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## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# “Conspiracy theory”: The case for being critically receptive

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## 1 | INTRODUCTION

“Conspiracy theory” is widely used as a pejorative term. An effect of this usage, however, is to discourage certain kinds of legitimate critical inquiry. In a world where conspiracies happen, it is reasonable to seek to formulate good theories of what exactly is happening; and through competent investigation, hypotheses of conspiracy can sometimes be verified. Thus, the general denigration of “conspiracy theory” tends to discourage a kind of practice that there is reason, in fact, to encourage. Of course, this kind of serious inquiry is not necessarily typical of conspiracy theories more generally. Some researchers regard its instances as *exceptions* to a more general rule whereby conspiracy theories involve unwarranted assumptions and misleading speculation;<sup>1</sup> others maintain—instead or as well—that such investigations as happen to identify a verifiable conspiracy should be *exempted* from the designation “conspiracy theory” and called something else.<sup>2</sup> However, such suggestions presuppose not only that the grounds of exception or exemption can be clearly specified but also that the specification will be generally understood and applied. But what if neither presupposition turns out to be warranted?

That concern is at the heart of this paper: when the pejorative understanding of “conspiracy theory” is allowed to influence policy-making it can serve to legitimate policies whose effect is to impede or even outlaw the kind of civic vigilance that aims to uncover malfeasance on the part of powerful actors. If all kinds of critical and unorthodox inquiry that challenge “official narratives” or institutionally recognized epistemic authorities are potentially liable to be dismissed as “conspiracy theory,” then in the event of corruption or capture of institutions this may not only go undetected but could even be protected from detection. The concern is by no means purely hypothetical, and this paper will cite troubling evidence of such an inquiry being not only denigrated and marginalized but actively censored, with those pursuing it being vilified and even persecuted. Accordingly, a central claim here is that the public interest is not well served by general compliance with a default assumption that *conspiracy theory* should be understood in a pejorative sense.

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Of course, the public interest is also not well served by the flooding of information channels by the kind of unfounded speculations and misleading claims that are commonly associated with conspiracism. And this countervailing concern has driven the extensive and growing literature across several disciplines that seeks to understand it as a cognitive and epistemic *problem*. Conspiracism—the elicited presumption that hypotheses of conspiracy explain every undesirable event, regardless of what reason or evidence suggest—involves, as Muirhead and Rosenblum (2019) put it, the positing of “conspiracy without the theory.” A proper theory—of a conspiracy as of anything else—treats reason and evidence with methodological rigour. Some theories about conspiracies will be rigorous, and others will not; some will succeed in explaining what they aim to, and others will fail. So although much of the literature does not clearly observe a clear distinction between the concept of conspiracy theory and that of conspiracism, there are good reasons why we should (Dentith 2017).

Accordingly, this paper shows that what can be problematic about conspiracy theories can be discussed, and more incisively, by excising prejudicial framings of the matter. As to be shown in Section 2, there is no particular difficulty in operationalizing a conceptual distinction between conspiracy theories that are methodologically rigorous and speculations about conspiracies that are not. This simple and robust approach has in fact already been developed by a number of philosophers who engage in applied epistemology. The approach allows that the term *conspiracy theory*—when not appended by an evaluative qualifier—can and should be used in a *neutral* sense. Any specific conspiracy theory may or may not be problematic, but this can only be known when it is evaluated. What makes a conspiracy theory problematic is the kind of fallaciousness in assumptions or methods that would make a theory about anything problematic, not the fact that it features conspiratorial hypotheses. This approach assumes that there is no inherent general defect that a respectable theory needs to prove itself *exempt* from. Hence any given conspiracy theory should be assessed on its particular merits.<sup>3</sup>

Nonetheless, because the opposite assumption is operative in some of the literature, the possibility to be canvassed in Section 3 is that there could be a particular kind of problem about conspiratorial hypotheses that is distinctive and inherent to them. When seeking to specify what may be inherently problematic about conspiratorial hypotheses, critics draw attention particularly to the degree of suspicion, or scepticism they depend on. Granting reasonable assumptions about limits to how sceptical it is rational to be, a general objection to conspiracy theories would be that they quite routinely exceed these limits. An important consideration that can be appealed to in this argument is the essentially collaborative nature of knowledge in general and the fact that we must all depend on others virtually all of the time for knowledge that we cannot immediately access individually. This is why it is generally rational to defer to established epistemic authorities and not to suppose that an individual who from their own narrow perspective identifies some anomaly in received wisdom has necessarily gained an enlightened insight rather than merely a “little knowledge” of the kind that is a “dangerous thing.” However, the response commended in this paper is recognize that just as scepticism should not be unbounded, nor should deference. The collective production of reliable knowledge is by no means the sole preserve of accredited institutions of epistemic authority.

Section 4 highlights the practical significance of the critically receptive approach with a case study of a group of citizen investigators who have been very publicly stigmatized as conspiracy theorists. They have challenged an institution with clear epistemic authority in its field and thus their challenge would qualify, on several of the other approaches discussed in this paper, for being considered *prima facie* unwarranted. However, on the approach advocated, the salient question is whether the group has engaged in rigorous and competent investigation. As it transpires, the study reveals that the group's investigation has been endorsed by scientists of the institution in question, who complain of corruption and intimidation on the part of its management. The case thus illustrates the reality that even institutions with seemingly unimpeachable claims to epistemic authority do not necessarily stand above

and immune from political contestations over knowledge and truth claims. For this reason, skepticism about them cannot always or necessarily be condemned as irrational. The argument of this paper is that when trust in institutions diminishes, the answer does not lie in suppressing questions about their trustworthiness or seeking to deter potential questioners, but in taking steps to make them worthy of trust. Meanwhile, the fact that malfeasance by powerful actors can and does occur is ultimately itself sufficient reason to take an attitude of critical receptiveness to conspiracy theories.

