

## UNDERSTANDING CONSPIRACY THEORIES – A COMPARATIVE CASE STUDY

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### Abstract:

*The present research addresses one of the most pressing current challenges in fighting disinformation: conspiracy theories. Conspiracy theories have always existed in societies, however, at present, they have gained momentum due to their easy spread and appeal in social media. Moreover, they have begun to corrupt people's understanding of the world and their willingness to listen to experts and authorities in times of crisis and not only, thus threatening not only the further development of societies but also the very health and security of the communities they lived in. The present research has two main objectives. Firstly, it analyses what conspiracy theories are and what their most prominent characteristics are, and, secondly, it examines three case studies to verify if the traits identified in the literature are reflected in actual conspiracy theories. We believe that this analysis can form the basis for better countering and mitigating the effects conspiracy theories have on democratic societies.*

**Keywords:** *conspiracy theory, characteristics of conspiracy theories, case study, debunking, democracy.*

### Introduction

Conspiracy theories have gained more ground in contemporary societies with the advent of social media which allow for their fast

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dissemination and increased numbers of supporters and promoters. Their effects on democratic societies cannot be understated as they corrode the knowledge foundations and common understanding of facts and events which allow for the adoption and promotion of the best possible policies to ensure societal progress.

The present research focuses, firstly, on providing a definition for conspiracy theories as well as a set of characteristics that they exhibit based on an extensive literature review and, secondly, on three particular case studies regarding three conspiracy theories that have circulated in European countries. Employing a case study research design, the second part of the article verifies what characteristics are common to the three conspiracy theories analysed and how these characteristics could be addressed in order to limit the spread and diminish the impact these conspiracy theories have in democratic societies. The case study research design has been considered the most appropriate for a better understanding of what makes up a conspiracy theory, what aspects make it become popular in a society and the reasons why it may affect democratic societies.

### **Definition of conspiracy theories**

Understanding and countering the negative effects that conspiracy theories have on contemporary democratic societies means that first and foremost, it must become clearer what conspiracy theories are and how they can be distinguished from actual conspiracies that have and will continue to exist in society. J. Uscinski proposes a definition for a conspiracy: “a secret arrangement between two or more actors to usurp political or economic power, violate established rights, hoard vital secrets, or unlawfully alter government institutions to benefit themselves at the expense of the common good” (Uscinski, 2018, 48). Uscinski also stresses the fact that a real conspiracy refers to events that proper authorities have determined that have actually occurred. The proper authorities have at their disposal the instruments needed to investigate and they are also comprised of people who have the verifiable and certifiable competencies and skills to evaluate and establish what events have actually happened. Problems arise in contemporary societies because there is an increasing distrust in competent authorities

as well as in expert knowledge and this fuel the public suspicion of official explanations and their quest for alternative ones, which often contradict official reports and endorse conspiracy theories.

One very well-known example of a conspiracy theory is that 9/11 was an inside job. This conspiracy theory has multiple strands: a) 9/11 was planned by the American government; b) the American government knew in advance the attacks were going to happen and did nothing to prevent them; c) the attacks were, in fact, planned demolitions staged as terrorist attacks, in order to justify the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq, and/or to curtail civil liberties by the measures that have been taken since, and/or to create a globalist government.

However, examples do not ease the difficulty of providing an accurate, synthetic and workable definition of conspiracy theories. One of the best known and most widely accepted is Uscinski's: a conspiracy theory refers "to an explanation of past, ongoing, or future events or circumstances that cites as a main causal factor a small group of powerful persons, the conspirators, acting in secret for their own benefit and against the common good" (Uscinski, 2018). Keeley approaches the definition of conspiracy theories from a logical point of view and as such characterizes them as unwarranted as they propose "an explanation of some historical event (or events) in terms of the significant causal agency of a relatively small group of persons – the conspirators – acting in secret" (Keeley, 1999, p. 116). Prooijen & van Lange (2014) and Douglas & Sutton (2018) also emphasise the secrecy and nefariousness of the plots expounded in conspiracy theories, as well as their explanatory prowess. R. Brotherton (2015, p. 125) points out that conspiracy theories are "are easy ways of telling complicated stories" which provide a means of eliminating complexity and clearly identifying causal relationships and perpetrators.

