THE RHETORIC OF CONSPIRACY THEORIES

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Abstract

Conspiracy theories are contentious narratives that claim to unveil a secret, malevolent plot by a group of conspirators. Research on conspiracy theories has been largely influenced by 'the paranoid style' (Hofstadter 2008); nevertheless, conspiracy theories are multifarious and complex narratives. They also hold persuasive powers – are rhetorical –and are widespread (Arnold 2008: 7, Goertzel 1994, Melley 2000). This thesis challenges the enduring association of conspiracy theories with paranoia by contributing to the growing body of work on socio-cultural approaches. In doing so, the current limitation of sparse intellectual engagement with the language of conspiracy theories is addressed by undertaking a socio-cognitive critical discourse analysis. This thesis also contributes to widening applications of socio-cognitive (critical) discourse studies (SCDS) by applying the approach to conspiracy theory discourse, both reinforcing and challenging its toolkit. Firstly, points of contact and divergence between diverse instantiations of conspiracy theories are demonstrated via the discursive construction of collective identities in the *conspiracy milieu* (Harambam and Aupers 2017: 125). Secondly, the persuasive properties of conspiracy theories and how proponents are positioned as enlightened victims are analysed. Thirdly, there is an exploration of how conspiracy theories can be replicated by a member of the general public.

This thesis demonstrates how conspiracy theories can both critique and reinforce systemic power inequalities. SCDS provides analytical frameworks that elucidate the persuasive properties encoded in language. In addition, SCDS explicates the toolkit that conspiracy theories offer to essentially become a 'DIY detective' (Byford 2011), uncovering conspiracy theories either directly or vicariously. A variety of analytical frameworks are employed, including Koller's framework for a socio-cognitive critical discourse studies (2019: 75), social actor framework (van Leeuwen 2008), Cap's proximization model (2006, 2008, 2010, 2012, 2013a, 2013b, 2015), text world theory (Gavins 2007, Werth 1999) and the appraisal framework (Martin 2000, 2003; Martin and Rose 2003; Martin and Rose 2007; Martin and White 2007; White 1997 and 2002). As a data set for the study, representative texts have been chosen via a digital ethnographic process, including superconspiracy (Barkun 2003), ufology, conspirituality (Ward and Voas 2011) and celebrity death conspiracy theories.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Principles and parameters

This thesis explores conspiracy theories using SCDS. Conspiracy theories are divergent narratives which both critique and reinforce systemic power inequalities. Nevertheless, conspiracy theories, albeit often simplified and homogenised, are diverse and complex phenomena that hold persuasive powers. The analytical stance I have taken challenges the long-held view of conspiracy theories as 'the paranoid style' (Hofstadter 2008), considering that we exist in a 'broader context of epistemological insecurity' with decreasing faith in scientific and institutional narratives (Harambam and Aupers 2015: 467). Instead, I contribute to a shift away from primarily defining conspiracy theories as illogical and towards understanding their popular appeal as anti-elitist (Neville-Shepard 2018: 129). Furthermore, they can usefully also be regarded ethnographically as a 'coded social critique' (Miller 2002) whereby the discourse participants become heroic victims in Manichaean battles between good and evil or on a quest for higher knowledge. The first chapter provides an overview of conspiracy theories as socially situated, enduring and highly divisive phenomena. I then discuss the key research questions, followed by a discussion of definitions in Chapter 2. Chapter 3 details the current sociocultural literature on conspiracy theories and Chapter 4 discusses SCDS and digital ethnography.

1.2 Conspiracy theories

Conspiracies exist. The Gunpowder Plot, The Final Solution and The Watergate Scandal each involved an actual secret plan orchestrated by conspirators. Furthermore, they become submerged into broader historical narratives. History is littered with conspiracies thus an historically literate person is, strictly speaking, a conspiracy theorist (Pidgen 2006), though 'virtually no one claims to believe in a conspiracy theory as such' (Knight 2000: 10). Conspiracies usually become public due to whistle-blowers, official investigations, or data leaks (Lewandowsky and Cook 2020: 3). On the other hand, conspiracy *theories* tend to be contested narratives germinating and persisting in a climate of rhetorical friction (Goodnight and Poulakos 1981). Conspiracy theories are also hugely divisive. Accusations of 'conspiracy theory' implicate implausibility (Arnold 2008: 6) and 'conspiracy theorist' incompetence (Husting and Orr 2007: 127).

Opponents often view conspiracy theories as an erroneous and highly flawed portrayal of global politics, which misinterprets those in power's motivations and organisational capacity (Hegstad 2014: 10). Conspiracy theories are not, by any means, a modern phenomenon and stretch back to the Middle Ages and the Christian crusades, the Templars, Rosicrucians, Illuminati and Freemasons (Pipes 1997), demonstrating a 'persistence as a dynamic set of stories and *shared* assumptions about the world embedded in a tradition of explanation' (Byford 2011: 139). Conspiracy theories also have a capacity for scapegoating and are used instrumentally to justify controversial political action (Berlet 2009: 48). Furthermore, they are symptomatic of social anxieties (Fenster 2008, Knight 2000, Melley 2002):

> Conspiracy talk involves working out not only where corporate responsibility begins and ends, but also, in times of viral confusion, where our corporeal identity has its limits […] there is now a permanent uncertainty about fundamental issues of causality, agency, responsibility and identity.
>
> (Knight 2000: 4)

Conspiracy theories are now easily accessed and propagated on the internet, which provides an ideal breeding ground for their dissemination (Soukup 2008) with *YouTube* as a main platform for conspiracy theory content (Byford 2011: 11, Allington and Joshi 2020). In other words, the internet has enabled heterodox information to permeate the mainstream (Barkun 2013: 50). Despite this, online conspiracy theories have received very little attention (Varis 2019: 3), and much of the current literature is on North American conspiracy theories with scant research on British conspiracy theories and theorists. Moreover, the 'creative, entertaining component' has received little attention (Basham and Dentith 2016: 18). To date, there is also a sizeable gap in conspiracy theory literature from a discourse-analytical perspective (apart from Allington, Buarque and Flores 2021; Allington and Joshi 2020; Bohal 2015; Demata, Zorzi and Zottola 2022; Marko 2022; Mason 2018; Rankin 2017; Varis 2019), with sparse literature from a critical perspective (Demata, Zorzi and Zottola 2022). The existing literature is predominantly within the social sciences, in particular political science and social pscyhology (see Chapter 2). However, there is a growing body of work on socio-cultural approaches, which is discussed in Chapter 3 and drawn upon in the analyses in Chapters 5, 6 and 7. My central underlying aim focuses on elucidating aspects of the rhetorical structures of conspiracy theories. I aim to demonstrate their rhetorical variety by uncovering different cognitive structures of conspiracy theories at a discourse level, demonstrating that the narratives are not 'paranoid' per se but a social critique that targets the collective underdog, drawing on the socially shared belief of a dishonest, self-serving political and economic elite.

Conspiracy theories claim to offer a solution to the epistemological uncertainty emanating from a sense of 'viral confusion'. In other words, we live in a digital age that has enabled easy access to vast amounts of data and information. Coupled with the often chaotic and complex nature of global economics and politics as well as sudden, catastrophic events, people attempt to make sense of confusing circumstances and conspiracy theories offer a convenient – albeit contentious – method of doing so. Moreover, conspiracy theories manifest in distinct genres, demonstrating their flexibility and diversity whilst retaining core narrative features, for example, conspirators with a malevolent plan. They are also accessed on the internet where anyone can create and upload their own conspiracy theory. I have taken a SCDS approach to the analyses. SCDS provides analytical frameworks for tackling questions around the persuasive properties of conspiracy theory rhetoric and the 'toolkit' it offers to essentially become a 'DIY detective' (Byford 2011), uncovering conspiracy theories either directly or vicariously. Taking the above points into account, I have undertaken an approach based in digital ethnography (see 4.4–4.7) to obtain contextual knowledge and enable me to notice rhetorical patterns in the data which would go unnoticed without an emic understanding achieved by repeated exposure to conspiracy theory rhetoric.
Accordingly, the focus is on understanding the phenomenon and is facilitated by detailed qualitative analyses of representative texts (Pennycook 1990: 15, see section 4.7 for an explanation of how and why the specific texts were chosen).

1.3 Research questions

The following three questions shape this research project:-

1. How can the conspiracy milieu (see section 5.2 for a discussion on the term) be defined considering its diverse applications of conspiracy theory rhetoric?

Subquestion 1: How are the terms ‘conspiracy theory’ and ‘conspiracy theorist’ reappropriated within the milieu?

Subquestion 2: How do conspiracy-theory-dependent rhetoric and hybrid genres diverge, and what are their points of contact?

2. How are readers/listeners persuaded to believe/entertain a conspiracy theory?

Subquestion 1: How are speaker and audience identity textually constructed and communicated?

Subquestion 2: How is the discourse space constructed as a conspiracy theory?

Subquestion 3: How is the point of view constructed in the text, and what role does it play?

3. How can a member of the public discursively construct a conspiracy theory narrative?

Subquestion 1: Where is attention drawn to in the search for evidence of a conspiracy?

Subquestion 2: How is evidence evaluated in the discourse to cohere with a conspiracy?

1.3.1 Research question 1: How can the conspiracy milieu be defined considering its diverse applications of conspiracy theory rhetoric?

My first research question takes as a central premise the eclectic nature of conspiracy theory rhetoric insomuch as conspiracy theories can and do appear in a wide variety of milieux. Conspiracy theories can be found throughout the political spectrum, across diverse interest groups and from the institutional core to the outer fringes of societies. Additionally, a spectrum of intensity exists both at a collective and individual level. Some communities are highly dedicated and reliant upon the core narrative structure of conspiracy; they are conspiracy-dependent, whereas hybrid genres take on conspiracy theory rhetoric but not as a central and fundamental rhetorical feature. Equally, proponents of conspiracy theories can be considered as being on a spectrum of intensity of belief (Allington and Joshi 2020: 35).

The first analysis (Chapter 5) focuses on the ‘conspiracy milieu’: communities of knowledge populated by self-identified ‘conspiracy theorists’ who are conscious of their relegated status in the eyes of the mainstream. Conspiracy theory rhetoric can and does appear in mainstream politics throughout the world. However, it is beyond the scope of this thesis to incorporate conspiracy theories expounded by politicians as they are rhetorically distinct and frequently motivated by instrumental purposes (for example, to win an election or intensify hatred towards an out-group and legitimise action against them). Accordingly, I analyse how the pejorative terms: ‘conspiracy theory’ and ‘conspiracy theorist’ are reappropriated and ameliorated within the conspiracy milieu. Subsequently, the terms can give an insight into their role in the formations of various in-groups and out-groups: an ‘us’ versus ‘them’ dichotomy. Following on, I conduct a comparative analysis that considers, at a discourse level, variances and commonalities between conspiracy-theory-dependent rhetoric and hybrid genres, enabling connections between seemingly disparate interest groups. The analyses are effected using van Leeuwen’s social actor approach (2008) which details a sociological grammar appropriate for analysing socially situated phenomena at a descriptive level. Analysis at the interpretative level is enabled by incorporating Koller’s framework for

socio-cognitive critical discourse studies (2019: 75). These will be outlined and discussed in section 5.3 below.

1.3.2 Research question 2: How are readers/listeners persuaded to believe/entertain a conspiracy theory?

The second research question concerns the persuasive properties of superconspiracy theories, which claim a blueprint for all the world's events that can be traced back to an elite evil group operating in the shadows. The analysis data comprises a viral, banned interview conducted during a national lockdown in the United Kingdom to stem the spread of the COVID-19 virus pandemic. The conspiracy theorist who is interviewed details the ultimate plan for global takeover by an elite supergroup before discussing its implications and thus reframing of the pandemic as an economic – as opposed to primarily health – issue, forming part of the group's masterplan.

The analytical focus is on the persuasive properties of the discourse, particularly what it claims to offer the discourse participants in terms of identity construction and viewpoint shifts towards a vantage point. As part of capturing the narrative 'blueprint', the analysis also explores commonly utilised rhetorical tools in conspiracy theory rhetoric such as out-group scapegoating and intertextual references – particularly to dystopian literature. To achieve these aims, I utilise both Cap's proximization model (2006, 2008, 2010, 2012, 2013a, 2013b, 2015) and text world theory (Gavins 2007, Werth 1999) to demonstrate how the discourse space is constructed as a conspiracy theory and how point of view and identity are constructed and communicated. The proximization model was developed to capture the rhetorical techniques used in war legitimation rhetoric, most simply the construal of increasing spatial, temporal and ideological proximization of an out-group, thus constructing a sense of imminent danger. This analysis extends its application to conspiracy theory rhetoric by incorporating text world theory's treatment of ontological layers regarding the status and verifiability of proposed evidence.

1.3.3 Research question 3: How can a member of the general public construct a conspiracy theory narrative?

The final research question focuses on the concept of the DIY detective (Byford 2011), which I encountered from extensive reading on conspiracy theories during the initial stages of the project. Byford uses the term to describe the role akin to an 'armchair detective' in that the discourse participant is a vicarious participator in an investigation to uncover a conspiracy. In other words, they may or may not be actively 'DIY-ing' or interpreting clues, such as inconsistencies, acts of apparent incompetence or epistemic lacunae in the official narrative, albeit there is a shared sense of discovery and illumination amongst author and receiver in the discourse process. The aim is to analyse the process of conspiracy theorising, looking specifically at where attention is drawn and how evidence is identified and evaluated to cohere with a conspiracy verdict.

In this analysis, the object of analysis concerns a case study of an event conspiracy as representative of the conspiracy theory subgenre of celebrity deaths (accidents and suicides that have been reframed as conspiracies). To date, celebrity deaths have received little scholarly attention despite being prevalent and enduring in popular culture, particularly surrounding untimely deaths. The analysis focuses on conspiracy theories about the accident and death of the British Princess Diana at 36 years old. This theory has proven consistently

popular and (based on digital ethnographic research) representative of the genre. To operationalise the analysis, I draw upon appraisal theory, a systematic method of analysing evaluative language – essentially, the DIY detectives re-evaluate the official narrative to cohere with a conspiracy outcome. Furthermore, the framework facilitates flexibility of interpretation which is appropriate to the nature of this project. In other words, contextual understanding obtained from digital ethnography is considered essential to the interpretative process, and the appraisal framework enables this due to its flexibility in categorising evaluative instances.

Chapter 2: Defining Conspiracy Theory

2.1 Introduction

The term *conspiracy theory* is a heavily loaded term whereby people immediately pass judgment on a conspiracy theory in terms not only of its veracity but also the authority of the speaker/writer. Therefore, it is difficult to define *conspiracy theory* without being judgmental or decontextualised. By decontextualised, I refer to a focus on the core narrative structure at the expense of bypassing the context around the narrative: its social functions and situatedness. By judgmental, I refer to avoiding any implicit or explicit subjective (often pejorative) inferences. Conspiracy theory functions as a loaded term; it does not operate in a societal vacuum and demands judgment from the interlocutors on the quality of the narrative and the rationality of the conspiracy theorist.

Conspiracy theory creates friction – either in opposition to an official narrative or against contradictory popular dominant beliefs. It could be a grander or opposing narrative and possibly an implicit one (where the rhetoric has been reified to the point of not needing to be explicitly said). Conspiracies exist and when they obtain official status tend to become submerged into broader historical narratives, such as the assassinations of Julius Caesar and Abraham Lincoln, The Gunpowder Plot, The Final Solution and Watergate. On the other hand, conspiracy theories have a different epistemic status which is signalled by the appellation ‘theory’. This chapter discusses how to define conspiracy theory drawing on current literature, which provides a foundation for the following chapter on narrative and contextual features. In the final section, I propose a working definition of *conspiracy theory.*

2.2 Popularity

The following section addresses, in its broadest sense, the popularity of conspiracy theories. I firstly discuss the aspect of historical popularity. I then summarise the popularity of the conspiracy theory narrative in both entertainment and academic discourses identifying peaks and troughs in their socio-cultural contexts.

2.2.1 Historical popularity

Conspiracy theories appear to wax and wane over time (Aupers 2012; Hofstadter 2008: 6), peaking at times of social conflict (Boym 1999: 98; Gulyas 2016: 25 Hofstadter 2008: 39) and are, according to Hofstadter, ’ineradicable’ (2008: 6). Furthermore, despite claims that they are fringe discourses (most notably, Hofstadter 2008), the propensity to believe in conspiracy theories is widespread (Arnold 2008: 7; Goertzel 1994; Melley 2000). An increasing number of publications, most notably in psychology, have been dedicated to elucidating connections between particular conspiracy theory propensities and beliefs with delineated demographics. From a political science perspective, according to Uscinski and Parent (2014: 157), belief in conspiracy theories in the United States cuts across both gender and political affiliation, though presents more in financially and educationally poorer environments and with those who have smaller social circles, less political and stock market participation and more disposed towards guns and violence.

There is some inconsistency around when these peaks have occurred in the United States (which has received the most scholarly attention), perhaps due to the varying methods in how

exactly an increase or decrease can be measured; moreover, there is a complex relationship between the visibility of a discourse and capturing actual belief. With the United States as their focus, Uscinski and Parent analysed 121 years' worth of more than 100,000 letters to the editor in the *New York Times* and the *Chicago Tribune*. They found that: 'the prevalence of U.S. conspiracy theorising has not varied much. There were peaks of resonance in the 1890s and 1950s, but the aggregate amount has fallen off since the mid-1960s' (Uscinski and Parent 2014: 157). However, Goldberg claims that the phenomenon increased in the second half of the century peaking in the 1990s (2001: 232). He infers this peak to be related to disingenuous governmental behaviour and the media and entertainment industry capitalising on its appeal, making conspiracy theory imagery and narratives commonplace. Concurrent with this perception is Knight, who states that: 'since the 1960s, however, conspiracy theories have become far more prominent […] a regular feature of everyday political and cultural life' particularly, after the JFK assassination in 1963 (Knight 2000: 2) which has been the consistent focus of conspiracy theorising.

The rapidly changing communications landscape is a significant factor in the visible popularity of conspiracy theories. The sheer quantity and availability of conspiracy theories appear to have multiplied since the advent of mass electronic communication and the internet (Miller 2002), giving the average person a fertile platform to receive and communicate ideas that did not exist before. The internet has relatively little gatekeeping regarding who can disseminate certain information, unlike previous major communications platforms that dominated, such as newspapers and a handful of major television channels. Furthermore, distrust in truth-guarding and producing institutions increases when perceived as corrupt, such as journalists collusion in corporate interests and government cover-ups. These scandals implicate the news outlet becoming the object of analysis and erode public trust. According to Ward and Voas: 'the realm of conspiracy theory has gained shape, prominence, and even respectability' (2011: 106). In turn, public interest in conspiracy theories as an object of analysis is evident, with mainstream media articles on topics such as the death of Princess Diana receiving over 130,000 reads and achieving global reach by being published multiple times (Bennett 2022). This combination of increasing distrust and scepticism and the almost flattened hierarchy of internet communications has raised pertinent questions on the nature of what can be disseminated where and by whom. For instance, notorious and prolific self-proclaimed conspiracy theorist Alex Jones – famous for his outlandish claims and spirals of outrage – and his Infowars channel were banned from four major social media platforms: Apple, Spotify, Facebook and YouTube, in one day: 6th August 2018 (Salinas 2018). former United States of America President Donald Trump was also banned from Twitter 'due to the risk of further incitement of violence' after losing the presidential election (*Twitter* 2021).

2.2.2 Popularity in entertainment discourses

Regarding entertainment discourses, both Kay (2015) and Ballinger (2011) suggest that the public can be more discerning (also see Knight 2008 and Fenster 2008 for more general discussions) than often given credit. Kay argues that as the internet has developed and that the public – particularly millennials – distrust authority and can discern between conspiracist-laden material and quality publications. However, Kay suggests that Wikipedia enables the general public to discern informational quality due to its balanced, fact-focused writing and citations.

Moreover, Ballinger suggests an underlying logic of conspiracy theorists' postings online: they do not consider that many internet users may consume one particular narrative – such as 9/11 conspiracy theories – and/or consume conspiracy theory content for entertainment

purposes. It is thus a distinct likelihood that audiences position themselves accordingly when consuming entertainment narratives (framed as fiction) or online conspiracy theory discourses (framed as fact), possibly processing them as a metaphor or allegorical tale highlighting the vicissitudes of the current political and economic situation (Ballinger 2011: 255–8). Reyes and Smith conceptualise conspiracy theories as an 'entelechial aesthetic endeavour' (2014: 400). That is to say, conspiracy theories turn something potential into an actuality. For instance, conspiracy theory reconfigures the possibiilty of an accidental celebrity death being a murder into a categorical assertion or an almost definite. Their entertainment value is 'like many of these formerly fringe subjects, conspiracy theories are now part of a lucrative multimedia entertainment complex' (403). That is to say, conspiracy theories have an entertainment function, and in this restricted sense, the aesthetic is more important than the truth values (see Birchall 2002).

The conspiracy or conspiracy theory as a plot-driver has become increasingly popular in entertainment narratives (Arnold 2008) – those which are explicitly fictional and 'factual' – and those which blur the lines between fiction and fact (Popp 2006). Knight (2000) also recognises that conspiracy narratives 'circulate through both high and popular culture and form part of regular thought patterns. The logic of conspiracy has become a ready source of scenarios for both entertainment and literary culture' (Knight 2000: 3). For instance, Oldham (2019) charts an increase in British television dramas with a conspiratorial narrative. The narratives draw on public distrust resulting from uncovered governmental and institutional malpractice, such as the inadequate protection given to David Kelly, the Iraq War whistleblower. A cursory glance at the online global streaming platform *Netflix* shows an abundance of narratives with conspiracies as plot drivers, on a cline from documentary to fantasy. Goldberg (2001: 251) also recognises the general trend as appearing in television programmes, newspapers and books that find easily accessible inspiration from the conspiracy milieu. Barkun (2003) points out that 'motifs, theories and truth claims that once existed in hermetically sealed subcultures have begun to be recycled, often with great rapidity, through popular culture' (Barkun 2003: 49).

The current prevalence of conspiracy theories circulating on the internet coincides with a marked increase of exposure to the conspiracy theory narrative model in popular entertainment**.** Its blend of fact with fiction would undoubtedly impact how people view the world, especially considering the current social climate, where there is scepticism over whether large corporations and government bodies are transparent and benevolent. In adherence to this, Arnold hypothesises on similar lines: 'popular movie and television treatments of certain topics [namely conspiracy theories], even when contained in overtly fictionalized accounts, influence public perceptions about the events and issues they contain' (Arnold 2008: 10). Furthermore, Boym suggests a conflation of the two, or at the very least a significant blurring of the dividing line: 'the boundaries between life and literature, fact and fiction become virtually irrelevant' (1999: 98).

Two crucial concerns need to be addressed. Firstly, some consumers position themselves towards conspiracy theory material as a form of entertainment. As Knight points out: 'a self-conscious and self-reflexive entertainment culture of conspiracy has become thoroughly mainstream', with 'serious' and 'entertainment' versions of conspiracy 'caught up in a spiralling mutual feedback loop' (2002: 6). The entertainment function is pertinent and enduring considering the commercial value **(**Pipes 1997: 18) of conspiracy theories as effective plot drivers and engaging sub-genres.

Secondly, the mainstreaming of particular conspiracy milieu motifs calls the conspiracy milieu to reposition itself in order to maintain its heterodox status. As Barkun points out, the

increased movement of ideas from stigmatised ideas to the mainstream, due to factors including the internet (see section 2.6) and distrust in governments and official institutions, dilutes their heterodox status (2013: 50). For instance, the Eye of Providence symbol, which is often associated with the Illuminati New World Order conspiracy theory in the conspiracy milieu, has become more mainstream with clothing companies and popular music videos using the image. The overt visual mainstreaming of the symbol has signalled a reinterpretation within the milieu so that the 'real' meaning can only be understood by the special few – the freethinkers – thus maintaining their heterodox status, refreshing the narrative and keeping a form of ownership over the symbol. On the other hand, Barkun claims that though some stigmatised-knowledge claims have been mainstreamed, such as the mainstream acceptance of alternative medicine in the United States, the realm remains existent as long as there is suspicion around major institutions (2013: 52–3). Alternative medicine has experienced increased popularity and entered the mainstream. Nevertheless, it has maintained heterodox status due to its condemnation by many in the medical establishment.

2.2.3 Popularity in academic discourses

When the term conspiracy theory came into academic usage in the twentieth century as an object of analysis it correlated with its inauguration into common parlance (Butter and Knight 2018: 33). It was with Popper's legacy, which I outline in the following paragraph, that it became immediately pejorative with the social sciences not wishing to be associated with the term. However, in the last few decades since Hofstadter's seminal essay 'The Paranoid Style in American Politics' (1968, reprint 2008, see 2.6) the phenomena has become an object of analysis.

Popper is the commonly used reference to the first usages of the term in scholarly discourse in his 1945 publication *Open Society and its Enemies*, when he wrote of the term: 'the conspiracy theory of ignorance*'.* He interprets ignorance as the result of a belief in 'some sinister power, the source of impure and evil influences which pervert and poison our minds and instil in us the habit of resistance to knowledge' (2002: 4). Popper claims that the social sciences' aim is to understand the unintended consequences of actions. What he terms the *conspiracy theory of society* takes this opportunity away as it enables future predictions, a certainty that, to Popper, does not truly exist: 'there are always certain unwanted consequences of our actions; and usually these unwanted consequences cannot be eliminated' (166). History is thus better understood by considering an *invisible* as opposed to *hidden hand*. He asserts that conspiratorial groups have replaced the lacunae created by the secularisation of society which God/the Gods used to inhabit. He also concedes that conspiracies do exist, but they are usually the 'consequences of the fact that conspiracy theoreticians came into power' (168) such as the conspiracy laid out in *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (a conspiracy theory) which was utlised by Hitler as part of anti-semitic propaganda.

There has been a growing body of literature on conspiracy theories in recent years, particularly from the turn of the twenty-first century. Nevertheless, increased conversation over a matter does not, by deduction, equate increased prevalence. As McKenzie-McHarg and Fredheim have noted: 'growing academic interest in the phenomenon need not correlate with an increased prevalence of conspiracy theorising' (2017: 157). By the same token, it may not merely be a case of the quantity and availability increasing, but also a highlighted anxiety in powerful groups, which in turn is reflected in this particular body of literature which

focuses on conspiracy theory narratives deemed implausible and outside the possibility of being true.

Despite the increased interest in conspiracy theories regarded as being implausible and irrational, there has been little attention given to actual political conspiracies. Bale (2007) criticises the dearth of academic literature on actual political conspiracies, recognising that although conspiratorial networks and behaviour are embedded into political life, they have not received due scholarly attention: 'very few notions nowadays generate as much intellectual resistance, hostility and derision within academic circles as a belief in the historical importance or efficacy of political conspiracies' (Bale 2007: 47). As McKenzie-McHarg points out, 'reconciling the need to dismiss conspiracy theories in the interest of social science with the need to entertain them in the interest of investigating crime has never been easy' (2018: 78). Bale suggests that: 'serious research into genuine conspiratorial networks has at worst been suppressed, as a rule discouraged, and at best looked on with condescension by the academic community' (2007: 48), with any existing analyses unlikely to be integrated into mainstreamed history and social science literature (49–50). Criticism that levies itself at suppression of information could easily be converted into a conspiratorial narrative, which begs pertinent questions, such as should genuine conspiratorial networks be studied, and should such a loaded terminology be used sparingly and with caution? Furthermore, the boundary lines between 'conspiracy theory' (implausible and irrational) and 'conspiracy' (widely recognised as existing) tend to be implicit without explicit discussion. The following section will address the distinction.

2.3 Prevalence of the term 'conspiracy theory'

The following section discusses intellectual engagement with studying the usage of the term 'conspiracy theory' over time. McKenzie-McHarg discusses usages in nineteenth-century newspaper crime reports, whereby journalists would report on crimes by conducting interviews to ascertain the whole story, including motives and culprits. The focus was thus on creating a theory and not necessarily the endpoint (2018: 67), as a tentative, non-conclusive report on another's ideas (70). Reporting on crime indicated that: 'the newspapers themselves had adopted theory in their own quest to report on ongoing investigations or trials in an impartial manner' and allowed journalists to signpost speculation and subjectivity (73).

The JFK assassination in the United States of America in 1963 marked a period when 'conspiracy theory' started to enter into mainstream discourse (McKenzie-McHarg and Fredheim 2017: 158). Speculations and interpretations of the assassination as a conspiratorial act, as opposed to the official lone gunman explanation, has made the event one of the most published and well-known conspiracy theories. However, the underlying forces behind its surge in popularity are contested. DeHaven-Smith refers to the popularisation of the term as a 'cultural reversal', a 'blanket condemnation of conspiracy beliefs [which was] planned and orchestrated by the [U.S.] government itself' (2013: 22). He states that 'the compact phrasing, "conspiracy theory," gained currency as a name pushed by the CIA [Central Intelligence Agency] for any and all theories that rejected the official account that Kennedy had been killed by a "lone gunman"', in other words it was reactionary, 'to sow uncertainty about the commission's critics' (deHaven-Smith 2013: 26). He claims that the CIA popularised and pejorated the term and was 'one of the most successful propaganda initiatives of all time' (deHaven-Smith 2013: 24). However, McKenzie-McHarg dismisses the claim as a 'highly tendentious reading' of the government report (2018: 62), with the brief disagreement appearing to mirror wider society's positioning and treatment of conspiracy theories.

‘Conspiracy theory’ was generally used neutrally in the nineteenth century, with the plural appearing later on than the singular *conspiracy theory* (McKenzie-McHarg 2018: 63). *Conspiracy theory* is now used pejoratively (Husting and Orr 2007). Furthermore, as the term is also now associated so strongly with improbability, the need to even satisfy the narrative criteria for a conspiracy has been surpassed:

> People started using the phrase *conspiracy theory* to mean “implausible conspiracy theory”, then “implausible theory, whether or not it involves a conspiracy”. Meanwhile, they leave out those implausible theories that have a lot of cultural cachet, such as these stories about cults, gangs, and terrorists.
>
> (Walker 2018: 59)

In essence, Walker is saying that the usage of the term is highly selective, it need not necessarily contain a conspiracy and those more conspiratorial narratives can evade being labelled with the term, especially if there is a vested interest in not doing so by authorities which control the dissemination of information. Conspiracy theories bear similarities to narratives which contain a conspiracy structure (a group, goal and secrecy – see section 2.4) but also terms which connote weak veracity. The following section discusses how similar terms are talked about compared with conspiracy theories.

2.3.1 Fake news, disinformation and misinformation

Conspiracy theory is strongly collocated with modern coinages (Butter et al. 2020: 4), namely *fake news*, *disinformation* and *misinformation*. The terms all function as ways of describing publicly disseminated information deemed false and dangerous; however, all differ in overall meaning. *Fake news* and *disinformation* refer to the conscious dissemination of factually inaccurate news presented as factual. For instance, Pennycook et al. define fake news as: ’entirely fabricated and often partisan content that is presented as factual’ (2018: 1865), whereas Dance defines *disinformation* as ’intentionally factually incorrect news that is published to deceive and misinform its reader’ (2019: 1). Both terms are often used interchangeably due to their similar definitions, with the latter taking on a more formal usage (House of Commons 2019). *Fake news* is also used for information disliked by the speaker, most notably the former president of the United States of America, Donald Trump, famously used the term as a rebuke against information he does not like. For instance, he tweeted on 2nd February 2020, prior to his deplatforming a year later due to incendiary postings claiming his election loss was a fix: ‘Mini Mike is part of the Fake News. They are all working together. In fact, Bloomberg isn’t covering himself (too boring to do), or other Dems. Only Trump. That sounds fair! It’s all the Fake News Media, and that’s why nobody believes in them any more’ (realDonaldTrump 2020).

In response to the varied real-world applications of the term 'fake news', The House of Commons uses the terms *disinformation* and *misinformation* instead of *fake news*, which is considered misleading due to its inconsistency in meaning and associated application with information that is merely considered unfavourable by the speaker (House of Commons 2019: 7). They define *disinformation* ‘as the deliberate creation and sharing of false and/or manipulated information that is intended to deceive and mislead audiences, either for the purposes of causing harm, or for political, personal or financial gain. *Misinformation* refers to the inadvertent sharing of false information’ (House of Commons 2019: 10). *Misinformation* differs from *disinformation* primarily in the ignorance of the disseminator and is defined as: ‘the unintentional sharing of false information. Usually, the producer intentionally broadcasts

the disinformation and misinformation is that same content unintentionally shared by the reader' (Dance 2019: 1). Strategic dissemination of conspiracy theories can be considered a form of intentional disinformation; for instance, there is evidence to suggest that the Russian government deliberately spread conspiracy theories in the West for tactical reasons (Avramov 2018, Yablokov 2015).

It is not just the veracity of the information that the term *conspiracy theory* has in common with related terms in common usage. There are also stories that could be referred to as conspiracy theories because they meet the definitional criteria of a secret group plot. For instance, Walker claims that there is a 'the tendency *not* to use the phrase "conspiracy theory" to describe conspiratorial stories embraced by the mainstream' (2018: 55), which highlights the relegated epistemic status of labelled conspiracy theories (see 2.6). For instance, terrorism bears similarities to conspiracy theories as they can both claimed to exist with little to no evidence, and can be exaggerated in size and power as part of a large, organised malevolent group. A logical reason for this is that to label an act 'terrorism' or people 'terrorists' legitimates preventative or mitigating action against the identified out-group, inciting both fear and a sense of immediacy for action. The 'conspiracy theory' and 'conspiracy theorist' labels function pejoratively in mainstream discourse (see sections 2.5 and 5.5) and therefore, despite containing the narrative structure of a group, a goal and secrecy, delegimate the veracity of the story and have markedly distinct connotations.

Furthermore, Walker (2018) claims gangs are also proposed to exist, for instance in newspaper articles, but can be written about with little to no evidence, particularly with 'an unfamiliar subculture'. In other words, if a group is deemed a threat then they can be construed as dangerous without the need to provide evidence, as readers are already persuaded. Walker suggests that gangs are afforded a higher degree of centralisation than actually exists with exaggerated imagery and are commonly disseminated – especially during tense episodes – as urban legends, and do not come initially from authorities (Walker 2018: 55–8). All of these points relate to conspiracy theories.

In addition, cults do not tend to get called conspiracies until a powerful agent, like the CIA, is supposedly involved. For instance, Satanic ritual abuse fear in the United States of America in the 1980s and 1990s involved the belief that a highly organised group of Satanists were ritually raping and murdering children. Furthermore, the two phenomenon have been linked: prominent conspiracy theorists David Icke and Alex Jones have both integrated satanic ritual abuse into superconspiracies (see 4.13), amongst others.

When stories involving terrorism, gangs or cults are equated with the term 'conspiracy theory', it presumes implausibility. However, implausible stories of terrorism, gangs or cults tend to evade the label 'conspiracy theory' if they 'have a lot of cultural cachet' (Walker 2018: 59). Nevertheless, distinct narratives such as weird beliefs, which are not *a priori* conspiracy theories, are conflated with conspiracy theories due to their heterodox status. The collocation of implausibility helps maintain the conception of conspiracy theories as a fringe phenomenon, although many mainstream and popular beliefs – such as those of terrorism, gangs and cults – fit a standard definition of conspiracy theory (59–60). Moreover, mainstream conspiracy theories are not labelled 'conspiracy theories', but are instead considered as terrorism and criminal networks. The labelling assumes a higher degree of organisational centralisation that rarely exists.

2.4 Defining *conspiracy theory*

In this section, I firstly outline dictionary definitions to capture the general, basic understanding of *conspiracy theory* before a more detailed and nuanced discussion on the term. The general pattern amongst dictionary definitions of *conspiracy theory* is that a group of people work secretly to create an event or situation (Cambridge 2022, Collins 2022, MacMillan 2022, Merriam-Webster 2022 and Oxford English 2022) with the adjective 'powerful' ascribed to the conspirators only in the Cambridge and Merriam-Webster definitions. The Oxford Dictionary extends the definition by describing the agents at 'responsible for an unexplained event'. The use of the adjective 'unexplained' is worthy of note as it indicates that either there is no other explanation or that any other explanations that do exist fail to satisfactorily and fully explain the actors, motives and mechanisms behind an event. That is to say, the conspiracy theory somehow explains more than whatever else is out there. Whether or not it was the intention to capture this in their phraseology is debatable, as an orthodox viewpoint would commit that an official narrative has, indeed, explained all that needs to be. However, it catches a key rhetorical function of conspiracy theories in that they often attempt to explain more than official narratives. The definitions capture the core narrative structure of a group plotting in secret. Dentith discusses the definitional issue at length, offering a core definition, which echoes the dictionary definitions of a group acting in secret to make something happen:

> Conspiracy theories posit the existence of a conspiracy, where the conspiracy is the salient cause of some event. The most minimal conception of what counts as a conspiracy, then, must satisfy the following three conditions:-
> 1. The conspirators condition: There exists (or existed) some set of agents with a plan.
> 2. The secrecy condition: Steps have been taken by the agents to minimise public awareness of what they are up to.
> 3. The goal condition: Some end is, or was desired, by the agents.
>
> (Dentith 2016: 577)

The utility of this definition resides firstly in its focus on the narrative structure, in the main characters and the core plot line – indicating how ubiquitous such narratives are. The recognition of goal-directed behaviour in the third point highlights the intention-based actions responsible for not just events past and present but can incorporate those situations which have not yet happened, in other words those events prophecised to happen in the imminent future. However, all of these definitions do not capture the essence of conspiracy theory as by this criteria there are many stories which would be wrongly classified as conspiracy theory. For instance, any narrative in which a secret is kept in order for a group to achieve its goal would satisfy the three conditions set forward by Dentith. The definition is useful in that it recognises the commonality of conspiracies, in their core sense, as we all encounter and are part of conspiracies all the time, as well as witness to them in both factual and fictional storytelling. The core narrative construct of a conspiracy in its most basic sense is part of our understanding of how society and human interaction works. Dentith discusses whether or not a surprise party would count under this definition, creating a distinction between benevolent (assuming the person in question wanted a surprise party) and malevolent conspiracies, and highlighting that a benevolent conspiracy would be an oxymoron and contradictory to the common usage of 'conspiracy'. Therefore, the agents' goal in a conspiracy is necessarily malevolent in any definition.

To 'posit the existence of a conspiracy' is to put forward an explanation, as it professes to explain the real actors and their true intentions, the causes behind a particular event or events and the desired effects. It is the unveiling of an act of secrecy, whereby the agents

wish to hide the existence of key information, which would not only uncover the plot but also, as an inevitable consequence, the identity of the conspirators. However, Dentith's 'minimal conception' definition, though necessary, is largely decontextualised; we need to widen the focus to incorporate a view of the terminology in action – what is going on around it, not just within the narrative. This can be done by separating *conspiracy* from *conspiracy theory* in terms of speakers, their intentions and the positioning and functions of conspiracy theories in a societal context.

Conspiracy theories are large-scale and 'at the expense of the common good' (Uscinski 2018: 48), hence why agents would want to 'minimise public awareness'. Conspiracies have been argued to be more difficult to keep secret the bigger they get as increasing 'size and scope' corresponds with an increasing number of people involved who can potentially whistleblow (Uscinski 2018: 48). As a logical extension of the correlation between the greater number of people involved and the correspondingly greater task of stopping information leaks, an increased level of malevolence is implicit. Therefore, is it a case of the bigger the conspiracy, the greater the malevolence and the more operationally complex to plan, execute and keep in the shadows? By this logic, the greater the level of organisational complexity, the less likely the conspiracy is to be kept secret – and if it is, then it is more likely to be untrue.

In terms of communicating a conspiracy, there needs to be a public interest enough to demand dissemination or an information leak, such as from a whistleblower. For instance, in 2013 Edward Snowden leaked highly classified information that he had access to as an employee of the US National Security Agency. Snowden's motivation was around issues surrounding public surveillance and individual privacy, which had enough public interest. As Robertson points out, malevolent goals are 'culturally determined' (2017: 39) and, by extension, relative and contextualised: what one group considers acceptable, another might not. In the case of Edward Snowden, individual privacy was considered important enough to jeopardise national security. Moreover, the large-scale nature of conspiracies is an inevitable secrecy concern.

The epistemic status of the narrative's explanatory force is a key contestation at the heart of the difference between *conspiracy* and *conspiracy theory*. Uscinski's definitions of *conspiracy* and *conspiracy theory* are representative of how conspiracy theories are considered both in the wider world and are useful to consider. He defines *conspiracy* as 'refer[ring] to events that our appropriate institutions have determined to be true [whereas] conspiracy theory refers to an accusatory perception which may or may not be true, and usually conflicts with the appropriate authorities' (Uscinski 2018: 48). The direct comparison highlights three key differences, namely the epistemic validity of the proposition, the epistemic power held by the speaker and the institution they represent and the pointing of blame towards previously unidentified agents. Furthermore, 'the agents' are where the malevolence is located thus ruling out discussion of systemic malfunctioning. As Coady points out, conspiracy theories tend to blame people, and by extension claim that removal of individual people is the solution, ignoring structural issues (Coady 2007: 197).

The semantic marker enabling a clear distinction between *conspiracy theory* and *conspiracy* is 'theory', which Keeley considers to be a deserving representation of its validity: 'conspiracy theory deserves the appellation "theory," because it proffers an *explanation* of the event in question. It proposes reasons why the event occurred' (1999: 116). Taking this further, it is thus by definition an unfinished product, yet to arrive at a complete consensus. The greater epistemic validity of 'conspiracy' enables a sense of endpoint, concretisation and factual status; 'conspiracy theory' on the other hand, does not deserve this status. Conspiracy theory is a hypothesis, and one of often highly dubious epistemic status.

Pipes refers to official conspiracies as ‘an act’ (1997: 21) and Barkun: ’actual covert plots, planned and/or carried out by two or more persons’ (2016: 1). However, conspiracy theories ‘exist only in the imagination’ (Pipes 1997: 20), are a perception (21) and are ‘intellectual constructs’ (Barkun 2016: 1). The theories, in this line of thinking, are thus not only epistemically but ontologically suspect as they do not exist at an ontological level. Actual conspiracies, on the other hand, happen in physical reality, as opposed to confined purely to imagination. Pipes further elaborates with the added terminology: ’*conspiratorial*, to refer to a real conspiracy, and *conspiracist*, to the fear of imaginary conspiracies’ (1997: 26). Correspondingly, conspiracy theories appear to receive more attention as an object of analysis than conspiracies, which tend to be submerged into larger cultural narratives, and thus unlikely to be afforded the attention to even be called a conspiracy.

The use of ‘conspiracy’ in legal parlance tends to be used to refer to small-scale acts which violate the existing law in some way: ‘when people work together by agreement to commit an illegal act. A conspiracy may exist when the parties use legal means to accomplish an illegal result, or to use illegal means to achieve something that in itself is lawful’ (Legal Dictionary 2020). The legal use of conspiracy refers to an act which is, in some way, contravening an existing law. A conspiracy theory, on the other hand, could potentially contravene an ideological law.

Considering the references to ‘official confirmation’ and Uscinski’s ‘appropriate institutions’ signals a conflict over what counts as a quality information source when comparing ‘conspiracy’ and ‘conspiracy theory’, and this tends to reside in often implicit assumption of who we should be trusting. Nevertheless, surveying the historical record demonstrates that not all conspiracy theories have the status of non-official counter-narratives, although modern liberal democracies have relegated them to the status of counter-narratives (McKenzie-McHarg 2018: 142). Arguably, just by saying a story is official says nothing about its epistemic superiority; instead it is a case of generally not calling official stories conspiracy theories (Dentith 2018: 101). ‘Official’ denotes key institutions, namely ‘government’, followed by ‘scientific organisations’ and ‘investigative journalism’ – those which are supposed to be trusted to create and disseminate the highest quality information. However, as found in a 2018 poll by YouGov, respondents tended to trust academics more than journalists, and friends and family members more than academics. The YouGov data shows a lack of trust in truth-guarding institutions (see also Bratich 2008) which begs the fascinating question of where to find information from if the official sources are not trusted. To encapsulate both the situatedness of the narratives and their epistemic power:

> Is a conspiracy theory defined primarily by its internal narrative characteristics or by its external discursive position? In other words, is it something inherent in the theory itself or is it more about the forums it appears in, its relation to other theories, and the legitimation accorded it? […They…] are defined not merely by their strictly denotative, inherent properties, but by their discursive position in relation to a ‘regime of truth’.
> (Bratich 2008: 2–3)

Extending the issue of epistemic power to a more general discussion of power, Uscinski considers that: ‘conspiracy theories are at their core about power: who has it and what do they do with it when no one can see’ (Uscinski 2018: 48). Moreover, it is not just ‘power’ in a neutral sense but evaluative ascriptions of good and evil to the goals enabled to be executed by power and their subsequent consequences. In the context of a conspiracy theory, secrecy connotes ‘evil’ uses of power, and also who has access to information, the ability to be able to understand what is really going on: opacity versus transparency. Questions of power thus

do not just reside within the narrative but around it as well in the wider context. Figure 2.1 is a summary of the discussion in this chapter, distilling my key observations.

Figure 2.1: Conspiracy theory versus conspiracy

	CONSPIRACY THEORY	CONSPIRACY
EPISTEMIC STATUS	1. a posited explanation 2. an accusatory perception 3. contested epistemic validity 4. unofficial 5. inconclusive 6. previously unidentified agents and goal 7. epistemic lacunae in an official narrative point towards conspiracy	1. an event 2. a foregone conclusion 3. ratified by epistemic authorities 4. official 5. conclusive 6. agents and goal known 7. any gaps due to circumstance (coincidence or incompetence)
SECRECY	1. agents are keeping the plan and their identity secret 2. unveils an act of secrecy	1. the agents no longer need to maintain the secret 2. any unveiling is historical
ETHICS	1. large-scale, complex and opaque 2. at the expense of the common good with evaluative ascriptions of good and evil	1. usually small-scale, explained and now transparent 2. at the expense of a specific person or goup

2.5 The pejorative labelling function

The official and epistemic status of a conspiracy theory affects the practical usages of the term. In this following section, I discuss its pejorative associations and the consequent complex relationship conspiracy theories have with orthodox conceptions of knowledge, particularly whereby the internet and globalisation are rapidly transforming the informational climate. There are now more opportunities for people who would not have had the platform to disseminate information previously via digital communication platforms.

Sometimes the conspiracy theory can be the first narrative, which may be followed by a counter-narrative later on. For example, the British Labour government's justification for going to war with Iraq in 2003 was that they claimed Iraq had weapons of mass destruction: an accusation that Iraq was in a conspiracy. However, no evidence was found of the weapons. Assigning imminent danger to a group of people, or the presence of destructive objects, such as weapons, as a legitimating tool for going to war with another country, is not

a counter-theory as such because it is the first narrative; the opposing theory arrives afterwards, countering that there is no danger. Nevertheless, the postulation of an alternative theory of events often becomes an act of conflicting interpretations; a case of the degree of plausibility based on available knowledge and how it corresponds with our understanding of the world. It sits in opposition to the official version of events contending to be the best explanation and in its opposing status often becomes a foregrounded component in its reception. Coady includes this friction in his definition of conspiracy theory as: 'the proposed explanation must conflict with an "official" explanation of the same historical event' (2006: 1). Byford considers the official-unofficial friction as indicative of the 'inherently dialogic nature of the label 'conspiracy theory'. Positioning an explanation as a 'conspiracy theory' serves to legitimise the competing one as rational, reasonable and evidence-based' (2011: 21).

According to Uscinski, 'conspiracy theories exist as a category not just of description but of disqualification' (2018: 3): 'the term *conspiracy theory* and its derivatives can evoke strong emotional responses' (47). Some of the main themes in the critiques levied against conspiracy theories have included being overly simplistic (Pipes 1997: 30, Popper 2002) and inaccurate, notably 'the poor person's cognitive mapping' (Jameson 1990). They are also considered a 'crippled epistemology' (Sunstein and Vermeule 2009), in other words, they are illogical and have a lack of quality evidence. Moreover, Arnold notes, 'as popularly construed in the 2000s, the label "conspiracy theory" is frequently taken to indicate an unhinged and implausible view' (2008: 6), often implying the person is mentally ill, superstitious or paranoid (deHaven-Smith 2013) and that the logic 'commits glaring errors of fact and/or reasoning' (Dyrendal 2013: 202). This, in turn, assumes a superiority of the accuser, as Parker notes, 'conspiracy theories are often treated with derision by commentators who claim to be more rational and scientific' (2001: 192). Thus there is a distinct elitism in the pejorative usage of the term: the accuser positioned from a perceived point of a societal in-group casting those associated with conspiracy belief as an inferior out-group.

Coady has suggested refraining from its usage as he does 'not believe there is such as a thing as the right definition of "conspiracy theory", or even that there are any good definitions' (2017: 2) based on both its ambiguity and pejorative associations. In the vein of the latter, Knight states that: 'there is no fixed set of inherent qualities that makes something a conspiracy theory, since in many cases a view becomes a conspiracy theory only because it has been dismissed as such' (2000: 11). deHaven-Smith considers the pejorative usage as an oppressive speech regulator which conflates non-orthodox viewpoints with intellectual shortcomings in the quest to maintain the status quo (40). He thus suggests an alternative term: 'State Crimes Against Democracy' (2013), an attempt to legitimise marginalised political concerns in the United States. On the other end of the spectrum, Allington, Buarque and Barker Flores use the term 'conspiracy fantasy' in line with the 'the clearly fantastical and outlandish nature' of anti-semitic conspiracy theories (2021: 30). This highlights the issue of a term which is used to both silence opposition in genuine political concerns and also narratives which promulgate discriminatory ideologies. Bearing this in mind, using a wider variety of terms could be beneficial in distinguishing between different genres of conspiracy.

A rhetorical friction is necessary, according to Reyes and Smith, to produce a conspiracy theory: 'a discourse is not fully actualised as a conspiracy theory unless and until it is (dis)credited as such, and the same goes for conspiracy theorists' (2014: 409). However, it extends beyond an act of conflicting interpretations due to the unofficial nature of the conspiracy theory. Robertson (2017: 37) considers the terminology of 'conspiracy theory' to be ultimately rhetorical. It is centred around the question of power, specifically epistemic power, and the epistemic authority's attempts to reclaim any perceived loss of such power. Official narratives tend not to be labelled as such, they act as if they are a base-point, an *a*

priori fact that need not be labelled. Conspiracy theory on the other hand is often intentionally deviant whether as a direct refutation of official lines or as an identity-forming technique in counter-cultural narratives. This can be further elaborated as meaning: officially endorsed by the relevant authorities, such as governmental institutions and/or major media outlets. Therefore, by this very logic, it is the powerful institution that decides what is labelled truth and what is a false conspiracy. Ironically, it is from this conflation of truth and institutional power that conspiracy theories thrive, as embedded in the rhetoric is a distrust of official narratives. Uscinski offers a comprehensive description of why the term is difficult to define:

> [Conspiracy theorist] is a term that has never been well defined. Given that everyone believes in a conspiracy theory or two, the term could apply to everyone, but this would render the term meaningless. Sometimes *conspiracy theorist* is used to denote people who believe in a specific conspiracy theory, or […] many […] to denote professionals who spread conspiracy theories for a living […or] a person with a high level of conspiracy thinking.
>
> (Uscinski 2018: 51)

In logical extension to these concerns, it is not the emotive and ambiguous possibilities associated with the term but its functional ability to shut down debate. As Knight comments: 'calling something a conspiracy theory is not infrequently enough to end discussion' (2000: 11). A similar conclusion was made in Husting and Orr's analysis of the United States press using the term 'conspiracy theorist' to find that the label was used as 'a mechanism of social control'. The three ways this is achieved are by its use as 'a routinised strategy of exclusion; a reframing mechanism that deflects questions or concerns about power, corruption, and motive; and an attack upon the personhood and competence of the questioner' (Husting and Orr 2007: 127). However, the term is reclaimed by the conspiracy milieu. Harambaum and Aupers point out that 'against the vast majority of the population, conspiracy theorists appropriate the image of the radical freethinker to differentiate themselves from the "sheeple'' and also from other thinkers that they consider to be the irrational ones' (2015: 118).

There are several considerations necessary in order to arrive at a sufficiently nuanced understanding of the term. Coady (2007) points out that we need to identify *who* is considered to be the epistemic authority and to what degree – whether excessive or not – someone is willing to investigate or dismiss a conspiratorial explanation. It is commonly assumed and promulgated that we live in an open society in which conspiracies would be difficult to keep secret (Popper 2002) especially the bigger they get and the more actors involved thus increasing likelihood of information leaks. However, as Coady points out, it is a 'conventional wisdom that all politicians are liars' (2007: 195). The issue is how the conspiracy theorist constructs knowledge – where and from whom do they gather what they consider to be quality information. They may not be 'any more sceptical about epistemic authority or expertise *as such* than other people. Rather, they merely have a particular view about who the epistemic authorities or experts are' (Coady 2007: 201). Conversely, a 'conspiracy denier' would excessively reject conspiratorial explanations and align with official accounts. A disproportionate willingness to dismiss conspiratorial explanations would thus facilitate the success of conspiracies as the result of stifling enquiry (Coady 2007: 202) – and, importantly, an enquiry can be conducted dispassionately without belief in a conspiratorial explanation.

2.6 The paranoid style and its legacy

The trend of psychologising conspiracy theories and theorists – which are not purely from psychology but span various disciplines – has been widely accepted to have started with Richard Hofstadter's deliberately pejorative ascription (2008: 3) of the term 'paranoid' to conspiracy theories in his seminal 1964 essay, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics.* He describes it as 'above all, a way of seeing the world and expressing oneself' (2008: 4). His work has had an enduring impact, with a sizeable legacy and subsequent increasing dissatisfaction. Furthermore, it has developed into the most prominent and easily accessible school of thought within the research area. Therefore, a summary of the key narrative components he mentions is worthy of discussion.

Hofstadter refers to *the paranoid style* as

> A style of mind, not always right-wing in its affiliations, that has a long and varied history. I call it the paranoid style simply because no other word adequately evokes the qualities of heated exaggeration, suspiciousness and conspiratorial fantasy that I have in mind.
>
> (Hofstadter 2008: 1)

Hofstadter describes the main focus of a person with *the paranoid style*:

> The central preconception of the paranoid style – the existence of a vast, insidious, preternaturally effective international conspiratorial network designed to perpetrate acts of the most fiendish character.
>
> (Hofstadter 2008: 14)

According to Hofstadter, this network enacts one all-encompassing conspiracy that drives historical events. I will now summarise Hofstadter's key components of the paranoid style, which he refers to as a 'political pathology' (6) with specific reference to the enemy/conspirators and the conspiracy theorist. Firstly, the enemy is 'a perfect model of malice, a kind of amoral superman: sinister, ubiquitous, powerful, cruel, sensual, luxury-loving […] he is a free, active demonic agent' (Hofstadter 2008: 31–2). The enemy also has vast control over society: controlling the media, the minds of the masses and the education system, and having unlimited funds. In this sense, the conspirators embody evil and ultimate power, a combination that has the potential to be catastrophic (Hofstadter 2008: 31–40). Therefore, the enemy must be obliterated, and the conspiracy theorist can only defeat them in a full-blown apocalyptic-style battle, with the discourse is in perpetual end-times, that is just about to go into the ultimate battle between good and evil.

Hofstadter considers the conspiracy theorist to see error and incompetence and reinterpret actions as by intentional design. He describes the conspiracy theorist as believing themselves to have the ability to understand what is really going on ahead of the masses.

> The typical procedure of the higher paranoid scholarship is to start with such defensible assumptions and with a careful accumulation of facts, or at least of what appear to be facts, and to marshal these facts towards an overwhelming 'proof' […] the paranoid mentality is far more coherent than the real world, since it leaves no room for mistakes, failures, or ambiguities.
>
> (Hofstadter 2008: 36)

However, their apocalyptic and absolutist approach creates ‘demanding and unrealistic goals’ that cannot be achieved – thus perpetuating his feeling of powerlessness and power of the enemy, such as not feeling heard in the political arena (Hofstadter 2008: 17–37).

There is a sizeable dissatisfaction with Hofstadter (see Chapter 3). Bratich refers to t*he paranoid style* as a ‘problematizer’ (2008: 5) which, in essence, places too much emphasis on potential danger than on socio-cultural and rhetorical concerns. In addition, Goldberg agrees that conspiracy theories are dangerous (2001: 260) but demonstrates that they are frequently mainstream, sometimes enduring and popular. Another limitation is its explanatory power: ‘as a work of descriptive history, [Hofstadter’s] essay has not been equaled, but as a work of explanation, his essay makes dubious and vague assertions’ (Uscinski and Parent: 2014: 154). There is also considerable rejection and critiques on the limitations of the approach as the consequence of pathologising the narrative (Butter and Knight 2018: 35); the body politic metaphor that society is suffering from an illness that must be cured (Knight 2000: 15). Furthermore, Barkun stresses that Hofstadter’s use of the word *paranoid* was intentionally metaphorical, not literal, whereby a *political paranoid* sees a plot against a group of people as opposed to the individual (2013: 24); the implications of using the term is that there is both the inference that believers lack realism and accuracy and the facility to label those which we disapprove of (Barkun 2013: 25). The following section synthesises the key divisions within the current literature which have arisen out of Hofstadter’s legacy.

2.7 Particularists versus generalists and the socio-cultural turn in academia

> Much of the scholarly work in our domain is the assumption that there must be something wrong with belief in conspiracy theories […] The issue is not that conspiracy theories are epistemically suspect; the concern is we are working with a suspect definition of what counts as a conspiracy theory.
>
> (Dentith 2018: 104)

Conspiracy theories are often discussed from incompatible viewpoints which are problematic to reconcile. As Butter and Knight comment, ’research in psychology and research in cultural studies […] approach the subject from almost diametrically opposed premises, and there is little dialogue between the two’ (2018: 42), resulting in fragmented scholarship and lack of meaningful engagement between divisions. According to Butter and Knight the academic landscape can thus be conceptualised as various, narrow and disconnected scholarship which has yet to cohere and satisfactorily attempt to answer the bigger questions. This lack of cohesion can be explored by identifying the ultimately core dispute which is their truth-value status. This is captured by Buenting and Taylor (2010) coining those who associate conspiracy theories with irrationality as ‘generalists’:

> Opposing views can be distinguished based on how they approach conspiracies. According to the generalist view, the rationality of conspiracy theories can be assessed without considering particular conspiracy theories. On this view, conspiratorial thinking qua conspiracy thinking is itself irrational. The particularist view about conspiratorial thinking denies that the rationality of conspiracy theories can be assessed without considering particular conspiracy theories.
>
> (Buenting and Taylor 2010: 569)

The sentiment that ‘conspiracies are a constant danger in all domains of society, from business to finance to administration to medicine’ (Moore 2016: 1) is echoed to varying degrees in political science (eg. Barkun 2016; Pipes 1999), history (eg. Gulyas 2016; Pagan

2008) and social psychology. There are also mass market publications aimed at debunking conspiracy theories, such as David Aaronovitch's *Voodoo Histories: How Conspiracy Theory has Shaped Modern History* (2010) and the afore-mentioned Richard Hofstadter's *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* (2008). They are united by the sentiment that belief in conspiracy theories negatively impacts on society.

