



Everything's going according to Plan(demic): a cultural sociological approach to conspiracy theorizing

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Abstract

In this article, I examine the case of a viral film entitled “Plandemic,” its sequel, and the epidemiologist that is its main subject, and develop a cultural sociology of conspiracy theorizing through the concept of “performative conspiracy.” I argue that the Plandemic case represents a cultural performance within the (ongoing) serious social drama of the Covid-19 pandemic. I focus primarily on the “alternative” narrative put forth by the Plandemic case; however, the (Western/US) “mainstream” narrative becomes clear as well. Both call upon the same sets of binary oppositions, chief among them, science vs. blind faith, truth vs. deception, and evidence vs. supposition. Audiences, who are themselves fragmented and differentiated, are exposed to multiple narrative paths. Within the mainstream, they encounter an apocalyptic-turned romantic story, in which science, evidence, and the truth, the sacred trio, will lift humanity out of perilous danger. Plandemic’s alternative narrative begins in a tragic tone and builds apocalyptically into a tale of terror, waged by the very same forces of science, truth, and evidence, to create a “plague of corruption” that will “kill millions.” To conclude, I reflect on the potential implications of the increasing popularity of conspiracy theorizing about Covid-19.

Keywords Performative conspiracy · Covid-19 · Narrative · Cultural performance · Social drama

Introduction

The film opens with calm but nevertheless foreboding music. A man and a woman are walking toward the camera on what appears an upscale, small-town shopping street. The narrator, also the interviewer of the film’s star character, solemnly introduces his subject. “Dr. Judy Mikovits has been called one of the most accomplished scientists of her generation. Her 1991 doctoral thesis revolutionized the treatment

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of HIV/AIDS. At the height of her career, Dr. Mikovits published a blockbuster article in the journal *Science*. The controversial article sent shock waves through the scientific community as it revealed that the common use of animal and human fetal tissues were unleashing devastating plagues of chronic diseases.” They continue to walk, now over a wooden bridge. The scene quickly shifts, and the camera is now focused only on Mikovits, standing with her hands clasped in front of her. As the camera zooms in for a close-up, the narrator declares: “For exposing their deadly secrets, the minions of big pharma waged war on Dr. Mikovits destroying her good name, career and personal life. Now, as the fate of nations hangs in the balance, Dr. Mikovits is now naming names of those behind the plague of corruption that places all human life in danger.”

This opening, from the film *Plandemic* (Willis 2020a), presages a gripping story, indeed an apocalyptic narrative, in which “the fate of nations hangs in the balance.” War is being waged on an accomplished scientist whose only crime is exposing the “minions of big pharma” for what they are. As the 26-minute film unfolds, we hear the about the trials of this scientist, arrested without charges, subjected to a gag order, and forced out of her career. We learn that “they” will “kill millions” if a vaccine for Covid-19 is administered universally. Although the film sometimes seems like it’s directed at an audience of insiders, familiar with Mikovits and her accusations about the existence of a “plague of corruption,”¹ anyone watching the film will not mistake its dire warnings and predictions: there is something terribly wrong with the world of science and medicine, especially when it comes to the coronavirus pandemic, and we must “wake up” to the real facts.

In this article, I examine conspiracy theorizing about Covid-19 through a case study about a viral film touted as “26 minutes that changed the world,”² its sequel and the epidemiologist that is its main subject. I develop a cultural sociology of conspiracy theorizing, elaborating the case as a “performative conspiracy.” I suggest that it is a cultural performance (Alexander 2004, 2006; Alexander et al. 2006) within the (ongoing) serious social drama (Reed 2006) of the pandemic. I also employ the concepts of narrative genres as articulated by Philip Smith and his colleagues (Smith 2005, 2012; Smith and Howe 2015), who build upon the work of Northrup Frye (1957), structuralist poetics and Aristotle. The goal is to reveal the “culture structures” (Rambo and Chan 1990), or collective representations, within stories about the Covid-19 pandemic. There exists some work in the sociology of conspiracy theorizing that applies a cultural lens (see, for example, Fine and Ellis 2010; Harambam 2017; Harambam and Aupers 2015; Knight 2000; Melley 2000), but to my knowledge, there has been no work that takes a performative perspective on the conspiratorial.

If the Covid-19 pandemic represents a “natural experiment” for social scientists (Alexander and Smith 2020), then part of the task is to embrace a “meaning first”

¹ Mikovits, along with co-author, Kent Heckenlively, released the book *Plague of Corruption: Restoring Faith in the Promise of Science* in April 2020, which details Mikovits’ life work as a scientist and activist against scientific corruption.

² <https://freedomplatform.tv/plandemic-indoctrination-world-premiere/>.



(Alexander and Smith 2018) epistemology, which accords culture and the process of meaning-making a starring role. The role of the sociologist is to grasp the meaningful dimensions that run through every aspect of social life “to interpret them, to understand their force, and to see how they can be considered as ‘causes’ that shape policy, outcomes, opinions, technologies, actions, politics, preferences, consumption, gestures, and expressions” (ibid. p. 13). During the pandemic, conspiracy theorizing has been escalating, with concrete effects, such as anti-lockdown and anti-mask protests around the world, and an increasing number of people who are “vaccine-hesitant.” Correlation is certainly not causality, but audience receptiveness to the film and other forms of performative conspiracy seems considerable. In early May 2020, 75% of respondents surveyed in the United States by IPSOS (2020) were “totally likely” to be vaccinated; just a few months later, only 51% would try the vaccine, even if widely available at a low cost (CNN/SRSS 2020).³ Clearly, the symbolic meanings underlying the pandemic are shifting in ways that manifest in “real” social consequences.

In the next section, I lay out the theoretical underpinnings for a cultural sociology of conspiracy theorizing, coining the term “performative conspiracy.” A methodological statement and a description of the data I collected follows. In the analytical section, I elaborate the conflicting narratives within the serious social drama of Covid-19. I focus primarily on the alternative narrative put forth by the Plandemic case; however, the (Western/US) “mainstream” narrative⁴ becomes clear as well, not only through the perspective of the those engaging in performative conspiracy, but also from the accounts that strive to debunk them. Both narratives call upon the same sets of binary oppositions, chief among them, science vs. blind faith, truth vs. deception and evidence vs. supposition. The mainstream narrative can be roughly summarized as follows: the virus occurred naturally, not in a lab; it’s dangerous, so we should follow the rules, wear masks and practice social distancing; a vaccine will be developed and bring things under control. The heroes are the leading health organizations that have our interests at heart—the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), the World Health Organization (WHO)—along with medical leaders like Dr. Anthony Fauci, and the villain is the virus, and perhaps nature itself. The Plandemic narrative suggests that the virus is likely part of a premediated plan; we should question the conventional wisdom concerning how to prevent its spread; and any vaccine will end in disaster on a global scale. The heroes are Dr. Judy Mikovits, an army of “hundreds” of other scientists and medical professionals who are “awake,” and the story has multiple villains—big pharma, Bill Gates, and others who will profit from the pandemic. Mikovits is also a martyr for the cause. To conclude, I reflect on the potential implications of the increasing popularity of conspiracy theorizing about Covid-19.

