

Conspiracy Networks and Fears of Industry and Science Through Fluoridation

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In Stanley Kubrick's classic, *Dr. Strangelove*, the idea that water fluoridation is a conspiracy to contaminate one's body was used as a joke - a belief so detached from reality that it was relegated to John Birchers and the like. Today, more than forty years later, it is still a widely held belief, which spawns forums, videos, and people who feel profoundly victimized. Their presence isn't relegated to the internet - there are conferences on the subject - but the internet is a prime place to investigate patterns and motivations. Furthermore, the conspiracists who rally against water fluoridation are not an isolated group, but all connect to each other with hyperlinks, interpersonal links, and sometimes direct commentary.

Water fluoridation has had a storied history, from the right-wing fear of a communist plot to part of a leftist New Age movement. Both elements - communist being replaced by a new world order mentality - still exist, but the larger by far is the latter, which will be the main, but not exclusive, focus of this study. The writings studied were mainly in places of community on the internet: forums, comment pages, links between sites, and the occasional stand-alone website. This may be a limitation, but it is the best place for group dynamics.

At first glance, fear of fluoridation seems to be little more than an example of Peter Knight's concept of "body panic"¹ - which it is - but it also has markedly different motivations than, say, conspiracies regarding the AIDS virus. It is a strong reaction to the growing concerns of all society, not just conspiracists, to the increasing presence of industry in our food supply. It is a panic concerned with the body, but far more with what is going into and out of our body, rather than the corruption itself. Water fluoridation conspiracies, then, are a natural part - admittedly extreme - of the growing

movement in our society to move from manufactured to organic, mass-produced to homegrown.

There are also revelations about conspiracy theory - specifically the social networks in which they exist - as a whole. One of the first points of interest in a study of these circles is the dichotomy between members. Some are established academics, others are militia members; some group in large, seemingly credible websites, others in internet back alleys. The second point of interest, however, is how the beliefs of these remarkably different people, for the most part, align. I believe that the fluoridation conspiracist community gives a prime example of how these opposites in other aspects of life - age, political stance, profession - can form a cohesive community. They coexist due to a combination of perceived victimization which needs support, and a willingness to adopt congruent beliefs.

The community in which fluoridation conspiracists operate is a diverse one, which connects markedly different individuals with a set of shared beliefs. Some are radical, even conventional conspiracy theorists. One is “JohnnyMuzz”, a leader of an Australian group named Together We Stand Freedom Advocates. It is impossible to tell who is viewing their work, but an unrelated video - on their belief of a DNA collection of Australian babies - has over 150,000 views. Indeed, based on their website, water fluoridation may be the most benign of their conspiracy theories, which include but are not limited to the 9/11 truth movement, public education as brainwashing, and the Illuminati’s “plan for a microchipped controlled population”.² They believe the same Illuminati - led by mostly Jews - have implemented the fluoridation of water for mind control purposes. They hold conventional, radical, and paranoid beliefs.

A further contrast could not be found than Paul Connett. He has a Ph.D. in chemistry from Dartmouth, and a Bachelor’s degree from Cambridge. He is a professor at St. Lawrence University, and has received awards for his work.³ Yet, his zeal in stopping the fluoridation of water is, if anything, more intense than JohnnyMuzz and his freedom advocates. His university profile has the fascinating note that Connett’s son, Michael, “is the research director and Webmaster for the Fluoride Action Network”, the website (fluoridealert.org) linked to and cited by legions of conspiracists.⁴

That website, relatively mild on its surface, in fact promotes many of the same theories as its more radical counterparts, linking to such articles as “Fluoride: Commie Plot or Capitalist Ploy?” and “Fluoride, Teeth and the Atomic Bomb” from publications like *Covert Action*. It is impossible to say that either Connett specifically believes these theories, and is not just providing to articles they didn’t read thoroughly, but they seem receptive, at the least. This very website also trumpets a list of 1,600 “professionals” who are opposed to water fluoridation. Though it seems anyone can fill out a form and a title and be added to the list, it seems likely a fair number of these various doctors, dentists, and scientists are a member of this community. While this is intended to lend an air of credibility, it is more effective at showing the ability conspiracies have to bring together radical and well-respected members of the community.

While the people involved are dramatically different, the similarities between these two groups, TWS Freedom Advocates and the Fluoride Action Network are their belief in the conspiracy, but also their very similar back stories. Each at least implicitly, but often explicitly, blame a vague consortium of the industrial-political complex. Each uses near-identical phraseology: poison, mass medication, toxic chemicals. This similarity of ideas allows for a relatively friendly co-existence, with neither degrading the other as either too moderate or too radical.

