

Transatlantic Conspiracy Viruses

The Migration of American Conspiracy Theories to Europe and the Netherlands through New Media



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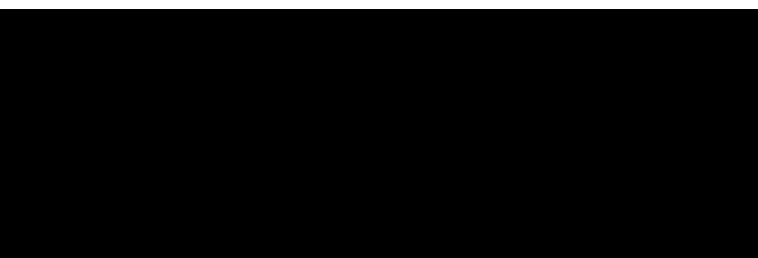
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Signed,



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There is no such thing as harmless disinformation; trusting in falsehood can have dire consequences¹

¹ Pontifex. "Pope Francis on Twitter: 'There is no such thing as harmless disinformation; trusting in falsehood can have dire consequences,'" *Twitter*, 24 Jan. 2018, twitter.com/pontifex/status/956126938392772608.

Abstract

Since the outbreak of the coronavirus, both in Europe and in the United States, the status of truth and expertise is at the heart of an intense debate about factual discourses. The Trump presidency (2017-2021) and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic have served as perfect breeding grounds for old conspiracies, such as the presumed existence of an pedophile elite group and that of vaccines allegedly containing microchips, to re-emerge and gain renewed recognition in a global war of information that is worsened through the increasing involvement of fringe movements such as QAnon on new media. New media such as Facebook and 4Chan have enabled the transgression of fake news from online platforms to offline situations, which has caused violent outcomes, such as Pizzagate (2016), to occur in real life. This thesis aims to show how American conspiracy theories have migrated to Europe and now form a global phenomenon of increasing conspiratorial thinking. As the Netherlands have played a visible part in the dissemination of fake news and conspiracy theories in Europe due to the rapidly growing following of Dutch QAnon believers, the Dutch reception of American-based conspiracies will be examined more closely. After all, through online media forms, such as Ella'Ster and We Are With You (WRWY), Dutch QAnon conspiracy theorists have placed themselves at the center of the current fake news debate in Europe, and extensively to that of the global debate about factual discourses.

Keywords

Conspiracy theories, fake news debate, conspiracy theories, the Netherlands, the United States, Europe, QAnon, factual discourse, Donald Trump, COVID-19

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Introduction

“On the Internet, everything appears equally legitimate,”² says Claire Boost. Within that massive digital arena that we have coined the World Wide Web, popular cultural personalities such as Lange Frans appear to be just as influential as the director of the World Health Organization or Prime Minister Mark Rutte. This has become especially noticeable during the COVID-19 pandemic. While the belief in conspiracy theories is perhaps an inherently human predisposition, it does spike during societal crises that create fear and uncertainty such as terrorist attacks, natural disasters, war – and in this case – a global pandemic, that calls into question the existing power dynamics and norms of conducts through rapid and often unforeseen changes in society.³

Arguably, fear of such changes leads to the concoction of conspiracies ranging from hardly distinguishable among traditional media to wildly different from the norm. This variety also makes it difficult to counter conspiracies and to discuss them properly. About this difficulty, Adam Mongrain says:

Once you believe something untrue, it's very easy to keep rationalizing that belief. It's very easy to dismiss your critics as shortsighted. And when you're constantly attacked, it's natural to make your resilience part of your identity, to become even more committed to maintaining it.⁴

Thus believing in conspiracy theories becomes not just a mere conviction, but a crucial part of one's identity (this likely also applies to *not* believing in them). Naturally, an attack on one of those conspiracies then also becomes an attack targeted at their person.

Even though a lot of research has been conducted on the topic of why people might believe in conspiracy theories, the question how conspiracies have actually migrated to different local contexts is an under-researched issue. Therefore, the extent to which conspiracies are adopted by individuals is not quite clear. Many scholars have deduced that conspiracies theories are more widely distributed than meets the eye. As a result, conspiracy theories are sometimes regarded as mere jokes or light-hearted urban myths. This tolerant cheerfulness fails to bring attention to the risks that accompany the extreme modes of thinking

² Claire Boost, “The Hidden Dangers of Conspiracy Theories,” *Maastricht University, Law*, 9 November 2020, n.p.

³ Van Prooijen, Jan-Willem and Karen M. Douglas, “Conspiracy Theories as Part of History: The Role of Societal Crisis Situations,” *Memory Studies*, 10, no. 3 (2017), 1-3.

⁴ Adam Mongrain, “I thought all Anti-Vaxxers were Idiots. Then I Married One,” *Vox*, 4 September 2015, n.p.

that result from engaging with conspiracies, such as mistrust towards authority. This is a serious issue because the legitimacy of institutions such as the government, the judiciary, and the police, are the foundation of any society, as is trust in universities and publicly funded research institutions.⁵ When these building blocks are endangered, we risk endangering the *morality of society*. Many scholars have argued that the new media, such as social media, have played a crucial role in the distribution of harmful conspiracies, and for the spread of misinformation in general. This highlights the urgency to examine new media in order to understand the complicated workings and dissemination of conspiracy theories on a global scale.

Relevancy

Fake news and conspiracy theories have taken up a prominent role in many societies across the globe. Even though the position of facts and expertise has been in decline, the question of what conspiracies can do in terms of harm to a democratically structured society, has been becoming more urgent. This makes the topic intrinsically interesting in general.

Particularly interesting is how misinformation can be used as a tool to create support for a new way of thinking and deeming the individual to be superior to the collective identity of a society, makes that marginalized trains of thought are increasingly stimulated. While this is not always a negative thing, it may lead to clustered concoctions by marginalized individuals that could potentially harm the core moral values of a society, and thus make or break it at its core.⁶ These issues also consist of intrinsically fascinating mechanisms that determine how alternative facts are distributed, received, as well as responded to by the public when they are actively pursued by marginalized groups.

Besides being a hotly debated topic in general and being intrinsically fascinating, the debate about conspiracies and fake news has also become particularly urgent since the beginning of the presidency of Trump who arguably reintroduced the fake news debate. Allegedly, this ‘American debate’ has also migrated across the Atlantic Ocean to Europe, where conspiracy theories have now gained some momentum. Thereafter, the American debate has also become a European one, albeit within different contexts.

It is crucial to raise awareness about these specific transatlantic migrations that have shaped debates in both the United States and Europe, particularly in recent times with the coronavirus pandemic sweeping through our daily lives. The COVID-19 pandemic has

⁵ Claire Boost, “The Hidden Dangers of Conspiracy Theories,” *Maastricht University, Law*, 9 November 2020, n.p.

⁶ Ibid, n.p

inspired a great amount of conspiracy theories ranging from vaccines that allegedly include chips to track individuals, to convictions of the virus having been created in a laboratory by orders of an ‘evil Bill Gates’. While these may seem outright ridiculous to many people, to some of us they do seem viable. Their belief in potentially harmful conspiracies that are increasingly conspired in collectives on the Internet could also harm democracy and taint the image of the media in general. Examining how and why this operates in such a way, especially when considering the immense role that old and new media formats play in people’s lives, is therefore crucial.

Research Question

This work places significant emphasis on the relationship between the United States and Europe, and in particular on the Netherlands, in relation to conspiracy theories and *how they have migrated*. The central research question is to what extent American conspiracy theories have travelled to Europe and the Netherlands. This will be examined in three thematic chapters.

Chapter one will concentrate on the American context by analyzing the fake news debate during the “Trump-era” in order to assess to which extent conspiracy theories are grounded in the specific political context of the United States.

Chapter two focuses on the situation in Europe. It will consider how the European public has received and responded to conspiracy theories originating from the United States. This will shed light on the dissemination of US-based conspiracy theories via social media in Europe in general.

Chapter three zooms in on discussion in the Netherlands. In order to explain the Dutch context, it is also necessary to assess how those tie into the larger frame of European fake news discourses to consider whether these may be part of more broadly existing trends surrounding misinformation in Europe in recent years (e.g. how have science and expertise become subjective in Europe in recent years, what is the position of freedom of speech on both sides of the Atlantic). Here, we will also zoom in on the present situation with COVID-19 in mind. This enables us to assess how the transatlantic conspiracies are coming to light during a worldwide pandemic.

Method

This thesis does not necessarily aim to explain *why* people believe in conspiracy theories, although it does point to fear as a main factor in the psychology of conspiratorial thinking. It does consider the circulation (migration) of conspiracy theories by focusing on the transatlantic migration of conspiracy theories and fake news, new light is shed on how

conspiracy theories are received and constructed by the media, both traditional and new ('social') media, and how the former (e.g. newspapers, television news) has responded to the increasing role of the latter (e.g. the Internet, social media).

It is particularly important to discuss how this debate has taken shape in the United States and to what extent European media have responded to this debate. The transatlantic dimension can help us to understand the global discussion about this disconcerting phenomenon.

In general, an interdisciplinary approach is used. This is accompanied by qualitative research in the fields of transatlantic studies to explain the comparisons and contrasts between the United States and Europe in the light of the fake news discourse, American studies to examine how this discourse has manifested itself in America and why, European studies to explain how the fake news discourse is present in European countries, media studies to assess the role of the media, history to consider the history of fake news and conspiracy theories in order to provide a broader context to my findings, and some philosophy with an emphasis on ethics to assess to what extent conspiracy theories through (social) media are harmful to the public.. These literary findings serve as vignettes for the overarching topic.

Specific emphasis within the European context will be on the Netherlands. While much research has been conducted on the state of conspiratorial thinking in Europe, which goes back many centuries, not much attention has been given to fake news and conspiracies in the Dutch context..

This thesis has therefore employed a case study by examining the discourses surrounding how conspiracy theories have been manifested in the Netherlands through new media, in order to assess how the local migration of conspiracy theories ties into a global perspective. The Netherlands has close ties to the United States and, arguably apart from the United Kingdom, has historically the most intimate ties to its neighbor across the Atlantic. Both have also been considered to be 'free havens' where, allegedly, free speech is cherished more than it has always been in other nations.

