Report on Conspiracy Theories in the Online Environment and the Counter-Disinformation Ecosystem in the UK

Clare Birchall and Peter Knight

Researching Europe, Digitalisation and Conspiracy Theories (REDACT)

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REDACT

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The REDACT project analysed how digitalisation shapes the form, content and consequences of conspiracy theories including online sociality and offline actions and effects. Rather than seeing digitalisation as a process that has universal outcomes, or conspiracy theories as the same over space and time, REDACT considered online conspiracy theories and counter-disinformation organisations in a selection of European countries. The project involved a team of 14 researchers analysing data from Western Europe, Central Europe, the Baltics and the Balkans.

Methodology

Using keywords from a range of conspiracy theory topics, the project gathered 6 million posts from Twitter/X, Facebook, Instagram and Telegram between 2019-2024. The researchers used a mixture of digital methods and close reading strategies to analyse the datasets. Each regional team also conducted ethnographic interviews with key members of counter-disinformation organisations across Europe. Political, social and economic contexts were brought to bear on all of these methods and findings.

About the Authors

Professor Clare Birchall (King's College London) and Professor Peter Knight (Manchester University) have been researching conspiracy theories and contested knowledges for over thirty years. Between them, they have published many books on these topics. They have both led large research projects on conspiracy theories, bringing together scholars from around the globe.

Key Findings

- **UK conspiracism requires UK-specific approaches:**
  Universal or US-based models fail to account for the UK's unique historical, political and cultural context. Strategies must be tailored to British conditions.
- **Conspiracism has deep historical roots:**
  From elite fears of subversion in the nineteenth century to digital-age populism, British conspiracy theories have evolved but remain tied to longstanding concerns about power, identity and dissent.
- **Belief is limited but influence is growing:**
  While conspiracy belief is less widespread in the UK than in some countries, its impact on public discourse, protest movements and political rhetoric is increasing.
- **Conspiracism amplifies culture wars and polarisation:**
  Conspiracy thinking intensifies political divisions, embedding itself in culture war narratives and making public debate more emotionally charged and intractable.
- **Conspiracy theories are adaptive and mobile:**
  Driven by distrust and perceived threats to freedom, conspiracy narratives shift easily between issues (e.g., from Covid to climate) and serve to connect different political groups.

- **Conspiracy thinking often reflects systemic failures:**
  Rather than isolated misinformation, conspiracy theories should be understood as expressions of public disillusionment with the gap between political promises and lived realities.
- **Grey zones complicate intervention:**
  Conspiracy talk often exists in a grey zone between legitimate political debate and disinformation. It's frequently expressed through dog-whistles, memes and implication rather than explicit claims – making it hard to identify, regulate or counter.
- **The counter-disinformation sector is diverse but pressured:**
  The UK's sector includes government, civil society and international NGOs, but faces funding challenges, political scrutiny and regulatory gaps – especially around AI, elections and health misinformation.
- **Critiques often misrepresent the sector's work:**
  Current debates about counter-disinformation are frequently based on caricature rather than an informed understanding of the actual work of these organisations.
- **Everyday users play a key role in countering conspiracism:**
  Beyond formal initiatives, ordinary people actively challenge conspiracies online – yet their efforts are often omitted from research, overstating the reach and dominance of conspiracist narratives.

Recommendations

1. **Create bespoke solutions:** Don't import models of and solutions to conspiracism wholesale from the US.
2. **Identify the underlying causes of conspiracy theories:** Address causes rather than symptoms.
3. **Understand conspiracy theories as a unique form of disinformation:** Consider what makes conspiracy theories stickier than other forms of disinformation.
4. **Create trustworthy institutions:** Instead of lamenting falling levels of trust, institutions need to become worthy of trust.
5. **Disincentivise online disinformation:** This requires regulators and platforms to work together for the public good.
6. **Look beyond social media:** Consider the whole conspiracist ecosystem.
7. **Don't use conspiracism to fuel the culture war:** Don't normalise conspiracy theories.
8. **Don't allow populist conspiracism to set the terms of national debates:** Media neutrality and balance does not mean that we have to tolerate forms of denialism or veiled racism.
9. **Address current funding models for counter-disinformation work:** There is need for long-term projects and greater agility.
10. **Acknowledge that disinformation is a political category:** From this starting point, organisations can be transparent about their criteria for qualitative decisions about the quality and efficacy of information.

1. History and Context of Conspiracy Theories in the UK

While conspiracy thinking is not unique to Britain, its history – marked by monarchy, class stratification, empire, war and religious conflict – has shaped a distinctive conspiracist tradition. British elites historically used conspiracy theories to maintain control, though modern versions often challenge authority.

