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How News Media Coverage of Crises Promotes Conspiracy Beliefs

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Introduction

- Previous work finds that exposure to conspiracy theories can increase conspiracy belief
- Presumably, conspiracy beliefs can be inflamed by less than direct conspiracy theory exposure
- Experiment focuses on mass media coverage of crisis events: Sandy Hook and Las Vegas shootings
- Coverage that questions the motives and conclusions of authorities promotes conspiracy beliefs
- Incentives and structural features of news media may work to cue conspiratorial thinking and foment conspiracy beliefs
- Conspiracy theorists are known for illusory pattern perception – being able to “connect the dots” and see patterns everywhere (Van Prooijen et al. 2018)
- Also good at conspiratorial narrative construction (Raab et al. 2013)
- Misinformation literature has begun to consider **implicit** vs. **explicit** cues/information
 - Explicit: direct exposure to a conspiracy theory, direct questioning of authority
 - Implicit: cueing uncertainty and distrust, activating illusory pattern perception through exposure to discordant, incomplete, and otherwise “fishy” information

Theory

- Media coverage of crisis events is a natural situation for this to occur, and CTs are formulated around these events
- Ripe informational conditions for those high in conspiratorial thinking
- **First stage** of crisis coverage (according to Graber 2000):
 - Conjecture reigns, rumors circulate about the causes and impacts of the crisis on those (assumed to be) involved and the basic nature and timeline of events
 - Coverage tends to be fragmented and contradictory as news producers are constantly trying to reconcile differences between the speculation of their initial sources and the factual information that is only trickling in
- **Second stage:**
 - Media try to correct factual errors in previous coverage, usually by granting access to those who are closest to information about the crisis: governmental officials and other authority figures

Hypotheses

- Exposure to subtler forms of conspiratorial information inflames conspiracy beliefs
- Cases: Sandy Hook and Route 91 Harvest Festival shootings
 - Crises that garnered 24/7 news coverage for days
 - Lots of (similar) conspiracy theories (e.g., second shooter, false flag)
- **Implicit** conspiratorial information
 - Contradictory information, corrections, confusion in direct aftermath
 - Conditional on level of conspiratorial thinking?
- **Explicit** conspiratorial information
 - Not quite as explicit as direct CT exposure
 - Direct challenge to the official account, question of investigation
 - Comes after the initial chaos, but before everything has been resolved

Results

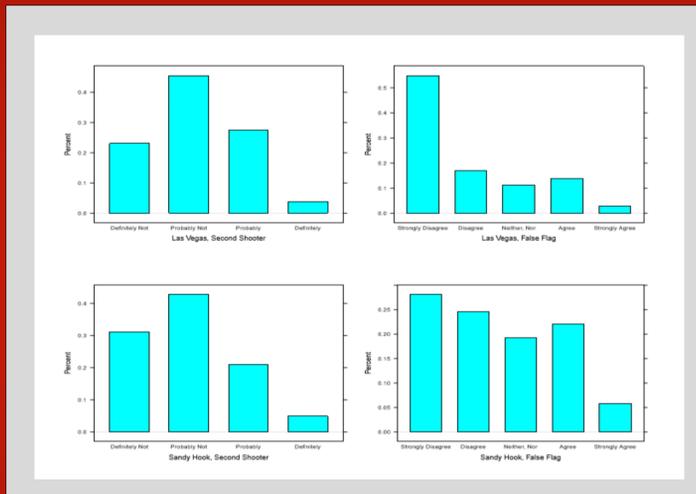


Figure 1: Distributions of responses to conspiracy belief questions

- Second shooter beliefs are distributed nearly equally between Sandy Hook and Las Vegas treatments
- Subjects exhibit lower levels of conspiracy beliefs when it comes to false flag conspiracy theories

