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The influence of conspiracy theories on political communication

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Introduction

In the past few decades, the modern academic research has devoted a great deal of attention to the theme of conspiracy theories. Scholars have established an enormous literature about narratives that inflate or misinterpret reality and the “belief in conspiracy theories” is now considered a subsection of it. Research on conspiracy theories ought to be conducted because they bring all civilizations together; conspiracy theories are today spread all over the world. Moreover, the literature on these theories is not exhaustive and there is still a lot that has to be documented since we are only just witnessing what the aftermaths of a faith in conspiracy theories might be for the society as a whole. Conspiracy theories have been almost solely presented in a negative light: they have the potential to produce xenophobic and exclusionary accounts that in turn may put in a great danger both the public consensus and the public discourse. In recent years, though, conspiracy theories have been also presented as cultural procedures through which citizens voice their discontent towards their administrations and governmental institutions (Hellinger, 2019).

Until a short while ago, the literature on conspiracy theories was dominated by the seminal approach introduced by the American historian Hofstadter who compared the belief in conspiracy theories to *the return to the paranoid style to American politics* (Hellinger, 2019: 3). Scholars have progressively depicted conspiracy theories as distrustful and delusional, widespread pathological tendencies of right-wing fanatics. Only during the last few years, this reading of conspiracism is being dismissed and critiqued for its excessive simplicity. Academics have introduced a more structural approach which acknowledges that it is also the impact of political structures that causes conspiracist theorizing and that conspiracism does not solely depend on psychological factors. Conspiracy theories have been principally studied from a western perspective and this has surely limited research findings; the analysis of nonwestern realities has permitted to comprehend that conspiracy theorizing is the result of the conditions in which local identities have been forged (Swami, 2012). Early studies on conspiracy theories were insufficient and very marginal on a methodological level; scholars mainly resorted to cross-sectional designs or demographic variables in which, for example, conspiracy theorizing was mainly dealt with as a function of political party membership. Nonetheless, these studies have laid the foundations and the starting points for the current scholarly research on conspiracism. Findings principally agree on two arguments: the first is that the psychology behind conspiracy theorizing is invariable for all sorts of conspiracy theories; though conspiracy theories are dissimilar for their contents, the logics that govern them seem to be always the same. The second point is that the social framework takes the lion’s share in conspiracy theorizing: despite the individual dissimilarities, it is the social environment that stimulates the creation of brand-new conspiracy theories. Unfortunately, a careful reading of the existent literature on conspiracy theories reveals that this field of research is deficient in a stable theoretical background. This deficiency hinders the contextualization of the earlier results and the making of new hypotheses; as a

consequence, no proper methods can be suggested to diminish the diffusion and subsequent affirmation of conspiracy theories among the different sections of society. At the present moment, theory development is still at the beginning (van Prooijen & Douglas, 2018).

Today more than ever, the time is ripe for moving forward in the research. There is evidence that the public is more prone to rely on conspiracy theories when it is going through a crisis and when the subsequent feelings of helplessness and weakness shape its attitudes. The analysis of conspiracy theories has never been so present on the media agenda as during the epoch of the coronavirus pandemic. The aftermaths of this rising belief in conspiracy theories have had great impacts on society. In fact, it has been proven that faith in a given conspiracy theory or the development of a conspiracist mentality has brought a great deal of pressure on the general public. For instance, these theories have reduced faith in the institutions, backing of governmental measures and social activism (Pummerer et al., 2020).

It is time for the academic research on conspiracy theories to explore new areas. One might be led to believe that conspiracy theories mostly circulate in civilisations wherein an authoritarian regime regulates the main public services and thus causes low levels of social literacy rates; that is not the case. In truth, a conspiracy culture has established itself throughout the world. The contemporary literature is still incapable of clarifying why conspiracy theories are accepted in extremely dissimilar societal strata. Conspiracy theories also prosper in cultures in which the high educational levels and the right to the freedom of expression consent a fair political competition and the establishment of unrestricted mass media organisations. Therefore, the assumed knowledge within the research field on conspiracy theories shows a gap. This concerns the interplay between society, politics and the mass media and the critical role that the latter plays in creating a type of political communication proper for the proliferation of conspiracy theories. The literature on conspiracy theories is focused on other themes but examining the influence of conspiracy theories on political communication might clarify why some conspiracy theories have the power to last over time and to be so diffused (Marmura, 2014). At the moment, conspiracy theories primarily prosper on social media platforms and the “conspiracy theorism” is by now one of the most widespread and conspicuous viewpoints of the present day. Traditional media have not benefitted from this all-encompassing conspiracy culture which collocates them in the category of those “villains” that have the task to shape the humankind according to an accurate and prearranged design. Conspiracy theories cannot be thought of as novel instances or as phenomena specific to some niches of the Internet. The conspiracy culture is no more than another expression of modernity and it is perfectly aligned with the contemporary belief that everything is related and that nothing is random in our modern social order. These are conceptions that have been set forth by several of the most decisive intellectual progresses of recent times, as the cybernetics, the notion of system and the omnipresence of the network (De Maeyer, 2019). The present thesis has the aim of indagating the notion of the conspiracy culture as an interpretation of modernity by covering the aforementioned lack of the present conspiracy literature; namely examining the influence of conspiracy theories on political communication.

In particular, the first chapter takes us to the world of conspiracies and conspiracy theories. This chapter mostly has a theoretical nature, and it aims at outlining the principal features of the phenomenon under observation.

The first paragraph explains that conspiracies and conspiracy theories are the “tangible expressions” of the modern cultural climate: while the former might actually occur, the latter are mostly the products of imagination. Instead, the last two paragraphs are closely related to each other. The second paragraph paves the way for the third one and it clarifies how the mediatic and academic representations of conspiracy theories extremely mold the public vision and the popular awareness of conspiracism. This insight is essential for later comprehending the evaluation of the conspiracy culture in the third paragraph. Understanding by what means and wherefore conspiracism is configured and “broadcasted” is therefore crucial for our purposes.

Secondly, the following chapter explores what has been named “the conspiracy platform society” by taking up the concept of “platform society” initiated by van Dijck, Poell & de Waal in 2018. This chapter demonstrates that conspiracy theories have by now developed into their “digitalized form” and thus ought to be considered as crucial components of the fourth age of political communication. Indeed, the first paragraph introduces the most noteworthy issues in the field of political communication which has by now entered its fourth phase. The second and the third paragraphs probe two phenomena that are closely connected with each other and which are both the results of a digital era that we are all going through. On the one hand, the former paragraph addresses the combined action of filter bubbles and conspiracy theories; the two together contribute to produce a condition of intellectual seclusion which can negatively affect the correct functioning of a democracy. On the other hand, the latter paragraph analyzes the so-called echo chambers, one of the countless psychological effects of the use of the Internet. The concertation of conspiracy theories and echo chambers causes the formation of homophilic groups wherein intolerant outlooks as hate speech may thrive.

Subsequently, the third chapter wonders whether the contemporary world order is truly a conspiracist one. This is the most empirical chapter. In a way, the objective is to follow the experimental scientific method and to make a real contribution to the academic research on conspiracy theories; thus, the hypothesis that conspiracy theories do influence political communication ought to be empirically demonstrated. The first paragraph investigates the origins of the term “conspiracy theory” and it outlines a sort of timeline of conspiracy theories of the contemporary age. The main difference between old and new conspiracy theories is that the latter have by now assumed a digitalized form which is extremely difficult to counter. The second and the third paragraph discuss the two empirical cases. On the one hand, the former paragraph considers the case of QAnon, a perfect illustration of the support to conspiracy theories by the general public and the effects on the “onlives”. On the other hand, the latter paragraph explains how threatening conspiracy theories can be when they are endorsed by powerful political figures. The case under consideration is that of the “Stop the steal” conspiracy theory triggered by the forty-fifth President of the United States of America, Donald J. Trump.

In conclusion, because of their dominion over the cyberspace, there has been much discussion on how to limit the proliferation of conspiracy theories on the web. Conspiracy theories are identified as a kind of disinformation and three are the most renowned practices advanced to counter it: debunking, fact-checking and media or digital literacy. The advice is to completely revise the first two procedures and to bet on the latter, currently the only one that could prevent conspiracy theories from flourishing on the Net. At the very

end, the findings of the thesis are evaluated; human labor can never be perfect and therefore the strengths and weaknesses of the thesis are exposed. Ultimately, suggestions for further research are posed.

Chapter 1

Inside the world of conspiracies and conspiracy theories

1.1. Definition of conspiracies and conspiracy theory

The target of the present dissertation is to validate the influence that conspiracy theories do exert on political communication; a validation that would be unfeasible if first a definition of conspiracy theories and conspiracies were not granted. Hence, it is worth highlighting that they are two sides of the same coin: on one hand, conspiracy theories embody the “creative” right hemisphere of the brain, they are simply the figment of imagination. On the other hand, conspiracies correspond to the “unimaginative” left hemisphere: they are conspiracy theories’ *factual counterparts* (Tangherlini et al. 2020: 1).

At the outset, the etymology of the term ‘conspiracy’ has to be studied. Conspiracy stems from the Latin “conspirare” which indicates ‘to agree’, ‘to plot’ and it is typically pictured as a despicable state of affairs in which two or more personalities collude with the intention of attaining a mutual goal (Byford, 2011). On these grounds, the most recognized aim of a conspiracy theory is to give an account of the “real causes” which lie behind the occurrence of some historical events (Basham, 2003).

People, especially academics and scholars, adopt the idiom “conspiracy theory” to categorise all those beliefs that they regard as ridiculous and baseless. Due to the negative nature continuously ascribed to them, conspiracy theories tend to be associated with the term paranoia and thus exclusively relegated to the psychological sphere (Krekó, 2015); it is no accident that the book by Hofstadter, one of the leading works in the study of conspiracy theories, comprehends the word “paranoid” in its title. Therefore, most of the academic study on conspiracy theories is partial and biased and whenever the term “conspiracy” is associated to politics, it is typically and solely recognised as a side effect of populism (Hellinger, 2019). Only in the last decade it has been registered a predisposition in the academic realm to investigate conspiracy beliefs and to recognise that conspiracies do exist in the real world and should be distinguished from conspiracy theories (Dentith, 2014).

Precisely for this reason, it is worth defining what conspiracy theories and conspiracies are, even though striving to define them presents unexpected impediments (Keeley, 1999). An objection to this attempt would be that every conspiracy theory is distinctive and that it is impractical to provide a definition that wholly and satisfactorily comprehends all of them. Though, establishing an “operational” definition would still be feasible provided that the logic and the configuration beyond conspiracy theories’ narratives is identical for all of them. Consequently, a conspiracy theory is typified by specific and recurrent arguments which would enable to delineate our “functioning” definition (Brotherton, 2015).

The first characteristic of a conspiracy theory is that it remains an *unanswered question* (Brotherton, 2015: 62). Inside the academic debate, conspiracy theories are basically presumed to be false, thus scholars avoid being associated to them. It may happen that some academics advocate the occurrence of a conspiracy, but

they validate their argument by sustaining that the belief in a conspiracy diverges from adhering to a conspiracy theory (Byford, 2011).

Nevertheless, the discussion about an ex-ante falsehood of a conspiracy theory diverts from one of its essential and essential features: a conspiracy theory is inherently unprovable; its pivotal proof has not been obtained yet and the coverage of events is still ongoing. Assumed its irrefutability, a conspiracy theory is a kind of “never-ending story”; whenever it seems incongruent, new elements can be advanced to restore the narrative (Brotherton, 2015).

People persist to rely on conspiracy theories because of a particular reason: proof that disputes these theories is further understood as deriving from the suspected conspiracy itself. The reasoning of a conspiracy theory is incredibly straightforward: both the lack of evidence and the presence of opposing data corroborate the truthfulness of the theory. On one hand, data cannot be collected as conspirators are efficiently obscuring it; on the other hand, a contradicting proof indicates that the conspirators are struggling to take the suspicion off themselves. Hence, the greater the evidence in contradiction of their theory, the more conspiracists gather new adepts and sustain their side of the story (Sunstein & Vermeule, 2008).

Nothing *is as it seems* (Barkun, 2013: 20) and appearances are not to be trusted, this is the second characteristic of a conspiracy theory. Conspirators try their best to act as innocent and benign as possible given that their purpose is to disguise their real identities and their malicious deeds (Barkun, 2013).

Therefore, the explanation offered by a conspiracy theory for an event never corresponds to the official account (Keeley, 1999, 114). Conspiracists recognize the official account as erroneous and biased and they are sceptical towards it; they tend to accept as true only narratives that agree with their worldview (Lewandowsky & Cook, 2020). However, conspiracy theories can also precede the official explanation; they can be created when the official account has not been consigned yet. In other words, everything must be mistrusted in a conspiracist’s world, even the way in which human beings comprehend their surrounding reality (Brotherton, 2015).

The aforementioned scepticism unavoidably leads to the third characteristic: the belief that nothing happens by chance (Lewandowsky & Cook 2020). Everything is governed by omnipotent figures who determine social and historical causality (Popper, 1966), so much that our world is the result of design and coincidence cannot take place in it (Barkun, 2013).

Though, nothing can be totally flawless, not even a conspiracy and traces are occasionally left behind (Brotherton, 2015). Conspiracy theorists perceive themselves not as *raconteurs of alluring stories*, but as *investigators and researchers* (Byford, 2011: 88). Conspiracists do want to publicly disclose the truth and finally hinder the conspirators’ plot; for this reason, they are in the constant search for hints and incongruities. It may occur that the official account cannot instantaneously justify apparently anomalous details; these details have been defined “anomalies” and conspiracy theories do necessitate them in order to survive. As a consequence, conspiracy theories seem broader if compared to the official versions: the former can clarify both official data and anomalies which the latter lacks to elucidate (Keeley, 1999).

The fourth characteristic includes mystery and wickedness: the conspirators' plot cannot be divulged since it hides strategies and actions which are ethically questionable. One of the most compelling queries that conspiracists have always been striving to solve concerns the real identity of the conspirators. According to them, all individuals gaining from a conspiracy are automatically involved in it (Brotherton, 2015).

Nonetheless, the most crucial trait of conspirators is their affiliation to the elite. These "bad characters" typically operate in the name of the public interest; they are placed in academies, in the media and obviously within the highest ranks of governments and businesses. These elitists possess infinite financial properties, and they dominate official means of communication, which in turn enable them to manipulate the many as if they were flocks of sheep. Accordingly, conspiracy theories and populism are generally related on account of the former's anti-elitist disposition (Byford, 2011).

As formerly stated, conspiracies and conspiracy theories are not to be confounded; the way in which they are considered, both in everyday life and in academic discourses, thwarts their relationship (Moore, 2018).

Regardless of a diffused divergence over a shared understanding of the wider idiom "conspiracy", the latter is currently considered as a crime before judges and administrations (Barkun, 2013). In actual fact, a criminal conspiracy is a circumstance wherein some individuals choose to perform unlawful acts and later bring them to fruition. However, conviction may occur even if the concrete misdeed has never been executed; it is sufficient that the suspected perpetrator was aware of the conspiracy itself (Teka, 2020).

In particular, in the event of a political conspiracy, the covert and unlawful pact is embarked on to enact criminal actions which will, in turn, badly affect the political system (Critchlow et al., 2008).

Political conspiracies are both subjective and collective activities which generally exhibit three features: concealment; whenever uncovered, they are endangered; and a mixture of unlawful, deceiving, or immoral conduct. The third aspect differentiates conspiracies from other types of covert alliances (Hellinger, 2003). Political conspiracy emerges as a way of doing politics and stating discontent provided that it refutes and undermines transparency which is in turn one of the fundamental principles of current democratic governments (Hellinger, 2019).

The aim or the outcomes pursued by conspirators delineate the level or range of a conspiracy. Indeed, three categories of conspiracies have been identified: *world or grand, operational and petty conspiracies* (Pipes, 1997: 20). World conspiracies aspire to dominate the whole world (and beyond) since their ultimate objective is to modify the current world order or the entire humankind as we know it; conversely, single petty conspiracies give rise to limited consequences which, however, can become extremely dangerous if cumulatively pondered (Pipes, 1997).

