

RETHINKING CONSPIRACY THEORIES

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Abstract: I argue that that an influential strategy for understanding conspiracy theories stands in need of radical revision. According to this approach, called ‘generalism’, conspiracy theories are epistemically defective by their very nature. Generalists are typically opposed by particularists, who argue that conspiracy theories should be judged case-by-case, rather than definitionally indicted. Here I take a novel approach to criticizing generalism. I introduce a distinction between ‘Dominant Institution Conspiracy Theories and Theorists’ and ‘Non-Dominant Institution Conspiracy Theories and Theorists’. Generalists uncritically center the latter in their analysis, but I show why the former must be centered by generalists’ own lights: they are the clearest representatives of their views, and they are by far the most harmful. Once we make this change in paradigm cases, however, various typical generalist theses turn out to be false or in need of radical revision. Conspiracy theories are not primarily produced by extremist ideologies, as generalists typically claim, since mainstream, purportedly non-extremist political ideologies are just as, if not more responsible for such theories. Conspiracy theories are also, we find, not the province of amateurs: they are often created and pushed by individuals widely viewed as experts, who have the backing of our most prestigious intellectual institutions. While generalists may be able to take this novel distinction and shift in paradigm cases on board, this remains to be seen. Subsequent generalist accounts that do absorb this distinction and shift will look radically different from previous incarnations of the view.

Analysis of the paranoid style is, itself, back in style. In recent years, there has been an enormous increase in academic and public commentary on conspiracy theories, in particular concerning the threats they pose. Here are a few sample headlines: “Stop the Online Conspiracy Theorists Before They Break Democracy” (*The Guardian*); “‘More Dangerous And More Widespread’: Conspiracy Theories Spread Faster Than Ever” (*NPR*); “Conspiracy Theories are Dangerous – and Here’s How to Crush Them” (*The Economist*).

Recent philosophical accounts have aimed to show that there is indeed something epistemically deficient in the very nature of conspiracy theories. Such ‘generalist’ philosophical views are so called because they argue that conspiracy theories, as a class, represent beliefs that are inherently epistemically flawed (Buenting and Taylor 2010). Once ‘conspiracy theories’ are understood in this sense, generalists then typically make the following four claims regarding conspiracy theories and theorists:

- 1.) Conspiracy theories are the work of amateurs. According to Quassim Cassam, “That’s not a comment on their intellectual merits, but on the qualifications of the amateur sleuths and Internet detectives who push them” (2019, 23-4). This “amateurish” nature of conspiracy theories is why, by extension, they reject “officially sanctioned experts or sources of information” (96).
- 2.) Those who subscribe to conspiracy theories are typically political “extremists” (Sunstein and Vermeule 2009, 219). More generally, the “ideologies that are most conducive to Conspiracy Theories are extremist ideologies” (Cassam 2019, 50).
- 3.) Conspiracy theorists are typically not well-off socioeconomically and are less educated (Freeman and Bentall 2017; Douglas et al 2019, 10; Cassam 2019). More generally, the social and psychological science on conspiracy theories has revealed important characteristics shared among conspiracy theorists (Douglas et al 2019; Sunstein and Vermeule 2009).
- 4.) We should solve the problems conspiracy theories pose by:
 - A.) Doubling down on the ways in which “[c]onspiracy theories are generally dislodged by the media and other non-governmental actors”, such as sites like snopes.com (Sunstein and Vermeule 2009, 219).
 - B.) Government online “infiltration of extremist groups” (219).
 - C.) Improving intellectual and moral education (Cassam 2019).

In what follows, I argue that all four of these claims – despite their familiarity from both the academic literature and their popular counterparts – are false or, at the very least, in need of radical revision. Furthermore, I argue that this is so *by the very lights of these philosophers’ own views of conspiracy theories* – by the very lights of the generalist position.

My argument differs from typical objections to these views. ‘Particularists’, who oppose the generalists, argue that we have plenty of examples of conspiracies obtaining historically and

throughout our political lives: conspiracy theories should therefore be judged on a case-by-case basis, rather than definitionally indicted.¹ Generalists reply that not all theories about conspiracies will amount to ‘conspiracy theories’ in the relevant sense. After all, groups of people conspire and attempt to cover their tracks all the time – for example, in the context of organized crime or routine government corruption. Claims about such activity involve theories about conspiracies and are often justified, but we rarely describe such views as ‘conspiracy theories’. We have in mind something more specific with the concept of conspiracy theories: views that are distinctly flawed. Cassam emphasizes this generalist point by distinguishing and referring to the relevant phenomenon via capitalization as ‘Conspiracy Theories’ – as opposed to just any theory involving a conspiracy (2019). Conspiracy Theories are flawed by their very nature, and once this concept is defined and individuated in this way, claims (1)-(4) can be seen to follow.

Rather than weigh into this definitional debate, I take a novel approach in this paper. For the sake of this discussion, I *accept* Cassam and the generalist’s argument that there is a distinction between theories about or explanations involving conspiracies and Conspiracy Theories. I argue, however, that within the generalist understanding of Conspiracy Theories, we must draw a further distinction between what I call ‘Dominant Institution Conspiracy Theories and Theorists’ (DITs) and ‘Non-Dominant Institution Conspiracy Theories and Theorists’ (Non-DITs) – a distinction that I then explain in detail in this section. Generalists uncritically center Non-DITs in their analysis, but I show why DITs must be centered: they are the clearest representatives of the generalists’ views, and they are by far the most harmful. Once we make this change in paradigm cases, however, the typical generalist claims (1)-(4) all turn out to be false or in need of radical revision.²

¹ For representative examples of ‘particularist’ approaches, Pigden (1995) and (2007), Dentith (2014) and (2018b). For particularist critiques of Cassam, see Hagen (2022) and of Sunstein & Vermeule, see Coady (2018).

² A reviewer asks why I choose to focus on generalist accounts that center Non-DITs when particularist accounts – such as Coady (2003) and Rääkkä (2018) – also center Non-DITs. This is a fair question. The main reason I focus on generalist accounts is that the generalists believe there is something inherently epistemically defective about conspiracy

In the first section, I lay out generalist views in more detail and examine the crucial role that their selection of paradigm cases plays in their analysis. In the second section, I show that DITs should be centered in any generalist analysis of Conspiracy Theories because they are the *clearest* representatives of the view. In the third section, I argue that DITs should be centered in any generalist analysis because they are by far the most *harmful* Conspiracy Theories. In the fourth section, I address several objections to my approach. In the fifth and sixth sections, I explain the wide-ranging revisions that will be required on any consistent analysis of Conspiracy Theories in light of this shift in paradigm cases.

1. A Closer Look at Generalism and the Role of Paradigm Cases

Recent generalist views provide two primary diagnoses of the epistemic defectiveness of Conspiracy Theories: first, Cassam's 'political propaganda' view and, second, 'epistemic insulation' views defended representatively by Cass Sunstein and Adrian Vermeule, among others.³ For Cassam, Conspiracy Theories are "*first and foremost forms of political propaganda*. They are political gambits whose real function is to promote a political agenda. They aren't 'just theories' like any other" (7). The epistemic flaws of Conspiracy Theories follow from their serving this political, propagandistic function. For example, the Conspiracy Theory that the Sandy Hook elementary school shooting was a false flag serves the political agenda of those opposed to gun regulation in the U.S. According to

theories and are therefore concerned to formulate analyses, summed up in claims (1)-(4), about who conspiracy theorists are, why they believe what they believe, and how resulting dangers should be combated. Because particularists believe the merits of any conspiracy must be evaluated on a case-by-case basis, they do not pursue these kinds of generalizations. It is these generalizations and analyses, currently developed by prominent generalists, that I want to object to here. But, as I indicate in section 4, I disagree with any account, generalist or particularist, that claims that we should build into the definition of 'conspiracy theory' that it cannot be "officially" issued.

³ These views are not necessarily in tension and are even complementary. Cassam, for example, endorses Sunstein & Vermeule's claim that Conspiracy Theories are epistemically insulated, though he does disagree with some of their views on best practices for combatting them. These accounts are also not exhaustive of generalism, but they are – at least in terms of citation and uptake – two of the most widely discussed views. They allow me to draw out the overarching argumentative strategy I want to deploy against generalism that can then be used against other incarnations of this approach.

this Theory, the shooting was staged by those who wanted to impose draconian gun regulations. The Conspiracy Theory about 9/11 being an inside job served the political agenda of those “on the left and on the right” who wanted ways “to shift the blame for 9/11 away from Al Qaeda and onto the Bush administration” and expose the machinations of the “deep state” (15). Along with these two cases, JFK assassination Conspiracy Theories are one of Cassam’s paradigm cases and are similarly analyzed. He then argues that Conspiracy Theories are unlikely to be true, precisely because they serve a political agenda above all else.

A second set of generalist views – ‘epistemic insulation’ views – argue more directly for the distinct epistemic defects of Conspiracy Theories and Theorists. Sunstein and Vermeule, for example, argue that Conspiracy Theories “turn out to be unusually hard to undermine or dislodge; they have a self-sealing quality, rendering them particularly immune to challenge” (2009, 204). That is, Conspiracy Theories are uniquely insensitive or resistant to counterevidence. As M. Giulia Napolitano puts it in a recent paper in line with this form of generalism, it is the “the evidential *insulation* typical of conspiracy theories [that] makes them epistemically problematic” (2021, 83). Not only do Conspiracy Theories and Theorists ignore or dismiss counterevidence, but Napolitano points out that they often react to “any counter-evidence...[as] a fabrication of the conspirators to steer the public away from the truth” (87).⁴ Any potential counterevidence is cannibalized into the Conspiracy Theory or by the Theorist: it is in fact *further evidence* for the Theory and Theorist because it was, for example, planted by the conspirators themselves (likely in an effort to discredit the Theory or Theorist).

