Permacrisis, Conspiracy Stories and Metaphors

Andreas Musolff
University of East Anglia, UK
A.Musolff@uea.ac.uk

Abstract

Conspiracy stories (also known as 'conspiracy theories') pretend to provide truthful and unambiguous responses to crisis experiences and thrive in conjunction with the latter: the more crises, the more conspiracies! Hence, it is no surprise that the recent, extended and multi-level crises have been accompanied by a cacophony of 'trending' stories that see conspiracies behind, e.g. COVID-19, climate change, migration, economic stagnation and military conflicts. These conspiracy stories link up with global master-conspiracies (e.g. Great Reset, QAnon) as well as with localised violent protests based on conspiracy stories at national or regional levels.

Despite their oft-lamented factual and logical deficiencies, conspiracy stories have two important assets. One asset is their narrative structure that presents a 'solution' to the narrative 'problem', which is identified with the topical crisis. They tell a supposedly secret back-story that 'explains' the current crisis and, based on it, provide a glimpse of an innovative solution. Their second asset is their figurative, non-literal formulation in terms of metaphor scenarios and metonymies, which enables users to mentally cancel part of their stories when they are exposed as untrue, and thus to maintain the story as a whole.

The article provides a corpus-based analysis of metaphor use in conspiracy stories about COVID-19 in the UK, America and Germany. It explains their function and sketches perspectives for further research. It also discusses the chances of "reframing" metaphor-enhanced conspiracy stories during (perma-)crises and argues that such an endeavour must not restrict itself to fact-checks and -corrections. Instead, the narrative appeal of conspiracy stories, based on their figurative structure, needs to be taken into account, in order to expose their potentially disastrous political and social consequences.

Keywords: conspiracy story, crisis, metaphor, narrative

Streszczenie

Permakryzys, opowieści spiskowe i metafory

Opowieści spiskowe (znane również jako „teorie spiskowe") utrzymują, że dostarczają prawdziwych i jednoznacznych odpowiedzi na doświadczenia kryzysowe i rozwijają się w połączeniu z tymi ostatnimi: im więcej kryzysów, tym więcej spisków! Nic więc dziwnego, że niedawnym, rozległym i wielopoziomowym kryzysom towarzyszyła kakofonia „modnych" opowieści, w których kryją się spiski, m.in. dotyczące COVID-19, zmiany klimatu, migracji, stagnacji gospodarczej i konfliktów zbrojnego. Te opowieści spiskowe łączą się z globalnymi

teoriami spiskowymi (np. Great Reset, QAnon), a także z lokalnymi gwałtownymi protestami opartymi na teoriach spiskowych na poziomie krajowym lub regionalnym.

Pomimo braków merytorycznych i logicznych, które często są wskazywane, teorie spiskowe mają dwie istotne zalety. Jedną jest ich struktura narracyjna, stanowiąca „rozwiązanie" pewnego narracyjnego „problemu", utożsamianego z omawianym kryzysem. Opowiadają rzekomo tajną historię, która „wyjaśnia" obecny kryzys i na jej podstawie dają wgląd w innowacyjne rozwiązanie. Drugą zaletą jest ich przenośne, niedosłowne sformułowanie w formie metaforycznych i metonimicznych scenariuszy, co pozwala użytkownikom na mentalne anulowanie części swoich opowieści, gdy zostaną one zdemaskowane jako nieprawdziwe, a tym samym zachowanie opowieści, jako całości.

Artykuł zawiera korpusową analizę użycia metafor w opowieściach spiskowych na temat COVID-19 w Wielkiej Brytanii, Stanach Zjednoczonych i Niemczech. Wyjaśnia ich funkcję i szkicuje perspektywy dalszych badań. Omawia również szanse „przeformułowania" wzbogaconych metaforą opowieści spiskowych podczas (perma-)kryzysów i argumentuje, że takie przedsięwzięcie nie może ograniczać się do sprawdzania i poprawiania faktów. Zamiast tego należy wziąć pod uwagę atrakcyjność narracyjną opowieści spiskowych, opartą na ich przenośnej strukturze, aby tym samym ujawnić ich potencjalnie katastrofalne konsekwencje polityczne i społeczne.

Słowa kluczowe: teorie spiskowe, kryzys, metafora, narracja

1. Introduction

In classic structural narratology, the "complication" or "complicating action" marks the start of a narrative (following a preliminary "orientation phase"), which then proceeds towards the stages of "evaluation", "resolution" and, optionally, "coda" (Labov & Waletzky 1997: 27-34). The complication may consist in a trivial, unexpected event such as a trusted retriever dog not returning a duck, which surprises its owner so much he nearly shoots the dog, as in one narrative analysed by Labov and Waletzky (1997: 6-7). Of course, a pandemic such as COVID-19 is of a different calibre in terms of an existential "complication" for millions of people, compared with a minor hunting accident, but the initial reaction to its outbreak at the start of 2020 was also characterised by disbelief and shock (Bok et al. 2021). The public health crisis was followed by an information and communication crisis, quickly dubbed 'infodemic' (Evanega et al. 2020; United Nations 2020).

