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Conspiracy theories as stigmatized knowledge

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Abstract

Most conspiracy theories exist as part of "stigmatized knowledge" – that is, knowledge claims that have not been accepted by those institutions we rely upon for truth validation. Not uncommonly, believers in conspiracy theories also accept other forms of stigmatized knowledge, such as unorthodox forms of healing and beliefs about Atlantis and UFOs. Rejection by authorities is for them a sign that a belief must be true. However, the linkage of conspiracy theories with stigmatized knowledge has been weakening, because stigmatized knowledge itself is growing more problematic. What was once clearly recognizable as "the fringe" is now beginning to merge with the mainstream. This process of "mainstreaming the fringe" is the result of numerous factors, including the ubiquity of the Internet, the growing suspicion of authority, and the spread of once esoteric themes in popular culture. Only a permeable membrane now separates the fringe from the mainstream. Thus conspiracism is no longer the province only of small, isolated coteries. It now has the potential to make the leap into public discourse. This, of course, does not apply to every conspiracy theory, but it happens enough to suggest that we are at an important transition point. The recent controversy in the United States over whether a conspiracy existed to hide President Obama's alleged foreign birth – a claim that years earlier would never have emerged beyond small radical groups – suggests the nature of the change. It also suggests the dangers that political cultures may face in the future.

Although the air is filled these days with talk of conspiracy theories, it is necessary to be clear about what conspiracy theories are and what they are not. Conspiracy theories are not the same as conspiracies. Conspiracies are actual covert plots, planned and/or carried out by two or more persons. Conspiracy theories, on the other hand, are intellectual constructs. They are modes of thinking, templates imposed upon the world to give the appearance of order to events. In their simplest form, conspiracy theories sometimes seek only to explain a single event, for example, a plane crash or an assassination. However, many conspiracy theories are far more ambitious and seek to impose order on a wide range of phenomena that may encompass entire countries, whole regions, or decades of history. These mental constructs assert that some small and hidden group has through

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special means, powers, or manipulations brought about visible and evil effects of whose true cause most people are unaware. Only the conspiracy theorists, with their claim to special knowledge, are said to know the truth. This belief in the possession of privileged knowledge converts them into a self-identified elite, differentiated from what they often view as the ignorant, herd-like public. It is, indeed, this sense of possessing knowledge that others lack which constitutes a buffer that partially protects believers against the potentially disastrous effects of disconfirming evidence.

In most cases, conspiracy theories are at odds with official or prevailing explanations. Consequently, they represent alternative or deviant views. As such, they conflict with whatever the orthodoxy is on the subject at hand. The degree to which they diverge from that orthodoxy determines the extent to which they are considered unacceptable, invalid, irrelevant, outdated, or dangerous. This separation from orthodoxy may result in conspiracy theories being ignored, but more often they are actively rejected.

Stigmatized knowledge

Because most conspiracy theories contradict some form of orthodoxy, they lie within a domain that I refer to as *stigmatized knowledge*. By stigmatized knowledge, I mean knowledge claims that have been ignored or rejected by those institutions we rely upon to validate such claims.[1] These institutions include (although they are not limited to) universities, the medical and scientific communities, government agencies, major mainstream media, and in some cases religious authorities. Such institutions provide forms of implied or direct "certification" that ideas, beliefs, or fact assertions can be relied upon. Those knowledge claims that have not made the grade acquire a kind of stigma, a disrepute by virtue of their failure to acquire institutional approval. Conspiracy theories are not the only form of stigmatized knowledge. A large number of other ideas also lie within the universe of stigmatized knowledge. Examples include beliefs in Atlantis, UFOs, unaccepted cancer cures, and channeling. Besides lack of institutional validation, another critical characteristic of stigmatized knowledge is the manner in which its believers are linked. Believers in one form of stigmatized knowledge are likely to also believe in or at least be sympathetic to other forms of stigmatized knowledge as well. Thus conspiracists, in addition to forming a sub-culture of their own, exist within a larger sub-culture of believers in other forms of stigmatized knowledge. The degree to which conspiracists, for example, are pre-disposed to look favorably on other forms of stigmatized knowledge derives from their attitude towards authority.