What paradigm cases do ‘epistemic insulation’ generalist views like these center in their analysis? Sunstein and Vermeule explain that “[o]ur focus throughout is on” examples such as “the various 9/11 [as inside job] conspiracy theories” (2009, 206). Napolitano explains that, for her

⁴ Napolitano’s position is discussed in more detail in section 6.

account, “I am thinking of theories such as the fake moon landing, flat earth, or the Illuminati controlling the world” (83).⁵

Interestingly, however, both Cassam and Sunstein & Vermeule acknowledge that there are other kinds of Conspiracy Theories and Theorists. But they quickly sideline them in their analysis. For example, the very first case Cassam discusses is quite different from the Sandy Hook-as-false flag, 9/11-as-inside job, and JFK assassination examples that dominate his book: “President George W. Bush denounced outrageous conspiracy theories about 9/11 while his own administration was busy promoting the outrageous conspiracy theory that Iraq was behind 9/11, in cahoots with Al Qaeda” (1). Given that this example of the Bush administration promoting a Conspiracy Theory (of Iraq conspiring with Al Qaeda) is the one that opens the book’s very first chapter, we might expect Cassam to return to it. And yet the example only appears once more in the final chapter and only then as an aside to illuminating the above cases of Conspiracy Theories that Cassam focuses on throughout. Sunstein and Vermeule also acknowledge this case, but then immediately marginalize it, along with any other cases of this kind: “Throughout, we assume a well-motivated government...although real-world governments can themselves be purveyors of conspiracy theories, as when the Bush administration suggested that Saddam Hussein had conspired with Al Qaeda to support the 9/11 attacks” (219).

Prima facie, however, there is a crucial difference between the Bush administration’s Conspiracy Theory linking Al Qaeda and Iraq and the cases that dominate generalist discussions: the former was fabricated and promoted by members of a society’s dominant political, economic, and media institutions – an example of what I call ‘Dominant Institution Conspiracy Theories and Theorists’ (or DITs) – while the latter are characteristically created and promoted by those who are

⁵ Napolitano’s discussion is focused on the attitudes of conspiracy theorists, rather than the theories themselves (2021). To account for this possibility, my main distinction carves up cases as either Dominant vs. Non-Dominant Institution Conspiracy Theories or *Conspiracy Theorists*.

not part of these institutions, what I call ‘Non-Dominant Institution Conspiracy Theories and Theorists’ (or Non-DITS).⁶

By ‘institution’ here, I intend a very non-controversial understanding of this concept. Seamus Miller gives a general gloss of institutions as follows: “an organisation or system of organisations [that] consists (at least) of an embodied (occupied by human persons) structure of differentiated roles... These roles are defined in terms of tasks, and rules regulating the performance of those tasks... Further, these roles are often related to one another hierarchically, and hence involve different levels of status and degrees of authority” (2019). Institutions are in part individuated by their “formal and usually explicitly stated, or defined, tasks and rules” (2019). When I refer to ‘Institutions’ in this discussion, I will be focusing on institutions such as a society’s government (including, if applicable, its executive, legislative, and judicial bodies), military, intelligence services, universities, media outlets, economic structures (such as public economic bodies and private economic institutions such as corporations), and organizations or clubs with a formal structure.

When I refer to ‘Dominant Institutions’, I have in mind those that are broadly powerful or influential within the society in question. In the U.S., for example, I have in mind the various branches of government and their corresponding officeholders, media outlets such as *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, CNN, and Fox News, intelligence services such as the C.I.A. and N.S.A., and economic structures such as the Department of the Treasury and corporations such as Amazon or ExxonMobil. The power and influence these institutions hold over U.S. life are sometimes the

⁶ As far as I can tell, besides the very brief citing of the Iraq-Al Qaeda DIT, Cassam only discusses two other DITs: former South African President Thabo Mbeki’s rejection of antiretrovirals for HIV because he “believed that the American government was conspiring with drug companies to sell toxic drugs to Africans” (68). This example is also not returned to in the book, and its most salient feature for Cassam – the scale of the harm caused by this Conspiracy Theory – will turn out to be an important consideration for centering this kind of case in our analysis. The second example is of “Donald Trump and the Republican Party” promoting the Conspiracy Theory “that protestors against the appointment of Brett Kavanaugh to the US Supreme Court were part of a conspiracy orchestrated by George Soros” (115). In the context of the latter example, Cassam cites the work of Kathryn Olmstead, and concedes “that governments themselves are responsible for so many Conspiracy Theories” (115). But these DITs play almost no role in his subsequent analysis, as we will see.

result of authority they have been explicitly given (in the case of governmental institutions), sometimes the result of how they are perceived and taken up by those in other positions of institutional power, and sometimes the result of their success (by certain measures). For example, *The New York Times* does not have the official, public authority to report the news for the general population nor to shape public opinion, but it nonetheless has been informally attributed this authority as the “paper of record”. Amazon and ExxonMobil similarly have no official, public authority to play a dominant role in their respective markets, but they have come to do so, thereby exercising enormous power and influence over our economic and political lives. Institutional power is also often interrelated. Part of the power and influence possessed by an institution such as *The New York Times* comes from how it is viewed and taken seriously by those in positions of other institutional, especially governmental power. Similarly, Amazon’s and ExxonMobil’s power and influence also comes in part from how they are viewed and treated by officeholders within government and other institutions.⁷

With these clarifications in mind, let’s return to the distinction between DITs and Non-DITs. The Bush administration’s linking of Iraq and Al Qaeda and claims that Iraq was conspiring to hide and use “Weapons of Mass Destruction” (WMDs) both count as DITs because they were created and promoted by officials in the U.S. government from both major political parties and by U.S. intelligence agencies; they were further fabricated and promoted by outlets such as *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and many other prominent media outlets; they were advocated by

⁷ I am not claiming that those who are not part of such dominant institutions can never gain or exert power and influence. My point is that the power and influence that these institutions have are not contingent features; they are characteristic of these institutions either because of the explicit authority they have been given or because, given their institutional mission and history, they are perceived as nonetheless having informal (though still crucial) authority.

many in the foreign policy and political expert class (among them, commentators, think tanks, and academics).⁸

In addition to the Iraq DITs (discussed in more detail below), I will analyze domestic and global McCarthyism Conspiracy Theories and Theorists as a case study of a DIT. Following the recent work of journalist Vincent Bevins, I use ‘Global McCarthyism’ to refer to the Conspiracy Theory promoted by U.S. administrations during the Cold War that shadowy, demonic communist forces controlled and unleashed by the Soviets would take over any country that had not explicitly pledged loyalty to the U.S. (Bevins 2020). Bevins explains that for officials in the U.S. during this period, “it was considered gospel that anywhere communists were acting, they were doing so on the orders of the Soviet Union, part of a monolithic global conspiracy to destroy the West” (16). Here, for example, is President Kennedy, just over a week after the failed attempt to invade Cuba in the Bay of Pigs, in an address to the press urging it to undertake “the self-discipline of combat conditions”:

[W]e are opposed around the world by a monolithic and ruthless conspiracy that relies primarily on covert means for expanding its sphere of influence – on infiltration instead of invasion, on subversion instead of elections, on intimidation instead of free choice, on guerrillas by night instead of armies by day. It is a system which has conscripted vast human and material resources into the building of a tightly knit, highly efficient machine that combines military, diplomatic, intelligence, economic, scientific and political operations (Kennedy 1961).

As Bevins points out regarding these Conspiracy Theories: “Most of this was simply untrue. Much of the rest was greatly exaggerated” (16). Even after Stalin’s death, intelligence agencies conceded that, “‘We have no reliable inside intelligence on thinking inside the Kremlin’...‘Our estimates of Soviet long-range plans and intentions are speculations drawn from inadequate evidence’...[T]he agency’s speculations about the Soviets were reflections in a funhouse mirror. Stalin never had a master plan for world domination, nor the means to pursue it” (Weiner 2007, 84).

⁸ For a helpful overview, see Draper (2020). On the role of *The New York Times*, see Wiegant (2016), Risen (2018), and Draper (2020). On the role of *The Washington Post*, see Wiegant (2016).

Domestically, consider J. Edgar Hoover's 1947 testimony to HUAC that communists "infiltrate and corrupt various spheres of American life", and there is "no doubt as to where a real Communist's loyalty rests. Their allegiance is to Russia, not the United States" (1947/2002, 128-9; 132). Hoover concludes:

Victory will be assured once Communists are identified and exposed, because the public will take the first step of quarantining them so they can do no harm. Communism, in reality, is not a political party. It is a way of life – an evil and malignant way of life. It reveals a condition akin to disease that spreads like an epidemic and like an epidemic a quarantine is necessary to keep it from infecting the Nation (133).

