

PRESIDENTIAL MEDIA GAFFES AND OPPOSITION RESPONSE: A REVIEW OF CONSPIRACY THEORY

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Abstract

Our conclusion on the belief of conspiracy theory is intimately connected with feelings of fear, uncertainty, or being out of control. As such, these insights can explain why conspiracy theory flourishes particularly in societal crisis situations. The main underlying process for this connection is that uncertainty stimulates a desire to make sense of one's social environment. In the narrative, we looked at the link between the current Nigeria political suspicion pervading in the various tribal cleavages and belief in conspiracy theories. Perhaps, we may conclude that the belief in conspiracy theory is part of human nature and that people have been susceptible to such beliefs throughout history hence the attempts to mock President Muhammadu Buhari's media gaffe. Secondly, our leaning on historical incidents and references to other democracies suggests that strong societal crisis situations exciting significant change have stimulated belief in conspiracy theories. We then peeped into psychological literature to explain why this. Evidence suggests that the aversive feelings that people experience when in crisis stimulate a motivation to make sense of the situation, increasing the likelihood of perceiving conspiracies in socio-political situations. We then explain that after being formed, conspiracy theories can become historical narratives that may spread through cultural transmission. We conclude that conspiracy theory originates particularly in crisis situations and may form the basis for how people treat prevailing political maneuvers or subsequently remember and mentally represent historical events.

Keywords: Presidential, Media, Gaffes, Opposition and Response

Introduction

Conspiracy theory is omnibus phraseology. It is the politicians' mock phrase to defend allegations of organized sinister backdoor maneuvers to criminalize their action. Some hold that it is a narrative paradigm to pathologize dissent.

However, the conspiracy theory is hyped in media reportage where it is alleged, seen through editorial emphasis and displays, a sort of framing, as a complicit to political

misdeeds and intrigues. In sum, belief in conspiracy theories is intimately connected with feelings of fear, uncertainty, or being out of control, and it is likely that societal crisis situations often arouse such feelings in people. As such, these insights can explain why conspiracy theory flourishes particularly in societal crisis situations. The main underlying process for this connection is that uncertainty stimulates a desire to make sense of one's socio-political environment.

Since the mid-1990s, a growing psychological research tradition has generated a great deal of knowledge about the antecedents and consequences of beliefs in conspiracy theory. The term “conspiracy theory” itself, however, has received little explicit attention in the psychological literature despite considerable interest from philosophers and political scientists in its precise meaning and implications (Bratich, 2002, 2008; Coady, 2006; deHaven-Smith, 2010, 2013; Husting & Orr, 2007).

Labeling a person a conspiracy theorist or a thing, conspiracy theory may be a rhetorical violence; somehow tossing away substantial suspicion as irrational paranoia. The conspiracy-theory label (deHaven-Smith 2013), comes with such negative baggage that applying it has “the effect of dismissing conspiratorial suspicions out of hand with no discussion whatsoever”. Husting and Orr (2007) likewise argued that applying the label “discredits specific explanations for social and historical events, regardless of the quality or quantity of evidence”. Byford (2011) disagreed with the expansion of the meaning of “conspiracy theory”. While the term once denoted speculation about secretive cabals controlling the course of world affairs, it has come to include wider discourses of suspicion such as routine mistrust of authority.

It is not only in academia that intellectual labeling of conspiracy theory is exclusive. Wood and Douglas (2013) found that social media buffs romanticize the term to refer the opposing belief or comments that were strongly motivated to counter-argue the label.

Belief in conspiracy theory

Events that wear the garb of conspiracy theory in Nigeria, at least from 2015 under Muhammadu Buhari administration, are legion: strategic plots to 'quell' restless Igbo Youth – IPOB i.e. Crocodile tears, and now the Fulani Herdsmen invasion of rural communities in the River Benue Valley/Middle Belt and Southern Nigeria. They are believed to be subterfuges, religious and political cabals, for Islamic conquest began by Othman Danfodio. Yet some others hold that they are expressions of social discontent or tribal hatred.