This infodemic in turn comprised not just the launch and spread of misinformation but also false explanations or "conspiracy theories" (Gerts et al. 2021, Madisson & Ventsel 2022), which in the remainder of this paper will be called conspiracy stories (CSs), to highlight their narrative character. Such would-be explanations of the pandemic contain traces of rational argumentation but that does not make them "theories" in the scientific or even in the everyday sense of the word. Just as fake news are not a subcategory of news, as they only pretend to contain actual

facts (Taylor 1995: 87-90), conspiracy stories only pretend to provide explanations of complex social or political problems. They thus imitate "didactic narratives" (Cortazzi 2008) that tell an exemplary tale which links a shocking personal experience to a more general insight into a supposedly 'hidden' truth. The readers of Labov and Waletzky's study 'learn' that a dog can be clever enough to distinguish between a dead and a wounded duck, which may change their outlook on dog psychology; pandemic conspiracy believers 'learn' that COVID-19 was not a natural event but a fiendish man-made scheme. In both cases a narrative structure is present: the story takes a surprise crisis "complication" of the expected course of events as a platform for a new perspective on the back-story of what (supposedly) caused it and on the "evaluation" that can be drawn from it for the future.

In this paper I analyse key-conspiracy stories from the context of COVID-19 debates, with a focus on the question of what makes them palatable for consumption by a wider audience, and attractive for followers and activists. The term *conspiracy story* is used here referring to the phenomena discussed elsewhere as *conspiracy theories* in the pejorative sense of "unorthodox and aberrant accounts of social and political reality" (McKenzie-McHarg 2020: 16). The reason why I choose *story* rather than *theory* is to highlight the narrative structure and function of such accounts, as indicated above with reference to Labov & Waletzky's narratological analysis, and their susceptibility to figurative (specifically: metaphorical) framing, as I will show in the later sections of this article. First, however, the database of this study will be introduced by way of an overview of conspiracies associated with COVID-19 over the period 2020-2022. The data consist of online articles from a broad range of newspapers and news sites in the US, UK and Germany, as well as a review of 84 research articles on conspiracy stories related to the COVID-19 pandemic.[1]

2. Conspiracy stories of COVID-19 in the USA

During the pandemic, conspiracy stories gained massively in popularity. Counts of COVID-19-related CSs vary widely between dozens and hundreds (Islam et al. 2021; Mohammed & Rossi

---

[1] The corpus was compiled manually and comprises 449 English language media articles from UK and US media (*UK:* BBC, Daily Express, Daily Mail, Daily Mirror, Financial Times, New Statesman, Spectator, The Daily Telegraph, The Economist, The Guardian/ Observer, The Independent, The Sun, The Times, *US:* CNN, Forbes, Fox News, NBC, National Public Radio, Star Tribune, The New York Times, The Washington Post, Time, USA Today) and 310 German media texts (ARD, Bild, Der Spiegel, Die Welt, Die Zeit, Focus, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, Frankfurter Rundschau, Merkur, Rheinische Post, Süddeutsche Zeitung, Tagesspiegel, tageszeitung, T.Online).

2022; Van Prooijen et al. 2022; Toepfl et al. 2022; Ripp & Röer 2022; Birchall & Knight 2023) but very broadly three main types can be distinguished:

- CS 1) narratives that the virus and the infection were a "hoax", invented by the Democratic Party in the USA and their "fake news" media allies, to damage the reputation of the Trump presidency;

- CS 2) narratives acknowledging the reality of the COVID-19 pandemic and alleging that its cause, the virus, originated in a specific country and/or cultural community and was launched from there either negligently or on purpose, in order to affect adversely other countries and/or the global community;

- CS 3) narratives about the pandemic's public health management (from the lockdowns to mask mandates, testing programs and vaccination cycles) as a giant deception, designed to cover up the nefarious policies of an international elite of powerful individuals and/or groups to control specific nations or the whole world by way of secret technologies, e.g. radiation or computer chip-implantation.

All CS types share two characteristics. In the first place, they ascribe responsibility for the damage of the pandemic and its consequences to more or less specific enemies, such as hostile parties and media, 'powerful' minorities, political parties, nation states, or international 'elites'; secondly, they are construed in terms of figurative, metonymical and/or metaphorical scenarios (Musolff 2006, 2016). Here I will concentrate mainly on the WAR scenario. As we will see, it proved applicable to all CS types. Its most salient instantiation, however, was the CS 2 type of a figurative war between China and the USA. From the start of the pandemic, the respective national governments, but in particular President Trump, traded accusations that the 'other side' had started the pandemic as an attack by spreading the virus and tried to justify one's own side's defence against that attack.[2] Trump's address to the United Nations Assembly in September 2020 provides a representative example:[3]

> We have waged a fierce battle against the invisible enemy – the China virus [...]. In the United States, we launched the most aggressive mobilization, since the Second World War [...] we must hold accountable the nation which unleashed this plague onto the world: China. In the earliest days

---

[2] The US-v-China opposition was not the only inter-nation war scenario in COVID-19 debates: other enemy-pairings are those of US-v-Iran, or Muslim-v.-Hindu/India; see Aljazeera 2021; Khan 2022; there were also 'reverse versions of Trump's CS proposed by Chinese foreign office officials' (CNN 25 March 2020: "Blame game escalates between US and China over coronavirus disinformation"; The New York Times 28 March 2020: "As Virus Spreads, China and Russia See Openings for Disinformation").

[3] For similar use of militarized vocabulary and anti-Chinese CS discourse on COVID-19 during his presidency see Trump (2020b-f); for detailed analyses see Musolff 2022a,b.

of the virus, China locked down travel domestically while allowing flights to leave China – and infect the world.

