

Online conspiracy theories and perceptions of institutional power: a study of the Flat Earth Society's Forum

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Abstract

Purpose – This study explores the interplay between institutional distrust and political narratives within the Flat Earth Society's online forum. Specifically, it investigates how institutional authority is challenged and how former US President Donald Trump is portrayed by users in relation to conspiratorial discourse.

Design/methodology/approach – Using data scraped from the forum spanning 2005–2024, a mixed-method analysis was conducted on over 2.5 m comments. Natural language processing (NLP) techniques were employed to identify common themes, bigrams and trigrams, providing a comprehensive understanding of the community's discourse.

Findings – Results indicate a strong anti-institutional sentiment, with users frequently rejecting mainstream scientific knowledge and promoting their own "research." The forum also exhibits clear support for Trump, linking his rhetoric to broader conspiratorial worldviews.

Originality/value – This research provides critical insights into how online conspiracy communities frame institutional authority, use political figures to legitimize their beliefs and influence discourse on trust, democracy and social cohesion in the digital age. By integrating computational and qualitative approaches, this study contributes to the understanding of the socio-political dynamics of digital conspiracy spaces.

Keywords Flat Earth, Conspiracy theories, Anti-science, Institutional power

Paper type Research article

1. Introduction

The rise of online platforms and social media undoubtedly has facilitated the proliferation of various conspiracy theories (van Prooijen and Douglas, 2018). Often, the basis of the conspiratorial mindset is a lack of trust in institutions that has developed in parallel with the transformation of the media (Flew, 2021). This erosion of trust in institutions has been particularly evident in the political sphere, where the interplay between conspiracy theories, populism and governance has become pronounced, especially during the last decade of the elections' outcomes. The connections between conspiracy theories and politics have already been widely studied in the prism of the presidency of Donald Trump in the United States (Hamilton, 2024; Hellinger, 2018; Kessel, 2022; Neville-Shepard, 2019; Pirro and Taggart, 2023). According to Kessel (Kessel, 2022), Trump uses a unique strategy of enhancing conspiracy theories through entertainment and his social media profiles (Haupt et al., 2021; Kessel, 2022; Ross and Rivers, 2018). However, the majority of research concentrated on Trump's supporters' communication on Twitter (Bastos and Farkas, 2019).

Previous research highlighted that there are meaningful connections between conspiratorial thinking and political preferences (Tuffy, 2023) or directly with Trumpism (Hamilton, 2024). It is noteworthy that scientific knowledge can be perceived as a system of beliefs, which endanger the worldview of its opponents. Moreover, there are a few features enhancing conspiracy theorizing (Enders *et al.*, 2023; Engel *et al.*, 2023; Pahuus *et al.*, 2024). Pre-existing biases and identity factors play an important role in online interactions with conspiracy theories. Common motives for engaging with conspiracy theories are the entertaining value of conspiratorial online content, desire to counter harms, political and religious beliefs, personal traumas or interests in paranormal activities (Engel *et al.*, 2023).

On the other hand, conspiracy theories have existed in the United States from the very beginning and the discovery of Christopher Columbus. Indeed, conspiracy theories have deep roots in American history (Goldwag, 2024; Hofstadter, 2012), dating back to the colonial period and continuing to influence the modern political and social discourse throughout the nation's development. Hence, it is not surprising that, when Flat Earth Theory appeared in the XIX century, it easily spread in the United States from the UK (Guimont, 2024).

This conspiracy theory has emerged as a great example of how conspiracy theories from the past can easily grow and spread all over the world due to online communication. We have decided to focus our research on this theory because it is classified by Abbie Richards as the highest-level conspiracy theory, which is characterized by serious detachment from reality (Richards, 2021). There are a few main objectives of the Flat Earth Theory; however, we must admit there also exist other variations of them.

Firstly, flat-earthers challenge mainstream science, including scientific discoveries and institutions (Fernbach and Bogard, 2024; Watkins, 2024; York, 2017) or even gravity and Newton's laws. Moreover, they reject the evidence of the spherical Earth that is presented in photographs or films. Evidence related to space travel and moon landings are also denied because the government is bribing astronauts and NASA in order to hide the flatness of the Earth. This is also consistent with some research conclusions, that conspiratorial thinking is related to emotional, not analytical, perception (van Prooijen and Douglas, 2018).

Secondly, the Flat Earth movement believes that the Earth is a flat disc with land and water in the center surrounded by a thick wall of ice (Fernbach and Bogard, 2024; York, 2017). This explanation is based on Samuel Birley Rowbotham's model, which was published in the book "Zetetic Astronomy: Earth Not a Globe" in 1865.

What is significant is that the movement produced its pseudo-scientific knowledge, including experiments and publications, and promoted it. As we can read on the Flat Earth Society's website:

Much of the experimental evidence for a Flat Earth is provided by Dr Samuel Birley Rowbotham, a 19th-century lecturer who traveled the isles of Britain, giving lectures at many prominent universities of the day. His experimental evidence is very easily reproducible and requires only access to a long body of standing water and a little trig to conclude that water is not convex, that the surface of the earth does not curve as the Round Earth doctrine mathematically predicts. Other experiments require only a stick and a plumb line. Each of the experiments is described in full in the Flat Earth Literature.

Although the movement's main channel for gaining new supporters is YouTube (Watkins, 2024), there are other channels of flat-earth communication, such as the online forums – Flat Earth Society's Internet Forum and website. They are valuable sources of information about conspiracy believers because of their wide timeframe of gathered posts – the Forum was established in 2005, although the available stats are available since 2007. According to the statistics found at the Forum [August 2024], there are nearly 40,000 members, and most of them are males (male to female ratio: 15:1). The most popular topic by replies and views at the Forum is "Why do you support Donald Trump?".