Nonetheless, political elites participate more extensively in operational conspiracies and it is precisely this latter type that has to be attentively monitored. Operational conspiracies typically point towards the subversion of a political system or of the allocation of wealth in a given society. Afterwards, the involved elites conceal the illegitimate misuse of power and authority exploited to accomplish their goal because they dread blame, debacle in further elections or criminal sanctions (Hellinger, 2003). Conspiracies are not rare in international relations; in actual fact, they do play a substantial part in them. It is not rare that nations covertly conspire at

the advantage or disadvantage of the others, suffice is to think about terrorism or all the plans of interference and disinformation globally performed by intelligence services. Moreover, the ebb and flow of regimes are also attributable to conspiracies and the latter have an effect on political negotiations by prompting hostilities and by facilitating the formation of ceasefires (Aistrope & Bleiker, 2018).

However, as previously mentioned, the vast majority of people deems unreasonable thinking and paranoia the hallmarks of conspiracies; whenever somebody (usually not influential) dares allude at clandestine plots within international arenas, he will surely receive the mark of paranoid. For instance, US administration distinguished certain conspiracies and depicted them as authentic, although their fallaciousness has been recently demonstrated; contrarywise, Arab conspiracies have been rejected and ruled out as ridiculous, albeit it has been proven that several do contain a kernel of truth (Zwierlein and de Graaf, 2013).

There is no denying that conspiracy thinking is paranoid in most of the cases, but it may also reveal itself as stimulating within those groups which would be otherwise disregarded by political elites. Notwithstanding this, the conspiracist way of reasoning benefits from the increasing prominence of globalization: society refuses to accept that governments are so transparent as they profess themselves to be and it seems like democracy reneged on its promises (Hellinger, 2003).

At the present time, conspiracism has the potential to establish itself as a considerable “set of values”.

It is worth wondering whether conspiracism is on the verge of ruining civil society and democracy as we know them, taking into consideration the weight that it has attained nowadays (Konda, 2019). This is not to say that conspiracies are capable of changing the course of history all on their own, but they have shaped and accounted for momentous (and not only) historical events: in effect, they cannot be more significant in political affairs than these days wherein we have been witnessing and living the so-called “*Trumpian era*” (Hellinger, 2019: 33).

1.2. Representation of conspiracy theorists and resulting popular imagination

A noteworthy feature has rendered American political and popular culture increasingly attractive across the globe: the omnipresence of conspiracies anxieties in both politics and daily life (Goldberg, 2008); on that account, this phenomenon has been predominantly examined in the USA. Conspiracy panics are as old as the exact human being, but worldviews ascribed to conspiracy theorists entered the mainstream particularly after World War II (Holliday, 2005). This condition has consolidated as a result of the combination of two factors which are one the consequence of the other: the former was the mounting exploitation of conspiracies perpetrated by politics during those years; the latter was the consequential abundance of movies and television productions whose central character was the subject of conspiracy theory. One fed the other in a vicious cycle: the more politics sustained the occurrence of conspiracies, the more movies and television products represented conspiracy theory, in turn, affecting the surrounding political culture (Arnold, 2008).

Indeed, conspiracy theories have become one of the main themes of popular media and an aura of naïve romanticism actually surrounds them. Their idealist worldview where human concord is simply perturbed by conspirators' malevolent deeds won the hearts of the many (Oliver & Wood, 2014). Nonetheless, conspiracy theorists do not retain the same romantic atmosphere of their theoretical counterparts and they are generally depicted as disruptive and suspicious personalities. The label "conspiracy" manipulates to a greater extent the picture of the people, instead of the theories themselves (Wood, 2016).

Though, it is generally suspiciousness the answer provided by the general public when encountering beliefs in conspiracy theories (Boudry, 2020). Inside the popular imagination, conspiracy ideas are hardly ever taken seriously, and the public utilizes the exact term "conspiracy theory" with carelessness, almost without realizing it (Arnold, 2008). Believing in conspiracy theories is typically perceived as an irrational act (Melley, 2002) and in fact the term itself is exploited for dismissing "foolish" individuals. Unexpectedly, not many scholars have produced research on the general perception of conspiracy theorists in the outer world because conspiracy study mainly contemplates the causes rather than the effects of the phenomenon (Douglas et al., 2019). Research on the influence of news media on people's perception chiefly concentrates on topics as corruption (Charron & Annoni, 2020) or medical issues (Kim & Kim, 2021; Chang, 2009), almost nothing is disclosed on conspiracy; that is precisely why public's perception of academic research is of importance (Al-Mossallami, 2014). Though, notwithstanding the widespread scepticism and the pathological character ascribed to them, conspiracy theorists are given the credit of uttering collective worries about the genuine trustfulness of the institutes of our times (Dentith, 2014). This general and diffused attitude produces apprehension in the academic world, particularly in the work of Brian Keeley in what has been labelled the "*Public Trust Skepticism*" (Dentith, 2014: 72). The argument establishes that belief in conspiracy theories inevitably induces deviant behaviours: conspiracists will inevitably sense skepticism towards all the public data distributed by powerful institutions which are the primary targets of their invectives (Keeley, 1999). Still, this line of reasoning is perfectly coherent to the liberal configuration of our society: liberalism consents skepticism, but only to a certain extent. Conspiracism is perceived as an overly amplified type of skepticism due to its likeness to thwart rationality, the benchmark of a liberal form of government. Conspiracism, with its ensuing and alleged paranoid style and political paranoia, is antipolitics not as a result of its groundlessness, but for the reason that it does not adhere to the *liberal regime of political truth* (Bratich, 2008: 42). There exists little evidence to accept the indicated line of reasoning: many people, exactly as conspiracists, do covertly suppose the occurrence of conspiracies in our political and public system, but this does not imply their attachment to radical skepticism. The real dilemma is that conspiracists openly convey their mistrust towards public institutions and for some this kind of suspicion cannot be tolerated, no matter what (Lauret, 2018).

In the academic world, the most renowned correlation is the one between conspiracism and paranoia. The connection occurs for two main motives: firstly, as a result of the resemblance amongst conspiracists' fictional stories and paranoids' unrealistic visions; secondly, on account of an academic culture beginning with Hofstadter's aforementioned "The Paranoid Style in American Politics" where conspiracists are identified as political paranoids. Being a conspiracist political paranoid entails suspecting that an entire conspirators' plot

is aimed at the entire human species; though, the word paranoid possesses an inner derogatory character, and it is frequently utilised to stigmatize mindsets that people do not comply with (Barkun, 2013). According to scholars, conspiracism and the paranoid style embody a specific and distinctive ways of thinking and, as such, they are to be problematized. This mindset corresponds to a domestic threat and it has the potential to subvert the political spectrum as it is currently known; conspiracism is likely to be endorsed both by the populist fringes and to influence the moderate, in a flow that goes back and forward from the extremes to the centre (Carpenter, 1964).

Even though today's conspiracy theories are chiefly broadcasted by the Internet and the mass media in general, these conspiracy designs remain within the borders of what has been labelled *stigmatized knowledge* (Barkun, 2013: 43), a type of knowledge discredited by the establishment. Nonetheless, by endorsing this us/them dichotomy, it is establishment itself that disseminates populism (Enyedi, 2018): establishment does not mean only the academic world, but also journalism. Journalism is essential when there is the need to restore "harmony" in the current neo-liberal political and social system. Journalism plays both sides: it professes to side with ordinary citizens, but instead of also supervising governmental corruption, they only scrutinise conspiracists, as part of the dangerous group of extremists. Consistent with journalists' view is the idea that paranoia essentially resides in the public and in pop culture productions; for instance, many Hollywood movies have turned out to be one of the main targets of journalism, provided their treatment of the conspiracy theme (Bratich, 2008). The real problematic behind academics and journalists' "collaboration" is that they have the duty not to merely disdain modes of social denunciation as foolish "conspiracy theories"; theories and claims should be corroborated or dismissed on the basis of detailed and approved principles. Furthermore, experts should not exclusively accuse the crowds of the dissemination of conspiracy theories; conspiracism involves multiple parts where disoriented communities have faith in theories that elites are interested to disseminate (Hellinger, 2019).

Though, in spite of the continuous pillory to which they are subjected, conspiracy theories are increasingly capturing huge audiences owing to their growing elaboration and complexity (McHoskey, 1995). Consequently, conspiracy theories are so diffused in the mainstream that the amount of people distrusting their public institutions is way greater if compared to the past (Arnold, 2008). At the present time, ordinary people are by far more indulgent towards conspiracy thinking, alleging the occurrence of extraordinary plots does not raise so much concern inside the public. There is no medium that does not propagate conspiracy thinking, especially the Internet where mobilizing adherents is not so complicated (Goldberg, 2008) There exist opposite stances on conspiracism; on the one hand, it may designate a framework to depict the world, on the other hand, it is merely perceived as folklore, a work of imagination (Fenster, 2008).

As previously mentioned, conspiracy theories and conspiracies need to be distinguished: concerning the former, the general public find it difficult to envision them; regarding the latter, citizens do believe in their occurrence and recognise the treacherous consequences they could entail (Arnold, 2008). Nevertheless, some mainstream media do incorporate conspiracy theories which are then accepted and recognised by the public as instruments of "mobilizing propaganda". Moreover, other conspiracy theories may appear as reliable

substitutes to some channels of mainstream media which have had previously become the subject of public scrutiny (Marmura, 2014). The most renowned public image of the conspiracy theorist as a *tin foil hatter* (Harambam, 2020: 72) is no more than a stereotype. Academics themselves have generated this stigmatization: these theorists have always been portrayed as representatives of the same and unique alliance where no distinctions in opinions and mind-sets exist and are tolerated (Harambam, 2020). It is worth emphasizing that conspiracy theories are not the prerogative of a single paranoid fringe; it is true that conspiracism lives at the margin, but it likewise prospers inside the majority of our society (Dyrendal, 2016). Attributing conspiracies plots only to the fantasies of a handful of crazy people is the prevailing attitude; attitude that, however, does not confront the problematic in any way (Brotherton, 2015). Additionally, everyone could potentially turn into a vehicle of conspiracy theories; the latter thrive whenever people sense to be at risk, and they pervade political discourse in time of emergency (LaFrance, 2017). As a matter of fact, there exists an escalating amount of conspiracy theories perpetrated all over the world. The year 2020 has been particularly flourishing on this account; it is possible to enunciate many instances, among which QAnon, the countless theories invented on the recent Coronavirus or the diffusion of the “Grand Replacement” Theory (Guilhot, 2021). What is required from the public is to pay attention to conspiracy theories likely to have a serious impact on our future; among them, the ones about vaccinations or climate change (Brotherton, 2015). An excessive indulgence led to the normalization of conspiracy theories; suffice is to think that Donald Trump, the former President of the US himself, has exploited them to gain and uphold the consensus throughout his presidency (Smallpage et al., 2017).

In conclusion, conspiracy theories do have a terrible reputation in the academic world and inside the world of “professional media”: to assert that someone is a conspiracist equals to declare that his/her opinions should be trusted under no circumstances (Coady, 2003). Conversely, the most publicly available media propose a more generous picture of conspiracy theories and, thus, the general community is more prone to endure and also have faith in them. Additionally, a tolerant conduct has resulted from the public awareness of the repeated incidence of conspiracies in everyday life; citizens mistake theories for the sole means available for denouncing factual and existent complots (Räikkä, 2009) Consequently, there is an increasing number of people advocating conspiracy theories; people who are not inevitably ignorant: every average citizen could fall into the trap of conspiracy theories (Oliver & Wood, 2014). What should concern the most is that the general public will not be ever again capable of distinguishing between conspiracies and conspiracy theories. A new cleavage may establish itself in the first half of the twenty-first century: that between “normal people” and “paranoid” conspiracy theorists (Cartelli, 2018).

1.3. Development of conspiracy culture

The theme and purpose of paragraph 1.2 was to determine how mediatic and academic depictions of conspiracism extremely shapes popular imagination and public perception of the phenomenon: the focus on this dynamic is now essential to comprehend in what way and wherefore conspiracism is actually structured and “publicised”.

What the twentieth century witnessed was the making of a conspiracy culture; the twenty-first century, instead, is attesting its propagation and consolidation across the globe (Aaronovitch, 2008). It is challenging to assess the real backing of a conspiracy theory, but up-to-date opinion polls disclose that these theories are exerting their influence on an ever-increasing number of worldwide adherents (Henley & McIntyre, 2020).

The term “conspiracy culture” has been coined precisely to indicate that conspiracy theory is one of the chief characteristics of the ongoing popular culture (Knight, 2000). On the one hand, provided that the public acknowledges that conspiracies do take place in daily life, a considerable amount of conspiracy theories are accepted and regarded as the accounts of authentic events; on the other hand, conspiracy conjectures that refer to more “paranormal phenomena” are mostly considered as the manifestation of a contemporary public feeling of powerlessness towards malevolent and mighty establishments (Locke, 2009). Unfortunately, it is very challenging to differentiate authentic theories from deceptive ones: while the former have been rejected and dealt with distrust, the latter have been accepted without questions: people do not believe in conspiracism in toto but they do not even disbelieve it entirely (Shermer, 2010).

The establishment of conspiracism within the cultural panorama does not come out of nowhere. Inside the contemporary political and intelligence environment, the dominant ranks often work undercover, and they then have a tendency to attribute all the responsibility (or blame) to their inferiors. Therefore, the public does rely on government conspiracy theories narrating that authority not only performs evil deeds, but also conceal its culpability (Hellinger, 2019). Ruling classes must constantly offer further evidence that no conspiracies or cover-ups have been occurring. Conspiring is not a prerogative of outcasts and political fringes anymore: both privileged and disadvantaged groups have embraced them, and they are always contemplated when seeking to take stock of a given event (Melley, 2002). In fact, conspiracy theorizing has appeared in all segments of the political spectrum and it is affecting new sexist and racist debates; indeed, the presence of conspiracy beliefs in the manifestos of novel social movements is rendering them increasingly potent and damaging (Sternisko et al., 2020).

The media played such a pivotal role in the spread and normalization of conspiracy culture that the “plotting” lexicon and leitmotifs entered in the common language, to mention a few: the killing of JFK, the decease of Princess Diana and the facility of Area 51 (Goldberg, 2008). All the manifestations of cultural production be they visual, auditory, and vocal exhibit a “conspiracist” trait. “Conspiracy literature” appears among the sections of the main publishing houses; tabloid publications advocate conspiracy theories and both conspiratorial and non-conspiratorial versions are recognised as legitimate sides of a story. The Internet, however, is one of the major, if not the most relevant, spreader of conspiracy theories provided that its websites, internet chatrooms and blogs are inexpensive and easily accessible fora in which conspiracies can thrive (Phillips & Milner, 2021).

In its initial form, the culture of conspiracy was mostly a subculture. Shadow was the cradle and ensuing dwelling of conspiracism. Since the earliest days, conspiracy claims have never been properly addressed and this is the main motive of conspiracists’ distress: for them, lack of consideration corresponds to refusal.

Retreating to subcultural undergrounds appears as the easiest solution whenever people perceive that their beliefs and opinions are deemed to be inappropriate and disconnected from the leading “ethos” (Barkun, 2013). A subcultural underground comprehends not only value-systems, but also their associated practices. Hostility to authority and mass media is one of the principal practices of the conspiracist setting. Authority alone can proclaim what normalcy is and have the privilege to make allegations about plots, without having the constant fear of being accused of paranoia (Rogin, 1988). Conspiracists despise mainstream wisdom and no overarching elites are recognized inside their milieu. Furthermore, conspiracists consider the media manipulators of reality, puppets in the hands of mighty plotters whose ultimate aspiration is to deceive the public (Harambam & Aupers, 2017).

