

Structure and Identity in an Online Conspiracy Theory Community

Real-time conspiracy narrative formation in Japan following the assassination of Abe Shinzō

Robert A. Fahey  *

Waseda Institute for Advanced Study, Waseda University

Conference Paper for MPSA: Chicago, IL, April 2023

Abstract

In recent years, conspiracy theory beliefs initially created and propagated by relatively small online communities have had significant and deleterious effects in several high-profile cases – not only the January 6th attack on the U.S. Capitol by adherents of conspiracy theories such as QAnon, but also violent attacks against minority groups in countries including Sri Lanka and Myanmar. This study aims to advance our understanding of the structure and identity of the groups who author and disseminate such conspiracy narratives by examining the online community that was central to spreading far-right conspiracy theories in the days immediately following the assassination of former Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo in July 2022. Network analysis methods are used to identify a close-knit community of

*robfahey@aoni.waseda.jp

21 Twitter accounts which developed conspiracy narratives and adapted them to fit
22 changing facts following the assassination. This community numbers fewer than
23 600 accounts, only 30 of which actively participated in writing conspiracy narra-
24 tives – but tweets promoting these narratives were potentially seen by millions of
25 users during this time period. An online ethnographic approach is then used to
26 analyse the nature of this community, with particular focus on the information en-
27 vironment (or “filter bubble”) within which these accounts and their followers exist,
28 which clarifies their worldview and offers some explanation for their motives in ac-
29 tively promoting conspiracy narratives.

30
31 **Keywords:** Conspiracy Beliefs, Conspiracy Theories, Social Media, Network Analy-
32 sis, Online Ethnography, Japan, Far-Right

34 **Funding Information:**

35 This work was supported by JSPS KAKENHI Grant Number JP21K13236. Additional
36 funding was provided by a Waseda University *Tokutei Kadai* Research Grant.

38 **1 Introduction**

39 Conspiracy theories, broadly defined as explanations of contemporary or historical
40 events which reject conventional understandings in favour of claims that they were
41 caused by powerful groups conspiring in secret to further their agendas (Levy 2007,
42 pp.181-192; Uscinski 2019, p.48), have been a consistent feature of societies around
43 the world and throughout history (Aaronovitch 2010; Davis 1971), and have recently be-
44 come the focus of significant interest from researchers and policymakers alike due to
45 the apparent role played by conspiracy beliefs in issues including political violence and
46 vaccine refusal. Research in recent decades has revealed that conspiracy beliefs of one

47 form or another are very widespread; far from being the rare and extreme pathology im-
48 plied by twentieth-century commentaries on the phenomenon (Bunzel 1967; Lipset and
49 Raab 1970), surveys have shown that a majority of adults hold at least one conspiracy
50 belief (Miller et al. 2016; Oliver and Wood 2014). In parallel with these advancements in
51 our understanding of how widespread conspiracy beliefs are, there has been a growing
52 interest in the role played by online media and social networks in the development and
53 dissemination of conspiracy theories (see Mahl et al. 2022). Internet platforms have
54 allowed the authors and promoters of conspiracy theories to bypass the filter of the
55 mainstream media and directly address large global audiences, while online social net-
56 works have fostered conspiracy-centred communities whose structures and strategies
57 share similarities with religious cults or extremist radicalisation processes – recruiting
58 and outreach, mutual reassurance and support paired with denigration of members’
59 “normie” friends and family who challenge their conspiracy beliefs, and encouraging
60 each other to “go deeper down the rabbit hole” by engaging with more extreme ele-
61 ments of the beliefs (see for example Bélanger et al. 2020, 2019; Hodge and Hallgrims-
62 dottir 2020). The dissemination of conspiracy theories through such online networks
63 has been implicated in a number of major events in recent years, including the role of
64 far-right conspiracy theory communities in provoking violent events such as the Jan-
65 uary 6th, 2021 attack on the U.S. Capitol building (Cox 2021; Hodge and Hallgrimsdot-
66 tir 2020), escalating racial tensions and violence in the United States and elsewhere
67 (Obaidi et al. 2022), and the rejection of COVID-19 vaccinations and other healthcare
68 interventions by large minorities in many regions (Eberl et al. 2021; Theocharis et al.
69 2021).

70 Despite these high levels of both academic and policymaker interest in conspiracy the-
71 ory beliefs and their effects, our understanding of how these beliefs function – how they
72 are created or adapted in response to current events, how communities form around
73 them and the strategies pursued by said communities, and so on – remains limited in
74 many regards. As Mahl et al. 2022 notes, research into conspiracy theories has tended
75 to focus narrowly on Western countries and English-speaking communities, while the

76 conceptual distinction between conspiracy theories and other forms of misinformation
77 (such as “fake news” or propaganda) is often poorly delineated. Technical limitations of
78 online data collection have also made it difficult to observe the process of conspiracy
79 theory formation; for example, active members of conspiracy theory communities can
80 easily edit or delete their public social media posts to bring their past statements in line
81 with current community orthodoxy, while moderation efforts by social media platforms
82 may result in the removal of posts by proponents of more extreme or radical conspiracy
83 theories.

84 This research paper presents a case study in which conspiracy theory narratives were
85 observed being developed and adapted in real-time in the weeks following a major po-
86 litical event, namely the assassination of former Japanese prime minister Abe Shinzō in
87 July 2022. Deaths or assassinations of public figures are often fertile ground for the de-
88 velopment of conspiracy beliefs – theories regarding events such as the assassination of
89 President John F. Kennedy in 1963 and the death of Princess Diana in 1997 rank among
90 the most well-known and widely-believed conspiracy theories even decades later (Go-
91 ertz [1994](#); Wood et al. [2012](#)). Abe Shinzō was one of Japan’s most high-profile public
92 figures, and his assassination – in a country where both violent crime in general, and
93 political violence more specifically, are extremely rare – certainly seems to fall into this
94 category of event that has historically been associated with conspiracy theory beliefs.
95 As well as granting insights into the functioning of conspiracy beliefs in a non-Western
96 context, this is also arguably a “hard case” for conspiracy theory formation and dissemi-
97 nation due to the relatively high levels of trust in traditional print and TV media in Japan
98 (see for example Sawa and Saisho [2022](#)). Prior research has shown that conspiracy be-
99 liefs often seems to have a basis in “disbelieving a mainstream or received narrative
100 rather than in believing a specific alternative” (Wood and Douglas [2015](#)), suggesting
101 that high levels of trust in mainstream media would create a challenging environment
102 for the alternative narratives of conspiracy theories to take hold in.

103 **1.1 Background: The Assassination of Abe Shinzō**

104 Former Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzō was assassinated while making a cam-
105 paign speech on behalf of a fellow candidate from the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP)
106 on July 8th, 2022. Abe was the longest-serving Prime Minister in Japan’s post-war his-
107 tory, having served a relatively brief one-year term from September 2006 to September
108 2007, before returning to office in December 2012 and serving for almost eight years,
109 stepping down due to health concerns in September 2020. A staunch conservative
110 from a dynastic political family, Abe had emerged as a leadership figure in the right-
111 wing grouping of the dominant LDP, and his nationalist views and willingness to en-
112 gage in high-profile feuds with centrist and centre-left media organisations made him
113 popular with right-wing voters, while also serving as a lightning rod for criticism from
114 opposition groups, which at times spilled over into major protests and demonstrations
115 against his rule (most notably during the passage of security reforms in 2015, dubbed
116 the “War Bill” by the opposition). Despite such protests, and a series of personal scan-
117 dals which dogged the later years of his administration (Carlson and Reed 2018), Abe
118 enjoyed consistent electoral success in his second term – returning the party to power
119 in 2012 after it had suffered unprecedented losses in the 2007 and 2009 elections, and
120 winning a further five national elections before stepping down in 2020 (for a detailed
121 overview of Abe’s career, see Harris 2020; for specifics of his administration’s policies
122 and reforms, see George Mulgan 2017).

123 Abe’s assassination came two days before a national election for the House of Coun-
124 cillors (the Upper House of Japan’s National Diet, whose members serve six-year terms
125 with half of the seats being up for election at regular three-year intervals). While making
126 a speech in a suburb of Nara city at around 11.30am, Abe was approached by a man with
127 a home-made firearm, who fired two shots, the second of which hit the former Prime
128 Minister in the chest and neck. He was rushed to a nearby hospital by helicopter, and
129 was pronounced dead five and a half hours later, at around 5pm. The assassin had been
130 arrested at the scene, having made no attempts to flee or resist arrest, and was iden-
131 tified late in the afternoon as Yamagami Tetsuya, a 41 year old man who had formerly

132 served in the country's navy, the Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF).

