"NO THEORY HOLDS TOGETHER:" SUSPICION, ITS PLOTTERS, AND THE PATTERNS OF IMAGINATIVE REASON IN (RE-)CONCEPTUALIZING DIGITAL CONSPIRACIST DISCOURSE

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Abstract

Arguably, our (post)modern age engenders suspicion and (explanatory) uncertainty, prompting epistemic instability, eroding veracity conditions and causing rational skepticism and distrust. This throws into sharp relief the leading pathologizing or stigmatizing scholarly evaluation of the practice of conspiracy theorizing. Especially insofar as the proliferation and stratification of competing (and power-differentiated) stories and knowledge representations are concerned. In challenging the validity of such conventional wisdom, this multidisciplinary essay broadly follows the critical "particularist" philosophical perspective. I will highlight the doubly collaborative activity underscoring digital conspiracism: The Latin etymology of "to conspire" ("to breathe together") and the storytelling dimension of "to plot" ("plotting a story"). Two notions will be introduced: *contra-plotting* and *plotters of suspicion*. Both elaborate on the ubiquitous role of narrative, for plotting necessitates an indefinitely expanding "middle" communally self-reproduced through "continual interpretation" – precluding the final acceptability of any resolution (*sections 1-2*). The *third section* offers an illustrative qualitative analysis of 'natural' discursive data. The sample of forum posts on the MS Estonia's catastrophic shipwreck is taken from the bilingual (Estonian-English) conspiracy forum *Para-Web* and broader (motif- and theme-oriented) plotting tendencies are identified. The essay concludes with some summarizing thoughts and suggestions for further research (*section 4*).

"[Dietrologia:] *the science of what is behind something. A suspicious event. The science of what is behind an event*"[2]

"[Our] *mind is allergic to uncertainty, randomness, and coincidence. It is addicted to meaning. If the storytelling mind cannot find meaningful patterns in the world, it will try to impose them*"[3]

1. Some background context: the trust deficit and its ramifications
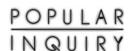
I will start this essay by dwelling to some limited extent on what some authors have termed the "crisis of trust" in the contemporary (Western) society. Following this, I will outline the subsequent structure of my essay. Now, arguably, our (post)modern era—where critical institutional omissions; wholesale withholding of information or key details due to presumable security concerns;[4] or the misleading of or lying to the public, even—frequently invokes (explanatory)

uncertainty. As such, ours is an age well primed for epistemic instability and erosion of veracity conditions, prompting popular suspicion and maintenance of a state of constant distrust, disbelief, and rational "vigilant skepticism."[5] Indeed, some research findings would undoubtedly help facilitate an argument that, more often than not, such suspicions may prove credible in and because of the historical retrospect. Some commentators have suggested that the First World War might be one point of origin for the betrayal of public trust. As history scholar Michael Redley explains, the belligerent powers' wartime governments brought into the fold "the 'free' press, publishing and film industries." By producing explicitly pro-war "propaganda masquerading as factual information," media became the mouthpiece for war, ensuring that "government's case gained a proper airing."[6] Moreover, Redley relates how these co-optation strategies also extended to the cultural sphere, instrumentalizing (even willing) people with some social standing—such as literary authors. These "[t]rustworthy people [who] len[t] their authority *to messages that the public might otherwise be inclined to disbelieve* became the basic stock-in-trade of wartime propaganda on both sides of the Atlantic."[7]

Similarly, we may consult a more recent case in the field of transport business. As sociologist Jane Parish indicates, here, too, the expert opinion effectively enacted a decoy's role. Namely, British Airways had for decades downplayed how long-haul passengers may be at risk for blood clots, going as far as using "counter-evidence [to mislead]" the public.[8] More recently still, the 2008 Center for Public Integrity investigation revealed that, following 9/11, George Bush Jr. and some other top officials had made "935 false statements [that] were part of an orchestrated campaign that effectively galvanized public opinion … under decidedly false pretenses."[9] What, then, can be surmised from the above iteration of precedents, all with considerable significance to the public sphere? If anything, then the not so inordinate implication that "facts"—even though supposedly 'objective'—are nevertheless in many cases stubbornly social (or socio-cultural) constructions; with the natural facts, as established by hard sciences, of course being the most obvious exceptions.[10] Accordingly, assuming that facts so envisioned are above and beyond the immediate purview of, and thus neutral (as if ideal entities), to the *existing* relations of power and control, never to be manipulated by these (ruling) vested interests (or: by our "knowledge generating institutions"[11])—and always only by some interested, non-ruling parties—might be a somewhat naïve stance, at best.[12]

Consequently, it seems a likely upshot, as proved by some empirical analyses undertaken in the field of trust studies, that trust has been increasingly dwindling for decades, notably though not exclusively in the liberal Western societies.[13] Now, interestingly enough, where popular distrust in and suspicion toward societal and governmental institutions has risen, so has the reverse. That is the normalization of suspicion as a "technique of governance" based on perceptions of

"risk" (Giddens, Beck). Especially concerning the minorities and "foreigners." As the post-9/11 and the "war on terror" narrative has amply shown (if not proved), such all-impregnating suspicion can too readily reveal barely dulled contours of an atmosphere belonging to that "old" Cold War era; or at the very least reinforce its looming ramifications. For instance, as Guittet and Brion observe, the United States' Transport Security Administration (TSA) has for over a decade trained their officers in catching "suspicious behavior," meaning "measur[ing] reactions and looking for signs of stress or deception" while advancing casual conversations.[14] Crucially, in perhaps most cases, these sort of strategies imply a(n imaginary) quest after an imaginary. The "environment of risk"[15] underlines hyper-cautious threat perception and encourages the absence of and abstinence from 'objective facts,' making the ubiquity of narrative to become paramount.

Accordingly, as much as our current condition might be characterized by suspicion, it is also indicative of the power, persuasion, and extent of storytelling.[16] As Cristina Bacchilega puts it: "[W]e live by stories and in stories ... stories matter."[17] Hence, it should be relatively unsurprising that we see posited either, say, "stylized" facts, drawn in part from the expedient strata of sanctioned truths; or, facts that are "invented" altogether.[18] While not going as far as to argue as if—to keep with Guittet's and Brion's example—both the police and the intelligence cultures at all times invent evidence. The fact of the matter is that due to the anticipatory "anxious alertness" described above, some risk society institutions discipline their subordinates in "narrative profiling," to adapt Christian Salmon's phrase. Not in "what is there," but in "[reading the] people and situations constantly [as] if they are not what they appear to be"—probing further, "beneath the surface."[19] In short, the ultimate result of some of the tendencies delineated previously seems obvious enough: we are increasingly bearing witness to promulgation of a "particular conduct, *a new way to formulate truth*, trust and normalcy."[20]

Being indebted to the prevailing sense of suspicion, such emerging conduct for parsing reality immerses to different degrees both the citizenry and state officialdom. Similarly essential is the aspect of constant information overload, or "surround," brought about by the hyper-diffusion characteristic of the social media era. By inhabiting this "information surround," as cultural sociologist Gary Alan Fine observes, we concurrently experience "too much information and too little."[21] Indeed, this latter predicament spells out and leads us to this essay's primary topic—that of conspiracy theorizing (CT) in the face of (explanatory) uncertainty.

