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History as the glue of online-published conspiracy theories and possible implications for collective memory

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Abstract

This article examines the role of historical substance in online-published written conspiracy theories from an epistemological view. It describes how conspiracy theories are mediated in the digital age. It then shows the basic argumentative process of conspiracy theories, linking fictional and real events. It is a variation of the argumentative fallacy of the "post hoc fallacy," which we call the "post coniurationem fallacy." The historical narrative thus provides a plausible perspective and the appearance of veracity to the conspiracy narrative. This dynamic is supported by the rootedness of conspiracy theories in implicit memory. The case study of the Czech conspiracy website Aeronet illustrates this. The multiplicity of today's conspiracy theories and the ease with which they can be disseminated through digital media is thus profoundly transforming how parts of society encounter historical fabric and shape collective memory.

Keywords

Conspiracy Theory, History, Media, Algorithm, Collective Memory, Implicit Memory

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Introduction

With the democratization of communication through digital media, the possibilities for spreading conspiracy theories have greatly expanded (O'Connor and Weatherall, 2019, pp. 147–186). That does not necessarily mean that more conspiracy theories are circulating today than in the past. Uscinski and Parent's (2014) analysis of letters to the *New York Times* and *Chicago Tribune* showed that the circulation of conspiracy theories in the US did not increase between 1890 and 2010. Moreover, the peaks of interest did not occur after the year 2000 with the advent of social networking, but in the years around 1900 during the Second Industrial Revolution as well as the late 1940s and early 1950s in the context of the emerging Cold War. Similarly, the functional finding that conspiracy theories are responses to social crises is not new. In the 1960s, Hofstadter (1965) came up with the idea that the "paranoid style" explains and justifies the ever-changing world for those who feel powerless in the face of the new conditions.

Conspiracy theories are thus a fixed part of history writing (Van Prooijen et al., 2018, p. 330). Therefore, the perceived novelty of the age-old phenomenon of conspiracy theories lies not in its historical novelty but in its new historicity. According to Hartog (2015), "regimes of historicity" are changing, and society is moving towards presentism in collective historical memory. This presentist historicity gives rise to a novel communicative structure of established and emerging conspiracy theories and their societal roles.

Beyond the social-psychological perspective, however, less attention has been paid to the actual communicative structure of conspiracy theories (Cassam, 2019), where the exceptions, such as Boudry, offer only "generic recipes" (2023, p. 622) without specific attention to the nature of their use of history and their mediality. That sharply contrasts with the recent increased attention to the epistemic aspects of conspiracy theories as symbolized by the special issue of Social Epistemology (Dentith, 2023b). The philosophical approach was once dominated by particularists, who do not identify conspiracy theories as inherently problematic.

However, the demise of a particularist consensus was brought about by a new wave of generalists, who hold stances closer to the non-philosophical mainstream (cultural anthropology, literary studies, media studies, etc.) and see conspiracy theories as malicious and epistemically vice. This text does not necessarily side with generalists, since it does not speak about conspiracy theories as a class but rather about those that utilize historical arguments (cf. Dentith, 2023a).

Another crucial aspect of the relatively recent situation regarding conspiracy theories is the development and proliferation of digital media and their impact on the latter. Conspiracy theories are increasingly moving from oral dissemination to written or audiovisual forms. We are moving from the malleable and amenable form of oral dissemination of socially shared conspiracy theories—which only occasionally manifested itself in, for example, a conspiracy letter from a reader to the *New York Times*—to a new communicative 'infrastructure' of conspiracy theories with the large number of permanent media contents on the internet. Simultaneously, these written and published conspiracy theories often contain factual or fictional historical events.

Thus, this paper aims to answer the following research question using the production of a conspiracy website from the Czech Republic as an example of the use of historical materials:

RQ: *What are the patterns of use of historical materials in online-published written conspiracy theories?*

The role of the media in conspiracy theories

According to Barkun (2013), every conspiracy theory contains three essential elements: (1) nothing happens by accident, and everything is by design; (2) nothing is as it seems, and innocence is deceptive; and (3) everything is connected. The narratives may vary, but they usually have a similar narrative of (1) a group, (2) acting in secret, (3) altering institutions, usurping power, hiding truth, or gaining utility, (4) at the expense of the common good (Uscinski and Parent, 2014, p. 58), or in another very similar definition of "a powerful and secret group engaging in covert,

malevolent, and organized activities against vulnerable groups" (DiFonzo, 2019, p. 258). Evidence suggests that when people experience insecurity or loss of control, they are more inclined to support conspiracy theories (Bilewicz and Sedek, 2015; Kofta et al., 2020; Whitson et al., 2015).

