

International Conference
ENGAGING WITH CONSPIRACY
THEORIES, FOSTERING DEMOCRACY:
DYNAMICS, DRIVERS AND DEFENCES

The Book of Abstracts



TaCT-FoRSED

Charles University, Faculty of Arts

Prague, Czechia

April 9 – 10, 2026

Funding statement

This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon Europe research and innovation programme under grant agreement 101178926.

CONFERENCE SCIENTIFIC COMMITTEE

Stefan Christoph (University of Passau, Germany)
Hannes Birnkammerer (University of Passau, Germany)
Patrick Urlbauer (University of Passau, Germany)
Oliver Hidalgo (University of Passau, Germany)
Carol Galais (University of Barcelona, Spain)
Petr Janeček (Charles University, Czechia)
Kristína Šefčíková (Prague Security Studies Institute, Czechia)
Leonardo Schiocchet (Charles University, Czechia)

CONFERENCE ORGANISING COMMITTEE

Petr Janeček (Charles University, Czechia)
Leonardo Schiocchet (Charles University, Czechia)
Marek Veverka (Charles University, Czechia)
Jan Švehla (Charles University, Czechia)
Nela Náplavová (Charles University, Czechia)

CONFERENCE STUDENT VOLUNTEERS

Emma Halászová (Charles University, Czechia)
Kateřina Kotová (Charles University, Czechia)
Kristýna Veverková (Charles University, Czechia)
Johana Císařová (Charles University, Czechia)
Ema Sodomková (Charles University, Czechia)
Nikola Ottová (Charles University, Czechia)
Nela Benlatreche (Charles University, Czechia)
Nikola Šroubková (Charles University, Czechia)

KEYNOTE SPEAKERS

Andreas Önnfors (Linnaeus University, Sweden)
Eva Hausteiner (University of Bonn, Germany)
Karen Douglas (University of Kent, United Kingdom)
Michael Butter (University of Tübingen, Germany)

PRESENTERS

Aaron Bielejewski (Center for Criminological Research Saxony, Germany)
Abraham Maurer (Charles University, Prague, Czechia)
Aileen Krumma (Center for Criminological Research Saxony, Germany)
Alejandro Fernández-Roldán (Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Spain)
Alexander Yendell (Leipzig University, Germany)
Andrei Prudnikov (University of Lisbon, Portugal)
Andrzej W. Nowak (Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań, Poland)
Ann-Katrin Voit (FOM University for Applied Science, Essen, Germany)
Aphrodite-Lidia Nounanaki (Academy of Athens, Greece)
Carol Galais (Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Spain)
Daniel Jolley (University of Nottingham / Glasgow Caledonian University, UK)
Eleanor Farmer (University of Nottingham, University of Lincoln, UK)
Elisabeth Faria Lopes (University of Cologne, Germany)
Emma van der Tak (University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands)

Falk Rößler (Friedrich Schiller University Jena, Germany)
Fatima Ezzahra Abid (Mohammed V University, Rabat, Morocco)
Franka Metzner (University of Cologne, Germany)
Georg Gläser (University of Cologne, Germany)
Gonzalo Soltero (National Autonomous University of Mexico, Mexico)
Gudrun Hentges (University of Cologne, Germany)
Christina Conolly (University of Nottingham, University of Lincoln, UK)
Iwan Dinnick (University of Nottingham, Glasgow Caledonian University, UK)
Jan Eufinger (Fern Universität in Hagen, Germany)
Jaron Harambam (University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands)
Lara de Poorter (University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands)
Lee Curley (University of Nottingham, Glasgow Caledonian University, UK)
Marc Guinjoan (Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Spain)
Mariëlle Hesselink (Heidelberg University, Germany)
Mariëlle Hesselink (Heidelberg University, Germany)
Marta Antonova (University of Bern, Switzerland)
Martha Seeney (University of Nottingham, University of Lincoln, UK)
Matthew King-Parker (University of Nottingham, University of Lincoln, UK)
Matyáš Lednický (Charles University, Prague, Czechia)
Michelle C. Schweitzer (Leipzig University, Germany)
Natalija Tanić (University of Ljubljana, Slovenia)
Nik Turšič (University of Ljubljana, Slovenia)

Oliver Hidalgo (Universität Passau, Germany)
Petr Janeček (Charles University, Prague, Czechia)
Radek Chlup (Charles University, Prague, Czechia)
Robin Forstehäusler (Carl von Ossietzky University Oldenburg, Germany)
Shaban Darakchi (Slovak/Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, Slovakia – Bulgaria)
Stefan Christoph (Universität Passau, Germany)
Thomas Land (Max Weber Kolleg Erfurt, Germany)
Tomáš Kolomazník (Metropolitan University Prague, Czechia)
Verena Schneider (Leipzig University, Germany)

Content

ADID Fatima Ezzahra	7	GALAIS Carol, Marc Guinjoan and Alejandro Fernández.....	12
Decolonizing Epistemic Injustice: Conspiracy Theories, Vernacular Geopolitics, and the Weaponization of the North/South Divide in the Gaza War	7	Manipulating Conspiracy Traits: Identifying the Most Democratically Harmful Components of Conspiratorial Narratives	12
ANTONOVA Marta.....	7	GLÄSER Georg and Gudrun Hentges.....	13
Conspiracy Regimes: A Comparative Study of the Correlates of Conspiracy Beliefs Across Europe	7	Conspiracy Theories in Immediate Social Environments – Effects on Partnership, Parenthood and Friendship	13
BIELEJEWSKI Aaron	8	HARAMBAM Jaron	13
Conspiratorial Reasoning and Narrative Closure in Everyday Explanations of Crime.....	8	Dealing With Distrust: How the Mainstream Media Respond to Conspiracy Theories.....	13
DARAKCHI Shaban.....	9	HATZIKIDI Katerina	Chyba! Záložka není definována.
Motivation, positionality, and recommendations in the accounts of truth-defenders in Bulgaria	9	Who (still) laughs at conspiracy theorists? .. Chyba! Záložka není definována.	
DINNICK Iwan, Daniel Jolley, Lee Curley	10	HESSELINK Mariëlle.....	14
The Democratic Cost of Conspiracy Thinking: Evidence for a Conspiracy-Juror Bias	10	The Euphemisms, Experts, and Half-Truths Legitimizing Satanic Ritual Abuse Conspiracy Theories	14
EUFINGER Jan	11	HIDALGO Oliver and Stefan Christoph.....	15
Criteria for Pseudo-Science and Conspiracy Theories within the Social Sciences	11	Democracy Between Resilience and Self-efficacy – Conspiracist Ideologies as a Challenge to Political Education	15
FORSTENHÄUSLER Robin	11	CHLUP Radek	15
Intersectional social theory and conspiracy thinking	11	Conspiracy Narratives as a Type of Social Myth	15

