Mark Andrejevic (*Monash University*) and Christopher O'Neill (*Monash University*)

›Das ende seiner kareer?‹ Idios-y and sensus communis in German Facebook Scams

Abstract

Der Beitrag untersucht in einer Fallstudie zur deutschen Facebook-Werbung über Krypto-Currency-Börsen den Zusammenhang zwischen Verschwörungstheorien, rechtsextremem Populismus und Onlinebetrug. In Anschluss an Hannah Arendts Auseinandersetzung mit Kants politischer Theorie soll gezeigt werden, wie Verschwörungstheorien von der gleichen Krise der Wahrnehmung profitieren wie etwa die Verfahren eines kommerziellen Populismus, der von einer dubiosen Werbepraxis finanziert wird. Wie gestaltet sich der Gemeinschaftssinn *(senus communis)* heute unter neoliberalen Voraussetzungen und der automatisierten Personalisierung von Nachrichten und Unterhaltung? Im Abschluss soll die Frage untersucht werden, in welcher Weise laut Alenka Zupančič Verschwörungstheorien als Unbewusstsein des gegenwärtigen Kapitalismus dienen.

Schlüsselbegriffe

Verschwörungstheorie, Konspiritualität, Kryptowährung, Betrug, kommerzieller Populismus

Keywords

conspiracy theory, conspirituality, cryptocurrency, scams, commercial populism

I.

It is telling that right-wing resistance to collective public health measures during the COVID-19 pandemic coalesced around debunked treatments like Ivermectin, an anti-parasitic drug, and hydroxychloroquine, an antimalarial. In keeping with a longer history of conservative commercial hucksterism, these alleged miracle cures were promoted precisely because they were rejected by a medical establishment allegedly subservient to »big

Pharma's« greed for vaccine revenues (Schraer/Goodman). Vaccines themselves bore the taint of collective responsibility and thus the seemingly burdensome claim of the public good upon individual autonomy. The right-wing resistance to claims made in the name of public responsibility upon the sanctity of the individual body was literalised in the form of conspiracies about microchips implanted via COVID-19 vaccinations. Public health was equated with public control and potentially debilitating miracle cures with liberty.

These tropes have a longer history that combines scepticism toward government programs with the use of conspiracy theories as marketing appeals in right-wing media. In the early 2000s, for example, ads for cheap, readily accessible cures supposedly suppressed by the medical establishment were a staple of online right-wing media outlets such as *Human Events* and *World Net Daily*. The ads promoted miracle cures and get-rich-quick schemes by mobilising a conspiratorial form of social critique. According to this critique, social ills were the results of economic and political elites hoarding the secret to health and wealth so as to keep the populace mired in conditions of fear and insecurity. The populist element of this critique lies in its displacement of structural pathologies onto elites and outsiders rather than, for example, the ›impersonal‹ dynamic of capital or contemporary biopolitical governance. This is an emphasis that, in the current context, helps to distinguish conspiracy theory from critique (along with other factors including non-falsifiability and a refusal to adhere to established standards of evidence and reasoning).

In this paper we draw upon a series of scam ads collected from Facebook to elaborate on this distinction, and to consider the way in which conspiracy theory functions not simply as, in Fredric Jameson's words, »the poor person's cognitive mapping in the postmodern age« (Jameson, 356) but also as an idiotic version of critique, where idiocy is invoked »in the sense suggested by Marx and Engel's use of the German term ›Idiotismus‹ in the classical sense (from the Greek word *idiotai*) to mean: ›a private person, withdrawn from public (communal) concerns, apolitical in the original sense of ›isolation from the larger community‹« (Attoh, 198 – internal quotes are from Draper, 220).[1]

1 Here we mark too a distinction between this classical critical sense of the term and the history of the epithet in eugenicist discourse (see Devlieger; Jarrett; Philo).

Conspiracy theory functions as critique in the wake of the decline of the ›efficiency‹ of social institutions and practices of judgement. In this respect, we might describe it as symptomatic of the suppression of a community sense – in the Kantian version of *sensus communis* invoked by Hannah Arendt in her lectures on political theory (Arendt). Or, as Mark Featherstone puts it, »the obscure politics of conspiracy theory re-stage the ideologies of monadic independence and their fatal attempt to deny the phenomenological reality of human sociability« (Featherstone, 43). In this respect, »conspiracy theory represents an attempt to compensate for the repression of sociability« (31). The compensatory gesture to this repression, we argue, can be discerned in what has been described as ›conspirituality‹ – the combination of conspiracy theory with an explicit gesture toward a New Age spirituality that offers up a reconfigured form of non-cognitive ›participation‹ – an affective form of compensatory sociality that manages to evade the communicative demands of the *sensus communis*.

To develop this argument, we situate contemporary scam ads within the context of right-wing populist advertising to set the stage for a close reading of a series of scam ads that appeared to German Facebook users. These ads form part of an international marketing strategy that follows a standardised format, but substitutes pirated and faked images of local celebrity ›endorsers‹ in each country to attract clicks and provide a veneer of credibility. We conclude with a consideration of the ways in which ›idiotic‹ critique reinforces the structures whose pathologies it allegedly addresses. The result, as Alenka Zupančič observes, is that »elites and conspiracy theorists often function in a strange complicity« (Zupančič, 4).

II. What the elites aren't telling you

As the historian Rich Perlstein notes, the current version of right-wing commercial populism has roots in the conservative political movements of the 20th century (cf. Perlstein, 23). His account focuses on the rise of target marketing (for fund-raising) as a campaign strategy pioneered on the political right – a strategy that was, from the start, something of a con. Perlstein notes that the pioneer of political direct mailing, Richard Viguerie, started a company that benefited himself much more than his political clients. As Perlstein puts it: »It brought the message of the New Right to the masses, but it kept nearly all the revenue streams locked down in

Viguerie's proprietary control. Here was a key to the hustle: typically, only 10 to 15 percent of the haul went to the intended beneficiaries« (25).

