

CONTENT WARNING

This presentation engages with sensitive material, including descriptions of misinformation and conspiratorial content.

Your discretion is advised and encouraged.

The 2019-nCoV outbreak and response has been accompanied by a massive ‘infodemic’ - an over-abundance of information – some accurate and some not – that makes it hard for people to find trustworthy sources and reliable guidance when they need it.

World Health Organization (Feb. 2, 2020)

**“We’re not just fighting an epidemic;
we’re fighting an infodemic.”**

Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus/WHO (Feb. 15, 2020)

**MIT
Technology
Review**

**The coronavirus is the
first true social-media
“infodemic”**

Hao & Basu/MIT Technology Review (February 12, 2020)



Photo credit: Salvatore Di Nolfi/Keystone via AP (March 9, 2020)



In this module, we will examine:

- 1. The emerging alliance between seemingly disconnected groups ensnared in the infodemic**
- 2. The basis and appeal of conspiracies that arise in a time of crisis**
- 3. The role that social media plays in facilitating the spread of COVID-19 conspiracies**
- 4. Strategies to mitigate the COVID-19 infodemic**



Will a Covid-19 vaccine signal an end to the anti-vaccine movement?

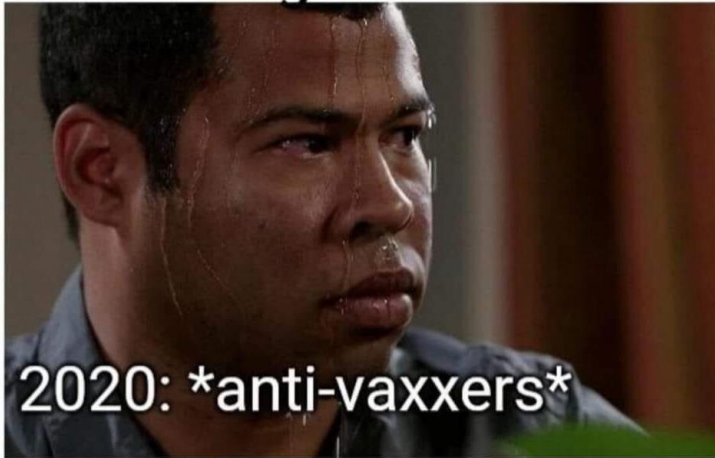
Hewko & Hotez (June 1, 2020)

theguardian Coronavirus causing some anti-vaxxers to waver, experts say

Henley/The Guardian (April 21, 2020)

1820: *Plague*

1920: *Plague*



2020: *anti-vaxxers*

ControversialOpinionz/Imgur (2020)



Ethan Klein
@h3h3productions

I bet anti-vaxxers will be real quiet when that corona vaccine comes out

10:38 PM · Mar 29, 2020 · Twitter for Android

15.7K Retweets 473 Quote Tweets 137.8K Likes

Anti-Lockdown Protests



Josh Edelson/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images



Peter Zay/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images



Trump supporters

Glen Stubbe/Star Tribute/Getty Images



Militia groups

Paul Sancya/AP Photo



QAnon

Getty Images



Casey Weinstein/Twitter (2020)



picture-alliance/dpa/S. Barbour

These groups are not mutually exclusive nor exhaustive

Not *all* members in *all* groups can be described as extremist

(The majority of Americans believe at least one conspiracy!)

Robust social media presence

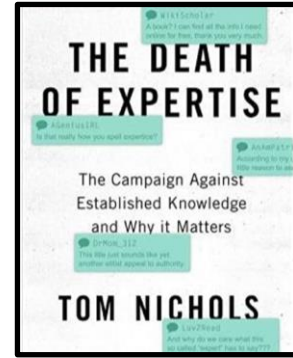
Michael Swan/Flickr



Pixabay



Oxford University Press (2017)



Perceived loss of civil liberties

Alternative health modalities

Erosion of institutional trust

Anti-Lockdown Protests

Lockdown fatigue

Right-wing funders



Recruitment opportunity

salon
White supremacists are using anti-lockdown protests to recruit new members
Boggioni/Salon (May 3, 2020)



San Francisco Chronicle (1919)

Conspiracy Theories



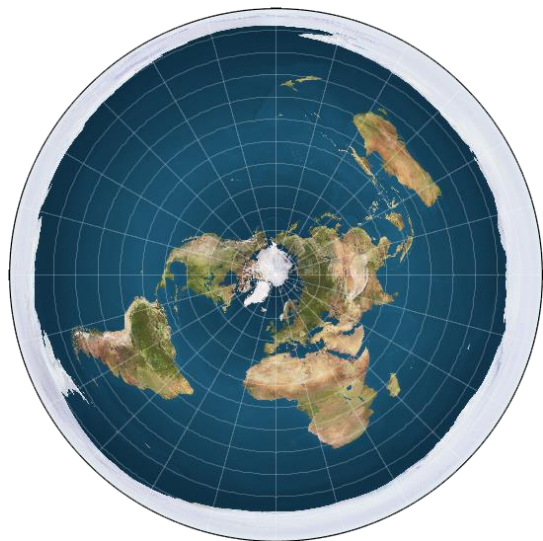
Deep State Mapping Project (2019)

“attempts to explain the ultimate causes of significant social and political events as secret plots by powerful and malicious groups.”