³ After the actual vaccine rollout, the percentage of U.S. Americans willing to be vaccinated increased again, reaching 71 percent in early 2021 (Brenan 2021). This turnaround may be at least partially attributable to an extensive vaccination campaign by the Biden administration.

⁴ As I will elaborate in the analytical section, the “mainstream” narrative itself is also contested, with variations in the plot.



Theoretical framework

My analysis is situated within the sociology of “conspiracy theories.” I realize that this term is loaded, and even questionable. For example, the most neutral researcher on this topic, Joshua Harambam (2017), uses the term “conspiracy culture” instead (see also Knight 2000). I follow Harambam’s aspirations to “methodological agnosticism” in his quest to understand (in terms of Weber’s *verstehen*) such a culture. Nevertheless, I do use the term “conspiracy theorizing,” to highlight the processual and performative nature of this activity. In no way am I adopting a normative stance who engage in conspiracy theorizing; instead, I seek to understand their meaning-making process. Accordingly, as I develop a cultural sociology of conspiracy theorizing, I coin a more neutral and less disparaging term—performative conspiracy.

Harambam is one of few exceptions that stands out among academics that pathologize, or, at the very least, pass judgment on conspiracy theorizing (see also Knight, 2000). Most studies hearken back to Richard Hofstadter’s (1963) essay “The Paranoid Style in American Politics,” who admits that “the term ‘paranoid style’ is pejorative, and it is meant to be; the paranoid style has a greater affinity for bad causes than good” (p. 5). Using the example of the movement against the fluoridation of municipal water supplies, he notes that it represents “catnip for cranks of all kinds” (Ibid). Most recently, Joseph Uscinski and his colleagues (Uscinski 2020; Uscinski et al. 2020; Uscinski and Parent 2014), whose work is also featured in the mass media, warn specifically about the implications of alternative narratives about Covid-19: “[T]he consequences of blaming the coronavirus’s emergence on the wrong source, or of doubting its seriousness, could be life-threatening on a massive scale” (Uscinski and Enders, 2020). In short, most of the theorizing on conspiracy theories carries a “warning label” that they are dangerous and irrational, representing “bad science” (Barkun 2003; Harambam and Aupers 2015; Pipes 1997; Popper 2011 [1945]).

In a related vein, a great deal of attention is devoted to highlighting the fact that conspiracy beliefs are widespread, only adding to the perception of danger. Uscinski and Enders (2020) report that virtually everyone believes in some conspiracy theory; only 9% of those in the United States that they surveyed in March 2020 didn’t believe *any* of the 22 theories presented. Among the most popular are John F. Kennedy assassination theories, believed by more than 50% of US Americans in one version or another for 50 years, with some polls showing 80% agreement. Efforts to reveal the universality of belief in conspiracies also extends to debunking common misperceptions, including the idea that conspiracies are somehow more prevalent today than in the past, that they are more prevalent among conservatives/right-wingers than liberals/left-wingers,⁵ and that conspiratorial thinking is the province of the mentally ill. There is some debate, however, on what exactly drives conspiracy

⁵ Some insist that this is changing since the 2010s. For example, a piece by *The Economist* (2020b) cites the strong levels of belief in the Covid-19 “infodemic” among the right globally, as compared to the left, also referencing conspiracy scholar Karen Douglas on the topic (see Douglas et al. 2019).



theories. It is from this point, about the “audiences” for conspiracy theories, that I now connect to my framework of “performative conspiracy.”

In the early-mid 2000s, Jeffrey Alexander and his colleagues (Alexander 2004; Alexander et al. 2006) developed a series of theories concerning the pragmatics of “cultural performance.” Put simply, cultural performance is “the social process by which actors, individually or in concert, display for others the meaning of their social situation” (Alexander 2006, p. 32). Further, “Successful performance depends on the ability to convince others that one’s performance is true, with all the ambiguities that the notion of aesthetic truth implies” (ibid). The six elements of cultural performance include: (1) systems of collective representations (background symbols and foreground scripts); (2) actors; (3) observers, audiences; (4) means of symbolic production; (5) *mise-en-scène*; and (6) social power. According to Alexander (ibid), every social performance is at least partially determined by these elements; each is a necessary, but not sufficient, cause of a given performative act. While in traditional societies, the elements of performance could be easily “fused,” in modern societies, “de-fusion” complicates the success of performative action. When it seems “real” and “authentic,” and has created “flow” (Csikszentmihalyi 1975), a performance is “re-fused” and “stitches seamlessly together the disconnected elements of cultural performance” (Alexander 2006, p. 55). Luengo and García-Marín propose that in today’s society, especially in light of “misinformation” about the Covid-19 pandemic, the reflexive practice of “fact-checking” and its interpretive power represents yet another element of performance, taking on “a double duty: trying to contribute to further ‘de-fusion’ (separating audiences from actors when the latter lack authenticity and credibility) on the one hand, and working to overcome it on the other” (2020, p. 1).

I assert that the alternative narrative presented in the Plandemic films represents a cultural performance within the larger (ongoing) social drama of Covid-19, in other words, a performative conspiracy. It has played out as a social drama, not necessarily in the classic sense described by Victor Turner (1974, 1982),⁶ but as the ideal type of performance Isaac Reed (2006) calls “serious social drama.” Reed seeks to provide nuance by looking closely at and *specifying* the relationships among the various elements of performance (ibid, p. 147). Within serious social drama, and its “complicity-in-conflict,” as Reed puts it, “all of the actors and audiences, though offering quite conflicting narratives and characterizations, work from within the same deeply felt set of collective representations” and “who has both the skills and the social power to enact them is of course the key question” (ibid. p. 149). As I will demonstrate below, the actors and audiences in the Covid-19 social drama draw upon the same collective representations in the form of binary codes such as science vs. blind faith, truth vs. deception and evidence vs. supposition. If the *mise-en-scène* is the key site of interpretation (ibid. p. 155), then the “narrative battle” (Jaworsky and Qiaoan 2021) playing out over Covid-19 takes place between mainstream

⁶ Turner’s (1974) model reflects a cycle of social drama that begins with (1) a serious breach, moves on to a period of (2) “crisis,” in which there is a “liminoid” state, then moves toward (3) redress, and finally comes to (4) reintegration or the social recognition of irreparable schism.



