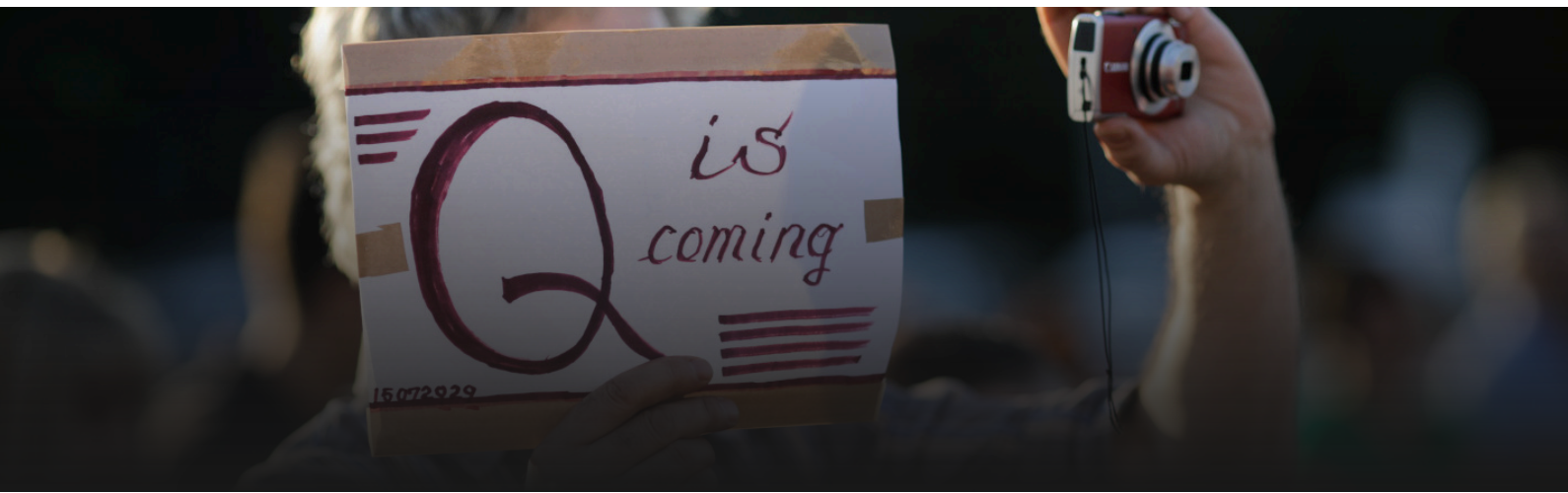




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The transnational flow of conspiracy theories reflects our fractured world

Online conspiracy theories can spread rapidly across the world. Yet as Zichen (Jess) Hu writes, the way conspiracy narratives are interpreted and reframed in different contexts reflects a fractured global order.

Conspiracy theories are an increasingly prominent part of modern politics – from **COVID-19 misinformation**, to Trump's "**Stop the Steal**", disputes over **Russia's war in Ukraine** and the surge of **AI deepfakes**. Yet while they are often dismissed as mere distortions that emerge in online echo chambers, these theories are not static artefacts.

Conspiracy theories are dynamic, mobile constructs that migrate across borders, media ecosystems and ideological divides. According to **my research**, the transnational flow of conspiracy theories is best understood as an emergent process, where narratives are not just transmitted but co-created by diverse audiences, from state actors to fringe contributors, within shifting discursive regimes.

In this sense, conspiracy discourse provides a lens onto the entanglement of liberalism, neoliberalism and illiberalism, which is the contour of today's fractured world: neoliberal infrastructures of technocratic governance, global connectivity and political economic opacity underpinning the promised liberal democracy, and illiberal appropriations that channel discontent into sovereigntist or exclusionary claims.

These narratives oscillate between mainstream platforms and underregulated media spaces, crossing national boundaries to rally ideological coalitions across seemingly unrelated contexts. A fringe US conspiracy video, for instance, may be reframed by state media in another country, thereby entering new public conversations and forming alliances of belief that transcend geography.