CHRISTOPH Stefan	16
First Results from Comparative Analysis: Factors Inhibiting and Promoting Conspiracism Across Europe	16
JANEČEK Petr	17
From Rumour to Vernacular Mythology: Comparison of Typology of Conspiracy Theories by Ethnology and Political Science	17
JANOVIČ Lukáš.....	17
An echo-chamber of conspiracies: how users of Slovak Telegram communicated Covid-19 and Russo-Ukraine war	17
JOLLEY Daniel ¹ , Matthew King-Parker ² , Christina Conolly ¹ , Eleanor Farmer ¹ , and Martha Seeney ¹	18
Can Contact Improve Police–Citizen Relations? Effects on Police Conspiracy Beliefs and Violence Toward the Police	18
KOLOMAZNÍK Tomáš	19
Instruments available to democratic states for combating disinformation in the public sphere in the age of artificial intelligence	19
KRUMMA Aileen	20
Police Distrust: The Impact of Conspiracy Mentality and Belief in a Dangerous World	20
LAND Thomas	21

The discourse on abolitionism as an example for pseudo- science	21
MAURER Abraham and Matyáš Lednický	21
“Do I Believe?”: Three Aspects of “Belief” in Conspiracy Theories	21
NOUNANAKI Aphrodite-Lidia	22
Ichor (IXQP): Myth, Blood, and the Making of Conspiratorial Nationalistic theories in Contemporary Greece.....	22
NOWAK Andrzej W.....	23
Fragile semi-peripheries: From Suitcase Science to Suitcase Conspiracy Theories.....	23
POORTER Lara de	24
Climate controversy and the politics of meaning: The cultural work behind climate counternarratives.....	24
PRUDNIKOV Andrei.....	24
Demography-Based Conspiracy Narratives and the Politics of Distrust in Authoritarian Russia	24
RÖBLER Falk	25
Imaginamics: Processes and Dynamics of Social Imagining	25
SCHNEIDER Verena	26
Conspirituality – Conspireligion? Entanglements Between Conspiracy Belief, Religiosity, and Esotericism	26

SOLTERO Gonzalo	27
Cultural narratives, identity and power. Conspiracy theories and gender.....	27
TAK Emma van der	28
(Un)Intended Effects: The Consequences of Dutch Disinformation Interventions	28
TURŠIČ Nik	28
From Distrust to Community: Legitimacy, Skepticism, and Ritual in Conspiracy Theory Networks	28
VOIT Ann-Katrin	29
From Fake News to Conspiratorial Narratives: Digital Disinformation, Democratic Resilience, and the Politics of Distrust	29
YENDELL Alexander and Michelle C. Schweitzer	30
Childhood adversity, COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs and the authoritarian syndrome: Modelling pathways to radicalization and right-wing extremism in Austria	30

ADID Fatima Ezzahra

Mohammed V University, Rabat, Morocco

Decolonizing Epistemic Injustice: Conspiracy Theories, Vernacular Geopolitics, and the Weaponization of the North/South Divide in the Gaza War

Conspiracy theories function as key discursive instruments in global political conflicts, yet their specific role in articulating and exacerbating the structural antagonisms between the Global North and South demands further scholarly attention. This paper addresses this gap by analyzing the **narrative construction of Israeli self-defense claims** during the 2023 Gaza War as a form of **vernacular geopolitical discourse** and modern political folklore. Prevailing analyses often focus on domestic polarization, neglecting the transnational mechanisms through which such **conspiracist narratives reconfigure historical grievances into Manichean geopolitical scripts**. Employing a **critical discourse analysis** grounded in postcolonial theory and cultural studies, this research probes: What are the distinct **narrative and epistemological mechanisms** of North/South-oriented conspiracy theories, and how do they undermine democratic resilience and international legal accountability? The study interrogates a transnational corpus of

digital and political texts that frame the conflict either as a necessary defense of Western modernity or as the execution of a deliberate settler-colonial project. The analysis elucidates how these **conspiratorial frameworks** systematically weaponize the North/South divide. They position democratic institutions and international law as mere façades for hidden power, thereby **eroding political self-efficacy** and foreclosing the possibility of legitimate dissent or ethical witness. This process represents the **folklorization of genocide**, a cultural performance that manufactures consent for extreme violence by converting critical inquiry into alleged proof of a conspiracy. The study concludes that fostering democratic resilience against such transnational conspiracism necessitates a **decolonial pedagogical intervention**. This intervention must address the historical roots of these adversarial narratives to disarm the cultural logic that justifies violence as a security imperative.

ANTONOVA Marta

University of Berne, Switzerland

Conspiracy Regimes: A Comparative Study of the Correlates of Conspiracy Beliefs Across Europe

A considerable body of research has examined the correlates and antecedents of conspiracy beliefs in the European context. Yet most

of it is both implicitly and explicitly dominated by a Western-European perspective – either through sample selection or in assuming universally valid underlying mechanisms upon which aggregate European conclusions can be drawn. Yet such assumptions disregarding regional contextual differences might not stand to empirical scrutiny. While distrust in the media can signal a conspiracy prone mindset in consolidated democracies with free media, it is an unreliable indicator in countries struggling with politically dependent outlets and narrative distortions. Even standard definitions of a conspiracy theory become less informative where state capture and covert collusion between politicians and oligarchic elites are common. To reevaluate the prevalent assumption of a common set of conspiracy belief predictors across the varying European sociopolitical contexts, I employ data from the European Social Survey round 10, conducted in 2020 and from the Special Eurobarometer 95.2, conducted in 2021. The data allows for both the examination of beliefs in a conspiracy involving general “hidden elites” and for a specific focus on scientists – a controversial, yet more politically detached, subgroup. The preliminary results point to systematic regional differences in the relationship between conspiracy beliefs and their most commonly assumed predictors. Disentangling this heterogeneity not only qualifies the assumptions of previous research but also provides

valuable nuance to both theoretical and practical considerations of the ever-growing issue of conspiracy theory proliferation and its harmful effects for democratic processes in Europe and beyond.

BIELEJEWSKI Aaron

Center for Criminological Research Saxony

Conspiratorial Reasoning and Narrative Closure in Everyday Explanations of Crime

Public talk about crime frequently reflects attempts to make sense of uncertainty, opacity, and perceived arbitrariness in social control. While scholarship on conspiracy theories often focuses on extreme belief systems or digitally mediated misinformation, this paper examines *conspiratorial reasoning* as a mundane narrative mechanism that appears in everyday explanations of crime and institutional practice. Drawing on ongoing qualitative fieldwork and semi-structured interviews conducted in the context of a broader research project on perceptions of crime and public / neighborhood discourse on crime in Germany, the analysis focuses on how participants selectively attribute intentionality to abstract institutions, compress distributed agency into singular actors (“they want it like this”), and resolve complex structural dynamics through simplified

causal closure. Such narrative strategies do not necessarily constitute fully fleshed-out conspiracy theories; rather, they function as *completion devices* that restore coherence, moral order, and a sense of intelligibility in contexts characterized by bureaucratic opacity and institutional distrust. Yet they often lay the groundwork for engaging with more systematized, worldview-defining and anti-institutional forms of conspiratorial belief.

