



Journal of Media Ethics

Exploring Questions of Media Morality

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/hmme21>

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To cite this article: Jukka Varelius (2023) On Ethically Informing Citizens About Political Conspiracies, Journal of Media Ethics, 38:2, 93-103, DOI: [10.1080/23736992.2023.2193956](https://doi.org/10.1080/23736992.2023.2193956)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/23736992.2023.2193956>



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Published online: 23 Mar 2023.



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On Ethically Informing Citizens About Political Conspiracies

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ABSTRACT

Conspiracy theorizing can sometimes have regrettable features that speak for suppressing it. Yet, given that an adequately knowledgeable citizenry is a prerequisite of a healthy democracy, the public should be informed about politically important events, including political conspiracies. In this article, I focus on the relationship between informing citizens about political conspiracies and the kind of conspiracy theorizing that arguably should be suppressed. More precisely, I maintain that informing citizens about political conspiracies threatens to lead to the kind of conspiracy theorizing there is reason to suppress, and I examine how the potential drawback ought to be dealt with. I propose that informing citizens about political conspiracies should both proceed in light of pertinent research on conspiracy theorizing and pay heed to adequate knowledge about the circumstances in which conspiracies are publicized.

ARTICLE HISTORY



Received 31 January 2023

Accepted 19 March 2023

Introduction

In the twenty-first century, conspiracy theorizing has become increasingly popular in the politics of democratic countries. A significant number of studies suggest that the development is regrettable. The studies show that, besides possibly expressing derogatory attitudes, conspiracy theorizing can compromise social trust, decrease political participation, and instigate violence, for instance (see Anshah, 2021; Baumann & Cohnitz, 2021; Cibik & Harđoš, 2022; Douglas & Sutton, 2015, 2018; Jolley & Douglas, 2014b, 2014a; Radnitz, 2022; Uscinski et al., 2021; Wilson, 2022; and below). Accordingly, it has been argued that conspiracy theorizing should sometimes be suppressed (see Cassam, 2019; Cibik & Harđoš, 2022; Lavik, 2016; Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009). However, given that an adequately knowledgeable citizenry is a prerequisite of a healthy democracy, the public should be informed about politically important events, including political conspiracies (see also Coady, 2018; Dentith, 2021; Pigden, 2018).

In this article, I focus on the relationship between informing citizens about political conspiracies and the kind of conspiracy theorizing that arguably should be suppressed. First, I present the main starting points I adopt in addressing the topic and then put forward reasons for suppressing conspiracy theorizing of a kind, namely dangerous false conspiracy theorizing. After drawing attention to important differences between conspiracy theorizing of that kind and informing citizens about political conspiracies, I maintain that both research on conspiracy theories and actual historical developments suggest that informing citizens about political conspiracies threatens to lead to dangerous false conspiracy theorizing. Based on the considerations to that effect, I propose that informing citizens about political conspiracies should both proceed in light of pertinent research on conspiracy theorizing and pay heed to adequate knowledge about the circumstances in which conspiracies are

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publicized. After briefly addressing three possible objections, I conclude by summing up and proposing some directions for future research.

Main starting points

In ordinary parlance, *conspiracy theory* is often used pejoratively, to refer to false and fanciful positions (see Boudry, 2022; Napolitano & Reuter, 2021; Walker, 2019). There are also researchers who understand conspiracy theory in line with this ordinary sense of the expression (see Ichino & Rääkkä, 2021; Shoaibi, 2022; Swami et al., 2014). However, according to what has come to be called the current standard academic understanding of conspiracy theories, any account of an event or phenomenon that explains the event or phenomenon as the result of a concerted action carried out in secret by two or more agents qualifies as a conspiracy theory (see Cibik & Hardoš, 2022; Dentith, 2021). I now employ this standard academic understanding of conspiracy theories.¹ In a wide sense, conspiracy theorizing encompasses the formulation, entertainment and presentation of conspiracy theories. Yet, from the viewpoint of suppressing conspiracy theorizing, the most central form of conspiracy theorizing is the public presentation of dangerous false conspiracy theories (see section 3 below).² And the dissemination of true theories about political conspiracies is plausibly most central from the point of view of informing citizens about political conspiracies.³

