



LUND UNIVERSITY

Conclusion

Conspiracism's Contexts

Birchall, Clare; Blanuša, Nebojša ; Butter, Michael; Drazkiewicz, Elzbieta; Madisson, Mari-Liis; Knight, Peter

Published in:
Conspiracy Theories in the European Digital Sphere

DOI:
[10.4324/9781003667223-14](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003667223-14)

2026

Document Version:
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Birchall, C., Blanuša, N., Butter, M., Drazkiewicz, E., Madisson, M.-L., & Knight, P. (2026). Conclusion: Conspiracism's Contexts. In C. Birchall, N. Blanuša, M. Butter, E. Drazkiewicz, P. Knight, & M.-L. Madisson (Eds.), *Conspiracy Theories in the European Digital Sphere* (pp. 371-376). Routledge.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003667223-14>

Total number of authors:
6

General rights

Unless other specific re-use rights are stated the following general rights apply:
Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal

Read more about Creative commons licenses: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/>

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

LUND UNIVERSITY

PO Box 117
221 00 Lund
+46 46-222 00 00

CONCLUSION

Conspiracism's Contexts

*Clare Birchall, Nebojša Blanuša, Michael Butter,
Elżbieta Drążkiewicz, Mari-Liis Madisson and
Peter Knight*

This volume and the research that undergirds it began with a deceptively simple question: how do online conspiracy theories operate across Europe? The answer, as our research demonstrates, is anything but simple. If there is one overarching conclusion to draw from the chapters assembled here, it is that one size does not fit all. Conspiracist narratives may appear to travel easily across borders, assisted by the affordances of social media, but their meanings, functions and consequences are profoundly shaped by local histories, political cultures and media environments. Attempts to impose universal explanatory frameworks – particularly those imported wholesale from the US – risk flattening this complexity and misdiagnosing the problem. Therefore, our research challenges assumptions about conspiracism as a uniform phenomenon. It reveals a dynamic interplay between global circulation and local adaptation, between transnational narratives and regionally specific concerns and grievances. As a way of closing this multi-authored book, we summarise findings and offer recommendations for policy, practice and scholarship.

Conspiracy theories are conditioned by regional European histories and experiences with freedom of expression, democratic and epistemic norms, state control, conflict, authoritarianism and propaganda. These legacies shape the content of conspiracist narratives and also their position within the political and cultural landscape. In some regions, conspiracy theories are marginal, associated with fringe actors and delegitimised discourse. In others, they occupy a more ambiguous space, mobilised by both those in power and those seeking to hold power to account. In fact, one of the most striking findings across our case study regions is the variable positioning of conspiracy theories on the spectrum between legitimacy and illegitimacy.

This variability complicates any attempt to define conspiracism in purely epistemic terms – as a deviation from truth or rationality. Instead, conspiracy theories

must be understood as political and cultural discourses and practices, embedded in local struggles over authority, legitimacy and identity. For example, in post-authoritarian contexts, conspiracist discourse (from below, rather than above) may resonate with lived experiences of secrecy and surveillance, while in regions marked by geopolitical vulnerability, narratives of foreign interference may acquire heightened plausibility. For example, in Poland conspiracist concerns over Covid-era restrictions on movement clearly resonated with memories of control, which included at times the imposition of martial law, during the Polish People's Republic. In the Baltic region, tales about Russian infiltration and interference hit an altogether graver note than they would, for example, in the UK. These dynamics underscore the inadequacy of universalising models and the necessity of the kind of context-sensitive approaches we have employed in this volume.

Such complexity demands analytical frameworks that move beyond pathologising conspiracism as an aberration on the one hand and universalising tendencies on the other. We must instead interrogate the conditions under which conspiracist discourse becomes politically expedient, culturally resonant or socially consequential. This requires attention to the content of conspiracy theories as well as how they articulate grievances, mobilise identities and structure imaginaries of power.