Chapter 1

“Conspiracy Viruses”: The Tradition of American Conspiratorial Thinking and the Position of New Media in the Fake News Debate

Conspiracy theories have been one of the defining features of American political life ever since the founding of the United States. According to Joseph E. Uscinski and Joseph E. Parent American culture enables the endurance and popularity of a wide array of conspiracies, such as those surrounding the Illuminati, the Kennedy assassination, and fear of communism (McCarthyism), but it has also paved the way for recent fringe movements such as birtherism and QAnon.⁷ Peter Knight, too, draws connections between recent conspiracies and those of pre-Civil War America about Freemasons, Catholics, Mormons, and abolitionists.⁸ Richard Hofstadter argues that such conspiracies tend to be an integral part of periods of *episodic paranoia* in American politics during critical events, such as the American Civil War. What all of these scholars agree on is that conspiracy theories appear to be an innate part of American culture – most notably, the American *political* tradition, and have originated in the United States

In recent years, largely due to the operationalization of fake news by Donald Trump, conspiratorial thinking has once again surged in the United States. In this chapter we will delve into the American conspiracy culture to better understand the current situation in the U.S. By considering the presidential elections of 2016 as a major shift and the Trump administration (2017-2021) as a period during which conspiratorial thinking reached new heights in the American political and public realms, we see how we are currently living in a new age of paranoia and to what extent this is a continuation of previous events when conspiracies skyrocketed. Effectively, the question is whether the conspiracies that flourished during the Trump era and beyond fit into the longer history of American political conspiracies and to what extent this is due to Trump’s involvement. While examining this, the role of the media in the fake news debate should also be considered in order to determine whether *new media* (social media, digital media) have taken over the position of *traditional media* (newspapers, television broadcasts) as main carriers of news and opinions.

⁷ Uscinski, Joseph E., and Joseph E. Parent, *American Conspiracy Theories* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 106.

⁸ Knight, Peter, *Conspiracy Theories in American History: An Encyclopedia*, Volume 1 A-L (Santa Barbara: ABC Clio, 2003), ix.

1.1 The Status of Truth in the United States

In the past decades, the notion that people can (and should) aspire to maintain a common truth based on scientific fact-checking of field experts, has been “falling out of favor” as *New York Times* editor Michiko Kakutani puts in *The Death of Truth*.⁹ The appreciation of objectivity as a proven measurement of common sense and good reason, she argues, has its origins in Enlightenment principles that encouraged the notions of liberty, reason, progress, and religious tolerance.

During the European Enlightenment period, these principles sprang out of the philosophical ponderings of a variety of thinkers, among which the most prominent were French *philosophes* Voltaire, Rousseau, Montesquieu, and Diderot. Their ideas became the cornerstones of much political reform in the eighteenth-century Atlantic community and inspired pivotal historical events such as the French Revolution that overthrew centuries of French monarchical oppression under the tripartite motto *liberté, égalité et fraternité* (freedom, equality, and fraternity).¹⁰ In the United States, these principles propelled the American Revolution that discarded British colonial rule. The Enlightenment principles served as empowering ideals for early abolitionists and the events that led up to the American Civil War. They also inspire the ongoing American Civil Rights movement to this very day.¹¹

Principles of liberty, equality and brotherhood, but also the underlying faith in *facts* and *common sense*, have shaped the way in which members of the Atlantic community have viewed their societies and polity and it also created the notion of a *liberal democracy*. Therefore, beliefs in objectivity and facts, as a result of the Enlightenment principles, are at the roots of a well-functioning liberal democracy such as the United States.¹²

At the same time, Kakutani identifies a dark counter-theme to these principles in the United States. She argues that factual discourses are episodically under attack due to an “episodic paranoid outlook” that threatens the American nation and disbands its underlying ideals of liberty, equality, and progressiveness.¹³ In *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism* about nativism between 1860 and 1925, John Higham describes this as episodic *angst*, which is nothing new in American history. Higham argues that nativism

⁹ Michiko Kakutani, *The Death of Truth: notes on Falsehood in the Age of Trump* (New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2018), 5.

¹⁰ William Bristow, “Enlightenment,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 29 August 2017, plato.stanford.edu/entries/enlightenment, n.p.

¹¹ Michiko Kakutani, *The Death of Truth: notes on Falsehood in the Age of Trump*, 10.

¹² *Ibid*, 9.

¹³ *Ibid*, 10-11.

always emerges in response to alien influences, religious perils, or even racial inequality.¹⁴ It seems that fear is a driving factor behind the majority of conspiratorial thinking, and that this fear originates from feelings of uncertainty as a result of major changes in the national context. Higham's views are similar to how Hofstadter views the episodic emergence of conspiratorial thinking in politics during heightened societal turmoil. Kakutani also compares the periodical disregard for established and available truths in many Western societies to an episodic "virus" that is just "waiting to reemerge" when the societal and political circumstances are just right.¹⁵ She argues that this virus tends to emerge more visibly in the transatlantic context of long-term changing demographics, income inequalities as a result of the 2008 financial crisis, and the increasing presence of globalization and technology in people's day to day lives.¹⁶ These developments have spurred on a deeply rooted *angst* in the forms of an increasing lack of compassion for others and paranoia about one's own status.

In the United States, this has often become apparent through growing sentiments of approval of nationalist and nativist politics as a result of a growing belief (*fear*) that the white working class could be marginalized by immigrants has emerged recently. Kakutani and Hofstadter both argue that this type of "episodic paranoia" is specifically targeted towards the status of science and expertise.¹⁷ With this, it is implied that Americans are living in a post-truth society – a nation in which conspiracies thrive and fake news has become mainstream, and have extended this to other nations in the world due to the rise of new media, which very often originated from the United States. Therefore, it is crucial to consider to which extent the emergence of a so-called post-truth world is inherently American and to what extent their role in its rise of influence is as prominent as it appears, as some scholars doubt that the United States is the sole culprit.

1.2 A Global Phenomenon

In *Fake News Nation: The History of Lies and Misinterpretations in America*, James Cortada and William Aspray argue that conspiracies have been a part of the American societal (public) discourse ever since the formation of the nation.¹⁸ In the United States, dis- and misinformation have thus been a prominent factor in the political arena as well as in public

¹⁴ Higham, John, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism 1860-1925* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1955), 1-3.

¹⁵ Michiko Kakutani, *The Death of Truth: notes on Falsehood in the Age of Trump*, 12.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 13.

¹⁷ Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press), 8-10.

¹⁸ Cortada, James and William Aspray, *Fake News Nation: The History of Lies and Misinterpretations in America* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2019), 4.

discourses for centuries, but the debate about alternative facts is not an exclusively American phenomenon.

Timothy Snyder argues in *The Road to Unfreedom* that the status of truth was already debated in the 1920s Soviet Union when truths were morphed into fabricated stories (propaganda) to further the communist ideal.¹⁹ Arguably, the Soviet Union catapulted the post-truth world into the mainstream. This view differs from the traditionally American-oriented views of Hofstadter, Knight, Uscinsky and Parent, in the sense that conspiratorial thinking as we know it today, according to Snyder, is absolutely not a solely American phenomenon. Snyder also claims that fake news and conspiracy theories have a global appeal and have had so for centuries, and that they are universally present as a result.

1.3 The Role of New Media and Donald Trump

Donald Trump has often used fake news and conspiracy theories as tools to discredit the media, as well as to inspire public mistrust. The media, according to Trump, are part of an “evil elite” regarded to be the “real” enemies of the American people. From his perspective, they intend to force their liberal ideology on the American people through, what Trump has coined, “fake news stories”.²⁰ While his accusations of “the media” make little sense, it does have significant consequences for a liberal democracy such as the American one.

According to Meera Salva, *traditional media* (newspapers, television broadcasts) play a crucial role in the countering, or distributing, of fake news and conspiracy theories. She holds that media, and traditional journalism in particular, is about having the power to shape public debate, and thus to bring about change.²¹ This is important in any liberal democracy. However, *new media* such as online platforms like Google and Facebook are also becoming increasingly influential as mainstream suppliers of information.²² As a result, the media are becoming fragmented. This leads to public mistrust of traditional media, after which they will look for other more accessible and reliable forms. Thus Trump may not necessarily cause the change in attitude towards the media all by himself, but he does capitalize on the increasing disintegration of traditional media in the light of the growing popularity of new media, particularly *social media*.

¹⁹ Timothy Snyder, *The Road to Unfreedom: Russia, Europe, America* (New York: Crown, 2018), n.p.

²⁰ Marjorie Randon Hershey, “Media and the 2020 Presidential Campaign,” in *the Elections of 2020*, ed. Michael Nelson (University of Virginia Press, 2021), 138-139.

²¹ Meera Salva, “Breaking News,” *RSA Journal*, 165, no. 3 (2019), 34, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26907479>.

²² *Ibid*, 34-35.

Social media (Facebook, Twitter) in particular have made it easier for people to either knowingly or unknowingly select the news that they want to engage in within their lives. Social media therefore serves as the ideal space for new media. The algorithms that determine what kind of content one is exposed to are largely influenced by a user's previous behaviors. This severely limits their exposure to "cross-cutting content" that allows users to encounter a more diverse content in their (news) feeds.²³ Many social media outlets utilize this information in order to cater to specific viewing needs, making it more about creating booming business ventures than about promoting truthful discourses. Facebook, for example, is easy to access and able to cater very specifically to its users' wishes through algorithmic machinations that lead them into contained information-bubbles. Within these bubbles, people are free to express their own views. The individual is also put to the forefront more prominently than would be the case in traditional media, such as newspapers. Jarred Prier has called this a *war of information* in which new media tend to utilize '(false) information' as a tool to coerce and persuade its users.²⁴ This trend gained more prominence alongside the growing importance of the internet in individual lives.

Around 2006, the so-called 'Web 2.0' began to emerge. The internet would henceforth not be a place to merely consume content, but also a space to create it, to alter it, and to discuss its 'truthfulness'.²⁵ Of this Prier says:

The social nature of humans ultimately led to virtual networking. As such, traditional forms of media were bound to give way to a more tailorable form of communication. US adversaries were quick to find ways to exploit the openness of the internet, eventually developing techniques to employ social media networks as a tool to spread propaganda.²⁶

There are several interesting implications that Prier brings to the table, for example that social media have become prevalent over traditional media in the past few years. As a result of this change in prevalence, Prier suggests that the origins of the exploitation of creation and openness on the internet are due to the rapid decline of trust in most traditional media in the United States. This would arguably make the US the most influential power in the 'information wars' that have been sweeping across the globe since, at its earliest, 2006 when the internet changed so tremendously.

²³ Eytan Bakshy et al., "Exposure to Ideologically Diverse News and Opinions on Facebook," *Science*, 348, no. 6239 (2015), 1130.

