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Platforming new conspiracism

Russell Muirhead and Nancy L. Rosenblum, eds., *A Lot of People Are Saying: The New Conspiracism and the Assault on Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019). 211pp., £20.00 hb., 978 0 69118 883 6.

One thing a lot of people are saying right now – especially after the events of January 6th 2021 – is that the supercharged forces of conspiracy theory and digital communication platforms have reshaped social norms and the operations of political institutions in the post-Obama era. In *A Lot of People Are Saying: The New Conspiracism and the Assault on Democracy*, political scientists Russell Muirhead and Nancy L. Rosenblum provide the first in-depth account of the complex and recursive relations between the global far-right, digital medi, and the ongoing crises of epistemological legitimacy and value faced by knowledge-producing institutions. The book argues that the globally-connected, anti-democratic right has strategically developed ‘new conspiracist’ tactics that delegitimise opposition parties, knowledge-based institutions and democratic processes and norms.

In order to understand what makes the new conspiracism new, Muirhead and Rosenblum introduce a key epistemological distinction. For them, classic conspiracy theory is best described as ‘a proposed explanation of some historical event (or events) in terms of the significant causal agency of a relatively small group of persons – the conspirators – acting in secret’. Classic conspiracy theory, they say, still believes in the epistemic powers of evidence and explanation to reveal the traces of a knowable, causal agency/agent responsible for global events. The new conspiracism, however, has no use for evidence, explanation and causation. Its distinguishing feature is that it is ‘conspiracy without the theory’.

Having shed the commitment to theory and explanation, the new conspiracism thrives off ‘innuendo, accusation, speculation, plausible deniability, and plain assertion’, and ‘traffics in sound bites, flow[ing] here and there through the capillaries of public culture’. Think of Trump’s famous rhetorical style, which for the authors serves as the book’s key example of new conspiracist messaging. The new conspiracism’s disavowal of evidence and explanation, according to Muirhead and Rosenblum, means that it is ‘satisfied with an allegation being “true enough”, rather than true’. If it’s *possible* that a child

sex trafficking ring is being run out of a pizza joint in D.C., who is to say – and more to the point, who can definitively prove – it is not happening *now*, or has not happened *before*? But if something seems true enough in the present, we must ask how the new conspiracism arrives at a temporal position so universally indifferent to truth claims.

The new conspiracism thrives in the perpetual present and runs on a corrupted program of epistemological nihilism that weaponises doubt and turns it into a foundational virtue. Muirhead and Rosenblum contend that ‘their [the new conspiracists’] certainty is at odds with skepticism; they are without residual doubt that things are as they represent them’, and they show how the new conspiracism pits skepticism against certainty. They also take note of the epistemological paradox at the heart of new conspiracist thinking: the distortion of skepticism-as-certainty, in effect, makes the new conspiracism ‘the enemy of skepticism’. In this formulation, the new conspiracism ‘doubles down’ on skepticism as certainty, which ‘corrodes both knowledge and skepticism’. The only thing of which new conspiracists can be certain is that their own unflinching skepticism is true in all contexts.

The coherence of the new conspiracism is paid for at the expense of truth. This coherence is, in reality, false, and what is not-false is that which has not been completely disproven (by new conspiracists, of course – never ‘experts’). Despite its alleged commitment to unearthing the truth, ‘the new conspiracism sets a low bar’ when it comes to testing the epistemological core of its claims. From this perspective, truth – or something resembling it in a funhouse mirror – is equated with skepticism toward total falsifiability. As the authors note, ‘If one cannot be certain that a belief is entirely false, with the emphasis on *entirely*, then it might be true – and that’s true enough’. In a sense, the new conspiracism recasts the absence of total falsifiability in qualitative knowledge as an existential impasse of sanctioning authority (‘true enough’ – for what purpose, to whom,

and when?). As mentioned above in the brief discussion of the temporal indeterminacy of truth claims in relation to the Comet Pizza restaurant in Washington D.C., the veneer of subjunctivity occludes the processes by which the new conspiracism's self-validating truth procedures function. *A Lot of People are Saying* shows how it might be strategically important for countering the global far-right's ascendance if we were to more carefully consider how the investment in modal difference can produce epistemo-political effects that are indifferent to truth and falsity. But my point here, drawing on recent work by Luciana Parisi and Alenka Zupančič, is that the new conspiracism is driven neither by skepticism nor certainty, but by a form of epistemic nihilism, fueled in turn by an autoimmunological turn in reason that has been exploited by anti-democratic politics and social media platforms. As their epistemic values are stripped bare, justified skepticism and incontrovertible proof become equally worthless to the new conspiracist.

In a related register, Muirhead and Rosenblum show

how the cybernetic operations of feedback, noise and signal processing have fundamentally altered the protocols and processes of academic work, remediated inevitably by our everyday experiences of simply being online. In a brief discussion of the QAnon movement, the authors observe how that particular conspiracy theory's process 'mimics collaboration and peer review', not unlike the way in which our relatives' endless scrolling through conspiracy-laden memes on Facebook – or our colleagues' entire workdays spent on 'academic Twitter' – now qualify as 'doing collaborative research'. The epistemic processes and protocols of academic/scientific research and exchange, the authors demonstrate, are now reflected across such vernacularly homogenous domains as Reddit, 'academic Twitter' and 4chan.

