

6 Fighting (for) truth?

Alex Jones, the WHO and the legitimization of conspiracy discourse

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6.1 Introduction

The origins of COVID-19, its short- and long-term effects and its treatment, were (and to a great extent still are) highly contested issues, both on a medical and a political level. Not surprisingly, ever since the beginning of the pandemic in early 2020, all aspects related to the virus have been affected by conspiracy theories, disinformation and false beliefs of all kinds: it has even been alleged that the virus originated from covert operations orchestrated by the United Nations and the World Health Organization (WHO), and that various concealed actors either engineered or intentionally disseminated it.

While they have often been chastised as “bad science” (Harambam & Aupers, 2015) or deviations from accepted norms of rationality or even morality, conspiracy theories have a significant impact in many countries, affecting people’s health while also influencing political process. Conspiracy theories are branded as one of the main contributors to, and symptoms of, the so-called post-truth era, a period in which emotions take precedence over facts and empirical evidence in shaping public understanding of social reality, significantly influencing how large segments of society acquire and interpret information (McIntyre, 2018). In the USA, in particular, these theories have managed to reach beyond those fringe groups who usually support them and to gain mainstream status, mainly through former (and newly elected) US President Donald J. Trump, who often promoted conspiracies as part of his own discourse.

Of the many media pundits to peddle conspiracy theories, Alex Jones is certainly one of the most controversial. For decades, Jones has been an active proponent of conspiracy theories. However, during the pandemic, his activities on his platform, InfoWars, were particularly prominent in disseminating disinformation and challenging official medical reports and health policies, especially those issued by the WHO. Additionally, he positioned himself as a purveyor of the “truth”, countering the narratives presented by mainstream media and political authorities.

This chapter seeks to address fundamental questions regarding the construction and widespread appeal of conspiracy theories. Specifically, it examines the factors that contribute to their persuasiveness and success, the discursive strategies employed by their proponents to enhance their credibility, and the

mechanisms through which they are effectively disguised to resemble truth. Furthermore, it critically investigates whether conspiracy theories can be definitively situated within the contemporary framework of post-truth discourse. In order to answer these questions, the term *epistemic masquerade* is proposed here to define the way conspiracies are enacted in discourse, whereby they are disguised as truth and legitimized by certain masking and manipulating devices at both the visual and linguistic levels. These devices are shown to be at the root of the communication strategies and discursive repertoire of Alex Jones, perhaps the most influential conspiracy theorist in the USA. I contend that Jones's discourse is paradigmatic of the epistemic masquerade that underpins the nature of conspiracy theories. This chapter examines two videos in which Jones denounces the WHO, portraying it as a component of a broader global conspiracy allegedly orchestrated by the United Nations and other actors. Grounded in a network of conspiracy theories concerning the origins of the virus, the purported dangers of vaccines and an overarching objective to impose global tyranny, Jones strategically constructs his discourse to enhance the plausibility of these claims. Through this rhetorical approach, he seeks to legitimize these theories while securing the trust of his audience.

In the first section of the chapter, I discuss conspiracy theories as discourse. This is in line with my previous work on conspiracy theory (Demata, Zorzi, & Zottola, 2022; Demata, 2024), whereby I consider such theories to be fully fledged, self-contained discourses, claiming the status of (socially constructed) truth in opposition to the official narratives of the media and political establishment. The next sections are devoted to the role of the WHO during the pandemic and to an account of Jones's status as a controversial anchorman who has risen to fame over the years by peddling conspiracy theories of all and every kind. The following section on methodology examines the two interrelated discursive strategies, manipulation and legitimation, that underpin the analysis of the two videos. In the subsequent sections, the analysis and discussion of Jones's videos demonstrate that conspiracy discourse operates as a hybrid, wherein ostensibly scientific sources, alongside manipulated or selectively transcribed official "reports", function as legitimation mechanisms for a series of unfounded claims. The discursive architecture of conspiracy discourse employs a number of persuasive strategies that revolve around the authority of what are presented as scientific sources and evidence. This legitimation and *masquerading* of truth occur because Jones, like all other conspiracy theorists, validates his claims by accumulating evidence through reference to other hyperpartisan (yet deemed to be authoritative) platforms and websites, thus creating an echo chamber in which his views gain traction and are granted "truth" value.

6.2 Truth as (and in) discourse: Conspiracy theories as *epistemic masquerade*

According to a widely accepted definition (e.g. Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009; Douglas et al., 2019; Uscinski, 2020), conspiracy theories constitute interpretative and communicative frameworks that offer alternative explanations to the official accounts

of events. For conspiracy theorists, everything stems from an intentional cause and has somehow been controlled and manipulated by obscure and powerful evil actors or groups acting against the people and the common good. The theorists come up with explanations for seemingly unrelated events and see connections where there are none. In this sense, they purport to explain what, in their opinion, can be proved empirically through observable and factual evidence which is instead kept well hidden from people's view. Those who propose or support conspiracy theories deny the validity of the narratives proposed by the "epistemological authorities" (Uscinski, 2020). They therefore counter the supposedly unbiased fact-based claims of social institutions such as the government, scientists, academia and the media. Every aspect of social reality has its own array of conspiracy theories. From politics to science, from entertainment to sport, no field is immune from groups of people theorizing over covert actions performed by hidden actors lurking beneath the surface of official facts or explanations. While they have always existed, conspiracy theories are particularly successful in a context of "epistemological insecurity" (Harambam & Aupers, 2015) or "epistemic instability" (Harambam, 2020), in which the authority of science is undermined and alternative views of reality progressively gain ground. Periods of social, political and economic unrest lead to insecurity and the advent of some unexpected or uncontrollable event serves to undermine social or political certainties.