²⁴ Jarred Prier, "Commanding the Trend: Social Media as Information Warfare," *Strategic Studies Quarterly*, 11, no. 4 (2017), 50.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 52

²⁶ *Ibid*, 52

Both Salva and Jardine warn that the decrease of media credibility and the increase of conspiracies could potentially endanger liberal democracies. Jardine argues that “in liberal democracies, where freedom of expression is enshrined as a fundamental right,” it is incredibly difficult for governments to control what is being published online, as censorship would harm the fundamental rights to having an opinion of your own, and the opportunities to voice them.²⁷ Therefore, Jardine emphasises that a key aspect of democracy should also be *trust*:

Democracy is fundamentally based on trust — trust of each other, trust in institutions and trust in the credibility of information. Influence operations, in particular those run by foreign governments or malicious non-state actors, can pollute an information environment, eroding trust and muddying the waters of public debate.²⁸

Individuals such as Donald Trump are actively undermining this trust and thus endangering the American liberal democratic system. Yet, individual exposure to conspiratorial thinking is key to its development in the public realm.²⁹ It might take a personal predisposition to such thinking, but new media such as social media provide more access to fringe opinions than traditional media have ever done before, such is what Salva, Jardine and Prier argue as well. People such as Donald Trump, and other fringe movements such as QAnon and the Birther movement, have become central to the fake news debate as a result of new media involvement that we have discussed so far. It is necessary to examine to what extent this is due to Trump’s presidency.

1.4 Conspiracies under Trump: Birtherism and Pizzagate

Although fake news has a very long history in American politics, it had rarely crossed beyond those boundaries into the public realm. It took the presidential elections of 2016 to really spur the issue into the realm of public debates. Kate Farhall et al. emphasize the increasing *weaponization of misinformation* (or: “fake news”) of political elites through a variety of social media.³⁰ As was mentioned earlier, Donald Trump has notoriously used fake news as a tool to “attack and discredit mainstream news media and political rivals.”³¹ During his presidency the most harmful and ridiculous types of conspiracies ran amok as result of his

²⁷ Eric Jardine and Centre for International Governance, “Beware Fake News: How Influence Operations Challenge Liberal Democratic Governments,” 34.

²⁸ Ibid, 33

²⁹ Ibid, 33

³⁰ Kate Farhall et al., “Political Elites’ Use of Fake News Discourse Across Communication Platforms,” *International Journal of Communication*, 13, no. 1 (2019), ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/10677/2787, 4354.

³¹ Ibid, 4354-4355.

weaponization of fake news. According to Hunt Allcott and Matthew Gentzkow, the 2016 elections have inspired this “specific concern”³²

The 2016 elections showed how Trump was willing to use fake news as a *weapon*. His *weaponization*³³ of false narratives and baseless conspiracies has served as a way to discredit his opponents and improve his own standing as a reliable individual – as much as this was, in fact, a grand farce.³⁴ The term fake news has thus been utilized by Trump in order to create and to maintain a personal and public vendetta against the media.

Despite this, Trump was not the first president to utilize the public effects of misinformation. Wayne Journell argues that Trump’s use of fake news as a *weapon* to fight “fake ideologies” that harm his own image, has influenced the manner in which many (Republican) American view traditional media as being something that is inherently negative.³⁵

During his campaign as well as during his administration, Trump has been shown to possess some sort of preference for conspiratorial thinking. Many of the conspiracy theories that were circulated during his election campaign and presidency also served to empower his followers, as well as to discredit his opponents and to gain something for himself.

Trump’s endorsements of conspiracies during his election campaign arguably began with the already existing conspiracy theory of *birtherism*, which originated in 2004 when columnist Andy Martin declared that Barack Obama was a fraud who spent a lifetime running away from his heritage which led to beliefs about his birthplace being in Kenya as opposed to Hawaii.³⁶ Martin himself claimed that he never proposed the notion that Obama was born outside the U.S. but that “crazies took over the movement.”³⁷ *Birtherism* lasted well into Obama’s own presidency when the theory became known as the *birther movement*. This movement implied that, according to them, because Obama was not a natural-born citizen of the U.S., that he should not have become president since this is a requirement in the American

³² Hunt Allcott and Matthew Gentzkow, “Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election,” *The Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 31, no. 2 (2017), 212.

³³ Jarred Prier, “Commanding the Trend: Social Media as Information Warfare,” 50-51.

³⁴ Panayota Gounari, “Authoritarianism, Discourse and Social Media: Trump as the ‘American Agitator,’” in *Critical Theory and Authoritarian Populism*, ed. Jeremiah Morelock (University of Westminster Press, 2018), 209-210.

³⁵ Wayne Journell, “Fake News, Alternative Facts, and Trump: Teaching Social Studies in a Post-Truth Era,” *Social Studies Journal*, 37, no. 2(2017): 8-10.

³⁶ Adam Serwer, “Birtherism of a Nation,” *The Atlantic*, 13 May 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/05/birtherism-and-trump/610978/>, n.p.

³⁷ *Ibid*, n.p.

Constitution³⁸. Donald Trump copied this and also held that it was uncertain where Obama had been born. He used the birther movement to capitalize on his own anti-Obama sentiments and that of his voters. In addition, Trump also accused Obama of being a Muslim secret agent, and therefore further capitalizing on existing notions of islamophobia and nativism.³⁹

One of the most notorious conspiracies that began in 2016, the year of his election campaign, was that of Pizzagate. This conspiracy conviction held on to the belief that Hillary Clinton and John Podesta, her chief of staff, were secretly operating a child sex ring from the basement of a pizza parlor in Washington, DC. While this began as an Internet rumor on *4Chan*⁴⁰, it quickly morphed into something more malicious – it became a trend and began to circulate wildly across the web. Interestingly, many of these forms of ‘evidence’ originated outside of the United States, yet Pizzagate has become synonymous with American conspiratorial thinking in the public realm.⁴¹ Conspiracy theories surrounding Clinton have a longer history that significantly predate the Trump era. Most of these conspiracies go back to the Whitewater controversy of the 1990s, when Hillary’s husband, Bill Clinton was to become president in 1992. In those years, the so-called *Clinton Crazies* began to focus on all sorts of conspiracy theories surrounding the Clintons, such as the Clinton Body Count, which asserted that they had assassinated at least fifty, or more, associates.⁴² There is also the email controversy, which Trump also capitalized on, in which such information about this body count, and other official communication, was said to be covered up through a private email server rather than an official State Department one. This became a major point of discussion during the 2016 elections as Trump weaponized these already existing tropes. Nevertheless, he did not come up with them, as conspiratorial thinking surrounding Clinton had already begun to be a part of American politics in the 1990s.

Out of all of these, the Pizzagate conspiracy ultimately ended in a real-life disaster as it “made a sinister cross-over into the physical world.” A man named Edgar Welch drove to the pizzeria in Washington, carrying an assault rifle, and wanted to see the basement where Clinton and Podesta allegedly ran their child sex ring from. The pizzeria did not have a

³⁸ Josh Pasek et al., ‘What Motivates a Conspiracy Theory? Birther beliefs, Partisanship, Liberal-Conservative Ideology, and anti-Black Attitudes,’ *Electoral Studies*, 40 (2015): 482-489.

³⁹ John K. Wilson, ‘Paranoid Trump,’ in *President Trump Unveiled: Exposing the Bigoted Billionaire*, (New York; London: OR Books, 2017), 139.

⁴⁰ *4Chan*: an American online imageboard.

⁴¹ Eric Jardine and Centre for International Governance, ‘Beware Fake News: How Influence Operations Challenge Liberal Democratic Governments,’ in *Governing Cyberspace during a Crisis in Trust: An Essay Series on the Economic Potential – and vulnerability – of Transformative Technologies and Cyber Security*, Report (Centre for International Governance Innovation, 2019), 32.

⁴² Amanda Marcotte, ‘The Clinton BS Files: ‘Lock her up’ isn’t really about emails – the right’s been accusing the Clintons of murder for decades,’ *Salon Archived*, 29 August 2016, n.p.

basement, but Welch was adamant about the validity of the story and fired off three shots out of anger at the pizzeria employees' "willingness to hide the base".⁴³ This implies how despite the availability of facts (such as the absence of a basement) conspiracists continue to believe in their own theories regardless of the lack of evidence.

The Pizzagate trope drew inspiration from QAnon, which holds that certain members of the elite are being part of a secret paedophilia ring. QAnon as a name is derived from a mysterious figure named Q, who posted anonymously on 4Chan, an online imageboard known for the anonymity and fringe opinions of its users. The movement has an online infrastructure and an ever-growing body of adherents. Ultimately, the gist of QAnon is that there is a massive sex ring that is operated by members of the elite.

QAnon ultimately traces its lore of elite members abusing children back to anti-Semitic conspiracies, such as the medieval blood libel: "a medieval fiction that posited that Jewish people stole and murdered Christian children in order to use their blood to make matzah."⁴⁴ QAnon uses these older conspiracies to create a contemporary breeding ground for new fictions that thrive well in the current political climate of the United States. Their ideas are only sustainable because, according to QAnon, *everything* can be explained. Even Welch, who showed some remorse for his actions at the pizzeria, continued to believe in the existence of "a larger truth" in which the core premise of Pizzagate was "recycled, revised, and reinterpreted" on online platforms such as 4Chan.⁴⁵ This is a movement that is united in its mass rejection of reason, objectivity and other Enlightenment values, and fosters feelings of already existing paranoia, which is also what Trump did during his presidency. So, even though Trump himself did not necessarily create the Pizzagate trend or QAnon (despite the beliefs of some of its members), their conspiracies did work out in his favor and thus he promoted them.

1.6 Conclusion

Generally, there exists a long tradition of conspiratorial thinking in the United States. The American political culture provides a breeding ground for conspiratorial thinking, as it has since the very founding of the United States. Some scholars, such as Hofstadter, Kakutani and Higham, have coined this to be due to episodes of paranoia in which a variety of conspiracies present themselves like a virus. While not all conspiracies are originally American and it is

⁴³ Eric Jardine and Centre for International Governance, "Beware Fake News: How Influence Operations Challenge Liberal Democratic Governments," 32.32

⁴⁴ Adrienne LaFrance, "The Prophecies of Q: American Conspiracy Theories are Entering a Dangerous New Phase," *The Atlantic*, June 2020, QAnon Is More Important Than You Think - The Atlantic, n.p.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, n.p.

not an inherently American phenomenon, there is clearly a *political* tradition that uses fake news and conspiracy theories as tools to influence American society. Yet, few of these issues have spilled over to the public realm as heavily as it occurred during the Trump administration. Beginning with his election process in 2016, there has been an increase in mistrust towards the state, elite groups, and most importantly, towards the traditional media.