The dominance of US-centric reference points in both academic and policy discourse has obscured these complexities. Frameworks developed to explain conspiracism in the American context – with its particular political formations, cleavages, culture wars, subcultures and media ecology – do not always map neatly onto European realities. Nor do strategies for countering disinformation, often premised on civil society capacity, technological solutionism, philanthropy and a network of institutions invested in liberal rationality that reflect US conditions. Our research demonstrates that importing these models wholesale is not only ineffective but potentially counterproductive. It risks misaligning interventions with local priorities, overlooking structural drivers of distrust and reproducing epistemic hierarchies that privilege Anglo-American perspectives. We argue that it is more effective to advocate for plural, locally attuned approaches that recognise European media systems, political cultures and regulatory regimes.

The European counter-disinformation sector itself must be understood in terms of heterogeneity. Our interviews with organisations across Europe in this sector emphasise the fact that far from constituting a unified field, it comprises a highly variegated assemblage of initiatives, shaped by divergent funding structures, political priorities and problem definitions. Some countries, such as Germany, benefit from robust institutional frameworks and sustained investment, while others, such as Poland, rely on precarious project-based funding or external support from tech companies and US agencies. This unevenness has profound implications for capacity, collaboration and resilience.

The new Trump administration marked a sea change in tolerance for and even promotion of conspiracism online. Many hitherto deplatformed conspiracy-laden social media accounts were replatformed, including that of Trump himself.

Concurrently, organisations tasked with curbing conspiracism (among other forms of disinformation) were castigated and in some cases, challenged in court or Congress as free speech evangelism came to prominence. The Trump administration has argued that the work of fact-checkers and the EU's Digital Services Act (DSA) in general 'are examples of censorship that disproportionately affect voices on the right and American technology companies, like X' (Guo 2026). Such claims, of course, are themselves conspiracist – positioning a liberal 'censorship industrial complex' plotting against the US right. Towards the end of our research, counter-disinformation organisations in the US came under attack with unprecedented force. In December 2025, the State Department instructed staff to reject visas for fact-checkers or content moderators (Bond 2025). This led to some high-profile figures being banned from entry, including former EU Commissioner Thierry Breton (Nadler 2025).

Having claimed in this book that we cannot always look stateside to understand the situation in Europe, it is clear that a populist playbook is also being used here albeit with local flavour. An understandable response is to reaffirm the scientific neutrality of countering disinformation. However, what we found is that this can play into the hands of those actors determined to stoke 'culture wars'. It may therefore be more effective to clearly state how the concept of disinformation and the counter-disinformation project are rooted in and protective of the tenets of social liberal democracy and the ideal of the public sphere that are based on people having access to quality information. To strengthen this, the sector can make a case for exactly why this political settlement promotes equality and agency more than authoritarianism, for example. Rather than waiting for an accusation of being political, the counter-disinformation sector should be part of a wider conversation promoting the merits of social democracy.

While the counter-disinformation sector in Europe is undeniably vibrant, it is therefore also vulnerable – to politicisation, harassment, strategic litigation and shifts in corporate or geopolitical priorities. Reliance on short-term funding streams undercuts possibilities for long-term planning, agile responses to emerging technologies and pressures and the cultivation of stable expertise. In some contexts, precarity translates into high turnover and insecure work, limiting effectiveness and eroding institutional memory. These structural constraints demand urgent attention if the sector is to fulfil its mandate in a rapidly evolving information environment.

Again and again, our case studies in this book reveal the inadequacy of approaches that treat conspiracy theories as mere informational errors to be corrected (through, e.g. fact-checking). Such strategies rest on an error model of communication, which assumes that misinformation results from cognitive deficits or lack of access to accurate information. Our findings decisively refute this assumption. Conspiracism is not simply a failure of reason from 'below', it is a mode of belonging, a way of articulating identity in contexts of perceived marginalisation or mistrust (Harambam 2020). From 'above', it is a highly effective mobilising discourse based on a politics of grievance and fear (Bergmann 2025).

