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Alternative epistemology in far-right anti-publics: a qualitative study of Australian activists

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Alternative Epistemology in Far-Right Anti-Publics: A Qualitative Study of Australian Activists

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Abstract

Beliefs in hostile conspiracies against 'Western civilisation' or 'white people' play a key role in tying divergent far-right tropes together under an internally coherent meta-narrative. Claims of having discovered this conspiratorial truth offer personal pride, create a sense of righteousness and urgency to stand up against these alleged secretive, malevolent forces, and help build a parallel counter-hegemonic community with its own distinct epistemology. Using qualitative interviews and a focus group, this study examines how actors engaged in 'ordinary' dissent in Australia developed an antagonistic fringe belief system, and the extent to which this alternative epistemology constitutes a manifestation of 'anti-publics' (Davis, 2021). The study found how participants' ideological mindset has grown from rather benign manifestations of dissent into a hostile, counter-hegemonic, conspiratorial meta-narrative through processes of 'doing their own research', sharing their learnings with significant others, and incorporating each other's ideological convictions. Their ideological radicalisation was characterised by personal feelings of pride and epistemic superiority, which created a sense of meaning, urgency, and purpose, as well as social recognition within their group. These psychological and social processes drew them further into a far-right 'anti-public' milieu and away from democratic expressions of dissent. The findings shed new light on how the complex and mutually reinforcing interplay between ideological and socio-psychological factors cements an alternative, oppositional epistemology. The study offers close-up insights into what drives radicalisation processes, creating or reinforcing a parallel 'anti-public' in hostile opposition to democratic processes and norms.

Keywords Far right · Epistemology · Radicalisation · Anti-publics · Dissent

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Introduction

With the global re-emerging of far-right and right-wing populist movements, especially since the mid-2010s, policymakers and academics in many countries have paid unprecedented attention to new and evolving threats at the far-right fringes of the political spectrum. Most public, political and scholarly debates on right-wing populism and extremism have revolved around the ideological messaging of these movements, creating a wealth of empirical insights into the ideological-cognitive facets of different far-right milieus around the world (e.g. Miller-Idriss, 2020; Mudde, 2019). In recent years, driven by the rise of conspiratorial movements such as Pizzagate and QAnon or the white supremacy Great Replacement narratives (Amarasingam & Argentino, 2020; Cosentino, 2020; Davey & Ebner, 2019), these debates have increasingly acknowledged the centrality of conspiratorial narratives as a key characteristic of the far right.

This is by no means a new observation in the scholarship on the far right. Lipset (1955) identified anti-communist conspiracy theories as a unifying rationale of the far right already in the 1950s. While the research presented in this article was initially not focussed on conspiracy narratives but sought to inductively explore what may make individuals more susceptible to far-right mobilisation, we found that conspiratorial thinking played a key role in transforming 'ordinary' dissent and non-egalitarian views that are widespread in mainstream society into an ideologically rigid, comprehensive fringe belief system. Conspiracy theories sit at the core of this politicisation: They are not simply an element of far-right ideologies but are crucial in linking divergent far-right tropes into an internally coherent grand narrative and in rationalising and promoting far-right ideologies. Our analysis explores how social relationships and a personal desire for recognition, respect and control influence the adoption of increasingly radical, conspiratorial worldviews, which function as the glue of ideologically coherent and cohesive far-right communities.

This paper presents an original empirical micro-perspective on how these dynamics manifest in the lives of a small number of actors and how their 'ordinary' scepticism towards government and anti-Muslim sentiments evolved within a short period of time into rigid far-right ideological convictions and shifting collective (in-group) identities. We do so through addressing a twofold research question: how did these individuals' 'ordinary' dissent evolve into an antagonistic fringe belief system, and to what extent is this alternative belief system a manifestation of 'anti-publics' (Davis, 2019, 2021)? Our study offers what Blee (2007, 121) called a 'close-up or "internalist"' analysis of the ideological radicalisation within this group that drew 'ordinary' citizens into a far-right milieu, situated at an increasing distance from democratic expressions of dissent. It seeks to add to the emerging qualitative 'close-up' scholarship on the far right (e.g. Pilkington, 2017; Sibley, 2023; Simi & Futrell, 2009), that is needed—but largely absent in the Australian context—to gain a deeper understanding of the psychological, social and structural factors that may explain the ongoing appeal of far-right movements. Highlighting the mutually reinforcing interplay between ideological and socio-psychological factors in these radicalisation processes, our analysis demonstrates the counter-hegemonic community-building

effects of conspiratorial thinking and how these processes have become pivotal in politicising mainstream exclusivist attitudes and creating an alternative truth, or what Ylä-Anttila (2018) calls 'counterknowledge'—an epistemology within far-right movements that stand in distinct, antagonistic opposition to public discourse and democratic deliberation.

Focusing on social processes of conspiracy-driven truth-seeking within far-right milieus, this paper attempts to make both an empirical and conceptual contribution to the scholarship on the far right. It uses the theoretical concept of anti-publics (Davis, 2019, 2021) and seeks to refine this theoretical framework through an empirical micro-analysis of the epistemological modus operandi of far-right anti-public spheres. Drawing on qualitative research with far-right actors in Victoria, Australia, it examines how the participants' ideological mindset has evolved through 'doing their own research' and sharing within their small friendship group, highlighting the social and psychological facets of an emerging alternative epistemology. We argue that this conspiratorial knowledge system constitutes a central element of far-right anti-publics that not only fundamentally rejects the dominant political discourse but also abandons basic principles of political engagement with the political adversary in liberal democracy.

After briefly discussing conceptualisations of the far right and anti-publics as we apply them in this study, we outline the methodology that underpins this research. We then present our empirical findings on the emergence and functioning of an alternative epistemology amongst the study participants. In the final part of the paper, we bring together the main conclusions and explore their significance and limitations.

Conceptualising the Far Right

Although our research did not intend to examine the far right as such but rather the susceptibility to far-right ideologies amongst 'ordinary' citizens, we needed a working definition of what we mean by 'far right'. Conceptualisations of the far right or right-wing extremism vary, but we agree with Carter's (2018, 157) assessment that 'there is actually a high degree of consensus amongst the definitions put forward by different scholars.'