Loss of certainty and control may occur personally, within a social group, or concerning the state and government (Abalakina-Paap et al., 1999; Goertzel, 1994). An important aspect is that those who believe in one conspiracy theory are also prone to believe in other conspiracy theories (Goertzel, 1994; Swami et al., 2010, 2011; Wood et al., 2012), so we can even speak of a conspiracy mentality (Bruder et al., 2013; Imhoff and Bruder, 2014). However, succumbing to a conspiracy mentality is far from the prerogative of a limited group of people on the margins of society. From Lasswell and Adorno's views in the 1940s that conspiracy theories tend to be only "the agitator" or "the authoritarian personality" (Butter and Knight, 2020, p. 34), research has come to a broader conception of conspiracy theories as an integral part of society's encounter with uncertainty. Half of Americans believe in at least one conspiracy theory, while many of these theories are global (Oliver and Wood, 2014).

Thus, while the nature of conspiracy theories and their reliance on implicit memory do not change much over time, the media as a mediator of conspiracy theories has changed radically. Instead of traditional word-of-mouth, the development of digital media has led to written or audiovisual forms of these stories quickly emerging without dependency on mass media. New communication-technological characteristics join the social-psychological ones discussed above. The popularity of social media has changed how conspiracy theory proponents communicate and disseminate their narratives (Grant et al., 2015). The media can also act differently on conspiracy predispositions (Strömbäck et al., 2023). For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the social network Twitter tended to dampen conspiracy theories as opposed to other social networks (Theocharis et al., 2023).

The medium we used in the following empirical probe was, as a class, researched by sociolinguists Cvrček and Fidler (2024). They coined the strategy of concealing the recurrent narratives, including conspiracy theories, as “parasitic discursive behavior,” which means “anti-system media mimicking the ‘host’ media (the mainstream) and conceptually mutating news topics to multiply ANTS-specific narratives” (2024, p. 51). According to their finding, the strategy includes active entrance into competition with mainstream media by building an image of a news portal, which is strengthened by reporting various current, newsworthy topics that are covered by the mainstream media. Our attention is paid specifically to the “mutating” strategies.

One prominent theme is the impact of algorithms used in digital media and their influence on social structure. Various conspiracy theories are spreading fast (Vosoughi et al., 2018), which promotes the polarization of society. The impact of so-called echo chambers is then disputed. Some scholars believe it is vital due to algorithms, while others think it affects relatively few people (Guess, 2021; Munger and Phillips, 2022).

The creators of published written conspiracy theories know how to use these algorithms in their favor. The number of responses to posts is a sign of community engagement and a fundamental building block of algorithms. Therefore, a well-organized group that may not be large, but who share and disseminate one piece of media content extensively at a time, can significantly boost the valence of an algorithm. The algorithm then shares such content more intensively, even though it may be a strongly unacceptable opinion in the majority.

The algorithmic battle for collective memory

One pervasive link in conspiracy theories is historical substance, which provides the narrative perspective and anchors the conspiracy story in the setting of actual past events (O’Connor and Weatherall, 2019, pp. 46–92). However, the historical references in conspiracy theories are usually directed to historical facts and the artful use of the community's collective memory. Halbwachs (1992) argued that the historical collective experience of a national, religious, or ethnic group is the interpretive framework of contemporary events. This collective memory can then

justify current politics (Hilton and Liu, 2017). Collective memory is constantly evolving; different memory narratives can drive different contemporary actions. For example, victims of perceived historical adversity may have a more robust demand for authoritarian leaders (Bilewicz and Sedek, 2015; Goertzel, 1994).

Historical traumas can also become a collective experience (Alexander, 2013). Thus, the impact of collective historical narratives can be long-lasting, transformed in different ways, and contribute in various ways to the interpretation of contemporary events. Well-constructed conspiracy theories exploit this. "Conspiracy theories may spread over time and become part of people's mental representations of important historical events, long after the feelings of uncertainty and fear that the events initially caused have dissipated." (Van Prooijen et al., 2018, p. 239).

