From Urban Vision to Online Conspiracies: Analyzing the Rise of the 15-Minute City

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Abstract

The concept of "15-minute city" has seen a rise in popularity in recent years in urban planning, with its vision of sustainable communities where residents can access their daily essential needs within a short travel time. This paper explores the evolution and implications of the "15-minute city" concept in the digital public spheres. Focusing on the period post-2022, when the idea gained substantial traction in online media, the research investigates how the concept has been portrayed, discussed, and debated in the digital realm. Moreover, the paper delves into the emergence of conspiratorial narratives surrounding the "15-minute city," examining the underlying motivations, key narratives, and their propagation in online communities and social media platforms. By analyzing the interplay between urban planning discourses and digital public spheres, this study sheds light on the impact of online media on public perception, policy-making, and the challenges posed by misinformation. Through a comprehensive analysis of scholarly research, media sources, and online discussions, this paper aims to contribute to a nuanced understanding of the "15-minute city" concept, its online representation, and the potential consequences of conspiratorial narratives in shaping urban futures.

Keywords: 15-minute city, conspiracy, social media

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The "15-minute city" is a concept in the field of urban planning that presents a vision of compact, self-sufficient neighborhoods where residents can access essential services and fulfill their basic needs within a short travel time. This concept is based on the principles of sustainability, livability, and community cohesion and has drawn the interest of urban planners, policymakers, and citizens worldwide. At the same time, the "15-minute city" concept has become the topic of online debates and conspiracies, with various actors questioning and opining about its true intentions, feasibility, and potential consequences.

This paper aims to explore the complex landscape of the "15-minute city" in the digital public spheres, especially focusing on the period from 2022 until the time of writing when the concept experienced a surge in online media. By delving into the representation, discussion, and controversy surrounding the "15-minute city" concept and the rise of the conspiracies related to it, this research seeks to uncover the dynamics of how well-intentioned ideas and practices can be translated into conspiracies through the power of online media platforms and influential actors in this realm.

Understanding this phenomenon is important for discussing the broader implications in policy-making, specifically in the field of urban planning and community development and for ensuring the safe dispersion of policy proposals across the digital public sphere. This study conducts an analysis of scholarly research, media sources, and online discussions, and hopes to contribute to a nuanced understanding of the "15-minute city" phenomenon, how the related conspiracies have spread and their implications in the context of the digital age.

The "15-Minute City" Concept in Urban Planning

Origins and Evolution of the "15-Minute City"

The concept of the "15-minute city" originated from the visionary ideas put forth by urban planner Carlos Moreno in 2016[1]. Moreno proposed a major shift in urban planning that aimed to create sustainable and livable cities by prioritizing proximity and accessibility to essential needs of citizens. The core principle of the "15-minute city" is to design neighborhoods in a way that enables residents to access their daily needs, such as employment, education, healthcare, leisure, and essential services, within a short travel time of approximately 15 minutes by foot, bicycle, or public transportation. This concept is a departure from traditional car-dependent urban models, emphasizing compactness, mixed land uses, and walkability.

Key Principles and Features of the "15-Minute City"

The "15-minute city" concept encompasses several key principles and features that contribute to its vision of creating vibrant and sustainable urban communities. These include:

Mixed-use neighborhoods: Encouraging a mix of residential, commercial, and recreational spaces within close proximity to reduce the need for long-distance commuting and enhance community interaction.

Accessible public transportation: Developing efficient and interconnected public transportation systems to facilitate easy movement within neighborhoods and between different parts of the city.

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[1] (*The 15 Minutes-City: For a New Chrono-Urbanism! - Pr Carlos Moreno*, 2019)

Active mobility infrastructure: Promoting pedestrian-friendly infrastructure, bicycle lanes, and other active modes of transport to prioritize non-motorized travel and improve health and well-being.

Local amenities and services: Ensuring a diverse range of amenities, including shops, schools, healthcare facilities, parks, and cultural institutions, are available within walking or cycling distance.

Participatory planning: Involving residents in the decision-making processes and design of their neighborhoods to foster a sense of ownership, social cohesion, and inclusivity.

Since its conceptualization, the "15-minute city" has gained attention globally, inspiring various urban planning initiatives and pilot projects. Several cities, such as Paris, Melbourne, and Barcelona, have embraced aspects of the "15-minute city" by implementing policies and interventions aimed at improving accessibility, reducing car dependency, and enhancing quality of life for residents. These case studies provide valuable insights into the challenges, successes, and adaptations involved in translating the concept into practical urban planning strategies.

