

Conspiracy Theories, Fake News, and Defamation in the Digital Age: A Yellow Criminology Perspective

Arnon Edelstein*

Professor, Criminologist, Ashkelon Academic College, Ashkelon, Israel

***Corresponding Author:** Abdul Gatrad, Consultant Paediatrician and Honorary Professor, Manor Hospital, Walsall, UK and University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY, USA.

Received: March 09, 2026; **Published:** May 06, 2026

Abstract

This article examines the proliferation of conspiracy theories, fake news, and disinformation through the lens of yellow criminology. While these phenomena are ancient, contemporary digital technologies have amplified their reach and impact. The analysis integrates theoretical frameworks from criminology, sociology, and psychology to explain why these narratives attract adherents and how they threaten democratic institutions. The article proposes that criminology must urgently address these issues as serious social problems requiring empirical investigation and evidence-based intervention strategies.

Keywords: *Conspiracy Theories; Fake News; Yellow Criminology; Crime*

Historical Context and Background

Contrary to popular belief, the phenomena of conspiracy theories, fake news, and disinformation are as ancient as humanity itself, with analogues observed throughout the animal kingdom [7]. Both humans and animals have historically employed deceptive practices for various purposes, including self-enhancement, elimination of rivals, and scapegoating. For example, some primates make false alarm calls when they find food to drive away competitors and monopolize resources [29]. Historical examples include beliefs such as the flat earth theory and events like the Salem witch trials [16]. However, these age-old phenomena have acquired unprecedented power and reach through contemporary technological developments, particularly the global expansion of the internet and digital communication platforms [33].

The development of social networks on computers, tablets, and mobile devices enables mass defamation of individuals, damaging their reputation and facilitating social ostracism, particularly affecting children and adolescents [3]. Technology development has made the creation of fake news considerably easier through tactics such as selective presentation of information to create biases, biased reporting of research findings, and using images and videos extracted from different or earlier contexts [2]. The analytical framework for examining conspiracy theories and fabricated news should be integrated with the study of defamation, as these phenomena share common mechanisms and often overlap in their manifestations and consequences [25].

Conceptual definitions

For the purposes of this analysis, conspiracy theories, fake news, and disinformation are defined as the systematic use of media and computational tools to disseminate false or misleading information, engage in defamatory practices, and create political, economic, social, and legal impacts on public consciousness for the purpose of achieving political, economic, social, or psychological gains [35].

These activities may constitute violations of civil law, criminal law, or social norms for which formal legal frameworks have not yet been established, resulting in informal social sanctions such as boycotts [42].

Fake news

Fabricated news, commonly referred to as “fake news,” consists of deliberately constructed misinformation that mimics the format and stylistic conventions of legitimate news media content, thereby causing recipients to perceive it as credible and authoritative [23]. The concept of “information laundering” elucidates how extreme or fringe narratives are systematically introduced into mainstream discourse through search engine optimization, social media networks, and automated bot accounts, progressively obscuring their unreliable origins until they achieve a veneer of legitimacy [31].

The primary motivations for creating and disseminating fabricated news include economic profit derived from advertising revenue, social media engagement metrics (likes, shares, and views), and political advantages achieved through the manipulation of public opinion and electoral outcomes [40]. Research demonstrates that false news spreads significantly faster and more broadly than accurate information on social media platforms, reaching audiences six times faster than truthful content [40].

Conspiracy theories

Conspiracy theories are defined as beliefs that significant events or societal developments are the result of secret plots orchestrated by powerful groups harboring malicious intentions [12]. These theories are characterized by their unfalsifiable nature; any evidence contradicting the conspiracy is interpreted by adherents as further proof of the deception itself, creating a closed epistemological system resistant to empirical refutation [10].

The internet has fundamentally enabled the proliferation of conspiracy theories by removing traditional gatekeepers such as editors, fact-checkers, and institutional validators who previously controlled information dissemination [32]. This process has been accompanied by secularization trends and the sophisticated application of psychological principles to maximize the appeal and spread of conspiratorial content [13].

Contemporary examples

One prominent example emerged in 2020 when COVID-19 appeared and rumors about side effects of vaccinations arose and continue to spread [28]. Other well-known conspiracy theories address the assassinations of political leaders such as President Kennedy in the United States and Prime Minister Rabin in Israel [36]. While these theories and fake news may help some individuals psychologically process major disasters, their negative consequences can be substantial [12]. The consequences extend to increased criminal activity, threats to internal security, and the destabilization of democratic systems [22].

Theoretical explanations for the growth of conspiracy theories and disinformation

Crisis of trust

The erosion or complete loss of trust in legal, judicial, and political systems has created a significant void in social cohesion [15]. Conspiracy theories effectively fill this trust vacuum, assuming a role analogous to that historically played by religious institutions in providing explanatory frameworks for understanding societal events and power structures [17].

This substitution represents a fundamental shift in how individuals construct meaning and navigate uncertainty in contemporary society [37].

Anomie theory

Drawing on Durkheim's concept of anomie, the proliferation of conspiracy theories can be understood as a response to the perception that social norms are no longer clear or stable, particularly during periods of crisis or rapid social transformation [14]. When traditional normative structures weaken, individuals seek alternative frameworks to make sense of their social reality, often turning to conspiratorial explanations that provide seemingly coherent interpretations of complex phenomena [26,38].

Power and marginalization theory

Empirical evidence suggests that politically marginalized groups, as well as groups that have experienced historical trauma or systematic harm, demonstrate a greater propensity toward conspiratorial beliefs [20]. This tendency can be understood as a compensatory mechanism through which marginalized populations attempt to explain their disadvantaged position and attribute their circumstances to the malicious actions of powerful elites, thereby maintaining a sense of agency and resistance [16,39].

