

THERAPEUTIC CONSPIRACY STORIES

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Abstract: Conspiracy theories ignore the law of parsimony which states that out of two competing explanations, the simple one should be chosen. Yet, some people tend to favor such theories, no matter how contorted their explanations. The present paper will argue that both extrinsic factors (such as conspiracies and lies fabricated by governments, or unpredictable events also known as Black Swans) and intrinsic elements (a innate human need for story-making) play equally important roles in people adhering to conspiracy theories.

Keywords: *conspiracy theory, lies, COVID-19, Black Swans*

Conspiracies and Conspirators

It was William of Ockham who repeated the law of parsimony so often that it became known as “Ockham’s razor.” The principle stated that entities are not to be multiplied beyond necessity. Out of two or more competing theories, the simple one should be enough to explain a phenomenon. Why is it then that some people tend to prefer the not so simple and not so obvious explanation? To put the question into a more contemporary light, why do some people prefer to believe that the COVID-19 pandemics is generated by a lab virus rather than by cross-species transmission chains, as most scientists believe?¹

¹ Scientific proof that coronaviruses travel across species can be found in most scientific papers and science magazines. Here are just two of them: Jane Qiu, “How China’s ‘Bat Woman’ Hunted Down Viruses from SARS to the New Coronavirus”, *Scientific American*, March 11, 2020, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/how-chinas-bat-woman-hunted-down-viruses-from-sars-to-the-new-coronavirus1/> (accessed April 7, 2020); a scientific article published in *Nature* Andersen, K.G., Rambaut, A., Lipkin, W.I. et al. “The proximal origin of SARS-CoV-2”, *Nat Med* (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41591-020-0820-9> (accessed April 7, 2020 from <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41591-020-0820-9#citeas>).

As psychologists Stephan Lewandowsky and John Cook show in *The Conspiracy Theory Handbook*², it is not unusual for governments to construct conspiracy theories for strategic reasons. For instance, there are US officials stating that the virus originated in a Chinese lab – even the American President dubbed it the “Chinese Virus” – and there are Chinese officials holding that the United States bioengineered the virus in a military lab³.

No wonder then that 29% of all Americans believe that COVID-19 is a lab virus. Some 37% hold that the press greatly exaggerated the risks of the epidemic, while another 25% think that the press slightly exaggerated the risks⁴. As soon as news emerge that the government manipulates information, trust in public institutions rapidly plunges. The most likely outcome is a dangerous phenomenon in times of epidemics: people stop listening and following government instructions concerning public health safety.

Another set of conspiracy theories, also with a strategic agenda in sight, are those fueled by the Russian government with help from its army of “patriotic hackers”. These are gangs of young people backed by the Russian government to use cyberattacks on specific targets, mainly but not exclusively in the West.⁵ Russian hackers notoriously attacked Britain’s telecommunications and energy sector in 2016 and used Twitter to influence the Brexit referendum⁶. Equally notorious is the 2014 information war launched on Ukraine. Even more familiar are the conspiracy theories we all grew accustomed with in the last decades: the stories about JFK’s assassination, about the Moon landing (believed to be a NASA hoax directed by Stanley Kubrick), about the alleged

2 Stephan Lewandowsky, John Cook, *The Conspiracy Theory Handbook*, published March 2020 by George Mason University, Center for Climate Change.

3 John Cook in an interview for *The Verge: Justine Calma*, “How to debunk COVID-19 conspiracy theories”, *The Verge*, March 20, 2020, <https://www.theverge.com/2020/3/20/21187983/debunk-coronavirus-conspiracy-theories-how-to-covid-19-news-science> (accessed April 7, 2020).

4 A. Mitchell, B. Oliphant, “Americans Immersed in COVID-19 News; Most Think Media Are Doing Fairly Well Covering It”, Pew Research Center, March 18, 2020 (accessed April 7, 2020, <https://www.journalism.org/2020/03/18/americans-immersed-in-covid-19-news-most-think-media-are-doing-fairly-well-covering-it/>).