By attending to the micro-mechanics of attribution, plausibility, and narrative stopping-points, this paper situates conspiratorial reasoning within broader sociological processes of risk perception, informal theorizing, and vernacular knowledge production. The findings suggest that conspiratorial inference may emerge less from exposure to misinformation than from everyday interpretive efforts to navigate disorienting institutional environments. This approach highlights the value of narrative analysis for understanding how conspiracy-adjacent explanations circulate without necessarily crystallizing into formalized conspiracy beliefs.

DARAKCHI Shaban

Slovak Academy of Sciences/Bulgarian Academy of Sciences

Motivation, positionality, and recommendations in the accounts of truth-defenders in Bulgaria

In recent years conspiracy theories have gained unprecedented visibility and popularity on a global level circulating on social media platforms and eroding trust in public institutions, expertise and democracy. While there is a solid body of scholarship that has investigated the development and the role of conspiracy beliefs and narratives, less attention has been paid to those social actors that counteract such narratives – the so-called “truth defenders.” This paper aims to contribute to this expanding body of scholarship by investigating how Bulgarian truth defenders articulate their motivation to counteract conspiracy theories, position themselves in the contested field of information and conceptualize recommendations in response to conspiracy theories.

Based on in-depth interviews the study identifies four main interrelated dimensions. First, the analysis pays attention to the socio-demographic profile of the truth defenders within the Bulgarian context. Second, it examines the motivations outlining personal, civic, and moral reasons that lead truth defenders to counteract conspiracy

narratives. Third, it investigates how truth defenders negotiate their authority and credibility within a contested information environment. Fourth, it explores the recommendations truth defenders suggest to counteract conspiracy narratives ranging from educational reforms and public policies to media literacy and civic dialogue. By situating these perspectives within the global contestation over truth and authority the study illuminates the lived experiences and negotiations of truth defenders as crucial and yet underexplored aspects of the counteractions against conspiracy narratives and campaigns.

DINNICK Iwan, Daniel Jolley, Lee Curley

University of Nottingham, University of Nottingham, Glasgow
Caledonian University

The Democratic Cost of Conspiracy Thinking: Evidence for a Conspiracy-Juror Bias

This research examined a previously overlooked consequence of conspiracy beliefs: their potential to bias juror decision-making – a cornerstone of a healthy democracy. We propose a *conspiracy-juror bias*, such that individuals with stronger conspiracy mentality are more likely to render guilty verdicts. Three studies, using varied mock-juror designs, systematically tested this bias. In correlational Study 1 ($n = 495$), mock jurors higher in conspiracy mentality were

more likely to return guilty verdicts in a murder case, through perceptions of evidence strength and anomie. In experimental Study 2 ($n = 558$), we manipulated the crime motive to test whether conspiracy mentality reduces its effect on guilty verdicts. We did not find moderation; however, we replicated the conspiracy-juror bias - via evidence strength and anomie - but only when no motive was provided, indicating crime motive might be a key to the conspiracy-juror bias. In Study 3 ($n = 425$), we experimentally increased conspiracy mentality to test its causal effect on guilty verdicts in a murder case. Although it did not directly affect verdict decisions, higher conspiracy mentality increased perceived evidence strength, which in turn predicted a greater likelihood of a guilty verdict. An internal meta-analysis ($n = 1, 477$) further showed robust associations between conspiracy mentality and guilty verdicts, perceived evidence strength, and anomie. Together, these findings provide the first evidence that conspiracy beliefs can bias judicial decision-making, revealing an overlooked harm: they threaten society's resilience by undermining every citizen's right to a fair trial.

EUFINGER Jan

University of Hagen, Germany

Criteria for Pseudo-Science and Conspiracy Theories within the Social Sciences

Thomas Heichele (2022) offers criteria to identify pseudo-science and conspiracy theories. However, in order for these criteria to be applicable to theories within the scope of the social sciences and humanities, they must be modified for two reasons. Firstly, his strong criteria regarding the ability to predict and provide a comprehensive description of phenomena can never be met by the social sciences (MacIntyre, 2007). Second, his criteria for conspiracy theories state that one group is believed to structure the world in a way that is advantageous to them and disadvantageous to another group. This would mean that all critique of power and ruling authority could be classified as a conspiracy theory. Therefore, two additional criteria need to be introduced. The first is that the exact mechanism by which these advantages and disadvantages are produced is not explained; the second is that it is not possible for individuals to transcend groups. For example, Marx's theory that the bourgeoisie exploits the proletariat via the production of surplus value can be discussed within academia, while the theory that the 'Jewish race' exploits the 'Aryan

race' cannot. While Heichele suggests that pseudo-science stands outside academia, we also need to discuss whether pseudo-science can insert itself into the social sciences and arts and pose as real science.

FORSTENHÄUSLER Robin

Carl von Ossietzky University Oldenburg

Intersectional social theory and conspiracy thinking

In certain humanities and social science contexts, as well as in activist circles, the idea of intersectionally interwoven systems of oppression (race, class, gender, and, sometimes, sexuality) has replaced the paradigm of Marxist social theory. Instead of a capitalist totality, society is conceived as a multitude of mutually interwoven subsystems. Although anti-Semitic elements can be found in the reception of both Marxist and intersectional social theory, I argue that the theories have different susceptibilities to conspiracy-theoretical appropriation. The example of the leading anti-Zionist ideologues of the Soviet Union, the so-called Zionologists, shows that their anti-Semitic propaganda (which was largely based on conspiracy theories such as the Protocols of the Elders of Zion that were integrated into a Marxist-Leninist framework) was contestable in the USSR political discourse precisely because it represented a perversion of Marxist

theory that could be criticized from within. In contrast, intersectional social theory has an open flank for anti-Semitism, among other reasons because it misconceptualizes the relationship between structure and empirical appearance outlined by Thomas Land and is motivated in its premises by activist imperatives that systematically distort the social-ontological significance of capitalist societalization.

GALAIS Carol, Marc Guinjoan and Alejandro Fernández

University of Barcelona

Manipulating Conspiracy Traits: Identifying the Most Democratically Harmful Components of Conspiratorial Narratives

Conspiracy theories pose well-documented risks to democratic life, yet we still know little about *which specific narrative components* make them persuasive, socially disruptive, and democratically corrosive. Existing experiments typically compare exposure to a conspiratorial message versus a neutral one, treating conspiracism as a monolithic category. This obscures the mechanisms through which distinct rhetorical features—such as secrecy, elite control, victimhood, epistemic awakening, or emotional framing—shape belief, sharing behaviour, and democratic orientations. This

study proposes a novel experimental design that isolates and manipulates five core traits of conspiratorial discourse while holding the baseline conspiratorial “grammar” constant. Within the framework of the TaCT-FoRSED project, participants across several countries are randomly assigned to one of six conditions: a placebo, a baseline conspiracy narrative, or treatments selectively emphasizing secrecy, elite control, collective victimhood, epistemic awakening, or affective mobilisation. We then assess four outcomes: perceived credibility, emotional activation, willingness to share, and satisfaction with democracy.