As the working assumption then, in turn, defines the trajectory of the research, it can be difficult not to conflate all conspiracy theories as illogical and dangerous. Research in the pathologising paradigm focuses on conspiracy theories which are claimed to have a direct negative impact on society (for instance Cichocka et al 2016; Douglas, Sutton and Cichocka 2017; Franks et al 2017; Goertzel 1994; Swami et al, 2014; Sunstein and Vermeule 2009; Wood, Douglas and Sutton 2012). It would be viable to consider this research under Buenting and Taylor's generalist label as the conspiracy theories analysed tend towards the more suspect on the truth–falsity spectrum with only the occasional brief recognition that 'conspiracies do exist'. Sunstein and Vermeule claim to be: 'narrowing our focus to conspiracy theories that are false, harmful, and unjustified' – which they refer to as a 'crippled epistemology' due to the perceived lacking in enough quality information to make an informed decision (2009: 204). Moreover, Jolley and Douglas (2014) refer to 'a conspiratorial mindset' whereby conspiracy theorists are seen to be interpreting the world through the assumption of conspiracy as the preferred explanation, insinuating a lack of critical awareness with the *a priori* assumption that not every explanation is conspiratorial. The research generates pejorative labels, such as Samory and Mitra (2018) insecure or avoidant attachment style, weaker social networks and disrupted childhoods (Freeman and Bentall 2017), and group narcissism (Cichocka et al. 2016). The enduring association amongst this particular strand is between conspiracy theories and endangerment to society, which reifies the pathologising paradigm. It is particularly noticeable in its reflection and impact on mainstream media approaches to focusing on conspiracy theories deemed sensational, implausible or an imminent danger (ironically echoing the imminent danger espoused in prophetic conspiracy theory narratives). However, its strength at least lies in the attempt to make cause-effect links in conspiracy belief and their tangible impact on society.

Though there is clearly some benefit to researching the more problematic conspiracy theory beliefs in terms of maintaining the status quo and mitigating any potential power fractures, there is an intrinsic and vital element evaded by ignoring the underlying structures of meaning embedded and repeated in conspiracy theory narratives. To entertain a conspiracy theory can be a method of making sense of the world when personal experience and provided information feel incompatible.

> Much of what happens cognitively when humans try to come to terms with new situations can be explained as relying on extrapolation from known situations. Situations tend to be comprehended holistically on the lines of frames and scripts with underlying understandings about participants' goals or intentions feeding into the process.
>
> (Fludernik 1996: 13)

Referring back to Dentith's (2016) basic definition, it is evident how the conspiracy theory narrative in its most simple format is commonly occurrent in the mundane everyday. It is thus a logical step to suggest that humans use their real-world experience to make sense of the spatially distal macro-scene of wider society.

From the *particularist* approach, conspiracy theories are not *a priori* irrational and therefore necessitate a case-by-case consideration (Basham 2017, Coady 2006, deHaven-Smith 2013,

Dentith 2014, Hagen 2017 and Pidgen 2007). They are argued to be the realms of the intellectually curious (Pidgen 2007), 'a thoughtful, normal and democratically necessary social activity' (Basham 2017: 60) and expressing logical political concerns (deHaven-Smith 2013). Conspiracy theorists actively engage in sense-making activities with the *a priori* assumption that malevolent conspiracies can and do happen in democratic societies, thus necessitating some form of due diligence. Further along this spectrum, deHaven-Smith states that 'the theories are considered dangerous not because they are obviously false, but because, viewed objectively and without deference to US [in his case] political officials and institutions, they are often quite plausible' (2013: 41). His focus on political accountability enables him to go into detail about cases in the United States of actual conspiracies, highlighting that conspiracy theories are not merely the playground of lunatics. Furthermore, Pidgen (2007) refers to the accuser as 'officially blind and officially incurious' (Pidgen 2007: 227) as history, after all, is littered with conspiracies: 'the ploy of dismissing critical allegations as conspiracy theories is not intellectually respectable, whatever the conventional wisdom may say' (224). The generalists' argument is thus:

> A pejorative understanding of what counts as a conspiracy theory. That is, they work with the subset of prima facie false theories to make claims about belief in those theories generally [...] the prohibition of even talking about treating conspiracy theories seriously leads to the *othering* of political voices, the consequence of which has negative social consequences in a democratic society.
>
> (Dentith 2018: 99)

There is a friction here between opposing parties and it is ultimately definitional, beyond that of a deconstruction of internal narrative characteristics but related to plausibility, respectability and societal impact. It reverberates outwards to concern the validity and place of the conspiracy theory narrative in society and what the underlying associations and collocations that are held with the term are. Ultimately, the question is where, how and to what extent conspiracy theories should be voiced and heard; what is their value and impact – should they be 'allowed'? An illustrative example is Sunstein and Vermeule's recommendation that believers were the product of a 'crippled epistemology' (2009: 204) who suffer from a dearth of relevant information and thus make an uninformed and incorrect evaluation of who is to blame. Furthermore, the narrative is self-sealing and immune to challenge and the adherents driven by negative affective states; their 'outrage' (Sunstein and Vermeule 2009: 226) as a response to a traumatic public event such as a plane crash and the desire to be part of a group draws people into conspiracy theorising to make sense of chaotic and devastating events. As a cure for this the authors recommend 'cognitive infiltration' whereby 'government agents (and their allies) might enter chat rooms, online social networks, or even real-space groups and attempt to undermine percolating conspiracy theories by raising doubts about their factual premises, causal logic, or implications for action, political or otherwise' (Sunstein and Vermeule 2009: 224–225).

Coady (2017) directly replies to Sunstein and Vermeule's paper with a stark refutation, reflective the conflicting assumptions held between the *particularists* and *generalists.* He points out the self-defeating irony of the cure that is suggested by Sunstein and Vermeule is a conspiracy in itself and would likely reinforce the conspiratorial beliefs of the targeted group. Furthermore, he proposes that any definitions of conspiracy theory are inherently unproductive as, at their core, they are not necessarily bad, nor irrational but explanatory devices for a world which is replete with conspiracies – sometimes they are right, sometimes wrong. He contests that the burden of accuracy is far more significant with conspiracy theories than scientific theories as with scientific theories it is accepted that some are wrong or ethically dubious, but mostly credible. From this perspective, conspiracy theories are

wrongfully marginalised narratives – as they are sometimes right – but it is clearly a more difficult path to tread as sometimes conspiracy theories have negative consequences, as argued by the *generalists.*

The boundary lines are challenging to draw, if at all. For example, focusing on a particular group of conspiracies deemed problematic poses a definitional issue: where are the boundary lines between acceptable and non-acceptable conspiracy theories? Do the generalists distinguish this by conflating officialised accounts as acceptable and non-official as unacceptable, or is it more nuanced? What is a negative impact, and is that a direct result of the theory? The pejorative association has underpinned and informed a significant proportion of the more recent research, for example, with an increasing prevalence of the association of the term 'conspiracy theory' with 'dangerous' (Bilewicz et al. 2013 – concerning anti-Jewish theories; Douglas and Sutton 2015 – climate change; Moore 2016; van Prooijen and Douglas 2018). Samory and Mitra (2018: 1) also qualify this with one example: 'the recent shooting by a man who took it upon himself to investigate #pizzagate [which alleged a paedophile ring based in a pizza shop], a fictitious online conspiracy theory that went viral during the 2016 US Presidential election'. Nevertheless, one example opining the theory's fault as opposed to the person is arguably tenuous and/or circular without research confirming a direct link between conspiracy theory belief and detrimental social acts, particularly considering the afore-mentioned commonality and universality of similar beliefs.

There is frequently an edgy resistance surrounding the narratives: 'conspiracy theories entail such skepticism because they call into question everything you think you know about the political world in which we live' (Dentith 2014: 76). Maybe the crux of the issue here is not to conflate those narratives whose truth-values are dubious with imminent danger and 'real' conspiracies as somehow not, but to – in the *particularist* vein – accept that some conspiracy theories are marginalised because they pose a threat to considerably unequal and unjust power structures, not to the health of society. As Coady argues, in his refutation on the afore-mentioned cognitive infiltration proposition: 'it is striking, however, that Sunstein and Vermeule appear to be exclusively concerned with things that may be harmful from the government's point of view, rather than with things that may be harmful from the citizen's point of view' (Coady 2017: 8).

So far, the distinction between conspiracy and conspiracy theory has been discussed, identifying three differentiating themes: epistemic status, secrecy status and ethics. In terms of visibility, they are a constant in society but wax and wane in prominence and popularity. In addition, conspiracy theorising cannot be pinpointed to a particular group as beliefs can be found throughout populations (Uscinski and Parent 2014). However, certain factors can determine certain beliefs by certain groups, particularly ideological motivation and confirmation bias, such as when a conspiracy theory fits in with an individual's or group's world-view. There are also ethical concerns of who has the power to not only concoct and implement a malevolent and secret plan but also who decides which narratives should be upheld as epistemically superior. There are basic tests for distinguishing between likely and unlikely conspiracy theories, including, 'Occam's razor, falsifiability, the worst intentions test, the cui bono test, the eternal recurrence of the same test and the impartial spectator test' (Uscinski and Parent 2014: 155) claiming that the most tests a narrative can pass the more likely it is to be true. However, considering the concept of a conspiratorial mindset (Dagnal et al. 2015), or a conspiratorial lens through which information is filtered, these tests only really work when conducted by someone uninvested in a conspiratorial explanation. Otherwise, the simplest theory is the conspiracy theory, as accordingly, the world is controlled by a small, powerful group, and they are the ones who appear to benefit, which can be proven countless times throughout history. In order to explore narrative logic and the situatedness of

conspiracy theory narratives further, the next chapter discusses narrative and context from a socio-cultural approach.

2.8 A working definition of *conspiracy theory*

Based on the discussion in this chapter, I propose a working definition of *conspiracy theory*. To recap, Dentith identifies three key components to a conspiracy theory: the conspirators condition, the secrecy condition and the goal condition. This basic definition highlights the ubiquity of the core conspiracy theory construct but fails to adequately capture the rhetorical features of conspiracy theory. I outline the features of a conspiracy theory followed by an explanation.

A portrayal of events must have most or all of the following characteristics to be deemed a conspiracy theory:
1. The version of the event is narrativised, with a narrative, narrator and narratee;
2. It must feature the conspirators' condition;
3. It must feature a *malevolent* goal;
4. It must unveil an act of secrecy to hide the identity and goal of the conspirators;
5. It must be labelled a *conspiracy theory*;
6. It must exist in rhetorical friction with an official narrative;

Firstly, the internal narrative characteristics must be considered. The goal condition needs to be modified to a 'malevolent goal', which is at the expense of the discourse participants, or at least someone they are in favour of (such as in celebrity death conspiracy theories). Furthermore, the narrative functions to unveil an act of secrecy which is of public interest. In other words, the speaker desires to expose the plot and the perpetrators for the common good.

Nevertheless, what is missing from core definitions is what Bratich refers to as the conspiracy theory's 'external discursive position' (2008: 2). For instance, a narrative may not even satisfy the internal characteristics listed above, but be dismissed as one (Coady 2000: 11). A conspiracy theory is never really a conspiracy theory until it is labelled as such (Reyes and Smith 2014: 409). It is the rhetorical friction (Coady 2006: 1) between a labelled conspiracy theory and the official line of authorities (Uscinski 2018: 48) which generates the conspiracy theory's recognisable identity of representing irrationality and implausibility (Arnold 2008: 6). The epistemic validity of a conspiracy theory is contested and they tend to be unofficial, as official conspiracy theories evade being labelled as such.

By extension, the accuser/ labeller self-identifies as superior (Parker 2001: 192) as they are too clever to fall for a conspiracy theory. Conspiracy theories are ultimately rhetorical as they raise questions around power (Robertson 2017: 37), both within the internal narrative structure of the malevolent conspirators' plan and in context, raising questions about who decides what is true. Ultimately, the direction of this thesis is concerned with where and how conspiracy theories manifest to better understand the varied external discursive positions of conspiracy theories in relation to the internal narrative construct.

Chapter 3: Narrative and Context

3.1 Introduction to narrative

The first part of this chapter reviews the existing literature on the narrative structure of conspiracy theories. The second part is concerned with the situatedness of conspiracy theories: how and where they appear from a socio-cultural aspect. A narrative contains events which are seen by the reader to be not only connected, but significant in some way. *Narrative* can be defined as

> A perceived sequence of non-randomly connected events, typically involving, as the experiencing agonist, humans or quasi-humans, or other sentient beings, from whose experience we humans can "learn"'.
>
> (Toolan 2001: 8)

The perception of significance, according to Toolan, is 'the prerogative of the addressee' (2001: 7), which is conceptually relevant to the notion of 'dot-connecting' in conspiracy theories (see 3.5). For instance, a causal relationship may be perceived by one reader and not another and it is exactly this kind of variance in interpretation which highlights the rhetorical friction caused by conspiracy theories. Furthermore, there is the opportunity to learn from a narrative. In the conspiracy theory it can be the act of revealing a secret malevolent plot.

In the first section, I discuss the notion of fringe versus mainstream discourses and how they differ in manifestation and composition. I address ways in which plausible and implausible conspiracy theories have been considered to differ as a conspiracy theory is a relational phenomenon. Based on the limited research, I then outline the basic narrative features of conspiracy theories followed by types of evidence. Lastly, I discuss the role of the discourse participants in the narratives and how they can be active in the process.

3.2 Fringe versus mainstream discourses

It has become more widely accepted that conspiratorial rhetoric frequently inhabits the mainstream (Goldberg 2001, Pfau 2005, Uscinski and Parent 2014). As Butter and Knight comment: 'all of the empirical studies have begun to converge on the result that conspiracy theorising is not a fringe phenomenon but a rather a fairly normal pastime' (2018: 38), and therefore not just 'a common ingredient of fascism, and of frustrated nationalisms' (Hofstadter 2008: 7) as previously thought. There exist inherent limitations to Hofstadter's paranoid legacy (see 2.6), which views conspiracy discourses as flawed and dangerous, situating them on the fringes (Pfau 2005: 152). Conspiracy discourse has been prevalent throughout history in mainstream political discourse; it is embedded in North American political discourses and appears in many other national political discourses (Butter and Knight 2020; Uscinski and Parent 2018). The 'paranoid' label is aimed at fringe discourses, not at politically mainstream discourses, as mainstream and fringe have distinct rhetorical characteristics (Pfau 2005: 169, see also Goldberg 2001: x–xi). For instance, Pfau found that in nineteenth-century North American slave power conspiracy discourses, there appeared 'a paranoid fringe' and 'a more moderate center' (2005: 154), indicating the fringe discourses exhibited a higher degree of 'paranoia' in terms of the alleged conspirators' longevity and potential reach of power.

Rhetorical strategies are at the centre in explaining why and how some conspiracy theories become mainstream (Pfau 2005). For instance, fringe discourses may be integrated with sacred ideologies, as opposed to the secular ideologies of more politically moderate conspiracy discourses. Mainstream discourses 'utilise the organic and temporal language of decay and renewal' (Pfau 2005:162), framing the battle as an inevitable win, with an easy-to-reach solution – to vote for a particular political party. Adherents are thus mobilised as action is within their capabilities, to support the political party. On the other hand, fringe texts create an enemy so vast and powerful it is impossible to defeat, thus distancing and disenfranchising the proponents from the political arena. In other words, fringe discourses tend to lack explicit actionability, despite the fear of the potential for action from the non-believers (see 3.9).

Considering further the distinction between fringe and mainstream conspiracy discourses, Zarefsky (referring to the Lincoln-Douglas North American political debates of 1858 but with broader applicability) discusses the mainstreaming of conspiratorial political debate and how mainstreaming gains momentum by the voices which espoused them:

> The intensity of belief and knowledge of plot details are greatest in th[e] core. With increasing emotional and intellectual distance from the nucleus, suspiciousness lessens along with commitment to the specifics of the plot. At the periphery –where the subculture joins the mainstream – receptivity, and only a vague, seamless account of conspiracy remains. The meaning of conspiracy has now slipped its legal moorings and lost even the little precision it once had. Thus conspiracy thinking is not only a tight belief system but a habit, a perception, a posture.
>
> (Zarefsky 1990: x–xi)

The core is inhabited most prominently by highly committed activists and entrepreneurs with both commitment to cause and financial need. The core is where both belief and knowledge are at their most intense. They express a high level of suspicion, and the narratives are 'strenuously logical and crammed with facts' whereby adherents will remember details to discuss and reinterpret theories. Moving away from the core, the adherents become increasingly passive and reliant on key figures for theories, taking 'a more expansive view of crimes and misdemeanours' including murder and hidden information. Emotional and intellectual distance decreases towards the periphery, as does suspicion and commitment to plot details. Socio-culturally, the periphery is: 'where the subculture joins the mainstream' (Goldberg 2001: x–xi and 238–239).

The conceptualisation of core and periphery narratives echoes the cognitive linguistic notion of prototypicality (Lakoff 1987), a useful entry point into parsing out the different instantiations of conspiracy theory discourse. Prototypicality is complementary to the fringe-mainstream distinction in that the former is more narrative-focused and the latter more reflective of socio-cultural positioning. For instance – as noted above – fringe discourses are associated with increased paranoia and points of contact with other fringe discourses, which are better dealt with from a socio-cultural angle but can also be traced at the narrative level. Therefore, the two cannot and should not be completely separated because of an inherent conceptual overlap. Accordingly, the narrative section foregrounds narrative aspects (sections 3.1–3.6), whereas the context section foregrounds socio-cultural concerns (sections 3.7–3.6) whilst neither is divorced from the other.

3.3 Plausible versus implausible conspiracy theories

A conspiracy theory reframes an official story: the official story explains one thing, the conspiracy another (unless, of course, the official story is a conspiracy, in which case it does not tend to be labelled as such). One way of achieving this is by foregrounding information that was either backgrounded or omitted from the official narrative, which indicates a pattern or sign of conspiracy. In other words, a distinction between rational and irrational conspiracy theories is:

> To hinge not only on its explanatory power but also on one feature of the evidence for the *official story* to which it is opposed, called fortuitous data*,* which 'fits the official story *too well*; is 'too good to be true' and the 'lucky' nature of the data is left unexplained by the official story.
>
> (Buenting and Taylor 2010: 572)

Buenting and Taylor use the example from the '9/11' terrorist attack on the United States on September 11th, 2001. The official story explains why the plane (Flight 77) crashed into the Pentagon (the headquarters of the United States Department of Defense) as opposed to somewhere else, whereas the conspiracy theory explains why it crashed into the only part of the Pentagon designed to withhold such an impact. Both explanations infer intention, but whereas the official explanation implicates intention to impact the building, the conspiracy theory explanation implicates intention to hit a specific part of the building – which happened to be the only part reinforced. Interestingly, when incorporated into a conspiracy theory explanation, this fortuitous data relies on the assumption that whoever organised the aerial attack knew that part of the building was reinforced, lending a degree of competence to the organisers, whereas the official explanation does not.

Keeley refers to 'unwarranted conspiracy theories': commonly perceived as implausible and unworthy of investigation (1999: 111) and 'epistemically problematic' (118). As can be seen from the following components put forward by Keeley (1999: 116–121), they can not only be distinguished as epistemically problematic but also in terms of secrecy status and ethics. Below is a summary of Keeley's main observations, which I have illustrated with examples from David Icke's *The Biggest Secret* (Icke 1998). Icke's explanation of the fatal Princess Diana accident (1997 car crash in Paris) claims that she did not die as the result of the paparazzi chasing the car she was travelling in but was ritualistically murdered by the Royal Family:

> The Brotherhood networks were working through many people and agencies to ensure that Diana was in Paris that night because, at its foundation, the plan was to perform a specific Satanic ritual.
>
> (Icke 1998: 431)

From an ethical perspective, the conspiratorial explanation points to the nefarious goal of a Satanic ritual, which immediately delegitimates the official accident story. However, the detail needed to prove that Diana (see Chapter 7 for an analysis of Diana conspiracy theories) was sacrificed is vast, complex and varying in degrees of incoherence depending on whether or not the reader believes in the proposition that she was sacrificed. Fenster has noted the: 'tendency to careen toward incoherence' (2008:123) which, I would argue, is a consequence of attempting to achieve 'unity of explanation at too high a cost' (Keeley 1999: 119). Subsequently, the inclusion of diverse evidence and observations challenges the narrative's cohesion and makes it problematic to process cognitively.

Secrecy is increasingly difficult as the narrative brings in more players and institutions. The secret becomes more difficult to maintain; Keeley contends that the presumption is more accurate of a pre-globalising world in which it was easier for institutions to keep secrets as they were fewer and with fewer agents. In this sense, conspiracy theories are anachronistic (Keeley 1999: 119–124). Keeley argues that it belies a fundamental misunderstanding of modern bureaucracies, which are multifarious and complex, with many agents holding competing interests. However, the unity of explanation offered by conspiracy theories is unarguably appealing in complex and uncertain environments as the conspiracy theory rejects 'the absurdism of an irrational and essentially meaningless world' (Keeley 1999: 125) in favour of a narrative blueprint which both explains existing power structures and prophesies the future.

3.4 Narrative features

The unity of explanation offered by an all-powerful conspiratorial group's proposed existence lends itself to their characterisation of a Manichaean world-view, which is closely linked to ethics. Strictly delineated good and evil, whereby the everyman is good, and the powers that be are evil and against the majority's interests and well-being (Byford 2011: 84) runs quite consistently throughout conspiracy theories. Byford notes the moral absolutism of conspiracy theorists as history is seen as an apocalyptic battle against the conspiracy of evil. The conspirators are described dramatically as unusually evil, which Hofstadter (2008) notes are usually reflective of the contemporaneous understanding of evil and is demonstrated in Icke's description of the Royal residence, Balmoral:

> Balmoral is a very, very nasty place. That's somewhere they want to dig underground. They will find reptile fossils, it goes back that far […] Christine Fitzgerald, thanks to her insider contacts and her knowledge of metaphysics, had been able to grasp the biggest secret: that reptiles on another dimension are controlling the world by working through physical bodies which look human. And also that the Windsors are one of these reptilian bloodlines. Christine also knew about the reptile Satanic rituals, the sexual rites and the widespread sacrifice […]of children […] Christine also spoke about the sex rituals and orgies involving the Windsors. The very word orgy comes from the Greek, orgia, meaning 'secret worship' and relates to the sexual rites of the ancient mystery religions […] The recovered mind-slave Brice Taylor tells in her book, Thanks For The Memories, how she was forced to have sex with Philip and Charles.
> (Icke 1998: 452–3)

In this extract, Icke weaves in a Manichaean view of evil of not only historical longevity but extending into other dimensional realms of existence. Furthermore, he draws on eyewitness testimony (accounts of this type are often retrieved from hypnotic regression to access repressed traumatic memories) to illustrate a contemporaneous evil. It neatly hooks into contemporary social anxieties, which are ever-present in conspiracy theory rhetoric – in this case, around ritualistic sexual abuse. Acts of incompetence or circumstance are reframed as deliberate to divert attention or complete the nefarious goal. Errant data, both unaccounted for and contradictory, is vital in the formation of the conspiracy theory; therefore, both received and errant sets of data are used (Keeley 1999). For example, much attention was given to a flashing light in the tunnel where Diana died. Below, Icke argues that the flashing light is a diversion from the truth, thus implicating that information backgrounded, suppressed or eliminated by the mainstream media holds vital clues as evidence of conspiracy:

> I think the stories about the mysterious Fiat Uno and the motorcyclist with the flashing light are diversions to lead researchers away from the simple truth. So much time and effort has been wasted on the Fiat in particular, fuelled by Al Fayed's investigation team. Whenever such assassinations are staged, there are always a stream of false 'clues' and 'leads' which divert attention.
>
> (Icke 1998: 433)

Authors often make connections between disparate events (see also Dyrendal 2013: 219; Fenster 2008: 13; Gulyas 2016: 125; Parker 2001: 194; Reyes and Smith 2014: 401 and Spark 2001: 59). Below is an example of how information from the official narrative is reconstrued as closely linked to an unconnected event:

> The Pont de L'Alma tunnel is not on the way to Dodi's flat. It takes you away from that area […] what an amazing 'coincidence' that this took the car into the Pont de L 'Alma tunnel, one of the Babylonian Brotherhood's most sacred sites for the goddess Diana!
>
> (Icke 1998: 427–8)

For a reader whose world knowledge holds that ancient sacrificial rituals exist, the information may likely be revelatory; however, to those who do not, the link between the circumstantial location of Diana's death and sacred sites is unconvincing. The disparateness is greatened in the following example, which also links in Egyptian myths and the unproven speculation that Diana was pregnant at the time.

> The symbolism of the lily with the pregnant goddess giving birth to the saviour-god (as in Isis and Horus) is fascinating, given the stories that Diana was pregnant at the time of her death and the way I have connected this to the legend of Osiris, Isis and Horus.
>
> (Icke 1998: 450)

Considering the conspirators in more detail, it is not just a matter of epistemology, secrecy and ethics that characterise conspiracy theories, but this is reflected in the discursive construction of the enemy or the conspiratorial body. The rhetorical cause-effect pattern inarguably necessitates a villain, whether that be a specific person, a group or organisation, or a shadowy intangible entity, 'an untouchable, almost unimaginable other' (Kelley-Romano 2008: 113). Byford states, 'the most important and ubiquitous characteristic of the conspirators, however, is their elite status' (2011: 76), and though this is often the case, it is certainly not always. For example, women and enslaved people were often the accused conspirators in Ancient Rome (Pagán 2008) which highlights how conspiracy theories can be used instrumentally against marginalised or non-powerful groups. These examples highlight their broad applicability.

Names of culprits are often given (Byford 2011); however, they often form part of mysterious and distant conspiratorial groups. For instance: 'the Queen Mother is connected to a long list of Brotherhood groups and societies and she is the head of the Inner Temple' (Icke 1998: 451). By connecting the Queen Mother to the nefarious Brotherhood, she has thus become associated with their given attributes (Byford 2011: 73), implicating her as part of the conspiratorial body. Seemingly unconnected – or loosely – individuals and groups are linked as part of the conspiratorial body. Icke claims that Blair, Al Fayed and the Royal Family were seen at rituals at the royal residence, Balmoral and that:

> They were all in it together and still are. Diana's murder had been planned for a long time, probably from birth, and it was in the 1980s, around the time Al Fayed was at the

> Mother of Darkness castle with the Royal Family and Tony Blair, that the flaming torch symbol was placed on top of the Pont de L'Alma tunnel.
>
> (Icke 1998: 456)

It is not absurd that Blair (British Prime Minister at the time of Diana's death), Al Fayed (the father of Dodi Al Fayed – Diana's lover – who also died in the crash), and the Royal Family have met. However, what the author is doing here is implicating the three in planning her ritual death a decade before it happened, which involves an (arguably unrealistic) extensive level of cooperation over a considerable period. The conspiratorial body is abstract and vague, making it enticing and adaptable enough for various parties to project onto it their own ideas. The specific characters change over time, but the script remains: 'the conspirators are, after all, just a personification of something less tangible, but more sinister' (Byford 2011: 77).

3.5 Types of evidence

Butter et al. (2020: 5) outline two strategies used in conspiracy theorising: one is confirmation bias (see also Brotherton 2015, Rankin 2017 and Sperber 2010) which seeks to 'provide evidence that confirms their position, while ignoring all counter-evidence'. The other strategy proposed is to 'poke holes into the official version of events'. As mentioned, finding errant data and epistemic lacunae, for instance missing evidence can help delegitimise the official narrative. One way to destabilise the official narrative is to ask leading questions: Byford refers to a rhetoric of asking questions that helps set the conspiratorial agenda (2011: 92). Asking questions directs attention to parts of the narrative that are fertile ground for questions and often overlooked or represented differently by officialised accounts. For example, in the conspiracy theory genre, a standard question is 'cui bono?' – who benefits?

Interestingly, the answer to the question seems to act as a form of evidence. The excerpt below exemplifies this as part of the materialist thread (Byford 2011) in conspiracy theorising that money motivates conspiracy and is socio-culturally bound. In the example, Max Wallace, a private investigator interviewed in the documentary *Soaked in Bleach* (2015), questions whether the 1994 suicide of North American musician Kurt Cobain was a murder orchestrated by his soon-to-be ex-wife, Courtney Love. Max Wallace thus makes the implied causal link between being a financial beneficiary and intent to murder.

> We know that Kurt and Courtney had a prenuptial agreement. They were in the process of getting a divorce; this was confirmed. They were divorcing; he was leaving her. If the divorce had gone through, she would've received a very small settlement as a result of the prenuptial agreement. When he died, she co-inherited an estate worth possibly more than a billion dollars in future royalties.
>
> (*Soaked in Bleach* 2015, 84:00 mins)

An integral narrative feature of conspiracy theories is a delegitimisation of the voices of the official narrative, which are invariably mainstreamed accounts and thus deriving from authorities, mainstream media and governmental organisations. Accordingly, existing distrust in mainstream information sources (Gualda and Ruas 2019) leads many conspiracy theorists to seek alternative forms and methods of evidence. Robertson (2017: 48–52) argues that 'the fundamental commonality between conspiracist and popular millennial discourses is the appeal to strategies for gaining knowledge outside those accepted by the epistemic authorities, that is, traditional religious institutions and academia' (27). He outlines five epistemic strategies typical of millennial conspiracism, which are illustrated with my own examples.

The first strategy is 'tradition'. By constructing alternative histories, narratives based in the past can be used as evidence as 'conspiracist narratives frequently appeal to historical precedent, for example arguing that the existence of 'false flag' attacks in history makes their existence in the present more likely' (Robertson 2017: 48). Erich von Daniken's *Chariots of the Gods?* (1968) presents an alternative history whereby intelligent beings from outer space visited Earth in ancient times and influenced technology. Techniques such as reinterpreting ancient art enable the enthusiast to discover the truth. Due to its presentation of 'human history from a quite different angle, but staging it in a very convincing and highly entertaining 'mediatized' form', traditional forms of knowledge, such as archaeology and history, are being challenged (Grünschloß 2006: 5).

The second strategy is 'scientific'. Robertson states that 'despite frequent claims to the contrary, conspiracist beliefs and millennial narratives typically present themselves as falsifiable and make clear appeals to scientific legitimacy' for instance a prophecy with a specific date attached to it (2017: 48–9). However, it is 'bolstered with epistemic capital drawn from other sources; discourses on occluded agencies of whatever variety' (Robertson 2017: 49). In other words, the information sources drawn upon are from a variety of sources and not necessarily with a citation or recognition of the original author. Reyes and Smith refer to the pieces of evidence used in conspiracy theories as 'a bricolage of material poached from evolutionary biology, astrophysics, ancient mythology, and science fiction, woven together with tropes common among conspiracists' (2014: 401). Gulyas refers to those who attempt this kind of evidence-gathering as pseudo-historians who use myths and poetry as a form of proof (2016: 19) as well as unrelated historical events (20). Unsurprisingly, there is a disdain amongst historians, for example Pagán (2008), whose own historical research clashes violently with the 'pseudo-historians'. Furthermore, demanding more scientific evidence, which is then – when not produced – interpreted as a sign of culpability, can be regarded as moving the goalposts, whereby the boundary line are shifted by the conspiracy milieu, not the gatekeepers of orthodox scientific inquiry (Byford 2011: 91). Whilst moving goalposts and contesting boundaries, conspiracy theorists often use traditional scientific and historical methods as evidence in their favour. For instance, documents are often used as evidence (or an allusion to them), particularly 'classified' documents' regarding the alleged existence of extraterrestrials or plans for world domination.

The third strategy is 'experiential, which refers to the legitimacy afforded to personal experience and eyewitness accounts which override scientific positivism and importance are given and popularity of insider testimony, also eyewitnesses with specific details (Robertson 2017: 51, also see Goldberg 2001: 242). Interestingly, eyewitness accounts are both utilised and undermined depending on whether the testimony confirms or counters a pre-existing belief. For instance, conspiracy ufologists, such as Steven Greer, frequently use insider testimony. Greer's 'Executive Summary of the Disclosure Project Briefing Document' (Greer 2001) is 'an overview of the issues surrounding UFO/ETI topics including background information and implications, summaries of military and government witness testimony of experiences with UFO/ETI and recommendations for action'. In the document an entire chapter is dedicated to witness testimony, including 'Government Insiders/NASA/Deep Insiders'. The summary is representative of the ufology conspiracy milieu whereby interviews with insiders are commonplace.

A relatively new development is the concept of 'virtual eye-witnessing' (McKenzie-McHarg 2019: 142), whereby photographic and video imagery not only render the invisible visible but overcome the spatio-temporal disparity of not being present at the scene. Images are read for clues and interpreted, as: 'photographic technology began to afford modern cultures a source of seemingly objective truth potentially at odds with the truths certified by the authority

of expertise' (143). However, it is dependent on the pre-existing bias, demonstrated in imagery detailing the September 11th 2001 attacks on the Twin Towers in New York taking precedence over numerous eye-witness accounts, as the latter did not fit the conspiratorial version. The video imagery capturing the planes crashing into the Twin Towers was scrutinised for the speed at which the towers fell and if the planes even existed or were the result of video editing. Eye-witnesses thus become crisis actors (people employed by the conspirators to act as victims), and visual evidence is undermined with the accusation of tampering. The tampering then becomes the signs which are traced as evidence: 'the visual record is for the most part readily comprehensible for laypersons. And yet this development has gone hand in hand with an ascent of claims to expertise' (McKenzie-McHarg 2019: 155).

The fourth strategy is 'synthetic', which is a dot-connecting strategy linking disparate sources to fit into a 'bigger picture'. It includes 'mainstream media sources, albeit often with a somewhat oppositional reading reflecting their particular world-view' (Robertson 2017: 51). The act of creating links has been noticed and discussed by a few researchers, including Parker, 'plots, schemes and conspiracies imply some kind of agency which is preventing us from discovering the truth, from connecting events and causes in a correct manner' (Parker 2001: 194). In addition, Dyrendal comments that 'the conspiracy is a web of relations, and everything is shrouded in secrets, the proof is in the linking' (2013: 219). Furthermore, Spark emphasises the participatory experience in the dot-connecting: 'conspiracy *practice* – the thrill of conjecture and the enlightening experience of apparently connecting things together' (2001: 59) and Gulyas refers to the conspiratorial practice of "connecting the dots", assembling narrative collages of concepts, statistics, and anecdote, which – taken separately – may be grounded in fact and reality' (2016: 125).

Dot-connecting takes on at least two forms. Firstly, linking seemingly disparate phenomena and weaving them into being causally connected. For example, within the fictional world of the hit television series *The X Files,* Kelley-Romano demonstrates how the practice of creating links, which to an anti-conspiracy theorist would be labelled as either not a link or a coincidence: 'Scully may walk by a car where viewers can identify the license plate as that of the vehicle used earlier to commit a crime. Because of basic visual clues, fans learn to look closely at texts. On one level then, these references condition viewers to process information differently' (2008: 113). As Fenster comments: 'the conspiracy theorist interprets and then draws links among disparate pieces of evidence – and in this practice finds conspiracy (2008: 13).

Conspiracy theory numerology is a good illustration of dot-connecting whereby links made are given causal significance, as theorists claim the symbolic power of numbers as a form of proof. Returning to the Icke-Diana example, Icke talks of the occult significance of the thirteenth pillar in the Pont d'Alma tunnel where Princess Diana died, thus making meaning by creating a link between the number of the pillar and the claim that her death was a ritual sacrifice. He also links her name with the Goddess Diana, whom he claims Diana was named after her as from birth; her purpose was to be sacrificed in homage to the goddess at a particular time and place. This particular theory is so dense with dot-connecting that these are just two examples of many within this one particular theory. Moreover, it becomes increasingly difficult to keep track of the speed and quantity of the links and meanings created throughout the narrative.

The fifth strategy is 'channeling' which can be considered as 'the direct transmission of information to an individual from a postulated, non-falsifiable source' (Robertson 2017: 52). The belief is that extraterrestrials are trying to contact humans, including via channeling (Partridge 2015). Websites such as *Gaia* (Appendix 4.1) post videos detailing communication

with other dimensions and is closely associated with ancient, esoteric knowledge. I would also add that channeling is conceptually linked with hypnotic regression in that both pertain to accessing otherwise inaccessible information. Channeling contacts other realms/dimensions, whereas hypnotic regression aims to access repressed memories in the subconscious and often co-exist on websites such as *Gaia* (see 3.5 for a more detailed explanation).

A recurring theme in the types of evidence gathered for conspiracy theorising is that they are more accessible than orthodox evidence, which may be classified by authorities such as scientific, police and governmental organisations. The belief that governments classify information proving the existence of extraterrestrial life has provided an entry point for conspiracy theory rhetoric into ufology, which was not initially or essentially conspiratorial but approached from scientific and journalistic viewpoints (Gulyas 2016: 65). Furthermore, the language and methodology used in academia, science and legal reports exclude those unfamiliar with the techniques and domain-specific language. Additionally, scientific investigation has been argued to have become tainted by dogmatism, thus restricting the spirit of free inquiry (Harambam and Aupers 2015: 471). However, the evidence used in conspiracy theorising contests the boundaries of orthodoxy, thus increasing accessibility to those amenable to the methods. Crucially, the discourse participants can take part in the process – they are included as opposed to excluded, such as with orthodox methods and evidence – which is the focus of the following section.

3.6 The active participant

The previous section discussed narrative components particular to conspiracy theories; however, the active role the discourse participants can take is paramount to understanding the allure of the theories. For instance, synthetic forms of evidence (namely dot-connecting) also activate the discourse participants in the process, even if just vicariously. In other words, the connection of previously disparate phenomena is not just a legitimisation technique but a function of the conspiracy theorist, whose purpose ‘is to connect things which were previously unconnected – to posit causes, motives, plans and plots’ (Parker 2001: 192), applicable to conspiracy theories posited as both fictional and factual. In a fictional narrative, such as a film with a conspiracy as its central plot driver.

> The protagonist collects, sorts, and interprets information, and can only begin to act by identifying and correctly unraveling the pieces of information that remain hidden […] the hero inserts himself into the real social and political order presented in the conspiracy narrative.
>
> (Fenster 2008: 125)

Interpreting and connecting vast swathes of information implicate the protagonist as highly adept, which is also prevalent with factually presented conspiracy theories. For example, Butler and Knight’s *Who Built The Moon?* (2007) and von Daniken’s *History is Wrong* (2009) both propose a radically alternative reality to mainstream consensus, positioning themselves as revelatory experts. For example, in the introduction of *Who Built The Moon?,* it states: ‘despite the fact that the Moon is almost certainly 4.6 billion years old, we will demonstrate beyond all reasonable doubt that Earth’s Moon cannot be a natural object’. However, in order for a narrative to have such great explanatory force as to rewrite history, the discourse participants would need to be deictically positioned from a vantage point, or as Parker suggests: ‘an elevated place for the observer’:

> Elevation is crucial in order to see the way that explanation works […] once we inhabit the elevated universe of conspiracy there can be no unexplained residues.
>
> (Parker 2001: 193)

If there are ‘no unexplained residues', then all details become meaningful, not just ‘errant’ (Keeley 1999) and ‘fortuitous’ (Buenting and Taylor 2010) data, but *all* data. In other words, all details acquire meaning, becoming reframed if necessary to fit the central thesis, as nothing happens by accident, nothing is as it seems, and everything is connected (Barkun 2013: 19–20). Fenster also recognises the viewpoint positioning of the conspiracy theorist: ‘seeing [the world] as a whole, from a birds’ eye view – both distancing themselves from society and feeling an increased immediate danger in their lives’ (2008: 125). However, it is only really relevant to superconspiracies: narratives that attempt to explain everything. Event conspiracies or hybrid narratives, which have incorporated an element of conspiracy but are not reliant on conspiracy, would not necessitate the same elevated position. For example, returning to the *Soaked in Bleach* documentary, which discusses the possibility that Kurt Cobain was murdered and then masked as a suicide, it only incorporates information directly surrounding the death of Cobain. In other words, the explanatory force does not extend beyond the event in focus; it does not extrapolate beyond Cobain’s death. Thus, the spatio-temporal coordinates of the discourse space are significantly less expansive than a narrative claiming a long-planned imminent dystopian global technocracy.

A conspiracy theory invites the reader to entertain doubts by assessing the information; instead of being a passive consumer, they can instead adopt a *participatory approach* to what is essentially a contrasting explanation to an official narrative. The conspiracy theorist participates; they are positioned as an investigator or researcher, with the implicature that they can become an expert (Byford 2011: 88–90). I have taken the term *participatory approach* from Byford, who discusses it concerning the ultimate celebrity death conspiracy theory: the assassination of American president John F Kennedy (JFK) in 1963:

> At the core of the DIY investigations carried out by the critics of the Warren Report [the official report about the JFK assassination] was the belief that ‘the truth is out there’, that official experts – from doctors and scientists to lawyers and government officials – are trying to conceal it, and that it is up to the ordinary man or woman to go and seek it out, against all odds. Rather than being aimed at passive consumers who were supposed to lap up the interpretations served to them by others, conspiracy theory became a call to mobilisation, inspiring readers to gather ‘evidence’, share it with others and become part of a community. The *participatory approach* to conspiracism [was] inaugurated in the 1960s.
>
> (Byford 2011: 67)

The notion of the participatory approach, with the conspiracy theorists as investigators, researchers, and detectives, activates the discourse participants as invested in constructing the narratives and seeing the world as a set of signs that can be interpreted to uncover the hidden truth. Gomel's ontological detective story is highly relevant to the DIY detective concept**:** in short, a detective story with additions of apocalyptic and utopian narrative elements. Moreover, it is a story posited as taking place in the real world:

> Texts in which the world where the action takes place becomes an object of investigation, a mystery to be solved, a secret to be uncovered. It has many formal similarities with the classical detective story in which the enigma of a crime (generally a murder) functions as the thematic and structural focus of the text and the plot follows the process of the culprit […] the world of mystery is, as a rule, a world of darkness, violence and evil, ripe for the cleansing of an apocalypse and a subsequent utopian transformation. And the coming of this transformation is predicated on the successful disclosure of some momentous secret […] the world does not merely become visible, it is *made* visible.
>
> (Gomel 1995: 345–6)

An example of the ontological detective story is *The X-Files* (Bellon 1999). The show problematises fundamental notions of secrecy, knowledge and authority, whereby the protagonists must find out the 'real truth' from the world around them. It goes beyond a mere distrust in authority, instead foregrounding the self as an authority. In other words, governments and science are not only treated with suspicion, but the individual's judgment is afforded a far greater power. In so doing, they can uncover truths in the external world and inner truths (Bellon 1999: 152). The latter indicates a clear thematic overlap with religious epistemologies, which conspiracy theories are thematically closer to than orthodox science (Harambam and Aupers 2015).

So far, the internal narrative features of conspiracy theories have been discussed. Moreover, how conspiracy theories differ depending on their prototypicality and the role of the discourse participants. The following section is concerned more closely with the situatedness of conspiracy theories and how taking a socio-cultural view of conspiracy theories as an object is essential to understanding their function and persuasiveness.

3.7 Context: cultural approaches

This section focuses on cultural approaches to conspiracy theories, mainly within the disciplines of history and sociology (in an American context, as that is the focus of the available literature), sociology, rhetoric and communication, and religious studies. I explore the relationship between conspiracy theories and collective anxieties and panic (corporeal and manufactured). I also look at how they are communicated and manifest, including the modern conspiracy theory phenomena of *bricolaging*, which modern digital communications structures enable.

Key contributors to our understanding of cultural approaches to conspiracy include, though not exclusively, Fenster (2008), Knight (2000, 2008) and Barkun (2013). I will firstly discuss Mark Fenster's cultural approach. I will then use his concepts as a springboard to discuss the related literature, focusing on sociology, communication and rhetoric. Fenster focuses predominantly on North America as does the more significant part of the academic literature; however, his general discussions are broadly applicable to the broader conspiracy milieu, defined 'as a fluid network of different groups of people, identifying with distinctly different world-views, beliefs, values and practices' (Harambaum and Aupers 2017: 125). Accordingly, the semi-globalised digital environment in which conspiracy theory more commonly circulates nowadays and the continuing prevalence of North American entertainment and political culture globally.

A key contention I have with Hofstadter's pathologising paradigm is that within the legacy it has created – both in critical analysis and its reflection in the mainstream media – it has tended towards two default assumptions that limit understanding. Firstly, it encourages derision: the focus on the narrative's logical shortcomings places the conspiracy theories and the conspiracy theorists on a truth cline, which essentially is designatory of epistemic status. Secondly, it collocates conspiracy theories with danger, insomuch that there have been calls for 'cognitive infiltration' (originated with Sunstein and Vermeule 2009) whereby government agents would be tasked with infiltrating conspiracy theory groups in order to try and undermine conspiracy theory beliefs by casting doubt on them (see Coady 2018 for a critique). The association of conspiracy theory with danger is somewhat ironic as the imminent danger of conspiracy theories, according to Hofstadter and his ongoing influence, is not dissimilar to the imminent danger of the evil overlords in many conspiracy theory narratives. Moreover, an unnecessary emphasis seems to focus on persuading an academic audience against conspiracy theories, who would surely not need persuading that, for instance, government officials are not really colluding with extraterrestrials (Knight 2000: 12–13).

Moreover, the tendency to implicitly conflate all labelled conspiracy theories into one category – from the most likely to the wildly unbelievable may well be part of the issue. In actuality, conspiracy theories have a more comprehensive range of applications than the traditional 'political pathology' rhetoric. Undeniably, paranoid political rhetoric does exist; however, conspiracy narratives are prevalent, for instance, in entertainment (Arnold 2008; Dorsey 2002), on internet forums and in a wide range of discussion topics (Ballinger 2011 and Soukup 2008). The broad application of so-called paranoid narratives would also suggest that a suspicious outlook is more widespread than merely within the confines of conspiracy theory rhetoric, including those who comment on conspiracy theories as an object of analysis. As Knight (2000: 10) comments: 'a quasi-paranoid hermeneutic of suspicion is now taken for granted by many Americans, including the scholarly community'.

An alternative approach to the pathologising paradigm is to examine the cultural significance of the anxieties represented in conspiracy theory narratives (Melley 2000: 14). The focus on the paranoid theorist, Melley claims, represents something far greater than the irrationally suspicious. It reflects deeper societal concerns not just of human agency, but of the relationship between power, ideology and knowledge: 'the postwar literature of conspiracy and paranoia […] is driven by a sense that knowledge and power are inextricably linked [see also Dyrendal 2015: 223] and that to be "paranoid" may only be to reject the normalizing ideology of the powerful' (Melley 2000: 18). As such, conspiracy theories, according to Melley, develop from an unwillingness to just accept official explanations and raise 'interpretative dilemmas revolv[ing] around issues of agency – questions about *who* or *what* is producing meaning in a set of signs' (2000: 23).

3.8 A continuous interpretative practice

Fenster (2008) describes the conspiracy theory as a continuous interpretative practice that presupposes activity on the part of the discourse participants. Fenster describes the relationship as follows:

> Conspiracy theory operates initially at the level of the individual producer and audience of texts. The conspiracy rush, the gateway to a world of interpretation and narrative, is a personal revelation and an intellectually and affectively disorienting, individual experience.
>
> (Fenster 2008: 158)

Originating from a utopian impulse, conspiracy theorising – according to Fenster – both illustrates a desire for political and social change while hindering it. Due to the simplistic discursive construction of the masses versus the powerful, the complex and nuanced nature of politics is overlooked. The conspiracy theorist looks outward at society to re-interpret common knowledge and uncover the deeper underlying forces of history; thus, its object of focus is different to mainstream political analyses. It is not inherently illogical, according to Fenster, as the pathological approach can tend towards, as it possesses an internal logic. However, it operates in excess, working: 'as a form of hyperactive semiosis in which history and politics serve as reservoirs of signs that demand (over)interpretation, and that signify, for the interpreter far more than their conventional meaning' (Fenster 2008: 95). The process does not end unless the theory becomes redundant due to no longer being a secret or discarded, constantly interpreting and accreting new findings., which is reflected in the desire to uncover deeper connections.

Furthermore: 'the very attempt to shut interpretation down is itself a suspicious act that requires interpretation' (Fenster 2008: 94). For instance, attempts to discredit a conspiracy theory can be integrated into the conspiracy theory narrative as a semiotic of truth. The real reason for the discrediting is because the conspiracy theory is true, and the powers that be are trying to dissuade people from the narrative by tabooing it. Knight (2000) also recognises an emphasis on process rather than an endpoint, describing conspiracy theorising 'more a process of endless self-ironizing suspicion than a fixed, ideological product. An ironic stance would suggest a self-awareness of the so-called conspiracy theorist and a clever get-out clause as what is said has not been wholeheartedly subscribed to. Nevertheless, ideologies such as distrust in official sources and the use of power would still be transmitted through the language. There is flexibility in its interpretative functions that questions the limits of the pathologising approach if the narratives are being used ironically.

The act of continuous interpretation necessitates a community of practice (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1992) in which at least some of the discourse participants are discursively constructing narratives based on current theories and new information. Conspiracy theories are not isolated; the social aspect is essential in how they develop and spread.

> Both as an adjunct to and an organizing principle for a social or political movement […] New conspiracy theories build upon or strike against existing theories, and their authors typically intend for them to compete for attention and opinion with other theories [they] thus presuppose the existence of a research community.
>
> (Fenster 2008: 158)

For instance, United States radio host Joe Rogan announced shortly after professional conspiracy theorist Alex Jones was banned from several major global social media platforms that he would not be able to have him on his radio show at that point. Jones had been banned due to his claims that the Sandy Hook elementary school shooting (on 12 December 2012 in Newtown, Connecticut, United States of America) was staged by crisis actors, which led to believers harassing victims' families. By disassociating himself with Jones, Rogan was attempting to maintain his public image as credible and distance himself from the ostracism and public criticism surrounding Jones, whom he had previously invited on his talk show.

Despite factions within communities, conspiracy theorists position themselves in opposition to the mainstream. Fenster suggests that 'they either belong to an oppositional political movement or hope to join or create a new one' (2008: 159). For example, both David Icke and Alex Jones position themselves as being in opposition to their individual definitions of the mainstream or dominant political ideologies.

In sum, Fenster's key insights include:-

1. Conspiracy theory is a reflection of social anxiety or major thematic concerns (discussed further in 3.9).
2. Conspiracy theory should be understood as a continuous interpretative practice (linked to 3.8.1 and 3.11).
3. The individual derives play and pleasure from the process of interacting with the text, which can both be revelatory and disorientating.
4. Conspiracy theory is a situated heterodox phenomenon (discussed further in 3.12).

3.8.1 Urban legends

As part of the continuous interpretative practice of conspiracy theorising, there seems to be constancy in new conspiracy theories emerging – some innovative, though many, as Gulyas points out: 'endlessly recycled, as are the arguments that circulate around them' (2016: 105). The theorists are the exposers of the revelation, and they have a higher tendency to survive if they are 'lurid, scandalous, highly emotive and personal' (108). Accordingly, conspiracy theories bear many similarities to urban legends and rumours, which are worth exploring as they crossover on key aspects of the interrelations with social anxiety and the transmission of the narratives.

Barkun notes several similarities between conspiracy theories and urban legends (2013: 27–8). Firstly, both conspiracy theories and urban legends are presented as believed or believable, unlike fairy tales which are presented as fiction. Regarding time period in which the narratives are set, urbans legends and conspiracy theories are set in the recent past. To add to Barkun's point, some conspiracy theories refer to the distant past but with the inference that they are relevant to the present. For instance, the past event will be presented to demonstrate a parallel with a present situation or that a historical group is connected in a vast conspiratorial network spanning centuries, demonstrating their far-reaching power over time and space (see section 5.6). Another similarity between urban legends and conspiracy theories is that they involve the average person, unlike myths, which engenders a sense of relatability – that the described event could possibly happen to the discourse participants. Similar to rumours, conspiracy theories and urban legends spread quickly and pertain to be true, with rumours often having a shorter life span. Finally, folklorists tend to focus on orally transmitted narratives, whereas conspiracy theories are now also transmitted via the mass media and online communications platforms.

From the above points, it is noticeable that the narratives are transmitted as true, temporally proximal, implicate the average person and have a level of believability. They also hook into contemporary social anxieties, which give them a currency of emotivity and potential longevity. As such, they are ecotypified (Tangherlini 1990: 385), meaning the story fits the culture within which it is being told and reflect commonly held group values. As with rumours, in order to stimulate transmission and lifespan, the narrative resonates with the participants. Likewise, the rooting of a conspiracy theory must successfully 'appeal to the right people, at the right time, in the right way, and adapt to survive' else face certain death (Uscinski and

Parent 2014: 158). Moreover, In conjunction with their conversational mode, both conspiracy theories and urban legends can be elastic in that the narrative can survive being played around with (altered, added or details omitted). The narratives can thus be ecotypified to reflect social anxieties whilst still exhibiting standard features, such as the imminent threat.

Anxieties are frequently similar for both urban legends and conspiracy theories, reflecting fears of modernity (Fine 1980), or as Brunvand notes regarding urban legends: ‘often depict a clash between modern conditions and some aspect of a traditional life-style’ (Brunvand 1981: 189). Highly applicable to conspiracy theories, examples are easy to find with current concerns around technology, particularly the modern phenomena of cybersecurity and globalisation, making them recurrent features of current conspiracy theories. However, as Best and Horiuchi (1985: 496) point out, they identify a threat but do not offer a solution.

The role of foreknowledge in urban legends, which proliferate around crises is discussed by Goldstein (2009). Stories which tell of the ability for people to be able to predict traumatic events enable a sense of safety, that ‘danger is knowable’ (241), demonstrable in its consistent prevalence in 9/11 contemporary legend narratives whereby a person or people had prior knowledge of the event which not only enabled protection from tragedy but also, in many cases, implicated guilt (245). Prophecies are also found in grateful stranger narratives (somebody does a favour and is returned with a warning about a future terrorist event). Moreover, foreknowledge can be constructed by the process of discovering number and word patterns (Knight 2008).

Donovan defines rumours as ’claims about reality – particularly events, people, and situations – that are circulated primarily outside official sources […] Rumor is marked by its process and not the truth or falsity of its content’ (2015: 788). Similarly, Bordia and Difonzo (2005) note that rumours have a heavy emphasis on finding, sharing and assessing available information (90). Furthermore, the importance of process is compatible with facilitating a platform in which common anxieties can be discussed even if some rumours are suspected by the interlocutors to be false but transmit them regardless as they provide a platform to discuss common anxieties (Donovan 2015: 792). Therefore, it is not just the act of filling in the gaps but also the opportunities for social bonding and the possibility to discuss anxieties, which are process focused.

A combination of lack of information (Heller 2015: 43; DiFonzo 2019: 258) from trusted sources compiled with heightened social anxiety creates a solid foundation for rumours, which then galvanise the distrust through clear enemy identification ‘rumors are not collective memory, they thrive in the absence of commemorative events, memorials and rituals’ Both Heller (2015: 44) and DiFonzo (2019: 258) use the term *conspiracy rumors* the latter defining them as: ‘rumors characterized by stories about the covert and malevolent activities of powerful and secretive groups’ whereby the rumors comprise smaller elements of a larger, cohesive, exclusionary narrative. Thus, according to DiFonzo and Heller, rumours arise from information lacunae, as can urban legends: ‘since official sources don’t convey satisfactory amounts of information, more creative, unofficial sources must fill the gaps’ (Goldstein 2009: 244). They also arise from social anxiety and are essentially social. They reinforce or foster group cohesion in the presence of a perceived enemy whilst bolstering a sense of in-group virtue (also see Uscinski 2014).

3.9 Anxiety and panic

The following section explores the relationship between conspiracy theories and social anxiety. It introduces the commonly present feature in conspiracy theories of representing contemporaneous social anxieties, such as current concerns around the power of new technology to curtail freedoms. Following on, *agency panic* and concerns around being in control of one's own body are discussed. The final part of the section concerns *conspiracy panics* whereby the conspiracy theory itself becomes the object of fear.

Fenster (2008) believes a culturalist approach yields more insight than the traditional pathologising approach. As such, the object of analysis should not be restricted to being seen as pathology but instead as reflections and signposts of social anxieties (Butter and Knight 2018: 40) or postmodern anxiety (Knight 2000, Melley 2002).

> Situating conspiracy theory and political 'mythology' in general within the historical, social, and cultural context in which they emerge, the symbolist approach – shorn of Hofstadter's simplistic conception of a 'paranoid style' – can offer a welcome and essential complement to the tendency of leftist critique of conspiracy theory to focus solely on conspiracy theory's ideological limitations and effects.
>
> (Fenster 2008: 51)

Instead of foregrounding illogicality and individual shortcomings, shifting the focus to looking at the collective in a less judgmental manner will achieve a greater understanding of their enduring and widespread popularity. Knight (2000) comments that: 'far from being a projection onto the outside world of repressed inner conflict, then, much conspiracy culture might instead be understood as an attempt to make sense, albeit in a distorted fashion, of the deeper conflicts which reside not in the psyche but in society' (Knight 2000: 18): a 'coded social critique' (Miller 2002: 41). For instance, pessimism towards the mainstream media and distrust in the credibility of the official information sources (Gualda Ruas 2018) can be linked with a desire for transformational political change (Gulyas 2016: 14). Essentially, the pathologising approach situates the locus of blame within the conspiracy community – specifically the people involved, manifesting as delusions of persecution. On the other hand, a cultural approach presupposes the object of analysis as a reflection of patterns of concern in society.

One of the central thematic concerns reflecting contemporary social anxieties is the issue of lacking or losing control of oneself due to more powerful forces usurping individual agency. Therefore, conspiracy theories not only question the location and use of power but are also concerned about the lack of power of the victims. As Knight (2000) states,

> The interpenetration of individual bodies and the global body politic […] other forms of power tap into the scary interpenetration of the corporeal and the corporate, offering explanations which float somewhere between the literal and the metaphorical, and even undermine the distinction between the two. Scenarios of body panic can therefore provide a highly charged if distorted way of representing forms of connectedness, of both the individual body and the body politic, for which there are as yet no adequate maps.
>
> (Knight 2000: 203)

The 'body panic' phenomenon is evident in the preponderance of recurring narratives which warn of a plan to control the entirety of humanity (Gulyas 2016: 43), with mind control offering an emotional and personal angle lacking in some conspiracy narratives (97). They can be

mental (such as brainwashing) and/or physical, particularly the recurring political concerns of anti-vax narratives. Other modern examples of conspiracy theories that have their roots in the brainwashing and mind control concepts are, for example, chemtrails (blamed for illnesses and infertility), fluoride in tap water (damages pineal gland, which is linked to psychic ability), soya (to demasculinise men – also linked to infertility) and mass media, including subliminal messaging (dumb down the population –keep them acquiescent). There is a consistent theme of Machiavellian bodily attack, engendering a feeling not just that authorities should be distrusted, but everyday objects are used as tools of manipulation.