The reason believers in one form of stigmatized knowledge are likely to accept other forms lies in their common skepticism about institutions. Those who gravitate toward stigmatized knowledge ideas tend to be individuals suspicious of orthodoxies, the institutions that advance them, and the authorities that these institutions embody. They often see each institution as part of a network of mutually supportive and interlocking elements, each of which is suspect and each of which seeks to protect the others. Hence ideas supported by the medical community may be rejected, but so too may be political ideas supported by the government and the media, in the belief that all are part of the same larger complex of institutions, each protecting the others from challenge.

It is logical, therefore, that believers in conspiracy theories – especially those theories that make broad claims – will be lodged with other stigmatized ideas. Indeed, the skepticism with which believers in stigmatized knowledge regard knowledge-validating institutions is itself a rudimentary form of conspiracy theory, since it implies that there may be a large-scale plot to freeze out all the beliefs in the stigmatized knowledge domain, whether they concern Atlantis, Big Foot, free energy, or other fringe ideas. Their view of knowledge-validating institutions is therefore that it is a web of mutually supportive power centers, with their individual mysteries, secrets, and deceptions that they seek to protect. Conspiracy theories claim to unmask some fraction of these interwoven deceptions.

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The social structure of stigmatized knowledge

Traditionally, stigmatized knowledge was maintained within small, insular coteries. That was a consequence of its having been excluded from universities, the mainstream media, and other venues. It existed in fringe books, periodicals, and associations, but only rarely was it able to reach out to the general public. As a result, there was a clear boundary between what was perceived as the "fringe" and what was understood to be the "mainstream." This boundary was maintained by numerous gatekeepers in the form of curricular authorities in educational institutions, editors of major media, and others who had the responsibility of making decisions about what content was included and what was excluded. Only occasionally was this boundary crossed in the case of conspiracy theories, most notably in the explosion of such theories about the 1963 assassination of President John F. Kennedy. However, for the most part the boundary remained intact. It was clear and well understood.

Conspiracy theories were, in a sense, doubly stigmatized, for they were stigmatized once by virtue of the rejection of their claim to be valid knowledge, and they were stigmatized once again by being made part of the social fringe. Books and periodicals about them were hard to find. They were excluded from mainstream media and culture. In general, they were pushed to the margins. If not invisible, they were at least in the shadows. However, this description may not seem to fit contemporary reality. That is because it is a description valid only for the period up to about 1990. After that, the situation began to change with increasing rapidity.

The erosion of the boundary

Beginning in the early and mid-1990s, the clear boundary between fringe and mainstream began to erode, with significant consequences for conspiracy theories. This erosion has been a function of the combination of technological and socio-political factors.

The technological factors have become so clear that they need little elaboration. They began with the development of the Internet in the early 1990s and continued with the growth of social media. Together they created a media environment that had three features: First, it provided a powerful alternative to the existing complex of newspapers, television, and periodicals. Second, it allowed individuals to create media platforms with virtually no capital investment. Third, it eliminated the gatekeepers who had traditionally filtered content.

The elimination of gatekeepers was particularly significant for the proliferation of conspiracy theories on the Internet. Material that had been systematically excluded from mainstream venues and consequently relegated to sub-cultures could now be found at the click of a mouse. Ideas of the most bizarre and esoteric sort not only appeared on the Web; they were multiply re-posted, and their re-postings on numerous websites gave them the appearance of validity, conferring a kind of pseudo-confirmation.

If conspiracism had simply remained a creature of the Internet, its expansion into an electronic world would not have been so consequential. However, as the Internet developed into a major form of communication, its function as a medium for the spread of conspiracy theories began to exhibit some important characteristics. Most obviously, ideas that in the past would only have reached the small audiences of conspiracy publications and late night talk radio now could potentially reach many more. Less obviously, it became clear that once fringe ideas appeared on the Net, they could eventually migrate into mainstream media.

This migration was often enabled through the process of multiple postings, in which an idea moved about from site to site. Not only did multiple posting supply pseudo-confirmation (if an idea appeared in so many places, viewers sometimes believed it must be true); multiple postings could

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gradually legitimize a fringe belief. That happened if in the process of re-posting a message eventually came to be picked up by more visible or better-known sites. Once this happened, the "taint" of its origins was scrubbed off, and this, in turn, allowed it to be moved to mainstream media. Thus the chain ended with the message finally re-appearing in a major newspaper, television news account, or some comparable report.

