

Conspiracy Theory Discourses

EDITED BY

MASSIMILIANO DEMATA, VIRGINIA ZORZI
AND ANGELA ZOTTOLA

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Edited by Massimiliano Demata, Virginia Zorzi and Angela Zottola

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Conspiracy theory discourses

Critical inquiries into the language of anti-science, post-truthism, mis/disinformation and alternative media

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1. The nature of conspiracy theories, old and new

What is a conspiracy theory? A short answer might be: a conspiracy theory is a set of explanations of events which are believed to be caused by a conspiracy, i.e. a secret and potentially harmful plan concocted by a group of scheming individuals. According to Douglas et al., conspiracy theories are “attempts to explain the ultimate causes of significant social and political events and circumstances with claims of secret plots by two or more powerful actors” (2019: 4). The underlying idea is that things are not as they seem, and that the truth behind certain events is hidden from view because of some manipulation unbeknown to (and at the expense of) the general public. Indeed, conspiracy theories attempt to make sense of the world by constructing narratives running directly counter to the “official” ones, often by “connecting the dots” between otherwise seemingly unrelated events that, for them, are evidence of a conspiracy. These alternative narratives may involve politics, business, finance, science, even sport, or any combination of them. Those who propose or support conspiracy theories refute or cast doubt on the knowledge contained in narratives proposed by the “epistemological authorities” (Uscinski 2020), i.e. those institutions in society, such as government, scientists, academia, media, who are in charge of making unbiased claims on the basis of available data and facts and of contributing to the spread of knowledge of all kinds. For conspiracy theorists, the epistemological authorities are judged to be part of the conspiracy itself, deliberately misleading the public by spreading false information.

Conspiracy theories are not new and have been a constant feature of society for as long as social institutions have existed. However, in the last few decades they have

been the subject of intense debate on both the popular level and in academia. More recently, in a global political and social context dominated by crises of all kinds, not a day seems to go by without some conspiracy theory being launched, gathering supporters and attracting attention and controversy in the media. Social media, in particular, have made conspiracy theories immediately accessible to a mass audience (i.e. potentially anybody with an internet connection). As a result, they spread much more quickly than in the past, and some of them have become very popular. Certain conspiracy theories are no longer just the narrative of some fringe group, as most conspiracy theories have been and still are, but have entered mainstream discourses, challenging other narratives and vying for social and cultural hegemony. One side effect of this is that some conspiracy theories are now widespread. Not a single nation in the world lacks its own share of conspiracy theories, and some of them are even transnational in scope, crossing borders and narrating their own “truth” about the issue at stake in more than one nation (e.g. the Bill Gates and/or 5G conspiracies about COVID vaccines).

There are *real* conspiracies, of course. As Uscinski argues, when a conspiracy theory is proved to be true, especially by epistemological authorities, then the conspiracy theory *is* an actual “conspiracy”. Two classic examples are the Watergate case and the Iran-Contra scandal (Uscinski 2020: 22-27). While most conspiracy theories are, however, largely false and unprovable, they are used by many people as their only reliable guide for interpreting the social world. According to the believers, conspiracy theories are not abstract “theories” but truth. However baseless or irrational a conspiracy theory may actually be, it is believed to be made up of “facts”, and these accord with (and strengthen) the vision of the world of those who support them. This is what may be termed *conspiracy thinking*, i.e. the predisposition of certain individuals to believe in and follow conspiracy theories on the basis of a positive attitude towards a certain kind of information (Uscinski 2020: 32–34). This positive attitude somehow allows conspiracy theorists to utterly reject any evidence running contrary to it. In this sense, conspiracy theories are *unfalsifiable* (Keeley 1999: 121) or *non-falsifiable* (Uscinski 2020: 27): even when the evidence for their false nature is vast and incontrovertible, conspiracy theories are rarely, if ever, discarded by those who believe in them. In fact, paradoxically, all evidence going against a conspiracy theory is considered by conspiracy theorists to be part of the conspiracy itself, and the more evidence to the contrary of a conspiracy theory that emerges, the wider and more powerful a conspiracy theory is believed to be by its followers (Keeley 1999: 120–122).

The term “conspiracy theory” itself has a largely pejorative connotation, as it is constantly used to refer to a set of beliefs stigmatised as extravagant, totally irrational and often dangerous to society as a whole and to individuals. Conspiracy theories are often deemed to be “bad science”, a pathology, a disease of the mind

that affects certain individuals whose actions may potentially be harmful to other individuals and society itself (Harambam 2020: 14–16). This negative evaluation largely comes from those same normative entities, including the epistemological authorities, who consider conspiracy theories to be outside the realm of empirical science and who are fought by conspiracy theorists (Harambam and Aupers 2015). The phrase is also a rhetorical weapon that can be used as a label to attack someone's narrative of certain facts. The basic principle of this negative connotation lies in the assumption that conspiracy theories are deliberately constructed as *false* or at least misleading. Conspiracy theory scholars themselves support this notion. Bergmann argues that conspiracy theories are “unproven stories told as truth” (2018: 6), as they are built in opposition to those stories created, told, and supported by the epistemological authorities, while Sunstein and Vermeule maintain that conspiracy theories are affected by “crippled epistemology” (2009: 211), as those formulating and following conspiracy theories rely on partial or unverified sources of information.

Conspiracy theories are also considered to be dangerous in the way they operate within society. The dangers they pose were first outlined by Richard Hofstadter, who may be considered the originator of the modern concept of conspiracy theory. Writing right after Kennedy's assassination in 1964, Hofstadter claimed that right-wing groups in the 1950s were characterised by what he called “paranoid style”, and while they were only a small minority on the fringes of social and political life, they could potentially be very harmful to the workings of democratic societies. Insisting on the socially dangerous nature of conspiracy theories, Popper argued that some conspiracy theories lie right in the middle of the political life of society. According to his “conspiracy theory of society” (1972), a conspiracy theory provides a worldview whereby all social evils are considered to be the product of careful human planning. As claimed by Popper, those who benefit most from conspiracy theories are totalitarian regimes; conspiracy theories are, in this sense, social and communicative processes which are part of certain ideologies informed by anti-democratic principles. In more recent scholarship, there is wider consensus that conspiracy theories are tightly linked to extremism and violence, especially of far-right origins, and are a potential threat to democracy (Barkun 2013; Byford 2011; Bergmann 2018; Wodak 2021). Indeed, conspiracy theories can influence people's actions and inspire violent behaviour. As remarked by Uscinski, “when people believe conspiracy theories, they may act on them” (Uscinski 2019: 1).

By contesting the epistemological authorities, conspiracy theories are inherently anti-establishment, since they construe the authority of official institutions as actively conspiring to hide the truth. In this sense, conspiracy theories are closely aligned with the current populist wave that many countries are witnessing. Indeed, in an epoch when populist (and often right-wing) parties, movements, and leaders have risen to power in many parts of the globe, conspiracy theories are often used

by populists to gain support. Conspiracy theories and populist politics have both become mainstream, and this has happened because of their close relationship in which they often feed off one another (Bergmann 2018). Populism and conspiracy theories share certain basic tenets. Both seem to emerge in periods of crisis, and both are founded on a Manichean view of society, which both view as evenly divided between morally and ideologically opposite forces. For conspiracy theorists, the core principle of the “paranoid” style is that “what is at stake is always a conflict between absolute good and absolute evil” (Hofstadter 1964), and this conflict demands total triumph against the evil manipulators behind conspiracies. In conspiracy theories, there is an intrinsic dichotomy between good and evil:

The conspiracy mentality divides people, things, and actions into two classes. One class is pure, the other impure. These classes are not only distinct, but antagonistic. They are polar opposites: everything social, national, and so forth, versus what is antisocial or antinational, as the case may be. On the one hand, everything normal, lawful, that is, native; on the other hand, everything abnormal, unlawful, and hence, alien. (Moscovici 1987: 154)

The categories identified by Moscovici and their Manichean juxtaposition largely coincide with those categories singled out by populists in their antagonistic and polarised view of society (Byford 2011: 82-83; Bergmann 2018: 101), with “heroes” and “villains” neatly separated and in perpetual struggle. For populists, the establishment or the elite aims at deceiving, to use Mudde’s famous definition (2004), the “pure people” and depriving them of their rights. The similarity between Moscovici’s identification of the “pure class” and that of Mudde’s “pure people” is more than mere lexical coincidence, as it touches on the ideological and social proximity of conspiracy theories and populism. Conspiracy theories are indeed often used by populist parties to delegitimise the social and political functions of the establishment and its epistemological agencies, which are portrayed to the people as corrupt and harmful. The praxis of populist movement also includes the delegitimation of institutions regarded as supporting the elite, including establishment politics, the economy, the media, and official science (including academia) – the same institutions attacked by conspiracy theories.

It is thanks to the rising success of populist politicians and movements around the world that conspiracy theories have gradually moved from the margins of the public sphere to becoming, in some cases, part of establishment discourse. Conspiracy theories “have dominated elite discourse in many parts of the world” (Uscinski 2019: 1), as testified by the example of populist politicians gaining power in many nations. The year 2016 was, in this sense, a key moment in the merging of conspiracy theories and populism and of the transformation of many conspiracy theories into mainstream narratives. The Leave victory in the Brexit referendum in

the United Kingdom in May and the election of Donald Trump as 45th President of the United States of America in November were both heavily influenced by conspiracy theories and a profusion of non-factual or unverified information that could not be challenged effectively. Rational and reasoned debate in the lead-up to the referendum was rare, and the general mood was somehow summed up by then-Lord Chancellor Michael Gove's famous statement, whereby "people in this country have had enough of experts" (Gove 2016). The rather disputable claims that the EU was conspiring to bring as many migrants as possible to the UK or that the UK was wasting a lot of its resources by sending money to Brussels became arguments that effectively contributed to swaying public opinion in favour of Leave (Shipman 2017). In the US, conspiracy theories have possibly had an even stronger impact. With the meteoric rise of Donald Trump and his election as 45th President, conspiracy theories were officially sanctioned by the highest authority of the country. The connection between conspiracy theories and political violence of right-wing origins has also been increasingly evident, and once-marginal extremist groups have been cohorting more and more frequently with mainstream Republicans and sharing commitment in conspiracy theories (Allam 2020). Trump himself relied heavily on conspiracy theories before, during and after his four-year presidency, retweeting their baseless claims and often siding with conspiracy groups such as QAnon in making the most extravagant (and dangerous) false claims on many issues, including COVID-19 and the outcome of the 2020 presidential elections (Butter 2020: 144-50). The age of "presidential conspiracism" (Muirhead and Rosenblum 2019) was indeed characterised by Trump's relentless attacks on official media and science as well as on establishment politicians, and these attacks were rooted in his devotion to conspiracy theories. It is only fitting that Trump's presidency ended with a perfect example of a conspiracy theory moving people to action. The storming of the Capitol building in Washington on January 6, 2021, by Trump's supporters was prompted by a conspiracy theory spread by a host of right-wing politicians and media pundits and by Trump himself, who wanted to "stop the steal", claiming that the vote had been rigged in favour of Democratic candidate Joe Biden.

Trump's attachment to conspiracy theories is just one example of their increasing public favour in many countries. Indeed, the rather loose adherence to facts that was a distinctive trait of the Brexit referendum campaign and the 2016 US election campaign are only the most evident symptoms of a wider phenomenon involving the public sphere worldwide, a phenomenon which has often been called "post-truth". This compound word was named Oxford English Dictionary's 2016 "Word of the Year", which defined it as "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals

to emotion and personal belief” (Oxford Languages 2016). In many respects, post-truth “is a challenge not just to the idea of knowing reality but to the existence of reality itself” (McIntyre 2018: 10). Reality and facts are subordinate to one’s own personal opinions, beliefs and emotions, and basic facts are often discarded because they do not fit into one’s own vision. This phenomenon has larger implications. As detailed by McIntyre, post-truth started with science denial, but now encompasses many aspects of our social and political life. Conspiracy theories have greatly benefited from (and have in turn fed into) the current post-truth climate, as post-truth is based on the same growing distrust in authority – *any* kind of authority, be it political, scientific or more broadly speaking, cultural – and distrust is a key element of conspiracy theories.

The post-truth paradigm, whereby “emotion is claiming its primacy and truth is in retreat” (d’Ancona 2017: 31), thrives in social media, an environment in which, partly because of the seemingly egalitarian status of its participants, attacks on expertise of all kinds occur regularly and the values of honesty and accuracy do not enjoy pride of place. Conspiracy theories owe a lot of their current popularity to the new communication environment based on the internet, and specifically on social media. The age of the internet has been characterised by the broad diffusion of many conspiracy theories, which have gained unprecedented visibility and often political and social *legitimacy*. This fact has certainly increased the number of people who follow conspiracy theories and has made networking among them very fast and easy (Butter 2020: 127–29). Social media are particularly prone to being used by proponents of conspiracy theories largely because of the affordances provided by Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram etc. to their users. Based on user-generated contents and fast, many-to-many, inter-subjective and (the illusion of) non-hierarchical communication (Herring 2013; KhosraviNik 2017), social media increase the “horizontal” spread of information at the expense of the authoritativeness and quality control based on information fact-checking. The difference between facts and opinions is often blurred in social media which, to a large part, lacks gatekeeping in the selection of its contents, thus allowing the free and largely unchecked circulation of all sorts of narratives, including those underlying conspiracy theories (in many respects, gatekeeping may be seen as having the same regulatory functions as epistemological authorities). Not surprisingly, starting from Trump himself, anti-establishment populist politicians who follow conspiracy theories have found the ideal channel of communication in social media.

The recent rise in popularity of conspiracy theories is, in many respects, both the cause and the effect of the fragmentation of the public sphere in the digital environment, and especially in social media. This fragmentation can be seen in the aggregation of users by the algorithms dominating the fruition of social media, which results in people with similar interests and political preferences to only see

information and news posted by like-minded people. Phenomena such as *echo chambers*, *filter bubbles* and *news silos*, whereby users are mainly directed towards content that aligns with their own declared preferences and beliefs, originated in the collapse of the traditional mass media environment. This has resulted in the social, cultural, and political polarization of the public sphere, where content of dubious quality, such as fake news, is exchanged and commented upon without any control (McIntyre 2018: 89–97).

2. The need for a discourse approach to conspiracy theories (and to those who oppose them)

Conspiracy Theory Discourses was first conceived by the editors in April 2020 during the early phases of the pandemic, when there was an explosion in popularity of health-related conspiracy theories, especially on social media. The medical, social, and political crisis generated by COVID-19 served as the backdrop for the growing popularity of numerous conspiracy theories about the origins of the pandemic. The frequent hesitations and backtracking by many governments and health authorities, including the World Health Organization, about the origins of the virus and the best strategy for combating it fed into that climate of uncertainty and fear which is the ideal environment for conspiracy theories. During this period (which continues to the date of writing this book), conspiracy theories have provided alternatives to the official narratives, gathering favour and popularity and stirring further hostility against official science (Constantinou et al. 2021). Indeed, the “knowledge contestation” which involves pitting conspiracy theories against official science takes place in a context of “epistemological insecurity” (Harambam and Aupers 2015) in which official science is constantly contested and opposed, and where alternative narratives are produced and spread among sizeable communities.

The rise and impact of conspiratorial counter-narratives around the pandemic caught our attention as scholars in Discourse Analysis and led us to address a series of questions regarding the ways in which conspiracy theory discourses are constructed and communicated to oppose “official” discourses. We have been careful not to fall into the trap of simply attacking or ridiculing conspiracy theories, something that would have prevented us from developing a scientific approach to them and from fully understanding their growing social importance. The impulse to study conspiracy theories that prompted this book stems from the awareness that their discourses are not just extravagant deviations from social and cultural norms by marginal social groups (indeed, some conspiracy theories have originated with very powerful social figures). Conspiracy theorists propose elements of social critique that, no matter how shaky in terms of their empirical foundations, pose a

challenge (often a violent one) to social structures. Rather than focusing exclusively on the social, psychological, or political motivations behind conspiracy theories or simply accusing them of being “bad science” or “paranoid”, *Conspiracy Theory Discourses* was conceived to address conspiracy theories from a discourse perspective by prioritising their *language*. It looks at how discourse is instrumental in the creation of ideological conspiratorial spaces in society by feeding into (and being fed by) alternative semiotic systems.

As editors, we also noticed that there is a lack of a systematic body of work approaching conspiracy theories using the analytical frameworks of Discourse Analysis. This gap in the literature on conspiracy theories is even more conspicuous when one considers the enormous interest that conspiracy theories have attracted in other research fields. For example, writing in 2011, Byford argued that “Communities of historians, political scientists, psychologists, sociologists, anthropologists and philosophers as well as journalists, commentators and political pundits have sought to explain the enduring appeal of the conspiracy culture” (2011: 3). More recently, Bergmann (2018: 9) compiled a similar checklist of the academic disciplines addressing conspiracy theories. Research projects studying conspiracy theories have also flourished, the most notable of which is COMPACT (Comparative Analysis of Conspiracy Theories in Europe). This group is made up of a network of 150 researchers studying conspiracy theories which started in 2015 and was funded by a COST (European Cooperation in Science and Technology) action. Its most important editorial output is the *Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories*, edited by Michael Butter and Peter Knight (2020), and its website currently hosts a bibliography of criticism on conspiracy theories with almost 2,000 titles (conspiracytheories.eu). Scholars from many disciplines are involved in these projects, whose primary aim is to promote partnerships and synergies in order to bridge the “great divide” (Butter and Knight 2015) between different disciplines and methodologies, specifically those with qualitative approaches (e.g., history and cultural studies) and those with quantitative approaches (e.g., psychology and political science). While these projects have led to major advancements in the study of conspiracy theories, they have largely (and curiously) neglected the potential contribution that research on the language of conspiracy theories can provide. If “conspiracy theories are essentially *social* constructs” (Butter and Knight 2015: 26; emphasis in the original), then it is all the more urgent to develop a more comprehensive understanding of how conspiracy theories interact with the public sphere and society at large starting from their discourses. It is the structure itself of conspiracy theories, their effects, and their role in society, as outlined by scholars of other disciplines, that demand an inquiry into them from the perspective of Discourse Studies: according to Prooijen and Douglas,

conspiracy theories are *consequential* as they have a real impact on people's health, relationships, and safety; they are *universal* in that belief in them is widespread across times, cultures, and social settings; they are *emotional* given that negative emotions and not rational deliberations cause conspiracy beliefs; and they are *social* as conspiracy beliefs are closely associated with psychological motivations underlying intergroup conflict. (2018: 897)

Clearly, then, the sociological, psychological, and political explanations for conspiracy theories cannot be separated from their close scrutiny under the lens of linguistic interpretation, and their growing social impact makes such scrutiny necessary. Ultimately, this volume aims to offer a nuanced approach to conspiracy theories as discourses in order to highlight their distinctive features as narratives and to discern their place and influence within the public sphere.

Some canonical works on conspiracy theories hint at the importance of discourse and rhetoric in the construction of conspiracy theories, but never actually engage with linguistic interpretations of the phenomenon. Hofstadter spoke of a "conspirational style" which, as discussed in Section 1 above, he referred to as "paranoid" and which he deemed typical of conspiracy theories. He called this style "a way of seeing the world and of expressing oneself" (1967: 4), thus implying the possibility of tracing certain recurring patterns in conspiratorial narratives. However, he did not elaborate on this in the direction of genre or linguistic analysis. More recently, Byford identified three founding narrative elements of conspiracy theories, i.e., the conspirators, the plan, and the endeavour to maintain secrecy (2011: 71–94). He noted that these three elements are a constant presence in the structure of conspiratorial narratives and can therefore be seen as their key generic features. Generic similarities between different conspiracy theories throughout history can also be traced in Billig's concept of "tradition of explanation" (1978, 1987), whereby certain ideas, tropes as well as rhetorical styles are accumulated and continually used over time in conspiracy theories. Bergmann similarly notes certain recurring patterns in conspiracy theories, as he speaks of them in terms of their having "*a separate rhetorical style* of explaining social and political events" (2018: 55; *italics ours*), thus constituting an alternative construction of reality through discourse. The identification of distinctive features of conspiracy theories made by Hofstadter, Byford, Billig and Bergmann is also confirmed by the strong similarities between past and present conspiracy theories, as certain generic, discursive and stylistic elements seem to be used over time. For example, the 9/11 Truth movement, according to which President George W. Bush himself was complicit in the 9/11 terrorist attacks, employed the same tropes used to attack Franklin D. Roosevelt, who allegedly allowed the Japanese to attack Pearl Harbor (Byford 2011: 5), while the lineage of antisemitic conspiracy theories, which were one of

the founding elements of Nazi propaganda, have continued to flourish since the end of the Second World War (Billig 1978: 1987) and can be traced to this day in conspiracy theories targeting George Soros (Wodak 2021: 139–141).

Conspiracy Theory Discourses does not enter a complete vacuum in scholarship on conspiracy theories, however. Some important contributions have been made in the field of Linguistics on the discourse of conspiracy theories and why – and how – they acquire their status as appealing and believable narratives. Oswald and Herman speak of conspiracy theories as “refutational narratives” (2016: 297), that is, narratives based on certain formal and textual patterns which aim at developing argumentative features countering the discourses of the “establishment”. It is through argumentation that conspiracy theories attempt to undermine the “official” discourses they oppose. The unique nature of conspiracy theories is also highlighted by Prochazka and Blommaert (2021; see also Blommaert 2020), who speak of conspiracy theories as forms of “light rationality”: while they are totally debunked by science or rational thinking, conspiracy theories are persuasive because of their ergoic reasoning, i.e. a simple, straightforward “cause-and-effect relation” which provides an explanation of reality and is based on three features: (1) they need to be *short* (and in this sense social media, and especially Twitter, are particularly suited for this); (2) they need to be *clean*, i.e. presenting neat conceptual and evaluative dichotomies; (3) they are replete with *implicatures*, i.e. words that immediately recall certain concepts (e.g. “Soros”). Seargeant develops a similar argument in his analysis of conspiracy theories within the broader framework of storytelling (2020: 192–202). As narratives, conspiracy theories reduce the complexities of our world by presenting simple and straightforward explanations, based on a *post hoc* fallacy, whereby each event must have a specific, well-defined cause, and correlations between events are mistaken as causation. The target of the stories at the basis of conspiracy theories is the malevolent mainstream or elite, the “bad guy” of so many stories against whom the “hero” fights and over whom he/she will eventually prevail. As discussed in Section 1 above, this is precisely the Manichean logic at the basis of populism. This logic is somehow at the basis of Deschrijver’s (2021) discussion of the presence and influence of conspiracy theories as a discourse category within society. By employing a metapragmatic approach, he argues that the labels “conspiracy theory” and “evidence”, with their different evaluations depending on whether one believes in or attacks conspiracy theories, is so ingrained in discourse that it provides speakers with an instrument of social categorisation which induces dichotomous discursive alignment in their judgement of conspiracy theories. As discussed in Section 1 above, the term “conspiracy theory” has negative connotations and has been used as a label for supposedly false narratives. The metapragmatic nature of the label “conspiracy theory”, which is used to attack *a priori* certain arguments, hinders the possibility

of a resolution of the debate (or, rather, conflict) between those who support conspiracy theories and those who attack them.

As evident from the discussion above, many scholars have identified a set of rhetorical or discursive features that make conspiracy theories stand out as distinct narratives supporting socially antagonistic values. However, the degree of critical attention that has been paid to the analysis of such discursive strategies, and how these actually make conspiracy theories a set of discrete discourses expressing worldviews in opposition to other worldviews, has been relatively limited when seen in the context of the magnitude of the conspiracy phenomenon. Hence the necessity to engage with conspiracy theories from the point of view of Linguistics and Discourse Analysis. For example, approaches from Pragmatics can shed light on the different argumentation strategies displayed by proponents and opponents of conspiracy theories in their dialectical exchanges in the public sphere. Even more crucially, the close relationship between language and social power has been the core concern of scholars who are commonly identified as part of Critical Discourse Studies (e.g., Fairclough 1989 & 1992; Wodak 1989 & 2021; Wodak and Meyer 2016). The way conspiracy theories legitimise or delegitimise certain unequal relations of power in discourse (or indeed become the focus of social and political struggle between different groups and ideologies) makes them particularly well suited to analysis by following critical approaches and methodologies such as those employed by Critical Discourse Studies. These approaches are useful for dissecting the discourse strategies at the basis of conspiracy theories, which oppose dominant discourse, may become dominant in themselves, and may also become dangerous to social institutions, as when they are part of racism or hate speech.

We, as editors, argue that conspiracy theories should be viewed according to the Foucauldian notion of discourse, whereby discourses are shaped in (and are the result of) specific historical circumstances and are reproduced according to certain discourse practices (Foucault 1972). If power relations within society are expressed through discourse and language and if discursive practices are socially controlled, then the narratives of conspiracy theories themselves constitute an alternative discourse to those normative discourses legitimised by epistemological authorities. Conspiracy theories are, in this sense, counter-discourses, competing for hegemony in society with “official” discourses, and occasionally becoming hegemonic discourses themselves. Conspiracy theories challenge the hegemony of dominant ideologies and discourses by presenting their narratives as the expression of marginal or oppressed groups who struggle for legitimacy as they claim to express an allegedly “true” explanation of social and political events in opposition to the “official” version. What takes place between conspiracy and non-conspiracy discourse should be seen in terms of a *discursive struggle* between two (or more) sets of discourses (cf. Foucault 1972; Laclau and Mouffe 1985; Fairclough 1992;

Laclau 1993; Fairclough and Wodak 1997). Within discursive struggle, a plurality of discourses vies for social, political and *ontological* hegemony: as social reality is constructed in discourse, meanings are never fixed because they are contested between different groups or interests. Thus, discursive struggle (or indeed, as mentioned above, “knowledge contestation” (Harambam and Aupers 2015)) takes place between different discourses, with each discourse legitimising itself and delegitimising the other – and basically “othering” the other. Conspiracy theories are a perfect example of this, in that they deliberately construct themselves in opposition to the political, cultural, and scientific establishment by proposing alternative interpretations of social reality, while the epistemological authorities in turn posit conspiracy theories as a dangerous “other”.

Considering the role that they play in the context of political and media discourse, a comprehensive critical assessment of the discursive strategies employed by makers and believers of conspiracy theories may shed new light on the discourses of conspiracy theories as well as on those which oppose them. The chapters in *Conspiracy Theory Discourses* also consider conspiracy theories as narratives constructed in discourse through their constitutive opposition to received and often hegemonic discourses. While the scope of this volume is not to confirm or deny the veracity of conspiracy theories (and it should be said that, as members of academia ourselves, we may be classified as “epistemological authorities” and, as such, may be the target of conspiracy theorists!), both prior and recent history does tell us that certain conspiracy theories pose serious threats to the democratic institutions of a society, to the public sphere as a whole, and to people’s health. For this reason, a critical approach to the language used to define as well as to attack conspiracy theories is long overdue, as it could add unique insights into the cultural and ideological dynamics behind the current popularity of conspiracy theories. The core concern of *Conspiracy Theory Discourses* is the exploration of those discourse strategies that make so many conspiracy theories credible and convincing among large sections of the population. Furthermore, a study on the discourse of conspiracy theories would also benefit from analysis of the distinctive anti-conspiratorial discourse, coming from both the “epistemological authorities” and sectors of the public sphere who object to conspiracy theories. What emerges from these comparisons is a set of polarised and highly conflictual narratives, in which different groups delegitimise each other: those who support conspiracy theories and those who are against them express totally different worldviews and diverging social and moral values.

In our outlook on conspiracy theories, we agree with Harambam’s sociological approach, which posits them as “some sort of cultural coping mechanism to deal with a complex and uncertain world” (Harambam 2020: 21) that is especially common during periods of “epistemic instability” (Harambam 2020), when uncertainty about society and science both turns into and is fed by power struggles in, over,

and of discourse. By addressing the discourse of conspiracy theories and those who oppose them it may be possible to gain a thorough understanding of the current dynamics behind changing social and political relations and, as both a cause and effect of them, the order of discourse which is constantly contested in society. The normalisation and legitimisation through discourse of a certain kind of alternative reality to official narratives and, conversely, the delegitimation of official narratives, ideologies, and discourses; the polarised, Manichean worldview, whereby an inner, “pure” group is threatened by the lies of the epistemological authorities; the highly emotional language used in the narratives of conspiracy theories in opposition to their equivalent but antithetical “establishment” discourses – all these elements are distinctively developed in discourse by the makers and believers of conspiracy theories and, as such, demand the attention of Discourse Analysis.

3. Structure of the book

Conspiracy Theory Discourses is organised into five distinct parts, each delving into a specific facet of the language of conspiratorial narratives. The chapters selected to be included in this volume were grouped according to the common grounds of their objectives. The first part deals with epistemological queries related to conspiracy theory discourses; the second part focuses on some of the communicative phenomena associated with conspiracy theories, such as the concept of echo chambers and hate speech, but most importantly fake news; the third part moves on to focus on social media as an environment which has facilitated the spread of given ideas; the fourth part looks at the way in which conspiracy theory discourses and counter-discourses are legitimised or given agency; the fifth and last part introduces some elements related to conspiracy theories that cross national borders.

Chapters in Part I, titled *Conspiracy theories: epistemological questions*, analyse different understandings of conspiracy theories, providing some wide-ranging definitions and descriptions based on linguistic data; they moreover discuss the functions conspiracy theory discourse performs within contemporary societies. Thus, Part I starts with Chapter 2, where Catenaccio pinpoints the central question of the discursive nature of conspiracy theories as a communication practice, whereby Linguistics and discourse analysis can and should be employed to recognise and deal with them (see Section 1 above). Following that, Jones, in Chapter 3, engages with the discussion of conspiratorial thinking in relation to digital literacy. He shows that, as pointed out in Section 1, believing in conspiracy theories can be a way for many people to make sense of complex aspects of the social world – in this case, the persistence of intrusive digital surveillance practices carried out by large tech companies. Citizens can interpret and take a stance against these practices

by voicing and supporting conspiracy theories. Conspiracy theories can thus be treated as a way to produce knowledge: their status as bottom-up constructed theories conveying knowledge as well as identities and practices, negotiated through language, is the focus of Blitvich and Lorenzo-Dus's Chapter (4). In their study, they address knowledge construction within online conspiracy theory communities, which they call affinity spaces, and they highlight how this epistemic construction is rooted in what conspiracy theory believers define as rational reasoning and a 'scientific method'. The last two chapters in Part I draw from COVID-19 related conspiracy theories to further discuss their nature. As a matter of fact, in addition to these, several chapters in this volume discuss the COVID-19 pandemic due to the abundance of conspiracist beliefs circulating about it at the time of writing. In Chapter 5, Oswald and Herman, who are among the first scholars who engaged in a discourse-based study of conspiracy theories (see Section 2), focus on the rhetoric and argumentation features of COVID-19 while suggesting that conspiracist thinking can be supported and safeguarded by means of strategies such as ethotic strawmanning, aimed at shifting the focus from one's own position and depicting opponents in a debate as ethically inferior. Persuasive strategies and COVID-19 are also at the centre of Chapter 6, where Musolf analyses figurative language used by US politicians, in particular Trump, to put forward the idea that the COVID-19 pandemic was voluntarily spread by the Chinese government. Contrary to Oswald and Herman, and to most chapters in this volume, Musolf observes that these persuasive strategies, used by Trump to undermine the Chinese government, do not appear to be successful due to the persisting lack of evidence accompanying them, as Trump's failure to be re-elected shows.

As a discursive phenomenon, conspiracy theories interact and partly overlap with other communicative phenomena, in a media environment characterised by increasing socio-cultural and political polarisation (see the end of Section 1 above). Part II, titled *Conspiracy theory-related communicative phenomena*, explores these interactions and overlaps, focusing specifically on echo chambers, false flags, fake news and hate speech. Bondi and Sanna, in Chapter 7, contextualise the spread of conspiracy theories about the COVID-19 pandemic within the phenomenon of echo chambers, seen as ideological structures and factors of polarisation and production of fake knowledge, including conspiracist beliefs. Drawing on terms that are crucial to the spread of COVID-19 conspiracy theories, the authors argue that echo chambers can emerge from linguistic markers of ideological conflict. Conspiracy theory thinking and online polarisation are also central in the development of false flag narratives, analysed by Mason in Chapter 8, where these narratives are approached through a cognitive stylistics perspective. Complementing Chapter 5 and 6 in their description of the persuasiveness of conspiracy theories, Mason considers how false flag advocates manipulate prior beliefs and knowledge

to fit into narrative schemas which confirm false flag beliefs as credible and persuasive in a circular manner. As the title of the chapter states, “If you can’t see the pattern here, there’s something wrong”. This well summarises the unfalsifiability or non-falsifiability of conspiracy theories to their supporters (see Section 1): they believe these theories regardless of whether they are well founded and rational, because patterns potentially confirming the theory already fit in their worldviews, whereas evidence against the conspiracy or pattern is thought to result from conspiratorial fabrication. Against this backdrop, conspiracy theories can be intended as objects of persuasion, yet they can also become means of persuasion and as such play a pivotal role in political agendas. In Chapter 9, Sargeant draws a comparison between the linguistic style of conspiracy theories and fake news, suggesting some points in common between them. They are both often used as means of political persuasion and both flourish in social media environments and, as terms/labels, within popular discourse. At the same time, Sargeant subsumes fake news under the broader category of conspiracy theories, identifying them, along the same lines of Catenaccio – although through a different lens – as a distinct genre that is, by definition, a form of mis- or disinformation. The last communicative phenomenon discussed in Part II is hate speech, which emerges as a marker of bitter conflict in conspiracy theory-related debates and is associated with the highly emotional language characterising conspiracy theory narratives. Drawing again on COVID-19-related conspiracy theories (specifically about the origin of the pandemic), Lee introduces, in Chapter 10, the affective and emotional underpinnings of conspiracy theory discourse by exploring the linguistic devices used in emotion-triggering discursive strategies employed in people’s reactions to conspiracy theory-related news content. According to Lee, similar strategies emerge in both conspiracy theory believers and opponents and draw their discourse close to discriminatory and covert hate speech.

Online resources are indeed an important source of linguistic data for most chapters in this volume. This reflects the fact that, as explained in Section 1, the internet and particularly social media are a primary channel for the spread of conspiracy theory-related messages, although, as Jones (Chapter 3 in this volume) points out, the companies who created the most popular social media are often made the object of so-called ‘Big Tech’ conspiracy theories. Part III, *Social media and conspiracy theories*, zooms in on social media, giving them centre stage. In keeping with Blitvich and Lorenzo-Dus (Chapter 4 in this volume), and focusing on YouTube video comments about the so-called ‘ID2020’ conspiracy theory, a theory claiming a supposedly global mandate to incorporate tracking devices through the COVID-19 vaccines, Inwood and Zappavigna focus on commenters’ forms of online aggregation. In Chapter 11, they frame this concept as communing affiliation and social bonding, and define them as the driving forces that bring

together believers of religious, political and technological branches of the 'ID2020' conspiracy theory. The study highlights the nuances of social bonding online; in other words, it provides a mapping of the different personae enacted by users who engage with conspiracy theory content, and suggests that personalised solutions that take into account ideological diversity rather than homogeneous ones should be pursued in the fight against misinformation. The following Chapter (12) explores Instagram. Gür-Şeker, Boonen and Wentker focus on the multimodal realisation of conspiracy theories by analysing political memes which promote them. They offer a multi-layered methodological approach to the analysis of memes and related hashtags in their context, as a way to scrutinise the spread of visual and textual conspiracy theory content on social media. Chapter 13, the last in this Part, focuses on Twitter. Mora Lòpez addresses the multiple and complex realisations of evaluative language used in tweets on the New World Order conspiracy theory, according to which a secretive totalitarian world government is soon to emerge. Comparing English and Spanish tweets, the author observes that they tend to focus on moral and social judgments and on the perceived value of targeted entities. Tweets on the New World Order draw from emotions such as desire and fear through nominal and verbal, rather than adjectival elements, mostly conveying negative evaluative language and displaying a lack of argumentation strategies.

Conflict between different stances is key to the development of conspiracy theories as objects of debate in the public sphere, as shown from the overview of the above-mentioned chapters. For instance, the way different stances are constructed through language is partly addressed in Lee's and Inwood and Zappavigna's chapters. Part IV, titled *Stancetaking and (de-)legitimation within conspiracy and anti-conspiracy discourses*, explores this aspect in further detail through the representation of conspiracy and anti-conspiracy stances. In Chapter 14, Mitkovska and Saračević rely on popular Macedonian online fora to analyse stance taking with regard to COVID-19 conspiracy theories as expressed by users who might support, oppose or be neutral towards given theories. Their approach identifies the concepts of affect, investment and alignment as means to create stance, express social identity and engage in interpersonal relations. Their findings somehow confirm Mora Lopez's suggestion that conspiracy theory discourse is mainly focused on negative emotions. As Lee points out in Chapter 10, there seem to be common features between the discursive strategies adopted by supporters and opponents of a conspiracy theory: this is partly corroborated by Mitkovska and Saračević, although they also find divergent stance-taking markers, giving rise to different emotions, between different groups.

Fiammenghi's contribution adds to the discussion about discursive strategies of legitimation and delegitimation in Chapter 15. Her study, like those presented previously in this Part, also covers conspiracy theories in the field of health and

medicine, this time focusing on the controversy over the MMR vaccine and in particular the theory – disproved by the scientific community – associating it to autism in children. Fiammenghi analyses a corpus of articles from some major UK and US newspapers, addressing the emergence of both anti-scientific and pro-scientific ideologies. The ideological element she identifies is in line with anti-scientific discourse associated with the post-truth era, as discussed in Section 1 above. Some of the previous chapters highlight that conspiracy theory discourse acquires plausibility through a *sui generis* pseudo-rational thinking as well as through the need for believers to find more and more confirmation of their beliefs. However, another key factor in building and promoting conspiracy thinking is the opportunity offered by conspiracy theories to identify as members of specific groups, which is the focus of Zorzi's Chapter (16). Her analysis draws on the concept of collective identities to explore how supporters of a variety of conspiracy theories – ranging from public health to climate science and politics – construct their own and their opponents' identities in a small set of news articles from conspiracy theory-promoting websites. The findings point to the diversity of identity-building strategies across and within conspiracy theories and to individuality, humanity and intellectual and moral superiority as key features of conspiracists' collective identities.

The volume continues with its fifth Part, focused on conspiracy theories which cross national boundaries, while being inevitably tied to the political contexts in which they spread. Part V is titled, in fact, *Political and international dimensions of conspiracy theories*. As extensively highlighted in Section 1, and also suggested by Oswald and Herman, Musolff and Seargeant (Chapters 5, 6 and 9 in this volume) populist and extremist political discourses frequently intertwine with the spread of conspiracy theories, and this interaction has recently gained power with the success of populist political forces in several countries. This aspect is recaptured by the chapters included in Part V. Chapter 17 by Richardson and Wodak opens this Part by focusing on the "Jewish World Conspiracy" and specifically on theories against Jewish philanthropist George Soros. In their analysis of Hungarian political posters by prime minister Viktor Orbán's far right party, the authors show how Soros, often regarded by conspiracists as a powerful actor within the conspiracy, is discursively represented as *Feindbild*, the symbol of all evil and a scapegoat that ultimately is used as an instrument to promote Hungary's far-right nationalist political agenda. The chapter thus lays out the close link between conspiracy theories and the constant erosion of democracy on the part of populist and far right political movements.

Campolong, in Chapter 18, positions her research within the overarching theme of Part V while also expanding on Musolff's account of Trumpian discourse. Specifically, she analyses the linguistic strategies adopted by the former US President to promote the conspiracist claim by which his opponents constantly

manipulate and underestimate information about the number of people supporting him at rallies. This chapter, once again, shows how conspiracy theories can be used for political propaganda: in fact, the crowd size conspiracy theory, employed by Trump to undermine his opponents, is contextualised within the speech genre and Trumpian discourse. It is argued that typical features of Trump's discourse, such as repetition and intertextuality, can work as tools to create, establish and promote a conspiracy theory. The consideration of the link between conspiracy theories over COVID-19 and nationalist political interests is enriched by Madisson and Ventsel in Chapter 19. Here, presenting the perspective of Anglophone Russian media, the authors tackle two main issues which circle back to many of the observations made about fake news in some of the previous chapters (see Musolff, Bondi and Sanna, Sergeant). Firstly, by focusing on the concept of infodemic, Madisson and Ventsel probe that conspiracy theories can be seen as a vehicle of contemporary information warfare. Secondly, these become, as highlighted previously, a 'label' and an instrument in international political agendas to undermine the opponent's reputation. Chapter 20, closing Part V, addresses yet another issue whose structure and discursive representation fits in the definition of conspiracy theory although not straightforwardly being identified as such. Zottola and Borba analyse the conspiracist discursive infrastructure of the phrase "gender ideology" which is increasingly gaining political traction around the world. Focusing on Brazil and the US, the authors stress the connection between conspiracy thinking and right-wing political propaganda by investigating two far-right media corpora of articles in Brazilian Portuguese and English. Their research points to the overlap between the discursive construction of "gender ideology/ideologia de gênero" and conspiracist narratives, which share the semantic realms of manipulation, puppeteering, falseness, and danger. This chapter highlights the versatility of the discursive infrastructure characterising this conspiracist narrative, which allows it to circulate across transnational borders while undergoing local adaptations which further strengthen it. The book ends with an epilogue (Chapter 21) written by Angermüller, that critically reflects on the many aspects brought to the fore by the chapters included in this volume.

All contributions in *Conspiracy Theory Discourses* partake into a complex and wide-ranging account of how conspiracy theories can be assessed and dealt with as a discursive and linguistic phenomenon. They do so through a range of methods and theoretical perspectives applied to a diversity of linguistic data. As highlighted above in this section, most chapters analyse instances of mediated and online language. The Discourse Analysis perspective characterising this volume is articulated in multiple, partly overlapping and sometimes coexisting analytical frameworks, including Critical Discourse Analysis, rhetoric, metaphor studies, multimodality, and quali-quantitative approaches through the use of corpus methodologies.

Such a variety of approaches can be seen as an entry point to further explore the environments which enable the proliferation of conspiracy theory discourses – especially in online contexts – as well as to continue to tackle these discourses, combining the more conventional analysis of verbal language with multimodal accounts. Study of conspiracy theories also gives rise to the discussion of its ethical implications, as insightfully discussed by Mason in Chapter 8. The multilayered nature of conspiracy theories is given by their diverse status across different national and socio-cultural contexts: despite the prevalence of English, this is mirrored by the variety of languages appearing in the data analysed, from Chinese (Lee) to Spanish (Mora Lòpez), to Brazilian Portuguese (Zottola and Borba), Macedonian (Mitkovska and Saračević) and Hungarian (Richardson and Wodak). Beyond the formal structure of the volume, with its different Parts, methodologies and perspectives, conspiracy theory discourses emerge as developing through some overarching principles that are exploited to enhance the appeal and popularity of these theories. These discourses can be presented as an epistemic effort, based on rational and truth-based thinking, as stressed, among others, by Blitvich and Lorenzo-Dus; they can claim superior morality through ethical considerations, as observed, for instance, in Oswald and Herman's account; and they can appeal to emotional triggers to prompt certain reactions on the part of interlocutors or the audience, as discussed thoroughly, for example, by Lee. The various contributions to this book bring novel insights to existing knowledge about conspiracy theories, which has so far developed in research areas other than Linguistics and Discourse Studies. A focus on how discourse constitutes and conveys conspiracist content can moreover be useful in recognising conspiracist perspectives and epistemologies beyond the most widely acknowledged conspiracy theories. This calls attention to conspiracist discourses as deeply ingrained ways to interpret reality, where language plays an essential role.

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PART I

Conspiracy theories: epistemological questions

A corpus-driven exploration of conspiracy theorising as a discourse type

Lexical indicators of argumentative patterning

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This chapter takes a view of conspiracy theorising as a discourse type and seeks to identify candidate linguistic features of such discourse in a corpus of books devoted to 9/11 conspiracy theories. Adopting a corpus-driven approach, the study identifies three discursive traits which appear prominent in conspiracy discourse. The first trait concerns a high incidence of metadiscursive references to terms such as *report*, *version* and *story*, which are associated with negatively evaluative verbs (for example, *claim*) when premodified by the adjective *official*, and tend to co-occur with verbs such as *emerge* when referring to conspiracy theorists' preferred versions. The second regards the frequent recourse to terms such as *evidence* (lack of which characterizes official stories) and *facts* (typically posited to be at the heart of conspiratorial versions). Finally, the study identifies the salience of hypothetical structures, signalled by the recurrent use of the modal *would*, which question official accounts using a *modus tollens* form of confutational argumentation.

Keywords: conspiracy theorising, discourse analysis, corpus linguistics, lexical indicators, argumentative patterning

1. Introduction, aim and scope of research

Conspiracy theories have been defined as “proposed explanation of some historical event (or events) in terms of the significant causal agency of a relatively small group of persons – the conspirators – acting in secret” (Keeley 1999: 116) and as “an effort to explain some event or practice by reference to the machinations of powerful people, who attempt to conceal their role” (Sunstein and Vermeule 2009: 205). A topic of growing interest and concern, conspiracy theorising has attracted the attention of scholars in multiple fields and has been investigated from a variety of

perspectives. One of the first studies to address the topic was Hofstadter's seminal article on "The Paranoid Style in American Politics" (1964), which framed the phenomenon in clinical psychiatric terms, setting the stage for subsequent work along the same line of argument (cf. Robins and Post 1997; Pipes 1998). In the following years, other approaches emerged alongside these 'pathological' ones. About a decade ago, Sunstein and Vermeule summed up the abundant academic literature on conspiracy theory that had appeared in the previous thirty years or so as belonging to two main strands: on the one hand, work by analytic philosophers "explor[ing] a range of issues but mainly ask[ing] what counts as a 'conspiracy theory' and whether such theories are methodologically suspect"; on the other, "work in sociology and Freudian psychology on the causes of conspiracy theorizing" (Sunstein and Vermeule 2009: 203). To these two main investigation perspectives, others can be added. The recently published *Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theory* (Butter and Knight 2020a) devotes ten chapters to outlining multiple academic traditions in the field, ranging from definitional issues (McKenzie-McHarg 2020), to historical, cultural and literary studies (Butter and Knight 2020b), to semiotic approaches (Leone, Madisson and Ventsel 2020), political science and political theory (Giry and Tika 2020), social psychology (Klein and Nera 2020) and social network analysis and big data (Gualda Caballero 2020).

Within this varied scenario, discourse approaches to conspiracy theorising occupy a relatively small but increasingly relevant niche. Conspiracy theories are, in fact, eminently discursive phenomena, and a thorough understanding of their linguistic and rhetorical structuring is of crucial importance for a full appraisal of their nature and configuration. Defined by Madisson and Ventsel as "strategic narratives aimed at constructing a shared meaning of the past, present and future of international politics" (Madisson and Ventsel 2021: 4; see also Miskimmon, O'Loughlin and Roselle 2017: 6), conspiracy theories have been ascribed to the textual tradition of explanation (Byford 2011: 4), which is characterised by a particular rhetorical style consisting of two separate but interconnected strands: the rhetoric of scientific inquiry, and the rhetoric of "just asking questions" (Byford 2011: 88-93). The latter is a direct consequence of the fact that conspiracy theories invariably emerge in response to some officially sanctioned account of typically dramatic (and often tragic or traumatic) events which they question, and which they must debunk as a means to make room for their preferred explanations. Such explanations are typically less strongly argued for than the contested versions are argued against, thus shifting on proponents of the "official stories" the burden of proving their truthfulness. Wood and Douglas (2103), for instance, have shown in a study of online comments about the tenth anniversary of 9/11 that conspiracy advocates display a tendency to spend much more time arguing against the official

explanation of 9/11 than advocating an alternative (Wood and Douglas 2013: 7). Oswald (2016) has defined conspiracy theories as “refutational narratives” (Oswald 2016: 3), and Aupers (2020) as “counter-narratives self-consciously formulated in opposition to the official interpretation of (mediatised) events [...] grounded in an oppositional reading of mass media texts, thus qualifying as oppositional readings par excellence” (Aupers 2020: 471). Because of their oppositional nature, therefore, rather than as explanations, conspiracy theories may be best seen as a form of argumentative discourse aimed primarily at dismantling an opponent’s standpoint.

Further discursive characteristics of conspiratorial discourse have recently been identified by Baden and Sharon (2021), who have convincingly argued that the concurrent presence of certain elements in a text can be sufficient ground to warrant its assignment to the category of conspiracy theorising. The features identified by Baden and Sharon are “pervasive potency, Manichean binaries, and elusive epistemology” (Baden and Sharon 2021: 101), all of which represent violations (or “corruptions”) of fundamental discursive norms (Baden and Sharon 2021: 85). The identification of these corruptions, however, is not straightforward, nor are they immediately retrievable from textual materials. In fact, it involves extensive meaning inferencing and attribution which often relies on (not always warranted) assumptions about people’s interpretations. Indeed, Baden and Sharon acknowledge that the conceptual distinctions they have devised to separate conspiracy theorising from legitimate forms of contestation rely on the retrieval of “interpretations communicated in natural discourse”, but are not immediately detectable “in the manifest text itself” (Baden and Sharon 2021: 100).

The findings discussed above indicate that conspiratorial discourse displays typical features which can indeed be identified; at the same time, they also suggest that textual (as opposed to more abstract, discursal) patterns may be more difficult to pinpoint. To pursue the goal of identifying textually encoded cues of conspiratorial discourse, useful contributions come from social media studies. Digital media, with their enormous outreach potential, have proven an ideal breeding ground for all sorts of conspiracy theories (cf. Southwell, Thorson and Sheble 2018). Research in this field has gained momentum of late, particularly as a result of the recent spike in the spreading of conspiratorialism, fuelled by fake news and sustained by highly active anti-establishment movements. A case in point (amongst many) is the QAnon conspiracy theory, which alleges the existence of a Democrat-led cabal of Satan-worshipping, cannibalistic paedophiles running a global child sex-trafficking ring and plotting against former U.S. president Donald Trump. Amply discredited at the time of writing this chapter in 2021, it continues nonetheless to command the loyalty of numerous followers, with dissemination through social media showing little sign of subsiding.

Investigation of conspiracy theorising on social media has yielded further interesting insights into key aspects of the phenomenon. For instance, recent research on conspiracy theories linked to the Zika virus (Wood 2018) has shown that conspiracy propagators on Twitter relied heavily on rhetorical questions (a well-known general attribute of conspiracy theory discourse; see Byford 2011), made extensive references to authorities (in fact, more, and more varied, than debunking discourse) and constituted a very large and rather decentralized group, as opposed to the greater centralization of supporters of official explanations. Repertoires of discursive strategies deployed in conspiracy discourse on social media have also been identified (see Kou et al. 2017, which likewise focuses on the Zika virus), and the language of conspiracy theories in online discussions has been explored (Samory and Mitra 2018). More recently, research has focused on automatic detection of online conspiracy theorising, relying, for instance, on cognitive structuring aspects of conspiracy narratives as instantiated in lexico-semantic and syntactic features (Tangherlini et al. 2020), and on the identification and detection of psycholinguistic characteristics of conspiracy propagators (Giachanou, Ghanem and Rosso 2021).

In this study, I build on the tradition of discourse- and language-based analysis described above to try to identify discourse-specific linguistic patterns in conspiracy theorising, with a view to associating them to the higher-level rhetorical and argumentative strategies typical of this discourse already identified in previous studies. I take a view of conspiracy theorising as a recognizable discourse type (Sarangi 2000) arising from a well-defined ‘activity type’ (Levinson [1979] 1992) and characterised by distinct features (signs, symbols, terms, argumentative patterns, typically occurring iteratively; cf. Madisson and Ventsel, this volume). More specifically, I consider conspiracy theories as instances of an argumentative activity aimed at refuting official accounts, and posit that recognizable lexical/phraseological clusters may be associated with its scaffolding function. While I acknowledge that such clusters may be at least in part specific to the conspiracy theory investigated, and therefore not always amenable to generalization, I believe that seeking to identify conventionalized linguistic and rhetorical patterns typical to conspiracy theorising as a discourse type may contribute to addressing some of the difficulties identified in recent literature on the topic, most notably that of finding heuristically valid methods to preliminarily identify texts which are likely candidates for assignment to the discursive category of conspiracy theorising. By connecting the micro-level of linguistic analysis to the meso-level of rhetorical organization and to the macro-level of discourse articulation, I hope to be able to offer some initial findings useful for the development of a description of conspiracy theory discourse that may also represent a viable heuristic method for the assignment of other texts

to this discourse type. The research presented in this chapter makes no pretense to be conclusive in this respect, and should be considered as only an exploratory step in the description of textual patterns in conspiracy discourse.

2. Corpus and method

The research approach selected for this study is quali-quantitative and seeks to complement and integrate the methodologies and findings of previous research by conducting a discourse-analysis informed, corpus-based investigation. The analysis is conducted on a collection of texts which can be attributed with certainty to the conspiracy theory category. The texts selected are all published books providing alternative explanations for the tragic collapse of the Twin Towers in New York on September 11, 2001. Alternative accounts of the 9/11 events have proven extremely enduring and continue to command a great deal of attention, and while they are a diverse lot – having failed to coalesce into a single coherent narrative – they are all generally accepted as belonging to the category of conspiracy theorising. Given the epistemic uncertainty surrounding conspiracy discourse, and on account of the unsanctioned status of other, less established and long-lasting conspiracy theories, compiling a corpus of texts that could be considered with certainty to be representative of the discourse to be investigated was crucial to guaranteeing the robustness of the results.

The corpus collected for the analysis (hereinafter the 911CT corpus) comprises six volumes on the 9/11 attack, all of them available for purchase on the digital marketplace www.amazon.com. A preliminary investigation of the popular 9/11 conspiracy website 911Truth.org, and in particular of its “Resources” section, provided insights into a number of publications devoted to the topic. Further investigation yielded additional related results. Only books which could be found on www.amazon.com were selected and digital versions downloaded to build a corpus in pdf format amenable to automated analysis.

The selection was confined to books on the same conspiracy so as to limit the dispersion effect of including books on multiple conspiracies, as this was deemed more suited to a preliminary investigation such as the present one. Of course, while having the advantage of reducing noise, focusing on a single conspiracy theory can involve the opposite risk – i.e. to generalize findings which may in fact be specific to that individual theory. To offset this risk, care was taken throughout the study to exclude from the investigation items which were suspected or known to be topic-specific.

Table 1. Corpus details (911CT)

Text code	Text details	Number of words
#0	Gold, John, 2012, 911 Truther <i>The Fight for Peace, Justice and Accountability</i> , ePublishPartners.com.	104,315
#1	Knight-Jadczyk, Laura and Quinn, Joe 2006, 9/11 <i>The Ultimate Truth</i> , 2nd edition, Boulder, CO: Red Pill Press.	227,555
#2	Marrs, Jim and Honegger, Barbara 2006. <i>The Terror Conspiracy Deception, 9/11 and the Loss of Liberty</i> . 2nd edition, Disinformation Books.	222,753
#3	Icke, David 2019. <i>The Trigger: Exposing the Lie that Changed the World – Who Really Did It and Why</i> . Derby: Ickonic.	378,969
#4	Bollyn, Christopher 2012. <i>Solving 9-11 – The Deception That Changed The World</i> . Christopher Bollyn.	83,076
#5	Summers, Anthony, Swan, Robbyn 2011. <i>The Eleventh Day: The Full Story of 9/11 and Osama Bin Laden</i> , New York: Ballantine Books.	218,695
	Total wordcount	1,235,363

The quantitative analysis was carried out using Sketch Engine (www.sketchengine.eu; Kilgarriff et al. 2014), a comprehensive suite of text analysis tools which offers numerous capabilities, including topic modelling, keyword extraction and identification of collocates and other co-occurrence patterns. The starting point for the investigation was the identification of salient lexical items and patterns which appeared to be discourse- rather than topic-specific – i.e., linked to conspiracy theorising as a discourse type and not to the subject of the conspiracy under consideration. The items extracted were then analysed in context and assessed in light of the findings of previous research.

The qualitative analysis was carried out within the overarching framework of discourse analysis, with a focus on the interconnections between the micro-level of lexical analysis and the macro-level of discourse profiling. Starting from the in-context analysis of lexical patterns, the study explores their role in the discursive construction of conspiracy theory. Initially corpus-driven (i.e., with corpus interrogation techniques being used to identify potential candidates for further analysis), the study shifts then to a corpus-based approach (i.e., one where hypotheses – based on the data findings of the preliminary corpus-driven analysis – are tested) for in-depth analysis of textual and discursive construction. The “useful synergy” (Baker et al. 2008) of corpus linguistics and discourse analysis has long been recognised, as have been the potential pitfalls of both (Gabrielatos and Duguid 2014). In this study, I try to balance the exploratory approach typical of corpus linguistics with the hypothesis driven approach of discourse analysis. My own approach is inevitably informed by the findings – of which I am aware – of previous research

on conspiracy theory discourse. My aim, however, is not to simply look for confirmation of such findings, but to identify textually encoded patterns which may help build a more complete picture of the discourse of conspiracy theorising. Because of this, I offer no preliminary hypotheses. Instead, I aim to qualitatively investigate emerging linguistic patterns in the light of previous research findings, thus hopefully providing some linguistic evidence amenable to future operationalisation.

3. The 911CT corpus: Preliminary insights from corpus analysis

The first step in the analytical procedure was wordlist compilation, followed by keyword extraction. A corpus wordlist is a list of all the words occurring in a corpus ordered by absolute frequency. Wordlists can be lemmatised, i.e. show the frequency of lemmas rather than individual words, thus facilitating the identification of relevant terms regardless of morphological variation (for instance, a lemmatised list will count occurrences of *attack* and *attacks* together). A wordlist (which can also be organized by part of speech) offers first of all an overview of the aboutness of a corpus – i.e., provides insights into its subject matter. In the corpus under consideration, for instance, the top 10 nouns are *time*, *attack*, *world*, *Bush*, *government*, *Israel*, *flight*, *plane* and *year* – a list which clearly reflects its subject matter, and which also provides an insight – albeit partial – into one of the elements in conspiracy theorising about the Twin Towers, i.e., the involvement of the Israeli government. As mentioned above, though, the purpose of this study is not to explore a specific conspiracy theory, but rather the discourse of conspiracy theorising, also in the light of the findings of previous research; as a result, frequency data were qualitatively culled and 9/11-specific lexis was deliberately excluded from the analysis; as for the remaining data, I focused on lexis which met two criteria: (1) it featured high (within the top 30 to 50 items) in the frequency lists extracted; and (2) could be related to discursive features found by previous studies to be salient in conspiracy theorising (for instance, metadiscursive references to “stories” or “accounts”, or epistemically laden words; cf. Deschrijver 2021).

In order to identify relevant lexis, besides the general wordlist, separate frequency lists were extracted for nouns, adjectives, adverbs and verbs. The frequency lists for nouns and adjectives included – as expected – items clearly related to the events of 9/11; however, it also featured lemmas which qualify as metalinguistic in nature, or which are epistemically charged. For instance, among the top 30 adjectives there appear words such as *official* (fr. 624), *public* (fr. 465), *secret* (fr. 409), *different* (fr. 396), *possible* (fr. 384), *clear* (fr. 368) and *true* (fr. 349). Among the top 50 nouns, we find *report*, with a frequency of 1,533, followed by *truth* (fr. 1,223),

story (1,151), *information* (fr. 1,138), *fact* (fr. 1,103) and *evidence* (fr. 1,030). As for adverbs, the list features *really* (466), *apparently* (fr. 314), *simply* (fr. 310), *certainly* (fr. 279) and *clearly* (fr. 258). Of special interest are also lexical verbs, of which the most frequent one is *say* (fr. 5,320), followed by *know* (fr. 2,382), while among modal verbs the most frequent one is *would* (fr. 3,714).

When seen in the light of existing definitions of conspiracy theories and of previous findings of research attending to the discursive features of conspiracy theorising, the above-mentioned lexical items appear to fit into conceptual groupings which closely match the discursive features identified in previous research. In particular, it is possible to classify them as follows:

Table 2. Classification of selected high-frequency lemmas

Metalinguistic references to activity type	Epistemically laden expressions	Evidence-related expressions	Public/secret juxtaposition	Hypothesis making
<i>report</i> (n)	<i>true</i> (adj)	<i>information</i> (n)	<i>official</i> (adj)	<i>different</i>
<i>story</i> (n)	<i>truth</i> (n)	<i>fact</i> (n)	<i>public</i> (adj)	(adj)
	<i>clear</i> (adj)	<i>evidence</i> (n)	<i>secret</i> (adj)	<i>possible</i> (adj)
	<i>really</i> (adv)	<i>say</i> (v)		<i>would</i> (mod)
	<i>apparently</i> (adv)			
	<i>simply</i> (adv)			
	<i>certainly</i> (adv)			
	<i>clearly</i> (adv)			
	<i>know</i> (v)			

The classification is somewhat porous, with some terms being possible candidates for more than one category, and – as always when dealing with purely quantitative data – amenable to further refinement after qualitative analysis. Moreover, the lists do not include *all* terms sharing the same characteristic or playing similar discursive roles, but rather only the ones which occur with the highest frequency in the corpus. Additionally, assignment of the verb *say* to the “evidence-related expressions” category results from preliminary qualitative assessment, which confirmed that forms of the verb *say* are typically used to introduce evidence (or counter-evidence) but also to expose false information. As for the last column, the adjectives *different* and *possible* may be expected to appear in alternative (*different*) hypothesis making, including hypotheses emerging from dismissing existing ones (as the recurrent use of *not possible* seems to indicate; see Section 3.1.1 below) the prominence of the modal *would* – by far the most frequent modal – also suggests that conditional clauses may feature prominently in the corpus, which could confirm the

hypothesis – formulated and qualitatively confirmed in previous research (Oswald 2016) – that inferential processes play a key role in this type of discourse.

Alongside frequency data, useful preliminary insights can also be provided by keywords. Both frequency lists (discussed above) and keyword lists are based on statistical significance, but they are the results of different computations and produce different (though occasionally overlapping) results. While frequency lists are computed on the basis of the total number of occurrences of each individual word (or lemma: Sketch Engine, as mentioned above, enables both options) in the corpus, keyword extraction is the result of a comparison between the frequency data of a corpus (in this case, the 911CT corpus) and those of a typically larger reference corpus. Keyword status is assigned to those words or multi-word expressions which appear with a statistically significant higher frequency in the corpus under investigation than in the reference corpus. If the reference corpus reflects general language use, the extraction of keywords will enable the identification of the words and phrases which are specific to a given corpus (“what is unique or typical”, as the explanation provided by Sketch Engine puts it). The “typicality” of a given word or phrase is independent of its absolute frequency in the corpus under investigation. In the case at hand, the 911CT corpus was checked against the EnTenTen 2018 corpus (a multi-million corpus of internet discourse representative of contemporary general English) provided by Sketch Engine. Both individual keywords and key (multi-word) terms were extracted, based on lemmatised frequencies. The keyword list proved of little significance, as it yielded a list of mostly proper names (those of the people featured in the conspiracy narratives – suspects, witnesses, investigators, political figures etc.), which understandably appeared with a significantly higher frequency in the corpus investigated as opposed to the reference corpus. The extraction of multi-word expressions (henceforth keyphrases), by contrast, proved much more interesting, and confirmed – amongst other things – the importance, in conspiracy discourse, of metalinguistic references.

Table 3 below shows the top thirty keyphrases in the corpus.

Table 3. List of the 30 top keyphrases in the 911CT corpus

Item	Frequency (focus)	Frequency (reference)	Relative frequency (focus)	Relative frequency (reference)	Score ¹
1. official story	192	9073	129.60000	0.40000	96.700
2. israeli intelligence	121	4338	81.70000	0.20000	70.800
3. <i>truth movement</i>	111	7155	74.90000	0.30000	59.500
4. controlled demolition	90	4286	60.80000	0.20000	53.000
5. death cult	63	1498	42.50000	0.10000	41.100
6. military intelligence	82	13847	55.40000	0.50000	36.700
7. second plane	54	2618	36.50000	0.10000	34.000
8. air traffic	121	37252	81.70000	1.40000	33.900
9. first plane	49	3965	33.10000	0.20000	29.500
10. israeli military intelligence	41	386	27.70000	0.00000	28.300
11. official version	51	6631	34.40000	0.30000	28.200
12. terrorist travel	37	239	25.00000	0.00000	25.700
13. terrorist attack	87	35725	58.70000	1.40000	25.100
14. israeli military	45	6691	30.40000	0.30000	24.900
15. laden family	36	1025	24.30000	0.00000	24.300
16. egyptian government	43	6536	29.00000	0.30000	24.000
17. patriot act	51	12888	34.40000	0.50000	23.600
18. crash site	46	9760	31.10000	0.40000	23.300
19. command center	43	8086	29.00000	0.30000	22.900
20. israeli government	62	22666	41.90000	0.90000	22.800
21. intelligence service	44	9067	29.70000	0.40000	22.700
22. israeli involvement	32	467	21.60000	0.00000	22.200
23. war game	35	3573	23.60000	0.10000	21.600
24. false flag	52	17383	35.10000	0.70000	21.600
25. homeland security	103	59502	69.50000	2.30000	21.300
26. inside job	36	5816	24.30000	0.20000	20.700
27. conspiracy theory	56	24970	37.80000	1.00000	19.700
28. intelligence agency	38	10966	25.70000	0.40000	18.700
29. commercial airliner	28	1930	18.90000	0.10000	18.500
30. official account	28	3549	18.90000	0.10000	17.500

1. The keyness score of a word or multi-word expression is calculated according to the following formula:

$$\frac{f_{pmfocus} + n}{f_{pmref} + n}$$

where $f_{pmfocus}$ is the normalized (per million) frequency of the word in the focus corpus, f_{pmref} is the normalized (per million) frequency of the word in the reference corpus, n is the simple Maths (smoothing) parameter ($n = 1$ is the default value). (<https://www.sketchengine.eu/wp-content/uploads/ske-statistics.pdf>)

As can be seen, while the majority of the phrases are – predictably enough – topic-related, referring as they do to clearly identifiable elements of the 9/11 events (*second plane, air traffic, first plane, commercial airliner, terrorist travel, terrorist attack, crash site, commercial airliner*), others identify further actors (*military intelligence, Israeli military, Egyptian government, Israeli government, homeland security etc.*), and still others refer to value-laden lexical items associated with the conspiracy theory under investigation (*controlled demolition*, but also *war game*, which indicates an interpretive frame, and *false flag*, which hints at forms of deception involving state actors, either as victims or perpetrators). Alongside these, though, there are other phrases – some of them very prominent – which are metalinguistic in nature (such as *official story, official version, official account*) or which can be described as epistemically laden labels (such as *conspiracy theory* and *truth movement*). Of the latter, *truth movement* is a term specific to 9/11 conspiracy theorising and identifies those people, often referred to as “thruthers”, who reject the account of the events of 9/11 provided by official sources. The other key phrases falling into these groups, such as *official story* or *conspiracy theory*, are not specific to any one conspiracy theory, but are indeed key elements of conspiracy discourse. In particular, the noun phrase *official story* is confirmed as being crucial in conspiracy discourse also from a statistical viewpoint, the string being the top keyphrase in the corpus. This is indeed an important piece of data, because it provides further confirmation of the results of previous research (most notably Deschrijver 2021) and gives additional strength to the hypothesis that metalinguistic references play a key role in this type of discourse.

In the next paragraphs I qualitatively investigate these data with a view to better determining the roles and functions of the salient words and expressions identified in the corpus under consideration. On account of the limited space available, I will confine the investigation to three sets of data: (1) references to *accounts, stories* and *versions*; (2) selected epistemic nouns and adverbs (*evidence* and *facts, obviously, apparently* and the like); and (3) discursive functions of conditionals (*would*) in the text. The word *truth* – an obvious candidate for inclusion in the analysis of epistemically charged expressions – will not be analysed because of its conventionalized use in the conspiracy discourse under investigation. Likewise, the lemma *report* will be left out of the analysis because prominently used to refer to the Final Report issued by the 9/11 Commission at the end of their investigation.

3.1 Delving deeper into the data: Qualitative investigation

3.1.1 *Official accounts, stories and versions*

The salience of metalinguistic expressions in both the frequency list and the keyphrase lists suggests that references to *accounts*, *stories* and *versions* are especially important in conspiracy discourse. The recurrence of the premodifier *official* (a highly frequent adjective in the corpus) in all three keyphrases suggests that qualifiers may be important in the corpus. An investigation of the qualifiers of the three nouns revealed that besides *official* (196 occurrences), the most frequent qualifiers of *story* are *true* (14 occurrences), *different* (14 occurrences), *real* (11 occurrences) and *government* (9 occurrences). For *version*, besides *official* (57) we have *accepted* (5), and *different* (5). For *account*, again, the most frequent collocate is *official* (28), followed by *eyewitness* (13), *witness* (4) and *firsthand* (4). As can be seen, the greatest number of collocations is with *official*. When seen in conjunction with the most frequent verbs which have as objects *accounts*, *stories* and *versions*, it becomes apparent that these metalinguistic expressions typically designate negatively evaluated accounts which are often *questioned*, *contradicted* and *disproven*.

Concordance 1. Selected concordance lines for (negative) verb + *story/version* as object

doc#0 | attack on this reporter for *questioning* the *government version* of events at the Pentagon
 doc#2 | with other scientists, completely *disproves* the *official version* that the Twin Towers fell
 doc#4 | of 9/11 Facts and evidence which *contradict* the *official version* of 9/11 have been skilfully
 doc#5 | freedoms. From hereon we shall *dismantle* this *impossible version* of events and show that
 doc#0 | that it was, and attacking anyone who *questions* that *story* with the slur of “conspiracy
 doc#5 | and FBI employees who are *questioning* the *official story* of 9/11 because from their area

Compared to *version* and *account*, whose occurrences other than in association with *official* are extremely limited, *story* appears to be used in a less restricted manner, including to refer to accounts differing or diverging from the official ones. When it does, it is usually in conjunction with verbs such as *emerge* or *leak*, which suggest a contrast between the monolithic obduracy of the official account and the open-ended and questioning nature of the alternative versions which manage to surface despite the odds. The concordance lines below provide evidence of this usage:

Concordance 2. Selected concordance lines for *story* + *emerge/appear/leak*

doc#4 | tip of an iceberg that was to become public in mid-2002. The *story began to surface* in
 doc#4 | Indeed, horror *stories* had *begun to leak out* about the degrading treatment of
 doc#1 | However, beginning on September 15, a second *story appears*. This story is similar
 doc#4 | during the 1961 NORAD exercise are eerily similar to *stories appearing* on 9/11
 doc#5 | were not only attacked by the authorities when the *stories appeared*. At the frontline of
 doc#3 | that Atta received \$ 100,000 as late as August 2001. A *story emerged* in the Indian press
 doc#4 | Numerous puzzling *stories* have also *emerged* about the so-called mastermind of the
 doc#5 | other staff recalled al-Shehhi drinking there. A similar *story emerged* from the other side

One final confirmation of the pejorative meaning of the noun phrases *official story* and *official version* is provided by the analysis of their collocates, reproduced in the concordance lines below:

Concordance 3. Selected concordance lines for *adj + official story/version*

doc#1		believed the <i>so-called official story</i> of 9/11 and would have tended to be an
doc#4		and narrate a <i>fraudulent official story</i> , remove evidence through the
doc#5		the blatantly <i>mendacious official story</i> and what it has been used to justify.
doc#5		on the <i>ludicrous official story</i> being true (with no provable
doc#2		a skeptic of the <i>unproven official version</i> , I have examined the facts and
doc#4		of the <i>untrue official version</i> remains a betrayal of every citizen

Though these phrases are rarely premodified, whenever they are, their mendacious character is invariably – though unnecessarily – emphasized, with a cumulative effect which betrays a deeply felt indignation.

Based on the above, it seems possible to state that noun phrases composed of the premodifier *official* followed by a metalinguistic expression such as *story*, *account* or *version* acquire terminology status in the corpus. In other words, the adjective *official* is not only an epithet (to use the terminology of Systemic Functional Grammar) with evaluative connotations, but rather a classifier, i.e., a premodifier which, in conjunction with the head noun, identifies a specific category of items sharing the same (negative) characteristics.

For what concerns the role of these phrases in textual structuring, while a detailed analysis is beyond the scope of this study, they appear to play – in some cases at least – a pivotal role in building up to a climatic pitch. Consider, for instance, Excerpts (1) and (2) below:

- (1) In the five years since the images of planes exploding in the windows of the World Trade Center were engraved in our psyches, the movement of people who doubt the *official story* of 9/11 has grown. There are now many websites devoted to the question. But how many Americans are willing to look the facts in the face and confront the truth: the “attack” of 9/11 was an inside job with help. (doc#0)
- (2) Years of foot-dragging and unnecessary secrecy by the Bush administration, widely documented in the mainstream press, also hampered independent and official inquiries into unanswered questions. Throughout this difficult process, unanswered questions about the failure of US intelligence also linger in the minds of critics of the *official story*. How could an obviously sophisticated terrorist plan that likely involved scores of persons collaborating over many years escape the notice of our intelligence services, especially the FBI and CIA? The fact is, it didn't. (doc#4)

In both of them, the phrase *official story* comes at the end of a passage where doubt has been instilled in preparation for the conspiracy claim. Taken together, the data presented above suggest that metalinguistic expressions such as *official story/version/account* not only carry a negative evaluation, but can also cue the incipient introduction of a standpoint which the arguer may then be expected to go on to defend, having first refuted the one supported in the official version. The closing sentences in Excerpts (1) and (2) are examples of such standpoints. In (1), the writer advances an alternative explanation (“the ‘attack’ of 9/11 was an inside job with help”); in (2) s/he simply refutes the claim (“The fact is, it didn’t”). Both utterances signal the opening of a confrontation stage in an argumentative debate aimed at refuting pre-existing accounts. This warrants the hypothesis, which needs to be confirmed with more in-depth analyses, that the occurrence of these noun phrases may be not only a characterising feature of conspiracy discourse, but also a textual cue signalling potential loci of refutational engagement.

3.1.2 *Contested epistemologies: Hard (or no) evidence, and obvious facts*

Another lexical field whose centrality emerges from the preliminary quantitative investigation of the corpus is that of epistemic certainty and uncertainty. The centrality of these notions to conspiracy theorising is easy to understand: conspiracy theories aim precisely at finding a truth that has been deliberately and perversely concealed by the conspirators, and to do so they rely on facts that have either been suppressed or ignored by the official accounts, while exposing as fabricated the evidence on which the latter is based.

Analysis of the context of occurrence of the lemma *evidence* suggests that it is used both when talking about ‘official accounts’ and when advancing alternative versions. In the former case, the actual existence of evidence is typically denied, or it is argued that it has been hidden or disposed of, as shown in the concordance lines reported below:

Concordance 4. Selected concordance lines for *evidence* referred to ‘official versions’ of the events

doc#0 | conferring on Shoot down Orders. There is *no documentary evidence* for this call. Even
 doc#5 | bin Laden’s Most Wanted page is because the FBI has *no hard evidence* connecting Bin
 doc#3 | and the diplomatic dithering stopped. While *no hard evidence* would emerge that Pakistan
 doc#0 | 9/11 attacks, despite the fact that there has *never been any evidence* of a link between
 doc#0 | many people to believe a story for which there is not only *no evidence*, but in fact, the
 doc#2 | bin Laden’s Most Wanted page is because the FBI has *no hard evidence* connecting bin
 doc#1 | (not just some investigators writing a report based on *evidence that is then withheld*) and
 doc#4 | backed by *little, no, or even contradictory evidence*. With *all hard evidence locked away*

In the second case, the reliability of the evidence produced is simply assumed, and often reinforced by means of boosters (*hard evidence*, *solid evidence*, *tell-tale evidence* to name but a few):

Concordance 5. Selected concordance lines for *evidence* referred to conspiracy theorists' version of the events

doc#2 | experts among the agents would make sense given the *evidence* that the terror attacks of
 doc#4 | "actions left researchers with only two types of *evidence*: a small number of eyewitness
 doc#0 | we were able to debunk each of these assertions with *hard evidence* and a healthy dose
 doc#5 | for an average of three days. These were the only *tell-tale evidences* aside from the scarring
 doc#4 | capability to produce such weapons. But the most *amazing evidence* of official duplicity
 doc#4 |, – The discovery of small iron microspheres providing *evidence* of the vaporization of
 doc#2 | be dismissed as "conspiracy theorists." We now have *solid evidence* of the advanced
 doc#3 | commercial pilot, and airframe mechanic, said that—on the *evidence* as he saw it in

In two examples, both from doc#5, scare quotes are used to argue the fabricated nature of the evidence produced by the supposed conspirators:

- (3) They know that not everyone will believe that and will look for some kind of conspiracy behind the official version of events. So they give them 'evidence' of a conspiracy to keep them happy and occupied (doc#5)
- (4) A warning to take great care with the 'evidence' of 'witnesses' supporting the official story is provided by the case of cab driver Lloyd England who claimed on television that one of the lamp poles 'struck by Flight 77' crashed through his car windscreen. (doc#5)

Scare quotes signal distancing from a term's perceived meaning, associated register, or normative definition (Gutzmann and Stei 2011; Predelli 2003), thus pragmatically carrying out an evaluative function. The meaning conveyed through the scare quotes is that the evidence produced is not, in fact, evidence at all. Notice that the evaluation is not limited to the evidence, but in fact targets the conspirators. Deschrijver (2021: 315) has found scare quotes to be used strategically in conspiracy discourse to dispute the reliability of official accounts. While an investigation of scare quotes in the corpus is beyond the scope of this study, the examples above confirm his finding.

Another lemma which occurs with a high frequency is *fact*. If evidence can be fabricated and disputed, facts are indisputable, and they appear to convey a much stronger epistemic force than the more technical term *evidence*. The concordance lines below illustrate this point:

Concordance 6. Selected concordance lines for *fact*

doc#2 | of its people.” So, who is really afraid of unpleasant *facts* and the truth of 9-11? It is not
 doc#4 | and hesitate even when being enlightened [with truth and *facts*]...” [Greas masses of
 doc#0 | like a Boeing 757 in this footage, but the *simple and obvious fact* is that there is no Boeing
 doc#5 | their most important task was to hide the *blatantly obvious fact* that the military was
 doc#0 | the public is still able to learn about the *suspicious facts*, it can only be through “rumors”. 117
 doc#1 | questions of me and by providing me with *indisputable facts* he’s opened my eyes. I have
 doc#0 | on them. We go on from there to test things and establish more *facts*. When we debate,
 doc#4 | the Twin Towers as well as other WTC buildings. The *strange fact* that this wall was largely
 doc#1 | was that he was deeply committed to using *verifiable facts* found in mainstream news
 doc#0 | analyzing this situation, I was struck by one *significant fact*: it is known that there were
 doc#3 | acquaintance’s flight instruction at the school—a *bizarre fact* that may be no more than a
 doc#4 | that senior government officials have covered up *crucial facts* about what really happened

References to facts are often accompanied by boosters (*verifiable*, *undisputable*, *crucial*), or (more rarely) qualified as *bizarre* or *strange* when suggesting that such facts contradict official accounts.

Evidence and *facts* are very much at the centre of conspiracy narratives, and are constantly assessed and evaluated in conspiracy discourse. Indeed, the refutational nature of conspiracy theorising means that proponents of such theories are constantly engaged in the epistemic assessment of official accounts. Consequently, epistemic stance may be expected to be salient in their discourse. The frequency of epistemic adverbs such as *apparently*, *simply*, *certainly* and *clearly* seems to confirm this hypothesis: these adverbs interpersonally engage the reader and guide his/her interpretation in the direction desired by the writer, building arguments characterised by a “self-sealing quality” which “render[s] them particularly immune to challenge” (Sunstein and Vermeule 2009: 204). The verbs *say* and *know* – the top two most frequent lexical verbs in the corpus – also appear to fit in with this emerging epistemic profile: *say* is largely used to introduce third-party utterances – either claims to be dismantled, or evidence in support of alternative claims; and *know* may be expected to be linked to the overall epistemic character of the narratives. Space constraints prevent a more in-depth investigation of these lemmas, which are, however, deserving of further exploration.

3.1.3 “Surely if a plane is ‘vaporized’ then the occupants would be vaporized too?”: Refutational argumentation and *modus tollens*

The last section of this analysis focuses on the modal *would*, the most frequent modal in the corpus with 3,714 occurrences. One of the factors which contribute to the over-representation of *would* is the fact that it occurs in reported speech, which, as I have suggested above, is a dominant discursive strategy in the corpus analysed. Due to the large number of occurrences, detailed examination of all the patterns of

occurrence of *would* was impossible. In order to restrict the analysis, a search was carried out for occurrences of *would* within a 15-word span of the lemma *if*. While not necessarily retrieving all instances of the use of *would* in hypothetical clauses, this method enabled the retrieval of a significant number of examples (404), the greatest majority of which proved to be instances of deductive reasoning based on *modus tollens*. *Modus tollens* is a principle of logics which can be summed up as follows:

If p, then q.

Not q.

Therefore, not p.

The quote in the heading of this section is an example of such a mode of reasoning. The deductive process involved is illustrated below:

If a plane is “vaporized” (p), then the occupants would be vaporized too (q)

The occupants were not vaporized (not q)

Therefore, the plane was not vaporized (not p)

Deductive reasoning, especially of the *modus tollens* type, is particularly suited to refutational argumentation because it relies on the lack of evidence which might be expected to exist in order to infer the invalidity of the premise. Recall that the absence of evidence supporting the official account is frequently referred to in the corpus. The prevalence of *modus tollens* in the dismantling of the official account (or refuting more shared assumptions; see Excerpt (6)) ties in with this approach. Further examples are provided below, with (7) being an instance of counterfactual logic which may be expected to be particularly prevalent:

- (5) If a 757 or jet fighter flew at high speed 100 feet from an eyewitness (p) the sound would be deafening (q). (doc#0) [*but it wasn't, according to witness evidence; therefore, no jet fighter flew at high speed*]
- (6) If we had a truly free press in the United States (p) this discovery would be front page news and a subject of discussion on every news outlet in the nation (q). (doc#2) [*but no one talked about it; therefore, the press in the United States is not really free*]
- (7) The fact is, if the systems already in place had not been ordered to stand down (p), there would not have been an attack on the WTC Towers (q). (doc#0) [*but there was an attack; therefore, the system had been ordered to stand down*]

Example (8) below invokes the same inferential process, despite the antecedent not being embedded in an if-clause:

- (8) There was no sign of the kind of damage to the Pentagon structure one would expect from the impact of a large airliner. (doc#3)

Explicitation of the argumentative structure may take the following form:

If a large airliner crashed on a site (p), it would cause extensive damage (q)
There was no sign of extensive damage (not q)
Therefore, no large airliner crashed on the site (not p).

There are also a few examples of *modus ponens*, another type of deductive reasoning whose logical structure is as follows:

If p, then q.
p.
Therefore, q.

Excerpt (9) exemplifies this structure:

- (9) “If I were to bring the towers down (p), I would put explosives in the basement to get the weight of the building to help collapse the structure (q).” (doc#3)
[*The towers were brought down; therefore, explosives were put in the basement*]

On occasion, both *modus tollens* and *modus ponens* are used to first refute a standpoint, and then advance an alternative one:

- (10) If Peterson was simply an idiot that somehow made it into the Army (p), one would expect widespread news coverage to demonstrate how seriously authorities were taking attempted bombings (q). [*but news coverage did not demonstrate that authorities were taking the attempted bombing seriously; therefore, Peterson was not an idiot that somehow made it into the army*] On the other hand, if Peterson was carrying out some undisclosed covert military orders (p), one would expect the incident to be hushed up (q). (doc#4) [*the incident was indeed hushed up; therefore, Peterson was carrying out some undisclosed covert military orders*]

While not accounting for all argumentative strategies deployed in conspiracy theorising (which, as Oswald (2016) observes, may be expected to include forms of abductive, besides deductive, reasoning, as well as a number of fallacies, such as “source-related fallacies (*ad populum*, *ad verecundiam*, *ad hominem*), hasty generalisations, arguments from analogy, [...], *ad ignorantiam*, and shifting the burden of proof”; cf. Oswald 2016: 8), a focus on conditionals can provide a valid heuristic method for spotting discursive traits which, in conjunction with other features, may indicate that a given text is an instance of conspiracy theorising.

4. Conclusions

In this corpus-driven study I have endeavoured to isolate lexical indicators which may be reliable candidates for the identification of conspiracy theorising as a discourse type. These candidates include metalinguistic references to *official versions/stories/accounts*, explicit mention of *evidence* and *facts*, markers of epistemic stance (*allegedly*, *reportedly*, *certain(ly)*, *obvious(ly)*), references to sources (by means of reporting verbs such as *say*; but this aspect should be further explored), and conditionals (*would*) used in hypothetical structures. All of them are associated to cognitive features which have been shown to be typical of conspiracy discourse.

While by no means exhaustive nor applicable in a deterministic manner, these indicators may be useful to provisionally assign a given text to the category of conspiracy theorising. Each indicator, taken in isolation, has limited significance; their co-occurrence, though, appears to be more reliable. To illustrate this point, consider text (11) below:

- (11) After denigrating the *official theory* of lightly-trained Muslim terrorists being able to miraculously pilot three jumbo airliners into three buildings, Sagadevan *explained*, “The writers of the *official storyline* expect us to believe, that once the flight deck crews had been overpowered, and the hijackers ‘took control’ of the various aircraft, their intended targets suddenly popped up in their windshields as they would have in some arcade game, and all that these fellows would have had to do was simply aim their airplanes at the buildings and fly into them. Most people who have been exposed only to the *official storyline* have never been on the flight deck of an airliner at altitude and looked at the outside world; *if they had, they’d realize the absurdity of this kind of reasoning.*” [...] Danielle O’Brien, one of the Dulles air traffic controllers, had this to say about Flight 77: “The speed, the maneuverability, the way [the pilot] turned, we all thought in the radar room, all of us experienced air traffic controllers, that it was a military plane.” This assessment may indeed have been correct, as is revealed in the Appendix to this book. [...] Numerous *puzzling stories* have also *emerged* about the *so-called* mastermind of the hijackers, Mohamed Atta. Atta *reportedly* left behind in his parked car two suitcases containing *incriminating documents*, including Atta’s passport, driver’s license, his last will, a copy of the Koran, flight simulation manuals for Boeing aircraft and a note to other hijackers. *But why even take suitcases on a suicide mission?* (doc#4)

In a very contained stretch of text, the excerpt features all the hallmarks of conspiracy discourse I have identified. Besides multiple references to the ‘official theory/storyline’, it also features reported speech (*explained*) to introduce witness testimony, as well as examples of reference to alternative accounts raising doubts on the

official version ('puzzling stories' which have 'emerged'), and instances of epistemic distancing ('so-called', 'reportedly'); while neither the lemma *evidence* nor *facts* occur, the phrase *incriminating documents* features a premodifier which is a strong collocate of *evidence*, and which suggests that documents are, in this case, synonymous with evidence. Deductive reasoning using *modus tollens* is also featured ('if they had, they'd realize the absurdity of this kind of reasoning'). Finally, rhetorical questioning appears in the closing line – a feature I have not explored in this study, but which is a well-known characteristic of conspiracy theorising.

Lexical indicators *per se* cannot be the sole criterion for deciding that a text is an example of conspiracy theorising. Critical analysis is necessary, as this alone can determine how robust – or, conversely, fallacious – a given account of certain events is. However, as Baden and Sharon (2021) have pointed out, critical reading has the disadvantage of relying to a great extent on inferential procedures, which are eminently exposed to reader bias and may lack evident links with the text. Lexical indicators, by contrast, have the advantage of being explicitly encoded in text. As a heuristic method for preliminary category assignment, they may hold a certain validity.

The findings of this preliminary study are only provisional, and must be verified on a larger and more diversified corpus of conspiracy texts. The corpus analysed comprised books on the 9/11 conspiracy theory – highly articulated texts embedding complex argumentation and benefiting from a considerable time distancing from the events analysed. Narratives of "active" conspiracy theories may differ from the one explored in this study. Other limitations of the study concern the discourse-specificity of the features identified. For instance, some of them – such as references to *evidence* and *facts* – may be expected to be equally prominent in conspiracy theory debunking, and are in fact typical of refutational argumentation in general, including that which is to be found in judicial discourse. By the same token, extensive reliance on sources, with the attendant use of reporting verbs, is also typical of journalism, and in particular of investigative journalism – another discourse type which has several points in common with conspiracy theorising. Further research is therefore needed to devise a reliable model with a more robust predictive power.

Despite these limitations, the findings of this study offer a possible way forward for linking the micro-level of linguistic analysis with the macro-level of discourse profiling. By virtue of this, they can advance the case for a linguistic-theory informed investigation of conspiracy theory capable of integrating the different disciplinary and methodological approaches on this extremely relevant, but still largely elusive topic.

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Is my mobile phone listening to me?

Conspiratorial thinking, digital literacies, and everyday encounters with surveillance

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Despite denials from tech executives, fact-checks from journalists and explanations from security experts, the “conspiracy theory” that internet companies listen to people’s conversations via the microphones in their mobile phones persists. This paper explores the ways people make sense of their everyday encounters with digital surveillance, and how they engage with or resist conspiratorial thinking in the context of the *actual* conspiracies implicated in the exploitative business models of tech companies. It examines how people talk about their lived experiences of being monitored, and how they work together with others to construct improvised epistemologies to explain them. The data come from a corpus of online discussions on digital surveillance from Reddit, YouTube and Quora. The analysis suggests while the theories that grow out of personal stories of digital surveillance may not be technologically accurate, they still constitute a kind of emerging digital literacy, a collective effort to make sense of and take a stance against the intrusive practices of tech companies. Such talk also serves a social function, providing people with ways to collectively narrativize their feelings of dwindling autonomy and to work together to formulate strategies to cope with complex technological and economic forces influencing contemporary communication.

Keywords: conspiracy theories, digital literacies, mobile phones, surveillance

1. Introduction

- (1) No joke, no lie the other day I was talking about pizza and fast food in with some friends and minutes later a pizza ad appeared on my IG feed I didn’t search nothing related to pizza on my phone I swear we were just talking and some domino’s pizza ad appeared that shit was really weird! (YouTube)

- (2) My girlfriend and I were making homemade General Tso's chicken, and the best way to make it is by double-frying, but I don't own a fry basket. So we had a whole conversation about the pros and cons of going to buy one. Didn't do any googling, just a verbal conversation. Next day, my Facebook had promoted ads for a deep fry kit on Amazon. (Reddit)

Stories like these of mobile phones supposedly eavesdropping on their owners are widespread on social media and have also been reported by more mainstream media outlets such as *Fox News* (Komando 2019) and the *Huffington Post* (Bond 2019). According to a survey of 1,006 U.S. adults conducted by *Consumer Reports* in 2019, nearly half of Americans who own a smartphone believe their phone is recording their conversations (Fowler 2019). The belief is so prevalent, in fact, that Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg had to explicitly deny what he called "this conspiracy theory that gets passed around that we listen to what's going on on your microphone and use that for ads" during his testimony to the US Senate in April of 2018 (Transcript 2018). Facebook has even issued a written statement on its website dismissing the claims ("Facebook does not use..." 2016).

The protestations of Facebook and other social media sites have been joined by a steady stream of experts who, via media interviews and columns, assure people that it is extremely unlikely that people are being spied on in this way. In one of the few academic treatments of the issue, computer security specialists Jacob Kröger and Philip Raschke (2019: 114) state:

So far, despite significant research efforts, no evidence has been found to confirm the widespread suspicion that firms are secretly eavesdropping on smartphone users to inform ads.

At the same time, however, they do not rule out the theory entirely, adding (114):

To the best of our knowledge, however, the opposite has not been proven either. While some threat scenarios can be ruled out based on existing security measures and considerations regarding an attack's visibility, cost and technical feasibility, there are still many security vulnerabilities and a fundamental lack of transparency that potentially leave room for more sophisticated attacks to be successful and remain undetected.

Despite the denials of tech executives and the reassurances of experts, and perhaps because of the shadow of a doubt that still remains, the belief that companies are listening to us through our phones has proven remarkably resilient. As Ben Gilbert (2019), writing for *BusinessInsider*, remarks:

It crosses generations, race, gender, and income brackets. Your conspiracy-minded uncle and members of Congress and your favorite morning news anchor are on the same page for this one. Everyone, it seems, believes that Facebook and Instagram are listening in on them. And no matter how hard they try to tamp down that belief, it persists.

But does this belief constitute a “conspiracy theory” as Mark Zuckerberg has labelled it? Conspiracy theory scholars (see e.g. Dentith 2016) say that three conditions need to be met for something to be labelled a conspiracy theory: The *conspirators condition* (some people are working together to do this), the *secrecy condition* (they’re not being honest about it) and the *goal condition* (they’re doing it for a reason, such as world domination, or, in this case, to sell people pizzas and deep fry kits). In this regard, these stories certainly qualify. More important, though, is that the *discursive practices* engaged in by people who relate these experiences also conform to those often associated with “conspiracy theorists,” such as the circulation and collaborative reworking of compelling stories (Raab et al. 2013), the dismissal of randomness and chance as possible explanations for phenomena (Willman 2002), and the deployment of sometimes tangential facts to support the theory (Dentith and Keeley 2019).

At the same time, Zuckerberg and others labelling these beliefs a “conspiracy theory” is also a discursive practice deserving critique – a way of positioning as “paranoid” (Harper 2008) those who are asking what might be considered reasonable questions about the surveillance practices of tech companies. Calling something a conspiracy theory is a way of asserting epistemic superiority over people by essentially accusing them of “epistemic viciousness” (Cassam 2016; see also Blitvich and Lorenzo-Dus, Chapter 4 in this volume). Ultimately, understanding why some narratives “are deemed to be scientific and others conspiracy theories,” argues Charles Briggs (2004: 275) requires that we focus on “how the ideological construction of their production, circulation, and reception shapes identities and social groups and orders them hierarchically.”

In this chapter, what I am most concerned with is not so much whether this theory is true, but how it functions as part of the constellation of *social practices* that constitute people’s everyday use of digital media. My interest is in how people use narratives like these to make sense of and discursively negotiate their *experiences* with an information economy in which their mundane interactions with and through technologies are constantly collected, processed and fed back to them in the form of “personalized” services and advertising.

2. Technology, surveillance and conspiratorial thinking

There has always been a relationship between new technologies and conspiratorial thinking, from the Moon landing to GMO foods (Uscinski 2020). Part of the reason for this is what Sunstein and Vermule (2008: 1) have called “crippled epistemologies” – the states of chronically incomplete knowledge associated with most people’s use of technologies that almost inevitably give rise to confusion or suspicion. For the majority of the population, the technological processes that govern so many of their daily activities are hidden within “black boxes” (Pasquale 2015) that are all but impossible to penetrate. Compounding the sense of distance people have from technological knowledge is the ambivalent status our societies confer on computer engineers and tech entrepreneurs themselves, who are simultaneously valorized as visionary and “disruptive” and demonized for their excess power (Quill 2016).

What is perhaps unique about *digital* technologies is the way they are not just the subject of conspiracy theories, but also engines in their spread. Part of this has to do with the architectures of digital networks and the algorithms which control them that often amplify content that is apt to elicit emotional responses from readers, as conspiratorial narratives often do (Jones and Hafner 2021; Varis 2019). Part of it also has to do with larger changes in the information ecology brought on by digital media, including increased hypersubjectivity and distrust of authority.

Finally, the underlying economic model of the internet, based as it is on ubiquitous surveillance and micro-targeted advertising (Zuboff 2019) can, as in other contexts of mass surveillance, produce feelings of anxiety, fear and suspicion (Ellis et al. 2013). Melley (2000) draws a direct line from the increase in conspiratorial narratives in European and American media and popular culture after World War II to the increased prominence of surveillance in everyday life during and after the Cold War, arguing that conspiracy theories are often attempts to respond to the perceived threats to privacy and autonomy associated with mass surveillance. Harper (2008: 2, emphasis mine) similarly argues that “the rise of surveillance *sets the conditions* for the development of conspiracy theories which, in turn, leads to paranoia about surveillance.”

Importantly, it is not just the *knowledge* of being watched that is seen to lay the groundwork for conspiratorial thinking, but the *feelings* of anxiety and uncertainty it produces. Koslala (2002) for example, notes how feelings of ambivalence and disorientation are associated with the proliferation of surveillance cameras on city streets, and Ellis and his colleagues (2013) describe the feelings of agitation people experience when responding to pop-up windows online which constantly inform them that they are being tracked. The ubiquity and complexity of contemporary practices of surveillance, they argue (720), have facilitated both “its normalization

and its incomprehensibility, its discursive formulation and its inexpressibility, its somatic registration and its dissociation” from the body.

Part of this disorientation comes from the fact that digital surveillance in many ways disrupts our conventional understandings of language and communication, visibility, and embodiment. Crary (1999) argues that new technological forms of communication always have the effect of restructuring our understanding of what it means to perceive and be perceived by others. In the case of digital surveillance, however, while we experience “being watched” (or, in this case, “listened to”) as an embodied sensation, there is no ‘body’ that we can easily locate that is doing the watching or listening, and the incorporeality and facelessness of the surveillor can help to create the conditions for fantasies and conspiratorial thinking (Ellis et al. 2013).

3. Digital literacies and discursive practices

The theoretical framework I adopt to examine this phenomenon comes from the study of *digital literacies* (Jones and Hafner 2021). Although “conspiracy theorizing” is not normally thought of as a form of “literacy” (but more often as a “failure” of literacy), the digital literacies framework I am using regards any discursive practice that grows up around the use of digital media and helps people to claim membership in a particular community of users a *literacy practice*. Experts (computer engineers, tech executives, etc.) of course, have their own specialized discursive practices that they use to talk about technology and claim identities as “experts”. But “ordinary people” also have their own sets of genres, styles and stances that they use when talking about technology which, while not always accurately reflecting the way these technologies actually work, do reflect their experiences with technologies and serve as tools for collaborative problem solving with other similarly “ordinary” users.

This view of literacies as part of wider social practices and social identities comes from the work of New Literacy Studies scholars such as Brian Street (1984) and James Gee (2011), for whom the social value of mastering particular discursive practices is not just to more efficiently exchange information, but, more importantly, to show oneself as a particular kind of person with a particular way of looking at the world. Discursive practices (such as being able to produce certain kinds of texts) both reflect these identities and worldviews and contribute to sustaining them. In this way, “communities of practice” (Lave and Wenger 1991) are also inevitably “communities of knowing” or what Hass (1992) calls “epistemic communities” – communities in which people work together not just to create knowledge, but to perpetuate particular “ways of knowing” (see also Latour and Woolgar 1986).

In recent years there has been increasing interest in online epistemic communities where non-experts work together to construct knowledge about issues of common interest such as technology, medicine, and parenting (see e.g. Akrich 2010; Détienne, et al. 2012). One common thread of many of these studies has been a focus on the strategies participants in such communities use to claim “lay expertise”, sometimes by appropriating discursive practices of experts (such as citing academic articles), but, more often by contrasting their own forms of expertise with those of experts through more “everyday” discursive practices, the most important being the telling of personal stories (see e.g. Jaworska 2018; Ogad 2005). Personal stories shared through digital networks can be effective vehicles for the exchange of knowledge and advice, but also serve important interpersonal functions, allowing people who exchange them to think of themselves as sharing common experiences. This sense of common ground achieved through sharing stories is further facilitated by the affordances of digital media, which create opportunities not just for the exchange of individual stories, but for the iterative co-construction of shared ‘storyworlds’ (Page et al. 2013: 192).

This notion that epistemic communities are held together by shared discursive practices that help to shape their processes of joint sensemaking has also been applied to the online spread of misinformation. Inwood and Zappavigna (2021, see also Inwood and Zappavigna, Chapter 11 in this volume), for instance, have examined the ways rumours and hoaxes are collaboratively constructed through shared textual practices which create what Zappavigna (2011) calls “ambient affiliation” among people who engage in them.

This insight highlights a dimension of epistemic communities which is less prominent in the literature on epistemic communities – the *affective* nature of knowledge construction and circulation. In the realm of politics, for instance, Papacharissi (2015: 5) has noted how collaborative storytelling through digital social networks gives rise to what she calls “affective publics” – groups of people who are bound by common *emotional orientations towards knowledge* (see also Lee, Chapter 10 this volume). Varis and Blommaert (2018) have also argued that collaborative processes of sharing and reworking discursive artefacts such as internet memes produces among users feelings of “conviviality”, leading to the formation of what they call “light communities”, groups which temporarily but enthusiastically coalesce around particular discursive objects online such as memes, online challenges and conspiracy theories.

Another dimension of digital literacies which is often overlooked, but seems particularly relevant to the case at hand, is their *embodied* nature. We are often so focused on the “virtual” dimensions of digital media that we neglect their material qualities and the fact that using them is always enacted through embodied practices and experienced through embodied sensations. Some scholars of digital literacies

(see e.g. Jones 2020a; Wohlwend and Lewis 2011) have begun to explore the embodied nature of practices such as online gaming and the sharing of photos and videos over social media. An aspect of embodiment that requires further investigation, however, is its role in individual and collective epistemic processes, how people use their bodies and embodied experiences to *understand* digital technologies.

4. Data and methods

The aim of this study is to explore the ways people cope with the experience of ubiquitous surveillance that is an inevitable part of digital media use nowadays by focusing on how they debate the theory that tech companies are listening to them through their mobile phones. The data come from online discussions of the question: ‘Is my phone listening to me?’ gathered by typing this question into the search engines of Reddit (an online discussion forum), Quora (a peer-based question and answer website) and YouTube. The Reddit search returned 16 threads in 6 subreddits with a total of 1293 comments (Table 1). The Quora search found 8 related questions with a total of 84 answers (Table 2). For YouTube, I downloaded the viewer comments from the 5 most popular videos on this topic, yielding a total of 8555 comments

Table 1. Reddit data

Thread	Subreddit	#
1. Is my phone listening to me?	r/android apps	27
2. Is my phone/Google listening to my conversations?	r/gadgets	19
3. Are phones listening to our thoughts?	r/Glitch	54
4. Does my phone listen to me?	r/no stupid questions	19
5. Does your phone somehow listen to your everyday questions and send you ads based on that?	r/no stupid questions	552
6. Is Facebook listening to me?	r/no stupid questions	47
7. My phone is obviously listening to me.	r/no stupid questions	19
8. Does your phone listen to you and tailor targeted adverts?	r/privacy	9
9. Observed Facebook app listening to conversations	r/privacy	14
10. Your Android is secretly always recording	r/privacy	182
11. I think our phones are always listening	r/technology	58
12. Our phones are actively listening to our private conversations	r/technology	85
13. Do our phones listen to us for ads?	r/technology	39
14. You're not being paranoid; Your phone is really listening	r/technology	63
15. Your phone is listening and it not paranoia	r/technology	96
16. Your phone is listening to you	r/technology	10
Total		1293

Table 2. Quora data

Question	Answers
1. Why do many technical people believe our phones are secretly listening to us?	11
2. I've hear that smart phones are constantly "listening". But how?	3
3. Are phones that are secretly listening just a myth?	4
4. Are phones listening to us even when we are not using them?	2
5. Is it true that my phone is listening to me?	30
6. Is Google listening to me via my Android smartphone?	17
7. Is your smartphone listening to you?	11
8. So you think your phone is listening to you all the time?	6
Total	84

Table 3. YouTube data

Video	Comments
1. Is Your Phone Listening To You?	3714
2. Facebook iPhone Listening into our Conversations for Advertising TEST	2788
3. Is my phone Listening to me?	1571
4. Is my phone listening to me? We tested it, here's what happened	335
5. Is your cell phone listening to your private conversations? How you can make it stop	147
Total	8555

The data were uploaded to Max QDA (VERBI Software, 2020), a qualitative analysis software that enables the coding of data, complex lexical searches, and various ways of detecting thematic and discursive patterns. The data were coded iteratively for themes and discursive patterns, with special attention paid to forms of argumentation and discursive strategies associated with different stances towards the theory and those who believe it.

Contributions to these discussions fell into two main categories: those from contributors who argued the affirmative – that they believed that their phones were listening to them (believers), and those who did not (skeptics). While the number of believers outnumbered skeptics by more than two to one, the role of the skeptics proved to be important in influencing how believers formulated their arguments (often in response to those offered by skeptics) and marshalled their evidence, and so, in the analysis presented below, I will first address the strategies used by skeptics to argue against the theory.

5. Skeptics

The difference between believers and skeptics in the data is not just what they believe, but also the discursive practices they use to make their arguments and enact their stances towards the topic and towards those with differing opinions. While believers tend to speak in narratives (see below), skeptics and debunkers tend to produce arguments that are more *analytical*, deploying “logical reasons” why phones “can’t be listening” based on their understanding of the current capabilities of technological systems or the economic or legal constraints on the industry. As one skeptic puts it:

- (3) Although there are many ways our privacy is invaded, I’m skeptical if they would actually go this far. It’s way too computationally demanding to save everything your phone’s mic hears, translate it to text, and revolve ads around it. There are much more efficient and effective ways to determine what you’re interested in, such as search history or visited posts. (Reddit)

This example illustrates a common strategy of skeptics, the display of technical knowledge as a way of both countering the more experiential arguments of believers and of presenting themselves as “savvy” and “epistemically virtuous”. These performances of expertise are also occasionally accompanied by more explicit assertions about posters’ credentials or “insider” knowledge, as in Excerpts 4 and 5:

- (4) As someone who buys media on behalf of very large brands, no this is not a thing yet. Trust me, we’d buy it if it were but I’ve never once had any company—including Facebook—pitch us their voice recognition data and yes, we’d be the ones to know. Source: media buyer (Reddit)
- (5) And sorry mate, I think with my 15 years experience in IT and internet marketing I do actually know a lot more than 90% of these YouTube commentators that have no idea but still believe Facebook is delivering them ads based on voice conversations (YouTube)

Typically, skeptics also offer a range of alternative explanations either having to do with other forms of surveillance tech companies engage in or with cognitive biases allegedly distorting believers’ interpretations. Often these explanations are delivered in a didactic tone, with skeptics positioning themselves as “teachers” and believers as “learners”, as in Excerpt 6:

- (6) A lot of people don’t know their cookies can be tracked across different devices (they can use your Google login, Facebook login etc to tag the computer as belonging to you even if it’s a non-google or Facebook site). So if you or your wife looks up something on a desktop computer, the cookies from that search session can eventually be linked back to your phone. (Reddit)

Some skeptics even try to appeal to believers by aligning with their suspicions and adopting their discursive practices. In Excerpt 6 below, for example the poster adopts the same narrative strategy believers use, telling of his own experience of thinking he was being “spied” as a way of demonstrating how it is possible to overcome such suspicions through careful reflection and reasoning:

- (7) Exactly. This is how internet ads work. You usually don’t notice the ads but then you need/want something and you start noticing the relevant ads. Example: I was thinking about getting new underwear a few weeks ago. I was browsing a few tech sites and saw ads for Haines men’s underwear. I thought that I was being “spied” on for the targeted ad, but in reality I probably had those ads before but just never noticed them because I wasn’t looking for new underwear at the time. (Reddit)

Often, however, these displays of epistemic virtue depend not just on displays of expertise on the part of skeptics, but also on positioning believers as “epistemically vicious” (Cassam 2016), calling into question the forms of reasoning and strategies of argumentation they use. In the excerpts below, for instance, posters undermine the value of experiential or ‘anecdotal’ evidence (Excerpt 8), point out believers’ flawed logic (Excerpt 9), and call on them to provide empirical evidence for their claims (Excerpt 10).

- (8) Anecdotal evidence is the best evidence because you can use it to prove any tin-foil you want! Where’s the control in these “experiments”? How often do these ads come up when NOT mentioned? Did they track all the other information? Because every moment one is online one is being tracked in some way. They really don’t need to listen, because you give permission for access with every app you use. (YouTube)
- (9) it doesn’t even make sense. You probably refer to thousands of different categories of inanimate objects every day, and the vast majority of those references don’t have anything to do with planned purchases. Y’all really think there’s people out there buying ads for “people who said the word ‘belt’ out loud in the last two days?” That would be a huge waste of ad money. (Reddit)
- (10) I also bet you can’t prove it that Facebook are delivering ads based on voice recognition and private, offline conversations... prove it, not just a hypothetical, occam’s razor type dribble like this but actual real proof, showing data being sent, recordings on the phone and so on... where’s the evidence? (YouTube)

Often, attacks on the epistemological basis of believer’s arguments deploy the frame of conspiratorial thinking to discredit these beliefs (see also Blitvich and Lorenzo-Dus, Chapter 4 in this volume). In such cases, attacks on believer’s arguments can cross over into attacks on believers themselves.

- (11) They'd run out of server space (imo) faster than you can say 'conspiracy theory'.
(Reddit)
- (12) Get over your tinfoil hats, boys. Your life isn't as interesting as you might think it is.
(YouTube)

Donovan (2007) notes that “skeptics” and “debunkers” often play an important part in the way rumors develop and are spread through social networks. On one hand, as will be seen below, skeptics help to define the parameters of the argument, sometimes helping believers to strengthen their theories by responding to or anticipating the “holes” in them that skeptics have identified. On the other hand, the ways skeptics *position* believers as “conspiracy theorists” can sometimes make believers *more* committed to their views as they engage in the discursive work needed to counter being positioned in undesirable ways (Levy 2017). This is particularly evident in the way believers responded to Mark Zuckerberg labelling their beliefs a “conspiracy theory”:

- (13) The mere fact that fuckerberg said “oh you're talking about the CONSPIRACY THEORY that we listen in?” TELLS you everything you need to know. 🤔🤔
They use the term to discredit ALL truth. It's getting boring.... 🤔🤔🤔.
(YouTube)

6. Believers

People who advance the theory engage in a very different range of discursive practices based less on logical argumentation and more on narrating their lived experiences and “feelings” of being listened to. In fact, one reason for the resilience of the belief, even in the face of the “logical arguments” from skeptics, is the genre of narrative itself. As Jones (2013) notes in his analysis of the MMR vaccine controversy in the UK, abstract arguments, no matter how carefully constructed with “facts” and statistics, are never as compelling as stories because of *temporal logic* of narrative, which compels readers or hearers to infer a “chain of causality” between events which are arranged in sequence, even when such a relationship may not actually exist (Carranza 2015). Indeed, it is the inference of causality that separates a “story” from a sequence of random events.

The stories believers tell tend to follow a fairly stable narrative template (see Figure 1), usually starting with a kind of “abstract” (Labov and Waletzky 1967) in which tellers frame their experience as “odd” or “suspicious”, typically followed by two accounts, one involving a physical conversation, the other involving them noticing some kind of echo of that conversation in the online ads they received. By placing these events in narrative sequence, narrators invite readers to infer a causal

link. This is usually accompanied by some form of disclaimer which preempts interpretations that are inconsistent with the theory that the narrators are trying to promote, sometimes followed by a process of “ruling out” other possibilities. The stories usually end with some kind of evaluation of the incident; sometimes involving an explicit articulation of the theory, but, more often consisting of innuendo, a rhetorical question such as “Coincidence?,” or some kind of *affective* evaluation regarding how “scary”, “weird” or “creepy” the experience was:

- (14) This is weird. Recently I picked up a small instrument at a thrift store and played it to see what kind of sound it made. Later that day on Facebook I see an ad for finger guitar. I’ve never heard of a finger guitar. Coincidence? (YouTube)
- (15) This happens to me all the time, Facebook definitely listens, I don’t have a baby, I don’t know anyone who has a baby and yet I went out for lunch and sat next to a crying baby and the next day I was recommended baby clothes, toys and buggies. Little bit creepy not gonna lie. (YouTube)

Abstract	• ‘I’ve been experiencing some really weird coincidences lately’.
Incident A	• ‘I was talking to (friend, family member, colleague) about X’
Incident B	• ‘Then I saw an ad for X on my Facebook/Instagram/Google’
Disclaimer	• ‘I’ve never searched for it.
Ruling out other possibilities	• ‘I’ve ruled out that that it could be IP or location based’
Evaluation	• ‘It was creepy as shit’
Uptake	• ‘The exact same thing happened to me!’