One well-known example is the abundance of conspiracies about the involvement of various influential groups in the assassination of US President John F. Kennedy. Three years after the assassination, just about 50 percent of Americans believed such theories. Over time, however, these conspiracy theories have not subsided but increased or fluctuated in credibility, reaching 81 percent of Americans in 1975 and 1999 and even recently well above 60% (Brenan, 2023; Swift, 2013).

Of all the variations in collective memory, conspiracy theories tend to activate and generally work, especially with what has recently been coined by Astrid Erll as an “implicit collective memory” (2022). As opposed to commemorative, visible (explicit) collective memory, people remain largely unaware of the implicit one that may contain “cultural stereotypes, tabooed pasts, emotional regimes, non-conscious master narratives” (Erll, 2022, p. 4). Wertsch and Roedinger project that “the power of narrative tools as forms of mediation in implicit and explicit collective memory” (2022, p. 9) is to become one of the keys to the future of memory studies. The empirical analysis shall thus be read using this prism as well.

The already very flexible formation of collective memory has recently become increasingly influenced by new communication platforms (Assmann, 2006). The digital world is changing how we store, remember, use, and forget historical knowledge (Mayer-Schönberger, 2011). This change is even evident in controversial historical topics.

Makhortykh, Urman, and Ulloa speak of "the algorithmic turn in memory wars" (2022, p. 1333). In their study of the Holodomor — the famine in Ukraine in the 1930s — they show how different search engines rank search results. Algorithms have their prioritization of sources; they value texts with as many links as possible, and search engines also influence political-economic relations: "While both Google and Yandex may prioritize sources of the same type (e.g., journalistic outlets), the exact choice of sources varies substantially with Google prioritizing more independent media, which are often critical of the Kremlin, and Yandex often giving priority to pro-Kremlin media," (Makhortykh et al. 2022, p. 1341).

Thus, with its algorithmic nature, the online media environment is more than just an uncluttered supply of media content, including published written conspiracy theories. It is also an extremely transparent battlefield for our attention, one that depends on mastering the algorithms of digital platforms, or in other words, applying the most effective AI-driven algorithms. In the case of published written conspiracy theories, this includes specific ways of manifesting fears, anxieties, and doubts about mainstream media narratives most effectively and credibly in online media. In the following sections, we propose some vital argumentative patterns within the use of history in online published conspiracy theories. This is followed by a case study of the Czech Aeronet website.

Argumentative use of history

Structurally, a flourishing conspiracy theory as manifested in the media must meet three main criteria:

> 1. To be persuasive, it must appear internally consistent. That does not directly relate to its ontological, accurate, or false status. However, the text must build on itself argumentatively because cognitive inconsistency would indicate implausibility (Pennycook and Rand, 2021).
>
> 2. It must also be flexible enough. Conspiracy theories claim to be truthful explanations of certain phenomena, while at the same time are very often only formally consistent but substantially contradictory and highly resilient to counterevidence (Boudry, 2023). However, this may not bother the dissemination of the theory in its media-manifested form if it is updated with a new fiction that creates a new apparent formal consistency. "If conspiracy theories enable people to make sense of the [present] world, we should observe that they are flexible enough to propagate inconsistent conspiracy theories over time, or even propagate contradictory conspiracy theories simultaneously." (Greve et al., 2022, p. 925).
>
> 3. To confirm its timeliness and relevance, a conspiracy theory must bring revelation or novelty. Although conspiracy theories might not necessarily be created with the cynical intention of deception, and are simply expressions of a desire to understand a complex world (Butter and Knight, 2020, p. 6), they are still often a target of malevolent practices. A published written conspiracy theory can support its visibility and authority in the digital environment in many ways. One widespread formal manipulation is to work with forged photographs or videos, or to decontextualize them. However, to enhance credibility, this typically includes a revealing, previously concealed perspective (Cassam, 2019). We might collate the situation to what Goffman (1959, p. 238) defined as the backstage or back region. Access to these regions is controlled in order to prevent the audience from accessing "backstage" and to prevent outsiders from stumbling upon a performance that is not addressed to them.

The use of historical material meets all three criteria. Historical perspective, often bearing the features of a myth of origin and a chain of evidence resembling historiography, often adds content consistency to conspiracy theories. This has the advantage of also justifying any necessary flexibility because some other supposedly hidden historical link to a new interpretation can always be found. At the same time, historical perspective adds relevance and linearity to an often-unsubstantiated narrative. That is why media-manifested conspiracy theories are so pervasive, as they attempt to show that they are apt explanations for several past major historical events, the sole existence of which cannot be denied. This gives the theories an appearance of integrity. Conspiracy theories are a tempting shortcut to a linear explanation and linking of historical events (Butter et al., 2020, p. 30).

