



Structural Exploitation of Individual Vulnerabilities in the “Post-Truth Era”

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Abstract

Many attempts have been made to understand the epistemic processes by which an individual is led to believe extreme and often dangerous conspiracy theories. The common view that conspiracy theorists simply lack information is demonstrably false, given the ease of access to information via the internet, so the issue lies in either the individuals themselves or the environment they find themselves in. However, upon reflection, it does not seem accurate to place the blame solely on either of these poles, as the epistemic practices of conspiracy theorists closely reflect those of non-believers, and clearly, not all individuals in a given environment end up with the same beliefs. In this paper, I consider two opposing diagnoses: Quassim Cassam’s argument for faulty individual thinking—namely, epistemic vices—as the root of conspiracy belief and Thi Nguyen’s case for the social-structural perspective—epistemic “luck”—as the catalyst for extreme beliefs. Ultimately, I reject both diagnoses and argue that the particular combination of individual “hero complexes” and for-profit media machines is to blame for the rise of extreme and corrosive conspiracy beliefs.

Keywords: Epistemic Bubbles, Echo Chambers, Conspiracy, Social Media

IT IS DIFFICULT TO UNDERSTAND why people believe strange things and even more difficult to understand why they continue to believe strange things despite compelling evidence against them. This seems to be the issue with modern-day conspiracy theorists. From Q-Anon to holocaust denial, the conspiracy theories of today are particularly corrosive to our society, and yet there is no clear solution to the problem of widespread misinformation and conspiracy beliefs. While we may want to initially point out the individual as the flawed epistemic agent, in context of their information environment, their thinking patterns aren't much different from everyone else's. So how do some people fall victim to conspiracies while the rest of us don't? In this paper I argue that the problem lies in the unique combination of vulnerable individuals within an exploitative social structure. To do so, I will first consider Quassim Cassam's argument for why the individual is at fault, contrast this with Thi Nguyen's view that the social structures are to blame, then present my own argument for why individual “hero complexes” and for-profit media machines are at the heart of the issue.

1. Who is to blame?

Quassim Cassam suggests proponents of conspiracy theories display certain epistemic vices;¹ character traits which impede their ability to analyze evidence and form conclusions properly. He argues the problem must be addressed at an individual level to “fix” their thinking. Thi Nguyen, on the other hand, believes that distinct social contexts—namely, *echo chambers*—structurally manipulate an individual's ability to process evidence rationally and turn generally good epistemic practices into unreliable ones.² Thus, he claims that the real issue is a social-structural one and people who fall victim to these traps are, in a sense, epistemically *unlucky*.

1 Quassim Cassam, “Bad Thinkers,” *Aeon*, Retrieved March 13, 2023, from <https://www.quassimcassam.com/post/bad-thinkers>. (2015), para 9.

2 Thi Nguyen, “Echo Chambers and Epistemic Bubbles,” *Episteme*, 17, no. 2, (2020), pg 156.

However, if this were true, we would be forced to conclude that people can develop extreme beliefs without taking an epistemic misstep somewhere.

It is clear the reason people believe conspiracy theories isn't due to a lack of access to evidence. Anyone can look up anything online, so the claim that conspiracy theorists are merely misinformed is obviously false. Instead, it must have something to do with how the conspiracy theorist is *interpreting* the evidence. This is something both Cassam and Nyguen agree on but for different reasons.

2. The Fault of the Individual

Cassam argues for an individualist perspective, claiming everyone has an “intellectual character” which influences the way they think. Intellectual character traits can either aid one’s ability to process information accurately—referred to as *epistemic virtues*—or they can impede their ability to do so—*epistemic vices*.³ He suggests that epistemology can provide the norms for correct thinking and inform us what virtues to cultivate. For example, virtues like humility, caution, and impartiality positively impact our ability to interpret information and form beliefs in light of our evidence, while vices such as gullibility and dogmatism lead us away from correct conclusions.