133 Public attention was incredibly focused on the assassination from the outset. Abe was
134 the country's best-known political figure, and in the run-up to the election rumours had
135 circulated that he was considering another return to front-line politics. Moreover, gun
136 crime of any kind is extremely rare in Japan – there were only ten reported incidents
137 involving a firearm being discharged in 2021, and only one gun death – so the involve-
138 ment of a firearm made the event even more shocking to the Japanese public. Reports
139 about the shooting began to circulate widely on social media within moments, with
140 major media outlets issuing news bulletins only minutes later. Most of Japan's major
141 broadcasters suspended their regular programming for the rest of the day to focus on
142 reporting about the event, and intense scrutiny followed every subsequent update re-
143 garding the incident, both related to Abe's condition and subsequently to arrangements
144 for his body to be transferred back to Tokyo, and to emerging details about his killer.

145 The assassin's identity was reported within hours of the shooting, and by the following
146 day reports had emerged about his motive, which was not related to Abe's policies or
147 political stances, but rather to his ties with the Unification Church, a Korean new reli-
148 gious movement which had a strong relationship with Abe's family dating back to his
149 grandfather, former Prime Minister Kishi Nobusuke. The Unification Church had culti-
150 vated relationships with a large number of LDP lawmakers, with Abe being the most high
151 profile among them. Yamagami, his killer, believed that the support of Abe and other
152 political figures allowed the Church to spread its influence and act with impunity; he
153 blamed the Church for hardships faced by his family after his mother, a church member
154 since the 1990s, had been pressured into donating large amounts of money and prop-
155 erty to it, continuing to make donations even after being forced to declare bankruptcy
156 in 2002. He had originally planned to target Unification Church leader Hak Ja Han, but
157 was unable to gain access to her during her visit to Japan in 2019; he then switched
158 his target to focus on Abe, whom he believed to be the leading enabler of the Church's
159 operations in Japan.

1.2 Background: Conspiracy Theories in Japan

As is the case for most if not all other countries, conspiracy theory beliefs have been documented at various points in Japan's history. Perhaps the most well-known instance of a conspiracy beliefs having significant consequences in Japan date back a century, when conspiracy theories blaming Korean residents for poisoning wells and committing arson were spread widely in the days following the devastating 1923 Kanto earthquake (which had caused both disruption to the water table and widespread fires). The anger spurred by these conspiracy theories led to the formation of lynch mobs who, over a roughly ten day period following the earthquake, murdered at least 6,000 people – primarily Koreans, but also including many other minorities and a number of left-wing activists and dissidents.

This incident took place a century ago, but still shows that Japanese society is susceptible to conspiracy theories and to the most extreme negative effects of conspiracy theory beliefs. Research into the nature and extent of this phenomenon in contemporary Japan has been limited. Majima and Nakamura 2020 conducted a survey which tested a translated version of the Generic Conspiracist Beliefs Scale (GCBS) introduced by Brotherton et al. 2013, with results suggesting that Japanese respondents had similar degrees of conspiracy belief to populations tested in other countries. There has, however, been little or no research into the specifics of Japanese conspiracy theories and how they may differ from those in other countries or regions. This is in spite of the public prominence of certain conspiracy theories; for example, a conspiracy theory claiming that certain media companies (notably the centre-left Asahi Group) are secretly run and funded by hostile governments in an attempt to undermine Japan regularly appears in far-right circles.

A significant uptick in interest in conspiracy theories and participation in online conspiracy theory communities was reported during the COVID-19 pandemic, which saw the emergence of groups such as "JAnon" and "Yamato-Q" which created and disseminated conspiracy theories related to the pandemic, the COVID vaccine, and other local

188 and global political topics. These groups draw from the "QAnon" conspiracy theories
189 that have become prominent in the extreme right in the United States, and their ori-
190 gins generally lie in translating QAnon theories and adapting their content to the local
191 Japanese context. There is clear evidence that these groups are also radicalising some
192 of their members, as was seen with QAnon in the U.S. – in one notable case, five partici-
193 pants in Yamato-Q conspiracy groups were tried and convicted in late 2022 for breaking
194 into a COVID vaccination center in Tokyo.

195 **2 Data and Methods**

196 In order to observe the development and dissemination of conspiracy theories in re-
197 sponse to the rapidly evolving information environment after the assassination was
198 reported, data were gathered from social media in real-time during the two-week pe-
199 riod directly following the event. These data were then analysed using a combination
200 of methods: human coding text analysis was used to identify conspiracy theories and
201 track their evolution in response to the changing information about the assassination,
202 while network analysis was used to identify the key social media accounts involved in
203 both creating and spreading these theories. Finally, additional data about those key
204 social media accounts (identified as the core community responsible for these con-
205 spiracy narratives) was gathered, allowing a more in-depth analysis of the information
206 environment – or the so-called "filter bubble" – in which these accounts exist.

207 **2.1 Data Collection**

208 The shooting was initially reported by Japan's domestic media at around 11.40am, and
209 gathering of social media posts related to the incident was started a few minutes later,
210 at around 11.50am. Posts were collected from the Twitter REST API for a period of 15
211 days, spanning the day of the incident and the following two weeks. Data collection
212 was carried out using a script that ran automatically every 15 minutes and collected
213 the maximum number of available Tweets matching a given set of keywords in the

214 prior 15 minute period. This approach bypassed the Twitter Streaming API, which did
215 not necessarily provide a representative sample of Tweets on a topic (see for example
216 Stieglitz et al. 2018) – while it still relied on the search functions of the REST API
217 (which may also return incomplete results in some circumstances), this API usually
218 provided a complete data-set as long as the volume of matching posts did not exceed
219 the traffic limits in each 15 minute window (see Hino and Fahey 2019, for more details
220 on this type of approach to data collection). During the 15 day data collection period
221 for this project, the data rate limit was not matched or exceeded in any 15 minute
222 window, so the resulting data set can be assumed to be complete with some degree of
223 confidence.

224 The keywords targeted by this data collection process were a combination of the for-
225 mer Prime Minister’s surname, *Abe*, and any of the following: Far-Left (*sayoku*), Anti-
226 Japanese (*han-nichi*), and Foreign Resident (*zainichi*)¹. Two other keywords were also
227 initially included in the collection process – Far-Right (*uyoku*) and Foreign Country
228 (*gaikoku*) – but were dropped as it rapidly became clear that no conspiracy theories
229 alleging far-right involvement were being circulated, while tweets including the “for-
230 eign country” keyword were extremely common and generally referred to messages of
231 condolence from various foreign embassies or leaders.

232 In total, approximately 240,000 tweets matching these keyword patterns were gath-
233 ered over the 15 day period. The frequency with which each keyword appeared (along
234 with the *Abe* keyword) is shown in Figure 1. The same data is also presented on a log
235 scale in Figure 2. While there was some degree of traffic for each of the keywords,
236 “far-left” was by far the most common, with orders of magnitude more tweets being
237 sent including this keyword than either of the others. The use of this term should not
238 be taken at face value as referring to extremist left-wing groups or activists – it is very
239 common within right-wing circles in Japan to use the term “far-left” to refer to a range
240 of centrist and centre-left groups, including the national broadcaster, NHK, and the

¹This term, *zainichi*, is mostly used to refer specifically to Korean long-term residents of Japan, who are often the target of right-wing hate speech and conspiracy theories, rather than being a common blanket term for foreign residents in general.

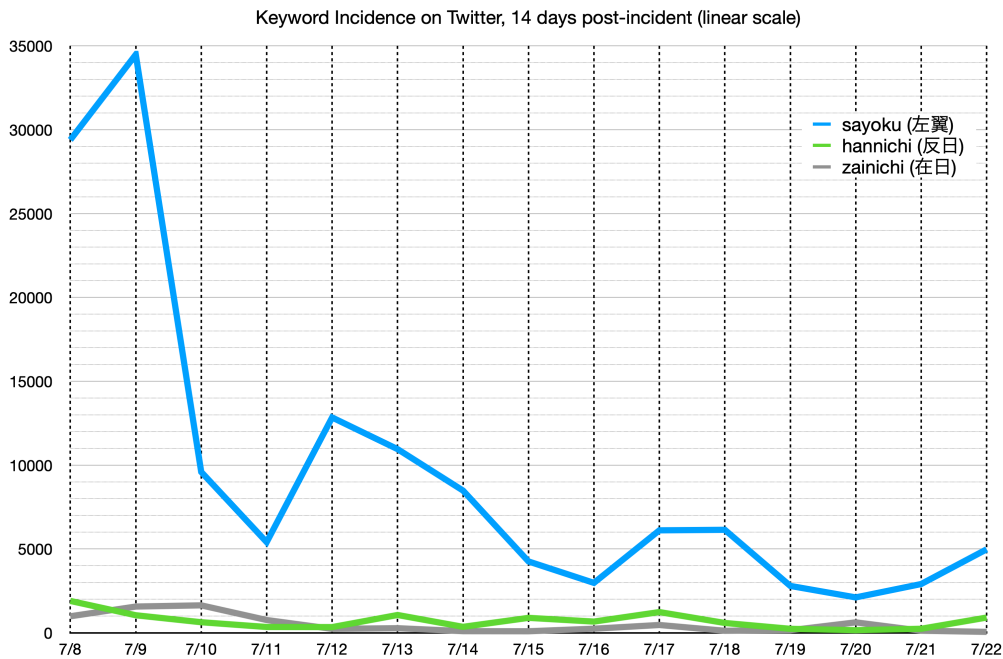


Figure 1: **Keyword Frequency on Twitter (Linear Scale)**

241 mainstream centre-left opposition party, the Constitutional Democratic Party.

