

The Covid-19 and the defeat of conspiracy theories. The renewal of public faith in scientific research

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Abstract

Conspiracy theories integrate, connect and catalogue together what are clearly independent and unrelated events in order to demonstrate correlation and construct impossible, fabricated tales of causation (Bessi, et al., 2015). In a narrative sense, these extremely sophisticated stories are often very intriguing, and their diffusion comes about due to a legitimate desire to enrich the non-scientific literature available. In other cases, despite the cultural maturity of the Western world, conspiracy theories are promoted as real news, able to upset public opinion and to involve a part of the population in Pindaric flights. Moreover, in many cases the creators of these illogical conspiracies are held as suffragists of so-called 'free thought', departing from mainstream theories and opening up the mind of the population to new and elevated levels of comprehension of reality (Melley, 2000) and at the moment, the spread of Covid-19 produces a greater awareness of the societal role of the individual.

Keywords: Covid-19; conspiracy theories; scientific research.¹

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¹ Received on October 20th, 2020. Accepted on December 17th, 2020. Published on December 31st, 2020. doi: 10.23756/sp.v8i2.536. ISSN 2282-7757; eISSN 2282-7765. ©The Authors. This paper is published under the CC-BY licence agreement.

1. The topic of fear: Covid-19

From a sociological and philosophical standpoint, one of the most interesting phenomena concerning the realm of public opinion concerns the emergence of international conspiracies theories and their strong relation to fear. In fact, the topic of fear is the thematic thread connecting the issues addressed in this short paper. Both unemployment and the arrival of immigrants from far off lands often increase fear, compromising a sense of identity that would otherwise represent an outlet for individual and collective anxieties. Conspiracy theories integrate, connect and catalogue together what are clearly independent and unrelated events in order to demonstrate correlation and construct impossible, fabricated tales of causation (Bessi, et al., 2015). In a narrative sense, these extremely sophisticated stories are often very intriguing, and their diffusion comes about due to a legitimate desire to enrich the non-scientific literature available. In other cases, despite the cultural maturity of the Western world, conspiracy theories are promoted as real news, able to upset public opinion and to involve a part of the population in Pindaric flights. Moreover, in many cases the creators of these illogical conspiracies are held as suffragists of so-called 'free thought', departing from mainstream theories and opening up the mind of the population to new and elevated levels of comprehension of reality (Melley, 2000).

At the beginning of this year, and probably at the end of the past year, a strong flu virus upset public order and healthcare systems throughout the World. Covid-19, otherwise known as 2019-nCoV or simply coronavirus, is the seventh coronavirus to attack the human population, causing one of the most rapid infections in medical history (Zhu, et al., 2020). Excluding the 1918-1919 Spanish flu pandemic, which killed about 50 million people worldwide, of the global infections in recent history, Covid-19 is the most powerful and difficult to eradicate, to date. With nearly 100,000 infections and a death toll surpassing 10,000, the imposed lockdown and forced quarantine have been the only methods able to contain the crisis.

The Covid-19 virus is 79.6% similar to that of SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome), which upset China in 2002. It is 96% similar to bat coronavirus, and for this reason, as well as other technical reasons, it is reasonably certain that the origin of Covid-19 is avian. Additionally, there is evidence that other past flu pandemics were also avian in origin (Zhou, et al., 2020).

Above all, this type of flu spreads very rapidly because it does not normally appear in the World population; the antibodies disappear quickly, and since the infection has not been present in the human environment for

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long, people do not have a strong predisposition for self-protection from it. Furthermore, the diffusion of an avian flu cannot be stopped because, in contrast to other animals, the removal of a large part of the infected population is impossible. The conditions for diffusion and the infectious power are therefore reasonably (if not certainly) ascribable to the genetic mutation of a preexisting avian virus.

Since human imagination is second only to human lunacy, theories of an international conspiracy to voluntarily diffuse Covid-19 by human means have quickly established a foothold. Without going into detail about the authors of these theories (even if they are well known to the public), the following paragraphs will attempt to summarize the main arguments of these hypotheses.