Critiques and Debates

While the "15-minute city" concept has garnered significant enthusiasm, it is not without its critics and skeptics. Some argue that achieving the vision of a fully functional "15-minute city" is overly idealistic and may not be feasible in all urban contexts. Critics raise concerns about potential trade-offs, such as increased land costs, gentrification, and displacement, as well as the challenges of retrofitting existing cities to align with the concept's principles. These debates

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surrounding the implementation and scalability of the "15-minute city" contribute to the broader discourse on sustainable urban development.

Meanwhile conspiracy theorists are also entering the discussion, portraying the "15-minute city" concept as a "climate lockdown". They are also adopting far-right ideas to spread misinformation about the concept, claiming that it involves global-minded organizations pushing a "socialist agenda" and a " Great Reset " of society. Indeed, one version of the conspiracy theory circulating online makes the claim that the United Nations and the World Economic Forum will "forcibly remove" people living on polluted land and require them to live in "smart cities."

How Conspiracies Surrounding "15-Minute City" Spread Across Digital Public Spheres

The advent of digital media and the rise of online platforms have transformed the landscape of public discourse, allowing individuals to engage in discussions, share information, and shape narratives on a global scale. In the context of urban planning, digital public spheres play a significant role in shaping the perception, understanding, and dissemination of concepts such as the "15-minute city." However, it is through the medium of various digital public spheres that conspiracies surrounding the "15-minute city" have taken shape and spread.

While the idea of "15-minute cities" has been around for a while, the recent spike in interest around it and its associated conspiracies can be attributed to online media platforms, specifically social networking sites, online forums, and news outlets. In fact, the rise of the conspiracy theories can be traced back to late 2022, when the concept was conflated with an effort to impose new traffic restrictions to ease congestion in and around the famous university

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community of Oxford[2]. In the first week of December 2022, local leaders in Oxfordshire hhad

voted to try a new traffic reduction system to try and help reduce congestion. This was followed

by tweets that compared the scheme to the strict COVID-19 restrictions.

Very quickly, discussions around the "15-minute city" morphed from simple

disagreements to various forms of conspiracy theories. Nick Fletcher,, the MP for the South

Yorkshire constituency of Don Valley called 15-minute cities "an international socialist

conspiracy,"[3] while conservative self-help guru and provocateur Jordan Peterson tweeted that the

restrictions were the work of "idiot tyrannical bureaucrats". He also brought up "Great Reset," a

phrase that originated at the 2020 World Economic Forum initiative which has since then been

latched on to by right-wing conspiracy theorists as a globalist plot against everything from

capitalism and personal freedoms. The TV presenter MarkDolan also jumped on the theme,

describing the restrictions as part of a push for "one world government."

The impact of these online discussions were not just limited to the digital public sphere but

instead also spilled over into the real world. In fact, on Feb. 18, approximately 2,000

demonstrators gathered in central Oxford to protest against the implementation of the traffic

filters and restrictions. The demonstration saw groups of both protesters and counter-protestors

gathering at the heart of the university town, and five people were arrested.

Understanding the Nature of Conspiracy Theories

In analyzing the nature of the 15-minute conspiracy theories, it helps to be specific about

some key terms. The term "conspiracy" can be described as a secret plot by two or more

[2] MASSARA, G. (2022, December 8). Traffic plan in Oxfordshire, England, isn't a 'climate lockdown'. AP News.
[3] O'Sullivan, F., & Zuidijk, D. (2023, March 1). How Did the 15-Minute City Get Tangled Up in a Far-Right Conspiracy? Bloomberg.com.

powerful actors (Keeley, 1999[4]; Pigden, 1995)[5], for a range of objectives, from gaining political or economic power, violating rights, for concealing important secrets from the general public, or for protesting against traditional institutions. "Conspiracy theories" can be understood as proposed explanations for the causes of certain social or political events, which often involve claims of secret plots by specific actors. While often thought of as addressing governments, conspiracy theories could accuse any group perceived as powerful and malevolent. A conspiracy may point to a true causal relation between certain events, while a conspiracy theory often takes the form, at least in its initial stages, of an allegation that may or may not turn out to be true. For example, the Watergate scandal was indeed a conspiracy, while the claims that the 9/11 terror attacks were actively caused by the collaboration of the Bush administration, the Saudi Government, corporations, the financial industry, and the Jews fall under the category of conspiracy theories.