An analysis of 26 definitions in the 1990s led Mudde (2000, 11) to identify five common features of right-wing extremism: 'nationalism, racism, xenophobia, anti-democracy and the strong state'. Little seems to have changed since then in the way the far right has been described. When Carter (2018) systematically examined 15 particularly influential definitions, most of them put forward after Mudde's (2000) analysis, she concluded that the following six attributes were most common: 'strong state or authoritarianism, nationalism, racism, xenophobia, anti-democracy, and populism or anti-establishment rhetoric' (Carter, 2018, 168). Not all these attributes need to necessarily be present to apply the far-right label, but, as Perry and Scrivens (2016, 821) argue, 'valorizing of inequality and hierarchy' can be seen as a core marker.

Our understanding of the far right is informed by this conceptual work. In addition, we make a distinction between right-wing extremism and radicalism, using the term 'far-right' as an umbrella term to cover both. The difference lies in their respective stance on democracy. In line with the proposition of scholars such as Mudde (2019) and Minkenberg (2017), far-right extremism fundamentally rejects democracy as a form of government, opposing its central tenets such as popular sovereignty and majority rule (Mudde, 2019). In contrast, far-right radicalism 'does not include an *explicitly* anti-democratic agenda' (Minkenberg, 2017, 27, emphasis in original), although it rejects certain liberal democratic principles such as equality and freedom of religion (Pirro, 2022). This distinction between the extreme and radical far-right has also been adopted in the Australian context (Peucker et al., 2019) where our research is situated.

As the subject of our inquiry was the susceptibility to far-right mobilisation in general, we did not include an explicit anti-democratic position. Following Jamin (2013), we focus instead on two key ideological attributes: an exclusivist version of nationalism, often ethno-nationalism, or nativism (Kešić & Duyvendak, 2019); and the rejection of egalitarianism, which can manifest in various ways, including but not limited to racism, antisemitism, xenophobia or transphobia. In addition to these ideological markers, we include the behavioural element of, broadly defined, political activism or, as Jamin (2013, 46) describes it, 'a "total" way of acting to give shape to the nationalist project in support of the acknowledgement of inequality.'

Conceptual-Theoretical Framework: from Agonistic Pluralism to Anti-Publics

Many of the key facets of far-right ideologies, from racism to transphobia, negatively define an out-group in opposition to the in-group. 'Anti-ism unambiguously marks out the enemy [and] it reinforces the "us"', Jamin argues (2013, 47). This notion of a bifurcated, antagonistic us-and-them mindset features prominently in the pertinent scholarship as a marker of extremist ideologies (Grossman et al., 2016; Mirahmadi, 2016). The elaborations of radical democracy theorists such as Chantal Mouffe on the salience of conflict in socio-political contestation of divergent ideas and convictions, however, challenge such assumptions, arguing that antagonisms are normal elements of social relations in pluralist democracies.

Acknowledging the ubiquity of dissent and conflict in modern democratic societies, Mouffe (2000, 15) describes the 'overcoming of this us/them opposition [as] an impossibility'. She posits that, 'given the ineradicable pluralism of value, there is no rational resolution of the conflict, hence its antagonistic dimension'. However, such a conflict-oriented version of democratic politics and societies is also characterised by the aim to manage these inevitable conflicts. Mouffe (1999, 755) proposes that within what she coined 'agonistic pluralism', the other is not regarded as an 'enemy to be destroyed' but rather as an 'adversary, i.e. someone whose ideas we combat but whose right to defend those ideas we do not put into question'. While some, or many, conflicts and disagreements with one's adversaries cannot be resolved through rationality or by referencing a higher moral, they need to be situated in an arena of

the public sphere where everyone adhere to the 'ethico-political principles of liberal democracy: liberty and equality' (Mouffe, 2000, 15). The precise meaning of these principles in practice may be contested, but the struggle between adversaries needs to take place, as Mouffe (1995, 34) argues, within a 'political community whose rules we have to accept.'

This agonism between adversaries—as opposed to antagonism between enemies—is a fundamental feature of modern liberal democratic societies, which sets it apart from authoritarian politics that often seek to eliminate such conflicts. Mouffe (2000, 16–17) further posits that suppressing these conflicts can reinforce 'apathy and disaffection with political participation' or even lead to 'the crystallization of collective passion around issue, which cannot be managed by the democratic process and an explosion of antagonisms that can tear up the very basis of civility'. This resonates with Bartlett et al. (2010, 128) argument that:

> the best way to fight radical ideas [of extremism] is with a liberal attitude to dissent, radicalism and disagreement. Silencing radical views is not only wrong as a matter of principle, but it can also create a taboo effect that inadvertently makes such ideas more appealing.

This risk of an unmanageable escalation of antagonism, where individuals feel no longer bound by the basic rules and ethical principle of a liberal democratic community, is directly linked with the concept of anti-publics, which we use as the theoretical framework for our analysis. Anti-publics are defined as a space 'where extremist groups position themselves in counter-hegemonic opposition to democratic conventions and processes' (Davis, 2019, 129) Davis (2021) draws on previous work on anti-publics (e.g. Cammaert, 2007), to develop the concept further based on an analysis of online anti-(climate) science discourses and far-right anti-emancipatory movements. He defines the anti-public sphere as the 'space of … socio-political interaction where discourse routinely and radically flouts the ethical and rational norms of democratic discourse' (Davis, 2021, 143). Davis's conceptualisation of anti-publics appears more tuned towards a normative model of Habermasean rationality and democratic deliberation and in this sense differs from Mouffe's agonistic plurality model. However, there are strong overlaps between both concepts. Resonating with Mouffe's notion of agonistic democracies, Davis (2021, 144) highlights that anti-publics are typically characterised by 'a level of hostility to democratic conventions and institutions that in general exceeds … even the most permissive notion of an "agonistic" public sphere.'