Ellen Schrecker explains the impact of Hoover's testimony: "The FBI director's stature and alleged expertise ensured that the views he expressed in this statement received wide circulation. Politicians, journalists, academics, and opinion leaders of all political persuasions adopted his formulations and recycled them in countless speeches, position papers, judicial decisions, and magazine and newspaper articles" (2002, 126).⁹

By contrast, Conspiracy Theories such as 9/11-as-inside-job, JFK's assassination, chemtrails, Sandy Hook-as-false flag, the faked moon landing, flat earthers, and Princess Diana's death Theories – that is, the Conspiracy Theories that are treated as paradigmatic by generalist accounts – all count as *Non-DITs* because they are fabricated and promoted by individuals who are not typically members of these dominant institutions. This is either because they are primarily created and espoused by very diffuse individuals with no institutional relationship to one another (other than informal, typically online communities, many of which do not meet Miller's characterization of institutions above), or they do belong to a kind of institutional context – a more formal organization, for example – but not one that possesses anything approaching the economic, political,

⁹ Pigden (2007) makes an observation that may explain why DITs have not been centered in generalist accounts: "When people say or imply that conspiracy theories ought not to be believed, what they actually mean...is that we should not believe theories that postulate evil schemes on the part of recent or contemporary Western governments (or government agencies) and that run counter to the current orthodoxy in the relevant Western countries" (229). But regardless of whether these motivations are animating such views, I argue that generalists are wrong not to center DITs. Thank you to a reviewer for drawing my attention to Pigden's observation.

or social power, influence, and authority of the above examples of dominant institutions. No political, media, intelligence, or economic institutions that wield substantial power and influence create or promote the Conspiracy Theories centered by generalists. These examples therefore count as Non-DITs in my sense.¹⁰

Now generalists do not give any arguments for why they center the examples they do. This is already a problem: arbitrarily marginalizing important cases will warp our analysis. But in the following sections, I argue that there are in fact two major considerations in favor of *centering* DITs over Non-DITs in any analysis of Conspiracy Theorists: first, DITs are by far the clearest representatives of Conspiracy Theories (construed according to these generalist views) and, second, DITs are by far the most harmful, which is the primary reason, according to generalists, we should care about Conspiracy Theories and Theorists.

2. A First Argument for Centering DITs

Which examples are the clearest representatives of the generalist views that Conspiracy Theories are forms of political propaganda and that such Theories and Theorists are epistemically insulated? I will use the case studies previewed in the last section to argue that it is DITs that most clearly reflect generalist views. In section (2a), I show that DITs rather than Non-DITs are far clearer and better representatives of ‘political propaganda’ generalist views. In section (2b), I show that DITs rather than Non-DITs are far clearer and better representatives of ‘epistemic insulation’ generalist views.

¹⁰ One might argue that the Sandy Hook Conspiracy Theory is a DIT because it was promoted by InfoWars, a media outlet with a substantial following and on which then presidential candidate Donald Trump appeared. The network also had connections to figures in the Trump administration. I would nonetheless characterize the Sandy Hook Conspiracy Theory as Non-DIT because it was never espoused or advocated for by political officials in their capacity as political officials, nor by mainstream, prominent media outlets, nor by the U.S. military or intelligence agencies, nor by any dominant intellectual or economic institutions. In fact, the Theory was regularly criticized by such institutions and outlets. This is not to deny that other Conspiracy Theories promoted by InfoWars may have crossed over into counting as, or been part of, DITs.

2a. DITs and Political Propaganda Generalism

Consider first the Iraq DITs and the political ideology and agenda behind them. This Conspiracy Theory grew out of a neoconservative politics – endorsed widely (though not always by name) across U.S. political parties – that views the U.S. as having a moral mandate to intervene militarily in the affairs of other countries to ensure the protection and expansion of American interests and hegemony.¹¹ The role of this political ideology and agenda in facilitating the creation and promotion of these DITs is readily discernible from politicians’ explicit articulations of this ideology, formal articulations of the reasoning behind the relevant institutional decisions, and the work of a host of public intellectuals.

Here, for example, is Bush in his 2003 State of the Union Address: “America’s purpose is more than to follow a process [of the U.N.]; it is to achieve a result, the end of terrible threats to the civilized world...[T]he course of this Nation does not depend on the decisions of others” (Bush 2003). This “purpose” is tested in light of the fact that “[t]he dictator of Iraq is not disarming. To the contrary, he is deceiving...The only possible explanation, the only possible use he could have for those weapons, is to dominate, intimidate, or attack...Evidence from intelligence sources, secret communications, and statements by people now in custody reveal that Saddam Hussein aids and protects terrorists, including members of Al Qaida” (Bush 2003). We find a direct statement of the Bush administration’s underlying political ideology and agenda in the 2002 National Security Strategy: “The U.S. national security strategy will be based on a distinctly American internationalism that reflects the union of our values and our national interests” (NSS 2002, 1). Later in the document: “The United States must and will maintain the capability to defeat any attempt by an

¹¹ See Schmidt and Williams for a helpful overview of neoconservative ideology and its impact on the Bush administration’s foreign policy (2008).

enemy – whether a state or non-state actor – to impose its will on the United States, our allies, or our friends...Our forces will be strong enough to dissuade potential adversaries from pursuing a military build-up in hopes of surpassing, or equaling, the power of the United States” (30).

Among public intellectuals, we find the same link between this ideology and support for Iraq Conspiracy Theories. William Kristol and Robert Kagan, for example, argue that “[n]o step would contribute more toward shaping a world order in which our people and our liberal civilization can survive and flourish” than invading Iraq, which was justified because there is no “doubt that, after September 11, Saddam’s weapons of mass destruction pose a kind of danger to us that we hadn’t fully grasped before” (Kristol and Kagan 2002). David Brooks similarly explains that the invasion of Iraq “represents what the United States is on earth to achieve” (Brooks 2003). He expands on this general mission in an earlier piece: we should think of the “specific historic role [of] America as the latest successor to Jerusalem, Athens, and Rome. In the procession of civilization, certain nations rise up to make extraordinary contributions...At the dawn of the 20th century, America was to take its turn at global supremacy” – a supremacy that Brooks laments the U.S. is shrinking from (Brooks 1997). Brooks later argues that Iraq’s “[w]eapons of mass destruction...[and] risks posed by terrorists and terror organizations” linked to Iraq are crucial for justifying the invasion (Brooks 2002). Franklin Foer, reflecting on the run up to the Iraq War, explains that it was hardly self-identified conservatives who shared this ideology and agenda: “Critics would say, ‘oh, [the] United States shouldn’t be the policemen of the world.’ And we were kind of like, ‘yeah, the United States should be the policeman of the world’” (Malone 2021). Influential liberal academic and later politician Michael Ignatieff is especially clear on the connection between this consensus neoconservative politics and support for these Conspiracy Theories: “The case for empire is that it has become, in a place like Iraq, the last hope for democracy and stability alike”, but fortunately “America’s empire is not like empires of times past” (Ignatieff 2003). Specifically, the U.S. should

wield its empire against Iraq because it “represents the first in a series of struggles to contain the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, the first attempt to shut off the potential supply of lethal technologies to a global terrorist network” (Ignatieff 2003).

The political ideology and agenda behind the Conspiracy Theories of domestic and Global McCarthyism can again be discerned by consulting the many explicit articulations of this ideology and agenda in a wide variety of institutional settings: ensuring the U.S. remains the world’s dominant superpower politically and economically. Historian Odd Arne Westad explains that “[d]uring the Cold War what set the function of these ideas apart...was how American symbols and images – the free market, anti-Communism, fear of state power, faith in technology – had *teleological* functions: what is America today will be the world tomorrow”, a topic I return to in section 3 (2007, 9).¹²

By contrast, Non-DITs are not nearly as clear exemplars of this generalist position: they often lack a clear or coherent political agenda or ideology. We have already seen Cassam concede this first point with respect to one of his paradigm cases: 9/11-as-inside-job Theories. This Conspiracy Theory is pushed by those “on the left and on the right”. JFK assassination Conspiracy Theories similarly run the gamut politically: on the more conservative side, we have the Theory that Castro and allies were behind the assassination; Theories that tend leftist but are also adopted by self-styled libertarians claim that anti-Castro exiles incensed by Kennedy’s lack of support carried out the assassination, backed by the CIA and elements of the military.

¹² It is also worth noting that a form of Global McCarthyism played a substantial role in the rise of climate denialism, which is itself often a DIT, as Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway have helpfully shown: “Our protagonists – Fred Seitz, Fred Singer, Bill Nierenberg, and Robert Jastrow”, institutionally successful and influential scientists, “were fiercely anti-Communist, and viewed science as crucial in helping to contain its spread [...] When the Cold War ended, these men looked for a new great threat. They found it in environmentalism. Environmentalists, they implied, were ‘watermelons’: green on the outside, red on the inside” (2010, 248). Because of these scientists’ “earlier work in the Cold War weapons programs, these men were well-known and highly respected in Washington, D.C., and had access to power all the way to the White House” (Oreskes and Conway 2010, 7). Beyond political institutions, “[r]espected media outlets such as the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, *Newsweek*, and many others repeated [their] claims as if they were a ‘side’ in a scientific debate” (7). The explicit articulations of the views of this group of Conspiracy Theorists are, again, readily apparent from the institutional record. Climate change must be a fabrication of a conspiracy of activists and politicians with, as Fred Singer put it, “hidden agendas” because the policies this group argued were necessary to deal with the threat were intended “not just to ‘save the environment’ but to change our economic system” (249).

