

Uncertain Conspiracies: A Latourian Analysis of R/Conspiracy in an Era of Global Upheaval

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ABSTRACT

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In the 21st century, digital tools have made it possible to disseminate information across physical boundaries instantaneously. This, combined with an increasingly polarized and uncertain climate in world affairs, has allowed ideologies of conspiracy to find receptive audiences across the globe. R/conspiracy, a popular forum where many congregate to with like-minded individuals provides a dynamic and rich research site to study the language and discourse taking place under a broad conceptualization of conspiracy. Using theoretical tools created by Bruno Latour (2005), this paper analyzes r/conspiracy over a period of 4 days to demonstrate the inadequate understanding of the conspiracist community elucidated by present day academics.

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Finally, I would like to dedicate this thesis to my late childhood friend, who took his life because he was told his entire life by his family that he was autistic due to vaccination. He always struggled to reconcile this, hating himself for a condition he falsely believed could have been prevented and I miss him greatly. Rest in peace.

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1. Introduction

We live in an increasingly uncertain era, where the knowledge taken for granted by previous generations can be so no longer. The myriad of 21st-century crises that infect our contemporary moment, such as climate change, the resurgence of political populism against a tide of political progressivism, income inequality, globalization, and the COVID-19 pandemic have challenged long-standing assumptions about our social orders for every individual on Earth. Furthermore, the 21st century is marked by the explosion of digital tools that disseminate information across borders to individuals on a scale unseen in history. This explosion has been accompanied by a process of informatizing and digitizing public discourse on matters of society, politics, and culture: our social and political participation, our work, our cultural output, and our education increasingly exist in the digital universe behind LED screen. The accelerated widening of public consciousness is accompanied by growing infection of the language of conspiracy into our everyday information diets (Rosenblum & Muirhead, 2020). This infection of social concerns with conspiratorial language impedes our collective ability to rally behind the institutional systems we need to solve existential problems. When individuals do not trust the mediators of public discourse on social matters it damages social cohesion beyond repair. The corporations behind social media platforms are complicit in the incessant dissemination of conspiratorial messaging and content. Platforms that aggregate and collate content for individuals based on their preferences have traditionally avoided aggressive content moderation with disastrous results. While providing a common digital space for individual interaction was revolutionary, it has consequently allowed conspiratorially minded misinformation and disinformation to propagate across the globe.

Conspiracy theories are affective appeals to individualistic thinking which challenge the commonly accepted consensus on social issues, even the idea of society itself. Rather than merely posing challenges to epistemological conclusions based on abstruse academic reasoning, they undermine the notion of scientific and political consensus itself. They present a worldview in which institutions and positions of authority manipulate the world and the information within to befuddle the masses into a state of submission. The issues and rhetoric may vary, but at its core, the language of conspiracy seeks to challenge the idea of the ‘black box’ (Latour 2005, Epstein 1995): when an issue is presented to the public as though it is straight-forward with no nuances or internal contradictions, the conspiracists will pounce, finding aspects of uncertainty within to claim that the socially accepted and institutionally reinforced conceptions are deliberate lies, leaping to claim that all socially accepted conceptions are lies.

While all social media platforms have played a role in ensuring the unchecked spread of conspiratorial discourse into all aspects of all lives, this paper will examine r/conspiracy, the Reddit subforum, to show how language of conspiracy has infected everyday discourse on salient political topics through maximizing awareness of uncertainty, and how a conspiratorial lens provides an internal paradigmatic mechanism favoring the internal logical processes of the individual against the uncertainties of institutional or collective knowledge. Reddit has a history as a platform that prizes informed, uninhibited, and wide-ranging discourse that will be briefly explored in the third section of this paper.

I will connect the epistemic unsettling inherent in conspiratorial accounts to the five sources of uncertainty in Bruno Latour’s *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction of Actor-Network Theory* (2004) as my organizing principles for examining content on R/conspiracy while comparing it to the background scholarship in the field. Focusing my analysis on Latour’s

5 uncertainties: no group identity only group formation, action is overtaken, the nature of objects, matters of fact vs matters of concern, and writing risky accounts. With these uncertainties Latour provides the theoretical space to capitalize on the range of contestation within the members a social grouping about their grouping itself, what it is about, why it comes together, and how it interprets the world. Using this as a starting point, I seek to retrace Latour's conception of the uncertainties as they pertain to the social sciences to compare the academic literature on conspiracy theorizing with the direct accounts of conspiratorial reasoning found on r/conspiracy. Latour problematizes traditional understanding of social explanation for phenomena, and I seek to echo his criticisms as they relate to the social scientific research in the field of conspiracy theorizing. Latour's conceptualization of these uncertainties emphasizes the unsettled nature of any social field, and this study will use Latour's theory to demonstrate the ephemerality of the conspiracist network within my digital site.

This paper will work along the following outline: an overview of the academic literature on conspiracy theories and conspiracists, followed by a brief examination of the academic research done on Reddit, even the pre-existing research done on r/conspiracy. I will then provide an overview of Latour and the 5 uncertainties to illustrate the methodological theoretical considerations that will go into the final analysis. My analysis will also be broken down into a few parts: a broad overview of the scope and scale of the collected dataset, followed by a 'risky account' (Latour 2005:122) of the forum through the lens of each uncertainty. This will include an analysis that relates the findings back to the literature on conspiratorial discourse, seeking to position their work as part of the conspiracist universe. The research question is as follows: What social universe is generated through the interactions on R/conspiracy? What associations are drawn in this universe and how are they maintained? How does the academic literature on this

universe construct the universe in tandem with the conspiracists themselves? Finally, what does R/conspiracy tell us about the infection of conspiracism into the issues of common politics?

2. *The Literature on Conspiracy Theorizing*

This first section will focus on providing an ample dissection of the academic literature on conspiracy theories and their prevalence in 21st-century society. I seek to provide a broad overview of what the literature offers us as useful conceptions for the analysis of R/conspiracy. This section will illustrate the trends that define the conspiratorial phenomenon understood by academics to paint the picture of the conspiratorial outlook, otherwise called the paranoid style (Hofstadter: 1967).

2.1 *Broad Definitions*

A discourse is conspiratorial when it posits a hidden cabal of nefarious actors that are behind the levers of power or when it posits hidden motivations for societal events, processes, and outcomes. Conspiratorial discourses explain certain events or actions “by reference to the machinations of powerful people “who will go to great lengths to hide their involvement” (Sunstein & Vermule 2009:205). Hence, to count as a conspiracy theory, the actors behind the postulated conspiracy must be conceptually imbued with transcendental power to achieve their goals and to cover up their involvement thereafter (ibid 207). Conspiracists, hold conspiratorial, suspicious, or paranoid perspectives of the world, find meaning in events and experiences in the malevolent forces “behind the cultural screens, underneath and beyond the empirical surface of modern life” (Aupers 2012:30). The universe is not random or capricious absent human action, thus there exist irreducible objective truths to any subject. As such, “the conspiracy theorist suspects there is intention where others find coincidence and contingency; they detect structure where others see chaos; they find meaning where others do not” (ibid). A conspiratorial outlook

offers the individual a way to interpret their experience of living within complex structures that lack clear elucidation.

Conspiracy theories incorporate any significant event including “an election result, economic crisis, death of a public figure, terrorist attack, natural disaster, plane crash, political assassination, military conflict, meteorological anomaly or flu pandemic” (Byford 2015:3) into their paradigmatic framework. Understanding each example above requires a high degree of research and expertise, far beyond that possessed by the average individual. Conspiracy theories offer an “everyday epistemological quick fix” (ibid) to help the masses make sense of the world they are inhabiting. Thus, conspiracy theories should be seen not just as a method of explanation, but as a “tradition of explanation” (ibid:5). What that explanation is meant to account for in uncertainty: they are trying to generate a comprehensible account of an event in the absence of the technical knowledge required to grasp its entirety. People have been positing grand conspiracies since the 1800s and likely prior, but they always appear at a moment of great social upheaval and change (ibid) when individuals likely lack a paradigmatic schema for the events engulfing them.

In his seminal work on the subject, Richard Hofstadter (1967), called this the 'paranoid style', applying the word paranoid which had been typically reserved for clinical purposes, and expanded it:

Although they both tend to be overheated, oversuspicious, overaggressive, grandiose, and apocalyptic in expression, the clinical paranoid sees the hostile and conspiratorial world in which he feels himself to be living as directed specifically against him; whereas the spokesman of the paranoid style finds it directed against a nation, a culture, a way of life whose fate affects not himself alone but millions of others (4).

Hofstadter summarizes this as the “feeling of persecution” (ibid). Living in a world without certainty makes one hyper-cognizant of potential threats to their way of being, and when viewed

conspiratorially uncertainty becomes apocalyptic; if I cannot be sure my way of life will continue as I enjoy it, any change deliberately threatens my security. Conspiracy theories offer adherents a cognitive and intellectual framework for incorporating all incommensurate conceptions and experiences into a single, easily comprehensible narrative.

2.2 Types and Taxonomies

One of the most important aspects of conspiracy theorizing is that it is ideologically fluid. There are conspiracy theories specific to the left and the right (Melley 2002, Jane & Flemming 2014), but, “the rhetoric of conspiracy can be utilized to effect by anyone who intuits a sense of their victimization or manipulation” (Jane & Flemming 2014:100). While accusations of secret deals and cover-ups abound in politics, business, and global affairs, only when an accusation of a secret deal or a cover-up is deemed false or ridiculous that the label ‘conspiracy theory’ is applied (Byford 2015:22). Few people would claim that the Nazi Party, the Soviet Union, or Richard Nixon did not conspire in various ways. There is a conceptual overlap between everyday politics and business and the word conspiracy, thus, it is necessary to understand the different ways scholars have classified conspiratorial ideation as it relates to the grandiosity and absurdities of conspiracy theorizing.

Brotherton et al (2013) came up with their classification of specific conspiracy theories using social-psychological methods (questionnaires) and they identify 5 separate categories of conspiracy theory. They are a) Government Malfeasance (GM), b) Malevolent Global Conspiracies (MG); c) Extraterrestrial Cover-up (ET); d) Personal Well-being (PW); and e) Control of Information (CI) (Brotherton et al 2013:8, Castanaho et al 2017:427). Although they appear self-explanatory, they deserve a little unpacking for my purposes. GM conspiracies posit that national governments actively choose to enact violence through crime or terrorism on their populace (Castanaho et al 2017:427). MG conspiracies posit that a small cabal of global elites

controls events to further their secret agenda (ibid). ET conspiracies are straightforward; governments know something about extraterrestrial activity on Earth (ibid). PW conspiracies are concerned with disease and the encroachment of medicalization into our lives (ibid). Finally, CI conspiracies posit that governments, as well as collaborators across the information production industry (author's term) from traditional news outlets to social media giants to academia, conspire to hide unfavorable information and ideas from the mass public (ibid). These classifications point to one overarching theme: the nature of power in claiming certainty i.e. who gets to claim certainty, how that claim is supported and reinforced, and what remains hidden or unsaid behind the certainty.

Mick West (2018) posited a demarcating scale in which beliefs are measured from 1 as most plausible or 'mainstream' to 10 as least plausible and fringe, subjectively measuring the role conspiratorial reasoning plays in an individual's paradigm (West 2018:31-32). For example, '1' could represent the idea that pharmaceutical companies conspire to sell unnecessary drugs to people to maximize profit, at 10 we have the conspiracy theory positing the ruling class are "a race of shape-shifting trans-dimensional reptiles" (ibid). All individuals have a line on this 1-10 scale which separates the plausible from the implausible (ibid:36). We can replace the term plausible with certain, as this a subjective, individual measure: the more certain one is of a claim, the closer it ranks to one and vice versa. I will operationalize this conception of a scale and a "line of demarcation" (ibid) when analyzing comments in R/conspiracy, specifically with regards to what they claim as certain and uncertain.

2.3 Building the Conspiracist Worldview

Conspiracies are perpetrated by evil elites doing terrible things and hiding them through control over the levers of power and informational production. The accused changes, the event changes, the question of degree changes, but the overall thrust remains. Conspiracists are deeply

skeptical of power and any explanation of the world that originates from institutional authority must be rejected immediately.

The primary defining characteristic of the conspirators is their elite status (Byford 2015:76) and applying that label serves a multi-faceted purpose. It allows the conspiracist to make their claims under the guise of popular or populist thinking (ibid), enough to identify who is 'elite' given the context, while simultaneously vague enough to project a conception of antagonistic elites onto anyone; it functions as a tabula rasa. Depending on the conspiracy theory, they will occupy the upper echelons of academia, business, government, politics, media, and culture, etc (ibid). Combining their vague, uncertain membership as an 'elite' as opposed to the masses taps into a cultural anti-elitism that allows those on the lower end of the status system to resent them and view them as inherently immoral or bad (Kou et al 2017:76). Why do they deserve to occupy the higher rungs of political, social, and economic power? Why do they get to tell us, the people, who ideas are good, and which are bad, and how our society should be run?

Secondly, the conspirators may be members of identifiable minority groups (ibid:72). For example, Jewish people and communists are the objects of conspiratorial invective due to their marginal status and the fact that they can exist among the masses without drawing attention to themselves (ibid). Muslims found this attention directed at them in the post-9/11 era up to the migrant crisis (ibid). The important part here is the delineated boundary between 'Us' and 'Them' (Aupers 2012:24), the more distant 'they' are from 'us', the easier it is to villainize, and the conspirators become Manichean antagonists. In Hofstadter's words, they are "the perfect model of malice, a kind of amoral superman" (Hofstadter 1967:31-32). Rather than people with whom we have reasonable disagreements, the conspirators become "evil incarnate [...] inhuman, superhuman and/or anti-human beings who regularly commit abominable acts and are

implacably attempting to subvert and destroy everything that is decent and worth preserving in the existing world” (Bale 2007: 51). Conspirators can represent evil, impersonal forces. In this category of conspirators, we are dealing with things like capitalism (Sapountzis & Condor 2012:471), imperialism (ibid), globalization (Hellinger 2003:22), American hegemony (ibid), The New World Order (West & Sanders 2003:3). Anyone seen to be behind these forces is viewed as the evil side in a Manichean struggle for the fate of humanity.

However, alleged scheming must be accompanied by deliberate obfuscation of the truth. Conspiracy theorists believe that the conspirators are hypercompetent, able to successfully produce and maintain the lie across so many individuals, institutions, and years. The question for the conspiracist concerns how the truth is hidden from the public, the answer to which starts with the question ‘Cui bono’ or ‘who benefits’ (Byford 2015; 41). when examining conspiratorial cover-ups, ask yourself is it in someone’s interest, to tell the truth. Would the individual providing this information lose their status if they said something else? Does this person or institution have a vested interest in the truth of this information? Do they profit if everyone accepts their claims? Notice these lines of inquiry are circular. For example, a climate scientist has a reputational need for their conclusions to accurately reflect reality, a pharmaceutical company has a financial stake in their product being perceived as and proven useful, political parties have powerful interests in voters viewing their opposition as ineffective, corrupt, or malicious. However, once you realize that someone has a vested interest in whatever they are saying, they cannot be trusted (Oswald 2016:6), a theme I will return to later.

Conspiracists are aware of a monopoly on the production of legitimate forms of knowledge held by the institutions of the modern world. This means, for conspiracists that anytime someone's ideas are silenced or ignored by the intelligentsia, ideological dogma is at

work (Mitchel 2019:229). The easiest examples to invoke with this example are those of the anti-vaccination movement, AIDS denialism, or climate change denialism. In all of the cases, the closing of the ‘black box’ (Epstein 1995:28) in which scientific inquiry on a specific question is seen to have produced a definitive answer and thus the questions are, for lack of a better word, ‘settled’. Conspiracists are aware of the ‘border war’ undertaken by the intelligentsia to separate themselves and their ‘superior way of knowing’ from the worldview espoused by the conspiracists (Harambam & Aupers 2015: 469). Summarily, experts and others with the task of presenting information and knowledge to the masses have the power to decide which viewpoints to present as reasonable, rational, certain, and true while simultaneously excluding those that they want to be viewed as fringe or unacceptable within the realm of reasoned discourse. Experts possess the epistemic authority to close the black box on issues, conspiracists challenge that epistemic authority.

2.4 Rhetorical Tricks of the Conspiracist Trade

In this section, I will delve into how exactly conspiracy theories operate on an argumentative and rhetorical level. This section will broadly sketch the techniques conspiracy theorists employ to argue against conventional understandings, persuade others, defend themselves, and spread. A quick examination of their rhetorical tricks will be followed by the rhetorical and discursive strategies they employ to make their worldview more easily accessible. Broadly speaking, conspiracist discourses rely on appeals to emotionality or emotionally charged subjects, mimicking scholarship, and causing informational overload, rhetoric that focuses on questioning, positing, speculating, and shifting burdens of proof followed by appeals to base reasoning indicating a rejection of orthodoxy and established knowledge, leading to argumentative unfalsifiability culminating in absurd leaps of logic.

Oswald (2016), notes that there are two main styles of conspiracist narratives, which are the rhetoric of science, and for my purposes, I will add the term rational inquiry, and the other is the rhetoric of just asking questions. (2). For the former, the argumentative form concerns itself with the demonstration and representation of proof (including the methodology that generates proof). This represents the conspiracists as investigator/researcher, demonstrating a reliance on multi-faceted, numerous arguments, emulating standard practices of academic inquiry and discourse including citation lists and logical ‘proofs’ (ibid). However, the rhetoric of ‘just asking questions’ functions as a refutational strategy, deflecting criticisms of conspiracist reasoning (ibid) while maximizing the perception of uncertainty. This includes representing the conspiracy theory as a “question-asking systematic enterprise meant to expose the inaccuracy of the official story and make room for alternative conspiratorial accounts” (ibid), an overreliance on errant data, continuously returning focus towards the perceived problems of the conventional narrative and framing the conspiracist argument as one the conventionalist must disprove rather than one the conspiracist must prove, shifting the burden of proof (ibid). Conspiracists rely on the rhetoric of legitimate (scientific and rational) inquiry as positive argumentation attempting to prove something, while simultaneously using the rhetoric of asking questions as negative argumentation focused on disproving and unsettling a truth claim. Therefore, the purpose of understanding conspiracists is identifying rhetorical buttons deliberately pushed by their rhetoric designed to convince laypeople.

Starting from that premise, it is prudent to begin with appeals to emotionality, or arguments specifically geared to elicit emotional reactions, that are continuously built upon. Anti-vaccination narratives often operationalize stories of childhood illness and death to appeal to paternal and maternal instincts to protect their children, allowing anti-vaccine advocates to

appeal to a visceral instinct that is difficult to rationalize around, proceeding to then make their case against vaccination (Smith & Graham 2019:1311). Fears of causing harm or even killing your child can be compounded and built upon if there is widespread public attention on the issue (Hausman 2017:282), as that emotional button is pressed every subsequent time you encounter the word vaccination. Suspicious of vaccination, the expansion (or threat of) of mandatory vaccination creates a twisted feedback loop descending into a conspiratorial mindset. Parents want certain the health and long life of their child, and anti-vaccine messaging challenges that certainty. Another commonly cited example of conspiracy theorizing that has appealed to base emotionality was the introduction of fluoride into public drinking water. Armfield (2007) found that antifuoridation literature provided numerous examples of biological and medical phenomena to stoke fear about its implementation, including poisoning, brain dysfunctions, arthritis, low intelligence, bone diseases, various cancers, kidney diseases, reproductive issues, AIDS, gastrointestinal problems, osteosarcomas, and perversely, increased tooth decay (6-7). Conspiracist literature claimed fluoride would ‘dumb down’ the population for the implementation of communism or to enhance profits for multi-national corporations (ibid). Crucially, they focused intently on ensuring that these claims were presented as certain, unquestionable claims about the harms of fluoridation. The strategy here is clear: use arguments that appeal to personal security and well-being, then dramatize your campaign as against ‘infringement[s] of personal freedom’ (Carstairs & Elder 2008:361). Once you have created that emotional opening, they become receptive to increased messaging.

The next step is to introduce complicated arguments about your topic that mimic academic journals or university classrooms. Appeal to an individual’s existential, epistemological need to learn the truth and assert certainty over the subject you have whipped

them into a frenzy over. Science has been demonstrated to be untrustworthy, so now one must take it upon themselves to restore scientific truth. Conspiracists aspire to restore science, to restore faith in the knowledge we hold (Achterberg et al 2017:705, Byford 2015:90).

Conspiracists strive for evidence, to prove they are the sensible ones, acutely aware they are judged based on standards established by academia and the intelligentsia (Barkun 2013:29).

