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Semiotic Approaches to Understanding Anti-Scientific
Conspiratorial Discourse on Social Media

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Abstract

This thesis investigates a Climate Change denial YouTube video and a set of eight tweets from an anti-vaccine influencer, with the aim of identifying the primary meaning-making mechanisms of anti-scientific conspiratorial discourse on social media. For that, qualitative empirical analyses were carried out using semiotics as the foundation and mixed methods based on discourse analysis. Fundamentally, science denialism is understood as conspiracy theory, which in turn is seen as a guide for interpretation. Moreover, the main difference between conspiracy theorizing and democratic political criticism was found to lie in the form (not content) with which conspiracy theories provide argumentation. In a general manner, the analysed conspiracy narratives create identities and shape social relations in the form of dichotomic oppositions and conflicts between ‘dishonest authorities’ (the enemy) and ‘truth-sayers’ (a symbolic elite). More specifically, the significance of the video is in how Climate Change is represented as a fraud and how possible policy responses to it are represented as scams. The effect of this discourse is deproblematization, for it provides people with reasons to reject proposals for actions that seek to mitigate the climate crisis in favour of other interests. The relevance of the anti-vax tweets lies on the fact that, by delegitimizing allopathic medical science, this discourse legitimizes alternative medicine, which is in the financial, political, and symbolical interests of the people who produce anti-vax discourse. Conclusively, conflict construction in terms of the aversion to authority and rejection of institutionalized knowledge serves as a foundation upon which such actors can build new habits to replace the ones currently operating and on which the very structure of our society relies.

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Introduction

Recent times have brought to light the issue of misinformation that has been intensified with the shift from conventional news platforms to prevailing online communication (Wardle, Derakhshan 2017; Avramov *et al.* 2020; Leal 2020; Stano 2020; Grimes 2021; Lorusso 2022). This problem has been aggravated to the point where, at the Munich Security Conference in February 2020, the World Health Organisation Director-General Tedros Ghebreyesus has declared: “we’re not just fighting an epidemic; we’re fighting an infodemic” (WHO 2020: vii). According to the WHO Situation Report from that same month, “an ‘infodemic’ is an overabundance of information – some accurate and some not” that is “propagated by the fundamentally interconnected way in [which] information is disseminated and consumed through social media platforms and other channels” (*Ibid*). Indeed, information on social media, most noticeably, “does not have to be investigated or confirmed in order to be shared”, leading “to unsubstantiated and even false rumours spreading like wildfire” (Stano 2020: 484).

The infodemic can be thus interpreted as a feature of what is commonly called post-truth; a large “societal and intellectual crisis” affecting the world for the last decade (Harambam 2020: 285). Post-truth is here understood as a system or as a ‘regime’ (Lorusso 2022), more specifically, a regime of truth (Foucault 1977), characterized in terms of power distribution and orders of discourse (Foucault 1971). Due to the “loss of a shared reality and a collective sense of truth” (Harambam 2020: 285) that came with this regime, “discursive rules and epistemic authorities have changed” (Lorusso 2022: 1), as social media allowed for the multiplication of the subjects that can intervene in the public sphere – meaning that “more people feel empowered to act as sources of truth” (*Ibid*, 6) – while the criteria of credibility also shifted, “moving from the level of knowledge, curricula, and professional roles to the level of experience” (*Ibid*, 1). Political models changed as well, and so did “the meaning of social relations, not only those among people but also those among facts”, resulting in the emergence of “a myriad of ideological contrapositions” (Leone 2016: 14).

Within this context, “traditional keepers and sources of knowledge [...] are abandoned and undermined in favour of ‘alternative facts’, pseudo-science, [and] conspiracy narratives” (Önnerfors, Steiner 2018: 16). Fake news – or, more precisely, information disorders¹ – as well as conspiracy theories are here understood as “both symptom and cause” of the post-truth crisis (Harambam 2020: 285). Post-truth, as a system that devalues the discrimination between true and false, is that which provides for the emergence of information disorders and conspiracy theories; but at the same time, information disorders and conspiracy theories corroborate and strengthen the post-truth system through the delegitimization of the informative authorities who are responsible for the distinction between true and false in the first place (Lorusso 2022: 10).

Even though information disorders are not novel and do not configure a problem confined to social media, the rapid evolution of unprecedented technology has undeniably and radically altered the way information is produced and distributed (Leone 2016: 14; Leone *et al.* 2020: 45; Wardle, Derakhshan 2017: 11). From this ever-increasing information supply fostered by the Internet, a “boom of conspiracy theories” is observed (Kimminich 2016: 36). According to Mari-Liis Madisson (2014: 280), as with “many other information exchanges, the spread of conspiracy theories today takes place mostly on the Internet” and predominantly on social (participatory) media platforms which have “evolved into the main channels via which coordinated misinformation is being distributed” (Madisson, Ventsel 2021: 16). This has happened due to the socio-technical affordances of platforms that allow “for the formation of audiences on an unprecedented temporal (very fast), spatial (geographically dispersed) and affective (strong, mobilising sentiment) scale” (*Ibid*, 92).

The expansion of social media up to this point of an ‘information overload’ (infodemic) has reached a paradox of visibility (Madisson, Ventsel 2021: 17), where apparently anyone could be able to influence the public sphere, but few people actually do so. Instead, what has become central are the focusers/filters, that is, mediators (institutions, individuals, and algorithms) “that can bring attention to a certain topic or an event” (*Ibid*). Therefore, despite the scale, speed, and reach of social media being “generally conceived as providing equal opportunities for communication between people and the spread of narratives, the reality shows that this horizontality is illusory”, since “some nodes are more well-connected than others” (Leal 2020: 499).

¹ The three types of information disorders are as follows: Misinformation – false information, not created to harm; Disinformation – false information, deliberately created to harm; Mal-information – factual information, deliberately used to harm (Wardle, Derakhshan 2017: 10).

Consequently, the “turn-of-the-century utopian dream of the internet as a space of liberation and as a birthplace of new democratic communities has vanished” (Puumeister 2020: 520). Horizontal distribution of power and equal opportunity has been replaced with the algorithmic logic of profit, which tend to increase the influence of the ones who already exert it. The problem is that “those that gain precedence will influence what it means to know; what kind of knowledge is culturally valued; how we learn; and who will have access to knowledge and power” (Birchall 2006: 8). For that reason, it is important to investigate how certain influencing actors, vested with their own interests, are able to use networks to manipulate and shape meaning – and here is where the matter those who produce conspiratorial discourse becomes relevant.

Arising from this context, the present thesis investigates, through the lenses of semiotics, the problem of anti-scientific discourse produced by conspiracy theorizing influencers on social media. The next section offers a brief literature review and historiography of the concept of conspiracy theory, upon which I am basing my investigation into anti-scientific discourse. After that, I detail the nature of science denialism and its relation to conspiracy theories, also describing the particular discourses that I am investigating in this work.

Most Important Related Research

Recent studies have been moving away “from debunking conspiracy theories towards exploring their meaning for those involved” (Harambam 2020: 280). A possible approach regards how “conspiracy theories serve as a way to express distrust and discontent with authorities, and perhaps even distrust towards society more generally” (Thórisdóttir *et al.* 2020: 313), showcasing how, in a more general manner, “relationships in public based automatically upon authority are in decline” (Fairclough 1995: 137).

Furthermore, “scholars have noted that conspiracy theorists often construct narratives that attempt to restore a sense of agency, causality and responsibility” (Törnberg 2018: 17). This relates to the idea that “one of the main causes for the currency of conspiracy theories is the fear and confusion accompanying contemporary socio-cultural upheavals” (Leone *et al.* 2020: 45). Similarly, conspiracy theories are said to “flood in to fill the void of a nebulous, dispersed terror or fear” (Birchall 2006: 62), configuring “attempts to explain the ultimate causes of significant social and political events and circumstances” (Douglas *et al.* 2019: 4), especially when these are not clear (a way to obtain cognitive closure). In this manner, conspiracy thinking

can be understood as a “person’s cognitive mapping in the postmodern age; it is a degraded figure of the total logic of late capital, a desperate *attempt to represent* the latter’s system” (Jameson 1988: 356, my italics).

In summary, conspiracy theories “appeal to individuals who seek accuracy and/or meaning, but perhaps lack the cognitive tools [...] to find accuracy and meaning via other more rational means” (Douglas *et al.* 2019: 8). Moreover, belief in conspiracy theories is not seen as a function of education, cultural capital, or political learning (Giry, Tika 2020: 112; Grimes 2021: 13). Conspiracy thinking is also not to be taken “as a mere symptom of a delusional mindset, but as an allegory [...] of the complex social and economic changes of globalisation that cannot be understood in any straightforward way” (Butter, Knight 2020: 32). Consequently, it should also not be understood as “only a symptom of the breakdown of knowledge authority”, as mentioned before, “but of the breakdown of intuitive causality itself, as society becomes an increasingly complex system” (Törnberg 2018: 17).

As a concept, ‘conspiracy theory’ is “inexorably and paradoxically multi-levelled” (Leone 2016: 13) as well as epistemically puzzling and historically variable (McKenzie-McHarg 2020). In the present thesis, conspiracy theory is defined from the perspective of semiotics as: “a representation that explains a series of events by postulating a conspiracy as its cause”, fundamentally operating “as meaning-making templates, originating from cultural memory” (Leone *et al.* 2020: 44–45). More specifically, it “refers to a narrative that has been constructed in an attempt to explain an event or series of events to be the result of a group of people working in secret to a nefarious end” (Birchall 2006: 34). In this sense, conspiracy theories point to an existing “competition between interpretation patterns within the semantic field of societal reality construction” (Kimminich 2016: 36). Therefore, “as a mode of interpretation [...], conspiracy theory might raise questions about cultural analysis, about interpretation and knowing *per se*” (Birchall 2006: 66).

Parallely, Michael Butter and Peter Knight (2020: 33) advise against the pejorative view of the concept, arguing that “conspiracy thinking is not merely an inevitable reaction to postmodernity, but at times it is a creative response”, so researchers should beware of treating the phenomenon only as something destructive or harmful. Some even argue that conspiracy theories are necessary to the healthy functioning of a democratic society by offering opposing political ideas, helping to “balance against concentrations of power” (Uscinski 2018: 234). Going further into this notion, one may find that conspiracy theories are “first and foremost, a type of political speech act” (Puumeister 2020: 522), conceivably being “a constructive force in politics” (Thórisdóttir *et al.* 2020: 305). The presence of conspiracy theories is spread across

social spheres, appealing “to political moderates, extremist partisans of both sides of the spectrum” (Avramov *et al.* 2020: 520) and involving “a wide range of social actors [...] at different levels or intensity” (Giry, Tika 2020: 111).

Further research suggests that “conspiracy theories may be associated with intentions to engage in political action against elites”, occasionally triggering “behaviours aimed at challenging the status quo and those in power” (Douglas *et al.* 2019: 20), which may in turn lead to the exposure of inconsistencies in official accounts of events as well as pressuring governments to become more transparent (Thórisdóttir *et al.* 2020; Douglas *et al.* 2019). Nevertheless, more often than not, they “have negative political and societal consequences” (Thórisdóttir *et al.* 2020: 305). Besides, “conspiracy theories about the politically powerful may work differently than those involving mostly ethnic or sexual minorities, activating different political identities and affiliations” (Bergmann *et al.* 2020: 260). In other words, not all conspiracy theories can be understood as manifestations of social struggles in the sense of questioning the status quo, since many serve to strengthen existing power relations, further excluding minorities from decision-making processes. Hence, a possible way to present “the difference between the political character of social struggles and conspiracy theories is that the latter are often tools in the hands of the political elite” (Puumeister 2020: 523).

Even if there are benefits to be found in the existence of conspiracy theories, it is important to distinguish between what Massimo Leone (2017: 229) calls *deconstructive* and *conspiracy hermeneutics*. There is a crucial difference between political criticism and conspiracy thinking which “cannot be made in terms of contents” but rather “must be made in terms of argumentative patterns”. Conspiracy theories adopt a specific rhetoric “to communicate an aura of secrecy, create a symbolical elite, and reproduce the separation between insiders and outsiders” which is parasitic to society (*Ibid*). Hence, even if many authors believe they can have beneficial effects, the way in which this is done is already prejudicial.

Inherent formal characteristics paint conspiracy theories as anti-democratic, in a way that I see it as inconsistent to treat them as anything but. However, since it appears that this claim is still debatable (as showcased by the cited research that argues for the benefits of conspiracy theories), it has become necessary to empirically support it – which is what I seek to do in this thesis. In *Chapters 2* and *3*, what I claim to be the specific rhetoric and inherently anti-democratic characteristics of conspiracy theories are detailed to better understand how exactly they are harmful, not only in terms of content, but mainly terms of *form*, as well as to further explain why I do not recognize conspiracy theories as a healthy feature of democratic societies.

According to Karen Douglas *et al.* (2019: 22), “further research is also needed to understand the communication of conspiracy theories [...] and its implications for social and political processes”. Since “it has become increasingly clear that conspiracy theories are likely to affect important social and political outcomes”, the study of this phenomenon “in specific contexts and at specific points in time can give a detailed account of the factors that determine those beliefs and what effects they may have” (*Ibid*, 21). Thus, the authors suggest that “future research could begin to examine the interplay between ideology and conspiracy belief”, by questioning “how conspiracy theories may shape ideological variables” and how these “may interact with each other to affect social and political behavior” (Douglas *et al.* 2019: 23), which is also amongst the aims of this thesis.

Overall, current research on conspiracy theories and their societal impact is vast, interdisciplinary, and traverse geographic boundaries (Madisson 2014: 274; Douglas *et al.* 2019: 21). As an example, the work by Julien Giry and Pranvera Tika (2020: 110) reviews several studies, including “quantitative methods based on polls, questionnaires or Internet data about conspiratorial items, [...] qualitative methods dealing with interviews and empirical observations”, studies from political science and social psychology “that address the reasons for supporting conspiracy beliefs”, as well as research surrounding the relationship between conspiracy theories and (mis/dis)information, partisanship, and extremist ideologies. The article by Douglas *et al.* (2019) also provides for an extensive and comprehensive literature review, citing qualitative and quantitative research on the field of conspiracy theories coming from psychology, communication, political and social sciences, as well as the humanities.

Conspiracy theories have also been researched from the point of view of: historical, cultural, and literary studies (Butter, Knight 2020); Internet, big data, and social network analysis (Caballero 2020; Stano 2020; Leal 2020); mass/traditional media studies (Aupers 2020); demographics, movements and individuals (Smallpage *et al.* 2020; Harambam 2020); political ideology and behaviour (Thórisdóttir *et al.* 2020); as well as epistemology and popular knowledge studies (Birchall 2006). There has also been works on this topic from the perspective of semiotics, including: the consideration of semio-technological structures and codes (Erdmann 2016); the textual status of conspiracy theories (Camilo 2016) and their logic of signification (Madisson 2014); conspiracy theory as modelling (Leone *et al.* 2020), as communicative phenomenon (re)constructing social realities (Kimminich 2016), and as strategic narrative (Madisson, Ventsel 2021).

Finally, recent theses defended in the Semiotics Department of the University of Tartu also regard the matter of strategic conspiracy narratives, specifically about: COVID-19 discourse in Estonian newspapers (Peterson 2020); anti-China meme production by a former Brazilian president (Jarmendia 2021); governmental approaches to countering Russian mis- and disinformation activities in the Baltic states (Voltri 2021); and Russian coronavirus propaganda in Ukraine (Tsvion 2022). Coming from this context, the present thesis concentrates on the issue of anti-scientific conspiracy theories on social media, more specifically, the matters of Climate Change denial and anti-vaccine discourse on YouTube and Twitter.

Nature of the Problem

This thesis investigates science denialism and anti-scientific discourse as conspiracy theory. Past studies point to how “conspiracy theories drive people to reject scientific consensus, most notably the consensus around anthropogenic Climate Change” (Douglas *et al.* 2019: 4), being also major drivers of “vaccine hesitancy, heavily influencing [...] intentions to vaccinate” (Grimes 2021: 2). Both climate science as well as immunology are highly complex subjects, whose data absorbing and interpreting require strong scientific literacy (Miller 2020: 2256). This way, “rather than engaging with information that is difficult to ‘see’ [(non-sensory)] and that may require changes in behavior”, it is easier for individuals “to look for other sources of information that resonate with their own feelings”, taking in the simple and reassuring perspective provided by conspiracy theories (*Ibid*).

Nevertheless, the lack of cognitive capacity to interpret the complex issues that are proposed by science² is not the only factor keeping anti-scientific movements alive. In fact, studies investigating the possible link between science illiteracy and denialism found that the “inability to grapple with the scientific method [...] does not seem to lead to denial or conspiracy theorizing” (Uscinski *et al.* 2017: 17). The idea that “science denialism is fuelled by a lack of science knowledge” is thus oversimplifying (Landrum, Olshansky 2019: 193); understanding something does not imply accepting it. Therefore, science denialism shows itself to be much more complex than mere ignorance, being also dependent on individual beliefs, attitudes, values, political and economic worldviews, as well as other ideological factors (*Ibid*; Uscinski *et al.* 2017: 20).

² Encompasses the humanities, natural and social sciences. In this thesis, ‘science’ is understood as both “a body of theory or knowledge” and “a practice engaged in by a certain group of people in our society” (Brown 2020: 25).

There are also various alternative terms and expressions that are used to discuss this issue, such as: science denial(ism), doubt, dismissal, contrarianism, anti-scientific, and unscientific, all of which may evoke different interpretations (Björnberg *et al.* 2017: 237). The commonality is the notion of being *opposing* to science, even though in different degrees of hostility, since being dismissive or doubtful of something is different than being actively contrary or anti-something. Hence, researchers may use these terms depending on what aspect one wishes to emphasize, but for practical effects, they shall hereby be put under the same, more general, ‘science denialism’ expression. Moreover, when writing about ‘anti-scientific movements’, I am regarding the pragmatic side of science denialism. The latter, as a way of thinking, provides for the context surrounding the former, as the socio-political manifestation of these ideas (as a discursive phenomenon), and as the organization of groups of people (actors) with their respective interests.

Speaking of actors, it is possible to divide science deniers into six categories: denying scientists; governments; political and religious organizations; industry; media; and the public (Björnberg *et al.* 2017). When it comes to the first category, a lot can be said about the scientifically trained conspiracy theorists who have historically claimed that “global warming is a manipulative hoax and that vaccines [...] are unsafe” (Goertzel 2010: 493). The main point is that anti-scientific movements do not understand themselves to be anti-scientific, as they frequently rely on such denying scientists to structure their conspiracy theories. As I describe further in my analyses, one can frequently identify references to the ‘real scientists who know the real science’, in opposition to the ‘fake scientists’ who are part of the conspiracy.

This polarization of notions (science/anti-science, or even ‘real science/fake science’) can be better visualized through the lenses of the semiotics of culture, that is, the relations between culture and anti-culture, or culture and non-culture (Lotman, Uspenskij, Mihaychuk 1978), or even culture and counter-culture (Eco 1983). Characterizing movements as anti-scientific is a stance taken by those who are outside these semiospheres. The question is thus not a matter of terms, but rather of attitudes of the users of the discourse. From the point of view of this thesis, Climate Change denial and anti-vax movements are anti-scientific, yet those inserted into these movements do not share this view – to them, the ones who are anti-scientific are whoever disagrees with their interpretations, be it the mainstream media, universities, renowned research institutions, or science communicators, since all the knowledge produced or divulged by these actors is perceived as being fake, having the sole purpose of deceiving and manipulating.

Straightforwardly, science denialism is here defined as: “the unwillingness to believe in the existing scientific evidence” (Björnberg *et al.* 2017: 237). Along these lines, anti-scientific discourse is defined as: “the employment of rhetorical arguments to give the appearance of legitimate debate where there is none”, with the “goal of rejecting a proposition on which a scientific consensus exists” (Diethelm, Mckee 2009: 1). In this sense, Climate Change denial and the anti-vax movement are products of science denialism and generate anti-scientific discourse because, despite the existence of a few denying scientists (who are outliers), there is strong scientific consensus regarding the gravity of Climate Change and the benefits of vaccination (Weigmann 2018: 4).