While it would be easy to dismiss conspiracy theories as false, they in fact provide their believers with a worldview, a set of rules of social behaviour and their own "truth". The current popularity of conspiracies raises important questions as to *why* their discourse is so credible, and how it is structured vis a vis "official" or legitimate ideologies and discourses. The term *epistemic masquerade* is proposed here to define conspiracy discourse and its claim to truth, as the discursive strategies to which conspiracies resort serve as a prop or façade to support the "truth" being promulgated. Conspiracy theories can be understood as challenging what is generally perceived by the majority as established facts or fundamental empirical evidence, including that which is supported by scientific inquiry. However, I argue that these theories exhibit their own internal discursive coherence and logic, which function to construct truth through self-legitimizing discursive strategies manifested within texts.

Epistemic masquerade manifests through three interrelated dimensions, each reflected in the discursive and linguistic structures of conspiracy texts. The first is their *oppositional epistemology*, a fundamental aspect of the ideological framework underpinning conspiracy theories, whereby such narratives position themselves in direct opposition to the "official" or hegemonic ideology. This oppositional stance frequently translates into the political sphere through the second dimension, the *polarized logics of populism*, which channel the epistemic masquerade of conspiracy discourse into social and political praxis. This process unfolds primarily within the third dimension, a *fragmented media landscape*, which provides an optimal environment for conspiracy actors to obscure false claims as truth and cultivate an intensely polarized communicative and discursive space. Indeed, as shown by Mäkinen (2025) in this volume, polarization in communication is a very

common feature in the discourses surrounding the COVID pandemic, as, at the time, highly conflictual views from different communities of people became the basis of public debates about the pandemic. These three dimensions are not new in the wide literature on conspiracy theories but I am using them here as the theoretical foundation of the notion of epistemic masquerade in terms of *counter-discourse*, which proposes the truths of social realities in opposition to those supported by official epistemological authorities. This occurs in texts mainly through discursive strategies of *manipulation and legitimation*. These two overlapping strategies mimic those used by the legitimate discourses of the epistemic authorities and create a “discursive illusion” of truth (Bhatia, 2015) which is typical of public discourses and, even more so, of conspiracy theories.

Conspiracy discourse generates an alternative epistemology of social reality. In this regard, it functions analogously to ideology by articulating a system of values and beliefs that diverges from the dominant ideological framework. By doing so, it constructs a worldview positioned in opposition to the allegedly deceptive narratives endorsed and perpetuated by the mainstream (Fenster, 2008; Fuchs, 2021). Conspiracies seem to act, in the Gramscian sense, in support of anti-hegemonic values, in that they oppose the social, cultural and political hegemony of the ruling classes (the “elite”, the “establishment” or, in typical conspiratorial jargon, the “mainstream”) and its instruments of legitimation, i.e. the epistemological authorities. They do so in the name of the general will, which is discursively constructed as an “us” or “people” allegedly marginalized and violated by those socially hegemonic elements which conspire against it. As argued by Harambam (2020), conspiracy theorists are in direct competition with established science in the battlefield of knowledge contestation, each vying for epistemic authority. In this sense, official science and conspiracy theories are mutually exclusive: they delegitimize each other and share no point of convergence when it comes to their explanation and evaluation of reality. They effectively construct two separate ideologies, each claiming legitimacy and each claiming to be the voice of truth.

The oppositional epistemology proposed by conspiracy counter-discourse is the expression of, and feeds into, an alternative “political epistemology” (Chapelan, 2021: 282), which becomes particularly evident during periods of crisis. This counter-discourse both expresses and feeds into forms of radical far-right populism. In much the same way as populists, conspiracy theorists cater for the sense of disenfranchisement felt by many social groups as they claim oppressed status and pose as the oppressed Other. They do so by attacking any voice of authority and proposing the(ir) truth in direct opposition to that of the epistemological authorities. Indeed, conspiracy theories are both the cause and the effect of what has been seen as an epistemic crisis of democracy, i.e. a growing distrust of any form of widely shared and *agreed upon* knowledge regarding the basic facts pertaining to social reality. Populist and far-right parties and leaders often exploit conspiracy theories to pursue their anti-systemic politics. In fact, populism and conspiracy theories intersect in their fundamental critique of the establishment, which they portray as engaging in clandestine actions that undermine the interests of the people and the collective will. The epistemological authorities which are the target of

conspiracy theories are one facet of the establishment which populists rail against as a staple of their trademark politics. The good vs evil polarization embodied in the people vs conspirators opposition typical of conspiracy discourse intersects with that of the people vs elite typical of populism, a moral polarization in and of itself (Bergmann, 2018). Furthermore, the conspiracy claim to truth corresponds to the populist claim to authenticity. Both populists and conspiracy theorists (the two groups indeed often overlap) claim to speak the truth and to represent the pleas and needs of the marginalized and humiliated majority, or “people” (Enli, 2024).