At the core of Davis's (2021, 145) conceptualisation, anti-publics are in 'counter-hegemonic opposition to democratic processes and institutions such as the state, the media and the academy, and their "managerial" elites.' This opposition is expressed in a way that shows 'little interest in adherence to principles of argumentation, evidence, truthfulness, mutuality, reciprocity, good faith and inclusiveness.' To bring out the specific contours of anti-publics, it is worth contrasting this concept with Fraser's (1990, 67) 'subaltern counterpublics', defined as 'parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter-discourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs'. Like anti-publics, Fraser's counter-publics are

also counter-hegemonic spaces challenging existing power structures, but they differ from the former in that they are not defined by their opposition to the 'ethico-political principles of liberal democracy' (Mouffe, 2000, 15). Anti-publics are not merely counter-hegemonic spaces of 'agonistic pluralism' (Mouffe, 2000), where adversaries combat each other's visions of the world, but rather an arena where a battle against a perceived hegemonic enemy takes place, a battle that is not situated within 'the grammar of democratic life' (Tambakaki, 2014, 3).

Seeking to contribute to the theorisation of the concept of anti-publics, Davis (2021, 150) proposes six thematic markers of anti-publics. First, they 'selectively lack rationality or recourse to evidence', where it suits the specific ideological agenda of the respective anti-public space. Second, they are 'antagonistic and divisive', more determined to create outrage and foster hatred towards a perceived enemy than to seek 'constructive agonism' (Davis, 2019, 132) or common ground with an adversary (Mouffe, 1999, 2000). Third, Davis (2021, 150–151) argues anti-publics generally target an alleged national or global 'elite', from government and academic to the mainstream media. Fourth, anti-publics are usually opposed to an interventionist state and its alleged attempt to impose regulations on people's everyday lives ('anti-statist'). Fifth, anti-publics are 'in general anti-cosmopolitan', rejecting what is perceived as 'technocratic transnational processes' such human rights, immigration, UN treaties or other global progressive movements (ibid). Finally, Davis (2021, 152) argues that anti-public spaces typically draw on 'the explanatory power of conspiracy theories' instead of basing their arguments on 'rationality, expertise and recognised facts'.

The belief in conspiracy theories forms a pivotal element of anti-publics, and conspiracy theories also feature centrally in the fieldwork data analysed in this paper, exploring the interplay between ideological convictions and conspiratorial thinking in what may qualify as anti-public spaces. Following Karen Douglas and colleagues (2019, 4), we define conspiracy theories as 'attempts to explain the ultimate causes of significant social and political events and circumstances with claims of secret plots by two or more powerful actors'.

The scholarship on conspiracy theories has grown significantly in recent years across disciplines and fields of study, from psychology, sociology and political science to terrorism studies. While in the past conspiratorial thinking was often pathologised as a societal fringe phenomenon, the academic literature has moved towards more nuanced perspectives on conspiracy theories, acknowledging their spread across significant segments of society (van Prooijen & Douglas, 2018) and distinguishing between 'actual conspiratorial politics and "conspiracy theories" in the pejorative sense of that term' (Bale, 2007, 897). Notwithstanding the 'ordinariness' of conspiratorial thinking, research has also shown that conspiratorial thinking is more common at the radical political fringes, in particular within the far right (van Prooijen et al., 2015). However, as Douglas et al. (2019, 11) argue in their literature review, it remains 'unknown whether conspiracy theorizing may be a result of political ideology, or vice versa, or both', with some studies suggesting 'that extremist attitudes may be a consequence of conspiracy belief'. Here, our study seeks to make an explorative contribution that resonates with what Harambam and Aupers (2021, 991) describe as an increasing tendency towards

tying several singular conspiracy theories together into larger meta-narratives, or 'all-encompassing super conspiracy theories'.

From a social psychological perspective, conspiracy theories are more than a way to perceive—and reduce—the complexities of an interconnected world or a tool for political messaging. They often have socio-psychological functions related to basic human needs. Douglas et al. (2017, 538) differentiate between three interconnected types of needs that conspiracy beliefs may meet: epistemic, existential, and social. First, epistemically, conspiracy theories can help individuals protect certain convictions against 'disconfirmation' and offer certainty by embedding them in a larger and internally consistent explanatory framework (ibid., 539). Second, and related to this, conspiracy beliefs are seen as being able to satisfy people's existential needs of feeling 'safe and secure in their environment and to exert control over the environment as autonomous individuals and as members of collectives'. Third, conspiracy beliefs may serve a social purpose as they offer an opportunity to strengthen identification with an in-group and uphold a positive (individual and collective) self-image 'as competent and moral', in particular when individuals feel marginalised and on the 'losing … side of the political process' (ibid., 540).

Acknowledging the social-psychological functionality of conspiratorial thinking, this paper applies the notion of anti-publics to explore how individuals have developed, deepened, and shared their ideological views over time, and how social and psychological processes have shaped the evolution of an all-encompassing super conspiracy theory of the kind that Harambam and Aupers (2021) refer to. While Davis (2021) hints at some epistemological components of anti-public spaces, our empirical analysis seeks to advance this theoretical contribution to the concept of anti-publics by linking it to the scholarship on conspiracy theories.

Methodology[1]

The study reported in this paper forms part of a larger, 18-month research project (2019–2020) that examined far-right dynamics in the state of Victoria, Australia. At the centre of this project were questions of how local far-right events resonate within the local community; how political and civil society stakeholder respond to these events; and what locally specific factors make people within a local community more or less susceptible to far-right mobilisation. As part of the empirical fieldwork, we conducted interviews and a focus group (Kitzinger, 2005) with altogether nine individuals, selected on the basis of their critical views on current debates around, amongst others, Islam, diversity or immigration and 'what it means to be Australian today'. Such critical views resonate with certain far-right ideological markers, as outlined above, but they are also relatively widespread in mainstream society. As such the presence of such dissenting views does not necessarily imply a person should be regarded as 'far-right'. We did not apply the label 'far right', neither implicitly nor explicitly, to the participants during the recruitment process. The

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[1] The project received approval from the Human Research Ethics Committee at XXX (HRE19-095).

rationale for this approach was based on the assumption that these individuals may be more susceptible to far-right mobilisation—yet, they were not selected because we considered them far-right activists.

