

Fascism and Paranoia in the Market of Information

Yasmin Gasimova

Liverpool John Moores University , Liverpool, United Kingdom

hssygasi@ljmu.ac.uk

Abstract: My paper is a theoretical exploration bringing together psychoanalysis, political theory and media studies to show how conspiracy media are expressions of paranoia that, in their attempts to resolve the contradictions present in liberalism, necessarily reproduce fascist ideology. Alternative political cultures and neoliberal media structures are posing increasingly greater challenges to the ideological authority of liberal institutions, exposing media users to the contradictions inherent in liberal democracy. Paranoia in the Lacanian structure is characterised by the radical rejection of the authoritative signifier, substituting this authority with some other, usually malevolent, omnipotent authority via a delusion. In substituting this authority, the newly formed reality retains investment in the signifiers of the old symbolic order but is imbued with new meaning. Fascism has been argued to be an ideology that attempts to purify the contradictions of liberal democracy, by either privileging the popular will over the rights of the individual or privileging the rights of the individual over the popular will. In my paper I draw on existing Lacanian analysis of fascism as containing a paranoid structure where, in confrontation with its failures, radically rejects the traditional authority of liberalism, resulting in the substitution of authority with some imagined corruptive obstruction (such as a Jewish cabal). As such, it is an ideology that distorts and gives new meaning to the discourse of liberal democracy. I will then link this argument to contemporary conspiracy theory media, demonstrating its paranoid character and how it reproduces the ideology of fascism in its attempts to reconcile the failures of liberalism by imagining some corruptive obstruction.

1. Introduction

Social media as a domain of communication has naturally developed into a space of public discourse: seeking, creating and sharing information on political issues. The structure of social media, despite attempts to regulate, “verify” and filter its content, has a neoliberal market form in which private individuals and traditional institutions of authority are bound by the same platforms and accompanying tools for attracting consumers to their content. In this form, information regarding matters of public and political interest is shared equally alongside all genres of content permissible on each platform. This has a profound impact on the relationship between the user and their relation to democracy, where despite social media embodying the manifest ideal of the public sphere, the users’ social investment in the institutions which give meaning to liberal democracy are at risk of withering away. In this chaos, a vulnerability emerges – where the emptied signifiers of liberal democracy are distorted and given new meaning through the discourse of fascism.

This paper aims to contribute to the growing body of research into conspiracy theories within social media through an interdisciplinary approach: bridging together psychoanalysis, political theory and media studies to offer an original theoretical understanding of the phenomena. By presenting existing scholarship which has accounted for the presence of paranoia and fascism in democratic discourse, this paper aims to synthesise this work by explaining the spread of conspiracy theories through a psychoanalytical approach and within a broader context of neoliberal media structures. I will first outline the Lacanian psychoanalytic framework that informs my analysis: focusing on the split subject, the three registers (Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real), and the structure of paranoia. I will then examine the neoliberal structure of social media through Jodi Dean’s concept of “communicative capitalism”, focusing on how it generates a crisis of paranoia in liberal democracy. Finally, I will draw on the analyses of fascism by Davide Tarizzo and Daniel Woodley to demonstrate how the violent conclusions of fascism are paranoid responses to the failures of liberal democracy. By exploring and unifying these theories through the Lacanian framework of paranoia, I aim to illustrate how conspiracy theories, in their attempt to reconcile the inherent contradictions of liberal democracy, inevitably reproduce fascist conclusions.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 The Split Subject

Lacan borrows from Freud’s discovery of the Oedipus Complex as a metaphorical foundation for the structure of the psyche (Fink, 1995). The subject’s identity and ego emerge through a process of alienation by signification, beginning from an initial state of unity in infancy before gradually mediating their self-identity and experience of the world through an externally imposed language. This external language is the discourse of the “Other”, the maternal metaphor in the Oedipal model and social domain through which experience gains meaning. In having to perceive themselves and their world through the language of the Other, the subject is therefore “split” and

fundamentally alienated (Fink, 1995). However, the language of the Other is inherently incomplete, as the domain of signifiers cannot fully account for the subject's experience. This failure creates a central gap or "lack" in the subject's identity, which becomes the primary driver of their engagement with the world as they seek validation from and reintegration with the Other.

