STUDIA MYTHOLOGICA SLAVICA

25

2022

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Gvido Birola, Kuga (Peste / Plague), 1972.

COVID-19 Conspiracy Theories in Slovenia

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Članek obravnava teorije zarote, ki so povezane s pandemijo COVID-19 v Sloveniji. Raziskava je potekala na gradivu, zbranem na spletu ter s terenskim delom. Vsebina je analizirana s semiotičnega in folklorističnega vidika, zgodbe pa so kategorizirane glede na funkcijo in glede na izpostavljeno temo, teorije zarote pa so obravnavane tudi z vidika mitološke strukture. Teorije zarote, povezane s pandemijo, izhajajo iz že uveljavljenih teorij zarote, ki pa so v konkretnem kontekstu pandemije povezane z večjo in neposredno grožnjo zdravju in svobodi človeštva, za katero se domneva, da jo izvajajo zarotene zle sile.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: teorija zarote, COVID-19, pripoved, semiotika, digitalna kultura

The article discusses conspiracy theories concerned with the global crisis triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic in Slovenia based on material collected from the Internet and during fieldwork. Content is examined using the well-established foundations of conspiracy theories, the semiotics of the conspiracy theories, and their mythological structure. Pandemic-related conspiracy stories appear to emerge from already established conspiracy narratives, linking them to a bigger and imminent threat to the health and freedom of humanity, believed to be perpetrated by conspiring evil forces.

KEYWORDS: conspiracy theory, COVID-19, narrative, semiotics, digital culture

INTRODUCTION

Conspiracy-based narratives are neither a recent social phenomenon nor a cultural product of modernism. They are known since at least Roman times, e.g., when the Jews were accused of having poisoned the water supply and causing a plague. Throughout Europe's cultural history, conspiracy-based narratives have followed times of crisis and social change, and been an important model for explanatory storytelling during periods of unsettled meaning (Kline 2017: 186, Merlan 2019: 13, Varis 2019: 2). After the French Revolution, reaching its peak in the 20th century (Oberhauser 2020, Girard 2020), the conspiracism in modern conspiracy theories took the form of mass transmission (Wojcik, 2003: 247), undergoing a particular poetic transformation in the digital ecosystem.

Although the most important contributions on the subject are made by American academics using examples from American history and culture (Girard 2019: 567), the European cultural history of conspiracism relies on its own matrices. After all, conspiracy theories are considered to be a global phenomenon (as shown in Routledge 2019).

Conspiracy theories have not been researched as often or as explicitly in Slovenia. Scholarly lack of interest in this field has stood out during the COVID-19 crisis, when many have sought to understand the source of the multiple conspiracy theories. Slovenia's conspiracy theories should be contextualised and researched within the scope of four spatial-temporal contexts: a) the tradition of European conspiracy theories in the 20th century (like in Girard 2019); b) Balkan conspiracy theories matrices (like in Blanuša 2019); c) the post-socialist era of conspiracy theories shared with Eastern Europe and Russia (as studied in Routledge 2021); and d) global conspiracy-based narratives emerging in Western popular culture. Insight gained into COVID-19-related conspiracy theories, given that we know much more about their narrative potential and preferences, means it is necessary to look back and rethink the conspiracy-related narratives involved. The current success and popularity of conspiracy-based narratives on COVID-19 and their connection to the numerous, already globally spread conspiracy theories reveals a strong conspiracy narrative tradition. At the same time, the conspiracy narrative models of storytelling are already a familiar response to epistemological dissonances in everyday life.

The media largely tried to 'fact-check' conspiracy narratives with scientific and researched articles, criticising the content of the conspiracy stories and their spread through comments in the public. Still, by making them a topic in the news, the media also helped to strengthen (yellow print) and give exposure to these theories. The question is whether public speaking about conspiracy theories assists in spreading them or whether this refers more to unleashing the long-silenced conflict between conspiracy theorists and their important opponent or 'collaborators' – the mainstream media (MSM). On the other hand, ignoring the spread and existence of conspiracy theories might bring even more serious consequences when one considers their constant success, growth and thus influence on public life (Radomirović Maček 2020: 5).

This article does not however engage in the truthfulness or lack thereof of the content of conspiracy theories. Based on numerous examples, we may say that conspiracy theories cannot simply be labelled truthful or wrong *per se* (Uscinski 2018: 5), mostly due to their specific epistemological path (Piazza 2011) or being grounded on fundamental attribution error and other logical fallacies (Pelkmans, Machold 2011: 68). We therefore consider them as narratives which function in society according to the matrices of folklore storytelling rules. Based on the semiotic approach, analysis is conducted on the narratives and their function in the relatively large outbreak of viral infection in Slovenia.

The topic of conspiracy theories about COVID-19 has attracted considerable interest and scientific analyses, published as proceedings at many conferences and debated in various articles, which rethink the psychological background of conspiracy theories research. For example, Uscinski J., Enders A., Klofstad C. et al. (2020) consider the connection between rumours and Internet space, Shahsavari S, Holur P., Wand T., Thangherlini T., (2020) are opening the new possibilities for conspiracy theories research

online. Conspiracy theories are becoming significant research subject also as part of the thematic journals like *Contemporary Legend* 3/10; the Estonian journal *Folklore* vol. 82 etc. with all the authors included, and books (the recently most visible: Bodner et al. 2014; Baeva, Ilieva 2021 etc.) or monographs (Gonsalo 2021; Butter 2020). It is also a subject of interest in considerable interdisciplinary research stressing the importance of researching conspiracy theories online, like in Shahvasari S., Tangherlini T., Holur P., Roychowdhury (2020), Gruzd A., Mai P. (2020), and Ahmed W, Vidal-Alaball J., et al. (2020). They have also at a minimum become an important subject of essayistic journalism, such as in Scott M. (2021).

