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Rethinking the "Conspiracy Crisis": Use and Misuse of "Conspiracy Theory" Labels After Covid-19

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Abstract

Against the backdrop of the Covid-19 pandemic, this article undertakes a critical evaluation of a series of shortcomings of the view of conspiracy theories that is predominant among scholars and the general public. Reviewing numerous studies on the topic, we critically assess: (a) how justified the claim is that we are in a conspiracy-thinking emergency, (b) how the label of conspiracy theorist can be used strategically to delegitimize heterodox views, and (c) the practical consequences, for academic research and the well-functioning of democracies, of unpopular ideas being labeled as conspiratorial. The empirical sources reviewed here suggest that beliefs in conspiracy theories have not increased over time and are less consequential than commonly believed, even in times of a global pandemic. Instead, the concept of conspiracy theory has become more prevalent and its derogatory connotation evokes a stigma that tilts the playing field against dissenting viewpoints. The stigmatization and political leveraging of this notion, we argue, lead to biases not only in the public discussion on various sensitive topics but also in the academic literature on conspiracy theories themselves. We analyze these academic blind spots in light of the diminishing political diversity in academia and recent perspectives on soft censorship. We propose to complement the research on conspiracy theorists with an analysis of individuals at the opposite end of the spectrum, who are inclined to uncritically trust institutional authorities and are prejudiced against heterodox opinions. Proposed solutions include promoting balanced news coverage, fostering critical thinking through debates, and piercing information bubbles to provide access to diverse perspectives.

Keywords

academic diversity; censorship; conspiracy theories; Covid-19; critical thinking; polarization; political psychology

1. Introduction

The term "conspiracy theory" has increasingly permeated public and academic debates, gaining prominence during pivotal global events like the Covid-19 pandemic. The substantial surge in the use of the conspiracy theory label during the pandemic (Figure 1) prompts questions about whether there has been an actual increase in conspiracies or if the label served other purposes. Originally a neutral descriptor (McKenzie-McHarg, 2018), this label has transformed into a contentious term that spans a broad spectrum from the plausible to the absurd. Its evolution has not only broadened its application but also raised the socio-political stakes of its use. This article contends that the predominant attitude toward conspiracy theories reflects a form of moral panic (Cohen, 1972), being overly negative compared to what the empirical literature we review suggests and leading to harmful repercussions on democratic processes and the integrity of intellectual discourse among scholars, issues that become even more pressing against the backdrop of an increasingly polarized society and decreasing political diversity in academia (Duarte et al., 2015; Inbar & Lammers, 2012).

Throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, various strategies were employed to control information, including blacklisting, legal actions, biased search algorithms, and media framing that cast alternative viewpoints in a derogatory light (Amnesty International, 2021). Such tactics underscored the broader implications of labeling certain perspectives as conspiratorial. Claims regarding the pandemic's origin, transmission, and the effectiveness and safety of interventions were often dismissed with limited consideration for alternate hypotheses, highlighting a significant challenge to viewpoint diversity—a concern particularly acute in the academic sphere (Clark et al., 2023; Duarte et al., 2015; Norris, 2020, 2023). Notable examples include the zoonotic vs. lab leak origins of Covid-19. Andersen et al.'s (2020) article at the beginning of the pandemic, combined with branding dissenters as conspiracy theorists, tilted the scales heavily in favor of the zoonotic origin theory, impeding the investigation of the lab leak hypothesis (which many scientists now consider plausible; Gordon & Strobel, 2023; Wade, 2024). Additionally, the reliance on the Flaxman et al. (2020) study published in Nature for lockdown efficacy was later questioned by more rigorous analyses (Bjørnskov, 2021; Herby et al., 2023), yet skepticism was often labeled as "misinformation." These instances highlight the need for a nuanced understanding that respects the complexity of ideas and avoids dismissing alternative views based on oversimplified sociological categories.

