

The Phenomenology of Conspiracy Belief

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## ABSTRACT:

Conspiracy theories, which typically suggest that hidden hands within the government are conducting a grand plot to manipulate and exploit its citizens, have become increasingly prevalent in contemporary political discourse. As political news media platforms have become increasingly polarized, individuals' beliefs seem to operate within starkly different versions of the same reality. While past studies have sought to understand the underlying social and psychological processes of conspiracy belief, much of the research has been limited by its failure to account for the institutional forces that effectively shape individuals' beliefs. With support from Althusser's theory of the Ideological State Apparatus and Herman and Chomsky's propaganda model, the current research will seek to understand how mainstream media narratives may actually drive the phenomenon of conspiracy belief. A study of articles from mainstream media outlets about the flat Earth theory and its supporters will find that media narratives serve to foster disbelief in the theory, which only fuels existing divisions.

## I. Introduction

Political conspiracy theories have become increasingly prominent since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, leading researchers to further investigate what drives the belief in these alternative narratives. Typically, conspiracy theory narratives imply that hidden hands within the government are conducting a grand plot, often involving the keeping of secrets in order to manipulate citizens of the state. On the highly polarized landscape of United States politics, especially since the 2016 presidential election of Donald Trump, conspiracy theories and “alternative facts” have become a part of mainstream political discourse. In addition to President Trump himself running a campaign fueled by misinformation and attacks on the free press, he has since been elevated to a literal messianic status by followers of a prominent online conspiracy theory known as QAnon. An anonymous user who calls themselves Q began writing cryptic posts in late 2017 on the internet forum 4chan, alleging to be “a government insider exposing an entrenched, international bureaucracy that is secretly plotting all sorts of nefarious schemes against the Trump administration and its supporters,” (Bank, Stack, & Victor, 2018). Trump is framed as “a conquistador battling a cabal of anti-American saboteurs who have taken over government, industry, media, and various other institutions of public life,” (Bank et. al, 2018).

The QAnon conspiracy theories expanded rapidly to other platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter, allowing followers to interact with each other and share new discoveries. Since then, QAnon followers have become increasingly visible at Trump’s rallies, and the theories have even been promoted by celebrities including Roseanne Barr. Perhaps the most concerning aspect regarding the prominence of these particular theories is that they have

been increasingly embraced among right-wing antigovernment extremists, of whom some have committed acts of violence, according to a report published by the Southern Poverty Law Center's Hatewatch blog (Kelley, 2019). According to the report, several events linked to followers of QAnon include: "The capture of nearly 300 migrants at gunpoint on the U.S.-Mexico border,"; "The firebombing of a Minnesota mosque and attempted firebombing of a Champaign, Illinois women's health center by an Illinois militia,"; "An armed Nevada man's blocking of traffic with an armored vehicle on a bridge near Hoover Dam,"; and "The arson by a California man of the Washington, D.C., restaurant Comet Ping Pong, which is at the center of the patently false Pizzagate conspiracy theory," (Kelley, 2019). While conspiracy theories have typically existed outside the realm of mainstream political discourse in the U.S., it seems as though the Internet has enabled their renewed prominence.

The election of Donald Trump has led to an increased academic interest in studying the phenomenon of misinformation being spread by the Internet and partisan media outlets. However, there is a lack of literature connecting this phenomenon to the existing body of research on conspiracy theories. Social scientists across disciplines, armed with their faith in the process of liberal democracy, have sought to understand how followers of conspiracy theories could be so sure in their knowledge, despite it deviating so drastically from what dominant narratives proclaim to be truth. Many researchers have approached the study of conspiracy theories as a pathological phenomenon, while ignoring the role played by social institutions which shape individuals' systems of belief. For the most part, the body of social science literature on conspiracy theories has also been limited by its failure to account for the deeply-loaded epistemic implications of the term, which is often applied to a wide variety of beliefs

and narratives that arise from vastly different sociopolitical contexts. Overcoming the limitations of past research is critical in order to understand the ideological foundations of specific conspiracy theories.

The first section of this paper will review the findings from the body of social psychological research on conspiracy belief, followed by a discussion of research that demonstrates the complexities of studying conspiracy theories. A new framework for studying conspiracy theories will be proposed, using Althusser's theory of the Ideological State Apparatus to connect the contemporary manifestation of conspiracy belief with the contemporary state of mass media and its ideological forces. Herman and Chomsky's (1988) propaganda model, which describes the process by which mainstream media narratives are shaped to serve the ruling class, will help to further understand how institutional forces may actually drive the phenomenon of conspiracy belief. A hypothesis will be made that mainstream media coverage about conspiracy theories will use certain discursive techniques to control the narrative in the favor of elite interests, by means of fostering disbelief. The current study will analyze a selection of news articles about the modern flat Earth movement in order to test the stated hypothesis.

#### Findings from Social Psychology

Historian Richard Hofstadter's (1966) work on the 'Paranoid Style in American Politics' provided early foundations for the academic study of conspiracy theories (as cited in Fluck, 2016, p. 53; van Proojien and Douglas, 2018, p. 897). Often viewing conspiracy belief as a pathological phenomenon associated with the 'paranoid type', past research has sought to

identify the psychological factors which predispose individuals to conspiracy belief. According to Van Proojien and Douglas (2018), conspiracy beliefs are driven by similar underlying psychological processes, originating in negative emotions such as anxiety, uncertainty, and fears of losing control, (p. 901). However, on the individual level, researchers have not fully accounted for the fact that these psychological processes are inseparable from one's perception of their external reality, which is shaped by their beliefs. Therefore, future studies must consider the likelihood that the origins of negative emotions are actually rooted in individuals' beliefs, rather than vice versa.