In the Early Modern period, interpreting political events through a Machiavellian lens of plotting and intrigue was common. During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, fears of Jacobinism and foreign subversion followed the American and French Revolutions. British authorities targeted groups like the Freemasons and the Illuminati, passing laws such as the 1799 Unlawful Societies Act. Conspiracies were invoked to explain unrest at home and in the colonies; the 1857 Indian uprisings, for instance, were framed as a coordinated plot. The inability to imagine popular protest to British rule as anything other than the result of secret manipulation by shadowy forces structured state responses to colonial mutinies, Fenian uprisings, Chartist protests and anarchist violence in the nineteenth century.

Antisemitic conspiracy theories flourished in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Britain. Benjamin Disraeli, despite being of Jewish heritage, echoed claims of Jewish global influence in his fiction. Working-class politicians like Keir Hardie blamed 'Jewish capitalists' for wars such as the Second Boer War. The British Brothers' League lobbied to restrict Jewish immigration, leading to the 1905 Aliens Act. Conspiracist antisemitism crossed political lines: Churchill warned of a Jewish communist plot, while parts of the left blamed Jews for capitalist exploitation.

Espionage fears peaked during World War II and the Cold War. Harold Wilson was suspected of being a Soviet agent, though MI5 found no evidence. Still, segments of the right-wing establishment plotted against him, meaning that paranoia and actual conspiracy co-existed.

Modern British conspiracy culture gained ground after JFK's 1963 assassination. Philosopher Bertrand Russell challenged the official account, forming a British committee critical of the Warren Commission, but UK 'conspiracy buffs' were in a minority. While American narratives spread via media like *The X-Files,* Britain's scene grew slowly.

Britain's multicultural makeup also shaped its conspiracist landscape. Diaspora communities imported conspiracy theories from their countries of origin. And marginalised communities used conspiracism as resistance. Yet, also in evidence are more regressive narratives. Holocaust denialism thrived in the 1980s–90s, championed by figures like David Irving. In the 1990s, David Icke began promoting his theories about reptilian elites and became a major conspiracy entrepreneur.

Princess Diana's 1997 death marked Britain's 'JFK moment' – a national tragedy that spurred mass conspiracist speculation, amplified by the emerging internet.

Anti-vaccine beliefs have deep UK roots, with Andrew Wakefield's debunked MMR-autism study fuelling today's movement. The Covid-19 pandemic revived these views and figures like ex-nurse Kate Shemirani became prominent at anti-lockdown rallies.

Islamophobic conspiracy theories are also a feature of the UK scene, especially after the 2014 'Trojan Horse' scandal alleged an Islamic takeover of Birmingham schools. Fears of immigration and cultural displacement shaped the Brexit campaign and persists in the rhetoric of Reform UK.

Despite increased visibility and traction of conspiracist rhetoric in politics and media, belief remains relatively low in the UK. A 2021 YouGov poll found the British among the least conspiracist globally, though other surveys suggest a far greater percentage of people find such theories at least plausible.[1]

Still, Britain has a vocal fringe. David Icke and Russell Brand have large audiences. Far-right figures like Paul Joseph Watson and Tommy Robinson promote nationalist conspiracy theories. Andrew Tate appeals to young men with conspiracist misogyny. Debunked claims of Satanic ritual abuse (SRA) persist, driven by figures like Jeanette Archer.

New media outlets fuel conspiracism. The *Light* newspaper and GB News have hosted such discourse, especially during the Covid pandemic. GB News presenters linked health measures to authoritarianism and cast doubt on the safety of vaccines.

Covid sparked grassroots anti-lockdown movements that evolved into opposition to climate policies, warning of 'climate lockdowns.' Some MPs, like Andrew Bridgen – who compared vaccines to the Holocaust – were reprimanded, but conspiracist dog-whistling is increasingly tolerated on the political right.

In sum, while conspiracy theories once helped elites maintain power, today's British conspiracism reflects both resistance and reaction. Though relatively marginal, it is increasingly shaping political rhetoric and public discourse.

2. UK Online Environment and UK Online Conspiracist Environment

Like other Western European countries, internet penetration in the UK is high (96%)[2] and social media use is widespread (92%).[3] The most popular platforms (by share of population) are WhatsApp (79%), Facebook (73%), Messenger (60%), Instagram (60%), X (44%), TikTok (40%). When measured by share of visits, the most popular site by far is Facebook (62%), followed by X (15%), Instagram (11%), Pinterest (6%) and YouTube (2%).[4] YouTube and TikTok attract younger audiences for news, via outlets like LADBible, Joe Politics, TLDR or Novara Media.

The UK has a robust news ecosystem, including its public service broadcaster (BBC) and commercial outlets. The BBC remains the most trusted news brand (62%), followed by Channel 4 News and ITV News (both 59%).[5] However, distrust in the BBC (22%) is higher than for the other channels, and has become a target for populist and conspiracist attacks in recent years.