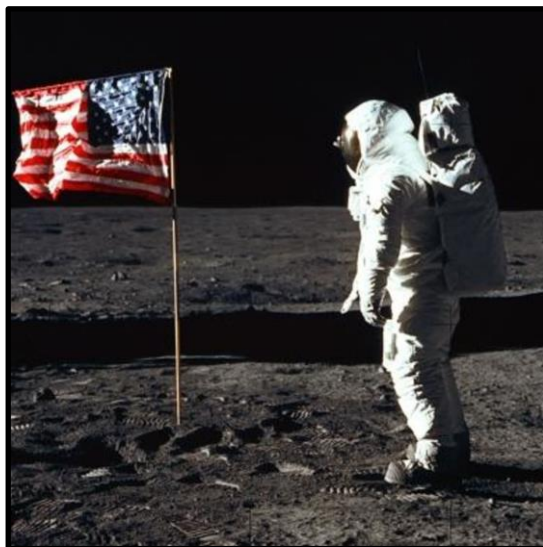
“Why Conspiracy Theories Matter”
(Douglas & Sutton 2018, 256)

- 1 An alleged, secret plot
- 2 A group of conspirators
- 3 ‘Evidence’ that seems to support the conspiracy theory
- 4 They falsely suggest that nothing happens by accident and that there are no coincidences; nothing is as it appears and everything is connected.
- 5 They divide the world into good or bad.
- 6 They scapegoat people and groups.

European Commission (2020)



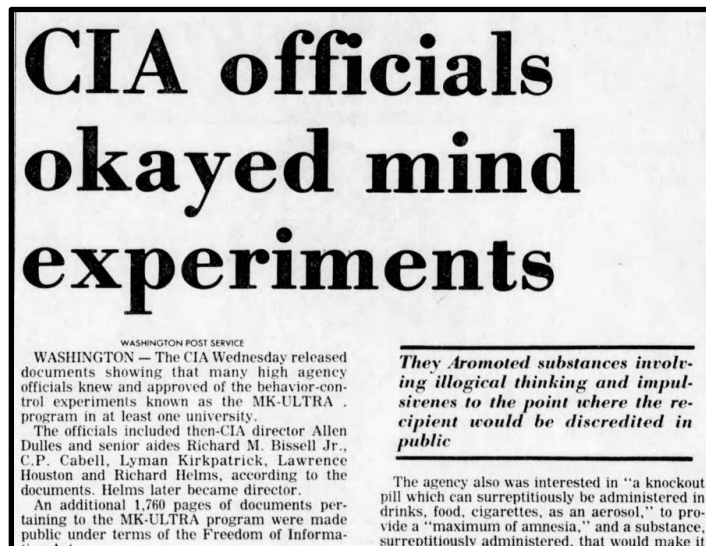
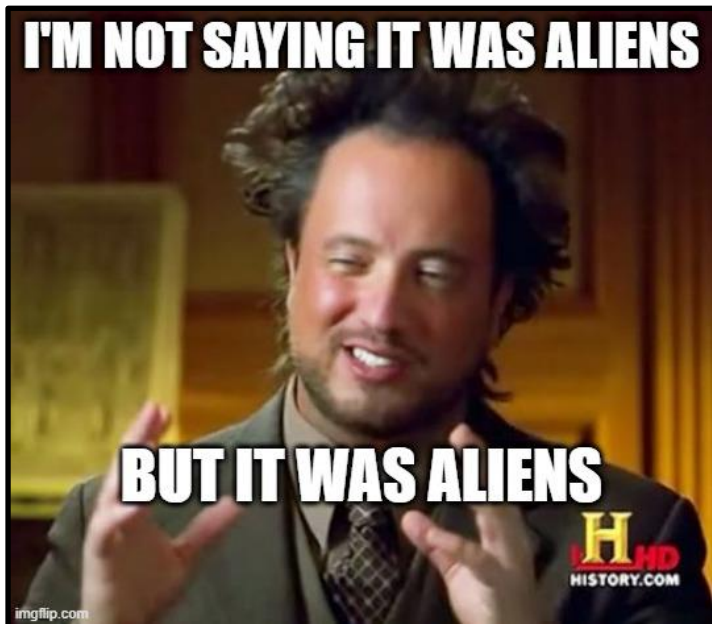
Wikimedia