Since access to information is not the issue, a conspiracy theorist—who Cassam names “Oliver”—clearly displays distinct epistemic vices. He is simultaneously extremely gullible and dogmatic,⁴ failing to use caution when presented with questionable evidence and lacking impartiality. He trusts “his sources” (Q-Anon, for example) without a second thought while refusing to accept information provided by mainstream media or “the other side.” Thus, the reason Oliver ends up with these extreme beliefs is ultimately due to his flawed intellectual character; in other words, his

³ Quassim Cassam, para 9.

⁴ Quassim Cassam, para 7.

flawed thinking. Since he is unable to interpret and respond to relevant information correctly, the only way to solve the problem is to help him cultivate epistemic virtues and “fix” his thinking.

Yet, it doesn’t seem obviously true that Oliver’s thinking is flawed when considered in context. He *believes* his evidence is good and his sources are trustworthy. While we can accuse him of being extremely gullible towards Q-Anon and extremely dogmatic towards traditional media, he could just as easily accuse us of being extremely gullible towards the government and dogmatic towards “independent, free-thinking” media outlets. We also can’t categorize all conspiracy theories as false beliefs since some turn out to be true, like in the case of Watergate or the American syphilis experiments. Therefore, if a hallmark of being a good epistemic agent is using caution and forming your beliefs in light of your evidence, Oliver doesn’t seem to be doing anything vastly different than the rest of us. Especially considering how infrequently most individuals—conspiracy theorists or not—double-check the information provided by their trusted sources. Cassam argues that despite the parallels, what Oliver is doing is still worse than what the general population is doing; his beliefs are not just “merely false, but perversely false.”⁵ While the rest of us put our faith in the “true” authorities and, therefore, end up with true and justified beliefs—Oliver does not.

Even so, if it *is* true that the only difference (epistemically speaking) between Oliver and us is that he puts his faith in “false” authorities, it seems—according to Thi Nguyen—that the issue is less a matter of intellectual character and more a matter of epistemic *luck*. Hence, it follows that the problem cannot be solved by fixing the individual and is more likely a product of the information environment and social structures the individual finds themselves in.

5 Andre Begby, Lecture 9: Cassam, 2023

3. The Fault of the Social Structure

Nyguen argues for the social-structural perspective, claiming our environments inevitably lead us to form some false beliefs through no fault of our own. He identifies two distinct problematic social structures that reinforce ideological separation and lead their members astray;⁶ *epistemic bubbles* and *echo chambers*. Epistemic bubbles naturally form as we create social networks based on common interests and beliefs. Due to the similarity of members in an epistemic bubble, the group will have significant gaps in differing perspectives without realizing it, limiting their access to relevant evidence or an objective set of arguments. This is not done consciously since members of epistemic bubbles are usually different *enough* from each other to convince themselves of their diversity. Nonetheless, the structure is problematic especially when reflected in social media algorithms. If we are only shown things online that we tend to already agree with or “like,” we are led to *bootstrapped corroboration*:⁷ the disproportionate confidence in our own beliefs caused by frequently encountering agreement. Fortunately, these bubbles are easily popped when relevant outsider information is made available, assuming that the members are well-meaning epistemic agents. This is what sets them apart from echo chambers.

While epistemic bubbles exclude certain perspectives by accident, echo chambers are designed to intentionally discredit outsider perspectives because they're outsiders. The key difference is in the treatment of new or contradicting evidence: Well-meaning epistemic bubbles update their beliefs when presented with new credible evidence they didn't have before. Echo chambers, on the other hand, are aware of the opposing evidence and respond by structurally discrediting non-members while artificially increasing their own credibility.

This is a process known as *evidential pre-emption*,⁸ the manipulation of

⁶ Nguyen, *Echo Chambers and Epistemic Bubbles*, p 141.

⁷ Nguyen, p 144.