(CDC, WHO, Dr. Anthony Fauci) and alternative (Dr. Judy Mikovits, David E. Martin, PhD, “hundreds of doctors”) scientific authorities, with each side embodying very different levels of social power and means of symbolic production. In short, the concept of performative conspiracy helps to elucidate the actual pragmatics of meaning-making and the cultural structures underlying conspiracy theorizing.

Research context

What exactly sets the stage for performative conspiracy about Covid-19? Conspiracy theory does not occur in a vacuum. What many social theorists do seem to agree on is that contemporary conspiracy theories represent a response to the conditions of late/post modernity.⁷ For example, coming from a Marxist perspective, Fredric Jameson has dubbed conspiracy the “poor person’s cognitive mapping in the post-modern age” (1988, p. 356). Nefes and Romero-Reche point to the forces of rationalization, secularization, and disenchantment of the world, “which erode traditional worldviews and beliefs and replace them with the tentative methods of science and the abstract formality of bureaucracy, and obviously cannot provide ultimate answers or meaning to social reality” (2020, p. 100). Karl Popper, in his famous tome on the “open society,” writes about the “conspiracy theory of society” as a “typical result of the secularization of a religious superstition” and “the very opposite of the true aim of the social sciences”. (Popper 2011[1945], p. 306). Finally, some theorists, especially philosophers, stress the loss of trust in official epistemic authorities (Räikkä and Ritola 2020). Harambam and Aupers (2015) argue that David Icke, one of the most well-known “conspiracy theorists” today, succeeds by providing his audiences with alternative sources of epistemic authority: experience, tradition, futuristic imageries, science, and social theory. They point to the polysemic nature of his texts, through which “each follower can ‘decode’ Icke’s super conspiracy theory differently and in conformity with one’s own social identity and political interests” (p. 16).

If audiences are “decoding” as they perform conspiracy, they do so in a context in which science has lost credibility and become politicized, at least for certain influential groups. For example, Mooney (2005) argues that in the United States, after decades of faith in science and the separation of politics and science following World War II, the emergence of the New Right in the 1970s precipitated two cultural shifts, the ascendancy of the New Right with the election of Ronald Reagan and the formation of a “war on science” with the George W. Bush presidency in 2000. To test Mooney’s (and others’) assumptions, Gauchat (2012) conducts an empirical study on public trust in science in the United States. He finds that such trust has not declined since the 1970s except among conservatives and those who frequently attend church: “In general, results are consistent with claims of the politicization

⁷ That is not to say that they are solely a “modern” phenomenon. Historians are careful to point out the *longue durée* of conspiracy theorizing, going back to the Roman Empire, the Middle Ages, and the French Revolution (see Section 5 in Butter and Knight 2020).



thesis and show that conservatives experienced long-term group-specific declines rather than an abrupt cultural break” (p. 182). He also challenges the “deficit model,” which predicts that those with higher levels of education will have greater trust, demonstrating that educated conservatives “uniquely experienced the decline in trust” (Ibid.). In a 2015 study, Gauchat looks at the cultural processes underlying the left-right polarization in perceptions of science, finding that a “collective identity” model that looks at both cognitive (beliefs, etc.) and emotional (solidarity, fear) content better explains the perceptions: [T]he “direct effect” of liberal-conservative orientation is spurious once the distinct belief systems that underlie those identifications are accounted for” (p. 739). My analysis supports such an interpretation; both narratives in the serious social drama of Covid-19 call upon the same sacred codes in the binary oppositions concerning the pandemic.

In a similar vein, Prasad (2021) argues that researchers must analyze the ways in which anti-science misinformation and conspiracies are discursively crafted, framed and interpreted within and by different social groups. He suggests that the “coronavirus pandemic has, in fact, become the new flashpoint in what has been called the post-truth era” (p. 2). Making a slightly different argument, Lynch (2020) asserts that “anti-science” may not be the best characterization of the current climate: “Far from being an opposition to ‘science,’ it makes selective use of emblems and idioms of scientific authority. Perhaps the problem is not anti-science per se, but the collapse of more nuanced debate into over-generalized ‘scientific’ claims in the public airing of disagreements” (p. 55). As I will demonstrate in the analysis that follows, the Plandemic case represents a telling example of this argument: it relies heavily upon “science” and “truth” in its claims. Finally, the latest research explores the connection between populism and trust in science. Eberl et al. (2021) posit, “Populist attitudes decrease trust in political institutions (1) as well as trust in science and research (2), both negatively relate to COVID-19 conspiracy belief. While right-wing populist actors, in particular, seem to be actively contributing to the COVID-19 conspiracy theory supply as well as its spread, our individual level evidence suggests that right-wing ideology plays only a subordinate role to populist attitudes” (p. 280).

Methodology and method

The underlying methodological justification for this qualitative analysis comes from the Strong Program in cultural sociology, as articulated by Alexander and Smith (2003, 2010, 2018). The basic premises include the relative analytical autonomy of culture (cf. Kane 1991), meaning reconstruction through “thick description” (Geertz 1973) of codes, narratives and symbols, and the attribution of causality to “culture structures” (Rambo and Chan 1990), in other words, “anchor[ing] causality in proximate actors and agencies, specifying in detail just how culture interferes with and directs what really happens” (Alexander and Smith 2003, p. 14). Alexander and Smith (2003) have dubbed this methodological approach to meaning reconstruction “structural hermeneutics.”



The cultural sociology of conspiracy theorizing that I propose thus relies on the reconstruction of binary oppositions and narratives, forms of collective representations in the Durkheimian sense, which provide “scripts” for the cultural performance. I use Geertzian thick description to draw out the binary codes and narratives of Covid-19 represented and interpreted by actors and audiences. Theories about narrative genres (Frye 1957; Smith 2005, 2012; Smith and Howe 2015) offer a way to depict the storylines. Binary oppositions are the “building blocks” of storytelling in the chosen genre (romantic, tragic or apocalyptic), especially in framing “good” or “bad” characters, like heroes and villains. In the ensuing narrative struggles, “interested parties try to have their story taken seriously and to falsify or eliminate the stories of others,” as in the social drama of climate change (Smith 2010, pp. 747–748; see also Smith and Howe 2015). I suggest that the unfinished social drama of Covid-19, mired in the “redress” stage, can be reconstructed in a similar vein.