Conspiracies thus function not only as political distortions but also as windows into how liberal, neoliberal and illiberal formations overlap, clash and reconfigure themselves in the global circulation of suspicion. Far from remaining marginal, these narratives are repeatedly reabsorbed by elites, who mobilise suspicion not only to shore up their own legitimacy but also to redraw the very boundaries of who counts as an “elite”. Conspiracy thus becomes an imaginary of power, a contested field where rival actors struggle to define, appropriate and weaponise the category of “elite” itself, sometimes **together with victimhood**, to claim legitimacy.

Fractured orders

Conspiratorial narratives have always existed. During the Cold War, their circulation was not eliminated but constrained by the weight of bipolar ideological blocs. In today’s fractured landscape, as rival powers project incompatible claims to legitimacy and colonial legacies complicate the picture, those margins have become porous. What once lingered in the shadows is now taken up, reframed and instrumentalised by state and non-state actors.

The September 11 attacks served as a catalytic event that wove older narratives of government secrecy into new global conspiratorial imaginaries. In the aftermath of crises, conspiratorial narratives about who controls the world began to link together and **planted seeds** for otherwise disparate claims: **QAnon’s visions of elite cabals** and retrospective certainties about **COVID-19 as a biopolitical plot**.

Crucially, these crisis-driven conspiracies both draw upon these older repertoires and, in amplifying them, serve as engines of connection for enriched conspiratorial narratives on emerging technologies, such as **5G and vaccine as injected chips**. These disparate threads coalesce into an imagined architecture of hidden power populated by fascists, globalists, Illuminati or a “new world order” that travels across borders and media infrastructures.

To trace this process, we must **revisit the categories** of “transatlantic” and “transpacific”. These are not neutral descriptors of geography but imaginaries of power. The transatlantic often denotes the Euro-American world, long coded as the centre of modernity and whiteness. Paul Gilroy’s ***Black Atlantic*** disrupted this frame, showing how diaspora and slavery complicated any presumed unity of the West.

The transpacific, by contrast, names a space of empire and rivalry: US hegemony, Japan’s postwar ascent and China’s rise today. Unlike the binary of Global North/South, it highlights shifting configurations of dominating power.

Yet these circuits are not neatly separated. Digital infrastructure collapses what once seemed a boundary between Euro-Atlantic and Asia-Pacific flows. We can see this in TikTok’s contested

ownership and its “refugees” **migrating to platforms like RedNote**, or in Chinese users posting on 4chan through VPNs.

China’s Great Firewall and similar stringent internet governance schemes, which were once lines of demarcation, have instead become conduits, with tech-savvy users using and developing VPNs that stitch together transatlantic and transpacific arenas of suspicion into a connected, though uneven, conspiratorial network.

Within this entangled space, postcolonial dynamics make the picture still more complex. In the transpacific, conspiracy theories are shaped by western critiques, yet these critiques are also simultaneously contested, sometimes from an illiberal perspective. Thus, what looks in the transatlantic world like suspicion of liberal cosmopolitan elites can, in the transpacific, be reframed as a postcolonial assertion of sovereignty, producing conspiratorial tropes that are at once derivative and defiant, mimetic and resistant.

Neoliberalism and the multiplication of elites

The spread of conspiracy narratives is intertwined with neoliberalism. Neoliberal innovations such as deregulated finance, undersea cables, cloud services and data centres have been promoted as pathways to integration, linking producers and consumers, as well as knowledge and capital across borders in the name of efficiency and growth.

These projects were meant to embody a world “**beyond Cold War divides**”, yet in practice, they have proven to be fragile and have merely preserved the language of freedom while narrowing its substance. The communication infrastructure that has been created is now treated as a strategic asset in a “new Cold War”, exemplified by **US export controls on semiconductors, bans on Huawei 5G networks** and **China’s investment in undersea cable alternatives**.

Generative AI intensifies this ecology of suspicion. Deepfakes and synthetic texts can be used as evidence for conspiracies. Both the left and right are deploying these tools, whether to accuse governments of censorship or corporations of collusion. Crucially, **AI itself has become a conspiratorial object**, with right-wing figures in the US framing AI regulation as elite overreach, while left-wing sceptics see the rise of AI as neoliberal capture by Silicon Valley.

