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BOOK OF ABSTRACTS

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Why Conspiracy Theories Are (Not) Theoretically Interesting

Recent scholarship by conspiracy theory theorists and philosophers of conspiracy theories has struggled with the question of how to define conspiracy theories (and conspiracy theorists). It has become standard for such literature to signal that, if conspiracy theories are simply theories about conspiracies, then they are unremarkable (e.g. Pigden 2016). This raises questions about what we actually *mean* when use these terms. We may, as argues Tsapos (2023), even be confronted with a dilemma in which our definition must concede forms of philosophical precision in order to be analytically useful.

In this paper I aim to intervene in this discourse by making two related moves: First, I gesture to common utterances from popular media such as ‘conspiratorial,’ ‘conspiracy theory, and ‘conspiring’ to argue that the term ‘conspiracy theory’ (as well as its relata) is used equivocally; it can mean *either* (simply) an account of some phenomenon that appeals to the existence of a conspiracy *or* an explanatory account of some phenomenon recognized to be difficult to canonize as public truth. (In this latter usage, it means something closer to a ‘fringe belief.’) These two usages are not mutually exclusive. The latter, more closely than the former, captures traditional associations of conspiracy theories with paranoia, rejection of mainstream epistemic authority, and a lack of explanatory parsimony.

Second, I suggest that one reason for the recent academic struggle to define conspiracy theories is that scholars are primarily interested in politically salient variants of the latter deployment of the term. What is interesting theoretically about conspiracy theories, I

argue, has very little to do with conspiracies *per se*; it has everything to do with patterns of narrative explanation that parallel the structure of myths and religious stories, which defy received standards of knowledge, and which – increasingly publicly – consolidate political identity in the context of power differentials. In defining our central terms, we theorists must be weary of trying to fit the big game we hunt into the small cage of conspiracies.

Word count: 328

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Amanda Persson, Lund University

Digital platforms, the manosphere and youth gender identity

I will present a recently started PhD project in Information Studies that explores the complex relationship between digital platforms, the manosphere and the formation of young men’s gender identity. The manosphere is a heterogeneous group of online communities that promote misogynistic discourses, that are characterised by a reactionary understanding of masculinity and an anti-feminist critique of society. The literature shows that young (cis) men in Sweden today hold conservative views on masculinity to a greater extent than the rest of the population. They also live and perceive the world largely through digital platforms. It is therefore of great importance to examine how the rapidly evolving digital landscape, together with the expanding manosphere, comes into play when young people’s gender identities are being formed. Not least in light of the cyber harassment that women face today, resulting in their participation in the digital sphere being restricted. The project contributes to the theme of the conference as the underlying narratives that characterise the manosphere are labelled by some as mere conspiracy theories and by others as ideology. The project will shed light on, discuss and problematise the boundary between what can be referred to as political opinions and conspiracy theories.

The overall aim of this PhD project is to investigate the entanglement of digital platforms, the manosphere and the development of gender identities among young people, focusing on young (cis) men in Sweden. The aim is achieved through the study of three interrelated themes:

- Young men of upper secondary school age who take part of, interpret and negotiate information about masculinity on digital platforms.
- Digital platforms and their inbuilt framework for interaction, including algorithms, moderation, content policies and community culture.
- Formal teaching in Swedish upper secondary education with a focus on the subjects *Digital literacy* and *Sexuality, consent and relationships*.

I intend to gain a deep understanding of how young men of upper secondary school age take part of, interpret and negotiate information about masculinity on digital platforms. By using the method of media go-along, I aim to identify and study information practices that are otherwise often seen as an everyday routine. I also plan to conduct interviews with the same group of informants. Furthermore, I plan to analyse the publicly published policies of a number of digital platforms in order to capture the platforms' own agency. The policy documents will be selected based on the platforms that the informants indicate in the interviews as the ones they use the most. I draw on socio-material theory, which is characterised by the recognition of the agency of material objects and the equivalence of non-human actors with human actors; the social and the material are understood as intertwined and interdependent. Of particular importance are Karen Barad and her concepts of the agential cut, intra-action and performativity. In the analysis of themes relating to masculinity, I will draw on Judith Butler's and Raewyn Connell's theories of gender and Richard Jenkin's theory of social identity.

Anders Eriksson

Alexander Dugins digitala apokalyptik: Rysk propaganda mellan ortodox nationalism och högerextrem antiglobalism

Alexander Dugins namn dyker ofta upp i studier av den svenska och den internationella extremhögern. Han är nämns ofta inom den nyfascistiska och etnonationalistiska identitära rörelsen. Bokförlaget Arktos har gett den internationella Alternativhögern ett starkt fäste i Sverige. Arktos har nyligen publicerat den ryske propagandisten Alexander Dugins "The Great Awakening vs the Great Reset", som är en krigsförklaring mot liberalismen och den västerländska demokratin. Dugin har kallats världens farligaste filosof eftersom hans ideologi har stort genomslag i det ryska samhällets ledande kretsar. Ideologin är en kombination av rysk-ortodox tro och nationalism genom att förhärliga Ryssland som den makt som står emot djävulens härjningar på jorden. I texten presenterar han en apokalyptisk vision av striden mellan "globalisterna" och "anti-globalisterna", där de förra står för hela den västerländska civilisationen och de senare för de krafter som under Rysslands ledning fått upp ögonen för det onda som väst representerar. Den engelska texten vänder sig medvetet till högerextrema krafter i hela världen och inkluderar både Donald Trump och Alex Jones i de krafter som vänder sig mot globalisterna under den amerikanske presidenten Biden. Texten är svår att få tag på i tryck, närmast censurerad, och sprids oftast i digitalt format. Den är ett intressant exempel på transition från Ryssland till USA.

På Amazon.se marknadsförs boken i apokalyptiska ordalag.

"The stage is set for a showdown of truly apocalyptic proportions, pitting the forces of righteous anger, those who want to preserve traditions and the true richness of human diversity, against the Antichrist and his Soros-backed minions of insidious degeneracy and evil, who want to erase all bonds and communities - down to the human race itself."

Anders Lundberg, Linnaeus university

Kristian Steiner, Malmö university

The great conspiracy - How world affairs and the spiritual connect in the writings of Pentecostal pastor Kjell Sjöberg

It has been said that religion and conspiracism have an elective affinity: both seem to create order in a chaotic world by discerning a pattern of goal-directed agency in the hidden and instilling a feeling that the world may be understood and controlled (Wood & Douglas 2018).

In evangelical Christianity, eschatology plays an important role. Particularly important is dispensational premillennialism, a theology which asserts that Christ will one day return. Christ's return will be preceded by a satanist world government which will lead up to a final battle between God and Satan. God's victory will usher in the millennium, a thousand years of peace.

Evangelicals make a connection between events in the spiritual world and the natural world. As Sweden voted on joining the EU in 1995, Evangelicals resisted with reference to the story of the Beast in the Book of Revelation (Hagevi 2002). Similarly, when Great Britain voted to leave the EU in 2018, evangelical leaders urged their followers to vote for Brexit as the EU was thought to be "the New Rome", the satanic world empire (Knowles 2018). On the other hand, US evangelicals voted for Donald Trump in 2016 because they thought he who would usher in the coming millennium (Berry 2020).

In this paper, we will study a Swedish pastor and prophet, Kjell Sjöberg. Sjöberg was based in Sweden and published around 20 books during the 1970', 80's and 90's. He had some influence internationally and foreboded and influenced a movement that had a concrete and important presence on Capitolium on January 6, 2021. Due to his political views Sjöberg was one of the "Palme leads" that were investigated following upon the murder of Swedish prime minister Olof Palme.

Central to Sjöberg's thinking is that the natural world is intimately connected with the spiritual world, populated by angels and demons. World affairs and politics thus, may be decoded by reference to biblical texts. Sjöberg describes vividly a world-wide conspiracy against God: a demonic conspiracy where politicians, business people and the Jews are governed by demonic forces and serve the coming of the Antichrist.

In this paper, we will set Sjöberg in context and discuss both his conspiracy theory and how he uses the bible to underpin it. This is accomplished through a reading of his books and prayer letters.

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The Soundtrack of Climate Change Denial: Imagining Conspiracy and Doom in the Writings and Music of Jacob Nordangård

Abstract

In 2012, Swedish geographer Jacob Nordangård (b. 68) defended his thesis “Ordo ab Chao”, on the biofuel politics of the EU at Linköping university. The central claim of the thesis, which has been downloaded more than 22 000 times, is that a tiny constellation of powerful interests orchestrated policy changes in Europe with the aim to reduce adverse impact of fossil fuels on the environment. Nordangård’s thesis suggests that these changes however not are motivated by environmental needs but rather power interests from the side of the involved pressure and lobby groups and their vast networks. The author’s academic work was accompanied by (and arguably embedded into) aesthetic expressions. Not only was the extremely symbolic cover art of his thesis commissioned by a folk multi-artist from Ireland, but Nordangård’s metal band ‘Wardenclyffe’ released a soundtrack with the title ‘Ordo ab Chao’ which can be read as comment to the thesis. The biography of the band suggests that it must have been the first of its kind with a ‘doom-metal cover’. Since 2012, Nordangård has developed into one of the most prolific Swedish climate change deniers. With book titles such as “The Doomsday Clock and the Myth of the permanent End of the World” (2013), “Rockefeller – a climate-smart history (2020) and “The Global Coup d’état” (2021) and his own blog and lectures, Nordangård has inscribed himself into the conspiratorial denial of climate change with a large group of followers and supporters, among them established academics and politicians. But what will constitute the focus of our contribution is the continued attempts of creating a sort of *Gesamtkunstwerk* between writings, doom metal music and imagery. Wardenclyffe has released music, music videos and artwork all related to the content of Nordangård’s books. These intermedial and multimodal expressions have however hitherto never been explored. They can be conceptualized as the dirty side of ecomedia or rather perhaps a form of eco-countermedia – denying the reality of environmental emergency through counter-aesthetics, set to music.

Our paper will present and discuss these expressions within the framework of emotionalization of medial content and ‘retrotopian’ longing (Bauman 2017) which is connected to populist meaning-making (Önnersfors 2020).

Keywords

climate change denial, doom metal, retrotopia, emotionalization, intermediality

Bio

Dr. Anette Mars works at the Department of Culture, Languages and Media at Malmö university, Sweden and researches the interplay of music and other forms of media as well as media pedagogic.

Dr. Andreas Önnersfors is affiliated to Fojo Media Institute at Linnaeus university, responsible for factchecking and countering disinformation in the media ecosystem. With a background in the cultural history of the eighteenth century, he has later in his career focused on radicalization, conspiracy theories and their overlaps. For the Swedish civil contingency agency MSB, Önnersfors published a report on COVID-19 and conspiracy theories.

