

The “Anti-American Liberal Elite” Conspiracy Theory and the Reproduction of Hegemonic Narratives

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ABSTRACT

In recent history, countless falsifiable conspiracy theories have spread throughout the United States; the theories that 5G is linked to the spread of COVID-19, that Barack Obama was not born in the United States, and that climate change is a hoax are just a few examples. In many cases, the spread of these theories can have serious consequences. One such theory asserts that there is a conspiracy of anti-American liberal elites attempting to undermine American values and take control of the United States, which, in 2021, culminated in the January 6th attack on the US Capitol. Many of the participants were acting on information provided by an anonymous poster on the messaging board 4chan known as QAnon. Through the construction of a convincing narrative, QAnon was able to sway their audience to radical action. Today, the “liberal elite” conspiracy theory persists and is espoused with the support of multiple disparate narratives. The purpose of this research is to understand the different types of narratives that support this conspiracy theory, how they are logically and rhetorically structured, and how those narratives are used to protect power and wealth.

INTRODUCTION

Conspiracy theories have existed as discourse in society since at least the Middle Ages as a way to blame societal misfortune on a scapegoat group. One of the oldest, blood libel, asserted that Jewish people in the Middle Ages used the blood of Christian children in dark magic rituals meant to give them power while defiling the Eucharist. In 2016, the eerily similar ‘Pizzagate’ conspiracy theory came to prominence, asserting that there was a child trafficking ring inside a Washington, D.C. pizzeria involving several members of the Democratic Party which eventually culminated in an armed gunman showing up to the restaurant on December 4th, 2016. Despite the thorough debunking of this conspiracy theory, it eventually evolved into the narrative that Hillary Clinton and other powerful individuals performed ritual abuse and murder as members of this trafficking ring. In the intervening years, conspiracy theories continue to be featured in discourse, especially those featuring a liberal, left, democratic, woke, or globalist elite with evil intentions to undermine American values. Although these narratives often posture as morally righteous, they far more frequently undermine the very values they purport to defend.

METHODS

This research seeks to investigate the role of conspiracy theory narratives, especially those that undermine progressive movements, in maintaining existing societal power structures. This project seeks to answer the question: “What rhetorical strategies are used to convince audiences to support the maintenance of a societal status quo?”

First, this project will ground itself in the communication model of Stuart Hall as described in *Encoding/Decoding* and the narrative codes of Roland Barthes as described in *S/Z* in order to describe how information is replicated, spread and codified, and how that information is referenced as normalized discourse.

Next, the project will analyze examples of conspiracy theory narratives across multiple forms of media, from a variety of narrators. It will identify several common rhetorical strategies used in conspiracy narratives and which of Barthes’s codes function most prominently within them.

The project will conclude by returning to the original research question in order to discuss the role of rhetorical strategies in maintaining hegemony via conspiracy theory narratives. Additionally, some strategies will be provided for reducing susceptibility and pushing back against conspiracy theory narratives.

Encoding/Decoding

Many people are already aware of the fact that large entities in business, government, and media have and continue to exercise their power and influence in ways that perpetuate their own (often interconnected) power and influence. For example, some fossil fuel companies fund environmental research in order to create scientific

misinformation which distorts our perception of reality (Cohen & Mann, 2022). This distorted perception has the power to shift opinion and climate policy to more strongly favor the interests of fossil fuel companies. This, in essence, is what Italian theorist Antonio Gramsci described in his writings as ‘cultural hegemony’ or the domination of a society by the ruling class via manufactured consent (Gramsci, 1971).

One prominent source of misinformation, including climate change denial related misinformation, is the world of conspiracy theories. For example, in a 2022 episode of his podcast, *The Jordan Peterson Show* titled *The Great Climate Con*, Jordan Peterson uses his platform to minimize the real threat of anthropogenic climate change. Crucially, he frames his argument against climate change concern not as a simple statement of fact or refutation of an honest misconception, but as a response to a concerted effort by an anti-progress cult of woke climate activists to spread misinformation. Peterson identifies climate activists as conspiring to prevent progress through their machinations (conspiracy theory narrative) against the fossil fuel industry, which he is partial to (in service of hegemony). As of 2022, Peterson’s content has been hosted on *The Daily Wire*, a conservative media company that received several million dollars in seed money from the oil billionaire Wilkes Brothers. Jordan Peterson is just one of many people who are beholden to larger interest groups and who will use conspiracy theory narratives to defend those interests. Hopefully, once deconstructed, these misinformation efforts can be seen as the simple ploys to protect the interests of fossil fuel companies that they are.