The interviews and focus group form the empirical basis for the qualitative analysis in this paper. The interview participants were recruited through a call for participation on Facebook, inviting people to anonymously share their views on 'issues that some people may find sensitive or controversial, such as patriotism, multiculturalism or even gender identities and climate change.' The focus group participants were identified based on their involvement in local anti-Muslim political activism, which brought them in contact with other far-right figures but would in itself not justify labelling them or their actions as 'far-right'. Similar to the interviews, the focus group was selected as an appropriate method to elicit the perspectives and experiences of the research participants, but it complemented the interviews by drawing out the range of views and perspectives more fully. A key feature of the focus group were the social dynamics and the attitudinal homogeneity within the group. Having common experiences helped to promote active conversations amongst participants who interactively shaped the discussion towards issues they considered important (Kitzinger, 2005).

The recruitment of the focus group participants was a challenging process. Initial contact was established in person by the first author, introducing himself and communicating to the group that he would like to learn more about their political activities and views. After initial scepticism, the researcher met with the group several times over a period of 3 months in the second half of 2019. Although nervous at first, the researcher did not feel unsafe at any point. Field notes were taken after each encounter and included in the analysis. These informal meetings were crucial to build positive rapport, which also required a high level of transparency by the researcher, who sought to practice 'moral non-judgement' (Ryen, 2008, 95) in all the matters discussed. These meetings and conversations ultimately led to an in-depth focus group with six people in late 2019. Prior to the focus group (and the same applied to the individual interviews), the researcher emphasised that he has his personal views on the issues discussed but that he would not share them; rather, this was an opportunity for participants to speak freely. After the end of the project, one of the participants requested a copy of the project report with the findings of the fieldwork analysis, which we provided. The person did not indicate they felt misrepresented, although they expressed personal disagreement with some (not further specified) parts of the project report.

We are limited in how much information we can share about the participants, firstly because we want to ensure their anonymity and secondly, because further personal information, for example about their educational or employment background, was not shared during the fieldwork. As Table 1 outlines, the sample included both men and women aged between around 18 and 65. We deduct from the conversations that most of them seem to have been of working-class background, and one of them mentioned she received welfare benefits.

The individual interviews were conducted via telephone in early 2020 (in-person meetings were not possible due to COVID-19 restrictions) and lasted up to around 1.5 h. The focus group took place in an informal outdoor setting (prior to COVID

Table 1 Participants with pseudonyms: gender and age

Interviews	
Mike	Man, 18–20
Anne	Woman, 45–55
Toby	Man, 20–25
Focus group	
Jason	Man, 60–65
Susan	Woman, 50–55
Mel	Woman, 35–45
Jenny	Woman, 35–45
Tom	Man, 40–50
Marie	Woman, 35–45

lockdowns); it went for just over 2 h. The interviews and the focus group covered four key themes:

- Participants' views or concerns around the current situation in their hometown and Australia, specifically related to issues such as Islam, immigration, multiculturalism, government, and gender diversity
- Origin and rationales of these views and their shifts over time
- Ways in which they have expressed these views
- Actions taken to work towards change

The interviews and focus group were audio-recorded, transcribed, and analysed in an inductive process of open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The open coding process was supported by visual mind mapping techniques, which proved effective in exploring the complex interplay between ideological, psychological and social factors of the participants' worldviews and their ways of creating an internally coherent in-group specific conspiratorial 'truth' system.

Findings

Given the purposive sampling approach, all nine individuals were critical of certain aspects of current public discourses on topics such as patriotism, multiculturalism or gender diversity. Given the ordinariness of such dissenting views, such attitudes per se do not justify labelling them 'far-right', and none of the interview participants indicated commitment to any form of political activism around their dissenting views, which we consider a factor in defining the 'far right', as outlined above. The six focus group participants were politically active, but prior to the fieldwork the nature of their ideological views was uncertain and applying the far-right label would have been premature. Through the fieldwork, we found that, driven by their conspiratorial convictions, the ideological beliefs of the focus group participants had evolved from rather ordinary dissent into hostile antagonism and an alternative,

counter-hegemonic epistemology. Before we discuss the social and psychological factors that shaped these processes amongst the focus group participants, we briefly outline the context of this fieldwork.

The Context

While the interview participants seemed to not have known each other, the participants in the focus group agreed that they have become 'all friends now' (Jenny). Their relationship had emerged and grown out of their political activism against the local council's approval of a mosque in their town in the mid-2010s, 5 years before the fieldwork was conducted. The local protests against this mosque were the context where participants all crossed paths for the first time. 'None of us knew each other before', Mel said. They all attended 'different public meetings and information sessions, also at the townhall' (Jason), where they recognised 'familiar faces', connected with each other and eventually became part of an informal, locally known group that would organise small public anti-mosque protests. Their anti-Islam views brought them together in their joint activism. Through their dissenting activism—a term they all considered to be apt, even flattering—they became friends and connected both on social media and offline, although their interactions remained mostly limited to their political 'mission'.

The local anti-mosque activities of the six focus group participants connected them with prominent far-right figureheads from outside the local community, who had used the local conflict as an opportunity to organise several street protests, seeking to mobilise for their broader nationalist agenda and enhance their public profile. The focus group participants welcomed the external support from these far-right groups. 'We were all yelling and screaming, and nobody was listening. So, they brought a couple of rallies to [our town]', Susan said. The connections forged during these local protests lasted, and all participants stated that they had since attended a number of larger far-right rallies in other parts of the state.

The three people who participated in the individual interviews were all aware of these local protests, but none of them attended. Questioning the effectiveness of such political activities, Toby stated that 'protests never make you look good'. Anne expressed her sympathy with the protest ('I'm glad there are other people out there doing it') but explained she did not have the energy for 'physical protesting'.

Ideological Views

While the three participants in the interview did not directly address the issue of nationalism, the focus group participants expressed strong national pride; their display of national symbols (e.g. flag) at their regular protests also underscored this. They articulated concerns about what they considered a trend towards 'erasing Australian history' (e.g. in school curricula), which seemed to refer to the colonial history of white Australia, and a lack of respect for 'our forefathers [who] fought for this country' and 'our Anzacs' (Jenny), who had fought in the Australian New Zealand Army Corps (ANZAC) during the world wars. While such references to Anzac are 'a particular

focus of worship within [Australia's] far-right … environments' (Peucker et al., 2021, 201), we are not suggesting that the Anzac nostalgia and glorification—nor the display of national symbols such as the flag—are evidence for far-right ideologies. Although they expressed their nationalism ('Aussie pride') in a way that at times suggested 'exclusionary nationalism' (Fozdar et al., 2015), this does not situate them at the political or social fringes. A notion of pride in 'Australia's way of life and culture' is shared by a majority of Australians (Markus, 2021), and some scholars have argued that even 'nativism is ostensibly mainstream in Australia' (Kefford et al., 2022, 5).

