COVID-19 CONSPIRACY THEORIES— A CHALLENGE TO DIVERSITY AND DEMOCRACY

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In 2021 Canada witnessed the occupation of the nation's capital and border crossings with the United States by so-called Freedom Convoys. The repercussions are still being felt in the nation because of an uprising against COVID-19 mandates, conspiracy theory ideas of a New World Order, disinformation about what was contained in the vaccines, and the disinformation campaigns regarding the health dangers the vaccines posed. The impact of conspiracy theories and disinformation throughout the pandemic has influenced not only the acceptance of the vaccines but also the death toll. A study conducted by Islam et al. in 2020 found that conspiracy theories and disinformation can lead to distrust and vaccine hesitancy. Their research analyzed 637 COVID-19 related posts from 52 different countries found on mainstream social media platforms including YouTube and Twitter.[1]

A further study conducted by the Oxford Coronavirus Explanations, Attitudes, and Narratives Survey (OCEANS) found a lack of confidence in vaccines can be exacerbated by lack of knowledge about how vaccines themselves work, a sense of distrust in institutions in society such as the government and the healthcare/pharmaceutical industries, and a concern or distrust with the newness of the vaccines or sense that the vaccines were created too quickly.[2]

Studies in Canada have shown that vaccine hesitancy and conspiracy theories are linked, in that the infodemic on social media platforms such as Facebook and Whatsapp has lowered the intentions of Canadians to get vaccinated. Those who believe in one or more conspiracy theories regarding COVID-19 or the vaccines have a lower intent to get vaccinated.[3] There were numerous COVID-19 based conspiracy theories that eventually morphed into a super conspiracy, with many linked hierarchically. The pandemic-based conspiracies found connections within the Great Reset, the Great Replacement, QAnon, United Nations-based, and technology-based conspiracies. A commonality with each of these conspiracies is a belief that the virus was a tool being utilized by an evil cabal to create a New World Order by tyrannical governments or world organizations such as the World Economic Forum. Technological advancements such as 5G technology or health measures such as lock downs, vaccines, and masks were understood to be mechanisms of control to ensure world domination over a complicit population. In response to these conspiracy theories the world watched as protests erupted of varying degrees, from weekly local protests to nationwide so called "freedom convoys" and border barricades, crippling Canada's economy and occupying the nation's capital.

Much like the COVID-19 conspiracy theories, the milieux of anti-COVID-19 protestors and dissidents was comprised of both long established organizations and groups created solely on anti-mandate and anti-vaccine foundations. While many of the individuals who joined these groups were frustrated with the impacts of the mandates there were also quite a few right-wing extremists who entered into the fray. Their role

as spokespeople and influencers within the anti-COVID-19 groups helped to spread their ideologies, conspiracies, disinformation, and create a perpetual sense of fear for the group members.

Well-known far-right-wing groups included the Oath Keepers, Soldiers of Odin, and the Yellow Vests Canada.[4] The pandemic itself accentuated the structural violence within Canadian society, including systemic racism and socio-economic disparities, leading to a strengthening of social polarization across the nation.[5] This social polarization created an opportunity for far-right or extremist groups to spread disinformation that positioned marginalized groups as the cause of the pandemic and resulting social upheaval and to endorse acts of violence against these marginalized communities. Further, these fears, conspiracies, and "othering" of marginalized communities created an opportunity for political leaders to attempt to secure elected positions of power through the promotion of anti-democratic agendas and platforms.[6]

Both far-right groups and populist political leaders promoted narratives of COVID-19 being human made and that those governing were lying when denying this idea, or that governments, pharmaceutical companies, healthcare agencies, and world organizations were profiting from COVID-19 and the resulting vaccines, and that the virus was being used to create a new political landscape or New World Order.[7] The platform for the spreading of political populism, far-right ideology, and COVID-19 linked conspiracy theories was social media, both mainstream and alternative. The result of these social media campaigns included social movements, religio-political movements, and acts of violence. Platforms such as BitChute, Youtube, and Odyssey were foundational in the creation of conspiracy theorists, political, and far-right vlogger influencers, while Facebook groups and Telegram channels created large scale communities with international memberships. Established alternative media such as Rebel News, Western Standard, True North, and The Post Millennial presented themselves as journalists and news outlets that not only helped to spread disinformation and conspiracy theories, they did so under the auspices of journalistic integrity while being the voice of those who were disenfranchised and distrustful of the institutions of society. Focused on a conspiratorial, truth-knowing, and anti-government narrative, these media sources became the voice of the self-proclaimed silenced, the persecuted, and the prosecuted, while delineating who was a patriot and who was the enemy of the nation.