The social factors operating at the same time were twofold: First, a general distrust for authority led to a greater willingness to look sympathetically at non-orthodox accounts of events. This skepticism was fed in part by increased governmental secrecy and the backlash that followed exposure of official deception and wrongdoing. The line of reasoning to which this led often took the form of: "If they did this, then perhaps even these other things must be true." Consequently, conspiracy ideas that once would have been ignored have been taken seriously. The other factor encompasses the broader society, and that is the penetration of conspiracy theories into popular culture.

Conspiracism always played some role in popular entertainment, but rarely have so many examples appeared in which conspiracy theories are central and in which the structure and content of the theories found in mainstream entertainment so closely match those previously found only on the fringe. Examples include the Mel Gibson film *Conspiracy Theory* (1997); *The X-Files* television program, which is about to be repeated; and, of course, the mega-best sellers by Dan Brown, including *The Da Vinci Code, Angels & Demons*, and *The Lost Symbol*.[2] While it is significant that all of these popular culture artifacts appeared, what is even more significant is that they have been immensely popular. They have clearly tapped into some need or receptivity in the general public. If one thinks, for example, of the Dan Brown novels, dozens even hundreds of mass-market books are published each year by relatively unknown writers with no claim to literary excellence. Very few achieve real success. That Brown has achieved his success not once but several times is a tribute not so much to his skill as a writer but to the fact that he responds to something in the minds of potential readers.

This combination of technological and socio-political factors has resulted in the erosion of what was once a clear and firm boundary between the fringe and the mainstream. Where fringe ideas were once segregated in insular sub-cultures, they now pass through that boundary and become part of the mainstream, a process I term *mainstreaming the fringe*. The boundary has obviously not become wholly permeable. Many fringe ideas remain where they were, with little possibility of migrating into the mainstream. But enough have done so that the once firm distinction between the two realms is now blurred. A considerable and ever-increasing amount of what once would have been considered fringe motifs are finding their way into channels that reach mass audiences. As a result, material from the stigmatized knowledge domain has entered mainstream culture, becoming de-stigmatized in the process.

Political consequences

These developments might be dismissed as merely trivial were it not for their potential impact on politics. While the examples to be given shortly are American, there is no reason to believe that the American political system is the only one affected by the mainstreaming of the fringe. Indeed, any society significantly impacted by the Internet and social media and in which respect for authority has been diminished is likely to exhibit the same effects. Once conspiracy theories become commonly discussed forms of explanation, their movement into political discourse is only a matter of time.

The two examples are quite different, although both received at least some measure of national attention. What also distinguishes them is that they almost certainly would never have come to public attention in the pre-digital age when they would have remained segregated within the fringe.

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The first is the one better known outside the United States: the claim that President Barack Obama has supposedly hidden the fact that he was born outside the country, something that would constitutionally disqualify him for the presidential office. Despite the complete absence of any evidence to support this allegation, it has proliferated on the Internet. It is difficult to precisely date its first digital appearance. However, one of the very earliest appeared in 2004, when Obama was elected to the Senate.[3] Many more appeared four years later when he won his first term as President. It is possible that the story, with its suggestion that a conspiracy was in place to hide the "truth," might have remained on the Internet, except for one transformative shift. In the process of the story's movement from site to site – an example of multiple postings – it was picked up by the website maintained by the *National Review*, a prominent and respected conservative magazine, where it was the subject of two articles (Geraghty, 2008a, 2008b). These articles not only drove the story forward but conferred upon it a pseudo-legitimacy.

That pseudo-legitimacy allowed the so-called "birther" story to migrate into print and television journalism. Among those subsequently suggesting that there might be some merit to it was Donald Trump, later to emerge as a serious contender for the 2016 Republican presidential nomination. It also forced the White House to begin producing birth documents in order to answer charges of foreign origins, thus paradoxically giving additional respectability to what had once been nothing more than a fringe rumor.

The other case of a fringe political story that entered the mainstream is less well known outside the United States. It concerned a military exercise known as "Jade Helm 15," organized by the United States Army Special Operations Command in the southwestern United States between July 15 and September 15, 2015. Jade Helm became the focus of an extraordinary number of conspiracy theories communicated on the Internet, only some of which can be outlined here. Among them were the following: that the exercise was the prelude to the imminent imposition of martial law; that the closing of Walmart stores in the exercise area was in order to facilitate their conversion into detention centers; and that the Walmart stores were really entrances to a secret government tunnel system maintained by the Department of Homeland Security and the National Security Agency.[4] There are many more, but this gives some sense of their flavor.