(Trump 2020g)

Trump combines metaphor ("fierce battle") and racist metonymy ("China virus", which insinuates not just the geographical origin but also ethical responsibility for the pandemic lying with China) with a comparison/simile of the US "mobilization" efforts for COVID-19 and for WWII and an ambiguous piece of factual information (the timing of travel bans by China); later in his speech he adds further vague allegations of economic and environmental "abuses" by the Chinese side, to paint a multi-level scenario of an over-arching war-like aggression against America. In addition, his Secretary of State, M. Pompeo, and other Republicans suggested that the SARS-CoV-2 virus had originated in a bioweapons laboratory in the Chinese city of Wuhan and had been deliberately released.[4] If they had been substantiated, these suspicions might have formed the basis of a casus belli for a military confrontation but the promised further evidence for it never materialized.

Despite its political explosiveness, this so-called "lab-leak hypothesis" was, however, not even absolutely essential to the CS. There were vaguer versions, such as the "Wuhan market" theory, which alleged that unsavoury eating habits and missing hygiene standards in the Chinese city had caused the pandemic, or speculations that the Chinese company Huawei, supposedly on government orders, had caused COVID-19 by radiation through rolling out its G5 IT technology (Freeman et al. 2020; Bruns et al. 2020; Evanega et al. 2020). In all these CSs, regardless of the details of the suspected origin, a degree of guilt was ascribed to the Chinese state authorities, setting them up as the enemy of the US and the "Free World".

The 'own' side, on the other hand, was presented as a community of heroes in a fight between good and evil, in which no neutral position was acceptable. How radical this Manichean view of the pandemic could become was demonstrated when the USA's foremost scientific public authority who was leading the nation's management of the pandemic, Dr Anthony Fauci, the Director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, was demoted in some media from a "hero" in the battle against COVID-19 to a "traitor" and secret ally of the Chinese attack, because he failed to endorse Trump's own unproven statements on 'alternative cures'

---

[4] See e.g. Fox News, 15 April 2020: "Sources believe coronavirus outbreak originated in Wuhan lab as part of China's efforts to compete with US"; 25 April 2020: Steve Bannon blasts China's response to coronavirus: 'They've got to be confronted'; NBC, 29 April 2020: "Senior Chinese official challenges Trump over coronavirus response, says U.S. wasted weeks", Newsweek 29 April 2020: "Chinese state media says Trump 'Feels no guilt' over U.S. coronavirus crisis and has 'failed' Americans". For analysis of his dominant influence on the spread of anti-Chinese CTs and hate-crime see Augustyn & Prażmo 2020; Croucher et al. 2020; Koca-Helvaci 2022.

and impending victory over the pandemic under his presidency (Shahsavari et al. 2020; Hall Jamieson 2021; Musi & Rocci 2022: 324-326).[5] In view of the fact that Fauci continued to enjoy the trust of a large majority of the US, the accusation was patently absurd. However, in terms of the WAR scenario it made sense because he had not shown sufficient solidarity with his own side. Fauci also featured in CS 1 ("hoax") versions, as an unlikely 'witness' for the case against the need to wear face masks (Musi & Rocci 2022). In an interview from 8 March 2020, Fauci had indeed stated that it was as yet unnecessary for everyone in the US to wear a mask because airborne infection had by then not been confirmed as a major form of transmission for the SARS-CoV-2 virus. However, when this confirmation came, both he and the WHO changed their advice; nevertheless, proponents of the "hoax" hypothesis kept quoting his outdated statement for many months as evidence for their own narrative, pretending that he had changed his mind only to please the pandemic lobby (Shahsavari et al 2020; The Washington Post, 21 December 2021).

The most prominent version of the hoax theory was, however, again provided by Trump who initially likened the new virus infection to the "flu" or the "sniffles" and alleged that the pandemic alert was his political adversaries' "new hoax", designed to thwart his re-election by exaggerating its dangerousness (Trump 2020a; NBC, 29 February 2020).

Whilst Trump's statement mainly focused on the Democrats' alleged "politicization" of the pandemic, his statements were also received as implying a generally sceptical stance on COVID-19's severity and global impact (Cook & Choi 2020; NBC 3 March 2020; The Observer, 15 March 2020; The Washington Post, 19 March 2020). Trump never withdrew the hoax allegation and insisted for the remainder of his presidency that the coronavirus outbreak was a "Fake News Media Conspiracy" (CNBC 26 October 2020) to help the Democrats. He and his political allies also undermined official pandemic-containment measures, e.g. testing and mask-mandates, by advocating dubious alternative cures (The New York Times, 1 October 2020). Logically, CS 1 version ('pandemic = hoax') was incompatible with CS 2 ('pandemic = war against China virus') but this contradiction did not stop Trump or his supporters from using sub-versions of both CS types.[6]

---

[5] Similar suspicions were raised against the UK's chief medical officer, Chris Whitty who was verbally and physically harassed in public for "lying" about COVID-19 and "murdering" victims through poisoning them with the anti-COVID-19 vaccination (The Guardian, 30 June 1and 2 July 2021, The Economist, 3 July 2021).

[6] Between them, CS 1 and CS 2 appear to have appealed to diverse sections of the public both in the US and internationally, depending on levels of risk-perception, political allegiances and willingness to comply with public health measures (Georgiou et al. 2020; Marinthe et al. 2020; Koca-Helvaci 2022).