As previously mentioned, conspiracy theories go against official explanations provided by legitimate, epistemic authorities (Brotherton & Eser, 2015). They make use of weak evidence, small unaccounted for details, endow the conspirators with sinister goals and above average competence. However, no matter how outlandish they may appear, they

have serious social consequences: reduced civic engagement, negative attitudes towards environmentalism, vaccination etc.

Moreover, as Q. Cassam (2021) and Oliver & Wood (2014) argue, conspiracy theories have political motivations and promote political ideologies, by providing the compelling explanatory narratives that sway public conviction in the desired ideological direction.

In brief, extrapolating from the above-analysed definitions, we propose the following integrative definition for conspiracy theories: they are explanatory causal-based, ideologically laden narratives which depict significant social events or crises as perpetrated by a group of powerful secret actors who solely follow their own nefarious interests, irrespective of the good of the masses. This definition acts as a starting point for the analysis of the characteristics of conspiracy theories. Understanding precisely what conspiracy theories are is a necessary first step in identifying them and possibly limiting their spread and countering their effects in democratic societies.

### **Characteristics of conspiracy theories:**

1. Conspiracy theories are *speculative*, meaning that they are “based on conjecture rather than knowledge, educated (or not so educated) guesswork rather than solid evidence” (Cassam, 2021). This aspect is doubled by other characteristics stemming from the fact that they are based on fringe science: they are esoteric, as in they promote strange alternative explanations to official stories. They rely on circumstantial rather than direct evidence, on conjecture rather than solid evidence.
2. Conspiracy theories are *contrarian* by nature (Cassam 2021, Brotherton, 2015, Wood & Douglas, 2013, Oliver & Wood, 2014, Keeley, 1999). They run counter to the official narrative or view, to the obvious, plausible and acceptable explanations of events. The obvious answer is never correct, as conspiracy theories cast doubt on everything, even the best scientifically supported explanations. An example in this direction is the flat earth conspiracy theory which claims that the scientifically proven fact that the Earth is round is a conspiracy. Instead, conspiracy theories identify the source of any event or of

scientific facts in unseen, malevolent forces who aim to harm people and societies and hide their nefarious actions.

3. As a consequence of the fact that they are based on pseudoscience and fringe science or ignorance of science, conspiracy theories are *amateurish*, as B. L. Cassam (2021) explains, referring to the qualifications of amateur sleuths and internet detectives who produce and promote them.
4. Conspiracy theories are *premodern* (Cassam, 2021, Keeley, 1999, Douglas and Sutton, 2018, Oliver & Wood, 2014), meaning that they attempt to impose order in a random, complex, uncontrollable world in which events, crises are seen by conspiracy theorists to occur as a result of evil machinations not as a result of a conjunction of numerous factors, causes and even coincidence that cannot be and are not controlled by any one person or group of persons. They are based on a Manichean, simplistic worldview, clearly divided into good and bad forces, with no grey areas, and no place for randomness. The lack of control that people experience when faced with tragic events is compensated for by attributing agency, be it malevolent, to a small group of powerful people who could bring about doom. Conspiracy theorists are not paranoid or delusional, but they do experience the need to identify and/or assign intentionality in the environment. They need to rely on the idea that things happen for a reason, that there is a design behind the randomness of events, that a pattern can be identified in haphazard stimuli.
5. Conspiracy theories are *self-sealing* and *self-sustaining* belief bubbles which makes them unfalsifiable (Cassam, 2021, Brotherton, 2015, Vermeule & Sunstein, 2009). They are difficult to challenge because any counterargument is met with the challenge "They would say that, wouldn't they?" which basically incorporates the contrary information into the conspiracy theory itself. This type of logic is unassailable, as any contrary evidence is interpreted as proof that the conspiracy is at work, hiding its machinations from the eyes of the public with a smokescreen of counterarguments. "Self-

insulated logic which makes them immune to refutation and they actually thrive on it" (Brotherton, 2015).

Being self-sealing and self-insulating also makes conspiracy theories strong since they are able to incorporate any apparently anomalous piece of information into the unifying theory they propose. As B. L. Keeley (1999) explains, conspiracy theories operate with unaccounted for data (data which is not included in the official explanation of the event) and contradictory data (data which goes against the official explanation of the event). These two types of data give rise to questions, which can, in turn, lead to conspiracy theories. As R. Brotherton (2015) posits, in essence, conspiracy theories are unanswered questions, which try to reveal hidden plots and to alert the masses that the truth is not the one officially presented, but different, always somewhat out of reach, just beyond the next data incongruence.

