Conspiracy theories and right-wing extremism – Insights and recommendations for P/CVE

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Conspiracy theories are morality tales based on archetypal narratives about right versus wrong, good versus evil. Providing "black and white" world views, they foster societal divisions between in-groups and out-groups by exacerbating intolerance against "the other" and delegitimising different voices as being part of the conspiracy. Extremist groups use conspiracy theories as a tool for recruitment and to advance their radical agendas exploiting uncertainties, fears, socioeconomic issues and mental health disorders amongst vulnerable people. In recent years, right-wing extremism has proven to be active and efficient in the dissemination of conspiracy theories aimed at targeting individuals or groups blamed to be responsible for the evil in society. Shielding the audience from the risk of being drawn into the conspiratorial labyrinth of these groups is crucial to push back the ability of conspiracy theorists in mobilising extremist action and violence.

Introduction

Conspiracy theories are a **global phenomenon** affecting almost every field of human activity. The belief that complex historical or political events, especially when they lack a clear explanation by the competent authorities or by the scientific community, are the result of secret conspiracies controlled by a small cabal of powerful people with malevolent intents has become a mainstream phenomenon in society. Such theories can be seen as **attempts to give meaning** to distressing events, to disclose their ultimate causes, and to connect the dots with what one may perceive as anomalous, suspicious or unexplained. In some cases, they are harmless and can be considered as part of the democratic discussion. In many other cases, however, conspiracy theories may be associated with radical behaviour, racist views, authoritarian attitudes and extremist ideologies with a deeply negative impact on society. Amongst the most **serious consequences** is the fact that conspiracy theories may enhance the appeal of extremist narratives (e.g. providing seductive "black and white" explanations of polarising events), erode the trust between people and governments (e.g. promoting the idea that governments are controlled by shadow elites), spread hate speech (e.g. identifying a definitive group or person as being culpable), demolish the respect for evidence (e.g. attacking experts and their knowledge without having the necessary competence to perform verifications), mobilise violence (e.g. identifying targets), and even cause death (e.g. inducing people to refuse vaccine protection through the anti-vaxxer propaganda).

COVID-19 as a catalyst

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic acted as a catalyst for conspiracy theories. Given that the virus is invisible, corresponding **conspiracy beliefs flourished, as in every period of crisis**. Extremist groups capitalised on the opportunity by offering simple solutions and answers to highly complex issues with the aim to advance their agendas and recruit followers. In this scenario, right-wing extremist groups played a major role in spreading hatred towards Jews and Muslims as well as anti-elite, racist and anti-immigration sentiments. The frequency with which these conspiracy theories keep appearing in extremist scenes suggests that they can play an important ideological role and function as a multiplier in the process of radicalisation.

This overview

This paper aims at providing practitioners working in the field of prevention of radicalisation and violent extremism with a concise overview on basic mechanisms through which **conspiracy theories support extremist narratives** and may contribute to the use of violence as well as on linkages between conspiracy theories and right-wing extremist groups.

The paper is divided into four sections:

1. The first part contains a **literature review** that provides the reader with background information on functions, features and objectives of conspiracy theories.

2. The second section offers an overview of the most frequent conspiracy theories supporting right-wing extremism, aiming to highlight the **narratives used to mobilise extremist action** and violence and

promote a political agenda, the key targets identified, their main channels for distribution and who is behind their spread.

3. The third part focuses on contemporary approaches to **countering conspiracy theories** drawing from existing practices and lessons learned on how to prevent risks related to their rapid spread as well as how to debunk them once they have gained a foothold in society.

4. Finally, the fourth section provides **recommendations** based on the information elaborated in the previous parts, on how civil society actors, schools, governments and security agencies may help to counter conspiracy theories in accordance with their respective field of action.

Background information

The issue of conspiracy theories is not a recent phenomenon ([1]). Human history is full of conspiracy tales and narratives based on conjectures and uncorroborated evidence rather than knowledge and trustworthy sources, devoted to stating that **"things are not as they seem"**. They often originate from a desire or need to understand multifaceted events in a simplistic manner, by finding someone to hold accountable for any problematic aspects ([2]).

Although its existence was known for a long time, the concept of "conspiracy theory" began to circulate in societies between 1870 and 1970 ([3]), and it was only from the 1990s that researchers demonstrated a growing interest in this topic ([4]). In the past 10 years, there has been a spark in terms of publications and projects focused on analysing conspiracy theories. Despite flourishing literature, applying the label "conspiracy theory" is far from being an unchallenged task. Firstly, official studies and experts show diverging opinions about the historical roots of the term; secondly, the concept itself of conspiracy theory is subject to uncertainties and disagreements amongst scholars when it comes to defining it. Indeed, research has tended to focus on the specificities of different national contexts without adopting a systematic comparative approach. Moreover, depending on the discipline investigating the topic (history, sociology, psychology, philosophy, etc.), some differences in the description of the phenomenon emerge according to the perspective of each field ([5]). Finally, the term is often (ab)used in the political arena to frustrate certain criticisms regardless of whether they are true or false and, as stated by Rob Brotherton, **"not every theory about a conspiracy qualifies a conspiracy theory"** ([6]). For all these reasons, it is crucial to provide a functional and working definition of the term, starting by describing its features, objectives, and functions.

Working definition

The difficulty in defining the term "conspiracy theory" also stems from the fact that its vital nutrient lies in the boundaries between life and literature, **fact and fiction**, science and pseudoscience. These theories are often based on facts, historical events or factual truths whose narratives are exaggerated, misleadingly modified or widely overturned according to the necessities.

Indeed, **conspiracy theories are primarily stories and morality tales** that can be totally fictional or based on a mix of facts and fiction **that produce vicious circles of internally consistent explanations and analogies**. This is the way, for instance, that **"a novelistic scene can turn into a text of revelation"** ([7]) relying on the idea of a Manichaean struggle between the so-called good people and the corrupt elite. Consider the example of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, one of the most influential forgeries of the 20th century. The alleged Protocols are a perfect illustration of an anti-Semitic conspiracy theory. Although their content is a work of fiction, the text that supposedly describes the myth of the Jews' plot for world domination

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([1]) Famous historical examples are the text written by John Robinson, Proofs of a Conspiracy against all the Religions and Governments of Europe, 1797, and the text authored by the Abbé Barruel, Memoirs Illustrating the History of Jacobinism, 1797. Both texts express conspiracy fears about the Bavarian Illuminati during the French Revolution.
([2]) EU DisinfoLab, COVID-19 Conspiracy Theories: Comparative trends in Italy, France, and Spain.
([3]) McKenzie-McHarg, Conceptual history and conspiracy theory, p. 18.
([4]) Hristov et al., Introduction, p. 11.
([5]) Radu & Schultz, Conspiracy Theories and (the) Media (Studies).
([6]) Brotherton, Suspicious Minds, p. 62.
([7]) Boym, Conspiracy Theories and Literary Ethics: Umberto Eco, Danilo Kiš and The Protocols of Zion, p. 98.

has been translated into 50 languages and was widely used to justify pogroms in Russia and Ukraine, Nazi ideology and massacres ([8]).

Conspiracy theories **do not need to be the most plausible account of events**. According to the European Commission, such theories can be defined as:

"The belief that certain events or situations are secretly manipulated behind the scenes by powerful forces with negative intent" ([9]).