With the *Great Climate Con* example still in mind, although portraying fossil fuels in a positive light is relatively easy, achieving enough of a cultural consensus to make a difference is a more difficult task. Notably, Peterson’s downplaying of anthropogenic climate change rather than outright denial is an indication that previous iterations of climate change denial have become too unpopular to succeed in the current cultural environment, thus the conspiracy theorist act must adapt. Even so, by ceaselessly asserting conspiracy narratives into societal discourse, the misinformation within them can become legitimized. In the case of the climate change debate, the Overton window has shifted in such a way that it is rarely any longer acceptable to deny climate change outright. The strength of narrative is in its ability to present a reason to think in a predetermined (hegemonic) way while also taking into account the current political/cultural moment in order to better resonate with average people.

In order to better understand the relationship of hegemony and discourse, it is helpful to have a conceptual framework in which ideas are spread. In his essay *Encoding/Decoding*, Stuart Hall describes a model of communication that traces information through the stages of production, circulation, consumption, and reproduction, and is a useful model in this discussion regarding conspiracy theory narratives.

Hall’s encoding/decoding model of communication can be represented as follows:

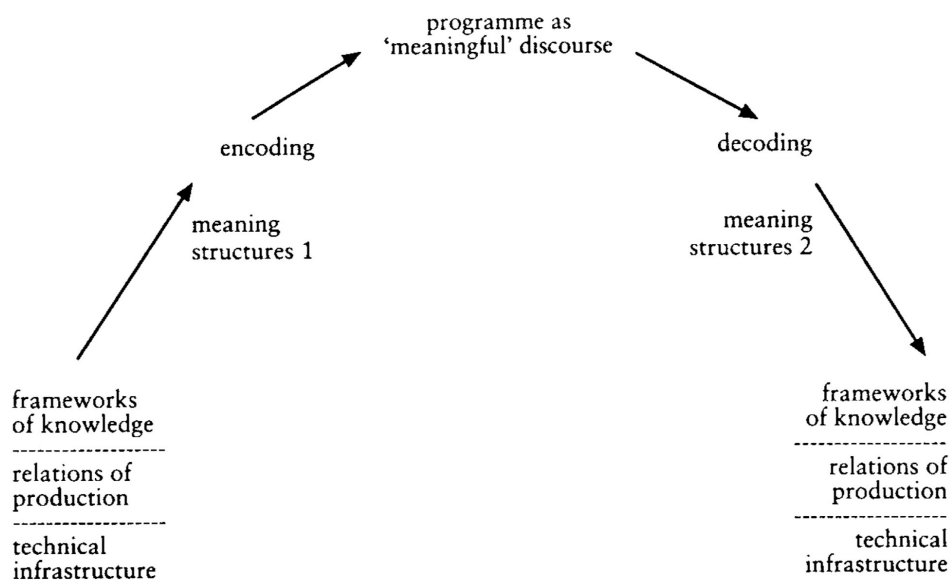


Figure 1. Stuart Hall’s model of communication as seen in his essay *Encoding/Decoding*

Starting on the left side of the figure, the first step, production, has already been discussed in this paper. Production is the conceptualization of discourse at the end of an encoding party in order to spread an ideology. In

the Jordan Peterson example, this ideology is that fossil fuel use is a net positive to our world. If an audience thinks this, they will likely think and act in ways that benefit fossil fuel interests. First, however, the raw ideology must be packaged in a narrative argument. For any single ideological goal, there can be multiple rhetorical repackagings tailored to suit a specific audience. For a different narrative take in service of the same ideology, see *The Alex Jones Show* example under this paper's subheading, *The Coming Calamity*. After the ideology has been packaged, it is distributed. As of 2022, *The Daily Wire* reported having over 1 million paid subscribers (Fischer, 2022), and as of 2024, more than 3 million YouTube subscribers (Social Blade, 2024). The information, in whatever form it comes in, is taken up in the decoding step and, if the presented argument is accepted, the underlying ideology becomes justified in the eyes of the audience member in what is the final step of the model. Ideally, the information encoded from the first step matches that decoded into the last step; this would be what Stuart Hall describes in his essay as the dominant/hegemonic position. Realistically, not all audience members will believe everything exactly as they are told, but constant reinforcing of the same ideas can shape their cultural bias to more easily accept the intended meaning.