Van Proojien and Van Vugt's "Adaptive Conspiracism Hypothesis" proposes that a "conspiracy detection system" developed among ancient humans during the evolutionary process, in order to protect against threats from "hostile coalitions" (Van Proojien and Douglas, 2018, p. 900). This theory suggests that conspiracy belief is a universal phenomenon throughout different time periods, cultures, and societies. The primary social motivations for conspiracy belief, according to Van Proojien and Douglas, include upholding a strong ingroup identity, and protecting against suspected outgroup threat (p. 902). These motivations are visible on the stage of American politics, in which Republicans and Democrats often believe conspiracy theories involving threats by the opposing party. Despite evidence suggesting that conspiracy belief is a universal phenomenon, however, the conditions under which they proliferate must be highly contextual.

Radnitz and Underwood (2017) argue that instead of being driven solely by individual psychological differences, conspiracy beliefs are conditional upon external, situational factors.

Because political beliefs in general tend to be “sensitive to contextual cues and cognitive stimuli,” conspiracy beliefs may develop in similar ways, implying that a “vast majority of citizens may be potential conspiracists depending on the context,” (p. 114). An experimental survey design was used to conduct the study: respondents were presented with a “fictional conspiracy vignette” in the form of a news article, describing a scenario in which “a mysterious illness afflicts a small Midwestern town, causing fatalities,” (p. 118).

Several independent variables were manipulated in the survey (Radnitz and Underwood, 2017, p. 119). To test whether anxiety will increase likelihood of believing a conspiracy, subjects read a statement about the negative impacts of the 2008 financial crisis in the U.S., and asked to describe how they were personally affected by it. This was followed by a question asking whether the respondent is currently feeling worried. To test how political ideology affects conspiracy belief, the biochemical plant is randomly identified as being either government or corporate owned. Respondents were randomly assigned information stating that either sixteen unnamed plant workers were affected and five died, or that one mother of three, whose name was given, died. This was intended to test whether identifiability and number of victims affects the inference of a conspiracy. The dependent variable, conspiracy belief, was measured by the degree to which there is a connection between the biochemical plant and the victims, that the biochemical plant did something wrong, and that they are hiding something. The study produced several findings of interest: Respondents who reported feeling worried after receiving the anxiety prime were most likely to perceive the involvement of a conspiracy, which may explain why conspiracy theories become more prominent in times of economic or political uncertainty (Radnitz and Underwood, 2017, p. 124). Self-reported liberals

were more prone to perceive a conspiracy, but this finding may have been influenced by using an environmental justice issue in the vignette. People were more likely to perceive a conspiracy when there were multiple unnamed victims involved, which suggests multiple victims may be interpreted as a pattern.

Radnitz and Underwood's (2017) study suggests that the formation of conspiracy beliefs is largely conditional on context, rather than individual characteristics, and that beliefs are based on factors both internal and external to relevant information. The research is useful in explaining how individuals may jump to conclusions based on limited evidence, but fails to contribute to understanding the phenomenon of widespread conspiracy theories, for which alleged evidence is usually already accumulated and propagated by claims-makers with a large audience. The larger body of research has found significant evidence that conspiracy belief is a phenomenon with deep social and psychological implications, therefore necessitating further attention from academics. However, many of these studies have fallen short in their attempts to isolate the psychological aspects of conspiracy belief from the larger systems of belief they operate within. Future research on conspiracy theories should direct closer attention to their surrounding sociopolitical contexts.

## II. Sociopolitical Viewpoints

While a significant body of research has focused on the psychological traits and processes associated with conspiracy belief, fewer studies have been conducted to identify the sociopolitical factors which influence belief in conspiracy theories. According to Nefes (2015), previous studies on the sociopolitical significance of conspiracy theories may be categorized



into two distinct theoretical approaches. The classical approach views conspiracy belief as, “a political pathology and underlines how conspiracy literature leads readers to distorted, extremist views of marginal political groups,” (p. 558). In contrast, “the cultural approach refutes this pathologization and argues that conspiracy theories are people’s rational attempts to understand society.” Many studies assume that conspiracy theories contain empirically false information, a view which rests on the assumption that dominant narratives should inherently be interpreted as true. Therefore, it is necessary for researchers to direct their attention to the sociopolitical contexts in which specific conspiracy theories take form, and the sources from which they originate.

According Silva, Bruno, & Levente (2017), conspiracy theories proliferate in an environment characterized by extreme “skepticism of the political sphere by a sector of the population that feels excluded,” (p. 427). According to Olmsted (2011), the prominence of conspiracy theories among citizens of the United States reflects a larger historical trend toward distrust in government, resulting from an extensive number of revelations about actual conspiracies and cover-ups conducted by state powers over the past century. “When citizens cannot trust their government to tell the truth,” writes Olmsted, “when they are convinced that public officials routinely conspire, lie, and conceal their crimes, they become less likely to trust the government to do anything,” (98). Olmsted argues that the solution to this problem is to increase transparency and accountability on behalf of the government. However, the proposal for increased transparency is contradicted by Fluck’s argument, which shows that appeals to transparency and conspiracy theorizing are both rooted in the same contemporary dominant “epistemic folkways”, defined as the “norms, practices, ideals, and assumptions through which

knowledge is pursued and understood beyond academia,” (Fluck 2016, p. 51). Academic research relying on a binary conception of knowledge as being objectively true or false creates further limitations for the study of conspiracy theories. The phenomenon of conspiracy theorizing operates under the same dominant epistemic assumptions, rooted in positivist philosophical tradition, “which relegates anything that cannot be reduced to logic or empirically identifiable facts to a ‘knowledge-free zone’,” (Fluck 2016, p. 66). A sociological analysis of conspiracy theories must surpass these limitations by accounting for knowledge as a subjective phenomenon.