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Catharina Lindstedt, City of Gothenburg

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Title: “How to break through the barriers of (dis)information? A case-study”

Mis- and disinformation on scientific topics such as telecommunications, vaccines, and climate change have existed for a long time. Mis-disinformation thrives in complex information ecosystems as audiences attempt to find explanations for missing, confusing, and contradictory information on a given topic. This phenomenon is fueling distrust in government, polarizing societies, disrupting stock markets, and impacting overall confidence in science and institutions. Disinformation intended to mislead and confuse — is an obstacle to effective governance. Disinformation becomes a national security problem when it contributes to political and targeted violence.

The spread of misinformation, once limited to fringe audiences, has now become commonplace in mass media, the internet, and social media. Misinformation thrives in both information voids and complex information ecosystems as audiences attempt to find explanations for missing, confusing, and contradictory information they are exposed to. In a complex information environment, the public’s attention can easily shift from government advice to alternative explanations of scientific processes and scientific findings, with an inevitable impact on people’s actions and compliance with

behaviors. While mis-, dis- and malinformation are ubiquitous phenomena, a full understanding of their true reach and impact on public trust in science and institutions is needed.

To increase the understanding of the impact on society, we are conducting a case study of the “LVU-campaign” and its effect on a local level, specifically in Gothenburg. Our aim is twofold: to understand the interplay between different levels of society and its impact on the local arena, both in terms of citizens living in the area and the public institutions and the people working there and how the municipal counteractions were designed.

This presentation borders on the conference themes case-studies and counteraction

Asbjørn Dyrendal
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Conspirituality or Religious Conspiracism?

Conspirituality was introduced as a term of academic use in 2011 and was gradually adopted over the following years. The term intuitively connected conspiracy beliefs and alternative spirituality, covering the overlapping areas. These areas increasingly became an area of higher academic and public interest, reaching new heights during and after the Covid-19 pandemic. This academic and public focus has resulted in a lot of interesting work. However, perhaps due to the intuitive appeal of conspirituality as label, the term seems to have often been adopted in a “you recognize it when you see it”-manner that has not contributed to clearing up the term. In this paper, I will use empirical findings to argue some pros and cons to keeping the term and develop its initial, intuitive meaning versus either extending its reach or adopting other, extant terms.

THE TRADITION OF ANTI-MASONIC DISCOURSE IN NORWAY

Aslak Rostad

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In my ongoing project I trace anti-masonic currents in Norway from the mid-18th century to present times. My goal is to examine how the idea of freemasonry as a conspiracy has endured to this day and at the same time been adapted to new contexts, and thereby constitutes a Norwegian anti-masonic tradition which we may follow through these historical forms:

1) Popular folklore in the 19th century depicting freemasons as involved in magic and cannibalism. This widespread belief led on one occasion (1869) to violent attacks on the Masonic Hall in Christiania (present day Oslo).

2) Anti-freemasonic polemics of the last two decades of the 19th century related to the conflicts leading up to the dissolution of the Swedish-Norwegian union, where advocates for wider Norwegian independence portrayed freemasonry as a tool for introducing absolute monarchy and incorporating Norway into Sweden. This culminated in 1892 when rumours of a looming coup d'état led by officers who were freemasons initiated a proposal for a constitutional ban on freemasonry.

3) Right-wing and antisemitic anti-freemasonry in the 1930s and 40s inspired by German ideology, especially Erich Ludendorff's ideas of freemasons as 'artificial Jews', i.e., non-Jews unwittingly promoting Jewish world domination. This eventually led to freemasonry being banned in 1940 by the German occupation authorities.

4) Attacks against freemasonry beginning in the late 1960s from left wing groups who regard it as a stronghold for the bourgeoisie, from the media or professional groups questioning the impartiality of freemasons holding positions in central institutions, or dismissals of freemasonry's compatibility with Lutheran Christianity.

5) Explicit portrayals, first occurring in the late 1960s, of freemasonry as cover for sinister intentions where Norwegian freemasons are portrayed as a hidden power elite, and more

recently linked to modern conspiracy theories such New World Order, Illuminati, or Christian apocalyptic beliefs.

I would claim that these attacks form a continuum and that we may talk about a specific Norwegian anti-masonic discourse where previous allegations against freemasonry adjusted to new agendas. For instance, the popular beliefs of the 19th century provided fertile ground for the anti-masonic polemics during the union conflict, antisemitic critics of freemasonry of the interwar period legitimized their claims by referring to the 19th century debate, post-war left-wing anti-freemasonry has sometimes been based on interwar antisemitic sources, while present day conspiracy theorists may refer to all this if it supports their agenda.

I would also suggest that this anti-masonic discourse frequently has served as a pretext for discrediting political rivals, often in internal conflicts. For instance, 19th century liberal advocates of Norwegian independence accused the Conservatives of being a ‘masonic’ party promoting Swedish interests, while adherents of pan-Germanic ideology during the German occupation 1940-1945 claimed that their nationalistic adversaries within the Norwegian National Socialistic movement were freemasons and ‘artificial Jews’, and we also find instances where communists have accused social democrats of having ties to freemasonry.

Professor Bo Petersson, Malmö University

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Mythmaking and conspiracy theories in the legitimization of Russia's war against Ukraine

This paper examines the legitimizing discourses prevalent in the propaganda spread by Kremlin.ru and other official channels after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine launched on February 24, 2022. It studies how the efforts to legitimize the Putin regime have been affected by the war against Ukraine, and how the propaganda has addressed the shifting fortunes of war. The paper differentiates between master myths and subordinate myths in the public narratives used to legitimize Putin's long-lasting hold on power. It argues that the master myths (such as eternal Russia, the encirclement of Russia by the depraved West, and the Russian world) have remained basically unaffected or have even gained in strength. These myths are to a significant extent based on conspiracy theories, where the morally unassailable Russia is at all times subjected to malevolent scheming and action by the so-called Collective West. The paper also discusses the extent to which the weakening of certain subordinate myths can affect master myths, what impact this may have on political developments, to what extent legitimization by political myth can be replaced with political control through repression, and what the general implications of these shifts may be for Russia, the Putin regime, Ukraine, and the global contestation between democracy and autocracy.

A Journey Mapping Approach to Online Self-Radicalization

In marketing, customer journeys (Trujillo-Torres et al., 2023) are a mapping device for visualizing a process of stages and touchpoints constituting a consumer experience. Marketing researchers use journey mapping to visualize opportunities for designing interventions that enhance customer experience and convert prospects into loyal customers. Siebert et al. (2020) proposed that “sticky” journeys can help explain why people keep returning for frustrating experiences such as *CrossFit*. However, journey mapping can be used outside commercial settings (Akaka and Schau 2019). For instance, researchers applied the journey framework to political affiliation (Jung and Mittal, 2020).

This study applies customer journey mapping to understand self-radicalization on social media. Recent calls encourage marketing researchers to study radicalization (Radanielina Hita and Grégoire, 2023), which is defined as the socialization process in which individuals lean toward an extremist belief system that justifies taking violent actions (McCauley and Moskalenko, 2017). The gap in the radicalization literature is understanding self-radicalization online where radicalization overlaps with legitimate consumption interests (Winter et al., 2020).

This research aims to map transitions between legitimate consumption interests and radical extremism. The context is the radicalization of male supremacism through consumption interests, such as dating, fitness, and financial advice. A narrative analysis of reflexive accounts within notorious misogynistic communities on social media is conducted. Self-radicalization into male supremacy occurs in plain sight on the social news site Reddit (Van Valkenburgh, 2021). The researcher joined several subreddits of the manosphere to identify journey-like accounts, including */r/IncelExit* and */r/ExRedPill*.

The reflexive accounts reveal two recurrent entry vectors. The first is a sense of frustration and disappointment for failing to generate meaningful relationships with women. The second is due to the legal challenges of divorce proceedings and child custody disputes in which men perceive they have been unfairly treated by legislation that benefits women over men.

The findings map a journey in which seemingly harmless consumer interests devolve into an echo chamber of grievances that increasingly justifies violence. Consumers enter the journey seeking dating advice and community support, only to encounter adversarial subtexts setting up liberalism and feminism as enemies.

Some narratives include: (1) Accounts describing romantic frustrations. (2) Accounts seeking personal growth and purpose. (3) Accounts of group belonging. (4) Accounts for interests such as fitness or videogames. (5) Accounts putting conservative values above others. (6) Culture wars express disdain for liberals. (7) Accounts of self-victimization and blame. (9) Accounts in which opponents, including women, and some men, are constructed as subhuman. (10) Accounts in which the harms of society can be attributed to liberals and feminists.

This study shows how fringe groups mask hate speech with legitimate consumption. The contribution extends customer journey mapping from a commercial application to public policy

to counter self-radicalization online. Policymakers can use journey mapping to generate meaningful exit ramps for young men caught in the self-radicalization pipeline on social media.

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Claus Bundgård Christensen

Conspiracy theory and right-wing extremist subculture in Denmark 1920-45 - The Nordic connection.

My proposal is about the fascist and extreme right-wing subcultures that emerged in Denmark in the interwar years, where conspiracy theories became a prominent part of this political culture and mind set. The focus will be on the environment around Wilfred Petersen and his national socialist party, the Danish Socialist Party (DSP), founded in 1932. The party is by far the most conspiratorial party in Danish political history and was associated with similar circles in Sweden and Norway.

DSP was a subculture where the majority of members, numbering around 1000 at its peak, were young men and women. The highly activist youth were characterized by a systemic conspiratorial worldview that included Freemasons, Jews, homosexuals, capitalism, social democracy and communism. This was expressed in street violence, terror and vandalism, but primarily through extensive propaganda activities that were fundamentally suspicious of authorities and society's elites. They cultivated both systemic conspiracy theories, but also event conspiracies as explanations for national misfortunes.

The focus will be partly on networks and partly on how the systemic conspiracy theories were developed over time. It will be shown how there was a direct path from the anti-Semitic environments in Denmark from the beginning of the century and the Italian-inspired fascists from the 1920s to the National Socialist and conspiratorial subcultures in the DSP. Over time, the party members developed their own independent paranoid style aimed at Freemasons, business and social democracy in particular as an explanation for the economic crisis and the impoverishment of the working class.

During the 1930s, DSP established close networks with similar subcultures in Sweden and Norway. Sharing conspiracy theories through meetings and reprinting articles in each other's journals, a pan-Nordic conspiracy culture emerged in the Nordic region.

This proposal is an in-depth analysis based on extensive research on Danish right-wing extremism 1920-1945, which has resulted in the award-winning monograph about DSP and Wilfred Petersen from 2022. The proposal covers topics such as Case Studies, Comparative Studies and Cultural perspectives.