The political agenda and the profiteering went hand-in-hand, setting the model for contemporary versions of right-wing commercial populism, ranging from Trump to George Santos in the US, and also including media figures like Boris Johnson in England and Berlusconi in Italy. Donald Trump's long career in branding positioned him uniquely to exploit the rise of commercial forms of populism – as evidenced by the multiple family business dealings that benefited from his time as president, ranging from his hotels to Jared Kushner's real estate deals, Ivanka Trump's fashion brand and Melania Trump's sale of commemorative ›non-fungible-tokens‹ – some of which violated NASA's policy of not using its public domain images for profit (Broadwater; Rabie; Swan et al.). According to Trump's erstwhile ›fixer‹ Michael Cohen, Trump's political career began as a marketing exercise gone awry: »Mr. Trump would often say this campaign was going to be the greatest infomercial in political history […] He never expected to win the primary. He never expected to win the general election. The campaign for him was always a marketing opportunity« (Samuels).

The commercial venture was successful enough to land him in the most powerful political office in the country – perhaps the result of a long-cultivated relationship between right-wing ideological outlets and the commercialisation of politics. The commercialisation process has a structural political bias toward the right, insofar as the displacement of civic commitments and identities with consumerist ones backgrounds collective commitments and societal interdependence to privilege more narrowly individualistic tastes and preferences. The subject of commercial populism is one who views the political landscape through the lens of the entitled consumer for whom the claims of others burden personal autonomy.

There is, consequently, an affinity between the economic instrumentalisation of politics and the commercial populism of the right-wing mediasphere. As *New York Times* columnist Paul Krugman observes, »right-wing extremism isn't just an ideological movement that happens to get a lot of money from sellers of snake oil; some of its extremism can probably be seen […] as a way of promoting snake oil« (Krugman). As a range of commentators have noted, right wing media outlets and personalities rely heavily on contemporary versions of ›snake oil‹ for economic sustenance. Alex Jones' notorious *InfoWars* site, for example, profits from the sales of re-branded supplements with names like »Infowars Life

Brain Force Plus, Infowars Life Super Male Vitality, Infowars Live Liver Shield and an array of similar potations« (Sparrow). Right-wing tabloid publications like *Town Hall*, *Human Events*, and *The American Prospect*, have marketed products including »The 23-cent Heart Miracle« and »INSTANT INTERNET INCOME« (»put an end to your financial worries […] permanently erase your debts […] pay cash for the things you want […] create a secure, enjoyable retirement for yourself« (cf. Perlstein, 24). The ads invoke a sense of imminent threat and future crisis: the uncertainties faced by those who feel buffeted by life's events and thus out of control of their world. At the same time, the ads carry undertones of conspiracy theory: health and wealth are within arm's reach, blocked only by vested interests seeking to control the population. The ideological work they do is to dismiss the need for collective solutions like public health care because diseases including hypertension and cancer can be miraculously and inexpensively cured by simple solutions strategically concealed from the masses. There is a subtext of conspiracy in such formulations: the easy path to health and wealth has been concealed by economic and political elites in order to more effectively control the population. The problem lies not in the economic or social system, but in the abuses of this shadowy cadre.

It is perhaps a sign of the times that such appeals become increasingly widespread on commercial social media, which, thanks to strategies of personalisation, reinforce the hypertrophied individualism of the political right. As the response to the COVID-19 pandemic in the US indicated, a reflexive form of conspiracism is the hallmark of the right-wing response to the call for collective action. This response bears out Featherstone's description of conspiracy theory as a reaction formation to the repression or recession of the social.

The online mainstreaming of more extreme versions of right-wing populism (Greven) combined with related forms of hyper-individualist New Age conspirituality (see, for example, McLaughlin) have led to the wider circulation of conspiracist commercial messaging, which has become a familiar staple of third-tier news and entertainment sites online. The clickbait appeal they pioneered has become, in particular, the model for a recent spate of reported crypto-currency and other investment scams.

We repeatedly encountered such ads in a database of more than 700,000 ads collected through the Australian Ad Observatory Project, which invited volunteers to install a browser extension that collected the sponsored content they encountered while using Facebook on a desktop or laptop

computer. We were struck by the prevalence of a range of ads for easy-money scams, which apparently constitute a reliable, if legally suspect, source of income for the platform. Of particular interest was the recurring clickbait formula of these ads, which featured fake images of well-known public figures being arrested or condemned for letting slip the poorly kept secrets of political and economic elites. Drawing on Meta's ad library, we learned that the ads we collected in Australia formed part of a global network of ads for sham cryptocurrency exchanges – or perhaps one exchange.

The scam exchange(s) used different names, landing pages, and celebrity endorsers – but often the same headlines and promotional text. The ads were localised for national audiences with purloined and faked images of celebrity endorsers. In Australia, for example, a key figure was that of David Koch, a financial journalist, news presenter, and mid-level media personality. The use of his image by cryptocurrency scammers became so widespread that it reached meme status. The scam ads tap into Koch's status as a well-known media figure who has built a career on providing consumer financial advice. His was not the only celebrity image that appeared in the ads – we came across similar ads for cryptocurrency trading platforms featuring prominent Australian figures including tennis player Ash Barty and the mining magnate Andrew ›Twiggy‹ Forrest. In more global terms, Elon Musk was a recurring figure in the scam ads – indeed, he has become a staple figure in a range of online scams for instant wealth opportunities and miracle cures for dementia and memory loss (Liles; Graham). Musk's own conspiracist tendencies position him well to play the role of the rebel billionaire leaking the secrets of the power elite.