A political conspiracy can now be understood as concerted action carried out in secret by two or more agents that relates to the practice of government or administration. Central historical examples of political conspiracies include the plots behind the assassination of Julius Caesar, the 1953 Iranian coup d'état, the Watergate scandal, the Iran Contra Affair, and the September 11 attacks, to mention just a few. All political conspiracies should arguably not be publicized. Concealing a secret military operation, for instance, can plausibly sometimes be warranted, for a period at least. The business affairs a government engages in may presumably sometimes involve trade secrets that justify a degree of secrecy, for another example. However, I now assume that, outside such cases, citizens should be informed about political conspiracies (see also Coady, 2018; Dentith, 2021; Pigden, 2018).⁴ Knowing that a candidate is involved in a political conspiracy can be essential from the viewpoint of making an adequately informed voting decision, for instance. Such knowledge can also help citizens to protect themselves against dangerous political conspiracies, enhance citizen autonomy (more generally), and promote the pursuit of truth (see also Ball, 2021 cf. Hannon, 2022).

The parties that could inform citizens about political conspiracies include officials of state institutions, members of non-governmental organizations, representatives of private media, and individual citizens (with access to pertinent information and means of communication). Which one(s) of them

¹Yet, the argument of this article would go through even if conspiracy theories were defined as, say, false and fanciful theories about activities carried out in secret by two or more agents and true accounts about such activities were called, say, conspiracy explanations (see also Napolitano & Reuter, 2021). Like most of the research discussed in this article, I now focus on political conspiracies and theories thereof. Yet, the considerations presented below pertain, *mutatis mutandis*, to ethically disseminating information about political conduct that is not secretive or undertaken in collaboration with others too. Moreover, conspiracy theorizing is sometimes discussed in connection with conspiracism, an activity that, besides conspiracy theorizing, encompasses mere verbal gesturing to the effect that, behind benign appearances, something sinister is underway (see Rosenblum & Muirhead, 2020 cf. Clarke, 2023). And conspiracism often spreads through fake news, typically understood as misleading reports that are intentionally and verifiably false (see Brown, 2023; Fritts & Cabrera, 2022). The argument of this article is relevant from the viewpoint of ethically securing against the threats of dangerous false conspiracism and dangerous fake news too.

²Freedom of thought (see Swaine, 2018) arguably entails that such activities as, for instance, privately entertaining a dangerous false conspiracy should not be suppressed. And a society should plausibly allow its citizens to engage in false public theorizing as long as the theorizing does not pose significant harm or danger (see also Cibik & Hardoš, 2022, pp. 451–452).

³By true theories I now refer, not to theories that accord with, say, the prevalent ideology or one's "gut feelings" (see Parks, 2022), but to theories that accord with fact or reality. Correspondingly, I now understand false theories as theories that do not accord with fact or reality. Although demarcating true theories about political conspiracies from false ones can sometimes be difficult, that does not mean that we are never or only very rarely able to determine the veracity of a theory about a political conspiracy. Accordingly, I now abstract from the question how true theories positing political conspiracies can be demarcated from false ones (see Pigden, 2018).

⁴Whether a political conspiracy belongs to the category of theories that citizens should know about should arguably be determined on a case-by-case basis.

would be the most appropriate informer(s) can plausibly vary between cases. At any rate, the following considerations are relevant to determining how any of the pertinent parties should inform citizens about political conspiracies. While I do not address all or even many of the ethical questions related to promoting citizens' knowledgeability about politically important events, an adequate assessment of the questions should acknowledge that informing the public about political conspiracies could lead to conspiracy theorizing there is reason to suppress. Therefore, and given that the potential drawback has not received adequate attention so far, I take it that examining it is worthwhile.⁵

A case for suppressing conspiracy theorizing of a kind

Consider, for example, the theories that a malevolent Jewish circle conspired for world domination and that there is an ongoing covert effort to replace the white populations in current white-majority countries. The former, the so-called international Jewish conspiracy theory, is among the most widespread and long-running conspiracy theories (see also Bangerter et al., 2020). The latter, the so-called white replacement theory, is prevalent in contemporary right-wing extremist thought, for instance. Besides most plausibly being false, but not unrelatedly, the theories are also morally problematic. Cibik and Hardoš (2022, pp. 456–457), for example, characterize versions of the theories as follows:

