Conspiracy Theories, Discourse Analysis and Narratology

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One very common and understandable approach can be discerned when talking about conspiracy theories in terms of the following questions: how can it be that so many conspiracy theories swirl around? Why do so many people believe in them? Aren't there any means through which to confine their influence in modern societies? In itself, this approach already presupposes that it is possible to delineate between factual accounts of events that take place in the world and erroneous versions spread through conspiracy theories. Although it is highly desirable to distinguish between true and false statements, it is not at all easy to do so. This is why conspiracy versions of events arouse so much interest. Conspiracy theories propose alternative versions which also vie for plausibility in relation to already existing versions of how certain phenomena or events probably happened.[1] Popular books on conspiracy theories are often structured by juxtaposing different stories: widely-accepted official accounts are confronted with conspiracy versions of the same phenomena.[2] More or less complex chains of events are represented in the form of "tellable" stories for the general public, making the different accounts of events resemble a contest of stories. The narrative nature of

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1   As Eva Horn and Anson Rabinbach put it, in a short introduction to the proximity of conspiracy theories and fiction, "[c]onspiracy theories take the opacity of reality as a point of departure to venture on an alternative interpretation about the order of things." – Horn/Rabinbach 2008: 6.

2   E.g., Southwell/Twist 2004.

the discourse on conspiracies therefore allows for a narratological approach which discusses both the most important aspects of the conspiracy narratives and their discursive environment.

Two Case Stories

According to a binary dichotomy of conspiracy theories,[3] there are two kinds of theory: cynical and kynical ones (the former being actively directed at certain groups which are being blamed for an evil, while the latter are musings about the possible reasons for the deplorable state of affairs).[4] For instance, speculations about the erratic oscillations of prices belong to the group of kynical theories, given that they seek explanations for an economic misery. Yet the distinction is not as sharp as it might first appear. Take, for example, the linking of the oil price development and international politics which Aleksandr Etkind and Ilya Yablokov have referred to in a paper on the contemporary Russian administration's inclination towards conspiratological thinking.[5] Russia's economic dependency on oil and gas exports provides fertile soil for conspiracy theories. The ruble exchange rate's obvious dependency on the international price of a barrel of oil inevitably leads to readily voiced speculations about secret agreements between international stakeholders who might want to weaken Russia's economy by deliberately keeping oil and gas prices low. When representatives of the Russian political elite speculate about the reasons for low prices on oil and gas, it is often difficult to determine whether they take a cynical or a kynical stance. For a classification as cynical one must qualify the fact that official statements by political leaders are always ideological (given that they not only yield an explanation alone, but also strive to hold onto power).[6] Although the same speculations about oil prices can also be made by an ordinary Russian citizen idly wondering

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3   Cf. Raab/Carbon/Muth 2017: 179–80 and 186–87.

4   The distinction goes back to Slavoj Žižek's use of a distinction made in Peter Sloterdijk's *Critique of Cynical Reason* (1983). Žižek considers that someone in power who knows that his ideological explanations are wrong, but stills applies them without admitting their falsity, is a cynical person. A kynical person instead ironically points out the false ideology of the powers that be; cf. Žižek 1989: 29.

5   Etkind/Yablokov 2017.

6   Among the many different meanings of "ideology," I am referring here to a concept of ideology as a complex of uttered ideas serving the legitimization of the powers that be; cf. Eagleton 1993: 7.

about the decline of his salary's purchasing power (which would justify a classification as kynical), the simple fact that a high-ranked person spreads such speculations via the media (and, in so doing, at the same time denies any responsibility for Russia's economic development) makes it a cynical form of conspiracy theory.