Acceptance of conspiracy theories can take place when an individual feels that the world is in a perpetual state of disaster, when one negative thing happens after another with no resolution in sight. Even if the person is religious, they can turn to their deity in hopes of a solution to this sense of chaos, but if no resolution comes forward then they start looking for a human cause for this situation. With the pandemic this sense of disaster could be found in numerous ways. The fear of the virus itself, the economic fears arising from the lockdowns and lack of employment, and the social isolation, caused some to see the world through a lens of perpetual doom. Conspiracy theories can help to delineate and explain the "evil" that is the cause of these perpetual disasters, by providing an organization composed of individuals who are working secretly to achieve a malevolent end. In their understanding of the world nothing that occurs in the universe is random, in their view the world is governed by design.[8]

Conspiracy theories are a method for those who believe that the political realm is impenetrable or a secret institution not available to them to participate.[9] In an environment where there exists a distrust of societies' institutions, such as the government, the media, academia, and science, and a mix of millenarian religion (apocalyptic thought or an end times view of the world), occultism, and radical politics, this can lead to what scholar Michael Barkun has titled improvisational conspiracism. In this form of conspiratorial belief, adherents can create novel belief systems that allow them to create a holistic and complete vision of the world that can explain all the phenomena they are witnessing. Similar to a moral panic, the media that is ingested by the conspiracy believers focus on repetitive fear-based messaging that promotes the idea that the adherents need to take action, not only to defeat those who are deemed the enemy, but also to save civilization. The fear mongering from the media influences how the world is perceived, leading to an understanding that perpetual fear and threat are central to normal life, that things are completely out of control. The answers that conspiracy theories give for the cause and solution to these chaotic times, provide a sense of control for the believers.

Those who adhere to this fear-based understanding of the world understand that they have to take action to save civilization, and in doing so they perceive themselves as social heroes who are ready to face their enemy and stop their malevolent plans. These social heroes believe they have the truth at their disposal, a truth those who are "sleeping" are unaware of, and when they speak this truth, there are ramifications. These believers will be shunned, denigrated, and ostracized by friends and family for their beliefs. In fact, their worldviews will cause them to be segregated by larger society, pushing them further into their conspiracy communities, and more importantly helps them to develop an identity as a victim. They are being persecuted and, in some cases, prosecuted for their beliefs and for speaking out.

Far-right individuals consistently linked themselves to the anti-COVID-19 movements creating a conduit for their hate ideologies to seep in and recruit from the anti-COVID-19 movement. The crossover between far-right ideology and the anti-COVID-19, anti-vax protestors was propositioned through the distrust and weakened support for the institutions in society. An example of the crossover between

far-right ideology and the anti-COVID-19 movement is the White Lives Matter (WLM) day of protest in 2021. WLM had planned protests across North America, with a single location in Canada, Toronto, Ontario. The Toronto based WLM channel on the social media platform Telegram developed a plan to bring anti-COVID-19 protestors to their movement and their planned day of protest. The WLM administrators were posting numerous comments on the channel about keeping the chat focused on the upcoming protests and excluding racial commentary or extremism. The administrators made this proclamation to ensure that any media that were monitoring their Telegram channel would focus on the planned protest rather than any hate speech or racism, and also to create an appealing environment for anti-COVID-19 groups or individuals.

The administrators for the Toronto group were making an appeal to anti-COVID-19 protestors in Toronto to join their protest on Sunday, April 11, 2021. Toronto based anti-COVID-19 protests were held in the city each Saturday during the mandates, and the WLM group were asking them to instead join in their Sunday protest. The Toronto Telegram channel was created on March 29, 2021, and on that day new members were asking if anyone was a part of the weekly, "end the COVID-19 oppression" protests in the city. The newly formed WLM group expressed sympathy for the anti-lock down protestors and hoped to create a bridge to that community based on shared perceived injustices and lack of government support for their causes. One WLM member posted, "the problem with that [lock downs] is the fact that it is creating a LOT of people with nothing left to lose. People have lost friends, family, and livelihoods. That is a dangerous state of affairs for any society. And it's being foolishly encouraged to continue by people who have nothing to lose." This astute post reflects the sense of fear, lack of control, and desperation of those who adhere to conspiracy theories, while also acknowledging how this is similar to their own racist positionality.