Finally, the success of modern conspiracy theories would appear to be, at least in part, a product of the new media system. Knowledge is now made available through a highly fragmented media system, with mass media and social media competing for audience attention but ultimately intermingling into new forms of media hybridity (Chadwick, 2017). In the digital environment, traditional hierarchies are undermined, and social actors, hitherto voiceless, can now find an outlet for their ideas with a potentially unlimited audience, claiming legitimacy and in turn delegitimizing the all-powerful political and media elite. The result is an “epistemic cacophony, where even the descriptions of basic social realities are often contested” (Dahlgren, 2018: 25) and where “competing versions of knowledge and facts arise, thereby generating incompatible views of reality, cementing and isolating incompatible discursive bubbles, and eroding the grounds for political discussion” (Dahlgren, 2018: 22). Sites and platforms supporting conspiracy theories and disinformation thrive in an environment in which there is no longer a single, idealized and unified public sphere, but rather a multiplicity of “micro” public spheres, each in direct (political and commercial) competition with traditional mass media. In fact, it has rightly been argued that it makes increasingly little sense to speak of a single public sphere as a homogenous entity, as we should rather speak of fragmented or micro-audiences, “in a fragmented field of media content production and circulation” (Blommaert, 2020: 393). This set of alternative, fragmented micro-audiences make up what has been called the “anti-public sphere”, i.e. a space (often online) which routinely, by its own nature, opposes the standard values of norms and conventions which are traditionally associated with democratic discourse (Davis, 2021).

6.3 The discursive strategies of conspiracy: Manipulation and legitimation

The three interrelated dimensions of conspiracy as epistemic masquerade described in the previous section find concrete realization in the language used in conspiracy discourse. As discussed in the author’s previous work (Demata, Zorzi, & Zottola, 2022; Demata, 2024), in order to claim legitimacy, conspiracy theories construct a discourse which stands as an alternative to the legitimate one. Discourse is here intended as a set of “context-dependent semiotic practices” which are “socially constituted and socially constitutive” (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009: 89) and are therefore crucial to the way knowledge of social reality is constructed. As conspiracy theories become increasingly popular, the importance of discourse can only be

perceived as crucial, as “dissemination to large audiences enhances the constitutive effect of discourse – its power, that is, to shape widely shared constructions of reality” (Mautner, 2008: 32).

The construction of the epistemic masquerade inherent in conspiracy discourses is facilitated by two primary discursive strategies: manipulation and legitimation. These strategies are well-established, having long been employed to analyse the mechanisms of persuasion, particularly within political and media discourse. Far from being an exclusively conspiratorial strategy, manipulation is a discursive strategy typical of language *per se*, especially in the set of discourses used to exercise social domination (e.g. news discourse, political discourse). According to van Dijk, “manipulation, socially speaking, is a discursive form of elite power reproduction that is against the best interests of dominated groups and (re)produces social inequality” (van Dijk, 2006: 364). van Dijk’s famous definition was originally conceived to explain the way manipulation was deployed by the dominant classes to rule over the masses and maintain social hegemony. However, manipulation is also employed by all those who wish to achieve social hegemony in direct opposition to those who already exert it. van Dijk argues that there are four strategies of manipulation in discourse: (1) the speaker’s claim to credibility and moral superiority in opposition to the opponent’s lack thereof; (2) the authenticity of the speaker’s beliefs and the evidence which is brought to testify to that; (3) the speaker’s attacks on his/her opponent and his/her beliefs, for example through the “ideological square”, i.e., the discursive construction of an *us vs them* dichotomy, whereby an *us*-group is given positive qualities and a *them*-group is given negative qualities; (4) appealing to the emotions, ideas and attitudes of the recipient (van Dijk, 1998, 2006). When these strategies are deployed, the description of certain events or people becomes partial, deceiving and, at least partly, potentially falsifiable, as certain aspects are obfuscated while others are highlighted. The ideological square is crucial in the polarized representation of conflict between two different groups, often identified in discourse with the pronouns *we/us* and *they/them*. These pronouns do not merely fulfil a grammatical function but are powerful indicators of collective belonging/solidarity/inclusion or estrangement/othering/exclusion. By using *we* and *them* as opposites and as coherent, consistent social wholes, speakers simplify social identities and reduce “complex social variability to a single dimension: *us* versus *them*” (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005: 384). All the while, the use of *we* can also promote the idea of consensus, thus manipulating people’s perception of reality.

Legitimation is achieved by using certain linguistic and non-linguistic instruments to validate statements or actions or to transform subjective stances into objective ones – in other words, this happens when “a system of linguistic objectification of human experience is transmitted” (Berger & Luckmann, 1966: 112), and this is done in order to persuade audiences. According to van Leeuwen and Wodak (van Leeuwen, 2007; van Leeuwen & Wodak, 1999), there are four categories of legitimation: (1) Authorization, or the use of traditional or legal authority; (2) Moral Evaluation, whereby legitimation occurs through reference to value systems; (3) Rationalization, or the reference to institutionalized social actors who possess

cognitive validity); and (4) Mythopoesis, that is, the use of storytelling. These strategies are exploited in all kinds of language use but become crucial in politics and news, which are discursive realms with a strong social impact and where persuasion plays a key role. Authorization, in particular, is a key strategy of legitimation as it employs the authority of other sources to legitimize the speaker's point of view. Within Authorization, van Leeuwen operates a further distinction, identifying Personal Authority, Expert Authority, Role Model Authority, Impersonal Authority, and the Authority of Tradition. Expert Authority and the Authority of Tradition are rendered concrete in language especially through quotation, an intertextual feature whereby parts or wholes of text are inserted into the text in question. The purpose of quotations may be multiple, as they can be used to delegitimize their original sources, or they can be used as sources of authority to bolster what is being said or written. Quotations have an epistemological purpose, as they provide discourse with evidentiality through statement of facts. News stories, in particular, are constituted by the integration of materials coming from different sources (e.g. videos, interviews, official reports, stories from social media). In this way, credibility and objectivity are communicated not as coming from the writers' own voice, but as validated by evidence and facts coming from "external" authorities (Bednarek & Caple, 2012: 90–94).