According to Fluck’s analysis, employing a lens based on Adorno’s Critical Theory, “a concept or theory can be ‘true’ to the extent that it reflects some dimension of existing social conditions, but false to the extent that it gives the impression of their permanence,” (2016, p. 68). From this perspective, conspiracy thinking can be seen as true “insofar as it reflects unquestioning faith that empiricism and rationalism provide the basis upon which progress or insight will be achieved,” (p. 71). Additionally, conspiracy thinking “reflects the truth that technical knowledge is generally used to promote goals other than popular empowerment, that institutions of global governance are experienced as malicious or indifferent actors, and that the normative-political resources of the public sphere are severely depleted when it comes to dealing with them.” Notably, it is also reflective of “the possibility that the means of rejuvenating that sphere might lie elsewhere than within existing institutions and their transparency policies,” (p. 72). Individuals seeking access to information through appeals to transparency or conspiracy theorizing misguidedly assume themselves to be on an objective pursuit of truth. According to Fluck, “the resources that appear to promise insight, progress,

and empowerment are the very bricks from which the impenetrable 'façade' of modern institutions is constructed," (p. 67).

Fluck's (2016) adaptation of Adorno's critical theory use of analysis of conspiracy theory belief as a sociological phenomenon must account for the complexities embedded in the term itself, and to avoid relying on positivist frameworks. Silva et. al. (2017) avoid several common flaws of previous research in their study of the relationship between conspiracy beliefs and populism. By relying on survey data which included questions to measure both populist attitudes and conspiracy beliefs, and distinguishing between several categories of conspiracy belief, the study finds a significant relationship without assuming any specific belief systems to be valid or not. However, the sample was limited to the United States and used fairly general variables to measure facets of conspiracy beliefs and populist attitudes. Without regard for the sociopolitical contexts in which attitudes and beliefs develop, it is difficult to determine the specific ideological connections between them. The findings by Silva et al. (2017) ignore the extent to which populist attitudes and conspiracy beliefs can both be understood as rational responses to actual political events and material inequalities.

Previous research has tended to assume conspiracy theories to be beliefs which are empirically false, or studied these beliefs without regard for their sociopolitical context. In contrast, Akhtar and Ahmad (2015) study the degree to which conspiracy theories are reflective of actual structural realities. The authors distinguish between two unique strands of conspiracy belief prominent among Pakistani society, which both contradict the dominant liberal narratives regarding the War on Terror, "in which the state is implicitly represented as willingly and successfully renting out its sovereignty to imperial interests for the enrichment of a

corrupt, collaborative elite that controls the levers of domestic power,” (p. 95). One form of popular conspiracy theory is described as “ultra right-wing, media-driven conspiracy propaganda,” distinct from the second form of conspiracy theory, which is based in “more organic, authentic forms of popular cynicism, (p. 96). While the rejection of mainstream liberal narratives and a preoccupation with US imperialism are common to both forms of conspiracy theory, the latter type of thinking does not identify specific actors responsible for violence; instead, they imply the involvement of “more impersonal, unknowable actors and economic forces, including those which might be endogenously rooted,” (p. 97). From this view, political violence “is driven at a deeper level by all-powerful material interests that ruthlessly wage war as a means of amassing wealth and resources.” Interestingly, the authors argue that this particular manifestation of organic conspiracy theory is consistent with “well-established structuralist theories of the capitalist state.” Instead of viewing conspiracy theories as “empirically verifiable facts about specific events”, they are analyzed by Akhtar & Ahmed as “the subjective co-ordinates of objective *structural* realities.” This theoretical shift allows conspiracy theories to be understood in terms of “how the state is perceived, lived and experienced by individuals and communities at the everyday level.”

Relying on Marxist theoretical traditions, Akhtar & Ahmad argue that the postcolonial state through which imperialism operates, functions “within a regional and international system that perpetuates the class system,” (2015, p. 98). Pakistan’s liberal elite, formally aligned with the U.S., holds the view that the “problem” of religious militancy should be addressed with a “military solution,”. However, this is contradictory to the beliefs held by the Pakistani public, who are certain that the conflicts are not being fought with their best interest

in mind. Organic conspiracy discourse alleges that attacks by the Taliban are backed by forces associated with institutions of state power, a belief that is “a product of the well-known history of covert support for the religious right by the US and Pakistani governments,” (p. 100). The manipulation of state institutions, driven by the neoliberal interests of U.S. imperialism, has left the people of Pakistan with little faith in their government. The systemic bias of liberal media only further contributes to the distrust in politics, “which is increasingly regarded as an unreal fabrication consisting of carefully staged spectacles and meticulously spun discourse with little relationship to the truth of things,” (p. 105).

Consistent with this widespread distrust in liberal narratives, organic conspiracy theories question the stated intentions of the actors who claim autonomous responsibility for terrorist attacks; they recognize that the true motivations behind these attacks may be unknowable, and that there well may be “hidden hands” involved. According to the authors, the “hidden hand” described by conspiracy theorists can be viewed as an analogy “for the ordinary day-to-day workings of the capitalist state,” (p. 108). Thus, the authors conclude that the organic conspiracy theories discussed should be understood as “a layperson’s-theory of the state that runs parallel to and against the dominant discourse,” (p. 108). This paper provides a useful paradigmatic lens through which to view conspiracy theory narratives—researchers must exercise caution to avoid imposing their own value-judgements regarding truth.