... [a theory that thirty Jewish bankers rule the world] is designed to fuel anti-Semitic feelings, clearly endangering the mutual respect, freedom and equality of citizens that stand behind contemporary liberal societies. A belief in such a conspiracy theory entails that one is a mere puppet in the hands of powerful Jews scheming to enrich themselves off a disempowered public. This clearly implies racial resentment, which is of course a highly undesirable element in every functioning society, not only a liberal one. ... [the theory that the Syrian refugee crisis was arranged to replace the white population of Europe with non-white Muslims] transforms refugees in desperate need of help into agents of a foreign power to whom we owe no compassion or benevolence – we should indeed actively fight them, as our very survival is at stake. The theory thus effectively dehumanizes them. As such, it directly challenges the belief in equality and respect owed to fellow human beings.

In addition to expressing derogatory attitudes, the Jewish conspiracy theory and the white replacement theory can, and also do, have detrimental practical consequences.

For instance, those who are inclined to see devious plots, such as the alleged international Jewish conspiracy and the one claimed to aim to replace the white populations in current white-majority countries, behind significant world events are likely to have distrust in government and to find democratic ways of political participation ineffective. Since World War II, the international Jewish conspiracy theory has been used to justify the Holocaust as self-defense (see Herf, 2006), for another example. And the white replacement theory has motivated terrorist attacks, such as the 2019 El Paso shooting, in which a far-right individual killed 23 people and injured 23 others at a Walmart store in El Paso, Texas (see also Blazak, 2022; Obaidi et al., 2022; Wilson, 2022). Both its derogatoriness and its (possible) detrimental consequences speak for suppressing conspiracy theorizing of the kind that the international Jewish conspiracy theory and the white replacement theory exemplify, conspiracy theorizing I henceforth refer to as dangerous false conspiracy theorizing.⁶ Dangerous false conspiracy theorizing might sometimes lead to, say, reasonable discussion of the theories, discussion that promotes autonomy,

⁵Research on media ethics emphasizes the importance of avoiding unjustified harm and minimizing justified harm (see Ward, 2020) and the principles of the *Society of Professional Journalists* 2014 for instance, advice to “[b]alance the public’s need for information against potential harm or discomfort” and to “[c]onsider the long-term implications of the extended reach and permanence of publication.” However, the factors pertinent to adhering to such guidelines in connection with informing citizens about political conspiracies have not, to my knowledge, received due attention.

⁶By saying that conspiracy theorizing is dangerous, I mean that it is likely to cause significant harm. For philosophical discussion on the notion of harm see Hanna (2016), Pitcovski (2022), Rabenberg (2014), and Ward (2020, Ch. 5). It has been suggested that conspiracy theories such as the two referred to above rather rationalize existing dangerous attitudes than lead people to adopt dangerous mind-sets (see Mercier, 2020). Yet, the rationalizing role is plausibly not the only role that such conspiracy theories can have in connection with dangerous attitudes and, even if it were, that would not entail that conspiracy theorizing of the kind is not dangerous. After all, rationalization of dangerous attitudes can maintain and strengthen the attitudes (see also Radnitz, 2022).

truth, and democracy (see also Mill, 1978). Yet, when no adequate prospect of such advantages exists, suppressing dangerous false conspiracy theorizing would plausibly be warranted.⁷

Conspiracy theories keep emerging, and predicting whether a conspiracy theory will have detrimental consequences may, like determining whether a conspiracy theory is false, sometimes be difficult. Assessing whether a conspiracy theory could be advantageous can also sometimes be problematic. Yet, conspiracy theories that have detrimental consequences would typically seem to share the feature of derogatoriness. Accordingly, at least when a conspiracy theory is as derogatory as one that is known to have (had) detrimental consequences, the former theory too can often be deemed likely to have detrimental consequences. Correspondingly, when a conspiracy theory is not importantly different from one that is known to lack significant advantages, the former theory too can often be deemed likely to lack significant advantages. And sometimes the mere derogatoriness of a conspiracy theory can arguably suffice to warrant suppression of the theory (see also Cibik & Hardoš, 2022). In practice, the suppression of dangerous false conspiracy theorizing could take different forms, varying from prohibiting such theorizing in public broadcasting to initiating information campaigns against the theorizing to enacting laws against the theorizing. What measure(s) would be the most appropriate one(s) could arguably vary between different cases.⁸