Jane Parish has positioned the practice of CT also in the context of the aforementioned "surround," envisioning it as "a way to assembl[e] possibilities and information." Parish draws on other authors, who already at the end of the previous century contended that truth of our age refers to "[the] emergence of reality out of possibilities" – in contradistinction to truths derived from "external facts."[22] Now, in casting "the reality" and "the truth" in these terms—especially

timely concerning the ongoing battle with "post-truth"—and still following Parish's work that builds on Baudrillard and others, her positing of what "reality" entails is noteworthy. Namely, the latter "[may] be understood as a surface where things scatter."[23] Parish proposes reality to consist of, or perhaps rather, being enrobed by, fragments of knowledge and information, leading to increased improbability in understanding. Luc Boltanski, for his part, talks of the (official) "surface reality"—itself a decoy concealing a "disturbed reality," made evident by the "thematics of mystery, conspiracy, and inquiry," in turn invoked by the 19th and 20th century's (detective) fiction.[24] In other words, Boltanski points out how *fiction*, namely popular literature, at least in part opened the floodgates for the suspicion and doubt to seep into the everyday. This affected peoples' construals of history and society, hence necessitating the exploration of "beneath the surface," as Guittet and Brion put it. As if to 'fix' any disturbances and re-assemble the real "real" reality once and for all. Accordingly, suggesting that the activity of conspiracy theorizing resembles an engagement with some form of "whodunit" is certainly not far off.[25]

Such proclivity to seek assurances, while peculiar in abstract, is thrown into exceptionally sharp relief if not legitimized, however, through the consideration of how the 'real' meaning and the manifestation of 'reality' is increasingly becoming undermined by the technological advances of our modern society. The emergence of so-called deep fake technology, inducing something of a "truth decay," is an example par excellence. For instance, recently, a deep-faked TikTok account of "Tom Cruise" went viral with 11 million views.[26]

In taking stock in the previous introductory discussion, I propose two tentative, interconnected summary notions: *malleable reality* and *fluidity of truth*. As I envision it, the former concept indicates how narratives and narrativizations increasingly come to operate as explanatory and exploratory heuristics for reality processing. Relatedly, the fluidity of truth marks the relativization of veracity conditions accompanying the latter. It underscores a deficiency of 'objective' truths and the consequent protrusion of subverted or subversive, communal truths.

This essay has three parts. Following the present introductory section (1.), I will ponder the theoretical issues from a multidisciplinary angle in the second section. In 2.1, I will briefly provide some relevant historical and etymological insight into the very concept of "conspiracy"; as well as sketch in broad terms the most inclusive definition of "conspiracy theory." In 2.2, I will survey key literature critical of the leading (and historically persistent) effort to stigmatize and pathologize conspiracy theories and theorizing. Finally, in 2.3, partially drawing on the previous overview, I will outline a more focused conceptual discussion. To that end, I will suggest some alternative theoretical vocabulary: i.e., conspiracy theorizing as a communal *contra-plotting* of continuous, open-ended narratives (characterized by an expanding Aristotelian 'middle'); with "theorists" re-envisioned as *plotters of suspicion*. In proposing terminological

updates, I aim to forge productive dialogues between conspiracy theory research, narrative and media theories. To the best of my knowledge the latter have not had any significant interest in such a popular practice. There has not been any cross-pollination between all the three fields, either. My contribution endeavors to fill these lacunae.

The *third section* is devoted to the qualitative analysis of 'natural' discursive data (instead of performing, say, interviews). Through an *illustrative* analysis I will concentrate on a sample of forum posts taken from the bilingual (Estonian-English) conspiracy forum *Para-Web*. I identify broader (motif- and theme-oriented) plotting tendencies and, at times, zoom in on further minute detail. While I will elaborate on this when introducing the section in question, suffice it to say for now that the posters are engaged in making sense of the still unresolved cruise ferry MS Estonia's catastrophic shipwreck in 1994. Although the posts span sixteen years, around 200 posts were extracted for present purposes: a sample of around 100 from 2004-2009 and a similar amount from year 2020. To afford a closer, 'micro-level' narrative discourse analysis, the sample was further limited by focusing on one of the key motifs and examined in order to sketch some loose temporal developmental trajectories of communal narrative contra-plottings. To this end, the presented analysis is experimental, exemplifying how the activity of the plotters of suspicion produces imaginative reasoning 'patternings' of virtual knowledge with 'expanding middles' (the "becoming" of knowledge). I will conclude by reiterating the novel theoretical conceptualizations, analytical findings and propose ways for further research.

2. Theoretical Discussion

2.1 History and etymology of "conspiracy" and the definition of "conspiracy theory"

The earliest known mentions of the word "conspiracy" can be attributed to literary and historical records. Where Geoffrey Chaucer used it in "The Monk's Tale" (*The Canterbury Tales*) in 1386; Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War* reports of a summer night in 415 B. C. when supposedly "unknown individuals" defaced the statues of Hermes in Athens, then in the midst of the war. According to Thucydides, such act indicated not only bad luck but grounds to suspect "a revolutionary conspiracy to overthrow democracy."[27] In 1770, the *New Hampshire-Gazette* implored its readership, the colonists of the "City and Colony of New York," to be cautious of "tyrannical" British "minions" laying "snares [to] enslave a free people." In 1835 the inventor Samuel Moore spoke of what he perceived as a vast "Catholic plot" against the United States people.[28] As Ed White observes, although the Enlightenment brought about the rising complexity in social and political life, its 'ideology' emphasized the logic of cause and effect, underwritten by the individualist modes for, or representations of, acting, i.e. motives, intentions, responsibilities, etc. Each of these was, in turn, open to be further "arranged as patterns."[29] An increasing

state of anxiety evoked inquiries about "what was who and who was doing what."[30] As such, appeals to conspiracies emerged as the "constitutive thought" of the 18th century. Especially during the American Revolutionary War, with "conspiratorial explanations of complex events becom[ing] normal, *necessary*, and rational."[31] (Around the same time frame in Europe, one can just as quickly point to the dissemination of the anti-Semitic forgery of the *Protocols*.) Indeed, in reflecting on the above examples it might be worth arguing—as some commenters, like Stef Aupers, have—that conspiracy thinking, invoked by the "generalized distrust" and "epistemological insecurity," highlights the broader influence of the "cultural logic of modernity." As such being far more importantly contingent on its still ongoing "processes of modernization," i.e., via media apparatus, social platforms, etc.[32] Hence, in discussing conspiracist cultures as driven by "epistemic instability," amongst other factors, some recent authors, like Jaron Harambam, recount how in 2018, the HRW Forum in Düsseldorf, Germany, hosted an international group art exhibition called "Im Zweifel für den Zweifel" (In doubt for doubt). This event proposed to explore" 'the power of conspiracy theories in times when increasing digitalization raises uncertainty about what we see on the internet'."[33]

How to exactly define these widely acknowledged and tacitly understood notions such as "conspiracy" and "conspiracy theory," however? We could start by consulting the Latin etymology. In Latin, the verb "to conspire" originates from the respective roots *con* ('with') and *spirare* ('to breathe'). Hence, as epistemological philosopher David Coady usefully remarks, the act of conspiring implies whispering. That is, conspiratorial plotting can be conceived of as an "act of 'breathing together'... a coordinated effort of plotting for some particular purpose" by some "set of agents with a plan" acting (or having acted) in secret (at least for a time).[34] "Theory" meanwhile—some authors, in fact, use narrative here instead—is something more 'loose' and ambiguous; in contradistinction to, say, the unified nature of scientific theories. Therefore, a (conspiracy) 'theory' is an assembly of hypothetical knowledge[35] that focuses on the "hows?" and "whys?" of some potential, assumed conspirators plotting. And it is advanced and elaborated on through tentative 'prospecting.' This prospecting, in turn, may "progress through and consist of truths and falsehoods simultaneously." For the markers of its ontological status, i.e., its truth-value, truth-status, and the degree of its fictitiousness (or facticity) are—just as more or less *everything* about it—as of yet volatile and uncertain, subject to constant revisions.[36]