Figure 1. Narrative template for stories of believers

Although these stories are presented as uninterrupted blocks of text, they are *co-constructed*, responding to and anticipating the contributions from other posters, both other believers and skeptics. Disclaimers, for example, are often supplemented with evidence to “prove” the disclaimer and pre-empt any possible doubts on the part of hearers:

- (16) I’ve never searched for cat items EVER because... I HAVE TWO DOGS.
No cats. (YouTube)

Similarly, processes of “ruling out” often take up the “reasonable” explanations offered by skeptics and attempt to undermine their explanatory power, demonstrating how debunkers of theories can also play a key role in their propagation by helping proponents hone their stories.

- (17) This has happened to me multiple times now, some of the times I could accept that maybe it was using say an IP address to target and someone searched something that was said, but other times it seems near impossible anything else than audio listening was happening. This is creepy, and obviously illegal.
(Reddit)

The critiques of skeptics are also taken up in the multiple instances where narrators preface their stories with insinuations that they are “not paranoid”, which is both an attempt to counter skeptics’ positioning of them as “irrational” and to “anticipate and disarm the authority of expert criticism” (Knight 2000: 17). The fact that believers feel it necessary to defend themselves against accusations of paranoia suggests that the “anti-conspiracy theory discourse” of skeptics has powerful regulatory effects. At the same time, however, these acts of counter-positioning also create opportunities for believers to create solidarity among themselves by unburdening one another of the “paranoid” label:

- (18) i honestly thought I was becoming paranoid. I’m so glad someone else has had this experience.
(Quora)
- (19) You’re not paranoid. You’re simply seeing the truth for the first time.
(YouTube)

But perhaps more important is the way these stories respond to and reinforce the contributions of *other believers* by essentially taking up the same narrative template used by previous posters and populating it with their own details. In a sense, the template functions in the same way image macros do in the circulation of memes, providing a stable format within which users are invited to produce their own creations, and, by doing so, demonstrate that they are “literate” in the genre (Shifman 2014; see also Gür-Şeker, Boonen and Wentker, Chapter 12 in this volume). These stories are also often structurally chained, with narrators linking their stories with those of previous tellers with abstracts like: “the same thing happened to me!” In other words, the stories are linked both paradigmatically by always reproducing the template, and syntagmatically – each one functioning as a response to the previous story and as an invitation for the next person to chime in with “Me too!” and share their own version of this experience.

And the more these stories are recreated and reworked, the more they come to take on the weight of doxa, a kind of “truth” that comes about through the iterative accumulation of shared perspectives on the same experience:

- (20) Too many people say this has happened to them for me to not believe it. It’s happened to me, it’s happened to people i know, and it’s happened to so many people here in this thread. We’re not all crazy. We’re not all imagining this, so even if we can’t figure out how, we know it’s happening.
(YouTube)

- (21) I've experienced it too many times. It's happened to too many people. Everyone knows it's happening. (Reddit)

Particularly telling is the way this template crosses genres, moving from retrospective accounts of fortuitous experiences to proactive performances of the phenomena in the form of make-shift "experiments":

- (22) I decided to try an experiment. Twice a day for five days, I tried saying a bunch of phrases that could theoretically be used as triggers. Phrases like I'm thinking about going back to uni. The changes came literally overnight. Suddenly I was being sold mid-semester courses at various universities. (Reddit)
- (23) I tested it by talking a lot about getting hair implants (I have a full head of hair so it's something I would have no actual use for, or would legitimately discuss otherwise). Boom – ads for hair implants. (YouTube)

While this experimental frame is in some way a response to skeptics, an effort to make the arguments of believers more "scientific", it also has the same memetic character of the shared stories, increasing the virality of the argument by presenting not just a story that people can tell together, but a *practice* that they can *do* together – not unlike the "Ice Bucket Challenge". Indeed, this challenge has been widely taken up both by tabloid journalists and by users of social media, with the "is my phone listening to me experiment" becoming a kind of YouTube sub-genre.

This more performative and embodied version of an already experiential narrative points to one of the main differences between this conspiratorial narrative and many others – the fact that it is, no matter who engages in it, a *personal narrative*. Since it is based on these personal, embodied experiences, either recalled in stories or performed in YouTube videos, the argument becomes simultaneously more engaging and more difficult to debunk.

Indeed, the *experiential* dimension of believers' reasoning is perhaps the thing most responsible for the persistence of this theory. Unlike the abstract, technological arguments of skeptics, the stories that believers tell are tangible, embodied, and situated in their physical and social worlds, often involving other people such as their brother-in-law, wife, or boyfriend, who share with them the disconcerting feeling of being listened to without their consent. In fact, believers frequently contrast their experiential knowledge with the abstract arguments of skeptics. "Anyone may dispute this as much as they want," says one poster, "but I've experienced too many of these for them to be mere coincidence" (Reddit).

It is in part, the experiential, embodied nature of these narratives – narrators' sense that their *physical territory* has been violated (Altman 1975) – that contributes as well to their insistence on the corporality of their surveillors. Even when relatively friendly skeptics remind them that "There is no person on the other end,

it's just a machine" (YouTube), or "It might be better to say that it's 'reading' since it's just processing data...it has no ears!", believers insist on characterizing what is happening as "listening":

- (24) If it can listen for "OK Google", what's stopping it from listening for other things? (Reddit)
- (25) isn't it common sense that it has to always be listening? How else could it work? (YouTube)

While these experiences are represented as based in situated, embodied perception, they are also presented as deeply "felt", emotional happenings, and this also contributes to their virality. As I mentioned above, nearly every story is accompanied by an affective evaluation, usually expressing how "creepy" the experience was. In fact, "creepiness" arises as a kind of *leitmotif*, surfacing again and again as people share their stories:

- (26) This is so damn creepy. If true, of course. (YouTube)
- (27) Very creepy and big-brother like (Reddit)
- (28) Creepy...  (YouTube)
- (29) It's creepy as f**k (Reddit)
- (30) It's friggin creepy and definitely unlawful. (Reddit)
- (31) It's hilarious. And creepy (Reddit)
- (32) creepy practices like this are why we can't have nice things. (Quora)

In their examination of the circulation of memes through what they call "light communities", Varis and Blommaert (2018) argue that sharing memes is a kind of "phatic" communication, less about exchanging information and more about exchanging *affect*. Raab and his colleagues make a similar point about conspiracy theories, that what chiefly contributes to their spread is that they are compelling stories that paradoxically often serve as much to *re*-mystify situations as to de-mystify them. Guerin and Miyazaki (2006) similarly suggest that rumors and conspiracy theories are spread not to reduce anxiety, as others (see e.g. Rosnow 1991) have argued, but "precisely because they are anxiety-provoking" (25), and so facilitate the circulation of affect among believers (see also Lee, Chapter 10 in this volume).

Somewhat paradoxically, however, another evaluation that often pops up is 'cool'.

- (33) If so, that's pretty dang cool/terrifying. (YouTube)
- (34) That's actually pretty cool (YouTube)
- (35) Cool story. (Reddit)

(36) I thought that was really cool because its true. (Reddit)

(37) That's very cool, Google! (Reddit)

Somehow, though, it should not be a surprise that the words “creepy” and “cool” are used to describe the same phenomenon, sometimes in the same utterance. The root of many people’s ambivalence about digital technologies in general, and digital surveillance in particular is the sense of the “uncanny” they create, the almost unavoidable pleasure that people take in the “magical thinking” that they invite them to participate in (Jones 2021). In fact, for many tech companies, the secret of consumer engagement is being able to “tread the thin line between cool and creepy” (Tene and Polonetsky 2014: 65). It is, in fact, by playing the “creepy” and the ‘cool’ off one another that such companies work to gradually shift social norms around privacy, making people more willing to accept the “creepiness” of surveillance in exchange for the “cool” convenience that digital platforms offer. But this relationship between the “creepy” and the “cool” is also implicated in the spread and gradual acceptance of conspiracy theories, which are often couched in stories which both terrify and delight (Campion-Vincent 2005; Raab et al. 2013).

7. Discussion and conclusion

In this chapter I have shown how the conspiracy theorizing that takes place in response to the ubiquitous surveillance practices of tech companies is a kind of “literacy practice” which functions to generate both shared explanations for phenomena that non-expert users of technology find difficult to explain and shared outrage against powerful entities against which they feel powerless. Like other “literacy practices”, conspiracy theorizing about technology involves distinct stances, forms of discourse, and discursive strategies, which I demonstrated by contrasting the arguments of ‘skeptics’ – who frame their contributions as “logical arguments” based on abstract reasoning and hypothetical situations, and position themselves as “knowledgeable experts” – with those of ‘believers’ – who construct their contributions as embodied *experiences*, whether as personal stories or as quasi-empirical “experiments” that they have conducted in the “real world”, and position themselves as “ordinary people” approaching the issue with “common sense”.

Sociologist Anthony Giddens (1991) notes that one of the key features of modernity is that it demands that we build relations of trust not just with people, but with *systems* – large organizations, socio-technical systems, platforms. The way such trust is built is through what he calls “access points” (83) – points where people can peek into the system and see how it works. In the absence of transparency, however, the only access points available are the outputs of the black box and the

vaguely unsettling feelings those outputs create. In the case of digital surveillance, the only access points that are available to most people are their own, embodied experiences of being “watched” or “listened to”. Such feelings, as Ellis and his colleagues (2013: 720) write, are characterized by their simultaneous “normalization and ...incomprehensibility.”

It is not surprising, then, that when confronted with the reality (and opacity) of digital surveillance, people cling stubbornly to the only access point they have available to them: their own embodied experience. Part of the “common sense” of the conspiracy theory that we are being literally “listened to” through our phones is the persistence of 20th century imaginaries of surveillance, in which it was chiefly a matter of “eavesdropping”, “wiretapping”, “bugging” – intercepting physical voices with physical ears. Elsewhere, in my work (Jones 2020), I have written about the problems of approaching digital surveillance with analogue ontologies – “human” understandings of what it means to speak and listen and infer meaning – because the ways digital systems process data and infer meanings are very different. But it is, at the same time, inevitable that the frame of human communication persists, and in some ways, it can be seen as a productive way to process the experience of digital surveillance. Nick Couldry (2006) argues that aural metaphors, always embedded in an embodied intersubjective space of perception, help highlight for us the ways we might be present for others online, including those who wish to track us. In other words, thinking that “they are listening” may not be technically accurate but may lead to more productive relationships with technologies. In the case of the “believers” in this study, for example, this belief often led to more critical, skeptical approaches to their own media practices, to learning more, for example, about the arcane privacy settings on their phones, or to engaging more seriously with the disembodied and in many ways more insidious ways digital surveillance takes place.

Conspiratorial thinking is often treated as a failure of literacy, especially nowadays when conspiracy theorists seem to be eating away at the very fabric of our societies. But there is a sense, especially in the face of increasingly powerful tech companies that *really are conspiring* to manipulate us for their own profit, that conspiratorial thinking might constitute a productive response. Not always, but these stories of people and their phones highlight the fact that understanding the literacies people build up in the context of constant surveillance requires that digital literacies scholars listen closely and empathically to their felt experiences, seeing them not just as “irrational” or “paranoid”, but as people caught up in a bind over the limits of their own agency.

New Literacies Studies taught us that literacy is not just a cognitive affair, that it is also social. But understanding digital literacies in the context of the hyper-synthetic personalization made possible by digital technologies also requires attention to the *affective* dimensions of literacies. “Knowing” about surveillance is

not enough, and indeed, much of what is happening is unknowable. “To ‘know’ amidst the digital swarm,” says Sun-ha Hong (2018: 137) “is less a question of firm evidence possessed by the rational individual and more a question of a collective investment into a deferred and simulated heuristics” – a more improvisational epistemology. We need to understand more generally how affect is discursively produced and amplified in digital contexts, and how people respond to it – where it can be destructive, and where it can be productive. We need to understand when “paranoia” might actually be the healthiest response. And we need to develop, as Shklovski and her colleagues (2014) suggest, a practical theory of “creepiness,” an understanding of how affect can function as an access point to knowledge and how it can be deployed as a tool for having productive ethical conversations about the kind of societies we want to live in.

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“Go ahead and ‘debunk’ truth by calling it a conspiracy theory”

The discursive construction of conspiracy theoryness in online affinity spaces

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To help fill in the research gap on conspiracy theorizing online (Varis 2019), this chapter addresses two research questions: the discursive construction of conspiracy *theoryness* in online affinity spaces (Gee 2005) and the extent to which these discursive constructions are aligned with those previously identified by extant literature, which has traditionally taken a top-down, macro-level perspective, as defining of conspiracy theories. Conspiracy theories are essentially social constructs (Butter and Knight 2016). To our knowledge, research to date has not examined how notions of what counts as a conspiracy theory are shaped in a bottom-up manner as knowledge, identities, and associated practices that are subjected to discursive struggle. Online affinity spaces, such as those provided by Reddit and YouTube and in which conspiracy theories are regularly discussed, give us unprecedented access to this process. Our analysis shows how the discursive construction of knowledge is crucially related to the concept of truth and how, contrary to common representations, conspiracy theories are seen – from an emic perspective – as stemming from rationality, reasoning, and deployment of an (albeit sui generis) scientific method. Although committed to knowledge activism, conspiracy theories in our data display a manifest proclivity for eudaimonic and social variables and lean strongly towards the depiction of the agents’ identity (both human and non-human) against whom conspiracy theorists relationally construct who they are.

Keywords: conspiracy theory, online affinity spaces, knowledge construction, identity

1. Introduction

Although conspiracy theories seem to have taken centre stage recently in, among others, mainstream politics (Byford 2011), they have been a staple in diverse societies for centuries (Uscinski and Parent 2014), mainly from a Western perspective. Conspiracy theories have also been the object of research (see Hofstadter 1966) in different fields such as philosophy, psychology, and law. Despite these facts, some claim (see van Prooijen and Douglas 2018) that the field is still in its infancy in what regards theory development. Similarly, as Varis (2019: 2) argues, with few exceptions (see among others Varis 2018; Procházka and Blommaert 2019), “very little has been said about conspiracy theorizing online and the digital infrastructures for conspiracy theorizing, and even less about the exact shape of conspiracy theory discourse online, or how conspiracy theories are constructed and circulated making use of digital affordances”.

In this chapter, we add to this new line by addressing two research questions regarding the discursive construction of conspiracy *theoryness* in online affinity spaces (Gee 2005) and the extent to which these discursive constructions are aligned with those previously identified by extant literature, which has traditionally taken a top-down, macro-level perspective, as regards defining of conspiracy theories. Conspiracy theories are essentially social constructs (Butter and Knight 2016) but, to our knowledge, extant research has not examined how notions of what counts as a conspiracy theory are shaped in a bottom-up manner as knowledge, identities, and associated practices that are subjected to discursive struggle. Online affinity spaces where conspiracy theories are discussed give us unprecedented access to this process.

Accordingly, we firstly review relevant research into the theoryness of conspiracy theories (Section 2). After introducing the methodology used in our study (Section 3), Section 4 reports the key overall findings (4.1) and discusses three knowledge dimensions that emerge as constitutive of conspiracy theorizing, namely factual-conceptual (4.2), procedural (4.3) and meta-cognitive (4.4). Throughout Section 4, we also discuss the extent to which the conspiracy theory characteristics that derived from our bottom-up discourse analysis are aligned, or otherwise, to top-down, academic understanding of conspiracy theories, and their theorizing. The chapter concludes (Section 5) by providing answers to the two guiding research questions and pointing to avenues for future research.

2. Theorising in and about conspiracy theories

Determining what counts as a legitimate conspiracy theory is a common goal of both scholarly and lay communities interested in conspirationism. Lay understanding thereof, specifically by conspiracy theory proponents in two digital affinity spaces, are presented in Section 4. In this section, we review academic perspectives into conspiracy theories, with a focus on how they are characterized. In this regard, it is helpful to start with Swami (2012: 1), who summarizes previous scholarship into how conspiracy theories may be defined as “a subset of false narratives in which the ultimate cause of an event is believed to be due to a malevolent plot by multiple actors working together” (see also Bale 2007). Although conspiracy theories have been described as pathological (Hofstadter 1966), van Prooijen and van Vugt (2018) claim that large portions of the human population believe in them. Crucially, the difference between what the intellectual community would deem as conspiracy theory material, especially vis-à-vis scientific material, needs to be established. That has indeed been one of the aims of related scholarship. From a philosophical perspective, and focusing on a sub-type of conspiracy theories that he labels as “unwarranted conspiracy theories”, Keely (1999) argues that conspiracy theories have the following characteristics:

1. Conspiracy theories offer explanations that run counter to received, official, or “obvious” accounts.
2. The true intentions behind conspiracy theories are always nefarious.
3. Conspiracy theories typically seek to tie together apparently unrelated events.
4. The truths behind events accounted for by conspiracy theories are generally well-kept secrets, even if the social actors behind conspiracy theories are well-known public figures.
5. Conspiracy theorists’ tools are “errant data”, i.e., contrary or unaccounted for by established/accepted theory.

More recently van Prooijen and van Vugt (2018), a team that brings together an applied psychologist and a criminologist, also identify five main components of conspiracy theories:

1. Conspiracy theories always involve a hypothesized *pattern* about how people, objects, events are causally interconnected.
2. Conspiracy theories ascribe intentionality and agency to conspirators.
3. Conspiracy theories presuppose a coalition or some kind and are not the work of individuals working alone.
4. Conspiracy theories contain an element of *threat* as the goals of those behind them are not benevolent, but harmful or deceptive.

5. Conspiracy theories carry an element of secrecy and thus cannot be falsified. Those conspiracy theories that are found to be true are no longer conspiracy theories.

Both sets of characteristics present significant overlap, including around the notions of truth, officialdom, pattern identification, secrecy and harm. Importantly, these characteristics – and those identified by extant conspiracy theory scholarship – also have in common their primarily stemming from macro-level analytic perspectives. As indicated in Section 1, we seek to understand how these macro-level categorizations relate to those that emerge discursively at a micro-level of analysis.

In a related effort to identify and characterize conspiracy theories, van Prooijen and Douglas (2018) argue that belief in conspiracy theories is related to four fundamental principles:

1. Consequentiality: conspiracy theories beliefs are consequential, i.e., they impact on important aspects of life such as health, interpersonal dimensions, and safety (think about anti-vaccination conspiracy theories, for example).
2. Universality: conspiracy theories beliefs are universal, appear common to all cultures (although most of what we know about conspiracy theories focuses on the Western world, see Swami 2012), and emerge across a wide spectrum of social settings.
3. Emotionalism: conspiracy theories beliefs are emotional. Paradoxically, even the most irrational conspiracy theories seem to be grounded in analytic and deliberative thought processes; however, empirical research suggests that beliefs in conspiracy theories are associated with intuitive rather than analytic thinking.
4. Groupness: conspiracy theories beliefs are social and fundamentally reflect the structure of intergroup conflict: a powerful and hostile outgroup is perceived as conspiring against the perceiver's ingroup.

The last aspect of conspiracy theories beliefs, groupness, ties in with how epistemic knowledge is collectively constructed and shared in groupings. In this respect, the concealing, by conspirators, i.e., the outgroup, of relevant knowledge about the *truth*, and the uncovering of that *truth* by conspiracy theorists, i.e., the ingroup, is a core dynamic of conspiracy theories.

Another core dynamic of conspiracy theories is the struggle over established, received knowledge associated with science which, hypothetically, debunks conspiracy theories but which conspiracy theorists see as flawed. Knowledge is then, at the heart, of both the out and the ingroup. Actually, group membership serves an important epistemic function, and this has been related to individuals' desire to maintain group ties (Tajfel 1982: 21–22). Similarly, it has been argued that groups

strive to maximize accurate beliefs while rejecting false ones (Fallis 2007: 267–268). Thus, in this view, a group's main goal is to pursue truth, which seems to fall in line with the ingroup's pursuit in the case of conspiracy theorists. This position has, however, been contested by Vähämaa (2013: 4), who argues that,

To better understand the formation of collective knowledge [...] researchers should emphasize eudaimonic and social variables, such as the desire for happiness, the maintenance of self-efficacy, group cohesion, and in-group communication, as a set of psychological and social standards that also often function as epistemic standards for groups.

From this perspective, sociability – rather than simply the search for knowledge and truth – plays a major role in joining groups. Group membership, therefore, plays an important epistemic function as, when individuals generate social knowledge, they do so in accordance with their chosen referent groups (Vähämaa 2013: 4).

Although conceptualizations – such as the ones discussed above – regarding the role of groups in the construction of knowledge are still relevant at many levels, it is important to remember that online communication has changed and problematized traditional understandings of *group*, *community*, and *social network*: a clear example of why we should exercise caution regarding predigital ideas about the nature of communication.

As Varis and van Nuenen (2017) point out, translocality, among other factors, has fundamentally shifted how "groupness" emerges online as it is no longer predicated on strong and lasting ties anchored in shared bodies of knowledge or facilitated by temporal or spatial co-presence. Similarly, Li and Young (2018: 4) argue,

digital communication networks have transformed people's social relationships from hierarchical, arranged, stable, tightly, and densely bounded groups to more fluid, dispersed, episodic, and less bounded relationships... global networked audiences are active agents who can make free choices based on their own interests, preferences, and affiliations.

Individualization, thus, emerges as a key feature of global connectivity. Alternative, and similar, conceptualizations such as *online affinity spaces* (Gee 2005) and *ambient affiliation* (Zappavigna 2011), *conviviality* (Varis and Blommaert 2014) have been proposed to capture the nature of online groupness, the often limited requirements for group affiliation (shared activities, interests, and common goals) and participation, as well as the fleeting nature of many online groupings that congregate and disband, in a mob like fashion, once their purpose has been accomplished, or are temporarily or more permanently united via the common use of a hashtag. Online affinity spaces are not like traditional communities, but a sense of community is evident in the different and often frequent ways in which online users attempt to reach and connect with each other. Indeed, as Angouri

(2016: 325) argues, understanding online groupings involves shifting the focus from what a group “is” to what a group “does”. This certainly applies to the groupings that provide the data for our research, as they emerged as involved in practice, i.e., theorizing about conspiracy theoryness.

In what concerns knowledge in participatory, networked groupings, Weinberger (2012) argues that one of the most important changes brought about by the participatory co-construction of culture is the diminishing of reliance upon experts and thus, we may add, of traditional hierarchies related to knowledge. Whether conceived in terms of a “re-valorisation of private (lay) over public (expert) knowledge” (Livingstone and Lunt 1994), or a “demotic turn” (Turner 2010) in postmodernity, such placing of individuals’ personal experiences at the centre of what counts as valid knowledge – and the consequent shifting of traditional, authority-based sources of knowledge to the margins – is of direct relevance to the construction of what passes or not as a legit conspiracy theory, including in digital affinity spaces. By creating value for the contributions of varied participants within collaborative content construction, these new digital spaces promote greater encouragement for participation while they also suggest a need for caution and care.

Against this theoretical background, this study seeks to answer the following two research questions:

1. What are the main characteristics of conspiracy theories from a bottom-up, discursive perspective?; and
2. How do these emergent characteristics compare with those presented in related scholarship, which has been mostly conducted from a top-down perspective?

In order to answer these research questions, the methodology described in Section 3 was devised.

3. Methodology

3.1 Framework

This study adopts a qualitative design to explore the discursive construction of conspiracy theoryness in two digital affinity spaces (see below) in which such construction emerges through group interaction. Specifically, our study uses thematic analysis, deploying Grounded Theory methods. Grounded Theory was developed in the 1960s by Glaser and Strauss, who defined it as “the discovery of theory from data which fits empirical situations and is understandable to sociologists and layman alike and most important, it works – provides us with relevant predictions, explanations, interpretations and applications” (1967: 1).

Researchers using Grounded Theory start with a general research aim or question and, through the analysis of research findings, develop a theory to account for that aim / question (Charmaz 2006). This makes Grounded Theory both inductive and deductive (Glaser 1978).

In Grounded Theory, moreover, data can be generated from multiple sources (Schreiber and Stern 2001), which are often determined by specific research questions. In the present study, our research questions led to selecting screen-based (data generated online by participants) as opposed to user-based (data triggered by researchers’ activities and produced via their contact with participants) data (Androutsopoulos 2013). This is not to say, however, that we treat screen-based data as a mere textual repository. Nor is it to mean that we treat online and offline spaces as separate. Instead, we conceive of digital spaces as enablers of human interaction that is dynamically related to offline activities and therefore to actual users.

3.2 Data

3.2.1 *Data selection and collection*

Data was selected and collected in iterative stages. Initially, the US based social news aggregation website Reddit was selected as our main data source. Reddit was selected over other digital platforms because it contained spaces specifically dedicated to conspiracy theories which had been in use for some time.

Within Reddit, a sub-Reddit / Community titled “Conspiracy Theories” was singled out for data collection (henceforth, Conspiracy Theory Reddit Community). The Conspiracy Theory Reddit Community describes itself as being “about both sharing your theories and laughing at the stupid ones. /r/conspiracytheories is the place to discuss every aspect of conspiracy *theorism*, from theories and current events to debunkings and popular culture”.¹ It was this self-asserted focus on the theorness of conspiracy theories that led us to select this as our initial data source. Content in the Conspiracy Theory Reddit Community was collected at two, randomly-selected points in time: 28/09/2020 and 05/10/2020. On each occasion, all the available content was filtered according to two criteria: popularity and time span. Thus, we respectively filtered our search by “Top” content, i.e., from most to least voted reddit, and we set the period of time for such content search to “All time”, i.e., from the creation of the Conspiracy Theory Reddit Community in 2011 until our two data collection points.

1. <https://www.reddit.com/r/conspiracytheories/>

The ensuing top 100 reddit threads were selected for examination. These ranged from 3,800 (the top reddit thread) to 1,000 (the 100th reddit thread) redditor votes, and their posting time span ranged from 12 months to one day prior to the data collection dates. The content of each of these 100 reddit threads was read and manually annotated for their overall topic. It is worth noting that, despite the Conspiracy Theory Reddit Community’s self-characterization as a place to discuss conspirationism per se, only five of its threads within the selected 100 sample included discussion about conspiracy theories/conspiracy theorizing. Further details of these threads are provided in Table 1, as they are the threads that were next selected for analysis.

Table 1. Reddit threads about conspiracy theories/conspiracy theorizing in the Conspiracy Theory Reddit community

#	Title	Comments / words	Period*
1	Uhhh	123 (2,308 words)	3 months
2	Tin foil hat gang	161 (5,788 words)	4 months
3	The true conspiracies are right in front of our eyes	137 (7,670 words)	6 days
4	When you try to warn some people	79 (1,143 words)	5 months
5	It do be like that	76 (2,895 words)	6 months

* Number of months prior to data collection date.

The five threads in Table 1 provided sufficient data in terms of number of comments/words for qualitative analysis. However, to gain a more varied perspective on conspiracy theories /conspiracy theorizing, we identified an additional source of data: user comments as response to YouTube videos about conspiracy theories. YouTube emerged as relevant to our study as it has been identified as a main hub for the promotion of different conspiracy theories (see, among others, Paolillo 2018). To identify pertinent videos in the first instance, we used the search string “what is a conspiracy theory”. We then selected the top two most viewed videos, as shown in Table 2, and downloaded for analysis the threads containing the highest number of comments for each. For video 1, the number of user comments was high for the first five threads, decreasing significantly thereafter. We thus selected for analysis those first five threads which, as shown in Table 2, added to over five thousand words. For video 2, we selected all comments and responses, which amounted to over ten thousand words.

The overall data thus comprises 36,185 words, from two different digital platforms (Reddit and YouTube) and a total of seven discussion threads.

Table 2. Data (YouTube)

Video #	Title and description summary	Number of words
1	The origin of countless conspiracy theories * The video was posted in 2016 and had received 1.6 million views at data collection point (10.2020). It is a TED Talk about what conspiracy theories are, with an emphasis on their origin.	Thread 1 (1,453 words); thread 2 (1,655 words); thread 3 (1,364); thread 4 (552 words); thread 5 (401 words). Total = 5,425
2	The truth behind conspiracy theories ** This video was posted in 2018 and had received 98,180 views at data collection point (11.2020). It is a segment of the CBS Morning Sunday show in which journalist Susan Spencer discusses conspiracy theories with a novelist, a psychologist, and an expert scholar.	10,956.

* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=88_C-fogY40&t=4s

** <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pTBvKjI6wF4&t=2ser>

3.2.2 Data analysis

Once the two datasets were collected, they were uploaded to the qualitative data analysis software NVivo12 for coding. NVivo is a qualitative data analysis, computer software package designed for qualitative researchers working with very rich text-based and/or multimedia information, where deep levels of analysis on small or large volumes of data are required. Within Grounded Theory, coding comprises the crucial link between data collection and theory emergence to explain these data. Three coding stages (Charmaz 2006) were undertaken:

- Initial: line-by-line coding of all the data, where each thematic-based code (or “node” as per the NVivo 12 terminology) represented a unit of analysis and ranged in length from a single character (textual or pictorial) to a group of sentences (or visual inputs). Nodes were specific and “action-reflective” (Charmaz 2006), such as “using scientific-sounding language” or “providing a definition”. This coding stage resulted in > 30 codes.
- Focused: Codes became more conceptual and were selected based on their having the most analytic value. This resulted in both a reduction of the overall number of codes and the emergence of hierarchical structures, which in NVivo are labelled in terms of “parent” and “child nodes.” Here, the initial set of nodes was reduced by just over 30% (20 nodes) and arranged around ten clusters, each containing a variable number of nodes.

Importantly, initial and focused coding developed over several joint-coding sessions during which both authors extensively discussed each node, resolved doubts

regarding units of analysis to be assigned to one or more nodes, agreed adaptations to inform the next iteration of nodes, and applied these to further data samples. This process was repeated until data coding saturation was reached, at which point the third coding stage commenced:

- Theoretical: This led to the development of a grounded theory regarding conspiracy theories. Over the course of a series of coding sessions, we discussed all nodes and their inter-relations. This resulted in raising those nodes that were most prominent to the level of theoretical concepts/categories (see Section 4.1). Each of these categories comprised related sub- categories. Cumulatively, they provided a coherent understanding of how conspiracy theories were conceptualized through discursive practices in the data under analysis.

4. Results

4.1 Constructing knowledge about conspiracy theories

The coding process described in Section 3 resulted in four theoretical categories, namely digital affordances, factual-conceptual knowledge, procedural knowledge and meta-cognitive knowledge. Figure 1 schematically represents how these categories related to each other in the data.

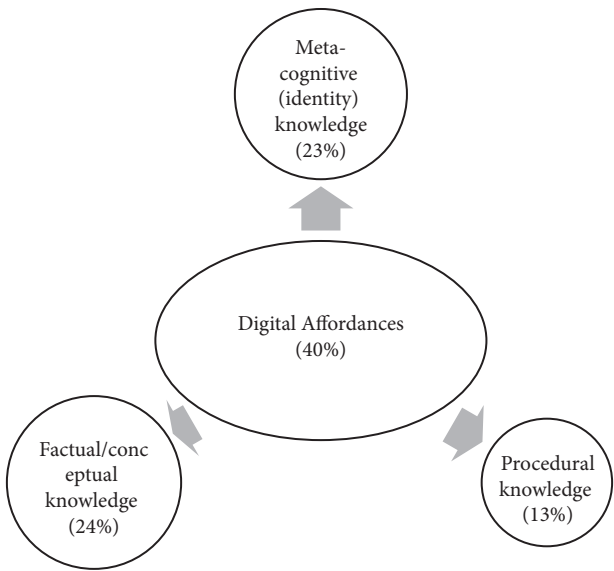


Figure 1. Conceptualising conspiracy theories

The digital affordances category referred to the digital properties (communication enablers, principally) of the digital spaces in which the users interacted. This category crucially underpinned the remaining categories. Therefore, it is placed at the centre of the schematic representation, its larger size conveying its proportional salience and the three arrows stemming from it indicating its linkages to the other categories. The actual digital affordances at stake were, in decreasing order of frequency, polylogal dynamics, community norm discussion and content spreadability. While quantitatively salient, the digital affordances category supports knowledge construction of conspiracy theories, rather than constitute a dimension of knowledge per se. As such, and also on account of word space limitations, we do not discuss it in any further detail here (but see Lorenzo-Dus and Garcés-Conejos Blitvich 2021).

The three other categories in Figure 1 correspond to what are known as dimensions of knowledge, specifically, they are adapted from an influential model of knowledge goals developed in the 1950s by Benjamin Bloom and collaborators Max Englehart, Edward Furst, Walter Hill, and David Krathwohl (Bloom et al. 1956). The model has been extensively revised over time, most crucially by Anderson et al. (2001). Crucially for our work, knowledge itself comprises four dimensions, as shown in Figure 2.

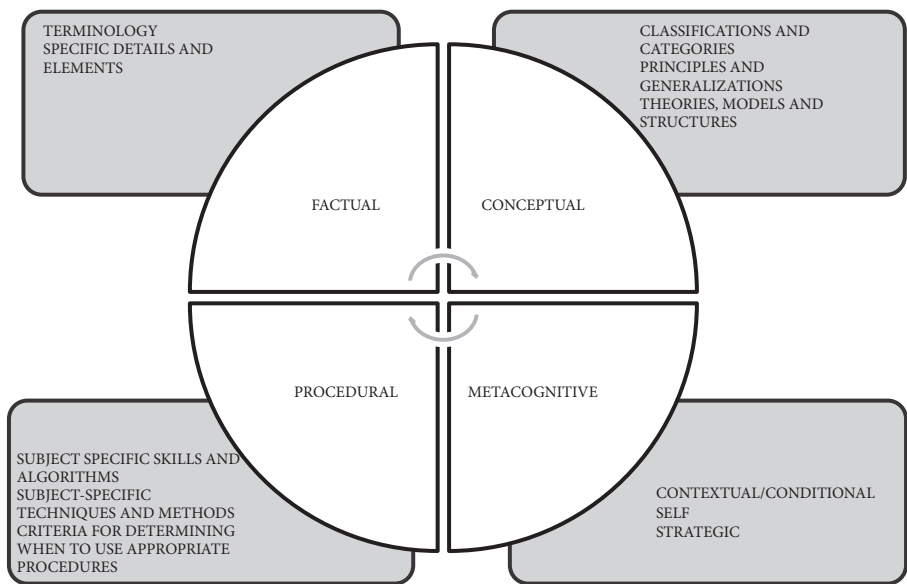


Figure 2. Dimensions of knowledge (adapted from Bloom et al. 1956)

All four dimensions of knowledge were present in our data, although some adaptations were required. As Figure 1 shows, we amalgamated the factual and conceptual dimensions into a single category: factual/conceptual knowledge. This was because factual and conceptual knowledge relate to, respectively, single fact- and multiple fact- (structure; relational) based information. In our data, it was not always possible to disentangle these two information types. What the data clearly showed, however, was that both types were neither empirical nor metacognitive based, i.e., references within the factual-conceptual knowledge category did not concern any actual procedures entailed in empirically analyzing phenomena; nor did they concern the identities of those individuals involved in the practice of conspiracy theorizing. As shown in Figure 1, factual-conceptual knowledge accounted for 24% (345 references) of all the coding in our data. It entailed users' references to what constituted – and/or did not constitute – a conspiracy theory.

The meta-cognitive (identity) knowledge category concerned users' references to the different social actors involved in the emergence, development and demise of a given conspiracy theory. These social actors were broadly aligned to either pro (conspiracy theorists) or against (agents)² conspirationism. In Bloom et al.'s (1956) taxonomy, this dimension of knowledge concerned strategic, contextual and self-knowledge. In our data, it was the self-knowledge aspect that was most salient, or rather, the construction of knowledge about self and others that prevailed, hence our adding the notion of identity to this category label. Quantitatively, as shown in Figure 1, the meta-cognitive knowledge dimension accounted for 23% of the coding (332 references) in our data.

As also shown in Figure 1, the factual-conceptual and the meta-cognitive (identity) knowledge dimensions displayed similar frequencies of use in our data, which is why they are represented in bubbles of the same size, and larger than the final dimension of knowledge identified in the data: procedural knowledge. In Bloom et al.'s taxonomy, procedural knowledge concerned subject-specific knowledge, whether of skills/algorithms or techniques/methods, and it crucially encompassed empirical know-how: what criteria to use in order to determine when to use adequate steps. This knowledge dimension was directly applicable to our data, consisting of references to the kind of empirical toolkit, as it were, that may (and may not) be legitimately activated to derive knowledge about what passes or not as a conspiracy theory. As shown in Figure 1, procedural knowledge accounted for 13% (185 references) of all the coding. This category concerned both the kind of broad methodological framework to be adopted to derive knowledge about a given conspiracy theory, and the procedural steps involved in the implementation of such a framework. Given that the aim of this study is to examine what passes as

2. The term "agents" is used in the conspiracy theory literature to label the individual or groups with nefarious intentions conspiracy theorist aim to unmask.

legitimate conspiracy theory knowledge within the data under analysis, discussion of the three knowledge dimensions therein excludes members’ challenges to conspirationism, focusing instead on in-group members’ discursive constructions of factual-conceptual, procedural and meta-cognitive (identity) knowledge aligned to conspirationism.

4.2 Factual-conceptual knowledge

Knowledge-based mentions regarding conspiracy theories were of two main types: definitional or descriptive. As shown in Figure 3, definitions of conspiracy theory accounted for 13.04% (45 references) of all factual-conceptual knowledge coding in the data, the remaining 86.6% consisting of four descriptive categories: truth (156 references), reasoning (67 references), scientific sounding (52 references), and contradicting official accounts (31 references).

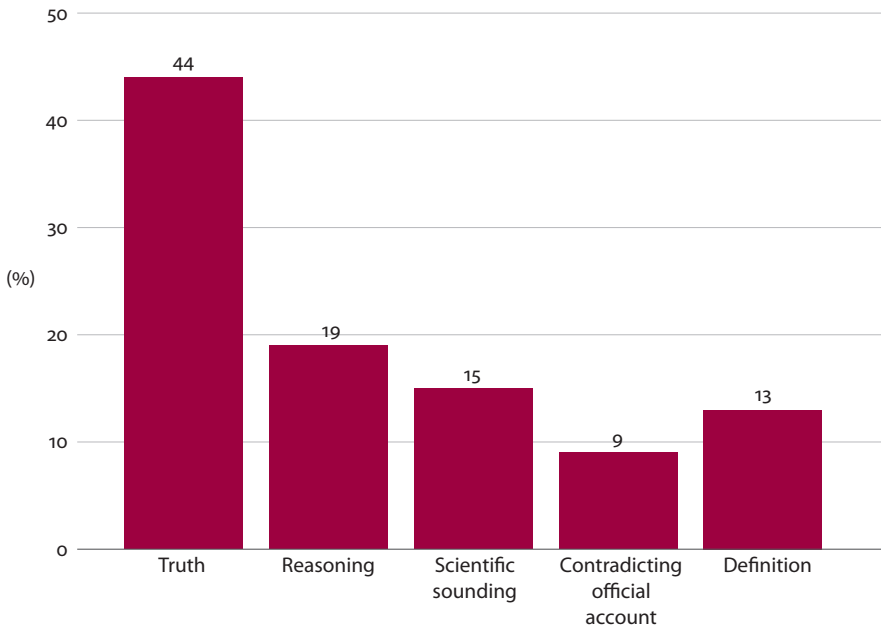


Figure 3. Factual-Conceptual knowledge in conspiracy theories

Regarding the definitional part of factual/conceptual knowledge, some of the definitions provided argued that conspiracy theories were “A secret plan by a group to do something unlawful or harmful.” Interestingly, there was some debate around whether conspiracy theory was a proper label for the phenomenon under scrutiny, as it was felt that it had been “Created and weaponized by... the CIA”, and thus mostly used, in a top-down manner, to stigmatize conspiracy theories by some

of the very people (the CIA) conspiracy theories target. The stigmatizing valence argued to be associated with the label conspiracy theory can be seen in (1): it has such negative connotations that it can delegitimize any facts by mere association:

- (1) Go ahead and “debunk” truth by calling it a conspiracy theory.

From the discussion, it emerged that conspiracy theories were viewed as “important” and “historical” transitory stages of knowledge which come to an end when the truth is revealed. In this sense, users, for example, asked “If you uncover the truth to a conspiracy theory, is it still just a theory?”, and defined conspiracy theories as “actual issues currently considered conspiracy.”

As shown in Figure 3, truth emerged at the core of descriptive characteristics associated with conspiracy theories, accounting for 44% of the total coding in the factual-conceptual knowledge category. Indeed, a crucial feature of conspiracy theories in the data was that they offered the true version of events according to the posts’ authors, as (2) illustrates:

- (2) THEY ARE GETTING SCARED, PEOPLE! CONSPIRACIES ARE TRUTH. PROPAGANDA MAINSTREAM NEWS IS CRIMINAL.

History, redditors argued, supported beliefs in conspiracy theories as many of them turned out to be “true”. Further, the truth contained in conspiracy theories was counterposed to “the official version of events” which was thus, by default, untrue. Consider (3) where it is claimed that believing the official version of events, regarding the 9/11 attacks for example, is tantamount to ignorance:

- (3) I’m surprised only 25% of people think 9/11 was a conspiracy. That means 75% of Americans still believe the Governments story. I don’t believe 75% of Americans are still in the dark. 9/11 was a collective insult to our collective intelligence. If you believe the Government story you have not really looked at the evidence. But ignorance is bliss I suppose.....

Further, because conspiracy theories were presented as “the truth” and alternative versions to official accounts, they needed to come across as “informed”. This was typically achieved through the use of scientific or scientific sounding language, which in our data accounted for 15% of all the coding within the factual-conceptual dimension of knowledge category. An example of this is provided in (4), in the context of defending the existence of chemtrails:³

3. “Chemtrails refers to the theory that governments or other parties are engaged in a secret program to add toxic chemicals to the atmosphere from aircraft in a way that forms visible plumes in the sky somewhat similar to contrails. Various different motivations for this alleged spraying are speculated, including sterilization, reduction of life expectancy, mind control or weather control”. <https://keith.seas.harvard.edu/chemtrails-conspiracy-theory>

- (4) the formation of it defys local atmospheric conditions. More heat + Higher UV penetration= faster dissipation. If you pay close attention you will notice that they tend to go on for miles and stick around much longer on days with high to extreme UV index. Contrails are vapor after all and are formed by a localized pressure difference created by the turbines. Contrails can last when the vapor freezes into ice but even that is dependent on the atmospheric conditions and should not last more than a short period of time.

Because of their being presented presented as well thought-out, true, alternative accounts to official versions, conspiracy theories were constructed as being formulated from a place of reason, not emotion; conspiracy theories were thus described as the results of reasoning, rather than of viscerality, another characteristic of conspiracy theories related to Factual-Conceptual Knowledge. This description accounted for 19% of all the coding in the factual-conceptual knowledge dimension category. By denouncing and warning blue pilld people (people who have chosen to be blissfully ignorant of reality) about cover-ups, the Conspiracy Theory Reddit Community tried to persuade them to accept their view of events. The discursive practice of persuading was presented as being based on reasoned argumentation and sharing of relevant information, as (5) illustrates:

- (5) How are they dumb things? Opening peoples eyes to the corruption seems like a precursor to overthrow governments. How do you convince your average blue pilld person to take control of their rights, without first opening their eyes to the misleading actions of the government? If you ask me, your post is the very thing you'r trying to warn us about.

When compared with scholarly accounts of the factual-conceptual knowledge dimension of conspiracy theories, the bottom-up components discussed clearly show some overlap. As in scholarly accounts (see Keely 1999; van Prooijen and Vugt 2018), bottom-up definitions of conspiracy theories in our data pointed to the existence of nefarious intentions behind conspiracy theories, which drove them towards "unlawful or harmful" ends and this intentionality was thus connected to agency. In this sense, our data supported Clarke's (2002) view that conspiracy theories are dispositional, namely the result of conspirators' intentions, rather than situational, namely the result of contextual factors unrelated to specific intentions or proclivities. Likewise, bottom-up descriptions in our data, just like scholarly ones, saw conspiracy theories as explanations that run counter to official or obvious accounts. In bottom-up accounts, however, conspiracy theories seemed to be overwhelmingly associated with the truth (even before they are proven and thus constitute *theories* no longer) whereas official accounts were, by default, associated with misrepresentations of reality. In this respect, in bottom-up versions, conspiracy theories were seen as transitory stages of factual knowledge on their way to becoming the

ultimate stage of knowledge which comprises *the whole truth*. Conspiracy theories were presented discursively as stemming from reasoned argumentation and knowledge of science. Scholarly accounts coincide with this view partly, arguing that conspiracy theories only seem to be grounded in analytic and deliberative thought processes but are really grounded in emotion (see, for example, van Prooijen and Douglas 2018). Our data showed, however, that bottom-up conspiracy theorizing aims at coming across as a rational rather than a visceral exercise. Importantly, our data showed a certain discontent with the label “conspiracy theory” as it was seen as an imposed denomination, created by those conspiracy theories target, like governments or the CIA, to discredit their pursuits in search of the truth. This is in alignment with research that argues that the label “conspiracy theory” is not neutral or objective, but it is negatively loaded and mostly used a pejorative dismissal of others’ worldview (Bratich 2008).

4.3 Procedural knowledge

As shown in Figure 1, references to procedural knowledge were comparatively infrequent in the data, accounting for 13% (185 references) of all the coding. Of these, 16 references (8.65%) entailed discussion of the broad methodological framework adopted to derive knowledge about conspiracy theories. The comparatively lower frequency of use of this category may seem to run contrary to the characterization of conspiracy theory communities as being “profoundly involved in knowledge activism” (Procházka and Blommaert 2019: 25). However, knowledge construction is strongly shaped by eudaimonic and social variables in our data. Users’ actions were primarily oriented towards developing these variables and less so towards the procedural variables – the actual analytic toolkit – to be involved. In other words, conspiracy theory communities are involved in knowledge activism, but not in the procedural sense.

The main defining property of the analytic toolkit was it being *sui generis* to conspirationism. It is argued conspiracy theorists had to devise a different/unique type of methodology, from the ones available, because the idiosyncrasy of their object of study makes it not suitable for any extant method. However, this led to, among others, not necessarily relying on sources of expertise traditionally associated with empirical science, as (6) illustrates.

- (6) I just question who gives all the authority to deem a person an expert. The video of the doctors being deleted recently has me question why we should only listen to one doctor’s opinion. I know that when I have a medical issue I don’t always just listen to one doctors opinion. Especially if a major surgery is involved.

The extract questions not only having regard for traditional experts (e.g., “doctors”) but also determining who decides who may be classed as an expert (“who gives all the authority to deem a person an expert”). This poses an interesting twist on the demotic turn (see Turner 2010) we are presently said to live in, which argues for a shift of expertise away from traditional, authority-based sources (experts of various ilk) and towards the common person (laity). What is being claimed in (6) instead is that we should be able to decide the criteria to allocate expertise. In the specific case being discussed in (6), the criterion is to consider more than one opinion – the opinion itself coming from traditional expertise sources (doctors).

The remaining procedural knowledge sub-categories (91.35%) entailed the actual steps needed to be taken to examine conspiracy theories empirically. They comprised (see Figure 5): formulating a hypothesis, reviewing the existing body of knowledge (“literature review”) about particular events, actors or phenomena connected with a conspiracy theory; conducting analyses by means of pattern identification, and confirming the initial hypothesis and, therefore, the legitimacy of the conspiracy theory.

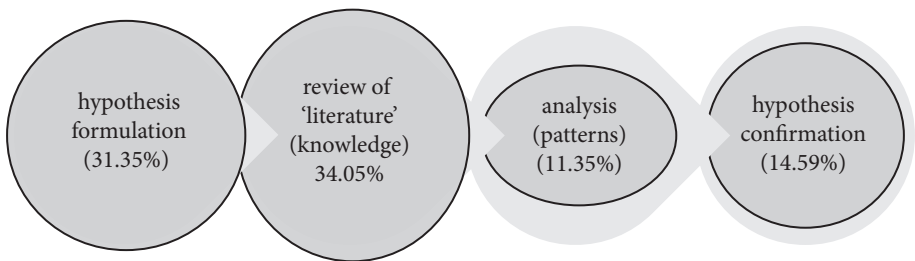


Figure 4. Procedural steps within the conspiracy theory sui generis analytic framework

Quantitatively, there was a marked difference between the initial two steps in the process of deriving procedural knowledge (hypothesis formulation – 31.35%; review of literature – 34.05%) and the final two steps (analysis – 11.35%; hypothesis confirmation – 14.59%). This suggests a lesser concern with data-driven aspects (the actual findings and their implication) than with ideational aspects (developing hypotheses and situating them within a selective body of knowledge). A sceptic may argue that this ensures the legitimacy of conspirationism as a practice for making sense of reality, whereby the salience of actual evidence and what this may mean is secondary to that of putative (i.e., yet to be proven) evidence. Instead, a conspiracy theorist may counter that the sui generis essence of their methodological approach warrants such a re-prioritization of conjectural over evidential procedural steps. Example (7) illustrates the hypothesis formulation step.

(7) Concave sphere

Maybe the entire thing, but the ground is measurably flat, there's really no getting around that repeatable fact.

Simply put, a hypothesis is a proposed explanation based on limited evidence and used as a starting point for further examination. In the data, explanations for given conspiracy theories were proposed and, as per the other procedural steps, techniques for examining the proposed explanations were also offered. However, as (7) shows, these explanations were presented as facts that would inevitably be ratified through the subsequent procedural steps. The step of formulating hypotheses thus worked in a kind of *fait accompli* manner, rather than as an open-minded journey of discovery that may lead on occasion to hypothesis refutation, rather than inevitably result in hypothesis ratification. For instance, in (7), an explanation (the earth is flat) was categorically asserted through an un-hedged, affirmative statement “the ground is measurably flat, there's really no getting around that repeatable fact” that is scientifically backed up on three accounts: quantification (“measurably” flat), replicability (“repeatable fact”) and facticity (the explanation is already a “fact”). Categorical assertiveness was further emphasized through the use of the adverbial booster “really” and constructing the hypothesis as the only possible explanation (“there's no getting around”).

Once ‘hypotheses’ were posited, the next procedural step entailed the gathering of information around the phenomenon/a being considered. Support for hypothesis formulation thus came from a body of knowledge that needed to be found and gathered for scrutiny – something akin to the literature review stage in science. This body of knowledge stemmed from different sources (internet reports, hear-say, books, mainstream media, etc.). Importantly, as (8a) and (8b) respectively illustrate, the procedural step of gathering it was consistently represented as requiring sustained effort (“gold mining”) and scientific rigour (“research”).

(8) Literature review

- a. It's kinda like gold mining, you have to sift through a lot of useless dirt to find anything worth your time.
- b. Research. Stay critical. Stay calm. Keep your eyes and ears open for opportunities to be on the side of truth..

In the data, terminology was used to reference the idea of perseverance (“Stay”, “Keep” in 8b indicate more than single, one-off engagement) and rigour (“Research”; “critical” (8b) indicate a certain objectivity) when conducting literature reviews. These were typically referenced as forms of “digging” (e.g. “I dug into this really far”), to which the expression “gold mining” (8a) and the idea that one had to “sift through a lot of useless dirt” (8a) are metaphorically linked.

The procedural step of familiarizing oneself with an extensive body of knowledge was, therefore, constructed as laborious, requiring patience and objectivity. Importantly, it was also depicted as bringing the highest reward to a conspiracy theorist: "being on the side of truth" (8b); see also Section 4.2). Moreover, this procedural step was closely aligned to the next one: actually analysing varying phenomena. Analysis was constructed, as (9a) and (9b) illustrate, in terms of pattern identification.

(9) Analysis

- a. Most of the biggest secrets in life are hidden in plain sight, so seemingly simple that most people glance right over them or disregard them entirely.
- b. Best place to hide is right in plain sight....people rarely notice peculiar things, as creatures of habit we are so used to everything being "NORMAL"

A recurrent metaphorical construction within the data analysis procedural step came from the visual domain. Specifically, it referenced conspiracy theorists as individuals who possessed the kind of trained eye that enabled them to identify patterns where others either saw coincidences or no patterns whatsoever. The patterns that conspiracy theorists were able to identify were presented as being "hidden" from others (see 9a); either agents or others who were yet to be enlightened (note the reference to hiding in 9b, too). Yet, conspiracy theorists also argued, these patterns were also obvious: "in plain sight" (9a) to those with a trained eye.

Whereas the actual patterns that conspiracy theorists identified were outlined and at times extensively described in the data, the methodological toolkit that they used for analysing them was conspicuous by its absence. Beyond literature review, and thus references aligned to "digging", no mention was made of scientific analysis methods used, such as interviews, systematic accounting of events linked to a phenomenon, and so forth. In the infrequent cases in which an analytic tool was mentioned, this ultimately relied on personal experience and beliefs, such as "I think for myself and I have seen patterns" or "Until I saw this and did some digging on my own." By definition, personal and/or experiential tools are not directly transferable to others, that is, they are not amenable to the scientific principle of reproducibility. As such, they may be dispelled by non-conspiracy theorists on grounds of lack of appropriate procedural knowledge. This was something the conspiracy theorists challenged on grounds of the *sui generis* essence of their method and the object of study: conspirationism and conspiracy theories, respectively. The argument may be aptly summarised in the following post: "patterns do exist, except the majorities have a specific set of knowledge (about life) that made them reject the 'connections' in first place." In other words, the pattern exists, but only those who are predisposed to see a pattern can see it. This is of course resonant of the traditional folk tale "The Emperor's New Clothes".

The above argument was extended to the final procedural knowledge step identified in the data: hypothesis confirmation. Therein, any evidence or view that did not confirm the explanation experienced/believed to be true was discarded, offering no actual rationale instead for the confirmed explanation/theory. Instead, the focus often shifted to metacognitive (identity) knowledge claims that constructed conspiracy theorists as victims of unjustified ridicule, whose knowledge methods would be eventually vindicated, as (10a) and (10b) illustrate:

(10) Hypothesis confirmation

- a. No matter how much they guffaw, ridicule and laugh.....Eventually SOMEone will have the last laugh.....
- b. Who is most foolish, the person who believes everything they are told or the person that, at very least, has a believability check?

Scholarly work on the kind of procedural knowledge used in conspiracy theorizing has primarily focused on explaining, from the top-down, the epistemic deficiencies of conspiracy theories, characterizing their “crippled epistemology” (Butter and Knight 2016: 6) and conspiracy theorists as “suffer[ing] from the epistemic vice of gullibility” (Dentith 2016: 573). Within the limited discourse analytic research into conspiracy theories, Procházka and Blommaert (2019) characterize the procedural mechanisms behind conspiracy theorists’ knowledge activism as entailing *ergoic reasoning* – i. e, as being driven through “the construction of plausible explanation formats in which details of everyday life can be related to some ‘theory’ as proof that theory (hence *ergo*, since the detail is explicable *because of* the theory).” (2019: 6; emphases in the original). This is closely aligned to our findings, where users identify the particular empirical steps required in conspirationism. They follow a procedure, which follows their own, *sui generis*, reasoning methods. Others – including academia – may consider their reasoning to be antirational on the grounds that it operates according to a circularity logic: “the validity of which resides in the quality of the theory” (Procházka and Blommaert 2019: 25). From the outside in, the Conspiracy Theory Community may be seen as antirational, but it cannot be classed as anti-reasoning, that is, its logic may be flawed but it does engage in argumentation to prove such logic. The Conspiracy Theory community under investigation applies such reasoning, and the relative salience of ideational mechanisms therein.

4.4 Meta-cognitive (identity) knowledge

The meta-cognitive knowledge dimension category accounted for 23% of the references in the dataset (Figure 1). As Figure 5 shows, it comprised three sub-categories, the comparative frequencies of which indicated a clear focus on the opponents of conspiracy theories – the agents.

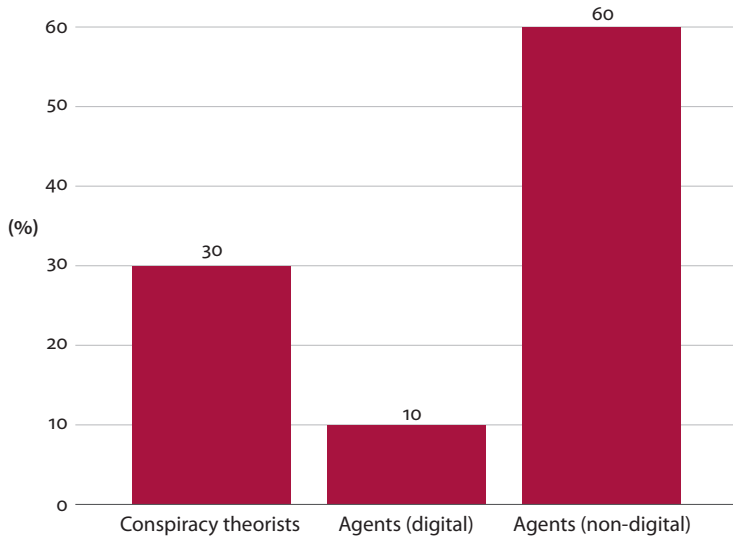


Figure 5. Meta-cognitive (identity) knowledge

Theorising about conspiracy theories entailed explicit acts of positioning (self and other) in relation to the very concept of a conspiracy theory. Two main social identities were referenced (defined and/or described) through these acts: conspiracy theorists and agents. At the core of both identities is their relationship with “truth”. With a frequency of 30% in the data subset, conspiracy theorists were (self-) labelled as “truthers”, as shown in (11), and “truth seekers”, among others, whereas the agents’ main goal was to hide the truth.

(11) These truthers are investigators to bring the truth to us...

It is because of their search for the truth and the risk this poses to human agents that the latter have gone out of their way to stigmatise conspiracy theories and those who work on them (see also Section 4.3); this can be seen in (12) where the CIA is again made responsible for the negativity associated with the conspiracy theory label and, crucially here, the identity associated with it:

(12) the phrase “conspiracy theory/conspiracy theory rest” which was created in 1967 to discredit those disseminating information and evidence that the CIA didn’t want people to hear because it potentially discredited the Warren commission report.

Truthers, across the board, present themselves in a positive light, as we can see in (13): they are undeterred by the criticism of those who claim to debunk their views; they are also critical, ask difficult questions and dig deep into alternative unofficial versions,

- (13) Trust No One.....Question Everything.....No matter how much they guffaw, ridicule and laugh.....Eventually SOMEone will have the last laugh.....

Thus, they co-construct themselves by displaying the features identified in Sections 4.3 and 4.4 as important features of conspiracy theories at the epistemological and/or empirical level, that is, as having the trained eye required to spot patterns and being in possession of the truth, among others.

Two broad agent types were, in turn, identified: digital and non-digital. Collectively, these accounted for 70% of all the references within the meta-cognitive (identity) category, most of these concerning human (non-digital) agents. Digital agents, 10% of the references, were non-human agents, typically a bot, that undermined/challenged the work of the conspiracy theorists and/or the conspiracy theory itself. The discussion about non-human agents appeared mostly in the Reddit dataset. This conversation referred to automoderators or bots designed to automate various moderation tasks for which no human judgment is needed – such as deleting comments – and whose decisions can be overridden by human mods.⁴ There was a generalized sense that, regardless of their non-human nature, these bots had ultimately been created by human beings who may have transferred their nefarious intentions to the bots via specific types/choices of coding. Mostly, bots' removal of certain comments was seen as censorship:⁵

- (14) On several occasions now I come close to deleting Reddit for its censorship

Perhaps, they wondered, their *digging* was getting too close to something important and that was the reason why a particular comment was deleted.

For their part, non-digital agents were individual or collective agents who undermined/challenged the work of the conspiracy theorists and/or the conspiracy theory itself and amounted to 60% of the references in this category. The general belief held by conspiracy theories was that an all-powerful elite, whose manoeuvrings are described in (15), controls apparently independent bodies such as Western governments, government agencies (the CIA, for instance), and the mainstream media:

4. The term 'mods' designates users' modifications to a software application (such as a video game) in order to change the way the application looks or functions.

5. For details regarding Reddit's moderation policies see:
https://www.reddit.com/r/modguide/comments/ep7aza/moderator_bots_what_they_are_and_what_they_can_do/
<https://www.redditinc.com/policies/moderator-guidelines>

- (15) Media propaganda, advertising, social media etc are the modern tools utilized by the corporate elite for social engineering. These tools are breeding a type of "robotic" (aka people who cannot think for themselves or utilize their own Will) human dependent upon a dopamine rush from novel stimuli.

This elite and their subsidiaries mislead the public, as it is claimed in (16), and try to take their attention away from situations/plans that may be to their detriment but to their elite's gain. Truthers are the only ones who catch wind of these nefarious schemes, using both their trained eye to spot patterns which are in plain sight but unseen by others (*blue pillers*, always constructed as gullible, as seen in 5 above) and the methodological framework to derive knowledge about a given conspiracy theory.

- (16) The government and mainstream media routinely lie to the public this is a fact not theory.

Thus, agents and conspiracy theorists intersubjectively and relationally positioned themselves in opposition to each other as they engage in ostensibly contradictory practices, i.e., cover/uncover the truth (see Bucholtz and Hall 2005). As a discouraging tactic, the elite attempts to subvert conspiracy theorists' efforts by delegitimizing them, as seen above and also in (17):

- (17) Western governments like to dismiss everything that's inconvenient to them as conspiracy theories, so that everyone asking any questions or raising issues they don't want to address can be easily branded mad. Just watching this video alone is enough to understand how the propaganda machine works

Conspiracy theorist then emerges as a stigmatized identity (Goffman 1963). Not only has the elite apparently been successful in discrediting those positioned as such, but there is also a strong tradition in academia that describes conspiracy theorists as suffering from some sort of mental pathology (Hofstadter 1966). In fact, early research in psychology, "tended to take for granted that conspiracy theories are held by distinctive kinds of people with identifiable and flawed psychological characteristics" (Butter and Knight 2016: 2). Similarly, in intellectual circles, conspiracy theorists' explanations are not seen as holding the same gravitas as those provided by non-conspirational accounts, although some conspiracy theories have turned out to be true (see Clarke 2002). Some of these views have changed. For instance, it has recently been argued that many in the public, not just a *deranged* few, believe in conspiracy theories (van Prooijen and Douglas 2018) and that conspiracy theories beliefs may indeed be adaptive in the evolutionary history of our species (van Prooijen and van Vugt 2018). However, conspiracy theorists still seldom self-identify as such. Truthers and truth-seekers, as we have seen, seem to be

two labels of choice. Despite the malignant positioning (Sabat 2003) the identity has been subjected to, our data show how conspiracy theorists legitimize themselves and their pursuits by delegitimizing (non) human agents (i.e., the conspirators). Intergroup conflict is thus at the core of intragroup gelling and social identity construction, which confirms van Prooijen and Douglas's (2018) views on conspiracy theory beliefs and groupness.

In general, since conspiracy theorists have been seen as not necessarily trustworthy, there is no substantive discussion about human agents in the literature, other than the general acknowledgement that human agents with nefarious intentions are behind conspiracy theories. Their noticeable presence in our data can, in part, be related to the discursive (rather than top-down, as we find in most extant literature on conspiracy theories) construction of identity. In that respect, many scholars (see Mendoza-Denton 2002, among others) have argued that identity construction is all about marking difference. What is more, it is only in relation to the other, to what one is not, that recognition is produced.

Regarding non-human agents, we have not found any related scholarly discussion about bots or similar entities. It is worth remembering that, as discussed above, online conspiracy theorizing has been under-researched. There is growing concern, however, regarding the role played by algorithms in datafication. Since⁶ algorithms are not neutral but the product of coding choices, they may perpetuate the biases held by those individuals doing the coding (see Cheney-Lippold 2017, among others).

5. Conclusion

Our discursive, bottom-up analysis of what counted as a conspiracy theory was guided by two main research questions. In this section, we provide analysis-based answers to those and some thoughts on how to advance research on online conspiracy theorising.

1. What are the main characteristics of conspiracy theories from a bottom-up, discursive perspective?

By applying a modified version of Bloom et al.'s (1956) and Anderson et al.'s (2001) knowledge model to the data, three main categories regarding what counted as a legitimate conspiracy theory emerged: factual-conceptual knowledge, procedural knowledge, and metacognitive (identity) knowledge. At the

6. <https://www.datasciencecentral.com/profiles/blogs/the-concept-of-datafication-definition-amp-examples>

core of all three categories was the concept of truth: conspiracy theories were seen as the true versions of events; to unveil the truth a *sui generis* analytic toolkit was devised, and those who applied this toolkit to the data obtained and searched for the truth positioned themselves as “truthers” (a favoured label, as ‘conspiracy theorist’ is seen by the in-group as term with strong negative valency), determined to expose the wrongdoings of various nefarious agents.

The factual-conceptual knowledge category made constant references to truth that could be found in the way conspiracy theories were defined and opposed to (by default untrue) official versions of events. To sound veracious, conspiracy theories were exposed in reasoned, not emotional terms, and described resorting to scientific-sounding vocabulary. This scientific flair was also found in the way procedural knowledge was conceptualized. Thus, knowledge entailed a *sui generis* toolkit/analytic framework devised to unveil the truth in which ideational steps (hypothesis formation and review of the literature) were given primacy over those that are data-driven (analysis and hypothesis confirmation). Regarding the meta-cognitive category, redditors saw truth as also being the main value associated with two identities pitted against each other and thus relationally and oppositionally co-constructed: truthers who sought to unveil the truth and agents (both human and non/human) whose main aim was to hide the truth for different reasons (but never in the public’s best interest).

2. How do these emergent characteristics compare with those presented in related scholarship, which has been mostly conducted from a top-down perspective?

As discussed, findings related to the three categories described above show significant overlap between top-down and bottom-up characterisations of conspiracy theories. There were a few discrepancies, however. Our data showed that conspiracy theories were presented as stemming from rationality, reasoning, and the (albeit *sui generis*) scientific method, whereas it has been argued in the literature (see van Prooijen and Douglas 2018) that they are fundamentally invested in emotion. Further, our results add nuance to Procházka and Blommaert’s (2019) assertion regarding conspiracy theory groupings being profoundly committed to knowledge activism. In our data, users engaged primarily in knowledge construction. Our data further reveals that the type of knowledge activism that they engaged with displayed a manifest proclivity for eudaimonic and social variables, principally aligned to meta-cognitive (identity) and conceptual-factual knowledge construction.

In addition, whereas most top-down accounts focus heavily on the description, usually in ways that malignantly position them, of conspiracy theorists, our data leaned strongly towards the depiction of the agents’ identity against whom conspiracy theorists relationally construct who they are. Interestingly,

and due to the digital nature of data, a new identity emerged, that of non-human agents that are seen as carrying out diverse functions, such as censorship, realising thereby the nefarious intentions that human agents may have transferred to them via certain coding choices. All in all, the results of this study confirm the added value that a discourse analytic perspective can bring to the study of conspiracy theories in terms of providing fresh insights into the ways in which conspiracy theorising emerges and develops from the interactional practices of affinity spaces such as the ones we have considered here.

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“You want me to be wrong”

Expert *ethos*, (de-)legitimation, and *ethotic* straw men as discursive resources for conspiracy theories

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This chapter discusses features of conspiratorial discourse related to the representation of social actors through the lens of rhetorical and argumentative analysis. Specifically, it identifies a previously undocumented variant of the straw man fallacy (a misrepresentation of an opponent's position meant to refute it more easily), namely the *ethotic* straw man, which unscrupulous arguers can use to legitimate their own credibility and undermine their opponents', thereby evading scientific discussion of relevant issues. A TV-interview with French virologist Didier Raoult, who championed hydroxychloroquine-based treatments in the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, is taken as a case in point to explain why such quasi-populistic discourse, prominently centred on questions of *ethos*, fits conspiratorial narratives so well.

Keywords: rhetoric, argumentation, *ethos*, *ethotic* straw man, legitimation, de-legitimation, conspiracy, Raoult, expertise

1. Introduction

Like many global events, the COVID-19 pandemic has provided a breeding ground for numerous conspiracy theories.¹ In this case, however, the health-related nature of the event has triggered unique challenges for public discourse on the issue. To inform the public on matters of public health and safety, the media naturally turned to scientific expertise. But because the virus was unknown, the scientific community, at least during the first year of the pandemic, operated under conditions of high uncertainty, both in the field of research and in public scientific communication.

1. See e.g., <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/eight-persistent-covid-19-myths-and-why-people-believe-them/>. Last accessed 21.01.2022.

Because of these two factors (partial scientific knowledge and media pressure to discuss it), medical disagreements and controversies on causes and treatments, which usually took place in medical circles behind academic walls, crossed the borders of the scientific sphere and became public discussions, with dissenting scientific voices competing for attention. While a healthy practice of scientific research cannot proceed without debate, conducting it in the public sphere is problematic, as the risk of confusing non-experts is high, and the danger of discrediting scientific research altogether looms large. In other words, when medical experts publicly disagree, over time science runs the risk of losing credibility, and debates on fundamental issues might be obscured, if not replaced, by peripheral discussions on the legitimacy of experts. And indeed, if we consider how widespread COVID-19 denialist discourse has nowadays become,² a tendency towards such an epistemological shift becomes tangible.

In Francophone media, Dr Didier Raoult, the French virologist who led the IHU (*Institut Hospitalo-universitaire*) Marseille, a medical training and research centre, until mid-2022,³ and who has championed the use of hydroxychloroquine and azithromycin to treat COVID-19 patients, became a public figure over the last years. His research is now regarded as controversial, as his studies have been criticised by his peers on methodological grounds.⁴ Yet, his behaviour during interviews has generated a sharp divide in the general public, with more than one out of two French citizens declaring in September 2020 that they have a favourable opinion of Raoult.⁵ A quick glance at his numerous media appearances reveals a combative personality who never shies away from criticising his opponents on other grounds than scientific ones – he is in fact well-known for his outspokenness and his contempt for social conventions, politeness included. In terms of argumentative debate, these interviews often derail into discussions on the (il)legitimacy and credibility of the social actors represented in COVID-19 discourse (scientists, politicians, etc.). These then problematically take precedence over discussions centred on the facts

2. See <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/07/24/a-look-at-the-americans-who-believe-there-is-some-truth-to-the-conspiracy-theory-that-covid-19-was-planned/> on the popularity of COVID-19 conspiracies in the US and <https://docs.cdn.yougov.com/2ouu9vfd10/YouGov%20-%20Globalism%20Study%20and%20conspiracies%20Results.pdf> for a worldwide survey on different conspiracy theories, including one of the allegedly harmful effects of vaccines. Last accessed: 21.02.2022.

3. https://www.liberation.fr/societe/sante/ihu-de-marseille-raoult-bientot-out-20210917_DFWGYRY3RBBNHMFG45MCXV5FAQ/. Last accessed 21.01.2022.

4. See e.g., <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7357515/>. Last accessed, 21.01.2022.

5. <https://www.lci.fr/population/sondage-plus-d-un-francais-sur-deux-declarent-avoir-une-bonne-opinion-du-professeur-didier-raoult-2164697.html>. Last accessed 21.01.2022.

of scientific research, which both policymakers and members of the general public count on to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic in appropriate ways. Ultimately, such discourse also fits the conspiratorial narrative.

This paper investigates the way social actors are legitimated and de-legitimated in discourse, in the vein of the now classical works of van Leeuwen on the representation of social actors (van Leeuwen 1996) and on legitimation in discourse (van Leeuwen 2007). However, it does so through the lens of argumentation theory and rhetoric, as it focuses on the Aristotelian notion of *ethos*, which we connect to a specific use of the straw man fallacy, discussed for the first time here. After a short discussion on the argumentative nature of conspiracy theories (Section 2), we articulate a model of *ethos* (Section 3), a notion not typically mobilised in mainstream and contemporary Critical Discourse Studies (CDS), while taking the example of the public image of Dr Didier Raoult as a case in point. We then focus on the straw man fallacy and characterise one of its variants, the *ethotic* straw man fallacy (Section 4), before turning to the analysis of our data to illustrate how *ethotic* strawmanning plays out in actual discourse (Section 5). We conclude our study by discussing why such *ethotic* strategies connect to and serve particularly well conspiratorial narratives (Section 6).

2. Conspiracy theories as argumentative objects

Conspiracy theories can be defined as “proposed explanation[s] of some historical event (or events) in terms of the significant causal agency of a relatively small group of persons – the conspirators – acting in secret” (Keeley 1999: 116). As such, conspiracy theories always emerge in reaction to an official account of a culturally, socially, politically and historically significant event. Their emergence and propagation have often been seen by researchers as the result of a seemingly low threshold of critical acceptance of information in conspiracy theory believers. As noted by Sunstein and Vermeule, “those who hold conspiracy theories (...) typically do so not as a result of a mental illness of any kind, or of simple irrationality, but as a result of a ‘crippled epistemology,’ in the form of a sharply limited number of (relevant) informational sources” (Sunstein and Vermeule 2009: 204). Although this quote establishes that conspiracy theories may stick at a population scale by virtue of a quantitatively limited access to relevant information on behalf of those who believe in them, a case can be made in favour of a more fine-grained account incorporating a qualitative component as well.

Philosophical and psychological approaches make the bulk of extant research on conspiracy theories (Byford 2011); yet, in the literature, little attention has been paid to conspiracy theories in terms of their discursive features (but see Byford 2011;

Zarefsky 2014), let alone in terms of its argumentative features (see Herman 2010; Oswald and Herman 2016 for preliminary thoughts in this direction). Interestingly, however, it must be noted that an argumentative perspective on recurring discursive patterns of conspiracy theories resonates well with social and cognitive psychological accounts of conspiracy theories (Oswald 2016). We posit that conspiracy theories are, in themselves, argumentative objects, for the following three reasons:

1. at their core, conspiracy theories are motivated by a need to publicly disagree with received accounts (Keeley 1999: 117) and as such fulfil one of the first necessary conditions of argumentation, namely its propensity to be used to resolve differences of opinion (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 2004).
2. because they verbally express disagreement with an official account, conspiracy theories are *refutational* narratives meant not only to provide alternative explanations to the events they purport to explain, but also to *persuade* (or convince)⁶ their target audience that they in fact surpass the official account in quality and accuracy.
3. conspiracy theories make extensive use of argumentative strategies (Zarefsky 2014) and adopt the argumentatively dense rhetorical style of scientific inquiry (Byford 2011, Chapter 4).

In turn, these make argumentation theory a relevant framework to study key dimensions of conspiratorial discourse. Before we focus on the discursive dimension, let us first mention two directions of research which indicate the potential of argumentation theory for the study of conspiracy theories:

- i. given the tendency of conspiracy theories to engage in problematic evidence-giving processes, their study stands to benefit from the input of *normative* frameworks available in argumentation theory, as the latter provide models designed to assess the quality of argumentation (reasonableness, cogency, soundness, etc., depending on the chosen normative system).
- ii. argumentation scholarship supplies various models of analysis meant to bring to the surface the inferential structure of naturally occurring argumentative data, among which warrants, *topoi* or any such kind of unexpressed premises. The analytical reconstruction of this data – or standardisation, in Govier's terms (2010) – allows us to better grasp how explicit and implicit meaning (which is often crucial to work out ideological implications), are articulated.

6. We will not discuss the differences between convincing and persuading, as we are here interested in the result of this operation rather than in the means through which this result is achieved. For an overview of the distinctions between persuading and convincing, see Cattani (2020).

In this paper, however, we focus on the *discursive* dimension of conspiracy theories and specifically examine strategies which affect the credibility of the social actors that are present in the discourse (van Leeuwen 1996). Following van Leeuwen (2007), we take the discursive construction of credibility as one relevant dimension of legitimation, through which speakers ascribe cognitive validity to meanings that are consonant with the institutional order they adopt and/or promote (Berger and Luckmann 1990). As we are interested in the representation of social actors, our analysis considers strategies of *legitimation*, which speakers use to answer “the spoken or unspoken ‘why’ question – ‘Why should we do this?’ or ‘Why should we do this in this way?’” (van Leeuwen 2007: 94). In our case, legitimation strategies and de-legitimation strategies are meant to answer questions about the credibility of the social actors referred to in discourse, such as ‘Who should we believe?’ and ‘Why should we believe them?’. We argue that this line of questioning overlaps with typical research questions in the study of *ethos*, taken as a resource of argumentation that does not aim at legitimating the message directly, but rather its messenger.⁷

3. *Ethos*: A multi-layered notion

To the best of our knowledge, *ethos*, which Aristotle defines as the speaker’s personal character (Aristotle, Rhet. 1356a in Barnes 2014), has been studied in Francophone (e.g., Amossy 1999; Bonnafous 2002; Cornilliat and Lockwood 2000; Doury and Lefébure 2006; Errecart 2019; Herman 2005; Krieg-Planque 2019; Lehti 2013) rather than in Anglophone discourse studies traditions. For example, recent handbooks on Critical Discourse Analysis (Flowerdew and Richardson 2018; Wodak and Meyer 2015) mention *ethos* only in passing. Moreover, a recent computational study which attempted to mine *ethos* in political debate (Duthie, Budzynska, and Reed 2016) acknowledges the lack of studies on this subject, in particular in artificial intelligence. Still, extant accounts tend to define *ethos* in terms of a person’s image – and not necessarily or exclusively the speaker’s. We defend, on the contrary, the idea that to attack the image of the other is also a way of building one’s own *ethos*, which is why it is necessary to keep the two notions (image and *ethos*) dissociated.

Ethos should moreover be redefined as exerting an influence on the audience even before a speaker utters her/his word in any speech event. Analysing *ethos* in discourse should therefore integrate the prior – or prediscursive – *ethos* as a parameter of analysis. The Aristotelian conception should also be broadened to do justice to the

7. See also Zorzi’s chapter on conspiracy theories and collective identities, which tackles aspects of *ethos* from the perspective of identity (Chapter 17 in this volume)

idea that *ethos* is not only bound to persuasive genres. In line with Erving Goffman's sociological framework (Goffman 1982), French discourse analysts consider that every time we speak, we create an *ethos*, even in descriptive genres like news stories. *Ethos* thus becomes a constitutive component of every speech act. While this is not highly important for our purpose, since our case study considers persuasive discourse, it appears that even a very objective sentence, say the description of a fact, can be analysed as displaying a specific kind of *ethos*.

3.1 Situational *ethos*

Pace Aristotle, for whom *ethos* is only built 'online' in discourse, discourse analysts who also rely on sociological studies (Goffman 1959) consider that the image previously built by a speaker before his or her speech also plays an important role in the persuasive process. Although this is often called *prediscursive ethos*, Herman (2005) prefers the expression *situational ethos*, which highlights *ethos* when the rhetorical situation takes place and before the speaker's first word: the micro-context of the situation, such as the circumstances in which the speech takes place, also contributes to the speaker's *ethos*. We consider three subtypes of situational *ethos*: generic *ethos*, specific *ethos* and expected *ethos*.

Generic *ethos* is a compendium of stereotypes, clichés and personal representations or thoughts about different "components" of a type of speaker. Our case study focuses on the figure of Dr Didier Raoult. Anyone who comes forward with his credentials is automatically seen as possessing a certain amount of authority and is considered to be part of the scientific elite. In March 2020, Raoult announced in an online-video and in a preprint scientific paper that hydroxychloroquine and azithromycin were effective in treating COVID-19.⁸ It is highly probable that non-specialists who are aware of this specific *ethos* (the set of personal and idiosyncratic information that an audience has about a given speaker before the latter even starts speaking) will defer to expertise and be less critical towards Raoult's assertions. Furthermore, once Raoult, who was not particularly well known by the general public before his bold and radical statements, starts accumulating media exposure, stereotypes about his physical appearance may also be activated. Indeed, he ostensibly departs from expected appearance stereotypes associated with medical authority through the use of garments and accessories typical of members of somewhat marginal communities, like punk musicians or bikers: medium-length grey and poorly groomed hair, shaggy beard and a skull ring. Raoult shows contempt towards received conventions of his social community and showcases himself as a

8. <https://www.medrxiv.org/content/10.1101/2020.03.16.20037135v1>. Last accessed 21.01.2022.

kind of maverick who does not care about the respectability he is supposed to embody. For this reason, he simultaneously represents an intellectual elite (through his titles and functions) and a form of disrespectful and overt anti-elitism (through his general appearance). He thus plausibly embodies the figure of a self-made brilliant scientist who reached the top neither by sucking up to the powerful nor by adopting conventions or servile attitudes for which he would have been unduly rewarded, but rather through intellectual and professional merit. This kind of framing is very conspiracy theory-friendly, since Raoult benefits from an *ethos* of untainted and pure research in stark opposition to some ‘corrupt elite’ members who were lucky to benefit from cronyism. As noted by Fuhrer & Cova (2020: 890),

[t]his contrast between a renowned scientist claiming to have found a cure to COVID-19 and the apparent hostility of the French government led Didier Raoult to become an “anti-system” figure (Soullier, 2020). He himself contributed to this image in his various videos and tweets by calling himself a “maverick”, by stressing the difference between the “real scientists” and the “so-called experts who advise the government”, by emphasizing the contrast between Paris (the capital) and the rest of the country, or even by opposing YouTube to the traditional medias, that he considers to be “less reliable” (Verner 2020).

Specific traits can confirm or invalidate the generic *ethos*; the more one knows the speaker, the clearer her/his specific *ethos* (our second subtype of situational *ethos*) will be. Since Raoult was the subject of sustained attention in the French media between February and September 2020, his specific *ethos* is likely to have been refined by the audience over the course of this period. Many people discovered that he was awarded the INSERM (French National Institute for Health and Medical Research) Grand Prize in 2010, that he is the discoverer of mimivirus and mamavirus (2 genera of giant viruses), that he has published enormous amounts of research (2000 to 3000 articles), and that he is highly cited (170’000 citations, with an h-index of 185 on Google Scholar),⁹ which is not without triggering suspicion – especially since several articles appear in journals edited by close colleagues, without proper double-blind peer-reviewing procedures. Moreover, people learned about the all-out feud between Raoult and Yves Lévy, a medical immunologist who happened to be the president of the INSERM between 2014 and 2018, and whose mandate was renewed in 2018 while his wife, Agnès Buzyn, was State Secretary

9. While the significance of these figures might not be apparent to a general audience, Raoult has repeatedly verbalised his influence by stating that his research on transmission diseases was the most quoted on the Expertscape.com platform. See the February 26 (2020) Bulletin of Scientific Information of his institution <https://www.mediterranee-infection.com/chloroquine-pourquoi-les-chinois-se-tromperaient-ils/>, last accessed: 21.01.2022. Thus, his prediscursive *ethos* arguably represents him as a top scholar, based on his publication record.

of Health in the Macron government. In this controversy, Raoult denounced the possible conflict of interest and wrote several articles against the INSERM. In 2018, the INSERM and the CNRS (the French National Centre for Scientific Research) stripped the medical training and research centre led by Raoult of its research labels, which constitutes a blowback for any leading researcher. These events created a favourable bedrock for the emergence of dedicated conspiracy theories, among which antisemitic ones, given the Jewish surname of Raoult's opponent (Lévy), which in turn led to complaints being filed against some of the people who propagated these conspiracy theories.¹⁰ Quite rapidly, Raoult came to embody, in the mass media storytelling, the resistance of the province against the centralised Parisian elite.

In the scientific arena, Raoult was steadily challenged up to the point of being accused of charlatanism in November 2020.¹¹ The media also became more critical of Raoult, who was labelled as a "reassurist" (as opposed to an "alarmist"), for, among other things, stating that there would be no second epidemic wave¹² or that the search for a vaccine was a waste of time.¹³ Facts disproved both statements. We conclude that Raoult's specific *ethos* is already quite complex, as some of its features seem to cast a shadow on the image of absolute success given by the generic *ethos*. However, his specific *ethos* also conveys the image of (i) a person who does not need to bow to conventions, including strict and scientific ones related to publication practices, (ii) a rebel much envied by those who criticise him, and of (iii) an outcast who suitably fits any conspiracy theory narrative in the role of silenced seeker of truth.

The third and final subcategory of situational *ethos* is *expected ethos*, i.e., the *ethos* we expect to see in a precise rhetorical situation. The material conditions of discourse (the importance of the audience, the distance between a speaker and an audience, on-stage props, the layout of the room, the motivation and reasons of the discourse, etc.) encompass many parameters which contribute to the formation of expected *ethos*. This is also why we prefer the expression *situational ethos* over *predisursive ethos*.

10. See <https://www.franceinter.fr/caricatures-complot-liste-de-noms-le-coronavirus-engendre-des-attaques-antisemites-sur-le-web>. Last accessed 21.01.2022.

11. <https://scienceintegritydigest.com/2020/03/27/post-publication-reviews-on-covid-19-papers/>. Last accessed 21.01.2022.

12. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nGPaQsh_rVM&feature=youtu.be&ab_channel=IHUM%C3%A9diterran%C3%A9e-Infection. Last accessed 21.01.2022..

13. <https://www.cnews.fr/videos/france/2020-12-07/si-samusait-faire-ce-vaccin-obligatoire-vous-auriez-une-revolution-estime>. Last accessed 21.01.2022..

3.2 Communicational *ethos*

Communicational *ethos* refers to the image of the speaker as the manager of his or her discourse. The *ethos* of anyone who speaks indeed refers to a double role held simultaneously: the role of the speaker and that of his public function. This metadiscursive *ethos* can be analysed from a range of perspectives, but we focus here on the use of Raoult's main communication channel: the YouTube channel of the IHU-Marseille.

From the point of view of his communicational *ethos*, Raoult is very present on the Internet, but somewhat 'passively', as he is not shown to communicate proactively: it is the media who come to him, not the other way around. The medical training and research institute he leads has a YouTube channel that regularly broadcasts his comments, in the form of interviews or filmed lectures. This is crucially not his own personal channel. Furthermore, he did not have a personal Twitter account until March 2020. Accordingly, the emerging communicational *ethos* is that of a character who is interesting enough to deserve our attention, but not that of a person who craves recognition and publicity by broadcasting content himself. This reinforces his credibility as a scientist who is detached from mundane contingencies, as opposed to some of his colleagues, whom he mocks on several occasions for preferring television sets to health care.¹⁴

Raoult's behaviour during interviews is also significant: on many occasions he has shushed journalists, plainly stated that they do not or cannot understand the topics at hand or threatened to leave the set. While such an interactionally disruptive attitude could be irritating, it confirms the *ethos* of a maverick in the system. In addition, several Facebook accounts were created in support of Raoult, such as "Didier Raoult vs coronavirus" and "Global coalition in support of Dr. Raoult" (Fuhrer and Cova 2020). In short, Raoult's communicational *ethos* confirms that he is outside the establishment and displays a sort of purity in the doctor's approach in the field, a form of disinterestedness that contributes to his credibility. This is related, incidentally, to the slogan of the IHU-Marseille YouTube channel, "the right to be smart". This phrase invites the inference that the YouTube channel offers valuable information that fosters personal reflection. It also insinuates that traditional news media only broadcast nonsense, and that they neither support nor promote

14. In the interview we consider as our case study, but also in other interviews, for instance here: https://www.liberation.fr/france/2020/03/24/antiviral-antirivaux_1782929/ (last accessed 21.01.2022).

this “right to be smart”. This is also a way of promoting alternative news channels which propagate “true facts” that are not given by the mainstream media.¹⁵

3.3 Discursive *ethos*

Ethos which is gradually built as discourse unfolds can be either shown or said, direct or indirect. Discursive *ethos* is thus more the result of an inferential process based on different “symptoms” in a text (shown *ethos*) than a self-portrait of the speaker (said *ethos*): “speakers should not say ‘I am competent in international finance’, but instead display such competence, for instance by quoting relevant statistics or by using a specific lexicon as indexes of their knowledge and abilities” (Jacquin 2018: 414). Direct *ethos* can be defined as covering cases of self-images that are personally (“I”) or collectively (“we”, “scientists” – when the speaker is one of them) conveyed. Indirect *ethos* covers cases where inferences – akin to weak implicatures (Wilson and Carston 2019) – may be derived from the way other people or groups are referred to. For example, Raoult portrays scientists attacking his paper on hydroxychloroquine as “Huey, Dewey, and Louie Duck do[ing] science” from which one can obviously infer a host of *ethotic* propositions along the lines of “I am a real scientist, I am serious in what I do, I have enough authority to judge colleagues, I am an adult (since they are children), etc.”

Interestingly, indirect *ethos* can be created from the image given of others in one’s discourse, as has already been shown (Herman 2005). Yet, we contend here that it can be indirect in an additional sense, namely through a process by which the speaker first represents the discourse of others and subsequently mocks it. We call this strategic move *ethotic straw man fallacy*.

4. The straw man fallacy: From propositional to non-propositional misrepresentations

The straw man fallacy has traditionally been defined as a fallacious refutational argumentative move in which a participant misrepresents an opponent’s position in order to refute it more easily (see e.g., Lewiński and Oswald 2013). Speakers who use this two-step argumentative move typically target a propositional content (the misrepresentation of an opponent’s position) with the hope of getting the

15. Raoult himself confirms this idea in one of his interviews: “we named it like that because we thought that what was circulating in the general information was neither always accurate nor always clever”. See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9LA6Jmf2IzQ&ab_channel=IHUM%C3%A9diterran%C3%A9-Infection. Last accessed 21.01.2022.

audience to reject it – the victim of the straw man is usually not intended to be fooled by the tactic (see de Saussure 2018). In terms of the type of propositional content the fallacy is aimed at, the straw man can target not only the standpoint a given participant defends, but also the premises that the latter invokes to support a standpoint.¹⁶ Existing research on the straw man fallacy, within the field of argumentation studies, has broadly tackled two research questions: a descriptive one and a normative one.

On the descriptive side, researchers have been interested in examining different types of straw men in terms of the target being misrepresented (Aikin and Casey 2011, 2016), the nature of the misrepresentation (Talisie and Aikin 2006), the focus of the misrepresentation (speaker vs. message), the meaning resources speakers dynamically draw on when strawmanning in argumentative exchanges (Macagno and Walton 2017), and the effects of the fallacy in argumentative exchanges, such as attacking and victimising (Macagno and Walton 2017) or gaining conversational prestige (de Saussure 2018). From a normative perspective, the straw man fallacy has been investigated in terms of the different ways in which it can run against various argumentative and pragmatic standards (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 1992, Chapter 11; Walton, Reed, and Macagno 2008; Lewiński and Oswald 2013; Govier 2010, Chapter 4).

For a long time, the straw man fallacy has been almost exclusively assessed as a strategy meant to get an audience to reject a given *propositional content*. In recent years, however, research has shown that straw men fallacies are oftentimes also accompanied by *ad hominem* attacks (Aikin and Casey 2011) and that they can also be used as a strategy to boost one's own *ethos* in terms of conversational skills and wit (de Saussure 2018) or to undermine someone else's image (Macagno and Walton 2017). Macagno and Walton call the latter *metadialogical* straw men and define them as misattributions of propositional contents. Here we propose to add the sub-category of *ethotic straw men*, which are exclusively meant to boost the speaker's *ethos*, and, crucially, which operate through misrepresentations of mental and emotional states – i.e., not through misattributions of propositional contents. On our account, the *ethotic* straw man thus consists in building a misrepresentation of the opponent's feelings, intentions, mental states *exclusively*, with no manifest intention to refute any position of the opponent. Instead, its goal is to undermine the latter's conversational credibility, possibly in the long run, and thus to de-legitimize them. We define the *ethotic* straw man as an argumentative

16. Recent experimental work on the persuasive effectiveness of the straw man fallacy (Schumann, Zufferey, and Oswald 2019) indicates that misrepresentations of premises for refutational purposes are more likely to go unnoticed than misrepresentations of standpoints, suggesting that strawmanning a premise is more persuasive than strawmanning a standpoint.

move by which a speaker boosts her/his own *ethos* through the misrepresentation of the emotional and cognitive states of an opponent (which relate to the opponent's psychological traits and identity) meant to undermine the latter's credibility in the eyes of an audience. We now specify this definition and characterise the *ethotic* straw man in terms of both its operational dimension and its genuinely argumentative nature.

On the operational side, the strategy unfolds in a context in which the conversational roles and the respective *ethotic* profiles of participants are well identified: it only makes sense to misrepresent someone's mental states when those are (i) relevant to and (ii) likely to have been made manifest in the ongoing interaction. In other words, conversational participants who engage in *ethotic* straw manning are targeting the legitimacy of their victims in terms of their credibility as conversational participants, in order to benefit from the comparison. As for the argumentative significance of *ethotic* straw men, it must be seen from within the rhetorical tradition on *ethos*, which has long considered the way speakers are able to profile themselves in the eye of audiences (see Section 3). Our case study is telling in this respect, as it showcases an expert being questioned for having been wrong in his predictions. Here, we will thus consider argumentative phenomena through their contribution at the interactional level, where epistemically relevant positioning dynamics are at play.

5. Case study

We articulate a qualitative analysis of an *ethotic* strategy through which Raoult, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, defends himself from the charge of having been wrong about the likelihood of a second wave. The data comes from an interview by French journalist David Pujadas, conducted on 27 October 2020, and broadcast on a major French news channel, LCI.¹⁷ This case study is not, *per se*, a case of conspiracy theory. Although highly controversial and problematic in many respects, the message Raoult conveys in this interview is, strictly speaking, not conspiratorial, as the interviewee does not straightforwardly explain any fact that he discusses by blaming it on the secret agency of a malevolent group of individuals. Despite the lack of conspiratorial claims, however, his discourse makes use of a host of strategies which can be recruited, in their actual form, by conspiratorial discourse. Our twofold analysis strives to systematically show (i) how Raoult manages his *ethos* through complex strategies bearing on the credibility of the social

17. The video is unfortunately no longer accessible online.

actors referred to in the interview, and (ii) that these strategies are immediately and straightforwardly compatible with conspiratorial narratives around COVID-19.

Eleven instances of the *ethotic* straw man fallacy were found in our data. We articulate our analysis around the converging legitimating and de-legitimizing functions these fulfil as they contribute to building Raoult's discursive *ethos*.

5.1 Delegitimizing the media by misrepresenting their true nature

The interview starts with Pujadas asking Raoult whether he recognises that his prediction about the absence of a second pandemic wave was wrong. In the ensuing discussion, we identified the following two examples:

- (1) I am not of your nature, I am of another nature. Me, I don't want to scare people, I don't use fear to scare people. (07:47)
Je ne suis pas de votre nature, je suis d'une autre nature. Moi, je ne veux pas faire peur aux gens, je ne manie pas la peur pour effrayer les gens.
- (2) As for me, I peacefully observe [scientific facts] while you get all worked up by what I might have or have not said; I peacefully observe. (11:03)
Moi, je regarde paisiblement pendant que vous vous excitez sur ce que j'ai pu dire ou ne pas dire. Moi, je regarde paisiblement.

Even if Pujadas is not particularly known for promoting sensationalism, in (1) and (2) Raoult echoes a general accusation often levelled against the media, namely a purported intention to scare people and reap the monetary benefits of scandals and controversies, thereby suggesting that this is what Pujadas is doing. This accusation must be inferred as follows: Raoult first asserts a difference in nature (1) and in behaviour (2) between him and the media, then states that he is not a scaremonger (1) and that he is a peaceful observer (2), leaving it up to the audience to conclude that the media, including Pujadas, are the opposite. Moreover, the contrast is made salient through the use of personal pronouns for reference assignment ("*your* nature" vs. "*I* am", uttered with a strong intonation on both pronouns to highlight the distinction; "*I* peacefully observe while *you* get all worked up"). The accessibility of the implied meaning, namely that people in the media are hysterical scaremongers, is thus increased, as it completes an inferential structure that facilitates it. Crucially, the accusation is not only attributive, as it implies something about the nature and the behaviour of the media, but also misattributive, because there is no plausible evidence in the interview that the essence of journalism is to scare people or to get all worked up by what people say. And because Raoult is not misattributing a claim but an identity and psychological traits, this is an instance of *ethotic* straw man. This de-legitimizing strategy positively impacts Raoult's own discursive *ethos*, since by

exposing the media's purported identity (their "nature"), Raoult hints that he has seen through their secret intentions. This allows him to build the indirect *ethos* of someone who is smart enough not to be fooled by the immoral motivations of the powerful.

Occasionally, the de-legitimation process also uses the classical straw man fallacy, as in (3):

- (3) I think that this country is living a dramatic error, which is the perpetual dramatization, for something of which, in the end, what are we going to suggest, that everyone remains locked up all their life because there are viruses out there? But you're all crazy, you've all gone nuts! (08:00)
Je pense que ce pays vit une erreur dramatique, qui est la dramatisation perpétuelle, pour quelque chose dont, à la fin, qu'est-ce qu'on va suggérer, que tout le monde reste enfermé toute sa vie parce qu'il y a des virus dehors ? Mais vous êtes fous, vous êtes devenus tous cinglés!

The French government has obviously never suggested the adoption of an exaggerated policy of lifetime lockdowns.¹⁸ It is nevertheless a premise for the standpoint "you're all crazy". This standpoint, an outright attempt at de-legitimizing the government and the media (who are not portrayed as critical of the government as they are part of the referents of the pronoun "you") through a misrepresentation of their position, also indirectly contributes to Raoult's own discursive *ethos*; as he denotes the "crazy" ones through the pronoun "you", he is necessarily excluded from their set – unlike them, he therefore appears to be wise and reasonable. Thus, the misattribution is strategically exploited to boost Raoult's own discursive *ethos*.

5.2 Delegitimizing the media by misrepresenting their intentions and emotions

Examples (4), (5) and (6) are examples of *ethotic* straw man fallacies which misrepresent Pujadas's inner mental states:

- (4) You want me to be wrong. (07:28)
Vous voulez que j'aie tort.
- (5) You would like me to play soothsayer, I am not doing that. (09:46)
Vous voudriez que je fasse le devin, je ne le fais pas.
- (6) I am very sad for you that you feel desperate. Me, I'm not. (10:58)
Je suis très triste pour vous que vous soyez désespéré. Moi, je ne le suis pas.

18. Note the hyperbolic language in quantification ("everyone") and in time references ("perpetual", "all their life"), which is symptomatic of misrepresentations.

Let us start by mentioning that there are no plausible reasons to consider that Pujadas wants Raoult to be wrong – Raoult *was* factually wrong, independently of anyone’s volition. (4) is part of Raoult’s answer to the question “Weren’t you over-optimistic at the time [in September 2020]?” (“*Est-ce que vous n’avez pas péché par optimisme à ce moment-là?*”), but has some prospect of not being identified as a misrepresentation because the French expression used by Pujadas (*‘pécher par optimisme’*, literally ‘to sin by optimism’) is semantically related to the notion of error (echoed in (4) by “wrong”). Moreover, Raoult explicitly refers to what Pujadas allegedly wants, i.e., to a deliberate intention. Precisely because of this, the motivation behind this deliberate intention is implicitly made salient and opens a space of speculation to start listing possible options. We should also mention that (4) is preceded by a short segment on the government’s actions at the time: “what happened is that the government decided to close down everything. A week later, they reopened everything”. Initially, therefore, Raoult tried to evade answering the question by deviating the discussion onto the government’s inconsistency and incompetence – even if the government overreacted, this has no bearing on Raoult’s over-optimism.¹⁹ Interestingly, in doing so, he destabilises Pujadas, whose sudden silence after the passage on governmental inconsistencies allows Raoult to follow up with an attack on the journalist (4). From the perspective of Raoult’s *ethos*, (4) indirectly establishes Raoult’s foresight, which is typical of individuals who can identify other people’s true intentions.

(5) and (6), which also attribute specific mental and emotional states to Pujadas, are immediately followed by the reporter’s denial (“no, no, not a soothsayer” and “no, I’m not desperate, no one is desperate” respectively), which shows that they are felt to be baseless misrepresentations – and thus potential straw men. However, because (4), (5) and (6) attribute negatively connotated mental and emotional states, they function as attacks on the credibility of the journalist. As a result of these misrepresentations, the initially attacked party (i.e., Raoult, who is held accountable for past declarations that turned out to be inaccurate) becomes the attacker, and the initial attacker (Pujadas) is led to defend himself from the accusations. This shift in dialectical roles translates into an *ethotic* strategy, as it simultaneously allows Raoult to build a discursive *ethos* of a smart man who can clearly identify the ‘true’ intentions and emotions of those who attack him, even when these are covert.

19. In addition to sharing features with red herring fallacies and shifting the burden of proof, this move is also reminiscent of a *tu quoque* attack, whereby he dodges an accusation by reverting it: he is accused of being wrong and answers by pointing out that the government was also wrong.

5.3 Legitimizing authority by ridiculing the interviewer

In the following examples, Raoult uses verbal irony while committing the *ethotic* straw man fallacy.²⁰

- (7) Again, if you want to give me science lessons on coronavirus, you are being ridiculous. (10:20)
Encore une fois, si vous voulez me donner des leçons de science sur le coronavirus, vous êtes ridicule.
- (8) You are right, explain to me what this is about once and for all so that I can understand and change my mind. (21:11)
Vous avez raison, expliquez-moi ce que c'est une bonne fois comme ça je comprendrai et je changerai d'avis.

In these examples, Raoult ironically reverses the status of expertise in the interaction by hinting at the fact that Pujadas is trying to explain coronavirus to him (7) and by requesting explanations from the reporter (8). This is obviously nonsensical, as Raoult is still the medical expert (this being the result of work on his situational *ethos*), while Pujadas is still the reporter, and arguably triggers an ironical reading. Yet, this irony is based on a misrepresentation of Pujadas's intention, who is portrayed as *wanting* to explain something he believes his interlocutor ignores – this is emphatically not the case. Now, if indeed Pujadas thought he was explaining medical matters, and the COVID-19 pandemic in particular, to Raoult, then he would appear to be ridiculous, which is the point Raoult consistently tries to make during the interview. This is another instance of *ethotic* straw man, because (i) the move consists in misrepresenting an intention (and crucially not a content) in order to undermine the credibility of his interlocutor – here his journalistic rigour and professionalism and (ii) the resulting effect is the construction of the image of a skilled conversational participant, who is able to expose his opponent's strategies by making fun of him.

While examples (1) to (6) misrepresent the unacceptable or immoral motivations of the media, examples (7) and (8) aim at de-legitimizing the media for the ridiculousness involved in their alleged attempts to give lessons to experts. All of them, however, converge in that they can also be said to serve to legitimate Raoult as a scientist. The effectiveness of Raoult's defence precisely consists in relying on the *ethos* of a great scientist (that Pujadas has incidentally acknowledged several

20. We use the label 'verbal irony' consistently with the pragmatic literature on the topic (see e.g., Garmendia 2018; Wilson and Sperber 2012), even if in standard English many speakers would refer to this phenomenon as sarcasm.

times in the interview) and in denying Pujadas the possibility of discussing scientific issues on an equal footing, as in the following examples:

- (9) You have a problem: it is that your scientific references are not scientific. (02:03)

Vous avez un problème, c'est que vos références scientifiques ne sont pas scientifiques.

- (10) You're challenging me with college notions and I'm talking to you as a scientist and you can't hear what I'm saying. (03:30)

Vous m'opposez des notions de collège et moi je vous parle en scientifique et vous n'entendez pas ce que je vous dis.

- (11) I wonder [laughing] if you properly understand what I'm saying. (09:35)
Je me demande si vous comprenez bien ce que je dis.

Raoult is ridiculing Pujadas's questions or assertions as if they were scientific, while Pujadas never claimed to be a scientist – in fact, he denies this twice in the interview. In sum, Raoult has accepted to be interviewed by a news television network but misrepresents Pujadas's questions as if they were a scientific critique: the framing linked to the genre (a TV interview, from which popular scientific discourse may be expected) seems to fade away, which allows Raoult to question the media's intentions and to avoid responding to the critiques/questions.

5.4 Legitimizing an *ethos* of victim by misrepresenting media intentions

Previous examples tackled either the purportedly deceitful intentions of the media or Raoult's scientific authority. But there is another *ethos* which is built though this interview, namely that of a victim. The *ethotic* strawman also helps building it, but while the preceding examples illustrated its reliance on irony and sarcasm, the following showcases tension.

- (12) You cannot tell me what I ought to do, you're crazy, you've gone nuts too (...) again, you are not to tell me that I must be optimistic or pessimistic, you're crazy. (26:57)

Vous ne pouvez pas me dire ce que je dois faire, quand-même, vous êtes fou, vous êtes devenu cinglé aussi (...) encore une fois, vous n'avez pas à me dire que je dois être optimiste ou pessimiste, vous êtes fou.

At no point did Pujadas tell Raoult what to do; he merely pointed out that facts seem to warrant a pessimistic attitude more than an optimistic one, and that optimism, considering the events surrounding the pandemic, might be dangerous and encourage irresponsible behaviour from the public. While here Raoult is explicitly

referring to an instance in which Pujadas allegedly told him what to do, he is also by the same token making the reporter look like a sanctimonious individual who admonishes morally condemnable behaviour. Again, this is based on a misattribution of intentions, as Pujadas's discourse does not qualify as such. The resulting effect on Raoult's *ethos* is that of a victim of an unacceptable command.

- (13) Don't think you can fuck me over like this. You take me for a fool, it's unbelievable, you are the only one who takes me for a fool, it's unbelievable. (32:36)
Vous ne croyez pas me couillonner comme ça. Vous me prenez pour un imbécile, c'est incroyable, vous êtes le seul qui me prend pour un imbécile, c'est incroyable.

Again, Raoult misattributes to Pujadas an intention (deliberately trying to 'fuck him over', in French, *couillonner*) for which we have no manifest evidence. But by doing so, Raoult conveys that Pujadas is not interested in finding out about the virus or about how to fight it. Instead, he is portrayed as wanting to make Raoult look bad. While there might be some truth to this, an alleged intention of setting up Raoult is far from being transparent in the interaction. Raoult then reverts to the preceding strategy: ridiculing Pujadas for his unbelievable attack on authority.

- (14) Are you done with that? Are you still trying to set me up on coronavirus?
 (23:39)
Vous avez fini avec ça, vous essayez encore de me piéger sur le coronavirus?

This example is loaded with irony as in (7) and (8), but it also contributes to the lexical field of entrapment ("cannot tell me what I ought to do", "fuck me over", "set me up"). The question (14) responds to was "Do you agree that there are precautionary measures, like wearing face masks in certain circumstances, that need to be observed?" Again, we see that Raoult fails to answer the question and instead reinterprets it as an attempt to trap him. The misrepresentation of Pujadas's intentions, as an *ethotic* straw man, not only allows Raoult to make the conversation derail onto a discussion on the credibility of his interlocutor, whose malicious intent is uncovered and denounced, but it also contributes to building the discursive *ethos* of a victim for the French scientist.

6. Why *ethotic* straw men are likely to appeal to conspiracy theories

It appears that Raoult consistently orchestrates a strategy which makes a discussion on facts inexorably derail onto a discussion on the credibility of those who oppose him, who are systematically de-legitimated: the journalist, just like the government, on the grounds of incompetence or dishonesty, and peers and scientists who disagree with him for being amateurish or downright mad. Again, this is done to

silence Raoult's opposition – the 'elite' (media, scientific institutions and government) – not through a critical discussion, but on the grounds of trustworthiness and credibility. In so doing, Raoult reduces all possible debates on the merits of standpoints to issues regarding the image of participants to these debates. This is something Raoult's rhetoric shares with populist rhetoric, which typically includes "some kind of appeal to 'the people' and a denunciation of the elite" (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017: 5). The interview strikingly illustrates that such a strategy allows Raoult to never get into the details of his own research.

Since conspiracy theories prepare their audience "for the big leap from the undeniable to the unbelievable" (Hofstadter 1964: 37–38) and since this process requires figures of trustworthy experts, argumentations dominated by *ethotic* strategies are likely to resonate favourably in conspiracy theory narratives. Although Raoult himself does not propagate known conspiracy theories on COVID-19, we hope to have shown that his multi-layered *ethos* is exceptionally compatible with conspiracy theories. Likely, because Raoult's *ethos* represents him as a maverick who fights dominant elites, his discourse is bound to strike a chord with conspiracy theory proponents. His argumentative discourse, dominated by personal attacks against the unreasonable ("crazy") media and government, together with statements uttered from a privileged position to know (resulting from his *ethos*) is thus tailor-cut for conspiratorial narratives, which are typically structured around the fight between good and evil. More specifically, we hope to have shown with our account of *ethos* and the *ethotic* straw man fallacy that Raoult's preference for misattributions of intentions and other cognitive states takes over the debate in a way that makes ideological considerations relevant in the exchange, to the point of fitting the now traditional conspiracy theory representation of deceptive elites.

Lastly, we would like to connect our findings with extant avenues of research in cognitive psychology. A recent study (Fuhrer and Cova 2020) found that trust in Raoult correlates with belief in conspiracy theories, and moreover that these two variables also correlate with a preference for an intuitive cognitive style – which denotes a way of thinking that privileges reliance on one's own intuition over a careful and objective assessment (i.e., an analytic style) of the situation in decision-making processes. Interestingly, our findings are in line with Fuhrer & Cova's, given that *ethotic* argumentative strategies, in so far as they impact trust and mistrust of social actors, are likely to resonate with intuitions about people more than with careful and full-blown argumentation on complicated issues we ignore much about. In other words, it should come as no surprise that arguing rhetorically by (mis)representing people's mental states is likely to seduce the conspiratorial mindset.

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Fake conspiracy

Trump's anti-Chinese 'COVID-19-as-war' scenario

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Conspiracy theories have an extraordinarily strong persuasive effect, as their huge increase during the public debate about the COVID-19 pandemic shows. How can they achieve such a communicative impact, given their flawed epistemic status? This chapter studies one COVID-19 related conspiracy theory, i.e. that the virus which caused the pandemic was “unleashed” by the Chinese government on the world, as propagated by the former US President Donald J. Trump and his political allies. Combining cognitive and pragmatic approaches, I analyse Trump's metaphorical framing of the pandemic in terms of a war-like conflict with China as serving the goal of inducing the US public to suspend their “epistemic vigilance” (Sperber et al. 2010). The analysis shows that the application of epistemic vigilance hinges, *inter alia*, on the conspiracy theory's *figurative* and *narrative coherence*. This analysis accounts both for the (qualified) success of Trump's conspiracy theory and its weakness as regards the lack of corroborating ‘back-up’ arguments for his narrative. The result offers clues to ways of re-activating epistemic vigilance and thus, argumentative resistance, against conspiracy theories.