This design allows us to identify which narrative elements most strongly heighten conspiratorial belief and intention to disseminate the message, and which most directly erode democratic satisfaction and endorsement of democratic principles. We expect that elite control and secrecy will particularly undermine democratic legitimacy, while victimhood and emotional anger cues will amplify sharing behaviour and conspiratorial predispositions. By offering a granular, component-level understanding of conspiracist persuasion, the study provides evidence to inform targeted pre-bunking, media literacy interventions, and platform moderation strategies. Ultimately, it contributes to the

broader goal of strengthening democratic resilience by pinpointing the rhetorical features of conspiracism that are most harmful.

GLÄSER Georg and Gudrun Hentges

University of Cologne

Conspiracy Theories in Immediate Social Environments – Effects on Partnership, Parenthood and Friendship

Systematic research into the effects of conspiracy theories on interpersonal relationships and immediate social environments is still pending. Even though there is a massive potential for negative effects on mental health, child welfare, and social cohesion. The research project “RaisoN – Radicalization Processes through Conspiracy Ideologies” (funded by the German Federal Ministry of Research, Technology and Space) investigates the effects of conspiracy theories on the immediate social environments such as families, friendships and workplaces. In addition to researching the manifestation of conspiracy theories, the project focuses on reactions and coping strategies of those affected as well as measures to combat conspiracy theories through education and counseling. The project further develops materials for educational and counseling practice and aims to contribute policy recommendations. In our contribution to the conference we will first present our project design and mixed method

methodology. Second, we will present and discuss our results. Building on the conference theme, we will focus on the appearance of conspiracy theories in immediate social environments. How do those affected by the radicalization of their partners, parents, friends or colleagues perceive conspiracy theories and radicalization processes in their social relations? How are they affected? Which facets and motives occur most significantly? How present is antisemitism with its structural similarities to conspiracy thinking in our data? Are there links to other ideologies of inequality such as racism, antifeminism, sexism etc.? Further, we are looking forward to discuss counter measures to foster democracy via education and counselling.

HARAMBAM Jaron

University of Amsterdam

Dealing With Distrust: How the Mainstream Media Respond to Conspiracy Theories

Many European citizens no longer trust their own societal institutions to work for the public good, but imagine those to be governed by a shadowy cabal with nefarious motives. One particularly dominant stream of conspiracy theories refers to the so-called “mainstream media”. Following that logic, media organizations do not (aim to)

cover world events in sincere ways, but are seen as instruments of the powerful to manipulate the masses into obedience.

While there is an increasing amount of scholarship on (such) conspiracy theories, there is little academic knowledge on how public institutions such as the media deal with rising levels of conspiratorial distrust. As if they have no agency when their existence is challenged, nor any influence on how conspiracy theories develop. This research gap is all the more surprising given the central democratic role of the media to inform public debates truthfully.

In this article, I qualitatively study how media organizations respond to the distrust embodied in conspiracy theories. To do so, I analyse a collection of media contents (43 newspaper articles and 13 TV-shows) about conspiracy theories that got published in the last five years in the Netherlands. The analysis reveals four ideal-typical reactions: Ignore, Debunk, Explain and Engage. I show how these reactions empirically look like, and what (unintended) consequences they have. Based on these, I conclude with normative recommendations about what the media should do in an era where public knowledge is widely contested.

HESSELINK Mariëlle

Heidelberg University

The Euphemisms, Experts, and Half-Truths Legitimizing Satanic Ritual Abuse Conspiracy Theories

Satanic Ritual Abuse (SRA) refers to a conspiracy theory infamous for its entanglements with psychotherapy and law enforcement during the 1980s “Satanic Panic,” and, more recently, for its hold on prominent conspiracist movements like QAnon. Although the initial period during which SRA emerged is now deemed a casebook moral panic, this purported form of abuse is still considered to be a real phenomenon in contemporary niches of psychiatry and psychotherapy, victim organizations, and scholarship—albeit under alternative names such as “ritual abuse” and “organized abuse.” Satanic Ritual Abuse therefore takes shape both as “outlandish” Pizzagate and QAnon narratives within contemporary conspiracism, and, in the guise of its euphemisms, as a purportedly genuine category of abuse that is legitimated through therapeutic and other professional contexts. Adding to the nebulous character of SRA is the ubiquity of media reports on cases of real “Satanic” or “ritual” abuse perpetrated by organized groups like 764 in a process termed ostension by folklorists. The realities of such extreme child abuse are strategically

integrated with conspiracist fictions about evil and omnipresent pedophilic cults to create confused so-called “half-truths.” This paper examines how the SRA conspiracy theory continues to enjoy legitimation beyond the Satanic Panic through the strategic utilization by professional actors of this quagmire of fact, fantasy, and ambiguous terminology.

HIDALGO Oliver and Stefan Christoph

University of Passau

Democracy Between Resilience and Self-efficacy – Conspiracist Ideologies as a Challenge to Political Education

Conspiracist ideologies arise and spread particularly easily under democratic conditions and, on the other hand, are a massive stress test for the resilience of democratic principles and institutions. At the same time, conspiracy ideologies provoke extremely polarising group identities and performatively undermine confidence in democracy's problem-solving capacity. They are therefore not harmless fantasies, but should be regarded as a serious threat. This makes it all the more important not to try to counter the growing belief in conspiracy myths with authoritarian measures (e.g. censorship), but to rely on the self-efficacy of democracy to strengthen the specifically democratic resilience between perseverance and adaptability, stability and

dynamism. Accordingly, this article outlines the contours of a form of political education that, when dealing with conspiracy ideologies, relies less on conventional debunking strategies and the “authority” of truth, and instead primarily promotes tolerance of ambiguity, participation in political plurality and the ability to deal with conflict.

CHLUP Radek

Charles University

Conspiracy Narratives as a Type of Social Myth

It has long been recognized that conspiracy narratives may be seen as a special kind of myth. In most cases, however, this is taken as a sign of their irrational and unsubstantiated nature. I argue that mythical modes of reasoning are actually far more pervasive in modern political and cultural discourse than we commonly admit and that the difference between mainstream discourse and conspiracy narratives is not one between “rational” and “mythical” thought but rather one between different types of mythical thinking. The specific nature of conspiracy myths is best understood in relation to two other types of social myths: political myths and fictional myths. Conspiracy myths are a hybrid of these two genres: like fictional myths, they make use of imaginative elements, but like political myths, they are understood

as having a relatively straightforward relation to reality and not just a metaphorical one. They are essentially antisystemic, and their chief ethos is that of distrust.

CHRISTOPH Stefan

University of Passau

First Results from Comparative Analysis: Factors Inhibiting and Promoting Conspiracism Across Europe

Conspiracism challenges the foundations of democratic identity building across European societies. While individual psychological factors driving conspiracy beliefs have been extensively studied, the systemic resources democracies possess to counter conspiracism and the connections between macro-level structures and individual dispositions remain underexplored.

