STUDY

Conspiracy theories and COVID-19: The mechanisms behind a rapidly growing societal challenge

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Responsible researcher/author (Andreas Önnerfors, Professor of Intellectual History)

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1. COVID-19 and conspiracy theories

1.1 Introduction: The infodemic – the vulnerability of knowledge in times of crisis

Conspiracy theories flourish in times of crisis

An invisible virus spreads across the entire world. Many people become ill and die, and politicians and public health experts decide on drastic counter-measures. People are put in quarantine and forced to wear face masks, sections of society are shut down, the economy is in crisis and freedom of movement is restricted. The COVID-19 pandemic is a global crisis that creates fear and worry. This is a perfect breeding ground for imagining that none of this is happening without a reason. Could someone have planned all this to harm us?

   In situations like this, conspiracy theories offer people simple explanations for complex problems. They describe alleged patterns, plans and actors who act in the shadows with evil intentions – a plot for which there is said to be proof. However, conspiracy theories are also based on a belief in absolute opposites, place the blame on others who are often demonised, and are fuelled by catastrophising about the ultimate collapse of the system. Conspiracy theories combine reasoning about what is true and false with values about what is right and wrong (or good and evil). Those who put forward and spread conspiracy theories often see themselves as victims and truth-sayers, and are firmly convinced to varying degrees that they are right. It is often hard to deal with having someone in one's close circle who believes in conspiracy theories. It is even harder when this belief forms a group identity. The psychology behind conspiracy theories is also used actively by various actors to influence and radicalise opinion, or to tarnish the reputation of their political opponents.

   This report illuminates the function of conspiracy theories as meaning-making narratives in times of crisis. Section 1 takes as its starting point our current situation: a global pandemic that has plunged the world into a major crisis. Section 2 defines and discusses the actual concept of conspiracy theories. Section 3 is devoted to identifying their components, and finally section 4 discusses what can be done to counter them.

The situation that is currently playing out in front of our very eyes is a text-book example of how information and knowledge are put under pressure in times of societal crisis. Various conspiratorial meaning-making narratives have been spread since the pandemic began in 2020 to explain why the crisis is happening, but also with the intention of consciously manipulating us. The propensity to believe in conspiracy theories has increased during the pandemic.[1] These theories relate to the origins, spread, infectivity and mortality of the virus, as well as the countermeasures proposed and carried out by politicians and public health experts. Here, vaccination occupies the most prominent position. A number of overall theories are also circulating about COVID-19 actually being a planned pandemic (or 'plandemic') orchestrated by the power elites, and that the disease is a hoax or entirely exaggerated, with the aim of introducing a global dictatorship. UNESCO and the European Commission have noted an increase in harmful and misleading conspiracy theories during the coronavirus pandemic. A valuable resource with related information graphics ("Identifying conspiracy theories") has therefore been launched.[2]

The World Health Organization (WHO) describes an 'infodemic' – in other words, a viral spreading of misleading information – which makes it harder for people to understand the seriousness of the disease and what is needed in order to fight it.[3] The EU's foreign service, EEAS, also operates the EUvsDisinfo platform, which provides a database of disinformation (i.e. false or misleading information which is spread intentionally) originating in media loyal to the Russian regime. Since the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic in 2020, no fewer than 785 references to the most bizarre claims about COVID-19 and efforts to combat it have been listed here.[4] Disinformation and conspiracy theories about COVID-19 have also necessitated the development of specific information initiatives.[5]

New conspiracy theories have been created, and old ones have been reused and actualised. For example, KGB – the Soviet security service spread a conspiracy theory in the 1980s about HIV having been created by the USA and tested as a biological weapon on the population of Africa. The pattern for this narrative ("state actor creates deadly virus and spreads it intentionally") can be seen in various COVID-19 conspiracy theories. Those who, in more recent times, have spread the conspiratorial idea that implanted RFID chips are.

1. Henley, Jon, "Pandemic leaves Europeans more likely to believe conspiracy theories – study", The Guardian, 22 February 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/feb/22/covid-pandemic-leaves-europeans-more-likely-to-believe-conspiracy-theories-study (last accessed 13 March 2021).

2. The European Commission and UNESCO (2020), "Identifying conspiracy theories", https://ec.europa.eu/info/live-work-travel-eu/coronavirus-response/fighting-disinformation/identifying-conspiracy-theories_en#what-are-conspiracy-theories-why-do-they-flourish (last accessed 23 March 2021), see also Lewandowsky, Stephen, et al. (2021), "The COVID-19 Vaccine Communication Handbook – A practical guide for improving vaccine communication and fighting misinformation", https://osf.io/f6a48/ (last accessed 10 April 2021).

3. WHO, "WHO public health research agenda for managing infodemics", 3 February 2021, https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240019508 (last accessed 13 March 2021).

4. EUvsDisinfo, search for the term "coronavirus", 14 March 2021, search results: https://euvsdisinfo.eu/disinformation-cases/?text=coronavirus, see also the blog "Coronavirus", https://euvsdisinfo.eu/category/blog/coronavirus/ (last accessed 14 March 2021).

5. EUvsDisinfo (2021), "My Loved-one Thinks Bill Gates Will Microchip Humanity". Now what?", https://euvsdisinfo.eu/my-loved-one-thinks-bill-gates-will-microchip-humanity-now-what/, see also EEAS (2021), https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/93863/"my-friend-thinks-bill-gates-will-microchip-humanity"-now-what_en (last accessed 18 March 2021).

being developed to achieve mind control have integrated the vaccine against COVID-19 into their narrative. One of the most widespread theories is that the vaccine contains a microchip that the global elites want to use to control our thoughts using the new 5G technology. Anti-refugee conspiracy theories about asylum seekers and migrants in need of protection as part of the planned so-called 'Great Replacement' have merged with a fear of the spread of COVID-19. People who are already vulnerable are thereby further blamed and demonised. These examples, which are discussed in depth below, point towards conspiracy theories appearing in many different guises. Their narrative structure has been constant for centuries, but their content varies depending on the target group and the nature of the crisis.

The need for a capability to respond to conspiracy theories

The main risk with conspiracy theories about COVID-19 is that they can undermine public health: If citizens do not take the advice of medical experts seriously, ignore recommendations or do not get vaccinated, the disease will claim more victims and cause greater suffering such as long-term illness. Conspiracy theories also have the potential for radicalisations, since they deepen polarising worldviews that play into the hands of populist political actors. They can fan the flames of bitter, violent extremism processes: politicians, officials, researchers and care workers can be subjected to threats and violence, infrastructure such as 5G masts can be sabotaged, and the pharmaceutical industry can suffer attacks.[6]

Belief in one conspiracy theory also often leads to belief in another. Once a narrative has become established that authorities and politicians cannot be relied on, and that experts' knowledge is false, this opens the door to the notion of a 'deep state' that intentionally misleads and harms its own population or is too incompetent and weak to respond to crises. Such a narrative contains a contradictory tension between ideas about absolute power or absolute inaction. In Sweden, this kind of conspiratorial thinking has a tradition dating back to the assassination of Prime Minister Olof Palme in 1986. It is often used in populist criticism of those in power or in foreign influence campaigns relating to Sweden's alleged inability to deal with crises. Outlining a negative image of Sweden in global political strategic narratives also undermines the country's position as a security policy actor in the international arena.

In this complex new information landscape, a specific psychological defence capability is needed to meet the objectives for society's security. With their clear narrative structures and convincing rhetoric, conspiracy theories represent a threat to societal crisis management in interaction between citizens and authorities. The way is also paved for using conspiracy theory narratives in various influence operations targeting Sweden and Swedish interests. This vulnerability can be responded to through greater knowledge about how conspiracy theories work, and how they can be identified and countered.

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6. UNESCO and EU (2020), "Conspiracy theories: the link to COVID-19", https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/live_work_travel_in_the_eu/unesco-conspiracy-english-7.jpg (last accessed 23 March 2021).

1.2 Conspiracy theories about the pandemic

The conspiracy theories relating to the COVID-19 pandemic fall into the following six categories:

- the origin of the virus and the disease (aetiology)
- the spread of the virus and the disease (epidemiology)
- who is infected and becomes ill from the virus (sickness rate) and who dies from it (mortality/lethality)
- what politicians and public health experts are doing to stop and counter the pandemic (limit, manage and prevent), in particular
- vaccination against COVID-19, and
- overall theories and explanations about why the pandemic is happening right now
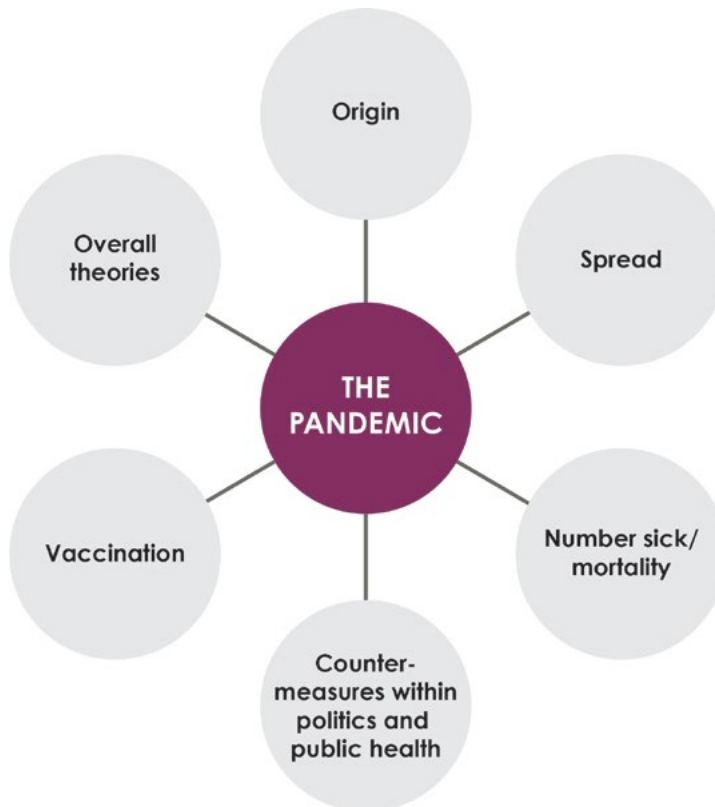
Model for different themes within conspiracy theories about COVID-19.

The origin of the virus and the disease

The question of the origin of the virus and the disease is infected because there is an underlying accusation of blame: Could those who knew about the existence of the virus have prevented its spread? Was the outbreak of the virus covered up? Was the virus created in a laboratory or through transfer from animals to humans? It is of course reasonable to ask questions like these, but they were quickly linked to a characteristic trait of conspiracy theories, namely assigning blame and pointing to scapegoats.

'The China virus'

By calling COVID-19 'the China virus', a narrative was established whereby China was made responsible for the contagious agent (the pathogen), the disease and by extension its spread.

Assigning blame was followed by expressions of racist, 'Asiaphobic'/'Sino-phobic' stereotypes being directed against people of Asian appearance around the world. Accusations about 'the China virus' also re-use another conspiratorial trope (as expressed by former US President Donald Trump and his supporters), that "climate change is a Chinese hoax perpetrated to destroy the American economy".[7] Here, climate change denial and assigning blame go hand-in-hand. Regarding COVID-19, attempts were thus made to explain that China had intentionally created or released the virus to harm the US (and its economy) – which was also said to advance the Democratic Party's agenda ahead of the 2020 presidential election. A serious investigation of whether the virus had leaked from the Wuhan laboratory was thus impeded.[8]

Both these conspiratorial narratives dismiss scientific expert knowledge. Dr Marietta Vasquez from Yale School of Medicine explains why it is both incorrect and xenophobic to give diseases ethnic or geographic labels. What causes the disease (the contagious agent, in this case a coronavirus) cannot be linked to culture or geography – it affects all people.[9] A conspiracy theory has also been circulated about the spread of the virus being the result of a plot between the Democrats and the Chinese government.[10] In September 2020, the US House of Representatives adopted a resolution to oppose anti-Asian rhetoric about the coronavirus.[11]

7. Helier, Cheung, "What does Trump actually believe on climate change?", BBC, 23 January 2020, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-51213003 (last accessed 13 March 2021); Jacobsen, Louis, "Yes, Donald Trump did call climate change a Chinese hoax", PolitiFact, 3 June 2016, https://www.politifact.com/factchecks/2016/jun/03/hillary-clinton/yes-donald-trump-did-call-climate-change-chinese-h/ (last accessed 13 March 2021).

8. Knight, Peter, 'What if a conspiracy theory turns out to be true? The return of the lab leak theory', Info-demic, 14 June 2021, http://infodemic.eu/2021/06/14/Lableak.html?fbclid=IwAR36ABeCohcJaU3bZL2AF-hYVTs69lhQrDnawFwtfIlyzy6wQHvSR4MI1eTE (last accessed 28 June 2021).

9. Vasquez, Marietta, "Calling COVID-19 the 'Wuhan Virus' or 'China Virus' is inaccurate and xenophobic", Yale University, 12 March 2020, https://medicine.yale.edu/news-article/23074/ (last accessed 13 March 2021).

10. Brown, Matthew, "Fact check: Coronavirus did not spread in the US because of an anti-Trump conspiracy", USA Today, 17 March 2020, https://eu.usatoday.com/story/news/factcheck/2020/03/17/fact-check-coronavirus-spread-not-anti-trump-conspiracy/5065736002/ (last accessed 13 March 2021).

11. Zengerle, Patricia, "U.S. House resolution opposes anti-Asian coronavirus rhetoric, including Trump's 'China virus'", Reuters, 17 September 2020, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavi-rus-trump-rhetoric-idUSKBN2682ZI (last accessed 13 March 2021).

"The USA virus"

Conversely, the US has also been accused of having created and consciously released the virus. This theory in turn re-uses the conspiracy theory about HIV/AIDS hatched in the 1980s by the Soviet KGB security service. In brief, the theory was based on the same thing: that the US had created HIV/AIDS and tested its biological weapon on the population of Africa.[12] This, combined with the fact that Dr Anthony Fauci (at the time already one of the US's leading experts on infection control) was involved in the development of treatment for the disease, means that conspiracy theorists now see unambiguous links. The Wuhan Institute of Virology is often singled out as the actual source of infection. However, links to American investment there via various agencies and companies are seen as proof that the institute is actually part of a group of facilities where biological warfare agents are developed and tested.[13] Nor is it particularly surprising that some people have linked the laboratory in Wuhan with the American-Hungarian businessman George Soros, whose Jewish roots make him a constant target for antisemitic conspiracy theories about attempts by 'the global elites' to achieve world domination.[14]

The spread of the virus

How the virus spreads among the population (epidemiology) also quickly became the subject of many conspiracy theories. These range from pure science fiction to classic xenophobia: Was there a link between the launch of the new 5G mobile technology and the spread of the virus? Were refugees bound for Europe used as infection spreaders (vectors)?

The 5G theory

Across Europe, mobile phone masts have been sawn down and base stations set on fire, and workers have been attacked. This is because perhaps the most fantastical theory involves the new 5G mobile technology either spreading the virus or helping to weaken human immune systems, making them susceptible to the virus.[15] Here, a number of different theories and fears are combined:

12. Smallpage, Stephen M., et al. (2020), "Who are the conspiracy theorists? Demographics and conspiracy theories", Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories, London: Routledge; EUvsDisinfo, "A war by another name", 1 February 2018, https://euvsdisinfo.eu/a-war-by-any-other-name/ (last accessed 13 March 2021).

13. Australian Associated Press, "GlaxoSmithKline falsely linked to Wuhan lab, Pfizer in COVID-19 contrivance", AAP, 11 December 2020, https://www.aap.com.au/glaxosmithkline-falsely-linked-to-wuhan-lab-pfizer-in-covid-19-contrivance/ (last accessed 13 March 2021).

14. Funke, Daniel, "Conspiracy theory falsely connects George Soros to COVID-19", PolitiFact, 19 March 2020, https://www.politifact.com/factchecks/2020/mar/19/facebook-posts/conspiracy-theory-falsely-connects-george-soros-co/ (last accessed 13 March 2021)

15. The Conversation (2020b), "Four experts investigate how the 5G coronavirus conspiracy theory began", 11 June 2020, https://theconversation.com/four-experts-investigate-how-the-5g-coronavirus-conspiracy-theory-began-139137 (last accessed 13 March 2021); WHO, "FACT: 5G mobile networks DO NOT spread COVID-19", 23 November 2020, https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/advice-for-public/myth-busters#5g (last accessed 13 March 2021).

Before the pandemic, 5G technology had already been portrayed as a threat to humanity by activists against mobile radiation (or sources of electricity and light), and separate conspiracy theories have been spread within this field.[16] China's position in connection with the development of the new standard (and Huawei's controversial activities) could then be linked with the origin of the virus.[17]

Blaming refugees as infection spreaders

Conspiracy theories about COVID-19 reinforce fears about what has been depicted as the external threat to the continent.[18] A conspiracy theory that refugees from the Middle East and North Africa (the MENA region) who had gathered in Turkey were being used to spread infection into Europe was circulated very early during the Coronavirus pandemic.[19] However, populist anti-immigrant figures have repeated the idea of a direct link between the spread of the virus and asylum seekers.[20] It has been maintained that the so-called 'UK variant' was actually imported to Great Britain via migrants. The outbreak of the disease has also been linked to refugee camps in Greece. Experts have expressed a concern that the imbalance in vaccination will be used to put more blame on refugees if they cannot show that they are vaccinated. This example shows how anti-immigrant and xenophobic conspiracy theories about 'the Great Replacement' – which have circulated in Europe since 2015 – have become merged with COVID-19.

Who gets infected and becomes ill, and who dies from the virus?

Who gets infected and becomes ill from the virus (morbidity) and who dies from it (mortality) – also known as epidemiological indicators – has also been subject to extensive speculation. Public health statistics have been used by two opposite poles in the conspiratorial camp. At one extreme, they have been used to justify an (allegedly ineffective) Swedish strategy whereby much tougher restrictions should be applied. At the other extreme, such as the 'Freedom Sweden' movement, the statistics are entirely manipulated and lack a factual basis – they are being used to push through a totalitarian agenda that contradicts 'truth and freedom'.

16. Bryngel, Frans, Funck, Marcus Admund, "Strålande tider" ["Radiant times"], Magasinet Filter, 21 September 2020, https://magasinetfilter.se/reportage/stralande-tider/ (last accessed 13 March 2021); Funck, Marcus Admund, "Konspirationsteorier i spåret av pandemin" ["Conspiracy theories in the wake of the pandemic"], Sveriges Radio, 19 October 2020, https://sverigesradio.se/artikel/7577824 (last accessed 13 March 2021).

17. Bowler, Tim, "Huawei: Why is it being banned from the UK's 5G network?", 14 July 2020, https://www.bbc.com/news/newsbeat-47041341 (last accessed 13 March 2021).

18. McGee, Luke, "Migrants could become the new Covid scapegoats when Europe's borders reopen", CNN, 6 March 2021, https://edition.cnn.com/2021/03/06/europe/europes-next-migrant-crisis-intl-analysis/index.html (last accessed 13 March 2021).

19. Önnerfors, Andreas (2020a), "Covid-19 – handsprit mot konspirationsteorierna som sprider sig viralt" ["COVID-19 – hand sanitiser against conspiracy theories that go viral"], LinkedIn, 1 March 2020, https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/covid-19-handsprit-mot-konspirationsteorierna-som-sig-önnerfors-/ (last accessed 13 March 2021).

20. Collier, Henry (2021), "Nigel Farage's 'barefaced lies' about a 'COVID crisis' in Dover", Kent Live, 28 February 2021, https://www.kentlive.news/news/kent-news/nigel-farages-barefaced-lies-covid-5055106 (last accessed 31 March 2021).