Keywords: argumentation, conspiracy theory, epistemic vigilance, metaphor scenario, narrative, relevance theory

1. Introduction

Why are conspiracy theories – understood here as publicly disseminated stories about conspiracies which are not real but fictitious – so successful? What are the factors that help induce people to believe them despite their flawed epistemic status? Such questions have been intensively discussed both in academic research and in the media, at least for the past decade.¹ In 2016, the *Oxford English Dictionaries*

1. For overviews see Sunstein and Vermeule 2009; Bergman 2018; Butter and Knight 2015, 2020.

announced a “post-truth” era, as Britain voted in favor of the “Brexit” referendum and Donald Trump was elected US president, with both campaigns being accompanied by assertions that they were dominated by fake news and conspiracy theories.² Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, conspiracy theories have gained even more notoriety, as they appear to motivate millions of people across countries and continents to resist social restrictions, e.g. lockdowns, testing and masking mandates and, since the advent of vaccines, the roll-out of public vaccination programs.

Among the many COVID-19-related conspiracy theories,³ one narrative complex that has gained global prominence is the allegation that the virus outbreak was not due to unforeseeable ‘natural causes’ (i.e. the “SARS-CoV-2” virus passing from animals to humans accidentally) but that it was ‘unleashed’ onto the world by elite groups of the People’s Republic of China (PRC). The basis for this conspiracy theory is twofold: in the first place it rests on the relatively consensual view that the pandemic originated in or near the Chinese city of Wuhan, where the first COVID-19 human infection cases were reported in December 2019.⁴ Secondly, a much more contentious (and until the time of writing neither scientifically corroborated nor falsified) assumption is made that the virus originated in a Wuhan virology laboratory, i.e. the so-called “lab leak hypothesis”. This conspiracy theory owes its prominence not least to the fact that it was implicitly endorsed by US President Trump in a number of speeches and press statements and was explicitly asserted by Trump’s Secretary of State, Michael Pompeo and other Republican politicians and friendly media.⁵ Trump presented an elaborate version of it in his September 2020 UN address, which triggered global responses and featured as one of his central

2. See *The Guardian*, 15/11/2016: “In the era of Donald Trump and Brexit, Oxford Dictionaries has declared “post-truth” to be its international word of the year.” For the role of conspiracy theories and fake news in the Brexit campaign see Buckledee 2018: 151–162; Musolff 2020: 357–361; Charteris-Black 2019: 86–87; for the Trump election being haunted by conspiracy theories see Cillizza 2016; D’Ancona 2017: 56–60; Demata 2018; Osborne and Roberts 2017.

3. For the range of COVID-19- related conspiracy theories see Bruns et al. 2020; Georgiou et al. 2020; De Coninck et al. 2021; Hartmann et al. 2021.

4. See Koley and Dhole 2021: 34–39. The consensus is not absolute as there has been (contested) speculation and rumours about a non-Chinese origin, see e.g. *The New York Times*, 28/03/2002: “As Virus Spreads, China and Russia See Openings for Disinformation”; CNN, 18/02/2021: “As the WHO investigated coronavirus origins in China, Beijing pushed a conspiracy about the US”.

5. See *The New York Times*, 18/03/2020: “Trump Defends Using ‘Chinese Virus’ Label, Ignoring Growing Criticism”; CNN 25/03/2020: “Blame game escalates between US and China over coronavirus disinformation”; *Fox News* 15/04/2020: “Sources believe coronavirus outbreak originated in Wuhan lab as part of China’s efforts to compete with US”; *The New York Times*, 30/04/2020: “Trump Officials Are Said to Press Spies to Link Virus and Wuhan Labs”.

political tenets in his campaign for the presidential election in November 2021, which he lost, however, to the Democrat Joe Biden. Despite this defeat and the absence of corroboration for the lab-leak hypothesis, Trump has kept asserting the theory, both as a defense of his service record and as part of the preparations for a potential 2024 reelection campaign.⁶ Unsurprisingly, it has become the object of intensive study from various methodological angles, i.e. social and political science as well as linguistic and media-analytical approaches, due to Trump's status as a 'super-spreader' of fake news and conspiracy theories, which has been shown to surpass by far that of other public influencers.⁷

This chapter analyses some of Trump's 2020 statements (Trump 2020a-g) in favour of this anti-China conspiracy theory from a pragmatic-linguistic perspective, with a view to elucidating its *figurative* and *narrative coherence* that appears to have induced large parts of the US public to suspend their "epistemic vigilance" (Sperber et al. 2010). Given that Trump failed to win the 2021 presidential elections (unless one wants to believe his further conspiracy theory that the election victory was 'stolen' from him by the liberal US establishment), his anti-Chinese conspiracy theory may be judged as *not* having been wholly successful in political terms. Whilst electoral impact or lack of it is not a as such linguistic concern, it may still be indicative of a less than fully successful persuasive impact. From a discourse-analytical perspective (see the introductory chapter of this volume by Demata, Zorzi and Zottola), we can ask: what are discursive aspects that influence the communicative success of Trump's 'theory' about the pandemic being caused by a Chinese state conspiracy?

Such an approach is distinct from studies that are based on philosophical or political science-oriented definitions of conspiracy theories as 'unwarranted' or 'unproven' or 'epistemologically crippled' (Sunstein and Vermeule 2009; Bergmann 2018; Keeley 1999). These definitions are useful for categorization but not of great explanatory value for a pragmatic linguistic account, as they beg the questions of *how and why* a conspiracy theory can become believable despite its epistemic flaws. The factual "truth" as such, i.e. the presumed match between the proposed event or state of affairs and the facts as they are documented, is not an issue for linguistics. Neither do we ask what social or psychological dispositions "cause[d] people to

6. See CNN, 21/02/2021: "WHO panel to recommend 'deeper' study of early Covid-19 clues"; BBC, 28/06/2021: "Wuhan lab-leak theory fuels Trump comeback rally"; Time, 19/10/2021: "It May Be Too Late to Find the Origin of COVID-19. The WHO Is Trying Anyway"; Maxmen and Mallapaty 2021; Banco and Lippman 2021.

7. For the overwhelming influence of Trump's COVID-19 conspiracy theories especially in social media see Calvillo et al. 2020; Evanega et al. 2020; Imhoff and Lamberty 2020; Chan et al. 2021; Hartman et al. 2021; see also Bondi and Sanna, as well as Lee, in this volume.

believe conspiracy theories” (Renard 2015) in this case. These extralinguistic factors are without any doubt also crucial for understanding the function and success of conspiracy theories, so I cannot claim to provide a comprehensive analysis. My more modest objective is to sketch a linguistic-pragmatic contribution that adds to a more general account of conspiracy theories’ social impact.

2. Methodology

Our approach in analyzing Trump’s allegations against China as a conspiracy theory is based on post-Gricean pragmatics and cognitive metaphor theory. H. Paul Grice’s “Logic and Conversation” introduced the “Cooperative Principle” as a basic model of successful communication and further differentiated it into four “maxims”, the second of which, that of “Quality”, includes the norms: “Do not say what you believe to be false” and “Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence (Grice 1989: 27).⁸ The notions of fake news and conspiracy theories clearly imply violations of these norms and by implication of the Cooperative Principle, as their authors hide what they know and assert propositions without giving “adequate evidence”.

Grice’s model has been criticized by representatives of “Relevance Theory” (RT) for extending the Cooperative Principle into the system of four maxims; in their view the maxims can be reduced to one meta-principle, i.e. that of “Relevance”, meaning that “every act of ostensive communication communicates the presumption of its own optimal relevance” (Sperber and Wilson 1995: 158). RT thus claims to account for all inferential processes by which the hearer works out the “relevance” of the speaker’s acts of ostensive communication, including that of its truth: “the hearer is generally led to accept an assumption as true or probably true on the basis of a guarantee given by the speaker” (Sperber and Wilson 1995: 116).

In an article from 2010, Sperber, Wilson et al. have specified some implications of their approach for the “epistemic vigilance” that hearers normally employ in checking a message before they “accept” it. *Acceptance* of a message (as true) is different from *comprehending* it, which is a necessary precondition but is epistemologically non-committal (Sperber et al. 2010: 367). The authors further distinguish between “interpreting an utterance as if one were going to accept it”, which

8. Within the Gricean theory, violations of the overarching Cooperative Principle by conspiracy theories may also concern the other three maxims (*Quantity, Relevance, Manner*), e.g. *to be as informative as required, avoid obscurity* etc. Grice’s specific maxim-distinction is, however, not followed up in the relevance theory-oriented account here. The Violations of the Cooperative Principle effected by fake news and conspiracy theories that I focus on are not identical with the various types of *flouting* of the four maxims, which leads receivers to infer “conversational implicatures” (Grice 1989: 30–37).

is necessary for recognizing it as principally relevant, and “actually accepting it” (2010: 368). Thus, in addition to comprehension and relevance recognition, utterance *acceptance* involves a “stance of trust that needs to pass a minimum of epistemic tests to be confirmed and converted into acceptance” (2010: 368). These tests target both the speaker’s competence and honesty (“vigilance towards the source”), as well as the logical and empirical fit of any new information given with the hearer’s background assumptions (“vigilance towards the content”; cf. 2010: 374–379). If these tests are not met, further inferencing work is required on the part the hearer to either dismiss the information on account of the speaker’s apparent unreliability, or correct their own background assumptions, or engage in “belief revision”, in which the speaker’s reliability and trustworthiness are weighed against the effort of discarding superficially held beliefs whilst maintaining coherence with deeply entrenched beliefs (2010: 375).

Whilst these epistemic testing mechanisms seem to work well at the level of inter-individual communication, they seem harder to implement in social transmission, where “many cultural assumptions are used as implicit premises in a vast number of communicative acts” (2010: 380). Hearers find themselves in a predicament if they try to “check the pronouncements of these sources [...] for coherence with their existing beliefs”, because a rejection of the pronouncements may “bring into question their acceptance of the authority of the source”, e.g. a political and/or social authority that is deemed beyond reproach. For many hearers, the least uncomfortable way out of this predicament is “to ‘optimize agreement’ [with existing beliefs] not by providing a clear and acceptable interpretation of these pronouncements, but by deferring to the authorities [...] and thus accepting a half-understood or ‘semi-propositional’ idea” (2010: 382).⁹ A further obstacle to the proper working of epistemic vigilance in social transmission is group loyalty, as the messages “help define group identities” (2010: 382). This is very much so in politics, where in addition to the belief in a leader’s authority, conformist bias and group loyalties among the hearers combine to prevent belief revision about content evidence.

There is another factor affecting the application (or lack of it) of epistemic vigilance that is not highlighted in Sperber et al.’s 2010 article, i.e. the *narrative and figurative framing* of the speaker’s utterance(s).¹⁰ Political messages do not

9. Sperber et al. (2010) cite empirical anthropological and psychological research on belief in rumors and lies to back up this “somewhat grim” (ibid.: 382) assessment.

10. The notion of “figurative framing” has been varyingly defined and operationalized across linguistic, psychological and information-processing theory frameworks (Entman 1993; Burgers et al. 2016; Brugman et al. 2017). It is here used in the sense of providing a non-literal conceptual environment for utterances in which they gain pragmatic “relevance” by inviting a range of analogy-based (rather than evidence-based) implicatures.

come in ‘bits’ of information but are always embedded in “frames” of background assumptions that have an interpretive and evaluative perspective and are often figuratively structured, i.e. as extended metaphors and narratives. This aspect of political communication has been investigated by cognitive, discourse-oriented metaphor analysis (Lakoff and Johnson 1980/2003, Charteris-Black 2004; Musolf 2016; Lakoff and Wehling 2016). Metaphorical and narrative framing provides political messages with scenarios in which they appear optimally plausible because they fit into familiar beliefs and attitudes and can thus override doubts and epistemic tests of counter-arguments. In Lakoff and Johnson’s words, they become a “guide for future action” and if further reinforced, “self-fulfilling prophecies” (Lakoff and Johnson 1980/2003: 156). In the following section I analyse Trump’s attempt to bolster his anti-Chinese conspiracy theory about the alleged “lab-leak” origin of COVID-19 by framing it within an over-arching war-scenario.

3. Trump’s “Chinese virus” claim as part of a figurative war scenario

The database for the following analysis is a collection of seven speeches and press conference statements by Trump from 2020 (Trump 2020a-g) and their coverage in the US and British press. Our analysis is purely qualitative, as it focuses on the pragmatic-discursive structure of the former president’s anti-China conspiracy theory, not on the statistics of its occurrences or of its uptake in media. We also exclude a discussion of the second main COVID-19 related conspiracy theory that Trump propagated in spring 2020, i.e. his dismissal of the pandemic as a “Democrat hoax” and exaggeration of a relatively harmless new type of influenza.¹¹ During February and early March 2020 he insisted that the spread of COVID-19 in America was “not inevitable” and that “the risk to the American people remain[ed] very low” (Trump 2020a, b). Whilst toning down his hoax-accusations, he later followed up the early reassurances with suggestions encouraging people to try out ‘alternative’ treatments of COVID-19, e.g. injection of disinfectants, anti-malaria drugs, most of which were quickly denounced as dubious.¹²

Although they do not strictly contradict each other, Trump’s two conspiracy theories articulated clearly distinct argumentative perspectives: the Chinese “lab

11. See NBC, 29/02/2020: “Trump calls coronavirus Democrats’ ‘new hoax’”; 03/03/2020: “Fact Check: Trump and the ‘New Hoax’”; CNBC, 26/10/2020: “Trump claims the worsening U.S. coronavirus outbreak is a ‘Fake News Media Conspiracy’”; *The Guardian*, 09/04/2020: “Rupert Murdoch, Fox News’ Covid-19 misinformation is a danger to public health”; for detailed analysis of the “hoax” theory see Imhoff and Lamberty 2020: 1111–1114, Evanega et al. 2020.

12. See *The Guardian*, 25/03/2020: “Chloroquine: Trump’s misleading claims spark hoarding and overdoses”; CNN 24/04/2020: “Lysol maker: Please don’t drink our cleaning products”; *The New York Times*, 25/04/2020: “We Need Herd Immunity From Trump and the Coronavirus”.

leak” theory interprets the virus and pandemic as a serious health threat and blames China for it; the “Democrat hoax” theory belittles the pandemic. Social science research has confirmed that both theories correlated strongly with a general conspiracy mentality in the US and UK but led to different attitudes: the hoax theory made recipients perceive COVID-19 as a relatively mild threat and made them more inclined to reduce containment-related behaviour, i.e. compliance with lockdown/masking measures, whereas the “lab leak” theory was linked to a stronger advocacy of “self-centred prepping behaviours”, e.g. hoarding of everyday goods or relying on alternative sources of information or remedies (Imhoff and Lamberty 2020: 1112–1116 and Chan et al. 2021). It seems remarkable that Trump managed to cater for audiences of both theories in his statements; whether their implicit contrasts affected his overall credibility is an open question and an object for further research.

In view of the worsening public health threat Trump publicly stigmatized the virus as an “invisible enemy” from mid-March 2020 onwards (Trump 2020c) and positioned himself as the *war-leader* against its *attack*. In his Press Briefing on 1 April, he piled up military metaphors and similes to portray a maximally emphatic war-scenario (highlighting of metaphor and similes through italics in this and further examples: AM):

- (1) So, *America continues to wage all-out war to defeat the virus – this horrible, horrible virus. [...] We’re attacking the virus on every front* with social distancing, economic support for our workers, rapid medical intervention, and very serious innovation, and banning dangerous foreign travel that threatens the health of our people. [...] In this time of need, I know that *every American will do their patriotic duty and help us to achieve a total victory. [...] I watch those people [= medical staff] go into hospitals [...]. They’re almost like – and I think I can take the word “almost” out. They’re like warriors.* (Trump 2020d)

Trump here not only categorizes the pandemic as a war event but attempts to evoke in his hearers a strong emotional and attitudinal identification of him and the nation as being bound together by loyalty, solidarity and a determination to fight the “horrible, horrible” enemy. Such an emphatic, extended and intensive usage is different from the routine employment of war- and fighting-terminology as a background metaphor, which is pervasive in political and in everyday discourse (Lakoff and Johnson 1980/2003: 4–5, 61–64, 156–157; Steuter and Wills 2008; Flusberg et al. 2018) as well as in popular science literature and media reporting, including literature on epidemics such as AIDS, SARS and indeed COVID-19.¹³ It amounts to an ontologically and associatively rich “metaphor scenario” (Musolff 2016) that spells out central narrative and argumentative implications of the war metaphor,

13. See Hodgkin 1985; Sontag 1991; Chiang and Duann 2007; for analyses of the war-metaphor’s ubiquity in international COVID-19-related discourses see Bates 2020; Benziman 2020; Momtaz 2020; Seixas 2021; Musolff 2022; Neagu 2022; Pan and Chen 2022; Silaški and Đurović 2022.

e.g. the necessity of fighting, doing one's "patriotic" duty and the need to achieve the ultimate goal of "total victory".

Trump's *pandemic-as-war* scenario was immediately reported and commented on globally,¹⁴ which gave it maximum worldwide publicity. Trump was by no means the only leading politician to 'declare war' on COVID-19; other war-announcements came from, *inter alia*, the British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, the French President Emmanuel Macron and Chinese President Xi Jinping and the UN Secretary-General António Guterres (Musolff 2022: 307). However, it was mainly Trump and his administration that combined the war scenario with allegations that the People's Republic of China (PRC), or more precisely, their government, was to blame for the pandemic by – accidentally or deliberately – not containing it at its place of origin. As early as 17 March, Trump insisted on calling the COVID-19 virus the "Chinese virus" and defended this designation as being factually accurate because "it did come from China" (Trump 2020c). From then on Trump continued categorizing the virus as the "Chinese" or "China virus", or "Wuhan virus".¹⁵

This usage contradicted the World Health Organization (WHO)'s recommendations to avoid all geographical origin allusions in naming diseases on account of their potential to stigmatize groups or whole nations.¹⁶ Trump's excuse that he was using "Chinese virus" as a mere fact-based geographical referencing, was revealed as disingenuous by the President himself, when he explicitly blamed China for having allowed the epidemic to spread out of the Wuhan province and become a pandemic in the same press conference. From mid-April 2020 onwards he also

14. For immediate comments and interpretations by US and British press media see e.g. ABC News, 18/03/2020: "Trump promises 'total victory' in 'war'"; *Time*, 19/03/2020: 'Our big war.' As Coronavirus spreads, Trump tries to refashion himself as a wartime president; *The Guardian*, 22/03/2020: "Trump talks himself up as 'wartime president' to lead America through a crisis"; *The Washington Post*, 31/03/2020: "[Trump:] 'WE WILL WIN THIS WAR. When we achieve this victory, we will emerge stronger and more united than ever before!'".

15. See e.g. Trump 2020f, 2020g; *The New York Times*, 18/03, 18/04, 22/09/2020; *The Washington Post*, 19/03, 20/03, 16/09/2020; CNN, 25/03/2020; NBC, 29/04/2020. A 'jokey' variation on the China-attribution was Trump's designation of COVID-19 as "kung flu" during an election rally, alluding to the Chinese martial arts discipline "Kung Fu", known from popular culture. Trump boasted that this was just one of "19 different versions of names" that he knew for the disease (*The Guardian*, 20/06/2020: "Donald Trump Calls COVID-19 'Kung Flu' at Tulsa Rally").

16. The WHO's naming of COVID-19 and its recommendations (WHO 2020) follow its general disease naming guidelines that have been codified since 2015 (WHO 2015). Socio-psychological research on the social media impact of Trump's *Chinese/China virus* statements has largely confirmed the WHO's warnings, see Augustyn and Pražmo 2020; Brooks 2020; Croucher, Nguyen and Rahmani 2020; Markowitz et al. 2021.

accused the WHO of being China's accomplice in covering up the PRC's responsibility,¹⁷ thus motivating his later decisions to cancel US funding and membership of the WHO (which were revoked by his successor, Joe Biden, in the following year).¹⁸

Trump's most prominent explicit accusation against China came in the form of his address to the United Nation's annual General Assembly on 21 September 2020. From the start, he sets up the conflict frame, comparing it with World War II:

- (2) We are once again engaged in a great global struggle. We have waged a *fierce battle* against the *invisible enemy* – the *China virus* [...]. In the United States, we launched the most *aggressive mobilization*, since the Second World War [...] we must hold accountable the nation which *unleashed this plague* onto the world: China. In the earliest days of the virus, China locked down travel domestically while allowing flights to leave China – and infect the world. (Trump 2020g)

Trump here alleges that China knowingly let the *invisible enemy/plague* spread to the world whilst protecting itself. He portrays the WHO as their collaborators, who aided and abetted their campaign of misinformation:

- (3) The Chinese government and the World Health Organization, which is virtually controlled by China, falsely declared that there was no evidence of human-to-human transmission. Later they falsely said people without symptoms would not spread the disease. (Trump 2020g)¹⁹

He thus alleges a systematic misinformation campaign, in other words, a conspiracy, by the PRP and the WHO against the US. This alleged hostile policy is framed as an *attack* within the war-scenario – via the WWII comparisons and the metaphor of the “Chinese virus as the enemy”.

17. For Trump's attacks on the WHO and their impact in the US see Trump 2020e, 2020f, 2020g; for press reactions see: *The Washington Post*, 15/04/2020: “Trump's critique of the WHO may be a diversion but it resonates beyond the White House” and 06/06/2020: “New Evidence suggests Trump was wrong about the WHO and China”; *The New York Times*, 07/05/2020: “W.H.O., Now Trump's Scapegoat, Warned About Coronavirus Early and Often”.

18. See *USA Today*, 22/01/2021: “Biden administration renewed support for World Health Organization is ‘good news for America and the world,’ scientists say”.

19. In his last sentence Trump referred to the fact that at the beginning of the pandemic, Chinese state officials, especially at regional level, had been slow to admit the severity of the pandemic-to-be and pass on the medical information, and that the WHO issued statements which later turned out to be erroneous, e.g. concerning infection-spreading by asymptomatic carriers. He failed to mention that these erroneous early pronouncements had since been retracted and corrected; see e.g. *The Guardian*, 09/06/2020: “WHO expert backtracks after saying asymptomatic transmission ‘very rare’” and 12/12/2020: “Origin story: what do we know where the coronavirus came from?”

Trump adds to this denunciation of China as culprit for the pandemic further charges of that nation's alleged environmental recklessness and economic aggression:

- (4) China dumps millions and millions of tonnes of plastic and trash into the oceans, overfishes other countries' waters, destroys vast swaths of coral reef, and emits more toxic mercury into the atmosphere than any country anywhere in the world. [...] We stood up two decades of China's trade abuses.

(Trump 2020g)

These allegations are not strongly figurative and use only the standard metonymy of the nation name (*China*) for the respective government, but they still fit into the over-arching scenario of a 'war-like' general US-Chinese conflict. In argumentative terms, they are vague and have nothing to do with the pandemic, so that they cannot count as strongly supporting or buttressing Trump's COVID-19-specific conspiracy theory. Nevertheless, by using them to 'fill in' further details of alleged anti-US aggression by China, Trump creates a continuum of metaphorical to literal accusations, all of which tell a war-narrative, according to which the US has to *mobilize* against *China's attack* across a wide range of policy fields in which the pandemic is just one of many acts of aggression.

From March 2020 onwards through to election day and beyond Trump was assisted in propagating this conspiracy theory by central members of his cabinet, such as Secretary of State Michael Pompeo and other Republicans and Republican-friendly media. They suggested even more aggressive versions of his theory than he did by speculating that the origin of human infections from the SARS-CoV-2 virus was a (secret) laboratory, possibly even a biological warfare institution.²⁰ If substantiated, these suspicions could have constituted a *casus belli* for a real military confrontation, i.e. a war in the literal sense, but the suggested evidence from intelligence and scientific sources was never publicized. In even more far-fetched speculations that became nonetheless widespread in internet forums and social media, the Chinese telecommunications company HUAWEI's global roll-out of "5G" technology was alleged to have been coordinated with the launch of the pandemic in order to facilitate the installation of "spyware" on mobile phones across the whole world; in an even more dramatic version this theory was connected to the "QAnon"-fantasy of a planned global mass killing event through the

20. See e.g. *Fox News*, 15/04/2020: "Sources believe coronavirus outbreak originated in Wuhan lab as part of China's efforts to compete with US"; 25/04/2020: Steve Bannon blasts China's response to coronavirus: "They've got to be confronted"; *NBC*, 29/04/2020: "Senior Chinese official challenges Trump over coronavirus response, says U.S. wasted weeks", *Newsweek* 29/04/2020: "Chinese state media says Trump 'Feels no guilt' over U.S. coronavirus crisis and has 'failed' Americans".

combined effects of the pandemic and alleged 5G “radiation”.²¹ However far-fetched these speculations may seem, they all fitted the WAR scenario, just like Trump’s vague allegations. Together they generated an echo-chamber of seemingly mutually reinforcing ‘explanations’ of the pandemic as part of a large-scale US-China conflict. Even if every single theory on its own might be considered dubious, they could still be interpreted as ‘convergent evidence’ of systematic foul play by the Chinese government and its suspected allies, such as the WHO.

4. Discussion: The advantage of combining conspiracy theory and metaphor scenarios

Whether far-fetched or seemingly plausible, conspiracy theories must rely on a fact-based truth assumption, i.e. the presupposition that there is factual evidence for the truth of their central proposition (Musolf 2020: 352), to have any credibility. Thus, Trump and his allies’ conspiracy theory about China’s alleged responsibility/guilt for the COVID-19 pandemic presupposes the real existence of factual evidence for that guilt. The credibility problem that they and all other conspiracy theorists have is that the supposed evidence is not accessible to the general public and is not easy (or impossible) to come by. As a result, their theories are extremely vulnerable to tests of content-related epistemic vigilance: basically, any stringent application of such tests is likely to reveal the theories as flawed and to trigger a process of belief revision among hearers. This problem may in many cases be ‘overridden’ by source-related factors such as loyalty to perceived authority and/or in-group loyalty, as Sperber et al. (2010) have pointed out. However, unless public political discourse is completely controlled by a source authority (e.g. a dictator in a totalitarian regime) there remains the risk of criticism from political opponents and media who will allege that the theory in question is based on false assumptions. This is precisely what happened to Trump’s conspiracy theory. In such a predicament, i.e. when the speaker alleges a conspiracy but lacks the evidence to prove it and faces critical questions and counter-arguments, the integration of a conspiracy theory into a larger figurative, metaphorical and narrative scenario provides at least a temporary way out.

21. The only “factual” background to this conspiracy theory was the vague coincidence of the “G5” system’s rollout in Wuhan province and the presumptive origin of the pandemic there, see *The New York Times*, 03/05/2020: “Global Backlash Builds Against China Over Coronavirus”; as well as the UK and UN’s refutations of the scare (United Kingdom Government 2020; United Nations 2020). For analyses of its impact on social media see Bruns et al. 2020; Evanega et al. 2020; Evon 2020.

By integrating his COVID 19-specific conspiracy theory into the metaphorical war narrative of a multi-level (epidemiological, environmental, economic) Chinese *attack* against the US, Trump could attempt to gloss over the absence of any direct proof of Chinese guilt for the pandemic. Instead, he combined a number of rhetorical ploys – (a) the suggestive, metonymically based formulation, *the Chinese virus*, (b) the heavy use of war-metaphorical lexical input in his speeches, (c) the accusations against the *enemy* (i.e., China, the WHO, the critical press) of obfuscating the ‘true’ origins of the pandemic, (d) hints at future revelations about them by US intelligence and science and (e) vague factual references to other policy areas (economy, environment) – to create the semblance of a ‘rounded’, amply supported accusation narrative that had no major ‘holes’ or flaws.

Nevertheless, one central weakness in Trump’s war-narrative remained: the lack of evidence for a decisive *victory*. Ideally this would have been a halt to the pandemic in the US, which was, however, realistically impossible within the first year of the pandemic, or a major breakthrough in its medical treatment. Trump did his best to suggest that at least such a *limited victory* was impending. From March to April/May 2020 onwards, he asserted time and again that the US under his leadership was “ready to do whatever [they had] to” to stop the virus spreading (Trump 2020a), that the virus had “no chance against us” (2020b), that the US “had to win this war, ideally quickly” (2020c) and was “attacking the virus on every front” (2020d) and that the “Invisible Enemy [would] soon be in full retreat” (2020e).²² However, the impact of the ‘second wave’ of the pandemic in the US in the summer of 2020 in terms of infections, deaths, new lockdowns and their negative socio-economic effects belied such promises of *imminent victory*. The search for proof of the “lab-leak” theory was equally inconclusive, and perhaps it even had to be. For if indeed the WHO or US intelligence or other investigations had found unambiguous evidence of an origin from a state bioweapons laboratory in Wuhan and made them public – what would have been the diplomatic and perhaps military consequences? Arguably, therefore, the evidence of *victory* or the enemy’s *guilt* were unlikely to be proven.

Faced with inconclusive, dissonant or at least contested input in relation to the key-elements of the war-narrative, undecided and even Trump-leaning US voters

22. For the media echo of Trump’s *victory* announcements see, e.g. *ABC News*: “Trump promises ‘total victory’ in ‘war’ as Pentagon increases role”; *Fox News*, 26/03/2020: “Trump can defeat coronavirus, save economy and turn disaster into an American victory”; *The Washington Post*, 31/03/2020: “From ‘It’s going to disappear’ to ‘WE WILL WIN THIS WAR’”; *The Independent*, 24/04/2020: “‘We win’: Trump appears to claim victory over coronavirus as US death toll jumps 129 in one day”; *The New York Times*, 06/05/2020: “Trump’s New Coronavirus Message: Time to Move On to the Economic Recovery”; *Boston Globe* 21/05/2020: “‘We’ve prevailed’: Trump’s claims of success against coronavirus pose political risks”.

may have then (re-?)activated their epistemic vigilance inferencing instead of accepting his *victory*-promises. This would have resulted in what Sperber et al. (2010) term “belief revision”, i.e. the dismissal of previously held convictions, with likely further negative effects on trusting their source, Trump. His presidential ‘authority’ and hearers’ group loyalty alone may on this occasion not have been strong enough to override the disappointment of those voters who were likely to have voted for Trump had he been able to present some evidence for a *victory*.

As stated above, the election result as such is inconclusive for an interpretation of the specific impact of Trump’s framing of the pandemic as a war event. Under the circumstances, Trump seems to have used as expertly as he could all the semantic and pragmatic means at his disposal to make up for the lack of factual information by telling an upbeat story about suffering, sacrifice and victory in war.

For the analysis of his conspiracy theory’s discourse success (as distinct from the political election outcome) it is crucial to recognize the war-metaphorical framing as a decisive factor. Once Trump had ‘declared war’ on the virus, the event-schema of a war-scenario, *declaration – start of hostilities – battle – victory/defeat*, became the frame into which all new statements had to be integrated. Hence, any other message than the promise of impending *victories* was likely to generate doubts about his war-leadership which would damage his public persona and his political ethos. Within the context of the presidential election campaign allowing for such a possibility was out of the question for Trump.

5. Conclusions

In this chapter, I have tried to show how metaphorical-narrative framing was utilized by Trump to make up for the lack of factual evidence for his anti-Chinese conspiracy theory about the COVID-19 pandemic. In many discussions of conspiracy theories, especially those connected with COVID-19, a great emphasis is laid on this lack of evidence as the decisive criterion for their defective epistemological status – and as a puzzle with regard to their apparently huge popularity, which is often interpreted as a sign of gullibility and blind acceptance of the public (or certain sections of it). However, such a lack of “factual” evidence – however defined – is characteristic for many, if not most, areas of public discourse where a scientific, historical or legal consensus about the origins or purposes of contentious topics is often established only much later, if at all (Butter and Knight 2015). Thus, the inaccessibility of “facts” as evidence cannot in itself be regarded as a sufficient basis for explaining the discursive success (or lack of it) for a conspiracy theory.

From the perspective of linguistic pragmatics, the relevance-theory oriented account of epistemic vigilance offers a general framework for analysing the credibility

and trustworthiness of utterances and is thus applicable to “conspiracy theories” that violate the standards of providing truthful information. Specifically, it provides the explanation that epistemic vigilance-mechanisms which may work well for individual inferencing capabilities can be inhibited by the vagaries of “social transmission”, so that recipients will “trust the source rather than [...] any evidence or arguments for the content” (Sperber et al. 2010: 380). This account still leaves open the question of how the “source”-speaker manages to reaffirm discursively this trust of his followers. It is here that the theory of figurative framing can contribute to analyze a given conspiracy theory’s discourse career by looking at the dominant metaphors and narratives that a speaker representing ‘authority’ uses. There is of course more to Trump’s rhetoric than just war metaphors and narratives derived from them, but in the case of his COVID-19 related public discourse these framing devices pervaded his speeches, were taken up by his followers and saliently discussed by the US media. As a result, they became the master-scenario into which most statements by him and his collaborators and allies were immediately integrated, i.e. as evidence confirming or disconfirming the basic presupposition of a ‘war-like’ confrontation of the US with China and ‘its’ virus, in which a *victory* had to be won.

For the analysis of conspiracy theories, this finding seems highly relevant because it allows us to reformulate the problem of ‘missing factual evidence’ as one of ‘missing evidence to complete the figurative (metaphorical/narrative) scenario’ that is used to frame the conspiracy theory. A conspiracy theory is *not* a scientific argument that can be (dis-proven) on the evidence of what the experts agree as the “facts”. Nor is it merely any kind of story that can be believed or not. On account of the *prima facie* missing literal evidence it has to include figurative framing elements that add up to a ‘good’, plausible or at least possible story that appears to be corroborated at several epistemological levels. Thus, the corroboration need not be exclusively factual but it does need to fit the scenario and to confirm the receivers’ default assumptions. Once a specific scenario has been set up as the frame for conceptualizing a contentious and frightening social issue such as the COVID-19 pandemic conflict, it requires its own event-schema to be fulfilled, e.g. by literal and/or metaphorical ‘evidence’ of enemy aggression, of successful defense against it; and tangible victory for one’s own side.

The lack of such evidence triggers hearers’ epistemic vigilance, which increases. The initial effect of Trump’s war-declarations of inducing and reinforcing hearers’ trust and loyalty to authorities and their peer group may thus have eroded and turned for some receivers into its opposite, dissociation and disaffection. The potential advantage of the ‘conspirative’ flair of conspiracy theories, i.e. the suggestion of mysterious, ‘behind-the-scenes’ forces may become a disadvantage for a speaker

who – like the “sorcerer’s apprentice” – cannot produce the necessary pieces of discourse to fulfil the scenario, because he is perceived as unreliable and hypocritical. Hence, highlighting such ‘holes’ in conspirative speakers’ own narratives may be a better way forward to debunking them than only pointing to missing facts.

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PART II

Conspiracy theory-related communicative phenomena

Exploring the echo chamber concept

A linguistic perspective

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Echo chambers have often been analyzed in social media studies as dysfunctions of communication fostering the polarization of debates and the spreading of conspiracy theories. On the other hand, from a linguistic perspective, very little research has been conducted on these themes. Our work aims to investigate the linguistic dimension of echo chambers, exploring them as ideological structures that are observable when ideological conflict occurs. Using word embedding and corpus-based discourse analysis, we investigate mediatic discourse on COVID-19 in the Coronavirus Corpus and in the Public Coronavirus Twitter Data Set. The analysis focuses on the semantic and pragmatic status of the word *hoax*, which emerges as a keyword characterizing the Twitter dataset. Our study shows how linguistic markers of ideological conflict can act as markers of position and affective/social identity.

Keywords: echo chambers, Twitter, corpus linguistics, word embedding, COVID-19, *hoax*

1. Introduction

Hofstadter's (1964) essay on the "paranoid style" of American politics has opened the way for a strand of investigations on the epistemological nature of conspiracy theories, on the psychological features of conspiracy theorists and on their discourse. The literature has recently shifted attention from features of individuals attracted by conspiracy theories to mechanisms of social self-selection associated with conspiracy belief (Klein et al. 2019), as users appear to be seeking communities of people who share their views. At the same time, attention has been drawn to the discursive and linguistic components of conspiratorial discourse (See Catenaccio, Chapter 2 in this volume). Conspiratorial discourse has been variously identified in terms of "refutational narratives" (Oswald 2016) and "oppositional readings" (Aupers et al. 2020), but also in terms of specific features of evaluative

lexis associated to notions like: powerlessness/outlet for negative feelings, defiance and distrust, maintenance of self-esteem, personal values and individuation, psychopathology, conspiratorial world view (Klein et al. 2019).

The availability of online social media has provided large datasets which have been used to study how the diffusion of conspiracy beliefs are somehow connected to the network structure (Quattrocio et al. 2014; Del Vicario et al. 2016a and b). Whether this is due to the passive effects of technologies or to forms of self-selection into communities – or “tribes” – with specific worldviews and goals remains object of debate. The social media, however, are often associated to the idea of an “echo chamber” (Cinelli et al. 2021a). The metaphor describes situations where only certain ideas, information and beliefs are shared in forms that are often described as toxic and polarized and oriented to segregation of users (Cinelli et al. 2020, 2021a and b). As shown in the literature (Törnberg 2018; Cota et al. 2019; Gallacher and Heerdink 2019; Cinelli et al. 2020, 2021a and b), echo chambers are structurally part of the spreading of misinformation and of the circulation of conspiracy theories, as they contribute to reducing interaction between opposing groups and polarizing not only issue positions, but also affective and social identities (Törnberg et al. 2021).

The present study focuses on echo chambers, intended as selective exposure to likeminded users and content (Jacobson et al. 2016); more specifically, it focuses on the language of echo chambers in relation to conspiracy theories by centering on a keyword in the debate on and around COVID-19 in 2020: the word *hoax*, a key element of Trump’s discourse and of his “presidential conspiracism” (Rosenblum and Muirhead 2019; see also Musolf, Chapter 6, Campolong, Chapter 18 and Madisson and Ventsel, Chapter 19 in this volume). The choice of such a focused topic finds justification not only in the quantitative role that the word *hoax* assumed in the context, but also in the centrality of the word – with its implications of deception and conflicting views – in relation to both conspiracy discourse and echo chamber effects. On the one hand, conspiracy theories revolve around the idea that the truth is deliberately hidden as a result of manipulation (a hoax); on the other hand, the vision of the social media as echo chambers points at how communication patterns and evaluative language choices can affect the way conflictual beliefs spread differently in the social media and in traditional media environments.

The aim of the study is thus to explore the linguistic dimension of echo chambers by analyzing the representation of conflict of opinion (and of partisan identities) in different media. Taking the case study of the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic and the debate on the nature of the SARS-CoV2 virus, we investigate its representation in news discourse and on Twitter, so as to be able to contrast the different ways in which the issue is framed in the two media. Using corpus-based discourse analysis (Baker et al. 2013) and word embedding (Mikolov et al. 2013), we

aim to reflect on the creation of different positions and their openness to dialogue or their inclination to consider competing views.

The structure of the chapter is as follows. In the next section, some conceptual issues on echo chambers are discussed. The third section takes a closer look at the data – a corpus of news discourse and one of Twitter discourse – and introduces the tools for analysis. The findings are presented in section four starting from an overview of the differences between news discourse and Twitter discourse as highlighted by keywords. We then focus on *hoax*, as it is both ideologically highly loaded and statistically characteristic of the Twitter corpus. Through concordance analysis and word embedding, we deal with its distribution, its lexico-grammar, its semantics and its pragmatic use. In the final section, we present the conclusions.

2. Background: Echo chambers

Echo chambers are a well-known construct in social media studies. With this broad term, scholars usually define an extreme polarization of the debate in which any type of reasonable argument between two different communities becomes impossible (Del Vicario et al. 2016a; Zollo et al. 2017; Fernandez & Harith 2018). This polarization has been highlighted with computational social science methods, showing that communities having opposite ideologies do not interact with each other on social media – by reacting, commenting or sharing – and that they consume only content that confirms their beliefs.

The concept of echo chamber is sometimes blurred with that of filter bubble (Tagg et al. 2017). This is probably due to the original theorization of echo chambers (Sunstein 2007), which referred to a mix of users' intention and technology's effect (i.e., the personalization of digital platforms). However, Sunstein made it clear that echo chambers are actively created by users (2007: 222) and empirical studies on echo chambers have always taken into account users' interaction instead of their personalized experience. On the other hand, the original definition of filter bubble (Pariser 2011) refers specifically to algorithmic personalization. Hence it is important to keep the two phenomena clearly distinguished.

The main difference between echo chamber and filter bubble is that the former is an active phenomenon, while the latter is fundamentally passive. Echo chambers are studied by analyzing how communities interact with social media content, whereas filter bubbles are studied by analyzing what the algorithms select for the users (Hargreaves et al. 2018, Sanna et al. 2021). Overall, we could say that users build echo chambers while algorithms create filter bubbles (Zimmer et al. 2019).

The original theorization of echo chambers sees them as a distortion of the normal communication flow and social media studies often analyse them as

dysfunctions of mass media communication (Del Vicario et al. 2016b) that foster the polarization of debates and the spreading of conspiracy theories, especially since the so-called “fake news debacle” (Zollo et al. 2017). Sunstein (2007) also refers to echo chambers as a problem for democracies, while Nguyen (2020) draws an epistemological distinction between the echo chamber and a normal divergence of knowledge and, consequently divergence of opinion. According to these theories, echo chambers are always dysfunctional.

It should be noted, however, that the tendency to favor information reinforcing one’s own beliefs and to associate with similar opinions is certainly not new: selective exposure theories have long been influential in media studies (e.g., Klapper 1960). What is often observed today is a tendency to polarize debates in specific digital contexts (e.g., Conover et al. 2011 on Twitter) or in selected communities of interest (e.g., van Eck et al. 2021 on the Climate Change blogosphere). The tendency, however, is not directly related to the affordances of social media.

Some media scholars have recently started to question the concept itself of the echo chamber, saying it is a product of academic theories rather than a social reality (Dubois & Blank 2018; Bruns 2019). An important observation they make is that echo chambers are often studied in single media, while individuals access information through different types of media – newspapers, tv broadcast, radio etc. – and “focusing on a single medium may not give us useful information about how political information flows across offline media and other online media” (Dubois & Blank 2018: 730). If it is true that ideological preferences are expressed mostly by sharing and commenting news articles from online newspapers, debates should be studied across different media.

Communication and information sciences have shown increasing attention to echo chambers (Edwards 2013; Guo et al. 2015; Duseja and Jhamtani 2019; Calderón et al. 2019). While characterized by different methods and goals, most of these studies tend to accept the current definition of echo chamber as an anomaly in the communication process. From a linguistic perspective, however, we should not take their dysfunctional dimension for granted. It is reasonable to imagine that the discursive strategies of opposing factions may be specular. If we define the echo chamber as the strong rejection of the opponent’s ideologies along with the strong adherence to an inherited cultural space, we should take into account both positions and look at echo chambers as dichotomic controversies. For instance, both the opponents and the promoters of vaccination campaigns can end up in an echo chamber. We might then argue that echo chambers are based on dichotomic structures that imply ideological conflict. More precisely, they are indeed ideological structures (Eco 1968) that are observable when ideological conflict occurs (Rogers 2018).

In linguistics, very little research has been conducted on echo chambers as such and on their linguistic dimension: while discourse studies have shown a long-standing interest in the representation of ideology – for example in Critical Discourse Analysis (Van Dijk 1998; Wodak 2002; Fairclough 2010) and in corpus-based discourse studies (Baker 2006) – attention has mostly focused on representation of conflicting positions in the news. We do have a variety of approaches to topics that are actually connected with echo chambers, such as studies on political discourse (Burgers et al. 2019; Breeze 2020) and offensive language (Culpeper et al. 2017, Tagg et al. 2017; Oliveira et al. 2020). In all these studies, however, echo chambers are (more or less explicitly) in the background but not the central point of the research.

The focus of our study is to explore linguistic markers of polarized opinions and echo chambers. Instead of studying users' interaction and how they share content, we study echo chambers as they may emerge around key elements of the text. According to Rogers (2018), we can observe ideological conflict directly in discourse, looking for what he calls *keywords*: lexical markers of stance taking, words that reveal the speaker's belonging to an ideology and consequently rejection of an opposite position, in a semantic relation of contradiction or even of contrariety.

3. Methods

This study is based on substantial samples of the Coronavirus corpus (Davies 2019–), available from English Corpora, along with a sample of a large corpus of tweets.¹ The comparative analysis of the two corpora aims at highlighting differences in the presence of polarized ideological discourse.

The Coronavirus Corpus was first released in May 2020 and has been regularly updated, reaching over 1000 million words in May 2021. This corpus is actually a subset of a larger corpus of news called the NOW Corpus (Davies 2016–), which has not been included in this study. The two corpora share the same data collection criteria. The NOW Corpus grows every day by about 10,000 articles, selecting news gathered from hourly Bing News searches and from the daily scraping of more than 1,000 websites.² All the articles containing at least two occurrences of the word “coronavirus”, “COVID” or “COVID-19” are added to the Coronavirus Corpus, along with articles having at least an occurrence of selected COVID-related

1. <https://www.english-corpora.org/corona/>, <https://github.com/echen102/COVID-19-TweetIDs>

2. <https://www.corpusdata.org/now-sources.asp>

vocabulary.³ The corpus, designed to record the social, cultural, and economic impact of the coronavirus, includes online newspapers and magazines in 20 different English-speaking countries. It is extremely varied in sources, occasionally also including comments to the published articles, but clearly representative of the discourse of online news. The subset we used comprised the first seven months of the debate, for reasons of comparability.

The social media corpus is a repository of an ongoing collection of tweets IDs associated with the COVID-19 outbreak. The collection started on January 28th 2020.⁴ The dataset is built searching a set of COVID-keywords via the Twitter’s search API to gather historical Tweets from the preceding 7 days; therefore, the first tweets in the dataset date back to January 21st 2020. A detailed overview of the data collection has been published by Chen et al. (2020). As recommended by the authors, we used the software Hydrator to collect our sample of data, as Twitter’s Terms and Conditions only allow the sharing of tweets’ IDs.⁵

Our comparative analysis centers on the first seven months of the pandemic, focusing in particular on the first outbreak of COVID. Hence, in the Coronavirus corpus we took into consideration all the articles written between January 2020 and July 2020 (henceforth “news corpus”), while in the Twitter corpus we extracted a sample of one million tweets for each month in the same range of time.

Table 1 sums up corpus figures.

Table 1. The corpora used

	N. of texts / tweets	N. of tokens	N. of types
News Corpus	650,699	442,252,000	2,086,489
Twitter Corpus	7,000,000	152,468,080	2,638,855

As already stated, the methodology combined corpus-based discourse analysis and word embeddings.

Corpus-based discourse analysis has a long tradition in the field of studies on ideology, starting from Stubbs’ work on the contribution of corpus-based lexico-grammatical analysis to critical studies of culture and ideology (e.g. Stubbs 1996, 2001), and work in corpus-based CDA (e.g. Mautner 2001; Baker et al. 2008; see Nartey and Mwinlaaru 2019 for a recent overview). Corpus perspectives contribute to discourse analysis by providing attention to frequencies and to words in combination, i.e., phraseology in a wider sense. Corpus tools like frequency lists

3. <https://www.english-corpora.org/corona/help/texts.asp>
4. A Tweet ID is a unique numeric identifier that is associated with a tweet.
5. <https://github.com/DocNow/hydrator>

and keywords provide us with easy access to quantitative data whereas concordances allow the study of meaning in text. Sinclair's extended-units-of-meaning model (Sinclair 1996) offers four levels of analysis: collocation (words that occur regularly with the node word, the word under investigation), colligation (grammatical categories that define the immediate context of the node word), semantic preference (the tendency to co-occur with words sharing the same semantic features) and semantic prosody (the tendency of the word to occur in specific pragmatic contexts, its relation to a specific speech act and/or evaluation) (Hunston 2007).

In this perspective, as a first step, we computed keywords of our social media corpus compared to our newspaper corpus using Wordsmith Tools 8 (Scott 2020). This was meant to highlight word forms that are used significantly more in social media discourse than in news discourse. We then explored the representation of the coronavirus pandemic in both corpora, looking for possible markers of ideological conflict. The main focus was on the word *hoax*, certainly identifiable as a "loaded" word which could index a strong ideological position and trigger ideological conflict.

Word embeddings are a set of machine learning techniques used in Natural Language Processing to investigate semantic similarity among words. In a previous experiment, word embeddings were used to investigate pragmatic inferences in different model readers (Sanna and Compagno 2020) in a study on the Facebook filter bubble. The real advantage of using word embeddings is that they build a probabilistic model of co-occurrences, hence capturing semantic relations that might escape corpus-driven analysis or other computational methods that are based on counting co-occurrences. Instead of having a simple co-occurrence matrix, word embeddings create a vector space that represents the probability of co-occurrence among words. Starting from the semantic space of a single word, we explored the *inferential path* proposed.

The semantic space of each word can be seen as a semantic frame (Fillmore 1976; Eco 1979), i.e., a typical context that is evoked by the word. For instance, the word *shopping* evokes the context of someone buying something in a physical or digital space, with all the elements (spaces, objects, actions, actors) that are involved in the shopping activity. In this internalist perspective (Violi 2000), the regularity of the meaning is granted because lexemes are indexed to a standard context. There could, however, be a link between *shopping* and 'romantic relationship' in our corpus if *shopping* is mentioned as the activity of two lovers. In a nutshell, the semantic frame selected by the word has a standard and invariable context (the commercial exchange) and other optional semantic components (the fact that going shopping might be a couple activity) that may depend on the specific context. By *inferential path* we mean the pragmatic act of combining and connecting the different levels – invariable and optional – required to interpret the frame.

4. Corpus analysis: Preliminary overview

The exploration of keywords as elaborated by Wordsmith (Scott 2020) aimed at finding out words that could be identified as markers of ideological conflict (and potentially of echo chambers) in the social media corpus. Of course, no systematic study of all the keywords could be attempted here for corpora of this size. An analysis of the top 100 keywords (ordered by keyness as measured by BIC score)⁶ can still provide an idea of what characterizes information on Twitter when compared to news discourse.

The data related to these semantic areas are listed below, in Table 2, in decreasing order of keyness, with frequencies expressed per ten thousand words (pttw) contrasting Twitter and news.

Table 2. Keywords: Semantic areas

Semantic areas	Word forms (pttw frequency in the Twitter corpus vs the News corpus)
the virus and the disease	<i>coronavirus</i> (125 vs 28), <i>COVID19</i> (22 vs < 1), <i>corona</i> (19 vs < 1), <i>COVID</i> (22 vs 2), <i>flu</i> (6 vs < 1), <i>coronavirus outbreak</i> (2 vs >1), <i>epidemic</i> (5 vs 1), <i>Wuhancoronavirus</i> (1 vs < 1)
the key social actors	<i>China</i> (47 vs 7), <i>Wuhan</i> (22 vs 2), <i>Realdonaldtrump</i> (12 vs < 1), <i>Trump</i> (21 vs. 6), <i>Chinese</i> (12 vs 2), <i>govt</i> (4 vs < 1), <i>CDC</i> (6 vs 1), <i>doctor</i> (5 vs 1), <i>china's</i> (2 vs. 1), <i>americans</i> (6 vs 1), <i>trumps</i> (2 vs < 1), <i>joe biden</i> (2 vs < 1), <i>CNN</i> (3 vs < 1), <i>democrats</i> (4 vs < 1), <i>NYTimes</i> (1 vs < 1), <i>Pence</i> (3 vs < 1), <i>doctors</i> (5 vs 2), <i>Fauci</i> (3 vs 1)
the everyday impact of the pandemic	<i>breaking</i> (9 vs < 1), <i>lockdown</i> (21 vs 7), <i>mask</i> (11 vs 2), <i>wear</i> (8 vs 2), <i>stay</i> (11 vs 4), <i>save</i> (4 vs < 1), <i>cure</i> (3 vs < 1), <i>stayhome</i> (1 vs < 1), <i>stop</i> (6 vs 2), <i>protesting</i> (2 vs < 1), <i>die</i> (3 vs < 1)

The data seem to suggest that the discourse of Twitter is more focused on the virus as such, as well as on selected features of the key social actors involved and the impact of the pandemic on everyday life. Using Van Leeuwen's (2008) categorization, we can say that social actors are represented mostly in specific terms, as identifiable individuals (*Trump(s)*, *Pence*, *Fauci*) or institutions and media (*government*, *CDC*, *CNN*, *NYTimes*) in the American context, against a background of indeterminate identities categorized in terms of their nationality, position or profession (*China/Wuhan/Chinese*, *americans*, *democrats*, *doctors*).

6. The Bayesian Information Criterion is a statistical criterion for model selection which is closely related to the likelihood function. In Wordsmith it is used in the implementation suggested by Wilson (2013). The BIC score thus measures the statistical significance of keyness. There is strong evidence of statistical significance when the score is over 10 (Gabrielatos 2018).

The other elements in the top 100 keywords are mainly related to (negative) grammar words (e.g. *don't*, *cant*), specific abbreviations or metadiscursive organizational elements (e.g. *thread*, *T/RT* for *Tweet* and *Retweet*), other popular tweeters or figures (*Spectatorindex*, *Narendramodi*) and pragmatic markers of attitude (*please*, *fucking*).

A word that inevitably attracted our attention was *hoax* (number 27 in ranking, with 54,028 occurrences of the token in the Twitter corpus, 3.5 pttw vs 2,492 occurrences in the news, < 1 pttw). Besides the significant difference in the overall frequency, there is also an interesting differentiation in the diachronic distribution of the word, as shown in Tables 3 and 4.

Table 3. Diachronic distribution of the word “hoax” in the News Corpus

Month	Words	Hits	Pttw	Dispersion
January	8,278,513	29	< 1	0.621
February	16,337,840	139	< 1	0.397
March	96,258,096	736	< 1	0.852
April	119,999,000	609	< 1	0.918
May	96,748,312	275	< 1	0.894
June	93,851,352	225	< 1	0.780
July	83,051,184	479	< 1	0.919
Overall	514,524,288	2,492	< 1	0.929

Table 4. Diachronic distribution of the word “hoax” in the Twitter Corpus

Month	Words	Hits	Pttw	Dispersion
January	20,690,930	2,940	1.4	0.407
February	20,464,160	1,158	0.6	0.483
March	21,860,520	35,073	16	0.869
April	24,210,576	2,660	1.1	0.929
May	21,654,360	3,026	1.4	0.793
June	22,128,794	1,928	0.9	0.936
July	22,163,356	7,243	3.3	0.735
Overall	153,172,704	54,028	3.5	0.951

The data shows that the word constantly attracts much higher attention on Twitter. The temporal distribution of the data also shows a wider peak of interest in the press (with much lower normalized frequency, but distributed around February, March and April, as well as later, in July) and a more intense peak in March for Twitter (together with an overall much higher frequency of the word). The moments of higher intensity in this temporal distribution clearly point at specific debates on public statements about the nature of the virus as *hoax* (see Section 5 below). They

also show how the debate on Twitter appears to respond to the hoax issue by intensifying the interest shown by traditional media.

Concordance analysis, however, becomes necessary to distinguish patterns of word use in the two corpora (see Section 6 below). Differences of use may be more illuminating than just quantitative differences.

5. Focus on *hoax*: Background

The word has long been used to refer to an act of deception: the OED dates it back to the end of the XVIII century and defines the verb as “To deceive or take in by inducing to believe an amusing or mischievous fabrication or fiction; to play upon the credulity of”. The noun refers to the act of deceiving and can be attributed to both physical objects, established by fraud or fabrication and to verbal acts intended to deceive.

The keyword in focus is almost exclusively a noun in our corpus. The nominalization of the action allows the speaker/hearer to activate different elements of its meaning. All instances qualify their referent as having no truth value, but individual occurrences may vary in their pragmatic functions. The word can be used simply to refer to something that is qualified as false, without taking any direct responsibility for the attribution (as in Example (1)), or it can be used in actual claims that something is false (as in Example (2)).

(1) Viral hoax messages may seem harmless, but they cause panic

(2) I believe that man-made climate change is a hoax

Nominal constructions where *hoax* is used as a pre-modifier allow the speaker/writer a relatively more neutral position, taking no responsibility for the accusation and avoiding to specify the author of the hoax, as in Example (1). Example (2), on the other hand takes up full responsibility for the claim (with *hoax* as complement), while still avoiding to identify the author of the hoax.

When the author is specified, the claim obviously also turns out to be a full accusation against the person who deliberately fabricated the hoax. Its present day-use in politics often qualifies the opponent's position in a controversy, thus delegitimizing the opponent by damaging their credibility, as in the reported discourse of Example (3).

(3) The whole thing, he said, was a “hoax” ginned up by the Democrats in a fresh attempt to undermine his re-election chances

Example (3) also highlights another important distinction in the semantic and pragmatic analysis of the use of *hoax*. The word, with its accusatory and delegitimizing value, is used here on the plane of the reported discourse, rather than the reporting discourse; the accusation therefore can only be attributed to the interviewee and is not necessarily averred by the interviewer.

It should also be noted preliminarily that the word *hoax* is widely recognized as distinctive of the Trumpian lexis (cfr. Stelter 2020). Over the year 2020, it reverberated from topic to topic before landing as a key term in the debate over the coronavirus by March. In January the word had been mostly used for the subject of Trump's impeachment (in relation to the effort to push Ukraine to investigate former Vice President Joseph R. Biden Jr. and his son in the 2016 election campaign). On February 21st, Trump said that the disclosure by American intelligence officials that Russia was meddling in a presidential election in his favor was merely another partisan attack against him. On February 28th Trump denounced Democrats, describing the concerns they had expressed about the virus as "their new hoax" after the Russia investigation and the impeachment. "Now the Democrats are politicizing the coronavirus" Trump said at a rally in South Carolina. On March 9th, the Fox Business anchor Trish Regan told viewers that the worry over coronavirus was another attempt to impeach the president and, on March 11th, Sean Hannity on a talk-radio program shared a statement he had found on Twitter about the coronavirus: that it was a "fraud" by the deep state to spread panic in the populace, manipulate the economy and suppress dissent. The word resonated extensively in the debate, both in the news and on Twitter.

6. Analyzing *hoax* in the News

We analyzed the word at the level of collocation, semantic preference and semantic prosody in the two corpora. When looking at collocation with full lexical items, the top collocates can be easily classified into semantic groups. In the News Corpus the top 100 collocates of *hoax*, ordered using t-score (Oakes 1998), show a dominance of the following semantic areas: potential referents of the term, potential sources and victims of the hoax, elements of negative evaluation and expressions of attribution/projection. The data including collocates related to these semantic areas are provided in Table 5. Words are ordered by raw frequencies, as collocation strength is not crucial for an analysis of semantic preference. Terms marked with an asterisk (*) have lower collocational strength, and would not be included in the top 100. Semantic preference, however, is a relation between the word and a semantic field (Stubbs 2001) and is then best illustrated by a wider picture of the semantic areas involved.

Table 5. *Hoax* in the news: Collocation and semantic preference

Semantic areas	Word forms (and absolute frequency)
Potential referents	The virus: <i>coronavirus</i> (285), <i>virus</i> (245), <i>pandemic</i> (138) and <i>covid-19</i> (124), <i>flu</i> (15)*, <i>corona</i> (14)*, <i>disease</i> (12)* Other referents: <i>Russia</i> (105), <i>impeachment</i> (91), <i>climate</i> (38), <i>change</i> (38), <i>Russian</i> (12)*, <i>Chinese</i> (10)*
Social actors involved	<i>Trump</i> (128), <i>democrats</i> (102), <i>democratic</i> (84), <i>they</i> (78), <i>media</i> (48), <i>news</i> (42), <i>people</i> (41), <i>president</i> (41), <i>government</i> (26), <i>democrat</i> (18), <i>liberal</i> (13)*, <i>party</i> (12)*, <i>Mueller</i> (11)*
Nominal and verbal elements of projection (reported speech or thought)	<i>said</i> (117), <i>called</i> (115), <i>think</i> (63), <i>word</i> (55), <i>saying</i> (50), <i>threat</i> (49), <i>call</i> (46), <i>calls</i> (45), <i>thought</i> (40), <i>believe</i> (36), <i>claiming</i> (27), <i>investigation</i> (19), <i>claimed</i> (18), <i>criticism</i> (18), <i>statements</i> (18), <i>referring</i> (18), <i>says</i> (15)*, <i>claims</i> (15)*, <i>told</i> (15)*, <i>claim</i> (14)*, <i>concerns</i> (12)*, <i>theories</i> (12)*, <i>believed</i> (12)*, <i>know</i> (12)*, <i>says</i> (10)*, <i>statement</i> (10)*
Qualifications	<i>Just</i> (82), <i>another</i> (60), <i>political</i> (56), <i>greatest</i> (17), <i>viral</i> (16), <i>cruel</i> (13)*
Negative collocates	Negative connotations: <i>threat</i> (49), <i>fake</i> (44), <i>cooked (up)</i> (31), <i>conspiracy</i> (22), <i>scam</i> (15), <i>fabricated</i> (14), <i>victim</i> (29), <i>perpetrated</i> (20) Negatives: <i>nothing</i> (27), <i>never</i> (21)

The most frequent lexical elements unsurprisingly refer to the virus as hoax, but there are also other noticeable potential referents of the term. The social actors involved (as victims or perpetrators of a hoax) are potentially identifiable as the American president, its political opponents and the media. Many elements of pre-modification recall the recurrence of the word in the news and its key role in describing a number of different issues in the ongoing political debate, from the impeachment to the coronavirus issue. Its frequent collocation with negative forms (*nothing*, *never*) and with expressions of inscribed negative evaluation seems to confirm the negative evaluative meaning of the word, inevitably evoking the whole ideological debate.

What is most noticeable, from a quantitative point of view, is that there is a substantial set of collocates that refer to processes of verbal or mental projection, i.e. reporting speech or thought. This is of course in line with the main reporting function of the news, but the frequency and range of terms suggests looking further into the question. When looking at the pragmatics of the word (and its *semantic prosody*, both in terms of illocutionary force and evaluative meanings), what becomes most prominent is the need to distinguish its use in the speaker's discourse from forms of reported speech or thought.

Identifying the attributed nature of the claim often requires looking up a wide context. This might even mean looking at the whole paragraph, as in Example (4) below, where the reporting element is only provided by the nominal *claims* in the final sentence of the paragraph; what might seem a series of accusations at the beginning of the passage simply turns out to be a series of reported claims:

- (4) Bill Gates created the coronavirus. China secretly developed it in a lab as a biological weapon. A cure exists and the government controls it, but won't release it to the public. The virus is no more dangerous than the seasonal flu. Coronavirus is a "fake news" *hoax* manufactured by the news. You can use hand dryers to kill the virus, vitamin C, or lemon juice. The country is going to be quarantined under martial law, and the government will shut down all grocery stores so that no one can buy food. All of these *claims* are examples of conspiracies associated with coronavirus that have been perpetrated by social media.

(Counterpunch, March 27)

An analysis of 200 random concordances of *hoax* provides an approximate quantification of how often the word is directly used by the speaker (thus potentially accepting different degrees of responsibility for its use, whether in an accusation or a denial of the accusation) and how often it is attributed to other sources. The expectation, of course, is that the majority of the occurrences will be attributed to someone else in the news, rather than used in claims of falsity inevitably implying mistrust in the source reported. The actual proportion, however, is quite striking in the analysis of the 200 concordances: 87% of the occurrences (174/200) are in reported discourse, whereas only 13% (25/200) are actually used by the voice of the speaker.

The quantitative data confirm that the word is a key element of the reported debate, rather than of news discourse itself. They also show that the term is overwhelmingly used in affirmative statements (except for 1 reported question and 14 reported denials of the term) and mostly in reporting claims of falsity. The focus is thus more on the context in which the term was used and on its accusatory function, than on reporting how the term was rebutted in the debate. The emphasis lies very much in reconstructing the context of the debate and interpreting the word in terms of the different components of its meaning. This involves both its semantics – i.e., the (non-)factual nature of what it refers to, and the presence or absence of reasons to support the claim – and its pragmatics – i.e., its accusatory value and the patterns of agreement/ disagreement that are constructed around the word. Example (5) below, for instance, contrasts the reported accusation with facts that would seem to contradict the semantics of the expression, while Example (6) reports contrasting positions about the virus and highlights conflict deriving from its pragmatics:

- (5) The victim thought the COVID-19 virus was a hoax, despite its killing more than 135,000 people in the United States so far.

- (6) Many Mexicans have developed a stigma around the virus and believe that it is a hoax or not as bad as it seems. It has also impacted the country’s healthcare workers who are facing widespread abuse from people who believe they are helping spread the virus.

It should further be noticed that 11 of the 25 occurrences actually used by the voice of the speaker in the news corpus are in readers’ comments and not in the journalist’s voice and one is a case where the word is mentioned, rather than used. In the other occurrences there is a tendency to use *hoax* as a pre-modifier – *hoax plate/call(2)/ messages (3)/ conspiracy-mongering/ stories/ texts/ text (2) /email* – or as a labelling noun referring to previous reports – *the hoax(2)/ hoax*. Here the speaker takes only partial responsibility for the accusation: the word is not used to make a claim of falsity but rather to refer anaphorically to such a claim or to the word. This leaves virtually no space to direct claims about the false nature of a position, let alone accusatory language.

7. Hoax on Twitter

The Twitter corpus provides a partially different picture of the word. The most obvious feature is that texts are more repetitive, due to retweets, and there is also a reduced lexical variety, probably also influenced by Twitter affordances such as characters’ limit.

Table 6 below illustrates data with reference to the same semantic areas we identified in the news corpus.

Table 6. Hoax on Twitter: Collocation and semantic preference

Semantic areas	Word forms (and absolute frequency)
Potential referents	The virus: <i>coronavirus</i> (24,535), <i>virus</i> (2,037), <i>covid-19</i> (1,615), <i>corona</i> (1,471), <i>covid</i> (1,438) Hashtags: <i>#covid19</i> (983), <i>#coronavirusupdate</i> (531)
Social actors involved	<i>Trump</i> (4,930), <i>democrats</i> (3,985), <i>@realdonaldtrump</i> (3,384), <i>Carolina</i> (2,531), <i>administration</i> (2,369), <i>politicizing</i> (1552), <i>dems</i> (1,092), <i>media</i> (783), <i>people</i> (597) Hashtags: <i>#liberallogic</i> (507)
Nominal and verbal elements of projection	<i>called</i> (4,807), <i>calls</i> (1,694), <i>call</i> (1226), <i>word</i> (1,193), <i>says</i> (1,152), <i>used</i> (893), <i>using</i> (711), <i>refer</i> (562), <i>think</i> (507), <i>believe</i> (424)
Qualifications	<i>just</i> (2,387), <i>another</i> (2,193) and <i>biggest</i> (754)
Negative collocates	Negative connotations: <i>failed</i> (2,630), <i>trojan horse</i> (454), <i>fake</i> (328)*, <i>dishonestly</i> (156)*, <i>blame</i> (144)*, <i>accuse</i> (140)*, <i>threat</i> (140)*. Role of misinformation: <i>pushing</i> (2,553), <i>spreading</i> (1,184), <i>hype</i> (503), <i>promoted</i> (131)*

The most common collocate is referred directly to the virus, with the word *coronavirus* being by far the most frequent collocation in the corpus, six times more common than the second collocate. The data also confirm that the word *hoax* is primarily associated – in terms of strength of the collocation – with the social actors involved, mainly politicians, and is often qualified by a limited set of elements of pre-modification pointing at the recurrence of the word in the political debate. An interesting feature is the frequent occurrence of *politicizing* (1552), pointing at the action that is attributed to most of the social actors, who are “politicizing” the question of the virus. Collocates referring to reported speech or states of beliefs, on the other hand, are substantially less, when compared to the News Corpus; the difference in the distribution is also accompanied by less lexical diversity and by the fact that most of these verbs refer specifically to former President Donald Trump.

It is worth highlighting the presence of a small set of hashtags that proved to be among the most frequent collocates: *#covid19* (983), *#coronavirusupdate* (531), *#liberallogic* (507). These hashtags are attributable to the areas reported above but, as hashtags, they show the key role of the virus and of politics itself in defining the trending topics and in activating the contextual assumptions which may guide users’ derivation of explicitly and implicitly communicated meaning (Scott 2015).

Finally, while lexical elements of negative evaluation stand out as both frequent and varied, a distinctive feature of the Twitter Corpus is the presence of collocations that refer to the propagation of misinformation: *pushing* (2,553), *spreading* (1,184), *hype* (503), *promoted* (131), thus showing the relevance of the issue on Twitter.

When considering the pragmatic status of *hoax*, the hypothesis is that the use of *hoax* would be more likely to be directly used in Twitter, and most probably in the form of claims of falsity, whether to deny a fact/claim or accuse the source of the hoax. The analysis of a random sample of 200 concordances actually shows that the picture is more varied in use (though not in forms perhaps). The formal repetitiveness that can be noticed is probably due to a very high percentage of the word in retweets (170/200) but also as hashtag (7/200 in this particular set of concordances). The pragmatic status of *hoax*, on the other hand, is varied, with little less than half of the occurrences (97/200, i.e. 48.5%) used directly by the speaker rather than attributed. There is also a fair balance between affirmative claims (claims of falsity, 58/97) and negative claims (denials, 39/97) in the discourse of the speaker.

In terms of the pragmatic functions of *hoax*, speakers use the word mostly in nominal constructions, but often specifying its source (Example (7)) in forms that bring out the full accusatory potential of the lexical item of a full claim (Example (8)), by pointing at the perpetrators of the hoax.

- (7) The Democrats new “blame Trump” hoax investigation about coronavirus
- (8) Democrats are pushing a new hoax by politicizing the coronavirus situation

Rebuttals often take the form of a simple denial, with no supporting argument (Example (9)). This leaves an interesting scope for ironical forms; Example (10), for instance, uses an analogy to highlight the absurdity of calling COVID-19 a hoax, without actually providing reasons for not believing so:

(9) The coronavirus is not a hoax

(10) the Coronavirus, COVID19, is a hoax in the same way that the earth is flat.

The controversy about the Coronavirus being or not being a hoax proves to be quite prominent in the quantitative data of the Twitter corpus, as shown in particular by the top clusters around the word (with the very high frequency of *is a hoax/is not a hoax*). Concordance analysis also shows that a large part of the discussion is focused on the word itself, and on how it is used in the political debate, as shown in Example (11):

(11) Trump says he used the word \“hoax\” NOT about the coronavirus itself but about what Democrats were saying about his administration.

This “metalinguistic” focus centers on the semantics and pragmatics of the word, showing how it can be used to summarize different positions and their conflict.

When the word is used directly by the speaker, a focus on its identity and accusatory value also seems to be dominant. Example (12) clearly uses the word *hoax* to delegitimize the opponents and to build group identity, whereas Example (14) combines an identity call to “Patriots” with attention to the word’s truth value and the need for forms of support for the claim (Example (13)):

(12) Urging all patriots to stay focused on: General Michael Flynn Case Spygate ObamaGate Clinton Foundation COVID Hoax The Fake News and Cabal want our attention elsewhere. Together we are powerful and they know it.

(13) IT IS A HOAX PATRIOTS! More people in the US have DIED from common influenza.

The overall impression of concordance analysis is that, on Twitter, the word *hoax* is not only discussed as an important keyword of the political debate (as happens in the news), but also appropriated by many participants. The political connections of the word become more prominent and so does its accusatory pragmatic function, as a clear index of Trumpism and opposition to Democrats (or China, the media etc.). The word thus expresses not only the speakers’ position on the specific issue, but also more general traits of their identity. The co-text clearly illustrates marked patterns of agreement and disagreement, while the space for providing arguments and discussing the general political context is limited.

8. Inside the inferential path: The embeddings

We finally created two word-embedding models to further explore the semantics and pragmatics of *hoax*.⁷ In the news corpus we selected all the articles where the word occurred, while in the Twitter Corpus we used all the tweets to compute our model.⁸ Figure 1 illustrates the semantic space of the word in the two corpora, with the top-15 most similar words. The thickness of the bands represents the number of occurrences of each term. On Twitter, unsurprisingly, there is a prevalence of usernames, indicating a direct addressing to the counterpart.

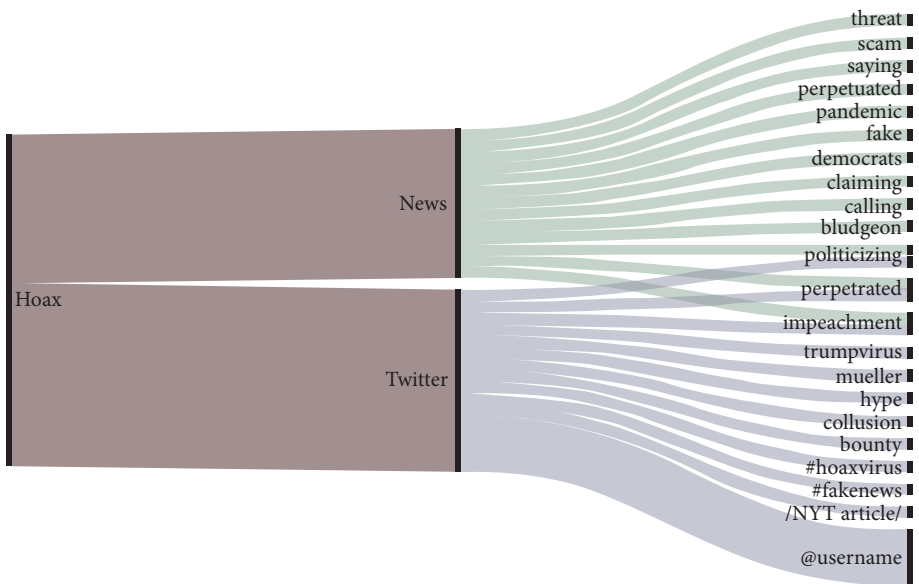


Figure 1. *Hoax* semantic space within the two corpora, top-15 most similar words

7. We used the word2vec Python implementation of gensim. <https://radimrehurek.com/gensim/models/word2vec.html>

8. We made this choice because of the significant differences in text sizes, as word embeddings are affected by texts' length in the machine learning process. The average tweets' length in the Twitter Corpus was around 20 words, while in the News Corpus the average number of words per text was around 670. On the one hand, we had a problem of computational efficiency (News Corpus was too large) while on the other hand we had a risk of computing poor embeddings (because of the characteristics of Twitter Corpus). We then came to this compromise to have a comparable result. We also tested the stability of our News Corpus model computing 2 different models, one using only the sample of texts with *hoax* occurring and another adding random samples of articles without *hoax*, finding no significant differences. The sample selected for the embeddings of the News Corpus has 1872 articles.

At first glance, our two corpora show a rather similar semantic space. In particular, both corpora see the word in semantic relationship with the words *politicizing*, *impeachment* and *perpetrated*. On the other hand, the data show differences that are predictable both because of the composition of our corpus and because of what we have seen in our concordance analysis. Clearly, in the news corpus *hoax* occurs mostly in reported speech, as shown by some of the verbs associated with it (*calling*, *claiming*, *saying*), while in the Twitter corpus it is mostly used to address or retweet other users, as indicated by the prevalence of usernames. As shown in Figure 1, it is also associated with two debated topics. The word *Mueller* refers in particular to the *Russiagate*, where Trump was accused to have favored Russian interference during the 2016 presidential campaign. Finally, the link with a *New York Times* article⁹ brings us in the debate of COVID-19 negationists. In fact, the word is associated with a specific set of retweets that share the NYT article to attack the counterpart, who believe the pandemic is a hoax.

Focusing on the words that are common to both corpora (*impeachment*, *politicizing*, *perpetrating*), it is possible to notice that in our News Corpus these terms are present in forms of reported speech (with reference to Trump and other media or political commentators). For instance, the word *impeachment* is associated to *hoax* because it is often reported that Trump called it a hoax, the word *perpetrated* is associated to Trump's political attacks to Democrats and media ("hoax perpetrated by dems/media"); finally, the word *politicizing* is the first link to COVID-19 pandemic, as it is reported that Trump was accusing the democratic party of politicizing the virus.

On the other hand, in our Twitter Corpus, these terms are mostly used directly by users to support Trump, especially attacking his political opponents. The similarity with the word *impeachment* is due to a set of 130 retweets of the following sentence: "This is the man that diverted attention from the first appearance of COVID-19, while pushing the impeachment hoax", originally shared by CIA officer Kevin Shipp together with a picture of Democratic politician Adam Schiff.¹⁰ Similarly, the two verbs *perpetrated* and *politicizing* are used to accuse the Democratic party of spreading misinformation, where *perpetrated* is used especially with reference to the impeachment case, while *politicizing* is used to accuse Dems of exploiting the coronavirus situation for their own political interest. Particularly interesting in these tweets is the use of the adjective *new* referred to *hoax*, as it recalls

9. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/01/world/coronavirus-news.html>

10. From his Twitter profile: "Kevin Shipp: Former CIA Counter Terrorism, Counterintelligence and Staff Investigator". No other reliable sources have been found. The author of the tweet also owns a personal blog which seems devoted to conspiracy theories (<https://kevinshipp.com/>)

the frequency with which the word *hoax* occurred in the political debate of the period, often in connection with Trump's interpretation of Democratic positions.

To follow our inferential path, combining the different levels – invariable and optional – required to interpret a semantic frame, we then explored the embeddings of the word *collusion*, that is the most similar word in the semantic space of *hoax*. This represents the strongest semantic association, hence it is the most probable move within the inferential path.¹¹ The results show that the term is another marker of ideological conflict, as it evokes the opposition between *russiagate* and *obamagate*.

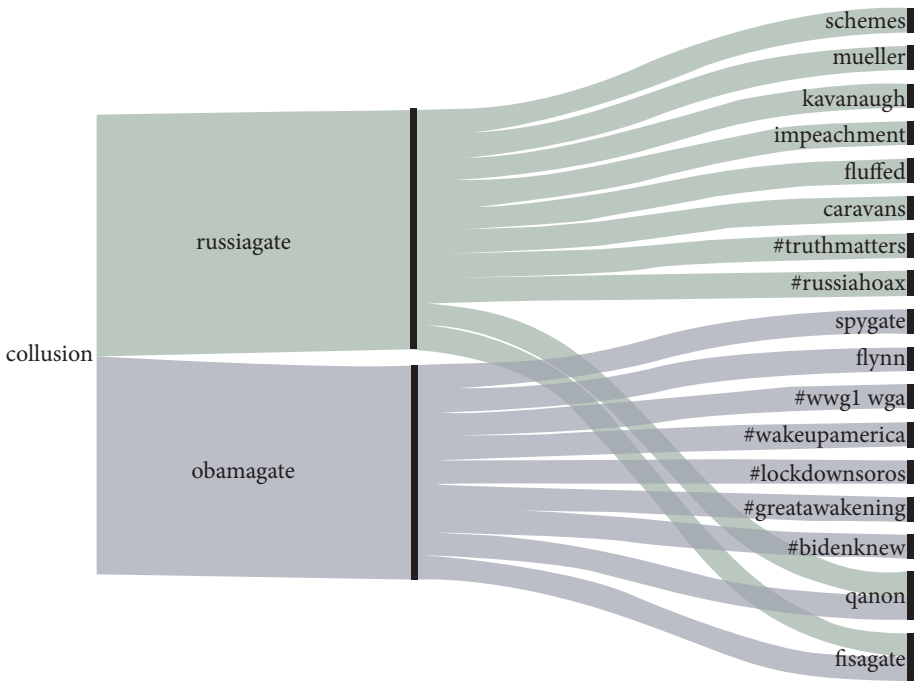


Figure 2. Part of the inferential path of the word *collusion* in the Twitter Corpus

Going deeper into our inferential path of these two words, as shown in Figure 2, we found examples of the increasing ideological isolation that is typical of echo chambers. As shown by our embeddings, the two words are ideological keywords coming from the alt-right area and, more specifically, from QAnon members.

11. Word similarity is evaluated calculating distances between vectors, hence calculating cosine similarity. Cosine similarity has a range of values between -1 and $+1$, with -1 indicating the maximum distance and $+1$ the maximum proximity. In our case, the word *collusion* has a cosine similarity of 0.43 with *hoax*.

We might see this stage of the pragmatic process as a deep dive into the echo chamber, due to the peculiar linguistic status of hashtags (Zappavigna 2011, 2015). The flexibility of hashtags as a semiotic resource turns them into forms of social tagging, ascribing the text to a particular trending topic and indicating stance taking. In this sense, the set of QAnon hashtags shown in Figure 2 are the very deep core of the Trumpist echo chamber, as they both mark the belonging to a conspiracy theory and their irreducible conflict with the Democratic counterpart.

9. Conclusions

As we hope to have shown in our analysis, we can study echo chambers starting from linguistic markers of ideological conflict. For the sake of brevity, we focused on the word *hoax*, as it emerged as a keyword from the comparison between our two corpora. We found evidence that in the News Corpus the ideological conflict is mostly reported; stance is hardly taken by journalists and, when they do take a stance, *hoax* is never used as an ideological keyword explicitly manifesting the position of the journalist. On Twitter, on the other hand, the word *hoax* is not only discussed as an important keyword of the political debate, but it is also appropriated by many participants in its accusatory pragmatic function. This becomes indexical of their position and their political identity, in contexts that highlight the conflict between positions, often without providing explicit arguments.

The word is thus not only a marker of ideological conflict, but also an ideological keyword of the republican area, a *cultural keyword* (Stubbs 2001) that evokes the whole context of the debate and derives its force from the discourse it belongs to, depending as it does, on a set of unstated premises. It is also a word that recalls the basic principles of Conspiracy Theories, as it refers to a process of intentional and concealed deception, hinting at a set of alternative explanations and recalling the notion of misinformation and fake news, thus contributing to the construction of conflictual social identities.

On the other hand, this study did not shed light on what we questioned in our introduction, namely the dysfunctional dimension of echo chambers. In fact, we did find proof of ideological isolation following the pragmatic contexts and the inferential path of *hoax*, which is coherent with the social science definition of echo chambers. In a corpus-based perspective, we highlighted the prominence of the political Trumpian connections of the word, with its accusatory pragmatic function. We also noticed that the word acts as a summary representation of a wider debate and as a signal of speakers' position and identity, rather than as the key elements of an actual claim to be supported or refuted. On the other hand, the limited focus on a single (however central) word does not allow to draw any

substantial conclusion on other aspects of echo chambers. Observable patterns in the data do not necessarily manifest users' tendency to select only information that confirms their system of beliefs. They also do not provide support for claims about the segregation of conflicting beliefs or any dysfunctionality in the system, except for the lack of real argumentation.

Rather than manifesting highly segregated communities, the data have shown ample proof of how ideological keywords can catalyze affective and social identity traits in discourse, especially in the form of belief displays that signal loyalty to a group. Belief displays are rarely accompanied by arguments or dissenting information (see also Zollo et al. 2017). The presence of many negative elements in the data realizes forms of denial more than rebuttal (let alone refutation). The debate appears more centered on affective and social identities than on issue positions. This seems to be in line with views of social platforms as marked by online tribalism (Bastos 2021). But whether ingroup affiliations should inevitably lead to outgroup derogations, political polarization (Conover et al. 211) and even segregation remains to be shown by other types of analyses. Further research would be necessary on how to distinguish echo chambers from normal disagreement and how to explain the genesis of echo chambers.

The difference between our corpora seems to suggest that, while acknowledging its informative function, many users look at Twitter as a site for positioning themselves and others, with greater emphasis on identity construction than on developing an argument or sharing information. In other words, if there is an echo chamber on Twitter, it is not because of its affordances, but rather because its users respond to a context characterized by tribal loyalties in ways that may lead to a polarization of conflict. It is not the medium itself, but rather what Tagg et al. (2017) have called "context design", i.e. users' "perceptions of what the technology is for, how it functions for this purpose, who they are communicating with, and the appropriate norms for doing so." (Tagg et al. 2017: 5)

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“If you can’t see the pattern here, there’s something wrong”

A cognitive account of conspiracy narratives,
schemas, and the construction of the ‘expert’

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This chapter will adopt a data-driven, cognitive stylistic approach, exploring ‘false flag’ conspiracy theories about mass shootings, specifically the Sandy Hook massacre in 2012, which claimed the lives of twenty children and six adults. ‘False flags’ are a sub-type of conspiracy theory where it is believed that, “one group commits an attack and blames it on a rival group or a fictitious group of its invention” (Kearns, Conlon, & Young, 2014, p. 46). Situated against a background of research in psychology examining the characteristics and behaviours of both conspiracy manufacturers and supporters (for example, Douglas et al. 2017; Wood et al. 2012), the chapter will use two concepts from cognitive stylistics – figure-ground, which explores the positioning of attention (Emmott and Alexander 2014; Stockwell 2009, 2020) and schema theory, which focuses on prior knowledge. Building on a previous study by the author (Mason 2019b), the chapter will explore how factually flawed false flag accounts are constructed as persuasive and credible. The research will use a triangulated design to examine stylistic patterns of discourse of both conspiracy manufacturers and supporters, through close analysis of video transcripts and viewer comments from three videos concerning Sandy Hook released on *YouTube*.

1. Introduction

The time of conspiracy belief as fringe is over. In 2019, for example, the World Health Organisation listed ‘vaccine hesitancy’ (delaying or choosing not to vaccinate your children because of fear or belief that vaccines are harmful) as one of the top ten global health emergencies, directly attributing this to the rise of the antivaccine movement (Olive et al. 2018; WHO 2019). A recent representative survey of 2,000 UK adults found that 5.4% “either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “The Holocaust never really happened”” (Holocaust Memorial Day

Trust 2019). The rise and development of the internet in particular, despite its many advantages, has brought to bear a new age of widespread and unregulated ability to access and share information without any need to show its veracity in order for it to be believed by many (Starbird et al. 2014; Wang and Zhuang 2018). News stories often break on *Twitter* with information shared by those (claiming to be) present, involved or witness to an event before a qualified journalist gets to the scene. The public can no longer rely on a qualified person checking facts and sources before sharing information. Rumour, conjecture and wilfully inaccurate pieces of a story now surround the individual who is left, often with little experience or training, to pick out what they think is fact and what is fiction, what seems credible and what seems speculative or unverified. In other words, who gets to claim the role of ‘expert’ has been widely disrupted and, in many spheres, undermined.

The ability to easily find and interact with likeminded people is fantastic for the isolated teenager looking for an accepting group who shares their particular interest but, as will be demonstrated, it is dangerous in other contexts. This chapter explores the phenomenon of ‘false flag’ narratives – a belief that certain tragedies such as mass shootings were either not real or were staged by powerful and malevolent groups – and the communities who variously propagate, perpetuate, support and believe in them. The chapter uses close stylistic analysis, drawing on schema theory and figure-ground (Stockwell 2009) frameworks, to offer a cognitively grounded account of how such narratives are formulated and how they come to be viewed by some as credible and persuasive.

2. Conspiracy theories

A conspiracy theory is “a proposed plot by powerful people or organisations working together in secret to accomplish some (usually sinister) goal” (Wood et al. 2012: 767; see also Coady 2006; Douglas and Sutton 2008; Goertzel 1994). The research on the language of conspiracy theories is scarce, though there is some work exploring conspiracy and language at a broad conceptual level. This focuses on epistemological positioning and truth propositions, with a specific emphasis on the term ‘conspiracy theory’ itself and the power of its application (Bjerg and Presskorn-Thygesen 2017; Coady 2003, 2007; Pigden 1995, 2007). Bjerg and Presskorn-Thygesen, for example, argue “‘conspiracy theory’ is no trivial word [...] any use of the concept of conspiracy theory always already implies a demarcation between legitimate, rational knowledge and illegitimate, irrational non-sense” (2017: 138). In other words, this research focuses on conspiracy theory as a form of powerful categorisation rather than close analysis of its discourse. Preceding the publication of this volume, surprisingly few studies have engaged in close linguistic

analysis of conspiracy narratives (notable exceptions include, for example, Mason 2019a; Mason 2019b; Oswald and Herman 2016; Procházka and Blommaert 2021; Varis 2020).

There is a substantial body of research from psychology exploring conspiracy theorists that is highly salient in the current context. Douglas, Sutton and Cichocka (2017) offer a comprehensive overview of existing research in that field, which explores reasons, motivations and predispositions that cause people to gravitate towards conspiracy versions of a narrative rather than a non-conspiracy explanation. They divide the best current research into three broad categorisations.

First, Douglas and colleagues outline epistemic motivations for conspiracy belief, which stem from a desire for clarity and certainty, specifically in relation to why something has happened (2017: 538). They explain that the sensation of having a secure explanation for an event serves many purposes, including, "slaking curiosity when information is unavailable [and] reducing uncertainty and bewilderment when information is conflicting" (2017: 538). Findings in this area focus on individuals' predispositions to perceive patterns where none exist (Brotherton and French 2014). Typical behaviours of people who find conspiracist accounts persuasive can include: constructing meaningful explanations for events, sometimes leading to belief in the paranormal such as ghosts or aliens (Bruder et al. 2013); feelings of distress in the face of uncertainty that are more intense than those experienced by other members of the population (van Prooijen and Jostmann 2013) and a tendency to believe that actions are deliberate rather than random (Douglas et al. 2016). Swami and colleagues also identified correlations between conspiracy belief and lower capacity for analytical thinking, though it should be noted that they could not evidence a causative link between the two, and this finding should thus be treated with caution (Swami et al. 2014).

Douglas and her co-researchers identify a second body of research exploring existential motives for conspiracism, explaining, "causal explanations [also] serve the need for people to feel safe and secure in their environment" (2017: 539). Similar motives include a desire to exert control over personal circumstances and the world around, either as an individual or as part of a group (see also Tetlock 2002). Research additionally suggests that people are more likely to be drawn to conspiracy narratives when they feel that they lack security and/or control, especially when this prompts emotions such as anxiety (Grzesiak-Feldman 2013) or experience a sense of being powerless (Abalakina-Paap et al. 1999). A third set of studies investigate social motivations for conspiracy belief. Here there is agreement that such beliefs are oriented around a desire to maintain a positive image of self and the group to which we perceive that we belong (Douglas et al. 2017: 540).

A final study of particular significance to the current research unravels the counterintuitive phenomenon of a single person's belief in multiple conspiracy

theories that are mutually exclusive, for instance that Osama Bin Laden was already dead when US troops stormed his compound *and* that he is still alive (Wood et al. 2012). The authors explain that conspiracist thinking is best understood as an *ideology* rather than a series of individual beliefs about specific events. In other words, conspiracism is better thought of as a world view – a way of thinking – that results in a willingness to believe a wide variety of theories, even if some sit in contradiction with one another, because the belief stems not so much from viewing that particular narrative as persuasive or credible, but from a broader conviction that those in power cannot be trusted.

2.1 False flags

False flags are a subset of conspiracy theory, defined as a version of events in which “one group commits an attack and blames it on a rival group or a fictitious group of its invention” (Kearns et al. 2014: 426). The term appears to have derived from a deceptive practice in naval combat, where a ship would fly the flag of another innocent party in order to get close to their enemy, only to then attack them (*ibid*). In the context of conspiracy narratives, ‘false flags’, sometimes called hoaxes, are reported events which, according to those who designate them as such, either did not happen at all, or were staged. The attacks resulting in the collapse of the Twin Towers in 2001, for example, have been frequently designated a false flag based on a belief that the towers only collapsed because they were blown up using explosives. The main evidence offered in support of this claim is a denial that the impact of planes would be capable of causing the towers to collapse leaving the only ‘logical’ conclusion that they had been rigged with incendiary devices. The purpose of a false flag, it is claimed, is to effect some change the populace would otherwise not accept by manipulating public mood; by inciting fear.

Some false flag supporters deny that the event itself happened or that victims are real. These interpretations necessitate belief that individuals appearing on television or in interviews either as grieving family members or friends, or as eyewitnesses, are wilfully lying. The reason typically offered as to why people would do this is financial motivation, namely that they are so-called ‘crisis actors’ (hired by the malfasant group to participate in the staging of the event and/or, to claim to have been an eyewitness to the event, and/or to claim to have known a victim of the event) or that they are members of the community who have been ‘paid off’.

Assessing the credibility or otherwise of the wide and varied range of conspiracy theories in circulation is well beyond the scope of this chapter. False flags, on the other hand, are often obviously inaccurate to a degree of certainty which would satisfy the vast majority of reasonable and critically thinking individuals,

and typically do a great deal of harm. Believing Avril Lavigne died in 2003 and was replaced by a body double called Melissa is not a view I find personally credible but ultimately holding such a belief is inoffensive. Believing that a grieving parent is in fact a 'crisis actor' paid by the government, the FBI, the Rothschild family or the Illuminati, and their child a fiction, is another matter entirely and merits serious academic scrutiny.

3. Analysing 'false flags': Methods and Data

This chapter adopts a data-driven, cognitive stylistic approach. Cognitive stylistics draws on the most recent research from fields such as neuroscience, psychology, and cognitive linguistics and applies it to close linguistic examination in order to offer an account of readers' different responses to a given text (see for example Gibbons and Whiteley 2018; Harrison 2017; Whiteley and Canning 2017). This chapter will look closely at research surrounding the manipulation of prior belief and knowledge, and the ways in which individuals make connections between stories, to offer a cognitively grounded account of false flag narratives and the characteristics of their style. The study focuses on the 'Sandy Hook' shootings, which received a wealth of accusations that it was a false flag.

3.1 Sandy Hook: Context

On 14 December 2012 a twenty-year-old man entered Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut in the United States of America with a firearm, having killed his mother earlier that morning. The shooter killed a further twenty-six people and then ended his own life. In support of the *No Notoriety* movement, this chapter will not name him (for further information see www.nonotoriety.com).

Six of the victims were adults working at the school: Dawn Hochsprung (47); Mary Sherlach (56); Victoria Soto (27); Lauren Rousseau (30); Anne Marie Murphy (52) and Rachel D'Avino (29). The rest were children. Their names are: Emilie Parker (6); Ana Marquez-Greene (6); Dylan Hockley (6); Grace McDonnell (7); Noah Pozner (6); Olivia Engel (6); Catherine Hubbard (6); Charlotte Bacon (6); Daniel Barden (7); Jesse Lewis (6); Jessica Rekos (6); Jack Pinto (6); Josephine Gay (7); Chase Kowalski (7); James Mattioli (6); Madeleine Hsu (6); Caroline Previdi (6); Avielle Richman (6); Benjamin Wheeler (6) and Allison Wyatt (6) (BBC 2012).

School shootings have become startlingly common in the United States (Gun Violence Archive 2018), but even amongst a list of shocking and upsetting events, for many Sandy Hook stands out, both because of the number who lost their lives

and in particular the fact that the children were so young. Unfortunately, largely because of this, the tragedy attracted false flag believers, convinced that the perpetrators were escalating the horror of their staged attacks to better manipulate the public mood. This fits with Leman and Cinnirella's (2013) finding that events viewed as large-scale and highly significant are more likely to attract conspiracist accounts.

3.2 Ethical considerations

Ethics surrounding use of open access online data is disputed (see for example Pace 2005; Spilioti and Tagg 2017), and as a result there remains much inconsistency in current research practices concerning issues such as consent, copyright and anonymity. This research adopts the position required by the author's institution, whilst acknowledging that this will not be universally viewed as ideal: data has been anonymised so that the authors are not traceable. Both videos and all comments analysed were posted onto *YouTube*: the content creators and commenters have chosen to upload with not only the awareness of, but for the purposes of, public consumption. As such, it is reasonable to infer expectation of the possibility of analysis and critique.

Furthermore, analysis of how such 'false flag' narratives are assembled and argued for offers potential public benefit that outweighs considerations relating to the creators themselves, though I strive to be respectful to them also. 'False flag' narratives have real world consequences: persuaded viewers have been documented, for example, harassing family members of those lost in tragedies. In the case of the Sandy Hook massacre, this includes parents who have lost young children (Vice 2018, see also Figure 2 below).

3.3 Data

The study draws on two data types: transcripts of videos created by, and comments from, 'false flag' advocates (individuals who produce and champion false flag narratives) discussing Sandy Hook. Examples are drawn from three sources, the first two of which are transcripts derived from videos produced by false flag advocates:

(1) Video One by Author One (published November 2015)

This video is a fifteen-minute walk-through of the creator's newsletter about Sandy Hook and his belief that it was a false flag. As such, the visual aspect of the video primarily comprises the author scrolling through his newsletter as he talks, occasionally switching to other screens. It focuses primarily on a book

called *No One Died At Sandy Hook* which another advocate had attempted to self-publish, and which had been subsequently withdrawn from sale by *Amazon*. The video argues that the book's removal from *Amazon* is a violation of free speech that was orchestrated by the perpetrators of Sandy Hook because of fears that the 'truth' about what they had done would be exposed. The video then mainly consists of the creator outlining and advocating for a false flag version of the shootings. Discussion topics range from perceived inconsistencies in accounts from witnesses and news agencies about what happened on the day to perceived parallels with a range of other events that the author also believes were false flags (including the attacks on the Twin Towers and the US Embassy in Benghazi).

(2) Video Two by Author Two (published June 2014)

This video lasts 30 minutes and comprises an audio track of an interview of a prominent Sandy Hook hoax advocate (a self-designated expert on active-shooter school drills) and another advocate acting as interviewer, overlaid with a series of still images and video clips offering further 'evidence' in support of the false flag narrative (see Figures 1 and 2 below). Both the interview and the material displayed alongside the audio focus on debunking official versions of events and perpetuating a version of the false flag story that claims the shooting was a staged drill.



Figure 1. Screenshot from Video 2



Figure 2. Screenshot from Video 2

In both transcripts, topics rapidly switch and conversation jumps around from point to point. To the speakers, all false flag advocates, all areas of the discussion are related, but to an outsider the trajectory of the unfolding narratives can seem to lack coherence, as shown in many of the examples offered below. In other words, some of the excerpts may feel confusing or hard to follow: this is not due to a failure to provide the reader with the context regarding how different sections of the transcript are related, but rather that the relationships between these sections are not articulated by the speakers themselves.

These two videos have been selected because they are both representative of content reviewed in a wider study examining fifteen false flag advocating *YouTube* videos, all focused on the Sandy Hook shootings (for further reports on the findings of this research see also Mason 2019b). Both video authors are relatively small creators in terms of *YouTube* more broadly, but have uploaded content frequently and consistently throughout the lifetimes of their respective channels: Author One has over 29,000 subscribers at the time of writing with around 3.2 million views of their video archive; Author Two has around 19,000 subscribers and approximately 4.7 million views of their archive. By comparison, other videos reviewed as part of this project had subscribers numbers in the tens or low hundreds, with only a few videos ever uploaded to the channel. Both the selected authors also focus the vast majority of their content across their channels on false flags, accusations of government cover ups or manipulation of media coverage, and conspiracy theories more generally. As such, whilst it is impossible to determine the number of people who find such narratives to be credible or persuasive, these videos offer strong

examples of prototypical false flag reports. Both videos were viewed in excess of ten times to facilitate a preliminary phase of stylistic analysis with the support of the auto-generated transcripts available through *YouTube*. In the course of this phase transcripts were of course checked for accuracy. Key stylistic features of the two videos were then established, and representative sections of the transcripts are analysed in detail below to illustrate and explore these features.

The final data source is a complete set of 93 comments posted in response to Video Three which, conversely, is a compilation of interviews with first responders at Sandy Hook and another tragic mass shooting at *Pulse*, an LGBTQ+ nightclub in Florida, USA. In other words, Video Three makes no claim whatsoever that Sandy Hook was a false flag, in fact quite the opposite, with some interviewees expressing disdain for, or distress as a result of, such narratives about the two attacks. The video is produced by a larger journalistic organisation whose channel has over 155,000 subscribers at the time of writing. As such we can infer that subscribers are not solely interested in content focused on mass shootings or other tragedies. This element of the study focuses on the viewers’ responses to the video. This dataset has been selected because of the high proportion of false flag supporting comments (54 of the 93), undoubtedly stimulated by belief in the fact that anyone claiming to be a first responder, and thus to have borne witness to the event and loss of life, demands that all the people interviewed in the video are complicit in the lie. This triangulating aspect of the study thus offers access to the discourse of a much larger number of false flag advocates than the first two video creators, demonstrating that the stylistic patterns identified in those videos are representative rather than unusual to false flag explanations.

4. Analysis

The remainder of this chapter now offers a cognitive stylistic analysis of the dataset, focusing on two key concepts identified as particularly relevant to offering an account of the potentially persuasive nature of conspiracy discourse: schema activation and manipulation, and figure-ground.

4.1 Narrative schemas and mental archives

Schema theory makes basic and largely intuitive claims about how our prior knowledge is organised and engaged (for applications of schema theory to text analysis see for example Cook 1994; Jeffries and McIntyre 2011; Miall 1989; Stockwell 2003). Knowledge each individual has accrued throughout their lifetime exists in the mind

as a potential pool of resources on which to draw to help us make sense of a current situation, whether that is in real life, or encountered in a text; in this case in a video. Schemas are the elements of that knowledge which we ‘soft assemble’ (Stockwell 2020) and have mental reference to at the point at which we need it, unconsciously activated by our perception of what is relevant (Anderson 1983; Thorndyke and Yekovich 1980; Kintsch and van Dijk 1975, 1978; Spiro 1982). Our sense of narratives and events is no exception, and thus every news story and world event of which we have knowledge is the result of this iterative process of past knowledge activation and dynamic schema accrual. What form an individual’s narrative schema (Mason 2014) takes depends on the interaction of those two factors: the prior knowledge they could potentially access in their *mental archive* of stories – our “internal personalised library where every book, film and tale looks exactly how you remember it” (Mason 2016: 147) – and the immediate contextual factors that might encourage some elements of knowledge to be activated and others left dormant. Which schemas are activated can vary from person to person, and this is crucial in accounting for why some find conspiracy narratives convincing and others do not.

4.1.1 *Schematising source reliability*

Two clear patterns relating to the source of information for false flag advocates emerge across the dataset, and this offers a convincing account for conspiracists’ alternative narrative schema construction:

1. a preference for sources of information gathered as an event unfolds as well as in the immediate aftermath; and,
2. a widespread distrust of ‘mainstream’ news organisations as sources of reliable knowledge.

Both of these filters prime conspiracists to accrete schemas from unreliable and tenuous pools of information. At the same time, they are positioned to both highly value the erroneous knowledge they receive and disregard contradictory, but more reliable, sources of information. Furthering this toxic combination, this style of ‘news reporting’ offers amateur journalists of the internet the opportunity to claim, and have affirmed, the role of expert.

The rationale for these two filters (‘contemporary’ and ‘not mainstream’) for source selection are interrelated: false flag advocates argue in favour of contemporaneous sources precisely because of their mistrust of larger news organisations, believing them to be either involved in the staging of the event or at least deceived by those who have organised it. Here, for example, both video authors posit that reports emerging in immediate spatial and temporal proximity to the Sandy Hook shooting are the most credible because the clandestine group responsible

for orchestrating the false flag will not yet have had the opportunity to control the media narrative. As such, for conspiracists, their tendencies towards unreliable sources prompts a path of distorted schema accretion from its inception. This is evidenced in both videos, with each creator not only disclosing these information preferences but actively advising their audience to adopt them too:

Video One (VO1-1): Whenever we first start these things, we want to review the evidence from the stories on the day, or the day after the attacks. You can pretty much eliminate everything else. You want to go to local sources, which I've done right here

Video Two (VO2-1): Now, I have always told everybody: when you're seeing these things play out in real time the best news reporting is what's happening in real time that day of, in the moments that are round the incident. But document for yourself what's going on, because you'll never see it again

Both advocates narrate that their own schema accretion is from highly unreliable sources that already cohered with their own ideological positioning. That positioning is characterised by a lack of trust in more credible sources and, at the same time, they advocate for viewers to follow suit. They present themselves as trustworthy experts in false flag investigation, shown through their presentation of their own methods not just as accounts of what they have done but as advice for others, using modality to frame the guidance as high certainty (epistemic: words or phrases that indicate the speaker's level of belief about the accuracy of their statements) and desirable (boulomaic: words or phrases that indicate the speaker's wishes, wants or desires). In Video One there are multiple instances of direct second person address "we want to", "you can pretty much eliminate" and "you want to go to". Similarly, the second video uses categorical assertions – "the best news reporting is" – and imperatives – "document for yourself" – in order to present opinion as expert instruction. This fits closely with Wood and colleagues' (2012) findings that belief in conspiracy fulfils a desire for a positive and powerful self-image. This preference for contemporaneous sources seems mutually exclusive to false flag advocates' common tendency to disbelieve accounts from eyewitnesses and first responders (instead framing these individuals as either lying paid participants in the staged event or else naïve individuals who have been duped). There is really no logical resolution to this inherent contradiction. However, this pattern of simultaneously held paradoxical views is also mirrored in the study by Wood and colleagues (2011) outlined above in Section 2, which found that conspiracists were more likely to believe, for example, that Princess Diana was killed by the Royal family *and* that she is still alive, than a person who finds neither theory persuasive. This is also a phenomenon not confined to conspiracy belief: Giles and Newbold (2011), for example, find a

similar pattern in relation to online health forums, where contributors frequently offer negative assessments of medical professionals and institutions but at the same time revere official diagnosis and frequently engage with diagnostic terminology.

4.1.2 *Constructing the self as 'expert'*

Another prevalent feature of false flag narratives arises here: the seeming desire for advocates to construct themselves as experts. This is a behaviour common throughout the dataset, and is what Peplow (2011) refers to as attempts to claim category entitlements. Drawing on Potter who defined a category entitlement as, "the idea certain categories of people, are treated as knowledgeable [...] simply being a member of some category – doctor, hockey player, hospital worker – is treated as sufficient to account for, and warrant, their knowledge of a specific domain" (Potter 1996: 133), Peplow analyses the practices of reading group members who typically wish their interpretation of the text to be the one accepted and preferred by the group. He observes that one common strategy used by his participants is the disclosure of information that allows the individual to claim a category entitlement and thus bolster their views on the text with a veneer of credibility and expertise. The same strategy is at play throughout the false flag discourse in this study. In Video One the specific category entitlement being claimed is vague but could broadly be defined as both expert researcher and expert on false flags. Video Two, however, is much more overt, claiming a range of entitlements for the person interviewed in the audio:

Video Two Description (VO2–2): former school administrator [... NAME OF INTERVIEWEE] spent 41 years in the California public school system, going all the way from custodian to district superintendent. He was a teacher, coach, vice-principal and principal before retiring in 2012 as superintendent of two charter schools. He is highly trained in school safety issues, having organized drills of many kinds, including active shooter drills

Here, interestingly, the 'expert' in Video Two both figures, and discloses, their own lack of expertise. In framing themselves as an expert on the basis of experience in staging shooter situations in schools the individual in fact highlights their own schematic priming to recognise such scenarios as 'fake'. None of these roles actually denote expertise on the subject the interviewee focuses on: the basis for their belief that Sandy Hook is a false flag. Instead, the characterisation of the speaker as an expert is constructed through the sheer volume of entitlements they are afforded. In reality, this profiling highlights, on close examination, that the false flag advocate's experience of school shootings is limited only to staged drills and not real events. Through the lens of schema theory, therefore, this could in fact offer an account of

why the individual thinks that Sandy Hook is a false flag: they are tuning their observations of the news footage against prior schematic knowledge of staged events rather than actual ones.

In spite of their differing approaches, both authors go to great lengths to present themselves as worthy of these expert entitlements: they give advice, they present as knowledgeable and sure, and they have dire warnings for those who do not heed them. Nonetheless, these positions are derived from, precisely, a lack of expertise. The same strategy is employed frequently in the comments from false flag advocates in response to Video Three, who most commonly claim entitlements as medical or crime scene experts, using similar stylistic techniques, in particular categorical assertion and high certainty modality. For example:

Commenter 44 (VO3-1): if this [Sandy Hook] hoax had been real, ambulances *would have flooded* (high certainty epistemic) the parking lot of the school trying to help. *no honest police dept would have allowed* (high certainty epistemic) the road to the school to be blocked by cars/trucks for hours.

Commenter 53 (VO3-2): If you were shot in the lower right abdomen, with such severe injury that you were rushed into surgery within 40 minutes, *you would not* (high certainty epistemic) be picking your mom up at the airport 6 days later. An injury like that *would require* (high certainty epistemic) bed rest for at least 3 weeks.

Here, like the authors of Videos One and Two, authors of these comments simply claim category entitlements as experts on Sandy Hook specifically, often coupling the presentation of themselves as highly knowledgeable by positioning themselves as being in possession of powerful pre-existing schematic knowledge that overrides any expertise displayed within the videos (such as first-hand experience of the scene) coupled with suggestions that anyone who disagrees is stupid:

Commenter 57 (VO3-3): the thing is that, *they know* (high certainty epistemic) that we know is fake, but as long as they can just make America believe the story just for a little, enough time to get people to vote for new unconstitutional laws, *that's all they care* (categorical assertion). mission successful lmao Americans are so stupid [...] *the main mission is to get the whole world into a single nation a single religion and a single currency* (categorical assertion)

Commenter 81 (VO3-4): Nobody is buying the bull\$hit of "Sandy Hoax" Everyone of these people *should be* (high certainty deontic) imprisoned for treason

This closely supports the literature surrounding breaking news stories, which highlights the central role developments in contemporary media have played in facilitating this preference for contemporaneous sources as well as the ability for individuals to position themselves as experts. Wang and Zhuang (2018), for

example, analysed over 20,000 tweets to identify patterns of rumour dissemination on *Twitter*. Consistent with other findings by Morris et al. (2012) and Starbird et al. (2014), they found, “*Twitter* users performed poorly with respect to rumour detection [...] less than 9% would doubt the rumour” (Wang and Zhuang 2018: NP). This pattern fits with work by Gerrig and Egidi (2010) who found that scepticism and disbelief has to be actively created – what they call the “willing construction of disbelief” – rather than being humans’ natural reaction to encountering information. In this context these findings are highly salient: in the initial hours after a story breaks online a wealth of speculation and rumour appears on social media and individuals who prefer conspiracist accounts, and encounter this, are predisposed to accrete it to their narrative schemas as true.

It is interesting to consider Gerrig and Egidi’s (2010) findings in light of Douglas and colleagues’ (2017) summary of the research in relation to the psychology of conspiracy belief outlined in Section 2 above. It may be tempting to assume that conspiracists have a stronger disposition towards scepticism than other members of the population, and Gerrig and Egidi (2010) did not explore variations between groups. However, this assumption does not stand up to scrutiny upon closer examination. Whilst it is certainly the case that conspiracy belief comes hand-in-hand with extreme scepticism in some regards, for instance in relation to governments and mainstream media, it also necessarily entails acceptance of information from sources that are, perhaps ironically, deeply unreliable.

Wang and Zhuang offer two more troubling findings. First, they found that if a rumour circulating on *Twitter* was discovered to be inaccurate users tend to simply stop disseminating it: “the number of rumour-spreading users decreased significantly several hours after the rumour release [...] indicating that the majority of the users were already clear of the truth” (2018: NP). Considered from the perspective of a false flag advocate, this behaviour pattern can be easily shaped to their more sinister account of the narrative: the rumour is true and disappears from the mainstream discourse when the malfeasant group uses their power to remove it. Second, they found that even when debunked to the satisfaction of most of the population, users tend not to redress inaccurate rumours that they have helped to spread:

Once debunked, only 3 to 10% of these rumour spreading users would post a new tweet to clarify the rumour tweets they had posted before. Less than 19% of the debunked-rumour-spreading users would delete their rumour tweets [...] The majority (78–96%) of the debunked-rumour-spreading users would neither delete nor clarify [the rumour they had helped to spread].