New media have gained more prominence in recent years as result of the rapid growth and popularity of the Internet. With the rise of the Internet and the digitalization of (new) media, people have also received increased access to all kinds of information. Simultaneously, this has led to more intense notions of subjectivity as opposed to having shared objective facts (common truths). Conspiracy theories that had previously only been available to a niche group of people, thereafter gained momentum in the broader public realm through the new media. While many conspiracies were already present on the fringes of society, new media, such as social media, paved the way to the mainstream for them. QAnon, for example, is a typically American phenomenon that has its roots in older conspiracies surrounding Satanic elites that abuse children, as well as in anti-Semitism, the first conspiracies being inherently American, while the second are global phenomena as well, that were first created on the Internet.

Chapter 2

“The American Virus is Spreading”: Conspiracy Theories in Europe

Conspiracies have not only run amok in the United States, they have also seen an increase in popularity on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean. According to Walter and Drochon, in Europe, conspiratorial thinking is “equal to, or slightly lower than” that in the United States.⁴⁶ More importantly, the ways in which European conspiracy theorists have voiced themselves in the public realm differ from their US counterparts.

This chapter focuses on conspiracy theories in Europe and examines how these notions have been adopted and altered by local conspiracies. By looking at how new media report about these issues in Europe, we can decipher how American conspiracies have migrated to Europe through the new media.

2.1 A Continent of Conspiracies

While on the other side of the Atlantic, the positions of truth and expertise have shifted, it is not clear yet to what extent this may also be the case in Europe. Some scholars have attempted to answer this by focusing on recent European developments in relation to conspiracy theories, but only as a broadly European trend. For example, in *Europe: Continent of Conspiracies* Andreas Önnarfors and André Krouwel consider conspiracies to be a part of the general European tradition. They examine how news and old imaginaries are related to Islamophobia and anti-Semitism, as well as how apocalyptic views of Eastern Europe during the Soviet era came into existence, and they discuss conspiracy theories surrounding Brexit, and the current coronavirus pandemic.⁴⁷ They also discuss less widely shared European conspiracy theories, such as whether William Shakespeare actually wrote his own works,⁴⁸ and the urban legend surrounding *Beatles* star Paul McCartney that claims that he actually died in a car crash in 1966 and was replaced by a look-a-like.⁴⁹

Their crucial work discusses a wide array of topics, but predominantly fosters an understanding of Europe as a whole, rather than to increase understanding of *how* the role of the American new media has affected the reception and distribution of these conspiracy

⁴⁶ Walter and Drochon, *Conspiracy Thinking in Europe and America: A Comparative Study*, 1.

⁴⁷ Önnarfors, Andreas and André Krouwel, *Europe: Continent of Conspiracies*, (Milton Park: Routledge, 2021), 1-282.

⁴⁸ Paul Precott, “Shakespeare in Popular Culture” In. *The New Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare*, ed. De Grazia, Margreta and Stanley Wells (Cambridge University Press, 2010), 273.

⁴⁹ Jim Yoakum, “The Man Who Killed Paul McCartney,” *Gadfly Online*, May-June 2000, <http://www.gadflyonline.com/home/archive/MayJune00/archive-mccartney.html>, n.p.

theories. It is important to examine how the dominance and the position of factual discourses and expertise have shifted in individual European nations.

Effectively, Europe is just another regional variant of a currently global phenomenon of conspiracy narratives, but its position within this phenomenon is crucial to understanding how the transatlantic migration of fake news and conspiracies has disseminated. Conspiracy theories have, after all, as Önnersfors and Krouwel have also argued, been a part of the European tradition for a much longer time and have shaped the way in which Europeans view themselves and the world.

Angst is a crucial factor here, as many of the European conspiracies take inspiration from feelings of collective fear among certain groups in European societies who fear being ‘replaced’ by outsiders. This seems very similar to the way some Americans became afraid of the increasing presence and potential influence of migrants in the United States in the twentieth century as part of, according to Richard Hofstadter, a period of episodic paranoia.⁵⁰

2.2 The Outbreak of American Conspiracies in Europe

Both Pizzagate and QAnon are specifically American conspiracy theories. They are deeply rooted in American politics and in the national paranoia about child abuse among elite groups in American society that has existed since the “Satanic Panic”⁵¹ of the 1980s. QAnon originated on 4Chan – an American imageboard – where an anonymous figure named Q, who claimed to be a White House insider, started posting (called Q drops) about all kinds of political conspiracies. Many of his posts deal with the existence of a ‘deep state’ that includes elites such as Hillary Clinton, Bill Gates, and George Soros. This ‘deep state’ is supposed to hide a massive network of pedophiles. Donald Trump represents a hero who is out there to uncover all of these secrets and make public all the crimes of the evil establishment

From this perspective, QAnon resembles a typically American phenomenon. Nevertheless, despite this QAnon theories have had real-world consequences, not only in the United States but also in Europe.⁵²

Many of the online platforms that have facilitated the spread of conspiracies in Europe, such as Facebook, Twitter and 4Chan, are American. These could inspire the flow of information, which tends to focus more on the United States. This is relevant because, for

⁵⁰ Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press), 8-10.

⁵¹ Caldwell, Noah, Ari Shapiro and Patrick Jarenwattanon, “America’s Satanic Panic Returns – This Time Through QAnon,” *NPR*, 18 May 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/05/18/997559036/americas-satanic-panic-returns-this-time-through-qanon>

⁵² Mohamad Hoseini et al., “On the Globalization of the QAnon Conspiracy Theory Through Telegram,” *Max Planck Institute for Informatics*, 2021.

example, currently at least 78% of Europeans use Facebook.⁵³ Facebook, in particular, has often been blamed of relatively freely allowing the circulation of fringe opinions which have had significant impact on factual discourses in real life.⁵⁴ For example, Trump supporters spent several months advising each other in Facebook groups about how to take down the government in the case that Trump would lose, after which a number of them stormed the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021 after it became clear that he had lost the elections.⁵⁵ Even though Facebook itself has made attempts to ban QAnon conspiracy groups in 2020, they have still been held largely responsible for “providing a platform for fake news and the dissemination of conspiracy theories,” among them the facilitation of QAnon theories such as Pizzagate.⁵⁶

Taking these dangers into account, Natalie Nougayrède writes that “Europe is a patchwork of nations whose past is riddled with conflicts born of manipulation and paranoia.”⁵⁷ This shows how Europe does not need more political and public turmoil, as it already torn apart by conflicts. Therefore, conspiratorial thinking is dangerous for the unity of Europe and the existence of the European Union. Nougayrède also illustrates this by how in Hungary, prime minister Viktor Orbán has elevated the operationalization of conspiracy theories to a become something akin to a new political method,⁵⁸ similar to how Trump has weaponized fake news in his favor in the United States. Orbán has been accused of “developing conspiracy theories”⁵⁹ himself, specifically in relation to his anti-George Soros rhetoric. His political opinions and choices have caused significant political peril in the European context, especially for Hungary itself, causing a large number of European nations to boycott Orbán and therefore immediately threatening European unity. Interestingly, George Soros is also a notably ‘returning character’ in Trump’s tirades against the media and towards

⁵³ Statcounter: Social Media Stats Europe May 2020 – May 2021, 2021, <https://gs.statcounter.com/social-media-stats/all/europe>

⁵⁴ Bruns, Axel, Stephen Harrington and Edward Hurcombe, “‘Corona? 5G? Or Both?’: The Dynamics of COVID-19-5G Conspiracy Theories on Facebook,” *Media International Australia*, 177, no. 1 (2020), 12-29. (28).

⁵⁵ NBC News: Some pro-Trump Extremists used Facebook to Plan Capitol Attack, Report Finds, 21 January 2021, <https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/tech-news/some-pro-trump-extremists-used-facebook-plan-capitol-attack-report-n1254794>

⁵⁶ DW: Facebook Bans QAnon Conspiracy Theory Groups amid Misinformation Surge, 6 October 2020, <https://www.dw.com/en/facebook-bans-qanon-conspiracy-theory-groups-amid-misinformation-surge/a-55181641>

⁵⁷ Natalie Nougayrède, “Europe is in the Grip of Conspiracy Theories – Will They Define its Elections?,” *The Guardian*, 1 February 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/feb/01/europe-conspiracy-theories-eu-elections>

⁵⁸ Ibid, n.p.

⁵⁹ Peter Plenta, “Conspiracy Theories as a Political Instrument: Utilization of Anti-Soros Narratives in Central Europe,” *Contemporary Politics*, 26, no. 5 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569775.2020.1781332>

the elites. Donald Trump and Viktor Orbán thus share similar anti-Soros rhetoric in their speeches.

Another European country in which QAnon is visibly becoming more mainstream is in Germany. In fact, according to Tyson Barker, “Germany has the second-highest number of QAnon believers after the United States.”⁶⁰ Many Germans have become exposed to QAnon theories through social media. During the coronavirus pandemic, Telegram (a messaging application similar to WhatsApp) became the most popular application among German QAnon followers due to it being less moderated than Facebook and Twitter – which have begun to remove content relating to QAnon.⁶¹ Telegram itself also highlights that messages sent through its system are “heavily encrypted and can self-destruct.”⁶² Such a private feature makes it more attractive to people who already believe that they are being watched, as opposed to trying to find like-minded individuals on increasingly more moderated platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp where they will most likely be banned. German QAnon conspiracists have thus become more visible during the coronavirus pandemic, also in part because of the large amount of anti-coronavirus demonstrations that took place in various German cities.⁶³ Some of its most ardent figureheads, such as Pegida leader Lutz Bachmann, have now shifted their emphasis towards Merkel’s COVID-19 policies through such demonstrations. These new conspiracies are often perceived to be related to older conspiracies that already existed in Germany, such as anti-Islam tropes and the global existence of a child sex-trafficking ring.⁶⁴

2.3 The War on Information

It is important to note that in times of the coronavirus, an increasing number of fringe platforms on the web have become increasingly visible in the global discussion about the origin of the virus, its nature (e.g. symptoms, transmission, harmfulness), and measures to prevent, contain, or cure it. The spread of misinformation, fake news, and alternative facts in the form of conspiracy theories have become even more visible during the COVID-19 crisis.