Culturally coded narratives about morbidity

Reasoning about morbidity and mortality often leads to culturally coded conspiracy narratives. For example, many of the first individuals in Europe to fall ill were prosperous skiing tourists who had returned from northern Italy. However, the infection also rapidly spread to less socioeconomically privileged groups in service professions and in vulnerable suburbs. Their cultural traditions, living situations and alleged lack of language skills were subsequently singled out as the causes of a wide-reaching spread of infection.[21] The blame was thereby shifted from a privileged, established societal 'insider group' to a societal 'outsider group' of ethnic minorities – a typical pattern in conspiracy theory reasoning on the spread of infection since the bubonic plague in the Middle Ages. A similar process occurred in the UK and the US, where lifestyle factors of societal minorities – comorbidities such as obesity – were highlighted as conditions behind a rapid spread of infection (rather than the lack of public health countermeasures).[22]

In terms of the mortality of the virus, it is obvious that those who are members of risk groups or have underlying diseases will be affected to a greater extent. Within a conspiracy theory explanatory framework, however, the high death rates at Swedish nursing homes were interpreted as an intentional 'geronticide' or 'senicide' (the intentional killing of the elderly). An article in the respected German news magazine Der Spiegel ("Has Sweden sacrificed its elderly?") triggered a fierce debate and was shared widely within the conspiracy theory environment.[23]

The battle over public health statistics

An entirely different aspect of the question about the epidemiological data used to study morbidity and mortality is public health statistics. Some maintain that the measurements of both the spread of infection (through COVID cases confirmed by testing) and deaths (related to COVID) are seriously exaggerated since the disease is "just a normal flu". The fight over statistics and how morbidity and mortality figures are calculated, used and compared between countries has become a conflict area of its own, much like interpretations of criminal statistics linked to immigration. In conspiratorial narratives, knowledge-generating state institutions and agencies (such as the Public Health Agency of Sweden or Statistics Sweden) are involved in intentionally covering up facts in order to mislead the populations of their own countries.

21. Sundkvist, Frida, "Klyftan: Rika testar sig för corona – fattiga dör" ["The divide: The rich get tested for COVID – the poor die"], Expressen, 25 December 2020, https://www.expressen.se/nyheter/qs/bristerna-i-test-strategin-rika-testar-sig-fattiga-dor/ (last accessed 13 March 2021). See also "Covid-döden har hela tiden handlat om klass" ["COVID deaths have always been about class"], https://www.expressen.se/kultur/ide/covid-doden-har-hela-tiden-handat-om-klass/ (last accessed 26 March 2021).

22. Malik, Kenan, "Illness, obesity, racism; who gets blamed for our crises? The poor of course", The Guardian, 2 August 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/aug/02/illness-obesity-racism-who-gets-blamed-for-our-crises-the-poor-of-course (last accessed 13 March 2021).

23. Pieper, Dietmar, "Corona-Desaster in Pflegeheimen. Hat Schweden die Alten geopfert?" ["Corona disaster in nursing homes: Has Sweden sacrificed its elderly?"], Der Spiegel, 9 October 2020, https://www.spiegel.de/politik/ausland/corona-in-schwedens-pflegeheimen-der-eingeladene-tod-a-00000000-0002-0001-0000-000173444539 (last accessed 13 March 2021).

The most extreme variants of COVID-19 conspiracy theories – those that completely deny the existence of the virus or its danger – claim that public health statistics are instead entirely fictitious and manipulated. Conspiratorial narratives are thus like a horseshoe with two extremes that meet in the criticism directed at political measures based on public health science.

Countermeasures within politics and public health

One particularly fertile area for conspiracy theory reasoning is what politicians and public health experts are doing to stop and counter the pandemic. For example, in order to limit, manage and prevent the disease, decisions have been made to restrict citizens' freedoms and rights, such as freedom of movement, freedom of assembly and freedom of trade (through lockdowns). Both directly and indirectly, life and health as human rights have been put to the test in various public health systems. Making reference to the state of emergency due to the global pandemic, states have taken exceptional measures such as travel bans, closing borders and schools, using apps to trace contacts and shutting down entire sectors of the economy (such as tourism, hospitality and the experience industry). Civil society has been hit particularly hard through recommendations and prohibitions against free association activities. These restrictions of individual and collective rights – however justified they may be deemed to be against the background of the pandemic – are seen by conspiracy theorists as the true intentions of political decisions. Just like the 'global war on terrorism' of the early 21st century, the pandemic is interpreted as an excuse for states to limit people's freedoms further and introduce a global dictatorship. Of course, there are problematic cases. Denmark's decision to cull all minks at the country's mink farms in an attempt to stop the spread of a virus variant probably breached the country's constitution. UN Secretary General António Guterres has spoken about a "global pandemic of human rights abuses".[24] However, within the field of conspiracy theories, there is no scope for nuanced discussion. The narrative of politicians' abuse of 'ordinary people' fits with the idea established more than 200 years ago of the 'interests of the elite' always being opposed to those of 'the people', who are deceived, manipulated and controlled.

In addition to this general narrative, which has grown in popularity during the pandemic, conspiracy theorists have a particular focus on public health experts – the Public Health Agency of Sweden has been subject to a long list of suspicions. Swedish authorities such as the Swedish Meteorological and Hydrological Institute have already been the focus of conspiratorial narratives and accused of covering up 'chemtrails' (alleged emissions from aircraft) or of exaggerating the impact of climate change.[25]

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24. Kelly, Annie and Pattisson, Pete, "'A pandemic of abuses': human rights under attack during Covid, says UN head", The Guardian, 22 February 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2021/feb/22/human-rights-in-the-time-of-covid-a-pandemic-of-abuses-says-un-head (last accessed 13 March 2021).

25. Palén, Tove and Wicklin, Martin, "Giftet i luften" ["The poison in the air"], Sveriges Radio, 28 June 2014, https://sverigesradio.se/avsnitt/388869 (last accessed 23 March 2021).

During the pandemic, one particularly symbolically charged subject has been the international requirement to wear a face mask (with Sweden being an exception) and to maintain physical distancing. In many countries, these requirements are perceived as a restriction of individuals' rights to physical integrity. Face masks are seen as an attack against the body, leading for example to conspiratorial critics taking over the feminist slogan "My body, my rights" (which originally referred to sexual and reproductive health rights). In many cases, criticism of the measures decided on by politicians and public health experts is based on alternative medicine. Alternative medicine's views on diseases and their treatment are a breeding ground for adopting conspiratorial thinking patterns targeted at both the pharmaceutical industry and state-organised public health services. There is often an overlap with an image of humanity characterised by esoteric thinking about the person as a whole, linked with neospirituality in the sectarian self-help and wellness industry.[26] This combination, which has clear traits of new religious meaning-making, is known internationally as 'conspirituality'.[27] However, perhaps the most problematic area for conspiracy theory reasoning in connection with public health counter-measures is vaccination.

Vaccination against COVID-19

Conspiracy theories relating to vaccination against COVID-19 combine two ideas that were already circulating within the conspiracy theory environment before the pandemic: the rejection of vaccines by the so-called anti-vax movement and fear of implanted microchips for mind control.[28]

Anti-vax conspiracy theories

Ever since inoculation against smallpox was introduced in Europe in the 18th century, arguments have been made – based on medical, moral or ideological/religious grounds – against preventing diseases through vaccination. In 2019, the WHO listed vaccine hesitancy as one of the ten biggest threats to global health.[29] Vaccine scepticism can take different forms under the umbrella of the global anti-vax movement, which operates effective machinery for spreading its ideas via the internet.[30] However, since a link between the MMR (measles, mumps and rubella) vaccine and autism was incorrectly asserted in the late 1990s, conspiracy theories about vaccination have been a notable part of this environment. The false medical argument against vaccines is combined in the conspiratorial environment with the idea that large pharmaceutical companies ('big pharma') intentionally aim to make people sick in order to leave them

26. McGowan, Michael, "How the wellness and influencer crowd serve conspiracies to the masses", The Guardian, 24 February 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2021/feb/25/how-the-wellness-and-influencer-crowd-served-conspiracies-to-the-masses (last accessed 13 March 2021).

27. Dyrendal, Asbjørn, "Conspiracy theory and religion", Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theory, 2020.

28. Nyman, Jenny, "Övervakningschip och dna-förändringar – så sprids konspirationsteorier om covidvacciner" ["Surveilance chips and DNA changes – how conspiracy theories about COVID vaccines spread"], Dagens Nyheter, 14 March 2021, https://www.dn.se/varlden/overvakningschip-och-dna-forandringar-sa-sprids-konspirationsteorier-om-covidvacciner/ (last accessed 13 March 2021).

29. WHO, "Ten threats to global health in 2019", 2019, https://www.who.int/news-room/spotlight/ten-threats-to-global-health-in-2019 (last accessed 13 March 2021).

30. Mahdawi, Arwa (2021), "How many anti-vaxxers does it take to misinform the world? Just twelve", The Guardian, 30 March 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/mar/30/how-many-anti-vaxxers-does-it-take-to-misinform-the-world-just-twelve (last accessed 31 March 2021).

dependent on pharmaceuticals or vaccines. Against the background of events such as the so-called opioid crisis in the US (in which tens of thousands of Americans died as a result of overprescribing addictive painkillers), this interpretation gains a degree of credibility. The narrative is then varied in connection with the COVID-19 pandemic. According to this variant, the pandemic has been created in order to allow the corrupt 'big pharma' companies to forcibly vaccinate the world's population and thereby line their own pockets. This theory is presented, for example, in a widely discussed quasi-documentary, Plandemic, which spread virally online.[31]

Fear of implanted microchips

A narrative confirming established ideas about 'global elites' has been linked to another conspiracy theory: that of the RFID (radio frequency identification) chip. RFIDs are used in applications such as automatic toll payment devices in cars. The idea that microchips would be intentionally implanted into people in order to exercise totalitarian control had already circulated among technosceptical conspiracy theorists (often also opponents of 5G technology) several years before COVID-19. So-called 'biohacking', in which RFID chips are inserted into the wrist and replace keys, credit cards or travel passes, for example, is seen as paving the way towards an inhuman dictatorship. It is not clear how, but the conspiracy theories surrounding RFID chips succeeded in being incorporated into and combined with anti-vax ideas: the vaccine is said to contain a microchip that allows mind control to be carried out.[32] This is where Microsoft founder Bill Gates comes into the picture. Since the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation is the largest private charitable organisation within global health, which has carried out vaccination programmes around the world and has massively supported vaccination against COVID-19, both the vaccination programme and the alleged microchip technology are linked to Gates.[33]

Overall, resistance and hesitancy towards vaccines is renewed and reinforced in connection with a global public health crisis such as COVID-19. Old conspiracy theories about the medical harm caused by vaccines gain new currency, and at the same time are combined with the narrative about RFID chips that are said to allow for mind control. Public health efforts to prevent new spread of infection by achieving a sufficient degree of immunisation among the population are thus undermined.

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31. Wilson, Jason, "Plandemic: how the debunked movie by discredited researcher Judy Mikovits went viral", The Guardian, 14 May 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/may/14/plandemic-movie-discredited-dr-doctor-judy-mikovits-how-debunked-conspiracy-theory-film-went-viral (last accessed 13 March 2021).

32. Reuters, "Fact check: RFID microchips will not be injected with the COVID-19 vaccine, altered video features Bill and Melinda Gates and Jack Ma", 4 December 2020, https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-fact-check-vaccine-microchip-gates-ma-idUSKBN28E286 (last accessed 13 March 2021).

33. Goodman, Jack and Carmichael, Flora, "Coronavirus: Bill Gates 'microchip' conspiracy theory and other vaccine claims fact-checked", BBC, 30 May 2020, https://www.bbc.com/news/52847648 (last accessed 13 March 2021).

Why now?
Overall conspiracy theories about COVID-19

Alongside conspiracy theories about the origin, spread, morbidity and mortality of the virus, political and public health countermeasures, and vaccination, COVID-19 is also incorporated into overall theories about why the pandemic is happening right now.

These are included to varying degrees and in various combinations in previously discussed themes, but the main aim is to offer an overall explanation for why the pandemic is happening now, rather than how it is playing out. Firstly, we must distinguish between those who believe that the virus exists and those who believe that it does not exist. Those in the first camp acknowledge that both the virus and COVID-19 exist, and that it is consciously or unconsciously spread by various actors (both states and others, such as Bill Gates or George Soros). Belief that the virus has been released from a laboratory does not necessarily mean believing that this was done intentionally, for example. However, the most common conception is that the virus was spread intentionally and planned, as represented by the idea of the so-called 'plandemic'. The above mentioned 26-minute YouTube film called Plandemic reached millions of viewers, and has been presented as 'proof' of the argument.

To support the conspiracy theory of the plandemic, reference has also often been made to a simulation exercise called Event 201, arranged in October 2019 by Johns Hopkins University (US) in association with the World Economic Forum (WEF) and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.[34] This exercise involved how decision-makers within politics and public health would deal with the catastrophic global spread of a new coronavirus. This, combined with the fact that the WEF arranged a meeting in June 2020 with the motto "The Great Reset" (of the economy and society after the pandemic), has fed the theories that 'the reset' is the actual aim of the planned pandemic which had, of course, been practised just a few months before it began.[35] As mentioned above, there is also the conspiracy theory that the entire pandemic is a hoax. Essentially, this theory is based on COVID-19 being staged by the global elites in order to introduce a totalitarian dictatorship. In actual fact, the pandemic (if it even exists) is an 'ordinary flu' that has been manipulated to appear like a dangerous, deadly disease in order to terrify the world's population into obedience.

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34. Johns Hopkins University, "Event 201", 2019, https://www.centerforhealthsecurity.org/event201/ (last accessed 13 March 2021).

35. World Economic Forum, "The Great Reset" (2020), https://www.weforum.org/great-reset/ (last accessed 13 March 2021).

1.3 The threat to Swedish democracy

Conspiracy theories about COVID-19 are a threat to democracy on several levels. They largely involve rejecting or misinterpreting established medical expertise, and casting suspicion on state and private actors and their intentions. However, conspiracy theories also hasten radicalisation processes that polarise society. When confidence in the exercise of authority (particularly in times of crisis) is undermined, other conspiratorial narratives can be added on and can lead to violent extremism. At the same time, conspiracy theories prepare the groundwork for – or are already part of – foreign powers' information influence activities against Sweden.

The rejection of expert knowledge

Sweden has a long tradition of independent government offices, in which civil servants with specialist expertise have wide-reaching scope to shape the practical exercise of authority. Thanks to the principle of public access, this takes place with a great deal of transparency. However, conspiracy theories attack the actual basis for expert knowledge that is an integral part of the exercise of authority – the scientific foundation. By deviating in their narratives from sound source criticism and established logical rules of reasoning (for example the coherence requirement for correspondence with reality), and by combining ethical value judgments (what is right or wrong) with statements of fact (what is true or false), suspicion is cast upon the grounds for the authorities' decision-making.

Rejecting scientific or legal expertise is often associated with populist political positions. Countries with populist leadership – such as Brazil under Bolsonaro or the US under Trump – have been much slower to take the pandemic seriously.[36] However, coronavirus deniers also see themselves as victims of the totalitarian conspiracy and as a resistance movement against it. For example, the Danish anti-coronavirus response protesters Men in Black (MiB) have adopted the motto "While the rest of you wake up, we're fighting for you".[37] Citizens' freedom is said to be under threat, and must be taken back by fighting actively on the streets. MiB, who draw support from militant football hooligans, have taken on the Italian antifascist protest song Bella Ciao and written new lyrics for it. They thereby compare themselves with a resistance movement in a totalitarian, fascist state, glorifying their social media street fight against law enforcement. In Germany, the Czech Republic and even Sweden, supporters of the coronavirus protest movement wear a yellow star with the word 'unvaccinated', like the stars the Jews were forced to wear in Nazi Germany and occupied areas.

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36. The Conversation (2020a), "Are populist leaders a liability during COVID-19?", 8 April 2020, https://the-conversation.com/are-populist-leaders-a-liability-during-covid-19-135431 (last accessed 13 March 2021).

37. Lindkvist, Hugo, "Men in black har tagit danska coronaprotester ut på gatan" ["Men in Black have taken Danish coronavirus protests out onto the streets"], Dagens Nyheter, 10 February 2021, https://www.dn.se/kultur/men-in-black-har-tagit-danska-coronaprotester-ut-pa-gatan/ (last accessed 13 March 2021).

As critics and opponents of COVID-19 vaccination, they compare themselves to the victims of the Nazis' antisemitic persecution and genocide.[38] The state that intends to vaccinate its citizens against the pandemic is compared with the Nazi dictatorship. Within the conspiracy theory environment, Israel and other countries are accused of breaching the medical Nuremberg Code.[39]

Conspiracy theories and radicalisation towards violent extremism

The spread of conspiracy theories against COVID-19 may lead to a new wave of radicalisation towards violent extremism within a broad segment across the political spectrum. It has been possible to place earlier protest movements – such as that against the G20 summits on global economic policy or against the refugee policy since 2015 – in clear right- and left-wing categories. By contrast, demonstrations against coronavirus restrictions in Berlin, London, Copenhagen and Stockholm have been characterised by mobilisation among the populist or radical science-denying right, and among the environmentally-committed vaccine sceptics from the 'conspiritual' camp and the anti-globalisation left. They have succeeded in combining an active online presence on social media with offline activism in classic street protests. This makes it easier for people who feel a general frustration with the current situation (restrictions and lockdowns that have a negative impact on the economy and everyday life) to align themselves with these broad platforms. This was seen as early as 2015 and 2016 with the German Pegida movement, which united those experiencing a decade of political disappointment in eastern Germany with resistance to a generous refugee policy.[40] In Sweden, similar protests are taking place with a wide range of slogans under the name 'The Thousand-Man March – for freedom and truth', advertised on various conspiracy theory websites and social media channels.

Although the majority of those who take part in these protests are only exercising their statutory right to the freedom of expression and demonstration, there are also clear elements of violent extremism. In August 2020, a group of fanatical right-wing activists who denied the existence of the Federal Republic of Germany attempted to storm the Reichstag building in Berlin.[41] In the US this movement is known as the sovereign citizen movement, and is deeply involved in the QAnon conspiracy theory which believes in a 'deep state' that manipulates its population.[42] The violent storming of the US Capitol in January 2021 was a direct consequence of wide-spread belief in one or more conspiracy theories (fuelled by the COVID-19 protest movement) that have radicalised Trump supporters.

38. Önnerfors, Andreas (2021a), "How radical Right conspiracy theories drive populist mobilization", openDemocracy, 25 May 2021, https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/countering-radical-right/how-radical-right-conspiracy-theories-drive-populist-mobilisation/ (last accessed 13 March 2021).

39. Joffre, Tzvi, "Israeli anti-vaxxers submit ethics complaint to ICC – report", The Jerusalem Post, 14 March 2021, https://www.jpost.com/breaking-news/coronavirus-israeli-anti-vaxxers-submit-ethics-complaint-to-icj-report-661925 (last accessed 14 March 2021).

40. Önnerfors, Andreas (2018), "Moving the Mainstream: Radicalization of Political Language in the German PEGIDA Movement" in Expressions of Radicalization: Global Politics, Processes and Performances (Eds. Andreas Önnerfors and Kristian Steiner), London: Palgrave McMillan.

41. BBC, "Germany coronavirus: Anger after attempt to storm parliament", 30 August 2020, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-53964147 (last accessed 13 March 2021).

42. Southern Poverty Law Centre (SPLC), "Sovereign Citizens Movement", https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/ideology/sovereign-citizens-movement (last accessed 13 March 2021).

