

What Do We Owe Conspiracy Theorists? Public Reason in the Age of Paranoia

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13th of April, 2015

A very rough draft.

Abstract

The Internet has been a great conduit for the democratization of public discourse, allowing almost anyone to bypass the institutional gate-keepers and make her voice heard. However, this also meant that fringe voices and opinions have proliferated, gaining a wider audience. Citizens have so far been unaccustomed to the task of engaging critically with dubious and obsessive claims of persons trapped in their chimerical epistemologies of paranoia. These developments raise the question of what exactly does a democratic discourse owe the conspiratorial thinkers and how far can conspiracy theories be advanced in the public discourse. In this article I will argue that certain types of conspiratorial thinking can be viewed on par with religious thinking. They also advance public arguments which reasonable people will disagree with. However, the democratic discourse cannot afford to exclude such contributions completely. Conspiracy thinking is a more fluid concept than a religious identity, responsive to outside factors, connected with issues of trust and legitimacy of political institutions. Instead, we need to develop measures that decrease the prevalence of conspiratorial ideation – but without these measures themselves becoming the subject of conspiracy theories. Therefore, instead of the democratic state speaking out against conspiracy theories and actively combating their spread, it needs to tread very lightly and support background conditions that make conspiracies less likely to develop.