What matters, to use the words of Benjamin Lee, is that they provide "clear and unambiguous narratives, **structuring the world into in-groups and out-groups**, reinforcing the sense of **specialness** that comes from having access to insider knowledge, and overall enhancing the appeal of extremist narratives" ([10]). In this way, conspiracy theories can target both alleged secret societies such as the Illuminati and real organisations such as the Bilderberg Group or the United Nations.

Conspiracy theories and extremist groups

Conspiracy theories are plentiful in social and political spheres and range from the Moon landing (accused to have never happened), to the assassination of President Kennedy (who would have been murdered by the CIA), to the death of Princess Diana (who would have faked her own death or would have been a victim of a royal conspiracy, amongst other theories). However, according to Bartlett and Miller, they are **"especially prevalent in relation to terrorist incidents"** ([11]). Claims that 9/11 was an inside job or a false flag, that the CIA was responsible for the Lockerbie bombing, or that the Madrid train slaughter was the result of a plot orchestrated by Spanish national and other foreign secret services are some concrete examples of such theories ([12]).

In this regard, conspiracy beliefs can contribute to radicalisation and extremism. Indeed, although a belief in conspiracy theories is not a sufficient condition for carrying out extreme actions (peaceful groups who believe in conspiracy theories exist) and more research needs to be done in this field, as demonstrated by John M. Berger, **the most common crisis narratives used by extremists include conspiracies** and especially "the belief that out-groups are engaged in secret actions to control in-group outcomes" ([13]).

We may add that some conspiracy theories are harmless, but others can have **destabilising effects** and **incite people to violence**. Not surprisingly, conspiracy theories constitute **a powerful recruitment tool** for extremist ideologues and, conversely, extremist ideologies can be conducive to conspiracy theories ([14]). Right-wing extremist ideologies, for instance, are linked to anti-Semitic conspiracy theories such as the one related to the above-mentioned *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, which aims at **inverting roles between victims and perpetrators**: according to this narrative, the Jews (the out-group) conspired to dominate the world and invented anti-Semitism to hide their real intentions and objectives against non-Jewish people (the in-group).

A strong component of **victimisation** is also present in some Islamist and extreme-left groups. For the former, the conspiracy focuses on an alleged Judaeo–Christian plot devoted to annihilating Islam. For the latter, conspiracies can be linked to anti-Semitism, as in the cases of extreme-right and Islamist ideologies, and to the so-called global elites plot aimed at attaining, according to some of them, a "New (totalitarian) World Order" ([15]).

([8]) Boym, Conspiracy Theories and Literary Ethics: Umberto Eco, Danilo Kiš and The Protocols of Zion, p. 98.
([9]) European Commission, What are conspiracy theories? Why do they flourish?
([10]) Lee, Radicalisation and conspiracy theories, p. 344.
([11]) Bartlett & Miller, The power of unreason, p. 17.
([12]) Ibid.
([13]) Berger, Extremism, p. 66.
([14]) Cassam, Conspiracy Theories, p. 50.
([15]) Bartlett & Miller, The power of unreason, p. 3.

Conspiracy theories can therefore overlap even across opposite extremist groups and, furthermore, they "often serve as a **'radicalising multiplier'**, which feeds back into the ideologies, internal dynamics and psychological processes of the group" ([16]).

In sum, according to the existing literature, the use and the spread of **conspiracy theories can play an important social role for extremist groups**, especially by:

- Presenting such theories as revelations devoted to bringing the "real knowledge" and the "hidden meaning" to those who deserve to know the truth, thus reinforcing a sense of unicity in groups and individuals who embrace this belief.

- Providing clear narratives as a solution against the complexity and the many uncertainties of life.

- Adding a sense of urgency to fighting for the right thing. The urgency also acts as a justification for violence towards opponents since "there are no alternatives" and, otherwise, "it will be too late".

- Producing victimisation.

- Inverting victims and perpetrators.

- Exacerbating an "Us vs Them" perspective, attributing real or perceived problems afflicting the in-group to secret and illegal acts carried out by a powerful cabal of mysterious out-groups.

- Delegitimising dissident voices as being part of the conspiracy.

- Enhancing the appeal of extremist ideologies and narratives.

- Justifying existing prejudices.

- Spreading distrust between, on the one hand, citizens and specific communities and, on the other hand, governments and institutions.

- Promoting a political or ideological agenda to the detriment of the truth.

Finally, such theories create room for individuals to identify who is the (assumed) responsible for their problems. By pointing to a definitive group or person as being culpable, they **may contribute to the application of extremist violence** and in selecting victims and guiding the target.

Conspiracy theories for political gain

The promoted existence of a conflict between two poles, the in-group and the out-group, is particularly relevant to clearly see that conspiracy theories almost always advance a political objective seeking **to influence public opinion** or a specific target group in the desired direction. In this regard, Cassam argues that "Conspiracy Theories […] are first and foremost **forms of political propaganda**" ([17]). According to the author, these sorts of theories are different from an ordinary tale of conspiratorial facts that happened in the course of history. The latter refers to well-documented historical episodes, the former relates to political gambits.

A review of the existing literature ([18]) makes it possible to identify some distinct **features** of conspiracy theories. These theories are:

- **Speculative**
  A successful conspiracy erases all evidence. Consequently, a conspiracy theory may often focus only on anomalies and fragmentary clues rather than on solid evidence to uncover the plot. This assumption enables conspiracy theorists to give validity to their conjectures.

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[16] Bartlett & Miller, The power of unreason, p. 4.
[17] Cassam, Conspiracy Theories, pp. 6-7.
[18] See: Cassam, Conspiracy Theories; Brotherton, Suspicious Minds; Keeley, Of conspiracy theories; Goertzel, Belief in conspiracy theories; Sunstein & Vermule, Conspiracy theories: Causes and cures.

- **Contrarian**
Mainstream and official experts are seen as part of the establishment's attempt to conceal the conspiracy. Therefore, their view is fake and conspiracy theorists are contrarian by nature to their "official tale".

- **Esoteric**
Official tales of historical events often lack the esoteric feel. By rejecting obvious explanations and offering a mixed recipe of mystery and esoteric accounts, conspiracy theories have greater appeal.

- **Amateurish**
Even though some conspiracy theorists have relevant qualifications, most of them are "internet detectives" and "amateur sleuths".

- **Premodern**
In this context, the premodern view considers complex events as always having a deeper meaning and a sort of elite group controlling them.

- **Self-sealing**
The attempt to dispel conspiracy theories may be considered by conspiracy theorists or individuals seduced by conspiracy theories as proof of the validity of their belief.

These features, Cassam argues, make conspiracy theories unlikely to be true. Indeed, according to the author, **"what counts is not whether a Conspiracy Theory is true, but whether it is seductive"** [19].

Why is there belief in conspiracy theories?

If a conspiracy theory is a seductive way to spread disinformation and fake news under the aegis of a noble mission devoted to revealing the hidden plot and the unseen hand behind overt (and often terrible) events, a **conspiracy theorist** can be defined as the (pretended) **hero in charge of bringing the light of the revelation**. On the other side of the spectrum, there are those who we can call **"conspiracy theory consumers"**, people who do not produce conspiracy theories but, nonetheless, are attracted to them or lend them credence, regardless of the fact that they spread them or not.

