In Lies We Trust

A cross-generational investigation into the overconsumption of conspiracy theories in the media and how they impact the erosion of trust in institutions.

Table of Contents

Introduction

The moon landings were fake! The government is using 5G networks to control our brains!

Conspiracy theories are referred to as "causal explanations of events that ascribe blame to a group of powerful individuals who operate in secret to form hidden plans that benefit themselves and harm the common good"[1]. Conspiracy theories are interconnected in all aspects of society and should be critiqued not only because of their potential harm but also for their implications on social dynamics and belief systems.

My worldview dictates the way I see and interact with power, authority, and changes in society. As I move from childhood to adolescence to adulthood, I see distorted truth in the institutions that directly affect the societies and cultures in which we live. By comparing Generation X (1965-1979) and Generation Z (1995-2009), I investigated how conspiracy theories impact micro, meso and macro interactions within society, further exploring the affected individual perceptions of institutional trust. My Personal Interest Project (PIP) investigates the promotion of conspiracy theories in the digital age, institutional trust and belief systems, and how institutions can rebuild this lost trust.

As an avid consumer of media with an interest in conspiracy theories, my hypothesis became *"a cross-generational investigation into the overconsumption of conspiracy theories in the media and how they impact the erosion of trust in institutions"*. In my research, I considered Walter Fisher's Narrative Paradigm Theory, which explores how human cognition favours coherence and fidelity rather than data, evidence and statistics, as storytelling aligns closely to the innate human tendency to recognise patterns and find meaning within the brain. I examine how widespread and easily accessible conspiratorial ideation affects the perceptions and beliefs of individuals, and how this changes between generations. This interaction with social continuity and change between generations influences the perpetuation of conspiracy theories, relating to those in positions of power and authority.

---

[1] S. Bowes & T. Costello & A. Tasimi, 'The Conspiratorial Mind: A Meta-Analytic Review of Motivational and Personological Correlates', *American Psychology Association*, 149/1 (2023), pp. 259–293. https://doi.org/10.1037/bul0000392, accessed 21 January 2025

My primary research consisted of a questionnaire that focused on the ideological differences between Generation X and Generation Z and how this impacts their trust in institutions and belief in conspiracy theories. My focus group of 15 individuals explored various stimuli about mainstream media sources and responded to a variety of statements surrounding their trust in media sources. The expert interview with Professor Nick Enfield from the *University of Sydney* showed both the impact of conspiracy theory consumption in the media and the rationale behind such beliefs. Additionally, I utilised a personal reflection to demonstrate personal engagement with the topic, highlighting the growth in my social and cultural literacy. I used relevant articles, papers, websites and a film in my secondary research to link my findings, synthesising and showing a significant relationship between my institutional trust and conspiracy theories.

In my research, I concluded that the increased consumption of conspiracy theories in the media had a significant correlation to the erosion of institutional trust in society, supporting my hypothesis.

Log

The direction of my PIP was in no way set in stone from the beginning. My initial interest in women in STEM quickly transformed to conspiracy theories as I read van Prooijen's '*Suspicion of Institutions: How Distrust and Conspiracy Theories Deteriorate Social Relationships*'[2]. After this, I concluded that I wanted to assess the consumption of conspiracy theories in the media and their effect on institutional trust. Noting that people often fall victim to conspiracy theories, I was interested in gaining a deeper understanding of their impact on broader society. My initial interest originated from Donald Trump's repeated perpetuation of conspiracy theories in the media, which established the basis of my whole PIP and laid the foundation for the chapters.

My initial plan for the cross-cultural component was centred around the political spectrum, aiming to demonstrate that movement towards ideological extremes produces comparable forms of hyper-partisanship and conspiracy theories. Due to the difficulty in quantifying and defining elements of this, the use of a political spectrum was not a viable option, so using generations (X and Z) became crucial. The patterns that emerged from the research became apparent, allowing me to successfully contrast Generation X and Z.

Whilst conducting secondary research, I was overwhelmed by the sheer amount of information available on my topic. To remedy this, I analysed and sorted primary and secondary data into chapters and their respective paragraphs by exploring and synthesising ideas. Planning of my chapters early in the research process was integral, as it helped to analyse and organise information based on thematic concerns.

Primary research involved a questionnaire, an expert interview with Professor Nick Enfield from the *University of Sydney*, a focus group of 15 participants, and a personal reflection. These research methods accounted for cross-generational components, conspiracy theories and their social implications. These research methods presented challenges, such as finding suitable experts to interview, but were ultimately highly useful. Recommendations from my

---

[2] J.-W. van Prooijen & G. Spadaro & H. Wang, 'Suspicion of Institutions: How Distrust and Conspiracy Theories Deteriorate Social Relationships, *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 43/65 (2022) https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2021.06.013, accessed 13 March 2025

teacher to explore university platforms and contacts for possible interviews aided this. Through the use of qualitative and quantitative data, the primary research allowed for the collation of complex concepts, including clear explanations and diverse perspectives, which became highly useful to my PIP.

Due to the abundance of research, there were many different perspectives on my topic, preventing me from easily condensing my PIP's subject matter. Consequently, through the illumination of the positive impacts of conspiracy theories, such as community formation, my negative viewpoint of conspiracy theories was challenged. This allowed me to engage critically with social issues, shaping my social and cultural literacy.

Overall, my PIP challenged my initial worldview by considering other ideologies different to my own. Additionally, the PIP was a highly valuable experience that deepened my understanding of personal, social and cultural identity by challenging me to remain ethically objective with conflicting perspectives and allowing me to question assumptions I had not previously questioned.

Chapter 1: Clickbait, Chaos and Conspiracies

An investigation into the rise of conspiracy theories in the digital age

Known for their captivating nature, conspiracy theories have piqued society's interest since the dawn of human civilisation. They are an explanation of an event that provides a sense of clarity or a supposed 'secret truth' about confusing events[3]. This chapter examines how the adoption of the digital age has contributed to the proliferation and dissemination of conspiracy theories.

Through the globalisation and progression of technologies, the digital age has transformed the way individuals engage with all areas of modern life, paving the way for shifts in global communication. With the increasing amount of news that "prioritise[s] profit and engagement" over "objective truth", there are increasingly levels "sensationalism, selective reporting [and the] pushing [of] certain narratives"[4] that "is becoming more advanced and threatening societies around the world"[5]. The rise of media and communication technologies enables the commodification of conspiracy theories, which is reinforced by confirmation biases and echo chambers, leading to fear, political disengagement and hostility[6].

With the increased accessibility of communication technologies, armchair experts[7] can share information without being "actually educated about the topic"[8], allowing ideas stemming from radicalised groups to reach millions, creating a fertile ground for conspiratorial ideation[9]. Since ideas are being fortified by repetition rather than challenged by objection, a

---

[3] S. Bowes & T. Costello & A. Tasimi, 'The Conspiratorial Mind: A Meta-Analytic Review of Motivational and Personological Correlates', *American Psychology Association*, 149/1 (2023), pp. 259–293. https://doi.org/10.1037/bul0000392, accessed 21 January 2025

[4] Primary Research: Questionnaire, Generation X Female

[5] J. Orlowski (dir.), The Social Dilemma [film], (Netflix, 9 September 2020)

[6] Echo Chambers: an environment in which a person only encounters their existing views, reinforcing them and not allowing alternative ideas to be considered.

[7] Armchair expert: an individual who offers advice on a topic without experience or qualifications

[8] Primary Research: Focus Group, Female

[9] Australian Institute of Criminology, 'Exposure to and Sharing of Fringe or Radical Content Online Exposure to and Sharing of Fringe or Radical Content Online', *Australian Institute of Criminology* (10 December 2024), https://www.aic.gov.au/publications/tandi/tandi705, accessed 17 April 2025

confirmation bias appears, leading to algorithmic echo chambers[10] that distort public perceptions over time[11], normalising conspiratorial thinking and causing people to be "more misinformed than ever before"[12]. This can be seen through the anti-vaccination movement on *Facebook* in 2020, where groups frequently shared the same misinformation, anecdotes and evidence, which reinforced one another's beliefs, dissenting voices and factual corrections, which were often deleted and ridiculed[13]. Moreover, as seen in '*The Social Dilemma'*, social media algorithms prioritise user engagement over accuracy, often promoting fake content as it gain more attention[14]. This algorithmic bias, coupled with a "lack of filters"[15], elevates favourable and engaging content, accelerating the dissemination of information[16]. By turning social media into echo chambers, algorithms reinforce the individual's beliefs endlessly, regardless of how misleading or inaccurate they may be[17]. In the questionnaire, one Generation Z participant states that he has "grown up with the internet and knows how easy it is to spread misinformation", but acknowledges "it's easy to start questioning everything"[18] when the same information circles around you[19]. Media trust and susceptibility to conspiracy theories can be further contextualised through Narrative Paradigm Theory, which sheds light on how the spread and casual consumption of conspiracy theories posits its power not through facts and logic, but rather through its ability to resonate with the user[20]. For Generation Z, who acknowledge there are "plenty of reasons to distrust governments and

---

[10] K. Riemer & S. Peter, 'Algorithmic Audiencing: Why We Need to Rethink Free Speech on Social Media', *Journal of Information Technology*, 36/4 (2021), https://doi.org/10.1177/02683962211013358, accessed 7 April 2025

[11] J. Orlowski (dir.), The Social Dilemma [film], (Netflix, 9 September 2020)

[12] Primary Research: Focus Group, Female

[13] N.F. Johnson et al, 'The Online Competition between Pro- and Anti-Vaccination Views', *Nature*, 582/230 (2020), https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-020-2281-1, accessed 7 June 2025

[14] J. Orlowski (dir.), The Social Dilemma [film], (Netflix, 9 September 2020)

[15] Primary Research: Focus Group, Male

[16] K. Riemer & S. Peter, 'Algorithmic Audiencing: Why We Need to Rethink Free Speech on Social Media', *Journal of Information Technology*, 36/4 (2021), https://doi.org/10.1177/02683962211013358, accessed 7 April 2025

[17] K. Riemer & S. Peter, 'Algorithmic Audiencing: Why We Need to Rethink Free Speech on Social Media', *Journal of Information Technology*, 36/4 (2021), https://doi.org/10.1177/02683962211013358, accessed 7 April 2025

[18] Primary Research: Questionnaire, Generation Z Male

[19] K. Riemer & S. Peter, 'Algorithmic Audiencing: Why We Need to Rethink Free Speech on Social Media', *Journal of Information Technology*, 36/4 (2021), https://doi.org/10.1177/02683962211013358, accessed 7 April 2025

[20] Communication Theory, 'The Narrative Paradigm', *Communication Theory* (6 January 2014) https://www.communicationtheory.org/the-narrative-paradigm/, accessed 20 April 2025

institutions"[21], the desensitisation and narrative overload still increase their likelihood to trust emotionally appealing narratives, even with the knowledge that they are "used to manipulate the perception of the public"[22]. Although Generation X's tendency to "mindlessly accept [what they are told] as truth"[23] may make them more accepting of conspiracy theories at face value, Generation Z's casual exposure and consumption results in confirmation biases and the false consensus effect, which reinforces widespread institutional distrust and alternative ideologies[24].

The advertent and inadvertent spread of conspiracy content, allows for misinformation to become monetised and incentivises sensationalism[25]. In social media, people who are "not actually educated about the topic"[26], such as influencers and content creators, often attempt to "attract attention and gain a following" by sharing conspiracy theories. Influencers often package conspiracy theories in relatable and emotionally compelling stories, which appear more trustworthy than genuine reports, drawing individuals away from critical thinking and towards alternative belief systems[27]. This can be further explored through Narrative Paradigm Theory, which explains how having an engaging story is more convincing than a logical argument[28]. This reinforces ideological echo chambers and social media-driven algorithms by offering an illusion of control and a sense of collective identity to individuals during a crisis[29].

---

[21] Primary Research: Personal Reflection

[22] Primary Research: Questionnaire, Generation Z Female

[23] Primary Research: Questionnaire, Generation X Female

[24] N. Higdon, 'The Critical Effect: Exploring the Influence of Critical Media Literacy Pedagogy on College Students' Social Media Behaviors and Attitudes', *Journal of Media Literacy Education*, 14/1 (2022), https://doi.org/10.23860/JMLE-2022-14-1-1, accessed 8 May 2025

[25] Primary Research: Focus Group, Female

[26] Primary Research: Focus Group, Female

[27] E. Blake, 'Conspiracy Theories Thrive on YouTube, New Study', *The University of Sydney* (5 October 2022), https://www.sydney.edu.au/news-opinion/news/2022/10/05/conspiracy-theories-thrive-on-youtube-social-media-expert.html, accessed 15 April 2025

[28] Communication Theory, 'The Narrative Paradigm', *Communication Theory* (6 January 2014) https://www.communicationtheory.org/the-narrative-paradigm/, accessed 20 April 2025

[29] J.-W. van Prooijen & G. Spadaro & H. Wang, 'Suspicion of Institutions: How Distrust and Conspiracy Theories Deteriorate Social Relationships, *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 43/65 (2022) https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2021.06.013, accessed 13 March 2025

Conspiracy theories are increasingly passively and unintentionally consumed through media such as memes, making them easier to access[30]. With this, I found that "the sheer volume of fake news and conspiracy theories is intimidating and it's hard to know what's real", ultimately contributing to their overconsumption and normalisation[31]. One focus group participant cited that "big things happen in the world and then they get turned into memes"[32], while another satirically referenced that the last news source on *Instagram* they saw was that "John Pork was found dead in a lake"[33], which demonstrates how the line between derision and misinformation often blurs[34]. This is highlighted in the 27% of Generation Z participants who struggled to identify credible sources[35], no matter the context or appearance of satirisation[36]. The dissonance between the perceived digital fluency of Generation Z and their attested media literacy[37] underscores how constant exposure does not equate to critical thinking or understanding of the world, revealing a dangerous overconfidence within the generation and highlighting the importance of social and cultural literacy in the digital space[38]. This false sense of security and competence fosters a confirmation bias within Generation Z and deepens distrust in institutions that conspiracy theories seek to commodify and exploit, normalising conspiratorial ideation[39]. The use of netizen vernacular[40] is relatively straightforward for digital natives who can recognise the satirical nature of the content, but

[30] L. Shifman, 'Memes in a Digital World: Reconciling with a Conceptual Troublemaker', *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 18/362 (2013), https://doi.org/10.1111/jcc4.12013 accessed 7 April 2025

[31] Primary Research: Personal Reflection

[32] Primary Research: Focus Group, Male

[33] Primary Research: Focus Group, Male

[34] L. Shifman, 'Memes in a Digital World: Reconciling with a Conceptual Troublemaker', *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 18/362 (2013), https://doi.org/10.1111/jcc4.12013, accessed 7 April 2025

[35] Primary Research: Focus Group

[36] N. Higdon, 'The Critical Effect: Exploring the Influence of Critical Media Literacy Pedagogy on College Students' Social Media Behaviors and Attitudes', *Journal of Media Literacy Education*, 14/1 (2022), https://doi.org/10.23860/JMLE-2022-14-1-1, accessed 8 May 2025

[37] N. Higdon, 'The Critical Effect: Exploring the Influence of Critical Media Literacy Pedagogy on College Students' Social Media Behaviors and Attitudes', *Journal of Media Literacy Education*, 14/1 (2022), https://doi.org/10.23860/JMLE-2022-14-1-1, accessed 8 May 2025

[38] N. Higdon, 'The Critical Effect: Exploring the Influence of Critical Media Literacy Pedagogy on College Students' Social Media Behaviors and Attitudes', *Journal of Media Literacy Education*, 14/1 (2022), https://doi.org/10.23860/JMLE-2022-14-1-1, accessed 8 May 2025

[39] J.-W. van Prooijen & G. Spadaro & H. Wang, 'Suspicion of Institutions: How Distrust and Conspiracy Theories Deteriorate Social Relationships, *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 43/65 (2022), https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2021.06.013, accessed 13 March 2025

[40] Netizen Vernacular: the language and dialect specific to use on the internet

still leads to misinformation[41]. However, for older generations, who are less accustomed to its nuances, there is a broader challenge for navigating misinformation in an oversaturated online environment. A clear example of this is the 'Birds Aren't Real' campaign, which mocks the absurdity of conspiracy theories by claiming that birds are government surveillance drones[42]. By imitating the viral spread of misinformation online, the campaign highlights how satire may still inadvertently contribute to conspiracies[43], highlighting the broader social and cultural implication which fuels the information disorder of the internet, damaging the epistemic foundation[44] of the digital world[45].

