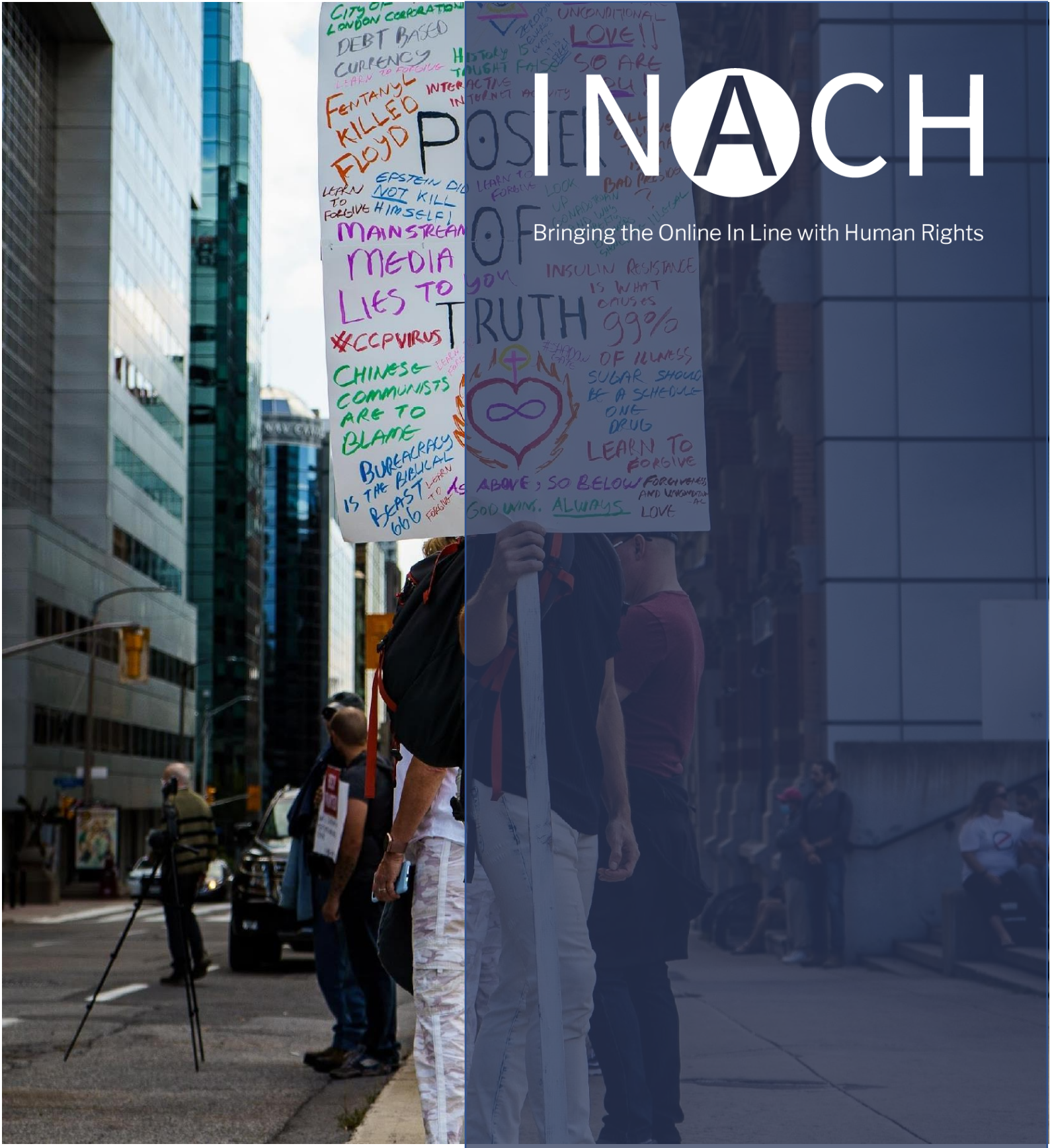

INACH

Bringing the Online In Line with Human Rights

The Rise of Conspiracies in Spreading Online Hate

– a state of the art report

by Adinde Schoorl

2021

Table of Contents

International Network Against Cyber Hate – INACH

INACH was founded in 2002 to use intervention and other preventive strategies against cyber hate. The member organisations are united in a systematic fight against cyber hate, for example as complaints offices, monitoring offices or online help desks. In their respective countries, they provide important contacts for politicians, internet providers, educational institutions, and users.

Funding for INACH is provided by its members, the European Commission, the BPB and other donors. The International Network Against Cyber Hate (INACH) unites multiple organizations from the EU, Israel, Russia, South America, and the United States. While starting as a network of online complaints offices, INACH today pursues a multi-dimensional approach of educational and preventive strategies.

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1. Introduction

During the start of the Covid-19 pandemic chaos erupted in different places in the world when people tried to set cell phone towers of 5G on fire. They believed that it was 5G that caused Covid-19. The people who attacked Capitol Hill in the United States in January 2021 came from different backgrounds and movements but all of them were convinced they were doing the right thing; they were saving Donald Trump from the fraud that was committed during the elections. They were led to believe in a conspiracy against the American President and decided to act upon it. It is a chilling example of what the effects can be of conspiracy theories. In 2016 a man entered a pizzeria in Washington carrying a gun. He believed that the restaurant was hiding children in the basement for the use of a paedophile network run by Hillary Clinton. He was surprised when he realized there was nothing to be found in the basement. These are all examples of misinformation leading to violence and they are a clear proof that conspiracy theories need to be taken seriously.