(Wang and Zhuang, 2018: NP)

This means that contemporaneous accounts of a rumoured piece of the narrative can be located by false flag advocates as they research the event. Given the belief that information in the immediate aftermath is the most reliable, this offers two versions

of the event, with the one viewed as more credible containing the details that later disappear. Through the lens of schema theory this means false flag advocates are likely to resist tuning their narrative schema for the event to remove the debunked information. As initial rumour, conjecture and misinformation is assessed and filtered it disappears from mainstream reporting: false flag advocates see this as suppression of evidence, and are thus primed to engage in schema accretion that incrementally reinforces their pre-existing conspiracist worldview.

Even in instances where reporting sources do issue clarifications, this may still be viewed as media manipulation to cover up the true version of events, a pattern evidenced in Video One, when the author is scrolling through a news article from a publication local to the Sandy Hook shooting, *The Newtown Bee*. The article is retracting and clarifying information that had initially been reported as the story broke. Again, paradoxically, the newspaper's performance of due diligence in ensuring their report is accurate is framed as acting to deceive. This is in spite of the fact that the publication is local to the incident, a quality that has previously been highlighted by the author as an indication a source will be more, not less, reliable, around two minutes earlier (see extract VO1-1 above):

Video One (VO1-2): There's a retraction story here. Okay? And this is what it says, "an early online report from the scene December 14th shootings at Sandy Hook Elementary School who identified herself as our reporter-, to our reporter as the principal of the school. The woman was not the principal, the school's principal." So this is evidence that there are boots on the ground. There are boots on the ground already. Mis-, disinformation is being spread already. This, this appears to be contrived. There are elements here that should not appear. *Unless*, there is an agenda, unless this is being used, this right here is being used by larger powers. Who is the mysterious woman? So I didn't follow up on that kind of thing but I'm just pointing to you the fact that there are inconsistencies here.

It is not entirely clear what role Author One is suggesting this woman who was initially misidentified as the Sandy Hook school principal has played in the false flag. The military metaphor "boots on the ground" is invoked twice, again indicating a pre-existing priming to activate schematic knowledge cohering with the author's worldview, resulting in a suggestion that the woman is in fact a member of the "larger powers" responsible for the staging. That is, there are no textual headers in the *Newtown Bee*'s article that encourage activation of a military schema: what is in fact happening here is a person looking for a 'military' schema has found one because they brought it to the narrative themselves. The involvement of the military or similar agencies is a very common feature of false flag narratives. As such it seems reasonable to suggest that where non-conspiracists will typically make sense of an article like this through drawing on their prior knowledge of 'school shootings' or

‘mass tragedies’ and assembling a relevant schema accordingly, conspiracists instead activate a ‘false flag’ schema. Viewed through this lens, it becomes clear why Author One would perceive a misreporting of a witness’ job role in the throes of an emergency scene as the presence of a mysterious woman, probably linked to the military or some other clandestine group, whereas a non-conspiracist account would be more likely to interpret these small confusions as an unproblematic and inevitable consequence of trying to report on such a serious and upsetting event as it unfolds. The distinct schematic knowledge that conspiracist and non-conspiracists accrete and tune in relation to an event like Sandy Hook may well thus often be informed by an initial categorisation of the event they expect to see; in this case a school shooting or a staged ‘false flag’.

Next, the account in Video One (VO1–2) shifts emphasis to shifts emphasis to the clarification itself rather than to the clarification itself rather than the woman’s potential actions. Author One offers the assessment “this appears to be contrived” but the non-specific nature of the determiner leaves us none the wiser as to what “this” is. Instead, a vague air of sinister interference at the site is constructed, with the woman’s actions framed as intentional, in keeping with Douglas and colleagues’ (2016) finding that conspiracy believers tend to view actions as deliberate rather than incidental. As will be shown later in this chapter, this tendency towards incomplete claims and a lack of specificity surrounding accusations is another key stylistic feature of false flag narratives.

4.2 Figure-ground configuration: Confirmation Bias

Another prevalent pattern pervasive throughout the dataset is the direction of attention to focus on particular elements of information or argument that appear to support the false flag narrative and distraction away from disanalogous elements that undermine it. This is the same pattern reflected in another analysis of this dataset (Mason 2019b). Cognitive stylistics discusses this through the lens of figure-ground configurations. Figure-ground research draws heavily on the study of attention in Gestalt psychology (Scott-Terry 2009). It explains that as we look at the world around us it is impossible to pay attention to everything; if we did our eyes would be overwhelmed with a *mêlée* of chaos. Instead, humans, usually unconsciously, constantly select elements of the scene in front of us to form the ‘figure’ of our attention in that moment, leaving everything else to fade into the ground. As with the visual field, the same is true when we read or listen to language: some elements come to form the focus of our attention whilst others quickly fade from our notice. In terms of the previous discussion above, therefore, elements that are strongly figured for a person are more likely to be accreted and form a central part

of an individual's narrative schema, whilst things left in the ground are likely to be omitted or quickly forgotten.

Stockwell (2009) compiled a list of good "attentional attractors" – properties that make something likely to draw a person's attention – which trace a clear evolutionary history as qualities of elements within a human's immediate physical environment that may pose a potential threat. In other words, our brain encourages us to pay attention to things that will help to keep us safe. Good attentional attractors include, but are not limited to: newness, activeness, noisiness, empathetic recognisability (humans are better attractors than animals, animals are better attractors than inanimate objects and so on) and definiteness (as opposed to vague or non-specific objects: 'the man' is more attractive than 'a shape', for example) – all qualities an approaching predator would possess entering our visual field and, thus, in our interests to notice (Stockwell 2009: 31). Things that are frequently returned to are also logically more likely to become figured in a person's attention, and thus come to form a key part of their narrative schema, whereas elements that are swiftly passed over or only mentioned indirectly are more susceptible to remaining in the ground, where they stand little chance of being accreted or, crucially in this case, critically reflected upon.

Both videos focused upon here, and many of the comments analysed, encourage a configuration of figure-ground that draws attention to elements that appear to support the false flag account whilst ignoring, or sometimes even actively diverting attention away from, features that may call the account into question. For example, consider this extract from Video Two:

Video Two (VO2–3): the first thing that caught my eye, is I was watching everything play out, was the lack of intensity with which *people were moving*. And that really disturbed me. And it hit me within the first few minutes that, you know, that watching the videos, you know, *the helicopters flying round* and so on things just didn't seem to be right like I would always understand in an incident command system. *People weren't rushing around, people weren't panicking*, uh, uh, *they ran that one guy off into the woods* and then *they arrested him* and there was no, there was no connectiveness to that. I was also wondering why *all the emergency equipment wasn't around* the school, and I didn't see any *students* either, which really bothered me.

Here Author Two shifts rapidly across several figures all being pointed to as evidence of a false flag: moving "people", "the helicopters flying around", two more instances of "people", "that one guy" and the "they" who arrested him, "all the emergency equipment" and, finally, "students". Nearly all of these figures possess qualities of high empathetic recognisability, and even those that do not – the helicopters and the emergency equipment – still imply the presence of humans. Nearly

all are active: the people are moving, the helicopters are flying, “that one guy” ran and “they” arrested. Much of the attentional attraction is achieved through negation, with phrases creating a positive absence encouraging the listener to focus on elements of the scene that are not there including people who “weren’t” rushing or panicking, the emergency equipment that “wasn’t around” and the students the interviewee “didn’t see”. All the figures also possess qualities of ‘definiteness’ with definite articles consistently premodifying the noun phrases. This creates an impression of a catalogue of evidence. By contrast, the interviewee’s assessments of the salience of these figured elements of the narrative are vague and insubstantial: they are “disturbed” and later “bothered” and the highly indefinite “things” are described as “just didn’t seem to be right”.

This pattern encourages listeners to accrete each piece of ‘evidence’ supporting the interviewee’s interpretation of events and then quickly move to another without critically assessing whether this evidence is actually credible, or indeed even noticing the lack of explanation as to why these things should be accepted as problematic. As with the example from Video One where the author repeatedly figures a mis-identified woman initially thought to be the school principal but “didn’t follow up on that kind of thing”, a grounded atmosphere of unease that is never substantiated with an explicit claim is constructed.

This pattern is prevalent throughout the discourse of the interviewee in Video Two:

Video Two (VO2–4): just within the first ten or fifteen minutes it all looked too staged to me. And, you know, I know about staging these things (laughs) since I’ve staged a number of them (laughs) and it, like I said when you stage something there’s a complete lack of intensity as you would have in a real scenario, when there’s panic really taking hold of people and they’re really afraid and there’s screaming, yelling and so on. Plus the one thing that really bothered me was where were the kids? You know they had how many hundreds of kids there at the school? I didn’t see them. And there was lack of accounting for them.

Again the schematic activation and accretion on display here is worth observing: there is a rapid shift between figuring the interviewee’s own expertise, followed by a focus on the movement (or lack thereof) of the people and finally the students (specifically the absence of them). The shift from the claim to category entitlement to the specifics of the imagined scene (where people are panicking, being afraid, screaming and yelling) completely grounds the interviewee’s lack of experience with real active shooter events. These figured elements all paint a rich picture of a ‘real’ scenario filled with attentional attractors of noise, movement and empathetic recognisability whilst backgrounding the fact that the scenario is entirely imagined: the interviewee has never been present at a mass shooting. Before the listener has a

chance to notice this, however, the large, definite and empathetically recognisable figure of "the kids", "hundreds of kids" is introduced to draw attention instead.

Figure-ground analysis thus complements our understanding of what is at play throughout the discourse of false flag advocates, which can often be designated as the result of confirmation bias. Nickerson (1998) defines confirmation bias as, "a less explicit, less consciously one-sided case-building process. It refers usually to unwitting selectivity in the acquisition and use of evidence" (1998: 175), continuing that in instances of confirmation bias, "people tend to overweight positive confirmatory evidence or underweight negative disconfirmatory evidence" (1998: 180). Viewing this through the lens of schema theory is again productive: listeners are presented with a bombardment of features within the Sandy Hook narrative that support their pre-existing and primed schematic perception: a version of events where other possible rational explanations are omitted and are thus likely to remain in the ground, discouraging activation or accretion of a more likely, yet dispreferred, account. Rapid transitions between attractors mask the fact that the assertions are superficially discussed and supported only by the vaguest claims of unease. This again supports the findings of psychological studies that point to a lack of comfort with ambiguity or uncertainty as a common trait amongst conspiracy believers (Douglas et al. 2017; van Prooijen and Jostmann 2013). Whether the presentation of these accounts is manipulated deliberately by the authors is impossible to determine. Given that schema activation is an unconscious process and most figure-ground configuration also passes below the level of conscious awareness, it is entirely possible – in my view, most likely – that the patterns observed in this chapter are not intentionally crafted. Instead, they may simply be the knowledge activation and attentional focuses, and blind-spots, of the authors' themselves, reflected back in their discourse.

5. Conclusion: 'If you can't see the pattern here, there's something wrong'

Ultimately, this kind of cognitive stylistic analysis offers insight as to how these distinct patterns of perceived connections arise. Our mental archives, and the narrative schemas we construct from them are unique, though they may contain broad similarities across groups (Mason 2019a). This is precisely how the distinct perceptions of salience and logic arise between false flag advocates and the rest of the population: because the content of their narrative schemas are different they perceive different patterns and points of contact between them. False flag narratives encourage listeners to see support for the narrative schema they, consciously or unconsciously, intended to construct, meaning that each newly assembled schema interacts with those that came before, and then act as further proof that this version

of events is real, whilst distracting away from the entirely circular nature of this argument, and finally reprimanding that “if you can’t see the pattern here, there is something wrong” (V01–3). This research highlights that the complementary stylistic examination of both schema deployment as well as what is figured, and what left grounded, always merit close scrutiny when analysing the discourse of conspiracists.

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Complementary concepts of disinformation

Conspiracy theories and ‘fake news’

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This chapter looks at the relationship between two distinct but related forms of disinformation currently widespread in political discourse: ‘fake news’ and conspiracy theories. Both play a significant role in the promotion and circulation of forms of false information which are considered by many as a threat to civil society. They are both frequently co-opted as means of political persuasion, often for propaganda purposes. Despite their similarities, the two exist as distinct genres of disinformation. The aim of the chapter is to analyse the nature of their similarities and differences as rhetorical tools in order to provide a more nuanced picture of the role they both play in contemporary politics.

Keywords: fake news, disinformation, propaganda, rhetoric, persuasion, genre

1. Introduction: Contrasting categories of disinformation

On 14 December 2020, the manufactured dispute over that year’s US presidential election should, finally, have been over. The previous week had seen the ‘Safe Harbor Deadline’ on 8 December, when all the states certified their own election results. On the 14th, the electors then cast their votes in their respective states, thus bringing the bulk of attempts to overturn the election result to an end, at least in any realistic practical terms. That’s not to say that the controversies over the validity of the result disappeared on that day. The effects of the disinformation campaign continued to build over the next three weeks before coming to a head on 6 January 2021 with the violent storming of the US Capitol by Donald Trump’s supporters. It seems likely that, even following the inauguration of Joe Biden, allegations of election fraud, and the conspiracy theories which purport to explain how it happened, will continue to circulate amongst some sections of the US population, very possibly for the rest of our lifetimes. What is an open question however, at least at time of writing, is whether the ‘post-truth’ culture which so defined the four years

of Trump's presidency and saw notions of truth in public life assaulted on a daily basis will also continue to thrive. Or whether Trump's defeat in the election will lead to a shift in the extent to which mendacity and deception have been allowed to dominate public discourse.

One of the most overriding issues in political culture during the second half of the 2010s was the way that notions of truth were being attacked and how this tendency was seen to be endangering the values of liberal democracy. Of course, it's not just the United States that has experienced this trend. In many respects it's been a fully worldwide phenomenon. But the United States has provided by far the most high-profile case, both in terms of the fixation that US politics has for the international community and the brazenness with which these issues were enacted by the Trump administration. In some ways, these issues appeared to become more extreme as Trump's presidency progressed, so that media commentators were describing 2020 (his last full year in office) as the epitome of the phenomenon (e.g., Ward 2020; see also Muirhead and Rosenblum 2019, for the way his presidency embraced conspiracism).

Of course, none of this is exactly 'new' as far as politics goes. The narcissism of the present often assumes that what we're experiencing today is fundamentally more extreme than in previous eras, but any familiarity with history will illustrate how mistaken this is (Seargeant 2020). Post-truth has, nonetheless, been one of the defining features of the past several years (McIntyre 2018); and it's one about which discourse studies have much to contribute (see the Introduction to this volume).

The aim in this chapter is to look at the relationship between two distinct but related concepts of disinformation currently widespread in political discourse: 'fake news' and conspiracy theories. Both of these play a significant role in the promotion and circulation of forms of false information and both are frequently co-opted as means of political persuasion, often for propaganda purposes. They also both flourish in the communication environment afforded by social media. Despite their many similarities, however, the two exist as distinct concepts, and the aim of the chapter is to analyse the nature of the similarities and differences between them in order to provide a more nuanced picture of the role they play in contemporary politics. The chapter focuses particularly on the discursive strategies which comprise the genre of the conspiracy theory, at how this has its own set of structural features and communicative expectations, and how it relates to the broader narrative of 'fake news' as this is used as a rhetorical tool by certain politicians and their supporters. The three primary questions the chapter will address are: what similarities exist between the categories of the conspiracy theory and 'fake news'; how can contrasting the two from a broadly discourse-analytic perspective help us better understand them as propaganda devices in the context of political communication; and how can a genre studies approach to conspiracy

theories help us analyse how disinformation, as broadly defined, is used as a form of political propaganda. I will be using as an illustrative case study the ‘Stop the Steal’ conspiracy theory promoted by Donald Trump and his supporters in the aftermath of the 2020 US presidential election, which was frequently combined with ongoing attacks on the ‘fake news media’ in an attempt to discredit the results of that election. In particular, I will focus on the first speech he gave after leaving the presidency, at the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) in February 2021, and at how this functioned as part of the promotion of the ‘Stop the Steal’ conspiracy theory. Before moving to the case study however, the next section will consider the first of the above two questions – i.e., the nature of the similarities and differences between the two categories of disinformation – as a means of providing the conceptual context for the discussion.

2. Definitions, differences and similarities

In his study of the relationship between conspiracies and populism, Bergmann offers a definition of conspiracy theories as “Unproven stories told as truth” (2018: 6). This could just as easily apply to the term ‘fake news’, and indicates an obvious overlap between the two: the notion of purposefully misleading information is of central consequence to both, albeit in occasionally different ways. Furthermore, as Barkun (2003) notes, any evidence which is raised in order to counter a conspiracy theory gets dismissed by conspiracy theorists as itself being false, and as being fabricated by those in power as a means of discrediting the people who have uncovered the truth.

This layered ambiguity around relationships to truth is part of a wider trend in social and political discourse which argues that much of what is taken as reality is, in fact, some sort of illusion or false consciousness. A proliferation of popular terms, from ‘woke’ and ‘red pilling’, to ‘gaslighting’ and the ‘deep state’ – as well as ‘fake news’ and the phenomenon of the conspiracy theory – all purport to identify and raise awareness of the ways in which mainstream culture is nothing more than a smokescreen hiding the true workings of society. Each of these concepts views surface reality as treacherous, and sees those who advocate for mainstream explanations of the social order as duplicitous. Instead, they (and the people who invoke them) insist on the need for an aggressive scepticism as the default setting for basic civic engagement.

Both ‘fake news’ and conspiracy theories are also key elements in the broader area of disinformation. As the authors of the Introduction to this volume write, “conspiracy theories have greatly benefited from (and have in turn fed into) the current post-truth climate”. If ‘disinformation’ is understood as the deliberate use of misleading or fabricated information, particularly for the purposes of manipulation

and deceit, then a certain form of ‘fake news’, along with a particular use of ‘conspiracy theories’, fall within its parameters. Wardell and Derakshan (2017), for instance, define ‘disinformation’ as “false information that is deliberately created or disseminated with the express purpose to cause harm. Producers of disinformation typically have political, financial, psychological, or social motivations”. As discussed below, however, neither phrase has a fully stable meaning, and thus there are certain uses of both terms which do not align so tightly with disinformation. But when used as a form of political persuasion or propaganda, both can be seen as closely related to disinformation. The two have been particularly salient in the second half of the 2010s, to the extent that they have been the focus of several high-profile government inquiries and other research initiatives (e.g., House of Commons 2019).

As noted above, there is nothing particularly new about this. Hannah Arendt famously wrote in the opening of her essay on ‘Truth and Politics’ (2005 [1967]: 295), “No one has ever doubted that truth and politics are on rather bad terms with each other, and no one, as far as I know, has ever counted truthfulness among the political virtues”. Contentious relationships with the news media, which often include controversies over allegedly fabricated or misleading reporting as well as the circulation of conspiracies as a propaganda tactic, have been a staple in politics for centuries. Back in the very first decades of the US republic, for instance, only nine years after the Bill of Rights had been written, John Adams, the second president, introduced the Sedition Act, which made it illegal to publish anything critical of the government, as a means of stifling what he saw as false news and derogatory opinion. A quarter of a century later his son John Quincy Adams was awarded the presidency despite having lost both the popular vote and the electoral college. The fact that he was nevertheless voted in by the House of Representatives led to various conspiracy theories from supporters of his rival, Andrew Jackson, about corrupt bargains and backroom deals. Neither phenomenon then is new to political campaigning, although they have very much come to symbolise modern-day politics.

One element that is, of course, different for modern-day instances of the two is the importance of the online world and social media for their current prominence. The relationship between both ‘fake news’ and conspiracy theories with online communication is twofold. Firstly, ideas which would previously have had a limited and niche audience can now spread widely; and secondly, as they spread online, they end up migrating to other forms of mass media (Barkun 2003), thus furthering their reach.

There are a number of other similarities. In researching ‘fake news’ and conspiracy theories we are, to an extent, taking the existence of the two concepts as axiomatic starting points for our investigations. We are assuming, when we talk of them, that there are stable categories of phenomena to which these terms straight-forwardly refer. In both cases, however, there’s been a great deal of discussion and controversy

about the terminology, often to the effect that it is problematic or misleading (e.g. Farkas and Schou 2020). For this reason, it can be very helpful to begin by looking at how this terminology is used, for what purposes, and by whom, as this offers some explanation as to why it is seen as problematic.

Both ‘conspiracy theory’ and ‘fake news’ are used, in certain contexts, as pejorative terms to discredit the opinions of others. ‘Fake news’ has become co-opted as a phrase by a number of politicians who use it to attack particular stories, reporters, or indeed whole news organisations that they dislike. This co-option happened within a few weeks of the term initially becoming popularised in the media to refer to purposefully fabricated stories. At the beginning of December 2016, less than a month after his election victory, Donald Trump used the term to denounce critical reports in the media, and then, in his first press conference as president-elect, responded to a question from a CNN reporter with the assertion that “You are fake news!” (NPR 2017). As the antagonism between the Trump administration and large sections of the press continued, the term began being used to undermine the legitimacy of the news media more generally, and was co-opted into the right’s long-running strategy of demonising the ‘mainstream media’ for being hostile to and out of touch with the concerns of ordinary people (e.g., O’Reilly 2004). Very early in the administration, Steve Bannon, who was White House chief strategist at the time, insisted that “[t]he media should be embarrassed and humiliated and keep its mouth shut and just listen for a while” (Grynbaum 2017a), while Trump, only a month into his presidency, branded journalists as ‘enemies of the people’ – something which Michael Grynbaum in the *New York Times* described as ‘a striking escalation in his attacks’ even for a president who routinely rebukes the media (2017b). The term ‘fake news’ was thus being exploited as a propaganda tool in its own right, and soon became a symbolic rallying cry for populist supporters of the president.

‘Conspiracy theory’ has, likewise, been used as a discursive weapon to undermine the credibility of other people’s positions (Aistrophe 2016; Dentith and Keeley 2018). It is not a term that conspiracy theorists themselves use when referring to their own interests – instead, words such as ‘truther’ are employed for self-identification. Rather, to call something a conspiracy theory is to refute its legitimacy (Buenting and Taylor 2010; Bjerg and Presskorn-Thygesen 2017).

In fact, there is a popular conspiracy theory that the term itself was invented by the United States government to discredit conspiracy theorists. That back in 1967, the CIA circulated an internal memo which advocated the use of the term as part of a campaign for undermining anyone who challenged or critiqued the ‘official’ narrative of the Warren Commission following the assassination of John F. Kennedy (Nera et al. 2020). The theory, then, is that the label conspiracy theory was purposefully coined and then circulated by a self-serving elite as a diversionary tactic to protect their own interests.

The problematic nature of the two terms has led to calls to avoid them in certain contexts as they are thought to confuse rather than clarify discussions of the phenomena to which they refer. In the case of ‘fake news’, there has been a great deal of discussion in academic and policy circles about whether or not to use the label. For instance, at the beginning of 2017 the UK parliament set up its inquiry into ‘fake news’ and ways of combatting “the growing phenomenon of widespread dissemination [...] and acceptance as fact of stories of uncertain provenance or accuracy” (UK Parliament 2017). Eighteen months later, when they published their interim report, one of the recommendations was that the phrase ‘fake news’ was now being ‘bandied around with no clear idea of what it means, or agreed definition’ and they therefore recommended it should be replaced with something more appropriate such as ‘misinformation’ or ‘disinformation’ (UK Parliament 2018). As a technical term, it can be given a technical definition, but this only delimits the meaning in certain well-regulated contexts, and the existence of popular and often conflicting discourses of ‘fake news’ thus provides a problematic context for its use as an analytic concept – as Wardell and Derakshan (2017) put it, the term “is woefully inadequate to describe the complex phenomena of mis- and dis-information”.

Despite these various similarities, the two concepts are quite distinct, and thus it will be useful to look at more detailed definitions which we can then use as foundations for the discussion to come. ‘Fake news’ is, from one perspective, the easier of the two to define, although it is complicated by having multiple concurrent usages (Tandoc et al. 2018). The initial meaning of the term – which became popularised around the time of the 2016 US presidential election – referred to fabricated stories produced either for financial or propaganda purposes which were purporting to be legitimate news (Allcott and Gentzkow 2017). This definition incorporates different types of misinformation and disinformation: stories circulated as news reports which are completely false; stories based on genuine information which has been manipulated or otherwise distorted; content presented in a deceptive way (e.g., the purposeful misuse of statistics) or in a misleading context (e.g., the recirculation of out-of-date stories). Soon after its initial emergence, this trend was picked up in the discourse of political commentators and public figures as being a corrupting threat for democracy (e.g. Cheshire 2016).

As noted above, however, soon after the term became current within media discourse it was also co-opted for what one might call negationist purposes, and began being used by politicians as an accusation intended to undermine the legitimacy of any reporting which was critical of those politicians (see Seargeant 2020, for fuller discussion). There are thus two very distinct discourses of ‘fake news’ – the first centring around its use to refer to fabricated news stories; the second around its use to criticise the actions or values of individual journalists or news organisations.

The fact that these both use the same term produces a discursive ambiguity which can be exploited for political purposes.

In the case of conspiracy theory, one strategy for defining the concept is by contrasting it with an actual conspiracy. Young and Nathanson (2010) identify four features of real conspiracies: that (1) they're coordinated; (2) they have an illegal or sinister purpose; (3) they're orchestrated; and (4) they're undertaken secretly. For Fenster (1999), a conspiracy refers to an act (i.e., something composed of these four elements), while a conspiracy theory is the perception of an act. We may wish to go further than this and say that a conspiracy theory, at least as far as the term is mostly used, is the *misguided* perception of an *imaginary* act. It is a delusional or deceptive belief about an invented act. There's something of a conundrum here however because the secretive nature of the act (the fourth element in Young and Nathanson's model) means that hard evidence is, by definition, difficult to come by. And this raises some interesting epistemological issues, many of which are exploited by conspiracy theorists themselves. One way of resolving this, however, would be to suggest that conspiracy theories have a particular logic which is not found in actual conspiracies, and that they can thus be identified from their discursive – or generic – structure alone.

3. Conspiracy theories as a genre

The structure of many conspiracy theories, as Uscinski and Parent (2014) suggest, is not that far-removed from normal political discourse. The main difference is that, with conspiracy theories, everything becomes that much more exaggerated, stark and immediate. Bergmann (2018: 55) describes them as having “a separate rhetorical style” and being composed of a specific internal explanatory logic. In other words, not only do they represent a particular worldview, but they do so via a distinctive style of communication. Byford (2011) identified a cluster of key elements he sees fundamental to all conspiracy theory narratives – namely, the inclusion of conspirators, a plan, and the element of secrecy. And as the authors of the introduction to this volume put it, analysis such as this “clearly point[s] to the identification of a set of discursive features that make [conspiracy theories] stand apart as distinctive narratives supporting socially antagonistic values”. In language and literary studies, we would call the idea of a distinct rhetorical logic or set of discursive features a ‘genre’. And while there has been some work, such as that by Varis (2019), looking at particular communicative trends (e.g., memes) as genres of conspiracy theories, there is as yet little detailed analysis of how the category of the conspiracy theory as generally conceptualised might itself act as a genre – and

specifically a genre related to rhetoric and persuasion – and how analysis of this sort may then assist in delimiting the boundaries of the concept.

The term ‘genre’ is used in both literary and linguistic studies, with a broadly similar meaning, to describe the way that categories of text are “determined by formal and functional criteria” (Busse 2014: 103). Categories of text – or of communicative events more widely (Bakhtin 1986) – are seen as having a particular “structural formula” (Halliday and Hasan 1989), comprised of patterns in their discourse, certain repeatable elements and, as dialogic forms of communication, a set of expectations which influence their use and interpretation. While in literary studies the word is used in non-analytic contexts to describe texts depending on their format (play, novel, etc.) and theme (fantasy, science fiction), in language studies the term has the technical meaning of forms of communication which operate in particular sociocultural contexts. For Bakhtin (1986), all such communication belongs to one such genre or another, which acts as a way of organising our knowledge and experience by means of discourse (Taavitsainen 2001). Genres can be seen as goal-directed because they are shaped in part by communicative purposes, and as such they are, as Procházka and Blommaert note, “powerful *argumentative* tools” in certain contexts (2021: 25).

To illustrate these various elements and properties we can take the example of a university lecture. This will have the purpose of imparting knowledge (drawn from a curriculum) to an assembled group of students; it will take place for a designated duration of time; be primarily monologic with perhaps the opportunity for a ritualised discussion by means of questions and answers toward the end; and will use a spoken academic register. The structure of the discourse, with an opening introduction, the body of the talk, and a conclusion, will also follow a general set pattern; and the students entering the lecture hall will all approach the experience with these expectations in mind so that their behaviour, as members of the audience, will be mostly in line with these expectations. Anyone entering the auditorium who was acquainted with the culture would be able to identify almost immediately, based on the language practices being enacted, what was going on.

In sum, then, genres consist of texts or speech events which are goal-oriented and structured according to patterns which are often comprised of various repeatable elements; which create certain contextually-influenced expectations for both speaker and audience, and organise knowledge in a particular way. All of this, moreover, is achieved via discourse.

How then do these factors apply to the category of the conspiracy theory? Conspiracy theories can also be seen as having a particular **purpose** or goal, and using a specific epistemology which relates to a distinct **outlook** or worldview. They are **structured** around a particular archetypal **narrative** which is built on a specific structural logic and, to an extent, they use their own distinct vocabulary or **idiom**.

They occur within certain sociocultural **contexts** and are communicated via various linguistic and semiotic **resources**. All of this creates a set of **expectations** amongst those participating in the communicative event. With a slight rearrangement of the order, this gives us the mnemonic CONSPIRE:

- Context
- Outlook
- Narrative
- Structure
- Purpose
- Idiom
- Resources
- Expectations

These different elements are all linked, with one often providing the basis for another. The particular characters of these elements, in the case of conspiracy theories, are as follows:

Purpose (or goal)

I have already mentioned the way that conspiracy theories are goal-oriented. In essence, the goal is to provide an alternative explanation of events to those given by ‘official’ reports, and this explanation then works as a critique of dominant institutions and offers a simplistic, populist account instead of a detailed analysis of the workings of power. A distinction can be made here between the *political* and the *epistemic* in terms of the purpose. The former refers to the ways in which conspiracy theories are adopted as a form of persuasion or propaganda. The aim in this case is to promote a particular ideological position, and in doing so enlist the engagement of supporters in advocating for this perspective. As vehicles for persuasive rhetoric, conspiracy theories draw on other elements of the genre, most noticeably narrative. This aim results in conspiracy theories being popular among certain types of politicians, not least authoritarians, for whom ends typically justify the means. As Byford (2011) notes, conspiracy theories tend to operate as a refuge for dictators, while Uscinski *et al.* (2016) note that frustrated political ambitions can often lead people to support conspiracy theories as they act as an explanation for the political failure. Both these factors are at a play with the ‘Stop the Steal’ saga, as we shall see below.

Alongside the political function there is a more psychologically-based aim relating to epistemic issues. The purpose of conspiracy theories in this context is the provision of a template for understanding and explaining the workings of power within society. They offer a theoretical model by which events within the

world – particularly those which exhibit a certain complex of sensational or controversial qualities – can be analysed to produce a reason-based explanation (the ‘truth’) which, on one level, offers a way of comprehending the world and shielding oneself from the implications of living with randomness and uncertainty (Douglas et al. 2017), and, on another, accords with, and provides evidence for, a certain anti-establishment ideology.

Procházka and Blommaert (2021: 6) introduce the distinction between the ‘rational’ and ‘reasonable’ as a useful way of analysing the epistemic aims of conspiracy theories. The ‘reasonable’ in this dyad consists of “the construction of plausible explanatory formats in which details of everyday life can be related to some ‘theory’ as proof of that theory”. These plausible explanations are based on common sense assumptions of how the world is (they are what we might describe as folk theories), which in turn relate to forms of reasoning prevalent in the culture, most notably that of narrative or storytelling. Conspiracy theories can thus be antirational in as far as they dismiss institutionally authoritative explanations of events – explanations which are the product of rational scientific investigation – and instead favour explanations which accord with a ‘reasonable’ understanding of the way the world works.

One of the key epistemic issues for conspiracy theories is legitimacy: of both knowledge and authority. The events or beliefs which constitute the topic of the conspiracy theories are subject to competing claims over what is known about them and how this knowledge is used, along with the consequences of the use and regulation of this knowledge as evidence for competing claims about how power is executed in society. For conspiracy theorists, the ‘official’ version of events is illegitimate, as also is the (moral) authority of those promoting this ‘official’ narrative. For those who are promoting the official explanation, the formula is reversed (i.e., the conspiracy theorist’s version, and thus their authority as experts, is illegitimate).

As has been noted, conspiracy theories are inherently anti-establishment. They are sceptical of mainstream or institutional authority and use this scepticism as an authority in its own right. They put forward an alternative narrative or explanation, and base the legitimacy of their perspective on the fact that this is *not* the mainstream.

As such, conspiracy theorist communities act as alternative bodies for the legitimization of knowledge, and do so by means of the key legitimization processes identified by Van Leeuwen (2007). These are legitimization with reference to authority (including expertise and experience); with reference to value systems; with reference to socially validated actions (e.g., the process of ‘reasonableness’ described above); and in accordance with overarching cultural narratives.

These two functions, the epistemic and the political, are different in respect to the nature of the beliefs held by those who voice the conspiracy theories. The epistemic aim is predicated upon the fact that the conspiracy theorist believes what

they're promoting. It is for this reason that conspiracy theories are often viewed as a form of delusional behaviour, practiced by marginalised individuals or communities. The political aim, on the other hand, does not rely wholly on belief from the conspiracy theorist, as their use as a propaganda tool could stem from a pragmatic standpoint as much as a conviction-based one.

Outlook (or worldview)

The value system underpinning conspiracy theories is primarily anti-authoritarian and sceptical. The interpretations they offer of events can be reduced, ultimately, to the idea that official accounts are purposefully deceitful and motivated by a desire for control over the populace. This worldview is encapsulated in the archetypal narrative which underpins all conspiracy theories.

Narrative

Drawing on Goffman's concept of frames (1974), Procházka and Blommaert (2021: 8) argue that for any given incident analysed as an example of a particular conspiracy, the explanation that the conspiracy theorists construct is "scripted in the terms of [a] masterframe", i.e., a set narrative (replete with plot, actors, and effects) into which the details of this new incident can be slotted. Any specific example of a conspiracy theory narrative conforms to a basic archetype which takes the following form: a corrupt and malevolent elite is manipulating public opinion by means of elaborate deception for the purposes of political power and self-gain (Seargeant 2020). There is a very clear Manichaeian strain to this, with those fighting against the plot (i.e., the conspiracy theorists) positioning themselves as representatives of the dominated masses and thus on the side of good versus evil. This archetype trades in generalities rather than specifics, but can be populated with local details to produce event-specific narratives.

Conspiracy theories are also premised on the belief that the deception is authored, and that someone is responsible. The incident which provides the focus for the conspiracy theory is typically dramatic, if not sensational, and the logic of the narrative requires there to be a sense of proportion between event and explanation, i.e., an event which is reported as a noteworthy news story needs an equally noteworthy (and thus satisfying) explanation.

Structure

The structure of conspiracy theories as a genre consists of three key dynamics: absolute causality, simplification and contrastive positioning. The logic which governs this structure is that all events have a cause which can be clearly identified; and that all actions produce causes of some form or other. As Barkun (2003) puts it: nothing happens by accident; nothing is as it seems; and everything is connected. Actions are invariably seen as deliberate rather than random (Douglas et al. 2016); and thus conspiracy theories present a worldview in which all social problems are the result of human planning (Popper 1972). One way to look at this is that conspiracy theories, like fictional narratives, conform to the logic of 'Chekhov's gun'. This is the principle of dramaturgy put forward by the playwright Anton Chekhov that if there is a gun hanging on the wall in Act I of a play, the audience's expectation will be that it gets fired by Act 3. For a conspiracy theory this means that any detail of note that is discovered is seen as an important part of the wider explanation.

Allied to this is the tendency for explanations to be not just all-encompassing – i.e., every stray detail plays its part in the overall narrative – but also to offer a simplistic picture of how power works. Melley (2000) has argued that conspiracy theories substitute a simplistic and populist-inspired vision of the good-versus-evil narrative in place of a detailed analysis of power structures. This is most obviously apparent in the way conspiracy theories ascribe responsibility for events to the agency of specific people or imaginary 'puppet masters' rather than acknowledging the complexities that tend to lie behind the actual distribution and execution of power within society. A conspiracy theory invariably offers a tidy (i.e., simplified) narrative, which is the result of deliberate human machinations.

The final dynamic is that conspiracy theories always stand in opposition to another narrative or explanation. They are always contrastive and rely on taking issue with and rebutting this other pre-existing narrative, which is condemned primarily for its provenance (i.e., as the product of some mainstream or institutional source).

Idiom

As with other genres, conspiracy theories have conventions for their use of language at both the discourse level (especially in terms of the narrative-related conventions mentioned above) and at the lexical level. This latter is not, for the most part, in terms of a particular technical vocabulary, or even a genre-specific register. Instead, it is the use of a cluster of terms which are metonymic, and in some cases symbolic, of broader narratives and ideological stances which are closely aligned with that conspiracy theory. Or to put it another way, the vocabulary used

by conspiracy theorists abounds with implicatures (Blommaert 2020). These will often be terms, phrases or names in common use, but which have been adopted by the community promoting the conspiracy theory as a shorthand for a belief-system to which they adhere. To take just one contemporary example, the mere mention of the name George Soros, the Hungarian-born financier and philanthropist, in the context of the promotion of a conspiracy theory, is metonymic of a traditional anti-Semitic narrative about a plot for Jewish global domination (Wodak 2021; see also Richardson and Wodak's chapter in this volume).

Context

An important component for the production and interpretation of meaning in communicative genres is the context in which they occur. The context influences the rules by which the interaction takes place, and the expectations the participants have for how the communicative event is organised. In the example I gave above of the university lecture the context is, relatively speaking, self-contained and focused. The place is a lecture hall on a university campus; the time is an allotted hour or 90 minutes within the institution's pre-devised timetable; the participants are the lecturer and a group of students; and the communal aims of the group are the studying of a particular topic within a larger discipline-specific curriculum. These all produce the general elements for the context, which will then be supplemented or modified by local details (e.g., the particular location or layout of the lecture hall; the idiosyncrasies of the lecturer's presentation style).

The context in which a conspiracy theory is communicated or discussed is not nearly as neatly delineated as this. The most noticeable differences with the lecture example are that conspiracy theories are not primarily tied to any particular temporal or spatial circumstances, nor are they self-contained in the way that a lecture is. Instead, they can be communicated via a variety of different channels, and for the most part the act of telling is fragmentary and communal, i.e., they are rarely told as a single coherent narrative event (see below). The only real constant is that they tend to be communicated in contexts where the audience will consist primarily, or at least to some degree, of like-minded people, such as those gathered together on a particular internet forum (see also Inwood and Zappavigna's chapter in this volume).

Resources

Conspiracy theories tend to be a dispersed genre which is multi-authored over different texts and modes. The communicative resources conventionally used are likewise multiple. They can be promoted and discussed in books, documentaries, on social media and other internet forums, in political demonstrations, political speeches and press-conferences, on T-shirts and bumper stickers, and so on. A community of like-minded individuals or small groups (e.g., the presenters of a podcast; contributors to an internet forum) collectively narrate, repeat and embellish the narrative by means of these resources, constantly providing additional details and 'evidence' and applying it to emerging events. In doing this they are constantly rebutting and reframing conventional interpretations of 'the truth'. The organisation of this community consists of light ties, that's to say they're very rarely the result of systematised organisations (although occasionally dedicated societies, such as the International Flat Earth Research Society, exist), but instead are united by their beliefs, objectives and discursive practices.

Expectations

It is the combination of all the above factors then which create the set of expectations that adherents to conspiracy theories have when encountering the genre. The logic of the conspiracy theory, built on these fundamental expectations, is that there is an explanation for everything; that every observable detail or fact has a causal implication; and that the truth about this explanation will be hidden by the authorities for their own political purposes. This, combined with the archetypal narrative which underpins specific examples of the conspiracy theory, and ideological beliefs about authority and legitimacy within society, provide a loosely structured knowledge community which can be susceptible to certain forms of propaganda based on a similar configuration of the above factors.

4. A return to 'fake news'

Where does fake news sit within this model? There are two elements to an answer to this, corresponding to the two primary uses of the term. Firstly, as discussed towards the beginning of the paper, the phenomenon of false news stories is used as a propaganda resource for circulating conspiracy theory narratives, particularly those used for propaganda purposes. They are, in other words, one of the mediums by which a conspiracy theory is narrated and promoted. As regards the other use of

the term ‘fake news’, this often itself acts as a metonym for a conspiracy theory, and the allegation that the mainstream media is part of a covert and coordinated effort by powerful elites to undermine the legitimacy of those who have been lawfully voted into office. The term is used to allude to this narrative, often alongside other narratives which make the same general sceptical claim (narratives such as those of the Deep State and allegations around the shadow banning of conservatives on social media). As we’ll see from the illustrative case study in the next section, the discourse of ‘fake news’ thus frequently gets pulled into the promotion of broader conspiracy theories, despite the two also having distinct genealogies.

5. ‘Stop the Steal’

In this final section I will consider how the issues and model discussed above apply to a specific recent example of disinformation rhetoric. This is more of an illustrative rather than analytical case study, but aims to provide examples of the way the issues outlined in the previous section apply to a modern political context. The ‘Stop the Steal’ movement is a politically motivated conspiracy theory which was promoted by Donald Trump and his supporters in the aftermath of the 2020 US presidential election. Their contention was that the election was fraudulently conducted, and thus Joe Biden’s victory was illegitimate. The broad claim was that the fraud was masterminded by the Democrats and other establishment forces, who had been attempting to undermine Trump’s presidency from the moment he was elected in 2016. The allegations took the form of a cluster of more specific conspiracy theories, all of which followed this same general narrative. These were promoted in a variety of ways, including presidential addresses, press conferences, media interviews, rallies, demonstrations and online campaigns (both official and grassroots). The aim was clearly political in intent, although likely involved epistemic considerations as well (it is an open question, for example, whether Donald Trump himself believed in the substance of the allegations, or whether it was simply *realpolitik*).

An example of the diversity of allegations that comprised the overarching conspiracy theory can be seen in the heterogeneous claims that Trump’s attorney (at the time) Sidney Powell made about voter fraud in November 2020 (Guardian 2019). These included assertions that voting machines were purposely designed to rig elections; that massive numbers of dead people had cast ballots; that communist money coming from Venezuela, Cuba, and China had been used to interfere with the election; that the Dominion voting systems that were used in many precincts had in fact been created in Venezuela at the direction of Hugo Chavez; and that the provenance

of these machines was also linked to George Soros, the Clinton Foundation, and Antifa (all of whom function as metonyms for other well-established conspiracy narratives). This list illustrates how interchangeable the details of conspiracy theories can be when used as political propaganda, and how the exact cast of the claims is often subservient to an overarching narrative broadly conceived as malign forces conspiring to seize power. In the end, Powell was fired from her position on Trump's legal team (donaldjtrump.com 2020), following sustained ridicule and criticism for some of these views in the press. But her dismissal appeared to be predominantly the result of differences within the legal team over style rather than substance, and the blunderbuss approach toward the 'Stop the Steal' narrative continued, with Trump himself promoting a similar range of allegations about voting machines, dead people, Venezuela, and communist interference.

At the end of February 2021, Trump gave his first post-presidential speech, addressing the audience at the annual Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) in Florida (transcript at Rev 2021). The hour-long speech was a mixture of attacks on the new president, Joe Biden, and his administration; a listing of the achievements Trump felt his administration had been responsible for; and repetition of the conspiracy theory that the election had been stolen. In analysing how he made the case for these claims, we can look at how the 'Stop the Steal' conspiracy theory aligns with the genre conventions outlined above, and how it also incorporates references to the 'fake news' conspiracy theory as part of its overall rhetorical strategy. It's worth reiterating that a speech of this sort is just one element of the dispersed construction and promotion of the conspiracy theory, and thus the specific textual details that can be identified are part of, and in a dialogic relationship with, a much wider whole.

The immediate context for the speech was a conference which was mostly supportive of the president and his position, including his interpretation of events surrounding the election. For instance, when at one stage he asserted that 'This election was rigged' the audience broke into a chant of 'You won. You won. You won'. The event was also covered by the broadcast, print and online media though, so that excerpts and commentary were relayed beyond the conference hall, and allowed the message to circulate widely.

'Fake news' was referenced multiple times in the speech, in relation to a number of different topics. The former president denied rumours that he was starting a new party ("I am not starting a new party. That was fake news, fake news"); railed against the way the press had covered Biden's election commitments ("I debated him. He wasn't talking about this... We didn't know all about him and the press because they're fake news. They're the fakest fakers there are"); and complained of how Biden was supposedly taking credit for the Trump administration's plans for

rolling out the COVID vaccine (“Joe Biden is only implementing the plan that we put in place. And if we had an honest media, which we don’t, they would say it loud and clear”). In all these cases, the term was not being used with direct reference to the ‘Stop the Steal’ conspiracy theory, but instead contributed to the more general narrative of malign forces ranged against the president. This theme was also echoed in details which did directly relate to ‘Stop the Steal’ however, for instance when he complained that the ‘Supreme Court and other courts didn’t want to do anything about [the alleged fraud]’, thus positioning establishment institutions as closing ranks against him. In each case the term was not being used a conceptual descriptor for a particular genre of disinformation, but was instead a rhetorical tool to index a general, anti-‘mainstream’ media (and thus elite establishment) narrative.

This narrative was given a moral dimension by his insisting that his fight against establishment corruption was not merely a personal matter, it wasn’t simply a matter of his individual electoral loss, but something which he felt honour-bound to pursue for the greater good of the country: “We can never let this or other abuses of the 2020 election be repeated or happen again... We’ve been set back so greatly with other countries and with the world. We need election integrity and election reform immediately”.

There were various call-backs to the claims that were being promoted by people such as Sidney Powell when, for instance, he alleged that there were “[ballots] coming all over the place, where illegal aliens and dead people are voting, and many other horrible things are happening that are too voluminous to even mention”. To supplement the citing of this sort of ‘evidence’, the speech also made great efforts to offer a ‘reasonable’ justification of the need for extreme scepticism: “So how the hell is it possible that we lost? It’s not possible... We, we got more votes than any incumbent, any incumbent president in the history of our country, almost 75 million votes”. The logic here is a prime example of precisely this difference between the ‘reasonable’ and the ‘rational’. Common sense would dictate that if you received several million more votes than you’d managed four years ago, the overall result would surely be positive. Likewise, “18 of 19 bellwether counties that have correctly predicted every presidential election for decades... voted for Trump, not for Biden”, which again would appear to provide *prima facie* evidence that events were going his way. Thus, by clinging to the common sense implications of these isolated facts, the former president could build a convincing case that, by any ‘reasonable’ standard, he couldn’t have lost. This sort of logic was backed up by the highlighting of apparent anomalies which were then interpreted as having ominous causal implications: “When you have more votes than you have people, that’s a problem, right? ... In Pennsylvania, they had hundreds of thousands of more votes than they had people voting. What’s that all about? ... Cheating, they say. Yeah, I’d say so”. His

overall conviction, then, becomes a product of a combination of anti-establishment scepticism and a structural logic which governs the way events are interpreted, all of which are combined together by means of an overarching conspiracy theory to produce a powerful propaganda tool.

6. Conclusion

The aim of this chapter has been to examine how the related concepts of ‘fake news’ and conspiracy theories operate as forms of political persuasion and how an approach which considers their standing as communicative genres in their own right can assist with this analysis. I have concentrated here predominantly on outlining the conspiracy theory as a genre, and on looking at how ‘fake news’, when used to allege a form of intentional partisan bias (i.e. when the term and concept is used as a rhetorical tool by politicians or their supporters), can then be subsumed within this wider category of the conspiracy theory. One of the ambitions for this sort of approach is to produce a model which can be used to distinguish conspiracy theories as a category from actual conspiracies, based on their discursive structure alone. An argument often put forward by conspiracy theorists is that the only difference between verified conspiracies and conspiracy theories is that evidential proof for the former is at such a level that mainstream opinion can no longer ignore it. The corollary here is that any given conspiracy theory is currently lacking this level of evidence, but that when this emerges it too will be similarly embraced as public truth. The contention of this chapter, on the other hand, is that a conspiracy theory is, in effect, a flawed account of the relationship between knowledge and social phenomena at a fundamental genre level, and thus anything which accords with the generic structure outlined in the chapter is, by definition, a form of mis- or disinformation.

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COVID-19 conspiracy theories as affective discourse

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This chapter analyzes online reactive comments to news reports on COVID-19 conspiracy theories, with a focus on hate speech on the origin(s) of the coronavirus. Largely mediated by feelings and ‘polarized emotionality’ (Boler and Davis 2018), COVID-origin conspiracy theories mobilize distinct affective publics online: commenters include supporters of China-origin theories and US-origin theories, and non-believers of conspiracy theories respectively. Informed by the theoretical framework of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), this study explores (i) the emotion-triggering discursive strategies surrounding COVID-origin conspiracy theories and (ii) the linguistic devices that realize these strategies. The analysis is based on 849 reactive comments to five Hong Kong-based COVID-origin news reports posted on Facebook. The study has found that such reactive comments to COVID-origin conspiracy theories share similar discourse strategies with those identified in the literature of discriminatory discourse and (covert) hate speech. Both believers and non-believers of conspiracy theories tap into the topoi of danger and threats, and strategically employ referentials, scare tactics, quasi-fallacious argumentations, and intensification/mitigation to legitimize their ideological stances. These strategies stir up negative emotions channeled through COVID-origin conspiracy theories. This chapter reveals the intricate relationship of conspiracy theories, affect, and hate speech in mediatized society.

Keywords: conspiracy theories, COVID-19, hate speech, emotion, affect, discursive strategies, Critical Discourse Analysis

1. Introduction

At the time of writing this chapter, the novel coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) that causes an acute respiratory syndrome has become a global pandemic. The actual origin of the disease, COVID-19, remains unknown to date. Despite lacking evidence, numerous conspiracy theories about COVID-19 origins have surfaced since its outbreak in late 2019. Conspiracy theories, according to Douglas *et al.*

(2019: 4) are “attempts to explain the ultimate causes of significant social and political events and circumstances with claims of secret plots by two or more powerful actors” (see also Demata, Zorzi and Zottola, Chapter 1 in this volume). A growing body of research has emerged in such disciplines as media studies and political science to scrutinize COVID-related conspiracy theories and their social impact. However, there is to date no explicit recognition and analysis of COVID-related conspiracy theories as *discursive action*. This chapter understands COVID-origin conspiracy theories as mediatised forms of affective discourse, represented through online hate speech (Lee and Chau 2018; Papacharissi 2015). Previous scholars have already identified the close relation between conspiracy theories and affect (Bergmann 2018). This chapter argues that COVID-origin conspiracy theories are enabled and sustained by feelings and *polarized emotionality* (Boler and Davis 2018), thus also mobilizing distinct affective publics online. This chapter, informed by principles of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), explores (i) the emotion-triggering discursive strategies surrounding news reports on COVID-origin conspiracy theories and (ii) the linguistic devices that realize these strategies. In this study, people’s emotional reaction to conspiracy theories is elicited from reactive comments to news reports on COVID-origin conspiracy theories posted on Facebook. As part of the author’s on-going project on on-line aggression in Hong Kong (Lee 2020, 2021), data were collected from Hong Kong-based news pages. The remainder of the chapter is organized as follows: In sections 2 and 3, I first offer a background overview of COVID-origin conspiracy theories, followed by a review of key theoretical concepts and previous research that explicate the relationship of conspiracy theories, affect, and hate speech in mediatised society. Section 4 outlines and describes the categories of analysis adopted by the present study. Section 5 discusses illustrative examples in light of their discursive strategies and linguistic realizations, followed by a concluding section that outlines implications for future work.

2. Conspiracy theories and COVID-19 origins

Despite lacking strong evidence, COVID-origin conspiracy theories have grown vigorously since the first reported outbreak in Wuhan, China in 2019. (For a more extensive review of other COVID-related conspiracy theories, see Bolsen et al. 2020; Bruns et al. 2020). Most COVID-origin conspiracy theories hold either China or the US accountable for the pandemic¹ (Jaworsky and Qiaoan 2020). Two major

1. For convenience, conspiracy theories that blame China for spreading the virus are referred to as ‘China-origin conspiracy theories’ and those that blame the US are referred to as “US-origin conspiracy theories.”

directions of COVID-origin conspiracy theories have surfaced to date: (i) that the virus was directly transmitted to Chinese people via wild animals, notably through the consumption of bat soup,² and (ii) that the virus was caused by humans, i.e. it was caused by a lab accident in Wuhan or brought to Wuhan by the US army. The circulation of COVID-origin conspiracy theories also gives rise to various naming practices of the virus. Media coverage of COVID-origin conspiracy theories heightened when key political figures posted about COVID-origins on social media. On March 6, 2020, former US State Secretary Mike Pompeo referred to the virus as ‘Wuhan Virus’ at a CNBC interview, and said “as a first matter, the Chinese Communist Party has said that this is where the virus started.”³ A week later, Chinese ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian posted on his Twitter account, citing a conspiracy website, that the virus originated in the US, not Wuhan (see Figure 1).



Lijian Zhao 赵立坚 ✓

@zlj517

🇨🇳 China government official

This article is very much important to each and every one of us. Please read and retweet it. COVID-19: Further Evidence that the Virus Originated in the US.
globalresearch.ca/covid-19-furth...



Get the facts about COVID-19

9:02 AM · Mar 13, 2020 · Twitter Web App

2. This conspiracy theory refers to the direct association between bat soup consumption and the transmission of the coronavirus. At the beginning of the pandemic, a video of a Chinese influencer eating bat soup went viral on the internet. The video was believed to have been filmed in Wuhan, China. The influencer later confirmed that the video was made in 2016 in Palau, not China (SCMP, 2020). This misinformation has been used by some to trigger hate against Asians. Although the official report by the World Health Organisation (WHO) indicates that the virus has zoonotic origins in bats, there is no evidence of the presence of the virus in their sampling of bats and wildlife in China (WHO, 2021).

3. <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2020/mar/11/inside-the-ring-global-engagement-secrecy/>

What followed was a series of back-and-forth virus-blaming incidents, or what Jaworsky and Qiaoan (2020) refer to as a ‘narrative battle’, between the Chinese and US governments. Supporters and opponents of conspiracy theories reacted aggressively both online and offline. A critical moment of COVID-origin conspiracy theories was when former US President Donald Trump, who was running for his second term of presidency at the time, first used the term ‘Chinese Virus’ on Twitter on March 16, 2020. Variants such as ‘Chinese virus’ and ‘Kungflu’ were used persistently by Trump in his election rallies in the following months. In response to a reporter’s question of whether the term “Chinese virus” is racist, Trump insisted that ‘It’s not racist at all...It comes from China’.⁴ Since then, there has been a spike of anti-Chinese hate speech, resulting in increasing incidents of physical attacks targeting Chinese people and people of Asian descent. A report published by moonshot in April 2020 (moonshot 2020) found that there had been a 300% rise in hashtags on Twitter that ‘encourage or incite violence against China and Chinese people’.

Blame attribution is nothing new in the history of pandemic-related conspiracy theories. For example, Chinese people were framed as dangerous and practicing unhygienic lifestyles by US mainstream media during the SARS outbreak in 2003, the first cases of which were identified in Guangdong, China (See Bolsen et al 2020). With COVID-19, however, conspiracy theories spread at an unprecedented speed and scale on online platforms that did not even exist in 2003. Public communication in networked media is characterized by their persistence (the potential to record and archive web content), replicability (the ability to reproduce and modify web content), scalability (the infinite possibilities of making content visible), and searchability (the ease of locating a person and their information) (boyd 2010). These affordances create *context collapse*, a concept in media studies that depicts the “collapse of infinite possible contexts” into one, with an “infinitely ambiguous audience” (Wesch 2009: 23). This means that when conspiracy theories reach an infinite unknown audience across social media, the negative emotions associated with them are also amplified as a result (Boler and Davis 2018).

4. <https://www.cnn.com/2020/03/18/coronavirus-criticism-trump-defends-saying-chinese-virus.html>

3. Conspiracy theories as mediatized affective discourse

3.1 Emotion, affect, and online hate speech

Emotion has been researched extensively in various branches in linguistics. In pragmatics, emotions are performed through ‘expressive’ speech acts, i.e. performative utterances⁵ that articulate feelings and emotions. From a discourse-semantics perspective, Martin and White (2005) analyze emotions as part of a system of meanings called *affect*, belonging to the broader system of *attitude*. Early studies of computer-mediated discourse already demonstrated the close relationship between language and emotion in online interaction. An obvious form of linguistic realization of emotion in online media is the use of emoticons that map emotions onto facial expressions, as detailed in Dresner and Herring (2010). Haffaker (2010) also notes that, in discussion forums, posts charged with emotions and sentiments are more likely to receive feedback.

Social media such as Facebook and Twitter are rich in stance, opinions, and evaluation (Barton and Lee 2013; Stieglitz and Dang-Xuan 2013). The commenting function in social media “embodies cognitive, emotional and behavioral aspects” of users’ engagement with news stories (Ksiazek and Springer 2020). Reaction buttons of ‘like’ and ‘love’ encourage and elicit emotional user responses which are programmed into algorithms. Through massive sharing and retweeting of content, emotion is circulated not only within people’s immediate networks, but also to an unknown audience around the globe in high intensity. Recent research has also probed into the emotionality and affective mediascape in political contexts (Boler and Davis 2018; Lee and Chau 2018). The “controversial and polarizing” nature of politics is likely to trigger sentiments and connect people of shared emotion (Stieglitz and Dang-Xuan 2013: 218). Garde-Hansen and Gorton (2013: 1) argue that networked activities in social media create what they call “emotional noise” where emotions are hard to be classified and presented as universally felt experiences. The spreadability of social media offers new opportunities for emotions to spread “horizontally (across e-mails, blogs, social networks and online video sites) and vertically (through journalism, television programmes, print media, and radio)”. Studies have also shown that emotionally charged political stories on Twitter are more likely to be retweeted (Stieglitz and Dang-Xuan 2013). Paying closer attention to language, Lee and Chau (2018) show that there is an intricate relationship between language choice and affective hashtags related to the Hong

5. A key notion in Austin’s (1962) speech act theory, performative utterances are statements that are not merely uttered to describe what people are doing; They are statements that actually perform actions (including feelings).

Kong Umbrella Movement on Instagram. In their study of affective stance markers of the #BringBackOurGirls campaign on Twitter and Facebook, Chilwa and Ifukor (2015) have identified extensive use of emotional language representing negative moods and feelings towards “persons, groups, and governments”.

The COVID-19 pandemic coincides with the post-truth era infiltrated with *affective politics* (Boler and Davis 2018). Post-truth politics, according to Bergmann (2018: 8), is where “the overflow of information drowns out facts and public discourse appeals rather to emotions and personal belief”. In mediatized interaction, truths are guided by felt experiences, i.e. what people ‘feel’ is true. The interplay of emotion, affect, and politics in mediatized communication is effectively captured and scrutinized in Boler and Davis (2018). Social media and algorithms reinforce what Boler and Davis refer to as “affectively reactionary disagreement” and “polarized emotionality”, i.e. disagreement between polarized political camps represented by emotionality, which is rarely based on informed political debates (Boler and Davis 2018). The centrality of emotion in politics also fosters the spread of conspiracy theories, as conspiracy theories are often represented and accompanied by affective discourse (as will be outlined in Section 3.2).

Defining emotion is not a straightforward task. According to Garde-Hansen and Gorton (2013: 30), emotion is “something that people express about the feelings they have, whether the feelings refer to a state of being or to a physical condition”. A salient aspect of emotion is that it does not belong to the individuals, nor is it just a private matter; rather, emotions are collective and socially constructed (Ahmed 2004: 4). Of particular relevance to the context of social media is that emotion can be exchanged and circulated widely among networked individuals (Wellman 2002). Emotions are not static categories but are “configured through relational processes and contexts” (Boler and Davis 2018: 81). The term *affect* is often discussed alongside emotion in the literature (see Papacharissi 2015). Boler and Davis (2018) call for an understanding of affect that orients to the relationality between affect and emotion. According to them, affect is “emotions on the move”.

Affect may be understood as emotions that are collectively or intersubjectively manifested, experienced, and mobilized, out of the “private”, individual realm and into shared, even public spaces [...] Simply put, the social life of emotions, especially when channeled into movement and social movements, can be described with the language of affect (Boler and Davis 2018: 81)

This conceptualization of affect draws attention to the “intersubjective dimensions of felt experience” (Boler and Davis 2018: 81), which has important implications for examining COVID-origin conspiracy theories and hate speech in this chapter. In the context of the pandemic, the enabling of COVID-related conspiracy theories relies heavily on everyday, routine, and repeated discourses of social memory and

shared emotions about the pandemic, such as *fear* caused by the number of cases and deaths, *disgust* of people from perceived source countries, and *dissatisfaction* with governance. In other words, the ‘social life’ of these emotions is channeled into conspiracy theories that are collectively constructed by believers and non-believers. This intersubjective process of conspiracy theories gives rise to discourses that negatively construct out-groups, notably in the form of overt or covert hate speech, both online and offline. Hate speech is not simply an expression of negative emotion. Hateful discourse is *target-oriented*, with a specific individual or a social (out)group as the object of hate (Fischer et al. 2018). One of the aims of this study is to foreground the emotional underpinnings of hate speech that represents people’s reaction to COVID-origin conspiracy theories, by examining online reactive comments to news stories that trigger negative affective involvement (Ziegele et al. 2018). Research in media studies and information sciences has focused on detecting hate speech through sentiment analysis of lexical dimensions such as the use of profanity (e.g. Badjatiya et al. 2017; Gitari et al. 2015). However, many instances of hate speech do not contain offensive words and abusive utterances, and thus they are not immediately recognizable by automated systems. Recent discourse analytic research has suggested that hate speech is often expressed through covert strategies, as in the coded language used in discourses of indirect racism and other discriminatory speech acts (Assimakopoulos et al. 2017). Hateful utterances that are covertly expressed are *inferred* rather than explicitly stated. Baider (2020) argues that ‘soft’ hate speech features such as irony and sarcasm can be as emotion-triggering and powerful as overt hate speech, thus deserving more attention from a discourse-analytic perspective.

3.2 COVID-origin conspiracy theories as discursive action of affect

COVID-origin conspiracy theories presuppose an us/them categorization, giving rise to persistent blame attributions and negative emotions against alleged source countries and their people. Although much research has already examined conspiracy theories in non-linguistic disciplines such as behavioral research, cultural studies and political science, very little attention is paid to the discursive nature of conspiracy theories (but see all chapters in this volume). This chapter examines online reactive comments on COVID-origin conspiracy theories through the lens of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), in that discourse is a social practice that is shaped by and in turn also shapes the situation, institution, and social structure that frame it (Wodak 2014: 303). Social actions, according to van Leeuwen (2009), are always represented and transformed by discourses through processes of recontextualization. In social media, the ease of ‘sharing’ content across media platforms involves recontextualizing an existing text to new contexts of discourse

(KhosraviNik and Unger 2016). As a “problem-oriented and interdisciplinary” approach to discourse analysis (Wodak and Meyer 2009: 2), CDA is particularly relevant to understanding a complex social problem such as conspiracy theories. It is the discourses of and about conspiracy theories that guide people’s attitudes towards conspiracy theories, their decision to continue to circulate these conspiracy theories or not, and eventually their behaviors in response to the pandemic.

3.2.1 *Discursive strategies of negative emotions*

A key characteristic of conspiracy theories is their power to mobilize publics through deliberately spreading intense negative emotions such as fear and anger (Bergmann 2018; Douglas et al. 2020). Although not always explicitly analyzed, a number of CDA scholars have discussed in their work the emotion-triggering potential of discriminatory and political discourses (e.g. Bouko and Garcia 2019; Chen and Flowerdew 2019; Hart 2010; Reyes 2011). For example, in anti-Semitic and racist discourse in Austrian contexts, media have been found to justify exclusions of migrants in terms of the threats and danger they pose to dominant social groups (Reisigl and Wodak 2016). Such perceived threats and danger trigger fear and anxiety (Hart 2010). A typical discourse strategy to predict threats is *scare tactics*, i.e. the exaggeration of (quasi-)figures and statistics that validate such imagined threats (Chen and Flowerdew 2019; van Dijk 1993). In their analysis of discriminatory discourse related to the occupy movement in Hong Kong, Chen and Flowerdew (2019) show how scare tactics are employed by mainland Chinese online commenters to stir up fears and anxiety about the damage the protests would bring to Hong Kong’s economy (Chen and Flowerdew 2019). Their study also found that predictions of threats and danger are accompanied by conspiracy theories, such as young protestors being manipulated by ‘foreign anti-Chinese forces’. These previous works have established the underlying connection between conspiracy theories, negative emotions, and discourse. These previous findings of discriminatory and racist discourse are relevant to the current discussion of COVID-origin conspiracy theories as these conspiracy theories, similar to discriminatory discourse, presuppose an us-them relationship, particularly between the two alleged source countries, China and the US. This us-them relationship is constructed by discourse strategies that are commonly identified in discriminatory discourse, as will be discussed in Section 5.

One of the most basic and effective discourse strategies to mark group boundaries and discredit out-groups is *referential strategy* or *nomination* (Hart 2010; Reisigl and Wodak 2016). Referentials are defined as the “dichotomous conceptualisation of an out-group defined with respect to a coalitional in-group which both text-producer and text-consumer are assumed to belong to” (Hart 2010: 56).

Hart (2010) offers a refined taxonomy of referential strategies, including the sub-strategies of nationalization, de-spatialization, dissimulation, and collectivization, each realized by a variety of “explicit and deictic noun phrases” such as xenonyms, metaphors, and nationyms (Hart 2010: 57). For example, *aliens* and *strangers* are xenonyms that realize dissimulation and categorize the out-group as different from the in-group. A closely related fear-instilling strategy is to imagine a *hypothetical future* in which the out-group would cause threats and danger. Linguistically, a hypothetical future is commonly realized through *if*-conditionals, which convey threats in terms of the past (cause), present (situation), and future (action being justified).

Negative emotion also manifests itself in quasi-rational fallacious argumentations (Reisigl and Wodak 2016; Wodak 2008), i.e. the use of seemingly convincing argumentations to exclude the out-group. Wodak (2008) outlines some key argumentation devices that convey prejudiced emotions including fear, anger, and disgust towards out-groups:

- i. *argumentum ad baculum*, which aims to “intimidate the opponent by using plausible arguments”, e.g. the use of quasi-objective numbers to create a sense of urgency that justifies a political action;
- ii. *argumentum ad hominem*, “a verbal attack on the antagonist’s personality and character”, e.g. the US calling Saddam a ‘dictator’ and ‘war criminal’ to justify the Iraq War (Sahlane 2012), and
- iii. *argumentum ad populum*, “appeal to prejudiced emotions, opinions, and convictions of a specific social group” (Wodak 2008: 64–65), e.g. using terms such as ‘most’ and ‘majority’ to frame an action as receiving mass support when there is no proof thereof.

The persuasiveness of conspiracy theories relies heavily on fallacious argumentations, which are also a common strategy in populist discourse (Bergmann 2020). Linguistic devices to realize fallacious argumentations include allusions, pragmatically vague lexis, presuppositions, implicit or connotative meanings of utterances, all of which guide social actors towards a specific version of a story. In argumentations, ‘outsiders’ are often constructed as being culturally different from the in-group, causing financial burden, or carriers of viral diseases. Fallacies used by dominant groups can effectively trigger negative emotions towards an out-group, and eventually people’s political beliefs and actions.

Of close relation to fallacies are *intensifying* and *mitigation* strategies, which aim to “qualify and modify the epistemic status of a proposition by intensifying or mitigating the illocutionary force of utterances” (Wodak 2008: 63). Reisigl and Wodak (2016) detail the linguistic devices that foreground or downplay illocutionary

forces, such as diminutives, tag questions, hesitations, vague expressions, indirect speech acts, verbs of feeling and thinking, etc. An example in point is taken from Reisigl and Wodak’s (2016) analysis of the Czech president Vaclav Klaus’ texts. Klaus’ fallacy of comparing communism with environmentalism potentially intensifies some people’s distrust of environmentalists’ recommendations about climate change. These strategies intensify threats, thus also stirring up feelings of dissatisfaction of the present situation and fear for the future.

The above-mentioned strategies prevail in CDA studies of political discourse, discourse of (indirect) racism and discrimination. Table 1 summarizes these strategies, the negative emotions that they trigger, and the linguistic devices commonly used to realize these strategies.

Table 1. Discursive strategies and negative emotions in CDA literature

Discourse strategies (and sources)	Negative emotions generated/ expressed	Description	Devices
Nomination/ Referential strategies (Wodak 2008; Hart 2010)	Anger, disgust	Constructing in-group and out-group boundaries by categorizing the self and others.	Membership categorization, pronouns, xenonyms
Scare Tactics (Chen and Flowerdew 2019; van Dijk 1993)	Fear, anxiety	Exaggerating potential threats caused by the ‘dangerous outgroup’ to stir up fear and anxiety	Quasi-statistics
Hypothetical Future (Reyes 2011)	Fear, anxiety	Predicting the negative impact of a future event that can be prevented by present action	If-conditional structure
Quasi-rational fallacious argumentation (Wodak 2008)	Anger, disgust	Using fallacies to construct seemingly rational arguments	Allusion (presupposition, connotation)
Intensification and mitigation (Wodak 2003 and 2008)	Dissatisfaction	Modifying (foregrounding or downplaying) the epistemic status and illocutionary forces of utterances	Vague expressions, indirect speech acts, modal verbs, etc.

4. Data and categories of analysis

As the pandemic is still on-going at the time of writing this chapter, my aim is to analyze online discourse surrounding COVID-origin conspiracy theories that is situated in particular points of the history of COVID-19. The data for this chapter comprise 849 reactive comments⁶ to five COVID-origin news reports posted on Facebook. These posts were selected on the basis that they were illustrative of the *critical moments* (see below) in the historical development and emerging trajectory of COVID-19 discourse. Reactive comments refer to comments in response to online news articles from mainstream news outlets. This means that the comments are not automatically conspiracy theories per se, but are ordinary people's reaction to COVID-origin conspiracy theories in the form of online reactive comments. It is the discourse strategies employed in the reactive comments that enhance or mitigate the epistemic status of the conspiracy theory that the commenters support or oppose. As part of the author's on-going project on online aggression in Hong Kong (Lee 2020, 2021), only Hong Kong-based news pages are covered in this chapter. The changing political situation in Hong Kong also gives rise to increasingly polarized publics, making it possible to identify posts and comments by supporters of China-origin conspiracy theories and US-origin conspiracy theories respectively based on different political alignments. A keyword search for the Chinese terms 肺炎 (pneumonia) and 源頭 (origin/source) was conducted to establish an initial database of news stories posted on Facebook pages that were potentially relevant to COVID-origin conspiracy theories. For this study, reactive comments on five posts that clearly thematize conspiracy theories about the origin of the virus are selected for further analysis. The five posts cover news reports on the key moments related to the development/spread of COVID-origin conspiracy theories in Hong Kong: (i) two posts report the Chinese ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian's tweet, in which he claimed that the virus was introduced by American soldiers, (ii) two posts report Trump's administration criticizing Zhao's theory, and (iii) one reports on a Hong Kong local expert urging the public to stop spreading conspiracy theories about the virus coming from the US. All the comments were retrieved via the website *ExportComments.com*.

6. For ethical reasons, no direct quotations are given in this chapter to ensure that the commenters are not identifiable. The examples given in this chapter are the author's own English translations from the original Chinese/Cantonese comments, and all user-names are removed. Nonetheless, the meaning of the original posts is retained as far as possible to ensure the validity of the discourse analysis. Selected keywords are quoted in their original language where necessary to support the linguistic observations. All examples quoted in this chapter have been test-run on Google to ensure that the original comments are not directly traceable.

Informed by principles and concepts of CDA and understanding conspiracy theories as mediatized affective discourse, the analysis adapts the discourse strategies listed in Table 1 above, summarized below with questions more tailored to the context of the current study.

- **NOMINATION/REFERENTIAL STRATEGIES:** What referentials and naming devices are used to name and linguistically realize social actors of COVID-origin conspiracy theories to convey and stir up anger and disgust towards the alleged origin? In particular: How is the virus named? How are supporters of different theories categorized and labelled? How are alleged source countries linguistically realized? How are cultural differences discursively constructed to stir up negative emotions?
- **SCARE TACTICS AND HYPOTHETICAL FUTURE:** How are present and future threats from source countries represented, predicted, or exaggerated to trigger fear and anxiety (among conspiracy theory supporters and opponents)?
- **QUASI-RATIONAL FALLACIOUS ARGUMENTATION:** How do supporters of COVID-origin conspiracy theories use seemingly credible arguments to make these conspiracy theories believable? What kinds of presuppositions are embedded in their comments?
- **INTENSIFICATION AND MITIGATION:** Of specific relevant to hate speech or indirect racism is: how are speech acts of discrimination intensified or mitigated to amplify negative emotions?

These strategies may be used independently or in combination. Following the triangulation procedures of CDA research (van Leeuwen and Wodak 1999), the study has considered three dimensions of the data, i.e. content, discursive strategies, and linguistic realization.

5. Discursive construction of COVID-origin conspiracy theories

5.1 Nomination/referential strategies

Nomination or referential strategies are the most straight-forward negative emotion-triggering strategies in verbal attack. Xenonyms and nationyms, for example, are common devices identified in hate speech of racism and discriminatory discourse (Baider and Constantinou 2020). In the context of COVID-origin conspiracy theories, there are five key hate targets in the data, namely:

- i. supporters of China-origin conspiracy theories,
- ii. supporters of US-origin conspiracy theories,
- iii. lay people who do not subscribe to conspiracy theories,
- iv. alleged source countries and their people,
- v. experts or authorities who attempt to debunk conspiracy theories, and
- vi. the virus *per se*.

First and foremost, COVID-origin conspiracy theories are instantiated and sustained by the naming practice of the virus. Supporters of China-origin conspiracy theories echo Trump's use of 'Chinese virus', while the US-origin theorists call the virus 'US Virus'. Premodifying the noun 'virus' or 'pneumonia' with a nationym presupposes a source, thus guiding the audience towards a certain version of the conspiracy theory. Negative-other construction is also achieved through distortion of nationyms. In discrediting the US, supporters of US-origin conspiracy theories replace the first part of 美國 (*mei5 gwok5*, USA) with the homophone 尾 (*mei5*), which literally means 'tail' or 'end', implying 'the worst'.

Dehumanizing metaphors are employed to discredit all social actors or alleged source countries. For example, supporters of Trump's naming practice have been referred to as 'American dogs', while supporters of US-origin conspiracy theories are called 'locusts' and 'pet dogs'. Another common referential strategy in the data is politicization through politonyms (see Reisigl and Wodak 2005: 45). Both China-origin conspiracy theory and US-origin conspiracy theory supporters have been labelled in terms of their political parties or stances, such as 'CCP' (Chinese Communist Party) which anti-Chinese commenters use to refer to all Chinese people; 'yellow ribboners'⁷ are those who support Trump's use of the expression Chinese virus to foster anti-China sentiments; and 'blue ribboners' is used to label pro-China Hong Kong people. At the same time, lay people who do not subscribe to conspiracy theories have used anthroponyms that denote or connote mental deficiency of the conspiracy theory believers (e.g. 'retarded', 'primary school chicken'). Finally, negative habitonyms (Reisigl and Wodak 2005) are references that denote unfavorable habits of hate targets, such as 'liars' or 'country of deception' to discredit China as untrustworthy in general. Table 2 is a summary of the key nomination strategies and linguistic devices used to represent different social groups and hate objects in COVID-origin conspiracy theories.

7. During the Hong Kong Umbrella Movement and recent protests, a yellow ribbon symbolizes the pro-democracy camp and a blue ribbon symbolizes the pro-China camp (see Lee and Chan, 2018).

Table 2. Nomination strategies and hate objects in COVID-origin conspiracy theories

Actors/Hate objects	Key strategies and linguistic devices	Examples
The virus	Nationyms/xenonyms/ metaphors to premodify the word ‘virus’ or ‘pneumonia’	Chinese Wuhan virus, US Flu*, 中国病毒 (Chinese virus), 美国肺炎 (American pneumonia), 蝗族肺炎 (locust-empire pneumonia), 支那狗肺炎 (China-dog-pneumonia), CCP Virus
Supporters of China-/ US-origin conspiracy theories	Dehumanization/ Metaphors	黃絲 (yellow ribboners), 港奴 (Kong-slave), 狗奴隸 (dog-slave), 漢奸 (traitor), 白甲 (cockroach), 蝗蟲 (locust), 尾國肺炎狗 (American pneumonia dog), 共匪養的一條狗 (a pet dog of the CCP bandit), 港豬 (Kong-pig), 腦殘藍屍 (retarded blue ribboners), 小學雞 (primary school chicken)
Source countries (and their people)	Collectivization involving the use of dehumanizing metaphors	大陸人 (Chinese mainlanders), 霉國 (rotten country), 美狗 (American dogs), CCP (Chinese Communist Party), 大話國 (country of lies)
Experts and authorities	Dehumanizing metaphors, attribution of negative quality	走狗教授 (lackey professor), 香港黑教授 (Hong Kong gangster professor)

* Examples presented in English without Chinese counterparts in this table were originally written in English in the comments.

Although these are typical nomination strategies that have been identified in previous CDA research on discriminatory discourse (Hart 2010; Reisigl and Wodak 2005), referentials in online hate speech come in high intensity. For example, the same person would repeatedly make hateful comments under the same post, or repeat the same expression within a comment or across several comments. In Example (1), the same name for the virus is repeated six times, bilingually, in the same reactive comment.

- (1) Wuhan Virus 中國武漢肺炎 Wuhan Virus 中國武漢肺炎 Wuhan Virus 中國武漢肺炎 Wuhan Virus中國武漢肺炎 Wuhan Virus 中國武漢肺炎 Wuhan Virus 中國武漢肺炎 Wuhan Virus 中國武漢肺炎

The use of this referential strategy is not only linguistically realized, but also visually and emotionally intense when repeated six times in the same comment. Every time an utterance is repeated, its illocutionary force is reenacted, thus intensifying the epistemic status of the utterance, as will be discussed later. Repetition is also a characteristic of hateful and racist discourse to create a ‘hostile environment’ causing emotional distress to the hearer (Calvert 1997).

5.2 Scare tactics and hypothetical future

Scare tactics appeal to the emotion of fear. At the most basic level, the use of vague figures and numbers of people who have been infected or died triggers the shared emotions of fear, disgust, and anger towards an alleged source country. For example, a supporter of US-origin conspiracy theories wrote in Example (2):

- (2) hundreds of millions of us have got USA virus !

While it is impossible to tell precisely who “hundreds of millions of us” are, this large but unspecified number presupposes a significant mass ‘us’ who are infected with a virus that they believe to have originated in the US (as implied in the nomenclature “USA virus”), thus also intensifying the status of the US-origin theory.

Another scare tactic is the framing of COVID-origin conspiracy theories as declarations of war. Against the backdrop of the deteriorating relations between China and the US, US-origin conspiracy theory supporters interpret conspiracy theories as a warning:

- (3) Don't the CCP realize this accusation is a declaration of war?
 (4) The US is starting a war with Chinese people. The Chinese are being excluded. You'd better watch your back, China.

Examples (3) and (4) react to Trump's claim of the virus coming from China. The China-origin conspiracy theory is taken by the two commenters as a *threat-connoting cue* (Hart 2010). On one hand, these comments introduce another conspiracy theory to discredit the US – that a war more destructive than the virus is in the making; on the other hand, the comments construct the US as a common enemy, thus mobilizing further anti-US sentiments. Linguistically, both indirect and direct representations of threats are identified. Example (3) uses a negative rhetorical question, which is an assertion in disguise and has strong potential to “evoke greater anger and negative feelings” (Leggitt and Gibbs 2000). The question indirectly encourages the audience to interpret COVID-origin conspiracy theories as a precursor to a real war. Example (4) contains a directive speech act of warning that directly addresses China (‘You'd better watch your back, China’). Resisting China-origin conspiracy theories, these predictions of war-related threats are also emotional appeals, developing a strong sense of fear and antagonism towards the US.

A strategy that cannot be separated from scare tactics is the construction of a *hypothetical future*. Predicting future threats often serves as an excuse for further exclusions of out-groups (Reyes 2011), as illustrated in Examples (5) and (6):

- (5) China should ban returnees from abroad. *If* China allows these people to return to their home country, they might bring with them the US virus, and spread it once again within the country.
- (6) *If* China keeps accusing the US, China will lose (Taiwan) soon. Very soon the US will declare Taiwan independence.

Both (5) and (6) contain an *if-conditional*, a common device to predict threats in political discourse (Reisigl and Wodak 2016). A hypothetical future connects different points in history – the present is the time for immediate action, which is justified by a cause in the past, and if immediate action is not taken, there will be a negative consequence in the future. Example (5) reacts to the news report on Trump's use of the expression Chinese virus. As a way of excluding the US, the commenter is encouraging China to ban nationals who have moved overseas (present) from returning to China because of the rise in imported COVID cases (past), and if this is not done, there will be another outbreak within the country (future). This comment serves as a directive for China to be more proactive, stirring up negative emotions towards overseas Chinese (who were alleged virus carriers). Example (6) predicts a future that escalates the long-standing US-China conflict over the political status of Taiwan. These predictions are not based on facts and do not necessarily influence political actions. However, through collectively imagining an undesirable future for China because of the US, the commenters, who may be supporters of US-origin conspiracy theories or opponents of China-origin conspiracy theories, effectively naturalize and legitimize negative constructions of the US, thus evoking shared emotions towards the country.

5.3 Quasi-rational fallacious argumentation

Believers of conspiracy theories are more susceptible to fallacy, especially conjunction fallacy, i.e. an error in reasoning where two separate events are judged to co-occur (Brotherton and French 2014). In the data, fallacies are situated within the argumentation schemes (topoi), i.e. recurring themes where arguments are made, of cultural differences and past actions by the out-group. For example, supporters of China-origin conspiracy theories structure their arguments against Chinese people around the topoi of 'cultural difference' such as bat-eating and 'dishonesty' such as fabrication of official statistics. The US is equally subject to fallacious argumentation by US-origin conspiracy theory supporters, such as equating the US influenza outbreak in 2019–2020 with COVID-19. Other examples include covert verbal attack on personality and character (*argumentum ad hominem*) and appeals to prejudiced emotions (*argumentum ad populum*) (Wodak 2008: 64–65).

(7) This is CCP culture.

Reacting to Zhao Lijian's tweet in which a conspiracy website is cited, the predication in (7) uses the referential, 'CCP culture'. This device attaches negative qualities such as dishonesty and unreliability to Chinese people, as the Chinese Communist Party is often accused of fabricating official statistics (Chow 2006). In a similar fashion, supporters of US-origin conspiracy theories also draw on the topos of dishonesty to negatively construct the US as unreliable and dishonest:

- (8) ...Don't you ever wonder why over 37,000 people died from flu in the US within a year? Could a developed country with flu vaccines have so many deaths (from flu)? ... There is a reason to suspect that some might have died from the coronavirus...

The comment in Example (8) presents a seemingly rational argument: First, it draws on the common strategy of scare tactic; second, the quasi- or rhetorical question 'Don't you ever wonder...' invites the audience to believe that COVID-19 might have already been discovered in the US at that time. This comment contains the pragmatic presupposition that the US, as a developed country, should have already discovered the coronavirus before the pandemic. Not only do these seemingly rational argumentations help justify and legitimize negative-other representations; the recurring topoi of threat and danger achieve "emotive effects" (Hart 2010: 66). In the data, the argumentation schemes of (un)trustworthiness, cultural differences, pre-COVID diseases and associated figures have been manipulated by both China-origin and US-origin conspiracy theory supporters to intensify their disgust and anger towards the perceived source country.

5.4 Intensifying and mitigation strategies

The coercive power of conspiracy theories relies on the epistemic status of the utterances that represent conspiracy theories, and such epistemic status can be modified, either by intensifying or mitigation of illocutionary forces (Wodak 2008). Some of the examples discussed in the previous sections already exemplify such strategies. For example, the equation of communism with dishonesty in Example (7) above intensifies the illocutionary force of the writer's belief of China being unreliable. Mitigation strategy is also employed to downplay one's support of a COVID-origin conspiracy theory. Example (9) below invites the audience to terminate the whole discussion by asking a rhetorical question, so as to exclude differing opinions on China-origin conspiracy theories. This is followed by an expression of pseudo-presupposition of knowledge, 'everyone knows...' (Flowerdew

and Loeng 2010). Doing so enables the writer to both delegitimize the status of the China-origin conspiracy theory in question and normalize it by reframing it as a matter of fact.

- (9) What's the point of continuing this discussion? *Everyone knows* where it (the virus) started

Linguistically, the most basic device to intensify the epistemic status of utterances is using epistemic modality. The modal 'must' in Examples (10) and (11) below amplifies the speaker's high degree of certainty about China-origin conspiracy theories:

- (10) The origin *must* be Wuhan p4 lab
(11) *Must* be batman

In addition, *batman* in Example (11) is a referential that mocks Chinese people for their bat-eating habit which allegedly became the source of the coronavirus. At the beginning of the virus outbreak, a video showing a Chinese woman enjoying a bowl of bat soup went viral on social media. Since then, hate speech that equates bat-eating with the coronavirus has surged (Schild et al. 2020). This brief comment "must be batman" contains both intensifying and mitigation strategies that topicalize the underlying conspiracy theory that the coronavirus was first transmitted to humans from bat consumption in China (see footnote 2). On one hand, the modal verb *must* intensifies the writer's certainty of their belief; on the other hand, the noun *batman* mitigates the illocutionary force of hateful speech act by way of mockery or sarcasm, a common covert hate speech strategy found in online comments to news reports (Assimakopoulos et al. 2017).

In online communication, intensification can also be realized visually, as shown in the repeated displays of the name 'Wuhan virus' in Example (1) above. Online commenters also exploit punctuation marks, emoticons, capitalization and other symbols (Sierra, 2021) to intensify their utterances, as shown in the following examples:

- (12) American dogs start barking 🐕
(13) I have always called it Wuhan virus! It is Wuhan virus!!!

The thumbs down emoji 🐕 in Example (12) intensifies the dehumanizing referential and metaphor *American dogs* that precedes it, reinforcing a negative construction of Trump supporters. In Example (13), the writer uses three exclamation marks to intensify their endorsement of the term *Wuhan virus*. The affordances of computer-mediated communication allow writers to play with keyboard strokes to perform a range of discourse functions (Barton and Lee 2013). In these examples, not only are the illocutionary forces of the utterances intensified, but also the emotions and affect attached to them.

6. Conclusion

This chapter has revealed the intricate relation of conspiracy theories, affect, and online discourse, by analyzing and discussing emotion-triggering discursive strategies in online reactive comments related to COVID-origin conspiracy theories. Informed by the framework of CDA, this qualitative and exploratory analysis has found that COVID-origin conspiracy theories share similar discourse strategies with those identified in the literature of discriminatory discourse and (covert) hate speech, especially those by powerful social groups and political actors. In the context of the current study, both believers and non-believers of certain conspiracy theories tap into the topoi of danger and threats. The strategic uses of referentials, scare tactics, argumentations, and intensifying/mitigation are not confined to traditionally powerful social groups. The study has also found that China-origin conspiracy theory supporters and US-origin conspiracy theory supporters have taken up similar strategies and linguistic devices to convey and stir up negative emotions channeled through COVID-origin conspiracy theories.

This study has probed into the emotional underpinnings of conspiracy theories and pandemic discourse. Largely mediated by collective feelings and ‘polarized emotionality’ (Boler and Davis 2018), discourses surrounding COVID-origin conspiracy theories have successfully mobilized two distinct affective publics online, notably China-origin conspiracy theory supporters and US-origin conspiracy theory supporters. Collective memory and emotion are crucial in building solidarity during the pandemic, especially when people are isolated and physically distanced during lock-downs (Depoux et al. 2020). Collectivity is also central to the construction of conspiracy theory-related hate speech, because believing in and spreading conspiracy theories can be a source of social stigma (Lantian et al. 2018). In other words, conspiracy theory endorsers and opponents need to act and feel collectively to construct themselves as a dominant group of ‘collective victims’ (Fischer et al. 2018). Hateful discourse towards perceived source countries is thus normalized by abiding to a shared set of ‘feeling rules’, i.e. “the prescribed emotional behaviors that situate people in different social contexts through affective expectations” (Boler and Davis 2018: 78).

Methodologically, there is still a need to further refine the various categories of discourse strategies, and foreground the interplay among these categories. Multiple CDA studies, especially those on out-group representations and legitimation, have provided lists of discourse strategies that do not clearly account for “the links among various levels of discourse analysis”, and the strategies “can manifest themselves at all levels” of analysis (KhosraviNik 2010: 58). This is true of the current study. For example, referentials and rhetorical questions occur in most discourse strategies. Commenters draw on fallacies and argumentations when employing scare tactics

and constructing a hypothetical future. In the context of reactive comments in social media, anyone can become part of the in-group or out-group of a certain conspiracy theory by employing similar discourse strategies and linguistic devices to represent counter-conspiracy or counter-hate. Researching conspiracy theories cannot be separated from studies of hate speech. The chapter provides further empirical evidence for the emerging body of research on ‘indirect’, covert or soft hate speech online. It also calls for a more in-depth analysis of emotions in hate speech from a discourse-analytic perspective. It is also worth noting that the examples analyzed in this chapter are not automatically conspiracy theories per se, but are people’s reaction to conspiracy theories, represented by the everyday discourses of online comments. Whether a commenter supports a certain conspiracy theory was only perceived and inferred by the analyst. Ideally, a more valid interpretation of the data would include perspectives from conspiracy theory creators and supporters. However, this may be impractical, as the term ‘conspiracy theory’ entails stigmatized knowledge in that no one would admit to being a conspiracy theorist (Bergmann 2018).

In mediatized society, conspiracy theories increasingly guide people’s behaviors that have direct consequences to socio-political issues (Bergmann 2018, 2020). COVID-origin conspiracy theories have become a form of ‘viral discourse’, literally and metaphorically (Jones 2021). Pandemic-related conspiracy theories and misinformation online rapidly spread fears and confusion, creating a ‘social media panic’ (Depoux et al. 2020). The production and circulation of discourses surrounding COVID-19 conspiracy theories and people’s collective emotions not only influence their health decisions, but also escalate exclusions and prejudice in society. Understanding the common conspiracy theory topoi and discourse strategies is important as they “activate mental modules in ways which promote decisions in favor of exclusion” (Hart 2010: 10), thus having the potential to promote further conspiracy theories and hate speech. While conspiracy theories and hate speech cannot be stopped, (critical) discourse analysts can help uncover the covert strategies in online discourse that are not immediately recognizable to ordinary online participants as potentially harmful and biased. Systematic analyses of the recurring discourse patterns in online conspiracy theory discourses can potentially inform policies of media literacies and education.

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PART III

Social media and conspiracy theories

The ID2020 conspiracy theory in YouTube video comments during COVID-19

Bonding around religious, political,
and technological discourses

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This chapter explores a dataset of YouTube video comments about the ‘ID2020’ conspiracy theory, which claims that Bill Gates is part of a global conspiracy to mandate a COVID-19 vaccine incorporating a tracking microchip. This conspiracy theory merges religious discourses about the ‘Mark of the Beast’, with discourses about quantum dot and blockchain technologies. The chapter aims to understand the kinds of values that are negotiated by users who interact with ID2020 conspiracy videos by posting in YouTube comment sections. The appraisal and communing affiliation frameworks developed within Systemic Functional Linguistics are used to investigate evaluative language and social bonding in the dataset. The results reveal distinct textual personae bonding around positions such as anti-globalism, anti-technology, political scepticism, and anti-vaccination.

Keywords: COVID-19, conspiracy theories, YouTube, systemic functional linguistics, bonding, affiliation, technology, religion, politics, discourse

1. Introduction

During the COVID-19 pandemic, conspiracy theories on YouTube have become abundant. Whilst YouTube has removed some conspiratorial videos, such as the viral ‘Plandemic’ video,¹ videos remain on the platform that spread conspiracies about COVID-19 under the guise of religious, political, or technological content. This chapter will explore a dataset of YouTube comments about the ID 2020 conspiracy

1. ‘Plandemic’ was a video that promoted the views of anti-vaccination activists and received millions of views on YouTube before being removed from the platform.

theory, focusing on what users are bonding around when they decide to watch these sorts of videos. A Systemic Functional Linguistics approach is undertaken in order to understand language from an interpersonal and social meaning-making perspective. The ID2020 conspiracy theory falsely claims Bill Gates is part of a global conspiracy planning to force people into having a COVID-19 vaccine that contains implanted microchips or 'Quantum Dot Tattoos' to track individuals.² These conspiracy theories highlight Gates' role in the 'Digital Identity Alliance' or 'ID2020' a non-profit organisation partially funded by Gates that conducts research into real-world applications of digital identities. Although Gates is involved in this organisation, ID2020 is not involved in any projects regarding the COVID-19 pandemic. The ID2020 conspiracy also references 'the mark of the beast', a biblical reference to a mark that all humans will be required to have in order to 'buy or sell'.³

This chapter is concerned with what users are bonding around when they watch ID2020 conspiracy videos on YouTube and the linguistic resources they use to achieve these aims. It will firstly discuss previous research into conspiracy theories on YouTube, and research into conspiracy theories more broadly. The theoretical framework for this research, Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), will be introduced as a means for understanding language from a social perspective. The sampling strategy and dataset for this chapter will then be explained. The method section will detail the SFL frameworks of Appraisal and Affiliation as a way of understanding key evaluative language and bonding strategies. The results will be presented around the key discourses explored in the dataset. Lastly, reflections will be provided on how an SFL approach to social bonding can be applied to other conspiracy theory case studies in the future.

2. YouTube and conspiracy theories

YouTube is a worthy platform to analyse in relation to conspiracy theories due to its algorithmic affordances which provide users with a constant stream of recommended videos, and its commenting affordances of pseudonymous identities. These affordances have contributed to YouTube's history as a platform that promotes extremist views. Previous qualitative research regarding deceptive content on YouTube, has explored right-wing extremist communities (Ekman 2014; Lewis 2018; Levy 2020), populist YouTubers (Finlayson 2020; Zuk and Zuk 2020) and conspiracy videos (Allington and Joshi 2020; Mohammed 2019; Paolillo 2018).

2. cf. <https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/bill-gates-id2020/>

3. Biblical reference in Revelation 13:15–18.

Whilst there is a large body of research analysing deceptive content on YouTube, a close discourse analysis approach of the kind undertaken in this chapter has been neglected. In addition, the affiliation framework used in this chapter focuses on a nuanced interpersonal interpretation of conspiracy theories to understand why people bond around conspiracy theories, in contrast to an experiential interpretation that focuses on identifying what is false but neglects social bonding.

The study of conspiracy theories has been explored from a range of philosophical, political, and media studies perspectives. The literature on conspiracy theories can be divided into works which focus on conspiracy theories as political propaganda (Cassam 2019; Yablokov 2015), versus works that discuss the importance of conspiracies in terms of epistemology (Coady 2012; Jane and Fleming 2014; Pigden 2007). This chapter is focused on studying conspiracies as political propaganda and aligns with Cassam's definition that conspiracy theories "...are political gambits whose real function is to promote a political agenda. They aren't just 'theories' like any other" (Cassam 2019: 7). Thus, this chapter analyses conspiracy theories as acts of deceptive communication, where users bond around shared ideologies that deliberately involve in-grouping and out-grouping certain people or organisations.

3. Dataset

The dataset analysed in this chapter consists of YouTube comment threads taken from five videos. This section will explain the two sampling strategies undertaken: the sampling strategy for the YouTube videos selected and the sampling strategy used to determine which comments would receive a close discourse analysis.

3.1 Sampling strategy for YouTube videos

Initially, a sampling strategy needed to be developed in order to select popular YouTube videos about the ID2020 conspiracy theory. *YouTube Data Tools* was used in order to obtain videos related to ID2020 via a YouTube API (Application Program Interface). The criteria for selection was that these videos were in English, had comments enabled, and had at least 10,000 views. The videos obtained by YouTube Data Tools either contain 'ID2020' in the title or the description of the video. Whilst there were 262 videos in English that mentioned the ID2020 conspiracy and had at least one comment, only 5 videos had over 10,000 views and over 1,000 comments. These videos were selected on the basis that they were popular videos, with a wide-reaching audience. Details about these videos are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Video dataset

Video title	Channel	Views*	Comments
Bill Gates – Microchip Vaccine Implants to fight Coronavirus	Law of Liberty	1930163	3037
Global Pandemic PLANNED? ID2020, Vaccines & Crypto!	Chico Crypto	445398	2262
Bill Gate The ID2020 And The Mark Of The Beast	Rafael Matos	211267	1364
BILL GATES MICROCHIP VACCINE IMPLANTS HELPS STOP CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC	Carolyn von Petzholdt	134692	1155
TRUMP, BILL GATES, FAUCI, MARK OF THE BEAST, DIGITAL IMPLANTS AND HYDROXYCHLOROQUINE	Laura-Lynn Tyler Thompson	105279	1451

* Video data accessed on 7th August 2020.

3.2 Sampling strategy for comments

The sampling strategy for comments involved a grounded theory approach. This process consisted of searching for patterns in the data, until reaching a point of saturation, where no new patterns could be detected (Strauss and Corbin 1997). All the main comments from each video (replies were excluded from this dataset) were categorised based on the main target of evaluation in the comment. Due to the short nature of the comments, there was a clear main target of evaluation that was identified for each comment. Thus, from this grounded theory approach five main categories were derived, based on shared themes and words the comments had in common, collected across all the videos. This is shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Grounded theory approach to comment sampling

	Name of category	Common words that the comments contained
1.	COVID-19 and Vaccines	COVID-19, vaccines, virus, flu, coronavirus, plandemic, pandemic, hydroxychloroquine
2.	Elites and Governments	Elites, Bill Gates, new world order, evil people, government, Trump, Dr Fauci
3.	Religion	Mark of the beast, tribulation, God, religion, Bible
4.	Technology	5G, cryptocurrency, blockchain, quantum dots, chips, microchips, technology
5.	Debunking	Conspiracy, tinfoil hat

Once these categories were established, for each of the five categories 15 comments were selected from each video. In total, a dataset was constructed of 375 comments that could be closely analysed. By adopting this thematic approach, this allowed a diverse range of comments to be analysed across the entire dataset, but also ensured that each video was equally represented in this analysis.

4. Method: Affiliation analysis

The theoretical framework adopted in this chapter is the social semiotic perspective of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) which approaches language as a social meaning-making resource with systematic choices in meaning. More specifically, this chapter analyses language from a discourse semantic perspective, exploring how bonds are shared or contested in the YouTube comment dataset. By bonds we mean the values expressed by a user in order to affiliate or disaffiliate with others. The affiliation analysis involved drawing on appraisal (Martin and White 2005), a framework for analysing evaluative language developed within SFL. Appraisal consists of ‘couplings’ of ideational (what is being evaluated) and attitudinal (how it is being evaluated) meaning in order to understand the values expressed in the comments (Section 4.1). How these values were negotiated is then explored by undertaking an analysis of the particular affiliation strategies acting upon these values (Section 4.2).

4.1 Coupling analysis

The affiliation framework explores the social bonds that are at stake in an act of communication. These social bonds are realised through ‘couplings’ (Martin 2000) of ideational and attitudinal meaning that can be negotiated. Affiliation originated in Knight’s work on conversational humour (2008, 2010, 2013), and how people either commune, reject, or defy particular social bonds. In order to analyse the attitudinal meaning involved in a coupling, the affiliation framework draws on the Appraisal system (Martin and White 2005). Appraisal analyses evaluative language according to three dimensions (Martin and White 2005):

- ATTITUDE (expressing emotion or opinion) as AFFECT (feelings and reactions to behaviour) JUDGEMENT (ethically assessing a person or behaviour) or APPRECIATION (valuing an object or phenomenon).
- GRADUATION (up or downscaling attitude) as FORCE (via intensity) or FOCUS (via prototypicality).
- ENGAGEMENT (managing the play of textual voices) as MONOGLOSS (expressing only one voice) or HETEROGLOSS (expressing multiple voices).

These are further illustrated in Figure 1 with examples from the comment corpus. The sub-systems of ATTITUDE that were coded in each YouTube comment are shown in Figure 2.

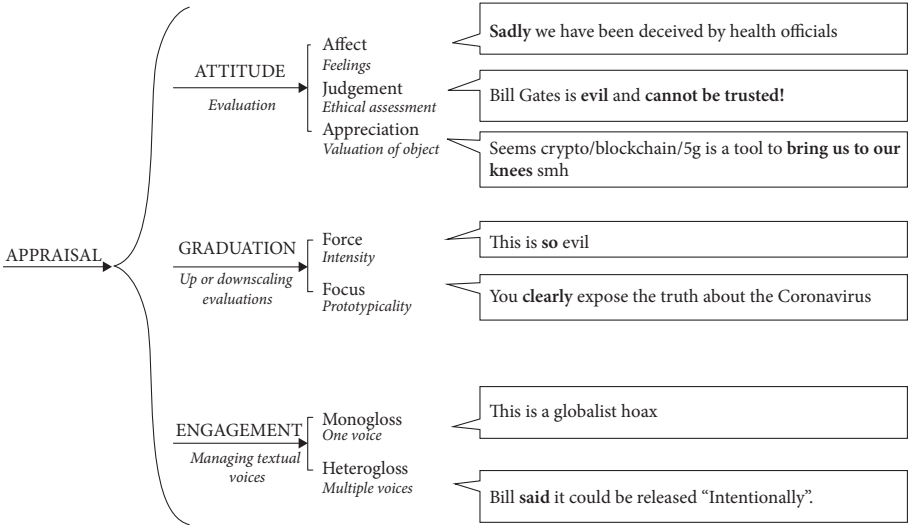


Figure 1. Appraisal system network (adapted from Martin and White, 2005)

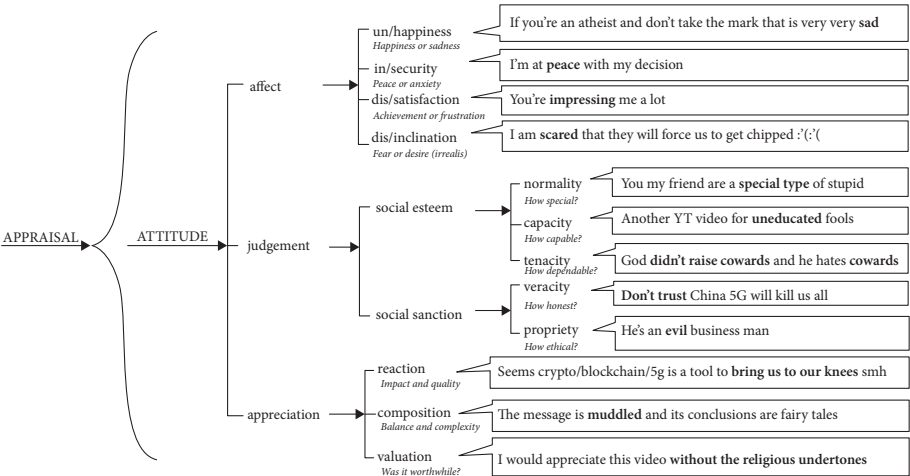


Figure 2. Sub-systems of appraisal (adapted from Martin and White, 2005)

4.2 Affiliation analysis

This research adopts a modified version of the Communing Affiliation system in order to explore the sharing and contesting of values in the comment corpus. Communing affiliation refers to how bonding (the social alignment of values) occurs in environments where users are not engaging with each other directly. This system was originally used by Zappavigna (2018) to explore the kinds of ambient affiliation possible in hashtag use in social media discourse and further developed in Inwood and Zappavigna (2021) to understand bonding in YouTube hoaxes. The revised communing affiliation framework is shown in Figure 3. This system captures three key affiliation strategies:

- CONVOYING: situating a bond through resources that muster together a community, for instance by the use of vocatives such as “Guys!” (MARSHAL), and/or establish its parameters, for instance by naming or referencing a particular community such as “*Us civilians*” (DESIGNATE).
- TEMPERING:⁴ adjusting a bond through resources that modify the degree of venture, for example through quantification “97%” (FOSTER) or modifying the scope of venture, for example “*BEGGING*” (MODULATE).
- FINESSING: assembling a bond through resources that broaden (EMBELLISH) or confine (DISTIL) its intersubjectivity. For example, embellishing would open the bond to various other possibilities offered by a range of voices with differing perspectives (“*might be*”) whereas distilling would limit this range, often to only one choice (“*do not take*”).

The coupling analysis and exploration of affiliation strategies was annotated according to the following structure, derived from Zappavigna and Martin (2018):

[ideation: <<>>/ attitude: <<>>]

AFFILIATION STRATEGY

The square brackets and / symbol represent the fusion of ideation and attitude to form a value that is negotiated by affiliation. The communing affiliation system is then shown underneath. Examples of ATTITUDE will be shown in **bold** and ideation will be underlined. ATTITUDE will also be marked as inscribed (overt evaluation) or invoked (implied evaluation).

4. PROMOTING was renamed TEMPERING to account for both upscaling and downscaling resources of the kind not possible in hashtags (which inherently make a bond more visible).

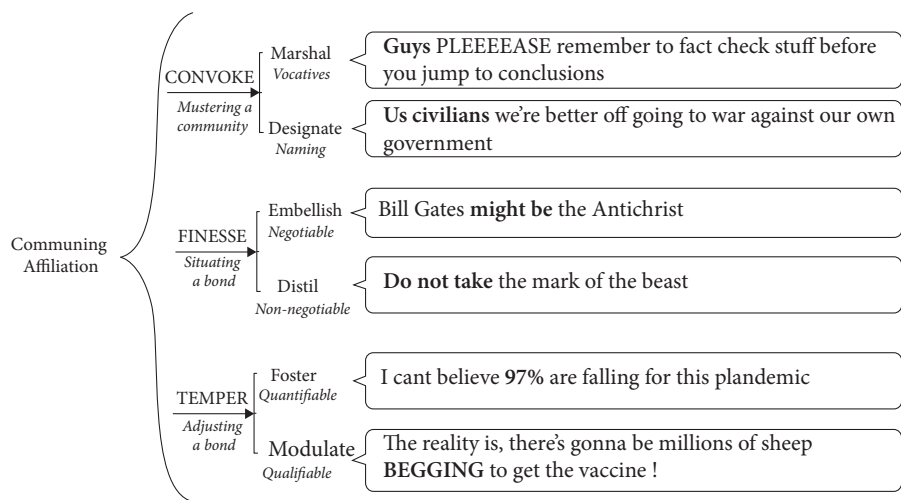


Figure 3. Communing affiliation system network (adapted from Zappavigna, 2018)

5. Results

The results of this study are presented in terms of the key choices in affiliation strategies and evaluative targets. These choices suggested six key discursive personae which were used to group the presentation of results. The term ‘personae’ is used instead of ‘people’, as YouTube comments are discursive, and an individual could enact a range of personae depending on the textual decisions they make. This section will explain the key values users are bonding around when engaging with conspiratorial content. These bonds can be likened to Stenglin’s idea of bonding icons where “values get ‘charged’ into them and communities tend to either rally around them or reject them” (Stenglin 2008). The results are qualitative and seek to identify ways of understanding common bonding patterns through a close discourse analysis, rather than a quantitative approach which would require a much larger dataset and automated methods of analysis. Therefore, exact frequencies of these patterns in the dataset are not provided.

5.1 Religious Fanatics

Discussion about Christian values and ‘mark of the beast’ were prevalent in the comment corpus since this biblical reference was intertwined with the ID2020 conspiracy theory that all the YouTube videos endorsed. A CONVOKING affiliation

strategy was used in these comments as a way of signalling that the ‘mark of the beast’ was a correct interpretation of the intentions behind COVID-19 vaccines. These comments were also tabling a [knowledgeable Bible bond], as seen in the following example (ideation underlined; ATTITUDE in **bold**):

- (1) Guys...this is the **mark of the beast**¹ in revelation of the Bible
[ideation: this/ attitude: invoked negative VALUATION]¹
Convoke: Marshal -> Guys (vocative) [knowledgeable Bible bond]

In this Example (1), ‘guys’ is MARSHALLING people to associate the ID2020 conspiracy with the ‘mark of the beast’, and more broadly associating the Bible with knowledge. There is invoked negative VALUATION as ‘mark of the beast’ is linked with a bleak future for humanity and Satan in a Christian religious context. The following (2) is another example of this pattern of CONVOKING affiliation and negative PROPRIETY:

- (2) We the sheeples¹ are the **antichrist**² and politics is the **mark of the beast**,³
everything else is consequences.
[ideation: sheeples/ attitude: invoked negative CAPACITY]¹
[ideation: sheeples/ attitude: inscribed negative PROPRIETY]²
Convoke: Marshal -> we the sheeples (vocative) [ignorant people bond]
[ideation: politics/ attitude: invoked negative VALUATION]³
Temper: Modulate -> everything else (graduation) [dangerous politics bond]

‘Sheeples’ connotes people acting like sheep, a term referring to people who unwittingly believe their political leaders and has since become frequently used among conspiracy theorists. Metaphors such as these were frequent in the comment corpus and would provoke attitude, as well as acting as bonding icons with loaded language that people could easily rally around. In this instance, ‘sheeples’ is annotated as both invoked negative CAPACITY due to the association of sheep as stupid, and negative PROPRIETY as the metaphor of ‘sheeples’ is further linked to the antichrist. The MARSHALLING of ‘we the sheeples’ establishes an [ignorant people] bond regarding the ‘sheeples’ following the ways of the antichrist. ‘Politics’ is also associated with negativity, in this case negative VALUATION and the MODULATING of ‘everything else’ strengthens the understanding that a [dangerous politics bond] is shared in this comment.

In another Example (3) of CONVOKING affiliation, a dichotomy is set up between Christians versus the people enforcing COVID-19 rules. Christians are named as a community whilst the people enforcing COVID-19 rules are associated with negative PROPRIETY for tricking Christians who know about the mark of the beast:

- (3) They know what Christians believe about the mark of the beast/chip. The COVID-19 is their “drag net”¹ to flush out² the people of God³ or anyone who opposes them.
 [ideation: COVID-19 / attitude: invoked negative VALUATION]¹
 [ideation: people enforcing COVID-19 rules/ attitude: invoked negative PROPRIETY]²
 [ideation: Christian (people) / attitude: positive PROPRIETY]³
 Convoke: Designate -> Christians & people of God (community) [righteous person bond]

These examples establish that CONVOKING affiliation has an important role in comments of religious discourse, signalling to Christians the importance of the mark of the beast and its supposed connection to the current circumstances surrounding COVID-19.