It should be noted, however, that there is not complete agreement within the group. As a general rule, the farther right-wing the group, the more New World Order, Illuminati, and the government are blamed. The left-wing is often oblique on the culprits, criticizing corporate interests or sometimes capitalism itself. A revision then, would point out that it is not the absolute congruence of beliefs between subgroups, but a combination of revised beliefs and the willingness to overlook differences which cannot be amended. This does not change the underlying argument, however - that larger conspiracy communities can support quite different subcultures based on a malleability of these subcultures.

A trait of the fluoridation conspiracy community which pervades most of the interactions is a profound sense of victimization. It influences many of their actions, and both allows them to survive, but also isolates them from society. In a certain YouTube video, a woman who identifies herself as “Olivia Hadassah”, can be seen bent over double, retching, and then fallen to her knees, coughing, gagging, and heaving. She looks to be in great pain, and the video begins and ends with her slumped over. The title of the video is “What Advanced Chronic Fluoride Poisoning Looks Like.”⁵ It is unflattering, to say the least, and it is fair to say that few people would post such a video unless they believed they would somehow receive support, reveal a great truth to an unwitting public, or both.

Similarly, in a forum entitled “Water fluoridation - mass poisoning of the people?,” the mood is closer to an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting than a conspiracy network. One woman writes “we have bad bones, thyroid and kidneys. We also have rotten teeth... by age 21 I had already had 19 fillings and 6 extractions and needed three years of orthodontic work.”⁶ Along with remarkably personal stories like this one, however, there are discussions on how best to avoid fluoride, some of which are extravagant.

While the trading of tips can be somewhat mundane, a flavor of how these conspiracists work is indicative of the support group mentality. In one exchange, a poster outlines his process, which involves five gallon bottled water, installation of water filters on the shower, and using rare, non-fluoridated toothpaste. Another poster decries his use of filters, explaining that “water filters don’t filter out fluoride as the molecules are too small ... vortex treatment of drinking water [is] important.”⁷ There are disagreements, but they are always civil, with much agreement and thanks. This give and take fosters a great sense of community, with some referring to others by their real life names, rare in internet forums.

This is similar, but not identical to, Dorothy Noyes’ belief, in her article “Group,” that “Stigmatized social categories recently granted civil rights are generally admitted to the hegemonic realm on the condition that their cultural difference remains invisible.”⁸ A study of this conspiracist community reveals their differences are not invisible, or left unsaid, but left unmentioned upon. A right-wing

theorist will simply link to the pages he agrees with, and ignore the rest. Due to the limitations of this study, it should be noted this could be an internet phenomena rather than a conspiracy phenomena, but it warrants further study.

This same general agreement of beliefs, while fostering a cohesive, functional community, is also deeply isolating. Many express their great frustration in society's unwillingness to provide "clean" water, and complaining that dentists don't have a clue. There is a conflict here, as at their core nearly all conspiracies want the public to become aware, but this clashes with the scorn many hold towards the general populace. Michael Barkun, in *A Culture of Conspiracy*, effectively describes the relationship between stigmatized knowledge and group dynamics which I would bring up and add to. He accurately points out that conspiratorial groups have "disdain for orthodoxy" but also fluidity - "ideas migrate easily from one part of the milieu to another, their movement facilitated by both a general receptivity to the unorthodox and a communication system of publications, meetings, and (more recently) interlinked Web sites."⁹ While this is all true, there is also an inverse. While unorthodox ideas travel and co-exist between subcultures, orthodoxy is actively attacked and disregarded. In one pro-conspiracy YouTube video, conspiracists have used a voting tool intended to remove spam to make skeptics' posts invisible.¹⁰ The ability of a group to allow differing opinions, then, also seems somewhat dependent on the exclusion of skeptics and disbelievers.

A negative effect of water fluoridation which is brought up again and again by both radical and moderate conspiracists is the effect fluoride has on infants and children.¹¹ A dentist in a remarkably well-produced video entitled "Professional Perspective: Fluoride in Tap Water," says that "we shouldn't fluoridate water and harm our most vulnerable."¹² He talks about the effect fluoridation has on children. Though it could be added to the list of unsupported symptoms, this would be a glossing over of a significant - and relevant - characteristic. There are two purposes for the intense focus on infants: one, a strict rhetorical device and an overstated but fundamentally valid claim against formula milk. The rhetorical effectiveness of

a claim which goes after the most vulnerable members of our society, and also one which has great shock value, should not have to be argued.