On a wider plain, one of the most discussed conspiracy theory in recent years must

have been the 9/11 terrorist attack on the World Trade Centre in USA. Four airplanes were hijacked, of which two crashed into the center, one hit the Pentagon and one ended up crash-landing in a rural field in Shanksville, Pennsylvania. However, within a couple of days a very persistent theory arose: Bush, or even the entire United States government initiated the attacks. Even now, the phrase “Jet fuel can't smelt steel beams” is commonly known. The question is of course: what could be true of this theory? Could this be one of the greatest governmental cover-ups in years? Could it be there is some secret, very powerful group of people making major decisions in western society?

Conspiracy beliefs refer to a set of false narratives in which multiple agents are believed to be working together toward malevolent ends, according to Swami et al. (2014). Bartlett and Miller (2010) speak of a “...*mainstream cultural phenomenon that represents irrational distrust and an inflexible tendency to act irrespective of the situation*”. Both lay emphasis on the incorrectness of conspiracy theory. Although belief in conspiracy theory may foster greater political transparency (Swami & Coles, 2010) and allow actors to challenge dominant ideological structures, it has also been associated with alarming traits such as, paranormal beliefs and schizotypal personality disposition (Sapountzis & Condor, 2013). Placing a conspiracy believer in an influential role in society could be harmful, due to the distrustfulness towards governments and other parts of society, embedded in most conspiracy theory, creating or enlarging a wedge between certain parts of society (Mikušková, 2017).

Politicians are clearly aware of the term's connotations. They are quick at deflecting accusations of impropriety by branding them as conspiracy theory (Benen, 2014; Helm & Boffey, 2011). It seems to be widely assumed, then, that labeling something a conspiracy theory makes it seem less believable—perhaps through association with conspiracy theory as paranoid and unfounded (Bratich, 2008).

There is good reason to believe that labels have power: Telling psychiatrist that a patient was previously diagnosed with a particular disorder may change his evaluation of that patient's behavior— usually, not for the better. This bias seems to be a plausible mechanism for the purported negative effects of the conspiracy-theory label. By most accounts, for the majority of people, the conspiracy theory is seen as unfounded and paranoid. In other words, perceptions of things as conspiracy theory drift toward this negative attachment.

However, speculation about the cause of the negative effects of the conspiracy-theory label seems premature because, there has been no empirical investigation of whether the conspiracy theory label actually has the impact people assume it does: No one has actually investigated whether calling something a conspiracy theory

makes people believe it less. Moreover, some researchers have advised caution on this widely held assumption; while Uscinski and Parent (2014) find it likely that the net effect of the label is negative, they have pointed out that some people find the label convincing and attractive based on favorable and exciting portrayals of conspiracies in popular media. The importance of this issue is clear: If simply calling something a conspiracy theory really makes people take it less seriously, journalists should choose their words carefully—and the public should be on the lookout for propagandistic use of the term (deHaven-Smith, 2013). To this end, there should be a study to determine whether the conspiracy-theory label is damaging to an idea's credibility, and if so, what some possible mechanisms might be: how likely is the conspiracy theory that the government has performed mind control experiments on its own citizens without their consent through strategic propaganda, how likely is the conspiracy theory that government agencies have recruited journalists into a secret propaganda network in order to influence the minds of the people through media framing, how likely is the conspiracy theory that government agencies have illegally used surveillance, infiltration, and base security harassment to cow and discredit domestic political groups that they considered potentially threatening and how likely is the conspiracy theory that the Police, DSS, EFCC and other agencies are being used by Presidential administration of Muhammadu Buhari to harass political oppositions.s_bs_banner

The psychology of conspiracy beliefs

There is psychological interpretation for those who hold on to conspiracy theory: it offers explanation of, even if vaguely, the genesis of a crisis situation, those behind it and who to trust. These provide cushion to minimise the effect of the fear of threat to people's surrounding and address the feelings by equipping individuals with the safety mechanism to confront the actions of the suspected conspirators.

