

# THE RHETORIC OF CONSPIRACISM IN USER-CENTERED DEMOCRACY

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## **ABSTRACT**

Tyler John Easterbrook: The Rhetoric of Conspiracism in User-Centered Democracy  
(Under the direction of Jordynn Jack)

This dissertation examines social media-based conspiracy theories of the past five years (2016-2021) and considers what this recent conspiracy rhetoric suggests about the evolving relationship between people, platforms, and politics in the contemporary United States. I use the tools of rhetorical theory and criticism to analyze a small archive of conspiracist content across three case studies—Pizzagate, a conspiracy theory alleging a vast pedophilia ring run by political elites; conspiracy theories surrounding the mass shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida; and *Plandemic*, a self-styled “documentary” about COVID-19 conspiracies that went viral in May 2020. In each case study, I show that the conspiracy rhetoric in question uses the unique affordances of social media platforms to amplify that conspiracy theory’s rhetorical efficacy. Ultimately, I argue that conspiracism has now become a durable form of social media content that threatens to wreak havoc on American political discourse.

To Nora, whose profound friendship made this dissertation possible.

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## INTRODUCTION

Digital witnesses  
What's the point of even sleeping?  
If I can't show it, you can't see me  
What's the point of doing anything?  
—St. Vincent, “Digital Witness”

In May 27, 2021, the *New York Times* reported harrowing poll results recently collected by the Public Religion Research Institute and the Interfaith Youth Core: “15 percent of Americans say they think that the levers of power are controlled by a cabal of Satan-worshiping pedophiles, a core belief of QAnon supporters. The same share said it was true that ‘American patriots may have to resort to violence’ to depose the pedophiles and restore the country’s rightful order” (Russell). According to the founder of the PRRI, that figure rivals various forms of religious belief in the United States: “Thinking about QAnon, if it were a religion, it would be as big as all white evangelical Protestants, or all white mainline Protestants,’ he added. ‘So it lines up there with a major religious group” (qtd. in Russell). How did we reach the point where a fringe conspiracy theory like QAnon could claim millions of adherents who openly admit that political violence might be necessary to achieve their goals?

“The Rhetoric of Conspiracism in User-Centered Democracy” interrogates the relationship between contemporary conspiracy rhetoric and the social media platforms on which this conspiracism appears. The following two research questions guide the project as a whole: how does the infrastructure of social media platforms shape the form and function of contemporary conspiracy rhetoric, and how does this conspiracism affect online political discourse in the United States? To pursue those questions, I use the tools of rhetorical theory and

criticism to scrutinize a selection of digital conspiracist artifacts from three social media-based conspiracy theories of the past five years—surrounding Pizzagate; the mass shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida; and the recent COVID-19 documentary *Plandemic*. In each case study, I examine how the conspiracy theory under review utilizes a distinct aspect of social media culture to suasory effect. My overarching claim in this project is that there is a mutually constitutive relationship between contemporary conspiracy rhetoric and social media platforms: the former draws its rhetorical force from platform affordances, and the latter, in turn, are then shaped by the burgeoning “information disorder” (Sellnow et al. 126) that conspiracy rhetoric produces across the social media ecosystem.

In this introductory chapter, I begin by positioning my work within the field of rhetorical studies, describing my distinct contributions both to conspiracy rhetoric specifically and to digital rhetoric more broadly. I then describe the methods and methodologies that orient the project, including the three key concepts—rhetoric, conspiracism, and user-centered democracy—that triangulate my arguments in the dissertation. I close the introduction with summaries of the project’s chapters, including their main claims and implications for our understanding of social media-based conspiracism.

### **Intellectual Parameters: Conspiracy Rhetoric and Digital Rhetoric**

I situate this dissertation within two distinct fields of inquiry: conspiracy rhetoric and digital rhetoric. I here describe the scholarly conversations I am joining and the distinct contributions this project makes to each of the two subfields. The most obvious (as reflected in the dissertation’s title) is conspiracy rhetoric, a subfield of rhetoric and communication studies that traces its origins to work in the early 1980s on the generic features of conspiracy argument and on the function of conspiracy theories in forming the “social consensus” around distressing,

ambiguous events such as JFK’s assassination (Creps, III; Goodnight and Poulakos 300).<sup>1</sup> A handful of articles on conspiracy rhetoric followed in the 1980s and 1990s (Zarefsky; Griffin; Young et al.; Goldzwig “Theo-Political”; Hasian), but the subfield really blossomed in the 2000s. A key text for my purposes is Steven R. Goldzwig’s lead essay in a conspiracy rhetoric-themed special issue of the *Western Journal of Communication*, which reviews the state of conspiracy rhetoric scholarship at the “dawn of the new millennium” and poses a dozen research questions for future work. It is Goldzwig’s twelfth and final question that most interests me: “What is the role of the Internet in the articulation and dissemination of conspiracy rhetoric?” (Goldzwig “Conspiracy Rhetoric” 505). Surprisingly enough, very few scholars have attempted to answer this question since Goldzwig posed it nearly two decades ago. While a couple of scholars since have examined internet-based conspiracy rhetoric (Reyes and Smith; Rice *Awful Archives*), this work focuses more on conspiracy theories that happen to be *on* the internet rather than querying the significance *of* the internet for those conspiracy theories’ form and function. The one major exception is Charles Soukup’s 2008 essay on 9/11 truther conspiracies, which argues that the hypertextual logic of the internet produces “entelechial” conspiracy theories that spin on endlessly (16-19). But a single essay is hardly an adequate rejoinder to a question aimed at setting the scope for future research!

My primary contribution to conspiracy rhetoric, therefore, is to provide a more substantive response to Goldzwig’s query than is extant in current scholarship. I trade out his more totalizing phrase “the Internet” for the slightly less totalizing “social media platforms,” but the force of Goldzwig’s question still motivates my project as a whole. My dissertation extends

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<sup>1</sup>As I discuss in Chapter 2, we could place the origins of conspiracy rhetoric much earlier, to Richard Hofstadter’s groundbreaking 1964 essay “The Paranoid Style in American Politics.” But Hofstadter was an intellectual historian rather than a rhetorician, and conspiracy rhetoric scholarship proper did not arrive until the 1980s.

conspiracy rhetoric scholarship by showing how integral social media platforms are for contemporary conspiracism in the United States—a key socio-rhetorical infrastructure that shapes conspiracy rhetoric, not simply a place where conspiracy theories happen to appear.

Digital rhetoric is the second subfield of rhetorical studies within which I situate my project. What counts as “digital rhetoric” is a bit up for grabs given the extent to which the internet has suffused most rhetorical activity in the twenty-first century—in fact, some leading digital rhetoric scholars have postulated that “the digital portends to be a momentary specialization that falls away” (Boyle et al. 258). Bracketing the question of the subfield’s uncertain longevity, I want to draw out one important thread within the history of digital rhetoric that my dissertation picks up and extends: the user of the digital as a subject position. The user of digital systems has been a central concern for digital rhetoric scholars since the subfield’s origins in Richard Lanham’s foundation work from the 1990s. In his essay collection *The Electronic Word: Democracy, Literacy, and the Arts*, Lanham argues that the emergence of digital technologies will bring about a “new rhetoric of the arts” that is “user-definable” and that will displace traditional humanistic thought as we know it (14-18).<sup>2</sup> Robert Johnson’s 1998 book *User-Centered Technology* echoes Lanham’s ideas and fleshes them out further, developing a robust account of the rhetorical possibilities opened up by user-centered design both for computer documentation and for rhetorical theory. Building on his earlier work, Johnson wonders in a later essay whether user-centeredness has lost its rhetorical value and attempts to “save it [user-centered design] from the landfill of ideas” (Johnson “Ubiquity Paradox” 336). More contemporary rhetoric scholarship ought to assuage Johnson’s worries; “user-centered”

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<sup>2</sup>If this seems dreadfully bombastic, it is. Lanham makes similarly gleeful proclamations about markets and contemporary capitalism in his later book *The Economics of Attention: Style and Substance in the Age of Information*. That book was published in 2006; its arguments have not aged well in light of the 2007-2008 subprime mortgage crisis.

approaches to the digital continue to appear, such as in a 2018 special issue of *Computers and Composition* dedicated to applying user-centered design to the composition classroom (Bartolotta et al.). In short, users have and continue to be a major area of interest for digital rhetoric scholars.

With respect to digital rhetoric, my dissertation’s intervention is to pose the user as a problem to be reckoned with rather than a possibility to be realized. That is, while I can understand the breathless enthusiasm for users and “user-centeredness” that appears in Lanham’s early work and recurs in more contemporary scholarship, I think that this enthusiasm is misplaced, if not outright dangerous.<sup>3</sup> In focalizing online conspiracism in this project, I aim to redirect digital rhetoric scholars to the serious problems users and user-centeredness have wrought for contemporary American politics. When 4chan users can gleefully announce in 2016 that they “actually elected a meme as president,” we are beyond the point where we can theorize users as an apolitical analytical category (qtd. in Ohlheiser “4chan”). My concept of “user-centered democracy,” explained in the following section, helps us understand what is at stake.

### **Methods and Methodology**

I have always had an interdisciplinary temperament. From my earliest days as an undergraduate I have had a butterfly mind, enticed by the far-flung intellectual pleasures to be found at the university, from logic and the foundations of mathematics to contemporary science fiction. My eclectic disposition eventually drew me to rhetoric, a broad yet also deep field aimed at excavating the roots of human behavior, society, and politics. As a bedrock discipline with a millennia-long history of interdisciplinary pursuits, rhetoric served as an apt home for my diverse interests. In this section I define rhetoric as I understand it, denote the rhetorical methods I

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<sup>3</sup>In a sense, the eagerness toward all things “user-centered” is just the latest manifestation of what Vincent Mosco described in 2004 as the “digital sublime.” See Vincent Mosco, *The Digital Sublime: Myth, Power, and Cyberspace*.

employ, and describe my key concepts, detailing throughout the core theoretical concerns that motivate this dissertation project as a whole. While of necessity a dissertation strives for narrowness, I hope that the following paragraphs nonetheless capture something of the broader influences on my intellectual life, both for this project and for my work more generally.

Defining rhetoric has been a troubled endeavor since the discipline's emergence in classical antiquity. A startling amount of papyrus/vellum/paper/bytes have been dedicated to pinning down what rhetoric is, exactly, and I harbor no illusion that any definition I provide will conclude that storied tradition. From my perspective, then, what matters is not a decisive definition of rhetoric but a useful one—something that helps me illuminate the strange, unsettling, opaque, and at times outright infuriating social media artifacts I study in this dissertation. As the remainder of this introduction will make clear, my primary objective as a scholar is to apply more or less traditional analytic tools to decidedly non-traditional objects of inquiry, so it makes sense that I cleave together here two useful definitions of rhetoric, one traditional and the other quite contemporary. The first useful definition is Aristotle's oft-repeated characterization of rhetoric (as translated into modern English by George A. Kennedy) from an early passage of his treatise *On Rhetoric*: “its [rhetoric’s] function is not to persuade but to see the available means of persuasion in each case” (35). The specific phrase “the available means of persuasion” has been a particularly resonant one for scholars and teachers of rhetoric because it captures so much in so little: it describes rhetoric as the study of suasive acts, within a unique context, aimed at moving someone to change their mind, with the full awareness that one’s tools for persuasion are partial and context-dependent and that therefore success cannot be guaranteed. Aristotle’s focus is obviously on humans as the users and abusers of rhetoric; although my own focus is on social media platforms that postdate Aristotle by two thousand-odd years, his

emphasis on rhetoric as a uniquely human activity is something I nonetheless embrace. Yet my attention to the complexities of social media platforms as an integral part of the human rhetorical activity I study requires me to supplement Aristotle's useful classical definition with a useful contemporary one. For that I turn to a recent review essay by Casey Boyle, James J. Brown, Jr., and Steph Ceraso, who conclude that ubiquitous computation has transformed the practice of rhetoric as we know it:

Rhetoric as a transductive process is not interactivity between separate nodes but a relational practice assuming pervasive connections across disparate registers. This relationality means the digital is everywhere and nowhere, everything and nothing, invisible and ever present, and transduction offers a way to immerse ourselves in that set of contradictions while still effecting change. It is *perhaps* too late to single out the digital as being a thing we can point at and whose fate we can easily determine. Instead, the digital portends to be a momentary specialization that falls away and becomes eventually known as the conditions through which rhetorical studies finds itself endlessly transducing. (258, original emphasis)

By "rhetoric as a transductive process," Boyle et al. mean "how a signal moves across disparate registers of relations," and they mobilize this definition of rhetoric-as-transduction to account for digital rhetoric's move, as stated in their essay's title, "Behind and Beyond the Screen" (257).<sup>4</sup> I find the metaphor of transduction helpful for thinking about the integral relationship between rhetorical activity and the global information systems that sustain it, but whereas Boyle et al. urge us to think about what happens *behind and beyond* the screen, I want to redirect our attention *back* to it. That is, I think that we still have a poor grasp of human rhetorical activity online (e.g., as evinced in the impulse to call everything online a meme), and this dissertation project attempts to enrich our vocabulary for thinking about one particular manifestation of what we see on the screen (recent social media-based conspiracism).

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<sup>4</sup>Boyle, Brown, Jr., and Ceraso teased out these ideas during a research seminar on "Digital Rhetoric Behind and Beyond the Screen" at the 2017 Rhetoric Society of America Summer Institute, which I had the pleasure of attending. Their review essay was published in a special issue of *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* dedicated to RSA's semicentennial.

My commitment to taking an infrastructural approach to social media-based conspiracism while privileging the humans within that infrastructure is reflected in the methods I employ in this project. My primary tools are the foundational ones of rhetorical theory and criticism: I study the distinct figures, devices, tropes, and topoi of contemporary conspiracy content and theorize their rhetorical effects. A humanist by training, I hold steadfast to the belief that deep analysis of very small things, such as a single digital image, can help us explain much larger things—up to and including the matrix of historical, sociotechnical, and ideological forces that make up what sometimes gets called “the human condition.” When faced with the utter magnitude of something like the internet, perhaps the most complex edifice ever built by humans, it is tempting to swap out old-school methods in favor of newer ones. And of course, rhetoric scholars have begun to deploy more quantitative, even “Big Data”-esque approaches to studying rhetoric online to great effect (Gallagher et al.; Ridolfo and Hart-Davidson). Nonetheless, I firmly believe in the value of taking a more traditional humanistic approach to studying the internet, and one of this dissertation project’s interventions is to show how the tools of rhetorical theory and criticism can shed light on the broader problem of online mis/disinformation, of which contemporary conspiracy theories are a part.

The archive of conspiracy content analyzed in the body chapters (chapters 2-4) is, in keeping with my deliberately small-scale methods, likewise scaled back. Chapter 4 focuses on a single video (*Plandemic*) that significantly contributed to the spread of COVID-19 conspiracism in the early months of the pandemic; the other two chapters are built around a selection of examples from small archives of user-generated Pizzagate imagery (Chapter 2) and anti-Parkland headlines (Chapter 3) that I gathered myself. Particularly in those two chapters, I refrain from making empirical claims that would be misaligned with my methods. I harbor no illusion that my

small archives are exhaustive or even statistically representative of each conspiracy theory in its entirety. Instead, I am interested in exploring in detail the rhetorical complexities that emerge when we focus our attention on each conspiracy theory in miniature.

A trio of key concepts serve as coordinates that triangulate this dissertation as a whole. The first is “rhetoric,” which I have already defined for my purposes. The second is “conspiracism,” a much less common term than “conspiracy theory” but one that I use intentionally. I adopt the term from political scientist Thomas Milan Konda, who in his recent book *Conspiracies of Conspiracies* describes conspiracism as “a mental framework, a belief system, a worldview that leads people to look for conspiracies, to anticipate them, to link them together into a grander overarching conspiracy” and posits that conspiracism “appears to have emerged as the belief system of the twenty-first century” (Konda 2). While I will at times use the term “conspiracy theory” in this dissertation, I have titled this project “The Rhetoric of Conspiracism in User-Centered Democracy” because conspiracism, not conspiracy theories, is the object of my analysis. I am not particularly interested in conspiracy theories as self-contained narratives of the world; that territory has already been thoroughly explored by other scholars across a wide range of fields—although of course there is always much more for us to learn. Rather, I am invested in studying online conspiracy theories as a distinct kind of social media *content* that helps us track broader permutations of U.S. political discourse in light of the socio-rhetorical infrastructure of major social media platforms. Put plainly, I think that this social media content indexes how the internet is changing American politics, and that is what makes online conspiracism worth our attention.

The third concept serving as a waypoint for this dissertation is what I am calling “user-centered democracy.” By “user-centered democracy,” I mean the historical moment we currently

occupy in the United States, in which the user of social media platforms has in key respects become the primary subject position of contemporary American politics (and perhaps also in other highly developed democratic polities, although that extends beyond my expertise). While a robust account of user-centered democracy would require its own dissertation-length project, I will sketch out here a few factors that suggest we have entered a new historico-political epoch in the United States. First, major social media platforms have become juggernauts in scale. Facebook, for example, hit 2 billion users worldwide on 27 June 2017, and ~73% of U.S. adults aged 18-64 have Facebook accounts (Vaidhyanathan 2; Pew Research Center “Percentage”). Social media usage more generally is widespread in the U.S., with 82% of people 12 or older using one or more of the major social media platforms in 2021 (Edison Research). Given this broad user base, it is perhaps unsurprising that social media serves as a major source of news for over half of American adults, with a September 2020 poll indicating that 53% of respondents either “often” (23%) or “sometimes” (30%) receive their news via social media and only 21% of adults responding that they “never” do (Pew Research Center “Share”). The 53% figure is likely to increase given the long-term decline of local news in the United States. According to a recent report from UNC’s Center for Innovation and Sustainability in Local Media, one-fourth of U.S. newspapers have disappeared since 2004 (Abernathy 11). More fine-grained data from this report shows that more than 200 counties have no local newspaper whatsoever, and over half of these “news deserts” are located in the U.S. South (Abernathy 20). With such restricted access to news sources, people may find social media platforms to be an attractive and seemingly cost-free hub for political information. The strongest signal that we now inhabit a user-centered democracy, however, is neither the scale of social media usage nor the frequency with which Americans turn to social media platforms for their news: it is the unnerving realization that

American politics itself has now transmogrified into a kind of social media content. Multiple scholars have analyzed this convergence between U.S. politics and social media discourse; I will cite two illustrative studies here. The first is *Make America Meme Again* by Heather Suzanne Woods and Leslie A. Hahner, who argue that “the most significant tactic of the Alt-right is its use of memes to both lure mainstream devotees and direct larger public discussions” (3). While one might be tempted to disregard the Alt-right as a fringe phenomenon, Woods and Hahner implore that we take their political rhetoric seriously, stating that “to dismiss memes is to thoroughly misapprehend the nature of political communication in the present” (218). Woods and Hahner’s arguments are complemented by another recent book, *Poaching Politics*, which traces the various ways that internet culture affected the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Using a “participatory cultures” framework, authors Paul Booth et al. show how fan and troll discourse was integral to the election. Like Woods and Hahner, they are unambiguous about the importance of social media for understanding contemporary politics: “Ultimately, scholars must begin to take participatory cultures and their role in politics seriously” (Booth et al. 170). From these two studies, we can begin to see how user-centered democracy has become ascendent in the United States, and we might further ruminate on this quotation from cultural critic Neil Postman, whose 1985 book *Amusing Ourselves to Death* continues to be prescient: “Our media are our metaphors. Our metaphors create the content of our culture” (15).

To close this review of methods and methodology, I feel compelled to mention one final influence on the intellectual work of this project that is personal but no less significant: I feel like a pariah when it comes to social media. I am a millennial who came of age with early web 2.0 technologies such as Myspace, yet I feel rather alienated from social media culture and thus from many other people of my generation, even more so those younger than me in Generation Z. I

certainly have used multiple social media platforms in the past—Myspace, Facebook, Formspring, and Tinder are a few that immediately come to mind—but currently do not have anything resembling a social media presence, and at a basic level, I simply do not understand the impulse. In an odd way, then, my estrangement from social media gives this dissertation project something of an anthropological cast; I feel like I am studying people totally unlike myself who maneuver the world in ways that I find endlessly fascinating but wholly unfamiliar. Thus, when I describe my archive as comprised of social media “artifacts,” this is not just a terminological flourish. From my perspective, social media objects indeed appear like something unearthed from an archeological dig.

### **Chapter Summaries**

The heart of this dissertation project consists in three case studies of social media-based conspiracy theories from the past five years (2016-2021): Pizzagate, the Parkland shooting, and *Plandemic*. In these body chapters I interrogate how each conspiracy theory exploits a particular aspect of the contemporary internet’s techno-rhetorical infrastructure to amplify said conspiracy theory’s plausibility, persuasiveness, or reach. By focusing closely on how conspiracism flourishes in our social media environment, I aim to nuance how rhetoric scholars understand—and ultimately address—the interrelationships between people, platforms, and politics in what Tarleton Gillespie has aptly characterized as the “long hangover of web 2.0” (*Custodians* 202).

In Chapter 2: “Pizzagate and Cut-and-Paste Conspiracism,” I analyze user-generated conspiracy collages about Pizzagate, a bizarre conspiracy theory that emerged just prior to the 2016 U.S. presidential election that alleges a vast occultic pedophilia ring run by Democratic party elites, including then-presidential candidate Hillary Clinton. I show that user-generated content both ignited Pizzagate and continues to sustain it, yet the prominence of user-generated

rhetorics often gets sidelined in accounts of the conspiracy theory. Turning to the broader field of conspiracy rhetoric research, I identify a similar oversight in the literature, observing that scholars have largely overlooked conspiracy content produced by ordinary people. I spend the bulk of chapter 2 closely analyzing what makes user-generated collages about Pizzagate so persuasive. I argue that the simple rhetorical affordances of cutting and pasting images together allows Pizzagate believers to tempt audiences with hidden secrets just out of their comprehension. By affirming in-group values with obscure allusions and addressing Pizzagate outsiders with alluring visuals and references to popular culture, user-generated Pizzagate collages can spread conspiracist ideas without the burden of articulating specific claims. This *cut-and-paste conspiracism*, as I call it, will only grow more pronounced in the coming years, and I implore scholars to address this and other rhetorical tactics of user-generated conspiracy rhetorics going forward.

