Influences of Misinformation and Conspiracy Theories on the Public

A Research Paper submitted to the Department of Engineering and Society

Presented to the Faculty of the School of Engineering and Applied Science
University of Virginia • Charlottesville, Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree
Bachelor of Science, School of Engineering

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Spring, 2021

On my honor as a University Student, I have neither given nor received
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Abstract

The novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic puts the general public in a vulnerable position to false information spewed from media outlets. The sociotechnical model of media effects on the COVID-19 pandemic dictates social responses to the virus itself and, in turn, how consequential the pandemic will be. These effects can be analyzed by looking at the associations between misinformation, conspiracy theory, and social responses surrounding other consequential events in modern history. Documentary analysis methods aid in validating the assertion that misinformation and conspiracy theory play a huge part in people's responses to these events. Research found that this subsequently affects how people remember the event, making it either significant or unnoteworthy. Being written in the midst of the pandemic, this thesis offers a unique perspective on COVID-19's influences.

Influences of Misinformation and Conspiracy Theories on the General Public

With over two and a half million deaths around the world, the pandemic caused by COVID-19 is disruptive and domineering to all facets of life. (*WHO Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Dashboard*, 2020). Not only does the virus put people's health at risk, but the uncertainty of a global pandemic leaves many vulnerable to the spread of false information as they attempt to grasp a sense of security and familiarity. Jennifer Doggett, a health policy analyst and consultant, writes that "the COVID-19 pandemic has been described as a 'perfect storm' for the creation and dissemination of . . . misinformation . . . and conspiracy theories" (Doggett, 2020). Doggett's commentary on the pandemic indicates that there is some relation between the general public's vulnerable state and the prevalence of false information seen in the media. A study by the Kaiser Family Foundation on the Presidential Election of 2020 and coronavirus finds that trust in both the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and Dr. Anthony Fauci, the Director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, have declined overall by ten percentage points since April 2020 (Hamel et al., 2020). This study suggests that while most adults know key facts about the virus, some misconceptions remain (2020). A sociotechnical model of media effects on the COVID-19 pandemic dictates social responses to the virus itself and, in turn, how consequential the pandemic will be. The severity of said effects relies heavily on the amount of false information in messages circulated by the media. In order to emphasize the importance of false information on the coronavirus pandemic, the following question must be addressed: How does misinformation and conspiracy theory affect people's social responses in the face of consequential events? Documentary analysis of specific messages surrounding other consequential events in modern American history, namely the 1918 influenza pandemic and the events of September 11, 2001, assist in answering this question. A chronological analysis of

these events shows false information's continued, yet increasing relevance to the narratives of consequential events.

Considerations

A distinction between the terms conspiracy theory and misinformation must be set prior to an analysis on their effects. A conspiracy theory is defined as a theory that explains an event or set of circumstances as the result of conspirators' actions (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Conspiracy theories shift and evolve – "…when a piece of evidence casts doubt on one theory the focus shifts to the next unanswered question" ("9/11 Conspiracy Theories," 2011). Misinformation, on the other hand, is incorrect or misleading information (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). This false or inaccurate information intends to deliberately deceive its reader and has major implications in situations like public health crises (Organização Pan-Americana da Saúde, 2020). Misinformation has the ability to affect decision-making processes and people's ability to find trustworthy sources (2020). Misinformation can be both independent of or the byproduct of conspiracy theories. Conspiracy theorists tend to spew misinformation in order to secure their theory's spot as credible or gain a particular base of followers. The consequences of misinformation and conspiracy are looked at through the lenses of both the social construction of technology and wicked problem framing. The perspectives provided by these frameworks calls attention to the relationship between society and technology, identifies reasons for tensions and contradictions surrounding false information, and calls for a way to tame the problem caused by the spread of false information as opposed to solving it.