The story begins even before the epidemic, with the United States' economic difficulty in obstructing the expansion of the Chinese economy and its acquisition of power. Being unable to slow down Chinese exportation and progress through import duties or tariffs, they might have a connection with the diffusion of Covid-19 in Wuhan. The United States' labs would have bioengineered the virus and brought it to the Chinese city. The foundation of this suspicion would be a study by the University of Delhi that found evident traces of genetic manipulation within the virus. According to conspiracy theorists, this research was withdrawn for no apparent reason. All of this, of course, would be possible because it is apparently very easy to force a researcher or University to withdraw his own research, even when it could significantly benefit the whole community.

Conspiracy theorists then claim that there were confirmations by important scientists of the artificial origin of this virus. Furthermore, the seventh edition of the International Military World Games, held in Wuhan in October 2019, would have provided the right moment to spread the virus by utilizing the help of the American armed forces. Moreover, the literature promoting this conspiracy idea would even be eliminated from Amazon's price list. To complete this picture of madness, the conspiracy theorists managed to connect the closure of a US laboratory during the summer of 2019 within this framework. In summary, the virus would have been created or designed in the United States and intentionally exported to China.

2. Some final considerations

The publication of such conspiracy theories encourages an intense and profound sociological discussion. It is not possible to debate all of the sociological repercussions of this type of conspiracy outcome. Therefore, in

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these few paragraphs, only the implications to public perception of scientific research that the diffusion of Covid-19 has caused will be discussed. Despite the fact that conspiracy theories generally have a positive social function, during this pandemic, they have been promoted less with respect to other periods (e.g. chemtrails, 9-11, etc.).

From a societal perspective, many people have the need to attribute meaning to their existence. However, the exact substance of this meaning bears no importance-- any meaning will do. Despite the fact that conspiracy theories are capable of attracting only a specific part of the population, the possibility of acquiring 'alternative knowledge' and feeling like "free thinkers" can bring about two important advantages to this group of people.

The first is the aggregation within a community of like-minded people and the opportunity to share an idea, which allows for the emergence of new identities and strong self-awareness. Second, it brings the population back to reading and documentation- despite this being a rather questionable methodological approach. Nevertheless, the problem of widespread conspiracy theories over recent decades cannot be ignored and must be analyzed in the light of the negative effects which it could have for a population on a cultural level.

At the moment, the spread of Covid-19 produces a greater awareness of the societal role of the individual. Despite the fact that support for the health and safety measures put in place is not fully shared by a considerable part of the population, the measures to ensure the respect of the quarantine seems to be rather effective. The campaigns promoted by individuals and the sharing of personal experiences are providing a new level of documentation concerning this disease, as well as proper conduct to ensure its containment. Within this context, greater importance is being given to the competencies of recognized professionals from the international scientific community, taking precedence over other far-fetched hypotheses promoted on the web. The population's awareness of the need for valid researchers to face this emergency is reawakening a more realistic and accurate vision of the importance of science within the greater society.

In the future, it is now likely that the position of scientists will be elevated and that the diffusion of fake news will cease to have such a strong impact on the validity and reliability of the news produced by the mainstream media. In a society which had lost confidence in scientific professionals and institutions, restoration to the value of science within public opinion appeared to be of

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extreme necessity. Now this return to a position of greater reverence will likely soon become reality.

Obviously, conspiracy theories are not the only cause of the spread of skepticism surrounding science. Competition within scientific research - which promotes careers on the basis of the number of internationally published articles produced, rather than on the capacity of research to reveal and disseminate information regarding truly important discoveries or knowledge - has played its role in the creation of the currently complex relationship between the general population and science. A new definition of the population-science paradigm is, therefore, anticipated, along with a redefinition of the epistemological value of truth seeking. In the current state of opinion crisis, which could be defined as the 'society of worldwide risk' (Beck, 2008), this potentially destructive situation can and must be transformed into a constructive challenge.

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