While conspiracy theories may not be consumed excessively in all cases, research highlights a significant rise in their passive and casual consumption[46], driven largely by social media platforms' lack of moderation[47]. As seen in *Google Scholar* results, when the keywords 'conspiracy theory' were used, there was a 530% increase in articles published from 1965-1990 (Generation X's adolescence) to 1995-2020 (Generation Z's adolescence). Additionally, throughout 2020-2025, the volume of academic publications about conspiracies is nearly equal to those published in 1995-2020, emphasising the growing concerns among scholars who view overexposure to conspiracy as significant enough to warrant academic investigation and critique[48]. The increase in passive exposure of Generation Z magnifies their

---

[41] L. Shifman, 'Memes in a Digital World: Reconciling with a Conceptual Troublemaker', Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, 18/362 (2013), https://doi.org/10.1111/jcc4.12013, accessed 7 April 2025

[42] T. Lorenz, 'Birds Aren't Real, or Are They? Inside a Gen Z Conspiracy Theory.' *The New York Times* (9 December 2021), https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/09/technology/birds-arent-real-gen-z-misinformation.html, accessed 7 June 2025

[43] T. Lorenz, 'Birds Aren't Real, or Are They? Inside a Gen Z Conspiracy Theory.' *The New York Times* (9 December 2021), https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/09/technology/birds-arent-real-gen-z-misinformation.html, accessed 7 June 2025

[44] Epistemic foundation: the underlying beliefs and values that justify other beliefs and values around the world

[45] C. Wardle & H. Derakhshan, 'Information Disorder: Toward an Interdisciplinary Framework for Research and Policy Making', *Council of Europe* (2017), https://rm.coe.int/information-disorder-toward-an-interdisciplinary-framework-for-researc/168076277c, accessed 14 May 2025

[46] A.M. Enders et al, 'The Relationship between Social Media Use and Beliefs in Conspiracy Theories and Misinformation', *Political Behavior*, 45/1 (2021), doi: 10.1007/s11109-021-09734-6, accessed 5 May 2025

[47] E. Blake, 'Conspiracy Theories Thrive on YouTube, New Study', *The University of Sydney* (5 October 2022), https://www.sydney.edu.au/news-opinion/news/2022/10/05/conspiracy-theories-thrive-on-youtube-social-media-expert.html, accessed 15 April 2025

[48] N. Higdon, 'The Critical Effect: Exploring the Influence of Critical Media Literacy Pedagogy on College Students' Social Media Behaviors and Attitudes', *Journal of Media Literacy Education*, 14/1 (2022), https://doi.org/10.23860/JMLE-2022-14-1-1, accessed 8 May 2025

scepticism and causes the radical alteration of worldviews, ideologies and environments[49]. This further reflects the increasing recognition of the storytelling power of conspiracy theories (as speculated in Narrative Paradigm Theory), as they gain traction due to their coherence and fidelity, often filling information voids, especially when institutional trust is low[50]. The continual saturation of conspiratorial ideation in media "make[s] it possible to spread manipulative narratives with phenomenal ease"[51]. Thus, this passive and increase in conspiracy consumption highlights how humans are inherently drawn to the fidelity and coherence of stories, rather than empirical evidence[52].

In the digital 'age of conspiracy', the abundance of unverified information has enabled a dilemma in navigating a media landscape where truth is easily manipulated[53]. The danger lies not only in what people believe, but in how these beliefs are formed and spread, "sowing total chaos and division within society"[54]. For example, a "domino effect" of misinformation where a small group of people promote the "spread [of] false information", which subsequently "get[s] exaggerated"[55]. This amplifies algorithm-driven content on platforms such as *TikTok*[56]. This process encourages and legitimises conspiracy theories, allowing information to get substantiated and repeated, facilitating their polarisation and proliferation[57].

---

[49] J.-W. van Prooijen & G. Spadaro & H. Wang, 'Suspicion of Institutions: How Distrust and Conspiracy Theories Deteriorate Social Relationships, *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 43/65 (2022), https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2021.06.013, accessed 13 March 2025

[50] Communication Theory, 'The Narrative Paradigm', *Communication Theory* (6 January 2014) https://www.communicationtheory.org/the-narrative-paradigm/, accessed 20 April 2025

[51] J. Orlowski (dir.), The Social Dilemma [film], (Netflix, 9 September 2020)

[52] Communication Theory, 'The Narrative Paradigm', *Communication Theory*, (6 January 2014) https://www.communicationtheory.org/the-narrative-paradigm/, accessed 20 April 2025

[53] Z. Gorvett, 'What We Can Learn from Conspiracy Theories', *BBC* (24 May 2020) https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20200522-what-we-can-learn-from-conspiracy-theories, accessed 29 January 2025

[54] J. Orlowski (dir.), The Social Dilemma [film], (Netflix, 9 September 2020)

[55] Primary Research: Focus Group, Female

[56] K. Riemer & S. Peter, 'Algorithmic Audiencing: Why We Need to Rethink Free Speech on Social Media', *Journal of Information Technology*, 36/4 (2021), https://doi.org/10.1177/02683962211013358, accessed 7 April 2025

[57] K. Riemer & S. Peter, 'Algorithmic Audiencing: Why We Need to Rethink Free Speech on Social Media', *Journal of Information Technology*, 36/4 (2021), https://doi.org/10.1177/02683962211013358, accessed 7 April 2025

The advdert and inadvertent censorship of viewpoints while amplifying others reinforces the importance of social and cultural literacy and critical thinking, raising suspicions about the flow of information and the criteria used to prioritise it[58]. Additionally, this reinforces the false consensus effect, in which individuals overestimate the extent to which their beliefs are widely shared, fostering a misplaced sense of confidence and further reinforcing their conspiratorial beliefs. As a member of Generation Z myself, I have never had so much information at my fingertips, yet I have never been more confused about which sources to trust, and the decision is only getting harder as the subjectivity and variance of information and its saturation continue to increase[59]. The overexposure, overconsumption and oversaturation of conspiracy theories have real, lasting consequences, contributing to desensitisation, normalisation and the blurring of authenticity and speculation[60]. Through the "change [to] how we consume"[61] conspiracy theories, the interactions with society's micro, meso and macro levels have caused what was once an outlandish theory to now become the norm, increasingly the visibility, casual consumption and easy accessibility of conspiracy content[62]. As conspiracy theories become embedded in both netizen and rational vernacular, society accepts individuals' doubt and distrust instead of the restoration that can bring about progressive change of improved institutional trust. The research concluded that misinformation affects the function and processes of institutions, eroding public trust and replacing evidence-based reasoning with tribalistic[63] and radical belief systems, forming a non-conforming society that will not survive the consequences[64]. Despite rising public awareness and platform policy shifts, a persistent continuity in the ineffective censorship of conspiracy theories highlights the need for meaningful changes to be implemented to offset their oversaturation[65].

---

[58] K. Riemer & S. Peter, 'Algorithmic Audiencing: Why We Need to Rethink Free Speech on Social Media', *Journal of Information Technology*, 36/4 (2021), https://doi.org/10.1177/02683962211013358, accessed 7 April 2025

[59] Primary Research: Personal Reflection

[60] Primary Research: Expert Interview, Professor Nick Enfield

[61] Primary Research: Expert Interview, Professor Nick Enfield

[62] A.M. Enders et al, 'The Relationship between Social Media Use and Beliefs in Conspiracy Theories and Misinformation', *Political Behavior*, 45/1 (2021), doi: 10.1007/s11109-021-09734-6, accessed 5 May 2025

[63] Tribalistic: advocating or practising strong loyalty to one's own social group

[64] J.-W. van Prooijen & G. Spadaro & H. Wang, 'Suspicion of Institutions: How Distrust and Conspiracy Theories Deteriorate Social Relationships, *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 43/65 (2022), https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2021.06.013, accessed 13 March 2025

[65] H. Rao & H.R. Greve, 'The Plot Thickens: A Sociology of Conspiracy Theories', *Annual Review of Sociology*, 50/191 (2024), https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-030222-031142, accessed 29 January 2025

Chapter 2: Power, Paranoia, and Perception

An investigation into how declining institutional trust shapes belief systems

Trust is the cornerstone of social cohesion, and a lack thereof undermines the stability of society[66]. It influences how individuals relate to the micro, meso and macro levels of society, shaping their interactions and willingness to believe in and conform with institutions[67]. This chapter explores the relationship between conspiracy theories, institutional trust and belief systems, highlighting how trust levels in institutions have shifted significantly throughout time. In societies where institutional trust is high, there is greater cooperation, stability, and mutual respect in their media and news, which enables institutions to function effectively. However, when trust is eroded, belief systems become vulnerable, creating a catalyst for conspiracy theories as individuals seek alternative explanations.

The widespread belief that governments deliberately spread false or sensationalised information reflects the deeply eroded institutional trust, creating a fertile ground for conspiracy theories to flourish. The 2025 Edelman Trust Barometer found that 69% of people believe their governments are purposefully lying to the public by presenting false statements, revealing a systematic breakdown of institutional credibility and increase in social polarisation[68]. This is evident in the 76% of questionnaire respondents who reported seeking out alternative information[69] which reflects a broader lack of trust in institutions and the growing consumption of fringe content[70] and unverified information[71]. With members of Generation Z expressing that even if information is "from a government website…it's not

---

[66] K. Douglas & R. Sutton & A. Cichocka, 'The Psychology of Conspiracy Theories', *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 26/538 (2017), doi: 10.1177/0963721417718261, accessed 13 April 2025

[67] K. Douglas & R. Sutton & A. Cichocka, 'The Psychology of Conspiracy Theories', *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 26/538 (2017), doi: 10.1177/0963721417718261, accessed 13 April 2025

[68] Edelman, 2025 Edelman Trust Barometer Global Report (23 January 2025), https://www.edelman.com/sites/g/files/aatuss191/files/2025-01/2025%20Edelman%20Trust%20Barometer%20Global%20Report_01.23.25.pdf, accessed 17 April 2025

[69] Primary Research: Questionnaire Q18b

[70] Fringe content: material that falls outside the mainstream and conventional understanding, unorthodox, radical

[71] Australian Institute of Criminology, 'Exposure to and Sharing of Fringe or Radical Content Online Exposure to and Sharing of Fringe or Radical Content Online', *Australian Institute of Criminology* (10 December 2024), https://www.aic.gov.au/publications/tandi/tandi705, accessed 17 April 2025

always true", the decrease of reliance on traditional institutions is highlighted[72]. This emphasises how individuals' identity is increasingly dependent on their personal worldview[73], values and beliefs, which is heavily shaped by the social media they consume[74]. The evolution of collective identities[75] "around…common kinds of interests,"[76] encourages validation and community formation through their shared belief systems[77]. Individuals are attracted to conspiracies that reinforce their views and beliefs, so in times of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, health-related conspiracies gained traction by people spreading misinformation that applied to them, reinforcing the ideological echo chambers of social media[78]. Additionally, many individuals seek out alternative news sources that provide a sense of understanding and control[79], fulfilling the "basic psychol[ogical] imperative to connect with other people"[80]. For example, the Flat Earth Society claims that the government and NASA is lying to the world, instead claiming that the Earth is a flat rather than a globe, highlighting the influence of peer validation in conspiracy communities and the collective identity which has formed from this[81]. This distrust is consistently illustrated in the questionnaire, where 75% of respondents reported they do not trust mainstream news sources such as *The New York Times*[82], with one Generation X member stating that "there's a decline

[72] Primary Research: Focus Group, Female

[73] K. Riemer & S. Peter, 'Algorithmic Audiencing: Why We Need to Rethink Free Speech on Social Media', *Journal of Information Technology*, 36/4 (2021), https://doi.org/10.1177/02683962211013358, accessed 7 April 2025

[74] A.M. Enders et al, 'The Relationship between Social Media Use and Beliefs in Conspiracy Theories and Misinformation', *Political Behavior*, 45/1 (2021), doi: 10.1007/s11109-021-09734-6, accessed 5 May 2025

[75] D. Saraga, 'It's Cultural to Believe in Conspiracy Theories', *Horizons*, (23 February 2022) https://www.horizons-mag.ch/2022/02/23/its-cultural-to-believe-in-conspiracy-theories/, accessed 29 January 2025

[76] Primary Research: Expert Interview, Professor Nick Enfield

[77] J.-W. van Prooijen & G. Spadaro & H. Wang, 'Suspicion of Institutions: How Distrust and Conspiracy Theories Deteriorate Social Relationships, *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 43/65 (2022) https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2021.06.013, accessed 13 March 2025

[78] E. Blake, 'Conspiracy Theories Thrive on YouTube, New Study', *The University of Sydney* (5 October 2022) https://www.sydney.edu.au/news-opinion/news/2022/10/05/conspiracy-theories-thrive-on-youtube-social-media-expert.html accessed 15 April 2025

[79] S. Bowes & T. Costello & A. Tasimi, 'The Conspiratorial Mind: A Meta-Analytic Review of Motivational and Personological Correlates', *American Psychology Association*, 149/1 (2023), pp. 259–293. https://doi.org/10.1037/bul0000392, accessed 21 January 2025

[80] J. Orlowski (dir.), The Social Dilemma [film], (Netflix, 9 September 2020)

[81] Steve Mirsky, 'Flat Earthers: What They Believe and Why', *Scientific American*, (27 March 2020) https://www.scientificamerican.com/podcast/episode/flat-earthers-what-they-believe-and-why/, accessed 26 July 2025

[82] Primary Research: Questionnaire, Q5

in the integrity of once-trusted sources…as they are more captive to vested interests"[83]. Yet, as individuals become more inclined to question information, conspiracy theories are more easily cultivated, ultimately fostering a political climate of uncertainty and distrust, which undermines institutional authority[84].

The shift away from centralised, authoritative sources illustrates the transformation of how information is consumed, highlighting increased the vulnerability to misinformation and the weakening of institutional trust[85]. Since Generation X exhibits high trust in their governments and institutions, they also present a reluctance to challenge traditional authorities, even in the face of misinformation[86]. Conversely, due to Generation Z's adolescent immersion into the digital world, they often approach all institutions with initial scepticism, inflicting hyper-vigilance which leaves them vulnerable to confirmation biases, alternative belief systems and echo chambers[87]. With 89% of questionnaire respondents questioning the official narratives propagated by political figures, the growing disillusionment with institutional trust is reflected, demonstrating the dangers of conspiracy theories[88]. Although only 13% of Generation Z regularly fact-check information, research concluded they are more likely to turn to alternative sources, particularly social media, when mainstream news sources do not align with their ideologies, ultimately reinforcing their confirmation bias[89]. However, "being naïve" to misinformation "is not exclusive to young people"[90], as Generation X often relies on traditionally trusted news sources and accepts information at face value. This highlights the significant generational differences in media consumption, particularly in perception of

[83] Primary Research: Questionnaire, Generation X Female

[84] M. Herold, 'The Impact of Conspiracy Belief on Democratic Culture: Evidence from Europe', *Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review* (12 December 2024) https://doi.org/10.37016/mr-2020-165, accessed 29 January 2025

[85] J.-W. van Prooijen & G. Spadaro & H. Wang, 'Suspicion of Institutions: How Distrust and Conspiracy Theories Deteriorate Social Relationships, *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 43/65 (2022) https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2021.06.013, accessed 13 March 2025

[86] Smart News, 'SmartNews Trust Survey: March 2025', *SmartNews*, (March 2025) https://assets.ctfassets.net/alwhqs3fp7nk/1l9f5OhC5fWENbbpAGUmDo/7dd225601a28032c2d8f5b271cf6ee57/SmartNews_Trust_Survey_March_2025.pdf accessed 17 April 2025

[87] Smart News, 'SmartNews Trust Survey: March 2025', *SmartNews*, (March 2025) https://assets.ctfassets.net/alwhqs3fp7nk/1l9f5OhC5fWENbbpAGUmDo/7dd225601a28032c2d8f5b271cf6ee57/SmartNews_Trust_Survey_March_2025.pdf accessed 17 April 2025

[88] Primary Research: Questionnaire, Q18d

[89] Smart News, 'SmartNews Trust Survey: March 2025', *SmartNews*, (March 2025) https://assets.ctfassets.net/alwhqs3fp7nk/1l9f5OhC5fWENbbpAGUmDo/7dd225601a28032c2d8f5b271cf6ee57/SmartNews_Trust_Survey_March_2025.pdf accessed 17 April 2025

[90] Primary Research: Expert Interview with Nick Enfield

traditional sources, power and authorities[91]. While it is "quite natural for human beings to look behind seemingly simple explanations and see something more"[92], the overconsumption of conspiracy theories has fundamentally reshaped the traditional belief systems that held authorities accountable, leaving individuals to apophenia[93] in otherwise mundane events[94]. For example, the Denver International Airport conspiracy suggested that the airport was the headquarters for a secret government organisation or the Illuminati because of its intricate tunnel system and murals, which hid supposed 'secret messages'[95]. In reality, all features of the airport had benign and innocuous explanations when investigated[96]. The notion of distrust of institutions "poisons public discourse"[97], which fuels populist and anti-establishment movements, furthering the individualistic and ideologically fragmented nature of society[98]. Contrary to Generation X's structured information from trusted sources such as governments, Generation Z's consumption of information is decentralised and chaotically organised, making them vulnerable to misinformation. This represents the undermining of credibility from these once-trusted institutions and facilitates the retreat into ideological echo chambers and deepening social polarisation.

The repeated exposure to misinformation reinforces the difficulties in distinguishing between reality and conspiracy, leading to a new understanding of belief systems becoming malleable and open to reinterpretation, challenging personal and collective[99]. While 73% of focus group

---

[91] Smart News, 'SmartNews Trust Survey: March 2025', SmartNews, (March 2025) https://assets.ctfassets.net/alwhqs3fp7nk/1l9f5OhC5fWENbbpAGUmDo/7dd225601a28032c2d8f5b271cf6ee57/SmartNews_Trust_Survey_March_2025.pdf accessed 17 April 2025

[92] Primary Research: Expert Interview, Professor Nick Enfield

[93] Apohenia: the tendency to perceive meaningful connections between unrelated things or random patterns, often leading to false interpretations or beliefs

[94] J.-W. van Prooijen & G. Spadaro & H. Wang, 'Suspicion of Institutions: How Distrust and Conspiracy Theories Deteriorate Social Relationships, *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 43/65 (2022) https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2021.06.013, accessed 13 March 2025

[95] C. Root, 'A Local's Guide to DIA Conspiracy Theories ', *Denver Public Library*, (22 February 2023), https://history.denverlibrary.org/news/denver/locals-guide-dia-conspiracy-theories, accessed 7 June 2025

[96] C. Root, 'A Local's Guide to DIA Conspiracy Theories', *Denver Public Library*, (22 February 2023), https://history.denverlibrary.org/news/denver/locals-guide-dia-conspiracy-theories, accessed 7 June 2025

[97] Primary Research: Expert Interview with Nick Enfield

[98] J.-W. van Prooijen & G. Spadaro & H. Wang, 'Suspicion of Institutions: How Distrust and Conspiracy Theories Deteriorate Social Relationships, *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 43/65 (2022), https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2021.06.013, accessed 13 March 2025

[99] M. Herold, 'The Impact of Conspiracy Belief on Democratic Culture: Evidence from Europe', *Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review* (12 December 2024) https://doi.org/10.37016/mr-2020-165, accessed 29 January 2025

participants could discern fake from real news, 93% admitted that they were still influenced by it[100], highlighting the ability for conspiracy theories and misinformation to gain a following even among the supposedly 'digitally literate'[101]. This is indicative of Narrative Paradigm Theory, which demonstrates how innate belief systems, such as conspiracy theories, are entangled in emotions and deeply affect institutional trust and every aspect of an individual's life, causing the retreat into ideological echo chambers[102]. This can be seen in *Facebook* groups during the COVID-19 pandemic, which prioritised misinformed content that sparked outrage and high engagement[103]. Thus, through the amplification of sensationalist and conspiratorial content, the process of spreading information is corrupted, distorting content, as it is curated based on engagement (rather than accuracy) and cultivating distrust in societies.