The fluctuations and oscillations of the prices of important goods are always subject to certain erratic elements. Economic theory can describe some basic interrelations and influences, but it cannot reliably forecast price developments. The opacity of markets excites fantasies about forces operating in the dark, exerting secret influence and bargaining for the sake of personal gain.[7] The most curious fantasy pertaining to power and influence on the world economy, one which Etkind and Yablokov mention in their article, was the one propagated by Vladimir Yakunin, a former director of the Russian Railways who now holds a chair at the Department of State Policy at MGU, the Moscow State University.[8] In a lecture he gave there in 2012, Yakunin retold the already retold story of an unnamed leading European politician[9] who maintains that he had a meeting with eight people on the top floor of the Empire State Building during which he was asked for his evaluation of the economic perspectives of various European countries. They then had dinner and the anonymous politician claimed that after this dinner he witnessed how the people he had been speaking to contacted 150 fi-

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7   One should keep in mind that Karl Popper refutes a "conspiracy theory of society" (in his understanding this is a theory which explains historical phenomena mainly by referring to the intentions of persons involved) by describing simple market mechanisms: If someone demands an item, he/she inevitably and unwillingly raises the price of the demanded good; if someone offers an item, then he/she lowers the market value of it (cf. Popper 2006: 14). Popper suggests that the intentions of individuals cannot significantly exercise influence on the prices—he discusses simple small markets (selling and buying real estate in one village), but his idea can be extended to complicated markets based on the circumstances that it would be even more difficult to realize one's intentions on complex markets. Popper's criticism of the idea that history is the result of the realization of purposeful intentions is also resumed in Butter 2018: 40–42.

8   Etkind/Yablokov 2017: 79–80.

9   The sequence of narrators is as follows: the leader ("premier") of a large European state spoke about his experience at the top of the Empire State Building to a diplomat and the diplomat told it to Yakunin who tells it to the audience at Moscow University and on the internet.

nancial institutions and ordered manipulative transactions amounting to 200 billion dollars.

To substantiate the story he has just retold, Vladimir Yakunin added that he himself had also once been to this location at the top of the Empire State Building, "admittedly on another occasion."[10] This homodiegetic addition to a very curious story, of course, makes it more authentic than a mere repetition of a story about the meeting of the high-finance elite.

While Yakunin's tale about the central hub of international financial power being located at the top of the Empire State Building is remarkable, for indicating that conspiracy stories are told and spread by people very close to Russia's political elite, another reference in Etkind and Yablokov's paper is even closer to the subject of conspiracy discourse and narratology. This "amazing case," as Etkind/Yablokov describe it,[11] is related to mind reading. In 2006, one major of the Russian secret service, the FSB, stated in an interview that the unit he commanded at the FSB possessed a new technology which made it possible to read other people's minds and ideas. The technology is said to have been applied to George Bush Sr., as well as to former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright. Probing into Mrs. Albright's mind, the FSB claimed to have read that she thoroughly disliked Russia's ownership of territories so exorbitantly rich in natural resources.[12]

Three Dimensions of Stories

In pursuing a discussion of stories told within conspiracy discourses, one should refrain from judging conspiracy narratives as totally wrong or misleading, but instead simply treat them as narratives whose ontological status—true, false, or fictitious—is often unclear, at least initially when confronted with such a story. The two stories about Russia's political elite not only indicate a certain bias amongst Russian politicians towards conspiracy theories, they also allow some insight into the close relationship between conspiracy narratives and literary discourse.

This proximity can be illustrated from three different perspectives which will each be discussed in detail in the following sections:

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10 «правда, по другому поводу» – "Novyi mirovoi klass i vyzovy chelovechestva," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3OvqfkCyMMc (ca. 8:00–11:30).

11 Cf. Etkind/Yablokov 2017: 63.

12 https://www.novayagazeta.ru/articles/2015/06/22/64636-patrushev-i-olbrayt-kak-fraza-kremlevskih-trolley-stala-simvolom-very-kremlevskoy-elity

- textual-narratological/syntactical/formal;
- referential/semantic;
- pragmatic (encompassing social aspects of communication and discourse).

Textual-Narratological/Syntactical/Formal Perspectives

Conspiracy narratives usually do not have obvious textual-narratological markers that would allow for them to be identified as fiction;[13] their authors avoid markers of fictionality, instead they prefer text types which are typical for factual (world-imaging) texts. The textual-narratological perspective is not particularly relevant to conspiracy narratives, but the following two perspectives—referential and pragmatic—are.