In the broad cultural discourse, every person has the power to shape meaning. While this is true, it's also important to note that, in a hierarchical society, that power to shape meaning is more strongly vested in the hands of certain people and organizations. As Dick Hebdige puts it in *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*:

For instance, if we pause to reflect for a moment, it should be obvious that access to the means by which ideas are disseminated in our society (i.e. principally the mass media) is not the same for all classes. Some groups have more say, more opportunity to make the rules, to organize meaning, while others are less favourably placed, have less power to produce and impose their definitions of the world on the world... They thus tend to represent, in however obscure and contradictory a fashion, the interests of the dominant groups in society (Hebdige, 1979).

Hall's model provides a solid framework in which to conceptualize the broad transmission of information, but it still leaves us to wonder how hegemonic conspiracy theory narratives are able to effectively function as parcels of information. To better answer this question, this research will hone in on individual pieces of conspiracy theory narratives and analyze them on a narrative level using literary theorist Roland Barthes's five narratological codes.

Barthes's Five Codes

For the purposes of this analysis, Roland Barthes's five codes can be understood as follows:

Hermeneutic (HER): The various ways that key questions or enigmas are introduced and maintained throughout the story. A variety of devices are deployed in order to delay the resolution of enigmas creating anticipation and intrigue.

Proairetic (ACT): The logic of actions as they are governed by the laws of conventional action sequence. Cultural assumptions about how narrative progresses create the illusion of continuity in a sequence of events.

Semic (SEM): The characterization of a person or thing with certain motives or attributes. These adjectival attributes are referred to as "semes" and their repetition and constant use in culture reinforces their codification.

Symbolic (SYM): A structure of representations composed of binary oppositions (antithesis). The more clearly defined within the text they are, the more ideologically charged the representations. For example: inside/outside, rich/poor, good/evil.

Cultural (REF): References in the text to established knowledge outside of the text also known as gnomic code. Like the semic, the repetition of ideas reinforces their meaning in culture, however, cultural code operates on a broader scale. This code refers to things that 'everybody knows' or what we might call 'common sense'. It's important to note that while cultural code is able to capture a social truth, it is only that, and not objective reality. It is within this social truth of accepted cultural conventions that the text is allowed to unfold.

The sum of these codes can be broadly characterized as the set of tools used to create both a functional and effective narrative. At any point within a narrative, multiple, or even all codes may be in use at once, but, ultimately, each code relies on the cultural code. There can be no reference to the conventions of storytelling without an accepted cultural model to reference. From *Encoding/Decoding*:

Certain codes may, of course, be so widely distributed in a specific language community or culture, and be learned at so early an age, that they appear not to be constructed – the effect of an articulation between sign and referent – but to be 'naturally' given... The functioning of the codes on the decoding side will frequently assume the status of naturalized perceptions (Hall, 1973).

Here, we see Hall's description of communication in *Encoding/Decoding* and Barthes's narrative codes intertwine. Both the broad shape of discourse and the conventions by which we communicate in society are culturally determined and reinforced. Given an established environment of natural perceptions, it only makes sense that an encoder would use that dominant code to encode meaning so that the message can be most clearly

understood, or as Hall says, “‘have an effect’, influence, entertain, instruct, or persuade, with very complex perceptual, cognitive, emotional, ideological, or behavioral consequences.”

It is in this ability to “have an effect” that narrative, in this case, that of conspiracy theories, can use established cultural code to manipulate opinion. In the literature review to follow, a comprehensive analysis of an image example is provided in order to more clearly illustrate how Barthes’s narrative codes work. The next section, titled *The Strategies of Conspiracy Theory Narrative*, will illustrate further how the application of Barthes’s narratological codes can be categorized into different narrative strategies frequently seen in conspiracy theory narratives.