The laws governing language and signification are established by a paternal metaphor, which Lacan terms the "Name of the Father". Through a French pun, Lacan plays on the homophony between "Nom-du-Père" (Name of the Father) and "Non-du-Père" (No of the Father), referencing the Oedipal role of the father as the figure who denies the subject access to the Mother, and emphasising the symbolic rather than literal role of the Father in this process (Fink, 1995). The Name of the Father functions as a primordial signifier: it defines the laws of signification and assigns meaning within the symbolic order. As the subject integrates into language, achieving a socially coherent identity and mediation of the world, it is this external authority which defines the laws of the Other from which the subject is split.

2.2 The Three Registers

Further terms that will recur throughout this paper are the three Lacanian registers. For Lacan, the subject's integration with their external world can be understood through three interdependent layers: the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real. While the definitions and applications of these terms have evolved throughout Lacan's work, I will briefly define them here to provide clarity for the purposes of this paper.

The Imaginary register refers to the subject's conscious experience, containing sensations, thoughts, emotions, and the internal world as perceived and understood. The Symbolic register constitutes the structure of language and signification through which the subject mediates their experience—imposing order and meaning, such as the words used to describe emotions or temporal and physical phenomena. The Real register represents a fundamentally inaccessible externality, bound by the limitations of the Symbolic order (Fink, 1995). The subject's Imaginary experience is thus mediated through the Symbolic order, which structures their engagement with the Real. However, because the Symbolic order—as a domain of language—cannot fully capture the Real, this mediation remains incomplete, leaving a surplus of the Real that always eludes the subject.

2.3 Lacanian Paranoia

Paranoia, as an instance of the psychotic psychic structure, was described by Lacan in greatest detail in *Seminar 3*, where he defined it as the "foreclosure" of the Name of the Father (Lacan, 1997). For Lacan, the psychotic structure is characterised by a radical rejection of the authority that organises and gives meaning to language. For a neurotic subject, if language fails to integrate an idea or object into conscious discourse, it is repressed into the unconscious. For a psychotic subject, however, the failure is so disturbing that the process of exclusion from the psyche targets the authority of language. In this way, the core of socialised meaning and the organisation of signifiers that mediate subjectivity collapses. The psychotic subject no longer has a stable point of reference from which the mediation of their experience is organised or derives meaning. As a result, the psychotic subject experiences a breakdown in the organisation of language within the Imaginary register, struggling to articulate or interpret experience through language. Their experience of the world becomes suspended, where anything can have meaning and nothing can be taken for granted. The subject is then left to reorganise their world, piecing together the ruptured fragments of signifiers to create coherence and meaning. When this reorganisation stabilizes, it manifests as a paranoid delusion. In reframing a world shattered by contradictions in language, the paranoid subject cannot accept the void of authority governing their existence. Paranoid delusions therefore often substitute this void with some other malevolent and omnipotent entity—such as an alternative God or deep state activity—that can meaningfully account for the disturbances in their experience.

2.4 Hegel and Paranoia

Wilfried Ver Eecke (2019) explains how Lacan's formulation of paranoia was deeply influenced by Hegel's concept of paranoid aggression, as articulated through the figure of the "Romantic Reformer." Ver Eecke outlines that, according to Hegel, paranoid aggression arises through several iterative stages. It begins with the Romantic Reformer, who believes that their deeply felt personal convictions are universally shared, similarly to how logical reasoning extends particular premises to universal conclusions. Convinced that the law should reflect the heart, the Romantic Reformer misunderstands the law — denying its necessary transcendence over individuals and its demand for their submission. By positioning themselves as the enactor of the "law of the

heart” and viewing their vision as an objective good for humanity, the Romantic Reformer cannot reconcile the inevitable resistance to their ideals. Their strong identification with the law, seen as an expression of their heartfelt passions, becomes fragile. In an attempt to reinforce their identity, the Romantic Reformer responds with outward aggression, perceiving resistance as a deliberate obstruction of a natural good, motivated by tyrannical intent.