Conspiracy theories offer more than an explanation; they offer agency, identity and meaning in times of crisis, fulfilling the psychological and motivational void that traditional institutions and governments fail to provide[104]. Therefore, as individuals become increasingly immersed in conspiratorial content, their ability to critically assess the information they consume diminishes, leading to increased political polarisation and distrust of society[105]. While being "an expression of the powerless"[106], conspiracy theories also encourage specific 'ingroups'[107], 'outgroups'[108] and communities within the macro world to foster a sense of belonging in their micro and meso world[109]. While both Generations X and Z experience

---

[100] Primary Research: Focus Group

[101] N. Higdon, 'The Critical Effect: Exploring the Influence of Critical Media Literacy Pedagogy on College Students' Social Media Behaviors and Attitudes', *Journal of Media Literacy Education*, 14/1 (2022), https://doi.org/10.23860/JMLE-2022-14-1-1, accessed 8 May 2025

[102] Communication Theory, 'The Narrative Paradigm', *Communication Theory* (6 January 2014) https://www.communicationtheory.org/the-narrative-paradigm/, accessed 20 April 2025

[103] N.F. Johnson et al, 'The Online Competition between Pro- and Anti-Vaccination Views', *Nature*, Volume 582/230 (2020), https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-020-2281-1, accessed 7 June 2025

[104] S. Bowes & T. Costello & A. Tasimi, 'The Conspiratorial Mind: A Meta-Analytic Review of Motivational and Personological Correlates', *American Psychology Association*, 149/1 (2023), pp. 259–293. https://doi.org/10.1037/bul0000392, accessed 21 January 2025

[105] A.M. Enders et al, 'The Relationship between Social Media Use and Beliefs in Conspiracy Theories and Misinformation', *Political Behavior*, 45/1 (2021), doi: 10.1007/s11109-021-09734-6, accessed 5 May 2025

[106] Primary Research: Expert Interview with Nick Enfield

[107] Ingroup: a group or community that an individual identifies with/is a member of

[108] Outgroup: any group or community that an individual does not belong/identify with, a rival group that an ingroup may ridicule or is prejudiced against

[109] H. Rao & H.R. Greve, 'The Plot Thickens: A Sociology of Conspiracy Theories', *Annual Review of Sociology*, 50/191 (2024), https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-030222-031142, accessed 29 January 2025

institutional distrust in different ways, the research illustrates that their attraction to conspiracy theories comes from the same psychological and sociological motivations in times of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic[110]. Furthermore, Generation Z's adolescence in an individualistic society fuels institutional distrust and greater reliance on personal beliefs over collective societal structures. The primary research indicates that "mainstream media is influenced by political and corporate agendas [with] lots of spin, selective reporting and omission of key details"[111], encouraging the retreat into alternative sources and echo chambers that validate the suspicion conspiratorial ideation thrives on[112]. Thus, the challenge for all generations lies in discerning when to be sceptical and when to accept credible information, a skill that is exponentially harder as the saturation of conspiracy theories is increasing[113]. As distrust towards mainstream journalism increases, a vacuum effect of media and news appears, filling individuals' social media feeds with conspiracy theories and thus creating ideological echo chambers where institutional distrust breeds and belief systems falter.

---

[110] S. Bowes & T. Costello & A. Tasimi, 'The Conspiratorial Mind: A Meta-Analytic Review of Motivational and Personological Correlates', *American Psychology Association*, 149/1 (2023), pp. 259–293. https://doi.org/10.1037/bul0000392, accessed 21 January 2025

[111] Primary Research: Questionnaire, Generation X, Male

[112] S. Bowes & T. Costello & A. Tasimi, 'The Conspiratorial Mind: A Meta-Analytic Review of Motivational and Personological Correlates', *American Psychology Association*, 149/1 (2023), pp. 259–293. https://doi.org/10.1037/bul0000392, accessed 21 January 2025

[113] Primary Research: Personal Reflection

Chapter 3: Repair, Reassurance, and Redemption

An investigation into how institutions can rebuild trust and confidence

As the reliability and credibility of institutions waver, individuals feel increasingly alienated from the political, economic and social decisions that impact their lives, creating a positive feedback loop in which distrust in institutions fuel the spread of conspiracy theories[114]. This chapter explores how conspiracy theories will still flourish without social media, the role of politicians in their propagation, and strategies on how to restore trust.

The secondary research highlights that conspiracy theories would still flourish without social media, as human scepticism has always existed[115]. So, it is not only social media that has "blood on their hands", as Dr. Duncan Maru claims, but also broader societal factors which create fertile ground for distrust and alternative belief systems to thrive[116]. For example, the anti-communist Red Scare of the 20th century[117], the 17th century Salem Witch Trials[118] and the 12th century anti-Semitic rumours[119], all emerged to satiate societal fears and where social media was non-existent[120]. Additionally, many of the beliefs researched were not established

[114] J.-W. van Prooijen & G. Spadaro & H. Wang, 'Suspicion of Institutions: How Distrust and Conspiracy Theories Deteriorate Social Relationships, *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 43/65 (2022) https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2021.06.013, accessed 13 March 2025

[115] A.M. Enders & J.E. Uscinski, 'Don't Blame Social Media for Conspiracy Theories, They Would Still Flourish without It', *The Conversation*, (18 June 2020) https://theconversation.com/dont-blame-social-media-for-conspiracy-theories-they-would-still-flourish-without-it-138635, accessed 17 April 2025

[116] B. Collins, 'Coronavirus Conspiracy Theories Are Frustrating ER Doctors', *NBC News*, (6 May 2020) https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/tech-news/what-are-we-doing-doctors-are-fed-conspiracies-ravaging-ers-n1201446?cid=eml_mrd_20200507&utm_source=Sailthru&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Morning%20Rundown%20Special%20Edition:%20The%20Coronavirus%20Crisis%2C%207%20May%202020, accessed 17 April 2025

[117] Miller Center, 'McCarthyism and the Red Scare', *Miller Center*, (2025), https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/educational-resources/age-of-eisenhower/mcarthyism-red-scare, accessed 12 May 2025

[118] J. Blumberg, 'A Brief History of the Salem Witch Trials', *Smithsonian*, (23 October 2007) https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/a-brief-history-of-the-salem-witch-trials-175162489/, accessed 12 May 2025

[119] United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 'Antisemitism in History: From the Early Church to 1400', *Holocaust Encyclopedia*, (2015), https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/antisemitism-in-history-from-the-early-church-to-1400, accessed 12 May 2025

[120] A.M. Enders & J.E. Uscinski, 'Don't Blame Social Media for Conspiracy Theories, They Would Still Flourish without It', *The Conversation*, (18 June 2020),

through social media, but rather through personal experiences and cultural narratives, highlighting that ideological corruption does not stem from digital disruption alone, but rather from a multitude of different sources which are both resistant and reactive to social change[121]. This highlights a key continuity: the enduring appeal of conspiracy theories, which often stems from a broader sense of disconnection and mistrust in authority[122]. This is theorised in Karl Marx's Conflict Theory, which highlights that society is structured by those in power and the disenfranchised who respond to systematic inequalities with conspiratorial narratives[123]. By providing a form of social resistance against institutions of power and authority, conspiracy theories reinforce the cycle of alienation from society and reduce the likelihood of social and cultural reconciliation[124]. Therefore, by addressing the spread of conspiracy theories requires more than regulating digital spaces, but rather the rebuilding of governmental and institutional trust through meaningful, long-term engagement with the public, as the sense of being heard and valued in society reduces the appeal of conspiratorial and oppositional narratives[125].

Populist political leaders often gain appeal to individuals by presenting themselves as 'truth tellers' who challenge institutions for the good of society, while often perpetuating conspiracy theories. This can be seen in the questionnaire where 92% of respondents agree that governments and institutions are hiding the truth from the general public[126], which promotes politicians who appear to be revealing these 'secret truths'. For instance, Donald Trump[127], who "came out with completely unfiltered ideas"[128] by socially scapegoating

https://theconversation.com/dont-blame-social-media-for-conspiracy-theories-they-would-still-flourish-without-it-138635, accessed 17 April 2025

[121] Primary Research: Personal Reflection

[122] Australian Institute of Criminology, 'Exposure to and Sharing of Fringe or Radical Content Online Exposure to and Sharing of Fringe or Radical Content Online', *Australian Institute of Criminology* (10 December 2024), https://www.aic.gov.au/publications/tandi/tandi705, accessed 17 April 2025

[123] C. Nickerson, 'Conflict Theory in Sociology', *Simply Psychology*, (10 October 2023), https://www.simplypsychology.org/conflict-theory.html, accessed 3 July 2025

[124] D. Saraga, 'It's Cultural to Believe in Conspiracy Theories', *Horizons*, (23 February 2022), https://www.horizons-mag.ch/2022/02/23/its-cultural-to-believe-in-conspiracy-theories/, accessed 29 January 2025

[125] Edelman, 2025 Edelman Trust Barometer Global Report (23 January 2025), https://www.edelman.com/sites/g/files/aatuss191/files/2025-01/2025%20Edelman%20Trust%20Barometer%20Global%20Report_01.23.25.pdf, accessed 17 April 2025

[126] Primary Research: Questionnaire, Q18a

[127] L. Griffin, 'The Rise of a Conspiracy Candidate' *The Conversation*, (20 September 2016), https://theconversation.com/the-rise-of-a-conspiracy-candidate-65514, accessed 13 March 2025

[128] Primary Research: Expert Interview, Professor Nick Enfield

outgroups such as LGBTQIA+ members and people of colour, Trump strategically exploits the fears and anxieties of his supporters to gain adherents[129]. These political figures gain support from certain demographics, not due to their empirically acclaimed evidence, but because the narratives they promote "resonate with the feelings of betrayal and marginalisation"[130] held by segments of societies, imploring outgroups to be attracted to certain stories because they support their worldview[131]. For example, in 20th-century Germany, anti-semitic conspiracy theories, which included the scapegoating of Jewish people for the country's defeat in WWI and the conditions of the Treaty of Versailles, gained traction because they appealed to the nationalistic resentment and economic frustration of the time[132]. This reveals a perpetual societal continuity that persistingly threatens individuals' welfare. In alignment with Narrative Paradigm Theory, these conspiracies, despite being factually questionable, offer both coherence and fidelity and cause individuals to feel more true than the official accounts given by institutions[133]. This was evident in the focus group where participants expressed that some conspiracy theories "felt more honest than actual news stories"[134], underscoring how conspiracy theories and populist claims gain momentum[135]. This reveals the dangers of institutional distrust in that it polarises communities and perpetuates misinformation[136].

---

[129] M. Ward, 'We Watched 20 Trump Rallies. His Racist, Anti-Immigrant Messaging Is Getting Darker', *Politico*, (12 October 2024), https://www.politico.com/news/2024/10/12/trump-racist-rhetoric-immigrants-00183537, accessed 11 May 2025

[130] Primary Research: Focus Group, Female

[131] J.-W. van Prooijen & G. Spadaro & H. Wang, 'Suspicion of Institutions: How Distrust and Conspiracy Theories Deteriorate Social Relationships, *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 43/65 (2022) https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2021.06.013, accessed 13 March 2025

[132] K. Ludwig, 'The Scapegoat', *Augustana College*, (2016), https://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1005&context=geifmanprize, accessed 5 June 2025

[133] Communication Theory, 'The Narrative Paradigm', *Communication Theory* (6 January 2014) https://www.communicationtheory.org/the-narrative-paradigm/, accessed 20 April 2025

[134] Primary Research: Focus Group, Female

[135] L. Griffin, 'The Rise of a Conspiracy Candidate' The Conversation, (20 September 2016), https://theconversation.com/the-rise-of-a-conspiracy-candidate-65514, accessed 13 March 2025

[136] J.-W. van Prooijen & G. Spadaro & H. Wang, 'Suspicion of Institutions: How Distrust and Conspiracy Theories Deteriorate Social Relationships, *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 43/65 (2022) https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2021.06.013, accessed 13 March 2025

Generally, conspiracy theories are propagated by the marginalised as a 'weapon of the powerless' to hold the powerful to account[137]. Professor Nick Enfield suggests that individuals are "fond of narratives that not only validate their sense of powerlessness, but promise to correct it"[138], which highlights the psychological[139] appeal of conspiracy theories in that they offer a sense of agency in a society which has previously disregarded their people[140]. For example, the hyper-partisan, far-right QAnon movement in the USA gained traction among individuals who felt disempowered and distrustful of mainstream institutions[141]. For many followers, QAnon became a way not just to challenge institutional authority, but also to reassert control in a world where they felt powerless[142]. Therefore, for institutions to effectively counter the spread and influence of conspiracy theories and their byproducts, they must address the underlying driver of distrust by delivering on promises that meaningfully enhance their citizens' quality of life[143]. The regaining of trust can be seen in New Zealand's response to the COVID-19 pandemic under Jacinda Ardern, which prioritised transparent communication and community engagement, causing 83% of citizens to trust their government, a major increase from the previous year[144]. Only by recognising that "trust goes both ways"[145] can institutions foster "a new culture of directness and honesty", limiting the consumption of conspiracy theories and reclaiming narrative authority[146].

---

[137] Z. Gorvett, 'What We Can Learn from Conspiracy Theories', *BBC* (24 May 2020) https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20200522-what-we-can-learn-from-conspiracy-theories, accessed 29 January 2025

[138] Primary Research: Expert Interview with Professor Nick Enfield

[139] K. Douglas & R. Sutton & A. Cichocka, 'The Psychology of Conspiracy Theories', *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 26/538 (2017) doi: 10.1177/0963721417718261, accessed 13 April 2025

[140] L. Griffin, 'The Rise of a Conspiracy Candidate' *The Conversation*, (20 September 2016), https://theconversation.com/the-rise-of-a-conspiracy-candidate-65514, accessed 13 March 2025

[141] Anti-Defamation League, 'QAnon', *ADL*, (4 May 2020), https://www.adl.org/resources/backgrounder/qanon, accessed 7 June 2025

[142] D. Bessner & A. A'Lee Frost, 'How the QAnon Cult Stormed the Capitol', *Jacobin*, (19 January 2021), https://jacobin.com/2021/01/q-anon-cult-capitol-hill-riot-trump, accessed 7 June 2025

[143] Edelman, 2025 Edelman Trust Barometer Global Report, (23 January 2025) https://www.edelman.com/sites/g/files/aatuss191/files/2025-01/2025%20Edelman%20Trust%20Barometer%20 Global%20Report_01.23.25.pdf, accessed 17 April 2025

[144] Colmar Brunton, 'Waka Kotahi Stakeholder Survey August 2020', *Colmar Brunton*, (August 2020) <https://www.nzta.govt.nz/assets/About-us/docs/Waka-Kotahi-NZ-Transport-Agency-Stakeholder-survey-full-re port-2020.pdf> accessed 7 June 2025

[145] Primary Research: Focus Group, Female

[146] Primary Research: Expert Interview, Professor Nick Enfield

To regain trust from younger generations, institutions must commit to long-term transparency, accountability and open communication across multiple generations to break the positive feedback loop that sustains conspiracies[147]. Professor Nick Enfield shares insight that "governments no longer have [the ability] to tell a story and have complete control over it", due to the fragmentation of societies in which information is decentralised and conspiratorial discourse is illuminated[148]. As trust in institutions declines and alternative ideologies gain traction, the power and authority of governments are undermined, heightening the need for them to "be straight [and] direct"[149] with their citizens[150]. Generation Z, having been raised amongst a time of mass media and digital overload, has developed scepticism shaped by their frequent and often passive consumption of conspiracy theories[151]. Conversely, Generation X grew up in a "culture of trust" where information sources were centralised due to political stability, allowing institutions to control dominant narratives[152]. Focus group participants stated that the government is "too far gone and there is nothing else they can do that could regain [Generation Z's] trust"[153], reflecting the widespread cynicism which undermines political engagement. To remedy this, clear and honest communication, which is not "cooked up...by spin doctors"[154] would ensure the equal representation of citizens in decision-making processes, limiting the environments for conspiracy theories to breed in[155]. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, governments initially advised the public that masks were unnecessary, a claim later revealed to be intended to preserve supplies for essential workers, influencing the perception that information is being manipulated by

[147] Edelman, 2025 Edelman Trust Barometer Global Report, (23 January 2025), https://www.edelman.com/sites/g/files/aatuss191/files/2025-01/2025%20Edelman%20Trust%20Barometer%20 Global%20Report_01.23.25.pdf, accessed 17 April 2025

[148] Primary Research: Expert Interview, Professor Nick Enfield

[149] Primary Research: Expert Interview, Professor Nick Enfield

[150] J.-W. van Prooijen & G. Spadaro & H. Wang, 'Suspicion of Institutions: How Distrust and Conspiracy Theories Deteriorate Social Relationships, *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 43/65 (2022) https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2021.06.013, accessed 13 March 2025

[151] Primary Research: Questionnaire, Q24

[152] Primary Research: Expert Interview, Professor Nick Enfield

[153] Primary Research: Focus Group, Male

[154] Primary Research: Expert Interview, Professor Nick Enfield

[155] J.-W. van Prooijen & G. Spadaro & H. Wang, 'Suspicion of Institutions: How Distrust and Conspiracy Theories Deteriorate Social Relationships, *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 43/65 (2022) https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2021.06.013, accessed 13 March 2025

institutions[156]. However, the future challenge lies in whether these efforts can overcome decades of mistrust[157] and whether people are "able to cope with that"[158].