The historical material for conspiracy theories might be employed in various ways. The more sophisticated ones may reflect the purposeful exploitation of historical trauma in collective memory, while the simplest ones could include the mere accidental incorporation of an undeniable historical fact into a conspiracy narrative. One of the simplest ways to create a persuasive historical perspective in a conspiracy narrative is to substitute temporal correlation for temporal causation. Among argumentative fallacies, it is referred to as "post hoc ergo propter hoc," i.e., "after this, therefore because of this."

In conspiracy narratives, the Latin expression could be replaced by "post coniurationem ergo propter coniurationem," i.e., "after conspiracy, therefore because of conspiracy." If current events are real, they can be passed off due to a previous conspiracy. Since the present event is real, and there is a pretended causality between the events, it is impossible that the past event (cause), hence the conspiracy, should not appear real. As mentioned above, this strategy happens within the context of "parasitic discursive behavior," a strategy prone to exploiting implicit memory.

The following case study of the Czech conspiracy website Aeronet shows how the technique of abusing/using history in online-published written conspiracy theories is specifically used in this way. The case study includes a detailed description of the selected conspiracy website and its

contextualization within the Czech media scene. This is followed by a rhetorical analysis (cf. Miller, 2002) of selected examples of conspiracy web production. The research shows how historical substance is used argumentatively in producing published conspiracy theories.

A case study of the Czech conspiracy website Aeronet

In 2018, the Reuters Institute Digital News Report focused on misinformation, and the Czech Republic ranked among the countries where people were relatively less afraid of being able to distinguish between real and fake information online. Of all countries surveyed, 54 percent of respondents were afraid of this on average, while in the Czech Republic, it was 43 percent (Fletcher, 2018). Most people in the Czech Republic were concerned about stories that are entirely fabricated for political or commercial purposes (66 percent), followed by stories where facts are modified because of a preferred agenda (63 percent), followed by lousy journalism (56 percent), followed by headlines that masquerade as news but are advertisements (48 percent). The term "fake news" was used to discredit the news media (41 percent), and people were least concerned about the effect of satire (21 percent).

Although the Czech Republic tends to be one of the countries with lower concern about conspiracy theories, this does not mean that conspiracy theories do not thrive in the Czech Republic. According to some authors, there are specific popular conspiracies in the Czech Republic (Panczová & Janeček, 2015), while according to others, the specifics of Eastern European conspiracies have converged into internationally disseminated stories (Astapova et al., 2020).

The Czech government essentially did not include the impact of conspiracy theories on society as part of its agenda until the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. On February 25, 2022, the government asked internet domain providers to block the domain names Aeronet.cz, Protiproud.cz, Ceskobezcenzury.cz, Voxpopuliblog.cz, Prvnizpravy.cz, Czechfreepress.cz, Exanpro.cz, and Skrytapravda.cz. For several months, the Czech domain administrator blocked these and other websites; a move whose constitutionality is being questioned (Mizerová & Harašta, 2023).

This case study focuses on just one of them - Aeronet. We use Aeronet as a critical case: a long-running Czech conspiracist outlet with sustained reach and a stable production of long-form texts that interweave contemporary claims with historical references. Its prominence in the Czech political-media context and the site's continued production, despite domain blocking, make it a theoretically information-rich case for examining historically inflected conspiracy argumentation.

Aeronet is anonymous and administered from abroad. Since 2014, the editor-in-chief, nicknamed "The Carousel Boss," and his collaborators have been publishing conspiratorial texts, often heavily anti-Semitic and xenophobic, with the aim of financial gain. The impetus for blocking Aeronet's Czech domain revealed conspiratorial media dynamics.

The website was immediately moved to a "*.news" domain, which does not fall under the Czech jurisdiction. The firm attachment of the community of readers to the Aeronet site has shown that they could easily continue to operate without the original domain: the site had 1.1 million visits in January 2022 and 1.8 million in February. After the domain was blocked, the number dropped to 0.8 million, but by April, the new aeronet.news domain already had 1.1 million visits, as it did at the beginning of the year (Šlerka, 2022). The site's creators can skillfully tailor any successful conspiracy theory to their audience and accentuate the crucial moments for them.