Religious Fanatics also used inscribed appraisal and imperatives to dissuade their ambient audience from taking the ‘mark of the beast’. In this instance (4), DISTILLING affiliation is used and acts to rhetorically limit other possibilities of knowledge in order to set up a [knowledgeable Bible bond]:

- (4) Preparations of one world order and mark of the beast 666 that’s **foretold in the Bible**.¹ **Do not take**² the mark of the beast! The Bible **says not to**.²
 [ideation: Preparations of one world order and mark of the beast 666 / attitude: positive VERACITY]¹
 Finesse: Distil -> that’s (monogloss) [knowledgeable Bible bond]
 [ideation: mark of the beast/ attitude: invoked negative VALUATION]²
 Finesse: Distil -> do not & says not to (monogloss) [dangerous mark of the beast bond]

The Bible is associated with positive VERACITY as it has predicted the ‘mark of the beast’ and users are encouraged to accept its advice. In contrast, the ‘mark of the beast’ is associated with negative VALUATION and users are clearly told ‘do not take’ and ‘says not to’, with DISTILLING affiliation making these statements non-negotiable. Thus, DISTILLING had an important role in these sorts of comments, with commenters leaving no options for alternatives and explicitly alerting people to the dangers of a ‘one world order’.

Overall, religious discourse in the comments frequently used CONVOKING affiliation in order to rally Christians around the importance of the mark of the beast. DISTILLING was also a common technique to limit other options and definitively state that the ‘mark of the beast’ is a danger to society. References to the Bible represented a [knowledge bond] and DISTILLING affiliation to limit other options of knowledge, whilst CONVOKING affiliation was used to either depict Christians with [powerful bonds] or [righteous bonds], or ‘sheeple’ with [ignorant bonds].

5.2 Anti-technologists

Within the comment dataset, there was a focus on ‘anti-technology’ discourse, that is, commenters spreading moral panics about technology either enslaving people or making them sick. This moral panic about technologies also incorporated discourse about COVID-19. However, with these sorts of moral panics often the main ideational target is shifted away from the topic of the video and users find another fear to bond around such as judgements about technology (Inwood and Zappavigna 2021). The following comment (5) construes negative REACTION towards crypto, blockchain and 5G technologies, and shares a [powerless people bond] according to which elites and technology wield all the power:

- (5) So it seems the elite have us where they want us.¹ Seems crypto/blockchain/5g is a tool to bring us to our knees² smh 😞³
 [ideation: elite/ attitude: invoked positive CAPACITY and negative PROPRIETY]¹
 [ideation: technologies / attitude: inscribed negative VALUATION]²
 [ideation: us/ attitude: invoked negative CAPACITY]²
 Convoke: Marshal -> us (vocative) [powerless people bond]
 [ideation: elites & crypto & blockchain & 5g/ attitude: invoked negative REACTION]³
 Convoke: Marshal -> our (vocative) [powerless people bond]

In this comment, the elites have invoked positive CAPACITY and negative PROPRIETY whilst ‘us’, in reference to everyday people, have invoked negative CAPACITY as they are powerless. Technologies (‘crypto, blockchain and 5g’) are associated with negative REACTION, particularly emphasised by the weary face emoji. Overall, a [powerless people] bond is shared, signalled by the dominant CONVOKING affiliation of ‘us’ and ‘our’ – elites and technology have all the power, whilst everyday people have no power.

Similar dichotomised bonds of people having ‘no power’ and technology or technologists having ‘power’ are seen in the following Example (6):

- (6) I called out Satoshi as Rothschild¹ a long time ago. They invented the blockchain slave grid.²
 [ideation: Satoshi/ attitude: invoked negative PROPRIETY]¹
 Temper: Modulate -> long time ago (graduation) [dangerous technologist bond]
 [ideation: Satoshi/ attitude: inscribed negative PROPRIETY]²
 [ideation blockchain/ attitude: invoked negative VALUATION]²
 Finesse: Distil -> they invented (monogloss) [powerful technology bond]

In this comment, a [dangerous technologist bond] is shared as the creator of the bitcoin whitepaper Satoshi has ‘negative PROPRIETY’ for being associated with ‘Rothschild’ a name that is commonly mentioned among conspiracy theorists, in reference to an anti-Semitic conspiracy theory about the wealthy Rothschild family controlling the world. The MODULATING affiliation of ‘long time ago’ emphasises that this [dangerous technologist bond] has been known for some time. A [powerful technology bond] is also shared, as Satoshi has the power to create a ‘block-chain slave grid’. DISTILLING affiliation does not leave this statement open to other possibilities. In these examples, clusters of bonds are identified with people having ‘no power’, and technology or technologists having ‘power’.

Another type of anti-technology discourse involved ‘5G’ conspiracy theories. These sorts of conspiracy theories existed before COVID-19, but within this particular comment dataset, 5G conspiracies were intertwined with ID2020 conspiracies as the following (7) suggests:

- (7) The virus is BS¹ it’s 5G that’s **killing the people**²
 [ideation: virus/ attitude: inscribed negative VALUATION]¹
 Finesse: Distil -> is (monogloss) [fake virus bond]
 [ideation: 5G/ attitude: invoked negative REACTION]²
 Finesse: Distil -> that’s (monogloss) [dangerous 5G bond]

In this comment, the virus is associated with negative VALUATION and a [fake virus bond] is shared via DISTILLING affiliation that does not elaborate on other discussion options. ‘5G’ is associated with invoked negative REACTION for ‘killing the people’ and therefore a [dangerous 5G bond] is shared in this case. In this next Example (8), 5G is associated with negative VALUATION, but in this case a [powerful 5G bond] is shared due to 5G’s supposed impact on society:

- (8) 5G network is **causing the symptoms**¹ people are experiencing. The government is **telling people that it’s a virus**.² The vaccine will eliminate the symptoms of radiation poisoning from 5G towers. Included in your “**life saving**”³ vaccination, is a microchip that will allow its host to **buy, sell, trade, really anything that we do now**.³
 [ideation: 5g network/ attitude: invoked negative VALUATION]¹
 Finesse: Distil -> is (monogloss) [powerful 5G bond]
 [ideation: government/ attitude: invoked negative VERACITY]²
 Finesse: Distil -> is (monogloss) [powerful government bond]
 [ideation: vaccination & microchip/ attitude: invoked negative REACTION]³
 Temper: Modulate -> really anything (graduation) [dangerous vaccine bond]

The government is also associated with negative VERACITY for not telling people the truth about 5G and a [powerful government bond] for having the ability to hide the truth from people, expressed again via DISTILLING affiliation leaving no other options to discuss. Microchips are associated with negative REACTION for their potential to control human behaviour and a [dangerous vaccine bond] that is amplified via MODULATING affiliation.

Overall, anti-technologists created moral panics about technologies through the sharing of [danger bonds] and [power bonds] being associated with technology, and ‘the people’ being associated with ‘no power’. Negative PROPRIETY and negative REACTION were commonly used, along with DISTILLING and MODULATING affiliation strategies, that would contract the discourse and amplify the dangers of technology.

5.3 Anti-Globalists

The Anti-Globalist discourse in the dataset tended to employ negative attitudinal resources targeted at those who supposedly hold a high degree of power: elites like Bill Gates, governments, the deep state, and globalist organisations like the UN and WHO. ‘Elites’ were often blamed for creating problematic vaccines:

- (9) Hey elites!¹ Guess what? You can take your ID and vaccine and **shove it up your arse!**²

[ideation: elites/ attitude: invoked negative PROPRIETY]¹

[ideation: ID and vaccine/ attitude: negative REACTION]²

Convoke: Marshal -> hey elites! (vocative) [evil elites bond]

In this Example (9), a CONVOKING strategy is directed towards elites ‘Hey elites!’ and elites are associated with negative PROPRIETY for being a common anti-bonding icon. The ‘ID and vaccine’ has negative REACTION. An [evil elites bond] is shared here, as elites have created the negatively evaluated ‘ID and vaccine’.

Whilst there were examples that used the generalised term ‘elites’ to signify a range of different organisations and people who are supposedly doing evil things, there were other comments that more specifically named their enemy elites. For example, this comment (10) equally associates ‘UN, WHO, Bill Gates, Big Pharma, Communist Governments’ with negative PROPRIETY. Mandatory injections are associated with negative REACTION and MODULATING affiliation that strengthens the supposed impact of vaccines:

- (10) **Endgame**¹ of COVID19 is mandatory WORLD WIDE MANDATORY VACCINE INJECTIONS.....so UN, WHO, Bill Gates, Big Pharma, Communist Governments worldwide in **collusion and they will never entertain any other solution or cure**² for COVID19 other than mandatory world wide VACCINATIONS

[ideation: mandatory injections/ attitude: invoked negative REACTION]¹

Temper: Modulate -> WORLD WIDE MANDATORY (graduation) [dangerous vaccines bond]

[ideation: UN & Gates & WHO & Big Pharma & communist governments/ attitude: invoked negative PROPRIETY]²

Finesse: Distil -> they will never (monogloss) [powerful elites bond]

DISTILLING 'they will never' contracts the coupling to highlight that there is only one option that these elites will take, and that they hold a 'powerful elites bond'.

In other instances, comments would discuss the 'Deep State', a common term within conspiratorial discourse and recent conspiratorial groups such as QAnon. In this particular comment (11), Kabballah members and the Deep state are associated with negative PROPRIETY:

- (11) these actors, Kabballah members are **crapping in their pants right**¹ now because they know: 1. the Deep State is now at peek clean level and both of them have allegedly **partaken in Pedophilia-Occult rituals-sex trafficking-kids**²

[ideation: Kabballah members/ attitude: negative capacity]¹

Finesse: Finesse -> they know (monogloss) [evil elites bond]

[ideation: Kabballah members & the Deep State/ attitude: invoked negative PROPRIETY]²

Finesse: Embellish -> allegedly (heterogloss) [evil elites bond]

Here, there is an EMBELLISHING affiliation strategy as the coupling is expanded upon with use of the phrase 'allegedly'. An [evil bond] is shared as Kabballah members and the Deep State are associated with evil paedophilia and trafficking acts.

The last main type of anti-globalist discourse was directed towards Bill Gates solely. As the ID2020 conspiracy is heavily focused on Gates, it is not surprising that many comments were specifically directed towards him. Within these comments, there was a lot of false information spread regarding biographical facets of Gates' life:

- (12) Bill Gates is on a **rampage**,¹ wanting to reduce world population with vaccines. He also wants to **blanket the world in chemtrails**¹ to "prevent global warming" He's never had his own children vaccinated, but has **destroyed lives with his vaccine programs**.² **Death**³ is in his genes. His father was a **director of Planned Parenthood**.⁴

[ideation: Bill Gates/ attitude: invoked negative PROPRIETY]¹
 Finesse: Distil -> is on (monogloss) [evil Gates bond]
 [ideation: Bill Gates/ attitude: invoked negative PROPRIETY]²
 Finesse: Distil -> he's never (monogloss) [evil Gates bond]
 [ideation: Bill Gates/ attitude: invoked negative PROPRIETY]³
 Finesse: Distil -> is in his (monogloss) [evil Gates bond]
 [ideation: father/ attitude: invoked negative PROPRIETY]⁴
 Finesse: Distil -> was a (monogloss) [evil Gates bond]

Gates is associated with negative PROPRIETY for supporting vaccines and chemtrails, another common conspiracy shared among those to deny climate change. Gates is also falsely associated with negative PROPRIETY for never having his children vaccinated and destroying lives with his vaccine programmes. In the last sentence, the target of negative PROPRIETY switches to Gates' Dad for his associations with 'Planned Parenthood', a non-profit US organisation that provides reproductive healthcare, that would be abhorred by right-wing anti-abortion movements. An [evil Gates bond] is most predominant in these sorts of comments, with the focus on highlighting the negative PROPRIETY of Gates' actions via DISTILLING affiliation strategies.

Overall, anti-globalist discourse consisted of a series of either [powerful elites bonds] or [evil elites] bonds. DISTILLING affiliation was most common, as users would contract the couplings, and not consider other possible perspectives. Conspiratorial content focused on those who supposedly have all the power, with commentary about Gates and global organisations featuring frequently.

5.4 Political sceptics

Within the comment dataset, there was a focus on political discourse intertwined within ID2020 conspiracy theories. Users would align themselves with a particular ideology, explicitly dismiss a political ideology, or dismiss politics entirely. For instance, in the following comment (13), communism as an ideology is associated with an [evil bond]:

- (13) **I will die**¹ before any communist resume **pushes for this demonic**² crap on me body.
 [ideation: communist resume/ attitude: invoked negative PROPRIETY]¹
 Temper: Modulate -> any (graduation) [evil communism bond]
 [ideation: chips or implants/ attitude: inscribed negative REACTION]²
 Finesse: Distil -> on (monogloss) [evil technology bond]

In this comment, 'communist resume' is associated with negative PROPRIETY and a MODULATING affiliation strategy 'any' that strengthens the claims. The chips and implants associated with the ID202 conspiracy theory refer to the 'demonic crap'

and are therefore associated with negative REACTION and a DISTILLING affiliation strategy that does not offer any other possible scenarios. There are [evil communism bonds] and [evil technology bonds] shared in this comment.

There were also comments that were explicitly anti-government, or anti-politics, in the sense that they did not align with a political view but just expressed anti-political views. For Example (14), the following comment tells users to not trust their government and instead go to war against the government:

- (14) Message to the world **stop trusting**¹ your government they're all **nothing but lies**² They **Don't Care**³ About Us civilians we're better off going to war against our own government to **end this madness**⁴ and **kill off**⁵ all the rich people as well [ideation: people/ attitude: invoked negative CAPACITY]¹
 Convoke: Designate -> message to the world (community) [ignorant people bond]
 [ideation: government/ attitude: inscribed negative VERACITY]²
 Convoke: Marshal -> your (vocative) [fake government bond]
 [ideation: government/ attitude: invoked negative PROPRIETY]³
 Convoke: Designate -> us civilians (community) [evil government bond]
 [ideation: world/ attitude: invoked negative REACTION]⁴
 Convoke: Marshal -> we're better off (vocative) [evil government bond]
 [ideation: rich people/ attitude: invoked negative PROPRIETY]⁵
 Temper: Modulate -> all (graduation) [evil elites bond]

CONVOKING affiliation is primarily used as a way of addressing the audience in this comment, for example 'message to the world', 'your government' and 'us civilians'. People are associated with negative CAPACITY [ignorant people bond] and the government is associated with negative VERACITY for lying [fake government bond] and negative PROPRIETY for how the government treats its citizens [evil government bond]. Rich people are also associated with negative PROPRIETY [evil elites bond] expressed via a MODULATING affiliation strategy 'all the rich people' that strengthens these claims.

In another instance of an anti-political comment (15), the government is associated with distrust and the COVID-19 virus is alluded to as a hoax:

- (15) I'm not afraid¹ of a virus, I'm afraid² of the extent our government will go to make us believe there is a virus.³
 [ideation: virus/ attitude: inscribed positive SECURITY]¹
 Finesse: Distil -> I'm not (monogloss) [safe virus bond]
 [ideation: government efforts to promote virus/ attitude: inscribed negative SECURITY]²
 Finesse: Distil -> I'm (monogloss) [dangerous government bond]
 [ideation: government & virus/ attitude: invoked negative t-VERACITY]³
 Convoke: Marshal -> us (vocative) [fake virus bond]

The virus is expressed as positive SECURITY and the coupling is contracted via the DISTILLING strategy of ‘I’m not’, therefore the virus holds a [safe bond]. In contrast, government efforts to promote the virus are associated with negative SECURITY and hold a [dangerous bond], with DISTILLING affiliation again contracting the coupling to only one possible option. Lastly, both the government and the virus can be associated with negative *t*-VERACITY⁵ and a [fake virus bond]. The comment uses a CONVOKING affiliation strategy in this last instance to rally with other commenters the notion that the government will ‘make us believe there is a virus’. Anti-political comments can be characterised by these [fake bonds] or [dangerous bonds] and [evil bonds] being directed towards the government, and CONVOKING affiliation strategies that would encourage users to join against the government.

Another key aspect of political discourse were comments that were pro-Trump. Pro-Trump comments were more frequent than anti-Trump comments and generally associated Trump with a [righteous bond]:

- (16) I won’t support the bash¹ Trump train. The rest I can see,² Trump, not so much.¹ Fauci is connected with Gates.³ He was involved with Event 201. I believe that this the attempt to de-populate to planet⁴
 [ideation: Trump/ attitude: invoked positive PROPRIETY]¹
 Finesse: Distil -> I won’t (monogloss) [righteous Trump bond]
 [ideation: the rest/ attitude: invoked negative PROPRIETY]²
 Finesse: Distil -> I can (monogloss) [evil politicians bond]
 [ideation: Fauci & Gates/ attitude: negative invoked PROPRIETY]³
 Finesse: Distil -> is (monogloss) [evil Fauci and Gates bond]
 [ideation: Event 201/ attitude: invoked negative REACTION]⁴
 Finesse: Embellish -> I believe (heterogloss) [dangerous Event 201 bond]

For example, in this comment (16), the user is defending Trump and therefore Trump is associated with invoked positive PROPRIETY and a [righteous bond]. DISTILLING affiliation makes this opinion non-negotiable. In contrast, ‘the rest’, ‘Fauci’ and ‘Gates’ are all associated with negative PROPRIETY and an [evil bond]. Event 201 was a pandemic scenario event organised by the John Hopkins Center for Health Security that has been incorrectly claimed by ID2020 conspiracy theorists as having predicted the COVID-19 pandemic.⁶ In this comment, Event 201 is associated with a negative REACTION and [dangerous bond] for attempting to ‘depopulate’ the planet. This is the only case of EMBELLISHING affiliation being used as the ‘I believe’ expands the coupling to a range of other possibilities. Otherwise, DISTILLING affiliation is the most common strategy throughout this comment. In pro-Trump

5. Token of veracity

6. cf. <https://fullfact.org/health/event-201-coronavirus-pandemic/>

comments people like Fauci and Gates had negative PROPRIETY, in opposition to Trump's positive PROPRIETY, and therefore [righteous bond].

Overall, political discourse mainly consisted of [righteous bonds] versus [evil bonds], or [safe bonds] versus [dangerous bonds]. While Trump was mainly associated with [righteous bonds], Gates, Fauci, the generalisation of the 'government' & globalist organisations such as the UN were associated with [evil bonds]. The virus was often depicted as a [safe bond] while the government was associated with [dangerous bonds]. DISTILLING affiliation was the most common strategy used to definitely ascertain these bonds and limit other ideological possibilities.

5.5 Anti-Vaxxers and COVID-19 Denialists

Comments by Anti-Vaxxers and COVID-19 Denialists either promoted anti-vax views in relation to a potential COVID-19 vaccine or promoted anti-COVID-19 restriction discourse by asserting that COVID-19 is a hoax. In the case of Anti-COVID-19 discourse [fake bonds] were the most common as in the following comment (17):

- (17) This is all political agenda.¹ The Coronavirus is a plandemic² and not a natural pandemic.
 [ideation: this (people making up coronavirus)/ attitude: invoked negative *t*-VERACITY]¹
 Temper: Modulate -> all (graduation) [fake virus bond]
 [ideation: coronavirus/ attitude: invoked negative *t*-VERACITY]²
 Finesse: Distil -> is (monogloss) [fake virus bond]

In this comment, the coronavirus is associated with negative *t*-VERACITY as it is a part of a 'political agenda' and a 'plandemic' inferring that coronavirus has been engineered by humans and is not 'natural', in this case real. MODULATING affiliation as in 'all' and DISTILLING affiliation as in 'is a' ascertains that this comment appears like a fact, not speculated upon. In another instance of anti-COVID-19-restrictions discourse (18), [evil bonds] and [fake bonds] are both shared:

- (18) These people r sick.¹ Divide² us so they can control us. That's all³ social distancing is. And wearing basic⁴ masks dont even do anything⁴ for covid 19. This is a joke⁵
 [ideation: these people/ attitude: inscribed negative PROPRIETY]¹
 Finesse: Distil -> r (monogloss) [evil elites bond]
 [ideation: they/ attitude: inscribed negative PROPRIETY]²
 Convoke: Marshal -> us (vocative) [evil elites bond]
 [ideation: social distancing/ attitude: negative valuation]³

Finesse: Distil -> that's all (monogloss) [fake virus bond]
 [ideation: masks/ attitude: inscribed negative VALUATION]⁴
 Temper: Modulate -> anything (graduation) [fake virus bond]
 [ideation: this (people implementing COVID-19 regulations/ attitude: inscribed negative *t*-VERACITY)]⁵
 Finesse: Distil -> is a (monogloss) [fake virus bond]

'People' as in those who are in control have negative PROPRIETY for just using social distancing as a means to control people. DISTILLING affiliation is used to contract the coupling and ensure the statement is concrete, while CONVOKING affiliation is used in the next sentence in order to directly target the communication. 'Basic masks' has negative VALUATION and a [fake virus bond] because they 'don't even do anything', is stressed via MODULATING affiliation. This comment ends with negative *t*-VERACITY towards people implementing COVID-19 regulations by stating that it is 'a joke' therefore sharing another [fake virus bond] and DISTILLING affiliation that does not open up any other interpretations. Thus, comments about COVID-19 restrictions tended to use [fake bonds] and DISTILLING affiliation in order to promote the view that COVID-19 is a hoax and restrictions for COVID-19 are meaningless.

Another focus in the comment dataset was on spreading the false idea that 'hydroxychloroquine' is a cure for COVID-19. In these cases, [fake bonds] were also the most commonly shared and often used in conjunction with [real bonds]:

- (19) And get rid of Dr. Faust (fauci), this is a **globalist hoax**.¹ We have a **cure**,² (Hydroxychloroquine, zinc, an the antibiotic)you catch it go to doctor, hospital-get cure-go home and get better. While they work on a vaccine. You don't destroy your whole country, by destroying your economy. A **weak**³ economy, a **weak**³ country. Your enemies start bullying you. (Iran, China). I don't know **what you're taking about**.⁴ Goodbye
 [ideation: Dr Fauci & covid-19/ attitude: inscribed negative *t*-VERACITY]¹
 Finesse: Distil -> this is (monogloss) [evil elites bond]
 [ideation: Hydroxychloroquine/ attitude: invoked positive VALUATION]²
 Convoke: Designate -> we have (community) [real cure bond]
 [ideation: country with weak economy/ attitude: invoked negative CAPACITY]³
 Convoke: Designate -> your enemies (community) [powerless country bond]
 [ideation: video creator/ attitude: invoked negative VERACITY]⁴
 Convoke: Marshal -> you're (vocative) [fake video bond]

In this comment (19), Fauci and COVID-19 are associated with negative *t*-VERACITY, as the commenter states via DISTILLING affiliation that this is a 'globalist hoax'. In contrast, hydroxychloroquine is associated with positive VALUATION and a CONVOKING affiliation strategy 'we have a cure'. The rest of the comment focuses on economics, associating countries with weak economies as having negative CAPACITY

and therefore a [no power bond], CONVOKING affiliation emphasising this view for readers by stating ‘your enemies’. The video creator is also mentioned here with the CONVOKING affiliation of ‘I don’t know what you’re talking about’ and is associated with negative VERACITY and a [fake bond]. Thus, discussions about hydroxychloroquine were primarily focused on [fake bonds] and delegitimising news outlets or medical professionals via CONVOKING and DISTILLING affiliation strategies.

The last main category represents ‘anti-vax’ discourse. Anti-Vax conspiratorial discourse has existed for some time, and many common anti-vax views seemed to be recycled in this particular dataset, but slightly recontextualised in order to fit with the current global pandemic. Within these comments, there was usually a range of [safe] versus [dangerous bonds], and [evil bonds] featured. For example, in this comment (20) the virus is considered ‘safe’ and the vaccine is considered ‘dangerous’:

- (20) I’d rather have the **treatable**¹ virus than the **toxic, terminal**² vaccine! I intend to be **free**,³ not tracked by some **megalomaniac**⁴ who’s trying to make the world in his image!!

[ideation: virus/ attitude: positive VALUATION]¹

Finesse: Embellish -> I’d rather (heterogloss) [safe virus bond]

[ideation: vaccine/ attitude: inscribed negative VALUATION]²

Finesse: Embellish -> I’d rather (heterogloss) [dangerous vaccine bond]

[ideation: user/ invoked positive CAPACITY]³

Finesse: Distil -> I intend (heterogloss) [knowledgeable user bond]

[ideation: Bill Gates/ attitude: invoked negative PROPRIETY]⁴

Temper: Modulate -> some (graduation) [evil elites bond]

In this comment, the virus has positive VALUATION and the vaccine negative VALUATION. EMBELLISHING affiliation is used here to state ‘I’d rather’ centring on the user’s own perspectives. The user infers to themselves with positive CAPACITY and a DISTILLING affiliation strategy ‘I intend to be free’. This involves a [knowledge bond] as the user is inferring that they are capable enough to know that Bill Gates is a ‘megalomaniac’. Thus, Gates here is associated with negative PROPRIETY and MODULATING affiliation emphasising that Gates holds an [evil bond].

Overall, anti-vax discourse predominantly focuses on creating [safe] versus [dangerous bonds] between the virus versus vaccines via DISTILLING affiliation, however, many comments would also delve deeper into this discourse and add on extra [knowledge] and [evil bonds] via CONVOKING and TEMPERING affiliation, in order to strengthen the reach and appeal of their message. Anti-vax and anti-COVID restrictions discourse would both focus on creating competing bonds in order to illuminate to viewers the competing bonds between what’s safe and dangerous, or what’s real and fake.

5.6 Educators

Whilst the majority of comments were of a conspiratorial nature, there were some comments that attempted to debunk content in the videos and alert people to the deceptive claims made in the videos. This category of personae are referred to as 'Educators'. Some comments by Educators would explicitly indicate that the video was false:

- (21) This video is propaganda¹ and a push for a libertarian ideology. Come to NYC and start complaining about your precious² civil liberties.... this is a global pandemic and thousands are dying it's horrible.³ The shutdown is to reduce the curve⁴ so we don't all die dude Wake up,⁵ this is real⁶
 [ideation: Youtuber's creation of video/ attitude: inscribed negative *t*-VERACITY]¹
 Finesse: Distil -> is (monogloss) [fake video bond]
 [ideation: complaining about civil liberties/ attitude: invoked negative VALUATION]²
 Convoke: Marshal -> your (vocative) [ignorant person bond]
 [ideation: pandemic/ attitude: inscribed negative REACTION]³
 Finesse: Distil -> it's (monogloss) [dangerous virus bond]
 [ideation: shutdown/ attitude: positive VALUATION]⁴
 Temper: Modulate -> all (graduation) [real virus bond]
 [ideation: dude/ attitude: invoked negative CAPACITY]⁵
 Convoke: Marshal -> wake up (vocative) [ignorant person bond]
 [ideation: this (experiencing a pandemic)/ attitude: invoked positive *t*-VERACITY]⁶
 Finesse: Distil -> is (monogloss) [real virus bond]

In this comment (21), the YouTuber's creation of the video is associated with negative *t*-VERACITY because it is overtly referred to as 'propaganda', therefore a [fake bond] is shared via DISTILLING affiliation limiting other possibilities. The user associates the pandemic with negative REACTION and a dangerous virus bond. 'Dude wake up' infers an [ignorant bond] via MARSHALLING affiliation as the YouTuber doesn't understand the severity of the pandemic, and 'dude' here has negative CAPACITY. Lastly, the experience of living in a pandemic is coded with positive *t*-VERACITY and a [real bond] via DISTILLING affiliation is shared as the user highlights the importance of the shutdown and again limits false interpretations.

In addition, there were comments that focused solely on setting up an [ignorant bond]. For example, the following comment (22) focuses on targeting ignorant people who believe these sorts of YouTube videos:

- (22) This is why America is a joke¹ and evangelists are clowns.²
 [ideation: America/ attitude: invoked negative CAPACITY]¹
 Finesse: Distil -> is a (monogloss) [ignorant Americans bond]
 [ideation: evangelists/ attitude: invoked negative CAPACITY]²
 Finesse: Distil -> are (monogloss) [ignorant evangelists bond]

In this comment, Americans and evangelists are treated with negative CAPACITY. FINESSING affiliation is used to DISTIL an [ignorant bond], again not leaving this opinion open to negotiation. [Ignorant bonds] were also common among users who were targeting anti-vaxxers. In the following comment (23), the video creator is treated with negative CAPACITY for believing in ‘the mark of the beast’:

- (23) Your stupidity¹ is the mark of the beast. We need² vaccination to prevent a flu pandemic. Good luck surviving³ anti-vaxxers when you are no longer protected by herd immunity.
 [ideation: video creator/ attitude: inscribed negative CAPACITY]¹
 Convoke: Designate -> your (vocative) [ignorant YouTuber bond]
 [ideation: vaccination/ attitude: invoked positive VALUATION]²
 Convoke: Marshal -> we (vocative) [knowledgeable user bond]
 [ideation: anti-vaxxers/ attitude: invoked negative CAPACITY]³
 Convoke: Designate -> anti-vaxxers (community) [ignorant anti-vaxxers bond]

A [knowledge bond] is also shared when the user attempts to correct the video creator by stressing the importance of vaccines, via CONVOKING affiliation (we). Anti-vaxxers are also directly addressed via CONVOKING affiliation and share an [ignorant bond]. Overall, Educators followed two main patterns; a focus on [fake/ real bonds], attempting to correct conspiratorial claims, or a focus on [ignorant/ knowledge bonds], attempting to overtly call out YouTubers for their ignorance via CONVOKING affiliation resources.

6. Bond cluster diagram of personae and their bonds

The affiliation analysis undertaken in this chapter revealed distinct personae in the comment corpus based on particular evaluative targets, and the key values they tended to negotiate using particular affiliation strategies. These findings are mapped out in Figure 4 as a bond cluster diagram following the approach for visually representing associated bonds developed in Inwood and Zappavigna (2021) and a summary of personae and their affiliation strategies is provided in Table 4. Whilst there were key bonds that personae had in common such as [dangerous mark of the beast], [fake virus], [powerful elites] and [evil Bill Gates] bonds, there were also bonds that were distinct to each personae. Religious Fanatics focused on discourse

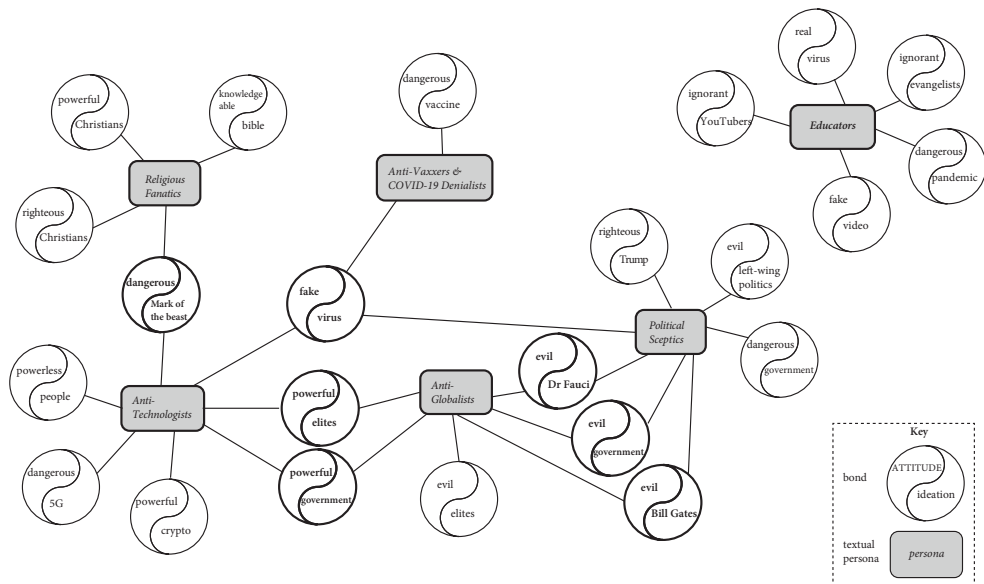


Figure 4. Bond cluster diagram of personae and their Bonds

about Christians as righteous, and the Bible as a key source of knowledge, but neglected direct evaluations regarding COVID-19. In comparison, Anti-Vaxxers and COVID-19 Denialists centred their evaluations on the virus as fake and vaccines as dangerous. Personae such as Anti-Globalists and Political Sceptics avoided reference to religious discourse but rather focused on evil elites. Anti-Technologists were also focused on elites but tended to focus on contrasting bonds between powerless people and powerful elites. Educators were the most distinct and did not share any common bonds with the other personae. Instead, Educators centred bonds around the pandemic being real and serious, and highlighting the ignorance of YouTubers. It should be noted that in this particular comment corpus each comment represented one persona, however, a larger text could contain multiple personae. Thus, these personae categories have the potential to be complementary rather than discrete. Overall, within this particular comment corpus there were polarised personae focusing on different clusters of social bonds.

Table 4. Overview of personae and their affiliation strategies

Personae	Description of personae	Key linguistic features
Religious Fanatics	Discussion about Christian values and mark of the beast	Convoking affiliation to rally Christians, distilling affiliation to limit options, righteous Christians and knowledgeable bible bonds
Anti-Technologists	Spreading moral panics about technology and COVID-19	Distilling and modulating affiliation to amplify claims, dangerous technology and powerless people bonds
Anti-Vaxxers and COVID-19 Denialists	Promoting anti-vax views and anti-COVID-19 restrictions	Convoking and tempering affiliation to strengthen claims, safe virus versus dangerous vaccine bonds
Anti-Globalists	Targeting elites with negative evaluations	Distilling affiliation to not consider other options, powerful and evil elites bonds
Political Sceptics	Dismissing political ideologies	Distilling affiliation to limit options, righteous Trump versus evil left-wing politics bonds
Educators	Debunking content in the videos	Convoking affiliation to call out YouTubers for their ignorance, fake video and ignorant people bonds

7. Conclusion

This chapter has explored the different social bonds evident in a corpus of YouTube comments about the ID2020 conspiracy theory. It has offered a method to analyse the social bonds that are at stake when users respond to conspiracy theory videos. This social bonding is important to analyse because it offers a means of understanding why people choose to engage with conspiracy theories online, and the presentation of conspiracy theories to claim superior morality or appeal to emotional triggers (see also Demata, Zorzi and Zottola, Chapter 1 in this volume). In other words, social bonding highlights the importance of evaluative language in the construction of different stances, a notion that has been explored throughout this volume (see also Lee, Chapter 10; Mora-López, Chapter 13; Mitkovska and Saračević, Chapter 14 in this volume). Additionally, this analysis has mapped out the various personae that can exist in YouTube comment sections. Commenting users do not simply replicate the content in the featured YouTube video they watch, instead they bring their own ideologies into play in their comments in order to align or dis-align with other users. Thus, the analysis revealed distinct emergent personae with different religious and political stances involving positions such as anti-globalism, anti-technology, political scepticism, and anti-vaccination. The analysis also indicated the presence of personae focused on debunking or educating people who believe the ID2020 conspiracy theory. At a more macro level, there were broader bonds that encompassed struggles over power, knowledge, and morality. The conspiracy theories that these users engaged with also incorporated recycled conspiratorial content and common moral judgements about society not specific to COVID-19. This affiliation analysis has revealed the complex array of bonds that can exist in relation to conspiracy theories, with users forming a mixture of bond clusters encompassing both their own specific ideological bonds, and broader bonds about societal and moral struggles. In order to combat issues of misinformation, it is important to understand and map out these nuances in the values of users, so that personalised solutions can be sought out rather than a homogenous solution that ignores ideological diversity.

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#conspiracymemes

A framework-based analysis of conspiracy memes as digital multimodal units and ensuing user reactions on Instagram

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Drawing on a multimodal corpus of Instagram memes (see Dancygier and Vandelanotte 2017; Yus 2019), this study explores the forms and functions of online conspiracy memes which are rooted in conspiracy theories (see Byford 2011; Butter and Knight 2020; Uscinski 2020). Focusing on posts, so-called digital multimodal units (DMUs), with regard to platform functions and the ensuing user reactions, this chapter qualitatively investigates DMUs with a discourse-analytic focus from two complementary angles: the posting of internet memes by the account holder as well as the ensuing meta-reflexive discussions (see Bublitz and Hübler 2007) among the audience, in which potential supporters and opponents of conspiracy theories engage to negotiate the semiotics and functions of DMUs.

Keywords: internet memes, multimodal linguistic discourse analysis, digital multimodal units, corpus, Instagram, conspiracy discourse, qualitative analysis

1. Introduction

The circulation of internet memes on social online platforms is a common practice among social media actors in participatory Web 2.0 environments. Recently, researchers have shown an increased interest in the study of internet memes because “internet memes represent a new genre of online communication, and an understanding of their production, dissemination, and implications in the real world enables an improved *ability to navigate digital culture*” (Wiggins 2019: i; our emphasis). This chapter is interested in this digital trend and sets out to systematically examine the role of memes, or ‘digital multimodal units’ (henceforth DMUs) in *conspiracy theory discourse* as found on Instagram. DMUs in conspiracy theory

discourse are socially constructed public discourses (Shifman 2014: 14) and can therefore “provide insight into how ‘everyday’ media texts intertwine with public discourses” (Milner 2012: 9).

Previous research (e.g. Osterroth 2015; Bülow et al. 2018; Denisova 2019; Yus 2019) has leaned towards investigating memes focusing mainly on the image, its components and features regarding text-image-relations. This chapter argues for a context-inclusive approach and develops an analytical framework with which DMUs in (visual) social media can be studied systematically in context with regard to their multimodal discourse environment (see Dancygier and Vandelanotte 2017; Jewitt 2017). Drawing on a multimodal corpus of DMUs on Instagram associated with the hashtag #conspiracymemes, this study explores the forms and functions of DMUs which are rooted in conspiracy theories (see Butter and Knight 2020; Byford 2011; Douglas et al. 2019; Uscinski 2020).

Focusing on DMUs with images and the ensuing audience reactions, this chapter seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the *formal* (textual and visual) characteristics of conspiracy DMUs?
2. What are the recurring *thematic* priorities of conspiracy DMUs?
3. What are the *functions* of posting conspiracy DMUs?

In order to address these research objectives, we first provide a working definition of the term DMU and conceptually link it to conspiracy theory discourse on Instagram (SECTION 2). We then discuss the methodology and data proposing an analytic framework for the systematic investigation of DMUs (SECTION 3). Subsequently, our two-fold analysis (SECTION 4) first examines the formal and thematic properties of the corpus (SECTION 4.1), after which an in-depth qualitative analysis of two selected DMUs (SECTION 4.2) serves to illustrate how they are strategically used in such a highly complex discourse setting as Instagram, both from a linguistic and interactional point of view. After comparing and discussing the results of the qualitative analysis, the concluding section (SECTION 5) provides a summary of the results and a brief outlook.

2. Understanding DMUs and conspiracy theory discourse on Instagram

2.1 From memes to DMUs

To date, there has been no common agreement on the precise definition of *internet memes* since the term refers to very different phenomena that spread on the internet, or more specifically, on social media platforms (see Denisova 2019; Gonzáles et al. 2019; Johann and Bülow 2019; Mahadian and Sugandi 2017; Attardo 2017;

Taecharungroj and Nueangjamnong 2015; Wiggins 2019). In line with Laineste and Voolaid, we understand internet memes as “a relatively complex, multi-layered, and intertextual combination of (moving) image and text that is disseminated by the active agency of internet users, becoming popular among them” (Laineste and Voolaid 2016: 27). Additionally, we agree with Denisova who proposes that memes are

remarkably versatile for meaning-making, emotion-sharing and attention-grabbing in the oversaturated Internet environment. Users exploit them to comment on or discuss all possible issues, from the personal to the societal. (Denisova 2019: 10)

In our understanding, what is commonly referred to as internet memes can be realised as combinations of text with a static image (so-called image macros), but also with moving images (i.e. videos and gifs), the former being the prototype of internet memes that consist of text superimposed on an image (see Zenner and Geeraerts 2018: 171). As a special type of internet memes, image macros have a prototypical structure: a setup line at the top, providing the semantic frame, and a punch line at the bottom which includes the twist (see Osterroth 2015: 31 and Bülow et al. 2018: 2). A text-image unit that is widely spread online and goes viral can be interpreted as a meme. Formally speaking, the combination can either consist of one single picture (i.e. ‘mono-pictorial’ memes) but also of two or more pictures (i.e. ‘pluri-pictorial’ memes).

For the purposes of our research, we propose the term ‘digital multimodal unit’ in analogy to Dawkins’ notion of “disseminated cultural unit” (see Yus 2019: 105). A DMU captures not only one artefact but comprises a range of items that produce joint meaning on Instagram. More specifically, a DMU as a notion can be understood as the unit of the posted element (i.e. a combination of text/image/video), the metadata (incl. profile information, e.g. posting time, posting text and hashtags, etc.), and Instagram’s social media affordances (e.g. likes, shares, comments, hashtags, etc.) that shape and influence the discourse context. In other words, we understand DMU to cover all aspects that are produced by the account holder on their profile. The term DMU is thus preferred over *meme* or *image macro* since the posted element needs to be understood as inherently tied to its circumstances of posting, the posting text and the information available about the account holder and profile. This takes into account that the DMU viewer has to draw their own conclusions, since the argument given in the DMU is often not explicit (see Huntington 2015). For the purposes of our study, images are understood as visual artefacts of various kinds (e.g. photographs, graphics, illustrations, etc.) whose meaning can only be inferred by analysing the interplay of language, image and the discourse-specific context (see Stöckl et al. 2020).

Our research follows Wiggins’ (2019) line of argumentation with regard to the dissemination and interpretation of memes. According to Wiggins, imitation is not

regarded as an essential characteristic of memes; it is rather “the capacity to propose or counter a discursive argument through visual and often also verbal interplay; the emphasis here is on those internet memes which inhere a critical component of society, politics, etc.” (Wiggins 2019: 1–2). Thus, the DMUs featured in our corpus are similar to political memes, which form “a sub-genre of the internet meme and address some aspect of political philosophy and ideology” (Wiggins 2019: 65).

In addition to the DMU, our analysis argues for the inclusion of data that is produced by the DMU audience, including, for instance, like counts as well as the discursive space below the DMU in which users post responses in the form of comments (also see Lee, Chapter 10, and Inwood and Zappavigna, Chapter 11, this volume, for the importance of including users and their comments into the analysis). Taken together, the profile-oriented DMU and the content produced by the audience are embedded in conspiracy theory discourse as a whole on Instagram.

2.2 Conspiracy theory discourse on Instagram

Since 2015, the number of social media users worldwide has risen continuously from 2.08 to 3.81 billion (Statista 2020: 2). Instagram, with its approximately one billion users (in 01/2020; see Statista 2020: 6), is understood as visual social media (see Highfield and Leaver 2016; Leaver et al. 2019) since it is seen as “a conduit for *communication*” (Leaver et al. 2019: 1; emphasis in original) with a strong focus on visual elements, e.g. images, videos and emojis (see *ibid.*). The analysis conducted in this study is less about the determination of individual visual types (e.g. images, fictional images) than about how they are spread (e.g. by using hashtags) and how meaning is constructed through text-image relationships within conspiracy theory discourse on visual social media.

Numerous studies deal with conspiracy theories from different perspectives (see Butter and Knight 2020; Douglas et al. 2019; Madisson and Ventsel 2020; Uscinski 2020; Varis 2019; Stano 2020). Conspiracy theories are seen as “an important social, cultural and political phenomenon in contemporary life” (Butter and Knight 2020: iii). However, conspiracy theories are by no means a new phenomenon and “their visibility and significance are increasing today. Conspiracy theories can no longer be simply dismissed as the product of a pathological mind-set located on the political margins” (Butter and Knight 2020: iv). Butter and Knight emphasise that conspiracy theories are different from fake news:

[...] the majority of those who articulate conspiracy theories genuinely believe in what they are saying [...]. They are convinced that they are helping to reveal the truth. But there [are] also those who spread conspiracy theories that they do not necessarily believe in themselves to make money or to achieve certain political goals.
(Butter and Knight 2020: 2)

The mentioned types of actors and their products can be found on Instagram exploiting different types of visual genres in order to spread conspiracy theories. As outlined above, we use the umbrella term DMU to capture the multimodal and versatile nature of visual elements as our focus is on “the transmission of conspiracy theories *through* different media forms” (Aupers et al. 2020: 387; emphasis in original). Both DMUs and conspiracy theories require active groups of social media users who produce and spread their messages. According to Stano, “online conspiracy theories are not understood as the passive repetition of the same ‘infective’ content across the Internet, but rather as the active reinterpretation and adaptation of such content by users, who thus confer different meanings on them” (Stano 2020: 487).

3. Methodology and data

This section introduces the analytic framework which is used for the analysis and elaborates on the selection, type of data as well as the sampling criteria used for corpus construction.

3.1 Analytic framework

The framework essentially consists of five analytic levels which are processed chronologically. A core distinction is made between the researcher perspective (I–IV), the user perspective (V) and the complementary reading of the DMU, the comments as well as the social media affordances by both the researcher and the users. The framework includes different thematic and functional foci ranging from profile description, formal and functional classification of the DMU, discursive embedding to meta-reflexive patterns evident in user comments (see Table 1).¹ In general, we understand the analytical approach as a circular process, which is supported by a complementary reading in order to arrive at a fully-fledged analysis of the DMU in its multimodal discourse context.

The analysis starts with the researcher’s perspective (levels I–IV), in the social sciences commonly referred to as ‘etic’ (see Frick 2018; Mostowlansky and Rota 2020). The first level (I) is interested in the profile and the post in general (e.g. name of profile, posting date with number of likes, etc.). On the following levels, the focus is on the formal characteristics of the image and multimodality (II), after which the

1. The notions of first- and second-order perspectives are adopted from pragmatic studies on (im-)politeness by Kleinke and Bös (2015); Watts (2003) and Eelen (2001).

Table 1. Analytic framework for DMUs – dimensions, methodologies and contexts

Focus on DMU (second-order/etic > first-order/emic perspective)		
I	Profile/Post Description [Metadata]	<u>account holder/profile</u> : name of account holder no. of subscriptions no. of posts profile picture profile description <u>post</u> : posting date posting text no. of likes/views no. of comments hashtags (see Gür-Şeker 2021; Highfield and Leaver 2016; Leaver et al. 2019)
II	Formal Dimension [Image/Multimodality]	<u>image</u> : what/who is depicted? expected/norm-challenging features (see Shifman 2014; Wiggins 2019; Wiggins and Bouwers 2015) <u>degree of multimodality</u> : no. and composition of textual / pictorial / audio-visual elements (see Jewitt 2017; McCloud 1994; Yus 2019)
III	Functional Dimension [Intentions]	<u>speech/picture acts (meaning relation between textual and pictorial elements of DMU)</u> : word-specific: text > picture picture-specific: picture > text duo-specific: text = picture additive: text + picture picture + text parallel: text ≠ picture montage: (picture (text)) interdependent: text <=> picture (see McCloud 1994; Yus 2019) <u>picture-to-text translation</u> (see Osterroth 2015) <u>intentions/functions of DMU</u> : e.g. humour (see Laineste and Voolaid 2016) criticism of politics, society (see Wiggins 2019)
IV	Discursive Embedding	<u>global theme(s) of DMU</u> : institutions people (current) societal topics + developments meta-CTD (see Butter and Knight 2020)
Focus on Comment Section (first-order/emic > second-order/etic perspective)		
V	Metareflexive Patterns of Description and Interpretation	<u>comments</u> : no. of first-level / second-level comments degree of interaction between account holder and commenting users account holder participation <u>target of comment</u> : account holder DMU ingroup(s) vs. outgroup(s) audience as a whole single user unspecified <u>user behaviour/communication strategies</u> : user positioning (dis-)agreement with DMU convivial vs. conflictual behaviour (non-)support of conspiracy theories identity construction (see Bucholtz and Hall 2005; Bös et al. 2018) discussion of intentions relatability (see Kanai 2019) emoji use + meanings (see Couper-Kuhlen and Selting 2018; Danesi 2017)



picture acts² and intentions of the DMU are classified adopting a functional perspective (III). Finally, the DMU is examined in terms of discursive embedding (IV). The second part of the analysis focuses on the audience (level V; ‘emic’ perspective) and considers various socio-technical phenomena in the comment section. This part of the analysis focuses, for instance, on the number of comments and degree of interaction (measured by the number of likes), the target groups of the comments (who/what is addressed?) and users’ communication strategies which reflect their attitudes and discourse roles in the context of conspiracy theory discourse. The complementary (re-)reading of the post, including metadata, user comments and social media affordances, accompanies the analytic process, with the aim of initiating and supporting the analysis, and interconnecting the various analytic levels to arrive at an overall understanding of the DMU. Depending on the specific research interests, the categories of each analytic level can be extended.

In a first step, the analysis classifies all posts in the DMU corpus with regard to relevant image and topic categories. Following this, two DMUs are selected for a qualitative case study to test the proposed framework. The following section describes the social media corpus and the selection of DMUs for the subsequent analysis.

3.2 Data

The data material was retrieved in a hashtag-oriented search using the tool ‘Instaloader’ (<https://instaloader.github.io/>), covering the period from 01/01/2020 to 20/09/2020, and was extracted on 21/09/2020. One post may consist of several images or videos and the associated posting text (see SECTION 4.2). In order to cope with the ethical challenges of collecting and analysing social media data (see Highfield and Leaver 2016: 56–58), only public profiles are included in this study. In this study we refer to profiles by abbreviations (see Table 3). In cases where users refer to each other within comments, the references are anonymised. With these ethical decisions we “balance the rights of subjects [...] with the social benefits of research and researchers’ rights to conduct research” (Markham and Buchanan 2012). We found a total of 3,477 posts based on the hashtag #conspiracymemes. A close inspection of the corpus points to seven core profiles. Indicated by the high numbers of subscriptions and likes, these profiles have the greatest reach in the community and thus contribute substantially to the dissemination of conspiracy

2. In analogy to John L. Austin’s notion of *speech act*, Osterroth (2015: 37–38) proposes the term ‘picture act’ to refer to the illocutionary force of pictures; a term which is adopted for our concept of DMU.

theories. An a priori reading of our data hints at the crucial role of hashtags (see Highfield and Leaver 2014; Zappavigna 2015; Zhu 2015) in the placement of the DMU. It is possible that image(s) and text(s) alone can produce a ‘neutral’ or illegible meaning, pretending to present mere facts, but regarded in synergy with the account holder’s profile name and their strategic choice of specific hashtags (e.g. #conspiracy, #truthseeker, #woke), a DMU can be embedded deliberately into conspiracy theory discourse.

From a total of 3,477 posts, we selected those with 1,000 or more likes (cf. Table 2) for further analysis (cf. SECTION 4).

Table 2. Data corpus (posts with hashtag #conspiracymemes; > 1,000 likes)

Period	Posts	Images	Videos	Comments
01/2020–09/2020	202	203	171	3,609

Our study can thus be classified as a corpus-assisted discourse analysis (see Baker and McEnergy 2015; Egbert and Baker 2019; Partington et al. 2013) in a digitally-mediated environment (see Herring 2013) that links language and image, while acknowledging the broader multimodal context (see Jewitt 2017; Kress and van Leeuwen 2001; van Leeuwen 2015; McCloud 1994; Stöckl et al. 2020; Yus 2019). This is justified by the fact that “[w]ith online media and means of digital expression becoming central to conspiracy narratives, the function of visual and multimodal elements in representations of conspiracy needs to be interrogated” (Leone et al. 2020: 50).

4. Empirical analysis

Taking the theoretical insights from the previous sections into account, this chapter presents the findings of the two-fold empirical analysis. In the first part, the data material is examined with a focus on the image types/text-image relations, the topics and the hashtags. The second part features an in-depth qualitative analysis of selected DMUs.

4.1 Hashtags, image types and topics in the corpus

Any analysis of DMUs needs to consider their distribution and mechanisms by which they spread on the internet or social media, i.e. their virality (see Butter and Knight 2020; Wiggins 2019). Various platform-specific practices are used for spreading posts, e.g. promoting a post as paid advertisement or the strategic use of hashtags as a filter, which allows for a thematic search for and sorting of images

and videos on Instagram. The hashtag search result is displayed as tiles, hence can be regarded as a ‘panoramic window’ of discourses. In addition to so-called ‘topic hashtags’, they can also be evaluative (see Page 2012: 187) or attain specific discourse-related functions, for example, navigate or steer discourses, communicate statements or express opinions (see Gür-Şeker 2021). Furthermore, hashtags are interactional since they can express ‘ambient affiliation’, indexing “particular kinds of ‘belonging’” (see Zappavigna 2017: 216).

The three most central hashtags in our corpus are the original search term #conspiracymeme (202 times in 100% of posts), #conspiracytheory (193 times in 95.05%), and #conspiracytheorist (189 times in 93.07%), which are often used in combination (see Figure 5 and 7).

With regard to the image types featured in the corpus it is evident that out of 202 DMUs (cf. Table 2), the majority is mono-pictorial (61.39%, $n = 124$), while the minority is pluri-pictorial (38.61%; $n = 78$) (cf. SECTION 2.1). Figure 1 depicts the major thematic categories identified in the corpus: *(current) topics* ($n = 80$) and *people* ($n = 78$) are the most dominant categories, followed by *institutions* ($n = 45$), *general CT* ($n = 31$) and *cultural references* ($n = 4$). In 40 instances, the theme is <unclear>; this category comprises elements in DMUs that display random objects which cannot be placed into a specific context, e.g. a bus or a plain black DMU. The <general CT> category contains elements that deal with meta-reflexive talk about conspiracy theory discourse. The *cultural references* category comprises references to, e.g., TV shows or series. In total, 278 thematic references were coded. This number implies double codings, i.e. in cases where one DMU covers different thematic categories.

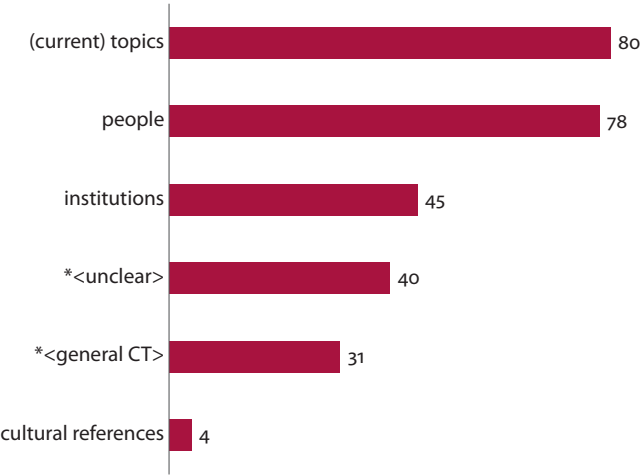


Figure 1. Thematic categories in the corpus ($n = 278$)

The figures (2) and (3) show the two most frequent thematic categories and their respective subcodes. The most frequently occurring (*current*) topics are: *COVID-19* ($n = 13$), *Black Lives Matter* ($n = 11$) and *9/11* ($n = 8$). The most frequently occurring *institutions* are: *the media* ($n = 15$), *the government* ($n = 12$) and *the police* ($n = 6$).

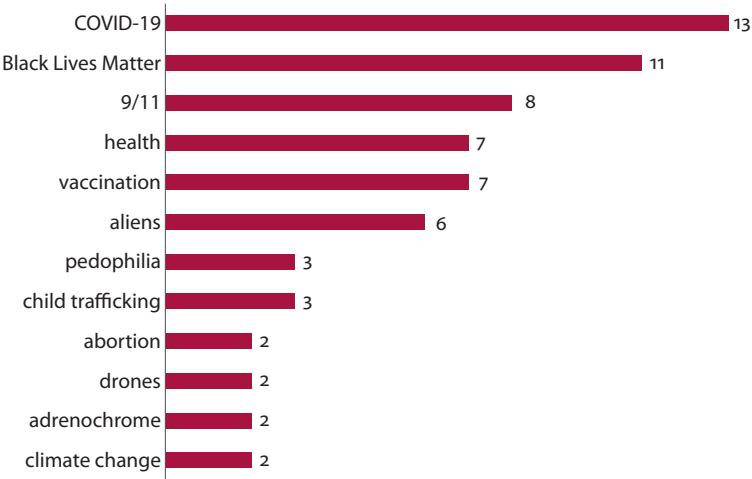


Figure 2. Thematic categories | (current) topics ($n > 1$)

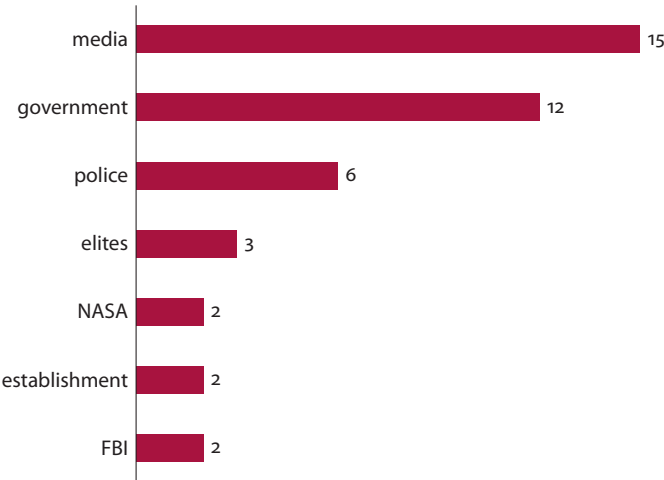
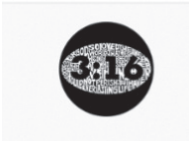


Figure 3. Thematic categories | institutions ($n > 1$)

4.2 Qualitative analysis of selected posts

For the explorative in-depth examination based on the analytic framework proposed in Table 1, we selected the two (static) DMUs with the highest like counts, both of which having been posted by one of the identified core profiles (see Table 3).

Table 3. Analysed DMUs of core profiles

Profile	Profile picture	Post identifier	Mode	Like count	Comment count (Order ₁ Order ₂)
1. TC		TC_DMU001_2020-08-25*	static image	9,331	197 (127 70)
2. CE		CE_DMU002_2020-06-03	static image	2,387	65 (25 40)

* The post identifier used throughout the chapter is composed of the profile name (TC / CE), the number of the DMU in our analysis (DMU001 / DMU002) and the posting date of the DMU (yyyy-mm-dd). Comment identifiers are represented as [TC_COM_12.4; L3], here indicating the fourth reply to first-level comment no. 12 which was liked 3 times.

The two DMUs selected for close analysis were chosen exclusively based on their numbers of likes. It was a mere coincidence that they differ in their formal setup, i.e. mono- vs. pluri-pictorial DMU. In the sections that follow, the selected posts are analysed and compared systematically in order to address the research questions (see SECTION 1).

4.2.1 Analysis of TC_DMU001_2020-08-25: “The Crazy Guy”

Level I: Profile/Post description

TC_DMU001_2020-08-25 was posted on the profile TC which has 46,300 subscribers and a total of 606 posts at the time of data collection. The lexemes in the profile name suggest that the account holder is concerned with aspects related to truth. As can be seen, the TRUTH topos³ plays a prominent role in the data. The religious stance of the account holder is evident in the profile image (see Table 3), which depicts a bible verse reference (John, “3:16”) placed in the white centre of an open

3. We adopt the discourse-analytic notion of *topos* (cf. Reisigl and Wodak 2015; Rubinelli 2006).

black eye and the respective words from this verse in the background, and some of the chosen hashtags (e.g. *#readyourbible*, *#walkbyfaith*, see Table 3).

The DMU (Figure 4) has a like count of 9,331 and triggered a total of 197 comments, comprising 127 first- and 70 second-level comments. In the posting text, the DMU is tagged with 28 hashtags (see Figure 5).

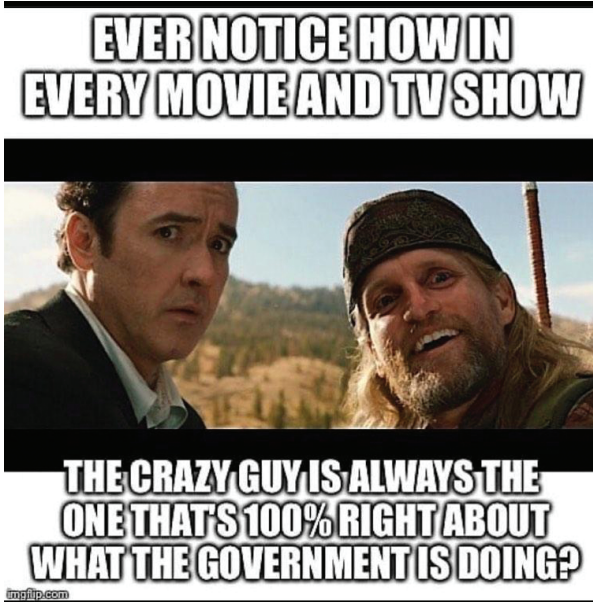


Figure 4. TC_DMU001_2020-08-25

Levels II + III + IV: Formal and functional dimension and discursive embedding

The DMU resembles the prototypical setup of an image macro, featuring a picture in the middle, a top text (“EVER NOTICE...”) and a bottom text (“THE CRAZY GUY...”) which can be read as a contiguous text. The picture in the middle is taken from Roland Emmerich’s 2009 movie *2012* and depicts two characters: On the right, there is Charlie Frost (portrayed by Woody Harrelson), a so-called conspiracy theorist and radio talk-show host who, contrary to public opinion and government statements, predicts that the world is going to end due to a series of large-scale natural disasters. On the left, we see the main protagonist, novelist Jackson Curtis (portrayed by John Cusack), who first does not believe Charlie, then later acknowledges that he was right all along.

The movie *2012* is thus used as a vehicle to refer to the persona of the conspiracy theorist (or *the crazy guy*) in conspiracy theory discourse with which participants can identify (see below). The picture amplifies the proposition put forward by the text (i.e. setup and punch line), making the text-image relation an additive one (see Table 1).

truthiscalling Congratulations, you ARE the
crazy guy 🤪

So am I though!

It's better to look crazy but be wide awake, in
my opinion.

But seriously, see how even in Hollyweird they
programmed us to dismiss people who were
seeking truth and keeping the cabal
accountable?

Repurpost @

#conspiracymemes #truthmatters
#truthmemes #truthseeker #indoctrination
#programmingmemes #hollyweird
timewithjesus #readyourbible #q #qanonposts
#qanon #pizzagate #conspiracy
#conspiracytheory #researchflatearth #jfkjr
#jfkjrlives #birthpangs #endtimeprophecy
#endtimesigns #wakeuppeople #woke #redpill
#redpillbluepill #wwg1wga #walkbyfaith
#prayerworks

Figure 5. TC_DMU001_2020-08-25; posting text with hashtags

In addition to text and image, the posting text (see Figure 5) reveals the stance and the intention of the account holder. It contains two major identity ascriptions (“*you ARE* the crazy guy 🤪 So *am I* though”) which position the account holder and the audience as members of a “crazy” ingroup opposing a disfavoured outgroup, comprising the cabal/government and Hollywood, which needs to be kept “accountable”. The use of pronouns “they” and “us” keeps the referents largely implicit, i.e. no explicit reference is made to antecedents, even though the co-text and context suggest the above-mentioned dichotomy. Furthermore, the choice of labels (i.e. “Hollyweird” and “cabal”) indicates the account holder’s critical stance towards this outgroup.

Level V: Metareflexive patterns of description and interpretation

The posting text seems to contribute to a relatively high number of comment responses, in which the aforementioned propositions are discussed. The account holder actively participates in the discussion and posts a total of 47 replies to user comments.

The majority of user comments appear to favour the stance featured in DMU, i.e. there is a high degree of relatability⁴ between the audience and the DMU: “Welcome to my world” (TC_COM_25.0), “👉 So True!” (TC_COM_70.0) or “[...] 100% accurate” (TC_COM_18.0). This finding is also supported by the repeated use of emojis expressing affirmation and a perceived factuality: “hundred points” (💯; 35 instances), “folded hands” (🙏; 14 instances) or “direct hit” (🎯; 2 instances).⁵ In addition to that, the content is perceived to be funny and entertaining, as is evident in the use of two emojis in particular: the “face with tears of joy” emoji (😂; 49 instances) and the “rolling on the floor laughing” emoji (🤣; 14 instances). Also, there is a large degree of creativity in emoji use to refer to conspiracy theories: “NO MORE 😊 We are all waking up now 🌐 •• 🌟” (TC_COM_67.0). The *AWAKE* topos features prominently in the data.

It is striking that out of 127 top-level comments, only one (1) exhibits a critical stance, which is followed by an immediate disqualification of the commenting user, who is implicitly discredited as a vaccination supporter, by the account holder:⁶

- (1) Woah. It’s almost like there is a difference between a movie, where the plot has to entertaining and out of this world to garner attention, and real life, where well things are real and not a part of plot created to get the attention of the public. [TC_COM_58.0; L2]
 <TC>: @TC_COM_58.0 so, are you getting the 🦠 in your left or right arm? [TC_COM_58.2; L0]

The general agreement (and lack of criticism) towards the DMU and the high degree of relatability are indicative of a conspiracy discourse community, which is further supported by the use of pronouns. The account holder uses pronouns in the posting text to speak about “us” (the ingroup) and “they” (the outgroup). In the ongoing discourse, these pronouns and labels help to construct semantic referents (see Kleinke and Bös 2018). Labels used for the ingroup, which are often combined with pronouns like *I*, *we* or *us*, tie up with the *CRAZY* topos: “I know I’ve become

4. Relatability is understood here as “an affective relation [...] produced through labour that reflects a desirable notion of common experience to an unknown audience” (Kanai 2019: 4).

5. All emoji names are taken from www.emojipedia.org [accessed 20/09/2020].

6. All misspellings are depicted as featured in the original comments and were not corrected.

the crazy guy” (TC_COM_77.0), “Yes we are the crazy ones” (TC_COM_46.0), “[...] all of us who think just like the crazy guy in the movies” (TC_COM_113.0), among others. Users labelling themselves as *crazy* are explicitly welcomed and accepted into the community by the account holder (@TC_COM_38.0 welcome!!”; TC_COM_38.1).

Ingroup identification and interpersonal appreciation among ingroup members is further evident in statements like “100% 🍌 u s u s u s” (TC_COM_32.0), “[...] you crazy lads 100% accurate” (TC_COM_18.0) or “I Love My Crazy Friend’s ¹⁰⁰ 🍌” (TC_COM_24.0). Such statements illustrate that the CRAZY topos is turned into something common and desirable within the community: “The crazy guy is always the interesting guy, but also the guy I would rather spend my company with, the crazy guy is always a universe away but oh so awake” (TC_COM_100.0).

The explicit construction of in- and outgroups is shown in (2) and (3):

- (2) They are given the name “crazy” to prevent *the rest of the “sane” people* believing the truth... [TC_COM_87.0; L0; our emphasis]
- (3) [...] The message there is that *sheeple* need to consider *truthtellers* as “crazies”, not take *them* seriously and to dismiss *them* as “conspiracy theorists”. The brainwashing is real! [...] [TC_COM_75.0; L0; our emphasis]

In those examples the “crazy” ingroup and the “sane” outgroup are opposed. While members of the ingroup are characterised as “truthtellers” and “dismiss[ed] as ‘conspiracy theorists’”, the outgroup is depicted as “sheeple”, implying that they are obedient and unknowing. Enclosing the term “conspiracy theorists” in inverted commas further implies that it is conceived of as a dismissive and thus disfavoured term for the ingroup.

The two user narratives about being the crazy person, depicted in (4) and (5), take up the CRAZY, AWAKE and TRUTH topoi and ascribe these to the ingroup, presenting them as desirable qualities which are met with doubts by people not belonging to that ingroup who do not seem to understand and ridicule people with such views:

- (4) [...] I am proud to be crazy right now because my family is trying to understand why I’m so awake and different [...] [TC_COM_57.0; L9]
- (5) [...] People have laughed and joked at my expense over the years [...] they now avoid me at all costs so that they do not have to admit the obvious..... that I HAVE been correct about EVERYTHING” [TC_COM_80.0; L0]

In comments with explicit outgroup mentions, the outgroup is usually denigrated. The government is referred to as “newborn baby fuckers” (TC_COM_3.0) “sheeple” (see TC_COM_75.0) or “‘sane’ people believing the truth” (see TC_COM_87.0).

The CRAZY and TRUTH topoi are creatively linked to discourses which are not explicitly mentioned in the DMU, e.g. the COVID-19 pandemic (“Crazy like you wear a mask?”; TC_COM_42.0), the Black Lives Matter (henceforth BLM)⁷ movement (“Crazy lives matter”; TC_COM_102.0) or the gender debate (“While the rest of the world is confused about what gender they are I will speak the truth”; TC_COM_120.0).

Reevaluating the above-mentioned findings, this mono-pictorial DMU, displaying an additive text-image relationship with a focus on the text, primes a meta-reflexive discussion (with few digressions) about the *crazy guy*, which is (strategically) used for the linguistic construction of identity categories, e.g. ingroup (“we”) vs. outgroup (“they”) as evident in the use of labels and personal pronouns. The overall findings indicate the manifestation of a conspiracy theory discourse community (or ingroup) which understands itself along the lines of the TRUTH, CRAZY and AWAKE topoi. It can be argued that the DMU is used as to achieve two primary functions: offering social criticism against the outgroup (e.g. government/elites/media) and building a discourse community, i.e. an ingroup of “awake truth-tellers” that are often depicted as “crazy” by the outgroup. The comments as a whole strengthen the ingroup members’ community ties.

4.2.2 Analysis of CE_DMU002_2020-06-03: “COVID Was Gone”

Level I: Profile/Post description

The profile CE has a total of 1,751 subscribers and 152 posts (see Table 4 below). The account holder uses a profile picture showing an eye framed by a triangle (see Table 3) and thus adapts a widespread symbol of the so-called ‘Eye of Providence’. This means that the profile not only fits into the conspiracy theory discourse as a digital actor with its profile name (C for Conspiracy), but also with the profile picture and profile description which is “Conspiracy Theorists”. The post, a static image, with the most likes within the CE profile is now systematically analysed (see framework, SECTION 3.1).

Level II: Formal dimension

According to the analytical framework CE_DMU002_2020-06-03 can be categorized as a pluri-pictorial DMU consisting of two images (see Table 1). Like the DMU analysed in SECTION 4.2.1, the picture below is a prototypical image macro

7. BLM is a social protest movement that began in the United States in 2013 with the use of a hashtag (#BlackLivesMatter) against racially motivated violence and police brutality against black people (cf. Rickford 2016: 35), meanwhile BLM has become a transnational social movement in different countries worldwide.

with setup and punch line. The upper picture depicts a demonstration with a diffuse crowd, showing presumably a BLM protest, facing police officers and police cars. The picture below shows a film sequence with Kevin Spacey, whose face is depicted from the front and is in focus. The picture is framed by a setup line (“AND JUST LIKE THAT”) and a punch line (“COVID WAS GONE”) in capital letters (see Figure 6). This declarative sentence about the disappearance of COVID-19 as well as the explicit question in the posting text (“Where is COVID ? 🤪🔥@CE”; see Figure 7) steers the comments into a certain direction and encourages the users to deal with that question. The text-image relations can be best described as interdependent.



Figure 6. CE_DMU002_2020-06-03



Figure 7. CE_DMU002_2020-06-03; posting text with hashtags

Levels III + IV: Functional dimension and discursive embedding

The predominant function of the DMU is to spread scepticism regarding media agendas. Thus, the image act is criticism, and can literally be translated in different ways such as ‘Because of BLM, COVID-19 is suddenly no longer an issue in media and society’ or ‘When BLM (with people keeping no distance) is possible, than COVID-19 never existed and thus is fake news’. Global themes of the DMU are about institutions (e.g. the media, government) and (current) societal developments regarding COVID-19 and the BLM movement. The visualization of Kevin Spacey is a reference to the cancellation of his role in a Ridley Scott film due to rape allegations. It is obvious that the DMU meaning is dependent on discourse knowledge about societal developments in the US.

Level V: Metareflexive patterns of description and interpretation

Now the analysis focuses on the user comments conducting a first-order perspective analysis (see Table 1, V). Two out of 65 comments stand out since they are liked at least 10 times. The first comment (6) contains a proclamation of violence towards BLM protestors, which is condemned in the reply.

- (6) Take a truck and run through them all. Honestly what I'll do
[CE_COM_12.0; L2]
 @CE_COM_12.0 Ur sick [CE_COM_12.8; L11]

The second comment (7) deals with a conspiracy regarding the death of George Floyd which is approved by the account holder CE:

- (7) I'll tell you here is my thought. That cop was told to kill George so that protests and riots would start because COVID-19 could spread like crazy. Give it time
[CE_COM_23.0; L10]
 <CE>: @CE_COM23.0 excatly 🤩❤ [CE_COM_23.1; L0]

Overall, the comments mainly refer to COVID-19 and the BLM movement in the US, suggesting that the assumed main intention (i.e. media criticism) is no key topic in the discussion.

The account holder participates in the discussions. More specifically, the profile uses '@<Username>' and emojis which are systematically used and repeated to confirm opinions. The "alien" emoji (👽) occurring 18 times in total, is mostly used as a kind of interunction to mark the end of the sentence or to approve formulated statements.

In contrast to the first DMU, conflictual behaviour can be found in different contexts here. There are a number of critical comments (8–10) regarding the statement "COVID is gone":

- (8) It isn't gone. The rate of infection will rise as soon as the incubation period is over from the time the riots started. People don't know that they have it right away. [CE_COM_1.0; L2]
 (9) Not gone unfortunately [...] [CE_COM_2.0; L4]
 (10) Dont be ignorant covid is not gone [CE_COM_16.0; L2]

Conflictual behaviour is also reflected in the comment "Ur sick" which is a reaction regarding postulated violence against BLM protestors by a user (see (6)). These examples indicate that intentions of the account holder or users who post comments are discussed.

Although there is no metapragmatic evidence for negotiating the topic conspiracy through lexical indicators such as "planned" (11), "they" (11), "fake" (12) or "awaking" (13), one can identify users who construct conspiracy theories.

Furthermore, a close reading of the comments reveals specific lexical patterns which are used to substantiate statements pseudo-argumentatively (see Hess-Lüttich 2007): “trust me” (14), “I’ll tell you” (15), so-that-conclusion (15).

- (11) Not gone unfortunately. Just wait until results come in. Remember that 2nd wave they were talking about right before all this happened? What if everything is going as *planned* 😊 😐 😓 🤔 [CE_COM_2.0; L4; our emphasis]
- (12) *Them* numbers *fake*. How can *they* test that many people in 24 hours? *They* didn’t and are exaggerating and lying. [CE_COM_5.0; L1; our emphasis]
- (13) The people are *awakening* [CE_COM_24.0; L2; our emphasis]
- (14) I had to go to the Er today. I didn’t see anyone there for covid19, and *trust me* I was looking [...]. [CE_COM_3.0; L1; our emphasis]
- (15) *I’ll tell you* here is my thought. That cop *was told* to kill George *so* that protests and riots *would start because* COVID-19 could spread like crazy. Give it time [CE_COM_23.0; L10; our emphasis]

Attitudes or positions within the comment section are also conveyed through emojis, of which there are 48 in total in this post. The “face with tears of joy” emoji (😂) occurs nine times. The users employ this emoji to critically evaluate statements about the disappearance of Corona and to express their astonishment regarding these user positions by laughing about them (16)–(17).

- (16) @CE yea, honestly wasn’t directed at you. I’ve just seen so many say it and it amazes me how stupid they are 😂 [CE_COM_1.1; L0]
- (17) Lmao who said it’s gone, expect them cases to go back up 😂 [CE_COM_17.0; L4]

In summary and after a complementary reading, also taking into account the explicit description of intended DMU functions by the account holder, the image act of the DMU is media criticism, and can literally be translated as: ‘Due to the BLM protests, COVID-19 is suddenly no longer a media issue’. However, the results suggest that the account holder cannot initially convey their intended goal of media criticism in a comprehensible manner, since misinterpretations and discourse shifts occur within the comment section. The DMU triggers a relatively high number of likes and comments, and spreads conspiracy theories visually and textually. On the lexical level, user comments which potentially spread or support conspiracy theories can be detected through certain search terms such as *planned* or *awaking*. The analysis demonstrates that the DMU meaning can be inferred more precisely by drawing on discourse knowledge in combination with the meta descriptions of the profile, the posting text and the comments.

4.3 DMU comparison

The main findings of the analysis indicate that there are a number of similarities with regard to the formal, thematic, and functional characteristics of the analysed DMUs which are compared succinctly in Table 4.

Table 4. DMU comparison, similarities and differences

DMU001		DMU002	
<i>Focus on DMU (second-order/etic > first-order/emic perspective)</i>			
I	Profile/Post Description [Metadata]	Profile: 46,300 subscribers/606 posts; digital CT actor Post (25/08/20): 9,331 likes, 197 comments (127 70), 28 hashtags, 192 emojis in total [1 post; 191 comments]	Profile: 1,751 subscribers/152 posts; digital CT actor Post (03/06/20): 2,387 likes, 65 comments (25 40), 30 hashtags, 48 emojis [2 posts; 46 comments]
II	Formal Dimension [Image/ Multimodality]	static, mono-pictorial, additive text-image relation	static, pluri-pictorial, interdependent text-image relation
III	Functional Dimension [Intentions]	(implicit) criticism of Hollywood/the media and the government/society picture-to-text translation: ‘The government/the media programs us to dismiss conspiracy theorists as crazy even though they are telling the truth.’	media criticism picture-to-text translation: ‘Due to the BLM protests, COVID-19 is suddenly no longer a media issue.’
IV	Discursive Embedding	meta-reflexive discussion of “the crazy guy” in the context of truth and CT, among others	BLM protests COVID-19
<i>Focus on Comment Section (first-order/emic > second-order/etic perspective)</i>			
V	Metareflexive Patterns of Description and Interpretation	discourse interaction account holder participates in discourse agreement > disagreement; largely convivial indicators on the lexical level, e.g. <i>awake, truth, crazy, sheeple</i> identity construction (ingroups/outgroups)	discourse interaction account holder participates in discourse agreement > disagreement; largely convivial indicators on the lexical level, e.g. <i>planned, awaking</i> identity construction (ingroups/outgroups)

What both DMUs have in common is that they express social criticism. More specifically, it is directed at state, media and economic actors, while the criticism can be placed on a continuum ranging from implicit to explicit linguistic strategies, e.g. pronoun usage, lexical choices or posted hashtags. Following Wiggins' (2019) observation, the comparative analysis thus indicates that DMUs are not merely intended to be witty and humorous but evidently function as carriers and distributors of political and social stances and attitudes. To this end, discussions are strategically and consciously stimulated in both of the exemplified DMUs.

In addition to that, the posting text and hashtags are carefully chosen to fulfil specific functions. It is evident that the analysed profiles are no amateurs; they display a high degree of familiarity with the mechanisms and affordances of visual social media and use them skilfully to generate reach, facilitate interaction and to stay in touch with their community.

With regard to formal properties, both DMUs contain static images that are strategically selected and posted. The distinction between mono- and pluri-pictorial DMUs helps to classify the degree of multimodality and meaning relations between various elements. The more images are integrated in the DMU, the more topics can be covered, and the more complex are the options for interpretation and, consequently, the users' responses. Furthermore, the analysed DMUs seem to evoke topics that are taken up in the comments section (e.g. BLM, COVID-19, etc.). Therefore, it is possible to hypothesise that with a mono-pictorial DMU, the comment section tends to focus on the central topic triggered by DMU. In cases of pluri-pictorial DMUs, the comment section appears to be more versatile, triggering more topics in the ensuing discourse.

As far as the topics and discourses are concerned, both DMUs are embedded in the larger context of conspiracy theory discourse. At the same time, they feature in different, partly overlapping sub-discourses, dealing with meta-reflexive discussions of conspiracy theories, BLM protests, the COVID-19 pandemic or the power of pharmaceutical industries. The mapping between the DMUs and conspiracy theory discourse is particularly evident in the choice of hashtags: both DMUs feature #conspiracy, #conspiracytheory, alongside #conspiracymemes, the actual hashtag used to select the data.

The account holder's intentions are not only conveyed by the static image and the decoded text-image relations but are reinforced in the posting text and taken up in the comment sections. In contrast to earlier work, which is constrained to the description of the meme in isolation, our analysis has demonstrated a multi-level examination of DMUs which is facilitated by the socio-technical affordances of Instagram. The analysis has identified meaning relations on various levels: between the ever more complex visual and textual elements in the posted element itself, which can then be considered in relation to the posting text. In turn, adopting

a first-order perspective has helped to illustrate that the meaning of the DMU is interactively negotiated among the users who react and share opinions in the form of comments, both with and without account holder participation. Overall, it has been shown that DMUs are constitutive of community. Users' linguistic practices in the comment sections are indicative of an emergent conspiracy theory discourse community, while the interpersonal ties between ingroup members are reinforced in and by means of interaction. At the same time, DMUs are generic, i.e. they do not explicitly focus on a specific nation, country or government and are thus easily transferable to other discourse communities worldwide. In other words, the DMUs have a high degree of relatability.

5. Conclusion

This study set out to develop an analytical framework in order to investigate multimodal political memes and discursive practices on Instagram in the context of conspiracy theories. Nowadays, Instagram, like other social media platforms, is used for political campaigns and has become politicized (cf. Bossetta 2018). As a visual social media platform, it enables the dissemination of communication formats that are characterized by language and (static and/or moving) images, all of which are influenced by various social media affordances (cf. SECTION 4.1). Our analysis of the hashtag *#conspiracymemes* clearly shows that pre-existing conspiracy theories are prominently featured and distributed on Instagram.

Having developed a methodological framework for the systematic multimodal analysis of DMUs, the empirical analysis has exemplified the application of this framework to an Instagram corpus of 202 DMUs focussing on conspiracy theory discourses. The major finding of this study is that account holders on Instagram strategically exploit DMUs as a vehicle to spread political attitudes and conspiracy theories that are fuelled by criticism of central societal actors. In addition to that, the strategic and repeated use of hashtags helps to spread attitudes in conspiracy theory discourse; they fulfil an important discourse-related function as they are used as a tool to mark the respective post as part of conspiracy theory discourse (e.g. *#conspiracy*, *#conspiracytheory*). Methodologically speaking, this implies that strategic hashtag and keyword searches can be used to access conspiracy theory discourse.

At the same time, the qualitative analysis suggests that the study of memes must necessarily move away from an isolated consideration. We argue for a close inspection and interplay between context, sociotechnical affordances and discursive embedding. The inclusion of contexts as a central element of the analysis provides access to the dominating attitudes and allows insights into discourse knowledge. For example, future research might examine quantitatively to what extent DMUs

actually promote conspiracy theories as opposed to discussing them critically. Finally, it can be emphasized that this contribution does not only illustrate how Instagram is used for “the transmission of conspiracy theories *through* different media forms” (Aupers et al. 2020: 387; emphasis in original), but also provides a methodology for analysing DMUs in context of conspiracy theories which are spread in social media.

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The New World Order on Twitter

Evaluative language in English and Spanish tweets

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This chapter explores the evaluative language used in relation to the New World Order (NWO) conspiracy theory from the perspective of Appraisal Theory (Martin and White 2005) in English and Spanish. Given the scarcity of analyses that go beyond the distinction between positive and negative evaluation, this chapter discusses the authors' approach to events and figures related to the New World Order (NWO) conspiracy theory. For that purpose, a corpus of 1,000 tweets about the NWO was annotated and analysed regarding Attitude realisations. The results show that authors use mainly a Judgement approach, which evaluates people socially and morally, in both languages. However, it is less frequent in Spanish, in favour of references to the value of the targeted entities (Appreciation). These evaluations were not found to be argued, but merely asserted.

Keywords: Appraisal Theory, Attitude, English, New World Order, Spanish, Twitter

1. Introduction

Conspiracy theories are a recurring phenomenon which have been and still are part of humanity's culture and history (Van Prooijen and Douglas 2017). Studies have been carried out on their positive and negative effects and the motives to believe them and share them (see Douglas et al. 2019), although the specific literature on the linguistic features of messages written by their supporters is not so profuse (see Section 2.2). Regarding sentiment, evaluation and emotions, literature usually focuses on general sentiment and polarity (positive-negative) identification (e.g. Narayanan et al. 2013; Wang et al. 2020), but not on more fine-grained distinctions.

With the worldwide impact of the outbreak of COVID-19, one of the conspiracy theories that has regained relevance and can be easily found in the media is that about the New World Order. This theory revolves around the idea of the existence

of a secretive group formed by members of the social elite whose aim is to create a global, totalitarian government that controls the world's population.

This chapter aims to contribute to the understanding of the discourse of and about conspiracy theories by determining whether and how evaluative language is used when writing comments related to the New World Order conspiracy theory contrastively in English and Spanish. From these aims, the following research questions can be posed: Do tweets about the New World Order include evaluative terms that indicate emotions, judgements of behaviour and assessments of things in English and Spanish? If so, which approach is more commonly adopted by authors to discuss the New World Order: a focus on how they feel, on judging other people and their actions morally, or on indicating the value of things? How and why are these evaluative resources used? How clear and founded are those evaluations? Are there any differences between English and Spanish tweets regarding these meanings and approaches? Answering these questions and understanding the role of evaluative language in this type of discourse will help uncover the perspective from which authors approach events and figures they find involved in the conspiracy.

2. Conspiracy theories, the NWO, Twitter and their language

In the following sections, an explanation of what the NWO conspiracy is about and why it is relevant today is provided. Also, the reasons why Twitter plays a role in the spread of conspiracy theories and why evaluative language is relevant to them is addressed. Finally, a justification of why Appraisal Theory is an adequate framework for the analysis of evaluative language is presented.

2.1 The New World Order

The popularity of the term “new world order” is tracked down to when it was used by President H. W. Bush in a news conference on 30th August, 1990: “As I look at the countries that are chipping in here now, I think we do have a chance at a new world order” (Safire 1991). Since then, he started using it on other occasions when urging to ban chemical weapons, promote cooperation and stop aggression, for example, in his State of the Union message when promising to success in the Gulf War and “fulfill the long-held promise of a new world order where brutality will go unrewarded, and aggression will meet collective resistance” (Safire 1991). Before that, it had been uttered by James A. Baker III, Bush's secretary of state in 1985 and Mikhail S. Gorbachev (as interpreted in the translation of his words) in 1991 (for further discussion about the origin of the term, see Safire 1991).

As it is understood today, the New World Order started as the perception that the world would be different after the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the communist opponent of the US, the USSR (Spark 2000). However, more recently, it has been widely associated with the idea that a secretive group of people may be leading the world towards a totalitarian government (Stewart 2002) with some specific aims in mind. In order to understand what New World Order means today, it is crucial to clarify the most important ideas this theory currently supports. These are listed and briefly explained below.

1. Reducing world population: due to the limited resources in the planet and the growth of population (UN 2017), NWO conspirators promote birth-control measures, like abortion or contraception. They also promote family planning services to decrease population growth and they may even implement more aggressive techniques like sterilization (Abrams 2015) or biological weapons like the bird flu in 2004 (Redfern 2015).
2. Governments spy on people: this is claimed to be done mainly through microchips and the Internet. Governments may spy on citizens via microchips under humans' skin: they are commonly used in pets to identify their owners if they get lost, but if done in humans – which has already been trialled in elders (Newling 2006) –, it would be used to surveil all citizens (Redfern and Steiger 2014: 26). Data about citizens may also be obtained through their Internet use, as Edward Snowden, former consultant in the NSA, indicated in the classified information he leaked to *The Guardian* (The Guardian 2013) and *The Washington Post* (Gellman and Poitras 2013) in 2013 about secret US surveillance programmes.
3. Communism, Totalitarianism and Satanism: conspiracy theorists connect these three concepts by associating powerful, authoritarian policies, as well as atheism, with Communism. Additionally, there are several groups, societies and various organisations who have allegedly been supporting the arrival of the NWO and have also been linked in different ways to some of these concepts since the last quarter of the 18th century: the Illuminati, the House of Rothschild, Freemasons, the Rockefellers, the United Nations (including agencies working under the UN, like the World Health Organization (WHO)), and the Bilderberg Group, among many others (Rivera 1994).
4. Important current famous figures: Donald Trump, Bill Gates and George Soros. Trump's political measures and behaviour led him to distance himself from international organisations allegedly supporting the NWO like the NATO or the UN (Wishart, Bolongaro and Delfs 2020) and communist countries like China (Usher 2020), thus becoming a figure actively working against the NWO and supported by conspiracists. On the other side, Gates is said to collaborate

to massively depopulate the world via vaccines and abortion and to be an ally of China's Communist party (Wakefield 2020). In the same line, Soros, a Jewish multi-billionaire philanthropist who created the Open Society Foundations and defends internationalism and progressive ideals (Bessner 2019), has been said to fund actions promoting the NWO (BBC News 2019) and support the creation of a financial NWO with China as a powerful member (Financial Times 2009).

The NWO conspiracists have found further evidence to reinforce their suspicions in the spread of COVID-19 and the world's reaction to it. For example, it may reduce world population; mobile apps used to track people's movements in order to control the spread of infections may be used to spy on people; the origin of the virus is China, a communist country; and the global indications of the UN and the WHO to countries and governments demand restrictions and limitations for citizens, thus perceived to behave in a global, totalitarian way. All these issues were found in the tweets analysed here, which can be summarised as pertaining to the following domains: control-freedom, good-evil, heaven-hell, truth-lie, protection-harm and political slants.

The NWO conspiracists have also found in social media a very powerful tool to spread and strengthen their suspicions, since conspiracy theorists are "disproportionately active in sharing and disseminating their views online" (Douglas et al. 2019: 16). Additionally, the Internet makes conspiracy theories stronger among those who are already prone to believe in them (Metaxas and Finn 2017). This is partially due to the fact that, in social media, little communities of like-minded people are created to be surrounded by others who share their ideas, due to the tendency known as "homophily" (Halberstam and Knight 2016; Bozdag 2020). The homophily principle shows that "relationships tend to be distributed according to the characteristics of the actors" (Maya-Jariego and Holgado Ramos 2014: 630) and, consequently, people who share gender, language, values, etc. "tend to cluster in social media" (ibid.). In Twitter, a similar phenomenon, namely "ambient affiliation" (Zappavigna 2011) does also occur, thanks to the use of hashtags. Hashtags are typographic conventions employed by users that introduce metadata in their messages, thus making them explicitly searchable and more likely to be found by other users who may eventually follow them, that is, receive their contributions regularly. Thus, users affiliate with a community "by bonding around evolving topics of interest" (Zappavigna 2011: 800).

2.2 Language and sentiment in conspiracy theory discourse

In general terms, conspiracists' discourse has been pointed out to revolve mainly around arguments against the official explanation, while anticonspiracists spend more time advocating the official version than arguing against the conspiracy theory (Wood and Douglas 2013). Also, conspiracy theorists are more likely to use supposedly knowledgeable authorities when making arguments, as well as to ask rhetorical questions (Wood 2018). Regarding sentiment, it has been found that the more active a user becomes, the more negative their comments are (Zollo et al. 2015). Levy, Saxon and Yang Wang (2021) analysed machine-generated texts and human-generated texts from Reddit about conspiracy theories and found that the latter included a higher rate of positive sentiment in comparison to the former, although both were classified as containing negative sentiment on average. Therefore, as these authors point out, "conspiracy theories and one's belief in them are emotional rather than analytical, and are linked to negative emotions" (Levy, Saxon and Wang 2021: 4). However, studies about more specific sentiments in conspiracy theorists' tweets are scarce. Thus, the analysis in this chapter aims to shed some light on how evaluative language is specifically used by conspiracy theorists when posting on the social network Twitter under the classification of this kind of language proposed by Appraisal Theory.

2.3 Appraisal Theory

Appraisal Theory is a model for evaluative language that emerged within the theoretical framework of Systemic Functional Linguistics and was mainly developed in Australia by Martin and White (Martin 2000; White 2003; Martin and White 2005). It is described as "an interpersonal system at the level of discourse semantics," that is, it involves the negotiation of social relationships and meanings above the clause. More specifically, Appraisal is realised in the form of evaluative language with expressions that indicate "the subjective presence of writers/speakers in texts as they adopt stances towards both the material they present and those with whom they communicate" (Martin and White 2005: 1). It must be taken into account that, although the most common resource used by these authors to illustrate evaluative language are single lexical items, not only isolated words convey evaluative meanings, but they can be found in elements beyond the word level, as Huston (2010) points out.

Appraisal Theory has already been used in a considerable amount of research on different genres and fields, like children's narratives (Martin 1996; Coffin 1997), news reports (White 1998), language acquisition (Painter 2003; Liu 2010), literary texts (Love 2006), social reports (Fuoli 2012), marketing (Wu 2018) and product reviews (Taboada and Grieve 2004; Mora-López 2020), among others.

Evaluative language on Twitter discourse has also been previously studied under the perspective of Appraisal Theory. For example, Zappavigna (2011) analysed the evaluative language used to affiliate in tweets about Obama's victory in 2008 and showed the importance of the use of the hashtag as a linguistic marker that references the target of evaluation. In a posterior study, Zappavigna (2014) explained how evaluative language is used on Twitter to communicate experiences and construe bonds with others by creating communities of shared values. Korenek and Šimko (2014) used Appraisal Theory to detect sentiment automatically in tweets; they showed that not only their approach was viable, but it also improved sentiment classification. More recently, it was used by Ross and Caldwell (2020) to analyse negativity in Trump's rhetoric on Twitter and revealed that he used Appraisal resources in a variety of ways to attack and undermine Hillary Clinton, his political opponent at the time. Appraisal Theory has therefore been shown to be a very useful framework when analysing evaluative language in a wide range of contexts and genres.

Appraisal Theory divides evaluative language into three axes, namely Attitude, Engagement and Graduation. Attitude is mainly concerned with emotional and affectual responses, values, judgements, and assessments; Engagement deals with the ways in which speakers and writers position themselves towards the text and other possible voices; and Graduation involves the degrees of intensity of the meanings expressed by either Attitude or Engagement resources.

This study focuses on the analysis of Attitude realisations, which are further subdivided into three categories: Affect, Judgement and Appreciation. Affect expresses positive or negative emotional reactions and feelings, like happiness, surprise, disgust or anger, and is usually realised in three ways (Martin and White 2005: 46): as qualities, by means of adjectives and adverbs (e.g. *a sad captain, the captain left sadly*); as processes, by means of verbs (e.g. *his departure upset him*); and as comments, by means of sentence adjuncts (e.g. *sadly, he had to go*). Judgement expressions provide moral evaluations about people and the way they behave according to social norms and rules. The meanings that are involved are related to how unusual someone's behaviour is (e.g. *predictable, odd*), how capable they are (e.g. *experienced, naïve*), how resolute they are (e.g. *faithful, cowardly*), how truthful they are (e.g. *discrete, manipulative*) and how ethical they are (e.g. *polite, evil*) (Martin and White 2005: 52–53). Finally, Appreciation resources deal with things: whether they catch our attention or they please us (e.g. *engaging, monotonous*), whether they are balanced or complex (e.g. *clear, distorted*) and whether they are valuable (e.g. *innovative, fake*) (Martin and White 2005: 56). The analysis carried out in this chapter will present the results for each of these three categories separately.

It must also be noted that Attitude may be activated either explicitly (i.e. inscribed Attitude) or implicitly (i.e. invoked Attitude). The examples above illustrate the first case, while implicit Attitude would be present in sentences where the

context triggers a specific Attitude meaning in the reader. For example, an action like *controlling* in the sentence *They control us* would invoke a negative Judgement on the subject, since the action is supposed to stand against freedom and people's rights. In this line, other terms that involve positive or negative concepts in the form of nouns, but which are presented in isolation, do also invoke a specific evaluative Attitude meaning in the appropriate context. For example, depending on the sentence, the term *manipulation* may imply that someone is manipulating someone else or that a specific item is considered to be a manipulation, so this would be regarded as negative Judgement or negative Appreciation, respectively.

Appraisal Theory is expected to provide interesting results in the analysis of evaluative language in tweets related to the conspiracy theory of the New World Order. Evaluative language in these tweets was classified according to the Attitude categories proposed in Appraisal Theory, to find out which specific evaluative meanings are conveyed, and which ones appear most frequently.

3. Corpus and methodology

In order to shed some light on the issue of the use of evaluation in discourse related to the New World Order conspiracy theory in English and Spanish on Twitter, a corpus was collected during the summer of 2020, including tweets posted from 20th June 2020 to 22nd September 2020. This time frame allowed for a wide enough perspective on the issue as well as the most recent one before carrying out the analysis. These tweets were retrieved including the hashtags #NewWorldOrder, #NWO, #NuevoOrdenMundial and #NOM (the search was not case-sensitive). While only Spanish comments were searched for the last two hashtags and only English comments were searched for the first one, the hashtag #NWO was used to retrieve both English and Spanish tweets. This is due to the fact that it is particularly common that English hashtags are used in comments written in other languages to make the tweet part of the topic beyond their linguistic borders. Since fewer comments are written in Spanish than in English on Twitter (SemioCast 2010), this was also a way of increasing the number of retrievable tweets in Spanish.

Tweets were obtained through the Google Chrome add-on Twitter Archiver, which emulates an advanced tweet search from Twitter. It retrieves a limited number of tweets automatically but on a regular basis, which was, in this case, once per hour. After three months of continuous, regular retrieval, the add-on had collected a number of tweets that matched the indicated parameters (language and hashtag) and allowed for qualitative and quantitative analysis. However, some unexpected tweets did also appear in the corpus. These included, for example, tweets that mentioned the selected hashtag, but with a different meaning: the hashtag #NOM had

been used not only as an acronym of *Nuevo Orden Mundial* but also for *Normativa Oficial Mexicana* (‘Mexican Official Regulation’), which underwent important changes at the moment of the retrieval and consequently was used to some extent on Twitter. Similarly, it was used for *Nature of Man* (N.O.M.), a K-pop (Korean pop) group. In some tweets including a re-tweet or RT (the text of a tweet to which they were referring to), if the referenced tweet was longer than the author’s comment itself, the tool was likely to misclassify the language of the tweet and therefore some unfitting tweets were retrieved. For example, the first half of one of these tweets, which is the author’s comment, was written in Catalan, a co-official language in Spain, while the text after the RT was written in Spanish, and therefore the tweet was retrieved as a Spanish tweet. Finally, some tweets including two of the searched hashtags were collected twice.

To solve these issues, the corpus was manually cleaned and tweets which did not include the hashtag with the intended meaning or were not written in the desired languages were eliminated; and those which appeared twice were de-duplicated. The total number of tweets left after the cleaning process is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Number of English and Spanish tweets left after the cleaning process

Hashtag	English	Spanish
#NewWorldOrder	5087	–
#NWO	20951	2098
#NuevoOrdenMundial	–	2755
#NOM	–	1995
Total (per language)	26038	6848
Total (complete corpus)	32886	

From this final corpus, 500 tweets were selected randomly for each language using a Python library.¹ Therefore, a total of 1,000 tweets were manually analysed and annotated to find Attitude realisations. These add up to 12,640 words in English and 10,972 words in Spanish. The annotation consisted in the identification of words or phrases that conveyed Attitude meanings and had the purpose of making it possible to obtain a distribution of attitudinal occurrences in both languages. These occurrences were counted individually, that is, tweets as such were not given a value or classification.

1. The sample was obtained using the Python library Pandas, which is used to manipulate and analyse datasets. More precisely, the method “sample” from the Pandas class “DataFrame” was used with a “random_state” value of 2020. For more information about the method “sample,” see: <https://pandas.pydata.org/docs/reference/api/pandas.DataFrame.sample.html>.

4. Results and discussion

As mentioned above, the randomly-selected sample of 1,000 English and Spanish tweets was manually annotated. The results of those annotations are discussed below.

4.1 Attitude results

Some of the analysed tweets were found to include Attitude expressions. In English, 161 tweets out of the 500 (32.2%) contained Attitude realisations while some more, 175 (35%), did in Spanish. However, some tweets included more than one realisation. The results for Attitude expressions in English and Spanish are presented in Table 2, in which the # columns show the raw number of Attitude occurrences and the % columns the percentage they represent in the total number of Attitude expressions in their language or in both (last column). The total row stands for the total number of Attitude occurrences in each language (#) and their representation in the total number of Attitude realisations in both languages considered together (%).

Table 2. Attitude results in English and Spanish tweets

	English		Spanish		Total	
	#	%	#	%	#	%
Affect	139	17.50%	122	18.16%	261	17.80%
Judgement	398	50.13%	282	41.96%	680	46.39%
Appreciation	257	32.37%	268	39.88%	525	35.81%
Total	794	54.16%	672	45.84%	1466	100%

Although more Spanish than English tweets included Attitude expressions, the first point that can be highlighted is that there were more Attitude occurrences in English (794) than in Spanish (672), but this matches the fact that there were also more words in the English corpus (12,640) than in the Spanish one (10,972). If occurrences are normalized, the result is almost identical: 0.062 (English) vs. 0.061 (Spanish). This shows that Attitude expressions are used similarly in both languages, but English authors are slightly more likely to either use more than one or not use any at all in their tweets about the New World Order.

Some significant differences ($p\text{-value} = 2.5655 \times 10^{-28}$ for English and $p\text{-value} = 5.97623 \times 10^{-16}$ for Spanish) appear regarding the distribution of each Attitude category inside languages. In English, it can be clearly seen that Affect (emotions) is the least used category (17.50%), Appreciation (evaluative meanings about the value of things) is the second most used one (32.37%), and Judgement (evaluative

meanings regarding how people's behaviour is with respect to social and moral rules) is the most frequent Attitude category (50.13%). However, in Spanish, although Affect is still the least used category (18.16%), Judgement and Appreciation have obtained very similar results (41.96% and 39.88% respectively). This means that Spanish speakers make a higher use of Appreciation realisations and a lower use of Judgement expressions than English speakers.

Although the specific meanings conveyed by realisations from each category will be analysed in more detail in the paragraphs below, in general terms it can be said that people's behaviour is more frequently addressed in both English and Spanish than other Attitude aspects, and emotions the least addressed one. However, the authors of the Spanish tweets introduce this meaning almost as much as they refer to the value of things while the authors of the English tweets have a clearer preference for the former.

In the English corpus, Affect meanings were mostly related to feelings of 'desire' (*want, love, hate, desire*) and 'fear' (*fear, afraid, dreaded, panic, scared, terror*), while in Spanish the latter was the most common one over any other Affect realisations (*miedo* 'fear', *asustar* 'to frighten', *aterrorizado* 'horrified', *estar metida en una película de miedo* 'to be playing a role in a horror film', *pánico* 'panic', *terror* 'horror'). Spanish also showed an overuse of emojis for Affect, including both positive and negative emotions: 😞 'hurt', 🤣 'laughter, rolling on the floor', 😂 'laughter', 😞 'disappointment', 😡 'anger' or 😏 'unamusement/disapproval', among others; while English only included 🤣 'laughter, rolling on the floor' and 😲 'astonishment'.

Since Affect was the least frequent of the Attitude category in both languages, it can be said that, when discussing the New World Order in their tweets and including Attitudinal evaluative terms, authors do not tend towards expressing emotions. However, when they do, English is more balanced regarding positive and negative emotions, while Spanish presents a higher use of negative items and emojis. Therefore, although previous studies have shown the importance of negativity and negative emotions in conspiracy theorists' discourse and how it may be related to gaining influence by turning to emotions like fear, anger or anxiety (Fong et al. 2021), this type of evaluative expressions have not been observed to be the preferred strategy in the present study. This may be because this study focuses specifically on the linguistic items used in the tweets under the framework of Appraisal Theory for evaluative language. For instance, Fong et al. illustrate anger and aggression in discourse with the sentence "u stupid sheeple need 2 wake up lol" (2021: 610). In this example, the terms "stupid" and "sheeple" would qualify as Judgement expressions. Therefore, although it is true that the author of the sentence might be led by anger when writing that message and intend it as an aggression to the recipient, the specific linguistic items do not refer to the author's feelings of anger or aggression, but to how capable or resolute the recipient is.

Regarding Judgement, it is important to note that reference to a specific set of ideologies and political regimes (Anarchism, Communism, Marxism, Socialism, Nazism, dictatorship, totalitarianism, tyranny and Fascism) was very frequent in the tweets and it was almost always cast in negative terms. However, it is not always mentioned what makes these ideologies intrinsically negative, but they are weaponised and infused with negative Attitudinal meanings. Examples (1) and (2) illustrate how ideologies and political regimes are mentioned with negative nuances and are therefore classified as Judgement realisations.

- (1) #LaTardeConHolaChile #PlandemiaComunista #CoronaVirus💀 #COVID19 #SARSCOV2 #PCCh #Chino es Responsable de 7500 #Muertes #Cesantía y #Hambre el Virus se Muto en Laboratorio de #Wuhan #China🇨🇳 #Comunista y Lo Propagaron al Mundo con Ayuda de #ONU🇺🇳 #OMS #NOM #BillGates e #Illuminatis ' #TheAfternoonWithHelloChile #CommunistPlandemic #CoronaVirus💀 #COVID19 #SARSCOV2 #PCCh #Chinese is Responsible for 7500 #Deaths #Unemployment and #Hunger the Virus was mutated in Laboratory in #Wuhan #China🇨🇳 #Communist and Was Spread through the World with the Help of #UN🇺🇳 #WHO #NWO #BillGates and #Illuminatis'
- (2) China is the role model for the #NWO. The one world government will be communist. Trump interrupted that scheme. #BidenHarris2020 will sell us lock, stock and barrel (no pun intended) to #China. #VoteTrumpToSaveAmerica

In (1), the author makes China responsible for the pandemic and its consequences (like death, unemployment and hunger) around the world as well as accusing other organisations (like the UN, the WHO and the Illuminati) and individuals (like Bill Gates) of being accomplices in its propagation. The author judges communists negatively by linking the word “Communist” to “Plandemic”, which suggests the pandemic was planned by them, and by the fact of mentioning the word “Communist” itself, which makes it appear as a remarkable and relevant characteristic of China and its role in the pandemic. Despite the fact that it has been acknowledged that the first cases of COVID-19 were reported in China (Ma 2020), the choice and introduction of the term “Communist” implies that it is this political orientation that is to blame for the pandemic. In (2), the author also emphasises the fact that China has a communist government as a negative aspect, since the tweet sides with Trump in his mission of saving America from a New World Order ruled by communists. Again, the choice of the word “communist” as something America has to be “saved” from, shows this ideology is weaponised.

Judgement meanings are also present through the axis good-evil, with respect to people’s actions and behaviour. It includes mostly negative evaluations like *devil* or *demons* and, especially, *evil*, *Lucifer/luciferian(s)* and *satanic/satanist(s)/Satanism*. Also included in Judgement are insults like *asshole(s)*, *bullshiters*, *fools*,

idiots and its Spanish equivalent *idiotas*, *stupid*, and *bobos* ‘stupids’, *sheep* / *sheeple* (“sheep” + “people”) and the similar Spanish term *borregos*, and other terms that evaluated the addressed entity negatively, such as *liar(s)*, *criminal(s)*, *murderer(s)* and its Spanish equivalent *asesino(s)/a*, *parasites* and *scum*.

As can be seen, the authors of the tweets are judgmental about several aspects of the conspiracy such as those people supporting and contributing to the arrival of the New World Order (communists and other organisations, as explained in point 3 in Section 2.1. above). Since atheism was another one of the negative characteristics of those contributors, it has been seen that conspiracists sometimes take a religious perspective introducing the good and evil axis to judge others and their actions. However, contributors may not be aware of their role, in which case they are not directly classified as evil entities but as idiots or sheeple. Since Judgement is the most frequent Attitude type in both languages, authors are more likely to take this evaluative perspective than the other two when approaching the conspiracy in their tweets. By making their discourse revolve around moral judgement, authors are creating a morally correct side (the conspiracists’) and a morally reprehensible side (those contributing to the arrival of the New World Order). This strategy may help to reinforce the conspiracists’ beliefs and gain new believers among those who do not have a strong opinion, since “the morality of authorities actions shapes reasoning about conspiracy theories particularly when people experience uncertainty” (Van Prooijen and Jostmann 2013: 114).

Appreciation, as said above, has a more important role in Spanish than in English. The most common lexical items refer to “lying” (e.g., *scam* and the Spanish equivalents *timo* and *estafa*; *hoax*, *lies* and the Spanish *mentira(s)*; *fake* and the Spanish *falsa*), but some other frequent items are more varied and general (e.g., *innecesario* ‘unnecessary’, *fucking* and the Spanish *maldito*, *bad*, *better*, *great*). An interesting case is that of a very frequent term in the Spanish corpus: *bozal* ‘muzzle’, used to refer to facemasks. It seems that rejection to wearing facemasks is more strongly shown in Spanish because of the term chosen to refer to them, which is intrinsically negative and related to the loss of freedom, since it is indicating that people are treated like animals, and they are not allowed to open their mouths. A search in the complete corpus shows that the lemma *maskarilla* appears 291 times and the lemma *bozal* appears 230, while their English counterparts have very different results: the lemma *mask* appears 3,281 times and the lemma *muzzle* only 101.

Therefore, Appreciation items are used for two main purposes. On the one hand, they reinforce one of the essential elements in conspiracy theories, namely, the fact that information given by official sources and media is false. In the case of the New World Order conspiracy, this would include, for example, international institutions (e.g. WHO), political parties (e.g. Democrats), governments (e.g. European and Latin countries, China) or television. On the other hand, authors

express their opposition to measures taken by governments by disqualifying those measures as a proof of population control, another essential aspect in conspiracy theories (e.g. facemasks are muzzles or measures are unnecessary from a health point of view so they serve a different, hidden purpose).

In conclusion, it can be said that the authors of the analysed tweets about the New World Order do include Attitude meanings in their messages. These meanings contribute to the ideas that are present in conspiracy theories and in this conspiracy theory in particular. Among Attitude meanings, the most frequent one is Judgement, used to morally evaluate (the behaviour of) people allegedly supporting the arrival of the New World Order and thus create a good (their) and an evil (the others') side. Secondly, authors use Appreciation to disqualify things like information and governmental measures, which are used to control the population's beliefs and behaviour. And finally, authors use Affect to introduce positive and negative feelings (mostly negative in Spanish) in their messages as a way to gain influence.

4.2 General observations

In the previous sections, the frequency and most common meanings found in each of the three Attitude categories were analysed. This section, in contrast, focuses on additional observations and characteristics of the tweets regarding the lexis used and the contents of the messages in relation to evaluative language.

To start with, a difference in the word class used to convey Attitude meanings is observed depending on the Attitude category. In this corpus, evaluation is frequently expressed by means of nouns and verbs instead of adjectives, which would be the expected word class to convey this type of meaning (Martin and White 2005: 58). The distribution of nouns (N), adjectives (A), verbs (V), and other strategies (O) like emojis, adverbs, interjections or more complex structures where the meaning is conveyed by the whole structure's meaning (e.g., "is producing gay kids", "it is not white people who are at the bottom of that scale") in English (EN) and Spanish (ES) is shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Word classes conveying Attitude meanings

	Affect		Judgement		Appreciation	
	EN	ES	EN	ES	EN	ES
N	32	35	240	159	107	108
A	23	21	122	90	133	140
V	73	38	21	15	9	5
O	11	28	15	18	8	15

It can be seen that the expression of emotions and feelings (Affect) is based on the use of verbs in English, and not only verbs but also nouns in Spanish. When judging people's behaviours morally (Judgement), authors use nouns in both English and Spanish as their first choice, and adjectives as the second one. When evaluating things (Appreciation), authors use adjectives. With respect to other resources, their use is higher in Spanish compared to English, mainly due to the higher use of emojis in the former. The choice of a different word class to convey these evaluative meanings (verbs or verbs and nouns for Affect, nouns for Judgement, and adjectives for Appreciation) may point to differences in how sentences are constructed depending on what message and evaluative meaning wants to be transmitted.