242 Within this data set of c.240,000 tweets, there were some 147 accounts whose posts
 243 had been shared (retweeted) at least 100 times – these were identified as being the
 244 most influential accounts within this information environment, and were the primary
 245 focus of the analysis.

246 **2.2 Methodology: Tweet Analysis**

247 Before moving on to any more complex analysis of community structure or identity, the
 248 first step was to ensure that the accounts in the data set were actually tweeting about
 249 conspiracy theories. While many powerful and advanced tools for computer-assisted
 250 text analysis now exist, this task required making judgements about whether a tweet
 251 was actually promoting a conspiracy narrative, as distinct from simply being angry or
 252 rude, leaping to conclusions, or being mistaken about factual matters – all of which
 253 may be things that add far more noise than signal to discourses around a topic, but
 254 which nonetheless do not qualify as conspiracy theories. This task demands a nuanced
 255 understanding of the content of the text that is beyond existing computer-assisted clas-

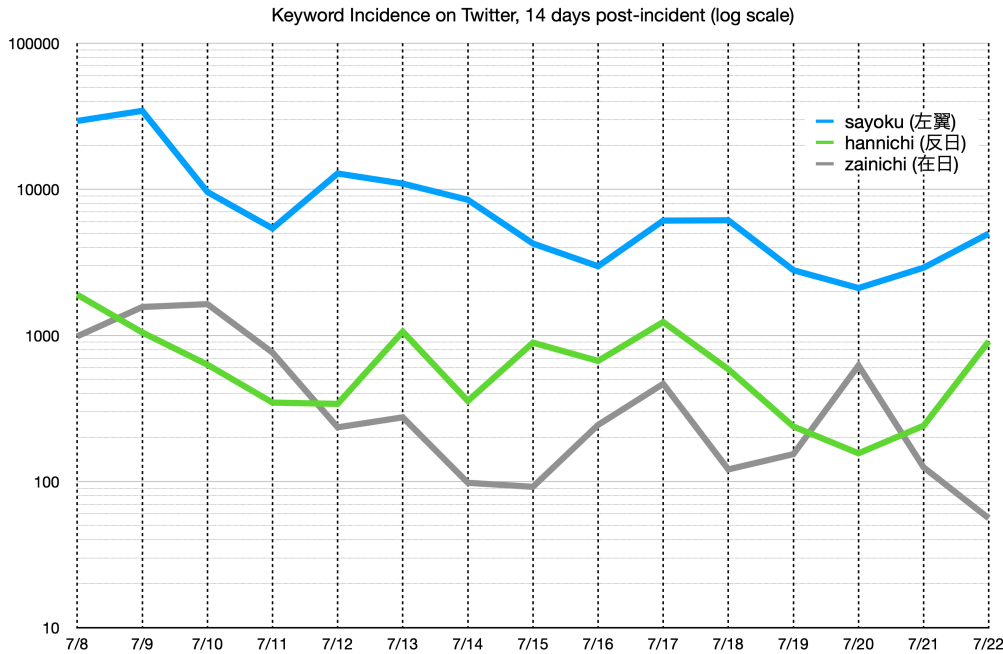


Figure 2: **Keyword Frequency on Twitter (Logarithmic Scale)**

256 sification systems. Instead, all of the tweets sent by the 147 high-engagement accounts
 257 in the data set were read and classified by hand in accordance with the following simple
 258 rubric.

259 A tweet was judged to contain or promote a conspiracy theory if it met one or more of
 260 the following criteria:

- 261 1. The post directly contradicted established facts about the case – not merely be-
 262 ing wrong about the facts, but specifically stating that the facts as reported and
 263 established are wrong, and promoting an alternative, unsupported narrative.
- 264 2. The post made serious unsubstantiated allegations – for example, accusing an
 265 individual or organisation of complicity in the assassination.
- 266 3. The post directly made allegations that the public has been deliberately lied to
 267 and misled about the incident.

268 Applying these criteria to the tweets excluded a large number of posts which, although
 269 inaccurate in their content, could be viewed as simply being mistaken, or as expressing
 270 a contrarian opinion without actually challenging established facts. A large majority of

271 the posts which were excluded were extremely angry, uncivil, and accusatory towards
272 left-wing groups in particular, but those accusations were often related to the posters'
273 perception of left-wing individuals' attitudes and behaviours – accusing them of having
274 treated Abe unfairly in the past, for example, or angrily claiming that they were not
275 showing an appropriate level of respect following his death. Other posts were simply
276 framed as speculation; for example, quite a few posts in the immediate aftermath of the
277 shooting argued that it was likely that a left-wing activist was responsible, or that this
278 was in some way a direct outcome of the left's powerful dislike of Abe. These posts were
279 speculative and ultimately inaccurate, but they did not directly challenge established
280 facts since, at this point, no facts in this regard had been established; consequently
281 they were not classified as conspiracy theory posts. Similar posts made some time later,
282 which continued to promote these narratives as a direct challenge to the established
283 facts of the situation, would however be classified as conspiracy theories.

284 The application of these criteria excluded the majority of the tweets and accounts in
285 the data set. However, of the 147 high-engagement accounts initially identified, 30
286 accounts did make posts that were labelled as containing or promoting conspiracy the-
287 ories about the assassination. These posts fell broadly into the following two categories,
288 translated examples of each of which can be seen in [Table 1](#). While conspiracy theories
289 that did not match either of these classifications were also found in the data set (for
290 example, there were a few posts claiming that Abe was secretly a left-wing agent who
291 had worked to undermine right-wing causes in Japan), these were much less common
292 and were not widely shared by other users.

- 293 1. **Cover-up:** Claims that the widespread reporting of the assassin's motives being
294 related to the Unification Church are part of an attempt by the liberal media to
295 cover up the involvement of left-wing groups in the incident.
- 296 2. **Hostile Agents:** Claims that foreign agents and/or anti-Japanese groups have
297 infiltrated the government and key social institutions in order to cover up the truth
298 about the assassination, or to disrupt and undermine memorial services for the

former Prime Minister.

1	Beating on the LDP using their connections to the Unification Church or Nippon Kaigi is a far-left conspiracy theory! Former PM Abe was shot by a suspect who believed their conspiracies!
2	[A compilation of falsehoods spread by filthy anti-Japanese Korean forces to discredit Abe] It is a falsehood that he is related to the Unification Church!
3	Left-wing parties and media made Abe into a target by continually spreading hate against him. Japan's peace and democracy have been destroyed by letting these Russian and Chinese spies roam freely.
4	The government has no choice but to hold a state funeral [for Abe] in the autumn, even though there are anti-Japanese and Chinese agents in the Cabinet!
5	Government facilities didn't put their flags at half-mast because someone in heart of government opposed it. Who are the anti-Abe, anti-Japanese figures in the Kishida administration? Find them and drive them out!

