



Conspiracy Entrepreneurs and Conspiracy Believers

Conspiracy Theory Formation and Belief in Japan

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Events during the COVID-19 pandemic brought the dangers of conspiracy theory belief into sharp focus. From widespread vaccine refusal to the attack on the US Capitol on January 6, 2021, conspiracy theories have been seen to threaten public health, democracy, and social cohesion.

Conspiracy theories also have a long history in Japan, with certain partisan conspiracy theories being popular on both the left and the right.

During the pandemic new online groups such as **YamatoQ** and **J-Anon** appeared which disseminated localised versions of the American “Qanon” conspiracy materials. A new political party, **Sanseito**, campaigned in 2022 by explicitly embracing conspiracy beliefs, and won a seat in the House of Councillors.

My research looks at conspiracy theories in Asia and Europe, focusing for the moment on Japan, and seeks to understand how both the structure of the beliefs themselves, and their impact on political behaviour, differs between countries.

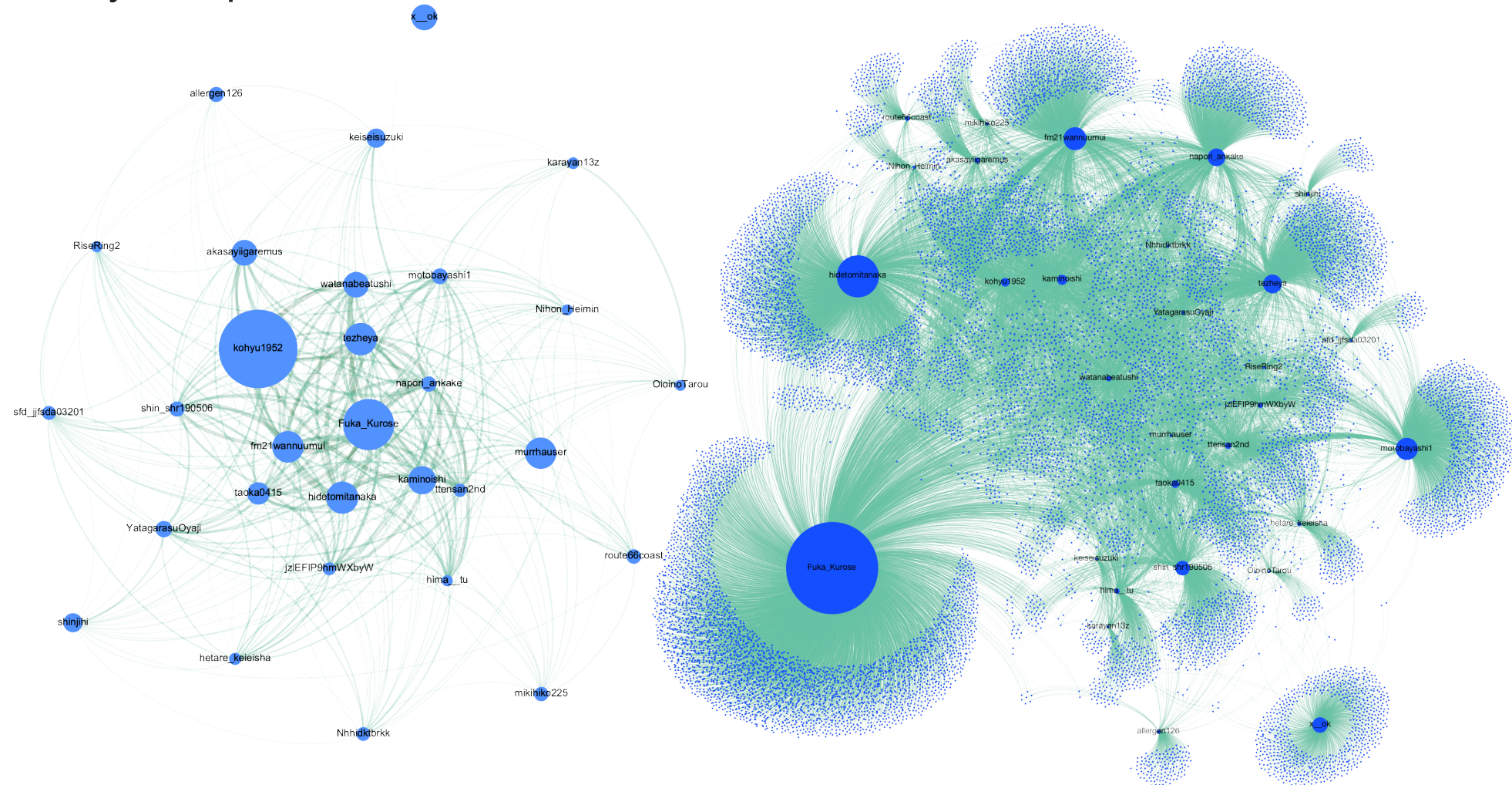
CONSPIRACY ENTREPRENEURS: CREATING AND SPREADING CONSPIRACIES IN THE WAKE OF THE ABE ASSASSINATION