By understanding these two theoretical frameworks, it is possible to better conceptualize how cultural hegemony is perpetuated in society as well as the role conspiracy theory narratives play in discourse favoring hegemonic goals. *The Encoding/Decoding* model illustrates the broader flow of ideology in discourse. The use of existing cultural code on the encoding side duplicates and reinforces it on the decoding side. Thus, communication becomes a circuit of reproduction where the points of consumption and production more or less match. At the same time, the self-evident truth of the cultural code is used to form convincing narratives via Barthes’s narratological codes.

In a vacuum of novel ideas, Barthes and Hall’s theories come together to represent a system of unchanging information endlessly reproduced. In order to change there must be some motivation. Conspiracy theories are one manifestation for the motivation to manipulate discourse to a political or financial end. Often appearing to be outside of the organizations they seek to benefit, the conspiracy theorist injects misinformation, controversial opinions, and narratives that lead an audience to think, and therefore act, in a way that benefits those organizations, and, by proxy, the conspiracy theorist.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND DISCUSSION

A Brief Analysis

In order to illustrate the application of these theoretical works to cultural texts, here’s an example of an advertisement from The Wellness Company that uses themes of conspiracy theory in order to sell a “medical emergency kit”:



Figure 2. Advertisement for a medical emergency kit found on Rumble.com

This image was found as an ad on the Rumble website under a Russel Brand video entitled “*The Left Are Globalists Now!*” *George Galloway DESTROYS The Uniparty Establishment - #331* from his channel *Stay Free*. It’s a small image ad from The Wellness Company promoting what it calls a medical emergency kit along with some

images and text. It's a simple image but an effective tool of ideological transmission making it an overall efficiently coded example of a text.

Immediately, large text grabs the viewer's attention and multiple codes are simultaneously employed. Here is a narrative code-level analysis of this advertisement in the style of Roland Barthes's *S/Z*:

- 1) *No matter what THEY* (REF) an unspecific group of bad actors who are central to most conspiracy theory narratives. For different narratives this could connote globalists, the woke mob, jews, the illuminati, etc. (SYM) implication of good/evil dichotomy. 'They' exists as binary opposition to 'us' which is where the reader implicitly places themselves. (HER) equivocation of identity.
- 2) *are planning next...* (REF) Reference to the past calamities. (HER) What will they do next? (ACT) Scheme : 1 : Nefarious conspirators plotting to harm the average person.
- 3) (Background image) Corona virions (left) (REF) COVID-19. Depending on the narrative this connotes a hoax or manmade virus. Example of past plot. (HER) Potential answer to the previously posed "what will they do next?"
- 4) (Background image) Bill Gates (right) smiling. (REF) Villain of past conspiracy theories. (HER) The figurehead of 'them'. (SYM) Evil, power-hungry, wealthy, antithesis to the everyman, the other. (SEM) The smile communicates that the injury done by carrying out these plans brings 'them' joy and/or parasitic benefit. (ACT) Scheme : 2 : the powerful enemy makes their move.
- 5) (Background image) Green text, too blurry to make out, is projected across Bill Gates's eyes. (SEM) Mind control, automation. Illustration of the audience's helplessness. (SYM) lies/truth. Only someone whose thoughts are being controlled would trust what 'they' say. (REF) Narrative that the Covid vaccine was a tool for mind control.
- 6) *Be Prepared.* (Image of Medical Emergency Kit) (ACT) Scheme : 3 : The everyman's defense against the scheme is presented. (HER) Helplessness resolved.
- 7) *Includes Ivermectin* (REF) Parasite medication used in conspiracy theory circles as an alternative to vaccination. (SYM) lies/truth (REF) Distrust of medical establishment.
- 8) *The Wellness Company* (REF) The look and feel of a legitimate medical organization (in spite of previous anti-establishment sentiment) (SEM) Health, quality, reputability. (ACT) Scheme : 4 : The anti-"them" champion reveals themselves to oppose the scheme.

Despite containing barely more than a handful of words, this advertisement overflows with meaning. The ultimate goal of this image is to convince an audience to purchase a medical emergency kit, and the encoder (seller) depends on the decoder (buyer) operating with a cultural bias that will result in them being compelled to purchase the product.