Dangerous false conspiracy theorizing and informing citizens about political conspiracies

Let us briefly compare dangerous false conspiracy theorizing with informing citizens about political conspiracies in light of two well-known political scandals, the Watergate scandal and the Iran-Contra Affair. The former, a scandal that led to the resignation of U.S. President Richard Nixon, stemmed from Nixon's administration's attempts to cover up its involvement in a break-in of the Democratic National Committee headquarters at the Washington, D.C., Watergate Office Building. The Iran-Contra Affair arose from the attempts by Reagan administration senior officials to fund, against a prohibition by the U.S. Congress and in violation of an arms embargo against the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Contras in Nicaragua. Some details of both of these conspiracies remain debated. Yet, it is generally accepted that the central events behind the Watergate scandal and the Iran-Contra Affair occurred in the way just roughly described above.

Now, in both of the conspiracies at hand, a group of government officials acted condemnably. Consequently, publicizing the conspiracies apparently presupposed employing negatively loaded language. Publicizing the conspiracies was also likely to, say, compromise trust in government. After all, the conspirators were government officials and they betrayed the trust placed on them. Yet, assuming that the conspiracies were depicted correctly and that the negative connotations employed were not excessive, publicizing the conspiracies did not, say, libel or dehumanize the conspirators. And because the conspirators betrayed the trust placed on them, the resulting losses of trust were arguably justified, insofar as the losses were proportionate to the misconduct that actually took place (see also Alfano & Huijts, 2020; Davidson & Satta, 2021).⁹ Accordingly, while informing the public about the conspiracies apparently employed negatively loaded

⁷While presenting a full-blown philosophical justification for this view is beyond the scope of this article, I take it that the above considerations suffice to make the view intuitively plausible. Moreover, even if *suppressing* dangerous false conspiracy theorizing was not warranted, limiting such theorizing – in the sense of, say, providing guidelines for how a dangerous false conspiracy theory should be presented in public (see also section 7.2 below) – would, because of its derogatoriness and dangerousness, arguably still be justified. And the argument of this article is relevant from the viewpoint of just limiting, as distinguished from suppressing, dangerous false conspiracy theorizing too.

⁸Whether a conspiracy theory should be suppressed and what would be the most appropriate way(s) of suppressing a conspiracy theory should plausibly be determined on a case-by-case basis.

⁹Determining whether a loss of trust is proportionate in the sense at hand can sometimes be difficult. Yet, if publicizing a conspiracy undermined trust in parties that were not engaged in the conspiracy, for instance, the loss of trust in question would plausibly be disproportionate.

language and had some detrimental consequences, it did not amount to conspiracy theorizing that should be suppressed.

An overgeneralization-based threat of dangerous false conspiracy theorizing

However, both research on conspiracy theories and actual historical developments suggest that informing citizens about political conspiracies threatens to lead to conspiracy theorizing there is reason to suppress. In light of the research, conspiracy theories typically aim to explain phenomena that people find confusing, distressing, incomprehensible, or uncontrollable (see Lantian et al., 2020). Relatedly, several researchers argue that conspiracy theorizing responds to certain common psychological needs, such as the needs for certainty and security (see Biddlestone et al., 2022).¹⁰ Moreover, as successful conspiring often presupposes that it remains hidden from parties able to hinder its completion, the secretiveness of conspiring has a reason. Besides just being silent about them, the endeavor to keep conspiracies hidden can involve the planting of evidence against their occurrence. Accordingly, it is possible to interpret both lack of evidence for and evidence against the existence of a conspiracy as supporting a conspiracy theory: lack of evidence for and evidence against the existence of a conspiracy are what one can expect when conspirators try to hide their plot (see also Boudry, 2022; Keeley, 1999). Because of these features of conspiracy theorizing, virtually any incident can give rise to conspiracy theories, and major historical events are, to quote Maarten Boudry (2022, p. 13), likely to spark conspiracy theories with “near-absolute confidence.”