In an era oversaturated with media and misinformation, conspiracy theories have flourished by offering emotionally compelling narratives that validate feelings of powerlessness, creating "bizarre autocratic dysfunction"[159]. To gain support, political figures exploit these dynamics, often bypassing facts in favour of fiction[160]. Therefore, institutions are urged to uphold meaningful promises with open communication and transparency to restore credibility[161] and to terminate their "failure of leadership"[162]. Only by addressing the root causes of distrust can institutions begin to "reclaim narrative authority"[163] and restore long-term social conformity[164].

---

[156] Primary Research: Expert Interview, Professor Nick Enfield

[157] J.-W. van Prooijen & G. Spadaro & H. Wang, 'Suspicion of Institutions: How Distrust and Conspiracy Theories Deteriorate Social Relationships, *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 43/65 (2022), https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2021.06.013, accessed 13 March 2025

[158] Primary Research: Expert Interview, Professor Nick Enfield

[159] J. Orlowski (dir.), The Social Dilemma [film], (Netflix, 9 September 2020)

[160] L. Griffin, 'The Rise of a Conspiracy Candidate' *The Conversation*, (20 September 2016), https://theconversation.com/the-rise-of-a-conspiracy-candidate-65514, accessed 13 March 2025

[161] J.-W. van Prooijen & G. Spadaro & H. Wang, 'Suspicion of Institutions: How Distrust and Conspiracy Theories Deteriorate Social Relationships, *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 43/65 (2022), https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2021.06.013, accessed 13 March 2025

[162] J. Orlowski (dir.), The Social Dilemma [film], (Netflix, 9 September 2020)

[163] Primary Research: Expert Interview, Professor Nick Enfield

[164] J.-W. van Prooijen & G. Spadaro & H. Wang, 'Suspicion of Institutions: How Distrust and Conspiracy Theories Deteriorate Social Relationships, Current Opinion in Psychology, 43/65 (2022), https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2021.06.013, accessed 13 March 2025

Conclusion

All conspiracy theories, from faked moon landings to mind-controlling 5G networks, flourish when trust collapses. To rectify this, institutions must take action to restore trust, or else the positive feedback loop in which conspiracy theories thrive will continue to undermine their credibility.

By validating my hypothesis that the consumption of conspiracy theories in the media leads to decreased institutional trust, my PIP allowed me to understand the full gamut of conspiracy theories, and not exclusively their negative impacts, as the media often portrays. Through the identification and acknowledgement of my biases, I uncovered the positive and negative impacts of conspiracy theories, leading to my ability to make an informed judgement on the impacts of conspiracy theories.

Chapter one investigated how the digital age has impacted the spread of conspiracy theories through the use of algorithm-driven overconsumption of conspiratorial content, proving highly resistant to institutional interference. Chapter two explored how scepticism crystallises into an impenetrable force and fuels political polarisation. Chapter three's future-focused outlook, proved the media's integral relationship with the perpetuation of conspiracy theories, ultimately exposing the consequences if action is not taken. This topic was highly relevant to fuelling the digital acceleration of conspiracy theories, the erosion of credibility of once-trusted sources and the struggle to rebuild public confidence, driving people into ideological echo chambers and intensifying political and social polarisation.

In the creation of the PIP, time was of the essence, so if I were to complete the PIP again, I would allot more time for editing and refining my work. Further, I would have attempted to expand the realm of my primary research beyond my geographical location to gain further generalisability and applications to other contexts. Additionally, there were limitations due to the word count, and I found it difficult to express myself within them, leading to a great deal of time spent editing and refining my entire PIP, a valuable skill in itself, and making my writing more effective within the allotted word limit.

Completing this PIP has been a journey, expanding my knowledge in the social and cultural aspects of life regarding media and political polarisation, echo chambers, and the impact of conspiracy theories. Through this investigation, I have gained a newfound understanding of the interplay between my worldview and identity, deepening my empathy for people with differing ideologies, allowing me to flourish as a researcher and as an individual. Thus, through the research process, it can be concluded that rebuilding public trust and confidence in institutions is crucial for the stability of democratic societies and the effectiveness of governance. Institutions must acknowledge failures and actively change with the public to regain their trust. If this is unable to happen, the positive feedback loop of conspiracy theories will continue to occur, further polarising the societal and political spheres and reinforcing echo chambers in physical and digital spaces.

Institutions must change.

Or else.

Primary Annotated Bibliography

Before release, the questionnaire included 20 questions that were sent out to three other society and culture students and the supervising teacher. These students and the teacher piloted, gave feedback and helped edit the questionnaire to ensure that it aligned with the PIP's hypothesis. This was extremely helpful in data collection and helped to gain clarity on the topic itself, ensuring it achieved its intended purpose, which was integral for the success of the final PIP. After the recommended editing and feedback were included in the questionnaire, it was sent out for the public to fill out. After it was published, no more edits were made to the PIP apart from minor grammar, spelling and punctuation errors, which were not fixed during piloting. These mistakes may have led to varied answers because of these discrepancies.

The purpose of the questionnaire was to conduct an initial survey of both Generation X and Z and their beliefs, values and norms, which were used to shape the foundation of both primary and secondary research in the PIP, enabling the researcher to further narrow the research question and hypothesis. The purpose was successfully achieved in the analysis of the raw data and integration of such data into the PIP.

The questionnaire's results reveal widespread distrust, especially towards mainstream news sources, highlighting the roles of algorithms, echo chambers and sensationalism in shaping belief systems and ideologies. This highlights the idea that revealed a highly emotional and personal interaction with distrust of mainstream news and media, which differs from the secondary research that linked the decrease of trust in society to institutional decline and digital overexposure. Additionally, the consensus of the questionnaire is that institutions are becoming increasingly untrustworthy to individuals as they serve their vested interests.

The final questionnaire included 24 questions involving a range of qualitative and quantitative, closed and open-ended questions, which included: *'Which of the following would make a conspiracy theory more believable/appealing?'* and *'How often do you come across conspiracy theories on your social media?'*. All quantitative questions included a Likert scale (strongly disagree to strongly agree or scale from 1-5). All 24 questions were targeted towards Generation Z and Generation X; if other generations fulfilled the

questionnaire, their responses were excluded from the data used in the final PIP to ensure that only the generations that were being studied were considered, increasing the validity of the research method. At the start of the questionnaire, there were questions to allow comparisons between Generation X and Generation Z, genders (female/male/other), religious beliefs (yes/no) and education. While this will be the most useful in my first and second chapters, *'Clickbait, Chaos and Conspiracies'* and *'Power, Paranoia and Perception'*, it has also provided a general understanding of broad societal views and context, which proved to be essential to all research and writing of the PIP.

A large majority of the questionnaire was answered well. However, due to the self-reporting nature of some of the questions, they required a certain degree of self-awareness to be answered well, such as *'If you were faced with strong evidence for/against a conspiracy theory, how likely would you be to believe what is being presented?'*. Due to the self-awareness that was needed for these types of questions, these questions were not very well answered, which shows a wide range of results that were not included in the writing of the PIP. Since the answers may have been skewed due to this, this lowers the reliability and accuracy of the questionnaire. Additionally, even though the survey was anonymous, there may have been a degree of social desirability bias in the answers given. Additionally, there may have been a lack of self-awareness or untruthful answers, which would have further skewed the results. However, this was minimised through the use of anonymous questions and answers, with the only personal information linked to participants being their generation, gender, education and presence of religion, thus making their answers detached from their person.

The reliability and accuracy were further impacted by the misunderstanding of questions due to syntax errors, difficult terminology and more, which was largely mitigated through rigorous editing processes and the defining of new or unfamiliar words. During the writing and editing process there careful actions were taken to ensure clear and concise questions. If miscommunication occurred and participants could not answer the question to the intended effect, there would be a reduction in the validity of the questionnaire. Since the participants of the study were presumed not to be experts in the topic of conspiracy theories, their answers are expected to have been based on surface-level or completely uneducated judgements, decreasing the reliability of the questionnaire. Since the PIP focuses on societal perceptions,

including individual ones, this uneducated viewpoint became a very important part of the writing process, as it allowed for the representation of individual and collective worldviews.

Further, it was difficult to maintain a gender balance, with 62% of respondents being female and 38% being male. Additionally, generation balances, with 70% being Generation Z and 30% being Generation X, were hard to maintain due to the researcher's limited access to older generations. This would have been due to the population who were both willing to do the questionnaire and had access to it, aligning with the distribution of users on social media.

As the questionnaire was mostly limited to the micro and meso spheres of the researcher, the results are not necessarily indicative of broader populations and may lack the generalisability and applicability. Additionally, deciding where to publish the questionnaire was a challenge, but in the end, *Facebook, Instagram* and *Snapchat* were chosen, and 93 valid responses were collected. This questionnaire was very useful in obtaining opinions of the general public, but for universal applicability, a larger sample size and higher diversity would increase its reliability and validity.

Although impartiality was the focus of the questionnaire, the researcher's bias may have affected the reliability of the questionnaire results and how the data were used in the PIP, such as the data chosen to use in the PIP, which could have been related to selection bias. As this methodology was the first research (apart from secondary) to be conducted, bias and adequate knowledge about the topic were issues that may have decreased the validity and reliability of the method.

Although it was successful in investigating broad societal views, the questionnaire would need to be more in-depth and nuanced to gain further insight into the topic. This would be done through a larger sample size, which contained a variety of different people to gain a holistic understanding.

Expert Interview

The expert interview was conducted with the *University of Sydney* Professor of Linguistics and Social Sciences, Professor Nick Enfield. By answering prepared questions, he provided insight into the impact of conspiracy theories and their relation to institutional trust. The purpose of the interview was to gain a deeper and expert understanding of the rise of conspiracy theories, how they impact institutional trust and how institutions may rebuild trust in society (especially in the context of younger generations), which are the three key elements of the chapters.

To gain the interview, the researcher investigated news articles on university pages, journal websites and news sources. After a few individuals were chosen from their articles, which were chosen due to their location, publication in conspiracy theory-related papers and other sources, six people were emailed about expert interviews. Due to time zones, non-replies and lack of knowledge on the specific topic, only two potential interviewees were possible to interview.

Professor Nick Enfield was ultimately chosen due to his article *'Navigating the post-truth debate: some key coordinates'* on *The Conversation*, an academic news and article source authored by university scholars. His article investigates what counts as factual information by exploring why falsehoods flourish, arguing that institutional distrust needs to be fixed, which has direct applications in the PIP.

The information initially given was limited, with just the premise of the PIP, a quick bio on the researcher and the interview questions included. Most of all, the importance of an in-person or *Zoom* interview was emphasised, due to the limitations of online and email-based communication. The interview took place over one hour of *Zoom,* which proved to be a difficult platform to use due to its time restrictions. However, since *Zoom* has a function to record clear audio as an MP4 file, it proved very helpful in making a transcript and analysing data.

There were 14 questions, including: *'How has news saturation and media distrust influenced the rise of conspiracy theories, particularly in the last 20 years?'* and *'To what extent are*

conspiracy theories an expression of powerlessness in the face of institutional failures?'. These questions mostly targeted chapters two and three (*'Power, Paranoia and Perception'* and *'Repair, Reassurance and Redemption'*), allowing for the investigation into institutional trust and the proposed methods of rebuilding this trust. The questions focused on gaining qualitative insight into the subject matter.

This methodology was highly useful in learning how conspiracy theories impact people in a concise yet conceptual way. However, the limitations of this were time restrictions (due to busy schedules), a lack of prior knowledge of the topic (from the interviewer) despite other research and possible biases from both the interviewer and interviewee, although these were mitigated through lengthening of time during the interview, the researcher continuing to educate themselves on the topic and the awareness and acknowledgement of possible biases so as not to affect the reliability and validity of the PIP's research.

The expert interview is invaluable not only in the formation of the PIP, but into the holistic understanding of the entire topic. While the interviewee offered explanations relating to the micro and macro world in the interview, the interaction of conspiracy theories with the meso world was not discussed in depth, and thus may lack the generalisability and applicability to other regions of the world that other research methods may have.

Because the interviewee was a member of Generation X, there may be some generational bias present in how he viewed the current landscape of conspiracy theories in the media. This may include framing Generation Z as especially vulnerable to conspiracy theories.

Despite the limitations, the interview was invaluable in the academic credibility and sophistication it presented to the PIP, supporting the secondary and other primary methodologies that lack academia and informed opinions, such as the focus group and questionnaire. An expert interview as a primary research method has been an integral part in gaining a cross-generational component as well as an expert's opinion on the topic, allowing for easily digestible and thorough explanations of the content regarding the past, present and future implications.

Focus Group

Conducted 24th of March 2025

The focus group was conducted with 15 Generation Z participants, 8 females and 7 males, with an age range of the participants was 17-26 years old. The purpose of the focus group was to enhance the cross-cultural component of the PIP, having a Generation Z perspective in the primary integration, since most secondary research would have been from Generation X and Y researchers.

Spanning over 40 minutes, the focus group was difficult to run as some Generation Z students did not demonstrate the maturity necessary for the process. This may have been because of the satirical nature of some of the stimuli, which made many students talk out or interrupt the process. Due to this, many were less vocal, highlighting the unintentional selection bias in the group discussion sections. This was mitigated through the worksheet, which allowed all participants to be equally heard in that section. Further, the inherent bias towards the favoured results of the focus group and the opinions of the focus group allowed these more vocal students to often have their opinions shown for often and thus may have persuaded others to their viewpoint, although this was attempted to be minimised.

In the first part of the focus group, a slideshow with various stimuli, which included quotes, images and questions relating to conspiracy theories, was presented. Additionally, a worksheet was given to the group, utilising a Likert scale (Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree and a scale from 1-5) to reduce subjectivity. To expand on these answers, the worksheet also included short answer questions that related to a Likert scale question, usually asking why they thought this or to expand on their answer. In the second part of the worksheet, participants were asked to circle all parts of a news source that appeared to be fake or unreliable. The worksheet was collected and the parts of the news source that were not reliable were explained, including a group discussion on reliability, allowing for the understanding that not all Generation Z members were as digitally literate as they thought they were, which was a key point in chapter one ('*Clickbait, Chaos and Conspiracies*') of the PIP.

There were 11 additional questions to the worksheet given at the start of the focus group, which included *'As a young person, how do you believe the government can help to regain the trust of your generation?'* and *'What would make you believe in a conspiracy theory?'.*

Apart from the questions indicated with a Likert scale, all questions were open-ended, and participants were encouraged to give detailed answers. This blending of qualitative and quantitative research allows for the triangulation of findings within the focus group and increases the validity of the findings.

Limitations when answering the questions were illuminated when opinions on topics were elicited when asking questions such as *'As a young person, how do you believe the government can help to regain the trust of your generation?'* and *'What would make you believe in a conspiracy theory?'* due to their largely subjective nature. Just like the questionnaire, the focus group required a certain level of self-awareness and self-reporting, which may have decreased the reliability and accuracy of the research methodology. Additionally, due to the public nature of the focus group, social desirability bias was present in the group. Although the focus group was successful in the gathering of qualitative and quantitative primary data of quotes and statistics, it was limited to the age, location and demographics of the researcher, as it was done in a school setting.

Moreover, the ethnicity of the focus group was 93% white, and 80% grew up in Australia, restricting the intended diverse perspective. Thus, both the applicability and generalisability of the focus group are limited beyond the scope of the researcher's age, race, location, socio-economic status, etc.

This focus group allowed for an in-depth analysis and discussion of how conspiracy theories and the micro world interact, enabling a wide range of opinions around politics, gender and race. This focus group is primarily helpful in the first chapter of my PIP, allowing for the analysis of past and future implications of conspiracy theories, complementing the other primary and secondary research components.

Personal Reflection

Written 24th of March 2025

The personal reflection was useful in discovering my perspective on conspiracy theories and my interactions with the topic. To showcase the cross-cultural component of my PIP, my Generation Z perspective is an invaluable resource in recognising my interactions with social media, news sources and conspiracy theories within the micro, meso and macro world.

Given the fact that the personal reflection is an opinionated medium, bias was inevitable in its creation, but this was minimised through secondary research, which educated me in the objective 'truth' of what conspiracy theories are about. Additionally, I also recognise that I have an inherent interest in conspiracy theories from the start, which could cause certain problems or points of the topic to be not explored due to my viewpoint on them, but this was mitigated through the investigation of secondary research instead of just from personal experience and knowledge.

In capturing my perspective on conspiracy theories, I utilised a cross-generational comparison in my own life (Generation Z) and my parents (Generation X), highlighting the differences in their experiences and deepening the cross-cultural component of the PIP. While this personal reflection was a valuable resource in consolidating my knowledge, triangulating the PIP and the integration and synthesis of four primary research methods and secondary research, acknowledging my inevitable biases is essential. To successfully integrate my personal reflection into my PIP, I guided its structure on the PIP's chapters, allowing for application in every part of the PIP. While it was only used directly in the PIP a few times, the personal reflection was an essential part of the PIP writing process as it allowed me to gain my own viewpoint of the topic, which guided the voice and subjectivity of the PIP.

As this personal reflection is used to illustrate my individual views on the topic, given my research and personal experiences, there are bound to be validity and reliability issues. This may include having contradictory information that is commonly found in literature, exploring a nuanced topic without it being fully explored in research or including too much of my opinion in the reflection. This was mitigated through extensive research into the topics. Additionally, as this was the last primary research method to be conducted, hours of research

worth of knowledge on conspiracy theories were applied to it and thus increased the reliability and validity.

However, as this reflection was personal, these limitations may strengthen it as a research methodology because of its strongly opinionated nature. While it does strengthen the cross-cultural component of my PIP, the information found in the personal reflection does not reflect universality, as it is a reflection of my personal beliefs and values. Personal reflection as a primary research method has been extremely important in the triangulation and synthesis of my PIP. So, although biased, it allowed for my thoughts on the topic to be integrated with my other research methods.