News sources are shifting: all online sources together remain stable at 74% but television has dropped to 48% and print to 12%, while social media has risen to 39%. Mainstream brands still dominate UK online news. These shifts are more extreme than in some other European countries (e.g. 61% of Germans still use television to access news content), but less so than in the US – where 34% use social media as their main source of news, compared to 20% in the UK.[6]

Leading UK news commentators on social media include James O'Brien, Robert Peston and Piers Morgan, but they now compete with more partisan (and openly conspiracist) figures like Joe Rogan, Nigel Farage, Russell Brand and Neil Oliver. [7]

Overall, trust in news in the UK is low – only 36% of people trust most news most of the time. By comparison, Finland ranks highest in Europe (69%), with e.g. Germany at 43%, Croatia 32% and the US 32%.[8] Interest in news also declined, from 70% in 2015 to 38% in 2024. Other countries have seen smaller drops (e.g. Germany from 74% to 55%, USA 67% to 52%), or no decline at all (e.g. Finland).[9] The decline is most marked among women and young people.

However, studies show misinformation and conspiracy theories form only a small share of the average Briton's information diet.[10] Ofcom (2021) found 'trustworthy' websites received 2 billion visits, versus 14 million for 'untrustworthy' ones.[11] A Reuters Institute study found 'untrustworthy' news sites represented less than 1% of all traffic and under 3% of Facebook engagement. However, some researchers argue this underestimates the problem, as much misinformation circulates beyond flagged 'low quality' sites – via social media and offline conversations.

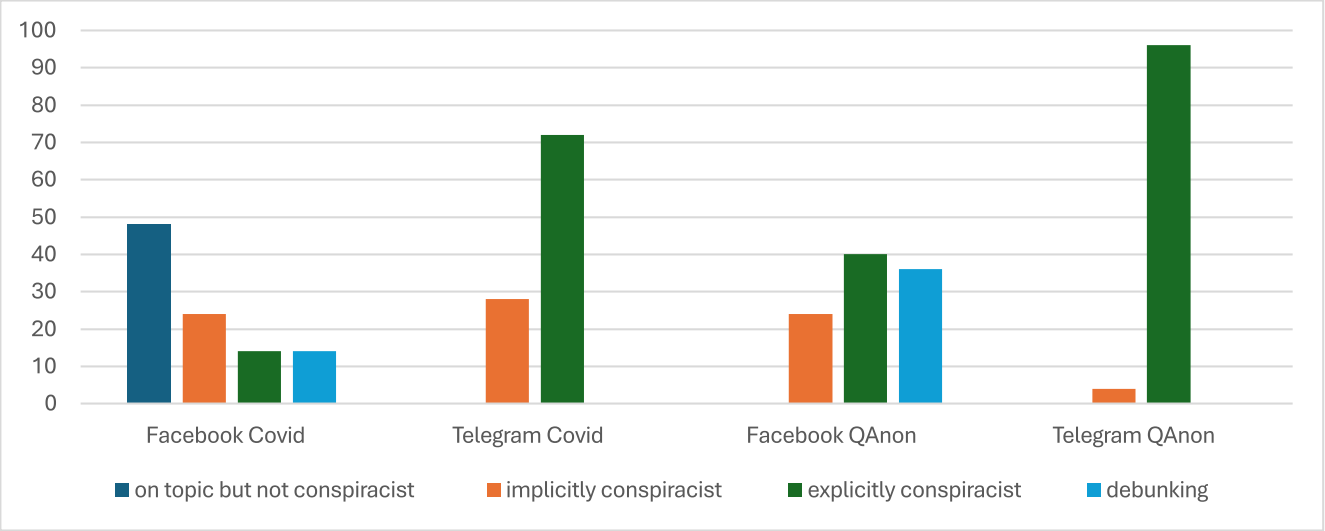

Figure 1. Analysis of style of post on Facebook and Telegram for Covid and QAnon conspiracy theory discussion. In the period of our data gathering (2019-2024) these topics were more successfully content moderated on (public) Facebook pages, with conspiracy discussion either resorting to coded forms or openly rejected. In contrast, Telegram has few restraints and explicit conspiracy talk is far more prevalent.

Following the civil unrest of summer 2024 after the Southport attack, many politicians and commentators blamed social media. This reflects wider public opinion: 66% of Britons say social media companies should be held responsible, and 80% believe platforms are under-regulated.[12] Research showed how misinformation about the attacker's identity spread from an obscure Pakistani clickbait site, amplified by local conspiracist provocateurs, and then reached a wider audience.[13] It also revealed horizontal far-right conspiracist networks such as Patriotic Alternative using platforms such as Telegram, Gab, Bitchute and Odyssey to spread anti-immigrant hatred and organise violence.[14] Algorithmic promotion of misinformation clearly played a role,[15] as did the amplification of racial tensions by figures like Tommy Robinson, Andrew Tate and Elon Musk. But it is simplistic to blame technology and foreign interference when UK politicians have also contributed to the increasingly toxic discussion about immigration.

3. Case Study: Great Replacement Conspiracy Theories in the UK

In the UK, contemporary references to the Great Replacement conspiracy theory must be understood within the context of ongoing culture wars. The concern is less about widespread belief in the theory or mass radicalisation, and more about how conspiracy-adjacent ideas have entered mainstream discourse – particularly in debates on immigration. This signals a shifting Overton window, where once-fringe ideas now shape political rhetoric.

