

An Analysis of “The Big Lie”

“The Big Lie” is a set of recent conspiracy theories which exist primarily on the conservative side of the political spectrum in the United States. Arising during the 2020 election cycle and gaining widespread traction, in particular on the political right, this conspiracy directly led to the tragic, violent events of January 6, 2021 (Seitz, 2021). As such, analyzing this conspiracy theory is critical, and will be the focus of this paper.

The theories of “The Big Lie” allege that a shadowy group of secret actors, including Democrats, government officials, or others in a “cabal,” engaged in various nefarious coordinated actions to steal the 2020 Presidential Election from then-President Donald Trump, and falsely make it appear as if then-Candidate Joe Biden were the duly elected President of the United States. The allegations ranged from relatively mild claims that postal carriers were intentionally losing mail-in ballots (Kennedy et. al., 2020), to wild claims that deceased Venezuelan dictator Hugo Chávez owned electronic voting machines and made the company, Dominion Voting Systems, switch votes from Trump to Biden (Dunn, 2020).

These allegations of voter fraud have been conclusively refuted, from fact-checkers (Reality Check team, 2020) and the court systems (Rutenberg et. al., 2020) to Trump’s own attorney general (Balsamo, 2020). Despite this, this conspiracy theory gained relatively widespread traction, with nearly three quarters of Republicans in the United States believing in these claims (Cillizza, 2021). The kinds of dubious evidence used to prop up the conspiracy theory narrative included vague accusations by prominent media influencers and conservative politicians, crowd-sourced images and videos which were then misleadingly framed to appear dubious or illegal, and extrapolation from small examples of mistakes or surprising results to allege massive wrongdoing and coverups (Center for an Informed Public et. al., 2021).

In this paper, I will argue that these conspiracies function primarily as a form of ideologically motivated propaganda (Cassam, 2019, p. 7-11). While there are certainly functions of these conspiracies that fit with other conceptualizations of conspiracy theories, such as being epistemically vicious (Cassam, 2015) or the purview of non-pejorative losers (Uscinski & Parent, 2014, p. 92), I will argue that the political propaganda framework is the most essential lens through which to view these conspiracies.

Elements of this conspiracy do, at first, seem to fit well with conceptions of conspiracy theories reliant on frameworks of corrupted epistemologies. In “Bad Thinkers,” Quassim Cassam creates a fictional conspiracy theorist, who is inclined to believe in conspiracy theories “because there is something wrong with how he thinks” (Cassam, 2015). Indeed, when analyzing voter fraud conspiracy theories surrounding the 2020 election, claiming that there is something wrong with their thought process is an easy stance to take. With the copious amounts of strong evidence that show fraud was a nearly nonexistent factor in the election, ignoring this reality would seem to indicate serious cognitive flaws. This is likely a factor in some parts of belief in these conspiracy theories, especially those that link voter fraud conspiracy theories to other conspiracy theories, such as the “Hammer and Scorecard” conspiracy theories (Sommer, 2020) or the QAnon-affiliated sub-conspiracy theory about Dominion Voting Systems (Collins, 2020).

However, approaching this from the lens of political propaganda allows us to gain deeper insights into the phenomena occurring here. Cassam claimed in 2019 that “Conspiracy Theories are first and foremost forms of political propaganda” (Cassam, 2019). This conspiracy blatantly serves a political goal, in that it alleges wrongdoing by one political group against another. These narratives were also used as a financial tool, allowing Republican campaigns, and in particular the Trump campaign, to raise money off of these claims (Kim & Steakin, 2021).

It is important to consider an additional alternate frame, which Uscinski and Parent raise in their 2014 work (Uscinski & Parent, 2014, p. 73-104). In their article, Uscinski and Parent argue that “each side believes that when the other side wins cheating is to blame, and they believe it about equally” (Uscinski & Parent, 2014, p. 92). Indeed, in this election, Republicans did lose control of the White House and the Senate, so this seems like it might be relevant. However, the political propaganda perspective is more applicable, as these allegations of fraud and malfeasance by Democrats surfaced long before the election had been decided. For example, a study by Harvard researchers found that rhetoric alleging conspiracy theories about mail-in voter fraud were prominently spreading as early as April 2020, 7 months before the election occurred, and were further amplified in the ensuing months (Benkler et. al., 2020). Additionally, the Election Integrity Partnership, a research coalition between the University of Washington, Stanford, the Atlantic Council’s Digital Forensics Research Lab, and Graphika, started monitoring for election integrity-related disinformation 100 days before the election, and from the beginning of the partnership found ample evidence that these conspiracy theories and false allegations were already present (Center for an Informed Public et. al., 2021, p. 29). Additionally, 22% of misinformation incidents investigated by the Partnership were investigated on Election Day specifically, a day when the outcome of the presidential race was far from certain (Center for an Informed Public et. al., 2021, p. 29). While it was true that Biden was favored to win for most of this period, and polls consistently showed Biden with a sizable advantage in the presidential race, the outcome was still far from certain while this conspiracy theory was being spread (Bycoffe et. al., 2021). Spurious allegations of conspiracy and voter fraud persisted, and arguably intensified, after the election results were known, and it’s possible that Uscinski and Parent’s framework of non-pejorative losers being prone to conspiracy

theorizing would apply to this sustaining or uptick in messaging of “The Big Lie” after the election (Uscinski & Parent, 2014, p. 92). However, viewing this as the sole or primary cause of this conspiracy, rather than Cassam’s framework of conspiracy theories as political propaganda, would be inaccurate (Cassam, 2019).