Furthermore, these descriptions (both mine in the above paragraph and Cassam's) risk assuming that individuals' political views are far more unified and coherent than they likely are. This is the case for at least two reasons: first, we have a great deal of empirical evidence to suggest that the general public's political beliefs are not nearly as ideological as these descriptions imply. The average citizen does not subscribe to anything like a unified political ideology (Converse 1964; Kinder & Kalmoe 2017). It may be argued in response that Conspiracy Theorists are not just any member of the general public. Given their Conspiratorial interests, they are far more likely to have a political ideology. Empirical evidence would be needed to support this claim (which, again, cuts against what we know about the politics of the general public), but there is nonetheless a further reason Non-DITs are likely to lack any sort of clear or unified political ideology – the very fact that they are made by individuals outside of dominant institutional contexts. First, consider that if Cassam is right that (what I would call) Non-DITs are “amateurish”, then we should expect them to be not only underdeveloped in terms of their epistemic practices, but also in terms of their articulation of any political ideology or agenda. We should expect in general to find a confused politics. Second, absent overarching institutional imperatives or pressures to articulate or synthesize a coherent political ideology or agenda, we should expect individuals to have all kinds of disparate, idiosyncratic reasons behind their support for Conspiracy Theories. And this does seem to be what we often find for Non-DITs.

Consider, for example, the following profile of chemtrail Conspiracy Theorists, a representative Non-DIT. The main Theorist profiled believes that in order “to mitigate global warming, mysterious airplanes spray chemicals into the atmosphere to form sun-blocking artificial cloud cover. This is done in secret, because these chemicals wreak havoc on environmental and human health, causing ‘Alzheimer’s, all sorts of brain problems, cancer’” (Dunne 2017). Who is responsible? “A vague, unknowable ‘they’” (Dunne 2017). What, then, is the political ideology of

this Conspiracy Theorist? It is very difficult to say. On the one hand, they are a farmer specifically concerned about environmental damage. On the other, they also express support for Trump's candidacy in 2016 because of a fabricated article claiming to show Trump's support for addressing chemtrails. They are, however, later disappointed when Trump, directly in line with his political ideology and agenda, proposes the Environmental Protection Agency's elimination. This Theorist therefore has a vague, general concern for the environment, but also sees no tension between this view and supporting a political party outspokenly opposed to environmental regulation.

Furthermore, within the broader online group of chemtrail Conspiracy Theorists this individual interacts with, that group's creator and moderator reports that, "People are so divided, even within this movement'... 'It's difficult to find enough common ground to make progress'" (Dunne 2017).

What we find, in other words, is a mishmash of political beliefs, ideologies, and agendas.

Now Cassam might argue that the fact that the political ideology or agenda behind a given Conspiracy Theory is unclear or even incoherent does not mean that the Theories do not therefore serve a political agenda. It could still be the case that the function of Conspiracy Theories is to serve a political agenda, even if that agenda is unclear or incoherent. But we are trying to determine what cases should serve as *paradigms* for Cassam's view that Conspiracy Theories essentially serve political agendas. We should therefore center examples where there is a clear political agenda behind the Theory – where there is something that can plausibly be served. Such cases best illustrate Cassam's overarching view. The characteristic ideological and political messiness and even incoherence of Non-DITs makes them far from ideal for illustrating Cassam's core claim.

By contrast, it is no coincidence that DITs have much clearer political and ideological commitments and agendas behind them. Actors within institutions that are dominant in a given society need to articulate and synthesize their agenda and ideology in order to rise to and maintain prominence within those institutions. If, for example, I am a politician, I will need to explain and

clarify my ideology and agenda to win voters and, in many contemporary political contexts, to attract various powerful interests (such as corporate interests) to support my candidacy. Similar considerations hold for a society's other dominant institutions. For example, if I want to rise in prominence at a financial institution (whether in the private or public sector), I will need to convince those already in positions of power at these institutions that my ideology and agenda aligns with their vision for this institution. The same holds for media institutions. For example, there is enormous (even if not explicit) pressure for journalists in the U.S. to conform to rigid ideological constraints and political agendas, as Herman and Chomsky find in their seminal study of U.S. media: "[T]he 'societal purposes' of the media is to inculcate and defend the economic, social, and political agenda of privileged groups that dominate the domestic society and the state" (Herman and Chomsky 1988/2008, 279). This is not because the U.S. media "function in the manner of the propaganda system of a totalitarian state. Rather, they permit – indeed, encourage – spirited debate, criticism, and dissent, as long as these remain faithfully within the system of presuppositions and principles that constitute an elite consensus, a system so powerful as to be internalized largely without awareness" (283).

Furthermore, as a result of belonging to such institutions, these actors will often be subject to various requirements that they explicitly articulate the political ideology and agenda behind their decisions. For example, such articulations will be required for the purposes of developing policy such as legislation, directing a company's economic future, attracting a reader or viewership, or formulating legal justifications for the institution's courses of action. There are, of course, often diverging public-facing and non-public, internal articulations of the ideology and political agenda of those who inhabit such institutions. But even those articulations that take place behind closed doors are attempts at synthesis and clarity that we do not find parallels to in many Non-DITs, where there is no pressure (or substantially less) to arrive at this kind of synthesis or clarity. DITs therefore seem

to be, by their very nature, far better fits for Cassam's view that Conspiracy Theories are "*essentially* political" (112).

2b. DITs and Epistemic Insulation Generalism

DITs are also more epistemically insulated than Non-DITs, making them better representatives of this style of generalism. Let's start by considering examples of the epistemic insulation of DITs, where the Conspiracy Theory is not given up by the Theorist despite decisive counterevidence and where this counterevidence is not only ignored, but cited as *more* evidence for the Theory itself. Paul Wolfowitz, Bush's Deputy Secretary of Defense and one of the driving figures behind the invasion of Iraq, was previously dean of John Hopkins University's Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS), widely viewed as one of the world's most prestigious international relations programs. Wolfowitz was an archetypal Conspiracy Theorist: "The SAIS dean would conduct strategy sessions in which, recalled one participant, 'I'd get into huge fights with Paul, who was convinced Saddam was the cause of all, and I mean all, of the problems in the [Middle East] region'" (Draper 2020, 11). Clear counterevidence to Wolfowitz's claims was both dismissed as counterevidence and then cited as more evidence *in favor* of the Conspiracy Theory (i.e. as further proof of Saddam Hussein's omnipotence). Wolfowitz was influenced by the work of Laurie Mylroie, who, at the time, was a professor at Harvard in Government and whose Theory was also altogether epistemically insulated: "Mylroie was convinced that Saddam had orchestrated the failed World Trade Center bombing plot of 1993. Her obsessive research on this matter took on a more farcical shape to some when she also maintained that Saddam was responsible for the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing" (10). Again, decisive counterevidence is dismissed and then, in turn, cannibalized into the Conspiracy Theory itself as proof of the conspiracy's reach. Questioning Mylroie's research, one official wondered internally when interacting with Wolfowitz, who took

Mylroie's research to be authoritative, "*Why is this book not in the science fiction section?* What [the official] said, politely, was: 'I'm not sure I buy the connection.'...Wolfowitz never consulted with [the official] after that" (15).

James Risen describes a parallel neutralizing of counterevidence at *The New York Times*: "What angered me most was that while they were burying my skeptical stories, the editors were not only giving banner headlines to stories asserting that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction, they were also demanding that I help match stories from other publications about Iraq's purported WMD programs" (Risen 2018). Counterevidence is dismissed or suppressed, and the demand is made to double down on the Conspiracy Theories. A journalist at *The Washington Post* pitched a piece entitled, "Doubts," reflecting the concerns of retired military officials about the headlong rush to war, an editor killed the story" (Draper 2020, 290). Influential commentator and member of Clinton's National Security Council, Kenneth Pollack wrote that the U.S. must not fall prey to the "inspections trap" because Hussein is "determined simply to deceive and outlast any new inspection regime while looking for ways to divide the UN Security Council" (Pollack 2002). No matter how far-reaching and rigorous, inspections are pointless because of the extent of the deception: "Iraq is likely to find counters to all of these provisions" (Pollack 2002). The Conspiracy holds no matter what, and if counterevidence emerges (i.e. inspectors demonstrate that there are no WMDs), then this is simply *more* evidence for the Conspiracy and Hussein's powers of deception.

Our second DIT case study was also epistemically insulated in just the way the generalist describes. Consider, for example, the role of this DIT in overthrowing the democratically elected President Jacobo Árbenz in Guatemala in 1954: Secretary of State "John Foster Dulles admitted he had no hard evidence that the Guatemalan government was being manipulated by the Kremlin but said he was determined to overthrow it anyway because of 'our deep conviction that such a tie must exist'" (Kinzer 2006, 294-5). Even the acknowledgement that one lacks "hard evidence" is no

obstacle to endorsing and acting on the Theory, and the very lack of evidence would itself be cited as proof of the extent of Soviet deception.