Table 1: **Examples of Conspiracy Theory Tweets**

300 These conspiracy narratives were also seen to evolve over time, responding to the emer-
 301 gence of new facts and details about the incident. The initial tweets positing that a
 302 left-wing activist or a foreign agent was likely responsible for the shooting morphed into
 303 conspiracy theory narratives when the killer's identity was revealed, showing that he was
 304 neither a foreigner nor notably left-wing – the earliest conspiracy theories in the data are
 305 those positing that the naming of the killer was a lie by the police and liberal media, or
 306 that he was merely a “patsy” being used to hide the involvement of the left-wing. As the
 307 role of the Unification Church in the killer's motivation was reported (initially by smaller
 308 or more fringe media outlets, with the mainstream media using terms like “a certain
 309 religious organisation” to avoid naming the church until a few days after the assassina-
 310 tion, by which point its identity was open knowledge on social media), the conspiracy
 311 theories shifted. The initial conspiracies continued the narrative of a left-wing cover-
 312 up, claiming that the Unification Church was another red herring designed to distract
 313 from the real culprits; this point also sees the emergence of conspiracy theories which
 314 reject the decades of documentation of the Abe family's involvement with the Unifi-
 315 cation Church and claim that Abe's involvement with the church had been fabricated
 316 by his political enemies and the media. A few days after the assassination, there was

317 a lull in conspiracy theory posts as the accounts which had been active in this sphere
318 mostly shifted to angry attacks on left-wingers who had come out in opposition to plans
319 for a state funeral for Abe. At the same time, however, the conspiracy theory narrative
320 regarding the Unification Church began to change; new theories emerged which no
321 longer rejected reports of Abe's involvement with the church, but instead posited an
322 alternative narrative of that involvement, claiming that Abe had been secretly working
323 with the church to undermine communist regimes and their agents.

324 **2.3 Methodology: Community Structure and Identity**

325 The set of thirty accounts which were identified as posting conspiracy theories became
326 the core focus of the next stage of the research, which aimed to identify the structure
327 of the online community creating and disseminating these conspiracy theories, as well
328 as gaining insights into the identity and self-perception of the individuals involved in
329 those communities.

330 To examine the structure of the community, a network graph was constructed from the
331 retweets of posts by the "conspiracy theory author" accounts during the target period.
332 By analysing the resulting network (primarily using Gephi, Bastian et al. [2009](#)), it was
333 possible to draw conclusions about the extent to which these authors form a cohesive
334 online community, as against being lone figures sharing their individual conspiracy
335 theories with a distinct audience. It was also possible to isolate and examine the next
336 level of the network – the Twitter accounts which did not author conspiracy theories, but
337 which retweeted large numbers of conspiracy theory posts. 548 of these accounts that
338 regularly disseminated conspiracy theory tweets were identified, some of which had a
339 large number of followers. They were not directly involved in the creation of conspiracy
340 theory narratives, but played an important role in the community nonetheless, expand-
341 ing the reach of the conspiracy theory authors and allowing these narratives to reach a
342 much wider potential audience.

343 In order to understand the identity of this community in more detail, two further data

344 collection processes were run on the identified accounts – the 30 conspiracy theory
345 authors, and 548 conspiracy theory spreaders. Firstly, all of the tweets sent by these
346 accounts in the three months prior to the assassination were collected; next, a full list
347 of all of the Twitter accounts followed by each member of the community was gath-
348 ered. These data allowed an in-depth examination of the information consumed and
349 shared by this community – the so-called “filter bubble” (Pariser 2011), a unique me-
350 dia and information environment that is created through a combination of the user’s
351 following choices and the social media platform’s hidden algorithmic choices. These
352 function to personalise the information presented to the user, generally delivering in-
353 formation that matches their tastes while hiding or deprioritising information they are
354 less likely to favour. While some version of this process has always existed – individuals
355 choose to consume media based on how well it matches their preferences, and often
356 surround themselves with like-minded acquaintances, for example – filter bubbles on
357 social media are suspected of playing a role in radicalisation and polarisation, as they
358 present only information that supports an individual’s biases while hiding challenging
359 or dissenting information. Moreover, the algorithmic component to a social network’s
360 filter bubble tends to favour showing users posts that will provoke a strong reaction and
361 make them more likely to re-share or otherwise engage with the post, which can lead
362 algorithms to prioritise extreme material over more balanced or centrist posts.

363 To examine the filter bubble surrounding the core community of conspiracy theory au-
364 thors and spreaders, each account’s most-retweeted accounts in the three months prior
365 to the assassination were identified and a network graph showing the most influential
366 and highly shared accounts within this community was constructed. As a simple exer-
367 cise in digital ethnography, a new Twitter account which follows all of those influential
368 accounts was created, and the information environment of that account was observed
369 for a two-week period, with particular attention paid to how the salience of certain is-
370 sues differed between Japan’s mainstream media (the “consensus reality” of popular
371 TV news networks and newspapers) and this community’s specific media diet. Finally,
372 the following data for the core community accounts was used to create a statistical

373 comparison between the online media following choices of this community, and the
374 following choices of Japanese Twitter users in general.

375 **3 Results**

376 **3.1 Network Analyses**

377 The retweet network surrounding the 30 accounts identified as authoring conspiracy
378 theories during the two weeks following the assassination incident is shown in [Figure 3](#).
379 A strongly connected core community can clearly be seen – many of the accounts’ posts
380 are being retweeted by the same users, suggesting a relatively close-knit community
381 rather than a series of “lone wolf” conspiracy authors – but a number of the major
382 accounts also have large audiences re-sharing their posts who are not connected to
383 any other part of the community graph. These accounts, which only shared one or
384 two conspiracy theory tweets from a single author’s account, are extremely important
385 to the process of disseminating conspiracy theories beyond the small core community
386 from which they originate. Users who are not deeply involved with the conspiracy theory
387 community are more likely to reach audiences of new potential believers, whereas those
388 whose online activity is very focused around conspiracy theories already are more likely
389 to be “preaching to the choir” with their posts and re-sharing activity.

390 To observe the core community more closely, [Figure 4](#) shows the same graph as the
391 prior figure, but with any node (account) with less than five edges (connections, in
392 this case meaning retweets) being removed from the visualisation. Here the close-
393 knit nature of this core community becomes much more apparent – almost all of the 30
394 authors are connected to one another directly (meaning that they are actively sharing
395 and engaging with each other’s posts), while a larger group of 548 very active sharers
396 are involved in aggregating conspiracy theory posts from multiple authors by sharing
397 them with their followers on their Twitter timelines. To borrow the metaphor of the rabbit
398 hole from *Alice in Wonderland* which is often used to describe radicalisation processes,

399 if the point clouds of accounts which only retweet posts from a single conspiracy author
400 seen in [Figure 3](#) are the entrance to the rabbit hole, easily stumbled upon by newcomers
401 to these conspiracy narratives, this close-knit community is the labyrinthine interior –
402 being led to any of these c.600 accounts would expose a new potential believer to a
403 wide set of conspiracy narratives from various different authors, and following these
404 accounts would effectively bring the new believer deeper into the rabbit hole.

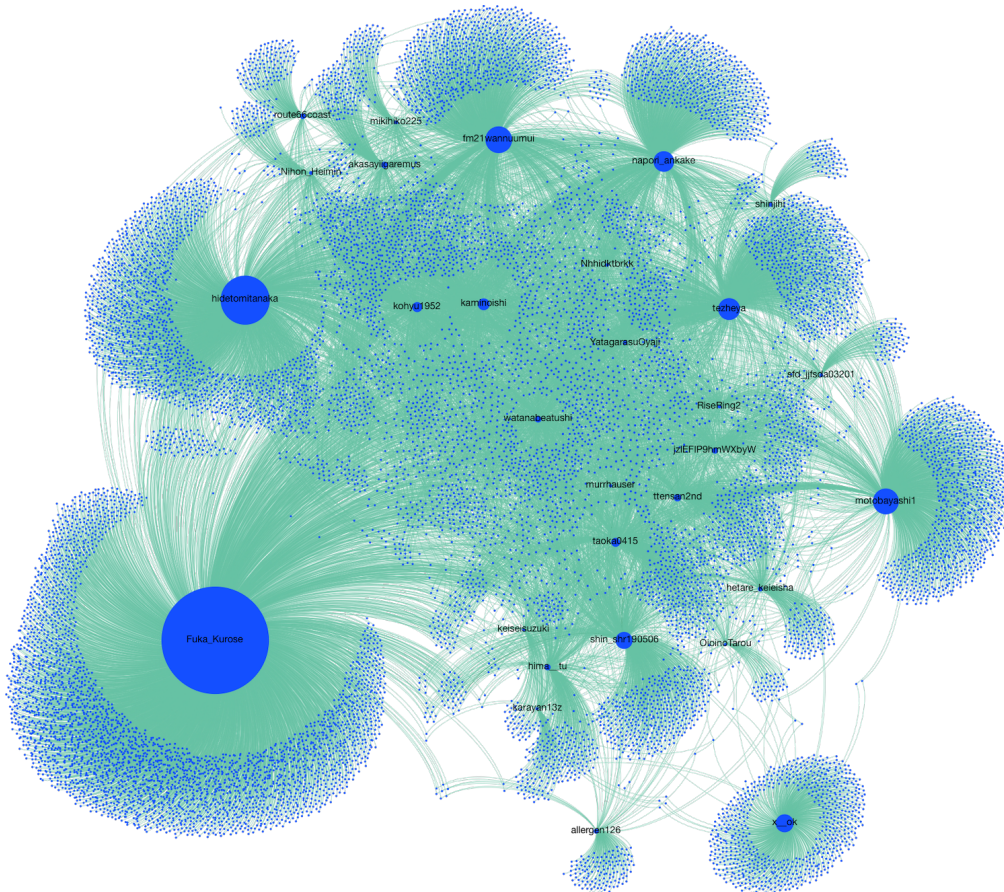


Figure 3: **Retweet network surrounding conspiracy authors**

405 The cohesive and close-knit nature of the community is also important because a sense
406 of community and tribal belonging is a major part of the appeal of of conspiracy theory
407 groups, and other radicalisation groups, for many of their members (e.g. Bélanger et al.
408 [2020](#); Hodge and Hallgrimsdottir [2020](#); Nagle [2017](#)). Such communities may have an
409 especially powerful draw for individuals who feel isolated, powerless, or with a strong
410 sense of anomie: the conspiracy theory group offers community, the desire to spread
411 its beliefs making it very welcoming to new members, while the theories themselves