Furthermore, considering this conspiracy through the lens of political propaganda allows us to better describe the spreading behavior of these conspiracies. Auerbach and Castronovo’s 13 principles of propaganda can be very useful here (Auerbach & Castronovo, 2013, p. 5-12). For example, principle nine states that “People can actively use propaganda and are not simply passive dupes used by it,” which is applicable to this particular conspiracy theory (Auerbach & Castronovo, 2013, p. 9-10). There were many examples of those in the general population participating in and contributing to these conspiracy theories. According to the final report by the Election Integrity Partnership, the “Army For Trump” was a campaign organization which allowed supporters of President Trump to “report alleged elections incidents directly to the campaign” (Center for an Informed Public et. al., 2021, p. 68). The report concluded that this “initiative assisted in creating a vast trove of images, videos, and stories of purported incidents that could be selectively chosen, falsely framed, and fed into ‘voter fraud’ narratives” (Center for an Informed Public et. al., 2021, p. 68). A concrete example of this was the “sharpiegate” sub-narrative of the 2020 voter fraud conspiracies, which alleged that poll workers in Arizona were giving Republican-leaning in-person voters Sharpies to vote with, which would invalidate their ballots (Leingang & Sadeghi, 2020). This narrative was initially raised by a very low-profile social media user, which was then picked up and spread by other, more influential accounts like Turning Point USA founder Charlie Kirk, Eric Trump, and Donald Trump Jr. (Center for an Informed Public et. al., 2021, p. 164).

However, other elements more common to traditional propaganda, like top-down spreading of information, were also evident in spreading this conspiracy theory. In September 2020, the conservative activist group Project Veritas spread misleading allegations of a plot by Minnesota Democrats, including prominent representative Ilhan Omar, to steal the election in Minnesota by “ballot harvesting” (Garcia-Camargo et. al., 2020). This campaign included evidence of coordination to spread this message by multiple prominent conservative influencers, including not only Project Veritas leader James O’Keefe III but also Donald Trump Jr., Students for Trump cofounder Ryan Fournier, and MyPillow CEO Mike Lindell (Garcia-Camargo et. al., 2020). Additionally, the Election Integrity Partnership found in an early analysis that, of the more than 600,000 users examined who tweeted about a collection of 43 incidents alleging “The Big Lie” and other election-related disinformation, a small subset of only 35 users accounted for more than half of all retweets. These 35 users included prominent media influencers like Sean Hannity and Jim Hoft, accounts associated with the QAnon conspiracy theory, and Donald Trump (Election Integrity Partnership Team, 2020).

As a result of these two phenomena, we see that there are elements of multiple mechanisms of spread for voter fraud conspiracy theories in the 2020 election. “Herd behavior” mechanisms, or those which rely on people relying on the behavior of a crowd over private knowledge and rational decision-making (DeWitt et. al., 2019, p. 320), is definitely evident in these conspiracies, from the online crowds on social media which both promoted and sourced these narratives (Center for an Informed Public et. al., 2021, p. 67-68). However, the “Follow-the-Leader” mechanism, which claims that influencers who are politically aligned with their audiences drive the spread of false information (DeWitt et. al., 2019, p. 324), also is evident through the remarkable influence that a handful of prominent politicians and media personalities

had in driving these narratives (Election Integrity Partnership Team, 2020 & Center for an Informed Public et. al., 2021, p. 184).

To consider what we ought to do to address “The Big Lie” and other similar conspiracies, in light of the aforementioned elements of how this particular conspiracy theory is structured, I will outline and evaluate several potential avenues for how we can address these conspiracies. These include an increase in content moderation with modifications to current content moderation policies to allow for greater participatory justice, factual rebuttals, and affective solutions.

First, it is critical for technology platforms to enact more consistent, proactive, and transparent content moderation. Since these platforms, at least in the United States context, are not government-controlled, they have the right to monitor, and moderate, what content is on their platforms. Actively using this right is made more difficult by claims of anti-conservative bias by influencers on these platforms, which is complicated by conspiracies like “The Big Lie” spreading more on the conservative end of the political spectrum (DiResta, 2021). This is not to say that all conspiracy theorizing is a primarily a right-wing phenomenon; indeed, some research has shown this is decidedly not true (Uscinski & Parent, 2014, p. 87-92), and other researchers have pointed out that left-wing conspiracy theories and left-leaning online disinformation have not been sufficiently investigated (Freelon, 2021).

There are certainly concerns about how to go about enforcing greater content moderation, particularly if these were to be done from a legal standpoint. Legal scholars have pointed out that even if a particular law is in place, who it is enforced against matters a great deal for whether or not it is effective (Calo & Fan, 2020). Furthermore, with current U.S. laws in place such as the First Amendment and Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act, legal statutes for

regulating the spread of conspiracy theories like “The Big Lie” face difficult, though not insurmountable, challenges to their constitutionality (Calo & Fan, 2020).