This paper presents comparative results from eight European case studies (Spain, United Kingdom, France, Germany, Austria, Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Bulgaria) conducted within the TaCT-FoRSED project throughout 2025. The research employs a multi-level analytical framework examining: (1) macro-level systemic influences on democratic politics, (2) meso-level conspiracy narratives and

organizational actors, and (3) micro-level individual conspiracy mentality and belief.

The theoretical framework builds on Easton's political systems theory, examining how the political community, regime structures, and authorities relate to three core democratic resources: democratic identity, democratic resilience, and democratic self-efficacy. Democratic identity encompasses the acceptance of pluralistic political identities and competing democratic visions. Democratic resilience involves the capacity to resist, adapt to, and recover from stressors while maintaining core democratic values. Democratic self-efficacy refers to citizens' collective belief in their power to effect political change.

Preliminary comparative findings reveal striking variations across European contexts in how these democratic resources relate to conspiracism prevalence. The analysis identifies both protective factors—including robust democratic institutions, media literacy, and participatory structures—and risk factors such as political polarization, institutional distrust, and economic insecurity. Particularly noteworthy are the bidirectional relationships: while strong democratic resources inhibit conspiracism, conspiracy ideologies actively erode democratic identity through exclusionary

narratives and undermine resilience by exploiting democratic ambiguity.

The paper explores how different European democracies can respond to conspiracism through measures that strengthen democratic counter-identities, foster resilience through tolerance of complexity, and enhance citizen self-efficacy through meaningful participation—all while respecting fundamental democratic freedoms.

JANEČEK Petr

Charles University

From Rumour to Vernacular Mythology: Comparison of Typology of Conspiracy Theories by Ethnology and Political Science

The proposed paper uses genological approach inspired by contemporary folklore studies which tries to interpret conspiracy theories as specific genre of modern urban folklore. According to this interpretation, a conspiracy theory is considered to be the final evolutionary stage of a *rumor* (unverified report on current topics of public interest) and *urban legend* (a supposedly true story from everyday life with specific actor). Conspiracy theories provide individual unrelated rumors and urban legends a broader context by connecting them into an ideologically coherent narrative discourse.

These partial narratives are thus woven into a distorted picture of the world with a hypertrofied causality. Previously isolated rumors and urban legends could be then interpreted within this vernacular mythology as concrete pieces of an imaginary puzzle: partial "confirmation" of a pre-existing idea of the hypercausal functioning of the world. Interestingly, this genological typology (*rumour, urban legend, mythology*) in many ways also corresponds to three main types of conspiracy theories proposed by Michael Barkun (2013): *Event conspiracies, Systemic conspiracies* and *Superconspiracies*.

JANOVIČ Lukáš

Masaryk University

An echo-chamber of conspiracies: how users of Slovak Telegram communicated Covid-19 and Russo-Ukraine war

This paper explores the dynamics of online discourse within the Slovak Telegram ecosystem, with a particular focus on opinion leaders' communication on the platform. Telegram has become a key platform for alternative media, conspiracy theorists, and politically extreme voices in Slovakia, making it an important case study for understanding digitally-mediated conspiracy theories and disinformation in Central Europe. Through social network analysis,

the paper identifies the most influential actors including politicians, alternative media outlets, and anonymous channels. The paper then applies Latent Dirichlet Allocation to uncover dominant topics circulating within the network, followed by narrative analysis to closely examine propagated conspiracy beliefs. The findings reveal a strong echo-chamber properties of the Slovak Telegram ecosystem with same users spreading conspiracy theories on various topics ranging from Covid-19 to Russo-Ukraine war, while often used to amplify distrust in democratic institutions. This case study contributes to broader discussions on the theory of conspiracy singularity and alt-tech platforms. It also raises methodological questions about researching closed or semi-open platforms like Telegram and the ethical challenges of studying anonymous actors.

JOLLEY Daniel¹, Matthew King-Parker², Christina Conolly¹, Eleanor Farmer¹, and Martha Seeney¹

¹University of Nottingham, United Kingdom

²University of Lincoln, United Kingdom

Can Contact Improve Police–Citizen Relations? Effects on Police Conspiracy Beliefs and Violence Toward the Police

Conspiracy beliefs about the police can undermine trust in institutions and escalate conflict, posing risks to democratic resilience. Understanding how to reduce these beliefs is therefore critical. Across two studies, we tested whether positive experiences with police - either direct or parasocial - can improve perceptions of procedural justice, reduce anger, and in turn lower police-related conspiracy beliefs and protest-violence intentions targeted toward the police. In Study 1 ($N = 424$ UK citizens), participants reporting more frequent positive contact perceived greater procedural justice and less anger, indirectly predicting lower conspiracy beliefs and reduced violent intentions. Study 2 ($N = 365$ UK citizens) replicated these pathways experimentally: viewing short TikTok videos of positive police–public encounters (vs. no videos) increased perceived procedural justice and reduced anger, again indirectly lowering conspiracy beliefs and protest violent intentions. These findings suggest that

everyday encounters and media-based engagement strategies can foster trust, defuse emotional hostility, and ultimately strengthen institutional legitimacy in a climate of growing conspiratorial polarisation.

KOLOMAZNÍK Tomáš

Metropolitan University Prague

Instruments available to democratic states for combating disinformation in the public sphere in the age of artificial intelligence

In the era of rapidly developing artificial intelligence (AI) technologies, state and government communication on social platforms in Central European countries faces a number of new challenges and constraints. While the digital environment enables faster and more efficient dissemination of information to citizens, it also carries significant risks associated with disinformation, societal polarization, and reduced trust in institutions. One of the main challenges is undoubtedly the spread of AI-generated content. This phenomenon, commonly referred to as “Slopaganda”, involves the deliberate spread of low quality AI-generated content with the aim of manipulating public perceptions and political processes with unprecedented speed and tailor-made precision. Slopaganda differs

from traditional manipulation methods in its ability to provide highly personalized targeting. Using advanced technologies, it can tailor content not only to broad social or demographic groups, but also to micro-groups or even individuals. Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries are particularly vulnerable due to their constant exposure to highly sophisticated influence operations, especially from Russian sources. Governments in these countries need to ensure the authenticity of messages and protect against the misuse of generative AI (such as the spread of deepfake content), but also to continuously develop the digital literacy of the population. The lack of transparency of AI algorithms, the ethical dilemma associated with automated content moderation, and the issue of oversight over algorithmically controlled content dissemination complicate the effective management of public debate. The aim of this paper is to analyse the current situation in Central European countries with an emphasis on the Czech Republic and Slovakia. The paper will present the current situation in these countries and the specific challenges they face, compared to Western European countries. Disinformation campaigns generated by artificial intelligence pose significant challenges to combat them, as current mitigation strategies in the Central and Eastern European region consistently demonstrate limited effectiveness. There are several reasons for this situation. These

include undoubtedly low digital and media literacy of the population. The countries also suffer from a low level of development of the civil society. Furthermore, there is low trust in institutions and the media, which creates space for the spread of alternative facts. For this reason, it is very difficult for state institutions to "compete" with sophisticated disinformation campaigns. Experience to date indicates that state interventions designed to counter disinformation have, in some instances, been counterproductive, contributing to societal polarization rather than mitigating the harmful effects of disinformation. Last but not least, there is also the ethical aspect of using generative models in government communication, where government communication encounters boundaries between transparency, security, and protection of citizens' privacy. Experience shows that a long-term sustainable strategy requires comprehensive cooperation between public administration, experts, civil society and platforms, including both rapid response to incidents and systematic support for society's resilience to digital threats. The contribution will be based on the results of research conducted in the Czech Republic, Slovakia, the UK and France. The aim is not only to show the differences in these countries, but also to analyze the possibility of implementing some of the practices in the Czech environment.