While conspiracy theories may sometimes, say, help to reveal political conspiracies citizens should know about (see Coady, 2018; Dentith, 2021; Pigden, 2018), the kinds of features of conspiracy theorizing referred to above unfortunately fuel dangerous false conspiracy theorizing too. In line with this, studies conducted by Katherine Levine Einstein and Glick (2015), for instance, suggest that exposure to a claim about government conspiracy has a potent negative effect on trust in even those government services and institutions that are unconnected to the claim. Jolley et al. (2020), for another example, report that exposure to conspiracy theories about a group of people not only increases prejudice toward that group of people but also is associated with increased prejudice toward a number of other, unrelated groups of people. In a similar vein, several conspiracy theory researchers focusing on dangerous false conspiracy theories argue that the single best predictor of belief in one conspiracy theory is belief in a different conspiracy theory (see van Prooijen, 2019; Wood et al., 2012).

Moreover, to turn from research on conspiracy theories to actual historical developments, consider the repercussions of the Watergate scandal and those of the Iran-Contra Affair. Clodagh Harrington (2022), for example, describes the former as follows:

Watergate cannot be blamed for the dysfunctional state of U.S. politics in the 21st century. It did, however, sow the seeds of mistrust that became the tangle of media, public and political cynicism that pervades to this day.

Olmsted (2018, pp. 243–244), for another instance, refers to the Iran-Contra Affair as a central blow in a series of shocks that undermined Americans’ trust in their leaders. Needless to say, a government should not be trusted blindly (see Alfano & Huijts, 2020; Davidson & Satta, 2021), and both the Watergate scandal and the Iran-Contra Affair warrant(ed) a degree of distrust toward those in power. Yet, even together with the political misconduct that has occurred since, the scandals arguably do not provide adequate justification for as pervasive distrust and political cynicism as that now prevailing in the United States, distrust and cynicism that finds such ways of discharging itself as, for example, the QAnon movement and the related January 6, 2021, attack at the Capitol Building in Washington (see also Rothschild, 2022).¹¹ Hence, both pertinent research on conspiracy theorizing and actual historical developments suggest that conspiracy theorizing tends to overgeneralize. Because of this feature of

¹⁰Some researchers maintain that, understood in accordance with the pejorative sense of the term (see above), conspiracy theories rather provide instant gratification than actually meet such needs (van Prooijen, 2022).

¹¹In line with the view of current U.S. politics expressed by Harrington and Olmsted, the OECD (2022), for a yet further instance, reports that in 2021 only 40.5% of Americans had confidence in the national government.

conspiracy theorizing, informing citizens about political conspiracies threatens to lead to dangerous false conspiracy theorizing.¹²

Responding to the overgeneralization-based threat of dangerous false conspiracy theorizing

Given the importance of an adequately knowledgeable citizenry to a healthy democracy, informing citizens about significant political conspiracies is arguably warranted even when it is likely to lead to a degree of dangerous false conspiracy theorizing (Cibik & Hardoš, 2022). After all, besides violating citizens' right to know about public affairs, concealing a significant political conspiracy could also result in even graver danger than revealing it, for instance. Yet, informing citizens about political conspiracies should evidently not cause unnecessary danger (Ward, 2020, Ch. 5). From this viewpoint, it is plausibly important that the informers depict conspiracies correctly and avoid exaggeration and generalization. Yet, as was already proposed, adhering to such requirements unfortunately does not erase the overgeneralization-based threat of dangerous false conspiracy theorizing. This motivates a search for further precautionary measures.

Besides having produced the results reported above, research also shows that conspiracy theories surge particularly following distressing and anxiety-provoking events, such as natural disasters, terrorist attacks, wars, economic crises, and swift societal change. And the research suggests that belief in conspiracy theories correlates positively with such factors as low formal education, anomie, disengagement from the system, discontent with or rejection of social norms, and feelings of powerlessness, disaffection, and hostility, and often relates to "conspiracy mentality," an enduring propensity to see secret plots behind world events. Moreover, several conspiracy theory researchers argue that, instead of analytic, rational deliberation and thorough assessment of evidence, belief in conspiracy theories is primarily rooted in fast, intuitive thinking and relies on emotions and heuristics, for a yet further example. (see Biddlestone et al., 2022; Lantian et al., 2020; Miller et al., 2016; van Prooijen & Douglas, 2017; van Prooijen et al., 2020)¹³