## 2 | CONSPIRACY THEORY AS *BONA FIDE* EXPLANATION

Few, if any, events or situations in the human world can ever be adequately explained in terms of one causal factor or with the methods of one discipline. So when conspiracy is a factor, it is unlikely to be the only one and may not be the most significant. The term *conspiracy theory* is sometimes used in practice to refer to any explanation which includes that factor; some users of the term, however, reserve it for explanations that prioritize conspiratorial hypotheses; some even use it of explanations that may be *prima facie* absurd but involve no necessary conspiratorial hypothesis (e.g., “Flat Earth” theory). On the other hand, some rule out its applicability to an explanation that has a conspiratorial hypothesis at its core if this is accorded the status of official explanation: hence to talk about the conspiracy of Osama Bin Laden and Al Qaeda to perpetrate the attacks of 9/11 is not to qualify for the “conspiracy theorist” label. This latter position might be rationalized by claiming that “conspiracy facts” are not “mere conspiracy theories,” but that would beg crucial questions about what one calls a theory prior to its investigation and how it is verified that official explanations are epistemically authoritative; alternatively, it might be suggested that a “plausible theory of conspiracy theory” is a different kind of thing than a “conspiracy theory”; indeed, one author even suggests that we use the term Conspiracy Theory, capitalized, when we mean the latter kind of thing. However, no matter what semantic innovations might be engaged in, the core conceptual question remains, and most vividly in those cases where an explanation starts out as a seemingly extravagant speculation but is subsequently vindicated: are there any epistemic criteria in terms of which all, and only, conspiracy theories may consistently be defined?<sup>4</sup>

One suggestion would be to use the term of any theory that generates a conspiratorial hypothesis. To define the term by this use, though, would be to make it unavailable as a slur. For it is possible to engage in investigations involving a conspiratorial element while observing established principles of scholarly and scientific inquiry. This is recognized by Peter Knight, leader of a largescale collaborative research project on conspiracy theories, who refers to “(plausible) theories of conspiracy” (Knight 2014, 348). It is not just any assertion of the existence of a conspiracy that has a reasonable claim to be entertained and assessed, though: there needs to be a cogent hypothesis, supported by a logically coherent explanatory argument, whose key premises are not *prima facie* implausible. Since the plausibility of a theory can only be ascertained by assessing it, an appropriate attitude to adopt, *ex ante*, toward *any* conspiracy theory, so understood, is one of critical receptivity.

This attitude differs markedly from that encountered in those research programs in the social and psychological sciences that regard conspiracy theories as a generic kind of cognitive phenomenon and construct them as a problematic object of inquiry.<sup>5</sup> Typically, these less receptive approaches tend to focus on concerns about cognitive processes rather than epistemic criteria, and thus look not so much at the characteristics of the theories themselves as the personal and behavioral traits of conspiracy *believers*. Since the ways and means by which people come to hold or relinquish beliefs are many and various, this general question area is understandably of interest to psychologists and other behavioral scientists. Insofar as people form beliefs in relation to untested conspiracy postulates, the cognitive

processes involved can be treated as objects of inquiry. (The same could also apply, of course, to the psychology of those with marked resistance to entertaining conspiracy beliefs or with a high tolerance for concatenations of remarkable coincidences.<sup>6</sup>) It is as well to be clear, however, that the cognitive and behavioral scientists engaged in such research are not thereby normally claiming to establish anything about the truth or epistemic justification of the ideas that their subjects of study do or do not believe in. Nor can they be presumed to know, in the case of conspiracy theories that are not implausible on their face, which of them are well founded or not, true or not, unless or until the specific questions have been properly investigated. This kind of investigation falls under the provenance of practical epistemology rather than social psychology.

So while there may be interrelationships between those different fields of investigation, the distinctiveness of each should not be ignored: the psychological studies of people who hold “irrational beliefs” are distinguishable from epistemological investigations of what beliefs it would be irrational to hold. This and related points have already been discussed by a number of philosophers writing about conspiracy theories from the perspective of applied epistemology. Indeed, something of a philosophical school of thought has been emerging around the question of critically evaluating “conspiracy theory” as a rational form of intellectual inquiry (see e.g., Basham 2016, 2018; Coady 2007, 2018; Dentith 2016a, 2016b, 2017; Hagen 2010, 2017; Pigden 2016).

A general problem that can be stated at a descriptive level, however, and does have resonance with both epistemological and psychological concerns, is appropriately called *conspiracism*. The term *conspiracism*, as it is taken here, designates an attachment to a fallacious mode of reasoning that tends to reduce the explanation of events to posited conspiracies, without properly investigating the relevant evidence for alternative hypotheses.<sup>7</sup> It can involve persistence in seeking a conspiratorial explanation even when wider inquiries have shown that factor not to be decisive or perhaps even operative at all. A *conspiracist* tendency is to see conspiracies where there is little evidence for them, without giving sufficient consideration to alternative explanations, and perhaps even being resistant to heeding quite compelling counter-indications. What is wrong with conspiracism, it may thus be noted, can be specified by reference to standards of inquiry that would characterize good conspiracy theory. For this reason, far from being interchangeable designations, the rational development of a serious conspiracy theory does not involve conspiracism and in fact can be seen as its antithesis. Thus when those who are unsympathetic to conspiracy theory of any kind use the terms interchangeably, they elide a crucial distinction. Moreover, just as one would not abandon the study of psychology, for instance, because some people make inappropriately reductive claims using it to explain things better understood in other ways—thereby committing the fallacy of *psychologism*—so there is no good reason to abandon the study of situations that could quite reasonably be suspected to involve conspiracies just because some people do it very badly.

A crucial point, though, is that to differentiate an instance of conspiracism from an instance of reasonable suspicion one needs to have independent criteria to establish the bounds of reasonableness. This is a matter of research methodology as applied to theory of conspiracy. One should accordingly be clear that social scientific analyses of conspiracist tendencies in an individual's psyche or socio-cultural environment have no bearing on an understanding of the methods and conduct of the investigative practices of serious conspiracy theory as I am proposing we understand this intellectual activity.<sup>8</sup> As will shortly be noted, the psychological disposition that supports a tendency to cleave to unreasonable conspiracy theories is also operative when scientists sometimes cling onto theories that their peers regard as no longer reasonable to maintain. One should thus be cautious about endorsing the idea of a distinctively “*conspiracist mindset*.” This was developed in the work of Harold Lasswell and Franz Neumann, and it informed Richard Hofstadter's (1964) influential study of the political pathologies of the “paranoid style” in the 1960s. This association of conspiracy suspicions

with irrationality and paranoia was then actively promoted in the United States. Lance deHaven Smith notes that “the conspiracy-theory label was popularized as a pejorative term by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in a propaganda program initiated in 1967.” (deHaven Smith 2013, 21) The program was created as a response to critical citizens' questions about the assassination of JF Kennedy. It “called on media corporations and journalists to criticize “conspiracy theorists” and raise questions about their motives and judgments.” Its reach has extended greatly since, and Knight takes it not to be particularly controversial now that “some of the labelling of particular views as ‘conspiracy theories’ is a technique of governmentality” (Knight 2014, 348). It is thus worth noting that a clear purpose for fostering the very concept of “conspiracy theory” has, in practice, been to disparage it so that people who desire to have a reputation as intellectually serious, or even just sensible, are discouraged from engaging in it.

If it were the case that all and only the designated conspiracy theories manifested distinctive fallacies associated with conspiracism, it would be reasonable to heed admonitions not to promote them. The problem is that those who use the term conspiracy theory to designate an intellectually disreputable activity cannot at the same time cogently define the term in such a way as to exclude intellectually respectable activities from its scope. It follows that to discern whether a “conspiracy theory” is worth taking seriously one has to be critically receptive to the possibility of its being so.