Using Twitter data from the 14 days immediately after the assassination of former Prime Minister Abe Shinzō, posts promoting conspiracy theories were identified and the network of authors who wrote and propagated these theories was analysed.

Two types of theory were dominant:

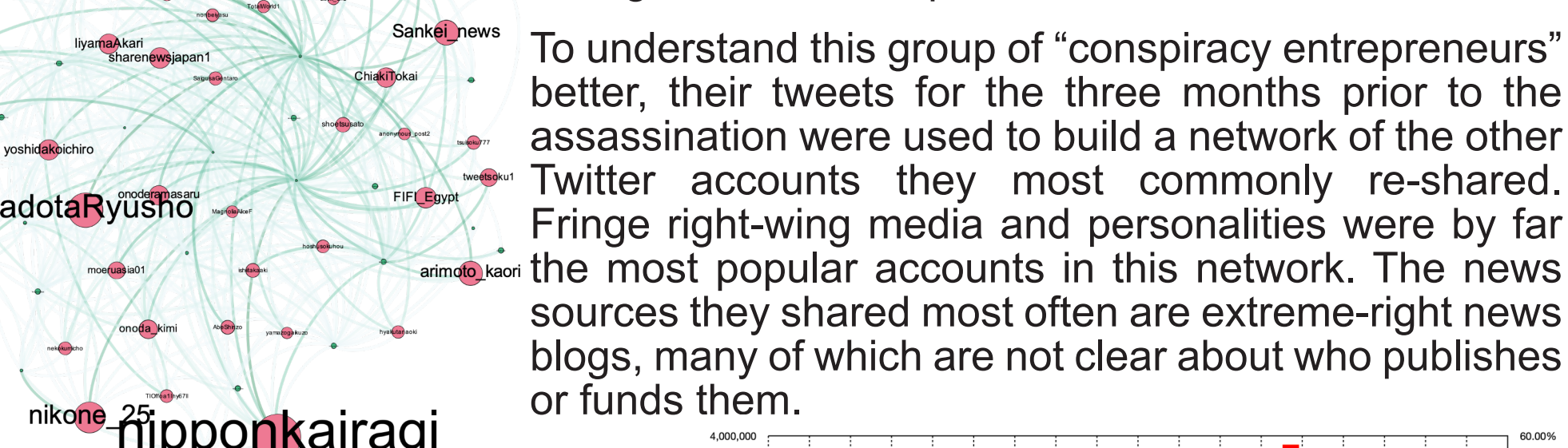
- 1) That the authorities were disseminating false information about the assassination to hide the culpability of left-wing or foreign agents;
- 2) That the government had been infiltrated by foreign agents who sought to undermine Abe's legacy.

These theories evolved in the hours and days after the assassination as new information became available. Often, the conspiracy theorists would first reject new information entirely, then later adapt their theory to incorporate it as it became more widely accepted.



