

Call for Proposals for contributions to an edited volume

Discourses of and about Conspiracy Theories

Ed. by Ruth Breeze, Massimiliano Demata, Virginia Zorzi and Angela Zottola

Conspiracy theories (CTs) seem to be having a growing influence on public opinion in many countries. A CT is “an effort to explain some event or practice by reference to the machinations of powerful people, who attempt to conceal their role” (Sunstein & Vermeule 2009). In other words, conspiracy theorists lay out a distorted representation of the world in which we are constantly being exploited and oppressed for the benefit of powerful groups. CTs are fed by misinformation and fake news and find a very favourable terrain in the Internet and especially in social media, where Facebook and Twitter have had a major role in spreading CTs and misinformation. While CTs are not new, the current age of “post-truth” or “the death of truth” has given new impetus to a set of increasingly powerful and popular counter-discourses opposing the hegemonic mass media, political institutions, the “elites” and official science.

CTs construct a counter-reality and a set of alternative explanations of complex problems, ranging from health issues (e.g. 5G, anti-vaxxers), weather control and climate (chemtrails, climate change deniers), economy and the state infrastructure (the New World Order, the “deep state”). Those who believe in CTs oppose the validity of mainstream science, the discourse of “official” media and state institutions, and employ discursive strategies based on highly emotional language and the construction of conflictual social identities.

CTs are also used as political tools, and are routinely used by some political parties as part of their agenda based on finding scapegoats for social or economic problems (Richardson 2013; Ter Wal 2017; Wodak 2020). Populist parties and leaders use CTs as a means to mobilize people against the elite or an outside enemy and explain the elite’s oppression of the people (Bergmann 2018; Bergmann and Butter 2020). The recent outbreak of COVID-19 has witnessed the rise of numerous CTs which supported accounts and explanations about the pandemic outside (and against) official science and mass media, even though most of them lack any hard evidence and often consist in totally exaggerated or implausible claims, which have been used with political motivations, for example to attack China.

Discourses of and about Conspiracy Theories aims to fill an important gap in the literature: CTs have attracted considerable attention from political scientists (e.g. Uscinski 2019), but there has been little extensive research done on the actual discourses and language of CTs, or those opposing them, by using the approaches developed by Discourse Analysis or Critical Discourse Analysis. We are looking for chapters focusing on the discourse of the currently most popular CTs (including those about the COVID-19 pandemic) as elaborated by three groups of social actors:

- 1) the “manufacturers” of CTs;
- 2) the “supporters” of CTs;
- 3) the “opponents” of CTs.

The focus of single chapters may be national, transnational or comparative. Issues may include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Discursive strategies of Self-Legitimization and Delegitimization (i.e. CTs attacking official media, institutions or science, or viceversa)
- Online discourses
- Emotions and violence in language
- Argumentation
- Humour in or against CTs
- Multimodal strategies in discourses of and against CTs

Abstracts for chapters (200 words plus references) should be received by 30 June 2020. An international publisher has expressed strong interest in this volume, and we will submit the full proposal to them after selection of abstracts. Confirmation of acceptance will be by 15 July 2020, and chapters will be due by 31 December 2020. We plan to have the book published by early 2022.

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