But these observations do not yet make the case that DITs are clearer or better representatives of the generalist's views. To show that, DITs would have to be *more* epistemically insulated than Non-DITs. I turn now to an argument that this is just what we find. What drives the epistemic insulation of Non-DITs? Napolitano tells us that it is likely the “the agent’s epistemic flaws, extra-epistemic motives, and biases” (2021, 95). Karen Douglas, Robbie Sutton, and Aleksandra Cichoka sum up the latter two possibilities: in addition to a flawed epistemology, belief in Conspiracy Theories typically follows from motives that are “existential (e.g., desire for control and security), and social (e.g., the desire to maintain a positive image of the self or group)” (2017, 538). There is something, then, about the *internal* characteristics of Conspiracy Theorists that explain why they refuse to give up their belief in their preferred Theory: either they are epistemically flawed in general, or they are driven by “extra-epistemic” motives – for example, desiring a simplistic, grand narrative to cope with the uncertain and uncontrollable nature of reality or a sense of community in an increasingly atomized culture. Such internal characteristics, on these views, help explain the Conspiracy Theorist’s inability to give up their Theory.

But DITs are epistemically insulated as a result of both internal *and* external pressures. Internal epistemic flaws and questions of identity formation can explain many DITs and the refusal to give them up: DITs are often the result of the agent’s epistemic vices and their psychological investment in narratives that have come to play an identity-constituting role for them. In this sense, they are similar to Non-DITs. But, for DITs, there are also enormous *external* costs – beyond internal, psychological pressures or epistemic flaws – to giving up the belief that do not hold for Non-DITs. Dissenting from a powerful institution that is fabricating and promoting a Conspiracy Theory can come with significant career, legal, and other livelihood costs.

Consider, for example, the dominant institutional pressures in the run-up to the Iraq War as described by former CEO of CNN, Walter Isaacson: “There was a patriotic fervor and the Administration used it so that if you challenged anything you were made to feel that there was something wrong with that” (Moyers 2007). As one former CNN reporter put it: “Everybody on staff just sort of knew not to push too hard to do stories critical of the Bush Administration” (Moyers 2007). These external pressures were not just applied by dominant political institutions, but influential corporate interests and advertisers. Isaacson: “[B]ig people in corporations were calling up and saying, ‘You’re being anti-American here’” (Moyers 2007). Here is Dan Rather on this same period: “Fear is in every newsroom in the country. And fear of what? Well...the fear it’s a combination of: if you don’t go along to get along, you’re going to get the reputation of being a troublemaker. There’s also the fear that...particularly in networks, they’ve become huge, international conglomerates. They have big needs, legislative needs, repertory needs in Washington. Nobody has to send you a memo to tell you that that’s the case” (Moyers 2007).¹³ Conversely, there was a pervasive sense among journalists that “[c]areers could be made by wars” if one hewed to the prevailing DITs (Draper 2020, 286). Draper explains that the same dynamic was at play in government and intelligence services: there was an unequivocal effort to “drown the voices of dissent – at the Pentagon, at the CIA, at the NSC”, and there were clear rewards for telling higher echelons what they wanted to hear (297). The brutal clamping down on dissidents and whistleblowers is also an extremely effective disciplining measure for ensuring that DITs are adhered

¹³ These are all examples of what Chomsky and Herman call ‘flak’, which “refers to negative responses to a media statement or program” (1988/2008, 24). They point out that “[t]he ability to produce flak, and especially flak that is costly and threatening, is related to power” (25). There are direct forms of flak, such as “phone calls from the White House to Dan Rather or William Paley...or from irate officials of ad agencies or corporate sponsors to media officials asking for reply time or threatening retaliation. The powerful can also work on the media indirectly by complaining to their own constituencies (stockholders, employees) about the media [and] by generating institutional advertising that does the same”, among many other measures (25).

to, one that our dominant political institutions readily employ (Ackerman and Pilkington 2015; Ackerman 2021).

The external measures to ensure the adoption of our second DIT are well-known. Consider in this light Arthur Miller's famous parable for McCarthyism, *The Crucible*: criticizing the Conspiracy Theory would inevitably result in the accusation from dominant institutions and institutional figures that those speaking out were part of the Conspiracy (i.e. were also subversive communist threats), and one's life and livelihood would be at risk in turn. Endorsing and advocating for the Theory were far safer bets: "guilt by association" was pervasive and even the appearance of a connection with "demonized groups and individuals could easily rub off – or so it was feared. For traditional American liberals...opposing the anticommunist crusade simply brought too many risks" (Schrecker 2004, 1071). Threats and actual instances of incarceration, employment blacklisting, and requisite loyalty oaths were all extremely effective disciplinary measures for ensuring the adoption and spread of this DIT.

One's material interests are therefore almost always on the side of endorsing and continuing to support the Conspiracy Theory in the context of DITs, and one's material interests are almost always at risk in dissenting from DITs. This is an entire register of pressures that has no obvious parallel in the case of Non-DITs. If anything, the calculation is reversed for Non-DITs: it is often in one's material interests to reject Non-DITs, and it is typically opposed to one's material interests to endorse Non-DITs. DITs are therefore *more* epistemically insulated than Non-DITs because there is a further layer of pressures preventing the acknowledgement of counterevidence and abandonment of the Theory, well beyond the particulars of the Theorist's psychology.

DITs are therefore the clearest representatives of how generalists understand Conspiracy Theories: they are most clearly driven by specific political ideologies and agendas and maximally epistemically insulated.¹⁴

3. A Second Argument for Centering DITs

In addition to DITs being the clearest representatives of generalist views, the second reason to center DITs over Non-DITs is that the harms of the former are far worse. For generalists, a primary motivation for analyzing Conspiracy Theories is the harm they cause: “If this book has a single take-home message, it is this: Conspiracy Theories are harmful” (Cassam 2019, 125). Sunstein and Vermeule: “[W]e also limit our focus to potentially harmful theories” (2009, 206). What harms result from Non-DITs? Cassam elaborates: “Imagine being the parent of a child who has just been shot dead at her elementary school and having to listen to people who claim that the shooting was a false flag operation in which no one died. How can anybody think that such theories only harm the people who put them forward?” (65). And because Conspiracy Theories are characteristically “amateurish” on Cassam’s view, they contribute to the more general phenomenon of the “death of expertise” (76). Serious political consequences follow: “Conspiracies Theories helped to create the intellectual and political climate that resulted in Brexit in the United Kingdom and in the election of Donald Trump, himself something of a Conspiracy Theorist, as US president” (77). If, then, there

¹⁴ One might object here that these external pressures demonstrate that DITs are not genuine Conspiracy Theories or Conspiracy Theorists because the Theories themselves are not genuinely believed and because they are often cynically (rather than sincerely) deployed, as opposed to Non-DITs. Such an objection, however, is of no help to Cassam, who rejects sincere belief as a necessary condition on someone being a Conspiracy Theorist: “Whatever [the Conspiracy Theorist’s] intentions, the actual function of his theory is to promote a political agenda” (2019, 11). More importantly, though, the notion that those in dominant institutions who fabricate and promote Conspiracy Theories are primarily doing so cynically is misguided. There are DITs who seem to be sincere believers, such as Wolfowitz and many of the commentators cited in this discussion who later explained their positions as products of sincere belief in the truth of the DITs. The external pressures I discuss here are also part of a larger, subtle process of shaping the beliefs of those who are members of such dominant institutions, as Chomsky and Herman document in the case of U.S. media in their (1988/2008). It is not, then, simply a matter of actors publicly going along with the DIT while privately disbelieving the Theory in the cases I discuss. The line is far more blurred, and intentions are extremely difficult to assess in these contexts.

are specific Conspiracy Theories that are particularly harmful, we should aim to center these Theories in our analysis given that a central goal of this analysis is addressing such harms.

Let's divide the harms cited here into two categories: direct harms to individuals (such as the harassment of families of the Sandy Hook shootings) and the more abstract harms to the "intellectual and political climate". Is there a meaningful difference between the harms caused by DITs vs. Non-DITs and so reason to center one set of cases over the other in our analysis? Consider first direct harms caused by the two types of Theories. The Sandy Hook Conspiracy Theory is a clear example of a Non-DIT, giving us a good sense of the direct harms such Theories can cause. There is no question that being exposed to preposterous speculation about the circumstances of a personal tragedy will cause a great deal of suffering for victims. Furthermore, producers and consumers of Non-DITs may harass individuals they take to be players in the Theory, which is what happened to many victim's families in the Sandy Hook case. Such harassment is a serious harm.

How do such direct harms compare to those caused by DITs? While we should in no way trivialize the harms experienced by targets of Non-DITs, they are simply not comparable, by any measure, to the harms of DITs. The Conspiracy Theories linking Iraq to Al Qaeda and claiming Iraq was hiding and planning to use WMD were central in the Bush administration's case for the 2003 invasion of Iraq and in shifting public opinion to support it. The war killed at least half a million Iraqis (and likely many more), created millions of refugees, plunged the country into a murderous civil war, and gave rise to the brutal regime of ISIS (Hagopian et al, 2013).

The role that McCarthyism played domestically in the U.S., destroying the lives of thousands who were suspected of communist ties (especially among U.S. government employees, members of labor unions, entertainers, and academics) are well-known. Not as well-known is how this

Conspiracy Theory about the “Red Menace” played a crucial role in the atrocities committed and abetted by the U.S. globally. I will limit myself to a few representative cases here:

→ The Global McCarthyism Conspiracy Theory played a key role in persuading President Eisenhower to overthrow democratically elected Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh, who had nationalized Iran’s oil industry, reclaiming it from the British:

[T]he two brothers who would direct American foreign policy after Eisenhower’s inauguration [were] John Foster Dulles, the incoming secretary of state, and Allen Dulles, the incoming CIA director, [who] were among the fiercest of Cold Warriors. They viewed the world as an ideological battleground and saw every local conflict through the prism of the great East-West confrontation. In their eyes, any country not decisively allied with the United States was a potential enemy. They considered Iran especially dangerous” (Kinzer 2003, 4-5).