Conspiracists will often employ the language of science, particularly the language of methodology making it difficult for laymen to differentiate between sound and unsound scientific claims (Carstairs & Elder 2008:357). Often, they will possess enough knowledge to distort and decontextualize scientific information to frame ‘settled’ science as anything but, simultaneously framing their analysis in the rhetorical aesthetic of science, evidence, and rationality (Mitchell 2019: 216). Oftentimes, they are adept at generating laundry lists of scientific argumentations, where so many claims are advanced, in quick repetition, that even if some can be proven as false, experts can’t address all of them (Armfield 2007:7). Jane & Flemming (2014) have illustrated how hyperlinking to an absurd number of different sources, either through the internet or through traditional footnotes, gives the appearance of validity that would require extensive digging to realize its falsity (45).

In addition to that, conspiracists can provide ‘independent experts’ to speak to their veracity of their claims and on the alleged orthodoxy of the mainstream consensus, when again further digging proves that said ‘expert’ has dubious credentials or viewpoints (47). Returning briefly to the previous example of the black box, few people have the background knowledge necessary for understanding the considerations undergirding scientific consensus. Fewer still are educated in the entire history of scientific reasoning, the scientific revolution, and the philosophy of science, the entire literature of that specific scientific field, and fewer still have the time and

opportunity to delve into it as adults. By presenting their arguments against scientific consensus in a way that aesthetically and rhetorically appears scientific itself, the laymen on the receiving end of conspiracist discourse lack the intellectual tools to understand what is presented to them. Once the conspiracists create an aura of uncertainty around conventional explanations, they reintroduce certainty by providing an exhausting amount of scientific content giving the shallow appearance of certainty when briefly examined.

Having established a scientific/mainstream consensus cannot be trusted, having primed the aspiration to science, rationality, and truth, conspiracist ideology must refute any potential information or explanation that threatens it. Illustrating how conventional accounts have explanatory gaps by illuminating ‘errant data’ (Oswald 2016), makes it rhetorically easy to dismiss. Conspiracists engage in the obfuscation of the truth; in their study on how discourse and news about the 2015/2016 Zika virus were spread over Reddit, Kou et al (2017) identified several discursive strategies that contribute more to obfuscation than illuminating truth such as “citing authoritative information selectively [...] imagining a scenario [...] proposing unknowable risks, casting doubts [...] deflecting the burden of proof” (Kou et al 2017:374). Rather than arguing positively, conspiracists rely heavily on obfuscation, refuting positive, certain claims, especially those that come from an official source, as immediately false (Wood 2017:513). This is followed by appeals to individual rationality; if any commonly accepted perspective is dismissed, individuals become “receptive to all forms of revisionism” (Barkun 2013:26). If commonly accepted knowledge can no longer be trusted, and I must do my own research to truly know anything, the only person whose perspective and understanding can be trusted is my own. Deeper still, if I am stigmatized for my belief system, it represents nothing less than an attempt to suppress the truth I am uncovering (ibid:28), I am the “courageous

independent scientist resisting orthodoxy” (Mitchell 2019:230). As Mitchell (2019) notes, “[conspiracy] commenters characterize themselves as critical thinkers who know better than to accept the official accounts from governments and other authorities” (ibid:231). By positioning themselves on the ‘critical thinker’ side of the argument, it becomes intellectually and rhetorically easy to write off anyone who attempts to defend a conventional account.

Since conspiratorial rhetoric has a “self-sealing quality” (Sunstein & Vermule 2009:14) to it, where it becomes difficult if not impossible to dislodge from an individual's cognitive landscape, the result is an ongoing loop of reinforced radicalization. Everything is suspect, and anything that contradicts my suspicions is placed there to undermine the truth and must be treated with even more suspicion. No information that comes from any institution can be trusted, and at any given moment I am bombarded with messaging that might influence my perceptions of reality. With everything previously assumed to be true completely disregarded and anything that supports the previously held truth suspect, the only cognitive recourse one has is to make increasingly absurd leaps in explaining what is happening and why. For Hofstadter (1967), there were arguments that one could make against water fluoridation or the Dodd bill – a gun control bill – that resemble conventional argumentation in politics (5). But the conspiracist is not concerned with conventional argumentation; they view these events through a catastrophic lens in which any government action is meant only to bring about a totalitarian rule in the latter case or to poison the population in the former. This is what Hofstadter refers to as the “big leap from the undeniable to the unbelievable” (37), in which a relatively uncontroversial statement is used as a springboard to absurd conclusions. For example, scientists often have a professional interest in reporting correct findings, therefore all scientists cover up evidence that contradicts their conclusions, or governments and health experts are pushing for the fluoridation of drinking water

and attempting to evade public input, therefore it must be an attempt to chemically weaken us, or finally, there is a great deal of confusing and conflicting information in various news media during the COVID-19 pandemic, or governments have sometimes imposed nonsensical restrictions in the name of fighting the pandemic, therefore this whole earth-shattering event this is made-up or blown out of proportion to expand government power. In this way, conspiratorial reasoning operates similarly to the ‘red pill’ of the alt-right manosphere (Dignam & Rohlinger 2019: 595), in which once you’ve accepted the truth about how the world ‘really is’ nothing can dissuade you from these notions and contradictory statements and evidence are dealt with through increasingly absurd leaps of logic.

2.5 Why Do We Believe Conspiracy Theories

In this section, I will discuss who engages with conspiratorial reasoning and why, and what they get from it. The answers to those questions are multi-faceted and nuanced, so I will stick here to broad outlines of themes identified in the literature. Three major reasons will be covered. Firstly, the 21st-century global system is complicated and deeply inequitable; these reasons are sociological. The second set of reasons explored in the literature focus on personality and cognitive traits; these reasons psychological or social-psychological reasons. Finally, there is a category of people who engage with conspiracists and conspiratorial reasoning not for social or psychological reasons but epistemological and personal reasons: these reasons make someone a ‘debunker’ (Jane & Flemming 2014). By examining these three dimensions of conspiratorial engagement, we shall come to see conspiracism as an intellectual style negotiating the boundaries of reason and truth, certainty, and uncertainty, through various channels.

2.5.1 Sociology: Mistrust & Uncertainty

The world is complicated, unjust, and inequitable. The masses and conspiracists are deeply aware of this fact. Remembering the importance of elite status in identifying conspirators,

that identification ensures an appeal to popular reasoning and consistent rhetorical strength. The world is complicated, strange, and increasingly unknowable because they made it that way. Elites control the mechanisms through which everyone comes to learn about the world. Mitchell (2019), in her study on the circulation of Zika virus conspiracy theories on Reddit referred to this as “institutional distrust” (226), which claims that all knowledge produced through the traditional scientific institutions is corrupted by corporate or government interference. This is exacerbated by the tendency of individuals within these institutions to exclude certain paradigms from the public debate (Miller 2002:52), regardless of the reasons for this occurring. Recall the black box from earlier; if a matter of public policy is seen as settled, assumed or certain without widespread buy-in or a clear elucidation of what is behind that conceptualization, the policy choice and those advocating for it become easy targets for conspiracist messaging. Consider that individuals in democracies are encouraged to engage in public decision-making and to debate ideas contentiously. Thus, any idea one is uncertain of being pushed as though it were universally agreed upon gives on the impression of conspiracy. Conspiracists deconstruct the front-stage presentation of scientific, political, economic, social, and cultural information that we are bombarded with daily to reveal “the social, economic, and political powers” (Harambam & Aupers 2015:477) lurking behind every mediated representation of reality. Knowledge or information that is presented as produced from a process of independent, disinterested, research and analysis is for the conspiracist further proof of the ideological power motivations behind such representations (ibid:473). To properly understand what is being presented and why you must examine it alongside the context in which it is produced within and think critically about the social, economic, and political forces acting upon it (ibid: 473); you must place it in a network.

Thus, because of this failure of our institutions of knowledge and information production, people are increasingly alienated from the institutions of knowledge and power that govern our everyday lives. Feeling alienated from the bureaucratic, economic, and technological systems that constitute our globalized world sparks “ontological insecurity” (ibid:29), where the only rationalistic recourse one has is to adopt the conspiratorial mindset which claims, “nothing is what it seems” (ibid). Thus, conspiracy theories become plausible cognitive maps that show what is ‘really’ going on behind the information projected into our eyes through screens, to “think the impossible totality of the contemporary world system” (Jameson, 1991: 38). So, the anomie experienced by individuals, often the less educated, results in the use of a conspiratorial mindset to restore a meaningful institutional order (Achterberg et al 2017:717). Conspiracy theorizing is the means through which the individual restores their sense of individuality against a collective system they neither admire nor understand as they resist at all costs (Melley 2002: 61). Our societies valorize critical thinking and individual inquiry, demanding that we form opinions on everything, and act based on said opinions, through political participation. In qualitative interviews with conspiracists, Harambam & Aupers (2015) had a participant who began his conspiracist journey when none of his economics professors could give him a definitive, clear answer on the question of where currency comes from and how it works mechanically (472). Thus, failure to give easily understandable answers to fundamental questions is evidence of dogma or conspiracy, instead of indicating that perhaps the realities of social life have no clear explanation.

One final reason people might start believing conspiracy theories is for “system justification” purposes (Jolley, Douglas & Sutton 2018). Put simply, when the status quo is threatened by external factors, individuals who for whatever reason have a vested interest,

economically, through race/gender/sexual hegemony, or religious priority institutionally, to maintain the present order may turn to conspiracy theorizing to organize the systemic threat into their pre-existing paradigmatic schema. Essentially, conspiracy theorizing can be used to deflect responsibility for societal ills away from the inherent features of the system and redirect it towards a small group and their malfeasance (ibid: 466). Furthermore, system threat may drive individuals towards conspiracy theorizing to protect a sense of control (ibid:470). This functions via a process of narrowing the scope and origin of societal problems, allowing conspiracy theorists to focus attention on a small group of malevolent actors rather than on social structures and systemic problems (ibid: 475), which for example means conspiracy theorizing justifies the system one lives in, offering the conspiracist a chance to critique their society while simultaneously exempting them from truly grappling with the “inherent limitations of their society” (ibid). Thus, studies in this field must examine a double-sided question; when is a conspiracy theory meant to ‘buttress’ the status quo: which means distinguishing sharply between “trust in governments” from “support for systems of government” (ibid)? To summarize “conspiracy theories may exonerate the system, just as blaming a driver for a car crash shifts blame from the car” (ibid).

2.5.2 Social Psychology

The second class of reasons why one might engage with a conspiracy theory is psychological. This set of reasons comes from literature in the field of social psychology, which uses questionnaires and statistical modeling to predict conspiratorial beliefs against several cognitive and personality constructs. A brief overview of the factors that have been identified as potentially correlated to (or suggested to correlate with) conspiracist ideation include “authoritarianism (Abalakina-Paap et al. 1999), feelings of powerlessness, low interpersonal trust, anomie (Goertzel 1994), uncertainty (Van Prooijen and Jostmann 2013), and, more

importantly for our discussion, a preference for Manichaeian narratives, which reduce events to a struggle between the good and the evil (Oliver and Wood 2014)” (Castanho et al 2017:426). Also prevalent are ‘strong imaginative ability’ (Bruder et al 2013:11), a need for uniqueness (Douglas & Sutton 2018: 271), a need for control (ibid:274), low education level (Douglas et al 2016:61), anthropomorphism (ibid:69), hypersensitive agency detection (ibid:71), and low critical thinking skills (ibid:73). These traits boil down to a generalized disposition of mistrust and uncertainty (Wood et al 2017:510), including “identification with a group that is under threat” (van Prooijen 2017:57). These traits also reduce quite neatly into a profile of a conspiracist as someone concerned and potentially even obsessed with their individuality, specifically of beliefs and opinions. Fears about autonomy and social power abide in conspiratorial narratives, and this is reflected in the social psychological research into the subject.

However, this vein of research should be treated with skepticism for several reasons. These studies are done through a process of questionnaires that what conspiracy theories participants endorse, their degree of endorsement, and the categories of conspiratorial beliefs they most subscribe to, correlating those responses against responses to questions about personality and cognitive traits to arrive at the relationship between endorsement, type, and extent of conspiratorial belief concerning the elucidated trait. This methodology, while useful at drawing attention to some personality traits that may be marginally useful to understanding a conspiracist’s personality profile, continuously adds factors simultaneously as these factors correlate less and less with conspiratorial belief, meaning over time the conspiracist profile becomes increasingly obscure (Byford 2014:6). These studies fail to consider “the creative potential, the dynamic, the interactive, and the narrative qualities of conspiracy theories” (Raab et al 2013:2), assuming a clear distinction “between an official truth and delusive idiosyncratic

explanations” (ibid). These attempts to seek out objective measurements of conspiratorial belief assume of their subject a higher degree of internal consistency, rigidity, and logic than is possessed. Conspiracy theories are not static, singular belief systems that individuals accept or reject wholesale, they are paradigmatic frames for interpreting events and information that change and shift as the informational environment that contextualizes them does (ibid, Franks et al 2017). Moreover, identifying traits that are present in the population merely indicates that any number of people could be conspiracists, not that everyone with that trait is (West 2018:55). Therefore, while these identified traits can help identify psychological manifestations of conspiratorial reasoning, it has very little to offer in terms of understanding the conspiracist mindset in objective terms.

2.5.3 Debunkers

This brief category sheds light on what conspiracist discourse offers to those who engage with it. The third reason people engage with conspiracy theorizing is to debunk and refute conspiracy narratives. Jane & Flemming (2014) were the first to identify conspiracy debunkers as an important angle for research into conspiracism. They note that debunking discourse, challenging conspiracy theories, and writing against them from a ‘rational’ perspective mimics conspiratorial rhetoric, from the grandiose tone to the tendency to view themselves as under attack from pernicious forces (3). So, the question is rather 'why do people engage with conspiratorial rhetoric on either side?', and that question shows the difference between those who argue a conspiracy exists and those who argue it does not is minimal. Conspiracists and anti-conspiracists are engaged in a “dialectical game” (ibid:9) that operates antagonistically to offer “consolation and an ego boost, as well as reasserting a sense of individual agency and empowerment” (ibid:71). Engaging in conspiratorial discourse offers conspiracists and anti-conspiracists alike a position of intellectual superiority because it proves them unique in their

ability to resist commonplace or intellectually easy conclusions. After all, they see deeper than those they argue against. The more antagonistic and heavy-handed the rhetoric of a debate becomes, the more likely it is that both sides of the argument mirror each other (ibid:89).

2.6 The Internet's Role in Conspiracy Dissemination

The internet's role in the rapid dissemination of conspiratorial narratives in the 21st century is a well-trodden aspect of the phenomena outside of the epistemological and ontological concerns of conspiracists. Jane & Flemming (2014) identified two significant ways in which the internet contributes to the 'development, circulation, and uptake of conspiracy theories' (ibid:43). Firstly, since it functions as a self-publishing medium with unrestricted access, information including public opinion, popular knowledge, gossip, and rumor spread near instantaneously, and secondly, the internet aggregates opinion in a visible manner, thus the more people believe or are talking about something, the more prevalent it becomes on the internet, and in particular social media. Bantimaroudis (2016) discusses this in the context of the chemtrails conspiracy – that posits contrails from airplanes are emitted deliberately for terraforming or poisoning. Even though the traditional media do not give airtime to the theory, it abounds on social media where traditional gatekeeping is non-existent and the group culture that emerges around the theory rejects any outside attempts at falsification. Indeed, the internet's ability to aggregate communities of the like-minded into a virtual community also plays a role (Barkun 2013:13), in which the members who frequent the groups increasingly find themselves unable to distinguish between mainstream and fringe viewpoints and sources (ibid:20). In digital spaces, conspiracists take advantage of a low-information environment, or an excessively abundant information environment to provide conspiratorial accounts of what is missing in the traditional news coverage (Shasavari et al 2020:4) as the absence of attention to the topic is proof of its reality.

Another angle to the problem of the internet in the dissemination of conspiratorial discourses is a reinforcing cycle of self-selection for both conventionalist and contrarian or conspiratorial information spaces. I've already discussed how conventionalist narratives in scientific fields hold a monopoly in the traditional gatekeepers of legitimate information, i.e. journals, newspapers, traditional media, etc. However, on the internet, anyone wishing to find a contrarian perspective can find it easily (Lewandowsky et al 2013:624), meaning that anyone can find information that confirms what they want to be told, rather than trudging through the complex, verbose, and extensive literature of that field. However, for scientific issues like climate change or the COVID-19 pandemic, there is no 'single unifying corpus of special or secret knowledge' (Shasavari et al 2020:16), thus conspiratorial narratives online involve varying degrees of positing and rank speculation to provide a single explanatory theory that uncovers 'what is going on' (ibid). This cycle is further reinforced by traditional news outlets, who find themselves reporting on varying social media conversations, if just to disprove them, perversely gives the theories exposure, and since traditional news media is covering it, it acquires an air of legitimacy (ibid:17). Even if that media outlet continuously repeats that the theory they are covering is false, they have given it credence as a legitimate position of debate by giving it attention (Jane & Flemming 2014, Epstein 1995). Just the mention of a conspiracy, projected into the retina via screen and through ears can root in the individual's paradigmatic framework.

2.7 Section Conclusion

Conspiracy theories are grand, totalistic theories that seek to disseminate awareness of the secret forces influencing everyday life. They posit that a secret cabal of elites is manipulating world affairs for some nefarious end and that they will go to any lengths to hide their involvement. The concept of conspiracy can be applied to any social, economic, political, or cultural topic, especially ones taking place against a backdrop of societal upheaval or change.

Conspiracists often employ a rhetorical strategy of maximizing confusion and uncertainty around a given topic, followed by appealing directly to an instinctual awareness of and aversion to threat, and then a rapid inundation of scientific/rational-seeming arguments, claims, and sources that attempt to make certain the conspiracists assertions, followed by a ruthless attack against any contradictory information. Conspiracist thrives off the epistemic uncertainty that permeates everyday issues and the informational landscape, including the internet. People can use conspiracy theories to reinforce their favorable opinion of the social order, allowing them to express favorable opinions for the way things are while casting blame on a small group of others for the way things are going, sidestepping serious consideration of widespread social problems. Many use the language of conspiracy, either for or against, as a way of feeling intellectually superior to others. There are some social-psychological constructs that can provide us a way of making sense of conspiracy theorists, but they must be viewed skeptically. Going forward, this established base can be used as a framework for going forward.

3. Research Site & Methodology

3.1 Reddit as a Research Site & R/Conspiracy

Reddit is a social media website ranked #19 on the Alexa global engagement ranking system as of April 18th, 2021 (Alexa 2021), which calls itself ‘the front page of the internet’ (liberationjunkie, 2016). Reddit is a “social news and discussion site” (Buyukozturk et al 2018:592) that aggregates links to other websites on its front page ‘r/all’ to demonstrate the highest trending topics and events on the platform at any given moment (Centivany 2016:4). Reddit users, henceforth ‘Redditors’ follow subforums dedicated to specific topics referred to as ‘subreddits’ or ‘sub’ for short, each one stylized with an ‘r/’ before the name (Suran & Kilgo 2017:1037). This means that anyone with a registered account on Reddit can contribute to discussions on a vast number of subjects if their contribution falls within the rules of that

subreddit. (Visser et al 2020:128). Reddit affords users the power to rate and rank discussions through an up-or downvoting tool that highlights the comments and posts that have higher levels of support (Buyukozturk et al 2018:592), while simultaneously burying others. The anonymous nature of Reddit accounts shields users from personal responsibility for the things they post. This is where the social value of Reddit appears; it affords users the freedom to participate in any discussion they want, and they are also free to contribute in any manner they chose, operates as the platform's main appeal and its source of ongoing critique.

Reddit has become infamous for the specific kind of intellectual and cultural communities it attracts. It has found outstanding success with 'geeks' and 'geek culture'; niche interests such as anime, cartoons, and video games find an audience and community excited to discuss them (Massanari 2017:331). The platform prizes longer form, text-based discussions, and interactions, and as a culture is "youthful, predominately male, and thirsty for content that is humorous, erotic, informative, and newsworthy" (Centivany 2016:4). Massanari (2017) has also noted that the proliferation of geek culture on the platform is indicative of the pervasiveness of 'hegemonic masculinity' on the platform. Squirrel (2019), in their study of two specific subreddits, found that both were majority male, the highest being 90% male (1915), not to mention that the majority were also university educated. Straub et al (2018) have found that the Reddit user base skews male, young, white, college-educated, lower-earning (although only slightly), liberal, and heavily online (1317). Furthermore, Kilgo et al (2018) have found that among users, men were more likely than women to post, same with older individuals, and those with a 'strong personality' (5). However, personality strength did not correlate with increased engagement (commenting, voting, reading), but those that valued news engagement were more like to comment on, vote on, or read any given post than they were to comment (6). It is

important to note that although Reddit is unrepresentative of the larger population, its value to social science research is as a discursive space where populations congregate to discuss a range of social, cultural, and political topics.