Germany's own COVID-sceptic Q movement, Querdenker ("lateral thinkers"), provides a common platform for legitimate criticism of political and public health measures and pure conspiracy theory conjecture.[43] Querdenker has also published articles about Sweden's anti-coronavirus response movement. In 2019 and 2020, two terrorist attacks took place in Germany. Several of the conspiracy theories mentioned by the terrorists in their manifestos also circulate among the COVID-sceptic groups, such as the 'deep state' theory or a belief that 'globalists' are aiming for world domination.[44]

All this also indicates that the conspiracy theory environment has international subdivisions. For example, the World Freedom Alliance (WFA) – an international coronavirus-critical network that coordinates protests and resistance action in various countries – was established in 2020. The WFA has strong representation in Sweden, and has links to both right-wing extremism and the wellness industry.

Conspiracy theories and information influence activities against Sweden

In several respects, the conspiracy theories surrounding COVID-19 convey both fake news and pure disinformation (which is spread as misinformation), and must therefore be considered as a possible part of a larger influence campaign that may be targeted against Sweden.[45] EUvsDisinfo clearly shows how the pandemic has become a projection screen for Russian strategic narratives about Europe's geopolitical weakness, decadence and approaching decline.

Sweden is already a target for a number of polarising narratives in relation to the so-called 'Swedish strategy', based on individual responsibility and rec-ommendations, and a more flexible approach to restrictive state measures that limit citizens' rights. For example, the Swedish view on the value of face masks for preventing infection stands out by international comparison. Swedish flags were therefore seen during American anti-coronavirus response protests. At the same time, dissatisfaction is bubbling up in Sweden, both in social media, letters to the editor and opinion articles, and beneath the surface in groups that go as far as accusing Swedish decision-makers of crimes against humanity. Here (and elsewhere), conspiratorial narratives about Sweden's alleged inability to deal with crises are repeated – narratives that had already surfaced during the refugee crisis of 2015 and 2016 and following the forest fires of 2018, and that have been combined with narratives about intentional cover-ups and far-reaching incom-petence ever since the 1986 Palme assassination, the 1994 M/S Estonia sinking and the 2004 tsunami disaster. These narratives have the potential to undermine the legitimacy and credibility of Swedish authorities, and thus also their ability to protect the country's population against societal crises or armed conflict.

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43. Siebold, Sabine, "Citing far-right sway, Germany tracks COVID protesters", Reuters, 9 December 2020, https://www.reuters.com/article/germany-security-coronavirus-idUSKBN28J108 (last accessed 13 March 2021).

44. Önnerfors, Andreas (2021b), "'Der grosse Austausch': Conspiratorial frames of terrorist violence in Germany", in Europe: Continent of Conspiracies. Conspiracy Theories in and about Europe (Eds. Andreas Önnerfors and André Krouwel), London: Routledge, 2021.

45. Sveriges Television, "Säpo: Utländsk makt utnyttjar coronakrisen"
["Swedish Security Service: Foreign power takes advantage of the coronavirus crisis"], 28 April 2020,
https://www.svt.se/nyheter/snabbkollen/sapo-utlandsk-makt-utnyttjar-coronakrisen
https://www.reuters.com/article/germany-security-coronavirus-idUSKBN28J108 (last accessed 23 March 2021).

What are conspiracy theories?

2. What are conspiracy theories? Definitions and discussion

There are many different definitions of conspiracy theories. Due to their specific structure, they also occupy a special position within disinformation and misinformation. How can we differentiate between theories about a conspiracy and conspiracy theories? How do they work as meaning-making narratives and belief systems? How are they used? This section discuss these issues against the backdrop of the current state of research.

2.1 Introduction and definition

Most people have a spontaneous understanding of the term 'conspiracy theory', but the term also has its own history and significance. People often picture cape-clad members of a secret group, clandestinely planning for world domination and – for this or some other nefarious purpose – manipulating the economy, politics and culture. However, the term originally referred to finding explanations for criminal behaviour. It was only in the mid-20th century that social scientists began talking about conspiracy theories as a way of under-standing how people could be drawn towards over-simplified explanations for major events. Other people are often labelled as conspiracy theorists as a way of devaluing or stigmatising their opinions. Having previously regarded these simplifications as a psychological deviation, or a 'paranoid style', researchers now believe that conspiracy theories are extremely common. They are defined as "an explanation of historical, ongoing, or future events that cites as a main causal factor [behind events] a small group of powerful persons […] acting in secret for their own benefit against the common good."[46]

Are conspiracy theories a threat, and if so why? This section presents and discusses definitions of the term, and why conspiratorial thinking can be dangerous for open societies. Our time is said to be characterised by information disorder, the instability of knowledge or having simply left the truth behind.[47]

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46. Uscinski, J.E. and Parent, J.M. (2014). American Conspiracy Theories, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 24.

47. "Information disorder", "epistemic instability" and "post-truth" are the terms used within research. For definitions, see Wardle, Claire and Derakshan, Hossein, "Information Disorder. Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policymaking", Council of Europe, 2017, https://rm.coe.int/information-disor-der-report-version-august-2018/16808c9c77 (last accessed 17 March 2021); Harambam, Jaron (2020), Contemporary conspiracy culture: truth and knowledge in an age of epistemic instability, London: Routledge and McIntyre, Lee, Post-Truth, Boston: MIT, 2018.

The growing amount of disinformation and misinformation that washes over us, for example via social media, means that we need to understand how conspiracy theories become effective means by which misleading or incorrect information is intentionally or unintentionally spread. This spread is accelerated by societal crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Following a brief overview of the current research landscape, the difference between a conspiracy theory and having a theory about a conspiracy will be explained.

Conspiracy theories are not only theories; they are also a form of meaning-making narrative with a fixed structure and dramaturgy. As well as explanations of (actual) events that are always based on a kernel of truth, they can easily become myths or religion-like belief systems that explain the events' almost unearthly causes. They thus become harder to reach with rational thought and source criticism. Confusion between the categories of true and false (statements of fact, factual judgments) and good and evil (value judgments) is typical. But why are conspiracy theories so attractive, who believes them and when do they become dangerous?

> **A working definition of the term 'conspiracy theory'**
>
> A conspiracy theory expresses and communicates the idea that events and their causes *do not happen by chance*, and that the world which is affected by these events is *divided up into two spheres*: a sphere of (evil) conspirators and (good) victims of their plot. *The plan* for the conspiracy has been prepared and is being (or has been) implemented *in secret* with the intention of harming others, and those carrying it out move within an invisible/dark/secret area *unobserved*. The conspiracy theory often blames or demonises those who are said to be guilty. It is also fuelled by the idea that society/the world is approaching its downfall.
>
> The conspiracy theory seeks to imitate scientific reasoning and establish what is *true and false*, but it also tries to explain *what is right and wrong* or good and evil.

2.2   Conspiracy theories, disinformation and misinformation

In 2020, the European Commission and UNESCO issued a guide titled "Identifying conspiracy theories" under the hashtag #ThinkBeforeSharing.[48] The guide noted that conspiracy theories are harmful and misleading, and that they have increased during the COVID-19 pandemic. The ten published factsheets aim to educate the public and the media about identifying and uncovering conspiracy theories, and will be presented in greater detail in section 4 of this study.

Our time is characterised by what some have called information disorder. Previously reliable rules about what can and cannot be seen as dependable information have been overturned by a more fluid information culture based on social media and online communication. Knowledge is no longer sta-

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48. The European Commission and UNESCO (2020), "Identifying conspiracy theories", https://ec.europa.eu/info/live-work-travel-eu/coronavirus-response/fighting-disinformation/identifying-conspiracy-theories_en#what-are-conspiracy-theories-why-do-they-flourish (last accessed 18 March 2021).

ble, and knowledge-producing institutions or Expert knowledge that forms the basis for our modern, open society are rejected in favour of alternative, competing truths, creating an instability of knowledge. Some say that what was once the truth has been left behind – we now live in a 'post-truth' era. How then can we determine what is true and false? Conspiracy theories, disinformation and misinformation are expressions for an ongoing destabilisation of societal debate. Disinformation is defined as intentionally spreading "all forms of false, inaccurate or misleading information".[49]Misinformation involves unintentionally or unconsciously spreading such information. The European Commission has drawn up a policy for responding to disinformation online.[50] In addition to the general threat scenario, this also describes the actions taken by the Commission since 2018 and the concrete problems that exist.

To varying degrees, these phenomena constitute threats to the information and communication flows in open, democratic societies. In a time when more and more people obtain their information and communicate online, we as individuals but also (knowledge-intensive) organisations are particularly vulnerable. The field is wide open for information influence activities, defined by MSB as "potentially harmful forms of communication orchestrated by foreign state actors or their representatives (intentionally or unintentionally)" with the potential to "create a climate of distrust between citizens and between a state and its citizens".[51]

Due to their narrative form and dramatic structure, conspiracy theories are perfectly suited for conveying disinformation effectively and passing it on as misinformation. Conspiracy theories are thus useful tools for information influence activities. Since people rationally want to understand the reasons behind important events and also want guidance for making ethical assessments, assigning blame and finding wider meaning-making explanations for existential questions, it is not hard to be convinced by the narrative of conspiracy theories. This narrative is also easy to recognise, since people have heard the same type of explanatory and meaning-making narrative in other contexts and over a long period of time. Social psychologists go as far as to maintain that mankind's propensity to believe in conspiracy theories developed as an evolutionary psychological mechanism to adapt to the danger presented by hostile groups.[52]

Neuropsychological factors such as these might explain why those who really believe in conspiracy theories are often hard to convince of the opposing view. Source criticism reaches its outer boundary when conspiracy theories become belief systems or deeply rooted psychological defence mechanisms.

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49. The European Commission (2018), "A multi-dimensional approach to disinformation", last updated 21 March 2018, https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/library/final-report-high-level-expert-group-fake-news-and-online-disinformation (last accessed 18 March 2021).

50. The European Commission (2021), "Tackling online disinformation", last updated 18 January 2021, https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/tackling-online-disinformation (last accessed 18 March 2021).

51. MSB (2019), "Countering information influence activities – A handbook for communicators", last updated 10 May 2019, https://www.msb.se/sv/publikationer/countering-information-influence-activities--a-handbook-for-communicators/ (last accessed 18 March 2021).

52. Van Prooijen, Jan-Willem, et al. (2020), "Social-cognitive processes underlying belief in conspiracy theories", Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories, London: Routledge, pp. 168–180.

They must then also be understood as such. Today, all these phenomena are a permanent feature of the political debate and of society as a whole. Both Brexit and the US presidential elections of 2016 and 2020 were influenced by misinformation and disinformation and by conspiracy theories, and during the COVID-19 pandemic it has been possible to see new coalitions between anti-vaxxers, climate change deniers and 'classic' conspiracy theorists who believe in a power elite, secret societies or associations.

- *Disinformation*: intentionally or consciously spreading all forms of false, inaccurate or misleading information
- *Misinformation*: unintentionally or unconsciously spreading disinformation
- *Information influence*: potentially harmful forms of communication orchestrated by foreign state actors or their representatives (consciously or unconsciously)

➜ *Conspiracy theories* convey disinformation, are spread as misinformation and can be used for information influence activities.

2.3 The state of research regarding conspiracy theories

Research into conspiracy theories in different academic disciplines

Between 2016 and 2020, a large European network – Comparative Analysis of Conspiracy Theories (COMPACT) – brought together researchers from many different disciplines.[53] The results of their cooperation included a series of books and a handbook on conspiracy theories published by Routledge in 2020. To date, this is the most comprehensive mapping and description of the research that has been presented. To give a few examples, research on conspiracy theories is common among social psychologists. Social psychology studies susceptibility and the relationships between susceptibility to conspiracy theories and other psychological patterns (trust, belief in supernatural beings, etc.). Political science research takes an interest in conspiracy theories for mobilisation purposes (to achieve political objectives within foreign or domestic policy) or as an expression of criticism of those in power (in both national policy and international relations). There is also a strong link between populism as a political style and conspiracy theories. Researchers within area studies (large geographical areas such as Europe or the Nordic region) investigate the global dimensions of conspiracy theories, but also their very specific regional, national dimensions (such as the global spread of 9/11 theories or the fact that the Palme assassination is hardly regarded as

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53. Comparative Analysis of Conspiracy Theories in Europe (COMPACT), https://conspiracytheories.eu (last accessed 23 March 2021).

relevant outside Sweden).[54] As an extension to this field, various disciplines within security studies also examine the position of conspiracy theories in hybrid warfare, radicalisation processes or their expression in terrorist manifestos. Anthropologists and ethnologists research conspiracy theories as narratives about cultural contexts, and their similarities to rumours and folklore (including urban legends). Historians and intellectual historians seek to map long development lines and megatrends (from the Reformation/Counter-Reformation to the French and Russian Revolutions, the interwar period, totalitarianism, 9/11, the financial crisis of 2008, the refugee crisis of 2015–16 and the COVID-19 pandemic). Literature, art and media researchers study conspiracy theories' forms of expression within film, art, literature and the media discourse is often linked to politics. Greater scholarly knowledge about conspiracy theories also opens up a number of collaborative fields.

The concept of conspiracy theory in research

To summarise the research situation very briefly, the term 'conspiracy theory' migrated from criminology to the social sciences between the late 19th century and the mid-20th century.[55] Initially, the term referred to an assumption about which actors had come together to commit a crime, or a conspiracy. Since the mid-20th century, the term has been used to explain how a state undermines the social order, and subsequently to explain why and how people can submit to totalitarian ideologies. In his book The Open Society and Its Enemies (1950, vol. 2), sociologist Karl Popper criticises conspiracy theories for their exaggerated focus on intentional action and for disregarding major structural causes and unintended effects in historical development. In other words, what is the intention and what are the structures and chances that drive (historical) change? The term 'conspiracy theory' then also seems to have reached a wider audience as a way of describing when someone exaggeratedly ascribes planned evil intentions to an actor in an event. That the CIA coined the term to disparage political opponents is thus incorrect.[56]

A pioneering 1964 essay presented conspiracy theories as "paranoid style in American politics".[57] Its writer, Richard Hofstadter, showed via a review of American history that belief in conspiracy theories had been part of the political climate from the Declaration of Independence in 1776 up until the McCarthy era of the 1950s, when everything and everyone was accused of being communists. In recent times, Hofstadter has been accused of describing

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54. Two examples are Astapova, Anastasyia, et al. (2021), Conspiracy theories and the Nordic countries, London: Routledge and Önnerfors, Andreas and Krouwel, André (2021), Europe: Continent of Conspiracies. Conspiracy Theories in and about Europe, London: Routledge.

55. For a review of the term's development, see McKenzie-McHarg (2020), "Conceptual History and Conspiracy Theory" and Blanuša/Hristov (2020), "Psychoanalysis, Critical Theory and Conspiracy Theory" in Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories, pp. 16–27 and 67–80.

56. Butter, Michael (2020), "There's a conspiracy theory that the CIA invented the term 'conspiracy theory' – here's why", The Conversation, 16 March 2020, https://theconversation.com/theres-a-conspiracy-theory-that-the-cia-invented-the-term-conspiracy-theory-heres-why-132117 (last accessed 18 March 2021).

57. Hofstadter, Richard (1996 [1965]), The paranoid style in American politics and other essays, reprint, Cambridge: Harvard University Press. See also https://harpers.org/archive/1964/11/the-paranoid-style-in-american-politics/ (last accessed 18 March 2021).

belief in conspiracy theories as negative and deviant – a marginal phenomenon within politics and society. There is thus a risk of describing such a belief as an illness (pathologisation). On the contrary, conspiracy theories are a very common way for people to explain historical change, at least since the French Revolution. They have been used both *from the top down* (by those in power) and *from the bottom up* (by the powerless and to criticise power). Current research therefore suggests that we must seek a greater number of more sophisticated explanations for the attractiveness and function of conspiracy theories as meaning-making (political) narratives.

2.4 The difference between a theory about a conspiracy and a conspiracy theory

Real conspiracies exist

We often hear people say that "real conspiracies exist" as an objection to research into conspiracy theories. And this is quite true. Plots have led to the assassination of monarchs and politicians, and have been used to achieve political and economic objectives, ever since Julius Caesar was murdered at the Roman Senate. Watergate happened, King Gustav III of Sweden was assassinated at Stockholm's Royal Opera House in 1792, and the Italian organisation P2 secretly sought to take control of Italy and make financial gains with a mafia-like structure. The verb "conspire" can be defined as covertly planning a criminal or otherwise hostile action together with another party or parties. In other words, conspiring involves taking part in a plot with someone against someone. A conspiracy can be defined as a 'secret plan or agreement'. Equivalent terms include 'sammangaddning' in Swedish, 'complot' in French and 'Verschwörung' in German. Theories about actual crimes or actual preparations for crimes can sometimes be confused with conspiracy theories.[58] The Swedish Academy Dictionary defines a conspiracy theory as an "imaginative theory that presumes conspiracies" (with the addition of "often ironically"), and this is where there appears to be an important distinction: a conspiracy theory contains an element of fantasy and fiction, whereas a theory about a conspiracy does not.

Differentiating between a theory about a conspiracy and a conspiracy theory

The problem is thus that the word "conspiracy", in the Anglo-Saxon legal tradition, is used in the sense of intentional (deliberate) preparation/instigation of a crime – for example, "conspiracy to murder". It is therefore easy to view theories about preparations for crimes having been made in consultation with others as conspiracy theories.

For instance, theories about the so-called 'police trail' surrounding the assassination of Olof Palme are actually entirely legitimate and justified, as long as they involve investigating which evidence could be used to bring proceedings

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58. For an excellent discussion, see van Prooijen, Jan-Willem, et al. (2020), "Social-cognitive processes underlying belief in conspiracy theories", Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories, London: Routledge, pp. 176–177.

against any perpetrator within the police force who carried out the actual crime. However, these theories abandon their scientific basis if they fall within a larger moral blame-assigning narrative in which the 'deep state' is accused of orchestrating and covering up events in order to mislead its own population with hostile intentions. This narrative no longer aims to solve the actual crime, and instead launches a generalising theory in which the explanatory meaning about (and arbitrary connection with) completely separate events can be created. Such narratives are thus no longer about objectively explaining (preparations for) a crime; instead, they involve fictitious explanations of meaning that have left behind the actual causal connections.

> - **(a)** *A theory about a conspiracy:* Imagining that a group is secretly preparing a crime (plot or conspiracy, cf. Chapter 23, § 2, paragraph 2 of the Swedish Penal Code) in order to bring proceedings against suspects based on legal provisions and evidence which can be presented and examined in a trial.
>
> - ➔ *Fact-based speculation about actual causal connections*
>
> - **(b)** *Conspiracy theory*: a meaning-making narrative that may take (a) as its starting point, but which for various reasons abandons logical thinking and, due to factors such as motivated reasoning (interpreting evidence in accordance with the group's convictions) or false positives (basing decisions on incorrect initial values), no longer involves what is true or false.
>
> ➔ *Speculation which leads to assumptions of fictitious causal connections*

With this distinction in mind, it is relatively easy to sort between different types of theories that either are or are not conspiracy theories.

2.5   Conspiracy theories as narratives and belief systems

The dramatic structure of conspiracy theories

It is important to remember that all conspiracy theories are built up according to more or less the same dramatic structure as a detective novel, an action film or a farce. We recognise ourselves in this structure, and the content is more easily convincing due to the actual form. "The medium is the message", as media researcher Marshall McLuhan once put it.[59] The universal formula is as follows:

The narrative simplifies complex cause-and-effect contexts

- by creating connections in allegedly non-random patterns
- by referring to a secretly planned intention with (often dramatic) events, and
- by identifying groups that are said to be hostile towards us and that threaten our existence.