5 P. Singer, A. Friedman, *Cybersecurity and Cyberwar: What Everyone Needs to Know*, Oxford University Press, 2014.

6 “UK cyber-defence chief accuses Russia of hack attacks”, *BBC News*, November 2017 (accessed April 7, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-41997262>).

medical and pharmaceutical conspiracy hiding the proof that vaccines cause autism in children (courtesy of a British gastroenterologist, Andrew Wakefield, who cheated on his data), about George Soros (or the Rothschilds, or Israel) secretly manipulating every political and economic crisis governments dive into, and more recently about how 5G technology is spreading the COVID-19 (which prompted some people in England to set 5G towers on fire)⁷.

Reading about these stories one cannot help but wonder whether our minds are some sort of funhouse mirrors prone to distort reality, as British empiricist Francis Bacon wrote.⁸ Among his idols of the tribe (which are intellectual errors common to all humans and due to our human nature) is also the tendency to oversimplify in order to avoid the natural complexity of any system of inquiry. We err because our minds are prone to error and only by exposing these fallacies is progress of knowledge possible. Karl Popper noted that, along with Descartes, Bacon firmly believed in the doctrine of the manifest truth, meaning that every person carries the source of knowledge in himself.⁹ If put before us, we are able to recognize the truth as it is. Yet, in order to do so we need to free our minds from the four sets of idols: the idols of the tribe, the idols of the cave, the idols of the market place, and the idols of the theatre.

To a contemporary person this is a confusing task. How are we to free our minds in a world where the flow of information grows exponentially and very little of this flow is under our control? We are better informed than any living human in history. However, that does not make us wiser. What truth are we to recognize out of a Google search of 135 000 results for a simple question like “Where did COVID-19 originate”? And how is truth going to reveal itself if governments around the globe add to the general public confusion?

In *The Conspiracy Theory Handbook*, Lewandowsky and Cook point to four factors that contribute to people believing and sharing conspiracy theories: a feeling of powerlessness, coping with threats, explaining unlikely events, and disputing mainstream politics.¹⁰

7 “Mast fire probe amid 5G coronavirus claims,” BBC News, April 4, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-52164358>.

8 Klein, Jürgen, „Francis Bacon”, The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Winter 2016 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), (accessed April 7, 2020, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/francis-bacon/>).

9 Karl R. Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations: The Growth of Scientific Knowledge*, Routledge, London, 2002, p.20.

10 Lewandowsky, Cook, *ibid.*, p. 4.

They show how people who feel vulnerable tend to endorse conspiracy theories because it allows them to cope with unknown or scary threats. It also enables them to find a culprit for their pain or anxiety (scapegoating). This way, the unknown gains an identity and becomes recognizable. But most of all, highly unlikely events (or what people perceive as unlikely, for instance a pandemic caused by a cross-species virus) receive a meaning or an explanation. Therefore, conspiracy theories work as coping mechanisms, making people think that they are capable to handle uncertainty.

One can easily see how conspiracy theories ignore Ockham's razor by going for the most sophisticated explanation and ignoring the law of parsimony. Finding inconsistencies in the Moon Landing movie is easy (the flag waving, the shadow on the lunar soil etc.). But inferring that there was no moon landing is not a necessary consequence. A very simple explanation for the movie inconsistencies is often ignored: the Moon tapes might have been so badly filmed that NASA had to remaster the tapes¹¹. Besides, if the Moon Landing had not taken place, the Soviet Union would not have missed the opportunity to publicly debunk such a hoax.