Ver Eecke explains that Lacan worked backwards from this framework, identifying the source of paranoid aggression as rooted in some disappointment or failure. Crucially, while Hegel locates paranoid aggression in a failed relationship to the law, Lacan attributes it to the defective representation of the law by the Name of the Father. As Ver Eecke notes, “For these people, the father abused the law he presented to his children” (2019). Taking the law to be the authority which governs language, paranoia is therefore “marked by a defective relationship to language”. This account of paranoia as a defence against instability in identity, particularly rooted in a disappointment of ideological organisation the subject, is especially useful for contextualising conspiracy theories as a form of paranoid discourse in the public sphere.

3. Social Media as the Neoliberal Public Sphere

Jodi Dean’s concept of “communicative capitalism” will be outlined here as it offers a critical framework for understanding how the neoliberal media economy creates a crisis of meaning. Lacan’s formulation of paranoia is an essential footing for her work as she argues that the neoliberal structure of digital media assaults the subject with competing contradictory narratives, collapsing the authority of signifiers. She argues that it is specifically the market environment which exacerbates the foreclosure of the Name of the Father, where the paranoid subject is left in an endless cycle of distrust and having to formulate conspiratorial narratives to account for their irreconcilable experience of contradiction.

In *Publicity’s Secret: How Technoculture Capitalises on Democracy*, Jodi Dean (2002) outlines the complex ways in which contemporary internet-based media fail to deliver on their promise of a Habermasian public sphere. By expanding the apparent networks through which the public can communicate, “communicative capitalism” promises to enhance democracy by fostering the illusion of an online public sphere. Social media platforms position themselves as both providers of information that the public has a right—or obligation—to know, and as the embodiment of the public sphere itself. Writing in 2002, as if anticipating the Cambridge Analytica scandal of 2015, Dean critiques the shift of political participation away from traditional institutions like political parties and unions toward “the domain of financially mediated and professionalised practices centred on advertising.” This critique remains strikingly relevant in 2025, as political campaigns increasingly resemble public relations exercises on social media platforms, leveraging the same algorithms designed to maximise profitability through consumer data trading and targeted advertising.

She draws on Slavoj Žižek’s explanation of the function of ideology, which argues that ideology is not merely a distorting mask or crude propaganda to be deconstructed. Rather, even when maintaining some awareness or critical distance from the source of ideology, it is impossible to be immune to its influence. For example, an individual might reject the reasoning behind a system or even recognise its exploitative nature yet continue to participate in its consumption and reproduction. It is this participation, rather than the individual’s beliefs or attitudes, that sustains the ideology. As such, despite alternative, antihegemonic, and pluralistic ideas existing within this media environment—which often even challenge it—it is the act of participating in communicative capitalism and the implicit investment in its promises that reinforces its hegemonic ideological hold as the public sphere.

Dean further explains that the existence of this “public sphere” creates the reassuring illusion of a unified site for democratic engagement. “Democracy appears convincing,” she writes, “in other words, because of the fantasy that we are all part of the same thing, members of the same public.” Ideology, in this sense, operates on a phantasmatic level, relying on an imagined external legitimisation of its language of signifiers. However, democracy contains an inherent untenability. Drawing again from Žižek, Dean explains that the democratic subject is necessarily split in their public engagement: “I know very well (that the democratic form is just a form spoiled by stains of pathological imbalance), but just the same (I act as if democracy were possible).” While Dean’s account of Žižek argues that it is the acknowledgement of this contradiction that gives democracy its strength, she also highlights how liberalism’s denial of this contradiction results in a self-consuming distrust.

