

Weaponized Conspiracy Theories: A New Method for Strategic Communicators to Analyze Conspiracy Theories in the Service of Malign Actors

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Introduction

Conspiracy theories are known to cause serious social problems, like the radicalization of otherwise normal people into extremists, that demand the attention of government officials¹ The old myth that only psychologically maladjusted people believe in conspiracy theories is not supported by scientific research. It is entirely plausible that most people are psychologically vulnerable to adopting conspiracy beliefs under the right circumstances.² Research shows that a majority of people in the US share some degree of

¹ Arie, Kruglanski, Michele J Gelfand, Jocelyn J Bélanger, Anna Sheveland, Malkanthi Hetiarachchi, and Rohan Gunaratna, "The Psychology of Radicalization and Deradicalization: How Significance Quest Impacts Violent Extremism," *Political Psychology* 35, no. S1 (2014): pp. 69–93.

² Jim. Kline, "C. G. Jung and Norman Cohn Explain Pizzagate: The Archetypal Dimension of a Conspiracy Theory," *Psychological Perspectives* 60, no.2 (2017): pp. 186–195.

conspiracy belief.³ Disturbing recent research shows that belief in conspiracy theories is on a rapid rise given that young people accept social media postings, where conspiracy beliefs are prevalent, as legitimate news,⁴ Therefore, conspiracy theories have enormous and dangerous potential especially if they are used as an information weapon.

In the early 1980s, the Soviet Union manufactured a conspiracy theory that HIV was invented by the US Army at Fort Dietrich, and they fabricated evidence to support it. It was accepted and disseminated somewhat uncritically by the global mainstream media. One of the project's objectives was to convince African Americans that HIV was created to kill them off. The overall goal was to intensify racial tensions both within the US and cause tension between the US and the populations of certain foreign nations.⁵ This Soviet operation was very effective. In 2005, a study by the RAND Corporation and Oregon State University revealed that nearly 50 percent of African Americans thought AIDS was man-made, over 25 percent believed AIDS was a product of a government laboratory, 12 percent believed it was created and spread by the CIA, and 15 percent believed that AIDS was a form of genocide against black people.⁶ Conspiracy theories can be a very effective information weapon. Clearly, strategic communication practitioners need to pay closer attention to understanding and mitigating conspiracy theories.

Despite the obvious importance of understanding and grappling with conspiracy theories, there is a lack of clear consensus in the scientific literature on exactly what constitutes a conspiracy theory. Some scholars claim that conspiracy theories are simply beyond the capability of scholarly analysis. Furthermore, conspiracy theories can sometimes be difficult to differentiate from propaganda, since they both often operate in similar contexts; even scholars have trouble separating the two.⁷ For instance, Russia

³ . Eric, Oliver, J. and Thomas J Wood, "Conspiracy Theories and the Paranoid Style(s) of Mass Opinion," *American Journal of Political Science* 58, no. 4 (2014): pp. 952–966.

⁴ Bantimaroudis, Philemon, Maria Sideri, Dimitris Ballas, Theodore Panagiotidis, and Thanasis Ziogas, "Conspiracism on social media: An agenda melding of group-mediated deceptions," *International Journal of Media & Cultural Politics* 16, no. 2 (2020): pp. 115–138.

⁵ Tom, Boghardt, "Soviet Intelligence and its AIDS disinformation campaign," *Studies in Intelligence* 53, no. 4 (2009):1-p. 24.

⁶ Laura Bogart, and Sheryl Thorburn, "Are HIV/AIDS Conspiracy Beliefs a Barrier to HIV Prevention Among African Americans?" *Journal of Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome* 38, no. 2 (2005): pp. 213-218.

⁷ Zuzana Panczová, "Conspiracy Theories and Rumours as Key Elements of Political Propaganda: The Cold War in the USA and Czechoslovakia in the 1950s," *Forum Historiae* 15, no.2 (2021): pp. 25–37.

claims that weapons and equipment provided to defend Ukraine are meant to defeat the special operation, but they will ultimately fail. However, the intention of weapons shipments is to destroy Russia as a race and civilization.⁸ Is this propaganda or a conspiracy theory?

Both conspiracy theories and propaganda are aspects of related but different communication phenomena, created in separate ways with unique effects on the target audience. One of the most basic definitions for conspiracy theories is that they are explanatory beliefs about a group of actors colluding in secret to reach goals malevolent to society.⁹ The semi-coherent crazy ramblings of a mentally ill person about malevolent actors do not inherently make them a conspiracy theory. For instance, research shows that conspiracy theories have relatively coherent story structures.¹⁰ The best definition for propaganda is that it is a deliberate, systematic effort to create perceptions, control cognitions, and orchestrate behaviour to achieve a strategic response intended by the propagandist.¹¹ To explain the difference, a number of conspiracy theories have been created by paranoid people with no strategic goal in mind.¹² Alternatively, they can be planned operations conducted by a nation-state to achieve a specific goal.¹³ Propaganda on the other hand is always a form of strategic communication.¹⁴ Each likely requires a separate type of strategic communication response strategy. Strategic communicators must first determine what is and is not a conspiracy theory, and then if the theory is strategic communication or not. But first, strategic communicators need a precise method to assess a potential conspiracy theory.

⁸ Olga Sukharevskaya, "How the West has long planned to use Ukraine to fight a proxy war with Russia." *Russia Today* 16 February 2023, accessed 16 February 2023, <https://www.rt.com/russia/571578-how-west-sponsors-killing-of-people/>

⁹ Jeffrey M. Bale, "Political Paranoia V. Political Realism: On Distinguishing Between Bogus Conspiracy Theories and Genuine Conspiratorial Politics," *Patterns of prejudice* 41, no. 1 (2007): pp. 45–60.

¹⁰ Mathieu Alemany, "Navigating Between the Plots: A Narratological and Ethical Analysis of Business-Related Conspiracy Theories (BrCTs)," *Journal of Business Ethics* 175, no. 2 (2022): pp. 265–88.

¹¹ Garth Jowett, and Victoria O'Donnell, V. *Propaganda and persuasion* (5th Ed.), (Los Angeles, CA: Sage, 2015).