We aim to dissect the social ramifications of the conspiracy theory concept and examine its role within societal and academic discourse. We critique the prevailing narrative that views conspiracy thinking as a societal emergency justifying restrictive political actions, a perspective intensified during the so-called "infodemic" of the Covid-19 era (European Parliament, 2023; WHO, 2020). The handling of the Covid-19 pandemic offers instructive examples of the dangers associated with prematurely dismissing ideas as conspiratorial. For instance, initial skepticism regarding the efficacy of surgical masks, broadly labeled as a conspiracy theory, later found support through rigorous scientific evaluation in a Cochrane review (Jefferson et al., 2023).

By critically examining the use of the conspiracy theory label, this article explores its impact on democratic discourse and the essential role diverse viewpoints play in sustaining a healthy democratic society. As a corollary, if our claims against the conspiracy theory emergency are correct, our analysis has broader implications for the credibility of alarmist claims by influential networks in academia, legacy media, and politics.

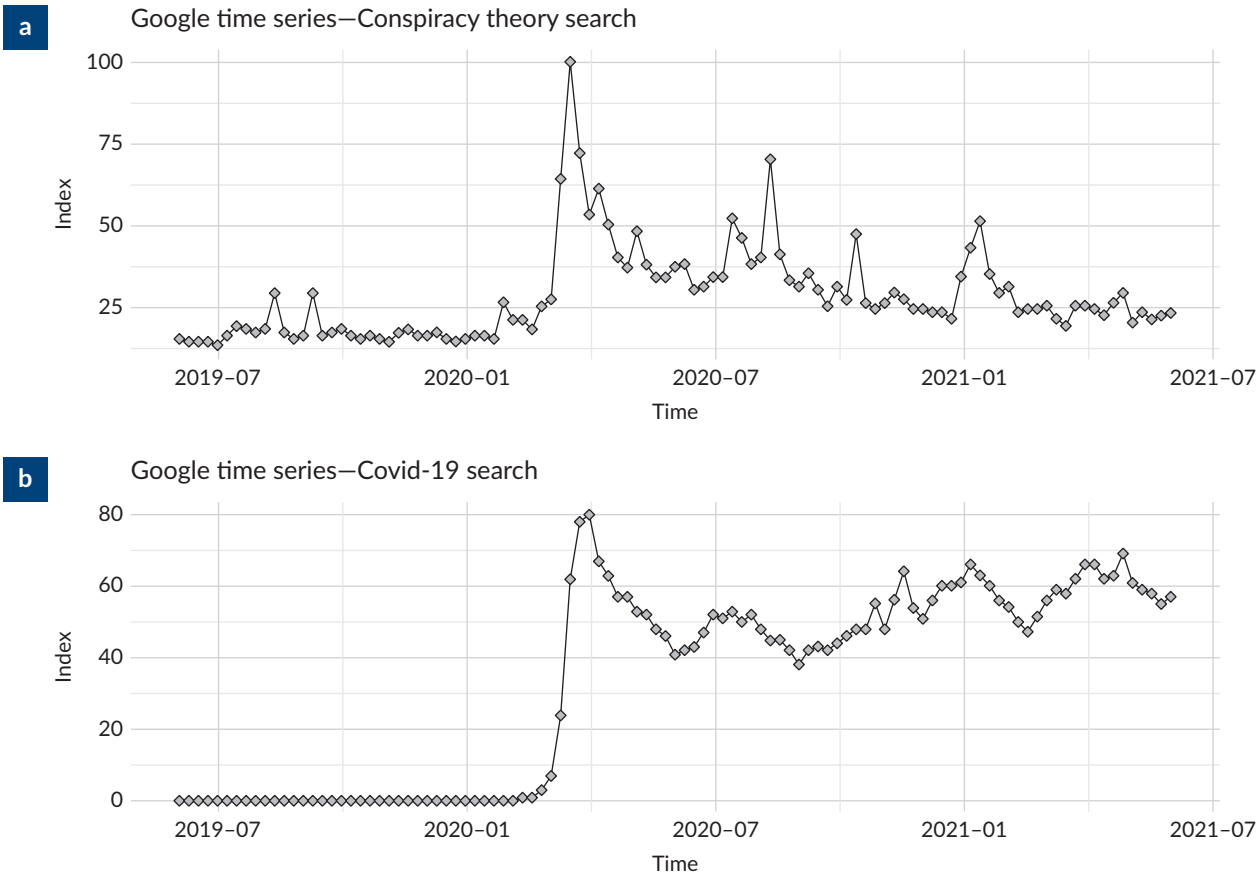

Figure 1. Time series analysis of Google search trends. Notes: The figure shows Google search trends from mid-2019 to mid-2021; (a) displays searches for "conspiracy theories" and (b) shows searches for "Covid-19"; both trends are indexed from 0 to 100.

