



Primo Piano - John McAfee's suicide: the Internet and conspiracy theories

Roma - 21 nov 2021 (Prima Notizia 24) According to rumours, the suicide of tax evader, bitcoin supporter and antivirus software pioneer John McAfee (1945-2021) - a British naturalised US citizen - has prompted both grief and new conspiracy theories.

After his evading taxes and dribbling the US authorities for many years, a Spanish court ordered - in the first instance - McAfee's extradition a few hours before he was found dead. If he had been extradited, the 75-year-old man would have faced life imprisonment in the United States of America. Former National Security Agency employee and whistleblower Edward Snowden criticised the global influence of US law enforcement agencies and warned that McAfee's untimely end may not be the only one. He wrote on Twitter: "Europe should not extradite those accused of non-violent crimes to such an unfair justice system - and to such a cruel prison system – to the point that those accused in a judicial prosecution in the United States would rather die than be subjected to it". The founder of Cardano - an open source project linked to cryptocurrencies that aims to create a public blockchain platform (a digital ledger whose entries are grouped into 'blocks', concatenated in chronological order, and whose integrity is guaranteed by the use of cryptography) for the management of computer protocols that facilitate, check or enforce the negotiation or performance of a contract, sometimes enabling the partial or total exclusion of a contractual clause (smart contract) - Charles Hoskinson, praised McAfee for his contribution to computer science, calling him "one of the most mysterious and interesting people in the history of cryptocurrency and computing". "He is also a deeply troubled person" - Hoskinson added - pointing to McAfee's well-documented personal trauma from his substance abuse problems. "The reason for the suicide seems to be obvious: McAfee was 75 years old and extradition to the United States of America was likely. If found guilty, he would have faced over 30 years in prison and it is certain that he would also have been incarcerated [...] He seemed rather determined to choose to end his life in a Spanish prison instead of a US one." Bitcoin influencer and podcaster Anthony Pompliano recalls that McAfee was "kind, funny and very smart". "I once had the opportunity to spend a day with the legendary McAfee on a boat in the Bahamas. I will always remember that day. I have great respect for one of the most unique people in the world." Kim Dotcom - a German entrepreneur and computer scientist with Finnish citizenship - is an Internet entrepreneur who is fighting extradition charges from New Zealand over his file-sharing network Megaupload. He regrets that McAfee's drug abuse robbed him of his potential. He said: 'He was a pioneer in data security. I always thought it was too difficult for him to be around other people. He should have avoided drugs and instead concentrate on using his ingenuity all the time. When he was lucid, he was dedicated to everyone's freedom". Although McAfee's legal representative in Spain told Reuters that McAfee committed suicide, preferring to hang himself rather than face life in prison, predictably the Internet is full of conspiracy theories

claiming that McAfee did not die by his own hand. Shortly after McAfee's official Instagram account shared the image of the letter 'Q', controversies and allegations were raised, igniting the imagination of QAnon conspiracy theorists, according to whom there is a hypothetical secret plot organised by an alleged Deep State (which can be identified in some hidden powers) that would act against the former President of the United States of America, Donald Trump, and his supporters. Business Insider reported that QAnon influencers on Telegram have hundreds of thousands of followers and are sharing posts suspecting suicide stories. McAfee's tweets have been republished since the day he died, and one of them dates back to December 2019, when McAfee claimed that the government had threatened to assassinate him. Hence there are many who do not believe any version of his suicide. Other conspiracy theorists followed a June 2019 post in which he claimed to have a data treasure trove of 31 TB and more, containing evidence of government corruption. Every eccentric millionaire who argues with the government claims to have evidence of corruption, and if tragedy befalls them, everything will be made public. In the end, tragedy falls on many of them, but the evidence is never released to the media, unlike we often see in US movies. It is worth recalling that McAfee was no stranger to bold and strange statements, including a promise that if the price of Bitcoin did not exceed one million US dollars by 2021, he would devour his supporters on national television. In the last weeks of his life, McAfee's tweets in prison had also become increasingly sombre. In May 2021, he revealed he had discussed suicide with a cellmate: "Today a person who is facing a difficult situation has asked me if I know a painless method of suicide. I have little experience in this field and I am not very forthcoming. Surprisingly, the tone of the discussion then slipped into how to spend the time". It is worth noting that the businessman had no particular reason for the suicide. The fact is that the Spanish court's decision on extradition was not final. Hence McAfee could have subsequently tried to appeal that decision. It is alarming in this story that even last autumn McAfee stated he would not commit suicide under any circumstances. Javier Villalba, a Spanish lawyer for McAfee, told Reuters he believed that McAfee could simply not tolerate being locked up in a prison: "This is the result of a cruel system. There is no reason for this elderly person to be in prison for so long." Conspiracy theories are flourishing in the United States. Probably fewer people believe in the "moon conspiracy", which is - after all - a matter of national pride. The rest of the stories are similar: vaccinations and HIV - a conspiracy of pharmaceutical companies; global warming - a conspiracy of climatologists; Kennedy's assassination by the special services - the said special services even staged the 9/11 attacks and school massacres, etc. The story of Bill Gates implanting microchips in COVID-19 vaccines to track us has also sold well: according to the latest polls, 44% of the Republican Party's members believe it. The problem is that such views - sometimes naive, sometimes strange and sometimes wild - often have consequences. Some people think 5G towers are really spreading the coronavirus and go and burn them down. Others refuse to vaccinate their children, and so massively that the WHO included it for the first time in its list of threats to human health. With the advent of the COVID-19 vaccine, this could become an even bigger problem. It is vain to think that conspiracy theories are about someone else, and not the smartest people, and certainly not about you and your environment. A 2018 poll showed that 67% of Russians believed in a secret "world government" (in 2014 it was 45%), and 68% of

them have higher education. Conspiracy theories are not a consistent story to be believed or disbelieved. Rather, it is a multitude of interpretations of individual facts, each of which can occupy any place on a scale ranging from pure absurdity to scientific evidence. Some might consider the enslavement of humanity by aliens incredible, but oppose vaccination - or vice versa. Between scientific facts and explicit conspiracy theories, there is a large grey area, within which for each of us there is a completely logical explanation of the world, which to someone else will seem like a conspiracy theory. Our image of the world is influenced by rather old settings of the brain and psyche. It is influenced by archaic settings of the brain and psyche: detection of apparent and insubstantial intentions; fear of uncertainty; generations of stories and distrust of strangers. When the subject is confronted with stress due to external circumstances, thinking runs the risk of becoming more conspiratorial, and hence developing the above mentioned four characteristics.

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