¹² Robert Sunstein, Cass and Cornelius Adrian Vermeule, "Conspiracy Theories: Causes and Cures," *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 17, no. 2 (2009): pp. 202–227.

¹³ Ilya Yablokav, "Conspiracy Theories as a Russian Public Diplomacy Tool: The Case of Russia Today," *Politics* 35, no. 4 (2015): pp. 301–15.

¹⁴ Douglas Wilbur, "Propaganda's Place in Strategic Communication: The Case of ISIL's Dabiq Magazine" *International Journal Of Strategic Communication* 11, no. 3 (2017): pp. 209-223.

A potential method of determining what is and is not a conspiracy theory has emerged through evolutionary psychology, by examining how people cognitively process conspiracy theories. The purpose of this paper is to examine one such theory, the existential threat model of conspiracy theories.¹⁵ To effectively test its efficacy we need to use a source that is known for presenting both conspiracy theories and normal propaganda to determine if the existential threat model can successfully decipher between them. Thereby, this would leave the chance that some of the material would not fully constitute a conspiracy theory. It was also desirable to identify a new source, not previously analyzed by scholarly literature. We chose the website *Global Research*: <https://www.globalresearch.ca>. It was founded in 2001 by an economics professor Michel Chossudovsky. Research by the US State Department found that *Global Research* was spreading Russian propaganda.¹⁶ Chossudovsky openly promotes various conspiracy theories and even wrote a book called *America's "War on Terrorism,"* which claimed that the 9-11 terror attacks were staged by the US Government for the economic benefit of global corporations,¹⁷ Thus, *Global Research* potentially provides an excellent sample for this study.

Conspiracy Theories

A major problem with countering conspiracy theories is that people do conspire in real life. In 2013, the Wall Street firms, Goldman Sachs, JPMorgan Chase & Co. and Glencoe Xstrata conspired to inflate the price of aluminum by creating artificial shortages. This reaped enormous profits while costing the American consumer an estimated \$5 billion they should not have had to pay.¹⁸ Thus, conspiracy theories are inherently difficult to challenge because they are rooted in actual human behaviour. You cannot

¹⁵ Jan Willem van Prooijen, and Mark van Vugt, "Conspiracy Theories: Evolved Functions and Psychological Mechanisms," *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 13, no. 6 (2018): pp. 770–788.

¹⁶ Jullian Barnes, "State Dept. Traces Russian Disinformation Links," *The New York Times*, (20 August 2020), <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/05/us/politics/state-department-russian-disinformation.html>.

¹⁷ Phil Edwards, "The 8 craziest conspiracy theories on Osama bin Laden's bookshelf," *VOX*, 20 May 2015, accessed 16 February 2023, <https://www.vox.com/2015/5/20/8631295/osama-bin-laden-bookshelf-conspiracy-theories>.

¹⁸ David Kocieniewski, "A shuffle of Aluminum, but to banks, pure gold," *The New York Times*, 20 July 2013, accessed 16 February 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/21/business/a-shuffle-of-aluminum-but-to-banks-pure-gold.html>

simply dismiss them as all being fantasy and expect people to accept your claims. In societies where corruption is pervasive, it is natural for them to form conspiracy theories since there is an increased probability that government officials, businessmen and other influential people are in fact conspiring for malevolent purposes,¹⁹ Despite the common perception that conspiracy theory is a derogatory word, research shows that labelling something as a conspiracy theory does not reduce a person's likelihood of believing in it. It could be due to people suspecting that actual political intrigue does exist.²⁰ Thus, conspiracy theories could contain elements of truth. This fact also lends credence to the notion that conspiracy beliefs are a pervasive part of the human condition.

While much of the research on conspiracy theories is conducted in the Western world, international polling reveals that belief in conspiracy theories is a global phenomenon. Very prominent theories, like the faked moon landing, are accepted almost everywhere.²¹ Their power is that they can spread like a contagious virus. New communication technologies, like social media, have greatly enhanced this power. For instance, there is a significant prevalence of fake news on social media, which is exacerbating the problem of conspiracy beliefs since fake news often contains conspiracy beliefs. Audiences of this fake news accept it as real news.²²

Complicating the problem is malevolent actors with sophisticated resources, like Russia and the Islamic State terrorist group, use Bots to spread conspiracies online. Bots are automated accounts designed to post prescribed information, often in collaboration with other bots, to promote certain hashtags, news sources, or storylines.²³ Bots have worked well because the theories they spread can be read and endorsed by average people. A recent study surveying people who spread conspiracy theories on social media found that most of these individuals do it mainly because they are convinced the message

¹⁹ Mathew Dentith, "Debunking Conspiracy Theories," *Synthese*, 198 no. 10. 2021: pp.9897-9911.

²⁰ Michael Wood, "Some Dare Call It Conspiracy: Labeling Something a Conspiracy Theory Does Not Reduce Belief in It," *Political Psychology* 37, no. 5 (2016): pp. 695–705.

²¹ Kirk, Ivan, "What conspiracy theories did people around the world believe in 2021?" *YouGov*, 8 February 2022, accessed 16 February 2023, <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/international/articles-reports/2022/02/08/what-conspiracy-theories-did-people-around-world-b>.

²² S. J. Roozenbeek van der Linden, and C. Panagopoulos, "You Are Fake News: Political Bias in Perceptions of Fake News," *Media, Culture and Society* 42 no. 3 (2020): pp. 460-470.

²³ Prier, Jarred. "Commanding the Trend : Social Media as Information Warfare," *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 11 no. 4 2017: pp. 50–85.

is true. Only a few participants who rated high for narcissism or psychopathy spread theories due to anti-social motivations. This means that emotionally healthy well-meaning people can be induced to spread socially dangerous information.²⁴

Other factors like social media influencers, who have high status with many followers a factor in spreading conspiracy theories. For instance, well-known conspiracist Alex Jones has millions of followers to whom he disseminates conspiracies. These people then spread these theories to others.²⁵ Even more dangerous is that social media users following people like Alex Jones tend to form closed online communities called echo chambers. Here people are selectively exposed to and acquire information they agree with. They filter out information they don't agree with and create with peers a shared narrative. Echo chambers can serve as a mechanism to reinforce existing opinions while moving the entire group toward more extreme positions.²⁶

The COVID-19 pandemic has made the problem of online dissemination of conspiracy theories exponentially worse. Conspiracy theories about the pandemic were shown to be extremely viral, even though only a few of the many of the involved Twitter accounts were shared and liked. These COVID conspiracy theories were still viral despite many other users who attempted to discredit them by linking Tweets to factual government sources or mainstream media reports.²⁷ This phenomenon may be caused by a unique feature of conspiracy theories whereby many theories assert that the mainstream media is actually a part of the conspiracy. This serves to de-legitimize the

²⁴ Sophie Morosoli, Peter Van Aelst, and Patrick van Erkel, "To Convince, to Provoke or to Entertain? A Study on Individual Motivations behind Engaging with Conspiracy Theories Online," *Convergence* 28 no. 4 2022: 1030-1059.