Using key phrases from the scam ads we collected in Australia, we were able to unearth a similar set of German language ads using the same formula but drawing on German media figures. That such a series of tropes can be so easily and smoothly repurposed for a German media audience is perhaps an artifact of the scammers' imperative towards efficiency in their own conspiracy. But at the same time, such interoperability indexes the way that the scam, the conspiracy, and the tropes of conspirituality, have taken on a certain kind of universal resonance in a ›glocalised‹ media economy. Certainly the ›modular‹ or even ›cut and paste‹ quality of the scam does not seem to inhibit its apparent success – German and Austrian authorities have warned of the growing threat of fake celebrity endorsed crypto schemes, echoing police warnings elsewhere (see Bundesministerium für Inneres).

In the following section, we consider how the clickbait appeal of these German ads draws on conspiracist tropes that reproduce some of the symptoms of what Featherstone describes as »an obscure attempt to understand the reality of sociability from the myopic perspective of a non-social political ideology« (Featherstone, 43). We are particularly interested in the fate of social critique attempted in the register of a consumerist individualism – one that suppresses the fundamentally social character of the political. We follow this section with an analysis of what we describe as ›idiotic critique‹ which takes the form of a crisis of ›common sense‹ in the terms outlined by Arendt (Arendt). We conclude with a consideration of conspiracy as the ›unconscious‹ of the online surveillance economy.

III. »This scandal ended his career«

The ads we collected from the Facebook ad library featured images of a celebrity or media figure with a headline indicating that their career was in jeopardy or that they had created a scandal by letting slip a secret during an interview when they did not realise the microphone and the camera were still on (see fig. 1). Based on what we learned from the collection of Australian ads, we searched using a combination of these phrases. The most common celebrities appearing in the German ads included TV presenters Stefan Raab, Günther Jauch, Carsten Maschmeyer, and Barabra Schöneberger (Barbara von Schierstädt née Schöneberger), as well as comedian Kurt Krömer, journalist/TV host Anne Gellinek, and Austrian journalist and TV anchor Armin Wolf. The ads were served from a variety of Facebook pages, some of which were apparently hacked. The ad links in many cases no longer worked, suggesting that the landing pages for the scams site had been banned, blocked or had moved on. We were able, however, to capture the text from the landing pages for the ads by doing a web search for key terms. We draw on the text of the extended scam appeals in order to consider the ways they link together a particular aesthetic with forms of populist critique that align with the longer history of the advertisements' characteristic of far-right online publications, as elaborated by Perlstein, Krugman, and Sparrow.

A. Populist cognitive mapping and ›idiotic‹ critique

The scam ad featuring television personality Stefan Raab included a faked image of him being led off by police, with a caption referencing a scandal that »shocked the whole world« – one possibly leading to the end of his career (fig. 2). The ad has a supermarket tabloid feel, mobilising a clickbait appeal and a somewhat clumsily photoshopped image. The landing page, allegedly a journalistic account from a (fake) newspaper called *Time Business News* (fig. 3) features a long narrative coupled with testimonials about a cryptocurrency trading platform operating under the names »Immediate Edge«, »Qumas AI«, »Quantum AI«, and various other aliases. The scenario outlined in the promotional material is that of a renegade celebrity letting slip a secret that incurs the wrath of the government and the Bundesbank. Raab is described as »being a cool character who has no problem talking about how he actually makes money« (Index Universe Crypto) – in other words, someone willing to buck the authorities to bring the secret of wealth to the masses during an interview on the TV show *Late Night Berlin* with presenter Klaas Heufer-Umlauf. During the alleged interview, »Raab called on all Germans to take advantage of this great opportunity before the major banks close it forever. And sure enough, shortly after the interview ended, a representative of the German Bundesbank called to stop Heufer-Umlauf's interview – but it was already too late« (Index Universe Crypto). Scepticism toward a platform offering instant wealth – one that promises to »build a small fortune in a flash« – is framed as a timid response to a subversive intervention: »Because it's so different, a lot of people are hesitant. Others don't even dare because big banks try to cover it up and portray it as illegal. Major banks are actively advocating against cryptocurrencies and platforms like Immediate Edge, saying it is a scam« (Index Universe Crypto). They are doing so, according to this account, not to protect consumers but to control them: »they are worried that their corporate profits will shrink when customers can generate massive wealth for themselves« (Index Universe Crypto).

The ad goes on to provide a personal testimonial, allegedly from an editor at the fake *Times Business News* who was facing financial hardship: »When I saw the program with Stefan Raab, I thought he was joking. Earning money from home is just a dream. I decided to give it a try anyway, because of my personal situation – and for the sake of good journalism« (Index Universe Crypto). At first the editor was, as a good journalist, sceptical, but then the Euros started rolling into his trading account. Within a week,

he was allegedly making more than his journalist salary: »I have to pinch myself every time to make sure I'm not dreaming […] I have planned a family vacation to Bali to celebrate in a small group that we are no longer in debt and that our financial situation is back on track!« (Index Universe Crypto).

The scam advertising copy performs the elementary ideological gesture of invoking an actual problem as the background for a false resolution. In so doing, it sounds a note of critique: a reminder that economic inequality and hardship persist in an affluent society that should have sufficient resources for all. On the one hand, there are figures like Raab whose wealth and status are framed as sources of happiness and ease – on the other are cash-strapped workers with whom the reader is invited to identify. The synergy between right-wing populism and conspiracy theory lies in the explanation for this discrepancy. In both cases, the explanation is framed not in terms of the economic structures of capitalism but rather in terms of a shady cabal of power-hungry elites. Without their machinations, everyone in a prosperous society like Germany could be well off. As the philosopher Slavoj Žižek puts it, »for a populist, the cause of the troubles is ultimately never the system as such but the intruder who corrupted it« (Žižek, 555). Raab's career is in jeopardy precisely because he let slip the formula to universal wealth, undermining the scheme to control the population through economic deprivation and *immiseration*. As the grateful editor of the *Times Business News* put it, »[t]his would not have been possible without the courage and generosity of Mr. Raab in broadcasting the whole thing on TV. And I'm overjoyed that I took the risk to try out the Immediate Edge for myself. My wife can finally laugh again and my children have a bulging toy closet« (Index Universe Crypto).