Using Jeremy Bentham’s defence of the democratic public as an example, Dean argues that “disavowing” this split and insisting on the public’s right to know generates a necessary suspicion “that no one has to, or should, believe.” The democratic concept of the “public,” or things being “open to the public,” simultaneously implies

the existence of things “hidden from the public.” Thus, the public sphere depends on the assumption of some “secret” that must be revealed. Democracy, then, is caught in a contradiction: it must continuously reveal the truth while simultaneously doubting it. By disavowing this inherent contradiction, the myth of a corruptive “secret” as the primary obstacle to democratic cohesion takes hold.

Dean argues that communicative capitalism thrives on the imagined “secret-that-must-be-revealed.” Driven by the fantasy of a democratic public sphere, contemporary digital media profits from the endless pursuit of knowledge, which is itself fuelled by perpetual suspicion and distrust of the information already accessed. As Dean argues, the “technocultural subject is the conspiring subject”—that is, the ideal consumer of contemporary media is a conspiracy theorist. In this way, Dean demonstrates how the untenable fantasy of liberal democracy produces a necessary surplus of paranoid subjects.

In *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies*, Dean (2009) further expands her psychoanalytical critique of communicative capitalism by demonstrating how the form lends itself to the proliferation of paranoid media due to a decline in symbolic efficiency. A term borrowed from Žižek, symbolic efficiency refers to the strength of a subject’s investment in accepting the value and meaning of signs. She explains that in a form which proliferates indiscriminately competing alternatives of information, there is a natural decline in symbolic efficiency in traditional media. Before the expansion of this form, a subject might have taken for granted that information directly from a government website was a credible source, without giving much thought to verifying or seeking alternative views on presented content. In the advent of a boundless market of information, the collision of alternatives creates doubt, a desire to verify, and an endless search for some seemingly more legitimate truth.

Dean attaches to this argument Eric Santner’s “crisis of symbolic investiture,” extending the decline of symbolic efficiency to the extremity of paranoid psychosis. Drawing on Santner, she describes how, in “excessive proximity to authority”—that is, the immediate awareness of the violence necessary to impose an artificial symbolic order—the subject cannot reconcile this presence into their existence. The subject denies the social necessity of buying into this fiction, instead substituting it with the certainty of an intrusive authoritative presence. It is under these conditions that conspiracy theory media thrives—by deteriorating the subject’s investment in socialised symbols, seizing them in an endless circuit of distrust and an overwhelming sensation of some external, overbearing force.

4. Fascist Discourse

While the market-driven structure of social media confronts the subject with the irreconcilable contradictions inherent in liberal democracy, the authority governing the signifiers of liberal democracy risks foreclosure. In substituting the void left from foreclosure, the paranoid subject is forced to construct an alternative discourse that reconciles the contradictions from this destabilising encounter. The following section positions fascist discourse as an ideology that specifically serves to resolve the inherent tensions in liberal democracy, and as such is an organic tendency for the paranoid subject in this context.

In *Fascism and Political Theory*, Daniel Woodley (2010) discusses numerous approaches to understanding fascism to build a robust critical theory, accounting for the inconsistencies present in its various theoretical manifestations that problematise its categorisation. He asserts that one of the fundamental characteristics of fascism is, despite the protestations of some of its advocates, that it is a product of modern capitalism. Woodley argues that fascism is the political commodity resulting from the failures of liberalism, quoting McCormick: “We need to address the deficiencies in liberalism which make fascism possible.” Drawing on the Marxist theory of commodity form, he explains that in fascist ideology, the material relations created by capitalism are obscured, and instead, there is an investment in the commodity fetishism established by social relations. For example, before capitalism, labour had no abstract value outside of itself; however, under capitalism, it began to represent potential exchange value, mystifying it as a commodity.