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59. McLuhan, Marshall (1964), Understanding media: the extensions of man, New York, NY: Mentor.

These groups (usually privileged or underprivileged minorities)

- are singled out, using simple black-and-white templates, as guilty or morally evil (they want to stab us in the back).

Their actions

- take us close to the ultimate collapse of the system; the end is nigh.

The only way we can be saved is that

- certain chosen heroes/truth-sayers have discovered the conspiracy and can reveal the truth to the others (the victims), who can possibly be pulled away and saved from the dazzling manipulation of the puppet masters, who have spread their tentacles out into the darkness like an octopus.[60]

In section 3, the narrative's components will be analysed further to identify them in detail.

THE DRAMATURGICAL STRUCTURE OF CONSPIRACY THEORIES

- The chosen few see what is happening
- There is a pattern
- There is a plan
- There is a group of people who want to harm us
- Everything is the fault of the conspirators – they are evil
- We are approaching the final collapse of the system

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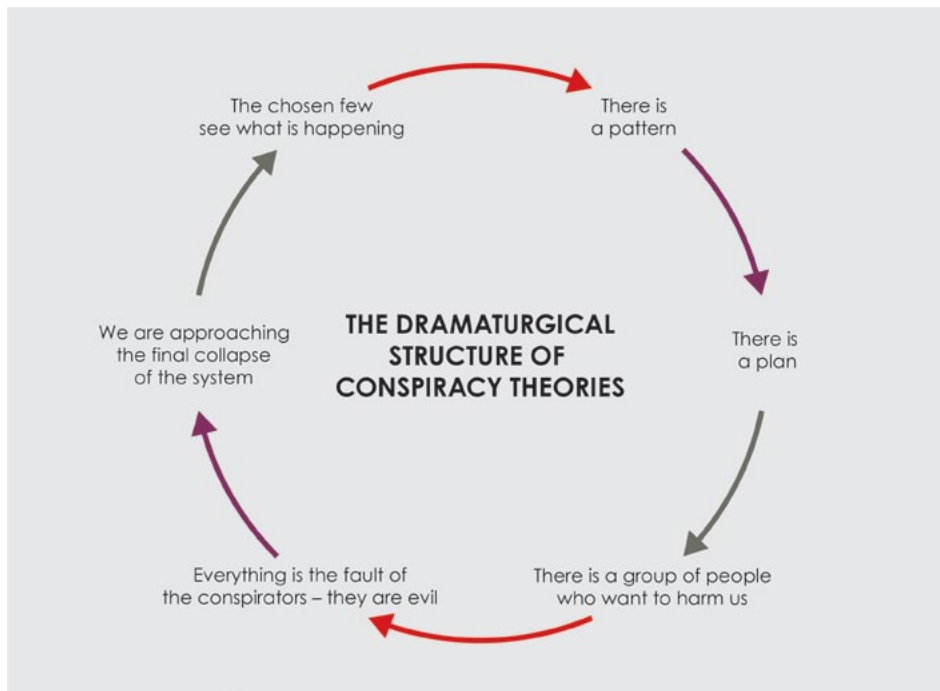
60. For a literary reference, see Eco, Umberto (2011), Begravningsplatsen i Prag ["The Prague Cemetery"], Stockholm: Brombergs, p. 100.

Conspiracy theories as religious belief systems

From here, it is not much of a leap to accept conspiracy theories as religious belief systems. The narrative's structure is closely related to myths, intuitive explanations of the world through reference to supernatural forces which have the power to intervene in and influence people's lives. In German research, the term 'conspiracy myths' is therefore being used increasingly often.[61] However, conspiracy theories also convey clearly religiously coded ideas about the dualistic battle between good and evil (theodicy) and ideas about Judgment Day (eschatology). A correlation has been noted between religiosity and belief in conspiracy theories among evangelical Protestants in the US (who often follow the QAnon movement), but also among fundamentalist Islamists.[62] Neospirituality (spirituality, New Age) also features overlaps with belief in conspiracy theories – so-called 'conspirituality'.

However, there is also another explanation: At almost the same time that the modern political ideologies of socialism, liberalism and conservatism arose – in the decades following the French Revolution – the conspiracy theory made its debut as an explanatory template for major political upheavals. Because the Age of Enlightenment and the Revolution brought a substantial secularisation of society, purely religious explanations for historical events lost much of their power. By giving the impression of being scientific while at the same time providing answers to existential questions (without explaining them in purely religious terms), the conspiracy theory can thus be regarded as part of the political religion within a more secular society. It can therefore be more easily accepted by people who do not define themselves as religious.[63]

Due to the conspiracy theory's mythical and religious explanatory power, it can become a belief system as a doctrine, with preachers, supernatural explanations for existential fears, hopes of salvation and a group of dedicated followers. QAnon, for instance, has been defined in recent times more as a religious movement or a cult that forms around conspiratorial content.[64] There are therefore great similarities between belief in conspiracy theories, membership of a religious sect and affiliation with a sectarian, radicalised environment.

61. Lamberty, Pia, "Verschwörungsmythen als Radikalisierungsbeschleuniger: Eine psychologische Betrachtung" ["Conspiracy theories as accelerators of radicalisation: A psychological review"], The Friedrich Ebert Foundation, April 2020, http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/dialog/16197-20200529.pdf (last accessed 18 March 2021). See also Önnerfors, Andreas and Krouwel, André (2021), "Unlocking the 'black box' of conspiracy theories in and about Europe", in Europe: Continent of Conspiracies. Conspiracy Theories in and about Europe, London: Routledge, pp. 253–263 in which the role of conspiracy theories as mythical explanations of Europe is discussed.

62. Gray, Matthew (2020), 'Conspiracy Theories in the Middle East', Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories, London: Routledge, pp. 624–637.

63. Önnerfors, Andreas (2021c), "Criminal Cosmopolitans: Conspiracy theories surrounding the assassination of Gustav III of Sweden in 1792" in Höllische Ingenieure: Kriminalitätsgeschichte der Attentate und Verschwörungen zwischen Spätmittelalter und Moderne ["Hellish engineers: Criminal history of assassinations and conspiracies between the late middle ages and the modern day"] (Eds. André Krischer and Tilman Haug), Konstanz: UVK.

64. Hassan, Steven, "I was a member of a cult. Here's how to bring QAnon believers back to reality", CNN, 4 February 2021, https://edition.cnn.com/2021/02/04/perspectives/qanon-cult-truth/index.html (last accessed 21 March 2021).

2.6 Confusion between the categories of true and false and good and evil

One of the clearest characteristics of the content of conspiracy theories is that they combine categories of what is true and false (the truth value or factual judgments) with right and wrong or good and evil (value judgments). The search for lasting knowledge (epistemology) has established perceptions of what are and are not legitimate knowledge claims. Another classic branch of philosophy is ethics, in other words critical reflection on morals. Conspiratorial narratives aim to create meaning within both these areas.
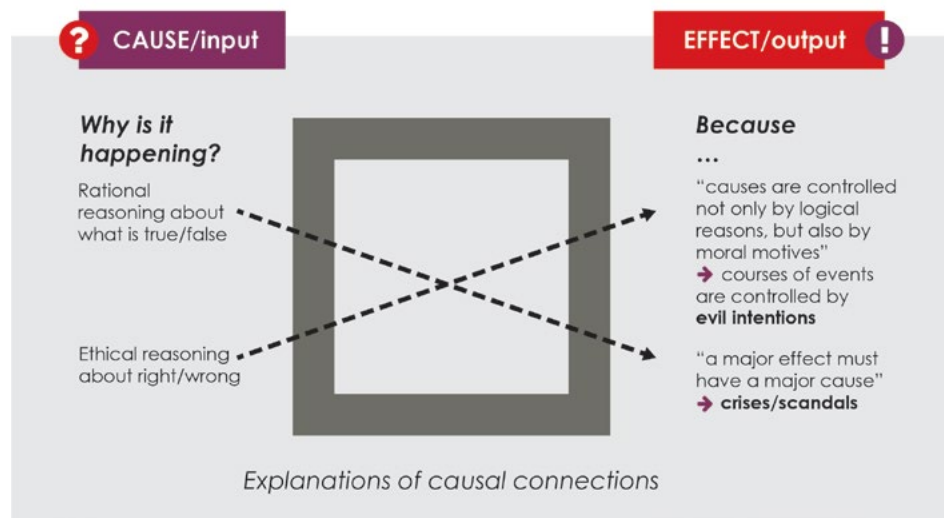
The 'black box' of conspiracy theories.

The model for the 'black box' of conspiracy theories aims to show how conspiracy theories explain causal links (causality) between cause (input) and effect (output).[65] They often take the actual effect as their starting point, with the proportionality expectation that a major effect must have a major cause ("a lot of smoke must mean a large fire") – explaining why what happens occurs. Rational reasoning takes place about what is true or false (and tries to imitate the rules of scientific thinking, together with 'evidence' which is presented). At the same time, however, ethical reasoning also takes place which seeks to establish ethical or moral assessments about who has carried out an action or can be held responsible for the cause.

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65. See also Önnerfors, Andreas and Krouwel, André (2021a), "Unlocking the 'black box' of conspiracy theories in and about Europe", in Europe: Continent of Conspiracies. Conspiracy Theories in and about Europe, London: Routledge, pp. 253–263.

In this area, people engage in ethical proportionality expectation – since the effect has negative consequences for those who are affected, those responsible must have acted based on evil intentions. The conspiracy theory thus communicates that the causes behind events are controlled not only by what is presented as logical reasons, but also by moral motives/evil intentions.

For example, there is no doubt that COVID-19 is having a major effect with significant consequences for the world's population. Based on this, the conspiracy theory creates a retroactive proportionality expectation to explain that the major effect must have major causes. In the rational reasoning, claims are then made to explain how the global elites have planned the pandemic in detail. (Here, what is perceived as evidence is presented.) But because this effect has also had so many negative consequences for people (in terms of both health and financial situation), there is also an ethical proportionality expectation. Great suffering can only have been caused by someone very evil. The global elites must therefore also be evil. And since people perceive their reasoning to be true, those who do not share this analysis must be untruthful/lying.

This thought operation could be called a reverse utilitarianism. In other words, based on the degree of negative outcome that a consequence of an action has (its effect), the conspiracy theory draws conclusions about the degree of evil intentions of the party who carried out the action. The more the harm, the greater the evil. Another, less sophisticated approach is to draw the conclusion – solely on the grounds of identifying the guilty party – that their actions must always have evil intentions and consequences. This typically applies to groups which, over the course of history, have been said to be responsible for negative events, particularly secret societies, Jews or 'global capital'.

2.7   How are conspiracy theories used?

As a result of their dramatic structure and their convincing meaning-making narrative style, conspiracy theories are effective ways of explaining major events in the world. At the same time, it is important to discern who expresses and uses them, in which contexts and for what purposes.

Conspiracy theories can be used

↓ *from the top down*: by political actors to reinforce power and to disparage political opponents

↑ *from the bottom up*: by those who feel (or are) powerless as a way to criticise power – or false use from those who claim to speak for the powerless

→ ← *from outside in*: as part of information influence directed towards another state

← → *from inside out*: blame-assigning conspiratorial narratives that are directed towards other groups in order to assert one's own collective/cultural identity

One good example of the use of conspiracy theories *from the top down* is the assertions about the presidential election having been 'stolen' from the former US President Trump in November 2020. The advanced conspiracy theory that was thus expressed by an incumbent power holder involved various elements that singled out Democrats, foreign actors, co-runners within the Republican Party and technology companies that dealt with vote counting, while at the same time rejecting legal expertise.[66] The storming of the US Capitol in January 2021 shows the potential of these conspiracy theories to push radicalisation towards violent extremism. Another example is the 2018 Czech presidential election, where unequivocal polarising propaganda circulated which linked the challenging candidate with conspiracy theories.[67]

After the First World War, many Germans felt that they had been tricked by their own politicians who, in collaboration with the victorious powers, had imposed a peace treaty on them (the Treaty of Versailles) which burdened Germany economically. This, combined with the global stock market crash of 1929, created a breeding ground for the acceptance of conspiracy theories (the 'stab-in-the-back myth') as meaning-making political narratives. (Perceived) powerlessness was expressed *from the bottom up*. In this concrete case, frustration was linked together with the antisemitic myth of Jewish 'plutocrats' who enriched themselves at the expense of the ordinary people. The Nazis were then able to take advantage of a nostalgic longing for the country's lost prosperity and its future re-establishment.[68] In turn, the Nazis' antisemitic conspiracy theories paved the way for the eradication of Europe's Jews.

The false use of conspiracy theories *from the bottom up* happens through populist actors.[69] One of the linchpins of populism is to claim to speak for the people against the elites, and to become a mouthpiece for the 'will of the people'. Populist power holders, organisations and parties use conspiracy theories which are expressed *from the bottom up* (and *from inside out* – see below) to mobilise voter support.

Conspiracy theories as part of influencing operations targeted against Europe – *from outside in* – are spread actively by media loyal to the Russian regime, and in eastern and southeastern Europe. One common theme is that the EU is actually the continuation of the Third Reich under German control, and that homosexuality, migration and gender studies aim to undermine traditional values such as masculinity, family and the nation state. The Hungarian-American financier George Soros (coded antisemitism) plays a prominent role in these conspiracy theories.

66. Swenson, Ali (2021), "AP FACT CHECK: Trump legal team's batch of false vote claims", Associated Press, https://apnews.com/article/fact-check-trump-legal-team-false-claims-5abd64917ef-8be9e9e2078180973e8b3 (21 March 2021).

67. Önnerfors, Andreas (2019), 'Manichaean Manipulation – Europe between Apocalypse and Redemption in the Imaginary of the New Right', in Anders Moberg (Ed.) European Disintegration, Gothenburg: CERGU: 13–20.

68. Karlsson, Ingela (2011), "Weimarrepubliken" ["The Weimar Republic"], The Living History Forum, https://www.levandehistoria.se/fakta-om-forintelsen/ett-tyskland-som-formades-till-nazityskland/weimarre-publiken (21 March 2021).

69. Bergmann, Eirikur (2020), Neo-nationalism: the rise of nativist populism, London: Palgrave and Önnerfors, Andreas (2020), "Review of 'Neo-Nationalism: The Rise of Nativist Populism' by Eirikur Bergmann (2020)", Centre for the Analysis of the Radical Right, 20 November 2020, https://www.radicalrightanalysis.com/2020/11/20/review-of-eirikur-bergmann-neo-nationalism-the-rise-of-nativist-populism-springer-2020-235pp/ (21 March 2021).

This conspiratorial narrative was also used during the Greek debt crisis and the Brexit referendum.[70] Another classic example is the previously mentioned conspiracy theory that HIV/AIDS was created by the US – a theory that was initiated and actively spread by the Soviet KGB security service.

When conspiracy theories are expressed *from inside out*, it is less about what state or political actors are doing to reinforce their power or influence opinion. Nor are such conspiracy theories targeted from the bottom up against privileged groups as a form of criticism of those in power. Instead, they involve conspiratorial narratives within a group or a culture that are directed against another group or culture. These narratives rather reinforce cultural and collective identity and stereotypes, where the one is clearly delimited from the other, and a clear 'us' and 'them' are created. One example is everyday antisemitic conspiracy theories that circulate in Sweden, in which the now defunct radio station Radio Islam played a prominent role.[71] Another example is anti-Armenian conspiracy theories denying the Armenian genocide.[72]

When assessing conspiracy theories, it is thus important to take into account who is expressing them, for what purpose and in which context. For example, populist power holders use conspiracy theories that are expressed within the population to maintain that they represent 'the interests of the people' against the 'corrupt elites', or to stir up feelings against what is perceived to be the enemy collective. They can thereby mobilise voter support or radicalise opinion (towards violent extremism).[73]

The conspiracy theory-fuelled anti-coronavirus response protests in Europe can be interpreted as frustration with state-prescribed restrictions having reached a critical breaking point, even among the middle ground of the electorate. There seems to be a correlation between 'tough measures' and the magnitude of protesters in this respect.[74]

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70. Several contributions to the book Europe: Continent of Conspiracies. Conspiracy Theories in and about Europe (Eds. Andreas Önnerfors and André Krouwel), London: Routledge, 2021 illustrate these conditions.

71. Ahlmark, Per (1993), Det eviga hatet: om nynazism, antisemitism och Radio Islam ["The eternal hatred: About neo-Naziism, antisemitism and Radio Islam"], Stockholm: Bonnier; Cohen, Katie, et al. (2020), "PM: Antisemitiska stereotyper i digitala medier" ["Memo: Antisemitic stereotypes in digital media"], Swedish Defence Research Agency, 6 October 2020, https://www.foi.se/nyheter-och-press/nyheter/2020-10-06-man-ga-antisemitiska-stereotyper-i-sociala-medier.html (last accessed 20 March 2021); Katzin, Mirjam (2021), "Skolgårdsrasism, konspirationsteorier och utanförskap. En rapport om antisemitism och det judiska minoritetskapet i Malmös förskolor, skolor, gymnasier och vuxenutbildning ["Schoolyard racism, conspiracy theories and exclusion. A report on antisemitism and Jewish minorityship in Malmö's preschools, schools, upper secondary schools and adult education"], City of Malmö, 18 February 2021, https://malmo.se/down-load/18. 4f363e7d1766a784af11a96d/1613644369102/Skolg%25C3%25A5rdsrasism,%2520konspirationste-orier%2520och%2520utanf%25C3%25B6rskap%2520,%2520slutversion.pdf (last accessed 20 March 2021).

72. Karlsson, Maria (2015), Cultures of Denial: Comparing Holocaust and Armenian Genocide Denial, Lund: Lund University.

73. Önnerfors, Andreas (2021a), "How radical Right conspiracy theories drive populist mobilisation", openDemocracy, 25 February 2021, https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/countering-radical-right/how-radi-cal-right-conspiracy-theories-drive-populist-mobilisation/ (last accessed 20 March 2021).

74. Lagercrantz, Maja (2021), "Coronapandemin – perfekt stoff för konspirationer?" ["The coronavirus pandemic – perfect material for conspiracies?"], Sveriges Radio, 20 March 2021, https://sverigesradio.se/artikel/langlyssning-konspirationsteorier-i-anticoronarorelsen (last accessed 20 March 2021).

2.8 The threat of conspiracy theories – the need for in-depth insights

In summary, conspiracy theories constitute a threat on several levels.[75] The COVID-19 pandemic is an example of how, despite having access to reliable expert knowledge, people have adopted perceptions that contradict scientific thinking, undermine the exercise of authority, and erode societal and interpersonal trust. Authorities, businesses, the media, schools, civil society and personal relationships are being negatively affected by conspiracy theories circulating within society.[76]

Authorities and organisations that work with national security need to increase their insights into conspiracy theories play a role in hybrid warfare, which are inherently characterised by conflicts about the dominant strategic narrative (whose narrative is true?), psychological operations and pure propaganda.[77] How foreign powers use conspiracy theories as part of information influence activities targeted against Sweden is just one question that is worth following up on. In terms of domestic security, the position of conspiracy theories within violent extremism needs to be studied across the entire ideological spectrum (for example how enemy images are constructed and meaning is made in everything from social media posts to terrorist manifestos). However, the work of the security authorities is also subject to conspiratorial narratives that undermine their authority and question their capacity to deal with crises.

Conspiracy theories are often based on the description of an alternative reality in relation to knowledge-producing institutions. But belief in this alternative reality that stands in conflict with expert knowledge is also directed against the judiciary, academic research or knowledge-intensive companies that work with new technology, pharmaceuticals and vaccines. Fact-based decision-making and legally sound exercise of authority are threatened by conspiratorial narratives.