Now, in uniting these two component parts, "conspiracy theory," then, becomes (i) an account "about an implicitly powerful group [of conspirators behind] historical, ongoing, or future events"[37]; (ii) whereby the "official story"[38] is usually challenged and, to a considerable extent, opposed. Put differently, history scholar Cornel Zwierlein's broad definition most appropriately coalesces (i) and (ii) for the purposes of this essay; whilst underscoring both the

tricky ambiguity instrumental to any such' theory,' and its dimension of narrativized (and counterfactualized) past. Observes Zwierlein: in "mix[ing] fact and fiction … [a] *conspiracy theory is typically a narrative of a possible past*[39] *constructed with a material of a large amount of facts that have really happened and that are commonly accepted as 'real'*[40] *and other fictions*, or at least not proven and not commonly accepted elements which are supposed to have happened."[41]

Now, as I have highlighted elsewhere, the act of plotting appears to hold two concomitant meanings. (1) "To plot" as in conspiring (something done by the supposed conspirators); and (2) as in *plotting a story* (about how and why do these supposed conspirators plot, challenging the received "official" explanation if one exists). This latter distinction—the explicitly narrative dimension of the act of plotting—is pertinent not only in light of the ramifications of Zwierlein's suggestion but especially for how the conceptual understanding of the activity of conspiracy theorizing could be further enriched. Consequently, in 2.3 I will zoom in on the latter concern, whilst establishing some preliminary points of tangency between conspiracy theory research, narrative (media) theories, and more.

2.2 Overview of critique on the received meanings of "conspiracy theory/theorizing"

In order to appropriately suggest augmentations and revisions, however, it is necessary to first assess some of the key literature on conspiracy theory research. In doing so, I will foreground authors who have been critical of the pathologizing and stigmatizing trends in scholarly approaches on the topic; and whose work might have more useful implications for my current study, as opposed to the dominant view.

Now, as conventional academic perspective would have it, conspiracy theories (CT) and theorizing (CTing) are something deeply "irrational." This scholarly effort for wholesale irrationalization, as it were—either through pathologization or illegitimization[42]—originates from Richard Hofstadter's account of "paranoid style" (Hofstadter 1964), on the one hand; and, from Karl Popper's discussion on the "conspiracy theory of society" (Popper 1972), on the other. Some recent authors have detected the early seeds of said trends decades earlier, however, in the 1930s, in the studies on "psychopathology."[43] In the contemporary research on CTs/CTing across a variety of scientific fields such intellectual heritage is still largely maintained.[44] Accordingly, epistemological philosophers Buenting and Taylor coined the distinction of "generalism" and "particularism" in order to pinpoint where such blanket dismissal approaches usually go awry. As they maintain, "believ[ing] *any* theory depends on considerations of evidence. Judging any theory to be insufficient independently of considerations regarding the evidence is [itself] irrational."[45] More recently, M. R. X. Dentith has argued that the generalist dismissal fails because historical documentation proves the occurrence of at least *some* conspiracies. Therefore, popular theories

about *potential* conspiracies cannot be easily dismissed as "irrational CTing" for they might indeed turn out to be warranted in the long run (thus carrying legitimate baseline suspicions). Accordingly, the "[b]elief in [CTs] is not prima facie irrational."[46] Instead, the "rationality of belief" of (or skeptical, vigilant distrust underwriting) every CT should be treated on its individual "merits" (or, indeed, lack thereof). For "it is not clear that conspiracies and CTs are [always] unlikely compared to their rivals [the "official theories"]."[47] Moreover, generalist assumptions carry a number of other negative side-effects, such as a naïve and overly trusting relationship with authority; an unsophisticated understanding of "what role officialness plays in theories which have been endorsed"; and, most importantly perhaps, what Dentith terms the "social cost": "[T]he idea that CTs *as such* are intellectually suspect helps conspirators, quite literally, to get away with murder (of which killing people in an unjust war is an instance)."[48] Arguably, the particularist stance avoids such pitfalls, however, for "when inferring any explanation, we have to look at the evidence before we accept or dismiss it. CTs are no different."[49]

Nevertheless, even if to allow that strictly based on its most rudimentary operative function (positing and proving a hypothesis) the activity of CTing might resemble scientific theorizing, the accepted similarities, if even that—as some other authors have remarked—ordinarily stop there.[50] These indiscriminately dismissive approaches, observes Jack Bratich, evaluate (all) CTs not merely as false, but "not even wrong."[51] That is, CTs and their "stigmatized knowledge[52] [claims]" are accommodated by the "epistemic authority" held by our validating institutions (e.g., governments and their agencies, mass media, etc.) only insofar as transposing them into a no man's land or a limbo space.[53] Hence, the very existence of CTs expands beyond the wrongness and falsehood itself. For being effectively non-falsifiable—unlike scientific theories ought to be—CTs thus loom somewhere below the thresholds of "acceptability" and "respectability."[54] Indeed, it may be this invalidating lack of epistemic categorization that commonly leads to the invocation of pathologizing terms like 'paranoia' and 'paranoid thinking.' Consequently, as spelled out by Bratich, CTs are "*para* (beyond or beside) the *nous* (mind). They are paranoid."[55] Notwithstanding that "the problemization of knowledge may be one of the most defining contemporary cultural and political issues."[56] In a similar vein, authors like Rankin Jr. and Hustling and Orr relate the tendency of a blanket dismissal to (socio-political) power relations and hegemonic strategies of "silencing" and "exclusion."[57] Meanwhile, some other researchers, like Katharina Thalmann, take a culture-oriented perspective, suggesting how conspiracy theories should not be wholly dismissed on the grounds of the accompanying theorizing activity functioning as a form of cultural "meaning-making," identifying and articulating actual "anxieties."[58] Stef Aupers concurs, maintaining that CTing—far from being wholesale "irrational" or "delusional"—builds on real historical events, thus "embod[ing] [a] form of reflexivity, criticism and skepticism

about every truth claim."[59] Taking into account especially the latter two socio-cultural considerations; but also more broadly building on the previous critical discussion, I will subsequently flesh out some theoretical vocabulary and conceptual context expounding on a narrativist research profile for the study of communal activity of CTing.

2.3 Some notes on the ubiquity of narrative, plotters, plottings and plots

It would be instructive to begin this sub-section with quotations from a recent speech by Margus Kurm, the ex-Chair for the (Estonian) Investigative Committee in the matter of MS Estonia's sinking (and also an ex-Attorney General). Speaking before the Estonian Parliament, Kurm observed how "[t]he official version is in a large part a theory of conciliated computations and calculations that have quite little to do with what the survivors remember." Kurm concludes by noting that the current official end report of the shipwreck is a "beautifully written story" and "seems plausible upon reading"; and yet, he opines, it has a "weak evidentiary basis."[60] For such an evaluative statement to come from someone of Kurm's stature, some extraordinary events were necessary. I will get to that in the next section. For now, though, I would argue Kurm's words to be instrumental in reflecting what could be termed the ubiquity of narrative. Here I mean a kind of condition brought about by the proliferation of stories. Each told from a power-differentiated vantage point whilst vying for authority—be it "the official" (state/government-sanctioned narrative) or "the popular" (grassroots' narratives challenging and re-working or re-drafting the seemingly factual account).