Additionally, when studying the Flat Earth Society's Forum, we should also emphasize the role of the dynamics of the message selection process on online forums. From research on political discussion forums, we know that users tend to engage more with messages that align with their own political beliefs (Song *et al.*, 2020). This behavior can lead to self-segregation,

where individuals primarily interact with like-minded people, reinforcing their beliefs and limiting exposure to diverse viewpoints. However, while self-segregation was prevalent, some users did engage with content reflecting different political perspectives, indicating that exposure to varying viewpoints does happen, but less frequently. One of the reasons for the forums' polarization is the moderation policy (Edwards, 2015; Scrivens *et al.*, 2022). Of course, the Flat Earth Society's Forum has its own rules, which serve as a structured framework to maintain respectful, appropriate and constructive discourse among its members. A central focus of these rules is to promote an environment free of hate speech, racism and harassment, explicitly prohibiting posts that contain derogatory, satirical or blatantly offensive content. Sanctions and the procedure for issuing warnings are specified for breaking individual rules.

On the other hand, the Flat Earth Theory was already studied in the context of Brazilian politics, where right-winged politician Jair Bolsonaro won the presidential campaign (Guimont, 2024), being promoted by one of the popular flat-earthers on his YouTube channel. It is even more significant when we take into account that 7% of Brazilians believed in the Flat Earth Theory in 2019. There were also Facebook groups gathering the Flat Earth believers, who are Bolsonaro supporters (de Melo and de Oliveira, 2023).

Moreover, York described Americans believing in conspiracy theories, including flat-earthers, who supported Donald Trump (York, 2017). As he pointed out, the rhetoric of this conspiracy movement resonates well with Trump's tendency to share alternate facts. The main problem with establishing a dialogue with flat-earthers is the fact that they are unwilling to discuss the opposite point of view. They strongly believe in their rational minds and do not need any more proof from other sources.

Our main interest in this research is to study how conspiracy theory believers relate to political content and institutional authority in online forums. We have chosen the most common keywords connected to authorities in the United States as well as Donald Trump's figure as a politician, who is often associated with multiple conspiracy theories, such as QAnon or climate change denial (Hellinger, 2018; van Prooijen and Douglas, 2018). We stated the following research questions:

- RQ1. How are institutional power and authority framed in the discourses within the Flat Earth Society's Forum?
- RQ2. What narratives about government emerge from discussions on the Flat Earth Society's Forum?
- RQ3. What is the relationship between support for Donald Trump and the rejection of institutional authority on the Flat Earth Society's Forum?

So far, there have been only a few studies published, covering the subject of pseudo-scientific and anti-scientific communication at this Forum (Pilati *et al.*, 2024). This research highlighted the differences between social media – Reddit Flat Earth page and the Flat Earth Society's Internet Forum in the means of communication regime and practices of conspiratorial discourses as well as the epistemological foundations and underlying conceptions of "truth" and evidence. However, the data analyzed by the forum was dated from 2013 to 2023. As it was found out, the Forum is a virtual space of pseudo-scientific knowledge, including documents and books. Moreover, the Forum's discussion is strictly moderated and structured by thematic boards and subjects.

The second study consisted of data collected in six months from six public forums connected to Flat Earth (Jones *et al.*, 2023). In general, it concentrated on the communication style and activities taken up at the studied forums as well as studied the in-group and out-group relations. Further, the authors found out that flat-earthers use the strategy of "motivated ignorance," to avoid content incompatible with their views.

In this study, we wanted to focus on the Forum because previous research indicates that online forums enable the spread of hate speech due to the anonymity of users and rules of content moderation (Åkerlund, 2021; Massanari, 2017).

2. Conspiracy theories – institutional distrust and science denial

One of the biggest challenges associated with the condition of modern politics and communication is the dynamic spread of disinformation and conspiracy theories, which is enhanced by social media (Oliveira *et al.*, 2022; van Prooijen and Douglas, 2018). The COVID-19 era has clearly shown that online disinformation campaigns can be dangerous to social trust and the citizens' health (Darius and Urquhart, 2021; Durmaz and Hengirmen, 2022; Russell and Patterson, 2023; Rutjens and Većkalov, 2022).

The belief in conspiracy theories, such as the Flat Earth Theory, is related to the common distrust of institutions and authorities (Flew, 2021). This trust deficit is enhanced by polarization, populism and massive disinformation campaigns. Thus, it is not a surprise that citizens are skeptical of the officials' statements and try to find trustworthy explanations and sources of knowledge. We already know that such a state of affairs can lead to serious problems with social cohesion, reduce commitment, cooperation and pro-sociality as well as increase extremism and prejudices (van Prooijen *et al.*, 2022). Meanwhile, authorities and institutions play an important role in creating and maintaining group values and a sense of security.

For instance, it is typical for conspiracy theories to spread anti-science statements. According to Diethelm and McKee, there are five characteristic features of such an attitude: the use of fake experts, relying on conspiracy theory, cherry-picking information, misinterpretation of research goals and possibilities and the use of misrepresentation and logical fallacies (Diethelm and McKee, 2009). All of those can be found in the Flat Earth Society.