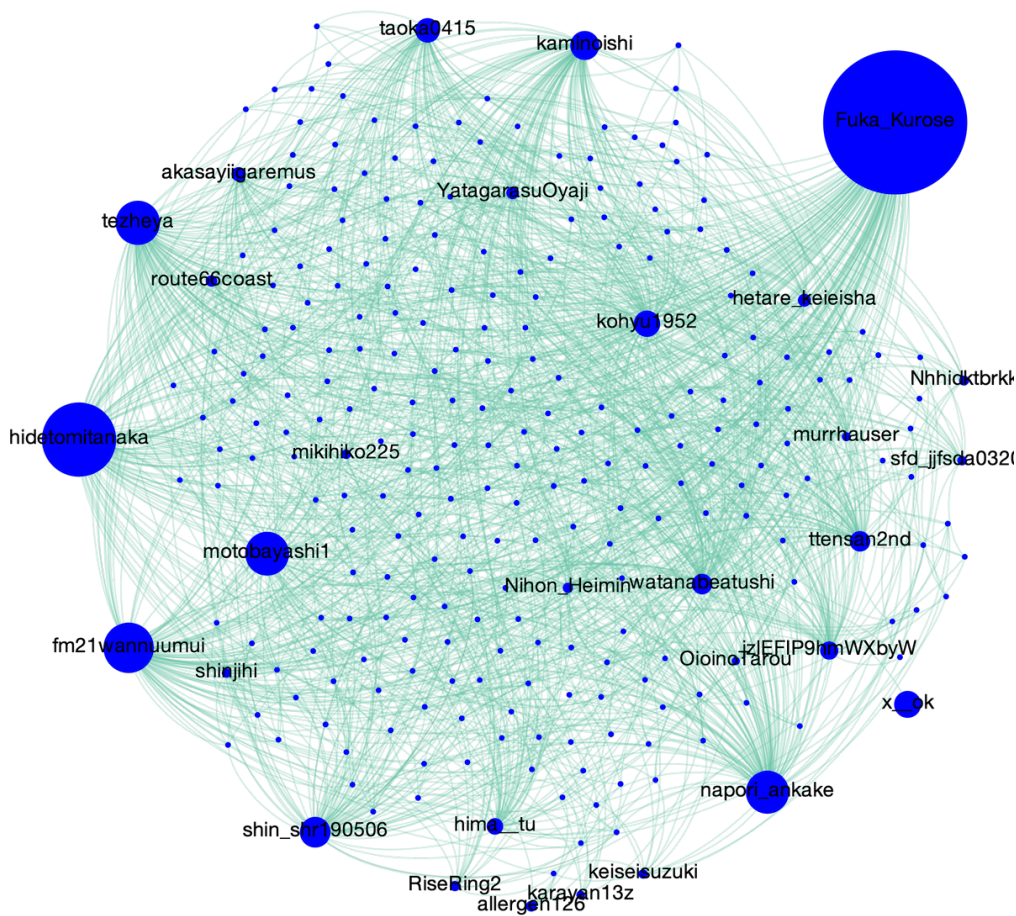


Figure 4: **Retweet network, showing only prolific retweeters (>5)**

412 empower believers with a sense of having access to important knowledge that most
 413 ordinary people are ignorant about, which further deepens the sense of tribalism and
 414 of connection to fellow believers.

415 Another way to visualise the extent to which such a network is cohesive is to calculate
 416 Jaccard Similarity on a pairwise basis between each of the accounts, allowing the con-
 417 struction of a new version of the network where accounts whose posts are retweeted
 418 by many of the same people are more closely connected. This network is visualised in
 419 [Figure 5](#), and while there are some outliers that are not so strongly connected to the
 420 rest of the community, the majority of the accounts are seen to be very closely intercon-
 421 nected. In particular, the largest and most-followed accounts (represented by the size
 422 of the nodes in this visualisation, the largest having 232,120 followers, with the mean

423 being 37,793) are all closely connected to one another, and make up the most central
424 part of this community.

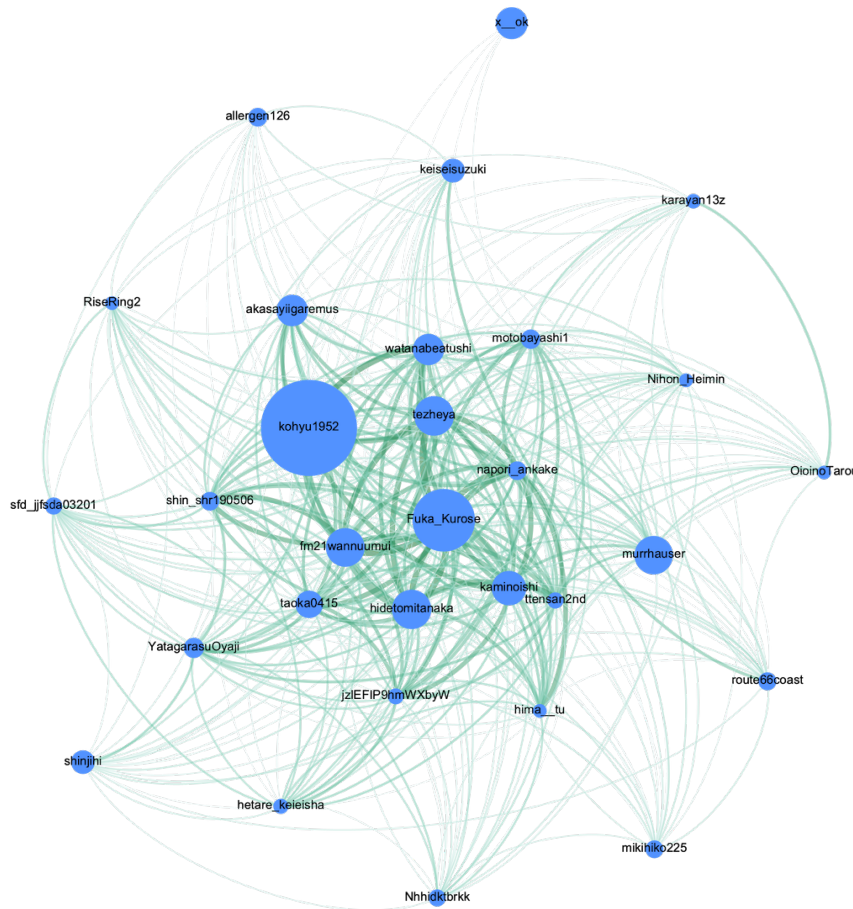


Figure 5: **Retweet network, Jaccard Similarity among conspiracy authors**

425 **3.2 Information Environment**

426 To understand the information environment in which this conspiracy theory community
427 exists, the other Twitter accounts (external to the community) that were most commonly
428 retweeted by the community members in the three months before the assassination
429 are shown in [Figure 6](#). The small green nodes represent conspiracy theory community
430 members, while the red nodes are external accounts that they retweeted. It's impor-
431 tant to note that the accounts shown here were not themselves authoring or promoting
432 conspiracy theories – but they are the most popularly reshared accounts by those indi-

433 viduals who do author and promote such theories, and as such, make up a key part of
434 the information environment in which these conspiracy theories were created.

435 Perhaps the most notable thing about this graph is what is missing: none of Japan's
436 most widely viewed and generally trusted media sources appear in the graph. The
437 only national newspaper in the group of extensively reshared accounts is the right-wing
438 Sankei Shimbun (@Sankei_news), which has the lowest circulation of Japan's national
439 daily newspapers and is the most politically extreme among them. The centre-right
440 Yomiuri Shimbun and centre-left Asahi Shimbun are far more popular newspapers in
441 general (in fact, they are the world's top two newspapers by daily circulation), but neither
442 of them appear in this group; nor does NHK News, the news and current affairs arm of
443 the country's national broadcaster (which is funded through a license fee like the UK's
444 BBC, and generally enjoys very high levels of viewership and audience trust), or any
445 other television news network.