Claus Bundgård Christensen is currently writing a book on the Danish cultural history of conspiracy theories.

Three-step rhetorical model of conspiratorial populists

A threefold claim that nativist populists put forth in their support of the people can be identified. *First*, they tend to create an external threat to the nation discursively. *Second*, they accuse a domestic elite of betraying the people, often even of siding with external aggressors. *Third*, they position themselves as the true defenders of the ‘pure people’ they vow to protect against both the elite and these malignant outsiders, that is, against those they have discursively created.

In this presentation, I will demonstrate that populist conspiracy theorists share these traits across both countries and themes. Three predominant cases of contemporary conspiracy theories are in focus: Eurabia in Europe, the Deep State in the United States, and anti-Western sentiment in Russia. I will analyse how populist leaders apply the rhetoric of Neo-Nationalists in all three cases, i.e., discursively creating an extraneous threat to the nation, accusing a domestic elite of betraying the people into the hands of the aggressors, and positioning themselves as the true defenders of the pure people they vow to protect, against both the elite and these malignant outsiders.

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Conspiracy Clutter: conspiracy theories in everyday politics

Both clutter and conspiracy theories go hand in hand. Living in a cluttered space is seen as a lack of control. Similarly, doing politics in a space full of conspiracy theories is seen as a messy endeavour, working against the ideal of ‘clean’ democratic politics. Like clutter, conspiracy theories are seen as messy. They are mudding scientific waters, poisoning democratic spaces, they make no sense yet are also morally potent, subjected to judgments and requiring interventions (decluttering or debunking, countering and fighting).

But as Nicolette Makovicky (2007) writes clutter can also be understood differently: not as something meaningless and disturbing but rather as an important way of manifesting and creating private cosmology. Inspired by her work, in this paper, I propose to consider conspiratorial excess that increasingly overwhelms European political spaces, not simply as dirt but as an ‘ordered disorder’, a form of political cosmology. By examining the latest election campaigns in Poland, I show how conspiratorial accusations and narratives allow those who engage with them to firstly ‘study’ how different events have been creating the Polish state, and to secondly figure out their own place within Polish state as well as their own relationship with the key stakeholders and other fellow residents.

As I argue, within a political space cluttered with conspiracy theories everyone must position themselves vis-a-vis specific theory, either by distancing themselves from it or by nesting in its proximity. Positioning vis-à-vis a specific idea mirrors political positioning. It allows political identification, building political alliances, deciding ‘who is with us and who is against us’, and perhaps most importantly who is ‘us’. Conspiratorial clutter forces people to engage with moral discourses of politics, capitalism, social organisation, and history. Because it does so not through elaborate narratives and theories, but rather through simple innuendos and, everyday in-between-lines accusations: micro-conspiracies without theories (Rosenblum and Muirhead 2020), it has the potential to engage wide populations. But as I will demonstrate, importantly, the omnipresence of conspiracy clutter does not mean the death of truth, but quite the opposite. In a space cluttered with conspiracies, the truth is the most important value, which requires constant probes and investigations: thus the world cluttered with conspiracy accusations is not a post-truth world, but rather a pan-truth world in which matters tremendously, even if this truth is not always known nor certain.

“Swedes are so dumb and naïve. It’s just as bad here!”

– How American claims of election fraud can travel across the Atlantic

By Emma Ricknell

Abstract

Claims of election fraud have appeared in connection with a number of national elections in recent years, even in countries that have generally been considered as democratic role models. The spread of disinformation regarding elections can lead to an erosion of trust for the process of electing democratic leaders, and can also be indicative of declining trust in the entire political system and its institutions, posing a challenge for a cohesive, democratic society (Berlinski et al., 2023).

The Nordic countries are not exempt from seeing a claims of election fraud and other types of disinformation proliferate in connection with elections appear in recent years (see e.g. Akerbæk & Skiphamn, 2021; Kaati & Shrestha, 2023; Runge, 2019). Yet in the context of disinformation about elections, even specifically claims of fraud, the issue in the Nordics pales in comparison to that of in other countries. In the U.S. for example, accusations of election misconduct are not new (Filindra et. al., 2023), but erupted most dramatically after the 2020 election. The highly publicized events of January 6th, 2021 made it clear that a large number of individuals believed very strongly in a conspiracy having taken place that had caused former President Donald Trump to lose the election.

Based upon developments in recent years, experiences in the Nordics and the U.S. in the context of online narratives of election fraud thus seem like polar opposites. However, online narratives and conspiracies proliferate online without regard for national borders. Extreme platforms where such conspiracies are spread are frequented by different kinds of users from different parts of the world, and can even end up appearing in far more mainstream settings (e.g. Åkerlund, 2021). This paper aims to examine the phenomenon of a form of conspiracy contamination across national borders, where an online narrative regarding elections being rigged spreads from one national context to a wholly different one. The case under examination is Sweden and the study comprises the last two national elections, i.e., 2018 and 2022, in order to see any kind of effect of the U.S. conspiracy narrative regarding the election on Swedish online discussions. The platforms that will be examined are Flashback and 4chan.

Covert online operations aiming to affect another country’s election and overall political stability constitute a serious threat to liberal democracies. Sweden and other Nordic countries have fared relatively well in this regard, yet research shows how mere exposure to different types of accusations of elections being rigged can have negative effects on voters’ faith in democratic norms (Albertson & Guiler, 2020). The study highlights the importance of domestic discussions being open to foreign influence, even though no efforts of organized election interference are carried out.

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A Racial Faith for the Nordic Race: Antisemitic Conspiracism and Christianity in Interwar Swedish National Socialism

In January 2024 I successfully defended my PhD thesis *Blodet och korset: tankefigurer i kristen nationalsocialism i Sverige, 1925–1945*. The main goal of the study was to understand how national socialist actors in Sweden incorporated ideas of Christianity into their political project during the interwar and wartime years. One of my most important results was that ideas of Christianity were far more prominent in Swedish national socialists’

Weltanschauung than, e.g., Norse mythology. Christianity was, in general, considered a remnant of an Aryan or Nordic primordial religion and intimately coupled with the racial soul as imagined. It marked a temporal link connecting the present to a glorious but lost past onto which their aspired golden age would be built. However, Swedish national socialists also claimed that Christianity throughout history had been degenerated, often through so-called Jewish influences. This conspiracist claim implied that the “original” Christianity – the religion of the Aryan/Nordic race – had been “Judaised”. Hence, a venue amongst others for national socialists to fulfil the racially homogeneous social order they desired, within which the Aryan/Nordic race would retake its alleged supreme role, was to de-Judaise Christianity and society at large.

Even though Swedish national socialists put more emphasis on Christianity than on Norse mythology, this did not mean that they rejected Norse mythology altogether. Similar to actors in the Völkisch Movement, whom Swedish national socialists to a large extent were influenced by and occasionally networked with, they tended to stress that Christianity and Norse mythology were not contradictory. These belief systems were often considered two sides of the same coin, both reflecting the heroic capacities of the racial soul. This implied ambiguities within the Swedish national socialist landscape on how to stress the relationship between Christianity and Norse mythology. These ambiguities also reflected similar ideas expressed by national socialist in the other Nordic countries. For instance, Swedish movements such as the Manhem Society and the National Socialist Workers’ Party and the Norwegian Ragnarok Circle all incorporated notions of a “racial soul” and “race psychology” that were prevalent amongst proponents of the “Nordic thought” (*nordische Gedanke*) in Germany. Proponents of the Nordic thought in Germany were not necessarily anti-Semites, but Nordic national socialists linked these ideas to conspiracist claims that one had to mobilise against the “Jewish menace” and its imagined influence on Nordic societies in order to achieve racial homogeneity and purity.

At this CONNOR inaugural conference, I wish to reflect on the general findings of my research in order to present new knowledge about the historical roots of conspiracy theories in or about the Nordic countries as well as how conspiracist claims, national socialist ideology and Christian theology have been entangled. I will focus especially on how conspiracy theories regarding the “Jewish world conspiracy” were used by national socialist actors in interwar and wartime Sweden to delineate Christianity as a faith for the Nordic race.

Everyday encounters with the contemporary conspiracy culture

Analyzing perspectives from life course interviews with ordinary people

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In the late 1990s and early 2000s, affluent Western democracies experienced a surge in popularized fiction centered around a "masterplot" of a Grand Conspiracy. Blockbuster franchises like *X-Files* and *Matrix* contributed to a widely shared conspiracy imagery, portraying hidden governmental agendas, elite cabals, and powerful forces manipulating reality itself. This exposure in pop culture laid the groundwork for the emergence of larger audiences taking conspiracy theories seriously, contributing to a cultural shift.

As mainstream audiences became fluent in the language of conspiracy, they could be encouraged to follow and participate in public discussion making use of such vocabulary. While some features of conspiracy culture consolidated within a decade into language that could be used in mainstream political contexts, the landscape of conspiracy culture also splintered into diverse subcultures and communities. Some conspiracy theories, like *The Voter Fraud*, explicitly invited people to engage with party politics, while others, like *The Flat Earth*, had very few political implications. Some, like *The Great Replacement*, attracted audiences of young men affiliated to the radical right, others, like *Pink* and *Pastel QAnon* were purposefully tailored for female audiences. Although academic research often focuses on specific facets of conspiracy culture, media coverage and popular literature has sought to present conspiracy culture as a potpourri of the most outrageous claims made within a diverse range of these subcultures.

Analyzing these conspiratory microcosms and conspiratorial figures in political arenas has become an important task for academic research. While these analyses are crucial, they cannot provide a comprehensive understanding of how conspiracy culture at large is experienced by ordinary people. For instance, we do know how certain conspiracy theorists themselves think and argue, and how conspiracy theories are employed in mobilizing certain electorates, we know very little about how the majority of ordinary people – those not participating in online groups or political rallies with conspiratorial content - relate to conspiracy theories.

Studying how ordinary people talk about conspiracy theories is challenging, as including people in studies and surveys comes with a distinct risk of self-selection, oversampling people who are keen to talk about conspiracy theories. The same applies to big data approaches: scraping online spaces for conspiracy talk would likewise yield bodies of text generated by people actively involved in conspiracy theories.

To navigate around these challenges, we have compiled a large body (n=1613) of 2,5 hour life course interviews (collected by the American Voices Project led by Stanford University) and computationally and manually operationalized this body for qualitative analysis. Even as none of the semi-structured interview prompts address conspiracy theories, our analysis indicates that about 10% of the interview transcripts include *conspiracy talk*, where the respondents spontaneously mention conspiracy theories as they relate to the prompted interview topics such as politics, media use, health, work, and personal relationships.