²⁵ H, A Hyzen Van den Bulck, Terry Flew, and Petros Iosifidis, "Of Lizards and Ideological Entrepreneurs: Alex Jones and Infowars in the Relationship between Populist Nationalism and the Post-Global Media Ecology," *International Communication Gazette* 82 no. 1 (2020): pp. 42-59.

²⁶ Matteo Cinelli, Gabriele Etta, Michele Avalle, Alessandro Quattrocioni, Niccolò Di Marco, Carlo Valensise, Alessandro Galeazzi, and Walter Quattrocioni, "Conspiracy Theories and Social Media Platforms," *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 47 no. 101407 (2022): pp. 1-5.

²⁷Guillermo Villar-Rodríguez, and Monica Souto-Rico, "Virality, Only the Tip of the Iceberg: Ways of Spread and Interaction around COVID-19 Misinformation in Twitter," *Communication and Society* 35 no. 2 2022: pp. 239-256.

mainstream news media while rendering them ineffective at combating these theories.²⁸ Another COVID-19 conspiracy theory research study found that conspiracy theories are reinforced in online communities that develop social norms. These can translate conspiracy beliefs into real-world action, such as resistance to vaccination. These real-world exchanges are then disseminated on social media, further reinforcing, and amplifying them as the cycle continues. Thus, dangerous conspiracy theories don't just stay online, they cause actual behaviour, in the real world.²⁹ Given this literature, it is obvious that social media enables the dissemination and belief in conspiracy theories for a significant number of people. It also presents an ideal platform for malevolent actors to cause a host of harmful consequences within a targeted society in a manner that benefits the conspiracy theorist. But the question remains, what exactly constitutes a conspiracy theory?

The Existential Threat Model

The existential threat model assumes that conspiracy thinking is natural to all humans as it is an evolutionary mechanism to defend against very real threats. An existential threat is the experiencing of a threat to existence that could potentially destroy the individual or group. It is usually caused by some menacing outgroup, like the Jews or the financial elites, but can also involve others within the group. It holds that conspiracy theories are most likely to occur after some distressing event.³⁰ Therefore, the presence of an antagonistic outgroup, whether it's aliens or the Illuminati, is required. Not everyone who experiences an existential threat, however, will develop conspiracy beliefs³¹.

According to the existential threat model, conspiracy theories have five essential components. The first is that a conspiracy theory will always involve the recognition of a

²⁸ Michael Hameleers, "They Are Selling Themselves out to the Enemy! The Content and Effects of Populist Conspiracy Theories." *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* 33 no. 1 (2021): pp. 38-56-56.

²⁹ J. Dow, Benjamin Amber L. Johnson, Cynthia S. Wang, Jennifer Whitson, and Tanya Menon, "The COVID-19 Pandemic and the Search for Structure: Social Media and Conspiracy Theories," *Social & Personality Psychology Compass* 15 no. 9 (2021): pp. 1-22.

³⁰ Jan-Willem van Prooijen, "An Existential Threat Model of Conspiracy Theories," *European Psychologist* 25, no. 1 (2020): pp. 16-25.

³¹ Ibid

pattern explaining how people and events are causally connected. Pattern recognition is a function of human learning that has helped the human species to survive.³² The brain is hardwired to look for existing patterns in nature, such as every time a person eats a green berry, they get sick. However, humans are keen to detect patterns even when a causal relationship doesn't exist, such as in astrology.³³ Thus, conspiracy theories need a pattern of events or relationships that appear to be casual in nature, whether the connection is real or not.

The second component of conspiracy theories is the detection of agency, which is our evolved capability to identify the intentions and motives behind others' actions³⁴. Agency detection allowed our ancestors to understand and differentiate between benevolent and hostile motivations for others' actions. This facilitated empathy for others within a person's tribe, which was needed for cooperation and survival. People's agency detection capabilities can also be hyperactive, detecting agency where none exists. Additionally, people often overestimate the agency of others, ascribing more than what actually exists, such as the magnification of evil intentions.³⁵ Consequently, any conspiracy theory must assign agency to someone for conspiratorial actions. These actors must have specific motivations and intentions.

The third element is the presence of a threat to the believer of the conspiracy.³⁶ Humans have an in-built need to seek preservation and survival, and the ability to detect threats is essential. Indeed, humans have a threat management system with two subsystems. The first of these sub-systems is the disease-avoidance system to avoid contact with dangerous pathogens. The next subsystem is the self-protection system, which quickly recognizes and anticipates direct threats to one's physical body.³⁷ Humans tend to see outgroups like other tribes or nations as self-protection threats. For instance,

³² , Jan Willem van Prooijen and Mark van Vugt. "Conspiracy Theories: Evolved Functions and Psychological Mechanisms," *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 13, no. 6 (2018): pp. 770–788.

³³ Jennifer A. Whitson, and Adam D. Galinsky. "Lacking Control Increases Illusory Pattern Perception," *Science* 322, no. 5898 (2008): pp. 115–17.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Karen M. Douglas, Robbie M. Sutton, Mitchell J. Callan, Rael J. Dawtry, and Annelie J. Harvey, "Someone Is Pulling the Strings: Hypersensitive Agency Detection and Belief in Conspiracy Theories," *Thinking & Reasoning* 22, no. 1 (2016): pp. 57–77.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Steven L Neuberg, Douglas T. Kenrick, and Mark Schaller, "Human Threat Management Systems: Self-Protection and Disease Avoidance," *Neuroscience and Biobehavioral Reviews* 35, no. 4 (2011): pp. 1042–51.

one study of Chinese people found considerable belief in conspiracy theories that the United States created the Coronavirus.³⁸ Thus, the conspiracy theory must include a seemingly real and consequential threat to the believer's health, safety, or welfare in order to be believable.