Another key figure who emerged in the scam dataset is the celebrity entrepreneur Carsten Maschmeyer – a panellist, among other media commitments, on the German iteration of the ›Shark Tank‹/›Dragon's Den‹ franchise, *Die Höhle der Löwen*, in which Maschmeyer and a group of other entrepreneurs evaluate various business pitches and make the decision to either reject particular proposals or to invest in them for a share of the fledgling enterprise's equity. Maschmeyer's wealth and celebrity cachet position him as an obvious figure for the scam formula we have identified, especially considering his quasi-mythologised role on *Die Höhle der Löwen* as an angel investor – characterised by a privileged knowledge of the market and the world of finance, with the capacity to ›make dreams come true‹ through his decision to invest or not in contestants' schemes (cf.

Kiersey). In the Meta ad library, Maschmeyer's ›scam‹ avatar is presented cheek-by-jowl with ostensibly ›legitimate‹ invocations of his authority. The German Federal Association of Young Entrepreneurs (advertising as *Die Jungen Unternehmer*) have for example recently publicised the success of several of their members who appeared as judges and contestants on *Die Höhle der Löwen* – grinning alongside a beaming Maschmeyer, the ads proclaim that the projects supported by the program will »bring young talents and top companies together« and »help with the issue of skilled labour shortages« (see fig. 4).

There is a curious dialectic at play here – while the ›legitimate‹ ads gesture toward the benefits of a well-functioning market economy driven by the entrepreneurial spirit of small business owners, the scam ads head off in the direction of conspiracy theories about economic and social ›elites‹. In both cases the broader structural failings and contradictions of the market are elided. In deflecting critique away from underlying social structures, populist conspiracy theory does the work of reproducing the social conditions it purports to alleviate. This is the substance of Jameson's description of conspiracy theory, as »the poor person's cognitive mapping […] it is the degraded figure of the total logic of late capital, a desperate attempt to represent the latter's system« (Jameson, 356). Because it repeatedly misses its target it is endlessly generative, resulting »in a seemingly inexhaustible production of conspiracy plots of the most elaborate kinds« (356).

But there is another sense in which conspiracy theory bears the mark of impoverishment: it speaks to the breakdown of the institutions and practices for judgment – for the formation of what Arendt, following Kant, refers to as a *sensus communis*. It is in this respect that we might describe the conspiracy theory as an ›idiotic‹ form of critique, in the sense of referring to a withdrawal from civic and communal life. Following Draper, Kafui Attoh refers back to the invocation of the »idiocy of rural life« by Marx and Engels in the Communist Manifesto, not to disparage the intelligence of rural residents, but to make a political point about the consequences of relative isolation: Attoh is interested in the forms of sociality and civic life enabled by urban environments, which throw people together in ways that highlight their interdependence (cf. Attoh, 198). It is no coincidence that the romanticised version of rugged individualism that backgrounds irreducible forms of societal independence takes as its defining image that of the frontier. By contrast, for Attoh, cities throw people together in ways that enable the formation of new alliances and coalitions (198).

It may seem odd, then, to attribute ›idiocy‹ to an online context apparently characterised by hyper-sociality and hyper-connection. As critics have pointed out (cf., for example, Vaidhyanathan; Andrejevic/Volcic), the term ›social‹ media is something of a misnomer. It might be more accurate to describe these platforms in terms of the offloading of sociality onto automated systems in ways that foreground a hypostasised version of the individual consumer that fosters the mis- or non-recognition of societal interdependence. It is a singular achievement of commercial platforms to render communication hermetic and self-contained – not simply through the material conditions fostered by remote, asynchronous interaction, but through algorithmic systems that frame users as consumers and communication as a commodity, reconfiguring interaction according to the model of public relations, publicity (in the commercial sense), and self-promotion. Authors concerned about the fate of public interaction and public deliberation point to manifestations of technologically enhanced *idios-y* such as the forms of personal mobile privatisation fostered by the prevalence of smartphones and earbuds in shared and public spaces (cf., for example, Turkle; Liming). These developments are of a piece with the algorithmic forms of specification that teach us to think about information not as a shared resource for discussion and deliberation, but as a personalised form of entertainment – more a matter of personal preference, of consumer ›likes‹, rather than a shared cultural or civic life.

To differentiate conspiracy theory from critique by characterising it as ›idiotic‹ is then to highlight its incompatibility with the institutions and practices of civic life – or, perhaps, to gesture toward the extent to which they have broken down or been discredited in the circles within which conspiracy circulates. In similar terms, Featherstone describes conspiratorial thinking as »a pathological effect of the dissolution of social recognition, a paranoid form of non-knowledge caused by the rise of political ideologies which foreground the rights of the individual at the expense of those of all others« (Featherstone, 31). To put it somewhat differently, it is a pastiche of critique for those who, along with Margaret Thatcher's notorious pronouncement, imagine a world in which »there is no such thing as society« (Thatcher). It might be tempting to describe conspiracy theorists as participating in alternative formations of social recognition – but the point of such ›theorising‹ is precisely that it is hermetic: a form of critique that exempts itself from critique insofar as its defining attribute is that it is non-falsifiable, not just on the terms of others, but on those of its own. Hence its proximity to emergent forms of conspirituality. With

respect to the cryptocurrency scams, the critique is not directed toward banking as an institution, but toward the elite conspiracy that prevents everyone from exploiting the system. The promise is perhaps continuous with that of cryptocurrency speculation: the prospect of a pyramid scheme in which everyone is at the top – an impossible leap of faith.