This allows us to examine how ordinary people experience conspiracy culture in their daily lives, what parts of their lives are affected by conspiracy theories, and how these experiences corroborate or challenge the state-of-the-art understanding of conspiracy culture.

Conspiratorial thinking: it's impact on political behavior and satisfaction with democracy

How does conspiratorial thinking impact political behavior and individuals' satisfaction with democracy, especially in the Nordic region? Research stresses that the effects are mostly negative. Belief in conspiracy theories can be viewed as a threat to democracy. Conspiratorial beliefs and thinking have been shown to undermine individuals' behaviors essential for democratic regimes, such as voting and participating in traditional forms of political behavior. This phenomenon is further strengthened by findings that individuals who believe in conspiracy theories can develop more negative perceptions of the government and its institutions. Research further implies that higher dissatisfaction with democracy can increase the wish for reform. This might not be negative. However, it might pose a threat if it leads to a push for less democratic reforms.

To contribute to the current literature on conspiratorial thinking's impact on political behavior and democracy, this paper will focus on voting behavior and satisfaction with democracy. The European social survey will be utilized, and findings from the Nordic countries will be compared with other European countries. Conspiratorial thinking is operationalized through the following two measures: general conspiratorial thinking that is rooted in the idea that a cabal of people are responsible for making all the decisions in world politics, and COVID-specific thinking that posits that the virus is the result of deliberate and concealed efforts by governments.

My tentative results align with previous research that conspiratorial thinking does indeed harm satisfaction with democracy. All the different measures of conspiratorial thinking are significant in predicting a negative effect on satisfaction with democracy when looking at European countries. However, in the Nordic countries, only one of the measures of conspiratorial thinking had a significant impact – a negative impact. The results also suggest a relationship between believing in conspiracy theories and refraining from voting. But this was only significant with one of the conspiratorial thinking measures and only in the Nordic countries. These results show how conspiratorial thinking impacts satisfaction with democracy and voting behavior differently in the Nordic countries compared to other European countries.

This paper is highly relevant to the political implications of conspiracy theories conference theme. It looks at how conspiratorial thinking impacts political behavior and opinion and compares the impact of conspiratorial thinking in Nordic countries to that of other European countries. Thus, making it possible to see if there are any apparent differences.

Keywords: conspiracy theories, conspiratorial thinking, political behavior, satisfaction with democracy

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How trust, distrust and mistrust relate to conspiracy mentality

This research examines the relationship between trust in authorities and conspiracy beliefs across nine culturally varied countries: the UK, Brazil, Germany, France, Iceland, India, Spain, Argentina, and Croatia. Prior studies repeatedly find a strong negative correlation between trust in authorities and the propensity to endorse conspiracy theories. This relationship between lack of trust and conspiracy beliefs is so robust and reliable, that the question arises if the two constructs can be meaningfully separated. Our goal in this research is therefore to determine whether a lack of trust in authorities is fundamentally different from the adoption of conspiratorial beliefs regarding political power structures. We will achieve this using a more nuanced measure of trust than used in previous research.

Using survey data from the TrustGov project, which provides a broadly representative sample from the nine countries, we investigate these concepts. Conspiratorial beliefs are quantified using the six-item Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire (CMQ; Bruder et al., 2013), which captures a person's general inclination towards conspiracy ideation. Trust is operationalized in line with Citrin and Stoker's (2018) definitions of 'mistrust' as a critical but constructive skepticism, and 'distrust' as a more deep-seated conviction of systemic bias and opposition by authorities, which can lead to political disengagement.

We predict that distrust, rather than mere mistrust, will exhibit a stronger association with a conspiracy mentality. Additionally, we hypothesize that the impact of distrust will be particularly significant among individuals who perceive themselves as socially or politically marginalized, as reflected in their self-placement on a social-ladder scale and demographic measures such as education and income. As the nine countries are expected to vary significantly in both trust and conspiracy mentality, differences between them may help illuminate findings.

The findings of this study are expected to shed light on the nuanced distinctions between trust and conspiracy beliefs and their respective socio-demographic predictors. This has important implications for moving forward the blooming but in many ways underdeveloped field of theory building on conspiracy beliefs within psychology.

Keywords: trust, distrust, mistrust, conspiracy beliefs, conspiratorial mindset

Bio

Hulda Þórisdóttir (e. Thórisdóttir) is a Professor in Political Science at the University of Iceland. She has a Ph.D. in Social Psychology from New York University (2007). Her research centers on political ideology, its structure, causes and consequences both in Iceland and internationally. She has studied how political beliefs can be driven by fear and distrust and in recent years how distrust manifests itself in belief in conspiracy theories.

Jutta Haider

Datification of conspiracy fragments and opposition to the green transition

This project in its early stages and not very well developed, but it will hopefully lead to interesting conversations. It is part of M-EC, the Mistra Environmental Communication Programme (WP1: Information Cultures, Data and Technology in Environmental Communication).

“Climate change is a hoax — at least it's not a crisis — and the ‘green transition’ is part of the Great Reset with the ultimate goal of enabling the Great Replacement. Wind farms, solar panels, attempts to reduce meat consumption or car dependency are all part of a plan by powerful elites to control and manipulate the world's population.” The building blocks of conspiracy narratives are strikingly similar for different topics. This also applies to the climate crisis. Here, such narratives seem to be proliferating in recent years on certain high-profile issues where change is needed to combat and mitigate climate change, such as energy, food and mobility, to name just the most obvious.

The climate change counter-movement (CCCM) is active on many fronts. Although it contains an undercurrent of conspiratorial thinking, particularly in relation to what is termed science denial, this is not its most dominant characteristic. Recently, however, it appears that an opportunistic exploitation of already established conspiracy narratives increasingly taps into the discontent of groups negatively affected by measures to reduce greenhouse gasses, subsumed under the term green transition. This transition is entangled in conflicting goals and interests. If these are not addressed, they will have potentially far-reaching implications for public acceptance of measure to climate change mitigation and society's ability to reduce GHG and to adapt to the climate crisis.

To explain, there are concrete, negative impacts on many communities that will affect people in certain parts of society disproportionately more than others. This includes the loss of jobs in certain industries and regions, nature destruction through mining of rare earth metals, or the construction of wind farms on traditional Sámi reindeer herding lands. All over Europe and in Sweden, local advocacy groups form in opposition to such projects. Their activities are often organized and communicated online, be it on Facebook, a mailing list, WhatsApp, or similar platforms that are open to the leakage of content from other groups and, importantly, other advocacy areas.

I am interested in how the informational texture of advocacy issues related to the green transition is constituted by their interrelation with other (contested) issues, particularly online. I want to analyse the joining together of data fragments, i.e. fragments of facts, of conspiracy narratives, of anecdotal and other forms of evidence etc., to map how, or whether, opposition to green transition initiatives links to the climate change counter-movement.

Here are some of the intersecting questions I grapple with, spanning empirical and methodological domains: How do advocacy issues related to the green transition interact with each other, with the climate change counter-movement and with conspiracy cultures? What role do conspiracy narratives/cultures play in popularizing

the aims of the climate change counter-movement? What data traces are available to investigate this? How can they be tracked across practices, platforms, groups, applications, and other actors, in alignment with ethical and legal requirements? What suitable strategies and methods exist for compiling and studying data traces and how they connect, in ways that pay attention to their situatedness? (Which other questions should I ask?)

**9/11, COVID-19 and the Hidden Power of the Elite:
Conspiracy Theories in Denmark in the 21st Century**

”It’s not about a virus, it’s about control” said one of the placards at the first *Men In Black*-protest on 9 January 2021 in Copenhagen, where several thousands of people had gathered to march against the Danish government’s handling of the Covid-19 pandemic, while singing their newly written protest anthem ”Mette Ciao”. Trust in authority was low after a year of enforced masks, the destruction of Danish mink that shuttered the industry, and lockdowns that seemed to threaten the mental health of both adults and children. At the same time, the government now proposed the Epidemics Act, giving authorities a wide-ranging mandate to act and, in principle, to force citizens to comply with instructions regarding treatment, vaccination and isolation.

Conspiracy theories about the government’s alleged misuse of power, corruption, and submission to foreign elites seemed appropriate and attractive elements to explain what was going on. Perhaps Danish democratic institutions were now controlled by the WHO, the World Economic Forum, and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation? Their motives could not be trusted, and most certainly entailed amassing power and wealth.

Covid conspiracy theories were first and foremost motivated by insecurity, fear, anger, and despair – resulting in a deep-seated mistrust of “elites” that mismanaged the democratic power given to them by the people. This mistrust, however, was not created during the pandemic. Rather, it was based on a modern Danish conspiracy culture that was developed during the time of the 9/11 attacks in the United States and the ensuing Danish participation in the War on Terror, strengthened during the aftermath of the recession of 2008-9, and solidified during President Donald Trump’s presidency from 2017-21.

This paper deals with the development of Danish conspiracy theories in the 21st century and examines the specific nature of the most important theories, the reasons why they have appeared, as well as why we have seen a rise in the importance of conspiracy theories in the public debate during this period. While our specific knowledge about Danish conspiracy theories remains limited, particularly regarding their scope of acceptance beyond dedicated groups and their potential consequences for democracy, we can point to at least three elements that characterize the development.

First, Danish conspiracy theories represent a reaction to the crises of the period and to governmental decisions and actions by elite groups that failed to make sense to adherents of these conspiracy theories. Second, this development has further been strengthened by a lack of transparency in official decisions and a rise in inequality, both economically and culturally. Third, in order to establish an explanation of the world that made sense, conspiratorial thinking was imported from the United States. This “Americanization” of Danish conspiracy theories was seen both in terms of content (many of the Danish conspiracy theories contained American examples and references to historical conspiracy theories from the United States) and methodology (the way in which they were delivered and spread were inspired by American means). In a sense, Americanization became a language of protest, because no other approach was forceful enough to express the sentiment.

Understanding the dissemination of misinformation, disinformation, and conspiracy beliefs among adolescents in Sweden

Belief in conspiracy theories poses a significant challenge to democracy, particularly when deliberately used by politicians – in both functioning and failing democracies. Key to counteract conspiracy beliefs is to have a good understanding of the nature and scope of conspiracy beliefs and narratives. This paper presents preliminary findings, based on qualitative data from focus group interviews within an ongoing project where a multi-module intervention is performed with the aim to enhance critical thinking about conspiracy theories among high-school students in Sweden. The intervention has been designed and carried out by an interdisciplinary team of researchers, including psychology, data communication, political science, and media studies. Among the findings, the study exposes a lack of awareness among adolescents about the inter-relatedness of territorial scales and the political aspects of online content. The study also provides methodological insights, identifying room for improvement in intervention procedures, emphasizing the effectiveness of participant-involved designs (see Andersson & Danielsson, 2021). From our focus groups and discussion with teachers we have learned that parts of our intervention fail to meet the students where they are - it comes across as irrelevant or too abstract (or too obvious). Addressing these issues involves understanding students' perspectives and framing the intervention as an exploration of cognitive processes vulnerable to disinformation in a digital media setting. This must be addressed in at least two ways: at the one hand, the researchers must develop a better understanding of what students find relevant and useful from, and on the other hand, we must be better to frame the intervention not as an exercise in source assessment but show students how to better understand cognitive processes and how these can be vulnerable to disinformation in a digital media setting. To create relevant interventions for the Swedish context, a more ethnographic approach could be a useful tool for understanding adolescents' online worlds.