As discussed in my previous work (Demata, 2024), the multimodal texts which populate the digital environment are rife with quotations and references to other texts, both verbal and non-verbal. Photos, videos, memes, links to external websites and retweets function as recontextualized and shared contents and are in themselves forms of quotation. The circulation of contents through quotation and sharing ensures visibility and aims at legitimation: sharing contents is a means for users to engage with each other and to legitimize each other's opinions (or to delegitimize those of others). Quotations can also have a political purpose and their analysis is crucial when assessing the way certain social values and hierarchies are encoded in discourse and the manner in which what is described is being recontextualized (Fairclough, 1992, 1993; Krzyżanowski, 2016). In line with van Dijk's second strategy of manipulation, i.e. focusing on the authenticity of the speaker's beliefs and evidence, quotations may also be used as instruments of manipulation, as they allegedly provide speakers with evidence that confirms their point of view and discredits that of their opponents.

Manipulation as an instrument of truth-building is also achieved due to the structure of the modern media environment itself. Manufacturers of media disinformation and conspiracy theories rely on the fact that contents can go from platform to platform basically unchecked and unchallenged, thus achieving legitimation and credibility by virtue of their being shared and made visible through different sources. Information can be decontextualized and recontextualized in contexts of production and use which are increasingly decentralized, and therefore more prone to the actions of disinformation agents. What happens with disinformation and conspiracy theories is the formation of "evidence collages" which filter out inconvenient or hostile claims and support certain (otherwise potentially refutable) claims (Kraft & Donovan, 2020).

6.4 The WHO and the conspiracy theories about the pandemic

Founded in 1948 as an international institution directly dependent on the United Nations, the WHO has the task of coordinating international efforts to tackle health issues, assisting governments in matters of health and safety, especially transmittable diseases. The WHO has often been a target for conspiracy theorists. For example, it was claimed the CIA had created HIV and the WHO had been instrumental in spreading it through polio vaccinations in Africa. This was supposedly done in order to reduce the world population (Kalichman, 2009). The WHO has often been seen as the perfect embodiment of establishment science and, accordingly, as an instrument in the hands of the United Nations or of more or less hidden powers conspiring against the health of citizens as well as their freedom. These beliefs intensified with COVID-19, whose exact origins and nature were to remain (and are still) largely unknown. Political and health institutions worldwide were engulfed in forms of crisis communication which did little to combat the general uncertainty about the virus that was perceived on a global scale (Wodak, 2021). The WHO itself was perfectly aware of the problems that a new and seemingly unstoppable virus could create in the world of news and information. In a report published in February 2020, they coined a new term, “infodemic”, which rapidly gained widespread popularity:

The 2019-nCoV outbreak and response has been accompanied by a massive ‘infodemic’ – an over-abundance of information – some accurate and some not – that makes it hard for people to find trustworthy sources and reliable guidance when they need it.

(WHO 2020)

Truth be told, during the pandemic the WHO did not always provide univocal and reliable information. From early 2020, when the pandemic broke out, the WHO began publishing a series of statements on the origins and spread of the virus which they would later retract or revise. For instance, the WHO first claimed that the virus could not be airborne, only to then retract such claims (Molteni, 2021). This hesitant behaviour gave origin to all sorts of conspiracy narratives whereby, for example, the WHO was supporting Chinese interests by covering up the supposedly lab-made origins of the virus.

The uncertain knowledge about the origins and spread of the pandemic and the often vague communication regarding its containment from scientific and political institutions worldwide were two key contributing factors to the rapid growth and popularity of anti-science and conspiracy narratives. These narratives cast doubts on the existence of the virus itself, and later of the effectiveness of vaccinations to prevent the disease (Constantinou, Kagialis, & Karekla, 2021; Vâlcea, 2023). The uncertainty regarding Expert Authority and the ensuing spread of fake news and disinformation regarding the pandemic and the anti-COVID vaccines were certainly a global phenomenon taking place in many nations, as illustrated by Larsen and Roslyng’s (2025) chapter addressing the case of Denmark in this volume. In

the USA, political culture has traditionally been ripe with conspiracy theories, and generalized scepticism towards scientific expertise and communication has a well-established history (Goldberg, 2001; Barkun, 2013; Uscinski & Parent, 2014). However, the level of diffusion of conspiracy narratives about the pandemic was unprecedented compared to earlier periods, no doubt induced by the new media environment, and specifically by the pervasiveness of social media. Conspiracy theories about the virus and the vaccines that were meant to combat it enjoyed huge popularity and diffusion. The life of these conspiracy theories could be traced as emerging from either social media or fringe websites, or both, only to then achieve mainstream status, usually through their being peddled by mainstream politicians or celebrities (Blevins et al., 2021; Bruns, Harrington, & Hurcombe, 2021). These conspiracy narratives targeted all aspects of the pandemic and offered a wealth of different explanations, including the origins of the pandemic as the result of a lab leak, its connection to the 5-G mobile technology, the use of vaccines both in terms of their impact on public health and their potential role as a mechanism for population control and the restriction of democratic freedoms. Similarly, the COVID-19 pandemic was interpreted by some as a tool for advancing the so-called Great Reset, whereby migrant populations were being deliberately positioned to replace white populations over time (Birchall & Knight, 2023). Large sectors of society both in the USA and the rest of the world were deeply influenced by these counter-narratives and conspiracy theories, with the result that the health of many people was severely endangered, lives were lost, and faith in the political process undermined.