This subcultural *cultic milieu* (Barkun, 2013: 23) is the natural environment of devotees of conspiracy theorists; nevertheless, it is also the birthplace of a new style of conspiracism: a style in which *conspiracy* is articulated *without the theory* (Rosenblum & Muirhead, 2020: 19). New conspiracism has much in common with the old one: for instance, both conclude that sudden action is needed to fight against the malevolent conspirators and that no procrastination is allowed. Though, the divergences prevail over the resemblances. On the one hand, old conspiracism deserved the appellate theory since its ultimate goal was to offer a clarification of a given event. On the other hand, the new kind is different precisely because it does not offer clarifications and, what is more, it seldom has something to explain. Additionally, no speculations are made on the occurring and ensuing concealment of a plot. It basically insinuates that a conspiracy has befallen but it does not define its circumstances (Rosenblum & Muirhead, 2019). The new style led to a humanity where a plethora of conspiracy theories endures, and everyone has faith in at least one of them. Or better, everyone places confidence in some of the narratives of one of them and individuals can develop a conspiracy attitude in different levels. For instance, concluding that the so-called “New World order” retain global hegemony on practically everything does not equate to suspecting that the results of a match have been determined in advance just because the favorite team did not walk away with the cup (Brandslet, 2021).

In the last decades, the conspiracist style did not remain restricted to the folklore of a given population or geographical area. As a result of globalization, conspiracy thinking is a common denominator of all the folklores scattered across the world. Globalization has always been portrayed as a process of cultural homogenization where our world is downgraded to be a scale enlargement of the American way of life and where local traditions are constantly being repressed and neglected (Owolabi, 2001). Nevertheless, it is more accurate to utilize the idiom “glocalization” assuming that we are facing a much more intricate mechanism wherein exports have to be adapted to a new background and integrated in the indigenous culture (Storey, 2003). This is exactly what is arising with conspiracy theories whose principal site of incubation is the US from which they are globally exported thus becoming integral parts of the tradition of involved societies. After the end of WWII and the demise of the Soviet Union, it has been recorded an acceleration in globalization and a consequent and huge augmentation of conspiracy theorizing. New conspiracy theories have been formed as a result of the combination of the classic conspirational τόπι with innovative sources of inspiration (Astapova et al., 2020). Indeed, a certainty is the recurrence of the same leitmotifs in both earliest and latest conspiracy

theories; leitmotifs that survive mutable historical circumstances, but also adapt to the timeframe in which they ought to dwell. Suffice is to think about conspiracy theories' pervasive antisemitic trait where the frightening villain is always embodied by the Jew (Byford, 2011).

A conspiracy culture is the inevitable side-effect of what has been branded the "age of surveillance capitalism" (Zuboff, 2019). Living in a surveillance society implies that a sort of "Big Brother" constantly monitors the population; a populace that, in turn, changes its status from observed to controller in order to survive (Lynch, 2020). The same logic applies to conspiracy theorists who are consequently suspicious of the "omniscient establishment", as for instance, the scientific realm and religious bodies. This surveillance age is characterized by a disappearance of grand values and conspiracy theories emerge as the obvious answers to otherwise inexplicable problems and to the technological and social transformations of this century (Melley, 2002). This does not necessarily mean that conspiracism on all grounds should be justified but affirming that contemporary conspiracy culture is a response to circumstances of social anxiety does not equate to fully support and recognize all its practices and forms as true and unquestionable. Moreover, sociological inquiry goes wrong in comparing all the conspiracy phenomenon to irrational manifestations of foolish paranoia; by doing so, their theories themselves become conspiracy theories about conspiracism (Locke, 2009).

Thus, it is possible to sustain that a conspiracy culture is one of the principal features of modernity and ongoing modernization. A widespread feeling of societal insecurity, already analysed in the nineteenth century but further heightened by modern procedures, largely moulded contemporary conspiracy culture. It is not essential to question whether or not conspiracy theories are rational, but their normalization is mainly the expression of the West cultural rationalization. Particularly since the 1960s and 1970s, the public has been losing confidence in the paramount social and political institutions and it has been transferring this diminishing trust to conspiracy theories. Indeed, the latter were the only ones capable of creating an innovative cultural environment where the rampant rationalism of the era could be merged with the strong and diffused need for the metaphysical (Aupers, 2012).

Conspiracy theories became and still are repositories of societal delusions and conspiracy culture is progressively modelling the Anthropocene.

Firstly, conspiracy theories have the effect of multiplying radicalization and violence within extremist groups. Their members have a common understanding of inner and outer circles and the use of violence is approved since conspiracy narrations silence differing inner opinions and amplify the danger posed by outer factions. Additionally, the occurrence of conspiracy theories in extremist "chronicles" improves their allures and animates further radicalization (Lee, 2020).

Secondly, conspiracy theories especially thrive in autocratic realms and boost the authoritarian trait of certain regimes. In particular, authoritarian beliefs easily fall prey to conspiracy theories provided that both are certain of their blamelessness and strive to find explanations that could completely validate the occurrence of compound and otherwise inexplicable events (Richey, 2017). Moreover, also extreme nationalism could conduct to conspiracy theorizing. For example, the neo-fascist post-World War II ideology is constantly in

search of an enemy and conspiracy theories properly support it in its attempt through their “perpetual enemies” narrative (Baker, 2004).

Thirdly, populist governments communicate with their “audience” and legitimize their power by exploiting conspiracy theories and their stories. Populist leaders are consequently capable of classifying alleged antagonists and external menaces, but also of stifling political challengers (Bergmann & Butter, 2020). In this regard, also populist intellectuals contribute to the production and proliferation of conspiracy theories so as to legitimize the authoritarian regime in power by having the side-effect of intensifying an already overly diffused “infodemic” (Panarari, 2018).

Lastly, although in the past conspiracy theories have mainly been “left in the dark”, they have now become a strategy of political communication in a great deal of countries. Elites deploy conspiracy narratives when, for example, they are the victims of certain scandals and they avoid conspiracy theorizing when, instead, the potential outcomes of a given matter may be in their favor. In this manner, political elites jeopardize the public information ecosystem and deteriorate the reliability of all information providers (Bräuninger, 2019).

Traditionally, communication scholars have always paid their attention to public discourse and struggled to comprehend how to correctly discern between its factual and fictional components. Communication and media studies are obviously focalized on the analysis of news distribution, but they have never addressed conspiracy theories notwithstanding their proliferation throughout old and principally new media. Indeed, social media and social networks are today’s main news distributors and there exists the need to ever more deeply scrutinize them (Radu & Schultz, 2017).

Conspiracy theories are nothing but the epiphenomena of the latest “platform society”. Conspiracy theories generate communicative ecosystems where procedures just as hate speech and disinformation are perpetrated and where trends like filter bubbles, echo chambers, information disorder and post-truth are becoming more and more of a reality. Numerous are the outcomes of conspiracy theories, among which: the disruption of public opinion, the manipulation of both consensus and social cohesion and the transformation of the public sphere (Sorice, 2020; Culloty, 2021). Next chapter will be focused on this: conspiracy theories as unavoidable mechanisms of the recent platformisation of society.

Chapter 2

A “conspiracy platform society”

2.1. Issues in political communication

Without communication, there would be no politics. Providing a definite and clear definition of what is meant by “political communication” is not so straightforward since both words of the expression, political and communication, can be interpreted in numerous ways (McNair, 2011). Nevertheless, describing it as *purposeful communication about politics* (McNair, 2011: 4) might be the best solution. In this respect, political communication does not simply consist of all those declarations expressed in a written or spoken mode, but it is much more composite; in fact, it can preferably be stated that three are its most significant subjects of inquiry. Firstly, political communication analyzes communication techniques endorsed by political actors whose final objective is to attain precise and pre-established objectives; secondly, it investigates communication directed to political players by non-political ones, i.e., the general public and all media sources; thirdly, it explores all communication undertaken to discuss about political actors and their doings, as it occurs in talk-shows or in every mode of media debates of politics (McNair, 2011). Indeed, the three leading roles of political communication were, are and will always be political institutions, mass media and citizens (Mazzoleni, 2004). Additionally, inside the scientific realm, the expression political communication has rather come to denote a trading among the three aforementioned actors of those symbolic contents which are given prominence in the public eye. Nonetheless, political communication does not exclusively concentrate on the interaction among politicians, media and the general public but further topics have been introduced in this field over the last few years, such as the relation between political communication, newsmaking and public opinion formation (de Nardis, 2020).

In fact, over the last few decades, we have been witnessing a paradigmatic shift in communication studies (Hepp et al., 2015). The traditional model is the so-called “dialogic” one where all the three actors act together and shape the public space by organizing it in three spaces. Each space is created by the interaction of two of the three political communication actors. On the one hand, political bodies and general public are the ones to produce the first space, the shared one; on the other hand, it is precisely media and political organizations which generate the second one, the communicative space. The informative communicative space, instead, is the product of the unilateral communication proceeding from the media to ordinary people. In addition, political communication turns into its mediated form whenever all the three actors interact among each other (Mazzoleni, 2004). Nevertheless, the aforementioned model needs to be revised given the increasing centrality of mass media in political communication; they certainly hold a greater power when compared to the other two players and this is firmly stressed in the so-called “media model”. Mass media become the environment in which media systems, political actors and citizens interact; at the same time, the last two actors use media as a channel to communicate with each other. The media model is characterized by an overlap between the public and the media space. Therefore, in this mediatized public space, politics in turn becomes mediatized

and mass media compel political institutions and general population to adhere to its communicational logics (Sortino, 2013).

Regardless of political communication being as old as the Ancient Greece (or possibly older), modern political communication systems and conspiracy theories upsurge are deemed to be coeval: both are the fruit of the post-World War II era. Indeed, in the period beginning in the late 1940s and developing throughout the 1950s, it is possible to collocate the first phase of political communication, the so-called “age of the newspapers”. During this first phase, public opinion had a profound esteem for the governing political systems since citizens were exposed to a type of political messages which exhibited great substance, and which were promptly receipted and disseminated by the media (Blumer & Kavanagh, 1999). Later, the second phase of political communication became known as the “age of the television” and it can be located in the time frame going from the 1960s to the 1980s. Television replaced newspapers and, therefore, political debate and public opinion building primarily took place by cable (Perloff, 2013). Finally, the “digital era” is the third phase of political communication which started to take shape at the end of the twentieth century and progressed up to the present day. The main difference with its predecessor is that now communication is “narrowcast”, namely, directed towards specific segments of the population. Internet is the main medium and cultivating communication techniques turns out to be one of the principal “basic requirements” expected from political professionals (Lilleker, 2006).

However, a fourth phase is assumed to have already “walked throughout the doors” of contemporary communication. “Mediatization” and “infodemic” are the magic words for comprehending our current civilization (Aagaard, 2016).

Throughout the first three phases, political communication has mostly proceeded in two directions: the unidimensional and bidimensional ones. The former is straightforward to comprehend; it implies that the message is transmitted once from the emitter to the recipient. For instance, this one-dimensional communication was applied in the field of mass communication where a message had to be meticulously developed and manipulated before being conveyed to a huge audience. The latter is also not arduous to grasp; the two-dimensional “interpersonal” communication entails a bivalent connection and an effective participation of both the sender and the receiver of the “news” (Stansberry, 2012).

Nonetheless, given the increasing complexity of the contemporary media world where it is possible to observe both instances of downward and upward communication, interactions among political communication actors are much more multifaceted and intricate. As a result of new media expansion, it is now feasible to uphold that communication is instead multidimensional and that the latest many-to-many notion of mass communication has to be advocated. The new media make voters capable of interacting among each other. The general public, previously referred to as the audience, does no more merely receive the message, but it holds much more power if compared to political actors in directing and propagating political messages and news (Tasente, 2020)

The concept “mediatization of society” denotes the broadening of media influence into all spheres of society and community life. Hence, the mediatization of society is a process involving media and society which have

now got a point where they are inevitably interdependent and where both automatically need the other to subsist (Mazzoleni, 2008).

The preeminence of mediatization has led political actors to recognize that a mediated reality is by far prevailing if measured up to all other types of reality; political actors ought to consider the media not only during electoral campaigning, but also throughout government or policy-making activities. If political and public characters formerly had to adapt to the media logic and to its leading standards, they now have to internalize and adopt them. Media logic has taken over politics to the point that social and political actors are not even able to discriminate between political and media logics anymore. Consequently, media are the principal sources of information and the existence of a mediated reality makes it extremely hard to still be certain of objective ones (Strömbäck, 2008). By fabricating an interpretation of reality, the media create a constructed reality which overly governs and replaces the objective one. Indeed, the general public observes the world through the “subjective” perspectives of the media and, in its opinion, constructed reality becomes the objective one (Kaid et al., 1991).

That is where conspiracy theories come in. The media system facilitates the diffusion of conspiracy theories even when it actually condemns them. One of the primary sources of social media revenue is their traffic which is essentially bolstered by the intensification of conflict on their platforms; in consequence social media profit by cultivating conspiracy theories and by boosting the size of their subsequent audiences. In reality, the root of the matter is that conspiracy theorists are nurtured by the “informative compulsion” which the media system itself has contributed to generate (Surace, 2021). The way in which new media and internet technologies narrate the world and project trickeries onto the real extremely determines our reading of it. Hoaxes spawned by the contemporary order recall to the most intense and hidden emotions eroding the ability of the population to discern reality from deceit (Muelrath, 2018).

The twenty-first century society is being so constantly remolded that it is feasible to sustain that a deep mediatization is actually occurring (Hepp, 2019). The recent upsurge of digitalization and of novel digital platforms made mediatization undertake a new course: all societal spheres, none excluded, are being shaped in line with the technological and by now all digital media of communication. However, deep mediatization is a highly complex, contradictory and conflictual process. Within the western hemisphere, the whole social order is being affected by deep mediatization; in fact, all our surroundings and lifestyles are being mediatized (Hepp & Hasebrink, 2018). Transformations are occurring also on the individual level provided that the digital “crumbs” that a person slips away offer the possibility both to corporations and business groups to surveil him/her but also to the crowds and communities to “interveil” one another (Hepp, 2019).

Numerous are the aftermaths of a “deeply mediatized political communication”. Mainstream news media are increasingly being observed with suspicion, so much that they are rapidly losing public trust and their customary agenda-setting role. Although they display the same selection of topics, news media are progressively overlapping. This is particularly meaningful since the principal modality through which the public obtains information about politics, international affairs and complex matters (as climate change) is precisely news media (Ball, 2018).

The huge and solid public sphere of the past is just a memory. Contemporary public spheres consist of minor *sphericules* (Davis, 2019: 184) and “liquid” networks where opinion polarization and partisan reinforcement are being favored and incentivized. The rising public spheres have a somewhat anarchic nature. The standard ideals and codes of conduct have been discarded and trust in the legitimate public bodies is on the decline (Davis, 2019).

In addition to the health pandemic, also an infodemic is affecting contemporary public sphere. Information can be found behind every corner and it is becoming increasingly complicated to connect with reliable sources and unbiased analysts without these being incessantly weakened by other sources. Information disorder typifies the crisis facing political communication; trends like fake news, disinformation or media manipulation are everyday objects of inquiry in contemporary political communication research. These trends are not completely new, but recent digital developments have modified their potentialities and made them once more salient. Indeed, authorities, citizenries and academics are struggling to comprehend these occurrences by reason of the fear that the established forms of democracy may be undermined (Freelon & Wells, 2020).

Therefore, it can be deducted that both public sphere and socialization are going through very rapid change due to the hasty enlargement of communication styles and technologies. At present, it is very frequent to discuss about the concept of “emotional public sphere” and about the relevance of an interrelated notion, that of networked individualism. Contemporary human beings are decreasingly bound to conventional and physical ties, but they are increasingly part of new networks and new places of social interactions as a result of ICTs latest expansion (De Blasio & Selva, 2019).

“Appealing to the masses” is the honor system of the fourth phase of political communication. Brand-new political and cultural modes speak to devoted spectators only with the aim of conveying identity solidarity rather than informed discourse. In addition, news organizations are being integrated all over social media platforms in which they suddenly feel some basic urge to share whatever type of content, without checking its veracity first. Indeed, this emotional appeal exercises great influence upon public spheres’ political polarization and involuntary (but also voluntary) commitment to disinformation distribution and subsequent consumption (Rosas & Serrano-Puche, 2018).

All types of information disorder adversely impact democracy, particularly when they are distributed on the Internet. Specifically, online disinformation is a menace to democracy because social media platforms have disrupted the standard configuration of powers of our communicative systems (McKay & Tenove, 2020). Disinformation denotes false information deliberately shared with the intent to cause damage and conspiracy theories fall into this category of information disorder (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017).