Immigration has long been a flashpoint in British politics. Enoch Powell's notorious 'Rivers of Blood' speech in 1968, reacting to Commonwealth immigration and the proposed Race Relations Act, articulated early fears of racial and demographic change. He cited a constituent warning that 'in fifteen or twenty years' time the black man will have the whip hand over the white man.' These sentiments resurfaced during the 2015 EU migrant crisis, when immigration again became a national concern. The Brexit campaign's call to 'take back control' of British borders resonated with Leave voters.

A persistent undercurrent of Islamophobia underlies much of this anxiety. After 9/11 and the 2005 London bombings, British Muslims became targets of suspicion. Beyond terrorism, demographic shifts in urban areas prompted wider fears of cultural change. In today's post-Brexit culture wars, mainstream

figures – including MPs – blur the line between discussions of immigration, demographics and conspiracy theories. Claims about 'no-go zones' governed by Sharia law illustrate this trend. A 2024 poll by Hope not Hate found 52% of Conservative Party members believe such areas exist.[16]

This forms the backdrop to remarks by MP Lee Anderson, who said that London Mayor Sadiq Khan was controlled by 'Islamists' and had 'given the capital city away to his mates.' The comments, aired on GB News, echoed MP Suella Braverman's claim that 'Islamists, extremists and antisemites are in charge now.' Even Labour Prime Minister Keir Starmer warned Britain risked becoming 'an island of strangers,' a phrase critics linked to Powell's rhetoric.

Facebook groups promoting 'traditional British values' often slide into conspiracist territory. One page with 35,000 followers reposted a *Telegraph* article critical of immigration, prompting a user to comment, 'The "economic case for migration" was always white genocide.' This reflects a common pattern across Facebook and Telegram where anti-immigrant views are framed as rational reactions to demographic change to deflect accusations of conspiracism. These posts highlight crimes or cultural shifts to lend credibility to claims of harm from non-white immigration.

Many Great Replacement posts cite the 'Kalergi Plan' – named after Richard van Coudenhove-Kalergi, a pro-European integration figure from the 1920s – misrepresented as proof of a Jewish plot to alter Europe's ethnic makeup. For instance, a UKIP-supporting Facebook page invoked it while criticising a BBC article about a teacher promoting 'black joy'.

The same page shared a meme comparing 1940s white British soldiers with Muslim men praying in 2017, captioned: 'Englishmen ready to die to prevent a foreign invasion... It's a mass replacement of the indigenous peoples of these once great isles.' (See Figure 2.) World War II here becomes a symbol of cultural loss, with commenters overwhelmingly echoing alarmist, Islamophobic views.

Fig 2. Screenshot of a Facebook post, 23 Oct 2020.

Foreign invasion is portrayed solely as something suffered by the UK, never inflicted by it. When the Empire is mentioned, it is framed as benign. This historical amnesia makes it easier to cast Britain as a victim of a sinister plot of demographic change, rather than a former coloniser facing its legacies.

Terms like 'white genocide' and 'Islamification' are common in the posts we analysed, revealing cross-pollination with US white supremacism. Online platforms have facilitated this exchange. Yet UK far-right groups haven't fully adopted the American version. For example, among the UK Telegram posts analysed, only two used the explicitly antisemitic phrase 'the Jews will not replace us.' Instead, they draw from more mainstream US figures like Tucker Carlson. A Scottish Identitarian group, for instance, praised Carlson for mainstreaming the Great Replacement on Fox News and urged Europeans to follow suit.

While the Great Replacement conspiracy theory draws on US and European far-right sources, UK discourse tends to focus on domestic concerns, often through an anti-multicultural and anti-immigration lens. Our analysis of posts on Facebook and Telegram shows frequent use of 'white genocide' alongside uniquely British terms, indicating a localisation of the narrative.

