

The Virus Gone Viral: The October 4th Conspiracy, "X", and Post-Truth

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ABSTRACT: On October 4th, 2023, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and Federal Communications Commission (FCC) conducted a nationwide test of the Emergency Alert System and Wireless Emergency Alerts, broadcasting a message to all consumer cell phones in the United States; This routine test became the catalyst for a baseless conspiracy theory involving 5G, wave frequencies, and zombies within the anti-vaccine community and gained significant traction online.

In the context of a post-truth world, the proliferation of such dangerous misinformation warrants an examination of the role played by social media platforms, particularly "X", in disseminating the October 4th Zombie conspiracy theory. This study explores how social media facilitates the dissemination and perpetuation of groundless theories devoid of objective truth within like-minded communities, and utilizes content analysis, discourse analysis, and an examination of user engagement with October 4th-related content on "X". What is found is that the rise of this conspiracy theory is largely attributed to the nature of the "X" algorithm: whether engaged with positively or negatively, engagement pushes content regardless of the nature of the post and therefore enables the widespread of the conspiracy theory across the platform to be viewed by millions. Thus, these findings bring forth the question of who is responsible for regulating informational versus misinformational discourse if we live in a post-truth era.

KEYWORDS: Twitter, Conspiracy Theories, Post-truth, Misinformation, Algorithms, Media Studies

Research Question and Background

Do you think you would survive a zombie apocalypse? Apparently, it is coming sooner than we might have been expecting.

On October 4th, 2023, the Federal Emergency Management Agency and Federal Communications Commission conducted a test of the Emergency Alert System and Wireless Emergency Alerts by sending a national alert to all consumer cell phones in the United States. This simple test was taken up by those in the anti-vaccination community, and twisted into a wild conspiracy theory that quickly spread amongst their community - that the use of 5G / a new wave frequency in the Emergency Alert System would turn vaccinated citizens into zombies. This theory was taken up by the same community that stormed the Capitol, the same community that swears JFK Jr. is alive, the same community that believes the vaccines will initiate "The Great Replacement". The number of aforementioned conspiracy theories demonstrates that in a post-truth world, it is important to understand how dangerous misinformation is taken up and spread. What role did social media, specifically "X" (formerly "Twitter") play in the spread of the new October 4th Zombie conspiracy theory? How does social media allow these expanding and ongoing theories based on no objective truth to be shared amongst like-minded individuals? Through content analysis, discourse analysis, and the analysis of user engagement with October 4th related content on "X", how can we apply the idea of subjective truth and Post-Truth Politics in understanding the viral nature of the October 4th conspiracy theory online?

Literature Review

Because of how I have based my research around the spread of not only the October 4th conspiracy theory, but other objectively false narratives, it is particularly useful to look into the literature surrounding the presence of other conspiracy theories on "X" and the analyses done in regards to their growth online. It will also prove useful to look into how exactly the "X" algorithm distributes content to users, as well as how the platform claims to regulate misinformation.

Several voices contribute to the idea of 'echo chambers' being of significance to the spread of their respective conspiracy theories on Twitter. Because of the nature of social media itself, including "X", the ability to "follow" or "like" the content and postings of certain

users/groups, and reject the content and postings of others, allows each user to aggregate and cluster within "ideologically distinct sub-communities" (Puri et al., 2587). In regards to subjectively developed conspiracy theories, digital media therefore grants likeminded actors of these theories a space wherein they can connect and support each other and their mantras, and intake solely homogenous information and ideas that fulfill their own beliefs (Farokhi). Members of these homogenous groups may have a hard time identifying falsehoods and trickery because the make-believe information is presented in a way that mirrors their beliefs and conforms to their common biases. Therefore, the essence of the 'echo chamber', and its isolating, self-affirming nature, makes it easier to fall for lies - and even when presented with evidence that disproves our own beliefs, we tend to avoid challenging our own beliefs (Metaxas and Finn). Therefore, "this is when we are most susceptible to lies; when they are presented in a way that confirms our own prior beliefs" (Metaxas and Finn, 2). This is all to say that, in regards to the spread of conspiracy via "X", the echoing of falsehood in 'echo chambers' plays a role. It will be interesting to identify the significance of 'echo chambers' in regards to the virality of the new October 4th conspiracy theory.