Chapter 3: “Parkland and the Sharebait Enthymeme” examines conspiratorial headlines surrounding the February 14, 2018 shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School and the student-survivors who agitated for gun control reform following the massacre. I trace the emergence of March for Our Lives—the biggest youth protest movement in American history—and chart the vociferous attacks on the student-activists that soon emerged following the shooting. Reviewing the literature on the rhetoric of gun violence in America, I show that the MFOL students made a genuinely novel intervention into discourse about gun control policy through their deft use of social media and the unique rhetorical agency they claimed as children afflicted by gun violence. I then address how anti-Parkland conspiracy headlines exploit the widespread phenomenon of sharebait—*inflammatory links and other content designed to be shared without even having been clicked on yourself*—to distort the media narrative about the

Parkland shooting and March for Our Lives. My central claim is that these conspiracist headlines function as what I term *sharebait enthymemes*. Drawing from Jeffrey Walker's sophisticated understanding of the enthymeme, I develop an account of headlines' uniquely enthymematic function within our social media ecosystem. I use a small archive of anti-Parkland conspiracist headlines drawn from the subreddit r/conspiracy to explain how the sharebait enthymeme works, and I close the chapter by reflecting on larger significance of "dead digital rhetorics" like sharebait enthymemes for how we theorize digital rhetoric.

I close out my case studies with Chapter 4: "*Plandemic* and Content Incoordination," an inquiry into constructions of audience in *Plandemic*, a self-styled "documentary" about COVID-19 that went viral in May 2020. I begin the chapter by citing recent data on the distinct uptick in global social media usage during the early months of the pandemic, when millions of people were subject to stay-at-home orders and other quarantining measures, and connect the proliferation of COVID-19 conspiracism to this increased reliance on social media platforms for news about the still largely unknown virus. Reviewing the growing literature in the rhetoric of health and medicine (RHM) on (anti-)vaccine discourse, I establish that RHM scholars have rarely studied anti-vaccine rhetoric as a form of conspiracy theorizing despite clear evidence that anti-vaccine discourse often traffics in conspiracist claims. I spend the majority of the chapter closely analyzing how *Plandemic* makes audience appeals. I begin this section in an autoethnographic mode, ruminating on my own unnerving experience watching the video; despite knowing that many of its claims were ludicrous, I still found the film oddly compelling. To help me understand that experience, I turn to Kenneth Burke's concept of piety as developed in his 1935 book *Permanence and Change: An Anatomy of Purpose*. I connect Burkean piety to rhetorical work on topoi, particularly Ralph Cintrón's theorization of topoi as "storehouses of

social energy [...] [that] organize our sentiments, beliefs, and actions in the lifeworld” (“Limitations” 100). I use these rhetorical concepts to show how *Plandemic* deployed footage of the AIDS crisis—ACT UP protests, queer men withering away in hospital beds—to compel me as a viewer: in activating my sense of piety as a gay man acutely aware of homophobia, *Plandemic* made its questionable claims about Dr. Anthony Fauci seem more plausible than they otherwise would be. I continue my analysis of the video by explicating how *Plandemic* similarly deploys topoi around communism and sexism to make Dr. Judy Mikovits’s COVID-19 conspiracy theories attractive to distinct audience members (conservatives and women, respectively). I close the chapter by coining the term *content incoordination* to characterize the unique way *Plandemic* uses parallel lines of argument to persuade distinct segments of its viewership. I argue that content incoordination enabled *Plandemic* to succeed under conditions of “context collapse,” Alice Marwick and danah boyd’s celebrated notion for how social media platforms dissolve the traditional boundaries that formerly separated our professional and personal lives.

I conclude my dissertation by considering the principal conclusions and implications of my project for rhetorical studies, not only for specialists who study social media and mis/disinformation but also for rhetoric scholars writ large. I enumerate a few interconnected takeaways from the project as a whole: conspiracy rhetoric is a central problem for contemporary American politics, not a marginal phenomenon; the form and function of this conspiracy content is inextricable from the architecture of the social internet; and social media platforms as they currently exist will always struggle with conspiracism and other forms of mis/disinformation because such inflammatory content exploits what these platforms value. Having reviewed my primary conclusions, I then turn to some of the major implications of my research for future

work in rhetorical studies. I suggest that rhetoric scholars need to take platform infrastructure more seriously if they hope to understand online rhetoric and its connection to contemporary politics. Ultimately, however, our ability to address “information disorder” (Sellnow et al. 126) will be limited unless we also push for substantive regulation of social media platforms. As those policy changes are uncertain at best, I end the dissertation with a humble proposal for how rhetoricians might make a more tangible intervention in the meantime: their pedagogy. I offer a vignette of my own clumsy attempt to teach a conspiracy rhetoric lesson, reflecting on what that pedagogical failure reveals about the difficulties of teaching mis/disinformation in the classroom. Without deluding ourselves that we are changing the world, I suggest that rhetoric and composition instructors might find a renewed sense of purpose in teaching the simple yet profound arts of argumentation and information literacy.

## **CHAPTER 2: PIZZAGATE AND CUT-AND-PASTE CONSPIRACISM**

The essence of conspiracy beliefs lies in attempts to delineate and explain evil.  
—Michael Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy*, p.3.

It is a testament to the sheer weirdness of conspiracy theories that a hat adjustment could signal disclosure of child abuse. When Justin Bieber fixed his black beanie in a May 2020 Instagram video, conspiracy theorists quickly interpreted this expression as an unspoken acknowledgment that the pop singer was a victim of Pizzagate, a conspiracy theory from 2016 alleging a vast occultic pedophilia ring run by global elites, including Hillary Clinton and other members of the Democratic party. A comment posted to Bieber's Instagram video livestream instructed the pop star to use the hat gesture as an indirect confession, and for Pizzagate believers the subsequent beanie adjustment was proof positive that sinister elites had claimed yet another victim (Kang and Frenkel). Since Bieber's now infamous hat touch, conspiracy theorists have produced a bewildering array of reactions to the event—comments, videos, memes, and more—across the social media sphere from Facebook to TikTok (Kang and Frenkel). What might otherwise have been an involuntary attempt at alleviating discomfort instead became fodder to be dissected by Pizzagate enthusiasts.

Beyond its value as a conversation piece—“Did you hear what happened on the internet today?”—the Justin Bieber incident illustrates how online conspiracy theories have ballooned since the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Indeed, as political scientists Russell Muirhead and Nancy L. Rosenblum argue in their recent book *A Lot of People Are Saying*, we are seeing an unprecedented expansion of conspiratorial thought into the bedrock of American politics itself

(1-4). Conspiracy theories have always been a fixture of American political life, of course, but the baffling scale of their proliferation in our contemporary social media ecosystem presents new challenges to rhetoricians concerned with improving public discourse. These new shifts in how conspiracy theories are produced and circulated require us, in turn, to reexamine how we approach conspiracy rhetoric both as scholars and as citizens.

Recent political events in the United States give this task great urgency. After his clear and unequivocal loss to Joe Biden in the 2020 U.S. Presidential Election, Donald Trump launched a noxious rhetorical campaign to “Stop the Steal,” claiming aggressively and without reliable evidence that Biden’s win was fraudulent. Trump continues to propagate this lie despite having 61 of his 62 election fraud lawsuits fail and twice being denied a hearing by the Supreme Court (Cummings et al.). This unprecedented attack on the democratic process literalized in the harrowing events of January 6, 2021, when hundreds of “Stop the Steal” rioters breached the U.S. Capitol building, hoping to prevent the 117th Congress from certifying the election results (Reeves et al.). Five people died in the attempted insurrection, including a police officer, and over 300 people have been arrested for causing over 30 million dollars in property damage and other crimes (Chappell; Hymes et al.). Despite the riot’s wide condemnation by both political parties in the U.S., Trump continues to insist that the election was stolen, and opinion polling suggests that millions of people still believe him.

The “Stop the Steal” phenomenon shows conclusively that scholars cannot ignore dangerous rhetorics such as conspiracy theories. When online disinformation leads to violence—as it did in the Capitol attack, and as it has in some of the most gruesome mass shootings of recent years in El Paso and Christchurch—scholars must seek to understand the pernicious rhetorical forces that manifest in grievous harm. As such, I offer this chapter as my own small

contribution to a growing body of research that seeks to confront malicious rhetorics in public life, from Patricia Roberts-Miller's *Rhetoric and Demagoguery* to Jennifer Mercieca's *Demagogue for President*, among others. While analyzing dangerous discourse always risks amplifying it, the costs of not attending to conspiracy theories are far too great. A bizarre conspiracy theory like Pizzagate might seem outlandish and even grotesque, but it cannot be ignored, as studying the rhetorical tactics of this discourse gives us crucial insight into how conspiracy theories thrive in online spaces.

In this chapter I extend scholarship on conspiracy theories and online political rhetoric by theorizing what I call *cut-and-paste conspiracism*: user-generated conspiracy images that employ the digital rhetorical tools of cut/paste to produce deliberately inscrutable content. Through an analysis of early Pizzagate imagery composed during the 2016 presidential election season, I argue that collaging techniques play a critical role in the expansion of conspiracy theories online. Such content works to entice viewers with secrets just out of their reach. By suggesting nefarious plots but withholding further information, Pizzagate collages can spread conspiracist messages to broader audiences without the burden of making specific claims. This productive ambiguity, in turn, invites outsiders to learn more—and perhaps become Pizzagate insiders themselves.

I begin with a partial history of Pizzagate. I demonstrate that mainstream accounts of the conspiracy theory have not fully grappled with the user-generated content that formed the backbone of the Pizzagate archive from the beginning. I then situate my analysis within conspiracy rhetoric scholarship, including Jenny Rice's recent work on the rhetorical function of conspiracy archives, to explain what a focus on user-generated conspiracy media might offer the field. To illustrate how cut-and-paste conspiracism works, I provide a close analysis of a small archive of Pizzagate collages, showing how the rhetorical work of inscrutability operates

effectively across varied subject matter and tonal registers. I conclude the chapter by examining cut-and-paste conspiracism beyond Pizzagate with an eye to what my analysis offers rhetoric and writing studies. I suggest that cut-and-paste conspiracism will only become more pronounced in the coming years, and that to confront it, scholars must take seriously the fact that conspiracy theorists now *produce* conspiracy media as much as they *consume* it.

### A Partial History of Pizzagate

Providing a definitive history of an online conspiracy theory like Pizzagate is a bit like trying to wrestle the internet itself into some kind of coherent narrative. As a digital conspiracy theory fueled by the logic of the internet, Pizzagate resists being historicized at all, illustrating Charles Soukup's point that digital conspiracy theories are "entelechial" formations that can never really end (16-19). Despite this difficulty, I want to tease out one important historical thread of the Pizzagate story that, paradoxically, both appears in mainstream accounts yet quickly gets downplayed or misconstrued: the significance of user-generated content to the conspiracy theory's origins and life cycle.

By most accounts, the catalyst for Pizzagate was Wikileaks. In October 2016 the anti-secrecy organization published a trove of emails from John Podesta, Hillary Clinton's campaign chairman, that Russian hackers had stolen earlier that month via phishing (Franceschi-Bicchieri; Entous et al).<sup>5</sup> Wikileaks designed a search engine for the Podesta archive, enabling easy navigability of the documents using keywords and numerical tags. Although tantalizing in its own right—who wouldn't want to snoop through a public figure's private emails?—the Podesta archive drew additional scrutiny in light of Clinton's email controversy, a widely covered news story and talking point for the Trump campaign (Hicks). Motivated by this prior scandal, users

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<sup>5</sup>The Podesta email archive is available at <https://wikileaks.org/podesta-emails/>.

could trawl Podesta's emails for new signs of wrongdoing, which WikiLeaks' handy archive made effortless.

Users probably would have found fault in the emails no matter what, but Pizzagate as such likely never would have developed without two crucial bits of user-generated content: a tweet by a white supremacist parody of a Jewish lawyer (see fig. 1)—yes, really—and an anonymous post on the imageboard 4chan (see fig. 2) (Aisch et al.; Silverman).<sup>6</sup>

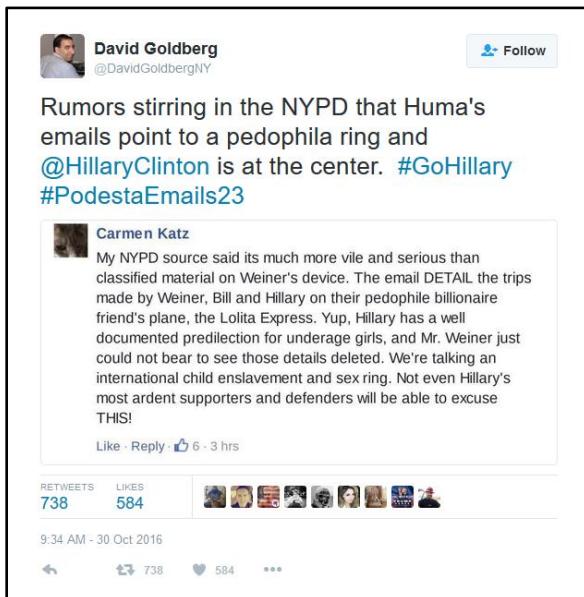


Fig. 1: @DavidGoldbergNY tweet.



Fig. 2. 4chan “glossary” for the Podesta email archive.

<sup>6</sup>These two posts occupy the center of the mainstream media narrative of Pizzagate’s origins. In a recent article, Tuters et al. (2018) instead locate Pizzagate’s roots in a different 4chan thread from 2 November 2016. The @DavidGoldbergNY tweet predates this thread by three days, however, complicating Tuters et al.’s analysis.

The former is a 30 October 2016 post from @DavidGoldbergNY, who tweeted a screenshot of a Facebook post by Carmen Katz, a woman from Missouri, which @DavidGoldbergNY glosses with “Rumors stirring in the NYPD that Huma's emails point to a pedophila [sic] ring and @HillaryClinton is at the center. #GoHillary #PodestaEmails23” (@DavidGoldbergNY).<sup>7</sup> The latter is a 3 November 2016 post that presumes to offer a translation of sorts for code words used by pedophiles to refer to sex acts with children—like ‘pizza’ for ‘girl’—and that encourages users to “[s]earch for these possible doublespeak keywords in Wikileaks” (qtd. in Aisch et al.).

Alerted to the presence of coded child abuse and armed with a purported key to its cipher, users began to search the Podesta emails for clues. When they inevitably encountered references to food—eating being a basic human need, after all—users felt they had stumbled upon a nefarious conspiracy reaching the highest levels of the U.S. government. Seemingly humdrum conversations about pasta recipes and gifts of cheese mutated into sinister accounts of child trafficking and abuse. One chain of emails between John Podesta and James Alefantis, owner of the Comet Ping Pong restaurant in D.C., was critical to Pizzagate’s subsequent development. In these exchanges Alefantis proposes to host a Clinton campaign fundraiser at his pizzeria, much like one previously held for Barack Obama (Gillin; Fisher et al.). With their eye on Alefantis, conspiracy theorists began to suspect that something sinister was afoot at Comet Ping Pong.

The search for coded pedophilia extended to Alefantis’s social media accounts before quickly spilling into the offline world. Pizzagate believers became alarmed at images of children Alefantis had posted to his Instagram account and suspected his pizzeria imprisoned child sex slaves in its basement (Aisch et al.). Comet Ping Pong’s logos and advertising also included common shapes such as hearts that Pizzagate followers linked to similar shapes used by

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<sup>7</sup>While the @DavidGoldbergNY Twitter account no longer exists, the Pizzagate-igniting tweet is archived at <http://archive.is/J6eRV#selection-3779.0-3824.0>.

pedophiles, citing an FBI document on coded pedophilia symbols Wikileaks had released in 2007 (United States, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Cyber Division, Innocent Images Unit). But similar shapes also appeared in the logos and advertising of nearby businesses in northwest D.C., leading conspiracy theorists to suspect that these bookstores, boutique shops, and restaurants were linked to Comet Ping Pong via secret underground tunnels (Fisher et al.).

Pizzagate believers quickly escalated their efforts from investigation to intervention, both at Comet Ping Pong and at nearby establishments. Some left harassing voicemails, made angry phone calls, and posted accusations on Yelp and other social media platforms; others went straight to sending death threats. More active Pizzagaters picketed outside Comet Ping Pong, holding signs with messages like “Investigate Pizzagate,” while Trump campaign organizer Jack Posobiec attempted to livestream video footage from inside the pizzeria on November 16 before employees forced him to leave (Fisher et al.). Most notably, on December 4th Edgar Maddison Welch held up Comet Ping Pong at gunpoint, driving from his hometown of Salisbury, North Carolina, to rescue children he believed were imprisoned at the pizzeria. When his search proved fruitless, he discharged his assault rifle into a closet and subsequently allowed himself to be arrested by police (Fisher et al.). Although the Welch incident should have killed off Pizzagate, it instead became fodder for further speculation that Welch *himself* was involved, working as a crisis actor in a “false flag” operation designed to “discredit the conspiracy theory” (Tait).

And on it goes, even years after the fact. To conclude this brief and necessarily partial history I want to underscore just how critical user-generated content has been to Pizzagate. As we have seen, the @DavidGoldbergNY and 4chan “glossary” played a key role in directing users to the Podesta archive and shaping how they ought to interpret it. Mainstream accounts of the conspiracy theory acknowledge this fact, yet quickly move to fact-checking particular claims

(Aisch et al.) or diagnosing the problem in terms of misinformation (Gillin; Fisher et al.).<sup>8</sup> Fact-checking misinformation is undoubtedly important, but framing Pizzagate solely in those terms risks misrecognizing what is distinctive about contemporary online conspiracy theories: they largely consist in user-generated content. Indeed, user-generated content continues to form the backbone of the Pizzagate archive, from the aforementioned harassment on Yelp and Instagram to memes, YouTube ‘documentaries,’ and other media propagating the tenets of the conspiracy theory. Of course, conspiracy theorists in previous eras also produced content about their theories using zines, photocopies, and other media available to them.<sup>9</sup> But what distinguishes Pizzagate and other contemporary conspiracy theories is the speed, scale, and above all *centrality* of user-generated content. In other words, we are witnessing user-generated content becoming the prime object of conspiracism today. Thus, if we hope to understand why something outlandish like Pizzagate could endure as it has, we must consider the rhetorical significance of producing such content oneself.

### **Conspiracy Rhetoric’s Supply and Demand**

Examining conspiracy theories from the perspective of user-generated content productively extends how they have previously been studied. Conspiracy theories have been a fixture of rhetoric scholarship since Richard Hofstadter published his celebrated essay “The Paranoid Style in American Politics” in 1964.<sup>10</sup> While this work is rich and nuanced, we can

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<sup>8</sup>Craig Silverman’s account in *Buzzfeed News* admittedly diverges in focusing more on user-generated content, but his piece is anomalous in this regard.

<sup>9</sup>For a history of how twenty-century conspiracy theories adapted to new media technologies, see Jennifer Gagliardi’s unpublished master’s thesis, “The Culture of Conspiracy: Evolving Media Technology and Its Relationship to Conspiracy Theories” (2017).

<sup>10</sup>While Hofstadter was an intellectual historian rather than a rhetorician, his essay takes a broadly rhetorical approach. Hofstadter characterizes conspiratorial thought as a stylistic defect that arises from conspiracy theorists overestimating the place of human will in shaping historical events (29).

make a broad distinction between two trajectories in the literature, using a recent article by Ryan Neville-Shepard as a guide. Neville-Shepard positions his work within the “supply side” of conspiracy rhetoric scholarship focused on “how they [conspiracy theories] function not for their adherents but for the elite rhetors who rely on them” (“Post-Presumption” 180). In Neville-Shepard’s case, the “supply side” rhetoric in question is the way former president Donald Trump uses conspiracy theories to undermine democratic norms. To Neville-Shepard’s “supply side” we might add a “demand side” as well, one that examines the various factors—cultural, economic, ideological, and the like—that make conspiracy theories compelling for audiences. Surveying the past 60 years of conspiracy rhetoric research, this broad conceptual division holds.

Supply-side and demand-side perspectives are roughly evenly weighted in the literature. Demand-side scholarship has approached conspiracy theories from a variety of angles, starting with Goodnight and Poulakos’s early analysis of the “social consensus” conspiracies help form in the wake of distressing or ambiguous events (300). Subsequent research in this vein has examined how conspiracies provide a social critique of institutions (Miller), arise in reaction to poor scientific communication (Bricker), and foment political extremism (Warner and Neville-Shepard). Beyond these broadly sociopolitical functions, scholars have explored a perhaps even more significant reason conspiracy theories have wide uptake: they make for great entertainment (Dorsey; Kelley-Romano; Reyes and Smith). In recent years, demand-side scholarship has expanded to include Calum Matheson’s psychoanalytic analyses of contemporary right-wing conspiracism (“Filthy Lucre,” “Stasis,” “Obama”) and Eric King Watts’s diagnosis of the racialized “biotropes” that undergird the worldview of doomsday preppers (445). In sum, the demand-side perspective examines at a macro-level the many reasons why people take up conspiracy theories in the first place.

The supply-side branch, by contrast, has focalized on elite deployment of conspiracy arguments across contexts. This emphasis on elites derives partly from rhetoric's traditional focus on significant rhetorical events such as public address. Early supply-side work explored the function of conspiracy rhetoric in the heights of American oratory—the Lincoln-Douglas Debates of 1858 (Zarefsky)—and the use of carefully constructed narratives to give conspiracy arguments “an image of inexorability” (Young et al. 106). Subsequent scholarship has analyzed the use of conspiracy arguments in social movements (Pfau), think tanks (Stewart), far-right religious magazines (Goldzwig), and early American jeremiads (Griffin), but the bulk of supply-side research has focused on presidential rhetoric (Johnson; Neville-Shepard, “Subtextual Form” and “Post-Presumption Argumentation”; Kelley-Romano and Carew). Taken together, the strength of this supply-side research lies in its fine-grained analyses of conspiracy arguments.

Conspiracy theories have been robustly analyzed by rhetoric and communication scholars from both supply- and demand-side perspectives, but taken separately, these two approaches risk overlooking what lies at their intersection: the everyday production of conspiracy discourse by ordinary people. Demand-side scholarship focuses on why people find conspiracy rhetoric compelling but often assumes that the media or elite rhetors supply these theories; supply-side scholarship attends to the production of conspiracy arguments but primarily that generated by elites. Yet as the case of Pizzagate illustrates, contemporary online conspiracy rhetoric largely consists of user-generated content produced by everyday internet users, not presidents or other elites, and for this reason we need a synthetic approach that examines why ordinary people find compelling the conspiracy rhetoric others like themselves have produced.

More contemporary conspiracy rhetoric scholarship, particularly Jenny Rice's recent work, provides a generative new direction for the field that pushes beyond supply- and demand-

side perspectives. In her book, *Awful Archives: Conspiracy Theory, Rhetoric, and Acts of Evidence*, Rice breaks new ground in the study of conspiracy theories by approaching them as embodied, constructive processes of archive-building—and in so doing, reevaluating what we perceive as evidence. Instead of treating evidence as something you possess, *Awful Archives* urges us to see it as something that “operates, moves, and is sustained in ways that may not show up at first glance[,] [...] an *act* rather than a *thing*” (12, original emphasis). For Rice, reframing evidence as a process likewise entails reframing what counts as an archive, describing it as “ordinary and extraordinary experiences in public life that leave lasting, palpable residues, which then become our sources—our resources—for public discourse” (16-17). The remainder of *Awful Archives* articulates the various kinds of “lasting, palpable residues” that conspiracy theories traffic in: suspicious (or suspiciously unsuspicious) documents, accumulations of minute details, or the absence of any details whatsoever.