Digital ecosystems are the birthplace of present conspiracy theories which are particularly effective in subverting the public perception of truth. The conceptual frameworks provided by these theories allow adherents to fabricate their own explanations of the surrounding social environment. However, whenever these explanations are likely to be jeopardized, followers are ready to resort to violence in order to preserve them (Miller-Idriss, 2020). Conspiracy theories captivate emotions (van Prooijen & Douglas, 2018) and they are

absolutely synchronic in a post-truth era; viz. an era in which it is not objective facts that manipulate public opinion, but rather emotions and individual opinions (Block, 2018).

2.2. “Bubbleheads”

Conspiracy theories are a modern genre of folklore. Although it is possible to relate them to legends, conspiracy theories give the impression of being plausible and thus credible. They are not narratives about fantasy creatures of an archaic epoch, but they are set in the recent past and involve common human beings. The difference with bedtime stories is that these theories are mostly deceitful, but they are always narrated as if they were authentic (Wilson, 2012). Nevertheless, what is particularly worrying about them is the way in which they are diffused. Some time ago, conspiracy theories were principally disseminated through journals or electronic vehicles; today, they have access to the Internet. Conspiracy theories generate folklore in the cyberspace wherein the new-born global subcultures never have a face-to-face confront. By revolutionising traditions’ mode of transmission, technology and mechanization have facilitated the making and distribution of a novel form of folklore. In fact, technological improvements are of a vital importance for the subcultures in which conspiracy theories do inhabit (Barkun, 2013).

A lively cultural environment is crucial for democracy and, for being lively, these environments necessitate inclusiveness, representativeness and open-mindedness. However, an obstacle to their endurance might be that whenever humans have the possibility to decide with whom to relate to, they are naturally inclined to create bonds with people who share their same points of view. Digital technologies and the Internet era have just augmented this natural attitude (Heatherly et al., 2017). Mutual understanding is vital for a strong and representative democracy which is, however, progressively threatened in the cyberspace; what were once huge and politically attentive mass audiences, are now countless and confined issue publics (Kim, 2009). This is particularly evident in what has been denominated “filter bubbles”.

The expression “filter bubble” has been circulating over the last decade; indeed, it has been coined by Eli Pariser, an Internet activist, in his 2011 book *“The Filter Bubble: What the Internet Is Hiding from You”* (Fletcher, 2020). A filter bubble denotes the “wealth of knowledge” carried whenever people browse the Net. A filter bubble is regulated by algorithms and it is tailor-made; designed in line with personal interests, liked pages and links clicked across the Internet. It is a bubble as it is imperceptible; nobody chooses to become part of it and many do not even know whether they are inside or outside the bubble (though it is highly improbable to be outside of it). There exists the risk of embarking on a never-ending loop: the more contents are personalized, the more the web resembles its users and the more it distorts the reading of the information found in a web page (Pariser, 2011; Bernardinis & Strizzolo, 2015). Filter bubbles do represent digital threats and their social impact is undisputable (Miller & Vaccari, 2020). Mounting social and political polarization is an issue that cannot be entirely overcome through technological methods and filter bubbles have augmented it. Conspiracy theories and filter bubbles are one directly proportional to the other. A person who is trapped in a filter bubble may have two reactions whenever encountering opposing materials and opinions: rejecting these

contents or reducing them to further evidence of their own beliefs: an identical behavior is adopted by conspiracists every time they necessitate to enhance the outlook of their theories (Bruns, 2019).

Undeniably, the information technology and related filter bubbles have contributed to create a cultural atmosphere where disinformation and conspiracy theories can easily prosper and proliferate. A rising faith in conspiracy theories and a growing impact of filter bubbles and echo chambers are the result of a general sentiment of disbelief in the establishment (Molla, 2020). The Internet and the social media have intensified this general sentiment owing to the possibility of “filtering out” material opposing someone’s beliefs. In fact, filter bubbles endorsing conspiracy theories typically target and deprecate certain issues, categories or nations and thus might be extremely dangerous for the common wellbeing. Suffice is to consider Donald Trump’s own bubble regarding climate change which led the US to be the sole country choosing not to take part in the Paris Agreement (Pinto, 2021).

When it comes to filter bubbles, three are the key dynamics at play: first, filter bubbles act as a centrifugal force by gradually creating distance among people; second, they are imperceptible and third, nobody consciously chooses to enter them (Pariser, 2011). These dynamics have also arisen in the conspiracist’ world for a long time and have further been intensified in the information age.

Firstly, the centrifugal force exercised by filter bubbles is a factor of “intellectual isolation”. Users do not get the chance to learn about divergent opinions and then ignore the existence of diverse perspectives and points of view (Stewart, 2018). Despite the general expectation that the Internet could transform the world into a *Global Village* (McLuhan, 1994: 43), algorithm-based flows of information have increasingly separated populaces among each other. Malevolent actors could also misuse filter processes to propagate their disinformation operations. By manipulating the rationale behind social media platforms, they want to publicize their fictitious material to the detriment of content from reliable sources (Woolley & Howard, 2017).

To comprehend how filter bubbles exercise their centrifugal force and promote the propagation of conspiracy theories, it could be of use to examine a particular social media which makes it almost impracticable to regulate filters: Facebook (Pariser, 2011). It is the ideal place in which conspiracy theories’ prophets can proceed in their tasks. Filter bubbles incessantly display content and the constant appearing of conspiracy theories on Facebook gives the idea that they are not so extremist as people are used to imagine. In fact, once the theory becomes acceptable, new adherents are recruited which are prone to then do their utmost to preserve their novel points of view. Though, conspirational material proves to be fairly upsetting in the beginning and those exposed strive to assign their inexplicable dread to a concrete source which always happens to be the government, some other established authorities or people having diverse opinions. The side-effect of filter bubbles is that people attempt to justify why they are upset although it was the conspirational object to disturb them at first (Schumaker, 2019). E.g., if Facebook users visit pages declaring that Covid-19 is a hoax, there could be the danger that similar content or other counterfactual narratives are suggested. In this manner, mainstream and reliable sources are replaced, and users end up being increasingly dependent on conspiracy theories and disinformation (Bruns, 2019).

Secondly, a filter bubble is imperceptible. On the inside of a filter bubble, it is complicated to grasp how much that environment is biased and how much it has been customized. Information obtained on the web is not totally accurate and unprejudiced as it is extracted from wider frameworks which are certainly not accorded to users. Sites can correctly or erroneously suppose their users' preferences, but people do not know that it is them the object of study (Pariser, 2011).

A consequence of filter bubbles' invisibility is that the totality of web content gives the impression of being equally reliable: conspiracy theories distributed on social media and mainstream media websites are merely the same thing (Blitz, 2018). For instance, the occurrence of the Holocaust is part of history and it is highly documented. Nevertheless, a diverse picture may be portrayed after only some searches on social media where Holocaust deniers are progressively supporting one another. The transmission of conspiracy theories on the Internet is being promoted by tech oligopolies, the paramount propaganda machines of our times. The algorithms utilized by these platforms to amplify content and to obviously increase their profit are those that best prompt users' interest, but also their subsequent dread and rage. Among which conspiracy theories are to be quoted (Boost, 2020).

Thirdly, filter bubbles hinder our free will. Nobody intentionally chooses to fall into a filter bubble, it is totally involuntary. This is because, whenever asked to express our preferences, the process of personalization sounds incredibly inoffensive. Accordingly, filter bubbles impede serendipity too. Personalization helps in finding *what we know we want, but not at finding what we do not know we want* (Pariser, 2011: 59). Once inside the filter bubble, it is troublesome to go out of it. This problem is heightened by our own behavior which enables the making of a bubble loaded with like-minded people. "Blocking", "unfollowing" and "unfriending" people whose ideas we do not comply with has become common practice (Guadamuz, 2016).

As previously described, social media algorithms facilitate the spread of conspiracy theories and resisting both filter bubbles and conspiracy theories is increasingly challenging in a post-truth era where people struggle to elaborate and promote their own account of reality (Venkataramakrishnan & Murphy, 2021). Inclusive bridging social capital indicates the establishment of relations between social groups, whereas exclusive bonding social capital denotes the building of relationships within a group or community (Leonard, 2004). A primacy of bonding over bridging social capital constitutes the Internet environment. This online social fabric is amplified by conspiracy theories which hinder the development of new interactions both outside and inside the web. Hence, like-minded people are further united and banned from the outside world of which they admit nobody in their "inner circles" (Sajuria et al, 2015). Therefore, social media and personalization expedite the growth of conspiracy theories which are now part of an alternative informational environment where conspiracists have lost the ability to discriminate information from opinion (Grimes, 2017).

The emergence of filter bubbles and personalization seriously impacted our democracies. Filter bubbles conceal sour or complex societal problems and reduce the possibility for serious public disputes to reach wider audiences. There is the need to see the bigger picture. Filter bubbles, conspiracy theories, disinformation are all symptoms of a new cultural age, a post-materialist one dictated by a "super-fast" thinking. Undertaking

conspiracy theories requires no waste of energy and no effort in questioning their actual accuracy (Giorgino, 2021).

Our current informational environment is an evidence in favor of the famous thesis according to which it is the economic base to determine the ideological superstructure. Online platforms increasingly compete for people's attention and the outrage and fury conveyed by conspiracy theories is one of the most effective means to attract audiences (Schumaker, 2019). The conspiracy "weltanschauung" creates profit thus online platforms advocate free speech only for letting conspiracy theories thrive and create lucrative traffic. Social media did not conceive conspiracy theories, but their filtered dynamics favored the mixture and enlargement of these frameworks (Harper, 2021).

The prompt democratization of digital production and broadcasting hastened the commodification of conspiracy theories; indeed, the main difference with traditional media is that digitalized ones are primarily grounded on speed. Therefore, digital media bet everything on an approximate simplicity and are by now governed by a commerce-driven creed (Barber, 1998) It is true that today's audiences are turning into "prosumers" of media, but digital media still retain control over the agenda building process. A public agenda must be constantly supervised for a democracy to correctly work, but with privatization this control is unfeasible, and democracy is annihilated to the detriment of liberty (Mattarella, 2021).

For the time being, it is possible to talk about platform imperialism. The difference with prior forms of imperialism is that global users are vital for platform owners and for those countries that "gave birth" to these platforms. Whenever global users access platforms, they generate a service which can be further sold to advertisers and businesses. As every form of imperialism, this new kind is also ideological since their hegemony is levied on all countries which purchase and utilize these platforms (Jin, 2015).

Finally, digital platforms have enabled the making of a "wicked problem": the unstoppable dispersion of conspiracy theories. These frameworks are propagated for profit reasons and once people embrace them in one area, they will inevitably look for such theories in other domains. Once inside a conspiracy "echo chamber", people tend to support the whole conspiracy corpus (Quattrociochi, 2017).

2.3. "Conspirational echo chambers"

Selective exposure theories are of a great importance for media and communication studies. According to these theories, individuals may have the tendency to endorse information which further strengthens their pre-existing opinions and to elude opposing information. This tendency is labelled "congeniality bias" or "confirmation bias" in the psychological field. Filter bubbles and echo chambers are two of the latest issues in these theories and although they may look similar, the difference is critical. In the case of filter bubbles, selectivity is determined by the algorithmic logics of platforms; inside echo chambers, selectivity instead depends on people's individual choices (Bentivegna & Boccia Artieri, 2019). Echo chambers may be identified as the effects of filter bubbles. The former allow the making of networks among like-minded people and a subsequent strong reinforcement of one's opinions; the latter, instead, permit to these networks to live in their "irony tower" (Bruns, 2019).

The phenomenon of echo chambers has been identified by the legal scholar Cass Sunstein whose focus area is the study of Internet and digital media potential effects on democracy. According to Sunstein, a rapid democratization of the net led to an unwarranted and broad diffusion of information. Nonetheless, the ensuing “infodemic” did not bring to a solid composition of the public sphere; on the contrary, it created an environment where it is increasingly difficult to distinguish between real and fake news (Pazzanese, 2017).

The term echo chamber denotes an isolated space on the web where the circulating ideas basically corroborate one another. A page about a specific conspiracy theory could be an echo chamber or a space where people share analogous political opinions. In these chambers, information basically confirms the pre-established points of view of users; even if diverse topics are advocated, the way in which individuals appreciate or share content basically remains the same. Additionally, the more a user engages in a topic, the higher the likelihood that he/she will come across topics reminiscent of the first one. Echo chambers rest on psychological effects: in fact, once inside the conspiracy mentality, a user will move through conspirational themes and concepts (Quattrociocchi, 2015).

The reason why conspiracy echo chambers come into being may be further understood through the reinforcing spiral model in which individuals endorse certain enduring and temporary stances because of adherence to a specific ideology. Indeed, people privilege some media sources and not others because the former are more consistent with their pre-existing views. Consequently, this selective exposure can strengthen or polarize mindsets (Slater, 2015).

Echo chambers are the direct consequences of a specific human tendency: homophily. Homophily entails that interaction between similar individuals will befall at a faster pace than the interaction between divergent ones. This distance is also expressed at the network level where information tends to be confined in specific social “corners” (McPherson et al., 2001). The homophily propensity is inhibited whenever diverse “kinds” of people meet each other, but it is on the net and on all types of social networks that *birds of a feather can easily flock together* (Sunstein, 2017: 4). These groups of like-minded people are fertile ground for conspiracy theories which can move very quickly among friends. Further distrust and uncorroborated anecdotes foment conspiracy theories; in fact, people strengthen their opinions whenever they discover something that validates it. If information complies with a conspiracy plot, it will turn into a advantageous content for a conspiracy cluster even when such material is intentionally deceitful and assumes the form of satire (Sunstein, 2017). Moreover, the reproduction and reinforcement of conspiracy theories within homophilic communities may likewise result in a situation of non-dialogue and heterophily among diverse communities (Gualda Caballero, 2020). In the beginning, echo chambers are formed because of a counter-reply to the individual and offline occurrences of daily life. Support for a conspiracy theory may appear innocuous, but the effects of subsequent echo chambers prove to be gigantic. Indeed, an echo chamber has the same upshots of a *dry pile of tinder in the forest* (Schumaker, 2019: 6); at the outset it is “just” a flame, but in the end, it consumes the entire forest (Schumaker, 2019).

Conspiracy theories eased the making of “alcoves” which progressively flourish in social media echo chambers; their influence on political communication is huge and it ought to be comprehended (Van Raemdonck, 2019).

In point of fact, it has been validated that there exists a direct correlation between a conspiratorial way of thinking and violent extremism habits (Harambam, 2020). The Internet offers more chances than offline interactions to corroborate existing opinions and online echo chambers are appropriate places for the proliferation of violent and extremist beliefs (Von Behr et al., 2013).

To comprehend wherefore conspiracy theories circulate, it is worth considering informational cascades which arise whenever an individual takes a decision by solely basing on the judgment of others (Palmer, 2020). Conspiracy theories may be hold even when deceitful or dangerous. Questions of status may trigger conspiracy cascades in which individuals know what it is true, but nonetheless choose to acquiesce the crowd just to be accepted and maintain a good reputation within specific social groups. Moreover, as mentioned earlier, conspiracy theories prompt deep feelings hence they can straightforwardly circulate in a public sphere progressively more emotional (Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009). The same dynamics can be found on the Web where cascades take the name of “cybercascades”: practices of information-sharing wherein some events or standpoints become “popular belief”, merely because inside an echo chamber it seems that a great deal of people rely on them. The usage of technologies that tailor information can ensue the rupture of the public spheres into separate linguistic communities. Albeit these groups are divided by “by definite isoglosses”, hate speech is their common language (Trucios-Haynes, 2006).