These individuals can be seduced by conspiracy theories because terrible events, as stated by Cass Sunstein, produce outrage and they need to attribute them to intentional action [20]; or because some of those theories fit with their ideological or political commitment, as claimed by Cassam, or further, according to Brotherton, due to the fact that,

"Conspiracy theories resonate with some of our brain's built-in biases and shortcuts, and tap into some of our deepest desires, fears, and assumptions about the world and the people in it. We have innately suspicious minds. We are all natural-born conspiracy theorists" [21].

To answer the question of why we are all potentially susceptible to believing in conspiracy theories, Brotherton highlights some cognitive biases of the human mind:

- **Need for control**
When one cannot be in control of themselves, they will look for a form of compensatory control. Believing in powerful enemies who are in control of some aspects of our lives is precisely a form of compensatory control.

- **Pattern finding**
Drawing connections and finding patterns helps to make sense of the world. One does this unconsciously and sometimes through "connecting dots that do not really belong together".

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[19] Cassam, Conspiracy Theories, p. 31.
[20] Sunstein, Conspiracy Theories and Other Dangerous Ideas, p. 13.
[21] Brotherton, Suspicious Minds, p. 16.

- **Intentionality bias**
  A tendency to assume that things always happen "because someone intended it to".

- **Proportionality bias**
  A tendency to assume that the magnitude of an event matches the magnitude of whatever caused it.

- **Confirmation bias**
  A tendency to look for evidence that fits what one already believes, ignoring contrary elements and proof.

Staying on the question of why individuals can be fascinated by conspiracy theories or inclined to create, consume, believe and spread them, other factors can be quoted. According to Freeman and Bentall,

"Conspiracy interpretations of the world would flourish in the context of marginalisation, poverty, adverse childhood experiences, lack of control, low self-esteem, and unhappiness" ([22]).

For the time being, there are mainly two schools of thought on why conspiracy theories form and proliferate. We can call them **"the paranoid perspective"** and **"the cultural sociological perspective"**. The former, pioneered by Richard Hofstadter ([23]), theorises that conspiracy theories are a facet of individual psychology and that conspiracy theorists have a paranoid personality type, they feel powerless, and have a black and white world view. The latter, instead, looks at conspiracy theories as something deeply embedded in political cultures and focuses more on the fact that conspiracy thinking can be seen as a form of populist protest against the so-called powerful elites ([24]). In this case, conspiracy theories may constitute the symptoms of underlying social tensions that need to be resolved.

The role of the internet and social media

Conspiracy theories are spread in many ways and for different reasons such as intentional manipulation of important events, political propaganda to target specific individuals and groups, lack of analytical skills, cognitive bias, entertainment, financial reasons, and so on and so forth. They can also be spread without the intent to foster polarisation, extremism or violence. Nonetheless, when a conspiracy theory takes root, it can grow quickly, and it is difficult to counter the impact it can have on people sensitive to being radicalised.

The internet, social media, TV broadcasts or the so-called conspiracy cinema **may increase receptivity to conspiracy theories** ([25]). In this regard, even **music** can play an important role. Movements like "White Power Music", for instance, spread racist content on the fact that white people would be undermined by internationalist conspiracies. Indeed, music has served white supremacist organisers for decades and the internet is a powerful way to further spread and promote it. The fact that the internet may promote and spread conspiracy theories and that online discussion forums and social media channels provide a valuable window into the phenomenon does not mean that individuals are more inclined to conspiracy thinking now than they were prior to the invention of the internet ([26]). Nonetheless, some elements such as the ease in accessing conspiracy theories, the speed with which they can be spread and a massive increase of the publicly available data without a clear guide for its interpretation may increase **the risk of falling in the conspiratorial labyrinth for those who are most vulnerable**. Furthermore, as far as social media channels are concerned, some scholars argue that,

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([22]) Freeman & Bentall, The concomitants of conspiracy concerns, p. 596.
([23]) See, for instance: Hofstadter, The Paranoid Style in American Politics.
([24]) See, for instance: Hooper, Populism and conspiracy theory in Latin America, pp. 260-274; Bergmann, Conspiracy & Populism: The Politics of Misinformation.
([25]) Mulligan & Habel, The implications of fictional media for political beliefs, p. 2.
([26]) Douglas et al., Understanding Conspiracy Theories, p. 15.

"Conspiracy theories do not bounce indiscriminately from person to person through social media as is often assumed. Instead they tend to stay concentrated within the communities who already agree with them" ([27]).

In this regard, it should also be noted that the new generation of terrorists share the trait that large parts of their radicalisation processes seem to have happened online ([28]), where they share a number of conspiracy theories through many online communities that reinforce and justify one another's theories according to their political world views. Risks related to reciprocal radicalisation and to the fuelling of polarisation in societies should not be underestimated.

Conspiracy theories and right-wing extremism

Research published in 2017 in the *Journal of Social and Political Psychology* states that **"extreme left and right individuals are more inclined to believe in conspiracy theories than moderates"** ([29]). Indeed, political extremism and conspiracy beliefs both relate to a similar mindset aimed at making sense of society ([30]). As stated in the first part of this overview, providing simple answers to difficult questions as well as clearly identifying reasons and responsible parties for complex events is precisely a way that allows people to manage uncertainty. Extremist groups exploit this human need to spread their radical political ideologies, providing their target audience with causal explanations to distressing events that permit individuals to safeguard convictions and beliefs notwithstanding vulnerability and logical inconsistency.

Conspiracy theories are popular throughout all kinds of extremism. According to Europol, in recent years, right-wing extremists conducted a significant number of terrorist attacks that also reached Europe inspired by "a global community adhering to and reinforcing conspiracy theories and disseminating calls to violence" ([31]). The attacks in Norway (2011) and New Zealand (2019), which will be explained in more detail below, constitute a striking example and demonstrate how **apocalyptic beliefs and conspiracy theories in right-wing extremist groups' discourses may have devastating effects**. Indeed, neo-Nazism conspiratorial mindsets and cultures of fascism that frame reality as "good or evil" ([32]) are regularly underpinned by conspiracy theories that offer their followers "a sense of mission and a 'higher' cause, at times drawing from them religious devotion – which some advocates openly describe as their 'faith'" ([33]).

Conspiracy theorists have a high probability of reaching individuals with broad ideological allegiances on the extreme-right spectrum. As stated by the Institute of Economics and Peace, in the last 10 years extreme-right terrorism has not been intrinsically linked to a specific terrorist group ([34]). On this spectrum of broad ideological allegiances, **conspiracy theories provide fuel to recruitment methods**, creating a sense of immediate danger that requires immediate action.

Right-wing extremism is composed of a diverse group of movements ([35]) that hold threatening and racist perspectives as well as conspiracy beliefs and theories about historical events and other socio-political facts ([36]).

([27]) Douglas et al., Understanding Conspiracy Theories.
([28]) See, for instance: Weimann, Terrorism in Cyberspace: The Next Generation; UNODC, The use of the Internet for terrorist purposes.
([29]) Krouwel et al., Does extreme political ideology predict conspiracy beliefs, economic evaluations and political trust?, p. 435.
([30]) van Proojien et al., Political Extremism Predicts Belief in Conspiracy Theories, p. 570.
([31]) Europol, European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report (TE-SAT) 2020, p. 77.
([32]) This mindset appears to be common to all kinds of extremism.
([33]) Jackson, Conspiracy Theories and Neo-Nazism in the Cultic Milieu, p. 462.
([34]) Institute of Economics & Peace, Global Terrorism Index 2019, p. 44.
([35]) For instance, white supremacists, white nationalists, white separatists, and neo-Nazis such as the Ku Klux Klan, American Nazi Party, National Alliance, Aryan Nations, etc.
([36]) Winter, My Enemies Must Be Friends: The American Extreme-Right, Conspiracy Theory, Islam, and the Middle East, p. 1.