METHODOLOGY

Today's communication environments make alternative points of view more visible than ever before (Stano 2020: 1). Several studies focused in the past on the dissemination of conspiracy theories in the mass media, while research into conspiracy theories in the digital setting remains a novel expertise (Stano 2020: 2). The most important online transmission aspects underpinning the methodology of online conspiracy theories are: going viral (quantitative dissemination), spreadability with recontextualisation (qualificative transformation potential), information overload and echo-chamber effect (Stano 2020). The research methodology includes both quantitative and qualitative analytical apparatus, often supported by specific software that segments and measures data according to certain parameters. The recent scientific drive to understand the velocity of the spread of online conspiracy theories calls for interdisciplinary research methods based on social analytics, digital ethnography and user path analysis such as the social big data analysis (Erdman 2016; Madisson 2016; Thibault 2016), and more recently (Caballero 2019; Stano 2020; Shahsavari, Holur et al. 2020; Varis 2019; Varis, Hoe 2020). These approaches build on the fact that the modern worldwide web is based on a participatory culture to diffuse online information, with the *many-to-many* communication model instead of the mass media *one-to-many* model (Stano 2020: 3, Caballero 2019: 135). Briefly, the key step in disseminating online CT is *re-sharing*, where more viral means more popular and visible, while more popular seems to amount to more relevant. The online group of material was collected as part of a 2-year research project[1] on various digital platforms; social networks (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram), blogs of conspiracy theory influencers, and webpages of social organisations whose activism is based on conspiracy theories and conspiracy-based ideology. It includes over 1,000 units collected from the start of the COVID-19 epidemic in Wuhan, namely between 14.2.2020 and 3.12.2021, when the working classification was created. For the purposes of this paper, only qualitative aspects of the collected online material are to be presented with a view to detecting the narratological diversity of COVID-19 conspiracy theories in Slovenia these days.

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[1] The doctoral dissertation title which includes the conspiracy theories material mentioned above "Contemporary narratives and notions about the end of the world in the area of former Yugoslavia", Kristina Radomirović Maček.

Alongside the online material, the article includes data collected through participatory observation, interviews and discussions with various known individuals and social networks from printed and audio-video media. This arose from a public call to collect COVID-19 humour and conspiracy theories issued by the ZRC SAZU Institute of Slovenian Ethnology and disseminated through e-mails. These two groups of material are divided and explained in a four-part typology, while the characters are grouped into seven narrational functions (Radomirović Maček 2021).

At this point, our approach is more narratological and semiotical than contextual. Nevertheless, our interpretation includes certain of the main functional aspects of conspiracy theories in Slovenia nowadays. We also raise the question of networking COVID-19 conspiracy theories with some previously established conspiracy theories that may have influenced the narrational line and lent a few well-known motifs to the COVID-19 conspiracy mindset.

CONSPIRACY THEORY

While definitions of conspiracy theory have different focuses, in this article we focus definitions that expose narrative and myth, and the elements of time and evil. The definitions provided are also supported with semiotic apparatus and used for folkloristic research of conspiracy theory.

The general definition of the content of a contemporary conspiracy theory is that it constitutes a belief that an event/situation is the result of a secret plan made by powerful people or entities. Conspiracy theories lead to the following dichotomy: on one side, there are evil conspirators who hold financial, symbolic or political supremacy together with evil intentions regarding the common good while, on the other side, there is an enlightened group of people who have discovered the mentioned evil plan and are fighting to defeat it (Barkun 2016: 1-2). At its centre we are dealing with plots including numerous hypotheses and possibilities very close to the potential–actual relationship (Zupančič 2022). Bratich (2008) defines conspiracy theory as "any narrative that accounts for an event by positing a collusion of agents who seek to determine the course of the event according to the agents' agenda, and at the expense of others' agendas. In addition, the collusion, the agenda, and/or the determination are shrouded in secrecy". Byford (2014: 90) puts it this way: Tales of conspiracy, the cause of disease or some other crisis are "marked with distinct thematic configuration, narrative structure and explanatory logic /…/ common motifs and tropes". Marjanić (2016) goes further and interprets these narratives with the help of urban legends, with the difference that conspiracy theories contain emphasised paranoid matrices, and here we may add non-folklore material, like fake news, misinterpreted scientific data, phony documents, false or decontextualized statements etc. By locating conspiracy theories next to urban legends, Marjanić also defines them as one of the folklore genres, reflecting social anxieties in a narrative form. A conspiracy theory refers to a perception and is the fear of a an alleged set of facts, while conspiracy itself refers to an act (Pipes 1997: 21).

In folkloristics generally, a conspiracy theory is a narrative circulating in society based on the folklore principle: often relayed through live communication, it has several variants, considers the questions of belief and believing in the narrative, and discusses the burning fears of society. The well-positioned location of conspiracy stories in the conceptual framework of society proves and reflects other folklore genres like rumours, which are often linked to conspiracy stories or even socially interpreted as them. Many rumours are also categorised in the media as a conspiracy theory, even though rumours are somewhat conceptually different. Rumours are claims made about reality (Donovan 2015: 13413), usually unofficial interesting stories or news items that may or may not, and spread quickly from person to person. Rumours are "usually brief and do not necessarily have a narrative element" (Mullen 1972: 96) and, unlike unwarranted, global conspiracy theories, rumours generally have no mythological structure and lack a narrative structure. Rumours about COVID-19 resonated in the media (during the COVID-19 pandemic they also appeared in official speech, being addressed as an 'infodemia', although historically they were spread by informal speech and the Internet or personal communication on a daily basis: they were negative (in Slovenia, they burst out in the spring of 2021). Yet, when it comes to the COVID-19 rumours, we cannot draw a parallel between them and urban legends as is often suggested (see Donovan 2015: 13413). In this case, the rumours lacked a narrative element, only clusters of rumours that could create a focal point (Mullen 1972: 96) and they changed within a short time, weekly or even daily. Rumours emerged and disappeared without any continuation. They emerged at new critical moments in the pandemic, either the rising death rate or the state's medical equipment purchases. Still, many of these rumours were built on existing conspiracy theories, or used as additional support for the conspiracy narrative, which explains why a deeper look at rumours makes sense – to establish the wider context and the connections among the conspiracy narratives.