The emotional appeals of conspiratory narratives were also identified to be a key element in the development and promotion of conspiracy theories online. The highly emotionally charged circumstances of a number of the theories discussed in the literature, including Covid-19 (Puri et al; Gruzd and Mai; Ahmed et al.), Pizzagate (Metaxas and Finn), and the Trucker Convoy (Farokhi), all allow for the deployment of emotionally appealing content. Narratives that make use of emotional appeals tend to be taken up more easily since they prey on vulnerability (Puri et al.), and ultimately, Twitter acts as an ideal venue wherein emotional narratives can be produced and consumed (Farokhi). Additionally, when a community is emotionally charged on an issue, conspiracy is then more likely to be taken up and promoted without skepticism (Metaxas and Finn). I will work to prove in my own research that emotions were certainly key players in the spread of the October 4th zombie conspiracy theory.

Also mentioned across a range of the literature was the leveraging capabilities of celebrities and/or larger accounts, and their potential for both the spread

as well as the debunking of conspiratory content. Popular celebrities and politicians can be instrumental in the widespread dissemination of information, both for or against conspiracy (Puri et al.). While the assistance of influential public authorities and bodies can be the key to the counter action of misinformation (Ahmed et al.), these figures can also act as the oxygen that fuels and expands a conspiracy; the growth granted by users with large reaching potential, like the aforementioned celebrities and politicians, have the ability to build awareness about their respective conspiracy theory, and after the initial boosts from these prominent accounts, the campaigns can be mostly sustained by its less prominent supporters (Gruzd and Mai). Therefore, in my own research, it will be significant to find more popular figureheads of the movement, and identify their role in making the October 4th conspiracy theory of wider significance.

The “X” algorithm is what controls what we see and how we see it, and is based on a variety of components including “location, personal interests, recency, and whether or not the post contains media” (“X-Twitter Algorithm 2023: Explained.”). The application uses a core set of features that collects information from posts and user history to create personalized user feeds, and breaks down this process into three steps: Candidate Sourcing, Ranking, and Heuristics, Filters, and Product Features. In the Candidate Sourcing step, the algorithm works to display a mix of content from both In-Network (accounts you follow) and Out-of-Network sources (accounts you don’t follow). The second process, Ranking, ranks each post using a machine-learning model that awards each tweet a score with a probability of engagement. The Heuristics, Filters, and Product Features step is used to enable diverse content, and also filters out posts from blocked users, not safe for work content, and posts you have seen already. The new 2023 algorithm emphasizes certain types of content, taking into special account “relevance, recency, variety, and multi-media” (“X-Twitter Algorithm 2023: Explained.”) - the metrics that are prioritized push tweets with high numbers of shares, retweets, likes, and replies, contain media, have a CTA to follow the author, is not reported as spam, have one relevant hashtag, doesn’t have an external link, and are from a reputable account (“X-Twitter Algorithm 2023: Explained.”). Understanding the “X” algorithm will be helpful in understanding how posts regarding the October 4th conspiracy theory gained traction on the platform based on the working of the application itself.

Available on the “X” Help Center, the application’s goal is stated as wanting “to help enable free expression and conversations, [and] only intervene if content breaks [their] rules ... otherwise, [they] lean on providing [the user] with additional context” (“How We Address Misinformation on X.”). Based on their policies, intervention takes place when misleading information has the potential to “shape crisis dynamics and put vulnerable people in harm’s way”, if content is “significantly and deceptively altered, manipulated, or fabricated”, or if the post “undermines the integrity of civic participation” (“How We Address Misinformation on X.”). Taking action involves limiting amplification or removing misleading content, as well as working to inform and contextualize “by sharing timely information or credible content from third-party sources” (“How We Address Misinformation on X.”). The app is also testing different opportunities to share feedback, like with misleading info reporting flow and community notes. Knowing what the app has in place for supposedly addressing misinformation on “X” will prove interesting as we delve into the massive spread of misinformation and conspiracy that took place on the app regardless.