"They contribute to a climate of fear and animosity against minority groups. Such a climate, built on xenophobia, hatred for Jews and Muslims and anti-immigration sentiments may lower the threshold for some radicalised individuals to use violence against people and property of minority groups as we have witnessed all too often in recent months" ([37]).

Even when right-wing extremist groups across the EU do not resort to violence, their propaganda — often based on belief in the superiority of the "white race" and the alleged conspiracy devoted to replacing white populations through mass immigration — **spreads hate speech**, **promotes the dehumanisation of the target groups** and **incites others to use violence**. Even right-wing populist movements often adopt conspiracy theories without directly resorting to physical violence. Another example, in this regard, is the **so-called gender conspiracy theory** that appears to be widespread by right-wing extremists. People who believe in this theory think that gender studies and activism for LGBT rights are the visible manifestation of a secret plot by powerful groups to hurt other in-groups, such as the Catholic church, or to threaten the family unit by triggering conflict between the sexes ([38]).

In sum, even without resorting to violence, these kinds of theories can popularise xenophobia, authoritarianism, scapegoating and conspiracism with the risk of legitimising discrimination or eroding trust in democratic institutions.

Anti-immigrant conspiracy theories

Before killing 51 people and wounding dozens more at 2 mosques in New Zealand, Brenton Tarrant posted a 74-page manifesto titled **'The Great Replacement'**. The title refers to Renaud Camus' conspiracy theory contained in his book *Le Grand Remplacement*. The content of the manifesto leads us to discover the building blocks of Tarrant's conspiracy beliefs and violent ideology, which may be summarised as follows ([39]):

- the immigrants are "invaders" who colonise other people's lands;

- the "invaders" are killing the planet due to their fertility rates;

- the white race is under attack and threatened by imminent extinction;

- Islam and Muslims are the major threat to Europe and to the white supremacy;

- both capitalists and socialists as well as ideologies of liberalism and "nihilism" have destroyed the environment and have strongly contributed to the decline of Western civilisation;

- the "Globalism", understood as an economic and political system that works for the benefit of shadowy forces that control the economy and the media, is quoted as an issue as well as the "anti-white media machine" and the "X groups", both guilty of malicious secret plots;

- the destruction of traditional family is one of the reasons for the decline of the European population;

- the internet contains all the answers: "You will not find the truth anywhere else".

Considering himself as an "eco-fascist" devoted to preserving the natural order through a "green nationalism" (fighting against overpopulation and migration), Tarrant claimed that the Christchurch attacks were **revenge** for the (alleged) genocide of white European people and the jihadi terrorist attacks that took place in Europe.

The manifesto points to the ideological links between the Great Replacement conspiracy and the parallel **"White Genocide" theory**, both focused on postulating the supremacy of the white race and on spreading the alarm about the fact that white populations risk being replaced. While both theories use racist wording against immigrants and promote hatred against minorities, their main difference can be characterised as the former being closer to the so-called **Eurabia theory**, which argues that Western countries are being brought

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([37]) De Bolle, Foreword, p. 4.
([38]) Marchiewska & Cichocka, How a gender conspiracy theory is spreading across the world.
([39]) Centre for Analysis of the Radical Right, 'The Great Replacement' – Decoding the Christchurch Terrorist Manifesto.

under Islamic rule, and the latter being more often tied to anti-Semitic conspiracy theories [40]. However, as argued in the first part of this overview, such theories may overlap in terms of target. In the case of the Great Replacement theory, for instance, the conspiracy is often perceived to be led by Jews [41].

The Great Replacement conspiracy theory is also linked with **anti-feminism**, where:

> *"Feminism is alleged to have been invented to distract women from their 'natural' role as mothers and, consequently, blamed for decreasing birth rates in Western countries, which in turn allows immigrants – whose women supposedly have not been influenced by feministic rhetoric – to become the majority more rapidly"* [42].

Brenton Tarrant declared that he was inspired by Oswald Mosley, an English politician who led the British Union of Fascists from 1932 to 1940, Dylann Roof, a white supremacist who killed nine African Americans in Charleston in 2015, and Anders Breivik, the author of the 2011 Norway attacks. They all share (or have shared) **racist views** offering a foresight of the dreadful future and destiny that will involve white people losing their power. A contemporary example of the use of this tale would be the current **Boogaloo movement** that assembles "fringe groups from gun rights and militia movements to white supremacists" who refer to a "second civil war" or "race war" using the word "boogaloo" [43]. The "boogaloo boys" make use of ironic images and memes such as an armed Pepe the Frog, a common meme used by white supremacist and alt-right groups.

In this regard, it is worth mentioning that movements such as *Identitäre Bewegung* (Germany) or Pegida UK have accused their respective governments of "genocide of their 'own people'" by associating Islam with Nazism due to their assumed common dangerous ideology of aggression, racism, call to kill, intolerance and oppression [44]. Generally, these movements feed on anti-immigrant sentiments by presenting themselves as vigilantes protecting the "majority populations" from the non-natives, outsider immigrants [45]. They depend on narratives and grievances that lie in the emotions of their target audience and subsequently spread these online. They bid on a perception of "demographic threat" coming from the outside to increase anti-immigrant sentiments.

Anti-Semitic conspiracy theories

Right-wing extremism is traditionally anti-Semitic. **Holocaust denial**, for instance, is a striking example of right-wing extremism's attempts to exonerate the Nazis while blaming the Jews of all kinds of misdeeds. The American investigative journalist Chip Berlet defines conspiracy theories as "tools of fear" [46] deeply rooted in anti-Semitism and racism. Indeed, even though targets can change along with historical circumstances, **"the Jews" remain an essential scapegoat for right-wing extremist groups**. The concept of **Zionist Occupied Government (ZOG)**, for instance, describes the conspiracy belief that a Jewish cabal secretly controls major world governments, and it is prominent in almost all neo-Nazi or white supremacist groups, resulting in slogans such as "Smash ZOG", "Death to ZOG" and "Kill ZOG".

As already mentioned in prior pages, the book ***The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*** most probably represents the best example of an anti-Semitic conspiracy theory. The infamous forgery, notoriously Hitler's favourite hoax document, is still circulating across the world in a number of different versions that hold the same allegations. In sum, Jews are mainly accused of [47]:

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[40] Davey & Ebner, The Great Replacement, p. 7.
[41] Europol, European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report (TE-SAT) 2020, p. 95.
[42] Ibid., p. 71.
[43] Zadrozny, What is the 'boogaloo'? How online calls for a violent uprising are hitting the mainstream.
[44] Klein & Muis, Online discontent: comparing Western European far-right groups on Facebook, p. 555.
[45] Ekman, Anti-immigrant Sentiments and Mobilization on the Internet, p. 557.
[46] Berlet, Toxic to Democracy - Conspiracy theories, demonization, & Scapegoating, pp. 2-3.
[47] Ibid., p. 19.

- secretly conspiring to conquer and dominate the world through Masonic lodges;

- controlling the press and the media to discourage independent thinking and keep people under their rule;

- controlling international banks, manipulating the economy and promoting financial speculation;

- weakening the church and the state;

- having a tyrannical world view;

- controlling governments through elected officials;

- plotting to suspend democracy by exploiting a state of emergency to hold the power permanently.