Focusing specifically on the actual activity of CTing, cultural and political history scholar Kathryn Olmsted has written about a "culture of suspicion" that affiliated grassroots networks of "citizen sleuths" in the United States. That is, amateur researchers who opposed the "culture of government secrecy" with regard to the Warren Commission and the so-called lone gunman theory of the Kennedy assassination (to this day the official story). By doing so, these sleuths— condescendingly dubbed the "housewives' underground" by their contemporaries for they were primarily women—became skeptical of "state's monopoly on expertise" and 'sanctioned' experts. Accordingly, they took upon themselves to implement careful, rigorous analysis of publicly accessible Warren Commission transcripts.[61] In her book-length study, Olmsted thus lessens this blistering tension between lay investigators and the officialdom by suggesting that not only are both storytellers, but, in some ways, the officials are not too much unlike those they persecute: "[State] officials also become storytellers ... [these] [o]fficial conspiracy theorists tell one story about an event; alternative conspiracy theorists [i.e., the skeptical members of the public] doubt the stories told [and] to make sense of the world, [tell] their own."[62]

Now, presumably due to the overall negative, superficial attention CTs and the activity of CTing has been and keeps on receiving, however, either topic has attracted—to best of my

knowledge—any consistent or systemic approaches from narrative scholars. If anything, "narrative" (or "narratology," even) has in more recent studies been subsumed by other approaches or scientific fields (e.g., the systems theoretical;[63] or political and organizational theoretical angles[64]). In particular, the more advanced studies into the storytelling and sense-making mechanics inherent in CTing have so far been only the bailiwick of the quantitative and information studies.[65] Consequently, in taking into account the potential deficiencies the above brief overview might have highlighted, my current theoretical and analytical contribution both builds upon my previous preliminary research; as well as sketches some new, potentially useful theoretical pathways for further investigations.

Accordingly, I find it necessary to start broaching these matters through the concept of "forensics." Accordingly, Katharina Thalmann's illuminating observation in her recent study—drawing on McKenzie-McHarg's unpublished research—sheds some further light on the genesis of the term "conspiracy theory." Apparently, it came to use in a *neutral* fashion in the late 19th and early 20th century forensic sciences and legal proceedings. Specifically, it was implemented to "describe a hypothesis to account for a possible crime."[66] Incidentally, in narrative theoretical media studies the correlation with forensics has already seen some purchase, namely in relation to popular television series and complex digital fan engagement. Accordingly, speaking of ABC's *Lost*, Jason Mittell explains: "[V]iewers [parse] the show … [for it] demands a hyper-attentive mode of spectatorship … a detective mentality, seeking out clues, *charting patterns and assembling evidence into narrative hypotheses and theories*."[67] In other words, *Lost* exemplified what Mittell coined as "drillable media," meaning that "viewers are mining to discover something that is already there, *buried beneath the surface*."[68]

The rest of this sub-section is devoted to my theoretical proposal. I will build on (i) Thalmann's historical observation; (ii) Mittell's theoretical insight; (iii) and the idea of the "science of suspicion" (dietrologia or "behindo-logy"[69]). I will also follow, in broad strokes, the assumption of CTing being a "creative activity" for making sense of the world (Hayes 2017). Consequently, I would re-conceptualize CTing as the activity of narrative *contra-plotting*—something that the *plotters of suspicion* are engaged in. Whilst this conceptual maneuvering would enable to avoid any, more or less justified, negative connotations of the original notion; what is its theoretical import? Firstly, the verb "to plot" holds two concomitant meanings. Whilst conspiracy theory research to date has understandably focused on one specific connotation of "to plot," i.e., a set of agents conspiring, "breathing together," in secret; crucial for understanding the complete implications of the activity of CTing is to foreground the second common meaning of the verb— namely, *to plot a story*. Indeed, the most integral act of CTing as such. Consequently, the immediate result of such conceptual expansion would be that the storytelling dimension of "to plot"

indicates "*another* set of people who … plot (though not in secret) *about* that first group of people who are supposedly plotting." Put differently, plotters "plot (about) the plotters—and that is fundamentally a narrative act."[70] Secondly, the theoretical discussion I have so far advanced allows to augment this latter preliminary conceptualization with that of *plotters of suspicion*. What does this specification bring to the table? As I envision it, "of suspicion" implies two perspectives. On the one hand, the (contra-)plotters are rigorously engaged in the 'science' of "behindo-logy," i.e., attempting to pursue 'truth' of some event perceived as "suspicious" (e.g., the MS Estonia's shipwreck). On the other hand, however, the accompanying condition of "continual interpretation"[71] forecloses "the end" in any measure, type or form. Instead, this kind of interpretation self-reproduces or self-perpetuates ambiguity as its operative mode. Narrative patterns[72] with ever-expanding Aristotelian 'middles' ("the space of suspense"[73] of deferred endings) are construed and fitted together—searching for yet immediately discarding, as if by design, any final, crystallized 'truth.' As such, insofar as the plotters of suspicion endeavor to obliterate any suspicion and reach peer-agreed, concrete, and straightforward event explanation; their very activity paradoxically breeds—and is scaffolded on the never-ending existence of—suspicion.

Before moving on to the analysis, it would worthwhile to further flesh out both concepts, however. Paul Wake's (2008) fascinating treatment of "plot" and "plotting"—drawing on Peter Brooks' seminal work (1992)—might be of interest here. Wake proposes a double-layered conception for both notions. The "first plane" is the classical plot (*mythos*), the "organizing line"[74] of narrative. This pegs narrative as a "mechanism of control"—"allied to power"—for its "organizing principle" (the plot) constrains, includes, excludes, restricts, summarizes and finalizes. Now, these previous ideas, when juxtaposed with my proposed notion of contra-plotting, help to further outline how this activity would work against—in aiming to "subvert" the "ordering" of—the accepted account of some event (the authoritatively plotted explanatory narrative). Moreover, Wake's "second plane," that of plotting, is clearly correlative with my proposals. "[Laying] outside of the borders of … truth/fact," Wake conceives plotting as a "dynamic form," an unrealized (or unfinalized), open and emergent *plot potentiality* to be predictively plotted by challenging the authoritative version. The implication here would be that this plotting—"read as a verb [and] necessarily imaginative"—would ultimately reveal the 'latent,' 'real' plot (the one underneath the "surface reality" of the official story). In order to make his distinction conceptually more transparent, Wake utilizes the dictionary meaning of "plot" (map, plan, scheme); as well as parts of dialogue from Shakespeare's *Henry IV* that play on divergent meanings of the word "plot." In the latter case, a plot becomes simultaneously a "model," a blueprint for a potential building (i.e., some final event explanation in the case of conspiracy plotting); and a plot of land where the building would be built (i.e., the official story).[75] To complement this, I would argue that Shakespeare

notably implies the inherent ambiguity of any such plotting. For the "figure of the house" (the blueprint) might prove too complicated to build. Hence necessitating "draw[ing] anew the model," thereby "survey[ing] both the plot and the situation" (and maybe also the (plot of) the model, to boot?).[76] Clearly, all the above sounds quite abstract, however. The purpose of the last section (esp. in 3.2) is to counteract any overt (theoretical) abstraction by outlining how—in the case of plotting the MS Estonia shipwreck—the probing of potentialities for a hole in the ship's hull (assumed since the outset of the discussion thread as the most potent cause for extremely quick sinking) and the "bomb version" hypothesis shifts to focus on the "how?" and the "what?" inflicting the hole (following the real world confirmation, in 2020, that the latter indeed exists).