The higher use of nouns and verbs means that, instead of saying that someone is "*dishonest*", it is typically said that "they are *liars*" or "they are *telling lies*"; instead of "*tyrannical* government", "*tyranny*"; and instead of "*conformist* people", "*sheep*". This is related to the fact that comparisons, similes and metaphors are commonly found, depending on whether both terms of the comparison are included or not (and the referent must therefore be understood by the reader). For example, both elements appear in (7), where television is evaluated as a virus.

- (3) *El virus es la tele #pandemia #COVID19 #NuevoOrdenMundial
#NuevaNormalidad*
‘The virus is TV #pandemic #COVID19 #NewWorldOrder #NewNormal

Example (3) also illustrates another important characteristic of these tweets: the lack of arguments. The evaluative terms chosen for the actions of the individuals convey the evaluation themselves with no need for further information. For example, most people would agree that murdering is bad, and someone who murders is, by extension, bad too. Therefore, by evaluating an entity as a murderer, a negative perception of that entity is transmitted. However, it is not necessarily the case in these tweets that those actions that are being condemned as murder, and therefore the reason why the entity is claimed to be a murderer, are included in a tweet to justify their evaluation. Actually, it is not necessary to say who is a murderer either.

- (4) *Asesinos en España #NuevoOrdenMundial*
‘Murderers in Spain #NuevoOrdenMundial’

In (4), the author evaluates some unspecified people as murderers, so it is understood that someone is killing someone else. There is no reference to who those people are and, although they are murderers, there is no information about who their victims are either. However, the author connects murderers to the New World Order, thus contributing to the positioning of the New World Order and its supporters in the evil side and to one of the basic ideas in the conspiracy: reducing world population.

Together with the lack of arguments, there is a general lack of clarity about the entities undergoing evaluation. There is something the authors are against, someone who is doing something perceived as negative, but it is sometimes difficult to find specific entities carrying out specific actions. (5) and (6) illustrate this issue, already present in (4), in a slightly more explicit way.

- (5) Disfruten el show, todos estan siendo usados y engañados. Todo el tablero se está poniendo mientras estamos en confinamiento; el Nuevo Orden. #NuevoOrdenMundial
'Enjoy the show, you are all being used and tricked. All the board is being placed while we are confined; the New Order #NuevoOrdenMundial'
- (6) A todos los seres oscuros de este mundo: NO PODEIS GANAR #NOM #NWO
'To all the dark beings in this world: YOU CAN'T WIN #NOM #NWO'

In (5), there is no information about what the show is, what actions or events are considered a show, who is using or tricking us, or even what board (again, it might be referring to any events, political or social changes, or something else) the author is referring to. However, the author manages to create a message where there are three groups: the author and others like him or her, who know what is happening; the ignorant victims; and the evil enemies, who are using and tricking the previous group.

In (6), there is a clear evaluation of those who are enemies for the author and are described as *dark*. Additionally, the author mentions a battle taking place at the time of writing: it is implied that these enemies are fighting, and the author wants them to know that, despite their actions, which are not mentioned, they cannot win the battle. Therefore, the only meaning conveyed by the message as is, is that someone else is evil, and whatever it is that they are doing against good people, they will not achieve their goals, whatever these are.

As another way to be vague, evaluations about people may also be evoked. In (7), it may be understood that the author says that people who are not white (in this case, black people, because of the parallelism with the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter) lack intelligence.

- (7) We know the truth though – what do you expect from establishment #globalist #newworldorder media? Racial disparities exist, including in IQ, but it is not white people who are at the bottom of that scale. #WhiteLivesMatter

Sometimes authors are slightly clearer. Example (8) illustrates this case by saying that it is China and the WHO who lie.

- (8) WE now know #Covid19 is just another virus and related to the common cold(a Coronavirus). #China & the #WHO LIED to the world. The #NWO_Globalists behind it all want COMPLETE CONTROL! Many Governor's & Politicians have SHOWN us their HAND & are clearly controlled by the #NWO

However, the lack of specificity prevails in other statements like “#NWO Globalists” (who are they?), “want” (for what purpose?), “COMPLETE CONTROL” (of what?), “Many Governor’s & Politicians” (who?), “HAND” (what was their hand about?), “controlled” (which actions show it? which indications from the NWO do they follow?)

Obviously, the use of the hashtags gives some contextual information, and this leads to another common issue in these tweets: the necessity of background information. It would be very difficult for someone with no knowledge of the NWO conspiracy theory to understand a full argumentation of their point of view from their tweets.

- (9) On a road trip and my family of 4 hasn’t worn masks in any stores in Texas, Arkansas, or Missouri and NO ONE has said a word to us. I’m sad to see that everyone is so willingly lowering their oxygen levels & helping train AI. #masks #truthvs lie #ai #nwo #tyranny

Example (9) includes the hashtag *#tyranny* but there is no reference to anyone behaving tyrannically or something being tyrannical. One may understand that the obligation of wearing a mask is related to a tyrannical government, since the New World Order (which is also part of the background of the tweet because of the hashtag *#nwo*) would imply a single, global tyrannical government controlling individuals’ actions around the world. Similarly, the author considers that wearing a facemask helps train AI and is, consequently, negative. Readers will find it difficult to see why and how if they ignore conspiracists’ belief that technology is used against citizens to spy on and control them. In this case, they assume that improved face-recognition techniques to identify people despite wearing a facemask, or even distinguish those wearing it from those who do not, have darker purposes or applications to which they do not want to contribute. Finally, the hashtag *#truthvs lie* has a less clear interpretation because it may indicate that the fact that facemasks are necessary, helpful or healthier is a lie, or that the objective of making people wear facemasks is training AI instead of reducing the transmission of the virus.

The terms *conspiracy theory* and *conspiracy theorist* are usually associated with irrationality and, consequently, weaponised (Douglas et al. 2019: 5) and regarded as negative. In this corpus, a similar result has been observed, as (10) illustrates by opposing conspiracy to reality.

- (10) This is not a conspiracy, this is real. #TheMoreYouKnow #NewWorldOrder #bilderberg

There is a special use of the term *conspiracy theory* and *theorists* that is very different between the English and the Spanish corpora. A humorous alternative for them is

the noun *conspiranoia* and the Spanish similar term *conspiranoia* (“conspiracy” / “conspiración” + “paranoia” / “paranoia”), and the adjective *conspiranoid* and the Spanish *conspiranoico* (“conspiracy” / “conspiración” + “paranoid” / “paranoico”), illustrated in (11).

- (11) Los conspiranoicos dirán que las protestas de #JusticiaParaAntoniaBarra son financiadas x #Soros #Onu #NuevoOrdenMundial??? 🤪🤪🤪 Payasos culiaos sin argumento tipo @bach20k 🤪
 ‘Conspiranoids will say that the protests of #JusticeForAntoniaBarra are funded by #Soros #Un #NewWorldOrder??? 🤪🤪🤪 Fucking clowns without arguments like @bach20k 🤪’

There was only one instance of these terms in the complete English corpus. However, in the complete Spanish corpus, significantly smaller than the English one, they were found 65 times. This shows that Spanish speakers turn to the use of these terms to show disagreement with conspiracy theorists or discredit them to a much higher degree than English speakers, who would use the standard term even if weaponised.

5. Conclusions

This chapter has analysed the use of evaluative language in 1,000 tweets about the New World Order in English and Spanish through the use of Appraisal Theory. It has been shown that these tweets do include evaluative terms about emotions, judgements of behaviour and assessments of things. More specifically, evaluative realisations focus firstly on judging (the behaviour of) people socially and morally (Judgement); secondly, they refer to the value of the targeted entities (Appreciation); and less commonly, evaluations include emotions and feelings (Affect). Although the second and third categories have similar results in Spanish, the authors of English tweets include Judgement meanings more frequently to the detriment of Appreciation ones.

Evaluative expressions were observed to contribute to common ideas in conspiracy theories and in the New World Order conspiracy theory specifically. Judgement was used to evaluate those allegedly supporting the New World Order and create a good (the conspiracists’) and an evil (the others’) dichotomy. It was expressed mainly by nouns and involved politics, ideologies and governmental control (Socialism, Marxism, Communism, totalitarianism, tyranny, fascism, Globalism), as well as the axis good-evil, mostly in negative terms. Appreciation was used to disqualify things that contribute to controlling population, like information and governmental measures. The meanings in this type of expressions were

usually related to the axis truth-lie, with special preference for negative meanings conveyed through adjectival expressions and nouns. Finally, Affect was used to introduce feelings (mostly negative in Spanish) as a way to gain influence. The emotions expressed revolved around the feelings of ‘desire’ and ‘fear’ and were mainly realised through nouns and verbs.

A lack of argumentation and, consequently, reasoning, in the tweets was also observed. Authors focused on evaluating entities instead of explaining what their evaluations were based on. Additionally, no contextual information was provided, so readers unfamiliar with the conspiracy theory may not understand the connections between the entity and the evaluation given. As a result, these messages are more likely to be transmitted only among members of their knowledge community.

In conclusion, this chapter has shown that the authors’ approach to events and figures related to the NWO conspiracy theory in Twitter posts in English and Spanish from an Appraisal Theory perspective is mainly based on judging them morally and socially with a lack of argumentation in their claims. This extends on the results from previous research on conspiracy theories which distinguished between positive and negative sentiment and showed a higher use of negativity in this type of discourse. However, there are many other aspects in this language that are worthy of attention. For example, a specific study on the use of metaphors and similes used would help decipher some underlying connections in the conspiracists’ understanding of reality. Similarly, an analysis of the use of the imperative verbs and how they urge others to action may help identify their persuasive strategies.

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PART IV

**Stancetaking and (de-)legitimation within
conspiracy and anti-conspiracy discourses**

Expressing stance towards COVID-19 conspiracy theories in Macedonian online forum discussions

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This chapter examines how stancetaking strategies aid advocacy and refutation of prevalent COVID-19 related conspiracy theories on two Macedonian internet discussion fora. The socio-political background and the content of detected conspiracy theories debated in the forum threads are briefly discussed. The authors explore affective, epistemic and interpersonal positioning in posts by three groups of social actors: conspiracy theory proponents, conspiracy theory opponents and a group of undecided. Through quantitative and qualitative analysis of selected discussion sequences the chapter draws attention to dominant patterns of stancetaking in conspiracy theory argumentation.

Keywords: stancetaking, internet discussion fora, conspiracy theories, COVID-19

1. Introduction

The restrictive measures implemented by governments throughout the world to combat the COVID-19 crisis have affected virtually everyone. The large scale of disruption caused by the pandemic and the intricate nature of the virus laid the ground for conspiracy theories to flourish and strongly influence public opinion. In this chapter we study internet forum discussions conducted in Macedonian on topics related to COVID-19, focusing on sequences in which users interact, expressing views on alternative explanations regarding different aspects of the pandemic. We analyse the ways supporters and opponents of conspiracy theories convey their stance to the topics discussed and to the interlocutors in an attempt to establish the stancetaking strategies of the two groups. We assume that supporters and opponents will employ different strategies.

The concept of stance is studied within various disciplines closely related to modality, evidentiality, subjectivity and intersubjectivity, sentiment analysis, etc. In this work we take a discursive, sociolinguistically oriented view according to which to take a stance means to take a position, to express a certain view in relation to what is said, to oneself, and to other people and objects (Barton and Lee 2013: 87). It is a complex multi-layered phenomenon involving many aspects. We confine our attention to three stance dimensions: *affect*, i.e., emotional attitude, *investment*, i.e., epistemic attitude and *alignment*, i.e., relational attitude. We begin with the following sub-hypotheses in relation to these dimensions:

1. Discussants will display predominantly negative affect, considering the situation;
2. Supporters will put more investment in expressing their views in comparison to opponents;
3. Alignment between holders of opposing views will be mainly divergent with high levels of friction.

Identifying the components of each dimension in individual posts of the collected discussion sequences, we aim to find answers to the following research questions:

1. How do emotions combine with commitment and interpersonal relations to build the overall stance towards the expressed content and the interlocutors?
2. Can we identify a specific stancetaking strategy characteristic of users inclined to adopt and defend conspiracy theories?

The chapter is structured as follows. Section 2 discusses the theoretical background of the research while Section 3 provides an overview of the social circumstances underlying the discussion. They are followed by data collection and research methodology outlined in Section 4. Section 5 presents the results and discusses the findings. Finally, Section 6 contains a summary and concluding remarks.

2. Related work

This research draws on prior work in interpersonal pragmatics, computer-mediated communication (CMC) research, and stance analysis in interaction. The chapter relates to studies on relational work and identity building, as well as the discourse pragmatics of social media communities (Crystal 2001; Locher 2010; Myer 2010; Arendholz 2013; Ehrhardt 2014; Locher et al. 2015; Hoffmann and Bublitz 2017). Discussion fora such as those we examine comprise large, complex communities that engage in various types of asynchronous communication. Pragmatically oriented studies on discussion fora focus on interpersonal relations, face-work and

identity building (e.g., Baym 1996; Arendholz 2013; Ehrhardt 2014). Previous research has shown that despite the apparently chaotic structure, such communication follows certain rules and reflects Brown and Levinson's (1987) basic pragmatic principles.

We look at the interaction in COVID-19 related discussions from the point of view of stancetaking. On online fora people interact with other members of the community, convey their opinions, feelings and attitudes towards things, people and situations, i.e., they take a stance. In that sense we consider stancetaking as a complex social phenomenon and draw on the sociolinguistic model outlined in Du Bois (2007) and elaborated by some other authors (e.g., Jaffe 2009; Barton and Lee 2013; Kiesling et al. 2018, among others). According to this view, "every utterance in interaction contributes to the enactment of stance, even if this stance is only evoked and not explicitly spelled out" (Du Bois and Kärkkäinen 2012: 438).

To capture all elements of the complex network of the stance phenomenon, Du Bois (2007) suggests a "triangular model" of relations among the three components: evaluation, positioning and alignment, which he calls "sub-acts". *Evaluation* refers to the act of assigning some quality or value to an object (e.g., *That's horrible*), while *positioning* means that the social actor takes a particular affective (*I'm glad*) or epistemic (*I think so*) position. *Alignment* is achieved in relation to the addressee, either real or imaginary, as they build relations and negotiate meaning. The realisation and interpretation of stance develops as an interrelation among the three components in the process of a dialogic action.

Kiesling et al. (2018) adopt this model for their annotation scale of stance in online fora, but with a slight modification. They also distinguish three components, which they consider stance dimensions, not sub-acts. Moreover, the stance properties are distributed in a different fashion: *affect* comprises evaluation and emotional reaction, whereas the speaker's commitment to the proposition represents *investment*. The component of *alignment* covers interpersonal relations. The separation of expression of feelings from epistemic positioning seems appropriate, since assessment is usually emotionally charged and difficult to distinguish from affective positioning in Du Bois's model.

A similar view on stance is adopted by Barton and Lee (2013: 86–106) in their book on language online. There is consensus among all these authors that by taking a certain stance the addressee positions the communicative act on the politeness scale affecting the interaction, thus stance constitutes an important component of face-work in communication (Goffman 1967).

The sociolinguistic approach to stancetaking resonates with the Appraisal Framework developed by Martin and White (2005) working within the Systemic Functional Linguistics paradigm. They also take a dialogic perspective in considering

verbal interaction a social act which should be interpreted in its context. Thus, the Appraisal Framework helps to understand not only how the speaker/writer employs language for evaluation, expression of certainty and commitment, but also how they position themselves in relation to real or potential interlocutors, negotiate meaning, align or disalign with them.

To examine stancetaking in discussion threads on the COVID-19 pandemic studied here, we have created a reduced system of features relying on the stance frameworks outlined above. It is explained in more detail in Section 4 and then applied to our results presented in Section 5. By analysing the chosen stance dimensions, we aim to gain some understanding of the strategies participants use to articulate their views and attitudes towards the COVID-19 conspiracy theories on public discussion platforms. Before we proceed to the presentation of the data and research procedure, we provide a short overview of the local socio-political circumstances and the conspiracy theories discussed in the examined fora.

3. Socio-cultural background

The socio-political circumstances in North Macedonia enhanced the creation and circulation of a number of conspiracy theories on the internet during the first four months of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Considering this country's troublesome history, whose consequences are still felt, and the country's location in the Western Balkans, conspiracy theories here can arguably be considered "symptoms and indicators of wider societal troubles and turbulences, expressed in specific emotional and condensed form" (Blanuša 2020: 597). These turbulences over the last two decades embrace political and economic instability, non-transparency of institutions, and corruption in the highest judicial and governmental ranks. These societal ills have severely weakened the public trust in authorities and generated feelings of insecurity and threat. The repeated statement that powerful outsiders collaborating with domestic traitors plot against local people presents an easier, "digestible" interpretation of complexities characteristic of the present and the past, and therefore more acceptable to the general public.

A recent study by BiEPAG¹ showed that the portion of people in the Western Balkans who believe in one or several COVID-19 conspiracy theories amounted to two-thirds, as compared to one-fourth in other European countries (Bieber et al. 2020). According to this source, conspiracy theories in the region have become stronger and more destructive, which has also affected the Macedonian population, who still rely heavily on regional news, despite the increased presence of

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international media. The BiEPAG survey, conducted in October 2020, explored six most commonly surveyed conspiracy theories detected on a global scale, all of which we found in the two fora examined here. They are listed below on a scale from the most to the least believed theories in this country, as reported in the survey:

1. The pharmaceutical industry is involved in the spread of the Coronavirus
2. The Chinese government engineered the Coronavirus in a lab
3. The Coronavirus escaped from a lab in Wuhan
4. Bill Gates is using the Coronavirus to push a vaccine with a microchip capable of tracking people
5. The United States engineered the Coronavirus as a biological weapon
6. There is a link between 5G technology and the Coronavirus

A number of forum discussion participants, however, do not explicitly support these theories on the origins and purposes of the disease, but either undermine or ignore them. What they all agree on is that the situation is exploited by mass media for a number of purposes including boosting traffic, spreading fear to aid lockdowns, and spreading fear and panic to harm the general psychological wellbeing of the society. This is also linked to either local or global actors as one of the means used to control or destroy humans. Local authorities are particularly suspected for exaggerating the number of deceased, or for hiding the real number of infected cases.

To summarise, unfavourable local socio-political circumstances contribute to heterogeneous discussions on the two internet fora we analyse. These discussions cover a range of theories on the origins of the SARS-CoV-19 virus and the purposes for which its virulence is exploited. Additionally, even though distrust in media content is present, the conspiracy theorists themselves inevitably rely on media in the formulation and communication of their ideas (Aupers 2020), and a number of theories are found to circulate at both a local and a global level.

4. Data and research procedure

The data for this study were retrieved from the two most popular Macedonian fora: *Kajgana*² and *Femina*.³ They use standard forum software (XenForo in both) and share properties with such online platforms worldwide.⁴ Both fora have a large number of members (75 381 and 124 152 respectively, 24 May 2021) actively

2. <https://forum.kajgana.com/>

3. <https://forum.femina.mk/>

4. For a similar site in English see *Off-Topic* at <https://offtopic.com/>. For the properties of such platforms see e.g., Arendholz (2013: 12–17).

communicating on a wide range of topics. Neither of the two fora is associated with a specific ideological stance, but *Femina* is more women-oriented. In *Kajgana* topics target diverse audiences, although male members seem to prevail. Thus, to avoid gender bias, we decided to analyse material from both fora jointly. With the outbreak of the coronavirus epidemic, general discussion threads on this topic were opened on both fora at the end of January 2020.⁵ From the very beginning these topics attracted a great deal of attention as members shared information about the development of the pandemic situation, both locally and globally, and about new findings related to the virus and its effects. Information about various theories that had started to circulate on the net was also shared. It was those sections of the threads with interaction on such topics that were extracted for this research. For this purpose, we read all posts contributed to the coronavirus threads from March 15 through May 15, 2020 on the *Kajgana* thread (about 8 000 posts) and from January 26 to May 1, 2020 on the *Femina* thread (about 20 000 posts). Sequences with discussions on various conspiracy theories were selected for analysis. These particular timeframes were chosen because the initial examination of the sites showed that posts before the specified date on *Kajgana* were less related to conspiracy theories and in May 2020, as the COVID-19 crisis continued, conspiracy theory topics were moved to separate threads.

Extracting the relevant sequences was quite a challenge. Discussion fora comprise asynchronous, polylogal interaction in which multiple interwoven strings of exchange take place at the same time. They may branch or merge, and gradual transition from one topic to another is not unusual (Marcoccia 2004). Following the succession of posts in the sequences was aided by the quotation tools which mark to which message or part of a message participants are responding. In the end, 109 sequences (66 from *Kajgana* and 43 from *Femina*) containing 621 posts (302 from *Kajgana* and 319 from *Femina*) were extracted for analysis and tagged for defined stance categories. Each sequence was viewed as a separate unit of interaction and the contribution of each post to that interaction was examined. Next, each post was tagged for the studied aspects of stance by both authors, with one author analysing half of the sample and checking the other half tagged by the other author. Divergent points were then discussed in order to achieve a unified analysis. It must be pointed out, however, that subjectivity in the judgements could not be fully avoided.

Depending on the expressed views towards the conspiracy theories discussed, each participant was characterised as a supporter or an opponent, while undefined participants were dubbed “uncertain”. Supporters (contributing 254 posts) express

5. They are entitled: “Coronavirus in Macedonia and the world” (*Kajgana*, 26 January 2020); “Coronavirus: the situation in Macedonia and the world” (*Femina*, 24 January 2020). The analysed sequences were excerpted from these threads.

belief in one or more of the controversial interpretations, while opponents (280 posts) are clearly against at least one of the theories. The group of the “uncertain” (87 posts) includes both those who are explicitly noncommittal and those who contribute one or two posts with no clear opinion on the topic.

To examine the participants’ stance towards the various theories, objects and subjects related to them, as well as to their interlocutors, we focus on three dimensions of stance: affect, investment and alignment, following Kiesling et al. (2018). *Affect* is demonstrated through the types of emotions expressed, both explicitly and implicitly. The term *investment* indicates the level of commitment to the theory propagated or opposed, while *alignment* relates to the type of relation established with the interlocutor(s). Subcategories of stance which were used as annotation tags were defined within each dimension.⁶ The percentages of the subcategories were calculated against the number of tags, not the number of posts. The quantitative data was attained through sorting on a spreadsheet and these are presented below, followed by a qualitative analysis.

5. Stance dimensions analysis

This section is devoted to the analysis of the collected data comprising discussants’ stance expression. Stancetaking is a combined effect of the three dimensions under study: affect, involvement and alignment, which were isolated for analysis. The results for each dimension are presented and discussed in separate sub-sections.

5.1 Affect

Affect is seen here as emotional attitude, that is, as emotional states or reactions expressed in posts verbally. Here we follow Kiesling et al. (2018) who argue that affect is not only found in evaluative lexemes, but also in the tone of an utterance.⁷ We determined affect values not only based on explicit lexemes, but also from the overall content of posts (considering lexis, grammar, discourse markers, particles, exclamation marks, punctuation), aided by preceding and following context.

6. A detailed presentation of the subcategories is given in Section 5.

7. See also Biber and Finegan (1989), Myer (2010) and Du Bois and Kärkkäinen (2012) for similar views.

5.1.1 Results

To analyse affect systematically, we first classified emotional reactions into two broad categories: positive and negative. We further divided each category according to the goal or source of reactions: whether they were provoked by or directed at internal subjects (other participants in the discussion) or at external subjects (social actors or issues mentioned in relation to the conspiracy). Under each subcategory, we defined a number of particular emotional reactions varying in their intensity. Posts which contained no observable affective positioning were considered neutral. The overall distribution of positive and negative affect among the three groups of participants is given in Table 1 below. As expected, negative affect dominates in all three groups of participants, amounting to up to 80% in posts of supporters, 68% in those of opponents, and just over a half in posts by the uncertain.⁸ Positive affect is significantly less present, covering only 8% on average. Neutral positioning is expectedly mostly present in posts by the uncertain, but it is the least present in supporters' discourse.

Table 1. Expression of affect within the three groups of interlocutors

	Negative		Positive		Neutral		Total	
Supporters	351	80%	28	6%	60	14%	439	100%
Opponents	261	68%	37	10%	86	22%	384	100%
Uncertain	89	55%	16	10%	57	35%	162	100%
Total	701	71%	81	8%	203	21%	985	100%

Most of the negative affective positioning is provoked by or directed towards an external trigger, amounting to more than 70% of the total annotated reactions in each group, as shown in Table 2 below. A considerable proportion of negative affect in response to an internal factor is present in opponents' posts, which we pick up on below.

Table 2. Direction of negative and positive affect within groups

	Negative				Positive				Total	
	External		Internal		External		Internal			
Supporters	317	84%	34	9%	27	7%	0	0%	378	100%
Opponents	212	71%	49	16%	35	12%	2	1%	298	100%
Uncertain	85	82%	4	3%	15	14%	1	1%	105	100%
Total	614	87%	87	11%	77	10%	3	0%	781	100%

8. For prevalence of negative affect in conspiratorial discourse see also Lee, Chapter 10 and López, Chapter 13 in this volume.

5.1.2 Discussion

The results presented above support the hypothesis that overall negative affect prevails on the two fora. Here we discuss individual emotions in classes of related feelings and provide relevant instances from the data. Defining emotion is a difficult task and there is no universally-agreed upon list of basic emotions. In our analysis we considered the Geneva list of 16 emotions (applied in Breeze 2020, for instance), which we modified as our data demanded. Figure 1 below exhibits all instances of negative affect, with the horizontal axis representing individual emotions, and the vertical axis showing the number of tags for each emotion in each group of participants.

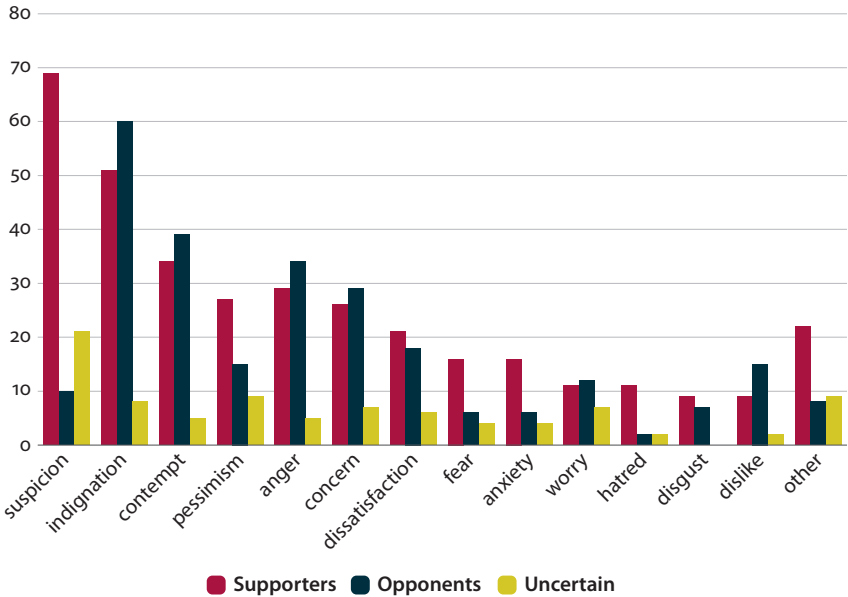


Figure 1. Individual negative emotions across groups

Cautious distrust, or what we have called here suspicion, is the dominant feeling among advocates of conspiracy theories, and among the uncertain, but rare among opponents. A level of suspicion was expected if we consider the novelty of the virus and the uncertainty of its virulence and spread, as well as the socio-political situation in the country. Conspiracy theory supporters are, however, also suspicious of any information disaffirming their position, especially of local authorities' decisions or reports, and of other participants' comments. Their scepticism is developed through posts, aided by a personal perspective on the situation, and supporting the proposed conspiracy theories. The following examples contain the basic indicators (see also Example (15) below):

- (1) [...] Не е како што треба *нешто ужасно смрди*.⁹ (supporter)
 [...] Something isn't right *something really stinks*.
- (2) Се сложувам со тебе, и јас сум против вакцинава *којзнае* што ќе ни стават
 ама мора од негде пари да лапнат. (supporter)
 I agree with you, I'm also against this vaccine *who knows* what they're gonna
 give us but they have to scrounge money from somewhere.

There is a range of feelings pertaining to anxiety that varies from worry to fear, generally present across the groups, suggesting that the seriousness and the severity of the situation affected everyone equally. These feelings are often personal and explicitly stated in the discourse, ranging from *I must admit I'm a bit afraid*, and *it sounds scary*, to a highly charged combination, such as in this post (commenting on the high death toll predictions):

- (3) [...] Луѓе и *тахикардија* и *несоница* и *жештина*, се осекам после ова.
Анксиозноста ме нападна вечерва. (supporter)
 [...] People I feel *tachycardia* and *insomnia* and *heat*, after this I feel it all.
Anxiety hit me tonight.

Additionally, participants also comment on the presence of such feelings in people in general, such as *we are all under intense pressure, at least let's try to keep our nerve*, or *psychosis has increased on a global level*. Uncertainty, economic problems and overwhelmed health systems cause a feeling of concern which often goes hand-in-hand with disillusionment with the competence of authorities to deal with the situation and pessimism about humanity in general. While emotions from this spectrum allow supporters of conspiracy theories to convey the impression of powerlessness and fear imposed by “them”, the unidentified powerful but evil people (4), in opponents' posts they serve to debunk the conspiracy beliefs (5), contradicting those who advocate the non-existence or non-severity of the illness.¹⁰

- (4) [...] *Опасно е, стравно е ова што се случува, ама ние незнаеме ништо!*
Кои сили се, кои јаки луѓе се тука во позадина. [...] Господ на помош само!
 (supporter)
 [...] This thing happening is *dangerous, scary*, but *we know nothing!* What
 powers there are, *what* powerful people are in the background. [...] *May God*
help us!

9. Example posts are provided here in their original form, as written on the fora. The translation is the authors'. Italics are added for emphasis of relevance to the discussion.

10. Inwood and Zappavignia, Chapter 11 in this volume, report on similar bonds among conspirators.

- (5) [...] Со вакви муабети, ја труете темата, која треба во моментите на паника која ја шири секој медиум, без ни грам совесѝ, да биде место за информирање и едукација. (opponent)

[...] With such talks, you only poison this discussion, *which in moments of panic all the media spread, shamelessly*, should be a place for getting informed and educated.

Feelings of disinclination also range on a scale of intensity, from dislike to hatred and contempt. A significant number of posts expressing such feelings, both from supporters and opponents, are orientated towards the Chinese (viewed as culprits or victims), towards their eating habits and lifestyle in general. A number of posts also direct hatred towards those perceived responsible for the situation, focusing on the behaviour of local authorities (6). Some of the posts are directed at other participants and their behaviour (as illustrated in Table 6 below, both by supporter A₂ and opponent C₁).

- (6) Луѓе, не е смртноста толку голема се пишува *се живо и диво* дека е од корона кога ќе почине ради пари. [...] тажно е што се дешава и злоупотреба на ситуацијата *ради нечиѝ профити* :/ (supporter)

Folks, the death toll isn't that high *just saying left and right* that people are dying from the Corona for money. [...] and it's sad that abuse of the situation is going on *for someone's profit* :/

Internal behaviour, however, more often triggers dissatisfaction and indignation (as in (5), and in C₁ in Table 6), coupled with confrontation, criticism, or even insult, as discussed in Section 5.3. General dissatisfaction with the existing circumstances, the preventive measures or incompetent medical treatment is also present, while indignation is directed at all actors involved: by supporters predominantly at external actors (17), by opponents at other participants (13). These feelings, often intensified by anger, are frequently matched with the previously discussed emotions.

5.2 Investment

The dimension of investment, as understood in this research, reflects the speaker's knowledge and belief in relation to the proposition, i.e., the attitude the discussants assume towards their claims. Following the discourse-functional tradition (Barton and Lee 2013: 92; Kiesling et al. 2018: 686), we have adopted a broader view of investment, including both the attitude towards reliability or certainty of the information and the source of information. We tagged how committed discussants appeared to be in relation to their propositions while expressing their views concerning the conspiracy theories under discussion. Posts that did not contain any such contents were left untagged.

To determine the degree of the participants' commitment, the following categories were identified: strengthened assertion, weakened assertion, bare assertion and distanced assertion. Investment was seen not as a property of a sentence, but rather of the whole text in which it was embedded (cf. Kiesling et al. 2018: 317). Statements implying higher confidence or conviction of the speaker were tagged "strengthened assertion". These statements are usually marked by intensifying adverbs or adjectives (7), predicates expressing certainty, adversative markers, negation, repetition, rhetorical questions (13) and (14), intensifying particles (8) and (13), exclamations, strong lexical items and/or paraverbal means (8 and (11) below).

- (7) Вирусот е 100% вештачки. (supporter)
The virus is 100% artificial.
- (8) [...] Ама неее... мора секоја тема да се *йосе*е* со небулози! Значи *мо-ра!* (opponent)
[...] But nooo... every topic has to be *clouded in sh*t!* It just has to be!

Strengthened assertions are presented as categorical claims that confront the possible opposition by participants holding an alternative position, leaving little option for denial or moderation, whereas those containing downtoning markers of any sort allow other possible interpretations. The latter were considered "weakened assertion". Propositions expressed in statements with no additional comment were counted as "bare assertion". From a dialogistic point of view, such statements are considered firm rather than neutral, a position adopted in our analysis. Finally, when a statement is presented from the point of view of an outside source it falls into the class of "distanced assertion", both when the source is explicitly mentioned (*X said/reported; according to X*) or just vaguely hinted (*some people say; according to some; it is claimed that*). Consequently, we assume that strengthened and bare assertions indicate higher investment while weakened and distanced assertion signal lower investment regarding the expressed views on the conspiracy theories discussed. At discourse level, the latter mitigate face-threatening acts, such as disagreement, and signal positive alignment, comparable to Martin and White's (2005) expansion categories of Engagement. However, these categories are not always clearly distinguished. For instance, a strong endorsement of a source can be a reinforcement device, such as (9), tagged as "strengthened".

- (9) Се консултирав со Бангладешкиот институт, [...], и *информациите* од *прва рака* се дека [...] (supporter)
I consulted the Bangladesh Institute, [...], and *the first-hand information* is that [...]

5.2.1 Results

The amounts of investment types detected in the sample are presented in Table 3 below, distributed across the established groups of participants. These results show that both supporters and opponents have most often applied strengthening strategies, but the percentage is slightly higher in the opponents' group. This disproves our sub-hypothesis that supporters would express higher investment than opponents. One of the reasons could be the fact that discussing conspiracy theories is discouraged on the two fora. Therefore, sometimes supporters tend to hint vaguely at their point of view (see Example (10) below).

Table 3. Investment strategies used by the groups

	Strengthened assertion		Bare assertion		Weakened assertion		Distanced assertion		Total	
Supporters	99	36%	62	22%	72	25%	47	17%	280	100%
Opponents	109	44%	58	23%	60	24%	21	9%	248	100%
Uncertain	19	30%	12	19%	22	35%	10	16%	63	100%
Total	227	39%	132	22%	154	26%	78	13%	591	100%

Bare and weakened assertions are employed in a similar fashion by supporters and opponents, but supporters show a higher reliance on outside sources to bolster their claims. All groups most often refer to media sources or authorities, less frequently to hearsay or to someone they know personally.

5.2.2 Discussion

In this section we examine qualitatively some typical patterns employed for expressing commitment. Both groups often strengthen their assertions with discourse particles, such as *ama* 'but' (see (8) above), (*e*) *pa* 'well (then)' (10) or the address particle *be* in (13), which by drawing the interlocutors' attention intensifies disagreement.¹¹

- (10) *Па ај да не читаме! Не читајте луѓе бидете неинформирани!* (supporter)
Ok then let's not read! Don't read people be uninformed!

Combining weakening and strengthening strategies in one proposition is used by all discussants of all three groups (supporters, opponents, uncertain) for various interactional aims. In such statements, though softening is used to facilitate interaction, it may not be intended as weak conviction, as evident in Example (11).

11. Lee (Chapter 10 in this volume) reports of similar intensifying devices.

- (11) *Ne sakam da polemiziram* no ne treba da IMA dilemma dali IMA ili nema korona.
(opponent)
I don't want to argue but THERE should BE no dilemma if THERE IS or there isn't corona.

Equally, weakening strategies combined with sarcasm and irony do not tone down the assertion (12). This is typical for discussions on controversial topics, as noted by Luzón (2013: 116): "In some cases, however, the effect of the mitigating device is counteracted by the severity of the criticism."

- (12) *He ėo ĩoĉenųvam ĩtaliјanskiov ĩprofesor, ama ako se seќavam dobro nekoľku nedeli nemaa kaпacитет мртвите да ги закопаат, ama можеби сиће им ĩќекнало oĉеднаш да умрајќ, не беше виновна коронава.* (opponent)
I do not underestimate this Italian professor, but if I remember correctly for a few weeks they didn't have the capacity to bury the dead, but maybe they all decided to die at that same time, the coronavirus wasn't to blame.

Although discussants have used similar strategies to convey their views, some patterns seem more typical for one group than for the others. Namely, questions, and especially rhetorical questions, are often used to strengthen participants' position. While opponents typically use them to counter or challenge some claim, evoking indignation to opposing interlocutors (13), supporters use them as an obvious conclusion, conveying suspicion, either explicitly (14) or implicitly (16). The affective stance is often expressed or intensified through commitment markers.¹²

- (13) Кој снег не се топи *бе* луѓе, мислам сериозно *бе*. *Учевиће физика воојшићо?*
(opponent)
C'mon [PART]¹³ people, what snow doesn't melt, I mean *seriously* [PART]. *Did you ever study physics?*
- (14) *Како да не се сомневаме дека ова е вештачки создадена паника?*
(supporter)
How can we not suspect that this is an artificially created panic?

One particular strategy used by supporters is to present themselves as the knowledge source (*in my opinion; I have my premonition; there is something in me that convinces me that...; I am pretty sure*). It may otherwise be a distancing strategy, but often the whole context signals strong conviction (15). One indication for this is the more frequent use of the long pronoun *mene* 'me' on the part of supporters

12. Compare Biber and Finegan (1989: 111) for a similar comment. See also Du Bois and Kärk-käinen (2012: 684).

13. PART stands for a particle that cannot be translated in English.

(twice as often as opponents). In Macedonian, accusative and dative personal pronoun clitics are used in neutral contexts, while the long pronouns are added for emphasis or contrast.

- (15) Мене ми мириса нешто тука, ама *ај* не е време за теории на заговор.
(supporter)

Something smells here to *me*, but *well* this is not the time for conspiracy theories.

These strategies serve to convey the supporters' inner certainty, stressing their intellectual superiority and independent thinking, hence leaving no space for counterarguments. Such behaviour seems to be typical of conspiracy theories discourse. Research in cognitive psychology has indicated that reliance on one's own intuition and self-belief rather than on careful argumentation correlates with conspiracy theory beliefs (cf. Herman and Oswald, Chapter 5 in this volume). Fiammenghi (Chapter 15 in this volume) also notices that "anti-vaccinators place more importance on personal beliefs and experiences rather than on facts" despite having access to them.

It is also typical of supporters to use indefinite pronouns, underspecified adverbs and nouns (as in (15) and (16)), which create vagueness and obscurity and though weakening the claim, produce a strong impact by raising suspicion.

- (16) Дали сега може да прифатиш дека некој лаже, дека нешто не е у ред????
(supporter)

Now can you accept that *someone* is lying, that *something* isn't right????

Supporters evoke a similar effect by using vague formulations, such as, *allegedly*; *all doctors agree*; *I read this on FB/Twitter*. Although views are not directly claimed, affirmative inference is invited (see Examples (1), (2) and (4)). Such lack of clarity and specificity in conspirators' discourse has been noticed in other studies (see López, Chapter 13 in this volume).

5.3 Alignment

The third stancetaking dimension that we examine concerns exchanges between forum discussants. Alignment between interlocutors is realised in speech activities of various types which can create convergent (17),¹⁴ divergent (19) or neutral alignment (18). In each post we have tagged one or more activities, marking them according to the target participants. Thus, we distinguish posts directed towards members with opposing views, to members with similar views or to all members.

14. => stands for "directed towards"

- (17) SUPPORT => like-minded
- A: Кризата може да заврши само тогаш кога ќе реши СЗО, без разлика дали у Македонија ќе има 2–3, 200–300 или 2000–3000 заболени.
(supporter)
- The crisis can only end when WHO decides, no matter whether Macedonia has 2–3, 200–300 or 2000–3000 infected.
- B: Така и ќе испадне цабе потрошено 3 4 недели седејќи дома, [...] (supporter)
- That’s how it will turn out 3–4 weeks spent at home for nothing, [...]
- (18) SHARING INFORMATION => all
- A: Еве ја статијата бе дечки, со директна информација од СЗО.
(opponent)
- Hey guys, here is the article, with direct information from WHO.
- (19) DISAGREEMENT => opposition
- B: Јас да бидам искрена ич не им ни верувам веќе на овие СЗО.
(supporter)
- To be honest I don’t trust this WHO any more at all.

5.3.1 Results

Table 4 below displays the overall results, which indicate that opponents most often engaged in divergent moves, while supporters showed predominantly neutral alignment. This confirms the observation that supporters often started a sequence, presenting a view that triggered a divergent reaction by opponents. As for the uncertain, half of their contributions were neutral comments or just sharing information.

Table 4. Alignment activities performed by members of the three groups

	Convergent		Divergent		Neutral		Total	
Supporters	127	22.7%	200	35.8%	232	41.5%	559	100%
Opponents	105	19.7%	244	45.8%	184	34.5%	533	100%
Uncertain	35	22.5%	38	24.5%	82	53.0%	155	100%
Total	267	21.4%	482	38.6%	498	40.0%	1247	100%

Overall, about one third of the exchanges create divergence, which correlates with the high level of negative affect and prevalence of strengthened assertion observed. More detailed information is given in Table 5 below, where the percentages of alignment types directed towards opposing interlocutors, to like-minded ones or to all participants in the discussion are presented.

These results support the hypothesis that alignment between opposing groups would be predominantly divergent. Both supporters and opponents have directed comparable degrees of divergence to opposition and convergence to like-minded.

Table 5. Direction of alignment within groups

	Convergent	Divergent	Neutral	Total
Supporters				
=> opposition	6.5%	59.8%	33.7%	100%
=> like-minded	57.4%	14.6%	28.0%	100%
=> all	12.9%	7.8%	79.3%	100%
Opponents				
=> opposition	9.5%	60.9%	29.6%	100%
=> like-minded	59.8%	17.7%	22.5%	100%
=> all	9.9%	18.5%	71.6%	100%
Uncertain				
=> opposition	0.0%	45.3%	54.7%	100%
=> like-minded	49.2%	18.0%	32.8%	100%
=> all	5.7%	5.7%	88.6%	100%

Disalignment between the like-minded is rare. The uncertain follow a similar course, but show a lower divergence to opposition, which is due to the varying views of the members in this group. Addresses to all are expectedly predominantly neutral.

5.3.2 Discussion

Alignment patterns reflect the nature of the relational work in the studied sequences (Locher et al. 2015). Neutral alignment, paired with neutral affect, is present in sharing information, expressing opinions, asking questions or making a request, which are mostly addressed to all. The most common convergent activities comprise elaboration and support directed to like-minded, a sign of cooperative and sympathetic interaction. Divergence is demonstrated through disagreement, criticism, challenge and confrontation, represented in the same order of frequency in both groups. Such acts are predominantly directed to opposing participants and combine with negative emotions. Attenuation of these face-threatening acts by mitigating strategies occurs rarely (in 15% of the acts by opponents and 6% by supporters). Nevertheless, an appropriate tone dominates in the studied sequences, even though divergence towards members of opposing views is occasionally intensified through ridicule (18% by supporters and 15% by opponents) and humiliation (11% by supporters and 7% by opponents), which leads to conflict at a few points (Table 6 below).¹⁵ Moreover, some supporters have explicitly signalled termination of communication: *There is no use of this forum, have fun!; That's enough, bye!; Don't*

15. Arendholz (2013: 225) also finds that in the “Asking for opinion” thread “appropriate and functional behaviour” dominates, though there is occasional flaming. Similarly, Luzón (2013: 115) finds that 68% of the comments in the academic blog discussions she examines represent “conflictual acts”, but only about 20% belong to aggravating ones (irony/sarcasm and insult).

cite me anymore. Farewell! This leads to the conclusion that supporters tend to be less tolerant of diverging views.

Discourse-oriented studies (cf. Du Bois 2007; Du Bois and Kärkkäinen 2012; Barton and Lee 2013) point out that stance should be viewed from an intersubjective perspective, arising in interaction. As interlocutors react to one another's stance they evaluate it, and by doing so they display their own stance. Hence, both investment and affect are shaped by the speaker contingent upon the alignment work at particular points of the interaction. To demonstrate this combined effect, we discuss the sequence presented in Table 6, which comprises convergence to like-minded, divergence to opposition and neutral alignment to all. Letters indicate different contributors and subscripts show turn numbers. Each turn is tagged for the three stance dimensions examined.

The topic of this sequence is money being offered (allegedly by the authorities) to falsely report a COVID-19 death. Participant A, a supporter, shares an extract from Facebook and expresses suspicion that the claim is true by asking a provocative (rhetorical) question, thereby strongly asserting his/her view. Participant B aligns with A by answering positively and supporting A's view with knowledge from unspecified sources. This view is reiterated as a conclusion that raises concern and suspicion to match A's feelings. Participant A responds with agreement, but adds a downright insulting comment that targets those with opposing views, thus diverging with the group of opponents. Affect and investment have equally strong values.¹⁶

Next, C aligns divergently with A₂ by starting with a strengthening particle (*epa*) and reiterates the reference to *brain-washing*, striking back with the same amount of offence and revealing strong negative emotions. The latter accentuates the commitment to a stance opposed to the one expressed in the previous posts. The exchange continues and escalates into a conflict.

This short extract illustrates how the interlocutors manage relationships and negotiate meaning. Their identities as supporters (A and B) and opponents (C) are constructed not only through the content of their posts, but also through commitment towards what they communicate, the emotions expressed and the type of alignment with the interlocutors. All of the sequences we analysed prove that "relationships online are no less real than relationships offline" (Locher et al. 2015: 6) and that the social factor (taking a stance in this case) is as important as the sharing of information.

16. Lee (Chapter 10 in this volume) observes that intensifying strategies do not only strengthen the illocutionary force of the utterances, "but also the emotions and affect attached to them".

Table 6. Sequence example

	Content	*	Affect	Investment	Alignment
A ₁	[Shares a clip from Facebook – a personal account of offering money to relatives to declare a COVID death.] Зарем нема ништо вистина во ова??? 'Could <i>there be</i> no truth in this??'	Supp	suspicion	strengthened	to all – neutral
B ₁	Re:A ₁ мислам да има, [...] 'I think <i>there is</i> , [...] [shares similar hearsay information] По се изгледа не е нешто како што треба, се слуша за вакви муабетии во повеќе држави. ' <i>After all it seems</i> there is something fishy here, <i>there is talk about something similar</i> in many countries.'	Supp	concern suspicion	weakened distanced	converge to like-minded
A ₂	Re:B ₁ Абе така е но кај мојш да им докажеш на овие луѓе, што се испрани мозоци и што гледаат направо како коњине со амути [...] ' <i>Yeah that's it</i> but how could you explain to these people, who have been brain-washed and only look straight ahead like horses with blinders [...]	Supp	contempt (internal)	strengthened	converge to like-minded diverge to opposing
C ₁	Re:A ₂ Епа од takvite kako tebe sto ne se so isprani mozoci (zatoa sto nemate gram mozok) sega patime site, [...] pa sega ti pak setaj si bez maski i misli si deka bas ti nemozis da zabolis i deka se e poradi 5G. ' <i>Well, because of people like you whose brains aren't washed (since you have no brain)</i> we all suffer now, [...] and now again walk around without a mask and think you are the one who can't be infected and that everything is because of 5G.'	Opp	contempt anger	strengthened	diverge to opposing

* Supp – supporter, Opp – opponent;

6. Summary and conclusions

In this chapter we investigate patterns of COVID-19 conspiracy theory argumentation and counter-argumentation on discussion fora in Macedonian through examination of stancetaking strategies. We see stance as an integrated effect of three dimensions: affect, investment and alignment, as illustrated in Section 5.3.2. The most common strategies employed at each level are displayed in Table 7 below. The quantitative analysis at each level leads to the conclusion that predominantly negative affect is paired with strengthening strategies resulting in divergent alignment between opposing groups. Strong emotions intensify investment and a strengthened assertion evokes strong emotions. As illustrated in 5.3.2, interpersonal relations also influence affect and investment configurations.

Table 7. The most characteristic strategies for each stance dimension

	Strategies
affect	lexical items of feelings (mainly of fear and disinclination), negative lexical items, rhetorical questions, repetition, punctuation
investment	strengthening strategies <i>grammatical markers</i> : intensifying adverbs or adjectives, predicates expressing certainty, adversative markers, negation, repetition <i>lexical markers</i> : intensifying discourse particles, exclamations, strongly negative lexical items <i>paraverbal means</i> : punctuation, capital letters, multiple letters etc. <i>rhetorical means</i> : rhetorical questions, ridicule (irony/sarcasm, mocking) <i>endorsing sources</i> : citing particular media source or authority weakening strategies <i>grammatical markers</i> : attitude verbs, dative, modal verbs, indefinite adverbs, downtoners, indefinite reference <i>lexical markers</i> : verbal discursive formulaic expressions <i>relegating responsibility by relying on a source</i> : vague reference combined strategies start with mitigation but include one or more strengthening markers
alignment	divergence <i>mostly to opposition</i> : disagreement, criticism, challenge, confrontation, ridicule convergence <i>mostly to like-minded</i> : elaboration, support neutral <i>equally to opposition and to all</i> : explanation, expressing opinion, sharing information

At the start we assumed that, given the controversial nature of the topic, discussants would display predominantly negative affect and that the alignment between the opposing groups would be mainly divergent. Indeed, divergence prevails, but conflicting exchanges are not very frequent. Negative emotions are directed more often towards external entities than to participants, while personal attacks are less frequent. However, our hypothesis that supporters would exhibit stronger commitment to their views than opponents was not fully confirmed. While strengthening prevailed in both groups, the percentage was slightly lower among supporters, who employed distancing strategies more frequently than opponents. Thus, beneath the overall similarity some specific stancetaking strategies of the supporters did emerge. Namely, negative affect is used for voicing concern, fear and anxiety about the situation and contempt towards the potential culprits. Such strategies are aimed to evoke the impression of powerlessness and fear imposed by the powerful elite and to highlight the misinformation spread in the media that manipulates people. Additionally, supporters often employ weakening devices (such as the dative, attitude verbs and indefiniteness) to facilitate interaction and avoid direct challenge, but add some strengthening devices to validate the claim made, raising suspicion and pessimism about the current situation and the validity of official reports. Hence, they convey conviction in their beliefs, presenting themselves as nonconformists and free thinkers, intellectually superior to the “brainwashed” masses. These conclusions resonate with similar observations in several chapters throughout this volume (see Inwood and Zappavigna, Herman and Oswald, Fiammenghi, Zorzi), adding to the understanding of the way conspiracy theory supporters present themselves and attempt to impose their views on others. Further consideration of supporters-opponents interaction and difficulties impeding their communication would shed more light on online discussions related to conspiracy theories and the argumentation strategies of the discussion participants.

This chapter adds to the stance research in CMC and offers some insight into the strategies used by forum discussants on a debatable topic during a difficult period of social insecurity and impending health danger. The focus on Macedonian forum discussions broadens the field to a less commonly studied language and socio-cultural environment.

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Ideologies and the representation of identities in anti-vaccination conspiracy theories

A critical discourse analysis of the MMR vaccine-autism debate

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The present chapter analyses a corpus of newspaper articles published in national UK broadsheets and tabloids dealing with the controversy surrounding the safety of the measles, mumps, and rubella (MMR) vaccine. By adopting a corpus-assisted critical discourse studies approach, the chapter seeks to highlight how writers variably use language to legitimise or delegitimise their own, as well as their opponents', claims and identities. The results show that there has been an increasing tendency in recent years among writers in the traditional, mainstream press to oppose anti-vaccination conspiracy theories by identifying and criticising "typical" anti-vaccinators conspiracy theorists, thus undermining their identities rather than their claims. However, these strategies risk to backfire if they push believers in anti-vaccination conspiracy theories towards online, fringe environments like internet fora and social media.

Keywords: MMR vaccine, autism, anti-vaccination, conspiracy theories, newspaper coverage

1. Introduction

Conspiracy theories have been studied from a variety of points of view, as a social, political, and cultural phenomenon, mostly from a psychological, sociological, and philosophical perspective. The present chapter applies the framework of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to the study of the ways in which proponents, supporters, and opponents of conspiracy theories use language in order to affirm and spread their views by asserting their identities and/or framing those of their opponents. More precisely, the chapter is devoted to the study of anti-vaccination conspiracy theories, which bridge the (medico)scientific, the political, and the social spheres;

and to the way these emerge in the newspaper coverage of the debate surrounding the safety of the measles, mumps, and rubella (MMR) vaccine in the UK, which is considered an ideal case study also for understanding the evolving nature of the interaction between science, politics, and society in the so-called “post-truth” era. For reasons of space, this introduction is limited to a very brief overview of the main ways in which the discipline of CDA could contribute to a better understanding of these phenomena and does not delve into the highly complex issues of critical discourse studies and identity, which are better explored by the works referenced in the bibliography.

1.1 CDA and the study of ideology and identity

The discipline of CDA seeks to uncover the ideologies hidden in a text, that may be revealed by the exploration of all its – lexical, morpho-syntactical, textual, multi-modal – characteristics. The underlying presupposition is that all texts may reveal a hidden ideology, because these ideologies are ubiquitous in society where they effectively create power relations, which in turn are established and reinforced through language. The term “ideology” is here to be interpreted as a pervasive, usually acquired, and implicit worldview influencing the way in which people understand and react to everything that happens around them (see for example: Fairclough, 1989, 1992, 1995, 2003; Wodak 1989; Gee 1990; Van Dijk 1991; Richardson 2007; Machin and Mayr 2012).

The notion of identity is here conceptualised following De Fina (2006: 263) as crucially being about

conveying to one other what kind of people we are; which geographical, ethnic, social communities we belong to; where we stand in relation to ethical and moral questions; or where our loyalties are in political terms.

According to applied linguists and critical discourse analysts, this act of “conveying” identities is typically carried out through language and other semiotic resources: in this sense, identity is considered a largely discursive phenomenon, as

classifications of self and other are largely influenced by discourses about social groups that are produced and re-produced at different levels of society and in different social spheres, e.g. the media, education and politics.

(Zotzmann and O'Regan 2016: 2)

This is why the concept of identity has been and is of great interest for applied linguists and critical discourse analysts (see, among many others: Block 2012; Caldas-Coulthard and Iedema 2016). One first question to be answered in the scope of the present chapter is then: is it legitimate to speak about ideologies, and

about the (linguistic) construction of identities, in the realm of (anti-vaccination) conspiracy theories? And if so, can the study of their discursive realisation be of some help to better understand them? The question seems to be even more significant when studying medico-scientific conspiracy theories, where the presence of hard facts and evidence can be expected to play a pivotal role.

The starting point for the analysis of conspiracy theories is often the definition provided by Sunstein and Vermeule (2009: 205), according to which a conspiracy is “an effort to explain some event or practice by reference to the machinations of powerful people, who attempt to conceal their role”. This definition configures a space occupied by powerful people, on the one hand, and by people who try and counteract both their deeds and their self-narrations, on the other hand. Anti-science and anti-vaccination conspiracy theorists often thematise the presence of an ideology of established science, which they frame as an obstacle to the freedom of knowledge and speech, and couple it with an idea of scientists colluded with governments and big pharmaceutical companies. This enables them to effectively frame their spreading of fringe, alternative theories as a necessary act of resistance. However, the alternative reality that they fabricate often does not correspond to events in the physical world, and it may constitute a concrete threat to the patients’ health and wellbeing. This in turn justifies the attempts of established science to define it as dangerous propaganda. Therefore, anti-science and anti-vaccination conspiracy theories can be said to be part of a more comprehensive anti-scientific and anti-establishment ideology, competing for recognition and discursive space with the pro-scientific one.

Secondly, anti-vaccination conspiracy theories are often said to be gaining traction in the contemporary era (Stein 2017) and could be linked to the “post-truth” worldview that seemingly characterises it. According to the *OED*, “post-truth” is an adjective “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping political debate or public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief” (s.v. post-truth). This definition, too, can be interpreted through the concept of ideology, because it identifies two opposing, conflicting values – objective facts on the one hand, and emotion and personal belief on the other hand – that can be used argumentatively to back and give relevance to an idea or point of view.

Clearly, identifying just two, antithetical ideological positionings can be simplistic: ideologies are complex phenomena because they encompass entire worldviews that can thus be multi-layered, constantly evolving and interacting; besides, they are undoubtedly shaped and continually redefined by entities in the physical world that exist outside linguistic discourse. Similarly, identities are often multiple and multi-layered: as Hodge (2012: 6) explains, “multiple identities are the rule not the exception”. The discipline of CDA recognises this complexity and attempts

to analyse it by using an array of linguistic and discursive categories from other branches of knowledge – also including sociology, psychology, and political theory, to name but a few. In fact, this has been one of the main criticisms directed at CDA, accused of being ineffective and arbitrary in superficially and selectively appropriating frameworks from other disciplines (see, for example, Widdowson 1995, 1998). However, it seems that this complexity is required when studying vaccination and conspiracy theories, precisely because these are complex phenomena which bridge and merge the medico-scientific, the political, and the social spheres.

Furthermore, as (self)description and (self)narration often play a pivotal role in highly ideological discussions, the focus of the present chapter is on the different strategies used by the different actors in the discourse – identified as proponents, supporters, and opponents of anti-vaccination conspiracy theories – to legitimise their views, and consequently to de-legitimise their opponents'. In this sense, the chapter has several points of contact with Zorzi's Chapter 16 in the present volume, although it focuses on traditional, offline newspaper coverage (instead of online texts) and on anti-vaccination conspiracy theories. More specifically, the chapter explores the debate surrounding the MMR vaccine as a case study. The following section is thus devoted to a brief explanation of contemporary anti-vaccination resistance, with a focus on the importance of the debate surrounding the MMR vaccine, its alleged toxicity and link to autism.

1.2 Anti-vaccination conspiracy theories and the MMR vaccine

Vaccination resistance is not a new phenomenon: vaccines have been variably questioned and opposed since their very invention in the late 18th century England. Various authors argue that there are many similarities between past and present anti-vaccination claims (see, for example, Durbach 2005: 204–205); and that some of the seemingly ever-present anti-vaccination claims can be incorporated into larger conspiracy theories, whereby vaccination is interpreted as a way for governments to control people's bodies, or as a profitable source of income for governments, scientists, doctors, and pharmaceutical companies, who are thought to systematically overlook possible dangers of vaccines in order to profit from wide vaccination programmes (see, for example, Kata 2009, 2011).

Despite these similarities, other authors argue that modern anti-vaccination ideas and campaigns have been deeply influenced by the new information age, where the internet has allowed wider parts of the population to access large amounts of information fast and easily, and where this information is often based on user-generated content that is easily created and spread (Zimmerman et al. 2005). More specifically, Offit (2011: 121) argues that this increased access to information on the internet has had repercussions on the social strata who are more likely to

foster anti-vaccine misinformation and conspiratorial beliefs, and identifies a major difference between past and present anti-vaccination movements by focussing on their proponents' social class:

Laws compelling vaccination in nineteenth-century England were directed against the poor. Authorities believed that the working class, because it was less educated, would be more likely to fear vaccines and less likely to get them. [...] Today, on the other hand, resistance to vaccines is found in the upper-middle class among parents who are college- and graduate-school-educated, likely to use the Internet to make healthcare decisions, and fully believing that they, too, can become experts in an information age. The problem, however, lies in how they obtain their expertise. Magazine and newspaper articles and the Internet often provide information that is misleading.

The belief that it is possible to find the truth about vaccines by looking for it autonomously is arguably further reinforced by the contemporary "post-truth" cultural landscape, that has profoundly undermined concepts of authority and expertise and changed the dynamics between the scientific community and its public as well as between doctors and their patients. In this context, one specific antivaccination crisis appears as a good case study, both for the period in which it took place and for the actors it involved, namely the scare surrounding the MMR vaccine and its alleged link to autism.

The MMR vaccine-autism scare was initiated in Great Britain in 1998, with the publication of a paper by Andrew Wakefield and colleagues on the prestigious medical journal *The Lancet* (Wakefield et al. 1998, retracted). The paper hypothesised a link between the measles virus and the insurgence of autistic spectrum disorders; one of its authors, Andrew Wakefield, went as far as to suggest that the presence of the virus in the patients' guts could be due to the MMR vaccine and, during a press conference preceding the publication of the article, suggested abandoning the triple vaccine in favour of "safer" single vaccines (Boyce 2007). However, single vaccines are not available on the National Health Service (NHS), as they are not deemed safe by the medical community because they unnecessarily stretch the time gap between vaccinations, thus leaving children unprotected and vulnerable for longer periods. Moreover, since 1998 several studies have been carried out in order to test Wakefield's hypothesis, but none have been able to replicate his results, while studies investigating the MMR vaccine further proved its safety and efficacy.¹ Most of Wakefield's colleagues publicly dissociated themselves from his positions and

1. For further information on combined vaccines and for a list of scientific studies on the MMR vaccine see for example the Oxford University Vaccine Knowledge Project website: <https://vk.ox.ac.uk/vk/mmr-vaccine> (latest access: 14th April 2022).

retracted the study; meanwhile, investigations over Wakefield's conduct revealed several serious research misconducts (Deer 2004, 2010, 2020), which led to his removal from the British Medical Register in 2010. The study was finally retracted by *The Lancet*, and Wakefield moved to the United States, where he currently resides. However, the paper and its subsequent press coverage initiated a scare and a scandal in Great Britain, arguably with repercussions on other European countries. Vaccination rates fell, leading to new outbreaks of measles;² moreover, general trust in the government, doctors, and the practice of vaccination was profoundly undermined, hence setting a frame for subsequent vaccination scares. This controversy has been identified as ideal for the study of anti-science debates in the "post-truth" era because it explicitly discussed the value of experts and hard facts over the feelings of parents, and because the discussion also took place in mainstream media, at a time when communications were starting to be profoundly influenced by the advent of the internet.

The debate has already received much academic attention, mainly from the points of view of immunology, epidemiology, sociology, and psychology, but also within studies on communication and new media (see for example: Fitzpatrick 2004; Mnookin 2012), also with a more specific linguistic focus (see for example: Plastina and Maglie 2019). The present study fits into this context, attempting to better focus on the dialogic positioning and framing of proponents, supporters, and opponents of anti-vaccination conspiracy theories in the MMR debate, as it was covered by mainstream, national British press, in the perspective of Critical Discourse Studies.

The following section is devoted to the explanation of the methodology used for the creation and the analysis of the corpus.

2. The corpus

First, it was decided to focus on UK national newspapers with a nation-wide circulation. This focus meant the exclusion of regional and local newspapers, and an exclusive focus on nationwide, mainstream, traditional, and ultimately "agenda-setting" publications (Boykoff and Boykoff 2004) to the detriment of more specialised texts. However, as the aim of the present chapter is to explore dominant ideologies, it was deemed interesting to analyse genres that benefit from a high circulation, and arguably also a high level of social and cultural recognition, to explore whether fringe theories have indeed conquered a more central position in the public debate in the

2. For a list of childhood vaccination coverage statistics in England, see <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/nhs-immunisation-statistics> (latest access: 14th April 2022).

“post-truth” society. It was therefore decided to focus on major UK newspapers, both broadsheets and tabloids, careful to include both right-leaning and left-leaning publications in their weekly and Sunday editions (note, however, that in some cases, the database from which the articles were obtained did not allow to separate the weekly and Sunday editions of the same newspaper, which were therefore treated as one). The final list of newspapers included can be seen in Table 1.

The relevant articles concerning the MMR vaccine-autism controversy were retrieved through the Nexis Uni database using the keywords “MMR vaccin* AND autism” (the wildcard was used to obtain both “vaccine” and “vaccination” in their singular and plural forms, while the connector AND was used to retrieve articles where these words are used simultaneously). It was decided not to set a timespan, to explore whether the issue had already been discussed in these terms before the publication of Wakefield’s paper, and whether it continued to be discussed after its retraction. However, it was decided to exclude articles published in 2020 and 2021, as the onset of the coronavirus pandemic merits a separate discussion, which could nonetheless benefit from insights into previous events.

This query resulted in a total of 2,519 texts. The composition of the corpus is shown in Table 1, while Figure 1 shows the temporal distribution of the articles in the corpus. Note that the corpus includes news articles as well as argumentative genres like editorials and readers’ letters to the editor. The articles retrieved were then uploaded in .txt format on the corpus analyser AntConc (Anthony 2021) to carry out quantitative and qualitative analyses on frequencies, collocations, and concordances, following a corpus-assisted discourse analysis approach (Baker 2006). The results of these analyses are discussed in the following sections.

Table 1. General composition of the corpus, including the list of newspapers, the number of articles retrieved for each newspapers, and the total number of word types and word tokens

Newspaper	Number of articles
Broadsheets	
The Guardian	313
The Observer	79
The Daily Telegraph	215
The Sunday Telegraph	60
The Times	381
The Sunday Times	109
Total	1,157
Word types	25,741
Word tokens	866,511

(continued)

Table 1. (continued)

Newspaper	Number of articles
Tabloids	
The Daily Mail and Mail on Sunday	417
The Daily Mirror and Sunday Mirror	217
The Daily Express	149
The Sunday Express	62
The Sun	104
The Independent	413
Total	1,362
Word types	22,521
Word tokens	880,874

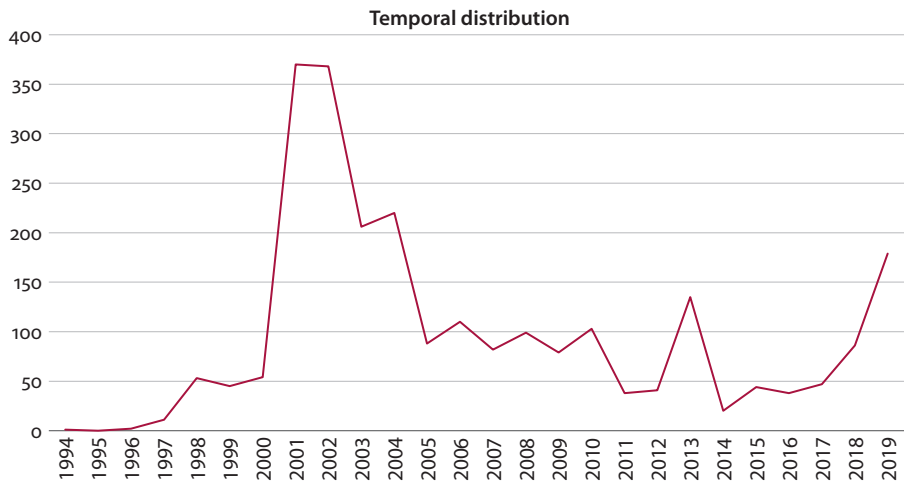


Figure 1. Temporal distribution of the articles in the corpus, showing the number of articles included in the corpus published each year, from 1994 to 2019. Note that the corpus covers the entire timespan starting from the publication of Wakefield’s paper (1998) to 2019, also including articles which were published before 1998 and where a possible correlation was already being suggested. This indicates that consistent coverage of the debate started before the publication of the paper and did not fade after its retraction, nor after Wakefield’s removal from the British Medical Register

3. Analysis

3.1 Discourses of and about anti-vaccination conspiracy theories and theorists

As the aim of the present chapter is to explore anti-vaccination conspiracy theories, as a first step the frequencies of the lemmas “conspiracy”, “theorist”, and “conspiracist” were calculated: this search was used to gauge how many times these concepts were mentioned in articles discussing the MMR vaccine and its alleged negative side effects, thus assessing the incidence of conspiratorial thinking in anti-vaccination discourses. It was thus discovered that the noun “conspiracy” is mentioned 326 times in the corpus, with a normalised frequency³ of 0.18. On the other hand, terms referring explicitly to people supporting conspiracy theories are less common in the corpus, as the noun “theorist” occurs 44 times (0.02), mostly in its plural form (40 times), and the noun “conspiracist” occurs only once, in the plural form in the phrase “vaccine conspiracists”. This datum is interesting if compared with the frequency of the label “anti-vaxxer”, which recurs 197 times in the corpus (0.11), and whose usage in context is discussed in more detail in Section 3.3.

As a second step, the number of articles containing one or more references to conspiracy theories and theorists was counted, to assess their distribution in the corpus with more accuracy. It was found that these concepts are discussed in a total of 148 texts: Table 2 shows the number and the percentage of articles containing these lemmas in the different publications in the corpus, in descending order, while Table 3 shows the temporal distribution of these articles, listing the number and percentage of articles containing these lemmas which were published each year.

Table 2. Number and percentage of articles containing the lemmas “conspiracy”, “theorist”, and “conspiracist” for each publication in the corpus

Newspaper	Number of articles containing the lemmas [conspiracy], [theorist], and [conspiracist]	Percentage
Times	31	39.24%
Sunday Times	12	11%
Observer	8	10.12%
The Guardian	31	9.90%
Daily Telegraph	14	6.51%
Independent	24	5.81%

(continued)

3. Normalised frequencies are frequencies expressed relative to some other value as a proportion of the whole; the normalized frequency was instead calculated using the formula: (raw frequency count / number of words in the text) $\times$ 1,000, following Biber et al. (1999).

Table 2. (continued)

Newspaper	Number of articles containing the lemmas [conspiracy], [theorist], and [conspiracist]	Percentage
Daily Mail and Mail on Sunday	16	3.83%
Sunday Telegraph	2	3.33%
Sunday Express	2	3.22%
Daily Mirror and Sunday Mirror	6	2.76%
Sun	1	0.96%
Daily Express	1	0.67%

Table 3. Number of articles containing the lemmas “conspiracy”, “theorist”, and “conspiracist” for each year in the corpus

Year	Number of articles containing the lemmas [conspiracy], [theorist], and [conspiracist]	Percentage
1998	1	1.88%
1999	1	2.22%
2000	0	0
2001	2	0.54%
2002	7	1.90%
2003	16	7.76%
2004	8	3.63%
2005	2	2.27%
2006	3	2.72%
2007	1	1.21%
2008	10	10.10%
2009	4	5.06%
2010	5	4.85%
2011	1	2.63%
2012	1	2.43%
2013	2	1.48%
2014	1	5%
2015	6	13.63%
2016	6	15.78%
2017	10	21.27%
2018	16	18.6%
2019	45	25.13%

The tables clearly show that in recent years there has been an increase in the number of times conspiracy theories (and theorists) are mentioned alongside (anti) vaccination discourses compared with the past; and that this tendency is more marked in broadsheets (especially *The Times* and *The Guardian*, alongside their sister Sunday newspapers *The Sunday Times* and *The Observer*) rather than in tabloids. An exploration of the collocates of such expressions coupled with a reading

of the concordances and the actual contexts in which they occur can help to clarify these trends.

The collocates of a word are those words which recur more frequently in its surroundings than it would be expected by chance alone, and they are generally considered useful to get a glimpse of a word's general connotation – “semantic preference” and “semantic prosody”, using Stubbs's (2001) terminology. Table 4 shows a selection of the most frequent collocates of the lemma “conspiracy” in the corpus (only content words, that is to say, nouns, adjectives, adverbs, and verbs are included). Unsurprisingly, “theories”, “theory”, and “theorists” are among the most frequent collocates; the noun “theorist” will be discussed in more detail in the following paragraphs. The nouns “vaccine”, “vaccines”, and “MMR” also clearly refer to the topic of the articles included in the corpus, as does the adjective “medical”. Noteworthy, however, are all those collocates pointing to a decidedly negative framing of the concept of conspiracy theories, qualifying them as “toxic” and “lies”. Moreover, the noun “volume” presumably points to instances where the incidence of conspiratorial thinking is discussed; when it is coupled with the adjective “unprecedented”, this seems to describe a situation where their number is increasing, possibly due to an “online” environment which favours their spreading. Finally, the mental verb “believe” highlights how conspiracy theories are generally not supported by hard evidence and proof, but rather rest on their proponents' personal beliefs and idiosyncratic ideas, as in the following example:

- (1) Young people online believe the government is conspiring against them or stealing their children which is outrageous but real for them.

(*The Guardian*, 2019)

Table 4. A selection of the most common collocates of the lemma “conspiracy” in the corpus and their raw frequencies

Collocate	Frequency
Theories	120
Theorists	39
Theory	29
Vaccine	25
Vaccines	19
Medical	19
Toxic	14
Lies	14
MMR	12
Volume	11
Unprecedented	11
Online	11
Believe	11

As the main goal of the present chapter is to explore the representation of identities in the discourse of anti-vaccination conspiracy theories, a more in-depth analysis was carried out on the occurrences of the lemma “theorist”. Each occurrence of the lemma was carefully read to understand:

- Whether the author of the newspaper article agrees or disagrees with conspiracy theorists;
- Whether anti-vaccination sentiments are explicitly linked with conspiratorial thinking by the author of the article;
- Whether other conspiracies are mentioned alongside anti-vaccination;
- The qualifiers used in conjunction with the lemma [theorist], as well as the people who are explicitly identified as (anti-vaccination) conspiracy theorists.

First, it must be noted that indeed, conspiracy theorists in the corpus often propound anti-vaccination claims (in 66% of the total occurrences this is the only conspiratorial belief mentioned); however, anti-vaccination claims are sometimes mentioned alongside other notorious conspiracy theories, mainly concerning 9/11, the death of Princess Diana, and the Moon landing. In other cases, anti-vaccine instances are coupled with scepticism surrounding climate change, which reveals a more general anti-scientific and anti-establishment mindset. Furthermore, the tendency to conflate different conspiracy theories seems to have become more pronounced in recent years, as this happens more frequently in articles published in 2018 and 2019.

Moreover, the analysis of these occurrences also uncovered the fact that in most cases (69.23%) the author of the newspaper article disagrees with (anti-vaccination) conspiracy theorists; in some other cases (28.20%) the author remains neutral; and only in one case does the author endorse conspiratorial thinking. This is an article published in 2010 by *The Daily Telegraph* and significantly titled “The hidden hand of powerful forces”; while discussing the GMC’s ruling against Andrew Wakefield (mentioned in the introduction to the present chapter), the writer states that:

- (2) It is not necessary to be a conspiracy theorist to recognise that the General Medical Council’s recent ruling to strike professors Andrew Wakefield and John Walker-Smith off the register had the fingerprints of the medical establishment all over it. (*The Daily Telegraph*, 2010)

The author is here claiming that Andrew Wakefield and his colleague were not struck off the British medical register because of scientific and medical malpractice, and that this ruling is actually an attempt to silence them on the part of the so-called “medical establishment”. This reference to powerful forces united against brave individuals who are trying to subvert an unjust status quo is typical of conspiratorial thinkers (Numerato et al. 2019), and this is the reason why this occurrence

was classified as endorsing conspiracy theories; nevertheless, it must be noted that the author is trying to explicitly distance themselves from the label “conspiracy theorist”, affirming that it is actually “not necessary” to be a fully-fledged conspiracy theorist to recognise the truth of this statement. Thus, the writer seems to be implying that conspiracy theorists tend to believe in far-fetched and unproven ideas, whereas their own statement is credible and possibly supported by evidence.

Indeed, the concordances where authors disagree with (anti-vaccination) conspiracy theories reveal a decidedly negative semantic prosody: when the noun “theorist” is not used to refer to specific people (typically, Andrew Wakefield or the former US President Donald Trump, who openly endorsed anti-vaccination positions; Hornsey et al. 2020), they are qualified by highly negative nouns and adjectives such as “demented”, “irritating”, “cranks”, “whackos”, “opportunists”, and even “idiots”. The following are instances of these words in context:

- (3) It was a great relief when Wakefield’s work was exposed as fraudulent, and he departed Britain to join a wacky fringe of conspiracy theorists and alternative health cranks in the US. *(The Daily Telegraph, 2017)*
- (4) One only has to stray into anti-vaxxer internet forums for a few minutes to see that they’re stuffed with conspiracy theorists, opportunists, reactionaries, and – worst of all – hubristic idiots. *(The Guardian, 2019)*

Once again, it seems legitimate to state that the tendency to denigrate supporters of anti-vaccination conspiracy theories using this kind of dysphemisms has become more pronounced in recent years, with articles published in 2017, 2018, and 2019 more prone to this behaviour. This could be possibly linked to the fact that in many instances, the rise and spread of conspiracy theories is linked by the authors of the newspaper articles to the internet and the “online world”; see, for instance, Example (4) above, where the author mentions “internet forums”, as well as the following occurrences:

- (5) Dr Andrew Wakefield, the British surgeon responsible for the study, is widely discredited but he lives now in America and in the online world of conspiracy theorists he has considerable support. *(The Times, 2015)*
- (6) California is a lightning rod for such debate, because it has unusually lax rules permitting parents to opt out of vaccination for non-specific personal belief. It also has a relatively high population of affluent, protective parents who don’t like to take what they are told on trust and have tapped into an online community of doubters, critics and conspiracy theorists who believe the pharmaceutical industry and the medical establishment are concealing the truth about vaccines. *(The Guardian, 2015)*

- (7) They had stumbled upon Wakefield's discredited claims, which were being fuelled online by alarmed parents of autistic children, alternative practitioners and conspiracy theorists. *(The Daily Mail, 2017)*

In this sense, it must also be noted that “ignorance” and “stupidity” are keywords when examining conspiracy theories, because one typical discursive strategy used by conspiracy theorists to represent and legitimise themselves and their beliefs is the emphasis on intelligence and knowledgeability (see also Zorzi, Chapter 16 in this volume). Indeed, “proponents of vaccination [are] perceived as naïve targets of the pharmaceutical lobby” (Numerato et al. 2019: 91), while conspiratorial beliefs “may help to uphold the image of the self and the in-group as competent” (Douglas et al. 2017: 540) and can be used to strengthen conspiracists' self-description as superior thinkers who resist manipulation: “the conspiracist raises herself to the position of an alternative knowledge authority, a true expert instead of ‘false experts leading us astray’” (Ylä-Anttila 2018: 362). Consequently, the choice to describe (anti-vaccination) conspiracy theorists instead as “idiots” could be considered a delegitimising strategy which aims to undermine and attack the opponents' own preferred means of self-representation. However, it must also be noted that other authors in the corpus criticise these strategies, considering them an example of ineffective and unnecessary vilification:

- (8) Telling anti-vaxxers they're stupid won't fix it. *(The Daily Telegraph, 2018)*
- (9) [...] scornfully throwing facts at people who we think are too stupid to engage with the realities of science often backfires by making people double down in their own worldview. *(The Observer 2019)*

Example (9) in particular criticises de-legitimation strategies attempting to discredit anti-vaccinators' identities, contrasting them with strategies aimed at debunking their claims through an explanation of the “realities of science”. Indeed, the authors of these examples seem to be more interested in describing and profiling anti-vaxxers and conspiracy theorists, rather than repudiating or accurately demystifying their statements. Example (6) above is particularly relevant in this sense, because it provides a detailed portrait of what is considered a “typical” anti-vaccination conspiracy theorist: first and foremost, they are “parents” who belong to the “affluent” social class; moreover, they have a very protective attitude towards their children, which they couple with a general distrust of the pharmaceutical industry and the medical establishment; this is ultimately what leads them to believe “doubters, critics and conspiracy theorists” who spread their views through “online communities”. Example (7) introduces a further category which is often mentioned alongside vaccine doubters and critics, that is, “alternative practitioners”,

who deviate from established science and medicine, offering a different, supposedly safer, more natural, and less interested approach to well-being.

These elements are discussed in more detail in the next section, which deals with two longer extracts offering a lengthy description of the identities of anti-vaccination conspiracy theorists.

3.2 Framing and defining anti-vaccination conspiracy theorists

Two articles, appearing in the same tabloid at a few months' distance in 2019, recount the stories of two vocal anti-vaccination mothers and present striking similarities in the framing of the two activists. Both articles explicitly connect the anti-vaccination movement with conspiracy theories: in the case of the August article, the reference is prominently placed in the headline, whereas in the October article this can be found in the body of the text. The incipits are reproduced in Table 5, where their parallel passages are underlined.

Table 5. Incipits of two articles describing anti-vaccination activists and conspiracy theorists

How social media is fuelling a deadly conspiracy, Daily Mail, 24.08.2019	Amazon's anti-jab bedtime story, Daily Mail, 26.10.2019
<u>A.W.* is not the kind of woman you would expect to be accused of putting young lives at risk.</u>	<u>H. K.-B. doesn't look like the sort of rabble-rouser you'd expect to find masterminding a subversive propaganda campaign that will poison children's minds and endanger their health.</u>
<u>She is a much respected primary school teacher who lives in the affluent London suburb of Kingston-upon-Thames with her businessman husband, their two children, aged 13 and 15 and the family dog.</u>	<u>A 72-year-old grandmother, she lives with her hedge fund executive husband, R. B., in a five-bedroom, £ 2.5 million house on a tree-lined street just off Ealing Common in West London. R. commutes daily to the City offices of investment firm M., where he works as a highly paid senior adviser on Japan. H., who cuts a similarly conservative figure, runs a wellness' clinic called Healing in Ealing, where the professional homeopath and life coach' charges clients about £ 90 an hour.</u>
<u>In her spare time, Mrs W., 53, also tends the allotment. She is a camper van enthusiast, too. The details of her comfortable middle-class life are listed on her Twitter profile.</u>	<u>A keen gardener, the American-born mother of two loves tending her vegetable patch, which during the summer and autumn produces marrows, courgettes and runner beans.</u>

(continued)

Table 5. (continued)

How social media is fuelling a deadly conspiracy, Daily Mail, 24.08.2019	Amazon's anti-jab bedtime story, Daily Mail, 26.10.2019
One entry, <u>though</u> , is worthy of further investigation. <u>She is the founder, we are told, of the Arnica Network, which believes in a holistic approach to health.</u>	<u>Yet K.-B. has another interest, quite at odds with the outwardly respectable nature of her existence.</u> She is <u>a leading player</u> in the strident and (critics say) highly irresponsible global anti-vaccination movement. [...] Her professional website links to an array of pages which promote the false claim that MMR jabs cause autism, while on Facebook she [...] posts articles from [...] a US website recently dubbed one of the largest brokers of far-Right conspiracy theories, including disinformation about vaccines.

* Their full names are given in the original articles, but were here omitted for privacy issues.

Both texts begin with an individualisation of the two women, who are mentioned by first and last name (see van Leeuwen, 1996 for a comprehensive analysis of the possible representational strategies used to characterise social actors in the discourse). The authors then go on to describe them according to their profession (using a functionalisation strategy), their income and place of living, their families, their age, and their personal interests. All these details serve to frame the two women by exploiting the general expectations connected with these traits. In the case of A., this description is then summarised with reference to her social class (“her comfortable middle-class life”), while in the case of H., it is surmised from her political leaning (“a conservative figure”) and from an overall judgement of her condition (“the respectable nature of her existence”). Note that homeopathy (which is usually closely connected to the idea of “alternative medicine” discussed above) is here only briefly mentioned as a profession, without explicitly connotating it.

However, the premise to interpret these descriptions is given in both cases at the beginning of the article, where the authors appeal directly to the readers and warn them of the contradiction between the two women’s appearances and their behaviour. In both cases they are first accused of endangering children’s lives (“putting young lives at risk”; “poison children’s minds and endanger their health”), and only following their portrayal as respectable middle-class mothers is the danger explicitly linked to their activities as anti-vaccination campaigners. The articles seem to imply that the dangerousness of their activities is made more outrageous by the fact that they are women (explicitly stated in the August article) and mothers (explicitly stated in the October article, and implied in the August article through the mention of A.’s children) and are therefore expected to be their children’s primary caregivers.

Incidentally, implication is confirmed by the analysis of the present corpus: here, the gender-neutral lemma “parent” is most frequent, being used a total of 7291 times in the whole corpus; however, the lemmas “mother” and “mum” both recur much more frequently than the lemmas “father” and “dad” (“mother” has a raw frequency of 1237, “mom” is used 176 times, whereas “father” has a raw frequency of 377 and “dad” is used 64 times). This framing arguably enables the writers to depict both women as active subjects in both texts, stressing their agency through the constant use of active voice coupled with nouns such as “founder” (August article) and “leading player” (October article). This agency, however, is arguably used here to imply guilt rather than choice and responsibility, due to the previous explicit negative judgement of their actions.

Both texts appear to proceed from the implicit premises that (a) there is a type of person that could be expected to be a supporter of anti-vaccination conspiracy theories, and (b) this type of person is not an educated and affluent middle-class mother. In both articles, this second proposition is especially prominent because it is introduced by an adversative conjunction (“though” in the August article, “yet” in the October article), which serves to strengthen the contrast between expectation and knowledge (Chafe 1986).

It seems legitimate, then, to wonder about the type of person one would indeed expect to be an anti-vaccination conspiracy theorist, and to hypothesise that they would be the opposite of what is described here: possibly an underprivileged working-class parent, or even someone who has never had any personal experience with children. It is possible then to derive a further implication of this type of discourse, namely that education and privileges should theoretically function as a barrier to conspiratorial thinking, and that only people who do not have the possibility to be exposed to the facts or to the education necessary to understand them should be prey of conspiratorial beliefs. However, the very fact that anti-vaccinators place more importance on their personal beliefs and experiences rather than on facts, to which they nonetheless have access (a foundational aspect of the so-called “post-truth” society) makes communication between opponents and supporters of anti-vaccination conspiracy theories more difficult, because they move on entirely different epistemological positions; in the words of an anti-vaccination mother, whose letter was published by the *Daily Telegraph* in 2018: “I’ve done a lot of research, but it’s just a feeling really”.

3.3 Conspiracy theorists and anti-vaxxers

The insights gained from the analysis of the phrase “conspiracy theorists” are made more relevant by their comparison with the usage of the phrases “anti-vax” and “anti-vaxxer” in the corpus. Indeed, these appear to be frequently used as qualifiers of nouns such as “movement”, “campaign”, and “propaganda”. They can also identify social actors in the discourse, especially when they modify nouns such as “parents”, “campaigners”, “mums”, and “groups”; however, it could be argued that this adjectival usage functions as a more indirect label, because it formally separates the person – variably identified as a parent or a campaigner – from their anti-vaccine convictions, which are thus treated as a quality possessed by the social actors rather than a core trait of their identity. However, once again there seems to have been a reversal of this trend in recent years, going in the direction of a more explicit labelling of groups of people, as the plural noun “anti-vaxxers” has become increasingly more common: indeed, 55% of all the occurrences of this term in the corpus appear in articles published in 2019. The following extracts are meant to exemplify these two different strategies:

- (10) The militant anti-vaxxer movement seems to be gaining momentum with supporters such as Donald Trump who has tweeted more than 20 times suggesting a link between vaccines and autism (which has never been proved).
(*The Daily Mail*, 2018)
- (11) Even though the claim that the MMR vaccines cause autism has been disproved time and again, [...] anti-vaxxers still repeat the lie to persuade vulnerable parents not to give their children life-saving medicines that have been scientifically shown to work.
(*The Daily Mail*, 2019)

In Example (10), the two clauses contain two main active subjects, namely the “anti-vaxxer movement” on the one hand, and “Donald Trump” on the other hand; however, the former US president is the subject of the action verb “to tweet”, while the “anti-vaxxer movement” is the subject of the stative verb “to seem”. Conversely, in Example (11), the plural noun “anti-vaxxers” is the active subject of the glossing verb “to repeat”, which introduces a non-finite clause of purpose expressed by the metapositional directive verb “to persuade” (on the classification of glossing verbs see, among others, Caldas-Coulthard 1994). These examples testify to the subtle power of identity labels to frame social actors as more or less active, positively or negatively connoted agents in the discourse.

4. Concluding remarks

Previous studies exploring the MMR vaccine-autism debate have shown that at first, the controversy was taken seriously by most newspapers, which staged a debate among science and health professionals who supposedly disagreed on the safety of the triple vaccine (see Clarke 2008; Stöckl and Smajdor 2017, other than the works already cited). Over time, however, evidence mounted in favour of the MMR vaccine; this, coupled with the fact that Andrew Wakefield was found guilty of scientific and medical malpractice thanks to the investigations of *The Times* journalist Brian Deer, finally convinced many newspapers that the vaccine was indeed safe and effective. As a result, articles stopped depicting the controversy as a debate and started to refer to it as an example of the declining trust of the general public towards the medical establishment, as a sign of a pervasive anti-scientific and anti-establishment sentiment, and ultimately, as a belief held chiefly by marginal and marginalised groups. To do so, they started using identity labels such as “conspiracy theorist”, often negatively connoted, to highlight the marginalisation of supporters of anti-vaccination claims, and the threat they pose to the wellbeing of the general population. The analysis presented in this chapter allows us to suggest that the main goal of these strategies is to delegitimise the anti-vaccinators’ identities rather than their claims, in order to exclude them from the mainstream discourse of established, traditional newspapers. In this sense, these texts can be considered a product of a “post-truth” mindset, whereby appeals to emotions and personal beliefs – which ultimately characterise people’s identities – are preferred over appeals to hard evidence.

The present chapter can only offer a limited insight into the – mainly – delegitimising strategies used by newspaper writers to identify and attack proponents of anti-vaccination conspiracy theories, due to the limited number and scope of articles analysed. However, it argues for careful consideration of the means by which the traditional and agenda-setting press tends to marginalise groups who already adopt extremist opinions, thus risking to further radicalise them in their dangerous views. Indeed, although anti-vaccination conspiracy theories undoubtedly pose a threat to health (as they undermine trust in medicine and science and propagate dangerous assumptions about safe and effective vaccines, especially childhood vaccines such as the one against measles, mumps, and rubella), these strategies arguably risk to further entrench these groups in their beliefs, possibly pushing them towards online communication environments where the flux of information is less controlled, freer, and where anti-vaccination claims and conspiracy theories can therefore spread more easily and uncontrollably.

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Collective identities in the online self-representation of conspiracy theorists

The cases of climate change denial,
'Deep State' and 'Big Pharma'

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A possible explanation for the success of conspiracy theories among some people is that the amount, accuracy and reliability of information is often not what appeals most to an audience. Indeed, conspiracy theory endorsement may be favoured by the opportunity it offers people to identify with a set of values and self-images, as well as to feel part of a wider community of like-minded people. This makes identity an essential element for the dissemination of conspiracy theories. This chapter focuses on the linguistic construction of the identity of conspiracy theory supporters' groups in six online articles promoting conspiracist content by applying Koller's (2012) model for the analysis of collective identities. Results highlight a variety of strategies across and within conspiracy theories, as well as a convergence towards notions of individuality, humanity and intellectual and moral superiority which conspiracist groups attribute to themselves.

1. Introduction

During the first COVID-19 pandemic lockdown in Italy, between March and May 2020, I came across the website of a school teacher association arguing against remote learning, the use of face masks and social distancing in Italian schools. They asserted that the media, most scientists and public institutions were deceiving people and spreading fears about the disease to control them. I could not imagine how anyone would want to risk their pupils' and their own health in that way, so I emailed them asking – as neutrally as possible – for more information on their viewpoint. With what I perceived as a conspiracist undertone, they replied that they disputed the dangers of abolishing safety measures, citing a scientific paper (which I found out to be retracted) to support their stance. They added that

widespread public concern about the disease was not to be trusted. I worded my reply to make it as polite and convincing as I could: by quoting official sources I argued that my concerns about the disastrous consequence of easing restrictions were indeed well-founded, asking why they disregarded those sources. To this day, I have received no response.

My inquiry did not really favour reciprocal understanding. In fact, our exchange was probably more of an attempt on both parts to persuade the interlocutor about the existence or absence of a COVID-19 conspiracy. At the same time, stating the plausibility of the conspiracy or lack thereof meant speaking on behalf of larger groups representing different values and beliefs, situating ourselves within the debate. Neither of us was willing to buy into the counterpart's ideas, despite our shared (professed?) concern about the Italian school and pupils' well-being.

This personal anecdote seems to suggest that when taking sides in disputes related to conspiracies and conspiracy theories, perceiving ourselves as representatives of a certain category or group bears some relation to our views, values, our perception of who we are and ultimately to the way we engage in the debate. In other words, it is important to address group identity issues when approaching debates over conspiracy theories, because people's sense of belonging to a group and their identification within the values signified by that group potentially play an important role in how pro- and anti- conspiracist views gain or lose support. According to Douglas et al. (2019: 4), conspiracy theories are

[...] attempts to explain the ultimate causes of significant social and political events and circumstances with claims of secret plots by two or more powerful actors [...] While often thought of as addressing governments, conspiracy theories could accuse any group perceived as powerful and malevolent.

Although not all conspiracy theories are unfounded or harmful, "many of them are in fact closely intertwined with some of today's most powerful, destructive social movements" (Sternisko et al. 2020: 1). The Internet has affected the way conspiracy theories unfold in society, granting them a more pervasive presence in political and popular culture (Byford 2011: 3) and favouring the creation of conspiracy theory-endorsing and conspiracy theory-constructing communities (Varis 2019a: 3), although it may not necessarily have contributed to their development and public support (Douglas et al. 2019: 15).

Considering the relevance of group identity issues to the success of and debate over conspiracy theories, and bearing in mind that some conspiracy theories – made somewhat more widespread by online interaction – can have serious social implications, this chapter aims to describe which identities are offered by conspiracist messages and how language is used to convey these identities in a way that arguably appeals to relatively large audiences, as discussed in the above-cited

literature. More specifically, this study seeks to illustrate group identities arising from online communication supporting certain conspiracy theories by analysing how language contributes to shaping and promoting said identities. The study draws on Koller's (2012) description of collective identity analysis, here applied to a small dataset of six different online articles reporting on three different conspiracy theory-related domains and published in news sources associated with conspiracist views. Section 2 situates the subject within the existing literature, identifies a research gap and sets the research questions accordingly; Section 3 zooms in on Koller's approach, while Sections 4 and 5 outline respectively text collection and the methodology applied; in Section 6 results are described and discussed; in Section 7 the most important findings are highlighted and contextualised, and possible directions for further research are suggested.

2. Conspiracy theories and the importance of group identity

Barkun (2016) dealt with conspiracy theories and their possible socio-political consequences by describing those theories as a type of knowledge – more specifically, a non-orthodox or not institutionally validated knowledge that is historically regarded as fringe, despite having become more and more present in the public debate (see Section 1). In introducing his account, Barkun convincingly argued that precisely because of this non-orthodoxy, conspiracist knowledge is regarded by its supporters as special and privileged: it refutes authority, denoting a strong critical attitude towards anything considered to be officially accepted/validated, and thus feeding into a positive vision of conspiracy theorists as a “self-identified elite” of rebels and independent thinkers, “differentiated from what they often view as the ignorant, herd-like public.” (Barkun 2016: 2; see also Mitkovska and Saračević, this volume).

In her discussion of conspiracy theory propagation through online memes, Varis (2019a: 4) further elaborated on Barkun's observations by stressing that “claims to particular identities” are as relevant as claims to knowledge in the promotion of conspiracy theories. Related to this is the remark that the amount, accuracy and reliability of information contained in a piece of news might not be what appeals most to an audience. Rather, success may be favoured by providing the audience with an opportunity to identify with a certain set of values and self-images (Varis 2019b), as well as to feel part of a wider community of like-minded people.

There is a close link between individual identity, here understood as “a set of traits, capacities, attitudes, etc.” characterising one person and distinguishing them from other individuals over time (Shoemaker 2006: 41), and the distinctive traits of the group(s) individuals affiliate to. In this context, social identity theory constitutes

a useful tool to understand group identification dynamics: it defines social identity as an individual's awareness of belonging to a social category or group (Abrams and Hogg 1990: 2); this awareness forms part of the individual self (Sternisko et al. 2020: 2) and leads to the categorisation of other people as in-group (when they are perceived as similar to the self) and out-group (when they are perceived as different, Stets and Burke 2000: 225).

Social psychology studies offer further insights into the way conspiracy believers may think and perceive themselves, including at a group level. Research in this field has indeed identified some attitudes and perceptions which seem to predict conspiracy theory endorsement in people. In their wide-ranging review, for instance, Douglas et al. (2019: 7) pointed out that, according to existing literature, people may be – even unconsciously – drawn to conspiracy theories when such theories promise to satisfy their desires for certainty and knowledge, control and security of their situation, and the maintenance of a positive image of the self or one's group (Douglas et al. 2019: 7). Research has also suggested that perceived threats deriving from societal changes and the transformation of society's defining values are a strong predictor of conspiracy theory endorsement (Federico et al. 2020).

As a matter of fact, feelings and attitudes like need for control, fear of change, suspicion towards the authorities and willingness to see oneself as an independent and critical thinker, as well as to be part of positively perceived groups, are not in themselves uncommon. In this sense, far from being relegated to the realm of irrationality and insanity, conspiracy theories have been described as strategies to react to feelings of powerlessness and anxiety, while at the same time bolstering one's own group confidence and denigrating people with different beliefs (Miller and Saunders 2016).

Regarding the link between conspiracy theory thinking and positive self-image, Federico et al. (2020: 927) recognised that both actual endorsement of specific theories and more general conspiracy-like styles of reasoning seem to be predicted by, among other features, a need for uniqueness and narcissism. This is in line with Barkun's (2016) and Vaaris's (2019a) remarks that conspiracy theory believers regard themselves and their believer in-groups as unique and special. Sternisko et al. (2020) explore in further detail the appealing identity claims around conspiracy theories. Drawing from previous literature, the authors theoretically articulate conspiracy theory support as based either on the unique narrative content of specific theories or on structural properties widely shared by conspiracy theories, such as their explanatory capability and their non-orthodoxy. They argue that people with a stronger need to feel unique and special tend to be enticed by the latter properties, whereas social identity motives, such as beliefs in one's in-group superiority and anxiety about its recognition are linked to the content of specific conspiracy theories, which may well involve the out-group as conspirators. Although these

are theoretical distinctions, which means that in reality different psychological aspects and motives interact and overlap, this description further clarifies how self-perception and identity may contribute to the success of conspiracy theories. Conspiracy theory endorsement can thus be related to a sense of threat to one's social identity, and to feelings of greatness and superiority regarding one's own conspiracy theory-supporting community, perceived as the in-group, which fosters polarisation and aggressiveness towards the out-group. Group identity is therefore critical to understand conspiracy theories (Miller and Saunders 2016: 3).

The role of group identity in shaping worldviews and behaviours has also been highlighted through the study of communities of practice, which sees discourse as crucial to the development of these communities. They are defined as groups whose members share some life experiences and regularly engage in common endeavours, committing to a shared understanding of reality and developing their own identity as well as the discourse to articulate this identity through the community itself (Eckert 2006). If supporters of a conspiracy theory or set of conspiracy theories are considered as communities of practice (in that they share their belief in the conspiracy theory or theories and engage in conspiracy theory support and spread), it is reasonable to assume that discourse and language play an important role in the articulation of their individual and group identity within the community.

Although research has addressed some key aspects about how conspiracy theory supporters may perceive their group identities, a description of the role played by language in enacting and attributing conspiracy theory-endorsing identities, and thus operating as a way of "being in the world" in certain contexts and with certain purposes (Gee 2011: 3,18), has not been specifically addressed, to the best of my knowledge. This chapter aims to fill this research gap through the Collective Identity (henceforth CI) approach (Koller 2012). CIs are "understood as socio-cognitive representations of the group self, including its attributes, relational behaviour, goals and values, which are constituted and negotiated by the interactions within a discourse community" as well as between communities (Koller 2014: 148, see Section 3 below). Here, this perspective is applied to online conspiracist news articles to answer the following research questions: what type of group identity is enacted by conspiracy theory supporters in communicating conspiracy theories, and through which discursive devices? Since it is not possible to address conspiracy theories and their supporters as monolithic entities, the research scope was narrowed down to specific instances of conspiracy theory-endorsing discourse and specific conspiracy theories, as explained in Section 4.1.

3. Collective identities

Koller (2012) proposed a model to analyse CIs in discourse. Since CIs are understood as socio-cognitive representations (SCRs), that is mental models negotiated through and emerging from discourse as a social practise, she situates her framework within the socio-cognitive approach to Critical Discourse Studies. SCRs are indeed partly constituted through the circulation of relevant texts within and across discourse communities, so that cognition is instantiated by discourse while also being shaped by it (Koller 2012: 21). Discourse may play a role in the success or lack thereof of SCRs: the more powerful and pervasive they are in discourse, the more recipients are exposed to them, and may accept, reject, reappropriate and negotiate them (Koller 2012: 23). Against this backdrop, the present study focuses on the CIs which conspiracy theory supporters construct for themselves through the language of news promoting conspiracy theory-related content. Those who oppose conspiracy theories can also be represented through CIs, which will be taken into account – when relevant – to describe conspiracy theory supporters' CIs.

According to Koller (2012), the critical analysis of CIs starts from an assessment of the language used to represent them: the emphasis of her approach therefore lies on the detailed analysis of linguistic features, which is also the main focus of this chapter. The model then proceeds to interpret linguistic evidence by acknowledging the discourse practices characterising the analysed text(s) and their broader social context(s) – these aspects are also partly addressed here.

Koller (2012: 19) suggests an “open-ended list of linguistic parameters” to investigate CIs in texts, pointing out that said parameters “should be handled flexibly enough to incorporate categories that are particularly important for the text under investigation, and to disregard those that are not”. In line with this approach, only some parameters in Koller's list (see Section 4.4) will be examined here.

4. Text collection criteria

4.1 Topics

Given the heterogeneity of the topics involved in the development of conspiracy theories, a choice was made to select texts which publicise a limited set of conspiracy theory-related topics. This allowed me to circumscribe the focus of the present analysis while adopting a wider scope than would have been possible by only focusing on a single conspiracy theory. The present analysis thus considers three conspiracy theory-related topics. These are not taken to be representative of

conspiracy theories in general, but are rather treated as separate examples, different in context, focus and – at least partly – audiences. Consequently, CI dynamics cannot be regarded as fully comparable across different topics. At the same time, all topics share a conspiracist undertone, being based on the assumption that powerful actors are hiding the truth from the public; moreover, the news stories here considered were all published in the same two news websites (see Section 4.2), which means that there may be some consistency among them in term of underlying ideology and editorial stance. This makes their juxtaposition pertinent to the aim of the present study.

The first conspiracy theory-related topic analysed here concerns climate change denial, voiced by some isolated scientists along with fossil fuel corporations and conservative groups who openly challenge the scientific consensus on the unfolding anthropogenic climate change (Dunlap and McCright 2011). This assault on science, as well as on any governmental regulatory effort to tackle the climate crisis, draws on a range of arguments which include the idea that climate change is a hoax resulting from a conspiracy on the part of the political, academic and possibly financial elites. The conspiracy is claimed to aim at damaging national sovereignty and delivering a centralised world government and world socialism (Gilman et al. 2011), or at enriching the conspirators (Jamieson 2011).

The second topic concerns the idea that a so-called Deep State, “a group of unelected government and military officials [...] secretly manipulate or direct national policy” (Hellinger 2019: 221). This assumption cannot be dismissed as completely false, since powerful groups (e.g. intelligence or military services) do operate within national governments with often unknown methods and goals. Accordingly, the Deep State can be understood as “an opaque realm of political power” giving rise to both conspiracies – when someone actually develops secret plans to carry out illegal or harmful manoeuvres – and conspiracy theories (Hellinger 2019: 224), with the latter being considered in the present analysis.

The third topic relates to Big Pharma, seen as the association of powerful pharmaceutical companies with health policy regulators, public health organisations, politicians and often medical scientists and physicians, working against the public interest to increase their own wealth and power (Blaskiewicz 2013: 259). While there have been grounds for accusing the drug industry to prioritise profit over ethical conduct (see Davies 2013 and Ferner 2005 about the UK) and scientific misconduct has been documented in the area of medical experimentation (Lefor 2005 and Petryna 2007), conspiracy theories have also emerged, supported, for example, by antivaccination movements (Oliver and Wood 2018: 154), AIDS denial (Byford 2011: 72) and the idea that pharmaceutical companies create and spread diseases (Hellinger 2019: 15).

4.2 Sources

This chapter focuses on Breitbart News and Infowars, two popular news websites within the populist-nationalist US media landscape, also described as hyperpartisan (Rae 2020). Hyperpartisan media totally or partly identify with the alt-right ideology, rejecting mainstream politics and media, and have relied on digital platforms and social media to extend their reach. They can be characterised as openly ideological, politically biased and transgressive in style, adopting sensationalist and emotional tones combined with an anti-establishment, us-versus-them logic, which emphasises conflict and aggressiveness towards those who hold different opinions. They often do so at the expense of (i.e. manipulating) facts, and consequently raise concerns about political polarisation, radicalisation and disinformation, spread, among other things, by endorsing conspiracy theories (Rae 2020).

Breitbart has been identified as one of the most influential hyperpartisan websites in and outside the US (Heft et al. 2020). Traffic data from Similarweb¹ show that Breitbart attracted an average of 54.2m monthly visits in the first trimester of 2021, ranking 354th among the most visited websites in the US and 1,557th globally in March 2021. Moreover, it currently has 1.4m followers on Twitter, 5.1m followers on its Facebook page and 346,000 subscribers on YouTube. Breitbart openly holds far-right political views and has been a strong supporter of Donald Trump during his 2016–2020 US presidency (Rae 2020: 6). It provides coverage on a range of topics including politics, sport and technology from different locations within and outside the US (Rae 2020: 11). Breitbart has been trying to make its extremism more mainstream, adopting “the practices of newsrooms” (Rae 2020: 2) – like providing contact and staff information – to identify as a professional journalism enterprise (Heft et al. 2020: 17). It partly relies on advertising revenues (Heft et al. 2020: 16) but also has an online store where it sells its own merchandise.² Alt-right websites have been found to attract audiences mainly consisting of white middle-aged working-class men (Rae 2020: 5), which can be assumed to apply to Breitbart too.

The other source is the Infowars website, which features articles, merchandise, video and radio content centred around the persona of founder and head Alex Jones. The website promotes “a counter-hegemonic mix of conspiracy theories and populist-nationalist political views [...] economic predictions, pseudo-science-meets-popular-culture fantasy” (Van den Bulck and Hyzen 2020: 42). Jones and Trump endorsed each other during the latter’s presidential

1. <https://www.similarweb.com/website/breitbart.com/>. Last accessed 30/04/2021.

2. <https://store.breitbart.com/>. Last accessed 30/04/2021.

campaign, reinforcing Infowars's stance as a far-right conservative website. At the height of its popularity (2017–18), Infowars had 20m monthly visits, 2m weekly listeners and a strong social media presence, with up to 1.3b views to his YouTube channel (Van den Bulck and Hyzen 2020: 43). Following defamation lawsuits filed against Jones after his outrageous statements on the Sandy Hook shooting,³ big platforms such as Facebook, YouTube and Twitter banned him in 2018 (Williamson and Steel 2018). While he lost part of his public as a consequence of that, he managed to monetise his position as a victim of the establishment, reinforced his presence on other platforms and kept the business going: Similarweb⁴ estimates an average of 10.2m monthly visits to Infowars in the first trimester of 2021, making it the 2,766th most visited US website and the 10,330th worldwide in March 2021. Since 2013, its revenues have come primarily from its online shop, where Jones monetises the fears he spreads by selling “a grab-bag of health-enhancement and survivalist products” (Williamson and Steel 2018). Van del Bulck and Hyzen (2020: 52) report that Infowars attracts a “fractured audience” of conspiracists, alt-right followers, libertarians, misogynist and men's rights activists, preppers (people anticipating and making preparations for end-of-the-world scenarios) and individuals who feel abandoned by politics and society, but also people who enjoy making fun of Jones's performances.

4.3 Article collection

The search functions of the two websites were used to retrieve relevant articles, typing “Deep State”, “Big Pharma” and “Climate change hoax”, “Climate hoax” or “Global warming hoax” as search words for the three topics respectively. One article for each topic and each source was selected, following a criterion of relevance based on the priority attributed by the search function combined with the researcher's own judgement; six articles were eventually collected (see Table 1).

3. In one of his most infamous acts, Jones spread false reports that the 2012 Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting in Newtown, Connecticut – which left 28 people dead and 2 injured – was a hoax (for a discussion of conspiracy theories related to the Sandy Hook massacre, see Mason in this volume). While some legal proceedings are still ongoing at the time of writing this chapter, he lost several lawsuits, and his appeals were denied.

4. <https://www.similarweb.com/website/infowars.com/>. Last accessed 30/04/2021.

Table 1. Analysed texts

Topic	Title	Short title throughout the chapter	Byline	Publication date	Source website	No. of word tokens
Climate Change denial	Delingpole: Study Disputes That Earth Is in a 'Climate Emergency'	Delingpole	James Delingpole	07/02/2021	Breitbart	951
Climate Change denial	Climate Change Policy Isn't Worth Its High Cost	Policy	Lipton Matthews	07/10/2020	InfoWars – reproduced from Mises.org	1,519
Deep State	Matt Whitaker: Deep State Wins if Good People Don't Go into Government	Whitaker	Robert Kraychik	21/05/2020	Breitbart	427
Deep State	Don't Like Big Tech Censorship? Blame the Deep State Money Manipulators	Manipulators	Charles Goyette	19/01/2021	InfoWars – reproduced from LewRockwell.com	791
Big Pharma	Pharmaceutical Companies to Infect Volunteers with Coronavirus for \$ 4,500	PharmComp	Thomas D. Williams	08/03/2020	Breitbart	398
Big Pharma	Vaccine Whistleblower Found Dead After Saying She'd Never Commit Suicide	Whistleblower	Unspecified	10/12/2020	InfoWars	303
Total tokens						4,389

For the purposes of this research, relevance to the topic does not entail explicit reference to a conspiracy theory. While Whitaker, Whistleblower and Manipulators clearly mention secret plots by a powerful group against the population, the remaining articles strongly imply conspiracies, although they do not explicitly mention them. For example, PharmComp refers to challenge trials⁵ as deliberate infections by pharmaceutical firms; Policy hints at censorship against people expressing non-mainstream ideas about climate change, blaming it on “antihumanism and [...] desire for control”; Delingpole harshly criticises mainstream ideas on climate change, which allegedly promote expensive and damaging global measures, even associated on one occasion to the Great Reset conspiracy theory (Slobodian 2020). As shown in Table 1, two articles published on Infowars also appear (with slight differences) on other websites: they were maintained because they appeared on Infowars and align with its ideology.

5. Method of analysis

Once the articles were collected, an initial inspection was carried out to identify and categorise references to conspiracy theory supporters and opponents as well as to actors, here called neutral, that were neither of the two. This tripartite classification cannot reflect the complexity and variety of possible attitudes, but it was considered appropriate to explore conspiracy theory-endorsement as a group identity issue. Conspiracy theory supporters include active supporters spreading the conspiracy theory and people represented as explicitly or implicitly holding conspiracy theory-supporting views – in other words, all those who can be considered as members of conspiracy theorists’ in-group. Conspiracy theory opponents include both conspirators and actors who do not believe or spread conspiracy theory-supporting ideas (e.g. mainstream media), who can be regarded as the out-group.