Conspiracy theories also partly function as a mythological/demonological narrative (Marjanić 2016: 112): a great evil imprecisely defined (only seemingly realistic, but actually abstract) with the intent to harm people, use them, or cause a commotion. Many conspiracy theories are established on the apocalyptical tension: they describe the final battle between good and evil (QAnon, Antichrist CT), predict the end of humanity (Computer Called Beast, Chipping and Depopulation CT), announce the end of the world as we know it (different Techno Dystopian conspiracy theories) etc. While conspiracy theories can have a very complex storyline, the protagonists are always constructed through a two-dimensional perspective: good and evil. The visible division is between 'light' and 'dark' forces of the particular mythopoetics, with the dark forces being the results of secret actions by groups, organisations, countries or other entities that represent evil. These forces of evil are very diverse, from classical (Freemasons, Jews (Judocracy), satanists and illuminati), through to classes of the world's financial and political hierarchy (the rich, Bill Gates, George Soros, communists, cultural Marxists, Antifa) and extra-terrestrial beings (aliens, coming from a parallel universe or reptiles from another world). Unlike mythological narratives, conspiracy theories involve humans rather than gods and demigods (Marjanić 2016: 120), albeit some of our fieldwork records show

that even in conspiracy theories evil characters acquire a degree of 'divinity'. One informant mentioned that the powerful sinister characters have royal, otherworldly, even extra-terrestrial blood –they are not regular human beings but take something from a sinister, transcendent world: "they say these aren't people, they're a kind of mixture, but not people proper, that's why they go around doing these ultra-psychopathic things (like Satanism, paedophilia etc.) /…/ we cannot perceive everything that exists, we only see what's in our human visual spectrum, so we don't see these beings from the other realm /…/ all the members of royal bloodlines, the Rothschilds etc., they have their genetics, they take the bloodline from these other beings. They're bred together, so they have human characteristics and special ones, too, this is how they know so much and recognise one another /…/ they're intelligent but without any empathy, besides they're not creative. Humans are creative and these half-bloods exploit our inventiveness, so these families and beings can then use it for themselves" (interview with a male respondent, 38 years, Ljubljana, 18.12.2020).[2] We found another example of the same transcendental nature of the vaccinated in the Internet material: "I cannot believe it, I noticed the same thing, in Maribor, at the vaccination place, there was a similar 'person', although I am unsure if 'it' was male or female, it was extremely white, had icy-blue eyes, I don't know what's going on, but that vaccine must be some kind of a poison. Has anyone seen something similar?" (12.5.2020, Facebook comment).

The narrative time in a conspiracy theory is always the time of the narrating (as Degh (2001) also showed for urban legends), yet it is simultaneously always apocalyptically oriented to the future, the future advocates the "time of the final judgement" (Klepec 2016: 63), as is also present in myths. As Dyrendal, Robertson and Leiden (2018: 36) state: "The conspiracy mytheme is almost automatically linked with another element that is common to religious myth: that of the apokalypsis, or 'revelation' of secrets of the past, present, and future". Notably, the outcome of modern conspiracy theories is almost always bad or even damning (with no re-birth into a new life) since its fatalism expresses a strong apocalyptic paradigm. In today's Western world, the apocalypse is often transmitted and limited to the level of humanity and the material world rather than the level of ontological destruction as we may find, for example, in a myth or in the main institutional religions. If we do not perceive the world as a divine creation whereby an absolute creating entity has a plan for the eternal afterlife, then there is no place for eschatological optimism in the modern world. Conspiracy theories in some ways reflect this deficiency: instead of personalised evil in the face of Lucifer, we have the secret elite with a doomed plan; instead of the promise of an eternal kingdom, the emptiness of ecological disasters awaits us, or the dystopia of the world of cyborgs is foretold. Conspiracy theories are awaking the need for centralised Evil, which can be discovered, fought and destroyed. The mythological modelling of the conspiracy theory was already noticed by Lotman (1988), subsequently further discussed in the article by

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[2] It is noted that the interviewee received information about the "extra-terrestrial blood of royal families" on the Internet, generally by listening to online talks on the topic. The original author of the idea was not revealed, the interviewee simply confirmed that they believed this notion to be true.

Leone, Madisson and Ventsel (2020: 47). Lotman's view on mythological modelling is interpreted as the outcome of conditions of social stress and anxiety: "although the mythological modelling to the sacral order is characterised with transcultural meta-text, it is transformed into the perception of contemporary events, so that the interpreter can recognise the original forms of the meta-text, which has its source in cultural memory" (Leone, Madisson and Ventsel 2020: 47). The mythological modelling of contemporary conspiracy theories might not be as intense and clear as that in archaic communities, yet it still "organises a specific kind of meaning-making that perceives tragic events not as a succession of unfortunate coincidences, but as motivated by one and the same original cause: Evil" (Leone, Madisson and Ventsel 2020: 47).

We apply semiotics and its sign theory while trying to discern the meaning-making of conspiracy in these narratives. Conspiracy theories build meaning-making on the search for secret signs of conspiracy, and on demonstrating the significance of such signs; these sign-based models for mapping reality are usually simplified (Leone, Madisson and Ventsel 2020: 44). We can illustrate this simplified perspective of the almost random and provisional connection between signs with the help of the early responses to COVID-19 seen on social media. The TV series The Simpsons predicted COVID-19 in an episode where, in order to entertain humanity, a secret elite is plotting based on the evil plan of an imaginary cat-virus. Another example is that the first 5G tower was built in Wuhan, the city in which the outbreak started; this is where the 5G–COVID-19 connection started to arise. Conspiracy theory, i.e., a sign from a semiotic perspective, therefore explains a series of events as signifiers by positing a conspiracy as their cause, i.e., signified; that is, the events are seen as "the result of a group of people acting in secret to a nefarious end" (Birchall 2006: 216-217). A telling example of that is a very interesting argument used by conspiracy theorists when confronted with the fact their storyline is actually already known from other conspiracy theories, to which they respond: "Yes, smart people knew that this was coming, so they wanted to secretly warn us". This backward prediction lap or reinterpretation of old 'facts' in relation to the new context is very common in conspiracy theory storytelling. Mark Fenster also notes that a conspiracy theorist sees even trivial everyday events as signs of conspiracies and manipulation and that these function as "a form of hyperactive semiosis in which history and politics serve as a reservoir of signs that demand (over)interpretation and that signify, for the interpreter far more than their conventional meaning" across time (Fenster 2008: 95). The passion of producing a conspiracy theory is not only seen in conspiracies but also in creating the theory, "assembling or recognising the things to attest to it, interpreting and connecting the clues" (Zupančič 2022). Conspiracy theories focus on specific explanations within the appropriate ideological and cultural context (Byford 2014: 92), and give numerous hypotheses and possibilities (Zupančič 2022). In these contexts, they may be seen as a rational attempt to explain complex situations, a cognitive mapping that locates the 'culprit' and attempts to explain the situation (without radically thinking through the propositions) (Klepec 2016: 64).