In order to ensure receptiveness is duly critical, a constructive proposal is that of Steve Clarke (2002, 2007). This would involve the same kind of epistemic due diligence as exercised with respect to a scientific theory. He advocates applying methodological principles such as commended in the philosophy of science by Lakatos (1970). On this approach, a constructively critical assessment of any theory, and a decision whether to adhere to it or to abandon it, centers on determining whether it is at the core of a *progressive* or a *degenerating* research program. This approach cuts through the prejudicial loadings of such designations as “official narrative” and “conspiracy theory” and directs attention to the issues that can potentially decide between contending accounts.

“In a progressive research program the proponents of a theory are able to anticipate new evidence and make predictions (and retrodictions) that are generally successful. By contrast, a degenerating research program is characterized by a lack of successful predictions (and retrodictions) and by the subsequent modification of initial conditions and auxiliary hypotheses after new evidence has come in.” (Clarke 2007, 167)

On this basis, the problem typical of conspiracists is that they are unable or unwilling to recognize when a theory they hold to has become demonstrably regressive. Their critics rightly regard persistent adherence to it as irrational, and they understandably look to psychological or ideological causes of this, since its cause is not a dispassionate epistemic estimate of what the evidence suggests.

Questions of psychology can impinge on epistemology due to the problem that in the real circumstances of controversy there are likely to be grey areas. As Clarke points out, although Lakatos plausibly maintains that it becomes irrational, at a certain point, to continue to adhere to a degenerating research program, he offers no categorical guidance as to how and where exactly such a point can be located. Moreover, Clarke considers it “doubtful whether we could stipulate an exact point at which it becomes rational to abandon any particular theory” (Clarke 2007, 167). As philosophers of science more generally recognize, the mere fact of anomalous data “can never logically compel a scientist to abandon a particular hypothesis because the hypothesis is embedded in a network of beliefs, any one of which might be wrong” (Chinn and Brewer 1993, 10). So, if it can happen sometimes that a scientist clings to a theory that peers see as crumbling, it can likewise happen that a person maintains a conspiracy theory that most others would commend dropping. It is only with the development of a



comprehensively better theory that one can speak of the old one being *refuted*. It is possible meanwhile to adhere to a degenerating research program even as the rationality of doing so diminishes (Hayward 2019, 545). It is in seeking to understand this adherence to hypotheses of diminishing epistemological rationality that psychological investigations may have a role to play.

Something important to appreciate, however, is that if adherence to demonstrably implausible hypotheses is a matter for behavioral analysis, then exactly the same line of inquiry can sometimes be appropriate in relation to cognitive subjects' acceptance of hypotheses advanced in relation to the official narratives that conspiracy theories challenge. For sometimes official narratives too have features of a "degenerating research program." In fact, it is precisely this that makes the activities of critical conspiracy theorists potentially valuable. Thus adopting the proposed approach keeps open the possibility of discovering that some conspiracy theories are not only methodologically rigorous but also have important insights to afford. So while the problem of conspiracism has a psychological dimension, another—and arguably more significant dimension of the problem—is the political contestation over truth that is a wider concern of the social sciences.

### 3 | EPISTEMIC DEFECTS ASSOCIATED WITH CONSPIRACY THEORY

Notwithstanding the cogent arguments that philosophers have made for adopting a neutral understanding of conspiracy theory, research projects premised on a pejorative understanding have burgeoned in recent years. The aim of this section is to see how cogently and informatively such an understanding can be articulated. The challenge is to provide a definition of conspiracy theory as an irrational cognitive activity that differentiates this both from other—non-conspiratorial—kinds of irrational thought process and from intellectually respectable investigations into potential conspiracies. This means explicating what is wrong with conspiracy theories from an epistemological perspective.

Identifying exactly what the epistemological problem is supposed to be, however, is a surprisingly difficult task. Symptomatic of this is the remarkable lack of attention paid even to such a rudimentary question as that of how to define what the object of critique—a conspiracy theory—is. This is illustrated by the fact that in a recent edited collection of 30 differently authored chapters (Uscinski 2019), the sole contributor to address the question of definition, Matthew Dentith, is a representative of the philosophical school discussed in Section 2. The editor of the collection is evidently alert to the conspicuous omission and inserts a brief comment on definitions aiming to assure the reader that "[i]n this volume, we try to keep our usage narrow and apply it as evenly as possible" (Uscinski 2019, 50).<sup>9</sup> This statement of editorial aspiration, however, sidesteps the crucial question already made clear in the early and influential remarks of Brian Keeley (1999) about defining "conspiracy theory". Keeley suggested that a "bare-bones" definition could be offered readily enough, along these lines:

"A conspiracy theory is a proposed explanation of some historical event (or events) in terms of the significant causal agency of a relatively small group of persons—the conspirators—acting in secret." (Keeley 1999, 116)

Keeley additionally notes a few things about this definition.

'First, a conspiracy theory deserves the appellation "theory," because it proffers an explanation of the event in question. ... Second, a conspiracy theory need not propose that the

conspirators are all powerful, only that they have played some pivotal role in bringing about the event. ... Third, the group of conspirators must be small, although the upper bounds are necessarily vague.’ (Keeley 1999, 116)

This can be considered a neutral definition because it does not imply anything inherently problematic about conspiracy theories in general.<sup>10</sup>

Problems only arise with the subset of them that Keeley calls *unwarranted* conspiracy theories (UCTs) on account of *additional* characteristics they exhibit. For instance, Keeley suggests, a UCT will run counter to an official story and take the intentions behind a conspiracy to be nefarious: UCTs also typically seek to tie together seemingly unrelated events and to take the truths behind events to be well-guarded secrets, even if the ultimate perpetrators are public figures. A problem with this auxiliary list of characteristics is that any of them, in any combination, could in principle also be found in a warranted theory. It follows from the fact that some cases of coordinated malfeasance have been revealed to have such characteristics that a warranted theory could refer to them.

To be clear, though, it does not suffice, for the warrant of a theory, that findings it claims to predict turn out to be true. This is a point that some critics of conspiracy theory have been at pains to emphasize, and Cass Sunstein seeks to illustrate: “I may believe, correctly, that there are fires within the earth’s core, but if I believe that because the god Vulcan revealed it to me in a dream, my belief is unwarranted” (Sunstein and Vermeule 2009, 207).<sup>11</sup> The “explanation” offered in such a “theory” would not pass minimal tests of plausibility or cogency. A fortuitously correct statement cannot be considered the *warranted* conclusion of a theory when the theory is faulty. What should also be understood, however, is that the difference between being warranted and being true cuts both ways. As in normal scientific inquiries, a theory may be warranted—because it rationally develops a line of investigation that pursues a reasonable hypothesis, as formulated in the light of available evidence—and yet it ultimately fails when fully tested against evidence. It is *only* after this failure that continued adherence to the theory would be unwarranted. If this applies with regard to scientific theories there is no reason it should not apply to theories with conspiratorial hypotheses: a conspiracy theory does not have to be proven, or “successful,” to be rational and warranted.