Despite not being fully grounded in factual reality, this advertisement is an affirmation of conspiracy theory narratives. It operates within the logic of a pre-established fiction of conspiratorial thinking, and it also operates within the more universal logic of storytelling. The audience is presented with a problem, held in suspense, and then provided resolution. Along the way, there are villains who align themselves with evil and virtuous heroes who align themselves with the audience. Like other works of fiction, the conspiracy theory narrative is a text that resonates because of its references to reality, although its events do not, themselves, exist in reality.

It's also important to note here is the multiplicity of meanings possible in interpreting this ad, especially with the inclusion of the ambiguous 'they'. This choice allows the advertisement to resonate with a multitude of conspiracy narratives by equivocating pretending that these vague illusions are made in order to safely talk about a secret or dangerous topic. In reality, the ambiguity of "they" multiple different decoders to imagine conspirators that comport with their specific views. While this advertisement was initially found under a Russell Brand conspiracy theory video, on the Rumble platform it could also easily be attached to the opinions of Alex Jones, Tucker Carlson, Steven Crowder, or Joe Rogan.

In this case, Bill Gates is the conspiracy theory's explicit antagonist, and his position as an influential tech billionaire is also useful to an array of narratives. By simply seeing this advertisement, a viewer may recognize a multitude of different conspiracy theories that they already believe. For example: Gates planned and funded the COVID pandemic, Gates holds the patent for the COVID-19 virus and/or the vaccine, Gates committed genocide in Africa via vaccines as well as population control via sterilization, Gates funded tests drug and vaccine tests in Guatemala by intentionally infecting people with sexually transmitted diseases, and there are microchips in the COVID-19 vaccine that will aid Gates in a plot for mind control and world domination (Reuters, 2021).

The Strategies of Conspiracy Theory Narrative

The following section is the result of compiling the annotations of multiple examples of conspiracy theory narratives from a variety of media sources and identifying some of the most prominent strategies used. Examples are

taken from podcast episodes, internet videos, radio broadcasts, and social media posts. Although it is not an exhaustive list of strategies, it should be enough to provide a good illustration of what prominent features to look for when spotting conspiracy theory narratives. Each narrative strategy example will be analyzed to show which of Barthes's codes are most prominent in addition to a brief summary of how they are applied in conspiracy theory narratives. It's worth noting that, like the narratological codes themselves, multiple of these strategies are often used within a single narrative example. Afterwards, strategies to avoid falling for conspiracy theories are provided.

The Kernel of Truth (REF) (SYM)

Although the conspiracy theories this paper examines are all factually incorrect, it should again be noted that this is not always the case. A conspiracy simply refers to a group of people plotting (often in relative secret) to do something harmful. For example, the New York urban planning of Robert Moses resulted in infrastructure that perpetuated the disenfranchisement of a predominantly poor, Black population by disproportionately limiting their transportation options (Caro, 1974).

The major code at play in this strategy is the referential. New conspiracy theories reference the perceived validity of old ones in order to posture as true. However, on a smaller scale, a kernel of truth (an accurate piece of information recontextualized to support a narrative) is also able to operate within a narrative and imply the validity of its surrounding parts. In many ways, this strategy is the narrative gateway between its grounding in reality and the fiction of conspiracy theory narratives. Like any coherent story, the conspiracy theory narrative must reference reality enough to be understood, but those references can be distorted at the convenience of the narrator in order to better serve their interests.

This strategy also allows the complex and confusing events of the world to be reduced into a simple symbolic binary. The kernel is a signifier of truth, a cherry-picked cross section of a broader false narrative. Information is either aligned with it (true) or against it (false). In discourse about technical or complex topics, the audience has a limited ability to interact with anything other than what they can solidly grasp. A cherry-picked citation from a legitimate source is presented in a conspiracy theory context, and by accepting the kernel, an uncritical audience can be led to accept the narrator's conclusions. In less complex contexts, the kernel of truth can also serve as a justification of preexisting beliefs. Personal attacks can be successful by tapping into the audience's existing prejudice and providing an example of its perceived legitimacy, justifying (reproducing) a reaction of intolerance.