2. The Controversial Concept of Conspiracy Theory

Conspiracy theories can be defined as interpretations of events or practices based on hypothetical conspiracies as a salient cause (Matthews, 2023). Surveys indicate that 40% of Americans believe a select group of powerful figures manipulates global affairs, irrespective of official leadership positions (Orth, 2022). David Coady reports that approximately three-quarters of Americans think the US government regularly engages in conspiratorial and clandestine operations (Coady, 2018, p. 182). This belief is not confined to the US; for example, in the UK, 55% of individuals subscribe to at least one conspiracy theory, a sentiment echoed across other European nations (Drochon, 2018).

Colloquially, the terms conspiracy theorists and conspiracy theories are not merely used to identify those who believe in the malfeasance of a small group of manipulative rulers. The concept is also extended to those who express viewpoints that are dissenting from the mainstream narrative, even in cases where no clear malevolent intent of a small group of powerful individuals is expressed or implied. A pertinent and recent example is represented by Canada's Prime Minister Justin Trudeau who, in the House of Commons, was questioned by the opposition leader Pierre Poilievre about receiving a donation from government contractors and similar alleged cases of corruption. Trudeau replied by accusing the opposition of "peddling conspiracy theories" and refusing to further elaborate on the topic (Toronto Sun, 2024).

The ordinary use of "conspiracy theory" extends beyond merely referencing actual theories about conspiracies; it carries an evaluation of these theories as false and unjustified (Napolitano & Reuter, 2023), and presents them as individual and social pathologies, as they exploit cognitive biases and hostile tendencies and constitute substantial dangers for society at large (Basham & Dentith, 2018; Coady, 2018; Harambam & Aupers, 2015). This stigma toward conspiracy theories is so ingrained that many scholars believe the very definition of a conspiracy theory should inherently include a negative evaluation, implying that such theories are essentially baseless and false (e.g., Brotherton & French, 2014; Levy, 2019), also in light of their potential danger for society, such as promoting risky behaviors, obscuring truths, and diverting attention from more pressing issues (Cassam, 2019). This raises an important question: How substantial and urgent are the societal problems associated with conspiracy theories, and are the responses to them justified?

3. The Standard View: Conspiracy Theories as a Global Crisis

The perception that conspiracy theories represent a significant socio-political emergency is predominant in current discourse. Recent claims by journalists (e.g., Dacombe, 2023) and scholars (e.g., Dow et al., 2021) support the public belief that the prevalence of conspiracies is increasing (CBS News, 2018) and that this is fueled by the advent of social media. This sense of urgency has led to calls for policy interventions designed to mitigate the impact of conspiracy theories, which are increasingly viewed as threats to democratic processes and public health. Consequently, policymakers globally have embraced the notion of treating the spread of conspiracy theories as an "emergency," actively establishing legislative and regulatory frameworks aimed at safeguarding the public from dangerous, misleading, and conspiratorial information (e.g., Finlay, 2023; Jivali, 2023; Lewis, 2023; WHO, 2020).

The climate of emergency surrounding conspiracy theories notably intensified during the Covid-19 pandemic. This period marked the emergence of the "infodemic," a term coined to describe the overwhelming proliferation of both accurate and misleading information across various media platforms, complicating the dissemination of public health messages from official authorities (WHO, 2020; Zarocostas, 2020). According to Naeem and Bhatti (2020), managing this infodemic requires a coordinated response from information professionals to ensure the public receives reliable guidance. Similarly, The Lancet Infectious Diseases (2020) emphasized the challenges posed by the infodemic in managing the spread of Covid-19, highlighting the need for effective communication strategies. Despite the WHO declaring that Covid-19 is no longer a global emergency ("WHO downgrades Covid," 2024), the most recent Global Risks Perception Survey, published by the World Economic Forum in collaboration with nearly 1500 experts worldwide, viewed "misinformation and disinformation" as the main emergency the world is facing over the next few years, above any other economic, environmental, geopolitical, societal, and technological risks (World Economic Forum, 2024), with Covid-19 becoming a prototypical example of the alleged dangers of letting misinformation spread (Ecker et al., 2024).

