Why Native Title anthropologists should care about conspiracy theories

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I wrote in 2022 that Belief in Conspiracy Theories (BCT) increasingly disrupts the fieldwork, consultations, and claimant meetings we conduct in our Native Title practice[1]. The purpose of that reflection was to better inform our responses as practitioners when claimants bring conspiracist thinking to the native title process, by exploring the societal and cultural factors that might drive claimants to those beliefs. This brief piece is intended as a conversation starter, to consider what anthropologists, and particularly native title anthropologists, might bring to the wider discourse around BCT.

BCT is currently a topic of public interest, attracting much thoughtful scholarship[2]. Notwithstanding all this attention, the proportion of the population who believe in conspiracy theories does not appear to be growing[3], yet research suggests BCT is already far more common than one might think[4]. But in relation to some conspiracy theories *something* has changed, and impactful BCT concerns us in new ways – whether we read the news about the Feb 2022 Canberra Convoy[5], or hear from our cousin about mind-control technology hidden within COVID vaccines at an awkward family dinner[6], or find ourselves in a native title meeting confronted by an angry Sovereign Citizen or "SovCit"[7].

In a thoughtful podcast, scholars Sobo and Harambam (2022)[8] suggest that what has changed is that the nature and content of the conspiracy theories, which have become more extreme in content and prone to cause harm. Indeed it is suggested that conspiracy theories seeded or amplified by alt-right white supremist movements have made considerable inroads into communities (including in the far-left) not typically associated with extremist mindsets or behavior[9]. Antivaxxers and SovCits[10] spring to mind as examples we observe in our native title client base. Perhaps increasingly extreme informational content, alongside internet technologies which manifest and enable online communities living in informational echo chambers[11] have indeed created perfect conditions for the coming storm[12].

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[1] Taplin (2022 in press), I hope to shortly be able to upload a link to this publication.

[2] Douglas et al (2019) van Proojin et al 2018, Uscinski and Parent 2014 provide some good fodder

[3] At least it's demonstrably <u>not</u> growing in the US and Europe according to Uscinski et al 2022

[4] Uscinki et al (2022) (2014) provides definitional clarity, and discussion of the ubiquity of BCT.

[5] Roose, (2022)

[6] For a good read about "the rise of vaccine outrage", have a look at Lewis (2022)

[7] SovCits thinking originated in the US, and many SovCIts believe that governments have been usurped by secret corporation which con 'citizens' for profit.

[8] Culture and inequality podcast https://soundcloud.com/culture-inequality/conspiracy-theories-social-justice-inequality?utm_source=clipboard&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=social_sharing

[9] for a good discussion clarifying what extremists' mindsets and behaviours are, have a look at Cassam (2022). Saphore (2021) and Hassam (2022) investigate the relationship between alt-right extremists and anti-vaxx / sovcit communities respectively

[10] See Taplin (2022), Hassam (2022), or the Anti Defamation League for insights into "SovCits" thinking

[11] Thi Nguyen (2020) says some online communities exclude sources of information that don't reenforce their views, thus becoming 'echo chambers'.

[12] Check out The Coming Storm podcast https://podcasts.apple.com/gb/podcast/the-coming-storm/id1601195264

But what's any of this got to do with native title anthropologists? Isn't it best to focus on our job description? I will argue that has plenty to do with us, and that we are compelled to engage on multiple grounds.

The first reason we are compelled to engage is that it is an important issue, and anthropologists are particularly well positioned to engage in a useful way. We are trained to develop understandings of unfamiliar social and cultural phenomena while turning our analytical lens inward. Open acknowledgement of the contradictions of our societal systems, our own prejudices and confirmation bias is a great starting point for conversations with believers in conspiracy theories, or "truth seekers"[13] who (like anthropologists) tend to question everything; even the truths many take for granted. Anthropology is a profession that develops our comfortability in talking to people with world-views that challenge our own, while maintaining our search for the meanings people attach to symbols, behavior, and language. Toseland (2019) describes of ethnographic fieldwork and analysis;

> "'Emic' descriptions are horizontal in that they understand a given system in its own terms. … The researcher must cross the bridge back to the etic perspective – which, of course, is emic unto the academic system – to offer meaningful analyses to his [SIC] readership."[14]