In order to fully understand the relationship between the spread of false information and social responses, both misinformation and conspiracy theory must be viewed as social constructions. To claim that these social phenomena are social constructions is to claim that they

originate within and are cultivated by society (Klein & Kleinman, 2002). The social construction of technology (SCOT) framework draws attention to certain issues surrounding misinformation and conspiracy and how these issues are understood as social problems. Society's perception of these social problems is based on collective views developed and maintained within particular social groups (2002). The relevant social groups in this circumstance are the spreaders of false information, people who have been led astray by this false information, and those who recognize that it is distorted. The difference in views between these groups highlights the most important component of SCOT: interpretive flexibility, a suggestion that being presented information "can produce different outcomes depending on the social circumstances of development" (2002, p.29). This indication that information in general is open to multiple interpretations comes from, firstly, our socially constructed idea that media that is considered as a 'credible source' will always communicate truth and, secondly, that the line between professionally created content and user-generated content has been blurred (Jack, 2019, p.435). Social movements such as those linked with conspiracy theories can be understood as collective efforts to change socially constructed ideas about specific events. This is to say that SCOT points to a sociotechnical model of media effects as the reason for why misinformation and conspiracy theory have the power to dictate how consequential an event is. This sociotechnical model is made up of three components: actors, messages, and affordances (Marwick, 2018). The 'messages' aspect of the model and the social contexts of these messages determine whether there are recurring patterns due to the spread of false information from the media.

Moreover, the spread of false information can be considered a wicked problem, one "that can neither be definitively described, nor conclusively solved" (Jack, 2019, p. 440). It is important to note that the spread of false information should not be approached as a solvable

problem as it cannot be solved once and forgotten; problems of this type are best solved 'over and over again' as there is no clear endpoint to their effects on society (2019, p.440). Wicked problems affect many disciplines and therefore no one solution will be correct. There are five main characteristics that denote a wicked problem: difficulties in problem formulation, multiple but incompatible solutions, open-ended time frames, novelty (or uniqueness), and competing value systems or objectives (Seager, 2012, p.469). With regard to problem formulation, it is impossible to discern where the problem of the spread of false information starts. Does the problem at hand start with lack of fact checking or with why people believe false information? There are also a multitude of solutions that could be used to tame this issue, but none works for all stakeholders involved. While verification of facts seems like a good solution to the spread of false information, verifying and refuting claims in content is "unbounded" as there is no clear stopping point – there is no foreseeable end to the cycle of fact checking false claims and refuting them (Jack, 2019, p.442). Verifying facts does not work as a stand-alone solution because it does not reach or connect with all audiences and social groups. As mentioned above, there are also competing objectives to different social groups involved: there are those who are intent on spreading false information and those who sincerely want to inform others. In many cases, it is impossible to tell the difference between these two groups. This difference in intentions causes tensions within and between different social groups as well as contradictions regarding what is truth. The spread of false information both from misinformation and through conspiracy theories falls perfectly into the wicked problem framework. Misinformation and conspiracy theories spewed by the media are not the primary force driving events, but instead highlight how content often becomes "the discursive focal point for controversies that implicate diffuse and systemic social concerns" (2019, p.441).

Precursory Event I – The 1918 Pandemic

The coronavirus pandemic has striking parallels to that of the influenza pandemic of 1918. The nation saw variations of public gathering bans, closure orders, mask mandates, and a host of other restrictions in order to slow the spread of influenza. Pushback to these restrictions was received from a vocal minority; the same disputes heard in 2020 over whether houses of worship, schools, establishments promoting gatherings, and places of public entertainment could operate happened initially almost a century ago (Navarro and Markel, 2021). Pushback in 1918 "overwhelmingly revolved around questions of the efficacy, equity, and duration of the measures" put in place (2021, p.420). While the 1918 influenza pandemic and COVID-19 pandemic appear to be the perfect example of the past being prologue, an important observation must be made about the media's role in the two pandemic's outcomes. The spread of news in 1918 was limited compared to today's standards, yet still included word of mouth, telegraphs, telephones, and newspapers. Telegraphs and telephones still allowed news to move fairly quickly and "newspaper circulation and readership were high" in the early 1900s (2021, p.420). Reports on sporting events, the war, and other cultural affairs took over the front pages of city newspapers during the early pandemic, having influenza take a backseat (Crosby, 2003). The problem in 1918 was that no one, "neither physicians nor laymen, knew more than a few scary rumors about the … influenza, providing a perfect climate for confusion, panic, and proliferation of quack remedies" (2003, p.49). In the early 1900s, health departments were not organized in a unified effort to help each other fight this disease (2003). Misinformation and misconceptions about the influenza were born primarily from this lack of organization and lack of knowledge about the illness itself. The overall lack of information and widespread denial in 1918 aided in the media's influence on the longevity of the influenza pandemic.