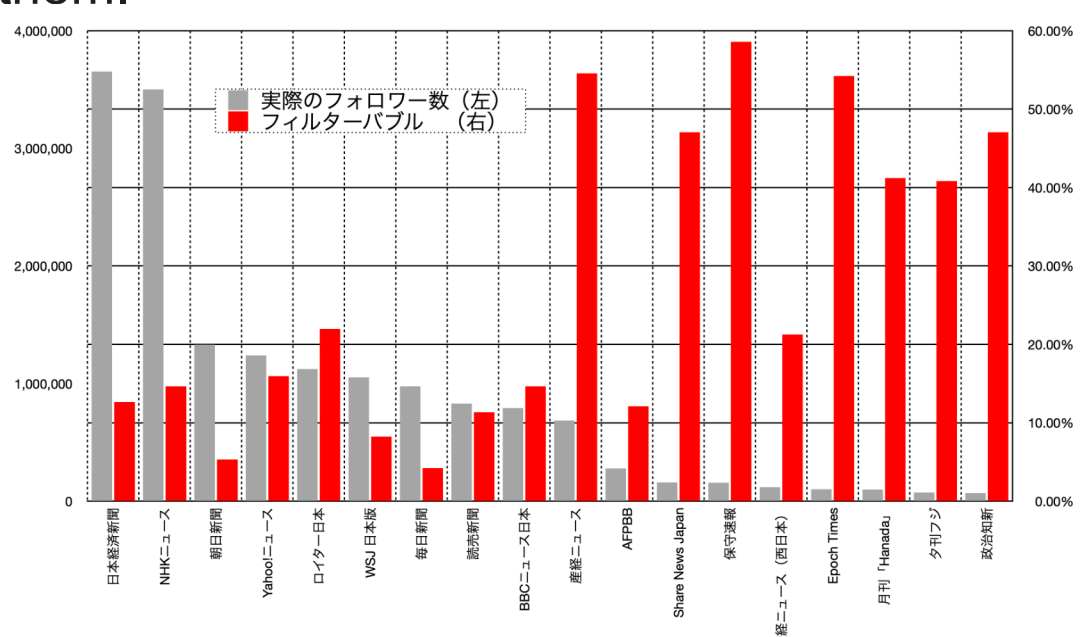
Left: Re-sharing activity between the 30 conspiracy authors.
Right: The authors' reach beyond their own core network - each dot is a retweet.

All of these conspiracy theories were authored by a group of just 30 accounts. A further 548 accounts retweeted and boosted the conspiracies extensively. This core group was very tightly interconnected; conspiracy authors all followed each other and boosted each other's posts. Although small, this network was able to reach millions of Twitter users during this two week period.



Above: The network of the conspiracy entrepreneurs' most commonly retweeted accounts prior to the assassination.

Right: The media accounts most commonly followed by the conspiracy network (red) compared to those most commonly followed by all Japanese Twitter users (grey).