Factors that influence conspiracy theory adoption

There have been many studies that explore the various reasons why people adopt conspiracy theories. These can broadly be boiled down to a few factors:

Psychological factors such as the belief in multiple conspiracy theories at the same time, which are supporting each other, as described by Goertzel (1994)[6] to be forming the monological belief system. This means that conspiracy beliefs tend to correlate strongly with other conspiracy beliefs, and if someone cannot explain why their pet theory has not been proven, they turn to other conspiracy theories to explain why. There can also be mutually contradictory conspiracy

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[4] Keeley, Of Conspiracy Theories. The Journal of Philosophy, 96(3), 109.
[5] Pigden, Popper Revisited, or What Is Wrong With Conspiracy Theories? Philosophy of the Social Sciences, 25
[6] (Goertzel, Belief in Conspiracy Theories. Political Psychology, 15(4), 731-742)

beliefs such as the one that claims that Princess Diana was murdered or that she faked her own death and is still alive.

The primary psychological motives people appear to be drawn to conspiracy theories, as suggested by Douglas, Sutton, and Cichocka (2017)[7]are epistemic, which involves a desire for understanding, accuracy, and subjective certainty, existential, which involves a need for control and security, and social such as the drive to maintain a positive image of the self or group.

Demographic factors such as levels of education and income can also play a major role in conspiracy thinking. Freeman and Bentall (2017)[8] for example, analyzed historical survey data to discover that believers tended to have some common demographic traits including being less educated. This suggests that education may be the key to developing critical thinking skills, which can help people to differentiate between facts and conspiracy theories.

Political Factors

Political events can also lead people to adopt conspiracy theories, such as those that cause a loss of trust in political institutions, extreme measures that make people feel powerless and uncertain economic and societal conditions. Ideological standpoints themselves play a big role first, as people are more likely to believe that those following an opposite political ideology are involved in malevolent activity than their own party's representatives. Some studies also indicate that the more extreme the ideological standpoint, the more one is likely to believe in conspiracies. For example, van Prooijen, Krouwel, and Pollet (2015)[9] found that in the United States and the Netherlands, conspiracy theorizing was strongest at the far left and right, although stronger on the right. It has also been observed by van Prooijen et al. (2015) that while those at the extremes

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[7] (Douglas, K. M., Sutton, R. M., & Cichocka, A. (n.d.). The Psychology of Conspiracy Theories. Current Directions in Psychological Science, 26(6))

[8] Freeman, D., & Bentall, R. P. (2017). The concomitants of conspiracy concerns. Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology, 52(5), 595–604.

[9] van Prooijen, J.-W., Krouwel, A. P., & Pollet, T. V. (n.d.). Political Extremism Predicts Belief in Conspiracy Theories. Social Psychological and Personality Science, 6(5).

of both left and right wing can buy into conspiracy theories, the link is stronger for those on the right of the political spectrum.

Similarities with the spread of "Climate Lockdown" conspiracies

The rise and spread of conspiracies surrounding "15-minute cities" shares a pattern very similar to that of another topic, namely "climate lockdowns". It is therefore useful to explore the key elements of how conspiratorial thinking around "climate lockdowns" took shape and spread.

In September 2020, the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) conducted an analysis of an emerging trend on social media relating to the term 'climate lockdown'[10]. They analyzed the emergence and mainstreaming of this phrase across the social media platforms of Twitter, Facebook and YouTube. Their results also follow a similar pattern to the rise of the conspiracies surrounding 15-minute cities in that there are some clear driving factors.

First is the role of actors with deliberate agendas, in this case, climate denialists. There were many actors involved in climate denial narratives already active before the conspiracies surrounding "climate lockdown" took shape – from institutions funded by right wing think tanks, websites promoting conservative ideologies, YouTubers as well as far right wing news outlets. While they had been promoting messaging around climate denial before the topic of "climate lockdowns" gained media attention, they did jump on the trend and helped accelerate the spread of the related conspiracies.

Second is the impact of poorly thought out communication from mainstream institutions and authorities. In this case, it was a series of poorly thought-out headlines and posts from media

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[10] *'Climate Lockdown' and the Culture Wars: How COVID-19 Sparked a New Narrative Against Climate Action,* 2021

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outlets such as The Guardian and international think tanks like the World Economic Forum, which sparked reaction from a reactionary media ecosystem, that eventually helped the conspiracies take off. In April 2020, the Guardian published an editorial suggesting that a "return to normal" following the lockdowns may not be desirable, considering that the restrictions to traffic and travel had helped in reducing carbon emissions. This was picked up by climate change denialists who claimed that activists would soon turn the COVID lockdowns into climate lockdowns. A tweet making this claim from Steve Milloy of the Heartland Institute, an institution that funds climate change denial, was amplified by ClimateDepot.com. ClimateDepot.com is a climate change denial website run by Marc Morano, who also writes for the Heartland Institute.