KRUMMA Aileen

Centre for Criminological Research Saxony

Police Distrust: The Impact of Conspiracy Mentality and Belief in a Dangerous World

Trust in the police is a key prerequisite for effective crime prevention and law enforcement. Low levels of trust reduce citizens' willingness to cooperate, weaken rule compliance, and make police work more difficult. While trust in the German police is high by international standards, it declined noticeably during the coronavirus pandemic.

Research indicates that perceptions of threat, which increased during the pandemic, are associated with a lower sense of security and greater mistrust toward governmental institutions. A common strategy for coping with such threats is belief in conspiracy theories, a phenomenon that gained attention during the pandemic and the emergence of the "Querdenken" movement. Conspiracy beliefs are reinforced by perceived threat and linked to institutional mistrust.

Although these patterns have been observed for governmental institutions, their relationship to distrust in the police has not yet been systematically examined. The present study therefore aims to explain

the decline in trust in the police by examining the relationship to two dispositional factors: the *belief in a dangerous world* and the *conspiracy mentality*.

Based on a longitudinal design in a representative German sample, a fixed-effects panel model was estimated to examine the influence of both dispositions on trust in the police over time. The study contributes to understanding the psychological foundations of police distrust and shows how threat perceptions and conspiratorial thinking undermine trust in key state institutions—especially in times of social crisis, when this trust is particularly crucial.

LAND Thomas

Max Weber Kolleg Erfurt

The discourse on abolitionism as an example for pseudo-science

On the basis of Jan Eufingers contribution the activist discourse on abolitionism following the Black Lives Matter and Defund the Police social movement will be discussed as a case of pseudo-science in academia since it fails to meet the central scientific discrimination between the non-visible structures or mechanisms and their empirical manifestations or appearances. Repressive institutions of the modern state, police and prisons, are taken by abolitionists wrongly as the

cause for racist and/or social problems and not as a necessary consequence of a modern capitalist society as such. Because abolitionists don't have a correct concept of the modern state and its required features as an integrated element of a capitalist social formation they demand to abolish police and prisons to overcome social problems (which would do harm not least to minorities and poor people). In contrast to the unsatisfactory abolitionist explanations a concept of the state will be presented as a result of the capitalist mode of production and its institutional prerequisites (such as modern private property, bourgeois freedoms and fundamental rights, extra-economic coercive power, etc.) which is needed to actually explain the contingent phenomena of empirical reality.

MAURER Abraham and Matyáš Lednický

Charles University

“Do I Believe?”: Three Aspects of “Belief” in Conspiracy Theories

This paper introduces a triadic framework for understanding belief in conspiracy theories, arguing that conspiracy adherence cannot be reduced to simple acceptance of factual claims. It draws on religious studies theory, that often deals with questions of belief. In particular, it adapts H. S. Versnel’s distinction between substantive, functionalist,

and cosmological levels of meaning originally developed for the study of Ancient Greek religion to a methodology for the study of contemporary dynamics of conspiracy belief.

While the substantive level concerns literal acceptance of specific factual propositions, the functionalist level reveals how conspiracy narratives fulfil social, emotional, or identity-based needs. The cosmological level, in turn, illuminates how conspiracies articulate broader worldviews shaped by uncertainty, distrust, and the desire for coherent meaning. By showing how these three aspects interact, overlap, and sometimes conflict within individuals, our model offers a nuanced tool for navigating, combating, and better understanding the contemporary conspiracy landscape.

Based on our published research – comprising of semi-structured interviews conducted with participants from various segments of the Czech society during the Covid-19 pandemic – we argue that effective public communication and counter-conspiracy strategies aimed at building a more resilient democratic society must address all three levels of belief, rather than focusing solely on fact-checking or cognitive corrections.

NOUNANAKI Aphrodite-Lidia

Academy of Athens.

Ichor (ΙΧΩΡ): Myth, Blood, and the Making of Conspiratorial Nationalistic theories in Contemporary Greece

When myth becomes evidence, nationalism becomes science and nowhere is this fusion more striking than in the contemporary Ichor (ΙΧΩΡ) narrative. In this paper, the contemporary nationalist conspiracy theory of Ichor (the alleged “divine” substance said to course through Greek blood) is examined as a focused case study of how ancient myth and pseudo-science cohere into powerful conspiratorial claims. Emerging from reinterpretations of ancient Greek mythology and reinforced through speculative genetic claims (such as references to the so-called “Epsilon gene”), the Ichor narrative constructs an argument for Greek biological superiority that is framed as both ancient in origin and scientifically verifiable. Crucially, this discourse circulates through forums, online groups, and informal nationalist communities, which are examined here through digital ethnography.

Ichor thus demonstrates how conspiratorial narratives of national superiority emerge at the intersection of ancient myth and pseudo-scientific blood theory. By tracing how this narrative is constructed,

disseminated, and incorporated into the informal strata of nationalist discourse, the paper aims to show how mythic antiquity and speculative genetics are combined to naturalize claims of exceptionalism and power. Through the case of Ichor, the study contributes to the wider academic discussion on the mechanisms through which biologized conspiracy theories acquire cultural traction and ideological force in contemporary nationalist milieus.

NOWAK Andrzej W.

Adam Mickiewicz University

Fragile semi-peripheries: From Suitcase Science to Suitcase Conspiracy Theories

This paper addresses the central question of why regions on the periphery and semi-periphery of the global landscape of knowledge production are fragile to conspiracy theories. Focusing on Central and Eastern Europe, it draws examples from these regions to illustrate the parallel mechanisms through which authoritative knowledge ('scientific facts') and counter-knowledge (conspiracy theories) circulate and become localised.