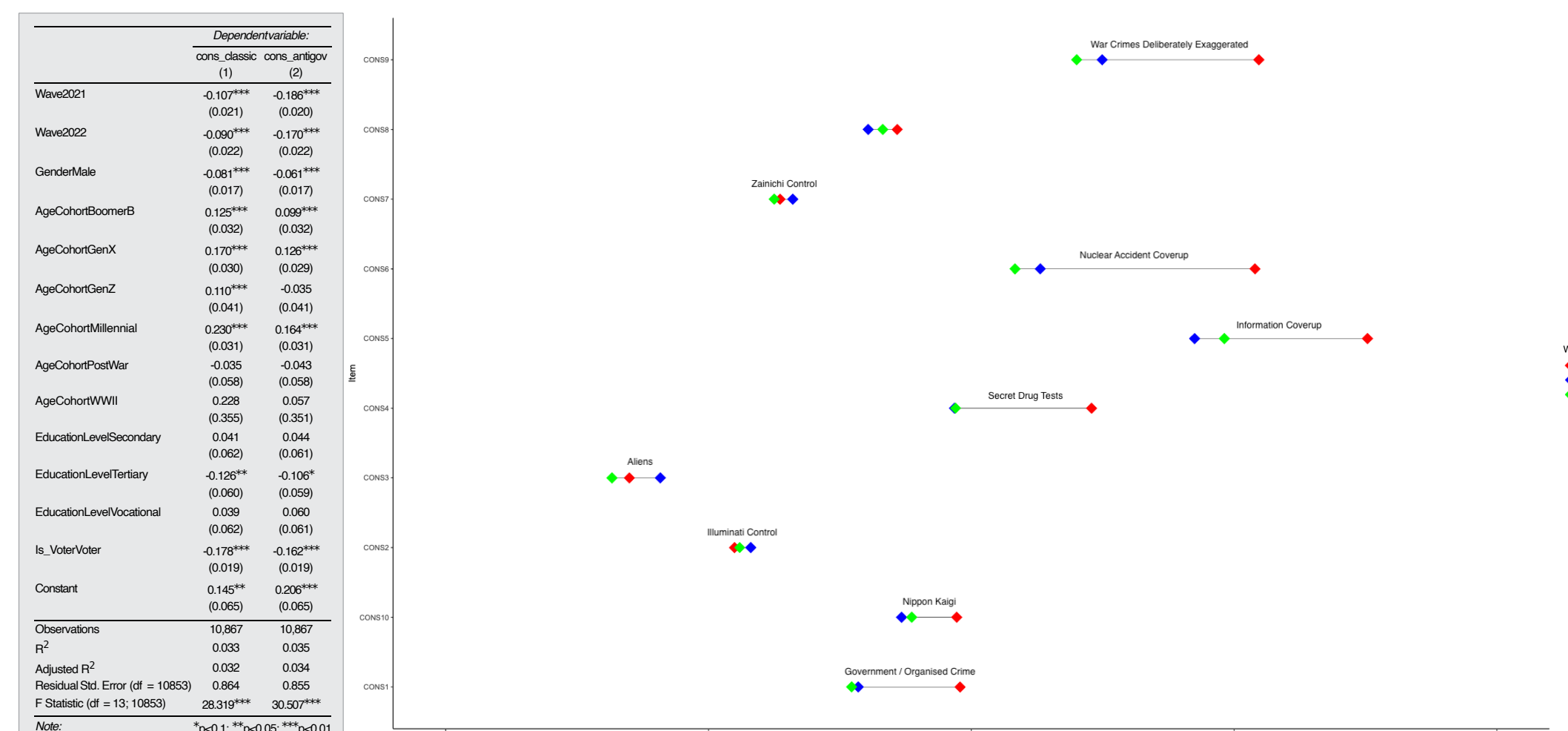


CONSPIRACY BELIEVERS: PUBLIC ATTITUDES TOWARDS CONSPIRACIES HARDENED DURING THE PANDEMIC

Since 2019, we have been asking questions about conspiracy theory beliefs as part of large-scale online electoral surveys at every Japanese election (2019, 2021, and 2022).

These questions include asking respondents about conspiracy theories specific to Japan, such as the right-wing conspiracy theory that historical accounts of the Second World War have been deliberately distorted to attack Japan, or the left-wing conspiracy theory that the Japanese government is being controlled from behind the scenes by Nippon Kaigi.

In addition, we ask about some more “universal” conspiracy theories: that contact with aliens is being covered up, that new drugs are being tested on citizens without their consent, or that a secret organisation controls all of the world's governments.



We find high partisanship associated with believing these conspiracy theories, although the only political party whose voters have an especially high propensity to believe in conspiracies is the NHK Party (Sanseito was not included in these surveys).

What was more surprising was that voters in 2021 and 2022 were significantly less likely to say they believed in conspiracy theories than in 2019 - suggesting that the heightened attention to conspiracy theories during the pandemic had actually hardened ordinary citizens' views against them.

This included pandemic-related conspiracy theories like the idea that drugs are secretly being tested on citizens - but conspiracy beliefs of all kinds, both right- and left-wing, dropped after the pandemic. The conspiracies for which belief remained stable pre- and post-pandemic were those with relatively low levels of belief to begin with, such as belief in alien contact or in the Illuminati.

Younger people (Gen X and below), less educated people, and non-voters were more likely to express conspiracy theory beliefs. (However, other research has suggested that many of the most fervent conspiracy theory believers are highly educated people - a pattern also found in cult religions.)