Mosaddegh himself was not a communist and was not affiliated with Iran’s communist Tudeh party. Agents within the CIA “admitted that the Tudeh was really not very powerful, and that higher-level U.S. officials routinely exaggerated its strength and Mosaddegh’s reliance on it” (206). But an appeal to the Global McCarthyist Conspiracy Theory – that Mossadegh himself was a communist in disguise or would eventually capitulate to Moscow – was key in persuading Eisenhower to commit to Mosaddegh’s overthrow. The coup not only resulted in the deaths of hundreds and represented an attack on democratic institutions, but also led directly to the brutal dictatorship of the Shah, which in turn oversaw the torture and murder of thousands of Iranians.

→ The overthrow of Árbenz in Guatemala was undertaken in no small part at the behest of The United Fruit Company: Árbenz’s land reform efforts threatened the company’s interests. We have a clear example here of the role economic institutions can play in fabricating and promoting such Theories and the harms that result: “United Fruit was extremely well connected in the Eisenhower administration, and started a public relations

campaign denouncing Árbenz as a communist in the US, and brought US journalists on press junkets, which were successful in getting deeply critical stories published in outlets like *Time*, *U.S. News & World Report*, and *Newsweek*” (Bevins 2020, 42).

→ In Indonesia, the U.S. orchestrated the overthrow of democratically elected President Sukarno, who “was committed to maintaining a friendship with both the United States and Moscow, and he certainly was not trying to aggravate the leadership in Washington” (Bevins 2020, 52). But “to Eisenhower, Wisner, and the Dulles brothers”, the problem was that “neutralism itself was an offense. Anyone who wasn’t actively against the Soviet Union must be against the United States” (59). The overthrow of Sukarno led to the slaughter of at least “a million Indonesians...[who] were killed as part of Washington’s global anticommunist crusade. The US government expended significant resources over years engineering the conditions for a violent clash, and then, when the violence broke out, assisted and guided its longtime partners to carry out the mass murder of civilians as a means of achieving US geopolitical goals” (157).

It would not be difficult to list many more examples here: “[I]n the years 1945–1990, a loose network of US-backed anticommunist extermination programs emerged around the world, and they carried out mass murder in at least twenty-two countries” (238). These programs often went hand in hand with the overthrow of democratically elected governments, installation of brutal, dictatorial regimes, and the long-term economic and political devastation of these countries.¹⁵

The scale of the harms caused by DITs is no coincidence. The resources of a society’s dominant institutions will typically vastly outstrip those outside of such institutions. If these

¹⁵ If we accept Oreskes and Conway’s history of the connection between a kind of Global McCarthyism and the rise of climate denialism (mentioned in footnote 12 above), then the harms of this DIT are impossible to overstate: it threatens the very future of humanity.

institutions are promoting a Conspiracy Theory, the scale and nature of the harm will reflect the power and resources of these institutions.

The second set of harms Cassam takes Conspiracy Theories to have is their contribution to the phenomenon of the “death of expertise” within certain Western societies, where citizens are said to be increasingly distrustful of experts, leading, for example, to phenomena such as increasingly widespread climate denialism or anti-vaxxer views. Now it is difficult to evaluate Cassam’s claim here because he does not give a clear empirical argument in support of his view that Non-DITs have played an important causal role in this phenomenon. He simply cites the fact that such Theories tend to reject the authority of official experts. But this claim does not itself show that Non-DITs have played any significant causal role in the more general “death of expertise”. Nothing Cassam says rules out the possibility that these Theories’ rejections of official experts have played only a trivial or even no role in this broader phenomenon. Interestingly, Cassam himself points out that it is unclear whether Conspiracy Theories are more prevalent today than they have been in the past, at least in the U.S. (Cassam 2019, 32). But then it seems we have good reason to resist the view that a supposedly more recent phenomenon – the “death of expertise” – is somehow importantly causally related to Conspiracy Theories.

It is also worth noting that the phenomenon of the “death of expertise” is not as straightforward as Cassam suggests. Onora O’Neill, for example, has argued that we should avoid sweeping claims about a novel wave of distrust given that individuals’ actual actions evince a great deal of trust in experts, despite what such individuals may avow (O’Neill 2002). But let’s grant that there is such a phenomenon. Which Conspiracy Theories – DITs or Non-DITs – are more likely to have played an important causal role in this trend? This is largely an empirical question that we cannot settle from the armchair. But one reason to think DITs are more pernicious in this regard is that when those cited as experts by a society’s dominant institutions produce and promote

Conspiracy Theories, they give non-experts a *legitimate* reason to be skeptical of those deemed experts by these institutions – not a decisive, all-things-considered reason, but a clear *pro tanto* reason in support of skepticism. This reason gains further weight when we consider that DITs are rarely held accountable for their propagation of these Theories and the harms they cause. (Simply consider the above list of politicians and public intellectuals who promoted Iraq Conspiracy Theories and their current institutional positions.) If Cassam is right about the nature of Non-DITs, then the doubt they cast on experts will *not* give non-experts a legitimate reason to be skeptical of experts. Of course, these Non-DITs may still have this causal result (an effect Cassam needs to show to support his view). But DITs legitimately call into question the authority of those experts cited by these institutions. A legitimate challenge would seem to be far more damaging to the authority of experts than an illegitimate or purely causal one.¹⁶

Whether, then, we consider generalists' views of Conspiracy Theories as characteristically forms of political propaganda or as epistemically insulated or we consider generalists' motivations for analyzing Conspiracy Theories in the first place (i.e. the harms they cause), both of these considerations speak convincingly in favor of centering DITs over Non-DITs as paradigmatic in our analysis. But an analysis that correctly centers DITs will look radically different from the one advanced by generalists, the topic I turn to in the fifth section.¹⁷

¹⁶ A reviewer points out that particularists emphasize an array of harms that may follow from Cassam-esque generalist views that are different from those I emphasize here. See, for example, Pigden (2007), Basham (2018), Coady (2018), and Dentith (2018c).

¹⁷ After establishing their fundamentally political nature, Cassam discusses other aspects of Conspiracy Theories (ones I do not discuss in detail here because they are not as relevant): Conspiracy Theories are “speculative, contrarian, esoteric, amateurish and premodern” (28). It is worth pointing out that DITs are also speculative, contrarian (in that they insist that surface-level appearances are deceptive – e.g. that those espousing left-wing ideas might seem harmless, but may well be communists aiming to infiltrate an organization), esoteric (allowing for explanations no matter how bizarre as long as they hew to the relevant political line), and premodern in their facile explanatory outlook. I will, however, take issue with the feature Cassam focuses on most here in the paper's next section: the purportedly “amateurish” nature of Conspiracy Theories.

4. *Objections*

Here I address three objections to the previous sections. A first objection might press me on why we should take my arguments to show that we ought to center DITs *over* Non-DITs. Why not construe the upshot of the above argument to be that generalists should simply make more of an effort to include DITs in their analysis, to discuss them at least as much as Non-DITs?

Note, however, that this objection misconstrues my position – which is not just that DITs should be more frequently included in generalist analyses. My argument has been that they are *paradigmatic* of generalist views. If this is right, then any analysis carried out or generalizations made regarding who Conspiracy Theorists are, why they believe what they believe, and how they should be combatted, would have to be primarily a reflection of these cases. DITs are the best examples of how generalists understand Conspiracy Theories: they are most clearly forms of political propaganda, they are maximally epistemically insulated, and they are the most harmful; generalist analysis should reflect this. Non-DITs are worse examples of the purported phenomenon and should therefore play a far more marginal role in any subsequent analysis.¹⁸

Any generalist account that wants to center both DITs and Non-DITs in their analysis will have to give an argument for why Non-DITs are equally good representatives of political propaganda and/or epistemic insulation generalism. We have seen that existing generalist accounts have failed to provide these arguments.¹⁹

¹⁸ A reviewer asks whether paradigm cases are relevant to conceptual engineering projects such as Napolitano (2021) and Napolitano and Reuter (2021). I discuss these views in more detail in section V, but note that paradigm cases do play a key role in both these specific conceptual engineering projects and in such projects in general. Sally Haslanger, for example, has critiqued her own earlier conceptual engineering project regarding the concept of gender for failing to vindicate the identities of various trans individuals – for, in other words, failing to capture what Haslanger takes to be a paradigm case (2020). Napolitano and Reuter (2021) use specific cases of conspiracy theories to draw out ordinary speakers’ usage of this term and have as a goal for their conceptual engineering project capturing this ordinary usage. Their engineering project therefore also aims to capture and remain accountable to specific cases.

¹⁹ A reviewer wonders whether an argument could be given for treating Non-DITs as paradigmatic because there seem to be many more of them. While interesting, this claim turns on the difficult question of how Conspiracy Theories

To say that DITs should be treated as paradigmatic because they are the best illustration of the generalist position, then, is not just to say that they should be discussed more; it is to say that we have excellent reason to treat them as fundamental to our analysis and not to treat Non-DITs as similarly fundamental. Our subsequent generalizations and analysis should reflect this.