This chapter extends Rice’s work by examining the way user-generated Pizzagate collages produce a kind of evidentiary effect on their viewers. Through the rhetorical work of cut-and-paste conspiracism, Pizzagate collages invite us to see the “lasting, palpable residues” of horrendous crimes by detecting clues hidden in seemingly mundane objects: business logos, social media posts, email references to Pizza. This archive, at once pedestrian and unfathomable, produces for viewers a network of wrongdoing so vast and unspeakable it can only be gestured at with ironic memes. It is to these bizarre displays of cut-and-paste conspiracism that I now turn.

### **If It Sticks... Cut-and-Paste Conspiracism in Action**

What immediately stands out about user-generated Pizzagate collages is their strange mix of accessibility and impenetrability. These images employ a common digital rhetorical tactic—cutting and pasting visual elements together—but do so to produce collages whose meaning is

thoroughly opaque. Complicating further this accessibility/inaccessibility dyad, Pizzagate collages mimic the appearance of memes and spread through social media platforms through filtering mechanisms such as hashtags and retweets. In other words, Pizzagate collages are *paramemetic* objects that ape the memetic format while diverging from memes in rhetorically significant ways.

As an example, consider the following two images: a traditional Pizzagate meme based on the “Condescending Wonka” template (@beckipercy2020) (see fig. 3) and a Pizzagate collage (“They Are All Pedophiles—The Choice to Know Will Be Yours”) (see fig. 4).



Fig. 3: “Condescending Wonka” Pizzagate meme.

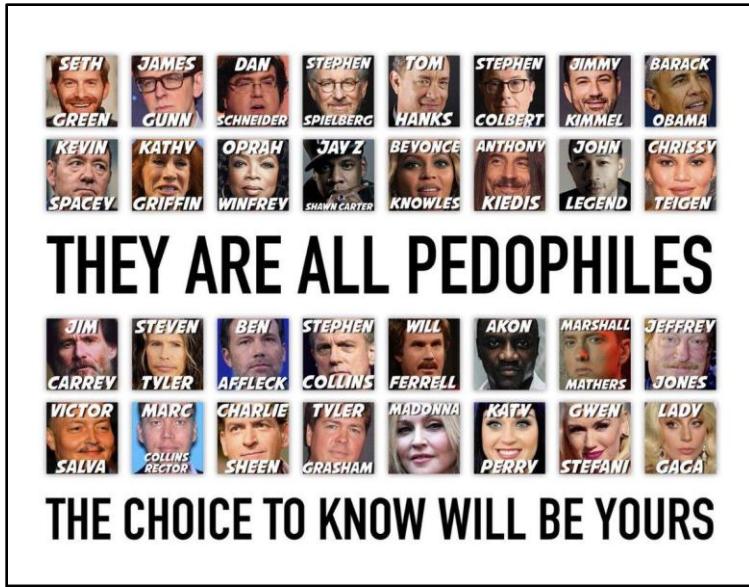


Fig. 4: “They Are All Pedophiles—The Choice to Know Will Be Yours” collage.

That figure 3 counts as a meme is unambiguous: it clearly uses the “Condescending Wonka” image macro, an internet mainstay since 2010 (Don and SabrinaTibbetts). Users familiar with the template will immediately recognize figure 3 as an example of it, and thus they can readily understand that the meme’s text is sardonic. By virtue of the visual template, the audience gets the implication that “they,” whoever “they” might be, are stopping conversation about Pizzagate because “they” know that the conspiracy theory is actually true. In short, Pizzagate memes like figure 3 spread conspiracy messages, including subtext, through the instant visual recognition memetic templates provide.<sup>11</sup>

Figure 4, by contrast, does strikingly different rhetorical work despite its para-memetic features. The text used in the image resembles the Impact font near ubiquitous in old-school memes, including figure 3, and it presents its message in two lines of text as is commonplace. Yet despite these surface similarities, figure 4 wholly lacks the shared visual framework of

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<sup>11</sup>This presents us with something of a paradox: it implies that we can only identify something as a meme after it has already become one! The internet phenomenon of “forcing” a meme further illustrates their strange *ex post facto* logic (Nissenbaum and Shifman 491-2).

traditional memes like figure 3. The overall image is unique to this collage: the creator has arranged 32 headshots of left-leaning actors and musicians, as well as former U.S. president Barack Obama, into four rows divided by text into two halves. The lack here of a memetic template creates a rhetorical fissure between image and text, a communicative gap between these two modalities. Whereas users viewing figure 3 can quickly ascertain its meaning, figure 4 introduces a degree of ambiguity: how does the creator know that all of these celebrities are pedophiles, and if the “the choice to know will be yours,” what exactly is it that the audience needs to know? Unlike the message conveyed in figure 3, the text of figure 4 leaves viewers with a rhetorical puzzle that remains unresolved; indeed, it directly confronts viewers with this irresolution by proclaiming “the choice to know will be yours,” a gesture to future acquisition of this hidden knowledge. Figure 4 thus opens up rhetorical space for what I am calling *cut-and-paste conspiracism*, the use of collaging techniques to produce ambiguous yet uncanny conspiratorial displays.

A key rhetorical operation of cut-and-paste conspiracism is what we might call *visual parataxis*. As Richard Lanham notes in *A Handlist of Rhetorical Terms*, the classical Greek term “parataxis” denotes “clauses or phrases arranged independently (a coordinate, rather than a subordinate, construction)” (108). Unlike “hypotaxis,” a syntax with clauses hierarchically arranged, a paratactic syntax gives equal weight to each textual element (Lanham *Handlist* 108). Applying the concept to images rather than text or speech, we can understand visual parataxis as the arrangement of equally weighted visual elements in a composite image.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>Unlike the term ‘juxtaposition’, visual parataxis does not require that the visual elements play off each other as contrasts.

Figure 4, discussed above, provides a concrete example of visual parataxis in action. The creator of the collage clearly has arranged the headshots of the alleged pedophiles such that no one image draws attention: the photos are equally sized/labeled and arranged in a grid. Moreover, the ordering of the headshots lacks a clear organizing principle such as alphabetization; Barack Obama, the only politician in the mix, appears unceremoniously and somewhat randomly at the end of the first row. The collage thus gives no headshot priority over the others, and the text in the image reflects this fact: “They are all pedophiles...” It is precisely the unprincipled ordering and deprioritization offered by visual parataxis that amplifies the rhetorical work of the image. Crucially, some of the public figures depicted (e.g., Jeffrey Jones) actually have been indicted for pedophilia-related crimes (Black).<sup>13</sup> By placing these convicted child sex offenders among headshots of celebrities who never have been charged or even accused of sex crimes, figure 4 validates its accusation of a web of pedophiles lurking in media, art, and politics without having to provide any real evidence thereof.

Visual parataxis enables Pizzagate collages to suggest nefarious plots without the burden of articulating specific claims, which rhetorically bridges Pizzagate insiders and outsiders to the conspiracist community. The next Pizzagate collage I discuss (see fig. 5) clearly demonstrates how such bridging works.

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<sup>13</sup>Dan Schneider, a former producer for Nickelodeon, has been dogged with pedophilia accusations for years but has never been formally charged with any sex crime. Thanks to Nora Augustine for explaining this history to me.

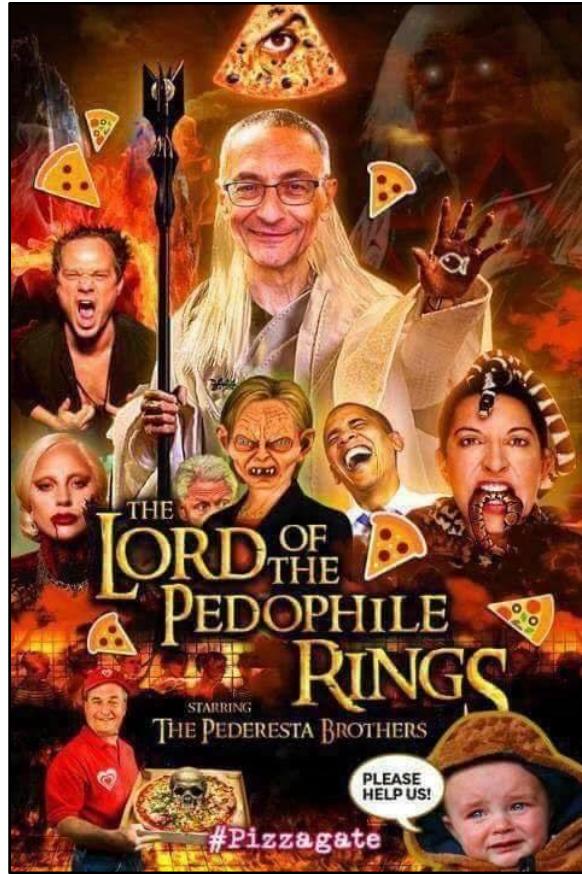


Fig. 5: *The Lord of the Pedophile Rings* collage.

This Pizzagate collage parodies *The Lord of the Rings* film posters by depicting the alleged Pizzagate conspirators as actors in a film called *The Lord of the Pedophile Rings*, a pun on two different meanings of ‘rings’.<sup>14</sup> The Podesta brothers, here misnamed the “Pederesta Brothers” for obvious reasons, prominently appear on the poster: John Podesta occupies the most visible position as villainous wizard Saruman in the top-center of the image, while Tony Podesta appears as a pizzeria employee in the bottom-left corner, skull-adorned pizza in hand. Working down from the top left quadrant, the other public figures depicted include Comet Ping Pong owner James Alefantis, baring his chest in mid-yell; pop singer Lady Gaga, dressed as her character The Countess from the anthology television series *American Horror Story*; Hillary

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<sup>14</sup>However, from what I can tell figure 5 is not based on any one *LOTR* film poster in particular.

Clinton, depicted here as *Lord of the Rings* character Gollum, behind whose right shoulder Bill Clinton peers nervously; Barack Obama, laughing maniacally; and celebrated performance artist Marina Abramović, decorated with a snake resting on her head and clamped between her teeth. To complete the collage, a distressed baby in the bottom right corner urges viewers, via a speech bubble, “Please help us!”

Figure 5 deploys visual parataxis to reconfigure a touchstone of popular culture into a sarcastic visualization of the alleged conspirators, thereby connecting outside audiences with Pizzagate believers. As I noted earlier, we know from supply-side scholarship that audiences find conspiracy plots deeply entertaining, hence their frequent appearance in popular cultural artifacts like *The X-Files* (Kelley-Romano; Dorsey) or *House of Cards* (Jones and Soderlund). While *The Lord of the Rings* does not contain a conspiracy plot per se, it is nonetheless an enormously popular fantasy franchise whose distinct heroes and villains serve as an accessible reference point for Pizzagate outsiders. Even if viewers do not recognize all of the figures depicted on the mock poster, said viewers will likely pick up on the associations drawn between the alleged conspirators and the *Lord of the Rings* characters they represent. Turning John Podesta into Saruman clearly makes him seem villainous, as does superimposing Gollum’s face on Hillary Clinton. While these are the only two conspirators transformed into *Lord of the Rings* villains, the depiction of the other conspirators becomes menacing by association. Barack Obama laughing, for example, appears perverse on a poster for a movie called *The Lord of the Pedophile Rings*; Bill Clinton, likewise, seems to peek behind Hillary’s shoulder because he has something nefarious to hide. The rhetorical force of this Pizzagate collage as a whole, then, rests less on the depiction of any one alleged conspirator and more on the network of conspiracy it visualizes. In sum, visual parataxis here grafts a web of conspiracism onto a recognizable pop cultural artifact,

using viewers' familiarity with the Tolkien franchise to impute heinous if ill-specified crimes to political and media elites.

Just as Figure 5 appeals to Pizzagate outsiders, so also does it affirm the beliefs and values of Pizzagate insiders, reflecting Jenny Rice's observation that conspiracy archives present "epideictic expression[s] of beautiful coherence" for conspiracy theorists ("Rhetorical Aesthetics" 44). We can discern this epideictic function of the collage at both the micro and macro level. At the micro level, Figure 5 contains multiple allusions to specific Pizzagate claims only an insider to the community would recognize. First, the collage depicts symbols identified by the FBI as pedophilic symbology: a heart-shaped spiral—code for "girl lover"—appears emblazoned on Tony Podesta's shirt as a pizza company logo (United States, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Cyber Division, Innocent Images Unit). A second visual allusion is to Tony Podesta's art collection, which Pizzagate believers allege is proof of his pedophilia. Specifically, Figure 5 includes a cropped piece of a 2006 painting by the Serbian artist Biljana Durdević, *Living in Oblivion*, which appears in the background just above Tony Podesta's head—albeit heavily altered via color saturation (Durdević). While to my knowledge Podesta does not possess this specific painting, he does own other works by Durdević, whose depiction of children conspiracy theorists find suspect (Wainman). A final visual allusion is the fish symbol on John Podesta's outstretched hand, a reference to a 2015 tweet from Podesta's Twitter account. The tweet includes a photo of Podesta with the number 14 and a fish symbol on his right and left palms, respectively, and is captioned with the text "Important but overlooked Global Goal: no. 14—we must protect our oceans and life they sustain #SDGs" (@johnpodesta). Podesta is here tweeting about the 14th "sustainable development goal" of the United Nations Development Programme, which Podesta helped draft (United Nations Development Programme).

Unsurprisingly, Pizzagate believers suspect instead that Podesta is tweeting occult symbology (Schlenker). FBI symbols, Serbian artwork, a random tweet—all of these far-flung references gesture to the insider knowledge gained by one’s initiation into the Pizzagate community.

At the macro level, the uncomfortable tone of Pizzagate collages further evinces the expressive work they do for insiders to the conspiracy community. These images often take on an irreverent, jocular tone thickly layered with irony, much like the transgressive Alt-right memes Heather Suzanne Woods and Leslie A. Hahner analyze in their recent book *Make America Meme Again*. This irreverence undoubtedly alarms users who encounter Pizzagate collages for the first time—why would the creators of these images joke about something like pedophilia? At first glance, the humor so common in user-generated Pizzagate collages would seem to undermine their rhetorical efficacy, particularly their ability to reach outside audiences. Jokes about pedophilia are highly taboo in most societies, after all. Yet when we consider the broader rhetorical choices made in these images, the irreverent humor makes sense. Pizzagate collages serve as epideictic displays that affirm the conspiratorial identity and values of the Pizzagate community. Pizzagate theorists can laugh at the alleged conspirators because they know the truth. In this way the images function like an inside joke: hilarious to those who “get it” but inaccessible to everyone else. Crucially, however, this inside joke is not entirely closed off to outsiders: there is clear indication that others can gain access to these horrific secrets too. Figure 4, for instance, informs viewers that “the choice to know will be yours,” and figure 5 urges viewers to “help” the children being abused—perhaps first by searching Twitter for #Pizzagate. We can understand these rhetorical choices as strategic attempts to bridge conspiracy theorists with audiences unfamiliar with Pizzagate. Even though their content might seem

opaque and offensive at first glance, Pizzagate collages nonetheless provoke outsiders to discover for themselves the cryptic secrets visualized yet withheld from their comprehension.

As we have seen, Pizzagate collages do double duty: affirming in-group values through tonal incongruity and conspiratorial references while addressing out-groups through visual parataxis and cryptic audience appeals. In this way, these practices of cut-and-paste conspiracism perform what Rice has recently described as “evidentiary acts” (*Awful* 173). Pizzagate collages *produce* for their viewers the archive of villainy they purport merely to *depict*. In assembling together political figures, pop culture references, inappropriate jokes, and cryptic symbolism, Pizzagate creators generate a strange and unsettling archive that produces in viewers the affective rhetorical work necessary to make something like Pizzagate plausible—what Rice memorably describes as “*Something intense, something real. Something off. Something fucked up. Something anomalous*” (*Rice Awful* 12, original emphasis).

These evidentiary “shimmers,” as Rice calls them, are perhaps no clearer than in Figure 6, the image that first prompted my inquiry into user-generated Pizzagate imagery (*Awful* 12). I conclude this section by analyzing this final collage, which most clearly illustrates how cut-and-paste conspiracism functions as an “act of evidence.”



Figure 6: “Do You Think I’ll Do Better Playing Dominos on Cheese than on Pasta?” collage.

Figure 6 depicts several people gathered around a table where John Podesta and Hillary Clinton appear to play dominos (Bill\_Murrays\_Sandals).<sup>15</sup> Moving clockwise around the table from the top-left corner, we see Marina Abramović, dressed in black and standing with a shirtless boy whose eyes she covers with her palm; the performer Majestic Ape from the band Heavy Breathing; James Alefantis, hunched over and equipped with a professional-grade camera; banker Herbert Sandler sitting at the table and wearing a black leather jacket; a man wearing an abstract black and white shirt, whose face is cropped out of the image; the head of Tony Podesta, which looms unnaturally large on the right side of the collage; a nondescript middle-aged man sitting across from the other older man and holding what appears to be dominos; two disembodied hands holding a smartphone displaying a Durdević painting; another disembodied hand gripping a professional-grade camera; and finally, to John Podesta’s right, a floating panda mask, staring vacantly and ominously at the viewer. A few odd objects sit on the

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<sup>15</sup>I originally found this image on Voat, a now defunct website that served as an Alt-right facsimile of Reddit. Since Voat shut down permanently in December 2020, the original post cannot be accessed, but it has been archived by the Wayback Machine here: <http://web.archive.org/web/20190319073454/https://i.imgur.com/nibV9Cm.jpg>.

table between Podesta and Clinton. A large plate of spaghetti is placed somewhat haphazardly before Podesta, while three columns of sliced Swiss cheese, topped with a row of dominos, are stacked before Clinton. Between the food, a line of dominos snakes around the center of the table. Completing figure 6, standard memetic text above and below the collage asks cryptically, “Do you think I’ll do better playing dominos on cheese than on pasta?”

Figure 6 is undoubtedly the most inaccessible of the collages I have surveyed, but it too uses cut-and-paste conspiracism to address both insider and outsider alike. The collage presents us with a classic conspiracist tableau: elites gathered around a table, crafting plots. While the background is well-lit, the light blue wall appears to be concrete or cinder block, materials often used in the foundations of buildings. The setting and configuration of the room thus leads us to suspect that Figure 4 depicts an illicit, subterranean scene to which we are fleetingly given access. As we will see, however, what Pizzagate believers and outsiders perceive in this scene differs dramatically.

More so than any other collage I have discussed, Figure 6 palpably revels in Pizzagate’s intricacies. In this case the collage visualizes one of the purported “smoking guns” of the Pizzagate theory: email #50332 in the Podesta email archive. Sent to John and Mary Podesta from prominent banker Herbert Sandler and simply titled “Cheese,” this seemingly mundane email has attracted immense interest from conspiracy theorists, in no small part because it is indeed odd when read out of context. I here reproduce the 24 December 2015 email as it appears, typos and all:

Mary and John

I think you should give notice when changing strategies which have been long in place. I immediately realized something was different by the shape of the box and I contemplated

who would be sending me something in the square shaped box. Lo and behold, instead of pasta and wonderful sauces, it was a lovely, tempting assortment of cheeses, Yummy. I am awaiting the return of my children and grandchildren from their holiday travels so that we can demolish them.

Thank you so much. I hope you and your gang are well.

I miss you both

Best wishes fro a merry Christmas and Happy New Year.

Herb

Ps. Do you think I'll do better playing dominos on cheese than on pasta? (Sandler)

I explained earlier that one of the central tenets of Pizzagate is that Podesta and other elites use code words like ‘pizza’ for sex acts with children. Deciphering the alleged code words in email #50332, Herb here thanks the Podestas for a Christmas gift of a little girl (‘cheese’) and expresses his surprise at not receiving a little boy (‘pasta’) instead (Aisch et al.). What Pizzagate believers focus on most, however, is the post scriptum—“Do you think I'll do better playing dominos on cheese than on pasta?—which they interpret as Herb asking whether he will do a better job having sadomasochistic sex (‘playing dominos’) with a girl rather than a boy. In sum, Pizzagate believers allege that this email describes sex trafficking.<sup>16</sup>

Returning to Figure 6, we find that the collage makes a perverse visual gag by literalizing

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<sup>16</sup>This is ghastly stuff, to be sure, but it is blindingly obvious when read in context that email #50332 has nothing whatsoever to do with pedophilia or sex trafficking. From other messages, we learn that the Podestas enjoy cooking, hence the culinary presents, and also enjoy playing dominoes with their friends—rather unremarkable interests for middle-aged adults. To take this instead as describing heinous sex crimes is, to say the least, uncharitable reading. I am reminded here of Hofstadter’s observation that in conspiracy arguments a “curious leap in imagination [...] is always made at some critical point in the recital of events” (“Paranoid Style” 37).

the text in email #50332 that Pizzagate believers read against the grain. Instead of depicting the subtext of the email, the collage shows us the alleged child sex traffickers sitting around a shabby table, literally playing dominos on cheese and pasta. This act of visual inversion rhetorically showcases the purported absurdity of taking Sandler's email at face value: to play dominoes on food. Confronted with that image, Sandler's post scriptum indeed sounds nonsensical—and hence suspect. The humor here can therefore be described as a kind of visual *reductio ad absurdum*. Importantly, however, this joke-as-argument can only work because the collage visualizes only part of email #50332. Were the collage to depict the rest of it, the image would become far more mundane and thus undermine the visual argument Figure 6 makes on behalf of Pizzagate believers.

Would outsiders get the joke? I doubt it. Yet through the work of cut-and-paste conspiracism, Figure 6 uses this very fact to tempt external audiences with hidden insight. For conspiracy theorists, the collage serves as an inside joke, inverting text and subtext to make a claim against reading email #50332 at face value. For Pizzagate outsiders, Figure 6 is an inside joke turned inside out: keeping the absurd image but withholding the punchline—and perhaps the humor altogether. Viewers unfamiliar with email #50332 are confronted simply with the uncanny image of Clinton, Podesta, and others playing dominos on food. Likewise, the question “Do you think I’ll do better playing dominos on cheese than on pasta?” transforms from a punchline to a description of sorts for the bizarre display in the collage’s center. Most important, however, the caption transforms into search terms: the first thing those unfamiliar with the caption will do is Google it.

Finally, the strategic use of eye contact in Figure 6 completes the rhetorical doublings characteristic of cut-and-paste conspiracism. While the collage depicts several figures gathered

around Clinton and Podesta’s game of dominos, those figures are not watching them: they are watching us. The panda mask, Abramović, Majestic Ape, Alefantis, Sandler, Tony Podesta—all of them stare directly at the viewer. What does this communicate? For Pizzagate believers, the stare functions as a knowing glance, a way to signal that the conspirators know that you know what they are doing. By contrast, for those outside the Pizzagate community the eye contact heightens the collage’s unnerving qualities, furthering the sense that we are witnessing something truly *wrong*. Collaging as a technique produces this sense of the unnatural by positioning the conspirators as if they were watching the dominos game while also clearly watching us.

