PLATFORMIZATION OF CONSPIRACISM: INTRODUCING A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR INVESTIGATING CONSPIRACY THEORIES ON "ALTERNATIVE" PLATFORMS USING A CASE STUDY OF BITCHUTE AND GAB

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Digital platforms have impacted the communication of conspiracy theories – defined as alternative explanations of events or practices by referring to individuals or groups acting in secret (Mahl et al., 2022) – in multiple ways: They enable users to publicly share their support for conspiratorial claims, to connect with each other, and to form like-minded communities (cf., DeWitt et al., 2018). As a result, conspiracy theories, along with other forms of deceptive content, often spread faster, deeper, and wider in the platform ecosystem than verified information (Vosoughi et al., 2018), and new conventions of conspiratorial communication have emerged out of the interaction between users and platforms (Tuters & Hagen, 2020). However, the volume, dynamics, and impacts of conspiracy discourses can differ greatly between platforms (Zeng & Schäfer, 2021) – especially considering that major tech companies have increasingly cracked down on users propagating conspiratorial and extremist content.

Using *BitChute* (the "censorship-free alternative" to YouTube) and *Gab* (an alt-right equivalent to Twitter), this study illuminates the interdependence and interplay between "alternative" social media platforms and conspiracy theory communication. On the one hand, these platforms tolerate and facilitate the propagation of conspiracy theories through their technological architecture, governance, and user culture. On the other hand, they profit from hosting conspiratorial propagators to attract traffic and to recruit users. We describe this mutual shaping between digital platforms and conspiracy theory communication as the *platformization of conspiracism*.

Theoretical & analytical framework

To systematically discuss the *platformization of conspiracism*, we draw inspiration from critical platform studies (Nieborg & Poell, 2018; van Dijck, 2021) and introduce a theoretical and analytical framework that integrates four interconnected dimensions:

1) *Infrastructure of platforms*: This dimension is interested in technological features of platforms which shape participation and discourse, for instance, by allowing users to stay blow the radar or to build a sense of community (e.g., by signifying political identity through hashtags such as #MAGA).

2) *Economic model of platforms*: This dimension interrogates platforms' business model and how user activities and transactions are commodified, for instance, through donations or investments which can indicate a strong commitment or through purchased accounts which entail specific technological features. In addition, it focuses on users' ability to use platforms to monetize their influence and visibility and to operate as "conspiracy entrepreneurs" (Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009).

3) *Governance of platforms*: This dimension considers how platforms are governed through terms of service (ToS), developer guidelines, or content moderation practices and whether and how this enables users to propagate conspiratorial narratives.

4) *User culture:* This dimension is concerned with user characteristics like sociodemographic characteristics or ideological sympathies indicated in users' profiles. In addition, it is interested in users' communication, for instance, whether they construct unique forms of vernacular subcultures by using memes or slang expressions.

Empirical case study

In line with our framework, we examine *BitChute* and *Gab* in the context of conspiracy theory communication along the following research questions (RQ):

RQ1. What are the main technological platform features that shape conspiracy theory communication?

RQ2. How does the platform's business model affect the propagation of conspiratorial content?

RQ3. How does the platform's governance practice impact the communication of conspiracy theories?

RQ4. What are the key characteristics and monetizing strategies of conspiracy theory propagators?

To investigate the platforms' technological features (RQ1), business model (RQ2), and governance practices (RQ3), we conduct a documentation analysis of media reports and the platforms own news updates alongside an in-depth examination of each

platform's functionality and interface. For example, we collected 200 newsletters from Gab (2021-2022) that offer valuable insights into key technological developments on the platform.

To answer RQ4, we rely on data from our larger conspiracy theory research project and identified 20 prominent conspiracy theory channels and profiles from *BitChute* and *Gab*, respectively. To gain insights into these actors and their monetization strategies, this study creates comprehensive profiles for each user by

- investigating their posts or videos to identify the most reoccurring themes;
- tracking and examining the web URLs presented on their page that lead to personal websites, donation pages, merchandising/publications;
- analyzing their interaction with other users on the platform.

Findings from our study shed light on how *BitChute* and *Gab* have positioned themselves as technological equivalents to their "mainstream" counterparts by offering similar features and interfaces. Rhetorically, however, they differ from "big tech" in that they present themselves as defenders of free speech and fighters against censorship. However, these platforms do not operate in a lawless zone, they moderate content – especially violent and pornographic content – to legitimize themselves. At the actor level, our preliminary findings suggest that both platforms provide conspiracy propagators a fertile refuge through which they can maintain their presence and connection with their followers – which also allows them to profit from their visibility by receiving in-platform monetary rewards or by directing followers to external websites where they can support them financially.

Consistent with previous research, our study of individual conspiracy propagandists suggests that de-platforming effectively minimizes the reach of disinformation and extreme speech (Rauchfleisch & Kaiser, 2021). However, we also argue that these may merely be short-term effects, as it takes time for conspiracy propagandists and "alternative" platforms to establish an "alternative" ecology. In the long run, conspiracy propagandists can rebuild their network through cross-platform content distribution and as long as the financial rewards remain, the reduced reach of "mainstream" social media users does not deter profit-driven conspiracy theory entrepreneurs from producing and disseminating content.

Significance

Conceptually, we advance research on conspiracy theories in platform environments by introducing a framework that allows scholars to interrogate why certain platforms seem to be more attractive to conspiracy communities than others. In addition, we inform platformization studies by applying a widely used concept to a specific and timely phenomenon. *Empirically*, we shed light on two under-researched platforms in the context of conspiracy theory communication.

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