Psychological mechanisms: Why conspiracy theories and disinformation attract audiences

Cognitive needs

Conspiracy theories and fabricated news satisfy several fundamental cognitive needs [12].

First, they provide simple, comprehensible explanations for complex and multifaceted phenomena, thereby satisfying the human need for certainty and understanding in an increasingly complicated world [24]. Second, they enable pattern recognition and the attribution of intentionality to events, fulfilling the cognitive imperative to perceive order and purpose rather than randomness in social occurrences [43]. Third, they create an illusion of control, as understanding "the truth" behind events provides individuals with a sense of mastery over their environment, even when that understanding is based on false premises [12].

Self-image and identity needs

Belief in conspiracy theories serves important identity functions [12]. Belonging to a community of individuals who possess ostensibly special or hidden knowledge confers a sense of uniqueness and distinctiveness [20]. Additionally, the belief that one can perceive truths that others cannot generates feelings of intellectual superiority over the "blind masses" who remain deceived, thereby enhancing self-esteem and facilitating self-aggrandizement [11]. The attribution of malicious intentions to out-group members or elite actors can also function as a projection mechanism, allowing believers to externalize negative emotions or impulses [20]. Furthermore, conspiracy theories serve anxiety-reduction functions by providing continuous updates and explanations for threatening or uncertain situations, offering psychological comfort through the perception of knowledge and preparedness [37].

Social needs

Communities of conspiracy believers provide strong group identity and fulfill fundamental needs for social belonging, particularly in cases involving significant social or political issues [13]. Conspiracy theories function as mechanisms for explaining perceived threats to the social in-group, thereby serving a protective function through the "exposure" of alleged plots against the community [7]. This dynamic is particularly pronounced in contexts of social polarization, where conspiracy theories both reflect and reinforce existing group boundaries and intergroup conflict [38].

Characteristics of conspiracy theory adherents

Empirical research has identified several psychological characteristics that predict susceptibility to conspiracy theories [34]. These include low analytical thinking combined with high intuitive or heuristic reasoning, an external locus of control characterized by feelings of powerlessness and lack of control over life circumstances [1], and a tendency to perceive intentional patterns in random or complex events—a phenomenon known as teleological thinking [8]. These cognitive and personality traits interact to create vulnerability to conspiratorial thinking patterns [13].

Actors and motivations: Who initiates conspiracy theories and disinformation

The creation and dissemination of conspiracy theories and disinformation are driven by diverse motivations [42]. Economic profit represents a primary driver, generated through book sales, donations, advertising revenue, and other monetization strategies [4]. Political influence constitutes another major motivation, including efforts to manipulate electoral outcomes and shape public policy debates [21].

Foreign state actors frequently engage in disinformation campaigns aimed at destabilizing rival regimes, advancing geopolitical agendas, and influencing electoral processes in target nations [27]. Additional motivations include the pursuit of attention and elevated social status, genuine ideological belief in the narratives being promoted—often combined with material interests—and psychological coping mechanisms for managing personal anxiety or existential concerns [13].

While it is easier to understand the impulse to defame others as a result of revenge, envy, or other emotions, legal frameworks can provide effective defense for victims [30]. However, defamation sometimes arises from political motivations, especially when aimed at affecting electoral outcomes [5].

Impact and consequences

The proliferation of conspiracy theories and disinformation produces multiple harmful effects across societal domains [25]. The consequences have critical effects on individuals, groups, societies, and nations. There may even be international ramifications when one nation is blamed for fabricated events and other nations respond with attacks or impose embargos [27].

Individual level

Mental health outcomes are compromised through the generation of anxiety, confusion, and panic among populations exposed to contradictory and alarming information [22]. Research demonstrates that exposure to conspiracy theories can reduce civic engagement, decrease trust in institutions, and promote harmful health behaviors [13].

Institutional level

Trust in institutions suffers severe damage, with reduced confidence in media organizations, governmental bodies, legal systems, judicial processes, and democratic institutions more broadly [36]. These effects cascade to influence electoral outcomes and policy decisions, fundamentally compromising democratic governance [25].

Social level

Public opinion is systematically distorted, with widespread impact on political attitudes, policy preferences, and civic engagement [32]. Political polarization intensifies as conspiracy theories deepen social divisions and strengthen partisan identities, making cross-group dialogue and compromise increasingly difficult [38].

The criminological imperative

Given the magnitude of these impacts, criminology must urgently address conspiracy theories and disinformation as serious social problems requiring empirical investigation, theoretical development, and evidence-based intervention strategies [18]. The discipline's expertise in understanding deviance, social control, and the relationship between information and behavior positions it uniquely to contribute to addressing these critical challenges to social order and democratic functioning [6].

The field of yellow criminology—which focuses on crimes facilitated by digital technologies and their impact on contemporary society—provides a framework for analyzing these phenomena that threaten the foundations of truth, trust, and democratic governance [41]. Therefore, criminology must address these issues by developing integrative analyses and theories in order to understand and combat these dangerous effects on democratic regimes [18].

Conclusion

This article has examined the proliferation of conspiracy theories, fake news, and disinformation through multiple theoretical lenses, demonstrating how these ancient phenomena have acquired unprecedented power through digital technologies. The analysis reveals that psychological, sociological, and political factors converge to make individuals vulnerable to conspiratorial narratives, while diverse actors exploit these vulnerabilities for economic, political, and ideological gains. The consequences extend across individual, institutional, and social levels, threatening the foundations of democratic governance. Criminology, particularly through the emerging framework of yellow criminology, must assume a central role in researching these phenomena and developing evidence-based interventions to protect democratic institutions and public discourse.

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Volume 15 Issue 2 February 2026

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