As was mentioned earlier, geek culture abounds on the website, but subreddits can range across any number of subjects or rhetorical positions, including r/gaming, r/science, and technology, r/worldnews, r/music, r/movies, r/askscience, r/explainlikeiamfive (Massanari 2017:331). Subreddits can be dedicated to specific pieces of content like movies, tv-series, music artists, or they can be dedicated to specific public figures like r/the_donald or r/contrapoints. People use Reddit for AMA's (ask me anything) where experts of public figures submit to questions from Redditors and try to answer them (Hara et al 2019:4). In the Web 2.0 era, Reddit is a platform many use to communicate with like-minded individuals to gain awareness about the world, search for new content or hobbies, and engage in public discourse (Centivany 2016: 2). This means that political discourse or regional discourses can find a home on Reddit. Over the 2016 U.S. Presidential election, there were subreddits for supporters of Hilary Clinton, Bernie Sanders, and Donald Trump, each with their own unique cultures and discourse that reflected the politics of their members (Roozenbeek & Palau 2017:10). There are subreddits for various diets, like r/paleo, or that discuss drugs for 'cognitive enhancement', like r/nootropics (Squirrel 2019:1911). Some subreddits discuss recreational drug use, like r/drugs, r/lsd, r/mdma, or r/psilocybin. There is r/Seattle for discussions of Seattle specific issues, including emergencies, the homeless population, tenant/property issues, and even traffic (Straub-Cook 2018:1324). The point is that subreddits will come to reflect the priorities and values of the specific topic to which it is dedicated and the users who frequent it. A cursory glance at r/Montreal for example shows

that conversation takes place in both official languages (English and French) and commenters will reply to comments in one official language with their primary language.

This ability to self-select a community that prizes specific forms of discourse has consequences. Firstly, the functionally infinite number of topics that have dedicated forums means there are communities for any ideological grouping/category one identifies with, providing fertile soil for ideological strengthening (Dosono et al 2017:66). Compounding on this, the practice of weaponizing downvotes to drown out dissenters, and the centrality of the karma tool (the ratio of up-votes to down-votes one receives) can motivate one to only comment if they are certain to be well-received (Squirrel 2019:1922). Furthermore, lack of deference to traditional informational gatekeepers, including traditional media, on Reddit by its users led to disastrous consequences in 2013, when Redditors discussing and disseminating information relating to the Boston Marathon Bombing, allowed personal information to spread widely, misidentified the bomber to the public after spreading their personal info (Suran & Kilgo 2017:1039). Reddit has also been a gathering place for problematic communities and a forum for spreading vitriolic content. It has been scrutinized for allowing misogynistic, racist, violent, and pornographic content to be freely disseminated across the platform (Kilgo et al 2018:2). Subreddits like r/thefapping, where nudes of female celebrities were shared without consent (ibid), or r/jailbait, where photos of teenage girls bordering on the age of consent were also disseminated (Centivany 2016:6). R/Braincells, a forum dedicated to the incel (involuntarily celibate) movement was a space dedicated to the dissemination of misogynistic and racist messaging by young men of all races who felt entitled to sexual experiences with women (Chang 2020). Massanari (2017) referred to this allowance of deeply problematic content justified under

the label of ‘free speech’ (341) as a toxic techno-culture, one that thrives because of a culture that prizes a geek male paradigm combined with a lack of platform moderation.

The relationship between Reddit’s aspirations as a haven for free expression and the eventual necessity of clamping down on objectionable content has been the locus of controversy for the platform. The unilateral decision taken by the Reddit staff to ban r/jailbait was seen by numerous members of the site, even those who never visited that subreddit, to feel like the company betrayed its values (Centivany 2016:9). Being viewed by its users as a space for free speech, seeing the platform cave to public pressure to close offensive forums appears as a violation of user trust. People do not want to be silenced and fear the suggestion that silencing might come for them. Another, niche form of this dispute takes the form of moderator-subreddit conflicts, where moderators are unsure about what rules to set and how to enforce them, or whether to set any rules at all (Squirrel 2019:1919). Furthermore, there is potential for conflicts with the moderators themselves, as the authority to moderate means that moderators are empowered to unduly influence the discourse or engage in flagrant self-promotion (ibid:1921). Ideologically extreme communities use absolutist, dehumanizing language about those they view as outsiders, like incels claiming that women like rape, are cognitively inferior to men, and are referred to as “femoids” (Chang 2020) on r/Braincels, another blocked subreddit. During Gamergate, Redditors on that eponymous subreddit transitioned from discourses about anti-censorship, gaming industry ethics, gamers as consumers, and consumer power in the early days to more extreme othering and adversarial framing as they became more isolated, publicly criticized, and censored on Reddit more broadly (Buyukozturk 2018:598). Subreddits easily become forums for contestation and aggression should they involve contentious social or political topics populated by those who feel aggrieved.

However, before moving on, it would be useful to briefly examine the research already done on r/conspiracy to set the stage for my risky account. On the topic of conspiracy theory dissemination and discussion on Reddit, specifically R/Conspiracy, several studies have been conducted to try and understand how conspiratorial discourse is operationalized and understood on this subreddit. These studies utilized quantitative methodologies to categorize the topics discussed and sentiments expressed by scrapping large quantities of data from the forum and analyzing it through complex algorithmic formulas that quantify and separate words into different categories that the researchers assigned differing values and labels to. Challenging the assumed monologicality of conspiracy beliefs, Klein et al (2018) posit that there are varying degrees of interest in different issues that are not reducible to monological explanations. Using statistical analysis to create a topic model that distinguishes between 12 different types of users – skeptics, anti-imperialists, downtrodden, true believers 1, patriots, truthers, pseudoscientists, true believers 2, anti-Semites, indignant, Redditors, and uncategorized - and 15 different topics- delineated through word clusters - they conclude that “individuals have particular interests to which they connect events if they can (ibid:10). In a similar study, Klein et al (2019) used a different data set from the subreddit, and instead of identifying the topics conspiracists care about, they analyzed the words for sentiment, identifying social-psychological factors at play in r/conspiracy. They identified 6 factors identified through sentiment analysis, which are ‘powerlessness/outlet for negative feelings, defiance and distrust, maintenance of self-esteem, personal values and individuation, psychopathology, and conspiratorial worldview’ (ibid:7). Both works contribute to a growing academic literature in the field on the multi-dimensionality of conspiratorial paradigms (ibid:12). Samory & Mitra (2018) use similar methods, identifying narrative constructs by analyzing framing over 10 years in the subreddit (ibid:3). They use a

complex formula as part of their analysis they call ‘agent-action-target’ (who-what-against whom) to break down more succinctly what conspiracists are discussing (topic) and what the narrative-construct behind it is (agent-action-target) (ibid:3). The topic categories they identify are ‘health and environment, US domestic policy, Military intelligence and surveillance, global issues, dramatic events, alternative media, religion/the occult/the paranormal’ (ibid:10-12). The different narrative motifs they identify denote the following separate motifs; ‘fear of the foreign, blaming corrupt powers, mistrust in official information, perceived threats to life and nature, the similarity between topics’ (ibid:12-18). This is a ‘social computing’ study (ibid:19) that views conspiratorial discourses as multi-dimensional. Suffice it to say there is a plenty of thematic and analytic content within these papers that clearly define their categories and reasonings behind them, but that is of no concern to us. These papers provide interesting accounts of the vast range of debates and discourses that take place under the label ‘conspiracy’ but they do not provide an account how these groups feel for either the participant or the observer. For all the topics, sentiments, and motifs they identify through complex mathematical formulae, they do not explain how debates unfold or the arguments people make in response to each other. They do not personally read and code every comment in their dataset over their periods, seeing how debates shift over time. Their studies do not capture the ephemerality of these debates, the ways in which specific ideas are presented and responded to directly.

To summarize, Reddit is a digital platform on which a small but complicated academic literature has developed. Reddit is a space for open discussion, prizing informative content and providing a haven for those who wish to establish their own safe space for discussion and debate about their interests. However, this set-up has allowed for toxic communities to take root, ones that emphasize ideological reinforcement and dehumanizing othering, where those who are

outside the zone of acceptability can be subjected to vitriolic attack for daring to exist in the setting. The contestation that Reddit prizes, the focus on text-based, informative discourse makes it a productive setting for a Latourian study. These themes were echoed in the research already done on r/conspiracy, as a community that clearly desires an open space to have a wide range of informative and contested discussions on relevant social topics, but where the lax approach to moderation has allowed a community that thrives on negativity to thrive. Franks et al (2017), found evidence of anti-Semitism, and Samory & Mitra (2018) found evidence of nativism xenophobia. To add to this body of literature, however, I will take a direct look at the conversations that take place on this forum over a few days, rather than using quantitative methodologies to arrive at large, statistically complicated findings.

3.2 Latour & Actor-Network Theory

First however, I will explore the main methodo-theoretical framework that will be applied to this study going forward. Bruno Latour's 2004 book *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* details an approach to social science research useful for exploring a culture that thrives in digital space. This section will provide an overview of Latour's Actor Network Theory, specifically to what he refers to as the five sources of uncertainty (Latour 2005:22), and how they will be applied to my study of R/conspiracy.

The relevance Latour has for these purposes is clear; Latour seeks to problematize sociological research that approaches the social aspect of its subject(s) as "a stabilized state of affairs" that can be operationalized to "account for some phenomenon" (ibid:1). In the field of conspiracy theory scholarship, this manifests in attributing conspiratorial beliefs to all number of 'social' factors and the meta-language of theory, including 'anomie' (Achterberg et al 2017), 'system-justification' (Jolley et al 2018), 'biopolitics' (Hausman 2017), suspicions about epistemic authority and hegemony (Harambam & Aupers 2015, Hellinger 2003), or the

numerous social psychological factors that might lead one to adopt a conspiratorial worldview. Jane & Flemming (2014), among others, sought to locate the conspiratorial phenomenon through several social factors like the 'reliance on expert testimony' (Jane & Flemming 2014, Armfield 2007), a cultural incitement to rationality (Jane & Flemming 2014,), globalization (Shaffer 2015, West & Sanders 2003, Hellinger 2003, Melley 2002,), ontological insecurity (Harambam & Aupers 2015), and the over-abundance of information on the internet (Phadke et al 2021, Bantimaroudis 2016, Wood & Douglas 2015, Jane & Flemming 2014). From a Latourian perspective, the issue with these accounts is that they take the 'social' to be the cause of the phenomena, rather than a consequence. People adopt conspiratorial beliefs for X reason or from Y premise, which originate from Z theoretical framework from the academic vernacular. When conspiracists make a claim about the nature of the world, they are making claims about "the power-knowledge nexus" (Harambam & Aupers 2015), "hegemony" (Hellinger 2003), or "individualism" (Melley 2002). The fault here is that conspiracists are assumed to exist and then mobilized to prove a theoretical position on the cultural, political, and social field, rather than taking the conspiracists at their word about what the social universe has become in their eyes (Latour 2005) without explaining it away. I am using Latour here to unsettle the circular reasoning of academic literature on conspiracy theorists that works like this; individuals adopt a conspiratorial outlook due to institutional facts of the epistemic, geopolitical, economic, cultural and social universe that are generating a epistemic crisis (see above). But why is there an epistemic crisis, because people are adopting conspiratorial outlooks about the above facts, rooted in scholarly language.

Latour's purpose for the book is to establish a method for examining the validity of truth claims within the field of social science: the 'science of the social' (ibid:5). Rather than single-

mindedly placing this research within an assumed social context, I must focus my efforts on the ‘tracing of associations’ (ibid). Therefore, my study of conspiracy theorizing on Reddit will analyze the “peculiar movement of re-association and reassembling” (ibid:7), as the conspiracists and anti-conspiracists engage in an argument with each other. For Latour, any proper Actor-Network Theory (from now on ANT) account must ‘follow the actors themselves’ (ibid:12) and to learn from them what life in the collective feels like to them, and what methods, associations, and ideas have they established to make sense of it all. However, this paper will not seek to create a complete actor-network account. Instead, my goal is to focus on the aspects of Latour’s theory that allows us to sketch the controversies themselves and the connections between them, allowing the actors to shape their cosmos (ibid:23).

Latour posits questions and intellectual orientations that I must incorporate into a proper account of this phenomenon in question. For Latour, the five major uncertainties represent the nuance that exists in the actor's account of their social universe, in the associations they draw, or whether the uncertainty resides in the observer, and the account they provide. The reason for this narrow focus on this part of Latour’s theory is multi-fold. One, the excessive size of my dataset forces us to narrow down the scope of the project. The second is that since conspiracy theories take advantage of the epistemological uncertainties of modern life, framing uncertainty as the central designation for this study maximizes the analytical potential, specifically because there is uncertainty in the actor's sketch of their worldview and the sketch of said worldview that will provide. These uncertainties will allow me to decenter the advanced theoretical language used by the educated to explain conspiracy theories and theorists without touching on what they do for their adherents.

Briefly, I'm going to touch upon the uncertainties. The first is the nature of groups or simply put the various ways one or many individuals come to be given or assume an identity (ibid: 22). The second is the nature of the action or how any course of action can displace original goals or result in unwanted or unforeseen consequences, and how the theoretical meat of in understanding action is the importance assigned to action by actors (ibid). The third is the nature of objects, ensuring that agencies are not missed because they reside in non-human actors, and that participation in generating associations is not prima facie excluded (ibid) on that basis. The fourth one deals with the nature of facts, prescient for my purposes, and here deals with links between the natural sciences and their commonly accepted ideas relating to the rest of society, i.e., how scientific facts are interpreted and acted upon within the rest of society (ibid). The fifth and final source of uncertainty, one which is also useful for these purposes is the types of studies done under the label of social science, as for Latour it is unclear that social sciences can be called precisely empirical (ibid). However, the final product must seek to be a risky account, where the dialectical shifts between objective and subjective are balanced across the previous 4 uncertainties to provide the widest account possible of how the social appears to these actors.

3.2.1 The First Uncertainty – The Nature of Groups

Starting with the first uncertainty, which deals with whom I am studying. Given that it is a mistake for Latour that this group be named from the outset, I will follow the controversies about the group participants claim to belong to, participate in, and why, and trace the controversies about what constitutes membership in said group. Group relation is a process of shifting ties, in which groups are consistently made and unmade over the course of events (ibid:28). Latour succinctly defines this as 'no group, only group formation' (ibid:29), meaning that instead of assuming pre-existing labels for different groupings, it's important to identify the

controversies surrounding the applications of different labels and definitions for groups (ibid:31). For example, as per Latour's example, are European leaders thinking as "Europeans" or are they thinking as 'German, French, Dutch, Italian, Spanish' leaders (ibid:27)? What would define the terms of thinking within either framework or who is doing the defining? Furthermore, I will ensure we are not relying on analytic, academic short hands to do the explaining for the actors (ibid:30). Any grouping, even conspiracy theorists, exists as the result of several group makers, talkers, and holders across many different groups, all engaged in a continuous process of defining and redefining both the in and outgroup (ibid:32). I am further required to position myself "one reflexive loop behind those they study" (ibid:33). Therefore, I must avoid the mistakes of the academics in the previous section, and refrain from applying theoretical concepts to the actors.

Before moving on, I must briefly define a few terms and rules relevant to this and further uncertainties. Actors, for Latour, are summarized as those who are "made to act by many others" (ibid:46). Everyone is an actor, because they are made to act by other forces in society, as will be seen when arriving at the second and third uncertainties. For my purposes, actors are those who post in r/conspiracy and those who are explicitly identified by the posters. I begin this uncertainty by tracing controversies about whom group formation includes and excludes. Latour provides 4 steps to maximize the analytic potential for this uncertainty. Firstly, I must identify the spokespeople; who are the actors explicitly providing an account of themselves (ibid:31)? While their accounts will differ, groups can only be formed through an ongoing discourse between-group makers, talkers, and holders (ibid:31). Secondly, groups will always form against an anti-group, and out-group for which to compare themselves against, and the identification of this outgroup will always contribute to their mapping of the social universe. Thirdly, the group

spokespeople will always seek to continuously redefine themselves against external pressure (ibid:32). Fourthly, and most importantly, I must include the social scientists and academics who write as spokespeople for the group, for they also play a role in perpetuating the group's existence (ibid). Actors within groups have the same job as the social scientists, the tracing of social bonds.

Group formations have no ostensive definition, that is no demonstrative definition (ibid:34). Instead, groups are defined performatively, by the manners and ways they act in the name of their group (ibid). Groups must constantly be maintained with efforts and action, i.e., performance of the group identity to continue to exist. Therefore, for an ANT study, I will merely trace the performances made in the name of group identification to learn of the association's actors draw between themselves and the world. Since action is required to maintain group identity, the meanings of the group identity are transferred through intermediaries and mediators, the next two important terms to define for my ANT study. Intermediaries are those nodes of the social universe through which meaning is transferred without translation; a 'black box' through which input predicts output (ibid:39). For example, a computer or a banal academic presentation are intermediaries. Mediators are those actors through whom meaning is translated and for which input does not predict the output. For this, one can imagine how gossip moves through a social grouping, with the original meaning and intention changed with each acting node it passes through (ibid). To summarize, for the first uncertainty, I avoid applying academic frameworks and conceptualizations to the subject matter. I will allow the discourse of r/conspiracy to speak for itself, and will humbly report on what I see there, rather than summarize what I think is there with a meta-language of academic theory. What are the processes of group and anti-group identification that are present on R/conspiracy? Who are the

actors taking on a mediator or intermediary in the community? Who are the mediators and intermediaries associated with the social universe for the participants on r/conspiracy? How do I maximize the mediating potential for the actors, allowing them the power to change the account as they do something?

3.2.2 The Second Uncertainty – The Nature of Actions

The second uncertainty, entitled ‘action is overtaken’ (ibid:45), refers to allowing the inquiry to capitalize on the range of controversies about who exactly is acting, what they are doing, and what that action accomplishes. Since people are never certain of exactly what makes us act or why they chose to act in a specific manner at any specific time, I will conceptualize action as the result of competing agencies (ibid: 52). We act in accordance with our interpretation of situational context, and therefore the focus of study should be on justifications given for specific actions rather than the actions themselves. This is true for justifications one gives for their actions or justifications given for the actions of others, whether those others be individuals, groups, organizations, or institutions. Capitalizing on these varying ‘figurations’ behind actions allows us to reach abstractly into the nature of the action itself rather than what specific actions people take and why. What is important are the ideas behind action provided by the members of the forum.

Thus, for these purposes, I will not assume the intention behind the actions of actors. Also, it should not be assumed that actors always clearly comprehend the motivations behind their actions (ibid:50), only that they can explain better the perceptions behind their actions. Actors must be allowed to explain for us the empirical metaphysics that undergird their conception of reality. At any moment, a conception of action is being proposed, actors are crediting some agencies with excessive power and other agencies with minimal power. I will merely trace the emphasis placed on certain agencies within a given controversy.

Since agencies must be visible to be considered such, anything not accounted for (invisible) is not an agency and must be included (ibid: 53). The figurations behind actions and agencies, whether they are ideo- or anthropomorphic will be sought. In the context of conspiracist discourse, is the agency (actor/actant) behind a given person, organization, or group like President Trump, The Democratic Party, politicians or is it some vague, faceless force, like socialism, fascism, capitalism, or Zionism? Do the actors attribute a high degree of agency to themselves or are they the victims of social circumstance (ibid:54)? The different ways actors figure they and others can be made to do things is the salient question. In this way, I will treat agencies and actants as mediators, as forces that cause other actors to act in ways inconsistent with the input. Just because one thing happens does not mean it has a clear cause, therefore the second uncertainty deals with the confusion around who is acting and why (ibid:62).

3.2.3 The Third Uncertainty – The Nature of Objects

The third source of uncertainty, ‘objects too have agency’ (ibid:65) means that objects must be included in the assessment of the same network of associations that humans and organizations make up. Furthermore, limiting the understanding of ‘the social’ to only person-person interactions would be tautological, as it would imply that the social could be defined solely through the act of socializing (ibid). Thus, if an object makes a difference in an actor's behavior, and this difference is detectable, that object has agency it enacts onto actors. Non-human forces do not dictate actions to actors; no account of selected phenomena is complete without including analysis of the role objects play in the construction and operation of the phenomena in the network. However, objects must enter the accounts of actors themselves, or else be rendered invisible (ibid:79), but since objects have no voice outside of their relationship to humans, the impact they have on human action must be considered. Also, as with earlier uncertainties, I must avoid applying academic and philosophical theories of object-human

relations to the objects in the study, instead focusing on their entanglements with actors and the actor's interpretations of those entanglements (pg 84). What objects are bestowed agency by the users of r/conspiracy and how does this agency change the behavior of the users.

