools necessary to convince naysayers to evacuate. Lives are at stake.

However, in discovering the tools for ridding people of conspiracy theories, social scientists are inadvertently and unintentionally providing the powerful with an increased ability to quash dissent. Social scientists often view conspiracy theories as misperceptions or incorrect beliefs; but they are much more than this. Conspiracy theories are tools for dissent used by the weak to balance against power (Uscinski and Parent 2014). To rid people of their conspiracy theories is to therefore rid them of a form of political dissent.

The purpose of this article is to assess both the promise and perils of the current scholarly trajectory and to urge social scientists to exercise great care when studying conspiracy theories. I begin first with a few definitions. Then I argue that conspiracy theories should be treated with skepticism but not as wrong or false per se. This is because conspiracy theories have unique epistemological properties which shield them from falsification. I then argue that conspiracy theories are necessary to the healthy functioning of society because they help balance against concentrations of power. This article then moves to highlight both the advances made by social scientists in recent years and the dangers that those advances pose. I conclude that in developing effective methods for countering

conspiracy theories, social scientists have unwittingly provided powerful interests with tools which can increase their power.

1. Definitions

For purposes of conceptual clarity, allow me to begin with a few definitions. By *conspiracy*, I refer to a secret arrangement by a group of powerful people to usurp political or economic power, violate established rights, hoard vital secrets, or unlawfully alter government institutions (Uscinski and Parent 2014: 31). Conspiracies are real and happen with regularity; Watergate and Iran-Contra are examples.

By *conspiracy theory*, I mean an explanation of historical, ongoing, or future events that cites as a main causal factor a group of powerful persons, the conspirators, acting in secret for their own benefit against the common good. This definition excludes theories positing benevolent actors toiling away in secret for the good of all mankind (i.e., doctors working in secret to save humanity from the scourge of cancer). Such theories seem to be the product of a very different set of factors and are rare compared to those positing an enemy.

One important facet of conspiracy theories that often goes without much notice is that conspiracy theories are notions about power: who has it and how are they using it? Conspiracy theories accuse an implicitly powerful group of conspiring. Usually that group is already powerful, i.e., the president, a legislative body, industries or corporations, foreign countries, multinational groups, etc. Powerless groups are rarely accused of conspiring. It is unusual to hear a conspiracy yarn about how the homeless are attempting a coup, or how transgendered people are plotting to take over society. The weak and marginalized are rarely seen as able to pull off a successful conspiracy. If they are, it is because they are assumed to have much more power than they actually have. This does seem odd when juxtaposed against classical political theory: Machiavelli for example argued that the weak are precisely the ones who should be conspiring; they do not have the power to use force to get what they want. The powerful on the other hand should not have to conspire—they can use force to get their way (Machiavelli 1996, see discussion in Uscinski and Parent 2014: 152). Nevertheless, conspiracy theories in the West tend to implicate the strong.

Put in the most neutral terms, a *conspiracy theorist* is anyone who believes conspiracy theories, and polls over several decades suggest that all Americans, for example, are conspiracy theorists in this sense. However, the term is often used to demarcate those, such as David Icke or Alex Jones, who take an entrepreneurial role in developing or spreading conspiracy theories.

While *conspiracy* refers to a real, actual event, *conspiracy theory* refers to an accusatory perception which may or may not be true. The line separating conspiracy theory and conspiracy is unclear and has been hotly debated (Clarke 2006, Coady 2003, 2006, Keeley 1999, 2003). Everybody believes in at least one conspiracy theory, but rejects countless others. Therefore, people disagree on which theories constitute "could-be-true" conspiracy theories and which constitute "are-true" conspiracies. What is their decision rule for separating the wheat from the chafe? I submit that most people do not have a consistent rule for accepting some conspiracy theories as true or for rejecting others as false. People appear to pick and choose based on factors that have nothing to do with consistent standards of evidence. For example, people tend to believe conspiracy theories

that denigrate the opposing political party but rarely their own (Miller, Saunders and Farhart 2016, Oliver and Wood 2014, Uscinski, Klofstad and Atkinson 2016). Epistemologists have also struggled with separating the true conspiracy theories from the false ones—and some have moved away from providing a consistent rule that dichotomizes the true conspiracy theories from the false ones. Rather they provide guidelines that separate the warranted from the unwarranted (Keeley 1999).