Hofstadter (1966) noted that conspiracy theory helps people comprehend complex events that are difficult to understand by attributing these events to a powerful and evil enemy group. More generally, a desire to make sense of the world is a core motive underlying belief in conspiracy theory (Bale, 2007).

Such sense-making is particularly likely to stimulate conspiracy beliefs in a social context that involves hostile or ideologically dissimilar outgroups. Such a competitive intergroup setting promotes a need to be vigilant, given that the powerful outgroup may cause more harm in the future, and conspiracy beliefs enable perceivers to estimate what the outgroup is capable of. It has been noted that people's motivation to make sense of their environment increases when they feel that they are not in control of a situation or when they experience subjective feelings of uncertainty (Van den Bos, 2009). The psychological concepts of lacking control and experiencing subjective uncertainty are closely interrelated, and both describe the

aversive experience of being in situations where it is unclear what the future may hold (Van Prooijen and Douglas). Such experiences are threatening, as people have a basic need to experience a certain level of control over their environment and to know what to expect from that environment. Feelings of control and certainty enable people to effectively navigate the world by successfully seizing on opportunities, avoiding threats, and making good choices that contribute constructively to one's wellbeing. When people are anxious and uncertain, they seek to restore control through enhanced cognitive activity to increase comprehension of the situation that they find themselves in (Park, 2010). Put differently, when people experience such aversive feelings, they engage in increased sense-making activities to imbue a situation with meaning and purpose.

If belief in conspiracy theory is a way of making sense of a situation, it follows that such beliefs are increasingly likely to the extent that people experience uncertainty or a lack of control. This assertion would provide an explanation for why conspiracy theory emerges in societal crisis situations: People often experience such situations as uncontrollable, hence, they are a cause of substantial uncertainty and anxiety among citizens. Moreover, it is often easy to connect societal crises to the purposeful misdeeds of hostile groups, making it likely that many citizens consider the possibility of secret conspiracy formation (Van Prooijen & Douglas).

In scenario where a head of state died of a mysterious illness, it may be more likely to assume that it was poison and that the poisoning was the handiwork of opposition with the aid of his domestic servants than when he survived the illness. Likewise, if the president was noted to have made careless and undiplomatic public statements, the likelihood is that conspirators are working through his speech writers or journalists to rubbish the image and the person of the president if not the country.

If studies were to be conducted today in Nigeria on the trending massive massacre of rural communities in their sleep by marauding Fulani herdsmen, the result may turn to be the conspiracy of Islamic jihadist implementing the Othman Danfodio Islamic domination or that the conspirators are powerful evildoers in the opposition working to blackmail the administration. Either way, the support for such “consequence-cause matching” in conspiracy beliefs, referring to the idea that people are more likely to believe in conspiracy theories to the extent that the consequences of an event are more harmful.

While conspiracy beliefs are a response to anxiety and uncertainty, it is not a given that they actually help to reduce such feelings. In fact, research reveals that exposure to conspiracy theory increases feelings of powerlessness, which, in turn, leads to a variety of maladaptive behavioral intentions, such as withdrawal from politics and a reluctance to have a child vaccinated, in response to vaccine conspiracy beliefs

(Douglas and Sutton, 2015). Conspiracy theories also appear to influence people without their awareness (Douglas and Sutton, 2008). We speculate here that conspiracy theories are likely to have some psychological payoff for perceivers, for instance, by reassuring them that harmful incidents do not occur at random, thereby enabling them to prepare for the dangers entailed by the suspected conspiracy. At the same time, believing that the world is filled with evil conspiracies is likely to invoke a host of negative emotions, which may help explain why belief in one conspiracy theory stimulates belief in other conspiracy theories (Goertzel, 1994; Wood et al., 2012).