For the sake of analytical clarity, it is worth noting three distinct ways in which a theory might be unwarranted. First, as we have noted, a theory in the process of development and testing might be warranted or otherwise depending on its being methodologically rigorous. Second, as we have also noted, if a methodologically sound theory is revealed to be substantively untenable in light of new evidence, then at that point—*ex post*—continued adherence to it is unwarranted. A third way is implied by the idea that there is something specific to a *conspiracy* theory—as distinct from any other kind of theory in any other domain—that generally makes it unwarranted *ex ante*.

To make sense of this latter idea, the question to ask is what do conspiracy theories in general presuppose, *ex ante*, that other kinds of theory do not?

The answer appears to be straightforward: what any given conspiracy theory takes as a premise is that available explanations of an event in terms of coincidence or incompetence are not sufficiently compelling to rule out the warrant for pursuing a conspiratorial hypothesis. The warrant for any particular conspiracy theory, *ex ante*, depends on reasonable doubt about the adequacy of available alternative explanations. So only in a situation where another explanation has already been established would the introduction of a conspiratorial hypothesis be unwarranted. Otherwise, a cogent and plausible conspiracy theory cannot be ruled out *ex ante*, including not on the grounds that official investigators consider it a less likely explanation than other as yet unproven alternatives. It is a quite typical feature of well-organized conspiracies that they aim to appear improbable.<sup>12</sup> History shows that some of the most egregious ones have succeeded and that official investigators can sometimes be complicit.<sup>13</sup> In



practice, then, the question is who decides, and how, when doubt is reasonable or not. Neil Levy has considered this question in a relatively dispassionate fashion:

‘Conspiracies are a common feature of social and political life, common enough that refusing to believe in their existence would leave us unable to understand the contours of our world; moreover, warranted belief in conspiracies is widespread, even among the intellectuals who confidently reject this or that putative explanation of an event as “just a conspiracy theory.”’ (Levy 2007, 181)

In practice, he suggests, it is not conspiracy theories as such toward which intellectually responsible people evince a reflexive suspicion but, rather, it is “conspiracy theories which conflict with (the right kind of) official stories that come under suspicion.” (Levy 2007, 181) The mark of a conspiracy theory that is irrational to accept is that it *goes against relevant epistemic authorities*.

Insofar as the criteria of relevance assumed are those of the highest available standards of logic and epistemology, this suggestion seems, in principle, a reasonable one. Due to the thoroughly social nature of knowledge production and transmission, all of us have to defer most of the time to others with respect to knowledge claims that we accept, so it is irrational not to defer to those with the best-established claim to relevant authority. However, the application of this general principle in practice depends on determining the relevant epistemic authorities in any given case, which, with respect to controversial questions, may itself be a matter of controversy. Moreover, precisely in cases where a conspiracy theory could be the right one there may be no relevant established authority to adjudicate because conspiracy theory is not—at least as things currently stand—a domain with recognized epistemic authorities! Certainly, there is nothing about the mere fact of being “official” that confers an authoritative guarantee of credibility on a story, as Levy recognizes:

“Clearly, it is often rational to heavily discount the official stories offered by some authorities. In totalitarian countries, people learn to read the official news media with a jaundiced eye, and this attitude is often warranted. Recent events in Anglophone Western democracies demonstrate that this kind of attitude toward the official stories promulgated by governments and by their sycophants in the media is all too often warranted in non-totalitarian countries.” (Levy 2007, 187)

What Levy then emphasizes, though, is that while it is not epistemically irrational to reject official stories *per se*, “there is a class of official stories that, other things being equal, we ought to accept. Responsible believers ought to accept explanations offered by *properly constituted epistemic authorities*.” (187) The important questions to consider, then, is who the properly constituted epistemic authorities are taken to be and how this should be decided. These are questions whose significance will be pivotal in assessing the case study in the next section, and so it is worth here recording the point that Levy adds:

“When there is a conflict between official stories, between the explanation offered by the political authorities and that offered by the epistemic authorities, responsible intellectuals are ready to believe the latter (regardless of whether either explanation cites the actions of conspirators).” (Levy 2007, 187–8)

Our later discussion will oblige us to reflect more closely on what even makes a story “official”—and whose view should rationally be deferred to (where “rationally” means for epistemological rather than prudential reasons)—when political authorities and epistemic authorities diverge.

As for what constitutes an epistemic authority, Levy's view is that "an epistemic authority is properly constituted when it has the right kind of structure." (188) The right kind of structure is that exemplified by science, where knowledge claims are the product of a socially distributed network of inquirers, whose methods and results are publicly available. Scientific inquirers "are trained in assessing knowledge claims according to standards relevant to the discipline, and rewards are distributed according to success at validating new knowledge *and* at criticizing the claims of other members of the network." (188) As Levy thereby emphasizes, scientific investigations tend to be pursued within the bounds of disciplines and in accordance with the methods, concepts and procedures appropriate to the discipline.

Accepting the general good sense of Levy's view—notwithstanding its arguable idealization of the purity of actual scientific research practices—and so granting its premise that scientific research does generally aspire to conform to the methodological norms indicated, its emphasis on disciplinarity prompts an interesting question for the present inquiry: is there or is there not a disciplinary home for conspiracy theory as a distinctive kind of inquiry? Differently nuanced answers to this general question might be offered, but we know that in the case of any specific putative conspiracy, depending on the particulars of the case, a variety of expertises are likely to be required to make headway. Each specific case, moreover, may require a distinctive interdisciplinary collaboration, with the mix of expertise required in any given case quite possibly differing from that needed in any other. What this means is that there is no uniquely determinable field known as conspiracy theory in which any scientist or scholar could claim special disciplinary expertise. The field of what we might call "conspiracy studies" is inherently interdisciplinary.

What follows from this is that there can be no such thing as dedicated expertise in the field of conspiracy theory unless or until the relevant epistemic authorities have established the methods, concepts and procedures appropriate to the field. This insight casts interesting light on a concern that Levy expresses as part of the upshot of his argument:

"The intellectuals who embrace explanations of the kind that we typically and pejoratively label conspiracy theories are almost never in possession of the directly relevant expertise. They may be experts in *something*, but rarely do they belong to the class of enquirers with the authority to issue official stories regarding the event to be explained." (Levy 2007, 189)

Our insight reveals Levy's statement here to be misleading in implying that an officially authorized group comprises anything *other* than a number of individuals each of whom is expert in *something* but not in the whole complex multidisciplinary field of inquiry relevant to a conspiracy theory. How would an "official" group differ—in terms of epistemological capacities—from another multidisciplinary group who were to gather together in an unofficial collaboration? Suppose the latter group challenged the epistemic authority of the official group?