3. When a(n) (official) "beautifully written story" will not do: plotting the "working version[s]"[77] on the elusive 'truth' of MS Estonia's sinking

"I only have one question: do you want THE TRUTH in the question of Estonia's sinking, or do you want that there would eternally persist a contraction of opinions and facts on this topic?"[78]

"On the question of the sinking there's indeed an actual truth to be found, if to collect more evidence both from the seafloor and near the visor. Insofar as the quantity of certain evidence goes right now it's just very feeble that no theory holds together incl. the official[.]"[79]

3.1 Some introductory context

The 1994 sinking of the MS Estonia has been noted as one of the worst maritime disasters of 20th century and the deadliest peacetime shipwreck in European waters (Wikipedia). This disastrous event—both on the national and Scandinavian context (there were fatalities also amongst the Finns and the Swedes)—that left nearly 900 dead has recently been back in the public eye due to the supposedly revelatory Swedish docu-series *Estonia – funnet som endrer alt*. This 5-part series aired on Sweden's Discovery Channel in September last year and touched upon some of the most well-known theories about the MS Estonia's sinking. It depicted the diving onto the Baltic seafloor near the wreck. Specifically, documentary's key revelatory turn made it evident how there indeed is a huge hole (or crevasse) in the ship's hull—as had been long speculated vis-a-vis the official narrative.[80] These findings, whilst derided as 'conspiracist,' nevertheless pushed both the Estonian as well as some Scandinavian governments to re-open the investigation (or at least strongly consider doing so). Since then, though, the documentary makers had been accused, in Sweden, of violating the grave site sanctity, facing either heavy fines or jail time. Just recently, the first-tier court acquitted the men, however.[81]

Now, the posts quoted above are from the bilingual (Estonian-English) so-called conspiracy forum *Para-Web*. This forum accommodates a wide variety of related interests (many types

POPULAR
INQUIRY

of which are admittedly indeed, politically reactionary, but also inconsequential to the present discussion). The focus of current analysis is the long-running thread on MS Estonia ("The Catastrophe of Estonia – accident? Conspiracy?"). This thread, in Estonian, contains to date (23.02.21) 1,605 posts with over 240,000 views. Notably, its activity spans sixteen years and counting, being originally published in 2004. These statistics, but especially the longevity involved, make it one of the most popular threads in this forum environment. This wealth of data is certainly worthy of scholarly attention. For present purposes, a number of posts from the outset of the thread (2004-2009); and some more contemporary material (2020) were collected. The underlying intention was to pinpoint narratively significant developments in time by contrasting different eras, as it were, especially in light of the recent real world revelations described previously. To that end, following a long-term observation, in total 210 posts were gathered and inserted into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet in two columns (user/date – post). Thereafter a preliminary surface reading and subsequent coding of the sample was performed and subsequent coding was performed. The coding process was inspired by a mixture of "motif" and "narrative" coding practices.[82] It revealed a number of potent narrative markers, or core motifs, that appear with some frequency across the sample and hence enable to trace the loose 'patternings' exemplifying the "becomings" of the communal reasoning in the ongoing development of virtual knowledge.

The analysis is presented as follows. On the one hand, I will pursue a context-sensitive 'macro-level' narrative analysis observing how—within the 'patternings' of imaginative reasoning in the span of 16 years and over two distinguished periods—some open-ended narratives (or assemblies of virtual knowledge) may emerge and be more or less identifiable. On the other, however, the latter analytical mode coincides with a discourse-oriented 'micro-level' format, at times augmenting the more general perspective with more specific details. In order to guarantee a manageable sample size for such qualitative examination, the initial samples from two time periods were further limited by zooming in on one central motif-- namely that of a (potentially) sprawling "hole" [*auk*] in ship's hull or in its bottom.[83] This "hole" comes to hold especially high relevance due to the apparent findings of the documentary crew that the plotters enthusiastically acknowledge. (There will also be some other, adjacent but significant motifs involved, e.g., ship's visor, possible bomb, submarine, etc.). It should be noted that the mode of analysis presented here is both experimental and *illustrative*. For a completely thorough treatment would require (at least) an essay of its own.

3.2 Analysis

Now, ever since the first handful of posts from 2004, the interlocking common sentiments appear to hold that, on the one hand, the "real," "actual truth" about MS Estonia will not be known; and, on the other, that the state governments involved must have been (and are) "lying," for why else would they "fear new investigation[s]" or "keep silent."[84] Accordingly, the real story, as it

were, will remain unearthed because of "all the evidence having been eliminated"[85]; and presumably also because of the enforcement of the grave site sanctity law. A number of posters from the early period foreground the "bomb version," which at least partially might be credited to German freelance journalist Jutta Rabbe's diving expedition leading to claims of holes in the ship's hull.[86] Some posters, though, remain at the same time skeptical of Rabbe in particular for, in fact, she neither "glimpsed nor photographed [any] hole"—i.e., it may well just be idle talk, and nothing substantiated by evidence.[87] Nevertheless, in 2006 there even circulate photographs of the hole (whether modelled, speculative ones, or actual, remains unclear due to broken web links), leading to further elaborations on the bomb theory, e.g., maintaining that "the edges of the hole are torn from the inside to outside," like "in case of an explosion."[88] Indeed, plottings about the potentiality of "something to do with a bomb"[89] persist into 2009, leading to an extensive debate totaling in some 25 consecutive posts out of the overall sample collected. In these posts authors either reference each other by name or use direct quotes of another's arguments (as afforded by forum's framework). Moreover, in this discussion thread (taken in a broad sense) the previously stand-alone plottings about the possibility of a "bomb"—and hence, the "hole"—coalesce more explicitly with those focusing on the "hows?" and "whys?" of the breaking away of the ship's (bow) visor. For instance, some find it "not logical" that the ship's visor breaks away just by itself, without any particular pressure (thus causing the sinking), hence making it a "strange theory." Some others, conversely, do not view the visor as if insufficient causal force at all.[90] Ultimately, there remains a somewhat fragile consensus in reasoning that other factors, such as MS Estonia having been "patched up," may have played a complementary, if not a deciding, role.[91] Nevertheless, this thread from 2009—as briefly outlined above—concludes by foreshadowing, 11 years earlier, Mauno's post in the epitaph for this section: "What I want to say is that with the present information no one theory can be either definitively proven or rebutted. Including the official."[92] Yet, even so the similar sort of attentive drilling, evermore beneath the surface, persists. Not only throughout 2009 and later, but being still ongoing little more than a decade after the posts considered above.

Comparatively, there are notable differences in the 2020 discussion, though. For one, there is Mauno's admission of uncertainty figuring as a hallmark of the whole paradoxical enterprise: the uncertainties and suspicions involved in 'unlocking the truth' persist, new findings notwithstanding. That is, having their suspicions and lingering doubts proved to have been at least to some significant degree justified *necessarily doesn't close the plotting process* but rather enables shifts to novel pathways whilst not entirely 'disconnecting' these previous, now resolved, inquiries. What I specifically mean here is that in taking into account latest real world developments (in 2020) it now appears that the hole (or crevasse) indeed is sprawling in the ship's hull.

Hence, the central inquiry into the possibilities that once reinforced the potentiality of such hole (a potentiality now fulfilled) gets diverted to instead target (yet new) potentialities of the "how?" (was the hole inflicted) and (by) "what?" (a strong wave, visor's impact, submarine collision[93], etc.). The apparent confirmation of the hole is taken as salutary and long time coming, no doubt; but this very acknowledgement comes with further inquiries attached, yet to be 'solved.' Hence, insofar as the noted affirmation is concerned, there again emerge extensive back-and-forth discussion threads, also within the 2020 sample.