Beginning in mid-2020 and continually increasing during the following years, parts of CS 1 and CS 2 narratives were combined to form the CS 3 type, i.e. those alleging that a secret international elite had started the pandemic and its public health management, as a means to take control of the world population or parts of it. CS 3 versions recycled an array of racist/ xenophobic ideologies, such as antisemitism, Sinophobia and anti-Muslim prejudice as well as the so-called "QAnon" narrative of occult elite circles engaging in human sacrifice, in addition to striving for world domination (Mohammed & Rossi 2022: 131-132; Bailin & Battersby 2022: 271, 276; Holoyda 2022). From CS 1, the idea was taken over that the pandemic was an excuse for implementing world control, while the emphatic WAR scenario of a fight for survival against an alien enemy aligned with CS 2. The CS 3-type enemy was, however, not another nation but a largely anonymous global conspiracy, of which only a few individuals, e.g. multi-billionaires such as Bill Gates and George Soros, traitor-scientists like Fauci and "liberal" politicians could be named, but in fact anyone doubting or criticizing the narrative was suspect of being in the enemy-camp.[7]

3. Conspiracy stories of COVID-19 in Germany

The CS 3-inspired narratives also led to almost war-like fighting experiences for some of their believers. One example was the WAR/BATTLE scenario enactment by German far-right wing groups who linked the pandemic-CS with the symbolism of the former German Empire (1871-1918), by flying the imperial war ensign at "anti-Corona dictatorship" rallies in violent protests in front of the parliament building in Berlin (Die Welt, 30 and 31 August 2020; Frankfurter Rundschau, 5 September 2020). The ensign in question has a long history of use by anti-Republican, Nazi and neo-Nazi groups, including the so-called "Reichsbürger" ('citizens of the Empire') groups (Schuppener 2022). For them it provided a platform to 'nationalize' the COVID-19 CS. The Reichsbürger group in particular do not accept the authority of the current German state, the "Federal Republic of Germany" (FRG) on the 'grounds' that the Empire, which existed in name until 1945 never concluded a peace treaty with its enemies. They thus did not accept the FRG's pandemic legislation and management, including lockdowns, testing and mask mandate or the vaccination program. This "resistance" is compatible with all CS versions about the pandemic: a) COVID-19 is a hoax that is propagated falsely by the FRG

---

[7] Their self-immunization against all cognitive resistance makes "superconspiracy theories" (Birchall & Knight 2023) such as QAnon extremely persuasive framing systems, into which local events or personal experiences can be integrated as seemingly confirmatory pieces of evidence of a global apocalyptic threat.

government following foreign orders and can therefore be safely ignored, b) the pandemic is real and has been imported from foreign states, possibly enemy states and/or imposed by global elites, which legitimizes "prepper"-style self-isolation and health-provision by "alternative" remedies; c) the vaccination program is imported from foreign states and/or by global elites as a cover-up for chip-implementation of the German population to exert general control and effect demographic changes and must be resisted at all cost. In August 2020, Reichsbürger-groups managed to break through the police cordon around the German parliament and attempted to storm it, which could only narrowly be prevented by the police. The scuffles and fighting scenes on the steps of the parliament building ("Reichstagsgebäude") resembled a medieval battle, which gave the activists a chance to feel and enact a mock-version of a real war, complete with (minor) injuries and 'heroic' resistance against alleged brutal suppression (Tagesspiegel, 31 August 2020). Far from being a decisive defeat, the 'battle' provided them with a motivational and conceptual platform to plot and prepare an overthrow of the democratic system in Germany and re-instate a "Imperial" government with an aristocrat as head of state, as became clear following a raid on the group in late 2022 (Die Welt, 7 December 2022) that led to 25 arrests.[8] This blending of (factually and logically unrelated) conspiracy stories of the Reichsbürger-movement and COVID-19-/vaccination-"sceptics" in Germany provides a disturbing example of how an imagined scenario of war-like resistance against a despotic conspiracy of national and international elites can be turned into a self-fulfilling prophecy.

4.   Metaphors and conspiracy stories

Neither the use of war-terminology in Trump's COVID-19 rhetoric nor the short-lived clash of anti-vaccination protesters with police in Berlin in 2020 amounted to anything coming close to a 'real' war. They remained figurative, metaphorical imaginations and enactments of fighter-identities. However, their WAR scenario framing enhances the persuasive force of conspiracy stories by neutralizing or overriding their chief weaknesses, i.e. factual and/or logical deficiency. It furnishes the CS with a simple but coherent event-schema, i.e. that of an attack by an aggressor, followed by a battle, which in turn is followed by an outcome (victory, defeat or truce). This schema enables its believers to assess progress and success of their defence actions, identify enemies, victims and traitors, and confirm their loyalty to and trust in populist leader

---

[8] A Reichsbürger sub-group also planned to kidnap the German Health minister Karl Lauterbach who had been the target of vilifications as a "traitor" and "hoax"-propagandist (*Der Spiegel,* 10 July 2021; Süddeutsche Zeitung, 17 May 2023).

figures. Their lack of factual information about the target topic COVID-19 can then be excused as an equivalent to the lack of factual oversight in real wars known as the "fog of war" (Hale 1896) and be exploited for further speculation and rumours as well as the paranoid suspicion of traitors on one's own side.