Government-mandated content moderation with regard to conspiracy theories also present challenges as the government is often not a neutral party with regard to conspiracy theories. Such theories often implicate government actors and agencies as the villains in conspiracy theories. This is also true of some examples of what Uscinski defined as conspiracies, which are “events that have been determined by the proper institutions to have actually happened” involving “a secret arrangement between two or more actors ... to benefit themselves at the expense of the common good” (Uscinski, 2018, p. 48). A similar hypothetical law which would have punished those who spread theories about Watergate or the Tuskegee experiments, prior to those incidents being confirmed by well-respected authorities, may have made it much more difficult to discover the truth in these instances.

Government-independent monitoring of these platforms, however, might be a more promising avenue for addressing conspiracy theories like “The Big Lie.” An independent observer and regulator, like the newly established Facebook Oversight Board, might be able to provide this oversight without the directly vested interest governments might have (Klonick, 2020). As it currently exists, the Board is still too closely tied to Facebook and too limited in its purview to fully address these issues (Klonick, 2020). If this Board’s power is expanded to make more substantial decisions, this might provide more promising methods to address conspiracy theories. Further, having such a board, if it were not as closely associated with Facebook, might also allow for more of a collaborative, context-aware approach to content moderation. As the information ecosystem currently exists, “hyper-partisan influencers can play the companies off against one another” (DiResta, 2021). That is, while content might violate Facebook’s current

standards regarding conspiracy theories, disinformation, or hate speech, Twitter may not have the same standards and leave that content online. This lack of consistency feeds into right-wing narratives of tech companies' anti-conservative bias.

By having an external oversight system like this, we could also increase the participatory justice that users experience, a promising tool for combatting conspiracy theories like “The Big Lie” (van Prooijen, 2018, p. 436-437). For example, an external, independent, non-governmental regulator would allow for increased consistency across platforms and posts (van Prooijen, 2018, p. 436-437). Additionally, when compared to governmental regulators, may allow for less of a self-interest in the decision, another important component of procedural justice (van Prooijen, 2018, p. 436-437). Furthermore, the current appeals systems in the Facebook Oversight Board could be expanded to address a far larger fraction of cases in a timely manner to implement correctability, another procedural justice component (Klonick, 2020 & van Prooijen, 2018, p. 436-437). Finally, having a regulator successfully operate under a procedural justice framework would require greater transparency with regard to what content was examined, what rules were considered, and what decisions were made, in order for people to have confidence in these decisions.

However, moderating speech should be far from our only approach to combating conspiracy theories like those surrounding voter fraud and the 2020 presidential election. For example, we should encourage rational engagement with reality and facts, but not do so in a paternalistic way. As Tsai explains in “Rational Persuasion and Paternalism,” if approaches to rational persuasion do not trust the rational capacities of the person being persuaded, or do not allow them to fully exert their agency, they would be paternalistic and unethical (Tsai, 2014). Considering the factors of how evidence is presented, what the evidence is about, when it is

presented, by whom, and what other evidence the receiver has access to are all important to avoid rational paternalism or manipulation (Tsai, 2014). Arguably, social media platforms and other online systems where “The Big Lie” gained major traction already could be construed as manipulative, such as Facebook’s controversial 2014 study showing that they could subconsciously manipulate the emotions of their users (Kramer et. al., 2014). While purely fact-based approaches to persuasion generally are not wholly effective (Kubin et. al., 2021), this should nevertheless be a component of our responses to maintain an ethical approach to these conspiracy theories (Tsai, 2014).

Finally, considering an affect-based perspective to approaching these sorts of conspiracy theories might be incredibly effective. According to Young, economic insecurity, precarity, and other losses of community are primary factors that have led to the recent crises of misinformation, as communities formed by misinformation and political conspiracy theories can serve as a replacement for more traditional communities (Young, 2021). From this perspective, what is most factually credible is not the most salient factor in choosing to believe information, but instead is replaced by what most “effectively exploit[s] our cruel attachments to fantasies of a good life” (Young, 2021).

If we adopt this perspective, which seems very plausible if we view “The Big Lie” as primarily an example of political propaganda, then the solutions we ought to pursue are those which will broadly improve socioeconomic conditions, rather than directly tackling conspiracy theories. Such policies may include strengthening labor and civil rights, reducing income inequality, and bolstering community resources. Regulation of economic structures more broadly, including how social media platforms are allowed to tap into our emotions, is another proposal that Young makes (Young, 2021).

In conclusion, “The Big Lie” is a set of conspiracy theories spread predominantly by the American right wing to claim that Democrats and other actors used various nefarious methods to rig the election and ensure a false victory for Biden instead of President Trump. These conspiracy theories ought to be examined primarily through Cassam’s lens of conspiracy theories as political propaganda (Cassam, 2019, p. 7-11). Potential approaches to combating this, and other similar conspiracy theories, include increased content moderation, non-paternalistic rational persuasion, and affective societal reforms.

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