6. For these reasons, conspiracy theories are much *nuanced* and *complex*. The simplest explanation is never sufficient because it cannot account for everything, it cannot account for randomness and coincidence, and it does not provide the all-encompassing explanation that the conspiracists' premodern mindsets seek. "Unified explanation is the sine qua non of conspiracy theories. Conspiracy theories always explain more than competing theories, because by invoking a conspiracy, they can explain both the data of the received account and the errant data that the received theory fails to explain" (Keeley, 1999, p. 119). The rule of logic Occam's razor is suspended, due to the fact that simple does not mean fully explanatory and, therefore, more complexity is needed, even if it is not warranted.
7. In order to reach its end, a conspiracy is, by definition, *unknowable* to and *untraceable* by the larger public. This leads to the contradictory nature of conspiracy theories and theorists, who, on the one hand, view conspirators as all-powerful masterminds who are able to protect secrets, control the population, are responsible for all the bad things that happen in the world, etc., and, on the other hand, the

conspiracy theorists overvalue their own abilities to catch them, to divine their plans and intentions (Cassam, 2021, Brotherton, 2015, Vermeule & Sunstein, 2009). This raises the question “If the conspirators are so clever, how come they have been rumbled by a bunch of amateurs?” (Cassam, 2021) This question remains unanswered and conspiracy theorists are unfazed by it as they believe they are engaged in a David vs Goliath struggle and that the apparently weak, but in fact vigilant person can outfox the greatest and most potent conspirators. D. R. Grimes (2016) points out that it is human nature for conspirators to leak information in the case of real conspiracies. Secrets are hard to keep due to human nature, but once the flaws in human nature are also doubled by technological weaknesses which allow for leaks or hacking, secrets become increasingly hard to handle. Moreover, the more time passes, the more likely people are to talk more freely about that secret, which is why, Grimes argues, it is not feasible to believe in long-standing conspiracy theories. If they had truly existed, they would have become evident.

8. Conspiracy theories form a *monological belief system* (Goertzel, 1994; Wood, Douglas & Sutton, 2012; Prooijen & van Lange, 2014). This means that each belief supports every other belief, and the more conspiracies a monological thinker believes, the more likely they are to believe new ones as well, regardless of their topic. As R. Brotherton (2015) further explains, the conspiracist mindset operates according to the slippery slope logic: if one conspiracy theory is true, it could become evidence for others being true. Wood, Douglas & Sutton (2012) and Douglas & Sutton (2018) have discovered the reason behind this. More precisely, the researchers discovered that this monological belief system is not determined by individual conspiracy theories, but by “agreement between individual theories and higher-order beliefs about the world” (Wood, Douglas & Sutton, 2012, p. 768), such as the idea that the authorities are deceptive and act against public good. Therefore, if a new conspiracy theory

is presented in which authorities are seen as being manipulative and secretive it is more easily accepted if the recipients already hold this belief, and, in this case, it will not matter if it contradicts another previously held conspiracy theory.

9. Conspiracy theories purport that people are not merely kept in the dark, they are being *actively fooled* by the authorities, as all appearances are misleading, and the elites do not have the people's best interests at heart. Official accounts are only meant to distract public attention from what powerful elites have actually planned, and their intentions are invariably evil and nefarious (Brotherton, 2015; Oliver & Wood, 2014).

As it can be seen from the characteristics of conspiracy theories identified in the literature, they are quite insidious in societies as they play and prey on the citizens' pre-existing beliefs, misconceptions, cognitive mechanisms, insecurities and anxieties and promote alternative, hard to disprove explanations to crises and shocking events which discredit official, scientifically proven explanations and narratives. The next section of the research focuses on three case studies, provides detailed accounts of the events that occurred and of the conspiracy theories that were generated as a basis for verifying if the characteristics in the literature can be identified in these particular cases, thus forming the basis for a discussion of means of countering conspiracy theories and their effects.

