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ON SOME ASPECTS OF THE GROWING POPULARITY OF CONSPIRACY THEORIES*

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Abstract. This study aims to investigate some aspects that contribute to the growing popularity of conspiracy theories in the 21st century. They have gained so much popularity among the public in recent years that an age of conspiracies. Conspiracy theories are increasingly responding to several socially significant events occurring around us, coming up with an alternative explanation, especially for those political, social, tragic, or other events that concern a more significant number of people. Thanks to the rapid expansion of access to the Internet and rapid development in information and communication technologies, systems, and means, conspiracy theories are significantly penetrating the mass media and especially the sphere of new media. Currently, social networks are the medium with the most incredible spread of various conspiracy theories. It is one of the primary reasons why conspiracy theories have become the subject of our scientific interest. Using relevant methods of qualitative theoretical scientific research, in this work, we present our research findings and a view on some selected aspects contributing to the growing popularity of conspiracy theories to readers from the professional and lay public.

Keywords: conspiracy theories; growing popularity; aspects; social networks; Internet

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1. Introduction

In the last few years, we have increasingly encountered various conspiracy theories that respond to several socially significant events around us (Radnitz, 2022; Harris, 2022; Stamatidis-Brehier, 2023). Immediately after their media coverage, a series of significant events are the object of alternative explanations that challenge official positions or explanations. Conspiracy theories come up with an alternative explanation, especially for those events that involve a more significant number of people. The belief that conspiracies are happening is based on human

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mistrust and doubt. Conspiracy theories also include a certain amount of mystery, which makes them even more attractive. Among several, let's mention, for example, the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, the events of September 11, 2001, the global financial and economic crisis, the disappearance of Malaysia Airlines flight MH370, the origin of the refugee crisis or the spread of the coronavirus around the world. Soon after their publication, these and other events received "new explanations" that sought to reveal their "true meaning, origin or causes".

Conspiracy theories today represent a phenomenon that, especially since the terrorist attacks in the United States of America that happened on September 11, 2001, has gained considerable popularity and has begun to permeate society. This situation has stimulated research into conspiracy theories and the emergence of publications that deal with the popularity of these theories and their impact on society. It is, therefore, a bit surprising that this topic, with exceptions (Panczová, 2017), is absent from professional literature written in Slovak that would deal with this phenomenon. This absence was one of the inspirations for choosing this topic for our research. This situation changed only in the 21st century.

However, the need for research in this area is now indisputable. Conspiracy theories and the belief in these theories represent a phenomenon that significantly impacts contemporary society. Conspiracies have had and still influence the content component of the production of popular culture. They also considerably penetrate the field of mass media and especially the field of new media.

Today, social networks are the medium with the most incredible spread of various conspiracy theories. In the same way, society influences how a given population approaches conspiracy thinking and positions itself to believe in these theories. The topics mentioned above have become the subject of our interest. Therefore, in this article, using relevant qualitative theoretical scientific research methods, we bring our findings and a view of some selected aspects closely related to the issue of conspiracy theories to readers from the professional and lay public.

2. The spread and rise in popularity of conspiracy theories

An essential aspect of conspiracy thinking, and the theories based on it, is the method of their dissemination, that is, how their creators can spread their theory to the rest of the population. Although conspiracy theories have existed for a long time, new media is crucial to their spread and popularity. Over time, interest in conspiracy theories has also been strengthened by the mass media - newspapers, television broadcasts, and cinematography (Arnold, 2008, p. 9). While for the 50s and 60s of the 20th century, television broadcasting and the production of the film industry were an essential factor in the spread of conspiracies, for the 21st century, the Internet and its more massive expansion, as well as the mass active use of social networks (Figure 1), have a crucial influence. Thanks to them, supporters of conspiracy theories have gained a powerful tool to spread their theories and to band together (Byford, 2011, p. 11).