Secondary Annotated Bibliography

Journals

Blake, E., 'Conspiracy Theories Thrive on YouTube, New Study', *The University of Sydney*, (5th of October 2022),
https://www.sydney.edu.au/news-opinion/news/2022/10/05/conspiracy-theories-thrive-on-youtube-social-media-expert.html **accessed 15 April 2025**

Elissa Blake's article '*Conspiracy Theories Thrive on YouTube, New Study'* investigates over 38,000 comments on *YouTube* focused on the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting how conspiracy theories dominated most discussions on the platform. This article further explores the minimal moderation of *YouTube*'s comment sections, where users construct and disseminate conspiratorial content, emphasising the need for improvement in content moderation to address the spread of misinformation and conspiracy theories. The research methods across this review article include data collection, topic modelling and content analysis, which proved to be suitable for the subject matter. The authors of this article are from Australian Universities (mainly Queensland), whose research provides valuable insights into the dynamics of online misinformation. These statistics and concepts were useful when writing the first and second chapters of the PIP due to their reference to how media shapes the eroding trust of institutions. Since it is a review, the article includes heavy reliance on the *Harvard Misinformation Review* article '*Where conspiracy theories flourish: A study of YouTube comments and Bill Gates conspiracy theories*, adding to the reliability and credibility of the *University of Sydney* article. By summarising this peer-reviewed study published at the *Harvard Kennedy School,* a team of researchers from the *University of Sydney* and *Queensland University of Technology* conducted research through the use of rigorous methodologies, and thus the article is reliable. Due to its publication in the *University of Sydney*'s 'News and Opinions', and its reference to the aforementioned study, the research used appropriate research methods and 38,000+ *YouTube* comments, and the validity was high. In publishing, Elissa Blake, the primary author of the article, acknowledges her biases and declares no potential conflicts of interest in the research, authorship, and/or publication of the article (as stated at the end of the article). However, the original authors of the non-review article from *Harvard Misinformation Review* may have had undisclosed bias that impacted their research, thus impacting this review article's bias. Due to its focus on science communication through simplified concepts and ideas, the intended audience of this

review article is the general public. However, it is mostly focused on internet users and educators and students who study this topic. Overall, the article presents a compelling and well-written argument that, through the mitigation of biases and the use of research methods, introduces a reliable and valid argument that is sustained throughout.

Bowes, S. & Costello, T. & Tasimi, A., 'The Conspiratorial Mind: A Meta-Analytic Review of Motivational and Personological Correlates', Volume 149 Issue 5, *American Psychological Association,* **(26 June 2023),** https://www.apa.org/pubs/journals/releases/bul-bul0000392.pdf **accessed 21 January 2025**

Shauna Bowes, Thomas Costello and Arber Tasimi's article *'The Conspiratorial Mind: A Meta-Analytic Review of Motivational and Personological Correlates'* addresses the widespread nature of conspiracy theories. By identifying the key motivations for belief, namely epistemic, existential and social (which are explained in-depth), the authors explain the concept of conspiracy theories in-depth and allows for a breadth of new understanding Additionally, correlates of perceived threats, intuitive thinking, feelings of superiority, unusual beliefs, etc., were also investigated, highlighting the psychological appeal to conspiracy theories beyond the factors of fear and distrust. This article not only helped to gain an understanding of the topic, but also the broader implications and causes of conspiracy theories, and was most useful in chapters one and two due to their focus on belief systems and adherence to conspiracy theories. In this meta-analysis, there is an interaction between motivational and personological characteristics that has not been studied before. While specific details of the author are not detailed in the article, their collaboration in this meta-analysis indicates their expertise in the psychological field and their affiliation with related academic institutions. As specified in the title, a meta-analysis of secondary sources utilised to examine factors of conspiracy belief. This includes a content analysis, assessment of heterogeneity (between data sets and studies), and the evaluation of biases in these sources. This rigorous methodological approach allows the authors and readers to gain a nuanced and complex understanding of the subject matter and the interplay between the variables studied. As this was one of the first articles explored, it shaped the majority of the PIP, but mainly in chapters one and two, where motivations and trust were more closely examined. This article was central to the writing of the PIP due to its all-encompassing meta-analytic style; however,

it was only directly referenced in chapters one and two. Due to the wide variety of resources and references (over 170) used throughout the meta-analysis, continuities, consistencies and themes were found throughout the topic. Thus, this strengthens the validity and reliability of the article. Additionally, this article may be subject to publication and selection biases and may not represent all populations equally due to location and language barriers and unintentional biases. However, due to the large sample size (almost 160,000) and more than 50 variables examined, this bias is mitigated and is shown to be applicable in many regions of the world. Due to its advanced statistical models and tests run to produce these results, there is an assumed familiarity with concepts in the field, and thus the intended audience for this meta-analysis is academic researchers and scholars in psychology or related fields (such as sociology). Thus, since the article was highly credible in its analysis of the psychological roots of conspiratorial ideation, the article is academically rigorous and deeply insightful, which fits the purposes of the PIP.

Douglas, D. & Sutton, R. & Cichocka, A., 'The Psychology of Conspiracy Theories', *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, **Volume 26, Issue 6, (December 2017), pages 538-542, https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC5724570/ accessed 13 April 2025**

Karen Douglas, Robbie Sutton and Aleksandra Cichocka's article *'The Psychology of Conspiracy Theories'* explores the psychological motivations behind the belief in conspiracy theories by identifying the primary drivers as being epistemic, existential and social. These are primarily driven by the individual's desire to understand their environment, their need for safety and security, and to maintain a positive self-image for themselves and those around them. However, the authors state that while conspiracy theories may be a short-term response to the crisis, they do not always fulfil the long-term needs of individuals, encouraging further research into the area. In doing this, the researchers offer the psychological benefits of believing in conspiracy theories, namely a sense of identity, meaning, purpose and control, especially in periods of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, which was thoroughly examined. While presenting that belief in conspiracy theories fulfils certain psychological needs, the article also cautions about the harmful outcomes that they may lead to. For example, distrust in institutions and the justification of unhealthy behaviours. The authors bring a wealth of experience from both social and political psychology from the *University of Kent*, England, with all of their work being directly related to conspiracy theories. The article

utilised various forms of content analysis to provide structure and understanding of the psychological factors influencing conspiracy beliefs, highlighting areas where further research is needed. This article was mainly useful in chapter two of the PIP due to its focus on media and institutional trust, but also has applications in chapter three. Due to the peer review undergone for this article in the academic journal *Current Directions in Psychological Science,* which is known for its evidence-based research and extensive references to other reliable sources, and thus its validity, accuracy and reliability are firm. In its representation of evidence-based arguments and empirical studies, the article offers a balanced perspective of the topic by acknowledging both the psychological benefits and potential social harms of such beliefs. Due to the primary research methodologies referenced in the psychological studies, information and selective bias may be apparent throughout the article. However, the authors acknowledge these biases in the article, including any evidence and knowledge gaps and encourage broader investigation of the topic. Due to the advanced statistics and measures used in the article, its intended audience is scholars and academics. Thus, the article is highly informative, succeeding in consolidating a wide body of research into an easily digestible and coherent summary.

Enders, A.M. et al, 'The Relationship between Social Media Use and Beliefs in Conspiracy Theories and Misinformation', ***Political Behaviours***, **(2021), Volume 45, Issue 1, https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/34248238/ accessed 5 May 2025**

Adam M. Ender's article, *The Relationship Between Social Media Use and Beliefs in Conspiracy Theories and Misinformation*, explores how social media use correlates with the belief in conspiracy theories and misinformation from two national surveys conducted in 2020. The surveys conducted in the article suggest that addressing the underlying cognitive bias of social media use is crucial to understanding the interaction of conspiracy theories and the digital world. Additionally, the measurement and statistical analysis of key variables further highlight the importance of individual psychological factors in understanding the spread and adherence to conspiracy beliefs. This article was most useful in chapters one and two of the PIP, where the influence of social media on views and belief systems is investigated, adding a nuanced perspective to the chapters. Due to the variety of authors in both speciality and diversity, there is a wide investigation into the complex relationship between social media usage and the endorsement of conspiracy theories. As this article is

published in the peer-reviewed and reputable journal *Political Behaviours,* which uses large data sets from surveys, clear methodologies and statistical analysis, it is highly reliable for academic applications. Through its linking to many major aspects of cognitive science with actual beliefs and behaviours, there is a strong validity to the article. However, the results collected may lack applicability to other parts of the world, as both were conducted exclusively in the United States of America and may not have the ability to be generalised to other populations and samples. As with most sociological and psychological primary research, there is the potential for confirmation and selection biases in framing the conspiracy beliefs as being inherently negative and problematic. However, the authors attempt to minimise their biases through their acknowledgement of individual psychological differences by using data-driven analytics rather than psychological tests and ideological assertions, which strengthens the article's validity and decreases its potential for bias. The intended audience for this article is academic researchers and scholars in political science, communications and psychology due to their background in research and academia. Thus, this article offers a robust and data-driven analysis of variables and is highly relevant.

Enders, A.M. & Uscinski, J.E., 'Don't Blame Social Media for Conspiracy Theories, They Would Still Flourish without It', *The Conversation***, (18 June 2020), https://theconversation.com/dont-blame-social-media-for-conspiracy-theories-they-would-still-flourish-without-it-138635 accessed 17 April 2025**

Adam M. Enders and Joseph E. Uscinski's article, *'Don't Blame Social Media for Conspiracy Theories, They Would Still Flourish Without It',* explores how conspiracy theories are not a new phenomenon due to social media. By investigating historical conspiracies such as the JFK assassination, as prominent within society even without social media's influence, the authors highlight social media as non-essential for conspiracy belief. By contending that solely attributing the rise of conspiracy theories to social media is incorrect, the article explores the oversimplification of the issue and illustrates the root of the cause, which is broader societal distrust. Both authors of this article have published papers in the conspiracy theory field, with postgraduate degrees in politics and political psychology. This indicates that their expert insights into psychological mechanisms are highly reliable and thus important to the PIP. This article was valuable in understanding the origin of conspiracy theories away from just social media, especially in chapter three, but has applications across

the entire PIP and was vital in the understanding of the full gamut of the topic. While there are no primary research methods used in this article, it summarises and discusses findings from other research, including prior studies from the authors, to contextualise and interpret the data and trends being presented. Given the article's publication in *The Conversation*, a reputable and academic-based platform, and its authors who specialise in political psychology, its reliability is high. However, due to this background, there may be confirmation and selection of subtle biases in the article, which lends to previous papers written by the authors. The article draws upon longitudinal studies, polls, and other academic pieces of writing to support and synthesise its claims, yet given its lack of peer review, the article is a secondary, interpretative piece that limits its academic applicability. However, the article still presents a clear and cohesive argument sustained throughout and challenges societal perceptions with reliable data to support it, strengthening its validity. While the article draws on academic sources, this article's intended audience is the general public, especially internet users, due to its review style. Overall, the article's summaries of scholarly research on psychological, political and sociological processes present a digestible format for all individuals while still staying reliable, valid and largely bias-free, making it an integral article to the PIP.

Herold, M., 'The Impact of Conspiracy Belief on Democratic Culture: Evidence from Europe', *Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review***, (12 December 2024)** https://misinforeview.hks.harvard.edu/article/the-impact-of-conspiracy-belief-on-democratic-culture-evidence-from-europe/ **accessed 29 January 2025**

Maik Herold's article *'The Impact of Conspiracy Belief on Democratic Culture: Evidence from Europe'* investigates how the belief in conspiracy theories influences democratic attitudes and political behaviours across Europe, suggesting its applicability to other Western regions, such as Australia and the United States of America. The utilisation of data from a 2022 survey with over 20,000 participants across Europe finds that individuals with low satisfaction in their democracy and low institutional trust tend to turn to conspiracy theories. Additionally, this data also shows a correlation between conspiracy theories and the endorsement of hyper-partisan political beliefs and values. Maik Herold is a professor at the *Institute of Political Science* in Germany whose research encompasses political theory and the study of democracy, particularly on how political beliefs and ideologies influence cultures

and institutions (and how conspiracy theories relate to this). The article includes quantitative research through surveys, regression-based analysis and comparison to focus on specific conspiracy narratives and examining how belief correlates with democratic tendencies and perspectives. This article was valuable in the writing of the PIP in chapters two and three, where the reasons for belief in conspiracy theories and their effects, detached from social media, are investigated. Due to its peer-reviewed publication and its use of a larger and more diverse sample size, there are generalisable concepts and insights found in its synthesis, allowing for high reliability, validity and applicability in many other regions. However, due to the Eurocentric focus, these results may not be applicable in Eastern regions and other global contexts, resulting in a Western bias. To mitigate this, the author addresses these limitations and highlights the need for further research into other contexts when addressing conspiracy theories. The intended audience for this article is academics in political science, sociology and psychology due to its analysis with democratic theory. Thus, the article is a valuable contribution to the understanding of the impact of conspiracy theories in democratic culture and is very helpful to the PIP research.

Higdon, N., 'The Critical Effect: Exploring the Influence of Critical Media Literacy Pedagogy on College Students' Social Media Behaviours and Attitudes', Volume 14, Issue 1, *Journal of Media Literacy*, (2022), https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1344750.pdf accessed 8 May 2025

Nolan Higdon's journal article, *'The Critical Effect: Exploring the Influence of Critical Media Literacy Pedagogy on College Students',* investigates the importance of media literacy education, especially by focusing on college students and their perceptions and uses of social media. By conducting a qualitative study on 18 students from a Northern Californian university who participated in a 16-week course on media literacy, the researchers compared their pre- and post-test sources, which led to significant shifts in the students' attitudes, beliefs, and awareness of privacy concerns in the digital sphere. By underscoring the potential of critical media literacy, the researchers reflect on its importance and application in many other areas of study. The primary researcher, Nolan Higdon, specialises in media literacy and education, which explores integrating media literacy into higher education to foster informed and responsible social media usage among adults. This article uses a self-exploratory qualitative study, which allows for an in-depth examination of the impact of

social media from an insider's (the participant's) perspective. This article was primarily useful in chapter one and of the PIP, where the growing concerns of scholars and media literacy surrounding conspiracy theories are investigated. Due to its publication in the *Journal of Media Literacy* and the use of pre- and post-tests as a method of comparison, there is high transparency and reliability. This is additionally increased as the researcher includes the 13 questions used in these tests and the summary graphs of the data. This allows for the personal interpretation of the statistics by readers and encourages further application to other studies. However, for the article to be more reliable, a constant, controlled test should also be performed with a separate group of students who did not take the media literacy course. There is a clear methodology (as defined over a 16-week course, pre-test and post-test) and consistent measurement through surveys. However, due to its sample size of 18 students as a singular American university, there are limitations to its external validity, applicability and generalisation to broader populations. This may have resulted in very biased results from the location, socio-economic status, race, etc., of the sample size. Since the author had a dual role as both the educator and researcher of the entire project, the results may have been influenced and interpreted differently if there were many researchers present. This introduces a selection and confirmation bias whereby the researcher/educator of the media literacy course may have intentionally or unintentionally influenced the results of the research through the content covered. However, this was mitigated by the qualitative data sets and self-reported reflections from individuals and the researcher, which help to limit its bias. The intended audience for this article is academics and researchers in media literacy and education, educators and students of media, which may help to develop or support individual or collective media literacy via programs or self-initiative. Overall, this paper was acutely helpful in the background knowledge and creation of the PIP.

Johnson, N.F., et al, 'The Online Competition between Pro- and Vaccination Views' (2020), Volume 582, Issue 230, *Nature*, https://www.nature.com/articles/s41586-020-2281-1 accessed 7 June 2025

Neil F Johnson's article, *'The Online Competition between Pro and Anti-Vaccination Views'*, analyses the dynamics between opposing vaccination communities on *Facebook*, revealing that, although peripheral, these conspiracy communities are more influential than originally thought. By warning that, without intervention, 'anti-vaxxers' could dominate public

discourse within the decade, authors suggest that understanding the structure and dynamics of these communities is integral for future effective public health strategies and campaigns. The collective expertise of the authors in a wide variety of fields provides a robust foundation for this study through their use of computational methods to map and analyse the online interactions of the variables. The data collection and network analysis were used to achieve this, using over 1.3 million *Facebook* pages related to vaccination. This article was most useful in chapters one and two, where *Facebook* and anti-vaccination communities were examined, highlighting the ideological echo chambers in which members are entrapped. Published in *Nature*, a peer-reviewed journal, authored by a multidisciplinary team of reputable researchers and using a wide range of network analysis, this article is highly reliable and rooted in evidence. The research successfully addresses the influence of pro- and anti-vaccine communities, employs a robust methodology and supports findings with replicable data and clear metrics, enhancing its validity. However, by only examining public *Facebook* pages and groups, private and encrypted spaces where significant anti-vaccination activity occurs and other demographics that occur on platforms such as *WhatsApp*, *TikTok* and *YouTube* are not examined. Thus, there may be a selection bias between social media platforms. The intended audience for this article is academic researchers and scientists who study misinformation and social dynamics, but also public health officials who work on vaccination campaigns and how online social networks may affect these. Overall, the article is very useful to the PIP and is reliable, valid and has minimal biases.

Rao, H. & Greve, H.R., 'The Plot Thickens: A Sociology of Conspiracy Theories', *'Annual Review of Sociology'*, Volume 50, Issue 1, (2024), pages 191-207, https://www.annualreviews.org/content/journals/10.1146/annurev-soc-030222-031142 accessed 29 January 2025

Hayagreeva Rao and Henrich R. Greve's article *'The Plot Thickens: A Sociology of Conspiracy Theories'* examines how conspiracy theories emerge, spread and influence individuals and their society, emphasising the role of social structures, group identity and institutions in this. By arguing that conspiracy theories are not a social anomaly, but rather a natural phenomenon in human nature, the authors reflect the deep embedding of conspiracy theories in a social context and the challenging of hegemonic power structures. By underscoring the importance of understanding the motivations of conspiracy theories, the

authors address the effects of conspiracy theories on society and public discourse. The authors of this article have a variety of different publications relating to psychology, sociology and conspiracy theories, and are experts in their fields, making them well-qualified to provide a comprehensive review of the subject matter. The literature review and analysis style of articles enables synthesis of findings by identifying patterns, gaps and core themes across multiple studies. This article was mainly used in the writing of chapters one and two due to its focus on the role of institutions, but it also had applications in chapter one about ineffective censorship. Due to the peer reviews, rigorous academic standards of the *Annual Review of Sociology* and comprehensive analysis of a multiplicity of sources, this article is highly reliable and valid and draws on a wide variety of resources to achieve this. However, due to conflicts of interest regarding the topic, authors may have unintentional selection and confirmation bias in their research. The authors acknowledge the complexity of the topic, recognising the need for further research, thereby mitigating any potential biases. The intended audience is academic researchers in sociology, psychology and political science. Overall, this article is suitable for PIP.

