Australian National University National Security College

Stopping the spread

Conspiracy theory and security practice

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Key Points

- Conspiracist thinking continues to rise in Australia, along with a corresponding fear of government. This fear is most prevalent in reaction to government responses to security crises.
- Security measures deployed against conspiracy believers can have unintended negative security impacts, exacerbating adherence to conspiracy theories and corresponding extremist behaviour.
- Australian Federal, State and Territory government agencies should consider social psychological indicators such as fear and trust when formulating security responses to people at risk of conspiracist thinking.

Key Recommendations

- Law enforcement agencies should develop in-house mental health capabilities to assess social trust and fear when dealing with conspiracists and 'low trust' groups.
- Similarly, law enforcement and security agencies should create guidelines to better manage tactical responses to conspiracist-led protests and civil disobedience.
- Government crisis messaging should be subject to inter-agency assessments which balance psychological and security considerations. This would help mitigate counterproductive impacts crisis messaging and responses may have on low trust individuals and communities.

The prevalence of conspiracy thinking in Australia is rising. The COVID-19 pandemic has not only provided opportunities for conspiracies to grow, but it has also necessitated security responses that further antagonise conspiracy thinkers. Social isolation experienced during lockdown, fear of sickness and medical interventions, and general crisis conditions have increased mental health risk factors associated with conspiracy and anti-social behaviour.[1] Beyond the difficulty conspiracy thinking poses for representative democracy and evidence-based policymaking, it can serve as a catalyst for extremism and politically-motivated violence.[2]

To address these risks, Federal and State governments must consider how such thinking spreads, how general mental health may affect public perceptions of policy measures, and how conspiracies challenge the effectiveness of security responses to crisis events. Protests and conspiracist behaviour such as the recent 'Canberra Convoy' and violent protests in Melbourne in 2021 provide an insight into how security measures employed to mitigate threats can unintentionally make matters worse: fuelling conspiracist thinking and exacerbating extremist behaviour. For example, routine police responses to the 'Canberra Convoy' prompted misinformation and conspiracy theory 'fuel' shared round the world.

This paper draws on psychological research to understand how fear and anxiety drive conspiracy thinking, and how the Australian security community can respond to minimise risks – or at least avoid increasing them.

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Assuming the worst

The COVID-19 pandemic has provided hyper- fertile ground for conspiracists. Their fears, however irrational, have undermined the efficacy of crisis messaging and security measures. Governments have relied heavily on Public Health Orders (PHOs), regarding for instance mask- wearing, vaccination, self-isolation and restricted movement and gatherings. As these became more common, so too did organised resistance. Further, some policing practises intended to limit that resistance fuelled the same anxiety and concerns that gave rise to the protests in the first place.

Essentially, the way conspiracists such as the Canberra Convoy protesters viewed security, the government, and their antagonistic relationship to that government, had a very real impact on the government's own capacity to secure the community.

For example, ACT Policing's deployment of Long Range Acoustic Devices (LRADs) becavme fuel for a litany of conspiracy theories shared both in Australia and around the world, even though such devices have been commonplace at large protests for over a decade.[3]

Convoy members complained of nausea, dizziness, blisters, burns and headaches, symptoms many ascribed to the LRADs (though under the name of 'directed energy weapons' or 'microwave emitters'). Even those who correctly identified the devices were quick to blame some of these symptoms on their use, though with no consideration for how they actually operate.[4]

However, whatever the reality of the situation, the perceptions and feelings of these individuals had an appreciable impact on the security landscape. Claims that children had been irradiated by the Australian government circulated around the world, often with the help of foreign-run social media pages, fuelling discontent and conspiracist concerns.

Similarly, Victoria's introduction of a Pandemic Management Bill during the height of the COVID tensions was perceived as rushed and untransparent, resulting in security threats, misinformation and long-term tensions. While the government claimed that pandemic-specific emergency powers were a needed improvement to existing emergency powers, legal advocacy groups raised concerns over the draft bill's perceived lack of transparency and accountability, and conspiracy groups used the bill as a catalyst for action, including violent protests.[5] Ultimately, the bill was extensively reworked in order to mitigate these concerns, however not before being the subject of protests that featured death threats against Victorian Premier Daniel Andrews. While the Bill was ultimately passed, the way in which it was first presented to the public further exacerbated conspiracy activity in the state.

The 'conspiracy difference'

So, what is the difference between conspiracist protests and more conventional drivers of civil disobedience?

The difference lies in what the protesters ultimately fear. For example, climate activists – generally skewed to the 'left'– might have an existential fear of certain policies and the harm they may bring in the future. Further, the harm that is feared is manifested through the climate itself (extreme weather, for example).

In contrast, the fear of members of the Canberra Convoy and their counterparts abroad was fear of government, made manifest through the restrictions and policing put in place to manage the pandemic and the protests.

Where more traditional protesters might fear the outcome of a policy, recent protests are instead characterised by a fear of 'policy' itself. In this way, much of any policy or response by government could be seen as a threat.

Instead of being seen simply as an objectionable political choice, or even an effort to suppress opposition to a policy, the government's security measures are being seen as directly threatening.

Even if only a small number of people genuinely perceive these threats as existential, they don't hesitate to portray them as such to wider audiences, fanning an atmosphere of fear and mistrust.