This deep-seated concern is evident in the way academics and opinion makers represent individuals who hold conspiratorial beliefs. In both popular media and academic literature (Hagen, 2020), conspiracy theorists are frequently portrayed as irrational and unscientific (Butter & Knight, 2018), gullible (Cassam, 2016), potentially violent (Lamberty & Leiser, 2019) and supporting of violence (Jolley & Paterson, 2020), paranoid (Hofstadter, 1965), delusional (Husting, 2018, p. 115), narcissistic (Golec de Zavala & Federico,

2018), schizotypal (Georgiou et al., 2019), magical thinkers (Ferguson, 2020), neurotic (Bowes et al., 2023), pathological (Kumareswaran, 2014), alienated (Lamberty & Leiser, 2019), motivated by supernatural, paranormal, and Manichaean (good vs. evil) thinking styles (Oliver & Wood, 2014), and, overall, epistemologically crippled (Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009).

4. Emergency or Moral Panic?

Despite widespread concerns about the impact of conspiracy theories, analyzing the empirical evidence on the diffusion and impact of conspiracy theories conveys a different picture. Notably, the narrative of a growing crisis in conspiracy theorism is contested by empirical research. Studies by Uscinski et al. (2022) employing multiple datasets spanning several decades and countries find no substantive evidence supporting the claim that belief in representative cases of conspiracies has increased over time, including throughout the pandemic. Despite the high visibility and propagation of specific theories, the overall prevalence of conspiracy beliefs has remained relatively stable.

The presumed role of social media as a deleterious force in democracy frequently emerges in modern discourse, mirroring concerns similar to those regarding conspiracy theories. Traditional media posits that platforms like Facebook and X contribute to polarization by facilitating selective exposure, where users isolate themselves among like-minded individuals, thus amplifying extremist views and conspiracy theories through a lack of exposure to conflicting viewpoints. However, the research reviewed by Bruns (2019) indicates that social media increases exposure to a diversity of viewpoints, challenging the assumption that social media isolates individuals into echo chambers and explaining why the data by Uscinski et al. (2022) reported no increase in conspiracy beliefs despite the large-scale adoption of social networks. Additionally, research conducted on social media and Covid-19 news reveals how these platforms acted in the opposite direction of what is commonly believed, amplifying the messages of scientists in favor of the main political measures adopted by governments (Ioannidis, 2022).

Further discrediting the alarmist perspective, there is reason to be skeptical about how consequential conspiracy theories truly are. Theories are examples of propositional, deliberate ("slow") thinking. Despite the importance of our intellectual faculties, their centrality in shaping our concrete behavior has been challenged by a longstanding tradition (e.g., Damasio, 1994; Hume, 1777/1998; Kahneman, 2011; Nietzsche, 1886/2003). Abstract ideas are often the product, not the cause, of intuitions, emotions, and behaviors. Accordingly, longitudinal studies on the relationship between Covid-19 conspiracy beliefs and vaccine hesitancy suggest that affective responses against vaccines—emotional and psychological discomfort—precede and shape explicit beliefs rather than merely follow them (van Prooijen & Böhm, 2024).

Historically, the view propagated by the media that vaccines might lead to autism, stemming from Wakefield et al.'s (1998) study, is often cited as one of the most dangerous cases of life-threatening misinformation. Initially, the study led healthcare professionals to adjust their recommendations, resulting in lower vaccination rates. However, when the study later resonated in the popular media, vaccination rates did not decrease but instead returned to the previous baseline (Smith et al., 2008). Worries about vaccine safety increased during media coverage (Motta & Stecula, 2021), making the behavioral finding even more surprising. Indeed, the popularity of skeptical vaccine theories is the product, not the cause, of vaccine worries, as people have resisted vaccination since their inception in the 19th century (Conis, 2015; Durbach, 2000).