Keywords: conspiracy theory belief, disinformation, misinformation, government, education, educational

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Abstract

Low affective counter speech in strong opinion environments

Bohlin, Margareta. Associate professor in Psychology, University of Gothenburg

Dennert, Mina. Journalist and founder I am here International

Conspiracy beliefs have garnered increasing interest across various research fields. These beliefs have been associated with social, personal, and health effects, yet little research has focused on the motives among people with strong beliefs and the reasons of their engagement in certain beliefs. Furthermore, scant attention has been given to the discourse between individuals with strong beliefs, typically seen as conspiracy theories in mainstream society, and a low affective counter-speaker (research assistant).

This study sought to address this gap in knowledge by engaging research assistants in conversations with individuals (N=10) who express strong opinions on social media opinions that run counter to research and facts. Conversations were conducted using the low affective method of #iamhere, a method proven effective in preventing hate speech.

Results showed that the subjects are deeply engaged in their beliefs and highly invested in their cause. While they are generally well-informed in their areas of expertise, their information tends to come not from mainstream channels but from personal experience and alternative sources. The subjects also appeared to struggle with personal relationships with friends and relatives who do not share their viewpoints. Feelings of being victimized or experiencing deep injustice were also common as well existential thoughts about life. The research assistants experienced the method as effective to maintain a good and learning tone of conversation, however sometimes finding it challenging to maintain the low affective conversation. The informants expressed that they felt heard and less reserved in contradiction to feeling judged and/or mistreated.

Our findings provide knowledge in the areas of conspiracy narratives and discourses and suggest strategies for low affective countering actions. The study contributes to the understanding of individuals with strong beliefs in disputed areas and offer insights into effective counter speech.

Key words: Counter speech, conspiracy theories, social media, comment fields, low affective conversation

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Truthers and Truth Defenders in Sweden – An Ethnographic Study of Conspiracy Theories and Conflicts over Truths

At the CONNOR conference I wish to present my recently started PhD project on conspiracy theories in a Swedish social and cultural context. Due to the early stage of my research, the purpose of my conference participation is to share and test my research ideas rather than presenting final results. My presentation however will contribute to insights into new ongoing cultural research on conspiracy theories in Sweden and thus a Nordic context.

My study is a part of the ERC-funded research project Conflicts Over conspiracy theories (CONSPIRATIONS) run by PI, Dr. Elzbieta Drazkiewicz. CONSPIRATIONS is a comparative ethnographic research project of conspiracy theories in different European countries (Germany, Sweden, Poland, Estonia, Belgium and Bulgaria). My study therefore is part of a greater comparative ethnographic study on conspiracy theories in Europe.

The objective of CONSPIRATIONS is to study the growing tension over conspiracy theories in Europe. The aim is to move beyond previous research's exclusive focus on 'truthers' (Those who endorse conspiracy theories) to examine the perspective of 'truth defenders' (Those who counter conspiracy theories) as well. The aim of my presentation is to present my ongoing work with mapping the landscape of individuals, institutions and organizations that can be identified as 'truthers' and 'truth defenders' in Sweden. I wish to dwell on the question whether these two categories are to be considered as separate stable entities or fluid. So far, my study of Swedish state agency institutions, responsible for combating fake news and conspiracy theories, which therefore can be defined as 'truth defenders', indicates a strong Swedish state rhetoric highlighting foreign powers as the main threath against Swedish society and its' so-called open democracy. Conspiracy theories existing within the Swedish society do not receive similar attention. The explanation for this, most likely is to be found in the strong juridical status of Freedom of Speech in Swedish legislation, which restricts and bans state agencies to criticize public opinions. However, the strong negative focus on foreign powers and their threath towards Swedish society, leads to a dualistic rhetoric of difference between 'Us' and the dangerous evil 'Others', which is common and typical for constructions of conspiracy theories and hence frequently used and drawn upon by 'truthers'.

Abstract

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Abstract

In my PhD-project I will study epistemic communities whose beliefs are discredited by mainstream science and medicine. Examples of these are proponents of alternative medicine, flat-earthers, climate-change deniers, and so forth. The project will be focused on how these communities establish and evaluate what are considered credible and relevant sources of information.

Previous research indicates that echo chambers can be created if an epistemic community has high trust for sources of information within their community and low trust for sources outside the community. Inside an echo chamber, members will be immune to evidence coming from the outside (e.g. Jamieson & Cappella, 2008; Nguyen, 2020). Similarly, in the context of research on post-truth and the information crisis, knowledge resistance has been proposed as an (perhaps increasingly common) epistemic vice (e.g. Klintman, 2021; Strömbäck et al., 2022).

As the communities studied are discredited by mainstream science or medicine it seems it would be contradictory from within their belief system to have high epistemic trust for mainstream science and medicine, at least regarding issues related to their beliefs. In other words, a flat-earther with high epistemic trust towards mainstream geodesy scientists seems impossible. Considering the number of sources who are opposed to the beliefs of the communities, they also seem likely to have a high level of echo chamberness, although this is an empirical question.

Conspiracy theories have been argued to create particularly strong and impenetrable echo chambers, since all evidence presented against the theories can be reinterpreted as evidence in favor of the theories (e.g. Baurmann & Cohnitz, 2021; Keeley, 1999; Nguyen, 2020). Powerful malicious actors will of course do what they can to hide the truth and attack those who try to expose them. As such, conspiracy theories seem like a particularly powerful way to protect a belief system.

In my project the ways in which these communities assess, create, and think about source credibility will be studied. Previous research suggests that valuation is a social process performed by various devices (e.g. Bessy & Chauvin, 2013; Chong, 2020; Karpik, 2010), and I argue that the same can be said about epistemic valuation. Many of these groups for example have their own professional organization, professional titles, book critics, academic journals, awards, newspapers, and other devices that seem to be involved in creating and evaluating credibility. Through studying the valuation practices connected to these devices, the criteria that are employed, and the underpinning world view, I believe we can get a better understanding of the communities in question, and the processes of epistemic power struggles and boundary work (Gieryn, 1983) more generally.

Although conspiracy theories are not the main object of study, I believe they are likely to come up in the empirical material. In addition, various theoretical perspectives on conspiracy theories are relevant for my research. I believe that the study can offer a novel way to look at conspiracy theories and how they relate to wider questions about the assessment and creation of epistemic credibility, and I therefore think that the project will be relevant for the CONNOR network.

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Everyday encounters with the contemporary conspiracy culture

Analyzing perspectives from life course interviews with ordinary people

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In the late 1990s and early 2000s, affluent Western democracies experienced a surge in popularized fiction centered around a "masterplot" of a Grand Conspiracy. Blockbuster franchises like *X-Files* and *Matrix* contributed to a widely shared conspiracy imagery, portraying hidden governmental agendas, elite cabals, and powerful forces manipulating reality itself. This exposure in pop culture laid the groundwork for the emergence of larger audiences taking conspiracy theories seriously, contributing to a cultural shift.

As mainstream audiences became fluent in the language of conspiracy, they could be encouraged to follow and participate in public discussion making use of such vocabulary. While some features of conspiracy culture consolidated within a decade into language that could be used in mainstream political contexts, the landscape of conspiracy culture also splintered into diverse subcultures and communities. Some conspiracy theories, like *The Voter Fraud*, explicitly invited people to engage with party politics, while others, like *The Flat Earth*, had very few political implications. Some, like *The Great Replacement*, attracted audiences of young men affiliated to the radical right, others, like *Pink* and *Pastel QAnon* were purposefully tailored for female audiences. Although academic research often focuses on specific facets of conspiracy culture, media coverage and popular literature has sought to present conspiracy culture as a potpourri of the most outrageous claims made within a diverse range of these subcultures.

Analyzing these conspiratory microcosms and conspiratorial figures in political arenas has become an important task for academic research. While these analyses are crucial, they cannot provide a comprehensive understanding of how conspiracy culture at large is experienced by ordinary people. For instance, we do know how certain conspiracy theorists themselves think and argue, and how conspiracy theories are employed in mobilizing certain electorates, we know very little about how the majority of ordinary people – those not participating in online groups or political rallies with conspiratorial content - relate to conspiracy theories.

Studying how ordinary people talk about conspiracy theories is challenging, as including people in studies and surveys comes with a distinct risk of self-selection, oversampling people who are keen to talk about conspiracy theories. The same applies to big data approaches: scraping online spaces for conspiracy talk would likewise yield bodies of text generated by people actively involved in conspiracy theories.

To navigate around these challenges, we have compiled a large body (n=1613) of 2,5 hour life course interviews (collected by the American Voices Project led by Stanford University) and computationally and manually operationalized this body for qualitative analysis. Even as none of the semi-structured interview prompts address conspiracy theories, our analysis indicates that about 10% of the interview transcripts include *conspiracy talk*, where the respondents spontaneously mention conspiracy theories as they relate to the prompted interview topics such as politics, media use, health, work, and personal relationships.

This allows us to examine how ordinary people experience conspiracy culture in their daily lives, what parts of their lives are affected by conspiracy theories, and how these experiences corroborate or challenge the state-of-the-art understanding of conspiracy culture.

AI models and consequences for media and information literacy

Olof Sundin, Lund University

In my presentation, I will provide a conceptual understanding of the challenges that AI models pose in relation to media and information literacy and notions of truth, trust and doubt. The presentation is particularly relevant to the conference theme 'Media and Mis/Disinformation'. I will build on my previous research on information seeking behaviour in everyday life (Haider & Sundin, 2019) and media and information literacy (Haider & Sundin, 2022), in the context of the evolving information infrastructure for AI-generated information (e.g. Bender et al., 2021).

The presentation will draw on an empirical example taken from the website *The Defender: Children's Health Defense*. This website publishes news and posts based on conspiracy theories, with a particular focus on anti-vaccination content in six different languages. In November 2023, a lengthy 'dialogue' between author Gavin de Becker (2023-11-08) and ChatGPT (version 3.5) was published under the title "I Asked ChatGPT to Explain DNA Particles in COVID Vaccines. Here's What I Learned". In this dialogue, Gavin de Becker engages in prompt engineering in an attempt to produce a text stating that a certain type of DNA particle has been found in Pfizer's COVID-19 vaccine. He also attempts to demonstrate that ChatGPT is censoring vaccine-critical research.