We compiled a corpus of Aeronet long-form posts that (a) are original editorial essays (not link dumps or short news items), (b) contain at least one explicit historical reference (event, actor, period, or symbol), and (c) link that reference to a contemporary claim (e.g., a current political decision, public figure, or policy). The primary analysis centers on the Macron/"Minerva owl" exemplar (Aug 5, 2021) to illustrate mechanisms, and is supplemented by additional Aeronet pieces that satisfy (a)–(c) to test pattern stability and seek negative cases.

Our case in point is the 2021 conspiracy concerning Emmanuel Macron that hit much of the European conspiracy scene. In August 2021, the French president urged young people on the social network TikTok to get vaccinated against COVID-19. However, the president's T-shirt with the owl symbol attracted the attention of the conspirators, and various interpretations began to emerge (Willsher, 2021). Most of the conspiracy theories concerned Macron's alleged affiliation with the Freemasons or the Illuminati. However, the creator of Aeronet managed to conclude his interpretation with their favorite anti-Semitic trope: "Emmanuel Macron is under the supervision of the architects of Zionist globalization as a cadre of the House of Rothschild, and therefore bears the symbol of the 'mentor' owl Minerva" (VK, 2021).

The whole text makes significant use of historical themes as a connecting piece. The essential figure corresponds to the "post coniurationem" argumentative fallacy:

> Emmanuel Macron sent a message through the symbol that he was entrusted with the building of the European Temple and is under the protection of the goddess Minerva and her owl of wisdom, which he spoke about on Mount Pnyx under the Athenian pantheon in September 2017 during his speech on the reform of the European Union! The French president used the owl symbol on his T-shirt as he called for a fight against misinformation about vaccines! However, at that moment, Macron revealed his affiliation with Bohemian Grove, and it was no mistake; it was a clear message that his 2017 Athens speech was about to be implemented, and no one must stand in his way! The owl goddess Minerva will guide you in building a new Babylonian temple in Europe! (VK, 2021).[1]

In his September 7, 2017, speech at the Acropolis in Athens, Macron spoke of Minerva the Owl, and his then-soaring, historicizing speech about a united Europe was alleged for several years by conspirators to have far-reaching meaning. The 2021 conspiracy theory stipulated that Macron had already spoken about owls in 2017, and in 2021, he wore a symbol resembling an owl on his T-shirt. Correlation was replaced by causation, and so the T-shirt was used to confirm the thesis of Macron's role in dominating Europe.

Suppose two temporal events are connected by the "post coniurationem" argumentation fallacy. In that case, it is already possible to associate it with any historical event between them and interpret it as evidence of the just-revealed conspiracy of the powerful. Between 2017 and 2021, it is possible to incorporate popular themes of conspiracy theories, for example, the thesis of a global elite controlling the world:

> Globalists install dilettantes as the heads of Slavic countries, and also as the heads of countries destined for destruction (e.g. 'They are not in charge of the Frankish Empire.') The globalists install their apprentices as the heads of these states, people who have proven themselves useful for their extraordinary abilities. Today, four years after 2017, it seems that Macron is ready as the new leader of Europe. (VK, 2021).

Alternatively, the financiers of the globalist elite might become the heads of state, which tend to be financiers of Jewish descent, most often the Rothschilds or George Soros:

> That is why the globalists have decided that Angela would conclude her mandate and instead of her, a former employee of The Rothschild Bank in Paris and current President Emmanuel Macron, will head the EU.
>
> Nevertheless, as a young cadre, he has no practical experience. His education is extensive, and his insight is excellent, but his experience is zero, so the Zionists cannot let him work independently over Europe. He must be overseen, monitored, and supervised, and this is precisely the symbol of the owl Minerva, who supervised and watched over the actions and deeds of the Roman gods (VK, 2021).

Finally, the author of the text himself reminds the reader of a principle fundamental to conspiracy theories:

> As you can see from this illustrative example, there is no such thing as coincidence. All the symbols that appear have meaning and origin in history, directly referring to occult symbols and previous manifestations. (VK, 2021)

Examples of the "post coniurationem" fallacy are abundant in virtually every text on Aeronet. Let us give a few examples of conspiracy theories with a strong representation of historical events: Since the co-founder of the Czechoslovak state and later its first president, Tomas G. Masaryk, was indeed in Russia in 1918, it only confirms the conspiracy theory that he was there to learn from V. I. Lenin how to make a revolution.