The first one (11 posts) is initiated by a post featuring a schematic image of what might be a construction blueprint of MS Estonia. The image appears to foreground one of the flanks of the cruise ferry, with the below the deck area especially zoomed in on, as marking of red circle indicates.[94] In the accompanying commentary it is reasoned (though the winking eye emoji in the end leaves the post somewhat ambiguous) that due to hole's position—above the ship's carcass—maybe the "welded seam," due to being "delicate," was "torn asunder." Hence there might not even have been any "big bang," for a "very little nudge" from the visor would have sufficed.[95] It is worthwhile herewith to point out how the "bomb version" from the 2004-2009 period begins to be updated with a variety of novel constellations of virtual knowledge applied to it insofar as the initial suggestion on the "welded seam" beckons further refinement from subsequent plotters. As such, in developing further the hypothesis (or its incorrectness) about the "welded seam," the potential significance of the visor and the possible explosion, the replies draw further insight from sources as diverse as the aforementioned Swedish documentary; elementary knowledge of (or lack thereof on) ship-building; a work-related visit to a Swedish pipe factory; or the well-known fact of a strong storm on the night of the shipwreck.[96]

The second thread (13 posts) was initiated a day later, involving a very lengthy, full quotation from a post from another forum (a more 'serious,' naval forum kipper.ee; "Kipper" meaning "skipper" in Estonian). The quoted post was from Imre Kaas, a journalist and ex-television reporter turned author who has written a book about the MS Estonia catastrophe and is thus held in something of a high regard in these circles (at least by this particular poster).[97] There are two issues with perhaps most ramifications between the two periods that both the original poster as well the subsequent ones pick up on from Kaas' account (who had alleged to have met with an initials-only ex-military 'whistleblower'). These are (a) the supposed existence of a "radioactive metal plate" (either extracted in secret due to otherwise "poisoning the whole of the Baltic Sea"; or buried beneath the seafloor); and (b) the history of whistleblowers, in the face of Kaas' account; and, in particular, the early (discredited and "eagerly" debunked by the Swedish authorities) claims by the Swedish military diver Håkan Bergmark of there having been a hole, indeed (later somewhat confirmed by the Rabbe-Bemis expedition). Here (a) leads to various

kinds of criticism and suspicion on the truth-value of claiming the existence of any such object[98]; as well as to re-emergence of adjacent plottings, such a potential collision with the submarine (which is, accordingly, plotted as buried, instead); or, the truck which carried the plate—the latter obviously dislodged from the wreckage post-haste by the Swedes); or, finally, a "Baltic Sea" UFO as "causing" the hole.[99] Meanwhile, the complete impact of (b) becomes evident already on the outset of yet another thread, where the reaction to Margus Kurm's speech becomes front and center in how to further tie down the continuity between the two eras.[100]

4. Conclusions

The present paper was a multidisciplinary theoretical exploration pursuing a narrative theoretical outlook on the popular digital practice of conspiracy theorizing. I began by charting the general background by considering the issues of (dis)trust and suspicion in the contemporary (Western) society (sec. 1). Next, I entered into a theoretical discussion (sec. 2) by giving a brief historical and etymological overview on the term "conspiracy" and pointing out a more inclusive definition for the notion of "conspiracy theory" (2.1); surveying some relevant literature critical of the predominant tendency to stigmatize and pathologize conspiracy theories and theorizing (2.2); and finally, elaborated on my proposed narrativist research profile, especially by proposing the notions of *contra-plotting* and *plotters of suspicion* aimed to better (and in less value-laden terms) foreground the centrality of narrative and sense-making in the much-maligned popular activity of "conspiracy theorizing." The last section (3.) was devoted for an illustrative analysis of a sample of forum posts discussing the sinking of the cruise ferry MS Estonia. Qualitative analysis, utilizing narrative and discourse analytical perspectives (3.2), was preceded by a short overview of recent real world events with regard to MS Estonia (3.1). Future research would necessitate both further fine-tuning of the conceptual apparatus as well as identifying potential topical points of comparison with other (international) corpora (e.g., Covid denialism, anti-vaxxers, 9/11 'truth' movement, etc.).

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[2] DeLillo, *Underworld* quoted in Wesley Beal, "Conspiracy, Theory, Genre: Collecting, the Paralysis of Interpretation, and Lyrical Truth in John Sayles's Silver City," *Genre* XLI, Summer (2008): 154.
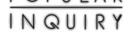
[3] Jonathan Gotschall. *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human* (Boston, New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012), chp. 5, Kindle.

[4] See, e.g. Brendan Nyhan et al., "Classified or Coverup? The Effect of Redactions on Conspiracy Theory Beliefs," *Journal of Experimental Political Science* 3, no. 2 (2016): 109-123.

[5] Montague (1968: 70) quoted in Michael Redley, "Origins of the Problem of Trust," In *Communication in the Age of Suspicion. Trust and Media*, edited by Vian Bakir and David M. Barlow, 27. Cham (CH): Palgrave Macmillian, 2007. Peter Knight, "ILOVEYOU: Viruses, paranoia, and the environment of risk," *The Sociological Review* 48, no. 2_suppl (2001): 24-5.

[6] Redley, "Origins," 27-28.

7 Redley, "Origins," 30.

8 Jane Parish, "The age of anxiety," *The Sociological Review* 48, no. 2_suppl (2001): 3-4.

9 Kurtis Hagen, "Conspiracy Theories and Stylized Facts," *The Journal for Peace and Justice Studies* 21, no. 2 (2011): 19n6. See also, M. R. X. Dentith, "When Inferring to a Conspiracy Might Be the Best Explanation," In *Taking Conspiracy Theories Seriously*, edited by M. R. X. Dentith, 8, 12, 21-22n9n10n11. London et al.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018.

10 Granted, the Covid and climate warming denialist and anti-vaxxing conspiracy theories take on even those.

11 Joseph E. Uscinski, "The Study of Conspiracy Theories," *Argumenta – The Journal of Analytic Philosophy* 2, no. 3 (2017): 237.

12 David Coady, "Conspiracy Theories and Official Stories," In *Conspiracy Theories. The Philosophical Debate*, edited by David Coady, 125-126. Hampshire, Burlington: Ashgate, 2006. Kathryn S. Olmsted, *Real Enemies: Conspiracy Theories and American Democracy, World War I to 9/11* (Oxford, New York: Oxford UP, 2009), 6. *Contra*, e.g., Stuart Sim, *Post-Truth, Scepticism & Power* (Cham (CH): Palgrave Macmillian, 2019), 13ff.; Michael E. Sawyer, "Post-Truth, Social Media, and the 'Real' as Phantasm," In *Relativism and Post-Truth in Contemporary Society: Possibilities and Challenges*, edited by Mikael Stenmark, Steve Fuller, Ulf Zackariasson, 63. Cham (CH): Palgrave Macmillian, 2018.

13 Vian Bakir and David M. Barlow, "The Age of Suspicion," In *Communication in the Age of Suspicion. Trust and Media*, edited by Vian Bakir and David M. Barlow, 3-5. Cham (CH): Palgrave Macmillian, 2007.

14 Emmanuel-Pierre Guittet and Fabienne Brion, "The New Age of Suspicion," In *Politics of Anxiety*, edited by Emmy Eklundh, Andreja Zevnik and Emmanuele-Pierre Guittet, 79-81. London, New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017.

15 Knight, „ILOVEYOU," 26.

16 Comp. Banis, Davide. "Fictiocracy: media and politics in the age of storytelling." Feburary 22, 2018 at Institute of Network Cultures. Accessed June 28, 2019.http://networkcultures.org/longform/2018/02/22/fictiocracy-media-and-politics-in-the-age-of-storytelling/; Salmon, Christian. Storytelling: Bewitching the Modern Mind. Translated by David Macey. London, New York: Verso, 2017. Kindle.

17 Cristina Bacchilega, "Narrative Cultures, Situated Story Webs, and the Politics of Relation," *Narrative Culture* 1, no. 2 (2015): 28-29.

18 Comp. Hagen 2011; Schmidt, Siegfried J. "On the Construction of Fiction and the Invention of Facts." *Poetics* 18 (1989):319-335.

19 Guittet and Brion, "New," 80-81.

20 Guittet and Brion, "New," 80-81; emphasis added.

21 Gary Alan Fine, "Rumor, Trust and Civil Society: Collective Memory and Cultures of Judgement," *Diogenes* 213 (2007): 5.