### **Case study 1 – the 5G technology global conspiracy**

As 5G technology started being deployed around the world in 2019, several strands of conspiracy theories began to appear. Stop5g groups, campaigns and sites have appeared in several European countries. Their messages are quite similar and revolve around three main focuses:

#### *a) The health impact of 5G technology*

According to conspiracy theorists, 5G technology affects the cells' DNA structure, causes various types of cancer, halts metabolism, affects eyesight, has neurological consequences, because of the increase in



frequency and wave length “which reaches the microscopic dimensions of tissues, cells and neurons and causes a series of extremely grave biological effects in absolutely all living organisms, by the phenomenon of resonance” (post Stop5gromania, 27 May 2019). Videos on stop5g webpages have titles such as: “where 5G was installed, birds and insects have disappeared”; “Testimonies about the malefic microwaves”.

Public figures are quoted as speaking out against 5G technologies and about its effects on human health, even if they simply voiced concerns and required further proof. One such example is the Belgian Environment minister, Céline Fremault, who declared "I cannot welcome such technology if the radiation standards, which must protect the citizen, are not respected, 5G or not. The people of Brussels are not guinea pigs whose health I can sell at a profit. We cannot leave anything to doubt" (The Brussels Time, 2019).

5G conspiracy theories emphasising its detrimental effects on the human body gained even more traction in 2020, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. As EUvsDisinfo monitored the situation, numerous sites in various countries, from Europe, to Russia, to Arab speaking countries promoted disinformation regarding the connection between the advent and spread of 5G technology and the appearance of the COVID-19 virus and its subsequent mutations.

#### *b) The environmental impact of 5G technology*

Videos on stop5g webpages have titles such as: “5G and dead birds”, “Dead tree in the proximity of 5G antennae”. Moreover, there was a signature collection campaign (signstop5g) which detailed the effects that 5G could have on the environment and why it should be stopped. Under the heading “destroying our environment” it mentions:

“With 5G the amount of connected electronic devices, antennas and satellites will explode. Unsustainable energy consumption, radiation emissions, harmful mining and pollution will follow, which will endanger biodiversity and natural habitats.”

The site goes further and mentions that several the reason the EU is considering accepting 5G technology is the lacunae in its own legislation such as:

“Why has 5G not been environmentally assessed? Because impacts of digitalization are exempt from environmental assessment in EU law.”

“Why are the Resource and Energy Waste not Considered? Because wireless electronic devices are not included in the current Ecodesign Directive...”.

“Does EU Classify Wireless as a Pollutant? No. But insurance companies do.”

These claims are closely linked to the idea that governments and international ruling bodies act against the citizens’ best interests, in an attempt to affect their well-being, as well as to bring prejudice to the environment, only to serve their own financial interests.

### *c) Government control and 5G technology*

This is one of the most prolific conspiracy theories related to 5G technology as it has several strands. One is connected to conspiracy theories regarding the COVID-19 pandemic and it states that the vaccines against COVID-19 also contain a microchip, linked to 5G networks, which can track the people’s movements and social behaviours and it will allow governments to control their citizens. Another conspiracy theory focuses on the idea that 5G technology allows for massive surveillance of the population, especially once it is doubled by the use of artificial intelligence. These two technologies will enable the massive collection of data and the manipulation of the oblivious public in the directions desired by the deep state and shadow governments. A more radical conspiracy theory states that 5G is actually part of a weapon system and it is only disguised as a technology in order to allow for its rapid spread. The 5G radiofrequency transmitters could be used as energy weapons, against targets ranging from people to assets.

All these conspiracy theories regarding 5G technology have had real life consequences as numerous arson attacks have taken place against telecom masts all over the world – 60 such attacks in the UK, 22 in Holland, three in Ireland, etc. (Cerulus, 2020). Moreover, public opinion surveys show that these conspiracy theories are very popular and that a large proportion of the public have at least heard of one form

of the conspiracies, and as many as 20% believed that 5G technology could have negative effects on their health (Sims, 2021).

As far as the traits that these conjoined conspiracy theories exhibit, our analysis has revealed the following: they are speculative and amateurish meaning that they are not based on an actual, scientific understanding of how 5G technology functions, but on assumptions and comparisons which do not follow objective criteria (e.g., comparing 5G technology to microwaves). These conspiracy theories are also contrarian because they do not acknowledge official and specialised explanations, provided by both scientists and policy-makers and they prefer to point out exceptions, such as one politician expressing their wish to consult the evidence in more detail or for more tests to be carried out. They are also premodern in their attempt to explain phenomena such as the disappearance of birds from an area or dead trees by linking them to 5G technology. The alternative amateurish explanations they propose are very complex, combing various obscure, distorted, convoluted and fringe scientific interpretations which their audiences do not necessarily understand but which mimic the language of actual scientific theories. These theories also claim to have uncovered a nefarious plot perpetrated by the deep state or the shadow governments whose aim is not only to actively fool, but also to exploit and mistreat the general unsuspecting, naïve public, and it is only these conspirators that are able to uncover them. Given the interweaving of 5G technology conspiracy theories with COVID-19 conspiracy theories, as well as with the overarching and self-sealing conspiracy theory regarding shadow governments or the deep state which controls everything and everyone in the world, we would argue that they are part of a monological belief system.