According to the ISP analysis, the engagement on tweets relating to the phrase "climate lockdown" was not growing too drastically. But that changed with the publishing of an article on 22 September by Mariana Mazzucato, an economist, titled 'Avoiding a Climate Lockdown' for Project Syndicate. Although Mazzucato was making the case for a "green economic transformation" and warned that if serious action was not taken to address energy issues, more radical steps may be necessary, such as restricting car use, meat consumption and energy usage. While she was not welcoming climate lockdowns and instead was proposing policies to avoid them, the financial news site Marketwatch, republished her article with a more sensationalized headline "Opinion: We need to act boldly now if we are to avoid economy-wide lockdowns to halt climate change". It was following this that the topic started rapidly gaining traction in online media, with tweets discussion the term "climate lockdown" rising to 2777 in the seven days following the Marketwatch article, compared to just 26 tweets in the fortnight before.

This growth in exposure of the term can be attributed to the large reach of Marketwatch, which has an online following of 4 million users. Their article was subsequently shared by Newsbusters, one of many entities in the conservative-leaning Media Research Centre (MRC), with an emphasis on the fact that Project Syndicate received funding from organizations backed by George Soros and Bill Gates. This only accelerated the spread of the conspiracy that climate lockdowns were an "eco extremist" idea pushed by the global elite with an agenda to ensure social control, a narrative that soon began circulating through YouTube conspiracy theory channels, right-wing news outlets such as One America News Network (OANN) and The Washington Times.

Polarization accelerated by online and social media

While conspiracy theories have been around for a while, well before the advent of the World Wide Web, it is easily observed that the Internet has played a major role in the spread of these theories. Especially significant is the polarization of communities on the Internet, which has made rational discussions and civil communication difficult.

There is also a tendency for online communications to become progressively more negative over time. According to Zollo et al. (2015)[11], the sentiment of users' comments and posts became more negative as they became more active, and the sentiment of communication threads between communities was especially negative, and became more negative as conversation threads persisted. Communication within conspiracy communities may be more civil but not necessarily more rational.

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It is notable that a similar polarization can be observed in the discussions around the 15-minute city. Marc Owen Jones, Associate Professor of Middle East Studies at Hamad bin Khalifa University, conducted an analysis of over around 120,000 thousand tweets on the hashtag #15minutecities and '15 minute cities' in February 2021[12]. He found that there was a significant polarization on the topic, with very little mixing.