The published dialogue on *The Defender: Children's Health Defense* exemplifies many challenges associated with contemporary AI models. Firstly, it serves as an example of anthropomorphism, where the language model is treated as a representative of the medical establishment. Secondly, it illustrates how the lack of transparency of AI models can reinforce conspiracy theories and the perception of censorship by 'the establishment'. Thirdly, the dialogue can be used as a starting point to discuss how the rapid development of publicly available AI models can undermine trust in established knowledge when skilful prompting can lead to disinformation in different areas.

To conclude, I will propose a suggestion of empirical research on the study of AI models in the context of conspiracy theories and other forms of disinformation and open up for a broader discussion on the relation between information infrastructure and media and information literacy.

Becker, de G. (2023-11-08). I Asked ChatGPT to Explain DNA Particles in COVID Vaccines. Here's What I Learned. *The Defender: Children's Health Defense*.
<https://childrenshealthdefense.org/defender/chatgpt-ai-covid-vaccine-dna/>

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Conspiracy Beliefs about COVID-19: Results from a Population Survey in Finland

Johanna K. Kaakinen, Ali Moazami Goodarzi, Tuomo Häikiö, Pasi Kivioja, Karl O. Mäki and Daria Pritup

[UNDER REVIEW]

Abstract

We examined the familiarity and popularity of various COVID-19 conspiracy theories, and associations between cognitive and social factors and COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs in a representative population sample of people living in Finland during the pandemic (N=1,077). Some of the most familiar conspiracy theories were the claims that the virus was deliberately developed (78%) and released from a Chinese laboratory (86%). Eighty-one percent of the participants had also heard the claim that corona vaccines are used to microchip people, and 72% had heard the claim that corona vaccines are harmful and that this fact is being covered up. The endorsement of different COVID-19 conspiracy theories was overall very low (medians ranged from 1 to 2 on a scale from 1 to 7). The two most popular conspiracy theories were that the virus was originally developed (M = 3.42, SD = 1.67) and deliberately released from a Chinese laboratory (M = 2.83, SD = 1.60). Of cognitive factors, pseudoscientific beliefs, lower scores on the actively open-minded thinking scale, and higher preference for anecdotal information were related to increased COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs. Of the social factors, lower trust in governmental institutions and science and scientists were associated with increased COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs. Moreover, the use of digital and alternative media was related to increased COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs, but after controlling for demographic variables only the use of alternative media had a significant association with COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs. Men were more likely to endorse COVID-19 conspiracies than women, and the beliefs decreased with age. The present results suggest that battling the spread of health-related misinformation, like COVID-19 conspiracy theories, requires actions that target the “mindware” of individuals, build up the trust felt towards governmental institutions, science, and mainstream media, and curtail the misinformation spreading in social and alternative media.

Oula Silvennoinen

For Freedom and Justice? The Vasara-Circle as a Conduit of Conspiracist Antisemitism in Interwar Finland

The paper analyses the circle of Finnish far-right activists, centred upon the publishing company *Vasara (Hammer)*, set up in 1931. It consists of a comprehensive survey of the backgrounds of the group members, the range of their antisemitic publications throughout the interwar era, the sources of their published material, and the content and style of their conspiracist brand of antisemitism, which runs as a central thread. Through the publishing company *Vasara* and a range of other publications, the group was active until the end of the Second World War in trying to disseminate this type of antisemitism within the Finnish far right. As most of its members were native Swedish speakers, they were also transmitters of antisemitic material between Sweden and Finland.

An analysis of the backgrounds of the group members reveals a significant exposure to Germany and German antisemitism of both the pre-world war and war era. Theodor Fritsch's *Hammer-Verlag* seems to have acted as the most important model, after which the *Vasara*-group and many other Nordic interwar antisemites modelled their activities. Of particular interest is the consistency with which the group attempted to shape the thinking of the Finnish far right at large, and the eventual fate of this project.

CONNOR Conference — Abstract:

Conspiracy Theories, Populism and the Threat to Politics

In this paper, I want to suggest an analysis of various aspects or components that constitute conditions for when the connection between conspiracy theories and populism is politically interesting.

Conspiracy theories have become more visible after the pandemic. Sometimes they are perceived as an instrument for unheard groups to be heard or as an expression of populist protest, but more frequently they are seen as a serious threat to political order, as they demonstrate disrespect for a shared framework. Conspiracy theories, like various forms of populism, see the world in terms of good and evil, right and wrong, friends and foes, and victims versus conspirators, nourishing a lack of trust in society. Furthermore, conspiracy theories are typically associated with unsympathetic things such as violence, war, terrorism, or prejudice.

Conspiracy theories have political consequences, as they contribute to widespread public skepticism about the government's assertions. It is also said that conspiracy theories are inherently resistant to correction, which is perhaps more fundamentally problematic. Moreover, those who accept conspiracy theories enter into a way of thinking that entails distrust of established knowledge-producing institutions, or so runs the argument. The result is held to be that it becomes difficult for anyone to believe anything at all.

Both populism and conspiracy theorists present themselves as having an underdog perspective. There is a conflict between the elite and the people regarding culture, values, rules, taste, politics, etc. This can be extended to a critique of the elite and its attitude in a broad sense, e.g. the prominent place given to science and to finance capital while the community is devaluated. All this fosters a sentiment that there is some strong and powerful force that acts in the background, unseen. It can be spelled out as 'the deep state', described in rather generic terms as 'big money' or more vaguely as 'foreign interests.' Supposedly hidden actors, associated with an elite, are sometimes identified as 'extremists', including LGBTQ-people, Marxists, or gender ideologists. Both conspiracy theories and populism represent alternatives to such narratives.

In this paper, I claim that the resemblance per se between populism and conspiracy theories is not enough to make the connection interesting or relevant for further studies and discussion; the relation has to be qualified, as any non-mainstream phenomena could be similarly described — e.g. much religion, political movements to the left (as Marxists, anarchists) or to the right, or movements for social change (environment, peace, justice and alike). The question is then: what is the significant difference between all such non-mainstream movements in general and populist movements, in this respect? What more precisely is the interesting link between populism and conspiracy theories, politically speaking?

Title:

The emperor without clothes is ugly: On the rise of political conspiracism

Author:

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Abstract

In this paper I propose that the contemporary dissemination of political conspiracy theories should be understood in relation to the current instability of symbolic representation in political practice and discourse. By symbolic representation, I mean the ability for some actor to stand in for the customs, laws, and other institutions that constitute social order. Drawing on H. C. Andersen's tale "The Emperor's New Clothes", I relate this instability to the set of problems faced by the emperor to represent imperial rule – even if he is clothed and carries his regalia – when everyone knows that underneath he is just another naked man. Political conspiracy theories are normative critiques of political power. Modern critique of power has predominately targeted the ideological dimension of order. Its ambition has been to reveal the nakedness of the emperor and to call out those who accept the fiction that he is clothed. This practice has, indeed, contributed to destabilizing symbolic representation. Contemporary conspiracism thrives on this destabilization and takes things one step further. Conspiracists hone in on the emperor himself. They object to him not for being without clothes, but for being ugly with no clothes on. Rather than being directed at the representation of imperial rule by the emperor, their critique concerns what the emperor is by himself, namely his – mostly crooked – personal qualities. Irrespective of the veracity of conspiratorial claims, there is an inherent problem with this kind of critique: It fails to recognize that what enables the emperor to do the things he does is not his personal qualities but, instead, general participation in the charade that he wears clothes. It is the efficacy of the symbolic order that accounts for manifestations of power. Emperors become ugly because they are emperors; they don't become emperors because they are ugly.

Targeted Individuals – Between Magic, Electronic Surveillance, and Mental illness

In the novel *Inferno*, August Strindberg describes how he, while living in a small rental in Paris, is attacked with gas and electric impulses by his neighbors. These experiences are usually categorized as parts of a period of mental illness. Although, today, in the social media of the contemporary information society, we can engage with groups of people describing similar experiences who denounce the explanation of Mental illness. They often have personal traits to their individual explanatory stories of why they were exposed to electronic attacks by people in their surroundings, but they connect these – together – to a common narrative: Being “Targeted individuals” (commonly abbreviated TI) or “Victims of Gangstalking”. It is hard to put a finger on what this really means, closest similar phenomenon could be to be conjured or under a “hex” – but with an internet-based support group.

Searching the web regarding “Targeted individuals” or “Gangstalking” there are several books, documentaries, forum threads, and other type of content available, often created from a North American perspective. There is equipment available to track and deactivate different electronic signals that are used, according to the targeted individuals, to harass and surveil them. There are discussions regarding who is behind the harassment, and activists/entrepreneurs who claim that they have access to lists of targeted individuals and methods to remove a person from these lists. There are several different support groups on most social media platforms.

My paper will focus on the discourse of “Targeted individuals” as it manifests itself in Sweden and on netpages and forums directed towards people living in Sweden, speaking Swedish. I am at the beginning of my investigation and analysis of this phenomenon and will present a few research outlines and possible perspectives. How is the phenomenon of “Targeted individuals” expressed in a Swedish setting? Are there changes in expression in relation to the North American norm that is present in the majority of content related to “Targeted individuals” online? How are references to other conspiracy theories used in the targeted individual’s discussions (5G, Deep State, Birth-certificate conspiracies, Chemtrails et cetera)? Are there references or discussions regarding other activities, religious or political movements et cetera?

The paper relates to two of the topics of interest described in the CfP. **Comparative studies** through the comparison between a Swedish and North American context. **Cultural perspectives** through the study of how a conspiracy theory is expressed in a Swedish setting.

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“Is there no disease?” – Anti-government conspiracy theories in Denmark during and after the corona lockdown

In the context of a press conference held by the Danish Health Authority on September 29, 2020, during the seventh month of the COVID-19 pandemic, an individual raised the question, "Is there no disease?" (Andreasen, 2020). This individual, purporting to be a journalist from the news outlet Midtsjællands Medier, had gained access to the press conference. The question followed several international social media posts in late summer 2020 which claimed that the virus does not exist (Reuters, 2020).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a proliferation of anti-authority conspiracy theories across the globe. In Denmark, we have observed the emergence of explicitly conspiratorial political parties such as JFK21 and Frihedslisten, employing anti-authority rhetoric and distrust towards official statements. As it turned out, the individual at the press conference was a member of JFK21.