Concerning the will of the individual or human agency, Dyrendal notes the sacred agency of the self, threatened by evil outside forces (2015: 223). There is centrality and significance to the individual, though an individual is under threat. Melley (2000) refers to what he calls **'**agency panic**'** (3): the notion of the ineffectual individual, embattled by a mysterious but concretised entity, as opposed to a conglomeration of individuals and small groups enacting various wills upon society. The conspirators cannot be properly pinned-down and held accountable, unlike the clarity of pinning the blame on a particular individual.

There is a distinct sense of bodily attack, what Kelley-Romano considers 'the dominant narrative theme of infiltration' (2008: 110) – ubiquitous, difficult to identify or pin down the source. For instance, any Cold War and post-Cold War narratives feature brainwashing as a central theme, which has been given extra currency of legitimation by the conspiracy theory-turned-actual conspiracy MKUltra – the United States mind control programme. The current popular *Netflix* series *Stranger Things* bases its core narrative on MKUltra. Mind control is also used as a minor explanatory tool: to explain behaviours of 'sheeple' within the malevolent organisations, such as David Icke's postulation that the chauffeur in the Princess Diana conspiracy theory was mind-controlled (David Icke 2018a).

Anxiety exists within the conspiracy milieu and around it, which would explain the panics and counter-conspiracy theorising aimed at conspiracy theories and their exponents. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the social sciences have never accepted conspiracy theories into the mainstream. Furthermore, the mainstream media exhibits a variegated treatment of conspiracy theories: entertaining them, outright propagating them, and condemning them. Bratich (2008) refers to 'conspiracy panics'; he shifts the focus of the object of analysis to those who believe conspiracy theories to be dangerous, in that the panic around them is what problematises them, not the conspiracy theories themselves. It is thus not the truth values of the narratives themselves but: 'the regimes of truth and reason that compost political life and examines the conditions under which alternative narratives are disqualified'. It is their problematization that fuels the continuation of conspiracy theories. It is posited that their longevity is because 'they ceaselessly incorporate new scandals into an already-formed metaconspiracy machine, because they inexhaustibly generate more conspiracy theories, and because, by definition, they must fail (thus regenerating)' (Bratich 2008: 159).

Bratich (2017) refers to the concept of actionable beliefs**,** insomuch as there exists a tangible fear of extremist political activity linked with particular ideas, particularly belief systems espousing dissent**.** Media stories such as Pizzagate are utilised as proof of actionable beliefs. Pizzagate is the name given to an event in the United States where a man went to a pizza restaurant to investigate a conspiracy theory propagated online that members of the Democrat party were part of a paedophilia ring (Kang and Goldman 2016). QAnon conspiracy, which started as an anonymous poster, is another example of actionable beliefs. 'Q'- left cryptic messages (breadcrumbs) on an online message board – 4Chan – which were interpreted by the readers as the Mueller investigation into the alleged collusion between

Russia and Trump actually being Trump secretly investigating elite corruption and child abuse (Cassin and Wendling 2018) – both common themes in contemporary conspiracy rhetoric. The accusation led to supporters joining rallies wearing 'Q' t-shirts – showing not just participation in encrypting the breadcumb-clues but an ontological blurring of the online world into the physical world.

3.10 Categorising conspiracy theory

With the development and movement of conspiracy theory narratives and their associated constituents moving between mainstream and heterodox, it can be a challenge to maintain an accurate bearing of the landscape as conspiracy theories tend to get thrown into one general box with the implicit assumption that key categorical differences not explicit. One method of distinguishing between different conspiracy theories is to address the conspiratorial scope. To illustrate, Barkun delineates between 3 main types of conspiracy theories as:-

1. Event conspiracies: the narrative is focused on one specific event.
2. Systemic conspiracies: a broader goal such as gaining control over a country.
3. Superconspiracies: a complex interweaving of event and systemic conspiracies controlled by 'a distant but all-powerful evil force.

(Barkun 2003: 22)

Barkun's categories echo the parallel between increasing complexity and decreasing factual likelihood discussed in the previous chapter. Categorisation can also be topic-based. Ballinger (2011) outlines a thematic typology of conspiracy theories to address the problem of the 'existing theoretical approaches to conspiracy theory to delineate [it] as a single theoretical 'object'' (34). He suggests two types: *realpolitik* and *classical. Realpolitik* stands for those conspiracy theories which function 'as part of the workings of existing political and economic structures without recourse to extremist or fantastical explanations' (Ballinger 2011: 34), whereas *classical* describes 'conspiracy in terms of identity politics rooted in extremist far-right ideologies and/or occult beliefs… [which] usually have long ideological pedigree within Western culture, e.g. anti-Masonic and anti-Semitic' (Ballinger 2011: 35). Within classical conspiracy theories there are three subcategories: fundamentalist religious ideology, nationalist and New Age. Examples include Amerocentric conspiracy theories that perceive globalist threats to the American ideal, which is categorised under the second subcategory of classical conspiracy theories as nationalist. An example of the third subcategory of New Age classical conspiracy theories is ones that draw on 'many occult and alternative spiritual traditions' whereby evil forces are hampering human spiritual development. (Ballinger 2011: 36).

Ballinger's typology is valuable and necessary to start to delineate and understand key differences between conspiracy theories that can appear wildly different despite being associated with the same category. However, the typology fails to accommodate the broader role of improvisational millennialism and its hybrid narratives that are not necessarily part of superconspiracy narratives. Moreover, he discusses the 'entertainment function' as a form of interest in conspiracy theory as spectacle, partly explaining the popularity of celebrity death conspiracy theories; however, they are problematic to fit into one of the classical subcategories. Therefore, the rest of this section will address these two issues exploring the concept of 'improvisational millennialism': a bricolage of seemingly disparate information to form new conspiracy narratives.

Millennialism is generally defined as the belief in the coming of a new utopian era, typically expected to occur around the millennium after a judgement day whereby good finally conquers evil. Teachings on this have been developed from both Christianity and Judaism. According to Barkun, who charts the links between millennialism, conspiracy theories and stigmatised knowledge, 'belief in conspiracies is central to millennialism in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries' (Barkun 2013: 18). He distinguishes between 3 types: religious, secular and improvisational millennialism.

Religious and secular millennialism derive from the Christian belief in the millennium as end time- judgment day after 1000 years of Christ's reign. *Millennialism* is extended to 'any religious vision that saw history reaching its climax in a collective, this-worldly redemption' (Barkun 2013: 32). Secular millennialism began in the late eighteenth century with 'secular visions of a perfect future' driven by transcendent forces, which within a hundred years had become tied in with nationalist political, racial and class ideologies (32). Post-Cold War secular millennialism is now manifested in ethnic nationalism and 'some antiglobalization rhetoric, with its implied nostalgia for a lost golden age of small, self-sufficient communities' (34). An example would be the self-sufficiency products sold on websites such as www.infowarsstore.com (associated with Alex Jones' Infowars website) and www.healthrangerstore.com (associated with www.naturalnews.com).

Conspiracy belief is linked though not necessary (the two can exist independently) and is best considered to be, according to Barkun, 'mutually reinforcing' (26). According to Barkun, millennials are attracted to conspiracism because the out-group can be scapegoated; the evil forces can be blamed for the failure of both a movement's insufficient popularity and the feeling that the end-times are out of reach. Millennialism and conspiracy theories both offer a Manichaean world-view (19–20): the world is a fight between good and evil, whereby good wins and ushers in a new, utopian age. However, there is a lack of consensus within the milieu on when and how this will happen (Hanegraaff 1996: 333). Religious beliefs assert the second coming of Christ, and secular millennials talk of the beginning of the Age of Aquarius. Thus, a key component of millennialism that conspiracy theories lack is a proffered solution: 'conspiracy theories locate and describe evil, while millennialism explains the mechanism for its ultimate defeat' (Barkun 2013: 26, see also Asprem and Dyrendal 2015: 368). According to Berlet, apocalyptic belief holds an expectation of confrontation between good (the blameless) and evil forces (the scapegaots) and that the confrontation will uncover hidden truths. The confrontation is both imminent and necessary (otherwise something terrible will happen) and once it has concluded, society will undergo drastic change. Furthermore, it is not just confined to religious beliefs, but is also present in secular beliefs (2009: 10).

3.11 The bricolage of modern conspiracy theorising

Improvisational millennialism has increased in popularity from the 1960s onwards. It is defined by Barkun as: '"an act of bricolage" and draw[s] on elements of seemingly disparate religious and secular traditions, as "ideological omnivores"' (2013: 40). In other words, information is drawn from diverse areas and joined together in an illogical manner. Nevertheless, it is important to note that to a proponent of a conspiracy theory the information is likely to appear logical.

Improvisational millenialism is distinguishable from religious and secular millenarianism, as they are based on particular beliefs and texts. The bricolage technique is ideal for *millenarian entrepreneurs* because people can 'create apocalyptic belief systems outside of customary

religious or secular traditions' (Barkun 2013: 34). Asprem and Dyrendal discuss the confluence of esotericism and conspiracy theory in that

> Political, spiritual, and (pseudo-)scientific discourses all have a home here, and they easily mix. Joined by a common opposition to "Establishment" discourses rather than by positively shared doctrinal content, conspiracy theory affords a common language binding the discourses together.
>
> (Asprem and Dyrendal 2015: 371)

Sources are from stigmatised-knowledge claims, including *rejected knowledge* and the cultic milieu (Barkun 2013: 39). The accessibility and hyperlinking offered by the internet provide an ideal ground to fertilise and propagate the bricolaging of heterodox information (Soukup 2008). *Rejected knowledge* is defined as 'suppressed or ignored bodies of belief deemed to be irrelevant, erroneous or outmoded' such as sectarianism, mysticism and deviant spirituality (Barkun 2013: 40), including theosophy and occult sciences: astrology, magic and alchemy. Ancient wisdom is also included (it is not always rejected, such as during the Renaissance). Improvisational millennials are drawn to occult ideas. However, the cultic milieu is broader than rejected knowledge as it is a subculture as opposed to just intellectual. It also differs in its inclusion of all non-standard systems of belief, not just occultism, such as alternative medicine.

Barkun (2016) uses *stigmatized knowledge* to refer to that which institutions do not accept, thus existing distinct from the mainstream and highly durable, in particular 'heterodox religion, occult and esoteric beliefs, racial politics, and fringe science'.

> Another critical characteristic of stigmatized knowledge is the lack of institutional validation. The maverick element acts to link believers together. Believers in one form of stigmatized knowledge are likely also to believe in or at least be sympathetic to other forms of stigmatized knowledge as well. Thus conspiracists, in addition to forming a sub-culture of their own, exist within a larger sub-culture of believers in other forms of stigmatized knowledge. The degree to which conspiracists, for example, are predisposed to look favorably on other forms of stigmatized knowledge derives from their attitude towards authority.
>
> (Barkun 2016: 2)

Barkun suggests the limitation of the cultic milieu is its focus on religious movements by extending out its focus to 'a broader range of outsider ideas' and includes:-

- Forgotten knowledge, for example, ancient wisdom narratives.
- Superseded knowledge, for example, astrology and alchemy.
- Ignored knowledge, for example, folk medicine.
- Rejected knowledge, for example, UFO abductions.
- Suppressed knowledge, for example, suppressed cancer cures.

(Barkun 2016: 42).

Stigmatised knowledge presents information as valid and explains both the allure of the forbidden and why the information is hidden. An underpinning belief is that what is presented as fact in the public domain is misleading fiction; thus, the fact is stigmatised. In reverse, films and novels are interpreted as fact (Barkun 2016: 45) or prophetic, such as *They Live* (*They Live* 1988) and *1984* (Orwell 1948). David Icke's reptilian thesis exemplifies improvisational millennialism situated within the cultic milieu. The narrative asserted a mighty, secret and

malevolent group of reptilian beings of extraterrestrial origin (ancient astronaut thesis) attempting to completely enslave the planet (prophetic political conspiracism), which they are at the cusp of achieving. The ancient astronaut thesis holds the belief that aliens came to earth, exposed it to advanced technologies and that humans are descendants of extraterrestrial origin. By bricolaging the thesis with political conspiracism, he thus bridged the two beliefs and their believers together (Robertson 2014: 35).

Conspiracy theories primarily mobilise the possibility of seeing the world through a conspiratorial frame and can be categorised as *classical* and *realpolitik*, with the former being much easier to identify due to its often fantastical elements. The fear held by the mainstream media of the actionability of the classical type is disproportionate, as classical conspiracy theories tend to lack clear, tangible solutions – though this is not always the case. Likewise, the implausibility association enables the term to function as a tool of disqualification from rational debate. Both the internal logic of the good versus evil battle and the connotative weight of the label function to delineate and distance an 'in-group' from an 'out-group'. Conversely, realpolitik conspiracy theories are embedded within wider political discourses, much less likely to be labelled so and function as a legitimation tool for various purposes – such as justification for war or persecution. The schematic associations of the term evoke the classical type, as opposed to realpolitik – it is those narratives that are clearly labelled 'conspiracy theory' which are more closely associated with the term and evoke imagery of aliens, chemtrails, Illuminati symbols and prominent figures such as Alex Jones and David Icke.

3.12 The cultic milieu

Core features of conspiracy theory are its relegated epistemic status alongside key concerns with power: in terms of who has it and how it is used, epistemic power and who/what has the right to decide between true and false. It is, in many ways, a social phenomenon, usually situated within the realms of heterodoxy and in conscious friction to mainstream beliefs. A fundamental sociological concept in understanding the role of conspiracy theory rhetoric in society is Colin Campbell's concept of the *cultic milieu,* which I have previously mentioned and will now discuss in more detail. The term has been recognised, to varying degrees, by several conspiracy theory scholars (Asprem and Dyrendal 2015; Harambaum and Aupers 2015; Robertson 2017; Whitesides 2015) and is defined as follows:

> The cultic milieu can be regarded as the cultural underground of society […] It includes all deviant belief systems and their associated practices. Unorthodox science, alien and heretical religion, deviant medicine, all comprise elements of such an underground […] it includes the worlds of the occult and the magical, of spiritualism and psychic phenomena, of mysticism and new thought, of alien intelligences and lost civilizations, of faith healing and nature cure.
>
> (Campbell 2002: 14)

The cultic milieu comprises a collection of loosely connected counterculture beliefs and practices which are 'a constant feature of society' (13). They share in common several features including a self-aware deviance from orthodox belief systems due to a belief in their inadequacy which has moved from religious towards scientific orthodoxy over the past 200 years. As a case-in-point, current popular conspiracy theories are scientifically heterodox, such as anti-vax, aliens, chemtrails and fluoride (the belief that flouride is deliberately put in the public water distribution system to damage people's psychic ability as it is supposed to calicfy the pineal gland). Also, mysticism and magic form an element that is rooted in

Western esotericism (see Asprem and Dyrendal 2015). New Age conspiracy theory rhetoric draws on Western esotericiam discourses as they are considered heterodox narratives which claim to espouse little-known, special knowledge. Furthermore, the cultic milieu consists of seekers of new and special knowledge in the form of a 'quest' to enlightenment/higher understanding. They are thus open to each others' teachings as part of 'a receptive and syncretistic orientation and an interpenetrative communication structure' (Campbell 2002: 23).

Of particular affinity with conspiracy theories is self-aware deviance, the act of finding new and special knowledge and the inter-penetrability of different subgroups, facilitating a movement of people and ideas. Whitesides asserts that once a person has encountered a piece of heterodox information, other heterodox information becomes more readily available due to the structure of the cultic milieu (2015: 32). Barkun stresses that significant features of conspiracy culture are the blanket rejection of popular beliefs as a priori false and fluidity of ideas between varying groups of the cultic milieu (2013: 41). However, Whitesides critiques Barkun's assertion of indiscriminate borrowing as it is more a case of intermittent cross-fertilization with some areas unaffected by each other (Whitesides: 2015: 33).

Campbell identifies the different levels of commitment by identifying the three main types of people attracted to the cultic milieu. The first type is labelled 'seekers'. They are considered the most dedicated and continue to seek out new truths, which can be in various areas. The second type consists of adherents to a particular brand, such as memberships, and the third type are named passive consumers. Passive consumers have a less intense commitment which is satisfied 'through subscriptions to magazines […] it is this substantial commercial substructure which is one of the principal reasons why the cultic milieu continues to survive' (Campbell 2002: 19). The concept of seekership highlights the participatory nature of conspiracy theories. The listener/reader, at the very least, feels like they are participating in a quest, even just through the act of choosing to adhere to a non-orthodox belief. In turn, the adherent may feel a sense of superiority in contrast to the masses.

There is an illumination of hidden knowledge through which the seeker of truth can understand the true nature of evil and thus be emancipated from the establishment – of whom must be treated with suspicion (Asprem and Dyrendal 2015). In this sense, it is 'a close relative of occult rhetoric' (Reyes and Smith 2014: 404) and can be seen in narratives which capitalise on interweaving spiritual discourses, of which David Icke is a solid example-positioning himself as a Jesus-like figure, who interprets a vast range of spiritual texts for the layman to be released from the mental prison of mainstream society, for example, *Who Built The Matrix* (David Icke 2018b). Accordingly the conspiratorial domain within the cultic milieu has a history of proximity to its metaphysical and utopian domains' (Whitesides 2015: 38). The boundary lines of the cultic milieu are not fixed, and ideas can move both ways. For example, Davies (2019: 3) argues that eugenics, a mainstream conversation before 1945, became ostracised and then entered the cultic milieu, whereas veganism has moved from the fringe into the mainstream.

The term *conspiracy milieu* is a valuable concept in that it combines the characteristics of *cultic milieu* as outlined above by Campbell with the focus on conspiracy theories. The term is used by Harambaum and Aupers (2015, 2017):

> People in the conspiracy milieu actively resist their stigmatization by distinguishing themselves from the mainstream as 'critical freethinkers': it is not they who are gullible, but the 'sheeple' who simply take for granted what the (epistemic) authorities tell them.
>
> Harambaum and Aupers (2017: 126)

The respondents in their ethnographic fieldwork identified as autonomous, rebellious and discontent with the current political and economic system. They also readily distinguished not only between themselves and the group within the conspiracy milieu they considered as irrational but also took a critical case-by-case stance towards eminent conspiracy theorists, such as Jones and Icke. Harambaum and Aupers found three categories: activists, retreaters and mediators. Activists (rejected by mediators and retreaters) and mediators are apparent by label, and retreaters see direct action as based on fear, so instead aim to change themselves first. I would note that this is compatible with the New Age milieu, where the focus is on personal transformational change, which will encourage wider change by example, not force.

In line with Campbell's *cultic milieu,* Harambaum and Aupers suggest *the conspiratorial milieu* to be considered 'as a fluid network of different groups of people, identifying with distinctly different world-views, beliefs, values and practices' (2017: 125). However, this special knowledge is only known to some (Pagán 2008: 28–9), which by extension fosters an 'in-group' 'out-group' mentality evident in the widely used pejorative term aimed at non-conspiracy theorists, who are seen to blindly follow mainstream society as 'sheeple' – a portmanteau of 'sheep' blindly following the shepherd (mainstream authority), and 'people'.

Van Eck Duymaer van Twist and Newcombe (2018) state that 'the oppositional nature of the cultic milieu encourages groups and networks to take a sectarian stance, creating social and conceptual boundaries between 'us' and 'them' – those on the outside' (2018: 153), in which the labels and good and evil can be easily applied. Self-awareness of being 'knowingly marginal' fits in neatly with the concept of a backlash of conspiracies on the part of the evil other. Van Eck Duymaer van Twist and Newcombe (2018) also recognise how apparently disparate enclaves of the cultic milieu have points of contact with each other, such as the belief of a conspiratorial plan to microchip humans as part of an enslavement plan. This belief has been evident in seemingly disparate groups, such as Christian, political and environmental. Big Pharma creating diseases for profit is another example of a belief that transcends group boundaries, shared not only by religious, political and spiritual groups but even from within the medical establishment itself (van Eck Duymaer van Twist and Newcombe 2018: 158).

I now illustrate the concept of the cultic milieu to a contemporary phenomenon that has received minimal academic interest – the *intellectual dark web*. Rozner refers to the *intellectual dark web* (IDW) as 'a distinctive mix of subversiveness and intellectual rigour, guided by conservative, classical liberal and libertarian philosophy. Thousands of similar videos exist online, as well as podcasts, blogs and independent news websites' (2018: 7). A critical guiding force is a discontent with the perceived censorship of unfashionable ideas and lack of open public debate, which Rozner refers to as consisting 'largely of confected outrage' (2018: 9). Key figures associated with the intellectual dark web are self-aware deviants and identify as critical freethinkers: ex- martial arts expert and web-radio host Joe Rogan, conservative political commentator Ben Shapiro, YouTube personality and talk show host Dave Rubin, mathematician Eric Weinstein, controversial public academic Jordan Peterson and polemicist Milo Yiannopolous. Platforms for the intellectual dark web are the channels

associated with the aforementioned, such as YouTube and online magazines, such as *Quillette.*

The internet functions as a convenient platform for the IDW; a lack of censorship and gatekeeping enables lengthy discussions on taboo topics without time restrictions (Rozner 2018: 9). For instance, Joe Rogan, who asserts to be receptive to stigmatised knowledge albeit with a self-defined critical mindset, regularly has guests with polemic viewpoints on to his online radio show, with dialogues continuing for several hours at a time. For instance, a 3-hour long chat with Randall Carlsson on the falsities of the climate change movement is a solid example of the sense of seekership of new or occulted information and the perception of ostracisation fuelling the sense that the information is somehow special.

This chapter has discussed the anatomy of conspiracy theories, including logic, key features and types of evidence, followed by a review of under what conditions and where conspiracy theories tend to manifest. My first research question concerns how conspiracy theory can be better defined considering its diverse applications and bearing in mind the tendency to homogenise and pathologise both narratives and their proponents. With a particular focus on the concept of the cultic milieu, the next chapter focuses on the germination, convergence and divergence of conspiracy theory narratives in key areas of the conspiracy milieu.

Chapter 4: A Socio-Cognitive Approach to CDA and Digital Ethnography

4.1 Introduction

This next section details critical discourse analysis (CDA) and the socio-cognitive approach to CDA (SCDS), how it is apt for the analysis of conspiracy theory discourse and where my research is situated within the field. I discuss the rationale behind choosing an innovative combination of methods situated within SCDS and explain how they are best suited to elucidating the rhetorical mechanics of conspiracy theory discourse. I then detail the ethnographic process undertaken. Fundamental to the project is an understanding and sensitivity to the object of analysis – conspiracy theories – by which I refer to two key aspects. Firstly, at their core, conspiracy theories are a critique of power with a deeply ingrained good versus evil dichotomy, reflected in constructed in-groups and out-groups who enact the battle between good and evil respectively. Secondly, conspiracy theories must be understood as socially situated phenomena because the core narrative construct persists (Byford 2011) but the details tend to reflect contemporaneous social concerns (see 3.9). Taking these integral points into account, the overarching approach taken is critical discourse analysis. Crucially, CDA is 'specifically interested in power abuse or domination' (van Dijk 2015: 71), which is of central concern both within and around conspiracy theories.

Drawing on the extant literature in the humanities and social sciences has enabled an understanding of key contextual and narrative features. In doing so, I have been able to formulate a working definition of conspiracy theory to identify relevant conspiracy theory texts, as a genre of discourse with its own schematic organisation (van Dijk 2015: 72). Furthermore, the crucial concept of the conspiracy milieu and associated ethnographic work in sociology and other disciplines have provided a foundation on which I have built a linguistics-oriented CDA study on conspiracy theories, analysing language in context. Nevertheless, conspiracy theories are a complex, heterodox phenomenon and 'the important thing is to choose a particular theoretical framework that has something to say about the social issue that is under investigation' (Page et al. 2014: 98). SCDS has enabled me to capture how conspiracy theory discourses are socially mediated by making explicit the cognitive representations at play. Put simply, SCDS can elucidate the role of conspiracy proponents' personal and social knowledge in the interpretation and construction of conspiracy theory narratives.

4.2 Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical linguistics emerged in the late 1970s – most notably the 1979 publication *Language and Control* by Fowler, Hodge, Kress and Trew. The methods and practices of CDA have to varying degrees, derived from this work (Hart 2010: 3). The 1979 text marked a shift away from formalism, proposing an analysis of language in context: as a social practice. The grammars used reflect the period; thus, Chomsky's transformational grammar (Kress and Hodge 1979) was used in the initial stages, followed by Halliday's systemic-functional grammar (Hart 2014: 10). This century have seen 'the cognitive turn' (Chilton 2011), which has broadened the scope of the enterprise by enabling the inclusion of contemporary cognitive science and psychology (Chilton 2005: 24). CDA has drawn on work ranging from as far back as Aristotelian rhetoric to modern social theory (see Hart and Cap 2014: 4 for a diagram linking different thinkers with different CDA strands). It draws more specifically on the premise that language is central to how social relations are mediated and reinforced, thus acting as a means of communication and control. Furthermore, language mediates between society and the reader/listener and facilitates 'a dialectical relationship between a particular

discursive event and the situation(s), institution(s) and social structure(s), which frame it' (Fairclough and Wodak 1997: 258).

In brief, CDA is situated within applied linguistics and is a transdisciplinary approach (Fairclough 2010, Weiss and Wodak 2003). Critical discourse studies (CDS) is also commonly used by researchers, which signposts the endeavour's interdisciplinarity via the inclusion of 'Studies' (see Catalano and Waugh 2020). CDA enables the analyst to study the relationship between language and the construction and reproduction of power inequalities. It is, therefore, 'a problem-oriented interdisciplinary research program' (Wodak 2013: 21) which aims to uncover the power asymmetries that become naturalised through repetition and thus operate under the radar of the average interlocutor. However, to achieve this aim, language is not studied in isolation of context, but in the social situations in which it occurs (Chilton 2011: 771). In other words, CDA is 'a critical social practice whose main target is the disclosure of relations between particular discursive practices and their broader situations, institutions and social structures' (Barkho 2011: 297). Therefore, analyses are topic-based, explained and interpreted with critical attention to the socio-political context (Unger, Wodak and KhosraviNik 2016: 3). CDA thus enables the analysis of societal issues by studying the language used. The following section provides a brief history of CDA followed by a more detailed discussion of its theoretical underpinnings.

Topics of CDA analysis have included, for instance, political discourse, ideology, racism, economic discourse, advertisement and promotional culture, media language, gender, institutional discourse, education and literacy (Blommaert and Bulcaen 2000: 450–451) and, more recently, 'press discourse, political discourse, popular cultural texts and educational discourses' (Lin 2014: 219). CDA is thus in the process of methodological development and disciplinary expansion and is now considered 'among the most vigorously developing research enterprises located at the intersection of contemporary linguistics and social sciences' (Cap 2013a: 293). The main strands of CDA are the socio-cultural approach (most notably Fairclough 1989, 1992, 1995), the discourse-historical approach (Reisigl 2017; Reisigl and Wodak 2001; Reisigl and Wodak 2009; Weiss and Wodak 2003; Wodak 2001, 2009, 2011, 2015; Wodak and Forchtner 2018) and the socio-cognitive approach (van Dijk 1995, 1998, 2002, 2009; Chilton 2004; Hart and Lukeš 2007, Koller 2005; Koller 2012; O'Halloran 2003). There are various other approaches to CDA, which each relate in varying degrees to the three key dimensions: textual, social and cognitive/mental (Unger 2016: 3).

The socio-cultural, socio-cognitive and discourse-historical approaches all perceive discourse to be a form of social practice. The socio-cultural approach's main position has three dimensions. Firstly, the discourse is to be considered at the descriptive level of text and secondly at the interpretation level of the production of the text. Thirdly, the explanatory level concerns the relationship between discourse and socio-cultural practice. Unequal power relations are seen to be reinforced by discourse as language choices are ideologically motivated and also have ideological effects (Fairclough 1989). In short, discourse is central to understanding the 'discourse-power-ideology relationship' (Amoussou and Allagbe 2018: 14).

4.2.1 Criticisms and in defence of CDA

In this section, I address several criticisms of CDA and discuss the implications they might have for my research. Firstly, the usefulness of the enterprise is considered, followed by a discussion of the necessity and implications of considering the contexts in which discourse is

produced and disseminated. Finally, I discuss the criticisms and challenges around researcher reflexivity and transparency.

If people and systems are endowed with an existing faculty for recognising instances of manipulation in language, then the enterprise of CDA would appear superfluous (for instance, Chilton 2005 and Jones 2008). In order to override this, CDA must exemplify how linguistic analysis can go beyond that of the layperson's ability to detect ideologically manipulative instances in discourse (Hart 2010: 5). Being systematic, rigorous and transparent are ways in which this can be achieved as well as developing and incorporating recent research. To elaborate, people make choices when they speak or write, from a range of lexical and syntactic options, which, in turn, encode ideologies and impact on social actions (Fairclough 1989, 1995; Fowler 1991). In other words, the 'Critical' in CDA aims to reveal ways in which 'language is used for the exercise of socio-political control' (Widdowson 2004: 89) beyond that which is evident to the layperson 'thus empowering them with a new critical awareness' (Hart 2010: 5). By analysing language to uncover ideologies hidden to the untrained eye, CDA can aid in demystifying power imbalances, making the 'opaque power object' of discourse (Blommaert and Bulcaen 2000: 448) more transparent.

The assumption that language is central to the construction and reinforcement of problematic social inequalities is essential to accepting CDA as a research enterprise. However, Jones (2008) criticises CDA for leading to a 'distorted view of the role of communication in society and the workings of social processes more generally' (337) as 'ordinary, everyday communication already involves the critique of communication' (338). He suggests that by focusing on language, we need to ensure that the blame is not focused on aspects of people's conduct in a communicative situation, thus shifting blame away from the offending people (342). He rejects the CDA premise of the centrality of language in society, thus rejecting the CDA enterprise itself (356). Although I disagree that there is sufficient critical ability present in everyday communication (not least due to time constraints, but also the primacy of sweeping generalisations and anecdotes in routine evaluations) Jones highlights an important point, which is to not shift the focus onto that which is not the cause but a manifestation or reflection of the cause. Nevertheless, language is an index of society, rather than being either entirely causal nor entirely consequential.

As a relatively new enterprise, there is a need for CDA both to define itself in order not to become subsumed by other disciplines but also to develop its toolkit and not rely on a few linguistic concepts whilst simultaneously embracing interdisciplinarity to maintain relevance (Fowler 1996). In addition, the linguistic tools used are limited in contrast with the variety of different types of texts analysed (Hart 2010: 4). Interdisciplinarity must take both the form of integrating findings from other disciplines to develop new and more sophisticated linguistics methodologies and – considering conspiracy theories – utilising current research on the object of analysis to aid and enhance data interpretation.

Considering the environment in which language is created, context is not objective but intersubjective and dynamic (van Dijk 2008: x). Moreover, ideology is non-objective, and CDA endeavours to uncover implicit ideologies encoded in discourse. In order to do so, contextual understanding must be integrated into the interpretation of analytical findings if the analyst wants to achieve substantiation to their work. According to Fowler, 'critical interpretation requires historical knowledge and sensitivity' (1991: 68). In other words, interpretation necessitates contextual understanding as discourses are situated in a broader socio-political context and, more to the point, analysis of conspiracy theories must consider the socio-cultural context in which they are germinated and reflect. The need for awareness of social and historical context is integral to the analytical process (Fairclough 1989, Pennycook 1990,

Simon and Dippo 1986); it highlights the role of language as a window into and aid in maintaining social inequalities. The notion of transformative critique mobilises such analyses to bring into awareness and destabilise these systemic inequalities. Accordingly, Lin argues that 'more future CDA research needs to be devoted to studying the processes of transformation rather than just reproduction of ideologies and developing the methodological tools to analyse transformation processes' (2014: 216). Nevertheless, I would posit that analysis that incorporates descriptive and interpretative levels needs to be the primary focus to fully understand phenomena before transformative critique becomes relevant, with conspiracy theories as a case-in-point.

Researcher subjectivity has been the focus of many criticisms (see Antaki et al. 2003, Breeze 2011, Chilton 2005, Jones 2008, Lin 2014, Toolan 1997 and Widdowson 1996) albeit mainly directed towards the beginning of the CDA enterprise. Triangulation has enabled the analyst to make connections across disciplines and enhanced methods and approaches. Triangulation can help to mitigate negative consequences of subjectivity via analysis from 'multiple means of inquiry' (Hart 2016: 402), such as incorporating ethnography (Krzyżanowski 2011: 233). Nevertheless, researchers cast their ideologies onto data (Billing 1999, Blommaert and Bulcaen 2000: 455, Schegloff 1997, Wetherell 1998), without awareness or explicit recognition that they are doing so. In other words, researcher subjectivity (see also Fairclough 2003, Reisigl and Wodak 2009) is inevitable to some degree and necessary given the politically charged enterprise of CDA (Fairclough 1996). However, this potential pitfall can enhance analyses if the researcher practices reflexivity and is transparent about their ideological positioning.

Furthermore, reflexive awareness of one's own biases and prejudices must extend to the interpretative level, particularly when drawing conclusions about audience reception, as in how a text is generally read (O'Halloran 2005: 1946). In addition, 'texts are usually highly ambivalent and open to multiple interpretations' (Fairclough 1992: 75), highlighting the need for researcher transparency and awareness of diverse responses to a given text. Interpretation brings the inherent issue of the analyst's perspective, which at an interpretative level is present, but can also be dynamic (Wodak 1999). Again, this need not be an issue if the researcher is aware of this potential pitfall and takes mitigating steps. Generally speaking, reader response and analysis of interview data are possible solutions.

To recap, CDA is grounded in the assumption that the distribution and reproduction of power in society is aided by language and can be problematic:

> CDA's locus of critique is the nexus of language/discourse/speech and social structure. It is in uncovering ways in which social structure impinges on discourse patterns, relations, and models (in the form of power relations, ideological effects, and so forth), and in treating these relations as problematic, that researchers in CDA situate the critical dimension of their work.
>
> Blommaert and Bulcaen (2000: 449)

However, what is considered a problematic power relation is dependent on viewpoint. It would appear that CDA analyses are often grounded in the implicit assumption that the discourse participants are adherents to the ideological pursuits of western liberalism, such as racial and gender equality. However, many pervasive cultural ideologies fundamentally subvert these beliefs, and we need to be aware of this, not just assuming that everyone is on the same page. I would argue that the CDA researcher ought not to presuppose ideological unity with their readership but make transparent their own ideological biases and not presuppose that the readership is of the same ideological positioning, which extends the

need for the researcher's self-awareness (as highlighted by Lin 2014) to the discourse participants. I would highlight that it extends beyond the traditional left-right political divide and attempts cross-cultural awareness that different cultural environments deem different power relations problematic.

The interdisciplinarity and centrality of socio-political context in CDA render it ideal for analysing the rhetoric of conspiracy theories. It enables me to draw on the current research in other disciplines on conspiracy theories to help inform my analyses and –essentially – analyse the narratives in context. Conspiracy theories adapt to socio-political circumstances; a divorcing of context would prevent any meaningful interpretation. Furthermore, CDA is equipped to consider the ideologies underpinning conspiracy theories that both persuade (or not) and reinforce identified inequalities.

4.2.2 The challenges of using CDA to analyse conspiracy theories

A key problem is that there is little social media research in CDA as it is emerging (Page et al. 2018: 99), including scant digital ethnogaphies of conspiracy culture (Varis 2019). As a solution, I drew on current literature from other disciplines to inform and complement my ethnography, notably Ballinger 2011, Harambam 2020 and Toseland 2019. The ethnography is detailed towards the end of this chapter.

Moreover, proponents present both CDA and conspiracy theories as a societal critique. For instance, both take mainstream newspaper articles and critique them, claiming to uncover power abuses. Contrasting them enabled a better understanding of where they converge and diverge. Conspiracy theories attempt to critique systemic power inequalities whilst simultaneously reinforcing the power structures they claim to be non-beneficial due to their heterodox logic. The conspiracy theorist positions themselves as knowledgeable in the conspiracy milieu whilst simultaneously self-construing as powerless against wider society. As Bernard puts it: 'the more powerful social actors regulate how ideas are put into practice and used to regulate the conduct of others' (2018: 83). On the other hand, CDA is in a powerful orthodox position, as part of the academic establishment, and aims to directly challenge unequal power structures by raising awareness of how language use reifies inequalities. In both endeavours, the speaker aims to exercise power and influence through discourse, albeit the CDA analyst aims to contribute to public discourse whereas the conspiracy theorist is focused within the conspiracy milieu.

> Discourse plays a pivotal role in the exercise of power […] discourse also expresses social cognition and may thus 'manage the minds' of other groups and their members.
> van Dijk (2015: 71)

In other words, both use discourse to transmit the belief that societal structure is organised to benefit a powerful group whilst conspiracy theories simultaneously derail general debate, not least due to their bad reputation. Being situated on the fringes – as part of the cultic milieu – conspiracy theory proponents are thus further distanced from mainstream debate, rendering a self-perpetuating social inequality. In short, CDA elucidates how language constructs and reinforces specific instances of power inequalities, whereas conspiracy theories posit the existence of a conspiracy using heterodox forms of evidence and argumentation which often exemplifies logical fallacies. Conspiracy theories discourage proponents from interacting productively with the political process.

Defining my stance and position as a researcher was also challenging. The analyst needs to be explicit about their socio-political stance to make transparent their positioning as a researcher. This process helps clarify data choices made and how the data is analysed. Accordingly, many CDA researchers are explicitly socio-political, which is befitting for their objects of analysis. However, conspiracy theories are inherently contentious and have a 'mirroring tendency'. In other words, on one side, there is the prototypical conspiracy theorist, who believes their conspiratorial interpretation is epistemically superior and considers the mainstream ignorant and foolish. On the other side, non-believers treat the conspiracy theorist in the same way; they believe themselves to be intelligent and superior and the out-group (in this case, the conspiracy theorist) to be ignorant. After undertaking an interdisciplinary literature review and digital ethnographic fieldwork, I have encountered the same pattern in the research (see 2.2.3) whereby implicit assumptions are often made about conspiracy theories' epistemic quality.

As a researcher, I aim to understand how these narratives are positioned in key areas of the milieu, how they are persuasive and their replicability. In addition, I aim not to further contribute to an already significant body of work that reiterates their inherent illogicality and the foolishness of their proponents, which is already evident in the pejorative connotations of 'conspiracy theory' and 'conspiracy theorist' (see 2.6). Adding to this body of work also reinforces the cyclical relationship between believers and non-believers of conspiracy theories; it essentially further dichotomises and reinforces current belief systems by reification of dominance over an out-group. To this end, I contribute to the growing body of socio-cultural research on conspiracy theories (see Chapter 3), which takes a more observational approach.

Another research concern was whether to conduct quantitative and/or qualitative research. Due to the research questions, it became evident that in order to answer them sufficiently, I would need to conduct a digital ethnography followed by fine-grained analyses of a qualitative data set. As Al-Saaidi (2002: 474) points out, qualitative research is apt for CDA analyses of political speeches, similar to conspiracy theories in their persuasive function. Furthermore, my research questions ask 'how?' which suits a qualitative approach (Page et al. 2014: 82).

> The following are taken to be among the major characteristics of qualitative approaches and methods: the contextualization and context-embeddedness of their object of study; targeting the insider's point of view; aiming at interpretation, empathic understanding, and understanding the actors' perspectives, in general; a strong role of interviews and narratives; applying inductive, natural, non-interventionist methods, such as participant observation; the guiding idea that case studies reveal (subsets of) the complexities of life affecting individuals.
>
> Kortman (2021: 1208)

It can be seen that to obtain an emic perspective and reach the interpretative level with a sensitivity and understanding of context, qualitative analysis was the most suitable choice for this research project. I discuss the challenges of qualitative research in the ethnography section, as well as making transparent the data collection process.

4.3 Socio-cognitive critical discourse studies

The following section details the rationale behind SCDS. SCDS focuses on how social cognition mediates between texts and societies instead of focusing on discursive practice. In other words, analyses should account for the cognition of the language users (such as knowledge and ideologies), not just discourse and society. The two levels of analysis are micro and macro. Van Dijk's ideological square (1993, 1995, 1998 and 2008) visually represents how ideological discourse is seen to be structured. The in-group is represented favourably by focusing on positive aspects and backgrounding or omitting negative aspects. The out-group is represented negatively with negative aspects foregrounded and positive ones backgrounded.

The assumption of a direct link between society and text in CDA has been problematised (e.g., Chilton 2005, 2011; van Dijk 2014, 2015, 2016). Van Dijk notes that: 'If discourse were directly dependent on social structure, instead on mediating (personal and social) cognitive representations, all discourses in the same social situation would be the same' (2015: 70). This stands to reason with conspiracy theories which bear the same schematic organisation, or *superstructure,* but exhibit variation. SCDS develops the work of the socio-cultural approach by integrating a *cognitive interface.* The interface explains how text is interpreted through the minds of language users who bring with them vast amounts of socially shared knowledge. The 'cognitive' in socio-cognitive can be defined as: 'the mind, memory and especially with the cognitive processes and representations involved in the production and comprehension of discourse' (van Dijk 2015: 66).

> The sociocognitive approach in critical discourse studies advocates a multidisciplinary, triangular analysis of text and talk integrating a discursive, cognitive and social component. It is critical of CDS approaches that link discourse with society while ignoring the personal mental models of individual experiences and interpretations based on socially shared knowledge, attitudes and ideologies.
>
> van Dijk (2015: 84)

Socially shared knowledge is particularly pertinent in the analysis of conspiracy theories, as the portrayals of events are invariably situated on a different ontological level to the direct experience of the discourse participants. As van Dijk notes, 'most of our non-experience-based knowledge is acquired by discourse, and the production and comprehension of discourse requires vast amounts of socially shared knowledge' (2015: 68). SCDS recognises the different nature of discourse and social structures because they are mediated through people's mental representations, i.e., their interpretations, based on their uniquely acquired bank of social knowledge. SCDS does not limit itself to only that which is observable but holds as fundamental that cognitive mediation is necessary to create the discourse-society link (van Dijk 2015: 64), a major differentiating factor with Fairclough's socio-cultural approach which does not take into explicit account the cognitive mediating aspect.

> SCDS deals with the ongoing communicative Common Ground and the shared social knowledge as well as the attitudes and ideologies of language users as current participants of the communicative situation and as members of social groups and communities … a socio-cognitive approach not only makes explicit the fundamental role of mental representations, but also shows that many structures of discourse itself can only (completely) be described in terms of various cognitive notions, especially those of information, beliefs or knowledge of participants.
>
> van Dijk (2018: 28)

Furthermore, a key benefit of SCDS is its methodological flexibility. As van Dijk points out, SCDS 'admit[s] many different theories, analytical or ethnographic methods, experimental procedures, and practical applications, carried out within a critical perspective' (2016: 4). For each analysis I chose the most suitable analytical framework resulting in the application of an innovative combination of analytical frameworks situated within, or compatible with, SCDS. The frameworks are detailed in the respective analysis chapters.

Central to SCDS is the concept of Socio-Cognitive Representations (SCRs): dynamic conceptual structures which are negotiated discursively. SCRs constitute knowledge that is ordered, cogent and similar amongst members of a specific social group. Knowledge is acquired from various sources and are the foundations on 'which expectations are built and evaluations of groups are performed. Such categorizations lead to the construction of group identities in discourse (Koller 2019: 71). Members of communities of knowledge are 'social actors who are members of linguistic, epistemic, and social communities and societal groups, institutions or organisations' (van Dijk, 2014: 127). Language users are able to understand each other and unite on common ground based on socially shared representations, thus implying that 'the personal and social dimensions in discourse processing are inextricably intertwined' (van Dijk 2014: 125). Language users draw on personal and social SCRs to textually construct the collective identity of a group. Moreover, SCRs are communicated and reinforced by language users as well as subject to change through contradiction or updating (Koller 2019: 75), meaning language and context are mutually constitutive. In addition, Koller defines *collective identities* as 'cognitive representations of the group itself, including its attributes, relational behaviour, goals and values, which are constituted and negotiated by the interactions within a discourse community' (2014: 148). Crucially, understanding context is integral 'as SCRs and other mental models cannot simply be read off texts but have to be inferred from the linguistic findings, socio-cognitive notions are most pertinent at the interpretation stage' (Koller 2012: 23).

4.3.1 Ideology, CDA and conspiracy theories

As noted, different viewpoints are represented in discourse. Discourse is not objective but ideologically saturated and a 'systemically organised presentation of reality' (Kress and Hodge 1979: 15). Language and ideology are inextricably linked (Fowler 1991, Fairclough 1992, van Dijk 1993, see also Koller 2014); thus, language is essential in analysing ideology. When issues of a societal structure are concerned, Fairclough takes a Marxist view, defining ideologies as 'representations of aspects of the world which contribute to establishing and maintaining relations of power, domination and exploitation' (2003: 218). Pennycook (1990) echoes this, arguing for the integral role language plays in sustaining systemic inequalities. According to Fowler, critical linguistics aims 'to get at the ideology coded implicitly behind the overt propositions, to examine it particularly in the context of social formations' and how the text medium reproduces ideology (1996: 3). With the text as evidence, misrepresentation and discrimination can be exposed with its effectiveness 'primarily in its capacity to equip readers for demystificatory readings of ideology-laden texts' (Fowler 1996: 5–6).

Language contributes to the reification of subjective representations of the world, which help create and sustain power imbalances. Van Dijk's definition of ideology, foregrounds the mediating cognitive aspect as ideology as:

> The fundamental social cognitions that reflect the basic aims, interests and values of groups. They may (metaphorically and hence vaguely) be seen as the fundamental

> cognitive programmes or operating systems that organize and monitor the more specific social attitudes of groups and their members.
>
> van Dijk (1993: 258)

It is clear that, despite variances in the explication of what ideology is, CDA unites on 'a common goal: the critique of dominant discourses and genres that effect inequalities, injustices and oppression in contemporary society' (van Leeuwen 2009: 278). Nevertheless, I follow van Dijk's socio-cognitive definition due to its explicit recognition of ideology as a mediating cognitive aspect of groups.

4.3.2 Socially shared ideologies: communities of knowledge

SCDS argues that contexts are constantly changing 'intersubjective constructs' negotiated in a group setting (van Dijk 2008: x). Members bring with them commonalities in their knowledge and experiences which enable the construction and reification of socially shared ideologies.

> Social members not only produce or understand discourse as individual persons, with their own personal history, autobiographical experiences, knowledge, opinions and emotions, but also as social actors and as members of groups, communities, organizations or institutions…[who]…share sociocultural knowledge of the world with other members of various epistemic communities, as well as attitudes, ideologies, norms and values.
>
> van Dijk (2016: 9)

The ideological construction of morality in conspiracy theories is relative, with a hyperbolic and Manichaean division between good and evil portrayed in many superconspiracy theories. It creates an ultimate and unthwartable evil. Integral to the ideology-saturated rhetoric of conspiracy theory is the discursive construction of in-groups and out-groups, with 'issues of threat construction based on discursive representation of conflict between the home group (us) and the antagonistic or enemy group (them)' (Cap 2017: 3). The oppositional construction of 'us' and 'them' links to perceptions of power, or lack of it, and how this negatively impacts a victimised in-group (Wirth-Koliba 2016: 23). The out-group is considered an immediate and ongoing danger to the well-being of the in-group. In addition, in-group/out-group construction depends on the speaker/writer (Wirth-Koliba 2016: 23) and is a central theme in CDA (for instance, Heritage and Koller 2020; Koller 2019, van Dijk 1993, 1998; Wirth-Koliba 2016; Wodak, 2008, 2013).

The conspiracy milieu concept differs from more broadly applied terms in discourse analysis, such as 'communities of practice' (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1992), as the conspiracy milieu is differentiated by performed belief. In other words, the conspiracy milieu focal point is on belief: both expressing belief and receptivity to others expressing conspiracy theory beliefs: 'act[ing] on the information is less important than the sense of revitalization in discovering the truth' (Goldberg 2001: 240). The focus on a heterodox epistemology and the search for and propagation of a hidden universal truth lies at the core of the conspiracy milieu. In an analysis of conspiracy theory internet memes, Varis uses the term 'communities of knowledge' (2019: 33) which captures the nature of the milieu as knowledge-centric.

> Conspiracy theorising is not only about claims to knowledge but also about claims to particular identities, as those propagating and circulating them occupy a specific knowledgeable position for themselves. Such positions are familiar from many online communities making claims to 'truth'.
>
> (Varis 2019: 4)

Heterodox truth claims are contradictory to a mainstream narrative. At the very least, the in-group is making a truth claim that undermines the integrity of the out-group. Returning to the core narrative structure of a conspiracy theory, it necessitates an out-group: the conspirators, as well an in-group: the speaker and the listener, who is implicated in the wider victim group or sympathetically aligned with the key victim. Van Eck Duymaer van Twist and Newcombe (2018) state that: 'the oppositional nature of the cultic milieu encourages groups and networks to take a sectarian stance, creating social and conceptual boundaries between 'us' and 'them' – those on the outside' (van Eck Duymaer van Twist and Newcombe 2018: 153). The following section concerns the digital ethnography I undertook to explore the communities of knowledge in which conspiracy theories are propagated.

4.4. Ethnography

The following section details the rationale for a digital ethnography – the study of milieux in online spaces – followed by an explanation of the research process I undertook. My research questions aim to uncover the rhetorical mechanics of conspiracy theories. To answer the questions requires contextual and sociocultural understanding of the conspiracy milieu as 'really, you need to know where your data comes from' (boyd 2010 - intentional non-capitalisation) to enable analysis at the interpretative level. This is particularly salient with the alternative meanings given to key lexis in the conspiracy milieu; 'as in any ethnographic endeavor, systematic observation allows researchers to acquire some of the tacit knowledge' underlying the semiotic practices of regular members' (Androutsopolous 2017: 238).

4.4.1 Ethnography and linguistics

Ethnography is formally rooted in anthropology and can be defined as 'a qualitative research method in which a researcher—an ethnographer—studies a particular social/cultural group with the aim to better understand it' (Allen 2017: 2). It is associated with the practice of the researchers actively participating by participant observation and conducting interviews in order to better understand a community. The researcher's presence – the active presence and participation of the ethnographer – is prototypical of ethnography (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995: 1). In the 1960s, ethnography of communication was developed (Gumperz and Hymes 1972) and more recently, linguistic ethnography (Eckert 1997, Blommaert 2006, Rampton 2007). Hymes (1996: 3) points out that the nature of ethnography is disagreed upon; however, a central aim is to understand phenomena from an emic perspective. An insider viewpoint must take into account the sociocultural context (Rampton 2006: 391) and understand that the researcher process is never entirely objective (Hymes 1996: 13). However, the researcher's presence is essential in that their 'own cultural and interpretive capacities are crucial in making sense of the complex intricacies of situated everyday activity among the people being studied, and tuning into these takes time and close involvement' (Rampton 2006: 392). In other words, and akin with CDA, 'the researcher is not an outsider to the research site but a crucial part of it. In ethnographic research, it is important to acknowledge this and to make the researcher's role explicit' (Page et al 2018: 110).

Linguistics and ethnography are complementary as linguistics provides a clearer focus for analysis for ethnography and ethnography opens up possibilities for linguistics. The two combined are fundamentally interdisciplinary (Shaw et al 2015). In other words, ethnography complements linguistics in that it encourages 'reflexive sensitivity to the processes involved in the production of linguistic claims, pointing to the potential importance of what gets left out' (Rampton 2006: 394). Ethnography also offers the opportunity to investigate context in a meaningful way (Rampton et al. 2015). On the other hand, linguistics provides ethnography the tools for language analysis that is systematic. Ethnographic approaches to language 'are concerned with how language is embedded in culture and they bring with them particular beliefs about what language is and how it can be studied' (Page et al 2018: 104). The epistemology of linguistic ethnography is to analyse language as a situated phenomenon in its socio-cultural context (Page et al 2014: 107, Varis and Hou 2020: 231). Ethnography also offers methodological flexibility (Flick 2007); therefore, the researcher can choose the method(s) best suited to answer the research questions, which is essential in the study of a sociocultural phenomenon as complex and understudied as conspiracy theories.

4.4.2 Digital ethnography

Recent years have seen the emergence of digital ethnographies to respond to the inception of digital communication media. Digital ethnography is an adaptation of traditional offline ethnographic methods to the study of online communities. However, 'there is no one coherent body of work' (Varis and Hou 2020: 229); for instance, various labels have emerged, including 'virtual ethnography' (Hine 2000), 'digital ethnography' (Varis 2019), 'internet ethnography' (boyd 2008) and 'network ethnography' (Burrell 2009). These labels diverge in both theory and methodology; nevertheless, 'digital ethnography' is the most compatible with the study of communication and language as

> Digital ethnography is interested in the ways in which people use language, interact with each other, employ discourses and construct communities, collectives, knowledge and identities, through and influenced by digital technologies. What kind of data and field sites each researcher will encounter and use to this end depends on the shape of each individual study.
>
> Varis and Hou (2020: 230)

Digital ethnography is a valuable tool in exploring the 'complex social landscape of the contemporary internet' (Hine 2017: 315). Immersion in the milieu enables the ethnographer to gain a more detailed insight from the viewpoint of its members (Hine 2017: 315). The 'first wave' of 'computer-mediated communication research' was often using data that was not systemically collected and then analysed out of context (Androutsopolous 2006). The second wave instead considered language in context, informed by pragmatics, discourse studies and sociolinguistics. The first comprehensive framework for analysing online data was Herring's Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis (2004, 2007). Androutsopolous (2008) proposed a *discourse-centred online ethnography* in order to address the issues and which 'combines the systematic observation of selected sites of online discourse with direct contact with its social actors' (2008: 2). Krzyżanowski (2011) points out that ethnography and CDA are mutually complementary: both are problem-oriented and context-sensitive in 'increasingly complex social, political and economic contexts' (Krzyżanowski 2011: 231).

My approach to digital ethnography builds on the principles of understanding language in context by systematic observation, albeit with the methodological decision made to not have direct contact with the participants (discussed in 4.6) and tied to the principles of CDA (see

4.5). To be able to choose whether or not to have direct participant contact highlights a key distinction between traditional offline and digital ethnography. Furthermore, communication is mediated via a digital interface (often globally public) and frequently includes participants who are spatio-temporally disparate, not knowing who exactly will be reading or watching their user-generated content. Moreover,, the communications structure of the internet is geographically non-localised, and thus better considered as a network of digitally mediated interactions. In addition, the range and quantity of digital data is vast and the digital ethnographer must decide on what data to include. Considerations pertinent to the study of online conspiracy rhetoric, such as participation (who can access and generate content) and how to draw the boundary lines of amorphous online communities are discussed in the following sections.

4.5 Social Media Critical Discourse Studies

Social Media Critical Discourse Studies (SM-CDS) has emerged to bridge the gap between digital media research and CDS/A by utilising principles from both (KhosraviNik 2014, 2017, 2018). The participatory web should not be regarded as a separate world but as 'part of a media apparatus that is used by individuals in society' whilst retaining the understanding that there are specific features of digital worlds that should be recognised and may impact on analyses (KhosraviNik and Unger 2015: 216).

The notion of the participatory web is essential in understanding the communicative nature of the conspiracy milieu online. The producer-consumer distinction is non-viable as the transmission and reception of conspiracy theories resembles urban legends in that they are spread like rumours or gossip, with details and attributions altering in the transmission process (see 3.8.1). The audience can be active by commenting, copy-pasting, re-posting links and creating their material. Furthermore, those who disseminate conspiracy theories, including prominent, self-labelled conspiracy theorists, tend to claim the uncovering of a conspiracy as from their own detective work, when in fact they are merely repeating or bricolaging parts or whole narratives from elsewhere.

KhosraviNik and Unger use the term *prosumers* to identify those who are 'not only viewers of creative content and advertisements, but also the co-creators and co-distributors of the very content themselves' (2015: 207). 'Web 2.0 is defined by the ability of users to produce content collaboratively' unlike its predecessor Web 1.0 (Ritzer and Jurgenson 2010: 18). Social networking websites, blogs, vlogs and forums are all examples of internet prosumption. The internet thus facilitates active involvement in a dynamic process: 'the participatory web is fluid, changeable, and non-static' (KhosraviNik 2018: 582), interactive and user-centred (KhosraviNik and Unger 2015: 211).

Prior to the internet, a few privileged information disseminators would have the platform to communicate within the confines of 'gatekeeping' to control the flow and content of information. In other words, the modern prosumer is difficult to control (Ritzer and Jurgenson 2010: 21) enabling conspiracy theories — as prosumer-generated content — to gain traction and prominence. For instance, Soukup argues that the digital world is responsible for the popularity of 9/11 conspiracy theory discourses (2008: 10). The communicative structure of the internet means that discursive power is becoming increasingly decentralised and democratised on the internet (KhosraviNik 2018: 582). Put simply, access to social media platforms and website creation means people who did not have the means of information dispersal pre-internet can now disseminate information rapidly, often without editing by

censors or gatekeepers. Furthermore, web platforms often transcend nation-state boundaries, tend to be multi-modal and can be swiftly edited or removed.

Both the communications structure of the internet and the maverick, heterodox nature of conspiracy theories are compatible in that neither conform to rigid power hierarchies in knowledge distribution. They both pertain to giving a 'voice' to those who previously did not have one. Ballinger's study on the relationship between the internet and conspiracy theories found that 'the technologically deterministic logic of the internet is entwined with the logic of classical conspiracy theory' being both decentred and unregulated (2011: 255). Moreover, there is a difference between liking or sharing a post, and engaging with it, with the extent of engagement much harder to measure (Moore 2019; Tagg, Sargeant and Brown 2017; Varis 2019). Popularity can be gauged, but ultimately ethnographic knowledge is needed to comprehend the impact better, particularly considering the sometimes ephemeral nature of online postings.

> A methodological issue related to online research that one very quickly encounters when studying conspiracy theories online has to do with searching for and finding such discourse, and it is also one related to the battles waged between platforms and users over what kind of content stays online.
>
> (Varis 2019: 10)

Barkun (2013: 36) characterises the information milieu of online conspiracy theories as having a disregard for intellectual property whereby reposting material without attribution and even claiming it as one's own is commonplace. As such, narratives can be easily bricolaged due to ease of access to information, as Ritzer and Jurgenson point out, 'prosumer capitalism online is increasingly a world of abundance' (2010: 22). Social media 'technologies have broken the uni-directionality of content flow from producers to consumers via [gated] mass media practices; and, at least on the face of it, have empowered ordinary users by having the option to participate in text production and distribution' (KhosraviNik 2014: 291). As such, the online conspiracy milieu can be characterised as 'communities of knowledge' (Varis 2019: 33, see 5.2) whereby the traditional consumer-producer dichotomy is becoming obsolete. Prosumers actively participate in the production and dissemination of conspiracy theories much like the transmission of urban legends, albeit with the feeling that they themselves are DIY detectives (see 1.3.3).