22 Cooper (1997: 690-691) quoted in Parish, "Age," 8.

23 Parish, "Age," 9.

24 Luc Boltanski, *Mysteries and Conspiracies: Detective Stories, Spy Novels and the Making of Modern Societies*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA.: Polity, 2014), xv, 1ff.

25 Ole Bjerg and Thomas Presskorn-Thygesen, "Conspiracy Theory: Truth Claim or Language Game," *Theory, Culture & Society* 34, no. 1 (2017): 2.

26 See also, https://thispersondoesnotexist.com , https://generated.photos/faces or CNN Business. "No, Tom Cruise isn't on TikTok. It's a deepfake." March 3, 2021 at CNN. Accessed April 5, 2021.
 https://edition.cnn.com/videos/business/2021/03/02/tom-cruise-tiktok-deepfake-orig-cnn-business;

27 Quoted in Ted Remington, *Conspiracy Theories as Socially Constructed Mythic Narratives* (PhD Diss., University of Iowa, 2002), 1. For a very comprehensive overview of the general and regional history of the term, see in the *Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theory*, edited by Michael Butter and Peter Knight (London, New York: Routledge, 2020), section 5.

28 Katharina Thalmann, *The Stigmatization of Conspiracy Theory Since the 1950s: "A Plot to Make Us Look Foolish"* (London, New York: Routledge, 2019), 1.

29 Ed White, "The Value of Conspiracy Theory," *American Literary History* 14, no. 1 (2002): 4.

30 Wood (1982: 410), quoted in White, "Value," 4.

31 Wood (1982: 420-421), quoted in White, "Value," 4; emphasis in original. Thalmann, *Stigmatization*, 18n2.

32 Stef Aupers, "'Trust no one': Modernization, paranoia and conspiracy theory," *European Journal of Communication*, 27, no. 1 (2012): 23, 26. See also, Emma A. Jane and Chris Fleming, *Modern Conspiracy: The Importance of Being Paranoid* (New York et al.: Bloomsbury, 2014).

33 Jaron Harambam, *Contemporary Conspiracy Culture: Truth and Knowledge in an Era of Epistemic Instability* (London, New York: Routledge, 2020), 4-5.

34 David Coady, "An Introduction to the Philosophical Debate about Conspiracy Theories," In *Conspiracy Theories. The Philosophical Debate*, edited by David Coady, 1-2. Hampshire, Burlington: Ashgate, 2006. Coady, "Official Stories," 117; Dentith, "Inferring," 8, 22n12n13.

35 A type of 'pre-' or 'foreknowledge,' an assembly of virtual structures of understanding, in-development, "in becoming." See, Camilla Hald, *Web Without a Weaver. On the Becoming of Knowledge: A Study of Criminal Investigation in the Danish Police* (Dissertation.com: Boca Raton, 2011), 5-6, 11ff.

36 Siim Sorokin, "Narrative conspiracy theorizing, fluidity of truth, and social media storytelling in the post-truth age," *Interstudia* 25 (2019): 72. Peter Deutschmann, "Conspiracy Theories, Discourse Analysis and Narratology," In *"Truth" and Fiction: Conspiracy Theories in Eastern European Culture and Literature*, edited by Peter Deutschmann, 22. Bielefeld: transcript Verglag, 2020.

37 Uscinski, "Study," 235.

38 "[A]n explanation that has official status at the time and place in question" (Coady, "An Introduction," 2).

39 Some conspiracy theorizing could just as well be about a possible *future*, however. Currently topical COVID-19, for instance, has birthed types of anti-vaxxer theorizing which, quite explicitly, focus on dystopian futures. Hence, whilst my present data is indeed about a past event, I see no reason to be temporally exclusive in a general sense.

40 "[T]he raw materials of history" (Olmsted, *Real Enemies*, 7).

[41] Cornel Zwierlein, "Security Politics and Conspiracy Theories in the Emerging European State System (15ᵗʰ/16ᵗʰ c.)," *Historical Social Research*, 38, no. 1 (2013): 70; emphasis added. See also, "Conspiracy theories [...] are modes of thinking, templates imposed upon the world to give appearance of order to events" (Michael Barkun, „Conspiracy Theories as Stigmatized Knowledge," *Diogenes* (2016): 1).

[42] I should underscore here that my intent is certainly *not* to suggest as if any and all CTs are warranted. There are plenty of "epistemically vicious" (to use Charles Pigden's phrase) CTs that s*hould* be actively discouraged (anti-Semitic, anti-Muslim, anti-LGBTQ*, climate change denialist and some over-exaggerated anti-vaxxer CTs come to mind here). See also, M. R. X. Dentith, „Taking Conspiracy Theories Seriously and Investigating Them," In In *Taking Conspiracy Theories Seriously*, edited by M. R. X. Dentith, 222-223. London et al.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018. However, the kind of CTs that are, in broad strokes, counter-hegemonical, i.e., invested in pragmatically-practically proving—with a great deal of effort and attention to detail—some governmental misconduct in handling, or worse, being involved in some grave (inter)national event, especially on the backdrop of historical precedents for deceit (in the case of U.S., at least)—might not be the best epistemic bedfellows to CTs about, say, covert lizard people or vaccines-as-microchips.

[43] Jack Bratich, *Conspiracy Panics: Political Rationality and Popular Culture* (Albany: State University of NY Press, 2008), 26-31. Nebojša Blanuša, "Depathologized Conspiracy Theories and Cynical Reason: Discursive Positions and Phantasmic Structures," *Coatian Political Science Review*, 48, no. 1 (2011): 96.

[44] E.g., Darwin, Hannah, Nick Neave, Joni Holmes. "Belief in conspiracy theories. The role of paranormal belief, paranoid ideation and schizotypy." *Personality and Individual Differences* 50, no. 8 (2011): 1289-1293; Sunstein, Cass R., and Adrian Vermeule. "Conspiracy Theories: Causes and Cures." *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 17, no. 2 (2009): 202-227; Quassim, Cassam. "Bad Thinkers." *Aeon*, 2015. https://aeon.co/essays/the-intellectual-character-of-conspiracy-theorists De Mucci, Raffaele. „The methodological individualism antidotes to poisons of the conspiracy theory of history and society." *Sociologia (Italy)* 49, no. 2 (2015): 15-21.; for criticism, see, e.g., Coady, David. "Are Conspiracy Theorists Irrational." *Episteme* 4 (2007): 193–204; Hagen 2011; Basham, Lee, and M. R. X. Dentith. "Social Science's Conspiracy-Theory Panic: Now They Want to Cure Everyone." *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 5, no. 10 (2016): 12–19.

[45] Joel Buenting and Jason Taylor, "Conspiracy Theories and Fortuitous Data," *Philosophy of Social Sciences*, 40, no. 4 (2010): 570; emphasis in original.

[46] Dentith, "Inferring," 3, 7.

[47] Dentith, "Inferring," 13.

[48] Pigden (*in press*), quoted in Dentith, "Inferring," 14.

[49] Dentith, "Inferring," 19.

[50] However, some commentators do see strong correlations between these two forms of discourse, see, e.g., Luis Roniger and Leonardo Senkman, "The Logic of Conspiracy Theory," *ProtoSociology*, 36 (2019).

[51] Bratich. *Conspiracy Panics*, 3.

[52] Peter Deutschmann terms this the "heterodox" (sub-cultural) knowledge (*versus* the "orthodox") (Deutschmann, „Narratology," 27).

[53] For "stigmatized knowledge," see, Barkun, "Stigmatized Knowledge," 2-4 and Michael Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America* (Berkley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2013), 33-38. "Epistemic authority" comes from Jaron Harambam and Stef Aupers, "Contesting epistemic authority: Conspiracy theories on the boundaries of science," *Public Understanding of Science*, 24, no. 4 (2014).