Objects must be treated as mediators, through which human actors transfer meaning and association onto other actors (ibid:71). Objects are needed for action; they might authorize, influence, suggest, block, render possible/impossible, forbid, communicate (ibid:72). Therefore, my account of the social of conspiratorial associations is incomplete with examining the role objects and artifacts have in generating action. This is done by refusing to transcend a 'subject-object dialectic' (ibid:76), explaining the assemblage that both are a part of. Objects can be made to talk by following these rhetorical steps; studying the innovations of experts and how objects contribute to that, accounting for the distance between actors and objects in knowledge, distance, and time, examining accidents and breakdowns of objects where human action is not the causality but is impacted, and finally, understanding objects through history, through the purposes they served in a previous era.

3.2.4 The Fourth Uncertainty – Matters of Fact vs. Matters of Concern

The 4th uncertainty deals with 'matters of fact vs matters of concern', where Latour notes that ANT started with the expression 'social construction of scientific facts' (ibid:88). It is important to note that even if something is constructed it does not equal false: it merely means there is a subjectively constructed process that goes on behind the scenes of science to determine what can be publicly declared true or false. Since for Latour the social sciences had failed to understand the social construction of scientific facts, it is evident that they failed elsewhere (ibid:94). Social scientists believed they could point to scientific facts, illustrate there were social considerations that went into delineating fact from fiction, and therefore science was a fabrication (ibid:90). The problem for sociologists (and conspiracy theorists) is that the scientific

establishment's response to this is a resounding yes; simply put, to generate conclusive findings, you have to construct a study based on a contrived hypothesis that originates in answered questions from previous findings which were themselves the results of constructed studies (ibid:90). So, sociology and the study of the social can not account for how hard, objective science is done, but a tracing of associations can account for how science impacts the rest of the social order.

This is where the distinction between matters of fact and matters of concern comes in. Matters of fact deal with only the irreducible claims that can be made about the material world, whereas matters of concern deal with what should be made of these facts and what goes on around them (ibid:115) as well as the social and political contexts in which matters of fact are arrived at what should be done about them. For instance, there is only one way to describe the biological and physiological way in which an embryo is fertilized, develops into a fetus, and is born a baby (a matter of fact) whereas there are numerous, competing theories and ideas about how to best raise a child (ibid:117). To put it even more boldly, one can see the difference between matters of fact vs matters of concern in the names of various fields including “physical and human geography, physical and cultural anthropology, biological psychiatry and psychoanalysis, material and social archaeology, and so on (ibid:117). Therefore, I will analyze how a matter of fact (reality) becomes multiple as it is deployed through a network of differing viewpoints; once shifted to the analysis of “*worlds* of matters of concern” attention is turned to the ontology of reality the participants are generating (ibid:116-117) As will be shown later, conspiracy theorizing generates this multiplicity by shifting matters of fact into matters of concern, by translating scientific facts through the mediating framework of conspiracy.

So, as my study follows matters of concern in the associations drawn by the various mediating actors I am exposed to, the following statements on Latour's 'to-do list' for following matters of concern will be considered (ibid:118). Scientific facts are fabricated and thus it is necessary to follow the facts as they are produced and multiply the sites where they are made visible (ibid:118). Fact-making is no longer limited to scientific labs as they are increasingly in contact with everyday life, rendering ties traceable (ibid). Seizing the controversies around scientific explanations and experiments allows us to fully trace the metaphysics and ontologies of the actors I am studying (ibid:119). Finally, the increasingly public debate between matters of fact and matters of concern must be accounted for. Various institutions across law, government, and media are increasingly responsible for negotiating -that is, acting as mediators- the debates around facts and concerns in the public sphere (ibid:119).

3.2.5 The Fifth Uncertainty – Writing Risky Accounts

The final source of uncertainty is 'writing down risky accounts' (ibid:125), in which great care is taken to directly transcribing actors into the account and making them the key authority. My accounts should treat each actor as doing something, forcing the account to move in a different direction, changing the nature of the object as it does. The goal is to capture the movement, the circularity, and the energy of the object or actors. I will allow actors to be mediators, directly impacting the outcome of the account. The goal is to straddle the line between objective representation and subjective artificiality. This is where the word network comes into ANT – the empirical point-to-point connections that must be traced, leaving aside anything absent in said connections, and focusing on the ephemerality of the network (ibid:132). For this study, the risky account will be the space where the claims about conspiracy theories made in the literature are compared against the data set, with the previous four sources of uncertainty as frames of analysis. However, merely situating the account within the theoretical

framework or background of the literature on conspiracy theorizing would not be sufficient for a risky ANT account. I will treat myself, the actors (including previously cited scholars) as mediators, where each one changes the meaning, the nature, and the direction of the account. Each actor changes the way other actors are interpreted, where no conclusive claim to the overarching social context will be made, just an endless series of accounts that illustrate the associations of the conspiracist understanding of the social.

So, to summarize what will go into my actor-network account of r/conspiracy, I will follow the zones of contestation that can be found in a raw analysis of R/conspiracy. I will do this by focusing on the 5 uncertainties in their posts, comments, and links. What do they define as constituting a conspiracy theorist, who is excluded or included in that, and how are these distinctions negotiated and maintained? What personal actions do they undertake/promote, what do they make of the actions of others, and again, how do they negotiate the meaning behind different actions? What objects loom large in their imagination and why? What do these objects offer these individuals and what do they associate with them? What do they think of the tools they use to communicate with each other? What are their matters of concern as they relate to specific matters of fact? What kinds of discourses around matters of concern generate more engagement than others, and what are the zones of debate within these concerns? Are there controversies about widely believed matters of facts? The goal is to write a risky account that considers academic conjecture alongside participant vocalizing, not for understanding conspiracists per se, but rather to critique the academic literature. With this premise, I am not setting out to do a straight Latourian analysis, rather I am using Latour's framework around the uncertainties to account for the ever-shifting nature of conspiracism in the digital age unaccounted for in the academic scholarship.

3.3 The Paper Going Forward

So, to bring all this together – Reddit, Actor-Network Theory, and conspiracy theories – the goal and outline of this project is clear. By analyzing scrapped Reddit data over the course of 4 days, reading every single thread to identify the zone of discourse, I hope to elucidate the true feeling of engaging with conspiracy discourse in the digital space. By witnessing the kinds of issues that are discussed and debated under the word ‘conspiracy’ I hope to see with more perspective the exact role conspiracism plays in our political culture. By focusing on the uncertainties identified by Latour, I hope to paint a picture of what conspiracy looks like to those who invoke it, by tracing the associations conspiracists draw between elements of the social network. By immersing myself in this discourse, I hope to understand the values and symbolic meanings are put forward by those who engage with conspiracy theories. The final hope, however, is to locate the degree relationality between the academic literature on the field and the field itself.

4. Tracing the Conspiracy

4.1 Data Gathering & Starting to Trace

The original data collection portion of this assignment was to scrap all threads and comments on r/conspiracy from October 27th, 2020, to November 11th, 2020. However, upon seeing the expansive data set, a decision was made to narrow the dataset down to include only October 29th, 2020, to November 1st, 2020. This date range was chosen because it represented 4 days immediately prior to the 2020 American elections (excluding November 2nd), and it was thought that this dataset would yield the most prescient collection for comprehending the conspiratorial mindset in a snapshot of the time. Furthermore, the dataset for November 3rd and 4th, election day and the day after, were double in usual size. At the end of the data analysis period, 4 days of data had been coded by hand, totaling 2169 unique threads and 56382

individual comments. Correspondingly, thousands of links to unique websites including mainstream news articles, government websites, conspiracy websites, scientific reports, videos, Twitter posts, images, and others were collected as well.

Given this vast, expansive data set and the fact that it was coded by hand, it will be difficult to make conclusive, empirical claims about r/conspiracy and the discourse that takes place there. Therefore, there is an intuitive advantage to using Latour's actor-network theory to trace the associations present on r/conspiracy. Firstly, through emphasizing uncertainty, conspiracy theorists engage in a process of "connecting the dots" (Van Prooijen, Douglas & De Inocencio 2018), and conducting this analysis of r/conspiracy based on a similar thematic tracing seems obvious. Secondly, with the expansive data set, I use this theory-driven methodology to trace the topics of conversation and follow the types of associations made by the members of the space as they engage in the discursive process, but only as they pertain to the uncertainties. This provides a useful narrowing framework, otherwise it would be nearly impossible to organize effectively. By tracking these ideas, concepts, individuals, and events as they are mentioned and in which contexts they are mentioned, I can explore the conversations occurring under the topical label of 'conspiracy'. This allows us to generate something like Latour's 'oligoptica' (Latour 2005: 181), getting as big of a picture as possible without losing focus by attempting to situate findings within an overarching theoretical framework.

The immediate discovery when starting this research process was how wide-ranging the discursive potential for conspiratorial discourse can be. On r/conspiracy individuals discuss any social, political, economic, or cultural issue from various perspectives and paradigms under the thematic framework of conspiracy. Conversation occurs as each anonymous poster, seeing the content that has preceded on any given thread, writes out an argument based on the internal

associations and conceptualizations they hold on the subject. As all topics can be understood through a conspiratorial lens, and since everyone shares their thoughts based on previously held conceptions, conversations are difficult to follow, topically shifting at a moment's notice or devolving into ad hominem attacks when one feels misunderstood or that others are deliberately insulting them. However, this does not mean that certain discursive trends can not be identified within the conversations. In the next section, I will begin with an overview of commonly mentioned individuals, ideas, and themes to explore and elaborate on as I discuss r/conspiracy.

4.2 The Broad Traces – Figures, Topics, & Texts

The easiest kind of associations to trace are those that are publicly known. Films, books, and public figures are mentioned quite frequently depending on the conversation being had. Past American presidents and their families, including the Trumps, the Bidens, the Obamas, the Bushes, and the Clintons are mentioned quite frequently. Global politicians like German Chancellor Angela Merkel, U.K. Prime Minister Boris Johnson, Chinese President Xi Jinping, and Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau are occasionally raised. Other commonly invoked figures are common in conspiratorial discourse, like Bill Gates, the Rockefellers, the Rothschilds, Alex Jones, David Icke, Princess Diana, Kurt Cobain, and JFK are mentioned with regards to the specific conspiracy theories that involve them or as purveyors of conspiracist messaging. Other public figures that exist in public life across various fields that have a heightened presence on r/conspiracy are Nancy Pelosi, Anthony Fauci, Kamala Harris, Bernie Sanders, Tucker Carlson, Tom Hanks, and Joe Rogan. Notable authors including George Orwell, Aldous Huxley, Saul Alinsky, Edward Bernays, and Gustav le Bon are mentioned when individuals wish to invoke their writings as part of an argument they want to make. Furthermore, references to the philosophers Marx, Nietzsche, Hegel, Plato, Aristotle, and Socrates find credence in this group.

Film references are common here, with *The Matrix* (1999) being by far the most common. Most often, the Matrix will be referenced as an example-*cum*-proof that reality is not as it appears. Other conspiratorially minded fictitious films including *They Live* (1988), *Men in Black* (1997), *Kingsman: The Secret Service* (2014), *Nightcrawler* (2014), *V for Vendetta* (2005), The 007 franchise, and *Children of Men* (2006) are invoked when a user seeks to link the film's themes to real-world events. Documentaries like *Loose Change* (2005), *Zeitgeist* (2007), *Vaxxed* (2016), *We Need to Talk About Sandy Hook* (2014), *Hitler: The Greatest Story Never Told* (2013), *September 11: The New Pearl Harbour* (2013) are shared and disseminated throughout the group to encourage learning about conspiracies and how to think conspiracy more broadly. While the documentary films encourage a form of critical thinking about a specific topic, the fictional films that are referenced more frequently start from a conspiratorial concept dramatized but presented in relatable terms. In reference to an impending COVID-19 lockdown in Britain, many individuals referenced the film for *V for Vendetta*, specifically the quotation "Remember, remember the 5th of November" (McTeigue 2005) in response to an impending lockdown in the U.K. beginning on November 5th (BBC, 2020).

Popularly mentioned books include the Bible, *1984* (Orwell, 1949), *Brave New World* (Huxley 1932), *Animal Farm* (Orwell 1945), *Fahrenheit 411* (Bradbury 1953), *Metamorphosis* (Kafka, 1915), *A Clockwork Orange* (Burgess, 2001), and *Dune* (Herbert 1965). Fictional dystopias tend to receive a great deal of attention because, like fictional films, they provide a comprehensive conspiratorial worldview that is easily accessible for popular consumption. However, when newcomers to the subreddit ask for books that go into detail about specific conspiracies or the conspiratorial worldview more broadly, common recommendations include *Behold a Pale Horse* (Cooper 1991), *Manufacturing Consent* (Chomsky 1988),

Propaganda (Bernays 1928), *Crystalizing Public Opinion* (Bernays 1923), and *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* (Le Bon 1896). One thread provided a large list of books detailing the damage of porn and libertine sexuality, including books entitled *Your Brain on Porn* (Wilson 2014), *The Virile Powers of Superb Manhood* (MacFadden 1900), and *The Way of the Superior Man* (Deida 2008). The writings of noted public relations expert and propagandist Edward Bernays hold a special place in the forum. Since they are written about unseen influences within the world of messaging in sales and politics, they are taken as proof that the processes described in Bernays' work are conducted on the population at large on a hidden but extraordinarily grand scale. The virtue of their existence, for the users of r/conspiracy, is taken to indicate the processes they describe are intentional on a supreme level. Two specific books written by WEF President Klaus Schwab, *The 4th Industrial Revolution* (2016) and *The Great Reset* (2020) are held up as examples of the elite global cabal's plan for a totalitarian, technocratic, one-world government, especially the latter as it was released during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Topics on r/conspiracy include the entirety of mainstream political discourse. The 2020 American elections, specifically the presidential election between former President Donald Trump and President Joe Biden, the way various media institutions covered it or the actions of social media giants like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and Reddit in moderating content, and finally the various scandals about the presidential candidates and their families, including Hunter Biden, the son of President Joe Biden and an alleged laptop containing compromising material. The other major topic of conversation was the COVID-19 pandemic, but this umbrella topic can be broken down into several different categories of discussion, including lockdowns (their 'true' purpose and their consequences), mask mandates in public spaces, the origins and purpose of the

pandemic, the story behind the number of cases or deaths, alongside pre-existing conspiratorial worldviews about our healthcare system and 'Big Pharma'.

Different forms of social and cultural upheaval play a large role in the discussions. Black Lives Matter and racial progress movements more broadly are frequently discussed and framed as being stoked by elites who wish to sow conflict. Progress for women in their professional and personal lives alongside greater freedom and visibility for LGBTQ identities are discussed as ways to weaken the population to make them ripe for dominance by the global cabal. Alleged pedophilia among the political, business and social elites is discussed as well, and often pedophilia is weaponized to frame specific actors as virtuous while simultaneously framing other actors as evil in a Manichean manner. Politics as a general topic is discussed in one of two ways; either as a contest to prove which 'party' is worse than the other as a discursive style of negative partisanship (Abramowitz & Webster 2016) or by disavowing the entire process of politics and casting the true problem to one of the rich elites against a hardworking and virtuous populous. Media institutions are also fiercely critiqued for their role in setting the public agenda through framing or outright ignoring certain events. Social media companies are scrutinized for moderating content on their platforms, which is seen as a violation of free speech. Which media sources can be trusted is also a topic of discussion, as users jockey to post what they view as the most reliable coverage of any given topic they can? Entertainment media, including movies and television shows, are accused of being platforms for the elite cabal to normalize their eventual goals, and the most frequent invocation of this phenomena, referred to as 'predictive programming' is *Songbird*, a dystopian thriller film by Michael Bay about a pandemic in the year 2024. Critiques of economic inequality abound throughout the posts, as well critiques of how science produces knowledge. Finally, anti-Semitism abounds in the space across many threads.

In effect, the name of the subreddit, r/conspiracy, in fact, provides the space for users to view everything through that lens.

4.3 A Risky Account of 4 Uncertainties

Going forward, this project will seek to capitalize on Latour's 5 sources of uncertainties. Focusing on these uncertainties, I generate a picture of exactly what is at issue for this conspiracy thread and how they manage and stabilize the controversies, uncertainties, and associations they have formed for these issues within their paradigmatic framework. Side note, no spelling or grammar fixes have been made to any direct quotations provided from the data set.

4.3.1 First Uncertainty - Who Are The Conspiracists

The first source of uncertainty, as Latour said, was 'no group, only group formation' (Latour 2005: 29). To summarize the approach taken by Latour discussed earlier, I must account only for the way various members of a social group define themselves and others and focus only on what participants say about themselves and their identity rather than apply a scholastic meta-language. I treat these actors as mediators, through which meaning, and understanding are translated. For this uncertainty as it pertains to the study, there is value in identifying the following things: what the members of r/conspiracy see as a defining attribute of the members of the space, how they individualize themselves as a part of that in-group by highlighting differences, and finally how they come to identify out-group members. Given that I am starting from a clearly defined digital space, r/conspiracy, it is easy to find the commonly identified traits that people use to identify other in-group members from out-group members in their view. Given that the space is digital, the only method they have for distinguishing others is via the words, sources, and arguments they utilize.

Focusing on the words, the main way individuals come to identify another as a member of their shared in-group is whether they are using conspiratorial language and reasoning or

whether the other user is relying on sources and arguments from mainstream actors. For this reason, in-group identification only takes place through a process of negative elimination, meaning that you are defined not by your clear endorsement of a conspiratorial worldview, but by your willingness to make mainstream, common arguments. The dividing line between in-and-out group identification is the popular commonality of a user's arguments, the level of their identification with mainstream actors and explanations, and the extent of their performance of conspiracist reasoning. So, for instance, on the topic of the COVID-19 pandemic, an ingroup and outgroup can be defined by clearly delineating what your opinion is on the measures taken to reduce spread: "I have some questions for the anti freedom, anti human, pro lock down, pro mask wearing COVIDIOTS shilling this sub in favor of the plandemic" (Oct 29th 21:04). If you believe the pandemic is real, thus some measures are required to limit transmissions, such as closures and mask mandates, you are immediately branded as part of the out-group. People who often defend mask mandates find themselves under vicious ad hominem attacks like the one above, or how one individual stated, "People should cut a hole in them [their masks] to accept a penis because maskers suck dick" (Oct 30th 1:10). Those who behave in line with the public guidelines form an anti-group and are targeted as such. They are viewed merely as intermediaries through which public health messaging is passively absorbed and repeated through action. Since the actors in r/conspiracy conceived of their identity in opposition to that behavior, they adopt a language of performative outrage, escalating their attacks on those who threaten the spokespeople's definition of who and what r/conspiracy is for.

The second part is nefarious, as once your argument has been identified as overly mainstream, you are given a label. Namely, the labels applied to individuals are shill, for someone who chooses to parrot mainstream talking points, bots for users assumed to be robots

programmed to stir up angry debate or cast aspersions on conspiracy theories, NPCs - short for a non-player character, a video game term for characters you cannot play as – for people who are unimportant or unworthy of serious consideration. Occasionally they will call someone ‘paid’ to accuse another of being present on the subreddit because it is their job to conduct psychological/information operations. Finally, one might be given the label of sheep, to indicate someone asleep and perfectly content to follow authorities uncritically. What makes these terms so rhetorically useful is their ability to allow individuals to assert their in-group identity while simultaneously providing the labeler an opportunity to ignore anything the labeled might say in response, no matter how convincing, well-argued, or well-sourced. The act of positioning is obvious here, in which the in-group actors are conceived as mediators, who are exposed to popular messaging through the media, but interpret it critically and attempt to translate said messaging through their conceptualizations while the anti-group are intermediaries, who passively transmit and repeat what they are exposed to. This labeling of the outgroup with these terms allows the in-group member to project their self-perceptions onto the labeled:

“wooooooooooooo NPC is scared by different opinions woooooooooooo” (Oct 30th 19:30). On one thread (Thread 323 posted Oct 30th 15:21) about alleged corruption by Hunter Biden (President Biden’s son), more specifically about DKIM verification of one email on an alleged Hunter Biden Laptop, anyone seen disputing the story as reported across right-wing and conspiratorially minded media was met with comments like “I’m just here to read the shill’s comments. So entertaining. My people in China are working hard tonight” (Oct 31st 6:25), “Wow the shills are rolling deep today. An absolute JOKE” (Oct 31st 4:13), and finally “Shills all over this thread lol it's crazy” (Oct 31st 1:10). However, the presence of so many individuals there to challenge the story meant that “This looks like a coordinated attack to muddy the water

and spread confusion about this story. Which makes the story even more legit, seems like OP hit a nerve!” (Oct 31st 16:14). As identified in the conspiracy theory literature where evidence against the conspiracy or merely the lack of evidence for it is interpreted as proof in-and-of-itself (Jane & Flemming 2014;50), on r/conspiracy the presence of a large cohort of people challenging a conspiracy theory proves that it’s real.