The WAR scenario is sufficiently flexible to cover all three COVID-19 related CS types listed above: CS1 (as the people's war of liberation against an oppressor-establishment who use the pandemic hoax to cement their and extend illegitimate power), CS 2 (as a national war of defence against an aggressor nation and its collaborators), and CS 3 (as a global civil war against international "elites" and their "deep state" collaborators/traitors). Amongst these, the CS 2 and CS 3-type narratives make the most of the WAR scenario by blending figurative and fact-based inputs into a persuasive, emotionally appealing (Lee 2022) explanation. By encouraging their followers to engage in violent protest activism, CS propagators create their own 'evidence' of alleged heroic resistance and unjust persecution, which reinforces believers' emotional attachment to them. The integration of WAR scenario and CS has a "meme"-like (Dawkins 1989, 2004) quality of adaptability to new conflict situations that ensures its longevity in public discourse. As the example of CS 3-based activism from Germany shows, the WAR scenario-CS link serves to connect global conspiracies with local or national protests, turning their concerns into triggers for concrete street-battles against the representatives of state authorities, in which the self-appointed freedom fighters perform and act out their assumed "fighter" identities. They thus see themselves as part of a real war, in which endangerment or sacrifice of human lives are legitimized as necessary for the greater good of rescuing the public from the alleged conspiracy.

Such fanatical enactment of CSs in a WAR scenario as a self-fulfilling prophecy is usually limited to small groups; it is more common and less costly for CS sympathizers to endorse and disseminate their imagined accounts of the pandemic anonymously on the internet. However, even in vague, non-committal manifestations, CSs remain available to be taken up and revived whenever it seems opportune for individuals or groups, to localize them to their own context and clientele, as in the German Reichsbürger case mentioned above. They create an emphatic identification or even the experience of a personal revelation that apparently explains a hitherto inexplicable stressful life situation in terms of a larger narrative, where disparate experiences and pieces of information 'fall into place' (Sunstein & Vermeule 2009; Imhoff & Lamberty 2017; Uscinski 2018; Butter 2020). If this seemingly revelatory experience has been accepted within a peer-community of 'insiders', it is very hard for individuals to distance themselves from it. Furthermore, critics and doubters can be dismissed as naively believing the state propaganda and falling into the trap of the conspirators, or stigmatized as having become part of the

conspiracy themselves. This self-vindication and -immunisation of CSs, which distinguishes them from any scientific "theory", enables their users to view themselves as having privileged knowledge of a hidden truth (Deschrijver 2021).

5. What is at stake?

Metaphor-enhanced conspiracy stories have 'proven' their historical dangerousness despite many attempts to correct them by way of supplying exact 'facts and figures' (Butter & Knight 2020; Girard 2020; Demata et al. 2022). Two infamous cases are the anti-Semitic story of a Jewish conspiracy to dominate the world, The Protocols of the Elders of Zion, from 1903 and the 'stab in the back' myth, invented to explain Germany's defeat in WW I as the outcome of a conspiracy of Jews and other subversive forces in Germany to sabotage the war effort. The Protocols were exposed many times as a fake in courts and in the media (Cohn 1967, Webman 2011) but kept alive for more than a century by the powerful metaphor scenario of the 'Jewish parasite' feeding on and destroying other peoples (Bein 1965, Musolff 2010). Likewise, the 'stab-in the back' myth was repeatedly countered by statistical proofs that German Jews had volunteered for and carried out military service at the front at least as much as non-Jewish Germans (Tyndall 1986, Rosenthal 2007, Carson 2010: 232-242), but was sustained by the 'encirclement' metaphor of German imperial ideology (Krumeich 2004; Evans 2020: 47-83). In each case, factual corrections did little to prevent the CSs from being believed as convincing narratives by millions of followers, with catastrophic historical consequences.

This depressing outcome does not, of course, invalidate the rationale for fact-checking and fake-news exposure but it reinforces the need to integrate such corrections in a wider context of CS-countering communication, including pre-emptive warning, text-analytical deconstruction, explicit criticism of sources, and removal from media (Butter 2020; Krekó 2020). Even then, however, the critics of conspiracy stories have always to reckon with 'rebuttal' arguments from the side of the conspiracists along the lines that any criticism of their stories is itself a part of the conspiracy (Krekó 2020).

Crucially, the story-qualities of CSs have to be taken seriously, rather than dismissed as informatively irrelevant. Outside academia and legal contexts, narratives are not primarily evaluated on the criterion of exact veracity, especially in crisis conditions. Rather, they are judged on issues of relative plausibility as crisis responses, i.e. their reassurance value in terms of suggesting a practical crisis solution, their closeness to pre-established experiences and prejudices, as well as on aesthetic and entertainment aspects. Creative figurative enhancement

of CSs likens them to fairy tales or science fiction stories that are riddled with logical errors, but it has a proven appeal to the wider public, as shown by their popularity in both traditional and social media. Figurative and narrative scenarios do not invalidate CSs but make them emotionally compelling for activists and palatable also for less fanatical media consumers. Any counter-communication that aims to "reframe" the public debate (Olza et al. 2021) by deconstructing the CSs has to be at least as imaginative as they are, in order to have a chance of overcoming them.