For the purposes of this article, I demarcate between conspiracy theory and conspiracy using the simple and consistent standard put forth by Neil Levy (2007). His premise is that properly constituted epistemic authorities determine the existence of conspiracies. Levy defines properly constituted epistemic authorities as institutions in which knowledge claims are the result of a socially distributed network of inquirers trained in assessing knowledge claims, with methods and results made public and available for scrutiny (i.e., courts of law, scientific institutions). If the proper authorities say something is a conspiracy, then it is true; if they say it is a conspiracy theory, then it is likely false.

By *conspiracy belief* I refer to a person's belief in a specific conspiracy theory, for example, Rosie O'Donnell's belief that the Twin Towers fell on 9/11 due to a carefully timed demolition. *Conspiratorial thinking* on the other hand refers to an underlying worldview in which events and circumstances are more or less the product of conspiracy (e.g., Brotherton, French and Pickering 2013). The more a person thinks in conspiratorial terms, the more likely they will be to believe in specific conspiracy theories. For example, previous studies show that those with strong conspiratorial predispositions are more likely to believe in conspiracy theories about media bias (Uscinski *et al.* 2016), scientific findings (Lewandowsky, Gignac and Oberauer 2013), and downed airliners (Nyhan *et al.* 2016). This worldview can be thought of as a bias that leads a person to view authoritative accounts as fabricated and powerful actors as conspirators (Wood *et al.* 2012).

2. Conspiracy Theories Should not Be Treated as Wrong

While conspiracies happen and people should be vigilant, conspiracy theories do not represent the best judgment of the appropriate epistemological institutions (Levy 2007). Because conspiracy theories contradict official accounts, they are suspect and should be treated with skepticism.[1] If we were to blur the difference between conspiracy theories and conspiracies (for example, see deHaven-Smith 2006), then we are in effect saying that the methods and institutions which generate knowledge claims are meaningless. We would be suggesting that anything goes when it comes to discovering truth.

This being said, the institutions which are best suited to determine the existence of conspiracies are also part of the entrenched elite establishment. Universities, peer-reviewed journals, elite journalists, government institutions, and the like are powerful, elite, and therefore exactly the kind of institutions which are themselves often accused of either being part of the alleged conspiracies

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[1] There are of course instances when a conspiracy theory does not contradict the appropriate epistemological institutions, for example, when an event occurs people may immediately posit a conspiracy theory to explain it prior to appropriate epistemological institution passing judgment on the cause of that event (Dentith 2016).

or too close to the alleged conspirators to render a sound, impartial judgment. Even the best knowledge generating institutions err accidentally; sometimes they err because they are not impartial. This is where conspiracy theorizing comes in. In cases where there may be a perceived conflict of interest, conspiracy theorists will gather evidence to challenge the judgment of our prevailing institutions. I am not suggesting that there is always a conflict of interest or that our institutions for determining the existence of conspiracy theories are inherently biased or part of a scheme to cover-up nefarious activities. Rather I am suggesting that our knowledge generating institutions are not—nor should they be—above suspicion or reproach.

Conspiracy theories are unique epistemological creatures because they are non-falsifiable (Keeley 1999, Uscinski and Parent 2014 pg. 40). It is difficult to prove that a secret plot is not taking place behind the scenes. A dearth of positive proof and an abundance of falsifying evidence seem to count in their favor. This is not inappropriate: if powerful actors are trying to hide something it only stands to reason that confirming evidence will be hidden and red herrings will abound. There is an assumption in the study of non-human phenomena—for example, the study of atomic particles—that the objects under study will not alter their behavior or try to hide their activities from researchers. We expect the conspirators to react to investigators so as to hide their activities (Keeley 1999).

This does not mean that we should count every conspiracy theory as true simply because we cannot prove the negative, that a secret plot is not taking place. Nor does this imply that we cannot discount the evidentiary claims made by conspiracy theorists in support of their theories. For example, the Oliver Stone film, *JFK,* makes many supposedly factual claims about the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. However, many of these claims are demonstrably false and Stone has attested to this himself. This does not mean that there was not conspiracy to kill Kennedy, it just means that the evidence presented by Stone does not make the conspiracy theory more likely to be true.

Given that conspiracy theories *could be true*, I warn against labeling conspiracy theories using a true/false dichotomy. I instead argue in favor of treating conspiracy theories as relatively more or less suspect based upon the amount of verifiable evidence in their favor. There are of course many legitimate ways of evaluating the veracity of conspiracy theories, for example Brian Keeley suggests that as more and more actors become involved in orchestrating or concealing the plot, the more likely detection becomes, meaning that if the plot has thousands of actors and they have yet to be detected, the plot probably does not exist (Keeley 1999, see also Grimes 2016). The prevailing point is that because they are non-falsifiable, conspiracy theories are different from the evidentiary claims used to support them which should be treated as true or false.