Conspiracy theories have always existed, but the development of the internet and the rise of social media platforms have helped to spread them much faster and further than in any other time before. Even much more worrying is the fact that online hate speech and conspiracy theories are now intertwined because one cannot be understood without the other anymore; anti-Asian hate is linked to the conspiracy theories on Covid-19, antisemitism is sowed into the QAnon theory and racism goes hand in hand with the Great Replacement theory. All of this will be explained more in depth in this report. The above-mentioned examples, and many others, show us that it is time to stop downplaying the harm of conspiracy theories and online hate speech. We now know that what is being said online can lead to real actions offline. In fact, it does not even make sense anymore to think about a clear division between our online- and offline lives and behaviour, since it is almost impossible to imagine our daily lives away from smartphones or tablets.

Therefore, in this report we focus upon conspiracy theories and the link to hate speech. We will answer the questions about what a conspiracy theory exactly is and why they are so attractive. With that, we will try to answer the question of why do we actually believe en masse in conspiracy theories? After that, the report will focus upon the role of social media in spreading conspiracy theories and misinformation and the specific characteristics of social media in doing so. If we say social media, we do not just mean the mainstream big platforms, but also the smaller alternative, and upcoming, platforms that have become a safe haven for extreme opinions. Third, we will have a look at four different theories that are connected to hate speech: the Great Replacement theory which believes that there exists a superior race that will go extinct eventually, the QAnon theory that could be seen as a pro-Trump fan club, the many different rumours and conspiracy theories surrounding Covid-19 and finally Eco-fascism, a mixture of environmentalism and white supremacy. The latter seems like a new theory but is actually the repetition of an old one. Finally, we will present our conclusions regarding the topic of conspiracy theories and online hate speech.

2. Conspiracy theories on social media

Before we look at the role of social media in spreading misinformation, it is important to first ask another essential question; what is a conspiracy theory exactly and why are they so attractive for people to believe in?

2.1 Why do we believe?

A conspiracy theory can be defined as: 'the belief in a proposed plot carried out in secret, usually by a powerful group of people who have some kind of sinister goal. With a sinister goal we mean something to gain from what they're doing, and they usually don't have people's best interests at heart. These people are focused on gaining something from it themselves (Douglas & Mills 2021). Conspiracy theories tell stories of wealthy and powerful people, they include horrible events and other details that connect many dots throughout history. We all love a good story but apart from that, why are these kinds of theories so attractive? Firstly, conspiracy theories often explain everything in detail, it all makes sense in the world of a conspiracist. As said before, it connects all the question marks and dots in world history. However, reality is often much more complicated and there is a lot that we do not know or cannot explain (yet). Especially during insecure times or major turning points in history, like a pandemic, people look for a theory that explains the chaos around them (Get the Trolls out!). For the past two years everything was insecure. We did not know when we would be allowed to leave our house again, to see our families or to go back to work. Every day the news told us something else about the future regulations, possible vaccines and a post-Covid world that still seems so far away. It makes sense to feel powerless and to look for an explanation of why something is happening, that way we can try to take control over the situation that remains so insecure. A conspiracy theory in this explanation gives back a sense of understanding (Douglas & Mills 2021). It means people can hold on to a justification about the chaotic world around them, like a so-called security blanket. Third, it is in our human nature to want to feel special. Many movies tell the story of someone who was the only one to know the real truth about the world and with that he or she became the ´chosen one´ to save the world. Think of movies like the Matrix, the Dan Brown stories, Lord of the Rings or Harry Potter. They all contain a character who had to save the world because he knew the actual truth while others did not. People like to think that they know better and that the rest of humanity acts like sheep. They have the actual truth in hand (Douglas & Mills 2021).
It is also in the human character to jump to quick conclusions based upon very little evidence, to see patterns when there really isn't one and to not be very analytical but rather intuitive in choosing what we believe in. Not all people have these characteristics, some of us are more thoughtful and analytical, and therefore are less susceptible to conspiracy theories. But many of us are and these characteristics are not very helpful in trying to dodge the rabbit holes that conspiracy theories are, especially in a world where misinformation and conspiracies flourish freely on the internet (Rogers & Mithani 2021). People who are more vulnerable to believing in fake news often have an 'inflated sense of their own intellectual competence' and are therefore

less likely to admit they were wrong about their beliefs. The combination of ignorance and overconfidence is a fertile ground for believing in conspiracy theories. This does however give an insight into how we could defend ourselves against conspiracy theories, namely with education and awareness raising. Through education we can learn to have the analytical skills to see through a conspiracy theory and avoid falling into a rabbit hole (Jarrett 2021).
Finally, it is not just us, it is also politics. By that we mean, misinformation and conspiracy theories are actively used by political parties and politicians to convince us of their truth. Especially politicians on the extreme right wing use the unease about immigrants or the reluctance to accept scientifically proven climate change and mix that with conspiracy theories to attract voters. And it is not just the politicians on the more extreme side of the political spectrum, all political parties do it to some extent. It has almost become inherent to the game of politics: presenting a story or truth to have followers believe in. How could they not, politicians know about the psychology of the people and the above-described factors of human nature. They know that easily digestible narratives that present a coherent worldview can be very effective, especially when the times we live in are chaotic and complicated.
To summarize, conspiracy theories are on the rise during chaotic times and play into the human desire to understand, to take control over their lives and to feel special. Of course, some more than others are susceptible to these kinds of circumstances due to characteristics like a lack of analytical thinking. Finally, conspiracy theories are used by politicians to convince potential voters of their truth.

2.2 Social media

The belief in conspiracy theories is not new, it is of all times. An example of an early conspiracy theory is the belief that the Illuminati organized the French revolution. However, currently there seems to be an increase of these conspiracy theories and of how many people are reached, and that is of course due to the existence of the internet and especially social media. Through the channels of these social media platforms, misinformation travels faster than it has ever done before. And it makes sense, most people now receive the news through social media, not a newspaper or the daily news broadcasts on television (Shearer & Mitchell 2021). But why is that? What specifically about these platforms leads to the spread of conspiracy theories? How can it be that misinformation travels faster than factually correct news through the same channels?