Science denialism can be characterized by some key interrelated features. The first one is, as it was mentioned, relying on fake experts or ‘denying scientists’ to legitimize the discourse (Diethelm, Mckee 2009: 2; Goertzel 2010: 494; Björnberg *et al.* 2017: 235). These individuals “purport to be experts in a particular area”, but their “views are entirely inconsistent with established knowledge” (Diethelm, Mckee 2009: 2). Yet, they are represented as “the courageous independent scientist resisting orthodoxy”, *à la* Galileo, which implies “that opinion is divided on the issue in question” (Goertzel 2010: 495) when it is not.

Another key feature of science denialism is selectivity, that is, “drawing on isolated papers that challenge the dominant consensus” (Diethelm, Mckee 2009: 3), overlooking any lapses on their side of the argument (Goertzel 2010: 495) and highlighting any flaws in the weakest papers among those of their opponents, aiming to discredit the entire field (Diethelm, Mckee 2009: 3; Goertzel 2010: 495).

Science deniers also tend to set impossible standards for science, such as the notion that “scientists should pursue research only to advance knowledge, free of any personal gain, bias, or convictions”, which leads to potential disappointed when people “realize that science does not live up to the expected” (Weigmann 2018: 4). This may also come in the form of asking for data that is impossible (or not yet possible) to obtain (Diethelm, Mckee 2009) or “in the form of attacking the inherent uncertainty of [scientific] models to reject the premise entirely” (Sherwin 2021: 561).

There is also the matter of the dissemination of doubt about authentic scientific data (Björnberg *et al.* 2017: 237) and/or consensus (Uscinski *et al.* 2017: 19), which may come in one of two main forms: (1) through the misrepresentation/misuse of facts (Sherwin 2021: 552), use of misleading/false information (Björnberg *et al.* 2017: 235) and logical fallacies (Diethelm, Mckee 2009: 3); or (2) through questioning the character of those who produce knowledge, disputing the motives and bias of scientists, attacking their credibility and ethos to discredit

their work (Sherwin 2021; Goertzel 2010; Landrum, Olshansky 2019; Diethelm, Mckee 2009). Research also points to how this second form is rooted in a heuristic processing (Cook *et al.* 2018; Landrum, Olshansky 2019) where people lacking the expertise to judge scientific claims tend to substitute the evaluation of what is complex (such as immunology or climate science) with something simple (the competence and motivations of experts), allowing science deniers to “justify their rejection of otherwise credible scientific evidence and resolve any cognitive dissonance” (Landrum, Olshansky 2019: 194).

This practice of impugning scientists and experts with corrupt motives is also understood as a “feature of conspiracy theorizing” (*Ibid*). For instance, some people “depict vaccine advocates as ‘poisoning children to benefit Big Pharma’,” while others “describe climate change as a conspiracy among scientists to sustain grant funding” or to harm a country’s economy (*Ibid*). Both fit inside the definition of conspiracy theory described previously (explaining an event as being the result of a group of people acting in secret to an evil end). Therefore, it can be said that “when the overwhelming body of scientific opinion believes that something is true, it is argued that this is not because those scientists have independently studied the evidence and reached the same conclusion”, but “because they have engaged in a complex and secretive conspiracy” (Diethelm, Mckee 2009: 2).

In fact, conspiracy thinking has been statistically influential in leading people to reject scientific propositions (Lewandowsky *et al.* 2013; Landrum, Olshansky 2019). Other works also consider the conspiratorial cognitive style as a distinctive feature of science denialism (Diethelm, Mckee 2009; Uscinski *et al.* 2017; Sherwin 2021), especially in the cases of Climate Change denial, whose discourse “routinely refer to global warming as a ‘conspiracy’ or ‘hoax’” (Lewandowsky *et al.* 2013: 3), as well as the anti-vax movement, which was revealed to produce “widespread conspiratorial content” (*Ibid*). Thus, it is possible to state that, in a way, every science denier is also a conspiracy theorist³.

Furthermore, conspiracy thinking has been found to be “antithetical to scientific reasoning”, meaning that “several attributes of the cognition underlying conspiracist ideation run counter to conventional scientific thinking” (*Ibid*, 8). The fact that science is falsifiable, slow, complex, and epistemically uncertain (Weigmann 2018; Sherwin 2021) is one of the main reasons why scientific propositions may be so unsatisfying to the public, whereas conspiracy theories can simplify and quickly ascertain what they believe to be irrevocable truths. Besides,

³ Not every conspiracy theorist is necessarily a science denier, since there are many conspiracy theories that regard other aspects of human life, focused on issues that are not opposing to scientific consensus. Conspiracy theories surrounding the death of Princess Diana serve as one out of uncountable examples.

since conspiracy theories are not falsifiable, fact-checks cannot help stop the construction, dissemination, or consumption of such narratives (Puumeister 2020: 521), which relates to “the conspiracy theorists’ backward approach to evidence” (Blaskiewicz 2013: 259), where the absence of evidence for the conspiracy is itself evidence for the success of the conspiracy (*Ibid*; Puumeister 2020: 521) and the arguments against it “are often ignored or even absorbed” into it (Douglas *et al.* 2019: 23).

Faced with this scenario, researchers have been investigating ways to deal with this problem, emphasizing the importance of understanding “the logic of conspiracy arguments and the best ways to respond to them” (Goertzel 2010: 493). In a study of anti-scientific conspiracy theories and their permeation into the legislative and executive powers, Brie Sherwin (2021) suggests that the employment of rhetorical tools innate to courtroom lawyers may be an effective rebuttal strategy for science communicators. Similarly, John Cook *et al.* (2018: 1) propose a strategy “to analyse and detect poor reasoning within denialist claims”. By focusing on argument structure and being based on general critical thinking methods, the strategy provides a way for those who lack scientific expertise to identify reasoning fallacies and check for the validity of an argument.

In general, extensive research has been done to develop methods to deal with anti-scientific conspiratorial discourse. Nevertheless, it is possible to state that the main problem of Climate Change or anti-vax conspiracy theories, “from a semiotic point of view, lies not in their supposed logical or scientific fallacy”, but in how they voice a social preoccupation, an “anguish toward the increasing deconstruction of scientific and also medical knowledge in the new digital arenas” (Leone 2016: 15). These deconstructive hermeneutics responsible for the de-normalization of scientific expertise generated a society “that does not provide itself with inter-subjective, rational patterns for the consolidation of interpretive habits” (Leone 2017: 228) – since this type of thinking takes any habit (mainstream belief) as being an imposition of power (authority) that, in turn, needs to be dismantled. The consequence of this “is inevitably a chaotic society” where “conflicts constantly arise and are never recomposed” (*Ibid*).

Hence, as much as strategies such as enhancing public cognitive skills, competence to critically analyse media content, analytical awareness, and general levels of digital media literacy can potentially help in the fight against anti-scientific discourse on social media, they are not enough. The problem runs deeper than just the matter of identifying logical fallacies or debunking false information – it is no longer a question of whether a statement is true or false, seeing how we are in the post-truth regime (Lorusso 2022). Rather, the issue regards how

conspiracy narratives are constructed in terms of conflict and opposition to authority and institutionalized knowledge.

In the interest of tackling this issue, the present thesis takes this research problem and regards the investigation of two case studies, which are understood as being products of anti-scientific conspiracy theories, with the aim of pointing to the discursive conditions that help spread anti-scientific conspiratorial discourse, by describing how subjects and conflicts were constructed in the analysed texts. The analysis of these specific objects may consequently be used to draw bigger and more holistic understandings of science denialism, as well as its role in the development of society.

It is worth highlighting that the objects chosen for the case studies have never been analysed in an academic context, configuring new and original material. Furthermore, it has also been described how the link between conspiracy theories and science denialism has been showcased through qualitative and quantitative research, however, this link is here explored by means of empirical semiotic analysis. Finally, the methodological framework here developed for the analyses resulted from the blending of four previously established methods (detailed under the *Methodology* section), configuring by itself a novel approach to the subject.

Objectives

As stated above, the present thesis investigates two cases of anti-scientific conspiratorial discourses, regarding Climate Change denial and the anti-vax movement on social media (specifically YouTube and Twitter).

The aim of this investigation is to identify the interpretative mechanisms and discursive conditions (on the level of form rather than content) that constitute and consequently help spread such types of discourses. The description of how subjects and conflicts were constructed in the analysed texts is also of extreme relevance for the understanding of science denialism, not only as a flawed argumentation strategy, but as modelling, that is, as a guide for interpretation that produces harmful effects in the development of society.

Research Questions

To achieve these objectives and organize the study, the following research questions are posed:

- Generally, what are the primary meaning-making mechanisms of anti-scientific discourse?
- More specifically, what are the discursive and signifying practices instrumentalized in each analysed text?
- What types of relations does anti-scientific discourse establish with regards to science and the scientific community?
 - a) What sort of social identities and conflicts are constructed in anti-scientific discourse?
- What is the strategic aspect behind the analysed discourses?
 - a) Which messages are ultimately being conveyed by the analysed texts?
 - b) What is the potential harm of these messages?

Structure of the thesis

The next chapter (*1. Materials and Methods*) describes how the objects of study were selected and the methodological framework used. In *Chapter 2 - Interview with a Climate Change Denier*, the first text is analysed, and the results are conjointly discussed. In *Chapter 3 - Anti-Vax Tweets*, the second text is examined, also including its respective discussion. Finally, the *Conclusions* summarize and compare the main findings from each chapter, latter briefly proposing a few paths for future research.

1. Materials and Methods

The methods through which the materials were selected for the case studies are described in the following section (1.1). After that, the methodological framework used for analysis is introduced in broad outlines (1.2). Specific analytic categories and concepts will be explained and developed during the analysis of the texts (*Chapters 2 and 3*), since the concepts are closely related to the material and would remain empty without being explicated through examples.

1.2 Material Selection

The first step was to select two movements among the countless different existing types that fit the expression ‘science denialism’. Climate Change denial and the anti-vax movement were selected as a function of their popularity.

In the same way that there are countless conspiracy theories, there is also a myriad of multimodal media products that can be considered as text for each movement, since the “range of media through which conspiracy theories are transmitted is extremely broad” (Leone *et al.* 2020: 49). This points to how, in the digital age, hyper-mediality appears to “dissolve the borders between text, image, sound and performativity⁴” (Caumanns, Önnersfors 2020: 454). Hence, I sought to select products expressed in hybrid textual compositions. For that, two social media platforms were selected – YouTube and Twitter – in a way that the first product consists of a video (speech, moving pictures, and sound), while the second is composed of a series of eight tweets (written natural language, pictures, hyperlinks, etc).

Another reason that contributed to this choice of social media platforms is the fact that YouTube, especially, is known for cultivating an environment that has been remarkably prosperous in the dissemination of conspiracy theories, where several channels have been singled out for having conspiratorial content (Aupers 2020: 474). Hugo Leal (2020: 506) also

⁴ Performativity is here understood as: creating and interacting with content that conforms to prevailing attitudes of a social circle (Wardle, Derakhshan 2017: 13).

states that, given the growing business environment of networking spaces, “social media platforms, such as YouTube and Twitter, became the online backbone of strategic disinformation” and conspiracy theory dissemination.

Besides allowing for such a variety of media formats and having a central role in the spread of conspiracy theories, “social media makes it possible to visualise the popularity of any conspiracy theory of interest through likes, shares and comments” (Madisson, Ventsel 2021: 32). Given that possibility, the specific products (the video as well as the set of eight tweets) were selected according to popularity (number of views/likes/shares).

It is worth mentioning that the choice of these media products has methodological consequences, namely the fact that these texts have explicit authors. A conspiracy theory does not have one single definite author, requiring the characterization of a Model Author for its analysis (Madisson, Ventsel 2020). In this sense, it may be possible to understand conspiracy theory as a type of ‘speech genre’ (Bakhtin 1986), whilst specific texts – as single meaningful units – often do have a clear author. In relation to this matter, it is interesting to consider what Harambam (2020) calls ‘conspiracy theories entrepreneurs’, who are highly influential, publicly visible people in possession of the means for reaching large audiences as well as economically thrive from the creation and spread of conspiratorial content (such as documentaries, books, interviews, live talks, etc.). The texts here investigated were produced and disseminated by subjects that fit this category.

Additionally, since ten or twenty texts would be no more representative than one in qualitative research (where one cannot hope to achieve a representative sample in any case), these materials are sufficient for analysis. I chose to work with two instances of a discourse, seeking to identify practices instrumentalized in them that I believe to also be operative in other texts belonging to the same discursive context, following Clifford Geertz’s (1973) hermeneutic notion that cultural analysis is meant to discern critical structures and established codes from specific instances that can later be applied to new understandings of the system (and its rules) that govern these instances. In this sense, the investigation of something particular can always be revealing of superstructures. Although the method of analysis and material selection may configure a limitation to this study (I am working within the limits of discourse analysis, not being able to analyse reception, actual interpretation, or social consequences – just a Model Reader account), findings are still valid. Besides, since a quantitative big data analysis falls out of my scope, the amount of material selected was also restrained by the physical size of this work, which allows for only so many pages, and – since I sought to provide a thick description (Geertz 1973) of each text – the inclusion of any more material became invariable.

1.1.1 *Climate Change denial YouTube video*

On December 2021, I carried out a search into the most popular conspiracy theory influencers and repeatedly came across the name David Icke. The British conspiracy theorist, former sports broadcaster, was however banned from both YouTube and Twitter (in May and November 2020 respectively). Yet, as I read Icke's Wikipedia page⁵, I found that he had given an interview to Brian Rose on the YouTube channel London Real, which had lately become quite popular (Whitworth 2021). Even though that exact video was removed from YouTube, I became interested in the London Real channel itself, where videos can be found on topics ranging from the Illuminati to the lost city of Atlantis. It was among the five most popular videos of the channel that I found 'WHY I SAID GLOBAL WARMING IS THE BIGGEST FRAUD IN HISTORY - Dan Pena | London Real', uploaded to the channel in July 2018 and viewed more than 758 thousand times (as of May 2023).

1.1.2 *Anti-vax Twitter profile and tweets*

In a recent study entitled *The Disinformation Dozen*, the Centre for Countering Digital Hate (2021) identified twelve anti-vaxxers who play leading roles in spreading mis/disinformation about COVID-19 vaccines on social media. The first actor flagged by the study is called Joseph Mercola, "a successful anti-vaccine entrepreneur, peddling dietary supplements and false cures as alternatives to vaccines" (*Ibid*, 12). The main Twitter profile of Mercola has more than 385 thousand followers (as of May 2023), a testament to his influence on the platform. In March 2022, I carried out a preliminary search on Social Bearing⁶ (a research tool for Twitter analytics) which revealed that, in the last 40 days, Mercola had made 45 tweets containing the word 'vaccine', amounting to 65,370 retweets and 207,995 favourites. Still using Social Bearing, I sorted through the most retweeted tweets by reading each of them and chose three to be considered for initial analysis (the criterium for selecting was that it had to discuss vaccination, either implicitly or explicitly). In February 2023, a complementary search was necessary to select five more tweets with the objective of finding more examples to support the analysis of the three previously chosen ones. The preliminary analysis of the three first texts allowed me to expand my search on Social Bearing to include tweets that contained

⁵ Available at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_Icke, 05.12.21.

⁶ Available at: <https://socialbearing.com/>, 15.02.23

the words ‘media’, ‘government’, and ‘big pharma’ (key terms that are further explained in *Chapter 2*).

1.2 Methodology of Analysis

Since the study of conspiracy theories is a “point of convergence for so many researchers coming from so many disciplines” (Hristov *et al.* 2020: 11), the semiotics of culture, being transdisciplinary (Torop 2006), offers theoretical tools that “provide an opportunity to systematise disparate studies in various disciplines into a coherent theory of the signifying logic of conspiracy theories” (Leone *et al.* 2020: 48). Additionally, “semiotics enables the systematic study of interpretations of conspiracies expressed in *concrete media*” (*Ibid*, 48, my italics), so it applies suitably to the analysis of the chosen social media products. Besides, as “the study of the contingent articulation of meaning in communication” (Selg, Ventsel 2020: 238), semiotics is “in principle the discipline studying everything which can be used in order to lie” (Eco 1976: 7), which also makes it suitable for the study of anti-scientific conspiratorial discourse.

Using semiotics as a foundation, the present study is composed of a “qualitative analysis based on a research logic that emphasises mixed methods and that focuses on the discourse” (Caballero 2020: 137) of the chosen media products. Overall, semiotics as a methodological perspective offers a point of view that “differentiates between three interrelated levels in analysing conspiracy theories” (Leone *et al.* 2020: 44), namely:

- 1st Conspiracy theories analysed as modelling system (interpretation filter) – allows for the identification of meaning-making mechanisms (Research Question 1).
- 2nd Conspiracy theories analysed as representation (text) – relates to instrumentalized discursive and signifying practices (Research Question 2).
- 3rd Analysis of the processes of identity construction and self-description in conspiracy theories – permits answering Research Question 3a.

In order to obtain a deeper understanding of each of these three levels, four related methodologies are here combined, namely: *Critical Discourse Analysis* (Fairclough 1995); *Political Discourse Analysis* (Fairclough, N. Fairclough 2013); *Relational Political Analysis* (Selg, Ventsel 2020), and *Strategic Conspiracy Narratives: A Semiotic Approach* (Madisson, Ventsel 2021). Since this thesis focuses on conspiracy theory as discursive phenomenon, it becomes interesting to, first of all, relate these three levels with the three dimensions of discourse and the three perspectives proposed by Norman Fairclough (1995) through which every discursive event (every instance of language use) can be analysed:

- 1) Text – TEXTUAL ANALYSIS consists of linguistic *description*, encompassing the “analysis of the texture of texts, their form and organization, and not just commentaries on the ‘content’ of texts which ignore texture” (Fairclough 1995: 4). Textual analysis is complementary to the 2nd level of semiotic analysis of conspiracy theories described above.
- 2) Discourse practice – INTERTEXTUAL ANALYSIS is the *interpretation* of the relationship between text production, consumption, and distribution – as well as genre (language use associated with a social activity) and orders of discourse (relationships of complementarity, inclusion/exclusion, and opposition between discursive practices of a social domain). As such, “analysis of texts should not be artificially isolated from analysis of institutional and discursive practices within which texts are embedded” (Fairclough 1995: 9). Intertextual analysis thus links text to context⁷, helping to answer Research Question 2 and, then, 1 (specifically regarding the possible generalization of the identified discursive practices); texts are situational, but the relation between text and context may be generalizing.
- 3) Sociocultural practice – SOCIAL ANALYSIS consists in the *explanation* of the discursive event as a whole, relating to society and culture, since social and cultural phenomena are realized in the textual properties of a text (Fairclough 1995: 4). Social analysis relates to the 3rd level of conspiracy theory semiotic analysis (Leone *et al.* 2020), helping to answer Research Questions 4a and 4b (about underlying meanings of messages and their potential harm).

To carry out the identity construction analysis on the 3rd level more thoroughly, as well as provide a comprehensive answer to Research Question 3 (regarding the relations that are established by discourse), I am also drawing from the methodology proposed by Peeter Selg and Andreas Ventsel (2020), where relations are understood as being constitutive – that is, “entities and their relations cannot be considered as being separate from one another” (*Ibid*, 3), so social phenomena are constituted by relations and not by “some sort of essences of entities” (*Ibid*, 28). The focus of this analysis is on form (as a network of relations) rather than content (as in ‘substance’), which is a preoccupation that already appeared in what has been described above as ‘textual analysis’ (Fairclough 1995). From this perspective, sign systems, meaning-making, communication, and social identities are conceptualized “in terms of power relations” (Selg, Ventsel 2020: 7).

⁷ Intertextuality (Kristeva 1980) and interdiscursivity (Fairclough 1995) call for the characterization of text and discourse as paradoxical phenomena, where there is a unity (a whole with boundaries) but at the same time this whole “emerges from an open, uncountable plurality of heterogeneous and multidimensional components” (Selg, Ventsel 2020: 127). In other words, even though “text is usually understood as a monologue”, it is actually a dialog (especially when it is in cyberspace – a place of interchange) and therefore, “it cannot have closure in any strict sense” (Sonesson 1998: 18).