Woodley emphasises that fascist ideology operates on the level of commodity fetishism, affirming the ideological social relations created by capitalist conditions. It establishes itself through symbols, rituals, language, and aesthetics—investing in abstracted and idealised images while denying any contradictory relations at the base of the ideology. Fascist ideology thus maintains a strong investment in symbolic social roles as a basis for identity and the organisation of society. For instance, the labourer and the capitalist are each assigned their necessary role for the harmony of capitalism, much like the supposedly harmonious oppositional roles of the man and woman in a nuclear family, as an attempt to reconcile contradictory material interests.

Where the universalising forces of capitalism and modernisation have created instability in social identities, Woodley states that “fascism offers a false reconciliation of ... cultural contradictions.”

In *The Unconscious Foundation of Modern Democracy*, Davide Tarizzo (2021) also argues that fascism arises out of an attempt to stabilise the inherent contradictions present in democracy and the principle of a social contract. He identifies a dysfunction in the discourse of democracy, where it must fulfil the will of the “nation” and the will of the “citizen” as if they were one and the same. This ambiguity opens the door to two interpretations, both of which represent a psychotic response in the Lacanian sense: either “absolutising popular sovereignty at the expense of individual rights” or “absolutising individual rights to the detriment of popular sovereignty.” Tarizzo classifies the former as “old fascism” and the latter as “new fascism.” While the term “nation” grammatically implies homogeneity within a populace, there is a distinct gap between the abstract concept of a homogeneous nation and the existing heterogeneous state of reference. Tarizzo illustrates this by examining how the Nazi party attempted to close the gap between sign and referent by conflating the metaphorical with the literal. They sought to reconcile the impossibility of this contradiction through measures such as promoting scientific evidence to define what constituted the nation’s “people”—namely, the Volk, or master race, as a unifying ideal. In their attempt to purify popular sovereignty into a truly unified, homogeneous nation, an excess of violence targeted the margins of society—Jewish people, travellers, homosexuals, and disabled people—in pursuit of an interminable logical circuit that could never be fulfilled.

“New fascism,” according to Tarizzo (2021), is the inverse form of old fascism, where the absolutising of individual rights erodes popular sovereignty through depoliticisation. Whereas individual rights were traditionally manifested through affiliation with a political entity (such as a nation-state), the post-war period saw the abstraction of natural human rights as independent of politics—belonging to everyone by virtue of being human. This created a contradictory position: while rights are awarded to every individual regardless of state or political affiliation, they can only be articulated through affiliation or membership to a political entity. Tarizzo argues that under new fascism, the attempt to resolve this contradiction involves dissolving the definition of socially contracted popular sovereignty into its constituent individuals. The universalisation of individuals as private, independent actors with independent interests transforms the social contract into an ineffective anti-society of individuals. With nothing binding them, the population is redefined as an abstracted mass of “everyone,” denying the existence or responsibility of any collective political power. Tarizzo highlights that, while this differs from old fascism in that the nation does not proactively purge impurities from itself, it instead becomes passive and apathetic toward the extreme violence perpetrated by private entities through its own degradation. This “new fascism” allows individuals to observe violence yet remain powerless against it, as any unifying power that might have provided the impetus for transformation is dissolved, compromising the democratic means to achieve any popular will. In this way, popular sovereignty dematerialises, and humanity is left without institutions to protect or defend against extreme violence or to manifest their so-called natural human rights.

Woodley and Tarizzo demonstrate how fascism emerges in opposition to liberal democracy, but only insofar as it attempts to resolve its inherent contradictions. In a structure that replicates paranoia, fascist ideology forecloses and substitutes the traditional authority of liberal democracy with an alternative discourse that seeks to purify the sign by removing the tensions inherent in its meaning. In doing so, fascist ideology denies the inherent impossibility of signification, instead striving to restructure an account of the world through a heavily aestheticised language seemingly free from contradiction.