	Las Vegas		Shandy Hook	
	False Flag	Second Shooter	False Flag	Second Shooter
Implicit Treatment	-0.035 (0.033)	0.008 (0.029)	0.030 (0.038)	0.046 (0.033)
Explicit Treatment	0.029 (0.036)	0.055* (0.024)	0.086* (0.036)	0.128* (0.031)
Conspiratorial Thinking	0.365* (0.055)	0.291* (0.043)	0.452* (0.065)	0.341* (0.050)
Republican	-0.093* (0.046)	-0.037 (0.044)	-0.030 (0.052)	-0.050 (0.044)
Conservative	0.275* (0.044)	0.200* (0.039)	0.218* (0.053)	0.193* (0.045)
Education	0.031 (0.047)	-0.036 (0.052)	0.033 (0.075)	0.026 (0.048)
Age	-0.232* (0.068)	-0.210* (0.049)	-0.163* (0.065)	-0.176* (0.059)
Female	-0.024 (0.020)	0.035 (0.023)	-0.012 (0.021)	-0.005 (0.023)
Black	0.086 (0.051)	0.117* (0.053)	0.105 (0.067)	0.045 (0.040)
Hispanic	0.051 (0.047)	0.051 (0.047)	0.070 (0.069)	0.060 (0.071)
Constant	0.015 (0.061)	0.192* (0.056)	0.023 (0.073)	0.055 (0.059)
R ²	0.268	0.234	0.267	0.227
n	436	436	441	441

OLS coefficients w/ standard errors in parentheses.
 * denotes significant at p < 0.05 level, two-tailed test.

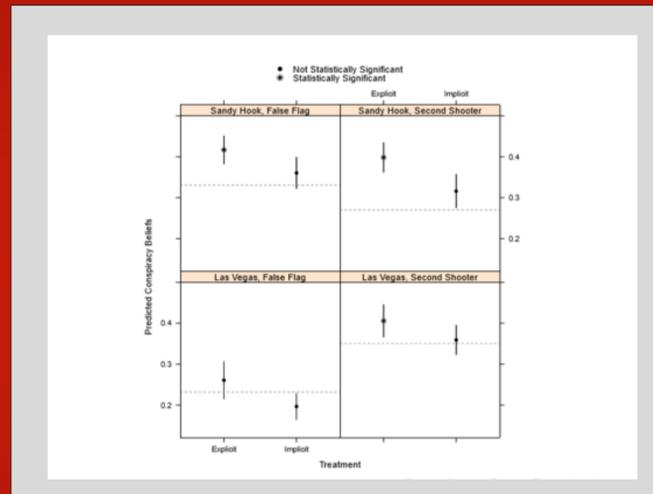


Figure 2: Predicted conspiracy beliefs by treatment group and conspiracy type – control means denoted by dashed lines

- Explicit conspiratorial information treatment effects are larger for Sandy Hook than Las Vegas (where significant)
- Tentative support that more explicit questioning of the official narrative and investigative conclusions foster conspiracy beliefs

Table 1: OLS regression of conspiracy beliefs on treatments, party affiliation, and interactions between the two

- Controls for conspiratorial thinking, political predispositions, and sociodemographic characteristics
- In no case did exposure to implicit conspiratorial information increase conspiracy beliefs
- Explicit conspiratorial information increases average level of conspiracy beliefs

Methods

- 2 conspiracy theories × 2 information types, plus control
 - Technically include repeats of conditions to ensure that outlet didn’t matter
- Treatments are short clips from real television media coverage (ABC, CBS, Fox)
 - Range in length from 0:45 to 2:00
 - Automatically played, respondents stuck on page, before being asked about audio
- Post-treatment, respondents asked about:
 1. Probability of a second gunman being involved
 2. Strength of (dis)agreement with statement that shooting was a government false flag to increase support for gun control laws
- Fielded via Mturk
 - Amazon Mechanical Turk(Mturk) is an online crowdsourcing website that can be used for a number of things, but it is most useful for us in terms of its survey participation function
 - Participants paid fee of 30 cents
 - Tends to be younger, white, and lean liberal

Conclusions

- That “implicit” conspiratorial information **did not** increase conspiracy beliefs is normatively positive
 - Corrections, confusion, and mistakes are inherent in crisis coverage
- That “explicit” conspiratorial information **did** increase conspiracy beliefs is normatively troublesome
 - Far from direct promotion of CTs, tame for even some “news” (*cough* Fox)
 - It’s the job of news media to question authorities and official accounts
- Next time:
 - Expand to non-mass shooting events
 - Tweak experimental design to pit coverage against itself
- Need more work considering subtle ways conspiracism can be cued and inflamed

Acknowledgements

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