Another significant factor causing loss of trust in the institutions is the lack of accountability often entangled with corruption, nepotism, policy errors (Flew, 2021) or the spreading of fake news regarding media (Zhang *et al.*, 2024). We also know that it is possible to distinguish various types of trust concerning this research's objective: trust in science, trust in people, political trust, trust in international organizations and separate belief in conspiracy theories (Syropoulos and Gkinopoulos, 2023).

Furthermore, the interaction between conspiracy theories and institutional distrust represents a significant threat to societal stability, as it undermines not only social trust but also the effectiveness of democratic institutions. Plenty of existing conspiracy theories are produced by two opposite, conflicted social groups (van Prooijen and Douglas, 2018) as part of their identity or justification for some actions taken. For instance, as it was found out, not only are right-winged voters prone to believe in conspiracy theories but also it is a more nuanced matter. Voters from both political ends are vulnerable to disinformation and conspiracy (Imhoff *et al.*, 2022). In high-corruption contexts, the difference between left- and right-wing conspiracy beliefs diminishes as corruption increases the perceived plausibility of conspiracies for people across the political spectrum. However, individuals supporting right-winged authoritarianism and having a tendency to link ambiguous social cues to intergroup conflict "are more likely to believe in conspiracy theories" (van Prooijen and van Vugt, 2018). The high level of institutional distrust has an impact on the quality of social relationships and stimulates radicalism (van Prooijen *et al.*, 2022). In addition, exposure to conspiracy theories decreases trust in the government, even though the conspiracy is not directly entangled with the institution (Einstein and Glick, 2015).

Institutional distrust in the case of Flat Earth Theory belief is also strongly connected to scientific skepticism. Members of this movement promote their own "research" and "science experts" and deny the credibility of sources from mainstream institutions and universities. Similarly to pseudo-scientific content shared by anti-maskers during the COVID-19 pandemic (Russell and Patterson, 2023), the Flat Earth's experts are employing scientific rhetoric and even conducting their own experiments. According to Vranic *et al.*, in the case of COVID-19, trust in science was the strongest predictor of lower endorsement of conspiracy theories (Vranic *et al.*, 2022). Further, a study about flat-earthers has shown that this group has a higher-than-average conspiracy mentality and considers themselves more skeptical and logical (Olshansky, 2018). Such an attitude is related to the sense of respect for every citizen's opinion, which is equally valid and valuable.

On the other hand, anti-scientific communication could strengthen the in-group identity and consolidate negative out-group perception (Hameleers and Van der Meer, 2021). Following Hofstadter's findings (Hofstadter, 2012) about American anti-intellectualism, we know that the myth of every man's knowledge and respect for common sense is linked to egalitarian politics. Moreover, the modern world is becoming increasingly complex, leaving the average American lacking the knowledge to fully understand it (York, 2017). Thus, there is a rising need for expertise and professional opinions to be part of social life. Such a supply of knowledge creates tensions between the intellectuals owning the expertise and average citizens.

Oliveira *et al.* highlighted that during the media transformation, scientific communication has become the responsibility of researchers, who have become content producers in social media. However, their actions combined with journalists' activity are not enough in the disinformation war taking place in online platforms (Oliveira *et al.*, 2022). This matter is mostly influenced by algorithms and echo chambers that easily trap the users in an information bubble.

In addition to the factors mentioned above, leading to conspiracy thinking and institutional distrust, we must include Trumpism (support for President Donald Trump) as a particularly unique type of right-wing politics. It is characterized by the leader's cult and scapegoating narratives, which are often combined with false claims. Trump voters are also more likely to reject scientific facts, such as the effectiveness of vaccines or the reality of climate change (Hamilton, 2024; Hawkins and Chinn, 2024). The spread of disinformation and conspiracy theories, often amplified by political actors, has the potential to undermine public trust in democratic processes and the legitimacy of government institutions.

In the previous research, institutional distrust was also analyzed in the frame of the theory of communicative action created by Jürgen Habermas (Bolton, 2006; Flew, 2021). It is possible to distinguish three main factors of true claims in communicative rationality: truth, rightness and sincerity (Habermas, 1984). We can assume that regarding communication from conspiracy movements, those factors are violated.

Another theoretical framework is useful for analyzing conspiracy theories concerning them as an oppositional force against the "regime of truth," which is oppressive, as in Foucault's understanding (Harambam and Aupers, 2015). Truth is not an objective reality, but rather a product of power relations, so it is authorized by the most influential social actor. Truth is constructed and maintained by those in positions of authority, who have the power to define what counts as legitimate knowledge. It can be interpreted as a battle for power over the veracity of information, which can be won by a corrupt government, fake scientists and institutions (the power elite) or conspiracy believers. Thus, conspiracy theories can be seen as counter-narratives that resist the monopoly of truth. In this sense, knowledge and authority are parts of the social power structure. Overall, alongside the rise of populism and right-winged parties, we can observe how antitrust, conspiratorial thinking and power disproportions can be used in political communication in favor of politicians like Donald Trump.

3. Methods

Online forums have emerged as crucial repositories for understanding the dynamics of conspiracy theories, political beliefs and fringe communities (Åkerlund, 2021). Given their wide archives and participatory structure, they offer a rich source of naturally occurring discourse in the studied group, especially conspiracy theories (Holtz *et al.*, 2012; Introne *et al.*, 2018). Unlike Facebook groups, they allow for creating more permanent repositories of knowledge bases as well as offer a more structured and searchable conversation, not focused only on immediate, contemporary exchange.

