FEMINIST QUEEN OR CONSPIRACY THEORIST? FEMALE SPREADERS OF WOMEN’S HEALTH DISINFORMATION

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Introduction

Soon after the Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization decision overturned the federal right to abortion in the United States, an investigation by Reveal, Mother Jones, and UC Berkeley revealed a disinformation campaign against birth control, driven by anti-abortion influencers (Reveal, 2022). Anti-abortion activists strive for fetuses to have a fundamental right to life, which they hope to achieve not only by illegalizing abortion, but also removing access to birth control they consider to be abortion, i.e., ‘Plan B,’ intrauterine devices, or the pill.

Disinformation targeting abortion and birth control is partially rooted in conspiracy, particularly the Great Replacement Theory, which plays on fears of white people being “replaced” by people of color (Samuels & Potts, 2022). This notion is a long-standing issue of the anti-abortion movement, as early successes in banning abortion were partially motivated by fears of white people having fewer babies than people of color (Holland, 2020). Studies have shown that Black Americans believe in conspiracy theories about birth control, e.g., that it is deployed by the government as a form of genocide against Black people (Thorburn & Bogart, 2005).

Unfortunately, though, these beliefs are not entirely unfounded. This problematizes definitions of conspiracy theories as “false, harmful, and unjustified”—notably only one definition (Graumann & Moscovici, 2012, p. 204). Black Americans, for instance, have long undergone inhumane experimentation by the American medical system, e.g., the
infamous Tuskegee syphilis study. The assault on birth control is rooted in real experiences, as women have long complained about the side effects, while men are spared (Healthline, 2018). In fact, Graumann and Moscovici (2012) argue that those with fewer civil liberties (e.g., Black Americans, women, and particularly Black women due to intersectional oppression) are more likely to believe in conspiracy theories.

Embodied experiences of suffering at the hands of American institutions—both state and medical—are being weaponized to lobby and campaign for laws that limit reproductive freedom.

This tension is at the heart of this paper (main RQ):

_What is the connection between embodied knowledge and the subsequent spread of disinformation and conspiracy theories?_

**Feminist knowledge: devalued and remade**

Women’s knowledge and experience have long been marginalized in the public sphere (Shapin & Schaffer, 2011). Pre-1900, women were trusted in one realm: reproductive health (Holland, 2020). Midwives delivered babies and cared for pregnant women, and abortion was legal up to the point of quickening—when the woman can feel the fetus move—which only the woman herself could attest to (ibid.). After male doctors took control of this realm, though, abortion quickly became illegal, until _Roe v. Wade_ in 1973 granted federal protections for abortion again (Wajcman, 1991).

It is thus vital for women to have a strong situated knowledge practice. Situated knowledge (Haraway, 1988) is a practice of valuing embodied knowledge and that of marginalized folks over institutional, Westernized, and often male knowledge practices. Knowledge grounded in individual and cultural experience (ibid.) can offer a way to reclaim control and power from those who claim objectivity merely because they are at the top of the hierarchy (historically, white upper-class men).

**Populist expertise**

Troublingly, though, feminist knowledge practices share similarities with those of conspiracy-theory-style thinking, or what Marwick and Partin (2022) identified as “populist expertise” among followers of the conspiracy theory QAnon. Believing your own body is necessary. Believing your own research over that of experts (Fenster, 1999), which is increasing among the American population (Kennedy et al., 2022), can be extremely problematic. The internet and social media, in particular, provide an avenue both for collective knowledge-sharing and knowledge-making, thus providing control over one’s life experience (incl. medical), and seeking out information that can align with any worldview, incl. a false one (Enders et al., 2021; Theocharis et al., 2021).

Thus, we develop a framework that builds on both situated knowledge, and conspiracy-theory thinking as knowledge-making practices to identify the ways in which the embodied knowledge of marginalized folks is being co-opted to spread disinformation.

*(Gendered) Disinformation and conspiracy*
To this point, scholars have generally conceptualized gendered disinformation as disinformation which is weaponized against women, particularly by those in the “manosphere” (Marwick & Lewis, 2017) or state-aligned disinformation that excludes women from politics (Judson et al., 2020) as opposed to thinking of gendered disinformation as that which is wielded by women. There is, however, emerging scholarship on the topic as it relates to QAnon, the alt-right conspiracy theory (Bender, 2022; Bloom & Moskalenko, 2021) and extant research within terrorism studies (Bloom, 2012), that speaks to women as producers of disinformation and conspiracy (Frydenlund & Leidig, 2022).

Problematically, though, scholarship that addresses women’s power to wield disinformation often roots this in maternity (Leidig, 2021). The colloquial term for female members of QAnon, for instance, is “QAmoms,” as they are primarily involved in the #SaveTheChildren conspiracy theory, a subset of QAnon that believes children are trafficked by the ‘deep state’ (Bloom & Moskalenko, 2021). Although we cannot ignore that propaganda spread by women is imbricated with sexist campaigns created by men, and at times does emphasize children and motherhood, we should elucidate the ways in which women as individuals (rather than mothers) are active agents in the spread of disinformation to keep from reproducing the notion that women are merely “passive victims” of information technology (McGaw, 1989), including disinformation and conspiracy. Further, we should complicate the notion of men as powerful oppressors over either resisting or submissive women by thinking through the ways in which women enact power over each other in disinformation campaigns.

**Data collection**

Following Moran et al. (2022), we engage in social media observation of public Instagram accounts of prominent anti-abortion organizations and female leaders of said organizations. First, we identified all anti-abortion organizations in the United States with active Instagram accounts. We then identified the presidents of said accounts and focused on the active and public accounts of female presidents, given our focus on female knowledge production. After creating a new Instagram account as a researcher for identification purposes, we followed all accounts (n=29). From February 13, 2023 to February 27, 2023, we engaged in one hour of data collection per day, in which all stories from each observed account were observed and collected using a screen recording app, with supplemental collection of posts. At the end of each session, new accounts were followed when recommended by the extant accounts, i.e., through reposting said accounts on stories and in posts, resulting in a total count of 154. Following each day of data collection, the first author wrote a thematic analytical memo with open codes of all data, compounded daily (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This study received IRB approval on June 10, 2022.

**Preliminary data analysis**

Two authors engaged in data analysis of the 14 hours of data and associated memos. We rely on critical technocultural discourse analysis (Brock, 2018) to examine the images, videos, and text in our corpus. Based on preliminary analysis, our themes support our argument that:
Prominent members and young activists in the anti-abortion movement have weaponized feminist knowledge-production and grains of embodied experience to spread harmful disinformation campaigns, which at times snowball into (racially-motivated) conspiracy theories for political and/or financial gain.
References