3. Conspiracy Theories are Necessary to the Healthy Functioning of Society

Conspiracy theorists are frequently insulted and treated with derision (Husting and Orr 2007); they are oft referred to as cranks, crackpots, kooks, paranoids, wingnuts, etc. Quite damning is that some of the most prominent and destructive conspiracy theorists include names such as Adolf Hitler, Timothy McVeigh, Anders Behring Breivik, Osama Bin Laden, and so on. Rarely are conspiracy theorists complimented or thanked for their service. Ask the average person to

name a beneficial conspiracy theorist and he or she will likely draw a blank. This is a gross injustice.

Like everyone, conspiracy theorists have their positive and negative sides, but yet as a society we tend to focus on the liability side of their ledger. To score cheap moral superiority people often disparage the outliers without examining the good in the group. Yes, the negative side of the ledger is visible and costly, and conspiracy theories are often likely false. However, the positive side of the ledger may very well outweigh the costs. Perhaps the most important positive role that conspiracy theories play is as a crucial part of the marketplace of ideas.

Conspiracy theorists can be likened to lots of things—gadflies, watchdogs, tripwires—but they are most similar to defense lawyers. They are opposing counsel in the war of political ideas, where the establishment is the prosecution, and they challenge prevailing wisdom. Like most defense attorneys, conspiracy theorists lose more than they win. This probability is worth keeping in mind next time you hear a conspiracy theory (it is probably not true). Fundamentally conspiracy theories are about the views of the strong versus the weak, the pros versus the amateurs, and the experts versus the novices. Over the long haul, the authorities tend to win more often.

That said, all courts err some of the time, and some decisions need reversing. This is where conspiracy theorists come in. The only way of ferreting out authorities' mistakes and rectifying them is through advocacy and appeals. Over the long term, conspiracy theories incentivize good behavior by the powerful: if the powerful conspire, someone will be watching, investigating, and publicizing.

When conspiracy theorists are right for the right reasons, they can save the rule of law. Think of Woodward and Bernstein excavating the Watergate scandal. When they are right for the wrong reasons, they can build nations. Think of the American Founders in the Declaration of Independence. When they are wrong for the right reasons, they can unearth new information. Case in point: we know much more today about the Kennedy assassination because of the persistence of conspiracy theorists.

Still, sometimes conspiracy theorists are wrong for the wrong reasons and this is surely a loss. Yet that is only known in hindsight and is probably a price worth paying. We do not know the strength of ideas until they compete in an open playing field and if conspiracy theorists do not test political truths and speak for the underdog, who would do it?

The media in most Western states is independent enough to expose scandals, wrongdoing, and conspiracies. However, the mainstream media has its blind spots. For example, there was considerable trepidation at the *Washington Post* as Woodward and Bernstein moved forward with their investigation into the Watergate break-in. Sometimes, journalists have partisan biases and treat their favored party with kid gloves. And, investigating alleged conspiracies vigorously could cost journalists access or respect. Given this, conspiracy theorists must sometimes act where mainstream institutions may not, in the court of last resort.

Conspiracy theories can be thought of as alarm systems for weak groups. They help groups address threats emanating from stronger groups. In our "conspiracy theories are for losers" hypothesis, Joseph Parent and I begin with a theory of groups: groups vie against others to create or capture resources, and distribute those resources authoritatively. Because victories can be leveraged to capture further victories, defeated groups have strong incentives to be vigilant and vociferous. Conspiracy theorizing provides a way for out-of-power groups to

recoup from losses, close ranks, overcome collective action problems, and sensitize minds to vulnerabilities (Uscinski and Parent 2014). Emerging groups, minor groups, and social movements will engage in conspiracy theorizing for similar reasons; it allows them to challenge existing power structures and react to oncoming threats from the establishment. Being out of power or outnumbered, anxiety and a perceived lack of control will drive conspiracy theorizing. In both cases though, balancing against threats is the crux of conspiracy theorizing. Victory being a lax disciplinarian, large winning groups feel less anxiety, more in control, and less need for conspiracy theories.