It should be noted that the text of the Protocols is often cited as proof of Jewish machinations by many conspiracists, not only from the extreme-right–wing sphere. A strong overlap between right-wing, Islamist and left-wing extremism undoubtedly lies in the anti-Semitic conspiracy theories. In this regard, anti-Zionism may be used as a stand-in term for "Jews" in conspiracy theories, thus making it more difficult to unravel anti-Semitic malicious narratives on the alleged Jewish global power.

As we will see in the next sections, the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic presented a window of opportunity for extreme-right–wing conspiracy theories to flourish with reference to anti-Semitic sentiments.

Anti-establishment and anti-elite conspiracy theories

As outlined, conspiracy theories often rely on a fictionalised group of powerful and malevolent elites who want to take control with criminal ambitions. **"QAnon"** and **"#Pizzagate"** are two conspiracy theories falling precisely under this category. QAnon is an extreme-right–wing conspiracy theory with no apparent foundation in reality that asserts that a mysterious high-ranking military officer or a United States (US) official ("Q") would have revealed, through the online message board 4chan, some information about an alleged "deep state" run by politicians like Hillary Clinton and the Hollywood elite standing against President Donald Trump [48].

What makes the theory even less reliable is the fact that it credits and mixes up its plot with other theories such as the one named #Pizzagate that went viral during the 2016 US presidential elections, especially when these messages and videos gained popularity within the Reddit community. This debunked conspiracy theory claims that the emails coming from the hacked account of Hillary Clinton's campaign manager contained some coded messages referring to child sex abuse and human trafficking. Since the email contained references to pizza and pizza restaurants, the alleged headquarter of the criminal activities was, according to this theory, the basement of a specific pizzeria in Washington D.C. The only truth in this story is **that a gunman fired an automatic rifle in this pizzeria after having entered to investigate the case he had read about online** [49]. Four years after the spread of this conspiracy theory, the #Pizzagate is still alive. Like a virus, the theory has morphed and mutated to survive, identifying different targets such as Justin Bieber and Bill Gates instead of Hillary Clinton. Once again, this happened some months before the new presidential elections.

#Pizzagate became a cornerstone of QAnon conspiracy theories whose influencers have also widely used the COVID-19 pandemic to spread disinformation and fake news that fuel polarisation in society and constitute a breeding ground for violence. While the QAnon theories may have originated in the US, **their narratives are believed to have no borders** and have already asserted their presence in Europe [50]. We will see the link between these theories and the COVID-19 pandemic in more detail in the next section.

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[48] Zadrozny & Collins, How three conspiracy theorists took 'Q' and sparked Qanon.
[49] Nelson, What is Pizzagate? The fake news scandal involving Hilary Clinton and Wikileaks explained - and why it's trending amid Epstein inquiry.
[50] Labbe et al., QAnon's Deep State conspiracies spread to Europe.

Conspiracy theories in the COVID-19 context

As clearly expressed by Michael Barkun, a conspiracist world view suggests a universe governed by well-defined structures instead of by haphazardness, and manifests itself in three main principles [51]:

- nothing happens by accident;

- nothing is as it seems;

- everything is connected.

In times of great uncertainty, these three principles greatly resonate with common grievances on a personal and political level. The COVID-19 pandemic brought with it doubts, anxiety, dread and threats to the lives of millions of people. Conspiratorial narratives flourish in such a context and **extremist groups exploited the spread of the coronavirus to disseminate fake news and to incite violence**.

Right-wing extremist groups and individuals opportunistically capitalised on the occasion, swamping social networks, and the web more in general, with racist narratives, apocalyptic theories, conspiratorial thoughts and extremist world views in a period when people were isolated within their homes making the web their main source of information [52]. This toxic convergence constituted the "perfect storm" where the most vulnerable people, such as those suffering from mental health or social issues, faced critical risks coming from the wild spread of disinformation. In this regard, right-wing extremism confirmed its tendency to use disinformation tactics as its most effective propaganda strategy.

The **main targets** of this series of hoaxes and conspiracy theories were Jews, Muslims, Asians and foreigners (especially immigrants).

The traditional propaganda of right-wing extremist groups, mainly authoritarian, racist and anti-Semitic, has been adapted to the period of the pandemic. The anti-Semitic sentiment, for instance, has been spread blaming the Jews and Israel for originating the virus and orchestrating the pandemic with the aim of taking over the markets and expanding their influence over the national governments. Israel has also been accused, together with the US, to have created the virus to target rivals such as China and Iran. Furthermore, extreme-right-wing disinformation campaigns called for actual attacks and violence. In this regard, some US movements incited their followers who have contracted the coronavirus to become "biological weapons" [53], entering local synagogues and **infecting Jews** — a gruesome call that also applies to other targets such as **Muslims**, mosques and **"non-white people"**.

Xenophobic sentiments have also turned to conspiracy theories referring to **Chinese people** and **migrants**. As far as the former are concerned, a grotesque and popular conspiracy theory circulating online states that the Wuhan laboratory, from which the virus would have originated, manufactured a drug called **adrenochrome** (widely used by Hollywood celebrities according to this theory) of which the production requires **the ritualistic murder of children** to obtain the necessary chemicals [54]. This theory is closely linked to the #Pizzagate narrative on child-Satanic rituals and widespread by QAnon followers. According to this narrative, the manufacturing plant in Wuhan is **funded by George Soros** [55].

During the COVID-19 Pandemic, the **QAnon community** has assembled a scope of other paranoid fears turning them into conspiracy theories, such as [56]:

- COVID-19 is a covert government plot to attack Donald Trump and to harm his re-election chances;

- COVID-19 is a bioweapon;

- a cure exists but it is available only for the elites of super-rich people;

- martial law will be declared by Donald Trump to facilitate the arrest of this cabal of powerful criminals.

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[51] Barkun, A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America, pp. 2-3.
[52] Katz, The Far-Right's Online Discourse on COVID-19 Pandemic.
[53] Institute for Strategic Dialogue, Covid-19 Disinformation Briefing No. 2. Far-right Mobilisation.
[54] Ibid.
[55] Ibid.
[56] Ibid.

Furthermore, right-wing extremists are spreading theories related to the fact that the COVID-19 pandemic is being exploited by migrants to **invade host countries**. These anti-migrant narratives are often linked with the tale of the apocalyptic advent of an inevitable civil war previously mentioned.

Who spreads these theories?

Conspiracy theories are vastly spread online via official and legal media platforms before switching to peripheral, darker areas through less accessible platforms such as forums and encrypted chat rooms. The **most commonly used online platforms** are Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, 4chan, 8chan, Gab, Reddit, Voat, and encrypted chat rooms including Telegram and Discord (gamer hangouts). **Offline strategies** to mobilise support occur at a certain stage where extremist groups will take over sport or online gaming activities happening offline or music festivals where they can meet and manipulate people all around Europe using conspiracy theories as a recruitment tool. These events represent a real gateway for mobilising support. But who is behind the spreading of such theories? More research and studies need to be undertaken in this regard to better capture the broad picture of the phenomenon and the wider strategy aimed at mobilising supporters and sympathisers. The main clusters to be analysed include:

- **Vulnerable individuals**
  Not all conspiracy theories have a malicious agenda. As highlighted by the European Commission, while some people purposefully want to stir and exploit the economic, political and cultural vulnerabilities of certain groups, other "people who spread conspiracy theories genuinely believe in them" [57]. People with a paranoid personality, for instance, consider the world to be an evil place full of dangers, risks and oppression, interpreting "innocuous events and behaviours as threatening and are receptive to conspiracy theories and threat 'stories' and narratives" [58]. This is also relevant for individuals with a narcissistic personality or people who have schizotypal traits, amongst others. These individuals are oftentimes drawn to conspiracy theories and eccentric explanations of the world. Other categories of individuals vulnerable to spreading conspiracy theories are those who suffer adverse socioeconomic living conditions, isolation and uncertainty in their life as such theories can make sense of complex events, providing them with tranquillity and instant comfort [59].