Collectively, the Pizzagate collages I have analyzed in this essay show how cut-and-paste conspiracism allows conspiratorial ideas to spread far beyond the fringe of true believers. Simple collaging techniques enable Pizzagate insiders to conjure all manner of villainy for outside audiences. Hollywood headshots become wanted posters for sexual deviance. A fantasy film poster advertises a vast network of all-too-real child abuse. A centuries-old strategy game alludes to heinous acts hidden in plain sight. Cut-and-paste conspiracism produces these rhetorical doublings for insider and outsider alike. By pasting together a confounding array of people, places, and things, Pizzagate collages manifest conspiracies before our very eyes—if only we take the time to look.

### **Confronting Cut-and-Paste Conspiracism Beyond Pizzagate**

Pizzagate might appear to be a fringe set of beliefs, but other conspiracy theories also employ the tactics of cut-and-paste conspiracism, suggesting that user-generated content continues to be the rhetorical lifeblood of these communities. For want of space, I can only gesture to this much larger archive in the remainder of this chapter, but I encourage rhetoric and

writing studies scholars to explore further the vast array of user-generated conspiracy media circulating online. This user-generated content shows no signs of abating. If we hope to mitigate the harm caused by online misinformation, we must understand the rhetorical strategies that ordinary people use to circulate dangerous ideas.

I reproduce below a user-generated collage associated with the recent “Stop the Steal” conspiracy theory I discussed in the introduction (ou812rusty). Figure 7 uses simple collaging techniques to generate, as the caption tells us, a “Biden Zoom Call With Election Team.” A very unflattering photo of President Biden—with vacant expression and mouth agape—occupies the center of the collage; above and below him are supposed members of his election team, drawn both from popular culture and from other rightwing conspiracy theories. Moving clockwise from the top-left corner, we see Carmen Sandiego, villain and namesake of the celebrated children’s edutainment franchise of the 1980s-1990s; George Soros, Jewish billionaire and prominent liberal philanthropist; the Hamburglar, a character used to market McDonald’s food to children in the 1970s-1990s; Dr. Seuss’s character the Grinch as depicted by Jim Carrey in the 2000 film *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*; a nondescript man wearing a black ski mask; and Swiper, the vulpine antagonist of children’s television show *Dora the Explorer*.

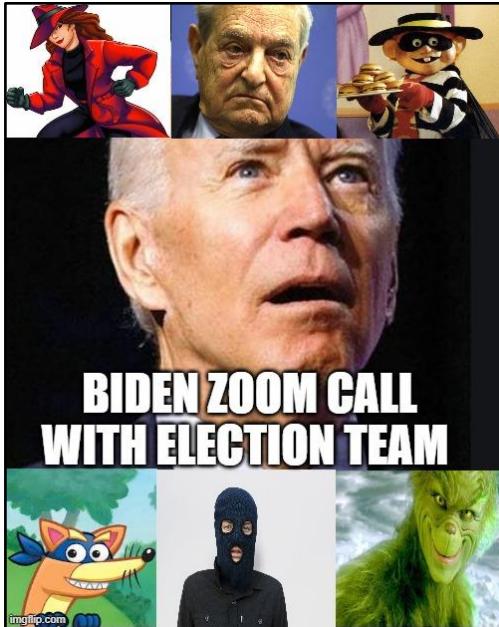


Figure 7: “Biden Zoom Call with Election Team” collage.

Much like the “Lord of the Pedophile Rings” collage I analyzed earlier, Figure 7 uses widely recognizable popular cultural touchpoints to spread ambiguous conspiracist ideas, in this case about election fraud. Most viewers would be able to identify at least one member of Biden’s so-called “election team,” if not several of them, and thus easily get the image’s visual pun: Biden’s election team is composed entirely of thieves.<sup>17</sup> Yet importantly, Figure 7 also subtly deploys visual parataxis to create the productive ambiguity that characterizes cut-and-paste conspiracism. I am referring, of course, to the placement of George Soros in the image. Soros is the only identifiable real person in the collage besides Biden, and unlike the fictional characters, he is not a thief. Or is he? By casually placing Soros’s headshot among the other images of fictional thieves, Figure 7 invites viewers to consider how Soros might be a thief, too—which in turn quickly leads to broader antisemitic conspiracy theories about Soros, whose alleged Jewish

<sup>17</sup>There is a further layer of ambiguity here: is Figure 7 mocking Biden’s presumed fraudulent election, or is it mocking conspiracy theorists who believe in “Stop the Steal”? I side with the former interpretation, but both are plausible. For more on the constitutive ambiguity of internet culture, see Whitney Phillips and Ryan M. Milner’s book *The Ambivalent Internet: Mischief, Oddity, and Antagonism Online* (2017).

influence controls world affairs, including the outcome of the 2020 presidential election. In this way, Figure 7 rhetorically bridges insiders and outsiders, just as in the Pizzagate collages examined earlier in this essay: your average internet user would get the joke about Biden's election team being run by thieves, but those more fully immersed in "Stop the Steal" conspiracy theories would also understand why Soros makes an appearance. Cut-and-paste conspiracism thus enables Figure 7 to invoke much more unsettling conspiracy claims while hiding behind the veneer of a simple joke about pop cultural icons.

But as the events of 6 January 2021 demonstrate, it is not all fun and games, and the proliferation of online conspiracy content demands our steadfast attention as rhetoric scholars and teachers. In this chapter I have developed the concept of cut-and-paste conspiracism to describe the rhetorical work accomplished in user-generated Pizzagate collages: cutting and pasting disparate elements together to produce ambiguous images that affirm in-group values and beliefs while also tempting out-group viewers with dastardly secrets hidden just out of sight. While important, cut-and-paste conspiracism is but one rhetorical tactic used in user-generated media, and I hope other scholars build on my work in this chapter by examining the strategies of these other user-generated conspiracy rhetorics. As social media companies face mounting political pressure to address the spread of disinformation on their platforms, rhetoricians stand to make a key contribution to the fight against dangerous online content. But doing so requires recognizing user-generated conspiracy content for the significant rhetorical force that it is.

## CHAPTER 3: PARKLAND AND THE SHAREBAIT ENTHYMEME

Clickbait is the digital version of a sideshow carnival barker, inviting us to enter the tent and see some freaky shit inside.

—Jenny Rice, *Awful Archives*, p.100.

Richard Hofstadter closes his classic essay “America as a Gun Culture” by posing an ominous question: “One must wonder how grave a domestic gun catastrophe would have to be in order to persuade us. How far must things go?” (Hofstadter “America”). Those lines were published in the periodical *American Heritage* in October 1970; reading them in 2021, I am both unnerved by the prescience of Hostadter’s query and dispirited that it has not found an answer. Five decades later, the United States still seems incapable of addressing its gun violence problem, which in 2019 positioned the country 32nd in terms of gun violence deaths—far higher than most other highly developed democracies (Aizenman). The majority of gun violence deaths result from suicide rather than homicide, but mass shootings have nonetheless become a fixture of American public life: according to the non-profit organization Gun Violence Archive, there was an average of 348 mass shootings each year for the years 2014-2019 (Gun Violence Archive). Surely any one of these mass shootings ought to qualify as, in Hofstadter’s terms, a “domestic gun catastrophe” that might prompt us to reevaluate America’s gun culture. Yet even truly abhorrent events like the murder of twenty children at Sandy Hook Elementary School in December 2012 have failed to produce meaningful deliberation about reducing gun violence, and public discourse has registered that sense of deliberative impasse. Indeed, as Justin Eckstein and Sarah T. Partlow Lefevre have observed, “The ubiquitous phrase ‘since Sandy Hook’ has become shorthand for an apparently broken system that allows unfettered gun violence. [...]

Sandy Hook is rhetorically codified as the moment where the gun debate stalemated” (226). I am as guilty as anyone else in contributing to that sense of stalemate; on multiple occasions I have remarked that if the mass murder of six-year-olds could not spark genuine policy change, nothing would. In the ossified public discourse of twenty-first century American culture, Hofstadter’s unsettling question appeared unanswerable.

However, the emergence of the March for Our Lives (MFOL) movement in 2018 seemed poised to disrupt the political gridlock surrounding gun violence in America. MFOL was created by student survivors of the February 14, 2018 shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, in which former student Nikolas Cruz killed 17 people, including 14 of his classmates (Albright). After decades of school shootings and decades of rote rhetorical patterns following each one—aptly captured by the scathing *Onion* headline “‘No Way to Prevent This,’ Says Only Nation Where This Regularly Happens”—it would have been reasonable to expect yet more stalemate surrounding gun control after the Parkland shooting (*The Onion*).<sup>18</sup> Yet the student survivors of the Parkland murders refused to let that happen. In the weeks following the shooting, a group of student-activists partnered with Everytown for Gun Safety, a non-profit organization advocating for gun control, to organize a youth-led demonstration against gun violence in Washington, D.C.<sup>19</sup> Called March for Our Lives, the 24 March 2018 protest was the largest demonstration against gun violence in American history (March for Our Lives). The protest drew at least 200,000 participants in the march on Washington, with hundreds of thousands of other protestors attending the estimated 800 other protests held across the United States (*CBS News*). The broader March for Our Lives

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<sup>18</sup>As Risa Applegarth notes, this headline is reposted every time that a new mass shooting occurs, with the details in the accompany news brief updated to reflect the latest massacre (168).

<sup>19</sup>Everytown for Gun Safety was created in 2013 in the wake of the Sandy Hook shooting.

organization developed out of this political demonstration; three years later, it continues to be a major force in gun control debates in the United States.

Although the Parkland shooting galvanized meaningful gun control activism, it also produced in mere days a proliferation of online conspiracy theories surrounding the murders and the people involved, including the student-activists who survived the shooting and started March for Our Lives. The emergence of Parkland conspiracy theories is to be expected in a sense. As early work by Goodnight and Poulakos (1981) demonstrated, conspiracy theories often serve as a “struggle to define the grounding of discourse” in the wake of distressing or uncertain events (301). Few things are as harrowing as the mass murder of schoolchildren; for some people, it is easier to imagine that the shooting did not happen as reported—or did not happen at all—than to reckon with the collective trauma of yet another school shooting. What stands out about the Parkland conspiracy theories, then, is not the simple fact that they exist but how rapidly and intensely they have circulated online. Indeed, so persistent and virulent were the attacks on the Parkland children that PolitiFact, a fact-checking site run by the Poynter Institute, declared them its 2018 “Lie of the Year” (Drobnic Holan and Sherman).

In this chapter I examine how one particular element of our social media ecosystem, sharebait headlines, contributed to the explosion of Parkland conspiracy theories online. I argue that these headlines succeed rhetorically because they function as enthymemes. Conspiracist headlines about Parkland work as self-contained rhetorical structures designed for rapid circulation, particularly by social media users who have not read the articles these headlines accompany. I develop the term “sharebait enthymeme” to describe this rhetorical phenomenon and closely analyze a selection of Parkland conspiracy headlines that operate in this way.

I begin the chapter by reviewing the emerging research on the Parkland shooting and MFOL, connecting it with the broader scholarship on the rhetoric of guns and gun violence. While debates about gun violence in the United States have long suffered from deadlock and faulty reasoning, the MFOL activists used their unique subject position as children who have survived gun violence to move discussion of gun control into more productive directions—although, as we will see, this unique subject position also made them vulnerable to dismissal by critics and conspiracy theorists. I spend the bulk of the chapter closing analyzing a selection of Parkland conspiracy theory headlines that operate as what I term “sharebait enthymemes.” I show that these headlines function as what Jeffrey Walker calls “stylistically intensified argumentative turn[s]” that return users continually to the same conspiracist talking points about the shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School (55). In so doing, these sharebait enthymemes strengthen the rhetorical presence of Parkland conspiracy theories online. I conclude the chapter by connecting my analysis to rhetoric’s recent turn to circulation studies, particularly John R. Gallagher’s work on the “afterlife” of digital writing (*Gallagher Update Culture 4*). Based on my analysis of sharebait enthymemes, I urge scholars to consider the uncanny rhetoricity of “dead” digital rhetorics such as defunct links, which are persuasive despite failing to meet traditional markers of online rhetorical success.

### **Literature Review: Parkland and the Rhetoric of Gun Violence**

The March for Our Lives story is one of rhetorical efficacy: a group of high schoolers deftly employed social media to organize one of the largest youth protests in the history of the United States. To understand the rhetorical significance of MFOL, we need to situate the student-activists’ engagement within American public discourse around gun violence. Research on the

rhetoric of gun violence, alongside the burgeoning scholarship on Parkland, helps us see how and why March for Our Lives was so notable.

What most stands out about gun violence discourse is the longevity of its rhetorical forms: public argument about the place of guns in society often falls into well-worn, seemingly inexhaustible argumentative grooves. Indeed, as Christopher M. Duerringer and Z.S. Justus point out, “there is durability to the argumentative structure of gun rights rhetoric. Specific arguments like *guns don't kill people, people kill people* and its variants have been in circulation since 1959” (182, original emphasis). Decades of hearing the same arguments repeated *ad infinitum* surely contributes to the sense of resignation I discussed in this chapter’s introduction, and as Duerringer and Justus argue, gun rights tropes “make argumentative moves which violate implicit norms of argument and, thereby, short-circuit the process of rational critical debate” (195). What keeps these arguments in motion, despite their inferiority? Part of the answer lies in social norms that attempt to delimit rhetorical activity in the wake of gun violence. Duerringer, in another essay, outlines how conservative politicians and commentators castigate any attempt to connect gun violence deaths to policy: “one finds pro-gun advocates [all] making a similar claim about decorum: that the Sandy Hook families or, far more commonly, President Obama and other Democrats deserve opprobrium because their use of tragedy as a motivational warrant for political reform is highly inappropriate” (91). Yet as Duerringer aptly recognizes, these rhetorical maneuvers are themselves the product of conservative ideology, particularly “an ideological commitment to order over and against other values realized through political struggle and change” (93). Consequently, dismissing any discussion of gun control policy as inappropriate leaves us with the same lifeless rhetorical performances that always seem to follow mass shootings: e.g., ‘thoughts and prayers.’

Given the rhetorical dynamics outlined above, the challenge becomes how to intervene meaningfully in public debates characterized by repetition and dismissiveness. Rhetoric scholars have identified a few tactics that might be effective. In his analysis of President Obama's gun violence eulogies, for example, David A. Frank suggests that "efforts to develop the 'gun violence as public health issue' theme may provide an answer to the complicated rhetorical situation faced by presidents seeking to reduce gun violence" (672). Another strategy comes from recent work by Eckstein and Partlow Lefevre, discussed previously. They propose "cross arguing, or the technique of adopting the other side's starting point" as a means to advance gun control debates beyond their typical parameters (228). Both proposals seek to circumvent the traditional forms of gun rights vs. gun control arguments in the public sphere.

Craig Rood's recent book *After Gun Violence: Deliberation and Memory in an Age of Political Gridlock* is perhaps the most significant rhetorical inquiry into how we might ameliorate public discourse about gun violence. As reflected in the book's subtitle, Rood's approach interrogates the links between "public memory" and "public deliberation": public memory shapes how we reason, and our reasoning shapes how and what we remember (Rood 24-25). Applying this insight to gun control debates, Rood analyzes a trio of substantive interconnections between public memory and gun violence: right-wing invocations of the Second Amendment, which rhetorically position it as a direct line to the Founding Fathers and thus to the bedrock of American history (53-60); "the warrant of the dead," which are (often but not exclusively) left-wing claims that "we must take action because we have an obligation to those who died" (73); and white supremacy, which "as an implicit past [...] functions as a lens or filter" that makes certain acts of gun violence legible and others invisible (119). All three ways that

memory and argument intersect in deliberation about gun control play out in the rote rhetorical grooves other scholars have identified.

Rood's book ends with a discussion of the rhetorical possibilities opened up by the Parkland student-activists, and subsequent rhetoric scholarship has fleshed out what makes March for Our Lives distinctive. While this research is in its infancy, it nonetheless has identified a couple of key features that contributed to MFOL's rhetorical success. The first has to do with how the MFOL activists claimed rhetorical agency. As Jesse S. Cohn and Rhon Teruelle have pointed out, children are often conceptualized as lacking adult capacities, including the capacity for civic engagement; in short, children are often denied rhetoricity as such (3-4). To counteract these tendencies, Cohn and Teruelle argue, the Parkland student-activists intentionally framed themselves as children, therefore preventing adults from speaking on their behalf: "by speaking as one of the 'children,' Hogg and his fellow student activists called into existence a new collective agent, claiming the right to speak *for themselves*, preempting representation, even taking a step beyond representation into autonomous action" (4, original emphases). Justin Eckstein makes a similar observation about the way the MFOL student-activists claimed agency through the subject-position he calls "the Parkland Kid": "The introduction of the Parkland Kid shifted the intractable gun debate from a partisan framing of what *is best for the students* to a nonpartisan *what the kids demand*" (169, original emphases). Adroit use of social media was critical to the Parkland students' ability to reframe themselves as rhetorical agents. Cohn and Teruelle single out Twitter as a key mechanism for the MFOL movement, particularly the accounts of David Hogg, X González, and Delaney Tarr, all of whose "tactical" use of the platform helped shape the evolving media narrative around March for Our Lives (6-9).<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup>González is non-binary and announced their new name "X" during a May 10, 2021 appearance on *The Tonight Show with Jimmy Fallon*. For González, the new name is both a reflection of their gender identity and an attempt to

Likewise, Snapchat was a key social media platform for the students, not least because it allowed them to broadcast excerpts of the shooting as it occurred. Eckstein contends that these Snaps were an integral rhetorical resource for MFOL: “The Snaps enabled a rhetorical situation where González could introduce the Parkland Kid as relevant to the gun debate” (167). In sum, the Parkland student-activists leveraged the rhetorical affordances of social media to carve out a unique subject-position from which they could intervene in public debates about gun violence.

Although the Parkland students were adept at gaining journalists’ attention, rhetorical framing by the media was in some respects detrimental to their cause. Risa Applegarth’s recent work shows that much of the immediate media coverage of March for Our Lives sought to situate the movement within longer histories of youth activism in the United States. Applegarth argues that this framing was guided by two “chronotopes,” or “embedded orientations to space and time [...] that encode values as they guide audience response” (160). In particular, media coverage of March for Our Lives used the chronotope of “exemplars” to assess MFOL in light of venerated activist movements of the past and the chronotope of “recurrent patterns” to frame MFOL as part and parcel of previous activist movements (Applegarth 160). Ultimately, Applegarth maintains, both chronotopes damaged public perception of March for Our Lives: “By selecting historical exemplars and reiterating recurrent patterns, media coverage invites adults to evaluate the likelihood that youth activism will result in ‘lasting change,’ and ultimately undermines the rhetorical agency of young people, by constraining the outcomes that are legible and possible to those that fit prior historical models” (161).

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distance themselves from the media discourse about them: “My name is Emma González, but I’ve decided to go by ‘X’ now because I really don’t want people who don’t know me assuming that they do know me because of the national narrative, or international narrative, that exists about me” (qtd. in Perkins).

The upshot of this brief literature review is that March for Our Lives represented a genuinely novel intervention into what Hofstadter has termed America’s “gun culture.” Unfortunately, the very qualities that distinguished the Parkland student-activists—their youth, outspokenness, social media savvy, righteous anger, and ability to generate significant media attention—also subjected them to intense criticism, including by conspiracy theorists who refused to believe that the children could command such rhetorical force by themselves. These critics instead saw conspiracies afoot, led by powerful forces (often implicitly or explicitly Jewish) manipulating the Parkland survivors to promote a nefarious gun control agenda. To understand the role conspiracy theorists played in generating anti-Parkland backlash, we need to examine how Parkland conspiracist headlines manipulate social media conversations using a rhetorical structure I call the “sharebait enthymeme.”

### **The Uncanny Power of the Sharebait Enthymeme**

The enthymeme is one of the most important concepts in rhetorical thought, albeit one whose precise meaning is rather fuzzy and thus widely debated. The term ‘enthymeme’ is usually contrasted with ‘syllogism’ or more formal propositional reasoning, but the details of that distinction are often muddled, as Richard Lanham laments in *A Handlist of Rhetorical Terms*:

Aristotle uses the term [enthymeme] to mean a “syllogism” in which the premises are only generally true, a rhetorical, or probable, syllogism. If they are absolutely true (scientifically proved) the proper term is syllogism. Thinking that Aristotle meant enthymeme to refer to the shortened form of any syllogism, later theorists called the rhetorical syllogism in full form epicheireme (see Quintilian, V.x.1-19 and xiv.14). Prevailing usage today seems to make enthymeme equivalent to rhetorical syllogism or shortened syllogism of any sort, and to ignore epicheireme. (65)

The root issue here is what exactly it means to present the “shortened form” of a syllogism. One common way of parsing that shortening is as a kind of incomplete argument requiring that an audience supply what has been left out, such as a missing premise. This is a useful enough

conception of the term, as it opens up productive questions about the ideology of audience assumptions: for instance, when a politician tells an audience that they should oppose a policy change because it undermines “American values,” such a maneuver assumes both that there is such a thing as “American values” and that those values ought to be protected in the first place. For my purposes in this chapter, however, I wish to adapt Jeffrey Walker’s more sophisticated understanding of the enthymeme as developed in his widely cited 1994 article in *College English*, “The Body of Persuasion: A Theory of the Enthymeme.” Explicating the varied meanings of the term in Aristotle, Isocrates, and Anaximenes, Walker defines the enthymeme as follows:

What remains characteristic of the enthymeme today, I think, is that it is a stylistically intensified argumentative turn that serves not only to draw conclusions but also, and decisively, to foreground stance and motivate identification with that stance. And, further, its motivating force will derive not simply from a propositional logic (the kind that can be analyzed with syllogistic or Toulminian diagrams), but from what Perelman has called a “web” or network of emotively significant ideas and liaisons that may or may not appear as a structure of value-laden oppositions. (55)

Walker’s description of the enthymeme as a “stylistically intensified argumentative turn” whose “motivating force” draws from a “network of emotively significant ideas and liaisons” aptly characterizes the rhetorical work of Parkland conspiracy headlines, as we will soon see. Before analyzing those headlines, however, I should pause to say a bit more about how I am defining the term “sharebait enthymeme” and how I generated my archive for this chapter.

By “sharebait” I mean bits of low-grade internet content designed to be shared indiscriminately on social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter. Similar in some respects to its sibling term “clickbait,” sharebait assumes an even lower common denominator of attention on behalf of users who engage with it: namely, sharebait describes content one shares

without even having *clicked on it*, let alone read.<sup>21</sup> In order to achieve its goal of wide reach, sharebait manipulates user behavior using emotionally charged language and psychological tactics; I will further suggest that it employs distinct rhetorical tactics as well. Connecting sharebait with Walker’s theorization of the modern enthymeme, we arrive at the following definition of *sharebait enthymeme*: a sharebait enthymeme is a headline that functions as a “stylistically intensified argumentative turn” designed to exploit users to share it on social media.