4.3.1.1 A Close Reading of Shill

However, it is useful to define further what a ‘shill’ is in this context, as it is an ambiguous term. In another thread (Oct 31st, 17:11, Thread 303), entitled “How to EASILY spot a shill on this sub” (ibid), the user claims that shills can be identified through “vulgarity. Frothing at the mouth with their hate” and that a true free thinker accepts that we all don’t think the same and that some people must hold dangerous or even stupid thoughts (ibid). So not only is it the conspiracists right to be wrong and misinformed, but it is also necessary for society, and it would be inappropriate to try and challenge them. The members of the thread consistently attempt to defend and redefine themselves against external pressure (Latour 2005: 32), which here is the existence of the shill. The thread, however, full of comments, had several interesting things to say about what makes someone a shill. For instance, one reason claims that shills “can’t apply nuance” (Nov 1st 21:03), another pointed out that “most of ‘em just aren’t good at thinking, they’ve never been taught” (Oct 31st 23:09), another said that “there are plenty of types of shills” (Oct 31st 22:56). Many users who by their comments had been referred to as shills in the past illustrated out the circularity of the label, summarized succinctly as “The easiest way for me to spot is a shill is by looking at whether they agree with me. If they agree with me, then they’re not a shill. If they disagree with me, then they’re 100% a shill” (Nov 1st 6:16) or the even more useful summary “In my experience, when I ask for facts I get called a shill” (Oct 31st, 18:13). Shilling is any rhetorical strategy that casts doubt on the conspiracy via argumentation against it.

One user pointed out the irony of the original poster claiming that shills engage in “childish name calling” (Oct 31st 17:11) by simply saying “I bet you don’t even see it” (Nov 1st 00:37) i.e. the name calling. An abundance of shilling (the process of being a shill) can often cause the conspiracists to double down on their claims and lines of inquiry by saying “The closer you get, the more spastically enraged they are in their insults” (Oct 31st 17:18). There is also the question of why someone would be a shill, for which there are several reasons. One is that they have already pre-decided what they believe vis à vis a specific political party or candidate and will they defend their stance vigorously against all reason. Other reasons are that they enjoy trolling or “triggering the libs” (Nov 1st 21:07). However, one user made one point that encapsulates exactly what the nature of a shill is in the context of r/conspiracy: “shills have skin in the game. the real folks here are the observers and questioners” (Oct 31st 22:55). Anyone who is personally invested in the argument they are making is a shill.

The reason I have done a close reading of this thread is that it perfectly encapsulates the way individuals decide who is worthy of their respect via the argumentative process on r/conspiracy. Seeing how shill gets applied to different individuals fulfills the Latourian goal of allowing the participants to describe for themselves how they view their identity as part of the community on r/conspiracy, specifically the formation of groups and anti-groups. R/conspiracy exists to provide space for like-minded individuals to feel they belong to a group. Furthermore, I have shown how meaningless the terms used to denote in-and-out group identification are in the context of r/conspiracy. To summarize the previous thread, essentially anyone can be a shill if they have an emotional attachment to what it is they are arguing; Anyone can be a shill for anything. You can shill for Donald Trump or Joe Biden, you can shill for vaccines or shill for the anti-vax movement, for manmade climate change or climate denial, for Christianity or Atheism,

for guns or against guns, the list is endless. Essentially, if your identity aligns with your argument, you are a shill. On a thread where the poster argues that ‘elites’ are pushing LGBTQ progress to weaken the family (Oct 30th 1:30, Thread 55), one user commented that:

Gays aren't born this way. There's no gay genes and gay DNA. Most gays were exposed to it at a young age, likely groomed, possibly molested, or recruited by a peer. Homosexuality is also prevalent in prison. In today's age, a lot of straight girls make out at parties for attention (Oct 30th 02:03).

When a gay-identifying user tried to argue that perhaps that is not true, the commenter doubled down, and after a repetitive back and forth, the commenter said, “Not sure why you're being so defensive” (Oct 30th 03:56). Taking this definition of shill here, the gay-identified user could be considered a shill because his identity was vested in the point he was trying to make, whereas the commenter was merely observing and questioning; the rhetoric of positing or just saying. Here is the performative definition of ‘conspiracy’ in discourse as actors engaging with the content in r/conspiracy through a detached, ironic, posture that merely seeks to make a point without personal investment in the argument is superior to one that performs emotional or intellectual investment. Again, users of the space treat others as either mediators or intermediaries in a Latourian sense. For the above commenter, LGBT identity is the output result of queer messaging or violent sexual trauma beginning from a young age. The tendency here to assume a greater degree of personal (intellectual and bodily) autonomy relative to your position in the discourse.

There is another identification problem for the posters on r/conspiracy that is related to shilling but not quite. That is disdain for anyone they view as insufficiently free-thinking, or in other words brainwashed - intermediaries. On a thread entitled “Annoyed by family” (Oct 31st, 20:46, Thread 395), a user expresses their frustrations with their family, as whenever they attempt to introduce conspiracy into a conversation their family members immediately silence

them “because they think everything is so simple and believe everything they read” (ibid). They then go on to ask “How can you believe everything you read and not question anything in your life?” (ibid). The comments indicate that this a problem that other conspiracists face and they either settle on not even bringing it up or they take their time. Another user on a different thread laments that the people who believe everything the TV tells them “can't protest or try to do something about the whole situation because they can't comprehend the bigger picture. They don't understand we are all being played” (Oct 31st 13:53). The users of r/conspiracy believe themselves to be an enlightened elect, and that belief is made concrete by the fact that among the users of r/conspiracy there are scant few who appear to meekly absorb and regurgitate media messaging uncritically. It is clear that there is an intense belief in the gullibility and susceptibility of others;

They don't fear the future and a world that is getting smaller by the day. Maybe they shouldn't be afraid. They are merely happy to watch Netflix, consume on Amazon, and maybe go for a walk or jerk off. These people have no God, many don't have their own families, zero ambition, no loyalty to any nation (rather fake characters and brands), etc. They will be perfectly happy until the censored internet gets cut off (Nov 1st 1:17).

The people most likely to be easily brainwashed in this sense have been alternatively defined as women, young people, and people of colour, the relevance of which will be apparent in the next subsection.

The concept of shilling or for any reason on top of a constructed model of the average citizen also brings us to the meat of the first uncertainty. There is no group identity on r/conspiracy, just a collation of users who have come to the forum to engage in conspiratorially minded conversation. Given the sheer number of users and the vast range of conversation topics, there is interestingly no relationship more antagonistic for users of r/conspiracy than other posters on r/conspiracy. There is a great deal of malice directed at the perceived hostile takeover

of the sub from a previous heyday of real conspiracy discussion that has become a hub for partisan, radically right-wing conspiracy theorizing. One user laments:

I fucking hate what this sub has turned into its just a political circle jerk now, I remember coming here for thought provoking shit that made me question reality, now I just watch you idiots babble back and forth about shit that doesn't matter (Nov 2nd 00:16).

What was once viewed as a beacon of ‘thought-provoking discussion’ about aliens, anti-authoritarian ideology, extra-dimensional beings, and hidden realities has become a home for the rabid Trump-supporting mob to congregate and disseminate partisan talking points. One user claims “this sub has been coopted by .win” (Oct 29th 18:29), a pro-trump web forum started after Reddit closed r/thedonald, and another user said, “This sub has become my uncle's Facebook feed. Sad.” (Oct 31st 21:19). The cooptation of r/conspiracy by Donald Trump’s supporters garners criticism for what is an authoritarian turn in the discourse, with users pointing out:

“Traditionally conspiracy theorists are critical and skeptical of authority, particularly law enforcement. This sub's deference for authority reflects the fact that it has basically become a right-wing political sub and is a conspiracy forum in name only” (Oct 31st 3:32), and “/r/conspiracy should not be pro President of the United States” (Nov 1st 2:28). Here is an open conflict between people who believe they are taking up the cause of conspiracy for righteous reasons between those they believe are only using conspiracy as a way of pushing an authoritarian agenda:

The gibbering Trump loyalists that entrench themselves in this profound fearmongering and stupidity tells you everything you need to know about why it is they support actual totalitarian virtues in their own country, and will conveniently ignore any conspiracy that runs counter to their identities, while crafting their own conspiracies that adhere to what they want to be true, irrespective of the evidence (Oct 31st 15:53).

4.3.1.2 The True Beliefs of Individuals & Groups

In capturing the fluid circularity between the conceptual associations as they are presented by r/conspiracy posters one essential claim to their sociological universe can be made

with this first uncertainty. Returning to the literature, Byford (2015) put forward the idea of ‘Cui bono’ (who benefits) (41) as a key question in the world of conspiracism. Remembering that anyone viewed as insufficiently conspiratorial, or conspiratorial for the wrong reasons on conspiracy can be written off as a ‘shill’ so to speak, from a Latourian sense these individuals are treated as intermediaries, meaning is transferred through them. This indicates however that anyone who is insufficiently conspiratorial is treated as though their views should not be given consideration. The conspiracist actor must conclude that no one’s opposing viewpoints can ever be assumed to be believed in good faith, and thus argumentation occurs through projecting bad faith conceptions of other’s beliefs onto other commenters. What I mean by saying “believed in good faith” is that individuals come to view the world the way they go through a process of experience and learning by which they critically investigate information they exposed to against what they already believe and seek to learn more about their interests. Moreover, that when expressing their beliefs they have considered alternatives and are making their best effort to explain what they believe with no intention of misleading or being logically fallacious – they are mediating the totality of their experience through a translation that can be understood by others. By projecting in bad faith, I mean the assumption that other people have hidden reasons for their beliefs they are deliberately hiding or that no person who has engaged in rational reasoning could ever come to that conclusion, and therefore is trolling or regurgitating media propaganda. They assume others are acting as intermediaries, directly transmitting the meanings they receive from mainstream actors. This is evident both for the debunkers and conspiracists, but also for academics.

Barkun (2013), described one common conspiracist rebuttal as the belief that any information present in the information space contradicting the conspiracy theory was generated

by the conspirators. This means academic journal articles, news stories, books, television shows, speakers, political ads, etc. If an individual relies on any of that in the formation of their worldview, they can't be assumed to be acting rationally i.e. in good faith. The 'debunkers' are not immune from this: anyone basing their opinion on something they saw on InfoWars or a fringe website must also be assumed to be operating in bad faith, as I have defined it. This is like the catch-22 outlined earlier by Jane & Flemming (2014;50), except instead of dealing with a specific conspiracy theory, I am demonstrating the circularity introduced into a debate on r/conspiracy due to the presence of the concept of 'conspiracy' itself.

Let us see this in action. The best example of this on r/conspiracy are the claims made about protests and riots in wake of high-profile instances of excessive police brutality against black men and women resulting in death and leading to the Black Lives Matter movement and the rhetoric of systemic racism. As one commenter put it "Riots are state sponsored. Look the fuck around. Husbands/wives/mom/fathers/brother/sisters want to be left the fuck alone and put food on the table. No one is rioting except state sponsored actors, lost souls, and slaves to the TV" (Oct 31st 9:14). It cannot be that people are out protesting what they view as state-sanctioned violence against racial minorities, they are assumed paid by the state to be there (despite the fact they are protesting the state) or mere ideological vacuums, passively absorbing whatever political messaging they receive. Another put it, again on the same topic "Its virtue signalling at it's finest brother. [...] Time to riot because people want black people to be able to get away with murder and assault. Racism at it's finest" (Oct 29th 13:24). Again, no valid legitimate criticisms can be made of police officers and their behavior here, anyone pointing to a pattern of racial oppression has merely been brainwashed or 'wants black people to be able to get away with murder' (ibid). So, not only is the potential for legitimate debate on this issue

summarily dismissed, but there is also the added layer of projecting evil motives onto those you disagree with by rejecting the notion that they may have legitimate grievances. Further bad faith argumentation emerges in attempting to deeply misrepresent anti-racist messaging; a thread entitled “Dissecting the Concept of racial discrimination” (Oct 29th, 8:40, Thread 193) claimed that the entire argument about systemic racism was that annual income was less for blacks than for whites, but that since Asian families made more on average than whites, that income disparities have no explanatory value for the concept of systemic racism.¹ This issue is finding one small aspect of a wide-ranging argument, showing it to have logical inconsistencies, dismissing it, and then implying that the whole theory is wrong due to one inconsistent argument. But what’s worse are those that argue that any attempt at pointing to real-world racial discrepancies or oppression is just a tool to keep us divided;

Systemic racism is always framed as a black problem and might occasionally include hispanic. The truth is, it's a problem for all. They want us focused on the difference they created for us all and not fighting for equality as humans. They want us in our little pens constantly fighting for their scraps and seeing the other pastures as greener (Oct 30th 21:56).

People who believe in systemic racism are asking us first to accept the idea of absolute equality between racial groups as an unquestionable characteristic of the human condition, but they only apply their belief in absolute equality to certain areas. They have no problem saying the members of one group are better dancers than another group, for example, but they will call you a blasphemer and try to get you fired if you say the members of one group are better at running cities than another group (Oct 30th 17:28).

I think the Confederate flag is stupid but to most southerners it is not a flag that has any racial component to it anymore and represents their ancestors that died in the millions in a bloody and horrible war that shaped their culture. Symbols change in what they represent, the swastica was around before the nazis and meant something different, the cross was used to justify horrendous crimes in the past, so was the koran. The leftist biggots that have tried to ban the confederate flag have inadvertently made people support its usage just to piss of the fascistic mob. Plus it was a big symbol in the dukes of hazard, a beloved tv series to many. Critical race theory is the most racist movement to

¹ u/MassLax. “Dissecting the Concept of Racial Discrimination (annual income)” Reddit. Accessed April 19th 2021 (Oct 20th, 2020).

https://www.reddit.com/r/conspiracy/comments/jk6eph/dissecting_the_concept_of_racial_discrimination/

gain institutional traction since segregation. The whole notion of white privilege is abhorrent yet widely accepted in leftist circles. California is literally removing civil rights labor laws that banned discrimination based on race, color, religion and sex. The left are full of fucking racists, deplorable, pretentious idiots (Nov 2nd 1:23).

These comments allow their commentators to get off the rhetorical hook, so to speak, on the actual question of systemic racism while at the same time positioning them as the people best suited to solve it, or smarter than those who talk about it. The mere introduction of ideas of racial injustice into the public conversation is to be dismissed due to reasons these users have constructed for that purpose. If you believe in systemic racism, why do you also say that black people are better dancers? Systemic racism is about keeping all of us down so stop mentioning it specifically as a black or Hispanic problem. Critical Race theory is racist, not the confederate flag. Construct an idea of the opposing argument that assumes it be operating in intellectual bad faith and you can easily refute it. Here is the clear maintenance of in-group and anti-group boundaries described by Latour. In the above case, those against protests for racial equality perform an identity against what they view as ideological oversteps by their opponents. Banning the Confederate flag, teaching ‘Critical Race Theory’, or mentioning systemic racism requires the performance of intellectual superiority.

4.3.1.3 Debunking Revisited Briefly

The choice by Jane & Flemming (2014) to include the role of debunkers as commensurate with conspiracy theory has proven useful. What have seen above, and will see later on, is that both the group (conspiracists) and the anti-group are present in the same space. Jane & Flemming (2014) called them the debunkers and the conspiracists call them shills. The world of conspiracism is filled with actors across the discursive field engaging in non-stop identity conflict, consistently defining themselves by what they are not. Through Jane & Flemming (2014), debunkers are positioned as integral actors in the conspiracist social universe.

They would often attempt to invoke a reframing of the conversation by elevating the discourse into a zone of consideration:

Thank you for this! People always forget Hanlon's Razor, Never attribute to malice that which can be adequately explained by stupidity. The news station f'ed up when they were testing graphics (Oct 29th 3:42).

So I'm genuinely curious as I'm having trouble reading context in the part were men are having movement because women as becoming mote successful and making more money? Why is that a bad thing? And why are men upset if women make more? Not being condescending just seriously curious (Oct 29th 13:44).

"I like how you make your own conclusions from a study that doesn't include the word 'mask' once (Oct 29th 21:42).

You dont need some sort of 'NOW' conspiracy to explain why capital and industry become consolidated into fewer and fewer factions over time, that's just a natural tendency of global capitalism and this has been apparent since at least the late 19th century. I find it bizarre how you read "War is a Racket" and took it as some sort of forewarning against the 'NWO', UN and Federal Reserve rather than the blunt condemnation of capitalist imperialism that it actually is (Oct 30th, 20:28).

I think bad actors have capitalized on the intrigue of conspiracy theories and manipulated them to move voters and exert influence. Even being open to the idea of them has basically become political. And the mainstream theories have become more and more bonkers. I would love it if this sub focused on real issues like human trafficking (real trafficking not the Qanon variety), stuff like the Panama papers, or the Tuskegee Syphilis Study. But instead its taken to laundering right wing talking points as some sort of apolitical 'conspiracy' (Oct 31st 4:14).

There is a conspiracy by billionaires to make communism look bad (Oct 31 20:36).

If you haven't noticed social media has turned conspiracies into engagement and clicks. Pedophilia is a juicy topic (Oct 31st 10:51).

Not to apply scholastic terms to our participants here, but there is clear evidence here of a 'dialectical game' (Jane & Flemming 2014:9) in which the conspiracists and the anti-conspiracists go through a discursive process where they define and shift the apparent rules of rational discourse. Conspiracists and debunkers alike define themselves through a performative stance that emphasizes their identity. Through attempting to recontextualize conversations in

various directions; a non-partisan focus, drawing attention to egregiously unconsidered facets of conspiracist claims, and appealing to a higher logical order, debunkers here participate in a recursive discourse which performs the opposite rhetorical strategy than the one they assumed held by the conspiracist. Their attempts to bring mainstream language into a discussion, will inevitably be labeled a shill and then rhetorically discounted from the argument. Any attempt to support their tenets will be seen as proof they are invested in their arguments which is even further proof of their ‘shillness’. Both groups find that participating in r/conspiracy offers them the opportunity to feel intellectually superior to others. Connecting this to the previous section, not even debunkers are immune to the assumption of bad faith on the part of their anti-group, the conspiracists. To associate the word conspiracy with any discourse is to assume that some actors are acting as intermediaries for the messaging they have absorbed from other actors while assuming yourself to be acting as a mediator for the truth.

4.3.1.4 Relevance to the Literature

The widespread adoption of identity-negation techniques through linguistically weaponizing the term ‘shill’ in conspiratorial debate relates well to themes discussed in the literature review. Firstly, West’s (2018) line of demarcation can be operationalized here to identify the conspiracist from the shill. The ideas one places on either side of their line and the language you use for that placement illustrate clearly for others whether to consider you a fellow conspiracist or a shill and once you have been identified, others will decide how much to value your analysis on their line of demarcation. What kinds of associations you draw between actors, events and explanations determine your membership in either the conspiracist or debunker category; your interpretive framework determines your group identity. Mitchell’s (2019) contention that the language of conspiracy allows actors to position themselves as the enlightened individual, the ‘critical thinker’, providing them an effective rhetorical tool to

reinforce their self-conception, shielding them from rigorous intellectual scrutiny from anyone who associates their paradigm with mainstream actors. Melley's (2002) idea that conspiracy theory offers the individual restoration of their individuality against collective masses is vindicated here, but against him as well; his participation in the conspiratorial debate and framing it as a manifestation of 'agency panic' (Melley 2002) illustrates that academics in the field use the field to reinforce their sense of individual intelligence. Jolley, Douglas, & Sutton's (2018) contention that conspiracy theorizing justifies contemporary systems or situations takes on new importance in the context of President Trump's supporters. Considering the alleged hostile takeover of the forum by the former president's supporters, I posit that engagement in conspiracy theorizing provides a lens under which any criticisms of the former president are subsumed under the label of TDS (Trump Derangement Syndrome) defined broadly as "hatred of President Trump so intense that it impairs people's judgment" (Zakaria 2017). Like shill, it offers Trump supporters a rhetorical weapon with which to bludgeon any passionate critique of Donald Trump.

However, the back and forth about who is a real conspiracist and who is a shill, with both groups hurling the labels at the other to dismiss their ideas, emphasizes the need to include the topic of debunkers in the conspiracist social universe. Jane & Flemming (2014). insistence on including 'debunkers' as a central component of conspiracy theorizing as a type of dialectic is evident in the data. Every user in the forum attempts to prove that they are the most serious thinker in the conversation, finding a way to negate other arguments is a central component of how they achieve this. As Jane & Flemming (2014) put it, engaging with conspiracy discourse provides "consolation and an ego boost" (71). Positing or rejecting a conspiracy theory represents the strength of one's cognitive capabilities, regardless of which side of the coin they

fall on. Present for the debunkers too is the incitement to individualism and the line of demarcation, as the debunker applies their line of demarcation to reality in the same way as the conspiracists.