On September 28, 1918, the city of Philadelphia held a parade to raise money for World War I, conveying again that the war effort and patriotism took precedence over influenza (Mihm, n.d., 2020). Dr. Wilmer Krusen of the Department of Health and Charities found himself left to man the ship, assuring the public that the illness would not spread beyond military personnel (2020). Because of falsely placed confidence in the medical community, the city failed to cancel the parade and ended up with thousands sick or dead with the flu. Even influenza's nickname, Spanish flu, was born from false information regarding the flu's origins. While other false narratives about influenza existed, many are difficult to reconstruct now due to the amount of time that has passed. False information surrounding the influenza pandemic was a high-stakes situation as many lives were on the line. By looking at responses to the 1918 pandemic, it's clear that false information has an effect on how these events played out. Confusion about what is true or not caused citizens to push back and protest restrictions by, for example, not wearing masks and congregating in large crowds. The 1918 influenza pandemic lasted about one to two years with interference from misinformation. Will the novel coronavirus pandemic, an event with similarly high stakes, last longer because of the overabundance of misinformation and conspiracy theories? The 1918 pandemic was heavily influenced by misinformation being spread by public figures, leaders who were assumed to be trustworthy and knowledgeable in their given field, leaving many infected or dead. Presumably, the COVID pandemic will play out in a similar or more severe fashion.

Precursory Event II – 9/11

Another event surrounded by a profusion of false information are the events surrounding 9/11. On September 11, 2001, four planes hijacked by Al-Qaeda terrorists deliberately crashed into targets in America. Almost three thousand people were killed this day and these events

unquestionably rocked America to its core. Many Americans do not believe that they have been told the whole story regarding the events of this day and have been waiting for classified, top secret information to be released; they believe that, until this happens, many of the truths will remain buried (London, 2016). Because there is still so much unknown information surrounding this event, 9/11 has been taken up by conspiracy theorists in an attempt to explain what really happened. Catchphrases such as "Bush Did 9/11" and "9/11 Was an Inside Job" are commonly known memes, associated with conspiracy theories claiming that the government covered up what really happened on September 11th (see Figure 1). A meme is an idea or amusing item that is spread widely online through social media, intended to be comical in nature but can often times comes across offensive (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

Figure 1. Meme implicating former president George W. Bush as the perpetrator of 9/11. Image depicts Bush's face as the clock turns to the time 9:11 (*Bush Did 9/11*, n.d.).

These particular memes have taken the internet by storm more than once and have continued to make this conspiracy theory relevant. At the center of 9/11 conspiracy theories are questions such as whether the events of September 11th were a plot conducted by the government or not. Conspiracy theorists, who call themselves Truthers, have provided evidence of a government coverup: an overall outline of the terrorists' movements and activity, a list of who did it, and a huge red flag indicating government agencies' lack of intervention (London, 2016). Truthers have additionally presented a list of unknowns that allegedly render the original story from the

government moot. There is no evidence that the Saudi government funded Al-Qaeda, no answers to why these actions were taken, or who organized and financed the attacks. According to Truthers, the pages released to the public by the government are certainly not as incriminating as the rest that go with it. Conspiracies such as these have instilled a general distrust in the government, as the system has not corrected these fallacies or offered up any new information.