First and foremost, because social media platforms push a post that generates strong emotions. That often happens with fake news because a fake news post receives a lot of likes and gets shared more. Objective and balanced news does not generate equally strong emotions. Fake news posts then appear more on people's wall or in a feed and that way are read more and are again shared more than other news stories. Therefore, these platforms worsen the problem of fake news so to say, because they make sure misinformation gets spread even further than ´normal´ objective news would. And it is not just because of people who interact more with posts that widen the spread of the posts, it is also the algorithm; a post that generates a lot of interaction, is shown en masse to people by the algorithm. From a business point of view that makes sense; a social media

platform is just automatically promoting its most successful products to generate more interest and keep people longer on its platform. The more time people spend on a platform, the more successful these platforms are.

Social media led to the existence of so-called ´echo chambers´; what we see on our social media walls or feeds (e.g., information, opinions, and comments) is a constant echo of what we believe, it confirms what we already think and convinces us that this is the Truth with a capital t. These echo chambers exist because when we create an account while signing up with a social media platform, we fill in our interests, hobbies, and passions. Based upon that, the platform looks for information that we will like and click on. The platform also tracks what kind of posts or videos we read and watch and offers us more of the same to make sure we will stay on the platform and keep spending time there. But the consequence of it is that it makes us less open to other opinions, to other pieces of information that might contradict our truth. We probably feel too comfortable in these echo chambers to step out of them and look through another door to see what is there (Schock 2021). So how do we reach people if we want to take them away from conspiracy theories and the hate that is mixed with it?

In a way it is ironic; before, our problem was a lack of access to information and the creation of the internet was supposed to solve that. But now our problem seems to be an excess of information and we struggle to find the truth. Of course, this pandemic has been a perfect context for conspiracy theories as well. As has been stated before, in times of social upheaval, chaos and insecurity, people look for a theory to hold on to. And on top of that, because of this pandemic people also spend more time at home online and are exposed more than normally to fake news (Cox, Ogden, Jordan & Paille 2021). The main characteristic of a new disease is that we do not know everything about it yet, the knowledge on it keeps developing. But exactly that makes people suspicious and confirms the feeling that the government is withholding information from them. Not only regarding Covid-19, but also other topics. Hateful extremists understand the characteristics of social media and use it to their own advantage by spreading misinformation on purpose as a recruitment tool and to increase exposure. On one hand, they try to convince and attract new followers of their ´alternative truth´ and at the same time, the more people who read their theories, the better. Often, they use ´bots´ to share the misinformation. These are automated social media accounts of fake people.

To summarize, most of us receive the news through social media channels, since TV channels are less influential than they used to be and mostly only reach middle-aged people. Social media was designed to highlight posts that create a strong emotion, which is often the case with conspiracy theories. The development of the social media platforms led to echo chambers in which our beliefs are confirmed, and we are unlikely to step out of them to receive contradicting information. This mechanism has been intensified by the Covid-19 pandemic during which we are more isolated and spend more time online. All of these characteristics are used by extreme movements to lure people in and gain more followers.

2.3 Alternative social media platforms

Next to the mainstream social media platforms - Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, etc. - there are a lot of smaller alternative platforms that can be used for similar purposes. On one hand, that is a good thing; diversification of the market means less risk of a monopoly. It is good that the power over the market is not centralized in the hands of one company where they decide for us what we see online and what they do with our data. The more there is to choose for us regarding what platform we feel comfortable using, it means we are stronger as a consumer. The recent malfunctioning of Facebook that lasted over six hours underlines the importance of avoiding monopoly. Facebook owns WhatsApp and Instagram and for hours all three platforms were unreachable (Lyons 2021). But at the same time there is also another process at play here that is much less desirable.

When the big social media platforms decided to listen to the demand for more moderation against online hate speech, by setting up regulations and removing accounts, it sent a lot of extreme opinions away to look for another safe haven where they can find like-minded people. Recent research found that many Americans felt that mainstream social media platforms are censoring political discussions and that these platforms hold a liberal bias against them (Vogels, Perrin & Anderson 2020). This resulted in new platforms that seem to be set up exactly for that: receiving the extreme opinions that are not welcome anywhere else. Some are even designed for it. For example, despite stating that they are a neutral platform, several users reported that after signing up for the first time on Parler, the first suggestions of trends were openly racist trends. Because it was their first time signing up, it could not have been based upon an algorithm. In other words, the platform promotes racism to new users (Yakovlev 2020).

These alternative platforms have been linked to serious hate crimes on numerous occasions. Brenton Tarrant for example, is the shooter who killed 51 people in a mosque in New Zealand in 2019 and spent most of his time online. He was on the platform 4Chan and later 8Chan from 14 years old where he communicated with others who shared his racist ideas. His attack was live streamed on Facebook. He hardly had any human contact offline, most of his life happened online during the video games that he played. The references he had to present in order to obtain a gun were even of people who he only knew through a video game (Euronews 2020).

Another example would be Robert Bowers who expressed his antisemitism on the platform Gab before he initiated the attack on a synagogue in Pittsburgh. A friend who knew him for over a decade said he never expressed any antisemitism, he only appeared to be somewhat paranoid about the government and hostile to the United Nations and its blue helmets. His online behaviour, however, paints a very different picture (Lord 2018).