To answer our research questions, we decided to analyze data from the Flat Earth Society's Internet Forum by focusing on the most popular topics and studying the discourse about institutional power. Our research approach combines quantitative methods with computational social science methods, incorporating NLP (Galende *et al.*, 2022; Holtz *et al.*, 2012; Peral *et al.*, 2019) and thick big data (Jemielniak (2020), which is based on the mixed analysis of a

large database, combining data science with ethnographic insight. We also utilized text-mining techniques to reveal the key characteristic features included in each text (Ahammad *et al.*, 2024; Eddington, 2018; Karami *et al.*, 2020). The abovementioned approach is an example of a mixed methodology used to holistically analyze the collected data. Torregrosa *et al.* explained that such a strategy overcomes the previous limitations of classical qualitative and content analysis (Torregrosa *et al.*, 2023).

Through data scraping techniques, we collected 2,586,829 comments with assigned threads from 2005 to 2024. The dataset includes metadata such as timestamps, usernames and thread titles. A similar research design was used in the primary study of data from the Forum (Pilati *et al.*, 2024). However, we analyze data from a wider year range than the previous research, bringing novelty to the field.

We have utilized BeautifulSoup and a Scrapy framework of Python to extract our data from the Flat Earth Society using a method of web-scraping. The data extracted was saved into the relational database file – csv. Format, containing features such as: date of publication, username, name of the thread, message, number of views and replies. In order to employ NLP we performed tokenization and deleted stop words, thus we used SpaCy, NLTK and TF-IDF vectorizer. Operationalization of key variables included identifying mentions of institutional actors (e.g. “NASA” and “government”) through keyword lists and entity recognition.

While the data was publicly accessible, we adhered to ethical standards for Internet research. User anonymity was maintained throughout the analysis by removing usernames and other identifying features. Additionally, we refrained from quoting any potentially sensitive or personally identifiable information verbatim.

4. Analysis

The purpose of our analysis was to study how users relate to the concept of institutional power and how the government and Donald Trump are illustrated in the discussion. We have chosen to closely examine the former American president due to his popularity at the Forum. Further, he has already been identified as a politician who spreads conspiracy theories to achieve his goals and denigrate opponents (Douglas *et al.*, 2019). In the context of the research’s objective, the believers of the Flat Earth Theory are challenging the mainstream worldview and institutional dispositions and follow the vision of secretly hidden truth and knowledge.

We not only conducted the NLP of the data but also checked the number of comments posted at the Forum each year (Figure 1). As illustrated, the number of comments per year from 2005 to 2024 shows a clear trend in user engagement over time. There is a sharp increase in

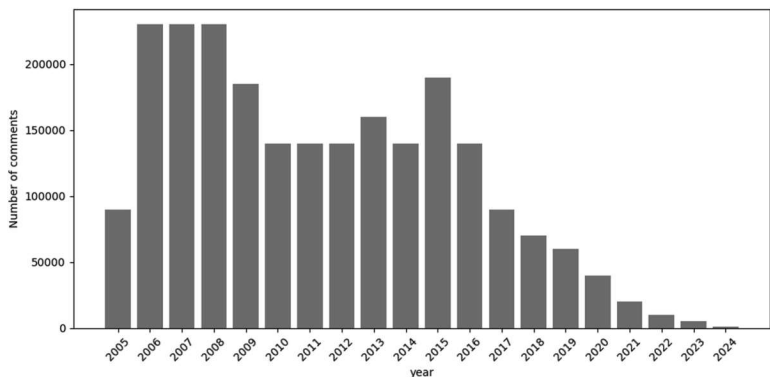


Figure 1. Number of comments at the Forum each year. Source: Authors’ own work

comments starting from 2006, peaking in 2008, when the number of comments exceeded 200,000. This period of high engagement continued until around 2011, after which there was a gradual decline in the number of comments. The drop became more pronounced after 2017, with the number of comments steadily decreasing yearly. By 2021, the comment count had fallen below 50,000 and continued to decline further in subsequent years, suggesting a significant reduction in user interaction or participation over time. This slight decrease might be explained by the increase in social media popularity. Further, we know from the previous research (Pilati *et al.*, 2024) that the Forum consists of a larger number of posts than the Reddit thread and is characterized by a longer average lifespan.

After we performed the process of cleaning and tokenization, we found out that the most frequent words were, in order of popularity: “earth,” “flat,” “fe,” “question,” “round,” “theory” and “gravity.” It indicates that the users often refer to scientific aspects of space. Moreover, the results highlight an interplay between pseudoscientific ideas and scientific counterarguments.

On the contrary, the most popular bigrams (Figure 2) revealed a broader range of topics, including support of Donald Trump, evidence for the Earth’s flatness, etc. Further, there was a large discussion about the “Heiwa’s 1,000,000 challenge,” which is a competition with a 1 m euro cash prize, established by conspiracy theorist and very active user of the Forum—Anders Björkman. He spreads various types of conspiracy, from the fake Moon landing and COVID-19 denial to non-functioning atomic bombs. He set up six types of challenges to gather evidence for his conspiracy theories. For instance, the first challenge is about proving that the WTCs’ collapse was faked. He also questioned the credibility of many international and American science associations (Björkman, 2024).

However, the challenges related to the Flat Earth Theory concentrate on space travel and the Moon landing. One of the Forum’s users claimed that he won the Anders Björkman Challenge 2. Later on, in this topic, users discussed scientific and pseudoscientific publications and possible solutions for the challenge as well as various physical phenomena.

It is noteworthy that both the Flat Earth Society’s Forum and Anders Björkman’s website are related to some aspects of the scientific method. For instance, they included scientific diagrams, charts, tables, etc. alongside references to scientific or pseudoscientific publications and terms. However, in the majority of comments, there were promoted interpretations denying mainstream scientific knowledge. It was always combined with questioning scientific institutions or accusing them of corruption and lies.