### **Case study 2 – The murder of Daphne Caruana Galizia**

Daphne Caruana Galizia was a very well-known Maltese reporter, editor, columnist and blogger. Her blog Running Commentary had a very high reach, comparable to the main media houses in Malta. Her continuous challenging of political power structures through her reporting on corruption, sleaze and crime, made her both liked and disliked by many (Borg, 2017). Throughout her career, Daphne Caruana Galizia received threats and was the target of several forms of

harassment because of her journalism. On 16 October 2017 Daphne was assassinated outside her home in Bidnija, Malta, by the triggering of an explosive device planted under her car seat. The investigation of her assassination further exposed the corruption of the government and institutions who were accused in a public inquiry of having created an atmosphere of impunity (Camilleri & Schembri, 2021).

A Maltese businessman, Yorgen Fenech was charged with having been the mastermind behind her assassination, but the trial is still ongoing. Three other people, Alfred and George Degiorgio and Vince Muscat were convicted of making, planting and detonating the car bomb that killed the journalist. In spite of the fact that the Police Commissioner has declared that all suspects in the case have been arrested and many of them have already been convicted, the case is still causing many controversies.

One such controversy is the conspiracy theory developed by Simon Mercieca, an Associate Professor at the University of Malta who employs his blog *Simon Mercieca's FreePress* to share a number of fake news and conspiracy theories on a wide variety of subjects, ranging from Maltese politics to COVID-19. According to him, Yorgen Fenech is innocent, while Daphne's assassination was organised by her husband (Peter Caruana Galizia) and her son (Matthew Caruana Galizia). According to his theory, the Caruana Galizia family is "hampering the investigation process and the court's operations so that the whole truth behind Daphne Caruana Galizia's murder will never be known. To achieve this scope, main witnesses of the prosecution, including Matthew Caruana Galizia are using the media and giving interviews to siphon issues to fit their agenda and condition the public" (Mercieca, 2021a).

Mercieca's theory has all the usual characteristics of conspiracy theories. Firstly, it is speculative. There is no actual evidence that the Caruana Galizia family is hampering the court's operations, nor that they have in any way deceived the prosecution or the public. Mercieca claims that Daphne's son, Matthew, decided to take the law into his hands and destroy potential key evidence, albeit there was never any official information to support this claim. The key word in this theory is potential. Mercieca's theory relies on conclusions which are drawn based on circumstantial evidence, offering an explanation that is different from

the official media reports and from the evidence presented in court. This leads to the second conspiracy theory characteristic – it is contrarian. Mercieca capitalises on the fact that the Maltese public is still divided on the subject of Daphne’s assassination, with some groups arguing that the investigation and prosecution have not been carried out in the most transparent and efficient manner. However, instead of aligning himself with those who sought justice for the journalist’s assassination and her family, his conspiracy theory argues the opposite that while justice has not been served the victim has been the Maltese businessman accused of murdering Daphne Caruana Galizia, namely Yorgen Fenech. He claims that Daphne’s family have intentionally hindered the investigation and sought to gain money from the investigation, by putting the blame on a well-known Maltese businessman. Moreover, he argues that Daphne’s family didn’t put pressure on the authorities to bring Yorgen Fenech to justice, in the hope that as more time passes they will be able to build the case on false information and hide traces that could lead back to them (Mercieca, 2021b). This argument goes against official information and ignores existence evidence gathered in the case and presented during the criminal trial, including the testimonies of the people convicted for making, planting and detonating the car bomb that killed the journalist. Instead, the theory develops a scenario of demonization, whereby the real “malevolent forces” involved in the case are Daphne’s family, who not only harmed Daphne but are now harming Yorgen Fenech and the Maltese society in general.