Most of these alternative platforms were until recently quite unknown with the wider public. However, when former president of the US Donald Trump was banned from Facebook and Twitter and at the same time the alternative platform Parler was shut down, Trump announced that from now on he would be using Telegram. Quickly after that, Telegram became the second most downloaded app in the US (Flegontova 2021). Telegram is a messenger service for private chat, groups, or channels. It has very few restrictions on hate speech and the platform uses its privacy and security settings to advertise and appeal to people. Naturally, it has attracted groups who need this level of security. Both jihadists and extreme right groups are active on it.

Most people use social media during their daily lives to see what others are doing or to look at beautiful pictures. But there are also subgroups that actually use it to communicate with each other. Discord for example, was designed for the gaming community but is often used by extremist groups to coordinate their campaigns on other platforms. For instance, in Germany the right-wing extremist group ´Reconquista Germanica´ uses Discord to coordinate its strategy for posts on Twitter and other social media platforms. In other words, they use this medium to talk openly to each other about their strategies on other platforms where they would not be able to talk so freely regarding these topics. On Discord there is simply less supervision on what is actually happening on their platform. However, in January 2021 Discord did ban the server of r/WallstreetBets. This group is responsible for pumping up stocks on Wall Street. Discord claimed they did not ban the server because of that, but because of the continuous spread of hateful and discriminatory content on it (Peters 2021). However, according to members of the r/WallstreetBets the shutting down by Discord was just the price they paid for being successful. They recognized the existence of racial slurs on their server but said they were working on moderating it (Sonnemaker 2021). Interestingly enough, 24 hours later the group was welcomed back on Discord and reported to have even received help from Discord to moderate its group (Warren 2021).
The opposite also happens; extremists often use the mainstream platforms to show more moderate content that will not be removed. Under the post they will tell their followers to go to their account on Telegram for example, to see more (extreme) content. That way, they use the huge public available on mainstream platforms to guide them towards alternative platforms where there is more freedom. According to a report from the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), more than 112,000 tweets were posted on Twitter containing links to Gab content between June 7 and August 22, 2021, which included antisemitism, misinformation relating to Covid-19 and QAnon conspiracy theories (Palmer 2021).
The content available on alternative platforms includes racism, misogyny, antisemitism, and LGBTQ+ hatred but it also focuses upon the glorification of previous terrorist attacks and gives practical guidance to planning similar attacks which obviously is very dangerous.

We can conclude that online hate speech has not declined since big platforms are putting more effort in banning it, it has moved to other places where there is less regulation and moderation in place. On one hand, this is not necessarily bad because it means that at least less people are seeing the hate. The number of users that Telegram or Gab can count on are by far lower than Facebook or Twitter. Racist and extreme posts therefore gather less views and are spread less widely than they would have been on the bigger platforms. However, extremist groups connect the wider public of mainstream platforms to the alternative ones. It converts these alternative platforms into safe havens where the most extreme opinions find each other, communicate with each other, and strategize, radicalize out of our sight, and might actually commit horrible, and possibly deadly, hate crimes without the rest of the world realizing the danger that was right under their eyes.

2.4 New types of content

Not only is there more variation in terms of social media platforms, but the content has also developed. Almost every platform has the option to post temporary content that will only be visible for 24 hours; there is for example Snapchat, Facebook Stories, Instagram Stories, or WhatsApp Status. This kind of fleeting content in relation to hate speech is important because it makes it harder to report it. The content simply will not be online long enough in order to flag it, analyse it and have it removed. Neither is there data available on how much misinformation is spread through ephemeral content since it is never long enough online to be tracked and researched (Wong 2018).

During the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, a new app appeared, called Clubhouse. It was a live audio app where people, who had an invitation to enter the app, could gather in a room and talk freely with each other. Celebrities entered rooms to talk with fans, experts gave lectures, and many different kinds of discussion took place. The app quickly became so popular that everybody was looking for an invitation to get in and hear what others were talking about or join a discussion. It made sense; a lot of countries in the world went into strict lockdowns at the beginning of the pandemic and in shock by the lack of human contact Clubhouse was a great way of staying connected and it came as close to a real-life conversation as possible. However, the same applies here as with other ephemeral content; we know that groups with extreme ideals gather there as well and exchange ideas, but we do not have any proof or data on it because nothing is recorded in Clubhouse. The fall of the app was just as sudden as its rise; once lockdowns and restrictions were lifted, most people preferred to go out and see their friends instead of staying at home and listening to Clubhouse discussions (Iwankovitsch 2021). Clubhouse was not the first social audio app, but it did popularize it and other platforms copied it; Twitter has the feature Spaces, Facebook Live Audio Rooms and Spotify has Green Rooms.
Other types of difficult content are text that is put on a picture, which makes it harder for AI to detect hate speech that possibly is present there, or names of accounts on Instagram that are racist but are hardly detected by AI. A less technological problem that happens a lot on social media, is the use of pictures that are added to an article about something else. Often this technique is used in order to spread fake news. For instance, in Myanmar social media posts with pro-Rohingya information showed pictures of victims of flooding in Nepal (Global Voices 2017). And then there are the manipulated pictures. During the start of the Covid-19 pandemic in March 2020, pictures came out of dolphins in the canals of Venice. Since humans had disappeared from the streets, nature was taking back the city. And during the fires in Australia, a picture appeared with a little girl wearing a gasmask and carrying a koala bear in her arms (SciTechDaily 2020). These are just a few examples of many more. Some of them are funny, others are trying to convince us of some kind of truth. But overall, they increase the confusion of what to believe or not.
Manipulation of pictures is obviously nothing new. Dictators like Stalin or Hitler already did it, and of course we all photoshop our own selfies every day. But the existence of deepfakes has taken the manipulation to another level, mostly because it is not done by humans but by AI. As the word says it already, this type of content is fabricated material that can include pictures, videos and even audio. It means you can see a video of Barack Obama calling somebody a ´dipshit´ or hear a voice