This question can be considered in relation to a case of what Levy takes to be typical of a pejoratively labeled conspiracy theory. The events of 9/11, Levy points out, undeniably and unequivocally involved a conspiracy. Therefore, any and every explanation of the events must involve conspiracy theory. However, there is an official conspiracy theory that Levy says can be regarded as authoritative, and this is not because the official theory comes from the US Government.

"It is because the relevant epistemic authorities—the distributed network of knowledge claim gatherers and testers that includes engineers and politics professors, security experts and journalists—have no doubts over the validity of the explanation that we accept it." (Levy 2007, 187)

The problem with the opinion expressed here is that the “relevant epistemic authorities” cited represent but a subset of the engineers, politics professors, security experts and journalists who—along with lawyers, eyewitnesses, financial market analysts, victims' relatives and intelligent laypersons—have engaged in serious investigations of the matter. It is by now a plain matter of fact that significant numbers of relevant experts in the cited fields have articulated substantial doubts about the official conspiracy theory, and some of these can be found explicated in authoritative publications. It is therefore demonstrably correct to say that there is *some* doubt in relevant quarters about the epistemic unassailability of the official version. That doubt, moreover, has to be regarded by Levy as reasonable if its articulation has survived the kind of scientific peer review process that he asks us to grant as an epistemic warrant. Concomitantly, not all alternative hypotheses can be dismissed as patently absurd. It may involve speculation to suggest, for instance, that certain well-placed people in the West could have had some foreknowledge of events of 9/11 (Ryan 2010), or that there could be doubts about the identities and provenance of the alleged terrorists involved (Kolar 2006), or about the precise cause of collapse of World Trade Center 7 (Hulsey and Quan 2020), but the suggestions are not irrational to entertain, pending more decisive evidence on the matters. Thus the problem with Levy's otherwise sound advice that we should defer to “properly constituted epistemic authority” is that when it comes to conspiracy theories there just may not be such an authority that it is uniquely rational to defer to.

Levy is aware that with regard to any complex situation that is a subject of conspiracy theory, “there is a holism of knowledge claims,” and he notes that “the official story enters into relations of mutual support with other knowledge claims,” but then he makes the problematic claim that “doubting the official story tears a hole in the web of distributed knowledge.” This claim—if taken as a reason for refraining from questioning official narratives—rests on an assumption that there is a unique, determinate “web” of distributed knowledge that is entirely sound, in all its threads, and in all their interweaving and intersection. Yet such a claim could not be made for scientific knowledge, since it would imply scientific advances that involved questioning received wisdom would never be made. So even were one to grant Levy's assumption that official narratives are supported by a structure of epistemic authority comparable to that of science, it would not suffice to support a claim that critical questioners of them are necessarily irrational.

#### 4 | CRITICAL RECEPTIVENESS IN PRACTICE: A CASE STUDY

The point of defending critical receptiveness to conspiracy theories is that sometimes investigations so designated by detractors reveal important truths. It has, of course, been noted that opponents of conspiracy theories claim that bona fide investigations are exempt from that designation and their opprobrium—so people who engage in such investigations should not properly be called “conspiracy theorists.” The problem with such a claim, as has so far been identified, is that the exemption is hard if not impossible to apply with any consistency, even in principle, given the lack of any decisive criteria for doing so. It is the practical significance of this problem that is to be considered now, for it brings us to the fundamental concern that has animated this paper. The reality is that the exemption does not apply in practice. Quite to the contrary, the disparagement of bona fide investigations as conspiracy theories is no less real a sociological phenomenon than are widespread beliefs in misleading conspiracy theories. This can have a disincentivizing effect on potential critical investigations that is to the detriment of a democratic society.

To demonstrate how real the concern is, this section examines a contemporary case study of how it is possible to engage in rigorous inquiry and yet be stigmatized—in public and even in academia—when

people choose to describe the inquiry as “conspiracy theory.” The study centers on a small group of citizen investigators from a variety of academic and professional backgrounds who were less sanguine about the epistemic authority of mainstream media than are those academics who would count among society’s “mechanisms for generating warranted beliefs” ‘the free press, made up of reporters, editors, and owners who compete to publish “the scoop” before others do’ (Keeley 1999, 122). The group—which the present author is a founder member—articulates reservations about the genuinely competitive nature of news publishing today, given how its output reflects the homogeneity of its ownership and control (Herman and Chomsky 1988; Miller and Dinan 2008). Thus, a claim like Levy’s, that “[t]he media is, or is part of, a properly constituted epistemic authority” (Levy 2007, 192n3), would be regarded as stating an ideal rather than describing reality. It would not necessarily be assumed that the mainstream media “are, in the main, trustworthy” (Räikkä and Ritola 2020, 60). Certainly, whatever the merits of that sanguine view of the media in relatively uncontroversial domains, the impetus for the formation of the Working Group on Syria, Propaganda and Media was concern about the media’s role in reproducing what it regarded as disinformation concerning the war in Syria. This was a concern because the foreign policy supported by such information could be doing significant harm.

In January 2018 the formation of the Working Group was notified in a blog post responding to an article in the *Guardian* (Hayward and Justice 2018). Over the next two months, while the group was yet to publish its first briefing note, the former *Guardian* journalist Brian Whitaker published *four* articles seeking to portray its members and advisers as conspiracy theory promoters (Whitaker 2018a, 2018b, 2018c, 2018d).<sup>14</sup> By mid-April 2018, it had become the subject of an extraordinary attack on the front page, as well as inside pages and leader column, of *The Times*, which accused its members of spreading “conspiracy theories promoted by Russia.” In the following days, the attacks were echoed in the *Daily Mail*, the *Daily Express*, *The Sun*, *Huffington Post* and *openDemocracy*.<sup>15</sup> At that time the group had still to publish any of its briefing notes on Syria. This fact serves to show that, whatever was the press’s concern about the group, it could not be that the quality of its briefing notes was poor or misguided. Meanwhile, attacks on group members persisted, with some journalists launching them repeatedly, including Dominic Kennedy doing so four times for *The Times* and Chris York of *Huffington Post* producing a full dozen (as detailed by Johnstone 2020a). None of these contain any substantive critique of the group’s briefings but they routinely feature the slur “conspiracy theorists!”.

It is a straightforwardly demonstrable fact, then, that Working Group members have been publicly stigmatized as conspiracy theorists.

Accordingly, the critical question to consider—if we follow the recommendations of scholars like Keeley, Clarke and Levy—is whether the group has or has not been engaging in rigorous and warranted investigations. A constructive way of addressing the question would be by applying the approach advocated by Clarke (as noted in Section 2) to the Working Group’s research program with the aim of determining whether it is progressive or degenerating. This would mean ascertaining whether it has been able to anticipate new evidence and make successful predictions.