To engage in this reconstruction, I compiled a case study on one of the most viral alternative narratives of Covid-19, analyzing the following written and visual texts through in-depth interpretive reading:

1. The viral 26-minute “Plandemic” film, released on May 4, 2020, created by Mikki Willis and featuring an interview with Dr. Judy Mikovits,
2. A follow-up interview with Dr. Judy Mikovits, a film in which she discusses with Mikki Willis the reactions to Plandemic,
3. The almost-viral feature-length film, “Indoctrination,” also known as Plandemic II, released on August 18, 2020,
4. Approximately 22 hours of podcasts with Dr. Judy Mikovits,
5. The book *Plague of Corruption*, written by Judy Mikovits and Kent Heckenlively,
6. The book *The Case Against Masks: Ten Reasons Why Mask Use Should be Limited*, written by Judy Mikovits and Kent Heckenlively, and
7. A purposeful sample of relevant mass media texts (approximately 55, chosen from a pool of several hundred), published in reaction to both Plandemic films, primarily (but not exclusively) “debunking” or “fact-checking” the material in the films.

The data to build the case were collected over several months, starting from the date the first Plandemic film was released, in early May 2020. The purposeful sample (Rapley 2014) of media texts covered the period starting the next day, from May 5, 2020 until September 30, 2020.

The logic of analysis was primarily inductive, letting the cultural texts “speak” their meanings, though an iterative process involving data collection, repeated readings of the data and the reconstruction of codes and narratives. With each round of data collection, I first engaged in what Stuart Hall refers to as a “long preliminary soak, a submission by the analyst to the mass of his material” that reveals “the same underlying appeals, the same ‘notes’ being sounded again and again in different passages and contexts” (1975, p. 15). In contrast to a formal coding procedure, the repeated in-depth, hermeneutic readings allowed me to



capture and analyze the nuances of the alternative and mainstream narratives within the case, including the binary oppositions. Following Smith (2005, p. 36), I believe that “the invisible symbol systems and structures of feeling that motivate action can be read, translated and then reconstructed again” through thick description (Geertz 1973). Smith imagines such a process as “a bouillabaisse of observations, evocative text, analogies, and nuggets of tentative theory that showcases the flavors of social life in particular settings” (2005, p. 36).

Finally, I considered the “cultural affordances” of the social media environments in which the films are available online, which “[capture] how people may use communication technologies to effectively and easily narrate a collective social drama” (Ostertag 2020, p. 6). Although the commentary on the first Plandemic video is limited, because mainstream social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube and Twitter censored and removed the film within just days of its release, for Plandemic II, the London Real website that premiered it on August 18, 2020 is still functional as of this writing, with over 6.6 million views and more than 5400 viewer comments.⁸

Analysis

The serious social drama (Reed 2006) of Covid-19 opened with a rapidly escalating breach, as the SARS-CoV-2 virus first spread throughout the province of Wuhan in China at the end of 2019, and then rapidly made its way around the globe, prompting the WHO to officially declare a global pandemic in March 2020 (WHO 2020). What makes this biological breach so *socially* significant is the shift in social relations and the “infodemic” that developed hand in hand (Richtel 2020). The drama remains mired in the stage of redress, with repeated attempts at redressive actions (lockdowns, government restrictions), taking place mostly at the nation-state level. At the time of this writing, reintegration seems unfeasible, as the conflicting narratives about Covid-19, although complicitly drawing on similar collective representations, are locked in a narrative battle that on the surface seems about mundane concerns like vaccines, masks and social distancing, but at its scared core is about the very premises of science and truth. On one side are stories about how the pandemic is actually a “plandemic” orchestrated by money-grabbing elites, and on the other, are tales of nature gone wrong and the promise of science to rectify the situation. The former sees the tellers and followers of the latter as “sheeple,” who must be awakened to the truth (Economist 2020a), whereas the latter views the narrators of the former as perpetrators of dangerous dis/misinformation in need of fact-checking and debunking.

⁸ <https://freedomplatform.tv/plandemic-indoctrination-world-premiere/>.



Origin stories: just where did the virus come from?

Narratives are crucial to performative conspiracy. Every social performance needs a good plot with an opening that immediately captures audience attention. The origin stories about the Covid-19 pandemic draw attention to the binary of evidence vs. supposition. Each side has its own version concerning both the emergence of the virus and the intentionality (or lack thereof) behind it, backing it up with science.

The Plandemic narrative

The Plandemic narrative is unequivocal; it alleges that the virus originated in a lab and was intentionally released. As explained in *Plandemic II* (Willis 2020b), it is a sordid story:

Somewhere between 2012 and 2013, something happened. The federal funding for research that was feeding into places like Harvard, Emory, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, that funding suddenly became impaired by something that happened at the NIH [National Institutes of Health], where the NIH got this little tiny moment of clarity and said, “I think something we’re doing is wrong.” And in 2013, the NIH said, “Gain of function research on coronavirus should be suspended.”... [W]hen the heat gets hot in 2014 and 15, what do you do? You offshore the research. You fund the Wuhan Institute of Virology to do the stuff that’s sounds like it’s getting a little edgy with respect to its morality and legality. But do you do it [the] straight way? No. You run the money [\$3.7 million] through a series of cover organizations that make it look like you are funding a US operation which then subcontracts to the Wuhan Institute of Virology. The US could say China did it; China could say the US did it. And the cool thing is that both of them are almost telling the truth.

It is not a question of which country is responsible for the breach; both are complicit.

There is no doubt about intentionality in the Plandemic narrative. It invokes the scripted, fictional, pandemic-simulation exercise, Event 201, conducted by the Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security in October of 2019, as the arbiter of the actual pandemic—it is simply too accurate a scenario to be a coincidence. *Plandemic II* opens with scenes from Event 201 interspersed with present-day news footage, for a full three minutes, eerily reminiscent of all the stages of the pandemic that have actually occurred, even down to the shots featuring lack of PPE and empty supermarket shelves. The opening ends with a member of the simulation team lamenting: “We have to ask: did this need to be so bad?” Of course, the answer is a resounding “no,” as the film unfolds to reveal the story of bad actors and what they will gain through the pandemic. Remarkably, a substantial segment of the US population also believes the pandemic was unleashed intentionally, with 25% telling the PEW Research Center it was definitely or probably true that the “coronavirus outbreak was intentionally planned by powerful people,” a number that increases to 34% among Republicans/Republican leaning and 48% among those with a high school degree or less (Schaeffer 2020). Globally, the levels of belief are highest in Bulgaria



and Ecuador (> 50%), with the lowest levels in Germany, Britain, Japan and Bosnia; nevertheless, they are greater than 15% (Economist 2020b).