Conspiracy theories find strong motivation in the belief that a certain truth exists, that someone knows this truth, and that this omniscient agent rules the world. The world is not random and chaotic, but shaped and overseen by the one agent or group that possesses greater knowledge (in the sinister, nefarious sense). To communicate these ideas, conspiracy theories rely on specific rhetoric to convey an aura of secrecy, create a symbolic elite, and reproduce the division between insiders and outsiders (Leone, Madisson, Ventsel 2020: 46) and aim to address the masses in addition to any mainstream rejections (Byford 2014: 92) so as to gain publicity and exposure. Desirable rhetoric is characterised by both metonymic logic (one that is close to the source of evil in order to be affected by it) and metaphoric logic (the more similar the objects are, the more they are perceived as connected) (M. Lotman 2009: 1239 cited in Leone, Madisson and Ventsel 2020: 45). On the first level, conspiracy theories are mostly paranoid (Bratich 2008: 3, Zupančič 2022) whereas the stated fundamental myth of conspiracy theories is not to be discussed: the discursive relationship of conspiracy theories is with "a regime of truth" (Foucault 1980), while manipulation and deceiving are prevalent in these discourses (Zupančič 2022). The worldview of people who follow conspiracy theories is based on knowledge and individual research which they gain through patience and dedication. Accordingly, they need to explain and convince other people of their truth so as to fascinate, cause fear and get attention in the storytelling context. As our fieldwork also showed, their knowledge collides with belief and thus labelling them as a conspiracy theorist seems offensive and aggressive. Here, talking about conspiracy theories is often transmitted to the level of belief and induces the problem of identity more than remaining on the level of constructive dialogue.

COVID-19 CONSPIRACY THEORIES IN SLOVENIA

The COVID-19 virus phenomenon shook the world in 2020. The official outbreak of the virus was located in China, allegedly due to inadequate hygiene measures at the "wet market". The highly contagious and for some even fatal virus spread very rapidly; the first positive coronavirus test in Slovenia was recorded on 5 March 2020. Before then, the virus seemed far away from people's minds, even though neighbouring Italy had already confirmed it had a COVID-19 epidemic. People did not perceive the virus as a particular threat, nor as something that would be conceptually labelled an enemy against which we must 'wage war' (while later, all media and political discourse surrounding the virus contained a conceptual war metaphor linked with the disease ("we are fighting the disease and defeat it by healing ourselves"): doctors and nurses are the "first lines of defence / in the trenches", we "fight" the virus in everyday life, we can win the "battle" against the virus with measures etc.). After an epidemic was announced in Slovenia, two diametrically opposed tendencies were present in the social sphere: the first being that COVID-19 was merely a flu, and the second that the apocalypse and final transformation of the world is heralded by the new disease. These two paradigms have stayed alive until today and have significantly marked the development of types and sub-types of COVID-19 conspiracy theories.

On 15 March 2020, the government began imposing epidemiological measures at various times mandating the wearing of masks, banning gatherings of people (except close family members), while closing schools, shops, museums, cultural institutions and libraries. As the strictness of the pandemic measures increased and the political crisis grew, so did scepticism regarding the virus and the institutions. The initial public reactions to the measures included discussions about perceived threats to democracy: the mask mandates, and organised movement or restrictions in public, closed spaces were seen as amounting to forced behaviour. Soon after the initial reactions, conspiracy theories grew in volume. These did not emerge in the Slovenian space per se, with the ones with the greatest momentum being global, heard across the world with possible minor adaptations (for example, describing Germany or even Italy as one of the antagonists, not China or the USA). Social networks were filled with conspiracy theory narratives and opinions about them, followed by media exposure – partly questioning whether there was any truth in these theories and partly trying to actively discredit the conspiracy claim.

The first conspiracy theories that immediately began circulating in Slovenia (and were heard in conversations cited in printed media and Facebook, as well as disseminated via email) were that: a) the virus came from a laboratory (it was brought to China by American soldiers, who are also responsible for its further spread); b) China created the virus in a lab and used it as a biological weapon; c) the USA created the virus to ruin the Chinese economy; d) the government wants to restrict human rights (dictatorship) and destroy small businesses; e) the virus was spread for (urgent) artificial selection: to reduce the number of old people; f) 5G radiation weakens the immune system, combined with the vaccine that contains surveillance chips the government will use to control humanity; and g) Bill Gates: chips for the vaccine will be made by Microsoft (recently developed tech to be used to exert general control over society).

In order to more systematically present the conspiracy theories and their variants circulating in Slovenia, we must consider seven different functions or clusters of motifs based on narrative agents. This division of characters based on their functions is first created based on the Internet material (Radomirović Maček 2021), although the subsequent fieldwork data confirmed its validity.

1. **Function of evil conspirators** – enemies of the people and the common good. Representatives of a 'dark order', who are following a secret plan. The evil conspirators, the central antagonist in conspiracy narratives that circle in Slovenia, are usually said to be the richest and most influential people; they cannot be detected by their name (except for some like Bill Gates, George Soros or the Rothschild family). The conspirators are more often referred to as secret groups of unknown (or mostly unknown) individuals, such as the Kaballah, the Illuminati, or members of the Deep State, and are plotting to enforce a single world government overpowering humanity. Slovenian versions of these conspiracy theories rarely mention specific nationalities, such as American, Chinese or German (even though it is noticeable that Germany appears as the negative, predator country in the Slovenian context); in most cases, the group of threatening Others is a hidden, shadow elite. Among them also we find: the

Freemasons, Jews, satanists, globalists, Babylon system, Big Pharma, elite and rich psychopaths and paedophiles, the Government, the Deep State, and Cultural Marxists. As noted, many of these are already known in conspiracy theories and storytelling. The choice of the evil conspirator points to the next function.