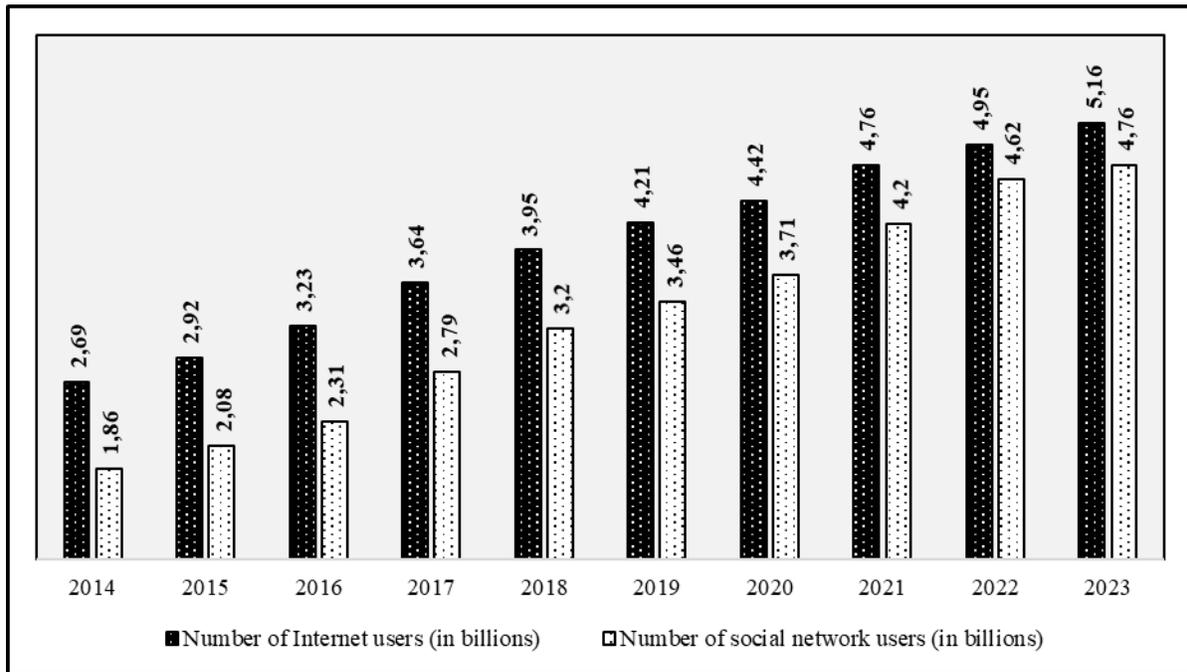


Fig.1. Overview of the growth of the number of Internet and social network users over the last 10 years (in billions)
Source: DataReportal (2023)

A significant influence on the spread and rise in popularity of conspiracy theories was also had by substantial events with a societal impact, which took place under circumstances that part of the population considered unclear and not very convincing, thus arousing interest in their alternative interpretation or explanation. It was, for example, the landing of Apollo on the moon, the murder of John Fitzgerald Kennedy, or the fatal car accident of Princess Diana. A national poll conducted by the New York Times in 1992 revealed that only 10% of the American population believed the official version that the assassination of Kennedy was the result of an independent individual action by Lee Hervey Oswald. At the same time, 77% of respondents were convinced that this act was the work of a more significant number of persons, and 12% per cent of respondents said they did not know or did not want to answer (Krauss, 1992).

Time also plays a vital role in spreading conspiracy theories and their rise in popularity in society. That is, the amount of time that has passed since the event that is the object of the conspiracy theory. As already mentioned, in 1992, only 10% of respondents believed in the official version of the assassination of the American president, while in 1966 (3 years after this event), 36% believed in the official version; during surveys carried out later, 11% of respondents in 1976 and 1983, and 13% during a study in 1988. So, as is clear, the number of sceptics rejecting the official version increased noticeably 13 years after the assassination, and until the 1990s, their number remained constant at similar numbers (Goertzel, 1994). This increase in belief in the conspiracy theory was noted even though, in the years following the assassination, more and more evidence was collected in favour of the version that Oswald was behind the assassination alone.