Politicians and Conspiracy Theory

Many politicians believe dubious conspiracy theories. It won't be surprising if a research result in Nigeria should show that the inability of APC government through the President Buhari to perform is the quantum of mismanagement of last PDP administration. On the other divide, if the result turns out to reveal that age and education of the president are the result of the drift and the undiplomatic gaffes, the PDP will shout, 'we said it before'.

The general assumption is that politicians, in government or its agencies are continuously plotting to sell dummy to the public designed to deceive the public or cover their failures. Generally, it is a matter of which divide one is that defines conspiracy theory: the ruling party tends to suspect the opposition party. Ask APC or PDP but generally the submission to the theory is the belief in another conspiracy theory: put simply, people often exhibit a 'conspiratorial mindset' that seems to transcend traditional left-right distinctions (Van Prooijen and Douglas). Van Prooijen and Douglas asked: How does ideology relate to the general susceptibility of individuals to believe in conspiracy theories? Quoting André Krouwel and Thomas Pollet study, they illustrated that it is not necessarily the content, but rather the *strength* of one's political ideology that predicts how likely people are to accept a range of conspiracy theories. That is, the political extremes – at both the left and the right side of the political spectrum – are most likely to have the required mindset that makes them prone to perceive conspiracies as a primary cause of important political events.

The main character of political extremists is that they tend to make clear-cut assumptions about the world, by rigidly classifying people, institutions, or events as positive or negative, competent or incompetent, evil or benevolent, and so on. Such black-and-white thinking is reflected in a belief that, with the right policies, societal problems can be solved rather easily – this contrasts with political moderates, who are more likely to appreciate the complexities of many of the problems that the world faces.

This style of thinking – referred to as 'belief in simple political solutions' – feeds into one of the main functions of conspiracy theory: to provide comprehensive explanations for distressing events that are hard to make sense. Conspiracy theories enable believers to resolve any ambiguity, and to find answers for any open question, when confronted with distressing events – by assigning blame to a set of powerful actors that they deem to be untrustworthy. Indeed, all conspiracy theories – even those which at first glance appear articulate or well-constructed – essentially depart from a simple assumption: that the official explanation must be dishonest. Belief in conspiracy theories and political extremism are associated with a similar, highly structured, style of perceiving and interpreting societal events.

Media Narration

Why do we believe in conspiracy theories? Perhaps, we may point at political ignorance: few much about the inside working of government or precisely, about politics and public policy. This is not strange; it is rational for most of us whose only access to make a better decision is at elections when and where we hope that our hope and our vote matter. But this is not enough or not to be given the likelihood that our vote counts: rigging is our mantra at least in the developing democracy like Nigeria. . People who don't know much about how the political system works find it more difficult to separate plausible claims from implausible ones.

Absolute ignorance may help to explain why people are more likely to believe outrageous political theory than similar ones about their personal lives. Most of us have very strong incentives to be well-informed about issues in our lives where our choices are likely to make a difference. The person who falsely believes that his family members or colleagues are conspiring against him will impose tremendous costs on himself if he acts on that assumption. By contrast, individual voters suffer no such obvious penalties when they embrace political conspiracy theories. This is one reason why many people who take in conspiracy theory about political events are generally rational in their everyday lives.

But belief in conspiracy theory is not just the result of simple ignorance. [Partisan bias](#) also plays a major role. It is no accident that members of Peoples Democratic Party - PDP - are more likely to believe conspiracy theories that make Muhammadu Buhari and APC as usurpers, while Atiku Abubakar supporters are more likely to believe those that reflect negatively on Goodluck Jonathan . Many people evaluate political information not as truth seekers, but as [“political fans” ready to hail appropriate party chieftain](#). They are [all too ready to accept anything that supports their preexisting views, while ignoring, skewing, or rejecting contrary evidence](#). Such tendencies [have become more severe in an age of increased polarization where partisan bias and hatred of the opposing parties and their supporters have grown](#).