There is also the "vaccines cause autism" theory. Wakefield's fraudulent study of 12 children stated that the MMR¹² vaccine is causing autism, although there is no corroborative study to prove the assumption and, in the meantime, he recognized that he cheated on his data. But once the information got in the news it snowballed and vaccination rates begun going down in some countries. This is what a medical paper reported about the situation in the United States:

" (...) the most commonly reported reason parents had for refusing one or more vaccines was other people or media reports. Stories in the popular media, such as social media and large-scale news outlets, are often sensationalized to elicit higher ratings and oftentimes spotlight a rare incident in which a child suffers as a result of an unforeseen side effect of a vaccine. Media that cite problems with components of vaccines (such as Thimerosal) and report that vaccines can cause autism, brain damage, or behavioral

11 This explanation was given by Romanian cosmonaut Dumitru Prunariu. NASA also admitted that the quality of the tapes was very bad (*The Apollo 11 Telemetry Data Recordings: A Final Report*, accessed April 24, 2020, https://www.hq.nasa.gov/alsj/a11/Apollo_11_TV_Tapes_Report.pdf).

12 MMR is the equivalent of the ROR vaccine in Romania.

problems cause parents to be more cautious and have more concerns regarding the safety of vaccines. Thimerosal, however, has been removed from those vaccines intended for children under 6 years of age for over a decade now. Accounts noting these rare occurrences breed fear in the hearts and minds of parents, who overestimate the dangers associated with vaccinations.”¹³

Many parents who refuse to vaccinate their children are putting them at risk and weakening the herd immunity at the same time (which should be above 90%). Any pediatrician can provide a much simpler explanation against Wakefield’s theory: autism is generally diagnosed around the age of 18 months, shortly after the MMR vaccine is taken.¹⁴

Lewandowsky and Cook end their handbook by pointing at various ways to debunk conspiracy theories. As helpful as their information might be, it is not this paper’s task to go any further on this topic.

How Governments Add to the General Confusion

In June 1971 *The New York Times* started to publish a series of articles based on highly classified information from the “Report of the Office of the Secretary of Defense Vietnam Task Force,” also known as “The Pentagon Papers,” a 47 volume study covering the US political and military involvement in Vietnam since the end of the Second World War. It also exposed the magnitude of the lies perpetuated by government officials under the shield of diplomatic secrecy.

Hannah Arendt remarked that truthfulness was never counted among the political virtues, thus making lies justifiable in politics¹⁵.

“This active, aggressive capability is clearly different from our passive susceptibility to falling prey to error, illusion, the distortions of memory, and to whatever else can be blamed on the failings of our sensual and mental apparatus.”¹⁶

13 McKee C, Bohannon K. “Exploring the Reasons Behind Parental Refusal of Vaccines”. *J Pediatr. Pharmacol Ther.* 2016;21(2):104–109 (accessed April 10, 2020, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4869767/>).

14 According to pediatrician Nina L. Shapiro in an interview with Sam Harris, “The Truth about Vaccines”, March 9, 2015, (accessed April 9, 2020, <https://samharris.org/the-truth-about-vaccines/>).

15 Hannah Arendt, *Crises of the Republic*, Mariner Books, 1972, p. 4.

16 *Ibid.*, p. 5.

Therefore, lying involves the intention to deceive and it disrupts social life because it damages trust. For the same reason truth can restore social life. As Václav Havel pointed in *The Power of the Powerless*, truth is a powerful political weapon in a totalitarian state because “if the main pillar of the system is living a lie, then it is not surprising that the fundamental threat to it is living the truth.”¹⁷ Because falsehood is spelled right into the ideology and imagination does not run too far away from the political dogma, it is easier in totalitarianism to tell apart truth and lies. In liberal democracies lies come in different forms and shapes. Some are the product of elaborate governmental PR strategies meant to persuade the public just as any other commercial aims to convince the consumer.

Up to a certain point, lies are even

“much more plausible, more appealing to reason, than reality, since the liar has the great advantage of knowing beforehand what the audience wishes or expects to hear. He has prepared his story for public consumption with a careful eye to making it credible, whereas reality has the disconcerting habit of confronting us with the unexpected, for which we were not prepared.”¹⁸

According to Arendt, the Pentagon Papers targeted the Congress and the American public, revealing the persistent fear that a military defeat in Vietnam would irremediably damage the United States’ reputation.