Referential/Semantic Perspectives

Usually, conspiracy narratives claim to be factual narratives and, as such, they are to be considered in terms of the distinction between truth and falsehood.[14] Whereas fiction or fictitious narratives can be described as explicitly and deliberately conveying untrue statements without any deceptive intention, factual narratives can be seen as world-imaging narratives, which is to say that they are ascertained to be true or false with direct reference to the real world.[15]

Factual discourse necessarily involves truth claims consisting, as it does, of statements about the world. However, due to their very nature, conspiracy narratives which are not true cannot simply be dismissed as lies, especially when we take into consideration the extent to which the narrators seem to believe in them;

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13 According to Nickel-Bacon/Groeben/Schreier, some textual markers indicating fictionality include, e.g., reported inner speech or an obvious literary ("overstructured") organization of the text; cf. Nickel-Bacon/Groeben/Schreier 2000: 396.

14 The case of conspiracy narratives that are clearly paratextually marked as fiction is not of interest here.

15 "World-imaging texts as representations of the actual world are subject to truth-valuation; their statements can be judged true or false. Fictional texts are outside truth-valuation; their sentences are neither true nor false." – Doležel 1998: 24, cf. as well Gorman 2005: 163.

they ought, in fact, to be judged as erroneous statements.[16] Usually, the mental state of the person supplying the text should not be decisive when judging upon the fictionality or factuality of a text (given that it cannot be accessed in an objective way). Similarly, after considering a narrative as a world-imaging text, one should better concentrate on the measure of accuracy and leave speculations about the mental states of the narrators aside. However, the promulgations of truthfulness and degree of sincerity which accompany the narration remain relevant.

With world-imaging stories, people assume that the narrator believes what he or she is saying and that he/she bears responsibility for the accuracy or truth of the story told. An argument may arise pertaining to the truth claims of the specific narrative in question, of course.

What exactly are the semantic criteria according to which narratives can be classified as either fact or fiction? Promulgators of conspiracy narratives strive to prove the story in question with recourse to all kinds of material and references. On the semantic level, it is not easy to distinguish proper accounts of events from the false ones.[17] Conspiracy narratives do not usually venture too far into

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16 Due to their truth claims, conspiracy stories should best not be compared with fiction. Because of this wrong conception Horn/Rabinbach suggest that "*conspiracy theory, like novels, is a form of fiction* [sic! my emphasis], but unlike most serious fiction, it is devoid of any reflexive insight into its own fictionality." – Horn/Rabinbach 2008: 6. If one treats conspiracy stories not as fictional, but as factual discourse, such specifications are not necessary at all. More accurate distinctions also outline the differences between fiction and factual discourse: "The conditions for satisfying the criteria of factual narrative are semantic: a factual narrative is either true or false. Even if it is willfully false (as is the case if it is a lie), what determines its truth or its untruth is not its hidden pragmatic intention, but that which is in fact the case. The conditions for satisfying the criteria of fictional narrative are pragmatic: the truth claims a text would make if it (the same text, from the syntactic point of view) were a factual text (be the claims true or false) must be bracketed out." – Schaeffer 2014: 191. The distinction factual/fictional, thus, is decisive for the attitude towards a represented narrative, but the distinction itself is usually neither made from the perspective of formal/syntactical considerations, nor is it made from the semantic perspective, but it is guided by pragmatic decisions which can take both the formal and the semantical perspectives into account.

17 There are only very few, rather marginal, narratives in which it is more or less obvious that the story told must be fictional or wrong, such as David Icke's assertion that pow-

the world of fantasy, which makes it far harder to determine their truth. Yakunin's story about the top floor of the Empire State Building, as the hub of international financial power, is hard to disprove; on the basis of probability, it would be difficult to either verify or falsify the possible truth of his account. Yet the very notion of mind reading already pushes the story of the FSB major into the realms of the untruthful, to the extent that the *Novaia Gazeta*, which printed the interview, treats the story sarcastically.

One should also take into account that people usually inform each other about factual events: an expectation of "true" messages is the "default" attitude towards communication; deviations are usually explicitly marked (as dreams, possibilities, fiction and the like).[18] On the level of "semantics," then, one usually needs a more thorough and detailed knowledge of what actually happened. One solution to this problem would be to gather further information through intense research and deeper inquiry. This solution, however, often leads to further problems, such as a surplus of data and a mass of information being open to a wide range of interpretations and, as such, not able to help to clarify anything. Don DeLillo's Kennedy-assassination novel, *Libra*, provides a good depiction of the notion of data surplus and the ensuing impossibility of solving the puzzle at hand. The fictitious character Nicolas Branch is overwhelmed by the amount of information that he has to deal with when examining the case of JFK's murder.[19]