⁶⁰ Tyson Barker, “Germany is Losing the Fight Against QAnon,” *Foreign Policy*, 3 September 2020, <https://www.aspeninstitute.de/wp-content/uploads/COVID-19-Pandemic-Conspiracy-Theories-Are-Taking-Over-German-Democracy.pdf>

⁶¹ Mohamad Hoseini et al., “On the Globalization of the QAnon Conspiracy Theory Through Telegram,” *Max Planck Institute for Informatics*, 2021

⁶² Telegram: a New Era of Messaging, n.d., <https://telegram.org>

⁶³ Julien Bellaiche, “QAnon: A Rising Threat to Democracy?,” *The Journal of Intelligence, Conflict, and Warfare*, 3, no. 3 (2021), 164.

⁶⁴ Tyson Barker, “Germany is Losing the Fight Against QAnon,” *Foreign Policy*, 3 September 2020, <https://www.aspeninstitute.de/wp-content/uploads/COVID-19-Pandemic-Conspiracy-Theories-Are-Taking-Over-German-Democracy.pdf>

The pandemic has shown how global information warfare is being weaponized by established and revisionist powers, in order to gain influence in the information sphere.⁶⁵ In fact, Bachmann et al. position that the coronavirus pandemic has “ushered in a golden age of information warfare.”⁶⁶ This war is not restricted to the transatlantic sphere. Bachmann et al. also hold that Russia and China have played crucial roles, especially since the beginning of the pandemic, in the distribution of conspiracies related to the virus in the information sphere.⁶⁷ They state that:

In addition to COVID-19 as a global health emergency, we see increasing weaponization of the pandemic by both the Kremlin and CCP to achieve strategic goals. Unfortunately, our own resilience to oppose such aggressive acts remains under-matched.⁶⁸

Bachmann et al. suggest that Russia and China attempt to influence and contradict the liberal, rule-based order of the West. The Kremlin appears to have increased its propaganda efforts in order to show how the European Union is failing as a collective by “propping up radical right conversations that promote the dissolution of the EU”⁶⁹ and the CCP focuses on promoting false narratives about the origins of the coronavirus as well as Chinese COVID-19 aid to other countries, through the cyber domain.⁷⁰ It also becomes clear that Europe and the United States, cannot match the aggressiveness with which these conspiracies are promoted and distributed. Nevertheless, the United States also plays a key role in the distribution of conspiracy theories surrounding COVID-19.

Yet, when making such claims, it should be recognized that the spread of conspiracy theories is also heavily facilitated by the largely independent Internet and social media, which are not necessarily linked to either nation. Many scholars have argued that the Internet is more at fault for the speedy dissemination of conspiracy theories than individual nations are. Nevertheless, this may not always be the case, as observed by Douglas et al. They hold that:

The speed of dissemination may even retard the progress of conspiracy theories into coherent arguments...the Internet may be responsible for limiting conspiracy

⁶⁵ Sascha-Dominick Dov Bachmann et al., “COVID Information Warfare and the Future of Great Power Competition,” *The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs*, 44, no. 2 (2020): 11-12
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/48599306>

⁶⁶ Ibid, 12

⁶⁷ Ibid, 11-12

⁶⁸ Ibid, 12

⁶⁹ Ibid, 13

⁷⁰ Ibid, 13

theories since billions of potentially critical voices are available to immediately refute conspiracy claims with evidence⁷¹

Thus because there are plenty of opportune entries for individuals to educate themselves on a variety of topics through information provided by those critical voices that refute conspiracies with actual fact-based evidence and clear expertise on a specific topic, not all people will be fully emerged in the world of conspiracy thinking. In addition, the way how conspiracy theories are communicated suggests that such online spaces are rather secluded information bubbles, which implies that conspiracy thinking already occurs before people are exposed to it through social media.

With this in mind, the current situation as it has presented itself in Europe and the United States, presents an image that is not necessarily restricted to the transatlantic context, but instead, is linked to a global shift of narratives in which the status of truth and expertise as it originated during the Enlightenment is declining. The demise of factual discourses is therefore a global development that has immediately led to the creation of post-truth societies as a result of intermingling from global powers and independent fringe movements on the Internet.

2.4 Globalization

Interestingly, some scholars, such as Jayson Harsin, acknowledge the increasing presence of post-truth narratives today, but do not necessarily link this to the gradual demise of factual discourses, saying that instead it has led to a complex reorganization of how power is being perceived and distributed in the world.⁷² They hold that it is, in fact, this particular reorganization process that has enabled the rise of the current post-truth society. These processes may be seen most visibly in a transatlantic exchange of conspiracy theories, which are actually the result of global exchanges of conspiracies – the *globalization* of information. Gabriele Cosentino agrees that conspiracy theories are a part of globalization processes.⁷³ Globalization means “the growing interdependence of the world’s economies, cultures, and populations”⁷⁴ through trade, services, technology, people, and information. Regarding this

⁷¹ Karen M. Douglas et al., “Understanding Conspiracy Theories,” *Advances in Political Psychology*, 40, no. 1 (2019): 14, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1111/pops.12568>

⁷² Jayson Harsin, “Regimes of Posttruth, Postpolitics, and Attention Economies,” *Communication, Culture & Critique ISSN*, 8 (2015), 327.

⁷³ Gabriele Cosentino, “From Pizzagate to the Great Replacement: The Globalization of Conspiracy Theories,” in *Social Media and the Post-Truth World Order* (Palgrave Pivot, 2020), 59-86.

⁷⁴ Melina Kolb, “What is Globalization?: And How Has the Global Economy Shaped the United States?,” *Peterson Institute for International Economics* (2019), <https://www.piie.com/microsites/globalization/what-is-globalization#:~:text=Globalization%20is%20the%20word%20used,investment%2C%20people%2C%20and%20information>

definition, conspiracies are indeed part of globalization because they are – regardless of their inaccuracy – a source of information.

Considering this background, it is urgent that we understand in what ways the information war that has been spread by Russia, China and the United States is being received by the European public. The European scholars that have engaged in debates about the effects of foreign conspiracies in Europe have shown how a receptive public may utilize various forms of traditional and new media in order to redefine the media. Many scholars do tend to focus on American contexts more often, yet some connections to Russian and Chinese interferences are made as well. References to a rising trend of rightwing radicalism in Europe that threatens to disintegrate the European Union, along with its values, are also common subjects.

2.5 Conclusion

In the global war of information, examining local narratives that are derived from worldwide conspiracy theories such as QAnon increases our understanding of how these migrate from place to place. The dissemination of conspiracy theories is not necessarily transatlantic; instead it is a global development. Globally, specific countries are attempting to gain power through the deliberate spread of fake news that may lead to the facilitation and promotion of conspiracy theories surrounding a currently relevant topic, such as Russia and China have been doing since the start of coronavirus pandemic in relation to spreading fake news about the virus.

Because conspiracy theories are a global phenomenon, just as in the United States, Europe also possesses a tradition of conspiratorial thinking. The status of truth in Europe has clearly been diminishing in recent years in almost equal measure to the American situation and historically, both the United States and Europe have been victims of episodic viruses of increased conspiratorial thinking, such as an increasingly large number of immigrants flooding in, or heightened political turmoil, such as in Hungary with Orbán and in the United Kingdom with Brexit. A major difference, however, is the extent of the public outreach of conspiracy theories. Recently, the majority of European conspiracies have become most apparent in the political realm, yet the increase in information hailing from popular new media platforms, such as Facebook and Telegram, has made the public reception of American-based conspiracy theories in Europe more visible. The best example of this is Germany, where QAnon is more popular than in any other European nation, and has determined most of the conspiracies surrounding the current pandemic.

Relatively few research endeavors have been conducted on the topic of to what extent American conspiracy movement have migrated to Europe, but it is clear that, for example, QAnon has spread and is still growing significantly in the European context because of new media.⁷⁵ Nevertheless, is still somewhat of a fringe phenomenon in Europe, whereas in the United States QAnon has been a part of the ‘mainstream conspiratorial movement’ for much longer. In Europe, ever since Pizzagate in 2016, we have seen an increase in QAnon-related theories in European contexts. Politics and sources of ‘alternative journalism’ have been at the center of these debates and they are more harmful than might be expected from a small movement such as the European QAnon branch. However, it remains crucial to realize that many of these American conspiracies, while they have retained some of their core beliefs, are often altered and shaped according to local conceptions of reality – such as will be examined in chapter three.

⁷⁵ Chine Labbe et al., “QAnon’s Deep State Conspiracies Spread to Europe,” *NewsGuard* (2020), <https://www.newsguardtech.com/special-report-qanon/#infiltration>

Chapter 3

“The Golden Age of Conspiracy Theories”: COVID-19, Dutch Debates and American Influences

When conspiracy theories from the American context migrate to the Netherlands (and to Europe in general), do they undergo considerable changes? This chapter will examine how the specific American context of conspiracy theories has changed once it has arrived in Europe. It will further examine how American influences, such as those discussed in chapter two, are viewed in the Netherlands. These interpretations offer insight into the way that the general fake news debate is currently being conducted in the transatlantic sphere. Specific emphasis will also be on the role of conspiracies during the COVID-19 pandemic.

3.1 The Dutch Debate and American Influences in Europe

John Poppelaars and Koen Vossen argue that the pandemic has caused a crucial shift in the Dutch context, and illustrated how conspiracies spark during episodes of societal turmoil.⁷⁶ Here, the influence that the global fake news debate has had on regional varieties become very visible.