The perverse incentives that cause political ignorance also help exacerbate partisan bias. Because there is so little chance that any one vote will make a difference, voters have little incentive to evaluate political information objectively, and carefully consider opposing views. Unlike in many other aspects of their lives, they can afford to indulge political biases with very little chance of suffering any adverse consequences. Just as it is rational for most voters to be ignorant about politics, it is [also rational for them to make little effort to control their biases in evaluating new political information.](#)

Sadly, however, rational behavior by individuals can lead to terrible collective outcomes. It makes little difference whether any one voter is ignorant or believes ridiculous conspiracy theories. But when millions do so, it [degrades the quality of government and political discourse.](#)

There is no quick and easy fix for the interlinked problems of political ignorance and partisan bias. But it is [long past time that we start taking these problems seriously, and consider various systemic changes that might reduce their impact.](#)

There is also [much that media can do to help voters improve their reasoning and reduce bias:](#) reasonable editorial framing, objective news reportage, enlightened commentaries in personal editorial columns.

Conspiracy Theories from other Democracies

*Conspiracy theories are menu listing in political discourse across vibrant democracies around the world. But does it matter in Nigeria as well? It does but rarely matters when casting of votes to renew mandate is canvassed. In other lands, it plays a significant role. In the United States and Europe for example, are some types of voters more likely to believe in conspiracy theories than others? Studies show, according to **Jan-Willem van Prooijen**, that those on the left and right of the political divide, and those who are more likely to have faith that there is simple solutions to complex political problems, are likely to believe in conspiracy theories. He writes: 'Whenever threatening, high profile events take place, conspiracy theories offering alternative explanations to the official narrative tend to emerge.'* And here, in Nigeria, do we look far, both in conventional media and the rampaging social media networks to find salacious statements about events, such as the intention or the mask behind the Boko Haram sect, the IPOB, EFCC, the Avengers, Afeniferes, the killer Fulani Herdsmen or the Nigeria Economic crisis like the economic crisis in the European Union deliberately caused by the International Monetary Fund and the sweeping statements about 'Israel's national intelligence agency (Mossad) or 'Islamic State beheadings staged by Hollywood producers?'

Far-fetched as these conspiracy theories might be, it would be a mistake to portray

conspiracy theorists as simply mentally ill: indeed some conspiracy theories – including theories that the CIA was behind the John F. Kennedy assassination, or that 9-11 was an inside job – are endorsed by a surprisingly large number of Americans. Moreover, conspiracy beliefs can have harmful consequences.

Discussion/Conclusion

People continuously experience substantial uncertainty and fear due to societal crisis situations, such as terrorist attacks, plane crashes, natural disasters, or war. While it is significantly difficult to provide an objective definition of “crisis” as a historic concept— as labeling an event as a “crisis” requires a subjective judgment, and the significance of an event to justify that label often can only be evaluated in retrospect (Roitman, 2011). In this contribution, we utilize a working definition of societal crisis as impactful and rapid societal change that calls existing power structures, norms of conduct, or even the existence of specific people or groups into question. Since people have a fundamental need to understand why events occurred, particularly in the case of negative or unexpected events, crisis situations often elicit sense-making narratives among citizens that become part of their representations of history. Many of these narratives take the form of conspiracy theory, commonly defined as explanatory beliefs of how multiple actors meet in secret agreement in order to achieve a hidden goal that is widely considered to be unlawful or malevolent (Zonis and Joseph, 1994). Central to this definition is a group, or coalition, of powerful and evil-minded individuals, distinguishing conspiracy beliefs from other forms of belief (e.g. religion, paranormal belief, and superstition). While some conspiracy theories have turned out to be true (e.g. the Watergate and Iran–Contra scandals), most conspiracy theories in history have no evidence to support them (Pipes, 1997). Well-known examples of conspiracy theories as explanations of societal crises are allegations that the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) was behind the assassination of President John Fitzgerald Kennedy (JFK) or that the Bush administration was involved in plotting the 9/11 terrorist attacks (Sunstein and Vermeule, 2009).