Although there are copious amounts of 9/11 conspiracy theories, it is important to also discuss misinformation's major role in how the general public responded to and presently views 9/11. Textbooks play the important role of teaching younger generations about American history and are generally supposed to "reflect a national consensus regarding cultural knowledge and values" (Romanowski, 2009). Textbooks clearly provide information about the event itself but do not outline responses and reactions to the events accurately. A research study done on the exclusion of ethical issues from U.S. History textbooks examined nine secondary school textbooks regarding the treatment of 9/11 and related events. It was found that most of these textbooks omit important information about 9/11 and disregarded moral and ethical aspects of the event (2009). Reactions to the attacks were portrayed within a framework of patriotism, with mentions of an increased display of the American flag and an increase of patriotic feelings; what these textbooks fail to mention, and in some cases completely misstate, is that these feelings of patriotism resulted in misplaced judgements toward the Arab American, Muslim, and South Asian communities (2009). Patriotism can be a force to unite but also used as a tool of oppression. These textbooks' portrayal of the events of September 11th show a blatant disregard for the Islamophobia produced by this event by putting emphasis on patriotism. It is critical to remember that there is a portion of the public that does not view 9/11 as a unifying event. For example, airports heightened their security after 9/11 and while these new safety measures are

only slight inconveniences to some, they are highly anxiety inducing procedures for people in the Arab American, Muslim, and South Asian communities. Permissible racial profiling in the realm of airline security is somehow different post – 9/11, with some arguing that a communal sense of security outweighs the treatment of human beings (Baker, 2002). There have been many reports of harassment, one of which involved racial profiling of two Muslim men attempting to embark on a flight to Dallas. Abderraoof Alkwaldeh and Issam Abdallah said they felt like airline staff were discriminating against their ethnicity and religion, being told by law enforcement officials that the crew members were not comfortable flying with them on the plane. (Miller, 2019). Abdallah was allegedly told that his action of flushing the airplane toilet twice raised red flags and was enough to cancel the entire flight (2019). False information resulted in a change in mindset for how people lived their daily lives, putting the aforementioned communities at risk of persecution or maltreatment. Analysis of the events of September 11th demonstrates that misinformation had major influence with responses to 9/11 and, therefore, why this incident is so significant.

False Information in the Scope of the COVID-19 Pandemic

Messages communicated through misinformation and conspiracy theories have strong effects on how people respond to events and how the event is remembered afterwards. False information about influenza directly affected people's actions taken to combat the spread of the flu. Conspiracy theories surrounding 9/11 have influenced the public's trust in the government, created a sense of patriotism throughout the country, and also exerted oppression on particular groups in America. Obviously, these two events do not encompass all significant events impacted by false information, but, even standing alone, they prove that there are recurring patterns due to the spread of false information in the media. These recurring patterns indicate that

the quantity of false information correlates to false information's interference with social responses.

Media has played a central and important role in the pandemic as past events would indicate would be the case – trust in science is now so heavily influenced by politics and social media. Rampant misinformation and conspiracy theories spread by extremists, right-wing outlets, and political figures heightens the distrust in science and therefore emphasizes contradictions regarding what is truth and what is not (Navarro et al., 2021, p.421). There exist misconceptions regarding the efficacy of hydroxychloroquine as a treatment for COVID-19, regarding masks being harmful to your health, and regarding the existence of a cure for coronavirus. A study done on the election and coronavirus in September 2020 found that 48% of registered voters believe in at least one misconception about the virus (Hamel et al., 2020). Of the misconceptions stated, 24% believe that hydroxychloroquine is an effective treatment for COVID-19, 20% believe that wearing a face mask is harmful to your health, and 14% believe there is a cure for coronavirus (2020).

The overabundance of false information about the virus and the polarizing social contexts surrounding it have directly affected people's actions and responses, and subsequently how the pandemic has been prolonged in the United States in comparison to other countries. The Institute for Strategic Dialogue found the following on misinformation and conspiracy theories' effects on the coronavirus pandemic:

> …Researchers have identified a number of potential harms resulting from COVID-19
> misinformation and conspiracy theory messaging including: distracting the main public
> health messages being communicated by governments and other authorities; undermining
> specific measures being implemented to reduce the spread of the disease…; fueling

racism, a key determinant of health; … providing governments with a ready excuse for

COVID-19 policy failures…; and obscuring underlying factors influencing the spread

and impact of COVID-19… (Doggett, 2020)

At this moment, there are almost thirty million confirmed cases of COVID in the United States

and the responses mentioned above have had major impacts on how high the number of cases is.