This conspiracy theory shows how, by taking a complex situation, one may very easily build a theory that will be widely spread on the premise of a simplistic, premodern view assigning intentionality to Daphne’s family to not only harm her but the whole Maltese society. This conspiracy theory is built around self-sealing conclusions, built on information taken out of context, which makes it hard to refute and essentially self-sealing. Moreover, the conspiracy theories are monological, built one upon another, as in Mercieca uses the idea of “malevolent forces” seeking to discredit him (e.g. they would say that, wouldn’t they?) as an argument against all criticism received in relation to the other ideas promoted. This can also be seen as an indicator that he

does not have any other counter-arguments/evidence that he can bring in support of his theories.

### **Case Study 3 – Conspiracy theories on the August 17 terrorist attacks**

On August 17, 2017, the worst terrorist attacks in Spain, since the Madrid train bombings of March 2004, took place in the Catalanian towns of Barcelona and Cambrils, with 16 deaths and more than 120 wounded (RTVE, 2017). The attacks temporarily coincided with preparations for the 1 October illegal referendum conducted by Catalanian secessionist parties and the Catalanian local administration.

In this context, some national and local news media, together with pro-independence political actors introduced the idea of a covert participation of Spanish intelligence in the attacks. The conspiracy theory was compounded by the decision made by the highest Spanish court (Audiencia Nacional) that rejected the request made by one of the victims' lawyers (and pro-secessionist member of the Catalanian parliament) to investigate the alleged connections. These two events led to the creation of the basis of a contrarian explanatory theory.

This conspiracy theory has had different versions but in essence all of its iterations attribute the responsibility of the attack to the Spanish state through its intelligence services. Sometimes, alternative, speculative theories point out to direct implication, but other versions of this conspiracy theory authorities and security services are accused of negligence and lack of action when counting with intelligence on the impending attacks. As far-fetched as it may appear, this malicious narrative can be captured in the following sentence: "The sewer of the state work to harm Catalonia" (*El Pais*, 2012).

It is easy to note the similarity of this conspiracy theory to those related to the "Deep state" that have circulated in other countries.

**Description of the facts:** The events began on August 17, 2017 on the Paseo de Las Ramblas in Barcelona where at 5:00 p.m. a van ran into a crowd of passers-by. On board was a single driver who managed to flee. Hours later, the Islamic State claimed responsibility for the attack

through the Amaq news agency. During the early morning of August 18, in the nearby town of Cambrils (Tarragona), another vehicle broke into the promenade, and ran over five pedestrians and a policeman. The vehicle was intercepted, and the terrorists shot dead (*El Mundo Internacional*, 2017).

These events were connected to the explosion of the previous day (August 16) in a house of Alcanar (Tarragona, Spain). Two people died because of those explosions, including Abdelbaki Es Satty, leader of the cell and imam of Ripoll as it was later discovered. Another terrorist who was later tried for the attacks was wounded (*El Mundo Internacional*, 2017). According to the instructions carried out and the content of the judicial sentence, a large attack with “van bombs” was being prepared in the Alcanar house. The explosion precipitated the subsequent attack in the Ramblas, and Cambrils since there was an ongoing police investigation and perpetrators knew they might get arrested (Jones, 2021).

**Origin of the conspiracy theory:** On 16 July 2019, almost two years after the attacks, a well-known Spanish digital newspaper published the results of a journalistic investigation reporting alleged evidence on the fact that the terrorist cell was being surveilled by Spanish intelligence and that the Imam of Ripoll was a human source for the Spanish National Intelligence Centre (CNI) (Bayo, 2019). The journalistic pieces included images of a hypothetical surveillance report prepared by the Spanish intelligence, as well as the messages allegedly exchanged between the imam and the service through the dead drop system (Bueno & Carranco, 2019).

This conspiracy theory also exhibits several of the traits previously detailed. It is contrarian since it goes against the official explanation of the events and against the terrorists’ own claim to responsibility. It is also amateurish as it substitutes intelligence expertise with that of journalists in claiming to have found evidence regarding the real perpetrators. This is complemented by the untraceable nature of the conspiracy theory which argues that the deep state, which controls intelligence services, has fabricated the official explanations in an attempt to hide its own involvement and it is actively fooling the unsuspecting citizens. This conspiracy theory is also premodern, as in the absence of all pieces of

information, something not unusual in criminal and intelligence research, different actors, sometimes with political interests, fill the gaps with unsupported assumptions.