On a more overarching level, it is worrying that conspiracy theories have the potential to undermine societal and interpersonal trust, which is essential for open, democratic societies. At the same time, conspiratorial narratives about perceived injustices and criticism of those in power need to be taken seriously, as they are often expressed by groups who either are or believe themselves to be under-represented or wronged.

Another worrying tendency is the impact that conspiracy theories have on society's overall climate for debate.[78] Since conspiracy theories are based on extremely polarised and black-and-white narratives about true and false, good and evil, and victim and perpetrator, there is very little scope for nuance.

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75. The European Commission and UNESCO (2020), "Conspiracy theories: they can be dangerous", https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/live_work_travel_in_the_eu/unesco-conspiracy-english-3.jpg (last accessed 20 March 2021).

76. Warnborg Carlqvist, Ylva, "Konspirationstänkandet tog greppet om hans sambo" ["Conspiracy thinking took hold of his partner"], Sveriges Radio, 6 March 2020, https://sverigesradio.se/avsnitt/1699106 (last accessed 10 April 2021).

77. Cagnazzo, Marco and Zinzone, Fabio (2020), The Art of War in the Post-Modern Era. The Battle of Perceptions, Italy: self-published.

78. SOU 2020:56, "Det demokratiska samtalet i en digital tid – Så stärker vi motståndskraften mot desinformation, propaganda och näthat" ["The democratic conversation in a digital age: How we strengthen our resilience to disinformation, propaganda and online hate"], 30 September 2020, https://www.regeringen.se/rattsliga-dokument/statens-offentliga-utredningar/2020/09/sou-202056/ (last accessed 23 March 2021).

As personal or collective belief systems, conspiracy theories increasingly involve personal psychological issues similar to the problems with sects and new religious movements in the 1990s. In many cases, belief in conspiracies offers a surrogate for religious convictions, and includes a whole range of similar factors in combination with group psychology and the feeling of being part of a wider context. Here, social media is a reinforcing element as its very attraction is to offer a community around a message (rather than an audience that receives information). Parents, partners, relatives, teachers and colleagues have needed to deal with conspiratorial religious beliefs in their immediate circles.

Without doubt, an increase in conspiracy theory thinking is also a challenge for teaching and education at all levels. Media literacy, source criticism and critical thinking are certainly included in curriculums, and form the foundation for scientific teaching and research. However, competing truths – particularly when they are communicated effectively in the form of urban legends, religious convictions or meaning-making political narratives – are a growing problem area. Many children and young people who use the social media platform TikTok, for example, were inundated (hastened by influencers) during 2020 by the re-used #pizzagate narrative regarding the Democrats' alleged involvement in – and cover-up of – a satanic paedophile network in the US. In addition, flat or Hollow Earth conspiracy theories persuade young people to doubt scientific knowledge that has been established for five centuries.

The situation is problematic for journalists and the media. The more conspiracy theories are spread – either seemingly 'harmless' variants such as believing that the Earth is flat, or more extreme ideas such as in terrorist manifestos – the more likely it is that they will influence the traditional media monitoring news cycle. There is a danger that reporting will also become part of the spread. As we know, conspiracy theories are effective and convincing narratives. Furthermore, the media must position itself within the conspiratorial narrative that it is part of the Great Cover-Up in relation to conspiracy theorists' claims to be speaking 'the truth'. How should conspiracy theories be responded to without being condescending? And how can quality-checked journalism position itself in relation to convincing conspiratorial narratives?

For actors within civil society, and for religious, ethnic and social minorities and associations, the enemy images of conspiratorial narratives can represent a concrete threat. For example, antisemitic actions are camouflaged as 'criticism of religion', and attacks against mosques and Muslim organisations follow conspiratorial thought patterns.

The way to respond to this complex threat is discussed in greater detail in section 4.

Identifying conspiracy theories and conspiracy theorists

3. Identifying conspiracy theories and conspiracy theorists

How can a conspiratorial narrative be identified? Is it possible to recognise those who believe in and spread conspiracy theories? What are the consequences of the radicalisation process driven by conspiracy theories? This section presents the conspiracy theory's individual components, discusses the question of how to profile a conspiracy theorist, and examines how many levels the conspiratorial worldview can have.

3.1 The components of conspiracy theories

PATTERNS
– everything fits together

THE PLAN
– everything happens intentionally

THE PLOT
– a group of people have planned everything together

EVIL INTENTIONS
– someone wants to harm us

SECRECY
– someone wants to hide something from us

PROOF
– there are facts that prove the conspiracy

DUALISM
– everything is black or white

SCAPEGOATS
– it's someone else's fault

DEMONISATION
– the guilty are evil

THE COLLAPSE OF THE SYSTEM
– society is heading towards its ultimate end

THE TRUTH-SAYERS
– the good side has seen through the conspiracy

THE OCTOPUS, THE DAGGER AND THE PUPPET MASTER
– the imagery of conspiracy theories

Twelve components of conspiracy theories.[79]

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79. The table and discussion are based on van Prooijen, Jan-Willem (2018), The psychology of conspiracy theories, London: Routledge, pp. 5–6, Berlet, Chip (2009), "Toxic to democracy: conspiracy theories, demonization & scapegoating", Massachusetts: Political Research Associates, pp. 2–3 and 11–13, https://www.politicalresearch.org/sites/default/files/2018-10/Toxic-2D-all-rev-04.pdf (last accessed 21 March 2021) and the European Commission (2020), "Identifying conspiracy theories", https://ec.europa.eu/info/live-work-travel-eu/coronavirus-response/fighting-disinformation/identifying-conspiracy-theories_en#what-are-conspiracy-theories-why-do-they-flourish (last accessed 18 March 2021). See also Önnerfors, Andreas (2020c), "Akademisk kvart: Fem sätt att lista ut en konspirationsteori" ["Mini lecture: Five ways to spot a conspiracy theory"], University of Gothenburg, 16 June 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T3zBGx-CWN2c (last accessed 21 March 2021).

Patterns: Everything fits together

Conspiracy theories explain events by maintaining that there are connections between actions, things and people that are not random (the 'conjunction fallacy'). Nothing has happened by chance, and there are no coincidences. This way of viewing the world includes perceiving patterns in vague or random impressions or facts, known within psychology as pareidolia. Simplified ideas about cause and effect (causality) are also expressed, led by the belief that a major effect must have major causes ('proportionality expectation') and overanalysing what appears to be similar or linked. There is also a confirmation bias, whereby people are selectively aware of information that confirms their own (preconceived) perceptions.

The plan: Everything happens intentionally

A conspiracy theory is based on events always having been caused intentionally and unavoidably by conscious actors for certain purposes. A premeditated plan, agenda or manifesto has been developed for this, with a desire to convert it into reality. These actors also have the power to implement the plan in detail and in accordance with a predetermined programmed sequence, like a script or an algorithm. This aspect of belief in conspiracy builds upon simplified ideas about why things happen together with an extreme view of predictability (our destiny is determined by others – fatalism). This in turn requires the existence of a directed consciousness, ideas about intentionality and path dependency without spontaneous deviations. It exposes a lack of analysis or an overanalysis of the motivations behind people's (assumed) actions. The capacity for insight is either too low or too high. The conception is also based on 'agency panic' that one's own individual scope for action is shrinking in favour of what is seen as an intelligent superstructure that causes a loss of control in one's own life.[80]

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80. Melley, Timothy (2002), "Agency panic and the culture of conspiracy", in Peter Knight (Ed.) Conspiracy nation: the politics of paranoia in postwar America, New York: New York University Press.

The plot: a group of people have planned this together

Conspiracy theories are based on an association or group of actors planning their actions together, with the knowledge, the desire and the power to carry out their plans. Human actors are usually assumed to be the hostile perpetrators, but non-human or supernatural actors – such as space lizards, mythical beings or AI – may also be involved. Chip Berlet's previously cited report (2009) presents a range of eight actors or groups that are often mentioned in conspiratorial narratives, either alone or in arbitrary groups: first and foremost there are always Jews (also coded as Zionists, Khazars or globalists), followed by liberal collectivists, Catholics (Jesuits, the Vatican), aliens (space lizards), plutocrats (industry magnates, the global financial elite, secret economic elites), secular humanists (feminists, LGBTQI+, gender scientists), Freemasons (Illuminati or other fraternal orders) and Communists (anarchists). Muslims, and increasingly power holders and decision-makers (politicians and officials) as well as experts within science, law and medicine, should also be added to this collection of possible and overlapping actors and agendas. In more regional or local conspiracy theories, other peoples and nations ('archenemies', as also used in influence campaigns) often appear. The idea of the plot is based on excessive suspicion (bordering on paranoia) and excessive collective identification processes which lead to strong enemy images of 'us' and 'them', and the threat that these others represent.

A lack of analysis or an overanalysis of the motives behind people's actions (intentionality or the power of insight) is also a significant element here. Strong, simplified images of a group and their qualities (stereotyping) is another contributing factor that is based on either (cultural) ideas that are communicated over a longer period of time or actual negative experiences which are unscientifically generalised.

Evil intentions: Someone wants to harm us

Conspiracy theories communicate the assumption that groups of actors always have hostile intentions, selfish motives for enriching themselves or interests that are directed against the common good. This assumption usually conceals an excessive fear and anxiety about the actions of others, founded on either conceptions or actual events. These fears can also be due to personal or collective crises and trauma, a feeling of powerlessness or having been let down. Those who believe in conspiracy theories often assume the role of a victim (victim mentality, self-victimisation) – they see themselves as victims of the intentionally planned external circumstances that the external (or internal) conspiring hostile group has orchestrated and that cannot be influenced. There is a feeling that everything bad affects them, and a fear of an inevitable series of events that are certain to affect the victims of the conspiracy. Here, too, there is a lack of analysis or an overanalysis of the motivations behind people's (assumed) actions.

Secrecy: Someone wants to hide something from us

Fear of the plot and its evil intentions feed upon it having been planned and carried out in secret. What cannot be seen openly always causes disproportionate concern. The idea that powerful people meet and convene behind closed doors to agree on coordinated action has sparked the conspiratorial imagination for centuries. In this regard,, there are simplified ideas about other people as actors: members of an organisation such as a secret fraternal order, the Bilderberg Group or the World Economic Forum (WEF) are seen as being programmed to do precisely what the organisation wants. There is a conception that membership or simply loose affiliation means that people give up their own free will and automatically become complicit in the evil deeds that the organisation is said to carry out. However, fear of this secret participation also involves hidden or sleeper agents, the treacherous so-called 'fifth column' which has allied itself clandestinely with the enemy. Throughout history, many groups have been accused of secretly carrying out the enemy's bidding: political parties, trade unions or educational associations.

According to sociologist Georg Simmel, secrecy is one of the greatest civilising factors in human history.[81] Fear of secrecy exposes a serious lack of interpersonal trust and mutual confidence. Modern society is based on knowing enough or sufficiently little about our fellow citizens or the relationships between the public and private spheres. Total transparency means that the private sphere is wiped out and the state exercises total control. However, those who believe in conspiracy theories are often afraid of the lack of insight and in turn require total transparency in relation to what they are afraid of. According to Simmel, secrecy also has another psychological function: it creates a tension towards what is revealed. Most conspiracy theories include the secret plan, the secret actors and the secret evil intentions having been discovered so that they can now be brought to light. This may seem paradoxical: the actors are thus made known through the conspiracy theory, but their alleged organisation and actions in secret are a sign of their morally evil intentions. In this way, the secrecy itself becomes a negative value judgment.

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81. Simmel, Georg (1906), "The sociology of secrecy and of secret societies", American Journal of Sociology, 11(4):441–98.

Proof: There are facts that prove the conspiracy

Many conspiracy theorists have an exaggerated belief in facts that appear to support their theory.[82] Having said that, there is often a strong confirmation bias — in other words, they include what confirms the expected result and exclude what could contradict it. The evidence therefore supports the pattern recognition, and vice versa. Connections are drawn between what are, in actual fact, random similarities. One specialist area among conspiracy theorists is the analysis of (moving) images (often grainy or blurry), such as the 1969 moon landing, the assassination of JFK or the hull of the M/S Estonia. The so-called evidence presented in most conspiracy theories would not stand up to scientific or legal review, and therefore communicates grossly simplified ideas about what is true and false (truth values). Conspiracy theorists are rarely schooled in scientific methodology, and are often driven by a (positivist) blind belief in the truth of facts and data, without being aware of or reporting their own starting points which could relativise their knowledge. They see knowledge as absolute.

While this applies to the part of the conspiracy theory concerned with covering up what is true or false, the evidentiary capacity for making ethical assessments is entirely underdeveloped. A conspiracy theory does not include any speculations about whether the actors' actions follow an ethical norm for its own sake (deontology), for example, or to maximise the positive outcome of the action (utilitarianism).[83] Methods to prove such ethical considerations are applied even less. As a general rule, the conspiracy theory culminates in sketchy assessments of morality in terms of 'good' and 'evil', or 'lie' and 'truth'.

82. From an epistemological point of view, they express a tendency for deduction – deriving conclusions from given premises.

83. However, as described above, there are retroactive ethical proportionality expectations, i.e. the degree of negative outcome an event causes is often taken as a pretext for assessing the actors' degree of evilness.
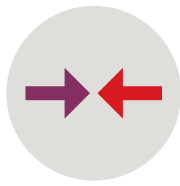
Dualism: Everything is black or white

Dualism is a framework narrative (a 'metaframe') through which people see the world divided up into incompatible and mutually exclusive categories such as good and evil (ethical, moral or religious value judgments). There is no scope in this framework narrative to see nuances, only an excessive need to see clarity and to express clear, fixed perceptions (categorical thinking). It also includes taking things literally, without allowing for different interpretations (fundamentalism). According to Berlet's previously cited report (2009), dualism can also be linked to absolute religious conceptions, known as Manichaeism. The dualistic framework narrative makes meaning around narratives about the eternal struggle between good and evil, light and dark, or God and the Antichrist, expressed in ideas about the final battle, the apocalypse and the world's downfall or ultimate salvation. Dualism also fuels violent extremism and the enemy images of totalitarian societies, and is an ingredient of populist ideologies.

Scapegoats: It's someone else's fault

The negative issues that have affected the supposed victims as a consequence of the perpetrators' evil, coordinated plans lead to conspiracy theories blaming the actors. Our current situation, which was caused by the conspiracy, is someone else's responsibility. This expresses an exaggerated need to place the blame on someone else in order to avoid taking responsibility or to attribute one's own shortcomings to others (projection). Here, too, there is the feeling of being a victim of other people's actions and external circumstances (victim mentality). The blame is often placed on privileged or underprivileged groups within society ('outgroups') for whom there are already strong stereotypes (i.e. ideas about negative qualities). Singling out scapegoats also provides a free pass for hating or harming others. The online incel subculture's hatred of women, combined with its suspicion of feminism and gender research, shows how women are blamed by men who live in 'involuntary celibacy', which has resulted in deadly attacks.[84]

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84. Fernquist, Johan, et al. (2020), "Hope, cope & rope. Incels i digitala miljöer" ["Hope, cope & rope. Incels in digital environments"], Swedish Defence Research Agency, 28 February 2020, https://www.foi.se/nyheter-och-press/nyheter/2020-03-04-kvinnohat-och-valdshyllningar-i-digitala-incelmiljoer.html (last accessed 21 March 2021).

Demonisation: The guilty are evil

Demonisation goes beyond merely blaming others. By explaining that the guilty are evil by definition, conspiracy theories express simplified moral/ethical judgments about right and wrong (value judgments) and explain evil (theodicy). Demonisation also allows for the anonymisation and dehumanisation of opponents, and thus for enemy images that can lead to acts of violence and hate crimes.

The collapse of the system: Society is heading towards its ultimate end

Another major framework narrative that characterises many conspiracy theories is that of the end of days, Judgment Day, the downfall of civilisation, the final decisive battle between good and evil, or the collapse of the system (eschatology, apocalypticism or millennialism). Since the uncovered conspiracy assumes such large dimensions and is driven by demonised actors with evil intentions, their plan can only involve the obliteration of 'us', their victims. One example is the Great Replacement (or White Genocide) theory, which is said to be a plan run by internal elites and external enemies to replace the white majority population in Europe and the US. This theory drove the Christchurch terrorist to carry out his attacks in 2019, and was copied by the German terrorist Tobias Rathjen in 2020.[85] The concept of the ultimate collapse of the system shows how conspiracy theories absorb and communicate ideas that exist within many religions: ideas about the end of the world. This is fuelled by a universal existential fear of loss and death (death anxiety) and excessive catastrophising. Apocalyptic thinking occupies a prominent position in conspiracy theories. The decisive battle between good and evil will change the world for ever and will reveal hidden truths.

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85. Önnerfors, Andreas (2019b), 'The Great Replacement': Decoding the Christchurch Terrorist Manifesto", Centre for the Analysis of the Radical Right, 18 March 2019, https://www.radicalrightanalysis.com/2019/03/18/the-great-replacement-decoding-the-christchurch-terrorist-manifesto/ (last accessed 21 March 2021).

The truth-sayers:
The good side has seen through the conspiracy

An important part of conspiracy theories as meaning-making narratives is the actual narrator. Since it is part of the narrative's structure that a conspiracy is revealed, the person who reveals the truth (in relation to that which is 'secret') occupies an important position. The truth-sayer draws power from the sense of having made a major revolutionary discovery, and it is this revelation that he (and it usually is a man) now wants to spread to the unenlightened, or within the (faith) community of those who are already enlightened. The truth-sayer has a feeling of being the chosen one, since he has been initiated into and has beheld a truth that most have not yet discovered. He often has excessive faith in his ability (verging on narcissism). He has a sense of infallibility in relation to the 'blind masses' (who are often referred to as sheep, or 'sheeple') and of playing a leading heroic role in the fight between good and evil. Another variant of the truth-sayer is those who have 'always' known that reality has been manipulated. For these people, each new conspiracy confirms what they have said all along, with a certain degree of dogmatism.
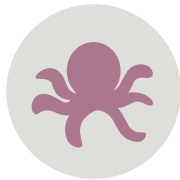
The octopus, the dagger and the puppet master:
The imagery of conspiracy theories

A conspiracy theory can also be recognised via the images (metaphors) used to communicate it. Since conspiracy theories spread via social media in a combination of words and images (such as in memes or profile picture badges), it is important to watch out for typical image elements such as the octopus, the dagger or the puppet master, people in capes, the Illuminati eye/triangle and the dollar bill, or abbreviations such as NWO (New World Order) or ZOG (Zionist Occupation Government). For at least 150 years, the octopus has been used as a metaphor for conspiracies, spreading out its tentacles and spraying ink to conceal itself. The dagger has been a symbol of treachery ever since the assassination of Julius Caesar at the Roman Senate. The puppet master pulls the strings to make the puppets dance on the stage.

The famous all-seeing eye, which was used in Christian art in the form of the holy radiating triangle (the Tetragrammaton), has been erroneously associated with the Illuminati (a German fraternal order which existed in the 1770s and 1780s, and which actually had an owl as its symbol). The triangle with the eye is said to float over the pyramid on the US one dollar bill to represent the aim of creating a New World Order. Other common images of conspiracy theories include the so-called 'conspiracy board', a notice board with red threads linking newspaper clippings, photographs and notes. A red pill is a reference to the film The Matrix, in which the protagonist is 'red pilled' and can see the truth. Another popular motif is the rabbit hole (again from The Matrix, via Alice in Wonderland) which promises insights. Another style-forming production regarding the imagery and drama of conspiracy theories is the TV series The X-Files.[86]

3.2 Belief in conspiracy, its spread and radicalisation processes

Who believes in conspiracy theories?