If you keep up with the news about disinformation, you'd be forgiven for thinking that we are already embroiled in a third world war[15]. By all accounts, all parties – from governments to epistemic institutions to online conspiracist communities – are fighting disinformation wars in which conspiracy theories can be weaponised on multiple fronts. Liberal democratic states are under siege both from malevolent State actors launching bots and troll farms in undeclared cyberwars[16], and from weird home-grown ultra-nationalist "swarms" triggered to leave their online hives and wreak havoc in the real world by anyone from talk-show hosts to the President of the United States himself[17]. Despite a concerted effort to find certainty in the sensible centre nobody can find the centre anymore because at the ends of the spectrum the alt-right and alt-left have come full circle, made an alliance and now speak the same language of conspiracist anti-vax well-being extremism[18]. They have forged a new high ground where fear is the defensive weapon of choice, and 'the State' is the enemy.

It is imagined in these "information wars" whomsoever wins the fight for control of the narrative will define Truth; some fear that the world is doomed to spiral into "post-truth" madness. But anthropologists always knew that truth is defined by narratives and that the narratives most popularly perpetuated don't define everybody's truth. We can be sure-footed upon methodological steady ground in a "post-truth" era. Rather than a frenetic oppositional response, anthropologists are well-positioned and well-trained to deliver meaningful analysis informed both by an understanding of the emic perspective of those who amplify disinformation, and by inward reflection on how the social institutions we hold dear in liberal democracies may have (perhaps unwittingly?) contributed to the problem.

The second and most obvious reason we are compelled to engage is that we will be forced to engage by claimants who bring conspiracist worldviews into their experience of native title. I have undertaken

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[13] Toseland (2019)

[14] P.28

[15] If you're not already terrified check out the Disinformation Wars podcast; https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/disinformation-wars/id1576442620, or The Coming Storm https://podcasts.apple.com/gb/podcast/the-coming-storm/id1601195264

[16] The Disinformation wars podcast above goes to this, also see Jones (2022)

[17] Van Badham (2021) is a good read and provides insights into how these 'swarms' might work

[18] Simmons et al (2021), Lewis (2022)

fieldwork research and attended meetings in relation to four different native title claims over the past six months and through the course of each one, clients have challenged native title processes using known conspiracist language and tropes. At one meeting I attended, an influential claimant encouraged attendees to boycott the authorisation of a claim because (it was said) as Sovereign citizens everyone in the room already holds rights to their traditional country that are "far more powerful" than any rights native title might confer, and native title is a hoax. The person aggressively hijacked the discussion for hours despite the personal investment several members of the group had made into the claim; some really wanted this claim authorised. I was put on the spot when I asked one old lady how she was going amidst all the aggression and she said, "Well I don't know it's so confusing. My nephew said native title is bullying and tricking us, we should go sovereign now". I can see why this might present an attractive option for some disillusioned claimants, but how to explain that so called "sovereign rights" attract no procedural rights in the case that a mine or tourist resort is proposed on country at some point in the future?

It is important we are challenged, and when we are challenged on cogent grounds it improves our practice. But BCT has the potential to do harm when it triggers nonsense challenges based on disinformation that could result in a detrimental outcome for a claim group. It is our job to counter disinformation which has the potential to compromise the best interests of our clients.

The machinations of global disinformation wars might seem worlds away from our native title practice, but in my experience fragments of fallout could already be at our doorstep. Native title anthropology is already a field in which our relationships with claimants, who are also the subjects of our research, are complexified by the history of colonial invasion and legal hegemony which underscore the Act. The future challenges Native Title practitioners may face in a context where disinformation is increasingly accessible to and amplified by claimants will go beyond the academic. These new challenges will go to the way claimants, and practitioners, think and talk about native title practice and outcomes. Harambam (2014) writes of the boundaries created when social scientists dismiss conspiracy theories, which he says arise in context of *"battles for epistemic authority"*. Such boundaries limit our capacity to gain insight into emic perspectives, and to create meaningful and productive dialogue, which is our job as native title anthropologists. This in mind, the final reason I will posit for caring about conspiracy theories is that understanding them will equip us to do a better job.

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