So, to summarize the findings on the first form of uncertainty, I show that r/conspiracy lacks a cohesive group identity because everyone engages with the language of conspiracy for a variety of personal and ideological reasons. Users find ways to identify whether someone is being adequately conspiratorial in their language and sourcing, choosing to write of those who are not as shills, emphasizing their cognitive abilities against collective reasoning. But the label of shill is rhetorically meaningless because anyone can be a shill for anything for any reason, even the person labeling another as a shill. Members of r/conspiracy distinguish themselves from outsiders via a process of ideological exclusion, with anyone who ‘believes everything, they read or say’ coming from mainstream actors as intellectually inferior. Furthermore, there is a deep frustration with the disproportionate presence of Donald Trump supporters seeking to colonize the idea of conspiracy for their ideological ends. For these individuals, conspiracy as a conceptual lens for interpreting the world is folded into their partisan alliances, justifying his presidency and the system that supported it. Therefore, even among the formed group of r/conspiracy, everyone is simultaneously shill and conspiracist.

4.3.2 Action in the Conspiratorial Universe

Returning to Latour for the second source of uncertainty, keep in mind that actions are the result of competing agencies, each actor acts in response to the actions of other actors. One rarely knows the exact reasons for their actions as understandings of action change depending on the time and context of the action. Therefore, for this section, the understanding of action must be ideomorphic, conceptualizing the figurations behind certain actions. The focus must be on the

varying accounts of action that legitimate some agencies and delegitimize others and trace the extent of agency attributed to actors.

4.3.2.1 Action to (Re)assert Agency

A good place to start for this uncertainty the advice provided each other on improving mental health or preparing for disaster; necessary to ponder for actors given the weight of the conspiracist worldview. Many users have adopted an apocalyptic paradigm about the state of society, thus occasionally they need assistance recentering and calming their perspectives. I have chosen these suggested actions for this uncertainty because it allows me the opportunity to trace figurations of behavior, returning the analysis to recommended actions proposed to manage the apocalyptic collapse of society.

The number one suggestion for improving one's state of mind on r/conspiracy is, functionally, to get off r/conspiracy. More specifically, one commenter said "Take some time off the Internet. You'll realize most of this stuff is fringe bullshit that has no affect on your actual life" (Oct 29th 08:07), another said simply "Throw your television out the window. All the problems go away" (Oct 29th 16:21). Others have suggested learning and reading as a good way to escape excessive focus on negativity, while simultaneously reclaiming control of their thinking. "Read Plato and Aristotle and other philosophers you'll do fine" (Nov 1st, 5:08), and another who provided resources to others to "develop critical thinking skills [and] [...] learn the rules of logical argumentation" (Oct 31st 08:33). Another suggested listening to the recorded lectures of British Philosopher Alan Watts. When one user described their mood under COVID-19 lockdown, one user quickly provided an answer and solutions: "It's depression. Sunlight, exercise, no sugar, meditate. It sucks, but it is manageable." (Oct 29th 20:51). Finally, one user had plenty of suggestions for improving one's state of mind;

1. Take about one or two VERY BIG steps back from that ledge. Find center - drink two eight-ounce glasses of water, sit in silence for five minutes, deep breath in through your nose, out through your mouth...60 times if you need to count them.
2. Throw out the social media - as most have said. Turn off the TV, put the phone away for at least 10-15 minute breaks every four hours.
3. Think on what gives you happiness. Write it down...with a pencil or pen on paper. Write a letter to someone you care about, or no one in particular. Write down your strengths. Write down the things you could improve, and the steps to improve them.
4. Level your chemistry, or make it unbalanced in a happy/healthy manner. Take Vitamin D...2,000 IU per day. A doctor can prescribe a higher dose. Go outside and breath in, look at the sky (even if it's raining, cloudy, smoke...well, don't breath in if it's Smokey...)
5. Ground yourself - put your bare feet on the Earth. Stand for five minutes (again, if possible - don't get hypothermia or something).
Feel and express love for the human conscious. We are all in this together, and we will make it. Stay positive. (Oct 29th 18:01).

All of these indicate an awareness that conspiracist quests for hidden, terrible truths encouraging cynicism and mistrust will have serious ramifications on the cognitive and emotional states of the individuals who embark on them. It is valuable as it hints at a behavioral uncertainty behind conspiracist engagement online. Remembering that the focus, per Latour, must be on the justifications for the actions, and actions listed above were provided in response to individuals expressing distress about the state of the world and of their thinking. This suggests that these actions are justifiable not because their good for you or they change anything in the long term; they allow the individual to reassert a sense of agency. In this case, justifiable action is that which responds to an individualistically conceived notion of power and autonomy over one's life.

Briefly, this is confirmed by actions suggested by those on the other end of the 'managing panic' scale. Many with a conspiratorial mindset view the world apocalyptically (Barkun 2003), and if you believe the world will soon come to an end, you should prepare. "Buy guns, Buy ammo, Buy Bitcoin and buckle up buckaroo!" (Oct 30th, 4:01), suggests one user who believes a

race war is approaching, while another user stresses, under the pretext that the global cabal will shut down the power grid:

Best thing to do is just have a bug-out plan in place. Make sure you know where to meet, what to bring, etc... if things get truly out of hand. At least at this point you have a destination to reach and a goal. Without it you'll just be standing there yelling, 'what do I do?' while someone says 'just come with us, you'll be fine (Oct 30th 8:02).

One user, claiming to be making a "very educated guess" that an earthquake that will leave all of America without power to be imminent (in the coming days), suggested, "stock up on: Water, Battery's, Non perishables, Medicine. [and] Protect your family and loved ones" (Oct 29th 6:59). Action in these cases is justifiable and even necessary as long it serves the individual's self-interest in the short, medium, and long term and provides a sense of security in the face of chaos.

4.3.2.2 Politics, Progress, Actions & Agency

The conspiracists of r/conspiracy also provide an interesting account of political action. They hold the perspective that political action through the traditional means of democracy is unproductive. Democracy, and American democracy, is a farce through which those with real agency reinforce their systems of control. Partisan electoral politics are a "divide and conquer" shield so individuals won't recognize "the partisan bickering that has held the 99.9% down for centuries at this point. You will never 'fix' the system working from within its boundaries/limitations" (Nov 1st, 17:19). Another user claims that "politics is the PR firm of the hidden hand" (Oct 30th, 5:59). On a thread about what might transpire after the 2020 U.S. Elections, one person summarized it: "It doesn't matter who wins, it's clear by now they are all pushing towards the same agenda [...] It's all a play, a script. We know it's fake but the play will go on" (Oct 30th, 5:57). Nothing will ever change so why even bother is the question they ask. For them, real change can only happen through the unification of the masses against a corrupt

elite. As one commenter put it; “It's not about Right vs. Left. its the people vs. the establishment” (Oct 30th, 00:30). Voting, activism, and political participation will not accomplish anything.

This brings us interestingly back to the trend of assumptions of bad faith in the beliefs and actions of ‘shills’ that echoes through to the second uncertainty when discussing social progress based on gender, gender identity, and sexuality. If social progress is impossible through traditional means, how have deliberate strides towards racial, gender, and sexual equality took place? How does action change and shift society in a system that cannot be changed? Starting, with gender progress, changes in marriage, family structure, and the role of women, I read many negative opinions about the expansion of women’s socio-economic power over the last 75 years. Although not necessarily conspiratorial, it draws on themes from alt-right and manosphere groups discussed by Massanari (2017) & Chang (2020) about women’s autonomy. For instance, on the decline of the traditional nuclear family, different commenters have claimed:

Blame family courts. That crap started at the same time. It was really an all out assault against the family, though. Welfare (enabling women to walk away), porn (enabling people to get off without a relationship), abortion (enabling consequences of sex to be nullified), and family courts (massive transfer of wealth to fund medicaid and welfare through unconstitutional private child support agencies) all happened at the same time. 50 years later, we're living in the aftermath, and its not pretty (Oct 29th 13:24).

Third-wave Feminism being taught at universities and being promoted in mainstream media has created beta versions of the sexes in which there is a mismatch in what one desires and what one attracts. For example the all too known, beta male, acts like his idea of an alpha female. An alpha female, is not looking for a beta male, but for an alpha male. An alpha male is a male who embraces masculinity and is sought after by beta and alpha females alike, he is a leader, he goes his own way, if at any point he values the female over himself, he is no longer alpha. A beta male is a male who embraces femininity. A beta female is a female who acts like her idea of an alpha male. An alpha male is not looking for a beta female, he's looking for an alpha female who is going to know her role and not challenge him for the part of Batman. It's important to understand that women also scheme to get the best situation for themselves. Plenty of women will purposely get knocked up at their peak sexual market value by "Chad" and then leave him in search of the wealthier, more dad-like, "Melvin" to raise and support her Chad kids and what you get in return is access to a beautiful woman you otherwise wouldn't have (Oct 29th 12:30).

Third, third wave feminism, the desire of women to be better than men not just equal anymore which often means that some women barely even date til they're 30 or older. I was having issues with this when dating in the last few years. I noticed that women my age were mostly way too focused on a career to be a good partner or married with kids and unavailable, maybe those have low level office jobs. I'm 32 and I want a family. [...] But life is really boring without someone to care about and share your life with on a level deeper than friendship...women don't seem to acknowledge that male mental health is in a downward spiral the last 15 years especially because so many women don't want to settle down anymore and wonder why there are so many maladjusted men these days (Oct 29th 10:44).

The single mother is incentivized through government benefits. Pop culture helped idolize the idea of the "player", a parasitic cuckoo bird father. The concept of conception is now secondary to pleasure (Oct 29th 10:09).

What these comments illustrate is a conceptual line that the posters can't cross. It cannot be that society decided that women deserve access to socio-economic autonomy previously denied to them. There needs to be some malevolent reason that things have changed. Intellectual and cultural elites must be pushing ideas onto the masses that muddy the natural order of things. Third-wave feminism is an ideological weapon against men, pop culture has normalized single-motherhood and absent fathers, abortion and welfare gave women more power over their lives and that's a bad thing. Thus, a theory of action on feminist progress is developed; through family courts, academic institutions, and pop-culture producers, an ideological of feminist empowerment was moved through government institutions to weaken the traditional family. Women 'scheme' to acquire the best outcomes for themselves, and they abuse the system for this end. In this account, 'beta males' exist as hapless intermediaries, absorbing 21st-century feminist gender politics while women are able to mediate between their internal desires and systemic realities to place men in a position of subservience. Here, women's agency is a threat to male dominance, especially the freedom to free them from the biological consequences of sexual activity with men.

A similar phenomenon can be seen with regards to the LGBT community. I will not rehash the earlier debate, but I can point to other examples to illustrate how LGBT identity can't be assumed to be held in good faith, nor can its emergence into mainstream awareness be explained as a process of progress in which formerly excluded populations find themselves accepted organically into popular culture. On gay men (lesbians are generally absent) commenters have claimed:

For male homosexuality I believe the paradigm changed when we started seeing it as a permanent state rather than a behavior, during the 19th century. At that time it was reserved for the marginalized who went against the new bourgeois order. It is not PC to say that but I believe gays became mainstream when governments lost their influence on the masses during the 90's. Since there's no real differences between the Left and the Right, Left started to victimise LGBT (amongst other groups) to make them dependent on their protection forever (Oct 30th 2:35).

All of these antifa men are all the same very female like, high voice and wimpy look. They look like they have been shot up with estrogen to the max. I guess that's what they want is to feminise the male so much he's just as girly as females and if they are men then have the wife take the children. The feminism thing they are doing pushing gay and trans will be the end of everything if they succeed. Why I take a high amount of testosterone and proudly show and being a proud man! These feminism dudes all gotta go (Oct 30th 3:04).

My point is in the 2000s, the most commonly cited statistic was that gays were about 3% of the population. Now that percentage has skyrocketed and I frankly don't buy it. I attribute the dramatic increase to socially conditioning and propaganda. At the rate this is going, it's very likely there will be more gays than straight within a generation, at least in major cities (Oct 30th 4:05).

Not saying being gay or LGBT is evil, you can do whatever you wish, but I think people these days are conditioned to believe they are such from birth or encouraged to be that way. It seems more like an ideology/fetish if I dare speak freely. I would like scientific evidence for homosexuality or transgender being a biological trait (Oct 30th 2:42).

On trans people:

What's wrong is the little kids. Parents have their 8 year old kids turn trans. If I'm a little boy and the father is absent all he has is an older sister and a mom the boy will say he wants to be a girl. The mom wants this so tells the boy it's called "trans" and shows him video and make him think it cool and ok. The mom then pushes it and gets the trans job done and when the boy gets older and realizes he's not gay and WTF happened? It's how the

kids are raised the elites and mainstream media pushes feminism and that is the cool thing to do to push the father out of the picture (Oct 30th 1:46).

Do people feel trapped in the wrong body/are unsure of their gender naturally or- have we created this confusion due to the destruction of humans through manmade creations that are altering nature? If so, is it getting worse due to the increase in toxins on our planet? (Oct 30th 2:48).

i think it's important to note that both real trans people and the people OP references both have mental issues. we're living an era of incredible cultural narcissism (Oct 30th 1:43).

Again, it cannot be that LGBTQ people have existed throughout human history coinciding with present-day movement to recognize they were excluded from societal narratives and suffered as a result. What is happening here is that an identity conceptually foreign to these individuals (LGBTQ) clashes with increased visibility for individuals in that identity group. Therefore, under the guise of conspiracy, increased visibility for this group cannot just be social progress for its own sake, but a nefarious plot to weaken traditional bonds and destroy the family. There must be a negative scheme afoot. Actors across media and politics involved in activism for gender and sexual progress are viewed as intermediaries for a darker agenda of making men obsolete, where chemicals and social conditioning are responsible for queerness. Political action on this front is filtered through a conspiratorial paradigm.

I posit that it is no accident that progress on social issues is conceptualized this way in r/conspiracy. In fact, social progress is ripe for conspiratorial thinking as it challenges a status quo that most never grappled with before. Debates about the role of government in people's lives, nefarious political plots to seize and maintain power, tragedies being weaponized for an ideological agenda, are all aspects of conspiratorial culture writ large since the time of Richard Hofstadter (1967:4). Hofstadter provided a useful phrase to conceptualize this difficulty, in which the "undeniable", greater visibility and acceptance for LGBTQ people and greater autonomy for women, leaps to the "unbelievable" statement that widespread conditioning is

occurring to make this happen (Hofstadter 1967:37). Recent movements, however, based not on the power imbalances of the governing versus the governed where there is a clear distinction but rather on marginalized identities that are unique to minority populations challenge the conspiracists' conception of themselves within the power structures they desire to revolt against. Being challenged by racial minorities claiming that you need to reconsider your complicity in power structures you detest poses a provocation to your self-concept that, if not meaningfully integrated, can only be explained in the language of conspiracy. Trans identity in this case likely represents the most recent and most forceful break with their self-concept. Given their relatively small population and extensive history of marginalization through predominant invisibility in the mainstream, their explosion in visibility for those never considering trans existence previously presents an extraordinary change and challenge to their understanding of theirs and others' personal ontology. If you believed yourself to be a firm, strong, masculine man who behaved the way others of your kind did, and that the opposite sex, women, also have a rigid manner of being and that both must be upheld, representation and increasing acceptance of trans individuals unsettles your idea of what being a person entails and leaves you feeling embattled against social agendas arrayed against you.

This coincides with both the first and second uncertainties. The previous paragraph analyzed the role social progress plays in-group identification, where an endless series of performative negotiations finds the demographic groupings searching for equality as the anti-group of a population under threat. This is where the uncertainty of action and agency appears. Those who do not benefit from the increasing status of previously marginalized populations lack the agency to stop it while groups that previously lacked the agency to assert their self-concept on dominant populations could not have achieved this without external help. Here, actors are

generating “abstruse metaphysical constructions” (Latour 2005:51) by redefining the terms under which social progress occurs. Interestingly, rather than seeing change and progress as the result of uncountable competing agencies that conflict but eventually shift paradigms, social progress becomes the result of obscure understandings of feminism, queerness, academic theories, race relations (see previous uncertainty) mediated through the lens of conspiracy to achieve a conceptualization of progress incommensurate with the conceptualization of progress held by those progressing.

From the literature review, conspiracy theorists search for the malevolent, intentional forces “behind the cultural screens, underneath and beyond” the surface of contemporary life (Aupers 2012:30). This is what the above accounts illustrate on the topic of social progress for racialized, gendered, and sexual minorities, and women. This progress, that they never directly agreed to is evidence of a plot to achieve a nefarious end. To intellectually reify this suspicion, the concept of conspiracy arms these posters with the ideological tool to deny that real progress is taking place and that those included in the progress don’t deserve it: an “epistemological quick fix” (Byford 2015:3) that substitutes the need for genuine reflection on the grand social changes. This is also where Jane & Flemming’s (2014) claim that the rhetorical idea of conspiracy can be used by anyone with a sense of their victimization or manipulation (100). If you feel like your identity holds less power than it used to (than it should), and that widespread manipulation is the reason behind this, the only recourse you have is too conspiratorial ideation.

This dovetails directly into the system justification theory of conspiracism, where the conspiracy theorist uses the concept of conspiracy to account for changes to the social system that threatens their position within it (Jolley, Douglas & Sutton 2018). Although not strictly scientific, there are remnants of Epstein’s (1995) black box, where instead of scientific truth, the

closed-off truth that the black box claims are that progressive conceptions of gender relations, gender identity, racial progress, and sexual freedom are good and must be widely embraced, encouraged, and occasionally enforced. Latour would call this black box an intermediary whose inputs predict the outputs. Conspiracists however do not accept the inputs, they translate them through their metaphysics of the social. Those who don't accept the theoretical reasoning behind the ideology of progress and were content with the pre-existing conception of the social hierarchy feel their agency threatened. By drawing attention, as the comments above did, to a closing of an ideological black box on issues like feminism or trans-liberation accompanied by mainstream enforcement of the ideological messaging, conspiracist actors posit a view of social progress that opposes an anti-group. Progress must be conceptualized as detrimental to society and the result of nefarious processes directed by malevolent actors (Jolley, Douglas & Sutton 2018:475). Therefore, the conspiracists are freed from the necessity of truly questioning the "inherent limitations of their society" (ibid). Anyone pointing out racism is the real racists, feminism, not capitalism, destroyed the family and made women too independent, feminism is pushing LGBTQ progress to destroy the family and the male.

4.3.2.3 Relevance to the Literature

The relevance here to the literature is small but important. Positive, productive action described both by the positivists trying to make the best of a bad situation and the apocalyptic preparedness described by the negativists validate a few points from the literature reviews. Firstly, there is a hint of West's (2018) line of demarcation again; how seriously do you think things are/will be, and therefore what course of action should you take? If you believe imminent social collapse to be unlikely, you should do things that will reassert your personal sense of control in positive ways: learning, disconnecting from media, meditation, do personally fulfilling things. If you believe disaster could strike at any moment, preparing yourself for it is the only

thing you can do: stockpile food, weapons, supplies, etc. Interestingly though, both courses of action still emphasize the individual against a collective, echoing Melley (2002). No matter what, it is important that you take care of yourself, there is no security in others.

However, this conceptualization of action does echo some of the social-psychological reasons identified as motivating factors in conspiracist belief. No matter what actions were recommended above, there is evidence for the following factors: feelings of powerlessness (Goertzel 1994), uncertainty (Van Prooijen & Jostmann 2013), strong imaginative ability (Bruder et al 2013), and a need for control (Douglas & Sutton 2018). The questions posed about how to improve one's state of mind or what to do to prepare for collapse originate from the fact the conspiracy theories posit threats to the individual, and the identification of this threat leads the conspiracist to search for a way to reassert a sense of control, methods of combatting the threats when they arise. However, with regards to these social-psychological factors, the question of their confirmation here is tricky. Do these factors arise before or after exposure to conspiracist information, and do the suggested actions reinforce these tendencies or counteract them, reduce their prevalence in the individual? The answer, in this case, is likely one of general relationality without a specific correlational relationship.

This goes further when relating the above to the conspiracist perception of progress. If the advancement of previously marginalized populations is held as evidence of nefarious plots, the above citations play an important in mediating the understanding of conspiracists. Specifically, conspiracists of r/conspiracy are engaged in the process of explaining events and other actors through the metaphysics of conspiracy, where nothing is taken for granted. Therefore, once conspiracist actors place an idea of the 'implausible' side of the line of

demarcation, they make use of all the facets of the conspiratorial worldview outlined to make an account of its existence and acceptance as fact by the mainstream.