In summary – and this is applicable to all posed research questions – components of a discursive event cannot exist apart from it, which also means that such aspects do not precede the event in time (as the components spring into existence, so does the event itself). Comparable to the relational nature of the sign in semiotics (not intelligible in isolation), political communication and its elements as well as context are to be analysed separately, *but not as being separate* (Selg, Ventsel 2020: 215).

In a complimentary manner – still considering Research Questions 3 and 3a – I further draw from the methodology proposed by Madisson and Ventsel (2021), who describe the core of conspiracy theories as being the matter of conflict construction, “characterised by strongly polarised identity creation in which an antagonistic opposition of ‘us’ and ‘them’ serves as an important dominant” (Madisson, Ventsel 2021: 37). This also relates to Research Question 1 (about primary meaning-making mechanisms) and the 1st level of semiotic analysis previously quoted, where conspiracy theory is analysed as modelling system (Leone *et al.* 2020) – since, according to Madisson and Ventsel (2021: 38), conspiracy narratives model the world “as two sides in a permanent conflict situation”, in a way that the symbolic function of such narratives is strategic, inasmuch as they seek “to offer an organising and meaningful narrative to the contingency of history” (*Ibid*).

To answer Research Question 4 (regarding strategy, underlying messages, and their potential harm), it becomes necessary to first understand the analysed texts as ‘political discourse’, which is, according to Isabela Fairclough and Norman Fairclough (2013), a form of practical argumentation that can ground decision. In other words, political discourse is premised on to the capacity of actors to drive change, which in turn implies strategy – that is, actors can develop strategies (plans of action) for changing the state of affairs in particular directions (*Ibid*, 24–26). From this perspective, even though strategies have a discursive dimension, since they are developed and formulated in discourse, “argumentation cannot be viewed as a ‘discursive’ strategy in itself”, because strategies “involve goals which are outside and beyond discourse, i.e., they involve desired changes in the world, not in discourse” (*Ibid*, 24–25).

What is thus important to understand is that “deliberative discourse, narrative, description and explanation can be viewed as subsumed to or embedded within arguments” (*Ibid*, 30). This indicates how the “ways of representing the world enter as premises into reasoning about what we should do” (I. Fairclough, N. Fairclough 2013: 86), or how beliefs feed into action. In other words, discourse as representation (in the sense of the 2nd level of semiotic analysis: conspiracy theory as text) comprises premises of practical arguments and serve *as reasons for action*, not

only describing “what social reality is but also what it should be” (I. Fairclough, N. Fairclough 2013: 103), in the sense of the 1st level of semiotic analysis (conspiracy theory as modelling).

In harmony with this understanding, Madisson and Ventsel (2021) state that narratives are always constructed from perspectives which are linked to specific interests. Therefore, a semiotic analysis of a conspiracy theory questions “which symbols, texts and other discursive phenomena known to the target audience have been used to construct the narrative” (*Ibid*, 23). This method of analysis proposed by the authors enables the connection between the last research questions (4–4b) with the opening ones (1–2). Not only does it allow for the analysis of conspiracy theory as a modelling system (1st level), but it also allows for the investigation of the strategic dimension of discourse (with which I. Fairclough and N. Fairclough are also worried, but that Madisson and Ventsel provide with precise focus on conspiracy theories).

Overall, the authors characterize a universal code-text for conspiracy theories: “this (whatever unpleasant event) is a conspiracy, i.e., the realisation of a malevolent plot of a covert grouping” (Madisson, Ventsel 2021: 44) – a set of relations that can simply be adapted to serve any specific situation. Hence, for the study of conspiracy theories, and the consequent answering of the posed research questions, the focus should be on rhetorical and argumentative lines that: (a) “create an aura of secrecy”; (b) “articulate the positions of the oppressors and the oppressed” (‘us’ vs. ‘them’); and (c) establish a “pattern of associations that directs the interpreters towards discovering ever new conspiracy layers” (*Ibid*, 41–42), referencing the notion that ‘everything is connected’ – a central logic of conspiracy thinking.

At last, it is relevant to point out that Fairclough (1995: 7) understands text as “sensitive barometers of social processes”, constituting “a form in which social struggles are acted out”. Hence, the interests of ‘micro’ social analysis can be understood as forms of social action, existing in a dialectical relationship with ‘macro’ social concerns. Following Fairclough (1995), I understand science denialism as both a condition and a resource for the creation of social media products such as the ones analysed in this thesis, and yet, at the same time, science denialism is also constituted *by* these products. A text is hence “socially shaped, but it is also socially shaping” (Fairclough 1995: 131).

Lastly, it is important to point out that the methodological framework here described provides for neutral and un-biased analyses, in the sense that I do not administer any sort of value-judgement over the studied texts or authors (even if I do not accept these discourses as legitimate and take a critical stance towards them). Both the video and the tweets, which have all been made public by their creators, are here treated from a strictly scientific point of view, ethically, and as objectively as possible.

2. Interview with a Climate Change Denier

The present chapter contains an analysis (and discussion) of the video ‘WHY I SAID GLOBAL WARMING IS THE BIGGEST FRAUD IN HISTORY - Dan Pena | London Real’ (Fig. 2), whose length is of 9 minutes and 52 seconds. For analysis to be possible, a complete transcription was carried out (available in full in the *Appendix*). For convenience, specific excerpts are quoted along this chapter as deemed necessary.



Fig. 2: Print screen of the video retrieved from https://youtu.be/m0sY2tjmr_Y, 08.12.2022.

2.1 Contextual Information

Given the importance, for intertextual analysis, of understanding the context surrounding the object of investigation, before delving into the video transcription, there are a couple of subjects that need to be clarified, namely: the main characteristics and origins of Climate Change denial (2.1.1), as well as who is Dan Peña and what is London Real (2.1.2).

2.1.1 *Climate Change denial*

In a concise manner, Climate Change deniers argue that the well-publicized scientific consensus surrounding the human impact on Earth's atmospheric and meteorologic conditions "is either manufactured or illusory and that some nefarious force – be it the United Nations, liberals, communists, or authoritarians – want to use Climate Change as a cover for exerting massive new controls over the populace" (Uscinski *et al.* 2017: 1).

In the *Introduction*, it has been stated that anti-scientific conspiracy theories rely on denying scientists for the structuring of the conspiracy. In the case of Climate Change denial, there are many actors that fit this description. What may be one of the most famous cases is that of the economist Bjørn Lomborg, who published a book in which he suggests that problems of change in climate, energy shortages, deforestation, water pollution, among others are all undocumented assumptions, and that – in every significant measurable field – human activity was shown to have only improved environmental and developmental aspects (Bergh 2010). Following Lomborg's rise to fame, climate scientists have worked to dispute his claims by reviewing his work in scientific journals and showcasing how Lomborg has misinterpreted data and reached dishonest results (*Ibid*).

Despite these efforts, other experts still insist on publishing so-called scientific research that challenge the consensus on Climate Change through other spurious methods (Keen 2021). Besides, on earlier days of climate science, data was still limited and, seeing how this field depends heavily on complex statistical models, differing results were obtained from models based on different assumptions (Goertzel 2010: 497). It took time to reach consensus, and even after overwhelming scientific evidence allowed for it to be reached, people like Lomborg (see Keen 2021 for more examples) have still been casting doubt upon what is now a mainstream scientific opinion. All of that contributed to the rise of Climate Change conspiracy theories that prey on this early uncertainty and the illusion of a lack of consensus. Today, "around 97% of publishing climate scientists agree that human activity is one of the primary causes of Climate Change", yet "there is a small, politically charged portion of the public that actively opposes" this consensus (Sherwin 2021: 556). Consequently, Climate Change "represents a unique case in that the scientific agreement has solidified, but public opinion at the same time has polarized" (Uscinski *et al.* 2017: 2).

Largely, Climate Change deniers may come in one of these shapes: those who "contest that any significant warming takes place", those who "question its anthropogenic nature, often attributing it to solar activity", the ones who accept it "but deny that it will have significant

(negative) impacts on humans or the environment”, and finally, those who question “the existing consensus among climate scientists” (Björnberg *et al.* 2017: 235). Moreover, research has showed that conservatism and free market endorsement are statistically correlated to rejection of climate science (Lewandowsky *et al.* 2013), probably because “cutting GHG emissions requires intervention – regulation or increased taxation of carbon emissions – that curtail free market economics” (Uscinski *et al.* 2017: 19). Sherwin (2021: 556) also states that “conservative think tanks with funding from vested interests and political action committees have played a primary role in sourcing misinformation [...] to cast doubt on the level of scientific agreement about Climate Change”.

In conclusion, Climate Change denial is arguably “the most coordinated and well-moneyed form of science denial, constituting the backbone of the opposition to environmentalism and environmental science in general” (Björnberg *et al.* 2017: 235). The consequences of this anti-scientific movement mostly come in the form of a decrease in public support, steering policy away from addressing this issue (Sherwin 2021: 556; Uscinski *et al.* 2017: 11), heavily affecting the future of the planet.

2.1.2 *Dan Peña and London Real*

Starting with the title of the video (Fig. 2), the question of who Dan Peña is and what does ‘London Real’ mean call to attention. Some answers may already be found in the video’s description⁸:

Dan Peña is an American born businessman, entrepreneur, mentor and creator of QLA, the Quantum Leap Advantage methodology responsible for the creation of over \$50 Billion of Wealth since 1993.

Born in the Barrio of East LA he now lives in a storied, 15th century castle in Scotland, and for the past twenty five years have been teaching his mentees and devotees, a style of achieving high performance, and super-success, in business and all aspects of their lives.

He was recently featured in the London Real Original Documentary film “The 50 Billion Dollar Man” which tells the story of Brian Rose's “complicated” relationship with Dan over the past four years.

The conversations between Dan Pena and Brian Rose on London Real have been watched over 7 million times.

Watch the full episode here: <https://londonreal.tv/e/dan-pena/>

About London Real:

Founded by Brian Rose in 2011. London Real is the curator of people worth watching. Our mission is to promote personal transformation through inspiration, self-discovery and empowerment.

We feature interesting guests with fascinating stories and unique perspectives on life. We aim to take viewers on a journey through the lives of others and ultimately inspire them to embark on one of their own.

⁸ Originally retrieved from https://youtu.be/m0sY2tjmr_Y, 06.12.2022.

Besides the brief information on who is Dan Peña and what is London Real, the third paragraph, where it is stated that Dan Peña was recently featured in a documentary produced by London Real is extremely relevant for the understanding of the video. Much of the conversation recorded on this interview revolves around events which apparently happened at the premiere of this film. Regarding the part which states that “the conversations between Dan Peña and Brian Rose on London Real have been watched over 7 million times”, it is not clear whether this is referring to this video (which has 700 thousand views, not 7 million), or some other content related to the documentary or its premiere. At the start of this interview, Brian Rose mentions a videoclip portraying Peña that has gone viral. It is a possibility that this viral video is the one that is being referred to in the description, however, I could not locate said content anywhere. The information regarding it (both in this description and in the interview) were not sufficient to allow for the retrieving of the exact material to what they are referring.

More thorough research shows that Dan Peña is a Mexican-American who began his career as a financial analyst on Wall Street and went on to become president of Great Western Resources, an oil company listed on the London Stock Exchange in 1984 (Sahagún 2021). After his dismissal in 1992, Peña sued the company and was awarded \$3.3 million dollars, with which he bought Guthrie Castle (Scotland), where he operates several businesses, including courses on how to become as financially successful as himself, as briefly mentioned in the video description. Peña is described by news media as a sharp opinionated conservative who advocates for the idea that one can get rich solely through hard work (Sahagún 2021).

As for London Real, besides what has been stated on the description, it is also interesting to note that the online talk show was inaugurated over 10 years ago (2011) and publishes weekly content to this day. However long it has existed, the London Real YouTube channel only came into popularity recently, after its host and founder, Brian Rose, started producing videos with guests he considers ‘controversial’ (Ondrak 2020), which explains why the description emphasises that the relationship between Rose and Peña is “complicated”. In May 2020, the London Real YouTube channel reached 1.83 million subscribers (Ondrak 2020), and by January 2022, the number had jumped to 2.05 million, indicating a recent rise in popularity.

It is worth mentioning that the London Real YouTube videos are only excerpts of the videos that are posted in full on the London Real website. All YouTube videos have, in their descriptions, links that redirect the viewer to the website where one must first submit a verified email address and agree to be sent marketing communications to view the full content. In the ‘About’ section of the website, it is stated: “We believe that spending time watching or listening to inspiring people opens your mind and stimulates new ideas. We also believe in the power of

personal mentorship to transform the individual” (London Real [s.a.]). These sentences take on an extra level of meaning when one is aware that Brian Rose, as well as most of the guests on his videos (including Dan Peña) are involved in the business of selling courses on public speaking, motivation, administration, among others.

2.2 Transcript Analysis

Since meaning is generated through text interpretation and there are innumerable interpretations one can make of a single text, it is impossible to disassociate ideologies from the understanding of discourse (Fairclough 1995: 71). To say that a discourse works ideologically, however, is not the same thing as to say that it is false. In fact, it has little to do with judgements of truth or falsity⁹ *per se*, relating instead to whether statements are well-grounded and how discourse “contributes to the reproduction of relations of power” (*Ibid*, 18). And power – in the sense of a semiotics of power (Selg, Ventsel 2020: 108) – is also textual, which is to say it is constitutional of signification and meaning in society. Arising out of this foundation, the present subchapter seeks to provide an analysis of the ideological aspects of the video based on rhetorical practice, grounding strategies, and power relations.

2.2.1 *Rhetorical practice*

From the video transcription excerpt found below (where BR stands for Brian Rose and DP for Dan Peña), ideological elements – the ‘implicit content’, the ‘unsaid of a text’, that which is presupposed (Fairclough 1995: 6) or, in Gramscian terms, ‘common sense’ – can be identified as taking part in the shaping of the text:

3. BR: We were on stage and a woman got up and asked you a question about Global Warming
4. DP: Yep
5. BR: And you went on to explain why you don’t believe in it. Uh, you said you changed your- no, you said you’ve got some new evidence recently
6. DP: Yep
7. BR: What happened that night?
8. DP: Ok
9. BR: Why did that clip go viral?
10. DP: The lady, uh, said ‘I’ve children and you’ve got a few bucks, and don’t you want- I wanna leave the world a better place for my kids’, essentially what she was saying

⁹ Even if ideology does not equal falsity, it is still in the domain of critical discourse analysis to question truth, either it being through exclusion (omission), distortion, or falsification of content (Fairclough 1995: 18).

11. BR: Right. Which is a good question
12. DP: [shrugs] Yeah, it's fine
13. BR: Do you?
14. DP: Yeah, I- I'd like my children- I want my children very much, but I realize it's up to them, it's not up to me. You see? I put responsibility-
15. BR: You are one of the biggest force-multipliers in the world
16. DP: Yeah, but I
17. BR: They don't have a
18. DP: It's up to the individual. I can give you all the information, but if you don't pull the trigger and take action...

In line 10, Peña starts off with “the lady said”, which one can presuppose (the information is not explicit) references what happened in the video Rose asked about. That which is excluded from a text is often overlooked in textual analysis (Fairclough 1995: 210) and yet, the choice of what *not* to say is as relevant as the choice of what to say. Peña, or even Rose for that matter, could have described the situation revolving the videoclip that they are talking about in a more explicit and detailed manner, but they chose not to. All the viewer knows going into this video is that Peña was at a stage (where? Why? What was the subject he was talking about that prompted the question from the lady? Was she in the audience or was she part of some panel together with Peña?). Since the viewer has virtually no contextual information regarding this videoclip and is presented with a very confusing account of what was questioned in the first place, the focus falls inadvertently on Peña's answer instead of on the question that came before.

Peña states: “the lady said I've children”. Although the conjunction ‘that’ is omitted, context indicates that the children who are being referred to are not Peña's but the lady's. The knowledge of both language code and principles of language use allows us to understand these sentences even though they lack explicitness, however, what matters to semiotics is not precisely these instances, but how ideology is applied to manipulate interpretation (Lorusso 2017: 50). This can be identified more clearly on the next sentence, when Peña says “don't you want-” and cuts himself off, choosing to change the subject of the phrase from “you” to “I”. “Don't you want” previously referred to the lady asking something of Peña. By shifting it to “I wanna”, the subject falls back to the lady, who is being quoted. Hence, wanting a better world is now a desire from the part of the lady.

Based on “I've children and you've got a few bucks” and “I wanna leave the world a better place for my kids”, one can assume the lady was referring to the idea that people with financial resource have a responsibility towards the world. In line 14, Peña says “I want my children very much”, that can be understood as something along the lines of “I also want my children to have a better world”, which is quickly followed up by “but I realize it's up to them,

it's not up to me". Here, we see Peña redirecting the responsibility to the next generation, concomitantly freeing his own from being held accountable. It is implied that there is no possibility of sharing the weight of making the world better; it is "yours" (the person who is asking for it) and not "mine".

In line 15, Rose recalls the fact that Peña is "one of the biggest force-multipliers in the world", and by "force multiplier" one may understand "rich". Peña's response in line 18 is, again, the redirection of responsibility: "It's up to the individual. I can give you all the information, but if you don't pull the trigger and take action" (line 18). Recalling the change of subject occurring on line 10 (from "you" to "I"), it is interesting to see how the switch from "don't you want" (won't *you*, Dan Peña, do something?) to "I wanna" (the responsibility falls on the one who is asking). Therefore, to Peña, if *you* want a better world, it is *your* responsibility.

It is important to see that nowhere in his answer did Peña acknowledge his financial status. The choice of expressions such as "you've got a few bucks" and "force multiplier", instead of "rich", "billionaire", or "in possession of a great amount of money" is also interesting to note. Rose (a "force-multiplier with a few bucks" as well) also avoids expressions that may paint wealth in negative shades. In his answer (line 18) Peña mentions "giving information", which makes some sense when you know that Peña sells coaching courses on how to become successful, yet he also completely ignores that aspect of the question. We can once again interpret his omission along the lines of "it doesn't matter that I am in possession of great financial resources, it is not up to me to fix the world, it is up to you – the one who is asking". Clearly, such explicit statement would not be well-received by any audience. However, the way Peña puts it, by avoiding touching on the financial subject and giving answers that are hard to put together, his discourse ends up quite appealing, especially neoliberals inclined towards meritocracy and individualism ("It's up to the individual" – line 18). This way, Peña's discourse has an inspiring effect: *change is in your power, you need to pull the trigger and take action*.

Finally, it is possible to recognize that, so far, the only instances when Global Warming was explicitly mentioned were at the very start of the interview, when Rose says "let's talk about Global Warming" (line 1) and "asked you a question about Global Warming" (line 3). After that, Peña mentions "leave the world a better place" as a supposed quotation of what the lady was saying, and from that point on until line 28, both Peña and Rose only refer vaguely to a so-called "responsibility". Indeed, it is not clear what this "make the world better" precisely means in this situation, although the title of the video and the beginning of the conversation (line 1) do indicate that 'Global Warming' is the central subject of the interview.

2.2.2 Grounding strategies

Another excerpt of the interview provides for more examples of other such ‘natural’ processes, relations, and structures, that are often taken for granted in discourse:

66. DP: Now, since then, since the thing went viral because of your movie premiere, I had my crack-staff do some research, and then I double-checked the research, only found one error, and the, uh... you know how many people have been to the North and South Pole? Both? Since the beginning of motherfucking time? Recorded time
67. BR: Couple of hundred?
68. DP: [gesticulates down]
69. BR: Just you and Sally?
70. DP: No, no, no. [...] Not counting the teams, but the lead people?
73. BR: Yeah?
74. DP: Ten people, plus Sally and I. Twelve! Since the beginning of fucking time
75. BR: [nods]
76. DP: You know how many of these other ten are bitching about Global Warming? [pause] Zero!