446 Instead, the graph includes a large number of accounts which would probably be en-
447 tirely unfamiliar to the average Japanese citizen. While there are some accounts be-
448 longing to recognisable right-wing figures with some media profile – journalists such as
449 Kadota Ryusho and Arimoto Kaori have appeared on network TV current affairs shows
450 alongside more regular appearances on right-wing YouTube channels and other fringe
451 media outlets – and a number of right-wing political figures including Abe Shinzō him-
452 self, few of these accounts have any following outside far-right circles. A number of other
453 politicians appear, but they are generally minor figures in the political world – several
454 are members of local assemblies whose outspoken right-wing views give them an online
455 media profile far in excess of what would be expected given their elected office. The
456 majority of these accounts, however, are anonymous far-right news sources – blogs or
457 social media outlets with no information about their authors, owners, or funders. Some
458 of these accounts pose as individuals, but their very high posting frequency suggests
459 that they may be the effort of a group; a few use the persona of a young woman and
460 an attractive profile picture, but here too the frequency of posting makes it seem likely
461 that an unknown group of people is coordinating the operations of some of those ac-

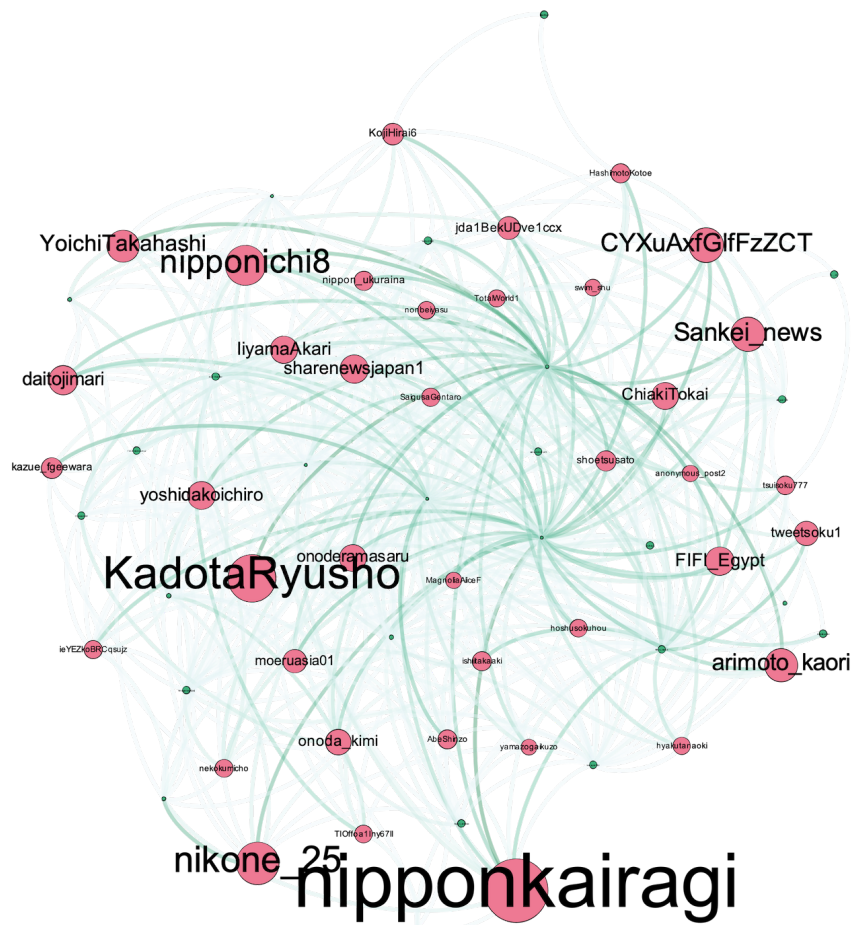


Figure 6: **Most-shared media accounts within the conspiracy community** (three months to July 7, 2022)

counts. Cases have emerged in recent years of political “influencers” in other countries who had in fact never existed, with their profile pictures being AI-generated; given that Twitter accounts are by default inherently anonymous and opaque it is entirely possible that this is also happening in some of these cases.

The extent to which the conspiracy theory community has rejected Japan’s mainstream media outlets in favour of these fringe, often anonymous information sources can be seen clearly in [Figure 7](#). This graph compares the overall follower numbers of a wide range of media accounts (an indicator of their popularity among Japanese social media users in general) with the percentage of accounts within the conspiracy theory community “filter bubble” which follow them. The contrast is very clear; the most popular accounts among ordinary Japanese citizens are among the least popular for conspir-

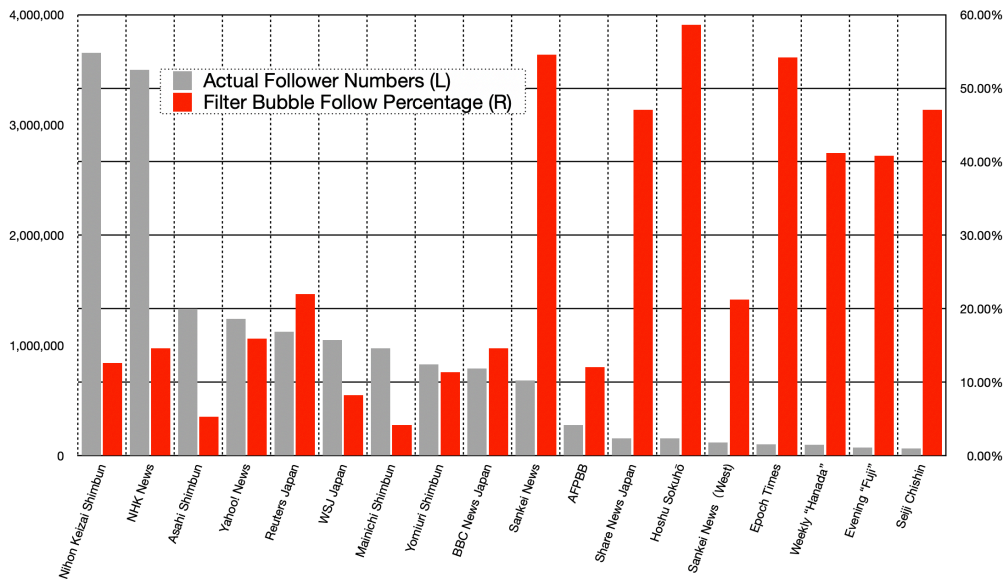


Figure 7: **Percentage of conspiracy community following major media accounts, vs. total followers for each account**

473 acy community members, and vice versa. In fact, conspiracy community members are
 474 unlikely to follow any of the mainstream media accounts – so it is not merely that they
 475 consumer media from these mainstream outlets but do not choose to retweet it, but
 476 rather that they have excluded these outlets from their information environment en-
 477 tirely. Instead, they are most likely to follow far-right fringe media outlets like the *Epoch*
 478 *Times* (a newspaper associated with the Falun Gong religious movement in China) and
 479 the *Hoshu Sokuhō* blog site, which most Japanese people have probably never heard
 480 of.

481 **3.3 Inside the Filter Bubble**

482 To understand how the information environment inside the filter bubble represented in
 483 [Figure 6](#) and [Figure 7](#) actually differs from the information presented by Japan’s main-
 484 stream media, a Twitter account which follows all of the accounts that are popular within
 485 the conspiracy community was created, and the timeline created for this account by the
 486 Twitter algorithm was checked daily over a two-week period. The differences between
 487 the information presented to this account and the information presented in Japan’s
 488 mainstream media (TV news bulletins and newspaper top stories) were assessed using

489 the framework suggested by agenda-setting theory, thus being divided into first-order
490 and second-order differences. First-order differences relate to the salience of topics
491 – for example, if a certain topic is a major focus of one information environment, but
492 almost entirely ignored in the other, this would be a significant first-order difference.
493 Second-order differences relate to the framing of a topic and the position taken on that
494 topic; we would expect that even when a given topic has high salience in both informa-
495 tion environments, it may be presented very differently, even to the extent of different
496 media outlets or communities taking diametrically opposed stances on the topic.