Denigration of scientific institutions is nothing new in the disinformation, anti-scientific and conspiratorial narrative strategy. For instance, such a communication strategy is used in

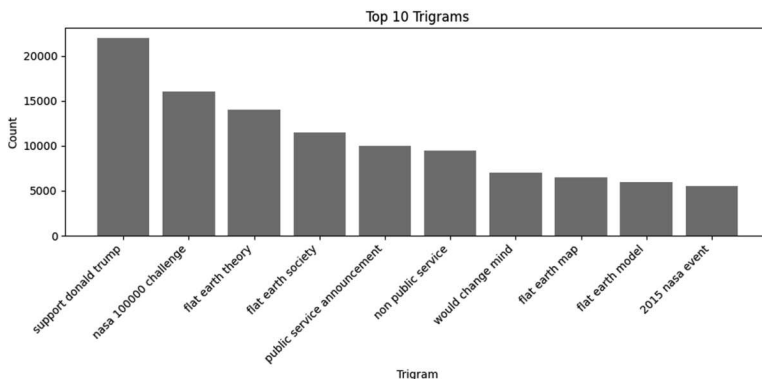


Figure 2. The ten most popular trigrams in the dataset. Source: Authors’ own work

the context of GMO, climate change, global pandemic (Strudwicke and Grant, 2020), vaccines (Foster and Ortiz, 2023), etc.

We wanted to explore a subject highlighted in other studies (Wischerath et al., 2023), referring to the widespread hate narrative against NASA as a “corrupted,” scientific institution. The users pay attention to various NASA’s attempts to prove the round shape of Earth, providing photo footage and basing it on unreliable resources. This conflict started in the 1960s with the launch of the American space program (Pilati et al., 2024). This skepticism was not only limited to the Flat Earth theory but also was part of a broader cultural trend where conspiracy theories began to thrive, fueled by the belief that scientific entities were hiding the truth from the public.

Further, we also explored the discourse connected to science and scientists. We present trigrams and bigrams with the most adequate and intriguing results (Figures 3 and 4), we also tried using the keywords: “scientific,” “scientists,” “anti-science” and “anti-scientific,” which provided similar results.

In the forum, we found a division created by the members for the “real” Flat Earth science, which confirms the conspiracy theory, and “mainstream” science, which is unreliable and believes in the heliocentric theory. For instance, the most frequent three-word phrase including “scientists” is “stupid scientists believe.”

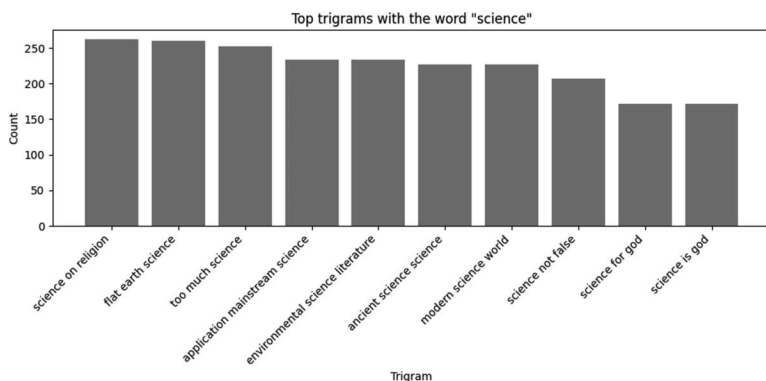


Figure 3. Top trigrams with “science.” Source: Authors’ own work

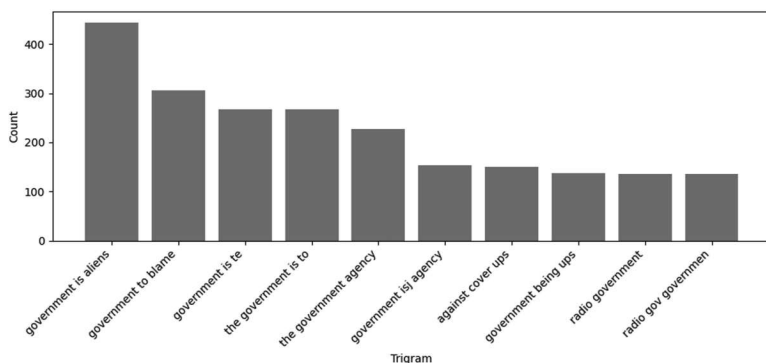


Figure 4. Top trigrams with the word “scientist.” Source: Authors’ own work

Moreover, we also studied common verbs, in their various forms, relating to values important to trust, such as: “believe,” “lie,” “trust,” “hide.” The results confirmed the negative sentiment towards science and NASA. It is visible that the users often expressed their distrust of scientists and accused them of hiding “the truth”. Moreover, not only scientists are mentioned in this context but also astronauts and the government. Even, there is a popular phrase “nasa epic lies,” which covers this subject. The data suggests that the users’ distrust is not confined to a single event like the Moon landing, but permeates their overall perception of scientific institutions and authorities.

It is quite natural for human cognition to find explanations for complex phenomena that we don’t understand. This can cause a problem when we no longer rely on well-checked and recognized resources of knowledge to understand the world better, but instead, we use social media or conspiracy forums to find the answers. Currently, everyone with Internet access is able to express their opinion to a large audience. In consequence, each opinion may be perceived equally as a voice worth being heard, even though anonymous and lacking expertise. Thus, it is very easy to reject mainstream science in favor of Flat Earth belief.