Belief in conspiracy theories is so widespread that it cannot be seen as part of a specific pathology – it is not deviant. As with most mental and psychological conditions, it is useful to picture a spectrum on which a specific degree of belief in conspiracy becomes problematic for the individual and those around them. However, there is no set template with which this can be assessed or diagnosed.[87] Section 3.2.3 presents different models for conspiratorial radicalisation processes in more detail, but based on this it can be asserted that 1) there is a growing degree of loss of reality, and 2) decisive boundaries are passed, for example a) between reality and fiction, b) denial of science, and c) aggressive enemy images that can lead to violent extremism.

In other words, there is a great difference in terms of whether belief in conspiracy is based on sound scepticism about real events or is already at a level where facts and science are rejected, and where a worldview or world explanation has been adopted in which evil manipulates people into obedience and slavery. There can also be a significant difference concerning whether the individual who believes in conspiracy theories actively propagates them or is a passive follower. Again, it is important to distinguish between whether the conspiracy theories are expressed *from the top down* (as part of the exercise of power and influencing operations) or *from the bottom up* (as an expression of political frustration), *from outside in* (as part of influencing operations) or from inside out (as part of cultural identity formation). The first case involves the use of conspiracy theories rather as a strategy within political psychology, while the second case relates to actual personality or group psychology.

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86. For this section, see in particular Önnerfors, Andreas and Caumanns, Ute (2020d), "Conspiracy theories and visual culture", Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories, London: Routledge, pp. 441–457 and Önnerfors, Andreas (2020), "The (Syn)Aesthetics of Conspiracy", Athenaeum Review, https://athenaeumreview.org/review/the-synaesthetics-of-conspiracy/ (last accessed 21 March 2021).

87. Beyer, Eric James (2021), "Why Do People Embrace Conspiracy Theories? – Researchers are finally clearing the mystery around why some people show more affinity towards conspiracies", Interesting Engineering, 22 March 2021, https://interestingengineering.com/why-people-believe-conspiracy-theories?f-bclid=IwAR3aXgLxdU9yRii_dw-BEn1q12E7Q8PDd4wVzDMfQPm7hRRwJSiHguTSOhA (last accessed 31 March 2021).

The third case involves psychological operations directed at another country, and the fourth case is a matter of collective identity psychology. These aspects overlap to varying degrees.

Social psychologists believe that the main reason for belief in conspiracy theories is often linked to experiences of individual or collective crises or trauma. For example, van Prooijen writes: "Conspiracy theories are a natural reaction to social situations that elicit feelings of fear and uncertainty." In order to master this fear and uncertainly, a self-preservation instinct of increased meaning-making develops which includes imagining the worst, even about one's fellow citizens. This includes a belief that they are acting based on self-interest – a feeling that increases with uncertainty and perceived loss of control. At a collective level, this belief is targeted towards privileged groups or minorities within society. The emotional explanations for fear and uncertainty go hand-in-hand with the cognitive aspects (in particular the proportionality expectation) of a psychological meaning-making reaction. Belief in one conspiracy theory often paves the way for intuitively accepting another, due to the formation of what van Prooijen calls a "monological belief system" which lowers the thresholds for similar explanations in other contexts.[88] The points listed in section 3.1 relate to both mental processes involving how information is processed and knowledge is formed (cognition, or cognitive style) and more prominent (accentuated) personality traits that can border on personality disorders or psychological conditions that can be diagnosed. To this can be added more general factors about a person's worldview. The propensity to believe in conspiracy theories (susceptibility) can thus be associated with:

- *cognitive style:* the way of perceiving the surrounding world, solving problems and carrying out tasks
- *(accentuated) personality traits:* personal qualities in relation to different life situations
- *worldview:* view of the world, thought systems, forms of belief

There appears to be a strong link between a person thinking analytically or intuitively and the propensity to believe in conspiracy theories: the more analytical the thinking, the less the propensity – and vice versa. Research shows that people who subscribe to fallacies based on assumed links (conjunction fallacies) take cognitive shortcuts such as recognising patterns and actors even in unclear contexts, drawing hasty conclusions based on limited initial data or arriving at conclusions (getting answers to 'Why?' questions that give meaning) even when official explanations are not yet established.[89]

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88. van Prooijen, Jan-Willem (2018), The psychology of conspiracy theories, London: Routledge, pp. 22 and 38.

89. Lantian, Anthony, et al. (2020) "Personality Traits, Cognitive Styles and Worldviews associated with beliefs" in Conspiracy Theories", Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories, London: Routledge, pp. 155–167.

Overall, it can be cautiously asserted in relation to the research findings that someone who primarily has an intuitive cognitive style and low values regarding personality types based on interpersonal trust, who perceives themselves to be living in an uncertain world featuring dangers, threats and fear, and who longs for authoritarian power would seem to be more receptive to conspiracy theories than others, and that based on this a propensity to believe in them can be predicted. However, these conclusions are strongly linked to cultural and personal factors, and may vary depending on conditions and context (such as acute or cultural crises and trauma). In view of current research, it is also uncertain whether it is possible to profile a 'typical' conspiracy theorist.

Who spreads conspiracy theories?

The media

We only have limited knowledge about the spread of conspiracy theories, but it is linked to both their use in different directions and for different purposes (see section 2.7), and the media via which they are communicated.[90] Conspiracy theories are attractive, and are dealt with in a steady stream of popular science magazines, books, TV series, social media channels and podcasts.[91] However, the established media also covers the phenomenon to a growing extent. The search term "conspiracy theories" gets more than half a million hits on Google. The more reliable tool Google Trends (which details search trends since 2004) shows that since a clear peak in 2004, the subject has been continuously trending for the last 17 years. Since 1983, the Retriever media archive database shows more than 28,000 references in the Swedish-language press, with a peak of more than 6,000 references during the Coronavirus year of 2020. Dissemination in the media is a problematic area – how should the media cover a subject that so clearly affects many people, and arouses interest and curiosity, without actually contributing towards the spread of misinformation/disinformation itself?[92]

The research cannot offer unambiguous explanations for which personality types can be linked to the spread of conspiracy theories, but at the risk of over-generalising it is still possible to discern certain traits.

90. Bangerter, Adrian, et al. (2020), "How conspiracy theories spread", Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories, London: Routledge, and "Section 4: Media and Transmission", pp. 206–218 and 385–524.

91. Typical titles include "Secret conspiracies: Everything they don't want you to know" (2017), a richly illustrated 160-page publication covering no fewer than 68 conspiracy theories, from Princess Diana to SARS.

92. The European Commission and UNESCO (2020), "How can journalists report on them?", https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/live_work_travel_in_the_eu/unesco-conspiracy-english-9.jpg (last accessed 22 March 2021).

Entrepreneurs

This category includes personalities such as the UK's David Icke and the US's Alex Jones who have written pioneering and tone-setting books, made TV programmes and talk shows, and given talks about their revelations for decades. They also largely thrive on their conspiracy theories, have built up a fanbase and produce merchandise about and featuring themselves. Although Icke is best known for his theories about space lizards that transform themselves into humans and control the British royal family – a theory that can be seen as relatively harmless – he stood on stage in London in 2020 during an anti-coronavirus response protest and gave a rhetorically polished inflammatory speech about the need to stand up to the state in the name of freedom.[93] Alex Jones, who in addition to his confrontational social media appearances has also made a name for himself by selling unscientific health products, is now being investigated by the FBI for his active participation in the protests that led to the storming of the US Capitol in Washington DC in January 2021.[94] Other examples of entrepreneurs include Mark Sargent (leader of the Flat Earth movement in the US, and known for his 2018 Netflix documentary Behind the Curve) and Anders Sydborg, a central figure in Sweden's anti-radiation movement.

Influencers

On 19 March 2021, singer Lana Del Rey released an album called Chemtrails Over the Country Club. Within 48 hours, more than 32 million listeners had streamed the title track on Spotify. Popular culture references to conspiracy theories (such as the allegedly harmful emissions from aircraft) are very common. They are a way of capturing narratives and symbols that circulate among fans or target groups. Influencers only have limited interest in or knowledge about conspiracy theories, but contribute towards their spread by bringing them to the attention of their audience and their fans. The Coronavirus pandemic has created an overlap between health and alternative medicine influences and serious conspiracy theories – a pattern that is also seen in Sweden.[95] For example, the German celebrity vegan chef Attila Hildmann was transformed in 2020 from a diet and health guru into a Holocaust-denying hate preacher.[96]

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93. Gayle, Damian and Blackall, Molly (2020), "Coronavirus sceptics, conspiracy theorists and anti-vaxxers protest in London", The Guardian, 29 August 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/aug/29/coronavirus-sceptics-conspiracy-theorists-anti-vaxxers-protest-london (last accessed 21 March 2021). Special thanks to Tea Jahrehorn for her idea about the different types of spreaders.

94. Frontline, "What Conspiracy Theorist Alex Jones Said in the Lead Up to the Capitol Riot", 12 January 2021, https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/what-conspiracy-theorist-alex-jones-said-in-the-lead-up-to-the-capitol-riot/ (last accessed 21 March 2021).

95. McGowan, Michael, "How the wellness and influencer crowd serve conspiracies to the masses", The Guardian, 24 February 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2021/feb/25/how-the-wellness-and-influencer-crowd-served-conspiracies-to-the-masses (last accessed 21 March 2021).

96. The Swedish Educational Broadcasting Company (2021), "Vegankocksinfluencern som blev coronakonspiratör" ["The vegan cook influencer who became a coronavirus conspiracy theorist"] Algoritmen, episode 3, 22 March 2021, https://urplay.se/program/221029-algoritmen-vegankocksinfluencern-som-blev-coronakonspirator (last accessed 31 March 2021); Deutsche Welle (2020), "Berlin bans rally by vegan chef and conspiracy theorist Attila Hildmann", 23 July 2020, https://www.dw.com/en/berlin-bans-rally-by-vegan-chef-and-conspiracy-theorist-attila-hildmann/a-54299794 (last accessed 21 March 2021). Two excellent video guides to conspiracy theories.

Revolutionaries

On 19 February 2020, German terrorist Tobias Rathjen killed ten people in a terrorist attack before also killing himself. The attack is described in greater detail below, but shortly beforehand Rathjen had posted a video message in German stating that the masses were behind a wall of ignorance. The truth was being hidden from them, and had only been revealed to a small group of chosen whistleblowers. According to Rathjen, the aim of the forthcoming terror attack was to open up a crack in the wall so that the masses could see what was hiding behind it. The truth would be revealed sooner or later, and it would set people free.[97] Max Winter – one of the initiators behind the Swedish Thousand-Man March anti-coronavirus response protest – justified his actions with almost exactly the same words, saying that the truth will always come out, no matter how much the media lies and manipulates.[98] The revolutionary type of spreader sees themselves as a highly moral truth-sayer (with claims to the truth). Their access to exclusive knowledge (usually based on online 'research') convinces them that they are superior to the 'sleeping' masses who must be 'woken'.

In contrast to the entrepreneur, the revolutionary is the one who creates or writes about conspiracy theories without having actually achieved insight into their explanatory value themselves. Instead, the revolutionary sees themselves as a hero who must now – at any price (and by any means, including terrorism) – make their fellow citizens aware of the danger of conspiracies.

Supporters – followers ('community')

The most obvious category of spreaders is the followers or supporters of a specific conspiracy theory who, in certain cases, create a community around it. One example is Flat Earthers in the US. As well as being united by the actual conspiracy theory that the truth about the Earth being flat is being intentionally denied, a social environment has been created with social media channels, as well as physical conferences and meetings. Another example is QAnon, a more complex web of conspiratorial meaning-making narratives, which has also built a strong online and offline movement with its own symbols, clothing and codes. In the digital environment, the previously mentioned conspiratorial incel subculture emerges as a clear community.

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97. Önnerfors, Andreas (2021b), "'Der grosse Austausch': Conspiratorial frames of terrorist violence in Germany", in Europe: Continent of Conspiracies. Conspiracy Theories in and about Europe (Eds. Andreas Önnerfors and André Krouwel), London: Routledge, 2021, pp. 90–91.

98. Lagercrantz, Maja (2021), "Coronapandemin – perfekt stoff för konspirationer?" ["The coronavirus pandemic – perfect material for conspiracies?"], Sveriges Radio, 20 March 2021, https://sverigesradio.se/artikel/langlyssning-konspirationsteorier-i-anticoronarorelsen (last accessed 20 March 2021).

Lone researchers

Lone researchers can be categorised as those who do not take the stage as prominently as entrepreneurs or revolutionaries, instead presenting their message – publishing a book or two, and maybe having a YouTube channel – from the sidelines. One example is Jüri Lina, who with his books about the 'fraudulent world-builders' found himself on the margins of conspiracy culture for decades, but who has now stepped into the limelight in connection with the anti-coronavirus response protests. Lone researchers do not need to monetise their spreading of conspiracy theories, do not have the persuasive positions of influencers, and are less agitatorial than revolutionaries.

Radicalisation processes driven by conspiracy theories

Belief in conspiracy theories involves abandoning rational thinking and sound moral value judgments to varying degrees, instead increasingly subscribing to the conspiratorial narrative that promises more and deeper revelations about how the world really works. Once a conspiratorial attitude has been accepted, it is easy to attach oneself and go even deeper. In many ways, this is similar to the radicalisation processes of extremist and violent ideological environments. There appears to be a clear link between the conspiratorial message on a cognitive level and the conspiracy theory as legitimation of extreme actions (the medium) on a behavioural level.[99] Conspiracy theorists themselves often identify different levels of the conspiracy, as described below. In order to understand conspiratorial radicalisation processes, it is possible to distinguish different degrees of loss of reality.

The four levels of the swamp

In Lewis Carroll's Alice's Adventures in Wonderland (1865), seven-year-old Alice meets a white rabbit who leads her to a rabbit hole that she falls down. In the subterranean world that she discovers, the laws of logic no longer apply and Alice experiences one bizarre scene after another. The white rabbit and the rabbit hole are referenced in the action film The Matrix (1999), about people being kept as slaves in a manipulated reality that has been artificially orchestrated by machines. In order to see the actual reality, the protagonist must swallow a red pill. This enables him to see that he has lived his life within an imaginary projection. Earlier in the film, he is encouraged to follow the white rabbit. Both images – the white rabbit and the red pill – have become coded references to 'seeing the reality' beyond the world that the conspirators have staged to keep the blind sheeple citizens in their power. A frequently downloaded illustration which has been circulated online – "The Swamp: It's ALL connected" – depicts the conspiracy's four levels, which are revealed to those who follow the white rabbit further and further underground. The phrase "drain the swamp" is often used by conspiracy theorists in the US as a political catchphrase, and was chanted during the storming of the US Capitol in January 2021.

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99. This explanation of radicalisation processes has been developed from one-directional models into more complex, comprehensive models describing the relationship between cognitive dimensions (ideas) and behaviours (actions). See Önnerfors, Andreas and Steiner, Kristian (2018), "Introduction", in Expressions of Radicalization: Global Politics, Processes and Practices (Eds. Kristian Steiner, Andreas Önnerfors), London: Palgrave, pp. 1–38.

Level 1: *The Matrix: The world we live in*

This first level explains how the entertainment industry controls our thoughts and programmes us to accept future events. Fake terrorism aims to limit gun laws. Patent legislation ensures the technology industry's monopoly. The environment is destroyed and controlled via a manipulated climate. 'Sanctuary cities' give spies and illegal immigrants a safe haven and support the Democratic Party. Food is replaced with artificial components through genetic engineering. The health sector controls people with addictive medicines and vaccinations. The Federal Reserve is ruining the economy.

Level 2: *The operatives:*
Those who manage The Matrix

Those who follow the rabbit down to level 2 will see how rogue intelligence services (via various programmes) and the major technology, agricultural, biotechnology and pharmaceutical companies actually control level 1 through active manipulation and power concentration. Together, they form a worldwide network of corporate control.

Level 3: *Sinister Designers and Funders:*
Those who design and fund The Matrix

However, the rabbit leads onwards to the next level, where it transpires that the intelligence services are funded via an alliance between George Soros, the Rothschild family and Saudi Arabia. The CIA has established secret underground bases, and devotes itself to trauma-based mind control. Level 3 also shows the power of the secret societies in the shadows: Knights Templar, Freemasons, Illuminati and Jesuits practise 'satanic rituals' with occult magic and worshipping the dark side, including human and child sacrifices. Alongside them are various trend-setting groups and think tanks, such as the Bilderberg Group, the Club of Rome and Chatham House. Secret space programmes are also carried out away from the Earth.

Level 4: *Overlords: Bloodline Families. Those who know*
the ancient occult magic behind The Matrix

The final hole that the white rabbit jumps into promises the answer to the question "Who's REALLY behind all these people?" Here, we discover that the overlords follow the 'Luciferian (satanic) religion' controlled by aristocrats and monarchs, who are united by their blood lines and are headquartered in London. The papacy and those families who have their bloodlines in the Vatican are also part of this nethermost level. Finally, there are the banking families who control powerful economic institutions from Washington DC. The rabbit tries to jump down another level, but there is no image of these final levels. Nevertheless, it is easy to imagine that there could be space lizards or ancient, immortal beings who have actually orchestrated everything.

Degrees of conspiratorial loss of reality

Within conspiracy culture, the 'four levels of the swamp' illustrate what is imagined to be hidden behind or beneath different layers of manipulation. Influencer Abbie Richards has been active in the fight against online misinformation and disinformation, and has published a conspiracy chart that seeks to illustrate conspiracy theorists' increasing loss of reality. This model currently lacks a scientific basis, but still effectively illustrates the consequences of being increasingly drawn into conspiratorial thinking.

- *The speculation line*
  From being grounded in reality, the triangle opens up towards eventually being entirely detached from reality. Up until the first border, the speculation line, the conspiracy theorist is still within the realm of ordinary events such as the NSA, the tobacco companies' manipulation of research or the existence of secret societies. At the second level, the conspiracy theorists' questioning leads them to wonder about Jeffrey Epstein's death in a prison cell, why Princess Diana died or whether UFOs exist.

- *Leaving reality*
  This second level is followed by leaving reality and entering a world of falsehoods which can still be regarded as harmless, such as aliens kidnapping people, Greta Thunberg being a time traveller or Prince Charles being a vampire.

- *Science denial*
  Crossing the third border involves science denial, with the beliefs that chemtrails spread toxins, COVID was intentionally created in a lab (as a bioweapon) or global warming is a hoax. These theories begin to become dangerous to those who believe in them and to others.

- *The point of no return*
  The final border that crosses into the third degree of loss of reality is the antisemitic point of no return. This brings together the most virulent conspiracy theories, such as those about white genocide, the Earth being hollow or flat, school shootings in the US having been staged, Bill Gates wanting to microchip the world's population with a vaccine or the Protocols of the Elders of Zion proving Jews' plans for world domination. Richards suggests that believing in one theory in this field often links to others, and recommends that those who believe in these theories should seek help.

Richards' model illustrates the route from relatively harmless questioning to racist and polarising enemy images that can lead to violent extremism. Michael Barkun differentiates between three levels.[100]

- Event conspiracies
- Systemic conspiracies
- Superconspiracies

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100.   Barkun, Michael (2013), A culture of conspiracy: apocalyptic visions in contemporary America, 2nd ed., Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Conspiracy theories about individual events include those about Princess Diana's death as a plot to hide the reality about the British royal family. Systemic conspiracies relate to how individual events can be sorted into a bigger pattern, together confirming David Icke's conspiracy theory about the royal family actually consisting of shape-shifting space lizards. Superconspiracies combine several conspiracy theories in an overall plan and claim that the Illuminati, the Bilderberg Group, the Vatican and George Soros control mankind's destiny together. Depending on the level of belief in these theories, it can be hard to leave this belief behind.