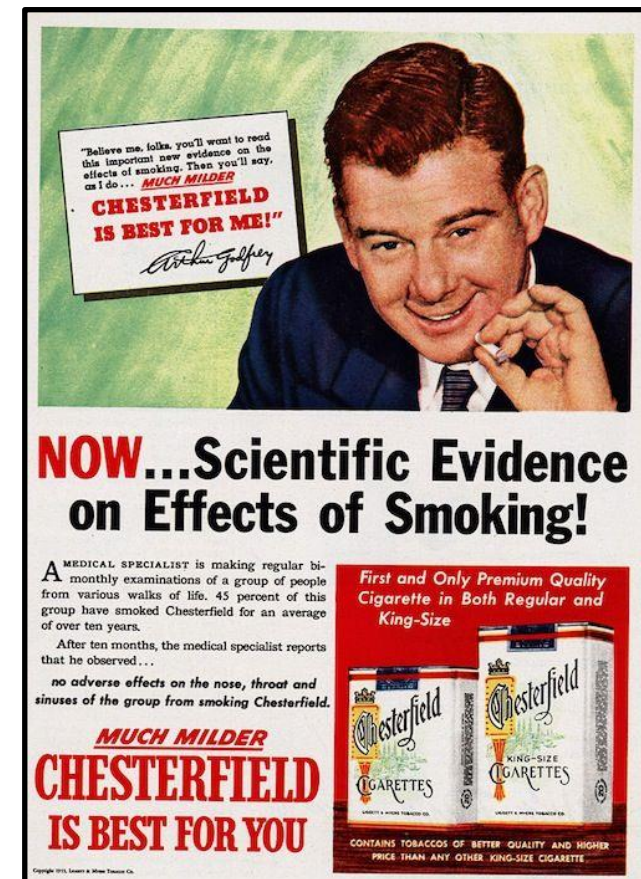
NASA/Newsmakers/Getty Images



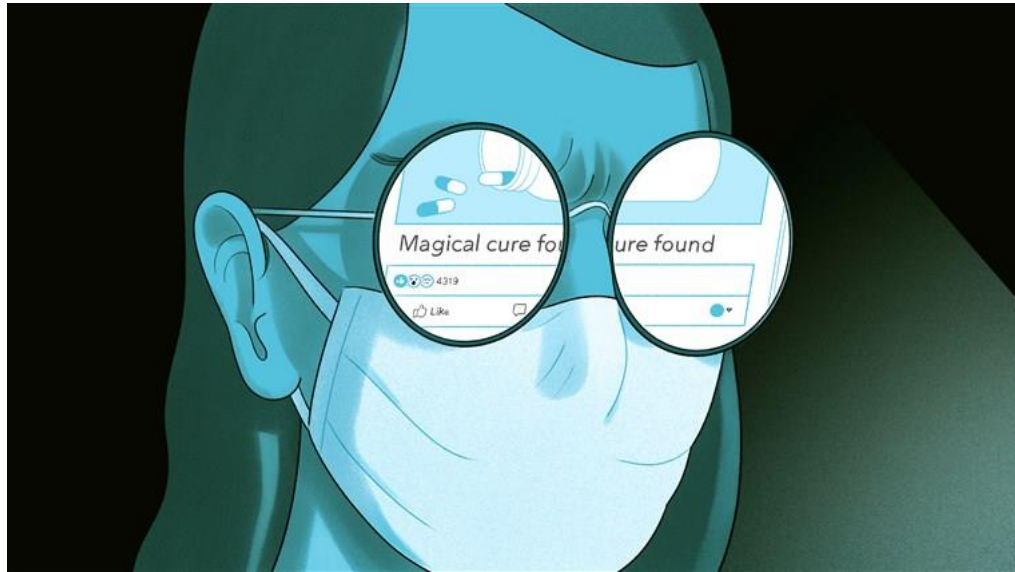
New York Times (1973)



San Antonio Express (August 18, 1977)



Chesterfield (1953)



Bianca Bagnarelli / for NBC News

The Psychology of Belief

Confirmation bias

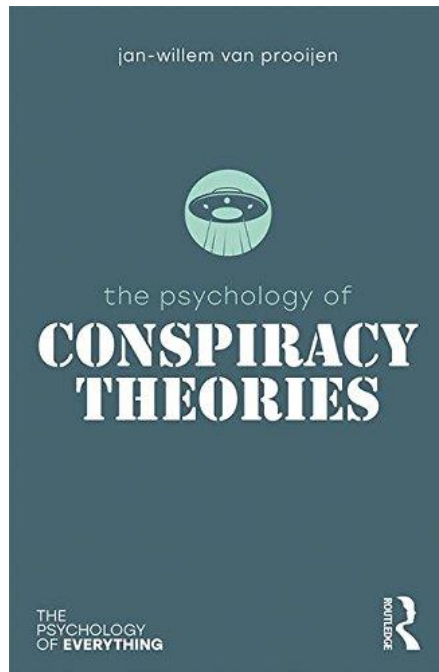
Seeking out information that aligns with existing beliefs

Cognitive dissonance

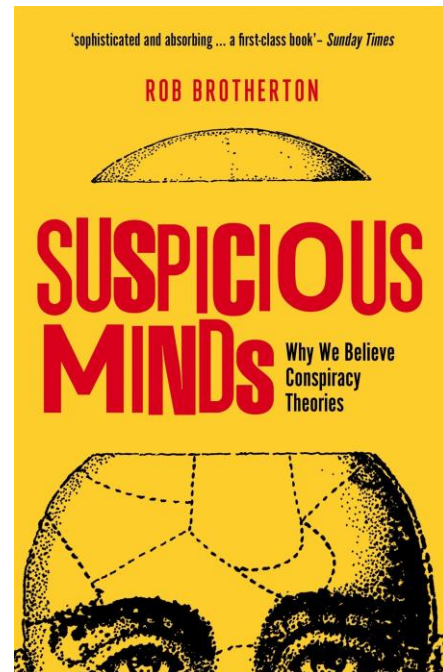
Discounting incoming information that threatens our beliefs