### III. Conspiracy Theories, Media Misinformation, and the Ideological State Apparatus

As the previous sections have shown, much of the past research on belief in conspiracy theories has neglected to account for the phenomenon’s sociopolitical influences and impact. In contrast, Nefes’ (2015) article seeks to understand the ways in which people with different

political views interpret the *Efendi* books by Yalçın, a popular Turkish conspiracy book series describing the alleged secret political rule of the Dönmes, a religious minority group in Turkey. Utilizing Boudon's rational choice theory, Nefes argues that readers of the *Efendi* series "interpret the conspiratorial accounts pragmatically to support their political views and express their ontological insecurities," (2015, p. 559). The research relies on semi-structured interviews with readers of the *Efendi* series to analyze their interpretations, as well as content analysis of the books, in order to identify "the logic of the conspiratorial rhetoric about the Dönme community," (Nefes, 2015, p. 565).

Nefes' research suggests that readers of the *Efendi* books seem to have integrated the conspiracy theories to fit within their existing political views, as the majority of respondents' political views were either strengthened or unchanged after reading the books (2015, p. 571). The interview data indicates that people with right-wing political views interpreted the conspiracy rhetoric in a way which supported their distrust of outsiders, while people with left-wing views interpreted the theories to support their understanding of power disparities under capitalism. Most notably, this study successfully demonstrates the importance of studying the phenomenon of conspiracy belief within its particular sociopolitical and ideological context. Nefes (2015) analyzes conspiracy theories that are particular to the context of Turkish politics, however, so it is difficult to assume the extent to which the study's findings are generalizable. Regardless, it is evident from this research that the process by which people come to believe in conspiracy theories cannot be studied in isolation from individuals' ideological dispositions.

According to Althusser in his essay on 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses' (1970), "ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of

existence,” (Althusser and Brewster, 2011). Through a wide network of institutions, famously coined by Althusser as the “ideological state apparatuses”, the ideology of the ruling class is imposed on the masses to ensure their willful cooperation within the existing social order. Institutions of the ideological state apparatus (ISA) take form as the religious ISA (churches, synagogues, etc.), the educational ISA (schools), the family ISA, the political ISA, the communications ISA (media), and the cultural ISA (literature, art, sports, etc.). Althusser argues that the ideological state apparatuses function by “interpellation”, or the act of recruiting “subjects among individuals”. As a result, the imagined relationship between individuals and their conditions of existence effectively become taken for granted as an objective reality. Althusser’s theories of ideology provide a useful framework for understanding the phenomenon of conspiracy theories in mainstream media discourse.

“For quite some time,” according to Cacciatore et. al. (2014), “the mass media arguably has played the most important role in informing the public and in shaping perceptions of political issues and candidates,” (p. 656). As direct a result, individuals have become forced to view politics exclusively through the lens provided by the media ISA. With the fairly recent advent of partisan media content on cable news and the Internet, this phenomenon has only been exacerbated, while also increasing the ability for individuals to expose themselves selectively to news that reinforces their existing beliefs (2014, p. 656).

Cacciatore et. al. (2014) argue that the ever-rising spread of misinformation, and its prominence on the modern U.S. political landscape, is driven both by polarized ideological biases and mass media. According to the authors, the term “motivated reasoning” is the tendency for individuals to process information in a way which confirms their pre-existing

biases and beliefs, and partly explains why partisan biases tend to skew the perception of objective political facts (2014, p. 655). Widespread misinformation may be additionally explained by the process of “selective exposure”, or the tendency for people to seek out information that is “consistent with or confirming a person’s prior attitudes,” meanwhile “avoiding information that runs counter to an individual’s original opinions,” (p. 656). The rise of polarized cable news networks, the Internet, and television comedy programs all add fuel to these social-psychological processes, effectively serving to increase the ability for media consumers to gather information that further reinforces their biases. Cacciatore et. al. (2014) provide evidence which suggests that “we are moving increasingly toward a political world in which our beliefs are shaped by the pseudo-realities created by hyperpartisan talk shows, political pundits, and the mainstream media,” (p. 659). As a result of such highly polarized beliefs, individual beliefs appear to operate within entirely different versions of reality, which is evidenced by the increased prominence of conspiracy belief in contemporary political discourse; proponents of conspiracy belief often reject mainstream media narratives altogether.

The conflation of conspiracy theories and political misinformation would require the preemptive assumption that certain conspiracy theories are empirically false. However, as long as one approaches the topic with careful regard for these epistemic limitations, the relationship between the two phenomenon should be given further consideration by researchers. A new framework for studying conspiracy theories should thus consider the possibility of a relationship between the institution of media and conspiracy theory belief. Herman and Chomsky’s (1988) “propaganda model” describes the process by which mainstream media



content is tactfully molded to serve the ruling class of political and economic elites.

Occasionally, the media do “attack and expose corporate and governmental malfeasance,” which allows their self-portrayal as “spokesmen for free speech,” (p. 1). However, according to Herman and Chomsky, the limited nature of these critiques is almost always overlooked. By accounting for the Chomskyan model as part of the framework for studying conspiracy theories, an argument can be made to show that the mass media has an interest in portraying conspiracy theories as fictional, regardless of whether or not they may be true.