The fourth element is an alliance of conspirators. Conspiracies by definition involve coalitions of people acting together for malicious ends.³⁹ Humans evolved to develop the ability to enter into cooperative alliances with others to aid in their survival. This ability also extends to detect alliances of adversaries forming to harm them. Research shows that humans have an innate ability to detect people available to form cooperative or hostile alliances based on political ideology. For instance, Marxists might see all non-Marxists as counter-revolutionaries conspiring to destroy them.⁴⁰ Thus, a conspiracy theory must involve multiple people, parties, or organizations.

The fifth element is that conspiracy theories must involve secrecy in that the conspirators are trying to hide or obscure their activities. The element of secrecy is integrated into the other four elements since if the conspirators are discovered, their plans can be thwarted. In real-life conspiracies, the conspirators make efforts to mask their activity in secrecy⁴¹. As with casual patterns and other factors discussed, people are prone to perceive secret activity where none exists. This facilitates increased conspiratorial beliefs⁴². The element of secrecy makes the theory harder to disprove, and it may reflect an intentional choice on behalf of the theory's developer.

³⁸ Mao, Jia-Yan.-Y., Jan-Willen van Prooijen, Shen-Long Yang, and Yong-Yu Guo, "System Threat during a Pandemic: How Conspiracy Theories Help to Justify the System," *Journal of Pacific Rim Psychology* 15, no. 11 (2021): pp. 1-11.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ David Pietraszewski, Oliver Scott Curry, Michael Bang Petersen, Leda Cosmides, and John Tooby, "Constituents of Political Cognition: Race, Party Politics, and the Alliance Detection System," *Cognition* 140 (2015): pp. 24-39.

⁴¹ Jan-Willem Van Prooijen, *The Psychology of Conspiracy Theories*, (New York: Routledge, 2018).

⁴² Marius Frenken, and Roland Imhoff, "Malevolent Intentions and Secret Coordination Dissecting Cognitive Processes in Conspiracy Beliefs via Diffusion Modeling," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 103, no. 104383 (2022): pp. 1-13.

Research Questions

Based on the preceding review of the literature, the following research questions are posed.

RQ1: Do the conspiracy theories proffered on *Global Research* present a pattern of casually connected events?

RQ2: Do the conspiracy theories proffered on *Global Research* present agency on behalf of the conspirators?

RQ3: Do the conspiracy theories proffered on *Global Research* present a consequential threat to the health and welfare of the audience?

RQ4: Do the conspiracy theories proffered on *Global Research* present an alliance of conspirators operating in secrecy?

Method

Ethnographic Content Analysis

A potentially good method for analyzing conspiracy theories, in the form of pseudo-news texts, is ethnographic content analysis (ECA). It is a respected form of qualitative content analysisⁱ. ECA can identify, locate, and analyze texts thematically by using ethnographic tools modified for content analysis.⁴³ ECA can provide a good contextual understanding of meanings that identify relationships by conceptualizing the analysis of documents as fieldwork.⁴⁴

First one must review the content to identify what kinds of data the researcher can reasonably analyze through rigorous analysis. Then you make a protocol, which is usually a list of questions, variables, items, categories or other features. Once established, the document is analyzed for content fitting the criteria of a specific protocol. Then those

⁴³ David Altheide, & John Johnson, "Reflections on interpretive adequacy in qualitative research," in *The Handbook of qualitative research*, (4th ed.,) N. K. Denzin, & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds. Sage (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2015), pp. 581–610.

⁴⁴ David Altheide, & John Schneider, *Qualitative media analysis*, (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2013),

samples are transcribed on the protocol sheet.⁴⁵ Employing reiterated comparison and contrasting of items on the protocol, you identify manifest and latent themes as well as explicit and implicit meanings. The researcher explores differences and extremes between items on the protocol.⁴⁶ Analyzed data are compiled into summaries.⁴⁷

In short, the protocol items reviewed were developed to answer the research questions. Since we are ultimately interested in determining if these texts constitute conspiracy theories as opposed to propaganda, all people, nations, and organizations to whom agency might be ascribed were protocol items. Descriptors of specific characteristics, such as quotes from news sources and adjectives to describe them, were also distinguishable protocol items. Additionally, accompanying pictures, metaphors, and titles of the articles were also listed as protocol items. *Global Research* does have videos and links to articles from other sites, and these were included in the analysis.

Sample Selection

Following the first step in ECA, the *Global Research* website was reviewed thoroughly to determine what types of data could be reasonably analyzed. *Global Research* published articles on a wide variety of topics with many authors. However, to ensure proper detection of a conspiracy theory we needed to choose topics that had plenty of content to analyze. We arbitrarily chose to examine three separate topics. We came up with a list of topics that had a depth of articles written on them such as The police state and civil rights, the 9-11 terrorist attacks, the war against ISIS in Syria and Iraq, the Russia-Ukraine war, global warming and the environment, COVID-19, religion, the global economy and biotechnology and genetically modified food. We then used a random number generator to pick three topics to analyze. The three chosen were globalization, the Russia-Ukraine war and COVID-19. A total of ($N=150$) articles were collected with ($n = 50$) for each of the three topics. Even though the articles had different authors, they were treated as a single continuous text.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Lance Daniel Laird, Justine de Marrais, and Linda L. Barnes, "Portraying Islam and Muslims in MEDLINE: A Content Analysis," *Social Science & Medicine* 65, no. 12 (2007): pp. 2425–39.