Illiberalism, by contrast, presents itself as a rebellion against liberal universalism. In populist movements across the transatlantic world and in state-led projects across the transpacific, illiberalism claims to restore sovereignty, tradition and communal belonging. It denounces the cosmopolitan elites of neoliberalism, often by rejecting **the Enlightenment’s aspiration to universal reason**.

Yet illiberalism is less an external rejection than a parasitic appropriation of neoliberal disillusion. Neoliberal infrastructures, including global finance, cloud platforms and undersea cables were legitimated through the language of openness, but their opacity generated fertile ground for suspicion.

Illiberal actors seize upon this discontent, reframing grievances against neoliberal opacity into narratives of sovereign restoration. What results is not two distinct trajectories but an entangled formation in which neoliberal infrastructures and illiberal appropriations reinforce each other. Liberalism thus generates its own shadows: neoliberal technocracy on one side and illiberal populism on the other.

Exploiting fractures by illiberal actors

Conspiracy theories exploit this fractured legacy. Take global supply chains as an example. The **COVID-19 pandemic** and subsequent US-China tech war exposed these chains as vulnerable. The subsequent shortage of masks, chips and rare earths was read by conspiracy theorists not just as economic disruption but as evidence of hidden control, manipulation and even sabotage. Conspiracies thrive in this gap between the promise of seamless flows and the reality of scarcity and weaponisation.

The reason why they thrive in this case is because they give narrative form to structural contradictions. Neoliberal infrastructures promise transparency, efficiency and universality, but they increasingly operate through opacity, monopolies and securitisation. This disjuncture makes it plausible for people to imagine hidden elites orchestrating events behind the scenes.

Who are the elites?

In the neoliberal imagination, elites were once **technocrats**, financiers and cosmopolitan leaders: figures meant to embody expertise and rational governance that transcended Cold War divisions.

Yet in practice, these elites became abstracted into opaque structures: central banks dictating austerity, platform companies filtering speech, global supply chains deciding what goods appear on shelves. They are rarely encountered as individuals but instead appear as faceless systems, which makes them fertile ground for conspiratorial personification.

Conspiracies thus name what is otherwise unnameable: they give faces to structural power, and they are sustained by people's experiences of opacity and disempowerment. In this way, conspiracy theories are less about elites themselves than about the historical conditions that produce the idea of elites. They are archives of how societies imagine who rules them and how they endure that rule.

The history of conspiracy theories, then, is also tied to the history of liberalism. Enlightenment reason first fractured into rival conceptions of freedom. Neoliberalism reduced liberty to the language of markets, expertise and technocratic rule. Illiberalism rose not only as a populist backlash against this process but also as an expression of postcolonial anxieties, reclaiming sovereignty in contexts marked by authoritarian consolidation and civilisational rivalry.

These illiberal formations are now great power players in the geopolitical and technological race. They contest liberal universality while simultaneously reshaping the terms of international cooperation. And in this fractured landscape, people who are caught between neoliberal promises and illiberal assertions frequently find conspiracy theories to be the form through which the contradictions of the global order are most viscerally understood.

Revisiting conspiratorial imaginaries

Responding to conspiracy theories is therefore not only about protecting truth from falsehood. It is about grappling with the larger question of how we imagine power and theorise elites in a fragmented global order. Conspiracy narratives provide a distorted but revealing cartography of power – a map to understand how different publics understand who governs, who profits and who deceives.

The challenge for researchers and policymakers is that these imaginaries do not align neatly with ideological camps or national borders. The left and right may disagree profoundly yet converge in their suspicion of neoliberal elites. Atlantic and Pacific circuits may differ, yet their conspiracies rhyme in framing hidden architectures of power.

To narrate how these imaginaries come into being, and the conditions for their emergence, is to do good history. It is to see conspiracy not merely as pathology or manipulation, but as a window into the contested ways we make sense of power in an age of new empires and new Cold Wars, while also inviting us to interrogate who the elites are, and how their shifting configurations can be mapped through the discursive regimes that conspiracy theories both reveal and reconfigure.

*For more information, see the author's accompanying paper in the **Journal of Information Technology & Politics**.*

*Note: This article gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: **Mircea Moira / Shutterstock.com***



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