⁸ Endre Begby, Lecture 10: Nguyen, 2023. (Nguyen, *Echo Chambers and Epistemic Bubbles*, p 147).

how someone can rationally respond to new evidence by pre-emptively discrediting contradictory evidence and inspiring doubt in opposing sources of information. This is what's at play in the phrase, “the mainstream media will tell you x!” An echo chamber member—let's continue to call him Oliver—now has the opposite reaction to evidence that should otherwise reduce his credence in his original extreme belief. This is because the echo chamber is right; the mainstream media *did* tell Oliver x, and now he is predisposed to see this outsider evidence as untrustworthy. He will also increase his credence in the testimony of other echo chamber members, creating a further division of trust between him and people who aren't part of this social structure. This is why Nyguen agrees that conspiracy thinking can't be due to a lack of evidence since echo chambers actively seek out outsider evidence in order to pre-emptively discredit it. The existence of contradicting evidence actually fuels extreme beliefs because of the way the social structure is designed. That being said, can't we still place blame on Oliver for ending up in this kind of social structure to begin with? Nyguen says no and highlights once again that even within the echo chamber, Oliver's thinking is not much different from everyone else's.

In the “post-truth era”⁹ we currently find ourselves, it is important to identify who is trying to mislead us and refuse their evidence, even when it seems compelling. This is referred to as an *antagonistic information environment*¹⁰ and influences how everyone interacts with outside information. If we aren't skeptical of certain arguments and evidence, we will end up with significantly worse epistemic agents overall. Thus, by refusing the testimony of someone like Alex Jones for the sake of being Alex Jones, we display our own echo chamber allegiance. Our evidential pre-emption tells us that someone like Alex Jones is untrustworthy, so we disregard the evidence he presents instead of giving his perspective equal weight to our own (characteristic of an epistemic bubble). Importantly, Nyguen is not saying that it is wrong to do this, considering our environment. He is,

⁹ Nyguen, *Echo Chambers and Epistemic Bubbles*, p 150.

¹⁰ Begby, Lecture 10: Nyguen, 2023.

however, highlighting that non-believers are essentially doing exactly what Oliver is doing while believing that they are justified, and he is not.

4. The Fault of the “Hero”

While I agree with Nguyen that echo chambers manipulate our ability to process evidence rationally, I am not convinced that someone can develop the type of extreme conspiracy thinking displayed by Q-Anon followers without taking an epistemic misstep somewhere. It appears that people tend to be indoctrinated into echo chambers slowly over time (assuming they aren't born into them). While they may initially seem like any other epistemic bubble of like-minded individuals, the new members are enticed with minor controversial “gate-way beliefs”¹¹ or uncomfortable “truths” referred to as *red pills* that, through bootstrapped corroboration, become acceptable within the group.

The leaders systematically exploit the trust and curiosity of the new members and lead them down a path of increasingly extreme and controversial beliefs under the guise of heroism. Instead of shying away from evidence or making their members passive, they make them pathologically *obsessed* with finding some nefarious “truth.” But blatantly irrational echo chambers don't form in a vacuum—it seems to me that they are a dangerous combination of power-hungry people exploiting our natural social structures (enabled by social media platforms), and vulnerable people falling for it. While someone's vulnerabilities might be used to excuse their behaviour and put the blame on the exploiters, I don't believe vulnerability is an epistemically innocent position.

Without careful self-reflection, individual vulnerabilities influence our ability to come to objective conclusions by making us more likely to take leaps of faith or lower our threshold for evidence when we *want* to believe something. The Q-Anon followers, for example, are convinced they

¹¹ Begby, Lecture 10: Nguyen, 2023.

are participating in some sort of “revolution” that outsiders “aren’t brave enough to accept,” because they *want* to be part of something like that. This type of “main character syndrome” or “hero complex” seems to be consistent in these communities; the leaders justify their actions either through some narcissistic entitlement to money or fame (especially in cases where they don’t even believe the theories they advocate for) or because they believe themselves to be a “martyr of truth.” The followers justify their actions because they are convinced they’ve cracked the code, broken out of the matrix, and are special enough to have “figured it out.” It is this unique mindset that I believe reveals an important difference between the relatively normal, benign echo chambers that most people find themselves in and particularly corrosive ones like Q-Anon. While Oliver may accuse me of being equally gullible and dogmatic, he can’t accuse me of believing I am part of a “revolution.”

