



Content or Context ? An Examination of What Causes Conspiracy Theories About Mass Shooting

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Abstract

- ❖ This research examined whether the characteristics of certain mass shootings led to alt-right media publishing articles that the mass shootings were conspiracy theories
- ❖ Hypothesis: Mass shootings in which there is no clear motive, the shooter is white, and the majority of victims are white will result in the emergence of conspiracy theories alleging a false flag attack on alt right media
- ❖ Results: The prevalence of conspiracy theories about mass shootings does not depend on the shooter and the victim both being white without a motive
- ❖ Result: Articles about different mass shootings used the same central conspirators: Mainstream media, CIA/FBI, Big Pharma, liberal organizations

Background

- ❖ Public awareness of mass shootings (Christchurch, NZ, El Paso, TX) as a consequence of far right conspiracy theories but not as much on the conspiracy beliefs that circulate online after mass shootings
- ❖ Conspiracy theories are psychologically and ideologically driven to mitigate feelings of uncertainty and confusion, ideology predicts which conspiracy theory person is likely to believe
- ❖ Man-made crisis events lead to increased volume of misinformation online, conspiracy theories are the most difficult to mitigate after exposure
- ❖ Alt-Right Media and Conspiracy Theories: Anti-globalist, based on a disbelief of narrative rather than specific counternarrative

Conclusions

- ❖ Preliminary observations from the data suggest that the public reaction rather than the shooting is a greater predictor of the prevalence of a conspiracy theory and conspiracy narrative but future research is required
- ❖ The conspiracy theory of Big Pharma/psychiatric medicine was profit motivated by Alex Jones to sell his supplements

Methodology

- ❖ Compiled data of every mass shooting from 2009-2019 on the race of the shooter, the majority race of the victims, and the motive of the mass shooting (if any)
- ❖ Collected data from articles (n= 373) published on Infowars about every mass shooting from 2009-2019
- ❖ Measured the number of total articles, the percentage of articles that suggested the mass shooting was a conspiracy theory
- ❖ Conducted a content analysis for the most prevalent conspiracy themes for each mass shooting and the most prevalent themes across all mass shootings
- ❖ Compared the percentage of conspiracy theories for each mass shooting to the shooter's race, victims' race, and whether there was a motive
- ❖ Conducted a quantitative analysis of the different conspiracy narratives

Results

- ❖ The prevalence of a conspiracy theory was not predicted by shooter and the majority of the victims both being white
- ❖ When Infowars did not write a conspiracy about a mass shooting, the amount of total articles was lower
- ❖ 30% of all articles about mass shootings on Infowars claim the event to be a conspiracy

Table 1: Results for Mass Shootings with Conspiracy Theory Articles Published on Infowars

Shooting	Motive of the Shooter	Race of Shooter	Demographic of Victims	% of Articles Pushing Conspiracy Theory	Total # of Articles
Sandy Hook Elementary School	N	White American	Majority White	67.6	34
Fort Hood shooting	Y	Palestinian-American	Majority white	58.8	34
Route 91 Harvest music festival	N	White American	Majority white	57.7	26
Aurora Colorado shooting	N	White American	Majority White	47.1	34
Stoneman Douglas Shooting	N	White American	Majority white	30.2	53
Walmart El Paso Shooting	Y	White American	Intended to target Mexicans, various races	26.7	15
Pulse Nightclub	Y	Afghan American	Gay and Latinx	21.7	23
Charleston Church Shooting	Y	White American	Black	15.0	40
San Bernardino Attack	Y	Pakistani American and Pakistani	Majority White	13.6	22
Washington Navy Yard	N	African American	Majority White	9.7	31

Table 2: Conspiracy Theory Related Terms by Category and Theme

Category/Theme	Mass Shootings Featuring Theme	Total Articles with Theme
<i>Narrative</i>		
False flag	10	56
More than one shooter	8	22
Hoax/drill	4	35
"Patsy," shooter was scapegoated	4	11
Cover-up: pharmaceutical drugs not drugs are the cause	4	4
Psychological mind control	2	6
<i>Agenda</i>		
Anti-gun agenda	10	34
Smear conservatives	2	7
Excuse for War on Terror	1	1
<i>Malevolent Actors</i>		
Corporate Media	9	39
FBI/CIA	7	32
Big Pharma	4	9
George Soros	4	9
Liberal Organizations	3	5

- ❖ The narratives of different conspiracy theories centered around the subversion of mainstream media
- ❖ The same conspiracy theory themes were used for different mass shootings
- ❖ Infowars published 2+ different (often contradictory) conspiracy narratives for the mass shootings that they called a conspiracy