> So Masaryk came to St Petersburg to watch and learn how to stage a coup d'état from Ulyanov. Logically, Ulyanov and Masaryk were emissaries and revolutionaries that the House of Rothschild paid to break up two powerful monarchies in Europe, first the Russian and a year later the Austro-Hungarian. (VK, 2018)

Ursula von der Leyen, on the other hand, was chosen to head the European Commission in 2019 because it was agreed upon long ago at the Bilderberg meetings, another frequent and widespread object of interest for the conspirators.

> She attended her first meeting in 2015 when the European migration crisis started. Since then, she has been invited to the Bilderberg meetings every year, where she is groomed as a cadre for the future management of European processes. That moment has now arrived. The Bilderberg cadre will sit in the seat of the most powerful person in Europe, the head of the European Commission. (VK, 2019)

The European Commission's announcement of the reform of migration and asylum rules in 2020 did not surprise the creator of Aeronet either; it was enough for them to update a long-standing conspiracy theory about the fulfillment of the Kalergi Plan, a far-right conspiracy that the Austrian-Japanese politician Richard von Coudenhove-Kalergi had hatched a plot to mix white Europeans with other races through immigration:

> For the Zionists, it makes no sense to increase the number of migrants in countries like Germany or France, because there the Islamisation has already started, and in 30 years they will be Islamic countries. But the problem is with the rebellious EU countries that do not want to participate in their own Islamisation and oppose it. That is why the migration NGOs get so much money from the EU and UN Zionists to push migration and the reception of migrants even in countries that resist the process of Kalergi's pan-European perestroika. (VK, 2019)

It is still the same process, where historical events are used to argue the fallacy that if something (real) happens after the alleged conspiracy, it must be the result of the conspiracy. Moreover, since the current event cannot be denied, neither can the historical event, even if it is, in fact, a fabrication.

Quotes from the Czech conspiracy website Aeronet may seem nonsensical and irrelevant to professional historians. That is, until you realize that aeronet.news had 783,000 visits in June 2023, and the main news website of Czech Television, ct24.ceskatelevize.cz, had 6 million visits (Similarweb, 2023). Aeronet thus reaches more than eight percent of the traffic of the largest public media in the Czech Republic. The domain-blocking case has shown that regulation may not be effective in stopping these media from creating and serving the conspiracy community.

In addition to Aeronet, many other high-reach conspiracy media outlets exist in the Czech Republic, which are also "loaded" with historical topics. Combining conspiracy theories with

historical material creates an extensive archive of historical interpretations. Thus, in addition to Aeronet's core themes of anti-Semitic and pro-Kremlin texts, Aeronet has produced a complex interpretation of Henry Kissinger's foreign policy, an interpretation of revanchism, a footnote history of the Fabian Society, a history of Marxist thought in Europe, and finally, Nazi plans for the unification of Europe as a precursor to the European Union. At the same time, Aeronet's creators invent entirely new conceptual and interpretive frameworks for some historical events; for example, "autogenocide" is the deliberate and total undermining of race and culture. Though most probably developed under the influence of the Great Replacement theory, which enjoys a globally strong influence (Cosentino, 2020), it still constitutes an original prism.

It is now possible to answer the research question, "What are the patterns of use of historical materials in online-published conspiracy theories?" In online media, the characteristics of persuasive published conspiracy theories are narrative consistency and incorporation of current news. Somewhat paradoxically, conspiracy theories must be flexible enough to incorporate conflicting facts and predictions and maintain narrative consistency. The incorporation of new events maintains novelty, relevance, and timelessness. These goals can be met by appropriately incorporating factual historical events into conspiracy theories.

Although the essential characteristics of published written conspiracy theories and their use of historical materials do not change much once mediated online, there are still changes stemming from the online mediality that substantially influence them. Online-published written conspiracy theories are becoming algorithmic and adapting to the online attention economy. The example of Aeronet shows how powerful such a medium can be.

At the same time, the online environment strongly supports the constant updating of published written conspiracy theories with new pieces of the supposedly hidden picture of the real world, keeping the reader attracted to the continuous access backstage. The result is a significant number of online-published written conspiracy theories based on the same, repeated story, but differing in detail and tailored to the immediate demands of the conspiracy website's audience and its attention.