The question of when the influences of false information will cease on the coronavirus pandemic

is left unanswered.

Counterargument and Conclusion

The central argument of this thesis is that false information, in particular misinformation

and conspiracy theories, spewed by the media continue to dictate social responses to the COVID-

19 virus and subsequently how consequential the coronavirus pandemic will be. Some scholars

claim that false information is not a primary factor for how events play out, and that the general

public, presumably, have learned to base their decisions off of prior knowledge and experience.

According to a study done on the emergence and transmission of misinformation in the context

of social interactions, collaboration during information encoding was found to reduce the

acceptance of misinformation and its subsequent recall (Saraiva, Garrido, & Albuquerque, 2021).

Their claim is that discussion about scientific knowledge is crucial to minimizing the acceptance

of misinformation and preventing people from engaging in behavior based on misinformation

(2021). Although there is validity to this argument, the claim fails to address that collaboration

and discussion will not always achieve this result. Discussion often produces conspiracies

because these conversations happen between like-minded people in the same social group. This

argument also fails to address that many people interact with the media away from group settings

where discussion would even take place. It is critical to understand why false information has

such serious effects on an individual audience member. This is in part due to the illusory truth effect, the tendency to believe something is true after being exposed to it multiple times (Cosenzo, 2020). Research through the Association for Psychological Science suggests that the connection between repetition and truth is learned implicitly at a young age and that the effect is universal - it affects all people, of all ages and stimuli (Fazio, 2020). "...Prior research demonstrates that people often use unreliable cues, such as repetition, to judge truth rather than more accurate cues such as prior knowledge or the source of the information" (2020). Because of repetition's equation to truth, prior knowledge is commonly abandoned when it comes to deciding what statements to believe. The illusory truth effect puts misinformation and conspiracy theories at the forefront of factors that contribute to how consequential an event is in addition to proving that, with more repetition, a false statement can be taken as truth. For that reason, the severity of false information's impact on an event directly relates to the amount of misinformation and conspiracy theories surrounding the event.

State sponsored media efforts, extremist movement platforms, anti-migrant networks, far-right networks, and various other groups and individuals have been found to be spreading misinformation about the virus and exploiting the pandemic for their own agendas (Doggett, 2020). Believing misinformation about the virus has been politicized due to public figures frequently spewing false information, repeating racially targeted expressions in connection to the virus, and refusing to follow basic public health protections. There has been absolutely no cohesiveness or call to action to unify the general public. The COVID-19 pandemic has become a partisan battle, with extremely high stakes and high interference from the flood of false information. The spread of false information, more specifically the spread of misinformation and conspiracy theories, continues to prolong the coronavirus pandemic.

While the full impact of false information on the pandemic is still unknown, one can predict the severe affect it will have. The aforementioned historical events set precedent for how to look at false information surrounding COVID-19. All signs point to this situation becoming worse. The world of social media continues to expand, allowing the number of outlets for false information to grow along with it. Principal recurring patterns include public, supposedly trustworthy figures spreading harmful misinformation and unanswered questions giving way to conspiracy theories. The way people respond to and react to false information will consequently affect the event itself. The amount of false information surrounding an event indicates how much the event is affected. The COVID-19 pandemic has been heavily influenced by false information because of its overabundance of misinformation and conspiracy theories, easily accessible content, and connections between politics and mindsets about the virus. People believing misconceptions about the virus directly affect their actions: not wearing a mask, gathering in large crowds, or opting out of a vaccine. These actions directly go against the guidelines and recommendations given by health officials to slow the spread of COVID-19. A large percentage of the general public has chosen to believe misinformation and conspiracy theories about the virus from particular news outlets without fact checking or checking multiple sources. This thesis is a call to action for a way to tame the effects felt by the spread of false information. Let this analysis of the 'messages' aspect of the sociotechnical model of media effects be used as a basis of understanding for future influential events.

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