Our analysis of the three case studies, based on documents, articles, posts, blogs, and videos freely available online, has verified that the three conspiracy theories exhibit several of the characteristics presented in the literature, as table 1 shows.

**Table 1.** Characteristics of the analysed conspiracy theories (authors' idea)

	<b>Conspiracy theories traits</b>	<b>5G technology global conspiracy</b>	<b>The murder of Daphne Caruana Galizia</b>	<b>August 17 terrorist attacks in Spain</b>
1	Speculative	X	X	X
2	Contrarian	X	X	X
3	Amateurish	X		X
4	Premodern	X	X	X
5	Self-sealing Self-sustaining	X	X	X
6	Complex	X		
7	Untraceable	X	X	X
8	Monological	X	X	
9	People are actively fooled	X	X	X

All three conspiracy theories analysed exhibit most of the characteristics identified in the literature. The 5G technology conspiracy theory reunites several complementary conspiracy theories and it is, therefore, the most complex of them all. The other two refer to particular events and our analysis did not focus on how they have been appropriated into other, more expansive conspiracy theories, which explains why they lack features such as monologicality.

The characteristics that they have in common prove that conspiracy theories go against official, scientifically proven explanations,



in an attempt to eliminate the inherent complexity and randomness of events and to provide easily understandable explanations that can give people a sense of control over the world. They all start from the belief that a nefarious elite, acting in its own self-serving interests, controls the world events, without leaving visible signs of their involvement and with no regard or respect for the ordinary people that their actions may negatively impact.

The fact that conspiracy theories are based on this ingrained belief and that they are formed by speculations and amateurish, conjectural data makes them particularly hard to counter and raises the question of what could be done to extract people from the rabbit hole of conspiracist thinking and involve them in informed, educated public debates, based on accurate facts and information. The next section of this research is aimed at identifying the possible solutions to this question which has implications for the well-being of democratic societies.

### **Countering conspiracy theories**

The need to counter conspiracy theories stems from the fact that their effects on society are grave. They challenge truth, and consensual truth matters greatly in a society as it is the foundation on which constructive and progressive dialogue is built. Without such dialogue, democratic societies at least are thwarted in their development by the polarization of the citizens who find themselves unable or unwilling to interact with others who have diverging opinions. If there is no common denominator of understanding and no common reference points, then debate becomes impossible, and arguments deteriorate into quarrels. All aspects of societal knowledge and function can be affected by conspiracy theories: science is altered when people believe that scientists are actually corrupted representatives of big corporations, the democratic processes suffer when people exercise their voting rights based on conspiracy theories and not facts and data, society is harmed when policies are enacted not based on knowledge but on conspiratorial beliefs, international relations suffer when disinformation outweighs facts and real events.

As dangerous as they are, the main challenges regarding conspiracy theories stem from the fact that they are difficult to counter.

Despite the fact that their consequences for society are perilous indeed, they also appear very resistant to being debunked. Researchers into the field are unanimous in their assessment that effective debunking strategies of conspiracy theories should be multifaceted and include both a political and an intellectual dimension (Cassam, 2021) to which others argue that an emotional component should also be attached as conspiracy theories reflect identity forming beliefs and, therefore, supporters are likely to feel aggrieved when facing counterarguments.

1. The *intellectual* dimension of a debunking strategy should focus on constantly rebutting the theories, by telling the truth. The truth may not dissuade die-hard conspiracy theorists, but may make it clear for the undecided that the conspiracy theory does not actually account for the events as they took place. West (2018) explains that rebuttal should be reinforced by the constant reference to the trustworthiness (or lack thereof) of the sources that conspiracy theorists gather their information from. If the source can be shown to be wrong on any account, then they might begin to question its reliability on all accounts. Moreover, conspiracy theorists should be exposed to new, accurate information constantly, so as to challenge their beliefs and possibly make them reassess them.

2. The *political* dimension of the debunking strategy should focus on exposure of any political interests the conspiracy theory might be serving, thus proving that it is part of political propaganda and not the truth. The ideological component of the conspiracy theory should be revealed and criticized, and people should be made aware of the fact that the respective theories are merely a political tool for a certain interested party to attain a benefit. Vermeule & Sustain (2009) explain that in order not to trigger a backfire effect and make a conspiracy theory even more popular during attempts to debunk it, authorities should not focus on debunking one particular such theory, but rather an ensemble of such theories, more precisely their points of commonality. Moreover, education with respect to debunking conspiracy theories and any form of disinformation should start as early as possible so as to prepare future citizens with the instruments they need to accurately assess the information they are presented with, and separate facts from lies and misconceptions.