Fear has been an effective indicator of action throughout the COVID pandemic and the corresponding rise in conspiracy. UK research has found that fear of COVID-19 infection was the only reliable driver of compliance with PHOs, and distrust in politics and science a reliable measure of their rejection.[6] Notably, this fear variable transcended political and social perspectives – while we might be tempted to separate protests and reactions according to political affiliation, when it comes to rejection of PHOs and conspiratorial concerns over COVID responses, 'left' or 'right' have little appreciable meaning.

In the wake of any crisis, it should be expected that fear will increase in the general population. However

psychological research suggests that a rise in fear also exacerbates the mental health risk factors that can fuel conspiracy thinking.

Further, this additional fear can increase the degree to which individuals attempt to use unhealthy coping strategies in order to deal with their rising levels of anxiety.[7]

Most concerning is the fact that the cyclical nature of this threat/fear dynamic has the very real potential to

compound and crystallise the same fear that fuels it. If fear of government action fuels security risks (for government and the community), the management of those risks fuels further fear on the part of dissenting individuals, they will be prone to 'cascading' anxieties.[8] Given the correlation between fear and conspiracy theory beliefs, this cyclical dilemma can contribute to the further radicalisation of such individuals – with obvious consequences for social cohesion and security. This is analogous to the famous 'security dilemma' in international relations, where one side's defensive response to a perceived threat actually makes the threat worse.

When it comes to conspiracist protests, the disregard of conventional political boundaries suggests the problem is more complicated than simply 'having' fear. We must also consider what is feared and how, if we hope to secure the community and reassure those at risk of turning to conspiracist behaviour.

Balancing the seen and the felt

How do we ensure that the operational benefits of security measures are not undermined by conspiracist radicalisation from those interacting with such measures? There are three recommendations that Federal and State government agencies and policymakers should consider to mitigate this issue.

First, to navigate the 'security dilemma' between governments and conspiracist groups, crisis messaging should be carefully designed to factor in known issues of trust and fear. Law enforcement and crisis management agencies should engage with psychology and mental health expertise to develop a capacity for 'low-trust communication'. This will reduce the risk of conspiracist individuals being pushed further into a cascade of fear that exacerbates extremist behaviour. Such messaging should be considered against up-to-date information on the state of mind of the likely actors who will be the audience for such messaging.

Second, agencies should use this capacity to ensure that where conspiracist thinking is at play, they can weigh the pros and cons of a particular security measure, such as the use of crowd control devices and public order restrictions. As a standard procedure, agencies should work to a checklist of questions, for instance balancing 'to what degree will this measure mitigate the immediate threat' alongside 'how might it fuel wider threats of misinformation and conspiracy?'

The deployment of LRADs at the Canberra protests are a simple illustration of the broader interactions of seemingly straightforward security measures. Despite the implausibility of the accusations surrounding the LRADs, the concerns felt by members of the Convoy were widely share and publicised as 'evidence'. These gained high-profile supporters. Even some parliamentarians questioned the government on the basis of these claims, further legitimating the sense of threat.[9]

Third, the above agency-specific capacity should be both connected to and bolstered by a concerted, whole-of-government approach during times of extended security crisis. This will ensure all government institutions are properly informed as to the risks of conspiracist thinking, and the basic indices of fear and trust within the population. Such co-ordination could be modelled on existing initiatives such as the multi-jurisdictional Joint Counter Terrorism Teams, or Critical Infrastructure Centre. Rather than simply pooling data or intelligence, channels of communication would be defined to ensure the timely delivery of relevant information as the need arises.

In practical terms, this information sharing network could include a national mental health commission, in concert – where appropriate – with Australian Secret Intelligence Organisation (ASIO), which should have insights into extremist groups of concern. This concerted approach could ensure member agencies (such as state and federal law enforcement) could conduct analysis of indices of fear and trust, combined with insight into specific at-risk groups or individuals. In so doing, risks to the community can be reduced, security resources used more effectively, and community resilience reinforced.

This co-ordinated assessment of the mental health impacts of a crisis can be disseminated across all relevant agencies, ensuring greater consistency across public messaging during crisis, the nature of public order restrictions, and the tactical nature of enforcement.

For example, conspiracy-relevant material - such as the Victorian Chief Health Officer's 'anecdotal' claim that the Delta variant was more transmissible in children - could be avoided. The perceived safety of children holds a powerful place within much conspiracy thinking.[10] The claim - which was later found to be inaccurate - was amplified by news outlets, before spreading into wider conspiracy discourse. If conspiracy and relevant anxieties were considered, the perceived benefits of making this anecdotal report 'official' might have been better weighed against its likely effects on conspiracy thinkers.

Conclusion

Fear and trust are powerful factors in all government crisis responses. However, the current wave of conspiracist thinking can be a toxic,compounding factor, generating unintended and negative consequences from government action to maintain order.

Given the sharp rise in conspiracist thinking in contemporary Australia, security agencies should carefully consider how their activities affect such thinking and how to best disarm the risks it generates. Robust engagement with emotional perceptions and mental health considerations is not some optional extra or political gesture. Instead, it is crucial to effective security for the state and the community. Understanding and addressing core human concerns of trust and fear is intrinsic to security responses that not only prevent harm but limit its spread.

Endnotes

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