This paper is a case study of some Danish examples of anti-government conspiracy narratives during and after the pandemic. Although anti-government conspiracy theories are not a new phenomenon it has gained momentum among various political groups during and after the corona crisis. Cases such as the before mentioned JFK21 and Frihedslisten as well as the heterogeneous anti-authority group Men In Black and individuals purporting anti-government conspiracy theories are analysed as part of a broader anti-government activism.

It is argued that the anti-authority mindset is fueled by existing conspiracy theoretical thought patterns that contribute to a critique of the power elite. This includes conspiracy theories such as The Great Reset, the various 5G theories and the so-called Plandemic theory.

Elements of the anti-authority ideology stem from a conspiratorial worldview, claiming that the world is controlled by a global elite of powerful individuals and organizations who manipulate governments worldwide (Krieg, 2022). Major societal crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine are perceived in this worldview as staged events and a kind of tactical diversion to capture the public's attention, allowing the government to implement totalitarian laws.

There is a tendency for anti-authority extremism and activism to become a broad catch-all term where a variety of elements can be thrown in, as long as there is resistance to the established system (Bjørge & Braddock, 2022). The category is often used to describe everything from people protesting the government's handling of the coronavirus pandemic and conspiracy theorists to supporters of alternative lifestyles sceptical of vaccines or hooligan-like protesters causing trouble. What these different groups have in common is a desire to reject authorities, without having a clear idea of what societal system should replace it.

During the coronavirus crisis in Denmark, anti-government activism has been mostly non-violent and issue-driven against governmental Covid-19 restrictions. However, verbal attacks on politicians and institutions, harassment against government representatives and civil servants, conspiracy theories about the non-existence of the virus or false claims about the vaccine may harm democratic institutions and processes and cause polarization in society.

Steven Sampson, Dept of Social Anthropology, Lund University

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Why do smart people believe conspiracies? Towards an anthropology of intellectuals

Elaborating a conspiracy theory requires a degree of intellectual sophistication in showing how events are connected, the villains are identified, and who it is who benefits. Intellectuals, scientists, many retired academics, also articulate their conspiracy theories in books, articles, lectures and podcasts, and are skilled at recruiting adherents or disciples. This is hardly surprising. Intellectuals and scientists are trained to dig deeper, to connect the dots, to look beyond the obvious and to be skeptical. This is the very nature of science. But these same characteristics should make intellectuals and scientists particularly skilled at deciphering and criticizing, if not destroying lightweight conspiratorial thinking. Yet there is a paradox. It is this same cohort of intellectuals, many of them otherwise eminent scholars in their fields, who promote some of the most outlandish conspiracy theories about 9/11, Covid, Globalism, Jews, etc. Intellectuals can also draw on the fringes of various political and social movements of the extreme right or left (both of which are full of conspiratorial thinking). Yet many political movements are notoriously suspicious of intellectuals, seeing them as an elite who will undermine the social order with their modernist or postmodern thinking. This paper is an effort to connect intellectuals and conspiracy. It argues for an anthropology of intellectuals. Here the work of the Hungarian sociologists Konrad and Szeleni is relevant. They distinguish between the technical intelligentsia, i.e. those who work with their heads, and genuine intellectuals, i.e. those who pose questions about society. Common to both is a dual view of power. They are suspicious of power, perhaps critical, but they are often powerless as bureaucrats and technocrats. At the same time they are close to power, sometimes drawn into power. And since conspiracy theorizing is really about hidden malevolent powers, including the powers of Satan, the Jews, or the globalizing elite, intellectuals may find this kind of power discourse both frightening and appealing. Some examples will be given from the 911 truth movement, which I have been following for some time, and is very much dominated by scientists, scholars, university academics and others who would call themselves intellectuals. And after we try to understand them, the obvious question is what to do about them.

“No to Russian Law” Protests and Conspiracy Theories about Nordic Countries in Georgian Alternative Media

Tamar Kikacheishvili, a journalist from Georgia, currently student at Linnaeus university, Sweden

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Abstract

“No to Russian Law” was the main slogan of the March 2023 protests that took place in Georgia against oppressive draft law initiated by a group of far-right pro-Russian politicians’ movement called People’s Power and backed by Georgian authorities and voted by the ruling party Georgian Dream. This draft law was widely covered in local and international mainstream media as a threat to Georgia’s democracy however alternative media decided to take an opposite approach and label mainstream media as a threat to the state in this particular context.

It had responses from the EU community where MPs from the European Parliament made statements supporting Georgian people in this fight and highlighted once again that they saw Georgia as a EU perspective country and that the law would affect Georgia’s EU integration process. They also made a joint statement on this issue and expressed concern that Georgian lawmakers ignored criticism that Western partners and local civil society had expressed.

The same period of time, alternative media has prepared the ground to illustrate that the “West”, including Nordic countries is “immoral” and therefore culturally not acceptable for Georgian society.

Anti-Western myths in Georgian alternative media were transferring through fake news. For example, it was often referring to Norway’s pride with misinterpreted context about children that was causing harsh anti-western discourse in digital platforms. The fake news was also spread about Sweden and was even circulated by Georgian politicians.

Who stands behind myths and where do they come from in Georgian alternative media? The Kremlin narrative translated into the Georgian language is the main line of one of such alternative media Alt Info, however, it is not just a coincidence with ideas, but a Kremlin-backed media platform. According to the independent investigative media project Ifact which

is a partner of OCCRP (Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project) Georgian alternative media, Alt Info, is financed by the Russian Federation. (ifact, 2022)

This paper won't examine the influence of these myths on public opinion, Russian influence on Georgia, and decision-making processes. It will rather present and discuss the materials about the "West" and Nordic countries in Georgian alternative media and its nexus to the events related to the internal movements such as the protests "No To Russian Law". Likewise, it will present examples from pro-Kremlin propaganda media and show the similarities in the narratives translated into Georgian alternative media. It will analyze alternative media in the framework of *The Claims of Culture: Equality and Diversity in the Global Era* (Benhabib.S. 2018) and *Key Dimensions of Alternative News Media, Digital Journalism* (Holt et al. 2019).

Keywords

alternative media, propaganda, fake news.

Bio

Tamar Kikacheishvili is a journalist, human rights defender and media expert from Georgia who had been working in the media and CSOs over 18 years. Currently she studies on the MA programme in Media, Democracy and Human Rights at Linnaeus university. With a background in the media development and journalists' safety, Tamar led programmes aiming to strengthen media and journalism in the countries of challenging or no democracies within the Eurasian region.

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Literary Tropes in Conspiracy Theories: A Blend of Fiction and Realism

In discussions of conspiracy theories, the use of literary tropes can serve various functions in meaning-making and reveal the complex relationships between artistic works and perceived reality. Literary works often act as frameworks, aiding in the interpretation of different events that are significant for conspiracy theories propagators. The specific imagery, ideas and structure of artistic texts provide diverse *affordances* for discussing various topics. The degree to which these texts blur the line between reality and fiction ranges from subtle allusions to being perceived as blueprints for sinister schemes. While using artistic text is common across many discourses, its particular use in conspiracy theories to blend fiction with reality is especially distinctive, highlighting a unique aspect of these narratives.

Our presentation investigates the use of literary tropes in Russian-language conspiracy theories about the Baltics, particularly in Facebook posts. We will examine and compare different strategies for referencing diverse imagery from George Orwell's "1984" (1948) and the specific image of a mankurt, a memory-less slave, from Chinghiz Aitmatov's "The Day Lasts More Than a Hundred Years" (1983). While the well-known dystopia in Orwell's work is frequently cited for its portrayal of an oppressive regime through various elements of its story world, the mankurt image from less prominent Aitmatov's novel exists almost independently from its main narrative. In the context of the broader Russian conspiracy narrative (Yablokov 2018, Borenshtein 2019), both texts are important and offer unique tools for constructing an alternative representation of the Baltic region as subjected to evil forces hostile to the Russian Federation and values that it represents.

Our presentation resonates with the conference's focus on 'Cultural Perspectives: Examining Expressions, Discourses, and Performances of Conspiracy Cultures.'. Our analysis, rooted in the semiotics, aims to understand how the repetitive use of artistic references in conspiracy theory discourse can simultaneously nurture creativity and lead to stagnation in the meaning-making processes.

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Borenstein, Eliot. 2019. *Plots against Russia: Conspiracy and Fantasy after Socialism*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.

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Conspiracy soundtracks: The role of sound and music in conspiracy theoretical documentaries

Tobias Pontara
University of Gothenburg

Abstract

In public discourse and mainstream media, conspiracy theories are often described as a form of disinformation and a threat to democratic societies. In the scholarly literature, however, this view has been vigorously debated. Are conspiracy theories always democratically subversive or can they also be democratically progressive? Should we assume that conspiracy theories are, as a rule, implausible or should we rather assess their plausibility and epistemic status on a case-by-case basis? What is the relation between conspiracy theoretical discourse and populism? And how could we understand conspiracy theories as a form of cultural and political resistance?

Scholars have also examined the visual and literary practices connected with conspiracy theories, including the narrative construction of such theories in fiction films and related screen media. So far, however, studies of audiovisually mediated conspiracy theoretical discourse have paid little or no attention to the role of the soundtrack in such discourse. The newly started research project presented here examines to what extent and in what ways soundtrack phenomena – music, sound effects, voice-over, and even silence – can be regarded as central for effective communication and persuasion in the audiovisual dissemination of conspiracy theoretical content. The project is funded by Riksbankens Jubileumsfond (2024-2026).

In my presentation I will give a brief overview of the project's research design. I will then present an analysis of the 9/11 conspiracy theoretical documentary *Loose Change: An American Coup* (2009/2015), focusing specifically on how soundtrack phenomena are implicated in establishing the film's conspiracy theoretical truth claims. In conclusion, I argue that music and sound play an important epistemic role in audiovisually mediated conspiracy theoretical discourse and that research on contemporary conspiracy theoretical worldmaking needs to address this overlooked phenomenon.

Most relevant conference themes for the presentation

- Cultural perspectives: Examining expressions, discourses and performances of conspiracy cultures.
- Media and Mis/Disinformation: Analyzing the role of media, social platforms, and digital spaces in disseminating and amplifying conspiracy narratives.

Bio

Tobias Pontara is Professor of Musicology at the University of Gothenburg. His research interests lie at the intersection of audiovisual studies, musical aesthetics, media studies, and the cultural study of music. Among the journals in which he has published are *Philosophical studies*, *19th-century music*, *Music, sound and the moving image*, *International review of the aesthetics and sociology of music* and *Music and the moving image*. Pontara is the author of *Andrei Tarkovsky's Sounding Cinema: Music and Meaning from Solaris to The Sacrifice* (Routledge 2020).