6.5 Alex Jones and InfoWars

Alex Jones fully exploited the feeling of mistrust in public health organizations and political institutions during the pandemic. He was, in fact, a major contributor to the spreading of disinformation about COVID-19. Jones is, without any doubt, one of the world's most famous conspiracy theorists. Through his own platform *InfoWars* and his substantial presence on social media, Jones has always been a highly controversial figure due to his promotion of conspiracy theories. Among the most infamous theories he has endorsed is the claim that the 9/11 attacks were not perpetrated by Al-Qaeda but were instead secretly orchestrated by then-U.S. President George W. Bush. He has also propagated the New World Order conspiracy theory, which posits that a clandestine elite is actively working to curtail individual freedoms and establish a dictatorial global government. Additionally, he has advanced the claim that the Sandy Hook Elementary School mass shooting was a fabrication, a so-called "false flag" operation allegedly staged by advocates of stricter gun control measures (Beauchamp, 2016). His public support of this last conspiracy cost him a trial for defamation from the parents of the victims of the school shooting and he eventually filed for bankruptcy.

Jones has always had a tumultuous relationship with social media: he was banned from Facebook and other social media in August 2018 (Riley, 2018) and again in May 2019 (Darcy, 2019) for spreading hate speech and openly calling

for violence. For the same reasons, Apple also deplatformed Jones in 2019 and Google Play Store followed suit in May 2020 because of the amount of disinformation he was spreading about the pandemic. Indeed, the InfoWars Facebook page and other Facebook pages related to it endorsed anti-vaccination views (Zadrozny, 2019). Jones compared coronavirus lockdowns to “what Nazis did” (Knox, 2020). Through his networks, he sold fake supplements (a considerable source of income for him) and an anti-COVID toothpaste which were allegedly treatments against the virus and were banned from commerce (Ferre-Sandurni & McKinley, 2020; Marantz, 2020; Porter, 2020). Jones certainly had a rather extensive following, and InfoWars itself, as a platform, often competed with, and was more successful than, mainstream websites such as Newsweek or The Economist (Beauchamp, 2016).

Jones’s attacks on the WHO form part of his general view of a global conspiracy, in which the pandemic and vaccinations are all instruments used by an all-powerful elite to gain authoritarian global world domination. Jones’s prominence is largely attributable to his presence in online videos, which are published on his own InfoWars website and disseminated across various digital platforms and social media. Consequently, a thorough analysis of his conspiratorial discourse must consider the ways in which his online videos construct “truth” through a combination of verbal and non-verbal strategies.

6.6 The dataset

The dataset used in this chapter consists of two videos. The first video was published on the “Alex Jones” channel on Rumble (<https://rumble.com/c/c-618485>) on 7 May 2022 and is entitled “BREAKING Alex Jones Warns The World Health Organization Is Attempting a Power Grab!” (<https://rumble.com/v13uor-breaking-alex-jones-warns-the-world-health-organization-is-attempting-a-pow.html>). *Rumble* (www.rumble.com) is an online video platform, initially conceived as an alternative to YouTube; it routinely hosts far-right and Republican politicians as well as conspiratorial contents. Jones’s short video is taken from InfoWars itself and was found by inserting “Alex Jones” and “World Health Organization” into the Rumble search engine. It was chosen because it was the most widely shared and reposted by several other pages on Rumble itself.

The second video was extrapolated from a page on the InfoWars website focusing on the statements made by biologist Bret Weinstein about the WHO’s alleged intention to introduce new health plans which would threaten democracy and free speech. The page, entitled “Biologist Warns WHO Planning to Take Control Over Nations For Next Pandemic, Confirms COVID “Vaccines” Killed 17 MILLION People” (www.infowars.com/posts/biologist-warns-who-planning-to-take-control-over-nations-for-next-pandemic-confirms-covid-vaccines-killed-17-million-people/), appeared on 6 January 2024 and was selected for this research because it is the first of a series of articles appearing in InfoWars in which Jones, in the following two weeks, discussed Weinstein’s claims at length. The analysis will focus on Jones’s video which appears at the bottom of the page, before the viewers’ comments, and is entitled “Experts Claim Global Heart Failure Pandemic Caused

by New COVID Strain”, in which he elaborates on Weinstein’s interview. As is the case for all webpages, the text consists of a combination of written text, photos and videos. Weinstein’s original statements were released during an episode of “The Tucker Carlson Encounter”, a program aired through the Tucker Carlson Network, in which its anchor interviewed Weinstein. Carlson is a very controversial radical right-wing anchorman and a supporter of conspiracy theories. He was fired from Fox News in April 2023 and founded his own streaming service in December 2023.

6.7 Analysis

In both videos analysed in this study, as in all content produced for InfoWars, Jones adopts the demeanor of a broadcaster in a professional newsroom, presenting against a backdrop featuring a large screen displaying digital world maps. These videos are highly polished in terms of production quality and employ visual settings that emulate those of established news organizations. Consequently, this carefully curated environment provides viewers with a sense of familiarity and credibility, creating the impression that they are engaging with an authentic and legitimate news program.

In “BREAKING Alex Jones Warns The World Health Organization Is Attempting a Power Grab!”, Jones argues that the WHO is going to pass amendments to the IHR, the International Health Regulations, at an upcoming meeting of the World Health Assembly taking place in Geneva on 22–28 May 2022. These amendments would then be sent to, and approved by, the US Senate and, as a consequence, according to Jones, the US would be further deprived of its sovereignty. The video starts by addressing the broader frame within which the amendments are to be approved:

As you know, the United Nations was set up by the Rockefeller Foundation and other multinational billionaire companies after World War II. It’s always been trying to set up a planetary world government that controls food, the medicine, travel, reproduction, everything towards a planned economy that depopulates the Earth.