B. A crisis of community sense

To speak of ›idiotic‹ critique, then, is to highlight the reliance of conspiracy theory on what might be described as a crisis of ›community sense‹ – Arendt's *sensus communis*. According to Arendt's reinterpretation of Kant, the faculty of judgement entails forms of deliberation that rely on the »enlarged mentality« of putting »oneself in thought in the place« of others (Arendt, 71). Judgement, precisely insofar as it lays claim to some version of general or universal assent, is distinct from individual preference (the consumerist frame) insofar as it is irreducibly social. As Beiner puts it, »sociability« is »the condition of the functioning of this faculty, that is, the insight that men are dependent on their fellow men not only because of their having a body and physical needs but precisely for their mental faculties« (qtd. Degryse, 349). Even if the process of putting oneself »in thought in the place of others« (356) were simply a mental exercise, it would pose a challenge to a culture of *idios*-y, but for Arendt, the process of judging is »dependent on actual speech and communication« (356). As Degryse puts it, »Arendt claims that our judgments, resulting from the mental process of judging, must be communicated to others, either orally or in writing« (353). In this respect, »she makes the mental process of judging dependent on actual speech and communication. In this way, she clarifies the link between action and the mental activity of judgment« (356).

The collapse of judgement into personal preference – an attribute of the affective appeal of contemporary populism – is a symptom of the misrecognition of interdependence enacted by the offloading of sociality onto automated platforms. What looks like hyper-communicative interaction online paradoxically poses a growing challenge to the process described by Arendt of »putting oneself in thought in the place« of others. This communicative block is a result of the scale of online interactivity, the algorithmic privileging of a reified individualism, and the conflation of publicness with (self-)publicity incentivised by the platforms. It is no

accident that a character like Donald Trump finds his increasingly hateful discourse about political foes and immigrants reliably amplified on ›social‹ media.

If, for Arendt, the formation of community sense is reliant upon actual communicative practices in the public realm, this faculty is undermined rather than enhanced by the deployment of language on commercial social media platforms. The resulting challenge to communication is perhaps most aptly framed by the combination of generative language models with the fantasy of post-linguistic communication. Drawing on the model of computer communication, figures like Mark Zuckerberg, Elon Musk, and MIT Media Lab founder Nicholas Negroponte have championed the prospect of dispensing with language in the name of efficiency and accuracy. If information can be directly written onto a hard-drive, why not onto human wetware? Zuckerberg imagines the prospect of an enhanced VR interface that allows for the direct communication of thoughts: »You'll just be able to think of something and your friends will immediately be able to experience it too« – albeit, via the medium of a commercially controlled platform (qtd. Dewey). The marketing possibilities would be truly stunning. Musk is already building a direct brain interface he calls *Neuralink* to allow direct brain-to-machine communication. The fantasy of bypassing language complements the avalanche of automated word production augured by recent developments in generative AI. Both developments shortcut the process of putting oneself in the place of the other: the first by collapsing the other into the self and the second by dispensing with the other (and language) altogether. The success of ChatGPT and other large language models has spawned the next generation of social bots designed to serve as always-on virtual companions.

However, there are two senses in which it is misleading to describe text-based generative AI in terms of language. The first has to do with the gap between sign and referent. Machine language collapses this gap – automated text generators are not language in any meaningful sense of the term: their texts, in themselves, do not refer to anything, they do not *signify* anything. The second has to do with the fact that they are non-dialogical. The notion that these devices mean to say something – that they intend a meaning, that there is a subject of some sort on the other side of their expressions is a matter of projection. There can be no form of meaningful recognition with a machine – we can pretend to ›recognise‹ it by attributing our own desires to it (hence, the recurring tendency to imagine that such machines ›want‹ to win at chess, to seduce, deceive,

serve or destroy us), and we can project cognition and thus recognition upon it. However, this projection would be something along the lines of a paranoiac fantasy that the patterns of the weather, those of the sacrificial entrails, or the stars signals an intentional intelligence, with the added twist that these patterns are generated by devices of our own design out of patterns of our own making.

C. After judgement

That the appeal of the scam ads defies ›community sense‹ speaks to an alternative attraction. The ads look amateurishly fake, and the associated explanatory text rehearses well-worn tropes of instant wealth. As in the case of conspiracy theory, their very outlandishness – the fact that they so clearly distinguish themselves from the conventions of ›mainstream‹ common sense – serves as one of their selling points, at least for those who are savvy enough to understand that the mainstream always serves the interest of entrenched elites. The combination of a generalised savvy scepticism with a leap of faith toward the rich possibilities discredited by the mainstream is characteristic of the forms of »conspirituality« defined by Chia et al. as »the confluence of New Age spirituality and conspiracism« (Chia et al., 1). This tendency is explored in detail by Giovanna Parmigiani in her study of COVID-19 conspiracy theorists among Italian Neo-Pagans. She is particularly interested in what might be described as the central theme of the promotional literature for the cryptocurrency scams: a willingness to believe in what is known to be untrue. As she puts it, conspiritual forms of »conspiracy-believing« are part of a »participatory experience, one that they link to magic, in virtue of the fact that it engages the aesthetic dimension (sensory and artistic) as a ›way of knowing‹« (Parmigiani, 520). To describe this experience, she distinguishes the practice of »conspiracy believing« from an actual »belief in conspiracies« (511). For her this distinction is captured by the Italian aphorism »*Non è vero, ma ci credo*«, or »It is not true, but I believe in it« (512). This formulation aligns neatly with Zupančič's invocation of the psychoanalytic formula for fetishist disavowal: »I know very well, but I nevertheless continue to believe the opposite« (Zupančič, 4). Insofar as it instantiates a split between knowledge and belief, the formula of disavowal highlights the lack of purchase upon conspiratorial beliefs of social practices and institutions reliant on shared norms of logic, reason and evidence.