Drawing on Koller’s (2012) approach, the small dataset was first explored through a quantitative inspection, whose aim was to produce a preliminary overview of the main lexical choices made in the texts to refer to the above-mentioned categories of actors. Word frequency lists were therefore produced for each article with the software AntConc (Anthony 2018), and items referring to conspiracy theory supporters and opponents appearing among the 50 most frequent items

5. In human challenge trials, volunteers are deliberately infected with a pathogen to study its characteristics and possibly the efficacy of treatments or prevention measures. See <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/worlds-first-coronavirus-human-challenge-study-receives-ethics-approval-in-the-uk> (last accessed 30/04/2021) about UK COVID-19 human challenge trials.

in each article were considered, to find out which actors were most frequently mentioned.⁶

Subsequently, qualitative analysis was performed. The central linguistic parameter considered among those described by Koller (2012) is social actor (SA) representation, where CIs are regarded as groups of SAs. SA representation is useful to uncover beliefs, knowledge expectations about SA groups, as well as attitudes and emotions conveyed towards them. Therefore, after categorising every explicit reference to SAs as conspiracy theory-endorsing, conspiracy theory-rejecting or neutral, all instances of SAs falling within the first two categories were classified following van Leeuwen's (1996) system, with a focus on conspiracy theory supporters. Both reference to groups and individuals were considered, since they both contribute to construe conspiracy theory supporters' CIs. A summary of the SA representation categories emerging from the analysed texts is provided in Figure 1.⁷

This classification was adopted as the main analytical approach in this chapter, and was carried out systematically through the whole dataset. SA representations that were particularly frequent or that emerged as prominent from a close reading of each text were then analysed in their co-text. At that point, aspects pertaining to other parameters were examined. One is evaluation, assessed through categories provided by Martin and White (2005), which highlights the qualities and judgments associated with CIs.⁸ Interdiscursivity, that is the reference to other discourses and genres besides those of the analysed texts (Koller 2012: 25), was also explored. Finally, metaphoric expressions used to refer to SAs were identified and analysed to understand how CIs had been conceptualised (Koller 2012: 25). Results are summarised through relevant examples and discussed in Section 6.2.

6. While it can be useful to obtain a general understanding of the lexical features of the analysed texts, this quantitative analysis is not aimed at any statistically significant conclusion; its results complement the subsequent qualitative findings, but they are not intended here to provide generalising information on CIs in conspiracy theory communication at large.

7. For a full explanation with definitions and examples, see Van Leeuwen (1996). N.B. Not all the classification categories described by van Leeuwen were found in the analysed texts: the map only contains those which were actually applied.

8. In his account of SA representation, van Leeuwen also included evaluative practices, which he grouped under the term 'appraisal', where SAs "are referred to in terms which evaluate them, as good or bad, loved or hated, admired or pitied" (van Leeuwen 1996: 18). The present study relies on Martin and White's work (2005) because of the more fine-grained framework it provides, as also suggested by Koller (2012: 25).

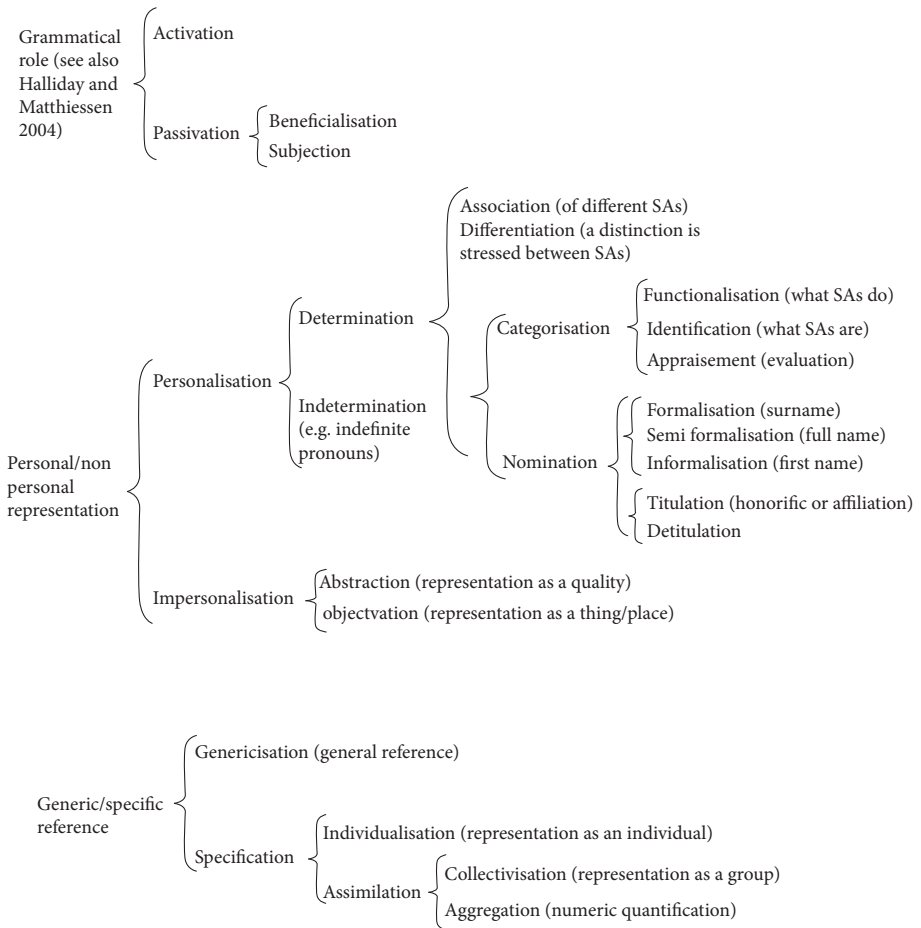


Figure 1. SA representation categories, adapted from van Leeuwen (1996)

6. Results and discussion

6.1 Preliminary quantitative analysis

The quantitative analysis concerned frequently mentioned actors appearing in the analysed texts. Findings regarding conspiracy theory supporters and opponents are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Actors appearing among the 50 most frequent words in each text (relative frequency per 1,000 words is provided in brackets)

Article (short title)	Topic	Source	Most frequent conspiracy theory supporters	Most frequent conspiracy theory opponents
Delingpole	Climate change	Breitbart	Goklany (8.41), study (6.31); he [Goklany] (4.21) report (4.21)	claims (5.26), Pope (4.21)
Policy	Climate change	InfoWars	we [readers and author/ author] (5.92)	study (2.63)
Whitaker	Deep State	Breitbart	Whitaker (25.76), Trump (11.71), president (9.37), we [readers and author], (9.37), good [attribute of people] (7.03), attorney (4.68), Donald (4.68), he [Whitaker], Kavanaugh (4.68)	government (16.39), Deep (11.71), State (11.71), media (9.37), left (7.03)
Manipulators	Deep State	InfoWars	Stockman (3.79)	State (15.17), Deep (12.64), they (11.38) [7 out of 9 occurrences refer to manipulators or big tech, 2 occurrences refer to people who will be damaged by economic crises], Big (7.59), Tech (7.59), business (5.06)
PharmComp	Big Pharma	Breitbart	–	companies (7.54), firms (7.54), Hatchett (7.54), pharmaceutical (7.54), CEPI (5.03), Hvivo (5.03)
Whistleblower	Big Pharma	InfoWars	Vaughan (29.70), she [Vaughan] (16.50), Brandy (13.20), statement [Vaughan’s] (13.20)	Pharma (13.20), Big (9.90), pharmaceutical (6.60)

In articles dealing with climate change denial, frequently mentioned denialists include “Goklany” – the surname of a denialist scientist – and scientific outputs (“study” and “report”) mentioned to support climate denialism. “We” refers to either the author alone or to the author and readers; in the latter case, it points to an inclusion of the audience within the denialist in-group. Frequently mentioned conspiracy theory opponents include environmentalists’ “claims” – a noun which emphasises partisanship rather than factual argumentation – and the Pope, who is here criticised for voicing concern over environmental issues.

Deep State articles mention several US political actors as supporters.⁹ In these texts, the main difference between frequently mentioned conspiracy theory supporters and opponents is that the former are mostly referred to as individuals or actual “people”, positively evaluated with “good”, or in-grouped through the pronoun “we”, which includes author and readers; opponents are mostly referred to as non-human entities, or out-grouped through the pronoun “they”. Identification with conspiracy theory supporters might therefore be favoured by associating the in-group to humanity as opposed to a dehumanised elite.

Big Pharma articles frequently feature organisations and companies among conspiracy theory opponents, except for “Hatchett”, the CEO of the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (“CEPI”, also among the most frequent actors in PharmComp), a global partnership between public and private organisations whose mission is to advance the development and accessibility of vaccines against several diseases.¹⁰ No frequently mentioned conspiracy theory supporters appear in PharmComp, suggesting that the article might strengthen in-group representation by focusing on the out-group. On the other hand, one individual conspiracy theory-supporting actor is frequently mentioned in Whistleblower: “Vaughan” is the surname of an anti-vaccination activist whose death is allegedly attributed to Big Pharma wanting to silence her. Her figure might therefore be highly relevant to conspiracy theory supporter’s CI.

Frequency is only one possible indicator of the salience of actors and related CIs: quantitative findings are thus integrated by the qualitative analysis described in Section 6.2. Listing and classifying all SAs is not possible for space reasons; consequently, the analysis only features the aspects deemed most relevant to the construction of conspiracy theory-supporting CIs.

6.2 Qualitative analysis

6.2.1 *Articles supporting climate change denial*

Both articles are based on the assumption that most scientists spread false information on the planet’s climate and future. To substantiate this assumption, they make large use of cherry-picked scientific outputs, by either decontextualising and

9. Besides former US President Trump, they are: Matthew Whitaker, a lawyer, lobbyist and politician who served as US Attorney General during the Trump administration; Brett Kavanaugh, an associate Justice of the US Supreme Court, nominated by Trump in 2018; and David Stockman, a politician and former businessman who was the Director of the Office of Management and Budget during Ronald Reagan’s presidency.

10. <https://cepi.net/about/whyweexist/>. Last accessed 30/04/2021.

misinterpreting scientific claims or citing work by scientists who reject the scientific consensus about the human contribution to climate change and its negative consequences on humanity and the planet. Most denialist SAs are therefore represented by scientific sources. These can be individualised and nominated, in some cases even titled (1) and functionalised (1, 2) when indicating specific scientists, regarded as authorities on climate knowledge.

- (1) There is no “climate emergency”, according to a study for the Global Warming Policy Foundation by *independent scientist Dr Indur Goklany*.¹¹ (Delingpole)
- (2) As *professor of atmospheric sciences Anastasios Tsonis* explains: “El Niño Southern Oscillation cycle and its ‘cousins’ do not tell us anything about human contributions to climate change”. (Policy)

On the other hand, authors exploit utterance autonomisation, a specific type of objectivation (van Leeuwen 1996: 34), whereby reference to a specific output rather than to its authors (3,4) is used to make the reference sound more objective, removing human and personal components.

- (3) Technologies that can remove carbon dioxide from the air could have huge implications for future food prices, according to *new research* [...]. (Policy)
- (4) But Goklany’s *report* – Impacts of Climate Change: Perception & Reality – claims there is little if any *evidence* to support the scare narrative. (Delingpole)

Conspiracy theory supporters have active roles, often as Sayers in verbal processes (4, cf. Halliday and Mathiessen 2004: 252–254) or they are encompassed within prepositional phrases introduced by “according to” (3), a structure which projects a verbal process onto its Sayer (Halliday and Mathiessen 2004: 276). On one occasion, Goklany’s actions are rendered metaphorically (5), drawing on what Lakoff and Johnson (1980: 4) identified as the conceptual metaphor ‘arguments are wars or fights’, quite common in English. Here the metaphor contributes to characterise Goklany as stronger than environmental activists: since other in-group members can identify with his views, his superiority is made part of conspiracy theory supporters’ CI; moreover, the belligerent tone of the metaphor fuels polarisation within the debate.

- (5) In his report, *Goklany destroys* many of the green movement’s shibboleths [...]. (Delingpole)

At the same time, these SAs are singled out and distinguished from mainstream scientists through adjectives like “independent” (1) “real” (6) and “actual” (7), which

11. Italics in the examples is the author’s adding and emphasises the linguistic features analysed.

imply that other studies are tied to non-scientific interests and do not qualify as science. Moreover, to stress the importance of the research cited, Policy hyperbolically and metaphorically quantifies it as “a mountain of evidence”.

- (6) Although, [sic] *real analysis* informs us that this gas has some beneficial effects, mainstream pundits persist in misinforming the citizenry. (Policy)
- (7) Maybe it's time the Pope looked at some *actual evidence*... (Delingpole)

Another strategy to legitimise climate change denial involves collectivisation, which makes denialist claims appear as if they were backed by a number of research-related organisations. This includes: mentioning the “Global Warming Policy Foundation” (Delingpole), a denialist organisation which commissioned Goklany's report; naming the scientific journals from which data had been cherry-picked; and referring to the scientists who authored the papers cited while also mentioning their affiliation. As shown in Section 6.1, conspiracy theory supporters' CI is made to appeal to readers through the use of “we”, which may refer to the author (8) or include the audience: in both cases, it invites readers to align with the author's line of reasoning.

- (8) As *we* highlighted earlier, warming is compatible with growing vegetation and ecological diversity [...]. (Policy)
- (9) So far, *we* have deduced that climate change is a normal process with positive implications ranging from improved vegetation to dynamic ecosystems. Now *we* need to establish if CO₂ is causing global warming. (Policy)

Opponents to the denialist-conspiracist view are often genericised (“environmental groups”) and functionalised (“green activists”, “writers”, “mainstream pundits”, “numerous thought leaders”), which seems to be instrumental in constructing them as monolithic and homogeneous crowds. Individual opponents are also major targets of criticism: in (10) World Economic Forum leader Klaus Schwab is associated with another conspiracy theory (see Section 4.3), while activist Greta Thunberg is attributed the metaphorical pseudo-title “Doom Goblin” which expresses a negative judgement (cf. Martin and White 2005: 52) that dehumanises her (goblins are by definition ugly non-human tricksters). Although individuals, these SAs are brought together through association and regarded as prominent representatives of a much larger group.

- (10) The report will make hugely depressing reading for all the prominent environmental activists – from *the Pope* and *Doom Goblin Greta Thunberg* to *the Great Reset's Klaus Schwab* – who have been pushing the “climate emergency” narrative. (Delingpole)

Conspiracy theory opponents are also abstracted in the form of attitudes and actions (“alarmism”, “defeatism”, “the unfortunate portrayal of CO2 as a pollutant”, “the war on carbon dioxide”, “prevailing wisdom”, “the orthodoxy of the school of global warming”, “antihumanism and a desire for control”). This again reinforces a vague, uniform representation of these SAs, sometimes associated with evaluation that exploits the negative connotations of most of these noun phrases. Through abstraction, these SAs are moreover portrayed as uncritical believers of unproven assumptions (see Example (11), “prevailing wisdom”, “the orthodoxy”, “narrative” in Example (10)), as opposed to the conspiracist-denialist independent, evidence-based approach.

- (11) It is an article of faith for the globalist elite and their useful idiots in the media, in politics, in business, and the entertainment that the world is on course for climate disaster which only radical and costly international action can prevent.
(Delingpole)

Overall, conspiracy theory supporters’ CI in these articles is associated with the capability of appreciating real knowledge, purportedly demonstrating intellectual superiority over conspiracy theory opponents. This entitles conspiracy theory supporters to criticise mainstream climate science: their CI is shaped as combative as they strive for intellectual independence. The way these articles validate the knowledge they rely on is an example of interdiscursivity, as the use of reported speech attributed to prominent scientists and the reference to scientific outputs is similar to that found in the public communication of mainstream science. In this sense, objectivation is used to factualise conspiracy theory-supporting knowledge and present it as objective. Interestingly, this finding was only observed in these two articles, which might point to a distinctive feature of conspiracy theories dealing with climate science.

6.2.2 *Articles on the Deep State*

Supporters’ and opponents’ presence was balanced differently between the two Deep State articles: in Whitaker, supporters (37 occurrences) are almost twice (1.85 times) as frequent as opponents (20 occurrences); in Manipulators, supporters (16 occurrences) account for less than one third of the opponents’ occurrences (60). Therefore, while Whitaker mainly constructs its in-group’s CI by referring to the in-group itself, Manipulators mainly constructs the in-group’s CI in contrast to the out-group.

In both articles, prominent conspiracy theory supporters are individualised and nominated in various forms: formalised (“Stockman”), semi-formalised (“Matt Whitaker”), titulated (“Justice Brett Kavanaugh”) and associated, e.g. “my co-author

Bill Haynes¹² and I". In Whitaker, they are partly represented as victims of the Deep State persecution (12), but overall Whitaker's response strategies to the Deep State's attack are foregrounded. He is frequently attributed Sayer roles in verbal processes (being the subject of verbs such as "added", "stated" and "explained"), as an authoritative source of knowledge with first-hand experience of the Deep State's machinations.

- (12) *Whitaker added, "We can't be deterred by what happens to people like Kavanaugh and Trump and myself [...]"*. (Whitaker)

The author of Manipulators attributes himself a role which is similar to Whitaker's for some aspects, in that he and his co-author (whose book the article is meant to promote) repeatedly appear as the subjects of verbs "explain" and "describe". They even feel entitled to rename the Federal Reserve "Deep State money manipulators", stressing their effort to uncover plots that "have been hiding in plain site [sic] for over a hundred years."

In Whitaker, in-grouping is also realised through "we", which includes readers. This is coherent with Whitaker's message as reported by the author of the article, according to which the Deep State acts as an anti-democratic force against American citizens as a whole. This elite-vs-people distinction is reinforced by the use of genericised ("good people", "honorable people", "regular people", "dissidents", "non-leftists"), collectivised ("Americans") and differentiated (13) SAs. "People" is appraised through adjectives indicating positive judgement, specifically social esteem – i.e., conformity to social normality and appropriateness ("regular") and social sanction – i.e., compliance with morality norms ("good", "honorable", cf. Martin and White 2005: 52–53). This contributes to a perception of conspiracy theory supporters' CI as characterised by moral rectitude, meeting receptive readers' need to develop a positive image of the in-group they may subscribe to.

- (13) *Whitaker defined the "deep state" as "left-leaning elitists who think they know better than the people of the United States of America" [...]*. (Whitaker)

Whitaker encloses these genericised SAs within several calls to action (14), where he attributes them Actor roles in material processes (Halliday and Mathiessen 2004: 179) involving political participation. The call to action is realised through

12. Haynes co-authored a book concerning the Deep State together with Goyette, who wrote the Manipulators article to promote the book; Haynes moreover appears as the author of several articles on LewRockwell.com, the website from which Breitbart took and republished Manipulators (<https://www.lewrockwell.com/author/bill-haynes/?pctype=article>. Last accessed 11/05/2022).

obligation modals “have to” and “must”, presenting good people’s participation as objectively necessary rather than as pertaining to Whitaker’s opinions.

- (14) “Good people have to raise their hand and volunteer to participate [in government],” advised Whitaker. (Whitaker)

In Manipulators, conspiracy theory supporters are abstracted as values (“free speech”, “free political speech”), but also as an imminent change (15) which they will bring about by subverting existing conspiracies. The vagueness of these expressions, open to different interpretations, potentially increases the likelihood of readers aligning with the conspiracy theory-supporting CI.

- (15) That is why we describe events that are now beginning to unfold as The Last Gold Rush... Ever! It is about financial events that occur at the crossroads of history. When *a new global reality* topples an old financial order. (Manipulators)

According to the author of Manipulators, those who subscribe to his view of the US financial situation will lead and take advantage of the imminent change; maintaining a certain vagueness through indetermination, he represents them as a smart minority (16). Their awareness will lead them to success (17), which contributes to the self-glorification of conspiracy theory supporters’ CI. Thus, while both articles appeal to the superiority – in terms of morality and capacity – of the in-groups with respect to the out-groups, Whitaker extends supporters’ CI to potentially include a wide public, while Manipulators refers to a restricted elite, which readers are invited to join by supporting the conspiracy theory.

- (16) *Few* have also detected the hand of The Deep State Money Manipulators in Big Tech’s arrogance [...]. (Manipulators)
- (17) *Some, the prepared few*, will prosper [...]. (Manipulators)

Conspiracy theory opponents are never individualised. They can be genericised and classified according to their ideological stance (“left-leaning elitists”) or functionalised and associated (“both elected and appointed officials, as well as bureaucrats” in Whitaker; or “the big internet censors, de-platformers, information monopolists, and enemies of free speech” in Manipulators). They are also collectivised (“Deep State Money Manipulators”, “Big Tech”). Referring to the out-group as elitist and powerful consortiums enhances the distance between them and individual readers, potentially favouring their identification as conspiracy theory supporters.

Distance is also emphasised by the objectivation of conspiracy theory opponents (e.g., “widespread news media” in Whitaker; “the monetary system”, “the banking cartel” in Manipulators) and their abstraction, especially in Manipulators. There, in contrast with the positive evaluation attached to conspiracy theory supporters (even

abstracted ones), abstracted opponents are characterised by negative moral evaluation (e.g. “Big Tech censorship”, “the corruption of finance”, “a pervasive culture of self-indulgence”). This negative judgement is also rendered through metaphorical language, for instance: “the mother-of-all-speculative bubbles”, which exploits economic terminology; the “unimagined financial pain” resulting from the financial elite’s decisions; (18) and (19), which draw on various source domains to create a scenario characterised by moral decay which calls for radical change.

- (18) As we explain, The Deep State Money Manipulators [...] *have pumped* unimaginable wealth to crony banks [...]. (Manipulators)
- (19) The trillions of dollars the Money Manipulators *have been stovepiped* to Wall Street and Silicon Valley *have unshackled* “too rich millennials and thirty-something brats who are *intoxicated* by unearned wealth,” writes Stockman in his newsletter Contra Corner. *The flood* of Deep State made-up money has freed Big Tech “from the job of profit maximization to indulge in *political virtue-signaling and moral smuggling*.” (Manipulators)

On the one hand, the message of the article is represented as based on rational and factual intellectual resources, namely financial expertise and the ability to spot conspiracies hiding in plain sight. On the other hand, it envisages a revolutionary, quasi-apocalyptic scenario, whereby a *status quo* pervaded by immorality is going to be overthrown by new actors leading to a new system. No alternatives to this outcome are contemplated: conspirators will eventually give up their power to assume a more subaltern role, as the metaphor in (20) shows. Conspiracy theory supporters’ CI is associated with awareness of this situation and ultimately with the capacity to eventually take over.

- (20) When the bubble pops, the masters of the tech universe *will [...] have to put out the welcome mat* for new business [...]. (Manipulators)

Overall, articles about the Deep State construct supporters’ CI by mentioning prominent actors (Whitaker, the author Goyette) with whom supporters have the opportunity to sympathise and identify, whom they can take as an example and learn from, as shown by their participant roles, which portray them as authoritative and knowledgeable. Supporters’ CI is also rendered as a cohesive group through genericisation and collectivisation in Whitaker and Manipulators respectively. In the former case, the CI encompasses a large group of people which are compared to a conspiring elite, following the typical populist and alt-right rhetoric of ‘the elite vs. the people’. In the latter case, the CI encompasses a more circumscribed group of smart people who are aware of the conspiracy and are compared both to conspirators and to the wider, unaware public. Supporters’ CI is characterised by

moral and intellectual superiority, which sometimes comes at the cost of vexation and oppression on the part of the conspirators. Such superiority, it is contended, should be used to overthrow the Deep State. In the case of Manipulators, this overthrowing is explicitly envisioned, attributing supporters the champion's role, which matches Infowars's penchant for survivalism in the face of apocalyptic events.

6.2.3 *Articles on Big Pharma*

As with articles on the Deep State, there is a difference between the two Big Pharma articles in how they balance conspiracy theory supporters' and opponents' presence. In PharmComp, the only explicit mention of conspiracy theory-supporting SAs is the byline – "Thomas William, Ph.D". While it might not be the focal centre of the text, it is nonetheless telling of the strategies employed by the author and Breitbart to legitimise their content. The PhD title conveys authority and knowledge regardless of its disciplinary field, which might not coincide with the topic being covered (Williams's doctorate is in theology).¹³ No other conspiracy theory supporter is mentioned in the text, whereas conspiracy theory opponents appear much more frequently, together with the volunteers taking part in the challenge trials on which the article reports. Whistleblower adopts a different approach, in that it contains 24 references to Vaughan (the whistleblower, see Section 6.1), three times more than conspiracy theory opponents (8 occurrences), thus focusing on Vaughan's figure and her fight against Big Pharma to construct conspiracy theory supporters' CI.

Vaughan is mainly formalised ("Vaughan") or semi-formalised ("Brandy Vaughan"), but also functionalised ("vaccine whistleblower", "former pharmaceutical insider", "ex-Merck sales executive", "a vocal critic of BIG Pharma") and positively evaluated ("a renowned whistleblower"). Some statements by Vaughan, where she speaks in the first person singular, are also reported. She is activated as a Sayer in verbal processes (e.g. "describing", "had made it clear", "said", "exposed"), Actor in Verbal processes (e.g. "Vaughan had created LearnTheRisk.org to educate people") and Carrier in possessive relational processes (e.g. "I have a huge mission", see Halliday and Mathiessen 2004: 245). She is subjected only when her death is mentioned (21).

- (21) A renowned whistleblower of Big Pharma and vaccines *has been found dead* roughly a year after she released a public statement saying she'd never commit suicide. (Whistleblower)

13. <https://www.thomasdwilliams.com/about-me>. Last accessed 27/04/2021.

This representation constructs her as a heroic, almost martyr-like figure, who fought for a good cause and fell victim to the powerful groups she criticised. This is implied by the headline (see Table 1), where Vaughan's statement that she would never kill herself is deemed sufficient to disprove all death causes except murder. Murder is moreover openly mentioned in a statement by Vaughan, reported from another website (22).

- (22) [...] healthnutnews.com is reporting Vaughan made it clear that if anything happened to her it would most likely be **homicide**. (Whistleblower)

SA victimisation is useful in constructing Big Pharma as evil oppressors. This can also be seen in PharmComp, where the victimised actors are the volunteers (here considered neutral SAs) taking part in challenge trials. Referred to as "volunteers", "the paid volunteers", "the infected patients", "up to 24 people" and metaphorically "human guinea pigs" (23), they are predominantly subjected, with Goal or Beneficiary participant roles in material processes expressed through verbs "infect" and "pay" (see the headline in Table 1).

- (23) Pharmaceutical companies expect to soon begin *paying* "human guinea pigs" £ 3,500 (upwards of \$ 4,500) to *be infected* with the coronavirus in a race to discover a vaccine for the disease, The Times reports. (PharmComp)

These lexical choices evoke the idea of corruption and deceit, whereby companies seem to be deliberately damaging people in exchange for money. The article thus exploits the – undeniable – ethical issues entailed in these trials to reinforce a view of research and pharmaceutical organisations as pursuing their own interests – it is also said that a COVID-19 vaccine would imply "enormous" profits for them – at the expense of common people's safety. Indeed, there is no mention of the involved organisations' long experience of conducting challenge trials, nor of the safety measures adopted in these practices.

In Big Pharma articles, conspiracy theory opponents are specifically conspirators. They are genericised ("pharmaceutical companies", "vaccines and pharma drugs"), aggregated and associated ("more than 20 firms and public sector organizations"), objectivised ("pharmaceutical products", "vaccines and unnecessary medical treatments", "the intimidation attacks") and collectivised as powerful entities ("Big Pharma") as opposed to conspiracy theory supporters' human, honest and possibly heroic CI. Negative appraisal (or valuation, Martin and White 2004: 56) of the objectivised actors emerges from the adjective "unnecessary", while negative judgement is invoked through "intimidation attacks" and "homicide".

The only individualised reference of a conspiracy theory opponent is "the CEO of CEPI (see Section 5.1), Richard Hatchett", here semi-formalised and

functionalised. Elsewhere in the article, he is also formalised (“Hatchett”) and titulated (“Mr. Hatchett”). He is always attributed Sayer roles, and his statements on the pandemic and the necessity of investing in vaccine development are reported without comments nor appraisal. This appears to be in contrast with the insinuations in the rest of the article; however, it might serve mitigating functions so as to fit Breitbart’s efforts towards their affirmation as a professional journalism platform (see Section 4.2).

All in all, Big Pharma articles construct conspiracy theory supporters’ CI by either providing a notable example (Whistleblower) or entirely through the representation of opponents (PharmComp). In the former case, supporters are expected to feel sympathetic with the whistleblower and take her as a positive example. The determination to face conspirators’ oppression therefore emerges as a feature of this CI, reinforced by the representation of conspiracy theory opponents. Despite dealing with science-related topics, these texts do not use scientific evidence to back their claims, as the climate change articles do. Rather, they voice supporters’ deep distrust of medical science as embodied by Big Pharma. Moreover, their CI is imbued with moral superiority, which is constructed in contrast with conspirators’ dishonest and oppressive behaviours.

7. Conclusion

In this chapter the discursive construction of conspiracy theory supporters’ CIs is analysed in six articles promoting three types of conspiracy theory-related content, through a preliminary quantitative and subsequent qualitative analysis based on linguistic parameters suggested by Koller (2012). Overall, a diversity of strategies emerges in the representation of these identities; one possible reason for this is the fact that analysing such a small dataset makes it difficult to detect overarching patterns. On the other hand, this diversity might point to the flexibility and variability of CIs and corresponding representations across and within conspiracy theories.

Some shared elements were however observed. One is the superiority of conspiracy theory supporters’ CI with respect to opponents, in line with previous research (see Section 2), which highlights the acute need of these groups – who may feel abandoned by institutions and the rest of society – to nurture a feeling of superiority upon the outgroup by positively evaluating themselves and harshly criticising opponents. The present study has identified two main types of superiority – moral and intellectual – which appeared either individually or in combination.

Another common feature observed was the use of objectivation, abstraction, genericisation and collectivisation with differing purposes according to whether they were applied to the in-group or the out-group. Often, they portray conspiracy

theory opponents in a depersonalising and/or dehumanising way, as a homogeneous entity rather than a group of individuals. In contrast, conspiracy theory supporters are mostly individualised, which makes individuality and humanity essential to their CIs. In the cases when they are collectivised and genericised, they are positively evaluated for their moral stature and/or intellectual capacity. When abstracted, they are represented as positive moral values (e.g. free speech), in line with their general representation.

These articles overall claim superior fact-based knowledge to be essential to conspiracy theory supporters' CIs, which may be instrumental in pushing these narratives and identities towards the news mainstream, besides fuelling the in-group's self-esteem. At the same time, the rejection of consensus and mainstream reasoning reflects the hyperpartisanship of the sources here considered, and draws these CIs closer the realm of Post-Truth (McIntyre 2018), whereby effective and shared scientific explanations are subjected to opinion and personal or group interests.

The present study can only offer a very narrow-scoped insight into the way conspiracy theory supporters might perceive and represent themselves as groups. Nevertheless, it could provide a starting point for further, more wide-ranging analysis based on more data. Moreover, it highlights the need for an identity-based discussion of the polarisation phenomena and the difficulties hindering communication between conspiracy theory-supporters and conspiracy theory opponents. In these contexts, attention should be paid not only to the actual conspiracy theories, their outlandish claims or the information manipulation. Rather, the nature and features of the involved CIs need to be considered. How these contribute to putting forward certain views and how they may favour conspiracy theory acceptance among different audiences – including undecided people – might be explored by further research, so as to better understand how these discursive practices ultimately justify peoples' belief in false claims.

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PART V

**Political and international dimensions
of conspiracy theories**

Anti-Sorosism

Reviving the “Jewish world conspiracy”

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This chapter presents a Discourse-Historical Analysis (DHA) of the antisemitic conspiracy theory at the heart of ‘anti-Sorosism’. Anti-Sorosism is a term used to label the global campaign against George Soros, a Jewish American philanthropist of Hungarian origin, launched by extreme-right activists (see Wodak 2020). We argue that anti-Sorosism is a modern synecdoche of the antisemitic ‘Jewish world conspiracy’. In addition to extreme-right individuals and organizations, several mainstream right-wing politicians have blamed George Soros for many complex global and local phenomena such as migration, the political decisions of the EU, the COVID pandemic, and so forth. Indeed, the Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán has instrumentalized Soros time and again as a *Feindbild* [enemy image] when campaigning against the rules and regulations of the European Union as well as when justifying and legitimizing his restrictive immigration policies.

In this chapter, we will first briefly trace the origins of this archetypical conspiracy theory throughout the 19th and 20th centuries up to the present. The chapter then turns to a case study examining posters produced by Hungary’s governing party Fidesz. Following a summary of the DHA and contextualization of the politics of Fidesz, and its leader Viktor Orbán, we then proceed to the multimodal discourse analysis of a series of posters produced and displayed in Hungary. We conclude by arguing that conspiracy theories help to simplify complex issues and to provide clearly separated Manichean divisions of the ‘innocent’ and of those ‘to blame’. In doing so, they help achieve a strategic political function for the Orbán government.

Keywords: Critical Discourse Studies, Discourse Historical Analysis, multimodality, antisemitism, anti-Sorosism, Hungary

1. Introduction

In August 2020, John was taking an evening walk near his home in Nottingham, and he happened upon a piece of graffiti, recently painted on a fence:



Figure 1. Antisemitic Graffiti, Nottingham (2020)

The piece shows the number 666 within three six-pointed stars, positioned over the words 'Men of Steal'. Though very rudimentary in execution, the combination of words and symbols, and the homophonic pun in particular, suggest that this was not an impromptu act of vandalism but a planned action. The graffiti was reported to Nottingham Police Constabulary, who recorded it as a hate crime.

The six-pointed star – the Star of David, or Magen David – is a generally recognized symbol of modern Jewish identity and Judaism. The vandal sprayed three stars on the fence in order to include a numerical six within each, giving 666, the number of the Beast – the Devil. This possibly references the medieval antisemitic belief that Jews were children of the Devil and followers of the Anti-Christ (Trachtenberg 1943), an attitude which draws its theological strength from a misinterpretation of the biblical verse John 8:44. Though some may consider such Christian antisemitism anachronistic, in fact it continues to motivate the most extreme antisemitic violence. For example, Robert Bowers – the terrorist who murdered 11 people at the

Or L'Simcha Synagogue in Pittsburgh, 27 October 2018 – used a twisted summary of the verse, that “Jews are the children of Satan”, on his Gab profile.¹

The slogan underneath the stars needs to be understood contextually and multimodally. The graffiti was painted about a mile away from the Nottingham Liberal Synagogue and, appearing underneath the three Stars of David, we are clearly meant to interpret ‘Men of Steal’ to refer to *Jewish* men. ‘Steal’ (a homophone of steel, and a pun on Superman’s soubriquet ‘the man of steel’) entails criminality in general and the unlawful appropriation of someone else’s property in particular – actions that are predicated as qualities, or characteristics, of Jews. This predication strategy moves beyond associating Jews with acts of theft, whether in a specific or more general sense (e.g. that ‘a Jew stole [x]’ or that ‘Jews steal [things]’). Rather, the construction here elevates the relationship between Jews and theft to that of an essence: Jews are ‘Men of steal’. That is, Jews are here *constituted* by theft (‘of’); they are defined by a *predisposition* to steal, they are by nature ‘greedy’; and, so, expropriating other people’s property is advanced as a *fundamental biological nature* of Jews – the basis of the ‘blood-sucking’ antisemitic falsehood.

These antisemitic ideas are not limited to street level hate speech. In fact, conspiracy theories linking Jews, finance and exploitation are now shared by those in the highest levels of government. They “have dominated elite discourse in many parts of the world” (Uscinski 2019: 1) and are shared by, amongst others, former US President Donald Trump, the Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán and the former Italian minister of interior affairs, Matteo Salvini. Such conspiracies are not only radical simplifications of complex historic and political-economic processes, they are also personifications: the fault lies with (Jewish) people, rather than systems (Byford 2011). In this way, conspiracy theories are particularly “seductive because they frame the complexities of capitalism in personal terms. Instead of examining abstract notions that show that accumulation is functional to capitalism, they generate a personal enemy with a human face who can be challenged” (Wall 2003: 120–121). In this chapter, we examine a specific example of this antisemitic conspiracy theory, focused on the political and economic power that George Soros is assumed to possess.

The antisemitic stereotype of the ‘Jewish Capitalist’ is closely related to three other antisemitic stereotypes: the ‘anti-national’, the ‘intellectual Jew’, and the ‘Jewish Bolshevik’, which has its origins in the Russian civil war. Each of these are what we might refer to as *systematic* antisemitic conspiracy theories. With such systematic conspiracies, “a single conspiratorial entity carries out a wide variety of

1. See: “Jews are the children of Satan” and the danger of taking biblical passages out of context’, 31 October 2018 <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/jews-are-the-children-of-satan-john-8-44-danger-of-taking-biblical-passages-out-of-context/> (accessed 29 January 2021)

activities with the aim of taking control of a country, a region, or even the world” (Evans 2020: 4). Here, Jews are identified as the arch conspiratorial group, using any means to achieve world domination – even a combination of capitalism and communism. While this might seem contradictory at first glance, it turns out to be another manifestation of antisemitism as an ideological syndrome, as a worldview characterized by a combination of contradictory elements, that is, *syncretic antisemitism* (Billig 1978; Richardson 2017, 2018; Stögner and Wodak 2015; Wodak 2018). A second type of conspiracy theory is the *event conspiracy*, in which a particular group is believed to have been responsible for (or ultimate beneficiary of) a single event, such as the JFK conspiracy or the 9/11 terrorist attacks. As Evans (2020: 4) points out, “conspiracies imagined in this case are usually short-term” and relatively self-contained. However, the two variants are also linked, in that “an event conspiracy may be thought of as one expression of a systematic conspiracy” (ibid.).

George Soros, the Jewish American philanthropist of Hungarian origin, is a part-for-whole synecdoche for *both variants* of antisemitic conspiracy theories: he is believed to be behind systematic conspiracies *and* the coordinator of particular events.² At once capitalist and progressive, a “currency speculator who made billions in secret financial transactions [...] a prominent proponent of a democratic ‘open society’ [...] and political fund-raiser for the liberal left” (McLaughlin and Trilupaityte 2012: 432), conspiracy theorists have blamed him for complex global phenomena such as financial destabilization and general patterns of migration, in addition to local and specific crises such as the COVID pandemic. Orbán has instrumentalized Soros time and again as a *Feindbild* – an *enemy image* – when campaigning against the rules and regulations of the European Union as well as when justifying and legitimizing his restrictive immigration policies. In this context, anti-Sorosism is the term used to label the global antisemitic anti-Soros campaign launched by extreme-right activists (Wodak 2020).

In our chapter, we will first briefly trace the origins of this archetypical conspiracy theory throughout the 19th and 20th centuries up to the present. We will briefly discuss some examples showing the rise of Soros-as-*Feindbild*, and its sedimentation as ‘anti-Sorosism’, before offering a more detailed multimodal discourse analysis of posters produced by Orbán’s Fidesz party, as part of an ongoing antisemitic campaign against Soros.

2. George Soros is a Hungarian-born American financial trader, author and philanthropist. In 1973 he established the Soros Fund (later Quantum Endowment Fund), a hedge fund, whose success made him one of the wealthiest men in the world. Soros is known as an influential supporter of liberal social causes, particularly relating to refugees. In 1984, he used some of his profits to create the Open Society Foundation, a philanthropic organization that continues to support democracy and human rights across the world. The Foundation’s initial work focused on then-Communist eastern Europe – including Hungary, where he awarded scholarships for studying abroad, including one to Viktor Orbán to Oxford.

2. History of the ‘Jewish World Conspiracy’

As historical contexts change, ushering in new crises, so the specific dimensions of antisemitic conspiracy theories shift and change. Simonsen (2020: 360) suggests that a shift from religious antisemitism, wherein Jews were considered allies of the Devil, to the modern, political notion of a ‘Jewish world conspiracy’ “can be traced back to the attacks against the French Revolution and the Enlightenment. In 1797, the French Jesuit priest Abbé Barruel published a four-volume book wherein he described the French Revolution as planned and initiated by a conspiracy consisting of the Philosophes, the Freemasons and the Illuminati” (see also Oberhauser 2020).

However, one continuity that exists between premodern/religious and modern antisemitic conspiracy narratives is the idea that the Jews pursue secret aims to the benefit of their own group and to the detriment of others (Heil 2012: 61–63). Across Europe, from around the second half of the 1800s, the uneasy tolerance of Jews changed. In France, perhaps encouraged by the defeat in the Franco-Prussian war, an economic depression and the provocation of the Paris commune, a new anti-Jewish mobilisation developed, exemplified by the so-called *Dreyfus Affair* (Hyman 1989, 2005). The *Rothschild family conspiracy theory* – a myth that a single European Jewish banking family has the power to control world events – also originated in France around this time and was quickly adopted in other countries (Rosensaft 1976). An ‘anti-capitalist’ author called Georges-Marie Dairnvæll produced a pamphlet entitled *Histoire édifiante et curieuse de Rothschild Ier, Roi des Juifs* in which he alleged that Nathan Rothschild knew the outcome of the Battle of Waterloo in advance, and used this information to make a significant profit speculating at the London Stock Exchange.³ Using this vast amassed wealth the Rothschilds were then allegedly able to control world events via controlling international banking and financial institutions, a conspiracy that lives on to this day, despite the significant drop in family fortunes.⁴ In 2018, the French publisher Hachete Livre republished Dairnvæll’s pamphlet and it remains on sale.

In Germany during the Nineteenth Century, antisemitism became more structured, with political parties and associations founded to fight against the supposed ‘Jewish influence’ in German economic and social life (Pulzer 1988). Soon after German unification, writers such as Willhelm Marr denounced Jewish control of

3. The pamphlet is available at: https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=IKVPAAAAcAAJ&hl=en_GB&pg=GBS.PA5 or as a German translation ‘Erbauliche und seltsame Historia von Rothschild I. König der Juden’ here: https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=c69DAAAAcAAJ&hl=en_GB&pg=GBS.PA3 (both accessed 3 February 2021)

4. The richest Rothschild – the banker Baron Benjamin de Rothschild – was ‘only’ the world’s 1,851st richest person, when he died on 15 January 2021. See <https://www.forbes.com/profile/benjamin-de-rothschild/?list=billionaires&sh=1472b4cd6454> (accessed 3 February 2021)

finance and industry, blaming the Berlin stock exchange collapse in 1873 (amongst other things) on Jewish manipulation. In 1879, Marr founded the 'Anti-Semitic League' (so coining the term 'antisemitism') and declared that winning the fight between Jewish and Teutonic 'races' was crucial to the future of the country. He proposed a pogrom, expelling all Jews from the country.

In Austria during the Nineteenth Century, "antisemitism became a pronounced and firmly established aspect of Austrian life" (Rosensaft 1976: 57). Simultaneously, "Vienna was internationally famous for its cultural sophistication. [...]. The Austrian capital had a pronouncedly Jewish character during this period." (ibid.). Vienna had a very diverse Jewish minority: intellectuals, artists, writers, doctors, journalists, on the one hand; bankers and rich industrialists, on the other; and, thirdly, poor Jewish immigrants from the Polish shtetls who fled the many pogroms in Ukraine and Poland (regions which still belonged to the Habsburg Empire until 1918).

Three distinct types of antisemitism could be observed in the period from Austrian fascism in 1934 to the so-called 'Anschluss' to Nazi Germany (12 March 1938): a traditional religious antisemitism drawing on medieval tropes of ritual murder and Jews as killers of Christ; a socio-economic antisemitism directed against so-called 'Jewish influence' (through the Christian Social Party and the well-known mayor of Vienna, Karl Lueger); and a racial antisemitism. The latter was the most dangerous one, launched by Georg Schönerer's pan-Germanic, nativist nationalistic Party. This racist antisemitism was also the source of Hitler's white supremacist murderous Nazi ideology. These three kinds of antisemitism finally all merged into one widely accepted syncretic antisemitism which can be still triggered when deemed politically opportune via the "*Iudeus ex machina*" strategy (Wodak 1989, 2018; Wodak et al. 1990). Modern forms of antisemitism continue to fuse together these different forms – for example, the belief, widespread amongst the far- and extreme-right, that Jews use political and economic power to weaken immigration laws and so encourage miscegenation of 'the white race' (Wodak and Richardson 2013; Richardson 2017).

Opposition to 'alien influence' in British life was a central rallying call of the British radical right from the last decade of the Nineteenth and into the Twentieth Century. 1901 saw the formation of The British Brothers League (BBL), a 'muscular Christian' organization which, for the next 5 years, conducted a very successful agitation against Jewish refugees fleeing pogroms in Russia and Eastern Europe. The Jewish refugees arriving in Britain from Tsarist Russia were escaping the "waves of anti-Jewish violence [that] occurred between 1881–1884, in 1903 and again between 1905–1906" (Simonsen 2020: 360). It was in this context – antisemitic sentiment was canalised, and antisemitic violence was functionalised, in the service of autocratic and reactionary Tsarist political interests – that *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* was produced. *The Protocols* were first published in Russia in 1903, in

a newspaper edited by a far right-journalist and antisemite called Pavel Krushevan (Evans 2020: 23; Langer 2007: 34–5). The main message of *The Protocols* is that a Jewish conspiracy to control the world exists: “That the Jews are working systematically and in secret, with the aim of achieving world power. Economic crises, revolutions, wars, capitalism, socialism, liberalism and democratic and anti-religious ideas are all claimed to be invented by the Jews as a part of this plot” (Simonsen 2020: 361–362).

The Protocols were translated into German and published by Müller von Hausen in January 1920, achieving instant success in the violent post-revolutionary atmosphere of the country at that time (Evans 2020: 25). It was reprinted five times in its first year alone and had gone through 33 editions by 1933 (ibid.). It retains its significance for antisemites even nowadays. The full text of *The Protocols* was included in *Subverted Nation's Basic Training for Revolutionaries* (2009), a book compiled by Adam Austin, a member of American extreme-right ‘Oath Keepers’. That book is specifically intended to incite violence, directing the reader to take up arms and defend US liberty from a conspiracy of powerful Jews: “Now is the time where you either buck up and get with the program, or you are not one of us. You are either with your people and working for their freedoms; or you are with the tyrants and oppressors [...] This enemy has tormented mankind for thousands of years, and if you refuse to face them, you condemn yourself and your people to whatever fate they chose” (74).

Simonsen (2020: 364) points out that “antisemitism as a legacy still influences conspiracy literature, even when the writers seek to distance themselves from anti-Jewish sentiments”. This influence is particularly marked when viewing conspiracies regarding financial or political control (Richardson 2017). As stated in our introduction, even systemic conspiracy theories are personalised: the fault lies, not with structures but with particular (Jewish) people: it is “The association of Jews and money [that] fuels related pernicious myths about Jews’ disproportionate political control” (Lockwood 2020: 265). In the case of anti-Sorosism, this is compressed still further: the fault lies not with Jews (plural) but with George Soros specifically.

3. Functions of antisemitic *Feindbilder*

Oppenheimer (2006: 271) defines the ‘Jewish world conspiracy’ as a “specific form of a negative stereotype”, whereas Volkan (2013: 216) perceives such conspiracies as “reservoirs of permanent externalization”, implying that every form of guilt or any problem could continuously be shifted/externalized towards an outsider – in our case, Jews. In the same way, Zamperini et al. (2012: 330) maintain – while defining the functions and meanings of *Feindbilder* from a purely socio-psychological

perspective – that “the collective violence towards the hostile group is made possible and justified through specific psychological delegitimization processes”, i.e., through derogatory and exclusionary rhetoric, legitimized *inter alia* by appealing to the common-sense *topoi* mentioned above (e.g., Pörksen 2005). In sum, the following important functions (and stages of the discursive construction) of *Feindbilder* could be distinguished (see Table 1):

Table 1. Stages, functions and means of the discursive construction of *Feindbilder* (adapted from Wodak 2021)

– Targeting a specific minority group as enemies/outsiders (discursive strategies of <i>nomination</i> and <i>predication</i> ; <i>Manichean division</i> of ‘us’ and ‘them’)
– Defining ‘the enemy’ by means of <i>propaganda</i> as allegedly cohesive group via <i>metonymies</i> and <i>metaphors</i> , fallacies (<i>hasty generalizations</i> , <i>straw man</i> , <i>argumentum ad exemplum</i> , <i>singularization</i> , etc.)
– Shifting blame by discursive strategies of <i>externalization</i> , <i>victim-perpetrator reversal</i>
– Employing means of <i>hate-incitement</i> (abuse, appeals to violence)
– Constructing conspiracy theories (<i>ideologies/narratives</i>)
– Institutionalizing measures of <i>identification</i> , <i>isolation</i> , and <i>exclusion</i> , i.e., the <i>racialization of space</i>
– Popularizing indifference by appealing to <i>common sense (topoi)</i> and discursive strategies of <i>justification/legitimation</i>

The features and political functions of antisemitic *Feindbilder* are summarized by drawing on previous research on the subject (e.g. detailed discourse-historical analysis of the so-called “Waldheim-Affair” 1986 [Wodak et al. 1990] and the discursive construction of Tal Silberstein, an Israeli spin-doctor advising the social-democratic Party in the Austrian national election 2017, as symbol of all evil [Wodak 2021]) as well as on the sociopsychological and historical theoretical approaches mentioned above (see also Byford 2011; Peham 2021). Obviously, not every feature and function can be detected or is politically instrumentalized in every case of an antisemitic conspiracy theory.

3.1 The emergence of a *Feindbild* – anti-Sorosism

On the radical right, Soros has been adopted as an antisemitic synecdoche – a part-for-whole argument, where a single case is presented as emblematic of a wider pattern (or, in this case, a conspiracy). Soros is taken as the exemplar of a powerful Jewish ‘globalist’, that is someone who is: (1) simultaneously a capitalist and socialist; (2) enriched through finance capitalism (in Nazi terminology, ‘degenerate’ capitalism); (3) gives financial support to liberal causes and, 4) is a supporter of ‘open societies’ (which many on the right interpret to mean ‘open borders’, leading to ‘race-mixing’).

Prior to our multimodal analysis, below, we briefly summarise a few early European examples of ‘Soros as arch Jewish conspirator’, to demonstrate the longevity and regularity of the conspiracy theory.⁵ In 1992, for example, Istvan Csurka, the vice-president of the Democratic Forum, which was at the time the largest party in Hungary’s coalition government, wrote a newspaper article in which he claimed Hungarian Jews were involved in a worldwide conspiracy against Hungary. This claim was then repeated by Gyula Zacsek, also a Democratic Forum MP, adding that “Gyorgy Soros” was part of the same plot (*Searchlight Magazine*, November 1992, 22).

In 1997, on the anniversary of the November Pogrom (9 November), 120 members of the Swedish neo-Nazi organisation, the National Socialist Front, marched through Stockholm in uniform to demonstrate against “Jewish control of the media” (*Searchlight Magazine*, December 1997, 21). After a brief fight with anti-fascist counterdemonstrators, the NSF marched to the Central railway station, where they held a 15-minute public meeting. Bjorn Bjorkqvist – the then-chief of propaganda – promised a war on “international monopoly capitalism” and “the Jewish world order of finance magnates”, citing George Soros as an example (*ibid.*).

On 14 November 2015 a meeting was held at a London hotel, arranged by London Forum, a ‘new right’ discussion group. The purpose of the meeting was to raise funds for Horst Mahler, the neo-Nazi and Holocaust denier, who was then in jail. In addition to around 70 British far- and extreme-right activists, several members of the extreme-right German National Democratic Party (NPD; German: *Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands*) also attended (*Searchlight Magazine*, Winter 2015–16). The NPD speaker at the fundraiser was Karl Richter, who was a Munich city councillor and a European parliamentary aide to the MEP Udo Voigt. During his speech, Richter claimed:

mass immigration from the Middle East to Central Europe is anything but an accident. On the contrary the mass immigration fits exactly into a cold-blooded calculation. In Greece there were found small pocket booklets in the luggage of so-called refugees with all necessary information about the best travel routes to Germany [...] You want to know who did the printing of those practical booklets and who paid the money for distributing them to the refugees, you are confronted in a very unexpected way with an old friend: the multibillionaire and so-called philanthropist George Soros, with his Open Society Foundation. (*ibid.*)

Here, foreshadowing an almost identical claim regarding the ‘migrant caravan’ moving towards the US three years later, Richter explained that Soros and his

5. Many thanks to the Searchlight Archive, at Northampton University, for helping locate these examples.

Foundation “plan to destroy Europe as well as Germany by millions of immigrants. To bring civil war, ethnic war to Europe in order to eliminate Europe” (ibid.). As we show below, this narrative continues in the official and explicit propaganda produced by the Hungarian party Fidesz.

There are also several historical instances where Soros was singled out for particular criticism in the US. In the late 1990s the neo-fascist American conspiracy theorist and perennial US presidential candidate, Lyndon LaRouche, published articles in his *Executive Intelligence Review* accusing Soros of a range of crimes, including an attempt to start World War III. On 09 November 2010, the television host Glenn Beck aired an hour-long television programme on Soros, titled *The Puppet Master*, in which he alleged that Soros planned to create a “shadow government” under the guise of providing humanitarian aid, prior to taking control of the mass media and electoral systems in the US.⁶

The conspiracy theory has also inspired political violence in the US. For instance, when the ‘migrant caravan’ story was a significant news story in the US, on 22 October 2018, a pipe bomb was sent to Soros’ home, in addition to the homes of other ‘liberals’ (including Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama). On 25 October 2018, Chris Farrell of Judicial Watch, a guest on the Fox News show ‘Lou Dobbs Tonight’, said that the refugee march was happening under the influence of the “Soros-occupied State Department.”⁷ Two days later, Robert Bowers murdered 11 people at the Or L'Simcha Synagogue – ostensibly attacking the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS) for bringing “invaders in, that kill our people.”⁸ Prior to this act of terrorism, Bowers had written regular social media posts referring to a conspiracy theory that Soros was bankrolling the ‘migrant caravan’ of 5,000 Honduran refugees via organisations like the HIAS.

There exist many more examples of this antisemitic prejudice being used today, such as the Austrian extreme-right monthly magazine *Alles roger?* which instrumentalizes antisemitic stereotypes by, on the one hand, referring to George Soros as a “locust speculator” (March 2017: 22) and on the other hand, presenting him as the “favourite child of circles like the Rothschilds” (May 2018: 9) (Feldner 2019).

6. Michael Wolraich, Beck’s bizarre, dangerous hit at Soros, CNN, 14 November 2010 <http://edition.cnn.com/2010/OPINION/11/13/wolraich.beck.soros/index.html> (accessed 2 February 2021)

7. Justin Anderson, Blaming ‘Both Sides’ for Hate Plays Into Hands of Right-Wing Media, 31 October 2018 FAIR <https://fair.org/home/blaming-both-sides-for-hate-plays-into-hands-of-right-wing-media/> (accessed 2 February 2021)

8. *Ibid.*

4. Multimodal discourse-historical analysis

For the remainder of this chapter, we examine political posters produced by the Hungarian party Fidesz. Fidesz is a right-wing, national-conservative party that, under the leadership of Viktor Orbán, has consistently opposed migration into Hungary, opposed taking any refugees (particularly Muslim refugees) and have taken an extremely adversarial approach to the EU, as a supposed menace to national/border integrity. Further, they argue in favour of a ‘Christian-based’, illiberal democracy, maintaining that everything should be done to ensure the survival of ‘the Hungarian nation’ – as a racial, ethnic and religious mono-culture (*jus sanguinis*) (Wodak 2020).

The Discourse-Historical Approach to CDS aims to triangulate insight from the social, political and historical contexts within which discursive events are embedded (Reisigl and Wodak 2001; Wodak 2020, 2021). Systematic qualitative analysis in the DHA takes four layers of context into account:

- the intertextual and interdiscursive relationships between utterances, texts, genres and discourses,
- the extra-linguistic social/sociological variables,
- the history and archaeology of texts and organizations,
- and institutional frames of the specific context of a situation.

In this way, we are able to explore how discourses, genres, and texts change due to socio-political contexts. “Discourse” in DHA is defined as being

- related to a macro-topic (and to argumentation about validity claims such as truth and normative validity which involves social actors who have different points of view).
- a cluster of context-dependent semiotic practices that are situated within specific fields of social action;
- socially constituted as well as socially constitutive;
- integrating various differing positions and voices.

Furthermore, we distinguish between “discourse” and “text”: Discourse implies patterns and commonalities of knowledge and structures, whereas a text is a specific and unique realization of a discourse. The DHA suggests six discursive strategies used by speakers/writers in these texts, which can be applied in analysis (Richardson 2017). A discursive strategy refers to a more or less intentional plan of practices adopted to achieve particular social, political, or semiotic goals, which can be expressed, and achieved, linguistically, visually and multimodally. We map these strategies out in Table 2, below (see also Reisigl 2018; Reisigl and Wodak 2001; Richardson 2017, and Wodak 2020 for discussion of these strategies).

Table 2. Discursive strategies of the DHA

DISCURSIVE STRATEGY	LINGUISTIC MODE	VISUAL/PICTORIAL MODE
Reference	Individualisations/collectivisations – i.e. that things can be named in a variety of equally accurate ways, but that each have different (i.e. positive vs negative) connotations	Individualisations/collectivisations, via membership categorization devices, inc. metaphor, metonymy and synecdoche
Predication	Assigning (positive and/or negative) qualities through denotation or connotation	Mise-en-scène (inc. subject interactions), facial expressions, symbolism, visual metaphor, caricature
Process representation	Choice of process; choice of paradigm; choice of syntagm (inc. transitivity and valency of process)	The ‘decisive moment’ representing movement, subject interactions, gaze & viewer engagement, symbolisation /visual metaphor, montage
Argumentation	The expression of opinions and reasoning within a context of disagreement	Visual expression of opinions and reasoning, within a context of disagreement
Perspectivisation	Whose perspective is communicated; to what extent is perspective acknowledged (e.g. quotation) or elided (e.g. plagiarism)	Point of view, framing, montage, particularly the ‘Kuleshov Effect’
Mitigation/ Intensification	Emphasising & amplifying particles, emphasising & amplifying morphemes (e.g. ‘super-’, ‘mega-’), exaggerating quantifiers, modal verbs	Mise-en-scène, close/mid/long shot, colour (de)saturation, colour ‘spotting’/ splashing/ washing out, shapes/arrows

First, there are referential, or nomination, strategies, by which people, processes, events and all other things (concrete and abstract) are named. Nomination can be achieved through individualisation, collectivisations (of diverse types) and several categorization devices, including metaphor, metonymy and synecdoche. This can occur visually as well as linguistically – a cartoon of The White House functioning as a metonym for the US President; or (in particular contexts) a red rose representing the UK Labour Party.

Second, predication strategies serve to describe people, events and all other things (material and abstract) linguistically. Reisigl and Wodak (2001: 54) state that predication is “the very basic process and result of linguistically assigning qualities to persons, animals, objects, events, actions and social phenomena.” Predicational strategies may, for example, be realized as evaluative attributions of negative and positive traits in the linguistic form of implicit or explicit predicates, or visually

through more socio-culturally situated signifiers. Visual predication can also be achieved through setting, symbolism, *mise-en-scène* (e. g. clothing, props, staging) and caricature.

Third, there are process representation strategies, through which actions and relations of being are represented (Richardson 2017). Choices in the way to represent the participants in a process are covered through referential and predication strategies; choices in the way that the process itself is represented, are reflected in the principal verb of the clause and its conjugation. Process representation strategies entail three inter-related choices: between the type of process (verbal, mental, existential, material, etc); between a range of lexemes (e.g. a verbal process may be represented as you 'stating', 'revealing', 'accusing', etc.); and between transitivity and valency of a process (e.g. through agent deletion). Processes can be represented visually in a variety of ways, for example in the 'decisive moment' capturing movement at a particular instant, representing gesture, subject interactions, symbolisation / visual metaphor, and through montage.

Fourth, there are argumentation strategies, through which people may offer, justify, legitimate or criticise points of view. An argument can be defined in the loosest sense as the expression of opinions and reasoning within a context of disagreement. Sometimes this reasoning can be explicit, with all the premises supporting a conclusion neatly laid out; more typically, understanding and analysing argumentation will require some reconstruction of the presumptions that have to be made for the steps between two discursive points to be understood. Images can contribute to complex communicative acts which advance and defend standpoints; these can be revealed through a comprehensible and charitable reconstruction of the implicitly advanced argumentation.

Fifth, there are strategies of perspectivization, or discourse representation, asking: "From what [or whose] perspective are these nominations, attributions and arguments expressed?" (Reisigl and Wodak 2009: 93). Through framing, speakers/writers express their involvement in discourse, and position their point of view in the reporting, description, narration or quotation of relevant events or utterances. In pictorial communication, such perspectivization can be communicated via the positioning of the viewers' gaze and, more specifically, through the meaning potentials inherent in framing, proximity and the angle of interaction. Sixth, there are strategies of intensification and mitigation. These help to qualify and modify the epistemic status of a proposition by intensifying or mitigating the illocutionary force of utterances or the modality of pictorial representations. In visual communication, this can be achieved through framing (extreme close up vs mid or long shot), colour (de)saturation, colour 'spotting' or selective emphasis, the use of shapes/arrows.

Single-shot printed party materials – either displayed as posters or reproduced as A5 leaflets – can be regarded as a sub-genre within political discourse (Cairns 2009). Political posters are a form of multimodal discourse, which work up meaning potentials through a combination of visual and linguistic means (Richardson and Colombo 2013, 2014). We would agree with Klymenko (2018: 441) that political posters/billboards “deserve broader attention as they remain among the more widely used communication genres of political parties”. Alongside political leaflets, posters/billboards have a significant reach amongst the electorate, particularly in countries “where legislation restricts the use of other media, or where political parties cannot afford to buy expensive television air-time” (ibid.: 442).

We assume that it is possible to advance and defend standpoints visually, and that if we are to understand the impact of anti-immigrant rhetoric on the electorate, analysing parties’ visual propaganda is particularly important. Indeed, visual propaganda constitutes a key element in political campaigns, as communicated through party logos and ‘brand identity’, photographs of party members, the ways party leaders are photographed or filmed (involving the choreographing of public events), the multi-modal design of printed party materials (including layout, font, consistent use of colour, framing and perspectivization, etc) amongst many other signifiers. Political posters generally contain very few words; the meanings of visual features (images, colours, party logos) are typically accompanied by a brief slogan which helps to disambiguate their meanings. Their brevity, and semiotic simplicity, mean that they can be read, and their meanings construed quickly, by the public/electorate as they pass by the poster, on foot or in transport.

We analyse three posters/billboards that were produced and publicly displayed across Hungary. Our translations were checked by a native speaker of Hungarian. The first two posters appeared in July and September 2017 and the final example in February 2019. The ostensible political function of these political adverts differed: the first was part of a ‘national consultation’ produced by Fidesz in the year preceding an election for the National Assembly.⁹ The second poster was part of another ‘national consultation’ regarding migration and refugees; and the third formed part of an electoral campaign, launched ahead of the European Parliament election, in May 2019. We acknowledge that political posters – like any discourse – are context dependent and, as such, “are situated in, shaped by and constructive

9. In Hungary, National Consultations are nationwide surveys that ostensibly seek the views of Hungarian citizens but do so using leading questions designed to elicit responses conducive to government policy. They are a leading tactic of the Fidesz government to generate statistical support for their political agenda. At time of writing, Fidesz has recently announced the 10th national survey since they came to power in 2010, in which the government is “looking for backing from the public” on a range of issue relating economics, migration and post-Covid recovery (see ‘PM details new government measures’, 10 June 2021, *The Budapest Times* <https://www.budapesttimes.hu/hungary/pm-details-new-government-measures/> [accessed 14 June 2021])

of circumstances that are more than and different to language” (Anthonissen 2003: 297). However, the meta-functions of each poster were the same: they each achieve their discursive, rhetorical goals by attacking Soros.

5. Analysis

5.1 Context

In Hungary, George Soros serves as scapegoat. In his campaign speeches and weekly interviews (every Friday), Orbán viciously blames George Soros for a variety of complex socio-political problems. In Orbán’s and Fidesz’s worldview, Soros is allegedly pulling the strings to force all migrants and refugees from the East to come to Hungary and Europe – a typical antisemitic stereotype of world conspiracy. A new bill was passed that criminalizes anyone helping so-called ‘illegal’ migrants in Hungary and thus threatens to send activists, lawyers, NGO workers, volunteers and so-called ‘Soros agents’ to jail.¹⁰ A weekly journal close to Fidesz even published a list of the first 200 individuals on a 2,000-person so-called ‘Soros list’, including scholars, journalists, intellectuals and NGOs who are trying to help refugees in Hungary (Wodak 2020: 238–239; Feldner 2019).

In a speech in 2018, commemorating the revolution of 1848–49 (against the Habsburg Empire), Orbán characterized Soros as follows, employing a plethora of traditional antisemitic stereotypes, such as “the greedy Jew”, “the capitalist Jew”, “the homeless Jew”, the “revengeful Jew”, in sum: Soros is ‘different’ and remains an extremely powerful and dangerous stranger. These predications are employed time and again throughout Orbán’s campaigns against Soros, sometimes just as explicitly, sometimes more coded as insinuations:

[He is] different [...] than we are. He does not fight with an open visor, he hides, he is not straightforward, but cunning, not honest, but malicious, not national but international, he does not believe in work, but speculates with the money, he has no home of his own because he has the feeling that the whole world is his. He is not generous, but vengeful and he always attacks the heart, especially when it is red, white and green. (Orbán 2018)

In 2019, Orbán evicted the Central European University (CEU) from Budapest in spite of strong international protests, as part of his anti-Soros campaign, directed primarily against the education of liberal intellectuals – CEU has now moved its European campus to Vienna and resumed classes in September 2019.

10. Shaun Walker, ‘Hungary to criminalise migrant helpers with ‘Stop Soros’ legislation’, *The Guardian*, 29 May 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/may/29/hungary-criminalises-migrant-helpers-stop-george-soros-legislation> (accessed 25 August 2022)

5.2 Posters

As stated above, Poster 1 in Figure 2 was displayed across Hungary, in early July 2017:



Figure 2. “Let’s not allow Soros to have the last laugh!”

The poster contains four elements, imposed on a blue background. The upper right corner of the poster contains two linguistic elements: the title “Nemzeti Konzultáció 2017”, accompanied by the Hungarian flag and, on the right, the message, “99% reject illegal immigration.” This particular “Nemzeti Konzultáció”, or National Consultation, ran from April 2017 and was completed by May.¹¹ In between the two linguistic elements are two arrows >> which entail a causal, or hierarchical, link between them: they suggest ‘from this to this’, or ‘this produced this’. The poster is therefore announcing part of the results of this National Consultation, and specifically opposition to “illegal immigration”.¹² The precise wording of the question that this Consultation used on ‘illegal immigration’ is not currently available, but it is rather unsurprising that a very large percentage of the population would apparently oppose something that is specifically labelled “illegal”, given the word’s negative connotation.

The heading also draws on a discourse about democracy, and majoritarian rule, given that the consultation summarized the (seemingly overwhelming) opinion of the Hungarian public. The poster therefore implicitly suggests that he is smiling/

11. This website shows a request for the raw data from the consultation, sent to the Cabinet Office of the Prime Minister https://kimitud.atlatszo.hu/request/2017_evi_nemzeti_konzutacio_adat (accessed 5 May 2021). The request was rejected.

12. It should be stated that ‘illegal migrant’ is not the official term: migration policies and studies refer instead to ‘irregular migrants’ (*sans papiers*). Migrants are – legally speaking – only illegal if their application for asylum is rejected and they – nevertheless – remain in the country.

laughing about something that is both illegal and opposed by 99% of the Hungarian population (who answered the consultation). The more specific sense that Soros is laughing *at our expense* is introduced by the idiomatic phrase “the last laugh”. This usually indicates an antagonistic social interaction, between two (or more) parties, where each enjoys the others’ misfortune. It constructs a narrative in which Soros is currently laughing at us, perhaps for something he has encouraged, but that if we act – in an undefined way – we will prevail and be able to laugh at him instead. The poster doesn’t go as far as to explicitly state that ‘Soros supports illegal immigration’ or, more specifically still ‘Soros is responsible for illegal immigration in Hungary’ but then it doesn’t have to. Soros’ beliefs or actions are not described, but Hungarians are encouraged to dislike him regardless. The government reportedly spent 5.7bn forints (€ 19m; £ 16.3m; \$ 21m) on this campaign message.¹³

Soon after being put on public display, many of the posters were defaced with graffiti. Orbán and the Fidesz government were clear that they didn’t consider the poster to be antisemitic; the Jewishness of Soros was, of course, not mentioned in the poster itself. However, it is notable that much of this graffiti *was* antisemitic, highlighting or vilifying Soros for being Jewish:



Figure 2a. Antisemitic graffiti, over Soros poster

13. Nick Thorpe ‘Hungary vilifies financier Soros with crude poster campaign’, BBC News 10 July 2017 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-40554844> (accessed 6 May 2021)

In Figure 2a, above, someone has written ‘dirty Jew’ over Soros’ face. This addendum provides a further, multilayered, signifier to the multimodal poster: the insult is, first, a clear indication of the antisemitic beliefs of the person who wrote it (that is: ‘I believe this man to be a dirty Jew’). Further, defacing the poster in this way points out, to anyone unaware, that Soros is Jewish, thus making explicit an understanding that previously required contextual knowledge. This predication also provides an overt reconstruction of the warrant of the poster’s argument: that you/we should not allow Soros to have the last laugh – *because* he is a (dirty) Jew, who is pleased by (and/or responsible for) illegal immigration in Hungary. The graffiti therefore not only reveals the antisemitism of the person who wrote it, it also indexes the wider antisemitic conspiracy theory – that Jews, and Soros in particular, are responsible for so-called ‘illegal immigration’.

Poster 2, below, was displayed across Hungary from September 2017:



Figure 3. “The Soros Plan”

This poster campaign announced another “Nemzeti Konzultáció” – National Consultation – this time on the so-called ‘Soros Plan’. Alongside the same image of Soros smiling/laughing, the poster read: “National consultation on the Soros plan Let’s not allow it without having a say!”

For this consultation, the Hungarian public were asked their views on George Soros’ proposals for managing the so-called refugee crisis of 2015/16. However, the government deliberately misrepresented Soros’ remarks in order to, again, generate the kinds of findings from the consultation that they desired. First, referring to “The Soros-Plan” entails that such a strategic “Plan” exists. It elevates Soros’ public remarks, and publications, on the need to respond in a humane way to the increased number of refugees to “a grand and elaborate scheme in which the

‘Brussels Commission’ and Soros are in cahoots to dismantle the EU’s nation states and impose immigrants, i.e., Muslim terrorists, on them.”¹⁴

Second, the Hungarian public were sent the National Consultation questionnaire on the ‘Soros Plan’, including a letter of introduction from Prime Minister Viktor Orbán which, amongst other distortions and fabrications, claimed:

On the basis of the Soros plan, they would settle 1 million immigrants in Europe per year and they would distribute the settled migrants among the member states. Hungary would also have to take part in this. According to the plan, they would give each immigrant 9 million forints from the money of the taxpayers. The fact that numerous leaders in Brussels support and represent this plan makes it truly dangerous. If it is implemented, Hungary’s culture and population would change in an irreversible way. [...] The Soros plan endangers our communities and our traditions. It endangers Hungary and all of that Europe with which we have become acquainted and which we love.¹⁵

These claims exaggerate numbers to emphasise the financial ‘burden’ upon Hungary represented by refugees. Further, by stressing that these refugees endanger “our communities and tradition”, Orbán implies that their cultures and traditions are dangerously different to those of Christian Hungary – again, insinuating the racist trope of the Muslim terrorist, in anti-migrant rhetoric.

These distortions were continued in the body of the consultation itself, which confuses categories (immigrant and refugee, for example) and refers to migrants in such a way that presumes them all de facto ‘illegal’. For example:

It is not by accident that dismantling the border-protection barriers is one of the important goals of the Soros plan. In this way, the borders would be opened to illegal immigrants. The billionaire put it this way, ‘our plan treats the protection of refugees as the objective and national borders as the obstacle’.

(Bloomberg Business, 10–30–2015)¹⁶

Here Soros is clearly referring to refugees, but Orbán simply changes the noun phrase, renaming them “illegal immigrants”, even though it is not illegal, in any country in the world, to apply for refugee status. According to data from the Cabinet Office of the Prime Minister, “the government paid 7.25 billion forints (23.5 million

14. Benjamin Novak Here are the “Soros Plan” national consultation questions! Budapest Beacon 28 September 2017 <https://budapestbeacon.com/soros-plan-national-consultation-questions/> (accessed 6 May 2021)

15. Quoted in National Consultation on the “Soros Plan”, <https://theorangefiles.hu/national-consultation-on-the-soros-plan/> (accessed 6 May 2021)

16. Ibid.

euros) for the three publicity campaigns it conducted” during the spring and summer of 2017, up to and including this anti-Soros National Consultation.¹⁷

Orbán also launched anti-EU campaigns in 2018 and 2019, choosing to depict the then President of the European Commission Jean-Claude Juncker with Soros:



Figure 4a and 4b. ‘anti-Brussels’ posters

Next to images of Soros and Juncker – significantly, both are again shown laughing – is the slogan: “You have a right to know what Brussels is preparing to do!” Interestingly, the posters also include two captions, showing the names of Soros and

17. Ibid.

Juncker. This suggests that, despite the now years of vilification, Fidesz still doubts that the Hungarian public will recognize Soros and Juncker from their images alone.

The poster in Figure 4a was designed to be displayed at bus stops and other locations where pedestrians may walk or wait and have more time to read its message. As such, it includes more detailed information not incorporated into the roadside billboard, in Figure 4b. Specifically, Figure 4a spells out “what Brussels is preparing to do”, which was introduced in the main slogan:

They want to introduce a mandatory settlement quota.
They want to weaken the border rights of the Member States.
Immigrants are facilitated with a migrant visa.

Needless to say, these claims are all false. Margaritis Schinas, Juncker’s then-chief spokesman, stated: “There is no ‘they’, only the European Union with Hungary sitting at the table. It is not true that the EU supports or undermines border protection. Quite the contrary. And there are zero plans for so-called humanitarian visas. Member states decide to what level they want to accept legal migration.”¹⁸

However, the truth or falsity of these claims is only half of the issue with this poster. The villain identified in the poster’s slogan and the additional accusations is the EU, represented through both metonym (“Brussels”) and synecdoche (Juncker as a part-for-whole representation of the European Commission). Why, then, does Soros feature at all? Why include a photograph of him smiling if the enemy being attacked is the EU? Here, two factors are salient: first, the political issues addressed by the poster are again migration and Hungarian border rights. Since becoming the Prime Minister, Orbán has repeatedly – indeed *incessantly* – argued that Soros is plotting to destroy Hungary, and the rest of ‘Christian Europe’, through an alleged mass immigration. The campaign against the imagined ‘Soros-Plan’ (discussed above) not only tied Soros and (illegal) immigration together, it also pushed the specific lie that Soros plots to remove borders entirely, so encouraging unconstrained migration, particularly from Muslim countries. Such arguments directly echo the antisemitic conspiracies we summarized earlier in the chapter: the internationalist Jew, enemy of the nation. Through including an image of Soros in the poster, Orbán can recontextualize that recent campaign, and its specific claims regarding the existential threat that non-Christian refugees represent to Hungary, into a wider campaign against the EU: thus, the “They” used in the poster refers to both the EU/Brussels/Juncker and Soros, seemingly united in these aims.

18. Jennifer Rankin ‘Brussels accuses Orbán of peddling conspiracy theory with Juncker poster’, 19 February 2019, *The Guardian* <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/feb/19/brussels-orban-jean-claude-juncker-poster-george-soros-hungary> (accessed 6 May 2021)

However, there is a further dimension to the way that Soros is visually included: he is positioned *behind* Juncker. Soros could have been positioned next to Juncker but, in both the portrait and landscape versions of the poster he is placed behind him, indicating that this is a deliberate decision (rather than a space-saving design solution). To say that someone is ‘behind’ someone, or something, is to claim that they are ultimately responsible for them – they are in charge, or somehow controlling and manipulating, the people or phenomena that we can see. If someone is behind something, they are ultimately to blame for it. The poster visually works up this sense of culpability by placing Soros behind Juncker (as synecdoche for Brussels/the EU) and so also ‘behind’ (responsible for) his actions. In this way, Orbán constructs an ever-wider link to his world conspiracy theme; he accuses Soros of not only having manipulated Hungary, but of manipulating EU institutions.

6. Conclusions

In this chapter we have examined the continued presence of antisemitic conspiracy theories in politics, through analysing the ways that George Soros is invoked as a *Feindbild*. Soros has become the symbol of all ‘evil’, allegedly responsible for very complex socio-political and economic problems, a scapegoat, strategically employed and instrumentalized whenever it serves specific political aims, not only of extreme-right but also of mainstream national-conservative politicians.

In this way, the “*Iudeus-ex-machina* strategy” (Wodak 1989) enters the political stage, time and again, and is – obviously – instrumentalized successfully to evoke antisemitic attitudes while drawing on traditional stereotypes and conspiracy theories. To capture, deconstruct and explain the continuous impact and influence of such antisemitic *Feindbilder*, of the many insinuations, symbols, stereotypes and tropes, a critical discourse-historical analysis suggests itself. Of course, the question remains why such virulent antisemitism has retained its manipulative force – after the *Shoah* and specifically also in countries from which hundred-thousands’ of Jews were deported to extermination camps and murdered during the Second World War. Why do such conspiracy theories and *Feindbilder* persist? Unfortunately, there exists no simple answer to this question. Freyenhagen (2020) while drawing on Horkheimer and Adorno’s theories on the persistence of antisemitism (1947) maintains that “One crucial point in all of this is that for antisemitism what matters is the image of ‘the Jews’ (i.e., the projection), not the actual make-up of those who self-identify as Jewish or are categorized as ‘Jewish’”. In “The Meaning of Working through the Past” (1959), Freyenhagen argues, Adorno already expressed huge skepticism that face-to-face encounters – and similar measures – would work for counteracting antisemitism. Indeed, one should not expect too much from the

recourse to facts, which antisemites most often will either not admit or will neutralize by treating them as exceptions (ibid.). *Feindbilder* obviously express the inability or unwillingness to cope with the complexity of political phenomena.

As a simple narrative with a simple plot, conspiracy theories help to simplify complex issues and to provide clearly separated Manichean divisions of the ‘innocent’ and of those to ‘blame’. In doing so, they fulfil a strategic political function.

The brief case study presented in this paper involves Viktor Orbán, leader of Hungary’s governing party Fidesz (e.g., Feldner 2019; Szombati and Szilágyi 2020; Wodak 2020). Sociologist András Kovács states that Orbán’s government is not *per se* antisemitic; however, governing politicians frequently use antisemitic stereotypes and court people who trigger and support antisemitic attitudes.¹⁹ The fact that antisemites are being tolerated fits the revisionist policy of the Orbán government. Fidesz has repeatedly tried to relativize Hungary’s role in the Holocaust, whether with statues, monuments or museums. Antisemitic authors such as Albert Wass, who was sentenced to death in Romania as a war criminal, have long been recommended reading in Hungarian schools. That Viktor Orbán and Israel’s previous prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu are close friends should not come as a surprise as they both endorse far-right populist politics and target the same ‘enemies’: the left, the liberals and Muslims.²⁰

As Peter Kreko, Director of the liberal Hungarian think tank ‘Political Capital’ summarizes, “a ‘siege mentality’, a feeling that everyone is against Hungary, is deeply rooted in Hungarian nationalist identity because of its past, the memories of the Trianon Treaty in 1920 (when Hungary lost 72 per cent of its territory), and the conflicts with the Allies in general and the neighbours in particular. Therefore, it is easy to fuel these sentiments in domestic discourses, and the right-wing camp is extremely receptive to such rhetoric” (Political Capital 2012).

The result of these and many other discursive and material practices is the constant erosion of democratic institutions and liberal democratic values, the monopolization of many areas and an increasingly authoritarian rule in Fidesz’ Hungary (e.g., Wodak 2020; Feldner 2019). Even if the *Feindbild* George Soros cannot alone be blamed (as scapegoat) for such developments, it certainly facilitates such policies, like a catalyst. Orbán’s imagined dystopia is the alleged threat to Christian European culture from Muslim migration, which is, he fallaciously claims, brought

19. Felix Schlagwein ‘Hungary: Orbán’s anti-Semitism problem’, 16 December 2020, DW.com <https://www.dw.com/de/ungarn-orb%C3%A1ns-antisemitismusproblem/a-55952114> [accessed 15 June 2021]

20. Ibid.

about by George Soros and his “network”. In this sense, the recourse to a *Feindbild* is an expression of far-right nativist politics that reduces complex issues to a simplistic Manichean narrative of “us” and “them”, of good and evil.

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“These cameras won’t show the crowds”

Intradiscursive intertextuality in Trumpian discourse’s crowd size conspiracy theory

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This chapter uses a linguistically-based critical discourse analytic framework to identify, isolate, and contextualize the discursive strategies involved in the construction of conspiracy theories in former US President Donald Trump’s campaign-style rally speeches. Unlike simple falsehoods, conspiracy theories are discursively constructed, repeated, and must involve (specific or vague) accusations about certain agents acting against another party surreptitiously. This chapter analyzes the discursive strategies Trump uses to construct the “crowd size” conspiracy theory: the oft-repeated claim in Trumpian discourse that Trump’s opponents (especially the media) routinely manipulate, mask, and underestimate the number of Trump’s supporters who come to see him at events. Five discursive strategies are identified: the iconization of stock phrases, the repetition of numbers, insults, intertextuality, and recursivity. I also demonstrate how the application of these strategies is necessarily *intradiscursively intertextual*, i.e., characterized by repetition and reference across both speech genre (campaign rallies) and discursive context (Trumpian discourse) more broadly.

Keywords: Trumpian discourse, conspiracy theories, Critical Discourse Analysis, truth, crowd size, discursive strategies

1. Introduction

This chapter explores the discursive strategies involved in the construction and deployment of conspiracy theories in Donald Trump’s speech. The many conspiracy theories embedded within Trumpian discourse deserve special attention due to the success with which they have been disseminated among Trump’s supporters and the mainstream media, along with the real-world consequences for the notion of truth in politics. Though the range of conspiracy theories that Trump and his

supporters engage with both online and in person is vast¹ (cf. Musolff, Chapter 6; Seargeant, Chapter 9 in this volume), this chapter aims to describe one particular conspiracy theory central to Trumpian discourse in general and Trump's rally speeches more specifically: what I will label the Trumpian "crowd size" conspiracy theory (CSCT). Below, I first discuss the context in which this conspiracy theory appears and outline my unique methodology for critical discourse analysis. Then, I identify and illustrate the main discursive strategies used to create and evoke the conspiracy theory at Trump rallies: the iconization of stock phrases, the repetition of numbers and insults, intertextuality, and recursivity.

Promulgated from the very inception of his presidency to its bitterly contested end, the CSCT posits that Trump's perceived opponents, especially the mainstream media, have collectively conspired to deliberately underestimate, underreport, and ultimately shield from public view the amount of support that Trump enjoys at various speaking engagements, including campaign rallies, public appearances, and, famously, his own inauguration. Here, it is prudent to distinguish between a lie or falsehood and the evocation of a conspiracy theory. A *lie* can be defined as "anything that may be used which clogs the channel, and is not the result of accident" (Bolinger 1973: 542). Factual inaccuracies, gross exaggerations, and statements that are logically sound but omit or otherwise conceal key information all fall into this category. On the other hand, conspiracy theories are more elaborate contortions of truth. A *conspiracy theory* is a type of untruth that is discursively constructed (within a particular discourse), repeated (often across discourses), and must involve (specific or vague) accusations about certain agents necessarily acting against another party surreptitiously. In the case of crowd size, discursive strategies like stock phrases, insults, and legitimating numbers construct the conspiracy theory; these specific strategies are then repeated across speech genres by various actors throughout Trumpian discourse; the malevolent actors are the "fake news" media; and the aggrieved party encompasses Trump and his supporters. As will be shown, once a conspiracy theory has been established, some elements of the above definition can be represented implicitly rather than explicitly. Thus, what appears as a simple lie outside of the discursive context can nonetheless evoke the CSCT intradiscursively.

The seeds of the CSCT were sown on Trump's first full day as President. On January 21, 2017, White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer held a special press conference to accuse the media of intentionally misrepresenting the size of the crowd

1. Including, but not limited to: the existence of the "deep state" and the climate change "hoax" (cf. Zorzi, Chapter 16 in this volume), polling inaccuracies, the Clinton "body count," birtherism, supremacy of the coastal/Hollywood elite (dogwhistles for Jews, cf. Richardson and Wodak, Chapter 19 in this volume), the Russia "hoax," the impeachment "hoax," Pizzagate, the Great Replacement theory, anti-vaxxers (cf. Fiammenghi, Chapter 15; Madisson and Ventsel, Chapter 19 in this volume), and QAnon.

gathered for the ceremony in Washington, D.C., while also erroneously claiming Trump’s Inauguration was the most well-attended in history. These comments garnered global attention, especially after Trump’s senior advisor, Kellyanne Conway, defended Spicer’s lies as “alternative facts” the following day. Fittingly, the end of Trump’s presidency was also marked by references to the CSCT, including at Trump’s infamous January 6, 2021 rally prior to his supporters’ attack on the U.S. Capitol. The by-then well-worn CSCT appeared extensively in Trump’s speech as proof of a separate Trumpian election conspiracy, legitimizing the coup attempt and its resulting fatal violence.

While the CSCT has become a defining feature of both ends of Trump’s presidency, references to it permeated the entirety of his tenure. The accusations were repeated over and over by both Trump and his aides, most notably at campaign rallies – the corpus for this study. Repetition is crucial to all aspects of the CSCT discussed below, including repetition of linguistic features, strategies, and even across texts. The result of this reflexive structure is what I call *intradiscursive intertextuality*, or the construction of the conspiracy theory by repetition and reference across both discursive context and speech genre.

2. Related work

Discourse-focused research is increasingly heeding the call to describe, interpret, and categorize the political language of various modern actors, especially those involved in populist and/or right-wing movements. Much of this work focuses on Western contexts, including right-wing populism in Austria (Wodak and Pelinka 2002), Hungary (Bolonyai and Campolong 2017), Greece (Boukala 2014), and Europe at large (Wodak, KhosraviNik, and Mral 2013; Wodak 2015). In the UK context, political discourse analysis has grappled with an abundance of metaphors (Musolff 2016; Demata, Conoscenti, and Stavrakakis 2020) and the Brexit phenomenon (Koller, Kopf, and Miglbauer 2019). Additionally, Trump has caused a surge in research on American political discourse (Demata 2017; Knoblock 2020; McIntosh and Mendoza-Denton 2020; Sclafani 2017).

While much work continues to be done on these topics, events of recent years have necessitated special attention on the discourses of truthfulness and deception, particularly conspiracy theories (cf. Demata, Zorzi, and Zottola, Chapter 1 in this volume) and the notion of “post-truth” (d’Ancona 2017).² Hansson and

2. The larger project of which this chapter is a part deals directly with constructions and distortions of truth in modern times. However, I avoid the term “post-truth” as it often suggests a radically “new” era of deception in politics, and I hesitate to ascribe newness to the current lack of concern for objective truth.

Kröger (2021) have highlighted the danger that political lies have for the future of democracy, while Dance (n.d.) explores the linguistics of online disinformation campaigns. Heffer (2020: 1) offers a book-length “comprehensive framework for analyzing and judging untruthfulness in discursive practice,” bringing linguistic nuance to contested terminology. This chapter contributes to this discussion with a timely empirical critical discourse analysis of a particular kind of untruthfulness in political discourse, as well as providing insights into the patterns of Trumpian discourse.

3. Key terminology

At the heart of this chapter is a distinction between *intertextuality* and *intradiscursivity*. Though various definitions of these processes exist, I draw largely upon Fairclough (1992) for my understanding of intertextuality, and upon Foucault (1972) for my conception of discourse(s) and the subsequent definition of intradiscursivity. I use the term *intertextuality* to refer to the interaction between individual texts within the same speech genre—e.g., when speech/events at one Trump rally reference speech/events from another Trump rally. *Intradiscursivity*, on the other hand, refers to the interaction of texts, utterances, or concepts within a particular discourse—e.g., the collection of assumptions and language patterns underpinning the speech of Trump, his aides, and supporters. In other words, while texts must be part of the same speech genre (e.g. Trump rallies) to be considered intertextual, intradiscursivity includes texts across all speech genres (e.g. Trump rallies, interviews, press conferences, Twitter posts, etc.) within a given discourse.

4. Methodology

This chapter offers a unique applied critical discourse analysis informed by several CDA traditions, including theoretical and methodological practices from critical language studies (CLS), the discourse-historical approach (DHA), and the socio-cognitive approach, among others. This theoretical literature includes, but is not limited to, Fairclough (1995, 2015); Jäger and Maier (2016); Reisigl and Wodak (2016); van Dijk (2008); van Leeuwen (2016); and Wodak (2015). Notably, my own practice of CDA draws from these frameworks but does not fall neatly into any one of them. Rather, I employ a multi-tiered analysis equally grounded in micro-linguistic structures and macro-ideological political concepts in order to fully examine the relationships between the forms *and* functions present in the discourse.

This methodology can be described briefly as *identify, isolate, contextualize*: (1) *identify* patterns or items of interest in the text, (2) *isolate* these features by

analyzing them individually on a micro-level, and (3) *contextualize* the features on a scaled basis. In this scaled system, contextualization begins with the surrounding utterances; then, the specific rally speech in full; its local audience and context; current events at the time of speaking; the speech genre of rally speeches as a whole; Trumpian discourse in general; and finally, within the context of political speech at large. These steps are neither discrete nor necessarily sequential. Importantly, the contextualize phase inevitably establishes patterns that must then proceed again through the identify phase. The cycle is repeated and features are reconsidered until a coherent investigative unit can be ascertained. Each investigative unit, in turn, is composed of both its micro-linguistic information *and* its macro-political context (and everything in between)—these aspects cannot be considered outside of one another. As an example: an investigative unit may consist of an instance of direct reported speech (the micro-linguistic feature) and all relevant contextual information, including (but not limited to) the subject being voiced, any discursive stance toward the subject or content, the thematic section of speech in which it occurs, as well as any identifiable sociopolitical ideologies present (the macro-political context). Full explanation and discussion of this CDA methodology can be found in Campolongo (forthcoming).

The project underlying this chapter considers a corpus of Trump’s campaign rallies during his time as president (2017 – 2021), comprising some 157 rallies in total. Here I discuss excerpts from seven of these rallies (see Table 1). The CSCT can be found across all Trump rallies and is pervasive in all forms of Trumpian discourse. These particular rallies were chosen merely to span the duration of Trump’s presidency.

Table 1. Trump rallies represented in this chapter

DATE	LOCATION	VENUE
August 22, 2017	Phoenix, AZ	Phoenix Convention Center
May 10, 2018	Elkhart, IN	North Side Middle School
October 1, 2018	Johnson City, TN	Freedom Hall
February 11, 2019	El Paso, TX	El Paso County Coliseum
November 26, 2019	Sunrise, FL	BB&T Center
December 18, 2019	Battle Creek, MI	Kellogg Arena
March 2, 2020	Charlotte, NC	Bojangles’ Coliseum

The analysis that follows provides an overview of discursive strategies involved in the construction of the CSCT in Trumpian discourse, with particular focus on the speech genre of the campaign rally. While it elucidates some of the most recognizable, salient strategies through a selection of typical examples, it does not constitute a full discussion of all relevant aspects of the CSCT.

5. Discursive strategies

In the following subsections, I identify and explain the discursive strategies used by Trump in the construction and promulgation of the CSCT. I define and discuss various discursive strategies related to repetition: stock phrases, numbers, insults, intertextuality, and recursivity. While I address each strategy separately below, they cannot be considered discretely when analyzing the data, necessitating the cyclical methodology described above; as will become apparent, these strategies are categorically intertwined, often appearing side-by-side in Trumpian texts.

5.1 Stock phrases

Perhaps the most recognizable feature of Trumpian discourse is the collection of phrases that are used repeatedly by Trump and his supporters. These *stock phrases* are part of what makes it so enticing for comedians, opponents, and the general public to mock, impersonate, and repeat Trumpian speech and therefore deserve significant discursive analysis. I use the term *allophrase* to describe a specific occurrence of a stock phrase, by analogy with the pairs phoneme/allophone, morpheme/allomorph, etc. Some stock phrases are versatile and common enough in Trumpian discourse to evoke multiple conspiracy theories depending on their context. For example, [*these are very dishonest people*]³ is a remarkably prevalent intradiscursive stock phrase used in reference to not only the CSCT, but also other Trumpian conspiracy theories in the wider “fake news” category. Though such broad-based stock phrases have relevance here, in this chapter I focus primarily on stock phrases that are unique to the CSCT. The utterance of these stock phrases constitutes a large proportion of the discourse around crowd size at Trump campaign rallies in general. Table 2 illustrates some stock phrases used in the context of the CSCT alongside a selection of their allophrases from various Trump rallies.⁴

3. Stock phrases are denoted as [*stock phrase*], and allophrases are denoted in quotation marks.

4. Keen readers will note the multiplicity of addressees inherent in many of these phrases, including the weaponization of both positive and negative affective stances and positioning. The polyphony of Trump’s speech, as well as frequent positive-self and negative-other representation, are themes I explore in other papers.

Table 2. Common stock phrases and example allophrases from the CSCT

STOCK PHRASE	ALLOPHRASES
[<i>The fake news won’t show the crowd</i>]	“you know I’d love if the cameras could show this crowd” “now the fake news back there... they will never talk about the crowd” “they won’t say it because when we have protestors all in favor they don’t talk about it” “the cameras you ever notice... they never show the crowd”
[<i>There are/aren’t a lot of people outside</i>]*	“you want to see lots of people go outside” “you have thousands and thousands of people outside” “outside right now... you’ve close to twenty thousand people standing outside” “go outside, tens of thousands of people are watching on screens outside” “there aren’t too many people outside protesting okay”
[<i>Thank you fire marshal/department</i>]	“if they can get ‘em in, whatever you can do fire marshal” “thank you fire department they got in about ten” “let them come in mister fire marshal” “the fire marshal turned away thousands of people”
[<i>You won’t believe the crowd</i>] [<i>You’ve never seen anything like it</i>]	“you won’t believe what’s going on out there” “this has never happened before” “unbelievable crowd” “forty-five thousand people...you can’t think of it” “I’ve never seen anything like it” “there’s something happening... like has never ever been seen before”

* Trump’s preoccupation with people being outside stems from the campaign’s claim that their large venues were regularly “oversold,” and overflow crowds must be accommodated outside the venue with the use of expensive equipment like jumbotrons. The actual presence of an overflow crowd is irrelevant – the erection of screens becomes part of the illusion of such a crowd.

The various stock phrases can be split into two groups based on their content: (1) phrases directly referencing the conspiracy theory, and (2) phrases appearing as simple lies which nonetheless evoke the CSCT. This excerpt from the Charlotte rally uses a version of [*The fake news won’t show the crowd*], a stock phrase of the first group, that is heavily aided by paralinguistic cues:⁵

5. See end of chapter for explanation of transcription notations.

- (1) 1 hey [points to press box] take your cam:eras (.) and spin em [spins index finger in circles above head] around this big (.) arena (..) go ahead (.5) spin em around
- 2 [crowd cheers; Trump shakes head and waves hand dismissively; crowd chants “four more years;” Trump points at someone in the audience]
- 3 [Trump points at press box] **they: don’t turn em (.) they don’t turn em (..)** **you: notice (.) they: don’t turn em (.5)** but if there was uhhh some kind of trouble in a little corner (.) any:thing to make us look bad (.5) that camera would turn: [makes J-shape motion with fingers] like a pretzel

Goldstein, Hall, and Ingram (2020) have discussed Trump’s gestures as an embodied source of comedic entertainment, and while it could be argued that comedy is involved here, these gestures are more relevant as semantic supplements to the stock phrase being used. The allophrase used in this excerpt can be represented as “you notice, they don’t turn ‘em” (line 3), though all three lines are directly contributing to the instance of the phrase [*The fake news won’t show the crowd*]. In line 1, Trump sets up the stock phrase by pretending to ask the media to sweep the arena in order to show the size of the crowd. This is followed by a series of paralinguistic cues (line 2) used to indicate Trump’s epistemic (and to a lesser degree, affective) stance toward the possibility of such an occurrence. Finally, in line 3, the core phrase is repeated consecutively not once but thrice, exemplifying the importance of repetition in Trumpian discourse; not only are stock phrases repeated throughout the discursive context, they are also repeated locally within the same text (i.e. the Charlotte rally). This generous repetition provides even greater potency to the strategy’s practice (cf. Bourdieu 1991) within the discourse.

The phrase exemplified above explicitly references the conspiratorial act at the heart of the CSCT – that the media are intentionally downplaying the size of Trump’s crowd support (and inflating the size of any protest or opposition). However, not all of the stock phrases used to evoke the CSCT are as explicit. Some, like [*You’ve never seen anything like it*] and [*There are a lot of people outside*] offer simpler statements that, outside of the discursive context, do not directly point to nefarious activity. This second group of stock phrases can be seen in the following excerpt from the El Paso rally:

- (2) 1 you know (.) **there’s never been anything like this in the history of our country (.)** we have to understand that (.) there’s never been- (.5)
- 2 if you would say: (.) as an example (.) that tonight (.) sixty nine thousand people signed up to be here (.) now the arena holds eight thousand (1)
- 3 and **thank you fire department (.)** they got in about ten: (.) thank you fire department
- 4 [crowd cheers]
- 5 but if you wanna really see: something (.) go: outside (.) **tens of thousands of people are watching screens outside (.)**

Several different stock phrases can be found in this short excerpt. In line 1, Trump claims “there’s never been anything like this in the history of our country,” an allophrase of [*You’ve never seen anything like it*], again with a partial repetition (“there’s never been”) appearing immediately afterward. Furthermore, an allophrase of [*There are a lot of people outside*] appears in line 5: “tens of thousands of people are watching screens outside.”

Both of these phrases seem to indicate in-person popular support on a level previously unheard of in American politics, but neither of them can be described as factual.⁶ Yet, they do not make explicit reference to the conspiratorial act within the CSCT by naming or alluding to a villainous agent or a surreptitious plot, as required by the definition of a conspiracy theory (see Introduction). Thus, these statements may initially appear as simple lies rather than as iterations of the CSCT. I argue, however, that the extent of repetition of these stock phrases across the speech genre (i.e. Trump rallies), alongside more traditional accusations – represented in part by the first group of stock phrases – allows for the enregisterment (Agha 2005) of these phrases within the discursive context. Indeed, following Agha (2005), it can be said that the social domain of these stock phrases (and their repetition within it) has contributed to the construction of the entextualized contrastive voice of Donald Trump. Put another way, the repetitive social practice of these stock phrases within Trumpian discourse have constituted, over time, a discursive *habitus* (Bourdieu 1991), positioning this second group of stock phrases as an integral part of the CSCT. This *habitus*, in turn, facilitates the *iconization* (Irvine and Gal 2000) of stock phrases within the discourse. The absence of a direct accusation does not preclude the reference to the conspiracy theory, as these phrases – through intertextual (and intratextual) repetition – have become semiotically and intrinsically linked with the CSCT within Trumpian discourse.

Also present in the previous excerpt is the stock phrase [*Thank you fire marshal/department*], appearing in line 3 with one repetition immediately afterward. This phrase has become part of the CSCT repertoire, creating an illusion of perpetually-packed (i.e. reaching/exceeding maximum capacity allowed by local fire codes) venues for Trump appearances. Often, as in the excerpt above, the implication is that local officials have “bent the rules” on overpopulated venues due to the overwhelming pressure of large, enthusiastic crowds.⁷ The following excerpt from the Phoenix rally further illustrates the relevance of this stock phrase to the CSCT:

6. Though Trump did often attract thousands to his campaign rallies, this is not incomparable to those of other American politicians. In fact, Bernie Sanders repeatedly bested Trump’s rally turnouts in 2016 and 2020. Furthermore, there is no Trump rally that this researcher is aware of where “tens of thousands” of supporters gathered outside the venue.

7. In reality, the El Paso venue holds 6,500 people (not 8,000) and was filled to capacity but not over-filled. Local officials estimate that there were approximately 10,000 attendees total (not 75,000), including those watching on screens outside. <https://eu.elpasotimes.com/story/news/2019/02/11/el-paso-fire-officials-say-trump-crowd-estimate-permission-not-true/2844091002/>

- (3) lot a people in here: lot a people pour:ing in right now (.) if they can get em in
(.) **whatever you can do fire marshal** (.) we'll appreciate it and I wanna thank
(.) our great vice president Mike Pence: (..) for the introduction

From the opening lines of this rally, Trump refers to an apparent flood of people attempting to enter the venue (“lot a people pouring in”) and positions the fire marshal as an ally able to break fire code laws on behalf of the Trump campaign (“whatever you can do fire marshal”). Trump insists that the marshal’s willingness to break the rules will be appreciated, framing the official as a loyal supporter comparable to Vice President Mike Pence, firmly on “our” side of the crowd size struggle.

Despite the occasional evocation of the fire department’s role in filling (or not filling) Trump’s rallies, the bottom line remains the large size of his crowds. The subsections that follow continue to demonstrate the ubiquity of stock phrases in Trump’s speech, highlighting the repetition that effects the iconization of these linguistic features.

5.2 Numbers

Importantly, the hegemony of numbers does not appear only in the context of the CSCT in Trumpian discourse, but is in fact a well-worn trope in political discourse, insinuating a particular kind of knowledge and expertise (cf. “number game,” van Dijk 1988). Within the CSCT, the repetition of numbers serves multiple functions. First, using exact figures for the number of attendees can be seen as a legitimization strategy previously described in the literature as an appeal to authority (van Leeuwen 2007). In other words, the appeal to an authority of data or numerical figures, in this case, serves to legitimize Trump’s estimates of crowd size, and their repetition further consolidates this version of alternative “truth.” An example of this strategy has already been seen in Excerpt 2, in which Trump rattles off a list of various figures, including “sixty-nine thousand,” “eight thousand,” “ten,” and “tens of thousands.” Though each of these figures has a different referent, the utterance of several numbers in rapid succession not only conveys a sense of authority, but also a legitimization of their supposed accuracy, as listeners might assign more “truthiness” to the recitation of myriad figures at once. This discursive strategy therefore acts as a clever means to disguise Trump’s false statements regarding his crowd size.

Consider the following excerpt taken from the Johnson City rally:

- (4) 4 in the great state of Missou:ri (1) you had (1) a big beautiful arena =I always
say= Madison Square Garden less (.) maybe: thirty percent (.) okay (.5) big:
beautiful arena (.) it was packed (.) and in: Missouri (.) they had **forty** =you
saw it= **forty five thousand people** out:side (.) =you can’t think of it=
...
7 Missouri (3)
8 [silence, then indistinguishable yell from crowd]
9 thank: you (.5) thank: you (1) **for:ty five thousand** (1)

Rather than reciting different numbers referring to different contexts, in this excerpt Trump repeats the same number three times while describing the large turnout at a Missouri rally: “forty,” “forty-five thousand people,” “forty-five thousand.” The first iteration of the number is realized simply as “forty,” though this is accounted for by Trump interrupting himself to interject “you saw it.” This utterance offers a legitimation of Trump’s estimate of the Missouri crowd size by appealing to the personal knowledge and experience of his crowd, who, in the limited communicative context of a campaign rally, cannot confirm or deny such knowledge (consider the “indistinguishable” comment from an audience member in line 8).

Coupled with this evidentiary framing is the repetition of the figure itself, first immediately after Trump’s interjection, and then again, a few lines later. Given the relatively short yet significant interval between repetitions (notice the three second pause after Trump again names the rally in line 7), the third iteration cannot be interpreted as a clarification or correction. Instead, the “forty-five thousand” figure given in line 9 emphasizes and intensifies the effect of stating the number initially – whether as a further appeal to the authority of numbers (i.e. for truth value), reinforcement of a large crowd size (i.e. for bragging about popularity), or some combination thereof. For context, the Missouri rally in question was held in Springfield’s JQH Arena, which has a maximum capacity of 11,000 people,⁸ falling far short of Trump’s claim of 45,000.

In addition to repetitive lies about the number of supporters attending Trump rallies, the repetition of numbers is also used to downplay the number of people attending opponents’ rallies. The following excerpt from the Sunrise rally illustrates this strategy alongside some now-familiar stock phrases:

8. A Springfield, MO newspaper reported at the time that local officials variously estimated a crowd of 12,000 people total, or up to 2,000 who were turned away at the doors: <https://eu.news-leader.com/story/news/local/ozarks/2018/10/10/donald-trump-springfield-rally-crowd-size-attendance/1569753002/>

- (5) 1 n:ow the fa:ke news back there
 2 [crowd boos]
 3 they:re gonna say the presi::dent c:ame (.) they will n:ever talk about (.)
 the crowd (.) you know one of the Demo:crats (..) yes:terday (.) had a rally
 (..) **two peo:ple** showed up **t:wo** (.) **t:wo** (..) **two peo:ple** (.) they give us no
 credit (.) if some:body has a ra::lly **like a thou::sand people** they'll say (.)
 so and so had (.) a rally it was packed they had a **thou:sand people** (.)
 4 if we have a rally with **fif::ty thou:sand people** they don't talk about it
 5 [crowd cheers]
 6 a::nd I don't know much a:bout this sta:dium but I can tell you it's big
 and you go outside and there are a::lot of people outside that can't get in

Here, Trump calls attention to the contrast between the number of people present for his rallies in line 4 (“fifty thousand people”) and the comparatively small number at his opponents’ rallies in line 3 (“two people,” “two,” “two,” “two people,” “like a thousand people,” “a thousand people”). Particularly, the repetition of the number “two” acts as an intensifier of the supposedly weak turnout for an unnamed (and thus unverifiable) Democrat. The authority of the numerical “data” given here, then, is directly incompatible with both the inability of a listener to fact-check this comment and the obvious hyperbole of the assertion itself.⁹ Trump goes on to refer to a hypothetical event at which an opponent has “a thousand people” gathered, a figure that is also repeated and presumably spoken without hyperbole, though the hypothetical nature of the event lessens the legitimation effect of using an appeal to numbers in this way. Thus, while the strategy can be clearly witnessed in this excerpt, it is unclear to what extent it may be considered effective in the construction of a Trumpian reality of crowd size.

In this short excerpt, we again find allophrases of [*The fake news won't show the crowds*] and [*There are a lot of people outside*], demonstrating the interlacing of discursive strategies discussed in this chapter. Indeed, the repetition of the impossibly low number of people attending Democrats’ rallies (“two”) can also be considered within the category of insults as a discursive strategy.

5.3 Insults

Alongside stock phrases, the use of insults to attack political opponents is a hallmark of Trumpian discourse. From the prolific use of nicknames to linguistic and paralinguistic mocking of those deemed ‘other,’ the abundance of Trump’s insults

9. There is no indication of any rally in which a 2020 candidate had only two people show up to a particular rally, so this remark must be assumed to be hyperbole.

contributes heavily to the "us vs. them" dichotomy that characterizes much of right-wing political discourse (cf. Wodak 2011). In the discussion that follows, I explore three types or categories of insults: (1) *negative qualifiers*, (2) *disparaging comments*, and (3) *nicknames*.¹⁰ By using a variety of insults to construct oppositional out-groups, the CSCT identifies not one but two malign actors: the fake news media, who perpetrate "false" reporting, and the Democrats, whose small-crowd rallies provide a convenient foil for Trump's within the media's disinformation plot.

In the previous excerpt (Excerpt 5), it is clear how these two groups, both poised in opposition to Trump, are brought together through the use of insults. Compared with a crowd of "fifty-thousand people," per Trump's claim in line 4, a crowd of "like a thousand people" is framed as quite unimpressive, despite the fake news's claim to the contrary ("they'll say so-and-so had a rally, it was packed"). Highlighting the media's duplicity (at the heart of the CSCT) alongside a supposedly embarrassingly low turnout for Democrats allows Trump to further illustrate the mechanism of the crowd size conspiracy. The use of numbers as type 2 insults themselves (i.e., the repetition of "two" as a comical/insulting hyperbole), meanwhile, provides a concrete example evidencing the conspiracy at authoritative levels.

The discursive strategy of insults is also used to discredit protestors at Trump rallies, as in this excerpt from the Battle Creek rally:

- (6) 5 but seriously look look look (.) they: won't say it (..) they: won't say it (..) because when we have protestors all: in fa:vor (.) they don't talk about it (..) but there:'s a **slob**:: [points to left] (.) there:'s a **real: slob**:
 6 [crowd cheers]
 7 wait [holds up hand, shakes head, crowd cheers] (2) wait a minute (3) she'll get hell: **when she gets back home with mom**:
 8 [crowd laughs]
 9 but (..) but she made: (.5) look: (1) she screams a little bit: (..) and you know what I like to do (.) avoid: them (.) but you know I'll tell you the big problem: (..) I could hardly hear her (.5) what happ:ens is all of you people go crazy (.) look: look: look: (.) and the place (1) okay so there's one: (..) **disgusting person** (.5) who made (.) wait: wait: (.5) who made a terr=I wouldn't say this= (..) but made a (.) horr:ible (..) gesture with the wrong finger right:

This passage coincides with a common occurrence for a Trump rally – a momentary disruption from someone staging a protest after "infiltrating" the event. Here, Trump uses repetitive insults to delegitimize the protestor in several ways: first, by referring to them as a "slob," "a real slob" (line 5). Structuring this insult as a noun

10. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for the helpful suggestion of this categorization system.

makes it particularly egregious relative to other forms of derogation; compare the *adjective + noun* insult “disgusting person” (line 9), in which the protestor is a “person,” despite being characterized as “disgusting.” In line 5, the repetition of the naming process along with the lengthening of “real” in the second iteration cements the dehumanization of the protestor.¹¹ Both “slob” and “disgusting person” can be categorized as insults of the first type: negative qualifiers. However, the speculation that the protestor lives at home with their mother (“when she gets back home with mom,” line 7) is intended as a further insult (of the disparaging comments type), exploiting the erroneous post-Recession, late-capitalistic notion that a young adult living in their parents’ house is somehow a financial or (relatedly in this ideology) moral failing.

Trump embeds each of these insults directly in the CSCT by again using repetitive stock phrases, including two allophrases and three iterations of [*The fake news won’t show the crowds*] (line 5): “they won’t say it,” “they won’t say it,” and “they don’t talk about it.” Trump’s allusion to the presence of his supporters at events other than his rallies (“because when we have protestors all in favor,” line 5) indicates that the fake news’s conspiracy to minimize crowd size applies not only to Trump rallies, but also to anywhere that Trump supporters may gather (cf. Sean Spicer’s comments regarding the Inauguration).

