

The spread of conspiracy myths online: what are the implications for human rights?

Tuesday 2 March 2021, 13h00-14h30, online

During the global pandemic, conspiracy myths have abounded online, unleashing ‘a tsunami of hate and xenophobia, scapegoating and scare-mongering,’ in the words of UN Secretary-General António Guterres. Media reports point to the growing influence and reach of conspiracy myths in the digital world, as well as the deepening impact on human rights of the broader phenomenon of digital disinformation.

QAnon has emerged as one of the most all-encompassing sets of conspiracy myths. This centres on bizarre and demonstrably false claims that a secret cabal of Satan-worshipping paedophiles comprising political leaders and financial and Hollywood elites - referred to collectively as the ‘Deep State’ - are secretly running a global child sex-trafficking ring, with the ultimate goal of controlling the masses. Donald Trump is viewed as a saviour figure, battling the enemy from within.

The Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) has identified conspiracy myths, especially QAnon, as a domestic terror threat, according to official documents published by Yahoo News. Facebook, Twitter and YouTube have all taken action to limit the spread of QAnon-linked conspiracy myths ahead and in the aftermath of the November elections – as well as in the context of the 6 January insurrection in Washington DC.

Conspiracy myths and antisemitism

Since it emerged in late 2017 (based on the anonymous postings of an internet user known as ‘Q’), QAnon has not limited itself to spurious claims about US politics. Its adherents have also asserted that Hitler was really a British spy, and that Queen Elizabeth II’s reign is illegitimate and the true King of England is a man called Joseph Hallett!

The weaving of the Rothschilds into this strange web of claims also points towards a powerful strain of antisemitism in QAnon. The Rothschild family, like George Soros, is a codeword, particularly in conspiracy circles, for wealthy, powerful Jews. While QAnon is not an ‘explicitly antisemitic movement,’ according to Vegas Tenold, an investigative researcher at the ADL’s Center on Extremism, ‘there are several tropes that [...] smack of antisemitism.’

It is in the context of the rapid spread of conspiracy myths online in the US over recent years and the interlinked issue of incitement to hatred, that the violent attack on the US Capitol in early January was stained by acts of antisemitism. One man, for example, was photographed wearing a shirt emblazoned with ‘Camp Auschwitz,’ a reference to the Nazi concentration camp, two white nationalists known for racist and antisemitic rhetoric livestreamed the insurrection to their online followers, while a video circulated on social media showed a man harassing an Israeli journalist who was trying to do a live report outside the building.

Conspiracy myths and antisemitism

Conspiracy myths like QAnon that allege the existence of a secret society, and weaponize false accusations of child-trafficking and murder against one's enemies, are built on centuries-old antisemitic tropes.

A number of these tropes emerged in the Middle Ages, alleging that Jews were responsible for kidnapping Christian children and drinking their blood for religious rituals. Those claims, called 'blood-libel' conspiracy myths, persisted throughout the 1800s and into the 20th century.

Another antisemitic conspiracy myth, that would go on to have tragic consequences (including the Holocaust), stemmed from the 'Protocols of the Elders of Zion,' a fictional text published in Russia in 1903, which falsely alleged 'a Jewish conspiracy to dominate the world.'

The blood libel conspiracy myth is still alive within the QAnon 'universe,' as is, of course, the belief that a secret cabal is dominating the world.

Digital panel debate: What should the international community do to address and confront conspiracy myths, and protect vulnerable minority groups?

Moderators: URG and University of Peace

Short questions and answers:

- Ambassador and Permanent Representative of Singapore (TBC)
- Ahmed Shaheed, UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief
- Irene Khan, UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of expression (TBC)
- Dr Jonathan Bright, Associate Professor, Senior Research Fellow at the Oxford Internet Institute (TBC)
- UNESCO (TBC)
- World Jewish Congress