497 The data for this analysis was collected over a two-week period in August 2022, start-
498 ing approximately one month after the assassination incident. During this period, the
499 mainstream news in Japan mostly alternated between two stories as their top news
500 item each day – the war in Ukraine, and ongoing investigations into other LDP mem-
501 bers’ links to the Unification Church – but a number of other stories were also featured
502 prominently, including the weak exchange rate of the Japanese Yen to the US Dollar,
503 speculation about the unwinding of pandemic related restrictions, and the ongoing ty-
504 phoon season (in particular, a lot of attention was paid to evacuation orders issued
505 when a major tropical storm made landfall in mid-August).

506 Strikingly, the information environment inside the conspiracy theorists’ filter bubble
507 did not simply present alternative perspectives on these events (second-order effects),
508 but rather had an almost entirely different set of priorities about what news was being
509 reported and discussed (i.e., first order effects). There was some discussion of both
510 the war in Ukraine and the investigation of the Unification Church, but it was relatively
511 low-traffic. Some talking points about Ukraine from far-right figures in the West (primar-
512 ily taking pro-Putin stances which blamed NATO for the conflict) were translated and
513 posted, but received low engagement within the community, perhaps because right-
514 wing groups in Japan tend to view Putin and Russia less positively than their Western
515 counterparts². Posts about the Unification Church were more widespread, but generally

²Japan has a significant territorial dispute with Russia over the latter’s occupation of the Kuril Is-
lands. Decuring the return of the four disputed islands is a *cause célébré* of many right-wing activists in
Japan, and right-wing groups regularly hold noisy demonstrations outside the Russian embassy in Tokyo

516 repeated the conspiracy theory that the community had settled on in the early weeks
517 after the assassination – i.e., that the engagement of Abe and other LDP figures with the
518 Unification Church was a secret cooperation aimed at fighting communism, and thus
519 praiseworthy. Economic issues and news about the typhoon season did not feature
520 at all; the only discussions related to the pandemic involved the sharing of translated
521 conspiracy theory materials related to COVID-19 vaccines.

522 Far more prominent than any of these topics, however, was what is perhaps best de-
523 scribed as “culture war” information – high-volume, high-engagement posts about is-
524 sues and events which were not major stories for the mainstream press, but which at-
525 tracted enormous attention from this community and its preferred information sources.
526 These stories tended to have xenophobic undercurrents (rumours and reports of for-
527 eign residents of Japan, especially Korean or Chinese residents, committing crimes
528 or engaging in anti-social behaviour were retweeted extensively within the network)
529 and often portrayed left-wing or anti-racist activists as being enemies of Japan who
530 are deliberately working to undermine the nation. One incident in particular captured
531 the attention of these information outlets for the majority of the two week period: a
532 small anti-racist demonstration which had been held outside a shop in Kanagawa (a
533 prefecture which encompasses many suburban areas surrounding the Tokyo metropo-
534 lis) whose owner had posted a sign explicitly refusing service to Chinese people. This
535 protest attracted less than a dozen people, was conducted peacefully, and lasted for
536 only an hour or two; unsurprisingly, no mainstream national media outlet picked up the
537 story, and the vast majority of Japanese citizens would be unaware of either the protest
538 or its inciting event. Within the filter bubble of the conspiracy community, however, this
539 was by far the most extensively reported and discussed news story of this two-week
540 period. Hundreds of tweets were posted about the event – condemning the protest,
541 seeking information about individual protesters and their employers, arguing that the
542 protest was an illegal disruption of the targeted business (as the store had closed early
demanding the return of the islands. Given this context, as well as the generally positive feelings about
the US and NATO among right-wingers in Japan, it is understandable if contrarian narratives about the
war in Ukraine have not found much appeal to these groups.

543 on that day) and demanding that the local authorities take action, and so on. Discus-
544 sions about this tiny protest reverberated through the community's echo chamber for
545 well over a week; to any observer whose primary sources of information are within this
546 bubble, this story (along with a handful of others about foreign residents committing
547 crimes) would appear to be the most important and prominent current affairs story in
548 Japan during this period.

549 **4 Conclusions**

550 In the days following the assassination of former Prime Minister Abe Shinzō, a series
551 of conspiracy theories about the incident were espoused by a right-wing community
552 on Twitter. These theories primarily involved claims that left-wing involvement in the
553 assassination was being covered up by the media and other institutions, and claims
554 that Japan's government has been infiltrated at various levels by hostile foreign agents
555 who worked to assist in this cover-up and damage Abe's legacy. The conspiracy theo-
556 ries being promoted evolved in response to changing facts about the case, and there
557 is some evidence to suggest that this evolution was strategic: in certain cases, con-
558 spiracy theorists responded to new facts by rejecting them and claiming that media
559 reporting them were covering up the truth, while in other cases, the conspiracy theories
560 themselves were adapted to fit the new information. Most notably, when the role of the
561 Unification Church in the killer's motivations was originally revealed, conspiracy theo-
562 rists rejected this as an attempt to distract and cover up the truth, but as this aspect
563 became more widely discussed in subsequent days, the conspiracy theories adapted
564 to accept the relationship between Abe and the Unification Church, positing that they
565 had been working together in secret to undermine communism.

566 It is notable also that the conspiracy theories created within this community tend to
567 reflect established conspiracy theories from other contexts – the response to the nam-
568 ing of the killer as a middle-aged Japanese man with a military background, for ex-
569 ample, was to label him as a 'patsy' being used as part of a cover-up, which mirrors

570 similar claims about Lee Harvey Oswald's role in the assassination of President John
571 F. Kennedy. The aforementioned claims that Abe had been working secretly with the
572 Unification Church to undermine communism and root out communist agents, on the
573 other hand, is a close match for some aspects of the QAnon conspiracy theories, specif-
574 ically the claim that President Donald Trump had been working in secret to undermine
575 a global criminal enterprise operated by corrupt Democrats, Hollywood liberals, and
576 other political foes of the right. It is possible that these are simply obvious templates
577 for a conspiracy theory explanation of a certain set of events – part of a corpus of
578 *ur*-conspiracies of sorts – but it is also worth noting that Japanese conspiracy theory
579 groups tend to be very aware of conspiracy theories from overseas, especially from the
580 United States and other English-speaking countries, with many online conspiracy the-
581 ory communities in Japan being initially focused on translating QAnon information into
582 Japanese for a domestic audience.

583 Perhaps the most striking feature about the community responsible for authoring and
584 disseminating these conspiracy theories is its small size. Only 30 accounts were ob-
585 served to be authoring original posts espousing conspiracy theories; a further 548 ac-
586 counts were identified as consistently re-tweeting conspiracy theories from multiple
587 authors, thus playing a key role in the dissemination of these ideas more widely. This
588 core community of fewer than 600 people appears to have been responsible for creat-
589 ing and spreading most if not all of the conspiracy theories about the assassination in
590 the weeks immediately following the incident. The potential audience for these conspir-
591 acy theories, however, was likely in the millions; while we cannot know exactly how many
592 people the Twitter algorithm chose to show these posts to, some of the core community
593 have hundreds of thousands of followers, while many thousands more people retweeted
594 just one or two conspiracy theories during this time – not enough activity to be consid-
595 ered a key part of the community, but certainly enough to lead some of their followers
596 “down the rabbit hole” towards conspiracy beliefs.

597 Within that “rabbit hole”, the conspiracy theory authors and the community surround-
598 ing them exist within a unique information environment that is dramatically different

599 from the information environment of the majority of Japanese citizens – what might be
600 described as the country’s consensus reality. Members of this community do not follow
601 or engage with Japan’s mainstream media, suggesting a lack of trust in media which
602 remains unusual in Japan, where trust in key media outlets such as NHK remains gener-
603 ally high. Instead, their information – at least online – comes from a set of sources that
604 are largely anonymous and opaque in nature, and which espouse hard-right viewpoints.
605 This information sphere does not just present alternative viewpoints on major news
606 stories; it has a radically different agenda and priorities to the mainstream media, ig-
607 noring major domestic and international news stories in favour of focusing relentlessly
608 on “culture war” issues, especially those related to foreign residents of Japan.

609 While the analytical approaches used in this study were able to give a good under-
610 standing of the activity and identity of this conspiracy theory community on Twitter, one
611 major limitation is that the community’s activities on other platforms beyond Twitter
612 could not be monitored. Private chat channels and image board systems like “2chan-
613 nel” (the original precursor to the United States’ controversial 4chan image board) also
614 likely played a key role in the formation of conspiracy narratives around this event, and
615 indeed, many tweets were identified which seemed to be summarising more lengthy
616 conspiracy discussions on 2channel into shorter posts.