In this excerpt, Peña is presenting an information, something which he knows for a fact. As farfetched as it may seem that only twelve “lead people” have ever been to the North and South Poles since the beginning of recorded time, the question here is not whether Peña is providing a ‘faithful’ representation of reality, but rather, it revolves around which signifying practices he is using to ground his affirmation, to convince people that he is conveying reliable information. The way this is done is by presenting a deductively valid argument that is constructed onto false premises:

Premise 1: Twelve people have been to the North and South Poles since the beginning of time.

Premise 2: None of these twelve people are complaining about Global Warming.

Argument: Global Warming is a hoax.

Of course, there is one premise that is missing from that argument in order for it to be deductively valid, which would be:

Premise 3: Only people who have been to the North and South poles are equipped with the expert knowledge necessary to assess whether Global Warming is real or not.

For the sake of discussion, let us assume that Premise 3 is subjectively included in Peña’s argumentation. Therefore, his argument

is deductively valid, because it is not possible both for its premises to be true and the conclusion to be false. If, for some reason, the premises were true, then the conclusion would have to be true. However, the argument is not sound (because the premises are actually false). Unlike soundness, validity has nothing to do with the actual truth of the premises. (I. Fairclough, N. Fairclough 2013: 37)

The example below also displays how the deductive validity of Peña's arguments are not dependent upon empirical evidence, but "solely on the meanings of the terms" (*Ibid*).

20. Sally and I were in the South Pole, 2011, and we're there and there's a big half-a-million-dollar scientific station there, that's mostly funded by the US government, and uh, the scientists came over and gave us these presentations. They had at that time- they'd drilled five, or six, or seven thousand cores uh, in the South Pole. [...] And so he's going through these cores and he says: fifteen thousand years ago it was two- uh, one point nine six degrees warmer Celsius than today and- STOP STOP STOP! Let's go back to that, how do you know that? And then all these MIT, CalTech, all these guys- oh, because this equals that bullshit, bullshit. We know for- absolutely within a millionth of a percent, it was warmer.

As Fairclough (1995: 139) puts it, one can see here the "instrumentalization of discursive practices, involving the subordination of meaning to, and the manipulation of meaning for, instrumental effect". In the quote above, Peña mentions people from the MIT and CalTech who supposedly told him (a first-hand account) that the South Pole was warmer in the past than it is in the present ("because this equals that" – line 20). And these supposed scientists supposedly came to this conclusion by drilling a non-specific number of ("five, or six, or seven thousand" – line 20) cores in the South Pole. Furthermore, CalTech and the MIT are worldly-famous institutions known by most people to be trust-worthy sources of information (highly naturalized ideology). Quoting these institutions is a way to ground statement. The same can be applied to the use of the word "scientists" (line 20), which represents actors that, given their role in society and our ideological preconceptions, are also imbued with the notion of legitimacy/reliability.

To similar effect, in line 32, Peña quotes the journal *Scientific American*:

32. DP: They say it has nothing to do with the hairspray, the ozone, nothing, zero. In fact, if you read *Scientific American*, [...] you would've known three months ago they said for the first time in forty years the ozone- what do you call- is uh, thickened up again.

In summary, such referencing to institutions and actors which are, due to our background knowledge, reliable information sources (*Scientific American*, MIT, CalTech, and "scientists"), Peña grounds his premises to convince the viewer of the soundness of his arguments.

Finally, one could also point to some strategies that Peña uses to paint himself as a reliable source of information. On line 66, he states: "I had my crack-staff do some research and then I double-checked the research, only found one error". The fact that he was able to find one error in his crack-staff's research seems to point to how capable and knowledgeable he is regarding the subject (even though viewers cannot be sure what this subject precisely *is*). Similarly, Peña mentions that he was supposed to be on a panel in George Mason University (line 78), once again attesting to his status as a academically respected person who is in possession of valid information to be shared.

Interestingly, Rose seems to pick up on Peña's strategies, since he subsequently poses the following question, getting the following reply:

79. BR: And so you're saying because you were at the South, you were at the North, I mean, it doesn't make you an expert, are you saying-
80. DP: No, no, but I talked to the experts. Who-
81. BR: Ok. And none of them buy it?
82. DP: These journalists! These fucking journalists that are writing about it, they haven't talked to dick! They haven't talked to anybody. Nobody has asked *me* what I saw there. Nobody has asked *me*, the scientists that *I* met with.

The word "experts" here serves a similar function to that of "scientists" in previous quotes, referring to people whose role in society serves to characterize them as reliable sources of information. Having "talked to the experts" (line 80), while his critics ("these journalists" – line 82) have supposedly not, Peña establishes that *he* is in possession of the truthful, legitimate information regarding Global Warming, and that *he* is the one you should be listening to.

2.3 Form / Content

So far, it seems fairly clear how ideology permeates this whole conversation on the textual level (such as using the subject 'you' instead of 'I' to redirect responsibility), interpretation level (using deductively valid arguments based on false premises), and sociocultural level (referencing to reliable institutions and societal actors to ground statements). Nevertheless, it is such a "common-sense thing" that its presence may be even more difficult to pinpoint. For instance, the very fact that Rose and Peña are taking turns while speaking is already dependent on ideology (what Fairclough calls 'orderliness').

Additionally, background knowledge of what the situation (an interview) requires is what defines the social relationship between Rose and Peña as 'host' and 'guest', as well as the roles that this relationship entails (the guest respectfully answers the questions from the host). Further background knowledge of the situation (which is an online interview) permits Peña to use swears and cuss words throughout the conversation, which he probably would not use so much if he was on television – a simple example of how contents are realized in forms, and different forms entail different contents (Fairclough 1995: 188).

2.3.1 *The interview genre*

Before all else, it is important to note that, even though I have been analysing a transcript, the product under investigation is a video, that is, a text expressed in, not only sound (spoken natural language), but also in a visual means of expression (moving picture). Therefore, it is necessary to consider that the heterogeneity of a text in terms of semiotic forms “relates to its heterogeneity in terms of meanings” (Fairclough 1995: 107). Thus, the three frames taken from the video shown in Figs. 3 and 4 will help illustrate the discussion in this section. Because this video is visually repetitive, these three images are enough for the present analysis – and by ‘visually repetitive’ I mean that it was shot in a single location, with three fixed cameras. The editing is done intercutting between these three framing possibilities, providing for a video composed of little variation in terms of visual images.



Fig. 3: Frame taken from the video under analysis.

From Fig. 3, it is possible to highlight the main aspects that convey meaning, serving to reinforce this video’s discourse. The first aspect is simply the fact that both people portrayed are white men in expensive suits. The choice of wardrobe (fine suit fabrics, wide ties, golden cufflinks, shiny black shoes...) characterize both the host as well as the guest as successful and respectful men of high social status. In the background, drapes hang from the walls in the colours of the American flag, tying the discourse to American nationalism and conservatism, a worldview that has been previously linked to rejection of climate science (Sherwin 2021; Lewandowsky *et al.* 2013). Other items can also be seen which are easily associated with images of intellectuals as well as the rich-and-powerful, namely: a silver bulldog statue, a small pile of unidentifiable books, and an intricate lamp in the shape of an armillary sphere (a common symbol of intellectuality tied to astronomers from Ancient Greece and Medieval Europe).

Besides the characterization of the physical space where the interview happens and the construction of the characters involved in it, the cinematographic language employed in the production of this video is also a meaning-carrier. As it is possible to see in Fig. 4, the framing of these other two cameras (a. and b.) are what is understood in the audiovisual industry as an over-the-shoulder shot, a classical form of indicating conversation by way of interchanging

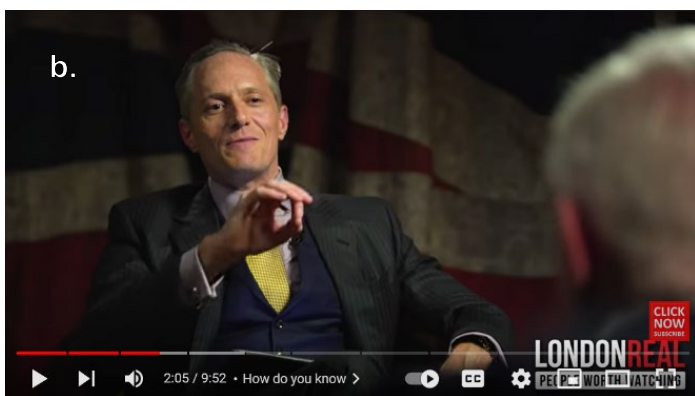


Fig. 4: Frames taken from the video under analysis.

between *plan* and *contre-plan*. Because over-the-shoulder shots are somewhere between a close-up and a medium shot, it also allows for a better portrayal of facial expressions, something that is not so well represented by the first camera (Fig. 3) that shows both characters in profile and from a bigger distance. Besides, the editing is also made to follow and thus emphasize the orderliness of the conversation, which is why this manner of filming is ideal for the interview genre. It also creates a sense of opposition between the character who is asking the questions and the one who is answering.

Stating that this video belongs to the interview genre entails associating it with certain principles of interpretation or “the conventions which people draw upon in producing and interpreting” text types (Fairclough 1995: 13). Therefore, the interpretation of this video depends upon the fact that it is recognizable as an interview, since the audience is aware of all the rules that are entailed in this kind of social activity (thus, genre provides context). Knowing that interviews are a type of journalistic practice carried out with the intent of exposing information on a determined subject by an expert on said subject, it is possible to state that the form is here enforcing the legitimization of the content, or at least contributing to create a “perception of legitimacy” (I. Fairclough, N. Fairclough 2013: 114). The fact that Peña is being interviewed in this professional setting already says something of the expertise he possesses regarding the subject under discussion.

2.3.2 Relational analysis

The relational analysis framework (Selg, Ventsel 2020) briefly mentioned in section 1.2, consists of general labels or categories referring to ideal types where one may identify certain prevailing logics of political articulation (not ideological content). Since a ‘pure’ form of communication exists nowhere but in theory, I am highlighting only the most predominant form that can be identified in the discourse of this video, which is ‘phatic communication’ linked to authoritarianism.

The term ‘phatic communication’ was borrowed from Jakobson’s language functions to determine exchanges carried out on the basis of habitualized standards or ritualized formulas, as well as affective attitudes, appealing to stereotypes (Selg, Ventsel 2020). This notion (habitualized standards or ritualized formulas) can be connected to those rules described by Fairclough (1995) that are entailed in a particular kind of social activity and that have been discussed on the previous subsection (2.3.1).

As deeply affective, the phatic communication form is virtually empty from the informational perspective (Selg, Ventsel 2020: 138–184). To illustrate, I bring the following excerpt from the transcription:

32. DP: They say it has nothing to do with the hairspray, the ozone, nothing, zero. In fact, if you read Scientific American, like the good MIT guy you are, you would’ve known three months ago they said for the first time in forty years the ozone- what do you call- is uh, thickened up again
33. BR: Yeah, the ozone has, but that’s a little different than carbon dioxide emissions, all that stuff
34. DP: They also said that we’ve known for at least fifty, sixty, seventy years that every square meter on the ground of the planet has between ten and fifteen thousand times more energy from the sun than it’s needed. Ten to fifteen thousand. How does it vary? You’re closer to the sun, it’s fifteen thousand, farther from the sun, ten thousand.
35. BR: Ok, what does that mean? There’s tons of energy
36. DP: Tons! Tons and tons. Ok, the first electric car was in 1846 I believe. I don’t believe, I *know*. 1846. Do you think, if we really wanted fucking electric cars, we couldn’t have them? It was 35 or 40 years before gasoline cars. But now, since then, and then the question is- Sally and I went to the North Pole
37. BR: Ok. But the electric car thing is because the oil business and all that, right?
38. DP: Correct. I’ll get back to that
39. BR: We’ll get back to that
40. DP: So, then we go to the North Pole and now there’s Russian scientists. Hardly anybody spoke English. Ok? And we got re-married at the North Pole and we talked to the scientists and, same questions, same answers as we got from the South Pole, Global Warming, they all laughed drinking vodka [mimicking]. Everybody is drinking in the North Pole, cause the Russians and Russians do like to drink vodka, as they say. And they say yeah, it’s just a load of shit, everybody knows it’s a load of shit and we’ve known it for years. When I was in the energy business, and forever more I’ll be an oil man, ok?
41. BR: You are an oil man

42. DP: Well, an oil man. Everybody laugh- everybody knew that when people will take more seriously Global Warming is when Aramco, Saudi, the Kingdom, runs out of oil. Now, two years ago, Aramco, which is uh, the petroleum company of the Saudi government, and how they're gonna go public. This was when oil was twenty-eight dollars a barrel. Now why would smart guys, MIT kinda guys, say they're gonna go public at the lowest oil price in the last thirty, forty years? Why?
43. BR: Why?
44. DP: Because when you go public, [...] they're gonna have to tell what the reserves are, and you know what the price of oil is gonna do when they say that there's forty-two kazillion-jillion barrels of oil?
45. BR: Gonna drop
46. DP: Like a fucking stone!
47. BR: So what does this have to do with Global Warming?
48. DP: Nah, because Global Warming is an anomaly, based on hyped-up, by this generation, for something to bitch about. We've had it. We've had it fifty thousand years ago, had it three hundred thousand years ago, but to blame it on us is bullshit
49. BR: Isn't it not accelerated by human's carbon emissions?
50. DP: Uh, one hundredth million of a percent, who cares
51. BR: Ok, so this is just a scam and a sham and all this-
52. DP: I'm jealous of vice-president what's-his-face
53. BR: Gore
54. DP: Gore! I'm jealous. And Sally and I were in a plane with him. A few years ago, he got in trouble because of the footprint, you know, the big G3 he flies around, G5 I guess it is, and so he was flying commercial, we were coming back from Peru, Lima. And Sally and I were doing some Safari, and I noticed why all these guys with fucking suits in here- business, cause they had no first class, and so it's vice-president Gore, he stands up and the- uh, and he's not as tall- you know all these people that say they're six-three, I mean, Jesus Christ, I mean he's about your height. And you know
55. BR: Everyone says that I'm
56. DP: Only six-one, he's only six one! He's about
57. BR: Everyone says I'm as tall as you!
58. DP: Yeah
59. BR: How tall are you?
60. DP: I'm six-one
61. BR: Ok. I'm not six-one
62. DP: No, no
63. BR: Ok
64. DP: And, uh, so
65. BR: Does Gore believe in Climate Change or is it all made-up?
66. DP: I don't know, I can't speak for the former vice-president, but he's gotta know the same stats I know.

The simplest aspect of phatic communication that can be identified in this excerpt is the appeal to stereotypes, starting with the non-English speaking Vodka-drinking Russian scientists (line 40), all the way up to “MIT kinda guys” (line 42). However, the most overwhelming aspect that characterizes this discourse as a type of phatic communication is the fact that Peña does not manage to finish one single line of thought. He starts off saying that Scientific America published results pointing to the thickening of the ozone layer (line 32). Rose, then, states that this does not necessarily mean that Global Warming is a fraud, seeing that the ozone layer

thickening is a different matter than carbon dioxide emissions (line 33). Peña never acknowledges that or tries to explain how the ozone layer thickening is connected to his argument that Global Warming is fake.

Instead, he moves on to talking about how, for many years, we have known that the surface of the Earth receives a lot of energy from the sun. Rose asks, “what does that mean?” (line 35), and Peña starts to talk about how we could’ve had electric cars since the 1800’s, presumably as an answer. He states that we have known about the Earth receiving a lot of energy from the sun for the last seventy years (line 34) and we could’ve had electric cars back in 1846 (line 36) if not for the matter of oil sovereignty (line 37). It is not in any way explained how this is related to Global Warming being a hoax. Surely, the matters of fossil fuel and solar energy are intrinsically tied to the subject of Climate Change as, respectively, one of the main causes of it and one possible solution to it. But the way that Peña presents the argument fails to add to his argumentation. Global Warming can be a real thing and we can still live in a world where we could, allegedly, have had electric cars for the last two-hundred years if not for the influence of oil companies (which is in itself another conspiracy theory). Here, Peña says something that is easy to be believed, but that essentially means nothing, or at least it does not serve to justify his argument, so we are still dealing with informational net zero.

This gets even more pronounced as the conversation goes on. Peña jumps from the electric cars to another story where he is in the North Pole with his wife. This story, apart from the colourful depiction of the Russian scientists, is very similar to the story about his stay in the South Pole: he talked to the scientists there, who say that Global Warming is not real. After this repetition, he comes back to the matter of oil. On line 44, Peña says 253 words (which were shortened above but that are available in the complete transcript in the *Appendix*) about the workings of oil businesses when they are “going public” or selling part of their oil stock. Most of it is vague and provides for no concrete information (such as “forty-two kazillion-jillion barrels” – line 44). When Rose enquires again “what does this have to do with the Global Warming?” (line 45), Peña answers: “it’s made-up”. There is simply no connection between Global Warming being a hoax and the very long talk about the fluctuations of oil price. The audience knows that the workings of the oil business are deeply connected to the matter of Climate Change, seeing that fossil fuel is one of its intensifiers. But Peña utterly fails to explain *how* that could be used to argue that there is no Global Warming.

Finally, after saying that Global Warming was invented “by this generation”, Peña skips to another story about the former American vice-president Albert Gore which never gets to its conclusion, because Peña stops in the middle to talk about how tall Gore is. Rose tries to recall

the story by asking if Gore agreed with Peña regarding Global Warming, but we have no way of knowing if this is where the story was initially going, seeing that Peña never finishes it. Nevertheless, it is still interesting to note that Peña starts talking about Gore's height by stating "you know all these people that say they're six-three" (line 54), and then highlighting the fact that Gore is, in fact, much shorter than what he (allegedly) claims. This seemingly innocent accusation serves a very serious purpose of painting Gore (an environmentalist, and founder of The Climate Reality Project¹⁰) as a man who lies, or at least distorts the truth. Besides, for those who are not aware of who Gore is, the story serves nothing more than to confuse and frustrate.

Hopefully, it has become clear how the communication in this video is phatic, meaning that it serves no other function than to just 'say things', in other words, *communication for communication's sake*. This type of communication can also be associated with an influencing strategy called 'information fog', in which the speaker presents "pieces of information, contradictions, fabrications, misleading information and downright lies" up to a point where the interpreter becomes incapable of differentiating between truth and falsity, right and wrong, fact and fabrication (Madisson, Ventsel 2021: 20).

Another concept that is associated with the phatic form of communication is the notion of 'myth' (Barthes 1973). By revoking complexity in favour of turning everything into simple essence, things are reduced to only those parts that are immediately visible, without contradictions. This can be seen in the video, mainly, on two instances: first, at the beginning, where Peña states that if you want to leave the world a better place, it is up to you, as an individual, and no one else; and then, again, when he says that Global Warming was invented by this generation as something to complain about.

Furthermore, another of the typological features described by Self and Ventsel (2020: 185) that conceptualize phatic communication which is also present in this video is the characterization of an 'enemy' that is public, "passive, 'official', and addressed indirectly and abstractly". On line 82 (quoted in subsection 4.2.2), Peña talks about "journalists" in a very emotive way (his voice picks up and his face gets reddened). He describes them as just "these journalists" that "haven't talked to anybody", thus referencing to such opponents in indirect and abstract ways. Because they haven't talked to anybody, this enemy is also passive, for they have not sought the truth like Peña has. Lastly, because "journalists" is a word that refers to a social role, to societal actors (in the same way that the word "scientists" does), which can also be based on common-sense stereotypical characteristic of phatic communication.

¹⁰ The Climate Reality Project is a non-profit organization that deals with potential solutions for the climate crisis (for more information, access: <https://algore.com/about>, 14.12.22).

Selg and Ventsel (2020: 185-186) state that this form of communication can include “various strategies of deproblematization of policy issues”, one of which is ‘deproblematization through stoicism’, that is, appealing to the ‘naturalness’ of things. In general terms, “phatic communication is oriented to presenting given social reality as fixed, unproblematic, and uncontested” (*Ibid*). The ultimate example can be found in line 48, where Peña argues that we have always had Global Warming (“We’ve had it fifty thousand years ago”). Hence, this is the most prominent example of deproblematization through stoicism: we should not worry about Global Warming, we should not pressure or governments to take action to mitigate it or to punish companies who are refusing to comply with regulations for GHG emissions, because Global Warming is a *natural* thing, and natural things should stay as they are.