Motivated reasoning

Evidence is more persuasive when it favors something we want to believe

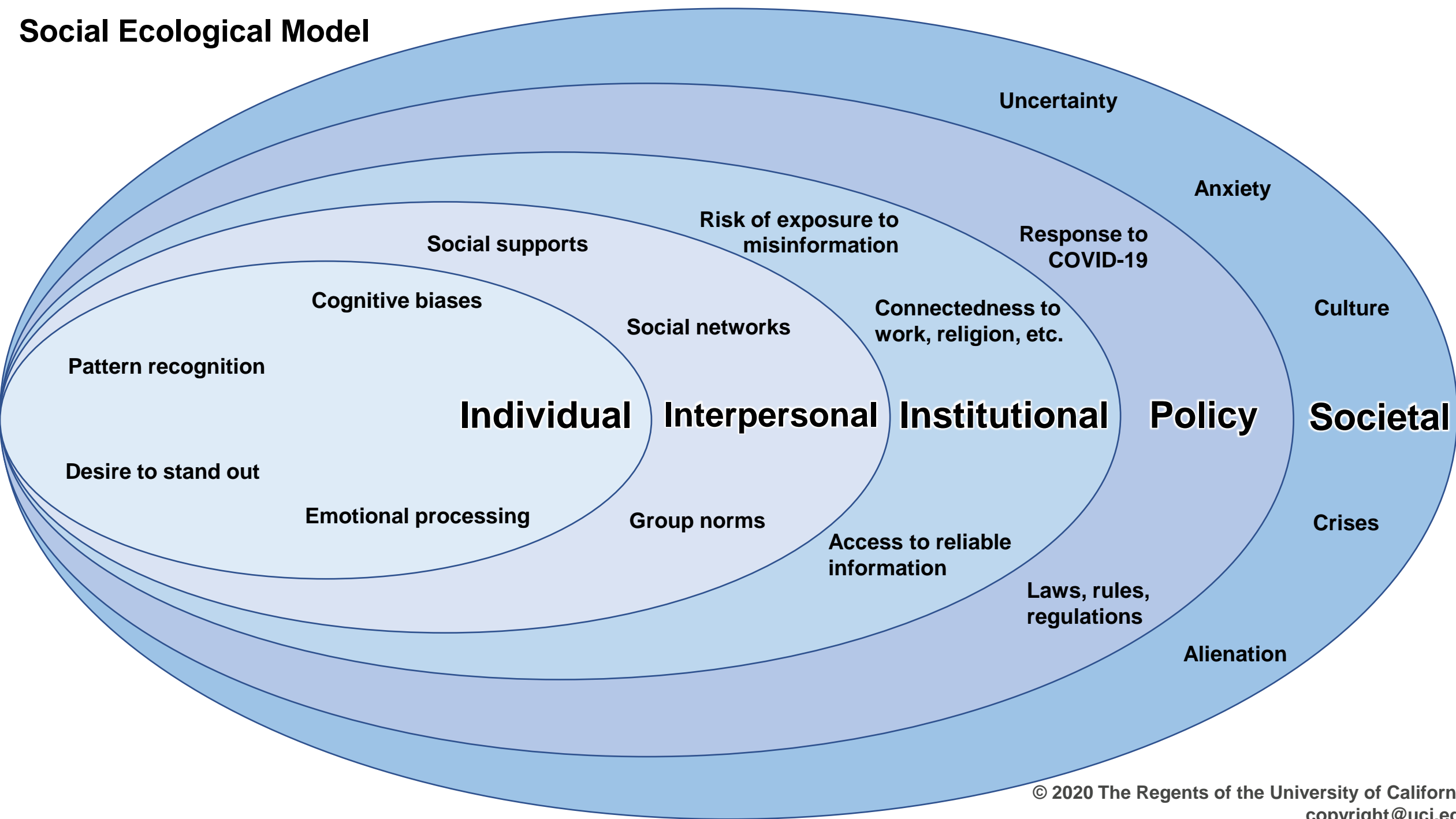


Routledge (2018)



Bloomsbury (2015)

Social Ecological Model



Conspiracies are an expected side effect of key historical events

(In that respect, the COVID-19 pandemic is no different!)

So what's different now?

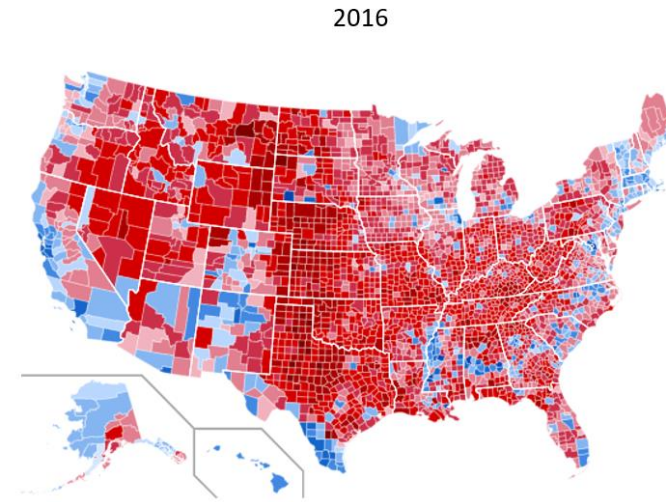
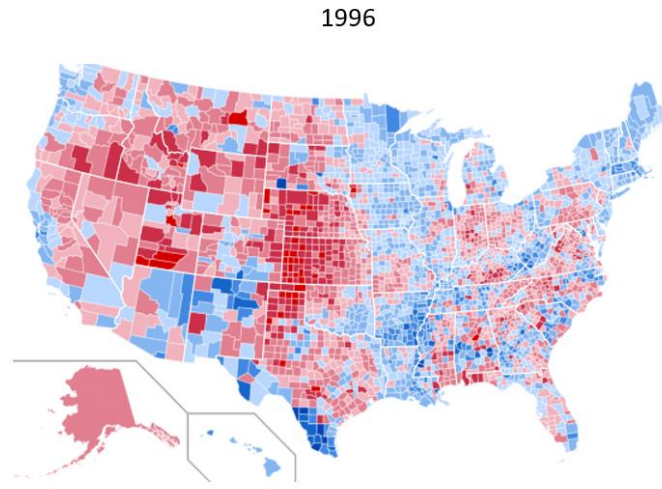
Political polarization

+

**Speed of circulation
on social media**



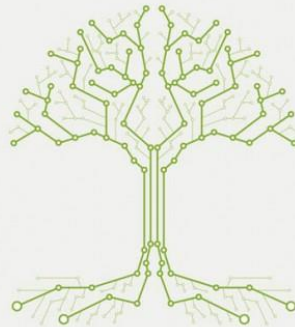
Houghton Mifflin (2008)



David Corrigan/NYC Science Data Academy (2018)

YOU ARE HERE

A FIELD GUIDE FOR
Navigating Polarized Speech, Conspiracy
Theories, and Our Polluted Media Landscape



WHITNEY PHILLIPS
AND RYAN M. MILNER

MIT Press (2020)

Deep memetic frames

“what we believe in our bones to be true about the world.”