The second part of this research concentrated on the trust of politicians and government. Recent studies observed that democracy erosion is connected with the lack of reliability in public institutions. However, Butzlaff and Messenger-Zimmer discovered that trust and distrust can be caused by negative experiences when politicians or institutions prove to be untrustworthy (Butzlaff and Messenger-Zimmer, 2020). Both are influenced by norms and values and are formed by social associations and networks. Is political mistrust then always an issue to worry about? In a democracy, the rules of checks and balances and controlling institutions are essential to the political system. It must also be mentioned that the trust connected with the functioning of a healthy democracy does not necessarily require blind trust. A certain level of skepticism and political mistrust can be beneficial. Nevertheless, when the increasing level of mistrust is entangled with the current social and political tensions.

Even well-settled democracies have problems with populism and institutional distrust (Butzlaff and Messenger-Zimmer, 2020). For instance, in Germany, declining trust in politicians and institutions was observed, which led to the demobilization of voters and the rise of populism. In this case, the main reasons for such a state of affairs were social inequalities, feelings of exclusion from the political process and stigmatization.

In the case of the Flat Earth movement, distrust is also connected with the fear of being fooled and limited access to land and other resources. Some of the members admit that the government is hiding the “truth” to keep the resources for particular states. Moreover, such an attitude is close to collective narcissism, based on the perception of in-groups being constantly threatened by out-groups. According to previous research (Golec de Zavala and Lantos, 2020), collective narcissism is closely related to conspiratorial thinking and can be enhanced by various types of threats to the in-group (Cichočka, 2016). It is also linked to low self-esteem, which is also a factor strengthening the belief in conspiracy theories.

On the other hand, the disbelief in scientific findings, as a part of a lack of general institutional trust, is entangled with the rising struggles with the experts’ communication, which was widely observed during the COVID-19 pandemic. The public perception of science and skepticism are connected to the debate about the place of scientists in the social system (Weingart, 2023). The social media era has changed the processes of knowledge production and distribution. Traditionally, scientists represent their institution and apply to well-established journals to publish their findings. Thus, scientific knowledge and research were not easily accessible to the public. Nowadays, in the era of democratization and mediatization of science, experts’ opinions and reports can be easily found on the internet (Weingart, 2023). This scientific expertises are mixed with poor general knowledge. Further, in social media, no gatekeepers or editors are checking the shared information, so each user’s voice can be treated as equal. In the thick of information, we lose confidence in sources and find it increasingly difficult to assess their quality.

The second part of our analysis is focused on the perception of Donald Trump at the forum (Figure 5) due to the popularity of the thread about supporting the conservative candidate. In the discussion, the majority of posts are concentrated on particular political events such as the COVID-19 pandemic – Trump’s diagnosis or the outcome of the 2020 presidential elections. Taking into account all contexts presented in the data, it can be said that pro-Trump discussions included a variety of topics. This lack of specific arguments for support is also noticed in the poll’s results conducted at the Forum (Figure 5). We must admit that this poll was not popular among users, because only 87 of them participated, but even from this small sample of data, about 55% answered that “Donald Trump is the wild card we need.” This suggests that a majority of Trump supporters in this sample perceive him as a disruptive, anti-establishment or unpredictable force, enabled to fulfill the political promises and bring changes. Moreover, nearly a quarter of the participants expressed anti-immigrant sentiment as a reason for supporting Trump (Geiger and Reny, 2024). It is not the policy proposals and programs that persuaded Trump supporters, but the image and rhetoric (Bergmann and Butter, 2020) he has created. It confirms the close relationship between populism and conspiracy theories (Butter, 2022).

Moreover, at the Forum, there were various arguments presented in favor of Donald Trump. Users argued that, he is “one of us,” and present accurate policy. We also noticed messages containing pro-Russian narratives justifying the start of the war, objecting American sanctions on Russia, and suggestions, that Ukraine should surrender. Despite the huge support for Donald Trump, there were also few users suggesting, that he “acts like a dictator” or “is stuck in business and everything is filtered through that.”

In the last part of our analysis, we studied the words connected with government. The most common bigram in the dataset is “government conspiracy,” which implies that users often relate to secret actions hidden from the public. They are also discussing the world’s government – a term used in many conspiracy theories and the United States government. Additionally, “PRISM government” and “PRISM government access” (Figure 6) are frequently mentioned, which refer to the controversial American surveillance program. Other bigrams indicating governmental distrust are: “government hiding,” “government coverup” and “government access.”

Data presented in Figures 6 and 7 illustrate the mistrust of the government as well as acknowledge that the users accuse the institutions of hiding the truth about the Earth. Even though many users express support for Donald Trump as a former President, who was a representative of a governmental body, there is a common skepticism about governmental actions. This kind of institutional distrust can affect the condition of democracy and is visible in the communication between citizens and officials.