4.5.1 Conspiracy theory digital ethnography

Demarcating conspiracy theory as a genre online is complex as the discourses appear in a multitude of both obvious and obscure places. It is of no surprise that 'qualitative or ethnographic studies of conspiracy culture are relatively rare' (Harambam 2020: 51). Current research on conspiracy theories using demarcated data sets include keyword searches of 'conspiracy theory/theorist' (Husting and Orr 2007, McKenzie-McHarg and Fredheim 2017), virtual ethnographies of QAnon (Forberg 2022, Robertson and Amarasingam 2022), ethnographies of a specific community (Johnson-Schlee 2019, Staehr 2014) and the coalescence of ufology and conspiracy theory (Robertson 2016). In Linguistics, Marko analyses 'the use of language in a conspiratorial anti-COVID Facebook group' (2022: 1) which demonstrates a general preference for researchers to focus on specific, easily demarcated communities. Another example is from Allington and Joshi (2020) who conducted a linguistic qualitative analysis of the user comments from one YouTube video by David Icke to analyse user support and propagation of anti-semitic language. The study was further developed by Allington, Buarque and Flores (2021), using a larger data set to enable

generalisations via quantitative measures of Icke, Richie Allen and Jen O'Keefe. Nevertheless, my research questions pose methodological complications as they require a general mastery of the conspiracy milieu as a genre. Therefore, the next section discusses how I overcame these methodological challenges by drawing on and developing on the nascent body of literature on both digital ethnography and the online conspiracy milieu.

4.6 Defining the boundaries of the online conspiracy milieu

Qualitative ethnographic studies of conspiracy theory as a genre are rare (e.g., Ballinger 2011, Harambam 2020 - Dutch conspiracy milieu, Toseland 2019 - British conspiracy milieu). As conspiracy theories are both overt and embedded in other genres, neither the notion of an online community (user-focused) nor that of a discourse field (focusing on the websites) (Androutsopolous 2007: 5) is sufficient. Both Toseland and Harambam adopt multi-sited ethnographies (Marcus 2012) as 'an insistence on one bounded locality does not capture the multiplicity of materializations of contemporary cultural phenomena' (2020: 34), which problematises the traditional mode of studying a single site (Toseland 2019: 37). The multi-sited approach affords 'the necessary flexibility and mobility' to describe the conspiracy milieu (Toseland 2019: 33). It is resonant of the concept of *guerrilla ethnography* (Yang 2003) whereby flexibility and open-mindedness allows for an ability to move freely around networks, mirroring the 'openness, fluidity and connections' characteristic of the internet (Yang 2003: 471).

I follow Toseland and Harambam in adopting an inductive method 'emulat[ing] the normal experience of a truth-seeker' (Toseland 2019: 34) by going in 'with an open mind,' with the goal to 'be taken along by' the rhetoric (Harambam 2020: 53). In doing so, a general picture can be slowly obtained; however, what counts as a conspiracy theory is a complex issue (as discussed in Chapter 2). It would appear that some genres or fields lack boundary lines (Hine 2017: 318, McLelland 2002: 394, Page et al 2018: 104). For instance, Varis (2019) conducted an online linguistic ethnography of crisis actor memes, highlighting that the data is not only difficult to find and requiring ethnographic knowledge but that some of her data was found incidentally, thus highlighting the complexities of the data collection process. Nevertheless, it is still pertinent to make transparent how all data is found and chosen, regardless of the process. This process is outlined in the following section.

In addition, 'the boundaries of this field site need to be constrained so that a project is manageable. What constitutes a field site in networked, social media contexts is problematic' (Page et al 2018: 107). Harambam drew the boundary lines of the conspiracy milieu based on the usage of the term 'conspiracy theories' by both proponents and debunkers. Similarly, Toseland used conversations with participants to be guided to relevant content. In my research, I primarily took on the role of a conspiracy theorist, following links and ideas in the style of guerrilla ethnography, as well as exploring genres of the wider cultic milieu in which conspiracy theory rhetoric occurred frequently, such as ufology, spirituality and alternative therapies. I also followed suggestions and references made by people I had conversations with, for instance, an old man who struck up a conversation with me waiting for a train at Nottingham Station introduced *Nexus* magazine, an Australian magazine that produces content on conspiracy theories, alternative therapies and UFOs. As my literature research and ethnography progressed I was able to formulate a working definition of *conspiracy theory* which functioned as a checklist for what comprises a conspiracy theory (2.8).

Researcher participation — i.e. active participation in the field and conducting interviews — is prototypical of ethnography and considered necessary (Androutsopolous 2008, Garcia et al.

2009, Paccagnella 1997), although there has been critique of the efficacy of interviewing (see van der Bom 2015: 78). Considering the research questions which aim to uncover the rhetorical mechanics of conspiracy theories, I chose to focus on collecting existing data (Page et al 2014: 85). I take the view of Hine that participation is dependent on the goals of the study and that triangulation should not be implemented for its own sake (2017: 32). As such, I did not conduct interviews, instead focusing on *participant observation* (Page et al 2018: 120), such as Paolillo (1999) and Pihlaja (2014). Online studies of conspiracy theories have also adopted a similar approach (Ballinger 2011, Bohal 2015, Hegstad 2014, Varis 2019), focusing on 'screen-based' data (Androutsopolous 2017: 236) produced by participants without the researcher's elicitation. Importantly, finding participants for interviews in the conspiracy milieu is doubly problematic as there are not just logistical and ethical considerations but those of cooperation (Ballinger 2011), as a researcher is generally considered part of the apparatus of oppression: the establishment.

4.7 Process

The digital sphere is characterised by an abundance of data (Ritzer and Jurgenson 2010) which poses the problem of how to select data (Androutsopolous 2017: 234, Page et al 2018: 91) with the added issue of less (qualitative) data being harder to collect (Page et al 2014: 86); therefore, the researcher needs to decide how to select data. Furthermore, a qualitative data set can lead to the accusation of cherry-picking - an easy criticism to levy at any qualitative research, albeit a logical choice for research questions which bear question markers such as 'why' and 'how' (Page et al 2014: 82). Nevertheless, I needed to collect a small number of case studies which represented distinct areas of the conspiracy milieu to allow for fine-grained analyses which would yield results able to answer my research questions. As Page et al. remark: 'the more of this work is required, the less data it is feasible to collect for a given project' (2014: 86). 'All alternatives have advantages and disadvantages, and the eventual choice depends on the research question and methodological practicalities' (Androutsopolous 2017: 235). The following section details and thus makes transparent the ethnographic process I undertook, including how I selected the data.

The ethnography was conducted between January 2018 and June 2020. As Page et al. point out: 'an important aspect of the ethical approach of ethnography is to respect and try to understand the perspectives of others, and not rush to evaluate them. There can be multiple perspectives from different participants in a situation and sometimes these can conflict with each other' (2018: 108). As such, I collected data from different thematic areas including not just within the conspiracy milieu but reports on conspiracy theories from the mainstream media as they form part of the body of evidence used by the conspiracy milieu to reinforce their heterodox identity and enact reinterpretation of official narratives.

To become an expert on conspiracy theories and thus able to analyse them at the interpretative level, I took on the role of a conspiracy theorist in the ethnographic process. I followed Androutsopoulos' (2008: 6) 'practice-derived guidelines for systematic observation' by starting at the core of the field and then moving to the periphery, repeating observations and maintaining openness. Both Gosa (2011) and Harambam (2020) declared to have used snowball sampling. Gosa started with basic search terms then used the results 'to identify reoccurring themes and conspiracy-related key-words' (2011: 193), whereas Harambam 2020 started at the core of the conspiracy milieu and then moved outward based on what he found. I used both of these techniques in my ethnography and used these insights to inform which phenomena to choose for sampling. I identified conspiracy theory material by initially

following the well-known self-labelled conspiracy theorists at the core of the conspiracy milieu and then following links and exploring different sites as a conspiracy theorist would.

I regularly read the superconspiracy news portals, followed hyperlinks, and investigated recurring themes. I watched conspiracy theory videos, including those from prominent conspiracy theorists on their websites and social media. Many of these have had their accounts deleted, so I downloaded and saved those which I deemed to capture a snapshot or recurring theme. I also downloaded key texts written by conspiracy theorists, especially those repeatedly referred to in videos, such as the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* and *Beyond a Pale Horse* (Cooper 1995), which formed my book corpus. I also watched commercialised conspiracy theory content such as celebrity death conspiracy theories and *Netflix* series about alternative histories and flat earthers. If below-the-line comments were enabled, I always read through the 'top comments' (in the 'sort by' function) to gauge what people were writing about a particular video or news article and follow up any links or references that would widen or deepen my understanding of the milieu. I wrote notes throughout in order to record salient details and observations. I also downloaded and saved any data I identified as representing a genre with high viewing figures.

Although I conducted a predominantly digital ethnography, I had many impromptu conversations offline with people who talked about their ideas around particular conspiracy theories and I followed up any references or suggestions online. I also attended a David Icke talk and several wellbeing shows which have many proponents of conspirituality (the convergence of conspiracy theory and spirituality), such as those in alternative therapies and psychic mediums. This enabled me to move further out from the core to the periphery by capturing themes from hybrid genres where the conspiracy theories are embedded and require ethnographic knowledge to find. The data from the ufology and, in particular, the conspirituality analyses are a result of my digital ethnography on the periphery of the conspiracy milieu where the conspiracy theory narratives are embedded within the wider cultic milieu.

4.7.1 Material evidence corpus

Digitization has meant that data is now easy to collect and file (Herring 2004; Androutsopolous 2008) and field notes, to help create a 'thick description' (Geertz 1973). I created 22 documents totalling 37,127 words, were kept in a field notes digital folder. I organised them by date (for general, time-specific notes) or topic (for notes exploring a specific topic, e.g., celebrity death conspiracy theories). This includes notes on the David Icke talk in Leicester on 4th May 2018 (494 words).

I collected articles, videos and video transcripts which displayed recurring themes likely to be taken off the internet and that satisfied the criteria of my working definition. I categorised them by sub-genre: Body/mind autonomy - e.g. vaccines and mind control (36), Celebrity/mysterious deaths (28), Climate change (11), Coronavirus (42), General theorists (38), Intellectual Dark Web (3), Mass shootings and terrorist attacks (17), Music and film (4), Conspiracy theorists in mainstream newspapers (9), Official conspiracies (18), Reinterpretation of public objects and artefacts (12), Satanic sacrifice and the Illuminati (3), Screenshots and forum threads (58), Space and aliens (18). I developed a digital book and magazine corpus (32) over the duration of books which I encountered (albeit not many as most material is now published directly on webpages or online videos).

I received, read, took notes on and archived 841 newsletters between January 2019 and June 2022. I signed up for each newsletter as they became available or I became aware of

them during my ethnography. All of these newsletters are sporadic, except Alex Jones' *Infowars*, which was weekly until it stopped arriving. David Icke and Gaia also stopped arriving, most likely due to being filtered. I also signed up to newsletters within the wider cultic milieu which have a significant conspiratorial component in their content: *ThriveOn Spotlight*, *Sacred Geometry International* and *Nexus Magazine*. The conspiracy-focused newsletters I received were all situated in the conspiracy milieu core, and thus well-known in the milieu: *Gab* (23/1/2019–18/3/2020), *Alex Jones* (14/01/2019–21/08/2019), *David Icke* (11/3/2019–19/04/2019) and *Gaia* (21/02/2019–16/03/2019).

4.7.2 Sampling techniques

Phenomenon sampling is the only viable option to gain a snapshot of key areas of the conspiracy milieu (Herring 2004: 11). Once I had categorised the collected data into folders I was able to obtain a picture of key nodes in the conspiracy milieu and how they related to each other. I was able to identify key areas of the conspiracy milieu compatible with my research objectives, in other words, prominent and sustained subjects of interest within the milieu. It was important to gain a snapshot of the complexity and diversity of the conspiracy milieu so the data chosen reflects both core (conspiracy-dependent self-labelled conspiracy theorists who view the world through a conspiratorial lens) and periphery (hybrid genres where conspiracy is not essential but a strategic narrative addition). I also wanted to reflect the nature of prosumption by sampling both popular and obscure discourses. The data was either chosen by popularity or from the first suitable data found via a hashtag or keyword search (detailed in 5.4), similar to Varis (2019), in the case of the conspirituality data.

The selected data is representative, chosen as the first relevant sample (meeting the working definition criteria) based on search results. In this sense, I follow boyd (2010) in selecting representative data randomly, i.e., the only delineators were the search term (essential to capture a specific phenomenon) and the working definition. However, where I was able to organise results by highest viewing statistics, they were chosen for popularity. As Barkun (2013: 36) notes, veracity correlates with popularity, such as how many likes a post has (equivalent in CDA to 'visibility-equals-legitimacy' KhosraviNik 2017: 66). Where popularity was not the key criteria (see 5.4), data was chosen as the first relevant result organised by newest first. In line with Harambam (2020: 37) my data selection is not comprehensive of the English-speaking online conspiracy milieu, but a snapshot of a constantly changing organic online network. I could have used other sources; nevertheless, those selected have been done transparently, i.e., the exact process could be replicated (if done at the same point in time) with the same results and adhere to the working definition of conspiracy theory. A detailed description of the data selection process is provided in each analysis chapter.

4.7.3 Transcripts and data protection

Transcripts were adapted from the YouTube automatically generated transcript, which I kept in American English. I left out punctuation as this is irrelevant to the analysis and beyond the remit. However, I amended the transcript by closely listening to each audio to ensure the correct word and phrase was in the transcript, particularly in relation to connected speech in British English accents which was often misinterpreted by the automatic transcript generator.

Regarding data protection, I have not anonymised the primary case-study data for the following reasons. Firstly, the central case studies used in the analysis chapters consist of publicly released videos and texts easily accessible online and do not require memberships or access into private groups. Furthermore, the data producers have posted it themselves

onto well-known digital public spaces. Anonymising the more prominent conspiracy theorists would be a pointless pursuit as the data is so easily accessible that a quick internet search would reveal any occluded identities. Moreover, my aim as a researcher is not to debunk, ridicule or mock but to elucidate the different types of conspiracy theory narratives, their persuasive properties and how they are formed.

Chapter 5: The Conspiracy Milieu

5.1 Introduction

This chapter explores how collective identities are discursively constructed within different areas of the conspiracy milieu, and subsequently, points of contact and divergence between them. The conspiracy milieu is defined as a part of the cultural underground whereby communities of knowledge form to discuss conspiracy theories. In order to explore the discursive construction of collective identities, I will apply Koller's adapted context model (2019: 74, adapted from Fairclough 2010: 133). I undertake a descriptive text analysis using van Leeuwen's social actor framework (2008), elucidating who is represented and how. The findings are then discussed in their social context to explain the representations of actors and events.

I first analyse how the terms 'conspiracy theorist/s' and 'conspiracy theory/ies' are reappropriated within the superconspiracy milieu and what discursive strategies are used. The superconspiracy milieu is defined by its dependence on a conspiratorial worldview, perpetually generating recontextualised news items and new evidence which claims to answer the behind-the-scenes mechanics of global society and politics. As such, superconspiracy websites often act as alternative news portals. The analytical focus of the main analysis is on the construction of in-groups and out-groups within key areas of the conspiracy milieu: superconspiracy, ufology and conspirituality. Broad ethnographic knowledge of the conspiracy milieu is integral to a context analysis, and thus the data is collected via a digital ethnographic process. The analyses are followed by a discussion of the findings in their social contexts. As a fundamentally socially situated phenomenon, the analysis will demonstrate the diverse applications of conspiracy theory rhetoric with a particular focus on the salience and characterisation of various in-groups and out-groups in discourses which, despite some fundamental similarities, differ greatly in terms of group roles: from battle-oriented rhetoric with a foregrounded enemy in superconspiracy theories to quest-focused with a backgrounded, inconvenient enemy in hybrid genres.

Conspiracy theory is strongly collocated with negative associations such as paranoia, implausibility and as a rhetorical act of dismissal from rational argument (see section 2.5). As a term with such heavily laden pejorative associations, it oversimplifies a complex phenomenon. Not all conspiracy theories are the same, and, as such, the distinct applications of conspiracy theories can easily be overlooked – and often are – due to the labelling issue. In other words, the generalised derogatory attitude towards conspiracy theories evoked by the conspiracy theory label ignores the various uses and functions of conspiracy theories in diverse milieux as it homogenises them. The dismissive attitude to the truth claims of conspiracy theories has been challenged in the generalist versus particularist argument, whereby the particularists have accused the generalists of the underlying assumption that conspiracy theories are by their nature false (see section 2.7 for a discussion). This bias is evident throughout the social sciences and is roughly reflected in disciplinary divides, with socio-cultural approaches tending to veer away from dismissing conspiracy theorists as intellectually inferior. On the basis that not all conspiracy theories are *a priori* false, a more nuanced case-by-case approach as proposed by the particularist argument is more favourable, which seeks a higher degree of analytical objectivity.

Nevertheless, the definitional issue should not be ignored, as the pejorative associations of falsehood and implausibility are bound into its functionality and application. As such, the associations form part of understanding the usage of the terms and how discourses within

the conspiracy milieu respond to the term. Moreover, rejection and reappropriation of the terms form part of identity construction. It is worth reiterating that my position as a CDA researcher is one of non-concern with the truth values (many are unfalsifiable) but in how different social actors are characterised and contextualised in relation to each other and what that says about identity and issues of legitimacy concerning truth and power. More specifically, the chapter explores why and how truth and power claims are (de)legitimised.

5.2 Conspiracy theory as socially situated

The conspiracy milieu is a network of heterodox knowledge practices situated in friction with the orthodox mainstream. Each side believes they are the ones who hold epistemic superiority, which manifests in 'interpretative contests' (Melley 2000). For instance, despite the pejorative labelling of conspiracy theories and theorists from the mainstream, there is a counterforce from the conspiracy milieu.

> Conspiracy theorists can be understood from this perspective. On the one hand, they are categorized – with a little help from social scientists – as paranoid and dangerous militants. On the other hand, conspiracy theorists actively fight back: they do not only resist the stigma of being labelled a 'conspiracy theorist' but openly contest the authority of the modern state, capitalism and science.
>
> (Harambam and Aupers 2017)

To illustrate this point, many major conspiracy theory website homepages consist of article headlines that aim to delegitimise and reinterpret mainstream media news items to fit within a conspiratorial worldview. Furthermore, the conspiracy milieu attempts to reclaim the pejorative labelling aimed at them. To explore reappropriation, the first analysis will uncover discursive strategies used within the conspiracy milieu to counteract and reappropriate the terms 'conspiracy theory/ies' and 'conspiracy theorist/s'.

The conspiracy milieu is an essential concept in understanding its situatedness and the diverse applications of conspiracy theories in context. It is derived from Campbell's *cultic milieu,* which more broadly describes 'the cultural underground' where 'deviant belief systems' and 'loosely connected countercultures beliefs and practices' can be found (Campbell 2002: 13–4). The cultic milieu, albeit diverse, fluid and often temporary, converges on the following features: self-aware deviance, seekers of new and special knowledge and 'a receptive and syncretistic orientation and an interpenetrative communication structure' (23). Adherents to the conspiracy milieu see themselves as freethinkers who critically assess and often reject mainstream narratives and can be defined as autonomous, rebellious and discontented with the current political and economic system (Harambam and Aupers 2017). The conspiracy milieu forms a part of the cultic milieu, and the term allows a specific capturing of this.

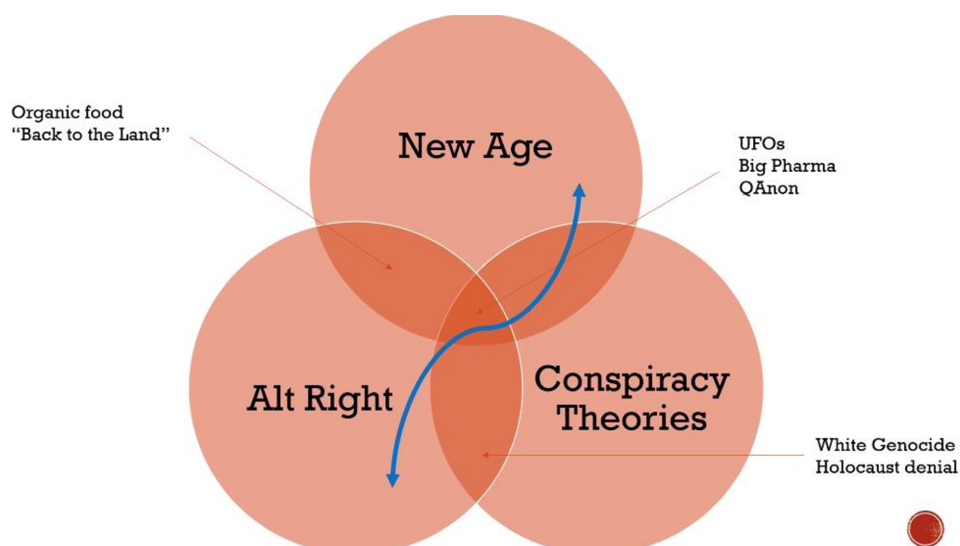
> The relatively stable, yet always fluid, network of people, places, and positions involved with the oppositional forms of knowledge commonly known as conspiracy theories, the conspiracy milieu. Like the cultic milieu, it is characterized by heterogeneity of people, beliefs, practices, and ideological orientations, yet united by an opposition to the cultural mainstream.
>
> (Harambam 2020: 34)

Similar to the cultic milieu, the conspiracy milieu has points of contact with various and often seemingly disparate discourses due to their receptivity to other marginalised discourses (van

Eck Duymaer van Twist and Newcombe 2018, Robertson 2021). For instance, the pharmaceutical industry – relabelled 'Big Pharma' – creating diseases for profit is an example of a belief that transcends group boundaries, shared not only by religious, political and spiritual groups but even from within the medical establishment itself (van Eck Duymaer van Twist and Newcombe 2018: 158). In Figure 5.1 (Robertson 2021), points of contact between specific conspiracy theories are demonstrated. The diagram illustrates the fluidity and receptiveness (albeit not indiscriminate, as points of convergence are necessary) of heterodox beliefs. It is thematically oriented, which rightfully ignores the problematic truth and rationality issues and is indicative of the thematic diversity of the milieu. For instance, both New Age and Alt-Right discourses – which are considered to sit at opposite ends of the political spectrum – have integrated conspiracy theories regarding Unidentified Flying Objects, Big Pharma (the belief that pharmaceutical companies are deliberately trying to damage people's health for a hidden agenda) and QAnon (a North American far-right political group centred on the belief that a satan worshipping, paedophilic cabal conspired against President Donald Trump).

Furthermore, the New Age and Alt-Right milieux are both receptive to 'back to the land' ideology which strives for (often rural) self-sufficiency and a move away from technology and processed modified foods. The Alt-Right milieu is receptive to the belief in White Genocide as well as Holocaust Denial, whereas the New Age is not currently associated with these beliefs. Notably, the diagram situates conspiracy theories as interconnected but in a realm of its own, suggesting different degrees of engagement with and dependency on conspiracy theory discourses.

Figure 5.1: Points of contact in the conspiracy and wider cultic milieu (Robertson 2021)

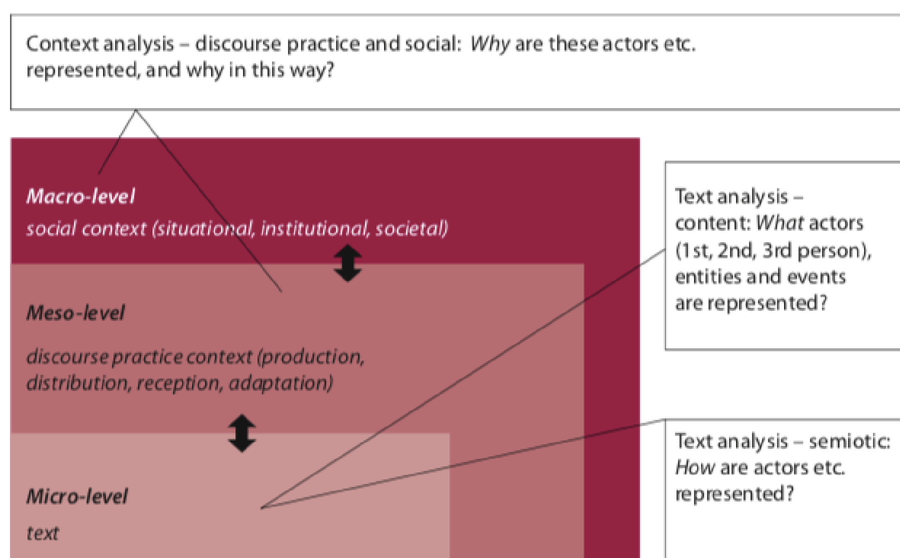


5.3 Koller's (2019) framework for socio-cognitive critical discourse studies

SCDS draws on social cognition research. It helps explain how an us versus them dichotomy is created through ways such as identity construction and social categorisation. SCDS is apt for the analysis of collective identities and is equipped to answer how language choices have been selected to represent collective identities (Koller 2014: 153). Koller's framework for SCDS (2019: 74, see Figure 5.2) is adapted from Fairclough (2010: 133). The framework has three levels: the micro-level, the meso-level and the macro-level. The micro-level analyses who is textually present and how these social actors are represented in different conspiracy theory discourses using social actor analysis. The framework solves the concern that 'the links between various levels of [CDA] analyses and the multilateral dialogic relationship among these levels are usually assumed rather than made explicit' (KhosraviNik 2010: 56). The meso- and macro-levels are contextual, explaining why social actors are present in the text and why they are represented in such a way: 'it is at the context levels that socio-cognitive concepts become most relevant' (Koller 2019: 74). The meso-level is more concerned with aspects of discourse production and reception such as why the texts were produced and for whom: 'who is communicating to whom about what, and whether the text is designed for a particular audience' (Koller 2019: 75). At the macro-level is the broader societal context, which considers political, economic and social concerns. Both meso- and macro-levels are closely associated with the conspiracy milieu concept. Thus, the framework incorporates an explanatory level enabling links between text and context; it explains why in-groups and out-groups have been represented in particular ways and how that contributes to the achievement of possible discourse goals. Notably, the meso- and macro-levels of analysis enable the analyst

> To identify what ideologies are relevant, where ideologies can be defined as a relatively stable network of beliefs that gives rise to expectations, norms and values about, and hence attitudes towards, events, ideas and people. Categorisation occurs when we encounter people or hear ideas expressed about them, and compare those experiences against ideologies […] Context analysis thus helps to account for the findings from text analysis by discussing what roles the wider social context and the ideologies at stake in it allocate to social actors, and why.
>
> (Koller 2019: 76)

Figure 5.2: Koller's framework for a socio-cognitive critical discourse studies (Koller 2019: 75)



At the level of descriptive text analysis, I use van Leeuwen's social actor representation (2008) in which the social actor SCRs are central. Social Actor Analysis is compatible with other SCDS methods, but also explicates the formation of social groupings through language (Wodak and Meyer 2009: 26). Van Leeuwen's framework – based on Foucauldian and Hallidayan principles (van Leeuwen 2008: vii) – enables a detailed analysis as it is a sociological grammar well-equipped for systematic textual analyses of social actor groups. For this reason, it is arguably better equipped than Martin and White's appraisal framework (2005) despite also having the facility to analyse evaluative language. Regarding group construction, concepts in van Leeuwen's sociosemantic inventory such as *concretisation* and *assimilation* (see key terms below) enable a more succinct contrastive analysis of collective identity. As van Dijk notes: 'the main category of group ideologies is their identity' (2015: 73). Social actor representation both accommodates the in-group out-group dichotomy at the heart of van Dijk's ideological square (1993, 1995, 1998 and 2008) as well as less boldly-differentiated social actor groups. Van Leeuwen describes it as a: 'sociosemantic inventory of the ways in which social actors can be represented and [to] establish the sociological and critical relevance of [these] categories' (van Leeuwen 2008: 23). Furthermore, it allows for interpretative flexibility as the grammar does not neatly link sociological and linguistic categories, allowing for a more contextually nuanced analysis. The example of agency is given, as a sociological concept that can be realised linguistically in various ways. As such, it should not be assigned to specific linguistic categories, such as the agent role in grammatical terms, because it oversimplifies and thus overlooks other representations, and that 'meanings belong to culture rather than to language and cannot be tied to any specific semiotic' (van Leeuwen 2008: 23–4). He thus uses sociological, not linguistic, categories (van Leeuwen 2008: 25). Koller's framework connects the descriptive social actor analysis to the interpretative level, as it enables linking between 'morpho-syntactic or intra-textual levels', meso- and macro-levels. Criticisms that social actor analysis 'downplay[s] the role of language and communication in moulding social 'meanings'' (KhosraviNik 2010: 58) are thus difficult to sustain.

Applications of SAA have tended to focus on the elucidation of discriminatory discursive practices against less politically powerful groups (see Sanchez-Moya 2019: 221), such as on 'race, ethnicity, religion, region, social class, nationality, language/dialect, gender and sexual orientations' (KhosraviNik 2010: 55). However, there is 'a dearth of studies making use of SAA to analyse online discourse' with most applications to written texts (Sanchez-Moya 2019: 221). I use social actor analysis to analyse both spoken and written online discourse. The analysis is an exploration of how Koller's and van Leeuwen's frameworks can be employed with digital ethnography in a contrastive qualitative analysis of distinct communities of knowledge in the online conspiracy milieu.

Key terms used in the analysis are explicated as follows.

1. *Appraisement:* positive and negative evaluations of a person or group (van Leeuwen 2008: 45).
2. *Individualization*: when social actors are individually referred to (van Leeuwen 2008: 37).
3. *Personalization:* 'personal or possesive pronouns, proper names, or nouns (and sometimes adjectives..)' (van Leeuwen 2008: 46).
4. *Genericization* and *collectivization*: ideologically 'impersonali[ses] social actors and perpetuate[s] social stereotypes' (Hart 2014: 34).
5. *Nomination:* 'social actors can be represented either in terms of their unique identity', with proper (in)formal nouns and can be titulated.
6. *Categorization:* in terms of identities and functions they share with others (van Leeuwen 2008: 40).

7. *Differentiation:* ‘explicitly differentiates an individual social actor or group of social actors from a similar actor or group, creating the difference between the “self” and the “other”, or between “us” and “them”’ (van Leeuwen 2008: 40).
8. *Assimilation:* when social actors as referred to, plurally, as groups.
9. *Aggregation:* ‘quantifies groups of participants, treating them as statistics’. *collectivization* does not (van Leeuwen 2008: 37).
10. *Functionalisation:* ‘when social actors are referred to in terms of an activity, in terms of something they do’ (van Leeuwen 2008: 42).
11. *Nominalisation:* objectivates and generalises an intangible phenomenon with the social actors not explicitly mentioned but implied (van Leeuwen 2008: 55)
12. *Passivation*: ‘represented as “undergoing” the activity, or as being “at the receiving end of it”’.
13. *Backgrounding* is de-emphasis.
14. *Activation:* ‘when social actors are represented as the active dynamic forces in an activity’ (van Leeuwen 2008: 33).

In order to provide a contextual analysis of each data set, I have taken a three-fold approach. Firstly, a background is provided for each set of the analysed data, each of which is followed by a textual analysis with some initial contextual explanations – such as which ideologies are relevant and why. Finally, the discussion section enables a more global perspective as I examine the four data sets within the broader context.

5.4 Data selection

The first part of the analysis uncovers how the term ‘conspiracy theor/ist’ is reappropriated within the conspiracy milieu. A digital ethnographic approach is essential (see 4.4–4.7 for a discussion) in providing interpretations that are sensitive to and knowledgable about the milieu. The approach is essential for the data selection and the contextual analysis of the superconspiracy, ufology and conspirituality milieux.

Professional conspiracy theorists such as David Icke and Alex Jones actively use the conspiracy theory label, both reappropriating the terms and, on a practical level, making them easier to find as an obvious keyword, thus drawing attention from both the mainstream and within conspiracy theory communities. However, much conspiracy theory discourse is harder to find; they are not just embedded within other genres, such as ufology and New Age spirituality. As Varis (2019) points out, understanding where to find the data is unavoidable. Not everyone wants to be associated with the terms and not just the pejorative associations but to avoid censorship, shadow-banning and manipulated algorithms due to pressure for major social media platforms to remove conspiracy theory discourses.

The first research question concerns how the conspiracy milieu can be better defined considering its diversity. From my ethnography it became clear that conspiracy theory rhetoric at its core is conspiracy-dependent whereas the peripheral hybrid genres, for instance ufology, utilise conspiracy theory rhetoric as a strategic addition, such as to justify the lack of evidence of alien life due to a government cover-up. The data chosen needed to reflect the core and periphery as well as the content being consumed and written by prosumers. It also needed to satisfy the criteria of my working definition. Therefore, the data moves from the core to the periphery and from prominent conspiracy theorists to embedded discourses.

The first analysis is of the terms *conspiracy theory/ies* and *conspiracy theorist/s*. I chose a British tabloid (*The Sun*) and broadsheet (*The Times*) as well as *The Guardian* as centre-left politically aligned to contrast the conservative values of the other two, as well as *The New Yorker* (liberal American magazine) and *The State News* (independent American tabloid). These newspapers were chosen as they had articles on conspiracy theories and to get a snapshot of different treatments of *conspiracy theory* in mainstream news outlets in the English-speaking world. I used the search term 'conspiracy theor' and took the most recent article that adhered to my working definition of conspiracy theory. The conspiracy theory news websites were chosen by starting at the node (most prominent) websites: *Infowars, DavidIcke, Breitbart* and *NaturalNews* and then using search terms to find other websites that had reposted the same news articles.

For the first analysis of conspiracy theory rhetoric within the conspiracy milieu I chose Alex Jones as the most prominent conspiracy theorist both within the milieu and in the mainstream (for incurring bans and televised court appearances). Alex Jones is the most well-known conspiracy theorist in the English-speaking world (see 5.6) with New World Order ideology underpinning his rhetoric. New World Order rhetoric is also prominent in academic literature (see Barkun 2013 and Gulyas 2016) as it constitutes the underpinning ideology of many self-appointed conspiracy gurus. However, understanding Jones' discourse is heavily dependent on an extensive knowledge of North American politics from the perspective of *Infowars* followers. As such, I have chosen extracts from his 2002 publication *9/11: Descent Into Tyranny* (see Appendix 5.1) which is written as an exposé of the New World Order superconspiracy theory: a hidden elite's secret agenda, both imminent and unfolding before our eyes, to enslave the world under a technocratic dystopia (Jones 2002). The extracts both encapsulate his underpinning rhetoric and do not require lengthy explanations of the political context (such as the significance of referenced social actors and complex intertextual references), which would extend beyond the remit of this chapter.

Ufology was chosen for the second data due to its prominence within the cultic milieu and its links to space and aliens, as well as body and mind autonomy (from my data folder categories). It is also relatively mainstreamed compared to other areas of the public milieu, due in part to online streaming services such as *Netflix* showing ufology series. Steven Greer is the most prominent ufologist of the current Disclosure movement: the most recent development in ufology, which has a conspiratorial element embedded into it. He also has links with other areas of the conspiracy milieu (see 5.7). I chose *Instagram* and *Gaia* to represent both a social networking site and the most prominent conspirituality conspiracy theory portal respectively. The two *Instagram* images were the first two images that appeared at the time of searching that complied with my working definition of conspiracy theory (the images are automatically ordered by newest first). I did a name search for Greer on *Gaia* which is the most prominent conspirituality news portal and chose the first search result (newest first) that complied with my working definition.

Conspirituality covers many of the categories from the collected data, including body/mind autonomy, climate change and reinterpretation of public objects and artefacts. The conspirituality data was chosen using a different technique as I wanted to use data which is embedded into spirituality discourses and thus only found incidentally, reflecting how many users happen to come across conspiracy theory material. I used three major social media platforms: *Facebook, Instagram* and *Youtube* to also reflect this. All the data was sourced in March 2021. I took a more structured approach than finding data as an 'accidental product of unrelated searching and browsing' (Varis 2019: 14) as I had enough ethnographic knowledge to know how to get to hard-to-find data of spirituality discourses embedded with conspiracy theory rhetoric. I chose search terms and hashtags based on their strong association with the

spirituality milieu and that had prominence (results on *YouTube*: over a million views, and *Instagram*: over a million results). For the first data I used the search term ‘1111 meaning’ on YouTube as the numbers are popular shorthand in the spirituality milieu for spiritual awakening. People claim to see ‘1111’ multiple times which is seen as a message from the spiritual realm that they are awakening. I worked down the search results from most popular and Victor Oddo was the first YouTuber (the fourth result) to have a video with conspiratorial content in the title (chemtrails).

I found the *Instagram* images by using the hashtag #thirdeye, which is a common term used in the spirituality milieu to talk about psychic phenomena and spiritual ascension. I went systematically through the posts of the accounts (automatically ordered by newest first), discarding the private ones and those that had no conspiratorial content using my working definition. I picked the first three that contained at least one post that had conspiritual content. For *Facebook* I tried different search terms for alternative therapists in Lincolnshire to narrow down the search. It was where I was living at the time and where I had attended the aforementioned wellbeing shows. I felt confident I would find conspiratorial content in this milieu of alternative spiritual therapies from my ethnographic knowledge. With the search term ‘reiki therapist’ I chose the first public profile I found which displayed conspiracy theory content.

5.5 ‘Conspiracy theor/ist’ analysis

The initial analysis looks at how the terms ‘conspiracy theory/ies’ and conspiracy theorist/s’ are construed within the conspiracy milieu on websites that act as alternative news portals (see Appendix 4.1 for a complete list) and, as such, tend to espouse superconspiracy theories as a central narrative binder which are orbited by other conspiracy-related discourses. The aim is to elucidate collective identity construction in light of the friction between the perceived ‘mainstream’ and the ‘conspiracy theorists’ whereby the ‘conspiracy theorists’ are positioned as the ‘in-group’ and the ‘mainstream’ the out-group. These websites use the key terms and are thus both prominent within the milieu and easy to find via a basic word-search.

Firstly, I briefly discuss recent representations of the terms in the mainstream media to demonstrate typical instances of pejorative and exclusionary usage of the terms. Elucidating usage in the mainstream aids in understanding how the terms are reappropriated in the conspiracy milieu as it is reactionary. An analysis of letters to the editor in United States publications found an increasingly pejorative usage and connotations of the term ‘conspiracy theory/ist’ (Uscinski and Parent 2014), which correlates with the general consensus discussed in section 2.6 that the terms function pejoratively when used from outside the conspiracy milieu. The increasing pejoration indicates a widening division between orthodox/mainstream narratives and those circulating within the conspiracy milieu. Furthermore, Husting and Orr did a word-search in United States newspapers of the term ‘conspiracy theorist’, finding that it was frequently used as ‘a routinized strategy of exclusion, a reframing mechanism that deflects questions or concerns about power, corruption, and motive, and an attack upon the personhood and competence of the questioner’ (Husting and Orr 2007: 127).

In-group out-group dichotomies that foreground the 'conspiracy theorists' perceived incompetence’ can also be found in British newspapers. To illustrate with a typical and representative example: the British tabloid newspaper, *The Sun*, published the following article: ‘LUNAR-TICS Flat-Earthers say Blood Moon was FAKE – and “invisible satellite” is to

blame for lunar eclipse: The kooky conspiracy theorists think our planet is shaped like a pizza' (Pettit 2019). The negative appraisal of the flat-earthers conspiracy theory group, whose aim is to prove that the earth is flat – contrary to mainstream science – not only differentiates the 'conspiracy theorists' as an out-group – 'kooky' – but the wordplay on 'lunatic' implies they have a mental health condition. The associations of not being attached to reality are also demonstrable with the metaphor 'to go down the rabbit hole'. For instance, a headline in the British newspaper, *The Times,* states: 'My crazy first year down the conspiracy theory rabbit hole' (Spring 2021) and *The State News* headline states: 'Falling down the rabbit hole: a deep look into the appeal of conspiracy theories' (Falinski 2020). The conceptual mapping between the source domain of falling down a rabbit hole and the target domain of consuming many conspiracy theory discourses suggests that the process is a type of descent (going underground) into a surreal network of interconnecting narratives (a rabbit warren). 'Falling down the rabbit hole' is an intertextual reference to *Alice in Wonderland* (Carroll 1865) as the protagonist falls down a rabbit hole into a fantasy world. Furthermore, differentiation of the conspiracy theorists as a negatively appraised out-group is also evident, such as in *The New Yorker*:

> What's New About Conspiracy Theories? Outsiders have always had a weakness for paranoid fantasies. Now our leaders are conspiracists, too.
>
> (Kolbert 2019)

Here there is a more dichotomic differentiation with the use of the collectivised 'outsiders' who have been classified as not belonging and distant from the deictic centre of the in-group (Chilton 2004). There are also instances of negative appraisement of conspiracy theories as a threat to the well-being and safety of the in-group. To illustrate, a headline in *The Guardian* newspaper states: 'Trapped in a hoax: survivors of conspiracy theories speak out' (Pilkington 2019). The sentence-initial verb 'trapped' necessarily implicates an enemy. Interestingly, the narrative is the threat in this article, not the 'conspiracy theorist'. The threat is textually realised by identifying a victim group as 'survivors', functionalising them as having lived through a terrible experience due to being 'trapped' by conspiracy theories. From a brief example analysis of mainstream newspaper headlines, there is clear evidence not only of negative appraisal and attacks on the rationality and mental state of the conspiracy theorists but also on the discursive construction of a rational, superior in-group and a foolish, dangerous out-group.

Just as mainstream narratives construct an in-group and an out-group by using 'conspiracy theory/ies' and 'conspiracy theorist/s' pejoratively, so do the conspiracy milieu, albeit with the in-group and out-group reversed. The semantic amelioration can be exemplified with a simple keyword analysis of the terms on conspiracy theory websites. I chose the following websites as representative of conspiracy theory rhetoric within the conspiracy milieu. All are easily accessible via a simple word search on a search engine and by clicking on hyperlinks from other conspiracy websites. All have newspaper articles consisting of varying combinations of original content, often reframing articles from mainstream news outlets and reposting general articles from within the wider conspiracy milieu. The websites are as follows: www.infowars.com, www.davidicke.com, truthcomestolight.com, www.naturalnews.com, reclaimthenet.org, www.caitlinjohnstone.com, www.globalresearch.ca and summit.news. I conducted a word search in February 2021 on each website using 'conspiracy theor' to capture the singular and plural of conspiracy theory and conspiracy theorist. I chose the first one in the search results that did not require a lot of frame-knowledge explanation to understand the headlines. Several articles had been reposted, indicating that the wider milieu and not just the specific website found the article worthy of reposting.

Below are four examples of headlines that include the singular or plural form of ‘conspiracy theorist’:-

(a) ’The “conspiracy theorists” were right, once again: our media controllers should be asked why they lied to the public for decades in order to keep this drugging program going and IQs falling’ (found on www.infowars.com and also posted on www.prisonplanet.com, www.newswars.com, vaticancatholic.com, www.informationliberation.com, rightedition.com amongst others)

(b) ’I am a conspiracy theorist’ (truthcomestolight.com, reposted from corbettreport.com)

(c) ’Stay away from Loch Ness, RNLI warns conspiracy theorists massing to search for monster’ (originally www.thetelegraph.co.uk**,** reposted on www.davidicke.com**)**

(d) ’Everyone’s a conspiracy theorist whether they know it or not’ (original source, https://caitlinjohnstone.com/, reposted on www.davidicke.com)

Below are five examples of headlines that include the singular or plural form of ‘conspiracy theory’:-

(e) ’Welp. It Turns out Weather Modification Wasn’t Just Another Crazy Conspiracy Theory’ (original source www.activistpost.com reposted on numerous websites, including truthcomestolight.com, www.naturalnews.com, www.sgtreport.com, www.activistpost.com, www.planet-today.com, www.theorganicprepper.com, themadtruther.com, www.brudirect.com, afinalwarning.com, howdeepistherabbithole.com)

(f) ’Most “conspiracy theories” turn out to be conspiracy facts, despite MSM denialism’ (www.naturalnews.com)

(g) ’How legacy media uses idea of curbing “misinformation” and “conspiracy theories” to force Facebook to pay them’ (reclaimthenet.org)

(h) ’Bill Gates shocked by “crazy conspiracy theories” about COVID-19’ (posted by summit.news as quotations of mainstream articles by *New York Post,* Fonrouge 2021 and *The Daily Mail,* Kenton 2021 among others)

(i) ’Delingpole: The Great Reset is not a conspiracy theory’ (originally www.breitbart.com, reposted on numerous websites, including www.naturalnews.com, conspiracyanalyst.org, greatreset.news, thetruthpatriot.com, climatechangedispatch.com)

In headlines (a), (f), (g) and (h), there is the use of inverted commas or scare quotes around the terms “conspiracy theorists”, “conspiracy theories” and “crazy conspiracy theories”, which fits with Vandergriff’s definition of ironic quotation: ‘to represent [..] other-discourse by framing it to suit one’s own purposes’ (2012: 69). Scare quotes function as a distancing device (Martin and White 2007: 113) that initiates or reinforces an existing division. The terms become ameliorated as the original pejorative usage is by an untrusted mainstream information source, a perceived out-group, such as the mainstream media (MSM): ‘despite MSM denialism’ and ‘legacy media’. Thus, ironic quotations reconstruct the ‘conspiracy theories’ as legitimate, as most ‘turn out to be facts’.

> At the heart of linguistic reclamation is the right of self-definition, of forging and naming one's own existence. Because this self-definition is formed not in one's own terms but those of another, because it necessarily depends upon the word's pejoration for its revolutionary resignification, it is never without contestation or controversy.
>
> (Brontsema 2004: 1)

Amelioration is evident in (b), which states 'I am a conspiracy theorist', framing the proclamation as an act of courage. The inference is that of an out-group using it as an insult, but the author has reappropriated the term by self-identifying as one. The article's first line reads: 'If you are afraid of being called a conspiracy theorist, then those words are having their intended effect. I will not censor myself to appeal to the Normie McNormiesons of the world'. Here, the writer has reclaimed an insult by resignifying it as an act of courage and free speech despite an oppressive mainstream.

Epistemic superiority is evident as the labels are ascribed truthfulness, for instance, in (f) with the substitution for 'theories' as 'facts'. Truth claims bring into question the veracity of mainstream media news outlets, characterised as 'media controllers' and 'legacy media'. Due to the reversal of meaning by the usage of inverted commas, an out-group and an in-group is inferred, which positions the in-group: the conspiracy theorists in ideological opposition to an out-group or out-groups: 'media controllers', 'legacy media', 'MSM', 'Bill Gates' and 'RNLI'. Fact for one group is fiction for the other and vice versa.

Oppositional interpretation appears in headlines (c) and (i). Headline i is a simple negation of a perceived mainstream campaign to silence opposition to 'The Great Reset'. The Great Reset refers to a World Economic Forum meeting in 2020 that discussed how to redesign societies and economies sustainably in light of current failings brought to light during the COVID-19 global pandemic (World Economic Forum 2021). The mainstream is labelling opposition who perceive the plan as a threat and move towards totalitarian rule as 'conspiracy theory'.

Headline (c), which is a direct reposting of an article from a mainstream newspaper, is reposted on a conspiracy theory website, thus positioning the reader in allegiance with the conspiracy theorists, as opposed to against them. Depending on the contextual knowledge of the reader, the headline could be interpreted as the RNLI (Royal National Lifeboat Institution) being foolish because RNLI wrote the warning in response to a viral event suggestion posted online – unclear whether those that signed up to the event would actually go, that people storm Loch Ness in order to find if the monster is real or not. Furthermore, contextual knowledge of the Loch Ness monster can reinforce the representation of the conspiracy theorists as positive, as a famous Scottish folklore narrative that has been long disregarded by the scientific community. To the conspiracy milieu, the scientific community is a perceived out-group who should not be trusted. Furthermore, as a mainstream organisation, the RNLI will be, by default, associated as an out-group are they are stopping the conspiracy theorists from finding out information by 'warning' them to 'stay away'. Notably, the Loch Ness monster narrative does not qualify as a conspiracy theory; however, due to the nature of the cultic milieu, there are points of contact between conspiracy theory rhetoric and pseudoscience, as both pursue heterodox knowledge. If framed as hidden truth, the Loch Ness monster narrative can be merged with conspiracy theory rhetoric.

There is the discursive construction of repeated revelation in headlines (a), (d), (e) and (f) despite being 'lied to' and having in-group beliefs dismissed via the pejorative label of 'conspiracy theory' or 'conspiracy theorist'. For instance, repetition is evident in: 'once again', 'most' and revelation in: 'it turns out', indicative of the belief that the truth always comes out in

the end. Revelation serves to help construct the in-group as having superior knowledge in relation to the sheeple: the ignorant masses, those that do not yet know that they are conspiracy theorists.

The headline examples demonstrate techniques to delegitimise out-group mainstream narratives and thus reinforce in-group beliefs. In these instances, the out-group is an essential part of the discursive construction of in-group identity. For instance, the out-group is constructed as trying to hinder the search for the hidden truth via ostracisation and blocking. However, combined with the repeated use of revelatory language, the in-group and out-group are represented as being in a continuous stream of epistemic battles to prove their narratives as the 'truth' and the opposition as the 'lie'.

5.6 Superconspiracy analysis

The extracts I have chosen for a close finely grained analysis are illustrative of key but differentiated areas of the conspiracy milieu: superconspiracy New World Order rhetoric, ufology conspiracy theories and conspirituality. The first extract (Appendix 5.1) is from Alex Jones, a prominent professional conspiracy theorist whose websites are also included in the initial analysis due to their usage of 'conspiracy theory/ies' and 'conspiracy theorist/s'. Although self-defined conspiracy theorists are easy to find with a basic word search a considerable amount of contextual knowledge is necessary to understand context, such as intertextual references. The extract by Alex Jones (founder of www.infowars.com) was published in 2002 in response to the 9/11 terror attacks on the Twin Towers in New York, explicating the New World Order conspiracy theory. The analysis in section 5.6 is an example of conspiratorial ufology rhetoric (Figures 5.3 and 5.4), and the final analysis (section 5.7) takes data from conspirituality rhetoric (Figures 5.5, 5.6 and Appendix 5.2). The background and contextualised explanations form part of each analysis. All the extracts require an understanding of the conspiracy milieu to locate representative illustrations.

Alex Jones is a prominent North American professional conspiracy theorist with a daily radio show described as 'the most censored broadcast in the world' (*Infowars* 2021) and the face of websites: *Infowars, NewsWars* and *PrisonPlanet.* Topics include New World Order conspiracy theories about secret collusions between corporations and governments to create crises to manufacture and then exploit public hysteria (Zaitchik 2011), such as pushing through policies curtailing freedoms in the name of public safety. He has also discussed topics such as '9/11 conspiracies, doomsday weather weapons, the global warming ''myth,'' and secret society plots involving vaccines' (Gosa 2011: 195) as well as staged and false flag attacks.

Although Jones has been identified politically as both alt-right (Sommerlad 2018) and far-right (Worley 2017), he self-identifies as a libertarian (Roddy 2019) and paleoconservative (Sommerlad 2018).

> In Jones' grand narrative, the United States represents liberty, freedom, and a free market economy – the opposite of the conspirators' ideals—and therefore is the prime target and principal hurdle towards their totalitarian agenda.
>
> (Robertson 2015: 87)

However, the New World Order theory that he closely associates with and underpins much of his discourse appeals across the political spectrum; for instance, he has had links with the political left of the North American rap music milieu (Gosa 2011: 195) and celebrities

associated with the New Age spirituality milieu such as the British comedian Russell Brand (Hare Krishna in the Movies 2017). Despite arguably 'the way in which these grand theories are structured makes them more a basis for a world view than any political analysis' (Hegstad 2014: 23), they are deeply enmeshed as the narratives claim to explain the behind-the-scenes mechanics of the global political system.

Jones was banned from four major social media platforms Apple, Spotify, Facebook and YouTube, in one day: August 6, 2018 (Salinas 2018) due to controversy and a court case surrounding his claims that the Sandy Hook school shooting massacre was a hoax and used crisis actors. Jones later retracted his statements blaming psychosis (Sakuma 2019). It was also claimed that he helped fund the 2021 storming of the US Capitol (Ramachandran, Berzon and Ballhaus 2021). Furthermore, algorithms have curtailed his online presence, and it is more challenging to access footage of events and interviews that he is better-known for, such as claims of false flags, crisis actors and events such as Pizzagate when a man opened fire in a pizzeria claiming to be investigating the allegation of a secret paedophile ring (Tangherlini et al. 2020). As of 2021, it was easier to access footage of him reframed as ridiculous than the original content, such as a reworked clip of him ranting: 'I don't like them putting chemicals in the water, they turn the friggin' frogs gay' (JazitJ 2018), declaring that the US government were contaminating the water supply with a 'gay bomb'. He is known for losing his temper (Topping 2013), for example: 'footage of the presenter working himself into a patriotic fervour or ranting wildly about the latest "Deep State" outrage on The Alex Jones Show regularly goes viral, often collected into montages and set to thumping house music' (Sommerlad 2018).

Much of Jones' discourse requires a thorough understanding of conspiracy theory rhetoric and an extensive knowledge of North American politics from the perspective of *Infowars* followers to understand, for instance, evaluative language ascribed to named social actors and intertextual references. As such, I have chosen extracts from his 2002 publication *9/11: Descent Into Tyranny* (see Appendix 5.1) which is written as an exposé of the New World Order superconspiracy theory: a hidden elite's secret agenda, both imminent and unfolding before our eyes, to enslave the world under a technocratic dystopia (Jones 2002). The extracts both encapsulate his underpinning rhetoric and do not require lengthy contextual explanations, as this is beyond the remit of this chapter.

Throughout Jones' discourse, he identifies a highly differentiated out-group, identified by their privileged societal position, as 'the global elite', classifying the group as superior.

> The New World Order is a synthesis of the survivors of empires, of super-merchant families, of barbarian kings, of banking families established in the middle-ages, and of the royal families of Europe. Over time, they have learned that if they can simply conceal the true magnitude of their power and install puppet rulers from the cultures they dominate, the people will accept greater forms of tyranny.

'The New World Order' is an efficient short-hand to construe a group in several ways. Firstly, the out-group is represented as a unified whole by nominalisation and the use of singular, not plural, form in 'order', suggesting a high degree of organisation, which is further established with the noun: 'synthesis': the formation of a connected whole. Secondly, 'order' functionalises the organisation: 'when social actors are referred to in terms of an activity, in terms of something they do' (van Leeuwen 2008: 42).

The group consists of 'barbarian kings, of banking families established in the middle-ages, and of the royal families of Europe'. In one way, the members have been specified, but the specifications refer to ancestors of those currently in the group. Nevertheless, there is no

individualisation (van Leeuwen 2008: 37), and the functionalisation of the groups spans politics: ‘kings’ and economics: ‘banking’ as well as a vast temporal range: ‘middle-ages’. Under the unified ‘New World Order’, the group is impersonalised, ‘whose meaning do[es] not include the semantic feature “human”’ (van Leeuwen, 2008: 46). Combined, the term denotes a unified, organised and powerful group. Thirdly, ‘world’ signals the global magnitude of their power, reinforced throughout the extract with adjectives related to size: ‘hulking’, ‘massive’, ‘magnitude’ and ‘too big’. Moreover, their power and presence spans over centuries, for instance: ‘of empires’, ‘middle ages’, as such the group is both spatially ‘global’ and temporally present. The term has been reappropriated to an imminent dystopian threat from its original usage, referring to a new national security strategy in a speech given by US President Bush in 1990 (Tunander 1991). The recontextualisation of a governmental speech is similar to The Great Reset example in the first analysis.

The New World Order is established as an out-group. The construction is evident from the negative appraisement of the group, which is when: ‘social actors are appraised when they are referred to in terms which evaluate them as good or bad’ (van Leeuwen 2008: 45). The out-group is characterised as misbehaving in its abuses of power, such as: ‘despotic laws’ and ‘tyranny', and Jones delegitimises its power by inferring corruption through the adjective, ‘criminal’: ’the criminal activities of the global elite’ and with an obsessive desire for power doubly expressed in both the adjective and noun: ‘power-mad megalomaniacs’.

As an elite, powerful and evil group, Jones creates a dichotomic division between them and a victimised, vulnerable group. The separation is realised via differentiation, when an author ‘explicitly differentiates an individual social actor or group of social actors from a similar actor or group, creating the difference between the “self” and the “other”, or between “us” and “them”’ (van Leeuwen 2008: 40).

> This collection of power-mad megalomaniacs has been engineering a successive string of terrorist events to usher in a corrupt world government—a world government where, public documents show, populations will be herded into compact cities, issued national ID cards, and even given implantable microchips.

The out-group: ‘power-mad megalomaniacs’ is activated whereas the in-group in which Jones and the reader are implicated: ‘populations’, and is passivated: ‘will be herded’. The future marker: ‘will’ denotes a high degree of certainty in Jones’ prediction, and the verb ‘herd’ metaphorically expresses the populations as being treated like animals. 'Populations' and the NWO are thus highly differentiated, with the former as powerless, passive and treated like animals.

Metaphor is also present: ‘puppet rulers’, denoting those who work on behalf of the elite and emphasising they are being controlled via the conceptual import of the lifeless puppet being brought to life and completely controlled by the puppeteer. The metaphor implicates the elite as the puppeteers and is common in conspiracy theory rhetoric (see Byford 2011). Thus there is a distinction within the out-group between those at the top of the power hierarchy and the ‘puppet rulers’, ‘the servants of the global elite’ and ‘their propagandists’.

However, as in the following example, it is not a simple in-group, out-group distinction with a dual-layered out-group of puppeteers and puppets. The in-group has ambiguities in its composition as Jones describes a group of people: ‘the average person’ aggregated (van Leeuwen 2008: 37) as the majority: ‘most individuals’. Interestingly, the semantic choices give a sense of individualising by using the singular noun form: ‘average person’ highlighting the significant disparity in power: the powerless individual versus the gigantic evil system.

Individualisation provides a sense of humanity and relatability to an albeit nameless person as opposed to a highly organised and unified entity.

> The average person judges the world according to their moral compass. Because most individuals are not ruthless, sociopathic control-freaks, they cannot even begin to fathom the dark gulfs that are the souls of the servants of the global elite.

Furthermore, the masses have both positive and negative appraisement; they are not evil – 'not ruthless, sociopathic control-freaks' – but at the same time ignorant and lacking in the ability to 'even begin to fathom' the situation. It then becomes more complicated as 'the average man' appears to be susceptible to the control of the out-group.

> Just a few years ago, the average man on the street refused to even admit the possibility of a world government. Now that same individual will bellow, "Yes, there's a world government – and we need it to protect ourselves from terrorism!"