5. The Fault of the Machine

All that being said, I am also unsatisfied with Cassam’s diagnosis of the problem. It clearly can’t just be an issue with the intellectual character of believers, since we know that social media platforms add fuel to the fire and allow echo chamber leaders to radicalize more people than otherwise possible. What’s worse, even mainstream news outlets are caught manipulating titles for attention as they compete with each other for viewership. We regularly see how news organizations from both sides of the political spectrum fixate on certain kinds of issues to the near or complete exclusion of others. Unsurprisingly, many news outlets—who often claim impartiality despite clear biases towards certain political views—publish a disproportionate number of articles on topics which directly relate to one party’s political success and the failures of their political opponents.

Even the choice to deliberately ostracize a group of people ends up working in their favour, as the marginalized groups tend to associate the polarizing media outlet with their political opponents. By extension, they

turn to that source to gain information on what the “other side” is thinking. By taking a side, the outlets not only gain the interest, clicks, and revenue of those who share the same political beliefs, but also the ones who are adamantly opposed.

This is no accident: more clicks equates to more revenue for these websites, and people interact with things that excite them—either out of curiosity or out of anger. For news outlets and social media companies, the quality of their publications often seems to come second to their clickability. Similarly, the race to “break a story” encourages shady research practices and rushed jobs, further contributing to the misinformation issue affecting all media outlets today. I doubt it would be difficult for anyone to recall a news story in recent years that had to be retracted due to the spread of misinformation.

If we want to be generous, we could argue that the media outlets are just doing what they must to survive in the competitive information environment. All businesses need money, and if a sensationalized title is what it takes to get the information to the public, then so be it; it's the public's fault for not wanting to read boring stories! While this olive branch might work when discussing individual journalists (although I'm sceptical I'd find it convincing in that scenario as well), it doesn't hold water when it comes to large corporations. News outlets like FOX, CNN, and CTV are private companies who have no inherent “right” to financial success. To take it to the extreme, we wouldn't give drug dealers a pass for selling harmful substances just because they need to “keep up with the competition.”

Similarly, a more generous person may excuse social media sites for their contribution to the antagonistic information environment on the basis that there are just too many people to regulate all the misinformation being posted daily. I find this incredibly unconvincing given the deliberate effort on the part of social media companies to show us content which prompts engagement—positive or negative. Am I supposed to believe that it would be too difficult to implement an algorithm to mediate the level

of misinformation being posted, when we all know that algorithms are capable of much more complicated tasks; uncannily relevant targeted advertisement, for example.

The steady erosion of trust in traditional news outlets has a significant impact on the ability for echo chambers to manipulate new members who feel confused, frustrated, or hopeless. The “hero” complex that broadly characterizes someone like Oliver is not a purely irrational response if someone genuinely believes the world is lying to them and everyone they love. That being said, not all people who interact with biased news outlets and corrupt social media platforms end up Holocaust deniers. Again, the issue cannot be purely structural or individual. The for-profit media machine which runs off of engagement and clicks demonstrates a structural exploitation of individual vulnerabilities, only possible within the “post-truth” era.

It appears that without addressing the antagonist information environment we find ourselves in, no amount of individual correction will actually have a lasting impact. Corporations will always find new ways of increasing division for their own financial benefit, and vulnerable people will become more radicalized as their trust in “reputable” media continues to wane and the confidence in their own martyrship grows.

In closing, it doesn’t seem correct to boil down the conspiracy theorist issue to just individual faulty thinking or unlucky placements in social structures. People who end up in these echo chambers share some blame, but it is crucial to acknowledge that social media networks and news outlets have something to gain from our division and radicalization. I suggest that the solution lies somewhere in addressing what makes individuals so vulnerable to these “main character” fantasies and removing the tools used by echo chamber leaders and corporations to exploit and profit off of these vulnerabilities.

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