⁴⁷ Ibid

Findings

Research Question One

The first research question asked, “Do the conspiracy theories proffered on *Global Research* present a pattern of casually connected events?” We will start with an analysis of articles on globalization. There was a clear pattern of casually connected events woven into a coherent narrative. The theme of globalization was primarily focused on economics. The pattern of casual events was that a network of financial elites from Wall Street firms like BlackRock and the central banks of nation-states were secretly working to comprehensively change the economic structure of nation-state economies in order to gain a type of centralized control. For instance, one article used the COVID-19 epidemic to present evidence of this effort. It stated, “Lockdowns also helped accelerate the restructuring of capitalism that involves smaller enterprises being driven to bankruptcy or bought up by monopolies and global chains, thereby ensuring continued viable profits for Big Tech, the digital payments giants and global online corporations like Meta and Amazon and the eradication of millions of jobs.⁴⁸” Another article highlighted how central banks were working towards the same goal but from a different direction. The author writes, “Sadly, the Fed and other central bankers lie. Raising interest rates is not to cure inflation. It is to force a global reset in control over the world’s assets, its wealth, whether real estate, farmland, commodity production, industry, or even water.⁴⁹”

Switching to the second theme of the Russian-Ukraine War, there was a pattern of casual events. Authors for this theme repeatedly claimed that NATO and the United States in particular wanted to destroy Russia as a nation and civilization. NATO was fighting a proxy war in Ukraine, which was their method of executing this plan. A common statement was like this one: “But perhaps *proxy war* is now a misnomer: officials

⁴⁸ Colin ToddHunter, “What Was Covid Really About? Triggering A Multi-Trillion Dollar Global Debt Crisis. Ramping up an Imperialist Strategy?” *Global Research* 4 March 2023, accessed 16 February 2023, <https://www.globalresearch.ca/covid-capitalism-friedrich-boris/5785964>

⁴⁹ William Engdahl, “Global Planned Financial Tsunami Has Just Begun,” *Global Research*, 25 February 2023, accessed 16 February 2023, <https://www.globalresearch.ca/global-planned-financial-tsunami-has-just-begun/5784217>.

are planning for long-term, hot conflict, and US leaders have even said they're ready to *fight to the last person* in Ukraine. On 25 January, German Foreign Defense Minister Annalena Baerbock openly stated "We are fighting a war against Russia."⁵⁰ Complicating matters is that Annalena Baerbock did actually make that statement. US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin openly stated that he wanted to see the Russian military weakened. Statements like these do give some credence to the claims made by *Global Research*.

However, *Global Research* did not present a strong, clear and cohesive narrative painting a pattern of casually connected events for the Ukraine war in the same manner as they did with globalization. They commonly make claims like this, "the 2022 Russian-Ukrainian War was, in fact, inevitable, as it was planned by NATO and consequently, step by step, led to such an outcome."⁵¹ The evidence provided to support this claim was that NATO needs Ukraine to be governed by Nazis because Nazis don't like Russia. Another claim said, "Russia is well aware that NATO is not just a self-defence organization, as it claims, but an aggressive war alliance, at least since NATO's wars of aggression in Yugoslavia, the Middle East, and Afghanistan."⁵² The argument is that NATO needs to destroy Russia because it wants to become an empire. While there is a pattern of casually connected events some of the claims are poorly developed and ridiculous claims are made. Since the main *Global Research* audience of this theme is primarily North Americans and Europeans to some extent, it is not as compelling as it could be.

The third theme of COVID-19 did present a strong, clear and cohesive narrative painting a pattern of casually connected events. Essentially COVID-19 was created in a lab in the U.S. or China, depending on the author, by a network of researchers funded by

⁵⁰ Stavroula, Pabst, "In a Compromised Media Environment, Western Intelligence Agencies Escalate NATO's Proxy War in Ukraine Unchallenged," *Global Research* 7 March 2023, accessed 16 February 2023, <https://www.globalresearch.ca/compromised-media-environment-western-intelligence-agencies-escalate-nato-proxy-war-ukraine-unchallenged/5811201>.

⁵¹ Vladislav B. Sotirović, "Stepan Bandera and Neo-Nazism: Why US-NATO Needs "Banderistan" Ukraine?," *Global Research*, 10 October 2022, accessed 16 February 2023, <https://www.globalresearch.ca/why-nato-needs-banderistan-ukraine/5795877>.

⁵² Felix Abt, "Provoked" NATO Expansion, 'Unprovoked' Ukraine War, and the Dire China Threat," *Global Research*, 16 March 2023, accessed 16 February 2023, <https://www.globalresearch.ca/provoked-nato-expansion-unprovoked-ukraine-war-dire-china-threat/5812148>.

Bill Gates, the World Health Organization (WHO) and pharmaceutical companies for the goals of enriching themselves and as a tool for depopulation. For instance, “Four health organizations — The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, GAVI, the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI) and the Wellcome Trust — rapidly took a lead on the global pandemic response, and while all four claim to be independent organizations, they’re all actually founded and/or funded by Gates Gates has used his wealth, influence and sheer shrewdness to get him into a position where he can dictate global health policy for his own financial benefit.⁵³” In regards to the depopulation agenda, “It’s been very hard to answer ... when people would ask us,” Is there a depopulation agenda?” People would point to things Bill Gates said, like how vaccines would reduce the population. There was an interpretation that it was going to make people healthier, and therefore they would choose not to have more children. It was murky. I think this film really helps us understand that this is not a conspiracy theory. It’s an absolute reality.⁵⁴” Strengthening the argument, Bill Gates made a comment that vaccinations would help curb unsustainable population growth. However, it was taken out of context.

The specifics of the pattern of casually connected events for the emergence of the COVID-19 virus revolve around Dr. Anthony Fauci, the National Institute for Health (NIH), the Wuhan Institute of Virology (WIV), the non-profit Eco-Health Alliance and its president Peter Daszak. The pattern of events is strengthened because the conspiracy theorists used an actual investigative report by legitimate journalists from *Vanity Fair*. Some elements of this pattern of casually connected events are factually true. The NIH gave \$3.7 million to the Eco-Health Alliance, who in turn gave \$600,000 to the WIV to conduct gain of function research. Peter Daszak had close involvement with the WIV, even appearing on Chinese TV. Furthermore, he did several things that were suspicious.⁵⁵

⁵³ Joseph Mercola, “Global Covid Response”: Health Officials Admit Bill Gates “Runs the World,” *Global Research* 1 October 2022, accessed 16 February 2023, <https://www.globalresearch.ca/health-officials-admit-bill-gates-runs-world/5794989>

⁵⁴ Joseph Mercola, “Video: ‘Infertility: A Diabolical Agenda’: The Shocking Truth About the Global Depopulation Agenda,” *Global Research*, 18 September 2022, accessed 16 February 2023, <https://www.globalresearch.ca/video-shocking-truth-about-global-depopulation-agenda/5786261>

⁵⁵ Katherine Eban, “‘This Shouldn’t Happen’: Inside the Virus-Hunting Nonprofit at the Center of the Lab-Leak Controversy,” *Vanity Fair*, 31 March 2022, accessed 16 February 2023, <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2022/03/the-virus-hunting-nonprofit-at-the-center-of-the-lab-leak-controversy>.