The analysis will go through three steps. First, the paper adopts a circulatory model of knowledge (following Latour) to conceptualise

the structural asymmetry in knowledge production in the semi-periphery. This asymmetry is characterised by 'suitcase science', whereby local researchers do not 'mobilise the world' (their own research), but instead 'travel' to the centre to fill a metaphorical 'suitcase' with established theories and data. The primary work conducted in the semi-periphery is thus the translation and reproduction of existing knowledge (from the centre) rather than genuine discovery. This leads to the emergence of so-called zombie science, where scientific facts are unevenly stabilised more by media circulation and popularisation than (simultaneously) by scientific institutions and research ("mobilisation of the world"), as is the case in the centre.

Secondly, this paper proposes that a similar semi-peripheral circulatory model can be observed in the propagation of conspiracy theories. These narratives are not passively received; rather, they 'travel and adapt' to local conditions. Major global narratives (such as the origins of the SARS-CoV-2 virus, the Great Reset, and the New World Order) are imported and then localised, becoming fused with existing regional anxieties. For example, the Great Replacement narrative is adapted to target Ukrainian migrants alongside antisemitic tropes in the Polish variant.

Thirdly, the paper demonstrates that semi-peripheries are uniquely fragile because of these dual importation mechanisms, which affect both scientific facts and conspiracy theories. This condition arises from fundamental dependence on imported, ready-made facts, which makes societal understanding of scientific knowledge unstable and susceptible to disruption by adapted conspiratorial narratives.

POORTER Lara de

University of Amsterdam

Climate controversy and the politics of meaning: The cultural work behind climate counternarratives

Climate controversy is often treated as an information problem: if people are exposed to enough evidence, their doubts should go away. But climate science and policy continue to be distrusted and framed through conspiratorial logics in many liberal-democratic societies, including the Netherlands, even alongside scientific consensus and ongoing policy debate. This suggests the problem is not only about the accuracy of facts, but also about the different meanings that these facts acquire in different segments of society. This study therefore focuses on the cultural contestation around climate change and asks how organised and lay actors in the Dutch climate countermovement make sense of climate science and policy. From this perspective,

counternarratives are not simply “irrational conspiracies” but value-driven ways of reasoning that turn evidence into arguments about legitimacy and the kinds of futures people should accept or reject. Empirically, I draw on ongoing multi-sited ethnography of the movement’s public-facing online and offline spaces. I observe and analyse alternative media outlets and organisations that report on climate, map recurring themes in their output, and attend public gatherings. This is complemented with in-depth interviews with producers and audiences of climate counternarratives. Through this approach I can trace how social and political meanings are built around knowledge claims, and how this constructs a social reality in which climate change is not labelled as a crisis. By identifying the cultural conditions under which these counternarratives become stable and politically influential, the study offers an interpretive account of climate obstruction in the Netherlands.

PRUDNIKOV Andrei

University of Lisbon

Demography-Based Conspiracy Narratives and the Politics of Distrust in Authoritarian Russia

This paper explores the political functions of demography fear-based conspiracy narratives in contemporary Russia — particularly the plots

of “population utilization,” “social genocide,” and “the Golden Billion.” Drawing on the Narrative Policy Framework and discourse analysis, the study conceptualizes these narratives as technologies of managed distrust that simultaneously sustain and destabilize authoritarian power.

The analysis covers more than a hundred textual and audiovisual sources from 2000–2024, ranging from official statements and parliamentary debates to digital communities such as Citizens of the USSR and the movement of Svetlana Lada-Rus. By mapping these narratives along the axes of performative radicalization and regime alignment, the paper identifies four structural clusters — from loyalist mobilizing versions that externalize the enemy (“the West destroys Russia”) to anti-systemic and apocalyptic variants in which the state itself becomes the agent of population destruction.

The findings show that demographic conspiracism in Russia operates as a moral-political ecosystem rather than a fringe belief system: it produces loyalty through fear while generating spaces of symbolic resistance. This double movement illustrates how conspiracy discourse, once weaponized by the state, erodes its own foundations, replacing civic participation with moralized distrust — a dynamic

crucial for understanding the resilience and fragility of authoritarian regimes within the broader context of democratic vulnerability.

RÖBLER Falk

Friedrich Schiller University Jena

Imaginamics: Practices and Dynamics of Social Imagining

Recent studies in the social and political sciences show that, in the German context, disdain for democracy is particularly high in the post-socialist eastern parts of the country. During my anthropological fieldwork on contemporary democratic civil society engagement in these regions in the autumn of 2024, I also found a strong connection between such democracy condemning attitudes and certain conspiracy convictions, such as the media being entirely controlled by the government, the government being entirely controlled by high finance, the West seeking to keep the East down at any cost, or migrants aiming to drain and weaken the nation state for their own benefit. Through the Covid-19 pandemic and the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, these narratives became even more aggravated and expanded in their variations. My contribution to the conference aims to examine central motives of these current East German conspiracy myths, which I was

able to classify through my field studies, while placing them in a broader context through two additional domains that extend beyond the East German sphere. The first consists of the small conspiracy narratives that each and every individual develops – mainly in situations of setbacks, unease, or potential humiliation – including episodes from my own history of conspiracy thinking. The second domain comprises examples of the current proliferation of artistic works (for instance, novels, comics, films, and radio plays) that address the fates of individuals who fall prey to conspiracy narratives and the consequences for their relatives. By combining these ethnographic, autoethnographic and art-analytical findings, I seek to interpret the rise and normalization of conspiracy thinking in East Germany (and beyond) as practices of individual attempts at “radical liberation” in the sense of Christoph Menke (2022) – attempts which, after breaking with the status quo, fail to establish new, genuinely free habits and therefore turn into radical bondage.

SCHNEIDER Verena

Leipzig University

Conspirituality – Conspireligion? Entanglements Between Conspiracy Belief, Religiosity, and Esotericism

The connections between conspiracy mentality and spirituality have been discussed scientifically for more than a decade. To describe this phenomenon, Ward and Voas (2011) coined the term “conspirituality,” which was later adopted by Asprem and Dyrendal (2015). The relationship between conspiracy and spirituality can also be illustrated based on the Leipzig Authoritarianism Study (Leipziger Autoritarismus Studie). By conducting a cluster analysis using the 2022 wave, Dilling et al. (2022) identified six different clusters of people who believe in conspiracy theories, three of which clearly show an affinity toward esotericism. This presentation aims to broaden the focus on conspirituality by incorporating other religious aspects (i.e., different denominations, universalistic religiosity, and religious fundamentalism) into the analysis. Preliminary results indicate that, while there are hardly any differences among the various religious groups, a universalistic understanding of religiosity is negatively related to conspiracy mentality (the more religious, the less prone to conspiracy belief). However, religious fundamentalism—an

exclusive understanding of religion—clearly correlates with conspiracy belief. Although this correlation is not as strong as that between conspiracy and esotericism, it remains significant for all items measuring conspiracy mentality and Covid-19 related conspiracy myths. This contribution examines both the seemingly protective effect of universalistic religiosity and the enhancing impact of religious fundamentalism on conspiracy beliefs, while considering other possible influences, such as age, gender, education, political positioning, and social trust.