The new conspiracism's epistemological nihilism is a feature, not a bug, of digital communication platforms. However, Muirhead and Rosenblum do not clearly define 'the new conspiracism'. Instead, we are left wondering if it is a political movement, an ideological stance, a



conspiracy or an ideologically-neutral network effect. I would submit it is the latter. While social media platforms are not central to the book's analysis, Muirhead and Rosenblum clearly think these technologies and the ideologies propping them up have played a pivotal role in enacting and disseminating new conspiracist tactics and anti-institutional beliefs. As they note early on in the book regarding the importance of sowing epistemic and institutional doubt, 'forwarding, reposting, retweeting, 'liking' ... are how doubts are validated in the new media'. This widespread doubt toward 'political parties, the norms of legitimate opposition ... and knowledge-producing institutions like the free press, the university, and expert communities within the government' is produced and disseminated through platforms' approach to epistemic value, a process which substitutes 'social validation for scientific validation'. The (il)logic of the crowd, the libidinal energy of the swarm, and the quantitative affirmations from the 'statistical refuse' heaps of the masses, in Baudrillard's terms: '*if a lot of people are saying it, then it is true enough*'.

Merging quantitative determinism with populist logic, digital communication platforms reconfigure epistemic value along these popular and emphatically *populist* lines. The truth or falsity of a claim is irrelevant; what matters is how widely it has been disseminated on digital networks and how many 'engagements' it has generated along the way. 'Even the character limit built into Twitter aligns with the new conspiracism's avoidance of evidence and explanation', Muirhead and Rosenblum write, continuing with the observation that 'the medium invites emphatic, unelaborated assertion [since] the internet is the ideal medium for repetition and for signaling identification with others who spread conspiracist narratives'. While the authors are right to observe that in-group signalling/identification and the quantitative logic of platforms shape cultural value and facilitate the spread of new conspiracist narratives, I am less certain that the ideological or political content of these operations is all that important.

The formal limitations of communication platforms produce real-world political and epistemic effects: from epistemic filter bubbles on digital platforms, to for-profit cable news, to paranoia-as-network-effect. With internet trolls baiting our collective ids into explosive outbursts of affect and with armies of bots unleashed on platforms

to boost the numbers and provide (in)authentic social legitimation, is it perhaps time that we reassessed the relations between conspiracy and politics in the age of social media? How much longer can faith in techno-reformism hold?

Regardless of political orientation, there is a tendency among the political junkies among us – or perhaps it too is a network effect of sorts – to view the epistemic and political feedback loops generated by platforms through a strictly partisan and, most worryingly, pathological lens. Digital platforms update Richard Hofstadter's famous observation that the paranoid style in American politics operates as its pathological Other, and they recast the problem of pathology as a problem of informatic signal transmission and detection. Partisan extremists and conspiracy theory true-believers, in this view, have been exposed to 'a malady or affliction that differs fundamentally from a healthy engagement in politics and surfaces in trivial and groundless claims made by marginal groups and individuals that can threaten the pluralist consensus of American democracy', as Fenster writes. The problem here is twofold. First, it is an error to assume that the existence of mis-/disinformation online poses an existential threat to democracy – the problem of transmission – even though many scholars and commentators continue believe the best way to address this problem is through the widespread dissemination of true, factual and empowering information (as we know, platforms already moderate content, of course, and the question to ask is this: do you really want corporate entities and governments regulating even more what you see online?). Second, there is a fundamentally anti-democratic undertone to the issue of faulty signal reception that would make Walter Lippmann blush. What kind of anti-democratic position believes that exposure to bad content on digital platforms irreparably and pathologically harms the everyday citizen's ability to make rational political decisions? In this view, the masses are easily manipulated, mobilised to treasonous political action by what they saw on Facebook or the wrong TV channel. This argument in particular informs Muirhead and Rosenblum's account of the rise of the global right. Nonetheless, Hofstadter's paranoid maladies resurface in the contemporary moment as a concern over digital form, yes, but mostly content, with platforms facilitating the transmission of malignant packets of ideological war-

fare couched in too-stupid-to-be-believed memes, viral videos and improperly-curated social media feeds. The form that these digitally-mediated signals take is never the point because we tend to focus exclusively on their ideological content. Repackaging these forms with factually true and proper messaging – or content which aligns with our own partisan loyalties which is, one supposes, the same thing – and retransmitting different political signals across the digital transom might help alleviate the pathological symptoms resulting from toxic media exposure. Or so we might think.

With ‘the polarized partisan divide now epistemic as well as political’, the tendency to write off political opposition as pathological leads one to believe that the proper political loyalties will immunise oneself from such epistemic afflictions as conspiracy theories and dis-/misinformation campaigns. Framing digital platforms’ network effects as forms of pathological exposure does a disservice to political discourse and to the foundations of democracy. Such a narrow and anti-democratic framing also reproduces the new conspiracist goal of delegitimising political opposition. Regardless of virtuous intent or its grounding in ‘facts’, framing political difference as a matter of pathology erodes public trust in institu-

tions. It’s clear that modern day conservatism is ‘the pure face of negativity’ in the sense that it ‘rejects the meaning, value, and authority of democratic practices, institutions, and officials’. Yet according to Muirhead and Rosenblum, the ideologically-neutral forces of conspiracism ‘help accomplish what conservatives in office cannot: they delegitimize the people and [knowledge-producing] institutions’. The controversial claim here is that the new conspiracism’s operations, techniques and network-effects are in fact ideologically-neutral and cannot be pinned to any one political party. It’s true that digital platforms create the conditions in which new conspiracism can thrive, but the success resulting from the coupling of new conspiracist goals and tactics with widespread network-effects has little to do with political ideology. The promotion and facilitation of anti-institutional beliefs (of both the right and left variety) on digital platforms is entirely self-serving, as they would like to be the only corporate institutions left in town. In this context, Muirhead and Rosenblum’s book is remarkably persuasive in its final argumentative turn: articulating a more robust defense of political and knowledge-producing institutions may very well be the best form of defense against the new conspiracism.

Michael F. Miller