Let's stay with the assassination of J.F. Kennedy. This act significantly shifted how the American public perceived conspiracy theories. The catalyst unleashed another flurry of conspiracy theories in American culture, primarily on television. Since then, the phenomenon of conspiracy theories has reached an iconic status, occupying people's minds with many other related thoughts and events. And so, at the beginning of the 21st century, conspiracy and

associated theories became a fixed part of the culture. This was also reflected in the content of films, television shows, books, and political debates.

Belief in conspiracies has also reached the highest levels of American politics. This is evidenced by the fact that their belief that the assassination of Kennedy was not the work of one person but that it was a conspiracy was publicly expressed, for example, by former US Secretary of State John Kerry (Parade, 2013) or former Pennsylvania state senator Richard Schweiker. Schweiker said that "the investigative report of the Warren Commission was like a house of cards about to collapse" (Olmsted, 2010, p. 168). He came to this opinion after becoming a member of the Committee for the Investigation of Political Assassinations in 1976. As part of this committee, Schweiker was present at re-investigating the circumstances surrounding President Kennedy's death and the activist Martin Luther King (Simkin, 2014).

Participation in this committee left him with the impression that the investigators at the time did not do a faultless job and ignored specific facts. For example, they left out the possibility that the assassination was not the work of a lone shooter but could be an act behind a more significant number of people. Senator Richard Russell, who directly participated in the investigation of the Warren Commission as a member, had similar doubts. Although he signed the investigation's final report, the personal notes he wrote during the commission's investigation indicate that he had trouble accepting the lone gunman version of the assassination (Rome News Tribune, 1993).

These ambiguities and doubts, which accompanied the investigation of this highly publicized case in the media, convinced many people that the officially presented reports were not entirely sufficient to explain the events surrounding the assassination. This situation then led to a series of conspiracy theories that were supposed to clarify this act and bring a desirable explanation.

The process by which conspiracy theories moved from the fringes of interest to the centre of television attention was a gradual one. The permeation of American culture by conspiracies also had an impact on the politics of the time. During this time, several films and television productions appeared, which composed diverse themes that shaped the status of conspiracy theories even more strongly and sharply, whether based on historical facts or assumptions and fantasy. The emergence of many movies and TV shows with this basic theme could hardly have been coincidental (Arnold, 2008, p. 9).

In the late 1990s, but especially in the early 2000s, it was not unusual to come across conspiracies as an explanation for a wide range of political events that might otherwise appear completely ordinary. For example, some considered the source of President Bill Clinton's problems at the time to be a grand right-wing conspiracy. The liberal media were accused of conspiratorial intrigues, which were supposed to be behind the fact that the media image of global events does not match the conservative views of the population (Arnold, 2008, p. 10).

Regardless of the personal preferences and opinions of individuals, conspiracy theories have penetrated from the periphery of interest to the mainstream of American culture and politics as a powerful source of contemporary experience, but one that can sometimes be confusing and ambiguous (Shields, 2022, Jetten, Peters & Casara, 2022; Sunstein, 2023, Cassam, 2023; Dentith, 2023; Stokes, 2023).

3. Conspiracy theories in the context of new media

The Internet has significantly changed our perception and way of communication, as well as our access to information. Based on this, the Internet has also been a great asset to the field of conspiracy theories. The modern era, associated with intermingling cultures and the development of information and communication technologies, systems and means, enables a much more effective and widespread dissemination of information and

communication between people. These aspects increase the influence of conspiracy theories on politics and society. With the declining influence of traditional gatekeepers of information, such as book publishers or film producers, it is easier than ever to access information considered unacceptable or even absurd by the mainstream. This phenomenon does not only bring positive aspects but can also provide specific threats and the risk of abuse (Hajdúková & Šišulák, 2022).

Therefore, in the next part, we will focus on the negatives that the Internet brings and new ways of spreading information that the Internet provides.

4. The threat of conspiracy theories in the context of new media

The Internet, various social networks, and their platforms offering the possibility of so-called microblogging have changed how it can access information and shape and spread the acquired knowledge further. Especially nowadays, viral social networks, where the users themselves create the content, provide a new dimension for observing how their content leads the interest of the visitors of the given servers to specific patterns of how they create, receive, and spread further information.