In view of the above considerations, the more pronounced the factors fueling the overgeneralization related to conspiracy theorizing are in a given situation, the more likely informing citizens about political conspiracies is to lead to conspiracy theorizing that should be suppressed.¹⁴ At one extreme, where such factors are most pronounced, the probability that informing the public about a political conspiracy leads to dangerous false conspiracy theorizing can be close to one. At the other extreme, where the factors are not pronounced, the probability that informing the public about a political conspiracy leads to dangerous false conspiracy theorizing can be negligible. Accordingly, the parties informing citizens about political conspiracies should acknowledge the factors fueling the overgeneralization related to conspiracy theorizing that figure in the concrete situation the informers face.¹⁵ Perhaps then, in view of taking the factors duly into account, the publication of information about a political conspiracy should be postponed until a crisis, or at least its most acute phase, is over. Perhaps the informers should warn their audience about the kind of emotions and heuristics that lead

¹²When a conspiracy is understood as broadly as it now is, all conspiracies need not involve misconduct. Accordingly, someone might argue that the overgeneralization related to conspiracy theorizing need not result in *dangerous* false conspiracy theorizing. Yet, as overgeneralizing information about a conspiracy that does not involve misconduct would at least misidentify some of the conspirators, such overgeneralization too would be misleading, at least. And of the political conspiracies that the public should know about, most would appear to involve misconduct of one or another kind.

¹³Some conspiracy theory researchers suggest that analytic deliberation is sometimes used to rationalize the intuitive acceptance of conspiracy theories (van Prooijen et al., 2020).

¹⁴The number of political conspiracies may, perhaps, increase during wars, economic crises, and swift societal change, for instance. Moreover, the distrust such factors as, say, anomie and disengagement from the system can instigate toward the government may make those in power more prone to conspire (Kogelmann, 2021, p. 2). Yet, such correlations would not appear to be necessary, to say the least. And, as stated, the research referred to above typically focuses on dangerous false conspiracy theorizing. Hence, the kind of factors mentioned above can plausibly be seen to fuel conspiracy theorizing of the particular kind.

¹⁵Yet, the possibility that a factor inflaming the overgeneralization sometimes cancels out the effect of another such factor cannot be ruled out. If pertinent research would show that such cancellations actually occur, they should be duly acknowledged here.

from accurate information about a political conspiracy to dangerous false conspiracy theorizing. Because concrete situations can differ from each other in important respects, the same specific ethical recommendations are unlikely to apply whenever citizens should be informed about a political conspiracy. But paying attention to the factors fueling the overgeneralization related to conspiracy theorizing would plausibly help to secure against the overgeneralization-based threat of dangerous false conspiracy theorizing.¹⁶

Those informing the public about political conspiracies, be they state officials, members of non-governmental organizations, representatives of private media, or individual citizens, may often lack opportunity to get adequately acquainted with pertinent research on conspiracy theorizing. And besides being acquainted with conspiracy theory research, duly securing against the overgeneralization-based threat of dangerous false conspiracy theorizing presupposes acknowledging the nature of the circumstances the informers face at each given time. This stresses the importance of the informers' having adequate connections both to parties knowledgeable about conspiracy theory research and to parties possessing up-to-date information about the prevailing circumstances. Besides conspiracy theory researchers, the experts relevant here include intelligence officers and analysts of different branches of practical life. Insofar as no adequate networks of such experts exist, the above considerations suggest that developing such networks would be worthwhile, perhaps as a part of the agenda of a government or a professional association, for example.

Possible objections

I recognize that the above considerations are not unproblematic. Accordingly, below I turn to three possible objections that readily suggest themselves.

A misguided concern?

A critic could argue that, instead of worrying that informing citizens about political conspiracies leads to dangerous false conspiracy theorizing, we should be concerned that suppression of dangerous false conspiracy theorizing would threaten citizens' knowledgeability about politically important events (Coady, 2018; Dentith, 2021; Pigden, 2018). The suppression could, the critic could continue, lead citizens to think that true information about significant political conspiracies is false and dangerous. Accordingly, the critic could conclude, the concern addressed in this article is misguided. However, while a significant amount of research supports the view that false conspiracy theorizing can be dangerous (Ansah, 2021; Baurmann & Cohnitz, 2021; Douglas & Sutton, 2015; Jolley & Douglas, 2014a, 2014b; Oliver & Wood, 2014a, 2014b; Radnitz, 2022; Uscinski et al., 2021; Wilson, 2022; and above), there would not appear to be research supporting the view that suppressing dangerous false conspiracy theorizing would threaten citizens' knowledgeability about politically important events. Moreover, if suppression of dangerous false conspiracy theorizing actually posed a significant threat to citizens' knowledgeability, the suppression could presumably often be combined with such means of alleviating the threat as advising the public against rejecting important true information about political conspiracies, for instance. Accordingly, as it stands at least, this possible criticism does not disprove the argument of this article.