One focus of the group’s investigations has been on repeated allegations of Syrian government responsibility for chemical attacks in areas held by opposition forces. These allegations have had considerable political significance to Western governments since the US declared such attacks to cross a Red Line that would justify a military response (Hersh 2014). Thus it was that the allegations of a chemical attack in Douma, on 7 April 2018, served as justification for a missile attack in retaliation by the United States, the United Kingdom, and France. The international institution charged with investigating the incident—the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW)—enjoys a high reputation internationally and fulfills as clearly as any institution does the criteria for being considered an epistemic authority. Thus, according to the reasoning of Levy and other social epistemologists, to reject its epistemic claims would not be rationally defensible. Nonetheless, when

the OPCW issued its final report on the Douma incident—after an inexplicably protracted delay—the Working Group identified significant failings in it as judged by the standards appropriate to a scientific report (McKeigue and Miller 2019a).

Now the Working Group is not composed of chemical weapons experts, even though it does consult with people who are,<sup>16</sup> and it did not visit the site of the attack: so it could not claim to have either specialist expertise or direct access to the evidence. These points are sometimes taken by the group's detractors as grounds to dismiss its claims without considering them. However, two things this dismissive response misses are the following. One is that no specialist expertise is required to know that a competent professional investigation of an alleged chemical attack would include certain kinds of information and to query their absence, particularly when there are other anomalies in the published information. For instance, there should be detailed reports from experts in ballistics/engineering (so as to explain how the munition was delivered) and toxicology reports (so as to identify the chemical used and assess its effects). The absence of detailed information of either kind constituted a significant anomaly that a thoughtful lay reader would know to query. The second thing, following from this, is that since the evidential value of physical access to the site resides in the findings to be presented in such reports, it is not clearly less rational to criticize the OPCW's failure to produce them than to accept conclusions it offers without close reference to them.

The Working Group's view was that since engineering and toxicology reports ought to exist, their absence from the documentation included in the OPCW's final report required explanation. And one obvious explanatory hypothesis—given the history of complaints about political interference in the work of OPCW (Landry 2017; Monbiot 2002)—was that the reports had been suppressed because inclusion of their detail would have been politically inconvenient to parties invested in the published conclusion. So implicit in the group's position is an inference to a possible conspiracy: the OPCW could have reached its published conclusions as a result of political steering rather than disinterested and unimpeded scientific inquiry.

If we call this implicit inference—that the report was nobbled—a conspiracy theory, the question is whether it is warranted; and a way of settling this, as suggested by Clarke, is to ask if the investigations generating it are progressive: in particular, do they generate novel predictions that come to be verified? A prediction directly implied by the nobbling hypothesis was that if suppressed reports should come to light their findings would be inconsistent with OPCW's conclusions published March 2019. This prediction might have remained unverifiable,<sup>17</sup> but in May 2019 the group received a leaked document revealing that an engineering assessment of the ballistics—signed by OPCW FFM sub-team leader Ian Henderson—had indeed been carried out onsite during the original OPCW inspection. The findings of this suppressed assessment substantially contradicted the conclusion delivered in the official published report, implicitly exculpating the Syrian government, and thus implying that the US-led bombing in retaliation lacked the justification claimed for it (McKeigue et al. 2019b, 2019d). The document confirmed a prediction and thereby provided evidence weighing in favor of the group's research being progressive.

The weight of further evidence was added when an OPCW whistleblower met with an internationally respected panel to testify, with corroborating documentation, that in the official report “key information about chemical analyses, toxicology consultations, ballistics studies, and witness testimonies was suppressed, ostensibly to favor a preordained conclusion” (Courage Foundation 2019). Thereafter, emails relating to internal struggle and malpractice within OPCW were published by Wikileaks (2019a), in turn followed by the release of further sets of documents in Wikileaks (2019b, 2019c, 2019d) and additional whistleblower testimony (Maté, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c, 2020d). A former senior official at the OPCW testified to a “toxic climate of fear” at the organization, and the OPCW's founding Director General, José Bustani, was so disturbed by the evidence of malfeasance that his



concerns were read into the record at a meeting of the UN Security Council (UNSC 2020). As regards the inference to a conspiracy within the OPCW, as implied by the Working Group, the testimony of OPCW's own inspectors and others within the organization explicitly allege one.

So the Working Group's investigations can reasonably be considered progressive in that their predictions about suppressed reports contradicting the official account have been verified. To be clear, in making this point, no claim is being made or relied upon about the facts of the matter that OPCW was called to report on. At the time of writing, Western governments and OPCW management have not publicly accepted that the Douma report was nobbled, even though concerns about it are shared by a number of states parties, and not only Syria, Russia and China. For their part, the OPCW scientists who carried out the inspections in Douma are not arguing that their reports must be accepted but just that they be allowed a full hearing, in good faith. This urging, however, has been vigorously resisted by OPCW management and Western states parties: indeed, the inspectors have been subjected to smears in public and intimidation within the organization. Although this issue has largely been ignored in the press, a number of distinguished international figures have published a Statement of Concern urging that the suppressed evidence be heard at OPCW (Courage Foundation 2021).

What is significant for the purposes of this paper's argument is that the OPCW cannot claim there is a consensus view amongst either the states it answers to or the scientists it employs. The scientists with the most directly relevant expertise, who actually investigated on site in Douma, not only confirm the analyses in Working Group briefing notes—which would explain why the leaked material first took the route it did (OPCW 2020)—but add considerable further detailed information about the concerns flagged. In these circumstances, to insist on deference to the epistemic authority of the OPCW as an organization is not so rational as it would otherwise be. OPCW's claim to epistemic authority with regard to the Douma investigation rests on the scientific expertise of the inspectors it sent there, and the latter have disavowed the conclusion superimposed on their work by the management. So this is a case where official authority and epistemic authority come apart: scientists and so-called “conspiracy theorists” are closely aligned, whereas opposed to both are representatives of political power and the authority it lays claim to.

For the purposes of this paper's main argument, this is all that needed to be shown with the case: the inference to a conspiracy—and one of considerable significance<sup>18</sup>—was not unwarranted. This serves to illustrate why the approach of critical receptivity is to be commended over approaches that depict “conspiracy theories”—as a general, albeit ill-defined class—as a problem in need of a cure.

Could this conclusion yet be resisted? Could critics of the OPCW whistleblowers suggest any good reason to think that their testimony was false or misguided in some way? Could they be seen as promoters of a bad conspiracy theory rather than as reliable witnesses providing warrant for a credible one? Attempts to argue along these lines have certainly been made. Initially, when only the engineering assessment had been leaked, OPCW management—and also certain journalists who boasted an inside track to the organization<sup>19</sup>—sought to downplay and discredit the assessment, shifting, in the space of ten days, through three mutually contradictory reasons for disregarding it (McKeigue et al. 2019d). When the toxicology report was then also leaked, the various new evasive responses included the publication by Bellingcat of a fake OPCW letter aimed at diminishing the significance of the real findings (Maté 2020e). Meanwhile, every attempt to get the matter properly aired at OPCW meetings and even UNSC meetings was blocked by states aligned with the three that had bombed Syria. The general pattern of response—being evasive and inconsistent—is symptomatic of a degenerating account and one that is certainly not compelling enough to show consideration of the alternative account to be unwarranted.