2. **Function of the plan against the common good**. Their goal is to: control, depopulate, profit, establish the techno-dystopia via chipping, cause a holocaust (or concentration camps) and faciliate genocide. It is implemented with the help of Helpers and Collaborators.

3. **Function of Helpers and Collaborators.** These vary and are found on different levels, from the MSM (mainstream media), the WHO, NGOs, war profiteers (mainly politicians) through to scientists, people who check PCT (abbreviation for prebolel, cepljen, testiran – the recovered, vaccinated, tested), bureaucrats, institutions and migrants. Helpers and collaborators are the first target of the enlightened agents. It is thus no surprise that the enlightened often express their dislike of the MSM in social networks and attempt to discredit them with accusations and silencing, like the following one published on Facebook: "I found the cure for corona virus: – Turn off the TV!".

Image 1: https://www.facebook.com/photo?fbid=2826295177626785&set=a.1387812728141711

Image 2: RTV (National television)! Your lies are killing people!

or one from the protests staged in front of Slovenian National Television building.

4. **Function of Saviour(s).** This function is shared between an individual and the group. They call themselves free people, "wolves", enlightened citizens of Slovenia, natural people (in contrast to the vaccinated who are artificial and in the possession of international pharmaceutical companies or the US government), fighters for freedom, and independent researchers.

5. **Function of Whistle-blowers**. Whistle-blowers make up a very important part of the narrative. It is they who have found out about the 'plandemic' and serve as proof of the conspiracy; namely, the heroes in the fight against the evil conspirators. Typically, they are widely celebrated because they need protection from powerful evil. They hold medical titles, or have worked in at vaccine companies, or at least have a medical education to decode the truth of the vaccine or virus: whether it exists or does not, as the case may be.

6. **Function of Traitors** – this is very closely connected to the collaborators and helpers. The difference lies in their ignorance, they are the 'sheeple' (sheep+people), '*ovce*', who are being manipulated. Sometimes they are referred to as being unenlightened, stupid, 'educated', the false elite or, simply, the vaccinated.

7. **Function As a Tool of Evil**: the primary tool is the vaccine, which may be described as: a DNA manipulator, a chip, genetic filth, poison, a brew, a genetic treatment, an annihilator with a third chain of the DNA material etc. Apart from the vaccine, the tools of Evil include: 5G, Chemtrails, PCR sticks for testing, and face masks.

This database of functions can make it easier to follow the conspiracy theories storyline, but might also be a good indicator of keywords for the online research methodology. As they are more motifs, we collect and divide them into functions to make it easier to track the most frequent variants of the conspiracy theories. For now, we can talk about four main types of COVID-19 conspiracy theories in Slovenia (Radomirović Maček 2021). These variants are divided into types by criteria in relation to the virus and appear in the following order:

1. **Type A: The virus is not dangerous**. This type of variant considers several narrational points: The virus is not as dangerous as it is presented, it is simply an excuse for social control; vaccines are the medicalisation of natural living and are unnecessary; traditional vaccines are fine, the problem is that MRna vaccines are experimental and not safe enough, rendering natural immunity the best choice. Pharmaceutical companies are in crisis due to the healthy lifestyle trend, and more people are doing sports and eating healthy food, forcing them to find other ways to make a profit. Vaccines are actually triggers for different diseases (chiefly cancer), meaning that in the future we will need to buy more medicine from these companies. This type of variant has a strong anti-capitalist background, while individualism, democracy and a healthy (bio, ecological etc.) lifestyle are openly promoted. They reference already known conspiracy theories like Big Pharma, Bill Gates, and the New World Order. In cyberspace and social networks, they emerge through individuals, organisations and webpages that promote bio food without supplements, organic products, sports and workouts, namely, a strong individualistic philosophy that everybody is able to control their own destiny and live as they wish. For example: "Hahaha, the globalists conduct and the government performs the repression. The point of corona is actually to take all the rights and freedoms away from us, like in the social credit system in China, to do away with printed money, and to vaccinate everyone en masse and change our genetic nature. Long story short, the New World Order is coming, people! The Babylon system is failing, and this is their last chance".

2. **Type 2: The virus doesn't exist**. This variant uses strong antivaccine propaganda. At the beginning, it referenced Andrew Wakefield and other known antivax activists. They go even deeper by saying that viruses do not actually exist, there is only a 'poison' from some kind of source (typically ricin, which is dispersed through chemtrails, testing sticks, masks or emitted with the help of 5G towers) that makes us sick with "COVID". They stand for common sense and folk wisdom by rejecting institutional knowledge and strongly confronting the MSM and scientific authorities. One Slovenian organisation that bases its anti COVID-19 activism on such narratives violently entered the studio of the national television broadcaster (RTV) demanding space to "tell their own truth" to the people. They claimed: "The Chinese virus does not exist, today we got the proof from an Australian university that no virus exists. Over 34 pages it is explained the truth of how the Rockefellers made huge business with viruses, and now they are conducting world depopulation, because they invented the solution – the chip-ccine (čipivo slov.: čip+cepivo=čipivo) for the problem of the 'virus'. This organisation has a strong Internet campaign. With their participation in the 'Wednesday' protests (against the COVID-19 measures), they continue to gain the public's attention in order to become a relevant political subject. These types of variants are easily connected with the Chemtrails conspiracy theories (CTs), the Diseases are Artificial CTs, with the Film Your Hospital movement and with many Antivax CTs. They refer to the values of freedom of choice and human rights.