“Image-making as global policy – not world conquest, but victory in the battle ‘to win the people’s minds’ – is indeed something new in the huge arsenal of human follies recorded in history.”¹⁹

It is understandable then why some other subsequently US international policies were put in the same category and gave rise to suspicion over their “true” motives. The fact that other lies were added to the already crooked image-making policy – Saddam Hussein’s weapons

17 V. Havel, *The Power of the Powerless*, 1978, <https://www.nonviolent-conflict.org/resource/the-power-of-the-powerless/>

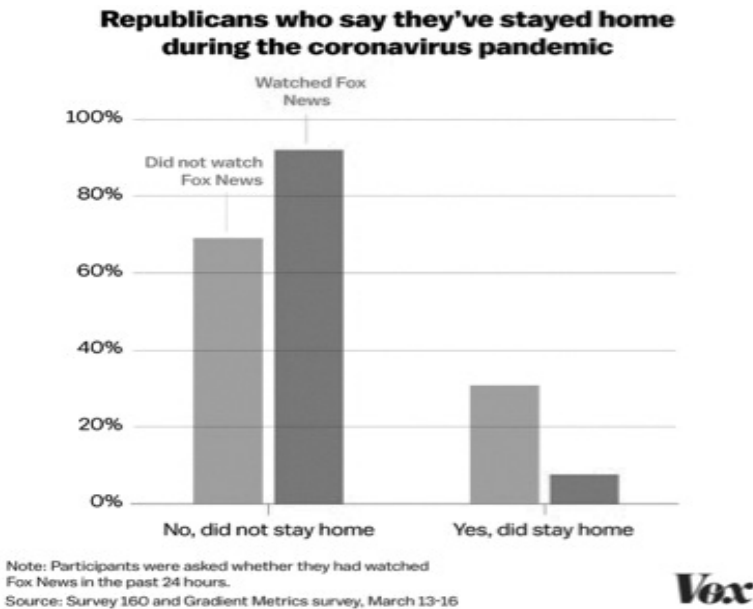
18 H. Arendt, *ibid.*, p. 5-6.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 18.

of mass destruction – did not help at all. One can say that a fair percent of all conspiracy theories are tightly or loosely connected to the US in one way or another.

The studies showing people's responses to social distancing are also revelatory about how many Americans expect their government to lie. Democrats tend to obey social distancing while many Republicans do not. Many Republicans believe that the scare of the pandemic is greatly exaggerated by the Democrats for ideological reasons. States with Republican governors have been slower in imposing restrictions²⁰. As did President Trump.

Another article shows how the pandemic is becoming a partisan issue in the US²¹. Fox News viewers are less likely to stay at home when compared to non-Fox viewers and are also less likely to take the pandemic seriously, even when compared to other Republicans.



20 Ronald Brownstein, "Red and Blue America Aren't Experiencing the Same Pandemic", *The Atlantic*, March 20, 2020, (accessed April 15, 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2020/03/how-republicans-and-democrats-think-about-coronavirus/608395/>).

21 Zack Beauchamp, Christina Animashaun, "New poll finds Fox News viewers think the coronavirus threat is exaggerated", *Vox*, March 27, 2020, (accessed April 27, 2020, <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2020/3/27/21195940/coronavirus-fox-news-poll-republicans-trump>).

This is how lack of trust works. Because many people expect their government to lie, they see lies everywhere. When citizens find out that they have been deceived about something, they immediately assume that the opposite of what they have been told must be true. Such fallacies fuel conspiracy theories.

As soon as citizens understand that their government – any government, not just the US government – is withholding crucial information, public trust is plunging. Why would they trust anything else that comes from their elected officials? Therefore, sharing public information, giving the necessary quantity of information (the information the citizens are asking for), discussing governmental policies publicly, even admitting that not quite everything is under control (yes, telling the truth) are steps that can consolidate public trust in times of crises. Knowing more about what lies ahead makes people feel more in control. This way, most of them will not need the false sense of control a conspiracy theory has to offer.