To create a cohesive and welcoming channel the WLM administrators asked members to post about "how we [whites] are victimized by non-whites." A secondary request from the WLM administrators focused on the signage at the planned protest, asking members to make protest signs that had images or references to white Canadians who had been murdered, especially children, so the members would not be "dismissed as white supremacists and other slurs." In the end the WLM's protest in Toronto that weekend was a failure, with only a small number of the Telegram channel's members showing up, and no anti-COVID-19 protestors in attendance. The legacy media wrote about the abysmal failure of the planned event, but failed to acknowledge the connections made between the two groups, or even the attempt to create a cohesive community.

While there was not a shared community at the protest, the WLM Toronto channel continued to build upon this initial recruitment plan. The members began posting more racist posts that reflected their worldview, but they also encouraged their members to recruit from within the anti-COVID-19 groups by attending "maskless" protests at grocery stores so they could create a bond through law breaking. This example of crossover between white nationalism and anti-COVID-19 movements reveals that the boundary between democratic political protests and that of far-right political populism is being blurred, which can create a challenge to democracy itself.[10] During the height of the pandemic and government response of mandates and lock downs, we witnessed a rise in anti-government protests, as well as conspiracy theories. Sociologist Ulrike M. Vieten compared social media messaging of far-right white political protests and found that there was a growing normalization of the far-right groups as they joined "anti-hygienic" or anti-lock down protests. Vieten found that white nationalists tied wider struggle over pandemic politics to arguments about who belongs.[11] A similar trope was being propagated by the anti-COVID-19 protestors as they delineated those who followed the COVID-19 mandates, those who wore masks, and those who were vaccinated, as complicit in the tyranny being enforced upon them, as well as the potential world domination understood as the foundation of their conspiracy theories.

Much like the WLM's attempted recruitment of the anti-COVID-19 protestors in Toronto, by far-right actors and groups, Levinsson et al. found that the association between COVID-19 conspiracy theories/beliefs and support of violent radicalization promoted by far-right groups, was evidenced by increased hate crimes and violence against individuals who identify as Asian, or arson attacks on 5G telecommunication infrastructure.[12] The ensuing violence and sympathy towards violent acts will not dissipate once the pandemic is over and could potentially lead to an increase in discrimination, hate crimes, and incidents of violence by both lone actors and organized groups. This discrimination and marginalization can also be furthered through political means.

Vieten argued that understanding the crossover between far-right white nationalist groups and anti-COVID-19 groups would be beneficial in understanding the political arena when the pandemic ended, expressing this new normal as "pandemic populism."[13] The Canadian federal election in 2021 revealed the initial impact of conspiracy theories and far-right ideologies on the political landscape of the nation. The People's Party of Canada, led by Maxime Bernier, had a platform based on limited immigration, anti-COVID-19 mandates, support of the convoys, and conspiracy theories. The platform promoted by candidates such as Mark Friesen in Saskatchewan, hinged upon the Great Reset, United Nations Agenda 21, and anti-immigration, all linked with COVID-19 hoax, anti-vaccine, and New World Order conspiracy theory narratives. While the People's Party of Canada did not fare well in the federal election, the anti-immigration,

pro-conspiracy platform was soon adopted in part by the Canadian Conservative Party under the leadership of Pierre Poilievre.

For us to understand the rise of populism in Canada we need to analyze the commonality of conspiracy theories in these two disparate groups. As COVID-19 variants continue to emerge and government response continues to be the promotion of vaccines and potential new mandates, some individuals' trust in their government and medical fields continues to deteriorate.[14] In response, populist political parties continue to promote a narrative of rising up against elitism, promoting conspiracy theories as a part of their political platforms, and most importantly positioning democratically elected politicians and parties as complicit in the conspiracy theories surrounding COVID-19. As scholars, policy makers, and public advocates and activists, we must work together to stem the flow of COVID-19 disinformation, conspiracy theories, and the spreading of far-right ideologies both by groups and populists, to ensure the protection of marginalized communities, racialized communities, and those affected by socio-economic disparities.

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