Ben Shapiro's February 2nd, 2024, episode of *The Ben Shapiro Show* titled *SHOCKER: Woke Kindergarten Fails* provides a good illustration of this strategy in action. The essential story is that a Bay Area school district invested in an anti-racism program called "Woke Kindergarten" which sought to address systemic inequalities faced by their students. In the wake of the program, test scores dropped making it easy for right-wing pundits to draw the conclusion that "woke ideology" was making the kids worse academically. In reality, the program was both mismanaged and poorly structured at an already underperforming school (Tucker, 2024). While details about the program's existence and ultimate failure are accurate, the conclusion that some ill-defined "wokeness" can be blamed for the failure remains to be proved. Regardless, the proximity of some truth and some falsehood can be used to group all the details into a single completely true or completely false story.

Emplotment (ACT)

In narrative, emplotment refers to the assembly of a series of events into a coherent story. This strategy is the structural development of a story by selecting how to organize and juxtapose its narrative pieces. This strategy often relies on the "kernel of truth" but rather than focusing on how conspiracy theories relate to reality, analyzing via emplotment allows us to more closely investigate how conspiracy theory narratives create their own separate realities.

Consider this social media post made by Russell Brand on May 9th, 2024, on the X platform:



Figure 3. X post made by Russell Brand promoting vaccine conspiracy theories

Although the post makes no direct reference to time, the grouping of these three narrative pieces (AstraZeneca, Pfizer, CNN Anchor) effectively implies their relation. The first two pieces are meant to illustrate that vaccination is, by design, dangerous to its recipients. The third piece illustrates action being taken in accordance with the first two pieces. The reporter symbolizes someone with potential inside information on the topic, which Brand is able to use to imply a confirmation of his own speculation. His final sentence, “Where’s your Conspiracy Theory Now?!” implies his conclusion: the malicious actions of AstraZeneca and Pfizer drove someone who knew the truth to take alternative medication which means that vaccine conspiracy theories are more legitimate than their detractors say.

As mentioned before, conspiracy theories are not all necessarily false. However, looking at the relationship narrative pieces have to one another can allow us to better differentiate between true and false narratives. Research suggests that, because of how they tend to be constructed, the weak interconnection of multiple domains in an emerging conspiracy theory is a hallmark of misinformation (Tangherlini et al.). Generally, conspiracy theory narratives are constructed with a conclusion in mind and simply draw from any piece of information convenient to support that conclusion. As a result, sources tend to be disparate, unrelated, and lazy (as illustrated by Brand’s post).

The Demonic Enemy / The Virtuous Protagonist (SYM) (SEM)

In the same way that the first strategy sets up a false binary of factual credibility, this strategy sets up a false binary of character credibility. The marriage of these two binaries is especially effective. In addition to true and false ideas, there must be people who believe them. The proclaimed believers of a narrative’s truths and falsehoods become living embodiments of the opposed ideologies.

An example of this strategy comes from *The Jordan B. Peterson Podcast* episode 430: *The Assault on Faith, Family, & Science* recorded with guest Dr. Phil McGraw. During the episode, McGraw says the following about student protesters in the United States:

I took a strong position on Hamas and Israel. I was sickened to see students on campuses around the United States, elite campuses, out rallying for what I consider to be assassins and murderers. It’s like we’re not teaching critical thinking here...I’m hearing rhetoric that I haven’t heard since I had read translated transcripts of the Hitler Youth movement.

Immediately, McGraw frames the conflict in question as having only two binarily opposed sides: Hamas and Israel. Amidst a steep rise in recent pro-Palestinian protests on college campuses (Ho & Doyle, 2024), McGraw conflates the Palestinian citizenry with a terrorist organization and thus aligns protesting students with violence. Next, he brings Nazism into the conversation by comparing pro-Palestinian protesters to the Hitler Youth, an alignment which he frames as an educational failure. The binary is now complete and tailored to be most useful to its hegemonic narrative: on one side there are Nazi students aligned with Hamas, on the other there are rational critical thinkers. McGraw recounts this anecdote without giving any verifiable details. He offers no specifics on

protest events, locations, or examples of Hitler Youth-esque rhetoric, simply allowing the possibility of truth to stand in for its verification.

Conspiracy theories work best when the particulars of a narrative are not fact checked. The strength of this strategy is that by focusing on the character of people, focus is taken off the importance of fact-checking. In cases where the ‘enemy’ is sufficiently evil, the narrative may even imply that the time spent deliberating could allow further harm to be done in the interim thus necessitating immediate and unquestioning decision or action.