[54] Sorokin, "Narrative conspiracy theorizing," 73.

[55] Bratich, *Conspiracy Panics*, 3; emphases in original.

[56] Harambam, *Epistemic Instability*, 6.

[57] Some scholars have also argued that the term "conspiracy theory," the way we know it today, was developed by the CIA (see, Lance DeHaven-Smith, *Conspiracy Theory in America* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014).

[58] Thalmann, *Stigmatization*, 10.

[59] Aupers, "Modernization," 24. See also, Mark Fenster, *Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture* (Revised and Updated Edition) (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 93-155.

[60] The IV Session of the XIV Parliament, 26.11.2020, see: https://archive.is/9mv3m (archieved 22 Feb 2021).

[61] Kathryn S. Olmsted, "The Truth Is Out There: Citizen Sleuths from the Kennedy Assassination to the 9/11 Truth Movement," *Diplomatic History*, 35, no. 4 (2011): 672-673, 681, 683.

[62] Olmsted, *Real Enemies*, 6.

[63] Deutschmann, 2020.

[64] Yiannis Gabriel, "Narrative Ecologies in Post-truth Times: Nostalgia and Conspiracy Theories in Narrative Jungles?" In *What Political Science Can Learn from the Humanities: Blurring Genres*, edited by R. A. W. Rhodes and Susan Hodgett, 33-55. Cham: Palgrave Macmillian, 2021.

[65] See, Introne, Joshua, et al. "The Collaborative Construction and Evolution of Pseudoknowledge in Online Conversations." #SMSociety'17, July 28-30, 2017, Toronto, ON., Canada. http://dx.doi.org/10.1145/3097286.3097297 Introne, Joshua, et al. "How People Weave Online Information Into Pseudoknowledge." *Social Media + Society* (July-September 2018): 1-15; Timothy R. Tangherlini, et al. "An automated pipeline for the discovery of conspiracy and conspiracy theory narrative frameworks: Bridgegate, Pizzagate and storytelling on the web." *PloSOne*, 2020. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0233879

[66] Thalmann, *Stigmatization*, 10.

[67] Jason Mittell, "Lost in a Great Story: Evaluation in Narrative Television (and Television Studies)," In *Reading Lost*, edited by Roberta Pearson, 128-129. London, New York: I. B. Tauris, 2009; emphasis added.

[68] Jason Mittell, *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling* (New York, London: New York University Press, 2015), chap. 8, Kindle; emphasis added.

[69] Spark (1998), quoted in Bratich, *Conspiracy Panics*, 15; Beal, "Collecting," 154.

70 Sorokin, "Narrative conspiracy theorizing," 76; emphases in original.

71 Fenster, *Secrecy*, 94.

72 I take the term "pattern" here in a generalized sense. Causal linkages, agency attribution, seeing consistencies "in noise" (of the information overload, say) all apply.

73 Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (Cambridge, MA., London: Harvard University Press, 1992), 18.

74 Brooks, *Reading*, 25.

75 Paul Wake, "Plotting as Subversion: Narrative and the Gunpowder Plot," *The Journal of Narrative Theory*, 38, no. 3 (2008): 295-296, 299, 301-303.

76 Wake, "Plotting," 295.

77 The term (*tööversioon* in Estonian) is borrowed from Geargirl, „Estonia katastroof – õnnetus? Vandenõu?", Para-Web forum, November 18, 2020, http://para-web.org/showthread.php?tid=569&page=42.

78 Geargirl, Para-Web, 19.11.20; all translations mine.

79 Mauno, Para-Web, 19.11.20.

80 See: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt13175494/ (Accessed 8.03.2021). For the moment of the discovery, see: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t1Z4ID7git4 (Accessed: 8.03.2021).

81 See: https://news.err.ee/1608101959/swedish-court-acquits-ms-estonia-documentary-makers (Accessed: 8.03.2021).

82 See: Johnny Saldaña, *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers* (Los Angeles et al.: SAGE, 2009),105-112.

83 Margus Kurm: "All alternative theories revolve, in some sense, around the hole in the bottom of the ship."

84 E.g., posters rha, "Estonia katastroof – õnnetus? Vandenõu?", Para-Web Forum, October 9, 2004, http://para-web.org/showthread.php?tid=569; Kaabulott, April 2, 2006, http://para-web.org/showthread.php?tid=569&page=2; HidoTozi, June 4, 2009, http://para-web.org/showthread.php?tid=569&page=5.

85 Rha, "Estonia katastroof".

86 See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jutta_Rabe; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Baltic_Storm .

87 Rha, „Estonia katastroof".

88 Madman07, "Estonia katastroof – õnnetus? Vandenõu?", Para-Web Forum, August 29, 2006, http://para-web.org/showthread.php?tid=569&page=2.

89 HidoTozi, "Estonia katastroof".

90 HidoTozi, "Estonia katastroof". E.g., "not impossible at all," referencing the building material failing Titanic (laizk, June, 2009, http://para-web.org/showthread.php?tid=569&page=5); The broken off visor "ALONE" not a cause, "only consequence" (excubitoris, June 4, 2009); Or that, in addition, the "ramp" also has to "give in," "be loose" (MorganLaFey, June 25, 2009). There are also a number of still further developments, e.g., when posters draw on (various deficiencies of) computer simulations on sinking scenarios.

91 Due to having "been repeatedly banged on reefs" (Alfar, June 6, 2009); "miscellaneous damages besides the visor" (Sturm, June 27, 2009). Interestingly, a variation on this "prior injuries" hypothesis also emerges in 2020: "Was on a trip to Saaremaa, the ship nudged the pier quite fiercely, but no welding came unstuck from nowhere. And from here the thought: perhaps Estonia split its side already in the port? It did stand with its right side facing the pier. [G]ot a tearing and went on the trip?" (TTT, "Estonia katastroof – õnnetus? Vandenõu?", Para-Web forum, November 17, 2020, http://para-web.org/showthread.php?tid=569&page=42). For more on "welding" and "welded seam," see below.

92 Alfar, „Estonia katastroof".

93 Granted, the submarine hypothesis existed long before the existence of the hole was confirmed.

94 For the image (already inaccessible through the forum), see: https://ibb.co/RyJshHJ (uploaded 15.03.2021). At least for me it proved impossible to find its origin. It could also be sketched by this user themselves.

95 Vasamasa, November 16, 2020.

96 "[T]he force of impact was calculated [there] based on the indented dint not [based on the hole itself]" (Mauno, November 16, 2020); "wouldn't it be easier to weld the hull together from rectangular metal plates? This hole, however, is askew, isn't it?" (Geargirl, November 16, 2020); "the welded seam was stronger than any other part of the pipe [...] it never was torn asunder" (Aadu66, November 17, 2020); "the wave banged [on it], the weight of the visor+the mass of the water pushing it=damage to ship's hull" (Vasamasa, November 17, 2020).

97 Geargirl, November 18, 2020.

98 Xcad, November 18, 2020; Mauno, November 18, 2020.

99 For a supposed UFO on the seafloor of the Baltic Sea, see this mainstream news story from 2012: https://forte.delfi.ee/artikkel/64549240/esimesed-eksklusiivkaadrid-laanemere-pohjas-avastatud-ufost. Xcad, November 18, 2020; Mauno, November 18, 2020; Geargirl, November 18, 2020; all from: http://para-web.org/showthread.php?tid=569&page=42.
TTT, November 19, 2020; xcad, November 19, 2020; Mauno, November 19, 2020; zzz34, November 19, 2020; all from: http://para-web.org/showthread.php?tid=569&page=43.

100 Mauno, November 26, 2020, http://para-web.org/showthread.php?tid=569&page=45.

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