5. A Poor Concept With Rich Consequences

As argued so far, widespread misconceptions surrounding conspiracy theories seem to be an example of moral panic (Cohen, 1972). The considerable size of this false alarm casts doubts on the public's ability to accurately identify true crises, particularly when professional journalists and researchers, expected to guide informed discussions, fall prey to the fascination with exaggerated claims. Despite habitual negative connotations, conspiracy theories can exhibit epistemic virtues like skepticism and critical thinking (Ritterfeld, 2021, p. 12), fundamental for a healthy democracy (Harambam & Aupers, 2015). Orr and Dentith (2018) caution that dismissing conspiracy theories too readily often fails to adequately weigh the risks of false positives against false negatives. Even if a theory is likely incorrect, its potential significance should warrant further examination. This approach aligns with the economic principle of expected value, suggesting that the probability of an outcome should always be considered in light of its potential impact. Since not all conspiracy theories are without merit, dismissing them outright risks overlooking genuine concerns mistakenly flagged as conspiratorial.

Numerous authors have highlighted the issue that labeling a proposition as a conspiracy theory encourages an automatic, categorical, and a priori rejection (Bale, 2007; Basham & Dentith, 2018, pp. 89–91; Harambam & Aupers, 2015, p. 2; Ritterfeld, 2021, p. 12). Even justified accounts that point to historical or political conspiracies are regarded with great "intellectual resistance, hostility, and derision" (Bale, 2007, p. 47). Bale (2007, p. 47) describes how such accounts immediately "set off an internal alarm bell that causes scholars to close their minds to avoid cognitive dissonance and possible unpleasantness." Similarly, Harambam and Aupers describe this reaction as an "effort to actively downplay the similarities and exaggerate the differences between conspiracy theories and (social) scientific explanations," a practice they identify as boundary work (Harambam & Aupers, 2015, p. 4). This boundary work risks overgeneralizing the most objectionable features of the least credible conspiracy theories to the whole category of beliefs involving conspiracies, leading to the dismissal of all theories that appear conspiratorial, regardless of merit.

The term conspiracy theory is frequently used as an attempt to delegitimize and dismiss perspectives, knowledge, or findings that threaten a prevailing narrative (deHaven-Smith, 2010; Wood, 2016), effectively marginalizing and silencing legitimate concerns within public discourse (Harambam & Aupers, 2015, p. 46). This act of silencing has been characterized as "effectively polic[ing] the boundaries of what is sayable, knowable, thinkable, and perhaps 'feelable'" (Husting, 2018, p. 110). Similarly, Coady (2023) likened the concept of a conspiracy theory to a policing device akin to the term "heresy" during the Catholic Inquisition. The overly cautious avoidance of conspiracy theories due to potential "embarrassment" (Basham & Dentith, 2018, p. 82) risks overlooking actual conspiracies or at least abuses of power. As highlighted by Dentith (2018), a robust democracy necessitates taking conspiracy theories seriously. Misleading assertions by the US at the UN to promote the Iraq invasion were initially dismissed as "outrageous conspiracy theories" (Basham & Dentith, 2018, p. 51), as were questions about the NSA's covert activities before Edward Snowden's disclosures (Dentith, 2018, p. 16). Thus, fleeing from discussions that resemble conspiracy theories only stifles debate and suppresses necessary inquiries. We should rather, as Basham and Dentith argue, engage with each conspiracy theory on its own merits through "contact and evidential interaction" to ascertain its validity (Basham & Dentith, 2018, p. 84).

When authorities are allowed to censor conspiracy theories, they not only silence claims about specific facts, but also insulate themselves from criticism and inquiries into their motivations for implementing policies,

including decisions about censorship itself. As such, the increased effort of authorities in fighting conspiracy theories can be understood as reluctance to respond to criticism questioning their intentions, competence, and past decisions—an especially worrisome trend in light of the controversial actions taken during the Covid-19 crisis (e.g., Shir-Raz et al., 2023). When institutions are granted the power to censor criticism about their decisions and their intentions, their claims about what is true or false can no longer be trusted given the conflict of interest in using censorship for avoiding criticism. To make matters worse, the censorship appears unfit from a psychological perspective, as an appropriate response to widespread distrust in institutions is to openly and transparently discuss these concerns and inform the public about the decision-making process that shaped the policy in question (Halma & Guetzkow, 2023; Shir-Raz et al., 2023). The lack of collaborative and transparent responses by authorities is corroborating perceptions of potential malfeasance, further fueling distrust in the population and increasing the gap between politics and society (Halma & Guetzkow, 2023).