Toni Saarinen

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Conspiracism between and beyond the vernacular and the institutional

This is a paper from a specifically folklorist perspective on contemporary conspiracism's complexities in terms of the divide between the vernacular (or "folk") and the institutional (organizations or other established official systems). As such, my paper is connected especially to two conference themes: First, the cultural approach on discourse. Second, the analysis of media environment(s), since traditional vernacular knowledge and communication, including conspiracist discourse, have been significantly altered by the Internet. Folklore studies approach sheds new light on the dynamics of the contemporary vernacular–institutional divide.

Conspiracism can simultaneously harbour a disdain for both "the people" and "the establishment," in addition to which it is still heavily stigmatised in both vernacular and institutional discourse. The (Western) conspiracy milieu most often consists of populist grassroots movements, and it is oppositional to many well-known hegemonic institutions. At the same time, however, it has been institutionalised from within, which has led to the development of its own (counter)elite. As a sign of elitism, the conspiracist discourse also displays a curiously derogatory attitude toward the masses as "sheeple," even reflecting the crowd psychology theories of the late 19th century. Due to the existence of this subcultural elite of experts offering alternative knowledge, the power relationships within the conspiracy milieu tend to vary. "Epistemic capital" is not evenly possessed or distributed. However, the discourses still contain "polyphony" typical to vernacular knowledge and narratives.

This paper makes use of some of the newer folklore studies' theories concerning the relationship between the vernacular and the institutional, as I look at the conspiracy milieu's heterogeneous formation through the interaction of these two domains. While separated in theory and often in discourse as well, the vernacular and the institutional are nevertheless intertwined to a significant degree. Such hybridity is apparent in, for example, digital media infrastructure, and is tied to the question of the Internet as an open communication environment that has arguably enabled conspiracism to reach new heights as "folk" knowledge. However, it should not be simply stated that conspiracism and conspiracist discourses are much more "folkloric" than the many institutional actors they oppose; and in the same sense, the role of Internet as a great culprit should be critically evaluated as well.

Indeed, researchers have already questioned the typical argument of the Internet as the impersonal perpetrator behind the profound changes in conspiracism's visibility and influence. Similarly, folklore studies can contribute to our understanding of conspiracist vernacular knowledge by disregarding the idea that it is simple, ill-founded, and strictly separated from the institutional sphere.

Toni Saarinen is a PhD student affiliated with the University of Helsinki. His research concerns conspiracism, end of the world discourses, digital folklore, and climate change related dissent.

Conspiracist Antisemitism in the Nordic Countries 1917–1945

Panel proposal by the Network for Nordic Fascism Studies
(NORFAS, <https://norfas.net/>)

Chair/Organisers:

Nicola Karcher (Østfold University College, Norway), nicola.k.karcher@hiof.no
Kjetil Braut Simonsen (Jewish Museum Oslo), kjetil@jodiskmuseumoslo.no

Participants:

Paavo Ahonen (Finland), Sofie Lene Bak (Denmark), Oula Silvennoinen (Finland), Nicola Karcher & Kjetil Braut Simonsen (Norway), Lars M. Andersson (Sweden)

Intro:

Conspiracist antisemitism can be considered as one of the most persistent and aggressive conspiracy beliefs in history and until the present, constantly adapting to changing social and political challenges.

In the shadow of the First World War and the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, antisemitic conspiracist publications reached a new level in modern history, flourishing the European continent. The political climate of fear, desperation, polarisation, and subversion created a fertile soil for conspiracism and intensified the distrust of Jews.

With Nazi Germany's invasion of the democratic countries of Western Europe, publications which during the interwar years had belonged to the political periphery of extremism now became mainstream.

This was also the case in the Nordic countries, despite of the different local conditions during the Second World War: Denmark and Norway were both occupied in 1940 and meant to become part of a future Greater Germanic Reich; Finland allied itself with Nazi Germany during 1941 to 1944, partly to regain territorial losses to the Soviet Union; and Sweden remained officially neutral, although Swedish authorities cooperated with the Hitler regime on several occasions.

This panel examines conspiracist antisemitism in Finland, Sweden, Norway, and Denmark from the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 until the defeat of Nazi Germany in 1945 through the prism of print production. Thus, we will cover the mass dissemination of anti-Jewish conspiracy narratives during the interwar period and the Second World War, when the expansion of German National Socialism profoundly changed the political space and opportunities for local antisemites. Based on this perspective, we seek to map the entangled nature of conspiracist antisemitism and its historical patterns in the Nordic countries. Through its comparative approach, our panel will both highlight the impact of various

historical conditions and take into account national peculiarities, transnational traditions, sources of inspiration, as well as ideological similarities and differences.

Together, our papers will provide new empirical knowledge of the character and dissemination of conspiracist antisemitism and how it has been creating preconditions for violence, persecution, and ultimately mass murder. Our findings will be published as a special issue in *Nordisk judaistik/Scandinavian Jewish Studies* in June 2024.

Papers:

A New Antisemitic Stereotype in the Finnish Press after the October Revolution

Paavo Ahonen, University of Helsinki

At the turn of the 20th century, Jews were mostly blamed for small scale and local conspiracies, but during and after the First World War global antisemitic theories started to emerge all over Europe. In 1917, already before the Communist Revolution, rumours spread around Russia, that there was a close connection between the Bolshevist movement and Jews. Soon this reflected also to Finland: Fear of Communism was strongly present in the Finnish society, especially after the Civil War in the spring of 1918.

This paper focuses on one of the main manifestations of this fear, the development and spread of the Judeo-Bolshevik conspiracy theory in the Finnish press after the October Revolution. It is based on my research on Finnish newspapers and magazines, published in the years between 1917 and 1920. In my paper, I will show how the Finnish press saw a link between Jews and Bolsheviks right after the Russian Revolution. It will also describe from where the idea of a Jewish-Bolshevik conspiracy spread to Finland, and how new antisemitic ideas were connected to the old, millennia lasting hatred of Jews.

“Denmark Contra Jvdæos”: Conspiracist Antisemitism and Stigmatised Knowledge in Danish National Socialism 1938–1945

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This paper poses the question whether conspiracism is an inseparable and integrated part of National Socialist antisemitism or a marginalised, extremist position even within such milieus. Through investigations of Danish national socialist journals before and during the Second World War, the paper discloses how the introduction of *stigmatised knowledge* in the form of anti-Masonic conspiracy theories and the myth of ritual murder led to an antisemitic escalation process in some national socialist milieus in Denmark. Yet, conspiracist antisemitism was far from mainstream in Danish national socialism.

In the largest and most successful Danish national socialist party, Danmarks Nationalsocialistiske Arbejderparti (DNSAP), it was an embarrassment and a liability until tactics and propaganda changed with the conditions of the Second World War.

Using national socialist journals to explore the prevalence and character of conspiracist antisemitism is methodologically fruitful, as it allows observations of explicit and implicit conspiracism, with the latter working through codes and references. As I will show in my

paper, such may move outside these milieus and become part of the antisemitic cultural heritage without new users being aware of the conspiracist framework they are engaging in.

For Freedom and Justice? The Vasara-Circle as a Conduit of Conspiracist Antisemitism in Interwar Finland

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The paper analyses the circle of Finnish far-right activists, centred upon the publishing company *Vasara (Hammer)*, set up in 1931. It consists of a comprehensive survey of the backgrounds of the group members, the range of their antisemitic publications throughout the interwar era, the sources of their published material, and the content and style of their conspiracist brand of antisemitism – a central thread through all their activities.

Based on the publishing company *Vasara* and a range of other publications, the group was active until the end of the Second World War in trying to disseminate this type of antisemitism within the Finnish far right. As most of its members were native Swedish speakers, they were also transmitters of antisemitic material between Sweden and Finland.

An analysis of the backgrounds of the group members reveals a significant exposure to Germany and German antisemitism of both the pre-world war and war era. Theodor Fritsch's publishing house *Hammer* seems to have acted as the most important model, after which the *Vasara*-group and many other Nordic interwar antisemites modelled their activities. Of particular interest is the consistency with which the group attempted to shape the thinking of the Finnish far right at large, and the eventual fate of this project.

'The Apocalyptic Battle'

Antisemitic Conspiracism in Norway During the German Occupation

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Conspiracist antisemitism was an integral part of national socialist propaganda in Nazi occupied Norway. Both the German occupier and the Norwegian collaboration party Nasjonal Samling interpreted the ongoing world war as an existential struggle between the "German-Nordic peoples" and a "Jewish world conspiracy". An imaginary unit called International Jewry was represented as the sinister force pulling the strings behind phenomena such as Communism, liberalism, capitalism, and cultural decadence. From this viewpoint, anti-Jewish measures of discrimination, segregation and even genocidal violence were rationalised as a war of self-defence and liberation against the "Jewish menace".

Our paper analyses the argumentation and functions of conspiracist antisemitism as it was disseminated by three journals in Nazi-occupied Norway: the Norwegian editions of the German antisemitic journal *Welt-Dienst (Verdens-Tjenesten)*, the weekly *Hirdmannen* and the antisemitic periodical *Nasjonalt Tidsskrift*. While all these publications represented history and politics as an apocalyptic battle against an alleged "Jewish conspiracy", their argumentation differed in several aspects. Whereas *Verdens-Tjenesten* first and foremost was an anti-Jewish news agency, *Nasjonalt Tidsskrift* and *Hirdmannen* were more focused on attacking the Norwegian Jews directly. However, as our paper will show, according to these journals, the national socialist persecution was an act of redemption from Jews and "Jewish ideas".

Antisemitism as National Enlightenment in Sweden

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An important idea in conspiracist thinking in general and in antisemitic conspiracy theories in particular is that the fight against the alleged conspirators is an act of self-defence, an uphill battle against an all-powerful enemy. Another key feature is the sense of urgency; it is always five to twelve, the last wake-up call for “the people”.

This sense of urgency and the idea that antisemitism is a form of self-defence are defining features of *Hammaren* (1943–1945), the most venomous Swedish antisemitic journal, inspired both by Theodor Fritsch’s *Der Hammer* and Julius Streicher’s *Der Stürmer* and published by the most radical Swedish national socialist and antisemites. They defined their task as an all-important enlightenment project, designed to – before it was too late – make “the Swedish people” aware that they were living under the boot of the Jews.

As I will show in my paper, to achieve this, the journal employed different strategies: 1) listing Jews in various professions; 2) naming Jews suspected, accused, and sentenced for various crimes; 3) mocking the majority of Swedes seen as advocates of the Jews; 4) promoting negative descriptions of Judaism, Jewish traditions, and Jews in history and 5) re-publishing antisemitic “classics”, and quotes revealing “truths” about the Jews.

Short biographies

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