The mainstream narrative

The mainstream narrative, in contrast, stubbornly asserts that the virus did not originate in a laboratory in China.⁹ The scientists authoring a journal article in *Nature Medicine* offer a definitive statement: “Our analyses clearly show that SARS-CoV-2 is not a laboratory construct or a purposefully manipulated virus” (Andersen et al. 2020), and *Science* magazine (Enserink and Cohen 2020) is even more specific: “There is no evidence that SARS-CoV-2 originated at WIV [Wuhan Institute of Virology].” Fact-checkers cite such scientific sources as authoritative (see, for example, Fichera et al. 2020; Lytvynenko 2020). They are exercising their interpretive power to de-fuse the Plandemic performance (Luengo and García-Marín 2020), calling upon science, truth, and evidence.

With regard to intentionality, the mainstream narrative (generally¹⁰) depicts humans as victims of nature, almost apocalyptically: “For decades, scientific experts have been warning that emerging zoonotic viruses are a *threat to humanity of the greatest magnitude*” (Campbell et al. 2020, emphasis mine). The *TIME* magazine article narrates the origin story from a remote bat cave:

That doesn’t mean Shitou Cave has faded in significance. Today, though, its musty depths speak not to local sustenance but global peril. Shitou was where Shi Zhengli, lead scientist at the Wuhan Institute of Virology (WIV), working with samples of bat feces in 2011 and 2012, isolated a novel virus that was very similar to SARS, which had been responsible for a pandemic a decade earlier. Shi—known as China’s “bat woman” for her tireless research on the winged mammal—warned that other bat-borne diseases could easily spill over into human populations again. Seven years later, her fears appear vindicated.

Again, the answer lies with science and its ability to explain “nature”: “Only through robust science and the study of the natural world will we be able to truly understand the natural history and origins of zoonotic diseases like COVID-19” (Hayes 2020).

The beginning of each narrative is performed within a context that reflects a lack of faith in science (Gauchat 2012, 2015; Prasad 2021). At the same time, the sacred

⁹ US President Donald Trump and US Secretary of State Michael Pompeo both cited scientific backing to propose a Chinese origin to the virus, thus adding a plot twist to the mainstream narrative. On April 23, Trump expressed “high level confidence” that the virus came from the Wuhan Institute of Virology in China (Aljazeera 2020). Pompeo claimed in an interview that there is “enormous evidence” that the coronavirus originated from a lab in Wuhan: “Look, the best experts so far seem to think it was man-made. I have no reason to disbelieve that at this point” (US Department of State 2020). As I finish this article, in a dramatic turnaround, the mainstream narrative also acknowledges that the virus may have originated in a laboratory.

¹⁰ Again, Trump and other conservatives have often laid blame on China.



side of a binary, “evidence,” is presented to buttress the claims about the origin of the virus, standing in contrast to “supposition.” The means of symbolic production in this narrative opening to the performative conspiracy is thus scientific fact, representing a contradictory scenario. Such a scenario complicates the often simplistic and psychologistic portrayals of conspiracy actors (cf. Harambam 2017).

Genre development and the naming of heroes and villains

Although the mainstream Covid-19 narrative seems to start out apocalyptically, with an uncontrollable natural force that threatens humanity, voices of reason (scientific actors) quickly take over and the narration shifts to a romantic register. Conversely, the Plandemic narrative starts out tragic, with the virus a planned laboratory event that will lead humanity into descent, but then it builds to an apocalyptic crescendo. As they unfold, both stories have their heroes and villains. And in both cases, there is the potential for a relatively happy ending, for entirely different reasons.

The mainstream narrative

As I have elaborated in the previous section, the beginning of the mainstream narrative plot has two variants, a conflict within a conflict—one validated by various scientific authorities in which “nature” is the source of the Covid-19 pandemic, and the other, espoused by Trump and other conservative politicians, and eventually, by mainstream media sources, in which a Chinese laboratory is responsible. Either way, the virus acts as a villain of sorts. The middle of the narrative is about following the rules set forth by heroic intervention: regardless of its origin, the virus is dangerous, so we need to wear masks, practice social distancing, and be vaccinated when it becomes possible. An extensive fact-checking piece by PolitiFact (Funke 2020), for instance, links the reader to the CDC, among others, for recommendations. The CDC (2020), in turn, calls not only upon its own research but also one of the medical community’s gold standards, the *Journal of the American Medical Association* (JAMA). The CDC and its director, Robert R. Redfield, could be seen as a hero, providing guidance and comfort for a public fearful about the biological villain: “We are not defenseless against COVID-19. Cloth face coverings are one of the most powerful weapons we have to slow and stop the spread of the virus—particularly when used universally within a community setting” (CDC 2020). The very self-description of the agency cements its status as a rescuer: “CDC works 24/7 protecting America’s health, safety and security. Whether disease start at home or abroad, are curable or preventable, chronic or acute, or from human activity or deliberate attack, CDC responds to America’s most pressing health threats” (ibid). Dr. Anthony Fauci is a lesser hero, at least for a time, while he is giving Coronavirus Task Force briefings during March and April of 2020. By the end of the summer, he has been denigrated by Trump and others, called by Trump in October a “disaster” and one of “these idiots” (Haberman and Crowley 2020). Moreover, the sector of the public willing to wear masks and otherwise “follow the rules,” is swiftly declining during this period.