Sources

Trump, Donald J. (2020a) *Remarks by President Trump, Vice President Pence, and Members of the Coronavirus Task Force in Press Conference*, *26 February 2020*. Retrieved from: https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-vice-president-pence-members-coronavirus-task-force-press-conference/. (Accessed 20 December 2020).

Trump, Donald J. (2020b) *Trump's Oval Office Speech on the Coronavirus Outbreak*, *11 March 2020*. Retrieved from: https://edition.cnn.com/2020/03/11/politics/read-trump-coronavirus-address/index. html. (Accessed 20 December 2020).

Trump, Donald J. (2020c) *Remarks by President Trump, Vice President Pence, and Members of the Coronavirus Task Force in Press Briefing, 17 March 2020*. Retrieved from: https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-vice-president-pence-members-coronavirus-task-force-press-briefing-4/. (Accessed 20 December 2020).

Trump, Donald J. (2020d) *Remarks by President Trump, Vice President Pence, and Members of the Coronavirus Task Force in Press Briefing, 01 April 2020*. Retrieved from: https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-vice-president-pence-members-coronavirus-task-force-press-briefing-16/. (Accessed 20 December 2020).

Trump, Donald J. (2020e) *Remarks by President Trump, Vice President Pence, and Members of the Coronavirus Task Force in Press Briefing, 10 April 2020*. Retrieved from: https://ge.usembassy.gov/remarks-by-president-trump-vice-president-pence-and-members-of-the-coronavirus-task-force-in-press-briefing-april-10/. (Accessed 20 December 2020).

Trump, Donald J. (2020f) *Remarks by President Trump in Press Conference, 14 July 2020*. Retrieved from: https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-press-conference-071420/. (Accessed 20 December 2020).

Trump, Donald J. (2020g) *United Nations address by US President Trump*, *21 September 2020*. https://www.vox.com/world/2020/9/22/21450727/trump-unga-speech-2020-full-text-china. (Accessed 20 December 2020).

References

Aljazeera (2021) "The 'Superspreaders' behind COVID-19 Conspiracy Theories." Aljazeera, 15 February 2021. Retrieved from: https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/2/15/the-superspreaders-behind-covid-19-conspiracy-theories. (Accessed 20 November 2021).

Augustyn, Rafał, Ewelina Prażmo (2020) "The Spread of *Chinese Virus* in the Internet Discourse: A Cognitive Semantic Analysis." *Gema Online. Journal of Language Studies* 20 (4); 209–227. DOI: 10.17576/gema-2020-2004-12. (Accessed 29 November 2020).

Bailin, Sharon, Mark Battersby (2022) "Inoculating Students Again Conspiracy Theories: The Case of Covid-19." [In:] Steve Oswald et al. (eds.) *The Pandemic of Argumentation.* Cham: Springer; 271–290.

Bein, Alexander (1965) "Der jüdische Parasit." *Vierteljahreshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 13; 121–149.

Birchall, Clare, Peter Knight (2023) *Conspiracy Theories in the Time of Covid-19.* London, New York: Routledge.

Bok, Stephen, Daniel E. Martin, Erik Acosta, Maria Lee, James Shum (2021) "Validation of the COVID-19 Transmission Misinformation. Scale and Conditional Indirect Negative Effects on Wearing a Mask in Public." *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*. 18 (21); 11319. DOI: https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph182111319.

Bruns, Axel, Stephen Harrington, Edward Hurcombe (2020) "'Corona? 5G? or both?': The Dynamics of COVD-19/5G Conspiracy Theories on Facebook." *Media International Australia* 177 (1); 12–29.

Butter, Michael (2020) "Conspiracy Theories in American History." [In:] Michael Butter, Peter Knight (eds.) *The Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories*. London: Routledge; 649–659.

Butter, Michael, Peter Knight (eds.) (2020) *The Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories*. London: Routledge.

Carson, Thomas L. (2010) *Lying and Deception. Theory and Practice.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Cohn, Norman (1967) *Warrant for Genocide*. New York: Harper & Row.

Cook, Nancy, Matthew Choi (2020) "Trump Rallies His Base to Treat Coronavirus as a 'Hoax'." *Politico* 28 February 2020. Retrieved from: https://www.politico.com/news/2020/02/28/trump-south-carolina-rally-coronavirus-118269. (Accessed 26 October 2022).

Cortazzi, Martin (2008) "Didactic Narrative." [In:] David Herman, Manfred Jahn, Marie-Laure Ryan (eds.) *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*. London: Routledge; 106–107.

Croucher, Stephen M., Thao Nguyen, Diyako Rahmani (2020) "Prejudice Toward Asian Americans in the Covid-19 Pandemic: The Effects of Social Media Use in the United States." *Frontiers in Communication* 5 (39). DOI: 10.3389/fcomm.2020.00039.

Dawkins, Richard (1989) *The Selfish Gene.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Dawkins, Richard (2004) "Viruses of the Mind." [In:] *A Devil's Chaplain. Selected Essays*. London: Phoenix; 151–172.

Demata, Massimiliano, Virginia Zorzi, Angela Zottola (eds.) (2022) *Conspiracy Theory Discourses*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Deschrijver, Cedric (2021) "On the Metapragmatics of 'Conspiracy Theory': Scepticism and Epistemological Debates in Online Conspiracy Comments." *Journal of Pragmatics* 182; 310–321.