A clear division is created between those who know the plan to 'usher in a corrupt world government' and those who believe in the propaganda: 'we need it to protect ourselves'. It implicates the discourse participants as epistemically superior to the masses and creates an ambiguity that makes the in-group out-group distinction overly simplistic. Instead, there is a dual-layered out-group of elite and servants to the elite. There is also a division between the ignorant masses and the knowing group. The ignorant masses and the knowing group are implicated together at points, such as when 'populations will be herded' but at other points differentiated when Jones highlights their ignorance and thus infers the superior knowledge of him and the reader.

The above examples illustrate Jones' New World Order conspiracy theory discourse. It has libertarian and anti-globalist overtones, for example, in the framing of loss of freedoms such as choice and bodily invasion: 'implantable microchips', of space: 'compact' and general humanity: 'herded'. Furthermore, at the macro-level (Koller 2019: 74) it hooks into legitimate societal issues around technology and power. The construction of the out-group as evil, organised, spatially and temporally vast engenders a debilitating narrative without a clear plan to overcome them. Assimilation (van Leeuwen 2008: 37) of the enemy as a unified group: the New World Order, concretises them. The concretisation removes an entry point for contestation and occludes individual identity. When individuals are named, which Jones often does in general, the discursive construction of an individual being part of such a group infers a challenge to be an almost pointless act due to the vast disparity in power.

5.7 Ufology analysis

Ufology is the study of unidentified flying objects (UFOs) believed to be of extraterrestrial origin, and was not initially associated with conspiracy theories. Conspiratorial thinking in ufology started to become more prevalent with accusations of government cover-ups and a 'more political, traditional conspiracy theory approach to ufology developed throughout the 1980s' with increased mainstream attention in the 1990s, such as the popular television series *The X-Files* (Gulyas 2016: 74). It was believed in the 1990s that the extraterrestrial threat was a ploy to get the nations to join together against the alien threat and thus create a New World Order of economic control and a cashless society (Gulyas 2016).

Dr Steven M Greer runs *CSETI: The Center for the Study of Extraterrestrial Intelligence*, founded in 1990 with the current website called *The Institute for Planetary Synthesis.* One of

the aims is to contact extraterrestrial life. The contact has already been claimed to have happened, and the extraterrestrials are believed to be benevolent. He also runs the *Disclosure Project,* which seeks to make public information and evidence of the existence of UFOs and extraterrestrials, which is believed to be held classified by the US government. Greer has written several books on the subject, including *Contact: Countdown To Transformation* (2009), *Hidden Truth: Forbidden Knowledge* (2013) and *Unacknowledged: An Expose of the World's Greatest Secret* (2017). The documentary *Unacknowledged* is available on online streaming on-demand services Netflix and Hulu, as well as *UFO Chronicles: What the President Doesn't Know* (2013) starring conspiracy ufologist Jim Marrs.

His various videos are available on hybrid-genre sites such as www.gaia.com, which posts a variety of spiritual, self-help and supernatural content. Greer is quite accessible and present online within the conspiracy (such as interviews with conspiracy theorists, such as Alex Jones) and the wider cultic milieu, such as an appearance on *The Joe Rogan Experience* (The Joe Rogan 2021). This popular North American podcast receives millions of listeners and interviews many mainstream and polemic guests. However, it has since been removed from the Spotify playlist along with other controversial interviews (Resnikoff 2021).

The following excerpt describes an event in Boulder, Colorado, in September 2021 called ‘Dr. Steven Greer CE5 Contact, Cosmic Consciousness and Meditation’ advertised on the *Gaia* website.

> Train with Dr. Steven Greer to become a conscious ambassador to the Universe. In this robust weekend-long program, Dr. Greer provides a deeper understanding of the science of consciousness, interdimensional travel, and how we can communicate with other interstellar beings using ancient practices and modern technology.
>
> (*Gaia* 2021)

Greer is titulated (van Leeuwen 2008: 41), drawing attention to his intellect. Interestingly, his titulation is a medical qualification (Virginia Board of Medicine 2021) and is thus not related to his ufology pursuits. The viewer is referred to as a potential future ‘conscious ambassador’, functionalising them as active in a goal-oriented process. The pronoun ‘we’ is inclusive of the viewers (Wirth-Koliba 2016), which is activated in the goal of communication: ‘with other interstellar beings’. Notably, the adjective ‘other’ constructs the extraterrestrial group by similarities to the ‘conscious ambassadors’ as both groups are ‘interstellar beings’. The social actors constructed are not differentiated by an in-group out-group dichotomy like the Jones examples, but by potential unity as the functionalised viewer becomes an activated ‘ambassador’.

Greer’s discourses are goal-oriented, with varied, but overall less focus on a conspiratorial out-group. Greer blames the US government for withholding vital information about UFOs and extraterrestrials from the general public (hence *The Disclosure Project* to declassify the information). Figure 5.3 exemplifies the rhetoric of governmental secrecy in conspiracy theories.

Figure 5.3: Ufology and conspiracy theories on *Instagram* 1 (Greer 2021a)

In Figure 5.3, the social actors are 'the powers that be' 'Big Brother', 'the masses' and 'we'. There are similarities to the Jones analysis in that the current authorities: 'the powers that be' are also implicated but depersonalised in a nominalisation to describe a malevolent system, in this case: 'Big Brother', an intertextual reference to the dystopian autocratic surveillance state in Orwell's *1984* (Orwell 1948). There is also differentiation between the aggregated 'masses' who are being manipulated into believing they 'need' a surveillance state and the non-inclusive 'we' (Wirth-Koliba 2016). The pronoun does not implicate the viewer as having seen the plans. Nevertheless, they are implicated by not being part of the ignorant masses due to being told of the plans in the post.

Figure 5.4: Ufology and conspiracy theories on *Instagram 2* (Greer 2021b)

In Figure 5.4, there is a combination of both in-group out-group construal and the goal-oriented discourse of establishing extraterrestrial communication. However, the goal is foregrounded, unlike the Jones discourse where the enemy and its actions were foregrounded, making it quest-focused. The sentence-initial nominalisation: ‘a truthful and peaceful disclosure’ foregrounds the goal of Greer and both negates and backgrounds ‘Governments’. Greer then activates the inclusive ‘we’, which includes the viewers, ‘to take action’ and ‘establish ambassadorial contact’. As a discourse, it discursively constructs the in-group as empowered via activation and foregrounding in goal achievement. In-group construction is markedly different to the disabling narrative of Jones. The Greer discourses indicate the role of the conspirators as a block in the path (that they have withheld evidence) on a journey. In contrast, the Jones discourse is focused on in-group out-group constructions, emphasising the hyperbolic negative attribution of the out-group, creating a sense of disempowerment in the face of an impossibly powerful and evil out-group.

5.8 Conspirituality analysis

The term: ‘conspirituality’ was coined by Ward and Voas (2011) to explain what they saw as a hybrid-narrative formation of alternative spirituality and conspiracy theories as a relatively new phenomenon. Although the concept has been disputed as nothing new and ‘a result of structural elements in the cultic milieu, rising from its interest in stigmatised knowledge, promotion of mystical seekership and suspicion of ‘Establishment’ discourses’ (Asprem and Dyrendal 2015: 379), the term is useful to articulate not only the existence of narratives which display both conspiracy theory and alternative spirituality rhetoric but that they are often in close proximity to each other, such as co-existing on a webpage or one click away via a banner ad or hyperlink in a comment. For instance, Figures 5.5 and 5.6 comprise screenshots of social media profiles (one Instagram, one Facebook- different users) that have a combination of spiritual and conspiracy theory rhetoric and illustrate how discourses of conspiracy, self-help and alternative spirituality co-exist.

In Figure 5.5, the ‘STAY VIGILANT’ Instagram post presents several key thematic concerns common within the conspiracy milieu pertaining in its most general conception to loss of freedoms: of behaviour (compulsory mask-wearing) of speech (censorship, ‘your voice’), and bodily invasion and control (micro-chipping). The concerns are framed as a warning, with the imperative: ‘STAY VIGILANT’, but it does not state of what exactly. The losses are presented chronologically as a slippery slope whereby with each move, more freedoms are taken, and with the last three as an imminent future prediction with the switch from past to present verb tense. However, the ‘you’ is only textually evident at the beginning and end. The adverb+verb+noun phrase pattern backgrounds the ‘you’ until the final line as well as suppressing (van Leeuwen 2008: 29) the social actors responsible for removing the freedoms. The reader’s losses and victimhood are thus foregrounded. Nominalisation objectivates and generalises an intangible phenomenon with the social actors not explicitly mentioned but implied (van Leeuwen 2008: 55). The occlusion of the agents in the nominalisation combined with the vagueness of the imperative in the first line could be debilitating for the viewer. At the same time, it can be revelational as the pattern (the slippery slope) is evident in the prophecy of what will happen.

Figure 5.5: Conspirituality on *Instagram* (Divine Ocean 2020)

Figure 5.6 Conspirituality on *Facebook* (Smith 2021)

The second Instagram post in Figure 5.5 is an example of self-help rhetoric with the use of the visual metaphor of a hand 'carrying a bag full of conditions', inferring irony in those who are 'looking for unconditional love' but are not willing to offer it. The framing is negative as it foregrounds 'conditions' as 'the problem'; thus, the interpretation should be that if you want unconditional love, you need to offer it as well. However, compared to the first post, there is an implicit goal: that you need to offer unconditional love if you want to receive unconditional love.

In the third Instagram post, the image of a meditating man in rainbow colours with beams of light exuding from his head is a visual representation of spiritual rhetoric with the message that to help the planet, you need to work on yourself through spiritual practices such as meditation. The viewer is consistently activated, which 'occurs when social actors are represented as the active dynamic forces in an activity' (van Leeuwen 2008: 33), rendering a much higher degree of agency than in the first post. The higher activation in the third spiritual image compared with a much lower degree in the conspiracy theory image is indicative of one of the points of compatibility between conspiracy theories and New Age spirituality as the former is often replete with fear-inducing and debilitating language due to its focus on the oppression. In contrast, the self-help and spirituality discourses are empowering, providing the discourse participants with agency, goals and ways of achieving those goals.

However, in Figure 5.6, there are two instances of spiritual rhetoric: one a visual image and the other an example of the law of attraction, a common trope teaching that you manifest reality through your thoughts. The other two images underneath are examples of conspiracy theory rhetoric. The reference to crisis actors delegitimises a protest as being populated with 'crisis actors' employed by the out-group to act out a false narrative. The anti-vaccination

post: ‘I believe that every human being has a right to make their own health decisions without coercion or force. Do you?’ is particularly noteworthy as the discourse participants (the meme-maker, the meme-poster and the viewers) are more highly activated than in the conspiracy theory rhetoric in the first post as they are agents who (should) ’have the right’ to decide. Though in context it is propagating anti-vaccination rhetoric, it has a specific goal-orientation: that of fighting for the freedom to choose to vaccinate or not.

The final representative illustration is a YouTube video by a professional vlogger and spiritual self-help guru, Victor Oddo, who had over 303 000 subscribers in December 2021 (Victor Oddo 2021). Oddo gained popularity for YouTube videos on popular New Age spiritual topics under the general umbrella term: the spiritual ascension process. His most popular video is on numerology, with over half a million views ‘1111 - (The Meaning Of 1111)... & Why You're Seeing It NOW’ (Victor Oddo 2016), whereby he explains the significance of seeing repeated number patterns in relation to a journey of spiritual awakening. Oddo is a representative example of how conspiracy theory discourse is often embedded in other discourses in the cultic milieu, in this case, New Age Spirituality and discourses of spiritual awakening. He actively participates with other YouTubers, such as Aaron Doughty and Bridget Neilsen. They talk on similar and related topics, with Bridget Neilsen discussing supernatural topics such as hollow earth, channeling and other-dimensional beings, showing a clear point of contact and overlap with the supernatural/ufology milieu.

Oddo rarely posts on conspiracy theories, but the video entitled ‘CHEMTRAILS - (Why I'm Not Concerned)’ posted on 17th April 2017 was in response to followers asking him to talk about chemtrails: ‘I'm going to answer a question that I receive all the time and for a while refused to dive into my own reasons which you're here but I'm going to discuss chemtrails today’.

> The term contrail is a contraction of condensation and trail, as chemtrail is of chemical and trail. The first one is used to name trails left in the sky by aircrafts under certain atmospheric conditions. Some people argue that when contrails do not dissipate quickly is because they contain substances added and sprayed for sinister purposes undisclosed to the population (weather modification and biological and/or chemical war are the most common).
>
> (Llanes et al. 2016)

As with his other content, the video is framed metaphorically as life being a journey of spiritual awakening (the spiritual ascension process). At the beginning of the video, he broaches the topic of chemtrails and states: ‘I went through a phase many years ago where I was voraciously consuming information of this nature and I believed it, I believe it still’. He situates chemtrails within a conspiratorial frame, as a society in which ‘crazy, sadistic, pretty much evil human beings or even uh or not… non-human beings’, which could be interpreted as the leaders being of extraterrestrial descent or that they are in allegiance with a malevolent extraterrestrial force. The leaders ‘impose their will on people who have unwittingly become ‘prisoners and slaves to this machine and they have no idea it’s going down’. The video is an explanation to his viewers as to why he does not usually talk about conspiracy theories. He states that he believes in them and went through a phase of consuming a lot of conspiracy theory material but had to stop as it was bringing his vibration down, though he supports the idea that each person should decide their life path, including if that means: ‘alerting people of the craziness and the insanity going on’.

The narrative displays similarities with Jones’ superconspiracy rhetoric in that he construes an out-group of conspirators as a Manichaean evil. For instance, the negative attribution:

‘some crazy, sadistic, pretty much evil human beings or even, uh, or non-human beings some people say […] have been very successful with implementing their will and imposing their will upon the masses and such a subtle and yet brilliant way’. Oddo refers to the singular ‘their will', which construes a homogenised group with a similar goal. Equally, the negative attribution of ‘crazy, sadistic, pretty much evil’ genericises the group, which ’symbolically remove[s] from the readers’ world of immediate experiences, treated as distant “others” rather than as people with whom “we” have to deal in our everyday lives’ (van Leeuwen 2008: 36). Again, they are construed as cunning (‘subtle’), clever (‘brilliant’) and organised (‘very successful in imposing their will’).

Oddo also differentiates between the out-group and the in-group: between Oddo as first-person: ‘I’m a lightworker, I’m going through this [spiritual ascension] process’ and the viewers in second-person direct address: ’you’. Similar to Jones, he also identifies the ignorant masses as a separate group, assigning them the categorisations (van Leeuwen 2007: 40) of prisoners and enslaved people: ‘the fact that most human beings are prisoners and are oblivious to that’ and ‘most people are prisoners and slaves to this machine and they have no idea it's going down'.

By aggregation (van Leeuwen 2008: 37): ‘*most* human beings’ as being ‘oblivious’ and ‘hav[ing] no idea’, Oddo constructs the in-group as having access to special, or little known, knowledge, which is prevalent in both spiritual awakening and conspiracy theory rhetoric. By doing so, he differentiates between the ‘us’: the knowing minority and the ignorant masses. This sense of being different to the majority, of pursuing heterodox knowledge, which is out of the reach of comprehension for the average person (although he states in other videos that they can increase their understanding of him and the viewer model spiritual awareness through example) is central to the self-characterisation of the in-group (Oddo and his viewers) as they positively differentiate themselves.

A war/battle metaphor is twice mentioned: ‘maybe their most powerful weapon is the fear we have of them and ‘you pursuing your highest joy is the greatest weapon you have’. Oddo explains why he does not normally talk about conspiracy theories explicitly stating that he is suppressing/ backgrounding the out-group and the conspiracy theories. This is because they were hindering his spiritual ascension journey, indicated by the verb ‘halting’ and the nominalisation ‘distraction’, acting as metaphorical blocks on his quest. By diverting his attention away, he states that he is taking away their power:

> And they're going to they're going to fall by their own hands, there's nothing that really we need to do about in my opinion and that the embodiment of fear and weariness and resistance of them is only halting our own spiritual evolution [pause] That's why I don't talk about this on my channel.

Oddo activates the out-group as bringing about their own demise in ‘fall by their own hands', which passivates the in-group as ‘nothing that really we need to do’. The passivation in the process diverts attention away from the out-group and onto the individualised spiritual journey with the goal-oriented ‘our own spiritual evolution’ encoding a metaphorical journey with the Oddo and the viewer activated as the metaphorical ‘traveller’. The metaphorical 'traveller' bears similarities to the Greer discourses in that both are quest-oriented with a conspiratorial element that is functionalised as a block on a metaphorical quest that can be overcome by finding another way to achieve the goal of contacting extraterrestrials or, in Oddo’s discourse, by diverting attention away from the out-group.

In order to build on the findings from this analysis, the following analyses will focus on conspiracy discourses operating both at the core of the superconspiracy milieu and at the fringe of the milieu where they operate in contact with the mainstream. The next chapter focuses on superconspiracy discourses, taking a case study from a prominent British superconspiracy theorist as a representative example. The final analysis chapter also takes a case study of celebrity deaths as representative of mainstreamed conspiracy theories.

Chapter 6: The Superconspiracy Discourse Space

6.1 Introduction

For the second research question concerning how readers/listeners are persuaded to believe/entertain a conspiracy theory I decided to further explore the New World Order underpinning ideology of major conspiracy gurus, focusing on the coronavirus as it was the main global event at the time (spring/summer 2020). Androutsopolous (2008: 7) states that a way to select threads is to look at the popularity statistics and number of threads to identify key players and using the search function to locate keywords. The David Icke on coronavirus video had the highest viewing figures on YouTube (before it was taken down) using the search words 'corona conspiracy'.

Public crises provide a fertile breeding ground for conspiracy theories. For instance, during pandemics and after plane crashes and terrorist attacks, various conspiracy theories circulate in an attempt to make sense of an unusual and frightening situation or event, with people actively participating in their construction. In 2020, the world faced a rapidly spreading coronavirus which caused many countries to quarantine their populations to limit contagion. Conspiracy theories around the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic included a conspiracy to depopulate (such as the elderly who are interpreted as a financial drain), a biological warfare strategy from China and a covert attempt to depopulate the Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) community in Bradford (Wright 2020). The banned viral video 'Plandemic' claims that the death statistics were false, the virus was manufactured, it came from a laboratory, and masks and gloves worsened people's health (Spring 2020). There was also the proposition that the wireless technology 5G was causing the virus, which gathered media attention. The concept of 5G as a danger to the public existed in the conspiracy theory milieu prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, such as 'concerns about high-voltage power lines in the 1980s to mobile phones in the 1990s' (Temperton 2020). The conspiracy theories were given traction and notoriety due to the contemporaneous prominence of professional superconspiracy theorists such as David Icke and Alex Jones. They espouse an all-encompassing conspiratorial worldview whereby all events fit within a superconspiracy narrative that claims an omnipotent evil elite is planning an imminent global dystopian takeover.

Superconspiracy rhetoric can be defined as a self-contained narrative construct that enables a reconfiguring and recontextualisation of mainstream rhetoric to explain the mechanics of world power within a neat and portable conspiracy theory narrative structure (see also Barkun 2003: 22). Accordingly, superconspiracy theories differ from hybrid genres, most prominently those that foreground an elite supergroup is planning an imminent global dystopian takeover. Superconspiracy theories rely upon conspiracy as its central and indispensable narrative component, whereas hybrid genres (such as those involving extraterrestrials, spirituality and social anxieties, such as the potential negative consequences of technological advancements) are non-reliant. My analysis focuses on David Icke.

> Right-wing fanatics, leftist conspiracy buffs, New Agers, college students, and an increasingly dissatisfied and questioning public the world over have found something deeply provocative in Icke that cannot simply be explained away as manifestations of a collective false-consciousness, clinical paranoia, or, as Freud would say, group hypnosis […] and media spectacle.
>
> (Lewis and Kahn 2005: 67)

Regardless of Icke's inability to convince the general public, his impact on the cultural scene is noteworthy'Icke's Reptilian Elite theory, while not convincing many in public opinion polls, has had a strong cultural impact. Icke frequently sells out small arenas for day-long events in which the audience is invited to dance away the conspiracy' (Uscinski 2018:16). Although Icke represents the fringe, it would be unwise to assume his ideology is a non-impactful anomaly. His discourse is not only representative of a global trend in counter-culture but is constitutive of broader conspiracy culture (Lewis and Kahn 2005: 46), which can be traced back throughout the twentieth century and beyond (see Gulyas 2016 and Roberts 2008).

I analyse how the official pandemic narrative was reconstructed to conform to the boundaries of the central thesis in the superconspiracy discourse space. I analyse the viewpoint positioning of the professional conspiracy theorist and his audience, demonstrating how the viewpoint construction of the audience and Icke positions them at a vantage point of the enlightened victim. Such positioning not only proffers the sense of having special knowledge (access to be able to 'see the bigger picture') but creates a conceptual distance between the discourse participants and broader society. To this end, I use Text World Theory (Gavins 2007): a cognitive model of discourse processing apposite for its capacity to distinguish between discourse- and text-worlds, thus enabling discussions of ontological levels and epistemic validity. I also use Proximization Theory (Cap 2013b): a pragmacognitive discourse framework, which enables analysis of how an out-group is construed as an increasing threat due to their spatio-temporal and axiological (ideological) encroachment on the in-group, threatening a way of life and indicating imminent disaster.

The analysis is situated, more broadly, within critical discourse analysis for its affordances to the discussion of epistemic power and how superconspiracy rhetoric not only challenges power inequalities but reinforces them. This chapter contributes to the growing body of work on socio-cultural approaches to conspiracy theories, precisely the aspect of persuasion from a linguistic perspective. For instance, the role of the audience has received very little focus in the current research and is integral to understanding the persuasive properties of the narratives. Furthermore, it can contribute to the expansion of cognitive discourse models, such as Text World Theory and Proximization Theory via application to a previously unanalysed discourse type.

6.2 Conspiracy theory as elevated viewpoint

Three key points – emerging from my research – need to be made when considering the phenomenon of superconspiracy theory rhetoric. Firstly, the primary communicator – the speaker/writer – positions themselves as a guru. In other words, they claim to being privy to esoteric knowledge, which illuminates the inner workings of the world they have chosen to impart to other, less knowledgeable people. Secondly, the discourse participants are victims of an omnipotent and evil supergroup operating in the shadows. The group performs its plan through large corporations and governments, which are connected via the nexus of the control centre of the evil elite. Thirdly, this group is not just able to enact their plan through the authorities' capabilities but is the mechanism behind which all critical political, social and economic events are propelled. They are, thus, responsible for all that happens, and it is by their design that it is detrimental to the general public and beneficial to themselves. This section will elaborate on the three points I have outlined, firstly discussing the concept of the guru in the conspiracy milieu. I subsequently develop the concept of an omnipotent evil elite out-group in friction with populations characterised as passive victims. To this end, I introduce the concept that this particular narrative structure construes an elevated viewpoint

whereby the discourse participants are not only positioned at a vantage point but simultaneously distanced – set apart from 'the system'.

6.2.1 The guru

A guru can be defined as a spiritual teacher and an influential guide who imparts superior knowledge to their audience. Accordingly, Icke has been referred to as a guru (Bohal 2015: 49, Franks et al. 2017: 3), immediately noticeable from the titles of some of his publications, such as the book *The Answer* (2020), *Everything You Need To Know But Have Never Been Told* (2017) and the video series *Escape the Matrix* (*Gaia* 2020). Speaker ethos (Goldberg 2001: 242) is central to the acceptance of conspiracy theory narratives; the officiality or authority of the speaker holds much weight (Dentith 2014: 91). An audience may be sceptical of specific details or a particular theory but will ascribe to the broader ideology. Moreover, people are drawn to that which confirms pre-existing beliefs. Thus, the popularity of figures such as Icke can be partly attributed to them endorsing a particular belief, not because of their ability to change minds (Mercier 2017). Therefore, I suggest Icke's popularity is because he says what people want to hear, not because he changes their minds. More important is his heterodox status espousing anti-mainstream and anti-elitist ideology, which affords a confirmation bias in the audience and is in line with the consistency principle, by which successful messages are given in line with those given the audience's ideological predispositions (Cap 2017: 10).

Due to the renegade, critical thinking self-perception and the fact that orthodox sources are not to be trusted, conspiracy theories are epistemically complex. Conspiracy rhetoric is socially situated in the conspiracy milieu, populated by self-defined critical thinkers (Harambam and Aupers 2017) who do not just adopt a stance of trust in the speaker. At the same time, they are primed to anticipate the illumination of hidden knowledge through which the seeker of truth can understand the true nature of evil and thus be emancipated from the establishment (Asprem and Dyrendal 2015). Clearly, this is cognitively demanding to assess whether the information given is by a competent and benevolent source (Sperber et al. 2010: 369). A logical, less costly fallback is to assume trust in a source – particularly if it fits in with a person's current beliefs – which is compatible with confirmation bias. For instance, when Icke claims that he 'was sent a document from 2010 that was published by the Rockefeller Foundation […] about a scenario involving a flu pandemic and it described what would happen' (see Appendix 6.1), he is reliant on positive speaker ethos for the discourse participants to believe him, as he does not provide tangible proof of the document. Therefore, if the audience has a common goal, points of contention and inconsistencies may be overlooked for the sake of overall coherence (Sperber 2010: 376). In short, the conspiracy guru is often aware of their 'critical thinking' audience and must compensate by maintaining their epistemically superior position. How this is achieved linguistically formed part of the guru analysis (see 6.5).

6.2.2 Elevated viewpoint

The superconspiracy theory narrative reconstructs events and represents the world under the absolute control of an elite evil. Therefore, when considering its persuasive properties, an essential question is how the audience's viewpoint is positioned. The role of the audience has received very little focus in the current research on conspiracy theories. Nevertheless, Byford's concept of the DIY detective is helpful. It recognises the self-perception of the discourse community as active participants because 'conspiracy theorists do not see

themselves as raconteurs of alluring stories, but as investigators and researchers' (Byford 2011: 88). Furthermore, Harambam and Aupers' (2017) ethnographic research in the Dutch conspiracy milieu concerns how those within the milieu self-identify and position themselves in relation to the mainstream and within the milieu itself. Central to viewpoint and persuasion, I am particularly interested in the use of the adjective 'elevated' in Parker's discussion of conspiracy theory.

> Once we inhabit the elevated universe of conspiracy there can be no unexplained residues, everything has a cause, everything has meaning and nothing can be left out. (Parker 2001: 193)

The concept that the audience can become elevated is conceptually close to a vantage-point positioning in terms of viewpoint construction, akin to a birds' eye view (Fenster 2008: 125). This elevated positioning also enables a sense of spiritual transcendence (Berlet 2009: 44, Bohal 2015: 49), which Icke claims to offer. The first part of the analysis will investigate the viewpoint positioning of the audience and its relationship with persuasion via pronoun usage and audience address. To this end, I also analyse the process of scapegoating the out-group, a necessary component of an all-encompassing world-view whereby one source is ultimately responsible. Furthermore, the analysis will also consider how foregrounded critical issues in the mainstream media and political rhetoric become reconfigured and backgrounded in favour of the conspiracy theory narrative. Ultimately, the relationship between the in-group and the out-group will be assessed.

6.3 Methodology

In the following analysis, I apply Cap's proximization model supplemented by Text World Theory, which I outline further below. The analysis is situated as an innovative cross-fertilisation between two frameworks with compatible socio-cognitive underpinnings. I therefore address Cap's assertion that 'the rapidly growing, intergeneric field of CDS is in need of new, interdisciplinary methodologies that will allow it to account for an increasingly broader spectrum of discourses, genres and thematic domains' (2014: 16). Text World Theory is predominantly applied to literature and non-political genre texts (albeit Browse 2016, 2018a and 2018b), whereas the proximization model is typically political in its applications. Although the proximization model was initially to analyse quantitative political rhetoric data that legitimises preventative action against an external threat, exploratory applications also include health, environmental, cyber-terrorism discourses (Cap 2014: 16), and discourses construing COVID-19 as an imminent threat (Alshanawani 2021). The analysis demonstrates application of the proximization model to qualitative data and expands its explanatory potential by incorporating a discussion of ontological layers, faciliated by Text World Theory. I elucidate how the epistemic status of a conspiracy guru's claims are unverifiable, but overcome by claiming traces of evidence in everyday life; therefore, appearing verifiable.

6.3.1 Text World Theory

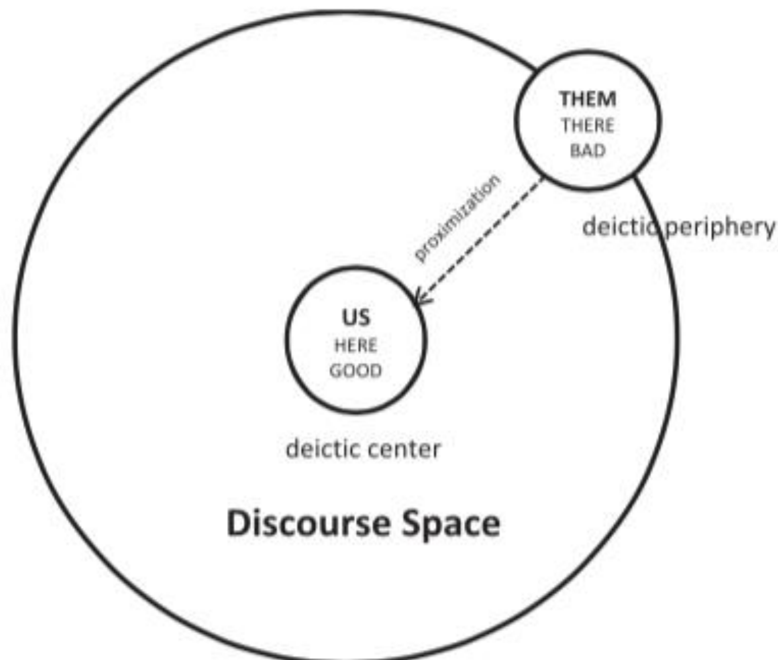
Text World Theory is a cognitive discourse processing framework designed to analyse the reception and production of discourse, capturing the underlying cognitive processes. It is fundamentally context-sensitive, ideally suited for a SCDS approach to the contextually bound phenomena of conspiracy theories. It is based on the cognitive scientific premise that language reflects thought. It originates with Paul Werth's seminal work, which is detailed in

his posthumous monograph *Text Worlds: Representing Conceptual Space in Discourse* (1999), in which the main concepts of the framework are laid out. Text world theory has been subsequently developed most notably by Gavins in *Text World Theory* (2007) and has been applied to fiction (Hidalgo Downing 2000a and 2000b) and advertising discourse (Hidalgo Downing 2000c), emotional response and real readers (Whiteley 2010, 2011, 2016), spoken discourse (van der Bom 2015, Lugea 2016a, Spanish language discourses (Lugea 2012, 2016a) and code-switching (Lugea 2016b), film narratives (Lugea 2013) and dramatic play-texts (Cruickshank and Lahey 2010), aiding web-based diagramming software (Lugea et al. 2017), religious dialogues (Kohn 2013), children's reading practices (Jackson 2019), experimental theatre (Gibbons 2016) and pedagogy (Cushing 2018; Cushing and Giovanelli 2019; Giovanelli 2010, 2016). Despite providing a valuable toolkit for a SCDS analysis as a framework that can handle contextualised text analysis at a discourse level, it is relatively unexplored in explicit CDA and SCDS applications. Key terms are explored in 6.3.3.

6.3.2 Proximization theory

The second toolkit I utilise in the analysis is proximization theory (Cap, 2006, 2008, 2010, 2012, 2013a, 2013b, 2015): 'where spatial cognition and CDA meet in a conspicuous way' (Cap 2018: 103). 'Proximization' as an analytical concept was proposed by Cap to examine political rhetoric concerning the attempts of the United States government to legitimise military action against Iraq (Cap, 2006, 2008, 2010). It then developed into Proximization Theory (Cap 2013b), integrating work from Chovanec (2010), Cienki, Kaal and Maks (2010), Dunmire (2011), Filardo Llamas (2010) and Hart (2010). Proximization theory provides the theoretical basis for a 'cognitive-pragmatic model of crisis and threat construction' (Cap 2013a: 16) and is aligned with SCDS (Hart and Cap 2014: 7). The theory's central premise is that a speaker attempts to legitimise action against an external threat based on the proposition that the identified threat is becoming increasingly closer: spatially, temporally and ideologically. The encroachment poses an imminent threat upon the in-group's safety and well-being, both physical and ideological, 'a forced construal operation meant to evoke closeness of the external threat, to solicit legitimisation of preventive means' (Cap 2017: 6). The theory is operationalised via the proximization model, which utilises 'concepts such as Discourse Space, deictic center or deictic periphery, [as such] proximization theory acknowledges the primacy of spatial cognition in language use and the construction of discourse' (Cap 2013a: 18). The diagram below visually represents the distal out-group encroaching upon the in-group.

Figure 6.1 The discourse space



(Cap 2017: 6)

It must be noted that the model was designed for political discourse using Iraq war legitimisation rhetoric; its primary use for conspiracy theory rhetoric is the general concept of the threatening movement of the out-group towards the in-group in the deictic centre. Conspiracy theory rhetoric is not necessarily a discursive vehicle to solicit legitimisation of preventative action; indeed, I would argue that for the most part, it serves to distance the milieu from the mainstream ideologically and tends to lack a defined course of action, as that is not usually its primary purpose.

6.3.3 The discourse space and key terms

The *discourse space* is defined as 'a pragmatic form of context used to structure knowledge contained in a discourse. Discourse spaces are created, updated or evoked by an agent who tries to generate or understand a discourse' (Moulin 1995). The discourse space is conceptually similar to text- and discourse-worlds in Text World Theory. However, Text World Theory makes a critical differentiation between the *text-world* and the *discourse-world*. Text- and discourse-worlds are ontologically distinct with *text-worlds* being a mental representation created in response to spoken or written text. The *discourse-world* represents the 'real-world' and is where the discourse participants (speakers, writers and audience) are located. The 'real' world or the discourse-world helps form a data bank of knowledge that enables people to interpret the world around them and the people who exist on the same ontological level, in other words, with 'all the personal and cultural knowledge those participants bring with them to the language situation' (Gavins 2007: 9–10). The text-world exists on a distinct ontological level and is one of many 'worlds' created as the product of processing discourse in its many forms. Therefore, knowledge from a participant's discourse-world is evoked in order to

process a given text and thus create text-worlds. The discourse-world is *participant-accessible* because the participants exist on the same ontological plane and can verify given information. On the other hand, the text-world is not participant-accessible because it is ontologically distinct. This means that discourse participants cannot verify information in the text-world but enactors (text characters) can, as they exist in the text-world. Therefore, the text-world is *enactor-accessible* (Stockwell 2002: 142).

A further – crucial – ontological layer is added with *modal-worlds*, which are creations of either text-world enactors (the characters in a story) or the authorial voice. *Modal-worlds* symbolise the thoughts (*epistemic modal-worlds*), feelings (*boulomaic modal-worlds*) and obligations (*deontic modal-worlds*) of the speaker. They have distinct spatio-temporal parameters – instantiated by deixis – and *world-building elements* (time, location, enactors and objects) to the text-world (Gavins 2007: 73). Paramount to the following analysis, modal-worlds – due to their ontological status – cannot be checked for factuality by the reader/listener as only that which exists in the discourse-world is accessible. Therefore, they must assess the trustworthiness and competence of (in this case) David Icke to decide whether or not a modal-world presented as 'fact' is indeed 'fact' or not. As such, text world theory allows a more nuanced discussion of the conspiracy theory discourse space from two aspects. Firstly, the differentiation between the text-world, discourse-world and modal-worlds and their accessibility enables a discussion of ontological layers. Secondly, it enables a discussion of the epistemic status of Icke's claims which are also central to his self-positioning as a guru imparting esoteric knowledge.

The *Discourse Space* takes the premise that the processing of discourse necessitates the construction of a Discourse Space in which 'not only entities, but also events are observed and organised relative to a ''deictic center''' (Cap 2013: 18). Regarding Text World Theory, Werth notes that deixis is 'central to the conceptual basis of language […] the notion of location in space' (1999: 4) and that 'conceptual space is modelled upon physical space' (Werth 1999: 7). A reader or listener will create a mental picture to comprehend a text (8), whether visual or more abstract, as the language used is metaphorical in its conceptual structure, utilising space and time language to describe abstract notions (15–16). 'Within the proximization approach deixis goes beyond its "primary" status of a formal tool for the coding of elements of context to make all communication possible. It becomes, eventually, an instrument (or a component thereof) for legitimisation, persuasion and social coercion' (Cap 2013a: 18).

Referring to the proximization model, the central circle (in Figure 6.1) is labelled 'US, HERE, GOOD', representing the deictic centre: 'the deictic center serves as such a reference point. The deictic centre is defined as the 'anchoring point that utterers and interpreters construct or impose during verbal interaction' (Chilton 2004: 56) and is concerned with 'two conceptualisation schemata: that of a container, having its elements inside, outside and near the borderline and that of the centre-periphery, with elements being manoeuvred inwards and outwards' (Wieczorek 2009: 120). The circle denoting the deictic centre is called *inside-the-deictic-centre (IDC)*, which is represented via lexico-grammatical markers (noun phrases) construing the in-group. Conversely, the circle situated on the periphery of the diagram, stating 'THEM, THERE, BAD', is the deictic periphery and thus deictically distal from the in-group. This circle is denoted the *outside-the-deictic-centre (ODC)* and is commonly represented by noun phrases referring to the antagonistic out-group and verb phrases denoting their spatial, temporal and axiological (ideological) encroachment on the IDC (Cap 2013b: 30). There are 'three lexico-grammatical frameworks, "spatial", "temporal" and "axiological" reflecting the functions of the three strategies of proximization' (Cap 2013b: 103). The *spatial axis* represents space and can conceptualise a physical encroachment from

the ODC to the IDC. The *temporal axis* represents time; it can represent increasing proximity to the present moment. The *axiological axis* is ideological, representing metaphorical distance and proximity of the 'alien and antagonistic values' of an out-group to the 'home values' of the IDC: the 'us' (Cap 2018: 98). These concepts enable an analysis of the dynamic relationship between the 'us' and the 'them', systematically accounting for conceptual movement – forced construal – via a lexico-grammatical labelling framework, and thus developing on the previous work of Deictic Space Theory. The proximization model thus enables analysis of in-group out-group dynamic relationships at both linguistic and conceptual levels, whereas in text world theory, it is more conceptual (Cap 2017: 4–5).

The proximization model is designed to cope with quantitative data sets as it provides a framework for analysis that enables the systematic labelling of text. Nevertheless, more fine-grained qualitative analyses are also possible, which enables me to focus on the interplay between discourse participant positioning with the worlds Icke creates 'an essentially micro-textual perspective, providing organised sets of examples of the most salient/frequent lexical builders of spatial, temporal and axiological proximization' (Cap 2013b: 73). Furthermore, the model accommodates an all-encompassing world-view which can be adapted to integrate viewpoint analysis and, to this end, I use text world theory (Gavins 2007, Werth 1999). Furthermore, as with any CDA approach to discourse, for 'maximal explanatory power they should be approached from an interdisciplinary perspective' (Cap 2013b: 73). The following section will outline the object of analysis and provide the relevant context to capture the situatedness of superconspiracy rhetoric as a heterodox phenomenon.

6.4 Analysis data

The data is a viral interview of Great Britain's most prominent conspiracy theorist, David Icke, and his re-interpretation of the 2020 COVID-19 global pandemic (London Real 2020a, see Appendix 6.1 for the transcript). It was uploaded online and spread rapidly, being repeatedly uploaded despite attempts by international social media platforms to ban it. The interview was broadcast on 18th March 2020 between Brian Rose: founder of londonreal.tv and David Icke. The interview went viral and developed into a 5-part series of 'long-form interviews' in response to the high viewing figures, the first reaching over 5 million views. Initially, the interview was streamed live on LondonReal and then posted on various streaming platforms, including YouTube, before being removed by the YouTube administration over a month after it was posted and was repeatedly uploaded by different users and available on other sites, such as Vimeo. The second and third interviews were immediately removed due to their incendiary content claiming 5G technology as the real cause of the COVID-19 pandemic.

6.4.1 Brian Rose and London Real (LondonReal.tv)

Brian Rose, founder and host of London Real, interviews David Icke in the videos. The YouTube video is an excerpt, from the first 45 minutes, of the 2-hour interview, which was available on londonreal.tv. London Real is a website that posts interview videos with influential figures on various topics such as physical and mental fitness, trading and plant medicine. The general themes in the interviews posted on London Real around this period were about personal strength, physical health and strengthening the immune system (*Create A Wall Of Armor For Your Immune System: How To Protect Against COVID-19*), mental fortitude and overcoming fear (*Coronavirus Anxiety Is Real: How To Stay Mentally Strong During The COVID-19 Pandemic*), rediscovering one's true self (*How Psychedelics Can Help You Put Your Past Behind You and Find Your Purpose In Life*) and business success (*How*

To Profit From The Electric Car and Autonomous Driving Revolution (It's NOT Tesla). As such, Rose's content is compatible with various milieux, including the Intellectual Dark Web, due to his renegade positioning and willingness to entertain politically unfashionable views. His guests range from the more well-known and mainstream, such as philosopher Alain de Botton and journalist Jon Ronson, to the more polemic, such as Canadian academic Jordan Peterson. London Real also offers training in business acceleration and public speaking. Its mission is 'to create a mass scale transformation of humanity into a fully empowered, conscious and cooperative species.' Brian Rose positions himself and the website as trailblazing and talks openly about his own transformation from city banker to entrepreneur, including an epiphanic experience at Richard Branson's Swiss chalet. He set up London Real as a response to being disillusioned with the sensationalist and sound-byte nature of the mainstream media. His advocacy for free speech is his central justification for facilitating the Icke interviews, despite explicitly stating that he does not agree with everything Icke claims. London Real joined YouTube in 2011 and had 200 million views with 1.41 million subscribers as of 26.03.2020, rising to 2.04 million by 16.11.2021.

6.4.2 David Icke

David Icke is a well-known professional conspiracy theorist, commonly associated with his infamous reptilian thesis, which claims public figures, such as the British Royal Family, are alien reptiles seeking complete global control. He regularly speaks to large audiences around the world. On 1st May, it was reported that David Icke's Facebook page had been taken down by site administration due to repeated publishing of misinformation about the pandemic. However, other pages with the same content, such as clips from his videos, remain (Quinn 2020). The following day, YouTube deleted David Icke's channel (David Icke 2020), echoing Alex Jones' public deplatforming after the Sandy Hook conspiracy theory controversy in 2018, whereby he was simultaneously de-platformed from several major social media websites. Prior to the banning, Icke had almost 800 000 YouTube subscribers. In addition, many of Icke's videos – usually either monologues from his shows, vlogs, and interviews – are posted on other channels; therefore, it is likely that his videos – the most-watched having around four million views – have been watched by many more from repostings by other channels and websites. For instance, one of David Icke's videos linking 5G to COVID-19 has been viewed over thirty million times, rising 1 million on Patreon and spikes in traffic after the interview was pulled (Quinn 2020).

Icke positions himself as a courageous renegade – representer of the underdog everyman – who has railed against the mainstream despite great ridicule. The public derision was particularly prevalent in 1990s England after an infamous interview with Terry Wogan where he claimed to be 'the son of God' (BBC News 2020) with Wogan's response that the audience was laughing at him, not with him. Icke often mentions this as proof of his battle for truth. His numerous talks are designed to guide his audience towards special knowledge and the real truth (a pending global technocratic dystopia) behind apparent reality portrayed by mainstream institutions such as the media and government. He is an ideal representative example of contemporary classical conspiracy theory production, typically bombarding the audience with reinterpreted information in the typical style of improvisational millennialism.

6.4.3 Context

This section focuses on Icke's relationship with the mainstream media and how his central thesis is disregarded in favour of reporting on temporary narrative inclusions, which are

deemed dangerous due to their potential actionability. The generated publicity is then utilised by Icke (integrated into his monologues and interviews) to bolster his heterodox positioning in renegade identity status and strengthen the sense of the knowledge being special, powerful and dangerous to authorities. Therefore, it is necessary to outline the link between Icke and 5G as it was the impetus behind his YouTube ban and associated mainstream media coverage. Icke incorporated 5G into his second and third interviews, but it is not even mentioned in the first, which concerned his central thesis: the New World Order superconspiracy theory. The theory linking 5G and COVID-19 had already spread by other people and created the momentum for a series of attacks on 5G masts in England before Icke bricolaged it into his interpretation. Thus, the interviews gained more views by piggybacking on the traction of the 5G theories.

On 2nd April, *The Daily Mail* published a report of a woman verbally abusing two workers laying fiberoptic cables for 5G in East London (Jackson 2020). On 14th April, it was reported in *The Guardian* that one of these masts had been serving NHS Nightingale hospital. Furthermore, BT engineers 'had been physically or verbally assaulted by members of the public who wrongly believed 5G triggered coronavirus. Some staff have received death threats' (Sweney and Waterson 2020). Over 50 incidents of abuse were reported in April, according to Openreach (Hern 2020). Several celebrities have been cited for having endorsed these theories, including boxer Amir Khan, Hollywood actor Woody Harrelson (Ostlere 2020) and British television presenters Eamonn Holmes (BBC 2020) and Amanda Holden (Pike 2020).

After the attacks, major news publications which had previously published content on 5G recategorised the narratives as conspiracy theories. For instance, *The Daily Star* reported on 24th March about 5G conspiracy theories in which the symptoms were claimed to be because of 5G, not COVID-19. Its original headline was 'Fears 5G wifi networks could be acting as 'accelerator' for the disease', but it was then changed to 'Activists in bizarre claim 5G could be acting as 'accelerator' for disease' reflecting the crackdown on the spread of the conspiracy theory (Bateman 2020b). The same reporter had written an article for the newspaper the previous month entitled 'Fears UK's new 5G network could 'lower sperm counts and sterilise young men' EXCLUSIVE: Scientists and academics are among those concerned about the high-speed network's electro-magnetic radiation having a harmful effect on young men's reproductive systems' (Bateman 2020a).

On 6th April 2020, Brian Rose interviewed Icke again. Several hours beforehand, he posted a YouTube video on his channel (London Real 2020b). He spoke directly to the camera, saying that, despite warnings that authorities do not want the interview to go ahead and warning that his channel will be 'shadow banned', he is going to go ahead with the interview as, though he does not believe in everything Icke says, he believes in free speech. The second interview was broadcast live with around 50–60 thousand live viewers at any point. Rose posted the interview on his YouTube channel, and within hours it was taken down by site administration due to its content suggesting a link between 5G and contracting COVID-19 and in light of contemporaneous attacks to 5G masts in the United Kingdom.

After the second interview, Rose posted another video on his YouTube channel where he spoke directly to the camera, telling his viewers that he was reinforcing his website and had reposted the banned video to the Vimeo website (the same website which I was able to access and download the video). He then explained how he felt that he had been building up to this moment for nine years by gaining an established audience, the interview skills and technical resources to create the video. Rose saw the day as about 'freedom of speech […] today, we did put the BBC out of business' and that he could not have done the interview on

a mainstream platform. He referred to the content as groundbreaking and grateful for his journey and finished by saying ‘question everything, go into your fear’ (London Real 2020c). David Icke also posted a video on the same day (7th April) urging his viewers to watch and share the banned video (David Icke 2020).

In the second interview, Icke mentioned 5G. This was after the news reports of broadband engineers being questioned and 5G masts being burnt after the first interview (Waterson 2020a). Icke did not talk about 5G in the first interview with Rose, which is a perfect illustration of the improvisational nature of his narratives, not only in bricolaging disparate information from diverse genres of material but also in his response to the public. Icke was responding to another theory around the pandemic, proving popular online about 5G: an elite cover-up that the real cause of the deaths is 5G and the erection of 5G masts. The 5G theory had been circulating on social media with videos of, for example, people in cars claiming that all the birds have died near a 5G mast. These videos had subsequently been banned from the leading social media platforms.

According to Wired magazine, the origin of the 5G COVID-19 conspiracy theory was located to ‘an obscure Belgian doctor'. The theory initially circulated the Dutch-speaking conspiracy milieu and then, by mid-February, had gained wider traction via major social media platforms such as YouTube and Facebook. It initially circulated in anti-5G groups, and then in the wider conspiracy milieu through online platforms such as *Infowars.* ‘On 22nd January, Belgian newspaper *Het Laatste Nieuws* published an interview with Kris Van Kerckhoven, a general practitioner from Putte, near Antwerp. “5G is life-threatening, and no one knows it” […] the *Het Laatste Nieuws* journalist pointed out that since 2019 a number of 5G cell towers had been built around Wuhan’ (Temperton 2020). On 24th April, it was reported in *The Guardian* that a ‘former Vodafone boss’ (who had only worked there for a year prior to 5G), Jonathan James, an evangelical pastor preaching at churches in Bedfordshire ‘is the previously unidentified individual who reached millions of people’ claiming COVID-19 was fabricated to cover up the negative health impacts of 5G (Waterson 2020b). As already discussed, 5G is not the focus of this analysis, despite being foregrounded in mainstream media narratives. Icke’s central thesis is the core rhetoric in superconspiracy rhetoric and the conspiracy milieu, whereas 5G is a temporary addition.

6.4.4 Interview summary

The video begins with an initial advert for London Real, reiterating key themes around personal and collective transformation. The interview starts with Rose introducing Icke as ‘David Icke, the English writer and public speaker known since the nineteen nineties as a professional conspiracy theorist calling yourself a full-time investigator into who and what is really controlling the world’. Rose then outlines his interpretation of the virus, which is that he believes it is naturally occurring, that he is compliant with government regulations and is ready to get it and achieve immunity but questions the measures to quarantine everyone at the expense of the economy. Rose also lists statistics around the number of cases and the current and projected economic situation. He then asks Icke for his interpretation. Icke responds with his central thesis, explaining the global Orwellian state plan, which he describes as a ‘Hunger Games society’ (an intertextual reference to *The Hunger Games,* a dystopian book and film series, see 6.8): a hierarchy whereby the 1% control everyone via a ‘vicious, merciless police-military state to impose the will of the 1% on the population and to prevent the population challenging the 1%’. He predicts that the global state will be a technocracy controlled by smart technology and artificial intelligence, with people merging with AI by 2030.

6.5 The guru

There are five analyses in total. Firstly, I discuss the discursive construction of Icke as a guru (6.5), which provides the basis for the analysis on the viewpoint positioning of the discourse participants (6.6). Subsequently, the characterisation of the out-group is discussed in detail, including scapegoating and underpinning anti-elitist ideology (6.7). Section 6.8 analyses intertextual references, particularly to dystopian futures. The following section then discusses how the narrative is reconfigured to background the virus (6.9), and the final section discusses Icke's construal of space and time, creating spatio-temporal proximization towards the in-group on the deictic centre from the out-group (6.10).

Icke's image, as a professional conspiracy theorist, requires that he both establish himself as aligned with and superior to the audience. He overtly displays his working-class, renegade image to align himself with those who self-identify with either or both categories. The majority of Icke's videos are monologues to the camera. When he is interviewed, there is almost complete domination of the narrative, with the speaker rarely contributing. In the analysis data, he quickly regains the floor when Rose is speaking (either just him or with one other person, usually an interviewer from the conspiracy milieu and occasionally the mainstream media). Icke has an informal style in both his clothing choices but also his language. Clothing plays an important part in constructing ethos (Browse 2018a: 45), and his informal style is a signal for the audience to see him as an 'everyman' and thus 'one of us', particularly in contrast with the more formally dressed Rose. In addition, minimalist stage apparatus is used, which is also applicable to Icke's homemade-style vlogs from his home office and his stage appearances which usually just involve him and a projector screen with homemade slides.

Integral to Icke's image is his self-projection as a guru. There are over seventy-five intermittent self-references reiterating Icke's continued performance of relaying the details of the cult's plan to the 'people'. Nineteen of these references are instances are of Icke's referring back to his alleged historical warnings. The first-person pronoun textually evidences the references, a predicate denoting Icke disseminating his key information about the cult, the present perfect (continuous) temporal parameters and/or a temporal adverbial phrase, such as 'I've been pointing out', 'I've been saying', 'I've been investigating' and 'I've referred'. In the other instances, the first person pronoun usually denotes a critical evaluation, for instance, 'I would hold back' and 'I question'. In the following text-world analysis, I analyse his guru image in more fine-grained details.

The diagram (6.2) is a text-world representation of the core thesis described by Icke in the first part of his first major turn. Icke initiates a text-world: 'for 30 years I've been warning people' set by the unfinished temporal parameters of the recent past via the present perfect continuous 'I've been warning'. Icke is situated as active as he initiates the movement within the text-world. He is also establishing himself as credible due to his campaign's longevity, publishing, and desire to inform people of the information he is about to say, albeit unspecified, but indicating his relentless pursuit 'in every other way I can'. Accordingly, Icke sets himself up as a guide to the people. The collective noun 'people' is unspecified, albeit implicating Rose and the audience alongside others who watched or read Icke's material or attended public events. Icke thus constructs the audience as needing to be guided and thus passivised grammatically in the object position.

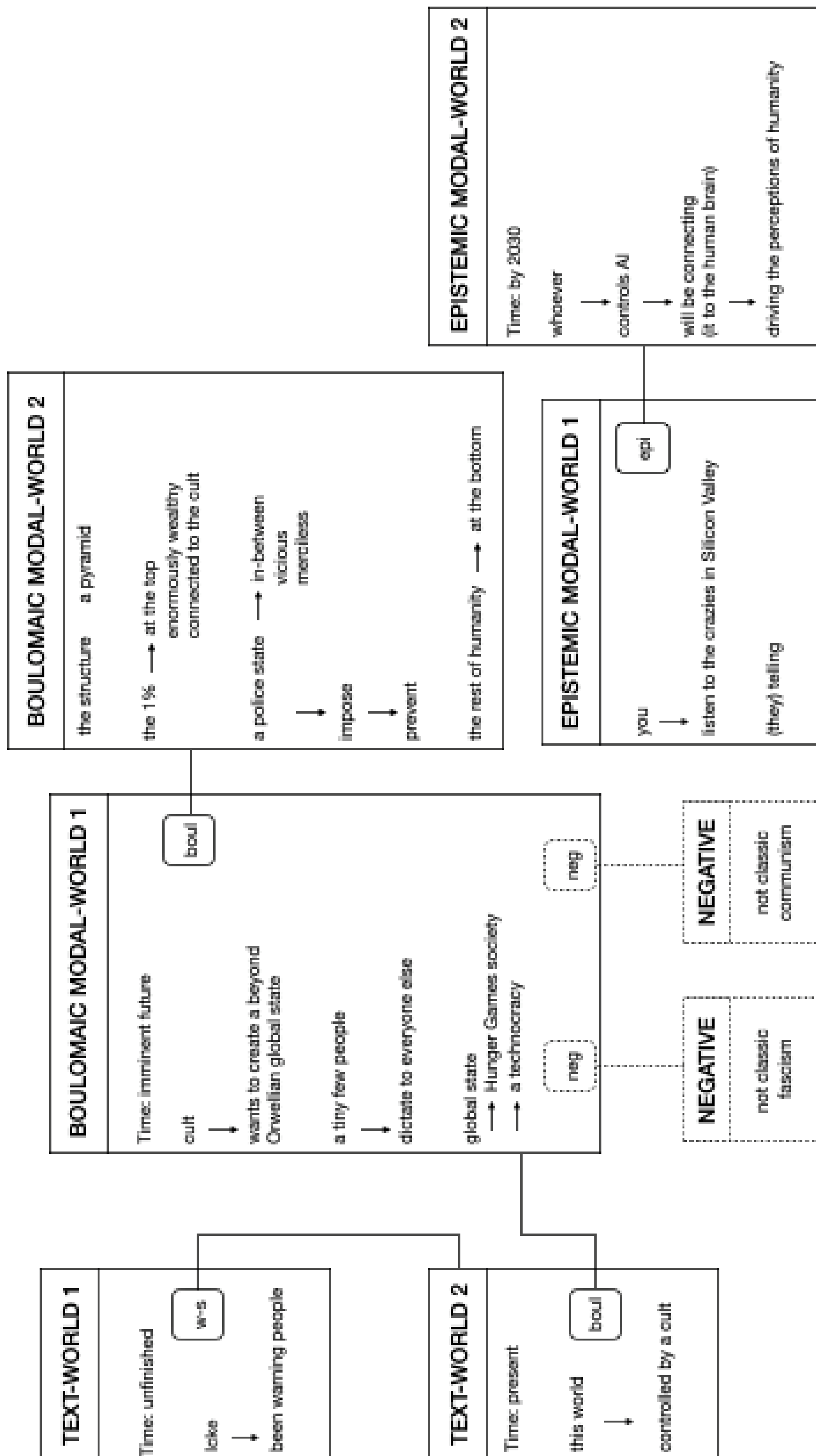
A second text-world is then created as Icke begins to detail his core message that 'this world is controlled by a cult', a text-world of vast spatial proportions with the function-advancer 'a cult'. The initial text-worlds are participant-accessible as Icke is a member of the discourse-

world. Icke, Rose and the audience exist on the same ontological level; thus, as a default setting, it increases the reliability of the text-worlds based on the possibility of verification. Rose can confirm or ask for clarification, and the audience could theoretically communicate with Icke. The assumption is that Icke is adhering to Grice's maxims of quality and cooperation (1989), that he will not be willfully untruthful (Gavins 2007: 77).

A world-switch is then created as Icke describes the secret desires of the cult in a boulomaic modal-world, which is an unrealised future world. In this world, the power structure is a metaphorical pyramid 'at the top is the '1%' who are described with the material intention processes of 'enormously wealthy' and 'connected to the cult', the cult maintaining their mysterious location of somewhere near the top, behind the scenes. The 'rest of humanity' is at the bottom and powerless: 'dependent on the 1%'. In the middle of the hierarchical pyramid is a police state, negatively shaded as 'vicious' and 'merciless. The predicates 'dictate' and 'impose' infer an autocratic society in which the majority are at the mercy of the 'will of the 1%' and, ultimately, the 'cult'. Icke is describing a world of extreme financial inequality and without freedom.

The division between an 'us' (Icke, Rose, audience) and a 'them' (the cult) is widened in the boulomaic modal-world as the cult goes from controlling the world to desiring a future dystopia. The boulomaic marker, twice repeated: 'wants', initiates the world, assigned agency with the anaphoric, depersonalised 'it', inferring a sense of inhumanity and singular unity. Icke explicitly indicates that the cult desires such a future, which by logical extension would make it a utopia for them but a dystopia for the discourse participants and general humanity. The world is by far the most detailed one initially. However, if the audience has no direct contact with a text-world entity, even if they exist in the discourse-world, they remain a text-world entity in a different ontological domain (Gavins 2007: 77). Crucially, the boulomaic modal-world is enactor-accessible as it is a future desired plan of 'the cult' as described by Icke. The audience can only access the modal-world via Icke as the cult not only exist on a different ontological level and is thus unable to verify or deny the claim but also an unspecified, homogenous group of unknown location. Regarding deictic positioning, the cult is constructed as almost maximally distal: ideologically (evil), spatially (unknown but seemingly omnipresent and thus intangible at its evil core) and, in a way, temporally (existing in the present but with a powerful reach stretching throughout history and into the future).