3. West (2018) provides a *personal* interaction dimension to the strategy of debunking conspiracy theories. He proposes three steps that could be undertaken to this end:

- a) Maintain effective dialogue which means that the debunker needs to understand what the conspiracy theorists are thinking and why, to be polite, respectful, open, to attempt to find common ground so as to validate their concerns if not their manifestations. Aggressive behaviour will sever all lines of communication and have the backfire effect of actually strengthening conspiracy theorists' views.
- b) Supply useful information which could counter the backfire effect, by showing the conspiracy theorists what mistakes they have made, why their sources may not be reliable, what information about the topic they missed, and what other details on the topic are available, thus helping them gain perspective.
- c) Give it time means that the change cannot and does not take place immediately, and that patience and reiteration are required.

Of these three stages, arguably the most important is to build back common ground. As previously mentioned, the greatest challenge with conspiracy theories is that they erode the common ground vitally important for communication and progress in a society. A polarized society cannot reach consensus on anything, as dialogue is impossible with no common framework of understanding of how the world functions. Dennett (2014) offers a three-step process to enable the rebuilding of common ground:

- a) Re-express the conspiracy theorists' position better than they do themselves, based on the principle of charity. This means that by restating the argument even better than initially presented, the debunker proves understanding, does the work to make the conspiracist details actually work, so that when the flaws are revealed, the conspiracy theorists are more likely to listen to them because they come from a person who understood them and what they were saying, that had built common ground.

- b) List points of agreement, especially uncommon points, through a gradual exploratory process, that will slowly and patiently take the debunker through the arguments, until such commonalities are identified. They could be specific or general, but they are almost always there, and they once more set a stable common ground from which to start. If in the respective conspiracy theory none such points could be identified, then another more uncontroversial topic could be explored so as to have the needed starting point of agreement.
- c) Mention anything that you have learned from the conspiracy theorists as this increase rapport, proves that real communication has taken place, and thus common ground is reinforced. This step might also include a validation of the conspiracy theorists' genuine concerns so that they feel heard and understood, rather than high-handedly dismissed.

Vermeule & Sunstein (2009) also suggest a more radical and somewhat difficult to implement tactic for breaking up the hard core of extremists who supply conspiracy theories: "cognitive infiltration of extremist groups, whereby government agents or their allies (acting either virtually or in real space, and either openly or anonymously) will undermine the crippled epistemology of believers by planting doubts about the theories and stylized facts that circulate within such groups, thereby introducing beneficial cognitive diversity" (Vermeule & Sunstein, 2009, p. 219). However, this would be a very dangerous tactic to apply, because if the infiltrated agent were to be uncovered, then the group would take it as further proof that there is a governmental conspiracy at work, which would radicalize their belief in the conspiracy theory even further.

There are no silver bullets when it comes to countering conspiracy theories. In any given situation, a combination of the above-analysed debunking strategies, adapted to the characteristics of particular conspiracy theories. The more complex a conspiracy theory is, the more strategies will need to be employed at more levels, ranging from the personal to the intellectual.

## Conclusion

The present research was aimed, firstly, at identifying and analysing the characteristics of conspiracy theories in the literature with a view to understanding their appeal and rapid dissemination. Secondly, three case studies were selected and examined in order to verify that they exhibit the traits identified and how they evolved. The end goal of the case study analysis is to provide a clearer image of what conspiracy theories are, what most prominent characteristics are and to turn these elements into building blocks for raising public awareness with respect to the inner mechanisms of conspiracy theories and for building societal resilience. To this end, the last section of the research focused on methods of countering conspiracy theories which are applicable at several societal levels, starting from the personal and increasing in range to the intellectual.

Debunking conspiracy theories may be difficult and very time-consuming, however, it is more needed than ever, as people seem more likely than ever to hide in their respective bubbles and break all forms of communication with anyone who disagrees with them. Such polarization, not solely along political lines, but also along understanding of facts and relation to reality, can only lead to dysfunctional societies.

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