2.4 Identity and Subject Construction: ‘Us’ vs. ‘Them’

People make discourse at the same time as “discourse makes people” (Fairclough 1995: 39). In other words, subjects are constructed in discourse according to ideological processes and semiotic choices (contingencies), in a way that textual construction of identities is a constantly developing and transforming process of meaning-making (Madisson, Ventsel 2021: 12). This process is (as it has been stated in *section 1.2*) relational, meaning that identities are as they are only in relation to other identities, being unintelligible “outside the[ir] reciprocal, multi-polar, interdependent, and processual relation” (Selg, Ventsel 2020: 18). In the case of conspiracy theories – since identity creation is strongly polarised by the antagonistic opposition ‘us’ vs. ‘them’ (Madisson, Ventsel 2021) – ‘us’ can only be understood as ‘us’ when in opposition to ‘them’. Therefore, when it comes to the question of identity construction, the strategic core of this type of discourse is precisely a matter of conflict construction, where the relation that constitutes the subjects of the discourse is always one of opposition.

The first type of conflict that can be recognized in the analysed text is the one surrounding legitimacy. In this case, ‘we’ are the ones who are together with “the real scientists” and “the experts”, while ‘they’ are the “journalists” (line 82). This is a conflict of legitimacy because Peña argues that “these journalists” who have not talked to the experts and the scientists that Peña has talked to (line 82) are disseminating so-called false information, whilst Peña himself is in possession of the real facts, which he obtained first-hand from the real scientists (at the North and South Poles). In this sense, the identities of ‘us’ and ‘them’ are being constructed on the grounds of ‘those who have the legitimate facts’ and ‘those who are spreading lies’.

As briefly discussed in the *Introduction*, science denialistic discourse establishes relations to science that is, surprisingly enough, not necessarily of opposition. Peña is not against scientists, nor does he understand himself as a science denier or a producer/propagator of anti-scientific discourse. On the contrary, he establishes his side ('us') as the one who is in line with the real experts, in possession of the actual scientific knowledge. This complicates the situation, for it seems that what is at stake is no longer the credibility of Science as an institution in society, but rather what matters is of *which science* we are talking about. The fragmentation of Science into 'real science' and 'fake science' (or 'badly executed' science) can be even more dangerous than the ample question of the loss of authority of the scientific community.

Another opposition that can be identified in the construction of identities in this video is the generational conflict between baby boomers and millennials/gen-z, or as Dan Peña refers to in the video "this generation" (line 48). Besides that, the video starts with Brian Rose saying:

1. BR: Let's talk about Global Warming, then I wanna get to the snowflakes.

Here, once again, knowledge of language code is insufficient, and the analysis needs to reach the level of sociocultural practice to arrive at a satisfactory understanding of what is being conveyed by this sentence. The word 'snowflakes' refers to a slang that emerged around 2015 "as a means of criticising the hypersensitivity of a younger generation" (Nicholson 2016: 1). As a term which refers to "younger generations", 'snowflakes' can also be used to characterize the discursive 'them' that stands in opposition to Peña's 'us'. Embedded with political meaning, the use of the word 'snowflakes' also serves to characterize Peña and Rose, seeing that this slang is "mostly lobbed from the right to the left" (*Ibid*), with the aim of invalidating arguments coming from younger people on the basis that they are supposedly too easily offended and cannot take criticism. By employing this term, Peña and Rose are also constructing their own identities as people who agree that younger generations are hypersensitive, which is consistent with the rest of Peña's discourse.

This stance (older vs. newer generations) was already mentioned at the beginning of this analysis (*subsection 4.1.4*), regarding the very beginning of the video, when Peña is stating that he also wants a better world for his children, but he realises that this is up to them and not to him (lines 12 to 18). Up until that point, the generational conflict is still subjective. However, it becomes explicit towards the end, when Peña states that Global Warming was made-up "by this generation, for something to bitch about" (line 48, quoted in *subsection 4.3.2*). I would also like to highlight the use of the word 'us' at the end of that sentence ("to blame it on us is bullshit" – line 48), which may be referring not only to Peña's generation, but also to his social

status or economic profile, or even the fact that he is a self-proclaimed “oil man” (line 40). It is unclear whether this statement is meant to absolve older generations of the responsibility for Climate Change, or the companies and businesspeople from richer layers of society (including the oil business), or most likely both. All in all, the identity construction of ‘us’ and ‘them’ is quite fuzzy, allowing for a certain extent of malleability of this discourse, in a way that it may be made to fit different situations, appealing to different people.

2.5 Climate Change Denial as Conspiracy Theory

For a product of one of the most popular conspiracy theories today, this video does not mention the word ‘conspiracy’ at all. Dan Peña argues that Global Warming is a hoax, yet, he does not say, at any point of the video, that it is a *conspiracy*. Is calling Global Warming “the biggest fraud in history” already enough to comprise conspiratorial discourse?

First and foremost, every conspiracy theory as a semiotic unit contains what is called a ‘dominant’ – a term that Madisson and Ventsel (2021) borrowed from translation studies – which provides the textual unity and structural integrity crucial for conspiracy theories given their discrete nature. For analysis to be satisfactory, one should “be able to distinguish a dominant that will determine the general meaning of the conspiracy theory and the function it fulfils” (*Ibid*, 37). When it comes to the present video, it is possible to state that the dominant is translated by Dan Peña’s main argument, namely: Global Warming is a hoax that has been invented by newer generations, with the help of worldwide acts of scientific and journalistic misconduct, for the purpose of undermining the status quo.

The implication that Global Warming is “the biggest fraud in history” suggests a secretive aspect (it is a hoax that nobody knows about; everyone is being tricked into believing the lie), as well as a collective aspect (seeing that if it weren’t for the coordinated efforts of a big group of people, it would not be such a successful fraud). The group of people accused of being behind the conspiracy regards unethical scientists (“fake scientists”), journalists, and newer generations (“the snowflakes”).

The ‘nefarious end’ in this case might not be so evil at first glance, but it is still very much undesirable. The idea that Global Warming was invented by this enemy as something to complain about entails that it is being used as an excuse to ask for *change*. Because the climate crisis is an issue rooted in functioning of late-capitalist society, the possible solutions that are often proposed to deal with this issue entail drastic societal transformation, which will

inadvertently affect the layers of society where Dan Peña and Brian Rose belong to. For Peña and his supporters, this change that must come in order to solve Climate Change threatens their very way of life and that is the pinnacle of Evil.

Moreover, one may recall how Peña's speech is full of gaps, going from one subject to the next without ever finishing one line of thought, which is also a characteristic of conspiracy theories. Semantic gaps allow the interpreter to "be led towards desired associations and, at first glance, irreconcilable levels of meaning can be united" (Madisson, Ventsel 2021: 5). This may clearly be seen in how Peña talks about the amount of energy coming from the sun (line 34), the story of the electric car (line 36), the lengthy description of the workings of the oil business (line 44), and both stories about the South and North Poles (lines 20 and 40). Some of these stories contradict one another, others offer repetition. For instance, when Peña says that we could have electric cars if not for oil sovereignty (lines 36-37), he does not explain how this connects to Global Warming being a hoax. Peña tells "open-ended (and sometimes even controversial) sets of stories", while the interpreter is left to "navigate through various plot fragments and draw his/her own conclusions about causalities" (Madisson, Ventsel 2021: 94). At the same time, given this discrete nature, "an important role in achieving cohesion between different entries is played by the consistent repetition of invariant elements of the narrative" (*Ibid*, 99). So, even though there is nothing that connects the explanation of the oil business, solar energy, and the electric car to Climate Change being false, the repetitions provided by the South and North Pole stories grant some coherence to the discourse.

Along the same lines, it is also possible to identify how the discourse blends topical information reports with story narratives and pure entertainment (Madisson, Ventsel 2021: 99). On some instances, Peña presents informative statements (or *disinformative*), such as the matter of how much energy the Earth receives from the sun (line 34), or the explanations of how oil businesses work (line 44). However, we are also presented with some first-hand accounts, such as the stories about the South and North Poles, as well as content crafted apparently for entertainment, such as the discussion on how tall former vice-president Gore is (lines 55 to 63). The effect of such blend is that the interpreter "does not feel that they are being induced to believe someone's message, but rather the unfolding of such a story is perceived as an exciting, captivating experience" (Madisson, Ventsel 2021: 99), further characterizing this discourse as being conspiratorial in form.

Finally, as stated in the *Introduction*, conspiracy theories possess a counterhegemonic potential (Birchall 2006; Leone 2016; Uscinski 2018; Thórisdóttir *et al.* 2020; Madisson, Ventsel 2021), that is, they recognize any form of authority or habit as undesirable.

Nevertheless, conspiratorial discourse can be both against mainstream knowledge and serve “as a strategic tool of the dominant regime” (Madisson, Ventsel 2021: 42; Puumeister 2020: 523). This is especially true when it comes to Climate Change denial and the discourse being constructed in this video. Peña is pro-establishment insofar as he clearly advocates that things should be left as they are, since this is the way they have always been. Therefore, the discourse of this video – as both a product and a component of Climate Change conspiracy theories – supports the conservation of ongoing power relations and the current state of affairs.

2.6 Relevance and Social Impact

Research has demonstrated that “climate change conspiracy theories not only influenced intentions to engage in efforts to reduce one’s carbon footprint, but also reduced intentions to engage in politics” (Jolley, Douglas 2012: 17). Along the same lines, it is understood that, “in providing alternative knowledge, conspiracy theories can be seen as the product of taking political positions, and their description of the world is often constructed in an attempt to mobilise people in a specific political struggle” (Bergmann *et al.* 2020: 259). In fact, Douglas *et al.* (2019: 13) go so far as to argue that the primary function of conspiracy theories as means of interpretation is to “communicate information to *generate collective action* in the face of threat” (my italics).

It is notwithstanding important to distinguish the matter of effect from the notion of ‘intentionality’. I cannot know for sure what are the intentions of Peña or Rose with regards to the production, distribution, and consumption of this video. I can, however, point to the possible social impacts of this discourse (if they are unwilling or on purpose, it is not my place to affirm). What I aimed to do throughout this chapter was thus to point out the mechanisms through which meanings surrounding Climate Change were shaped by this video, and how they may lead to influencing the Model Reader’s behaviour in a certain way (generate action).

As it was shown, such influencing happens through diverse ideologically invested discursive practices that contribute to, in this case, sustain power relations. Of course, power relations can be influenced in different ways (sustained or undermined) by any kind of discourse, including scientific discourse. It is not something restricted to science denialism or conspiracy theories. However, that “does not mean that all types of discourse are ideologically invested to the same degree” (Fairclough 1995: 82). I believe it is reasonable to affirm that this video was produced and distributed in a way that it contributes to sustaining power relations

between: (a) the rich-and-powerful, who are generally seen as emitting great amounts of greenhouse gasses, and that also possess resources to tackle the climate issue, but refuse to take any action, and (b) the people who care about Climate Change and feel powerless to stop it in any direct way, other than speaking up about it.

Besides contributing to sustain these power relations, what can arguably be considered as the primary effect of the video is how it serves to influence the viewer's perception of Climate Change as being fictitious. In this sense, determining perceptions or imposing narratives are not ends by themselves – at least they are not what we should be worried about – but rather how “getting people to accept a particular narrative of the crisis [...] gives people a reason for favouring or accepting certain lines of action and policies rather than others” (I. Fairclough, N. Fairclough 2013: 4).

In summary, explanatory narratives such as the ones supplied by conspiracy theories always encapsulate *practical* arguments, influencing processes of decision-making that have very real impacts on the social sphere (and, in the case of Climate Change, in the biosphere as well). The significance of this discourse is in how Climate Change, as a crisis, is represented, explained, narrated, and interpreted as being fictitious, and how possible policy responses to it are, consequently, seen as scams. Hence, it is possible to state that besides the obvious – getting people to believe Climate Change is a fraud – the underlying and most dangerous impact of this discourse is deproblematization, which provides people with reasons to reject and abandon policies and plans for action that seek to mitigate the climate crisis in favour of other interests.

This chapter analysed and discussed a YouTube interview with a Climate Change denier. In working ideologically, discourse is generated according to given perspectives and interests. In this sense, ideology – not just as a set of values/beliefs or encoded knowledge, but as a manipulation resource – can be understood as one of the primary meaning-making mechanisms of anti-scientific discourse, being strategically applied to shape interpretation. Additionally, several discursive and signifying practices were identified as being instrumentalized in this text, namely:

- Drawing from the viewer's lack of contextual information (the focus falls on the answer being given instead of the question);
- Redirection of responsibility through a simple subject change (done in an implicit and barely noticeable way, yet producing a powerful effect);

- Avoiding certain subjects and constructing a hard-to-follow, chaotic speech pattern (use of information fog), repeating key elements that give coherence and shape meaning;
- Presentation of deductively valid arguments constructed onto false premises;
- Referencing to institutions, societal actors, and organizations which are reliable information sources (due to background knowledge), grounding statements;
- Revoking complexity (turning everything into simple essence without contradictions);
- De-problematizing by appealing to nature; and
- The video format (set construction, clothing, framing, editing) contributes to characterizing the speaker (and the discourse) as being trustworthy, legitimate, and authentic.

As it is typical of all conspiracy theories, identity creation in the analysed discourse was shown to be strongly polarised and based on the antagonistic relation of opposition between good vs. evil, true vs. false, ‘us’ vs. ‘them’. When it comes to the specific social identities and conflicts constructed in this discourse, two instances were identified: the first can be understood as a generational conflict, where ‘the newer generations’ are characterized as the enemy (abstract and public). The second conflict surrounds the matter of legitimacy, where ‘the journalists’ appear as the (also abstract and public, as well as official) enemy. Here, the identities of ‘us’ and ‘them’ are constructed on the grounds of those who have the legitimate knowledge (‘the real scientists’) and those who are spreading false information (‘the journalists’). This discourse, thus, establishes an attitude with regards to science that is not of opposition, as one would expect. In this context, the fragmentation of science into ‘real science’ and ‘fake science’ is pointed here as being just as dangerous as the question of the loss of authority of the scientific community.

Overall, the code-text of the Climate Change conspiracy theory, as represented by the analysed video, can be translated as follows: Global Warming (*an event*) is a hoax that has been invented by newer generations (*the result of a group of people*), through worldwide acts of scientific and journalistic misconduct (*acting in secret*), to undermine the status quo (*to an evil end*). Even though this discourse seeks to delegitimize authority and mainstream knowledge, it is still pro-establishment – it still serves to strengthen power relations of the dominant regime, since it clearly advocates that things should be left as they are. Hence, the significance of this discourse is in how Climate Change as a crisis is represented as a fraud, and how possible policy responses to it are represented as scams. In conclusion, the underlying and most dangerous effect of this discourse is deproblematization.

3. Anti-Vax Tweets

This chapter contains an analysis (and discussion) of the eight tweets selected from the Twitter profile of Dr. Joseph Mercola (Fig. 7), an anti-vax influencer. All analysed material is showcased along this chapter as figures for better understanding.



Fig. 7: Print-screen of Joseph Mercola's Twitter profile, retrieved from <https://twitter.com/mercola>, 10.01.22.

3.1 Contextual Information

Similar to what has been done in *Chapter 2*, before analysis begins, it is important to understand the context surrounding the object of investigation. Therefore, the next subsections describe the main features of medical conspiracy theories and the anti-vax movement (3.1.1), as well as the central aspects of Mercola's Twitter profile and professional website (3.1.2).

3.1.1 Medical conspiracy theories and the anti-vax movement

Essentially, Medical Conspiracy Theories (MCTs) “depict medical, science or technology-related issues as under the control of secretive and sinister organisations” (Lahrach, Furnham 2017: 89), advocating that malevolent “motivations underpin everything from vaccination campaigns to cancer treatment” (Grimes 2021: 1). Although MCTs have been “a problem since before the dawn of social media” (*Ibid*), it is unquestionable that the Internet has provided an amplification to this issue. Even before the pandemic, when the gravity of this problem became most evident (*Ibid*), the digital spread of disinformation had already shown alarming consequences for the acceptance of medical science, especially when it comes to anti-vax propaganda.

Already in 2019, the WHO (2019) declared “vaccine hesitancy” as one of the top-ten threats to global health. Since “MCTs directly contradict evidence-based scientific research” (Lahrach, Furnham 2017: 89), belief in this type of conspiracy theory leads people to reject modern mainstream medicine (*Ibid*; Douglas *et al.* 2019: 3), the consequences of which can be severely life-limiting and harmful (Grimes 2021:2). Under these circumstances, the case of the anti-vax movement is especially concerning, seeing how the online spread of disinformation contributed to the worldwide decrease of vaccine uptake, consequently leading to the comeback of diseases that had been virtually cured in the past (Douglas *et al.* 2019: 4; Grimes 2021: 2).

Many controversies led to the widespread of anti-vax conspiracy theories, ever since the very beginning when vaccines were first being developed¹¹. What eventually became one of the main pillars of the anti-vax movement was the publication of an article in 1998 by gastroenterologist Andrew Wakefield (who became the denying scientist upon the which anti-vaxxers structured their conspiracy theories), that suggested a link between the measles, mumps, and rubella vaccine to the development of autism (Stano 2020: 488; Sherwin 2021: 559). Even though in the following years Wakefield’s research was investigated and found to be irresponsible, dishonest, and fraudulent (in the words of the UK General Medical Council), the anti-vax movement had already gained traction, so much so that by 2002 “immunisation rates dropped below 85 per cent” (Stano 2020: 489). Progressively, the phenomenon of the anti-vax movement “extended beyond Wakefield’s case, making social networks key actors in the rise and spread of forms of anti-vaccine conspiracionism online” (*Ibid*, 491).

¹¹ Controversies regarded: administration by piercing the skin; vaccines being derivative from animals; vaccination violating people’s personal liberty (further discussed on *section 3.2*); questions surrounding the efficacy and safety of the procedure; debates over the use of “substances considered toxic in vaccines” (Stano 2020: 488).

Social media has thus become, as frequently cited in academic studies, a “source of vaccine controversy” (Grant *et al.* 2015: 2). Thriving in this ambient, anti-vax conspiracy theories have become resilient, persisting despite all efforts to eradicate them, even progressively gaining more support – something that is reflected, for instance, on the fact that last year (from January 2022, when Fig. 7 was generated, to February 2023) Mercola’s Twitter profile gained more than 20 thousand new followers.

It is also important to note that MCTs “are widely known, broadly endorsed, and highly predictive of many common health behaviours”, in a way that their belief “arises from common attribution processes” rather than from psychopathological conditions (Oliver, Wood 2014: 818). The anti-vax movement, more specifically, is “highly resistant against factual scientific evidence”, and is not restricted to any single political inclination (Avramov *et al.* 2020: 521). Thus, it is challenging to devise a clear-cut profile of the anti-vaxxer (or the Model Reader for this conspiracy theory). Besides, it is possible to affirm that belief in MCTs and vaccine hesitancy are not likely to be binary, but rather, exist “on a spectrum, which can be readily influenced by several mechanisms” (Grimes 2021: 2).

Along the same lines, there is also a variety of critical stances towards vaccines (Grant *et al.* 2015: 4). A term such as ‘vaccine sceptical’ “denotes a variable attitude toward vaccines and vaccination”, while ‘vaccine resistance’ is a term that “forefronts an action taken against vaccines” (*Ibid*). Additionally, anti-vaxxers themselves may be divided into two dominant fronts: those who resist compulsory vaccination, and those who self-identify as anti-vax activists, who join societies and write newsletters (Grant *et al.* 2015: 2). Seeing how this case study regards a person who actively seeks to spread anti-vaccine conspiracy theories, with clear intentions of driving action, the term ‘anti-vax’ is better suited than ‘vaccine sceptical’ or ‘resistant’, since I only am dealing with one extreme of this spectrum.

3.1.2 *The profile of Dr Joseph Mercola*

By virtue of how the Internet has facilitated access to information, users now “have access to health information generated by *nonmedical* practitioners”, raising concerns about the quality of such material (Grant *et al.* 2015: 2–3, my italics). Yet, the problem seems to run even deeper: what if the person spreading medical disinformation is (or self-identifies as) a physician?