The attitude of distrust of institutions in American society is also influenced by the capitalist system and the “paranoid style” of politics, coined in 1964 by Richard Hofstadter to describe narrative patterns used by political movements (Fenster, 2008; Hofstadter, 1979, 2012; Van Der Linden *et al.*, 2020). In the groups supporting Trump, we also observe manifestations characteristic of “paranoid style,” such as us vs them mentality, elections fraud claims (Kessel, 2022), and suspicion of hidden enemies. Moreover, the capitalist mindset is

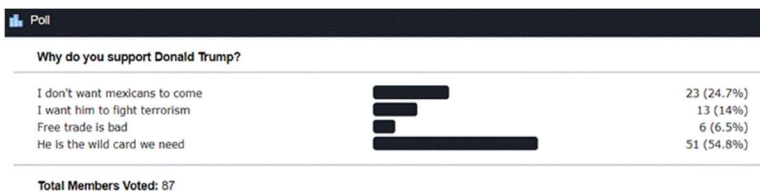


Figure 5. Poll at the flat earth society’s Forum about the reason for supporting Donald Trump. Number of votes = 87. [Access: 18.09.2024]. Source: Screenshot from the Forum

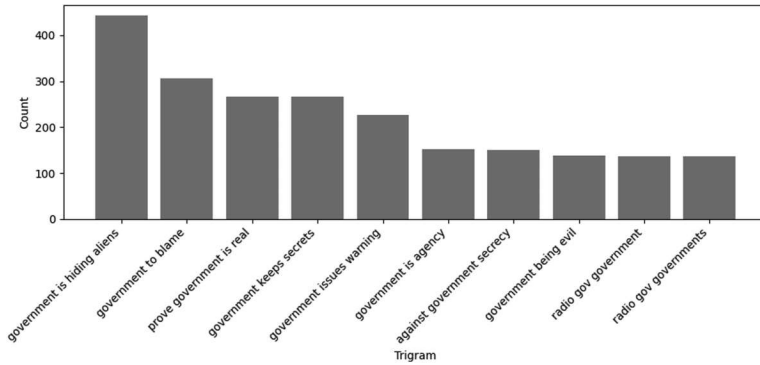


Figure 6. Top bigrams with the word “government.” Source: Authors’ own work

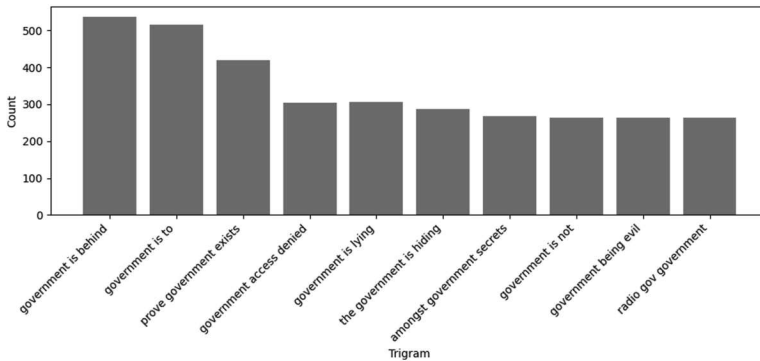


Figure 7. Top trigrams with the word “government.” Source: Authors’ own work

related to the belief that the elite possess control over the land resources. In this context, the Flat Earth Theory can be interpreted as a form of resistance to the dominant narratives imposed by the system.

5. Discussion and conclusions

Our analysis of the Flat Earth Society’s Forum interactions provides valuable insight into the dynamics of distrust and the politicization of conspiracy theories in digital spaces. Our findings align with broader research on institutional distrust, particularly in contexts where conspiracy theories flourish. Conspiracy theorists often cultivate group solidarity by opposing perceived institutional deception (Prooijen *et al.*, 2022), a phenomenon evident in the Flat Earth Society’s characterization of NASA and other scientific bodies as deceptive agents. This “us versus them” mentality strengthens community bonds within conspiracy circles, further reinforcing a collective opposition to institutional authority and legitimizing anti-science perspectives within these communities.

Further, the Forum data underscores the role of conspiracy theories in shaping political preferences, particularly through alignment with populist figures like Donald Trump. Trump's rhetoric appeals to individuals skeptical of scientific consensus, reinforcing the anti-establishment and anti-expertise sentiments pervasive in groups like the Flat Earth Society (Hamilton, 2024; Hawkins and Chinn, 2024). Trump's emphasis on questioning established institutions (Borah *et al.*, 2025) has inspired a uniquely American style of conspiratorial thinking that blends political distrust with skepticism toward science, aligning with Fenster's (2008) and Hofstadter's (1979b) exploration of the "paranoid style" in US politics. This alignment with Trump's rhetoric is a gateway for the community to adopt similar ideologies across political, scientific and social realms, further polarizing public discourse. Thus, the studied forum can be interpreted as a form of an echo chamber (Eady *et al.*, 2019; Garimella *et al.*, 2018) and as an isolated knowledge ecosystem in which participants validate and reinforce one another's distrust of institutions. The dissenting information is either ignored or reinterpreted to fit the conspiratorial beliefs.

The Flat Earth Society's use of pseudo-scientific language and self-produced "research" demonstrates how conspiracy groups attempt to create their authoritative discourse, which can mimic scientific rigor while discrediting mainstream knowledge. This pattern is consistent with findings by Harambam and Aupers(2015), who suggest that conspiracy theorists often present their beliefs as legitimate alternatives to "official" science, framing their knowledge as emancipatory and "truth-revealing" or "hidden knowledge" (Douglas *et al.*, 2019). This epistemic opposition illustrates Foucault's theory of "regimes of truth," where dominant knowledge structures are continuously contested by alternative narratives, particularly online forums, without traditional gatekeepers to validate shared information (Weingart, 2023). Such self-styled epistemic authority can significantly reshape public understanding and foster widespread acceptance of pseudoscientific ideas.