on WhatsApp telling you to transfer money to a bank account. Deepfakes were originally used in the porn industry, where they would put the faces of celebrities on the bodies of porn actresses. But AI technology has become available to governments, companies and even amateurs to produce this type of content. Everyone can see the danger here: it will become impossible to know if the video you are watching is actually real or fake. It might not cause an international crisis because governments have their own security system to recognize if a piece of content is fake (Sample 2020). However, it only takes a politically unstable situation to have deepfakes, or the threat of it, to stir things up. There is the example of the African country of Gabon where the president had not appeared in public in months and many doubted if he was still alive. He gave a New Year's speech but rumours quickly started that the video of his speech was a deepfake and as a consequence the military tried to stage a coup, which failed. Until today it is not clear whether the video was real or not (Toews 2020). This case shows that the mere existence of a deepfake on its own already causes enough destabilisation because we as the public do not know anymore what is real and what is not. Politicians can play with that confusion because it is more and more plausible to deny reality and blame it all on deepfakes as well. Politicians who are accused of something will say the footage is just fake. Who can we still trust then if we do not know anymore what is real or fake? Especially, regarding conspiracy theories and misinformation this will be a huge problem because it will be even easier to believe these theories if you see the ´proof´ of it in a video while at the same time the trust in politics is currently extremely low in many countries(Sample 2020).
In other words, while social media platforms try to develop their ways in which they detect hate speech, so do the people who spread it. In terms of moderation of hate speech or illegal content, deepfakes are particularly hard to moderate. If the moderation is done by AI, the algorithm will have to eliminate almost everything present on social media since the simplest pictures are usually photoshopped as well. It would come down to human moderators to do the work and since deepfakes become better every day, it will take very skilled moderators who to recognize the falsity of the content in order to remove it (Vincent 2020).

Concluding, the main problem of fleeting content is that it is sort of a loophole for monitoring. It never stays online long enough for it to be reported and removed. It is not archived and does not provide us with data on what kind of hate speech is being spread through these features. That is worrying and a solution should be found for it. The existence of deepfakes lead to a lot of confusion and that in return makes us vulnerable to believing conspiracy theories and fake news. Now it is time to turn to the conspiracy theories that are connected to hate speech.

3. Conspiracy theories and hate speech

Now that it is clear why conspiracy theories are so attractive and what the role of social media is in spreading these theories, it is time to actually look at what conspiracy theories are going around online which lead to hate speech. For this report we chose to discuss four different theories but of course there are more.

3.1 The Great Replacement

Immigration is often a hot topic in politics, and it is almost always a point of debate during national elections. Donald Trump built a wall, Angela Merkel lost, and gained, popularity when she welcomed a wave of immigrants into Germany and one of the reasons why Brexit happened was to be able to limit immigration into the UK. In other words, there is a lot of distrust around the topic. A high number of people in Western countries believe that their governments hide the truth about immigration: 30% in the UK and 21% in the US. But if we have a look at right wing voters: 47% of the Brexit voters believe the same statement and 44% of the Trump voters. To clarify, even though Islam is the second religion in the UK, only 4.4 % of the British population is foreign. So, to speak of a wave of immigration would be an exaggeration (Dodgson 2018).
These percentages show there is enough ground for the first conspiracy theory, called the Great Replacement. It probably is one of the theories which contains the most widely accepted information, even by mainstream media. It has integrated so far into society that often we do not even realize we are feeding into this theory. The Great Replacement simply comes down to this: the demographic change in a country is organized and has the plan behind it to exterminate the white race. Whether true or not, many believe that in thirty years white people will be a minority in their country. That goes for both the US and Europe. The Great Replacement theory originates from the book ´Le Grand Replacement´, written by French philosopher Renaud Camus in 2011. Camus inspired the setting up of the group Generation Identity, which is estimated to be one of the fastest growing far right movements in countries across Europe (Ebner & Davey 2019). However, bits and pieces of the Great Replacement theory are used by many different groups and politicians.
The belief in the Great Replacement has led to deadly hate crimes. Andres Breivik for example, the Norwegian shooter who killed 77 people, was influenced by a book by Madison Grant who wrote about how the Nordic race is superior and slowly being taken over by other races and the Christchurch attacker Brenton Tarrant wrote about wanting to stop the white genocide (Ebner & Davey 2019).
Not all supporters of the Great Replacement necessarily talk about violence, but they argue for remigration or de-Islamisation. Proponents of this theory often also sow antisemitism in it. According to them it is a secret Jewish elite that organized this mass immigration into Europe. However, most outstanding about this theory is the fact that it has been taken over by many right-wing politicians. The Great Replacement theory mostly focuses upon the ´threat´ of the Islamists taking over Europe. They underline the incompatibility of the Islam with Western culture. This reasoning is used by right wing politicians like Geert Wilders in the Netherlands, Dries van

Langenhove in Belgium or Marine Le Pen in France and they use it to criticize left wing politicians for letting these immigrants into Europe. All of them explicitly mention the Great Replacement and the need for remigration and de-Islamisation on their social media channels. Of course, that is no proof of the politicians actually believing in the Great Replacement or that they endorse violence. But they do consciously use parts of the theory to attract voters and increase their political power. And it means that regular media outlets take over the same wording and parts of the theory. This is not without consequences. The prime minister of Hungary, Viktor Orbán, called refugees Muslim invaders and blamed that on George Soros and on the EU in a campaign that had antisemitic undertones and connotations.