¹⁶True, acknowledging the factors would likely not suffice to totally erase the risk. Yet accounting for the factors could often diminish the threat to a significant degree, at least. Moreover, future research on conspiracy theorizing could provide further information pertinent in this context. It could be useful to examine how people disengaged from the system, for instance, react to different ways of presenting information about political conspiracies of different kinds (see also note 15).

The public should know about false conspiracy theories too

A critic could still maintain that as false conspiracy theorizing can be quite significant (see above), citizens should know about false conspiracy theories too. Hence, insofar as it assumes that citizens should be informed about true theories about political conspiracies only, the critic could conclude, the argument of this article is based on a misunderstanding of when the public is adequately informed about conspiracy theories. Now, this possible criticism is plausible in that recognizing the significance of false conspiracy theorizing can be important to, say, understanding human psychology and to preparing for the detrimental effects false conspiracy theories can have (see above). Accordingly, providing information about false conspiracy theories should arguably be a part of the curricula of pertinent educational institutions, and parties responsible for dealing with the detrimental effects of false conspiracy theorizing should be duly informed about the theories.

However, informing the public about political conspiracies in the way proposed above does not preclude informing the public about false conspiracy theories. Instead, the approach just aims to limit the emergence of novel forms of dangerous false conspiracy theorizing. Moreover, those who are provided information about false conspiracy theories could sometimes mistakenly end up believing that the theories are true. Given that the factors inflaming the overgeneralization related to conspiracy theorizing are likely to increase that risk too, also the parties informing people about false conspiracy theories should plausibly acknowledge both pertinent research on conspiracy theorizing and the nature of the circumstances in which they disseminate the information. Accordingly, this possible criticism does not disprove the argument of this article.

The approach would violate freedom of speech

Finally, a critic could argue that regulating the ways in which information is provided to citizens would violate freedom of speech. Accordingly, instead of urging those informing the public about political conspiracies to adopt the approach proposed in this article, the critic could conclude, the informers should be allowed to act without any such regulations. However, while the value of freedom of speech should not be downplayed, in practice freedom of speech is seldom the only morally relevant consideration, and there arguably are cases in which other moral considerations, such as protecting people from danger, warrant limiting the freedom (Brison, 2021; Emerick, 2021). Several jurisdictions have laws against hate speech, for instance. Given that other moral considerations can sometimes be even more important than freedom of speech, the approach to informing citizens about political conspiracies proposed above does not, assuming that it is applied with due conscientiousness, unjustifiably limit the freedom. Therefore, this possible objection does not undermine the argument of this article.

Conclusion

In this article, I have considered a risk related to informing citizens about political conspiracies: that such informing leads to dangerous false conspiracy theorizing. I argued that both research on conspiracy theories and actual historical developments support taking the risk seriously. Based on the considerations to that effect, I maintained that informing citizens about political conspiracies should both proceed in light of pertinent research on conspiracy theorizing and pay heed to adequate knowledge about the circumstances in which political conspiracies are publicized. Moreover, I suggested that insofar as no networks of experts adequately knowledgeable about the research and circumstances exist, developing such networks would be worthwhile. I also briefly addressed three possible objections against the considerations presented here. As proposed, it could still be useful to examine how different audiences react to different ways of providing information about political conspiracies of different kinds and whether some factors fueling the overgeneralization related to

conspiracy theorizing cancel out the effects of each other, for instance. Also, such ethical questions as when exactly concealing a political conspiracy would be warranted remain topics for future research. However, given that the topic focused on above has not received due attention so far, the argument of the article is, I take it, not redundant. At least, the argument could stimulate further discussion on an important matter.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Funding

The work was supported by the Academy of Finland [321903].

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