Riemer, K. & Peter, S., 'Algorithmic Audiencing: Why We Need to Rethink Free Speech on Social Media', Volume 36, Issue 4, *Journal of Information Technology* (2021) https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/02683962211013358 accessed 7 April 2025

Kai Riemer and Sanda Peter's article '*Algorithmic Audiencing: Why We Need to Rethink Free Speech on Social Media'* explores the complexities of free speech in the context of social media, which are present and play a significant role in the development and identity of individuals by determining what content they see. The introduction of *'Algorithmic Audiencing'* suggests how algorithms create and amplify the echo chambers that shape the perceptions of many people, reinforcing the false consensus effect and influencing which voices are heard. Both of the authors are professors at the University of Sydney in emerging technologies, AI and media. By combining their technical insight, the authors discuss the influence of algorithms on public discourse, bringing their deep research background on the subject matter to the article. The authors critically analyse how social media algorithms have reshaped the concept of research by influencing whose speech is heard and how it spreads. While no quantitative data is being collected or analysed, the article is still relevant because its information is derived from media theory, sociology and political philosophy, and relies on

synthesis rather than testing a hypothesis. Due to its focus on media, this article was most useful in the chapter of the PIP, but it has applications in chapter two because of its investigation into belief systems and ideologies. Since the article was published in the *Journal of Information Technology,* a peer-reviewed journal that references a multiplicity of reputable sources, the reliability and validity of evidence and analysis can be ensured. However, while the authors present a critical perspective on algorithms, the information has a Western-focused bias and may not be applicable in Eastern countries with more censorship, such as China and North Korea. Although the authors acknowledge the complexity of the topic, highlighting the need for further, more diverse research. The intended audience of this article is academics and researchers who are studying media, information, digital communication and political science. Additionally, policy and legal makers of institutional bodies involved in technology regulation, free speech law and social media who explore how algorithms influence misinformation. Overall, for those examining online algorithms, this article is a thought-provoking contribution to academia.

Shifman, L., 'Memes in a Digital World: Reconciling with a Conceptual Troublemaker', *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication***, Volume 18, Issue 3, (2013), pages 362-377, https://academic.oup.com/jcmc/article/18/3/362/4067545 accessed 7 April 2025**

Limor Shifman's article *'Memes in a Digital World: Reconciling with a Conceptual Troublemaker'* examines the concept of a 'meme' within the context of digital culture, arguing for their complexity instead of the simple cultural units in which society portrays them. Shifman proposes the importance of the context, form and stance of memes by examining the 'Leave Britney Alone' meme, which demonstrates how memes function as broader social commentary and multifaceted communication technologies. This represents a profound critique and investigation of memes in the digital world. Limor Shifman is a Professor in the Department of Communication and Journalism at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem who specialises in digital media, popular culture and internet memes, specifically how they carry social meanings. In this article, qualitative content analysis and case studies were used on meme content to clarify the concept of memes and understand their role in digital culture and communication. Due to its specificity to meme and internet culture, this article was only useful in chapter one of the PIP, where the interaction of memes and satirical conspiracy theories was examined. The article's validity and reliability are enhanced by its

comprehensive analysis, acknowledging the complexity and multifaceted nature of the topic beyond the small scale of the article. Further, with the focus on the 'Leave Britney Alone' memes, the full diversity of meme culture is not fully represented. To remedy this, the researchers should explore a variety of different memes across different platforms, interpretations, languages and times. The reliability is supported by the peer review and publication in the highly academic *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*. However, there is a potential bias where the conclusions may be limited due to the specific focus of memes in Western, English-speaking countries. To mitigate this, various memes from different regions could be investigated to acknowledge multiple interpretations and languages. The intended audience of this article is academic researchers and scholars in the fields of media and communication studies, digital culture, internet studies and sociology, because it provides a foundational level of understanding of memes and offers further insight into the subject matter. Overall, the article clarifies ambiguous terms and concepts to provide a solid foundation for future research and study, and while not rooted in empirical research, it will balance conceptual evidence. However, as this article was written in 2013, it does not reflect more recent developments, as its case study is based on a meme from 17 years ago (2008).

van Prooijen, J.-W. & Spadaro, G. & Wang, H., 'Suspicion of Institutions: How Distrust and Conspiracy Theories Deteriorate Social Relationships', *Current Opinions in Psychology*, Volume 43, Issue 43, (2022), https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2352250X21000828, accessed 13 March 2025

Jan-Willem van Prooijen, Giuliana Spadaro and Haiyan Wang's article *'Suspicion of Institutions: How Distrust and Conspiracy Theories Deteriorate Social Relationships'* examines the effects of institutional distrust and conspiracy beliefs on social cohesion and argues that suspicion towards institutions not only erodes trust between institutions and the individual but also between ingroup cooperation, while simultaneously creating prejudice between social groups. The article highlights how conspiracy theories foster social fragmentation by undermining individual and collective trust and engagement with the political environment. All authors who contributed to the article are senior researchers in universities or institutions, holding postgraduate degrees. The author, Jan-Willem van

Prooijen, focuses on both theoretical integration and empirical work relating to conspiracy theories and their broader consequences. Due to his extensive research into the subject matter, all of van Prooijen's work is an integral piece of secondary research in the PIP, as it is interconnected in all aspects of the topics explored. The research methods of this article include literature synthesis and integration of theories from social psychology and political science to support its arguments. This article was used in all three chapters of the PIP, as the primary focus of the writing was the suspicion of institutions. Additionally, the article investigated the future implications and the possible rebuilding of trust was examined. However, due to its applications in all chapters of the PIP, this article was central to the writing due to its application to the foundational knowledge of the PIP and its research methodologies. This can be seen through the multiplicity of applicable and useful concepts and quotes that were used throughout the PIP. Due to its peer review and publication in the journal *Current Opinions in Psychology*, the prior reputability of the authors' work, and this article is recognised for its scholarly standards, elevating its reliability. The synthesis of primary and secondary research in the article provides a comprehensive understanding of the topic, enhancing the article's validity. However, there is no empirical evidence or data that presents the limits and scope of their findings, restricting the research applications and generalisability to other regions. Although there is a declaration of no conflicts of interest, the article focuses on the negative aspects of conspiracy theories, highlighting a small selection and/or confirmation bias within the research, reflecting the importance of diverse viewpoints in research. The intended audience of this article is academics and scholars in social psychology and political science, as it focuses on trust, institutional legitimacy, group dynamics and conspiracy theories. This interdisciplinary approach to conspiracy theories allows for extensive integration and applicability of research to the PIP. As this review offers a balanced, evidence-based perspective on the current research on this topic, it also invites scholars to debate the positives and negatives of the argument.

Reports

Australian Institute of Criminology, 'Exposure to and Sharing of Fringe or Radical Content Online Exposure to and Sharing of Fringe or Radical Content Online', (2024), https://www.aic.gov.au/publications/tandi/tandi705 accessed 17 April 2025

The Australian Institute of Criminology's report *'Exposure to and Sharing of Fringe or Radical Content Online Exposure to and Sharing of Fringe or Radical Content Online'* explores how Australians encounter and share fringe/radical content both online and offline. Since most content is accessed via mainstream media and social media posts, the study suggests restricting access to radical groups and material on these platforms could reduce intentional and unintentional exposure to fringe content. The *Australian Institute of Criminology* (AIC) focuses on collecting and analysing national criminological data to provide evidence-based research to government and policing agencies. The AIC uses large-scale surveys and statistical collections using the national census to measure unintentional and international exposure to fringe and radical content. This report is useful in the writing of chapters one and two, where a lack of institutional trust and exposure to fringe content is explored in both online and offline areas. As this report was published by a government body known for evidence-based research and peer review, it is highly reliable. The article's validity is supported by its use of structured survey data, in which the *Australian Institute of Criminology* concludes a multitude of reliable references, which ensures the findings were both accurate and valid around the topic of broader online behaviour. While there is minimal bias, there may be a subtle institutional perspective around the prioritisation of security and public policies. The intended audience of this report is government policy makers and law enforcement bodies who develop prevention strategies and policies in relation to content moderation. Thus, this report's comprehensive scope and clear focus on online behaviours offer valuable insights for policymakers, law enforcement and the PIP.

Colmar Brunton, 'Waka Kotahi Stakeholder Survey' (Colmar Brunton 2020) <https://www.nzta.govt.nz/assets/About-us/docs/Waka-Kotahi-NZ-Transport-Agency-Stakeholder-survey-full-report-2020.pdf> **accessed 7 June 2025**

Colmar Brunton's report, *'Waka Kotachy Stakeholder Survey'*, assesses its stakeholders' satisfaction and positive changes in their responses from 2019. By showcasing the persistent challenges, targeted improvements and communication with the public, Colmar Brunton shows the across-the-board improvement in the satisfaction of their stakeholders. This report was most useful in chapter three when the trust of the New Zealand government was assessed as an example of restorative trust in institutions. This website formed an example in chapter three where New Zealand increased their institutional trust. Conducted by Colmar Brunton, a reputable research firm with high methodological rigour and a representative sample size, the study showed high consistency and thus reliability, allowing for comparative analysis. The clear objectives, data-driven analysis and actionable outcomes allow for high validity to the report, providing strategic goals and areas of improvement to ongoing challenges. However, due to the self-reporting nature of the survey, there may be selection and social desirability biases that are apparent in the research. However, due to the nature of the sample and the high academic quality of the research, this was mitigated. The intended audience of this report is government officials and policymakers who evaluate the public sector performance and stakeholder engagement. Overall, this report's example of redemption of trust in New Zealand's governments and institutions was an important part of the PIP.

Edelman, 2025 Edelman Trust Barometer Global Report (23 January 2025) <https://www.edelman.com/sites/g/files/aatuss191/files/2025-01/2025%20Edelman%20Trust%20Barometer%20Global%20Report_01.23.25.pdf> **accessed 17 April 2025.**

Edelman's *'2025 Edelman Trust Barometer Global Report'* is a report from a public relations firm in Australia. In the surveying of over 33,000 individuals from 28 countries, the report investigates the decline in public trust globally in businesses, media and governments fueled by economic anxieties, systematic unfairness, economic inequalities and more. This corporate research project highlights the need for institutions to rebuild trust and credibility and address public concerns to mitigate this. This article was invaluable in the creation of the entire PIP, having applications in all three chapters and being fundamental to the preliminary

quantitative and qualitative research through its statistics and quotes. Edelman is a leading global communications firm that specialises in digital communications. The Annual Edelman Trust Barometer is a global survey that measures trust in institutions, brands, media and governments, that strives to understand trends and patterns around the world and suggest preventive strategies. This resource applies to the entire PIP due to its digital trust, institutional trust, and the future implications of conspiracy theories. Edelman's history of conducting annual trust surveys since 2001 highlights its consistent methodologies and its surveying of a multiplicity of diverse regions from across the entire world. These annual reports allow for continuities and changes to be shown in graphs, statistics and other formats whereby their reliability is ensured. In its survey of 33,000+ participants, 28 countries and 50+ variables, the generalisability of Edelman's findings is very high, increasing its validity. However, since there are so many translations of languages, there may be discrepancies in the way the questions are interpreted, which influences the report's validity and reliability. While the report is aimed to be a neutral assessment of global public trust, there could be discrepancies and inherent biases in the stakeholders, clients or individual participants of the survey and the corporation. There are countries from all regions of the world, such as South and North America, Africa, Oceania, Europe and Asia, so there is a high degree of universal applicability in the research. Additionally, due to the internet penetration discrepancies between different countries, a different number of people have access to the internet across the world, impacting the types of people (e.g. socio-economic status and location) who would be surveyed. This difference can be seen between third-world countries (such as Kenya, with 41% internet penetration) compared to first-world countries (such as the United Arab Emirates, with 100% internet penetration). While these concerns are important, Edelman's ethical biases are acknowledged, and many courses of action are taken to mitigate them, such as data cleaning. The intended audience of this institutional report is leaders and executives of institutions such as scientific bodies because of its insights to help guide decision making and strategies according to public sentiment. As we are living in an age of institutional fragility, leaders must rebuild trust, and this report helps individuals adequately do this.

Ludwig, K., 'The Scapegoat' (2016)

https://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1005&context=geifmanprize accessed 5 June 2025

Katherine Ludwig's report, *'The Scapegoat',* examines the persecution of individuals under Nazi Germany, highlighting the often overlooked struggles of the scapegoated communities, such as Jewish people and the LGBTQIA+ community. By illuminating Holocaust history, the report investigates the full gamut of the experiences of those affected by the Nazi party, underscoring the importance of acknowledging all victims of the Holocaust. Katherine Ludwig, when writing this report, was a first-year student at Augustana College who majored in Geology. In this paper, she studied the historical roots and motivations of antisemitism. The historical content analysis explores antisemitism through recurring themes throughout history. This report was primarily used in chapter three of the PIP, when examining the scapegoating of outgroups through the use of conspiracy theories. Although written by a student, *'The Scapegoat'* is well-researched and published through *Augustana Digital Commons* as part of the *Geifman Prize* in Holocaust studies, indicating its high academic rigour. By citing both primary and secondary sources, including testimonies and other articles, the reliability is high. By reporting on the victims of the holocaust and supporting its claims with historical evidence, the report highlights its validity. However, due to the report's focus on LGBTQIA+ suffering, there may be a bias against other parties, such as Jewish and disabled people. Further, by framing the report as highly influenced by modern social justice, there may be an oversimplification of the persecution of queer people and people of colour. As this report was submitted to a university, the intended audience of this report is history academics and scholars. Overall, this report was an adequate resource for synthesis in the PIP, especially when integrating contemporary examples of conspiracy theories in society.

SmartNews, 'Trust in the Media: Exploring Consumer Sentiment and Behaviour' (2025) https://assets.ctfassets.net/alwhqs3fp7nk/1l9f5OhC5fWENbbpAGUmDo/7dd225601a28032c2d8f5b271cf6ee57/SmartNews_Trust_Survey_March_2025.pdf **accessed 17 April 2025**

SmartNews' market news report, *'Trust in the Media: Exploring Consumer Sentiment and Behavior'*, explores how widespread distrust in social media, especially amongst content consumed primarily by Generation Z who are the least likely to verify the information they see on the internet, it most influenced by a media outlet's reputation, while the local news is most frequently shared content amongst many demographics. Additionally, it investigates how political and generational divides shape how people engage with news, including their likelihood to facilitate their own confirmation biases. This report was published by *SmartNews*, a news curation platform founded in Tokyo, Japan, which is dedicated to understanding media trust and opinions. In the report's primary research, there was an online survey of 1036 adults from the United States of America conducted from the 1st to the 11th of March 2025 to gain a full understanding of the consumer trust in media. This report was mostly useful in the creation of chapter two of the PIP, whereby Generation Z's tendency to question narratives, even when they form a reputable source, was investigated. Additionally, the trust that Generation Z and Generation X have was examined. Due to its transparent methodology and sample size of over 1,000 American adults, the article is reliable. However, since it is a one-time survey and not a recurring survey used to compare results over time, and is conducted by a private company, its findings may not be consistently reproducible as those from peer-reviewed sources from journals and government websites. Since the questions in the survey directly relate to trust in the media, they are strongly valid. Yet, due to its limited sample size being only from the United States of America, the results may not be applicable or generalisable in other regions. Since *SmartNews* is an aggregator, meaning they collect and distribute information and data, they may profit from this showcasing of 'groundbreaking' or statistically significant claims. Still, the report attempts to reduce bias through its range of demographic data and by avoiding largely subjective language. The intended audience of the report is users who are seeking a diverse, balanced and current news perspective on media and trust. Overall, this report is highly useful for the synthesis of the PIP, especially due to its generational focus.

Wardle, C. & Derakhshan, H., 'Information Disorder: Toward an Interdisciplinary Framework for Research and Policy Making', *Council of Europe* **(2017)** [https://rm.coe.int/information-disorder-toward-an-interdisciplinary-framework-for-res earc/168076277c](https://rm.coe.int/information-disorder-toward-an-interdisciplinary-framework-for-researc/168076277c) **accessed 14 May 2025**

Claire Wardle and Hossein Derakhshan's report, *'Information Disorder: Toward an Interdisciplinary Framework for Research and Policy Making'*, explores the three forms of an 'information disorder' (informative, disinformation and malicious), which are spread unintentionally, deliberately and through genuine content used as harmful (respectively). This shows how information is created, promoted, distributed and driven by political and social polarisation, warning how this may erode democratic participation and effectiveness, and public trust. To conclude, the authors urge institutions to utilise platform transparency and regulatory reforms that are coordinated across governments and other institutions. Claire Wardle (with a PhD in communication and political science) specialises in fact-checking and misinformation response, studying at the *Harvard Kennedy School*. Hossein Derakhshan studied sociology, media and communication at various universities, which brings an expert level of knowledge to the report. This report was most useful in chapter one of the PIP, where the broader social and cultural implications of this are the fueling of the information disorder of the internet and the damage to the epistemic foundation of the digital world was examined. Due to the fact that the report is peer-reviewed and references every statistic and example using reputable sources, the research is reliable. Additionally, due to its three-part taxonomy of informative, deformative and maladaptive information disorders, which is sustained throughout, there is a uniform framework by which the remainder of the research has increasing coherence and high repeatability for other sociological studies. By linking platform behaviours and theories to information disorders, the authors ensure a high validity with real-world concepts measured throughout. Additionally, the conclusions made can be generalised beyond a single cultural or political setting. Due to the publication in the *Council of Europe*, there may be a downplaying of the severity of state media control and censorship. This would lead to an institutional bias towards the *Council of Europe* so as not to tarnish their reputation. The intended audience of this report is policymakers and academics who study and are interested in media literacy and its application to the law and policymaking. Thus, this report was useful in the PIP.