In the present contribution, we focus on the role that societal crisis situations play in people's tendency to believe in conspiracy theories and the implications of this for how people make sense of, and remember past events. We specifically examine whether, and why, societal crisis situations stimulate belief in conspiracy theories. To do so, we integrate historical insights about crisis events that have taken place and stimulated conspiracy theories, with psychological insights about underlying mental processes leading to conspiracy beliefs. In the following, we first examine how prevalent conspiracy theories have been throughout history. Are conspiracy theories mainly a product of our modern, digital age facilitated and perpetuated by internet and social media? Or, have conspiracy theories been prevalent among citizens throughout history? As a second step, we provide examples in both near and distant

history of how crisis situations were intimately connected to the appearance of, and widespread belief in, conspiracy theories. As a third step, we describe the underlying psychological dynamics of how crisis situations may stimulate belief in conspiracy theories. As a final step, we explain that once formed, conspiracy theories can stabilize into coherent narratives that influence how people remember, and think about past events.

Are conspiracy theories unique to modern time? A common idea among lay people, journalists, and academics seems to be that we now live in an “age of conspiracy.” To some extent, this assumption is understandable: Conspiracy theories can be found everywhere and statistics reveal that large portions of ordinary citizens endorse them for a wide range of topics. This is why active public ask whether—or even downright assume that—conspiracy beliefs are on the rise. But is this actually true? What does the empirical evidence say about the prevalence of conspiracy thinking over time?

Uscinski and Parent (2014) from a generated data from an empirical research found that conspiracy theories have not increased over time, and if there ever has been an “age of mischief, it is not now. Uscinski and Parent reason that, insofar as the internet plays a role in conspiracy theorizing, its role seems restricted to replacing other means of communication (e.g. word-of-mouth).

A comparable conclusion emerges from a study by Andeweg (2014), who studied how citizens feel about politicians, political parties, and democracy, within various European Union (EU) countries. His study specifically examined whether the trust that people have in politicians and political parties, and their satisfaction with the political system, has declined over time. The data on satisfaction with democracy range from 1974 to 2012, and the data on trust range from 1997 to 2012. The results suggest that although across EU member states, political trust and satisfaction tend to be low, they are not declining. There have been within-country fluctuations throughout the years, but these fluctuations seem mostly due to specific historical events (e.g. economic recession vs prosperity) and do not reflect structural changes. Although Andeweg (2014) did not directly assess belief in conspiracy theories, measures of trust in, and satisfaction with, politicians have been found to closely predict such beliefs (Abalakina-Paap et al., 1999; Goertzel, 1994). Combined with Uscinski and Parent's (2014) data, these findings offer little evidence for the proposition that conspiracy theories are unique today.

Furthermore, there is also little evidence to support the idea that conspiracy theories are specific to civilized democracies or cultures. There were studies of widespread conspiracy theorizing: Eastern Europe (Golec de Zavala and Cichocka, 2012), Asia (Mashuri and Zaduqisti, 2015; Swami, 2012), South Africa (Grebe and Natrass, 2012), and the Middle East (Zonis and Joseph, 1994).

To be sure, the summary is that it is natural in human relationship, socio-political or religious, to be suspicious of opposing cleavages that constitute cabal for the purpose of wresting power thus, the belief of conspiracy theory.

While it is possible to assume, by some people on the conservative left, that the conspiracy-theory label has simply lost some of the power that it once had, there is in significant reality that its effective manipulation may not have been moderated such assumption. It is quite possible that even people who are skeptical of the sorts of conspiracy theory are sympathetic to the idea of conspiracies in general.

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