So I maintain that the case study shows how it may be possible for an investigation that includes a hypothesis that could be designated a *conspiracy theory* to be warranted. It also incidentally shows how engaging in such investigations can provoke reactions from defenders of the official narrative



challenged. Notwithstanding the epistemic considerations that tell in favor of the Working Group's analyses, its members have continued to be vilified by certain journalists, politicians and government officials.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, covert attacks—not only on the Working Group but on anyone challenging the public narrative justifying UK Foreign Policy—have been funded by the UK Foreign Office and other Government departments. These have been implemented by a range of bodies including the British Army's 77<sup>th</sup> Brigade (Coburg 2019; Hutcheon 2019) and the so-called Integrity Initiative (McKeigue, Miller, and Mason 2018).<sup>21</sup> These entities have been implementing policy ideas that have been proposed and supported by normative argument from certain academics. Cassam (2019), for instance, thinks that because conspiracy theories are often “smokescreens for political ends” the aim should be to defeat them, using political as well as intellectual means (Cassam 2019). This echoes the view of Sunstein that “[b]ecause conspiracy theorists are likely to approach evidence and arguments in a biased way, they are not likely to respond well, or even logically, to the claims of public officials.” (Sunstein and Vermeule 2009, 225) Hence his recommendation, published during his time as an adviser on information strategy for President Obama, was to enlist independent organizations to rebut the claims of designated conspiracy theorists and to engage in “cognitive infiltration” of the groups that produce them.

Could it be argued on behalf of Sunstein's position that even if the present case might be an example of a warranted suspicion, it would be an exception to a more general rule which is not invalidated simply because it admits of a few exceptions. Sunstein is certainly aware that sometimes conspiracy theories are vindicated, and yet he considers it a lesser evil that the occasional exception is wrongly stigmatized than that dangerous conspiracy theories should be allowed to flourish. Hence he considers it justified to counter arguments of groups trying to hold government to account on behalf of citizens by means of cognitive manipulation and message control. Sunstein thinks governments should “hire credible private parties to engage in counterspeech,”<sup>22</sup> for instance, and suggests that “government officials would participate anonymously or even with false identities,” for although this “risks perverse results,” compared with less inherently dishonest tactics it “potentially brings higher returns.” (Sunstein and Vermeule 2009, 225) Such suggestions assume not only that the government knows best but that it is legitimate to constrain citizens to believe what government says, while systematically seeking to undermine citizens' coordinated capacities to raise questions aimed at holding it to account. A reasonable cause for concern in response is that the advocacy of coercion, social engineering and even covert infiltration of dissident groups in the name of protecting democracy from corrosive influence risks achieving the opposite result.

Viewed from the perspective commended in this paper, what the case study shows is that it is possible for investigative activity to be rigorous, progressive and significant while yet being condemned in influential quarters as “conspiracy theory.” The inquiry did not start from suspicions of conspiracy at OPCW; it started from noticing anomalies in a report, and indications of conspiracy only came to light as whistleblowers came forward. In retrospect, however, it is interesting to consider why the working group had come under such extraordinary attacks in the press even before it had started the investigation. One hypothesis would be that those attacks were intended pre-emptively to damage the group's credibility and to discourage emulation by others of its activities. But perhaps alternative hypotheses could be suggested by someone with a more powerful imagination than the present author.

## 5 | CONCLUSION

The case study makes vivid the validity and practical significance of the argument developed and defended in principle, namely, that if an epistemic challenge to an official narrative is sufficiently troubling to warrant a response, then this should be critically receptive. It illustrates the reality that

even institutions with well-established claims to epistemic authority do not necessarily stand above political contestations over knowledge and truth claims. For this reason, skepticism about them cannot always or necessarily be condemned as irrational. When trust in institutions diminishes, the answer does not lie in suppressing questions about their trustworthiness or seeking to deter potential questioners. The fact that malfeasance by powerful actors does occur is ultimately itself sufficient reason to take an attitude of critical receptiveness to so-called conspiracy theories. Critical investigations that some refer disparagingly to as conspiracy theories can prove valuable assets in the protection of a democratic society; their suppression contravenes the most fundamental principles of a democracy and its associated values freedom of thought and expression.

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Cassam, for instance, thinks “conspiracy theories in the ordinary sense are extraordinary,” so to mark this extraordinariness he undertakes to capitalise the term Conspiracy Theory when used in what he regards as the ordinary usage of making extraordinary claims (Cassam 2019, 6). A question, of course, is how to know when or when not to use the capitalised term without actually investigating the claims being advanced.
- <sup>2</sup> Rääkkä, for instance, stipulates that “explanations that refer to conspiracies and are official wisdom are not conspiracy theories”: “Official explanations can (a) be theories and (b) refer to conspiracies, but they cannot be conspiracy theories—unless they are official explanations of *wrong* authorities. The view that the well-known events on September 11th in 2001 were due to a conspiracy on the part of al-Qaeda is not a conspiracy theory.” (Rääkkä 2014, 63).
- <sup>3</sup> Accordingly, this approach is often referred to in the philosophical literature as *particularism* (Dentith 2016a). For Basham (2016), the tackling of particular theories one at a time is usefully complemented by critical investigation of how primary information sources may be supporting questionable official stories.
- <sup>4</sup> There are some who believe not and commend dispensing with the term. Radical social critics like Bratich (2008, 2011) criticize the idea of a distinction between ‘conspiracy theories and legitimate skepticism’. Even among the more thoughtful defenders of the distinction is acknowledgement that ‘what counts as a “conspiracy theory” (vis-à-vis legitimate exploration of real conspiracies) is a topic of continuous debate and disagreement.’ (Byford 2011, 25) Byford recognizes conceptual difficulties in determining ‘where legitimate analysis of secrecy in politics ends and conspiracy theory begins’ and highlights how much this is a matter of political demarcation of accredited and discredited knowledge claims.
- <sup>5</sup> This difference has been highlighted from the standpoint of those wholly opposed to conspiracy theory in the context of a debate that has unfolded under the auspices of the Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective by Wagner-Egger et al. (2019): they refer to the critically receptive view of some philosophers as a ““healthy” view on conspiracy theories’ and contrast with this ‘the “unhealthy” or “pathologizing” view held by the majority of psychologists ... and some sociologists’.
- <sup>6</sup> Interestingly, Michael J. Wood conducted an experiment to test the widespread assumption ‘that labelling something a conspiracy theory makes it seem less believable’ (Wood 2016, 696) and found it does not. Commenting on this finding, Basham suggests that the label may only carry a pejorative connotation for certain sections of society, ‘largely limited to certain social elites, academia, mainstream media, and political and economic leadership.’ (Basham 2016, 7) This, in turn, is consistent with oft-expressed concern from those quarters of connections between conspiracy theory and populism, a term used with sometimes unreflectively pejorative associations.