Such is the case with the Twitter profile under investigation. As it can be seen in Fig. 7, the name displayed on the profile adopts the title ‘Dr.’, which carries credibility. This is what I. Fairclough and N. Fairclough (2013: 72) call a ‘status function’, where an object (people included) can only perform a certain function in virtue of “a collectively recognized status” (or ‘collective intentionality’) that they possess. A “series of obligations, rights, duties, responsibilities, etc.” comes with a status function, characterizing it as a “vehicle of power in society” (*Ibid*, 73). The status function of ‘medical doctor’ thus implies a clear set of responsibilities (recalling the Hippocratic Oath taken by physicians which states “I will do no harm”). One of the effects of the collective acceptance of this status function is, thus, the belief that regardless of personal desires and interests, medical doctors will always protect people’s well-being. Therefore, the problem becomes a matter of not only avoiding medical information transmitted by *non*medical practitioners (who do not possess a collectively recognized status function), but also, being able to distinguish between trustworthy and non-trustworthy physicians. Hopefully, the analysis of some of the content that can be found on his Twitter profile can demonstrate why Mercola fits the latter category instead of the former, and how similar subjects can also be identified.

Looking at the profile (Fig. 7), the element that probably stands out the most is the header image, portraying a picture of a wheel pack (the classic type of safe lock) and the words “Access Dr. Mercola’s Censored Library”. Below it, there is also a web address which leads the user to a page with the information contained in Fig. 8, where the words “Take Control of Your Health” stand out. It has been stated that belief in conspiracy theories is likely driven by feelings of powerlessness and anxiety in the face of today’s prevailing complex socio-economic context. When it comes to the matter of health, past research (Aujoulat *et al.* 2008: 1228) investigated patients with chronic conditions and conceptualised the feelings of powerlessness that come with the experience of illness “as a threat to [patients’] senses of security and identity”.

Considering how the matter of health can thus be interpreted as a source of anxiety and feelings of powerlessness, it is understandable how belief in MCTs can be empowering, since their narratives revolve around taking back control, and are aimed at people who are already

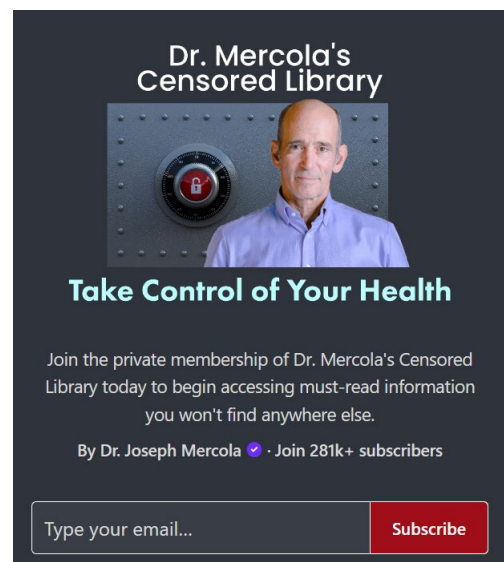


Fig. 8: Print-screen from the website: <https://takecontrol.substack.com/>, 11.02.23.

seeking medical assistance, that is, people who may already be in distress. Mercola’s catchphrase “take control of your health” is thus extremely effective, considering these circumstances.

Furthermore, the phrase in bold which says “Join 281k+ subscribers” (Fig. 8) issues a sense of community (“come join all of these other people who already joined”), something that is fundamental for the endurance of conspiracy theories. Along these lines, anti-vax online spaces have been found to be designed for community discussion and foster community building, which is one of the reasons why such spaces are more effective in drawing in people, when compared to pro-vaccination websites that come off as authoritative due to their lack of interactivity (Grant *et al.* 2015: 3). Moreover, terms such as “membership” and “information you won’t find anywhere else” (Fig. 8) further imply that the community being here built is privileged and distinguished (this necessity of conspiracy theories to set themselves apart from mainstream knowledge is further discussed in *section 3.2* of this chapter).

Without entering an email address into the box (Fig. 8), the user is redirected to Mercola’s webpage¹², being denied access to the secret library. Another way to reach this page is through the hyperlink on the Twitter profile (Fig. 7, in light blue). By clicking it, one finds themselves on the address mentioned above, where a pop-up immediately takes the better part of the bottom corner of the screen (Fig. 9).

Three elements stand out in relation to this pop-up: the idea of ‘truth’; the concept of ‘independent news’; and the 48-hour time-limit on the access to this information. More will be discussed on the relation between conspiracy theories and the concept of independent information (once again, the detaching of conspiracy theory knowledge from the mainstream), so I would like to focus here on the 48-hour limit on the access to the articles and the idea of truth.

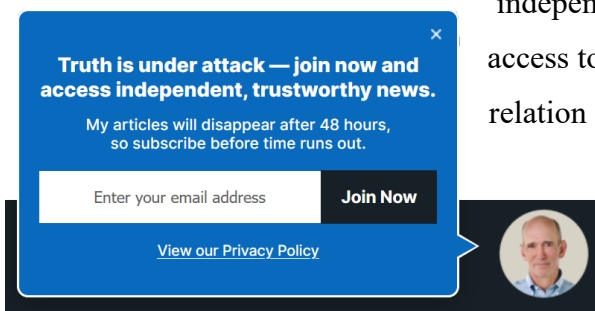


Fig. 9: Print-screen from the bottom-right corner of the webpage: <https://www.mercola.com/>, 11.02.23.

According to Birchall (2006: 74), conspiracy theories have a “self-legitimizing structure”, meaning that “the ‘truth’ is in the telling, and the telling is often claimed to be ‘dangerous’.” By imposing a time-limit to the accessibility of the information, Mercola is not only pressuring the user to subscribe, but also implying that there is a reason for this time-limit. One of the possible interpretations for this reason is the matter of censorship. Recalling the Twitter profile

¹² Available at: <http://www.mercola.com/>, 03.04.2023.

header image (Fig. 7) as well as the webpage that it connects to (Fig. 8), the word “censored” is repeatedly displayed. The image of the safe behind Mercola also serves to emphasize the secretive aspect of the contents of his library (secret information that ‘they’ do not want you to know). The time-limit implies that he is running against censorship, which may as well be a fact, since more than once, Mercola’s content has been flagged and taken down by Twitter (Frenkel 2021). By telling people that they must read his articles before they get censored, Mercola not only draws in the people who are prone to conspiracy thinking, but also spreads disinformation before any measures can be taken against him, since it takes time for content to be taken down or be properly discredited.

Turning once again towards the Twitter profile (Fig. 7), the description states “Osteopathic physician, best-selling author, and founder of the #1 natural health site”. The terms “physician” and “best-selling author” give his profile further credibility, while “osteopathic” and “natural health” indicate the type of medicine that Mercola practices. Osteopathy is, according to Howell (1999: 1465), an alternative healing practice based on the idea that manipulation of the bones, muscles, and tendons to promote blood flow could “improve health by allowing the body to heal itself”. As research reported (Blaskiewicz 2013: 260), anti-vax conspiracy theories are popular amongst alternative medicine practitioners, so it is indeed unsurprising that Mercola would be the type of physician who practices alternative (non-allopathic) therapy.

The “#1 natural health site” refers to the one that was already mentioned¹², a webpage that not only contains the link to the censored library, but also showcases other “news” (which can be seen regardless of subscription) as well as a link to a virtual shop¹³. It is at this last address that Mercola sells “health products” such as vitamin supplements, essential oils, and even tanning beds. According to an investigation by *The New York Times*,

As his popularity grew, Dr. Mercola began a cycle. It starts with making unproven and sometimes far-fetched health claims, such as that spring mattresses amplify harmful radiation, and then selling products online — from vitamin supplements to organic yogurt — that he promotes as alternative treatments. (Frenkel 2021 §19)

The article further describes how “Mercola has a keen understanding of what makes something go viral online”, stating that he “routinely does A/B testing, [...] in which many versions of the same content are published to see what spreads fastest” (*Ibid*, §22). When interviewed via email, Mercola told *The New York Times* that “a variety of media positions are standard for most content-oriented websites” (*Ibid*, §23).

¹³ Available at: <http://www.mercolamarket.com/>, 05.04.2023.

Previous research (Grant *et al.* 2015: 3) analysed communication tactics in anti-vax websites and found that these spaces tend to promote a variety of philosophies, containing references to both pro- and anti-vax material, presenting themselves “as unbiased toward vaccination”. However, the focus on the danger and adverse effects proves that the presentation of both sides of the argument served only to create an impression of objectivity (*Ibid*). In the case of Mercola and his social media accounts, it appears that the strategic posting of varied, and sometimes even contradicting/paradoxical content not only serves to promote an image of impartiality, but also helps him devise further strategies to digitally reach the biggest possible number of people.

3.2 Code-Text: Authority vs. Freedom

The *Introduction* has briefly touched upon the distinct anti-authoritarian drive of conspiracy theories, their contempt for expertise, as well as distrust towards politics, society, and official histories in general (Birchall 2006: 35; Kimminich 2016: 36; Thórisdóttir *et al.* 2020: 313; Grimes 2021: 13). Further research state that any conspiracy theory “has always a disruptive specificity”, being “defined by a negative axiology” (Camilo 2016: 143), being thus “understood as oppositional readings par excellence” (Aupers 2020: 471). This aspect is exceedingly clear across the discourse of all selected tweets.

Related to this oppositional, counter-narrative, disruptive character, the matter of individual freedom (and how authoritative vaccination poses a threat to that right) becomes central to the analysed text. Hence, a clear relation of opposition between authority and freedom serves as the foundation of anti-vax discourse, meaning that the code-text of this movement may be translated as: *the authorities are taking away our freedom through the fallacy of vaccination.*

Moreover, because conspiracy theory (as code-text) “is a relatively universal structure derived from cultural memory”, it can thus be “applied automatically and without much reflection to any given confusing event” (Madisson 2014: 294). The consequences of this are that “diverse structures are perceived as reflections of the same evil”, and “the attributes necessary for distinguishing such structures turn vague” (*Ibid*, 295). Since the evil (the enemy) is diffuse, these “authorities” can take different shapes. In the case of the selected tweets, it was possible to identify three different structures that represent the same evil: the government (*subsection 3.2.1*), the mainstream media (*3.2.2*), and the so-called Big Pharma (*3.2.3*).

3.2.1 Governmental authority

The first tweet to be analysed is showcased in Fig. 10, below.

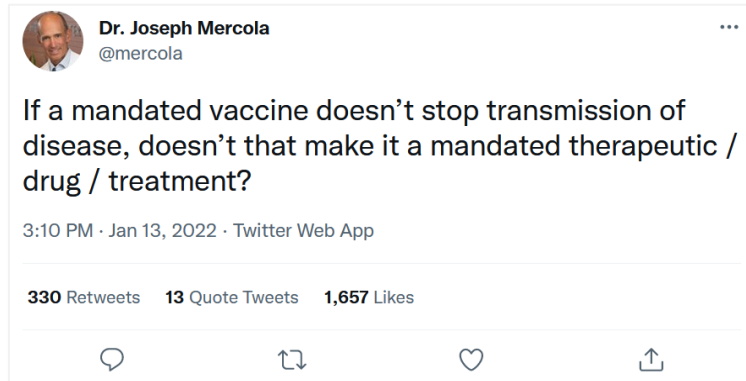


Fig. 10: Print-screen of the 1st analysed tweet, retrieved from: <https://twitter.com/mercola/status/1481614681072676870>, 31.03.22.

The focus here is on the word “mandated” and how it represents the whole anti-vax struggle against authority. The tweet also appeals to the supposed ineffectiveness of a vaccine (“doesn’t stop transmission of disease”) to discredit the necessity of it being mandated. Furthermore, seeing how the tweet was published in January 2022, it is possible to deduce that Mercola is talking about the controversy that was being spread around social media at that time regarding how the Pfizer vaccine was not tested to prevent transmission of COVID-19. The key is that, technically, Mercola’s tweet is not spreading disinformation, but mal-information, because it was true that the vaccine was not tested for that purpose. However, the issue is that stopping transmission is not the primary function of a vaccine, but rather preventing vaccinated people from getting ill. Therefore, Mercola is building his discourse on top of what is already a false premise, but he does so with factual information.

This is what Lorusso (2017: 53) describes as an ideological practice, which “is a discursive-rhetoric practice that demands to become a grammar: it demands to establish codes, precisely when it selects certain types of correlation”. In this case, a correlation is established between the news that Pfizer did not test for transmission prevention (fact) and the premise that vaccines which do not prevent transmission are ineffective (biased). This “is a specific type of manipulative discourse that, by hiding the bias of its process and absolutizing it, by vocation becomes normative, or code-creating” (*Ibid*). These ways of framing a narrative (rhetorically motivated representations) should thus “not be seen as isolated features of the text but as having an argumentative function of steering the argument towards a certain conclusion and precluding other conclusion from being arrived at” (I. Fairclough, N. Fairclough 2013: 116).

Moreover, the text does not explicitly state that vaccines should not be mandated. It also does so through ideologically biased correlation. According to Fairclough (1995: 74), “a text ‘postulates’ a subject ‘capable’ of automatically linking together its potentially highly diverse and not explicitly linked elements to make sense of it”, which means that, “in postulating such a subject, a text contributes to constituting such a subject”. For the tweet’s pre-given answer to be achieved (since it is shaped like a rhetorical question), it is necessary to presuppose that one does not agree with mandated therapeutic/drug treatments. In other words, for one to understand this text as anti-vax propaganda, one must also agree that therapeutic treatments should not be mandatory, and so – seeing how vaccines are supposedly equivalent to such treatments, given their alleged ineffectiveness – they should also not be so. If a person has no problem with mandated therapeutic treatments, it will not matter if they agree with Mercola that vaccines that “do not work” are the same as therapeutic treatments. What remains is that this tweet will not change a one’s stance towards the matter of vaccines being mandatory – it will not be successful in disciplining the interpretation process – for someone who accepts mandated treatments.

To that end, the “strategic success of a narrative will largely depend on how aptly the narrative’s creator has anticipated the reference world of the audience” (which is a socio-cultural construction), and/or “the typical meaning-making tendencies prevailing in it” (Madisson, Ventsel 2021: 57). This means that the correlation vaccine–treatments is effectively meaningless *unless* the reader has a problem with mandated treatments. However, Mercola is talking to his social media bubble (in essence, his Model Reader), where people are not accepting towards *anything* obligatory, given their anti-authoritarian predisposition – that is, their reference world, values, ideology, and their tendency to model the world following the conflict construction logic of ‘us’ (free individuals) vs. ‘them’ (controlling government).

Fig 11, below, displays another instance of this contempt for governmental authority:



Fig. 11: Print-screen of the 2nd analysed tweet, retrieved from: <https://twitter.com/mercola/status/1475806560584708099>, 31.03.22.

In this case, the fear of losing one's freedom is more palpable. Even though the previous tweet (Fig. 10) also portrayed the struggle against being controlled by the government through the aversion to mandates, the idea of control is more explicit on this tweet (Fig. 11), where the concept of digital IDs appears as something that should be avoided, for it is seemingly through them that the government may exert control over its people.

Considering that the present research has been carried out at the University of Tartu, located in Estonia, a country where digital IDs have been successfully under effect for more than a decade, some readers may find it hard to understand why people would be apprehensive towards a technology that is made to be safer, faster, and more practical. Again, ideology as part of a specific culture and time plays an important role. It would indeed be hard to see how vaccine passports being transformed into digital IDs could be a bad thing, unless one is prone to conspiracy thinking, particularly of the kind that is anti-government. A characteristic of conspiracy thinking is what Leone *et al.* (2020: 45) call 'opacity of reference', meaning that, "while we cannot put our finger on why something is dangerous, we are nevertheless certain that it must be destroyed". Although the reason why digital IDs are dangerous (or how the government will control us through them) are unclear, it is obvious that they should not exist.

This tweet is interesting because it showcases a great example of conspiracy thinking for more than just this reason. It also connects two things that are in no way connected: vaccine passports and digital IDs. The link that Mercola shared on the tweet¹⁴ leads to a UK government webpage describing the proposals under development for a digital type of identification document. The page refers to the COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdown as situations that contributed to the idea of developing such technology, however, the vaccine or vaccination passports are simply not mentioned (or even remotely referenced to). These semantic gaps (Madisson, Ventsel 2021: 5) – both the one between 'digital ID' and 'vaccine passport', as well as the one between 'digital ID' and 'danger/surveillance' – can be understood as mechanisms that trigger the Model Reader's interpretation, guiding them towards the association of meanings that are incompatible, allowing for these incongruous connections to be formed.

Conclusively, the tweet affirms that there was "a plan", which has always been in motion, to turn vaccine passports into digital IDs. This point makes it possible to clearly characterize this discourse as a product of conspiracy thinking, where the narrative explanation that is guiding people's interpretation regards: *an event* (vaccine passports turning into digital IDs)

¹⁴ Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/digital-identity-document-validation-technology-idvt/identity-document-validation-technology-in-the-right-to-work-and-right-to-rent-schemes-and-dbs-pre-employment-checking-accessible-version>, 12.02.23.

that is the result of *a group of people* (the government) acting *in secret* (people could not see that this was the plan the whole time) to an *evil end* (control/surveillance).

Finally, one more question begs to be asked: *what government?* In the tweet above (Fig. 11), the government being referenced is the United Kingdom. Still, Mercola regularly mentions governments from other countries, primarily the United States. A search on Social Bearing⁶ revealed that Mercola had posted 18 tweets on the last 160 days (as of 15.02.23) containing the word ‘government’. Out of this total, 6 tweets specified that the government in question is from the US, while the rest was either from other places (UK, Europe, and Africa) or remained unspecified. This also shows not only how the enemy in the anti-vax conspiracy theory is diffuse but also how Mercola’s discourse is absolutizing: *it does not matter where you are from, all governments are evil.*

3.2.2 Information authority

This subsection analyses the idea of freedom, which, in relation to information authority takes the following shape: *to be free is to diverge from the mainstream media.*

The third tweet under analysis (Fig. 12) showcases Mercola seeking to discredit the mainstream media by posting a meme that represents, according to him, the “media evolution cycle”. The meme, which became popular in Twitter circa 2020, is known as “How It Started vs. How It’s Going” (Hamilton 2021), where two images are put side-by-side to signify that a transformation has happened between the time in which they were both generated. In this case, the change that is being represented by the meme relates to how COVID-19 vaccines were previously found to be unrelated to menstrual changes, but that are now supposedly linked somehow. The “media evolution cycle”, as Mercola puts it in the tweet, is thus a



Fig. 12: Print-screen of the 3rd analysed tweet, retrieved from: <https://twitter.com/mercola/status/1561048009588330496>, 15.02.23.

generalization of the meme, where two specific instances are compared in order to be absolutized and applied to all mainstream media.

Anti-vax memes have been widely spread across social media, appealing to the emotions of the reader and employing “sarcasm to create interest and involvement” (Stano 2020: 491). However, “jokes only work if all those involved in the trans-action are aware of the cultural history, socio-political, and other contexts that the jokes touch upon” (Selg, Ventsel 2020: 32). On these grounds – and as a vehicle for the articulation of the relationship between the people who share this joke (Jenkins *et al.* 2013; Stano 2020) – the meme provides for a bitter laugh, since it points to what can be interpreted as a hypocrisy. First, “the media” (note how the name of the first news outlet is cropped out of the image, facilitating generalization) states that the vaccine has no connection to menstrual changes, then it goes back on its word and states that there may be a link. In this case, the joke is in catching the lie; it is in sharing the knowledge that only me and my community of like-minded people (‘us’), who already knew that the media (‘them’) was a liar, were right all along – and the meme (the image collage) is proof.

Added to the textual expression, this pictorial material serves as evidence of the conspiracy (Madisson, Ventsel 2021: 105), making it visible, “available to everyone (who also are provided with the ‘right tools’ of analysis, the conspiracist-revelatory gaze)” (Caumanns, Önnerrfors 2020: 453). With such memes and collages, readers believe to be developing “their own reality construct”, that is, detecting “a truth, hidden or falsified by mainstream information, which is permitting them the allegedly ‘true’ interpretation” (Kimminich 2016: 51).

