Opinion: Conspiracy theorists create distrust

By Jennifer Mercieca

“Nothing is more surprising,” wrote David Hume in his 1758 “First Principles of Government,” than “the easiness with which the many are governed by the few.”

What explains this surprising easiness? Trust is at the heart of the answer. Hume believed that since the people always outnumber their leaders (and thus retain the power of “force”), the legitimacy of all government rests merely “on opinion.” Governments exist solely because “the many” trust the government to serve their needs. Once government loses the trust of “the many,” then they will refuse to be governed by the few.

From my perspective as an American scholar of communication and rhetoric, Hume frames many questions, including: What tools of rhetoric and communication inspire the trust needed to support legitimate governments? And, in eras such as ours when trust in government declines, what rhetorical appeals must government leaders make to keep power? And conversely, as trust in government declines in the U.S., what role does rhetoric play in diminishing that trust?

Americans today still trust the government to do a lot of things—even if we don’t always value and recognize its role in our lives. According to a 2015 Pew Research Center survey, 94 percent of Americans think it’s the government’s job to keep “the country safe from terror”; 88 percent think it’s the government’s job to respond “to natural disasters”; 87 percent think it’s the government’s job to ensure “safe food and medicine”; 76 percent think it’s the government’s job to maintain “infrastructure”; and 70 percent think it’s the

government's job to ensure "access to high quality education."

We trust, when we buy food or drinks from a grocery store or a restaurant, that the government has checked to make sure we won't be poisoned. We trust that the government has made sure that the water we drink and the air we breathe won't give us diseases. We trust that if we get sick, the government has credible research about how to cure us and has credentialed enough people as doctors and nurses to treat us. We trust that the government-provided roads we drive on won't destroy our cars and will take us in the direction that we want to go. We trust that the government-printed money we earn will be deposited into government-guaranteed checking accounts and available for us when we want to buy things. We trust that the government will make sure that the lights, heat, and water will go on, and if there is a natural disaster that all of these services will be restored as quickly as possible.

But such trust and legitimacy, as Jürgen Habermas reminds us, is fragile. And so political communities can be destroyed when the "system does not succeed in maintaining the requisite level of mass loyalty." What is the requisite level of "mass loyalty" and have we crossed over into a dangerous decay in trust in our government?

According to a 2015 Pew Research Poll, "Only 19 percent of Americans today say they can trust the government in Washington to do what is right," which is consistent with trends since 2007. Pew reports that this widespread distrust represents "the longest period of low trust in government in more than 50 years." A 2016 Gallup poll found that we also have historically low trust for all sorts of authority figures, including clergy (44 percent of Americans have a very high or high opinion, down from well above 60 percent in the 1970s and 1980s), journalists (23 percent of Americans have a very high or high opinion), lawyers (18 percent of Americans have a very high or high opinion), and labor union leaders (18 percent of Americans have a very high or high opinion).

What explains our distrust in our government and our leaders? According to Harvard political scientist Robert Putnam, Americans have grown more distrustful of one another and our government because we have less “bridging social capital” and more “bonding social capital” than previous generations of Americans. That is, we spend more time with people like us and we spend less time interacting with others, including government organizations and schools—we are failing to join the PTA or the bowling league and instead are cocooned in our media bubbles. Our lack of participation negatively influences our trust in one another and in the decisions made by the government because, in this case, unfamiliarity breeds contempt.

Today, not only is our trust in government and established leadership waning, but lately it is under attack by a surprising figure: the president of the United States.

Donald Trump became a political aspirant on the strength of a conspiracy theory—the “birther” argument over President Barack Obama’s birth certificate. According to one count he subsequently advanced more than 50 conspiracies during his presidential campaign. Now, as president, Trump foments distrust by proclaiming corruption and conspiracy in many aspects of American life.

Trump has sought to undermine the trust that we have for judges by referring to them as “so-called” and implying that they are part of a plot against American safety. He has sought to undermine the trust that we have for the media, polls, and facts by claiming that journalists are an “opposition party” and by pre-emptively claiming that any negative polls are “fake news.” He has appointed cabinet members who actively purport to distrust established science such as inoculations and climate change.

What makes such conspiracy theories appealing—and what are the consequences of such appeals for government legitimacy? As

Richard Hofstadter famously noted, conspiracy rhetoric is premised on the "paranoid style." Conspiracy argument, he observed, is rife with "heated exaggeration, suspiciousness, and conspiratorial fantasy" that creates a coherent narrative of a dangerous plot. Conspiracy theories in American history often have been premised on the blurring of difference between appearance and reality: what is apparent is false and hides the actual plotting that is determined to and capable of destroying America.

Conspiracy rhetoric is also premised on a self-confirming or circular reasoning (Latin: *circulus in probando* or "circle in proving"). Once the narrative of conspiracy and corruption takes hold within a political community it is difficult to dispel because conspirators cannot be trusted to tell the truth about their plot. Conspiracy argument is "self-sealing" in that any holes in the story are quickly covered up by the logic of the conspiracy. For example: why didn't media reports show that there is a massive increase in crime, as Trump claimed? Not because crime didn't increase, but because the media are part of the plot to deny that crime has increased.

In this way, conspiracy rhetoric creates a perverse sort of legitimacy for the leader who uses it. And conditions are ripe for conspiracy rhetoric.

Communication scholar Jack Bratich explains via Michel Foucault, that conspiracy theories participate in any society's "regime of truth," or the politics surrounding the techniques and standards that a society uses to determine "true" from "false." Obviously, there is much power at stake in labeling one version of "truth" a "conspiracy" and another "fact."

It's easier for society to control what counts as "true" when there is a unified "truth" presented to the public via mass media. But the fracturing of media and the dominance of polarized news have created concurrent truth realities that

enable conspiracy theories to flourish.

Trump’s conspiracy arguments have exploited pre-existing distrust, frustration, and polarized versions of “truth.” What are the potential consequences? Conspiracy rhetoric is dangerous because it creates a cohesive reality for those who adhere to its narrative, and naturally lends itself to violence.

The Civil War, for example, can be seen as the culmination of two opposing conspiracy arguments. Abolitionists believed that there was a “slave power” conspiracy determined to deprive the North of political power. Slaveholders believed that Abraham Lincoln was part of a plot to abolish slavery, deprive them of their justly owned property, and destroy the South. Despite Lincoln’s assurances in his First Inaugural Address, Southerners had been convinced of the conspiracy of “miserable fanatics” against their rights and believed themselves justified in seceding from the Union.

Like the polarizing rhetoric leading up to the Civil War, Trump’s distrustful conspiracy rhetoric could potentially make the nation even more distrustful of the government and established leaders. In this way, Trump is at war with his government and himself. The conspiracy rhetoric he uses to legitimize himself as president threatens the fragile trust that legitimizes his government.

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