However, authors from *Global Research* add more false evidence to support the pattern of casually connected events to this story.

They leverage another piece of investigative journalism from *Politico* about Bill Gates and the WHO. They cite, “The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation helped organize Event 201, a tabletop pandemic preparedness exercise in October 2019 that prophetically predicted COVID-19 — and the need for a massive propaganda and censorship campaign to quash “conspiracies” about the virus.⁵⁶ Thus, Bill Gates was helping to plan out the pandemic as evidenced by Event 201. There are many more twists and turns to this conspiracy narrative, but the pattern of casually connected events leads one to the conclusion that COVID-19 was intentionally developed, most likely for use as a bio-weapon.

Research Question Two

The second research question asked, do the conspiracy theories proffered on *Global Research* present agency on behalf of the conspirators? Some of the intentions and motives of the conspirators were discussed above, but we will expand on them here. Starting with the theme of globalization, the motivation is to create a one-world government with a centrally controlled economy that benefits the elites. One author takes real-world experimentation with a cashless society, such as in Sweden, which will ultimately help the one-world government gain centralized control of the economy. He states, “Electronic money, a cashless society, is perhaps the ultimate and most direct means of the New World Order (NWO), also called One World Order (OWO), to control us all via its financial system.⁵⁷”

The issue of genetically modified foods and new technology-driven farming methods bleeds over into the globalization theme. Citing Indian activist Vandana Shiva, one author argues that Bill Gates is trying to re-colonize India and other parts of the world

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Peter Koenig, “Electronic Money” under “The One World Order,” (OWO): Are We Becoming “Money Slaves?,” *Global Research*, 2 June 2021, accessed 16 February 2023, <https://www.globalresearch.ca/electronic-money-under-the-one-world-order-owo-are-we-on-the-verge-of-becoming-western-money-slaves-solutions-resistance-economy-de-dollarization-and-de-globalization/5600200>

through control of farming methods. He states, "Tech billionaire Bill Gates, now the largest owner of farmland in the US, is at the root of the problem, pushing technology as the only mechanism to save the world, and in so doing denying real solutions. This path is not accidental but carefully orchestrated to amass wealth, power and control while making all but the elite subservient."⁵⁸ Population reduction also made its way into the agency of the conspirators. One author claimed, "The fundamental pillar of the Great Reset is a horrendous plan called 'Agenda ID2020',¹⁶ which is a blueprint for resetting the world in line with the objectives of the super-rich. Aided by the methods of the *Big Tech* platforms, it promotes the idea of a massive population reduction."⁵⁹ Agenda ID2020 is aimed at developing secure and accurate methods of personal identification, primarily for people in developing nations where this is a serious economic problem. Thus, for the theme of globalization, the agency of the conspirators is clear and consistent.

The agency of the conspirators in the theme of the Ukraine War is not as clear and consistent within the texts analyzed as one might expect. The global elites want to destroy Russia and Putin because he presents an obstacle to a one-world government. For example, "Hence, apart from vastly increasing corporatism or economic fascism, the WEF's Great Reset is also aimed at destroying Russia – and China – and recovering the dwindling hegemony of the Western nations as they rapidly lose their global leadership in an increasingly multipolar world."⁶⁰

Within the Ukraine War articles analyzed, only a few offered clear agency. It is clear that the goal is to destroy Russia. For example, "Washington's coup in Kyiv and the attack on the Russian-speaking Ukrainians in the east and south is part of Washington's strategy to reassert its uni-power position. Russia's independent foreign policy and Russia's growing economic and political relationships with Europe became problems for Washington. Washington is using Ukraine to attack and demonize Russia and its leader and to break up Russia's economic and political relations with Europe. That is what the

⁵⁸ Joseph Mercola, "Vandana Shiva: A New Wave of Colonization, Carbon Slavery," *Global Research*, (25 June 2021), <https://www.globalresearch.ca/vandana-shiva-new-wave-colonization-carbon-slavery/5748621>.

⁵⁹ Arthur Noble, "The Rise and Fall of the Great Reset," *Global Research*, (19 October 2022), <https://www.globalresearch.ca/rise-fall-great-reset-professor-arthur-noble/5796627>.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

sanctions are about.⁶¹ Russia presented an unacceptable threat to the US's hegemonic control over Europe. In another piece, NATO was presented as having its own agency. It states, "NATO provoked Russia by its open-ended promise to Ukraine in 2008 that it would become a member of NATO."⁶² Here and in a couple of other articles, NATO wants to grow for the sake of growing. However, this indirectly contradicts arguments about the US trying to gain control of Europe. In this theme the conspirators do have agency, it's just not as strong and compelling as agency in the other themes.

In the COVID-19 theme, agency for the conspirators is strong and compelling. COVID is a manufactured crisis to make money and help with depopulation. One author claims that the WHO and China manufactured a myth that putting COVID-19 patients on ventilators was an appropriate first-line response. But, putting patients on ventilators increased their chance of dying. He states, "Medicare has determined that if you have a COVID-19 admission to the hospital you'll get paid \$13,000. If that COVID-19 patient goes on a ventilator, you get \$39,000; three times as much."⁶³ Thus, the government financially incentivizes euthanasia while enriching the medical industry. Expanding upon population control, another article extends it to children. He says, "Obviously from what we are learning about the impact of the mRNA vaccine on human fertility, population control. To succeed in reducing the population, you have to kill off the young or make them infertile. Thus, the drive to vaccinate 5-year-old children."⁶⁴

Chossudovsky doesn't write many articles, but he penned a good one about Pfizer. He says, "Pfizer was fully aware upon assessing the results of their own *confidential report* on 1 March 2021 that the Worldwide marketing of their Covid-19 mRNA

⁶¹ Paul Roberts, "America's Proxy War against Russia Started Nine Years Ago: The Minsk Peace Deal: Farce Or Sellout?" *Global Research*, 25 February 2023, accessed 16 February 2023, <https://www.globalresearch.ca/the-minsk-peace-deal-farce-or-sellout/5431033>.