Another matter that is worth pointing out regards the premise that is underlying the meme: *if the media changes its stance, it is because it was previously and purposefully seeking to deceive*. That is what I. Fairclough and N. Fairclough (2013: 92–93) call a ‘premise containing a persuasive definition’ (in the shape of “X is Y”, that is, “a change in opinion *is* a lie”), which is a way of rhetorically re-describing reality to direct readers towards a given conclusion. In this case, I believe the primary effect of this meme is the notion that no matter what the media says, it is always untrustworthy because it will change its opinion over time.

In addition, temporal circumstances can be seen as discrete elements (Madisson, Ventsel 2021: 107) – there was a ‘before’ and there is a ‘now’, or a ‘how it started’ and a ‘how it’s going’. Yet, the evil caused by these temporal circumstances is seen as non-discrete (*Ibid*), and the ‘lying’ is the continuous element that besets the discrete ones. It is the disparity between discrete and non-discrete elements that “will cause the need in the interpreter to find an explanation level relating them to each other”, given people’s necessity for narrative sense-making (*Ibid*).

The message is thus clear: the mainstream media spreads falsities and we are the only ones who can expose their clear contradictions. On that account, “the dichotomy of false and true follows the dichotomy of bad and evil” (Kimminich 2016: 42), meaning that if the mainstream media spreads falsities, the mainstream media is evil. This way, “the code-text of conspiracy theories generates modelling that is based on a specific causality that can be reduced to intentionality” (Madisson, Ventsel 2021: 46) – the media was always intentionally misleading. Instead of the idea that knowledge may change, and that the media may reflect these transformations, the message is that this enemy always knew the truth but *chose* to lie.

A simultaneous idea behind this conspiracy theory, which is even more interesting, is that if you do not “think with your own head” (Madisson 2014: 279), that is, if you are not opposed to the mainstream media, you are being manipulated. Eva Kimminich (2016: 51) characterizes this occurrence in sociosemiotic terms, by stating that interpretations of social realities are transformed (or reinterpreted) into deviant realities, much like the dynamics between centre and periphery of the semiosphere. The interpretations presented by mainstream media are pushed out towards the periphery, while new interpretations take the centre. Naturally, I understand that Kimminich refers to the semiosphere to which conspiracy theorists belong, since, from the point of view of the outsiders, their interpretations continue to be peripheral (chaotic).

Even so, being cast out serves only as self-affirmation. For conspiracy theorists, there is an aesthetic pleasure in “being ridiculed by the ‘ignorant mass’ [which] is further proof of belonging to an illuminated elite” (Leone 2017: 226). As it has been mentioned, science deniers “are usually not deterred by the extreme isolation of their theories, but rather see it as the indication of their intellectual courage against the dominant orthodoxy and the accompanying political correctness” (Diethelm, Mckee 2009: 3). These ‘aesthetics of diversion’ at the core of conspiracy theories and science denialism will be discussed on a deeper level during the next subsection.

3.2.3 *Scientific and medical authority*

The tweet showcased in Fig. 13 (next page) is a good example of what conspiracy theorists believe are the actions of a great evil they call Big Pharma – a term that boils down to “an abstract entity comprised of corporations, regulators, NGOs, politicians, and often physicians, all with a finger in the trillion-dollar prescription pharmaceutical pie”, that make up a “monolithic agent of evil” (Blaskiewicz 2013: 259).



Fig. 13: Print-screen of the 4th analysed tweet, retrieved from: <https://twitter.com/mercola/status/1481614681072676870>, 15.02.23.

Among the reasons listed by Jensen as being behind such an investigation, there is the fact that he “promoted the advantages of natural immunity over vaccines”. Halfway through the video, Jensen also promotes his book entitled *Exposing the TRIAD of TYRANNY: We’ve Been Played* (published by Bronze Bow Publishing in January 2023), which he describes on the video as being a discussion on “what happens when Big Pharma, Big Tech, and Big Government¹⁵ come together and wanna crush you”. This configures a perfect example of a denying scientist – someone who sees themselves as a courageous and independent scientist resisting indoctrination (Goertzel 2010: 496; Diethelm, Mckee 2009: 3).

Jensen’s conspiracy thinking logic is clear: he portrays himself as being a “dissenting voice” (whose thinking diverges from what is disseminated by the medical/scientific authorities) and, because of that, he is being censored/persecuted or, in his own words, “shadow banned”. In the original tweet, Jensen uses the word “they” in the description of the video, and it only becomes clear who this “they” are (Big Pharma, Big Tech, and Big Government) when one watches the video at least until halfway through. According to him, the enemy is acting to silence ‘us’ (dissenting voices) and has the legal authority to do so.

¹⁵ As we seem to be in the zeitgeist of “Big Things”, Big Government is defined, according to Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary (s.a.), as “a type of government that has a lot of control over people’s lives and the economy”.

As one may see, Mercola retweeted a video originally posted by a Scott Jensen, a medical doctor who is (according to the video and its description in Jensen’s own source-tweet) being prosecuted by the Attorney General’s Office from the state of Minnesota/USA, and whose Medical License is apparently at risk of being revoked. In the video, Jensen claims that the investigation being carried out into his work is about “raw politics, raw power, and punishment”, as well as an “opportunity for dissenting voices to be crushed, literally extinguished”.

Therefore, the biggest danger being denounced by Jensen is that the authorities have the means to end freedom of speech, and “if it can happen to him, it can happen to you” (Fig. 13). What is perhaps most interesting regarding this enemy (Big Pharma/Big Tech/Big Government) is how it is depicted as being “highly systematic and as having permeated internal structures” (Madisson 2014: 286), also “being so efficiently organized that they are capable of controlling every single one of the structures that govern social life” (*Ibid*, 290). This all-encompassing enemy described by Jensen ultimately serves to highlight “the supreme coherence, the connection of everything with everything” that is the “hallmark of conspiracy theories” (*Ibid*).

It is also important to note how Mercola uses his platform to not only build his own popularity, but also to boost other anti-vax influencers (Mercola has 380 thousand followers as of February 2023, while Jensen has only 115 thousand). That promotion will, in turn, serve to support Mercola’s own similar ideas and eventually strengthen and expand his social media bubble. Also, by stating in his retweet that “every doctor must bow down and kiss the feet of big pharma or pay the price”, Mercola is efficiently condensing the message from Jensen’s video, so that people coming across it can quickly grasp its content and feel more inclined to watch it. Mercola’s retweet is more effective than Jensen’s original post which states that they are taking away his medical license and that “it can happen to you”, because it offers a clearer narrative that is more absolutizing (“Big Pharma will silence *whoever* disagrees).

Since the process of identity construction rests on the articulation and establishment of a relation between elements (Selg, Ventsel 2020; Madisson, Ventsel 2021), it is possible to state that the dominants of identity creation (Madisson, Ventsel 2021: 37) of this discourse regard ‘us’ as the *dissenting voices* and ‘them’ as the *medical/scientific authorities* (or “Big Pharma”).

Besides this, Big Pharma conspiracy theories also present the two following common charges: 1) “a cure is being withheld to keep people on more expensive, less effective medical regimes”, and/or 2) “diseases are deliberately manufactured [...] in labs and released onto the populace in order to give companies an excuse to sell medications” (Blaskiewicz 2013: 260). Hence, Big Pharma is not only an authority capable of legally eradicating freedom of speech, but it is also deeply corrupt, for its actions are always driven by profit.

Accordingly, Fig. 14 shows a good example of this line of thinking:



Fig. 14: Print-screen of the 5th analysed tweet, retrieved from: <https://twitter.com/mercola/status/1562839879884881920>, 15.02.23

The tweet above implies that the bivalent COVID-19 and influenza vaccine was developed with the sole purpose of profit, seeing how, allegedly – according to the original tweet by a Ryan Grim – the proof of the effectiveness of this vaccine is lacking. Therefore, with a tweet such as this one (speaking of Mercola’s retweet and not the original by Grim), it is possible to condense the Big Pharma anti-vax conspiracy theory as follows: *vaccination is being pushed onto the people* (event) by *Big Pharma* (a group of people), who *will silence whoever does not disagree* (acting in secret) in order to *drive the biggest possible profit* (evil end).

Fig. 15, below, displays a tweet that will allow for a conclusion to the present discussion.



Fig. 15: Print-screen of the 6th analysed tweet, retrieved from: <https://twitter.com/mercola/status/1588140306435825664>, 15.02.23

What is happening on this tweet is that the image of the enemy who embodies the scientific and medical authorities is not explicitly Big Pharma, but a “medical mafia”. Although it would probably still be possible to argue that the two are one and the same, the notion of a “medical mafia” has different connotations than those of Big Pharma, namely illegitimacy. While Big Pharma is composed of legal authorities, the “media mafia” is criminal (or should be so). By calling the medical authorities a mafia, Mercola seeks to delegitimize their deliberations, even labelling those decisions as “discrimination”. Therefore, delegitimization of the scientific/medical authorities is also an approach in anti-vax discourse.

Nevertheless, there is a strategic purpose behind the tweet, which is independent from how Mercola chooses to portray his enemy (either it being Big Pharma, a “medical mafia”, the mainstream media, the government, or all the above). It is possible to imagine a goal behind the advocating for the end of mandated vaccination, as well as for efforts to delegitimize scientific and medical authorities. One may note that, while Mercola is denouncing Big Pharma for developing vaccines for profits, he strategically takes attention away from the fact that his own motives behind his discourse are the same.

As it has been described in section 3.1.2 regarding Mercola’s Twitter Profile and website, what Mercola does for a living is sell alternative medication that has not been scientifically proved to work and/or are not medically approved. It is thus in his financial interests to question medical and scientific authority. Denouncing the greed of Big Pharma (as he does in Fig. 14) is a textual strategy whose function “is to establish particular interpretative links in the audience via which readers can be directed towards goals that are being aspired to, using the narrative” (Madisson, Ventsel 2021: 92) – and the goal in this case is clear: delegitimize medical science, legitimize alternative medicine, sell more of Mercola’s own products.

According to Birchall (2006: 41) conspiracy theories are often commercially mediated, an aspect that I found to be somewhat neglected in the literature. In their majority, analyses focus on psychological, social, and political aspects of conspiracy theories, however, the monetary matter is of extreme importance to all those perspectives. Conspiracy theories are lucrative. Creators and spreaders of such content not only accumulate symbolical and political leadership (Leone 2017: 228), but also wealth. The anti-vax movement is no different, being permeated by alternative medicine practitioners seeking to validate their own businesses.

According to Eduardo Camilo (2016: 151), conspiracy theories instigate revolt towards certain institutions and social actors with a practical aim of setting the “foundation of (an)other program of manipulation” – that is, “they are not messages strictly characterized by just a shocked discourse, but also by a (strategic) speech of renovation or even of overcoming of the

agents and institutions” (Camilo 2016: 151). Hence, the spread of the anti-vax conspiracy theory serves Mercola, not only because it supports the end of mandated vaccination and supposedly protects the right to freedom, but more so because it ultimately serves as a foundation upon which Mercola can build his alternative medicine business model (another programme of manipulation). By saying that the “medical mafia”, Big Pharma, the government, and the media are all lying, Mercola is claiming to be the one who tells the truth. Being the one to advocate for the fall of the authorities, he is strategically setting himself up to replace them.

As it was mentioned on the previous section, there is an aesthetic effect which derives from this aversion to authority or mainstream thought that, according to Leone (2017) “is the result of a semiotic mechanism” described by the term ‘deconstructive hermeneutics’ (quoted in the *Introduction*). Leone (2017: 226) further states: “as deconstruction, so conspiracy thought aims at the reactivation of semiosis, mainly through denigration of mainstream truths as public lies”. As mainstream knowledge gets pushed off the centre of the semiosphere, conspiracy theory takes its place, replacing “mainstream habit, supported by the scientific and socio-political community, with a minority habit, which titillates the minority’s feeling of exclusivity” (*Ibid*, 227). The conclusion to which Leone arrives applies very well to the present case study: “conspiracy theories embrace a trivialized deconstructive attitude toward interpretive habits”, that is, “they deconstruct mainstream beliefs, but only in order to merely replace them with cliquish alternative visions” (*Ibid*). Akin to a seesaw, mainstream allopathic medicine falls, alternative medicine rises.

3.3 Fear as Driver of the Anti-Vax Conspiracy Theory

Three decades ago, Juri Lotman (1991: 792) wrote that “the psychosis of mass fear gives rise to the recognizable pattern of ‘the mythology of danger’,” from which “arises the notion of some tightly knit, secret group, plotting against society”. Additionally, fear itself is also a semiotical phenomenon – according to Mihhail Lotman (2001: 417), it can be understood as semiosis as well as something creative. In this section, it will hopefully become clear how conspiracy theories, arising from fear (Birchall 2006), are undeniably creative in their modelling capacity, as interpretation guides.

In the tweet in Fig. 16, Mercola states that “many conspiracy theories were correct”. But what were they correct about? The link attached to the tweet leads to an article on Vice Magazine, published in February 2020, entitled “Anti-Vaxxers Are Terrified the Government Will ‘Enforce’ a Vaccine for Coronavirus”. The subtitle indicates that “anti-vax groups on social media are claiming that the spread of the disease will lead to mandatory vaccinations and 'unlimited surveillance'.” This means that, for Mercola, who posted the article more than two years later, what



Fig. 16: Print-screen of the 7th analysed tweet, retrieved from: <https://twitter.com/mercola/status/1526171429082996737>, 17.06.22.

has been proven to be correct was precisely the fear of the spread of COVID-19 leading to mandatory vaccinations and unlimited surveillance (consistent with what was found in *section 3.2* regarding how the code-text of the anti-vax conspiracy theory revolves around the fear of losing one’s freedom).

In this tweet, Mercola is confirming that the anti-vax conspiracy theories which arose from the terror and fear induced by the COVID-19 pandemic were in fact accurate, yet he does not explain how. That is probably because, since Mercola is mostly talking to his followers, he assumes people have been accompanying his tweets and, thus, understand what he means without him having to spell out everything. This is an instance of ‘restricted code’ use (Bernstein 1971), where speakers need to draw on background knowledge and shared understanding (ideology) to drive meaning from a text. Restricted code is economical at the same time that it is complex, since it conveys ample meanings with fewer signs. In this context, restricted code can also be understood as being indexical. As such, “in codes known only to a limited group”, it is “possible for the members of that group to uncover the text’s full meaning potential, while the text remains incomprehensible to those not familiar with the code” (Madisson, Ventsel 2021: 25). This type of code “is of considerable importance in communicating on social media, for often the semiotic units that trigger the readers’ activity are given as excerpts, not as a clear narrative” (*Ibid*).

Fortunately, in the present chapter, six other tweets were already investigated, in a way that it is now possible to tap into this knowledge that is shared between Mercola and his followers and understand what he means in this post (Fig. 16). The tweets in section 3.2.1, for instance, talked about mandated vaccination (Fig. 10) and digital IDs (Fig. 11), and both were posted a few months before this one. Assembling the timeline in chronological order, it is possible to arrive at the following narrative:

- December 2021 - Mercola posts about how the UK government is issuing digital IDs, a worrisome development since this supposedly may give the government more control over its people.
- January 2022 - Mercola posts about how mandated vaccinations are unwarranted, given their supposed ineffectiveness in preventing transmission.
- May 2022 - Mercola posts an article from 2020 stating that conspiracy theorists feared that the pandemic would cause mandated vaccination and governmental surveillance.

In retrospect, from the point of view of Mercola and his followers, it is obvious that their fears have become a reality. Borrowing the concept of holism (Torop 2022) from the semiotics of culture – where the parts are interconnected with (and cannot be understood without reference to) the whole – it is possible to understand the tweet as being an affirmation of the conspiracy theory, because when taken together with other texts produced by this same subject, it goes from a baseless sentence to a foolproof confirmation of all anti-vax fears. It is the ultimate “we told you so”.

The last tweet to be analysed (Fig. 17) is especially interesting because it neatly encapsulates the anti-vax conspiracy theory. The phrase is evidently sarcastic, seeing how it describes a hypothetical situation which is, in reality (at least in Mercola’s interpretation of reality) already in effect.



Fig. 17: Print-screen of the 8th analysed tweet, retrieved from: <https://twitter.com/mercola/status/1618999702657327106>, 15.02.23

I state that this tweet is able to compile the whole anti-vax conspiracy theory because of its incredible capacity to connect different structures – submitting discrete elements to a non-discrete logic of signification (Madisson, Ventsel 2021). In this tweet, Mercola connects social media censorship of anti-vax discourse to governmental control (the fact that vaccines are mandatory), and to Big Pharma (the idea that legal authorities protect pharmaceutical companies from liability). That is, the associations constructed on the tweet give “a unified meaning to essentially different text-elements, which are initially independent” (Leone *et al.* 2020: 48), connecting these disconnected elements into a cohesive narrative whole that is organizing and limit-defining to the anti-vax culture.

It is also interesting to note how the proper semantic value of the information being transmitted by Mercola is relatively minimal, seeing how the function of his discourse is to merely to confirm what he thinks are existing ties. This repetitiveness is also very characteristic of conspiracy theories, as “the connection itself becomes more significant, the words [become] more redundant” (Madisson, Ventsel 2021: 40).

Moreover, one may note that, at the core of every conspiracy theory, there is the construction of “a conflict in which the opponent is perceived as corrupt and immoral so that entering a dialogue or reaching a compromise with them is in principle excluded” (Madisson, Ventsel 2021: 46). The consequences of this are that “the elimination of the conspiracy (and at times also the conspirators)” appears “as the only positive solution” for the problem being represented (*Ibid*) – which is another reason why I believe it is not possible to understand conspiracy theories as “necessary for the healthy function of society” (Uscinski 2018: 234).

Overall, in all his tweets, Mercola is attempting to alert people of a danger that they should fear – the evil end that lies behind vaccination. Nevertheless, are vaccines dangerous because they don’t work? Or are they dangerous because of the side-effects they might cause? Perhaps they are dangerous because they are a way for the government to control the people, or maybe because they are developed with the sole purpose of generating wealth to the pharmaceutical industry. As it has been stated, this danger is as unclear as the people who are behind it.

The conspiracy theory code-text tells a story about how different circumstances are motivated by an evil intent, and thus although cultural agents cannot perceive the structures of evil directly, they can nevertheless surmise that there are connections between events and circumstances that lead back to evil itself. (Madisson 2014: 296)

From this context, it arises what can be understood as an “aestheticization of accusation and the production of an ironic-sceptical stance” (Birchall 2006: 39), where anti-vaxxers are not even sure about what the accusation precisely *is*, just that nobody and nothing can be trusted to be true, and that everything must be destroyed.

This chapter analysed and discussed the Twitter profile and a set of eight selected tweets from an anti-vax influencer. A clear anti-authoritarian quality was identified as being prevalent in this discourse, whose character can be described in terms of a negative (disruptive) axiology, contempt for expertise, and skepticism in face of official information. The related theme of individual freedom was also identified as being central in the analysed discourse, so that the opposition between authority and freedom serves as one of its primary meaning-making mechanisms. Additionally, the main discursive and signifying practices that were identified in this chapter were:

- Argumentation based on false premises and mal-information (strategic spread of factual information with harmful intent);
- Establishment of codes based on the selection of certain implicit ideologically biased correlations (a practice that is improved by anticipating the reference world of the audience);
- Use of semantic gaps that trigger desired associations of (actually incompatible) meanings;
- Imprecise characterization of the enemy and danger (opacity of reference);
- Use of pictorial material as proof of truthfulness and interpretation anchors/memory, facilitating the formation of meaningful connections;
- Use of memes, appealing to the emotions of the audience, employing humour (especially sarcasm) to grab attention and promote spreading;
- Reduction of causality into intentionality;
- Rhetorical re-descriptions of reality (use of persuasive definitions in the shape of “X is Y”, that are not necessarily true but are posed as such);
- Drawing from fear and confusion, the discourse is constructed to provide a sense of agency and control to the audience; and
- Submitting discrete elements and meaning relations to a non-discrete (continuous) logic of signification, generating an explanatory narrative based on associations.

