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Editorial

Conspiracies have been a cultural mainstay for decades (Melley). While often framed as an American problem (Melley), social media has contributed to their global reach (Gerts et al.). Bruns, Harrington, and Hurcombe have traced the contemporary movement of conspiracy theories into the cultural mainstream from fringe conspiracist groups on social media platforms such as Facebook through their greater uptake in more diverse communities and to substantial amplification by celebrities, sports stars, and media outlets. Consequently, conspiracy theories that were once the product of subcultural groups have increasingly mixed into popular and authoritative media (Marwick and Lewis) and entertainment (Hyzen and van den Bulck; van den Bulck and Hyzen).

Over the past five years conspiracy theories, whether they be anti-vaccination, politically motivated, or pop-cultural artefacts, have found their way into mainstream cultural discourse. Increasingly, conspiracy theories, once regarded as the domain of largely harmless eccentrics, are having real, material effects. These real-world harms are evident across a number of domains of social life, from the storming of the US Capitol on 6 January 2021 (Moskalenko and McCauley) to the effects of vaccine refusal and resistance which continue to stymie attempts to control the global COVID-19 pandemic (Baker, Wade, and Walsh). Digital spaces and communities have made conspiracy theories more accessible and transmissible. Conspiracies are persistent, resistant, and pervasive.

The illusion of neat segmentation between the sites of conspiracy theorising and mainstream media content generation has vanished. However, our understanding of what motivates those engaging with and disseminating conspiracy theories is still partial and incomplete. While there is a large corpus of social psychological research into conspiracies, much of this research is focused on deficits in logic, reasoning, and/or personality traits. The focus of the 'deficits' of those drawn to conspiracy theories is also reflected in popular discourse, where those believing in conspiracy theories are described within a variety of synonyms for the word 'stupid' (Chu, Yuan, and Liu). In this issue, we approach the topic of conspiracy from a different standpoint, exploring the sociological conditions that enable conspiracies to flourish. We have assembled a variety of articles, both empirical and conceptual, from which a more complex social picture of conspiracy emerges.

To begin examining the complex social life of conspiracy theories, our feature article by Brownwyn Fredericks, Abraham Bradfield, Sue McAvoy, James Ward, Shea Spierings, Troy Combo, and Agnes Toth-Peter cuts through the conspiracy frame to a very real world example of the consequences of conspiracy. They examine the specific social contexts and media ecologies through which COVID-19 conspiracies have flourished in some (not all) Indigenous communities in Australia. Their analysis highlights the detrimental impacts of unresolved elements of settler colonialism that propagate conspiracist thinking within these communities. Through research conducted with stakeholder participants from the Indigenous health sector (both Indigenous and non-Indigenous) they outline a series of recommendations for how we can constructively address the demonstrated impact of circulating misinformation upon Indigenous communities in Australia. In their recommendations they reinforce the need to centralise Indigenous voices and expertise in our social and political life.

Other articles in the issue explore how to theorise conspiracism, present examples of contemporary conspiracism in digital media, unpack methods for how to conduct research in this socially contentious space, and highlight the consequences of conspiracies. They draw examples of communities entangled with conspiracy theories and media environments across the world.

Absence and presence (of evidence) are both important elements in conspiracy theorising. In contrast to scholarship that focusses on the spread of conspiracy-style misinformation, Tyler Easterbrook's examination of dead links or 'link rot' online demonstrates how the absence and removal of information can be a powerful motivator of conspiracy rhetoric. Easterbrook's work demonstrates the potential complexities of moderation models that emphasise the removal of conspiratorial content. The absence of content can be as powerful as its presence.

Scott DeJong's and Alex Bustamante's article uses novel methods to interrogate the analogies we frequently use when discussing the spread of conspiracy theories online. In designing their own board system to model how conspiracy theories might spread, they speak to a growing body of work that likens conspiracy theories to game systems. DeJong's and Bustamante's article highlighted the powerful capacity of creative methods to speak to social problems. Echoing Easterbrook's warning about the power of content removal to fuel conspiracy theorising, in their simulating DeJong and Bustamante found that there is an "interplay between the removal of content and its spread" and argue that "removing conspiracy is a band-aid solution to a larger problem". With current attention focussed on the problem of moderating conspiracy and misinformation in digital ecologies, these articles are important considerations about the relative success of such a strategy.

In their commentary examining so-called COVID-19 'cures', Stephanie Alice Baker and Alexia Maddox explore how hydroxychloroquine and ivermectin shifted from potential COVID treatments to objects embroiled in conspiracy during the pandemic. Baker and Maddox highlight the interwoven nature of the conspiracy landscape illustrating the roles that public figures and influencers played in amplifying conspiratorial discourse and

knowledge about these drugs. Importantly, as with DeJong and Bustamante, and as also highlighted by Easterbrook, they highlight how tackling conspiracy theories is not as simple as providing “accurate” facts to counter false and misleading information. Baker and Maddox argue that, paradoxically, the process of debunking which included mockery and derision “reinforces the audience segmentation that occurs in the current media ecology by virtue of alternative media with mockery and ridicule strengthening in and out group dynamics”. When debunking succumbs to ridicule, they suggest that critics may be strengthening people’s commitment to conspiratorial narratives and alternative influence networks.