Interesting conspiracy stories usually have some element of credible probability. The general public cannot indulge in minute verification processes on the amount of their truthfulness, so the "ordinary reader" of a story—which is to say, average persons not directly involved in the events, but informed by the media—cannot do anything but compare the story to their own knowledge of the world; this often consists not only of direct or firsthand information, but also of works of fiction, such as crime novels, films and the like.[20] The interpretation and classification of narratives—whether they are truthful or not, or whether they are only possible or actually real—rest partly on the recipient's experience with literary texts or "realistic" fiction in general. With respect to this, modes of reception which have been acquired from fictional texts might also play a significant role, e.g., a predisposition for believing in fictional representations—one should think of the capability of imagining that one thing is, at the same time, something dif-

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erful reptiles from outer space live in the caverns inside the Earth and transform their shape from reptilian to human and back again.

18 Zipfel 2014: 100–01.

19 Cf. DeLillo 1988: 300–01 and 442–43.

20 Cf. Boltanski 2013: 392–95.

ferent (a special form of a cloud is an animal or a face). The subsequent immersion into fictional worlds enhances the belief in the stories told, no matter whether they are fictional or factual. When "make believe" can be regarded as an essential operation for the production and reception of fiction,[21] then the familiarity with this operation makes it easier to believe stories towards which disbelief should better not be suspended willingly.

In the interesting cases of conspiracy narrative, then, there are not usually any obvious semantic traits which would enable the recipient to categorize the postulated narrative as false or fictitious. Analyses that could verify or falsify the narrative are usually complex; these analyses cannot normally be conducted by the general public. As a result of these obstacles, the general public can only, ultimately, either believe or not believe the proffered story.[22]

Pragmatic Perspectives

As we have seen in the case of conspiracy theories, textual-narratological and semantic perspectives on conspiracy narratives tend not to provide sufficient evidence for ascertaining the truthfulness or fictionality of a story. This is no great surprise insofar as the texts in question are not intended to be unequivocally qualifiable. Instead, they always contain a level of intentional ambiguity. Therefore, the pragmatic level is of major importance when it comes to judging a text and when delineating factual and fictional texts. In combination with aspects of the textual-narratological and the semantic levels, it is the pragmatic level at which the relevant decisions about the text's character are made.[23] The participants engaging in a given communicative exchange have to take various aspects into account when trying to ascertain the truth or falsity of a given text, including both general aspects of the text and the message it conveys, as well as the situative context more generally. The recipient is confronted with paratextual information and with questions pertaining to the narrator and his reliability. Luc

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21 Cf. Bareis 2014: 51.

22 This position shall not deny the heroic educational efforts of authors who have worked on methods of how to dismantle conspiracy theories, such as Hepfer 2015 and Raab/Carbon/Muth 2017. Their mostly instructive suggestions serve as a remedy against many conspiracy stories; nevertheless, their main problem rests in the necessity of special training. Only then can the situation of "exposure" to stories, of various reliability, be tackled.

23 Cf. Nickel-Bacon/Groeben/Schreier 2000: 290.

Boltanski has analyzed letters to the editor of *Le Monde* with respect to particular markers of conspiracy postulations or markers of insanity. His analysis revealed that there were indeed pragmatic markers that allowed a more or less consensual identification of paranoid writers of conspiracy fantasies: e.g., when people described themselves as victims of a powerful group of conspirators that even went so far as to have recruited their close relatives, or when they boasted of their status using dubious titles,[24] there was usually hardly any doubt about the fantastic character of the stories told.[25]

By far the most intriguing aspects of conspiracies lie in their cultural embeddedness and in their potential to shape interpretative groups, cultures or subcultures. Conspiracy theories create a type of imagined communities comprised of all of the people who subscribe to a given narrative. This social process of creating groups that are united by their shared interpretation of a narrative helps to sharpen some important distinctions. Whereas conspiracies are clandestine actions directed against an enemy, conspiracy narratives are overt speech acts which create at least two groups: those who believe in the narrative and those skeptical non-believers who do not, whereby the very notion of a conspiracy theory implies that the plausibility of the narrative is inevitably hard to ascertain. As has been stated previously in relation to the interplay of fictional texts in the reception of world-imaging narratives, belief is of central importance when it comes to describing the reception of conspiracy stories because the interpretative process involves a significant amount of trust and belief: the addressees decide whether or not to believe a particular narrative. In most cases, it is hardly possible to verify the truth of the facts presented, so one simply has to rely on the narrator or on the media sources disseminating the narratives; pragmatic aspects, thus, are highly relevant in this respect.