<u>Figure 6.2 Text-world diagram of Icke’s superconspiracy core thesis</u>



The boulomaic modal-worlds representing the cult's desires and plans are both the centripetal point of the entire narrative and noteworthy in that they proffer special access to the cult's desires. They represent a deep distrust in authority and an attempt to demystify and make power structures transparent. The narrative focuses exclusively on proving the cult's plan which, as already noted, is an enactor-accessible boulomaic modal-world. Strictly speaking, an enactor-accessible modal-world is unverifiable by the participants and thus less reliable than a verifiable participant-accessible world. However, a conspiracy theory discourse proposes and argues for its verifiability by reconstructing worldly events through a conspiracy lens. Epistemologically, the non-verifiability of claims is problematic as Gavins states 'the text-worlds created by text-world enactors who do not occupy the discourse-world are processed differently as a direct consequence of this. In text world theory terms, these worlds are only enactor-accessible text-worlds' (2007: 77). A level of trust in the speaker is thus necessary as the cult exists on the ontological level of the text-world with no tangible discourse-world representation. Seemingly, the perceived discourse veracity relies upon belief in the ideology as it is unverifiable (see Bohal 2015 for a discussion on ideology in superconspiracy theory discourse). However, Icke attempts to subvert the ontological and epistemological status of the cult. Firstly, Icke does not have access to the cult other than indirectly in the form of 'clues'. The clues will often take the form of negatively shaded events, such as a national quarantine – which is reinterpreted as Icke's phrase 'totalitarian tiptoe' in action to slowly deplete freedoms and destroy the economy. Conversely, the mainstream narrative is health-centric, to stem the spread of a global pandemic. The reinterpretation is then taken as evidence of the plan. On this premise, Icke is attempting to evidence his claim that the cult exists on the ontological level of the discourse-world.

By presenting the boulomaic modal-world as categorically asserted fact and integral to understanding how the world really works, he structures his entire interpretation of worldly events upon this premise; thus, the discourse is a presentation of reality. When a discourse is presented as factual, the ontological boundary is narrowed as 'transcending the divide between a discourse-world and a text-world is not particularly problematic for the participants in a factual, informative or instructive discourse' (Gavins 2007: 84). Therefore, an ideal audience would interpret the 'real-world' through a conspiratorial lens, as detailed by Icke. The notion of ontological boundaries is also relevant to the deictic positioning of the discourse participants; thus, the next part of the analysis is concerned with how the audience becomes implicated in the text-world.

6.6 Elevated viewpoint

The next part of the analysis is concerned with the use of the second-person pronoun and its multiple functions. Together, they construe an elevated viewpoint whereby the discourse participants are able to see 'the bigger picture' and are thus situated at a vantage position. In the following excerpt, Icke explains what he calls 'the totalitarian tiptoe'.

> Here's another version which I call no problem reaction solution where **you** don't need a real problem **you** just need the perception of one weapons of mass destruction in Iraq and **you** still have the ability to provide **your** society-changing solution the stablemate problem-reaction-solution is what I call the totalitarian tiptoe where **you** start at A and you know **you**'re going to Z but **you** know if **you** go in too big a leap <u>people</u> will look up from the game show and the latest Simon Cowell and say what's going on what's going on because the change is so great so **you** do it in as bigger steps as **you** can towards your outcome but not so fast or big that **you** alert too many

> people to the fact that it's a pattern what **you** want people to believe is everything is random and I have this other phrase which relates to all this – know the outcome and *you'll* see the journey- if you don't know where this world is being taken by this cult then everything seems random coronavirus random climate change random economic crash random but when *you* know where we're being taken *you* know the outcome this Hunger Games structure society now the apparently random events become clear.

Put simply, the totalitarian tiptoe refers to the process of the cult covertly shifting in small increments – so not enough people realise what is happening – towards the goal of a totalitarian one-world government (the Hunger Games society). The start of the excerpt is focused on the actions of the cult; the pronominal 'you' (in bold) is placed in the subject position, indicating that it is the cult enacting, with the positioning of the underlined 'people' (thus implicating everyone else: Icke, Rose, the audience and the unknowing masses) in the passivised object position. The present simple tense also reifies the epistemic status of the information as it is framed as a generalised fact, representing how the world is perceived to work. The use of the second-person pronoun in bold signifies Icke mind-modelling the cult's thought processes and thus deictically positioning the discourse participants from the cult's viewpoint. It briefly narrows the ontological boundary between the two referents and ideally evokes a sense in the audience that they are 'in the mind' of the cult. At this point, there is an evoked sense of proximity to the enemy, at the very least proximity to the cult's thought processes which are causally linked to proximal outcomes co-textually present: 'coronavirus' and 'economic crash' and in the discourse participants' daily lives.

Double deixis is a central concept in understanding the multiple 'you' function (Herman 1994, 1997) as the second-person pronoun both refers inwards towards the cult in the text-world and outwards towards the audience in the discourse-world. The audience is thus superimposed deictically onto the cult as spatio-temporally situated in the text-world (Herman 1994: 390). The projection is not relational in that it evokes an empathic closeness (this is a completely oppositional reading as the cult have been defined as the dichotomic out-group), but an attempt to gain access to the thought processes of the out-group. I would argue that the direct address creates a sense of proximity between Icke and the audience, as he frames the information as him imparting wisdom.

The nominal 'people' can be split into two distinct groups: those who know what is really going on (the discourse participants and wider conspiracy milieu), and those who are oblivious (the unknowing masses). The same can be considered for the inclusive pronoun 'we'. This is not only evident from the co-text, for example that 'people' are too busy subsumed in light entertainment to notice or 'look up from the game show' but also in the multiple deictic functions of the second-person pronoun. For instance, 'if you don't know' refers to the people who are unaware (and even the historical selves of the discourse participants) and 'when you know' refers to the discourse participants/ conspiracy milieu.

The multiple deictic functions of the second-person pronoun enable a sense of elevated viewpoint as the discourse participants move between being deictically aligned with the out-group and the in-group in the text-world, as well as being privileged to the 'bigger picture' via the descriptions of the out-group's movements and impacts textually represented as active agents. In discourse-analytical terms, this is a discourse space of vast spatio-temporal proportions.

6.7 Scapegoating the out-group

Icke's initial declaration 'this world is controlled by a cult' clearly marks the out-group as 'it wants to create a beyond Orwellian global state'. As a unified, homogenous nominalisation with heavily pejorative associations relating to religious extremism and idolatry, the group denoted as controlling the world is imbued with intangibility with 'no borders' and omnipotence as 'it operates in all the at least major countries and in fact all the countries in the end'. Furthermore, those within the conspiracy milieu who are aware of the 'Satanic Panic' of the 1980s (Frankfurter 2006, Hughes 2017) or have read or listened to Icke's other material (for instance *The Biggest Secret* 1998) may well make schematic associations with the narrative that the elite controlling group partake in satanic rituals. Moreover, collectivisation obscures individual responsibility inferring their physical obscurity and indestructibility as 'ideologically, genericisation and collectivisation can serve to impersonalise social actors and perpetuate social stereotypes' (Hart 2014: 34). Throughout the interview, 'cult' is mentioned eleven times, with six being during his first long turn ('a cult' x2, 'the cult', 'this cult' x6 and 'this global cult'). Their initial emphasis would suggest an immediate foregrounding of 'the cult' as a prominent enactor in Icke's explanation of how the world works. However, this is not the case as the out-group is tripartite. The second part is the connected 1% who then mobilises the cult's plan via the authorities alongside the 1%, who are defined as

> A tiny few enormously wealthy people that actually are connected to this cult we now have a name for them we call them the 1% at the bottom of this pyramid in The Hunger Games society is basically the rest of humanity that is dependent upon the 1% and in between the two is a vicious, merciless police-military state to impose the will of the 1% on the population and to prevent the population challenging the 1%.

'1%' is mentioned eight times, four times in the first turn. Specific members of the 1% are named, such as 'the Rockefeller family which is fundamentally involved in this global cult'. Other instances of specifying individuals or specific groups within the 1% include, for instance, 'in this Gates World Economic Forum 1% simulation' and

> The World Economic Forum which has its meeting every year in Davos this is the 1% 1% and involved the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation Bill Gates the guy that wants to vaccinate the frickin world.

The '1%' are thus more accessible than the 'cult' as specific well-known figures are nominated albeit connected to global powerful organisations, such as the 'World Economic Forum', and specific families: 'the Rockefeller family' and 'the Rothschilds'.

> Rockefeller Foundation obviously is a front for the Rockefeller family which is fundamentally involved in this global cult in fact the Rothschilds and the Rockefellers were the creators of the World Health Organization which is there to control health policy and direct the perception of health in its all its forms from a central point.

The interview is dominated by a focus on the authorities, who also form part of the out-group, albeit the lesser powerful and sometimes represented as unknowing metaphorical puppets. Nevertheless, the majority of out-group references can be categorised as 'authorities'. For instance, metonymic country references include 'China' and genericisations: 'the authorities', 'officialdom' and specific organisations: 'World Health Organisation'.

Subgroups of the enemy include:-

1. Orthodoxy: ‘unquestioning pathetic mainstream media’, ‘mainstream doctors’, ‘mainstream authority’, ‘the mainstream everything’,’ officialdom’ and ‘the regime’.
2. Construed networks of large organisations: ‘massive 1% organisations’, ‘the authorities’, ‘gigantic corporations’, ‘these organisations’, ‘the media’, ‘Hollywood’ and ’the West’.
3. Specified large organisations: ‘Center for Disease Control’, ‘Amazon’, ‘Gavi’, ‘The Rockefeller Foundation’, ‘The World Health Organization’, ‘The World Economic Forum’, ‘The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation’, ‘Facebook’, ‘Google’, ‘The World Health Organization’, ‘YouTube’ and ‘this Gates World Economic Forum’.
4. Unspecified people: ‘somebody in a suit’ and ‘the crazies’.
5. Specific people: ‘Simon Cowell’, ‘Deborah Blix (sic: Birx)’, ‘Ted Ross’ (sic: Tedros Adhanom), ‘Bill Gates’ and ‘Prince Charles’.
6. Countries: ‘China’, ‘America’ and ‘Israel’.

The subgroups of the enemy that Icke identifies have been analysed specifically for their ideological properties in allegiance with Cap’s lexicogrammatical categorisations in the axiological proximization framework, specifically category two: ‘noun phrases construed as ODC [outside-the-deictic-centre: the out-group] negative values or value sets’ (Cap 2013b:122). Firstly, Icke’s pejorative ascription of ‘mainstream’ positions the discourse participants as heterodox – against the mainstream – which is a central characteristic of the conspiracy milieu. Secondly, the identified out-groups are more accessible to the discourse participants than the 1% and the completely inaccessible ‘cult', omnipresent, intangible and unified, homogenous entity. Put another way, the organisations and people construed as ‘authorities’ exist in the participants' discourse-world. On an ontological level, they are easier to verify; for instance, one could visit the YouTube headquarters or watch Prince Charles being interviewed. This helps create a sense of proximity in the cult's reach towards the unwitting masses; despite the key culprits still being inaccessible, there are named figures and organisations explicitly linked as a part of the out-group. Thirdly, the variety of nominalisations construed as the authorities reifies the omnipresence of the out-group, which span not only vast geographical space but also occupy key powerhouses: politics, the entertainment industry, the technology industry etc. All-in-all, the three hierarchical layers of the out-group: the cult, the 1% and the authorities, are construed as having vast power with a correlation between decreasing ontological accessibility and increasing responsibility for the imminent dystopia. The inference is that any attempt to combat the out-group would be near-impossible as the true culprits are intangible and non-specified.

Anti-elitist ideology permeates the construal of the out-group. For instance, the conspirators are characterised as disproportionately wealthy, hooking into social anxieties around the unfair distribution of wealth: ‘a tiny few enormously wealthy people that actually are connected to this cult’. Associating the out-group with dishonesty is vital in the delegitimisation of the official narrative generated by the mainstream.

> I question any figures coming out of mainstream authority I've been investigating the mainstream everything for 30 years and you know most of the time if they ever told the truth they would genetically implode from the shock so I question everything and if it stands up it stands up but I don't just take it because somebody in a suit has told me to.

In the above excerpt, Icke expresses his lack of trust in authorities and his self-perception of taking a questioning stance towards ‘the mainstream everything’. The scapegoat and how they are depicted reflects contemporary discontents. Upward classism is explored by

Zitelman (2020) via an empirical interview study. The study was conducted in the United States, France, Great Britain and Germany, uncovering that it is perceived as socially acceptable to openly criticise higher social classes and actively encouraged. The observation fits with Fiske, who states 'the knowledge that their prejudices and stereotypes are shared gives people social permission to express their biases, reinforcing their own and other people's stereotypes and prejudice' (2005: 44). People feel betrayed by the institutions that claim to protect them (Howell 2012: 431). As such, it is socially acceptable to overtly criticise groups considered disproportionately privileged with little concern of rebuttal. Scandals involving, for example, millionaire tax evasion become ammunition for making negative generalisations. Moreover, 'in most cases, feelings of hostility towards the rich are not expressed in such explicitly aggressive language. But prejudices against the rich are widespread in all strata of society' (Zitelmann 2020: xii). Thus, the act of generalising and homogenising the rich as – in the case of conspiracy theories – high in competence and low in warmth easily conforms to the culprit role in the conspiracy theory narrative.

The potential for scapegoating in conspiracy theories has been widely recognised (Berlet 2009: 15, Bilewicz and Krzeminski 2010, Goldzwig 2002, Hegstad 2014, Howell 2012, Imhoff and Bruder 2014, Kelley-Romano 2008, Knight 2000, Pipes 1997, Showalter 1997, Uscinski and Parent 2014) and 'scapegoats, those believed to be the conspirators' allies, henchmen, or collaborators' (Barkun 2016: 6) Moreover, the outlined negative characteristics align with those of a scapegoat (see Fiske 2005 and Glick 2005). A standard question in the conspiracy theory genre is 'cui bono?' or 'who benefits?' (deHaven-Smith 2014, Knight 2008, Dentith and Orr 2017, Madalina 2015, Sunstein and Vermeule 2009) Given the socio-economic hierarchy, it would appear to be those in power as they are in advantageous positions. Ideology around success and wealth is encoded in the pejorative characterisation of the out-group, for instance, 'gigantic corporations', 'somebody in a suit' and the frustration that large organisations are compliant with the system, such as 'unquestioning pathetic mainstream media'. Construals like this could be interpreted as believing the economic system is unfair to an outright rejection of capitalist values. Nevertheless, discontent permeating from the belief that the economy is rigged in favour of the rich has been found to be prevalent amongst the lower working classes in Great Britain (Killick 2020). Moreover, a lack of success in a society that encourages competition can lead to frustration, which may then be displaced onto a scapegoat (Zitelmann 2020: 86). Developed Western societies tend to covet wealth and success underpinned by meritocratic rhetoric when, in reality, wealth and success are relative concepts whereby it is not difficult to identify more affluent, more successful individuals or groups, even amongst the rich themselves.

6.8 Intertextual references

The dystopian element is marked by two intertextual references to popular dystopian narratives, in which tyrannical autocratic states wield complete control over a subjugated underclass. Icke's first description of the cult's plan for society is 'a beyond Orwellian Global State', followed a 'Hunger Games society'. They provide a richly detailed reference pool which any audience member who has knowledge of either of these popular narratives has immediate access to of what the future dystopia might look like. The adjective 'Orwellian' refers to George Orwell's book *1984* (Orwell 1948) which tells the story of an autocratic future dystopian police-state. Of the coinages Orwell uses in *1984*, several of them have entered into common parlance as intertextual references and are thus easily understood and accessed, including 'Room 101' (where one's worst nightmare comes true), 'thought police' (the police are able police people's thoughts) and 'Big Brother is watching you' (society is under constant surveillance by the authorities). The conceptual mapping between Orwell's

1984 and the boulomaic modal-world of the cult which Icke describes is thus fairly straightforward. 'Hunger Games' and 'Hunger Games society' also references a dystopia: *The Hunger Games*, originally a trilogy of novels (Collins 2008, 2009, 2010), followed by a prequel (Collins 2020) and subsequently a popular film series (*The Hunger Games* 2012, 2013, 2014 and 2015). The narrative tells the story of a society in which the rich people residing in the Capitol rule over the impoverished majority, pitting them against each other in an annual televised battle to the death.

Icke mentions Hunger Games ten times and Orwell(ian) four times in the interview. Besides acting as an economic illustration of autocratic dystopia, references to films and literature serve a second function. Further on in the interview, Icke mentions *Contagion* (a 2011 Hollywood film about a virus) once to illustrate 'pre-emptive programming where they they preempt something to put it into the subconscious mind even the conscious mind through Hollywood and then suddenly it kind of happens for real'. The reference exemplifies how they are also used as prophecies or clues to the plan of the hidden elite/ 'the cult' and is commonplace in general conspiracy theory rhetoric. For instance, in a prior public talk, Icke claims that the narratives of *1984* and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932, another famous dystopian story) are prophetic as they knew each other and had access to the elite plan for world domination. He states that they are 'so accurate because they knew each other – information source – so *1984* and *Brave New World* it wasn't a story it was knowledge of the future and that future is now I'm falling by the day because like I say there is some projection there is a program designed to play out' (Inlight TV 2015). In conspiracy milieu narratives, dystopian literature is reconfigured as a semiotic of prophecy or a hidden clue of the secret plan, which has also been noted by Melley (2008) and Panchencko (2017). Intertextual references provide not only an illustration but are presented as a form of evidence.

Both initial intertextual references to *The Hunger Games* and *1984* are from narratives with protagonists in the underclass and the out-group as the dominant class. As noted, the deictic positioning of Icke and the other discourse participants is constructed by Icke to be aligned with the underclass. When considered alongside the discussion on pejorative characterisations of the out-group, Icke is construing a world that is not only currently undesirable but designed to become significantly worse, as succinctly represented in the intertextual references.

6.9 Backgrounding the virus

The interview is presented as a discussion on the contemporaneous global pandemic; however, Icke does not mention COVID-19 until the end of his first major turn, after explaining the cult's plan for a global technocratic dystopia, and even then, it is alongside other conspiracy theories. Throughout the first interview, Icke refers to the virus as 'corona' – the more informal term, with a total of thirty-one (five mentions by Brian Rose). The term COVID-19 is mentioned once by Brian Rose at the beginning. At the time of the interview, reporting on the virus dominated all major news outlets and political discussions and was positioned as deadly and dangerous. Icke uses the following techniques to subvert its official representation, reposition it as unimportant, and background it to focus on his central thesis.

Throughout the interview, he repeatedly minimises the virus's impact, specialness, and urgency. For instance, the first mention by Icke is once he has set out his central thesis, with the virus backgrounded in a list form: 'everything seems random coronavirus random climate change random economic crash random'. Climate change is an issue that circulates in the

conspiracy milieu as having been manufactured as part of the broader conspiracy of subjugation. In the second mention, he passivises the virus grammatically by not only placing it in object position but instructing the audience that the central thesis is going to be imposed upon the virus – fitted within the pre-existing narrative: ‘now let’s take it all and apply it to the coronavirus’. By backgrounding the virus, Icke shifts the focus away from the central contemporaneous concern communicated in the mainstream media, politics and health systems, reconfiguring it as unimportant and non-impactful from a health perspective. Brief foregrounding to disqualify its impact is demonstrated by 8 out of the 26 mentions of the virus displaying reverse deixis: ’*this* coronavirus’. The deictic marker ‘this’ is when a person or thing is ‘both foregrounded and regarded with detachment – sometimes even with disfavour’ (Toolan 1995:130).

Icke reconstrues the virus as a vehicle of oppression. For instance, ‘technocratic AI-controlled tyranny and both the coronavirus and the climate change hoax are providing the the problem’, ‘now its climate change we're all gonna die and what we have now is the coronavirus version of that everything is coronavirus’, ‘beyond Orwellian well you just look what they’ve brought in as a result of this coronavirus’ and ‘I've said this cult wants this cult is getting as a result of this coronavirus’. The veracity of the virus is also questioned with four instances of ‘coronavirus hysteria'. The construal of the virus backgrounds it in favour of foregrounding the chaotic irrationality of the mainstream. Furthermore, the use of statistics both characterise the authorities as untruthful and repeatedly position the virus as over-exaggerated: ‘96% plus of those who have been tested for coronavirus in South Korea were negative’, ‘according to officialdom 80% of people who get the coronavirus diagnosed with the coronavirus have not necessarily all got it have very mild symptoms’ and ‘you know in 2017–2018 45 million people got the flu in America according to Centers for Disease Control and Prevention figures 61 000 died um where was the hysteria then 61 thousand people dying’. Icke thus challenges the epistemic status of the statistics and, by logical extension, official narratives by reconfiguring them to fit his interpretation.

6.10 Spatio-temporal proximization

This section discusses the construal of spatio-temporal proximization-in-action, which creates the ideological effect of imminent dystopia. Importantly, the sense that it is already happening, that we are already in a living nightmare, is essentially ideological. The discourse space contains the deictic centre of ‘us’: representing ‘here’ and ‘good’, and a ‘them’: representing ‘there’ and ‘bad’ positioned on the deictic periphery. In the proximization model, the ‘them’ encroaches on ‘us', representing ‘a discursively construed movement of the THEM-peripheral entity toward the US-center entity’ (Cap 2017: 3). In the conspiracy theory discourse space, the encroachment has already entered the deictic centre and is construed to worsen in pace and impact in the imminent future. Furthermore, in Cap’s analysis of war legitimisation rhetoric, there was a contrast between oppositional and privileged futures (Cap 2013b: 114). However, the privileged future is not construed in Icke’s thesis, just loosely implied via explicit reference to what the worst-case scenario would be. The afore-mentioned intertextual noun phrase ‘Hunger Games society’ provides the rich dystopian image succinctly. The absence of an explicitly referenced privileged future highlights imminent dystopia: the oppositional future, which is already happening. For instance, in the below excerpt, the present continuous ‘we’re living’ sets the temporal parameters as the immediate present. The ultimately responsible group ‘the cult’ is implicit, which arguably reinforces its shadowy intangibility as ‘this system has allowed it to happen’ – the system under the control of the ‘cult’. In addition, the victimhood of the in-group is foregrounded.

> We're living in a an electromagnetic technologically generated soup of radiation toxicity and this system has allowed that to happen, has allowed corporations to do that and now having done all that that's devastated the lives and the immune systems of old people.

The present perfect predicate 'has allowed' repeated twice assigns blame to the agentive 'this system' and signifies temporal proximization in progress, having started before the present-time and continuing beyond. The heavily elaborated noun phrase 'an electromagnetic technologically generated soup of radiation toxicity' also engenders a sense of spatial proximization, describing a toxic environment in which the in-group resides.

> It's going to be catastrophic now now here's the point what happens to those people whose businesses collapse what happens to all those people who were working for those businesses for bars for for hotels for all these businesses that have been targeted don't go there shut down what happens to them they fall into the bottom of the Hunger Games society and and what we're seeing now every day is this Hunger Games society coming closer and closer and closer.

The verb phrase+adjective 'going to be catastrophic' intensifies an already bleak-sounding present day with the impact denoting a physical encroachment upon the IDC/ in-group via spatial proximization (Cap 2013b: 108). The verb phrases 'we're seeing' and 'coming' reinforce this spatio-temporal and ideological imminence as businesses close down, indicating a falling apart of the current system and loss of economic power. Interestingly, Icke uses the visual predicate 'to see' as he reconfigures real-world events, that businesses are closing as a consequence of the mandated quarantining of populations, to be a tangible sign of the unfolding of the cult's plan. Again, the 'cult' is not textually present but implicit via the passive present-perfect: 'businesses that have been targeted'. Moreover, the logical structure of people 'fall[ing] into the bottom of the Hunger Games society' due to 'businesses collaps[ing]' requires a logical leap of faith as a person does not automatically become destitute if their business fails. I argue that the effect of this kind of partially-verifiable evidence contributes to a sense of imminency whereby the disastrous effects are already unfolding. Here is another example:

> They want a cashless society a digital cashless society one world currency which has phenomenal implications for freedom they want rid of cash and when I said that there was lots of cash in circulation people going end of cash now look at it and you know what was it this guy Ted Ross [sic: Tedros Adhanom] the head of the World Health Organization a man I wouldn't trust to tell me the time in a room full of clocks by the way um he said don't touch cash use cards because the virus can pass on through cash I've come up here today for this chat three times in places that are always cash I had cash turned down no, we're not taking cards and when this when this runs on they're going to be justifying a cashless society on the basis of this not this that you can pass viruses on through it and they're going to be saying we can't have this again we can't have this happen again so you're gonna have more technological testing of people for whether they have a temperature and all this stuff and the whole surveillance is going to move on precisely as it has in China.

In the above excerpt, Icke exemplifies his assertion that 'they want a cashless society' by providing an anecdote of how he had 'cash turned down'. In other words, he has reconfigured a process of technological advancement: the transition from cash to digital money transactions, concretising it with anecdotal evidence. Notably, the scenario he describes is

one that many discourse participants will also experience as it is a patterned societal behaviour. For instance, in the comments section on londonreal.tv, one user comments:

> Cindy Fear: Went to Michael's yesterday and went to pay in cash and they asked me if I had anything else to pay with. I said no and paid with cash. He is right absolutely.

According to Hart (2011: 9) on the reliability of evidence cline, ‘perception’ and ‘proof’ is deemed the most reliable. If a discourse participant can ‘live’ the evidence via direct experience, it provides a sense of concretisation of knowledge and proof that it is really happening. As businesses were limiting cash handling as a preventative action against virus spreading, many discourse participants would likely have experienced similar. It thus feeds into the loop of Icke being a credible guru and his information being verifiable and thus ‘true’.

Icke combines a sense of visual, tangible proof via discourse participants’ shared lived experiences with a requirement to take a logical leap of faith. For instance:

> They're planning an enormous economic crash and I've been saying it even more since because 2008 seemed a bit of be a nightmare the point I’m making is what they want is something that would make 2008 look like you know a Sunday-school tea party.

Here, Icke takes the 2008 economic crash when many people experienced economic hardship: a real-time event that is likely to be in many discourse participants’ discourse-world knowledge. It thus potentially evokes images from that time reframing it as ‘a Sunday-school tea party’. He thus evokes a past event and then amplifies its negative impact via analogy to describe ‘what they want’, which would necessitate a hostile spatio-temporal encroachment upon ‘the people’.

> The most promising candidates seem structured combinations of ‘real time’ (RT) lexico-grammatical markers and ‘construed time’ (CT) lexico-grammatical markers, in which the RT markers denote events as happening at dated points in time, while the CT markers ‘fit’ these points (and the events), by analogy and other means, into preferred temporal frames. It should be remembered that the RT markers do not only denote actual past events, but can also describe or pre-suppose future point-in-time events, which the CT markers turn into durative phenomena.
>
> Cap (2013b: 111)

The same technique can be observed in ‘9/11’s a classic they'll roll back some of it but not what nearly rolled back to where it was before the whole thing’s moved on closer to the Hunger Games society’. Here Icke is evoking a real-time event: 9/11, which signifies the terrorist attack on New York’s Twin Towers on 11th September 2001 and how freedoms were curtailed as a result of the event in order to improve security. I would argue that this technique is compelling as he utilises actual events accessible and lived by many discourse participants and then construes them as part of a broader narrative of subjugation. For a discourse participant who already has beliefs that align with Icke’s, such as a feeling that the system is rigged against their favour, these construals of actual events and lived experiences can be particularly powerful.

The final analysis in the next chapter focuses on mainstreamed conspiracy theories, specifically celebrity deaths, enabling a contrast between the superconspiracy and hybrid discourses analysed in Chapters 5 and 6. Reflections on the analyses and a generalised discussion is in Chapter 8.

Chapter 7: Mainstreamed Celebrity Death Conspiracy Theories

7.1 Introduction

This chapter explores the discursive construction of mainstreamed conspiracy theories by members of the conspiracy and wider cultic milieu. I take the concept of the DIY detective (Byford 2011) as a springboard to analyse the process by which official narratives are reconfigured as a conspiracy theory. Due to their enduring popularity and presence in mainstream media discourses, the focus of analysis is on celebrity death conspiracy theories, specifically the death of the British Royal Princess Diana in 1997. I have taken a qualitative approach with a fine-grained analysis of the DIY detective process and its salient components.

As the other analysis data was more associated with the cultic milieu, I chose a mainstreamed topic: celebrity/mysterious deaths to reflect how some subgenres of conspiracy theory rhetoric are mainstreamed. I had considered the death of Kurt Cobain due to its popularity but decided to use Princess Diana as it is British and most current literature is USA-centric. Furthermore, as a British citizen I have a contextual understanding of the mainstream rhetoric surrounding her death since it happened in 1997 when I was a teenager. Using the search term 'Diana conspiracy,' the video I found had the highest viewing figures at the time, other than a *Vice* interview (which I discounted as it was more an exploration of David Icke as a figure and his overall ideology and also did not have Diana in the title). Both the Icke (previous chapter) and Diana data were chosen from YouTube as it is a major platform that allows me to search by popularity by arranging the search results by viewing figures.

Conspiracy theories surrounding the death of Princess Diana in 1997 have remained prominent in the public consciousness via consistent coverage of her life and death. They are also popular, with 38% of respondents in a YouGov poll stating that they believed Diana's death was not an accident. Only 41% stated that they believed it was an accident, with the final 21% stating they did not know (Jordan 2013). My data comprises a YouTube video by the American YouTuber Kendall Rae, whose channel has around 1.7 million subscribers and appeared as the top result using the search words: 'Princess Diana conspiracy' in 2020 (Kendall Rae 2016).

I apply the appraisal framework (Martin 2000, 2003; Martin and Rose 2003; Martin and Rose 2007; Martin and White 2007; White 1997 and 2002) as it is a usage-based language model whereby language is analysed in context. Furthermore, the framework enables an analysis of how discourse participants evaluate the world around them and in relation to others and how this is expressed through text. Accordingly, the application of the framework to the discursive construction of conspiracy theories facilitates a methodical approach to analysing the DIY detective process.

To date, there are few discursive analytical accounts on celebrity death conspiracy theories; therefore, this analysis aims to contribute an initial understanding of the phenomena from a critical discourse analytical perspective. I draw on current findings within the humanities and social sciences relevant to the rhetoric of the DIY detective and – crucially – situate the analysis within its socio-cultural context, thus enabling contextualised analysis at an interpretative level.

7.2 The DIY detective

Conspiracy theory rhetoric is increasingly recognised as not just a fringe discourse but inhabiting the mainstream (Butter and Knight 2018, Goldberg 2001, Pfau 2005, Uscinski and Parent 2014). Nevertheless, mainstream rhetoric differs in intensity and commitment depending on whether the narratives are positioned in the paranoid fringe or more moderate mainstream (Pfau 2005, Zarefsky 1990). The degree of commitment, both intellectual and emotional, is less pronounced than the self-contained conspiracy milieu insomuch as a conspiracy is not contingent to the narrative but facilitates an act of reconfiguration to an existing non-conspiratorial narrative. For instance, the narrative that there is a secret elite planning a global takeover is conspiracy-dependent, whereas the proposition that a celebrity was murdered reframes an accident or suicide official narrative. Therefore, on one end of the spectrum, highly committed professional conspiracy theorists rely upon grand conspiracy narratives (see Chapter 5). The other end is occupied by narratives that display a much lower degree of intellectual and emotional commitment and intensity to particular theories and their details.

The concept of the DIY detective (Byford 2011) runs throughout the spectrum, with conspiracy theorists – discourse participants – positioned to varying degrees as active in 'conspiracy *practice'* (Spark 2001: 59) and as self-perceived researchers of topics in which they can become experts as part of the 'we': the universal audience (Billig 1995). As such, replicability is a crucial feature of conspiracy theory rhetoric, as 'conspiracists have often applied the same basic narrative to a variety of contexts' (Gulyas 2016: 9).

In order to reconfigure an official narrative as a conspiracy theory, it must be reframed. At a global level, the conspiracy theory explains something different to the official explanation (Buenting and Taylor 2010). To illustrate, here are two examples of explanations for Diana's death: the first is the official report, and the second is the conspiracy theory. The official report is known as The Paget Report, which was compiled by the Metropolitan Police 'to document the findings of the criminal investigation into an allegation made by Mohamed Al-Fayed of conspiracy to murder the Princess of Wales and his son Dodi Fayed. The inquest was held in order to answer: '(i) Who the deceased was, (ii) When he/she came by his/her death. (iii) Where he/she came by his/her death. (iv) How he/she came by his/her death (Metropolitan Police 2006). However, a conspiracy theory claims to answer a different question: 'cui bono?' – who benefits? (deHaven-Smith 2013, Knight 2008, Dentith and Orr 2017, Madalina 2015, Sunstein and Vermeule 2009). For instance, the conspiracy theory explanation claiming Diana was killed as she 'knew too much' is a narrative explaining the benefit to those who silenced her and – crucially – implicating them as the culprits. It is the causal link between benefit and culpability that creates the conspiracy theory, as embedded in the rhetorical structure is benefit is a semiotic of potential blame.

Conspiracism displays teleological bias and can be defined as 'the attribution of purpose and a final cause to natural events and entities' (Wagner-Egger et al. 2018). When answering the question 'cui bono?' and causally linking it to blame – which a conspiracy theory does by virtue of its narrative structure necessitating villains with a plan – the narrative becomes teleological. In other words, the endpoint is decided first, and then the narrative details are configured around the endpoint. For instance, if the endpoint is that Diana was killed to allow her ex-husband to remarry, then the narrative is arranged according to the purpose. In addition, Keleman, Rottman and Seston consider teleological explanations to 'account for objects and events by reference to a functional consequence or purpose' (2013: 1074). Interestingly, even highly educated scientists, when under time constraints, can choose a teleological explanation of natural phenomena, indicating that teleological bias is not just

evident in young children but ‘a developmentally persistent cognitive default’ (1075). Furthermore, Scott states that: ’humans default to functions and purposes when asked to explain the existence of mysterious phenomena’ (*in press*) and, arguably, one of the most famous global celebrities, which would assumedly get the best security due to her status, dying in a road traffic accident which could have been avoided does appear mysterious to many. The attribution of cause and purpose is understood as ‘intention-based teleology’, which uses ‘estimates of a rational agent’s current beliefs, knowledge, and goals to understand and predict its behavior’; thus, behaviours must match the assumed goal (Scott *in press*). Teleological explanations also reject the possibility of coincidence and accident as all events are explained as intentional by the conspiratorial group’ (Panchenko 2017: 71).

Notedly, teleology is rarely mentioned in academic conspiracy theory literature (except, for example, Harambam and Aupers 2015: 468, Robertson 2015: 86) despite being a core component of conspiracy theorising. The brief mentions tend to be in the context of prophecy and grand narratives (for instance, Robertson 2015). However, teleological reasoning has significant conceptual overlaps with confirmation bias in that both seek to confirm pre-existing beliefs. In other words, the detective process can work backwards by starting with the answer and then attempting to evidence it instead of the other way round. Confirmation bias has been recognised as a cognitive fault in conspiracy theorising (Brotherton 2015, Butter et al, 2020, Gualda and Ruas 2019, Rankin 2017, Miller, Saunders and Farhart 2016, Sunstein and Vermeule 2009, see also Sperber 2010). However, it is arguable that presupposing confirmation bias only serves to contribute to the pathologising agenda of research into conspiracy theories (Basham 2017). Teleological bias differs from confirmation bias in that confirmation bias seeks out information to consolidate existing presuppositions whereas teleological bias not only focuses on confirming a pre-decided endpoint but – crucially – the logic is intention-based and seeks out patterns of function and intention to actions to form a narrative. Teleological reasoning thus favours plans and goals over chaos, accident and coincidence.

7.3 Appraisal Theory and SCDS

I apply the appraisal framework (Martin and White 2005) as it is a usage-based language model whereby language is analysed in context. Furthermore, the framework enables an analysis of how discourse participants evaluate the world around them and in relation to others and how this is expressed through text. Accordingly, the application of the framework to the discursive construction of conspiracy theories facilitates a methodical approach to analysing the DIY detective process. Evaluation ‘plays a crucial part in legitimation’ and Appraisal Theory has enabled CDA to extend beyond modality to account for interpersonal meanings not only across the range of grammatical categories but also invoked meanings dependent on the reader’s textual interpretation within a unified and systematised framework (Hart 2014: 43–4).

Any worthwhile analysis of conspiracy theory demands not only consideration of context but also the interplay between authorial intention, text as medium and audience interpretation. The conspiracy milieu participants position themselves as DIY detectives, which requires the participants to interpret information.

> We do not see textual instances as the endpoint of instantiation. While texts are often highly constraining in terms of the meanings to be taken up, it is only through reader/listener interpretation in a given context that meaning occurs. And this final 'reading' may, of course, vary between readers/listeners according to the assumptions, knowledge and value systems they bring to the text and the use they are making of the text.
>
> (Martin and White 2007: 162–3)

That is to say, the Appraisal Framework's recognition and facilitation of multiple participant interpretations are compatible with the armchair detective work of conspiracy theorists in the conspiracy milieu. There is little research of conspiracy theory discourse using the appraisal framework, and it is focused at the descriptive level (e.g. Inwood and Zappavigna 2022; Mora Lopez 2022). Nevertheless, interpretation is largely dependent on socio-cognitive resources and the intersubjective space that binds the conspiracy milieu. Conspiracy theory argumentation strategies can be located at the evaluative, interpersonal level of discourse as an official narrative is reperspectivised via a process of evaluation to fit into the teleology or pre-supposed conspiracy. SCDS and the appraisal framework are well-matched, as SCDS centralises mental representations, and the appraisal framework explicates and links cognitive notions such as 'information, beliefs or knowledge of participants' to text and society (van Dijk 2016: 3, see also 2015 and 2018 for usage of terms of appraisal in van Dijk's analyses).

A SCDS approach combined with ethnographic knowledge is needed to reach the interpretative level with fine-grained analysis of qualitative data. I demonstrate how appraisal resources can be utilised at the interpretative level and evidence discourse-level features at a (teleological) narrative level. Equally, there is little research combining the appraisal framework with SCDS, including in-group out-group representations in political news discourse (Abdalla 2018), US-China political relations (Al-Saaidi 2022), clichés (Bullo 2019), a 'sexuality-based online community' (Heritage and Koller 2020), political speeches (Oni 2018), and the construction of nationalism in the Indonesian national anthem (Surjowait 2021). These analyses recognise the utility of the appraisal framework, enabling SCDS to extend its toolkit to *attitudes,* which very little is known about, and that 'represent the relationship between social groups, their members and the ways members as language users express opinions about social events, situations people or group' (van Dijk 2014: 129).

Explicit argument for the suitability of the appraisal framework in SCDS is made by Bullo (2019) and Al-Saaidi (2022). Appraisal theory operates at descriptive text-level (micro-level) whereas SCDS is contextual and interpretative (at the meso- and macro-levels). Appraisal theory thus grounds an SCDS analysis in textual evidence, demonstrating their mutual compatibility and complementariness (Al-Saaidi 2002). Bullo (2019: 289) demonstrates that evaluation – elucidated with the appraisal framework – can be evoked via shared knowledge: though socio-cognitive resources. Put simply, evaluative stances can be interpreted via socially-shared knowledge resources; the speaker aligns 'the audience into a community of shared values, therefore performing an interpersonal function' (Bullo 2019: 292). Similarly, Al-Saaidi recognises attitudes as primarily social, not personal knowledge (albeit mental models will differ from person to person). In other words, language users express ideas and beliefs about phenomena, which link communities together. For instance, the ideological dichotomy of in-groups and out-groups is seen to be designed and reinforced via group linguistic creativity (Al-Saaidi 2002: 473).

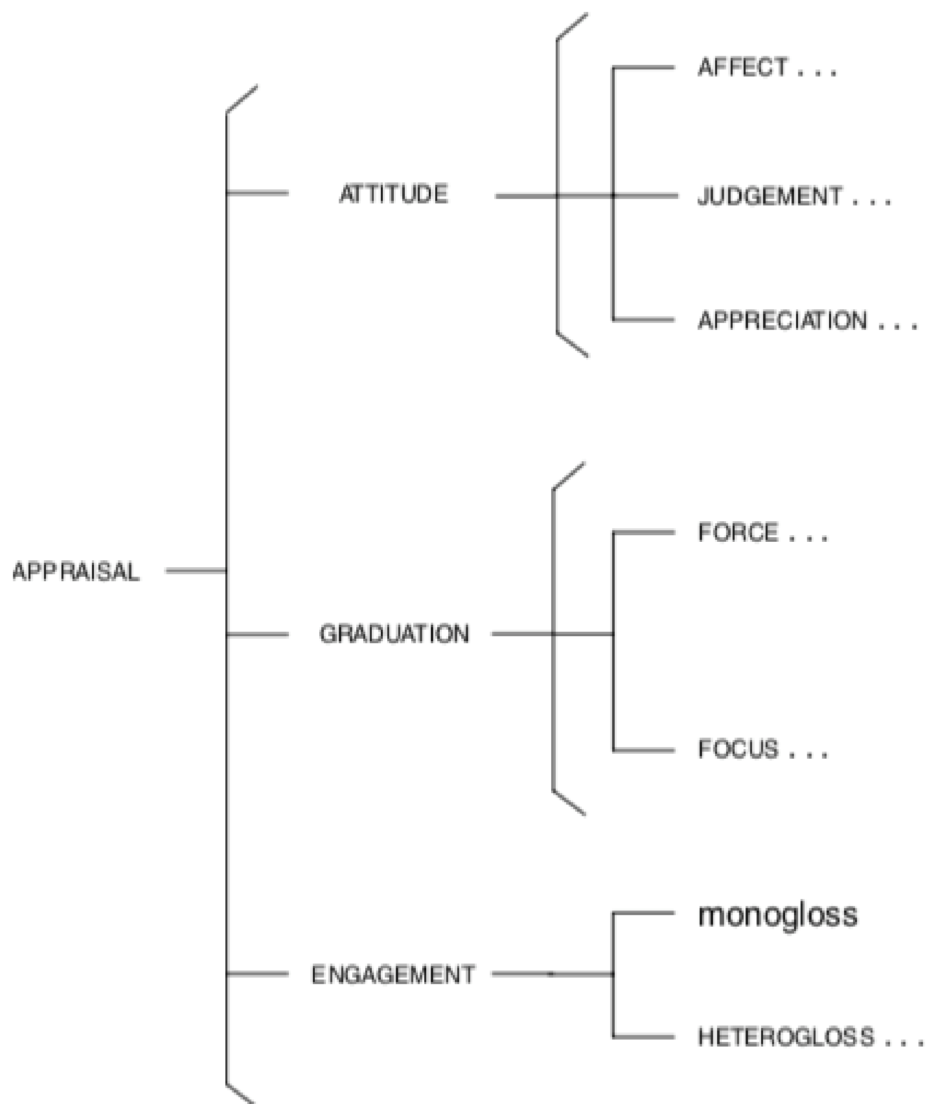
Evaluative language can be used to express attitudes and judgments on what is considered 'good' or 'bad'. Ideologies are built on '*norms* of (good) conduct, or *values* of what should be

striven for' (van Dijk 2015: 73), people 'acquire, express and reproduce their ideologies largely by text or talk' (van Dijk 1995: 135)'. The Appraisal Framework offers a grammar of evaluation to address the interpersonal aspect: 'the subjective presence of writers/speakers in texts as they adopt stances towards both the material they present and those with whom they communicate' (Martin and White 2005: 1). It is a 'framework concerned with the resources of dialogistic positioning' (Martin and White 2007: 98) and is derived from Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (1978, 1994, 2013). The central focus is to enable the identification and analysis of 'the semantic resources used to negotiate emotions, judgements and valuations, alongside resources for amplifying and engaging with these evaluations' (Martin 2000: 145). Put simply, the framework enables a systematic, 'fine-grained' (Koller 2012: 25) method of analysing how people's opinions and subjective evaluations are expressed through language and, in doing so, how they position themselves in relation to worldly phenomena, including people, ideas and objects.

Key terms are as follows. The attitude framework is 'for mapping feelings' and comprises three sub-frameworks. The first is *affect*, which 'is concerned with registering positive and negative feelings', such as expressions of happiness, confidence and interest, or lack thereof. They can be expressed as qualities via adjectives (*happy*) and adverbs (*interestingly*), or processes, via verbs (*distressed*). The second, *judgement*, 'deals with attitudes towards behaviour, which we admire or criticise, praise or condemn'. They may relate to behavioural habits, capability (*in/experienced*), resolution (*loyal/weak-willed*), truthfulness (*secretive/open*) and ethics (*good/evil*). The third is *appreciation*, 'involv[es] evaluations of semiotic and natural phenomena, according to the ways in which they are valued or not in a given field'. Appreciation involves whether things are aesthetically pleasing (*captivating/dull*), relating to balance and complexity (*clear/distorted*) and value (*innovative/counterfeit*) (Martin and White 2005: 52–6).

The *graduation* framework is 'concerned with gradability' (Martin and White 2007: 37), divided into *force* and *focus. Force* is 'assessments as to degree of intensity [quantification: *slightly, extremely, few, many*] and as to amount [size, weight, distribution, proximity: *small, large, nearby, distant*]' (Martin and White 2007: 140). *Focus* refers to 'adjusting the strength of boundaries between categories, constructing core and peripheral types of things', such as sharpening [*fully-fledged, award-winning*] and softening [*somewhat, about*] (Martin and White 2007: 37) The *engagement* framework refers to 'sourcing attitudes and the play of voices around opinions' (Martin and White 2007: 35) and is subdivided into *monogloss* 'no recognition of dialogistic alternatives' [categorical assertions] and *heterogloss* 'recognition of dialogistic alternatives' [*in my view, there is the argument, everyone knows*] (Martin and White 2007: 100). Figure 7.1 represents a basic typology of the framework:

Figure 7.1: The basic appraisal system



(Hart 2014: 45)

7.4 Context

7.4.1 31st August 1997

The British royal celebrity Princess Diana's untimely death in 1997 in a car accident in Paris received extensive press coverage, with around two and a half billion people globally watching her televised funeral (Mourning a Princess 2020). Her enduring legacy continues, as she was not only highly socially influential but 'very few people attracted more media attention than did Diana, during her lifetime and at the time of her death' (Brown, Basil and Bocarnea 2003: 589). Her life was played out in the media, including her turbulent marriage to Prince Charles, her many love affairs, humanitarian pursuits and her relationship with her sons. Princess Diana had recently begun a relationship with Dodi Fayed, an Egyptian film producer. Diana, Dodi and Henri Paul, the driver, all died in the crash. The bodyguard Trevor Rees-Jones was severely injured, but the only survivor.

> At around 12.20 am on Sunday 31st August 1997, the Princess of Wales and Dodi Al-Fayed left the Ritz Hotel to return to the apartment in rue Arsène Houssaye. They were the rear passengers in a Mercedes S280 car driven by Henri Paul, the Acting Head of Security at the Ritz Hotel. Trevor Rees-Jones, Dodi Al Fayed's bodyguard, was in the front passenger seat. They left from the rear of the hotel, the rue Cambon exit. After crossing the Place de la Concorde, they drove along Cours la Reine and Cours Albert 1er (the embankment road running parallel to the River Seine) into the Place de l'Alma underpass. The Mercedes collided with the thirteenth central pillar in the underpass. Dodi Al Fayed and Henri Paul died at the scene. Both were taken directly to the Institut Médico-Légal (IML), the Paris mortuary, not to a hospital. The Princess of Wales, who was seriously injured but still alive after the impact, was taken by the emergency services to Pitié-Salpêtrière Hospital in Paris. Trevor Rees-Jones survived the impact with very serious injuries. He also was taken to the same hospital as the Princess of Wales for emergency treatment. At around 4 am, following emergency surgery, the Princess of Wales died.
>
> (Metropolitan Police 2008: 1–2)

Shortly after the car accident, conspiracy theories surrounding her death became widely publicised. Dodi Fayed's father, Mohammed Al-Fayed, publicly declared that the deaths were secretly ordered by the Royal Family (Diana Crash 1998). He specifically alleged that Prince Phillip had ordered MI6 to kill Princess Diana as they did not want her son – Prince William, the future heir to the throne – to have a Muslim stepfather, based on the claim that Dodi and Princess Diana were engaged and she was pregnant with his child (Metropolitan Police 2008: 5) The momentum of the conspiracy theories that ensued was significant enough for 'The Operation Paget inquiry report into the allegation of conspiracy to murder' to be conducted, by London's Metropolitan Police. It individually responded to 52 claims concluding that the deaths were due to unsafe driving and the pursuing paparazzi (Metropolitan Police 2008).

The murder theories gained legitimacy from key insider figures, not only Mohammed Al-Fayed but also Princess Diana's ex-butler, Paul Burrell (Metropolitan Police 2008: 100). Burrell publicly showed a letter allegedly written by Princess Diana claiming that she feared for her life as 'my husband is planning "an accident" in my car, brake failure and serious head injury in order to make the path clear for him to marry Tiggy [the Royal nanny]' (Rayner 2007). In addition, her spiritual advisor, Rita Rogers, claimed she had warned Diana that her car brakes would be tampered with and that Diana had expressed concerns to her lawyer that she was going to be killed (The Mirror 2007). In an interview with Martin Bashir, Diana claimed that: 'they see me as a threat of some kind […] every strong woman in history had to walk down a similar path and I think it's the strength that causes the confusion and the fear (of her by the Royal Family)' (unCensored 2016).

7.4.2 Media characterisation of Diana

The characterisation of Diana is integral in understanding the context in which conspiracy theories were able to germinate and flourish. She was and still is a pervasive media image embodying the characteristics of a tortured but kind victim with whom the general public feel a great attachment. Her portrayal in comparison to the Royal Family was, in many ways, dichotomic – with a 'victim image cultivated by Diana' (Walter 1999: 28) and the Royal Family the cold villains: distant and formal. This simplistic division echoes the conspiracy theory script in that there is an absolute division between good and evil (Byford 2011: 82).

Furthermore, nothing is an accident or coincidence, but by design, meaning a global celebrity's untimely and accidental death is opportune for conspiracy theorising.

The enduring presence of Diana's image in the media is, at least in part, due to its great commercial exploitability potential; the Diana memorial fund 'received around 200 applications a week' to be able to use her image in advertising (Walter 1999: 272). Still now, in 2022, there are frequent references in newspaper articles and television documentaries about her life, some of which include conspiracy theories surrounding her death. Diana was a comforting presence as a regular, dependable character in the mass media, but her death was sudden and unexpected. Her skilled use of 'communicating with people enabled millions to sense she was a conduit between royalty and commoner, society and the individual, even perhaps between the divine and the human' (Walter 1999: 26). Princess Diana represents a global celebrity to whom many people felt an affinity and emotional attachment, demonstrable not only in the outpouring of grief when she died but in her enduring legacy. According to Walter, 'Diana evoked more love than any other royal in living memory, in any country; indeed it became her trademark […] beautiful, glamorous and charmed everyone she met… vulnerability and regality' (1999: 277). By entertaining and publicising alternative narratives – particularly those which invite debate and controversy – an extra platform is facilitated, and her presence in the mainstream media is heightened.

Her death meant people could feel grief but without the pain of losing a family member: 'a ritual liminal experience […] a theatre of grief' (Walter 1999: 37). The afore-mentioned emotional attachment many people felt (and feel) towards Princess Diana can be described as a parasocial relationship, defined by Horton and Wohl as a: 'seeming face-to-face relationship between spectator and performer' (1956: 215). People identified with Diana, more-so women and those of her age group, insomuch as they felt a sense of common ground and through a parasocial interaction, by relating to her as a friend (Brown, Basil and Bocarnea 2003). She was portrayed as vulnerable, an outcast from the Royal Family, but deeply humanitarian and approachable. In a *YouGov* survey, Princess Diana ranked the most missed deceased celebrity: 'the famous person whose passing they felt saddest about within their lifetime' with a slightly higher incidence amongst women respondents and those aged between 54–72 years old (Waldersee 2019). Parasocial involvement involves a degree of emotional attachment – and, by logical extension, not only increases active sourcing of information about the celebrity but also an increased likelihood of attributing external factors to negative consequences, in the case of Princess Diana, thus more likely to place blame than if they did not feel identified with her.

7.5 Data

The analysis data comprises a video entitled *Princess Diana Conspiracy Theories* (Kendall Rae 2016, Kendall Rae 2021) of 22 minutes 10 seconds in length and, as of June 2020, had 1.2 million views; 'Kendall Rae is an American YouTube star known for her thought-provoking videos […] she uploads videos on various interesting topics like free thinking, true crime, unsolved mysteries, politics, world travel, space and ocean exploration, history, astrology, strange incidents/phenomena, and paranormal activities' (Kendall Rae bio 2020). Her most popular video: *Emma Walker: Tragically Murdered By Stalker Ex*, has over 7 million views. Her most popular videos are a mixture of conspiracy theories, such as *Kardashian Konspiracy Theories!*, conspiracies, for instance, *The McDonald's Monopoly Game Conspiracy* and true crime, for example, *BIGGEST LIE EVER ENDS IN TRAGEDY! Case of Dee Dee and Gypsy*. She also posts videos on other topics such as astrology, for instance, *BEST AND WORST TRAITS OF YOUR ZODIAC SIGN* and weird phenomena, such as *Are*

Mermaids Real? She is active on Instagram (Kendallraeonyt 2021) and has a merchandise website: https://milehigher.com/, selling logo apparel, accessories and outerwear. She also has a YouTube channel with her husband: *Mile Higher Podcast* (Mile Higher 2021), which focuses on her personal life, such as house, beauty, pets and crystals, with over 370,000 subscribers. Considering the content of her posts seeking out the esoteric and heterodox, she is representative of a member of the cultic milieu (Campbell 2002, see Chapter 3 for a discussion).

Kendall Rae has an informal and personable style and posts videos often based on viewer requests, which was her declared impetus for the Princess Diana video: 'a lot of the comments on that video [from the previous week] were requesting a conspiracy theory this week on Princess Diana and the strange theory surrounding her death' (Kendall Rae 2016). The video starts with Kendall Rae introducing the topic and outlining information for her viewers, such as who the British Royal Family are and prominent events, such as the divorce of Prince Charles and Princess Diana. She speaks directly to the camera from her house with photo inserts throughout illustrating what she is talking about. There are also ten video clips of news reports, interviews, talks and accident footage interspersed throughout the interview. During the video, Kendall Rae outlines several of the conspiracy theories surrounding Princess Diana's death in the following order:-

1. Princess Diana faked her own death to escape the constant attention.
2. The culprits were actually targeting Dodi (father's business enemies or just the Royal family wanted to be rid of him as he was Muslim).
3. MI5 killed her (maybe because of the proposed Palestinian campaign as suggested in video insert 6)
4. The Royal Family killed her because she was going to marry Dodi (according to Mohammed Al-Fayed footage) or so Charles could marry Camilla (according to the letter the butler claimed Diana wrote).

7.6 Analysis

The analysis is structured as follows: firstly, I analyse the framing of conspiracy, which primes the discourse participants to expect and interpret data through a conspiratorial lens. Secondly, I discuss the attention given towards delegitimising the official narrative by highlighting discrepancies between events and a hypothetical ideal scenario. Put simply, acts of incompetence, accidents and those that do not follow what is considered standard procedure are reconfigured as semiotics of conspiracy. Thirdly, the offering of alternative possibilities is analysed, followed by blame assignment: who is ultimately behind the conspiracy which killed Diana.

7.6.1 Framing conspiracy

Kendall Rae begins the vlog with an introduction to the topic by explicitly framing it as a conspiracy theory with words such as 'strange', 'sketchiness' and 'corruption'. In doing so, she not only situates the death of Diana within the intertextual landscape of contested and heterodox narratives but more specifically within the tradition of celebrity conspiracy theories, most simply signalled in the introduction: 'welcome back to another Thursday night in October where I am doing a conspiracy theory or something spooky or mysterious'. Another textual indication is the mention of a previous vlog on the assassination of John F Kennedy, which is a prominent celebrity death conspiracy theory (one which marked the transition from

the external villain to the enemy-within and the domestic government as the culprit in the conspiracy narrative, Dorsey 2002: 464).

Underlining = mentions of conspiracy

Bold = [ATTITUDE–APPRECIATION–REACTION]

> Welcome back to another Thursday night in October where I am doing a conspiracy theory or something spooky or mysterious, every Thursday night in October. Last Thursday, we talked about the conspiracy theory surrounding the assassination of John F Kennedy, if you didn't see that video I'll put a little link to it right here, if you click there you can watch it. There's always a playlist in the description box that will show you guys all the conspiracy theories that I've done, now I think I have over 10, so, weird. And a lot of the comments on that video were requesting a conspiracy theory this week on Princess Diana and the **strange** [IMPACT–POSITIVE] theory surrounding her death. That's what we're going to be talking about today and let me tell you guys, this one is equally as **fascinating** [IMPACT–POSITIVE] as the last. This may even be one of my **favourite** [QUALITY–POSITIVE] conspiracies of all time.

At the beginning of the vlog, during her first speaking turn, 'conspiracy theory' is mentioned three times and 'conspiracies' once (see underlined text in above extract). 'Conspiracy' is also mentioned twice: once at the end of the first turn and once in the middle of the vlog. Moreover, 'conspiracy theories' is mentioned twice: once during the first turn and once at the end of the vlog during the conclusion. 'Theory' and 'theories' (with the 'conspiracy' elided) are mentioned six and two times, respectively, all during the positing of various culprit narratives. Furthermore, the adjectives in 'strange theory', 'fascinating [theory]' and 'favourite conspiracies' evaluate and thus ideologically shade the forthcoming conspiracy theory narrative around Diana's death. The adjectives are all categorised in the attitude framework, which maps feelings (Martin and White 2007: 42) and thus represents Kendall Rae's evaluations of the official narrative, that elements appear incongruent and ultimately unconvincing.

In the attitude framework, 'fascinating' can be categorised under 'appreciation' as a positive reaction in that it engages Kendall Rae, who aligns herself with her putative audience, as also being engaged by 'a conspiracy theory or something spooky or mysterious' (see Martin and White 2007: 56). Due to the co-text, for instance, the positive instantiations of 'spooky' and 'mysterious' at the beginning of the vlog, 'strange' can therefore also be categorised as denoting a positive impact on the discourse participants. As Martin and White point out: 'declarations of attitude are dialogically directed towards aligning the addressee into a community of shared value and belief' (2007: 95). To put it another way, the discourse community – Kendall Rae and her audience – derive enjoyment from engaging with conspiracy theories and unsolved mysteries. 'Conspiracy' is thus positively shaded, which is most simply evident in its co-occurrence with 'favorite' and 'fascinating'.