3. **Type 3: The virus is an artificial bio-weapon or a genetic treatment**. The 'little man' in the storms of history is the chief protagonist of such narratives. The official worldview, media representations and everything that is learned in public schooling is simply a simulation masking the actual history that is going on. Dark forces are treating the governments and the media like puppets. They are using more symbolic and fantastic language than used in the discourse of the previous types: this is the era of the snake (poison, medical staff, evil force) and the needle (vaccine), the fighters of light must reveal the apocalypse occurring behind the scenes. The Third World War has already begun, with the children being the first to be attacked, so many stories about infertility, birth defects following vaccines, paedophile elites and hidden laboratories where evil conspirators experiment with vaccines and foetuses. For example: "It happened in Turkey! Hairy babies and babies with tails are born to vaccinated parents". Or, like in the next variant: "The Black swan, how things are going should be moving off the African continent towards Europe, and that force will shake us all, but the transfer of that force will be in the Alps. So, above Mount Triglav, pretty much here. I feel that from March and I warned you already. Now we are almost there". Besides the apocalyptic discourse, prophetic language frequently in use. Currently, there is a variant in Slovenia (tracked down from the Balkans[3]) in which the new virus is ready to arise: "(...) Actually, this is the next pandemic – the

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[3] In the Slovenian Internet space, variants of the Marburg virus are supported with shared material (video or quotes about conspiracy theories from influencers in other parts of the WB) in the Serbian or Croatian languages. For example, in variants which include ricin, the most commonly referenced influencer is the clinical psychologist Mila Alečković, known for her anti-COVID activism.

Marburg virus. Symptoms of this virus are very similar to the side effects of the vaccines (…). The plan of governments around the world is to cause panic once again by telling that the side effects are not side effects but the symptoms of Marburg, which is more contagious than corona (...), then they will get you to a PCR which is staged to be positive, so to call 'positive people', then they will say that everyone must take the vaccine against this Marburg, and this vaccine will have that thing, deadly thing, ricin in it. (...)". This type is very closely connected to the QAnon, antisemitic and racist CTs and the Deep State CT, while it is observed that their storytellers are found on the far-right end of the political spectrum which they often show, among others, via affection for former US president Trump or for anti-migration propaganda. On the other hand, the vaccine in such conspiracy theories is a tool for decreasing fertility. It was often heard in the conversations that parents do not wish to vaccinate their children, which they explained by not knowing what the vaccine might do to a young person; it might destroy their health or even cause infertility.[4] The last infertility argument was mostly heard from the parents of daughters. This argument typically continued with the expressed fear their daughters would be unable to have children and create their own family.

4. **The virus is an nanotechnology asset**. The point of vaccination is to insert chips into human bodies and achieve a techno-dystopian world. The human body will become technologised, leading to a new era of cyborgs. The syndrome of magnetic arms or mysterious magnetic fields around the body following vaccination is well known in these kinds of narratives. The goal of the evil conspirators is to destroy human society with digital control where the hybrid human is privately owned by multinational digital corporations. Anxiety regarding the idea of the anti-nature element of the human body is the main preoccupation of the storytellers, such as the values of a pure and natural human. This type commonly refers to CTs such as a Computer Called Beast, the QR or Bar Codes, HAARP, and includes the links between 5G and COVID-19[5]. The core idea is that the Antichrist will arise in the digital space, where the signs are devious and have no meaningful background. Avatars without a voice or body dominate in this demonic ecosystem of cyberspace , they appear to have chthonic smiling faces without a soul and tangible past. In this 'simularium', everything can be manipulated, retouched and falsified. As in the examples: I1: "Has anyone noticed how the vaccinated have lately started to behave aggressively? More people have confirmed this, I also noticed it." I2: "Me too, aggressive and bitter. David Icke told to be aware this autumn and to observe the behaviour of the vaccinated. Something in their consciousness will change. Nanotechnology will start to work. "Or the following example: "The USA decided that everyone vaccinated in the world is their property because they are patented by their law, and are not humans anymore. With modified

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[4] The conspiracy theory about infertility somewhat follows the earlier conspiracy theory about HPV virus vaccination, which in 2009 was added to the compulsory vaccinations for girls.

[5] These similarities reflect different narrative elements: motifs (chip, poisoning from the air, ricin etc), tropes (digital control, cyborgs, surveillance systems, weather control) and storylines, such as exemplified in the 2020–2021 Radomirović Maček research.

> DNA or RNA GEN vaccination, you are the property of the ones who patented this genetically modified vaccine (...). They are not people anymore but trans-people so their human rights are lost".

We must be aware that these types represent ideal variants. The situation in the field is much more complex since many motifs and narrative fragments are fluid and easily attached to various spectra of motifs. An example of the intertwining of different types is seen in the next example: The evil conspirators are supposed to also interfere in our daily habits, trying to enforce a sterile, anti-social environment and thereby weaken the immune system.[6] In one interview (male, 1957, August 2021), the question of why the interviewee thinks there is a chip in the vaccine was responded to with a set of his own questions: "Why wouldn't there be a chip? Why would they try so much to vaccinate all of these people all around the world? It is obvious!! They want to control us!". Concerning the question of who is trying to control us and why, the answer was "I don't know who, they, who can afford it. And it is always about money". All of these quite soon coalesced to form a major conspiracy theory arc, further reaffirming that not only do the conspiracy theories "sound remarkably alike" (Byford 2014: 90), but even have 'travelling motifs' transmitted from one narrative to another, they emerge and are re-argued. However, these travelling motifs are not the subject of this paper.

After the vaccinations against COVID-19 were approved, the conspiracy theory very soon emerged that the hidden elite is trying to gain control of the population through the vaccination plan. The vaccination contains technology transmitting information about each person, the 'chip': it will transmit activities, habits, even physiological processes like heartbeat, metabolism etc.

Consequently, an interdisciplinary study about online CT during the COVID-19 crisis (Shahvasari, Thangerlini, et al., 2020) shows that individuals are not really aware of the whole narrative of the conspiracy theories. In the storytelling process they decide which part is the most convenient to talk about. As mentioned, like many folklore narratives conspiracy theories have an open structure, they have the structure of a network, which is very easily spread with new narrative fragments. One might argue that this web-like characteristic explains the huge success on the Internet, which similarly has a web structure.