Because of the ongoing, expansive, and collaborative nature of a myriad of conspiracy theories that have developed over previous years, it is important for the ongoing study of how such conspiracy theories gain and maintain prevalence in internet spaces. My own research will contribute to the literature as the latest installment of “X” conspiratory research, making use of but also elaborating on previous works and studies and identifying prior as well as perhaps new methods used to promote October 4th propaganda and the zombie conspiracy theory.

Methodology and Ethics

To conduct this research, I used a mixed method approach including content analysis - quantitatively categorizing the content in posts - and discourse analysis - qualitatively examining the language and what it entails. Data collected for this research came from Twitter/“X”, and I identified keywords that were frequently employed in October 4th tweets to collect posts to analyze. I used the phrases “October 4th Emergency Alert” and “Emergency Alert Zombies” in the search bar, and manually searched for content relevant to this study. I then used content analysis to categorize the themes of the messages included and

to evaluate how these posts are suited to appease the “X” algorithm, and thus to determine how the virality of certain posts came to be. I then used discourse analysis to evaluate the discursive rhetoric of tweets and how they invoke certain emotions targeted to intended audiences and what this means in the spread of the conspiracy.

Preliminary Findings

We can begin by taking a look at Spinachbrah’s (@basedspinach) post from October 3rd, 2023. Their tweet reads:

“Turn off your smart phones on October 4th. The Emergency Broadcast System is going to “test” the system using 5G radiation waves. This will activate the mRNA in people who have been vaccinated. And sadly turn some of them into zombies. No tweet’s tomorrow, going to call in sick and play Minecraft as the world burns down”

The post garnered a total of 297K views, 150 reposts, 97 quotes, 1.5K likes, and 157 bookmarks. The post clearly lays out what the implications of the conspiracy theory are (5G radiation waves activating mRNA in the vaccine to result in zombies), as well as Spinachbrah’s stance on the matter (they will be staying away from their 5G device and therefore Twitter, and will be one of the few that survives while “the world burns down”). Comments beneath the post were supportive (68 supportive out of 113 total), with some users providing further advice - “Turn off[f] your microwave and put your phone inside it if you don’t Have a faraday cage.” (@praisethechrist)- and others thanking Spinachbrah for the post - “Man I appreciate the heads up you are a real one” (Williamson).

This same mantra seemed to have been taken up by the community who stood behind the conspiracy theory: User Abraxsys (@Abraxsys) posted a screenshot of the same text available in Spinachbrah’s post appearing in a number of tweets:

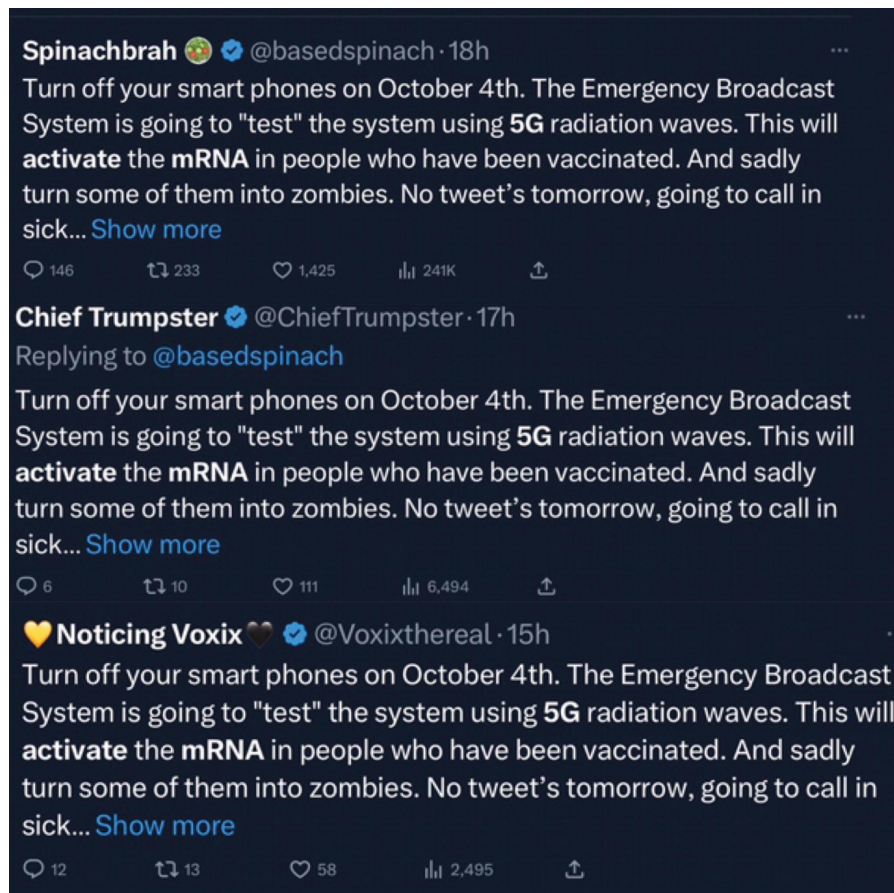


Fig. 1. Screenshot from @Abraxsys’ X post

Based on what we know about X's current algorithm, what seemingly took place is that the algorithm took Spinachbrah's highly reacted to post, relevant to the happenings of the day, and recently posted within 24 hours, and pushed this content to like-minded individuals who were probably going to engage with the post. Users not only engaged with the post via reposts, quotes, like, and bookmarks, but rather copied the message and posted it onto their own feeds for their own followers to see - Chief Trumpster posted their tweet to their followers an hour after Spinachbrah, and Noticing Voxix posted their tweet to their audience two hours after Chief Trumpster. This allowed the conspiracy theory to be spread to a wider audience, and as it was copied by more people, to even wider audiences. While Spinachbrah may not have been the one to come up with October 4th conspiracy theory themselves, we can see by the amount of engagement with the three posts depicted above that their post (about 234,500 views ahead of the next most viewed post) acted as a figurehead in the movement to copy and paste this specific message. This allowed the message to be echoed again and again, finding more and more skeptics to continue to echo the message over and over and louder and louder as the algorithm would continue to push content conspiracy theorists wanted to see to their page. None of these posts come with any form of community note, since from what we can infer from the engagement with Spinachbrah's post, it was likely being viewed by users who believed this was the truth. This demonstrates a flaw in the misinformation system of users providing feedback set by X - if the users the content caters to find nothing wrong with the information provided, they are not likely to report it.

Let us also take a look at what ended up being the most popular "X" post amongst the October 4th Conspiracy posts. The tweet belongs to user Gina Shirah (@GinaShirah81815), where she states:

"Turn off your cell phones on October 4th. The EBS is going to "test" the system using 5G. This will activate the Marburg virus in people who have been vaccinated. And sadly turn some of them into zombies."

The post contains no hashtags, no external links, and no attached media - the post is solely text, but is accompanied by two community notes that state:

"The EBS does not currently exist; it has been

replaced by the Emergency Alert System (EAS)"
And,

"While it is true that wireless alerts transmit over cellular networks, the claim that the test will transmit a virus or activate special code is false"

At the time of writing, the tweet has accumulated a whopping 11 million views, 1.2K reposts, 7.1K quotes, 4K likes, and 1.2K bookmarks. Immediately, these statistics entertain the "X" algorithm that prioritizes pushing tweets with large numbers of shares, retweets, likes, and replies. But seemingly, this post did not garner the attention that it did for being supported and believed: the analysis of a small sample size of 200 comments showed that 98% of the replies were denying or ridiculing what Shirah had to say. The replies to Shirah's post included a myriad of gifs, memes, and commentary denouncing the post and conspiracy, including statements such as:

"Community notes disagrees" (Braga)

"I respect your sadness threshold! Marburg — hemorrhagic fever that'll have you bleeding from all orifices and kill 25%-90% of the people it infects: not sad. Zombies: sad. Good calibration scale for the next time we get sick or injured: it could be zombies!" (Polaski)

"This is a joke Tweet, right?" (Smith)



Fig. 2. Screenshot of @GinaShirah81815's X post

While not viral due to support, the post ended up viral nonetheless. Because of the uproar from those against the conspiracy theory who found it humoring or irritating, the post managed to gain enough of the

right data for it to become viral. The overwhelming amount of comments from users dispelling the post allowed the overall visibility of the post to increase, as more and more engagement with the post (whether positive or negative) allowed the post to track well with the “X” algorithm. Here, we see how emotions were vital to the spread of this conspirator’s post. Through brief discourse analysis of the aforementioned tweets from commenters on Shirah’s post as well as other replies from the 98% of users against the theory, it is evident that the large majority of those engaging with Shirah’s post did so to express their frustrations with the conspiracy theory, or to poke fun and laugh at what the post had to say. Their desire to voice their emotions ultimately fed into the nature of the “X” algorithm, pushing Shirah’s post into the eyes of 11M viewers - and 11 million “X” users were fed misinformation. While evidently most refuted the misinformation, from our former example it is just as evident that this same misinformation was also taken up and believed, and was given the ability to become immensely widespread through the “X” algorithm. Despite the fact that this conspiracy theory could be categorized as content that is “significantly and deceptively altered, manipulated, or fabricated” (“How We Address Misinformation on X.”), all of the aforementioned posts are still up and viewable on the “X” platform.

Conclusion

Ultimately, this research brings forth the question of who is responsible for regulating informational versus misinformational discourse if we live in a post-truth era. This research makes it clear that truth is not taken into account in the virality and spread of narratives on the “X” platform. During a time in which “people can believe whatever they want to believe as long as they *feel* it is right” (Meckley), emotions and personal belief overwhelm the influence of facts and figures, and it is evidently reflected in what is spread through the “X” algorithm. If enough people can get on board with 5G COVID zombies, or even just discuss the theory for that matter, it has the ability to earn its place on the “X” platform. How are we supposed to trust anything we see online?

In this post-truth era filled with fake news and conspiracy, do we need to become our own “fact checkers”? Or, with our algorithms feeding into what *we* think, can we be trusted to be our own voices of reason? Evidently, Gina Shirah finds herself to be

correct in her own conspiracies, and if what she *feels* is supposedly right, can we all be certain that what *we* believe is in fact correct? Or do we all risk being in our own right forms of Gina Shirah in a world where “somehow having a wealth of information at our fingertips has made it more difficult to be ‘certain’ about anything” (Meckley)? We need to be able to separate feelings from fact.

But are we even able to separate emotions from informative discourse? Or did Aristotle curse us when defining the art of rhetoric all those years ago? The undeniable appeal of pathos, or emotions, seems to have found its way to the forefront of the rhetorical trifecta (Aristotle’s defined means of persuasion), seemingly outshining ethos and logos as the most appealing appeal in a post-truth society. Are we a more emotionally driven generation, evidenced by these obvious denials of logic from long-established institutions and systems in order to support more emotionally charged claims? How do we learn how to look past the persuasive nature of emotion when algorithms continually feed us with what it thinks is going to appease our emotions the most? Are we not to be persuaded to continually push the content that influences us to *feel* when emotions have been such a key component of persuasion for thousands of years? The post-truth era has capitalized on the art of rhetoric to push its emotionally driven agenda against objective truth, and evidenced in the rise of the October 4th conspiracy is the effects of this drive towards subjectivity through feelings by way of social media and algorithms. Ultimately, let this research be proof that more needs to be done in pursuit of the spread of real, objective truths via “X”.

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