The Plandemic narrative

In the Plandemic narrative, the now-apocalyptic middle of the story is about an awakening. It is crucial to “wake up” to the fact that dark, indeed evil, forces are at work: “If we don’t stop this now, we can not only forget our republic and our freedom, but we can forget humanity because we’ll be killed by this agenda” (Willis 2020a). Dr. Judy Mikovits, the star of Plandemic I, and also featured in Plandemic II, is the hero of the story. She sacrifices the possibility of regaining her discredited career as an epidemiologist, and even eschews a generous monetary bribe:

If I thought that even one child, or one grandma was injured or killed because I didn’t do something, that would have ended my life as I know it. There was no money you could ever pay me to get me to cover this up. I will never stop telling the truth.” (Willis 2020b)

In this sense, Mikovits is also a martyr for the cause of awakening. The details of the very long story of Mikovits’ demise within the scientific community are revealed in both films, excruciatingly elaborated in *Plague of Corruption* (Mikovits and Heckenlively 2020b) and repeated throughout numerous podcasts. Mikovits recites them nearly by rote, using the very same phrases across all the venues. It is a tale of the innocent and the good coming up against the evil, almost religious and ritualistic in its telling.¹¹

There are several villains—individual and institutional—in the Plandemic narrative. The villainy of Anthony Fauci dates back to the 1980s, with the discovery and spread of the HIV virus. In Plandemic I, Mikovits asserts that Fauci “directed a cover-up” that delayed the release of valuable confirmatory information about the virus. As Mikovits elucidates:

The virus didn’t have to wait until 1984 to be confirmed. Think of how many people – the entire continent of Africa lost a generation as that virus was spread through, because of the arrogance of a group of people. And it includes Robert Redfield, who’s now the head of the CDC, right along with Tony Fauci. They were working together to take credit and make money.

The film’s *mise-en-scène* then features vintage footage of New York writer, Larry Kramer, who had called Fauci the “the Bernie Madoff of science.” As for Fauci’s recommendations concerning the current pandemic, they are, according to Mikovits, “absolute propaganda.” When asked by Brian Rose in a London Real podcast (2020) what she would say if she had five minutes with Fauci, Mikovits replies, “I probably don’t want five minutes alone with [him]. ... I have no respect, literally no respect, no reason for people who yell at people and stop studies that reveal inconvenient truths. To me, he’s just pure evil and I hope never to see him again.”

¹¹ As the news outlet BuzzFeed assesses it, “Unlike other conspiracy theorists, who can shout or ramble, Mikovits is composed and speaks calmly. Her air of reasonable cadence is bolstered by selective clips from news reports and an interviewer who appears curious and sympathetic” (Lytvynenko 2020).



The other character Mikovits labels as “evil” is Bill Gates, the person she believes will profit most from a coronavirus vaccine as he “kills millions,” and who has already profited from the medical misfortunes of others.¹² Director /producer Mikki Willis reflects on Gates in *Plandemic II*:

Bill Gates is either the most misunderstood man alive or one of the most convincing con men to ever live. [clips of Bill and Melinda being interviewed and receiving awards] Is he a benevolent hero or a malevolent opportunist? Personally, I would love to believe that one of the richest men in the world is giving away his fortune for the betterment of humanity. I want to believe that endearing smile, I want to believe that his heart is as soft and warm as his sweaters. [Now, clips featuring children of color suffering]. At the very least I want to believe he's unaware of the damage he's done [fade to black].

Mikovits is entirely unwilling to give Gates the benefit of the doubt: “This [ambiguous; no referent] is the crime behind letting somebody like Bill Gates with billions of dollars—nobody elected him, he has no medical background, he has no expertise, but we let people like that have a voice in this country, while we destroy the lives of millions of people” (Willis 2020a).

The institutional villains in this narrative include big pharma, global health organizations and the “mainstream media.” In fact, media are indicted at length in *Plandemic II*. In its second scene, Willis introduces Mikovits as a “science whistleblower” that received “fierce backlash for what the media calls dangerous conspiracy theories.” He reassures the audience that he has “thoroughly researched and vetted her story”:

As a father and a veteran media producer, there is no way I would release harmful information into the world in a moment as vulnerable as now. ... One thing I can say without question is that Judy Mikovits is one of the most honest, caring and courageous women I have ever known. Why then would the most powerful forces of big tech, politics, media and medicine go to such extreme measures to silence her voice all over the world?

David E. Martin provides an answer, in which not only the words but the *mise-en-scène* reveal a deep conspiracy:

Every media that is in the public media right now has planted evidence and they have reranked pages, so if you look today at facemask wearing, and if you look today at social distancing studies, you will see the studies that used to

¹² A considerable portion of the film is devoted to exposing the vaccination work of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation in India and Africa, which allegedly harmed countless children. Willis narrates the evidence: “In 2018, a scientific study released in an international journal...concluded that over 490,000 children in India developed paralysis as a result of the Gates-supported oral polio vaccine that was administered between the years 2000–2017. Using all the usual sleight of hand, US based media and factcheckers rushed to bury the story.” An African American “humanitarian, researcher, and educator,” Dr. Aaron Lewis, laments: “Of all the places that Mr. Gates could have gone in the world, why did he settle on Africa? it's not that he cares about people that look like me. It's that he cares about an agenda.”



be 1, 2, 3 on the pages of page rank search don't exist anymore. What is there are studies that wind up having headlines that support the common narrative [clips of Fauci speaking about following the rules for Covid-19]. Because if you can keep people from assembling, guess what they're not talking about. If you can keep people in their homes, the only source of info is what you curate for them. [overlay of people on their phones, with inaudible voices speeding up] Being fed the only message I'm allowing them to hear, through a media that I control.

A narrative about the covert CIA Operation Mockingbird, started in the 1950s to ostensibly control news media, follows, using vintage clips. Part of the story includes a historical exposé of US billionaire Rockefeller that highlights his control and corruption of not only media but the medical field in the United States. As the narratives reach their final stages, issues of power within such institutions come into the limelight.

The middle of the plot in both narratives is filled with heroes and villains. The protagonists portray these characters vividly (“evil,” courageous,” etc.) as the crescendo toward crisis develops within the social drama. An amorphous but powerful character (“the media”) enters the scene, attracting audiences for performative conspiracy that already are suspicious of its motives. Worldwide, trust in media exists only for a minority; 44% indicate they trust most news most of the time. In the United States, the figure is just 29%. (Reuters 2021).

Where does it end? Waking up to the realities of social power and the means of symbolic production

The possible endings of the narrative for Plandemic and for the mainstream couldn't be more different. In virtually all the data sources I consulted regarding the Plandemic case, there prevails a dire, apocalyptic warning about a vaccine for the coronavirus—untold millions will die. The mainstream narrative envisions a more romantic ending, in which the public has followed all the recommendations, and the numbers of the infected go down.

