



Selected Papers of #AoIR2023:
The 24th Annual Conference of the
Association of Internet Researchers
Philadelphia, PA, USA / 18-23 Oct 2023

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

Zelly Martin
University of Texas at Austin

Inga Trauthig
University of Texas at Austin

Samuel Woolley
University of Texas at Austin

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

Suggested Citation (APA): Martin, Z., Trauthig, I., & Woolley, S. (2023, October). *Feminist queen or conspiracy theorist: Female spreaders of women's health disinformation*. Paper presented at AoIR2023: The 24th Annual Conference of the Association of Internet Researchers. Philadelphia, PA, USA: AoIR. Retrieved from <http://spir.aoir.org>.

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

- Bender, E. (2022). Anger in the overlooked: A gendered analysis of the January 6, 2021 Capitol Hill breach. *Theses/Capstones/Creative Projects*.
https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/university_honors_program/164
- Bloom, M. (2012). *Bombshell: Women and terrorism*. University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Bloom, M., & Moskalenko, S. (2021). *Pastels and pedophiles: Inside the mind of QAnon*. Stanford University Press.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Brock, A. (2018). Critical technocultural discourse analysis. *New Media & Society*, 20(3), 1012–1030. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444816677532>
- Enders, A. M., Uscinski, J. E., Seelig, M. I., Klofstad, C. A., Wuchty, S., Funchion, J. R., Murthi, M. N., Premaratne, K., & Stoler, J. (2021). The relationship Between social media use and beliefs in conspiracy theories and misinformation. *Political Behavior*.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-021-09734-6>
- Fenster, M. (1999). *Conspiracy theories: Secrecy and power in American culture*. U of Minnesota Press.
- Frydenlund, I., & Leidig, E. (2022). Introduction: “Love Jihad”: Sexuality, reproduction and the construction of the predatory Muslim male. *Religions*, 13(3), Article 3.
<https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13030201>
- Graumann, C. F., & Moscovici, S. (2012). *Changing conceptions of conspiracy*. Springer Science & Business Media.
- Haraway, D. (1988). Situated knowledges: The science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective. *Feminist Studies*, 14(3), 575–599.
- Healthline. (2018, August 3). Birth control side effects: Risks and long-term safety of the Pill. *Healthline*. <https://www.healthline.com/health/birth-control-side-effects>
- Holland, J. L. (2020). *Tiny you: A Western history of the anti-abortion movement*. Univ of California Press.
- Judson, E., Atay, A., Krasodonski-Jones, A., Lasko-Skinner, R., & Smith, J. (2020). *Engendering hate: The contours of state-aligned gendered disinformation online: October 2020*. DEMOS. <https://dera.ioe.ac.uk//36786/1/Engendering-Hate-Report-FINAL.pdf>
- Kennedy, B., Tyson, A., & Funk, C. (2022, February 15). Americans’ trust in scientists, other groups declines. *Pew Research Center Science & Society*.
<https://www.pewresearch.org/science/2022/02/15/americans-trust-in-scientists-other-groups-declines/>

Leidig, E. (2021). From love Jihad to grooming gangs: Tracing flows of the hypersexual Muslim male through far-right female influencers. *Religions*, 12(12), Article 12. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12121083>

Marwick, A. E., & Partin, W. C. (2022). Constructing alternative facts: Populist expertise and the QAnon conspiracy. *New Media & Society*, 14614448221090200. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448221090201>

Marwick, A., & Lewis, R. (2017). Media manipulation and disinformation online. *Data & Society*, 106.

McGaw, J. A. (1989). No passive victims, no separate spheres: A feminist perspective on technology's history. In S. H. Cutcliffe & R. C. Post (Eds.), *In context: History and the history of technology: Essays in honor of Melvin Kranzberg* (Vol. 1, pp. 172–191). Lehigh University Press.

Moran, R. E., Grasso, I., & Koltai, K. (2022). Folk theories of avoiding content moderation: How vaccine-opposed influencers amplify vaccine opposition on Instagram. *Social Media + Society*, 8(4), 20563051221144252. <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051221144252>

Reveal. (2022, October 8). The long campaign to turn birth control into the new abortion. *Reveal*. <http://revealnews.org/podcast/the-long-campaign-to-turn-birth-control-into-the-new-abortion/>

Samuels, A., & Potts, M. (2022, July 25). How the fight to ban abortion is rooted in the 'Great Replacement' theory. *FiveThirtyEight*. <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/how-the-fight-to-ban-abortion-is-rooted-in-the-great-replacement-theory/>

Shapin, S., & Schaffer, S. (2011). Leviathan and the air-Pump: Hobbes, Boyle, and the experimental life. In *Leviathan and the air-pump*. Princeton University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400838493>

Theocharis, Y., Cardenal, A., Jin, S., Aalberg, T., Hopmann, D. N., Strömbäck, J., Castro, L., Esser, F., Van Aelst, P., de Vreese, C., Corbu, N., Koc-Michalska, K., Matthes, J., Schemer, C., Sheaffer, T., Splendore, S., Stanyer, J., Stępińska, A., & Štětka, V. (2021). Does the platform matter? Social media and COVID-19 conspiracy theory beliefs in 17 countries. *New Media & Society*, 14614448211045666. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448211045666>

Thorburn, S., & Bogart, L. M. (2005). Conspiracy beliefs about birth control: Barriers to pregnancy prevention among African Americans of reproductive age. *Health Education & Behavior*, 32(4), 474–487.

Wajcman, J. (1991). Reproductive technology: Delivered into men's hands. In *Feminism Confronts Technology* (pp. 54–80). Penn State Press.