The use of this theory by right wing politicians has also led to a shift with more moderate political parties. They have noticed how right-wing parties have gained votes and these parties do not want to lose more votes to the extreme right than strictly necessary. Politicians choose their words differently because they do not want to lose votes and try to remain attractive to the more extreme voters. For example, it led to a deal between the EU and Turkey to not let the refugees it hosts cross the border into Europe, or to hiring a company like Frontex to be in charge of the borders of the EU, to pushing refugees in boats back into the sea knowing they probably will not survive and to protests when a refugee centre is opened. In other words, the Great Replacement theory is one of the factors that played into the politics of far-right wing parties to attract voters and as a consequence put pressure on more moderate parties to be more extreme as well. Everybody on the political spectrum moved to the right to stay politically relevant. The consequences are clear, both in society and in politics and regarding online hate speech. From the Monitoring Exercises for example, that INACH and its partners regularly carry out for the EU, we know that hate speech against immigrants is in the top 3 of most used online hate speech and that it is actively used, shared and talked about by all right-wing politicians in Europe. Research done by the Global Project Against Hate and Extremism (GPAHE) found 67 Twitter accounts for Generation Identity in 14 countries with nearly 140,000 followers. Those numbers do not include the accounts of individual Identitarians, such as GI's unofficial leader and head of the Austrian chapter Martin Sellner, who has nearly 40,000 followers on Twitter, or accounts for Generation Identity coordinated activity, like Defend Europe, which has 27,000 followers. On YouTube, GPAHE found at least 12 countries represented by 31 Generation Identity movements with about 86,000 subscribers (Beirich & Via 2020). The content on these accounts includes talking about de-Islamization and the rejection of Muslims, immigrants and refugees into Europe and the US. Videos of training appear where participants prepare for the coming civil war against the Islamization of Europe and often these accounts talk about a return to the 'Reconquista', a 700-year period in Spain and Portugal when Muslims were violently expelled from the Iberian Peninsula. What stands out is that social media platforms are less strict with these white supremacy groups as they are with for example ISIS followers. The reason for that is that a group like Generation Identity is not considered a terrorist group, despite numerous deadly attacks that were carried out and linked to GI groups (Beirich & Via 2020).

3.2 QAnon

The origin of the QAnon theory comes from an individual, known as Q, who wrote about his theories on the platform 4Chan. He mixed the suspicion of a paedophile network with a pyramid of political and media control which would have the Mossad, the Israeli secret service, at the top of that pyramid. Who Q exactly is, nobody knows (LaFrance 2020). After Q, others have taken his legends and developed it further, focusing mostly on American politicians (Media Diversity Institute 2020). At the core of their belief is the fact that there is a 'deep state' or secret elite that has the actual power in hand and is trying to get rid of Donald Trump, their hero. Trump is the only one who is not tied to any of these secret elites that have had power in their hands traditionally. That is why sometimes it is also called the pro-Trump conspiracy. According to many followers, Donald Trump is the only politician who is not part of this network and is actually trying to fight it. Some of the protestors who stormed the Capitol this year were supporters of the QAnon theory. They wore t-shirts with slogans used by QAnon theorists, like 'trust the plan' or 'great awakening' (Wendling 2021). Apart from the storming of the Capitol, which clearly is a direct proof of the danger of spreading online hate and misinformation, numerous instances of people threatening with violence both online and offline have happened. In 2016 Edgar Welsh took up his arms one day and went to a pizza place where he was convinced that Hillary Clinton held children in captivity for her paedophile network. He became convinced of it because he saw videos about it on YouTube (LaFrance 2020). The story of PizzaGate was later adopted by QAnon which is one of the most interesting parts of the QAnon theory; it amalgamates all kinds of different conspiracy theories into one big theory tied together by the deep state (Kang & Frenkel 2020). Hillary Clinton has stated that she is very happy with the protection of the Secret Service because she does take the threat of the QAnon supporters very seriously and it shows without a doubt the danger of the QAnon theory (LaFrance 2020). The problem with this theory is that its stories are very wide-ranging, often contradicting previous statements and at the same time people still keep believing in it. The justification often used by followers is that misinformation from the other side is sown into these theories. Therefore, there is no point in trying to argue with followers about the incorrectness of the stories.

The QAnon theory contains a lot of covert racism. For example, the propaganda used to show proof of missing children that are kidnapped by the 'deep state' paedophile network, portray almost only white children. Some of the pictures are actually portraits of child actors from the '90s like Drew Barrymore. Apart from the fact that the children on those pictures are mostly not missing at all, by far the majority of abducted children and victims of slavery in the world, are not white at all (Bloom 2021). But it also involves a lot of overt racism. Many followers of the QAnon theory claim that the 'deep state' or secret elite is dominated by Jews who are planning for world domination. They base themselves upon the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, which is a hoax document that dates back to the early 1900s (Halvorsen 2021). So ironically, the racist components of QAnon are not new at all. But QAnon theory does not just use antisemitism. For example, at the start of the Covid-19 pandemic the QAnon supporters were quick in blaming the virus on China and the Chinese. Their comments were fuelled by Trump, who often spoke about Covid-19 by naming it the 'Kung flu' or the 'Chinese flu'. It has caused a lot of Anti-Asian sentiment which will be discussed in the next section (Chabria 2021).

QAnon followers are very present on social media. Research done by Get The Trolls Out! and Textgain, showed 1,250 profiles on Twitter related to QAnon worldwide exhibiting an alarming level of antisemitism. 20% of the QAnon tweets targeted 'Jewish elites and their hordes of immigrants to replace white people and install the New World Order' (Kochi 2021). Although the theory mostly focuses upon the US, QAnon has followers all over the world. There are QAnon Facebook groups in Belgium, France, the Netherlands, the UK, and Germany. Most QAnon followers are not openly antisemitic but always accuse the 'deep state' that according to them is made up of Jewish well-known figures. QAnon followers do not openly talk about using violence but they do paint a picture of urgency and crisis in the world that might lead to unstable individuals taking it on themselves to do something. Those individuals do often not reach these elite figures but end up going to a synagogue for example and that is where the real danger lies (Get the Trolls Out!).