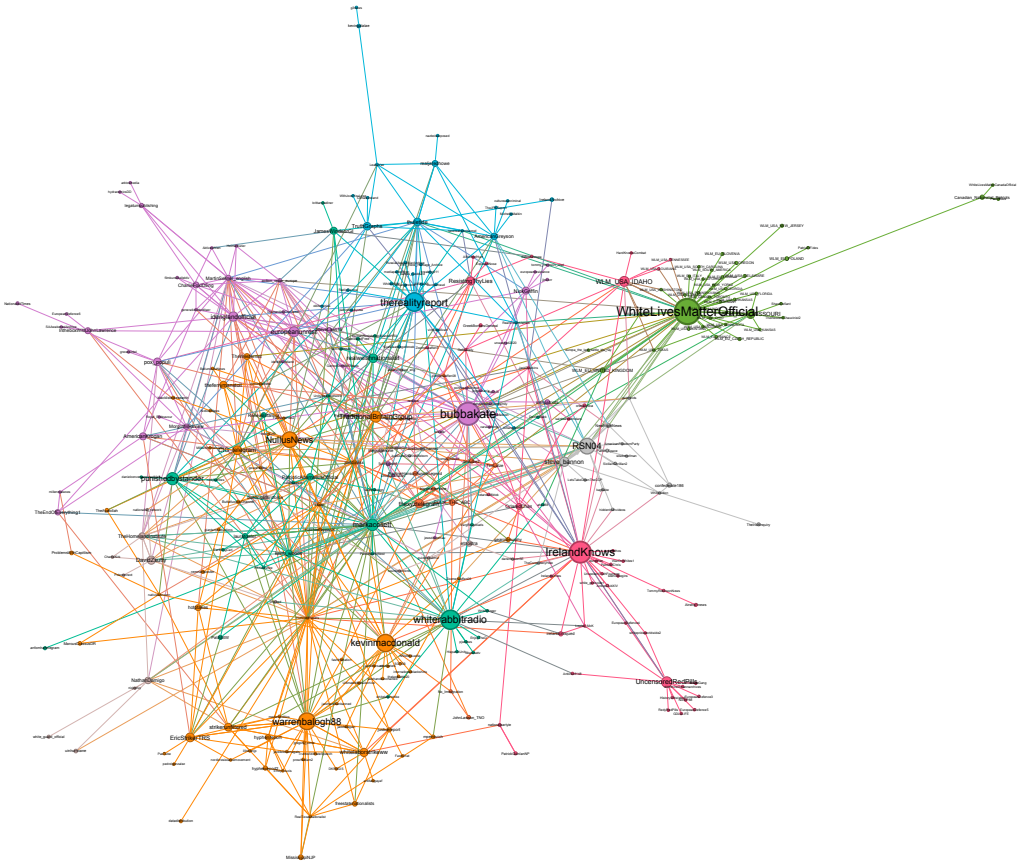

Figure 3. Network diagram of superspreader accounts on Telegram promoting the Great Replacement conspiracy theory, showing how UK channels provide a bridge to the American far-right.

One Facebook news feed with 71,000 followers exemplifies how Great Replacement rhetoric overlaps with broader culture war issues. Styled after alt-right influencers like Jordan Peterson, the page combines populist commentary with conspiracist content – on immigration, gender identity, vaccines and media distrust. While Great Replacement fears are present, they exist alongside wider anxieties around sovereignty, social change and perceived cultural decline. The comment sections are where conspiracist language thrives, especially regarding Islam, immigration and vaccines. While social media influencers like Tommy Robinson and far-right groups like Patriotic Alternative play a significant role in promoting these narratives, there is considerable buy-in from their online audience.

During Brexit, Great Replacement rhetoric was tied to populist, anti-EU sentiment. More recently, it has become drawn into a broader conspiracist worldview. This shift reflects how racial anxiety remains shaped by culture wars, which have grown more conspiracist in tone since Covid-19, with greater focus on sovereignty.

The threat of the Great Replacement theory lies not just in its demonisation of immigrants and supposed orchestrators, but in its ability to stifle nuanced discussion about multiculturalism and asylum. Even left-leaning parties like Labour struggle to present alternative immigration narratives, fearing loss to the populist right. These conspiracy theories also hinder balanced debate about real pressures on public services.

Yet there are grounds for hope. Our data shows meaningful push-back from some social media users alongside conspiracist content, a form of grassroots counter-disinformation work. Many online participants actively challenge false claims, showing concern for the integrity of public debate. While this doesn't excuse the retreat of major platforms from content moderation, it's important to recognise these dissenting voices. Big data studies often overlook them, risking an overestimation of the reach of conspiracy theories and racism, particularly in the case of the Great Replacement.

4. Case Study: 15-Minute Cities

In 2023, conspiracy theories emerged around progressive traffic and urban planning measures introduced in the UK. While media discussion often treated conspiracy theories about 15-minute cities as bizarre and unheralded, these narratives are rooted in Britain's broader socio-political and media context.

In post-Brexit Britain, a polarised culture war environment – amplified by right-leaning outlets like *The Telegraph, GB News* and *Spiked Online* – has helped mainstream hard-right ideas, including conspiracy theories targeting 15-minute cities. Practical urban and environmental measures like congestion charges and Low Traffic Neighbourhoods (LTNs) became politicised when anti-lockdown and anti-vaccine activists reframed traffic management as a threat to personal freedom. This reached Parliament in 2023 when MP Nick Fletcher called 15-minute cities an 'international socialist concept', reflecting anti-green sentiment within parts of the Conservative Party. Although some critiques – such as potential impacts on the working class or traffic displacement – are valid, they were eclipsed by conspiracist narratives drawing on post-Brexit sovereignty myths and US-imported culture war fears. These ideas gained traction online and were amplified by protest groups shifting from Covid-related grievances to climate policy opposition.