6. Implications for Research and the Academic Community

The indiscriminate dismissal of all conspiracy theories can also detrimentally affect the scientific value of the research on this topic. According to Orr and Dentith (2018, p. 144), research on beliefs in conspiracy theories remains biased and unproductive as the main concepts involved in the analysis of this phenomenon are laden with negative associations and derogatory preconceptions. The prevailing negative bias in much of the social science literature (Basham & Dentith, 2018, p. 90) prevents a thorough understanding of the complex dynamics that constitute what we call a conspiracy theory (Orr & Dentith, 2018).

In their article "Prosocial Motives Underlie Scientific Censorship by Scientists," Clark et al. (2023) reveal a nuanced view of censorship within the scientific community, extending beyond mere authoritarian suppression of academic freedom to include subtle forms of soft censorship motivated by ostensibly prosocial concerns. These less visible forms of censorship—rooted in a desire to protect societal well-being, shield vulnerable groups from potential harm, or uphold social cohesion—might manifest as self-censorship among scientists wary of career repercussions (e.g., "ostracism, public shaming, double standards in hirings, firings, publishing, retractions, and funding"; Clark et al., 2023, p. 2), or as institutional pressures that discourage the pursuit of certain lines of inquiry perceived as controversial or harmful.

This dynamic shows how the stigma around concepts like conspiracy theories can engender a form of censorship that, while less overt, is no less impactful. By stigmatizing certain viewpoints as conspiratorial, academic and public discourse may be marginalized and silenced through self-censorship among researchers, impoverishing intellectual diversity. With scholars becoming more homogeneous in worldviews despite efforts to promote diversity and inclusion (Abrams, 2016; Carl, 2018; Duarte et al., 2015), censorship in academia is becoming more extensive and institutionalized, as shown by a worrying uptrend in sanctions against scholars for their pedagogic and critical approaches (German & Stevens, 2021; Norris, 2023).

Surveys document a concerning readiness within the academic community to support the dismissal of job applications by peers who publish contentious research outcomes. Results from the US, the UK, and Canada indicate that a notable fraction of academics, ranging from 9% to 25%, endorse the dismissal of peers for controversial research. This figure reaches 43% among PhD students, suggesting the trend will continue as new generations replace older colleagues (Kaufmann, 2021). Scholars' approval of discrimination within

recruitment, career advancement, grant allocation, and publishing based on political views (Honeycutt & Freberg, 2017; Inbar & Lammers, 2012; Yancey, 2011) compounds this concern. A national survey among US university faculty found that 91% of respondents consider themselves at least "somewhat likely" to self-censor in various academic contexts, with 25% being "very" or "extremely" likely to do so (Honeycutt et al., 2023). Notably, a deterioration in academic freedom is felt by the majority of scholars across the political spectrum, not only political minorities (Norris, 2020).

Clark et al. (2023) discuss broader societal consequences of this trend, emphasizing that such censorship stifles academic freedom and undermines public trust in scientific and academic institutions. Prosocial motives driving censorship foster an environment where research and discussion are filtered through moral and social desirability lenses, potentially at the expense of truth and open inquiry. This intellectual conformity impoverishes scientific and societal progress and deepens public cynicism towards official narratives (potentially "encouraging conspiracy theories"; Clark et al., 2023, p. 7), exacerbating polarization and distrust that censorship aims to mitigate. Thus, prosocial intentions behind scientific censorship reveal a paradox where efforts to protect society may inadvertently undermine foundational principles of free inquiry and expression that sustain it.