Evanega, Sarah, Mark Lynas, Jordan Adams, Karinne Smolenjak (2020) "Coronavirus Misinformation: Quantifying Sources and Themes in the COVID-19 'Infodemic'." Cornell University. Retrieved from: https://allianceforscience.cornell.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Evanega-et-al-Coronavirus-misinformation-submitted072320-1.pdf. (Accessed 20 February 2022).

Evans, Richard J. (2020) *The Hitler Conspiracies: The Third Reich and the Paranoid Imagination.* London: Penguin.

Freeman, Daniel, Felicity Waite, Laina Rosebrock, Ariane Petit, Chiara Causier, Anna East, Lucy Jenner, Ashley-Louise Teale, Lydia Carr, Sophie Mulhall, Emily Bold, Sinéad Lambe (2020) "Coronavirus Conspiracy Beliefs, Mistrust, and Compliance with Government Guidelines in England." *Psychological Medicine* 52 (2); 251–263. DOI: doi.org/10.1017/S0033291720001890.

Georgiou, Neophytos, Paul Delfabbro, Ryan Balzan (2020) "COVID-19-Related Conspiracy Beliefs and Their Relationship with Perceived Stress and Pre-existing Conspiracy

Beliefs.” *Personality and Individual Differences* 166. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2020.110201.

Gerts, Dax, Courtney D Shelley, Nidhi Parikh, Travis Pitts, Chrysm Watson Ross, Geoffrey Fairchild, Nidia Yadria Vaquera Chavez, Ashlynn R. Daughton (2021) “‘Thought I’d Share First’ and Other Conspiracy Theory Tweets from the COVID-19. Infodemic: Exploratory Study.” *JMIR Public Health and Surveillance* 7 (4). Retrieved from: http://publichealth.jmir.org, 14.04.2021. (Accessed 20 February 2022).

Girard, Pascal (2020) “Conspiracy Theories in Europe during the Twentieth Century.” [In:] Michael Butter and Peter Knight (eds.) *The Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories*. London: Routledge; 569–581.

Hale, Lonsdale (1896) *The Fog of War.* Aldershot: Aldershot Military Academy.

Hall Jamieson, Kathleen (2021) “How Conspiracists Exploited COVID-19 Science.” *Nature,* 01/11/2021: *Nature Human Behaviour* 5; 1464–1465.

Holoyda, Brian J. (2022) “The QAnon Conspiracy Theory and the Assessment of Its Believers.” *The Journal of the American Academy of Psychiatry and the Law* 50 (1); 124–135. DOI:10.29158/JAAPL.210053-21.

Imhoff, Roland, Pia Lamberty (2020) “A Bioweapon or a Hoax? The Link between Distinct Conspiracy Beliefs about the Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Outbreak and Pandemic Behavior.” *Social Psychological and Personality Science* 11 (8); 1110–1118.

Islam, Md Saiful, Kamal Abu-Hena Mostofa-Kamal, Alamgir Kabir, Dorothy L. Southern, Sazzad Hossain Khan, S. M. Murshid Hasan, Tonmoy Sarkar, Shayla Sharmin, Shiuli Das, Tuhin Roy, Md Golam Dostogir Harun, Abrar Ahmad Chughtai, Nusrat Homaira, Holly Seale (2021) “COVID-19 Vaccine Rumors and Conspiracy Theories: The Need for Cognitive Inoculation against Misinformation to Improve Vaccine Adherence.” *PLoS ONE* 16(5); e0251605. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0251605.

Khan, Aaqib (2022) “Identity as Crime: How Indian Mainstream Media’s Coverage Demonized Muslims as Coronavirus Spreaders.” [In:] Andreas Musolff, Ruth Breeze, Kayo Kondo and Sara Vilar-Lluch (eds.) *Pandemic and Crisis Discourse. Communicating Covid-19 and Public Health Strategy*. London: Bloomsbury; 355–373.

Koca-Helvaci, Zeynep Cihan (2022) “‘Coronavirus as a Political Weapon’. The COVID Pandemic through the Lens of the US Alt-Right Media.” [In:] Pascal Hohaus (ed.) *Science Communication in Times of Crisis*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins; 169–195.

Krekó, Péter (2020) "Countering Conspiracy Theories and Misinformation." [In:] Michael Butter, Peter Knight (eds.) *The Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories*. London: Routledge; 242–255.

Krumeich, Gerd (2004) "Einkreisung." [In:] Gerhard Hirschfeld, Gerd Krumeich, Irina Renz (eds.) *Enzyklopädie Erster Weltkrieg*. Paderborn: Schöningh; 452–453.

Labov, William, Joshua Waletzky ([1967] 1997) "Narrative Analysis: Oral Versions of Personal Experience." *Journal of Narrative and Life History* 7; 3–38.

Lee, Carmen (2022) "COVID-19 Conspiracy Theories and Affective Discourse." [In:] Massimiliano Demata, Virginia Zorzi and Angela Zottola (eds.) *Conspiracy Theory Discourses*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins; 216–237.

Madisson, Mari-Liis, Andreas Ventsel (2022) "From Strategic Depiction of Conspiracies to Conspiracy Theories: RT´s and Sputnik´s Representations of Coronavirus Infodemic." [In:] Massimiliano Demata, Virginia Zorzi and Angela Zottola (eds.) *Conspiracy Theory Discourses*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins; 443–464.