5. Paranoia and Conspiracy Theories

Conspiracy theories, particularly in the contemporary media environment, have been strongly associated with radicalisation and populism, and the historical link to antisemitism is well-documented (Butter and Knight, 2020). It is important to emphasise, however, that the scale of conspiracy media propagated through social media represents an extreme response with profound consequences for democratic engagement.

As described, the neoliberal structure of social media undermines the authority of social signifiers and, in doing so, compromises the liberal democratic institutions that rely on this authority. Users of social media, confronted with endlessly contradictory content and lacking effective discriminatory measures, face the inauthenticity of the hegemonic ideology underpinning social order. This confrontation can have traumatic consequences, manifesting as paranoia, where the subject’s adherence to socialised authority collapses. In a desperate defence of their identity, which depends on liberal democratic values, they are left attributing its failure to some deliberate obstruction. Like Hegel’s Romantic Reformer, advocates of conspiracy theories fundamentally cannot

accept that the ideology of liberal democracy is inherently contradictory and refuse to concede the fictional nature of the abstracted concepts to which they are tied—such as democracy, freedom, and justice. By insisting on these ideals, they reconfigure them through an alternative narrative in which democratic dysfunction is caused by corruption from a hidden, malign, and intrusive force.

By refusing to acknowledge the contradictions of liberal democracy and attempting to forcibly reconcile them, conspiracy theorists are fated to reproduce the conclusions of fascist ideology. Central to most conspiracy theories is the belief that the proper functioning of society is compromised by some hidden corruptive influence—whether targeting individual freedoms, cultural identity, or the popular will. Theories focusing on individual freedoms tend towards conclusions aligned with new fascism, where state institutions are seen as inherently corrupt, enslaving individuals through alienating laws—a view most prominently demonstrated in the sovereign citizen movement (Matza, 2020). Conversely, theories focusing on cultural identity or the popular will habitually align with old fascism, reviving ancient tropes such as a shadowy Jewish cabal wielding omnipotent power for malevolent ends, or some other depraved entity attempting to deteriorate national culture (Becker et al., 2024). There is little coherency or utility in systematising these theories, perhaps because paranoia is fundamentally an isolating phenomenon in subjectivity. However, a common thread ties conspiracy theorists together: the paranoid certainty of an overwhelming malevolent force. It is through the neoliberal communicative form of social media that this certainty proliferates. Ultimately, these narratives of dysfunction place the subject in a desperate position, where the only perceived means of achieving a pure form of liberal democracy is through the violent excesses of either new or old fascism.

The theoretical framework presented in this paper has significant implications for understanding and addressing the challenges posed by social media in contemporary democratic societies. The fact that the neoliberal structure of social media exacerbates the crisis of symbolic efficiency and risks triggering paranoid responses demonstrates the urgent need for regulatory interventions that go beyond superficial measures such as content moderation or algorithmic transparency. Although platforms have implemented policies to combat misinformation and hate speech, these efforts often fail to address the deeper structural issues that fuel distrust and enable the proliferation of conspiratorial and fascist discourses. Furthermore, the psychoanalytic dimension of this paper highlights the fragility and limitations of subjectivity that renders individuals susceptible to radicalisation. That is, individuals are not radicalised by conspiracy theories merely through malignant brainwashing or repeated exposure to extremist content, but rather through a destabilising confrontation with the inherent fraudulence of the narratives that mediate their world. Addressing this issue raises significant political, economic, and ideological questions. However, given that paranoia is triggered by the collapse of authority through contradiction, efforts could be made to foster an appreciation of the tensions and constraints inherent in liberal democracy, thereby mitigating their destabilising effects. Participatory democracy, which enables effective engagement in institutions such as unions, political parties, and civil society, can reduce the distance between the language of liberal democracy and the experience of the individual. By transforming political and democratic expression into more engaged practices—where the individual is not merely subordinate but also an active contributor to democratic discourse—the public sphere can become more resilient to the appeals of fascism.

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