- <sup>7</sup> I am here assuming a quite minimalist definition of ‘conspiracism’, having in mind an analogy with other kinds of ‘ism’—scientism, psychologism—that indicate an excessive or reductive attachment to an inappropriate mode of analysis. For a critical discussion of more expansive ideas about the psychology or character of people who tend to be drawn to conspiracist ways of thinking see Dentith (2017).
- <sup>8</sup> This is not to dispute that research into the social and psychological bases of conspiracist tendencies can be interesting and potentially significant for other purposes. Peter Knight (2014) offers an informative overview of multi-disciplinary research efforts in these areas. The studies in question relate to a variety of topics, including the varying political and cultural uses that conspiracy theories have served the individual psychology of conspiracy beliefs, and their symbolic dimension. Knight points out the need for interdisciplinary methodological reflection on the balance between psychology and culture in the accounts; he stresses the need to consider also historical and political dimensions, in order to address the social dynamics of conspiracy beliefs.
- <sup>9</sup> According to Uscinski’s definition: ‘Conspiracy theory refers to an explanation of past, ongoing, or future events or circumstances that cites as a main causal factor a small group of powerful persons, the conspirators, acting in secret for their own benefit and against the common good.’ (Uscinski 2019, 48) This definition is more neutral than seems to be assumed in the work of some of his contributing authors. Regarding the term *conspiracy theorist*, he says ‘the authors in this volume have limited the use of this term and when they do use it, they use it so that its meaning is obvious.’ (Uscinski 2019, 51).
- <sup>10</sup> Attempts to define conspiracy theory also have to define ‘conspiracy’, and although this is a matter that lies outside the scope of the present paper it is worth noting an obvious challenge. In seeking to distinguish rational scepticism from irrational conspiracy theorising Knight has invoked the idea of actors being ‘involved’ in events generated by a conspiracy but not being part of it (Knight 2014, 351). However, it is arguable that the tantalizing idea of an ‘involvement’ that ‘falls short of an actual conspiracy’ would be an unhelpfully narrow definition of conspiracy if it were to exclude a whole range of subtle and implicit kinds of involvement that might include collusion, collaboration, conniving, tacitly understanding, secretly agreeing, jointly planning, acquiescing, turning a blind eye, covering up for, bribing, intimidating, blackmailing, misdirecting or silencing.
- <sup>11</sup> The specific paper cited here was co-authored with Adrian Vermeule, but because Sunstein has written and spoken about conspiracy theory in numerous places, and has had the opportunity to refer to his ideas on the subject in his role as adviser to President Obama, I am following the precedent of other commentators (e.g., Hagen 2011) in focusing on Sunstein as the influential disseminator of the central ideas under discussion. These will be considered more closely in Section 4.
- <sup>12</sup> The reverse side of this point is emphasised by those like Sunstein who complain that conspiracy theorists rationalise every rebuttal as further proof of a conspiracy at work. But while some conspiracists may indeed do this, the approach advocated here would impose epistemic discipline on both sides.
- <sup>13</sup> As, for instance, with the US intelligence community’s cover-up of what didn’t happen in the gulf of Tonkin (Basham 2016).
- <sup>14</sup> The simple fact of such an intense interest being taken in an unknown and newly formed group of relatively obscure individuals might seem puzzling on its face but was contextualised at the time by Jonathan Cook (2018).
- <sup>15</sup> For a list of these attacks and subsequent ones, with links to them, see this timeline: <https://timhayward.wordpress.com/syria/working-group-in-the-press/wgspm-timeline-of-hostile-media-coverage/> [accessed 20 August 2020].
- <sup>16</sup> Piers Robinson (2020) notes that the late Julian Perry Robinson, one of the world’s leading experts on chemical and biological weapons, was in communication with the Working Group. ‘At the time of his death, he was completing a chronology regarding chemical weapons and the war in Syria. Writing about the events surrounding alleged chemical weapon attacks in Syria and the vicious attacks against WGSPM, he noted that: “It is not immediately clear from their pronouncements that the critics of the WGSPM just quoted have in fact adequately studied the Group’s publications.” ... It was Julian Perry Robinson who subsequently invited WGSPM member Professor Paul McKeigue to present at the Harvard-Sussex Program on Chemical and Biological Weapons roundtable meeting in March 2020.’
- <sup>17</sup> Something the case accordingly illustrates is why it would be a mistake to allow a general assumption, as Keeley suggests, that ‘the credibility of conspiracy theories erodes over time as corroborating evidence fails to turn up’ (Keeley 2003, 105). For unless further evidence in favour of the official story turns up, there is no shift in the relative weights of evidence.

- <sup>18</sup> Although mainstream Western media have largely ignored it, veteran journalist Peter Hitchens (2020b) called it ‘the biggest story I have handled in more than 40 years of journalism’.
- <sup>19</sup> Three of the Working Group's most persistent critics in social media and the press—Brian Whitaker, Scott Lucas and Eliot Higgins of Bellingcat—claimed inside knowledge of OPCW deliberations at management level, which they deployed in attempts to downplay the significance of the leaked information and whistleblower testimony from OPCW's scientific staff (McKeigue et al. 2019c, 2019d; Hitchens 2020a).
- <sup>20</sup> For instance, Sir Alan Duncan, interviewed as Minister of State at the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), responded to a question about the Working Group, specifically naming four members: ‘These academics dotted around the UK, whenever there is something pro-Russian, row in behind it in a coordinated way ... We should not be taken for a sucker. We should realize what these people are doing together against our interest and against the interests of democracy more widely.’ (Haynes 2019).
- <sup>21</sup> The latter, although funded by the Foreign Office, purported to be a charitable body engaged in education and public service information in the interests of defending democracy against Russian disinformation. For critical discussion see the extensive list of links provided in Hayward (2018).
- <sup>22</sup> He is openly proposing conspiracy as a method: ‘If disclosure of the tactic does occur, however, the perverse results are just a possible cost, whose risk and magnitude is unclear. Another possibility is that disclosure of the government's tactics will sow uncertainty and distrust within conspiratorial groups and among their members; new recruits will be suspect and participants in the group's virtual networks will doubt each other's bona fides. To the extent that these effects raise the costs of organization and communication for, and within, conspiratorial groups, the effects are desirable, not perverse’ (Sunstein and Vermeule 2009, 225).

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