3.3 Covid-19

We focus here upon the conspiracy theories surrounding the Covid-19 pandemic since it has proven to be a crisis that is a breeding ground of conspiracies. While the pandemic continued and the knowledge on the disease evolved, so did the misinformation and the mistrust against governments. The World Health Organisation has even called it an ´infodemic´ (UK research and innovation 2021). The time we spent at home during lockdowns, the lack of contact with others and the increase in time spent online, has led to conspiracy theories flourishing.

A lot of rumours have appeared since the emergence of Covid-19; the disease came out of a Chinese laboratory where they lacked monkeys and decided to test it out on humans, is one rumour. Another is that the vaccine already existed, and the disease was spread to increase vaccine sales or that the disease is not as deadly as they say it is. A very persistent rumour has been that the vaccine against Covid-19 contains a chip that will lead to governments controlling us or that the vaccine will genetically modify us. Or the virus escaped from a Chinese lab or was actually spread on purpose by the Chinese government as a biological weapon (van Prooijen 2020).

There are a few variations surrounding the 5G networks and Covid-19. Some argue that it is not the corona virus that causes Covid-19 but the radiation of the 5G network. Others assume that the 5G network lowers our immune system and makes us vulnerable to the virus (Lynas 2020). And then there are also people who believe that the 5G network facilitates the spread of the Covid-19 virus. Of course, it is no coincidence that the first 5G tower was put in Wuhan, where the virus seems to originate from. That is incorrect by the way, the 5G towers have been put in place in different cities at the same time and there have been huge Covid-19 outbreaks in parts of the world where there is no 5G network yet, like in Iran. Finally, there is a video of Bill Gates on YouTube in which he warned about the threat of a pandemic when he talked about the Ebola outbreak. Therefore, many have suspected him of causing this pandemic because somehow, he will financially benefit from it (van Prooijen 2020).

Of course, the danger of these conspiracy theories surrounding Covid-19 is that believers of them are less willing to get vaccinated and less inclined to follow the rules put in place. But it also has led to more online hate speech. What stands out is the hatred against Asians. Since the virus seems

to originate in China, it has led to most rumours focusing upon China and the Chinese and it has caused a lot of anti-Asian hatred. The hashtags used on social media during the start of the pandemic in 2020 started with #CCPVirus and #ChinaLiedPeopleDied but changed over time into incitement of violence like #NukeChina, #BombChina and #DeathtoChina. Of course, the percentage of violent tweets like these hashtags was much lower than the other conspiracy tweets about China, but the fact is that there are a lot more than there were in the pre-pandemic era. The conspiracies, rumours and misinformation on Covid-19 have fueled Anti-Asian racism and xenophobia around the world (Moonshot 2020). Not just online or in the media, but also by politicians who have used these sentiments. An Italian Governor said that Italy would be much better in handling the pandemic due to its strong sense of hygiene culturally, while the Chinese eat mice alive. According to Human Rights Watch the accounts of physical violence, attacks, threats and bullying against Asians and people of Asian descent has increased strongly everywhere in the world (Human Rights Watch 2021).

In Asia itself, the Covid-19 pandemic has led to much more racism as well. In Malaysia, the authorities carried out mass raids arresting Rohingya refugees and other migrants, saying they were responsible for spreading the virus. The same happened in different countries across the Middle East. In India and Sri Lanka, the pandemic is being blamed on Muslims.

There is no real connection between Covid-19 and the Jews. However, the pandemic has been taken in by followers of the QAnon theory, to prove again that there is a ´deep state´ or secret Jewish elite who are causing all of this in order to dominate the world (Human Rights Watch 2021).

3.4 Eco-fascism

Eco-fascism is defined by Michael Zimmerman as: ´a totalitarian government that requires individuals to sacrifice their interests to the well-being of the ´land´, understood as the splendid web of life, or the organic whole of nature, including peoples and their states´ (Shukla 2021). Some of the concerns of eco-fascism go all the way back to the 1800s. Calculations made by Thomas Malthus about predictions of the growth of the world population are often used by followers of eco-fascism. Malthus said the world population was outgrowing the food that the earth has to offer us and therefore argued in favour of population control. Eco-fascists continue using the arguments of Malthus until today, despite the fact that it already has been proven that his calculations were wrong (Wilson 2019). Hitler and the Nazi party also covered up their racism in concerns over lack of resources and overpopulation. Their plans for the extermination of many people were often justified by concerns of population growth and lack of food available. Their slogan ´blood and soil´ also refers back to the duty to take care of their land (Shukla 2021).

So eco-fascism has always been here but now it is undergoing a revival because climate change is a real fact. However, the solution proposed by eco-fascists is a very different and dangerous one than usually proposed by environmentalists on the left wing or others who are genuinely worried about climate change. In fact, the solution of eco-fascism is genocide. Eco-fascism sees industrialization as the cause of climate change and longs back to traditional pre-industrial times. The modern movement draws its inspiration from several people. Ted Kaczynski, also known as the Unabomber, protested against industrialization and promoted going back to pre-industrial

times. He lived in a hut in Montana, where he had no electricity and tried to live off his own piece of land. He was eventually linked to a series of mailbombs that caused many wounded and even deaths. Kaczynski is seen as one of the key figures that inspires the modern eco-fascist movement. Another one is Pentti Linkola, a so-called deep ecologist from Finland. He talks about ´lifeboat ethics´. When a ship carries 100 passengers and it is about to capsize, not everyone will fit into the lifeboat. If you put too many passengers in the lifeboat, it will sink. Therefore, it is wise to sever the hands that cling to the sides of the lifeboats and save those who can be saved. In other words, eco-fascists see an environmental collapse as an opportunity to reorder society and get rid of whoever does not fit within their plans (Gangadharan 2020).