This is where the problem of knowledge enters the field. Following Anton/ Schetsche/Walter, societies contain both official/orthodox and heterodox "knowledge." Orthodox knowledge is widely accepted and confirmed by the authorities and among leading media companies, whereas heterodox knowledge dwells in subcultures and in their media.[26] Conspiracy theories, in the ordinary sense, therefore belong to heterodox knowledge, which is rejected, discarded and disqualified by the official position. The position that conspiracy narratives take up

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24 When authors make pretentious use of academic titles, they try to obtain more acceptance; however, academic titles on book covers can often provoke suspicion and skepticism in people who are engaged in the academic field.

25 Cf. Boltanski 2013: 386–89.

26 Cf. Anton/Schetsche/Walter 2014: 14.

along the sliding scale between orthodox and heterodox can vary; heterodox knowledge may even become orthodox knowledge and vice versa.[27]

As has been stated previously, conspiracy narratives belong to factual discourse; to that end, they are closely intertwined with the various dimensions of discourse in general, especially with power relations on the one hand and with claims to truth on the other.[28] Conspiracy narratives often explicitly refer to both real and imagined power relations in societies; at the same time, though, they are also informed by these power relations, even though this is often overlooked, ignored or denied. Instead, the narrative claims to "tell the truth." How can one best understand this denied relationship between discourse and power? First, it is worth noting that discourse always governs the scope of possible utterances: that which can be said in a given discourse does not always have to be true. The notorious *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, for example, are still regarded by many people as proof of a Jewish conspiracy, even though their inauthenticity has been well known since 1921, when *The Times* published a series of articles proving that the *Protocols* were a forgery constructed on the basis of a fictitious French dialogue. This shows that the power of anti-Semitic-discourse is sometimes stronger than clearly proven sound argumentation, as was evident in Hitler's declaration that even if the *Protocols* were a forgery, they were true insofar as they expressed the sinister aims of the Jews as he saw them.[29]

So, when there are two opposing or antagonistic narratives, which both describe an important event or a particular state of affairs, it is not advisable to be too optimistic about one's ability to make a rational choice between them on the basis of deliberate reasoning in the sense meant by Habermas. Instead, the discursive environment that people are embedded in often exerts quite a strong coercive force, and people choose options that go against widely accepted and confirmed knowledge.

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27 This does not happen very often, but see the chapter written by Alois Streicher on the possibilities of varying assessments of the plane crash of Lech Kaczyński and other representatives of the Polish authorities.

28 Michel Foucault developed his idea of discourse in many writings on different subjects in such a manner that is not at all easy to determine central passages in which the main ideas are expressed. Some commentaries, though, provide a concise and helpful overview of the Foucaultian notion of discourse and its interrelation with truth, power and knowledge. For our purposes, Mills 1997: 60–76, proves helpful.

29 Cf. Benz 2011: 107–08, see also Marmura 2014: 2382.

Mediated Reality

However, the possibility that truth might be overruled by the sheer power of discursive conditions need not lead to an impasse amounting to an equivalence of orthodox and heterodox interpretations of narratives. Instead of denying the possibility of distinguishing between true and false narratives, or of right and wrong ones, considerations about the role and function of the mass media in contemporary societies might be helpful in a situation in which examining the truthfulness of stories is hardly possible. The media work in terms of distinguishing between information and non-information.[30] It is clearly evident that any account of an extraordinary event fulfills the condition of providing information, but a heterodox view participates as a parasite feeding on the orthodox account. The differences between the orthodox account and the heterodox one is, in itself, a new piece of information, its truth or falsehood notwithstanding. The media, according to Niklas Luhmann, do not disseminate true accounts of what happens in the world:

Although truth or at least the presupposition of truthfulness is indispensable for news and reports, the mass media do not follow the code true/not true, but even in their cognitive realm of programming they follow the code information/non-information. One can discern this on the circumstance, that untruthfulness is not used as a value worthy reflection. For news and reports it is not important (or at most during inquiries which are not conveyed to the public) that untruthfulness can be excluded. Differently than in science, information is not examined in a way that a truthful way allows for excluding untruthfulness before truthful statements can be proclaimed.[31]

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30 This statement refers to Niklas Luhmann's analysis of the functioning of mass media ─ cf. Luhmann 2017: 28.