- **Conspiracy entrepreneurs**
  Cass Sunstein argues that those "who profit directly or indirectly from propagating" these theories can be defined as a "conspiracy entrepreneur". Some individuals who spread conspiracy theories, including the ones relating to right-wing extremism, fall under this category. They can be interested in money, fame or in achieving socio-political goals [60].

- **Extremist groups**
  As previously explored, extremist groups have and continue to utilise conspiracy theories to explain/justify their actions, attract followers and advance their agendas. In this regard, the global impact and insecurity that the COVID-19 pandemic has had and continues to have has generated fertile ground for all types of violent extremist groups to offer their version to frame the current crisis, spreading narratives in the form of conspiracy theories and fake news. Most significantly, they offer a community (both offline and online) with the possibility to vent and discuss the situation, as well as a platform to encourage ideas on how to change the current world into what they propagate as a better one.

- **The international political arena**
  Many conspiracy theories are spread for political gain. Some leaders of populist parties, for instance, make frequent use of conspiracy tropes. Moreover, the case of the QAnon group and the #Pizzagate hoaxes are two striking examples of the political uses of conspiracy theories. Finally, the coronavirus pandemic showed how the uncertainties relating to a time of crisis may be exploited by hostile non-governmental foreign actors to politically discredit Western democracies through disinformation

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[57] European Commission, Identifying conspiracy theories.
[58] Radicalisation Awareness Network, Extremism, Radicalisation & Mental Health: Handbook for practitioners, p. 27.
[59] In this regard, see Radicalisation Awareness Network, Violent right-wing extremism in focus.
[60] Sunstein, Conspiracy Theories and Other Dangerous Ideas, p. 12.

campaigns, conspiracy theories and other harmful content devoted to fostering division among the EU's Member States and its political allies.

Contemporary Approaches to Countering Conspiracy Theories

While significant efforts have been made to try and understand how conspiracy theories are structured, how they function and what their purpose is, limited research has been undertaken to understand how they can be challenged, prevented, deconstructed and debunked. On top of the reflections that should be made on this topic, there is the fact that conspiracy theories are not an isolated phenomenon that can be addressed focusing only on the theories themselves without considering, for instance, the conspiracy theorists' overall world view ([61]). Indeed, **conspiracy theories can be considered a symptom of a broader disease** that can include social, political, ideological, psychological, and economic issues. Furthermore, rebutting conspiracy theories may sometimes be counterproductive, risking to further spread some theories should the counteraction be unsuccessful. Indeed, rebutting does not necessarily mean persuading people about the fallacy of a theory, and the risk of producing the opposite effect must be taken into consideration ([62]). According to Cassam, the attempt to **rebut a conspiracy theory may backfire** on those who are deeply committed to it:

> *"A more promising and worthwhile target of rebuttal efforts is people with a weaker commitment to Conspiracy Theories, or the presumably large numbers of those who are curious about such theories, maybe even receptive to them, without yet being true believers"* (*[63]*).

The fakeness of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* is a striking example. Despite the forgery having been well documented during two trials in 1934–1935, the book remained a bestseller. At the same time, some conspiracy theories risk producing even more serious harm to society if not tackled in time. Medical conspiracy theories, for instance, may be grounds for health behaviour that puts human lives at risk. Doing nothing to counteract them is not a solution. It is therefore crucial to identify **conspiracy theories that require urgent interventions**. According to Péter Krekó ([64]), counterstrategies and debunking actions should focus on theories that share three characteristics:

- **Harmfulness**
  For instance, when they fuel Us vs Them perspectives calling for actions against clear targets or when they encourage risky health behaviour.

- **Low plausibility**
  When there is no evidence to support the theory or when evidence proving the contrary is greater.

- **High popularity**
  When a conspiracy theory goes viral.

Furthermore, a distinction should be made between interventions that focus on prevention and those devoted to reducing the harm of a conspiracy theory that has already gained a foothold in society.

Preventive approaches

"*An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure*". Benjamin Franklin's attributed suggestion is confirmed by most of the research undertaken on the topic of conspiracy theories. Indeed, once a hoax has already spread in society it is often very difficult to neutralise it. Hence, the question needing an answer is: How we can prevent conspiracy theories from harming society?

([61]) Cassam, Conspiracy Theories, p. 99.
([62]) Ibid., p. 100.
([63]) Ibid.
([64]) Krekó, Countering conspiracy theories and misinformation, p. 245.

As previously stated, conspiracy theories cannot be addressed without considering them as an integral element of a troubled society on a political, ideological, psychological, and economic level. Moreover, research is showing that "certain existential needs drive people to endorse conspiracy theories as a way to achieve a stable, confident, and accurate understanding of the world" [65]. In other cases, believing in specific conspiracy theories can be correlated with an individual's attempt to identify or differentiate with one social group and another. Indeed, group identities such as nationalities, political parties, ideological orientations, racial designations, and age demographics are a powerful component in leading people to limit their lenses within their own group. This dynamic results in individuals' assertion of their group as being the only morally right way forward as opposed to all other groups they consider as either biased or immoral. Hence, preventing harmful conspiracy theories to gain a foothold in society without addressing their root causes through focused policy interventions on a broad level would be partially ineffective.

Bearing this preliminary reflection in mind, it is worth underlining that, to date, intellectual virtues such as **critical thinking** and **open-mindedness** as well as **fact and logic-based interventions** have been found to be helpful protective factors in reducing the impact of conspiracy theories [66]. Therefore, equipping people with critical thinking skills through specific programmes is an important way to **shield the audience**. In this case, **education** and the role of schools are key to preventing the spread of conspiracy theories since they have the power to shape young people's minds and enhance their skills. Youth, in particular, when in the process of developing opinions and exploring different world views, need to be **trained to recognise** conspiracy theories and, more broadly, malevolent disinformation attempts. Indeed, grievances that resonate with conspiracy theories are particularly dangerous for young people. Therefore, teachers, youth workers and local civil society organisations have a great responsibility in helping youth to achieve the necessary skills [67], to critically think and to improve their **digital literacy** [68]. This, in order to push back the ability of conspiracy theorists in the mobilisation of the extremist action and violence. Hence, in summary - to prevent conspiracy theories from harming society - front-line practitioners should focus on enhancing:

- critical thinking and open-mindedness through education;

- fact and logic-based interventions;

- awareness and ability to recognise disinformation and conspiracy theories;

- digital literacy.

Examples of initiatives include:

- **The Web Walkers programme**
  This was launched in 2019 by the National Family Fund agency, aiming at encouraging positive behaviour on the internet and equipping web coaches through a training programme. These "Web Walkers" are professionals who connect with young people via their social network pages to guide them in their research by "encouraging a critical mindset when faced with information and images" [69].