Verba volant, scripta manent; despite this, the Internet offers the exclusive occasion for people to voice all their hatred, a hatred that is daily observable on the Net and for which no one is and can accurately be hold accountable. This regime of ostensible freedom consents that alternative media present themselves as bulwarks of anti-establishment and pro-freedom stances just because they do not surrender to the politically correct by greeting topics like conspiracy theories (Hirvonen, 2013). In consequence, anti-immigrant, white supremacist, ultra-nationalist, anti-semitic and xenophobic conspiracy theories have been put forward to deprecate refugees, outsiders, notorious personalities and politicians (Peters, 2020). Hate speech must never be confused with free speech, the former is a limit to the latter (O’Sullivan, 2019). In this regard, a question worth asking is whether it is democracy which causes free speech or the other way around. However, what is certain is that democracy and free speech are not two separate things, and that there are no restrictions to political communication in democratic societies. The use of the Internet entailed many opportunities for a fruitful elaboration of public discourse (van Dijk & Hacker, 2018), but also numerous threats. In fact, heated and divisive is the debate on whether governments should regulate social media to safeguard democracy. Government regulation may be good for the general public but could also jettison critical speech. Both government and social media powers would gain from regulation as the former might sway the informational ecosystem, the latter might gain from monopoly protections (Uscinski, 2020). Furthermore, neither social media should autonomously decree which type of content can be published and which not; it is not conceivable a world wherein private agencies exert full control over freedom of thought and over the way in which it is expressed (Giorgino, 2021).

However, the Internet is not the root of all evil; blaming new technologies for all social issues is a too simplistic and careless attitude. The advent of a media imperialism is the expression of enduring societal problems which have constantly been neglected and in no way been addressed (Uscinski, 2020). In fact, it is the approach

towards new technologies that has to be blamed. The “paradigmatical” crisis of political communication is the direct consequence of a more profound political crisis. A post-truth and emotional age has been determined by the interaction between communication and digital technologies but politics is incapable of comprehending its logics. Facts and values are not properly communicated as the political system has not grasped the times and procedures of ICTs yet (Pritzlaff-Scheele & Nullmeier, 2018). Digital technologies can be causes of a significant distributive injustice. Conspiracy theories and a correlated populism can be regarded as a response of those who undergo these injustices and do not obtain an adequate protection in the democratic system. Technologies can replace repetitive charges and it is exactly from the workers of these “replaceable” sectors that remonstrations questioning democracy arise (Ebert, 2011).

Technological change is deemed to be influenced by institutional choices. If the former produce differentiated costs and benefits to distinctive categories of workers, this signifies that even the latter are sources of social inequality. Digitalization in politics can generate potential advantages for democracy, but an unfortunately disintegrated political system tends to obscure it; indeed, pessimism prevails optimism whenever arguing about political communication and digitalization. A selection of the arguments is the following: economic powers dictate over the public communication system; the informational environment is no more than a contemporary Babylon and phenomena like filter bubbles and echo chambers have significant political effects (Papageorgiou & Michaelides, 2016).

The latter phenomena are grounded on a systematic maneuvering of citizens’ preferences, preferences that have always been at the heart of an actual democratic governance. There exists the risk to imperil the democratic model altogether if, in the eyes of society, this systematic distortion of citizens’ preferences comes to be perfectly normal. Citizens are being constantly monitored each time they surf the internet and ever more information is collected about them. The “age of surveillance capitalism” is the *leitmotiv* of the current thesis: as data are being incessantly analyzed down to the smallest detail, private spheres are being progressively exposed and ways of communicating more and more altered (Maffettone, 2020).

The impact of echo chambers has been considered by bearing in mind the wider societal context which determines not only preferences and characteristics of Internet users but also the ensuing way in which they express political opinions on social media. It must be underlined that echo chambers hinge on psychological factors thus the use of social media does not necessarily induce their formation. Much more composite informational dynamics are at stake (Vaccari et al., 2016). Being digital technologies a novelty of recent years, nobody taught citizens the suitable skills to make an adequate utilization of digital media. The point, however, is not only the necessity of digital and social media literacy alone. Citizens will become more resilient to conspiracy theorists’ themes only when digital and algorithmic literacy will be complemented by a series of governmental, educational, civil society and commercial initiatives (Bruns, 2019).

As discussed above, echo chambers systematically distort citizens’ preferences thus yielding further difficulties for the governance. Conspiratorial echo chambers may beget political polarization and the self-segregation of voters into factions where the same ideas are incessantly shared and assented. As a result, for the time being it is incredibly problematic to attain rational political solutions. Political orientations

progressively shape individual choices and sharing content on social media corresponds to convey one's convictions and contrasts with "opponent groups" (Barberá, 2020).

Participatory media provide these factions with the possibility to produce and distribute new media content. Essential hubs for politically motivated conspiracy theories are anonymous discussion spaces and ideological blogs and websites. By connecting and partaking each other's contents, these sites build a fully-fledged "conspirational network" whose victims are mainstream social media too. In fact, the latter are used by conspiracists to disseminate their theories to many more people and to "make their own contribution" to an already overloaded informational environment (Marwick & Lewis, 2017). Conspiracism has got to a point wherein it is able to affect the contemporary public and political debate, especially when it takes a "presidential" form. The present and other considerations will be empirically validated in the next and final chapter (Rosenblum & Muirhead, 2020).

Chapter 3

A “conspiracy world order”?

3.1. Old and new conspiracies plus theories

It is common practice to suppose that conspiracies and conspiracy theories belong to the most recent past, but that is not the case. These trends have been circulating for centuries and they have been increasingly exploited as ways of understanding the world. The tipping point for conspiracy theorizing was the initiation of the post WWII era and especially all the events around the JFK assassination. The narrative underwent a profound change: in the past, conspiracy theories spread to “report” the deeds of rebellious individuals whose main aim was to destabilize the dominant powers; now, they instead tell a different story in which it is exactly the dominant powers that do everything they can to exert their influence on all societal strata (Braun, 2020).

Conspiracy themes are intrinsically the same and are modified in accordance with the “transmission period”. For instance, some conspiracy theorists still believe that the Illuminati represent a real threat to the contemporary society. Moreover, conspiracy theories also strive to politically defame presidential candidates and the birther movement of the 2008 presidential race followed this exact mandate. These “birthers” suspected and still suspect the authenticity of Barack Obama’s citizenship and thus his capacity to meet the requisites to be US president (Croddy et al., 2020).

Conspiracies and conspiracy theories are not phenomena which can be relegated to a specific lapse of time; they have always been present and deployed into political communication to strengthen power and to support a precise ideology (Guilhot, 2021). Although it is usually believed that conspiracy theories originated in the US, there exists no “patent” on their invention (Uscinski, 2020). However, the beginning of the modern conspiracy theorizing could be located in the period following the French revolution during which conspiracy theories attributed main social events to the machinations of some subversive strategies. Conspiracy theorizing flourished throughout the centuries and its influence is still incredibly strong; indeed, conspiracy theorists have always been believing that forceful figures, such as Aliens, have seized the control and that now the conspirational forces operate through the government (Byford, 2011). Moreover, it could be affirmed that conspiracy theorizing has mainly been focused on a specific theme in its narrations: the incessant struggle among dominant powers to gain the control of the public perception of a precise event. In the early years of the twentieth century, only the elite ruled over information which, as a result, turned out to be the representation of their instances. Information became truly public only in the second half of the same century and that was when an undisputable transformation has taken place. Therefore, citizens had many more opportunities to create their own versions of an event and to question the official accounts (Olmsted, 2009). Conspiracy theories became an object of public interest only in the last thirty years, but they have characterised and affected social life and political discourse for a long time. Their influence somewhat oscillates, but conspiracy theories are particularly significant during societal crisis situations wherein tragic public events, such as financial or political crises, revolutions or wars could befall (van Prooijen & Douglas, 2018).

Moreover, it is undeniable that the spread of the Internet has had an impact and facilitated the worldwide diffusion of conspiracies and conspiracy theories, but it would be deceiving to affirm that they are a recent phenomenon and that they were not a characteristic of the past (Brotherton, 2015). In fact, digitalization only expedited a process which has been existing for centuries. Conspiracy theories are significant just as they were in the past, but their weight is felt even more owing to a considerable availability of information and because of a public sphere that is no longer elitist (Stano, 2020).

To provide a reliable chronology of old and new expressions of conspiracy theories, it is first of all necessary to classify them. Acknowledging that conspiracy theories do not always cite radical or fantastical accounts is imperative: this first category is named “realpolitik conspiracy theories” which relate those real conspiracies created by political and economic institutions to factual institutional or geopolitical courses; an instance is the persistent covering of climate breakdown enacted only with the aim of not endangering and of increasing corporate revenues (Bale, 2007).

Nevertheless, it is the second type of conspiracy theories that has affected in particular the Western ideology and that has always moulded popular perception of conspiracies: they have been labelled classical conspiracy theories. These theories generally rely on far-right beliefs and mystic convictions and their narratives are illustrations of identity politics: conspiracy theorists of this kind do tend to form restricted political coalitions and to oppose those social groups, such as Jews, homosexuals or feminists, that convey completely different world views. It is true that conspiracy theories cannot be ascribed only to the right end of the political spectrum, but while realpolitik theories mostly have a leftist orientation, the classical ones show a more rightist character (Ballinger, 2011).

Classical conspiracy theories require an additional differentiation too. Classical theories developed prior World War II possessed nationalist or fundamentalist features as they mostly opposed those social groups deemed to be plotting against the nation or the established religion. Conversely, classical theories established after World War II revolved around mysterious and alternative mystical practices thus belonging to what is known as the “New Age” way of thinking. These theories are the foundations of the most unrealistic and curious conspiracy ideas since new age theories conjecture that the humankind is unable to evolve because as a result of the impact of materialist or scientific forces. New Age conspiracy theories’ divergence with nationalist and fundamentalist conspiracy theories is that while the latter strive for the restore of a nationalist or religious past, the former generally associate conspirators to inhuman powers, for instance extra-terrestrials or inter-dimensional intelligences (Robertson, 2016).

Delineating a specific chronology of conspiracy theories would prove to be redundant considering that countless works have attempted and succeeded in doing so. To fully recognise the current configuration of conspiracy theories, it is much more worthwhile outlining their conceptual history. The nineteenth was the century in which the notion “conspiracy theory” started designating a shadowy circle inhabited by disgraceful characters who, due to their humble origins, are incapable of taking part in the political life and its correlated conspiracies. Consequently, it is worth comprehending why conspiracy, a word originating from the political field, has been combined with theory, a notion deriving from the scientific domain (McKenzie-McHarg, 2020).

The unification of these two terms has occurred in two distinct, yet highly related contexts: the legal and the social science ones. Regarding the former field, the term conspiracy was widely known already in the nineteenth century. The word conspiracy was consequently combined with the notion theory owing to a legal tradition that usually ascribed the noun theory to any kind of crime. The potential extent of the term “conspiracy theory” had not been properly understood and thus the concept has since then been employed in a somewhat innocent way (Katyal, 2002). Although in the legal ground conspiracy theory was rightly applied to designate individual and criminal conspiracies, in the field of social sciences it got to define wider social orientations and worldwide political occurrences. In fact, at the moment the term conspiracy theory embraces an extensive range of phenomena and it can no longer be reduced to sporadic activities. Accordingly, the conceptual confusion enclosing the “conspiracy theory” concept primarily depends on the two dissimilar interpretations that both the forensic and social science fields have provided of it. The upshot is that social sciences ineffectively disdain this concept, despite conspiracies actually occurring in the real world; occurrence of which the legal argumentation is well aware. Accordingly, its conceptual confusion renders conspiracy theory a composite phenomenon also on the empirical level (McKenzie-McHarg, 2019).

Subsequently, contemporary conspiracism is a direct consequence of the inefficient juxtaposition of the two terms, conspiracy and theory. In fact, conspiracism in its contemporary form adheres to no theory, in the meaning of a detailed set of doctrines to be pursued. Once, conspiracism excellently assumed the role of “conspiracy theory”: previous conspiracism proudly exhibited its “noble” goals of edification and renovation of society, though it actually resulted in a whole brainwashing of society (Bligh, 2020). Former conspiracism offered solid promises and it had a clear vision of the conspiracy potential outcomes. Conversely, contemporary conspiracism does not define objectives to be achieved and it has no precise program of political reorganisation. Conspiracism in its former shape was so persuasive that it was believed that it could replace the essential ideologies of politics; fortunately, this is not the case as political ideologies are still at the core of political confrontation (Rosenblum & Muirhead, 2020). Being aware of the discrepancy between the two terms conspiracy and theory, it is nonetheless proper to use them in conjunction so as to enable a more appropriate comprehension of this phenomenon; all the events associated to conspiracism are more easily evocated when employing the expression conspiracy theory.

Once adherents of a given conspiracy theory group together, their actions may cause great damage to the community (Harambam, 2020). Despite having been repeatedly demonstrated that conspiracy theories do have the potential to foster collective action (Smallpage et al., 2017), it is more appropriate to speak of connective action, namely action wherein people are “called to arms” by poorly coordinated groups or by prominent figures (Duisters et al., 2014). Conspiracy theorists are increasingly inclined towards the most banal form of political participation: clicktivism which inevitably affects offline involvement. Conspiracists wield established media, progressively utilize alternative platforms, and cleverly draw on biased media to “spread their good word” (Freelon et al., 2020). Instead of inspiring a healthy movement, conspiracy theories stimulate anti-democratic social movements and do constitute a danger for the correct functioning of democracy. Adherents of conspiracy theories do not feel the duty to contribute to the most basic proceedings of democracy,

such as voting due to increased feelings of political disaffection and suspicion. Indeed, these devotees are involved in anti-democratic political activities and individuals embracing the greatest conspiracy opinions are more dedicated to everyday misconducts, especially those directed towards outgroups (Sternisko et al., 2020). Contemporaneous conspiracy theories pose a threat to democracy because they instil feelings of political weakness in their adherents, according to the latter, governments and political institutions are ineffective in guaranteeing the responsiveness that should be at the basis of a true democracy (Dahl, 1971). These negative feelings are the direct consequence of the most distinctive narrative of conspiracy theories: political ruling elites do not warrant responsiveness because they are too busy complotting; they crave to satisfy their own personal desires at the expense of the demands articulated by the general public. In this manner, conspiracy devotees progressively abandon traditional forms of participation with the effect of restraining the overall citizenry's leverage on administrations and political establishments. If conspiracy theories are given wide publicity, they will surely have disastrous effects not only on a national level, but also on a more international one (Ardèvol-Abreu et al., 2020). Without even realizing it, present conspiracy theories are delegitimising democracy thus putting it under siege. The process of de-legitimization can be easily detected in everyday politics: for instance, it befalls whenever political oppositions and establishments are depicted as the most fearsome society's public enemies. De-legitimization deprives political organisations and procedures of all their power, but contemporaneous conspiracism does not offer any viable alternative to the unreliable world they are aiding to build (Breakey, 2020).

Despite living in the century of new conspiracism, it is possible to observe that conspiracy theories constantly deal with the same themes and that there exists an inexorable return to that nationalist character developed prior World War II. Indeed, nationalist conspiracy theories prevail on the scene of contemporaneous conspiracism wherein fundamentalist and new age positions are integrated only to sustain nationalist notions and explanations (Ballinger, 2011). Numerous conspiracy theories with nationalist nuances have been conceived in the US after Donald Trump's appointment; several Trump supporters both have faith in conspiracy theories and exhibit nationalist attitudes. Nationalist conspiracy theories are extremely widespread trends in the US where conspiracies are typically portrayed as intrigues against the motherland. The targets par excellence of these theories are the bearers of instances at odds with American socio-political principles; individuals that endanger the authentic "American spirit" and all those political and economic groups that challenge the American superpower (Malešević, 2020). That is exactly what has occurred and has been occurring with what by now looks like a feeble wisp: QAnon, one of the fewest conspiracy theories that support governments in charge just because the precedent US administration was a nationalist one and thus an ideal recipient of a conspiracy of this type.

3.2. QAnon: will-ò-the-wisp?

At this stage in the analysis, there is the need to empirically assess the influence of conspiracy theories on political communication. The case of QAnon substantiates this thesis and it demonstrates what may arise whenever conspiracy theories are backed by a huge segment of the population.

QAnon can be described with several epithets: “political movement”, web game, clique, or terroristic threat. QAnon is first of all a conspiracy theory conceived and subsequently promoted on far-right social media platforms (Wu Ming 1, 2021). An account of this conspiracy conjecture is thus crucial to truly recognize its effects.