Except for Mike, who seems to have responded to the call to participate in the study more out of curiosity, all participants held exclusionary attitudes towards certain groups of people, rejecting the principles of egalitarianism. Such attitudinal inclinations were expected given the participant selection rationale of the project as outlined above. This manifested particularly in their anti-Islam and anti-Muslim sentiments, articulating Islamophobic tropes around extremism and (sexualised) violence. Anne alleged that Muslims 'want to take over the world' and that those who 'follow the Quran … would be killing people for the name of Islam.' Anti-Islam views were expressed particularly harshly in the focus group. Susan claimed a Muslim man had once told her that 'Western women in miniskirts make them horny and they just want to fuck them.' Tom added that Muslims 'are going to throw every gay off the roof, then they are going to kill every other thing that isn't Islamic'. 'Islam is extremism', Jason said, describing it as a 'totalitarian regime', similar to communism, that 'breaks up' society. While the way Islamophobia was articulated by the participants was dehumanising, this does not automatically make the participants 'far-right' as anti-Muslim sentiments are fairly widespread in Australia with one third expressing negative views of Muslims (Markus, 2021).

The interview participants superficially supported multiculturalism but highlighted the importance of cultural assimilation. While assimilationist perspectives were also expressed by the focus group participants, they explicitly rejected multiculturalism—without calling for an ethno-national white Australia though. Mel's statement 'multiculturalism doesn't work, multiethnic does' resonated with others in the group. Multiculturalism, which 'our councillors are pushing' (Susan), was seen as leading to 'a series of tribes', while in a 'multiethnic' society 'people from all over the world come to one country and assimilate' (Jason) into the Australian culture. The group also applied this cultural assimilationist view to Australia's First Nations (Indigenous) peoples, differentiating between those 'who believe they have the right over our land', on the one hand, and 'those who support us … and who believe [our national holiday] is not Invasion Day, but Australia Day' (Susan), on the other hand.

Almost all participants criticised local and state governments for imposing a progressive, or 'socialist' (Anne), agenda. Toby and Anne referred in particular to the local council's 'rainbow agenda' (Anne), which they alleged had led to 'protected conversations' (Toby), silencing dissenting views and alleged preferential treatment of LGBTQI+communities. The focus group participants articulated a more radical anti-government stance. 'You can't trust the government' (Mel). This sentiment was repeated several times throughout the discussion. Similar to strong national pride, anti-Muslim sentiments and opposition to multiculturalism, such mistrust in government

is not restricted to the margins of society (Markus, 2021) and does not constitute evidence for far-right worldviews. However, the way the focus group participants—but not the three interview participants—consistently linked these issues to ominous conspiratorial allegations, together with their political activism, situates them at the far-right fringes of politics. They frequently claimed, for example, that governments pursue a hidden agenda to control the people, using tactics such as legalising abortion, mandatory vaccination (note: fieldwork was conducted prior to the outbreak of COVID-19), and chemtrails. These singular conspiracy theories were all tied together into one meta-conspiracy (Harambam & Aupers, 2021). At the same time, the focus group participants were convinced that governments and their representatives were controlled themselves and being 'told what to do' and 'fed what to say' (Susan) by a 'one-world government' and the global 'cabal of the New World Order' (Jason).

This conspiratorial worldview, which is—in different variations—very popular amongst far-right movements internationally, constituted the umbrella narrative of the group members' ideology, which sets them apart from the interview participants. They expressed a firm conviction that there is a secret global plot to 'break down Western democracies' (Jason), destabilise societies and de-populate the world until only 'the few chosen ones were left' (Tom). While these New World Order (NWO) related conspiracy narratives amongst far-right circles are often explicitly anti-Semitic, referring to a Jewish cabal and accusing Jewish individuals or groups (e.g. George Soros, 'the Rothschilds'), the participants in our research did not make such allegations—apart from Jason who used the implicitly anti-Semitic trope of global 'banking cabal'. Instead, the group linked the alleged NWO to Islam, resonating and reinforcing their anti-Islam sentiments that brought the group together in the first place in the context of the local anti-mosque protests. They all agreed when Mel claimed that 'Islam is a useful tool for the New World Order to pretty much purge the world of any other religion … Spread throughout the world, take over, make Islam the Number 1 religion, the only religion, because one law, one religion, one order, one world'. Tom even drew a link between the alleged expansion of Islam and the alleged NWO depopulation agenda, claiming that Muslims would 'throw gays of the roof', 'kill anyone who is not Islamic' and 'kill the gene pool [by] marrying their cousins'.

Overall, the focus group participants' Islamophobic re-interpretation of the typically anti-Semitic NWO myth illustrates how global far-right tropes are shaped and modified by specific local circumstances. For our participants, it provided an opportunity to elevate their local concerns around a mosque into a much great threat scenario, which they felt an obligation to stand up against. This did not only allow them to embed their other grievances (e.g. around vaccination, abortion, gender diversity, multiculturalism) but also create a sense of urgency and righteousness for their political activism. The focus group participants' ideological views as such—from nationalism and mistrust in government to anti-egalitarianism—may not be suitable indicators of political radicalism, but rather the way these attitudes were functionally embedded in their firm conviction of a comprehensive and highly hostile conspiracy. We discuss this in more detail in the following section.

Epistemological Pathways: Seeking and Finding the Conspiratorial 'Truth'

'At first it was just about the mosque, but [now] it is about so much more', Jenny stated. Their opposition to a local mosque, a widespread sentiment shared by one in four Australians, according to a recent survey (Hassan, 2018), brought the focus group participants together as a politically active group in the local space. But the central question is: how did this common denominator of Islamophobia gradually develop into a much more comprehensive conspiracy-based ideological worldview they all shared? The local conflict—and the group's joint opposition to the planned mosque—served as a significant catalyst in this process as the construction of the mosque was regarded as part of a secret and hostile plot to 'break' their local community. 'We all started realising little bits at a time, what was happening around us, but at first we didn't see the magnitude of it', Mel explained.