BEHIND THE CONSPIRACY: UNDERSTANDING SOCIAL TENSIONS AND FEARS

Conspiracy theories thrive on the fear and confusion that accompany contemporary socio-cultural upheavals. Both Bauman and Castells argue that fear has become one of the most effective mobilising emotions in modern society (Bauman 2006; Castells 2009), and the media-fuelled proliferation of irrational fears is a powerful force undermining the ability to critically assess the social world (Leone, Madisson, Ventsel 2020: 45).

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[6] This conspiracy memeplex was also disclosed in an interview in a more or less similar variant.

The process of fear is also semiotic: "The temporal distance between the immediate experience of the fear object and the interpretation of the same allows for an intensification of meaning-making processes. Conspiracy theories are central epiphenomena of this kind of meaning-making in the context of an atmosphere of anxiety" (M. Lotman 2009: 210 cited in Leone, Madisson, Ventsel 2020: 45). Potential referents for conspiracy theories are usually therefore individuals who fear explicit phenomena in the culture, typically based on cultural memory. Zupančič (2021) links conspiracy theories with Lacanian comments on jealousy and the pathological factor with it; still, Zupančič also stresses that with conspiracy theories it is never the individual pathology but the social pathology that is registered. This collective aspect is crucial not only because it can be discussed from the folkloristic perspective, as the engine of storytelling, but can also be a clue for the functional analysis of modern conspiracy theories.

Like all conspiracy theories, this COVID-19 conspiracy narrative builds on fear and confusion: fear of losing one's health or even life and that of one's relatives, friends due to a deadly disease, fear of excessive control, of surveillance, digitalisation, fear that some external agent controls more of our lives than we do. The language of fear concerns disease, death, totalitarian social control and uses certain elements of reality interpreted as fearful omens and warning signs: "When two things are similar, one is a sign of the other and vice versa" (Eco 1990: 164). People start to intentionally draw connections and similarities between two phenomena, sometimes tentatively, often simply to enable a connection which might present itself as a fearful omen, even when connections are not evident. The similarities are supported by explanatory narratives, typically exaggerated and over-emphasised, all with a view to show the threat of the phenomenon. These signs connect and the connections are upgraded with new signs, and once again with new signs – this is how the chain of conspiracy-based narratives then expands the content and support the fear of technology and control: 5G is radiation yet also technology that will control humans via chips inserted through vaccination. The already existing connection between HAARP (high-tech technology system) and ricin coming from the chemtrails is hence easily amalgamated with previous ones. Signs like the Internet network, disease, chip, and control taken separately by its purpose and source do not have any connection, yet the narratives link them and even add some natural phenomena as fearful omen, such as the position of the clouds in the sky or the direction of the wind.

Different narratives often show society's tendency to polarise the phenomena into the ontological 'good' and 'bad', and conspiracy theories on every level go even further in this polarised logic: an antithetical opposition between 'us' and 'them', brightness–darkness, nationalism–cosmopolitanism, prosperity of culture–cultural disaster, honesty–corruption etc. (Ventsel 2016: 315-325), and the demonised alien and/or distant Other is usually characterised as paranoia towards the human institutions of modern society itself (Auspers 2012: 24). The distant, threatening Other is transformed into a mythological beast (as described at the start of this article) that seems to be invincible (albeit some conspiracy theorists fight it with disclosures and persuasion).

Confusion in the conspiracy theories about COVID-19 is not only seen in the narrative, where the emphasised misleading of the population creates the basis of fear, but is

also noticeable in the functioning of the Slovenian medical profession, the government, and the public. Confusing information about the virus and the corrupt dealings in Slovenia that accompanied the respond to it and created a perfect storm for doubt and mistrust, providing an ideal environment for conspiracy stories to flourish.

All four main characteristics of conspiracy theory: fear, confusion, doubt and mistrust are observable in the COVID-19 conspiracy narrative and were felt by the general public. Therefore, even trivial everyday events

Image 3

soon became seen as signs of manipulation by conspiratorial forces, such as mandatory medical face masks that have come to embody coerced behaviour.

[Conspiracy theories do not exist, only conspiracies exist. The corona virus is a conspiracy with which the (hidden) leaders wish to justify the upcoming worst economic crisis, they want to scare people and redirect their focus elsewhere. National governments are gladly using it and cooperating with the media in this effort. They are scaring people with fascist measurements, restricting movement with the intention of creating a herd of sheep that they can take whatever they want from! From money to dignity!]

ESCAPING THE CONSPIRACY: TOWARDS HUMOUR AND PARODY[7]

Conspiracy theories reflect society and its fears. Still, humour also reflects well-positioned phenomena in society: when a phenomenon is well-known and well-positioned, another of the possible reactions is a humorous response, in this case to being fearful and the exaggerated claims. Putting these narratives into humorous form makes them lose authority: the exaggeration becomes so over-emphasised that it trivialises the fear of a greater danger posed by 'evil'; their mythological nature is negated by comedy. However, humour usually points to the topic's importance: conspiracy theories are obviously increasingly present in society, and are being taken seriously, given that the humorous
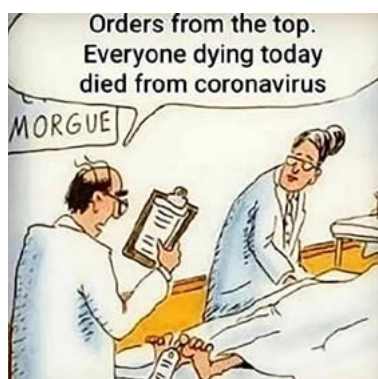

Image 4: Instagram page Koronazlom, 27.2.2020

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[7] For more, see Mencej Mirjam (2022).

Image 5: [Aha! The corona virus is targeting men! A conspiracy of the new world order so that all rich men can have all the women for themselves]

form cannot function if the semantic referent is not understood widely. This means that while we can say that conspiracy stories are nevertheless narratives of a disaster, just the opposite, humour proves its importance in the contemporary narrating situation.

CONCLUSION

Pandemics, including COVID-19, are some of the biggest crises affecting humankind. Diseases in themselves bring a fear of physical and mental suffering, of losing one's loved ones. As such, they are a sign of suffering and represent evil on the very foundational level of ontology. It seems that the individual must often justify their suffering cognitively and therefore place the responsibility on the numinous Other: on either the mythological God (who wants to punish society) or the demonised group of governing people (who wish to exploit society).