“they shape how we see and what we know (or think we know) so completely that we probably don’t even notice them.”

“Please, Please, Please Don’t Mock Conspiracy Theories” (Phillips/WIRED 2020)

“guide a person’s journey through life, but they don’t necessarily correspond to the actual topography of the land.”

You Are Here (Phillips & Milner 2020)



Boris Johnson learns no one is immune to Covid-19

Opinion by Rosa Prince

Updated 2:51 PM ET, Tue March 31, 2020



Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro gets coronavirus after months of downplaying the pandemic

Jen Kirby/Vox (July 7, 2020)



Tennis champ Novak Djokovic tests positive for COVID-19, apologizes for holding tournament: 'We were wrong'

Emily Shapiro/ABC News (June 23, 2020)

Ohio veteran, 37, who went viral for refusing to wear a mask, died of COVID-19

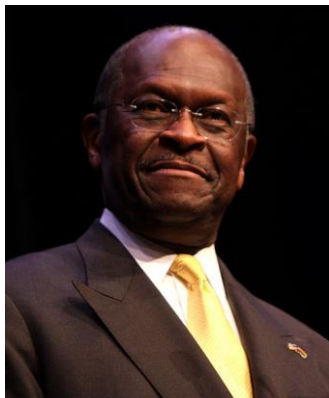
[Joshua Bote](#) USA TODAY

Published 6:44 a.m. ET Jul. 17, 2020 | Updated 6:44 a.m. ET Jul. 17, 2020



Herman Cain, ex-presidential candidate who refused to wear mask, dies after COVID-19 diagnosis

Reuters (July 30, 2020)



Source: Wikimedia

A Perfect Storm?

We're **more connected** than ever



in a digital environment that
is **not heavily regulated**

during a **global pandemic** that leaves us **stranded** at home in front of our **computers**.

**“A lie can travel halfway around the world
while the truth is still putting on its shoes.”**



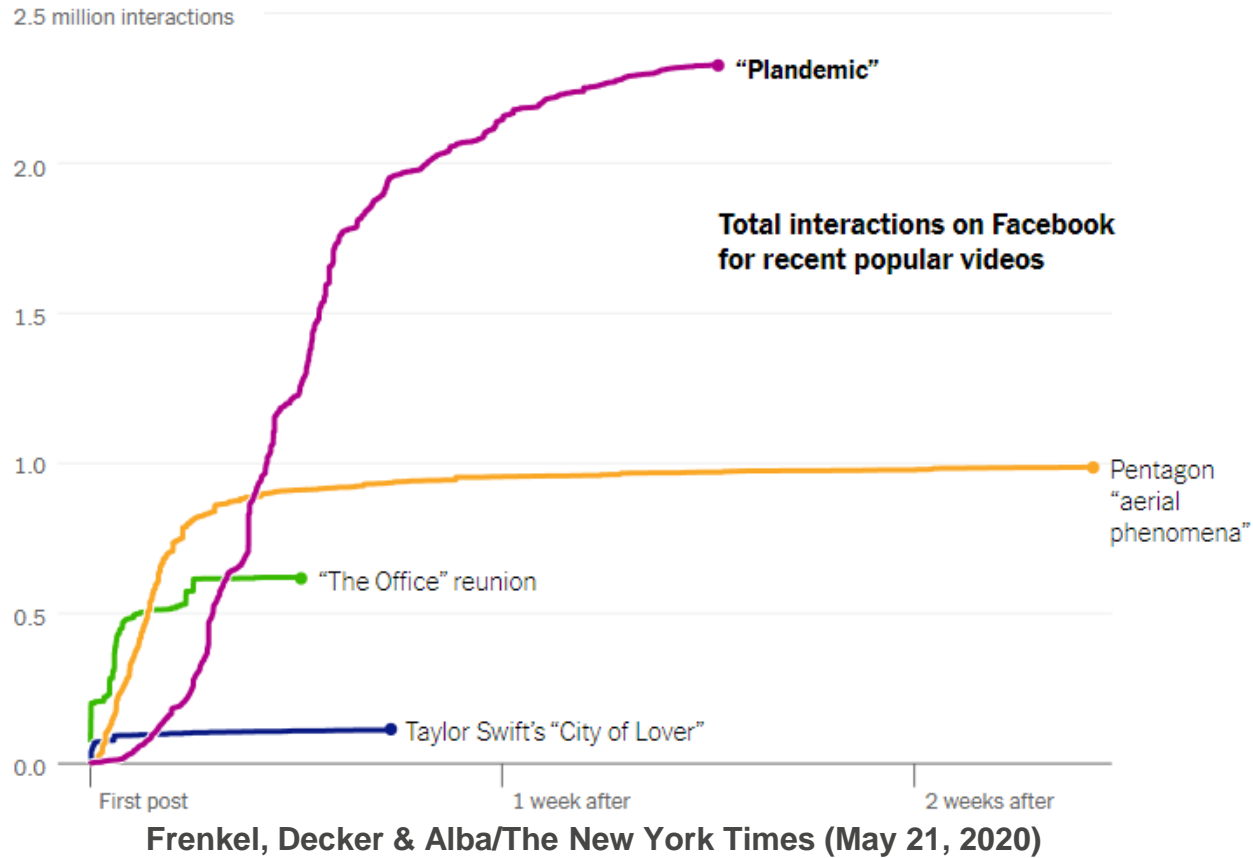
THE CONVERSATION

**The Victorians had the same concerns about
technology as we do**

Melissa Dickson/The Conversation (June 21, 2016)