31 "Obwohl Wahrheit oder doch Wahrheitsvermutung für Nachrichten und Berichte unerläßlich sind, folgen die Massenmedien nicht dem Code wahr/unwahr, sondern selbst in ihrem kognitiven Programmbereich dem Code Information/Nichtinformation. Das erkennt man daran, daß Unwahrheit nicht als Reflexionswert benutzt wird. Für Nachrichten und Berichte ist es nicht (oder allenfalls im Zuge von nicht mitgemeldeten Recherchen) wichtig, daß die Unwahrheit ausgeschlossen werden kann. Anders als in der Wissenschaft wird die Information nicht derart durchreflektiert, daß auf wahre Weise festgestellt werden muß, daß Unwahrheit ausgeschlossen werden kann, bevor Wahrheit behauptet wird." – ibid.: 52–53.

Mass media provide information about society, for society. Like any other system in the modern world, the media reduces the complexity of the world according to principles pertaining to their respective system. The media's governing system (or "code," as Luhmann puts it) is the distinction between information and non-information. This difference alone does not enable us to distinguish between true and false information, because anything "new," regardless of whether or not it is correct, still counts as information.

The point is that much of our knowledge of the world stems from the media system, and that this system has two sides: its thematic side, which is oriented towards the world and provides information about it, and its operative side, which usually remains concealed and is not generally visible in media-based communication. Any mediated information is selected and reworked by the media system. This gives rise to the general suspicion that the news is always somehow manipulated and that "certain interests" underpin the functioning of media system.[32] This suspicion itself is also interesting and informative and would make a good subject for media communication. The idea that our knowledge of the world is manipulated to our detriment is a side effect of the media system because it is easy to understand that information is always necessarily processed by people who cannot be totally neutral or objective.

In contrast to the information selected and spread via the media, it is sometimes tempting to consider "what is left out," or "what is not said," that is: the alternative side of the information selected. This is a current issue regarding contemporary politics and diplomacy in relation to Russia: any information that is spread is said to be motivated by self-interest. One need only think of "news" about current affairs: something is communicated by the media and, as a standard reaction, the audience and political commentators focus in on the source, thus questioning its bias and in so doing already unwillingly casting a shadow of doubt. This happens symmetrically: if the Russian media report something, then people who are critical of the Russian government tend to treat the information skeptically (something is left out, the report is not accurate…), but the same thing takes place when a Russian audience judges reports (preferably about Russia) issued by "Western" media. Both audiences assume some influence on the part of politics on the media system in their respective countries ("or spheres of

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32 Boris Groys has generalized this idea of suspicion and extended it from the world of media to a philosophical description of the interrelation of subjects in the modern world, cf. Groys 2000: 19–54. This general suspicion of manipulation, though, is irreducible—a media company can by no means prove that no manipulation is going on and this stimulates further communication; cf. Luhmann 2017: 56–57.

influence") and question the "objectivity" of that media. This general suspicion towards mediated information is entertained not only towards state-controlled media (the general attitude towards Russian news), but also towards media which are not overtly under the tutelage of the state apparatus. "Manufactured consent" inevitably arouses suspicion and provokes conspiracy speculations.[33]

Because of how the media system functions, any information communicated can be accounted for by the vested interests of the source, as well as the catenation of orthodox and heterodox narratives that are pertinent to the media as our main source of cultural knowledge. If the media contribute to the dissemination of orthodox narratives, then any heterodox version already counts as "information" (as something new and "interesting") and can, therefore, be communicated in the media system.

Nevertheless, even though the media significantly construct our reality and contribute to our knowledge of the world,[34] the fundamental rules and nature of the media system preclude false information in the long run. To put it bluntly: if *heterodox* narratives were more than merely interesting versions of the world, if their truth claims could be taken seriously, then these alternative narratives would be of too great a value to the media to remain neglected. Instead, the media would pounce on the narrative in question and appropriate it, because it would be a "breaking news" story in the true and literal sense of those words. This inherent self-correction of the media system precludes that overtly false narratives can, in the long term, spread via the media system.