#### IV. Herman and Chomsky’s “Propaganda Model”

According to Herman and Chomsky (1988), “the media serve, and propagandize on behalf of, the powerful societal interests that control and finance them,” (p. xi). Over the past several decades, the media has become increasingly beholden to corporate interests, due to the centralization of ownership. Herman and Chomsky note that a near-entirety of mass media channels in the U.S. are now owned by only two dozen different companies (p. xiii). Journalists and other media personnel have little choice but to portray the interests of the elite and powerful in a positive light. Thus, the media has become a critical tool used by those in power to impose their preferred ideological beliefs upon the masses. Although one cannot be certain whether any given conspiracy theory is actually true, the suspicion that conspiracies may exist should be regarded as valid because of this.

Herman and Chomsky’s “propaganda model” describes the effects that the “inequality of wealth and power” have on “mass-media interests and choices,” (p. 2). According to the authors, “it traces the routes by which money and power are able to filter out the news fit to print, marginalize dissent, and allow the government and dominant private interests to get

their messages across to the public.” The authors describe five “news filters” which raw news content must pass through before reported to the public, which “fix the premises of discourse and interpretation, and the definition of what is newsworthy in the first place.”

The first filter discussed by Herman and Chomsky (1988) is the fact that mass media is a business, and its main goal is to accrue profits. Over the past several decades, the ownership of media channels has become concentrated among a small number of very large wealthy corporations; thus, this small number of firms has a huge amount of control in regard to setting the national media agenda. Because of the extreme wealth of corporate leadership, as well as having close relationships with others in the corporate community through boards of directors, they have special interests in controlling narratives to maintain the status quo (p. 8).

According to the authors, the large media companies are engaged in close business relationships with commercial and investment bankers, who are also major investors in media stock. “These holdings, individually and collectively, do not convey control, but these large investors can make themselves heard, and their actions can affect the welfare of the companies and their managers,” (Herman and Chomsky, 1988, p. 11). Additionally, non-media companies have become increasingly involved in the business of mass media. For example, General Electric (GE) owned the NBC broadcasting network from 1986 until 2013, when the network was bought out by Comcast. Through the 1990s, CBS was owned by the Westinghouse Electric Company. “GE and Westinghouse are both huge, diversified multinational companies heavily involved in the controversial areas of weapons production and nuclear power,” the authors state (p. 12). Because these major organizations have critical stakes in political decisions, they are incentivized to shape the messages and narratives dispelled by the media in their favor.

Herman and Chomsky's second news filter is "the advertising license to do business," (1988, p. 14). Advertisements are a major means of profit for the mass media; therefore, media companies are highly beholden to advertiser interests. "The power of advertisers over television programming stems from the simple fact that they buy and pay for the programs," according to the authors (p. 16). "As such, the media compete for their patronage, developing specialized staff to solicit advertisers and necessarily having to explain how their programs serve advertisers' needs." Advertisers discriminate against media institutions who are perceived as harmful to their interests, thus tending to choose only to sponsor programs which promote their values and interests. "Large corporate advertisers will rarely sponsor programs that engage in serious criticisms of corporate activities, such as the problem of environmental degradation, the workings of the military-industrial complex, or corporate support of and benefits from Third World tyrannies," (p. 17).

In order to maintain a steady flow of news reports, the mass media rely on information received directly from government and corporate sources, "where important rumors and leaks abound, and where regular press conferences are held," (Herman and Chomsky, 1988), p. 18). Major sources of information for news reports include the White House and the Pentagon at the federal level, and city governments and police departments for local news. This sourcing of raw news material constitutes the third news filter. According to Herman and Chomsky, government and corporate sources are generally deemed as credible due to their prestige. Thus, "newswriters are predisposed to treat bureaucratic accounts as factual because news personnel participate in upholding a normative order of authorized knowers in the society," says Fishman, as quoted by Herman and Chomsky (p. 19). In other words, reporters trust

bureaucratic officials “to know what it is their job to know.” Government and corporate bureaucracies allocate significant resources toward public-information operations, which allow them to dominate and control the information that becomes publicized.

Government and corporate bodies also shape the supply of experts accessible for media reporting, by “putting them on the payroll as consultants, funding their research, and organizing think tanks that will hire them directly and help disseminate their messages,” (Herman and Chomsky, 1988, p. 23). In the 1970s and 80s, according to Herman and Chomsky, institutions were established to recruit academics and fund their research, in order to propagandize on behalf of corporate interests. For example, experts on the economy or defense issues may be treated as voices of authority by the press; however, these experts are selectively chosen to reinforce narratives that serve elite interests.

The fourth news filter is the unique ability of the powerful to produce “flak”, a term referring to “negative responses to a media statement or program,” (Herman and Chomsky, 1988, p. 26). A small activist group or a conspiracy theory blog, for example, may criticize a news story, but this criticism would have little impact on the media company in question and would be unlikely to affect the overall narrative of the story. In stark contrast, flak directed at the media by the powerful can be highly threatening. Through the 1970s and 1980s, according to Herman and Chomsky, “the corporate community sponsored the growth of institutions such as the American Legal Foundation, the Capital Legal Foundation, the Media Institute, the Center for Media and Public Affairs, and Accuracy in Media (AIM). These may be regarded as institutions organized for the specific purpose of producing flak,” (p. 27). While these organizations consistently weigh attacks on the mass media, the media continue to pay them

with “respectful attention, and their propagandistic role and links to a larger corporate program are rarely mentioned or analyzed,” (p. 28).

Lastly, the fifth news filter of Herman and Chomsky’s (1988) “propaganda model” is anti-communist ideology. According to the authors, “communism as the ultimate evil has always been the specter haunting property owners, as it threatens the very root of their class position and superior status,” (p. 29). As has been previously discussed, the groups of people who hold the most wealth and power in society are highly involved in the business of mass media; opposing communism is therefore a major priority. The mass media use the rhetoric of anti-communism to “mobilize the populace against an enemy.” Whether that enemy is domestic or international, “it can be used against anybody advocating policies that threaten property interests or support accommodation with Communist states and radicalism,” the authors state. The framing of communism as the greatest evil has resulted in the support of fascist regimes abroad, and is also used to attack domestic left-wing activists and politicians.