Despite the enthusiastic debate about how new technologies and media have sparked interest in public discussion on political or social issues, the role of the technical system and its influence on public opinion still needs to be determined. Although social media users are becoming more wary of unverified information, false, fabricated, altered, and alarmist news remains ubiquitous on the Internet. However, a large part of active users of social networks are still willing to believe them.

The World Economic Forum, in this regard, has called the spread of unofficial theories on the Internet "one of the biggest threats the world will face in the coming years" and said it could have serious real-world consequences (Howel, 2013, p. 11). Industry officials and event risk experts said the spread of fake news on the Internet ranks alongside economic crises, environmental degradation, and the spread of disease among the biggest global threats today.

The current situation regarding the Internet and social networks and the spread of fake news and conspiracy theories is compared to that of 1938 when the massive spread of radio receivers led to the confusion and fear of thousands of Americans during the broadcast of Orson Wells' radio play *The War of the Worlds*. Today, radio broadcasts would not confuse anyone, but this role has now been taken over by the Internet, especially social networks.

The World Economic Forum sees the main threat: the Internet has no regulatory mechanism for spreading false information. The viral spread of various conspiracy theories, disinformation and hoaxes on social networks negatively impacts individuals and society. A possible solution to this problem is limiting Internet anonymity. However, attempts that should have led to this or a similar decision are regularly met with a great wave of resentment (Wood, 2013). But how do we deal with the situation if the originator of disinformation is an international organization or even a state? Social networks and their users and content creators will have to develop an ethos of self-responsibility and healthy scepticism towards the content presented on the Internet, just as happened with radio listeners (World Economic Forum, 2013).

Spreading conspiracy theories, disinformation, hoaxes, and alarmist messages of various kinds on the Internet and social networks is currently a major problem. And that's because of the easy availability of this information, combined with the possibility that anyone who decides to present their opinions or articles publicly can do so at will with zero or only minimal control. This shows how the subject of these messages can quickly get their disinformation into broader awareness and harm someone through them. New media provide space for the

expression and association of people who share the same interest in conspiracies and the possibility of deliberately spreading deceptive, invented altered or unverified news.

In this context, Solon (2014), as an illustrative example, points to an event when a message appeared on the Facebook social network during the Italian elections in 2013 that Italian senators voted for a law proposed by Senator Cerenga, the purpose of which would be to provide 134 billion euros to politicians whose party fails in the elections, to find a new job (Ascione, 2013). Even though the truth of this report could be questioned based on several points, for example, there is no senator named Cerenga, the Italian senate did not discuss or approve such a law, or the number of senators who were supposed to vote for the adoption of this law was higher than the total number of senate members, this news spread quickly. More than 350,000 users on Facebook shared it in the first month after its publication, and it even ignited civil unrest in several Italian cities. These events only prove the influence that new media has on the spread and perception of conspiracy theories today and also that their users generally approach them with a minimal degree of prudence (Visentin, Tuan & Di Domenico, 2021; Cinelli et al., 2022)

The authors tried to clarify new media's influence on the spread and acceptance of conspiracy theories in the work *Collective Attention in the Age of (mis) Information*. As part of this work, its authors conducted a study to understand the connection between political debate and information on the web. Part of the Facebook social network was analysed, and the findings showed that this network represents a complex set of social interactions. During the study, it was found that there is a debate based on news from different information sources (alternative or conventional) and that there is a strong interaction between political debate and information sources. Most of the activities on the mentioned social network contained the belief that the conventional media and their news are manipulated by other, superior entities, making the information they provided unreliable and biased. Out of the 1279 monitored users, 56% regularly followed alternative sources of information and were thus significantly more exposed to unsubstantiated claims and fake news (Mocanu et al., 2014). This study, therefore, shows that the greater the amount of unconfirmed information in circulation on the Internet, the greater the number of users who succumb to the distortion of this misinformation when choosing the content. With the penetration of the Internet, the issue continues to deepen (Birchall & Knight, 2022; Gagliardone et al., 2023).