There is also a strong resistance towards the research on conspiracy theories in the Netherlands, however.⁷⁷ Such resistance prevents the establishment of objective and neutral viewpoints. Dutch researchers often warn about the dangers of fake news and conspiracy theories. But their studies aim to improve the future rather than to simply understand where these opinions are coming from and how they are communicated among different groups of people. Therefore, it is urgent to understand why people believe in conspiracy theories and how they are communicated among different groups in society.⁷⁸

Another aspect of the Dutch research discourse is how conspiracies and fake news are regularly linked to politics in both the regional and the global context. More specifically, conspiracies are linked to populism in Dutch politics.⁷⁹ Koen Vossen describes conspiracies as being an integral part of populist politics in the Netherlands. He uses the current politics of PVV, FvD, and even the Socialist Party, as examples of how conspiratorial thinking is

⁷⁶ John Poppelaars: Fabels, *Stator*, December 2020, <https://www.vvsor.nl/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/STAtOR-2020-4-24-25-Poppelaars.pdf>

⁷⁷ Hilda Schram, “Complotdenken als Paranoia: De Pathologisering van een Sceptische Grondhouding,” *Kunst en Wetenschap*, 25, no. 2 (3 June 2016), 11-12.

https://pure.rug.nl/ws/portalfiles/portal/32803637/KW_Complotdenken_als_paranoia.pdf

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁷⁹ Koen Vossen, “Van Marginaal naar Mainstream: Populisme in de Nederlandse Geschiedenis,” *Low Countries Historical Review*, 127, no. 2 (2012), 28-54.

weaponized in Dutch politics.⁸⁰ Arguably, the particular operationalization of radical conspiracy theories by these political parties, has also led to a disdainful perspective on the conspiracy debate in the Netherlands. Currently, conspiracies tend to be viewed as political rather than as something that belongs to the public realm and is only extended to political contexts as a result of public interference. This is also one of the reasons why conspiracy theories in the Netherlands more than elsewhere, are sometimes deemed to be a form of ‘political radicalization’.⁸¹ This does not imply that conspiracy theorists are never viewed as radicals in other nations, but that the Dutch utilization of the word “radical” is used much more extensively and more easily in research contexts. For example, since the emergence of QAnon in the Netherlands, conspiracists have been called radicals more often than they had been called that before.⁸² Yet, in the Netherlands, there was already an existing movement surrounding the conspiracy about a secret pedophilia ring run by elites and other influential people. These movements predate the emergence of QAnon in the Netherlands, which only really emerged here in 2016. QAnon served as a tool to help make the already existing movement more visible, and in addition it broadened its global scope.

3.2 Social Contexts and Intergroup Conflicts

Even though conspiracy theories are universal, they are also bound to social contexts.⁸³ Of this Jan-Willem van Prooijen and Karen M. Douglas state that:

Conspiracy theories are a social phenomenon in that they reflect the basic structure of intergroup conflict. [...] These conspiracies typically plan to harm or deceive not just one individual but a wider collective, as is the case with conspiracy theories implicating political organizations, branches of industry, minority groups, managers, and so on. (n.p.)

Intergroup conflicts in Europe and the United States mainly entail conflicts centered on the issue of identity. In the United States, this is often linked to political affiliations, and in Europe, is often extended to the question of a cultural identity. In the previous chapter we have seen how both American and European conspiracy theorists tend to fear the intrusion of

⁸⁰ Ibid, 28-29.

⁸¹ Marc Tuters, “Fake News and the Dutch YouTube Political Debate Space,” in *The Politics of Social Media Manipulation*, ed. Richard Rogers and Sabine Niederer (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University press, 2020), 217-237. <https://library.oapen.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.12657/42884/9789048551675.pdf?sequence=1#page=218>

⁸² Marc Tuters, “Fake News and the Dutch YouTube Political Debate Space,” in *The Politics of Social Media Manipulation*, ed. Richard Rogers and Sabine Niederer (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University press, 2020), 217-237. <https://library.oapen.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.12657/42884/9789048551675.pdf?sequence=1#page=218>

⁸³ Van Prooijen, Jan-Willen and Karen M. Douglas, “Belief in Conspiracy Theories: Basic Principle of an Emerging Research Domain,” *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 48, no. 7 (2018), 897-908.

perceived outsiders (e.g. minority groups), who are considered to be an outside threat that could potentially harm or destroy a particular social group.

Nevertheless, European conflict has also begun to shift its focus to political cultural identities in recent years. Cultural identities have become an important part of Dutch right-wing politics. In the case of the PVV, this means taking inspiration from anti-islamization works, such as *Eurabia* (2005) and *The Force of Reason* (2004) that both hold that Islam is a political movement that threatens the destruction of Dutch and European culture.⁸⁴ This trope is typical for many European right-wing parties, such as those in France, Germany and Hungary, but ultimately, the Dutch political debate on islamization does have ties to the United States too, nor is it something that is only occurring in Europe. Thinking back on, for example, the “terrorist threat” in the United States that led to Donald Trump’s notorious Muslim ban, is a prime expression of how islamization is also feared in the United States.⁸⁵ However, in the American context these fears are mostly politically motivated, while in Europe certain right-wing politicians politicize Islam in order to draw attention to the dangers of cultural islamization.⁸⁶

According to Amsterdam researcher Jason Harambam, essentially these are recycled tropes.⁸⁷ In the past these were often considered to be Jewish people or communists, today the dangers come from within our societies: our governments, our health care system, or the banks.⁸⁸ By politicizing Islam, the danger essentially implodes in on itself, making it a part of the government and other inside forces. The act of politicizing outside dangers is native to both the United States and Europe, and has also become particularly noticeable during the still ongoing coronavirus pandemic.

3.3 Dutch and American COVID-19 Conspiracies

Protests against the coronavirus have been mainly targeted towards governmental leaders, who those protestors believe are robbing them of their freedom and are forging plans to subordinate humanity.⁸⁹ Protests have also been targeted at medical professionals and the

⁸⁴ Koen Damhuis, “The Biggest Problem in the Netherlands: Understanding the Party for Freedom’s Politicization of Islam,” *Brookings*, 24 July 2019, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/the-biggest-problem-in-the-netherlands-understanding-the-party-for-freedom-politicization-of-islam/>

⁸⁵ Narzanin Massoumi, “Why is Europe So Islamophobic? The Attacks Don’t Come from Nowhere,” *The New York Times*, 6 March 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/06/opinion/europe-islamophobia-attacks.html>

⁸⁶ Ibid, n.p.

⁸⁷ Geerten Moerkerken, “Complotdenken als Nieuwe Religie,” *Reformatisch Dagblad*, 5 January 2019, <https://www.rd.nl/artikel/783504-complotdenken-als-nieuwe-religie>

⁸⁸ Ibid, n.p.

⁸⁹ Spieksma, Maartje and Dominique Voss, “Complotdenken over 5G en de Pandemie: Hoe een Twitterstorm Zendmasten kan Vellen,” *AD*, 1 August 2020, <https://www.ad.nl/binnenland/complotdenken-over-5g-en-de-pandemie-hoe-een-twitterstorm-zendmasten-kan-vellen~ae8c19ed/>

pharmaceutical industries (Big Pharma).⁹⁰ They are believed to have created the coronavirus and make people ill in order to sell more of their experimental vaccines.⁹¹

These are tropes that seem similar to conspiracy theories suggesting the existence of an establishment that wants to rule the world and make humans more susceptible to their plans for a New World Order. According to Elise Thomas and Albert Zhang, this is normal, since “there is never just one version of a conspiracy theory – and that is part of their power and reach.”⁹² Nevertheless, coronavirus-related conspiracy theories have been altered and expanded rapidly across the globe during the pandemic.

In the Netherlands there have been various instances where this and their link to American variants have become clear. In the United States in 2019, a fringe conspiracy movement emerged online which posed that ID2020, a “non-profit organization that promotes shared principles to guide an ethical approach to global digital identity systems,” of which Microsoft is a founding member,⁹³ is part of a New World Order (in line with conspiracies surrounding the Illuminati) that wants to inject microchips into the population to control them. They are said to have connections to GAVI, a global vaccine alliance who have also been accused of wanting to rule and reshape the world.⁹⁴

Having been heavily inspired by older Christian conspiracies, these particular conspiracists also held that the microchips included the ‘Mark of the Beast.’ There are plenty of explanations of what kind of mark this might entail, often consisting of three different types in general, but the gist of the story is that whatever the mark is, it shows who is loyal to Satan and who is not – in other words: who is allowed to get into Eternal Paradise (Heaven) and who is getting into Satan’s Kingdom (hell).⁹⁵ Christian conspiracy theorists utilized this to prevent people from getting vaccinated in general, even before COVID-19, because getting vaccinated would mean that one would not be living in God’s favor anymore.

During the pandemic, these anti-vaccine ideas took on a new spin when conspiracies about specific vaccines against COVID-19, incorrectly being infused with a microchip, were

⁹⁰ Ackerman, Gary and Hayley Peterson, “Terrorism and COVID-19: Actual and Potential Impacts,” *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 14, no. 2 (2020): 59-73, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26918300>.

⁹¹ Spieksma, Maartje and Dominique Voss, “Complotdenken over 5G en de Pandemie: Hoe een Twitterstorm Zendmasten kan Vellen,” *AD*, 1 August 2020, <https://www.ad.nl/binnenland/complotdenken-over-5g-en-de-pandemie-hoe-een-twitterstorm-zendmasten-kan-vellen~ae8c19ed/>

⁹² Thomas, Elise and Albert Zhang, *ID2020, Bill Gates and the Mark of the Beast: How COVID-19 Catalyses Existing Online Conspiracy Movements*, Report: Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 2020, 1, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep25082>.

⁹³ *Ibid*, 4

⁹⁴ *Ibid*, 2

⁹⁵ Candice Lucey: What is the Mark of the Beast in the Bible?, 25 April 2021, <https://www.christianity.com/wiki/end-times/what-is-the-mark-of-the-beast-in-the-bible.html>

being circulated. Followers of QAnon in both the United States and Europe have asserted that Bill Gates, founder of Microsoft, has plotted with China and Big Pharma to create the virus order to force humanity to take the vaccines containing the microchips.⁹⁶ In the Netherlands, certain conspiracist groups have used this trope in their protests. Anti-corona protests in the Netherlands have often included slogans such as “vaccines are bad news”, “save the children” (referencing QAnon’s paedophile group conspiracy), and many accusations directed at Bill Gates.⁹⁷

In the Netherlands, these tropes have begun to include Dutch politicians and journalists who are frequently accused of being “child molesters” and are being increasingly intimidated.⁹⁸ For example, the Dutch national broadcaster NOS has been forced to remove its logo from vans in order to protect those and the journalists themselves from vandalism and abuse.⁹⁹ In the political context, several politicians have been intimidated, such as happened to Pieter Omtzigt who was followed and threatened by protestors yelling “Satanists” and “Deep State” who wanted to know why he had betrayed his people.¹⁰⁰ This shows how American conspiracies, such as QAnon, have adapted themselves to the Dutch local environment by focusing on local actors, especially during the pandemic when heightened sentiments surrounding the virus itself and the role that news plays in the Dutch context have all added to a new discourse on truth. It also indicates how these conspiracies consist of a global nature, which has made it easier for conspiracists to share a variety of conspiracy theories from all over the world without actually losing the core narrative of QAnon: the presumed existence of a paedophile group consisting of members of an alleged establishment.