Furthermore, as we will see in more detail in the next section, the fundamental differences between these types of Theories means that our analysis will look utterly different if we center one type of Theory over the other. Centering both simultaneously would therefore leave our analysis incoherent. For example, we will have to argue, as generalists do in reference to Non-DITs, that the “ideologies that are most conducive to Conspiracy Theories are extremist ideologies” while also arguing that mainstream, non-extremist ideologies are equally conducive to Conspiracy Theories given that DITs are promoted by those who subscribe to mainstream, supposedly non-extremist ideologies. Or, to take another example, we will have to argue that Conspiracy Theories are both “amateurish” and, at the same time, produced and promoted by many who are deemed experts. Centering both types of cases, then, often cannot work – at least if generalists want to pursue the kind of analysis that they have traditionally. We should center our analysis around the cases that best exemplify the phenomenon, and, as I have argued in this and the previous section, DITs have a far better claim to this paradigmatic role.

A second objection might argue that the line I have drawn between DITs and Non-DITs is too pronounced, that it is often unclear whether a Theory is a DIT or Non-DIT. Consider, for example, the QAnon Conspiracy Theory. It originated, seemingly, as a Non-DIT, on a small corner

should be quantified and individuated. Is, for example, Global McCarthyism a single Conspiracy Theory, or is its application to each country or government a different Theory? Furthermore, DITs often multiply given their political aims. For example, to facilitate Mossadegh’s overthrow, press “[a]rticles accused him not just of communist leanings and designs on the throne, but also of Jewish parentage and even secret sympathy for the British. Although Mossadegh did not know it, most of these tirades were either inspired by the CIA or written by CIA propagandists in Washington” (Kinzer 2003, 6). Bevins discusses similar tactics at play in Brazil (2020, 103). It is not clear to me, then, that there is a substantial difference between the quantity of DITs and Non-DITs or precisely what the relevant measure would look like here, though I would welcome further argument on this question.

of the internet, and then exploded in popularity, eventually receiving uptake from political figures and playing a not insignificant role in real-world violence and political turmoil. Perhaps, then, we should not insist on a strict division of Theories into DIT versus Non-DIT, as I have suggested. But the fact that Non-DITs can *become* DIT does not mean that the distinction itself is meaningless.²⁰ If anything, the distinction allows us to track the evolution of such Theories more accurately: the way in which a Theory can move from the margins to the center of our political, media, or economic lives and thereby (on my account) have its most destructive effects.

A third objection might argue that we can simply build into the definition of Conspiracy Theories that they reject “official” explanations and that therefore DITs simply do not count as Conspiracy Theories or Theorists. Keith Harris has recently argued for this approach, citing kindred observations from other philosophers (Keeley 1999; Feldman 2011).²¹ We can stipulate that the concept refers to “only those theories that run counter to the official account of some target event” (Harris 2018, 237). There are three problems here. First, generalists *themselves* categorize the cases such as the fabrication of an Iraq-Al Qaeda link as a Conspiracy Theory. Perhaps generalists should reject such categorizations, but it would need to be clarified exactly why they were undertaking this revision of their previous claims.²² Second, the move also seems arbitrary: if the defining characteristics of the phenomenon are equally present in “official” contexts, it is unclear why would limit our focus to only one subset of cases. Harris claims that the move would conform to “common usage”, but, absent argument, it is unclear why this consideration should be a decisive

²⁰ Dentith (2018, 101) makes kindred observations about the movements of Theories from dominant to non-dominant institutional contexts.

²¹ A reviewer points out that it is not clear that Keeley’s (1999) supports Harris’s claims here. For other relevant discussion on the relationship between ‘conspiracy theories’ and official status, see Coady (2003), Levy (2007), Rääkkä (2018), and Dentith (2018b).

²² Harris denies that his account advocates for a form of traditional generalism. He wants to show that we have “*prima facie* grounds for scepticism about the epistemic merits of conspiracy theorising even if certain instances of conspiracy theorising are epistemically unimpeachable” (2018, 240). Regardless of whether Harris’s position is itself distinguishable from generalism, my point here is that it cannot be invoked by generalists to defend their marginalizing of DITs absent additional argument and explanation since they themselves categorize certain DITs as Conspiracy Theories.

constraint on a stipulative definition (237).²³ Elsewhere, he acknowledges that his definition will itself depart from ordinary usage in only picking out a “subclass” of cases, so the weight of continuity with reigning usage is unclear (238). Third, and most importantly, such a view rules out critical cases. On this approach, for example, Hitler and members of the Nazi regime would not be appropriately categorized as Conspiracy Theorists about Jews because they issued “official” explanations concerning Jews forming “an immensely powerful, intangible, international conspiracy” aiming to undermine the German nation and Aryan race (Postone 1980, 106).²⁴ Similarly, Stalin and his regime’s fabrications of plots against them, such as the infamous ‘Doctors’ Plot’, would not count as Conspiracy Theories since they were “official” explanations. It is not clear to me why we would want a view that delivers these verdicts.

5. Implications of Centering DITs

If I have successfully made the case that DITs should be centered as paradigm cases in our analysis of Conspiracy Theories, what follows exactly? Recall claims (1)-(4):

- 1.) Conspiracy Theories are amateurish: they are produced by those with “the qualifications of...amateur sleuths and Internet detectives”, who reject “officially sanctioned experts or sources of information”.

(1) is false. We have seen throughout that DITs are not “amateurish” or fabricated and promoted by those with little or no “qualifications”. On the contrary, with DITs centered, Conspiracy Theories turn out to be regularly fabricated and promoted by those who were educated at, are affiliated with,

²³ In my (2020) and (2021), I discuss the conditions for felicitous objections to stipulations, particularly in the context of conceptual articulation. Detailed argument concerning the relevant ends of inquirers and the weight of such ends is necessary, on my view, for endorsing an attempted stipulative articulation or rearticulation of a concept.

²⁴ The history of antisemitism – as well as the history of various forms of racism and bigotry – provide an enormous number of examples of Dominant Institution Conspiracy Theories and Theorists. For discussion of the considerations involved in arriving at an adequate concept of antisemitism, see Klug (2013) and (2018) and Abicht et al (2020). Though I do not have space to examine this aspect of his account in-depth here, Cassam’s discussion of antisemitism in his (2019) fails to engage with the contemporary literature on this subject.

and work for a society's most prestigious educational and intellectual institutions. Many "officially sanctioned experts" turn out to be exemplars of Conspiracy Theorists.

2.) Conspiracy Theories are a product of politically extremist ideologies.

Mainstream, non-"extremist" political ideology – where this means areas of consensus among the most influential elements of ostensibly left-wing and right-wing political parties and institutions – turn out to be at least equally conducive to Conspiracy Theories, if not more so. To take the example of the U.S., there is a great deal of consensus among the dominant political parties over foreign policy. To protect and further perceived American interests, Conspiracy Theories are often developed, such as in the case of Global McCarthyism (advocated for by most of both major American parties) and the Iraq-Al Qaeda and Iraq-WMD Conspiracy Theories (also advocated for by most of both major American parties). Both sets of Conspiracy Theories were also fabricated and promoted by the most powerful and influential media outlets and, especially in the case of Global McCarthyism, supported by dominant economic institutions.

3.) Conspiracy theorists are socioeconomically downwardly mobile and lacking in formal education.

With DITs correctly centered, Conspiracy Theorists turn out to be socioeconomically among a society's *most* well-off in socioeconomic terms; they are also among its best educated.

To make the case for (3), generalists cite the psychological and social scientific literature on conspiracy theories – as Cassam does, for example, in chapter 2 of his (2019). But in an overview of this literature, Karen Douglas and colleagues explain that "[t]o measure belief in conspiracy theories, scholars and polling houses often ask respondents— through surveys—if they believe in particular conspiracy theories such as 9/11, the assassination of JFK, or the death of Princess Diana," making clear just how widespread a focus on Non-DITs is in this literature (Douglas et al 2019, 5). A problem for both how generalists invoke this literature and the literature itself, then, is that it typically fails to test agreement with DITs among individuals who are part of a society's dominant

institutions. If we were to do so, the resulting picture of who Conspiracy Theorists are, what they believe, and why they believe it would, in turn, look dramatically different.

Suppose, for example, we were to ask in 1953, the level of belief among American politicians, media outlets, and intelligence agencies in the following statement (especially as opposed to the general public, who would likely have no opinion): ‘Mossaddegh is working with the Soviets against U.S. interests’. Or sampling the same institutional group the following year, suppose we asked for the level of belief in the statement: ‘Árbenz is working with the Soviets against U.S. interests’. Or in 2002, we again sample this same group and their level of belief in the following statements: ‘Iraq has and is attempting to conceal WMD’; ‘Iraq is working with and supporting Al Qaeda’. We do not need to speculate about these counterfactuals because we know that many of those who occupied the relevant positions in dominant institutional contexts unabashedly endorsed these Theories.

But in focusing on Non-DITs, the current psychological literature that generalists rely on arrives at the conclusions such as the following – that, as Cassam summarizes these conclusions, “conspiracy interpretation of the world flourish in the context of marginalisation, poverty, and other negative life circumstances” and that people “who are conspiracy-minded are more likely to see themselves as being at the bottom of the social ladder” (2019, 56). But with DITs taken as paradigmatic of Conspiracy Theories and surveys and testing adjusted accordingly, we will almost certainly find that Conspiracy Theorists are in fact among the most educated, most wealthy, and most socially elite members of society. Once Conspiracy Theories are understood aright, then, both generalists’ claims about the psychological and socioeconomic profile of Conspiracy Theorists and

the methodology behind the psychological and social scientific research they rely on will also have to be revisited.²⁵

- 4.) To prevent the harms Conspiracy Theories cause, we should double down on how they “are generally dislodged by the media and other non-governmental actors”; we should pursue government infiltration of groups that espouse these Theories; and we should ensure education is more widely available and effective.