5. The impact of secularization on conspiracy thinking

Geertz (2000, p. 105) defined religion as "a system of symbols which establish strong, penetrating, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating concepts of a general order of being and endowing these concepts with such an air of reality that these moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic".

According to Wilson, religion is the ideology of a traditional society. In this society, religion provided signs and symbols to individual and group identity and legitimized the way of life. The goals of human life were expressed in transcendent terms, that is, in terms of moving beyond sensory experience, and every part of the life of traditional societies was permeated with religious symbolism. People used religion to gain strength and justification for their position, well-being or, on the contrary, poverty (Mužny, 1999, p. 62).

Thus, religion established societal interactions, defined moral norms, and explained various phenomena. But over time, with the progress of industrialization and the development of modern technologies, society moved from a religious level to a rational one to a certain extent. In contemporary society, religion is no longer the apparent originator of the functions above, and a process of social secularization is taking place. Secularization is when religious practices, consciousness and institutions lose their original social meaning (Mužny, 1999, p. 62).

One of the possible reasons why contemporary society is so permeated with conspiratorial thinking can also be the fact that the Western world is going through a process of secularization, during which the position of religion is significantly weakened (Casanova, 2006, p. 14). Halík disagrees with this and states that "faith does not disappear; it only "moves" from public life and from external forms (especially institutional church-oriented forms) to the area of the private life of individuals; religion does not disappear, but becomes less visible" (Halík, 2013). This thesis is evidenced by the rise of modern religious movements within the New Age movement. Modern society no longer clings so much to classical forms of religion but looks for alternative ways through contemporary forms of religion and philosophical directions. Believing in conspiracy theories can be one of the possible alternatives.

Heil states that, for example, the current belief in anti-Semitic conspiracy theories stems from the belief that the Jewish people are no longer under God's guidance, are uncontrollable and that everything they do is for their benefit, deliberately ignoring anyone who is not of the Jewish faith. This state is called the "desacralization process", which is more broadly the result of multifaceted social secularization. According to the author, the process of secularization changed the concept of anti-Semitic conspiracies and led to a complete reversal of their original arrangement (Heil, 2014, p. 66).

Popper, on the other hand, presents the opinion that conspiracy theories are a typical result of the secularization of religious beliefs. While earlier traditional religions attributed wars to the intrigues of the gods, in current society, conspiracy theories have replaced the gods with powerful individuals or organizations, sinister and influential groups whose sinfulness is responsible for all the evil that society suffers from (DeHaven-Smith, 2014, p. 92). Supporters of conspiracies can thus find an explanation for the evil and suffering that occurs in society through conspiracy theory, but with the difference that the originator of individual events is no longer transcendental authorities and forces in the form of various deities or demons but powerful figures from the field of politics or an influential organization.

Conspiracy theories provide an alternative way to interpret specific actions or events in contemporary society, just as these explanations were previously offered by traditional religion. Belief in conspiracies represents a belief system that replaces conventional religious orientations and fulfils a deep-rooted desire for spirituality that has been transforming in recent decades. This also proves that religion and belief in it is not a matter of social evolution but rather an "anthropological constant" (Halík, 2013). This phenomenon can be traced to the rise of the already mentioned New Age movement, which points out that the departure from the classic directions of faith does not mean that contemporary society is not interested in religion but that this interest is only moving in a different direction than the traditional one - less towards community way and more to the individual. Conspiracy theories can thus, in a certain way, represent a contemporary secularized form of religion and can be considered a modern form of a traditional religious myth, which means an analogy to religious belief (Bilewicz, Cichočka & Soral, 2015, p. 116), in the sense that these theories present an explanation of events that are perceived as threatening.