My analysis of sharebait enthymemes in this chapter is based on a small sample of 40 Parkland conspiracy headlines drawn from the r/conspiracy page on Reddit, the popular forum-based social media platform.<sup>22</sup> By “headline,” I mean one or both of two things: either the title of a post on r/conspiracy about the Parkland shooting or the title for a Parkland conspiracy article that has been reposted on r/conspiracy. I use this more capacious definition of “headline” because it best aligns with the posting practices on r/conspiracy, which include both original material posted to the subreddit as well as posts directing redditors to conspiracist content elsewhere.<sup>23</sup> My selection criterion for gathering my headlines was also intentionally quite loose: I simply gathered any headline posted within a couple of months of the Parkland shooting (which occurred on 14 February 2018) that alleged a conspiracy behind the event.<sup>24</sup> I wanted headlines

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<sup>21</sup>Emerging empirical evidence suggests that sharebait is a widespread practice: a 2016 study, for instance, suggested that “59 percent of links shared on social media have never actually been clicked” (Dewey). That’s an alarming figure and a statistic undoubtedly fueled by the proliferation of automated (“bot”) accounts.

<sup>22</sup>The text string “r/conspiracy” stands for the page’s slug, the part of the URL after the domain name reddit.com (i.e., www.reddit.com/r/conspiracy).

<sup>23</sup>For clarity and consistency, whenever I cite a headline I will always cite the Reddit post where I found it, regardless of whether or not it is a repost, but I will specify in my analysis where the headline originated. Since my interest is strictly in the headline as a rhetorical structure, I think this is a sensible citation practice.

<sup>24</sup>I do not claim that my sample exhausts or fully represents all Parkland conspiracy content online. Here as elsewhere in this dissertation, my interest is in close rhetorical inquiry of social media-based conspiracy content, not empirical claims about how that overall body of said content circulates online.

that were roughly contemporaneous with the massacre to register how conspiracism developed in its wake, but that timeframe was my only major concern.

I narrowed my search to r/conspiracy for a few reasons. First, this subreddit is one of the most prominent hubs for online conspiracy content, with over 1.5 million members as of June 2021 and thousands of active users viewing the subreddit at any given time. The forum has been live since January 25, 2008; it is an established space in the online conspiracy theorist ecosystem (r/conspiracy). Second, due to its subject matter r/conspiracy had a higher density of the rhetorical artifacts I am seeking—conspiracist headlines about the Parkland shooting—than other social media platforms. The subreddit skews towards credulity and thus is rife with conspiracy content about Parkland and March for Our Lives. By contrast, when I conducted a preliminary search on Twitter for Parkland conspiracy content, quite a lot of the results were simply mainstream news articles informing the reader that anti-Parkland conspiracies exist or tweets from users criticizing Parkland conspiracy theorists. The third and final reason relates to the other two: because r/conspiracy is a dedicated space for discussing conspiracy theories, it is more reliable than platforms like Twitter or YouTube. Reddit's platform architecture delegates the task of content moderation to a team of volunteers who moderate each particular subforum (known as a subreddit or simply sub). Within the broader content moderation policies established by Reddit, each subreddit sets its own more specific list of rules governing posts on its page. r/conspiracy lists ten such rules, including the curious rule #8, which states that “misleading, fabricated or sensationalist headlines are subject to removal” (r/conspiracy). But my very ability to generate a list of sensationalist anti-Parkland headlines for this chapter indicates that this rule is only loosely enforced.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup>Another rule I find dubious is the first one: “Bigoted slurs are not tolerated” (r/conspiracy). The mods might not allow *slurs* per se, but they certainly must permit *bigotry* given the extent to which anti-semitism infuses conspiracy

I turn now to the headlines themselves. The following headline serves as a good entry point into thinking about the suasive work I am calling the sharebait enthymeme: “Google Caught Red-Handed Censoring Search Results Asking Questions About Parkland Shooting” (conspiracyseeker).<sup>26</sup> This headline (hereafter referred to as headline 1) is comparatively mild in its conspiracism compared to the others I will analyze later in this chapter, but even here we see how the headline’s structure and tropology produce what Walker describes as the enthymeme’s “stylistically intensified argumentative turn.” The key figure is personification—*prosopopoeia* in the classical rhetorical lexicon—which transforms the huge tech monopoly Google into a petty crook captured in the moment of wrongdoing (“caught red-handed”), in this case “censoring” what appears in its search engine. What is otherwise a highly abstruse, multifaceted, and proprietary process—populating and ranking search engine results—now becomes a singular concrete act of criminal behavior. The enthymematic “turn” here is to activate American anxieties about online censorship and to redirect those fears toward the mere act of “asking questions about the Parkland shooting,” which, characterized as such, indeed seems benign.

I want to underscore here something that distinguishes the sharebait enthymeme as I understand it from other enthymemes we find elsewhere, including those analyzed by Walker. An analogy derived from the work of another major theorist of the enthymeme, Cara A. Finnegan, will help me clarify what makes headlines distinct. In her now-classic analysis of what she calls the “naturalistic enthymeme,” Finnegan has this to say about how audiences supply objectivity to photographs: “the viewer of the photograph ‘fills in the blank’ with the assumption

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theories, particularly those involving “globalists” or the “New World Order.” When conspiracy theories scale up they begin to involve ever-greater numbers of conspirators, which quite often includes Jews (Barkun 36-37).

<sup>26</sup>I reproduce all of the headlines as they appear, including their erratic capitalization, typographical errors, and wonky grammar.

that the image is ‘real’[.] [...] [R]egardless of what else a photograph communicates, at minimum it is continually making an argument about its own realism” (143). I quite like Finnegan’s phrasing here, particularly her description of photographs “continually making an argument about [their] own realism,” and I think we can make a similar observation about the rhetorical function of headlines within the landscape of social media-based conspiracism. Just as photographs cannot help but argue for their realism, headlines cannot help but argue for their newsworthiness. Said another way, in making an announcement a headline also claims that its subject matter is worthy of being announced. Thus, even indirect and seemingly minor conspiracist headlines, such as “Google Caught Red-Handed Censoring Search Results Asking Questions About Parkland Shooting,” serve to validate those allegations as being inherently attention-worthy—prompting users to consider why that might be.

This default orientation toward newsworthiness helps us make sense of other Parkland headlines on r/conspiracy that appear, on first glance, like strict statements of fact. For example, consider the following headline (headline 2): “Dead at 42: Broward County Sheriff deputy who questioned Parkland school shooting’s gun control agenda” (oakdrew). Headline 2 seems straightforward enough: it appears to inform us of the death of a sheriff’s deputy opposed to gun control policies. Yet even this simple headline does enthymematic work, as it prompts the internet reader to consider why the death of this Florida deputy is being announced at all. That is, perhaps its newsworthiness is not simply due to the untimeliness of the death (“Dead at 42”) but because the deputy “questioned [the] Parkland school shooting’s gun control agenda.” Linking the deputy’s early demise to his anti-gun control views allows the headline to overlay a conspiracist interpretation onto a simple statement, and in this small way nudges the reader to see foul play at work—without their having to bother reading the article accompanying the headline.

I found other variants of headline 2 that made more explicit allegations about the deputy's death, but even this implicit version performs the rhetorical work necessary to manifest conspiracism about the Parkland shooting.<sup>27</sup>

Another statement of fact twisted to appear conspiratorial is the tip the FBI received about Parkland shooter Nikolas Cruz on January 5th, mere weeks before the violence at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School on Valentine's Day, 2018. See, for example, headline 3: "FBI got tip on Parkland shooter Nikolas Cruz in January, but didn't 'follow protocols'" (*BanMikePantsNow*). It is true that someone called the FBI's anonymous public tip line to express concern about Cruz; it is also true that 20 other calls to express concern about Cruz were made to the local sheriff's office in Broward County in the years preceding the shooting (*Siemaszko et al.*). Thus, what is particularly interesting about headline 3 is not its characterization of the facts but rather how mundane it actually is. It very closely mimics a headline from an *NBC News* story, which poster *BanMikePantsNow* links to directly: "FBI got tip on alleged Florida shooter Nikolas Cruz in January, but didn't 'follow protocols'" (*Siemaszko et al.*). The difference between the headlines is minor—the only change is the phrase "Parkland shooter" instead of "alleged Florida shooter." Yet headline 3 is noteworthy precisely because it derives its conspiratorial force from mainstream news coverage rather than something more obscure or overtly conspiratorial. Therefore, if headline 3 functions as a sharebait enthymeme, then it can only do so because the *NBC News* headline it is modelled after also functions as something like a sharebait enthymeme. The contexts may differ—mainstream media website

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<sup>27</sup>Here is a good example of a more obviously conspiratorial headline about the deputy's death: "Broward County Sheriff's Deputy Fitzsimons Who Questioned Parkland Shooting's Gun Control Agenda 'Dies Unexpectedly & Suspiciously'" (*ihappening*).

versus a conspiracy theory forum—but the headlines do similar rhetorical work and equally lend themselves to conspiracist interpretations.<sup>28</sup>

The more overtly conspiratorial headlines I gathered from r/conspiracy deploy a few distinct lines of argument that are worth interrogating in depth. One recurring rhetorical strategy—and one of the more common conspiracist tropes surrounding the Parkland shooting and its aftermath—seeks to discredit the student-activists behind March for Our Lives by portraying them as inauthentic pawns playing a political role rather than expressing a genuine desire for policy change around gun control. Headline 4 exhibits this strategy at work: “David Hogg Can’t Remember His Lines When Interviewed for Florida school shooting” (JakeElwoodDim5th). This particular headline refers to a now-notorious video of David Hogg struggling to answer questions posed by a reporter in the aftermath of the shooting. For Parkland conspiracy theorists, this is something of a “smoking gun” that proves something sinister is at work, particularly since the video has long since been removed from YouTube and other platforms. The enthymematic “turn” in headline 4 is to reframe the video as Hogg acting out a role rather than answering honestly; instead of an interview, which in principle if not in fact assumes spontaneity and honest reactions, we are witnessing something closer to reality TV, rehearsed fictional content produced with the veneer of its being “real.” And it is not even good reality TV: headline 4 informs us that Hogg is a weak actor who “can’t remember his lines.” Even more peculiar is the use of the preposition “for” in headline 4 instead of the more intuitive and grammatical “about.” Although a simple change, the swapped prepositions markedly change the headline’s meaning: “for” implies that the interview is actually a part of the broader “Florida

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<sup>28</sup>We might also consider here Alice Marwick’s empirical work on how so-called “fake news” functions within the larger online media landscape, particularly her finding that “*problematic partisan information exists on a continuum with mainstream partisan media*” (Marwick “Fake News” 501, original emphasis).

school shooting” event, suggesting that the shooting itself has been manufactured for televisual consumption.

Related to headline 4 are conspiracist headlines that attempt to invalidate MFOL by claiming their gun-control activism predates the Parkland shooting. Headline 5 exemplifies this framing: “DC Police: ‘March For Our Lives’ Planning Preceded Parkland FL Shooting By ‘Several Months’” (Generic\_Username46). The “stylistically intensified argumentative turn” in this sharebait enthymeme is to confront the reader with a startling temporal contradiction: if March for Our Lives was a reaction to having experienced gun violence, how could it have been planned “several months” in advance of the shooting itself? Inverting time in this way leads the reader to question the authenticity of both MFOL and of the Parkland shooting. Headline 5 further uses ethos to lend this enthymematic turn legitimacy. Constructed as a statement from the “DC Police” and using what appears to be directly quoted material (“several months”), the headline primes the reader to see the headline as a simple statement of fact rather than a fraudulent claim bandied about in anti-Parkland conspiracy forums.<sup>29</sup>

Perhaps the most extreme version of the Parkland sharebait enthymeme seeks to deny that the tragedy occurred whatsoever. Headline 6 is a particularly striking example: “David Hogg ‘my sister lost 4 of her friends’ ‘my sister lost 2 of her best friends’ ‘my sister lost 3 of her best friends’ ‘my sister lost 2 of her best friends’” (ilikerealmmaplesyrup). This headline echoes other headlines that accuse the student-survivors of performing for the camera, and like headline 4, this sharebait enthymeme focuses on David Hogg fumbling his words when interviewed about what happened at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School. But headline 6 also insinuates something

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<sup>29</sup>Headline 5 originates from *Memory Hole Blog*, the personal blog of former communication studies professor James Tracy. Tracy is best known in conspiracist circles for his claims that Sandy Hook, Parkland, and other school shootings never occurred. He is publically infamous for harassing Lenny and Veronique Pozner, whose son Noah was the youngest child murdered at Sandy Hook.

far more sinister: that Hogg’s sister did not lose any of her friends, perhaps because the shooting never occurred. The key rhetorical operation here is *anaphora*, the classical Greek term for “carrying back,” which works through “repetition of the same word at the beginning of successive clauses or verses” (Lanham *Handlist* 11). Headline 6 uses anaphora to present the reader with a series of inconsistencies in the number of Hogg’s sister’s friends who were murdered: “‘my sister lost 4 of her friends’ ‘my sister lost 2 of her best friends’ ‘my sister lost 3 of her best friends’ ‘my sister lost 2 of her best friends’” (ilikerealmmaplesyrup). Unable to remember the number (4? 2? 3? 2?) nor the closeness of the friends his sister lost (“best friends” or just regular “friends”? ), David Hogg appears suspicious, and without having to say so outright, headline 6 alleges that perhaps none of Hogg’s sister’s friends died at all.

The anti-Parkland headlines I have examined in this chapter illustrate the distinct rhetorical work of what I have called the sharebait enthymeme. As I have argued, these sharebait enthymemes function as, in Jeffrey Walker’s apt phrasing, “stylistically intensified argumentative turn[s]” that repeatedly re-turn users to the same conspiracist talking points about the Parkland shooting and the student-survivors who agitated for gun control reform in the massacre’s aftermath. The economy of headlines compresses wider conspiracist worldviews into small strings of text; the function of headlines presents these compressed conspiracist worldviews as inherently newsworthy. Given the broader phenomenon of sharebait, or sharing content on social media that a user (whether human or bot) has not even clicked on themselves, these anti-Parkland headlines can enjoy wide reach on social media platforms, distorting the online narrative about the shooting and March for Our Lives with fairly minimum effort. The fact that these Parkland sharebait enthymemes continue to circulate online years later suggests that some digital rhetorics continue to persuade long after they have ostensibly expired. In the

closing section of this chapter, I reflect on what sharebait enthymemes and other “dead digital rhetorics” suggest about the weird temporality of the internet.

### **Page Not Found**

Anyone who has used the internet to any significant degree has encountered a 404 error: a page or message informing you that the link you clicked no longer leads to the content it once did. In popular parlance, this phenomenon is sometimes called clicking on a “broken” or “dead” link, and without proper care taken to prevent the occurrence, all URLs are susceptible to dying eventually (much like us mortals). The precise extent of so-called “link rot” on the internet is unknown—and potentially unknowable—but multiple studies have been conducted over the years to assess the degree of link rot in specific archives. One study from 2015 found that nearly 50% of the URLs cited in 406 library and information science journal articles published between 2008-2012 were no longer accessible (Kumar et al. 59). In the context of governmental webpages, a 2010 study determined that while only 8% of the URLs sampled in 2008 had link rot, that number more than tripled to 28% of URLs with link rot when sampled only two years later (Rhodes 589-590). Link rot presents a serious problem for modern scholarly citation practices, particularly for researchers who study web-based phenomena. In a recent editorial for *Communication Studies*, Patric R. Spence and C. Sean Burns recommend that communication scholars combat link rot by archiving their references with tools like the Wayback Machine or Perma.cc (912-913). But none of these measures are a perfect solution; link rot is an unavoidable reality of internet architecture, which is always under (re)construction.

In an odd way, link rot gestures to in a liminal space where form has been severed from function. URLs, after all, are a kind of hypertext—a term describing interlinked text that reaches beyond itself, in this case to digital objects that live elsewhere on the internet. Yet when we

encounter a broken link, we have encountered the hypertextual become “hypotextual,” to use Joseph M. Reagle, Jr.’s term for how “[online] comment’s links to context are easily severed” (80). Dead links continually grasp for something that is no longer there.

What is the rhetorical significance of something like link rot? I asked myself this question when I encountered multiple broken links as I assembled my archive of Parkland conspiracy headlines for this chapter (see figure 8). While some of the headlines I gathered still linked back to their source material, quite a lot of the source URLs no longer worked—particularly those that linked to YouTube or Twitter, which are a bit more aggressive in removing mis/disinformation on their platforms (or at least when the public and/or government applies sufficient pressure). Yet even in cases where the source link had broken, the Parkland conspiracist headlines about those sources remained, housed in the more permissive space r/conspiracy provides.

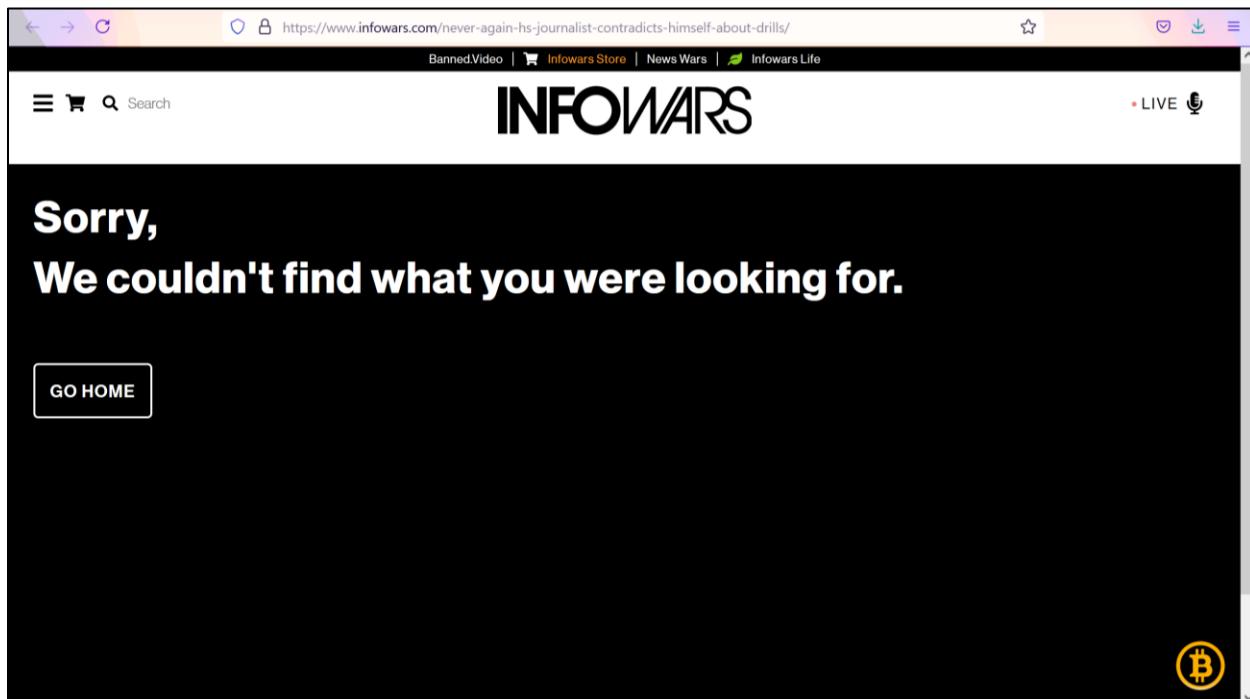


Figure 8: Screenshot of a 404 error from a dead *InfoWars* link.

The enduring rhetoricity of the sharebait enthymemes I have analyzed in this chapter suggests that scholars should attend to what we might call “dead digital rhetorics” that continue

to possess suasive force long after they appear to have become obsolete. These strange digital rhetorics point us to what John R. Gallagher has recently described as the “afterlife” of digital writing (*Update Culture* 4). Gallagher rightly acknowledges that scholars have not sufficiently explored what happens to a digital text after it has been written. But whereas his afterlife is a very active one, an “update culture” that presents “an ongoing need to reread, edit, and update texts in digital environments mediated by interactive and participatory internet (IPI) templates,” my work in this chapter addresses an afterlife of another kind: our online encounter with digital rhetorics long after they have been abandoned and left to rot (*Update Culture* 32).

While discarded, these dead digital rhetorics continue to persuade, and the afterlife of something like a Parkland sharebait enthymeme reflects the broader disjuncture between the temporality of offline events and their rhetorical construction online, especially but not exclusively by conspiracy theorists. For the average person, the shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School on Valentine’s Day 2018 was a horrific act of violence that left 17 people dead. But for those who encounter Parkland conspiracy headlines, the shooting is remade before their eyes, presenting users with a startling array of claims: Nikolas Cruz was not the shooter (there were multiple shooters, possibly the police themselves); David Hogg, X Gonzalez, and the other student-activists are actually crisis actors (possibly funded by George Soros); March for Our Lives was planned months before the shooting (suggesting the shooting was either a planned incident or never occurred in the first place); a police officer who opposed MFOL’s gun control activism died mysteriously (and without media coverage); and on and on. The source material for these shocking claims might no longer exist, but the headlines do important rhetorical work nonetheless. Dead digital rhetorics persuade from beyond the internet’s grave.

## **CHAPTER 4: PLANDEMIC AND CONTENT INCOORDINATION**

To debate the public good or public policy presupposes that arguers and audiences have a sense of before and after, of that which leads to debate and that which may extend beyond it.

—G. Thomas Goodnight, “The Personal, Technical, and Public Spheres of Argument: A Speculative Inquiry into the Art of Public Deliberation,” p.198.

A worldwide lockdown is a fitting occasion for conspiracy theorizing. As coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) became a global crisis in the early months of 2020, government officials issued stay-at-home ordinances and other directives to limit the virus’s spread, forcing billions of people to restrict their public outings to essential errands. With social functions severely limited, the newly housebound turned to social media to fulfill their need for connection and community. Usage data provided by major social media platforms bears this out. For example, Facebook reported in late March that use of its Messenger and video calling apps increased by 50% in countries where the COVID-19 outbreak had been particularly severe; in Italy, an early epicenter of the pandemic, that figure rose to an over 70% increase (Schultz and Parikh). Twitter also announced that despite a projected loss of earnings, it nonetheless had 164 million daily users in the first quarter of 2020, a 23% increase from Q1 2019 (Wagner). TikTok, the youth-centered micro-video app, boasted an even more drastic increase, with its monthly unique visitor count nearly doubling from 27 million in October 2019 to 52.2 million in March 2020 (Williamson). These statistics are perhaps unsurprising, but they portend something more serious: the profusion of COVID-19 misinformation that accompanied this increased social media activity.