To summarize, the question of individual action for conspiracists is that they take action that directly reinforces their sense of individual security against threats, and that identification of threat is of the utmost importance. All the provided advice reaffirms the individual's place in their life and never suggests that building stronger community relationships might be a useful task. The concern and proposed solutions to the problem point to specific social-psychological factors about control, uncertainty, and imagination, but those factors likely play a diffuse, ambiguous role in the theorizing itself. This theory of action takes place against a theory of action that believes socio-political events and changes are the direct result of nefarious plots to weaken society.

4.3.3 Objects of the Conspiracy Universe

The third source of uncertainty deals with the agency of non-human objects in the networks they are part of. Considering the role of objects in the network means considering how specific objects change an individual's action. Specifically, how agencies are translated through objects, and why will be examined. In this case, what object(s) do the posters of r/conspiracy identify as changing their behavior one way or the other. For this, I have identified two major answers: vaccines & televisions.

4.3.3.1 Vaccines

Widely touted as the way out of the worst of the COVID-19 pandemic, vaccines occupy a particular place in the r/conspiracy's interpretation and understanding of the pandemic. For the mainstream actors, vaccines render freedom of gathering possible. For commenters in r/conspiracy, vaccines render possible a state of medical and biological control over the mass population. For instance, one commenter on the topic of the upcoming Pfizer vaccine "I don't

know what that vaccine is designed to do, but I want no part of it. It's pretty clear to me that this whole thing is more about control and compliance than health" (Oct 31, 1:49). The vaccine in this case represents not a tool for improving health or removing a threat to health, but a threat to individual health itself. This is echoed by another in a more detailed thread:

Ok yeah you explained it all perfectly I totally see it now. And I'm not 100% sure about the vaccine conspiracies but I believe that's why my mom didn't allow me and my sister to get vaccines. A lot of people say that those who are vegan and only eat plants and fruits are crazy but in all reality I don't think they are. The girl that I know doesn't believe in god but states that we're not supposed to get sick that our bodies weren't made to get sick. It's the stuff that they put in the food or in vaccines and medications to alter our bodies that make us weaker and sick. They have vaccines to defend against cancer but my mom never had me or my sister take them because she was worried we'd end up getting cancer. Since most vaccines they give you have the virus or illness so they can inject you with it themselves. Then again I don't know all about the science (Nov 1st 16:04).

Notice here the distance between this actor and vaccines. They have never received one, and they relate them to other medical innovations like medications, but also to plant foods. Vaccines for this commenter are not merely unnecessary for health but are actively the cause of illness. She asserts that on a patient-medicine-medical establishment network, the medical establishment uses the medicines, including vaccines, to sicken us. This individual's mother's understanding of the vaccine has generated a chain of vaccine hesitation. Since most vaccines inject a portion of virus or bacteria it is important to reject vaccination as to not allow 'them' to inject you with foreign bacteria themselves. Distance from the process of vaccine research and development allows an opposing conception to arise, where the conspiracists define themselves against the anti-groups of vaccine scientists, health officials, and vaccine takers. Another individual claimed, "The coronavirus vaccine will be the stupidest medical experiment in modern history. Not only will none of them work as intended, but they will maim and murder millions" (Oct 29th 14:44). In this account, perhaps the actors behind the vaccine may have

better intentions, but vaccines will still create mass casualties. One individual posted a thread describing their theory of how vaccination will play out (Oct 31st, 21:01, Thread 400), claiming that most ‘sheep’ will get the vaccine so that they can return to their normal lives, and once completed the next step will be to force those who are suspicious of vaccine to receive it if they want to work or travel. But then, once almost everyone has received it, a mysterious new pandemic wipes out almost everyone who received the vaccine. Here the vaccine is not merely a threat to health but will be forced on the population to cause mass global genocide. Actors across the institutions of power will use the vaccines to achieve the goal of depopulation. So, for r/conspiracy, vaccines represent a threat to health security and must be viewed skeptically, where actors emphasize vaccines in public for an ulterior motive.

4.3.3.2 Televisions

The second object I can incorporate into this account is the television. However, in a Latourian sense, conspiracists view television as a tool through which elite actors transmit information to the masses. Remembering back to the first uncertainty, conspiracists actors viewed their anti-group as one that passively absorbs information from the TV, specifically news media or entertainment. One user claimed that protesters for racial justice were mere “slaves to the TV” (Oct 31st, 9:14). One user, when confronted at a post office for not wearing a mask, told their critic “to fuck off back home at sit in front of the TV for the rest of his life so he can be scared” (Oct 29th, 23:06). The television becomes the intermediaries for conspiracists through which the anti-group passively absorbs mainstream messaging about COVID-19 meant to trap them in a constant state of fear. As I will show see in the next uncertainty, digital tools to disseminate media messaging on the pandemic are attributed a high degree of causal agency in changing individuals’ behaviors.

So, what does this conceptualization of the TV tell us about r/conspiracy? Well, it shows that the relationship conspiracists have to the television is one in which it threatens their intellectual autonomy. Earlier, there was one user suggest to another that they throw their television out the window and all their problems would disappear. More dramatically, one user claimed;

Havent been able to watch a movie in years. There is a reason why TV shows are called "PROGRAMMING" they are literally programming the viewer to think certain ways, even if just subtly and even sometimes subliminally (Oct 29th 20:40).

Conspiracists view the television as the transmitter of power and domination, much like vaccines. The ubiquitous status of television in our culture as the means of communication allows powerful actors to pass their ideological goals through an intermediary that no one will question. The conspiracist of r/conspiracy is the ones who mediate the information they view through a critical lens. The place television holds as an object through which elite power is translated and meaning is transmitted is related to the definitions of conspiracist identity from the first uncertainty. The anti-group passively absorbs television, the group analyzes it critically or simply does not engage. The performative act of not watching TV, or at least saying you do not, delineates your identification with a group asserting autonomy against the content production industry.

4.3.3.3 Relevance to the Literature

Relevance to the literature for this example is slight but important. The conceptualizing surrounding the object, the messaging conveyed about it, frame the vaccines, more specifically the COVID-19 vaccine(s) as a personal threat to the individual. While they are presented as something authorities use their agency to enforce upon others, they are also presented as a counter to individual agency, on the potential threat of maiming or death. Vaccination in this context is something to do you, to sicken you, to weaken you. This appeal to personal autonomy,

security, and health was identified by Smith & Graham (2019) and Hausman (2017). Although those scholars focused particular attention on the anti-vaccination movement as it relates to parents, the fear-based messaging anti-vaccine advocates use against parents is transferable to the COVID-19 vaccine. As individuals in the forum have already adopted a conspiratorial paradigm towards the pandemic (more on that in the next section), there is a ripe opportunity for anti-vaccine advocates to disseminate their message of vaccine fear to a grander audience who will be encouraged to get vaccinated. Again, the relevance is slight but important. Being provided the space to make grand proclamations, to speculate and posit upon about what vaccines are, what they do to you, and what the COVID-19 vaccine will do to society, the third uncertainty illustrates the importance of the rhetoric of positing and appeals to emotionality that underscores how conspiracist ideologies are spread.

With regards to television, the relevance is harder to parse. While television enters the accounts of r/conspiracy, they do so less through their physicality than their ability to transmit messages. Rather than render something as possible as vaccines do, television influences and suggest. Actors use the television to transmit content, and actors receive the content, fitting it into the perspective of the world. For the conspiracist though, they interpret TV content as obscuring a set of forces acting through it (Harambam & Aupers 2015:473). Social ties are made through the television; groups are made and unmade (1st uncertainty), actions are represented, recommended, or discouraged (2nd uncertainty), and they may disseminate information as fact when it may not be so simple.

Quickly, it is worth pointing out here that I have not completely fulfilled Latour's expectations for incorporating objects into an account of the social universe; the above analysis would seem a little shallow. However, the reason that this section of the analysis was limited is

multifold. First, with the sheer amount of content, it was difficult to identify many objects that might complement this analysis. However, leading into the second reason, was that the main object available for analysis would have been Reddit itself, but an analysis of the way Reddit operated as an object for the participants would have required an extensive backgrounding in theory too large for this project. A future study might look at the way Reddit exists as an object for its participants in a Latourian sense. Thirdly, the goal was not to stick rigidly to Latour here, just illustrate the ways in which his theory could be applied to a social universe in various ways.

4.3.4 Matters of Fact vs Matters of Concern?

Returning to Latour, remember the difference between ‘matters of fact’ which I described as irreducible claims about the material world and ‘matters of concern’ which I described as what should be made of those facts i.e. what they mean in sociological contexts. However, when discussing conspiratorial discourse in this vein, one must take a high degree of liberty in blurring the definition of the two and the boundary between them. This is due to something unique to conspiratorial (and anti-science rhetoric more broadly), namely the wholesale rejection of certain matters of fact. For the posters of r/conspiracy, there is a great deal of suspicion about specific matters of fact, and thus a good deal of discursive energy is spent into unsettling commonly agreed upon matters of fact. However, detailing, unpacking, and debunking all the various arguments made to challenge ‘matters of fact’ would be extraordinarily onerous and challenging and would distract from the main thrust of this argument. So instead, I shall show here how r/conspiracy engages in a process of moving ‘matters of fact’ into the category of ‘matters of concern’.

The most prominent topic of conversation where matters of fact are turned into matters of concern is the COVID-19 pandemic. But since the pandemic is a global-scale event that has impacted basically every aspect of life on this planet, the members of r/conspiracy must engage

in a multi-faceted approach to challenge the ‘facts’ of the pandemic. They must challenge the pandemic from a wide variety of angles, including the existence of SARS-Cov-2, the case counts, the death rates, the seriousness (i.e., why people are dying), and the large ‘goal’ behind it. Secondly, they must challenge the measures taken to combat it, like closures and lockdowns, mask mandates, and mass vaccination. As will be seen in this next section, the posters of r/conspiracy use a lot of the rhetorical tricks detailed earlier to cast doubt about the pandemic and its seriousness.

4.3.4.1 Concerning the Pandemic

The existence of a global pandemic is the first matter of fact to challenge for a conspiracist. They need to use of scientific literature, or least scientific sounding literature to disprove the existence of a pandemic. To this end, one user has repeatedly posted a collection of links to various sources disproving the existence of COVID-19. So, what starts as a matter of fact, the existence of a virus called SARS-Cov-2 which causes COVID-19, is challenged through links to articles presenting scientific sounding arguments. One is that SARS-Cov-2 has failed to meet Koch’s postulates (Devereaux & Frei, 2020), an argument familiar to the AIDS denialist movement as explored by Epstein (1995). Another is that PCR tests, the tests done to learn whether an individual has contracted SARS-Cov-2 are meaningless (Engelbrecht & Demeter, 2021) and even including a short video from PCR inventor Kary Mullis explaining PCR tests². People will claim that PCR tests have led to an inflation of COVID-19 cases by “[giving] a positive result even on low viral loads [...and...] including people with antibodies” (Oct 29th 14:06), and also that “an 80% false positive rate from the PCR tests” (Oct 30th 21:21, thread 528) creates a ‘casedemic’. They will find any piece of information that can cast aspersions of the

² Mr_Pink. (2020, October 10). PCR Inventor Kary Mullis says Technique Should not be used as a tool in “the diagnosis of infections. BitChute. <https://www.bitchute.com/video/Sy6rQEqTMF84/>

testing, like Ohio Governor Mike DeWine who tested both positive and negative in the same day (Stracqualursi, 2020). They will allege “dodgy PCR” tests as a pretext for claiming that positive test cases might have just had the flu (Oct 31st 12:16). So here, case counts are moved from matters of facts to matters of concern, and therefore debate by drawing attention to sources that claim PCR does not work. However, just casting doubt on case numbers does not disprove the pandemic.

So next they move onto deaths. They further muddy the waters on the death count, by arguing that the death count is “padded” by including individuals with comorbidities, saying that “only 6% of deaths were from covid alone, the rest had numerous comorbidities” (Oct 31st 8:00).³ The focus on deaths with comorbidities led to another way in which deaths and serious illness were discounted; focusing on individual health practices. One particularly cruel commenter pointed out:

Was just at the store yesterday and couldnt help but laugh at all of the incredibly obese people, riding around on their scooter because they are too fucking fat to walk, wearing a mask like covid is their biggest worry in the world (Oct 29th 16:19).

Bad eating habits generally and fat people in general were a frequent target for undermining the severity of the pandemic, but also sick people in general;

If other people's health has become my responsibility then I feel like I need to go around and check their fridges - clean out all the coca cola, processed foods, HFCS foods... i also need to make sure they exercise everyday instead of sitting on the couch watching tv for 5+ hours, i also need to follow them where ever they go and slap the McDonald's out of their hands, i need to make sure they are a healthy BMI (Oct 29th 16:10).

ppl [sic] in the US praise japan and south korea for their low rates. These countries have super low rate of obese people compared to the US. its not because of some sort of asian collective mentality or compliance with

³ CDC. (n.d.). COVID-19 Provisional Counts - Weekly Updates by Select Demographic and Geographic Characteristics. CDC.Gov. Retrieved April 19, 2021, from https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nvss/vsrr/covid_weekly/index.htm#Comorbidities

authority (Oct 30th 16:37).

Right but at one point the monthly deaths of covid exceeded the monthly deaths of cancer. You also have to consider that a large portion of cancer is self inflicted (Nov 1st 12:00).

So, medical arguments about comorbidities shift into a base reasoning, arguing that the high number of unhealthy people in America is why the pandemic might be more serious, a claim with intuitive sensibility. However, notice something else in this line of argumentation: it is not that there is no COVID-19, merely it is not as serious as governments and media are treating it. So, a matter of fact that there is a pandemic that is making people so sick they die is quietly turned into a matter of concern about public health more broadly. This generates a space to exempt the conspiracist from necessary actions needed to combat the pandemic. The pandemic is individualized a question of personal responsibility. Connect this with a technically low case counts against the total population and low statistical death rate in which cases of serious, potentially long-term illness, but not death is statistically (and thus rhetorically) excluded, one commenter sufficiently summarizes r/conspiracy's stance on the pandemic "Think about how long ago this 'pandemic' would be over if people applied your thought process... where are all the sick people?" (Oct 30th 14:16). In this view, nothing short of dead in the streets can sufficiently prove there is a pandemic before even considering measures to avoid that outcome.

Moving the mere fact of the pandemic into the category of debatable concern are two comments that highlight the exceptional nature of the denialist reasoning present on r/conspiracy. One Individual summarized it succinctly as "no internet = no pandemic" (Oct 30th 8:15). This was part of a thread entitled "What if Facebook started the Pandemic" (Oct 30th 7:42, Thread 186), where it was posited that the social media companies were behind the pandemic as a way for force everyone to be online constantly at home. Another user however started a thread (Oct

31st, 13:31, Thread 220) (here⁴) posing a thought experiment. I will not copy the whole text of the ‘thought experiment’ here but instead give a summary; two isolated communities, each 1000 people, are told a new virus has emerged and been transmitted to a member of the community. Group A receives daily reminders of this fact and authorities issue strict social distancing guidelines and mandatory mask wearing combined with rigorous enforcement; this group is told these measures prevent the spread. Group B receives only daily reminders, and no changes in behaviour are required. The question is “After one full year of both groups being told there is a dangerous virus, which group has the highest percentage of people still believing that?” (ibid). Leaving aside omitted variables required to think through the thought experiment, including the very important question of whether a new virus is genuinely circulating, the basic premise is clear. Our belief in the pandemic is what makes it real. The fact we are told there is a pandemic and that we must take precautions by changing longstanding behaviours is the real pandemic. Here the matter of fact of the pandemic is made into a matter of concern about how acting like it creates it: it is a concern that we believe it to be a fact. One commenter summarizes it by saying “If people stopped listening to the media, the pandemic would be over.” (Oct 31st 14:54). For r/conspiracy the question of whether there is a pandemic is secondary to the concern that we are being told about it. But here, two facets of common conspiratorial rhetoric are used to turn a matter of fact into a matter of concern. First is the repetitive posting of long chains of links that claim certain things about PCR tests, deaths, morbidities etc that mimicking scholarship via informational overload or ‘death by footnote’ (Jane & Flemming 2014: 7). Then, with this paragraph’s example, they offer appeals to basic commonsensical reasoning attempting to

⁴ u/[deleted]. “The purpose of masks has always been obvious”. Reddit. Accessed April 19th 2021 (Oct 31st 2020). https://www.reddit.com/r/conspiracy/comments/jlieir/the_purpose_of_masks_has_always_been_obvious/

demonstrate a cognitive problem with believing in a pandemic to change that belief into skepticism.

4.3.4.2 Concerning the Measures

This brings us to the restrictive measures put into place to reduce the spread of COVID-19. So once a member of r/conspiracy has fully incorporated a conspiratorial lens towards the pandemic's existence, the measures must also be viewed the same. Specifically, mandatory masking in indoor public spaces and lockdowns are the two major measures implemented by governments to curb transmission. Starting with lockdowns, they are a matter of concern vis à vis the fact the pandemic. But once conspiracists have unsettled the pandemic as a fact, the concern at stake in lockdowns shifts dramatically. What is in mainstream discourse an issue of the economics of keeping an economy stalled alongside the detrimental effects this poses for long-term health (physical and mental) including suicides, substance abuse and overdoses, takes all of that and subsumes it under a fear of ulterior motives. As one commenter put it;

They have to uphold their narrative and pretend that all the restrictions are in place to protect us. If the government actually gave a shit about public health, they would be concerned with the rising rates of poverty, hunger, depression, alcoholism, substance abuse, and weight gain that have come as a result of lockdowns. Never hear anyone talking about that though, do you? (Nov 1st 18:54).

The lockdowns, which all individuals find to be personally difficult on some level, become part of an elite cabal's plan to crash the economy, implement the 'Great Reset', impose quarantine camps, and even implement genocide.

But even worse for many of r/conspiracy posters are the masks. Leaving aside what the masks represent, there is an immense effort to message the ineffectiveness of mask-wearing but turning it into a matter of concern about imposing mask mandates. Users will, as with the case counts and deaths, post a collection of articles all claiming that masks do not work. The point here is to shift the debate of concern from one over spread to one of individual choice and rights

to not wear a mask and importantly one of efficacy. One thread entitled “Big Tech CEOs commit to censoring all posts that state “masks don’t work” (Oct 31st, 13:17, Thread 215) posted a link to an article claiming censorship of anti-mask messaging, and the comments section devolved into a blob of posted links claiming any number of things about masks. Here again the same rhetorical tendencies towards argumentation are present. Posting a great deal of links hoping that the sheer amount alone will convince the receiver of the scientific validity of the overall claim being made. For the casual observer, who lacks the scientific knowledge or time to parse through this barrage of links and claims, this will be overwhelming enough to cognitively shut them down. Although the details of these mask studies would be too large to delve too deeply into, it is worth stating outright that none of the posted links proved with 100% accuracy of efficacy of masks of one way or the other. This is likely due to the fact that all of the posted studies were testing different types of masks in various settings with different forms of illness and inconsistent levels of participant masking/masking in the total social environment i.e. too many uncontrolled variables. However, the point of this is not to settle factual question about mask usage and it would be wrong to view it as such. The point, particularly for the anti-mask posters but also for the pro-mask posters, is to inundate the informational space with immensely inordinate messaging about masks as to make actual refutation impossible. To refute the overall point of someone’s argument, one would need to read through each study (and sometimes dozens were posted in the same component), concretely understand the methodological quirks of each individual study, and write a long-winded explanation of what small claims to truth each article can provide and what this means in the larger debate on masks as a public health measure, and few have both the time and education required for that project. That is how the zone of concern

attached to a fact can be altered using scientific seeming argumentation by papering over the constructed nature of scientific facts.

4.3.4.3 Relevance to Latour & Literature

Referring this source of uncertainty on r/conspiracy back the literature, it's important revisit the concept of the black box. Remembering that the "black box" (Epstein 1995:28) refers to the stage in scientific discourse, or socio-political discourse more broadly, when a certain truth claim on a topic becomes widely accepted as true, concealing within it all the scientific and logical reasonings behind it. The black box is what is presented to the lay public, hiding all the minute, abstract scientific, theoretical, philosophical reasonings that support it, because to open a public conversation on the highly technical considerations behind the claim would undermine the purpose of claiming it to be true. For Latour (2005), the black box is an intermediary, transmitting its inputted data to others. To put it simply, the public at large lack the technical education required to understand the complex reasonings behind a scientific truth claim. So, like the example of aids denialism (ibid) or the process described by Miller (2002) about the institutional practice of excluding certain paradigms from public consideration, conspiracists on r/conspiracy seized the presence of the numerous black boxes of our pandemic response, from its existence to masks. Masks in particular offer a useful example here, as the rapid shift from believing them to be unnecessary to being crucial in news media demonstrated for users a rapid closing of a black box on the subject immediately preceding widespread forced implementation.