SOLTERO Gonzalo

National Autonomous University of Mexico

Cultural narratives, identity and power. Conspiracy theories and gender

This paper forms part of the initial stage of a research project funded by the Mexican Ministry of Science (SECIHTI) and follows my book *Conspiracy Narratives South of the Border. Bad Hombres Do the Twist*. Conspiracy theories and gender have in common a strong connection with issues of power. Gender and its hierarchies are constructed according to power structures. And conspiracy theories are increasingly used by right-wing political groups to advance their

interests pointing at imaginary enemies, usually at the cost of further discriminating against vulnerable segments of society.

It is very easy to ignite conspiracy theories regarding human diversity by making segments with a traditional better standing afraid of losing their privileges. An example and likely case of study is the claim that white people, and especially cisgender heterosexual men, are currently under attack due to a population replacement plan through immigration and a progressive agenda, which has brought electoral gains for the right. Besides the conspiracy theories themselves, this project seeks to examine their role in the design and implementation of political campaigns and public policies.

Feminist authors like Sara Ahmed and bell hooks have written about gender as cultural politics, and how popular culture carries a pedagogy about these topics. Among the research project aims at this initial stage is to examine the implications that these authors describe, along categories such as Ahearne's implicit cultural policy (which is not overt about its cultural objectives but has an impact upon culture), to understand some of the causes and dynamics that have contributed to misinformation and social polarization in recent times, and counter them through educational guidelines taking into consideration intersectional empathy.

TAK Emma van der

University of Amsterdam

(Un)Intended Effects: The Consequences of Dutch Disinformation Interventions

In recent years, the Netherlands has seen multiple surges of conspiratorial disinformation. Institutions have in turn employed different responses with varying degrees of success in terms of eliminating falsehoods and (re-)establishing the truth. Rather than focusing on the effectiveness of such interventions in this sense, however, this paper asks what other, unintended, effects these might have. Based on ongoing qualitative research into the consequences of disinformation interventions in the Dutch context, I compare two case studies in which different mitigation strategies were employed. The first concerns a disinformation-fuelled controversy surrounding primary school sexuality education, in which a conservative catholic lobbying organisation was taken to court by Rutgers, the main provider of sexuality education lesson materials, and subsequently ordered by the judge to stop accusing Rutgers of having a pedophilic agenda. The second case study explores the community-based conversational approach employed by local Dutch health authorities in order to mitigate people's doubts and thus combat vaccine-related

conspiracy theories and disinformation. I interrogate how these interventions distinguish between truths and falsehoods, and how they are experienced and evaluated by individuals on both sides of these truth contestations. More broadly, I ask what the (positive or negative) implications of such interventions are for the ways in which knowledge is produced and disseminated in the public sphere. What can be learned, then, from these two case studies, about which kinds of interventions might be best suited not only to mitigate disinformation, but also to minimize the negative 'side effects' that counter-disinformation efforts can have?

TURŠIČ Nik

University of Ljubljana

From Distrust to Community: Legitimacy, Skepticism, and Ritual in Conspiracy Theory Networks

This paper analyzes the core functions and mechanisms of conspiracy theories by focusing on three interrelated dimensions: legitimacy, skepticism, and ritual within conspiracy theory networks. First, it examines how conspiracy theories establish legitimacy and, in turn, legitimize individuals, their beliefs, and actions, reinforcing collective identities and group practices. Second, it explores the dual nature of skepticism in conspiracist worldviews, which fosters distrust toward

scientific, political, and media institutions while discouraging critical scrutiny of conspiracist claims and communities. Third, it investigates the role of shared rituals, such as “doing your own research,” collective decoding, and narrative circulation, in sustaining these legitimacy and skepticism dynamics. The proposed analytical framework is subsequently applied to a case study of QAnon conspiracy networks, with particular emphasis on narratives concerning human trafficking, in order to assess the framework’s explanatory capacity and empirical validity. The analysis demonstrates how these three dimensions intersect to shape the cognitive orientations, interpretive practices, and forms of collective action among participants within conspiracy theory networks, as well as the organizational and symbolic structures of the networks themselves. Finally, the paper considers the broader implications of conspiracy theories for public understandings of social reality and for contemporary policy-making processes.

VOIT Ann-Katrin

University for Applied Science, Essen, Germany

From Fake News to Conspiratorial Narratives: Digital Disinformation, Democratic Resilience, and the Politics of Distrust

Public debates in many democracies have become filled with misleading claims, rumours, and, at times, fully developed conspiracy stories. Although fake news and conspiracy theories are not identical, they often appear together in ways that make them hard to separate in practice. Several studies suggest that false or distorted news items can act as an initial spark: they give people a simple explanation at a moment when official information feels confusing or untrustworthy (Douglas et al., 2019; van Prooijen & Douglas, 2017). This paper takes a closer look at how that spark travels through digital environments. Rather than presenting a unified theory, research on different strands will be drawn. Research on social media shows how platform design affects what gains visibility; emotionally charged material tends to spread faster and reach wider audiences, which also applies to misleading news and conspiratorial frames (Cinelli et al., 2021). At the same time, social-psychological studies point out that people are more receptive to such narratives during periods of

insecurity or when political institutions are viewed with suspicion (Imhoff & Lamberty, 2020; Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009). These are not marginal conditions anymore. The analysis combines a prisma literature analysis with of online debates, including those around climate policy and public health. The focus is on how fairly ordinary misinformation can, step by step, drift into conspiracy talk. This gradual shift is often overlooked.

YENDELL Alexander and Michelle C. Schweitzer

Leipzig University

Childhood adversity, COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs and the authoritarian syndrome: Modelling pathways to radicalization and right-wing extremism in Austria

Conspiracy beliefs consistently co-occur with prejudice, anti-democratic orientations and political radicalisation, yet their developmental antecedents remain insufficiently understood. Drawing on classic theorising about the authoritarian personality (Adorno et al. 1950) and its contemporary extension into an authoritarian syndrome (Decker et al. 2020), this study examines whether COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs function as an attitudinal mechanism linking early-life adversity to escalating political radicalisation and anti-democratic and right-wing extremist

orientations. Using Austrian survey data collected in 2021 (N = 1,040)), we analyse relationships between adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs, indicators of radicalisation, and anti-democratic and right-wing extremist orientations. Initial patterns show that COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs are tightly connected to exclusionary and extremist attitudes, while ACEs display modest but meaningful associations with these belief structures. Additional dispositional factors, such as dark personality traits, may form part of this broader configuration, though model specifications remain exploratory. Against this backdrop, we propose a structural pathway in which childhood adversity increases susceptibility to COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs, which in turn are expected to fuel higher levels of political radicalisation and associated anti-democratic tendencies. Structural equation modelling will be used to test alternative specifications of this pathway and to assess direct and indirect effects. Finally, because Austria is one of the national contexts examined within the TaCT-FoRSED project, this dataset offers an additional empirical foundation for analysing conspiracist dynamics in a setting central to current debates on democratic resilience.



© Michal Menšík (Nikkarin)