The paradoxical logic of disavowal is directly staged by a series of web sites apparently seeded by the scammers to link the Immediate Edge platform with the *Shark Tank* franchise – a link foregrounded by the appearance of Maschmeyer in the Facebook ads. The sites, which are optimised for discovery on Google searches, feature headlines suggesting Immediate Edge may be a scam, such as the nonsensical: »Immediate Edge Review Dragons Den Trading System? The Shady Tactics Exposed« (cf., for example, Foretec Online). The headline itself is confusing, because the review is of Immediate Edge, not the *Shark Tank* show. In fact, the entire page – apparently posted to a hacked web site (like other similar pages), operates in paradoxical fashion, first invoking the possibility that the Immediate Edge platform is a scam and then touting its benefits. Under the heading »Is Immediate Edge a scam« the post from the site administrator notes: »The legitimacy of the Immediate Edge software's claims has not yet been confirmed, but it guarantees investors returns of up to 90%« (Fortec Online). It also notes that »hacked trading accounts have been reported, with users losing their funds« (Fortec Online). It continues, in something of a non-sequitur, since no specific countries are mentioned in the previous text, to assert that »we aim to reveal the fact that Immediate Edge Canada is not a legitimate site to believe in this case« (Fortec Online). Nonetheless, it asserts that Immediate Edge actually is available in Canada – as well as other countries – and proceeds to enumerate its benefits, including easy withdrawal of funds and »all of the necessary assistance to help you thrive in the bitcoin market« (Fortec Online). Finally, and again, confusingly, it describes the platform as »Immediate Edge dragon's den« and states in a section titled »Should I invest in Immediate edge«: »that's not really how it works – and you will never really make any money« (Fortec Online).

Another similar site titled »Immediate Edge: Was the Software on Dragon's Den« (Index Universe Crypto) further confuses the issue by asserting there is »no evidence« that Maschmeyer has »met Immediate Edge and been set for life« (Index Universe Crypto). Moreover, it critically references the promotional literature for the platform, noting that it is »full of spelling and grammatical errors« (Index Universe Crypto). But the review then adds that the platform should be of interest to Maschmeyer and the *Shark Tank* show because it is an innovative way of making money. Under a section titled »Should I invest in Immediate Edge« the review concludes nonsensically: »Absolutely, because while the advertising may seem too wild, it is ultimately not true. We would like to point out in detail that

we have not yet seen any false advertising from Immediate Edge« (Index Universe Crypto).

Reading through these sites amounts to a disconcerting encounter with non-communicative language. The writing, such as it is, defies common conventions of consistent and coherent communication. If the content was not generated automatically, it could have been – by a glitchy AI. The review sites model some future version of written non-communication augured by so-called large language models: words are assembled into grammatically correct sentences that nonetheless fail to convey a sense of interpersonal meaning. It is hard, when reading through them, to divine any sense of a thinking subject behind the words. Instead, the reader is faced with the challenging task of ascribing sense to non-sense – that is, of trying to discern a meaningful pattern behind words that were not shaped by any thought process. This pastiche of communication might be another way of framing the suppression of the social invoked by Featherstone (Featherstone). The rise of this automated non-language complements what Featherstone describes as »the conspiratorial/monadic thinking which is unable to understand the value of communicative recognition/human sociability« (Featherstone, 43). Indeed, it is not hard to imagine the prospect of an automatically generated conspiracy taking hold. As the QAnon movement has demonstrated, incoherent nonsense can be reframed as cryptic authenticity requiring ongoing interpretation, improvisation and revision on the part of its followers. Idiotic communication – in the sense invoked by Attoh – lies at the heart of the hermetic character of conspiracy theory (Attoh).

In the place of coherence and the prospect of shared meaning, the scam ads provide a series of well-known tropes that signify sensational revelations without having to deliver them. The ›hot mic‹ gaffe is a familiar clickbait headline, and the ostensible scandal draws on the stock repertoire of right-wing populist advertising. The formulaic fantasies of instant wealth combined with generic associations of reliability also read like automatically generated content. The blended pastiche of corporate accountability and journalistic integrity reads like a parody highlighting just how vexed both of these practices have become.

IV. Conclusion

Perhaps the question posed by the versions of ›conspirituality‹ apparent in the German ads is how to distinguish conspiracy theory from critique. As Peter Knight puts it, »[t]he question is whether it is possible, under conditions of neoliberalism that make it harder than ever to trace lines of corporate and governmental accountability, to talk about problems of collective action and occluded power without lapsing into a conspiracy theory« (Knight, 197). A range of distinctions have been asserted to forestall this lapse, including, for example, the notion that conspiracy focuses on shadowy ›others‹ as the cause of social conflict, dysfunction, and inequality – rather than on systemic and structural causes (as in Žižek's critique of populism). Ben Peters has emphasised the non-falsifiable character of conspiracy theories: they provide a pastiche of logic and reasoning that is impermeable to the empirical evidence upon which these supposedly rely: »Today most theories are verifiable, some are even falsifiable; by contrast, most conspiracy theories are not« (Peters, 273). Cassam has argued that conspiracy theories are deliberately contrarian, both in the sense of disrupting consensus narratives and in deliberately avoiding the obvious explanations: choosing the complicated and convoluted over the simple and straightforward (cf. Cassam). Some of these distinctions, significantly, focus not on the content of the alleged theories but on the affective attachment they inspire in their adherents – that is, they may be attracted to a theory because it is contrarian. They may even be empirically correct about an existing conspiracy while remaining ›conspiracy theorists‹ because their attachment was not about whether the theory was verifiable.