To put into a word, QAnon narrates that a sect of Satanists rules the functioning of our world. These Satanists are obviously not common people, but powerful ones: they are magnates, Hollywood superstars and democrats, e.g., Joe Biden or Michelle Obama. QAnon adepts accuse them of paedophilia and human trafficking; these malevolent personalities abuse babies as their final objective is to extract the adrenochrome, a life-prolonging compound, from their blood (Roose, 2021). Like any conspiracy theory, QAnon has not come about overnight but it takes inspiration from both aged and contemporary conspiracy theories. The notion that our world is regulated by an elite of malicious “creatures” is as old as the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, one of the most infamous antisemitic conspiracy beliefs. Additionally, the idea of a top-secret faction of people quenching their thirsts with children’s blood was the core topic of those conspiracy theories perpetrated by the Christian community against the Jewish one already in the twelfth century (Wong, 2020).

The QAnon adventure already begins in 2016 when the so-called “Pizzagate” conspiracy theory circulated. This theory alleged that references to the “Comet Ping Pong” pizzeria and its pizzas in the emails of John Podesta, the chairman of Hillary Clinton’s presidential campaign, were actually coded messages for a child trafficking occurring in that pizza shop. The effects cannot be underestimated; a common citizen, Edgar Maddison Welch, believed in the tale so much that he started a shooting in that pizzeria with the aim of saving under seizure children (Cosentino, 2020).

After this incident, the QAnon story really began. In October 2017, an anonymous user who signed under the pseudonym of “Q”, started publishing a series of posts on the message board 4chan wherein he declared to hold the “Q clearance”, a security permission that permits to log into state or organizational secrets of the US Department of Defense. Subsequently, QAnon followers have been invested with the task of decoding Q’s enigmatic messages, the so-called “Q drops” or “breadcrumbs”. The role of Donald Trump in this conspiracy theory is that of the hero. The Tycoon complemented his duty to govern the US with a clandestine and exhausting fight against the Satanists. QAnon devotees have faith in Donald Trump’s potentialities, and they sturdily believe that one day he will be able to activate “The Storm” or “The Great Awakening”, a kind of apocalypse day during which he will finally send all these criminals to the Guantanamo Bay detention camp (Greenspan, 2021).

However, QAnon must not be thought of as the classic American extravaganza. Regardless of American cultural hegemony being in decline (Bhutto, 2019) the conspiracy theory has gone viral and it has disproportionately spread not only in the West, but also in the East. Australia, Brazil, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Netherlands, and New Zealand are just a few of those countries that have fallen under the spell of QAnon (Farivar, 2020). Times have been favourable for the diffusion of the theory: conspiracy theories flourish in times of crisis and numerous Covid-19 deniers have found in the QAnon narrative the excuse for insisting that the pandemic is nothing more than another of those plots put in circulation by the

dominant elites to ulteriorly dupe the reckless multitudes (Douglas, 2021). The Covid-19 pandemic has brought along a great deal of uncertainty and the large dose of disinformation, that is at the heart of the QAnon dialectics, has led its enthusiasts to willingly (or not) disseminate unsubstantiated information. The notorious symbol Q has made its “offline debut” during several of the anti-covid demonstrations that have been arranged in Berlin, London, and Paris. Europe cannot ignore the existence of this phenomenon: Germany appears to be the primary breeding ground of the conspiracy theory in the Old Continent: the so-called Reichsbürger who believe that the Reich is still standing have adhered to the theory; not to mention the “Lateral Thinkers”, Covid-19 deniers, who exhibited QAnon symbols while they were seeking to storm the German Parliament (Cramer & Wu Ming 1, 2021).

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, two wholly diverse factions ruled the discussion about the Internet: Optimists and Pessimists. On the one hand, the former had high hopes that the Internet could pursue an authentic and effectual process of democratization: due to the Internet, citizens could have finally attained the much-needed empowerment. On the other hand, the latter refuted optimistic interpretations by maintaining that the Internet was nothing more than another ruse for advancing increasing surveillance and manipulation. At present, it appears that the Optimists withered away and that the Pessimists are the only ones left. Even older optimists accept the assumption that the Internet could be at the root of social degeneration, as the mounting political polarization or the massive flow of misinformation (Hwang, 2018). Furthermore, the introduction of the Internet has also stirred the expectation that public debate could also ensue in novel environments, for instance the cyberspace (Dahlberg, 2001). In fact, today public debate ensues both in the online and traditional types, the latter being in particular the protest-oriented one among which it is possible to include grassroots mobilizations (de Nardis, 2020).

QAnon has extensively directed the public debate, and its devotees have intensely engaged in both the online and traditional types of public debate: QAnon has been designed on social media platforms, as 4chan, 8kun (formerly 8chan) and Parler, but it has also exerted its influence on the offline environment. It all started with the “innocuous” display and chanting of QAnon symbols and mottoes at Trump demonstrations all the way to the storming of the United States Capitol happened on the 6th of January 2021 (Aliapoulios et al., 2021).

The empirical case of QAnon opens a broader discussion. Popular imagination has constantly conceived conspiracy theories as bizarre or even funny phenomena, but it had never seriously considered their potentially hazardous effects. It is true that modes of conspiracism like UFOs, flat-Earth, or moon-landing denial are for the most inoffensive; but it has to be likewise considered that conspiracy theories coping with vaccines, the Elections or plain politics are considerably more threatening and alarming. The latter modes of conspiracism do negatively affect not only those believing them but all the people around them, no one excluded; the most combative extremist groups progressively utilize these conspiracy theories to convince others of their positions’ consistency. During a pandemic, refusing to be vaccinated and persuading others to make the same choice does not remain confined to private spheres, but it is something that concerns all of us. Conspiracy theories exist in their adherents’ minds, but the Internet has nurtured a sense of belonging and given the

possibility to create “imagined communities” where conspiracists’ numbers of followers and likes increasingly escalate (Lystad, 2021).

Differentiating between the online and offline did not pose a problem about two decades ago; today, it is a serious issue and conspiracy theories as QAnon are a demonstration of this. Digitalization affects all aspects of life, the political, social, and economic ones and this holds true just by comparing today and one year ago lifestyles. Contemporary political communication is tainted by the logics of digital dualism, the belief that the online and offline are greatly detached and diverse lives: considering online manipulation as innocent speech is perilous because there is the danger to minimize a problematic which is actually very present. The storming of the Capitol inspired by QAnon members proves that treating the online and offline as two worlds apart does not give any result: by doing so, misinformation and conspiracy theories will be given consideration only when it will be too late to repair their damages (Gosse & Hodson, 2021). It is significant to recognize the difference between online and offline lives, but also to realize that they are two sides of the same coin and cannot be treated as “planets of different galaxies”.

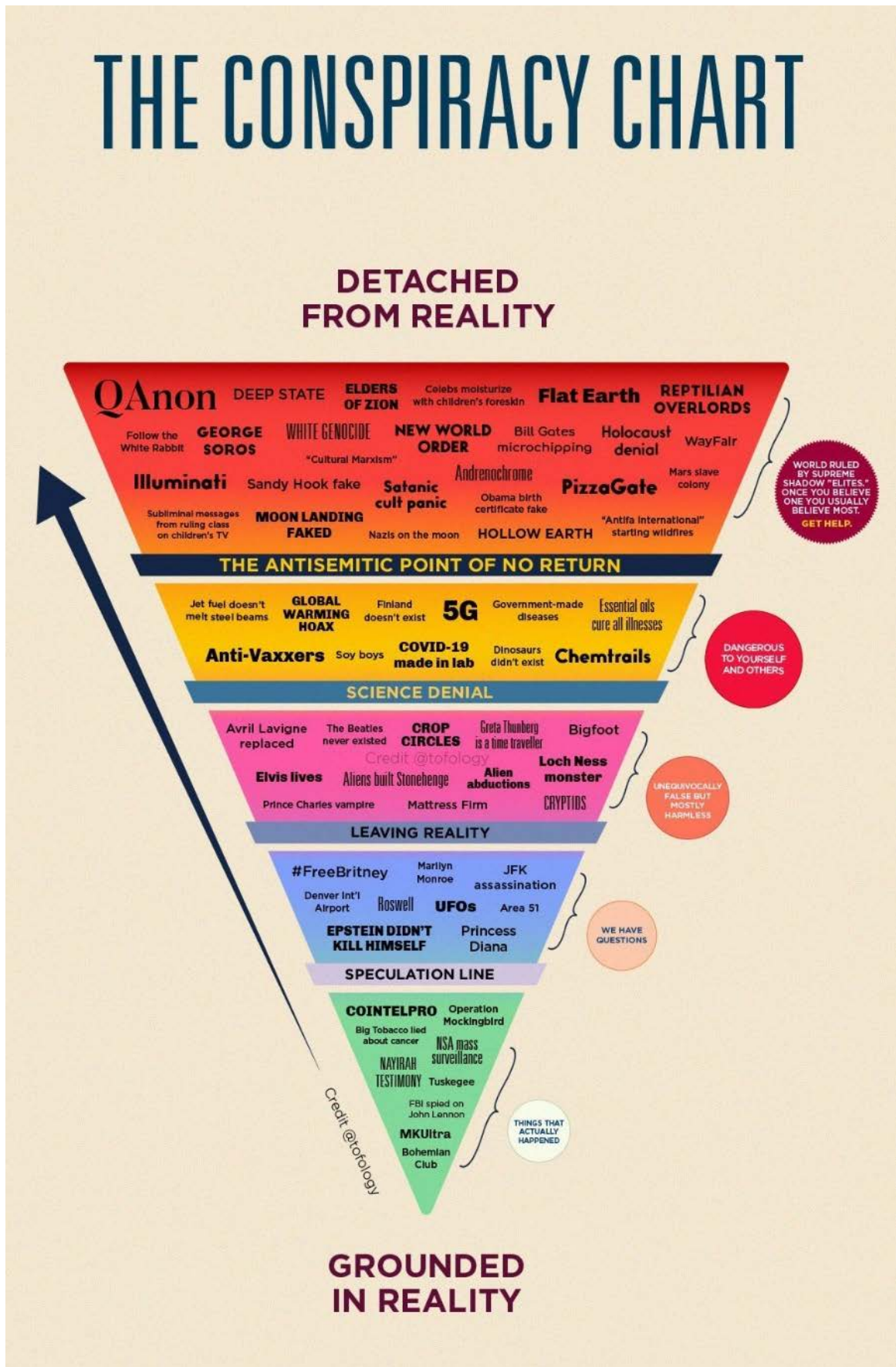
Contemporary social conspiracism’s influence on political communication would not be real if the latter did not ensue online (Giansante, 2015). Influencers have played a major role in the spread of QAnon: they declared that they were able to unravel the “Q drops” and the theory has been perpetually publicized on blog posts, podcasts, and YouTube videos. At the beginning of 2020, when the Coronavirus pandemic arose, the QAnon community was present on every social media and network platform, including Facebook, Twitter, or Telegram. The theory rose in popularity and it facilitated the dispersal of health disinformation, as fake news on the actual security of face masks usage (Greenspan, 2021). Proponents of technological determinism have always maintained that the Internet can be a valuable tool for socio-political paradigmatic revolution thus validating conspiracy theories because they were recognized as revolutionary designs of democratic change. Nonetheless, contemporary Western civilization cannot accept conspiracy theories as devices of democratic enhancement; it has to be acknowledged that they are rather one of the main traits of “ostracised” social groups of society and of those upholding technocratic and techno-deterministic worldviews (Donskis, 1998). The Internet has the potential to be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it is worth emphasising that the Internet is an innovative public sphere, and it can advance the cause of democracy. Au contraire, it ought not to be disregarded that the Internet can inspire the formation of definite and narrow groups wherein radicalization, polarization and instances of identity politics successfully flourish. Virtual communication generates brand-new varieties of communities that typically fight against traditional power relations; these groups generally reside *in the grey area between the public and private sphere* (Ventsel, 2016: 309) and conspiracy theories kinships can be included amongst them (Ventsel, 2016).

QAnon is a sort of product for amateur users: the general public has been and is the main maker of this conspiracy theory. Its adherents practice their creed as if it were a virtual reality game: they are required to detect the particulars of the theory on their own by solving puzzles and sleuthing the truth. QAnon is the demonstration that ever more conspiracy theories will prosper as social media platforms are turning into several people’s core social outlets (Flam, 2021). The possibility to individually produce content within old

and new social media platforms has intensified phenomena like QAnon and networked conspirational thinking. Currently, ordinary people are able to straightforwardly access information and anonymized mass communication is on the rise. A conspiracy theory as QAnon is threatening for the very reason that amateurs from all over the world contribute to the making of its narration and undercurrents thus enabling a rapid expansion of this theory (Robertson, 2021). Despite an ostensible deceleration of the theory given that the day of the “Storm” has not arrived yet and that Joe Biden has become the forty-sixth President of the US, QAnon still poses a threat. The online format of this theory has facilitated the building of an effective infrastructure to transmit conspiracy theories and contemporaneous media organisations seem to be ill-prepared in the face of this threat. Conspiracy theories are an integral part of present digital ecosystems and this implies that they will ever more pervade the general public’s existences, politics, and society. QAnon is the first online conspiracy theory of this magnitude, but it will not be the final one: real danger exists that it will be “superseded” by even stronger and deeper conspiracy notions (Hannah, 2021).

What is especially disturbing about our society is the intensified use that politics makes of conspiracy theories which are purposely created and elaborated precisely for deliberate political motives. For instance, last year alone, the Russian administration worked very hard to diffuse an incalculable number of political conspiracy theories in the West (Lewandowsky & Cook, 2020). It is difficult not to cite Donald Trump among those politicians who without any shame promulgate conspiracy theories for political and unpolitical motives. An article on Wikipedia has even “catalogued” all conspiracy theories advanced by Donald Trump and *presidential conspiracism* (Rosenblum & Muirhead, 2020: 59) is the final issue to be considered.

Figure 1 – The Conspiracy Chart



Source: Abbie Richards, 2020,
<https://twitter.com/Ajkiwi/status/1312837109321920512>.

3.3. “Top-level conspiracism”

The objective of paragraph 3.2 was to present the dynamics of conspiracy theories endorsement by the general public and QAnon is the most recent and a masterful case in point. Comparably, the point here is to determine the aftereffects of conspiracy theories support by political figures, especially if supported by a President of the US.

Conspiracy theories have always been a constant of US “chronicles”, but at present they are becoming increasingly widespread, hastened by very high-speed social media. Former President Trump has to such an extent promoted conspiracy theories that they are now a political weapon that countless politicians cannot do without. The results of the 2020 election day have been and still are a hard blow to Trump’s overinflated ego; he was so dissatisfied with the result that his call to arms to “stop the steal” actually produced a full-fledged far-right and conservative protest movement. The promoters of this “stop the steal” campaign uphold a conspiracy theory whereby an extensive electoral fraud took place throughout the 2020 presidential election which consented the victory of an “ungrateful” Joe Biden (Cohen, 2021). It goes without saying that all these statements have never been proven. The weeks following the elections have been characterized by a frantic struggle of Trump and the Republican Party to manipulate the results. The Trump campaign has submitted numerous lawsuits of suspected electoral fraud, which have all been discharged by US courts, although the Department of Homeland Security has ceaselessly validated that the election was not rigged and that it ensued in a legal manner. On the occasion of the demonstration “Save America” organized near the White House, Trump went as far as exhorting his “followers” to march on the Capitol building ‘to stop the steal’. The outcome has been a death count of five people and a nation that has to consider the almost certain possibility of forthcoming and riskier assaults (Luke, 2021).

Having faith in most of contemporary conspiracy theories does not require a lot of effort. Notwithstanding the groundlessness of the “Stop the steal” conspiracy theory, the bulk of Donald Trump voters strongly sustains that the election was falsified and that the result of the elections should have been another one. Election fraud conspiracy theories jeopardise both political and democratic legitimacy. These theories make it unfeasible to find the basis for a genuine public consensus and the ensuing non-acceptance of reliable data strongly weakens even the most basic decision-making processes. On the word of these conspiracists, it is exactly the functioning of elections that has to be reconsidered: elections cannot be authentic if entire democracies are subject to the authority of evil conspires, or even worse a sect dedicated to child-trafficking (Breakey, 2020).