Other practices instrumentalized in this text may still be relevant to point out, such as: First, the use of the title ‘Dr.’ which implies a clear set of responsibilities (collectively recognized status function), thus providing credibility. Besides that, there is a sense of urgency that arises from the time-limit imposed to the accessibility of the information shared on the website to which some of the tweets refer, that confers an aura of importance and secrecy to this information, also contributing to censorship dodging (since it takes time for platform moderators to act on flagged content). Lastly, it was observed that the posting of paradoxical

content not only serves to promote an image of impartiality, but also helps the conspiracy theorist to devise further strategies to progressively reach more people.

Regarding identity, relations, and conflict construction, this discourse postulates ‘us’ as the ‘dissenting voices’ (those who see themselves as diverging from the hegemonic way of thinking) as well as a diffuse, but highly systematic and organized enemy, which embodies three main different kinds of authorities: the government, the mainstream media, and Big Pharma – who censor, silence, and persecute.

From that, the narrative explanation posited by this discourse may be summarized as: vaccination (*an event*) was created and institutionalized by the authorities (*the result of a group of people*), with an intention that nobody knew about but that has always been the plan (*acting in secret*), to monitor/control the population and drive the biggest possible profit (*evil ends*). What follows is that the diffusion of anti-vax conspiracy theories, as represented by this discourse, serves their spreaders not only because it supports the end of mandated vaccination and supposedly protects one’s freedom, but more so because it ultimately serves as a foundation upon which such actors can potentially build new habits to replace the ones that are in operation. In other words, by delegitimizing medical science, this discourse legitimizes alternative medicine, which is inevitably in the financial, political, and symbolical interests of the sort of people who produce anti-vax discourse.

Conclusions

This thesis has investigated two social media texts (a YouTube video and a set of eight tweets) here understood as products of two anti-scientific conspiracy theories (Climate Change denial and the anti-vax movement). The aim was to identify the primary meaning-making mechanisms of the discourses these texts belong to, that is, the formal conditions that allow discourse to shape interpretation. For that, qualitative empirical analyses were carried out using semiotics as the foundation upon which the following methods were combined: Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough 1995); Political Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, N. Fairclough 2013); Relational Political Analysis (Selg, Ventsel 2020), and a Semiotic Approach to Strategic Conspiracy Narratives (Madisson, Ventsel 2021). Accordingly, this work has sought to examine the interplay between ideas and action, as well as belief and behaviour, pointing to the potential social effects of discourse.

A few discursive and signifying practices were commonly identified across both texts, such as the presentation of deductively valid arguments constructed onto false premises (recalling how Climate Change is said to be false because none of the scientists at the North and South poles are complaining about it, or how a vaccine does not work because it has not been tested to prevent transmission of disease), as well as the use of semantic gaps that trigger desired associations of incompatible meanings (for instance, the gaps between the explanation of the oil business, the electric car story, and Climate Change being false, or the gaps between digital IDs, vaccine passports, and danger/surveillance).

Both discourses are also seen to revoke any and all complexity from the issues they discuss, turning everything into simple essence without contradictions, offering a simple and meaningful explanatory narrative. Part of this simplicity rests on the imprecise characterization of the enemy and the danger it poses, something that facilitates the application of the conspiracy theory in many different contexts. In the analysed texts, both enemies that have been identified (journalists/newer generations in the case of Climate Change denial, and the government/the media/Big Pharma in the case of anti-vax) are diffuse, while the danger posed by them (subversion of the status quo/draastic societal transformation, and population control/

surveillance for profit) is vague and incomprehensible on any deeper level (how is this transformation bad? How is this control/surveillance exerted?). It is also interesting to point out that the mainstream media appears as the enemy in both texts (represented by “these journalists” in the first one, and just as “the media” in the second). Thus, the notion that “the mainstream media lies” seems to be central to the discourses of both conspiracy theories.

Regarding the Model Reader of these texts, it is possible to state that, for Climate Change denial, the discourse seems to construct a subject who fits the profile of a neoliberal (with a tendency towards free market endorsement, individualism, and meritocracy). For the anti-vax movement, the subject being constituted cannot be linked to any particular political profile – since this discourse appeals to people across the political spectrum – but rather, it may be understood as a subject whose feelings of powerlessness and anxiety arising from medical situations (either it being the experience of illness, or something like the COVID-19 pandemic) induce a desire to take back control over one’s health. In this sense, anti-vax discourse is appealing towards a bigger range of people than Climate Change denial.

There is also something to be said regarding the constitution of the subjects producing the discourse (the authors). In the case of Dan Peña and Brian Rose, the video genre and format (set construction, clothing, framing, editing, etc.) as well as some grounding strategies (i.e., referencing to well-known scientific institutions) are what characterize the discourse as being trustworthy and authentic. In the case of Joseph Mercola, however, such efforts to construct the subjects as reliable are not necessary because the mere presence of the title ‘Dr.’ in his Twitter profile is already enough to represent him as someone legitimate.

Furthermore, it is possible to state that both discourses establish an attitude in regard to Science that is not of opposition. Peña, for instance, argues that he has information given by the real scientists. Even though Mercola, on the other hand, denounces Big Pharma and a so-called “medical mafia”, he is still an ‘expert’ himself (together with other ‘denying doctors’ he interacts with through Twitter). Therefore, in both situations, there is a fragmentation of the scientific community into ‘real’ vs. ‘fake scientists’, or into ‘dissenting voices’ (courageous experts who tell the truth) vs. ‘sycophants’ (those who serve the authorities and help manipulate the people). Therefore, the problem of the breakdown of knowledge authority is also fed by this fissure between ‘different kinds of science’, which ultimately serves to cast doubt upon scientific consensus, creating yet another layer of conflict in society.

Overall, the discourse of Climate Change denial, as represented in this video, is seen to promote political disengagement through deproblematization, while the discourse of the anti-vax movement, as expressed by the tweets, questions the legitimacy of institutionalised

scientific and medical knowledge. Therefore, one way this can possibly be interpreted is: Climate Change denial discourse advocates for the sustaining of existing power relations (things should stay as they are), while anti-vax discourse advocates for undermining them (new power relations should replace the existing ones). Which prompts the question: does this mean Climate Change denial discourse is not anti-authoritarian in nature (as is the case of anti-vax)?

One may note that Climate Change denial, being against societal transformation, argues for the *acceptance* of the current state of affairs, suggesting that not all conspiracy theories have a necessarily strong disruptive axiology. However, this discourse still holds heavy skepticism towards official information. If we understand the journalists (posed as the enemy) as being representative of a type of authority (precisely authority on information, akin to the mainstream media), then there is no question that – even though this discourse seeks to maintain certain power relations – it still endeavours to undertake institutionalized knowledge. The way through which it further promotes a division of the scientific community (into real and fake experts) can also be seen as an effort to undermine (deconstruct, disrupt) the pre-existing division of cognitive labour on which the structure of society relies. Therefore, both discourses are equal in essence. Both Peña and Mercola characterize themselves as being the ones you should trust amongst a majority of liars – which is to say that they both seek to delegitimize mainstream knowledge and replace it with new habits that serve their financial and political interests.

In a general manner, conspiracy theorizing is fundamentally distinct from healthy and democratic political criticism due to the form (independently from content) with which it seeks to provide argumentation – by creating identities and shaping social relationships in the form of dichotomic oppositions and conflicts between (in the case of the analysed discourses) the enemy (dishonest authorities) and a symbolic elite (the truth-sayers). Therefore, when it comes to this increasing deconstruction of scientific knowledge that we have been witnessing in online spaces, this thesis sought to consider not the issue of mis/disinformation, but how the aversion to authority or institutionalized knowledge are semiotically constructed in conspiracy narratives, by pointing to some of the discursive conditions that contribute to their propagation, describing how subjects and conflicts were constructed in the analysed discourses.

Possible paths for future research may include the generation of a hybrid quantitative-qualitative methodology that could allow for the application of semiotics to a large-scale analysis of signs and texts, that is, dealing with large user-generated datasets (big social data) through neural networks and artificial intelligence – so that bigger formations of ideological clusters could be investigated and better comprehended, thus contributing to the design of appropriate countermeasures programmes to deal with the issues here discussed.

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Appendix

Full transcription of the video ‘WHY I SAID GLOBAL WARMING IS THE BIGGEST FRAUD IN HISTORY - Dan Peña | London Real’, available at: https://youtu.be/m0sY2tjmr_Y, last access on 14.12.2022.

BR = Brian Rose DP = Dan Peña

1. BR: Let’s talk about Global Warming, then I wanna get to the snowflakes
2. DP: Ok
3. BR: We were on stage and a woman got up and asked you a question about Global Warming
4. DP: Yep
5. BR: And you went on to explain why you don’t believe in it. Uh, you said you changed your- no, you said you’ve got some new evidence recently
6. DP: Yep
7. BR: What happened that night?
8. DP: Ok
9. BR: Why did that clip go viral?
10. DP: Uh, the lady, uh, said ‘I’ve children and you’ve got a few bucks, and don’t you want- I wanna leave the- the world a better place for my kids’, essentially what she was saying
11. BR: Right. Which is a good question
12. DP: [shrugs] Yeah, it’s fine
13. BR: Do you?
14. DP: Yeah, I- I’d like my children- I want my children very much, but I realize it’s up to them, it’s not up to me. You see? I put responsibility-
15. BR: You are one of the biggest force-multipliers in the world
16. DP: Yeah, but I-
17. BR: They don’t have a-
18. DP: It’s up to the individual. I can give you all the information, but if you don’t pull the trigger and take action
19. BR: [nods]
20. DP: So, getting back to the lady, and I said uh, I- I went through my story, which is not a story, Sally and I were in the South Pole, 2011, and we’re there and there’s a big- half a million dollar- uh, scientific uh, station there, that’s mostly funded by the US government, and uh, the scientists came over and gave us this presentations and they had at that time, they’d drilled five, or six, or seven thousand cores uh, in the South Pole, and not many people realize the South Pole is on a mountain top, so you’re up about twelve, thirteen, fourteen thousand feet, so people suffer from oxygen deprivation- it didn’t bother Sally and I. And, so, he’s going through these cores and he says fifteen thousand years ago it was two- uh, one point nine six degrees warmer Celsius than today and-

STOP STOP STOP! Let's go back to that, how do you know that? And then all these MIT, CalTech, all these guys- oh, because this equals that bullshit, bullshit. We know for- absolutely within a millionth of a percent, it was warmer.

21. BR: But no one's denying that
22. DP: No no no no no, wait wait
23. BR: Ok
24. DP: And so, and so
25. BR: Ok
26. DP: We all know it's cyclical
27. BR: Yeah, we know it's cyclical
28. DP: Ok, and then, what about Global Warming? Everybody laughs! All at the same time. It's a load of shit. I mean, we could've predicted this, Global Warming, a hundred years before, but nobody did, cause nobody figured out a way to make any money out of it.
29. BR: Ok, but when people talk about Global Warming, when they are talking about the human being accelerated version of the Warming
30. DP: No, no
31. BR: No one's saying that it's not cyclical
32. DP: No, no, no the- They say it has nothing to do with the hairspray, the ozone, nothing, zero. In fact, if you read Scientific American, like the good MIT guy you are, you would've known three months ago they said for the first time in forty years the ozone- what do you call- is uh, thickened up again
33. BR: Yeah, the ozone has, but that's a little different than carbon dioxide emissions, all that stuff-
34. DP: They also said that we- we've known for at least fifty, sixty, seventy years, that every square meter on the ground on the planet, has between ten and fifteen thousand times more energy from the sun than it's needed. Ten to fifteen thousand. How does it vary? You're closer to the sun, it's fifteen thousand, farther from the sun, ten thousand.
35. BR: Ok, what does that mean? There's tons of energy-
36. DP: Tons! Tons and tons. Ok, the first electric car was in 1846 I believe. I don't believe, I know. 1846. Do you think, if we really wanted fucking electric cars we couldn't have them? It was 35 or 40 years before uh, gasoline cars. But now, since then, and then the question is- Sally and I went to the North Pole
37. BR: Ok. But the electric car thing is because the oil business and all that, right?
38. DP: Correct. I- I'll get back to that
39. BR: We'll get back to that
40. DP: So, then we go to the uh, the North Pole and now there's Russian scientists. Hardly anybody spoke English. Ok? And uh, we- we got re-married at the North Pole, and uh, we talked to the scientists and, same questions, same uh- uh, answers as we got from the South Pole, Global Warming, they all laughed drinking vodka [mimicking], everybody is drinking in the North Pole, cause the Russians. And Russians do like to drink vodka, as they say. And they say yeah, it's just a load of shit, everybody knows it's a load of shit and we've known it for years. When I was in the energy business, and forever more I'll be an oil man, ok?

41. BR: You are an oil man
42. DP: Well, an oil man. Everybody laugh- everybody knew that when- when people will take more seriously Global Warming is when Aramco, Saudi, the Kingdom, runs out of oil. Now, two years ago, Aramco, which is uh, the petroleum company of the Saudi uh, government, and how they're gonna go public. This was when oil was twenty-eight dollars a barrel. Now why would smart guys, MIT kinda guys, say they're gonna go public at the lowest oil price in the last thirty, forty years? Why?
43. BR: Why?
44. DP: Hum. Because when you go public, and they're gonna sell, they're gonna sell two percent of the company oil, uh, when they go public, they have to report a reserve report, publish a reserve report. Which means that for the first time in the History, since they uh, discovered oil there, J. Paul Getty discovered oil there back seventy, eighty years ago, they're gonna know about, plus or minus ten percent, how much oil the Saudis really have. Now, I'm here to tell you, they have hundreds of trillions of barrels. They're never gonna run out of fucking oil in your children's lifetime. Now, they've now pulled back and they've changed three times the day of the public offering. Three times in the last two years. Now, 2019 looks good but maybe, maybe not, we'll let the market dictate, of course oil is up from twenty-five, twenty-six dollars a barrel up to sixty-fiveish, more or less, uh, and uh, the uh, they don't wanna publish that number if they don't have to. The price I hear, the price where uh, where the lines cross, supply and demand, for Aramco, for the Kingdom, is around seventy-five to eighty dollars a barrel. Stabilized over two, three, four, five years. Not one day. So I don't see when they're gonna go public, because if they do, they're gonna have to tell what the reserves are, and you know what the price of oil is gonna do when they say that there's forty-two kazillion-jillion barrels of oil?
45. BR: Gonna drop
46. DP: Like a fucking stone!
47. BR: So what does this have to do with the Global Warming [inaudible]
48. DP: Nah, because Global Warming is a- an anomaly, based on hyped-up, by this generation, for something to bitch about. We've had it. We've had it fifty thousand years ago, had it three hundred thousand years ago, but to blame it on us is bullshit.
49. BR: Isn't it not accelerated by human's carbon emissions?
50. DP: Uh, one hundredth million of a percent, who cares
51. BR: Ok, so this is just a scam and a sham and all this-
52. DP: I'm jealous of vice-president what's-his-face, uh
53. BR: Gore
54. DP: Gore! I'm jealous. And Sally and I were in a plane with him. A few years ago he got in trouble because of the footprint, you know, the big G3 he flies around, G5 I guess it is, and so he was flying commercial, we were coming back from, uh, Peru, uh, Lima. And Sally and I were doing some Safari, and, uh, I noticed why all these guys with fucking suits in here- business, cause they had no first class, and so it's pres- vice-president Gore, he stands up and, uh, the- uh, and he's not as tall- you know all these people that say they're six-three, I mean, Jesus Christ, I mean he's about your height. And you know
55. BR: Everyone say that I'm-
56. DP: Only six-one, he's only six one! He's about, uh [inaudible]
57. BR: Everyone says I'm as tall as you!

58. DP: Yeah
59. BR: How tall are you?
60. DP: I'm six-one.
61. BR: Ok. I'm not six-one.
62. DP: No, no
63. BR: Ok
64. DP: And, uh, so, uh
65. BR: Is it- Does Gore believe in Climate Change or is it all made-up?
66. DP: I don't know, I can't speak for the former vice-president, but he's gotta know the same stats I know. Now, since then, since the thing went viral, because of your movie premiere, I had my crack-staff do some research, and then I double-checked the research, only found one error, uh, and the uh, you know how many people have been to the North and South Pole? Both? Since the beginning of motherfucking time? Recorded time.
67. BR: Couple of hundred?
68. DP: [gesticulates down]
69. BR: Just you and Sally?
70. DP: No, no, no
71. BR: w-
72. DP: Not counting the teams, but the lead people?
73. BR: Yeah?
74. DP: Ten people, plus Sally and I. Twelve! Since the beginning of fucking time.
75. BR: [nods]
76. DP: You know how many of these other ten are bitching about Global Warming?
[gesticulates] Zero!
77. BR: [shakes head]
78. DP: I can't wait- I was supposed to be on a panel, in George Mason University, last March, uh, first it was gonna be a talk, I could talk about anything, and then it wasn't, then it was a panel, then they wouldn't let me film it, so then I dropped out, uh, but I was hoping Global Warming would come up.
79. BR: And so you're saying because you were at the South, you were at the North, I mean, it doesn't make you an expert, are you saying-
80. DP: No, no, but I talked to the experts. Who-
81. BR: Ok. And none of them buy it?
82. DP: These journalists! These fucking journalists that are writing about it, they haven't talked to dick! They haven't talked to anybody. Nobody has asked me what *I* saw there. Nobody has asked me, the scie- scientists that *I* met with. Yeah, ten plus Sally and I. And Sally and I are bipolar.
83. BR: [laughs]

Magistritöö kokkuvõte

TEADUSEVASTANE VANDENÕUDISKURSUS ÜHISMEEDIAS: SEMIOOTILINE VAATENURK

Käesolev magistritöö analüüsib ühte kliimamuutust eitavat YouTube'i videot ning kaheksat vaktsiinivastase mõjuisiku säutsu. Analüüsi eesmärk on tuvastada peamised tähendusloome mehhanismid, mis iseloomustavad vandenõudiskursust ühismeedias. Selle saavutamiseks viidi läbi kvalitatiivne empiiriline analüüs, mille aluspõhja moodustasid semiootika ja diskursuseanalüüsist lähtuvad segameetodid. Teaduse eitamist mõistetakse siin vandenõuteooriana, viimast omakorda tõlgendusjuhisenä. Peamine erinevus vandenõuteoreetilise arutlusviisi ja demokraatliku poliitilise kriitika vahel peitub selles vormis (mitte sisus), mida vandenõuteooriad argumenteerimisel kasutavad. Üldiselt loovad analüüsitud vandenõuteooriad identiteete ning kujundavad ühiskondlikke suhteid lähtuvalt dihhotoomsetest opositsioonidest ja konfliktidest „ebaausate võimude“ (vaenlase) ning „tõerääkijate“ (sümboolse eliidi) vahel. Täpsemini peitub kliimamuutuse eitamise teemalise video tähtsus selles, kuidas ta representeerib kliimamuutust pettusena ning potentsiaalseid poliitilisi vastuseid sellele kelmusena. Selle diskursuse tulemuseks on deproblematiseerimine, kuna ta annab inimestele aluse lükata tagasi igasugused ettepanekud leevendamaks kliimakriisi ning valida teiste huvide kasuks. Vaktsiinivastaste säutsude tähtsus peitub asjaolus, et nad delegitimeerivad allopaatilist meditsiiniteadust ning legitimeerivad alternatiivmeditsiini, mis on vaktsiinivastase diskursuse tootjate huvides – nii rahalistes, poliitilistes kui ka sümboolsetes. Kokkuvõttes on selle diskursuse aluseks vastumeelsus autoriteedi suhtes ning institutsionaliseeritud teadmise tagasilükkamine. Neilt alustelt lähtub seda diskursust loovate aktorite võime kujundada uusi harjumusi, mis asendaksid käesolevaid, millele toetub ühiskonna struktuur ise.

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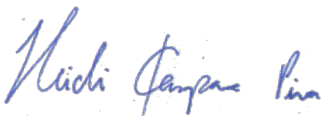
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