By way of conclusion, we are interested in pushing in a somewhat different direction by arguing that conspiracy theory might be described in terms of a crisis of recognition. This is how we interpret Featherstone's invocation of a »conspiratorial mindset which is banned from thinking along social lines« (Featherstone, 41). The incoherence of the language in the reviews of Immediate Edge is telling in this regard – as is the hiving off of belief from sharable forms of knowledge invoked by the formula of conspirituality (»it is not true, but I believe it«). Language is at the heart of Arendt's version of political judgement because it serves as a medium for the recognition of an irreducible interdependence combined with an irreducible otherness. As Petersen puts it, the conditions that shape collective life combine the understanding that »we are equal (enough) to

be able to understand one another, and that we are distinct (enough) that we need a way to understand one another« (Peterson, 183). The model of machine generated ›language‹ highlights an incipient crisis of recognition insofar as it posits the possibility of the eclipse of the other: there is no need for recognition when there is no subject at the other end. Fantasies of direct mind-melding, bypassing the medium of language altogether, enact a complementary collapse of the other into the self. In both cases, the role of language as a means of marking the place of another – and of our dependence upon a medium that is irreducibly social (as opposed to the fantasy of achieving autonomy through the individual's generation of a pure idiolect) – is suppressed.

It is beyond the scope of the current argument to explore the various factors contributing to the crisis of recognition that results in the ›idiotic‹ critical tendencies of conspirituality. However, these tendencies align with the hypertrophied individualism of automated forms of personalised customisation and targeting, as well as with the commercial elevation of consumer sovereignty and attendant forms of neoliberal policy. Taken to the limit, the model of automatically generated customised content tends toward a technological Babel: everyone speaking in their own tongue, crafted for them by a personal software agent. This tendency already manifests in what Knight describes as »a seemingly unbridgeable gulf between conspiracy theorists and their critics – not least because in the current climate of populist resentment against technocratic elites, epistemological authorities (including the media, scientists, and government agencies) are viewed as themselves part of a massive conspiracy« (Knight, 210). The result, he argues, is that »there is little space for discussion of other varieties of collective action« (210). Indeed, the avenue for action in the face of elitist conspiracy offered up by the scam ads is to cash in on the secrets overlooked by the sceptics.

To posit that conspiracists represent the ›unconscious‹ of the non-duped, as Zupančič does, is to highlight complementary forms of non-recognition. There is, after all, a critical thrust embedded in the conspiracy theory of the scam ads: a recognition of systemic and ultimately unsustainable forms of exploitation reproduced by existing economic relations. As Zupančič puts it, »disavowal does not simply take place on the side of conspiracy theorists and the ›blind masses‹, but perhaps primarily on the side of the ›elites‹, the (supposedly) ›rational‹ mainstream, the wielders of economic and political power« (Zupančič, 4). Where this ›mainstream‹ overlaps with the ostensibly contrarian conspiracy theorists is in deflecting

attention away from this recognition – in the promise that the prospect of wealth on offer can be universalised. In this respect, the repressed universality implied in the demand for recognition returns in the false promise of universal prosperity by the scammers.

Cited Works

Andrejevic, Mark/Zala Volcic. »Virtual Empathy«. *Communication, Culture and Critique* 13.3 (2020): 295-310. Web. 20 November 2019.

Arendt, Hannah. *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989.

Attoh, Kafui. »Public transportation and the idiocy of urban life«. *Urban Studies* 54.1 (2017): 196-213.

Broadwater, Luke. »Trump Received Millions from Foreign Governments as President, Report Finds«. *The New York Times*, 4 January 2024. Web. 10 December 2023.

Bundesministerium für Inneres. »Online-Anlagebetrug«. Web. 7 May 2024.

Cassam, Quassim. *Conspiracy Theories*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019.

Chia, Aleena/Jonathan Ong/Hugh Davies/Mack Hagood. »Everything is Connected«: Networked Conspirituality in New Age Media«. *AoIR Selected Papers of Internet Research* (2021). Web. 15 September 2021.

Degryse, Annelies. »›Sensus communis‹ as a Foundation for Men as Political Beings: Arendt's Reading of Kant's ›Critique of Judgment‹«. *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 37.3 (2011): 345-358.

Dewey, Caitlin. »Mark Zuckerberg Says the Future of Communication is Telepathy. Here's How That Would Actually Work«. *Washington Post*, 1 July 2015. Web. 1 July 2015.

Devlieger, Patrick. »From ›Idiot‹ to ›Person with Mental Retardation‹: Defining Difference in an Effort to Dissolve it«. *Rethinking Disability: The Emergence of New Definition, Concepts and Communities*. Antwerp: Garant, 2003: 169-188.

Draper, Hal. *The Adventures in the Communist Manifesto*. Alameda, CA: Center for Socialist History, 2004.

Featherstone, Mark. »The Obscure Politics of Conspiracy Theory«. *The Sociological Review* 48.2 (2000): 31-45.

Foretec Online. »Immediate Edge Review Dragons Den Trading System? The Shady Tactics Exposed«. Web. 2 November 2023.

Graham, Lulu. »Elon Musk Used in Fake AI Videos to Promote Financial Scam«. *RMIT Fact Lab*. Web. 15 August 2023.

Greven, Thomas. »The Rise of Right-Wing Populism in Europe and the United States«. *Friedrich Ebert Foundation, Washington DC Office*, 2016: 1-8. Web. 16 May 2016.

Index Universe Crypto. »Immediate Edge: Was the Software on Dragons' Den«. Web. 14 January 2024.

Jameson, Fredric. »Cognitive Mapping«. *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. Eds. Cary Nelson/Lawrence Grossberg. Urbana/Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988: 347-360.