What distinguishes the Jade Helm conspiracy theories from many others is that at the beginning of May 2015, the Governor of Texas, Greg Abbott, directed the commander of the Texas State Guard to monitor the exercise. He gave as his reason that it was "important that Texans know their safety, constitutional rights, private property rights and civil liberties will not be infringed" (Fernandez, 2015: A15). This was an extraordinary action when one recognizes that an American public official felt it necessary to observe and oversee United States military forces operating on US territory, presumably as a response to the conspiracy theories that had spread wildly on the Internet. Once Gov. Abbott acted, the story leapt into every mainstream news channel, both print and electronic.

The birther story and the Jade Helm story both begin with fringe characteristics and thus inhabit the same stigmatized knowledge universe. However, they diverge in terms of the ways in which they left that universe and became at least partially "sanitized" enough to enter the mainstream. Prior to the Internet, the birther story would have remained a fringe story, isolated within a small subculture. It was a single conspiracy theory, arguing that a vague plot existed to hide the President's true origins. What made its mainstreaming possible was its gradual migration to a relatively high-status website that gave it enough legitimacy so that mainstream publications and television news organizations felt confident to report it. The Jade Helm affair had a different dynamic. In the first place, it involved multiple conspiracy theories each of which appeared implausible on its face, beginning with the prediction of imminent martial law. These, too, might have remained the property of a small sub-set of believers. Their mainstreaming was indirectly facilitated by the actions

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of the Governor, who did not in fact mention any of them explicitly in directing the State Guard to watch over the maneuvers. However, many of the news accounts of his actions included summaries of the conspiracy theories as the likely drivers of Abbott's behavior, and without his action, the conspiracy theories would never have reached a wider audience.

Conclusion

Conspiracy theories now diffuse more widely than perhaps at any earlier time. While there are politically significant examples, such as the birther and Jade Helm cases discussed above, it is not yet clear what the overall impact will be from the mainstreaming of the fringe. The increased permeability of the boundary separating the fringe from the mainstream may have two quite different consequences.

On the one hand, the more frequent presence of conspiracist motifs in mainstream culture may serve merely to trivialize them. This might well be the result of their movement into films, television, and popular literature. If they come to be seen as little more than entertaining plot devices, it is possible there will be less incentive to take them seriously. They may be seen as little more than clever devices to enhance improbable stories.

On the other hand, their association with mainstream cultural platforms also confers a kind of respectability. It makes their articulation socially acceptable, even if they are not explicitly endorsed. That may lead to conspiracism emerging as an accepted mode of explanation, a way of both understanding the world and construing the political environment. The many variations on conspiracy that the Internet affords provide an endless menu for re-configuring the world.

It is the second alternative, of course, that is the more troubling, for if mainstreaming leads in this direction, more people may think of the world not in terms of change that can be accomplished by themselves, but as something that is the province of a mysterious "they" – the cabal whose hidden power supposedly exercises all real control. By implication, both individuals and organized groups are thus rendered powerless and politically irrelevant. They become mere passive objects to be manipulated by the conspirators.

This shift from active agent to passive object may also be accompanied by a search for scapegoats, those believed to be the conspirators' allies, henchmen, or collaborators. This was one of the most troubling aspects of past conspiracy theories, and if it becomes linked to modern electronic communications, it will only spread more widely and more rapidly. If the conspirators are believed to be hidden and invisible – as most conspiracy theories suggest – then the anger of those who believe themselves to be the conspirators' targets is easily diverted to those who are visible and are said to do the conspiracy's work.

All of this suggests that as the fringe seeps more and more into the mainstream, with stigmatized knowledge becoming "cleansed" of its stigmas, we may face a more dangerously volatile and polarized politics.

Notes

1. I deal with stigmatized knowledge in greater detail in Barkun 2013: 33–38.
2. One may see some indication of the breath of interest in Brown's *Angels & Demons* in Burstein and de Keijzer, 2009.
3. "Presidential candidate Andy Martin on the arrest of Barack Obama's Uncle," http://andyforpresident.wordpress.com/2011/08/31/presidential-candidate-andy-martin-on-the-arrest-of-barackobamas-uncle
4. A summary of some of the more bizarre theories appears in "The New World Order: Operation Jade Helm 15 and Wal-Mart Closures," http://thenwwrdor.blogspot.com/2014/11/operation-jade-helm-15-and-walmart.html

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