⁶² Benjamin Medea, and Nicolas Davies, "How Spin and Lies Fuel a Bloody War of Attrition in Ukraine," *Global Research*, 14 February 2023, accessed 16 February 2023, <https://www.globalresearch.ca/how-spin-lies-fuel-bloody-war-attrition-ukraine/5808516>.

⁶³ Joseph Mercola, "How COVID patients Died for Profit," *Global Research*, 1 February 2023, accessed 16 February 2023, <https://www.globalresearch.ca/how-covid-patients-died-profit/5806918>

⁶⁴ Paul Roberts, "The People Are Unaware of the War Being Conducted Against Them," *Global Research*, 12 October 2021, <https://www.globalresearch.ca/people-unaware-war-being-conducted-against-them/5758327>.

vaccine involving a target population of 8 billion people would result in an unprecedented upward wave in mortality and morbidity. Pfizer had the choice of withdrawing and cancelling the roll-out of their deadly vaccine on 1 March 2021. Profits in the billions of dollars were the driving force behind this diabolical agenda. *Killing is Good Business*. What we are witnessing is a crime against humanity on an unprecedented scale, affecting the lives of the entire population of our planet.⁶⁵ Thus, Pfizer deliberately assisted in killing millions of people for billions in profit. The agency for the COVID-19 theme is strong and clear.

Research Question Three

The third research question asked, do the conspiracy theories proffered on *Global Research* present a consequential threat to the health and welfare of the audience? For the theme of globalization, the consequential threats to the health and welfare were numerous and serious. We will only review the most serious one here. Most of the world's population will be reduced to a new kind of slavery, where a combination of technology and authoritarian governance will deny people their sovereignty and autonomy. One author describes how the elite are using science to develop covert ways of getting the mass population to subconsciously obey commands. He states, "They are committed to a strategy of distracting, seeding division, undermining rational thinking and using a combination of blatant intimidation with open bribery to slowly, systematically, overpower and reduce to slavery 99.98% of the Earth's population... There has been extensive research by corporations, and by the CIA and Department of Defense (government organizations exploited to hide the true entities demanding such research) into how humans can be manipulated without their knowledge, and compelled through imperceptible persuasion to permit, or even aid, their own disenfranchisement without us even being aware of this silent and invisible takeover."⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Michel Chossudovsky, "The Pfizer Vaccine: A Tale of Two Reports. "Money vs. Mortality," *Global Research*, 18 March 2023, <https://www.globalresearch.ca/the-pfizer-big-money-maker-have-a-look-at-their-report/5807009>

⁶⁶Emanuel Pastreich, "How the Super-Rich Destroy Our Minds," *Global Research*, 18 March 2023, <https://www.globalresearch.ca/how-super-rich-destroy-our-minds/5807433>.

For the Ukraine war theme, there was only one threat, nuclear war, and the audience for this threat is presumably people from North America and Europe. However, this threat is very tenuous with only two instances discovered in the texts. For instance, “Russia has made it clear that any intervention by NATO would be considered an existential threat to the Russian nation, thereby invoking one of the two clauses in the Russian nuclear posture in which nuclear weapons could be used. The other would be in response to a nuclear attack against Russia.”⁶⁷ This threat is part of Putin’s periodic sabre-rattling to warn the US and NATO not to invade or bomb Russia. None of the articles claim that either the US or NATO was actually conspiring to directly attack Russia, thereby triggering a Russian nuclear defensive response. The texts really only discuss the Ukraine War as being a proxy war. The threat to the audience is presented as being so minimal it’s not very consequential to their health and welfare.

The threat presented in the COVID-19 theme is presented as being very consequential to the audience's health and welfare. Many of these threats are discussed in the context of the COVID-19 vaccines. Mainly, the threats are death and infertility, which have been mentioned above. However, *Global Research* attributes other serious side effects to the COVID vaccines. One article states, “We have heard all about the many cases of myocarditis and pericarditis post-injection, as well as recipients repeatedly testing “positive” for the virus even after doing the deed. But there is another concerning side effect occurring in the *fully vaccinated* that is rarely mentioned: blindness. The latest data out of the United Kingdom suggests that a growing number of fully jabbed people are losing their eyesight.”⁶⁸ Given the large amounts of people who are vaccinated or required to be vaccinated, this is a serious threat.

Research Question Four

⁶⁷Scott Ritter, “The Onus Is on Biden and Putin. “Fundamental Misunderstandings” Could Lead to Nuclear War,” *Global Research*, 16 October 2022, accessed 16 February 2023, <https://www.globalresearch.ca/onus-biden-putin-scott-ritter/5796474>.

⁶⁸Ethan Huff, “Many People Fully Vaccinated for COVID Are Now Going Blind,” *Global Research*, 9 April 2023, accessed 16 February 2023, <https://www.globalresearch.ca/many-people-fully-vaccinated-covid-now-going-blind/5778951>.

The fourth research question asked, do the conspiracy theories proffered on *Global Research* present an alliance of conspirators operating in secrecy? In the theme of globalization, some conspirators like the Rothschild and Rockefeller families were mentioned above. Deep state actors like the Central Intelligence Agency and the Council on Foreign Relations are mentioned as well. However, *Global Research* paints Klaus Schwab as being the real puppet master. One article says about Schwab, “The brainless leaders of the West have fallen headlong for the concealed totalitarianism of Klaus Schwab’s global takeover agenda...‘World Economic Forum’ is accurate but was clearly designed to present Schwab’s criminal global and globalist intentions in a deceptively positive light.”⁶⁹ These conspirators are specifically accused of operating malevolently in secret. One article about the World Economic Forum that meets yearly in Davos Switzerland said, “In addition to the official agenda with more or less open meetings, dozens of secretive clandestine meetings take place behind closed doors, not accessible to anybody who has not been personally invited. It is in these secret meetings, where real “decisions” are taken.”⁷⁰ There are many more claims of secretive activity by these conspirators.