News Articles

Bessner, D. & A'Lee Frost, A., 'How the QAnon Cult Stormed the Capitol', *Jacobin,*
(2021), https://jacobin.com/2021/01/q-anon-cult-capitol-hill-riot-trump accessed 7 June
2025

Daniel Bessner and Amber A'Lee Frost's magazine article *'How the QAnon Cult Stormed the Capitol'* explores the presence and influence of the QAnon conspiracy community and its adherents during the 2021 Capitol riot. By arguing that mainstream media and social media played a large part in the event, the researchers emphasise the movement's broad appeal beyond the traditional right-wing appeal. Daniel Bessner (PhD) is an associate professor at *Duke University* who is an expert in foreign agency and authoritarianism. Additionally, Amber A'Lee Frost is a cultural critic and author of *'Dirtbag: Essays'*, about socialism. This interdisciplinary blend of fields provides expert knowledge for the subject matter. By drawing from publicly available resources such as news reports and video footage, this article frames QAnon within broader historical themes such as cult behaviour, political populism and reactionary movements which characterise the conspiracy community. This news article was most useful in chapter three, where conspiracy theories are represented as weapons of the powerless and a tool for the outgroups of society to reassert control in their environment. Although published in a magazine, the article has established authorship and evidence-based source integration, which both support its claims and reliability. Due to these evidence-based claims and focused analysis on QAnon's role in the Capitol riot, the validity of the article is high, supported by specific examples and observations of identifiable events and statements. However, the use of negative language such as 'cult' to reflect QAnon's framing underscores the authors' beliefs and values, presenting their ideological bias towards the events and community. Additionally, due to the focus on QAnon's role in the Capitol riot, other factors and communities are underrepresented. Since the artist is published in a recognised "leftist"/liberal magazine, there may be confirmation and selection biases present, highlighting only the negatives of QAnon, due to their far-right wing affiliations. This news article's intended audience is the politically engaged, left-leaning readers who engage critically in the ideologies of conspiracy communities. Overall, this article informs, critiques and engages readers on how conspiracy movements reflect deeply societal failures rather than individual ideologies, accurately reflecting the subject matter of the PIP.

Collins, B., 'Coronavirus Conspiracy Theories Are Frustrating ER Doctors', *NBC News*, (6 May 2020),
https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/tech-news/what-are-we-doing-doctors-are-fed-conspiracies-ravaging-ers-n1201446?cid=eml_mrd_20200507&utm_source=Sailthru&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Morning%20Rundown%20Special%20Edition:%20The%20Coronavirus%20Crisis%2C%207%20May%202020 accessed 17 April 2025

Ben Collins' news article, *'Coronavirus Conspiracy Theories Are Frustrating ER Doctors',* discussed the frustration among E.R. doctors, nurses and practitioners that report patients as being influenced by misinformation and conspiracy theories and often distrusting medical advice, refusing treatments or demanding unproven medicines in favour of what they have seen online. This complicates care, endangers lives and stops practitioners from seeing other patients, highlighting how the spread of false information undermines the public health system and puts strain on the medical sector. Ben Collins is a technology and cybersecurity reporter for NBC News who is an expert in topics such as mis/disinformation, digital extremism and public health. By focusing on the impact of COVID-19 on conspiracy theories in medical fields, Collins' article is grounded in firsthand and expert insight while referencing medical practitioners. Collins utilises expert interviews from medical professionals to reveal emotional and ethical responses to conspiracy theories. Additionally, he integrates real-time descriptions of emergency room conditions through observations and secondary analysis. This was particularly useful in chapter three of the PIP, where this is a direct quote from the article explaining how it's not only social media that has "blood on their hands", but also the natural scepticism of humanity for the birth of conspiracy theories. As this article was published in *NBC News*, a mainstream news outlet with large editorial teams, peer-reviewing and rigorous research methods, it lends itself to a high level of reliability, especially considering its application and integration of both secondary research and primary research, whereby they interview doctors and use reliable sources. However, given the individualistic and journalistic nature and anecdotal structure of the article, this is a limit to the generalisability of the data, given that it is built from interviews rather than statistics and empirical data. This article is valid due to its depiction of real-world scenarios and its demonstration of the consequences of misinformation. However, due to the deeply subjective nature of the topic, without quantitative data, it is difficult to interpret trends, which limits the scope of the article. There is an apparent bias in the representation of conspiracy theories, in that they are dangerous and misleading, sympathising heavily with healthcare workers and

overlooking the reasons as to why people fall victim to conspiracy theories and how to help them out of it. The intended audience of this article is news consumers, specifically those who may believe or share their conspiracy beliefs with others, by challenging and correcting misinformation by raising awareness of how misinformation and conspiracy theories are directly affecting healthcare. Thus, through its overview, this article was very helpful in the formation of the base knowledge of the PIP.

Gorvett, Z., 'What We Can Learn from Conspiracy Theories', *bbc.com* (24 May 2020) https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20200522-what-we-can-learn-from-conspiracy-theories **accessed 29 January 2025**

Zaria Gorvett's news article, *'What We Can Learn from Conspiracy Theories',* explores how conspiracy theories reflect social anxieties and dynamics, illustrating that these theories emerge during times of crisis, serving as an attempt to mitigate fear and uncertainty. The article investigates the roots and appeal of conspiracy theories, suggesting that they offer valuable insights into collective fears and may help in developing strategies to address distrust. Zaria Gorvett is a senior journalist at the *BBC*, where she covers a range of topics including psychology, biology and environmental science. In her interdisciplinary background, Gorvett brings diverse experiences to inform her approach to conspiracy journalism and allows her to explore complex topics from multiple perspectives. The use of real-world examples and history includes case study examples to illustrate the key points and highlight themes throughout history. Additionally, by reviewing existing psychological theories, opinions, and academic and sociological studies, Gorvett brings a diverse perspective to the article. This article applies to chapters one and three of the PIP, given its focus on the media and the future implications of conspiracy theories. Since the news article was published on *BBC* (*British Broadcasting Corporation*) *News*, a globally respected media outlet known for its editorial and fact-checking standards, the reliability and credibility of the news article are very high. While not a journal article, the expert opinions and reliable secondary sources in the news article also add to its reliability. The news article provides relevant examples and insights into how conspiracy theories reflect societal and psychological trends, which align with already existing sources. Since it is not an academic paper, there is no methodological breakdown, detailed data or peer-reviewed research. Therefore, while there is limited academic applicability, there is high validity and reliability

in explaining public understanding. As a mainstream news source, there may be institutional or editorial biases in framing their institution positively and in how conspiracy theories are harmful and irrational. However, the article strives for objectivity by exploring why people believe in conspiracy theories rather than simply dismissing them as real or fake. As this article is easily accessible in language and ability to engage, the intended audience is the general public who is interested in conspiracy theories as a whole, or psychology and society. Overall, the article balances complex scientific and psychological concepts with a narrative, making it suitable for everyone, yet adequate for the PIP.

Griffin, L., 'The Rise of a Conspiracy Candidate', *The Conversation***, (20 September 2016), https://theconversation.com/the-rise-of-a-conspiracy-candidate-65514 accessed 13 March 2025**

Lauren Griffin's news article *'The Rise of a Conspiracy Candidate'* explores how United States President Donald Trump's 2016 election campaign and 2016-2019 presidency leveraged conspiracy theories to gain political traction and has further polarised the democratic and republican parties. The article argues that such leveraging of public fears and anxieties leads to the scapegoating of outgroups (for example, immigrants, democrats, etc.) and creates a politically polarised government where facts are undermined. Lauren Griffin is an Associate Professor of Sociology at the *University of Florida* who specialises in sociological analysis of conspiracy theories and the dynamics of political culture. The research methods used for this news article are a content analysis of Donald Trump's political campaigns, a case study of his candidacy and campaigns, and an integration of secondary sources. This article was mostly useful in chapter three of the PIP, where the future of conspiracy theories was explored, highlighting the positives of conspiracy theories in fostering quality of life and prosperity. Given its publication in *The Conversation*, a news source known for its evidence-based research and analysis by academics and experts in their field, such as Griffin, as an Adjunct Associate of Sociology at the *University of Florida*. Additionally, due to the real-world politics, events and quotes used in the article, they can be independently verified and lead to higher reliability. As the claims are consistent with other independent academic findings, the article is highly reliable. However, as it focuses on Donald Trump, his 2016 election campaign and presidency, there are limits to its applicability and generalisability to other contexts, especially in other political regions outside of the

United States of America. Although there is a critical tone of Donald Trump and his conspiracy-driven politics, suggesting ideological biases and not talking about the positives of this strategy. The intended audience of this article is the general public who are intellectually curious and interested in current affairs, but it targets left-wing individuals due to the critical nature of the article towards the American Republican Party. Overall, this article offers theoretical insight into conspiracy theories and the weaponisation of such topics.

Lorenz, T., 'Birds Aren't Real, or Are They? Inside a Gen Z Conspiracy Theory.' *The New York Times* (9 December 2021)
https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/09/technology/birds-arent-real-gen-z-misinformation.html**, accessed 7 June 2025**

Taylor Lorenz's news article, *'Birds Aren't Real, or Are They? Inside a Gen Z Conspiracy Theory'* explores the 'Birds Aren't Real' conspiracy theory as a satirical response to the proliferation of absurd theories. By adopting the premise that birds are not real but are instead surveillance drones the government uses to spy on the public, the movement aims to parody and critique the spread of misinformation. While some observers initially took the movement at face value, mainly older generations, the theory has been clarified as a performative social commentary, as the founder admitted he did not believe in the conspiracy. Taylor Lorenz, at the time of publication, was a technology columnist at the *New York Times* who studied political science at the *University of Colorado*, giving credibility and depth to the coverage of her article. Through her use of expert interviews (Peter McIndoe, creator of *Birds Aren't Real*), observation of rallies, signs and social media behaviour, and a social media content analysis on platforms such as *Instagram, TikTok* and *YouTube,* which analyses how conspiracy beliefs, however satirical, still gain traction and resonate with audiences. This article was helpful in the understanding of the satirical form of conspiracy theories, which have emerged as Generation Z's response to misinformation and was primarily used in chapter one for this purpose. Being published in the *New York Times* by an experienced journalist who performs comprehensive research, including interviews and firsthand accounts of the conspiracy theory, this article is highly reliable for both academic and journalistic standards. The accurate representation and contextual analysis of the article through statements from the conspiracy's founder and the insight into societal implications allow for a high validity of the article. There is a neutral and balanced perspective that acknowledges

both the humorous aspects and serious commentary on the state of misinformation online, limiting any bias. However, the focus on Generation Z lacks a balance in other generations and the possible implications the conspiracy may have for those demographics. This could be mitigated through the investigation of other generations. Additionally, there is an underrepresentation of the consequences of this theory and its misinterpretations by the public, which may have harsh consequences. The intended audience of this article is primarily the satirical believers of '*Birds Aren't Real'*, which includes social media users, but also may include parents and educators who attempt to make sense of the irony-ridden online culture of Generation Z. Overall, this article was an excellent overview of the impact of satirical conspiracy theories.

Saraga, D., 'It's Cultural to Believe in Conspiracy Theories', *Horizons - the Swiss Research Magazine***, (23 February 2022)**
https://www.horizons-mag.ch/2022/02/23/its-cultural-to-believe-in-conspiracy-theories/
accessed 29 January 2025

Daniel Saraga's news article, *'It's Cultural to Believe in Conspiracy Theories'* features an interview with Sebastian Dieguez, *'Le complotisme'* (English translation: *'Belief in Conspiracy Theories'*), where he argues that the belief in conspiracy theories is more than just misinformation, but rather a social and cultural phenomenon. By suggesting that conspiracy theories are an active and identity-driven process that individuals engage with, Saraga explores how they assert group identity and resist mainstream discourse, functioning as a self-reinforcing positive feedback loop that draws strength from the absence of evidence rather than the evidence itself. Daniel Saraga is a senior editor and interviewer at *Horizons* Magazine who specialises in ideologies and social commentary, giving the article an expert foundation. Saranga employs an expert interview with Sebastian Dieguez, who is a neuroscience researcher at the *University of Fribourg* in Switzerland, who focuses on how social media and cultural factors shape belief formation. This interdisciplinary study of sociology and neuroscience enables Saranga to explore the cultural phenomenon that is conspiracy theories, rather than the individual experience that it is generally thought to be. This news article was used in the writing of chapters two and three, when exploring the community formation of conspiracy theories and the cycle of alienation they perpetuate, respectively. Due to its publication in *Horizons*, a Swiss magazine publication backed by the

Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF) and an interview with expert neuroscientist and author, Daniel Saraga, reliability is enhanced. Due to its academically accurate presentations of theories and opinions about conspiracies as a cultural phenomenon, there is high validity. Despite the fact that the article is interview-based, and thus opinionated and single perspective, there are many core ideas explored which are valid as a perspective in the PIP. As this article is an interview, it primarily showcases the opinions and research of Dieguez with little critique or opposing views. Additionally, there may be a confirmation bias in the interviewee's framing of conspiracy theories and a potential European (primarily Swiss and French) bias, which limits applicability and generalisability to other regions, which may shape their assumptions about conspiracy theories across cultures. The intended audience of this article is the general public with an interest in science and society; however may also apply to university students and science communicators who aim to make research accessible beyond academia. Overall, this source was very helpful in connecting the interplay between society and culture and conspiracy theories, making it an integral part of the synthesis process.

Ward, M., 'We Watched 20 Trump Rallies. His Racist, Anti-Immigrant Messaging Is Getting Darker. - POLITICO', *Politico***, (12 October 2024), https://www.politico.com/news/2024/10/12/trump-racist-rhetoric-immigrants-00183537 accessed 11 May 2025**

Myah Ward's news analysis piece, *'We Watched 20 Trump Rallies. His Racist, Anti-Immigrant Messaging Is Getting Darker'* analyses Donald Trump's political rhetoric in his recent (2024 Presidential election) rallies that are growing increasingly racist, elitist and anti-immigrant. Based on the 20 Trump rallies studied, the piece highlights the use of dehumanising language directed at minority groups, invoking fear and distrust in other parties and governments. This underscores the political strategy of the United States of America's Republican Party (led by President Donald Trump), which is designed to form his base through nationalistic and racist appeals. Myah Ward is a reporter at *Politico* who focuses on national politics, having researched extensively into political campaigns, electoral dynamics and social issues. Known for her evidence-backed political writing, Ward's writing includes legends, speech analysis, political commentary and reporting on political events. This article included a content analysis of 20 Trump rallies. Through its analysis of language, tone and

frequency of racist and/or anti-immigrant remarks, this was successfully examined and presented. Additionally, the participant observations allowed Ward to attend and review rallies, analysing first-hand accounts of messaging and audience reactions, encouraging her to contextualise and validate findings. This article was used in chapter three of the PIP, where the use of conspiracy theories by a community speaking power was investigated. Due to its publication in *Politico*, a news source known for its political journalism and expert writers, and the use of observational data from 20 Donald Trump rallies, this news piece is reliable due to its variety of data collected. Further, the consistent results from all of the research methods increase the reliability. Additionally, the article draws conclusions based on the use of a content analysis of Donald Trump rallies, and there is high validity, which shows the results to be synonymous with the purpose of the investigation. However, the interpretations of tone and language of the writing carry some subjectivity, affecting the universal applicability of the research due to language complications and cross-over. As with many political writing pieces, the article may carry editorial and confirmation bias, as writers may neglect to raise points that the research concludes due to previous opinions. Additionally, due to the nature of political writing, there is an obvious ideological bias against the hyper-right-wing Republican party, influencing the bias of the piece. Further, the writing and language style of the article reflect the author's editorial stance, making it highly biased in both its findings and conclusions. However, the article is still valuable in the research of the PIP. The intended audience of this article is left-wing, politically engaged readers who have background knowledge of the United States of America's political system, its elections and Donald Trump's past campaigns. Thus, through the article's emphasis on the implications of Donald Trump's rhetoric on social exclusion, it aims to raise awareness and inform civic discourse about his presidency.

Websites

Anti-Defamation League, 'QAnon', *ADL, (*4 May 2020)

https://www.adl.org/resources/backgrounder/qanon accessed 7 June 2025

The *Anti-Defamation League*'s website on QAnon discusses the far-right, hyper-partisan conspiracy community, which claims that a secret 'Deep State' of elites is involved with child-exploitation, Satan-worshipping and cannibalistic communities, and that United States President Donald Trump is the only thing that can save the public from them. The movement, originally spread on the social media platform '*4Chan',* influences political discourse, encourages violence and undermines the trust of democratic institutions. The *Anti-Defamation League*'s mission is to "secure justice and fair treatment to all" by fighting anti-semitism, hate crimes and bias through informing the general public on a variety of topics. A content analysis of language, symbols, narratives and rhetoric used by extremist groups was utilised to identify the trends between groups such as QAnon. This article was most useful in chapter three when QAnon was used as an example of a conspiracy theory that gained traction among individuals who feel disempowered and distrustful of mainstream institutions. Published by the *Anti-Defamation League*, a well-established and credible organisation which specialises in tracking extremism and hate groups, the information presented is supported by evidence (including timelines, public statements and real-world events) which is regularly updated and maintained by experts. Thus, through its factual accuracy, this article is reliable. By including specific examples and links to other related conspiracies, and using consistent definitions and concepts, the article is highly valid, directly addressing QAnon's beliefs, origins and real-world impact. As an anti-hate organisation, the ADL has an inherently negative view on QAnon and other conspiracy communities, lacking an unbiased representation of the groups, their supporters and perspectives, limiting objectivity and introducing a confirmation bias. As the organisation's language leans towards condemnation, the reader may be influenced to negatively view the community, however justified. The intended audience of this website is policymakers and law enforcement, as it provides data and analysis to help authorities understand and strategise responses to extremist threats. Beyond exclusively QAnon, this article has applications to all extremist groups and conspiracy theory communities, making it an important part of the PIP.