Early in the pandemic, news outlets reported on the flurry of strange COVID-19 conspiracy theories quickly emerging. One early cluster of theories revolved around 5G cell phone towers, the next generation of wireless network technology. Celebrities such as the actor Woody Harrelson and the rapper M.I.A. suggested on social media that 5G radiation could make people more prone to catching COVID-19 or more susceptible to its negative health effects once infected (Bradley). A stronger version of the claim alleges that the rapidly escalating pandemic is merely a ruse designed to deflect attention away from 5G infrastructure, which the elites will use to control the masses (Temperton). In the United Kingdom, anti-5G advocates went so far as to set multiple 5G towers aflame (Slotkin). Other conspiracy theories sought to cast doubt on the pandemic's origins, claiming that the mainstream narrative about the outbreak was mistaken—perhaps deliberately. While the global medical community surmised that COVID-19 likely was transmitted zoonotically at a “wet market” in Wuhan, China, conspiracy theorists suspected instead that the virus came from a lab, probably the Wuhan Institute of Virology (Cohen). Whether the outbreak was merely an accident or released for nefarious purposes was, for skeptics, a matter of active debate. Republican politicians legitimized these speculations by giving them airtime in public fora. Among others, Arkansas senator Tom Cotton claimed in a *Wall Street Journal* editorial that circumstantial evidence “all points toward the Wuhan labs” (Cotton), while President Trump announced in an April coronavirus press briefing that his administration was “looking into it [the Wuhan lab conspiracy theory]” (Jackson and Hjelmgaard). Despite firm rebuttal by medical researchers, the lab outbreak theory enjoys wide

uptake in the United States, with one Pew Research Center poll suggesting 29% of Americans believe it (Schaeffer).<sup>30</sup>

Among the myriad conspiracy content circulating, the 26-minute video *Plandemic* is perhaps the most notable, both in its sophistication and for its overall public impact. This self-styled “documentary” purports to show, as its title suggests, that COVID-19 was not an unforeseen public health calamity but rather a devious scheme by political elites.<sup>31</sup> Produced by Californian filmmaker Mikki Willis and anchored by an interview with disgraced biochemist Dr. Judy Mikovits, *Plandemic* is a remarkably polished film. It boasts high production values befitting more mainstream fare, and it deftly employs classic documentary techniques such as “talking head” interviews and montages of archival news footage. Partly for these reasons, *Plandemic* enjoyed wide circulation on social media after it released on May 4, 2020 (Lytvynenko). While it is nearly impossible to calculate an exact figure for the documentary’s overall viewership, the original Facebook video received “1.8 million views, including 17,000 comments and nearly 150,000 shares” (Gebel), and another upload on YouTube likewise received over 1 million views before being taken down (Graham). Social media platforms removed these particular videos within a few days, but research from the non-profit organization First Draft revealed that thousands of copies of *Plandemic* were being shared internationally in over a dozen languages (Lytvynenko). Additionally, despite the social media bans, the documentary is readily accessible at plandemicseries.com—presumably a site run by the

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<sup>30</sup>When I originally wrote this chapter, the lab outbreak theory was harshly criticized as a fringe belief. As I finish this dissertation in summer 2021, however, COVID-19’s origins has been reopened as a live question for debate. See Bloom et al. (2021), Gordon et al. (2021), and Wade (2021).

<sup>31</sup>To declutter the page, I omit the scare-quotes after this one instance of “documentary.” I entreat the reader to imagine them going forward.

filmmakers, although it is hard to be certain—and at [plandemicvideo.com](http://plandemicvideo.com), an offshoot site run by a group calling itself the “Regressive Left Watch” (“More Censorship”).<sup>32</sup>

*Plandemic*’s rapid circulation begat equally swift news coverage, with everyone from *Science* editors to talk show host John Oliver reacting to the video’s bizarre claims. As one might expect, much of the public response to the conspiracy video took the form of dismissals. This is most apparent in fact-checking articles (Enserink and Cohen; Funke; Neuman), but the broader impulse to critique appears in some guise in other mainstream news coverage as well (Andrews; Alba). Addressing the bogus claims in *Plandemic* is important, of course, and I do not mean to suggest otherwise. Yet scholarship on conspiracy theories has consistently revealed the rhetorical limitations of fact-checking maneuvers in dispelling conspiracy beliefs. Hofstadter long ago pointed out that the paranoid style “is, if not wholly rational, at least intensely rationalistic” in its aggressive accumulation of evidence, “nothing if not ‘scholarly’ in technique” (36-37). This perverse kind of pedantry becomes all the more ironclad given research suggesting, paradoxically, that some conspiracy theorists also hold inconsistent beliefs. In a particularly striking case, psychologists at the University of Kent found empirical evidence of conspiracy theorists holding contradictory beliefs (e.g., Osama Bin Laden is both alive and dead), motivated by a larger “monological belief system” of conspiracism as such (Wood et al. 772). For these reasons, it is difficult to endorse fact-checking as the only or primary reaction to *Plandemic*’s conspiracy claims.

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<sup>32</sup>It is unclear whether Regressive Left Watch is an actual group or merely the labors of one person. There is a website with a similar name ([regleftwatch.com](http://regleftwatch.com)), but there is no concrete evidence that it is related to the owner of [plandemicvideo.com](http://plandemicvideo.com). The [regleftwatch.com](http://regleftwatch.com) site itself is quite shoddy and non-functional, with deliberately broken links to non-existent social media accounts and a homepage repeatedly populated with the same few items of clickbait-y content. I assume the page largely exists to maintain ownership of the domain name.

What might a more appropriate rhetorical response be? In this chapter I approach this problem by way of asking and then answering the following question: who is *Plandemic*'s audience? While deceptively straightforward at first glance, this question actually proves rather difficult to resolve, and working out an answer requires us to interrogate how the documentary uses audience appeals. In my previous chapters on Pizzagate and crisis actor conspiracies, I examined two case studies of contemporary conspiracism's authorship and messaging. This final case study focuses instead on the third vertex of the rhetorical triangle: the social media users to whom online conspiracism is addressed. I begin the chapter by briefly reviewing the literature on (anti-)vaccine rhetorics, the most applicable body of rhetorical scholarship for my purposes, mining its insights on audience. I show that although vaccine rhetoric scholars have shed great light on who vaccine skeptics are and how they construct anti-vaccine arguments, researchers have only rarely approached vaccine skepticism as a form of conspiracy theorizing. This omission is important because it changes how we ought to understand audience appeals in anti-vaccination discourse. I then apply this perspective to a sustained rhetorical analysis of how *Plandemic* constructs and addresses its audience. I argue that the documentary's rhetorical efficacy hinges on how it segments its audience into distinct, even oppositional ideological groups. The video deftly deploys topoi that speak to each sub-audience in turn while refraining from making these appeals explicit, and in this way, the documentary maximizes its audience to ensure its success as a social media object. I conclude the chapter by connecting my analysis with Alice E. Marick and danah boyd's now classic work on "context collapse." Riffing on their concept, I propose the term "content incoordination" to describe the overall strategy at play in *Plandemic*: the deliberate use of discrete and inharmonious lines of argument within a single rhetorical artifact to persuade multiple sub-audiences simultaneously. I posit that content

incoordination allows *Plandemic* to exploit the unique rhetorical conditions that result from audience indistinction on social media.

### **Audience Appeals in (Anti-)Vaccine Rhetoric**

It is often remarked—and I have said it myself—that one of rhetoric’s most significant scholarly contributions is its careful analysis of audiences. This is particularly true for vaccine rhetoric scholarship, a rich body of literature situated primarily but not exclusively within the broader subfield of rhetoric of health and medicine (RHM). Taking a rhetorical approach to vaccine discourse enables RHM scholars to shed new light on vaccine skepticism, a key problem for doctors, governmental officials, and other stakeholders interested in maintaining high vaccination rates. Vaccine skeptics, or more pejoratively ‘anti-vaxxers,’ have risen in number and profile since 1998, the year British physician Dr. Andrew Wakefield published his notorious, subsequently retracted study on an alleged link between MMR (measles, mumps, and rubella) vaccination and autism rates in children (Bricker and Justice 172).<sup>33</sup> Opposition to vaccines has become a growing public health concern, as herd immunity necessitates consistent mass vaccination across human populations (Bricker and Justice 173). Yet importantly, vaccine skepticism is not just a public health problem: it is also a rhetorical one. Because vaccination can only be compelled in certain circumstances (e.g., as a precondition of enrollment in public schooling), the challenge becomes convincing people to vaccinate themselves and their children. Rhetoricians, obviously enough, have a lot to say about persuasion, so it is unsurprising that vaccine discourse has been an active area of research for RHM scholars. But at least since classical antiquity, rhetoricians have also known that the only way to persuade someone is to understand how they think and feel—hence rhetoric’s longstanding attunement to audience.

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<sup>33</sup>Vaccine skepticism is far older than this, however, as Jacob Heller shows in his 2008 book *The Vaccine Narrative*.

Audience as a key concept appears in a variety of ways in the vaccine rhetoric literature. One recurring theme is the need to reconsider public health messaging about vaccination. In one of the earliest RHM articles on vaccine rhetoric, Monica Brown proposes that “[s]tepping back to think about vaccine skepticism differently might both improve vaccination rates *and* fend off a return of deadly illness” (6, original emphasis). Miles C. Coleman makes a similar but stronger point, arguing that “[r]hetorical strategies, which presume scientific consensus should not be questioned, ‘Because it’s science!’ can actually feed into the vaccine denialist’s position by seeming to represent the uncritical regurgitations of discourses fabricated by ‘big pharma’” (“The Role of Patience” 516). Instead of shutting down skeptics, Coleman urges patience when dealing with anti-vaccine rhetoric: “Polarization is not overcome with courageous shutting out of the other; it is overcome by patiently engaging them” (516). Although commendable, Coleman’s call for measured dialogue presents its own problem: how much attention should we give to anti-vaccine arguments when people’s health—even their lives—are at stake? Adam S. Lerner takes up this question, recommending a synthetic approach that integrates the perspectives of “narrative medicine, RHM, and medical ethics” (89).

Calls to reconsider how we talk to and about anti-vaccinationists naturally raise the question of who comprises this audience, a second major concern in vaccine rhetoric research. Scholars have done important work here in clarifying our understanding of the demographics of vaccine skeptics on the individual level as well as how they congregate online at the macro-level. To the first point, Shari Hoppin makes a crucial distinction between the “unvaccinated” and the “undervaccinated.” The former are disproportionately wealthy and white people with the financial means to choose not to vaccinate, whereas the undervaccinated are usually people of color and poor people for whom inconsistent vaccination results primarily from socioeconomic

barriers, not vaccine skepticism as such (Hoppin 51). This disparity along lines of race and class plays out in vaccine advertising, too, as Carolina Fernandez Branson identifies in her analysis of Gardasil advertisements. The ads stress Gardasil’s anticarcinogenic properties, but in marketing to middle-class white women, “the ads attempt to expand the market for the disease to a group less likely to be affected by cervical cancer but who have the means to purchase Gardasil” (Branson 149). In addition to being wealthy and white, vaccine skeptics predominately tend to be women, as suggested by a recent big-data analysis of anti-vaccination content on Facebook (Smith and Graham 1319).<sup>34</sup> This makes sense when we recall that fear of an MMR vaccine/childhood autism link energized the modern anti-vaccination movement and that women are socialized to be caregivers in patriarchal societies such as ours.

Moving to the macro-level, Smith and Graham’s work also provides insight into the structure of anti-vaccination Facebook groups, which “despite their relative size and high levels of activity, are relatively sparse or ‘loose’, that is, they do not necessarily function as close-knit communities of support with participants interacting with each other in a sustained way over time” (1323). Echoing this point about the extent of online participation in such spaces, Devon Moriarty introduces the concept of a “peripheral public” in her analysis of vaccine debates on Reddit. In contradistinction to traditional notions of the public that assume a highly active and engaged citizenry, Moriarty’s “peripheral public” describes the “relatively anonymous, low-stakes participation within a virtual public” such as redditors (79). While both Moriarty and Smith and Graham define (anti-)vaccine groups in spatial terms, Miles C. Coleman offers an alternative characterization based on these groups’ rhetorical orientation. He shows through network visualization that both pro- and anti-vaccination audiences frequent the Vaccine

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<sup>34</sup>Smith and Graham are technically communication scholars, not rhetoricians.

Adverse Events Reporting System (VAERS), an FDA/CDC webpage that allows users to upload accounts of alleged vaccine harms (Coleman “Rhetorical Logic Bombs” 210-11). The difference lies in what each group takes the VAERS archive to show, suggesting that even high-quality evidence *for* vaccination can be rhetorically redirected into evidence *against* it.<sup>35</sup> The upshot of all of this scholarship is that vaccine skeptics share important demographic characteristics—they are disproportionately white wealthy women—but also resist easy classification based on where and how they participate in online communities.

The third and final focus in the vaccine rhetoric scholarship is on the rhetorical strategies of anti-vaccine arguments. On its face, this line of inquiry seems removed from an emphasis on audience, but understanding audience remains the primary motivation for this work, too, insofar as the need for better health communication underlies this scholarship. The most expansive catalogue of anti-vaccine rhetoric remains Anna Kata’s pivotal 2012 article published in *Vaccine*, an interdisciplinary journal of vaccinology. Kata diagnoses four broad rhetorical moves of online vaccine skepticism, which she classifies as “skewing the science,” “shifting hypotheses,” “censorship,” and “attacking the opposition” (3781). Disambiguating these four moves, Kata describes fourteen common tropes used in anti-vaccine arguments, from invoking scientific controversies of the past that turned out to be correct (e.g., heliocentrism) to accusing vaccine supporters of being controlled by powerful corporate interests (3781). Jennifer Bracken Scott uses the concept of “boundary work” to explore further how vaccine skeptics construct scientific expertise in their arguments. Counterintuitively, Scott finds that vaccine-autism arguments *overestimate* science’s abilities, forcing opponents to be on the defensive: “Rhetors who argue for a link between vaccines and autism try to stretch science beyond the boundaries of

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<sup>35</sup>For this reason, we might say that the VAERS functions as what Sarah Ann Singer calls a “wildcard source.” See Sarah Ann Singer, “Embracing Wildcard Sources: Information Literacy in the Age of Internet Health” (2019).

its capabilities, resulting in unrealistic expectations and creating a need for rhetors arguing against a link to reinstate the boundary” (79). Working in the opposite direction, Brett Bricker and Jacob Justice describe why anecdote is such a powerful persuasive tactic *against* scientific arguments for vaccination: “Anecdotes are persuasive because they highlight tension between theoretical scientific knowledge and particular individual experiences” (177).

To close this brief literature review, I should mention a text that synthesizes and extends the three focal points described above: Heidi Yoston Lawrence’s recent book *Vaccine Rhetorics*, the first monograph on the subject. Lawrence’s intervention is to argue that controversy around vaccination results from competing “material exigences,” which she defines as “imperfection[s], marked by urgency, created by the material operation of vaccines” (119). The four material exigences Lawrence analyzes—“[d]isease, eradication, injury, and the unknown”—hold different weight for different stakeholders; while concerned parents frame vaccination in terms of unknown possible harms, doctors and public health officials frame vaccination in terms of infection rates and disease resurgence (119). Thus in a very real sense, diverging material exigences cause medical practitioners and skeptical parents to talk past one another: vaccines, as material objects, operate at entirely different registers for them. To move dialogue in a more productive direction, Lawrence exhorts scholars to rethink vaccination in terms of persuasion, not compulsion: “Vaccination deserves rhetoricity. Vaccines are science turned into medical practice turned into policy, which ultimately makes them historical, cultural, political, public, and individual objects in addition to scientific and medical ones” (132).

As this brief review has made clear, scholars within and beyond RHM have done important work on the rhetorical contours of vaccine discourse. Yet in surveying this research as a whole, I am stuck by a notable omission: scholars rarely describe anti-vaccination arguments as

a form of conspiracy theorizing. Indeed, a recent essay by Bricker and Justice (2019) suggests as much, the thrust of their argument being that scholars have overlooked the fact that anti-vaccination arguments have endured precisely because they are conspiracy theories (174). But aside from this one article, vaccine rhetoric scholars describe anti-vaccine arguments in quite different terms—as ‘vaccine skepticism,’ ‘vaccine denialism,’ ‘vaccine controversy,’ and the like. On some level this is understandable, as the label ‘conspiracy theorist’ carries quite negative connotations of irrationality, even stupidity. Yet if Bricker and Justice are correct, we must examine the conspiratorial undergrowth of anti-vaccine discourse if we are to understand its perdurance and spread. My own contribution to this work commences in the next section, as I analyze how *Plandemic* carefully mixes topoi to attract a broad social media audience.

### **“That’s all we can do”: *Plandemic*’s Segmented Audience Appeals**

As I watched *Plandemic* for the first time, I was astounded to find that I actually agreed with a lot of it. This was an unnerving realization for a scholar intimately familiar with all of the tactics that make conspiracy theories compelling for their adherents. Should I not be cognizant of this video’s shoddy claims, its Hofstadterian “curious leap[s] of the imagination”? I was, of course. I had to suppress a laugh when, for instance, Dr. Mikovits claimed that “wearing the mask literally activates your own virus” (20:27-20:35), or when she implied that “sequences in the soil, in the sand” might cure COVID-19 (20:53-20:56). Yet at the same time, my training in science and technology studies made it impossible for me to dismiss outright the very real sociotechnical problems *Plandemic* identifies, such as the profit motive of the pharmaceutical industry, which often prizes revenue gains over public health, or the funding structure of contemporary science, which clearly influences what researchers study and why. When the 26

minutes were up, I found myself in the uncomfortable position of finding sensible a video whose sum total is nonsense.

This is precisely what makes *Plandemic* a challenging rhetorical artifact to critique and why it deserves a closer look. The mainstream media’s attempts to fact-check the video or dismiss it with incredulous laughter fail to account for why it has been so persuasive, and writing off millions of users as idiots duped by specious arguments obviously brings us no closer to understanding the documentary’s impact. Instead, I will argue that a better route to understanding comes from clarifying what exactly I was experiencing when I watched *Plandemic* for the first time—and to help me do that, I will turn to rhetorician Kenneth Burke.

In his 1935 book *Permanence and Change: An Anatomy of Purpose*, Burke introduces the notion of piety to explain how humans respond to their rhetorical surroundings. Broadening the term from its religious context, Burke describes piety as “the sense of what properly goes with what” (74, emphases removed) and as “a schema of orientation, since it involves the putting together of experiences” (76). Our sense of piety derives not from rational thought but rather from our unconscious, specifically from the wellspring of formative “childhood experiences” that shape our future selves (74). Likewise, we react to piety’s disruption with what Burke calls “symbolic expiations” intended to mend these symbolic harms (74). Taking a charming example from his youth, Burke memorably describes his “great resentment as a child upon learning that lions were cats, whereas to me they were purely and simply the biggest dogs” (73). Burke’s childhood outrage resulted not only from his sense that lions *were* dogs but also that they *ought* to be dogs—and that lions being cats was *wrong* at some deep level. This sense of wrongness is perhaps merely cute at the level of a child’s crude biological taxonomies. Yet when we scale up

to something like the refusal to wear a mask to stop the spread of COVID-19, we can see just how serious piety and its symbolic expiations can be.<sup>36</sup>

Returning to *Plandemic*, something like piety was at work in my split reaction to the video: despite knowing at a rational level that many of the documentary's claims were spurious, I found myself being drawn in by the video's subtle rhetorical appeals nonetheless. The clearest example of this comes roughly a fourth of the way into *Plandemic*, when Dr. Judy Mikovits accuses Dr. Anthony Fauci of being a propagandist whose lies have “kill[ed] millions since 1984” (4:44). After alleging that Fauci orchestrated a conspiracy to ruin her scientific reputation, Mikovits describes an earlier incident where she claims Fauci pressured her to hand over the results of a scholarly paper on HIV that was currently in press.<sup>37</sup> She refuses, but Fauci manages to coerce Mikovits’s boss Dr. Rusetti to do so. Once he had the manuscript, Mikovits maintains, Fauci delayed the publication process long enough to steal the results and then profit from the patents that followed (5:03-6:32). Concluding her story, Mikovits makes the grave pronouncement that “this delay of the confirmation [...] literally led to spreading the virus around, [...] killing millions” (6:24-6:32).

At this point *Plandemic* takes a surprising turn as the video switches from Mikovits to news footage of hospitalized AIDS patients (figure 9). Before this moment the documentary has refused to acknowledge the primary victims of the AIDS crisis: gay and bisexual men, over 300,000 of whom have died from AIDS since the pandemic began in the 1980s (Centers for

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<sup>36</sup>Burke's concept of piety shares some similarities with the “deep story,” a concept developed by sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild in her 2016 book *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right*. Hochschild describes the deep story as “a *feels-as-if* story—it’s the story feelings tell, in the language of symbols” (101, original emphasis).

<sup>37</sup>Mikovits's reputation suffered from a scientific misconduct case from 2011 involving an article she published in *Science*. I discuss the rhetorical functions of this incident for *Plandemic* later in the chapter.

Disease Control and Prevention). Even here *Plandemic* refrains from naming this marginalized group outright, instead opting to use visual cues to communicate this information indirectly. In so doing, the video assumes its audience has a certain familiarity with the archival footage shown, and it is this familiarity that *Plandemic* exploits to make powerful appeals about government culpability for queer suffering.



Figure 9: Screenshot of AIDS patient from *Plandemic* (06:33).

The implication that government inaction led to the deaths of legions of gay and bisexual men becomes more pronounced as this segment of *Plandemic* continues. Following the AIDS patients footage, viewers are presented with selections from a 2017 *CBS News Sunday Morning* featurette, “36 Years and Counting: AIDS in America,” which includes archival footage of AIDS activists in the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>38</sup> At this point the audio switches from the Mikovits interview to a voiceover by Rita Braver, veteran news correspondent for *CBS News Sunday Morning*, who remarks: “Perhaps no one expressed the anguish of AIDS better than New York writer Larry Kramer. But he was even more angry at the federal government and the pharmaceutical industry. One person who felt Kramer’s fury was NIH doctor Anthony Fauci” (*Plandemic* 6:36-6:56). As we listen to Braver’s voice, we see black and white photographs of Larry Kramer followed by

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<sup>38</sup>I identified this segment by searching online for this sentence from the voiceover: “Perhaps no one expressed the anguish of AIDS better than New York writer Larry Kramer” (6:36-6:42).

video clips of ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) protests; during a pause in the voiceover, we hear ACT UP activists chanting their famous slogan, “Act Up! Fight Back! Fight AIDS!” (6:43-6:45). The segment ends as Braver’s voice does, returning to the interview with Mikovits immediately after the camera pans over a phrase Kramer wrote in an op-ed: “An open letter to an incompetent idiot, Dr. Anthony Fauci” (6:53-7:00).