6. Belief in conspiracies as a consequence of authoritarianism in society

A prominent element of belief in conspiracy theories is the relationship between authoritarianism and society, especially right-wing authoritarianism. Therefore, some authors tried to find a causal connection between the level of authoritarianism in society and the belief in conspiracies and conspiracy theories. Adorno drew attention to this phenomenon in his work and outlined the relationship between authoritarianism and belief in conspiracy theories. Right-wing authoritarianism is defined as a covariation of three attitude sets – authoritarian obedience, authoritarian aggression, and conventionalism (Altemeyer, 1996, p. 7).

Authoritarian obedience expresses a general acceptance of the establishment and official authorities in the society where the individual lives and a high degree of willingness to accept them. Authoritarian aggression is a state of hostility and general aggressiveness towards other members of society, for example, towards members of minority groups or towards those whom the individual considers to be ideological enemies. It is possible to include racial, ethnic, or national minorities among them. Right-wing authoritarians are the group most subject to social prejudice. Authoritarian aggression is usually accompanied by the conviction that this behaviour is approved by the authority in question or that it is a way to keep the rule in place and thus maintain its status quo. Conventionalism expresses adherence to social conventions, perceived as punishment and support from authority and society. This phenomenon is closely related to the belief that others should also have a positive attitude towards and follow social norms. It is also possible to point to a relationship between authoritarianism and religion or that religious upbringing can represent the basis for an authoritarian personality type (Bilewicz et al., 2015, p. 116).

For the first time, the thesis connecting authoritarianism and conspiracy theories, as already mentioned, was expressed by Adorno and a group of authors in the publication (Adorno et al., 2019, p. 765). Specifically, that belief in conspiracies is characteristic of individuals with a high degree of authoritarianism. The first work that looked at the influence of personality differences on belief in conspiracy theories, including authoritarianism, was a study by Abalakina-Paap and her colleagues, in which they measured authoritarianism with a twelve-item scale derived from Altemeyer's Scale of Right-Wing Authoritarianism. Based on this measure, right-wing authoritarianism was a good predictor of belief in a particular conspiracy theory. These included, for example, the theory that a Jewish conspiracy controls the banking system or that the government is deliberately covering up the landing of extra-terrestrial civilizations on Earth (Abalakina-Paap et al., 1993, p. 642). However, this study did not confirm the connection between authoritarianism and belief in the existence of conspiracies on a general scale, only their connection with specific theories.

Bruder, in his study, using Funke's twelve-part scale, demonstrated that right-wing authoritarianism has a positive effect on both acceptance of conspiracy theories as a general phenomenon and belief in specific conspiracy theories. These particular cases of conspiracies in the study included the death of Princess Diana, the landing of extra-terrestrial civilizations, or business conspiracies pointing to the influence of organized crime on the operation of the Vatican Bank (Bruder et al., 2013). Grzesiak-Feldman, for example, addressed this topic in her work on the influence of authoritarianism on the spread of anti-Semitic conspiracy theories in Poland. Her study pointed out that anti-Semitic conspiracy theories among the Polish population are also positively influenced by authoritarianism (Grzesiak-Feldman, 2009).

On the other hand, it is also necessary to mention works that reached different results. McHoskey, in his publication, concluded that the respondents he observed, who showed a greater degree of authoritarianism, were more open to arguments that supported the official, non-conspiracy explanation of the assassination of J.F. Kennedy (McHoskey, 1995). Exciting and unexpected results were achieved in Swami's research. He showed mixed results when he conducted two investigations as part of the study. The first research investigation revealed a relationship between right-wing authoritarianism and belief in a Jewish conspiracy, and the second investigation pointed to a positive correlation between right-wing authoritarianism and general belief in conspiracy theories (Swami, 2012). Imhoff and Bruder (2014) also got surprising results the following year when they used Funke's scale again during the following study but with different results. They pointed out that the relationship between authoritarianism and conspiratorial thinking was statistically insignificant.

Many contemporary conspiracy theories have a populist and anti-government focus. In these theories, authorities are blamed as the originators of evil in society - for example, that the American government is responsible for the attacks of September 11, or that the British secret service MI6 is responsible for the accident of Princess Diana.