Jarrett, Simon. »Consciousness Reduced: The Role of the ›Idiot‹ in Early Evolutionary Psychology«. *History of the Human Sciences* 33.5 (2020): 110-137.

Kiersey, Nicholas J. »›Retail Therapy in the Dragon's Den‹: Neoliberalism and Affective Labour in the Popular Culture of Ireland's Financial Crisis«. *Affective Economies, Neoliberalism, and Governmentality*. Ed. Anne-Marie d'Aoust. London: Routledge, 2017: 90-108.

Knight, Peter. »Conspiracy, Complicity, Critique«. *Symploke* 29.1 (2021): 197-215.

Krugman, Paul. »The Snake Oil Theory of the Modern Right«. *The New York Times*. Web. 30 August 2021.

Liles, Jordan. »Did Elon Musk Create CBD Gummies that ›Reverse Dementia‹?«. *Snopes*. Web. 18 May 2023.

Liming, Sheila. *Hanging Out: The Radical Power of Killing Time*. Brooklyn: Melville House, 2023.

McLaughlin, Melissa Ann. »Great Awakening 2020: The Neoliberal Wellness Journey Down the Rabbit Hole«. *Electronic Theses, Projects, and Dissertations*. 2021: 1277. Web. 24 June 2021.

Parmigiani, Giovanna. »Magic and Politics: Conspirituality and COVID-19«. *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 89.2 (2021): 506-529.

Peters, Benjamin. »Beware the Theory in Conspiracy Theories.« *Fake News: Understanding Media and Misinformation in the Digital Age*. Eds. Melissa Zimdars/Kembrew McLeod. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2020: 273-282.

Peterson, Terri. »Hannah Arendt, Recognition and Human Beings.« *Nursing Philosophy* 2.2 (2001): 183-186.

Perlstein, Rick. »The Long Con: Mail-Order Conservatism«. *The Baffler* 21 (2012): 22-32.

Philo, Chris. »›Looking into the Countryside From Where He Had Come‹: Placing the ›Idiot‹, the ›Idiot School‹ and Different Models of Educating the Uneducable«. *Cultural Geographies* 23.1 (2015): 139-157.

Rabie, Passant. »Melania Trump's Apollo 11 NFTs Violate NASA Guidelines«. *Gizmodo*. Web. 19 July 2023.

Samuels, Brett. »Cohen: Trump Described his Campaign as ›the Greatest Infomercial in Political History‹.« *The Hill*. Web. 27 February 2019.

Schraer, Rachel/Jack Goodman. »Ivermectin: How False Science Created a COVID ›Miracle‹ Drug«. *BBC*. 7 October (2021). Web. 7 October 2021.

Sparrow, Jeff. »The Covid Crisis Suits Rightwing Media Personalities as they Monetise Fear«. *The Guardian*. Web. 23 August 2021.

Swan, Jonathan/Kate Kelly/Maggie Haberman/Mark Mazzetti. »Kushner Firm Got Hundreds of Millions From 2 Persian Gulf Nations«. *The New York Times*. Web. 30 March 2023.

Thatcher, Margaret. »Margaret Thatcher: A Life in Quotes«. *The Guardian*. Web. 8 April 2013.

Turkle, Sherry. *Alone Together: Why We Expect More From Technology and Less From Each Other*. New York: Basic Books, 2017.

Vaidhyanathan, Siva. *Antisocial media: How Facebook Disconnects Us and Undermines Democracy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018.

Žižek, Slavoj. »Against the Populist Temptation«. *Critical Inquiry* 32.3 (2006): 551-574.

Zupančič, Alenka. »Conspiracy Theory Without Theory: On ›Don't Look Up‹«. *e-Flux Notes*, 16 December 2021. Web. 10 December 2022.

Figures

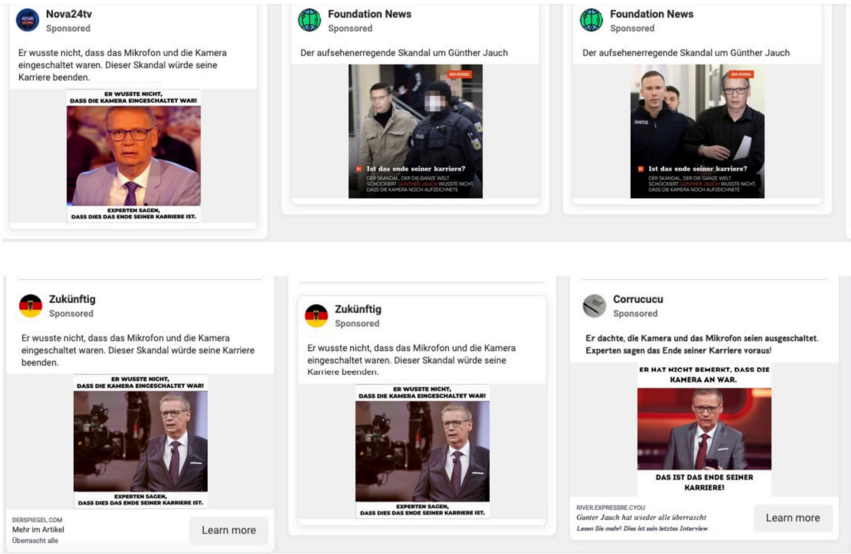

Fig. 1: Apparent scam ads for cryptocurrency exchanges on German Facebook.

Fig. 2: A scam ad depicts television producer Stefan Raab being frogmarched by two police officers amidst his own ›scandal‹.

Fig. 3: A fake scam-checker ›reviews‹ the promises made by the Stefan Raab scam, ironically as a component of the same scam.

Fig. 4: The Young Entrepreneurs celebrate their participation on *Die Höhle der Löwen* and the transformative powers of digital platforms to grow capital.