The question of 'cui bono' (Byford 2015:41) takes on an important dimension here, as the overwhelming shift in media coverage on the subject was interpreted by conspiracists as signalling something sinister. Exacerbating this were actions taken by social media corporations to restrict content that was against mask usage as proof that masks were not useful; "If masks actually worked they wouldn't need to do this. Their censorship proves the lie." (Oct 31st 15:48).

Users were aware that black box had been closed and they were primed to counteract that. As part of that goal, they clearly employed the rhetorical techniques were explored earlier, identified by Oswald (2016): the rhetoric of just asking questions/just saying and the rhetoric of scientific and rational inquiry (2). The attempts at using scientific sources and the language of scientific reasoning show the aspirations to prove a point scientifically to render disapproval impossible. Also echoed here is Armfield (2007), who pointed out that conspiracist literature is often accompanied by laundry lists of scientific claims and arguments that cannot be argued against all at once (7). The laundry list of citations provided by the users also illustrate the use of excessive footnoting to provide the appearance of scientific validity for those without the means or time to independently verify the claims made described by Jane & Flemming (2014:45). The repetitive invocation of the name Kary Mullis, who founded PCR tests as an expert source *par excellence* proving their uselessness was also raised by Jane & Flemming (2014) where appeals to experts are made but a thorough digging through Mullis's beliefs one finds he held several unscientific views: HIV is not the cause of AIDS, that there is no man-made climate change, no ozone depletion, and that he believes in astrology (Mullis, 1998). But again, the goal is not to provide bulletproof scientific reasoning for conspiracist claims, just a slew of informational content meant to confuse and capitalize on uncertainty.

This is where the second rhetorical stance of conspiracists comes into play: asking questions and positing. Remember that individual commenters above claimed that questioning the existence of the pandemic would clearly evaporate the narrative surrounding it. Simply asking questions is enough to reason yourself out of belief in the pandemic. This is also where appeals to emotions-based reasoning comes into play. By emotions here I do not mean that which necessarily generates specific emotions (anger, happiness, sadness etc.) but appeals to

reasoning that ‘feels’ true. Remember earlier, users attempting to downplay the severity of the pandemic latched onto the unhealthiness of the American diet to make a point about why people were dying. Rather than proving conclusively that COVID-19 is serious, they proposed the idea that case severity was linked to personal habits. By proposing an alternative theory of COVID-19’s seriousness that refers to easily digestible rhetorical ideas (healthy eating), combined with a subtextual disgust for fat people allows the conspiracist to weaponize hypothesizing against the common understanding of the pandemic.

Latour’s (2005) recommendations for following the debate between matters of fact vs matters of concern have proven uniquely prescient here. He presented 4 items on an analytical ‘to-do list’ (Latour 2005: 118) in which to root the analysis. Firstly, he proposed that scientific facts are always fabricated and in vary levels of completion (ibid). Masks were not initially recommended at the outset of the pandemic, and it took a few months for public health officials to recommend mandatory widespread masking (Molteni & Rogers 2020). Thus, masks were moved from a question of concern to a question fact for health officials, as the scientific fact regarding their usefulness was settled into a black box, an intermediary fact that had to be completed. But this did not go unnoticed by the actors of r/conspiracy, who viewed this highly visible change in scientific recommendations as a controversy. Which brings us to the second item; the sites of fact making are longer limited to labs, they often come into direct contact with us (Latour 2005:118). Specifically, widespread and mandatory masking would demonstrate its effectiveness in real time as the population adopted the behaviour (Molteni & Rogers 2020). This rendered the mask an object of metaphorical significance, a sign of how seriously you took the pandemic. For the conspiracists however, they expected concrete proof of effectiveness before widespread implementation and mandates, which I showed earlier was not established

concretely, meaning mask mandates were in part a widespread experiment on the populous. Thus, Latour's 3rd item (ibid:119), in which experiments, and controversies become an insight into the ontology of a paradigm is arrived at. Masks in this example represent for the actors the imposition of unproven methods on a population; the mask mediates between the scientific consensus of its effectiveness and the rejection of that consensus. This is exacerbated by the very public nature of this debate; actors could see how the settling 'fact' of mask effectiveness would impose a change on their behaviour, a challenge to their personal sense of agency (2nd uncertainty) through an object (3rd uncertainty).

The debate around the existence and the severity of the pandemic imitates this pattern. Shifting recommendations and statements as more data becomes available illustrated just how fabricated and incomplete scientific knowledge can be at any given time (1st item). However, for r/conspiracy, the endless changes symbolized something nefarious. Rather than shifting statements tracing a process of data interpretation, it indicated that scientific institutions were engaged in deception, especially as the pandemic and scientific facts began to interfere with their personal lives (2nd item). This was present in the thought-experiment one actor proposed; would the pandemic only be made visible through awareness and attention to it, through the behaviours adopted to combat it? I also showed debates around the way cases and deaths were counted relating both to Latour's 1st and 2nd items here. Case counts were 'constructed' based on PCR testing, and deaths were reported in a manner that included comorbidities alongside positive COVID-19 tests. The public awareness of this processes leads r/conspiracy to the third item; the controversies actors could mobilize about the experiments and methods of the study allowed them to generate an ontology of the virus understood as non-lethal and non-serious, therefore begging the question: why are we implementing all these measures over something so banal?

Exacerbating all this uncertainty was the public nature of the crisis. Everyone was involved in the threat COVID-19 posed, everyone was expected to change their behaviour (2nd uncertainty) to mitigate the threat. The actors of r/conspiracy formed a group identity around doubt of the pandemic and it's serious, and the maintenance of this group identity was performative rejection (1st uncertainty) of social distancing (2nd uncertainty), vaccines and vaccination (2nd & 3rd uncertainties) and masks (2nd & 3rd uncertainties).

To summarize, the users of r/conspiracy make use of the rhetorical strategies of asking questions and positing alongside the aesthetic of scientific reasoning to move the 2020/2021 COVID-19 pandemic from the zone of fact to the zone of concern. They seek to dislodge the popular understanding of the pandemic by casting doubt on the case counts, the death numbers, the seriousness. They frame the measures as dramatic and unscientific responses to a non-existent problem. They appeal to lay logic and maximize the exposure to aesthetically scientific argumentation to generate and capitalize on uncertainty. The controversies around the scientific facts of the COVID-19 pandemic are effectively mapped through Latour, and conspiracist posters on r/conspiracy are sophisticated rhetoricians, seizing on these controversies to smuggle the conspiratorial ideology across the internet.

4.3.5 Positing & Bigotry

This indicates that the research on the rhetorical strategies of conspiratorial discourse provides another proven-out thread of this study. I demonstrated above how the aesthetic of rationalistic, scientific inquiry was used to cast doubt upon the COVID-19 pandemic's existence, and the measures used to combat it. I have also witnessed rhetorically simple appeals to base reasoning used for the same purposes and to 'prove' that the pandemic was not serious. I witnessed the use of 'just asking questions', or more accurately, 'just positing', in the thread about the origins of the pandemic including the thread positing that 'thought experiment'.

Positing was also a large part of the comments people made on feminism and LGBTQ rights.

This risky account has demonstrated that the nonchalant capacity the users of r/conspiracy possess to lob postulations and claims into the digital ether without consequence is taken advantage of. Even further examples include:

I just read your article and proved it wrong. Republicans aren't going to do away with the US Constitution. Democrats would love to do that and start a communist style socialism where they can use 5G to track your every step, buy \$1000 lunches, get rid of undesireables by sending them to reeducation camps, etc... *[sic]* Also, the article claiming those guys who planned to kidnap the Michigan governor were right wing is wrong. They hated Trump and law enforcement. That's not right wing, it's left wing (Oct 29th 2:36).

They [fetuses] are sold to put in vaccines and for stem cell research. Some babies are still alive when being pulled out from the mother and they just leave them on the counter with hearts breathing instead of saving that baby as you would with any other life. They treat fetuses as if it's trash. It's absolutely disgusting and cruel (Oct 30th, 1:04).

You realize your Biden boys are already deep in the kiddie boy porn game. Hunter's fucked half his family at this point. Maybe he'll have a go at Dad next. It's kind of a Republican's thing to stop all the Democratic voters for voting for people that have a thing for having sex with and abusing children (Oct 30th 14:05).

The feminine (liberal) imperative. To seek security under that which is deemed an authority, to provide for you the best sense you can muster. This is what happens when you vilify the masculine and destroy the family and sense of community in a society. It makes sense when you understand everything about the liberal ideology is female (to take). It's why the CIA conceived and promoted feminism, to undermine and weaken a strong society. As soon as that happened, everything started tilting left, people dyed their hair blue and started talking about how bad men are and how much government owed them (Nov 2nd, 00:58).

In defense of participants, these comments do not represent callous, carefree postulations without purpose. They are explanations of ultimate truth, a good-faith expression the beliefs that inform their lives. But one can see the rhetorical tricks of conspiracist literature all the same. There are the appeals to emotionality in invocations of re-education camps and the tragic suffering of recently aborted fetuses. As Richard Hofstadter noted, referring to the "big leap from the undeniable to the unbelievable" (1967: 37), premises about the U.S. Constitution, abortion,

salacious accusations against the Biden family, and the relationship between feminism and liberalism become twisted under the vocabulary of conspiracism, with absurd leaps into nonsensical territory under the guise of truth-telling.

The research explored early on in this paper on Reddit as a research site has been mostly vindicated. I have shown how Reddit's modality as a discourse-centric space attracts a community of users excited to articulate endlessly their interest in conspiracy theories. I have also shown a lack of deference to traditional gatekeeping authorities in the information landscape. I saw how an ideologically extreme space created and used totalizing language to attack outsiders, and even the overlap between the sexist and racist discourse that had been present on other forums had found a home on r/conspiracy. There was a great deal of explicit bigotry in the space:

There are a lot of conspiracies involving Jews, and its not anti semetic to talk about them (Oct 29th).

You know what? I'm sick of this. Pop those rafts, fuck those people, and hang the people responsible. This shit is unfuckingacceptable. Africans are objectively the worst group of people to allow into your borders (Oct 31st 15:02).

To send as many fighting age capable, unskilled/untrained, and "ready to impregnate any human that doesn't have a dick between its legs" freeloaders as possible. They [African Immigrants] are allowed to invade European first world nations so they can snuff out the native Europeans and erase any history of their culture. It's an invasion. Period. Build your own fucking country you fucking locusts! (Oct 30th 23:52).

There's a culture on the east coast of orthodox Jews who know how to work the social welfare system like a fucking art form. Most of them only vote Dem because it's a business decision. Jews, not part of that culture (like modern normal ones without the twirly hair) have nothing do with that system and run the gamut on their political views (Nov 1st, 21:55).

And Bolshevik jews used to cut open prisoners heads and force others to eat their brains (Oct 31st 21:36).

Those last two quotes are demonstrative of an exorbitant amount of anti-Semitic language on the forum, the most common being a substitute of the word Zionism for the word Jewish, or Jew.

I believe that like the conspiratorial questions surrounding social progress in the earlier sections, that expressions the expressions of bigotry here relate deeply to conspiracist ideology more broadly. Reddit's existence as a platform that prizes contention combines with the rhetorical trick of positing in conspiratorial circles to provide a safe space for expressions of this kind of bigoted speech. Byford (2015:72) pointed out that Jewish people, a widely available scapegoat for conspiratorial thinking due to the blurred line they inhabit between us and them; easily able to blend but with minority status. That is traditional conspiracy thinking and is not new to the genre. The role immigrants rhetorically occupy in the examples above as a threat to European society is like that assigned to Jewish people.

Revisiting the section on the building blocks of the conspiracist worldview, I posit that the bigotry above expressed towards immigrants and Jewish people, and the similar sentiments expressed towards LGBTQ people in an earlier subsection is essential to the identification of the conspirators. Specifically, recalling that conspiracy theories can often target those on the fringes of society, there is an obvious reason these groups draw the attention they do. Individuals that exist are the margin of society make easy scapegoats for the conspiracist who has had little interpersonal interaction with the groups they villainize as it is easy to view them as threats to their security, with their radical theories of gender identity, their strange religion, their unfamiliar culture, and language. Notice in many of these comments these groups are framed as working towards a goal of undermining current structures, or as manipulated socially for that end. Here again, are echoes of the systemic justification component of conspiracy theorizing (Jolley, Douglas & Sutton, 2018), where vile claims about marginalized people are rhetorically supported

by the importance of maintaining what we currently have and speaking the truth about the threats outsiders pose to our security. Users in r/conspiracy are given free rein here to posit bigoted claims about minority groups under the guise of Reddit as a space for free inquiry and the label of conspiracy as a shield to deflect against accusations of bigotry.

4.3.6 – Final Contributions to the Literature

This account confirms core claims from the literature review about the role of social media and the internet in disseminating and reinforcing conspiratorial messaging. As Jane & Flemming (2014) pointed out, the internet allows conspiracists to aggregate the opinions and claiming, sharing them widely across the information space. Anyone wanting to share a rumor, experience, opinion, article, book, or compilation of the above on COVID-19 has a space to do, instantaneously blasting it across the planet to anyone who wants to look for it. Digital objects are tools for mediating agency, as conspiracists use them to assert individual agency, allowing them to “think for themselves” rather than appealing to authority (Oct 29, 23:39). Shasavari et al (2016) illustrated in the early days of the pandemic there was a lack of a unifying corpus of knowledge so conspiracy theorists had to resort to speculation and positing to explain what they were experiencing. As the pandemic dragged on however, conspiracists had compiled a collection of sources they could appropriate to spread uncertainty and doubt across the internet. Digital tools were used to gather and disseminate information that supported the conspiracist conception of the pandemic to justify ignoring the recommendations.

The literature review included an overview of research that was conducted on r/conspiracy. The set of interrelated topics discussed by Klein et al (2018) (see above) were found in the data set and the sentiment analysis of Klein et al (2019) was also borne out in the dataset. The topics of conversation and set of connections and associations they identified are rooted in the networks drawn by the actors of r/conspiracy. However, these studies failed to take

their findings to generate a dynamic, contextual understanding of what they were researching. To put it simply, they generated categorical word clouds that were vindicated in the research, but the studies offered little else in terms of understanding how the members of the forum understood events. They assumed that the labels they applied to a set of word clouds were fixed and easily categorizable. Samory & Mitra (2018) fared similarly: the narrative motifs they identified were identified in the dataset, alongside their topic categories, but they too failed to do more than illustrate the collection of words used in an expansive dataset. Therefore, I contend that further research on r/conspiracy must utilize a similar method to mine here; collecting data and reading through it comment by comment to search for the dynamic, nuanced, and opaque social universe generated in the space. Categorizing words present by quantity and category tells us nothing about why those words or how they are applied in the discourse.

As for the social psychology research, I found echoes of all the traits identified by the literature in one form or another. However, I contend that this not be taken as a vindication for those findings or the methods behind them, as despite evidence of relationality between conspiracy theorizing and the stated concepts, there is no evidence to state conclusively the direction or degree of that relationship. This relates to the issues discussed with these studies earlier, namely the failure to consider “the creative potential, the dynamic, the interactive, and the narrative qualities of conspiracy theories” (Raab et al 2013:2). Furthermore, I put forward that the social-psychological constructs applied to conspiracy theorizing by research in this field that was bound to appear in the data set due to the overbreadth of the concepts and the size of the dataset. Simply put, traits that could have been identified as part of the conspiracist profile based solely on analysis of conspiracist literature or the academic literature surrounding it would inevitably appear in comments on a conspiracy forum. The traits are treated by scholars as

matters of (social-psychological) fact, i.e. they exist independently and are applicable to conspiracists. However, it would be more accurate to consider these traits as matters of concern; they take on meaning only when they are described in an account of a conspiracist actor. While these traits might appear in a conspiracist's personality, the questions of direction and degree are impossible to answer because they vary from person to person and from topic to topic and exist only when invoked by a conspiracist.

So, my account has found that the lens of conspiracy is operationalized on r/conspiracy to dismiss the beliefs of others as being held in bad faith; no individual could believe or agree with a mainstream narrative on a topic through their intellectual capacities and processes. A social universe is drawn in which there is a Manichean conflict between the enlightened and the ignorant that reaches through politics, society, culture, and economics to impact every individual. This universe provides the conspiracists of r/conspiracy rhetorical space to dismiss conflicting opinions as brainwashing or ideological programming, in part due to a need to justify and maintain the pre-existing status of certain identities against previously marginalized ones. The rhetorical techniques conspiracy theorists apply are present R/conspiracy, including the use of aesthetically scientific reasoning and the use of positing to disseminate ideological messaging. These techniques were executed to generate doubt about the COVID-19 Pandemic and the measures imposed to combat it. Reddit's existence as a space for contentious discourse was spectacularly affirmed through the innumerable topics discussed on r/conspiracy how each was framed to provide the poster the rhetorical high ground. This demonstrated through the use of positing to spread bigoted messaging under the guise of free speech and logical inquiry. The central role of debunking in the overall conspiracy discourse was affirmed, as it plays into the ongoing circularity of assuming bad faith on the part of your discursive opponent. Pre-existing

research into r/conspiracy was shown to have been valid but limited in application. Social-psychological research into space was also shown to have some merit but only as part of the wider field of literature into the conspiracist phenomena.

5. Analyst's Notes & Conclusion

This thesis represents merely a fraction, a brief overview of the innumerable findings that could be uncovered within just this dataset alone. There are entire topics of conversation, issues that spanned dozens of threads, and thousands of comments that could not be discussed here due to project limitations. Future areas of research into this or similar fields could include team-based coding to identify logical and rhetorical tendencies via technical terms, or by applying discourse analysis of the arguments that happen on just one topic. A deep dive into all the scientific discussions that occur on this thread that attempts to explain in detail the scientific rationale behind various claims made by the posters here is possible. This research barely scratches the surface of the kind of work that could be done by scholars trudging through comment sections of contentious web forums and piecing together a cohesive argument about what they found. Perhaps future researchers could, as part of the research process, properly engage the subjects. Interrogate their intentions, their perspectives, their deeply held convictions, and the past experiences that inform them. That might make the project feel more personable, more interactive. It might provide future researchers a greater sense of autonomy, being able to challenge participant conceptions.

What I found going through these conversations, reading these threads, tracing every argument I could find, following every link, was that trying to keep tabs on all of this was mentally and emotionally exhausting; a Sisyphean task. The cognitive and emotional strain of informational bombardment can not be understated for any future researchers in this field or for

the millions of people who frequent conspiracist spaces online. As I managed my pandemic stress, dealing with the monotony of daily life confined to my apartment, trudging through an endless sea of uninformed angry, racist, misogynistic, homo/transphobic comments about politics, the pandemic, my sexual orientation, and movements for social equality, this project grated on my mental health greatly. I was doing this purely for intellectual and scholarly purposes, out of my interest in examining belief systems far outside my own to potentially learn ways of engaging with those individuals and persuading them away from radical beliefs. Imagine others, who went there because they were confused about a pandemic that ripped their previous lives from their hands. Imagine grieving a life you thought you knew and entering r/conspiracy only to be flooded with information you cannot process properly about it was stolen from you for nefarious purposes and everything you are being asked to sacrifice is being pushed for evil ends. It is psychologically destructive sifting through endless claims about bloated cases and death counts, ongoing partisan mudslinging about which party's presidential candidate is a worse pedophile/rapist and, nonstop fear-mongering about rioters looting and burning cities to the ground projected into your brain via your retinas by a backlit screen.

R/conspiracy is a space where the conspiratorial politics of the 21st-century information space play out in real-time. At any given moment, thousands of users are posting threads and comments in discussions about all topics simultaneously. In this space, Redditors are turning matters of fact into matters of concern, isolating themselves in a discursive game that centers their logic against the thought processes of others, are fantasizing apocalyptically about the future of human society, and sharing life advice. This space provides users the appearance of intellectual freedom to pursue their craziest conceptions of the world. Many seek the deepest truths of our humanity; where did we come from? How long have we been here? What

knowledge have we lost? Is there anyone else out there? What is reality? What is being hidden from us? Others seek to encourage and develop critical thinking skills in others. Others still seek to use the idea of a conspiracy to justify the imposition of their authoritarian ideology. What is clear, however, is that the language of conspiracy has become an increasingly prominent aspect of our public discourse for political, social, cultural, and economic matters. This will, if it has not already, make it difficult, if not impossible, to have a productive public discourse that will settle our collective crisis.

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