While brief, this thirty-second clip profoundly illustrates how *Plandemic* mobilizes piety to make powerful rhetorical appeals to distinct subgroups of its audience. At no point in this segment, nor anywhere else in the video for that matter, do we hear any mention of gay rights or even the word “gay.” This starkly contrasts with the “36 Years and Counting” featurette that the documentary excerpts, which clearly foregrounds queer men’s suffering and the critical role their activism played in combating the AIDS crisis. By including footage of gay activist groups but deliberately omitting any discussion of gay rights, this segment of *Plandemic* makes two arguments simultaneously.<sup>39</sup> For its majority-heterosexual audience, many of whom likely ignorant of the history of AIDS activism, the footage serves to bolster Mikovits’s earlier claim that Fauci is a liar whose propaganda has “kill[ed] millions since 1984” (4:44). When this audience hears Braver state that Fauci “felt Kramer’s fury” or reads Kramer’s assertion that Fauci is “an incompetent idiot,” the claim presented is something like the following: ‘Fauci is suspect as a COVID-19 authority because he stole Mikovits’s research and mismanaged the AIDS crisis.’ But for its minority-queer audience, who are more likely to know the history of AIDS in America, *Plandemic* offers a different argument: ‘Fauci is suspect as a COVID-19 authority because his inaction as Director of the NIAID caused thousands of gay and bisexual

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<sup>39</sup>In general I avoid attributing intentionality to any rhetorical artifact—I cannot get in anyone’s head—but in this case, I feel confident asserting that the gay stuff was consciously left out. *Plandemic* stitches together the *CBS News* footage extremely precisely; at some points, the cuts are merely a split-second away from references to gay men.

men to die of AIDS.’ This second line of argument requires a certain piety on the part of its queer sub-audience—namely, the lived experience of homophobic oppression—to be persuasive. After all, Braver’s commentary has been selectively edited to exclude any discussion of institutional homophobia at the CDC and other government organizations, and nowhere does *Plandemic* refer to gay people or homophobia whatsoever. Yet queer viewers who know why Kramer was so angry at the CDC and other government bodies—they neglected to take action precisely because most AIDS victims were sexual minorities—understand at a deep level why they ought to be angry, too. Queer viewers can be outraged at Fauci and thus begin to doubt his medical authority only because this segment of the documentary taps into the felt injustice many queer people intuitively recognize when confronted with the AIDS crisis.

That its arguments operate more at the level of affect than reason, as I am arguing here, does not diminish *Plandemic*’s rhetorical force, as an understanding of topoi makes clear. Topoi is a bedrock concept in rhetorical theory going back to classical thought; as Richard Lanham writes in *A Handlist of Rhetorical Terms*, topoi “were for Aristotle, as they have been for rhetoricians since, both the stuff of which arguments are made and the form of those arguments” (152). Described in this way, topoi seem to take on a more logical cast, but they can also be understood more holistically, taking into account the affective dimensions that are part of all rhetorical situations. In this respect I find useful Ralph Cintron’s theorization of topoi as “storehouses of social energy [...] [that] organize our sentiments, beliefs, and actions in the lifeworld” (“Limitations” 100). I like Cintron’s definition because it conveys that topoi are active rather than inert; they are the dynamic products of our collective socio-rhetorical investments. We can see, for instance, the great force and motility that the *topos* “freedom” holds for many conservative Americans or that the *topos* “equality” holds for many liberals. Ultimately, Cintron

maintains that topoi form the foundation of civic life itself: “Topoi do not emerge out of the blue. If they did they would not be recognized, and it is their recognizability, a bringing-before-the-eyes, that makes them potent. So the ability to get things moving collectively is dependent on the fact that topoi constitute the body politic in a visible and highly public sort of way” (101).

What is rhetorically distinctive about *Plandemic* is not just that it deploys multiple topoi simultaneously, as I have argued above, but also that these topoi operate in parallel: that is, the video carefully balances multiple messages at once that do not interact with each other. Doing so is critical to the documentary’s ability to appeal to a wide, ideologically diverse social media audience. In part this aligns with Ryan Neville-Shepard’s claim that “particularly viral conspiracy theories include a critique that is anti-establishment, opposed to a dominant political myth, while featuring a broad-based ideology” (“Paranoid Style” 124). Surely *Plandemic* includes such “anti-establishment” topoi and attacks a “dominant political myth,” namely that government officials always work in the best interest of the governed. But the documentary’s rhetorical power comes primarily from coordinating but not consociating its multiple rhetorical appeals. To take the AIDS crisis footage as an example, omitting any reference to gay rights activism prevents the clip from alienating more conservative viewers, but since that footage is not strictly necessary for the COVID-19 narrative, merely including it at all indicates a clear effort to reach a queer sub-audience, too. It is thus no coincidence that Dr. Mikovits and Willis are silent during this segment: the AIDS crisis footage is meant to command our full attention, although what exactly we are *attending to* while watching it remains ill-defined.

Although the AIDS crisis footage is perhaps the most striking example, the pattern of paired but parallel topoi recurs throughout *Plandemic*. Indeed, this rhetorical strategy appears in the documentary’s opening moments, as the interview with Mikovits starts to construct two

discrete narratives about her former career as a research scientist. The video begins in an epideictic mode, introducing Mikovits as “one of the most accomplished scientists of her generation” as she and Willis walk in slow-motion towards the camera (0:11-0:15). The image is noticeably desaturated, almost black and white in its minimization of color; both Mikovits and Willis wear mostly black attire that aligns with the scene’s overall composition and mood. As the pair converse silently, walking past storefronts and over a stone bridge through a park, the narration continues to establish Mikovitis’s scientific credibility, describing her “1991 doctoral thesis [that] revolutionized the treatment of HIV/AIDS” (00:16-00:20) and her “blockbuster article in the journal *Science* [...] [that] sent shockwaves through the scientific community” (00:24-00:30). However, the voiceover quickly pivots from panegyric to rebuke as it chronicles how “minions of Big Pharma waged war on Dr. Mikovits, destroying her good name, career, and personal life” (00:39-00:45) for uncovering that “the common use of animal and human fetal tissues were unleashing devastating plagues of chronic diseases” (00:31-00:36).<sup>40</sup> *Plandemic*’s opening segment ends on an apocalyptic note as the narrator moves from Mikovits’s destroyed career to the threat of human extinction: “now, as the fate of nations hang in the balance, Dr. Mikovits is naming names of those behind the plague of corruption that places all human life in danger” (00:47-00:56). Before cutting to the interview, we see a shot of Mikovits solemnly standing in a park, hands crossed in front, as the camera slowly inches towards her (figure 10).

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<sup>40</sup>This gloss of Mikovits’s article also makes a very subtle nod to audience members opposed to abortion. It is not coincidental that interviewer Mikki Willis is first introduced as a “father/filmmaker” (00:57).



Figure 10: *Plandemic* screenshot of Dr. Mikovits standing in a park (00:47). The opening sequence plays a critical role in laying the groundwork for *Plandemic*'s dual arguments about Mikovits, both of which revolve around victimization. The first argument is the most explicit: evil scientists conspired to ruin Mikovits's promising career because her work threatened to reveal how corrupt scientific practices were endangering the public's health. This story thus centers on Mikovits as a scientific maverick, a brave and independent thinker who dared to challenge the "minions of Big Pharma" and as a result became a victim of the scientific community's degeneracy. We are bluntly presented here with a distinct hero and villain who activate two clusters of topoi, two "storehouses of social energy," that pervade political discourse in the United States. On one hand, Mikovits stands for freedom, the individual, leadership, and personal initiative. We can see these topoi appear in the voiceover's nigh-hyperbolic praise of Mikovits's career, from her brilliant insights (she "revolutionized the treatment of HIV/AIDS" and wrote a "blockbuster article") to her productivity ("one of the most accomplished scientists of her generation"). The association is also communicated visually through this segment's closing shot of Mikovits standing in the park (figure 10): Mikovits's facial expression and body language convey steely resolve, but she stands alone. On the other hand, the broader scientific community is the story's villain; they are associated with the topoi of control, the collective, subservience, and groupthink. After all, these people are mere "minions of Big Pharma" opposed

to Mikovits's groundbreaking new ideas that disrupt the status quo! It almost goes without saying that these two sets of topoi are starkly opposed in American public discourse. Cast in the starker terms, Mikovits and the scientific community represent the topoi of America and communism, respectively, and the scientific community's personal battle against Mikovits serves as a microcosm for the much larger geopolitical battle between China and the United States.

The connections drawn between Mikovits's personal experience and international political dynamics explain how *Plandemic* rhetorically frames COVID-19 crisis later on in the documentary. At multiple points we see medical doctors and other health practitioners decry pandemic mitigation strategies—everything from local lockdown ordinances to the simple act of wearing a mask—as an affront to human freedom. A particularly notable example occurs in the final minutes of the video, directly after Dr. Mikovits expresses faith in the “doctors who are waking up and saying, ‘Wait a minute!’” (20:20-20:22). After she says this, the video cuts to low-resolution footage of a bald white healthcare worker in black scrubs sitting in a medical office (figure 11). As he angrily points at the camera, he delivers an impassioned call-to-arms:

You, you doctors that are watching this, and I see a lot of you right here. Why are you not getting loud? I'm here to defend you; I'm here to defend my freedoms; I'm here to defend my family's freedoms, my patients' rights to choose what to do with their life [sic]. I'm just blown away. And I'm blown away why there are not more doctors like me talking about this all over the place. We should be banding together right now. You need to wake up because your liberties are getting taken away from you all because of fake news that's out there. This is wrong! People should be going to jail for this stuff!  
(*Plandemic* 22:23-22:55)



Figure 11: *Plandemic* screenshot of an angry healthcare worker's speech (22:23).

This excerpted speech, much like *Plandemic*'s opening voiceover, positions individual experience as a battleground for the fundamental topoi of the American social imaginary—freedom and family. The speaker exhorts his fellow healthcare workers to “defend” these topoi from an external threat, but the nature of this threat remains unclear: is it Dr. Fauci and other members of Trump’s Coronavirus Task Force? the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention? the mainstream media? the American Medical Association? the Chinese government? The danger remains vague, but the speaker sees it encroaching on all sides, from the individual (“my freedoms”), to the home (“my family’s freedoms”), to the practice of medicine itself (“my patients’ rights to choose what to do with their life”). His proposed solution to this danger is somewhat nebulous as well, but the speaker says it requires speaking up (“getting loud”) and collective action (“banding together”). Another name for that, of course, is politics.

Based on his speech, one might wager that the politics the speaker recommends skew decidedly conservative. It is indeed true that the topoi of ‘family’ and ‘freedom’ are often associated with the American Right and thus would appeal to the piety of conservatives who see their traditional values under threat. But as I have argued above, *Plandemic*'s opening scene formulates Mikovits's conspiracy theory in much broader terms—America itself versus its

enemies at home and abroad—and just prior to this healthcare worker’s speech, Mikovits has bemoaned how propaganda is “driving us to hate each other” (21:55-21:56). As such, the healthcare worker’s speech also serves to substantiate the opening voiceover’s contention that the COVID-19 conspiracy theory ought to concern us all because it “places all human life in danger” (00:54-00:56).

Here and throughout *Plandemic*, we see echoes of Mikovits’s story of victimization by the pawns of Big Pharma and other anti-American forces that threaten life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. This is the first argument derived from *Plandemic*’s opening segment about Mikovits’s lost scientific career. At the same time, however, there is a second argument at play in the documentary. The second argument is much more subtle than the first, but it too connects Mikovits’s scientific career to larger social forces: the scientific community exiled Mikovits because she was a woman who dared to challenge the status quo.<sup>41</sup> This story centers on Mikovits as a woman in science, a brave and independent thinker who dared to challenge the powerful men in the scientific community and as a result became a victim of patriarchy. The topoi articulated to Mikovits—freedom, the individual, leadership, and personal initiative—are now imbued with rather different rhetorical significance when considered through the lens of gender; her personal story about her interactions with Fauci and other high-ranking male scientists illustrates the all-too-common dynamics of being a woman in male-dominated professions.

While gender politics is never explicitly discussed, *Plandemic* conveys subtle messages about gender throughout its runtime that tap into women’s lived experiences of mistreatment and

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<sup>41</sup>Thanks to Nora Augustine for encouraging me to think about how gender functions in *Plandemic*. Much of my argument in the next few pages is indebted to her insight and feedback.

harassment by men. Most notably and crucially, Mikovits is the only woman featured in the video, and every conspirator she names is a man: Dr. Robert Redfield, Dr. Robert Gallo, and above all, Dr. Anthony Fauci.<sup>42</sup> This establishes a clear gender divide onto which the documentary grafts its larger narrative about rank corruption in scientific research and the pharmaceutical industry. Recall that structurally, *Plandemic* uses its interview with Mikovits as its anchor and point of departure. All of the other footage—the ACT UP protests, the monologues by angry medical professionals, and so on—is intermixed with Willis's conservation with Mikovits, largely serving to validate her claims, so at a formal level her voice is the primary one we are positioned to hear. Mikovits thus commands great rhetorical authority in the video; the stories she tells are the focal point for the audience.

Deploying Mikovits's personal life in this way echoes another well-known rhetorical maneuver that places individual women's lived experiences at the center of larger social issues affecting women as an oppressed class: "the personal is political." This celebrated rallying cry of second-wave feminism made famous by Carol Hanisch's selfsame 1969 essay drew attention to how women's oppression could be located in the everyday experiences discussed at consciousness-raising groups. Indeed, as Hanisch notes, "One of the first things we discover in these groups is that personal problems are political problems. There are no personal solutions at this time. There is only collective action for a collective solution" (Hanisch). Situated in the present day, "the personal is political" finds a clear counterpart in another slogan, #MeToo, a Twitter hashtag meant to build solidarity among women who have suffered sexual harassment and

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<sup>42</sup>Technically, we see and hear other women in the video, but their presence is scant. We hear Rita Braver's narration during the *CBS Morning News* excerpt, for example, and Dr. Deborah Birx appears on screen for six seconds to deliver the line "If someone dies with COVID-19, we are counting that as a COVID-19 death," a sentiment Mikovits immediately criticizes (*Plandemic* 14:33-14:39). All of the other audio clips come from men, and the only other women we see are in the background of news footage.

sexual assault. With these analogues in mind, we can begin to see how Mikovits's anecdotes can draw rhetorical force from gender politics without saying so outright.

The two stories Mikovits tells about Fauci well exemplify this strategy.<sup>43</sup> In the course of the interview, she twice accuses Fauci of mistreating her, first as a young laboratory technician working on HIV/AIDS research in the mid-1980s and then in 2011 when she lost her job as research director of the Whittemore Peterson Institute (Neuman). In the first case, Mikovits claims that Fauci pressured her to hand over the results of her co-authored scientific paper on HIV that was currently in press. She refuses, citing its confidentiality; in response, Fauci "started screaming at" her and threatened, "'give us the paper right now or you'll be fired for insubordination!'" (*Plandemic* 05:54-06:00). Although Mikovits is resolute in standing up to Fauci, she goes on to state that he succeeds in coercing her boss Dr. Rusetti to hand over the paper's results, which Robert Gallo then steals and publishes as his own work (06:10-06:24). At no point in this story does Mikovits mention the gendered dimensions of Fauci's interactions with her, but women's everyday experiences of male aggression in the workplace give this vignette its persuasive appeal. Mikovits says she was only twenty-five years old when this incident occurred, and given the time period, she was likely one of few women working at the lab. In contrast, Fauci would have been in his forties and held a high-powered position as director of the NIAID. When Mikovits describes him "screaming at" and intimidating her, she paints a vivid picture of sexism in the workplace. Fauci's hostile behavior towards Mikovits is only possible because of the stark differences between them: she is a young woman working as a lowly lab tech in a male-dominated profession; Fauci is an older man directing a major research

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<sup>43</sup>I should clarify that while I find Mikovits's conspiracy theories highly suspect, we obviously should believe women who come forward with accounts of gender-based harassment and sexual violence. In comparing Mikovits with something like #MeToo, I am not equating them; my point is strictly to identify their shared rhetorical structure, which *Plandemic* exploits.

center, who can verbally abuse women like Mikovits without consequence for his behavior. Mikovits never acknowledges these gendered factors, but in the wake of #MeToo and greater public awareness of sexism, *Plandemic* can assume audience familiarity of the social script she recites.

The second vignette about Fauci likewise gleans its rhetorical weight from its implicit gender politics. Mikovits actually leads with this story—it is the first thing she talks about after the opening voiceover—and she immediately connects it to the first anecdote I have just analyzed. According to Mikovits, Fauci orchestrated a vast conspiracy to end her career as a research scientist and “directed the cover-up” (*Plandemic* 04:11-04:11) that followed, paying hush money to keep his co-conspirators from ever revealing the truth (04:13-04:35). Mikovits alleges that lab notebooks from her employer, the Whittemore Peterson Institute, were planted in her home to set her up for charges of intellectual property theft. As Mikovits describes it, she was “held in jail with no charges” and “called a fugitive from justice” (01:59-02:02). The video then cuts to dramatic night time footage of a helicopter followed by a SWAT team suiting up and preparing to break down a house door. Mikovits continues her account as we watch this footage: “No warrant. Literally drug me out of the house. Our neighbors are looking at what’s going on here. You know, they search my house without a warrant. Literally terrorized my husband for five days” (02:07-02:19). The documentary then cuts back to the interview with Mikovits, who goes on to claim that the “heads of our entire HHS [Health and Human Services] colluded and destroyed my reputation” (02:45-02:51). Throughout her narrative Mikovits has been measured in expression and tone of voice, not displaying much emotion of any kind, but she is forthright about the emotional toll of the ordeal: “It was one of the few times I cried. It was cause I knew

there was no evidence the first time. And when you can unleash that kind of force to force someone into bankruptcy with a perfect credit score..." (01:23-01:37).

Mikovits says more about legal technicalities of her scientific misconduct case, but for my purposes, the above summary suffices for understanding how *Plandemic* taps into women's experiences of harassment and abuse to amplify this vignette's rhetorical impact. As I argued earlier in this chapter, the video opens by claiming that Mikovits lost her career because she posed a threat to the evil machinations of Big Pharma. Yet by following this story with the earlier one about Fauci's workplace harassment, *Plandemic* also constructs another narrative: Mikovits lost her career because she defied a powerful man bullying her, and he wanted to get even.<sup>44</sup> Lodging misogyny into Mikovits's story connects her experience with that of viewers who also have feared reporting harassment or abuse out of fear of retaliation, and the violent language and imagery used in this segment of the video give the message great emotional resonance. Mikovits describes being subject to violence by Fauci's underlings ("drug me out of the house") and this violence being sustained and relentless ("terrorized my husband for five days"). The SWAT team footage that accompanies this dialogue—likely from a true crime reality television show or some such—visualizes this impending violence at the hands of Fauci's men. The language of power and power relations likewise appears in how Mikovits characterizes her inability to defend herself legally from the erroneous charges. She describes the unfathomable "kind of force" that Fauci could wield to make her give up and to "force someone into bankruptcy with a perfect credit score," which ultimately caused her to break down for one of the only times in her life ("It was one of the few times I cried"). Altogether, by using her work against her—placing lab notebooks in her house—Fauci in a sense completes his bullying from

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<sup>44</sup>For a philosophical account of misogyny, including violence against women, as an enforcement mechanism for patriarchy, see Kate Manne, *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny* (2017).

decades earlier, making the domestic sphere itself a site of continued workplace harassment. He was not able to fire Mikovits for insubordination in the 1980s, but by destroying her career decades later, he got his revenge nonetheless.

Importantly, however, the messages about sexism and misogyny communicated here and elsewhere in *Plandemic* are counterweighted by distinct efforts to downplay gender and gender politics. Indeed, this is critical for the documentary's ability to persuade multiple audiences simultaneously, including more conservative viewers who might be alienated by frank discussion of sexism. The most glaring is the total absence of any direct reference to gender: words like 'woman' or 'man' are never heard in the video, nor does Mikovits ever say anything about being a woman, despite that identity likely impacting her scientific research career significantly, particularly so in the 1980s. Mikovits also deemphasizes her gender in manner and mood. Dressed in an all-black pantsuit and speaking without emotion, Mikovits adheres to social constructions about masculine dress and behavior; she stays emotionless even when recalling traumatic events like being dragged out of her house or filing for bankruptcy. She just states the facts; she does not feel them. These rhetorical choices surely serve to highlight her scientific authority, the subject-position of 'scientist' having been restricted to men for centuries and still often socially coded as masculine (i.e., the coolly rational and dispassionate genius excogitating into the void). Mikovits—and by extension the documentary as a whole—encourages viewers to take her seriously because she is a brilliant thinker who downplays her gender altogether.

Summing up what I have argued so far, *Plandemic* succeeds rhetorically through its careful work of addressing multiple kinds of audiences through multiple clusters of topoi. These distinct lines of argument speak to the distinct pieties of its audience, from a right-wing viewer who feels America is being attacked by Chinese communists to a gay man like myself who feels

Fauci really does have blood on his hands for mishandling the AIDS crisis. The video is able to manage these multiple audiences simultaneously precisely because these audience appeals do not intersect.<sup>45</sup> Proceeding in parallel but disavowing their coexistence, these appeals ensure that the documentary enjoys a wide audience. To conclude this chapter, I zoom out from *Plandemic* to consider what my analysis suggests more broadly about what makes conspiracy content such as this video so effective as a social media object.

### **Content Incoordination and the Social Media Audience**

In their groundbreaking article “I Tweet Honestly, I Tweet Passionately: Twitter Users, Context Collapse, and the Imagined Audience,” communication scholars Alice E. Marwick and danah boyd develop the term ‘context collapse’ to describe how Twitter “flattens multiple audiences into one” (122). Tweets are visible by anyone at all—and therefore no one in particular. This radically alters how Twitter users engage with other people online; unlike in real life, these users cannot easily address different audiences differently. Instead, Marwick and boyd write, “The requirement to present a verifiable, singular identity makes it impossible to differ self-presentation strategies, creating tension as diverse groups of people flock to social network sites” (122).<sup>46</sup> This tension manifests in various ways, as the authors discovered through interviewing Twitter users. Some users felt pressured to sanitize their tweets, imagining a “nightmare reader” such as a future boss who might scour their social media feeds for controversial posts (125). Other users, particularly those with large followings, carefully engaged in “impression management” strategies designed to tailor their “personal brand” to their

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<sup>45</sup>Of course, I am not arguing that the pieties of viewers never overlap; a Log Cabin (i.e., LGBT) Republican, for instance, might be persuaded both by the AIDS crisis appeals and by the anti-communist ones, as they speak to said viewer’s experiences as a sexual minority and as a conservative.

<sup>46</sup>For more on the consequences of the social media self, see social critic Jia Tolentino’s lead essay “The ‘I’ in the Internet” in her collection *Trick Mirror: Reflections on Self-Delusion* (2019).

followers' tastes without appearing "inauthentic" (126-8). Above all, context collapse on Twitter required users to reckon with a "networked audience" that is neither public nor private (130).