The New York Times

How the 'Plandemic' Movie and Its Falsehoods Spread Widely Online



POLITICO

Sinclair to delay segment featuring 'Plandemic' conspiracy theory

Aubree Eliza Weaver/Politico (July 25, 2020)



Pew Research Center
@pewresearch

NEW: 25% of U.S. adults see at least some truth in the conspiracy theory that COVID-19 was planned. But those shares differ by demographics and partisanship. (July 24, 2020)

COVID-19–Related Infodemic and Its Impact on Public Health: A Global Social Media Analysis

Md Saiful Islam et al. 2020

If the virus is exposed to a temperature of 26-27 ° C. it will be killed, as it does not live in hot regions. Also **drinking hot water and sun exposure** will do the trick

And **stay away from ice cream and eating cold** is important.

Gargle with warm and salt water kills the tonsils' germs and prevents them from leaking into the lungs.

Adherence to these instructions fulfills the purpose of preventing viruses.
UNICEF

08:22

WhatsApp/Al Jazeera (March 10, 2020)

BBC

'Hundreds dead' because of Covid-19 misinformation

Alistair Coleman/BBC (August 12, 2020)

BBC

Coronavirus: World leaders' posts deleted over fake news

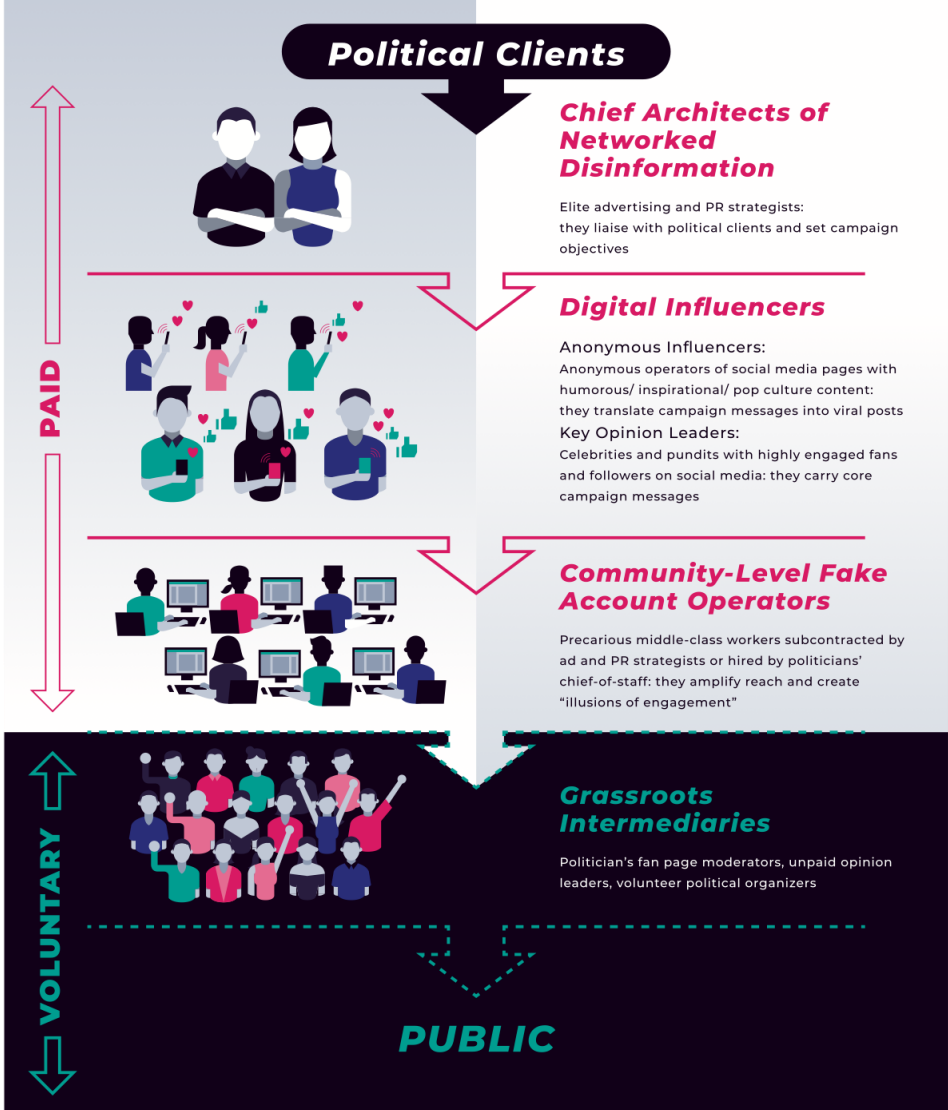
BBC (March 31, 2020)