The Coming Calamity (ACT) (HER)

Urgency and danger are key elements in any conspiracy theory. The threat of consequences, real or invented, taps into the audience's fear of some form of harm coming to themselves or people they care about, and the suggestion of the threat's imminence spurs the audience to take immediate action in defense (recall the advertisement example). This strategy, in essence, is the narrator establishing narrative conflict in their story. Here's an example from the March 18th, 2024, episode of *The Alex Jones Show*:

The British government with their top universities and government institutions has put out a report called Absolute Zero where they don't just want to have net zero increase in carbon or lower it to a previous state, they want to get rid of all carbon, which humans are. And I was going over this report today and it's so big, literally and figuratively, that I want to make a big deal about this, but I also don't care if other people, like Tucker Carlson or anybody else, goes and does it first, I just want to get this information out. It's so nightmarish that it's hard to describe what they're doing other than total feudalism, the end of civilization as we know it.

Jones begins by referencing the kernel of truth that anchors his narrative to reality. Absolute Zero is and has been for some time been a goal in discussions about carbon emissions. Jones's is likely referencing the 2019 release from UK Fires entitled *Absolute Zero: Delivering the UK's Climate Change Commitment with Incremental Changes to Today's Technologies (UKFires, 2019)* which asserts that, because clean energy resources won't be able to produce at scale without further development in the near future, society should slowly reduce its reliance on carbon emitting activities while making an effort to limit those activities in the first place. In addition to the referential code Jones employs by bringing up Absolute Zero, there are several other codes at play here. Most prominently is the interplay of the questions raised by the ambiguity of the statement (HER) and the logical narrative sequence of present and future events (ACT).

Jones could be exaggerating the direness of his conclusion for effect, or he could be literally suggesting that his globalist enemies are trying to erase the element carbon from the planet. In the world of InfoWars, either is a valid reading. In this way, the statement itself equivocates. An audience member on the more outlandish fringe can believe Jones's words verbatim, while another audience member can take a more negotiated approach to the words and reason that he is at least spiritually correct or speaking metaphorically. The narrative, as a result, is able to appeal to a wider audience. Often, the absurdity of Jones's narratives are what bring people into his sphere of influence in the first place. No matter the type of belief, believing in Jones's conspiracy theories leads to the same thought and action that his rhetoric implies.

The Natural Order of the World (SYM) (REF)

This strategy, while drawing most overtly from referential code, also relies heavily on narrative manipulation via other rhetorical devices. This strategy is Hall's entire model of communication in a neat parcel. By virtue of certain ideas existing as ‘naturally given’ they assert themselves as true and all future references reaffirm their validity by virtue of their persistence. As illustrated by the “kernel of truth” strategy, untrue conclusions can be drawn from factual information, but the “natural order of the world” strategy extends even further into untrue conclusions drawn from societal truths as well. Where the first is rooted in some, at least partially, verifiable truth, this strategy relies on ideas so embedded that they verify themselves as soon as they are referenced. This strategy relies on vibes and aphorisms unquestioningly reproduced and upheld.

In the same way that all of Barthes's codes are ultimately reliant on the referential in order to have meaning, this strategy is foundational to all of the others and fundamental to the practice of peddling conspiracy theories. In addition to being extremely referential, this strategy relies heavily on the symbolic code by placing the things it references into strictly defined and oppositional camps. There are two steps in this strategy. The first is to recall a hegemonically accepted premise. For example, people who work hard in society are rewarded. The second step is to draw a conclusion on a contemporary issue based on this premise. For example, if people are rewarded for their effort, then poor people must be poor because they are lazy. This strategy is also an effective way to frame the discourse in an advantageous way. Shifting the focus to a binary model of lazy and hardworking people implicitly ignores factors like race, class, gender, disability, or any other relevant factors.

The following example is from a video by Dennis Prager hosted on PragerU.com posted on April 4th, 2024. It's from the 335th episode of his Fireside Chat series and is titled *Gender and the War on Common Sense*. In this episode, he has the following to say about gender identity:

It means that truth doesn't exist any longer. If whether you're a man or a woman is no longer a truth proposition, but an opinion, truth doesn't exist. It's as Oprah Winfrey has often said: It's my truth or your truth. But of course, your truth and my truth often means no truth, right? That's the same as my opinion.