Our analysis identified three interconnected factors in this gradual process, which applied to most of the participants. First, participants typically mentioned a certain event or personal experience that planted a seed of doubt in the dominant narratives around diversity or related government actions. This triggered their interest. For Marie it was a programme she had watched on a Christian TV channel: 'I'm coming to all this mainly from a Christian point of view. I grew up in a white Christian area … and had no idea about Islam, but then I came across what's going on in a mosque through Christian TV.' Mel recalled a friend's Facebook post about Islam and immigration, which she was initially 'actually really annoyed by', but it encouraged her to 'start doing my own research, and I was blown by it.' Susan became increasingly interested after she had attended local council meetings, where she grew more and more critical of the councillors' work. And for Jenny it started during her technical and further education (TAFE), where she came to the conclusion that refugees were getting preferential treatment in their TAFE placement at the expense of 'everyday Aussies' (see Sharples & Blair, 2021); later at university, she became aware of what she regarded as a 'link between socialism and immigration' and that the university was trying to 'brainwash' her.

Second, these personal experiences encouraged them to independently 'do their own research' and looking for sources to find out more ('educate themselves') about these issues. What exactly these sources were, was not revealed during the focus group discussion, but our analysis suggests that the search was guided by confirmation bias (Nickerson, 1998) rather than critical assessment of different perspectives and sources. While only Susan claimed that she got a lot of her information from the library, all participants highlighted that the internet, including social media and in particular certain Facebook groups, was a particularly central source of information. Jason also alluded to mistrust in mainstream media when he mentioned an alleged violent incident involving immigrants which he found out about 'on Facebook but not the main news'. He also stated, in a tone of deviant pride, that his Facebook account had been taken down several time. While some referred to unconfirmed hear-say and local rumours, others claimed they actively try to get first-hand information by talking to people. 'Go and talk to Muslims and talk to Australians, try to talk to our refugee', as Susan said, and they all interacted online, via social media, mostly Facebook, with likeminded people from other parts of Australia and around

the world. Overall, it seemed that their individual pathway to 'the truth' was not guided by traditional or official source of knowledge and expertise but by alternative source and their own individual experience. Van Zoonen (2012, 56) refers to this procedural dimension of epistemology as 'I-Pistemology', whereby individuals seek knowledge on the 'basis of I (as in me, myself) and Identity' (ibid., 60).

Our analysis, however, also found a strong social dimension. The third factor of this epistemological pathway that has led them to their shared conspiratorial belief in a sinister global force is talking with and learning from 'significant others' in particular within their own group. These social processes of sharing and exchanging what trusted individuals have discovered through their 'own research' appears crucial. It reinforces existing beliefs and turns them into 'truths' by erasing any potential doubts, as the group member mutually confirm each other, which was also demonstrated during the focus group itself where the group seemed to mostly speak with a collective voice, while also emphasising their individual journeys towards their shared convictions. This offline echo-chamber effect appears particularly strong due to individuals' mutual trust and perceived credibility within their group. But these group dynamic processes of exchanging different learnings and experiences of group members not only solidified but also amplified and expanded their belief system by incorporating additional tropes into an increasingly comprehensive conspiratorial meta-narrative.

> I guess that pushed us a bit more, and as we learned more, we developed, and we all come back together, it's about networking too. We all share. Like you would find more information about something to do with Islam and Christian values, and we may find out something about Communism. (Jenny)

One example that illustrates the circular nature of this interplay between individual 'research' and introducing new beliefs to the group is the issue of vaccination. Speaking about her personal family experiences, Mel had mentioned to the group her concerns about what she believed were harmful effects of vaccination on her children. This encouraged Susan to look into this matter:

> I knew that vaccinations affected some people, but it wasn't until I met [Mel] that I found out that her daughter was fine until she had a vaccination. Now, then, what I've done is I went off on my own and I started reading, educating myself.

This eventually led to the conviction shared by everyone in the group that vaccinations were dangerous; and this single-issue conviction was then incorporated into the group's conspiratorial meta-narrative of the NWO, whereby vaccinations were seen as one of many deliberate strategies to allegedly depopulate the world.

> Tom: What Islam doesn't get, the vaccination will…. Yeah, so this is all about depopulating the planet…there is no value on life.
> Jason: nah… [*agrees*]
> Tom: And they are making that so obvious, you know with abortions and everything else, vaccinations, killing off everyone…
> Jason: Chemtrails…
> Susan: Chemtrails, yes, all government controlled!

Tom: …and the only ones who are going to be left are the chosen few and they won't even be safe.

Jason: The elitists

[*Everyone agrees*]

Jason: We had most diseases defeated in Australia for decades and suddenly they are all spreading up. There was a country in the Pacific, I can't remember which one, they vaccinated half the population, and six weeks later they had all these bloody viruses.

Marie: I don't trust vaccinations.

Through these group dynamics, single issues, such as vaccination, climate change, multiculturalism and immigration, or Islam, become tied together under the umbrella of the NWO narrative, within which they all obtain a specific functionality. It creates an internally coherent alternative belief system, a non-negotiable 'truth' and ultimately adds to a counter-hegemonic epistemology.

Socio-Psychological Dimensions

Our analysis indicated that this alternative epistemology had something positive to offer for the participants, something they may, implicitly or explicitly, have sought or felt they deserve. This points to the psychological and social functions and effects of such conspiratorial ideological worldviews (Douglas et al., 2017).

On the individual level, participants expressed great pride in their own (claimed) ability to 'educate themselves' and find the 'truth' outside mainstream sources, fending off the alleged manipulation attempts of what they regard as an orchestrated system of governments, media and education institutions. 'We were just amazed by the knowledge in our brains. How do we know all this?', as Mel said. This conviction of having found superior knowledge and insights provided an opportunity for them to gain a sense of self-worth. This resonates with Douglas et al. and's (2019, 9) argument that conspiratorial thinking can 'allow people to feel that they are in possession of rare, important information that other people do not have, making them feel special and thus boosting their self-esteem.'