In the next part, we will zoom in on the Netherlands to examine how these theories have become visible in the Dutch context. By examining how American conspiracy movements have migrated there through two well-known websites related to the Dutch variant of QAnon, we will see how American conspiracies have been recirculated to suit local Dutch narratives, which has also occurred in other European nations.

⁹⁶ Ackerman, Gary and Hayley Peterson, “Terrorism and COVID-19: Actual and Potential Impacts,” *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 14, no. 2 (2020): 59-73, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26918300>.

⁹⁷ Diederik Baazil, “Dutch Fall for Covid Conspiracies in Warning to Europe’s Leaders,” *Bloomberg*, 3 November 2020, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-11-03/dutch-fall-for-covid-conspiracies-in-warning-to-europe-s-leaders>

⁹⁸ *Ibid*, n.p.

⁹⁹ *Ibid*, n.p.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid*, n.p.

3.4 Case Study: Ella'Ster and WRWY

Nowadays, conspiracy theories of all kinds have been on the rise in the Netherlands, with some of those having roots that trace back to American ones, while others are deeply ingrained in the Dutch context. The transatlantic orientation of the Netherlands is very strong. This is the result of a long-term historical friendship based on presumed shared values, among them being “free nations.”

According to the Dutch newspaper *Trouw*, QAnon is by far the most popular conspiracy movement in the Netherlands today.¹⁰¹ As early as in 2016, theories inspired or promoted by QAnon were published to a website called Ella'Ster which led to the further spread of QAnon conspiracies to other Dutch websites, such as Dutch Patriots, Fatsforum and QAnon Nederland (WRWY).¹⁰² Nevertheless, according to Jelle van Buuren van the University of Leiden, the adoption of QAnon theories did not mean that they were simply copy-pasted onto the Dutch context. Instead, Van Buuren argues, Dutch conspiracists essentially ‘rebranded’ the American versions of well-known QAnon conspiracies and shaped them into Dutch variants rooted in much older Dutch conspiracies.¹⁰³

He illustrates this by describing how Micha Kat – a Dutch journalist and conspiracist – has been involved in promoting conspiracies surrounding, for example, secret pedophile elite groups in Dutch contexts for much longer than QAnon has been present in the Netherlands. Kat has targeted the Dutch royals, the ING bank (he called them the ‘Pedobank ING’), and he accused RIVM director Jaap van Dissel of being part of a Dutch pedophilia network.¹⁰⁴ People who are perceived to be part of some elite are also accused of being part of child sex abuse rings in the QAnon lore, so this is what QAnon and Kat have in common. Nevertheless, van Buuren argues, most of Kat’s conspiracies are specifically Dutch and have been a part of his narrative even before they became linked to QAnon. Van Buuren holds that a mixture of Dutch and American conspiracies is applicable to the beliefs of the majority of Dutch QAnon followers, but is this truly the case?

¹⁰¹ Nienke Schipper, “Pizzagate, Deep State, 9/11 en Corona: Waarom Complottheorie QAnon zo Populair is,” *Trouw*, 3 November 2020, <https://www.trouw.nl/cultuur-media/pizzagate-deep-state-9-11-en-corona-waarom-complottheorie-qanon-zo-populair-is~bc19b11b/?referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F>

¹⁰² Gedachtenvoer: Van een Schuchter Begin met “Qanon” in 2017 naar een Gigantische Ontwikkeling in 2020,” 11 January 2020, <https://gedachtenvoer.nl/2020/01/11/van-een-schuchter-begin-met-qanon-in-2017-naar-een-giga-ontwikkeling-in-2020/>

¹⁰³ Vice: Het Probleem met Complottheorieën Los Je Niet op Met een QAnon-verbod, 9 October 2020, <https://www.vice.com/nl/article/y3zady/een-qanon-verbod-op-facebook-lost-niks-op>

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, n.p.

3.5 Ella'Ster

The first website is Ella'Ster.¹⁰⁵ Ella'Ster was one of the first Dutch websites to pop up on the Dutch QAnon scene and its authors are anonymous. At first glance, the web page looks very professional but once the user delves into the articles that Ella'Ster hosts, they will be trapped inside a 'rabbit hole' of fake news and disinformation. Currently, most of their top stories are related to the coronavirus. Articles about the dangers of vaccines, mouth masks and PCR tests, use a very similar language and tone to that of traditional news outlets. Topics range from articles about the movement against COVID-19 vaccines having won a case against the Dutch government¹⁰⁶ to concoctions of how Michael Jackson may have been used by the Illuminati – which would then 'explain' why he was abused in his childhood.¹⁰⁷ The latter article draws parallels with QAnon theories about secret paedophilia rings and how they have been the cause of Jackson's own abuse. Essentially, Ella'Ster argues that Jackson was not, in fact, a paedophile, as the media portray him to be. Instead, they claim that those accusations were actually lies concocted by the Illuminati in order to discredit Jackson because he had 'failed' their *cause*.

'The Illuminati' (literally: the Enlightened) consists of several groups that wish to gain political power and aim to establish a 'New World Order.'¹⁰⁸ What started out as a secret society in Bavaria, has taken over the world by becoming one of the centerpieces of modern conspiracy movements. The conspiracies surrounding the Illuminati as we know them today are often related to the presumed existence of a tyrannous government run by the Rothschilds, Bushes and Soros's (among others) that are determined to enslave human kind. It is telling that Ella'Ster utilizes concepts and conspiracies from this particular conspiracy realm, because it is one of the most obvious indicators of American conspiracies becoming part of the mainstream publishing of online Dutch conspiracy movements.

A bit further down the web page, users can find other articles that appear to be even more in tune with the American conspiracies and general QAnon lore. They particularly illustrate how these conspiracies have been placed in the Dutch context.

¹⁰⁵ Ella'Ster, n.d., www.ellaster.nl

¹⁰⁶ Ella Ster: Stichting Vaccinvrij in gelijk gesteld vanwege nalatigheid overheid, 20 December 2020, <https://www.ellaster.nl/2020/12/10/stichting-vaccinvrij-in-gelijk-gesteld-vanwege-nalatigheid-overheid/>

¹⁰⁷ Ella Ster: Het misbruik van Michael Jackson, 26 March 2021, <https://www.ellaster.nl/2021/03/26/het-misbruik-van-michael-jackson/>

¹⁰⁸ Gregory S. Camp, *Selling Fear: Conspiracy Theories and End-Time Paranoia*, Commish Walsh (1997).

One of the articles deals with child abuse occurring at Dutch elementary schools and day-care facilities.¹⁰⁹ In a multiple part article, Ella'Ster explains how child abuse that has happened within those facilities in the past (e.g. Sexbierum, Bolderkar and Clownsaffaire) are all part of a scheme by a global network of paedophiles. By tracing 'patterns' of similar types of abuse in the alleged Satanic ritualistic abuse of children as are also described in theories surrounding child abuse proposed by QAnon¹¹⁰ The notion that there is a secret group of psychopathic people who control the entire world. is central to all of these theories, but we see that they are applied to different contexts within different countries as a way to make more sense to local sensibilities, which is something that Ella'Ster has greatly capitalized on.

Ella'Ster highlights how American and Dutch conspiracies have merged together by using American stories in Dutch local contexts, such as people, places, and events from the past. Ella'Ster has been fundamental to the rise of QAnon in the Netherlands, most likely because they appeal to Dutch local interests as a result of this adaptation. While they do report extensively on American politics, such as the 'stolen' elections of 2020, they balance this by simultaneously putting just as much emphasis on Dutch news and debates, such as whether wearing mouth masks can be forced upon citizens or discussions about the dangers of COVID-19 vaccines.

3.6 We Are With You (QAnon Nederland)

Another influential web page is "We Are With You," (WRWY)¹¹¹ which is essentially the Dutch variant of QAnon. They introduce themselves as "awakened citizens" who prefer to remain anonymous, just as Ella'Ster does. An introduction such as this already draws clear parallels with QAnon, and the figure of Q in particular, who is also still anonymous. Anonymity appears to have become an important aspect of conspiratorial lore related to QAnon all around the world. We Are With You claims to share topics that allude to 'The Great Awakening.' The Great Awakening here does not necessarily refer to various periods of religious revival in the United States in the past, but it does highlight the near-spiritual and religious affinities of the QAnon movement. To the followers of Q the Great Awakening is

¹⁰⁹ Ella Ster: Honderden kinderen misbruikt op scholen en kinderdagverblijven, 4 January 2019, <https://www.ellaster.nl/2019/01/04/honderden-kinderen-misbruikt-op-scholen-en-kinderdagverblijven/>

¹¹⁰ Caldwell, Noah, Ari Shapiro and Patrick Jarenwattananon, "America's Satanic Panic Returns – This Time Through QAnon," *NPR*, 18 May 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/05/18/997559036/americas-satanic-panic-returns-this-time-through-qanon>

¹¹¹ We Are With You, n.d., www.blog.wrwy.nl

one of intellect and of the spirit, and they believe that it will bring “salvation” and destroy the satanical elite¹¹²

Similarly to Ella’Ster, WRWY publishes articles about American politics. They have launched several stories about the presidential elections of 2020 that claim that Trump was actually the real winner.¹¹³ This is in line with how QAnon has reported on the elections of 2020, in which they also accuse Biden of being a puppet of the Deep State elite who want to create a ‘New World Order’ (e.g. the Illuminati). The latter is something that WRWY has also published an article about and even coined a name for: Bidengate.¹¹⁴

Generally, WRWY posts a lot about Donald Trump. This is in line with QAnon lore as well, in which Trump is considered to be a savior. Therefore, it makes sense that WRWY puts so much emphasis on his person. In doing so, they sometimes lack links to the Dutch context but make up for it by claiming that anything that happens in the United States, will also affect the Netherlands – which is in line with an alleged global conspiracy against humanity.

As for the specific Dutch context, WRWY has been known to share podcasts by Lange Frans, a Dutch rap artist and conspiracist.¹¹⁵ Those podcasts include topics more inclined towards conspiracies, such as widespread pedophilia in relation to Dutch media personalities, politicians, and events. In the traditional Dutch media, some of these podcasts have caused some outrage. In August of 2020, Lange Frans and Janet Ossebaard – a crop circle specialist – fantasized about assassinating Mark Rutte, Geert Wilders, and the Dutch royal family while seeming to ask for help and support from their listeners.¹¹⁶ Ultimately, this led to a complete shutdown of the Lange Frans YouTube channel. At WRWY the existence of a global network of pedophiles that has also infiltrated the Netherlands is also debated extensively, and podcasts and interviews conducted by Lange Frans have found a less moderated platform there, as opposed to YouTube or Facebook – which are allegedly controlled by the elite.