The cultural truth being referenced here is the idea that gender identity is a rigid binary with complete intolerance for anything that isn't cis identity. It's a faulty and bigoted premise, but it's one that the PragerU audience is primed to accept as a natural fact. In order to tie this to conspiracy, Dennis concludes that this is yet another piece of the liberal plot to undermine the truth and create a subservient population. Again, this strategy simply reinforces an already held belief by presenting it to an audience over and over again until it seems true; it's propagandistic junk food. A common way to bolster the credibility of narratives using this strategy is to make authoritative appeals that mask the narrative's inherent flaws.

The invocation of scientific authority is a particularly strong tool of misinformation. Of all the rhetorical approaches, imitating or misrepresenting academic rigor is one of the most difficult, but with its inherent legitimacy comes so much power to influence. For example, despite being long disproven, elements of race pseudoscience and phrenology can still be observed in modern discourse (Chatters et al., 2022). Similarly, ideas from the thoroughly disproven Andrew Wakefield study used to create a causal link between vaccines and autism can also still be seen in current discourse (Motta & Stecula, 2021). Scientific misinformation has a unique strength in both establishing and defending axiomatic truth at once, and this ability provides a powerful inroad for conspiratorial thinking.

Strategies For Not Being Tricked

As has been demonstrated, conspiracy theory narratives have the capability to be highly persuasive vehicles for misinformation. Not only can they be rhetorically convincing, but they are also specifically crafted to resonate with the views of disparate audiences, making it nearly impossible to avoid encountering them. So, how can a person avoid falling for them?

One proposed strategy is to increase the audience's attention to source accuracy by reminding them that not everything they encounter is strictly true. A 2021 study indicated that simply priming test subjects to think about accuracy resulted in a reduction in false headlines shared by the subjects and no significant decrease in shared true headlines (Pennycook et al., 2021). It's essential that people slow down and critically digest information that they encounter. As an audience member, remember that not everything you see is true, and ask yourself, "Why would someone want me to believe this? How can they benefit from belief in this narrative? Who could get hurt by belief in this narrative?"

Another study highlighted the fact that belief in misinformation is heavily predicated on the audience members inability to self-verify (Ecker et al., 2022). Another important factor in the ability to identify conspiracy theory misinformation is economic inequality (Jetten et al., 2022). Of course, no one has enough time to do rigorous research into every claim they hear. The high and constant volume of conspiracy theory narratives is one of its greatest strengths. Misinformation is not any one person's problem, it's society's problem. We should approach fighting back against it as a collaborative effort. Some people are better equipped to investigate different facets of conspiracy theories. Identify and support reputable sources and engage in open, honest dialogue with other people who may hold opinions different to your own. Remember that we are all human beings who want to live our best lives.

Hopefully, the research in this paper, and future ones like it, can serve as remedies to conspiracy theory narratives. Rather than relying on personal fact checking in a world where misinformation is rampant, a reliable shorthand for spotting conspiracy theories could help people more quickly reject misinformation and make more informed decisions without having to waste too much time engaging with them.

CONCLUSION

While theoretical frameworks can be useful tools for studying the complexities of discourse, their texts are often not very accessible to a general audience. Hopefully, by explaining Hall's communication model and Barthes's narrative codes, these concepts were made more accessible and allowed the reader to more meaningfully engage with examples of conspiracy theory narratives.

Especially in our modern era of instantaneous and large-scale media, conspiracy theories are a difficult, although not impossible to parse part of everyday discourse. Everyone is vulnerable to faulty logic in one way or another, and with such a variety of strategies at the disposal of conspiracy theorists, it's possible for anyone to fall for misinformation given the right circumstances.

Of course, conspiracy theory narratives are not without their flaws and conventions, and, by deconstructing and analyzing them, those flaws become more evident and categorizable. Additionally, deconstruction can allow us to more clearly trace the, often hegemonic, interests that these narratives derive from. By getting a clearer view of what conspiracy theory narratives are and how they function, as well as simply being aware of their presence, people should be able to more easily identify and dismiss them as the misinformation that they are.

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