Successful conspiracy theories provide a unifying narrative of a terrifying enemy; the tendency of conspiracy theorists to scapegoat, however reprehensible, serves a rational purpose and attempts to balance against existing power arrangements. For example, the much reported "Jade Helm" conspiracy theories and the 9/11 Truther theories have lost the many of the followers they once had because the observed threats dissipated (the military exercise at Jade Helm ended; Bush left office).

History suggests that power is best when it is limited, divided, and constrained. Because they can rally the weak to balance against power, conspiracy theories are set apart from simple forms of misinformation (myths, rumors, incorrect beliefs, etc.) which tend to have a much more accidental quality to them. This role played by conspiracy theories should not go underappreciated by social scientists who study them.

4. The Advances Made by Social Scientists and the Dangers that Those Advances Pose

A small number of papers examining conspiratorial beliefs and underlying conspiracy thinking were published between the 1970s and 1990s (Goertzel 1994, McHoskey 1995, McClosky and Chong 1985, McCauley and Jacques 1979, Crocker *et al.* 1999, Butler, Koopman and Zimbardo 1995, Abalakina-Paap *et al.* 1999). These papers were some of the first to use quantitative methods—surveys and experiments—to measure what individuals, rather than what groups or society believed. However, none of these papers were part of, or sparked a larger research trajectory within psychology, social-psychology, sociology, or political science.

In terms of quantitative research, it was not until the end of the first decade of the Twenty-first century that a more cohesive research agenda developed. Perhaps the watershed moment was the 2012 publication of "Dead and Alive: Beliefs in Contradictory Conspiracy Theories" in the journal of *Social Psychological and Personality Science* by Michael Wood, Karen Douglas and Robbie Sutton. This study showed that many people who believed in a conspiracy theory also believed in other conspiracy theories which logically could not also be true. For example, those believing Osama bin Laden was dead before the Navy Seals entered his compound also believed he was still alive. This finding suggested that belief in conspiracy theories was not so much about the evidence or logic of any specific conspiratorial explanation, but rather about instinctively denying official stories and implicating powerful actors. The implications are that (1) evidence and logic do not drive belief in conspiracy theories as much as conspiracy theorists would argue, and (2) there is an underlying worldview in which official stories are fake,

powerful actors are conspirators, and events and circumstances are the product of vast conspiracies.

The findings by Wood, Douglas, and Sutton (2012) led researchers in several disciplines to begin treating conspiracy theories less as a individual or collective psychopathology (i.e., paranoia) and more as a set of opinions which conform to what researchers have found to be true of other political opinions, most notably that conspiracy theories are the product of information laid over a set of an individual's predispositions (i.e., Zaller 1992). In the years since the Wood *et al.* 2012 paper, many scholars have examined what they refer to as an underlying worldview towards seeing conspiracies (Bruder *et al.* 2013, Imhoff and Bruder 2013, Brotherton *et al.* 2013, Lantian *et al.* 2016, Lewandowsky *et al.* 2013, Brotherton 2015, van der Tempel and Alcock 2015, Dagnall *et al.* 2015, Swami *et al.* 2011, Uscinski *et al.* 2016). The major take-away from these studies is that some people are more prone to believing in conspiracy theories than others. To consider this in a more neutral light, some people will believe in any conspiracy theory even on light evidence while others at the opposite end of the spectrum are naïve and will deny the existence of conspiracies even on accumulating evidence. If we treat this worldview much the same way political scientists treat partisanship or political ideology, then this conspiracy worldview helps individuals interpret information, events, and circumstances around them. Political scientists have therefore begun treating conspiracy beliefs as the product of new information overlaid on top of a set of predispositions (Uscinski *et al.* 2016, Carey *et al.* 2016, for an example in psychology, see Newheiser, Farias and Tausch 2011).

The first journal articles on the topic published by political scientists showed that people tend to (1) believe in conspiracy theories which denigrated their political adversaries and (2) eschewed those conspiracy theories that accused their own side of conspiring (Miller *et al.* 2016, Oliver and Wood 2014). Such studies imply that people do not have an open mind when evaluating the evidence supporting conspiracy theories, but rather chose to believe in only those that fit their preconceived notions (whether the evidence is all that good or not). Miller *et al.* 2016 suggest that conspiracy theories were largely the product of motivated partisan reasoning (Taber and Lodge 2006, see also Claassen and Ensley 2016).