It is not a stretch, however, to find the other two points made amongst the claims. One of the current leaders of the anti-fluoride movement, the previously-mentioned Paul Connett, comes close to essentially arguing against formula rather than fluoride. In a debate on a Canadian health program, Connett seems to have a strange fascination with mother's milk. He asks, transitioning abruptly from a fact about hip fractures, to questioning "Why is it that fluoride is so low in mother's milk?"¹³ The ostensible point here is that fluoride is unnatural, which is why it isn't in mother's milk, but I believe that is only the overlay. The man he is debating - a member of the Canadian Dental Association - points out in rebuttal that fluoride naturally occurs in water, but Connett continues the point about formula.

This is a perfect example of how fluoride becomes a mask to criticize other parts of our society. The creation of formula to replace breast milk was a move largely pushed by industry, but also by a greater stress towards modernity.¹⁴ It is constantly reiterated that breast feeding is better for the child than formula, but many still choose formula. As Michael Schwab puts it in his essay "Mechanical Milk," "loss of respect of nature was central to the mechanistic march of progress."¹⁵ Fluoride becomes the connection to allow a greater point to be made, that formula milk (which uses tap water) has hundreds of times the amount of fluoride in breast milk. This is not to say that Connett does not believe that fluoride addition is detrimental, he certainly does. Instead, that fluoridation speaks not just to industry becoming part of food, but of a wider mistrust of the merging of modernity, industry, and science - which often affects food.

Peter Knight outlines his idea of body panic as largely related to more outlandish phenomena, unknown mutilations, corrosive sperm, and alien body-snatching.¹⁶ He describes the cases he uses - very accurately - as "paranoid fantasies" about the body being infiltrated and corrupted. Yet, this panic is much more widespread than the farther reaches of the conspiracy community. It has been growing more mainstream each day, along with the growing social move-

ment towards less synthetic and manufactured food. Movies like “Fast Food Nation” and “Super Size Me” have made millions of dollars on these claims. The former focuses on the social effects of fast food, like the obesity epidemic and the corruption of children (similar to fluoride conspiracist interest). The latter has a strong tilt towards the physical effects of eating large quantities of fast food, which the film contends - apart from weight gain - reduces sex drive and basic energy (both claimed by fluoridation conspiracists). These are widely-seen and respected films; countless books and diets have been sold on the subject. Organic has been widely accepted as beneficial. These fears, along with this renewed vigor against the fluoridation of water, are part of a new kind of body panic, directly related to a very real perception that society has over-industrialized and modified our food and water.

The fact that this new fear does indeed qualify as a panic is also significant. Panic is not the sole cause of many of the phenomena witnessed in the fluoridation conspiracy community, but it likely contributes. A community in panic looks to find comfort within, and isolates itself from the outside. A community in panic attempts to find the reasons behind what is causing them such an overwhelming fear, whether it be a New World Order or failed capitalism. Panic certainly helps foster a victim mentality, and causes those in panic to seek support from other members of the group. For these reasons, panic is the exact word to use, especially body panic.

While there is not a definitive scientific consensus that the actual act of modification of food is negative, it is hard to debate that much mass-produced food is unhealthy. Fast food chains like McDonald’s create burgers which have massive amounts of calories and fat. Their salads can be worse. The rise of soda and snack food vending machines in schools has been repeatedly linked to the obesity epidemic - in itself likely related to the natural foods movement. Recently, an Associated Press report stated that “a vast array of pharmaceuticals have been found in the drinking water supplies of at least 41 million Americans”¹⁷. Again, these are not indicators of a conspiracy, nor even that mass-producing food somehow makes it unhealthy. Rather, it shows that whether or not it is true, society has

deemed it a problem, and their root concerns are much the same of even the most radical conspiracist. Each wants to live healthier, and find reasons for health issues which may be from eating unhealthy foods. Fluoridation conspiracists undoubtedly take this concern of many to a different realm, but the origin is the same, an issue which most everyone has thought and worried about. The extent to which these beliefs are different has to be accounted for, however. Many of these theorists contend that fluoride causes nearly every major health problem today, from arthritis to respiratory problems.¹⁸ The fluoride conspiracy, in its current form, seems to be an offshoot of the larger New Age movement, but also a mutation which looks for a catch-all problem to many of the current health problems of the day.