The five filters, as detailed by Herman and Chomsky (1988), effectively constrain the information that becomes news, and especially limit that which become major news stories. The authors argue that the result of this propaganda model is that media coverage will choose to focus on the victims of abuses by enemies to dominant American interests, and largely ignore the victims of abuse by their allies. According to Herman and Chomsky, “propaganda campaigns will not be mobilized where victimization, even though massive, sustained, and dramatic, fails to meet the test of utility to elite interests,” (p. 33). In *Manufacturing Consent*, the propaganda model is primarily used to analyze discourse regarding international politics and military affairs, comparing how quality of media coverage “differ in ways that serve

political ends,” (p. 35). Herman and Chomsky’s political theory should be accounted for when studying the phenomenon of conspiracy theories, as it indicates the possibility that any conspiracy theory could potentially be true.

#### V. Methods and Procedures

In contrast to Herman and Chomsky’s (1988) study of the mass media, it is not the job of the researcher in this context to determine whether any given conspiracy theory is being deliberately withheld from media coverage. Researchers of conspiracy theories must withhold judgement regarding the truth of any given claims, so to make this judgement, an already proven conspiracy would need to be analyzed. However, it *can* be taken as fact that the wealthiest and most powerful members of society have a significant amount of control over the public’s access to information and knowledge through the mass media. Therefore, regardless of whether any particular conspiracy theory is true, the suspicion that it may be is valid; the five news filters would play a critical role in shaping narratives about any information that relates to a conspiracy among the elite and powerful. It is unnecessary to determine whether a theory is true or false in actuality, because the powerful have an interest in maintaining the masses’ perception that conspiracy theories are fictional. Thus, despite how popular any given conspiracy theory may be, they are paid little attention by the mainstream news media. This leads to the hypothesis that when conspiracy theories are covered at all by mainstream media sources, certain discursive tools will be employed in order to foster disbelief in the conspiracy theory.

In order to further understand how disbelief is shaped and promoted by media narratives, the current research will analyze a selection of six articles from mainstream media

outlets about the modern flat Earth movement (Burdick 2018; Cappucci 2020; Dobson 2019; Moshakis 2018; Picheta 2019; Wolchover 2012). The theory that the Earth is flat experienced a resurgence in the first half of the 2010s, gaining traction mainly through YouTube and other online communities. Supporters of this theory, often referred to as flat Earthers, argue that scientific evidence of a globular planet has been falsified, and that powerful institutional actors, such as NASA, are responsible for keeping the truth under wraps. It is expected that mainstream media coverage of the flat Earth movement will serve to promote the dominant knowledges and dismiss the conspiracy theories, rather than to simply report objectively on the topic.

#### VI. Findings and Discussion

Although the flat Earth movement has never been the subject of sustained news coverage, articles have been published on the topic over the years, if only occasionally. However, even in editorial sections where one would expect to find a more diverse set of viewpoints, mainstream media articles about the flat Earth theory and its associated community are never written by flat Earthers, and they are certainly not written for flat Earthers. Presumably, such content would not pass through the news filters as described by Herman and Chomsky (1988). Each of the articles in the sample made this clear, with variation in tone; in one way or another, the author distinguishes themselves from the flat Earth community (Burdick 2018; Cappucci 2020; Dobson 2019; Moshakis 2018; Picheta 2019; Wolchover 2012). This constructs an us-versus-them dichotomy: the reader of the article and the author are established as holding the same dominant beliefs, while othering those who believe in a conspiracy.

Dobson (2019), for example, states this outright in the article's second paragraph:

"While I am certainly not a flat-earther, I am always intrigued by the mystery of our planet and can't ignore the dedicated and growing Flat Earth organizations and followers throughout the world."

Introducing a UK flat Earth convention, Moshakis (2018) writes that it is "designed to provide believers with opportunities to engage with others who subscribe to the same hypothesis: that the Earth is not a globe, as most of us think, but some kind of plane, with edges." This sentence directly distinguishes flat Earth believers as a minority group.

Cappucci's article begins with a similar distinction:

The Earth is round. It may seem like an obvious fact that we've understood since primary school, but for a body of 'Flat Earthers,' the concept of a globe-shaped Earth is paramount to what they claim is the biggest conspiracy theory ever to exist. (2020)

Other authors are less explicit that they are not flat Earthers themselves, but this can be readily assumed by how the flat Earth community is introduced as the article's subject, such as in the first sentence of the article by Wolchover:

Members of the Flat Earth Society claim to believe the Earth is flat. Walking around on the planet's surface, it *looks* and *feels* flat, so they deem all evidence to the contrary, such as satellite photos of Earth as a sphere, to be fabrications of a 'round Earth conspiracy' orchestrated by NASA and other government agencies. (2012)

In any case, each article is written in such a way to ensure that it cannot be read as an endorsement of the flat Earth theory.



An apparent commonality among all six articles is that none of them are hard news stories, which portray a (seemingly) objective picture of current events targeted toward a general audience. In contrast, the articles about flat Earth belief are either human interest features, editorials, or a combination of both (Burdick 2018; Cappucci 2020; Dobson 2019; Moshakis 2018; Picheta 2019; Wolchover 2012). Cappucci's (2020) article stands alone in the sample as the only pure editorial; the author is a meteorologist employed by the publication, and the article's sole intent is to debunk the flat Earth theory. The other five articles are written with the purpose of telling a story about flat Earthers as a group. These articles all attempt to explain why people believe the theory, with the exception of Dobson (2019), which is a more surface-level human interest story that highlights claims made by flat Earthers about Antarctica.