We have seen throughout, however, that the media institutions Sunstein and Vermeule cite as antidotes to Conspiracy Theories are in fact primary producers of them. Their second strategy is also no longer intelligible: the state is itself a major source of Conspiracy Theories, so it is unclear why, or even how, an institution that is a chief culprit here would nonetheless be capable of policing this phenomenon.

Cassam advocates for a “multitrack strategy for dealing with Conspiracy Theories”: first, rebutting them whenever possible using evidence and argument; second, improving education to both “equip people at an early age with the [necessary] critical thinking skills and intellectual virtues” as well as providing “moral education” to combat “the evils of the racist and extremist ideologies that it is the function of Conspiracy Theories to promote”; and, third, exposing Conspiracy Theories *as* Conspiracy Theories, i.e., pointing out their function as political propaganda (124). Once we center DITs, however, these strategies prove to be inadequate. Evidence and argument, critical thinking skills, intellectual virtues, moral virtues, and the exposure of DITs as Conspiracy Theories were all, for example, on full display by many of the critics of Iraq War. They were, however, marginalized, retaliated against, or ignored by dominant American institutions. The measures taken against critics of domestic and Global McCarthyism were often even more extreme.

²⁵ Uscinski & Parent do pay more attention in their empirical work than other researchers to such possibilities (2014). But they also work with a broadly particularist view of conspiracy theories: “[W]e do not mean a pejorative connotation with our use of ‘conspiracy theory’ or its variants”, so they are not individuating and measuring DITs in quite my sense (2014, 31).

When we consider DITs, what is required to combat the production and promotion of such Theories is a restructuring of these institutions – political, economic, media-related, educational, and intellectual – so that they cannot be used to serve propagandistic ends. Such a process would involve changing the way they are funded (away, for example, from forms of privatization that make them accountable to the interests of an exclusive few), maximizing their accountability to the general public they govern, and creating far more genuine avenues for dissent. More generally, any attempt to combat DITs will have to be part of a larger effort to combat the political ideologies and agendas behind these Theories. In the cases we have examined, for example, U.S. imperialism and capitalism would be central targets since these are the ideologies and agendas driving the Theories in question.

I want to round out this section by addressing a final objection concerning the possibilities for future generalist views. It might be objected that even if I am right that generalists have, in the past, committed themselves to (1)-(4), there is no reason they *must* do so. They could revise their views to accommodate DITs as paradigmatic. In fact, the objection might continue, a recent generalist account that does not explicitly commit itself to (1)-(4) is M. Giulia Napolitano's (2021) and Napolitano and Kevin Reuter's (2021). Generalism can, then, absorb the criticisms I have advanced here.²⁶

To begin, it is worth reiterating just how wide-ranging the revisions to many generalist views will be if my criticisms are taken onboard. As we have seen, extant generalist accounts of who Conspiracy Theorists are, why they believe what they believe, and how we should combat the harms of Conspiracy Theories would all have to change. Perhaps such changes can be made. But they would result in generalist analyses entirely different from those that have been on offer.

On Napolitano specifically, while it is true that her (2021) does not explicitly endorse (1)-(4), this is because her project, as it has so far been developed, remains exclusively at a definitional

²⁶ Thank you to a reviewer for pressing me to clarify my position on these points.

register. That is, it argues only in favor of a conceptually engineered view of ‘conspiracy theorist’ as someone “who holds one or more self-insulated conspiracy-beliefs” (2021, 87). Napolitano and Reuter also remain at this definitional register and pursue an even more general characterization, arguing only for a “negatively evaluative” concept of conspiracy (2021, 1). Neither project has applied its understanding of the concept to questions that have been of particular concern to generalists: figuring out various other characteristics typically possessed by conspiracy theorists, determining why they believe what they believe, and explaining how the harms of such theories should be combatted.

It is not an accident that generalists return to these questions. In applying their understanding of the concept of conspiracy theory to real-world actors and cases, they demonstrate what they take to be the payoffs of their view: various theoretical insights and practical guidance for countering a purportedly urgent threat. The value of a generalism that remained at a purely definitional register and did not eventually commit itself to any subsequent analysis or application would be unclear. Citing this omission is not a criticism of either Napolitano (2021) or Napolitano & Reuter (2021). These papers presumably represent the conceptual groundwork for this type of analysis. And if in developing their accounts and addressing these questions, Napolitano and Napolitano & Reuter center DITs, then my arguments in this discussion would not pose a problem for this elaboration of their views. Again, it depends on how generalists will choose either to revise *or* develop their accounts in light of the arguments I have given for centering DITs. But, either way, the resulting analysis given by generalists will look entirely different from how such views have been articulated in the past.

It also seems that, in terms of these accounts specifically, we have some reason for concern. As we saw earlier, after explaining that she will be opting for a “revisionary” conceptual engineering project, Napolitano tells us that in developing this account, “I am thinking of theories such as the

fake moon landing, flat earth, or the Illuminati controlling the world” – all Non-DITs (83). When drawing out her specific Bayesian characterization of epistemic self-insulation, Napolitano uses the following case: “The Twin Towers fell as the result of a controlled demolition, intended by government officials” – a Non-DIT that we have seen many other generalists center (90). And after approvingly citing both Cassam and Sunstein and Vermeule, Napolitano then explains that her view of “conspiracy theories as insulated conspiracy-beliefs is an attempt to promote an investigation of the phenomenon of conspiracy theories as a distinctive one, to be understood in its current political and social function” (102); she clarifies that the kind of investigation her account can promote is “the role of conspiracy theories as forms of political propaganda (Cassam 2019)” (102, fn 32).

Now I agree with our hypothetical objector that it is not clear that these Non-DITs must be treated as paradigmatic on a view like Napolitano’s, but it is concerning that they are currently cited as such. In their (2021), Napolitano and Reuter carry out various studies of ordinary speakers to try and show that within ordinary usage, speakers operate with a negatively evaluative concept of conspiracy theory.²⁷ They claim their attempt to engineer this concept of conspiracy theory that is continuous with ordinary usage is useful because it provides a strong theoretical foundation for existing empirical “approaches that look at the non-epistemic reasons for believing conspiracy theories – such as psychological or sociological reasons – and the institutional attempts at minimizing belief in conspiracy theories” (23).²⁸ But I have argued here that this research and these institutional attempts are themselves often shot through with the uncritical centering of Non-DITs. If Napolitano and Reuter’s engineering project aims to underwrite this research and preserve it as it stands, then it falls prey to the critique I have advanced here.

²⁷ I discuss Napolitano and Reuter (2021) in-depth in my (forthcoming).

²⁸ Napolitano echoes this point in her (2021): “The main advantage of understanding conspiracy theories as self-insulated conspiracy-beliefs rather than as mere theories involving conspiracies, is that it allows for empirical studies in the psychology of conspiracy theorists” (97).

There are hints, then, that Napolitano and Napolitano & Reuter will develop their projects in line with the generalist centering of Non-DITs – a serious error if I am right. But, again, these projects are in their early stages, and whether they, or other forms of generalism, can be developed in a way that is compatible with the arguments I have given remains to be seen. I invite generalists to pursue this work.

6. *Conclusion*

Let's review where we stand in the overall argument. I have accepted the generalist's distinction between conspiracy theories and Conspiracy Theories and their views that Conspiracy Theories should be interpreted as forms of political propaganda or as beliefs that are distinctly epistemically insulated. I then showed that the correct paradigmatic cases for Conspiracy Theories so interpreted are DITs because they are the clearest representative of the view and because they are the most harmful. What I showed in the previous section is that, with DITs correctly taken as paradigmatic, our account of who Conspiracy Theorists are, why they believe what they believe, and how we should combat them must all change radically from the picture the generalists and popular accounts that echo their views give us.

If I am right, then Conspiracy Theories should not be primarily thought of as created, promoted, and consumed by extremist, online amateurs who are marginalized in various ways. On the contrary, it turns out that Conspiracy Theories should be primarily thought of as created, promoted, and consumed by those who occupy positions in a society's dominant political, media, and economic institutions, who correspondingly enjoy enormous wealth, prestige, and a reign at the top of the "social ladder", who have been credentialed and lauded by that society's most prestigious educational institutions, and who create and promote Conspiracy Theories to protect the status-quo and their interests. The relevant image of the Conspiracy Theorist would therefore not be the

downwardly mobile, resentful, internet saturated outcast who rejects all official expert explanations, rails against the powers-that-be, and self-styles as a renegade defender of truth. The image that should first come to mind is the politician, the intelligence agent, the corporate executive, the journalist, the academic, or the public intellectual who has reaped the benefits of and assiduously seeks to protect – perhaps without even knowing it – the dominant institutions of their society via their Conspiracy Theorizing. Our prescriptions for addressing Conspiracy Theories would also have to change in turn. They would focus primarily on critiquing our institutions and radically restructuring them in ways that will not allow them to be conducive to Conspiracy Theories and the subsequent atrocities that result. I am doubtful that generalists will be a fan of this way of taking their project, but I have shown why this direction is necessary if the project is to remain true to its central claims and if it is to combat the most dangerous harms of these Theories.²⁹

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