This picture is made even more worrisome by data revealing a pronounced political shift over the past few decades within academia, resulting in a more uniform political landscape among faculty members (e.g., Duarte et al., 2015; Inbar & Lammers, 2012). This reduction in ideological diversity means that prevailing views are more likely to align with political beliefs rather than being grounded purely in scientific evidence. When combined with overly zealous efforts to combat misinformation and with the availability of labels that too easily evoke stigma (such as conspiracy theory), this environment risks marginalizing minority scientific perspectives, evaluating them through a political lens rather than based on their scientific validity.

7. A Bipartisan Psychological Perspective

In light of considering solutions to mitigate social polarization on topics such as healthcare, climate, geopolitics, and democracy, it is relevant to examine the psychology of groups at the extremes of these debates. Whereas research has spent a great deal of attention investigating the psychology of conspiracy theorists (e.g., Douglas & Sutton, 2023), little to no attention has been applied to understanding the psychology of individuals on the opposite end of the spectrum—namely, those who believe that institutional authorities should be systematically trusted and are willing to antagonize dissenting voices with various measures, including censorship. Here we present a first exploration of the psychology of individuals who are inclined towards system justification—a type of motivated cognition underlying the tendency to believe that that the social system and the status quo are legitimate (Kay & Friesen, 2011)—and summarize recent findings that corroborate some of these first hypotheses.

Similar to other social animals such as sheep, birds, and fish (Couzin & Krause, 2003), humans often seek out the safety of the group when feeling threatened (Dezecache, 2015; Palau-Sampio, 2021). In the case of humans, safety in numbers is not only expressed in terms of not wanting to stand out visually or spatially but also in terms of adopting viewpoints, attitudes, and behaviors that are considered to be morally correct and accepted in a population (Maher et al., 2023). This conformist behavior prevents social exclusion (Rudert et al., 2023) and provides psychological safety in response to a perceived societal crisis (Wagoner &

Pyszczynski, 2024). Individuals may thus easily and unquestioningly adopt the predominant narrative (Roccato et al., 2021), especially when voiced by epistemic authorities such as experts (Bylund & Packard, 2021), to vicariously restore their sense of control (Shepherd et al., 2011).

Following this line of thinking, we expect individuals who side with the mainstream perspective to be highly trustful and respectful of institutions and authorities and to value the importance of an orderly and structured society where individuals act in accordance with the rules and regulations that are communicated to be the norm (Shockley & Shepherd, 2016). At the same time, this implies that dissenting views or behaviors that go against authorities will be perceived, by these individuals, as immoral and as a threat to the system that they have identified with. A natural response will then be to punish, censor, or stigmatize such views to prevent their broader dissemination (Fischer et al., 2007; Hetherington & Suhay, 2011; Hodson et al., 2006; Wnuk et al., 2020), without considering the potential validity of these critical perspectives or their larger implications.

Two recent studies from our lab that were conducted during the Covid-19 pandemic corroborate some of the core hypotheses that were outlined in the previous paragraph. The first study (Bisschops, 2023) used an online convenience sample (N = 162) from the UK, consisting mostly of vaccinated consumers of mainstream media with low conspiratorial beliefs and an average trust in institutions. Participants were asked to answer questions about (a) their negative feelings (threat, uncertainty, and lack of control) regarding the Covid-19 pandemic, and (b) their belief in conspiracy theories related to Covid-19. The order of (a) and (b) was experimentally manipulated so that we could study (c) the influence of emotions on conspiratorial belief and (d) the influence of (anti) conspiratorial beliefs on emotions. Results indicated that the initial activation of negative feelings regarding the Covid-19 pandemic caused a *reduction* in conspiratorial beliefs rather than an increase in conspiratorial beliefs as predicted by theories suggesting that conspiracy theories find their origin in existential fear and uncertainty (van Prooijen, 2020). This reduction in conspiracy belief may be understood as a system justification response, meaning that people are inclined to defend their societal systems, including the authorities, when threatened, while showing an increased tendency to reject antagonistic outgroups such as conspiracy believers who are perceived as a threat to the system (Mao et al., 2021). This evidence furthermore undergirds the idea that fearmongering may be used to nudge people into compliance (Mishi et al., 2024), while stimulating intolerance towards dissenting views. Vice versa, the initial activation of participants' (mostly negative) attitudes towards conspiracy theories caused them to feel less threatened, uncertain, and powerless with respect to the Covid-19 pandemic, which corroborates the idea that part of the function of affirming one's affiliation with the system is to appease threat-induced negative emotions.