For the theme of the Ukraine War, there is an alliance consisting of the US, NATO and Ukraine, but it’s currently not secret. However, the alleged conspirators are not as specific as they are in globalization where specific elites like Klaus Schwab are named. For secrecy, a few articles did reference a secret 2014 plot during the Maidan uprisings, where the US was accused of planning a coup to oust Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovich with Petro Poroshenko. However, in the current situation, anti-Russian alliance goals are openly stated. There isn’t much mention of secret plots in the articles except for a couple of tactical or operational-level military operations. But this activity is actually happening and is not a secret, so it does not meet this requirement for a conspiracy theory.

For the COVID-19 theme, there is an alliance of conspirators operating in secrecy, and most of these were mentioned above. Adding detail to this finding, the mainstream

⁶⁹ Arthur Noble, “The Rise and Fall of the Great Reset,” *Global Research*, 19 October 2022, accessed 16 February 2023, <https://www.globalresearch.ca/rise-fall-great-reset-professor-arthur-noble/5796627>.

⁷⁰ Peter Koenig, “Prelude to the 2023 WEF Davos Meetings. “Cooperation” in Triggering “Depopulation” and a “Fractured World,” *Global Research*, 21 January 2023, accessed 16 February 2023, <https://www.globalresearch.ca/prelude-2023-wef-davos-meetings/5804615>.

news media is also implicated as a co-conspirator, working with the elites and big pharmaceutical companies to keep the facts secret. One author states, “One suspects the CIA suggested to their paid inserts in the major media stations to use the term ‘anti-science’ as a thought stopper, much like the way they got the media to embrace the term ‘conspiracy theory’ in relation to major crimes of State.⁷¹” There are many other examples of this.

Discussion

This study set out to test if the existential threat model of conspiracy theories could serve as a useful tool in helping strategic communicators discern what is and what is not a conspiracy theory. This capability is an essential element for initiating the process of taking counter-measures against weaponized conspiracy theories. Propaganda, while very dangerous, can be less complicated to deal with than a compelling conspiracy theory. Analyzing the three themes of globalization, the Ukraine War and COVID-19 from *Global Research* reveals that two of the themes meet the criteria for a conspiracy theory, while one is primarily pro-Russian propaganda.

For the theme of globalization, *Global Research* uses a variant of the new world order (NWO) or one world order conspiracy theory. The common theme in conspiracy theories about an NWO is that a secretive power elite with a globalist agenda is conspiring to rule the world with an authoritarian one-world government. This government will replace the current system of sovereign nation-states. It will use a comprehensive system of propaganda to spread its ideology and control the

⁷¹ Michael Welch, & James Weiler, “We are in Deep Trouble!” Following the Science behind the COVID Catastrophe,” *Global Research*, 31 December 2021, accessed 16 February 2023, <https://www.globalresearch.ca/we-are-in-deep-trouble-following-the-science-behind-the-covid-catastrophe/5763496>.

population.⁷² Interestingly, the NWO conspiracy embraced by and intensively disseminated by the Putin regime in Russia.⁷³

The globalization theme did present a pattern of casually connected events, but these events are focused on economic control. This renders it different from other NWO theory variants. The agency of the actors is also mainly economic in nature. They exclude apocalyptic religious or occultist strains common in other NWO theories. The cast of conspirators does overlap with other NWO theories, but there are differences such as Klaus Schwab being the primary agent and the absence of the Pope as a player. The threat would be serious to the audience, especially economic disenfranchisement, depopulation and mind control. The theme of secrecy is prevalent, but Global Research does make good use of on-the-record quotes to use as evidence for the theory. Thus, the theme of globalization passes the existential threat model test and is a legitimate conspiracy theory offering an interesting variant of the NWO.

The theme of the Ukraine War was analyzed thoroughly, but evidence of a conspiracy was not prevalent. There is a weaker pattern of casually connected events than was present in globalization. Of course, western military aid to Ukraine constitutes a pattern, but it's hardly conspiratorial. The openly acknowledged agency of the US, NATO and Ukraine is to cause a Russian military defeat and a full withdrawal back to Russia. The authors add to the agency of this theme by claiming that the destruction of Russia as a civilization is also a goal. However, there wasn't a really compelling agency when compared to the globalization theme. In terms of threat to the audience, it is neither compelling nor definitive. This theme also lacks the element of secrecy since the actors are transparent about their goals and no substantial claims of secrecy are offered. Thus, the Ukraine War theme falls short of a legitimate conspiracy theory and is better classified as propaganda.

The final theme of COVID-19 had two patterns of casually connected events, the virus itself and the vaccine. The agency is also split into two strains. The first is economic profit and the second is depopulation, which overlaps with NWO theories. The primary

⁷² Alasdair Spark, "Conjuring Order: The New World Order and Conspiracy Theories of Globalization," *The Sociological Review* 48, no. 2 (2000): pp. 46–62.

⁷³ , Ilya Yablokov, "Conspiracy Theories in Putin's Russia," In *Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories* Butter, Michael and Peter Knight, Eds., (New York: Routledge, 2020), pp. 582-595.

threat of COVID-19 is death, which is a very real fact. However, infertility and other associated health problems from the virus and vaccines also serve as compelling threats. Finally, there is a set of conspirators who are accused of acting in secret and using mass media control and censorship to keep their activities concealed. Thus, the COVID-19 theme passes the conspiracy theory test.

Conclusion

The existential threat model of conspiracy theories is still a relatively new model, with only a couple of research papers from the discipline of psychology. It is relatively straightforward and easy to understand. This study was an initial test to authenticate its value as a communication tool for strategic communicators and other information warfare specialists. The model passed this test and offers much promise if it continues to be developed. It needs to be tested on different purveyors of conspiracy theories and different types of theories. The method of actually analyzing the content of the articles, Ethnographic Content Analysis, is valid and reliable if it is employed correctly. However, it is time-consuming and tedious. A simpler and faster method of analyzing documents is warranted for strategic communicators working under a tighter deadline. Overall, the model can offer considerable benefits for strategic communicators who employ it.