Marwick and boyd published their article in 2010, and the ensuing decade has thoroughly validated their insights. Indeed, readers in 2021 might take their analysis to be obvious. If this is so, it is only because their diagnosis of context collapse now aptly describes the default rhetorical conditions of our online lives as such. We might take these conditions for granted, but as I argued in the introduction of this dissertation, they are the contingent result of decisions tech companies made in the mid-2000s about what social media ought to be and do. Marwick and boyd may not frame their argument in terms of rhetoric, but context collapse is principally a rhetorical problem with rhetorical consequences.<sup>47</sup>

*Plandemic* illustrates one such rhetorical consequence in action. Riffing on the term 'context collapse', I propose that the documentary employs a rhetorical strategy I call 'content incoordination.' Content incoordination names the inharmonious coexistence of discrete, at times oppositional lines of argument within a single rhetorical artifact. In the case of *Plandemic*, we saw this strategy at work in the diverse topoi the video used to build its case: communism, the AIDS crisis, individual freedoms, #MeToo. These topoi address the unique pieties of its broad social media audience, but they do so delicately, ensuring that the topoi do not offend any particular subgroup of its cross-ideological viewership. In sum, content incoordination allows *Plandemic* to maximize its rhetorical impact under conditions of context collapse.

We should understand content incoordination as an atomic persuasive strategy, a particular clustering of rhetorical tendencies we see elsewhere on social media. For example, content incoordination bears some kinship with the "impression management" tactics analyzed

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<sup>47</sup>Rhetoric is the bedrock of Marwick and boyd's argument nonetheless, as their references to rhetorical scholarship on audience attest: Ong, Lunsford and Ede, etc.

by Marwick and boyd, although in this case, we are dealing with a single rhetorical artifact rather than a set of tweets. It also involves a keen sense of “rhetorical velocity,” Jim Ridolfo and Dànienne Nicole DeVoss’s term for “the strategic theorizing for how a text might be recomposed (and *why* it might be recomposed) by third parties, and how this recomposing may be useful or not to the short- or long-term rhetorical objectives of the rhetorician” (Ridolfo and DeVoss, original emphasis). Rhetorical velocity is clearly an apposite concern for *Plandemic* given that clips of the video continue to circulate on platforms like TikTok, but the fragmentation of video files into their constituent parts is less a content-specific result than a media-specific one.

Content incoordination, I submit, has aided *Plandemic*’s wide uptake on social media platforms, and other conspiracy content that employs this rhetorical strategy should likewise enjoy outsized online reach. Obviously, content incoordination is not the only reason the documentary boasted such rhetorical success; other critical factors include its debut during a period of widespread lockdowns, which caused an uptick in social media use, and the great social unrest and economic precarity that accompanied a public health crisis like COVID-19, which we know fuel audience desire for conspiracy theories to make sense of a volatile world. But content incoordination helps us clarify how certain types of conspiracy content can exploit the unique landscape we occupy in the “long hangover of web 2.0” (Gillespie *Custodians* 202).

In its case studies this dissertation has analyzed how three contemporary conspiracy theories—surrounding Pizzagate, Parkland, and *Plandemic*—have intervened in political life online by using unique rhetorical strategies that social media platforms enable, encourage, and reward. After venturing into such dire and depressing territory, it is easy to despair the future prospects of our user-centered democracy. We are plainly in a bad way when a QAnon supporter like Marjorie Taylor Greene can win a congressional seat, and the proliferation and impact of

conspiracy content in politics surely bodes ill for the health of public discussion and debate in the United States. Yet I remain steadfast in this belief: humans are historical beings, as are the systems they build. As I often tell my students (and remind myself), social media as we currently understand it has only been around for some fifteen-odd years, and it will not be here forever.

## CONCLUSION: WHEN CONSPIRACISM BECOMES CONTENT

Welcome to the internet / have a look around  
Anything that brain of yours can think of can be found  
We've got mountains of content / some better, some worse  
If none of it's of interest to you, you'd be the first.  
—Bo Burnham, “Welcome to the Internet”

Lisa Dush opens her award-winning 2015 article “When Writing Becomes Content” with the following statement: “To work with writing today means to work with writing as content” (173).<sup>48</sup> Dush goes on to argue that our metaphor of “writing” has delimited writing studies’ view of online textual composition (179-181); she urges scholars to supplement that metaphor with “content,” another metaphor that illuminates different factors involved in online rhetorical production: “we should acknowledge writing’s unavoidable status as content, keeping the two metaphors simultaneously in mind both in individual rhetorical acts and in our understandings of the field concerns of writing studies” (183). Unlike “writing,” the “content” metaphor captures the broader infrastructure of digital composing, as Dush emphasizes in her “proposed definition of content for writing studies”: “*digital assets, conditional in their shape and value, that are assembled within and pushed out to networks, where human and machine audiences will assess them, assign value to them, consume them, appropriate and repurpose them, extract from them, and push them into other networks*” (178, original emphasis). Ultimately, Dush claims, writing studies must engage with digital-composing-as-content or face “marginalization and missed opportunities for growth” (183).

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<sup>48</sup>“When Writing Becomes Content” received the 2016 Richard Braddock Award for the best article published in *College Composition and Communication* in the previous year (“CCCC Richard Braddock Award”).

Dush's pithy opening line has always stuck with me, and modifying it for this project, I would conclude the following: to encounter conspiracism today means to encounter conspiracism as content. I have shown in this dissertation that social media platforms have shaped the form and function of contemporary conspiracy discourse. It is not simply that conspiracy rhetoric now appears on social media platforms; that much is fairly obvious and largely unremarkable. Rather, a more significant change has occurred: the technological and ideological mandates of content production for social media—that said content be, in Dush's terms, “*conditional, computable, networked, [...] and commodified*”—have shaped the rhetorical contours of contemporary conspiracy discourse (178, original emphasis).

My project has catalogued this shift throughout its three case studies. In the first chapter, I demonstrated that the unique affordances of user-generated imagery, what I called “cut-and-paste conspiracism,” enable Pizzagate believers to spread conspiracism to outside audiences without the burden of articulating specific claims of wrongdoing. In the second case study, I established that anti-Parkland headlines derail online discourse about gun violence through “sharebait enthymemes,” which redirect users to the same conspiracist talking points *ad infinitum*—even or especially if those users never read past those headlines. And in my final case study, I analyzed how *Plandemic* carefully deploys discrete audience appeals to persuade multiple audiences simultaneously, a rhetorical strategy I termed “content incoordination.” We see in all three examples how conspiracy rhetoric has adapted to the social media landscape, utilizing the tactics of content production to great rhetorical success.

But in truth, the relationship between social media platforms and conspiracism is really a bidirectional one: just as social media platforms shape conspiracy rhetoric, so also does conspiracy rhetoric shape social media. When it adapts to the dictates of social media,

conspiracism thrives—and when it thrives, it makes social media a welcoming habitat for more conspiracy content to proliferate. This cycle, such as it is, continues apace until conspiracy content ceases to register as anything out of the ordinary, subsumed into the larger scroll of content social media users consume on a daily, hourly, minutely basis. Photos of a friend’s baby, an advertisement for the latest streaming service, memes claiming the Sandy Hook kids never died because they never lived to begin with—all fodder for the social media subconscious to churn through without a moment’s hesitation.

What happens when conspiracism becomes content? I think there are two interrelated consequences of this state of affairs. I have already pointed to the first: users become more comfortable seeing conspiracism reflected in their social media feeds. Conspiracy rhetoric begins to lose its unfamiliarity—and with that, the suspicions that unfamiliarity would normally arouse. Conspiracy theories have been around for quite a long time, of course, to the extent that Russell Muirhead and Nancy L. Rosenblum identify the Declaration of Independence as America’s founding conspiracist document (21-24). Yet it is also accurate to say that conspiracy discourse has long been a considered a disreputable practice, something relegated to the fringes of acceptable public discourse. But when conspiracism becomes content, it gains a newfound legitimacy that it otherwise would not possess.

The second consequence is the more grievous one: conspiracy rhetoric becomes harder to confront precisely because it no longer seems worth confronting in the first place. Neil Postman, the great twentieth-century cultural critic, helps us understand why this is so. In *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, his popular jeremiad against “the decline of the Age of Typography and the ascendancy of the Age of Television,” Postman argues that television produces a “peek-a-boo world” of decontextualized meaning consumed as entertainment (8, 77-80). Within a cultural

landscape such as that, critique becomes difficult if not impossible, as Postman elegantly muses near the end of his book: “Who is prepared to take arms against a sea of amusements? To whom do we complain, and when, and in what tone of voice, when serious discourse dissolves into giggles? What is the antidote to a culture’s being drained by laughter?” (156). Postman aims these questions at televisual entertainment, but I think his concerns equally apply to the problem of conspiracism becoming content. How can we address conspiracism when it becomes indistinguishable from all of the other social media content that populates our feeds?

The socio-technical infrastructure of social media platforms itself restricts our options for recourse. One option would be to fact-check the conspiracist content, but at this point it is clear that fact-checking has profound rhetorical limitations. Among its most notable flaws, fact-checking often solidifies false beliefs via the backfire effect.<sup>49</sup> The impulse to fact-check is understandable and likely will remain a common reaction, particularly for journalists, yet it will never be sufficient. A second option would be to attempt to get the content removed, using the flagging mechanisms platforms provide for users to report content that violates their “community standards” or other platform-speak for terms of service agreements. While not pointless, content moderation is an extremely complicated and delicate endeavor for all of the reasons Tarleton Gillespie identifies in *Custodians in the Internet*. We face something of a Hydra problem: getting one bit of conspiracist content taken down causes two new bits to appear in its place. This difficulty will persist so long as platforms are given the “right but not the responsibility” to moderate content under Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act (qtd. in Gillespie 42-44). A third option would be to provide a *rhetorical* response to social media-based

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<sup>49</sup>In addition to the research cited earlier in this dissertation, see Dana L. Cloud’s 2018 book *Reality Bites: Rhetoric and the Circulation of Truth Claims in U.S. Political Culture*. The thrust of much of this work, Cloud’s included, is that emotional resonance often drives attachment to faulty political claims—and one cannot fact-check a feeling.

conspiracism, one that labors to pinpoint how conspiracist content uses rhetorical devices to appeal to users. This is a more promising intervention, but I intentionally describe it as a kind of ‘labor’ because it takes quite a lot of work.<sup>50</sup> Moreover, developed rhetorical responses might also struggle for visibility amid the instant reactions privileged by the affordances of social media platforms. Perhaps the best place to develop such responses, then, is in the deliberative space of the classroom. I make such a proposal in the final section of this dissertation although, like Postman, I concede that that pedagogical maneuver is a “desperate answer” (162). But above all, my worry is that when conspiracism becomes content, no one bothers to muster *any* response to social media-based conspiracism because that content no longer seems noteworthy.

### **The Rhetorical Limits of User-Centered Democracy**

When I started this dissertation project in fall 2017, my motivation was to study how the user of digital platforms and services was rhetorically constructed as a subject-position. That initial interest went through various permutations over the years, from a more theoretical approach based on the question of what it means to use something to a more political approach aimed at critiquing how the internet distorts everyday political discourse. My dissertation’s trajectory ultimately ended at conspiracy rhetoric as a lens for thinking about users and politics, but the original considerations that led me to that endpoint still inhabit this project, albeit at a more subterranean level. In this section, I briefly want to draw some of those more latent ideas to the surface and suggest some future research directions for rhetoric scholars interested in studying the nexus of people, platforms, and politics that I have called “user-centered democracy.”

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<sup>50</sup>Indeed, if this dissertation is any indication, it could take years of one’s life!

One line of research might track the significant rhetorical changes that resulted in user-centered democracy as I have defined it: our contemporary historical moment in the United States, in which the user of social media platforms has become the primary subject position of contemporary American politics. This research might proceed in by way of what other scholars have termed a “rhetorical history,” doing for users what Robin E. Jensen has done for infertility and Amy Koerber for hormones. Scholarship in this vein might be guided by the following questions: how has “user” become a key term within American political discourse? How did stakeholders, from social media company representatives to social media users themselves, rhetorically leverage users as important agents in U.S. politics? In what ways were users rhetorically contested, and what factors ultimately pushed those disagreements to their (ir)resolutions? What rhetorical limitations are there for American political discourse when users become the primary audience to whom that discourse is addressed? Some rhetoric scholars have begun to explore these topics, such as James J. Brown Jr., who has analyzed how Barack Obama’s 2008 presidential election campaign procedurally mobilized users through the platform mybarackobama.com (45-71). But this work is still in its infancy, and there is much more for us to learn.

Another line of research might further theorize content as a rhetorical category and/or phenomenon. My project has provided some initial analysis into contemporary conspiracy rhetoric as a form of social media content; yet conspiracy rhetoric is but one small piece of the vast swirling mass of social media content being produced at unfathomable speed and scale. Certainly, the subfield of digital rhetoric is quite robust—to the extent that leading digital rhetoric scholars could argue that “the digital portends to be a momentary specialization that falls away” (Boyle et al. 258). And there is also a small but ever-growing body of research in rhetoric

that attends more specifically to social media objects as opposed simply to digital ones.<sup>51</sup> As of 2021, however, there is not yet a distinct subfield for *social media rhetoric* within rhetorical studies more broadly that might help organize the scattered work being done on social media and serve as its disciplinary home. Rhetoricians interested in this topic need more robust rhetorical theory about social media that might function as the subfield's lodestar. While not conscripting myself to that formidable task, I suggest a few questions that might steer future theoretical work on the rhetoric of social media: how do social media platforms operate as an infrastructure that shapes our rhetorical possibilities in the present? Just as James P. Zappen called for an "integrated theory" of digital rhetoric in 2005, should we also call for an integrated theory of social media rhetoric, and if so, how might that diverge from previous rhetorical theory that answered Zappen's call for digital rhetoric (323)? Finally, could we theorize "content" as a unique rhetorical form in contemporary culture, and what would be the conceptual payoff for so doing?

There are just some of the future research questions that this dissertation implies but cannot answer outright. My hope is that in future projects I will contribute to answering them myself. In any case, it is an immensely rich period to be conducting rhetoric scholarship on social media, and I am eager to see the future directions this research takes.

### **Conspiracism in the Classroom: A Closing Vignette**

As I happily finish this dissertation in summer 2021, antitrust legislation aimed at big tech platforms is making its way through Congress (Reardon). This is a welcome and long overdue development, but it is also one whose future is uncertain and whose impact will unfortunately be limited even if those bills pass. The problems of conspiracy rhetoric and social

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<sup>51</sup>See, for example, Williams et al. (2017), Hatfield (2018), and Kampherm (2019).

media-based mis/disinformation more broadly run really deep—far deeper than antitrust legislation could possibly go. As cultural critic Jia Tolentino quips at the end of her essay “The ‘I’ in the Internet,” social catastrophe might be more probable than meaningful change: “What could put an end to the worst of the internet? Social and economic collapse would do it, or perhaps a series of antitrust cases followed by a package of hard regulatory legislation that would somehow also dismantle the internet’s fundamental profit model. At this point it’s clear that collapse will almost definitely come first” (33). Tolentino is obviously being cheeky, but I think she is right to see the internet’s issues as far more deep-rooted than they might otherwise appear.

But that’s it? The internet sucks and then we all die? As critical as this project has been, even I cannot marshal that level of nihilism, and I want to end this dissertation on a cautiously optimistic note. So I will pose the following question: what can rhetoricians do to address mis/disinformation while we await meaningful structural change to the internet? It might seem a bit hokey, but I think one answer is this: we should make online mis/disinformation an object of study in our courses as we teach students the ordinary yet essential arts of argumentation and information literacy.

I provide below a vignette from my own clumsy attempt to teach a conspiracy rhetoric lesson in fall 2020.<sup>52</sup> While ultimately a failure, this pedagogical account nonetheless illuminates both the perils and the potential rewards in bringing mis/disinformation into the rhetoric and composition classroom. I thereby offer the following narrative in the spirit of Paul Lynch, whose book *After Pedagogy: The Experience of Teaching* points to the significance of reflection on pedagogy: “Pedagogy is not what we do before we enter the classroom or even while we’re there. It is what we do after we leave” (xviii).

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<sup>52</sup>To offset the negative impression this story gives of my teaching abilities, I should note that for teaching this course I was later honored with a major campus-wide teaching award. We all have off days!

In the fall of 2020, I taught an introductory class on Digital and Multimedia Composition (ENGL 149) that I more or less approached as a course on writing for social media. After a couple of weeks dedicated to internet history and infrastructure (both technical and ideological), the remainder of the course revolved around three writing projects: a micro-video à la TikTok, a social media graphics campaign, and a clickbait article housed on an accompanying WordPress site. We started off each unit by studying a handful of important cultural issues surrounding the social media form I tasked students with producing by the unit's end. For example, in our social media graphics unit we watched the documentary *Fyre: The Greatest Party That Never Happened* and considered the paradoxes of influencer culture—e.g., how did paid false advertising campaigns on Instagram contribute to the Fyre Festival debacle?

In this vein, I had allocated an early session of our clickbait unit to conspiracy rhetoric and mis/disinformation. I decided to assign the COVID-19 “documentary” *Plandemic* since I was writing a dissertation chapter on the video and was keen to hash out some of my early ideas with my students. I paired the video with a chapter from Siva Vaidhyanathan’s book *Antisocial Media* that details how malicious state actors use Facebook to launch disinformation campaigns; despite focusing on a different kind of disinformation than the kind we were examining, the Vaidhyanathan reading dovetailed well with *Plandemic*, I thought. A lesson on COVID-19 misinformation specifically also seemed apt given the circumstances surrounding the course I was teaching, which had originally been designed for on-campus instruction but almost instantly went remote after multiple COVID-19 outbreaks during UNC’s first week of classes. I figured that my students would appreciate the opportunity to discuss a subject that was directly affecting them that semester, and I was eager to have a conversation about COVID-19 conspiracy rhetoric.

I realized early in our session that I had grossly miscalculated how the lesson would go. I opened the class by asking students what I thought were pretty solid questions—what is *Plandemic*'s message? What does it want you to do?—but was unnerved by the answers those questions elicited. The most common responses my students gave were that *Plandemic*'s message is that we should think critically about the media and question the information we receive. Those answers seemed benign at first, but they quickly turned darker as the conversation unfolded and I saw how my students were internalizing those messages. One of my brightest students chimed in to say that she thought the video was thought-provoking; she connected the video's message to her rural hometown, which had a low COVID-19 caseload despite almost no one wearing face masks. Another strong student suggested that while some of the video's more outlandish claims were probably wrong (e.g., that wearing a face mask actually gives you COVID-19), there might be some truth to thinking sand and saltwater had healing properties that could cure the virus. Why is the government preventing people from spending time at the beach?

At this point I did my best to redirect a conversation that had clearly gone off the rails. I tried to acknowledge the validity—meager as it was—behind my students' observations, tying it to the rhetorical strategies *Plandemic* employed to make its outlandish claims sound convincing. I experienced some temporary relief when other students made more critical comments about the video, which partly neutralized the conspiratorial thrust of our conversation. Ultimately, however, I defaulted to talking quite a lot more than I otherwise would in a class discussion—a panicked decision that, I reasoned, would be my best form of damage control.

I could not help feeling troubled by how our lesson had ended. Reflecting on the experience with my friend and fellow instructor, I expressed concern that I had done concrete harm with my pedagogy. I was unnerved by the possibility that what I had intended as a fun and

topical lesson *critiquing* COVID-19 conspiracism instead *produced* COVID-19 conspiracism in my students. I used the first few minutes of our subsequent class session to circle back to our previous lesson and emphasize the more critical points we made about the video, but I felt a lingering unease.

With the benefit of hindsight and critical distance, I can identify why things went awry. First, I had seriously underestimated how persuasive my students would find *Plandemic*. I was still in the early stages of writing my dissertation chapter on the video; I had not yet fully grappled with how rhetorically powerful it is despite its ludicrous claims. I genuinely expected that my students would find *Plandemic* outlandish rather than compelling. Second, I did not provide the right kind of critical framing for our discussion. In opening the class session in a more general way, I had inadvertently also opened up the classroom (or in this case, the Zoom call) to conspiracism.<sup>53</sup> The Vaidhyanathan excerpt was there to provide some of that critical framing, but I had not drawn the necessary connections between the two course materials I had assigned. With only this implicit critical framing in place, some of my students treated *Plandemic* as a source to be trusted rather than a problematic cultural artifact to be dissected.

One might conclude from the foregoing vignette that our curriculum ought to dodge conspiracy theories altogether. While I can understand that reaction, I think rhetoric and composition instructors have much to gain from delicate, deliberate engagement with conspiracy rhetoric and other forms of mis/disinformation in first-year writing and other courses. I see two clear reasons to engage with this kind of material. The first and possibly stronger reason is that students are already encountering conspiracy theories and other forms of “information disorder”

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<sup>53</sup>Which is not to say, of course, that starting a class with an open-ended conversation is always a flawed pedagogical move. Sometimes students need space to process their early reactions to course materials before guiding them to articulate more specific observations tied to course themes or goals. But I learned the hard way that conspiracy rhetoric does not easily lend itself to that approach.

(Sellnow et al. 126) on social media. With respect to *Plandemic*, several students told me they had previously seen snippets of the video circulating on TikTok and other platforms. As my dissertation has demonstrated, social media-based conspiracism is a growing problem that will not dissipate anytime soon; thoughtful integration of conspiracist content in the classroom gives students a rigorous yet supportive space for them to analyze the information disorder they encounter online. In this respect I echo Sarah Ann Singer's recent call to integrate what she terms "wildcard sources" into the classroom, which she argues "are worth examining in college English courses because they are rhetorically compelling sites that attract broad public audiences" (153). Singer's focus is on ambiguous online healthcare sources, but we can apply her argument to conspiracy rhetoric as well: since users clearly also find conspiracy rhetoric "rhetorically compelling," we ought to interrogate why that is.

The second reason to address conspiracy rhetoric is that this content provides instructors with an engaging resource for teaching critical topics that students might otherwise find boring: civic argumentation and information literacy. These are absolutely essential elements of a university education, particularly in light of the broader forces in American culture that want to stamp out any form of critical thinking, yet because these subjects are so commonly taught, they risk becoming boilerplate topics whose significance we underestimate. Using conspiracy rhetoric and other forms of mis/disinformation as a testing ground for students' developing critical literacy skills might revitalize lesson plans that have long gone stale. Integrating conspiracy rhetoric into information literacy lesson plans obviously requires judicious planning, as my botched *Plandemic* session shows by counterexample. Instructors cannot simply plop conspiracist content into their first-year writing courses and expect things to go swimmingly. But careful study of mis/disinformation might inspire students to see the profound value of a

rhetorical education in preparing them to confront the weird, treacherous, yet oddly alluring conspiracism that now flourishes in our user-centered democracy.

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