617 The potential for radicalisation within a community and information sphere such as
618 the ones outlined above cannot be ignored, and even in Japan – where, the assassina-
619 tion of Abe Shinzō notwithstanding, political violence has been extremely rare in recent
620 decades – cases have been seen of individuals inspired by conspiracy theory beliefs
621 to commit criminal acts (for example, the group convicted of breaking into a COVID
622 vaccine centre in 2022). The community’s clear rejection of mainstream media outlets
623 presents a particular problem in this regard, as it makes it much more difficult to chal-
624 lenge the narrative and logic of conspiracy theories. A great deal more research will be
625 required to identify effective strategies for reaching out to conspiracy groups such as
626 the one documented in this study – and only at that point can the even more difficult
627 task of coaxing their members to leave the “rabbit hole” be attempted.

References

- 628
- 629 Aaronovitch, David (2010). *Voodoo Histories: The Role of the Conspiracy Theory in*
630 *Shaping Modern History*. 1st American ed. New York: Riverhead Books. 388 pp.
- 631 Bastian, Mathieu, Sebastien Heymann, and Mathieu Jacomy (2009). *Gephi: An Open*
632 *Source Software for Exploring and Manipulating Networks*.
- 633 Bélanger, Jocelyn J., Blaine G. Robbins, Hayat Muhammad, Manuel Moyano, Claudia
634 F. Nisa, Birga M. Schumpe, and Michelle Blaya-Burgo (Dec. 1, 2020). "Supporting
635 Political Violence: The Role of Ideological Passion and Social Network". In: *Group*
636 *Processes & Intergroup Relations* 23.8, pp. 1187–1203.
- 637 Bélanger, Jocelyn J., Birga M. Schumpe, Noémie Nociti, Manuel Moyano, Stéphane Dan-
638 deneau, Pier-Eric Chamberland, and Robert J. Vallerand (2019). "Passion and Moral
639 Disengagement: Different Pathways to Political Activism". In: *Journal of Personality*
640 87.6, pp. 1234–1249.
- 641 Brotherton, Robert, Christopher C. French, and Alan D. Pickering (2013). "Measuring
642 Belief in Conspiracy Theories: The Generic Conspiracist Beliefs Scale". In: *Frontiers*
643 *in Psychology* 4.
- 644 Bunzel, John H (1967). *Anti-Politics in America: Reflections on the Anti-Political Temper*
645 *and Its Distortions of the Democratic Process*. Knopf.
- 646 Carlson, Matthew M. and Steven R. Reed (2018). "Scandals During the Abe Administra-
647 tions". In: *Japan Decides 2017: The Japanese General Election*. Ed. by Robert Pekka-
648 nen, Steven Reed, Ethan Scheiner, and Daniel Smith. 1st edition 2018. Cham: Springer
649 International Publishing, pp. 109–126.
- 650 Cox, Daniel A (Feb. 11, 2021). *After the Ballots Are Counted: Conspiracies, Political Vi-*
651 *olence, and American Exceptionalism*. The Survey Center on American Life. URL:
652 [https://www.americansurveycenter.org/research/after-the-ballots-are-](https://www.americansurveycenter.org/research/after-the-ballots-are-counted-conspiracies-political-violence-and-american-exceptionalism/)
653 [counted-conspiracies-political-violence-and-american-exceptionalism/](https://www.americansurveycenter.org/research/after-the-ballots-are-counted-conspiracies-political-violence-and-american-exceptionalism/)
654 (visited on 09/06/2021).
- 655 Davis, David Brion (1971). *The Fear of Conspiracy: Images of Un-American Subversion*
656 *from the Revolution to the Present*. Ithaca [N.Y.]: Cornell University Press. 369 pp.

657 Eberl, Jakob-Moritz, Robert A. Huber, and Esther Greussing (May 31, 2021). “From Pop-
658 ulism to the “Plandemic”: Why Populists Believe in COVID-19 Conspiracies”. In: *Jour-
659 nal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties* 31 (sup1), pp. 272–284.

660 George Mulgan, Aurelia (July 6, 2017). *The Abe Administration and the Rise of the Prime
661 Ministerial Executive*. Routledge. 197 pp. Google Books: [SkcrDwAAQBAJ](#).

662 Goertzel, Ted (1994). “Belief in Conspiracy Theories”. In: *Political Psychology* 15.4, pp. 731–
663 742. JSTOR: [3791630](#).

664 Harris, Tobias (2020). *The Iconoclast: Shinzo Abe and the New Japan*. London: C Hurst.

665 Hino, Airo and Robert A. Fahey (2019). “Representing the Twittersphere: Archiving a
666 Representative Sample of Twitter Data under Resource Constraints”. In: *International
667 Journal of Information Management*.

668 Hodge, Edwin and Helga Hallgrimsdottir (Aug. 7, 2020). “Networks of Hate: The Alt-right,
669 “Troll Culture”, and the Cultural Geography of Social Movement Spaces Online”. In:
670 *Journal of Borderlands Studies* 35.4, pp. 563–580.

671 Levy, Neil (Dec. 20, 2007). “Radically Socialized Knowledge and Conspiracy Theories”.
672 In: *Episteme: A Journal of Social Epistemology* 4.2, pp. 181–192.

673 Lipset, Seymour Martin and Earl Raab (1970). *The Politics of Unreason: Right Wing
674 Extremism in America, 1790-1970*. Vol. 5. New York: Harper & Row.

675 Mahl, Daniela, Mike S. Schäfer, and Jing Zeng (Feb. 8, 2022). “Conspiracy Theories in
676 Online Environments: An Interdisciplinary Literature Review and Agenda for Future
677 Research”. In: *New Media & Society*, p. 14614448221075759.

678 Majima, Yoshimasa and Hiroko Nakamura (2020). “Development of the Japanese Ver-
679 sion of the Generic Conspiracist Beliefs Scale (GCBS-J)”. In: *Japanese Psychological
680 Research* 62.4, pp. 254–267.

681 Miller, Joanne M., Kyle L. Saunders, and Christina E. Farhart (2016). “Conspiracy En-
682 dorsement as Motivated Reasoning: The Moderating Roles of Political Knowledge
683 and Trust”. In: *American Journal of Political Science* 60.4, pp. 824–844.

684 Nagle, Angela (June 7, 2017). *Kill All Normies: Online Culture Wars From 4Chan And
685 Tumblr To Trump And The Alt-Right*. John Hunt Publishing. 140 pp.

686 Obaidi, Milan, Jonas Kunst, Simon Ozer, and Sasha Y. Kimel (2022). "The "Great Re-
687 placement" Conspiracy: How the Perceived Ousting of Whites Can Evoke Violent
688 Extremism and Islamophobia". In: *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations* 25.7,
689 pp. 1675–1695.

690 Oliver, J. Eric and Thomas J. Wood (2014). "Conspiracy Theories and the Paranoid
691 Style(s) of Mass Opinion". In: *American Journal of Political Science* 58.4, pp. 952–
692 966.

693 Pariser, Eli (May 12, 2011). *The Filter Bubble: What The Internet Is Hiding From You*.
694 Penguin UK. 246 pp.

695 Sawa, Yasuomi and Reiko Saisho (June 15, 2022). *2022 Digital News Report - Japan*.
696 University of Oxford: Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism.

697 Stieglitz, Stefan, Milad Mirbabaie, Björn Ross, and Christoph Neuberger (Apr. 2018).
698 "Social Media Analytics – Challenges in Topic Discovery, Data Collection, and Data
699 Preparation". In: *International Journal of Information Management* 39, pp. 156–168.

700 Theocharis, Yannis, Ana Cardenal, Soyeon Jin, Toril Aalberg, David Nicolas Hopmann,
701 Jesper Strömbäck, Laia Castro, Frank Esser, Peter Van Aelst, Claes de Vreese, Nico-
702 leta Corbu, Karolina Koc-Michalska, Joerg Matthes, Christian Schemer, Tamir Sheafer,
703 Sergio Splendore, James Stanyer, Agnieszka Stępińska, and Václav Štětka (Oct. 9,
704 2021). "Does the Platform Matter? Social Media and COVID-19 Conspiracy Theory
705 Beliefs in 17 Countries". In: *New Media & Society*, p. 14614448211045666.

706 Uscinski, Joseph E., ed. (2019). *Conspiracy Theories and the People Who Believe Them*.
707 New York, NY: Oxford University Press. 511 pp.

708 Wood, Michael J. and Karen M. Douglas (2015). "Online Communication as a Window
709 to Conspiracist Worldviews". In: *Frontiers in Psychology* 6.

710 Wood, Michael J., Karen M. Douglas, and Robbie M. Sutton (Nov. 1, 2012). "Dead and
711 Alive: Beliefs in Contradictory Conspiracy Theories". In: *Social Psychological and Per-
712 sonality Science* 3.6, pp. 767–773.