The unprecedented process of radicalization set in motion by Trump and his “allied” media and television channels, Fox News being the most famous, has inevitably brought about the 2021 storming of the United States Capitol and a mounting devotion to conspiracy theories. In fact, Donald Trump and Fox News have been and are the chief vehicles of all the misinformation associated with the unproven falsification of the elections. The ex-president of the US has never openly reproved or stalled conspiracy theories distribution channels because he can do nothing but benefit from their propagation (Stelter, 2020).

That is where the role of social media once again comes in: no President has ever made such reckless use of them as Donald J. Trump. Trump has been exploiting social networks, mainly Twitter, not only to encourage

conspiracists' stances, but also to do politics. The point of his brief and splintered tweets was to convey the message that he went into politics exclusively for championing the general public's requests. The hashtag that generally complements Trump's tweets is also his distinctive slogan: "Make America Great Again" or #MAGA: the implicit message is that Trump is struggling to rehabilitate a political system spoiled by years of Democratic administration. No surprise if the Democratic Party is being continuously delegitimized and that conspiracy theories against the Democrats have seen an incredible growth in recent times (Gounari, 2018). Especially after Donald Trump's expulsion from Twitter and Facebook and regardless of the extensive use that the Republican party makes of traditional social media, the members of this political party are increasingly complaining about the suspected censorship of which they feel the primary victims. Because of that, the most ardent supporters of Trump have decided to move to and to give their opinions on alternative social media, of which Parler is the most popular instance. Precisely during the most inflamed days of Trump's requests to recount the votes, Parler has exceeded the number of ten million subscribers. Alternative social media are putting traditional ones into crisis: the latter have always relied upon the work of content moderators; the former, instead, impose no restriction upon their users. Since the time of Hobbes, it is well known that if citizens do not have rules to appeal to, the upshot will be an unrestrained state of nature of *bellum omnium contra omnes*: social media similar to Parler are now the main venue for conspiracy theories and akin circumstances of antisemitism, white suprematism, and political radicalization. These two forms of social media platforms have not established their rules of coexistence yet and their sharp division merely echoes a social one in which Fox News audience is incapable of getting along with the CNN one. Parler is the prediction of what might happen if the relation between social media and politics will not be seriously considered (Mossetti, 2020).

Presidential conspiracism is dangerous primarily because a President of the US can exert a global influence far superior to that of many other political leaders. A President and his rhetoric have the power of setting the national agenda and Trump has introduced a completely novel type of political discourse. Albeit all the other Presidents ahead of him have always invoked national unity, Trump's conspiracy theories have a disruptive force, and the feeling of national unity is perceived only whilst scapegoating or distrusting the "outsiders" (Levendusky, 2020).

Trumpian conspiracism has engulfed Washington D.C. and it has weakened long-established democratic institutions. Trump definitely takes inspiration from other conspiracy accounts, but the most worrisome aspect of Trump's conspiracism is that the vast majority of his conspiracy theories replicates his own perception of reality. The tycoon's reality is dictated by his own personal wants and desires and this leads him to boldly invoke both rhetorical and physical violence to secure a status quo beneficial exclusively for him. The former President has imperilled not only political instances but also the knowledge-making ones: according to him, his own imagination is the prime source of information and the factual and reliable ones have constantly been under attack. Trump was in the position to levy his own perception of reality and he cared a great deal that his "subordinates" adhered to his interpretations: indeed, conspiracy theories are the best weapons to refute contrary theses and assessments of reality. It becomes evident that presidential conspiracism spawns many

more unruly outcomes if associated to that of the general public; the perceived reality of a President of the US inevitably dominates the public sphere. Trump has inflicted his own narration on Republican members and civil servants who felt obligated to serve his requests to avoid losing their jobs (Overell & Nicholls, 2019).

Presidential conspiracism is linked with the latest and most distinctive tendencies of the fourth age of political communication: the decline of democratic institutions, the delegitimization of authority and elites and the crisis of political ideologies (Blumler, 2016). Top-level conspiracism degrades democratic procedures and bodies and it likewise compels them to conform to conspiracist assertions. The Trumpian disparaging dialectics has continuously accused the press of being the promoter of fake news and it totally altered the regular activities of nominated delegates, bureaucrats, and public employees. An efficient constitutional system requires that, under conventional state of affairs, the members of the executive body serve the elected president, in spite of the political party or agenda. If presidential conspiracism is in place, this constitutional duty imperils political stability and reality is unavoidably spoiled by the conspiracist interpretations. All the most reputable practices of information collection and decision-making are hindered “for the sake of” procedures designed for attesting the conspiracist truth (Muelrath, 2018).

The year 2020 has really been the paradigm of a time of crisis (Davis, 2019). We have been witnessing both an ongoing and multifaceted crisis unleashed by the recent Coronavirus and a crisis of the political communication as we used to know it. These crises have availed Trumpian conspiracy theories since a crisis is a time in which the involved population necessitates to make sense of what it is observing. Social media information consents to elaborate a collective comprehension of the occurrences and it thus turns out to be a vital expedient tool throughout a crisis because of its provision of instantaneous information. Nonetheless, the widespread need for immediate sensemaking processes inevitably promotes misinformation and an often-unsubstantiated information. Provided that everchanging social media are by now the principal sites for information exchange and sensemaking, it is now fundamental to determine and adjust the role that social media play during crisis times (Huang et al., 2015).

As a matter of fact, misinformation is unfortunately becoming a constant of the current public discourse and it is now more than ever worth examining this issue. It is true that misinformation has always been a strategy of political debate, but, while in the past it was mainly utilized as an additional evidence of a specific political position, it has now set in motion an overwhelming stream of infodemic and conspiracy theories. As previously established, conspiracy theories can have countless effects on society especially because their rhetoric is an established instrument of political communication. Conspiracy theories are exploited to disseminate political deceits and it is unsafe to simply portray them as sincere and rightful political creeds. Not merely conspiracy theories built on the basis of deceptiveness, but all political declarations of this kind should be discharged and not be included in the public discourse. The “stop the steal” conspiracy theory further reinforces this argument, and the storming of the Capitol presents the aftermaths of a somewhat inattention towards the events of the public sphere and of the failure to address fraudulent conspiracy discourses (Lewandowsky, 2021).

Political conspiracism delegitimizes democracy and its foundations, in particular political parties. Trump has rendered these novel and social conspiracy theories efficient political customs and he has repetitively exerted

their force. This new form of conspiracism is not going to leave the scene because technology and social media are all the time more nourishing and prolonging it. Conspiracism is the present-day business card of all those political newcomers who want to present themselves as ground-breaking system subverters. Presidential conspiracism has not been consigned to the past and it is not a unicum of immediate present: if other demagogues will appear on the political scene, they will not resist the temptation to exploit conspiracy theories as rhetorical devices and political instruments (Rosenblum & Muirhead, 2020).

Conclusion

What appears evident from the reading of the present thesis is that conspiracy theories have by now become common practice: it is now more than ever necessary to deal with them. As previously mentioned, conspiracy theories are a form of information disorder, more specifically disinformation and thus a great threat to democracy (McKay & Tenove, 2020). Three are the most suitable practices developed to limit the spread of disinformation, viz., debunking, fact-checking and media or digital literacy (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017).

The first process, debunking, is mainly exercised by all those figures specialized in the scientific scepticism: scientific procedures are utilized to probe and rebut all those statements which are dubious and approximated and present no scientific ground. The practice of debunking has been elaborated precisely with the intention of coping with phenomena as conspiracy theories, but also with all the deceits deployed in political communication. To achieve the expected results, the process of debunking requires a democratic environment; indeed, the relationship between debunkers and debunked people is highly problematic. On the one hand, the former run the risk of becoming the prime targets of the latter's invectives; on the other hand, the debunked people exhibit such hateful behaviour because they feel underrated by the debunkers (Wu Ming 1, 2018).

As a consequence, the attempt to debunk conspiracy theories has always proved to be problematic. Academics should try to adopt a neutral attitude whenever coming into contact with conspiracy theorists and their related narratives. This does not mean that the option of debunking is in all respects precluded, but rather scholars ought to be impartial and broadminded each time they evaluate conspiracy theories. Though, for the time being, this clearly does not seem to be the case. The bulk of social science writings on conspiracy theories shows a certain reluctance to evaluate them with no prejudice (Hagen, 2020). In fact, the verb "debunk" indicates that the erroneousness of a given idea has to be showed and, if it is constantly sustained that conspiracy theories ought to be debunked, this implies that each conspiracy theory is after all erroneous. Academics should instead scrutinize conspiracy theories and they ought to advance positive definition of conspiracy theories so as to probe them without the prejudice intrinsic in a debasing characterisation. It should be recognized that faith in a conspiracy theory does not inexorably bring about pathological states; this recognition would permit to corroborate one of the first arguments of conspiracy theories literature, viz., that the acceptance of a conspiracy theory consistently refers to the existence of authentic conspiracies (Dentith, 2020).

Conspiracy theories are ever more broadening their influence and their structures are assuming a form so networked that debunking them is by now an arduous undertaking. One of the most common risks that may be faced when dealing with conspiracist subcultures is to reinforce the faith in a given conspiracy theory: showing too much interest in conspiracy theorists and exposing them to the public pillory unavoidably induces them to emphasize their condition of social outcasts. Additionally, shutting down websites or banning accounts promoting conspiracy theories does not solve the problem since these deplatforming strategies only appear as unregulated attempts to censor and control the Internet. The present era of infodemic reveals that all the

technical or political solutions advanced so far are not at all effective as the technological progress has gone forward without us human beings creating apparatuses to render it sustainable (Hannah, 2021).

The same applies to the practice of fact-checking. The core of fact-checking is to validate that news or declarations rendered by public figures like politicians or bureaucrats are truthful. Moreover, this practice can also take the name of source-checking when, with the aim of performing a more accurate control, the consistency of the sources is likewise certified. Nevertheless, the process of fact-checking may entail some drawbacks. For instance, just like the practice of debunking, a “backfire effect” has been observed: exposing erroneous or deceptive conspiracy theories can lead to the conclusion of encouraging instead of reducing the faith in them. Fact-checking may even produce the hypercorrection effect: conveying truthful information to people who have been previously exposed to disinformation may in the long run result in them simply recalling the latter and totally forgetting the former. Consequently, also the practice of fact-checking should be revisited in order to improve its efficiency in confronting a type of disinformation like conspiracy theories (Tambuscio et al., 2018).

Educating to informational and data literacy most likely is the only really valuable way to effectively cope with conspiracy theories. Indeed, informational awareness should be taught and further promoted throughout all strata of society, not only inside universities or higher education institutes (Mortimer, 2017). Media literacy and its latest form, namely digital media literacy, includes all those procedures that enable ordinary people to have access, critically examine, produce, and direct media messages and ecosystems. Media literacy is essential for acquiring those ICT skills needed to comprehend media function and the environment in which the media perform their tasks (Livingstone & Van der Graaf, 2010). As pointed out several times, information has now been democratized and in a disordered environment as the modern digital media scene it is feasible to access conspiracy content in a quasi-immediate way. Supporting conspiracy theories is an issue for the correct functioning of a democracy wherein citizens ought to take informed choices; governing a misinformed citizenry that sustain deceptive ideas because more easily accessible is even more ruinous than administering an uninformed electorate. It has been demonstrated that unfamiliarity with the media world and its mechanisms is directly proportional to faith in conspiracy theories; it is for this reason that media literacy is of the utmost importance. The greater the acquaintance with the world of media, the less probable will be the allure of conspiracy theories. It remains true that people are disposed to advocate conspiracy theories that are line with their political leanings, but it is equally true that news media awareness can diminish this propensity in spite of the political stand. Media literacy is more viable than the other two practices since enhancing the understanding one has of the media world is easier than attempting to “adjust” an already acquired mindset (Craft et al., 2017). Prevention is better than cure; this saying also applies here. Media literacy is a form of prevention because it prevents people from becoming devotees of conspiracy theories; instead, debunking and fact-checking are forms of healing since they attempt cure an evil that has already taken root in the conscience of a conspiracy theorist.

The findings of the present thesis prove that conspiracy theories do influence political communication. The line of reasoning addressed in the thesis is consistent with the main vicissitudes taking place in the domain of

political communication. The growing relativism characterizing the fourth age of political communication has led to the disdain of objective information and evidence. Forms of disinformation like conspiracy theories have by now invaded and took a grip on the present public discourse and opinion; it is common practice in politics to use unverified opinions as arguments in support of their reasonings. This state of affairs is unsettling; democratic systems hinge on a political communication wherein it is rather faithful information that should guide the decision-making processes of both citizens and political actors (Van Aelst et al., 2017).

Furthermore, this thesis wants to fill the aforementioned gap in conspiracy theory literature, namely the effect of the combined action between society, politics, and the mass media on the making of a political communication in which conspiracy theories easily flourish.

The fulcrum of all the analysis is precisely the mutual influence of the conspiracy culture and the sociological context in which the former resides. Conspiracy theories present themselves as simultaneously alternatives and remonstrations to an established neoliberal system of political truth. The ongoing conspiracy culture is gradually more shaped by historical changes like mediatization or globalization which have made it nearly impossible to determine a specific, factual, and proven truth. Consequently, conspiracy theories are at the same time attempts to rationalize our modern world, but also manifestations of the so-called “postmodernism”. Reality is being seriously mediatized and all the processes of this “postmodern turn” are tangible in our day-to-day lives. Occurrences as infodemic make it extremely tough to believe that we are facing the advent of an era of fact-based and emancipatory information like the one the Internet utopians alluded to. Our online (and offline) activities are under the yoke of given algorithms that invisibly throw users into a sort of parallel world made of filter bubbles and echo chambers in which the human tendency to homophily is fulfilled. In all likelihood, what is truly alarming is that giant corporations monitor these algorithms exclusively for satisfying their own interests: algorithmic effects on individuals are extremely hard to assess (Harambam, 2020). The focus on the cultural system is the strongest point of the present thesis and what probably makes it one of a kind.

The weak points are anyway present; the Western perspective adopted in the two empirical cases has to be addressed. Conspiracy theories have become integral parts of the contemporaneous Western civilisation especially after the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic: there is the need to promptly concentrate on the pervasive irrationality that is transforming Western societies (Gerstenfeld, 2021). In particular, the dominant perspective is the American one in both cases: the choice has fallen on QAnon and the “Stop the steal” conspiracy theories because, willingly or unwillingly, occurrences in the United States strongly affect the Italian scene, namely the one experienced while the events took place. The presentation of cases too far from our experience would have rendered the examples too abstruse; we have all consciously or unconsciously heard of these two conspiracy theories which may in addition have noteworthy societal and political effects on the most nearby realities. Therefore, the suggestion for future research is to run analyses that adopt a wholly non-western perspective in a way that would make more known some experiences of which we basically ignore the existence.

By the same token, some of the latest courses in political communication have not been tackled. To list a few: the function of policy professionals (Aagaard, 2016), the adoption of a rhetoric extensively populist (De Vreese et al., 2018), the decay of the classic media business model (Trappel et al., 2015) or rather extremely volatile electorates (Davis, 2019). Obviously, it is possible to find a connection between all of the latest courses in political communication and the current and hasty circulation of conspiracy theories but examining all of them would have rendered the thesis much lengthier. The decision has been that of considering only the most suitable topics for defining a coherent approach. Consequently, the recommendation is once again to conduct the research on the coaction of conspiracy theories and the most recent and critical events of political communication (Bennet & Pfetsch, 2018). The academic research on conspiracy theories is still in its early stages and intellectuals would only benefit from deepening it. Adherence to conspiracy theories is by now general practice and scholars have not reached a consensus on how to deal with it yet.

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Abstract

Negli ultimi decenni, la moderna ricerca accademica ha dedicato grande attenzione al tema delle teorie del complotto. Gli studiosi hanno sviluppato una vasta letteratura su quelle narrazioni che distorcono o misinterpretano la realtà e la "fede nelle teorie del complotto" è ritenuta una sottosezione di tale letteratura. Progredire nella ricerca sulle teorie del complotto è di fondamentale importanza poiché tali teorie sono ormai diffuse in tutto il mondo. Inoltre, l'odierna letteratura sulle teorie del complotto non è esaustiva e vi è ancora molto da documentare in quanto, solamente ora, stiamo assistendo all'impatto che la fede in una teoria del complotto può avere sulla società nel suo insieme.