It is in this respect that "traditional" mass media differ from the "new" social media: via the latter, not only can anything be stated and communicated, there is often also no social responsibility for the communication in the sense that the sender represents a media enterprise (broadcasting company, media house, news agency and the like). This lack of responsibility corresponds to the annulment of self-reference on the part of the sender (which manifests itself in the use of avatars, nicknames and pseudonyms). If there is no "palpable" self-reference, one cannot even speak of a system.[35] In contrast, the traditional media count as rather complex systems[36] operating in the real-world and are, therefore, intrinsically

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33 Cf. the analysis of right- and left-wing conspiracy thinking in the U.S. in Marmura 2014.

34 Cf. Luhmann 2017: 83.

35 Or only of an "odd" system in which the established link between sender and receiver significantly differs from face-to-face interactions, due to the circumstance that one does not know the identity of the disguised interlocutors.

36 Their complexity even corresponds to the amount of self-reference in the system.

tied thereto. Therefore, media companies—no matter which interests lurk in the background—must be distinguished from internet "troll armies": although these armies might have a great influence in reality, their lack of transparency and their anonymity, at the same time, devaluate the messages spread.[37]

Conclusion

Why conspiracy theories "flourish" can easily be explained by way of how the media system functions. It prefers complex and mysterious cases because they easily attract publicity over an extended period of time, particularly if it seems that there is still something left unsolved.

Unresolved events ("mysterious cases") are not just interesting to the media. The history of conspiracy theories very clearly shows that the political system can also make good use of them. If something unusual or harmful simply happens by chance, then nobody can be blamed for it. Conspiracy narratives, on the other hand, imbue a given story with suspected responsibilities which are difficult to rebut, for example when European and American politicians are accused of influencing the price of oil and gas, as mentioned previously. In the field of politics, thus, conspiracy narratives serve to identify a scapegoat who can be blamed for undesirable effects or events.

Conspiracy narratives, like factual narratives, must not be confused with explicit lies to the extent that, in many cases, the person professing believes in them and, moreover, he/she does not primarily aim to deceive the audience. The amount of truth in them is generally difficult to examine, so that it is very difficult to ascertain their ontological status on the vertical axis—the relationship of a given text to the world. The horizontal axis of the narrative situation links the narrative discourse with discourses pertinent to societies and cultures. The example of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* shows that these horizontal relationships between narratives and cultural discourses can sometimes even outweigh the vertical referential axis, so that a narrative is held to be true even though its falsehood has been proven comprehensively.

When viewed from a systems theory perspective, conspiracy narratives fit the media system and provide a certain degree of mediated "knowledge" of the

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37 The moment at which social media are used by media companies, they, of course belong to the social system of the companies, whereas state-sponsored troll armies do not belong to the system of mass media, but rather to the political system or to an organization.

world, their truth or falsehood notwithstanding. Conspiracy narratives should also be regarded as an inevitable side effect of contemporary society in its dependency on the media as a pervasive system—not because of the conspiracy itself, but because of the way the media work. Whenever information is provided, it is to be expected that someone will always question the "completeness" of the information and suspect that something is being withheld. In this way, conspiracy narratives fill in the gaps, occupying up the shady side of our contemporary, media-based society and modern culture.

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Abstract

Conspiracy theories are often considered as being a danger to modern societies; they weaken trust in institutions by spreading dangerously false information. Apart from such a pessimistic view on the phenomena, this chapter tries to show that conspiracy theories are an irreducible side effect of the mass media. Due to their intrinsic entwinedness with the media system, one should not put great hope in the possibility of eliminating conspiracy theories but rather regard them as an interesting cultural phenomenon. This chapter votes to not qualify conspiracy theories automatically as fictional discourse, but as factual discourse whose truth claims are difficult to verify. Different perspectives of conspiracy narrations—syntactic, semantic and pragmatic—are discussed. Pragmatic aspects and considerations from media theory can be deemed of primary importance for an analysis of conspiracy theories which does not lend itself to alarmism.