Tresa LeClerc’s article explores the increasing entanglement of health and wellness with alternative right (or alt-right) conspiracies, focussing on underlying themes of white nationalism within these communities. LeClerc’s piece compellingly traces the ideological underpinnings of purity within the paleo diet that already blend pseudoscience and conspiracy, highlighting the ways wellness spaces have cultivated modes of thinking that are conducive to alt-right conspiracies. Also delving into the intersections of wellness and conspiracy, Marie Heřmanová explores conspirituality and the politicisation of spiritual influencers during the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on the case of prominent Czech lifestyle Instagrammer Helena Houdová who became an outspoken anti-vaxxer and COVID denialist. In a rich case study, Heřmanová examines the ways Helena blends her feminine aesthetic and aspirational and individualistic take on spirituality with conspiracy messages informed by QAnon and political messaging that speaks to both national history and global trends. Heřmanová astutely observes that the rise of conspirituality reveals the capacity of these influencers to bridge the gap between the everyday and personal, and the collective narratives of conspiracies such as QAnon.

Continuing to explore how conspiracy theories intersect with embodied and digital environments, in her article on ‘Coronaconspiracies’ Merlyna Lim examines the role algorithms and users play in facilitating conspiracy theories during the pandemic. Lim contends that social media provides a fertile environment for conspiracies to flourish, while maintaining that “social media algorithms do not have an absolute hegemony in translating the high visibility or even the virality of conspiracy theories into the beliefs in them”. As Lim explains, human users retain their agency online; it is their “choices” and “preferences” that are informed by the algorithmic dynamics of these technologies.

Extending research into the relationship between conspiracy and algorithms, the impacts of labelling are foregrounded in the work of Ahmed Al-Rawi, Carmen Celestini, Nicole Stewart, and Nathan Worku. Their article presents a reverse-engineering approach to understanding how Google’s autocomplete feature assigns subtitles to widely known conspiracists. Google’s algorithmic approach to labelling actors is proprietary knowledge, which blackboxes this process to researchers and the wider public. This article provides a technical peek into how this may work, but also raises the concern that these labels do not reflect what is publicly known about these actors. Their work provides an insight into the ways that the Google autocomplete subtitling feature may further contribute to the negative real-world impacts that these conspiracists, and other such toxic actors, have.

Stijn Peeters and Tom Willaert take us into the fringes of the online ecosystem to explore ways to research conspiracist communities on Telegram. They extrapolate on Richard Rogers's edict to repurpose the methods of the medium and take us through a case-based examination of how to conduct a structural analysis of forwarded messages to identify conspiracy communities. In weighing up the results of applying this technique to Dutch-speaking conspiracist narratives and communities on Telegram they highlight the methodological gains of such a technique and the ethical considerations that doing this style of data gathering and analysis can raise.

Moving away from the fringes, Naomi Smith and Clare Southerton take us into the belly of popular culture with their examination of the #FreeBritney movement and raise the proposition of conspiracy as a site of pleasure. They turn on its head the assumption that conspiracy thinking is because of a deficient and deviant understanding and point to the appeal and pleasure of engaging in the chase of partial threads and leads found in social media that could be woven into an explanation, or conspiracy. Drawing from fan studies, they highlight that pleasure is not a new site of motivation and that a lot can be learned by applying it as an explanatory frame for why people engage with conspiracies.

The diverse body of scholarship assembled in this special issue illustrates the complex nature of contemporary conspiracies as they find expression in digital spaces and media. There are a variety of approaches to understanding this phenomenon that highlight how strategies of control and technological intervention may not be straightforwardly successful. The contributions to this issue demonstrate, from a range of perspectives, the importance of understanding how and why conspiracy theories matter to the communities that embrace them if we are to address their social consequences.

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Dr Naomi Smith is a digital sociologist at Federation University Australia (Gippsland). She has a broad range of scholarly interests, including emerging technology, place and bodies. Primarily, her digital work has focused on the intersection of the internet and bodies (including anti-vaccination), how online communities influence the way we make sense of our bodies, and how we manage them.

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Alexia Maddox (PhD) is a sociologist of technology and specialises in research engagement with communities, digital research methods and socio-technical transformations. Her research focuses on the cultures in emerging digital frontiers, including crypto-based technologies such as cryptocurrencies and blockchain technologies, and digital pleasures such as digital drugs.

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