The concept of 15-minute cities is an urban planning model that aims to place essential services within a short walk or cycle, reducing car reliance and improving liveability. It gained traction in late 2022 and early 2023, particularly in conspiracy circles, before entering mainstream discourse. Originating from blogs by climate change sceptics, the conspiracy theory about 15-minute cities was amplified by anti-Covid lockdown activists, with social media algorithms driving its spread.

Platforms like Twitter and Telegram saw a surge in mentions, with the hashtag #15minutecities rising from under 100 in 2022 to 45,000 in early 2023. American climate sceptic blogs such as *Watts Up With That?* fuelled the narrative, citing Oxfordshire's traffic plans as part of a supposed global 'climate lockdown.' A widely shared December 2022 article falsely claimed residents would be confined to 'zones'. By summer 2023, the issue had become politically significant in the UK, with the Conservative Party leveraging opposition to ULEZ expansion during by-elections. This shift reflected a broader move away from Net Zero goals, tapping into concerns over freedom and sovereignty in a post-Brexit, post-pandemic context. A feedback loop emerged between activist groups (e.g. Together Declaration, Not Our Future), media outlets and political figures, transforming a fringe theory into a mainstream political issue.

Figure 4. Meme from Instagram, 2023.

These conspiracy theories are best understood as post-Brexit, articulating concerns about sovereignty and control, and post-pandemic in the way they borrow rhetoric from anti-lockdown movements. As shown in the meme in Figure 4, distrust around Covid lockdowns has shifted towards fears of 'climate lockdowns.' Post-pandemic conspiracism is also marked by its agility – able to attach itself to previously apolitical issues, such as traffic planning.

This allows conspiracism to evade moderation, feed alarmist media coverage and be exploited by populist politicians. Additionally, traffic control conspiracies are often part of broader 'superconspiracy' theories, such as the Great Reset, which warn of elite plans to restrict personal freedom under the guise of environmental policy.

There is no single 'pipeline' driving these theories. While social media is a key vector, a feedback loop operates across four nodes: online conspiracism, protest groups, political actors and mainstream media. Each contributes to British conspiracism. Moreover, distinctions between online and offline are increasingly blurred, as seen in the 18 February 2023 Oxford protests, which were both digitally organised and widely posted. 'Online conspiracism' therefore functions as a shared resource for all the other nodes.

This case study reveals the political appeal of populist-conspiracist narratives, particularly on culture war issues like migration, identity and heritage. In an era when such narratives have eroded democratic norms globally, their use in domestic politics appears more about self-promotion than public interest.

What makes this dynamic especially harmful is its capacity to obscure the material realities underlying public frustration. Instead of fuelling moral panic about conspiracy theories and online communication, mainstream media would better serve the public by addressing the often-legitimate grievances that conspiracy theories distort.

Figure 5. Photographs of the 15-minute city protest in Oxford, 18 Feb 2023 © Annie Kelly

5. The Counter-Disinformation Sector in the UK

> *"Last week, somebody called us 'The Industrial Censorship Complex'."*
>
> *"The end goal is not to get people to believe a certain thing, it's to get them to doubt everything and then leave them in a position where they can be manipulated."*
>
> *"It takes a network to fight a network."*

As well as mapping out the whole counter-disinformation sector, REDACT conducted interviews with key NGOs to understand how disinformation in general and conspiracy theories in particular are understood and tackled. This is important because while such organisations use the umbrella term 'disinformation', the examples they often use are conspiracy theories (because they grab attention). We think conspiracy theories work in ways that are different from other information inaccuracies, and we wanted to address the consequences of this slippage.

The UK has a large, diverse and well-established counter-disinformation sector, shaped by strong top-down government interventions and a wide array of NGOs and initiatives. Established in 2019, the Counter-Disinformation Unit (now known as the National Security Online Information Team, or NSOIT) coordinates across government and civil society. It supports a regulatory framework that includes the Online Safety Act (2023), the National Security Act (2023) and the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology's (DSIT) Media Literacy Strategy. Ofcom, the UK's communications regulator, is tasked with enforcing the Online Safety Act, while the National Security Act introduces a Foreign Interference Offence (Section 13) targeting state-sponsored disinformation. The Government Communication Service (GCS), based in the Cabinet Office, has also developed resources to help civil servants counter disinformation more effectively.

However, many in the UK's wider counter-disinformation community believe the Online Safety Act falls short. While it introduces a 'false communications offence' – criminalising knowingly false messages intended to cause non-trivial harm – it does not cover health or election misinformation, nor AI-generated content. Although less comprehensive than the EU's Digital Services Act, the UK legislation offers more protection than US equivalents. The UK also lacks a constitutional free speech clause, removing a legal shield often cited in the US to defend disinformation. Nonetheless, British libel laws are often viewed as favouring wealthy plaintiffs over journalists.