3.7 Conclusion

In the Netherlands, QAnon has become one of the most popular fringe movements. This American phenomenon has found fertile Dutch ground to grow in. In 2016 the addition of

¹¹² Adrienne LaFrance, “The Prophecies of Q,” *The Atlantic*, June 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2020/06/qanon-nothing-can-stop-what-is-coming/610567/>

¹¹³ WRWY: The Navarro Report, 27 January 2021, <https://blog.wrwy.nl/2021/01/27/the-navarro-report/>

¹¹⁴ WRWY: Bidengate | Laptop From Hell | Vervolg 7, 31 October 2020, <https://blog.wrwy.nl/2020/10/31/bidengate-laptop-from-hell-vervolg-7/>

¹¹⁵ (example) WRWY: Podcast: Lange Frans en Elke de Klerk, 30 October 2020, <https://blog.wrwy.nl/2020/10/30/podcast-lange-frans-en-elke-de-klerk/>

¹¹⁶ Sebastiaan Quekel, “Opnieuw Gedoe Rondom Podcast Lange Frans, Rapper haalt Gesprek Offline,” 23 January 2021, <https://www.ad.nl/show/opnieuw-gedoe-rondom-podcast-lange-frans-rapper-haalt-gesprek-offline~a2faa086/>

QAnon theories were catapulted into the Dutch conspiracy mainstream by the website Ella'Ster. As these ideas spread to other new media platforms, such as WRWY, they also began to suit the Dutch local conspiracies more often, by alluding to conspiracies relating to Dutch events and personalities. This shows how American conspiracies have, in fact, migrated to Europe and have been altered in specific local contexts, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, the underlying nature of conspiracy theories has not necessarily been fundamentally altered by the COVID-19 pandemic. Many conspiracies that have sprouted during this period can be linked to older conspiracies.

This becomes clear from how the American movement QAnon has migrated to Europe. In the Netherlands, there was already an existing movement surrounding the conspiracy about a secret pedophilia ring run by elites and other influential people. These movements predate the emergence of QAnon in the Netherlands, which only really emerged here in 2016. QAnon served as a tool to help make the already existing movement more visible, and in addition it broadened its global scope. The emergence of QAnon has also caused some amount of increased radicalization among a variety of conspiracy groups in the Netherlands, which is in line with how Dutch researchers, such as Koen Vossen and Marc Tuters, have perceived the emergence of QAnon in the Dutch context.

Something that is also important in the Dutch debate and global debate about fake news in general, is that they are still flourishing. The pandemic has shown how this is the case, despite not altering the core narratives of older conspiracies as much. There have been changes in the right-wing of the political spectrum in a variety of nations in the transatlantic sphere, among them the Netherlands. If the dissemination of these conspiracies does indeed pose as a threat to liberal democracies, which is, for example, the case with people who refuse to be vaccinated based on conspiracies they have encountered online or in their social circles, then taking them and their followers seriously is crucial. Those who are anti-Vaxxers, arguably endanger the societal collective. Recognizing that they are also part of the broader fake news debate and examining why they drift towards fringe movements, helps us understand society at large as well.

Conclusion

The main question that this thesis set out to examine is how American conspiracy theories have migrated to Europe. By examining the histories of conspiracies and the fake news debates in the United States and Europe, as well as by looking at how American conspiracies have been received in the Netherlands, we can deduce that, first and foremost, the majority of conspiracy theories from the United States have migrated elsewhere through new media. Such platforms could consist of more well-known social media, such as Facebook, Twitter and 4Chan, but also websites dedicated to conspiracy theories, such as Ella'Ster and We Are With You (WRWY), that specifically facilitate the spread of American and global conspiracy theories.

Main Findings

In chapter one it was deduced that while many conspiracies are American-based, conspiratorial thinking is not necessarily an American phenomenon. Timothy Snyder argues that conspiratorial thinking originated in the Soviet Union, rather than in the United States. Snyder does accept the centrality of conspiratorial thinking in the American political tradition, but he holds that is not necessarily an inherently American cultural tradition. Kakutani also argues that conspiratorial thinking plays a key role in the American political tradition, but extends conspiracies and the more recent issue of *fake* news to the American public realm as well, *and* argues that they have also been crucial beyond the American context in the transatlantic sphere, such as in Europe.

It was examined how the Trump presidency and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic have both launched a plethora of new conspiracy theories. Many of these concoctions are the result of older conspiracies that are being re-examined and re-shaped in the light of new societal changes. Under Trump, old conspiracies surrounding Hilary Clinton and Barack Obama re-emerged and were adopted by a newer fringe movement named QAnon, who also took inspiration from older conspiracy lore surrounding the presumed existence of satanic cults involving elite members of society and anti-Semitic blood-libels.

It is often claimed that the beginning of the debate surrounding fake news began with the presidency of Donald Trump (2017-21), who claimed to have invented the term. Although Trump did not invent the term, he offered a new perspective on what fake news entailed: content that did not agree with his presidency or general person. Apart from utilizing the discourse of fake news, Trump's former presidency also smoothed the way for many formerly mostly unknown communities that had been spawning conspiracy theories online.

Nevertheless, Trump was not the first president to utilize the public effects of misinformation, but Trump used the term ‘fake news’ excessively to discredit his opponents more often.

From this, it can be established that conspiracies need a proper breeding ground to sprout in any society. This breeding ground can be anything that shakes up the regular order of things. In the Soviet Union it was the beginning of a new ideology, in the United States today it may have been Trump’s presidency. Under Trump, conspiratorial thinking skyrocketed. The concept of fake news has acquired a more prominent place in the current American narrative, specifically during and after the presidency of Donald Trump. By looking at how the fake news debate has taken shape during his presidency, we see how conspiracies have taken up such strong roots in American political and public life.

Chapter two focused on the European context. Europe could be regarded as a regional variant of a global phenomenon. Conspiracy theories have disseminated in Europe for much longer. Similarly to the bouts of fear that episodically threaten factual discourses in the United States, angst is also a crucial factor in Europe. These feelings tend to be derived from collective fear among certain groups in society, who fear being replaced by ‘outsiders’, such as immigrants. Feeding on these fears, new media have served as great facilitators for the spread of conspiracies in Europe. The recent emergence of new media has contributed to the dissemination of conspiracies that migrate from the United States to Europe.

Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that, even though social media has made it significantly easier for people to create their own content and publicize it to as many people as possible in the light of (virtual) human networking, people still tend to use some type of measure of credibility when assessing their sources. This is an interesting paradox of media credibility as it highlights how much the borders between fact and fiction have been blurred in the past few years. What we perceive to be trustworthy media has changed considerably as well.

Significant emphasis was placed on the difference between specific American phenomena, such as QAnon, and the tradition of conspiracy theories in Europe and in general. Conspiracy theories tend to emerge in times of conflict or distress. Richard Hofstadter was one of the first scholars to argue that people develop and maintain conspiracy theories because of great uncertainties in their lives that lead to paranoia about the status of factual discourses. As a result, according to Kakutani, the status of facts and expertise has been diminishing. Both in Europe and in the United States, we can see that the roles that experts play in society are often undermined because of mistrust towards an alleged ‘establishment.’

One of the most prominent examples today is QAnon, once a fringe phenomenon but now largely mainstream, that has flooded the Web with fake news about politicians and media

personalities (who they regard as Satan-worshipping pedophiles), and more recently misinformation about COVID-19 and the presidential elections of 2020. All of this is occurring not just online but offline as well, as became clear when its followers participated in the Capitol riots of January 6, 2021 in order to protest the (in their eyes) ‘undemocratic’ presidential elections that ‘favored’ Joe Biden.

Chapter three discussed how the Dutch debate has been shaped by American influences, such as QAnon, and how these American conspiracies have migrated to the Dutch community. In the Netherlands the fake news debate serves as an extension of the global discussion about conspiracy theories. This debate has existed for at least a decade. Yet, many Dutch scholars have only begun to truly examine how this has materialized in the Netherlands since the presidency of Donald Trump in the United States, and the start of the COVID-19 pandemic worldwide.

Conspiracies can often help explain the social and moral contexts that they reside in. Fear is often an underlying cause for undeterred beliefs in conspiracies and other ‘alternative facts.’ The American conspiracies that have migrated to the Dutch context are often the result of societal angst among certain groups as well. These fears are related to specific local contexts, which alters the way in which conspiracies are voiced in different places. This means that an American conspiracy theory that migrated to the Netherlands would be adapted through Dutch events, people, and even older local conspiracies that were already present in Dutch society. One of the most visible examples of this is de Dutch QAnon movement, which has its roots in both the American tradition and the Dutch one. In the Netherlands, there were already conspiracies surrounding pedophile rings among the elite members of Dutch society. QAnon did inspire a more vocal emergence of these conspiracies in the Dutch public debate. Simultaneously, this has led to a degree of radicalization among fringe movements in the Netherlands.

During the COVID-19 pandemic these conspiracies really came to fruition when websites such as Ella’Ster and WRWY dedicated their entire brand to the facilitation and spread of conspiracy theories in line with QAnon lore and originally Dutch conspiracies. The pandemic did not alter the essences of these conspiracy theories; they merely made them more visible to a broader public.

Further Research

For further research, more emphasis might be on who these Dutch conspiracists are specifically, and how they are linked to global individuals. This thesis predominantly focused

on the migration of conspiracy theories through new media, but it is perhaps also crucial to take into account the role of individuals have as live-action facilitators. After all, there is also a notable lack of first-hand accounts in the literature. Many works are descriptions of conspiracists, or comments on their actions, but not many scholars have attempted to conduct research on what kind of people these conspiracists actually are, thus much of what is stated is often an assumption of what they *might be* based of societal and historical accounts that rank high in regard of similarity to a specific relevant context. Examining individual accounts may also show how different social context determine the way in which conspiracy theories from elsewhere are received by the public.

In addition, it is also urgent to examine to what extent conspiracy theories pose a threat to liberal democracies, as it is often stated in literature about factual discourses and fake news that misinformation is dangerous to liberalism and to democracy. In the future, more in-depth research could help deduce in what ways misinformation is a danger. This is particularly important in the light of the ongoing coronavirus pandemic which has changed the way in which conspiracy theories are received by the public, such as to what extent they have caused a decline in education, social morality, and cohesion within and between societal groups.

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