This diabolical group of people and entities in conspiracy narratives is a cabal of rich, influential and mysterious, albeit hidden individuals. With the help of collaborators, Evil distributes its tools (virus, vaccine, chip-ccine) in order to subordinate, destroy and control humankind. Just like we have a need to understand and define Evil, we have an aim to have or be a hero in the final transformation. Luckily, the enlightened individuals, with the help of whistle-blowers, do whatever it takes to reveal the decentralised Evil, to fight against its minions, and bring the light of knowledge to the sinful and deceived. These and similar mythological structures have followed humanity throughout the cultural history of any civilisation. Conspiracy theories are not the fantasies of foolish people, far from it, they are logical response to times of crisis and disappointment. Their characters are based on our postmodern reality. In a world without gods, promises of the afterlife, and cruel economic inequality, the suffering of the little man is even stronger and more visible than ever before due to the possibility of having insight into every corner of this globalised world with the help of the Internet. Feelings of fear, insignificance, marginalisation and anger regarding the deafness of others make conspiracy theories possible, in turn awakening the known mythological patterns.

People use conspiracy stories to make the world manageable and understandable. By wanting to map and control the world, storytellers exhibit a tendency to demand an answer to everything. The control is supposed to ease the collective fear and confusion caused by the disease and the upcoming control by a hidden elite; both disease and control (including the fearful control of the hidden elite as well as to gain control over the situation) are signs connoting fear, terror, apprehension, 'the wrong way for humanity

to evolve'. All of these identifications are utilised as the language of fear also within the conspiracy theory on COVID-19: the fear that our lives and future will be destroyed, the fear we will lose our freedom, that someone else will take charge of our lives. Namely, scepticism and disbelief are the starting point of the conspiracy theory, even though subsequent conspiracy theories in further give another, truer explanation, which seems to be the one single truth (Zupančič 2022). In the process, the scepticism and distrust are replaced with the explanation given by the conspiracy theory. On the other hand, turning these conspiracy theory narratives into a humorous form makes them lose their authority: the fear and danger are trivialised, their mythological nature is negated with comedy. Moreover, transforming them into a humorous form shows that conspiracy theories are narratives that are well established in our day-to-day discourse and experiences. After all, these conspiracy theory narratives can fuel the engine of storytelling and also be a clue for the functional analysis not only of modern conspiracy theories but of society and related humour as well.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Slovenia has been overloaded with various suspicions: some turned out to be factual wrongdoings, some remained on the level of rumours, and others were altered or added to conspiracy theories. Considering that the pandemic is not yet over, people will spread new rumours, and conspiracy theories will evolve and be added to the mythology arc, while their basis of fear, confusion, doubt and mistrust will remain. Likewise, public interest in conspiracy theories will continue: identifying a culprit for the social anxiety, providing an explanation – these are intra-social narratives that are passed on in daily communication.

The seriousness of people understanding and acknowledging conspiracy theories is also evident in the adjacent use of popular humour: memes and jokes about conspiracy themes prove that people pay some regard to the narratives, as it is only in this way that the comedic referent can be widely understood. Likewise, among some segments of the population, the mythopoetic narrative of a 'great evil at work' continues to drown out science, thereby fanning the flames of fear and doubt.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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TEORIJE ZAROTE O COVID-19 V SLOVENIJI

Kristina Radomirović Maček, Saša Babič

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Teorije zarote so znan pojav še iz starorimskih časov (npr. obtožba Judov za epidemijo kuge) in so spremljevalni pojav vseh družbenih kriz in sprememb. V Sloveniji so večjo odmevnost doživele v času pandemije COVID-19 (2020–2022), kjer so na podlagi starejših teorij zarote, njihovimi združevanji, dodajanjem novih narativnih elementov izoblikovale nove, vendar so te povezane s starejšimi zgodbami. Članek obravnava teorije zarote kot zgodbe, ki jih uporabniki prenašajo tako ustno kot prek medijev (in se ne sprašuje po njihovi resničnosti). Raziskava je temeljila tako na kvantitativnem (več kot 1000 enot) kot kvalitativnem analitičnem pristopu; zgodbe so bile zbrane tako s terenskim delom kot prek medijev in spleta v času pandemije.

Pandemije, vključno s COVID-19, spadajo med največje družbene krize. Bolezni same po sebi prinašajo strah pred fizičnim in duševnim trpljenjem, pred izgubo bližnjih. Zato so znak trpljenja in predstavljajo zlo na temeljni ravni ontologije. Zdi se, da mora posameznik velikokrat spoznavno opravičevati svoje trpljenje in zato odgovornost prelagati na numinoznega Drugega: bodisi na mitološkega boga (ki želi kaznovati družbo) bodisi na demonizirano skupino vladajočih ljudi (ki želijo izkoriščati družbo).

Ta diabolična skupina ljudi in entitet v pripovedih o zaroti je krog bogatih, vplivnih, čeprav skritih posameznikov. Zlobneži s pomočjo sodelavcev distribuirajo svoja orodja (virus, cepivo, »čipivo«) za podrejanje, uničenje in nadzor človeštva.

Tako kot moramo razumeti in definirati zlo, pa se v teh zgodbah kaže tudi cilj biti junak v končni preobrazbi: razsvetljeni posamezniki s pomočjo žvižgačev naredijo vse, kar je v njihovi moči, da razkrijejo decentralizirano Zlo, da se borijo proti njegovim privržencem in prinesejo luč spoznanja grešnim in zavedenim. Te in podobne mitološke strukture so sledile človeštvu skozi celotno kulturno zgodovino katerekoli civilizacije. Teorije zarote niso domislice neumnih ljudi, daleč od tega, so logičen odziv na čase krize in razočaranja, vpogleda v vsak kotiček tega globaliziranega sveta s pomočjo svetovnega spleta. Občutki strahu, nepomembnosti, marginalizacije in jeze zaradi gluhosti drugih omogočajo teorije zarote, posledično pa prebujajo znane mitološke vzorce.

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