Aside from Cappucci (2020), every article in the sample allows some space to entertain the theory of a flat Earth, usually through quotations from interviews with flat Earthers, which helps to portray that the author has made an attempt at objectivity. However, the flat Earth theory and its followers are dismissed in other ways throughout the articles. In two articles, there are instances where flat Earth, the claims are stated nonchalantly, despite that the theories would be world-shattering if one were to actually believe them (Burdick 2018; Picheta 2019). The nonchalant tone can thus be read as sarcastic, implying that the theory shouldn't be taken seriously. Paraphrasing an interview with the organizer of the Dallas flat Earth conference, Robbie Davidson, Picheta (2019) writes that Davidson "has a few things he wants to make clear to a flat-earth novice. Firstly, and most importantly — 'none of us believe that we're a flying pancake in space.' The community merely believes that space does not exist, the world sits still, and the moon landing was faked."

Near the beginning of Burdick's article, the author takes on the narrative position of a flat Earther:

If you are only just waking up to the twenty-first century, you should know that, according to a growing number of people, much of what you've been taught about our planet is a lie: Earth really is flat. We know this because dozens, if not hundreds, of YouTube videos describe the coverup. We've listened to podcasts—Flat Earth Conspiracy, The Flat Earth Podcast—that parse the minutiae of various flat-Earth models, and the very wonkiness of the discussion indicates that the over-all theory is as sound and valid as any other scientific theory. We know because on a clear, cool day it is sometimes possible, from southwestern Michigan, to see the Chicago skyline, more than fifty miles away—an impossibility were Earth actually curved. We know because, last February, Kyrie Irving, the Boston Celtics point guard, told us so. (2019)

Neither of these examples suggest that the flat Earth theory is actually plausible, despite that the phrasing indicates otherwise.

As should be expected, flat Earth claims are more frequently portrayed as idiotic and preposterous. According to Wolchover (2012), "while writing off buckets of evidence that Earth is spherical, [flat-Earthers] readily accept a laundry list of propositions that some would call ludicrous." The details of the theory, the author says, make it "so elaborately absurd it sounds like a joke." Apparently unconvinced by the flat Earth theory, Burdick (2018) describes its logic as "by turns mesmerizing and maddening". Cappucci (2020) writes, "their science is laughable, their evidence baseless and their claims prone to falling flat."

Also unsurprisingly, each of the six articles appeals to evidence from the scientific community to object against claims made in support of the flat Earth theory. While this is the basis of Cappucci's (2020) entire article, other articles rely less on challenging specific claims with contrasting evidence to dismiss the flat Earth theory. Dobson (2019) withholds from arguing against the flat Earth theory throughout the article, and in the final paragraph writes, "while the heated discussion from scientists, NASA, and other experts would fill volumes about how false the flat earth claims are, I am a huge believer of allowing everyone to express their personal beliefs and opinions." Dobson simply doesn't need to defend the belief in a round Earth, because it is assumed that the audience trusts these authorities.

The articles foster disbelief in the flat Earth theory by challenging it directly, as well as through the stigmatization of people who do believe in the theory. Several articles portray flat Earthers as ostracized from the larger society as the result of their beliefs (Burdick 2018; Moshakis 2018; Picheta 2019). In the feature article about the U.K. flat Earth convention, Moshakis writes:

I hear stories of family bust-ups, of partners never speaking to each other again. 'I don't enjoy being a Flat Earther,' one speaker says. "People ridicule you." Another woman tells me, "My friends, they thought I was crazy." Believers hide their views from loved ones, fearful of potential repercussions: the blank stares, the angry retorts. It isn't just 'really nice' to be in a room with open-minded people, it is far less emotionally taxing. (2018)

Burdick's story about the North Carolina conference paints a similar picture:

Several people described the relief of “coming out” as a flat-Earther. “You can tell people you’re gay, you can tell people you’re Christian, but you don’t get ridiculed like a flat-Earther,” I overheard one woman say. “It’s really that bad.” (2018)

Of course, there is no effort made to portray this ostracization as undeserved. On the contrary, it is implicitly justified by the stance that the flat Earth theory is not only false, but outlandish. Thus, according to the articles’ narratives, there must be something else wrong with flat Earthers.

Several articles appeal to psychologists to provide their expert opinion regarding why people would believe the Earth is flat, under the assumption that this is false. (Moshakis 2018; Picheta 2019; Wolchover 2012). The psychologists portray the belief in conspiracy theories as the result of individual differences, which they say make people vulnerable to deception. Daniel Jolley, a psychologist at Northumbria University in the U.K., states that people view the world from a biased perspective: “They may have distrust towards powerful people or groups, which could be the government or NASA, and when they look towards evidence that makes sense to them ... this world view (is) endorsed,” (Picheta 2019). It is important to note that there is no consideration here for the reasons why people may distrust the powerful, thus relegating the distrust to paranoia. In the same article, University of Kent social psychologist, Karen Douglas attributes conspiracy belief to a “desire to ‘maintain a positive view of the self and the groups we belong to,’” as well as “an underlying need for power and control.” Douglas also suggests that the rejection of scientific beliefs may potentially be harmful.