Blumberg, J., 'A Brief History of the Salem Witch Trials', *Smithsonian***, (23 October 2007)**

https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/a-brief-history-of-the-salem-witch-trials-1751 62489/ **accessed 12 May 2025**

Jess Blumberg's article, *'A Brief History of the Salem Witch Trials',* explores the events that transpired in Salem, Massachusetts, in the 17th century. During this period, over 200 individuals were falsely accused of witchcraft, which led to the execution of 20 people. This delves into the social, cultural, political and religious factors that contribute to the mass hysteria and discusses the eventual exoneration of the accused and its impact on the culture of America. Jess Blumbery is a senior editor at *Smithsonian Magazine* who specialises in historical narratives, cultural history and social justice, contributing an expert opinion to this article. The article employs a synthesis of primary and secondary findings, which provide a comprehensive overview of the Salem Witch Trials. This was achieved through primary source analysis of court records, trial transcripts and personal accounts from the 1692 trials and integration of scholarly analysis and interpretation to contextualise the events. By combining these, Blumberg utilises a content analysis whereby she identifies the underlying themes of mass hysteria, religious extremism and social scapegoating. This article was primarily useful in chapter three of the PIP when giving examples of conspiracy theories that propagated without social media, but was also valuable in the total understanding of conspiracy theories. The *Smithsonian Institution* is a reputable and authoritative source known for its commitment to academic and historical accuracy, indicating reliability. Additionally, the article is written by Jess Blumberg, a journalist with experience in historical news articles and whose work is based on historical events and sources, increasing the reliability of the article. The article presents high validity due to its alignment with the consensus of the Salem Witch trials, which is rooted in historical evidence and confirmed by historians. Thus, by incorporating historical context, references and figures of the trials, the conclusions drawn are highly valid. While the article aims to present an objective and historical account of the Salem Witch Trials, there may be an inherent historical bias to the 'good side' of history (being that of the non-'witches'). Additionally, his emphasis on the irrationality and injustice of the events reflects the contemporary values and sensibilities rather than their original context. However, this perspective is consistent with most postmodern sources and serves to highlight the dangers of mass hysteria and the social progress that has been made since then. The intended audience is the general public who are

interested in American history and cultural studies, but it also applies to students as an accessible resource for teaching and learning. Overall, this article offers a concise yet comprehensive and accurate summary of the Salem Witch Trials, making it a helpful resource for the PIP.

Communication Theory, 'The Narrative Paradigm', *Communication Theory***, (6 January 2014)** https://www.communicationtheory.org/the-narrative-paradigm/ **accessed 20 April 2025**

Communication Theories website on *'The Narrative Paradigm'* is an overview of Walter Fisher's Narrative Paradigm Theory, which theorises that humans are inherent storytellers, and that all meaningful communication is done through stories. Additionally, it emphasises that humans are more easily convinced of something if it is in a story. It explains that narratives are judged by two different principles: coherence (consistency and structure) and fidelity (truthfulness and reliability), and discusses the application of the paradigm in its applications in understanding human communication. Walter Fisher (1931-2018), the founding theorist of *'Narrative Paradigm Theory'*, earned his PhD from the *University of Iowa* and founded his theory as a broader concept to communication theory, which completely reframed communication as narrative-based and highlights the innate human tendency to assess messaging through coherence and fidelity rather than strictly logical arguments. This website's research is a secondary research synthesis, allowing for a range of viewpoints to be heard. Since this social theory was central to the creation of the PIP, this source and its overview were applicable in all chapters and were essential in framing the understanding of *Narrative Paradigm Theory*. *CommunicationTheory.org* is a trusted source for educational summaries of social and psychological theories, and the information on the website aligns with other academic sources, making it reliable. The website accurately presents the primary concepts of Narrative Paradigm Theory as well as its secondary components, making it valid. However, as the website does not go into much depth, use empirical research or talk about real-world applications, its validity decreases and cannot be applied academically. Since the website is written in a neutral and explanatory tone, there are few found biases. However, the website does not explain limitations or negatives to this theory, so there is a one-sided interpretation that could lead to a bias. The intended audience

of this news source is those studying sociology at a high school level due to its simplified structure. Overall, this website was very useful in the creation of the PIP.

Miller Centre, 'McCarthyism and the Red Scare', *Miller Centre***, (2025) https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/educational-resources/age-of-eisenhower/mcarthyism-red-scare accessed 12 May 2025**

Miller Centre's article *'McCarthyism and the Red Scare'* examines the period in the mid-20th century of intense anti-Communist sentiment in the United States of America, known as the Second Red Scare (the first being primarily focused on the perceived threats from the labour movement). Both the article and the period primarily focus on Senator John McCarthy, who was mainly responsible for heightening the fear of Communist infiltration (primarily from Russia during the Cold War). This was primarily a result of a series of highly publicised investigations into communist allegations within society. The website also investigates President Dwight D. Eisenhower's cautious approach to the coined term 'McCarthyism' and its eventual disapproval and decline of influence in society. McCarthyism can be described as investigating *"any man who has been named by either a senator or a committee or a congressman as dangerous to the welfare of this nation"* and how these people were *"submitted to various intelligence units…[to] conduct a complete [communist] check upon him"* (John McCarthy). The Miller Centre is a scholarly foundation that draws from historical sources, which are subject to contextual bias. This website's research is a secondary research synthesis, allowing for a range of viewpoints to be heard. This article was primarily useful in chapter three of the PIP when giving examples of conspiracy theories that propagated without social media, but was also valuable in the total understanding of conspiracy theories. Due to the *Miller Centre* being a non-partisan, non-politically affiliated organisation and an affiliate of the University of Virginia, whose content is produced by historians and scholars, reliability is ensured. The article offers a highly valid interpretation of the Second Red Scare, supported by its sources, and aligns with the already established historical consensus on the topic. Since the article's tone remains highly objective, it does not exhibit an overt bias but rather provides a balanced perspective on a complex topic. The intended audience of this website is the general public who are interested in the history of the Cold War, not for university use. Overall, this website is good for the PIP when using it as a background for an example.

Mirsky S, 'Flat Earthers: What They Believe and Why', Scientific American, (27 March 2020)

https://www.scientificamerican.com/podcast/episode/flat-earthers-what-they-believe-and-why/, accessed 26 July 2025

Steve Mirsky's website *'Flat Earthers: What They Believe and Why'* is a summary of the 'Science Talk' Podcast that explores why modern flat-earth beliefs still exist and how they relate to broader conspiratorial thinking and that motivates people to oppose mainstream science. The podcast explores the belief of a flat disc, rather than a sphere, and is surrounded by the edge of an ice wall (Antarctica and the Arctic) which is to hold in the oceans. Steve Mirsky has been a reporter and writer for a variety of different news outlets and sources who have led public sceptical campaigns (for example, the homoeopathic overdose which targeted NHS funding of homeopathy), which increases his reliability in the topic discussed. The research methods used is an interview with Michael Marshall who conducted a participant observation with flat-Earth conventions in person (for example, the 2018 Flat Earth UK Convention) where he interacted directly with believers, took notes and recorded conversations. This qualitative method enabled him to understand flat-Earther beliefs from the inside, without bias from negative perceptions of the ideology. This website was useful in chapter two where the flat-Earth conspiracy was used as an example of the human need to connect with other people in a community, while often seeking alternative sources for their mistrust and uncertainty. By finding consistent themes within the broader research on conspiratorial thinking in the participant observation and the interview, this website was found to be highly reliable. While the exact methodology is not repeatable, attending flat-Earth conventions and analysing them would likely yield the same results for other researchers. The validity is very high because the data comes from real life settings, however since it is not a formal psychological study, the research has many ambiguities and possible discrepancies which may be misinterpreted between researchers and readers. As a well-known skeptic, Michael Marshall may expect to find irrational or conspiratorial thinking within the conventions, introducing a confirmation bias within the research. Additionally, the podcast episode does not offer a platform for flat-Earthers believers to defend their beliefs, as the research is more about them rather than with them, as there is a lack of opposing views. The intended audience of the podcast and the website is the general public with an interest in conspiracy theories and flat-Earthers. Overall, this website was very useful in the PIP for the use of an example as it has a broader overview of the topic.

Nickerson, C., 'Conflict Theory in Sociology', *Simply Psychology*, (10 October 2023), https://www.simplypsychology.org/conflict-theory.html accessed 3 July 2025

Charlotte Nickerson's website, *'Conflict Theory in Sociology,'* gives an overview of Karl Marx's Conflict Theory by emphasising how ongoing struggles over power, authority, resources and status of different groups shape societal structures. Nickerson highlights society as a site of struggle due to the systemic inequalities within society and the conflict between the classes. Charlotte Nickerson is a Harvard graduate who specialises in mental health, productivity and design, bringing an expert level of knowledge to the website. Additionally, this page has been reviewed by numerous individuals within the same field. While this website does not present any original data, it synthesises their information in a literature review style format, through the key concepts and ideas of Karl Max and other theorists. This website was applied in chapter two, where the response of the disenfranchised to societal conflict was examined. The website, *Simply Psychology*, is widely used as an educational site for psychological and sociological concepts in a summarised format, increasing its reliability, especially for students. Additionally, Conflict Theory has been consistently referenced in academic journals, adding to the PIP's reliability. However, *Simply Psychology* does not always provide citations and references to original academic sources, which may limit its reliability. The core principles, key theorists, critiques, and overview of Conflict Theory reflect strong validity. However, since the website simplifies complex sociological ideas for a general audience, there is a lack of depth and nuance, which reduces its validity for higher academia. Since the article is written mainly for educational purposes, there may be an oversimplification of conspiracy theories, especially critiques and limitations to the theory. Additionally, there is a bias towards the Western world since there is no discussion of non-Western interpretations of conflict theory, despite its possible application to countries such as China. Due to its purpose in educating, this website's intended audience is educators and students who are studying sociology and its related fields. Overall, this website was good for use as an example.

Root, C., 'A Local's Guide to DIA Conspiracy Theories' *Denver Public Library, (*22 February 2023)

https://history.denverlibrary.org/news/denver/locals-guide-dia-conspiracy-theories **accessed 7 June 2025**

Chris Root's *'A Local Guide to DIA Conspiracy Theories'* explores the key conspiracy theories surrounding the Denver International Airport since its inception in 1989 (opening in 1995), ranging from the swastika-shaped runways, intricate tunnel systems, location and murals which sparked theories about secret societies and apocalyptic messages. By emphasising the imaginative nature of these theories, the article serves as a comprehensive guide to understanding and debunking the myths surrounding the DIA. Chris Root is a historian and writer in the Special Collections and Archives department at the Denver Public Library. He specialises in local folklore, archival research and regional narratives, which is furthered in his investigation into the cultural myths and conspiracies in his micro and meso levels of society. The article includes an analysis of documents in archives and the media. This includes references to historical documents, public records, local archives, public signage, art installations and murals within the airport, which helps to explore how design, media reactions and visual culture have contributed to these conspiracy theories. This article was used in chapter two when the DIA was used as an example of individuals becoming increasingly sceptical of otherwise mundane events and seeing patterns in events which are not there, a classic hallmark of conspiracy theories. Due to its publication on the *Denver Public Library*'s website and the specific citing of examples of the features of the DIA, the research is reliable, helping readers differentiate evidence from conspiracy. Because of the article's accurate historical and contextual explanations and use of local knowledge to clarify popular misconceptions, its validity and truthfulness are strong. Due to its dismissive tone towards conspiracy theorists, there is a slight bias in favour of debunking rather than neutrally presenting both sides of the argument. However, the article does prioritise logical explanations over subjectivity, limiting its biases. Additionally, due to the library's stake in the government and its extensions, there may be a slight bias in positively presenting the airport, influencing its tone and internal biases. The intended audience of this article is the general public and Denver locals who are curious about history and the conspiracies behind the Denver airport. Additionally, the piece doubles as a cultural guide as visitors to the airport may have heard of its strange reputation and want to understand the origins and scepticism of

this conspiracy theory. As this article is used as an example in the PIP, this article is adequate for its purpose.

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 'Antisemitism in History: From the Early Church to 1400', *The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*, (2015), https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/antisemitism-in-history-from-the-early-church-to-1400 accessed 12 May 2025

The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's online encyclopedia article, *'Antisemitism in History: From the Early Church to 1400'* explores the development of anti-semitic attitudes and beliefs in Europe from before the 15th century and through the Medieval and pre-Christian eras. By detailing the conspiracy theories surrounding Jewish people, such as their supposed responsibility for Germany's economic and political situation between World War I and World War II due to the Treaty of Versailles, the article highlights the ideological positions that have been propagated over time. The analysis of documentaries and other secondary sources allows the researchers to examine documents from the early Christian period through Medieval Europe and integrates interpretations that historians who specialise in antisemitism and religion have made. This article was most useful in chapter three, where examples of conspiracy theories that propagate without social media were investigated. Since the article is published on the *United States Holocaust Museum's* website, a government-funded institution with the mission to document and educate about the history and future of Judaism and anti-semitism, authored and reviewed by historians and scholars, and has curated sources, the article is reliable. Due to its roots in history, it presents widely accepted facts about the Judeo-Christian relationships in Europe, which cite theologians, historians, social and political developments, and the avoidance of speculative and subjective claims. Since the article is written from an educational and informative approach to understand the root of anti-semitism and the moral stance of human rights, there is a lack of bias since there is no judgement or stance taken on the subject. However, because of this, and the emphasis on Christianity's role, there may be a confirmation and interpretive bias for the information given, due to the site's affiliation to a Jewish organisation. While the source may be biased, it is still grounded in a scholarly perspective. As this website is part of an online database and encyclopedia used in schools and universities, the intended audience of the website is students and educators, as well as the general public who is attempting to gain

knowledge of the subject matter. Overall, this website is an adequate source for the PIP for the purpose of an example.

J. Orlowski (dir.), The Social Dilemma [film], Netflix, (9th of September 2020)

'*The Social Dilemma'*, directed by Jeff Orlowski, is a hybrid documentary and drama that explores the impact of social media, technology and algorithms on the human mind. Through interviews with experts from former and current technology companies such as *Twitter*, *Facebook* and *Pinterest*, the documentary strives to convey the disruptive nature of social media to an individual's daily life. By revealing how these platforms manipulate users through their algorithms to increase engagement and screen time, the film highlights their main objective to ultimately maximise company profit from advertising. The documentary explored the key themes of 'surveillance capitalism', the idea that social media companies accrue vast amounts of personal data to use to predict and influence user behaviour. Additionally, the 'algorithmic manipulation' of platforms is further explored through their highly personalised content to purposefully create echo chambers and filter bubbles that reinforce beliefs. The documentary further exposes the addictive side of social media, which degrades mental health through the persuasive techniques that are designed to exploit human psychology. The film represents this through the explicit links to increases in teen and pre-teen self-harm and suicide, and the drama side of the documentary, which showcases a family who are battling with the struggles of balancing social media and their life. Moreover, the film shows how the misinformation, fake news and conspiracy theories on social media spread faster than through truth due to their emotionally triggering content, polarising platforms and communities. Finally, the moral responsibility of technology giants is explored, calling institutions to stop exploiting the vulnerability of the human psyche and to implement stronger legislative regulation of algorithms in social media use. This documentary was most used in chapter one due to its links to the internet and its algorithms, but was also used in chapter three in the discussion of the function of democracy and the future of societies within the context of the continual perpetuation of conspiracy theories. Additionally, due to the community formation prospects of conspiracy theories, which are explored in both the PIP and the documentary, there was further integration in that respect. To effectively analyse *'The Social Dilemma'*, relevant quotes, insights and concepts were extracted while viewing the documentary. After watching, these excerpts were evaluated for their relevance and value to the PIP through identification of connections between the subject matter and documentary.

The documentary features former and current experts from technology companies who were engineers, monetisation experts and executives. Their insider experience of these companies provides primary accounts of how algorithms are coded and used to advantage their respective companies. By including factual information through present-day examples such as the Pizzagate conspiracy theory, the documentary aligns with scholarly literature on its findings, increasing reliability. However, although the speakers are credible, not all claims were backed with empirical evidence and may have been exaggerated for effect within the film itself. Additionally, the drama format prioritises emotional storytelling over straight facts and may oversimplify or over exaggerate complex technological systems and experiences. By highlighting core social issues of addiction, data-harvesting and echo chambers, all of which are supported with broader academic research, the documentary has high validity. By illustrating the real-world impact of algorithms on families through the drama integration in the documentary, audiences are encouraged to engage and affirm in the message of the documentary instead of just passively consuming, which is the central message of the piece. However, this can blur the line between fact and fiction, the very problem the documentary is addressing, and may reduce how viewers interpret the evidence. Additionally, the arguments are generalised towards all technology companies and are not specific in the preventative strategies that could be performed, thus not accounting for the complexities and nuances of each company. To mitigate this, instead of just warning the audience about what the consequences and future implications are, the documentary could have explored how to break this positive feedback loop of technology consumption. The documentary drama presents a critical stance towards technology companies and does not explore the positives of social media, only portraying them as manipulative and profit-driven. Additionally, since all expert interviewees feature former employees of technology giants and current CEOs of their own companies, there is an increased confirmation bias, limiting the alternative perspectives of other individuals and companies. The intended audience of this drama documentary is any social media user, encouraging awareness among everyday users of social media about the hidden manipulations behind algorithms and content. Additionally, parents and educators are targeted as social media affects the mental health and media literacy of children and youth. Overall, this drama documentary is useful as an educational resource in media studies, psychology and in everyday life, encouraging reflection in all individuals on the consequences of their design choices and profit models.