The following excerpt from the El Paso rally illustrates another set of insults within the CSCT, this time directed towards a specific Democratic opponent:

- (7) 57 and we were all challenged (..) by a **young man who lost an election to Ted Cruz** (.)
 58 [crowd boos]
 59 and then they said (.) you know what (.) hey (..) **you’re supposed to win**
 (.) **in order to run** (.) by the way (.5) we (.) I (.) we (.) am one and one
 (.) am one for one (.) think of it (.) we had one election (.) we won (.)
 now we’re gonna beat two for all and everything’s gonna be perfect (.)
 60 [crowd cheers]
 61 when a young man (.) **who’s got very little going for himself** (.) **except**
he’s got a great first name (.5) he is (..) he challenges us (.) so we have
 (.) let’s say (.) thirty five thousand people tonight and **he has two hun-**
dred people (.) **three hundred people** (.) **not too good**
 62 [crowd cheers]

At a simultaneous rally held opposite Democratic candidate Beto O’Rourke’s, Trump denigrated his opponent with several type 2 insults about O’Rourke’s name,

11. This dehumanization, in turn, allows for Trump’s call to violence against this individual a few minutes later (not shown in this excerpt).

his loss to Ted Cruz, and the crowd size at his competing rally, among other targets. In line 57, Trump describes O'Rourke simply as "a young man who lost an election to Ted Cruz," declining to mention him by name, but also suggesting that a loss to Ted Cruz, a Texas Republican and regular Trump adversary, would itself be humiliating. Trump then compares himself favorably to O'Rourke by mocking his record with elections in general ("you're supposed to win [the Senate race] in order to run [for President]," line 59). Comparing Trump's "one for one" election record with O'Rourke's loss to Ted Cruz in Texas is a clear insult from Trump's perspective, who values ratings above all else. Trump goes on to insult O'Rourke again with another unflattering description ("a young man who's got very little going for himself," line 61). This repetition of simple insults (types 1 and 2) provides a baseline for Trump to attack O'Rourke on a deeper level: crowd size. In line 61, Trump uses repetition of numbers to contrast his own crowd size ("thirty-five thousand people") with O'Rourke's less impressive turnout ("two hundred people," "three hundred people") before appending this repetition with another insult in the form of a direct negative affective stance ("not too good").

While Trump openly mocks Beto O'Rourke's given name at the El Paso rally, he is well-known as a creator of nicknames for his political opponents. At the Charlotte rally, we see an example of Trump's use of these type 3 insults in the context of the CSCT:

- (8) by the way you know I have to say this (.5) you have thou:sands and thou:sands of people outside (1) and: (2) some:body was saying that if (..) **Po:cahontas:** (1) any one of em (2) **Sleepy Joe** (.) he doesn't have that==so he doesn't have large crowds==he has very small crowds (..) but if: (..) **Slee:py Joe::** (..) if any of em had a crowd (..) one tenth: the size (..) they'd go around talking about how big the crowd==they never say that

In this excerpt are two of Trump's pejorative nicknames: "Pocahontas" for then-candidate for the Democratic presidential nomination, Senator Elizabeth Warren, and "Sleepy Joe" for now-President Joe Biden. The first of these, Pocahontas, insults Warren for previously claiming Native American ancestry, and the second, Sleepy Joe, mocks Biden for supposedly having low energy, a common source of Trump's insulting nicknames (e.g. Low-Energy Jeb [Bush], Sleepin' Bob Casey, Sleepy Eyes Chuck [Todd]). These nicknames (Biden's appearing twice) are accompanied by insults regarding supposedly small crowd size, also repeated: "he doesn't have that," "he doesn't have large crowds," "he has very small crowds." Starting with an iteration of the [*There are a lot of people outside*] stock phrase ("you have thousands and thousands of people outside"), Trump continues by categorizing all Democrats through the use of his nicknames: "any one of 'em," providing a generalization after "Pocahontas," and "any of 'em," repeated after the second iteration of

“Sleepy Joe.” Thus, the entire Democratic field would be defined by these pejorative nicknames and their low-turnout rallies – were it not for the conspiracy at the center of the CSCT. In addition to claiming that his opponents would falsely brag about their rally turnouts (“if any of ‘em had a crowd one-tenth the size, they’d go around talking about how big the crowd”), Trump directly references the media conspiracy through the [*The fake news won’t show the crowd*] stock phrase: “they never say that.”

Given Trump’s affinity for disparaging his political opponents, it is unsurprising that insults should also serve as a discursive strategy in the construction of the CSCT. By positioning anti-Trump protestors, Democrats, and other perceived enemies with a strongly negative stance, alongside other strategies that evoke the CSCT, Trump is able to associate his opponents’ supposed personal failings with their relatively low numbers of supporters. Thus, the “disparity” between media coverage of opponents’ levels of support versus his own discursively proves the “malicious” intent of the “fake news.”

5.4 Intertextuality

Per the aforementioned definition of intertextuality, this subsection discusses instances in which the crowd sizes at previous rallies become relevant in Trump’s rally speech. This can be seen, among other strategies, in Excerpt 4, in which Trump references a recent rally, repeating its location (“Missouri”) three times.

In the following excerpt from the Sunrise rally, Trump references several other rallies at once:

- (9) 90 I will tell you (.) in fr:ont of these guys and they’re f:ake (..) and they’re corrupt but I will tell you this in: front of the me:dia (..) let me just say (.) this has n:ever happened before (.) we go out we never have an empty s:eat and all I say is (..)
- 91 let’s go to Flo:rida just get me the biggest arena doesn’t matter where (.) let’s g:o to Wis:consin (.) let’s go to Mi:chigan (.) let’s go: to Penn:sylvania (.) North Caroli:na (.) South Caro:lina (.) let’s go anywhere (.) Michigan (..) Michigan
- 92 [crowd cheers]
- 93 a:nd all I say is (..) it does:n’t matter (.) just get me the biggest are:na and we get these mass:ive arenas (.) like this one (..) and they’re packed (.) and we put big screens out:side so people can see (.) and it happens (.) because there’s something happ:ening in our country (.) like has n::ever (.) e:ver been seen (.) before

Though the list of rallies in line 91 is framed discursively as a list of suggestions from Trump to his campaign staff (“let’s go to...”), the locations mentioned do in fact correspond to actual Trump rallies and can easily be interpreted as intertextual references. The clear use of the historical present in line 93 (“we get,” “they’re packed,” “we put,” “it happens”) further supports this claim. Six different states that had previously hosted Trump rallies are included, with one state repeated a total of three times: “Florida,” “Wisconsin,” “Michigan,” “Pennsylvania,” “North Carolina,” “South Carolina,” “Michigan,” “Michigan.” Trump’s ability to garner large crowds underscores his need for large venues everywhere he goes, emphasized in line 91 (“just get me the biggest arena, doesn’t matter where”) and line 92 (“just get me the biggest arena and we get these massive arenas”). These two phrases bookend the list of locations in line 91, neatly applying the implication of large crowds to each of the states.

The relationship of the need for large arenas to the CSCT is also evident in the several iterations of stock phrases used to introduce the topic, including allusions to the stock phrase [*These are very dishonest people*] (“they’re fake,” “they’re corrupt,” line 90), further constructing the difference between the dishonest media and Trump the Truth-Teller, who is willing to combat their conspiracy face-to-face (“I will tell you in front of these guys,” “I will tell you this in front of the media,” line 90). The excerpt has two iterations of the CSCT-specific stock phrase [*You’ve never seen anything like it*], first as “this has never happened before” (line 91), and then “there’s something happening... like has never ever been seen before” (line 93). Also present is an allophrase of [*There are a lot of people outside*] (“we put big screens outside so people can see,” line 93), further enclosing the intertextual references within the iconized stock phrases of the CSCT.

5.5 Recursivity

A striking outcome of the CSCT is the causative circular reasoning involved in the assumption that crowd size is necessarily equal to political support. Under this fallacy, the number of people that a political figure can assemble at an in-person event has a direct correlation with their chances of winning an election. In a U.S. presidential election, any number of factors may accumulate to make this statement false. However, the CROWD SIZE = POLITICAL SUPPORT fallacy is based on what are meant to be observable “truths,” and therefore its simplicity can be deceptively enticing. This circular reasoning is a form of recursivity (Irvine and Gal 2000), an element that defines each of the other strategies discussed in this chapter. Consider the following excerpt from the Elkhart rally:

- (10) 3 remem:ber I used to (..) read stats (1.5) Hispanic (..) African American
 (.5) stats: (1) and I'd read: (.5) and it said: (.5) high crime rate (.) lousy
 education (..) this this==I'd read like six==and **one: day in front of a
 mass:ive crowd** of twenty five thirty thousand people (.5) I said (..) vote:
 for me (.5) what the hell: do you have to lose: (.) and you know what (..) **they
 did: (.) they: did:**
 4 [crowd cheers]
 5 [off mic] remember that:
 ...
 9 the Democrats have had a lock:: (.5) on the Hispanic vote (.5) and they've
 had a lock:: (.5) on the African (.) American vote (.) **no longer no longer**

This excerpt also features intertextuality, where Trump references a previous rally identified not by name or location, but by crowd size: “one day in front of a massive crowd” (line 3). In line 9, Trump refers to the low support the Republican Party has traditionally received from Black and Hispanic Americans while falsely claiming that he has reversed this trend. Electoral support from Black and Hispanic Americans is framed as a direct consequence of Trump’s “massive” crowd size and is used as counterevidence to the media’s conspiracy to downplay his success both in popular opinion and electoral victory. By constructing an opposition between himself and others over crowd size, with the votes of historically marginalized people caught in the middle, Trump is able to use the CSCT recursively, leading to a consequential intradiscursive conclusion: when crowd size equals electoral support, and Trump has the largest crowd size, he cannot lose an election.

The repetition inherent within the various discursive strategies highlighted throughout this chapter (stock phrases, numbers, insults, and intertextuality) speaks to the reflexive nature of much of Trumpian discourse’s logic. For a claim – or at least a conspiracy theory – to be true within Trumpian discourse, it must be repeated. That includes on a micro-scale, such as in the same or adjacent lines of speech, on a meso-scale, across different texts within a speech genre, and on a macro-scale, across different speech genres within the discourse. Though this chapter focuses mainly on the first two scales, the third can be evidenced by a plethora of other tweets, press conferences, and other such texts from Trump and his close allies, which unfortunately lie beyond the scope of this chapter. It is the recursive relationship between intertextual references to the conspiracy theory and its broader intradiscursive construction that gives rise to the term *intradiscursive intertextuality*. Far from being a simple coincidence of the strategies studied here, these elements are inseparably intertwined in the manifestation of the CSCT. The repetition/reflexivity of discursive strategies across these three levels is not merely a feature, but a *requirement* for the CSCT to be part of the discourse’s internal reality. It is both this dependence upon one another and the propensity for the strategies to be used in myriad, increasing contexts that classify it as *recursive*.

6. Conclusion

This chapter has shown that Trump does not simply lie about crowd size – the repetition of intertextual and intradiscursive strategies turn these lies into a conspiracy theory. The recursive application of several identifiable linguistic features in Trump’s rally speeches evoke not only lies about the size of Trump’s audience, but also a targeted accusation of a conspiracy of “fake news” media. This analysis has added to our understanding of how conspiracy theories are discursively constructed, through a case study of a ubiquitous Trumpian conspiracy theory (the CSCT) and five of the discursive strategies involved in its construction: the repetition of stock phrases, numbers, insults, intertextuality and recursivity. Indelibly linked through significant overlap and co-occurrence, these discursive strategies echo throughout the intradiscursive space to create and propagate a particular kind of “truth” in Trumpian discourse. Importantly, these strategies have an iterative, indiscrete relationship with each other, whereby one cannot exist separately from the others, as seen above, e.g., in Excerpts 5, 6, 8, and 9.

Furthermore, the methodology for CDA that I propose in this chapter provides an intuitive framework for the identification of the discursive elements of conspiracy theories. Not restricted to the analysis of conspiracy theories, the recursive processes of *identify*, *isolate*, and *contextualize* are intended to aid in the identification and analysis of ideologically contextualized linguistic features in political discourses more generally. Further aspects of this research probe additional facets of Trumpian “truth,” including an exploration of the discursive functions of the CSCT, as well as critical analyses of other truth-defining linguistic features in Trumpian discourse (Campolong, forthcoming).

Transcription notations

[]	extralinguistic information, e.g., gesture, external events
==	self-latching
:	syllable lengthening
(.)	brief pause
(..)	longer pause, < 0.5 seconds
(2)	pause measured in seconds
bold	indicates excerpt of thematic interest

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From strategic depiction of conspiracies to conspiracy theories

RT's and Sputnik's representations of coronavirus infodemic

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Our study focuses on the coverage of coronavirus-related conspiracies/conspiracy theories published in spring 2020 ($n = 146$) in Anglophone media outlets RT and Sputnik that are financed by the Russian government. In our analysis we rely on a semiotic approach to strategic (conspiracy) narratives. Our study demonstrates a significant shift in the representation of conspiracies: instead of the depiction of malicious acts of secret grouping, RT and Sputnik narrate about alarming effects of conspiracy theories. Coronavirus-related conspiracy theories are represented as a means that the US is using in blame games against China and Russia, as well as a propaganda-tool for scaring the Western audience.

Keywords: strategic narratives, conspiracy theory, Model Reader, COVID-19 infodemic

1. Introduction

The year 2020 will go down in history as the year of the coronavirus pandemic, unprecedented restrictions on mobility, and infodemic. Already in an early phase of the global spread of the COVID-19 epidemic, on February 15 2020, a month before the pandemic was declared, the Director General of the WHO Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus gave a talk that highlighted the dangers of an infodemic emerging side by side with the coronavirus. According to WHO an infodemic is an overabundance of information, which includes deliberate attempts to disseminate wrong information to undermine the public health response and advance

alternative agendas of groups or individuals (WHO 2020). The European Union¹ and several internationally recognised disinformation monitors² expressed their concern over the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China using the infodemic, particularly all kinds of corona-virus-themed conspiracy theories, strategically to increase their influence and validate their narratives in the eyes of a global audience. History has shown that disinformation campaigns focusing on epidemics had been used by strategic actors in the past– e.g. the Soviet Security Service (the KGB) would be systematically disseminating the conspiracy theory according to which the HIV was supposed to be a biological weapon developed by the United States (Geissler AND Sprinkle 2013: 13–15).

This study focuses on the qualitative analysis of the coronavirus-related articles that contain representations of conspiracies/conspiracy theories on the English-language RT and Sputnik. RT (formerly called Russia Today) is a Russian state-funded broadcasting network comprising of radio and TV programmes and news articles. It was launched in 2005 with the direct support of the Russian government and is regarded by scholars as Russia's public diplomacy, nation branding, and state propaganda tool that is used to influence international audiences (Pomerantsev 2016; Flaherty and Roselle 2018; Miazhevich 2018) Sputnik is another major Russian media outlet that publishes stories on topical issues, professing to lay an emphasis on global politics and economics. It was launched in 2014, based on the government-financed radio station Voice of Russia, and owned by news agency Rossiya Segodnya. Both RT as well as Sputnik produce content in multiple language and have developed into an important platform spreading pro-Russian and anti-Western narratives abroad (see Kragh and Åsberg 2017; Miazhevich 2018; Pomerantsev 2016; Wagnsson and Barzanje 2021). After Russia's invasion in Ukraine in February 2022, both channels were banned in the European Union.

Several earlier studies have pointed out that conspiracy theories play an important role in the messages of RT and Sputnik (Yablokov 2015; Flaherty and Roselle 2018; Ramsay and Robertshaw 2019; Watanabe 2018; Kalmar 2018). On the one hand, these fit the counter-hegemonic image of RT and Sputnik: the outlets use the slogans *Question more* (RT) and *Telling the Untold* (Sputnik) and brand themselves as channels offering an alternative to the decadent media serving the interests of Western power and business elites (Miazhevich 2018; Yablokov 2015). This is

1. See Briefing. COVID-19 foreign influence campaigns Europe and the global battle of narratives, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2020/649367/EPRS_BRI\(2020\)649367_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2020/649367/EPRS_BRI(2020)649367_EN.pdf);

2. See https://s3-ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/ad-aspi/2020-04/Patriotic%20Troll%20Campaigns%20Report_ASPI%20Cyber.pdf, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/the-secret-labs-conspiracy-a-converging-narrative/?highlight=conspiracy%20theory>, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/capitalising-on-the-coronavirus-onspiracist-frenzy/>;

somewhat paradoxical as often their stories recycle content from Western media channels (Kragh and Åsberg 2017: 788; Watanabe 2018: 16). On the other hand, conspiracy theories suit Russia's strategic aims that are broadly connected with undermining the policies of the Western countries and, in turn, legitimising Russia's actions (Yablokov 2015: 301). Conspiracy theories are narrative explanations that see "a group of people acting in secret to nefarious end" (Birchall 2006: 34). Conspiracy narratives have proved themselves as effective strategic "means of creating distrust or even fear of and disdain towards political opponents, of spicing up points being made and constructing a positive self-image of moral superiority" (Madisson and Ventsel 2020: 11).

We are not aware of any thorough academic publications concerning the coronavirus-related content that has appeared on RT and Sputnik. The most direct analysis of this topic comes from a brief inquiry published on the research website of Stephen Hutchings and Vera Tolz from the University of Manchester that focuses on the COVID-19 reflections that had appeared on RT until April 2020. One of the telling conclusions Hutchings and Tolz (2020) draw is that EUvsDisinfo, the EU's main task force for fighting Russian disinformation, erroneously attributed propagating coronavirus-themed conspiracy theories to RT. The authors agree that there was much talk of conspiracy theories in RT's content, yet the theories were primarily presented in a condemning or ridiculing light (Hutchings and Tolz 2020).

This chapter analyses the, seemingly paradoxical, shift of RT and Sputnik from exposing secret manipulations and conspiracies towards harsh criticism of conspiracy theories. Our aim is to map the main narratives speaking of conspiracies/conspiracy theories spreading via these media channels, and explain their predominant meaning-making tendencies and communicative functions. In addition, we attempt to show what associations and interpretative competencies such media coverage is likely to awaken in the target audience, as well as to explain the broader strategic aim of spreading such tales. Our analysis relies on a semiotic model that makes it possible to explicate the invariant mechanisms of meaning-making of conspiracy narratives (see Madisson 2014, 2016; Ventsel 2016; Madisson and Ventsel 2016, 2018) and on the semiotic approach to the strategic narrative (Ventsel 2023 in press; Madisson and Ventsel 2020). European semiotics in general (Barthes, Kristeva, et al.) and the approaches used in this article (Eco, Lotman) share similar theoretical assumptions with several schools of discourse analysis (Laclau's and Essex's political discourse analysis, Michel Pêcheux's and Michel Foucault's approaches, etc.) and develop Saussure's and Benveniste's ideas further on meaning as a result of systemic relations. At the same time, the traditional structuralist view on the system of meaning as a closed entity has been abandoned, and it is stressed that meaning making is open to various contextual factors (Wodak and Meyer 2001; Seriot 1999; Laclau 1993; Ventsel 2011; O'Halloran and Tan 2023, in press).

2. The model of textual strategies of strategic (conspiracy) narratives

Strategic narratives can be described as “means by which political actors attempt to construct a shared meaning of the past, present, and future of international politics to shape the behaviour of domestic and international actors” (Miskimmon et al. 2017: 6). Influencing through strategic narrative is based on the relation between the author–text/message–receiver that presupposes a shared part of memory in communication partners. For the text to catch the audience’s attention the latter have to a degree to be aware of the events as well as the central theme of the conflict represented in the narrative, and of the parties involved. For the message to achieve its aims its interpretation needs to be a part “of its generation mechanism: to generate a text means to trigger a strategy a constituent part of which is foreseeing the other moves (of the potential receiver – the authors’ addition)” (Eco 2005: 61). The shaper of the strategic narrative takes into account possible interpretative moves by the addressee and directs them through pragmatic aims.

According to Umberto Eco (2005), when creating the text the author constructs a Model Reader whose aim is to direct the reader in as an accurate decoding of the message as possible. This means that in an ideal case the strategic message should actualise in the addressee competencies (symbols, codes, historical and cultural subtexts, rhetorical devices, etc.) desired by the author (Madisson and Ventsel 2020: 28). The Model Reader is constructed with the help of meaning-making strategies that are textually determined and can therefore be studied on the level of the discourse. Although Eco speaks of the Model Reader primarily proceeding from the general aims of text creation, the present treatment uses the Model Reader as an analytic tool to analyse strategic narratives. The promise of researching strategic narratives lies in the possibility of studying the communicative aims that the text is meant to achieve. We can outline the following strategies constructing the Model Reader:

Topic as the central conflict-theme of strategic narrative (Madisson and Ventsel 2020: 51–52). In short, the topic is a hypothesis formulated by the interpreters when they attempt to determine what the text is about (Eco 2005: 98). Usually the headlines, subtitles and key phrases are of help in determining the topic (Eco 2005: 99). Determining the topic is a cooperative (pragmatic) step that directs the reader towards determining the text’s semantic properties (Eco 2005: 108–109). In the case of the media projections of strategic narratives, the topic can usually be determined by detecting the central conflict about which the different parties are fighting or constructing a trigger that brings an imbalance into the initially balanced state of relations (Madisson and Ventsel 2020: 52). Similarly to strategic narratives, conspiracy theories centre around a conflict in which those suffering from the conspiracy and evil-minded powers who gain from it are brought face to face.

A *basic dictionary and choice of the language* (Eco 2005: 84) that is necessary for the words used in the text to be recognisable by the target audience on an elementary semantic level. The choice of the basic dictionary has to guarantee that the message is initially understood by the audience, which is why the events, actors and proper names depicted in a strategic conspiracy narrative have to be somewhat familiar to the target audience (Madisson and Ventsel 2020: 27).

The *rhetorical and stylistic options* are understandable to interpreters who have a certain encyclopaedic competence or are aware of the words' contextual or pragmatic meaning as connected to different empirical usages in addition to the so-called dictionary meanings and rules of syntax. The strategic narrative should contain references to the peculiarities of the discourse use predominant in the target audience, as well as of similes, cases of irony, metaphors and personifications, etc., they would understand (Madisson and Ventsel 2020: 27).

Speaking of constructing the Model Reader in the context of conspiracy narratives, one of the most often employed textual strategies is generating analogies which mostly work on the principle of associative modelling (Madisson and Ventsel 2020; Madisson 2014, 2016). Often, analogies are only marked by acts of mere indication or naming that is approximate creation of links (Lotman 1975).

Another rhetorical textual strategy characteristic of conspiracy narratives is *mirror projection* or *antithetic depiction* (Madisson 2014: 283–284). This is an extreme case of binary modelling characterised by an attempt to interpret all semiotic systems or meaningful wholes (cultures, texts) that are opposed to the pre-given *correct* system as a *unified* wrong system – an anticulture (Lotman and Uspenskij 1978).

The *choice of the ordinary scenario* determines how the actors' specific characteristics and the trajectory of their actions are represented in strategic narratives (Eco 2005: 86). Understanding the ordinary scenario presupposes pragmatic competence also on the part of the interpreter, that is, certain normative and stereotypical developments and characters that have become condensed in their memory and be mediated by earlier textual experiences (Eco 2005: 87). A specificity of texts depicting conspiracies is that they often represent the world as a battle between Good and Evil.

Intertextual choices point at the author's intention to create a text whose reader is aware of a specific textual repertoire and can comprehend certain conceptions and explanatory schemes (Eco 2005: 88). Conspiracy narratives contain fairly typical references, e.g., to classic literary dystopias such as Orwell's *1984* the image of the thought police (see Madisson and Ventsel 2020: 81).

The *author's ideological choices* touch upon the ways in which the author appeals to the readers' values and ideological leanings by using different textual devices (Eco 2005: 91). This can allow adding credibility to certain statements or directing the interpreter to certain world-view-related dominants. The conflicts

in today's conspiracy theories are often focused on the opposition of liberal and conservative ideologies that is evoked through intertextual references (Madisson and Ventsel 2020: 28–29).

Detecting the textual strategies constructing the Model Reader makes it possible to explicate how the target audience is being shaped in texts speaking of conspiracies and/or conspiracy theories and how the parties in the conflict are constructed in these so as to meet the author's strategic aims. As repetition can be regarded as a special characteristic of the strategic narrative (Zhabotynska and Velivchenko 2019: 361), the continuous and repetitive use of these textual strategies in constructing the Model Reader allows us to presume that these are the result of the author's conscious choice to pursue particular strategic aims (Ventsel 2023 in press).

3. Empirical material and analysis procedure

The empirical part of this study is based on the stories that contained references to the coronavirus and conspiracies/conspiracy theories that appeared on RT and Sputnik from 1 February to 31 May, 2020. We decided in favour of this period for it covers the outbreak of the coronavirus epidemic in Europe and North America, the declaration of the pandemic and the related restrictions on mobility as well as the approach of the end of the first wave of the virus and loosening of the restrictions in many countries.

In compiling our sample we relied on RT's and Sputnik's research engines. We focused on the stories that contained at least one of the following keywords: *COVID-19*, *coronavirus*, *SARS-CoV-2*; and at least one of the following keywords *conspiracy theory*, *conspiracy*, *plot*, *fake*, *Wuhan Lab*, *false flag*, *coverup*. Taking these considerations into account, our sample involved 62 stories from Sputnik and 84 from RT; the majority of these had been published in the section of international news or news on particular countries, primarily the USA and the UK and occasionally also Russia. Approximately one third of the analysed content was classified as opinion pieces; due to the specificity of the genre the texts contained numerous vivid images and evaluative statements. Although several stories were accompanied by audiovisual content interesting to this study, we decided to focus on textual representations.

After collecting the material we focused on close reading of the RT and Sputnik stories. As no considerable differences appeared between the coronavirus coverage in RT and Sputnik we decided in favour of trans-publications or cross-case analysis. In the analysis we paid attention to what topics and conflicts they were mentioned in connection to, what were the attitudes towards the conspiracy/conspiracy theory representations, who was depicted as the main active agent, what aims were

connected with spreading conspiracies/conspiracy theories, and who was depicted as suffering the most due to the conspiracies/conspiracy theories.

After that we synthesised the notes of authors into a unified mapping and moved to the next stage – analysing the main ways of depicting conspiracies/conspiracy theories in the light of the semiotic model of strategic conspiracy narratives.

It is important to bear in mind two caveats when it comes to our approach. First, it should be recognised that we do not have direct access to the Russian Federation's broad strategic aims when analysing RT and Sputnik (see Wagnsson and Barzanje 2021: 240). Our approach is centred around empirical textual material through which the strategic influencing of the audience occurs. We proceed from the presumption that the strategic function of media texts becomes clear if we detect the textual strategic devices that are used for shaping the aim and the target audience, without us having to pose questions concerning “primary authorship of the narrative or the detection of the central instance coordinating its dissemination” (Madisson and Ventsel 2020: 109). Our approach does not allow to treat the level of reception. The Model Reader makes it possible to analyse potential interpretation paths towards which the target audience is being directed.

Secondly, we are not taking a position on the existence of conspiracies, but study only the textual strategies of conspiracy narratives. We find that it is important to study conspiracies and conspiracy theories as the latter have a central role in the battle for the meaning of the coronavirus epidemic and infodemic.

4. Analysis of representations of conspiracies and conspiracy theories

In the analysis we detected four main topics focusing on conspiracy theories and conspiracies. Such differentiation first and foremost bears the function of creating an analytic organisation as the same text might contain several parallel topics and topics occasionally become intermingled. Below, the main textual strategies of constructing the Model Reader used in covering the topics are introduced. Although we detected all textual strategies in relation to each topic, we highlight the dominant ones regarding each of them. We give concrete textual examples of each topic and the textual strategy that in our estimation serves as the clearest representation of these.

4.1 Viral spread of 5G and anti-vaccination COVID-19 conspiracy theories

In this period quite a few stories were published on the main topic of the explosive spread of conspiracy theories linking 5G waves and/or dangerous vaccines and the coronavirus on social media. For example, it was pointed out that 5G weakens people's immunity and makes them more vulnerable to the coronavirus and

that the knowledge of this was being covered up from the public. The content of anti-vaccination theories can roughly be summarised as follows: Bill Gates, or another person considered to be a globalist, e.g. George Soros, are malevolently using the coronavirus and the accompanying background of fear to attach microchips to as many people as possible in the shadow of corona vaccines so as to make them manipulable (Korso 2020a; RT 2020a; RT 2020b).

The articles on RT and Sputnik on conspiracy theories were primarily critical, bringing forth the ungroundedness of such the anti-vaccination or 5G conspiracy speculations. Often it was pointed out in the title that it was a “a conspiracy theory”, “fake news” or “scaremongering device” (Sputnik 2020a; Korso 2020b).

The articles mediated opinions of different countries’ officials (Cabinet Office Minister Michael Gove (Korso 2020b)) and institutions (British media regulator Ofcom (Sputnik 2020b)) or recognised fact checkers (e.g. Logically) involved in the COVID-19 crisis communication that unequivocally denounced 5G conspiracy theories and even declared them dangerous. The aim of the textual strategy pointing at official expert evaluations was to create a Model Reader critical of the 5G conspiracy theories; the standpoint of Stephen Powis, National Medical Director of the National Health Service of England (Korso 2020c) covered on both RT and Sputnik is a good example of this textual strategy:

The 5G story is complete and utter rubbish, it’s nonsense, it’s the worst kind of fake news. The reality is that the mobile phone networks are absolutely critical to all of us, particularly at a time when we are asking people to stay at home.

Additionally, the RT and Sputnik stories displayed the use of a ridiculing (through words such as “dangerous nonsense”, “mysterious”, “ill-judged”, “myths about 5G”, etc), and at times also denigrating (“utter rubbish”, “bizarre”), rhetorical style. Western netizens linked to the spread of 5G conspiracy theories were depicted as simple-minded, weak and confused (RT 2020c).

Differently from 5G theories, in the case of anti-vaccination theories no messages from scientists/experts warning against or refuting these were mediated. At the same time, neither RT nor Sputnik let it on that the publications would condone the explanations offered by the anti-vaccination conspiracy theories connected to the coronavirus.

Such criticism of anti-vaccination and 5G conspiracy theories was often presented in the Model Reader on the basis of an ordinary scenario according to which people will behave irrationally and unusually in a crisis situation: the spread of such conspiracy theories is a symptom of (mostly Western) people’s poor mental coping with the corona crisis. In connection with the latter, the attacks against 5G masts committed by conspiracy-theorist activists received ample coverage. As a rule, such articles focused on covering attacks that had taken place in Europe, mostly in the

UK and the Netherlands, but some stories also reported on similar events in Canada and the USA (Cureton 2020a; RT 2020b; Sputnik 2020c; Dergacheva 2020a; RT 2020d; RT 2020e).

The Model Reader was constructed with a text strategic dominant whose aim was to direct the reader towards interpreting the endangering of possible 5G trade negotiations between Huawei and several Western countries (e.g. UK, France) as the main aim of spreading conspiracy theories pointing at connections between 5G and the coronavirus (RT 2020e). In this context, the two active parts of conflict have been pointed out. First, representatives of the Trump administration whose interests lie in the failing of trade agreements between Huawei and European countries and who use coronavirus-related 5G stories as part of the scaremongering campaign targeting the Chinese technology giant. Second, the Tories of the UK whose motives were mostly seen as arising from domestic politics (Serebriakova 2020; RT 2020f). In such cases, RT and Sputnik as well as the spokespersons mediated on the channel clearly expressed their condemnation of making strategic use of 5G-related fears and ungrounded accusations of political opponents, mainly China and Iran (Sputnik 2020d). Differently from pointing at the reasons for the spread of 5G conspiracy theories (the USA circulating them to blame China) there was no such agency in case of anti-vaccination conspiracy theories pointed out in the RT and Sputnik stories; nor were the hidden goals of the dissemination of such conspiracy theories provided.

To sum up, in RT and Sputnik stories of conspiracy theories linking 5G, anti-vaccination conspiracy theories and the coronavirus, a Model Reader was constructed that was dominated by a critical and ridiculing attitude. The reader was directed towards interpreting the theories as signs of a collective tsunami of fear pointing at an infodemic, that is leading Westerners to panic and irrational behaviour. The fiery accusations that Trump made against China enabled to show that the US administration's economic interests lie behind the strategic spread of 5G conspiracy theories.

4.2 States/high officials accuse one another of a conspiracy concerning the coronavirus as a biological weapon

One of the central topics of the stories that appeared during the period analysed was that of different countries accusing one another of secretly creating the coronavirus as a biological weapon and of hiding the evidence after the pandemic broke out. A weaker version of this topic explained the outbreak of coronavirus as a result of human negligence or its intentional cover-up.

In most stories the basic dictionary of the narrative's Model Reader consisted of references to powerful representatives of the USA, mostly former President Donald

J. Trump and former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, as spreading conspiracy theories that see China's malevolent activities or culpable negligence behind the virus outbreak.

In such representations neither RT nor Sputnik expressed any agreement with the conspiracy theories; rather, the tone of the articles would condemn them. On the level of the headlines as well as of article content the explicit label of *conspiracy theories* was used and occasionally the channels emphasised that no watertight evidence had been provided regarding the biological weapon conspiracies. On several occasions references were made to research and scientific evaluations or comments from US politicians, intelligence agencies and representatives of the FBI that confirmed the zoonotic origin of the virus (Burunov 2020, Korso 2020d; Cureton 2020b; RT 2020g).

When debunking the biological weapon conspiracy theories, arguments coming from scientists or top officials of the USA were mostly used. This communicates an impression of neutrality of the criticism in the Model Reader, and directs the target audience towards seeing a conflict of opinion within the USA.

The strongest condemnation in the articles was directed at the USA as the main disseminator of biological-weapon conspiracy theories. Several articles pointed out that Trump, "an outspoken fan of conspiracy theories" (Sputnik 2020e) was behind such dissemination and his whole administration was following his example with the aim of undermining China's international reputation or even to legitimise waging a war with China (van de Beek 2020a; Sputnik 2020d; Sputnik 2020f). The position of RT and Sputnik is concisely outlined in an interview with ex-UN official Alfred de Zayas that appeared in Sputnik (Blinova 2020):

Trump is a populist by nature, but not a very convincing one. There is zero evidence, not even a beginning of a "piste" to follow. Just a cheap conspiracy theory that smacks of xenophobia and "hate speech" against the Chinese and other Asians.

The first sentence discredits Trump's standpoint ("populist by nature") and points out that his accusations have no scientific basis ("zero evidence", no "piste to follow"). In addition to overthrowing his accusations, also the immorality of his activities is mentioned (sowing of "xenophobia" and "hate speech"). In addition to blaming China, the reason for spreading such conspiracy theories was seen in the wish of the US administration to divert attention from problems in domestic politics, particularly in managing the corona crisis (Sputnik 2020g; Luqman, Blackmon 2020). We can see here an ideological-political textual strategy in constructing the Model Reader that points at the immorality of US politics, for differently from China, Cuba and Russia who "are sending medical teams and supplies around the globe, the US abuses the corona crisis to throw mud at China and break Iran and Venezuela" (Van de Beek 2020a).

The stories representing the US administration as the main disseminator of conspiracy theories pointed out at times that such spreading activity, as part of public diplomacy, has been causing tensions between the USA and its allies and strongly upset China and the rest of the world (Van de Beek 2020a). The media coverage also referred to the opinions of scientists or politicians who refuted such accusations on the part of the US administration as “absolutely crazy” (Dergacheva 2020b). Thus, the tendency to interpret the USA as the origin of the dissemination of such conspiracy theories prevailed in the Model Reader.

In addition to the US administration, also Western media were accused of giving too much time and space to conspiracy theories concerning biological-weapon and the like. The Model Reader was aimed at getting the impression that Western media and US-based non-governmental organisations are “orchestrated by the “US government, NATO, arms industry to drive Cold War PR blitz”” (Sputnik 2020f). Also here, negative ideological-political encoding appears as an important textual strategy of constructing the Model Reader: freedom of speech constituting Western democracy is illusionary, since it is actually in the grip of the US administration.

In summary, Sputnik and RT had a negative attitude to intimations of biological weapon conspiracies: these were considered unfounded and disproved by scientists. One of the main dominants in constructing the Model Reader was accusing the US political elites and the media serving their interests of disseminating conspiracy theories whose aim was mostly seen in undermining China’s international reputation. Occasionally, characteristics of conspiracy theories emerged in such accusations published on RT and Sputnik; they will be discussed below.

4.3 Corona infodemic and coronavirus anxiety are being used maliciously

Occasionally stories appeared on RT and Sputnik in which the central conflict was the malicious use of the corona crisis in order to manipulate the opinions of ordinary citizens of Western countries and gain greater control of them. The abbreviation MSM or its longer version mainstream media (RT 2020i; Birchall 2020a) and *politicians and media* establishment/elite (Tickle 2020a; Wilson 2020) held the central position in the headlines and *globalism/globalists* were also often mentioned (Dockery 2020). Such basic dictionary, particularly if a text contains several such signifiers, directs the target audience towards the NWO basic scenario, which is broadly connected with an all-encompassing conspiracy through which biased powers that have infiltrated mainstream structures are attempting to subject humankind to their control.

Malevolent actors appearing in opinion stories, as well as their aims can broadly be divided in two. Firstly, a fairly abstract elite was mentioned that will use the coronavirus to deprive people from all possible freedoms and submit them to their

control. It is vividly expressed in Guy Birchall's (2020b) opinion piece with the telling title "From lions to lambs: Covid-19 reveals supposedly freedom-loving British to be anything but, as we happily clap away our liberty", that claimed that mainstream media and experts have been doing such intensive propaganda work that "the British people have embraced their new restrictions in frighteningly supine and lamb-like fashion." The image of the sheep signifying so-called unenlightened citizens is widespread in NWO conspiracy theories.

Secondly, the fears related to the coronavirus that were fanned by the Western media were related to a hidden anti-Trump influencing campaign, for instance in an opinion story on RT titled "Weaponizing the coronavirus: Why US politicians & media suddenly care (hint: it's about getting Trump)": "[...] Democrats and media NeverTrumpers alike, would have Americans believe that the virus is not contained, that Trump has gutted the government's ability to respond to it, and his administration doesn't know what it's doing" (Malic 2020a). Both the title and the quoted sentence suggest that the reader is to be convinced that the Democrats and the media supporting them are using the coronavirus-related infodemic in their own interests. Also, in other stories of anti-Trump influencing such ideological encoding became clearly visible – thus dishonest tricks were attributed to the Democrats and liberal media such as *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, *NBC News*, *CNN*, etc. (RT 2020i; Sputnik 2020h). In brief, such texts construct a Model Reader that leads the target audience towards an interpretation of the above-mentioned media channels and the Democrats through a negative ideological encoding.

In summary, on RT and Sputnik the topic was dominated by a textual strategy of creating the Model Reader that directs the interpreter towards looking for malicious manipulations behind the public messages related to the coronavirus. The interpreter was directed towards considering also Trump as victim of a malicious hidden influencing campaign.

4.4 False accusations of disseminating conspiracy theories as part of hostile information influence activities

Quite often, the central conflict in the stories published by RT and Sputnik was ungrounded and malicious accusing of Russia, and occasionally China, of spreading disinformation related to the pandemic, particularly disseminating conspiracy theories. The USA, the EU and its strategic communication units and Anglo-American media were described as primary actors or authors of the ungrounded accusations. In the titles and leading paragraphs of the stories such phrases appeared as Anti-Russia hysteria (Van de Beek 2020b), 'Russia Threat' Yarn (Sputnik 2020i), Covid-19 information war against Russia (MacDonald 2020), and Russiagate (RT 2020j; Malic 2020b, 2020d) all of which direct the reader towards a base narrative of systemic enmity towards Russia.

The main motif for the media, Brussels and Washington to accuse Russia in coronavirus-related conspiracy theories, was found in the fear and dissatisfaction of the Western people so that Russia could be turned into a universal scapegoat to blame for the reigning chaos (Sputnik 2020i; MacDonald 2020 ; Malic 2020b). It was suggested for instance that during the period of anti-lockdown protests in the UK and Germany the Brussels spokespeople started to issue warnings claiming that “Russian media and “Kremlin-friendly” sources were pushing conspiracy theories about Covid-19” (RT 2020k). Erroneous accusations of anti-Russia conspiracy theories were presented in the RT and Sputnik stories as a long-lasting and repeated pattern: “When all else fails, blame Russia” (Malic 2020b) or “the fail-proof ‘blame Russia’ approach” (RT 2020i; Sputnik 2020j).

The recurring codename for the Russophobic series of accusations based on unproven conspiracy theories was the label of Russiagate. The stories represented Russiagate as having lasted for at least four years (Malic 2020c, 2020d); its important components included the Steele dossier (Malic 2020d), considered to be the incentive to start an investigation into Russian interference in the 2016 Presidential Election in the US (RT 2020m); the Skripal affair; the application of the Gerassimov doctrine; and various cases of hacking (Tickle 2020b; Malic 2020e). The Russiagate examples clearly demonstrate the typical meaning-making of conspiracy theory based on analogies: phenomena totally dissimilar in essence such as the outbreak of the coronavirus and infodemic and the Skripal poisonings are linked through the motif of the malevolent and systemic anti-Russia information manipulation by Western powers. Such references construct a Model Reader whose aim is to lead the target audience towards looking for conspiracy motifs behind all accusations made against Russia and seeing all present phenomena and events of Russiagate as Western fabrications. The generation of such meaning is made possible by analogies – malevolent hidden activities of the West are shown to be the common element in references compromising Russia.

We noticed a certain ideological coding in the case of texts concerning Russiagate. It was mostly the US Democrats that were represented as the architects of Russiagate; for instance, Barack Obama was given the title of Russiagate godfather (Malic 2020c). False accusations of Russia in connection with coronavirus-related conspiracy theories were mostly connected with left-wing media and “red-baiting blue-checkmarks” (RT 2020n). The latter, pejorative expression is used in right-wing discourse to signify left-wing politically correct spokespersons who have had their identities verified on Twitter, that is, they have obtained the blue checkmark.

In addition, analogies with China were created in the context of the victim position in malicious dissemination of conspiracy theories – using the logic of Russiagate, also Chinagate was evoked. In the case of Chinagate it was suggested that the USA is spreading ungrounded claims as if China was providing misleading data concerning the coronavirus and 5G technology (Malic 2020e; Dockery 2020;

RT 2020n). Occasionally, even analogies with the war in Iraq, prominently justified by the US-invented conspiracy theory regarding weapons of mass destruction, were made. The gist of such explanations is given in the title of Scott Ritter's story "As the Trump administration legitimizes Covid-19's 'China lab' origins conspiracy theory, remember Iraqi 'WMD'" (Ritter 2020). Creating such analogies constructs the explanatory scheme in the Model Reader that misleading conspiracy theories can be continuously found in the arsenal of the USA (and other Western states) and that spreading these is sometimes followed by real military interventions. Among other things, the representation of the USA as a self-serving force disseminating dangerous conspiracy theories casts a noticeable shadow on all the statements the state would make on the coronavirus outbreak and the infodemic.

The brunt of the responsibility for the malicious linking of the infodemic with Russia, i.e. Russiagate's final component, was attributed to the United States Department of State and the European External Action Service (EEAS) that published a report, based on disinformation monitoring activities, that criticised Russia for a corona-themed disinformation campaign. For instance, Nebosja Malic's story (2020b) claimed that the report had been compiled by the "propaganda division" of the EEAS and that it "consists of generalities, cliches and tropes already worn out from four years of "Russiagate" hysteria in the US [...]" Such references strongly demonstrate a device that had characterised RT stories even earlier – underscoring the hypocrisy of those criticising Russia. The use of mirror projection and antithesis is a rhetorical device characteristic of conspiracy narratives. Firstly the EEAS is attributed long-term anti-Russia information influencing activities, including dissemination of conspiracy theories. Against this background the accusations coming from the EEAS linking Russia to a corona-themed disinformation campaign are shown to appear immoral and hollow. A sceptical stance towards frontliners in the fight against disinformation is constructed in the Model Reader by repeating in different stories that those who accuse others of disinformation and spreading conspiracy theories are the most dangerous disseminators of the same.

To conclude, the Sputnik and RT stories represented accusations of dissemination of coronavirus conspiracy theories that were launched against Russia as part of a long-lasting Western information influence campaign. The main dominant in the construction of the stories belonging in this topic was creating analogies between accusations connected with the corona-infodemic, the Steele dossier, the Skripal poisonings, and other events. Also, an analogy was created between Western hostility to Russia and China, or Russiagate and Chinagate. Another predominant device was the use of antithesis preceded by projecting an accusation of disinformation onto the EEAS and thereafter presenting statements regarding Russia as hypocritical.

5. Discussion

Our analysis detected four major topics in narrating conspiracies and conspiracy theories. Usually, RT and Sputnik expressed explicitly negative attitudes towards conspiracy theories. Two peculiarities of strategic narration appeared in such representations: (a) criticism of conspiracy theories, and (b) conspiracy-based explanation of the circulation of conspiracy theories.

The viral dissemination of conspiracy theories that blame 5G for the rapid spread of COVID-19 and growing popularity of anti-vaccine plot was fiercely condemned in Russian Anglophone media outlets as a manifestation of irrational fear and weakness on the part of Western people. The coronavirus bioweapon conspiracy theories were treated as a particularly dangerous form of COVID-19 infodemic and the US leaders were severely condemned for spreading them. This enabled RT and Sputnik to position themselves as media-literate and critical channels. They often supported claims about the baseless and misinforming nature of COVID-19 conspiracy theories by referring to scientific research and statements by medical and communication experts etc. Anti-conspiracy discourse typically identifies its spokespersons as rational and responsible agents who are in sharp contrast with paranoid and irresponsible conspiracy theorists (Goshorn 2000).

In case of these two topics, we distinguished two dominant ways in which RT and Sputnik use the strategic-depiction conspiracy theories. Firstly, anti-conspiracy discourse was used to support the Russian Federation's strategic narrative of the general decline of the West, i.e. a story about a morally corrupt elite and frightened, easily manipulable people (Ventsel 2023 in press; Ramsay and Robertshaw 2019; Pomerantsev and Weiss 2014). Such a narrative makes it possible to strengthen anti-Western attitudes and to present the RF, as well as people who consume its media, as insightful and moral agents.

Secondly, Russian Anglophone media outlets presented selective criticism of conspiracy theories. The US, the EU and the Western mainstream media were blamed for voicing and circulating COVID-19 plots. President Trump's speculations about the Wuhan lab and biological weapon theories were severely condemned as dangerous and sneaky strategic moves amidst the US-China trade wars that aim to damage the international reputation of China. It is noteworthy that similar conspiracy statements made by China and Iran were not so strongly criticized; rather, they were seen as a response to an aggressive PR-campaign on part of the US. Such tactics of selective criticism make it possible to support the RF's strategic narrative of partnership with China (see also Ventsel, Madisson and Hansson 2021; Jantunen 2018).

Notwithstanding the extensive condemnation of COVID-19 conspiracy theories, RT and Sputnik also published stories that carried the main features of conspiracy theories. There were several articles about the covert malicious manipulation of the Western public opinion that harms a great number of people. As a third topic,

we noticed NWO plots that claimed that the US media and power elite are malevolently using the coronavirus to stir up fears and to establish greater control over population. This conspiracy narrative matches with the aforementioned strategic narrative of the decadent West.

The fourth topic included the depiction of both conspiracies and conspiracy theories. Alleged false accusations of Russia of spreading COVID-19 conspiracy theories were themselves represented as a part of a conspiracy, plotted by the US, the EU and the Western mainstream media. Such purportedly baseless accusations were depicted as a part of a vast hostile information influence campaign against Russia. For a long time, RT and Sputnik have propagated a narrative of deceptive, manipulative and Russophobic ‘Anglo-Saxon media’ (Yablokov 2015: 305) and we noticed a strategic repetition of this plot in the analysed articles. It is important to stress that in the cases when prominent Western media outlets or disinformation detectors make inaccurate or misleading statements about Russian information influence activities, the Kremlin will use these claims to fortify the aforementioned narrative (see Hutchings and Tolz 2020). The articles related to the fourth topic paid much attention to the Steele dossier, which was presented as an example of the Russophobic bias of the Western media. The media coverage of this dossier and the so-called Russiagate has been criticized not only by RT and Sputnik, but also by renowned media scholars (see Majin 2019, Marmura 2020). Several researchers have noticed that the Kremlin has actively spread a narrative that the West is waging an aggressive information warfare against Russia (Kragh and Åsberg 2017: 778, Kragh et al. 2020; Pomerantsev 2019: 39). Russia positions itself as a victim of such information warfare (Berzina 2018: 170) and claims that the West’s devious hostile influence campaigns need strong counter-measures (Van Herpen 2015).

Our analysis shows that conspiracy theory is seen as an important means of contemporary information warfare – it is associated with the capacity of fuelling fears and inducing irrational behaviour. It appears that RT and Sputnik have internalised the criticism of several researchers and media experts who have accused them of conspiracy theorising. Now, the Russian Anglophone media channels blame their opponents for the same sin. Explicit condemnation of conspiracy theories enables RT and Sputnik to mask their own representations of the alleged Western conspiracies. Conspiracy theory has become new “fake news” because it functions as a universal accusation that can be used to undermine one’s opponent’s reputation.

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“Gender ideology” and the discursive infrastructure of a transnational conspiracy theory

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The formula “gender ideology” has recently gained political traction in several countries. This chapter investigates its conspiracist discursive infrastructure by probing two corpora of far-right media from Brazil and the US. Analysis indicates that “gender ideology” is framed within semantic realms of manipulation, puppeteering, falseness, and danger. It also suggests that anti-gender rhetoric acts as an all-encompassing narrative whereby a cohort of inchoate but ideologically interlinked conspiracy theories are lumped together in a seemingly coherent whole. Comparing datasets from two countries empirically illustrates how anti-gender rhetoric crosses transnational borders and adapts to local specifics along the way.

Keywords: gender, ideology, conspiracy theories, Brazil, USA, corpus-based critical discourse analysis, floating signifier

1. Introduction

Mobilizations against the feminist concept of gender have recently mushroomed across the globe.¹ Disparate political actors, civil society groups, and institutions rally against gender equity, sexual and reproductive rights, and pro-LGBTIQ+ legislation, giving morally-loaded discursive tropes to far-right populists who opportunistically produce moral panic to bamboozle citizens into their fundamentalist projects. Depicting feminism and queer activism as harbingers of totalitarianism, these groups coalesce around the “gender ideology” formula, collating various expressive forms onto it to attack the view of gender as socially constructed. This

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“crusade against gender” (Corrêa 2018) attempts to strengthen ideals such as the heterosexual family and the nation by delegitimizing well-established concepts in academic circles and advancing its own “alternative field of knowledge production” (Graff and Korolczuk 2017: 183) grounded on a supposedly scientific version of dogmas about the role of women and men in society.

To a significant extent, “gender ideology” has gained social and political traction from the apocalyptic tone its supporters champion in their public appearances. A paradigmatic case is that of the 2016 Colombian referendum on ratifying the peace agreement between the Revolutionary Armed Forces (FARC) and the government. Noting that the armed conflict victimizes LGBTIQ+ people forty times more frequently than the heterosexual population (Muelle 2017), the agreement aimed to promote equality for all citizens, regardless of sexual orientation and gender identity. Demanding that the term “gender” be dropped from the text, Colombian Catholic authorities vociferously mobilized their forces to reject it while also requiring that the agreement include religious institutions among vulnerable groups (Aciprensa 2017). These demands were not granted, and, by a small majority, the population voted against the peace agreement because it would supposedly lead to unrestrained sexual perversion.

This case illustrates how the concept of gender has taken on a weighty role in the recent rise of the global right (Graff et al. 2019). Despite local particularities, transnational anti-gender campaigns are strikingly similar on several levels. First, they are loosely linked by what is called “gender ideology”, “gender theory”, “genderism”, “the gender lobby” etc. Second, they demonstrate that the appeal of the “gender ideology” formula rests precisely on its semantic elasticity, which allows it to encompass anything that may be viewed as a threat to nativist ideals of the nation. Lastly, they produce apocalyptic discourses and fearmongering. In other words, anti-genderism relies on a conventionalized aggregate of expressive forms and thus serves as a register (Gal 2019, 2021; Borba 2022) that binds various conservative actors in a cohesive whole and is used to bolster masculinist views of the nation. Anti-genderists’ boisterous public stands against changes in gender and sexual hierarchies provide fertile ground for conspiracy narratives about the destruction of the “natural” order of things, namely patriarchy and its attendant institutions of heterosexuality and the traditional family.

These overlapping facets of anti-gender campaigns are cogently illustrated by the way feminism, queer scholarship and activism are framed in different national contexts. In Poland, for instance, “gender ideology” is seen as “worse than communism and Nazism put together” (Graff and Korolczuk 2017) – a specter of an ominous past that lurks behind contemporary views of gender equality. Attempts to protect the authenticity of a nation from global elites are also channeled through rhetoric portraying the concept of gender as a colonial imposition from the wealthy

West on unsuspecting nations (Korolczuk and Graff 2018; Viteri 2020). This is made possible, so goes the narrative, by the enormous sums feminists and LGBTIQ+ organizations supposedly receive from foreign elites, the UN, and the EU, forming a dangerous international network. Revamped images of age-old anti-LGBTIQ+ figures such as the threatened child and the endangered heterosexual family populate acrimonious campaigns against sexual education and inclusive school curricula which are viewed as proxies for the sexualization of children and threats to their supposedly natural gender identity (Miskolci and Campana 2017; Sauntson and Borba 2021).

The burgeoning scholarly literature on anti-gender campaigns highlights their transnational scope; with few exceptions, however, studies are circumscribed to national contexts. The collection edited by Kuhar and Paternotte (2017), for instance, consists of chapters on several European countries. The NGO Sexuality Policy Watch has recently published a series of e-books analyzing the eruption of anti-genderism in Latin America (see, for instance, Campana 2020; Corrêa and Kalil 2020; Delgado 2020; Ramirez 2020 for research on Argentina, Brazil, Chile, and Costa Rica, respectively).² The transnational circulation of this rhetoric is attested by the similarities among cases, but studies comparing data from different national contexts are scarce (see, however, Souza et al. 2020; Katsiveli and Coimbra-Gomes 2020).

Though anti-genderists portray feminist and LGBTIQ+ demands rather catastrophically, little has been said about the conspiratorial nature of their discourse (see, however, Marchlewska et al. 2019). This chapter aims to contribute to this debate. We focus on the discursive infrastructure of what we dub anti-gender conspiracy narratives and their circulation through national borders and across different languages. To do so, we probe two corpora of far-right media from Brazil and the US, where anti-gender mobilizations have recently gathered momentum. Grounded on corpus-based Critical Discourse Analysis (Baker et al. 2008), the study unpacks the collocational patterns of expressions relating to “gender ideology” in the corpora and its concordances to investigate the semantic realms which give it meaning. Dispersion analyses of the phrase indicate that anti-gender rhetoric is an umbrella narrative that lumps together a cohort of inchoate but ideologically interlinked conspiracy theories in a seemingly coherent but highly heterogeneous narrative whole. Comparing datasets from two countries allowed us to scrutinize how the anti-gender register (Borba 2022) and its conspiracist expressive forms cross geographical and linguistic borders and adapt to local specifics along the way.

2. Available at <https://sxpolitics.org/GPAL/>.

2. Anti-gender conspiracy narratives

Although today's forms of anti-genderism have a long genealogy, the literature on the phenomenon seems to agree that its main discursive forms took shape in the mid-1990s (Kuhar and Paternotte 2017; Corrêa 2018; Borba 2022). The 1994 UN Conference on Population and Development in Cairo had an important role in including feminist demands such as sexual and reproductive rights in the global agenda. This move was met with strident opposition from various groups during the preparations for the following year's Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing (Corrêa 2018; Bernini 2020).³ At that time, one of anti-genderism's most vocal representatives was US journalist Dale O'Leary who, with the support of the Permanent Observer Mission of the Holy See to the UN and the alliances it built with Muslim nations against the inclusion of "gender" in the Beijing Platform for Action, has since had a pivotal role in shaping the apocalyptic tone of the anti-gender register (see, for instance, O'Leary 1997). O'Leary portrays feminists as elitist opponents of ordinary people who manipulate language and institutions to eradicate the natural differences between men and women. She, however, cannot be credited with coining the phrase "gender ideology". This was the Vatican's doing (Garbagnoli 2016; Case 2019), leading commentators to argue that contemporary mobilizations against gender are "a Catholic counterattack" (Miskolci and Campana 2017: 185) against its mainstreaming.⁴

Two documents published by the Vatican are particularly important in feeding the anti-gender rhetoric with fear-mongering strategies. The *Lexicon: Ambiguous and Debatable Terms regarding Family Life and Ethical Questions* (Trujillo 2007),⁵ commissioned by the Pontifical Council for the Family, presents the views of Catholic experts on contentious topics as part of the Vatican's attempt to reinforce its moral dogmas about the role of men and women in society. Its aim is to set forth "the content and the truth which must guide correct applications [...] of confusing terms and jargon difficult to access" (p. xiii). According to Cardinal

3. Corrêa (2018) offers an eye-witness account of the emergence of anti-gender politics at the UN in the 1990s, and Moragas (2020) discusses its presence in the Organization of the American States (OAS). While the current shape of anti-genderism emerged in the 1990s, its epistemological and discursive grounding has a longer pedigree. Garbagnoli (2016) and Junqueira (2019) find its roots in John Paul II's theology of the body in the 1970s, and Ramirez (2020) identifies Catholic neo-integralism of the 1960s as its main driver.

4. Despite its Catholic origins, the anti-gender register currently coalesces multiple religious groups that otherwise disagree quite vocally on several principles.

5. The first edition of the *Lexicon* was published in Italian in 2003 and was subsequently translated into several languages. We use the 2007 English edition.

Trujillo, President of the Pontifical Council for the Family and general editor of the *Lexicon*, paying attention to such verbal engineering is important because “many expressions are used in parliaments and world forums with concealment of their true content and meaning” (p. xiii), which may lead to public policies regarding abortion, euthanasia, women’s empowerment, in-vitro fertilization, and equal marriage.⁶ Similarly, the booklet “*Male and Female He Created Them*”: *Towards a Path of Dialogue on the Question of Gender Theory in Education*, published in 2019 by the Congregation for Catholic Education,⁷ is grounded on the premise that the world faces “an *educational crisis* [...] in the field of affectivity and sexuality” (p. 3), fueled by the implementation of progressive curricula that “destabilise the family as an institution, bringing with it a tendency to cancel out the differences” (p. 3) between women and men.

The Vatican’s discursive investment in the notion of “gender ideology” helped extend its semantic scope not only to feminist demands for gender equality but also (and perhaps most centrally in Latin America and Eastern Europe) to LGBTIQ+ activists’ claim for respect for sexual diversity and trans rights (Borba 2022). This stance was clearly encapsulated in 2016 by the Peruvian movement *con mi hijos no te metas* [don’t mess with my kids] whose votaries opposed including gender in the national curriculum on the grounds that this ideology, promoted by the likes of George Soros, would ultimately implode the nuclear family by (homo)sexualizing children, legalizing abortion, sex reassignment surgeries, and same-sex marriage, as well as through population control (Meneses 2019). Despite the portrayal of feminism and LGBTIQ+ agendas as a well-funded plot to erode the pillars of patriarchy and heterosexuality, the conspiracist character of anti-genderism has been scantily investigated (see, however, Marchlewska et al. 2019).

According to Barkun (2016: 1), conspiracy theories are “modes of thinking, templates imposed on the world to give the appearance of order to events.” Procházka and Blommaert (2021) argue that conspiracy theories tend to follow an argumentative structure in which troubling everyday events are made to fit a “theory” as proof of that theory. A theory here is not a set of scientific explanations grounded in abstraction; rather, it “consists of general propositions of ‘how the world is’ and how, consequently, everyday events can be made sense of as ‘logically’ explicable with reference to the general proposition” (Procházka and Blommaert 2021: 6). This is a way to oversimplify miscellaneous events that trouble a desired order of things.

6. For detailed discussions of the *Lexicon* see Garbagnoli (2016) and Borba (2022).

7. Available at http://www.educatio.va/content/dam/cec/Documenti/19_0997_INGLESE.pdf.

Byford (2011: 71 original emphasis) suggests that conspiracy theories are often materialized as narratives. Structurally, these narratives rely on three elements: “the *conspirators*”, who plot against an unsuspecting group of people; “the *plan*”, the conspirators’ actions; and “the *endeavour to maintain secrecy*”, the objective of the conspiracy which must be laid bare by individuals who keep watch on the conspirators. This narrative structure, Procházka and Blommaert (2021: 7) affirm, stems from “an antirational mode of arriving at reasonable explanations grounded in ergoic relations between specific events and a general theory.” This teleological narrative structure (i.e., A, therefore B) gives conspiracy theories a “self-sealing quality” (Sunstein and Vermuele 2009: 207). In short, the elements of the narrative are looped to one another, making it almost impossible to argue against the way a conspiracy theory “logically” explains events.

These disparate narrative elements are tied together by metaphors. For Byford (2011: 84), conspiracy theorists typically use metaphors from the semantic realms of theater and puppeteering that portray their opponents as invisibly “pulling the strings” of the world (Byford 2011: 84), an action that cries out to be uncovered. This metaphorical nature of conspiracy theories befits a narrative in which the many are manipulated by the few. Another common feature of these narratives is the use of the rhetoric of scientific inquiry (Huneman and Vorms 2018; Byford 2011). Conspiratorial explanations of the world replace actual scientific facts with alternative ones (McIntyre 2018) that best fit their theory. Cherry-picking facts that teleologically prove their general theory allows conspiracy theorists to claim epistemic superiority to convince their audience that they know better.

Much has also been said about conspiracy theorists themselves and the belief systems they hold and that undergird the ways they are affected by the narratives they subscribe to. Marchlewska et al. (2019), for instance, investigate gender conspiracy beliefs, which they define as “convictions that gender studies and gender-equality activists represent an ideology secretly designed to harm traditional values and social arrangements” (Marchlewska et al. 2019: 776). The authors convincingly demonstrate that the endorsement of gender conspiracy beliefs is linked to people’s defensive identification with their religious groups. Douglas et al. (2019: 5), in turn, suggest that the participants in their investigation share a “conspiracy mindset”, i.e., a proclivity to believe in various otherwise unrelated conspiracy theories simultaneously. These studies, however, leave the discursive dimensions of gendered conspiracy narratives unexamined. We argue that looking at how “gender ideology” is discursively produced in anti-gender media texts from Brazil and the US provides fruitful avenues for unpacking (1) the infrastructure of its conspiratorial rhetoric, (2) its circulation through transnational borders, and (3) its local adaptation within national contexts.

3. Data and methodology

We collected two corpora of news articles from Brazilian and US far-right media outlets. The articles were scraped from the newspapers' online platforms using a script in Python.⁸ The dataset covers a time span of 3.5 years, from January 2017 to June 2020. The search phrase "gender ideology/ideologia de gênero" was used to select the newspaper articles. In 2017, the USA and Brazil witnessed major political and social circumstances which clearly shifted or reinforced the public discussion on gender and sexuality. In the USA, 2017 marks the beginning of Donald Trump's presidency and its unabashedly anti-gay, anti-trans, and misogynistic discursive regime (Cameron 2020; Mendoza-Denton 2020). In Brazil, this is the time when Jair Bolsonaro gained visibility mostly due to his homophobic and misogynistic speeches crafted to please religious sectors of the electorate and his Neo-Pentecostal supporters (Corrêa and Kalil 2020; Borba 2021). These events helped galvanize the anti-gender register by making "gender ideology" or its correlates visible in both countries' public opinion.

Five of the most popular far-right online newspapers per country were selected. The selection of these online newspapers was based on their readership and availability, which testify to their popularity. Once the data were collected, there was a discrepancy in the size of the two corpora, as the US outlets produced a much larger number of word tokens. To render the two corpora as comparable as possible we increased the number of Brazilian news outlets. Details about the size of the two corpora and the newspapers included in the dataset are provided in Tables 1 and 2.

As the Tables illustrate, while there are more articles in the Brazilian corpus than in the US corpus, the latter has almost double the number of word tokens. For this reason, the two corpora will be compared on their normalized result, i.e., the frequency of "gender ideology" will be displayed in relation to corpus size rather than considering the token's absolute frequency. This score is calculated based on how many times the token would occur if the corpus were a specific size (one million words in our case). The corpora were analyzed separately and subsequently compared. Using CQPweb (Hardie 2012),⁹ we first carried out an exploratory data analysis using its dispersion tool (Rodrigues Gomide 2020), which helped determine whether the tokens of interest were equally distributed and identify the presence of any anomalies or outliers.

8. The following libraries were used in the script: BeautifulSoup (<https://pypi.org/project/beautifulsoup4/>); Newspaper (<https://pypi.org/project/newspaper3k/>); Selenium (<https://pypi.org/project/selenium/>).

9. The corpus is available at www.ola.unito.it. The authors would like to thank Dr. Andressa Rodrigues Gomide for support in the data collection and preparation, and for the maintenance of the hosting server.

Table 1. Brazilian corpus

Newspaper	Articles	Tokens
<i>Conexão política</i>	55	55,906
<i>Crítica Nacional</i>	56	43,329
<i>Estudos Nacionais</i>	196	178,745
<i>Folha política</i>	84	46,857
<i>FOLHA Universal</i>	43	27,580
<i>Gazeta do povo</i>	65	81,980
<i>Jornal da Cidade</i>	89	65,965
<i>MBLNews</i>	28	19,686
<i>Pleno News</i>	65	31,440
<i>Portal Conservador</i>	15	45,700
<i>Renova Midia</i>	79	32,443
<i>Terça livre</i>	83	83,393
Total:	858	713,024

Table 2. US corpus

Newspaper	Articles	Tokens
<i>American Thinker</i>	85	98,224
<i>Daily Caller</i>	65	51,363
<i>The Daily Wire</i>	247	216,689
<i>National Review</i>	343	778,035
<i>The New American</i>	80	103,242
Total:	820	1,247,553

A collocation analysis of the terms “ideology/ideologia” and “gender/gênero” helped us identify statistically relevant co-occurrences. The statistical measure used for this analysis is mutual information, an effect-size measure that calculates how strongly two items are bound together (McEnery and Hardie 2012). We considered a minimum collocate frequency of five and a word span of +/- 5. Specifically, we lasered in on the top fifteen most significant collocates which were qualitatively investigated via a concordance analysis, an in-depth investigation of the term’s context (Tribble 2010).

We then investigated the occurrence of the phrases “gender ideology” and “ideologia de gênero” since their collocation was statistically significant in both corpora. The US corpus produced 126 occurrences which were subjected to concordance analysis. The Brazilian corpus produced 1704 hits for “ideologia de gênero”; for this reason, a collocation analysis was carried out first and later a concordance analysis, following the procedure explained above.

As for the methodology, given the nature of the two corpora, we follow Baker and colleagues' (2008) framework which combines the computer-mediated quantitative techniques of Corpus Linguistics and the problem-oriented, ideology-seeking qualitative approach of Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough and Wodak 1997). The framework suggests an initial context-based analysis of the socio-historical and political issues prior to formulating the research questions. Once the potential sites of interest in the corpus are uncovered, a mix of qualitative and quantitative analysis informed by the context-related information is carried out. For the purposes of this chapter, we reviewed the scholarly literature on conspiracy theories and "gender ideology", mostly produced in disciplines other than linguistics. This enabled us to identify the main linguistic features attributed to conspiracy theories and the relevant anti-gender rhetorical patterns, especially those related to "gender ideology".

4. Analysis

In this section, we scrutinize the discursive infrastructure of the formula "gender ideology/ideologia de gênero" and its functions in anti-gender conspiracy narratives in the US and Brazil. We do so by showing how the phrasal unit is framed within the semantic realms of manipulation, puppeteering, falseness, and danger – rhetorical devices that spread moral panic about the destruction of the nuclear family, the erasure of differences between men and women, and the sexualization of children, presented as threats to masculinist views of the nation. Importantly, the analysis highlights that anti-genderists' linguistic and discursive strategies overlap with those associated with conspiracy theories in the scholarly literature. We argue that the conspiracist flavor of the anti-gender register serves as a discursive glue that binds together several expressive forms and enactable person-types that populate narratives portraying feminist and LGBTIQ+ demands for social justice and judicial reform as an intricately orchestrated plot of a minority against a victimized majority.

The collocation analysis of the top fifteen most significant collocates of the four key terms reveals how the news outlets evaluate "gender ideology" through adjectives and nouns which carry negative affectively-loaded connotations, as shown in Table 3.¹⁰

10. For the Brazilian corpus, we provide English translations of the data in italics followed by their Portuguese form.

Table 3. Collocates of the terms “gender”, “ideology”, “gênero” and “ideologia”

	Coll. of “gender”	Coll. of “ideology”	Coll. of “gênero”	Coll. of “ideologia”
1	nonconforming	harms	<i>maintaining</i> conservando	<i>infamous</i> famigerada
2	dysphoria	dominant	<i>dysphoria</i> disforia	<i>maneuvers</i> manobras
3	fluidity	entitled	<i>Puppets</i> Bonecos	<i>forbid</i> proíba
4	non-conforming	Marxist	<i>forbid</i> proíba	<i>accept</i> aceitamos
5	variant	Communism	<i>ideology</i> ideologia	<i>nefarious</i> nefasta
6	neutrality	official	<i>harmful</i> nociva	<i>Former secretary</i> Ex-secretário
7	dysphoric	leftist	<i>conveyed</i> veiculadas	<i>gender</i> gênero
8	onset	driven	<i>fluid</i> fluido	<i>imposition</i> imposição
9	perpetuating	determine	<i>infamous</i> famigerada	<i>oppose</i> opor
10	conforming	impose	<i>innate</i> inata	<i>defence</i> apologia
11	identity	transgender	<i>neutral</i> neutro	<i>apply</i> aplicar
12	affirmation	extreme	<i>identity</i> identidade	<i>prohibited</i> proíbia
13	confusion	gender	<i>solid</i> sólidas	<i>responsible</i> compet
14	harms	fit	<i>Former secretary</i> Ex-secretário	<i>insertion</i> inserção
15	stereotyping	harmful	<i>ideologues</i> ideólogos	<i>propagation</i> propagação

The term “ideologia” is more frequent in the Brazilian corpus than its English correlate in the US corpus, with a normalized frequency of 2,389.82 for “ideologia” and 706.98 for “ideology”. Interestingly, both terms are frequently used in relation to gender beyond the occurrences of the phrase “gender ideology/ideologia de gênero”. This is evident in the dispersion of the tokens in the two corpora as Figures 1 and 2 illustrate.¹¹ In these dispersion plots, the horizontal axis represents all the texts

11. In the US corpus, the Juilland’s D for “gender” and “ideology” are 0.95 and 0.96, respectively. In the Brazilian corpus it is 0.93 for “gênero” and 0.96 for “ideologia”. This score establishes how evenly distributed tokens are within a corpus. A score closer to 1 signals a relatively ubiquitous distribution (Rodrigues Gomide 2020: 109).

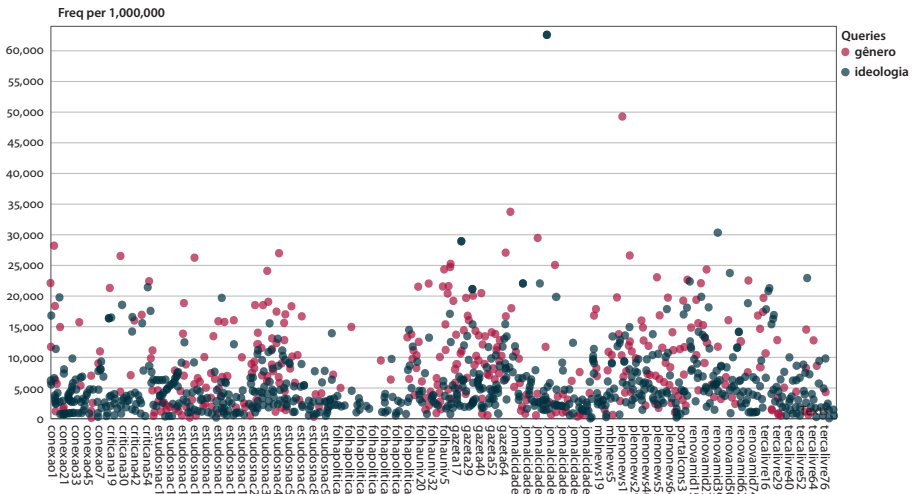


Figure 1. Dispersion Plot: “género” and “ideología”

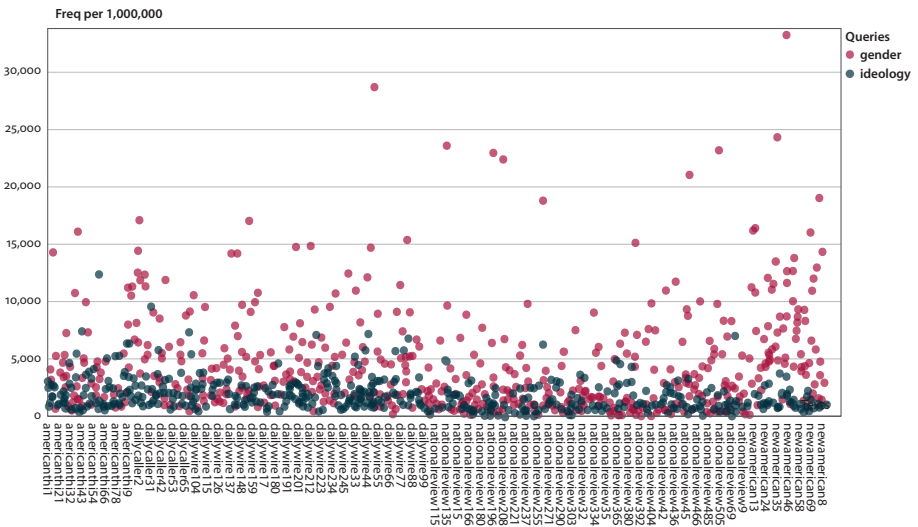


Figure 2. Dispersion Plot: “gender” and “ideology”

included in the corpus in the order in which the corpus was encoded, the vertical axis represents the lowest and highest possible values of relative frequency. Each dot represents the relative frequency of the query in each text.

What is evident in the dispersion analysis is reinforced by the results of the collocation analysis. In the US corpus, the strongest collocate of “ideology” is “harm”. These extracted concordances refer to the March 2016 statement by the American

College of Pediatricians¹² in which they proclaim that “gender ideology” harms children. The discourse of danger is furthered by the use of adjectives such as “abusive” and “harmful” and by assessments of the feminist concept of gender as a “violation” of children’s “right to bodily privacy and safety” (*American Thinker*, March 9, 2017). The frequency of terms from the semantic realm of danger is such that the adjective “harmful” is a statistically significant collocate used to modify the terms “transgender”, “leftist”, “masculinity”, “gender-identity” and “transmisogynistic”. These collocates seem to reinforce the view that any gender-related concept is deleterious. Similar ideas are found in the concordance analysis of the collocate “transgender”, which is defined as “ungodly”, “irrational and harmful”, “out-of-control”, “juggernaut”. The phrase “transgender ideology” is described as a form of “child abuse” and the verbal patterns that surround it are “critiquing” or “question validity”. Another collocate of ideology, when associated with gender, is “extreme”.

This apocalyptic rhetoric is made credible by mobilizing scientific tropes to counter the validity of gender as a scientific concept and transmogrify it into an ideology that distorts reality. As Byford (2011) notes, this pattern is typical of conspiracist narratives. In the US corpus, this is underlined by the frequent use of the term “determine” which appears in all its occurrences as a collocate of “ideology” in sentences such as the following:

- (1) Monday’s statement made a similar point: “Facts – not ideology – determine reality.”
(*Daily Caller*, March 25, 2016)

Another discursive pattern is the association of “gender ideology” with the political left, as the dispersion analysis also highlights.

The dispersion analysis suggests that “gender ideology” is frequently collated with other seemingly unrelated themes. In the case above, “gender ideology”, “communism”, “Marxist”, and “leftist” systematically overlap in the corpus. We refer to this phenomenon as a thematic bundle, namely a merging of distinct semantic fields as a result of the combination between collocates and nodes belonging to (apparently) unrelated semantic realms. Such thematic bundles, where two or more semantic fields that have no apparent connection are merged to support a general (often conspiracist) proposition, are frequent in both corpora. We have, in fact, collocates such as “Marxist” and “Communism”, both of which are not clearly related to the feminist view of gender as a social construct. These clusters suggest that anti-genderism may be viewed as a proxy for anti-leftism. If we look at “leftist”

12. The American College of Pediatricians is a national organization of pediatricians and health-care professionals who hold conservative values such as the heterosexual traditional family and believe that science is absolute and transcends relative social considerations. For more about the association see: acped.org

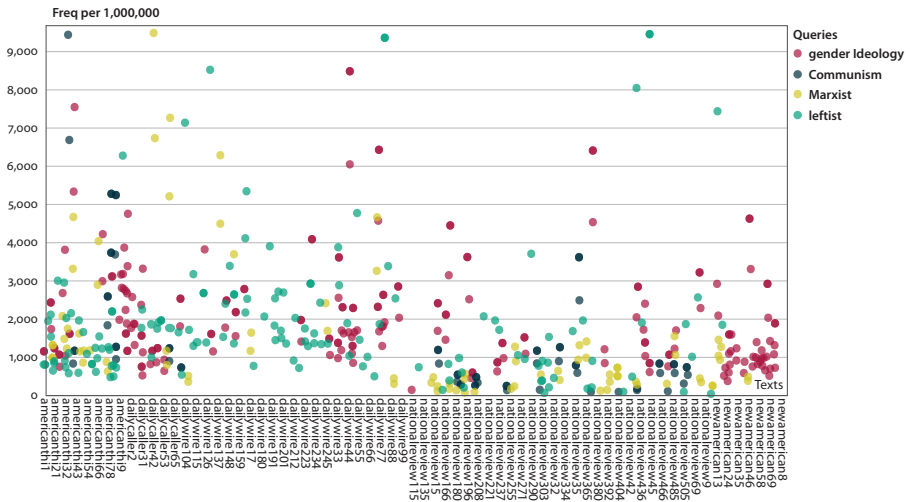


Figure 3. Dispersion plot: Thematic bundles in the US corpus

specifically, 26 out of 28 concordances use evaluative language such as “radical”, “extreme” and “impoverished”.

Similar findings emerge from the concordance analysis of “ideologia” in the Brazilian corpus. The most significant collocate for this term is “famigerada” [infamous]. This is a straightforward attempt at manipulating the reader to view (gender) ideology negatively.

- (2) *In this sense, there are countless inventions of four “democratic” Marxists in the quest to indoctrinate, censor, and impose a new worldview. Obviously, at first, they present a noble objective for an even nobler cause, founded on unquestionable and praiseworthy virtues. However, this disguise is used to prevent questioning the absurdities they present. There are countless examples. The infamous gender ideology is one of them.*

Neste sentido, são inúmeras as criações dos nossos “democráticos” marxistas, na sanha de doutrinar, censurar e impor uma nova visão de mundo. Obviamente, a princípio, apresentam um nobre objetivo para uma nobilíssima causa, fundado em inquestionáveis e louváveis virtudes morais. Entretanto, o disfarce é posto apenas para afastar o questionamento dos absurdos que apresentam. São incontáveis exemplos. A famigerada ideologia de gênero é um deles.

(*Terça Livre*, December 7, 2018)

In Example (2), “ideologia de gênero” is presented as a surreptitious method of indoctrination and censorship. Similarly, the collocate “nefasta” [nefarious] is used to reinforce this negative evaluation. LGBTIQ+ activism is framed as a plan to take over the State and impose their view, as Example (3) below illustrates.

- (3) *The ultimate goal for many LGBT activists involves centralized state power. I see many people in good faith getting carried away by homosexual militancy due to their engaging victim rhetoric. Make no mistake, we are not dealing with amateurs. There is much more than you can see behind this nefarious ideology.*

A meta final para muitos ativistas do movimento LGBT envolve um poder centralizado estatal. Vejo muitas pessoas de boa fé se deixando levar pela militância homossexual devido à sua retórica vitimista envolvente. Não se iluda, não estamos lidando com amadores. Há muito mais do que você pode ver por trás dessa ideologia nefasta. (Conexão Política, September 20, 2019)

Transforming a group that has no major political clout into powerful schemers who bamboozle unsuspecting citizens into their plans to impose a new world order is a frequent rhetorical pattern in the anti-gender conspiracy narratives. Baker (2005) and Zottola (2021) found a similar phenomenon in their analyses of “gay lobby” and “transgender lobby”, respectively. In our data, this is also accomplished by terms such as “projeto totalitário” [totalitarian project], “criminoso” [criminal], “abusando” [abusing], “ignorar a ciência e as crianças” [ignoring science and children] in the corpora.

Portraying the concept of gender as the instrument of a totalitarian project that aims to further unscientific changes in a well-established order of things contributes to the self-sealing quality (Sunstein and Vermuele 2009: 207) of the anti-gender conspiracy narrative. This is also accomplished by another recurrent discursive pattern in our data, a rhetorical strategy we call intent-reversal whereby feminist and queer activism is turned against the people they should protect. In other words, the emancipatory intent of feminist and queer views is reframed as malevolent to women and LGBTIQ+ individuals themselves. This intent-reversal rhetorical strategy, in turn, produces a categorial cleavage: feminist and queer conspirators (i.e., activists, academics, and the elite) versus everyday (i.e., “normal” or, to use O’Leary’s jargon, “authentic”) women, lesbians, and gay men, as shown in Example (4).

- (4) *To have an idea of the seriousness of the situation, the suicide rate among transsexuals is 40%. FORTY PERCENT! We are talking here about an EPIDEMIC, that is taking human lives and for which TREATMENT IS PROHIBITED, so that these people can be used as MASS OF MANEUVER [i.e. object of manipulation] for the imposition of a NEFARIOUS AND GENOCIDAL ideology. All my criticisms of gender ideology and “differentiated treatments” for homosexuals have NOTHING to do with BIGOTRY, HATRED or HOMOPHOBIA. On the contrary. It is just DESPERATION to consciously watch lives being destroyed or mowed down, in the name of this SOCIAL ENGINEERING, to which we are being subjected.*

Para se ter ideia da gravidade da situação, o índice de suicídios entre os transexuais é de 40%. QUARENTA POR CENTO! Estamos falando, aqui, de uma EPIDEMIA, que está ceifando vidas humanas e que tem o TRATAMENTO PROIBIDO, para

que estas pessoas possam ser usadas como MASSA DE MANOBRAS na implantação de uma ideologia NEFASTA E GENOCIDA. Todas as minhas críticas à ideologia de gênero e aos “tratamentos diferenciados” para os homossexuais, não têm NADA a ver com PRECONCEITO, ÓDIO ou HOMOFOBIA. Pelo contrário. É apenas DESESPERO de assistir, conscientemente, vidas sendo destruídas ou ceifadas, em nome desta REENGENHARIA SOCIAL, à qual estamos sendo submetidos.

(*Jornal da Cidade*, September 14, 2019)

This example references suicide rates among trans people. According to the writer, these rates are a consequence of the spread of “gender ideology”, a nefarious and genocidal form of social engineering. Gender is described as a tool of manipulation whose aim is to impose a new order of things – a plot where activists hoodwink ordinary trans people against their will, according to this author. The intent-reversal rhetoric also distances anti-genderists from accusations of bigotry and hatred. This author writes in defense of trans people about whom he is desperately worried, but against feminist and queer activists who are portrayed as malicious conspirators. Intent-reversals of this kind contribute to how the anti-gender register piggybacks on the authority of well-established rights vocabulary to further discrimination and polarization (Gal 2019, 2021; Borba 2022). Embedding conservative meanings in progressive vocabulary is a recurrent feature in our data. This is a strategy that undergirds the semantic elasticity of “gender ideology”, helping it cast its net wide. This is illustrated by Examples (2) and (4) which relate to the discursive pattern of thematic bundles we identified earlier in the US data, connecting anti-genderism to anti-leftism. Leftists, feminists, and queer activists are depicted as responsible for society’s decline and for the imposition of a new social view. Quite unsurprisingly, then, the concept of “engenharia social” [social engineering] occurs 28 times in the Brazilian corpus. The dispersion plot below also highlights this trend.

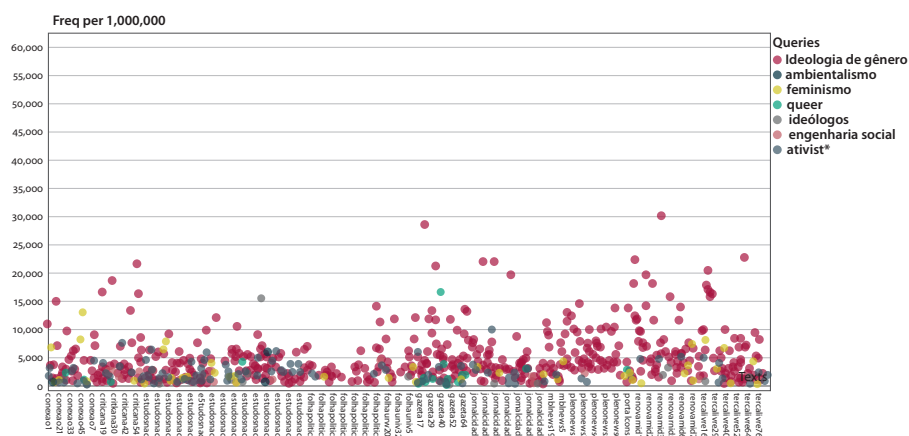


Figure 4. Dispersion plot: Thematic bundles in the Brazilian corpus

The terms “gender” (NF: 2,220.35) and “gênero” (NF: 3,928.34) provide additional support for the patterns discussed above in reference to “ideology/ideologia”. In the US corpus, this term has a much higher frequency than “ideology”. At first glance, the top collocates of the term seem to refer generally to gender identity (see “affirmation”, “confusion”, “dysphoric”, “neutrality”, “non-conforming” and “fluidity”). On closer inspection, however, the concordances bring to light discourses that link gender to a leftist plot to impose an LGBTIQ+ world order festering in the shadows to influence the State and medicine, as Examples (5) and (6) illustrate.

- (5) *See, the Left breathlessly insists upon the “separation of church and state” but that is only because it wants to clear the deck so that the religious doctrines of its own church may dominate.*

“Gender fluidity” is doctrine, not science.

“Safe sex is better than abstinence” is doctrine.

“Masturbation is healthy and natural” is doctrine.

“Kids ought to be encouraged to sexually explore themselves and each other” is doctrine.

It is fine to teach these doctrines during Sunday school at the local satanic temple, but they have no place in the public education system.

(The Daily Wire, April 16, 2018)

- (6) *Yet now, under the “gender affirmation” model, almost all young patients proceed from puberty blockers to cross-sex hormones. Inexplicably, activists appear to be influencing and even dictating medical guidelines.*

(National Review, April 22, 2019)

In the US data, the “gender ideology” formula is used to put forward a critique of the current diagnostic and treatment system where a “radicalized government [...] has as a chief goal the normalization of homosexuality, gender confusion and all manner of sexual perversion.” (*New American*, February 19, 2020). Similarly, in the Brazilian corpus terms which directly relate to gender identity are found in the collocation analysis (see “disforia” [dysphoria], “fluido” [fluid], “neutro” [neutral], “identidade” [identity]). Patterns comparable to those in the US corpus are found in the Brazilian one, testifying to the fact that the anti-gender register and its conspiratorial discursive formulas travel transnationally and cross-linguistically with little variation.

- (7) *This is not science ... I don't think you need to have an MD or a PhD. To know that it is not science – this ideology is disguised as science. [...] “Gender ideology” is in full swing, in soap operas that treat the disorder as the most normal thing in the world, in countless reports that consider parents raising their children as “gender fluid”, “cute” and “modern”, or in celebrities who declare themselves in favor of sex change even in children. The campaign is intense, and it is only possible*

to understand the phenomenon by having an idea of what the Frankfurt School preaches, as the perverted left has been trying to pervert society since Kinsey and Foucault, [...] “Gender ideology” is the new communist instrument against the family and Western civilization.

Isso não é ciência ... Eu não acho que você precisa ter um M.D. ou um Ph.D. Para saber que não é ciência – essa ideologia está disfarçada de ciência. [...] A “ideologia de gênero” está a todo vapor, em novelas que tratam o distúrbio como a coisa mais normal do mundo, em inúmeras reportagens que consideram “fofo” e “moderninho” pais que criam seus filhos com “gênero fluido”, ou em celebridades que declaram-se favoráveis à mudança de sexo mesmo em crianças. A campanha é intensa, e só é possível compreender o fenômeno tendo noção do que prega a Escola de Frankfurt, como a esquerda pervertida vem tentando perverter a sociedade desde Kinsey e Foucault, [...] A “ideologia de gênero” é o novo instrumento comunista contra a família e a civilização ocidental.

(*Gazeta do Povo*, 16 October 2017)

This example frames “gender ideology” as a communist plan against the “family” and “Western civilization” via two main strategies: (1) Reference to scientific discourse by denying scientifically sound theories linked to gender identity and discrediting feminist science as an ideology; and (2) negative evaluation that leads to moral panic by using terms such as “abuso infantil” [child abuse] and “perveter” [to pervert] in reference to leftist people.

So far, our analysis focused on the collocations of “gender/gênero” and “ideology/ideologia” as individual tokens. Appearances of the phrasal unit “gender ideology/ideologia de gênero” also yield noteworthy results. As specified in Section 3, the analysis procedure for the two phrases differed slightly due to the number of occurrences. Although the creation of the “gender ideology” formula was spearheaded by the Vatican in the late 1990s (Case 2019; Borba 2022), its discursive eruption was mainly in Latin America and Eastern Europe in the 2010s. The formula has only recently taken root in the US, where it also appears as “gender theory” and “genderism”. This explains the different occurrences of the phrases “gender ideology/ideologia de gênero” in our corpora. The conspiracist discursive infrastructure of “gender ideology” (which remains almost untouched since it first appeared) is, however, reiterated by other means.

The concordances of “gender ideology” in the US corpus demonstrate a strong negative evaluation of the phrase through adjectives such as “pernicious and destructive”, “radical”, “dubious”, “dangerous”, “ridiculous”, “extreme”, “wacky”. All 126 concordances depict the phrase negatively. The manipulatory character of “gender ideology” is also reinforced by the verbal patterns with the phrase as subject occurring in the concordances; examples include “impose”, “foist”, “harms” and “force”. The definitions of “gender ideology” reinforce once again this manipulative

discourse: examples suggest that the concept of gender is “just an ideology” (*Daily Caller*, April 29, 2020); “not appropriate for Catholic school” (*Daily Caller*, April 3, 2019); “being force-fed to children” (*Daily Wire*, September 20, 2019); “built on feminism” (*Daily Wire*, July 25, 2019); “profoundly anti-scientific” (*National Review*, July 17, 2019). These examples point to the use of intent-reversal rhetoric in the US corpus as well, whereby feminism is viewed as inherently deleterious, especially for the people it should help, i.e., women and children (see also the third quote above).

One last example worth mentioning is the personification of “gender ideology” as an enemy (see also Borba 2019), fostering the conspiracist narrative’s tripartite structure discussed in Section 2: an agent, a plan, and secrecy (Byford 2011), as Example (8) illustrates.

- (8) *As the Goliath of gender ideology runs amok – undermining American political, legal, cultural, educational, and journalistic institutions – we at National Review stand strong with sling and stone.* (National Review, July 29, 2020)

The following table shows the top fifteen collocates of the phrase “ideologia de gênero” in the Brazilian corpus.

Table 4. Collocations of “ideologia de gênero”

1	<i>maintaining</i> conservando	6	<i>accept</i> aceitamos	11	<i>Cabral</i> (a politician)
2	<i>infamous</i> famigerada	7	<i>Former secretary</i> Ex-secretário	12	<i>insertion</i> inserção
3	<i>maneuvers</i> manobras	8	<i>environmentalism</i> ambientalismo	13	<i>responsible</i> compete
4	<i>prohibit</i> proíba	9	<i>oppose</i> opor	14	<i>prohibited</i> proíbia
5	<i>harmful</i> nociva	10	<i>defense</i> apologia	15	<i>imposition</i> imposição

While some of these results overlap with those presented earlier (see Table 3), interesting patterns can be highlighted here as well. The strongest collocate is from a quote by President Bolsonaro in his inauguration speech, a call to arms to fight “gender ideology”.

- (9) *President Jair Messias Bolsonaro reaffirmed his commitments to Brazil during a speech at the National Congress, this Tuesday (1st). “We will unite our people, value the family, respect religions and our Judeo-Christian tradition. [We will] fight gender ideology, preserving our values. Brazil will again be a country free from ideological bonds,” said Bolsonaro during the inauguration.*

O presidente Jair Messias Bolsonaro reafirmou seus compromissos com o Brasil durante discurso no Congresso Nacional, nesta terça-feira (1º). “Vamos unir o nosso povo, valorizar a família, respeitar as religiões e nossa tradição judaico-cristã. [Vamos] combater a ideologia de gênero, conservando os nossos valores. O Brasil voltará a ser um país livre das amarras ideológicas”, afirmou Bolsonaro durante a posse. (*Terça Livre*, January 1, 2019)

This example illustrates two important discursive patterns in the Brazilian corpus. First, the endorsement of anti-genderist ideas by powerful people and institutions (i.e., the country’s president), makes the conspiracy narrative believable and institutionally condoned. Second, far-right extremist and fundamentalist views of how the world should be are presented as non-ideological by saying that the country will be free of ideological bonds once it fights “gender ideology”. Consequently, the scientific concept of gender is portrayed as ideological, producing disbelief and suspicion of feminist demands. “Gender ideology” is thus a wide-ranging category of denunciation (Corrêa 2018; Gal 2021) used to lambaste progressive groups and institutions who the anti-gender conspiracy narrative portrays as plotting to destroy children’s innocence, the nuclear family’s sanctity and, consequently, the nation’s moral integrity. In both corpora, “gender ideology” emerges as an accusatory category used by anti-genderists to lay bare this insidious plan.

The collocate “ambientalismo” [environmentalism] (see also Figure 4) illustrates how the “gender ideology” formula is used to produce thematic bundles of otherwise unrelated issues (in this case, gender and the environment). This discursive strategy transmogrifies “gender ideology” into an all-encompassing conspiracy theory that lumps together any progressive view of the world within a highly heterogeneous but coherent whole, as in Example (10).

- (10) *One of the most difficult things today is to distinguish science from militancy that serves political agendas. Let us take two very popular examples: Gender Ideology and environmentalism. Both use scientific discourse while actually conveying beliefs with mysterious and unclear elements. The aim is to implant certain clichés in the collective mind that tend to be unquestionable through elements that obstruct reflection and thought.*

Uma das coisas mais difíceis hoje é distinguir ciência de militâncias que servem a agendas políticas. Pensemos dois exemplos bastante em voga: a Ideologia de Gênero e o ambientalismo. Ambos utilizam-se de discurso científico enquanto na verdade carregam crenças com elementos misteriosos e pouco esclarecedores. O objetivo é plantar na mente coletiva certos sentidos comuns que tendem a ser inquestionáveis através de elementos sobre os quais a reflexão e o pensamento ficam obstruídos. (*Estudos Nacionais*, September 16, 2015)

We see both the thematic bundle technique and the use of scientific rhetoric to negatively frame “gender” in the conspiracist narrative. Ideas related to gender and environmentalism are defined as militancy as opposed to science. In other words, in our data anti-genderism emerges as a conspiracy narrative which portrays feminists, LGBTIQ+ communities, and the political left as secretly plotting against the status quo. This narrative is based on scientific truth (despite its links to the far-right and to religious institutions), while feminism and environmentalism are discredited as ideologies that aim to indoctrinate the collective mind.

The discourse of manipulation is furthered by the use of vague language and nominalizations. Anyone slightly associated with the left or progressivism, or who simply disagrees with anti-genderist views of how the world is, could be the manipulator. In light of the narrative’s tripartite structure, the agents’ actions are either nominalized or they are referred to in broadly abstract terms (the left, the activists, the feminists etc.). By doing so, the enemy who conspires against the heterosexual family and the nation becomes a very elastic category. As such, “gender ideology” and its acolytes (be they feminists, LGBTIQ+ activists, communists, Marxists, environmentalists) function as specters lurking behind unsuspecting citizens, anywhere, anytime.

5. Concluding remarks

Recent scholarship suggests that “gender ideology” works as a discourse, a political strategy of far-right populism, and a transnational phenomenon with harmful national effects (Kuhar and Paternotte 2017). While the two latter dimensions have been extensively described (see, for instance, Corredor 2019; Case 2019; Corrêa and Kalil 2020; Korolczuk and Graff 2018 among many others), its discursive infrastructure merits more scrutiny. The work of Mad’arová (2015); Garbagnoli (2016), and Gal (2018, 2019, 2021) offers compelling evidence that anti-genderism gathers impetus to circulate transnationally because of its votaries’ rhetorical dexterity.

Probing two corpora of far-right media from the US and Brazil provides a window into the ways the three macrosociological dimensions described by Kuhar and Paternotte (2017) are entwined in anti-genderists’ situated language use. The deployment of a conspiracist narrative structure (Byford 2011) allows anti-gender zealots to rewrite progressive agendas about human rights, reproductive health policies, and anti-discrimination school curricula as a plot of malicious groups who aim to destroy the pillars of the nation, namely heterosexuality and its attendant institutions.

As we argue, despite its apocalyptic portrayal of feminism and queer activism, the anti-gender register gains credence through four main strategies: (1) disingenuous use of scientific discourse to discredit feminism (and other academic fields) as ideological while taking on a patina of neutrality, (2) highly negative adjectival characterization of any slightly progressive gender-related ideal via a discourse of manipulation in which feminists, LGBTIQ+ activists and others are lumped together as puppeteers pulling the world's strings, (3) intent-reversal rhetorical moves whereby progressive agendas (especially gender equality) are reversed as deleterious to those they intend to protect, and (4) the use of well-established rights and anti-discrimination vocabulary to advance exclusion and discrimination. The transnational character of this register is attested by these strategies' presence in both corpora, which repeatedly highlight the overlaps between the major discursive patterns associated with conspiracy theories and the representation of "gender ideology" in Brazil and the US.

Framing feminist and queer demands for social and judicial reform in a narrative triad consisting of agents (i.e., conspirators), plans (i.e., sexualization of children, erasure of the differences between men and women, destruction of the heterosexual family, etc.), and secrecy (i.e., working behind the scenes to obtain their objectives) aids anti-genderists to depict themselves as well-intentioned citizens wishing to warn the unsuspecting population about this plot. This is done through broad and vague nominalizations which make it difficult to identify the conspirators: they could be anyone who challenges anti-genderists' theory of how the world should be (Byford 2011; Procházka and Blommaert 2021). These agents are depicted as manipulators, puppeteers, indoctrinators of the masses who go against science to lay out their plan of social re-engineering.

In our data, "gender ideology" functions as a central element of the anti-gender conspiracy narrative. This narrative is sustained by (anti-)scientific discourse, the creation of thematic bundles of otherwise unrelated actors and views (Communism, Marxism, environmentalism, etc.), and intent-reversal rhetorical moves. In this way, anti-gender supporters put forward a series of legitimization strategies that allow people to believe and endorse their ideas. These similarities in the linguistic infrastructure enable anti-gender beliefs to circulate through transnational borders, which in turn makes them stronger. At the same time, the affective bond that seduces people into believing the anti-gender conspiracy narrative is only possible because of the local adaptation of the references, events, and issues associated with this discussion within national contexts. Looking at how anti-gender zealots use language and rewrite feminist and queer concepts may prove useful in devising ways to confront this conspiracy narrative's self-sealing quality.

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Beyond discourse theory in the conspiratorial mode?

The critical issue of truth in the age of post-truth

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While many observers lament the declining quality of contemporary political discourse, current populist tendencies have been indeed favorable to Discourse Studies as a field. If lies and insults are used as weapons, if leaders are idolized and demonized, if groups are blamed and blame others for perceived social ills, if conspiracy and post-truth theories thrive and spread, political discourse indeed cries out for analysis. The advent of such discourses signals a conjuncture in which Discourse Studies no longer needs justification.

Discourse Studies has always resonated with the great political questions of the day. And since its beginnings in the late 1960s, discourse researchers have focused on language as the crucial dimension for understanding social and political change. After two world wars, social scientists became aware of the importance of linguistic practices in everyday social life as well as in the public sphere. The democratization of political debate, the rise of mass media, the postmaterialist value change designate just some of the developments that testify to the central importance of communication and meaning making in social and political life, especially during periods of peace and political stability. In any ways, Discourse Studies is a product of the liberal-democratic consensus in Western societies.

Nowadays, liberal democracies are again under threat by right-wing extremists and populists. Yet the role language plays in contemporary society remains an important issue. If some populist discourses no longer commit to truth or reality as regulative ideals, how else to account for them other than in terms of a language game that constructs rather than reflects its object? And if narcissist leaders celebrate themselves in social media, whipping up their followers with affect-laden speech, what keeps us from unpacking the rhetorical ploys that mesmerize their audiences so that we understand why emotion prevails over reason?

Such are the questions that the contributions in this volume respond to. And these questions are unavoidable if one tries to account for the proliferation of

conspiracy theories in political discourse over the last few years. However, discourse researchers would do well to register subtle shifts in the theoretical terrain where they typically navigate. It is indeed noteworthy to see terms like “conspiracy theory”, “post-truth”, “fake news” entering the vocabulary of discourse theorists, terms which were unlikely to be found among those who pioneered our field decades ago when political power usually alternated between centre-left and centre-right parties.

French discourse analysis goes back to the early 1970s and it developed in the shadow of the slow and protracted decline of the French Communist Party after the Second World War. Critical Discourse Analysis, started in the late 1980s in Anglophone and German-language debates, under the impression of rising xenophobia and racism that have made traditional parties lurch to the right across Europe. The discourse theorists then reacted to the political challenges of their times. And so do the contributors of this volume. Yet while many classical discourse analysts perceived discourse as conveying hidden ideological messages, for today’s generation the manipulations of discourse no longer necessarily take place “in secret”. Ongoing discourse analytical work on conspiracy theories as well as on discursive post-truth phenomena is a case in point. The critical epistemology underpinning these more recent discourse theoretical developments is built on the following three assumptions.

Firstly, there are untruths and any rational observer can understand their lack of truth. No elaborate critical theories are needed to understand when a conspiracy theory is wrong. Even though textbook definitions acknowledge the possibility for conspiracy theories to turn out as true (Uscinski, 2020: 26f), that possibility is mostly rather hypothetical: you do not start out describing something in terms of a “conspiracy theory” if you think it might turn out to be true in the end.

Secondly, truth and reason are not the problem. Discourse researchers understand what is untrue and they have recourse to reason or common sense to understand why and how people think and talk themselves into untruths. Discourse researchers articulate their critique, therefore, from a position of rationality, which is in need for no special theoretical justification. If there are untruths out there in the contemporary world, there are also truths which are neither compromised nor affected by untruths.

Thirdly, truth is manifestly different from untruth and they are in need of different approaches. If untruths are constructed and established discursively, the same is not necessarily the case for the truths that discourse researchers claim. While untruths are a product of discursive dynamics, truths follow a different logic, which may or may not be discursive. Therefore, entering a truth discourse is different from entering an untruth discourse.

In a nutshell, to deal with political discourse in the populist age, current tendencies tend to embrace a common-sense idea of truth, a rationalism that allows us to spontaneously distinguish between truth and untruth. As false ideas are peddled in political discourse, have we regained a spontaneous sense of truth? Spontaneous rationalism as the response of the discourse analyst to the blatant lying of the neo-fascists?

Our current discourse theoretical debate is moving away, it seems, from the “hermeneutics of suspicion” which pervaded much of classical discourse theory. By this, the French philosopher Paul Ricœur (1961) designated a critical gesture among theorists of his time who aimed to reveal hidden truths in a world whose appearances must never be taken at face value. Instead, in order to truly account for truth and reality, the critical hermeneutician needs to pull away the layers of opacity shrouding the object of analysis, enter its deeper layers of meaning and thus establish access to its hidden truths.

According to Ricœur, Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud and Friedrich Nietzsche were the three masters of the “era of suspicion”. They promised to pull back the veil of ideology from bourgeois society (Marx), to remind us that we are never conscious and transparent to ourselves (Freud), to reread the genealogy of Western morality as a will to power in disguise (Nietzsche). I do not need to elaborate here on the impact these figures have had on a wide range of theorists from poststructuralism to (Frankfurt-style) Critical Theory who have crucially shaped the work of classical discourse theorists.

The most prominent example is Michel Foucault, who problematizes truth as knowledge entangled with power. Knowledge is not true as such. It is *made* true in discursive practices and the question how one can account for the sociohistorical mechanisms that allow knowledges to be established as truths. Accordingly, the force of critiquing discourse arises “in this coupling between the knowledge buried by scholarship and the knowledge disqualified by the hierarchy of knowledge and science” (lecture of January 7, 1976; Foucault 1997: 9).

We can also cite Michel Pêcheux, who argues against the illusion of the free, speaking subject. Subjects do not exist as autonomous beings with intentions and an identity outside discourse. People turn into subjects by entering discourse and by appropriating semiotically defined subject positions. Discourse, in other words, creates an “illusion of autonomy constitutive of the subject, so that the subject ‘works by himself’” (Pêcheux 1975: 121f). Subjectivity, therefore, is an effect of hidden discursive mechanism, not its origin.

And Norman Fairclough asks how unequal relationships between social groups are represented, enacted and justified in discourse as a social practice. Language is not a neutral mirror of the social world. Using language means partaking in social

struggles and conveying ideologies while the “linkages between discourse, ideology and power may well be unclear to those involved” (Fairclough 1993: 134).

Theirs is an epistemology of suspicion rather than of “trust” (if that is the opposite): they want to bring to light the veiled interests, the concealed mechanisms, the hidden forces. The apparent meanings of discourse, its linguistic surface, need to be questioned in view of a depth structure, an underlying reality.

Is not this the sound we hear in many of the conspiracy theories which are analysed in this volume? Do the pioneering theorists of Discourse Studies reproduce some of the discursive mechanisms that are typical for conspiracy theories?

If discourse theory is a discourse in the conspiratorial mode, it is one in a theoretically much more sophisticated way. And I do not want to say that discourse theorists are committed to, prone to or even in risk of contributing to post-truth discourses in any way. Attempts of liberal-conservative humanists (Pluckrose 2017) trying to blame “postmodernist” authors from Europe such as Foucault and Derrida for the decline of Anglo-American democracy in the 2010s are clearly absurd (see similar tendencies in France, in Angermüller 2015: 60ff.). Discourse theorists do not systematically use claims of dubious quality as a tool for capturing the attention of social media communities. However, we can register that the reasoning by suspicion, which once characterized the more intellectually chic circles of our disciplines, has conquered public political discourse as well. At the same time, current work in the social sciences and humanities under the impression of populist post-truth discourses has become “epistemologically serene”.

Theories in the conspiracy mode is not necessarily a bad thing as long as they help distinguish between true and false knowledges. And perhaps the accounts and explanations that we like to share and spread in our own academic discourse always come with a touch of conspiracy theory. For theories, too, aim to give alternative accounts of the world. Theorists sometimes construct elaborate conceptual edifices that are unfalsifiable (because they can counter any critical argument, are too abstract...). They often subject their own claims to critical reflection up to a point that any truth is relativized as a product of its context. And they sometimes turn readers into faithful disciples who have gone through an eye-opening moment of theoretical conversion.

I don’t want to suggest a hierarchy of one theoretical approach over another, of serenity over suspicion. As such, the conspiratorial way of reasoning is not less legitimate as the rationalist one as long as both are committed to science as the pursuit of truth. And if scientific research is to hold out novel and groundbreaking ideas, is not suspicion precisely what characterizes the scientific mindset fundamentally?

Conspiracy-style theories in academia are often rather controversial and they like to come across as “heterodox” in Bourdieu’s terms as opposed to “mainstream” developments in the disciplines (if such a thing exists), which may prefer a more

rationalist, analytical and empirical style of thought. Perhaps there are cultural differences that explain why certain styles fare better among some academics: “Continental” theorists (who happen to be well established in UK and US universities) may be more open to more conceptual and speculative type of theorizing than is common among “Anglo-Saxon” circles.

And importantly, over the past few decades, we may register a certain waning of critique as suspicion in theoretical discourse, including within Continental traditions, a theoretical development that runs parallel to the postmodernist sea change in the cultural field. Jameson makes this point when he observes that “contemporary theory ... has among other things been committed to the mission of criticizing and discrediting this very hermeneutic model of the inside and the outside and of stigmatizing such models as ideological and metaphysical” (Jameson 1991: 61). A number of voices from Critical Theory or (post)structuralist backgrounds have indeed challenged critical epistemologies that claim access to an alternative, deeper, “more real” reality. Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida concur in their critical stance in that they reject critique grounded in a pre-discursive ontology. Another example is Laclau/Mouffe, who are widely known for a discourse theory that has emerged from the critique of Marxist social theory and its “determinism”. Interestingly, if the latter have vigorously argued against conspiracy accounts in social theory, they are one of the first (and by now few) discourse theorists to welcome populism as a democratic development (Mouffe 2019; Cleen & Stavrakakis 2017).

The emergence of conspiracy theory as an object of discourse research raises the question: Can we replace one conspiracy theory, which we assume to be a populist con, by another one, which we consider to be the correct scientific one? Can we use the conspiracy mode of reasoning as a basis for criticizing conspiracy theories?

Contemporary populism and culture wars indeed invite us to reflect on our own positions as discourse theorists in ongoing discursive struggles over truth. Elsewhere, I have argued for a Strong Programme in Discourse Studies (Angermüller 2018), according to which truth needs to be accounted for symmetrically in the discourse that we understand as true (our own discourse theories) and the discourse that we deal with and with may or may not wrong (such as conspiracy theories). Strong Programmers defend a difference of value between truths and untruths. They are against relativism but they do not see a return to rationalism as the solution either. The discourse theoretical ramifications are indeed significant. If conspiracy-style reasoning can be problematic in current political discourse, we would do well to question similar patterns in our own discourses on discourse, too. Do not we need to critically interrogate the way discourse researchers reduce complex social problems to simple causes? Can we go on using terms like “neoliberalism” or “racism” if those terms insinuate sinister mechanisms in the interest of small groups of power?

After Hitler and Stalin, our contemporary social world is again torn by antagonistic struggles over truth. Even though most of the conspiracy theories analyzed in this volume are unquestionably wrong, our position as propagators of discourse analytical truths has not always become easier in turn. In no way can we step outside the struggles that we analyze and criticize. We are no neutral observers from a far-away planet called science. We are citizens of the social world and as citizens we cannot be indifferent to what counts as truth in our discourses no matter whether they involve academic specialists or participants of a broader public space. More reflexive theorizing is needed on how we, in our own discursive practices, respond to the challenges of our world today.

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Conspiracy Theory Discourses addresses a crucial phenomenon in the current political and communicative context: conspiracy theories. The social impact of conspiracy theories is wide-ranging and their influence on the political life of many nations is increasing. *Conspiracy Theory Discourses* bridges an important gap by bringing discourse-based insights to existing knowledge about conspiracy theories, which has so far developed in research areas other than Linguistics and Discourse Studies. The chapters in this volume call attention to conspiracist discourses as deeply ingrained ways to interpret reality and construct social identities. They are based on multiple, partly overlapping analytical frameworks, including Critical Discourse Analysis, rhetoric, metaphor studies, multimodality, and corpus-based, quali-quantitative approaches. These approaches are an entry point to further explore the environments which enable the proliferation of conspiracy theories, and the paramount role of discourse in furthering conspiracist interpretations of reality.

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