Douglas is also featured in another article in which she argues that an appealing feature of most conspiracy theories, “is that they explain a big event without going into details .... a lot

of the power lies in the fact that they are vague,” (Wolchover 2012). Additionally, she attributes the appeal of conspiracy theories to the phenomenon of minority influence: “If you’re faced with a minority viewpoint that is put forth in an intelligent, seemingly well-informed way, and when the proponents don’t deviate from these strong opinions they have, they can be very influential.” In addition to Douglas, Wolchover features the opinion of University of Chicago political scientist Eric Oliver, who says “conspiracy belief stems from a human tendency to perceive unseen forces at work, known as magical thinking.”

Moshakis (2018) interviews Chris French, a professor of psychology at the University of London, who says that conspiracy theorists’ “rejection of conventional views” are “both a bid to reclaim personal agency and an attempt to experience community,” especially after experiencing “some kind of psychological crisis.” Rebecca Owens, a University of Sunderland psychology professor, reinforces this explanation: “It’s almost like a coping mechanism .... They’ve had this revelation and now something makes sense — while everything else in their world is chaotic.”

Through direct interviews with flat Earthers, Burdick (2018) comes to the similar conclusion that the main reason for people believe the flat Earth theory is to cope with existential anxiety:

To believe in a flat Earth is to belong not only to a human community but to sit, once again, at the center of the cosmos. The standard facts of astronomy are emotionally untenable—a planet spinning at a thousand miles per hour, a mote in a galaxy of unimaginable scale, itself a mote in the vast and expanding universe. “That, to me, is a huge problem,” Campanella said. “You are a created individual. This is a created place.

It's not an accident; it's not an explosion in space; it's not random molecules joining together."

You, we, are special. "It's like God is patting me on the shoulder, saying, 'You deserve this!'" a man from New Orleans told me. He was a trucker, the son of a former newscaster, and an occasional musician. As we were talking, an older man in a wheelchair approached and, in a drawl, introduced himself and asked if we were Christians. He brought up the notion of infinite space and the lack of a creator. 'How can people live with that?' he asked.

The portrayal of people who believe in conspiracy theories as being fundamentally irrational helps to foster disbelief in the flat Earth, as well as other conspiracy theories.

Additionally, attributing the belief in conspiracy theories to the result of existential anxiety, emotional instability, and other cognitive shortcomings allows the discussion to be diverted away from the fact that the belief is inherently rooted in a distrust toward authorities on knowledge. In order to fully acknowledge this, it would be necessary to address the sociopolitical reasons as to why these authorities are perceived as untrustworthy. Perhaps this is due to the bureaucratic and hierarchical nature of the institutions that produce knowledge, which may be experienced as elitist, inaccessible, and even manipulative. The institution of mass media itself would be implicated, as it plays an integral role in maintaining the hierarchical production of knowledge. The distrust could also be a response to the extensive history of real conspiracies taking place in state institutions, as Olmsted (2011) suggests. Regardless, even if these considerations were made by the author of an article, such a critique of power would not

be authorized for publication, because it would directly threaten the interests of the ruling class.

## VII. Conclusion

Through the analysis of articles about the flat Earth theory and its followers, the conclusion is drawn that the coverage of this conspiracy theory serves a propagandistic function. Regardless of whether the theory is true or false, the spread of its embrace poses a threat to those in power, who must maintain the population's trust in their authority. The news filters of Herman and Chomsky's (1988) propaganda model ensure that conspiracy theories will only be recognized by mainstream media once they reach a level of prominence that makes them difficult to ignore. When discussion of a conspiracy theory eventually enters the mainstream, media reports serve to control the narrative in order to protect the credibility of the powerful. If a mainstream media publication were to report on the flat Earth theory without any criticism, the publication would be likely to receive flak from NASA and other scientific institutions that the media relies on for sourcing news and other information. The contemporary structure of the mass media makes certain that dissenting viewpoints are not provided with a meaningful platform, regardless of their credibility.

The conclusion of Akhtar and Ahmed's (2015) study which suggests that organic conspiracy theories in Pakistan should be understood as "a layperson's-theory of the state," can be used to understand why people would believe in conspiracy theories in the first place. In reality, the ability to control knowledge and information is concentrated among those who have the most power in society. Therefore, to fully dismiss any conspiracy theory as false is to assume the impossibility of information being hidden. Despite this, the falsehood of conspiracy

theories is assumed by many academics and journalists who seek to understand the phenomenon. Thus, they reject the possibility that they could be vulnerable to deception themselves. Defenders of science and flat Earthers both conform to the same epistemic assumptions, rooted in positivist orientations toward knowledge (Fluck 2016). The opposed parties share the assumption that the real, objective truth can be determined at all. Because each side embraces contrasting evidence of what is truth, any argument made will serve to reinforce the other's beliefs.

Unfortunately, the findings of this paper do not make the study of conspiracy belief any less complex; it is difficult to imagine a realistic solution without fully understanding where the problem lies. This analysis does support the need for researchers to withhold judgement about the truth of conspiracy theories, and indicates that future research should continue to seek a deeper understanding of how the structure of society's institutions may be experienced in a way which is perceived as untrustworthy. If reducing conspiracy belief is the goal, institutional changes would need to be implemented to limit the ability of the powerful to control the flow of information; however, any scenario in which the powerful would willingly relinquish their control is incredibly far-fetched. Removing barriers of access to information may help reduce conspiracy belief, as well as increasing the accessibility of quality education. Additionally, media literacy programs for all age groups should be widespread; these programs must thoroughly engage with criticisms of the mass media in order to promote truly independent critical thinking skills. But even these efforts cannot reverse the fact that we have entered an era where it is difficult, if not impossible, to be absolutely certain about the true nature of reality.



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