Sharing important information with your citizens is also a way to recognize their fundamental human rights, the right to freedom and dignity, as stated in the preamble to the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights: “Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world.”²² Paternalistic governments who treat their own citizens as children not yet fully capable of making decisions should not be surprised when those “children” disobey.

The rational way to avoid conspiracies

A rational method of avoiding the fallacies of conspiracy theories was given by the Austrian philosopher of science Karl R. Popper.

In an essay named “Towards a Rational Theory of Tradition”²³, Popper stresses that the goal of social sciences is to explain the unintended, unwanted consequences of individual actions. Conspiracy theories explain everything in terms of intention and conscious design,

²² Universal Declaration of Human Rights, <https://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/> (accessed April 23, 2020).

²³ K. Popper, *ibid.*, p. 180.

assigning social groups a specific personality. But social life is largely the result of not foreseeable consequences of specific actions. In other words, things do not always turn out the way we want them to. Only when we take this into account can we hope to explain social life.

Following this thread, essayist and statistician Nassim Nicholas Taleb coined the “Black Swan”²⁴ concept. In his own words: “Black Swan logic makes *what you don’t know far more relevant than what you do know*.”²⁵ A Black Swan illustrates the limits of our empirical knowledge because one single new observation forces us to reconsider established knowledge (as prior to the discovery of Australia people were convinced that all swans were white). There is no way we can predict the future outcomes of our present actions.

“But we act as though we are able to predict historical events, or, even worse, as if we are able to change the course of history. We produce thirty-year projections of social security deficits and oil prices without realizing that we cannot even predict these for the next summer (...). What is surprising is not the magnitude of our forecast errors, but our absence of awareness of it.”

This is exactly what the present pandemic reveals. Those who think it was engineered or planned in advance should consider that an epidemic is not something anyone can control beforehand. If some people were not surprised when it started, or even expected something like this to happen, is because they usually take Black Swans into account, not because they had some secret knowledge about it. After the 2003 SARS outbreak and the 2012 MERS outbreak it should not have been a surprise to any reasonable informed person that there are many more coronaviruses out there and some will spread to humans. Unpredictable was only the exact moment of this happening.

The flu kills more people in a flu season than COVID-19 but, for us, it is a well-known disease and most of us had it at least a couple of times in our lifetime. For the moment, we know very little about the new virus and this lack of information makes our anxiety rise, therefore we concoct our own stories about it. Any explanation seems to be better than no explanation or too many.

24 Nassim Nicholas Taleb, *The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable*, Random House, 2007, p.xxi.

25 Id., p.xxiii.

Although there are for sure several other reasons why some people tend to listen to conspiracy theories, the fact that we like telling stories to appease our distress is one of them. As Karl Popper used to say, even our rational, scientific tradition sprung from mythmakers²⁶. The Ancient Greek philosophers who wanted to understand the natural world challenged the old mythical tradition and put new myths in place, scientific ones that gave more adequate answers about the world. These new stories resulted from a critical examination of tradition and of the world. It was the beginning of a rationalist philosophy.

Yet, such a luminous exercise was restricted to a happy few. In the second half of the 5th century BC, the philosopher's rationalism was accompanied by regressive popular beliefs. Irrational attitudes and ideas took preeminence in the Hellenistic world, as E.R. Dodds brilliantly argues in *The Greeks and the Irrational*²⁷. Why did this happen? Because people were more afraid of being free than of finding grim future perspectives in their natal chart. Freedom does not guarantee safety any less than rationality offers comfort.

If scientists were to tell us everything they know about this coronavirus, would that alleviate our worries? Probably not. Not if the truth would be difficult to handle. Some of us might prefer a therapeutic bedtime conspiracy story. But this is our decision to make, not for our elected officials to make.

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²⁶ K. Popper, *ibid.*, p. 169-170.

²⁷ E.R. Dodds, *Grecii si irationalul*, translated by Catrinel Pleșu, Polirom, 1998, 212-217.

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