Uscinski *et al.* 2016 melded the political aspects identified by both Miller *et al.* 2016 and Oliver and Wood 2014 with the findings of Wood *et al.* 2012 to suggest not only that conspiracy beliefs are the product of motivated partisan reasoning, but also that conspiracy beliefs are likely to occur when individuals have a worldview in which conspiracies dictate events. This explains why most partisan conspiracy theories in the United States do not convince more than 25% of the population (Birther and Truther theories, despite their ubiquity max out at about that). Only those with a sufficiently elevated conspiracy worldview and on the side of the political spectrum not implicated in the conspiracy will believe in a given partisan conspiracy theory.

Social scientists have begun to discover how to convince people of conspiracy theories. For example, Uscinski *et al.* (2016, see also Nyhan *et al.* 2016) show that giving informational cues suggesting a conspiracy theory—even cues lacking any supporting evidence—to those who have a set of predispositions congruent with the conspiracy theory can drive people to adopt that conspiracy belief. Knowing how this process works is not without its pitfalls. We should not want powerful groups to become more effective at convincing people of conspiracy theories in lieu of evidence. When conspiracy theories accuse the

powerful and well protected of conspiring, it is unlikely that the ability to convince people of conspiracy theories can do that much damage. When powerful people use conspiracy theories to scapegoat the weak, the ability to convince people of conspiracy theories becomes more lethal.

Working on the opposite end, several social scientists have invested greatly in understanding how to rid people of their conspiracy beliefs. There is a sizable upside to this line of research. Diseases that were once cured, like mumps and measles, have come back because some people believe in conspiracy theories about vaccine safety and choose to eschew vaccination. There are currently concerns that the Zika virus, now infecting people in south Florida, will be difficult to cure because of the conspiracy theories on social media. Beliefs in extreme conspiracy theories have led to violence, take Anders Breivik for example. Racist conspiracy beliefs had led to violence against Jews and others. Imagine the good that could be done if such conspiracy beliefs could be eliminated.

The major finding from this line of research is that it is very difficult to rid people of their conspiracy beliefs, and that just attempting to do so may lead to a "backfire effect" where individuals exposed to information disconfirming their conspiracy belief double-down on that belief (Nyhan and Reifler 2010, Nyhan *et al.* 2013). A more recent attempt at correcting conspiracy beliefs examines beliefs surrounding President Obama's attempt at health care reform (Berinsky 2015). The corrections used in this study proved more effective, particularly when people received corrective information from a co-partisan. It is likely that further studies will build on this finding and discover more effective correctives. No doubt, this work is promising. Having the ability to present information in a way that corrects incorrect beliefs could solve many problems.

However, this line of research treats conspiracy beliefs as a problem of information: if people had better information they would have "correct" beliefs. Such works do not consider, that conspiracy beliefs might be more than a cognitive hiccup. Since conspiracy beliefs are protests against power, it may not be desirable to correct them. First, the ability to correct conspiracy beliefs gives those with the ability to deploy those corrections new powers of persuasion. Such people would have the ability to counteract beliefs which question their own behavior. Second, unlike misinformation per se, it is not clear that conspiracy beliefs are incorrect. They may be dubious, but since they are non-falsifiable, they may not by wrong. "Correcting" such beliefs run the risk of steering people away from, rather than to, truth.

5. Conclusion

Democracy works much like a market. In order for markets to function, there must be buyers and sellers on both sides of trades, and some of those people some of the time will guess wrong and lose money. But that is necessary for the system to work at all. Similarly, democracy needs people to poke and prod and vet the conventional wisdoms, if for no other reason than to keep the conventions from corruption. Conspiracy theorists, in this telling, are idea entrepreneurs. And typical of entrepreneurs, most of them will not make it.

Conspiracy theories continue to have a terrible reputation—most people treat them with overt skepticism or downright derision. This is not unreasonable, most are likely not true. But why would something with such a bad reputation be

so popular? If conspiracy theorists are crazy or stupid, why are they so numerous and stubborn? Perhaps the reason is that conspiracy theories are less about specific details and more about broader conceptions of power: who has it and what are they doing with it?

In this sense, conspiracy theories are alarm bells, trip wires, early warning systems. They alert the vulnerable to coming threats, violations of ground rules, and the abuse of power. The alarms sound even when the threat is not realized. The question is, would democracy be better off with more warning bells, or with less? This is a choice, and both paths present risks. The current scholarly trajectory should spend more time contemplating those risks. Not to do so could lead researchers to remove people's fears of corruption, deceit, and abuse without removing the actual corruption, deceit, and abuse.

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