The participants seemed to be in agreement on almost anything that was discussed, including and especially the NWO meta-narrative. There was a strong sense that all the topics discussed during the focus group had been jointly explored before, resulting into a coherent set of convictions across the group members. The only issue that came up during the discussion where some minor disagreement occurred was in relation to the question of whether homosexuality was morally wrong. Only one participant considered homosexuality as a sin based on her firm Christian belief system, while the others 'couldn't care less whether two gays get married' (Susan). Apart from that, the focus group participants' views were expressed unanimously as a collective position they have reached through individual efforts and sharing and discussing with each other. They would often finish each other's sentences, nod when others spoke or express their agreement verbally. These focus group dynamics both reinforced and demonstrated their strong identification with their in-group. However, when the

interviewer noted that there 'doesn't seem to be much disagreement' between them, they strongly rejected that assertion—as if it might question their personal efforts of and pride in having done their own independent research. They were keen to avoid the impression of them simply believing what others say, seemingly in an attempt to emphasise their individual efforts on their pathway to the truth. The focus group discussion appeared to be used by the participants as an opportunity to perform both their in-group cohesion and individual agency as independent 'free' thinkers.

> Interviewer: It seems that when you talk to each other and friends, there is not much disagreement…
> Mel: We have disagreements, we definitely do!
> Interviewer: Yeah, but overall…
> Mel: No, we do, but what we do is we talk it through…we learn…we all disagree, don't we?! And we learned to agree to disagree.
> Jenny: It's called respect
> Mel: Respect, yeah.
> Jenny: I don't agree on everything but we have that mutual respect.

Their personal journey towards the 'truth' helped them make sense of the world around them, also by seeing what they consider the bigger picture and how unrelated issues are, in their view, inherently connected. Several participants recalled that they used to be confused or suspicious about contentious issues such as the alleged size of the planned local mosque, immigration or the way the local council talks about diversity. Mel expressed this initial confusion like this: 'What's all this? What's this multiculturalism, what's diversity? Why are they keep saying these buzzwords? What do they mean? And when you go and look them up, you go like ah, ok'. They also tried to make sense of complex global immigration patterns by alluding to them as part of a secretive NWO plot:

> Jenny: I find it bizarre that all western countries at the same time get inundated with immigration – at the same time – don't you find that a little bit…?
> Susan: At the same time!
> Jason: And the same type of immigration!
> Mel: Why is that…?

Resonating with the epistemic, existential and social motives of conspiracy beliefs, identified by Douglas and her colleagues (2017), the respondents' NWO meta-narrative provided answers to these and other complex questions and, in doing so, helped them not only gain a sense of control but also a sense of agency and morally righteous purpose, both individually and as a collective. This sense of purpose, together with the conviction of having discovered the truth, sent them on what they consider their 'mission' to educate others. All seemed to agree when Mel stated 'If you can tell somebody about something, and then they … tell someone else as well as go and do research, and then they go and do research. It trickles on, and so, we find that education is the key'. Jason added: 'Marxism has

used that for the last 40 years, in the education system', and Mel continued: 'They have used it against us, so let's use it against *them*'.

Education is weaponised in an us-versus-them struggle over the contested question of truth. This appears to be the main driver for their political activism, performed with moral righteousness or even a sense of duty that flows on from their discovery of what they regard as the truth. As Mel put it: 'Yes, education! And it's not just us. Stand up for what is right, also in our everyday lives, we use every chance we can.' And Jason confirmed: 'The more we do, try to get more people on your side. Without that nothing happens. You've gotta try something.'

Respondents' commitment has been sustained not only by their claims of the moral high ground and superior knowledge but also by a sense of efficacy and responsibility to be the 'voice for many' (Jenny), especially those who may not speak out for fear of repercussions. The participants claimed they received supportive feedback from many in the local community, and this was confirmed by the first author of this paper during several previous meetings with group. 'Many people have woken up', Marie stated, and Susan explained: 'When I go to the supermarket, I still get called Nazi scum, racist bigot … but the next ten people would say "good on you".' Susan also mentioned a person from the local community who 'was chosen as a delegate to thank us for [what we do] because they had been warned if they speak out in support of us, their jobs would be on the line.' Their self-declared mission to 'educate' as many people as possible and their sense of responsibility to speak on behalf of those in the community without a voice offers them a sense of pride and purpose in their lives and political activism.

These elaborations pinpoint the social dimensions of the group's alternative epistemology whereby the 'truth' is the central factor to differentiate between those who have found it ('us') and those who try to hide it or are complicit in the NWO agenda more broadly ('them'). Their ideological meta-narrative creates and cements these group boundaries and strengthens cohesion and a sense of belonging within their own group, which they seek to grow by 'educating' others. As the public discourse in the local community was dominated by a pro-diversity climate, it seems plausible that the participants felt marginalised by large parts of the local community due to their public anti-Islam stance. Susan alluded to this when she said, in reference to their initial local anti-mosque mobilisation, 'we were all yelling and screaming, and nobody was listening'. Against this backdrop, we suspect that their potential need for respect, recognition and belonging has not been sufficiently met in the wider community, which may have encouraged them to look for it within their own small in-group.

Discussion

Does the social and ideological space that the study participants created constitute an anti-public, positioned in 'counter-hegemonic opposition to democratic processes and institutions' (Davis, 2021, 145)? Our analysis indicates that, while this is not the case for those we interviewed individually, several of the characteristics that Davis proposes are present amongst the focus group participants as their initially rather

benign manifestations of dissent and expression of relatively widespread anti-Islam views evolved into an ideologically rigid and comprehensive fringe belief system. A central factor in this evolution is the group's conspiratorial thinking, which, according to Davis (2021, 152), replaces 'rationality, expertise or recognised facts'. The focus group participants, however, did not reject the notion of rationality and reason as such but rather insisted that 'recognised facts' and 'expertise' are part of a larger manipulation attempt. Thus, they consider themselves to be critical thinkers as they seek to look behind the smokescreen allegedly set up by the secretive NWO cabal and their complicit 'puppets' (Jason) in government, education and other institutions. Their approach to enhancing their knowledge and finding the truth is, at least in parts and on the surface, guided by the common epistemological notion of questioning dominant interpretations of the world, drawing on experiences, 'doing their own research' and discussing it with others.