(0:07–0:24)

Jones’s words immediately place the claims about the proposed amendments to the IHR within the frame of the New World Order conspiracy theory. As discussed in Section 6.4 of this chapter, the WHO is perceived as a tool employed by the United Nations to establish global dominance in accordance with the objectives set forth by the New World Order. This objective would purportedly be realized through the implementation of various restrictive health regulations, including global vaccination, a premise that Jones uncritically assumes to be true. Indeed, the incipit of Jones’s monologue, “As you know”, presupposes a common knowledge of facts shared by Jones and his audience and a mutually agreed upon evaluation of them. It is an evidential claim based on presupposition and aims to establish an immediate connection with his viewers.

The conspiratorial notion whereby the US Senate was willing and ready to ratify the amendments of the IHR is presented as truth by legitimizing it through a strategy of Authorization. This is achieved at two levels. The first is the purely linguistic one, based mainly on Jones's narrating voice. He constructs legitimacy through intertextuality as he reads extracts from an article and a webpage which are shown on the screen:

Here's a few articles, and they break it all down. "Bill Gates Wants to Build a New Global Team Called GERM," it's this whole UN United Nations treaty that goes over it all, we'll be covering it live on air, but this is all unfolding right now in Geneva, Switzerland the 27th and the 28th excuse me... so there it is, it's a great site that breaks it down... DontYouDare.INFO they did a great job kind of putting it all together.

The articles shared by Jones with his viewers are from two hyperpartisan websites, Gateway Pundit (www.thegatewaypundit.com) and DontYouDare.info. Jones uses these articles as evidence of the WHO's conspiracy to achieve a "power grab". The article in the Gateway Pundit is copied and pasted from ProTrumpNews.com, another hyperpartisan website. This section of Jones's video therefore includes a quotation of a quotation. Quoting these articles means using Authorization, whereby sources considered reputable confirm the speaker's point of view. Furthermore, it is not just the cited text that confers Authorization, but the *act* itself of quoting and sharing a certain source somehow amplifies certain claims and bestows legitimacy upon them, especially when this is done multiple times, as in the case of the article from ProTrumpNews. As discussed in Section 6.4, this is a strategy used by legitimate journalism when quoting external sources or other news outlets in order to lend authority to what is claimed.

At 1:01–1:03, the camera shows a section of the article published in Gateway Pundit:

The 75th meeting of the World Health Assembly will be held in Geneva, Switzerland this May 22–28, 2022. The Assembly will vote on the amendments to the IHR. They are very likely to pass and be enacted into international law unless "We the People" stand up against this attack on our sovereignty.

The mention of "We the People" combines two strategies: (1) the ideological square, which consists of two groups, us vs them, who are constructed in discourse in opposition to each other, through positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation. This is a typical populist/conspiracist strategy, whereby the "us" is construed in opposition to the "them", i.e. the elite or the establishment, and the two groups are seen as perfectly consistent; (2) the Authority of Tradition, as the mention of "We the People" is a reference to the initial words of the Preamble to the United States Constitution, which is taken to be common knowledge in US society, and constitutes the evaluative force of Jones's argument. Through the combination of these two strategies, Jones aligns his opinions with those of "we the

people”. He grants credence to his claims by making use of the highest authority in the country, as the words from the Constitution legitimize his own stance in opposition to those of the conspiratorial elite.

The second level in which truth is constructed through Authorization in the video comes from Jones’s physical environment. His quotations from the two websites are followed by him pointing to his desk and saying: “I’ve got hundreds of articles over here we are covering right now”, with the camera showing several small piles of sheets of paper which are meant to confirm Jones’s claims (Figure 6.1). Authority through textual reference is therefore realized via non-textual elements, i.e. the visual elements pointed out by Jones in the video. We might call this presupposed intertextuality, as it is assumed that what Jones is saying about the WHO’s conspiratorial planning is validated by other texts, i.e. those spread across the desk, which viewers do not have direct access to but which Jones considers as validating sources of authority. The authority in this case is asserted not on the basis of the supposed contents of the articles (which viewers cannot read and therefore do not have knowledge of), but on the basis of their quantity (“I’ve got hundreds of articles”) and their presence and visibility on Jones’s desk.

The video ends with, once again, the assumption that there is a conspiracy going on and a call to action to his viewers, who are encouraged to share the news he is airing:

The pandemic was just phase one. This is phase two. We got to maintain America’s sovereignty. God bless, and good luck, now get started, get this information out please.



Figure 6.1 Screenshot from “BREAKING Alex Jones Warns The World Health Organization Is Attempting a Power Grab!”, 7 May 2022 (<https://rumble.com/v13uuor-breaking-alex-jones-warns-the-world-health-organization-is-attempting-a-pow.html>)

Thus, the narration of the video shifts from reporting the news from other websites and platforms, used as sources of authority, to evidential statements about a conspiracy, whose existence is taken for granted. This communicates an impression of veracity to what Jones says.

The second video under analysis, “Experts Claim Global Heart Failure Pandemic Caused by New COVID Strain”, is included as part of a page in the InfoWars webpage entitled “Biologist Warns WHO Planning to Take Control Over Nations For Next Pandemic, Confirms COVID “Vaccines” Killed 17 MILLION People”. In the page, Jones discusses an interview in which Bret Weinstein stated that the COVID vaccine caused extensive damage to people’s health worldwide. Weinstein also claimed that the resistance of a “small group of dissidents” against the vaccines managed to somehow alter the dominant narrative and highlight the dangers of the WHO’s plans to both democracy and human health.