Beyond government agencies and regulation, counter-disinformation work is taken up by the BBC as well as NGOs. The BBC houses a specialised team – BBC Verify – with over 60 journalists focused on countering disinformation. Independent fact-checkers like Full Fact do similar work; in 2023, Full Fact published 624 checks and requested over 180 corrections. Campaign-led NGOs, such as Hope Not Hate, address disinformation in relation to specific issues, while organisations like the Centre for Information Resilience – funded in part by the UK Foreign Office – use Open Source Intelligence (OSINT) to combat disinformation and promote democratic security. Even institutions not traditionally associated with the issue, such as the Anglican Church, have joined efforts – for example, partnering with the World Health Organization to combat health disinformation in Africa. A range of initiatives also focus on digital and media literacy.

While the variety in the sector resembles that of countries like Germany, one distinguishing feature is the number of UK-based organisations working internationally. This reflects both the transnational nature of disinformation and the dominance of English in digital spaces. Organisations like the Institute for Strategic Dialogue, Centre for Countering Digital Hate, Logically.ai and the Global Disinformation Index operate across borders, particularly in the US.

Interviews with sector organisations revealed a sophisticated understanding of conspiracy theories, but also the challenge of balancing nuanced analysis with the need to secure funding. Varied in their approaches, organisations use tactics ranging from disrupting disinformation's business model to journalistic exposés and deplatforming efforts.

In contrast to the US, the UK has to date not seen as strong a backlash against fact-checking or the rise of disinformation denialists targeting the sector's neutrality. However, several interviewees flagged the influence of PR firms – particularly in the fossil fuel industry – adopting counter-disinformation rhetoric to delay climate action. Organisations with operations in both the UK and US report growing political pressures, with some being labelled part of an 'industrial censorship complex'. While the sector is adapting to this more hostile landscape, many see this as proof of impact. As one interviewee remarked, 'They are running out of ground.'

> *"Nothing else is possible until we make progress on [social media transparency]."*
>
> *"Conspiracism creates a reservoir of content creators and audiences that are quite ready to buy into any new disinformation or potentially hate."*
>
> *" We're gonna have to think about how we protect our US based staff . . . because they're at a real risk of the work that they're doing being really politicised and potentially brought into some sort of legal, Kangaroo court type of proceedings and that's really alarming."*

6. Expanded Key Findings

Conspiracy Theories

1. **UK context requires UK-specific approaches:** Universalist or US-centric approaches to understanding conspiracy theories, the platforms used to share them and the sector tasked with combatting disinformation are of limited use for approaching the British scene. One size does not fit all.

2. **Historical roots, evolving forms:** While conspiracy theories have historically been used by British elites to justify power and suppress dissent, contemporary British conspiracism reflects both resistance and reaction. From elite-driven fears about colonial and/or working-class subversion in the nineteenth century to fringe digital activism and Westminster populist dog-whistling in the present, the UK's conspiracy culture has evolved. An understanding of conspiracism's past and present in the British context will enable us to anticipate future threats.

3. **Marginal but growing influence:** Although belief in conspiracy theories remains less widespread in Britain than elsewhere, their influence on public discourse and political rhetoric continues to increase. We should not give in to alarmism, but equally, it's important not to underestimate the appeal of conspiracy theories.

4. **Conspiracism makes culture wars more entrenched:** In British politics, culture wars are becoming increasingly conspiracist in tone making them more heated, polarised and harder to contest.

5. **Grey zone between debate and conspiracism:** It is tempting to focus primarily on 'crackpot' examples of conspiracy theories, but doing so misses how conspiracy talk is often connected to important social issues such as immigration and climate change. To avoid moderation or reputational damage,

conspiracy theories are now frequently expressed in coded language, memes or through tactics like 'just asking questions', blurring the boundary between legitimate political debate of controversial topics and conspiracy theories.

6. **The conspiracy ecosystem:** There is a feedback loop between online conspiracism, protest groups, party politics and mainstream media reportage.

7. **Post-Brexit, post-covid landscape:** Online conspiracism in the UK today needs to be understood as post-Brexit and post-Covid: these contexts produce an outsized concern with sovereignty read through culture wars conspiracism. This means that conspiracy culture needs to be understood as rooted in identity and belonging rather than merely misinformation.

8. **Mobile conspiracism:** Pandemic-era grassroots conspiracist movements with a strong online presence have turned to climate scepticism, warning of 'climate lockdowns.' When undergirded by a concern with personal freedom, conspiracism easily migrates from topic to topic.

9. **Narrative saturation:** Conspiracy theories tend to use up all the oxygen on a topic, leaving little room for progressive viewpoints to be aired about contentious topics such as immigration.

10. **Conspiracy theories reflect deeper dysfunction:** They are more usefully thought of as symptoms rather than causes of democratic failures. Although often rife with false and misleading information, they nevertheless express popular frustration at the gap between political and economic promises and lived realities.

Counter-Disinformation Sector

1. **Diverse and active sector:** The counter-disinformation sector in the UK is varied and robust, consisting of government entities; regulatory and legal frameworks; public and civil society actors.