The mainstream narrative

In a potentially happy ending, the CDC director proclaims, “If we could get everybody to wear a mask right now, I think in four, six, eight weeks we could bring this epidemic under control” (Fernandez 2020). Moreover, a vaccine will help prevent the situation from recurring; according to Fauci (quoted in Brueck 2020), it's all about following the rules:

I believe that by the time we get to the end of 2021, if everyone gets vaccinated and we continue to implement the public-health measures that I have been talking about incessantly over the last several months — they're not univer-



sally adhered to — if we do that, plus the vaccine, we'll get to the point where the level of virus will be so low, and maybe even, you know, close to absent.

Since the *Plandemic* films were released, the mainstream narrative's romantic ending has only amplified. The vaccine is seen as a panacea, and the Biden administration's push to address those who have been hesitant is proceeding at full steam, with a plan to even go into individual neighborhoods, door to door, to convince the vaccine-hesitant to comply.

So, if you're vaccinated, you're protected....It works. It's free. And it's never been easier, and it's never been more important. Do it now — for yourself and the people you care about; for your neighborhood; for your country. It sounds corny, but it's a patriotic thing to do.

[...]

Let me close with this: We are emerging from one of the darkest years in our nation's history into a summer of hope and joy, hopefully. Think about where you were — where you were last year, where you are today; what you were able to do last year at this time and do today. It's a year of hard-fought progress. We can't get complacent now. (The White House 2021)

The social power behind Biden's words not only encourage solidarity through the patriotic act of vaccination, but also speak to the country's emergence from the "darkest years in our nation's history." In a sense, the vaccine itself can be seen as an actor in the narrative saga of romanticism.

The Plandemic narrative

Notably, the *Plandemic* narrative also posits a potential romantic ending, of "awakening" and a movement toward the common good in which humanity prevails (cf. Smith 2010). Mikovits, as the hero, is on a quest to educate and prevent harm:

Well, if I can prevent one person from getting a flu shot this year, if I can prevent one person from ever getting a vaccine again, from one injury, I've done my job each day. If I can get that message across and have someone take off that mask,¹³ that's why I get up every single day" (London Real 2020).

For Mikovits, it's "great news" that doctors are "waking up" and that her "education company" is succeeding: "We wake up doctors. And it's very difficult. But every doctor who's realized that they may have been part of the problem and has now turned that around to march toward a better society and restore faith in the promise of medicine. That's all we can do" (Willis 2020a).

If that's "all we can do" for Mikovits, there's certainly much more that big pharma and the mainstream media can accomplish—they are the ones that appear

¹³ The book entitled *The Case Against Masks: Ten Reasons Why Mask Use Should be Limited* (2020a) details the purported dangers of wearing masks to prevent Covid-19.



to have the most social power in this performance. And the corruption of the two institutions is historically intertwined. In *Plandemic II*, Willis details its complexity, against a montage of grainy, black and white footage of medical contexts:

Around the same time that John D. Rockefeller seized US media, he also hijacked US medicine. ... Medicines used for thousands of years were suddenly classified as “alternative,” while the new, petroleum-based, highly addictive, and patentable drugs were declared the gold standard.... Rockefeller leveraged his political influence by pressing Congress to declare natural healing modalities “unscientific quackery.” Rockefeller then took control of the American Medical Association and began offering massive grants to top medical schools, under the mandate that only his approved curriculum be taught. Any mention of the healing powers of herbs, plants, and diet was erased from most medical textbooks. [Those who objected] were crucified by media, removed from the AMA, and stripped of their license to teach and practice medicine. Those who dared to speak out were arrested and jailed. When evidence began to emerge that petroleum-based medicines were causing cancer, Mr. Rockefeller founded the American Cancer Society, through which he suppressed that information. John D. Rockefeller is duly credited as the founder of the pharmaceutical industry and the reason that medical error is currently the third leading cause of death in America.

Not only media, and medicine as a field, but also doctors have fallen under the sway:

This is not an indictment of doctors. More than anyone, they are under the stranglehold of the single largest lobbying power in Washington. Every year, the pharmaceutical industry spends twice the amount as big oil to influence laws, policies, and public perception. Thanks to Mr. Rockefeller, the architect of American monopolies, no industry has more power over our lives than big pharma.

Global health organizations are likewise affected: “The WHO is sustained by private donations, the bulk of which are made by pharmaceutical and biotech corporations, who have a vested financial interest in the organization’s support.” A crucial question is asked and answered in *Plandemic II* by physician, researcher and writer, Meryl Nass: “How did the pharmaceutical industry come to capture the rest of the medical industry? It’s because they had so much money, to bribe the NIH, the CDC, the FDA, the professional associations, you know, the journals, the medical schools and everyone else.”

With the media and the pharmaceutical industry controlling so much of the means of symbolic production, from the former’s incessant fact-checking reportage to the latter dominating the evening’s TV programs with drug advertisements, one might think that performances by actors like Willis and Mikovits don’t stand a chance. But the distributive power of mass media and big pharma must contend with the power of virality through social media. Produced and directed by Willis on a shoestring budget (less than \$2000) in about two weeks (Rottenberg



and Perman 2020; Widger 2020), Plandemic I seized audiences across the globe immediately upon its May 4, 2020 release. In the few days before it was banned on virtually all major social media platforms, it had 9 million views on YouTube and 16 million engagements through Facebook (Kaplan, 2020). And Willis counted on this sort of viral spread. His original post did not feature the film's content but stressed that it would be immediately censored: "Stealing a line from the civil rights movement (and poet June Jordan)—'We are the ones we've been waiting for'—he implored his readers to make copies of the video and share it" (DiResta and García-Camargo 2020). The same week Plandemic I was released, Mikovits' *Plague of Corruption* reached number one on Amazon's print bestseller list.¹⁴ The New York Times has called her the "new star of virus disinformation," reporting that "mentions of her on social media and television have spiked to as high as 14,000 a day, according to the media insights company Zignal Labs" (Alba 2020). Scholars and think tanks now devote substantial resources to this new field of mis/disinformation, including the new project from Harvard's Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Policy, entitled the Media Manipulation Casebook (<https://mediamanipulation.org/>), which features Plandemic I as a case of "distributed amplification."¹⁵

An important villain has emerged by the end of the Plandemic narrative, "big pharma." Along with "mainstream media," they wield immense social power, as is portrayed through the *mise-en-scène*. Their control of the means of symbolic production, however, is challenged by the cultural affordances of social media (Ostertag 2020), which allowed for wide distribution of this performative conspiracy. Looking at the narrative through the lens of cultural performance has allowed us to reveal the potential audience success (fusion or re-fusion) of the scripts deployed by the actors.