- **"Les Joutes Verbales"**
  Another initiative that deserves to be mentioned is the one named "Les Joutes Verbales" put forward by a Brussels-based civil society organisation *Les ambassadeurs d'expression citoyenne* [70]. In these exercises, participants are required to undertake a *joute* (joust) on a societal issue to which they may be emotionally connected without having a say on the position they will have to defend during the debate. These *joutes* represent an oral rhetorical confrontation of arguments between two individuals or between groups. Such exercises and games with youth can enable a debate on a particular conspiracy theory throughout which participants will not necessarily defend their position, pushing youth to balance their thoughts and adopt an open perspective on sensitive topics.

- **Samoan Circle and handbooks for teachers and social workers**
  Very similar to the above-mentioned initiative is the "Samoan Circle" meeting process. During a

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[65] Douglas et al., Why do people adopt conspiracy theories, how are they communicated, and what are their risks?, p. 7.
[66] Cassam, Conspiracy Theories, p. 120; Krekó, Countering conspiracy theories and misinformation, p. 252.
[67] In this regard, see Lenos & Krasenberg, RAN Ex Post Paper, Dealing with fake news, conspiracy theories and propaganda in the classroom.
[68] Regarding the importance of digital literacy, see Guess et al., A digital media literacy intervention increases discernment between mainstream and false, p. 2020.
[69] Radicalisation Awareness Network, Doing digital youth work in a P/CVE context, p. 10.
[70] Les Ambassadeurs d'expression citoyenne, *Les Joutes Verbales*.

RAN EDU meeting in Antwerp, a group of secondary school students from the "GO! Koninklijk Atheneum Antwerpen" programme demonstrated how to facilitate the exchange of information and different points of view between youth on potentially polarising contentious issues (⁷¹). In this regard, the European Foundation for Democracy, a Brussel's based NGO devoted to preventing radicalisation, created a number of handbooks for teachers and social workers (⁷²) in different countries on how to deal with controversial issues in the classroom, including fake news and conspiracy theories. These types of projects and activities, together with anti-discrimination training, peer-education approaches and empowerment programmes, constitute precious help to counteract disinformation issues and their negative impact in societies.

Moreover, as stated in previous pages, the internet makes conspiracy theories more accessible. At the same time, **the Web can also be used as an antidote** to rebut them (⁷³). Indeed,

"The historian David Irving has for many years promoted the idea that Hitler didn't order the extermination of the Jews in Europe. [...] Imagine a person whose curiosity about Holocaust-denying Conspiracy Theories leads him to the idea that Hitler didn't order the extermination of the Jews in Europe. It's easy enough to locate more information about this online, much easier than it would have been before the days of the Internet. But a quick Google search of David Irving reveals that he was found by a court to have deliberately distorted the historical evidence in order to promote Holocaust denial" (⁷⁴).

Together with the improvement of logical and analytical thinking, targeting the main drivers of conspiracy theories can be another proficient methodology for helping people to receive **stronger immunisation** against paranoid ideas and conspiracy beliefs. About this, Krekó suggests that,

"While certain personality traits, social status or minority status are difficult or impossible to change, reducing feelings of uncertainty, mistrust, powerlessness and lack of control, that are found to be important factors that enhance conspiracy thinking, seems to be a possible way" (⁷⁵).

When it comes to speaking about preventive approaches, the **inoculation strategies** are among those that have been found to be the most efficient to increase the **immune system of individuals** against conspiracy theories. As stated by Lewandowsky, van der Linden and Cook:

"If people are made aware that they might be misled before the misinformation is presented, there is evidence that people become resilient to the misinformation. This process is variously known as 'inoculation' or 'prebunking' and it comes in a number of different forms" (⁷⁶).

Borrowing the notion from medical science, this approach aims at introducing an antigen to stimulate the production of antibodies against conspiracy beliefs. The antigen can be a fact-based treatment provided to the audience preceding the demonstration of a conspiracy theory's weak arguments to minimise the impact of similar threats in the future and stimulate the generation of counterarguments (⁷⁷). For this, social media companies can play an important role, especially through cooperation with local and national authorities to stop disinformation campaigns and raise awareness on the issue.

(⁷¹) Radicalisation Awareness Network, RAN EDU meeting on dealing with religion-inspired extremist ideologies in school, p. 9.
(⁷²) See, for instance, Bouarfa & Farinelli, *Laïcité et Prévention de la Radicalisation*.
(⁷³) Cassam, Conspiracy Theories, p. 118.
(⁷⁴) Ibid., p. 103, p. 117.
(⁷⁵) Krekó, Countering conspiracy theories and misinformation, p. 247.
(⁷⁶) Lewandowsky et al., Can we inoculate against fake news?, p. 10.
(⁷⁷) Ibid.

Debunking approaches

When preventive activities fail to contain the spread of a harmful conspiracy theory, other strategies devoted to reducing the negative impact of such theories should be put in place. Lewandowsky and Cook ([78]) distinguish between debunking methods addressed to target highly educated people and those addressed to target a more general public and especially individuals who adopt conspiracy beliefs as part of their belief system. Regarding the former, the authors state that the following options have been shown to be effective:

- **Fact-based debunking:** using accurate information to show that the theory is false.

- **Links to fact checkers:** providing links to a fact checker website.

- **Source-based debunking:** ridiculing arguments such as the ones addressed to the believers of lizard men was found effective. On the contrary, empathising with the targets of conspiracy theories (e.g. the Jews) had little or no effect.

- **Logic-based debunking:** explaining the inconsistencies or the techniques used to create a conspiracy theory.

Regarding people who are chronically committed to conspiracy theories, the authors state that to potentially reach them, the following procedures could help:

- **Trusted messengers:** former extremists could be helpful in creating and spreading counter-messages.

- **Show empathy:** building an understanding with conspiracy theorists can help to develop their open-mindedness.

- **Affirm critical thinking:** capitalising on the perception that conspiracy theorists have that they are critical thinkers to redirect their approach towards more reliable sources and analysis.

- **Avoid ridicule:** ridiculing arguments or aggressively deconstructing a conspiracy theory does not work with individuals who are highly committed to conspiracy theories. This could produce a backfire effect and should be avoided.

As schematically shown above, there are many ways to discredit conspiracy theories. However, research shows that debunking them can be more effective with the general public than with people who strongly believe in conspiracy theories. Indeed, "rather than basing their beliefs on external evidence, conspiracy theorists' belief system speaks mainly to itself, and each belief serves as evidence for every other belief" ([79]). As a result, when conspiracy theorists encounter counter-messages to their theory online, they respond by sharing more conspiracist content. Thus, **debunking can potentially make conspiracy theorists and others more convinced that the theory is correct and that people who argue against the theory are evil and part of the problem** ([80]). It is also true that;

"When (local) governments or social media outlets (try to) censor FRE [Far-Right Extremist, A/N.] messages, the FRE movement transforms these actions into a battle for the freedom of speech [and consequently, A/N] when countering FRE messages, its believers feel strengthened in their conviction that there is an ongoing conspiracy to silence them" ([81]).