The recurring motives all point toward implicit memory, which might be an efficient way of supporting the post coniurationem thesis. First, many of the motives and figures of the conspiracy agenda fall within the implicit memory set. Erll (2022, p. 8), for instance, uses antisemitism as one of the examples of chronically accessible, long durrée narrative patterns of implicit collective memory.

Second, the repetitive nature of the figures of conspiracy theories is close to one of the effects of priming, which Erll (2022, p. 3) describes as "what is seen and heard again and again, often without awareness, seems familiar, is liked, and is even considered true." Similarly, within different discourse, Cvrček and Fidler (2024, p. 52) note that "such recurrent narratives may enter the reader's world knowledge, which in turn becomes easily accessible when interpreting newly arising events."

Finally, the structure of the causal chain of the conspiracy theory, with its dense set of historical facts and real supposed effect (the current, newsworthy event), is especially prone to individual, constituent source amnesia. As Erll (2022) notes, “implicit memory involves source amnesia. The source of a piece of information and its status (is it someone's lived experience or hearsay? Is the source reliable or unreliable, fictional or factual?)” (p. 4).

Discussion of the impact of conspiracy theories

The collected literature and the case study answer the research question of the function of historical material in published written conspiracy theories: mention of historical events strengthens the consistency of the conspiracy narrative. At the same time, it allows the narrative to be adjusted and refer to a broader historical framework in the case of illogicalities. Revealing the historical context is an easy way to create a sense of novelty and an attractive way of framing your story by offering an exclusive view, in Goffmanian terms, access to backstage.

Historical material is not selected randomly. The historical events cited usually touch sensitive points of implicit collective memory in some way — hence the constant references to Nazism, communism, and all sorts of catastrophes. Events that do not fall under any of these categories, at least in the conspiracy narratives, contain the possibility of future disasters — that is, all sorts of conspiracies of Freemasons, Illuminati, Jews, neo-Marxists, and other real and unreal groups. Any conspiracy story can easily be narrated, as all kinds of historical events are artfully inserted to testify to its truth by argumentative fallacies.

The communicative transformation of digital media enables the production of many such texts with a high proportion of historical material. Without further research, it is difficult to ascertain how the reception of this historical material affects its consumers. The study of conspiracy theories always concentrates on the final fiction, i.e., whether the person in question believes that the CIA, the KGB, or Cuba assassinated JFK. However, it is virtually never the subject of research whether conspiracy theories also affect the level of knowledge of "ancillary" historical material, i.e., in the case of JFK, for example, knowledge of the CIA, KGB, or Cuba.

In the case of the current European conspiracy theories, this would mean asking not whether the person in question believes that Ukraine provoked Russia into a special military operation, but how the person's ideas about Eastern Europe, Nazism, the results of World War II, or NATO expansion have changed. The example of the Czech website Aeronet has shown that published written conspiracy theories not only contain a great deal of historical substance but are probably, for many consumers, their first encounter with many historical phenomena.

Richard von Coudenhove-Kalergi, the Rothschilds, Bilderberg, and many other popular components of conspiracy narratives are not on the agenda of high school history classes. However, on conspiracy websites, they stand out as essential nodal points of conspiracy theories. The fact that they have not been taught or discussed during high school history classes reinforces the narrative that they are part of the great mystery, a backstage aspect that is naturally not revealed in schools.

Such a conspiracy mentality among a significant portion of society somehow transforms implicit collective memory and alters the shared interpretation of many historical events. The example of the unsuccessful blocking of the Aeronet website and the equally unsuccessful effort to expose the owner of the anonymized website shows that previous discussions about the possible blocking of conspiracy websites are not only highly problematic but, more importantly, address only a tiny part of the problem of these new influential interpreters of history. It is a challenge for historians and other related disciplines to examine how high exposure to historical material affects the consumers of conspiracy sites, how it changes their view of history, and the consequences for the (implicit) collective memory of large sections of societies.

Online conspiracy narratives are an integral, if troubling, strand of contemporary historical culture and, in that sense, a competitor for students' attention and trust. A core aim of history education is to equip learners to navigate this culture and evaluate competing accounts of the past. The question is therefore not *whether* schools should engage this sphere, but *how*. As a precondition, history teaching needs to reach beyond academic historiography to include the practices of public and collective memory, both explicit and implicit, through which the past is invoked in everyday life. Comparable dynamics appear across diverse national settings, even as symbols and episodes vary, suggesting that the competencies required are broadly transferable.

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