2. **Gaps in regulation:** The Online Safety Act is limited in its use in the fight against disinformation (it lacks coverage for AI-generated misinformation, health or election-related disinformation).

3. **Transnational focus:** Unlike NGOs in other European countries in the sector, many in the UK have an international reach reflecting the transnational nature of online disinformation.

4. **Tactical diversity:** Organisations use varied tactics such as disrupting disinfo business models, journalistic exposés, fact-checking, digital literacy and deplatforming efforts.

5. **Structural pressures**: Funding pressures and models may sometimes lead to short-term thinking, a lack of flexibility with regards to tackling emerging threats and, at worst, overstating the threat of disinfo.

6. **The challenge of politicisation:** The sector has not yet faced full-scale ideological attacks like in the US, but is encountering bad-faith actors, corporate co-opting of counter-disinfo language and the increasing politicisation of disinformation.

7. **Mischaracterised critiques:** Misplaced Attacks: Current critiques of the counter-disinformation sector as either a vehicle of censorship or a self-sustaining industry that overhypes the threat do not reflect what the organisations actually do. The debate is therefore based on a caricature of the actual work performed by these organisations.

8. **Everyday counter-discourse:** As well as funded counter-disinformation organisations, many ordinary users actively push back against conspiracism on social media. People care deeply about the health of their information/communication spaces and often correct conspiracists. Big data studies tend to eliminate counter-discourse, which risks presenting a distorted, overly alarmist view of online conspiracism and echo-chambers.

7. Expanded Recommendations

- **Create bespoke solutions:** While it's good to draw on models of best practice from wherever they arise, the UK should not import solutions or approaches wholesale from different socio-political contexts. Rather, these should be developed organically in relation to the British situation.

- **Identify underlying causes:** Conspiracy theories cannot simply be dismissed as paranoid delusions. They often resonate with genuine grievances (whether we consider these to be justifiable or not). If we understand why particular conspiracy narratives resonate, we can address the root causes. Too much discussion in the realm of politics, the media and counter-disinformation focuses on the most sensational examples of crazy conspiracy theory beliefs and not enough on the grey zone in which conspiracism connects to potentially legitimate political grievances.

- **Understand how conspiracy theories stick:** Conspiracy theories are not merely pieces of erroneous information, but narratives embedded in social and political contexts and rooted to identity and belonging. As a result, conspiracy theories are 'sticky', or resistant to refutation. It is therefore important to create narratives about, for example, the radical project of democracy that are as engaging as stories about conspiracy. It is also vital for democratic institutions to build stronger relationships with communities.

- **Instead of lamenting falling levels of trust, institutions should become worthy of trust:** The focus cannot only be on the 'paranoia' of citizens, but should examine the trustworthiness – or otherwise – of institutions and political actors. Because conspiracy theories are better thought of as symptoms rather than causes of democratic disfunction, energy should be directed towards making democratic institutions and systems fair, robust and transparent.

- **Disincentivise online disinformation:** To understand contemporary conspiracism, we need to examine how platform affordances and financial incentives shape online communication and, crucially, how they intersect with legacy media and the offline world. This requires platforms giving access to researchers as well as algorithmic transparency.

- **Look beyond social media:** while platforms have clearly increased the velocity and visibility of conspiracy theories, online media should be considered as just one component of the whole media-political ecosystem. A continued focus on narrow, digital-only interventions will not be enough to address this challenge.

Figure 6. Image widely shared across social media platforms.

- **Don't use conspiracism to fuel the culture war:** in the UK, as elsewhere, certain political figures have weaponised conspiratorial rhetoric and tropes. The individuals engaging in this behaviour are not just endorsing and spreading conspiracy theories but are also further deepening distrust in democracy. This creates an environment ripe for the emergence and strengthening of further conspiracy theories. Breaking the link between conspiracy theories and culture wars requires a deep examination of the cracks in our democratic foundations, including the people most likely to get lost within them.

- **Don't allow populist conspiracism to set the terms of the debate:** Because conspiracist versions of contentious topics, such as immigration, grab attention, mainstream politicians may feel pressure to address these issues within the terms laid out. This maintains, rather than challenges, the conspiracist framing therefore normalising conspiracy theories.

- **Address current funding models for counter-disinformation work:** Funding models for counter-disinformation work should be reformulated in consultation with the sector to ensure swift and adequate responses to emerging issues.

- **Acknowledge that disinformation is a political category:** Instead of insisting that one side (counter-disinformation organisations and researchers) is the last defence of scientific objectivity and liberal democracy while the other side have been brainwashed by the algorithms or influencers, we need to recognise that efforts to label and categorise misinformation, disinformation and conspiracy theories are always political. If we start from this position, we can then make a case for why a politics based on fact-based information produces the fairest settlements for citizens.

If you would like to hear about future events or projects, or to give your feedback on this report, please scan this QR code.

For more information on the REDACT project:
www.redactproject.sites.er.kcl.ac.uk

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