Where focus group participants diverted from the common understanding of critical thinking is in their selection of sources for their research as confirmation bias seems to radically narrow the scope of what kind of information they considered trustworthy and relevant. The participants did not elaborate on the specific sources other than pinpointing their extensive research online, in particular on social media, and the social processes of learning from each other. In line with the 'epistemic motive' of conspiracy theories (Douglas et al., 2017), everything that could challenge their ideological worldview is not only regarded as false but as part of a deliberate strategy to hide the 'truth' which in turn only further confirms their conspiratorial beliefs. Sunstein and Vermeulen (2009, 207) refer to this epistemological phenomenon as the 'self-sealing quality' of conspiracy theories. It is therefore the selectiveness of their 'research' that shapes their epistemological pathway towards an alternative 'truth', rather than a mere lack of reason or rationality. Davis (2021, 150) highlights this facet of anti-publics, when he argues that '(t)his selectivity suggests the irrationality in play is not general but is ideologically programmatic.'

Our study found that most participants, in particular those in the focus group, expressed strong us-versus-them views, whereby Muslims and other minority groups are dehumanised as the Other and the world is divided in those ('us') who have discovered the 'truth' and those individuals and institutions that seek to hide it ('them') with the intention to brainwash, control or ultimately even eliminate 'us' ('depopulate'). This resonates with Davis's (2021, 150) characterisation of anti-publics as being 'antagonistic and divisive'. Who exactly constitute the outgroup, remains mostly vague, with references to the 'rich elite', 'globalist banking cabal' (Jason) or a 'one-world government, the UN, banking cabals, Agenda 21' (Susan), but also accusing local government and the education system of being complicit. Here, the group expresses views that can be described as anti-elite, 'anti-statist' and 'anti-cosmopolitan', whereby 'Immigration, human rights treaties, multiculturalism, climate treaties and progressive emancipation projects, … represent technocratic transnational processes to be resisted' (Davis, 2021, 151).

Our analysis indicates a strong overlap with Davis's six-dimensional conceptualisation of anti-public spheres. On an ideological level, the participants' convictions are situated in deliberate and combative opposition to hegemonic discourses and democratic institutions. While, on a behavioural level, their political activism—from

public protests to attempts in their everyday lives to persuade others of their 'truth'—sits within the democratic norms of political engagement, the underlying epistemology, including their non-negotiable and quasi-religious truth-claims, does not seem to adhere to the 'principles of argumentation, evidence, truthfulness, mutuality, reciprocity, good faith and inclusiveness' (Davis, 2021, 145). The participants may see themselves as rational and critical thinkers, who 'talk it through' (Mel) when they encounter disagreements amongst themselves, but their conspiratorial NWO conviction 'flouts the ethical and rational norms of democratic discourse' (Davis, 2021, 143) due to its resistance to any discursive or rational scrutiny. 'Conspiracy theories are unique epistemological creatures because they are non-falsifiable', as Uscinski (2018, 237) noted.

The socio-political space the participants have created seems to sit outside of Mouffe's (2000) radical democracy model of agonistic pluralism. Their epistemological and political agenda is not only antagonistic and divisive. The secretive 'NWO cabal' and allegedly complicit governments and other institutions are not simply seen as an 'adversary … whose ideas we combat but whose right to defend those ideas we do not put into question' (Mouffe, 2000, 15), but rather as the Goliathan enemy who seeks to harm 'us', and break 'our' society. This seemingly existential and counter-hegemonic struggle does not appear to be bound by the 'ethico-political principles of liberal democracy: liberty and equality' (ibid.).

Conclusion

In this paper, we have adopted a micro-analytical perspective to explore the emergence and consolidation of an alternative epistemology that underpins far-right anti-publics. The findings offer qualitative insights into how a group of Australian individuals, who connected in the context of a local anti-mosque conflict, entered a process of ideological radicalisation that increasingly shifted their articulation of 'ordinary' dissent and Islamophobia towards the political far-right fringes. This shift unfolded through social and psychological processes that have resulted in—and been driven by—the evolution of an alternative epistemology within their anti-public sphere. Three interrelated factors characterise this pathway: (a) certain events or personal experiences that plant a seed of doubt in the dominant narratives around diversity or attendant government actions; (b) independent conduct of their 'own research' in order to self-educate through alternative, non-mainstream sources; and (c) sharing and discussing within an in-group of fellow believers what activists discover through self-education.

These processes were shown to create an internally coherent, alternative belief system, a non-negotiable 'truth' and ultimately add to a counter-hegemonic epistemology. This should be understood in relation to the social and psychological function and meaning this belief system and epistemology hold for participants. Ultimately, it is not primarily their nationalistic, anti-egalitarian, and anti-government attitudes themselves that situate them at the political far-right fringes, but the way these ideological components have obtained a functional meaning within their conspiratorial

meta-narrative of an evil secretive NWO elite that allegedly seeks to depopulate world and break Western societies.

This study follows Blee's (2007, 121) call for more 'close-up or "internalist" studies of far-right movements' to better understand the 'dynamics and the motivations of their activists'. As such, our findings are highly contextual and not geared towards generalisation of any statistical-probabilistic type due to the qualitative nature of the fieldwork and the relatively homogenous social and geographical composition of the sample. Rather, our study adds to the emerging 'close-up' scholarship on the far right, providing an in-depth empirical analysis of complex socio-psychological dynamics of radicalisation and 'micromobilization' (Blee, 2007, 120) and of the applicability of the concept of anti-public spheres to the far right. Moreover, it helps to further advance the concept by highlighting how psychological factors and social processes shape the interplay between the 'self-sealing quality' (Sunstein & Vermeulen, 2009) of conspiratorial thinking and the development of an ideological meta-narrative within these anti-publics. Future research could follow a similar line of inquiry with larger, more diverse, samples to ascertain the extent to which our findings are transferable to other, more heterogeneous far-right anti-public spheres.

Declarations

Ethics Approval The study was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee at Victoria University (HRE19-095) and was performed in accordance with the ethical standards laid down in the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research*.

Consent to Participate Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

Competing Interests The authors declare no competing interests.

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