As with all webpages, the article which appears on InfoWars is constructed as an ensemble of verbal and visual texts. The verbal sections consist mainly of extracts from Weinstein’s interview. They are interspersed with four tweets, each featuring video extracts from Weinstein’s interview for “The Tucker Carlson Encounter”, embedded in the webpage, and with several links to the biologist’s full interview. As in the case of the first video, information is communicated and legitimized through the intertextual presence of external sources. In the title of the article, the mention of the fact that Weinstein is a biologist imbues the whole narrative with authority. Following the strategy of Authorization, and specifically that of Expert Authority, what is said about the pandemic is taken as true and legitimate because these statements are made by a reputable man of science.

Jones’s own 7:19 video was originally published in Banned Video, another platform controlled by Jones himself. Once again, Jones is in the InfoWars newsroom commenting and expanding upon the news presented in the page. The WHO is not directly mentioned in the video but was implicitly held responsible both for the virus’ effects on people’s health and for the restrictive measures that were introduced in order to contain the spread of COVID-19.

As in the first video analysed previously, Jones is shown in his own newsroom sitting at a desk strewn with copies of news articles (Figure 6.2). The visual aspects of the video aim once more to communicate the abundance of sources available to Jones, something that legitimizes his claims. In the video, Jones makes several appeals to the scientific evidence contained in the articles he reads. Authority is achieved by quoting Weinstein’s 17-million claim and merging it with other scientific sources and data:

We have top scientists, with the nations that have reporting data, so it’s higher than that, 17,000,000 conservatively killed by the shots. The RAS [renin-angiotensin system] infected with prion crystals that basically create cancer and cut the DNA strand right at the key spot. I mean, they have hit us and hit us hard, with a soft kill delayed reaction weapon. Now I’m sorry to have to announce



Figure 6.2 Screenshot from video featured in “Biologist Warns WHO Planning to Take Control Over Nations For Next Pandemic, Confirms COVID ‘Vaccines’ Killed 17 MILLION People”, 6 January 2024 (www.infowars.com/posts/biologist-warns-who-planning-to-take-control-over-nations-for-next-pandemic-confirms-covid-vaccines-killed-17-million-people/)

that to you, but that’s why the illegal aliens are exempt, they want them as the new replacement population. But shit, shit, shit, it’s just the reality and it’s horrifying. Here’s some more of the news on that front. And then we’re going to your phone calls.¹

The mention of “We have top scientists”, again following Expert Authority, lends an air of credibility to the whole statement by Jones, who then goes on to use complex medical language (“The RAS infected with prion crystals that basically create cancer and cut the DNA strand right at the key spot”) that goes well beyond basic layman knowledge, thus creating a layer of authority through obfuscation, i.e. the use of a very specialized language known to experts only. This is followed by an explanation of the reason why migrants may allegedly opt out of the vaccination campaign (“that’s why the illegal aliens are exempt, they want them as the new replacement population”). This last statement places Jones’s supposedly empirical explanation in the context of the Great Reset conspiracy theory.

Jones then shows the audience a number of articles taken from various sources and reads some headlines and short extracts from them. The articles originate from various hyperpartisan news outlets and platforms, including Breitbart, ZeroHedge, Gateway Pundit, and RedState, as well as InfoWars itself on three separate occasions. Jones presents these sources as substantiating his claims

regarding vaccines, as each of them cites statements attributed to purported medical authorities and experts:

Experts say new COVID strain will cause global heart failure pandemic. Global heart failure Pandemic. And they go on and say ohh *scientists around the world and in Japan* they've they've looked at the new variant, it has a spike protein on it – they all do, the HIV spike protein – and it attacks the heart and causes viral myocarditis.

Here's a Fox News Report: "*Doctor Mark Siegel* on what's behind the decline in U.S. life expectancy" – hmm mmm for the first time ever – "*up 25% among 35 to 44 year-olds and up 19% among 25 to 34 year-olds*, but the vaccine which supposedly saved lives, nobody is studying what the long term effects of the vaccine here are". That's also an elephant in the room. Didn't save any lives, it was all lies.

Yep. *New study*: "Safety Concerns about the Covid Shot Arise", "New Safety Concerns about the Covid Shot Arise".

Again, following Expert Authority, credibility is lent by the authoritativeness of the people quoted ("Experts", "Doctor Mark Siegel"), by the fact that his quotes are part of some scientific report ("New study"), and also because the sources of these quotes are external authorities, or are presented as such (Zerohedge, Fox News, and InfoWars respectively). As in the case of the conspiratorial claim whereby "illegal aliens" are going to become "the new replacement population", at the end of the Fox News Report Jones makes another typical claim, "That's also an elephant in the room. Didn't save any lives, it was all lies," again mixing the seemingly scientific evidence with his own personal assessment of the situation.

At the end of the video, after having finished reading the headlines of some of the articles spread across his desk describing the supposedly adverse effects of vaccines, Jones exclaims: "That's quite a stack of news on that front, isn't it". Again, just like the "hundreds of articles" at the end of the "BREAKING Alex Jones Warns The World Health Organization Is Attempting a Power Grab!" video, the supposedly high number of sources and their visibility to the viewers have a cumulative effect in terms of legitimation, as if the validation of Jones's claims were due to the sheer quantity of articles displayed by him to his viewers.