A second study (Dubey et al., 2023) compared individuals with high and low conspiratorial beliefs in their appreciation of a balanced news chatbot that provided a bipartisan selection of news articles on climate change. Results indicated that the group of participants with high conspiratorial beliefs expressed more trust in the chatbot, had a more positive attitude, and were more inclined to use the chatbot in the future, than participants with low conspiratorial beliefs. These findings argue against the view that individuals with conspiratorial beliefs are epistemologically isolated and averse to information conflicting with their perspective (Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009). Instead, the findings suggest that individuals with a mainstream (non-conspiratorial) worldview are more reluctant to consider opposing perspectives on contested topics, in line with the dominant societal push against alternative (conspiracy-labeled) viewpoints by legacy media and regulatory authorities (Amnesty International, 2021). Vice versa, the higher trust and more positive

appreciation of the unbiased news chatbot by individuals high in conspiracy ideation may reflect their hope that alternative viewpoints will be considered more fairly in public discourse.

8. Solutions Towards Resolving Polarization

Our analyses so far point to fear and anxiety as crucial psychological factors that compel people to adopt prevailing opinions uncritically and delegitimize other viewpoints. Initiatives to resolve societal polarization may aim to prevent or mitigate psychological reactions that begin with fear or anxiety and end with out-group derogation and censorship. One practical solution would be to actively constrain anxiety-evoking news by pressing for a more balanced choice of positive and negative news messages (Soroka & Krupnikov, 2021) and a broader selection of viewpoints. The latter may help news consumers derive a more nuanced understanding of societal threats, and thereby counteract fear through understanding (Fischer-Preßler et al., 2019). Another practical solution may be to stimulate debates. Debate may promote and stimulate higher-order and critical thinking, help individuals identify novel facts, and form new opinions on controversial issues that otherwise would have been subjected to bias (Kennedy, 2009). Consequently, debates may reduce pre-existing blind spots or even shift consolidated opinions (Budesheim & Lundquist, 1999). Academia may play an exemplary role in hosting and participating in public debates, leveraging its long-standing tradition of respectful exchange of arguments and its esteemed position in society. A further solution to reduce polarization is to pierce information bubbles in which individuals are presented with a one-sided and limited perspective on currently polarized topics. Although the argument to pierce information bubbles typically targets alleged social media echo chambers and rabbit holes (Cinelli et al., 2022), this argument should also apply to legacy media. These media have been reported as selective in their coverage of contested topics, leaving out information that could threaten a prevalent societal narrative (Elejalde et al., 2018). Including alternative discourse on topics of the societal divide may prevent people from uncritically accepting parroted points as true. That is, if individuals are presented with the same information repeatedly, the processing of this information increases in fluency, which promotes a sense of familiarity, liking, and safety (Alter & Oppenheimer, 2009), that causes people to experience such statements as a personally felt truth (Reber & Unkelbach, 2010). By presenting a more diversified set of opinions and facts, or by allowing news consumers to set their preferred mixture of news, the uncritical acceptance of such statements and the prejudice toward dissenting individuals may be effectively reduced (Pearson & Dovidio, 2013).

9. Conclusion

The current notion of conspiracy theory, loaded with stigma and prejudice, serves as a divisive label that marginalizes dissenting voices and suppresses critical examination, thereby impoverishing public debate and intellectual diversity which are crucial to a healthy democratic process. This tendency to silence uncomfortable opinions is intensified in times of crisis, as exemplified by the Covid-19 pandemic, with authorities calling for unity, and dissidents risking being targeted for their divisive ideas. Our analysis indicates the need to be vigilant about the risks of alarmist narratives diverging from reality, even when informed by academic research. Academia, in particular, bears the responsibility to lead by example, dismantling intellectual biases, and, contrary to the current trend, fostering an open dialogue that could bridge the divides that mark societal polarization. Encouraging an environment where diverse perspectives are not only tolerated but valued, can enhance society's capacity to adapt to new challenges and protect civil liberties and democracy.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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