Marinthe, Gaëlle, Genavee Brown, Sylvain Delouvée, Daniel Jolley (2020) "Looking Out for Myself: Exploring the Relationship between Conspiracy Mentality, Perceived Personal Risk, and COVID-19 Prevention Measures." *Br. J. Health Psychol.* 25; 957–980. DOI:10.1111/bjhp.12449.

McKenzie-McHarg, Andrew (2020) "Conceptual History and Conspiracy Theory." [In:] Michael Butter, Peter Knight (eds.) *The Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories*. London: Routledge; 16–27.

Mohammed, Dima, Maria Grazia Rossi (2022) "The Argumentative Potential of Doubt: From Legitimate Concerns to Conspiracy Theories about COVID-19 Vaccines." [In:] Steve Oswald, Marcin Lewiński, Sara Greco and Serena Villata (eds.) *The Pandemic of Argumentation*. Cham: Springer; 125–144.

Musi, Elene, Andrea Rocci (2022) "Staying Up to Date with Fact and Reason Checking: An Argumentative Analysis of Outdated News." [In:] Steve Oswald et al. (eds.) *The Pandemic of Argumentation.* Cham: Springer; 311–330.

Musolff, Andreas (2006) "Metaphor Scenarios in Public Discourse." *Metaphor and Symbol* 21 (1); 23–38.

Musolff, Andreas (2010) *Metaphor, Nation and the Holocaust. The Concept of the Body Politic*. London: Routledge.

Musolff, Andreas (2016) *Political Metaphor Analysis: Discourse and Scenarios.* London: Bloomsbury.

Musolff, Andreas (2022a) "'War against Covid-19': Is the *Pandemic Management as War* Metaphor Helpful or Hurtful?" [In:] Andreas Musolff, Ruth Breeze, Kayo Kondo and Sara Vilar-Lluch (eds.) *Pandemic and Crisis Discourse. Communicating Covid-19 and Public Health Strategy*. London: Bloomsbury; 307–320.

Musolff, Andreas (2022b) "Fake-conspiracy: Trump's Anti-Chinese 'COVID-19-as-war' Scenario." [In:] Massimiliano Demata, Virginia Zorzi and Angela Zottola (eds.) *Conspiracy Theory Discourses*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins; 121–139.

Olza, Inés, Veronika Koller, Iraide Ibarretxe-Antuñano, Paula Pérez-Sobrino, Elena Semino (2021) "The #ReframeCovid initiative." *Metaphor and the Social World* 11 (1); 98–120.

Ripp, Tilli, Jan Philipp Röer (2022) "Systematic Review on the Association of COVID-19-Related Conspiracy Belief with Infection-Preventive Behavior and Vaccination Willingness." *BMC Psychol* 10 (66). DOI : https://doi.org/10.1186/s40359-022-00771-2.

Rosenthal, Jacob (2007) *Die Ehre des jüdischen Soldaten. Die Judenzählung im Ersten Weltkrieg und ihre Folgen.* Frankfurt: Campus.

Shahsavari, Savi, Pavlan Holur, Tiangyi Wang, Timothy R. Tangherlini, Vwani Roychowdhury (2020) "Conspiracy in the Time of Corona: Automatic Detection of Emerging COVID-19 Conspiracy Theories in Social Media and the News." *Journal of Computational Social Science* 3 (2); 279–317. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1007/s42001-020-00086-5.

Schuppener, Georg (2022) *The Germanic Tribes, the Gods and the German Far Right Today*. London, New York: Routledge.

Sunstein, Cass R., Adrian Vermeule (2009) "Conspiracy Theories: Causes and Cures." *Journal of Political Philosophy* 17 (2); 202–227.

Taylor, John R. (1995) *Linguistic Categorization. Prototypes in Linguistic Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Toepfl, Florian, Daria Kravets, Anna Ryzhova, Arista Beseler (2022) "Who Are the Plotters Behind the Pandemic? Comparing Covid-19 Conspiracy Theories in Google Search Results across Five Key Target Countries of Russia's Foreign Communication." *Information, Communication & Society* 26 (10); 2033–2051. DOI: 10.1080/1369118X.2022.2065213.

Tyndall, Andrea (1986) *The 1916 German Judenzählung: Action and Reaction.* Greensboro: University of North Carolina Press.

United Nations (2020) "UN Tackles "Infodemic" of Misinformation and Cybercrime in COVID-19 Crisis." *United Nations*, 31 March 2020. Retrieved from:

https://www.un.org/en/un-coronavirus-communications-team/un-tackling-%E2%80%98infodemic%E2%80%99-misinformation-and-cybercrime-covid-19. (Accessed 20 February 2021).

Uscinski, Joseph E. (2018) "Down the Rabbit Hole We Go!" [In:] Joseph E. Uscinski (ed.) *Conspiracy Theories & the People Who Believe Them*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; 1–32.

Van Prooijen, Jan-Willem, David M. Amodio, Arnout Boot, Anita Eerland, Tom Etienne, André P. M. Krouwel, Michal Onderco, Peter Verkoeijen, Rolf A. Zwaan (2022) "A Longitudinal Analysis of Conspiracy Beliefs and Covid-19 Health Responses." *Psychological Medicine* 1 (8). DOI: https://doi.org/10.1017/S0033291722002938.

Webman, Esther (ed.) (2011) *The Global Impact of 'The Protocols of the Elders of Zion'*. London: Routledge.