THE CONSPIRACY CHART

DETACHED FROM REALITY

QAnon DEEP STATE ELDERS OF ZION Celebs moisturize with children's foreskin Flat Earth REPTILIAN OVERLORDS

Follow the White Rabbit GEORGE SOROS WHITE GENOCIDE NEW WORLD ORDER Bill Gates microchipping Holocaust denial WayFair

"Cultural Marxism"

Illuminati Sandy Hook fake Satanic cult panic Andrenochrome PizzaGate Mars slave colony

Subliminal messages from ruling class on children's TV MOON LANDING FAKED Obama birth certificate fake "Antifa International" starting wildfires

Nazis on the moon HOLLOW EARTH

WORLD RULED BY SUPREME SHADOW "ELITES." ONCE YOU BELIEVE ONE YOU USUALLY BELIEVE MOST. **GET HELP.**

THE ANTISEMITIC POINT OF NO RETURN

Jet fuel doesn't melt steel beams GLOBAL WARMING HOAX Finland doesn't exist 5G Government-made diseases Essential oils cure all illnesses

Anti-Vaxxers Soy boys COVID-19 made in lab Dinosaurs didn't exist Chemtrails

DANGEROUS TO YOURSELF AND OTHERS

SCIENCE DENIAL

Avril Lavigne replaced The Beatles never existed CROP CIRCLES Greta Thunberg is a time traveller Bigfoot

Credit @tofology

Elvis lives Aliens built Stonehenge Alien abductions Loch Ness monster

Prince Charles vampire Mattress Firm CRYPTIDS

UNEQUIVOCALLY FALSE BUT MOSTLY HARMLESS

LEAVING REALITY

#FreeBritney Marilyn Monroe JFK assassination

Denver Int'l Airport Roswell UFOs Area 51

EPSTEIN DIDN'T KILL HIMSELF Princess Diana

WE HAVE QUESTIONS

SPECULATION LINE

COINTELPRO Operation Mockingbird

Big Tobacco lied about cancer NSA mass surveillance

NAYIRAH TESTIMONY Tuskegee

FBI spied on John Lennon

THINGS THAT ACTUALLY HAPPENED

MKUltra

Bohemian Club

Credit @tofology

GROUNDED IN REALITY

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Design ◎ @anti_conspiracy_memewars

Abbie Richards' "Conspiracy Chart", with permission from the originator.

Example 1: Deadly terrorism as strategic communication of conspiracy theories

The German terrorist Tobias Rathjen has been described as a confused lone wolf, spending his time in his bedroom devoted to twisted conspiracy theories based on open racism, science fiction and space fantasies. In his case, these theories and ideas, and the message behind them, correspond to a cognitive radicalisation process.

A few days before committing his terror attack, he published a video in English in which the population of the US was warned about the satanic conspiracy being carried out by its own government. Rathjen left behind a terrorist manifesto showing that he believed in conspiracy theories about remote-controlled thought manipulation being carried out by a powerful security service. He also believed that Germany was being subjected to an orchestrated population exchange with people with lower IQs, preventing mankind from evolving towards a future space stage. At least half of the world's population had to die, and only white people were intelligent enough. His manifesto was directed towards the German people, in whose service Rathjen carried out his deadly terrorist attack. So far, all this happened at a cognitive metalevel.

We do not know whether Rathjen was in active contact with other conspiracy theorists, but he did refer to others like him who had started to tear down the wall that prevented others from seeing the light of the real truth. Rathjen had apparently looked for and compiled information from the internet. In his video and his manifesto, he directly addressed supposed support communities: the American and German people. The aim was to free them from the evil conspiracies of the elite, one of the opponent collectives. In the case of Germany, all those of non-German origin were potential opponents who needed to be purged. Within the radicalisation process, Rathjen here found himself on a collective mid-level: He identified both a (probably imagined) support community of which he had made himself a representative, and an opponent collective that was blamed, demonised and dehumanised.

As long as the video and the manifesto did not mobilise any followers, Rathjen was able to fully embrace conspiratorial ideas at a cognitive level. It is doubtful whether he could have been punished for them, except possibly for the overt racism of the manifesto. However, as soon as Rathjen put his conspiratorial ideas into action by killing people, the actual intention of the action turned into creating PR for these very ideas (something that Anders Breivik consciously referred to in Oslo in 2011). The Great Replacement conspiracy theory (which also inspired the Christchurch terrorist in 2019) was medialised through the terror attack. Without the act of terrorism, no one would probably have ever paid any attention to Rathjen's video or terrorist manifesto. Rathjen therefore communicated (medialised) these ideas (the message) to other like-minded members of the support community, to those he wanted to inform, and to those against whom his violence was directed.

Example 2: The conspiracy theory as a brand – violent riots as a PR coup

During the time of former President Trump, American conspiratorial thinking (which has a long intellectual history) reached new heights. This was crystalised in the QAnon theory (the idea at the cognitive level of radicalisation) which, briefly, is based on the US actually being dominated by a 'deep state' and that the role of the president as a national saviour is to uncover this conspiracy and 'drain the swamp' (see the 'four levels of the swamp' above). Q is said to be an inside source within the state apparatus who occasionally began to release information about future events ('Q drops') regarding the imminent great draining. Several earlier conspiracy theories merged in QAnon (which has almost become its own brand) – everything from antisemitic ideas about the 'globalist' elite, about climate change and COVID-19 being hoaxes, about the satanic paedophile rings of the Democrats and the elites (#pizzagate), and so on. QAnon is a good example of a superconspiracy according to Barkun's definition.

   QAnon followers began to organise themselves into support communities around the idea, both online and also offline IRL (in real life) – the message contributed towards the formation of a social community and, after a while, of a regular community of faith where Q's sermons could be revealed drop by drop. Different antagonist collectives targeted by these ideas were singled out in the conspiracy theories. The radicalisation process within QAnon – which found its breeding ground in everything from right-wing militant groups and evangelical congregations to associations of 'concerned mothers' with an interest in health – quickly led to an increasing loss of reality. When, after losing the presidential election in November 2020, the QAnon movement's saviour Trump began to spread conspiracy theories about the election having been stolen, this idea (which flew in the face of reality, formal expert knowledge and legal assessments) was swallowed in its entirety by the already radicalised followers. On the symbolically charged date of 6 January 2021 – Epiphany – radicalised Trump supporters followed the urgings of their saviour figure, cheered on by conspiratorial entrepreneurs such as Alex Jones, to take the matter into their own hands.[101] The deadly storming of the US Capitol took place, and has since been described by the FBI as an act of "domestic terrorism".[102] Regardless of how much the people who took part in the storming were aware of QAnon or the 'Stop the Steal' conspiracy theories, they communicated these ideas through their actions and presented threatening, hate-filled messages to both support communities and the antagonist collective. The actual storming cannot be undone, and joins the ranks of earlier iconic narratives about the people's fight against the state, such as the siege of the Branch Davidian sect in Waco in 1993, which ended in disaster.

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101. Önnerfors, Andreas (2021a), "How radical Right conspiracy theories drive populist mobilization", openDemocracy, 25 May 2021, https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/countering-radical-right/how-radical-right-conspiracy-theories-drive-populist-mobilisation/ (last accessed 22 March 2021).

102. Greve, Joan E (2021), "FBI chief calls Capitol attack 'domestic terrorism' and defends US intelligence", The Guardian, 2 March 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/mar/02/fbi-christopher-wray-capitol-attack-domestic-terrorism (last accessed 22 March 2021).

Radicalisation processes driven by conspiracy theories

In summary, it can be noted that conspiracy theories occupy a similar place in radicalisation processes to extreme political or religious ideologies (which in turn may have conspiratorial elements). They can be developed from relatively harmless cognitive positions that question the state of things into a growing loss of reality that leads to accepting and carrying out radicalising actions and deadly terrorism. Since conspiracy theories base their meaning on clear ideas about 'us' and 'them', or victims and perpetrators, they need an environment of imagined or actual support communities and antagonist collectives (those groups that are blamed, demonised and dehumanised). As long as the conspiracy theories do not mobilise into action, they are as hard to take legal action against as radical ideas.

However, extreme actions – such as the terror attacks in Oslo and on Utøya in 2011, or in Christchurch in 2019 – reflect them more or less consciously. In contrast to Rathjen's 2020 terrorist manifesto, the one left by the Halle terrorist in 2019, for example, is much less complex. This repeats well established Neo-Nazi, antisemitic, Islamophobic themes peppered with references to the world of online gaming and the woman-hating incel sub-culture. Nevertheless, the live-streamed attack against a synagogue and the two murders carried out were a way to spread these conspiratorial ideas.

Responding to and countering conspiracy theories

4. Responding to and countering conspiracy theories

Responding to and countering conspiracy theories is a complex challenge that depends on both who is expressing them for what purpose, and the degree of radicalisation driven by conspiracy theories.. This section will discuss meaningful interventions and the need to develop a defence capability within this area in order to be able to meet the objectives of society's security.

4.1 When is it right to intervene?

When does the greatest harm occur?

As long as conspiracy theories do not constitute punishable crimes, it can be hard to stop their spread. However, the latest developments suggest that social media platforms are taking greater responsibility for moderating what is published and shared. These steps are deemed to be justified due to the potential for conspiracy theories to drive radicalisation processes, polarise societal debate and undermine the democratic exercise of authority. However, apart from the purely technical measures against the actual media used for spreading these theories, questions should always be asked about whether it is most effective to target the intervention towards the author/source or the audience/target group. Cognitive styles, personality traits and worldviews differ from one individual to another in relation to their age, group affiliation or education. Depending on the time of exposure and the degree of loss of reality, it is hard to find a solution that suits all cases of response. The question is also closely linked to how conspiracy theories are used, by whom and for what purpose. Depending on whether they circulate in schools, are part of information influence activities, are expressed at a demonstration or are presented by someone in a position of power, the response must be different. Are the measures pedagogical in nature? Is it a question of psychological defence? Should the media's knowledge level be raised? Should the power rhetoric be disarmed?

Social psychologist Péter Krekó has proposed that the targeted intervention against conspiracy theories should be assessed in relation to three factors:

- a high degree of harmfulness
- a low degree of plausibility
- high popularity and spread

Krekó believes that a conspiracy theory which can do great harm, which is based on very loose foundations, but which has been widely spread should be prioritised in all forms of intervention.[103] For example, conspiracy theories about COVID-19 vaccines are harmful and are relatively unreasonable, but are spread actively via social media and demonstrations. They can more likely be rendered harmless through objective information efforts regarding their unreasonableness. (The assertion that "the vaccine contains a microchip" can be easily responded to.) Conspiracy theories about the sinking of the M/S Estonia, on the other hand, are not as harmful to society, have been worked out in greater detail, are based on facts that are harder to distinguish from pure fiction, and are relatively less widely spread. Countering these theories requires a more carefully thought-out strategy that responds in detail to technical evidence that is often presented (like with 9/11). When assessing whether an intervention is needed, anti-vax theories should therefore be prioritised in the short term, even if the M/S Estonia theories merge with wider, harmful 'superconspiracies' about the 'deep state' and its manipulations.

- *Harmfulness* can be assessed based on a ranking, where the conspiracy theory's potential for violence (choice of language, image of the enemy, inciting violence) is considered, followed by other serious political or societal consequences (undermining confidence in society, authorities or science) and the consequences for the group and the individual who believe in it (loss of reality, denial, isolation).

- Assessing the *plausibility* of a conspiracy theory must take into account its complex structure. It communicates more or less credible statements about circumstance, as well as value judgments. The logical plausibility can be assessed relatively easily in relation to common fallacies and short-cuts or blind faith in a particular type of evidence. The ethical plausibility must target the actors' assumed motives: Is it reasonable to divide the world up into absolute good and evil, and who gains what precisely from the conspiracy (the Latin legal question cui bono)? Those conspiracy theories with the least plausibility in terms of both the description of reality and the description of the actors' ethical motives is easier to counter on these very points.

- Lastly, the conspiracy theory's *popularity and spread* should be considered when deciding on countermeasures. It goes without saying that degree of spread affects the assessment of the need for countermeasures. More marginal conspiracy theories may perhaps be promoted if they are addressed or responded to in the media or by the authorities. But this is a double-edged sword. For example, the conspiratorial idea that the spread of COVID-19 was driven by migration to Europe was only a marginal phenomenon at the beginning of the pandemic. A year later, this position has reached the mainstream on the European right wing. The question is when it would have been best to respond to this conspiratorial narrative.

Last but not least, these three initial values must be assessed in relation to who makes use of the conspiracy theories.
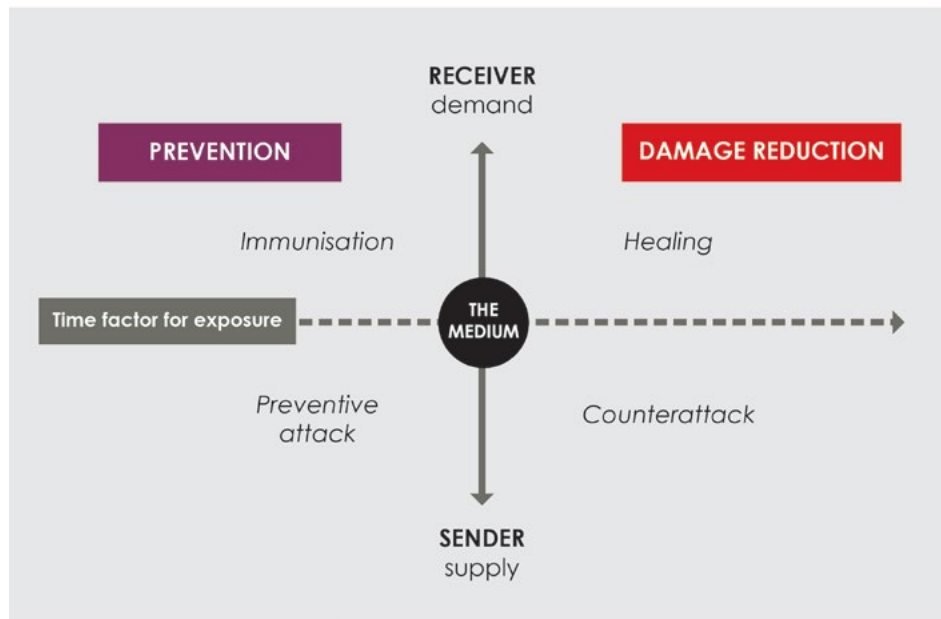
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103. Krekó, Péter (2020), "Countering conspiracy theories and misinformation", Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories, London: Routledge, pp. 242-256.

When are countermeasures effective?

To better adapt countermeasures, Krekó also proposes the following intervention model.

INTERVENTION MODEL
(Krekó, 2020)

The model is based on two dimensions: (a) the *time factor* for exposure to conspiracy theories and (b) the *supply* in the form of a sender's conspiratorial message in relation to an audience and demand. Between the author and the audience come the actual media and the message being communicated. Prior to exposure, this involves preventive measures. After exposure, damage limitation is called for.

If the potential audience/target group for the conspiratorial message is known, it is possible to immunise against demand – in other words, the propensity to believe in conspiracy theories – during the prevention phase.[104] For example, measures can be taken relating to source criticism, understanding of scientific methodology, media and information skills, ethical reasoning and cultural stereotypes. By mapping cognitive styles, personality traits and worldviews/attitudes that are susceptible to conspiratorial thought patterns and forms of belief, it is possible to better identify possible measures. The ability to identify and deal with the media through which the conspiracy theories are communicated can be a central aspect of immunisation.

If the potential sender is known, the supply can instead be neutralised during the prevent stage, for example by revealing its source (such as information influence activities by foreign powers) or by contradicting the conspiracy theory in advance ('pre-bunking').

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104. Roozenbeek, Jon, et al. (2020), "Prebunking interventions based on 'inoculation' theory can reduce susceptibility to misinformation across cultures", MisInformation Review, 3 February, https://misinforeview. hks.harvard.edu/article/global-vaccination-badnews/ (last accessed 23 March 2021).

At this stage, it may also be worth neutralising the actual medium through which the conspiracy theory is communicated, for example by closing down a social media account or channel.

After exposure to conspiracy theories, it is a matter of 'healing' the audience and limiting the damage. Depending on the degree to which the perception of reality has been lost, measures are targeted at deradicalising those who have been exposed to and believed conspiratorial messages. Here, lessons can be learned from defectors exit activities carried out in relation to both religious sects and radical political groups.

When it comes to the author, interventions are targeted at subsequently revealing and contradicting the conspiracy theories, for example as done by EUvsDisinfo with regard to news reporting loyal to the Russian regime with conspiratorial content ('debunking'). Viral review or fact-checking, as carried out by Källkritikbyrån, Fojo Media Institutes' Fact Check, Alle Fonti and its Facebook group "source criticism, fake news and fact checking" should also be highlighted in this context.[105]

A toolbox for response

It goes without saying that the operational toolbox for response must be varied in relation to the effectiveness of the interventions. The European Commission's information material also distinguishes between predicting and revealing conspiracy theories.[106]

The first field of (a) *preventive measures targeted at the audience* mainly involves pedagogical initiatives, source criticism, logical thinking, greater digital competence, fact checking, media literacy and various measures to strengthen the democratic debate. A particular competence can be built to identify conspiracy theories (before they are spread further): Who is the sender? Who is writing this and why? What is the standing of the source and is it reliable? Check the tone and style. Is it objective, subjective, condemnatory?[107]

In the second field, (b) *preventive measures targeted at the sender*, there is a need for different competence and cooperation between actors with insight into who the senders are. Government agencies, businesses or civil society initiatives can be reasonably expected to have different capacities for carrying out these preventive measures. While targeting foreign powers' information influence activities falls within the field of psychological defence capability, it is the technology companies' responsibility to regulate content on social media. At the same time, various initiatives within civil society or the media can provide information about and counter conspiratorial content.

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105. Källkritikbyrån, https://kallkritikbyran.se, Fojo: Faktajouren, https://fojo.se/faktajouren/, Alle Fonti, https://www.allefonti.se, Källkritik, Fake News och Faktagranskning https://www.facebook.com/groups/kallkritik/ (all last accessed 23 March 2021).

106. The European Commission and UNESCO (2020), "Pre-bunking and de-bunking", https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/live_work_travel_in_the_eu/unesco-conspiracy-english-5.jpg (last accessed 23 March 2021).

107. See the European Commission and UNESCO (2020), "Is this one? Check before sharing", https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/live_work_travel_in_the_eu/unesco-conspiracy-english-1.jpg (last accessed 23 March 2021). See also SOU 2020:56, "Det demokratiska samtalet i en digital tid. Så stärker vi motståndskraften mot desinformation, propaganda och näthat" ["The democratic conversation in a digital age: How we strengthen our resilience to disinformation, propaganda and online hate"], 30 September 2020, https://www.regeringen.se/rattsliga-dokument/statens-offentliga-utredningar/2020/09/sou-202056/ (last accessed 23 March 2021).

In the third field, (c) *damage reduction measures after the audience has been exposed*, the focus must be on flexible response methods depending on the degree of radicalisation. For a model of how this can be done, see below under point 4.2.