To note, there is a conceptual overlap with the categories of 'impact', and 'quality' in the appreciation framework as 'impact' denotes positive engagement, denoting something being interesting, and 'quality' as something being liked. Therefore, an adjective such as 'strange', giving both the co-text and the context, is likely to act for many of the discourse participants as indicative of enjoyment and interest. Turning to the entirety of the vlog, adjectives that share similar conceptual qualities occur throughout: weird, fascinating, strange (x10), interesting (x6), odd, unusual, bizarre, and sketchy (x4). Interestingly, these words are multifunctional as they also delegitimise the official narrative of Diana's death, acting as

signposts of both interest (thus foregrounding information considered by Kendall Rae as noteworthy) and also epistemic uncertainty. In the appreciation framework, adjectives such as ‘bizarre’ and ‘sketchy’ are classified under composition–negative, as they encode the evaluation of information as illogical. Again, there is a multi-functionality with ‘strange’, ‘odd’ and ‘unusual’ also used by Kendall Rae as signifiers that serve to delegitimise particular elements of the official death-by-paparazzi narrative.

The dialogism and ideological backdrop of the communicative situation is a crucial underpinning of how Appraisal Theory approaches the analysis of stance taking. The speaker is fundamentally partaking in a social event whereby they align themselves in relation to existing voices in the intertextual landscape and the putative audience (Martin and White 2007: 92–3, see also Baktin 1981 and Voloshinov 1995). The ‘ideological colloquy’ of different voices signposted and evaluated by the speaker, responds to something, affirms something, anticipates possible responses and objections, seeks support, and so on’ (Voloshinov 1995: 139, cited in Martin and White 2007: 93). From a dialogistic perspective, when mentioning a particular issue, the speaker is engaging – to varying degrees – with a ‘socially significant community of shared belief and value', and the value position the speaker takes may also be evaluated: accepted or challenged by the audience (Martin and White 2007: 93).

As noted, the vlog content is framed as a conspiracy theory with textual cues throughout, which direct the audience’s attention towards narrative elements deemed interesting by virtue of their content as either delegitimising the official narrative and/or legitimising conspiratorial explanations for Diana’s death. At a discourse level, the vlog is overtly heteroglossic. By way of explanation, central to the premise of the ‘community of knowledge’ (Varis 2019: 4) – occupied in this case by Kendall Rae and her putative audience – is the enjoyment derived from exploring alternative explanations within the established boundaries of a conspiracy theory narrative structure. Therefore, a secret group must have planned to kill Diana for their benefit. The narratives not so much compete with each other but function collectively to undermine the official narrative and provide a space in which the discourse participants can take on the role of ‘DIY detectives’ whereby participants actively seek out and assess information relating to conspiracy theory (Byford 2011). The collective effort can be observed at a textual level by the use of the inclusive pronoun ‘we’. For example: ‘we talked about’, ‘we’re going to be talking about today’ and ‘we have talked about most the information, let’s talk about’.

The concept of discussion and shared endeavour is encouraged by Kendall Rae by explicitly requesting the audience's viewpoints. Thus, at a discourse level, the narrative is overtly heteroglossic by virtue of the incorporation and encouragement of different theories. For instance: ‘Now, I do want to know what you guys think about this’, ‘I'm interested to hear from people’ and ‘so definitely leave me a comment […] I love to read the comments everyone else loves to read the comments and kind of like interact with each other and just sort of discuss the whole thing’. Furthermore, Kendall Rae is uncommitted to a specific explanation, appearing to be primarily motivated by deriving pleasure in the DIY detective process and the interplay and evaluation of different propositions: ‘I'm not saying any of this is true, I'm just presenting information and letting you guys make your own conclusions’. Together, a community of DIY detectives is textually constructed, with Kendall Rae as the presenter of information. The information is derived from unacknowledged sources from the broader discourse community and framed as of reliable truth quality evident in the term ‘research’ with its strong connotations to the scientific process of investigation: ‘and by the research I’ve done’ and ‘this is just from the research that I've done’. The audience is thus primed as DIY detectives within the boundaries of the conspiratorial narrative structure. By focusing on

purpose served rather than cause, behaviour and events are interpreted as goal-directed and intentional, and thus the endeavour is an intention-based teleology.

Once Kendall Rae has provided a background to the Royal Family (as she claims that a large proportion of her audience is from North America), she describes the lead-up to the crash based on her research:

> There was a ton of paparazzi following them that day, so they had made this plan that they were going to divert the paparazzi by having fake cars parked outside at the front of the hotels that people would think Diana was going to come out at any second when in reality they took the backdoor, and they left that way but apparently [ENGAGEMENT–HETEROGLOSS–EXPAND–ENTERTAIN] the paparazzi in the back were able to alert people in the front, and they were followed by a bunch of paparazzi.

The use of the adverb 'apparently' is heteroglossic as it marks the incorporation of other voices: 'by explicitly presenting the proposition as grounded in its own contingent, individual subjectivity, the authorial voice represents the proposition as but one of a range of possible positions' (Martin and White 2007: 98). Kendall Rae has retrieved the information from her research and chosen to distance herself by explicitly marking it as from an external source, to: 'entertain values present the internal voice of the speaker/writer' (Martin and White 2007: 111) as 'apparently' does not mark epistemic certainty but probability. The lexical choice signifies to the putative audience of DIY detectives that the information provided is to be evaluated. By this, I mean that despite not directly challenging this particular moment in the narrative of the official events, it forms part of a more comprehensive delegitimisation campaign.

7.6.2 Discrepancy with what 'should have happened'

After the initial introduction to Diana's death, there is an epistemic lacuna due to those present in the car either dying (Diana, Dodi and the driver: Henri Paul) or not remembering (Trevor Rees-Jones, the bodyguard):

> And the bodyguard was seriously injured and he doesn't remember anything so nobody knows what actually happened [ATTITUDE–JUDGMENT–COMPOSITION–BALANCE–NEGATIVE]. And another interesting bit of information is none of them were wearing seatbelts, which was very odd to a lot of people because Diana was always seen in the backseat of cars wearing a seatbelt and it was unusual for her to not be wearing one [COUNTER-EXPECTATION].

Due to the lack of eyewitness testimony, the first sentence can be labelled under the attitude framework as a negative judgment regarding composition, as the information is implicated as incomplete. Thus, an epistemic lacuna is created based on the lack of first-person witness accounts. Accordingly, the discourse community of DIY detectives seek out other forms of evidence in lieu of first-person accounts.

Furthermore, there is a counter-expectancy inscribed in 'very odd', highlighting that Diana not wearing a seatbelt was contrary to the norm. Interestingly, the seatbelt issue is not expanded on, so it is raised as an oddity (from which conspiracism can germinate) but is not pursued. As it is not causally linked to anything other than highlighting information contrary to

expectation, its only cohesion is in the collection of 'odd' occurrences, with the presupposition of greater quantity equating to a greater likelihood of conspiracy.

Notably, counter-expectation is used throughout the delegitimation of the official narrative. Moreover, it aids the establishment of an 'us versus them' dichotomy which is foundational to the conspiratorial narrative structure, specifically that the establishment is to blame and not to be trusted. Delegitimising establishment voices can be achieved by foregrounding acts labelled as incompetence or circumstance but evaluating them as malfeasance.

> In France, it's actually standard procedure to send an ambulance with a fully equipped team of doctors and nurses to assess the victim's injuries and administer care immediately [ATTITUDE–JUDGEMENT–SOCIAL ESTEEM–NORMALITY–POSITIVE], and people say that if they had actually followed their proper procedure that she would have been in surgery in under 30 minutes [ATTITUDE–JUDGEMENT–SOCIAL ESTEEM–NORMALITY–NEGATIVE]. Another really strange [ATTITUDE–JUDGEMENT–SOCIAL ESTEEM–NORMALITY–NEGATIVE] bit of information is that the ambulance was ordered to stop by the doctor in the car because apparently, her injuries were getting so bad [ATTITUDE–JUDGEMENT–SOCIAL SANCTION–VERACITY] they actually stopped 30 seconds away from the hospital in front of a museum when that literally the entrance to the hospital was in sight. So it was like very bizarre that they just stopped right there [ATTITUDE–JUDGEMENT–SOCIAL ESTEEM–NORMALITY–NEGATIVE]. Many people think that in the ambulance they were actually trying to make her injuries worse, that she wasn't that bad and she probably could have survived, but they took a long time on purpose [ATTITUDE–JUDGEMENT–SOCIAL SANCTION–VERACITY–NEGATIVE PROPRIETY] and then actually made her injuries worse [ATTITUDE–JUDGEMENT–SOCIAL SANCTION–NEGATIVE PROPRIETY].

There are several evaluative patterns worthy of note in this extract. Firstly, the negative shading of not following procedure [ATTITUDE–JUDGEMENT–SOCIAL ESTEEM–NORMALITY] signposts the speaker's assessment of how normal an action or event is. It has been labelled NORMALITY as contextually the discourse participants seek out conspiracy, which necessitates deliberate, not accidental or incompetent, action (which would be labelled CAPACITY–POSITIVE). Considering co-textual features, Kendall Rae continues by delegitimising the assumed voice of the ambulance staff with the adverb '<u>apparently</u> her injuries were getting so bad', which bears the invocation as being judged to be untruthful. Therefore, the speaker expands the colloquy of voices to include the ambulance staff, which can be coded as [ENGAGEMENT–HETEROGLOSS–EXPAND–ENTERTAIN] only delegitimise them as untruthful. Again, this is supported co-textually with the heteroglossic expansion of 'many people' thinking that the ambulance 'were actually trying to make her injuries worse, that she wasn't that bad', which has been double-coded as both dishonest (veracity) and unethical (propriety): 'judgements of sanction have to do with 'veracity' (how truthful someone is) and 'propriety' (how ethical someone is)' (Martin and White 2007: 52) Therefore, the speaker foregrounds actions considered abnormal and narrows the interpretative options by inscribing the actions as deliberate.

In the extract, Kendall Rae is initially focused on signalling abnormality but then judges these acts as deliberate malevolent acts. Thus, an action is considered abnormal and then connected to untruthfulness, considering the immediate context of medical staff and an international celebrity with severe injuries. Their actions can thus be doubly coded throughout as untruthful and immoral [ATTITUDE–JUDGEMENT–SOCIAL SANCTION–VERACITY–POSITIVE PROPRIETY] due to the societal expectation that medical staff have a moral

obligation and expectation to follow the standard procedure, which is inscribed as of benevolent design, namely to save lives: ‘if they had actually followed their proper procedure that she would have been in surgery in under 30 minutes’. The hypothetical past conditional constructed creates an unrealised fleeting world – ideal scenario script (for scripts, see Schank and Abelson 1977) – signposting an alternative course of events culminating in Princess Diana’s survival.

In the attitude framework, the judgment of other people’s behaviour can be categorised under social esteem, not just under normality, but also capacity (how capable) and tenacity (how resolute), as well the discussed social sanction: propriety (how moral) and veracity (how honest). Kendall Rae has chosen to present information that judges the behaviour of the medical staff, assigning agency and thus implicating the medical staff as malevolent: ’them’ – creating a division between an ‘us’ (who wanted Diana to survive) and ‘them’ whose goal was to kill her. Again, the focus is on intentionality linked to the goal, making it teleological.

Epistemic and ontological instability is created as the medical staff are framed as deliberately trying to harm instead of cure, which is not only against their role expectations but also immoral and runs counter to how a benevolent society works. The sense of injustice is further intensified by Diana's status as relatable (Brown, Basil and Bocarnea 2003), ‘a conduit between royalty and commoner’ (Walter 1999: 26). Being of high social standing, the victim intensifies the instability as it invokes a heightened sense of injustice due to the implicit ideology that important people receive preferential treatment. Later on in the vlog, this belief is inscribed.

> I mean when a car accident fatal car accident happens I understand that they try to move it along when it’s just an average one of us, but this was Princess Diana! Why try to move it so fast and it just seemed very, very sketchy.

The logic of society of how society is run is presented as a logic of normality, of how things *should* be done, or ‘standard procedure’. It is combined with framing the discourse space as the seeking out of conspiracy. In the attitude framework, the exclamatory ‘but this was Princess Diana!’ contrasted with ‘an average one of us’ can be labelled as [ATTITUDE–JUDGEMENT–SOCIAL ESTEEM–NORMALITY]. Diana is considered ‘special’ therefore should have received ‘special treatment’, and by this not happening, an incongruency with normality is highlighted. The adjective ‘sketchy’ can be coded as [ATTITUDE–JUDGMENT–COMPOSITION–BALANCE–NEGATIVE] as it highlights information that does not ‘add up’, appearing illogical. In addition, the increased force assigned to the speed at which processes were undertaken provides the focal point in the narrative indicating malfeasance: ‘why try to move it so fast’ [GRADUATION–FORCE–QUANTIFICATION–EXTENT–DISTRIBUTION–TIME]. Moreover, considering the context of the DIY detectives and the previous discussion around the double-coding of adjectives such as ‘strange’ ‘sketchy’ represents a significant conceptual overlap. Not only does the adjective signal illogicality, but it may well be interpreted as indicating interest and enjoyment, categorised as [ATTITUDE–APPRECIATION–REACTION–IMPACT–POSITIVE] and [ATTITUDE–APPRECIATION–REACTION–QUALITY–POSITIVE] respectively.

The concept of a discourse community formed by DIY detectives in the pursuit of conspiracy necessitates the recognition of different voices. In the engagement framework, heteroglossia deals with the recognition of alternative positions which the speaker can either acknowledge or distance themselves from. However, the acknowledgement can be contractive, especially if the attributed source has epistemic superiority/ weight (Hart 2014: 54). By extension, if the attributed voice is of low epistemic value, then it would have a distancing effect, for instance,

‘the government says….’ would distance the discourse participants from whatever the government says in the dialogic space of a conspiracy theory due to the current distrust in powerful institutions.

> Newsreader Dean Shepherd in video clip insert 2**:** the paparazzi arrested after Princess Diana's deadly car crash are put under formal investigation by a Paris judge.

By way of example, the inclusion of ‘a Paris judge’ as the actor initiating a ‘formal investigation’ signals to the discourse participants that the act should be questioned as suspicious as not only does the judge represent a key figure in the judicial system but the adjective ‘formal’ reinforces orthodoxy.

7.6.3 Proposing alternative explanations

The term ‘monogloss’ denotes a lack of recognition, stating information as bare assertions (Martin and White 2005: 98–104). Categorical assertions are strictly speaking monoglossic, albeit set against a heteroglossic backdrop in which alternative viewpoints reside despite not being explicitly referenced at that point (Martin and White 2007: 99). The heteroglossic backdrop can be applied to conspiracy theorising, which relies on the dichotomised ‘other’ and competing discourses. Therefore, even if a statement is monoglossic, the heteroglossic backdrop of competing discourses is ever-present as inherent in the statement’s function is that it is the most convincing out of a series of options. Furthermore, heteroglossia can either function as 'dialogically expansive’ or ‘dialogically contractive’ in their intersubjective functionality’ (Martin and White 2007: 102), thus opening up a possibility or rejecting a proposition. This section demonstrates how Kendall Rae delegitimises the official narrative and legitimises a conspiracy theory via the engagement framework, namely monoglossia and heteroglossia. After the Dean Shepherd clip in the previous extract, Kendall Rae states:

> So this [the paparazzi] was what was <u>first</u> [GRADUATION–FORCE–QUANTIFICATION–NUMBER] blamed for is that the paparazzi made them crash [HETEROGLOSSIA–EXPAND–ENTERTAIN]. Now, what <u>actually</u> happened [HETEROGLOSSIA–CONTRACT–PROCLAIM–PRONOUNCE].

Use of the ordinal ‘first’ denotes several proposals of culpability, inscribing the heteroglossic backdrop of conspiracy theorising. Furthermore, ‘blame’ is expansive in that the speaker is presenting the assertion that the paparazzi were responsible, thus facilitating that voice albeit briefly; if the viewpoint is given an external voice, then it is recognising other options and is thus categorised as a heteroglossic expansion (White 2003). However, it can also be considered implicitly contractive by not mentioning the possibility of an accident without human culpability. Nevertheless, the discussion of possible reasons behind Diana’s death is not limitless but boundaried to facilitate only those that conform to the event structure of an intentional teleology, meaning those responsible intended for the death to happen. A perceived lack of pre-meditation and obvious benefit is one of the reasons why the paparazzi being blamed is rejected by the conspiracy milieu, as it was unintentional, and there is no obvious ‘bono’ (‘cui *bono*?’), as they did not benefit from it.

A further point to note is that Kendall Rae expands the dialogic space by entertaining possible narratives and then discounts them by contracting the space. Here is another example concerning the supposition that Henri Paul’s (the chauffeur) blood was not his. Tests revealed high alcohol and carbon monoxide levels but did not display any signs of intoxication in the hotel security footage prior to getting in the car. Furthermore, Kendall Rae

states that an unprescribed drug was found in his system, which precedes the rhetorical question: ‘so why was this random drug in his system?’. Contextually, the answer is a conspiracy, despite other likelihoods.

> So that was very strange as well, so there's t<u>ons of experts</u> [GRADUATION–FORCE–QUANTIFICATION–NUMBER–UPSCALED] out there that think that his blood actually is not his blood, the blood that they sampled, that it’s actually from a suicide victim that would make more sense about the carbon monoxide and stuff.

The above excerpt positions the audience to assess the blood-swapping proposition as believable due to the high status ascribed to ‘experts’ denoting a high degree of expertise (Martin and White 2007: 116). Kendall Rae aligns herself with the statement as ‘that would make more sense’. Interestingly, the ‘experts’ are aligned with the discourse community: the ‘us’ and not the ‘them’ as they counter the official narrative. Selectivity demonstrates that the anti-elitism ideology of much conspiracy theorising is not absolutist but contingent on the value position perceived to be taken, such as the case with Mohammed Al-Fayed (who publicly declared his son, Dodi, and Diana had been killed in a conspiracy), and Diana herself: commonly portrayed as ‘one of us’.

> John Morgan, author in video clip insert 4: Question is, how do how do you get a sober driver to register a blood alcohol concentration of 1.74 [HETEROGLOSSIA–CONTRACT–PROCLAIM–ENDORSE]. And I suggest [HETEROGLOSS–EXPAND–ENTERTAIN] that one way is to test blood samples from a different body. Total [GRADUATION–FORCE–INTENSIFICATION] miscarriage of justice [ATTITUDE–JUDGMENT–SOCIAL SANCTION–NEGATIVE PROPRIETY].

The John Morgan clip starts with an expository question that could be seen as heteroglossic, but given the co-text that Kendall Rae has just posited the theory that the blood was from a suicide victim, it is contractive. It endorses the proposal given by ‘tons of experts’. He finishes with a monogloss stating categorically that the blood had been swapped and passes a negative judgment on the justice system. He brings into focus a perceived negative morality which is intensified by the maximally upscaled ‘total’. The inscribed attitudinal assessment concurs with the afore-mentioned blood-swapping proposal and thus implicates conspiracy and aligns John Morgan with the discourse community.

Kendall Rae expands the colloquy of voices throughout the vlog by introducing groups of people and individuals who offer conspiratorial explanations to various points of contention in the official narrative. Via heteroglossic expansion, Kendall Rae is not only widening the population of the DIY detective discourse community but also giving epistemic weight to those hypotheses which are compatible with the intentional teleology of conspiracy theorising.

> Acknowledgements are dialogic in that they associate the proposition being advanced with voices and/or positions external to that of the text itself and present the authorial voice as engaging interactively with those voices. In this way they overtly construe the communicative setting as heteroglossic.
>
> (Martin and White 2007: 113)

Essentially, epistemic weight is given to hearsay: ‘instances of attribution where no specific source is specified’ (Martin and White 2007: 112). Hearsay feeds into the armchair detective concept, in that active detective work need not be done as it can be done without leaving one’s armchair; the focus is on how convincing a proposition is and not contingent on the

source. For instance, in the first excerpt discussing Diana in the ambulance, ‘people say’ and ‘many people think’ [ENGAGEMENT–HETEROGLOSS–EXPAND–ATTRIBUTE–ACKNOWLEDGE] opens up alternative possibilities via heteroglossic expansion: that the procedure had not been followed ‘on purpose’ to make Diana worse, which is an assignation of agency to kill. However, it functions only as a jigsaw piece as the assertion does not explain the motive behind the ambulance staff’s actions; it is implicit that they were following orders as the discourse world knowledge of the conspiracy milieu asserts that the conspiratorial body is behind the scenes.

Acknowledging external voices is evident throughout the vlog, and there are thirteen instances throughout the vlog of attributing an unspecified group of people to a conspiratorial hypothesis. The first eleven are shown below (the final two are discussed in the following section):-

Underlining = [ENGAGEMENT–HETEROGLOSS–EXPAND–ATTRIBUTE–ACKNOWLEDGE]
Bold = [ENGAGEMENT–HETEROGLOSS–CONTRACT–PROCLAIM–PRONOUNCE]
Italics = [ENGAGEMENT–HETEROGLOSS–EXPAND–ENTERTAIN]

1. People say that if they had **actually** followed their proper procedure that she would have been in surgery in under 30 minutes

2. Many people think that in the ambulance they were **actually** trying to make her injuries worse, that she wasn't that bad and she *probably could* have survived

3. And a lot of people think that the car was *possibly* tampered with and that Mercedes just knows that anyone who’s qualified to be like an expert on Mercedes cars would automatically be able to detect that.

4. Some people think that it was replaced with a remote control that purposely crashed the car

5. According to people who say that they saw this motorbike, he *apparently*, after the crash happened, got off his bike, looked into the vehicle and then held up an X.

6. A lot of people think that that's what distracted the driver and that's why he crashed, it was this light. This mysterious light.

7. People think that he *could* have been targeted by business enemies of his father.

8. A lot of people think that *maybe* he was targeted so that Diana wouldn't marry him and that maybe the crash was only meant to kill him.

9. A huge, huge theory that a lot of people have is that Diana was **actually** killed by like the Secret Service over there.

10. And one thing that’s brought up by so many people including Tomlinson is like how was there no video footage of any of this, there's no like record of anything.

11. Many people say that the Royal Family had a lot of conservative values and that Diana *possibly* marrying a Muslim man, Dodi Fayed, would be extremely against everything that they would want.

In the above examples, there are three instances of ‘say’ and six of ‘think’ attributed to unspecified groups of people implicated as part of the conspiracy theorising pursuit. Upscaled quantification [GRADUATION–FORCE–QUANTIFICATION–NUMBER–UPSCALED] is present in sentences 2, 3, 6, 8, 10 and 11, which connects with *argumentum ad populum*: the logical fallacy that the more people who believe something, the more likely it is to be accurate, giving epistemic weight to widespread belief within the milieu. Nevertheless, all the verbs attributed to ‘people’ including ‘have’ (9) and ‘brought up’ (10), form a heteroglossic backdrop in which, regardless of how committed the discourse participants may be to a proposition, there is a signalled recognition that there are others. It is particularly so with groups in conflict with the conspiracy milieu and adherent to the official narrative and/or reject conspiratorial explanations that do not share the same viewpoint (Martin and White 2007: 107). Accordingly, ’think’ is an instance of a mental verb projection that is ‘modal rather than experiential or informational in their communicative functionality’ (Martin and White 2007: 105), helping construct the heteroglossic backdrop by acknowledging the colloquy of voices.

The propositions tend to display either pronouncements or entertaining ideas, both heteroglossic, albeit pronouncements are contractive and entertaining ideas expansive. In sentences 1, 2 and 9, ‘actually’ has been labelled as a pronouncement due to its semantic similarity with ‘in fact’, signposting ‘reality’ instead of ‘possibility’. Entertaining ideas is inscribed via modal auxiliaries in sentences 2,3,7,8, and 11 with ‘probably’, ‘possibly’, ‘could’ and ‘maybe’. However, sentences 1,4,6,9 and 10 have no expressions of likelihood via modal auxiliaries, modal adjuncts or modal attributes (see Martin and White 2007: 105). Despite no inscription of likelihood (for instance, ‘apparently’ in sentence 5 maintains the subjective grounding of the proposition in the external voice ‘people who say’), these sentences still function similarly, except with the increased potential for the discourse participants to interpret these propositions as considered by ‘people’ as more likely. Pragmatically, modals do not mark uncertainty but ‘unacknowledged by the discourse community’ (Myers 1989: 12), as Kendall Rae is non-committal to a specific explanation. Given the context of the DIY detective community, the propositions can be considered dialogistically; thus, all the propositions are expressions of likelihood on a scale of probability because they are ascribed to the voice of ‘people’. In other words, the assertions are grounded in the subjectivity of ‘people’ and imply that the ‘real truth’ is in at least one of the propositions. The final two instances acknowledge an external voice via ‘people’ that delegitimises the official narrative by expressing disbelief and a lack of being convinced:-

12. a lot of [GRADUATION–FORCE–QUANTIFICATION–NUMBER] people do not buy this [ATTITUDE–JUDGMENT–COMPOSITION–BALANCE–NEGATIVE]

13. which was very odd to a lot of [GRADUATION–FORCE–QUANTIFICATION–NUMBER] people because Diana was always seen in the backseat of cars wearing a seatbelt and it was unusual for her to not be wearing one [ATTITUDE–JUDGMENT–COMPOSITION–BALANCE–NEGATIVE].

The above textual instances of delegitimisation have been annotated under the attitude framework, marking a proposition as illogical in its composition. Moreover, in both cases, the external voice is given extra epistemic weight by quantification: ‘a lot of’. Quantification reiterates the argumentum ad populum fallacy, whereby a positive correlation is assumed between the veracity of a statement and how widespread the belief is. Argumentum ad populum is also evident in the first theory that Kendall Rae presents: ‘so, she faked her own death to be able to get away and finally live, like, a free life. However, that one is definitely not as widely believed’.

There is only one instance when ‘people’ is attributed to an out-group: those who believe the mainstream media and are not open to conspiratorial hypotheses. In all the other cases discussed, the ‘people’ form part of an in-group of a loose network of DIY detectives.

> Male speaker in video clip insert 3: people who believe that Diana died as a result of our routine Saturday night traffic accident must be the same people who believe that President Kennedy was shot by a lone gunman.

Interestingly, the male speaker in the video clip constructs an out-group of ‘people’, identifiable by what he considers erroneous beliefs. The demarcation is evidenced by the intertextual reference to the shooting of the North American President: John F Kennedy, a cornerstone twentieth-century conspiracy theory narrative with the official explanation being that he ‘was shot by a lone gunman’. It also echoes Robertson’s observation of ‘tradition’ as a form of evidence gathering: ‘conspiracist narratives frequently appeal to historical precedent, for example arguing that the existence of ‘false flag’ attacks in history makes their existence in the present more likely’ (2016: 48). In this case, the untimely death of international celebrities has previously been brought into question by the conspiracy milieu. The method of tradition can also be observed in the audience comments. For example: ‘carynrosa: The Royals have a history of getting rid of unwanted wives- just saying…’

Despite the frequent attributions to the external voices of ‘people’, there are several instances whereby individuals are specifically attributed. For example, a former secret agent, Richard Tomlinson: ‘he was actually discharged from the secret agency, swore that they were responsible for it’. Kendall Rae states that he claims MI5 was monitoring Diana and that Henri Paul was a paid informant. Robertson regards insider testimony as a method of experiential evidence: the ‘importance given and popularity of insider testimony**,** also eyewitnesses with specific details’ (2016: 51. also see Goldberg 2001: 242). Furthermore, according to Kendall Rae, Tomlinson claims to have seen documents of a similar plan to assassinate a Serbian President.

> He also claimed that in 1992 he was shown documents of an outlined plan to assassinate the Serbian leader, President Slobodan Milosevic, probably not saying that one right. And the plan was almost identical to the way that Diana was killed in the same way of the tunnel and the flash of light.

Tomlinson’s claims appeal to the insider testimony method of evidence gathering as well as the historical and synthetic strategies, with the latter being: ’a dot-connecting strategy which links disparate sources to fit into a ‘bigger picture’’ (Robertson 2016: 51). The dot-connecting is apparent in the intertextual reference to an apparent historical identical assassination plot, which eludes to them being connected. Thus, he implicates MI5 as agents behind Diana’s death, particularly considering the holism of conspiracy theory logic that there are no coincidences; everything is connected (Gulyas 2016: 21). Goldzwig has noted that a theory ‘is made more plausible, if not credible, by a specific and very real background and context: the lack of full disclosure in governmental circles’ compounded by the common knowledge of the existence of real conspiracies, such as Watergate (2002: 495). Therefore, parallels and links made with posited historical events lend a theory considerable epistemic weight in conspiracy theorising logic.

7.6.4 Blame assignment

Kendall Rae posits four conspiratorial explanations that progressively increase the likelihood, therefore the final theory is given the most epistemic weight. Furthermore, the degree of likelihood assigns also correlates with emotional intensity; specifically, the closer relationally the posited culprits were to Diana, the more likely they were to have killed her. Interestingly, Diana's personal involvement with Dodi is frequently foregrounded. Despite the fact they had only been seen publicly together that summer, with Dodi already engaged to Kelly Fisher, an American model (Dunne 2008), their apparent romance was seized as a major story by the mainstream media. I focus on the second and final theories, which not only foreground Diana's relationships with Dodi and the Royal Family but also Dodi's religious affiliation as a Muslim.

There is a strong textual link between Diana and Dodi, with their names not only often co-occurring in Kendall Rae's speech but alongside mentions of relationship and marriage. Starting with the first mention of her relationship with Dodi, Kendall Rae mentions the name 'Diana' twenty-three times (before that, she briefly introduces Diana's family background). In ten mentions, she co-occurs with Dodi, including three whereby they are textually linked by 'and', thus occurring directly linked to each other. In one mention, Diana was 'calling out for' Dodi and, interestingly, the other six involve references to either relationship or marriage: three mentions a relationship: 'Diana actually started a relationship with a man named Dodi', Diana was having this other relationship with this guy – Dodi' and ' the relationship between Dodi and Princess Diana, like people thought that they were getting engaged'. The other three include: 'possibly marrying', 'was gonna marry', and 'he [Dodi] was targeted so that Diana wouldn't marry him'.

A consequence of this strong co-occurrence is priming the viewer to see her relationship with Dodi as a potential motive for her murder. To illustrate, Kendall Rae relays Mohammed Al-Fayed's opinion that the Royal Family wanted to stop her from marrying a Muslim man, Dodi; seven of these mentions are evaluative references (including only one of which co-occurs with 'Dodi'). Interestingly, one may expect viewer comments to mirror Kendall Rae's focus on Diana's relationship with Dodi. However, this is not the case, with mentions of Dodi totalling around 10% of Diana mentions. Even then, Dodi's death is either incidental (1) or backgrounded in favour of associating the Royal Family with Islamophobia (2).

> (1) Rebekah Bridges-Tervydis: I believe Diane was the intended victim. Just a coincidence that Dodi was also murdered.'
>
> (2) Yasmine Dabash: Dodi Fayed was part of a very prominent Egyptian family. I'm American-Egyptian and all my Egyptian friends and family are 100% certain Diana got pregnant with Fayed's child and that the royal family had them killed because they didn't want a Muslim baby in the royal family. This would also explain the super quick embalming. This is just word of mouth stuff I've heard.

The second theory implicates financial motives and religious intolerance:

<u>Underlining</u> = <u>[ENGAGEMENT–HETEROGLOSS–EXPAND–ENTERTAIN]</u>
Bold = [COUNTER-EXPECTANCY]
Italics = [ATTITUDE–JUDGMENT–SOCIAL ESTEEM–NORMALITY–NEGATIVE]

> They were **actually** targeting Dodi. People think that he <u>could have been</u> targeted by business enemies of his father. Another key part of this mystery is that Dodi was a

> Muslim, so that *wasn't always like the most accepted thing*. A lot of people think that maybe he was targeted so that Diana wouldn't marry him, and that maybe the crash was only meant to kill him.

In this theory, Kendall Rae expands the colloquy by entertaining two possibilities focusing on the target, not being Diana but Dodi instead. The propositions are dense with assumptions: they were going to marry, the agents were against certain intercultural marriages and the assumption that Dodi was the sole target. Kendall Rae does not explicitly align herself with either possibility but posits that the agents did not want Diana and Dodi to marry due to Dodi's religion which she draws attention to by framing it as 'another key part of this mystery'.

The third theory also implicates religious as well as political intolerance. It is centred around a clip by a former female agent who claims that Diana's plan to campaign alongside the Palestinians was the motive for the MI5 (The United Kingdom's security service) to kill her. Again, there are several implicit assumptions, including Diana's potential to damage the political reputation or security of the United Kingdom, that campaigning for the Palestinians was worthy of a murder plot. The final theory is presented as the most convincing by Kendall Rae, which is that the Royal Family plotted to kill her in order to stop her from marrying a Muslim man.

Underlining = [GRADUATION–FORCE]
Bold = [ENGAGEMENT–HETEROGLOSS–EXPAND]

> Kendall Rae: And this one kind of makes a lot of sense [INTENSIFICATION–QUALITY]. And I don't mean to offend anyone who like really loves the Royal Family or anything, this is just from the research that I've done. Many people say [ATTRIBUTE–ACKNOWLEDGE] that the Royal Family had a lot of conservative values [QUANTIFICATION–NUMBER] and that Diana **possibly** marrying a Muslim man [ENTERTAIN], Dodi Fayed, would be **extremely** against everything that they would want [INTENSIFICATION–QUALITY].

Firstly, Kendall Rae presents the theory as attributed to 'many people'. An instance of modality in this excerpt is attributed to the motive: 'possibly marrying'. The motive is arguably central to the logic and persuasion of a murder theory but is the only instance of modality. The key difference in language use to describe the final theory is intensification: 'a lot of' x2 and 'extremely', of which two modify the Royal Family's religiopolitical intolerance: 'a lot of conservative values' and 'extremely against everything that they would want' assuming that they did not want Diana to be married into a Muslim community. The upscaled attitudinal evaluation of the Royal Family as conservative presents a dichotomy of progressive versus traditional modes of being, with Diana and Dodi implicated as progressive. Given the contemporaneous socio-political context whereby racial and religious prejudice is prominent in the public consciousness and often vilified, labelling the Royal Family as religiously intolerant not only contributes to their characterisation of the evil other but also provides an efficient insult that also functions as a murder motive.

As noted, intensification (labelled under the graduation framework) elucidates how Kendall Rae is more convinced by the final theory. She then reinforces this with a clip from Mohammed Al-Fayed, who speaks in categorical assertions [ENGAGEMENT–MONOGLOSS].

> Mohammed Al-Fayed in video clip footage 9: they have murdered my son and Princess Diana, and I put my finger straight. The gangster who is ruling the country behind the scene who is the head of the Royal household- Prince Philip.

Mohammed Al-Fayed's connections with the establishment and being the father of Dodi Fayed would categorise him as an insider. The epistemic weight is most pronounced in the final theory not only with Al-Fayed's assertion but also with an insider testimony clip of ex-Royal butler Paul Burrell. Kendall Rae presents the famous letter from the note butler Paul Burrell claimed Diana wrote to him, which Kendall Rae reads out:

> This particular phase in my life is the most dangerous. My husband is planning an accident in my car break failure or serious head injury in order to make the path clear in order to make the path clear for him to marry.

Kendall Rae then comments:

> Now, no one knows if this is true, but if it is, that's <u>pretty incriminating</u> [GRADUATION–FORCE–INTENSIFICATION–QUALITY] right there. Her butler has said that she seemed <u>very scared</u> [GRADUATION–FORCE–INTENSIFICATION–QUALITY] of him and that she told him <u>a lot of things</u> [GRADUATION–FORCE–QUANTIFICATION–NUMBER]**.**

An object – the letter – is produced as evidence. The context of the letter is that Diana was reportedly paranoid that Charles was having an affair with the nanny (Tiggy Legge-Bourke) and wanted to marry her, but used Camilla Parker-Bowles as a decoy (whom he married in 2005). There are several underlying assumptions, including the belief that Paul Burrell is credible, that the letter is authentic and written by Diana and that Charles would not be able to marry again if Diana was still alive. Nevertheless, Kendall Rae expresses her endorsement of the theory via the graduation framework. Throughout the final theory, the dichotomy of good and evil is more pronounced and emotionally upscaled. For instance, Kendall Rae states: 'her butler came out and said that Diana was <u>extremely</u> [GRADUATION–FORCE–INTENSIFICATION–QUALITY] afraid of Prince Charles'. The following excerpt demonstrates the combination of the good-evil and victim-perpetrator dichotomy infused with emotion.

> The butler in video clip footage 10: Towards the end of the princess's life, I became everything [GRADUATION–FOCUS–MAXIMALLY UPSCALED]. I became her policeman, her dresser, her valet, her butler, her driver, her confidante, her friend and the list goes on. And there was nothing that I wouldn't have done for the princess. During the last few years of her life she was a lost soul, searching for love, searching for someone to put their arms around her. Someone to take care of her. You see, you might think that a princess lot is a happy one but it's not really [GRADUATION–FORCE–INTENSIFICATION–PROCESS]. And it certainly wasn't for Diana because, again she once said to me: Paul, I had to kiss a lot of frogs to find a prince. And the princess had such a hard time with her husband. Prince Charles wasn't kind to his wife. He wasn't very understanding to his wife [HETEROGLOSS–CONTRACT–DISCLAIM–DENY]. And at times I felt very, very sorry for the princess who was mentally tortured [GRADUATION–FORCE–INTENSIFICATION–PROCESS] in lots of ways [GRADUATION–FORCE–QUANTIFICATION–NUMBER].

Burrell characterises Diana as a victim, which is evident in his positioning as taking all the roles missing in her life as well as Diana's search for love and lack of happiness. The categorisation under the graduation framework as intensification–process foregrounds Diana's victimhood through her emotional distress. Conversely, Charles' unfulfilling of the roles she sought – categorised as denial and thus implicating him not conforming to his

assumed role – presents him as the evil other and reinforces Diana's victim status. Top viewer comments primarily focus on evaluations of Diana's personality, which is congruent with Burrell's victim characterisation of Diana. They are categorised under the attitude framework as positive judgement, specifically of high ethical status and special. For instance, 'relatable' (Laura Jones), 'truly kind-hearted and down-to-earth' (EllieTheBrit) and 'genuinely cared for everyone' (livingstoned), which are categorised as [ATTITUDE–JUDGEMENT–SOCIAL SANCTION–PROPRIETY]. Furthermore, comments described Diana as special [ATTITUDE–JUDGEMENT–SOCIAL ESTEEM–NORMALITY]: 'her values which were different to how a princess is supposed to behave, meaning she actually gave a damn about her country and the people living in it' (Erryn McCarthy) and 'a sign of hope and encouragement for Single and Newly Divorced Mothers everywhere' (Adam Goodson). Interestingly, Kendall Rae doubts whether the letter was legitimate: 'we're not sure was actually written by her or not but here's what he claims [HETEROGLOSS–EXPAND–ATTRIBUTE–DISTANCE] she gave him'. The doubt would suggest that a conclusive decision on who was to blame is not an integral part of the DIY detective process but, as Fenster (2008) suggests that pleasure is acquired via the theorising process (see 3.8). She concludes the video by asking her viewers to comment on their thoughts and evaluations.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

This thesis has explored the diverse manifestations, persuasive properties and the replicability of conspiracy theories as heterodox socially situated narratives. A review of the research in conspiracy theories and CDA identified significant theoretical gaps in discourse analyses of conspiracy theories with scant research combining the two. In the final chapter, I reflect on the research questions in light of the analysis findings, followed by a discussion on the contributions of the thesis to the study of conspiracy theories as well as applications of SCDS. Firstly, I explore the findings specific to each of the analysis chapters. The final section takes a broader approach by discussing several significant generalisable findings and their implications for further research in both the study of conspiracy theories and the development of the SCDS enterprise.

8.1 Reflection on research question 1

Research question 1: How can the conspiracy milieu be defined considering its diverse applications of conspiracy theory rhetoric?

Subquestion 1: How are the terms ‘conspiracy theory’ and ‘conspiracy theorist’ reappropriated within the milieu?

Subquestion 2: How do conspiracy-theory-dependent rhetoric and hybrid genres diverge, and what are their points of contact?

In Chapter 5, I analysed how collective identities are discursively constructed in the superconspiracy, ufology and conspirituality areas of the conspiracy milieu. The analyses were operationalised using van Leeuwen’s social actor framework (2008): a grammar that recognises the sociologically bound nature of the representation of actors in a narrative. The analyses demonstrated how in-groups and out-groups are constructed in key distinct areas of the conspiracy milieu, both linguistically and sociologically.

The initial analysis explored how the terms ‘conspiracy theory/ies’ and ‘conspiracy theorist/s’ were reappropriated in the superconspiracy milieu as signifiers of uncovering the truth in a perceived informational climate of deceit. The conspiracy theorists discursively constructed themselves as critical thinkers, positioned as renegades in relation to an ignorant and deceived mainstream population. I then undertook finely grained analyses of representative texts in the superconspiracy, ufology and conspirituality milieux to uncover how conspiracy theory narratives shape collective identities of in-groups and out-groups.

The discourses converge on the construction of the discourse participants: the author and readers/viewers as epistemically superior to the mainstream, thus reinforcing distrust in mainstream narratives, mass opinion and pride in being ostracised. The superconspiracy and conspirituality discourses are textually evident, whereas, in the ufology data, it is implied via the discourse goal of revealing or reinforcing suppressed information, which by logical extension there would exist a group ignorant to the truth. Epistemic superiority is evident in strategies such as pejorative labelling of an ignorant masses group and an in-group of apparent outcasts who will triumph in the end following the belief that the truth is always discovered.

On the other hand, there are several key divergences in terms of the salience of the constructed out-group. To elaborate, the degree of focus and attention given to the

conspirators varies depending on if the discourse foregrounds an in-group out-group struggle. For instance, the superconspiracy New World Order theory in the Jones text provides a more significant amount of detail and more consistent mentions throughout the text than in the ufology and conspirituality data. By representing the out-group as a Manichaean evil, it taps into social anxieties and distrust in authorities (Bratich 2017, Gualda and Ruas 2019). The ideological group division is also evident in the distinction between the puppets and the puppeteers and the prophetic element detailing the conspirators' plan and how it will transpire in the imminent future. Focus on the conspirators does not occur in the ufology and conspirituality data. Despite possible appearances in other related texts, less emphasis on the conspirators is indicative of genres in which knowing the details of the conspirators' plan and the extent to their abuses of power towards the masses is not the central narrative element; ufology and conspirituality can survive as a genre either without or with conspiracy as a strategic block on a quest.

A battle-oriented narrative structure appears to be present in the conspiracy-dependent superconspiracy milieu, which correlates with the overt presence of superconspiracy discourses online via usages of the simple and obvious search terms: conspiracy theory/ies and conspiracy theorist/s. The use of obvious keywords indicates an invitation for potential conflict as key propagators in the milieu enable access to their material in the explicit knowledge that they are considered 'crazy' and misinformed, thus easy targets. Furthermore, the attempts to reclaim the pejorative terminology via delegitimation of the out-group and reinforcement of the legitimacy of the in-group not only reify divisions but create a lexicon in which words take on opposite or distinct meanings when used within the conspiracy milieu. Non-conspiracy-dependent narratives, namely the ufology and conspirituality data, do not appear to overtly position themselves for a wider audience inclusive of out-group members, albeit are accessible via hyperlinks and references from websites in the conspiracy and wider cultic milieu. As noted, these narratives appear to be less dependent on the conspiracy theory narrative construct with a more focused, instrumental use such as to justify the lack of evidence due to a government conspiracy, for instance.

8.2 Reflection on research question 2

Research question 2: How are readers/listeners persuaded to believe/entertain a conspiracy theory?

Subquestion 1: How are speaker and audience identity textually constructed and communicated?

Subquestion 2: How is the discourse space constructed as a conspiracy theory?

Subquestion 3: How is the point of view constructed in the text, and what role does it play?

Firstly, Icke's constant facework suggests that he is somewhat insecure in his self-imposed guru status, not least due to the repeated instances of phrases telling and reminding the audience of his long, arduous journey as an outsider with superior knowledge, akin to 'I told you so'. His lack of citations also signifies that he is attempting to claim ownership for ideas that are not his but either evident in earlier conspiracy theory texts or constructed posthumously; for instance, he has never prophesied a pandemic in any of his previous books (conducted via a word-search of similar and related terms), interviews or videos consumed in the ethnographic process.

Nevertheless, he claims special access to the masterplan of the cult, which is evident via a process of clue-deciphering of everyday events whereby a functional and predictable teleology is applied. Therefore, events and processes are assigned agents which are not only invariably traced back to the cult but are also of evil intent and increasingly detrimental to the in-group. This sense of increasing proximity is demonstrated via Cap's proximization model, which has been given greater explanatory force and clarity by incorporating the ontological layers operationalised in the Text World Theory distinction between discourse-, text- and modal-worlds. Moreover, the relationship between discourse participants and reality is of particular importance and interest in assimilating the discussion. By this, I refer to the epistemological status of the core narrative and how it is legitimised through evidence that 'you can see with your own eyes' via the construal of actual events to fit the superconspiracy narrative. The ontological inaccessibility of the cult in enactor-accessible modal-worlds is thus overcome by claiming traces of evidence in everyday life, in the discourse world. For example, Icke's anecdotal evidence of having cash turned down is representative of a more comprehensive process of fiscal subjugation.

I have demonstrated how the proximization framework can be successfully widened in application from its origins in war legitimisation rhetoric to conspiracy theories. Text World Theory complements the proximization framework by facilitating a systematic analysis of ontological layers. Text World Theory has demonstrated how ontological layering can be used as a rhetorical tool to persuade people to believe the conspirators' plan. It can be combined with the dot-connecting strategy of identifying 'proof' in the everyday, as the ontological inaccessibility of the plan is construed as accessible, real and present in everyday life.

The underpinning logic of the core thesis that all events and processes can be traced back to the cult's master plan via a process of teleological resignification offers an easily applied blueprint through which the world can be interpreted. It offers the possibility of super-vision via the luxury of an elevated viewpoint. For those who operate in the conspirituality milieu, it claims to offer the possibility of spiritual transcendence via the metaphor of elevated viewpoint. Nonetheless, the core thesis provides a shortcut: elites are homogeneously categorised as one evil entity, evidence is heavily evaluative on known details, which tend to be limited by information already in existence in the conspiracy milieu, reinterpretations of mainstream media narratives and a culturally bound ideal scenario by which they are measured (such as the ideal of a minimal to non-existent rich-poor divide and its non-existence as a semiotic of conspiracy).

Placing the discourse participants as enlightened victims engenders a sense of epistemic superiority whilst simultaneously relieving people of responsibility for the political and economic situation; by being deictically positioned as so distant from the perceived locus of societal control, change thus appears an impossible feat. I argue that this is primarily mobilised by a pervasive feeling that the system is rigged to favour the privileged few (see Killick 2020). It is also aided by the over-generalisation of 'bad' power, whereby all power is seen as organised and malevolent instead of its opposite: semi-improvised chaos of competing interests.

8.3 Reflection on research question 3

How can a member of the public construct a conspiracy theory narrative?

Subquestion 1: Where is attention drawn to in the search for evidence of a conspiracy?

Subquestion 2: How is evidence evaluated in the discourse to cohere with a conspiracy?

In the final analysis, I turned the focus to mainstreamed conspiracy theories, which contrasted with the core superconspiracy narrative exemplified in the Icke case study. The final analysis further explored techniques, such as delegitimisation of an official narrative by pitting an event against a culturally bound ideal scenario script, amongst other techniques used in the DIY detective process.

Undoubtedly, Diana's international celebrity status and her media characterisation as 'one of us' amidst a cold-hearted and distant Royal Family plays a significant part in the enduring prevalence of conspiracy theories surrounding her death, not least due to their commercial potential. Interestingly, the anti-elitism heavily foregrounded in superconspiracy narratives is less pronounced and explicit, albeit still prevalent. In other words, the dichotomy is less apparent, with so-called whistleblowers throughout the video being implicitly regarded as aligned with the discourse participants – the in-group. Whereas the Icke interview evaluates events within a framework of systemic corruption, the evaluative language of the Diana data focuses on instances of not following procedure (pitted against an ideal scenario script). The focus implicates procedure as benevolent (if they had followed procedure, she would still be alive) and that certain subversive people within that system are not to be trusted. In the Icke interview, the procedure is considered malevolently designed, and its purposes and functions were communicated dishonestly. There thus appears to be more focus on a critique of human behaviour as opposed to an absolutist worldview whereby the discourse participants are enlightened victims against a monolithic evil. Therefore, the celebrity death conspiracy theory is more palatable for a mainstream audience who are more invested in expressing grief for a much-loved celebrity and derive a sense of comfort from a detective process that presupposes blame as opposed to the chaos of the accident.

Nevertheless, a lack of recognition for fallibility and circumstance – the fallibility of people or the CCTV cameras not working – is of particular note. On the one hand, a degree of criticality is essential for a functioning society in which crimes do not go unpunished; but, on the other hand, an absence of the recognition of fallibility and circumstance in an interpretative climate of hypersemiosis sets apart these discourses from the scientific process as the causal links are often just not provided. For instance, if the ambulance staff were deliberately trying to worsen Diana's condition, then there ought to be some evidence to indicate that, such as direct testimony (not speculative insider testimony from otherwise unlinked individuals).

The components of the theories posited by Kendall Rae are cohered by the conspiracy narrative framework whereby the conspirators are so powerful that they are exceptionally competent and organised. Otherwise, it is separate people, such as a total or partial combination of the following: ambulance driver/doctors, embalmer, whoever told the press not to report murder, whoever instructed the tunnel to be cleaned, Mercedes, whoever tampered with the blood test and the person who shone the bright light.

In the analysis of how people judge the world around them in various ways, the usage of the Appraisal Framework has enabled a systematic method for uncovering finer distinctions between, for instance, social sanction and social esteem, which delineates morality, normality and competence, thus validating a discussion on the interplay between human responsibility and the benevolence of the systems within which they operate.

The theories surrounding Diana's death are, in many ways, representative of discourses of celebrity death conspiracy theories (too many to fully list here). For instance, the theory that Courtney Love murdered her soon-to-be ex-husband, Kurt Cobain of the rock band *Nirvana,*

to benefit from his financial legacy (*Soaked in Bleach* 2015) echoes Diana theories. Both claim concrete evidence (in the Cobain case, a handwriting sample suggesting Courtney practised his handwriting to forge the suicide letter), interpretations of not following an ideal scenario script (police were accused of not following the proper procedure), the teleological 'cui bono?'.

8.4 Contributions

The main original contribution to knowledge from a critical linguistic perspective is to challenge the erroneous pre-conception of conspiracy theories as paranoid, instead seeing them as an anti-elitist critique. Furthermore, the sparse discouse-analytical literature foregrounds potential dangers of conspiracy theories (e.g. Marko 2022 analyses linguistic features also used by extremist groups) at the expense of highlighting their functional multiplicity, such as a block in the quest for spiritual enlightenment. I have demonstrated the utility of a SCDS study grounded in close textual analysis to the cross- and interdisciplinary study of conspiracy theories. To this end, I employed an innovative combination of SCDS-compatible frameworks on a topic where there is currently very little linguistic work and even less in-depth ethnographic studies which enhance the interpretative level through analysis grounded in emic and contextual understanding; my work builds most closely on Varis (2019) who conducted a discourse analysis and digital ethnography of crisis actor conspiracy memes. As is clear from the outset, this research project has challenged the common misconception of conspiracy theories as simple and homogenised (made possible by the identification of distinct data from the digital ethnography), instead turning towards understanding them as diverse, persuasive and complex phenomena, evidenced by contextualised rhetorical analysis. This thesis has investigated various characterisations of in-groups and out-groups in the conspiracy milieu, analysed the structures of cognitive processes which underpin conspiracy-dependent narratives and explored how language is used to evaluate and reframe official narratives as conspiracy theories. I bring insights on the rhetorical features to existing knowledge of conspiracy theories, and thus bridge a gap in the current literature. I drew on cross-disciplinary work on conspiracy theories to inform my understanding of the milieu to create a working definition (2.8). By critiquing and building on insights from other disciplines, I reinforce and demonstrate the flexibility of SCDS and how fine-grained qualitative language analysis, with a cognitive focus, brings new insights grounded in textual evidence. Furthermore, I have contributed to the development of SCDS by demonstrating underlying cognitive structures of conspiracy theories and that conducting research from a politically 'neutral' position – by which I mean, not specifically aiming to discredit the milieu as an epistemically inferior out-group. The position facilitates an inductive approach (Harambam 2020) to digital ethnography, emulating the 'truth-seeker' (Toseland 2019: 34) and mirroring the flexibility and open-mindedness of the internet (Yang 2003: 471). A 'neutral' positioning enabled me to target 'the insider's point of view' (Kortman 2021: 1208) and thus gain emic understanding.

A central aim of the thesis was to create an ethnographic portrait of the online conspiracy milieu, where there is currently very little linguistic ethnographic research. The work is underpinned and strengthened by digital ethnography, deepening my understanding of the milieu and enabling the selection of suitable qualitative data**.** For instance, *Conspiracy Theory Discourses* recognises 'a lack of a systematic body of work approaching conspiracy theories using the analytical framework of Discourse Analysis' (Demata, Zorzi and Zottola 2022: 8); nevertheless, the publication has no mentions of ethnography. CDA is only used in three quantitative-based studies of conspiracy theory discourse (the Campolong, Fiammenghi and Lee chapters). Sparse literature on qualitative linguistic accounts (e.g. Marko 2022; Mason, 2019, 2022) do not utilise ethnography to enable and deepen an interpretative analysis. As Harambam comments: 'qualitative or ethnographic studies of conspiracy culture are relatively rare' (2020: 51)

despite their disparate, networked and complex nature which can only truly be reflected and recognised in ethnographic studies. This thesis stands as a pioneering example of how SCDS and a multi-sited digital ethnography can be combined to achieve a critical ethnographic snapshot of the milieu, illustrated by the following points.

Ethnography and qualitative research help achieve meaningful, interpretative-level findings, demonstrating an emic understanding of phenomena. The multi-sited ethnography enabled me to find data for the conspiracy milieu chapter. I was able to highlight the multiplicity of conspiracy theories and how, despite adhering to the working definition of conspiracy theory, they differ greatly in narrative structure, identity construction and prominence, and evaluation techniques. Accurate group categorisation using social actor analysis and evaluative language using the appraisal framework was only possible from ethnographic knowledge. For instance, the finding that *conspiracy theory/ist* is used pejoratively on *Twitter,* a mainstream social media platform (Mora Lopez 2022: 310) is unsurprising. Via ethnography and an understanding of heterodox digital platforms and conspiracy theory portals, I demonstrated that the terms are, in fact, often reclaimed and ameliorated in these spaces (Chapter 5). Moreover, Allington, Buarque and Flores (2022) focus on anti-semitic scapegoating through quantitative word-frequency analysis, but do not explore the extent to which use of anti-semitic language represents anti-semitic belief and/or is a shorthand for anti-elitism. An ethnographic study would elucidate the historical links with anti-semitic conspiracy theory (as key theorists draw on key conspiracy texts, such as Nesta Webster's) and contextualise usage of anti-semitic language. The multi-sited digital ethnography enabled me to notice rhetorical patterns in the data which simply would go unnoticed without an emic understanding achieved by repeated exposure to conspiracy theory rhetoric. I have thus contributed to an understanding of conspiracy theories at a rhetorical discourse level. A case in point is the development of Cap's proximization model supplemented by Text World Theory to elucidate an underlying cognitive structure of NWO conspiracy theory – the superconspiracy discourse space – which is not dissimilar to that of political war legitimisation rhetoric.

SCDS enabled me to explore the cognitive structure of notions of power and knowledge within the conspiracy milieu. In-/out-group construction in the superconspiracy discourse space (Chapter 6) and becoming DIY detectives in a teleological murder mystery (Chapter 7) both invert the conspiracy theorist's relative powerlessness in the public sphere, elevating them to a special status**.** The theorist possesses an esoteric blueprint to the secret forces governing global politics, demonstrating the complex relationship between knowledge and power. The analyses work together productively by each elucidating different aspects of the underlying cognitive structures of conspiracy theorising. Analysing distinct areas of the conspiracy milieu enabled comparison, by employing different analytical frameworks, and in the case of the NWO analysis, by using a unique combination of two analytical frameworks from distinct disciplines. Of particular note, is that these analyses demonstrate the rhetorical variety of these particular conspiracy theories. Put simply, the celebrity death analysis evidenced a different underlying cognitive structure – retroactive intentional teleology – to the imminent threat of the NWO superconspiracy discourse space. I have demonstrated how the analysis of conspiracy theory rhetoric can uncover different cognitive structures at a rhetorical discourse level to qualify their theories and persuade their readers/listeners.

Furthermore, the analyses demonstrate the dynamic formation and foregrounding of in- and out-groups in different sub-genres of the conspiracy milieu, enabled by Koller's socio-cognitive framework for CDS and social actor analysis**.** The out-group was significantly more foregrounded and detailed in the superconspiracy theory discourses; whereas, the ufology and conspirituality discourses focused on the in-group, with the out-group often inferred. The

celebrity death conspiracy theory discourse was the least committed to in-group out-group construction which is indicative of its mainstream appeal to a wide audience with 'increasing emotional and intellectual distance' (Zarefsky 1990: x). Nevertheless, a key similarity throughout the analysed data showed the construction of a conspiratorial out-group whose negative points are emphasised and positive attributes excluded, compatible with van Dijk's ideological square. Put another way, nowhere in the data was a character ambiguously construed, every character had a clear group categorisation. Out-group construction in conspiracy theory has clear conceptual overlaps with scapegoating, not least in the superconspiracy discourses (6.7) but throughout the data. In other words, all the discourses attributed malevolent actions to the out-group. In contrast, the in-group was always discursively constructed as epistemically superior, albeit to varying degrees. Epistemic superiority is more explicit in the superconspiracy discourses, and implied in the hybrid discourses, such as ufology (as mentioned in 8.1). The mainstreamed celebrity death conspiracy theory discourse had less commitment to identifying the in-group as intellectually superior with more emphasis on curiosity and skepticism of orthodox discourses. The celebrity deaths discourse in Chapter 7 is also quest-focused, albeit with the quest to find the 'real' cause of a celebrity death, unlike the more complex quests to contact extra-terrestrials or achieve spiritual enlightenment in the ufology and conspirituality narratives.

Considering the self-contained narrative blueprint offered by the superconspiracy discourse space, the boundaries of the discourse space help construct a highly ordered and predictable narrative. Put another way, the enemy is clearly defined as the out-group encroaching rapidly – ideologically, spatially and temporally – on the deictic centre of the in-group. Furthermore, the research on conspiracy theories around dot-connecting strategies (section 3.5), bricolaging (3.11) and the active participant (3.6) appear compatible with the superconspiracy discourse space. For instance, in Chapter 6, Icke claimed that the outcome of the pandemic would be ultimately economic, not a health issue. He evidences the point by dot-connecting small businesses closing due to nationwide quarantines, which the discourse participants can also do.