The extreme right political parties traditionally do not believe in climate change. But now that the evidence is undeniable that climate change is real and caused by humans, the denial of it is a lot less credible and some of those politicians have realized that too. The traditional conservative right is sticking with climate change denial, but other groups have moved on to a new reality with eco-fascism (Wilson 2019). This ideology directs the worries about the lack of resources and emissions towards immigrants and refugees. They reason that if more people come into a country, there will be more carbon emissions, more construction of houses, more use of non-renewable resources and so on (Bove 2021). Far right political parties are smart in taking on this topic since 93% of Europeans think that the climate is a serious issue (March). If they want to attract voters, they need to say something about it.

The hate speech of eco-fascism appears also on social media. The online eco-fascist group Pine Tree Party uses the slogan 'bees, not refugees' and the conservative political activist Ann Coulter used the message: 'greening, not browning'. All of them refer to a fake choice between immigrants and saving the environment (March). Another eco-fascist hashtag is #treesnotrefugees and slogans like 'love nature, kill non-whites' and 'save bees, plant trees, shoot refugees' appear often on social media (Wegener 2021)

Eco-fascism focuses upon the 'white' or 'original' people of western Europe or the US. They are the people who need to step into the lifeboat and will be saved. It is everybody else whose hands will be pushed back into the water to drown. Of course, it is ironic that these theorists ignore that most pollution does not come at all from people from other continents and that they actually live in parts of the world where they are more vulnerable to the consequences of climate change and have less means to protect themselves against it. And that is just it, eco-fascism is not really about the environment. It is an excuse for blatant racism. However, the consequence and real danger of this theory is that it lures in anybody who feels unease about the foreigners in their country and convinces them of the presumed threat that comes from the outside. It means there will be less incentive to welcome immigrants and refugees and less motivation to help others who are experiencing the consequences of climate change on the other side of the world. Eco-fascism has already been linked to very severe hate crimes. The shooter in Christchurch, New Zealand, claimed to be an eco-fascist and the shooter in Texas, who killed 23 people, said he was inspired by the ideals of the Christchurch shooter (Shukla 2021).

Concluding, these four different theories show the danger of the spread of these conspiracy theories. These theories have led to spikes of online hate speech against minorities like immigrants, refugees, and Jews. Sadly, all four theories have also been linked to (deadly) hate crimes, whose instigators picked up on those ideas on social media. Therefore, it makes sense to

not only try to tackle online hate speech but also to take a look at the underlying causes and one of them clearly is the increase and spread of conspiracy theories. We will close off this report with an overall conclusion.

4. Conclusion

In this report we focused upon conspiracy theories that are on the rise during chaotic times and play into the human desire to understand, to take control over their lives and to feel special. Humans, some more than others, are susceptible to these kinds of circumstances. Ignorance, jumping to conclusions and overconfidence in this context can be very vulnerable characteristics that lead to falling into the rabbit holes of conspiracies. Conspiracy theories are also used by politicians to attract voters and manipulate opinions. In order to have a healthy democracy, people need to learn the analytical skills to see through these conspiracy theories and understand the flaws in order to be able to reject them. Education and awareness raising should thus be a very important component of a strategy to confront conspiracy theories and make us more resilient to the flow of fake news and misinformation.

It is in our human nature to be attracted to stories that contain conspiracy theories and social media has been, by accident, designed to easily spread news that generates a lot of buzz. Social media was designed to highlight posts that create a strong emotion, which is often the case with conspiracy theories. Digitally, we live in echo chambers where our opinion keeps getting confirmed and in return it makes us less open minded to contradicting information. These echo chambers have only been reinforced by the Covid-19 pandemic because we live now more isolated than before. It means that social media companies have to take the responsibility of moderating misinformation upon them, more than they have done so far, and look for a solution to take us out of these echo chambers. Also, when it comes to new types of content as fleeting content or deepfakes, social media companies have the responsibility to proactively look for a way to moderate it, flag the fakeness of videos and speed up the process of reporting temporary content. Since Covid-19, social media platforms have added a tag when a post talks about the disease, to warn about misinformation regarding it. The same kind of tag can be used for conspiracy theories, deepfakes and misinformation.

Due to more moderation efforts of social media platforms and diversification of the market, online hate speech has not declined, it simply has moved to other places where there is less regulation and moderation in place. These new platforms are safe havens where the most extreme opinions communicate with each other and strategize hate speech campaigns, radicalize out of our sight and plan hate crimes. National governments and the EU have to step in and cooperate internationally to incorporate the new platforms in the Code of Conduct. Of course, the Digital Service Act (DSA) is an important opportunity, now more than ever, to put laws in place to confront the issues that we highlighted.

The four conspiracy theories that we reviewed in this report - the Great Replacement, QAnon theory, COVID-19 theories, and eco-fascism - each show that it is naive to think about our online and offline lives as separate components. Where we find information, what we believe in, our opinion on political matters, how we express ourselves and our actions, are all influenced by both the online- and offline world. All four theories have also shown that conspiracy theories and hate speech go hand in hand and provide a dangerous combination to our societies. In order to have a healthy (democratic) society we need to take the issue of conspiracy theories seriously and make sure individuals can recognize the difference between real and fake information.

Finally, more research is needed to develop an early warning system on the state of online hate speech. It is essential to stay up to date on what conspiracy theories are flourishing and what kind of hate speech persists. More research is necessary on the tendencies on social media and that is only possible with cooperation of the social media companies. Therefore, more transparency and accountability of these platforms is necessary. That is the only way to mitigate the effects of the conspiracy theories and hate speech.

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