Therefore, before debunking a conspiracy theory, the proponent must have good background knowledge and be fully aware of what and who they are targeting. In this regard, the Amadeu Antonio Foundation provided useful suggestions ([82]) for practitioners who find themselves confronted with conspiracy theories. Among them, the Foundation highlights the fact that belittling the counterpart who believes in a conspiracy theory is ineffective and that, instead, trying to figure out why that theory has an important role in their life

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([78]) Lewandowsky & Cook, The Conspiracy Theory Handbook, pp. 9-10.
([79]) Ibid., p. 10.
([80]) Zollo et al., Debunking in a world of tribes.
([81]) Radicalisation Awareness Network, RAN Factbook, Far-right extremism. A practical introduction, p. 24.
([82]) Amadeu Antonio Stiftung, *Wissen, was wirklich gespielt wird. Widerlegungen für gängige Verschwörungstheorien*.

would be key to providing proper feedback. Furthermore, making the reason behind your disagreement about that theory clear (e.g. racist views) and **highlighting its inconsistencies and contradictions** (e.g. why is a very secret plot widely revealed on so many YouTube videos?) can be useful ways to encourage critical thinking in the counterpart.

Recommendations

The information collected in this overview permits to elaborate some recommendations on how different actors of prevention of radicalisation and violent extremism can contribute to countering or discrediting harmful conspiracy theories.

General

- Invest in **prevention**. Once a hoax has already spread, it is usually very difficult to neutralise it. In this context, enhancing critical thinking and open-mindedness as well as adopting fact and logic-based interventions preceding the demonstration of a conspiracy theory's weak arguments to the audience have been found to be helpful and protective factors to shield the audience from conspiracy theories.

- **Education** has a crucial role in the immunisation of youth against conspiracy theories. In all democratic societies, it is vital that educational institutions prepare students to become engaged citizens who are able to navigate the internet safely and identify and read reliable news to stay informed. To accomplish this goal, all first-line practitioners must be properly equipped — having, amongst others, basic knowledge on areas such as media literacy and on how to deal with difficult topics in the classroom, such as disinformation, extremist propaganda and conspiracy theories. In this way, young people will be exposed to distinct narratives in a safe environment, inspiring critical thinking without imposing any specific views and/or beliefs.

- The World Wide Web makes conspiracy theories more accessible. At the same time, **the web** can also be used as an antidote to rebut them. The internet enables users to easily investigate where information comes from, the background of the author and, consequently, the level of reliability of the information itself.

- Conspiracy theories are used as a recruitment tool by different extremist groups and they often overlap across opposite extremist ideologies. It is, therefore, crucial to address the issue **targeting totalitarian ideologies** behind all forms of extremism.

- Conspiracy theories are seductive. Highlighting their real **functions and purposes** may contribute to reducing their appeal.

- Conspiracy theories often reflect the symptoms of underlying social tensions including social, political, ideological and economic issues. In this regard, **reducing feelings of uncertainty, mistrust, powerlessness, and lack of control** as well as enhancing the socioeconomic living conditions of citizens in society may help to push back grievances that resonate through conspiracy theories.

- It is important to **distinguish between different targets** when attempting to debunk conspiracy theories. Targeting individuals who are deeply committed to conspiracy theories or a more general public requires the use of different methods. Rebuttal efforts, for instance, can be effective with people with a weaker commitment and might instead backfire if used with those who adopt conspiracy beliefs as part of their belief system. As a concrete example, ridiculing arguments have proven to be effective to discredit some conspiracy theory in the eyes of educated people with a weak ideological commitment in relation to conspiracy beliefs. On the contrary, when approaching a committed conspiracy theorist, one should avoid ridiculing and show empathy.

Governments and security agencies

- It is very difficult for governments to effectively counter conspiracy theories directly as, in the eyes of conspiracy theorists, they lack credibility. Therefore, governmental institutions should **invest more resources in enabling credible actors** (i.e. civil society organisations) to help people think critically. The "credibility" of actors depends on the particular conspiracy theory and its target group.

- Many conspiracy theories are adapted to different national milieus. A permanent observation of the flexibility of conspiracy theories in a local/regional/national environment is an important challenge for all practitioners. Governments should **provide fact sheets and figures** to those who are esteemed as being the most credible messengers.

- Governments should **protect communities** targeted by conspiracy theories in order to avoid sentiments of revenge against those who blame them. Furthermore, governments should invest in programmes carried out by trusted civil society organisations that **encourage critical thinking** and deconstruction of extremist propaganda.

- Some conspiracy theories can be particularly harmful, requiring their removal from the web. At the same time, they are part of the democratic discussion and they cannot be completely prohibited. Finding **a balance between freedom of speech and the necessity to protect society** from their divisive poison is crucial. In this regard, governments must also pay attention to the fact that once a message has been censored, extremist groups will probably place the spotlight on that very action as evidence of the existence of a conspiracy to silence dissident voices.

- Fact checking by **social media companies** is vital to spread awareness on the phenomenon of conspiracy theories. Authorities and social media companies should further cooperate in creating guides for navigating the large amount of data available online to stop or reduce the effects of disinformation campaigns.

- Conspiracy theories flourish in relation to terrorist events. On this subject, it is crucial that government officials, security services and media adopt a **clear communication** highlighting security implications deriving from the dissemination of fake news and uncorroborated evidence.

- Since many conspiracy theories are devoted to revealing the "hidden plot" and the invisible hand behind terrible events, security and policing agencies should invest in building **closer relationships with sensitive communities**. Finding opportunities to interact with community members in a "non-enforcement" context or the involvement of police in local school activities and community events would increase mutual understanding and trust.

- In recent years, right-wing extremism has proven to be a serious threat in Europe, especially due to the fact that even when such groups do not resort to violence, their propaganda still has devastating effects in society, spreading hate speech and promoting the dehumanisation of targeted groups. Governments should therefore **not underestimate the threat posed by the so-called non-violent groups** and their conspiratorial mindset.

- Even though targets can change along with historical circumstances, "the Jews" remain an essential scapegoat in conspiracy theories relating to all kinds of extremism. Understanding how to push back these narratives and how to address this phenomenon should be addressed by the **EU security policy**.

Civil society actors

- Considering the difficulties governments have in countering conspiracy theories directly, civil society actors and organisations should play a more prominent role in **confronting hoaxes and lies that create grounds for radicalisation**, especially when they aim to undermine liberal democracies and to exacerbate polarisation in society.

- Many conspiracy theories are spread within the family environment or among circles of friends. The people we love are more likely to be inclined to listen to us and take our consideration seriously. Assuming a **proactive attitude** when we are confronted with conspiracy theories in these contexts can be a useful way to spread awareness on this subject.

- When confronted with conspiracy theories, it is important to:

  a. **Not belittle** the counterpart in the argument and try to find out why the conspiracy theory is so important in this moment of their life.

  b. **Make it clear** why you disagree with the conspiracy theory (e.g. because it represents an anti-Semitic, sexist or racist world view).

  c. You should **point out contradictions** in such theories, for example: If so much is happening in secret, why are there so many YouTube videos, revealing the supposed "conspiracy"? If the "conspirators" are so powerful, why are there entire blogs and videos about it? Are they not in control of such big video platforms?

Research

More research needs to be carried out in the field of conspiracy theories with a view to:

- Reach a **consensus** regarding terminology and definitions. This would help to avoid misunderstandings among frontline practitioners and would improve the possibility to implement more effective interventions.

- Adopt a systematic **comparative approach** amongst the different disciplines investigating conspiracy theories to better capture the broad picture of the phenomenon.

- Merge academic research and activities on the ground to **test findings** and elaborate more efficient counteractions.

- Focus on the broad ideological spectrum of **all forms of extremism** to mitigate the risk of stigmatising only some categories. This is crucial in avoiding feelings of victimisation and in ensuring the credibility in the overarching interventions.

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