What was described for (b) also applies to the fourth field of (d) *damage reduction measures directed at the sender/supply*: responding according to the ability to carry out various measures. According to the European Commission, debunking should focus on "the facts you want to communicate, not the myth you want to debunk". The target of the intervention should be chosen: the author, the source or the logic behind the conspiracy theory. Always state clearly that the information is wrong, before quoting a conspiracy theory. A fact-based alternative explanation should be provided, and use visual aids to back your argument. It is extremely important not to share conspiracy theories, and to take responsibility by contacting the sender or the publisher to correct the false information.[108]

A number of strategies are recommended for media responses to conspiracy theories: Facts and not conspiracy theories should be emphasised in headlines, core facts should be reinforced in the main text using verified information, warnings should be given about related conspiracy theories circulating before referencing them, and it should be explained how they are misleading.[109]

Krekó lists seven typical obstacles when responding to conspiracy theories:[110]

- *The resistance of conspiracy theories to factual information:* Those who seek to debunk a conspiracy theory are themselves identified as complicit.
- *Lingering effect of misinformation:* Once misinformation has been launched, it has a tendency to stick.
- *The sleeper effect:* Information that was not credible to begin with is whitewashed with time.
- *Familiarity backfire effect:* The more often we mention a conspiracy theory, the more people become familiar with it.
- *Reactance:* Excessive response attempts can have the opposite effect, that those who believe in conspiracy theories can become deadlocked.
- *Identity and motivated reasoning:* Not only do conspiracy theories communicate disinformation, they also create a strong group identity. Factual arguments have a limited impact on socialisation.
- *True believers:* Those who have adopted conspiracy theories as (a surrogate for other) belief systems are very hard to convince with rational arguments.

Despite these seven distinct risks of interventions, it is reasonable to develop different forms of response.

4.2   A six-step model for response

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108. The European Commission and UNESCO (2020), "Concrete counter actions", https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/live_work_travel_in_the_eu/unesco-conspiracy-english-8.jpg (last accessed 18 March 2021).

109. The European Commission and UNESCO (2020), "Conspiracy theories. How can journalists report on them?", https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/live_work_travel_in_the_eu/unesco-conspiracy-english-9.jpg (last accessed 18 March 2021).

110. Krekó, Péter (2020), "Countering conspiracy theories and misinformation", Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories, London: Routledge, pp. 245–246.

How should we respond to those who have been exposed to one or more conspiracy theories, and have been radicalised to varying degrees in their conspiratorial perception of reality? Taking anti-coronavirus conspiracy theories as a starting point, EUvsDisinfo has developed a six-step model focused on interpersonal response.[111] Although this particular model is intended for responding to suspicions towards vaccines, the conclusions can be generalised.
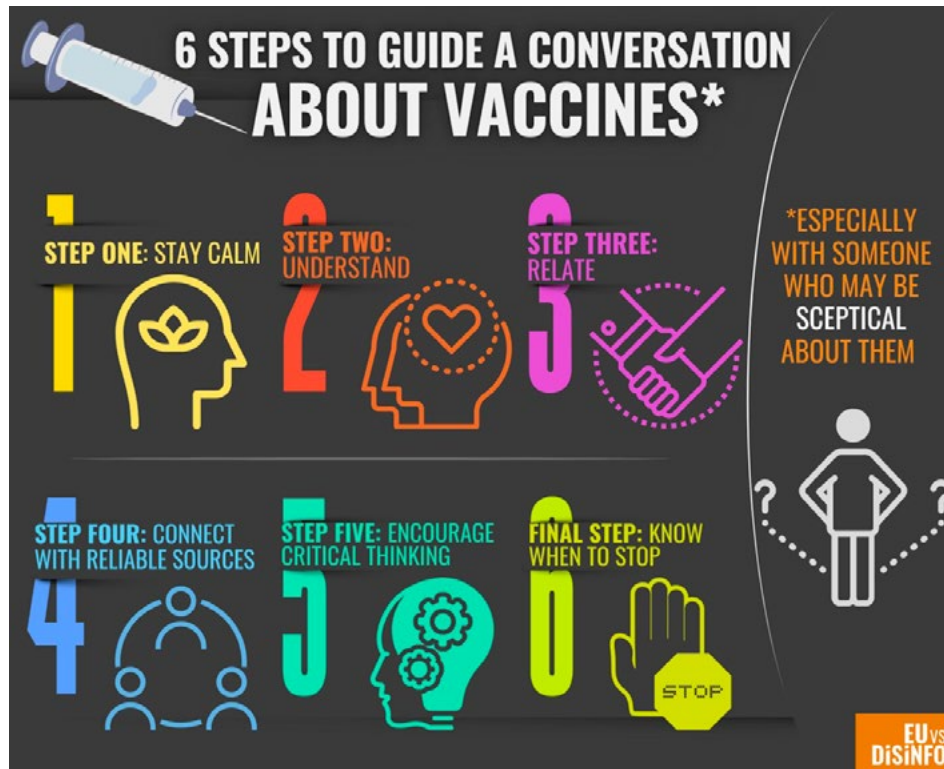
Source: EU EEAS, EUvsDisinfo.

Step 1: Stay calm

The first step is to continue to respond with respect and a willingness to understand. It is important not to pathologise (seeing them as sick) or to make fun of them.

Step 2: Understand

There are many reasons why people believe in conspiracy theories – this can be a mixture of emotions such as fear, worry and uncertainty, moral values or simply incorrect information. Try to listen without judging.

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111. EUvsDisinfo (2021), "My Loved-one Thinks Bill Gates Will Microchip Humanity. Now what?", https://euvsdisinfo.eu/my-loved-one-thinks-bill-gates-will-microchip-humanity-now-what/, see also EEAS (2021), "My Friend Thinks Bill Gates Will Microchip Humanity. Now what?" https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/93863/"my-friend-thinks-bill-gates-will-microchip-humanity"-now-what_en (last accessed 18 March 2021), see also Lewandowsky, Stephen, et al. (2021), "The COVID-19 Vaccine Communication Handbook – A practical guide for improving vaccine communication and fighting misinformation", https://osf.io/f6a48/ (last accessed 10 April 2021).

Step 3: Relate

Arguing about who is right can create more conflicts and frustrations. Try to relate to why the individual embraces these particular theories on an emotional and personal level. What is the cause of their worry?

Step 4: Connect with reliable sources

Try to get them to engage with information from reliable sources, research and fact-checking to balance disinformation.

Step 5: Encourage critical thinking

Conspiracy theorists often see themselves as 'critical thinkers'. Ask them why they rely on the sources that spread conspiracy theories and what their motivations may be. One approach is to question the individual components of conspiracy theories, as presented above in point 3.1.

Step 6: Know when to stop

Belief in conspiracy theories is linked to cognitive style, personality traits and worldviews, and to real or perceived trauma. The person in question may already be deep in the conspiracy swamp, in which case the discussion can reinforce polarisation rather than easing it. The most important thing is to try to show understanding.

The European Commission's information material provides several examples of what might be a suitable strategy for responding to those who believe in conspiracy theories.[112] Those who question a conspiracy theory are often identified as being involved in it. For example, researchers can be accused of belief in 'scientism' – that scientificity is a kind of ideological belief system and not an attempt to describe the truth. In this way, otherwise entirely reasonable scientific arguments against the conspiracy theory are invalidated. Forms of response other than pure contradiction are therefore required (including certain overlaps with the six-step model above):

- encourage debate
- start self-reflection by asking questions
- get help from defectors from the conspiratorial environment
- use many different sources
- don't make fun of anyone
- show compassion
- focus on simple facts and logic, instead of all the parts of the conspiracy theory
- (there is a specific weak point in all reasoning – try to find it)
- don't go too fast – repeat your attempts

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112. The European Commission and UNESCO (2020), "How to talk to someone who firmly believes in them", https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/live_work_travel_in_the_eu/unesco-conspiracy-english-6.jpg (last accessed 18 March 2021).

Psychological approaches

Since, in addition to cognitive style, belief in conspiracy theories is also based on personality traits and worldviews, it is important not to shy away from more existential questions. The European Commission's information material describes this as examining one's own starting points, but in actual fact this also applies when responding to others.[113] In terms of cognitive style, this involves for instance asking oneself "Why do I believe what I believe?" (an epistemological question) or "Which sources of information do I usually consult, and why?". Doing 'research' on the internet cannot be compared with reading scientific articles or information from experts at knowledge-intensive authorities.

Prejudices and fears are linked to accentuated personality traits (or personality disorders), actual experienced trauma and crises, and worldview. For example, the EU material asks: "Where do my fears, beliefs and values come from?" and "What are my fears, beliefs and values? How do they affect my decisions and how I interact with people?" People can also feel slighted, and it is important to get to the bottom of why feelings of helplessness or powerlessness exist (and whether they are based on real or imaged injustices). Another typical psychological reaction is assigning blame, and it is reasonable to ask oneself and others why there is a need for this. Finally, one's own and other people's prejudices and stereotypes should be analysed. Why do these affect our way of seeing the world? These fundamental qualities and values come to a head in times of crisis. It is normal to feel uneasy and to want answers. It is hard to absorb all the information (particularly if it appears contradictory) and to know what one's responsibilities are in a crisis.

4.3 Counternarratives – responding to the actual narrative

A more strategic way of dealing with conspiracy theories is to respond to the actual dramatic structure of the meaning-making narrative (see 3.1 above). Is it possible to create counternarratives or counter-messages with which to disarm the conspiratorial worldview? There is a lack of reliable studies into radicalisation towards violent extremism and terrorism.[114] Without referencing any scientific basis, and in the absence of systematic sampling within the field and in conspiracy theory environments, counternarratives could highlight the following elements.

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113 The European Commission and UNESCO (2020), "What about my own beliefs?", https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/live_work_travel_in_the_eu/unesco-conspiracy-english-2.jpg (last accessed 18 March 2021).

114. Braddock, Kurt and Morrison, John F. (2018), "Cultivating Trust and Perceptions of Source Credibility in Online Counternarratives Intended to Reduce Support for Terrorism", Studies in Conflict & Terrorism, 43:6, 468-492. The Routledge Handbook of Counter-Narratives was published in 2020, mapping the great breadth of the field.

THE QUESTION MARK
– try to find the real cause

THE COMPASS
– learn to orientate yourself

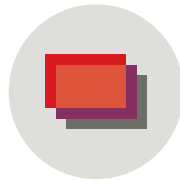**THE HANDSHAKE**
– do something together with others

THE PEACE SYMBOL
– most people do not wish you any harm

LIGHT
– investigate what frightens you

METHOD
– there are proven ways to find out what is true

COMPLEXITY
– there are always other perspectives

OWN RESPONSIBILITY
– you can make your own conscious choices

EMPATHY
– understand other people's actions better

THE FIRE EXTINGUISHER
– extinguish your fears

ACKNOWLEDGE OTHER VOICES
– no one person ever has the truth

THE KITTEN, THE FLOWER AND THE CAMPFIRE
– surround yourself with images of hope

- **THE QUESTION MARK** – try to find the real cause: Most causal connections are complex, and cannot be reduced to temporary similarities or arbitrary pattern recognition.
- **THE COMPASS** – learn to orientate yourself: Reality is not planned by someone else; personal autonomy involves being able to navigate within society for yourself.
- **THE HANDSHAKE** – do something together with others: By meeting other people from many different backgrounds, you will become part of a wider context.
- **THE PEACE SYMBOL** – most people do not wish you any harm: By spending time with other people in many different situations, it will become clear that the majority do not have evil intentions.
- **LIGHT** – investigate what frightens you: Map out your fears and your need for knowledge, and get more experience and insights about them.
- **METHOD** – there are proven ways to find out what is true: Facts and evidence are not self-explanatory; they must be seen within a wider system of scientific or legal methods in order to strive for the truth.
- **COMPLEXITY** – there are always other perspectives: A single person or group does not have all the answers; most events and developments can be seen from several different angles.
- **OWN RESPONSIBILITY** – you can make your own conscious choices: You are not a victim of external circumstances – you are the creator of opportunities; go from reactive to proactive; the responsibility lies with you.
- **EMPATHY** – understand other people's actions better: Always see the person behind other people's actions; try to put yourself in their situation.
- **THE FIRE EXTINGUISHER** – extinguish your fears: People have survived for tens of thousands of years, and have made it through wars and catastrophes; your life will come to an end, but generations will come after you; be in the present and plant a tree.
- **ACKNOWLEDGE OTHER VOICES** – no one person ever has the truth: There is rarely only one solution to the problem or one way of looking at it; there are always many proposed solutions.
- **THE KITTEN, THE FLOWER AND THE CAMPFIRE** – surround yourself with images of hope: Dwelling on catastrophe or seeing yourself as a puppet in someone else's control is not constructive; there is more hope than hate in the world.

These twelve elements can be regarded as starting points for both prevention and damage-limitation interventions targeted at individuals or groups, or as a script for strategic narratives that respond to polarising political narratives or information influence activities.

Summary and conclusions

5. Summary and conclusions

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the vulnerability of knowledge in times of crisis. Various conspiratorial meaning-making narratives have been spread since the pandemic began in 2020 to explain to people why the crisis is happening, but also with the intention of consciously manipulating us. The WHO describes an 'infodemic' – in other words, a viral spreading of misleading information – which makes it harder for people to understand the seriousness of the disease and what is needed in order to fight it

Conspiracy theories about the origin and spread of the virus, its morbidity and mortality, the political countermeasures, the expertise of public health science and in particular vaccination have influenced and polarised opinion. Conspiratorial ideas about the pandemic not actually existing or being a way of achieving a global dictatorship sow discord and undermine societal and interpersonal trust. Conspiracy theories are a serious threat to Swedish democracy, since they reject or cast suspicion on expertise and state actors, and hasten radicalisation processes. They also prepare the ground for foreign powers' information influence activities directed at Sweden. There is no doubt that greater knowledge about conspiracy theories is needed within a psychological defence capability.

But what actually are conspiracy theories? Based on the current state of research, the report describes how they express and communicate ideas that

- everything fits together (patterns)
- everything happens intentionally (the plan)
- people have planned this together (the plot)
- there are evil intentions directed against the common good (evil intentions)
- the plan has been prepared in secret to keep us in the dark (secrecy)
- there are facts that prove the conspiracy (evidence).

They also maintain that

- we live in a world of absolute opposites between good and evil (dualism)
- someone else is responsible for the bad things that happen to us (scapegoats)
- these other culpable parties are evil and inhuman (demonisation)
- we are approaching the collapse of the system (Judgment Day).

Conspiracy theorists also see themselves as

- truth-sayers waking up the sleeping masses, and
- communicating their message with clear imagery.

It is important to differentiate between a conspiracy theory and a theory about a conspiracy. While the latter still operates within the field of what can be proven by facts, conspiracy theories combine categories of true and false (truth values) and good and evil or right and wrong (value judgments). Conspiracy theories communicate their message in accordance with a set dramatic structure, and quickly assume the position of a religious belief system. They are used in four different ways:

- *from the top down:* by political actors to reinforce power and to disparage political opponents
- *from the bottom up:* by those who feel (or are) powerless as a way to criticise power – or false use from those who claim to speak for the powerless
- from outside in: as part of information influence activities directed towards another state
- *from inside out:* blame-assigning conspiratorial narratives that are directed towards other groups in order to assert one's own collective/cultural identity.

It is possible to decode a conspiratorial narrative by studying its twelve typical components (see above) more closely. These reflect cognitive styles, accentuated personality traits and worldviews. In other words, some of these components relate to how we perceive reality, what worries and affects us psychologically and our general values, such as stereotypes and prejudices. The propensity to believe in conspiracy theories can also be attributed to damaged confidence and broken trust. These traits are reinforced during societal crises, in which group identities are also promoted. Conspiracy theories are spread by the media, social media, popular culture and entertainment, but there are also typical groups of spreaders (conscious and unconscious, prominent and behind the scenes).

Belief in one conspiracy theory often leads to belief in another. A radicalisation process with a growing loss of reality can take place, in extreme cases radicalising towards violent extremism and terrorism. Conspiracy theorists assume that several layers of reality are hidden behind the manipulation we are exposed to. By passing various boundaries of denial (actual reality, science and all plausibility), those who believe in conspiracy theories find themselves at different stages – not unlike sect members.

However, responding to and countering conspiracy theories is complex. To assess whether it is meaningful to intervene, an assessment must be made of the degree of

- harmfulness,
- plausibility, and
- popularity and spread.

The more harmful a conspiracy theory is, the easier it is to expose. The more widespread it is, the more likely it is that the interventions can have an effect. But in order to assess the countermeasures better, it is also important to consider when they happen (before and after exposure) and whether they are targeted at the audience or the sender. The operational toolbox will look very different depending on this initial data, who actually expresses conspiracy theories and for what purpose. Without falling into the typical traps of responding, the report proposes a response model in interpersonal situations. This is based on empathetic respect and encouraging self-reflection, in combination with access to verified information and clear distinctions. Since psychological disposition is an important factor behind the propensity to believe in conspiracy theories, it is important to take fears and worries seriously – not least in times of crisis. In conclusion, the report suggests that counternarratives can be created to respond to the conspiratorial narrative. These counternarratives can either be targeted at individuals or groups, or can be part of larger strategic narratives.

In order to ensure the security of society, competence needs to be increased in order to tackle conspiracy theories as part of psychological defence. Conspiracy theories are already part of postmodern hybrid warfare, such as psychological operations on the strategic narratives and perceptions of geopolitical actors and events. The potential of conspiracy theories for radicalisation must be taken into account in domestic security. Conspiracy theories are often also based on the description of an alternative reality in relation to knowledge-producing institutions and authorities, and therefore threaten societal trust. Their potential for polarisation challenges the democratic order and the political climate for debate. At the same time, they are also indications of societal frustrations that need to be taken seriously. To an ever greater extent, belief in conspiracy theories is also becoming part of interpersonal psychological problems, much like the issue of sects and new religious movements, and can present a challenge for others. Without doubt, an increase in conspiracy theory thinking is a challenge for teaching and education at all levels, as it requires the mediation of alternative and competing truths. Due to the conflict between quality-assessed journalism and the false content of conspiracy theories, the situation for the media is similarly problematic. However, belief in conspiracy theories also undermines trust within civil society.

In order to take on this complex threat to democracy and democratic dialogue, and to strengthen resilience to disinformation, misinformation and information influence activities, there is thus a need for broader information efforts to enhance competence on conspiracy theories and how to respond to them.

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6. References

6.1 Online resources

General:

- Alle Fonti: One of the most useful resources for source criticism and external monitoring in Sweden, http://www.allefonti.se
- Comparative Analysis of Conspiracy Theories in Europe (COMPACT): Overview of research projects and publications on conspiracy theories, collection of links to pedagogical resources, reports, etc. https://conspiracytheories.eu
- Källkritikbyrån, formerly Viralgranskaren, https://kallkritikbyran.se
- Fojo: Faktajouren, https://fojo.se/faktajouren/
- 'Källkritik, Fake News och Faktagranskning', a Facebook group run by Alle Fonti, https://www.facebook.com/groups/kallkritik/
- Lewandowsky, Stephan and Cook, John (2020), "The Conspiracy Theory Handbook", George Mason University, https://www.climatechangecommunication.org/conspiracy-theory-handbook/?fbclid=IwAR2H3lD-KurTHScfGIbZVx77zlOXcziOcsqAq raXLaG0GA2sIHWPKRF5I_8k. The Conspiracy Theory Handbook is available in ten languages.

For schools:

- The Swedish Educational Broadcasting Company's "Conspiracy" series (2014) with teacher guidance:

  - Episode 1, "Conspiracy UFO", https://urplay.se/program/181739-conspiracy-ufo
  - Episode 2, "Conspiracy Chemtrails", https://urplay.se/program/182248-conspiracy-chemtrails
  - Episode 3, "Conspiracy Illuminati", https://urplay.se/program/181741-conspiracy-illuminati
  - Teacher guidance: http://www.ur.se/mb/pdf/handledningar/182000-182999/182848-1_ Conspiracy.pdf

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