A significant theme is the concerns about misuse of power and their relation with contemporaneous social anxieties. Attention in all the narratives is drawn away from structural problems (Berlet 2009: 15) becoming superseded by a battle or quest to uncover the truth at the expense of directing energy towards identifying elements of the political system which can be modified for the greater good. The integration of genuine concerns around abuses and imbalances of power into a narrative defined and boundaried by the conspiracy theory structure provides an accessible space for the exploration of these concerns. It also serves to isolate the discourse participants from the possibility of beneficial social and political reform. The socio-political paralysis is due not least to the impossible and intangible evil accused of all ills.

This study demonstrates the need to consider conspiracy theories, not as *paranoid* but an anti-elitist critique which shifts the balance of power towards the conspiracy theorists, diminishing the epistemic power of orthodox power centres. I have shown that insights beyond that of the layman are possible when analysing language (Hart 2010: 5). I have also demonstrated that a problematic power relation is dependent on viewpoint. In the case of conspiracy theories, it is the economic and political elite who are problematic and the conspiracy 'gurus' who use language (with the cognitive interface mediating between text and society) to become knowledge elites within the conspiracy milieu. The celebrity death conspiracy theories, ufology and conspirituality analyses demonstrated a lack of paranoia as quest-based narratives were foregrounded. The out-group was an inconvenient 'roadblock' and excuse for not achieving a particular aim, or targetting someone other than the discourse participants. Although arguably of the paranoid style because of its 'heated exaggeration,

suspiciousness and conspiratorial fantasy' (Hofstadter 2008: 1), the NWO rhetorical patterns of the Icke-Rose text suggest that such an attribution is unecessarily deductive and focusing on truth claims instead of socio-cultural significance. The superconspiracy discourse space indicates a narrative blueprint that can facilitate a conspiratorial worldview whereby all political activity can be reconstrued as conspiracy. Paranoia targets the individual whereas conspiracy theory rhetoric (political paranoia - Barkun 2013: 24) targets the collective underdog, drawing on the socially shared belief of a dishonest, self-serving political and economic elite. The association with lack of realism and accuracy by a mainstream orthodox 'out-group' is central to the rhetoric as it is often situated in heterodox milieux which prize esoteric knowledge, evident in the reclamation of *conspiracy theor/ist* by the conspiracy milieu. Social actor analysis, Text World Theory and the appraisal framework were applied to demonstrate aspects of conspiracy theories which are not *a priori* paranoid, instead elucidating conceptions of self and other, enemy proximization and evaluation which extend beyond the belief of self as victim to that of systemic critique reliant on socially shared cognitive structures.

8.5 Thesis limitations

Overgeneralisation can be mitigated by 'explicitly stating the limitations of the research, which has the benefit of clearly delineating the scope of interpretation' (Page et al. 2014: 84). This study forms a preliminary exploration of a complex, nuanced and rapidly changing phenomena. Despite random sampling – which enables some generalisability (LeCompte and Goetz 1982: 34) – more research is needed of the constantly changing language and the diverse and complexifying online conspiracy milieu spaces. Furthermore, qualitative findings are non-generalisable (van der Bom 2015: 229). The data chosen is not thorough or extensive but a snapshot of the English-speaking online conspiracy milieu; the focus was qualitative to achieve an emic perspective. I selected sources transparently and the process is thus replicable, similar to Harambam (2020: 37). It is possible that the analytical patterns and findings discovered are reflective of general conspiracy theory rhetoric, which could be verified by further corpus studies. There are undeniably limitations to qualitative research, and it was a choice – given the time and resource constraints – between being able to conduct fine-grained detailed analyses enabling the illumination of rhetorical structures or, instead, a corpus-based analysis that could pick up potentially new/different findings, such as word frequencies.

My role as ethnographer and path taken in the selection and interpretation of data is clearly limited albeit unavoidable. Doing a 'guerrilla ethnography' (Yang 2003) highlights the limitations of accountability and opens up the research to easy criticism. Though arguably this is a limitation of the thesis, I stand by my decision to take the 'messy route' of a multi-sited ethnography to fully honour the complex, networked and constantly changing nature of the milieu (as per Harambam 2020 and Toseland 2019). A researcher may well have chosen different data, which questions external validity. A Swedish ethnographic researcher may have found more data on the Swedish conspiracy theorist, Henrik Palmgren, not Alex Jones and chosen a Palmgren text. However, it is important to reiterate and emphasise that the project is a snapshot: an ethnographic portrait following a transparent and systematic process which recognises the researcher's subjective role. Focusing on British-centred narratives was a conscious methodological choice due to the lack of representation in current research and the researcher advantage of being in the milieu myself and privy to emic understanding. I also tried to be as aware as one can be about my own role, and develop reflexive analysis capabilities; for instance, by being systematic and transparent in data collection.

Notably, the systematicity and transparency required of the ethnographic process enable me to affirm its internal reliability. Given the same variables, the study is replicable, i.e., another researcher could achieve the same results with the same methods and variables. However, this is an impossible realisation as 'because human behaviour is never static, no study can be replicated exactly, regardless of the methods and designs employed (LeCompte and Goetz 1982: 35). Furthermore, the researcher would need to assume a similar social role in the ethnographic process, i.e. a 'truth-seeker' (Toseland 2019, Harambam 2020). The analyses' internal validity (how the findings represent reality) is confirmed by the analytical frameworks used, grounded in textual evidence and supported at interpretation level. Nevertheless, it is an essential caveat that the findings are specific to the analysed texts and should not be extrapolated to the entire conspiracy milieu. The external validity is currently a proposition, and would need to be backed up by further studies to corroborate findings across a wider data set.

The data is representative insofar as it was chosen randomly (boyd 2010). Listing results by viewing statistics enabled me to choose the most viewed data, and when not possible, the first result that fit the working criteria was chosen, ordered by newest first. I chose the search term based on my ethnographic knowledge; therefore, another researcher may well have chosen different keywords. Undeniably, choosing data based on highest viewing statistics has its shortcomings, despite the argument that the more prominent a text is, the more influential it is (Barkun 2013: 36, KhosraviNik 2017: 66). This is a limit to the current capacities of the digital world as we do not truly know which texts are the most viewed. Conspiracy theories are often reposted and taken down due to the transient nature of internet data (which reiterates the usefulness of emic knowledge), as well as current debates around censorship and gatekeeping. Ultimately, the ethnographic process I undertook has been documented, making transparent its limitations.

Digital ethnography is time-consuming; it was a choice between in-depth contextualised analysis or more surface-level interpretations which do not benefit from emic understanding. I stand by my choice to conduct qualitative ethnographic research of a milieu that already has a significant body of research inspired by the *paranoid style* ascription and that is lacking in linguistic ethnographies, with a research gap addressing the milieu from an emic perspective. 'Insider knowledge' can also lend itself to the temptation to generalise; therefore, I have aimed to avoid doing so. Furthermore, ethnography highlights subjectivity in research; however, this can be seen as positive in that it is transparent, as all research is subject to researcher bias, not least in data selection. Transparency, systematicity and rigour were integral to the process and were focal points in decisions made in the ethnographic process.

8.6 Public impact potential

Finally, there is a real potential for public impact, considering both the enduring prevalence of the conspiracy theory narrative in popular culture and also the contemporaneous concerns around the propagation of conspiracy theories on social media. A case in point is a published article in *The Conversation* on Diana conspiracy theories, based on Chapter 7, which has received high viewing statistics (Bennett 2022). The impact of conspiracy theories on outcomes such as vaccination uptake and closely related phenomenon of misinformation, disinformation and fake news have created obvious opportunities for public impact. Moreover, Stefanowitsch argues for 'an empirically based cognitive linguistics directed at the public' (2019: 178) that is accessible. He cites Lakoff as a prime example of public engagement as an active public figure in the critique of political language in the United States. There exists the possibility for both public engagement of cognitive linguistics and

conspiracy theories in elucidating the distinct characteristics, persuasiveness properties and logical shortcomings of the narratives in working towards informing the public in how to sharpen their criticality in a digital era of information overload.

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Appendices

Appendix 4.1: List of websites accessed

Below is a list of sources consulted in the digital ethnographic process:-

Alternative news websites

Alex Jones and Infowars: www.infowars.com and www.prisonplanet.com (banned.video)

Daniel Estulin: https://vipwebinars.org/

David Icke's main website New World Order and Conspirituality material: www.davidicke.com

Henrik Palmgren: https://redice.tv/about

Paul Joseph Watson: summit.news

www.breitbart.com

www.caitlinjohnstone.com

climatechangedispatch.com

conspiracyanalyst.org

www.globalresearch.ca

greatreset.news

www.informationliberation.com

www.naturalnews.com

www.newswars.com

reclaimthenet.org

rightedition.com

thetruthpatriot.com

truthcomestolight.com

vaticancatholic.com

https://vigilantcitizen.com/

Chat forums and user-generated ‘prosumer’ content:-

https://www.reddit.com/r/conspiracy/

www.gab.com

Instagram

YouTube

Vimeo

Facebook

Other

Contacting extra-terrestrials: www.seti.org

The Institute for Planetary Synthesis, website, available at: https://ipsgeneva.com/en/

Paid membership portal for New Age spirituality and self-help as well as curiosities such as ancient civilizations, extra-terrestrials and the supernatural: www.gaia.com

Sacred geometry: https://sacredgeometryinternational.com/

The Flat Earth Society: https://www.tfes.org/

Books

Alex Jones (2002) *9/11: Descent Into Tyranny*

Alex Jones et al (2019): *CENSORED: How the West Became Soviet Russia*

Butler and Knight (2007): *Who Built The Moon?*

David Icke has published over 20 books between 1991 and 2021, with the most recent being *Perceptions of a Renegade Mind* (2021)

Erich von Daniken (1968) *Chariots of the Gods?* and *History is wrong* (2009)

Milton William Cooper (1995) *Beyond a Pale Horse*

The Protocols of the Elders of Zion (1903), unknown author

Appendix 5.1: Extract from Alex Jones’ 9-11 Descent into Tyranny (2002)

‘The New World Order system of world conquest has always been visible, but it is so hulking and massive that it has remained hidden in plain sight.

One of the most common pre-conditioned responses I hear from the average compartmentalized individual is that there couldn’t be a society of people working for world

government. Those in denial proclaim, “It’s too big...it would unravel...they couldn’t keep it hidden...”

The average person judges the world according to their moral compass. Because most individuals are not ruthless, sociopathic control-freaks, they cannot even begin to fathom the dark gulfs that are the souls of the servants of the global elite.

The New World Order is a synthesis of the survivors of empires, of super-merchant families, of barbarian kings, of banking families established in the middle-ages, and of the royal families of Europe. Over time, they have learned that if they can simply conceal the true magnitude of their power and install puppet rulers from the cultures they dominate, the people will accept greater forms of tyranny.

In the late 20th Century, as the formation of a true world government entered its final stages, the globalists began to do what was unthinkable just a few years before. They began to admit that there really was a move towards a New World Order, complete with a World Court, World Taxes and a World Army to enforce its despotic laws.

Just a few years ago, the average man on the street refused to even admit the possibility of a world government. Now that same individual will bellow, “Yes, there’s a world government – and we need it to protect ourselves from terrorism!”

The globalists’ plan is so far along that now they must admit that world government is a reality. Their propagandists are hailing the New World Order as the only system that will keep us safe and secure.

In reality, it is the world government itself which is conducting the terrorist acts.

I can think of no better way to introduce this book than with a collection of quotes by members of the global elite touting this dehumanizing system.

[end of page 6]

…

<u>911: Descent into Tyranny</u>

<u>The House of World Government</u>

For many years I have been exposing the criminal activities of the global elite, also known as the New World Order. This collection of power-mad megalomaniacs has been engineering a successive string of terrorist events to usher in a corrupt world government—a world government where, public documents show, populations will be herded into compact cities, issued national ID cards, and even given implantable microchips.

In this book we are first going to look at some historical examples of tyrants and governments—oligarchies alike—using disasters (in many cases terrorist events that these tyrants themselves perpetrate against their populations and bureaucracies) to create a crisis in order to convince the people to exchange liberty for so-called security.

We will start our analysis of the use of the Hegelian dialectic of problem-reaction- solution by looking at some historical examples, going back to Nero, who burned Rome, then blamed the fire on the Christians. We will then fast-forward to Adolph Hitler, who burned the Reichstag (the German Capitol Building Complex) shortly after being elected so that he could blame its

destruction on the Nazis' political enemies. He did this in order to destroy the German bill of rights and constitution, using the crisis to declare martial law in the Reich. Turning next to the Northwoods document from 1962, we will examine how the Joint Chiefs of Staff and many other sectors of the federal government, up to the highest levels, were planning to blow up airliners full of American citizens as a pretext for war.

(Jones 2002: 6-11)

Appendix 5.2: Victor Oddo's YouTube channel, *CHEMTRAILS - (Why I'm Not Concerned)* (April 17th 2017)

I get a lot of questions about chemtrails and people in a very panicked state saying "Victor, are you aware that this is happening, that they're trying to control us, they're trying to dumb us down and lower our vibration. Are you aware, look outside your window Victor, don't bury your head in the sand, buddy". People, I guess, maybe assume that because I don't talk about it very often that I am not aware of the gross injustices taking place on this planet and the fact that most human beings are prisoners and are oblivious to that.

I went through a phase many years ago where I was voraciously consuming information of this nature. And I believed it. I believe it still. I believe all of that and then some is going on. It's a very crazy-ass reality we live in with some crazy, sadistic, pretty much evil human beings or even, uh, or non-human beings some people say. That they don't have our best interests at heart and have been very successful with implementing their will and imposing their will upon the masses and such a subtle and yet brilliant way to the point where again most people are prisoners and slaves to this machine and they have no idea it's going down. And people ask me like "why don't you talk about this, why doesn't this bother you, why- you know you should be- you're on YouTube, you should be telling people about this". And, you know, what I I went through a little bit of phase where I would have agreed with that sentiment, that people need to know this, and in a sense they do. But what I've learned is that, it doesn't do me any good. It started to really bring my own vibration down. Not the chemtrails, not the chemicals in the water, not the.. all the other crap going on, not the commercialism and whatnot and. Not that in and of itself, but my resistance to it. I didn't like that that's how things are, even though that is, it is what it is and that's how it is. I didn't like it, I was resisting it. Moreso, I was I was becoming kind of consumed by it, and made to feel fairly weary and uncomfortable about it. I started getting kind of paranoid, thinking- they're watching me. I'm a lightworker, I'm going through this process, so they might they're gonna be on to me. And because the energies are different now, and fear can manifest itself quite physically quite quickly, I experienced a lot of scary shit. I had the negative entities, I had the psychic attacks, I had very weird experiences, the feeling that I'm getting followed and all of that. It was a very real experience. I'm not saying it was all in my head, I don't know if it was, but I but I what I'm saying that I learned that I attracted that to me. That maybe their most powerful weapon is the fear we have of them. The anger and the frustration and the indignation we have of them. That is the enemy, not them all by themselves. They can't really continue to sustain themselves much longer in the new energy which is demanding integration and love, love and integration with love and basically, and they are they're the antithesis of that. And they're going to they're going to fall by their own hands, there's nothing that really we need to do about in my opinion and that the embodiment of fear and weariness and resistance of them is only halting our own spiritual evolution [pause] That's why I don't talk about this on my channel. I don't want to spread fear. I don't want to get people looking over their shoulder about the scary that does exist in my opinion, I believe it. It's a and I understand that it took me a period of adjusting to this and kind of concluding this on my own.

For a while like a lot of you guys, I was learning about it, I was appalled by it, it affected me quite a bit emotionally I was afraid of it and I wanted, I wanted to deal with the feelings that it conjured up in me by addressing it literally, by trying to tell people all about it, so we could do something about it. And that doesn't seem all that illogical, but what I realized that this beast is so big that spouting off to people out of fear and anxiety is not going to really help matters, walking around afraid of it's not going to help, resisting and being angry about it's not going to help. What does help is spreading light, spreading truth, expressing yourself from the place of being aligned with your soul's purpose- that has an effect, that's what they don't want and that's what they're hoping all these little symbol of the symbols and all the stuff going on is going to just going to deviate you from that path. It's a distraction [pause] But that's just my opinion, that's just my perspective, and it's not 100% accurate either, because there are people out there who really feel strongly, and it is their mission to share about this stuff. And to bring awareness to that, and that does need to happen ,that's going to happen one way or another and a lot of it a lot of it's going to happen by people like you who feel resonant with the idea of sharing this sort of information. But a lot of people get really lost in it. It wasn't my purpose to do that and yet I was because I was so afraid, I started doing it anyway and it just caused me stress, it didn't help matters at all and it only served to better their cause. So in my opinion it's about just being very honest with yourself and how all of this relates with you and your own life path. And that you pursuing your highest joy is the greatest weapon you have- and maybe it is, perhaps it is your greatest joy to start writing and sharing and making videos and alerting people of the craziness and the insanity going on. And if that's the case and I wish you all the luck. It's not a black or white situation: what to do what, not to do. It's about being honest with your life path and what is relevant to you and what is not. But for me again, it's not- I believe that if I was to share about this all the time and get people all pissed off about it, it would be, it's just not what I'm here to do. So, I just kind of want to make this one video about this stuff to, just to let you guys know I'm not ignoring your comments and concern and I respect it and understand it but it's just not my placa. So, anyway, take that for what you will folks I will speak to you tomorrow, have an amazing day. Namaste.

Appendix 6.1: Transcript of the David Icke and Brian Rose interview, **The Truth Behind the Coronavirus Pandemic, COVID-19 Lockdown and The Economic Crash**

BR: Brian Rose   DI: David Icke

Introduction

BR: The world is changing, inspiration is everywhere. It's never been so easy to connect, share and bring people together. We're learning from others and finding the best in ourselves. Challenging our beliefs, sharing our vulnerability, overcoming our fears, transforming ourselves so we can transform the world. How far can we go? This is London Real, I'm Brian Rose, my guest today is [music]

Main Interview

BR: This is London Real, I am Brian Rose, my guest today is David Icke, the English writer and publc speaker known since the nineteen nineties as a professional conspiracy theorist calling yourself a full-time investigator into who and what is really controlling the world. You're the author of over 21 books and 10 DVDs and have lectured in over 25 countries speaking live for up to 10 hours to huge audiences filling stadiums like Wembley Arena. You're here today to talk about the coronavirus pandemic, the worldwide covid-19 lockdown and the looming global economic recession. David, welcome back to London Real

DI: nice Brian

BR: great to have you here a lot of people out there with a lot of questions there's a lot of confusion this is a crazy time I wanted to start off and just say a few things as far as where we are

DI: okay

BR: it’s March 18th 2020 right now I want to throw some of my views out there and then I want to hear your views

DI: okay

BR: I want to have a good discussion about this

DI: right

BR: and also talk about the numbers we know so far so first of all just as far as my beliefs I personally don't believe the coronavirus was created by a third party I do think it occurred naturally I do believe in the science and I do believe in vaccines I'm sure we're gonna talk about this I do plan on getting my flu vaccine and any future coronaviruses vaccines although you might talk me out of it we'll see I am now obeying the orders of the government I'm complying with their request for information and behavior we're gonna see what happens with that that being said I do believe at this point that the virus can no longer be controlled in the Western world and as a healthy 40-something year old male I’m prepared to get it right now and I don’t believe it's gonna kill me we just shook hands over the long term I do think 70 to 80% of the population is gonna get it and hopefully become immune to it but also I understand due to the safety of the elderly I know we're going to talk about that and those with lower immune systems and respiratory problems I understand and I agree with this policy of social distancing in order to flatten the curve and not to overwhelm our medical system finally I just want to say I think we believe we're now live in a post-coronavirus world where the virus is gonna be along for a long period of time and it's gonna change our behavior let me hit you with some stats and then we can jump into this as of today March 18th there are two hundred and eight thousand two hundred and twenty one reported cases worldwide and eight thousand two hundred and seventy two confirmed deaths countries like China with eighty one thousand cases about three thousand two hundred deaths Italy thirty one thousand cases twenty five hundred deaths Iran sixteen thousand cases nine hundred eighty eight deaths as we go down to Spain 13,000 cases five hundred and thirty three deaths and then down into the USA was sixty five hundred cases and one hundred and sixteen reported deaths and here in the UK nineteen fifty cases and 71 deaths stock markets in America are down well over twenty five percent since their highs and a global recession is all but certain Federal Reserve has cut rates to nearly zero the US has approved a trillion dollar stimulus package the UK a three hundred and thirty billion pound stimulus package many industries at risk aerospace travel companies entertainment events retail outlets the list goes on and on and on I hear through my sources we should expect military troops here in London in the next couple days on the streets David there's an ancient Chinese expression that says may you live in interesting times some say it's a curse what do you see in the world what are you concerned about and do you feel for the British citizens and global citizens

DI: right well maybe if I just put some background in place and then we can take it from there for 30 years I've been warning people in my books and in every other way I can that this world is controlled by a cult it’s a cult that has no borders it operates in all the at least major

countries and in fact all the countries in the end and particularly in those countries that dictate the direction of the world so the cult will be at the core of the system in China it will be at the core of the system in America etc etc etc and so what have I said in this thirty years that this cult wants I've said and we said I've said it in the chats we've had before it wants to create a beyond Orwellian global state in which a tiny few people dictate to everyone else I've referred to this as the Hunger Games Society and you can picture the structure very clearly picture a pyramid at the top of the pyramid you've got a tiny few enormously wealthy people that actually are connected to this cult we now have a name for them we call them the 1% at the bottom of this pyramid in The Hunger Games society is basically the rest of humanity that is dependent upon the 1% and in between the two is a vicious merciless police military state to impose the will of the 1% on the population and to prevent the population challenging the 1% and this hunger games society is not classic fascism it's not classic communism although the outcome in terms of tyranny is the same it is a technocracy a technocracy is defined as a society that is controlled by bureaucrats experts scientists engineers technocrats and the ability of that situation to to happen is through smart technology and AI the idea is that everything will be connected to AI this is what the Internet of Things is all about and if you listen to the crazies in Silicon Valley they're telling you that in the period around 2030 a year that keeps coming up from all directions we will have a situation where the human brain will start to be connected to AI and thus whoever controls AI will be connecting will be connecting and driving the perceptions of humanity and that can be done from a central point through this smart grid global smart grid so that's the structure that they want they also want a society completely cashless where everything is digital money a single one one world currency which will be run through this smart grid now in the same 30 years I've been saying there are two major techniques that are being used to bring about that situation one I've called since the 1990s problem reaction solution where you covertly create a problem you use the unquestioning pathetic mainstream media to tell the public the version of the problem you want them to believe and you're looking at stage two the reaction for fear that's the currency of control outrage whatever the problem is and either a demand from the public that something must be done or at least an acceptance from the public that things need to change because of the problem and at that point those who've created the problem got that reaction openly in changes in society offer the solutions to the problems they have themselves covertly created and those changes step-by-step take us further and further to that hunger game society there’s another version which I call no problem reaction solution where you don't need a real problem you just need the perception of one weapons of mass destruction in Iraq and you still have the ability to provide your society-changing solution the stablemate problem-reaction-solution is what I call the totalitarian tiptoe where you start at A and you know you're going to Z but you know if you go in too big a leap people will look up from the game show and the latest Simon Cowell and say what's going on what's going on because the change is so great so you do it in as bigger steps as you can towards your outcome but not so fast or big that you alert too many people to the fact that it's a pattern what you want people to believe is everything is random and I have this other phrase which relates to all this know the outcome and you'll see the journey if you don't know where this world is being taken by this cult then everything seems random coronavirus random climate change random economic crash random but when you know where we're being taken you know the outcome this Hunger Games structure society now the apparently random events become clear stepping stones to that outcome now let's take all of that and apply it to the coronavirus and what's happening now and let people decide for themselves if they think that the fact that the coronavirus hysteria ticks every single box of that outcome that goal whether that's the coincidence I absolutely do not believe that it is and you know you mentioned that you don't think that it was a created virus but but the fact is whether it was or whether it wasn't doesn't matter to the fact that once you you roll this out it takes on a momentum of its own

BR: I agree with that

DI: and therefore what is unfolding was desperately predictable and in fact we'll get into this as we chat to massive 1% organizations one in fact six weeks before this virus came to light in China were playing out scenarios and simulations based on exactly this scenario that's unfolding now and what they said would happen is exactly what is happening down to the fine detail okay

BR: but the corona virus is real and it is dangerous you do believe that

DI: um well not as a black and white no

BR: but it is real

DI: um obviously there is a strain of this corona virus there are many corona viruses which appears to be different but if you look in terms of the danger the danger is to a certain section of society do you know mainstream doctors I watched an interview with one in America only two or three days ago and they're saying well just to put into context 80% of people that are diagnosed with corona virus have and this is his quote very mild symptoms the ones that are in danger and by the way in danger from any virus including the classic flu are those that have compromised immune systems and they are old people elderly people and they are people with what is termed pre-existing health problems why the pre-existing health problems are putting so much pressure on the immune system it's already weak when it's hit with this this is why someone like that will have potentially a serious situation and someone with an immune system in working order of any level will just swat it away and another point you know have we not learned yet to take what the authorities tell us with a pinch of salt until it's proved otherwise do you know there was a lady called Dr. Deborah Blix [sic: Birx] she's the White House coronavirus coordinator she said in a press conference two days ago that ninety-six percent plus of those who have been tested for coronavirus in South Korea were negative and she said and our testing results in America show about the same and so when you are in a massive way you are diagnosing on the basis of symptoms how the hell do you know they've got this coronavirus strain and and not something else meet me and my son Gareth well before Christmas both went down with we’re very very rarely ill that's why we remember it we both went down with this with this illness and now as I read the symptoms of this coronavirus strain we had word-for-word point-by-point every single symptom and that means one of two things it means either this coronavirus strain was going around in Britain then before it didn’t even emerged out of China or far more likely we got something else with exactly the same symptoms so I would hold back on believing the figures and I would also

BR: those figures I mentioned are you unsure about those

DI: I question any figures coming out of mainstream authority I've been investigating the mainstream everything for 30 years and you know most of the time if they ever told the truth they would genetically implode from the shock so I question everything and if it stands up it stands up but I don't just take it because somebody in a suit has told me to believe it for instance you know in 2017-2018 45 million people got the flu in America according to Centers for Disease Control and Prevention figures 61 thousand died um where was the hysteria then 61 thousand people dying

BR: well they say that this is more dangerous and more contagious and what’s potentially gonna kill more people

DI: well

BR: because otherwise that's a good question David everyone's like well how come people aren't worried about this when the flu from 18 killed 50,000 this has only killed 8,000

DI: the point is though that this is the point that according to officialdom eighty percent of people who get the coronavirus diagnosed with the corona virus have not necessarily all got it have very mild symptoms the vast majority of the rest have what they call moderate symptoms and that leaves some with compromised and weakened immune systems who get the serious end of it and they get the serious end of the flu as well and and other viruses

BR: these people are clogging up the Italian Health System right now

DI: well

BR: do you believe that's true

DI: the point is what we what we surely should be doing is focusing on those people and doing doing what is necessary to protect them and their immune systems from the consequences but to have the vast majority of the population who at most will have mild symptoms some even no symptoms I mean I remember this story one of the first Scottish people to get the virus was interviewed on a BBC local radio station and he said well you know I had a bit of a mild fever well what's that that's the immune system using heat to kill the predator just perfectly immune system response so anyway he says and so I got checked out they said I've got coronavirus and they said you've got to go to hospital he said but uh I felt well I I a bit yeah a few aches and stuff but I'll be alright so so go to hospital he said but by the time I get to hospital he said the symptoms are gone and he's gone down as a statistic coronavirus in in the numbers so when you've got people who are getting that on even if they do get it on a vast scale in terms of percentage who have that response you get an even greater number of who don't get it and for that you destroy because that's what's happening before our eyes Brian you destroy the world economic system now let's go back to how I started one of the things I've been pointing out as a problem reaction solution that was coming to to transform human society including by the way one of the things I said was coming in my earlier books was a pandemic because of all the boxes it takes but what I've been saying for the best part of 30 years is they're planning an enormous economic crash and I've been saying it even more since 2008 because 2008 seemed a bit of be a nightmare the point I'm making is what they want is something that would make 2008 look like you know a sunday-school tea party and so this coronavirus hysteria gives the the excuse to do what they're doing and the outcome and the consequences of what they're doing is to dismantle the world economic system now another thing I've been saying this hunger games society I've been saying this for a long time is designed to have no small business no even medium-sized business globally just gigantic corporations that control and produce everything Amazon is a classic example of what I'm talking about what this coronavirus hysteria is creating is a situation unfolding by the hour worldwide that is destroying small business family business even medium-sized business some even really big businesses - it's destroying them that the big legacy of what is happening now will not be to do with health long-term it will be economic

BR: I agree with you

DI: It's going to be catastrophic now now here's the point what happens to those people whose businesses collapse what happens to all those people who were working for those

businesses for bars for for hotels for all these businesses that have been targeted don't go there shut down what happens to them they fall into the bottom of the Hunger Games society and and what we're seeing now every day is this Hunger Games society coming closer and closer and closer because of what's being done in the name of protecting the people I've got news for you you go deep enough into this system they don't give a shit about the people we are being asked to believe now that this system cares about old people we must protect the old people we must destroy the world economy to protect the old people oh these would be the old people would they that have paid in their entire life through taxation and other means and at the end in their final years they get handed a pittance of a pension which gives them the choice between being warm or being hungry and what does that do when people are going without essential things because the system doesn't care and and and they they're having to buy shite food because that's all they can afford they they can't have nutrients to boost their immune systems because they can't afford them in the mainstream everything's not telling them they need them anyway and at the same time they're breathing in shit air drinking toxic water and other drinks being deluged with sugar which has a phenomenally destructive impact on the immune system all this is going on we're living in a an electromagnetic technologically generated soup of radiation toxicity and this system has allowed that to happen has allowed corporations to do that and now having done all that that's devastated the lives and the immune systems of old people we are being asked to believe that the system cares about the health of the elderly it doesn't give a shit I'm not talking about the nurses I'm not talking about the doctors I'm talking about that at the core which is driving this and the the idea that all these things are being done to protect the elderly they don't give a shit about the elderly the elderly are an excuse to impose the very society that I'm talking about now if you look at when these things happen and and great Orwellian draconian things are put in place oh we've got to do this because of the problem well the problem eventually passes this virus will eventually flatten out but what you see every time 9/11's a classic they'll roll back some of it but not what nearly rolled back to where it was before the whole thing's moved on closer to the Hunger Games society another thing you're going to see or by the way I mentioned that term a great goal of this and I've been saying this might well when did I first write this about 1993 they want a cashless society a digital cashless society one world currency which has phenomenal implications for freedom they want rid of cash and when I said that there was lots of cash in circulation people going end of cash now look at it and you know what was it this guy Ted Ross [sic: Tedros Adhanom] the head of the World Health Organization a man I wouldn't trust to tell me the time in a room full of clocks by the way um he said don't touch cash use cards because the virus can pass on through cash I've come up here today for this chat three times in places that are always cash I had cash turned down no, we're not taking cards and when this when this runs on they're going to be justifying a cashless society on the basis of this not this that you can pass viruses on through it and they're going to be saying we can't have this again we can't have this happen again so you're gonna have more technological testing of people for whether they have a temperature and all this stuff and the whole surveillance is going to move on exactly as it has in China

BR: right

DI: if people thought China had reached the point of beyond Orwellian well you just look what they've brought in as a result of this coronavirus

BR: I want to talk about that technology because it's a very good point what now Italy right now we're looking at Italy and from what we can see in here the hospitals are chock-full of people that are dying there's not enough respirators etc I mean surely we must do something about this David I know what you're saying is then these things will pass and we're crushing

our global economy which actually has bigger implications than the health I agree with you this will ruins people's lives

DI: not only that it will cause massive amounts of ill health and death

BR: I agree with that too I agree with that it's just it's just pushing it down further but what about these people that are dying and clogging up hospitals and the fact that could happen with the NHS that is a reality

DI: well I thought all along and it seems to be the case that the strain that is prevalent in Italy is something of a stronger nature than than what's generally circulating and and also in Iran that's something else just as an aside we have a country targeted by America targeted by Israel Iran and as this virus came out of China of all the countries in all the world Iran got it smack worse than anyone before it started to appear in in Italy

BR: it was a little odd

DI: and members

BR: could have been a coincidence

DI: well I mean you know after 30 years Brian coincidences are something I have to be very very well persuaded because coincidences don't turn out to be so they turn out to be made to happen anyway so not only did Iran have this what again seems a stronger strain of it but it was killing the reg.. people within the regime at a very early stage and and you know that's that's a coincidence how many coincidences do you want and then you have another one you see I mentioned that one of the problem reaction solutions that I've said in the books over the years that they were going to use to justify this Hunger Games Society was a pandemic you you look at the movie Contagion I think it was 2011

BR: I watched it last week

DI: it tells it's basically coming out of China and stuff like that

BR: yeah, Steven Soderbergh it's got Jude Law in there and yeah Paltrow it's very interesting and very well made

DI: yeah but you know you know I've talked to you in previous chats about something called pre-emptive programming where they they preempt something to put it into the subconscious mind even the consciousmind through Hollywood and then suddenly it kind of happens for real but I was sent a document from 2010 that was published by the Rockefeller Foundation Rockefeller Foundation obviously is a front for the Rockefeller family which is fundamentally involved in this global cult in fact the Rothschilds and the Rockefellers were the creators of the World Health Organization which is there to control health policy and direct the perception of health in its all its forms from a central point

BR: you don't trust the WHL at all

DI: well it's currently headed by a guy called Ted Ross from Ethiopia who was a politburo member in a Marxist government that's been running Ethiopia for a long time he was Health Minister and was exposed three times for covering up cholera epidemics in Ethiopia and now he's head of the World Health Organization telling us about the corona virus you you will

understand if I don't agree or even believe a word that comes out of his mouth see these are these these organizations are not there to serve the public they're there to serve this agenda so who came out and said all no don't touch cash you pass on the virus just you just use Ted Ross same same guy he's the one that's praised China for a wonderful job they did with the corona virus and and and and and what have you now this Rockefeller Foundation document was about a scenario involving a flu pandemic and it described what would happen that that China would use authoritarian draconian methods to to meet the challenge and then the West wouldn't basically start like that but then would would become the same and this whole global lockdown was described in this document and then we moved to six weeks before the virus came to light in China and we had something called event 201 this was a simulation of a corona virus pandemic which involved the World Economic Forum which has its meeting every year in Davos this is the 1% 1% and involved the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation Bill Gates the guy that wants to vaccinate the frickin world and by the way is funding the electronic tracking of people to so that the authorities know if they've been vaccinated or not through an organization he funds called Gavi and they ran this simulation called event 201 in which they inserted you know scenario a row or simulated news reports and if you watch them you can see it on the internet it's just like the news reports we're seeing in the media and they had they they were discussing okay you know what can we do and and there was a whole area of this simulation where they're discussing how they control information and they're saying how do we deal with the anti-vaxxers how do we make sure that the official narrative of the pandemic is the one that's dominating the internet and all these lines of communication and not what they call conspiracy theories putting another another point of view and all these things that they talked about in this scenario have happened we've had Facebook and Google saying that they're going to make sure that the first of all the World Health Organization version gets free advertisements and they're going to suppress the the other opinion what they call conspiracies and what have your disinformation and fake news who decides if it is they do we've had YouTube this week say that because they don't have the same number of staff they're going to now have videos taken down purely by AI algorithms and because of that they say a lot more videos are going to be taken down even those that don't you know break what they call Community Guidelines so all these things that were decided in this Gates World Economic Forum 1% simulation six weeks before that they should happen or happen

BR: and that was all public information about them doing that or you got the report about it

DI: no no I read I read I read the actual document of the Rockefeller Foundation its scenario which is exactly what's played out but the event 201 simulation was filmed you can see it on the internet

BR: and now they're running that playbook right now

DI: exactly the same another thing is that at the same time that that simulation was taking place 10,000 military personnel and support staff were attending the world military games in Wuhan China so that is I'm not again I'm not saying this happened but what we have to put if we're not going to be scammed and just believe the official narrative we have to explore possibilities and another possibility is that that world military games was a wonderful front to to release some kind of virus in that same area so all these things are something that have to be explored and put into the mix because what happens if you only believe the official version of everything is the official solution for the problem you believe in is going to take us further and further down the road to a society that would make George Orwell bloody wince and all the things that I've said this cult wants this cult is getting as a result of this coronavirus

BR: what do we do about this situation in Italy do you think it's correct to lock everybody down you know if it is this bigger strain do you think that is the intelligent solution to ease off on the hospitals because you know you agree people are dying most likely up there what do we do in that situation is there a point where a big reaction is warranted

DI:well

BR:because I know you care about people

DI: you you have to keep the reaction in proportion to the problem so maybe more needs doing in places like all parts of Italy but the point is you've got to keep your eye on the rest of it and how you can you can see the world completely transformed and economically demolished by taking action now that will have phenomenal knock-on consequences and so when you look in the the global average and in most other countries the number of people who are seriously affected by this against all those who are not the way the whole economic system is being shut down is suicide and and what happens when it reaches a point where in its present state it cannot continue it cannot survive a whole new economic system comes in which is the one this cult wants and I'll tell you another thing I've been going on for years and years and years about the fact that the idea of human-caused climate change is a joke it's a hoax and people say why would they hoax climate change you look at all the solutions to climate change and again and again and again they are exactly the same solutions as and consequences as with the coronavirus what what did Prince Charles say at Davos only a matter of you know two months or so ago he said by 2030 this year that keeps coming up all over the place from all directions we need a new global economic system economic order to meet the challenge of climate change whatever been writing for 30 years this cult wants to transform the world economic order into this technocratic AI-controlled tyranny and both the coronavirus and the climate change hoax are providing the the problem I would say in many ways the illusion of the problem not least with human-caused climate change to offer the solution of exactly what they want which is a transformed centrally controlled AI-controlled world economic system which will not have mom-and-pop businesses anymore it won't have small businesses

BR: now

DI: wants rid of them

BR: now the people in in America are Trump and his advisers and the people who are Boris Johnson’s advisors are gonna say that the virus since it spreads exponentially needs drastic action now that's what they say we have to shut everything down so it doesn't become you know a thousand x in the next 14 days which can happen with a virus can happen with something that grows exponentially that's true right you just don't believe that's the case here

DI: what what what I keep coming back to is the effect on the health of the overwhelming vast majority which have immune systems that just basically slap it aside and it's this small group of elderly people who for reasons I've described have weakened immune systems and those who have other health conditions and therefore weakened immune systems they're the ones in danger so if we focused everything on them and if necessary isolate them and and focus your resources on them so no one goes hungry and no one is in need but the rest of the population 80% very mild symptoms or no symptoms others with moderate symptoms well are we going to destroy the world economic system by saying that those people also have to isolate and not go to work for me that's crazy focus on those who are in danger throw everything at them cocoon them if necessary but cocoon them with with fairness and with

compassion and with total support but the rest of the population I got exactly the same symptoms I repeat before Christmas and I carried on working well unpleasant for two or three days coughed some stuff up and all that but you get on with it and this is how to people all the time I'll give you an analogy Brian years ago you might remember this we used to have a thing called weather and weather used to change and there used to be storms and there used to be you know strong weather situations and we used to call it weather now every time that happens as it's always happened now its climate change we're all gonna die and what we have now is the coronavirus version of that everything is coronavirus we don't even know if so many people have been logged as having had it actually have it when you're testing like I said earlier on symptoms well these symptoms are true of many different things who says they this person's got it or this person hasn't got it we don't know the point is they're not dying from it they're not even most of them being affected more than very mild symptoms so why are we locking them away and bringing down the world economic system and destroying people's businesses livelihoods ability to pay the rent why are we doing that and not just focusing totally on those who could have a serious problem because of their immune system deficiencies

BR: I don't know and they're telling us

DI: I'll tell you why because if they carried on and allowed that to happen the world economic system would not be demolished and the idea is to demolish it so you can replace it problem reaction solution that's why to continue watching the rest of the episode for free visit our website London real TV or click the link in the description below

Appendix 7.1: Transcript of the Kendall Rae video, *Princess Diana Conspiracy Theories*

Kendall Rae: *It's my cat sneezing. Now there's kids screaming outside. Is this a fucking joke? The world doesn't want me to film today, is this real? Please everything shut up for a second.* Welcome back to another Thursday night in October where I am doing a conspiracy theory or something spooky or mysterious, every Thursday night in October. Last Thursday, we talked about the conspiracy theory surrounding the assassination of John F Kennedy, if you didn't see that video I'll put a little link to it right here, if you click there you can watch it. There's always a playlist in the description box that will show you guys all the conspiracy theories that I've done, now I think I have over 10, so, weird. And a lot of the comments on that video were requesting a conspiracy theory this week on Princess Diana and the strange theory surrounding her death. That's what we're going to be talking about today and let me tell you guys, this one is equally as fascinating as the last, this may even be one of my favorite conspiracies of all time. Since I know that a large majority of my audience is from America, which I actually do know where you guys are from I can look at where all of my viewers are from, which is really interesting stuff, but I know that a lot of you guys probably don't know anything about the British Royal Family and like what it is because. To me as an American I really don't understand it I don't really get like what they do. It's really complicated like how the whole family works and everything. Here's the family breakdown in short just, so you kind of understand what I'm talking about. This is Queen Elizabeth, she's still around, she's alive. Her son is the Prince of Wales, Prince Charles and he married who actually at the time of getting married was named Diana Spencer. Before they were even married she was part of the British noble family. And here what they were titled after they got married, she became the Princess of Wales, the Duchess of Cornwall, Duchess of Rothdesay and Countess of Chester. So I don't really know what any of that means to be rather honest with you. So then she had two sons, Prince Charles and- *nice, alright with the noise guys but I'm going to keep*

going- Anyway, Charles and Diana had two sons named William and Harry. Prince William is married to Kate Middleton and it was like a huge thing. Like even I knew about that, I like kind of followed that a little bit, like you because all over our like you know magazines and stuff. Anyway, the marriage of Prince Charles and Princess Diana ended up failing. In 1992 it came out that they were both having affairs and then they got divorced in 1996. Well, in their divorce agreement Diana received about 23 million dollars in a settlement and also got an additional six hundred thousand per year and retained the title of Princess of Wales, but she was no longer Her Royal Highness. So I wouldn't even know the difference. And she also continued to live at the Kensington Palace and the agreement was that both parents were to remain active in the boys lives. So then Princess Diana actually started a relationship with a man named Dodi Fayed, which I think I'm saying that right I hope. Anyway, he was the son of an Egyptian billionaire, and that is where the conspiracy begins. On August 31st of 1997, Princess Diana and Dodi Fayed died in a car crash together along with the driver of the car.

[03:18] Newsreader in video clip insert 1: Diana's death in the car crash of August 1997 stunned a world that had lived her life with her [simultaneous car crash image and mourners' flowers]

[03:24-03:58 video footage of funeral procession and the Queen walking down the aisle during the funeral]

Kendall Rae: Princess Diana was only 36 years old. Her bodyguard who was named Trevor Rhys Jones was also in the car but he ended up surviving, but he was the only one out of the four of them that survived- *and my cat really wants to stop sneezing. Dude, why are you sneezing? Tell me why you're sneezing like that. Oh, you're such a little stupid. Alright get out of here*- The crash happened on August 31st and it happened just after midnight, so it's like Sunday morning very early hours.There were so much paparazzi after the Royal Family, like I'm not sure people in America understand. The paparazzi are intensely always following these people and especially after Diana was having this other relationship with this guy - Dodi- everyone wanted to know about it so they were constantly being followed. So they were staying at the Ritz in Paris and. There was a ton of paparazzi following them that day, so they had made this plan that they were going to divert the paparazzi by having fake cars parked outside at the front of the hotels that people would think Diana was going to come out at any second when in reality they took the backdoor and they left that way. But apparently the paparazzi in the back were able to alert people in the front and they were followed by a bunch of paparazzi.

[05:02- 05:16] Newsreader Dean Shepherd in video clip insert 2: The paparazzi arrested after Princess Diana's deadly car crash are put under formal investigation by a Paris judge. Good evening, the seven men held for questioning in Princess Diana's death could face charges of involuntary homicide.

[05:02- 05:16 video footage of a police van and the car wreck followed by newsreaders Sue Simmons and Dean Shepherd reporting on North American CNBC News]

Kendall Rae: So this was what was first blamed for is that the paparazzi made them crash. Now, what actually happened, they were driving and then they went into a tunnel and that's where that crash actually happened So the driver of the car- this is him- his name is Henri Paul. I think it's Henri, I don't know if I'm saying it right, I know that I'm probably not. But he died, obviously Diana and Dodi died. And the bodyguard was seriously injured and he doesn't remember anything so nobody knows what actually happened. And another interesting bit of information is none of them were wearing seatbelts, which was very odd to a

lot of people because Diana was always seen in the backseat of cars wearing a seatbelt and it was unusual for her to not be wearing one.

[05:53] Male speaker in video clip insert 3: People who believe that Diana died as a result of our routine Saturday night traffic accident must be the same people who believe that President Kennedy was shot by a lone gunman.

[05:53-06:10 Video footage of male speaker followed by footage of car crash]

Kendall Rae: The bodyguard who doesn't remember like I said doesn't really remember much. But he does say he vaguely remembers Diana calling out for Dodi and moaning and crying, so she was like somewhat aware of what was going on. So there's been different reports about how long the ambulance took to get that body to the hospital, but it took anywhere from 1 hour and 15 minutes to an hour and 40 minutes. In France it's actually standard procedure to send an ambulance with a fully equipped team of doctors and nurses to assess the victim's injuries and administer care immediately, and people say that if they had actually followed their proper procedure that she would have been in surgery in under 30 minutes. Another really strange bit of information is that the ambulance was ordered to stop by the doctor in the car because apparently her injuries were getting so bad they actually stopped 30 seconds away from the hospital in front of a museum when that literally the entrance to the hospital was in sight. So it was like very bizarre that they just stopped right there. Many people think that in the ambulance they were actually trying to make her injuries worse, that she wasn't that bad and she probably could have survived, but they took a long time on purpose and then actually made her injuries worse. After Princess Diana died they actually imbalmed her body like immediately, which was against the law. It was against all of the French laws to do this and her body was still warm when they embalmed her, so no-one got a chance to do a really thorough medical examination. So they were unable to determine if some one had ever tampered with her body. A lot of reporters have actually come forward and said that they were specifically told not to interview anyone who mentioned murder or that there was any kind of conspiracy going on. And then another strange thing about that night is the tunnel was completely cleaned instead of having a forensic crime scene set up, you know, in investigating the crash they literally hosed it down. They hosed down the tunnel, cleaned it out and people were able to start using the tunnel again in just a few hours, which alarms me so much. I mean when a car accident fatal car accident happens I understand that they try to move it along when it's just an average one of us, but this was Princess Diana! Why try to move it so fast, and it just seemed very very sketchy. Another strange thing is that Mercedes refused to look at the car. And a lot of people think that the car was possibly tampered with and that Mercedes just knows that anyone who's qualified to be like an expert on Mercedes cars would automatically be able to detect that. The car was a Mercedes S280, it was the only available car. Apparently, this car was actually just stolen and was actually bought by a rental company who gave it to them to drive. And by the research that I've done there was a microchip that was missing from the car that controlled its breaking, its steering, its navigation, not to mention its acceleration as well. Some people think that it was replaced with a remote control that purposely crashed the car. Now let's talk about the different theories, okay, so the French police actually came out and said that the reason that the crash happened was because the driver Henri Paul was completely drunk. There were newspaper reports of this that he was drunk, that his blood alcohol levels were extremely high. But a lot of people do not buy this, including his family. They ordered for the blood to be retested and it was and it came back with pretty much the same result. But the blood also contained a drug, which I don't know how to pronounce but I think it's Albendazole. And his doctor said that he was never actually prescribed this drug, so why was this random drug in his system?

And he was actually prescribed another drug called Acamprostate, Acamprostate, I think is probably not correct at all. This is a drug that he was prescribed but it was not found in his blood which was very strange. High levels of CO2 which was very strange and as well because he showed absolutely no sign in any of the security footage that they have of him that night of being drunk or having any kind of influence from carbon monoxide. Later found out that when he died he his neck broke so you don't take any breaths after your neck breaks. So it couldn't have been from the car because his neck broke and so he wouldn't have taken any breaths at the scene of the car crash, so that was very strange as well, so there's tons of experts out there that think that his blood actually is not his blood, the blood that they sampled, that it’s actually from a suicide victim that would make more sense about the carbon monoxide and stuff.

[10:19] ‘John Morgan, author’ in video clip insert 4: Question is, how do how do you get a sober driver to register a blood alcohol concentration of 1.74. And I suggest that one way is to test blood samples from a different body. Total miscarriage of justice.

[10:19- 10:37 Interview clip of John Morgan on Australian QUT news with insert of his book- *DIANA INQUEST UNTOLD STORY*]

Kendall Rae: Another strange thing about him is that he wasn't actually on duty that night. But he returned just to drive them. Another strange factor is that there is also a Fiat in the tunnel that night that apparently was seen leaving the tunnel extremely fast after the crash happened. And the police have confirmed that this was a real car that was there, but they were never able to locate its driver or find any other information about it. So one of the things that Diana's bodyguard does remember is that he thinks he saw a motorbike, kind of sitting near them, like at red lights and things like that like sort of close to them, he recalls this motorbike. According to people who say that they saw this motorbike, he apparently, after the crash happened, got off his bike, looked into the vehicle and then held up an X. Now, I don't know how true this is, but it seems to me like that would be some type of single, signal, like this happened we like complete mission completed. Eyewitness testimonies all talk about this light, that there was a big flash of light in the tunnel before the crash happened. A lot of people think that that's what distracted the driver and that's why he crashed, it was this light. this mysterious light.

[11:41] Male interviewer in video clip insert 5: Flash, like a photo flash

Francois Levistre’s translator voiceover: No, it was stronger than a photo flash.

[11:41-11:46 video footage of Francois Levistre- eyewitness- interview]

Male voiceover: the Mercedes goes left, right, left

[11:46-11:52 Video footage of an animated reconstruction of the car crashing in the tunnel]

Kendall Rae: So, now that we have talked about most the information let's talk about the theory. First theory that I'm going to talk about is the theory that the whole accident was faked by Diana, that she’s didn't actually die in that her and Dodi ended up living and could finally live their life in peace because they were dealing with so much paparazzi and drama between her and her ex and everything like that. So, she faked her own death to be able to get away and finally live, like, a free life. However, that one is definitely not as widely believed. Another theory is that they weren’t actually targeting Diana at all, they were actually

targeting Dodi. People think that he could have been targeted by business enemies of his father. Another key part of this mystery is that Dodi was a Muslim, so that wasn't always like the most accepted thing. A lot of people think that maybe he was targeted so that Diana wouldn't marry him, and that maybe the crash was only meant to kill him. Now there have been a lot, now a huge huge theory that a lot of people have is that Diana was actually killed by like the Secret Service over there. This is the Secret Intelligence Service, or SIS, a British intelligence agency which supplies the British government with foreign intelligence similar to like our CIA. Richard Tomlinson, he was actually discharged from the secret agency, swore that they were responsible for it. He testified to some major thing, claimed that the agency had actually been monitoring Diana since before her death. In the years leading up to the fatal crash, MI6 used a paid informant in the security department of the Ritz Hotel, he concluded that this was Henri Paul. Interestingly enough, though he actually retracted that statement years later. He also claimed that in 1992 he was shown documents of an outlined plan to assassinate the Serbian leader, President Slobodan Milosevic, probably not saying that one right. And the plan was almost identical to the way that Diana was killed in the same way of the tunnel and the flash of light. He testified that a strobe light was going to be used to disorient the driver of the vehicle ensuring the crash took place in the tunnel, which you know has close
proximity to walls, so there's like much more of a chance of having an accident in a tunnel, if that makes sense. And he claimed that that was also done because there would be less witnesses in a tunnel to see something like this happen. So, if that really was a plan that this agency was doing things like this, then it makes a lot of sense that they just used the same plan for Diana. He also testified that a member of the paparazzi who routinely followed Diana was a member of the UKN, which was a small group that took pictures as paparazzi, like, undercover. He was supposed to be doing an interview on NBC and when he came to the JFK Airport here in America, he was arrested and deported by the CIA. And here's another former agent talking about some very interesting things, I'm gonna play this clip for you guys cuz this kind of blew my mind.

[14: 34] British female speaker in video clip insert 6: It's proof that there was an MI6 interest in this, and then of course we started looking at the other evidence and all the rest of it. And I have to say, my personal opinion, I think yes they did intend to at least seriously injure or kill her. And it's not just about the fact that was she pregnant wasn't she will never know because they embalmed her against all French law. And all the other speculative things you see in the press. It's also the fact that it was reported, that she was being a great success in the landmine campaign that she was running.

Audience solo voice: Yes

Former agent: But also she was about to go into campaigning on the behalf of the Palestinians. Now you can imagine someone of Princess Diana's profile doing that, just, they would not have tolerated it, they could not have dealt with that. So I
think that's why she was taken out. I think they've probably been planning it for a while and it was just perfect timing they did it when they did.

[14:34-15:24 video clip footage of a British female speaker speaking to an audience, which is out of frame]

Kendall Rae: And one thing that's brought up by so many people including Tomlinson is like how was there no video footage of any of this, there's no like record of anything. And they actually over there has something called CCTV, which stands for closed-circuit TV. There's tons of surveillance cameras in London. It is reported that in Greater London there are over

500,000 cameras and a total of over 4.2 million cameras in the UK in total. According to their estimates, the UK has about one camera for every 14 people that live there, super super strange, so why was none of this captured? The final theory that I'm going to talk about is that it was Royal Family themselves that took out Princess Diana.

[16:06] The Queen in video clip insert 7: Since last Sunday's dreadful news we have seen throughout Britain and around the world an overwhelming expression of sadness Diana's death.

[16:06-16:16] video footage of the Queen addressing the camera]

Kendall Rae: And this one kind of makes a lot of sense. And I don't mean to offend anyone who like really loves the Royal Family or anything, this is just from the research that I've done. Many people say that the Royal Family had a lot of conservative values and that Diana possibly marrying a Muslim man, Dodi Fayed, would be extremely against everything that they would want.

[16:36] American male interviewer in video clip insert 8: People believe that because Diana was gonna marry Dodi.

Mohammed al Fayed: yep

Male interviewer: That they couldn't have that that that would somehow dilute the monarchy that they didn't want an Egyptian stepfather.

Mohammed al Fayed: yeah

Male interviewer: For the boys and

Mohammed al Fayed: Absolu..

Male interviewer: And this is just as basic as that

Mohammed al Fayed: That's absolutely right, an Egyptian they know why

Male interviewer: Right

Mohammed al Fayed: Naturally tanned, his daddy have curly hair you know and he have the same know it's just they will not accept that.

[16:36-17:03 video clip footage of interview between male interviewer and Mohammed Al Fayed]

Kendall Rae: There's all these rumors about the relationship between Dodi and Princess Diana, like people thought that they were getting engaged, that he was already looking at jewellers, there was reports of jewellers coming to them. A Ritz Hotel staff member even claims that he saw a jeweler go into their hotel room. A bunch of reports that they were going to announce that they were getting engaged. So paparazzi were actually following them a lot because of these rumors, and there's also rumors that she was pregnant. And a lot of people thought that she was either gonna announce that she was getting engaged or that she was pregnant and one of the two was coming like the next day. Fayed's father thinks that something sketchy happened. He claims that he knows that they were about to get engaged.

He even claims that that day over the phone she told him she was pregnant, but since her body was embalmed they were not able to do a pregnancy test on her.

[17:48] Mohammed al Fayed in video clip footage 9: They have murdered my son and Princess Diana, and I put my finger straight. The gangster who ruling the country behind the scene, who is the head of the Royal household- Prince Philip.

Male speaker: You you think that he stopped you

Mohammed al Fayed: He is the person have initiated and also in participation with Prince Charles

Voiceover: Al Fayed wears the black tie of mourning each day until what he considers to be the truth is revealed.

[17:48-18:16 video clip footage of Mohammed Al Fayed talking to a male interviewer]

Kendall Rae: Now another interesting bit of information to go along with the theory that the family may have done this. Her butler came out and said that Diana was extremely afraid of Prince Charles.

[18:26] The butler in video clip footage 10: Towards the end of the princess's life, I became everything. I became her policeman, her dresser, her valet, her butler, her driver, her confidante, her friend and the list goes on. And there was nothing that I wouldn't have done for the princess. During the last few years of her life she was a lost soul, searching for love, searching for someone to put their arms around her. Someone to take care of her. You see, you might think that a princess lot is a happy one but it's not really. And it certainly wasn't for Diana because, again she once said to me: Paul, I had to kiss a lot of frogs to find a prince. And the princess had such a hard time with her husband. Prince Charles wasn't kind to his wife. He wasn't very understanding to his wife and at times I felt very very sorry for the princess who was mentally tortured in lots of ways

18:26-19:26 video footage of the butler being interviewed]

Kendall Rae: She had given him notes so that they could be kept safely and so no one would take them or find them and she had trusted her butler with these notes and gave him one of them. And here is one of them, that we're not sure was actually written by her or not but here's what he claims she gave him. You can look up exactly what the whole thing says but the main point of it that's really important is that: [reading from note] 'this particular phase in my life is the most dangerous my husband is planning an accident in my car break failure or serious head injury in order to make the path clear in order to make the path clear for him to marry'. Now, no one knows if this is true, but if it is, that's pretty incriminating right there. Her butler has said that she seemed very scared of him and that she told him a lot of things and that he'd often find her bizarrely like rolling up carpets, looking under furniture to make sure she hadn't been wired tapped or anything like that and she was also given the same security as the rest of the Royal Family but Diana turned it down. Like when the divorce happened she was able to keep the same security people and she didn't want to because she knew that anything that she said or did would be reported back to them, so she hired her own bodyguard. I have to say I don't know much about the Royal Family and stuff, but I wouldn't be surprised if there's some sketchy business that goes on in that whole situation and has for a very long time. I mean this goes on for years and years and years and years, this family history goes back and. Personally I think there might be some corruption within the family, I

mean it would make a lot of sense to me. Personally, I think there is far more evidence that something sketchy happened that either it was the government or the the secret agency. Or that it was the Royal Family themselves that, you know, ordered this to happen. And so me personally, I think that the least plausible explanation is that it was just a crash that just happened, just a normal traffic crash, all the sketchiness that unfolded after was just chance. I think that is probably the least likely and that one of these theories is a lot more likely. Now, I do want to know you guys think about this, this is an extremely interesting case like I said. I'm interested to hear from people that actually live over there that like maybe remember it a little better or people older than me like just there you know interpretation of the whole thing. So definitely leave me a comment, I wasn't able to cover every single bit of evidence or anything and information so um definitely leave anything that you have that you want to share down below, I love to read the comments everyone else loves to read the comments and kind of like interact with each other and just sort of discuss the whole thing and I would like to say that as always with these conspiracy theories, I'm not saying any of this is true I'm just presenting information and letting you guys make your own conclusions. I hope you guys are having a great day and I'll talk to you next time.