This insight has profound implications for intervention. Efforts to debunk conspiracist claims without addressing underlying socio-political conditions are unlikely to succeed and may even exacerbate distrust. Responses should rather engage with the affective and relational dimensions of conspiracism, recognising its role in mediating experiences of power, vulnerability and injustice as well as the ways it has been systematically weaponised.

We have found that conspiracy theories do not merely circulate; they hijack attention, saturating the discursive space and crowding out more nuanced debate on contentious issues such as immigration, as [chapter 3](#) on the Great Replacement showed. Media coverage, even when critical, often amplifies conspiracist narratives, granting them visibility and legitimacy. This dynamic reflects broader logics of the attention economy, in which outrage and sensationalism are monetised by platforms and exploited by actors seeking influence.

Addressing conspiracism therefore requires interventions at the level of media infrastructures and economic incentives, not merely content moderation or fact-checking. Strategies must disincentivise the amplification of conspiracist discourse – through demonetisation, algorithmic reform and investment in alternative narratives that foster constructive public debate. This will also avoid the traps of critical digital media literacy initiatives which place the onus on individuals to manage their information environment over pursuing structural solutions.

Another critical finding is one that has been important to the study of conspiracism in the humanities: that conspiracy theories should be understood not as the cause of a crisis in trust but as a symptom of deeper structural conditions such as economic precarity, political disenfranchisement or institutional opacity ([Knight 2000](#); [Melley 2000](#)). While conspiracism may exacerbate distrust, it does not originate it. This distinction matters because it shifts the focus from correcting beliefs to addressing the material and symbolic conditions that render conspiracist narratives attractive or plausible. This perspective also cautions against alarmist framings that conflate conspiracism with imminent violence. While some perpetrators of violent acts entertain conspiracist beliefs, the causal link is weaker than commonly assumed ([Belton et al. 2025](#)). Overstating this connection risks misdirecting resources and legitimising disproportionate interventions that infringe on civil liberties.

Equally, our research troubles a simplistic, journalistic story about the centrality of social media as an engine of conspiracism (e.g. [Gabriel 2017](#)). We argue, rather, that while social media platforms play a significant role in disseminating conspiracist content, they are only part of the story. Conspiracism is sustained by a complex ecosystem that includes influencers, activist (or pseudo-activist) groups, partisan media, book publishing and political actors operating across online and offline spaces. Focusing exclusively on platform governance obscures these dynamics and limits the effectiveness of interventions.

Moreover, content moderation on mainstream platforms often displaces conspiracist discourse to unmoderated environments such as Telegram, where it may

become more extreme (VSquare 2023). This raises difficult questions about the trade-offs between visibility and privacy, surveillance and radicalisation. Should conspiracism be encouraged to migrate to private silos? What is at stake in terms of public debate in such a move? There are no easy answers, but any strategy must grapple with these dilemmas.

Compounding these challenges is the notable quantity of conspiracist-adjacent discourse, which often operates through innuendo, speculation, memes and implication rather than explicit claims. As well as necessitating new ways of thinking from scholars of conspiracism, such grey zones frustrate efforts to identify, regulate or counter conspiracism using conventional tools of content moderation or legal sanction. They also blur boundaries between satire, critique and disinformation, placing the emphasis on nuanced interpretation that is attuned to context as well as raising questions about freedom of speech and the limits of intervention in democratic societies.

We also found that while many governments blame conspiracism and disinformation on foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI), this can often deflect from homegrown conspiracist narratives. While it is clear that FIMI does generate conspiracy theories, our research shows that many theories are domestic, rooted in local grievances and cultural imaginaries. FIMI exploits and amplifies rather than originates these narratives, creating feedback loops that reinforce distrust and polarisation. Recognising this dynamic is crucial for designing interventions that address external threats and internal vulnerabilities alike, without collapsing them into a single undifferentiated category.