On the other hand, this phenomenon also aligns with Bourdieu's (Bourdieu, 1992) concept of "symbolic power," where the mimicry of scientific discourse performs as a legitimizing tool, subtly reshaping public perceptions of truth and authority. In these forums, symbolic power fosters an environment where expertise is made relative and truth becomes flexible, relying on community endorsement rather than universal standards of evidence. This shift in authority exemplifies how digital spaces can reshape the landscape of knowledge, empowering individuals without formal expertise to question, reinterpret and even redefine what is accepted as legitimate knowledge. Rather than valuing traditional expertise, group members redefine expertise to align with their collective values and narratives, often elevating lay members who echo group beliefs over traditional authorities. Furthermore, members with the most group-aligned views gain status and influence, challenging the traditional hierarchy of knowledge.

The findings of this study align with Foucault's concept of "regimes of truth," illustrating how conspiracy theory communities actively construct counter-narratives that challenge institutional authority. The Flat Earth Society's Forum exemplifies how these groups reject dominant knowledge systems – such as those upheld by scientific institutions like NASA – by creating their own pseudo-scientific discourse and frameworks. This process redefines epistemic authority within the community, where truth becomes relative and is legitimized through collective agreement rather than empirical evidence or traditional expertise. By framing mainstream science as corrupt and deceitful, the forum operates as a site of epistemic resistance, enabling its members to position themselves as truth-seekers uncovering hidden knowledge. These dynamics underscore the interplay between power and knowledge, where digital platforms empower marginalized or oppositional groups to contest the hegemonic "truths" perpetuated by institutions, aligning with Foucault's argument that truth is not an objective reality but a product of power relations. This theoretical lens provides a deeper understanding of how online conspiracy communities disrupt established knowledge hierarchies and foster alternative regimes of truth.

The analysis also confirmed the presence of “motivated ignorance” in the Flat Earth Society’s Forum (Jones *et al.*, 2023), where members deliberately ignore scientific evidence that challenges their beliefs to protect their social identity. Forum participants frequently framed mainstream science as corrupt or deceptive, which strengthens their sense of in-group solidarity against perceived external threats. Social identity threat further drives this motivated ignorance, as members see institutions like NASA as hostile forces undermining their worldview. By questioning the legitimacy of these institutions, forum participants feel they are safeguarding their autonomy and protecting hidden truths.

Moreover, our findings are linked to the results of other studies about the relationship between conspiracy beliefs and the strength of political ideology (van Prooijen *et al.*, 2015). It is also aligned with the mechanisms existing in extremist political groups, such as using “crippled epistemology” (Hardin, 2002) based on political information provided by their in-group, or a psychological need for closure inducing the group-centrism (Kruglanski *et al.*, 2006). Conspiratorial groups provide simple solutions and answers to major social and political issues, filling the gap with uncertainty and fear in the modern world.

We have distinguished two main discursive patterns, which were in the majority intertwined: anti-institutional sentiment and sympathy toward Trump. Users who supported him frequently echo conspiracy themes, which were described in other studies, such as election fraud or COVID-19 misinformation, which overlap with their beliefs about a Flat Earth. This suggests that Trump functions not just as a political figure, but as a narrative symbol within the forum’s epistemology: a representative of “truth-telling” and “outsider resistance” against what users perceive as elite deception.

However, we must admit that, while the analysis of online forums provides valuable insights into the dynamics of conspiracy theories and fringe communities, it is not without its limitations. One notable limitation is the potential lack of generalizability. Forums such as the Flat Earth Society’s platform represent a specific subset of Internet users who are already inclined to participate in niche online communities. This self-selection bias means that the findings may not accurately reflect broader conspiracy theory communities or public sentiment beyond the forum. Furthermore, the anonymity afforded to users on such platforms may encourage extreme opinions or fabricated posts, complicating the interpretation of authenticity and representativeness in the dataset.

Moreover, the platform-specific nature of the study introduces a limitation in terms of bias. The Flat Earth Society’s Forum operates under a unique set of cultural norms, moderation policies and user behaviors that may not be reflective of other online communities or conspiracy theory ecosystems. For example, the tone of discourse, frequency of posting and dominant narratives might be influenced by platform-specific dynamics rather than broader conspiratorial or anti-institutional trends. This limitation highlights the need for comparative studies across multiple platforms to validate findings and reduce the risk of overgeneralization.

Given the strong links between forum discussions and political events, further studies could adopt a longitudinal perspective to analyze how major political occurrences, such as elections or pandemics, influence the frequency and nature of conspiracy discussions. For example, examining the evolution of discussions during Trump’s presidency compared to subsequent administrations could shed light on the role of political leadership in legitimizing or challenging conspiracy narratives.

Future work could also investigate how different moderation policies influence the discourse and growth of conspiracy forums. Comparing platforms with strict moderation against those with minimal oversight could highlight the effectiveness of various content control strategies in mitigating the spread of misinformation and fostering healthier discussions. This research could offer policy recommendations for platform designers and regulators.

Finally, the politicization of conspiracy theories is evidenced in the Flat Earth Society’s Forum’s discourse on Donald Trump, mirroring a broader trend of conspiracy theories becoming intertwined with political ideology and identity. Butter (2022) observes that modern

populism increasingly incorporates conspiracy narratives to unite followers, maintain group coherence and vilify opposition, creating an environment where political loyalty overrides factual accuracy. This politicization normalizes fringe beliefs and serves as a recruitment mechanism, drawing individuals into conspiracy communities by framing political figures as protectors against institutional corruption and deception (van Prooijen, 2024). In this way, conspiracy theory forums not only propagate anti-institutional views but also play a pivotal role in fostering ideological echo chambers where misinformation thrives and reinforces group identity.

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Further reading

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