Discussion and conclusion

At one point in Plandemic II, there comes a dramatic pause. The screen has faded to black and then large letters appear, declaring in Plato's words, "Those who tell the stories rule society." Willis solemnly declares:

Since the invention of the printing press, there's been a battle to control disseminated information. In the early 1900s, oil tycoon John D. Rockefeller-

¹⁴ Mikki Willis' book about the Plandemic films, *Plandemic: The Incredible True Story about the Most Banned Documentary in History*, will be released in October 2021 and is already highly ranked on Amazon.com: #38 in Books overall; #1 in Social Activist Biographies; #1 in Diseases & Physical Ailments Health; and #1 in Virology (<https://www.amazon.com/Plandemic-Incredible-Banned-Documentary-History/dp/1510765549/>).

¹⁵ "Distributed amplification" is defined as "A call to participants to rapidly and widely spread campaign materials, including propaganda or disinformation. Distributed amplification relies on many campaign participants to individually share sensitive or banned content on their personal social media accounts in an effort to evade platform mitigation efforts or dominate the information ecosystem with repetitive content" (<https://mediamanipulation.org/definitions/distributed-amplification>).



Table 1 Binaries

Science	Blind faith
Truth	Deception
Evidence/data	Speculation
Those who have “awakened”	Sheeple/the unaware
Freedom	Limits/repression

ler took control of every newspaper and news editor of his era. He became America’s first billionaire, paving the way for the power hungry ever since. Thus, began the gold rush for the modern world’s most precious resource, the narrative.

Clearly, Willis understands the importance of employing the “modern world’s most precious resource.” And the very first debunker of Plandemic I, Buzzfeed News (Lytvynenko 2020), underscores the significance of the film’s “subsidiary narrative,” that of a whistleblower. It quotes Renee DiResta of the Stanford Internet Observatory: “You see this a lot in crisis situations, where there’s a morbid curiosity audience and where they think they are fighting an anti-censorship battle. ... She’s going to be framed as a whistleblower, and that’s because the whistleblower narrative really works.” Judy Mikovits—hero, martyr, whistleblower—gives the audience something to believe in when they are losing faith in the mainstream narrative. The film doesn’t need to offer the “fair and balanced” narrative that one might expect of a news agency. As Willis confirms to ProPublica (Allen 2020), “The other side of the argument plays 24/7 on every screen in every airport and on every phone and in every home. The people are only seeing one side of the story all the time. This is the other side of the story. This is not a piece that’s intended to be perfectly balanced.” In his “most banned documentary of all time” (Fichera et al 2020), Willis seeks instead a “fused” social performance, to achieve psychological identification and cultural extension with the audience (Alexander 2006, pp. 34–35).

So-called conspiracy theorists talk about “following the breadcrumbs” in order to “connect the dots” (Economist 2020a). Doing so is a quest for a re-fused performance. In the serious social drama (Reed 2006) of Covid-19, audiences, who are themselves fragmented and differentiated, are exposed to multiple narrative paths that span different genres of breadcrumbs. Within the mainstream, they encounter an apocalyptic turned romantic story, in which science, evidence and the truth, a trio of sacred codes (see Table 1), will lift humanity out of perilous danger. The Plandemic performative conspiracy narrative begins in a tragic tone and builds apocalyptically into a tale of terror, waged by the very same forces of science, truth and evidence (cf. Prasad 2021), to create a “plague of corruption” that will “kill millions.” In addition, there are binaries of awakening and freedom. In the case of the mainstream narrative, awakening comes through listening to established scientific authorities such as the CDC, WHO, and Anthony Fauci, leading to *freedom from* the virus. Conversely, the Plandemic narrative makes heroes out of those who challenge that authority, scientific whistleblowers that seek to awaken the Sheeple, if only they would listen. The *freedom to* refuse the



conspiracy and its practice of mask-wearing and vaccines is performed as a constitutionally guaranteed right of “our republic” (cf. Prasad 2021)

Is it simply a matter of “waking up” to the “right” narrative? After all, the critical thinking and research involving evidence and factual data encouraged by performative conspiracy are a part of what can lead to exposing *actual* conspiracies like Watergate, the Iran-Contra Affair, and tobacco companies hiding the connection between smoking and lung cancer. When thinking about whether one narrative prevails over the other, an answer may not be feasible. As Alexander points out, modernist narratives often end in ambivalence, not resolution (personal communication, 30 October 2020). The context for determining what is actually “true” is very slippery indeed. While there is arguably a correlation between right-wing ideology and loss of trust in science (Gauchat 2012; Mooney 2005), the bottom line is not about being anti-science, being populist, or living in a post-truth era (see Lynch 2020; Prasad 2021). A cultural sociology of conspiracy theorizing allows us to see that even polarized factions draw upon the same sacred codes in their meaning-making processes.

Several implications thus stem from employing a cultural sociological perspective on conspiracy theorizing. First, cultural sociology facilitates the study of performative conspiracy not as an anomaly, but as integral to the narrative battles that take place in the public sphere, making it possible to analytically treat both mainstream and alternative narratives as somehow equal, even if the researcher conceives of one narrative as more reasonable or “true.” Second, identifying the underlying binary codes that give rise to both narratives helps to analytically reveal the precise points of polarization, which help illuminate the fervent political debates raging nowadays. Finally, the narrative analysis of performative conspiracy shows how sacred codes become woven into complex stories that have a strong emotional appeal and clearly distinguish between antagonists and heroes—thus helping to better understand the meaning-making contexts within which social actors and institutions operate.

To close, I would like to consider the clarion call by so many researchers of conspiracies to expose the “tactics” of “conspiracy theorists,” in a way that “help[s] raise awareness of the ways conspiracy theories distort the facts and is key to building resilience and inoculating ourselves and others from being misled, especially when we are most vulnerable: in times of crises and uncertainty” (Lewandowsky, Cook, Ecker, and van der Linden 2020). The real-world implications are potentially huge. Will we be “inoculating ourselves and others from being misled,” or inoculating our already “vulnerable” bodies with a Covid-19 vaccine? As the pandemic continues in second, third, fourth, or even fifth waves throughout the world, the stakes are high indeed. But disparaging conspiracy theories and their proponents seems a futile task (cf. Harambam 2017). Future research on meaning-making among audiences of performative conspiracy, which reveals the reach of both mainstream and alternative narratives, is the next important step in reconstructing culture’s consequences.

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