Drawing on these findings, we propose the following recommendations, with the recognition that some of these are more utopian than others:

- 1 Tailor solutions to local contexts: Avoid importing US-centric models wholesale. Recognise regional differences while establishing EU-wide minimum standards.
- 2 Address underlying drivers of conspiracism: Tackle structural grievances and institutional trust deficits.
- 3 Differentiate conspiracy theories from other forms of misinformation: Treat them as identity- and grievance-based phenomena, not mere informational inaccuracies.
- 4 Create trustworthy institutions: Implement initiatives that make institutions worthy of trust rather than lamenting its decline.
- 5 Disincentivise online conspiracism: Reform attention economy dynamics, demonetise outrage and invest in alternative narratives.
- 6 Look beyond social media: Consider the full conspiracist ecosystem, including offline circulation and political actors.
- 7 Resist conspiracism's discursive dominance: Media neutrality does not require platforming denialism or veiled racism.
- 8 Reform funding models for counter-disinformation work: Enable long-term planning, reduce precarity and enhance agility.

- 9 Acknowledge the political nature of disinformation: Be transparent about the criteria and motivations for evaluating and promoting information quality.
- 10 Avoid alarmism: Respond proportionately to the actual risks posed by conspiracism.

In summary, conspiracy theories are not merely informational aberrations; they are cultural and political phenomena that demand nuanced, context-sensitive responses. To confront conspiracism effectively, it is important to move beyond universalising or information-based models and towards modes of understanding and strategies that acknowledge the relationship between top-down and bottom-up conspiracism, the constantly shifting place of conspiracism on the continuum of epistemic legitimacy, how conspiracism is assisted by the affordances of digital media and, lastly, the lived realities of trust and distrust that are embedded in complex social histories.

This volume offers a foundation for such an approach. It invites scholars, policy-makers and counter-disinformation practitioners to rethink the epistemic and political assumptions underpinning current interventions and framings, and to imagine alternatives that are democratic, proportionate and attuned to the diverse ecosystem of European conspiracism. In doing so, it affirms a broader commitment to cultivate the conditions of possibility for informed, inclusive and resilient public discourse.

References

- Belton, Emma, Tiahna Mulholland and Kristina Murphy. 2025. 'Linking Conspiracy Beliefs with Violence: A Scoping Review of the Empirical Literature'. *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 6 March, 1–27. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2025.2462601>.
- Bergmann, Eirikur. 2025. *Weaponizing Conspiracy Theories*. Conspiracy Theories. Routledge Taylor & Francis Group.
- Bond, Shannon. 2025. 'State Department to Deny Visas to Fact Checkers and Others, Citing "Censorship"'. Technology. *NPR*, 4 December. <https://www.npr.org/2025/12/04/nx-s1-5633444/trump-content-moderation-visas-censorship>.
- Gabriel, Renaldo. 2017. 'How Instagram Drives Conspiracy Theories'. *VICE*, 28 April. <https://www.vice.com/en/article/how-instagram-drives-conspiracy-theories/>.
- Guo, Eileen. 2026. 'What It's Like to Be Banned from the US for Fighting Online Hate?' *MIT Technology Review*, 19 January. <https://www.technologyreview.com/2026/01/19/1131384/what-its-like-to-be-banned-from-the-us-for-fighting-online-hate/>.
- Harambam, Jaron. 2020. *Contemporary Conspiracy Culture. Truth and Knowledge in an Era of Epistemic Instability*. Routledge.
- Knight, Peter. 2000. *Conspiracy Culture: From the Kennedy Assassination to The X-Files*. Routledge.
- Melley, Timothy. 2000. *Empire of Conspiracy: The Culture of Paranoia in Postwar America*. Cornell University Press.
- Nadler, Gabrielle. 2025. 'Five Europeans Denied US Visas for Combating Hate Speech Online, Accused of Censoring "American Viewpoints"'. *France 24*, 24 December. <https://www.france24.com/en/technology/20251224-us-bars-five-europeans-over-alleged-pressure-on-tech-firms-to-censor-speech>.
- VSquare. 2023. *Telegram, the Free Zone for Disinformation and Conspiracies*. Investigative Report. <https://vsquare.org/telegram-the-free-zone-for-disinformation-and-conspiracies/>.