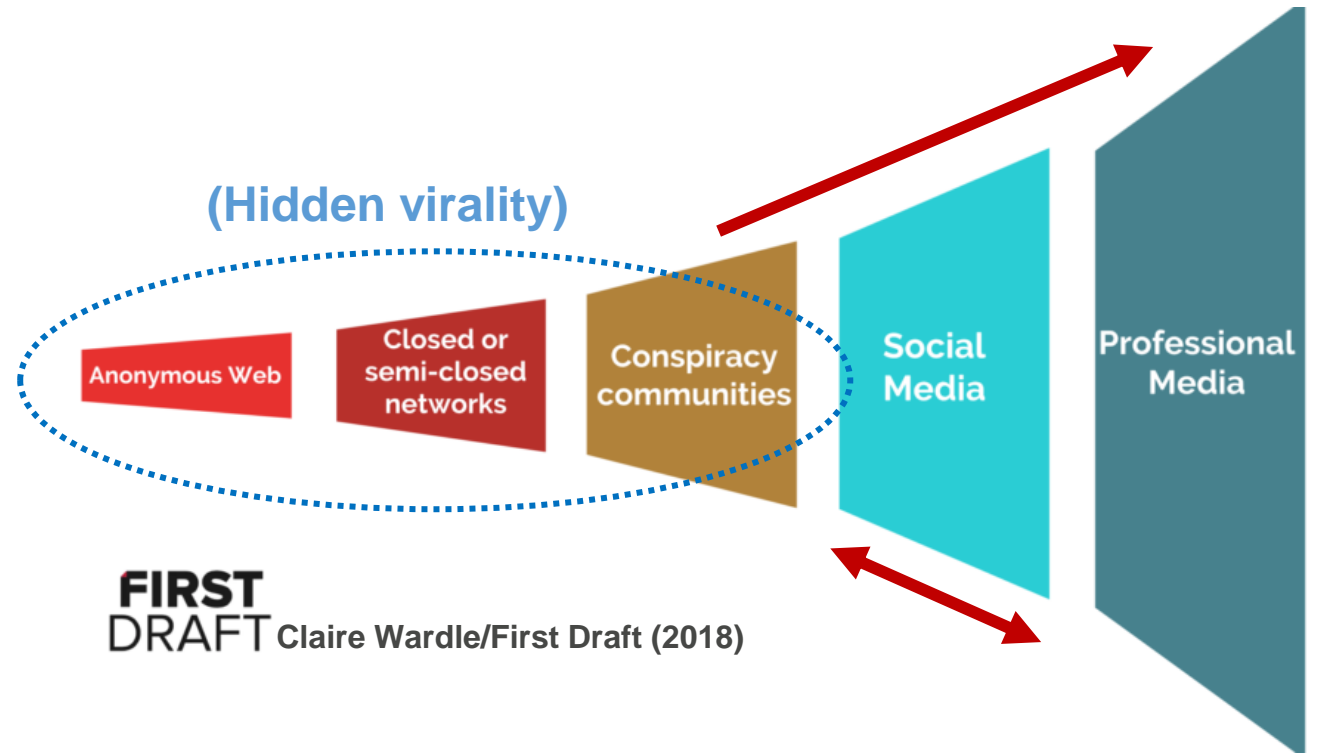
Photo credit: Eva Marie Uzcategui/Bloomberg

THE ARCHITECTURE OF NETWORKED DISINFORMATION

REFERENCE: Ong, J.C. & Cabanes, J.V. (2018). Architects of Networked Disinformation



Architects of Networked Disinformation (Ong & Cabañes 2018, 9)



Findings

CCDH
Center for Countering Digital Hate

Platform	Posts Reported	Group/ account removed	Post removed	Flagged as false	Total acted upon
Facebook	334	0.0%	10.2%	2.1%	12.3%
Instagram	135	5.9%	4.4%	0.0%	10.4%
Twitter	179	2.8%	0.6%	0.0%	3.3%
Total	649	2.0%	6.3%	1.1%	9.4%

#WilltoAct (Center for Countering Digital Hate 2020, 9)

Facebook's Algorithm: A Major Threat to Public Health



- Global health misinformation spreading networks spanning at least five countries **generated an estimated 3.8 billion views** on Facebook in the last year.
- **Only 16% of all health misinformation analysed had a warning label from Facebook.** Despite their content being fact-checked, the other 84% of articles and posts sampled in this report remain online without warnings.

Avaaz (August 19, 2020)

theguardian Facebook algorithm found to 'actively promote' Holocaust denial

Mark Townsend/The Guardian (August 16, 2020)



One in three Americans say they won't get coronavirus vaccine: poll

J. Edward Moreno/The Hill (August 14, 2020)

POLITICO

You're Living in the Golden Age of Conspiracy Theories

Zack Stanton/Politico (June 17, 2020)

“the relative magnitude of the **misinformation** problem on Facebook has **declined** since its peak.”

“Trends in the diffusion on social media“
(Allcott, Gentzkow & Yu 2019, 1)

DAILY NEWS

Conspiracy theories have hounded America since the start, just used in new ways

Joseph Uscinski/New York Daily News (Sept. 5, 2020)



The New York Times/YouTube (March 10, 2014)

VICE

The Strange, Centuries-Long History of Satanic Pedophile Panics

Modern-day conspiracy theories like Pizzagate and 'QAnon' have roots that stretch back to medieval Europe.
Mark Hay/Vice (November 15, 2018)

“The strain of living in this particular time, with a dragging, devastating pandemic and a global uprising against police brutality and racial injustice, crashing together at the highest speed, has accelerated something that’s been going on for years.

Call it the **conspiracy singularity**: the place where many conspiracy communities are suddenly meeting and merging, a melting pot of unimaginable density.”