Source: https://twitter.com/marcowenjones/status/1628105064890998785
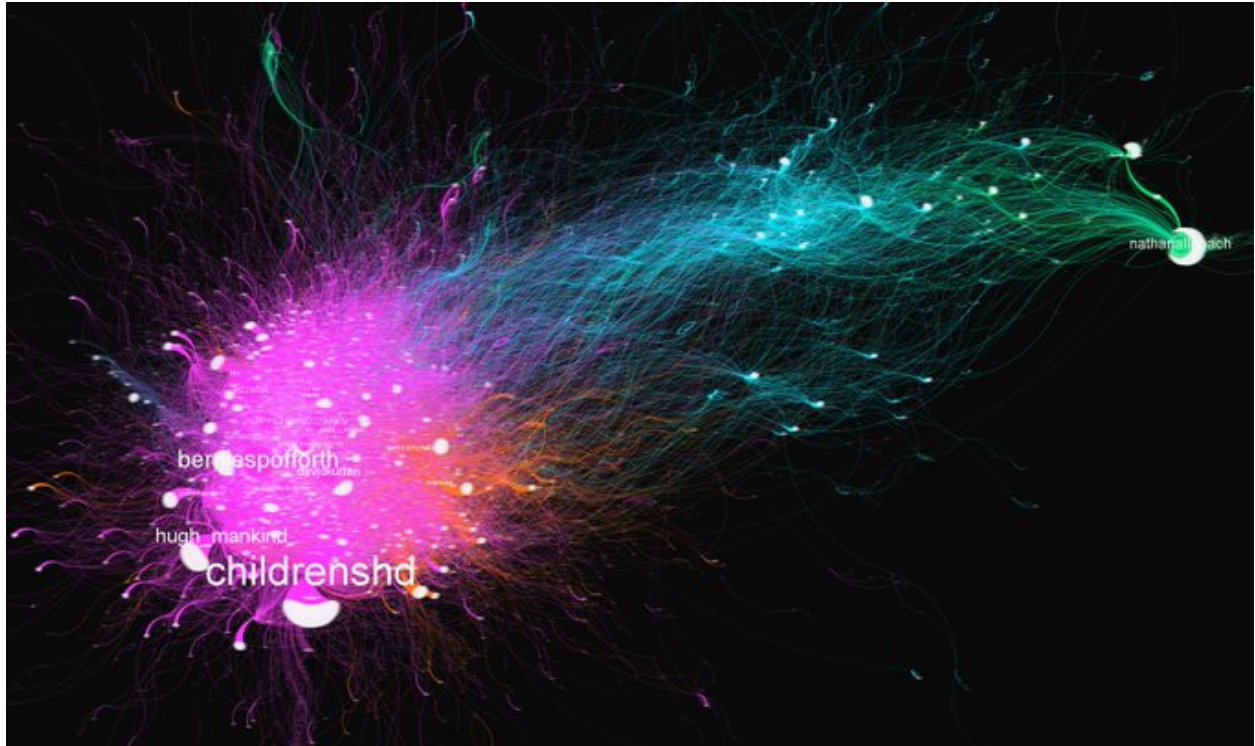
In a thread on Twitter, he showcases visual clustering indicating the intensity and volume of tweets on the topic from a period of four to five days. In the visual, it can be seen on the left that the number of people promoting the conspiracy is high, and that there is very little interaction

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[12] Jones, O. (2023, February 21). Marc Owen Jones on Twitter: "1/ Analysis of over around 120,000 thousand tweets on the hashtag #15minutecities and '15 minute cities' highlights clear polarisation on the topic with little 'mixing'. As others have pointed out, a fairly obvious right-wing are promoting it

between those people and those debunking the conspiracy. He also noticed that the most active promoters of the conspiracy included @ChildrensHD, an anti-vaccine propaganda organization[13] @hugh_mankind, an anti-globalist disinfo/propaganda account and @davidkurten, a British politician and anti globalist. Others who have promoted the conspiracy include popular "influencers" known for their provocative nature and for spreading misinformation such as @lozzafox and @jordanbpeterson.

The analysis also examined the bios of the accounts and found that the word "anti-" was common to most of them. Furthermore, the word "anti-woke" was also found to be very common, as was "anti-World Economic Forum" and "anti-globalist". The bios also revealed a conservative, Christian, nationalistic preference and many mentioned "No DMs"s in their description.

Conclusions

The concept of "15-minute cities" promises much for revolutionizing urban planning with a view on creating sustainable, liveable and walkable communities. However, it has sparked the rise and spread of various conspiracy theories fuelled by a number of factors including communication faux pas from mainstream institutions and authorities and right-wing media outlets and influencers misinterpreting and repackaging original proposals on social media and other digital platforms.

The conspiracies surrounding "15-minute cities" share some of the common factors that underpin the nature of how such theories spread, including the desire among people for

[13] Stone, W. (2021, June 8). A Prominent Anti-Vax Group Is Spreading False Vaccine Info To Black Americans : Shots - Health News.

understanding, the need for control and security, extreme ideological standpoints, specifically on the right, as well as the tendency to be associated with other conspiracy theories. There is also strong similarity with the rise and spread of conspiracies associated with "climate lockdowns" which was observed in 2020, and which is itself a topic not entirely unrelated to that of the concerns surrounding "15-minute cities".

What has also been crucial in fuelling the spread of the "15-minute" theories is the increased polarization among communities when it comes to ideologies, especially in online and social media platforms.

While it may be unrealistic to expect radical changes in the way that people evaluate information and exercise restraint before engaging in conspiratorial thinking, it becomes a critical responsibility for authorities and institutions engaged in communicating policies to be aware of the dangers of how misinformation can spread online. The proponents of the concept of "15-minute city" would do well to exercise care in framing proposals and narratives and in avoiding overdramatic language in the phrasing of materials for publishing online, especially headlines. As we navigate the complex landscape of online digital media, the practices for communicating information needs to be constantly evaluated and refined so that consumers of such content can get absolute clarity on subjects and how it may or may not affect their lives.

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