The communities where conspiracies of fluoridation swirl about are diverse ones, and connect believers in Zionist plots of world domination to established academics. Though they would condemn the other on beliefs regarding different topics, the amount of congruity in beliefs of water fluoridation is remarkable. It is a result of two factors, one which speaks to the truth behind fears of fluoridation, the second to the traits of conspiracy networks. In current times, there are broad-based fears which extend far beyond the relatively extreme mindset of New Ageists. Organic food is a booming field; holistic medicine is no longer scorned. Wellness is a New Age term. This could be dismissed as a coincidental trend, but even if it is, fear of fluoride is a reflection of these new fears. Drugs like Vioxx have come - by accident or intent - into the populace, with deadly effect. Formula milk has become a widely-used alternative to breast milk, arguably as a money grab, with little need or reason.

Furthermore, fluoridation conspiracists operate using the same narrative as the broader New Age movement. Thomas McLaughlin, describes - in the role of a New Ageist - the relevant micronarrative: "I used to be like *that* (unwell, alienated, divided), but then I experienced "X" (crystals, yoga, channeling, etc.), and now I'm like *this* (spiritually healed, unified)."¹⁹ This is the *exact* narrative which fluoridation conspiracists use, with the previously-discussed contempt for those who used to be as they are. The combination of these similarities, along with the real issues which motivate both the more mainstream New Age movement and the fluoridation con-

spiracists, it is not a stretch to believe that these theorists are indeed a part of the wider movement. People have worries about genetic engineering of food and animals, even though it is capable of great good. The conspiracies of fluoride detractors is not a reflection of truth, necessarily, but it does speak to the worries of our society as a whole.

Worries, however, do not always create cohesive conspiracy communities, however. I would posit that it is a fairly traceable line as to how this happens, at least in this case study. Men and women of vastly different backgrounds have been able to create a steady, malleable back story to which they can all agree. This story is a common point, from which they can build a support group where there is virtually no disagreement, and each refines his or her specific beliefs to mesh with the whole. This process of group bonding, then also produces the group victimization mentality which pops out so easily at the observer. How conspiracy networks function and sustain themselves is a topic of further study, and why some are group-oriented - as fluoridation - as opposed to individualistic, is vital and warrants investigation.

Notes

¹ Peter Knight, *Conspiracy Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 168.

² Together We Stand Freedom Advocates, <http://www.tws.id.au/>.

³ St. Lawrence University, *St. Lawrence University: Faculty*
<http://it.stlawu.edu/~chem/faculty/connett.htm>.

⁴ Fluoride Action Network, *Homepage* <http://fluoridealert.org>.

⁵ Youtube, *What Advanced Chronic Fluoride Poisoning Looks Like*
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oX8ppB-wKEQ&feature=related>.

⁶ WaterCure Insider, *Water Fluoridation - Mass Poisoning of the People?*
<http://www.watercureinsider.com/viewtopic.php?t=12&postdays=0&postorder=asc&start=15>.

⁷ WaterCure Insider, Page 1.

⁸ Dorothy Noyes, "Group" *Journal of American Folklore* 108 (1996) 430: 449-478.

⁹ Michael Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America* (Berkeley: University of California, 2003) 26.

- ¹⁰ YouTube, *Professional Perspectives: Fluoride in Tap Water*
http://youtube.com/comment_servlet?all_comments&v=Ys9q1cvKGk&fromurl=/watch%3Fv%3D_Ys9q1cvKGk.
- ¹¹ Ibid.
- ¹² Ibid.
- ¹³ YouTube, *Medical Hotseat: Water Fluoridation (pt 1 of 3)*
<http://youtube.com/watch?v=CjwspURnUmA>.
- ¹⁴ Michael Schwab, "Mechanical Milk," *Childhood* 3 (1996): 479-491.
- ¹⁵ Ibid, 483.
- ¹⁶ Knight, *Conspiracy Culture*, 168.
- ¹⁷ CNN International, *Prescription drugs found in drinking water across U.S.*
<http://edition.cnn.com/2008/HEALTH/03/10/pharma.water1.ap/?iref=mpstoryview>.
- ¹⁸ Fluoride Action Network, *Fluoride Health Effects Database*
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- ¹⁹ Thomas McLaughlin, *Street Smarts And Critical Theory: Listening to the Vernacular* (Madison: The University Of Wisconsin Press, 1996) 78-100.

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