• Anna Merlan/Vice (July 17, 2020)

AXIOS 11 GOP congressional nominees support QAnon conspiracy

Jacob Knutson/Axios (July 12, 2020)



Marjorie Taylor Greene/YouTube (2020)



Donald J. Trump 
@realDonaldTrump



Congratulations to future Republican Star Marjorie Taylor Greene on a big Congressional primary win in Georgia against a very tough and smart opponent. Marjorie is strong on everything and never gives up - a real WINNER!

5:29 AM · Aug 12, 2020



The Washington Post

‘Pizzagate’ gunman says he was foolish, reckless, mistaken – and sorry

Spencer S. Hsu/Washington Post (June 14, 2017)



Jack Posobiec
@JackPosobiec



 Follow

False flag. Planted Comet Pizza Gunman will be used to push for censorship of independent news sources that are not corporate owned

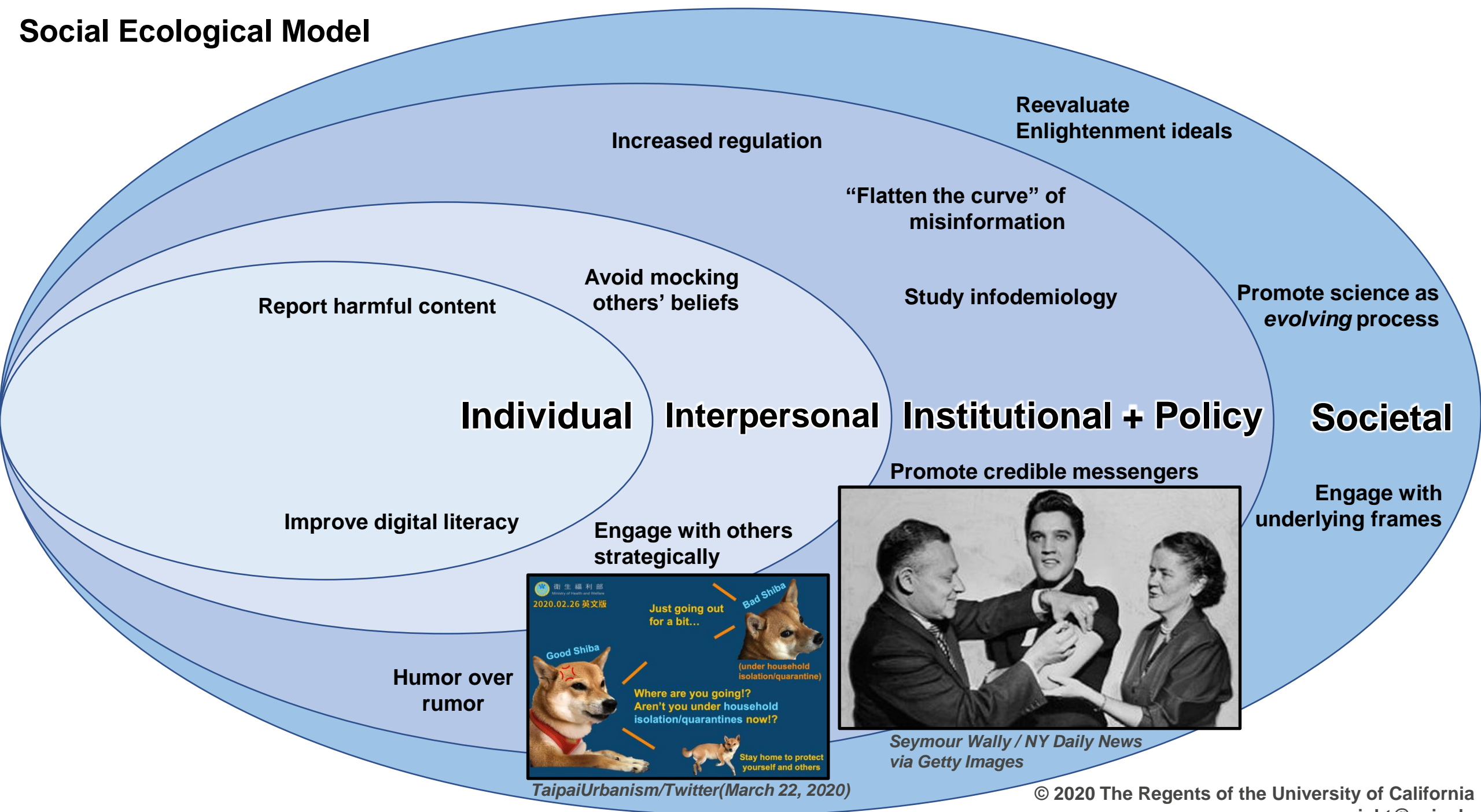
RETWEETS
2,097

LIKES
2,764



4:40 PM - 4 Dec 2016

Social Ecological Model



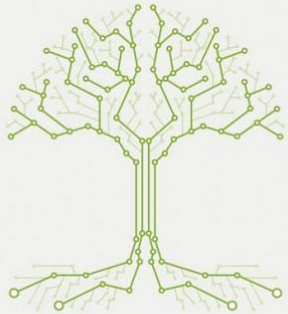
TaipaiUrbanism/Twitter(March 22, 2020)



Seymour Wally / NY Daily News via Getty Images

YOU ARE HERE

A FIELD GUIDE FOR
Navigating Polarized Speech, Conspiracy
Theories, and Our Polluted Media Landscape



WHITNEY PHILLIPS
AND RYAN M. MILNER

MIT Press (2020)

**“If facts aren’t how we got there,
then facts won’t change our minds.”**

You Are Here (Phillips & Milner 2020)