According to Wood (2013), it can be deduced from this those supporters of authoritarianism are significantly less prone to believe that their authorities (the government) conspired against them and, conversely, that opponents of authoritarianism find this idea even more attractive.

Although most research on the link between authoritarianism and conspiratorial thinking sounds positive in favour of their mutual correlation, some studies have yielded the opposite results. An evident connection between authoritarianism, belief and the spread of conspiracy theories has not yet been demonstrated, and it is, therefore, possible that this aspect is present only in some specific theories and cannot be considered a general characteristic that could be applied to a broader spectrum of conspiracy theories. The different characteristics of the research sample of the respondents likely caused the other research results to be different.

Swami attributes this phenomenon primarily to cultural contexts (Swami, 2012). While his study on the relationship between authoritarianism and conspiratorial thinking conducted among respondents in the Central European region showed a positive correlation, his second study, which investigated the same among a Malaysian sample of respondents, showed the opposite results. It is, therefore, evident that it is necessary to consider the extent to which regional politics, the economic situation and the cultural climate affect a given society and how these factors influence conspiracy thinking and belief in conspiracy theories in general. It is also essential to distinguish between belief in a specific conspiracy theory and belief in conspiracy theories as a widespread phenomenon that includes a subset of individual theories.

Conclusions

Taking into account the fact that in the last few years, due to the enormous progress in the spread of the Internet, in the development of information and communication technologies, systems and means, and the mass use of various social network platforms, we increasingly encounter multiple theories that respond to several socially significant events taking place around us, the aim of this the work was, with the use of relevant methods of qualitative theoretical scientific research, to investigate one of the phenomena of the current modern information society – conspiracy theories. We found that they represent a phenomenon that can be looked at from different points of view, both in terms of their scope and the size of their sphere of influence, as well as based on their originators, causes, or what roles they have in society or what their motivations are. Although conspiracy theories and tendencies towards conspiracy theorizing have been inherent in humans throughout the long historical development of human society, they only entered the wider consciousness in the 21st century after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.

Based on the examination of certain selected social aspects related to the relationship between society and conspiracy theories, we can conclude that there is a connection between the increase in popularity of conspiracy thinking and socially significant events that took place under unclear circumstances or whose official explanation was not sufficiently convincing for part of the population. This relationship is mutual and is mainly visible in how the popularity of conspiracy theories has affected, for example, television and film production. Other aspects that positively affect this relationship include the degree of authoritarianism and religious secularization in a particular society. Ambivalent results were obtained on the question of how the degree of authoritarianism affects the affinity for conspiratorial thinking. It is impossible to generalize since it is necessary to consider the specifics of societies, conditions and cultures. As we indicated above, the development of the Internet and the massive use of social media platforms played a significant role in this area, which raised conspiracy theorizing to a new higher level. While conspiracy theorists had limited opportunities to spread their theories until then, with the massive development and availability of internet connections and the active use of various social networks, they have gained a powerful tool to associate and share their theories about supposed conspiracies.

Conspiracy theories represent a topic within which it is difficult or impossible to formulate clear conclusions and attitudes. Just as it is impossible to condemn every supporter of conspiracy theories as paranoid suffering from cognitive distortion, it is also impossible to label every theorist as a truth-seeking and injustice-fighting individual. While some theories are so outlandish that it is evident from the start that they are mere figments of a wild imagination, some theories not only have at least a partial basis in reality but may prove to be wholly or partially true over time. This situation further complicates the attitude towards the phenomenon of conspiracy theories. This points out that they cannot be seen as a general set to which all conspiracy theories belong but must be seen as separate and distinct entities in their context. In an individual approach to this topic, it is, therefore, necessary to focus on specific aspects of personal theories with a critical distance and try to form an opinion of a particular conspiracy based on them. This way of thinking could lead to finding out whether a specific theory is at least partially relevant and whether it tries to point out a possible problem, the detection and subsequent solution of which would be valuable and desirable for society, or whether it is just a purposeful accusation that aims harm the subject who is the target of the accusation.

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