6.8 Discussion

The discursive strategies in Jones's videos analysed in this chapter are the textual foundation of the epistemic masquerade which I consider to be the essence of conspiratorial discourse. The construction of truth, which is negotiated through the three dimensions of masquerading – ideological, populist and communicative – are conveyed in the language used by Jones by means of strategies of manipulation and legitimation. Through these strategies, an epistemology of knowledge, itself the basis of social and personal conduct, is upheld, however "false" or untrue it may

be. Crucially, the conspiracy counter-discourse is masqueraded as truth by using certain visual and verbal strategies that mimic those of the official discourses of epistemological authorities: Jones communicates contents which are clearly oppositional and anti-establishment but are well *masqueraded* as meaningful, rational and legitimate as they recall familiar visual frames, terms of reference and modes of speech.

First of all, Jones's conspiracy discourse occurs within a visual setting which is recognizable. As has been mentioned in the previous section of this chapter, the newsroom environment at InfoWars, with Jones as its anchorman, looks authentic and legitimate and recalls that of traditional newsrooms. In other words, in order to claim credibility, Jones borrows the visual conventions of mainstream media. Interviews and other sources are used in much the same way as legitimate journalism. The details of the visual setting, with the "stacks or articles" strewn across Jones's desk for his viewers to see, also add elements of tangibility and veracity to his claims.

Second, at the purely textual level, Jones masquerades his claims by employing discursive strategies that are very frequent in traditional or establishment political and media discourse, and generally in those discourses that aim at persuasion in the public sphere. van Dijk's manipulating strategy of the "ideological square" is the discursive expression of Jones's Manichean worldview, a worldview typical of conspiracy theorists, whereby the world is seen as a battlefield between the forces of good and those of evil. The ideological square constructs an opposition between us and them in discourse: the us-group is granted the status of morally good actors, while the members of the them-group are constantly represented as evil-doers. In Jones's videos, this polarized positioning is embodied discursively in the people, or the USA, vs the United Nations, the WHO, Bill Gates, and whoever else conspires to the detriment of people's health and freedom. Jones's enemies have also been the frequent targets of populist leaders and movements for pretty much the same reasons: the WHO, the United Nations and other obscure actors manufactured the virus or exaggerated its impact, hid information from the people, and have plans to subjugate mankind through the vaccine, either directly through the vaccine's effects or indirectly by establishing a "power grab" at the expense of the popular will.

The epistemic masquerade of conspiracy theories also takes place at the discursive level through strategies of legitimation, by which conspiracy discourse both mimics and opposes the establishment discourse of science. Thus, an alternative system of knowledge is constructed, functioning as an epistemological framework, a value system and a counterpoint to the hegemonic paradigm upheld by the establishment. Indeed, while Jones actively critiques and seeks to dismantle the official scientific discourse of the WHO, his own discourse continues to be framed, and even deliberately *masqueraded*, as scientific, and it incorporates counter-evidential claims which he purports to be *true*. Jones's discussion of the WHO's plans for a "power grab" and of Weinstein's interview regarding the dangers of vaccines is rife with strategies of legitimation, such as Authorization, which manage to transform his manipulated, partial or pseudo-scientific claims into what appears to be truth.

Jones utters authentically conspiratorial statements during presentations which are replete with supposedly authoritative statements issued by scientists. Thus, legitimization stems from the use of sources which are apparently empirical, i.e. medical and scientific reports, quoted from and mediated by recognizable media, i.e. news websites and platforms. Indeed, credibility is achieved through quoting, sharing, and referring to external sources multiple times, these sources being presented as “evidence collages” claiming legitimacy by means of intertextual chains.

6.9 Conclusion

In the conspiratorial mind set, “official” science is attacked not just because of its supposed fallacies or manipulations. Supporters of conspiracy theories see science as a key segment within a socially encompassing worldview: scientists are attacked for the social and political authority and role they hold, not just for the (supposedly wrong) scientific ethos they support. During the pandemic, the WHO played a key role in addressing the crisis within the international public sphere. Not surprisingly, the WHO also became a frequent target for conspiracy theorists and often the focal point for conspiracy theories regarding COVID-19 and the vaccines created to combat the virus. Given the importance of science in the public debate at the time of the pandemic, conspiracy theories regarding the broad spheres of health and science became very popular, attacking, as they did, the foundations of the official narratives issued by the epistemological authorities.

In order to claim legitimacy and present itself as “true”, conspiracy discourse is aligned to (and makes use of) certain strategies which are typical of scientific and news discourses. Alex Jones’s videos analysed here mimic the reliability and trustworthiness of “legitimate” news in more than one way and from more than one semiotic perspective. The claim to truth of conspiracy theories has often been characterized as manipulative, false and deceiving: the standard view of conspiracy is indeed one based on the absurdity of the claims advanced by conspiracy followers, stemming from the assumption that all that they state as fact is false. However, persuasion in Jones’s discourse is achieved through the presentation of a mixture of conspiratorial beliefs and traditional discursive strategies based on (allegedly) empirical evidence. This presentation lends authority and credibility to what he says. The New World Order, the Great Reset and other conspiracies are based on epistemic masquerade, whereby conspiratorial claims are legitimized by scientific (pseudo-)evidence masquerading as truth. Indeed, it may be said that thanks to a number of well-honed discursive structures, falsehoods are disguised or masqueraded and thus granted an aura of authenticity which may well be (mis) taken for truth.

Note

1 Emphasis in this quotation and in the following ones is by the author.

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