Le teorie del complotto sono state presentate quasi esclusivamente in una luce negativa: esse possiedono il potenziale necessario per poter produrre narrazioni xenofobe ed escludenti che a loro volta possono mettere in grave pericolo sia il consenso pubblico che il discorso pubblico. Negli ultimi anni, però, le teorie del complotto sono state presentate anche come delle istanze culturali attraverso le quali i cittadini possono esprimere il proprio malcontento nei confronti delle loro amministrazioni e istituzioni governative (Hellinger, 2019).

Fino a poco tempo fa, l'approccio dominante nella letteratura sulle teorie del complotto era quello introdotto dallo storico americano Hofstadter il quale paragonava la crescente fede nelle teorie del complotto al ritorno dello stile paranoico nella politica americana (Hellinger, 2019). Di conseguenza, le teorie del complotto sono sempre state descritte come delle tendenze patologiche molto diffuse appartenenti per lo più a dei deliranti fanatici di destra. Solamente negli ultimi anni, tale lettura del complottismo è stata respinta e criticata per la sua eccessiva semplicità. Gli accademici hanno introdotto un approccio più strutturale nel quale l'impatto delle varie configurazioni politiche gioca un ruolo fondamentale nella nascita delle teorie del complotto; il complottismo non dipende esclusivamente da fattori psicologici. Le teorie del complotto sono state studiate principalmente da una prospettiva occidentale e questo ha sicuramente limitato i risultati della ricerca accademica; dall'analisi di realtà non occidentali si è evinto che il complottismo è il risultato delle condizioni in cui le varie identità locali vengono plasmate (Swami, 2012).

I primi studi sulle teorie del complotto erano insufficienti e molto marginali a livello metodologico; gli studiosi ricorrevano principalmente a disegni trasversali o variabili demografiche in cui, ad esempio, la teorizzazione del complotto veniva principalmente trattata in funzione dell'appartenenza a partiti politici. Tuttavia, questi studi hanno posto le basi e i punti di partenza per l'attuale ricerca scientifica sulle teorie del complotto. I risultati concordano principalmente su due argomenti: il primo è che la psicologia alla base del complottismo è costante per tutti i tipi di teorie del complotto; sebbene le teorie del complotto siano dissimili per contenuto, le logiche che le governano sembrano essere sempre le stesse. Il secondo punto riguarda il quadro sociale e il ruolo principale che svolge nel moderno complottismo: nonostante le differenze individuali, è l'ambiente sociale che stimola la creazione di nuove teorie del complotto. Sfortunatamente, un'attenta lettura della letteratura esistente sulle teorie del complotto rivela che questo campo di ricerca è carente di un solido

background teorico. Questa carenza ostacola la contestualizzazione dei risultati precedenti e la formulazione di nuove ipotesi; di conseguenza, non possono essere suggeriti metodi adeguati a diminuire la diffusione e la successiva affermazione delle teorie del complotto tra i diversi settori della società. Al momento, lo sviluppo teorico è ancora ai suoi inizi (van Prooijen & Douglas, 2018).

Oggi più che mai i tempi sono maturi per andare avanti nella ricerca. È stato dimostrato che le persone sono più inclini a fare affidamento sulle teorie del complotto quando stanno attraversando una crisi e quando i successivi sentimenti di impotenza e debolezza prevalgono nei loro animi. L'analisi delle teorie del complotto non è mai stata così presente nell'agenda dei media come nell'attuale epoca della pandemia di coronavirus. Le conseguenze di questa crescente convinzione nelle teorie del complotto hanno avuto un grande impatto sulla società. In effetti, è stato dimostrato che la fede in una determinata teoria del complotto o lo sviluppo di una mentalità complottista hanno esercitato una grande pressione sull'opinione pubblica. Ad esempio, queste teorie hanno ridotto la fiducia nelle istituzioni, il sostegno alle misure governative e l'attivismo sociale (Pummerer et al., 2020).

È tempo che la ricerca accademica sulle teorie del complotto esplori nuove aree. È molto forte la tendenza a credere che le teorie del complotto circolino soprattutto nelle civiltà in cui un regime autoritario regoli i principali servizi pubblici e quindi causi bassi livelli di alfabetizzazione sociale. In realtà, questo non è il caso. La “cultura complottista” si è ormai affermata in tutto il mondo. La letteratura contemporanea è ancora incapace di chiarire perché le teorie del complotto siano accettate in strati sociali estremamente dissimili tra loro. Le teorie del complotto prosperano anche in quelle culture in cui gli alti livelli di istruzione e il diritto alla libertà di espressione consentono una competizione politica leale e la libertà dei mass media. Pertanto, il campo di ricerca sulle teorie del complotto è privo dell'analisi della rilevante interazione tra società, politica e mass media e del ruolo critico che questi ultimi svolgono nel creare un tipo di comunicazione politica adatto alla proliferazione delle teorie del complotto. La letteratura è focalizzata su altri temi, ma l'esame dell'influenza del complottismo sulla comunicazione politica potrebbe chiarire perché alcune teorie del complotto riescano a perdurare così tanto nel tempo e ad essere così diffuse (Marmura, 2014).

Al momento, le teorie del complotto prosperano principalmente sulle piattaforme dei social media e la teorizzazione complottista è ormai uno dei punti di vista più diffusi e cospicui dei giorni nostri. I media tradizionali non hanno tratto beneficio da questa cultura complottista che li colloca nella categoria di quei “cattivi” che hanno il compito di plasmare l'umanità secondo un disegno prestabilito e ben preciso. La cultura complottista non è altro che un'altra espressione della modernità ed è perfettamente allineata con la moderna convinzione che nulla è casuale nel nostro ordine sociale moderno. Alcuni dei progressi intellettuali più decisivi degli ultimi tempi, come la cibernetica, la nozione di sistema e l'onnipresenza della rete hanno determinato tale convinzione (De Maeyer, 2019). La presente tesi ha lo scopo di indagare la nozione di cultura del complotto come interpretazione della modernità colmando la sopraindicata lacuna della presente letteratura del complotto; vale a dire esaminare l'influenza delle teorie del complotto sulla comunicazione politica.

In particolare, il primo capitolo ci porta nel mondo dei complotti e delle teorie del complotto. Questo capitolo ha per lo più un carattere teorico, e si propone di delineare le principali caratteristiche del fenomeno in

osservazione. Il primo paragrafo spiega che le cospirazioni e le teorie del complotto sono le "espressioni tangibili" del clima culturale moderno: mentre le prime possono effettivamente verificarsi nella vita di tutti i giorni, le seconde sono per lo più il prodotto dell'immaginazione. Invece, gli ultimi due paragrafi sono strettamente correlati tra loro. Il secondo paragrafo apre la strada al terzo e chiarisce come le rappresentazioni mediatiche e accademiche delle teorie del complotto formano grandemente l'opinione pubblica e la consapevolezza popolare sul complottismo. Questa intuizione è essenziale per comprendere la valutazione della cultura complottista che avviene nel terzo paragrafo. Capire con quali mezzi e per quale motivo si configura e si "trasmette" il complottismo è quindi cruciale per i nostri scopi.

In secondo luogo, il capitolo seguente esplora quella che è stata chiamata "the conspiracy platform society", in italiano "la complottista società della piattaforma", riprendendo il concetto di "società della piattaforma" avviato da van Dijck, Poell e de Waal nel 2018. Questo capitolo dimostra che le teorie del complotto si sono ormai evolute nella loro "forma digitalizzata" e che quindi sono da considerare come componenti cruciali della quarta età della comunicazione politica. Difatti, il primo paragrafo introduce le questioni più rilevanti nel campo della comunicazione politica, la quale è ormai entrata nella sua quarta fase. Il secondo e il terzo paragrafo indagano due fenomeni strettamente connessi tra loro e che sono entrambi frutto dell'era digitale che tutti noi stiamo attraversando. Da un lato, il primo paragrafo affronta l'azione combinata delle "filter bubbles", o bolle di filtraggio, e delle teorie del complotto; le due insieme contribuiscono a produrre una condizione di isolamento intellettuale che può incidere negativamente sul corretto funzionamento di una democrazia. L'altro paragrafo, invece, analizza le cosiddette camere d'eco, uno degli innumerevoli effetti psicologici dell'uso di Internet. Insieme, le teorie del complotto e le camere d'eco provocano la formazione di gruppi omofili in cui prospettive intolleranti come l'incitamento all'odio possono prosperare molto facilmente. Successivamente, il terzo capitolo si chiede se l'ordine mondiale contemporaneo sia veramente complottista. Questo è il capitolo più empirico. In un certo senso, l'obiettivo è quello di seguire il metodo scientifico sperimentale in modo da dare un contributo concreto e vantaggioso alla ricerca accademica sulle teorie del complotto: l'ipotesi secondo la quale le teorie del complotto influenzano la comunicazione politica deve essere empiricamente dimostrata. Il primo paragrafo indaga le origini del termine "teoria del complotto" e delinea una sorta di cronologia delle teorie del complotto dell'età contemporanea. La principale differenza tra vecchie e nuove teorie è che queste ultime hanno ormai assunto una forma digitalizzata estremamente difficile da contrastare. Il secondo e il terzo paragrafo esaminano i due casi empirici. Da un lato, il primo paragrafo considera il caso di QAnon, una perfetta illustrazione del sostegno alle teorie del complotto da parte del grande pubblico e degli effetti che esso può avere sia sulle vite online e offline. Viceversa, l'ultimo paragrafo spiega quanto possano essere minacciose le teorie del complotto quando sostenute da potenti personaggi politici. Il caso in esame è quello della teoria del complotto "Stop the steal", "fermate il furto", innescata dal quarantacinquesimo presidente degli Stati Uniti d'America, Donald J. Trump.

Ciò che appare evidente dalla lettura della presente tesi è che le teorie del complotto sono ormai divenute prassi comune: è ora più che mai necessario affrontarle. A causa del loro dominio sul cyberspazio, si è molto discusso su come limitare la proliferazione delle teorie del complotto sul web. Le teorie del complotto sono

identificate come una forma di disturbo dell'informazione, più specificamente disinformazione, e quindi una grande minaccia per la democrazia (McKay & Tenove, 2020). Tre sono le pratiche più adatte sviluppate per limitare la diffusione della disinformazione, vale a dire, il debunking, o la demistificazione, il fact-checking, o la verifica dei fatti, e l'alfabetizzazione mediatica o digitale (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). Il consiglio è di rivedere completamente le prime due procedure e di puntare sulla seconda, attualmente l'unica che potrebbe impedire il fiorire in rete delle teorie del complotto. Invero, prevenire è meglio che curare e questo detto vale anche in tale dissertazione. L'alfabetizzazione mediatica è una forma di prevenzione perché impedisce alle persone di diventare convinti seguaci delle teorie del complotto; invece, il debunking e il fact-checking sono forme di guarigione poiché tentano di curare un male che ha già messo radici nella coscienza di un teorico del complotto.

I risultati della tesi dimostrano che le teorie del complotto influenzano la comunicazione politica. Il ragionamento affrontato nella dissertazione è coerente con i principali avvenimenti dell'ambito della comunicazione politica. Il crescente relativismo che caratterizza la quarta età della comunicazione politica ha portato al disprezzo dell'informazione e delle prove oggettive. Forme di disinformazione come le teorie del complotto hanno ormai invaso e impadronito l'attuale discorso e l'odierna opinione pubblica; invero, è pratica comune in politica utilizzare opinioni non verificate come argomentazioni a sostegno dei propri ragionamenti. Tale scenario è inquietante; i sistemi democratici dovrebbero fare perno su una comunicazione politica in cui dovrebbero essere piuttosto le informazioni affidabili a guidare i processi decisionali sia dei cittadini che degli attori politici (Van Aelst et al., 2017).

Inoltre, questa tesi vuole colmare la suddetta lacuna nella letteratura sulla teoria del complotto, vale a dire l'effetto dell'azione combinata tra società, politica e mass media sulla realizzazione di una comunicazione politica in cui le teorie del complotto prosperano facilmente.

Il fulcro di tutta l'analisi è proprio l'influenza reciproca della cultura del complotto e del contesto sociologico in cui la prima risiede. Le teorie del complotto si presentano contemporaneamente come alternative e rimostranze ad un ormai stabilito regime di verità neoliberista. La contemporanea cultura complottista è sempre più modellata da cambiamenti storici come la mediatizzazione o la globalizzazione che hanno reso quasi impossibile determinare una verità specifica, fattuale e dimostrata. Di conseguenza, le teorie del complotto sono allo stesso tempo tentativi di razionalizzare il nostro mondo moderno, ma anche manifestazioni del cosiddetto "postmodernismo". Dato che la nostra è una realtà mediatizzata, tutti i processi di questa "svolta postmoderna" sono tangibili nella nostra vita quotidiana. Eventi come l'infodemia rendono estremamente difficile credere che stiamo affrontando l'avvento di un'era di informazioni fattuali ed emancipatrici come quella a cui alludevano gli utopisti di Internet. Le nostre attività online (e offline) sono regolate da determinati algoritmi che, grazie ad una loro azione quasi impercettibile, riescono a gettare gli utenti in una sorta di mondo parallelo pullulante di bolle di filtraggio e camere d'eco in cui la tendenza umana all'omofilia trova il suo compimento. Con ogni probabilità, ciò che è veramente allarmante è che grandi aziende monitorano questi algoritmi esclusivamente per soddisfare i propri interessi e che gli effetti algoritmici sugli individui sono

estremamente difficili da valutare (Harambam, 2020). L'attenzione al sistema culturale è il punto di forza della presente dissertazione e ciò che molto probabilmente la rende unica nel suo genere.

I punti deboli sono comunque presenti; prima di tutto, solamente una prospettiva occidentale viene adottata nei due casi empirici. Le teorie del complotto sono diventate parte integrante della civiltà occidentale contemporanea soprattutto dopo lo scoppio della pandemia di Covid-19: ciò rende necessario concentrarsi tempestivamente sulla pervasiva irrazionalità che sta trasformando le società occidentali (Gerstenfeld, 2021). In particolare, la prospettiva dominante è quella americana in entrambi i casi: la scelta è caduta sulle due teorie del complotto QAnon e “Stop the steal” perché, volenti o nolenti, gli avvenimenti negli Stati Uniti influenzano fortemente la scena italiana. La presentazione di casi troppo lontani dal nostro vivere quotidiano avrebbe reso gli esempi troppo astrusi; abbiamo tutti sentito parlare, consciamente o inconsciamente, di queste due teorie del complotto, le quali riescono ad avere degli amplissimi effetti sociali e politici sulle realtà a noi più vicine. Pertanto, il suggerimento per la ricerca futura è quello di condurre analisi che adottino una prospettiva che sia totalmente non occidentale in modo da far conoscere al grande pubblico alcune esperienze di cui fondamentalmente ignoriamo l'esistenza.

Allo stesso modo, non sono state affrontate alcune delle ultime tendenze della comunicazione politica. Per citarne alcune: la funzione dei professionisti della politica (Aagaard, 2016), l'adozione di una retorica ampiamente populista (De Vreese et al., 2018), il decadimento del classico modello business dei media (Trappel et al., 2015) o la presenza di elettorati piuttosto volatili (Davis, 2019). Ovviamente è possibile trovare un collegamento tra tutte le ultime tendenze della comunicazione politica e l'attuale e spedita circolazione di teorie del complotto, ma esaminare tutte queste connessioni avrebbe reso la tesi molto più prolissa. La decisione è stata quella di considerare solo i temi più adatti a definire un approccio coerente e onnicomprensivo. Di conseguenza, la raccomandazione è ancora una volta di condurre la ricerca sulla coazione delle teorie del complotto e gli eventi più recenti e critici della comunicazione politica (Bennet & Pfetsch, 2018). La ricerca accademica sulle teorie del complotto è ancora agli inizi e gli intellettuali trarrebbero molto vantaggio dall'approfondirla. La fede nelle teorie del complotto è ormai pratica diffusa e gli studiosi non hanno ancora raggiunto un consenso su come affrontarla.