The "Conspiracy outbreak": (dis)information contagion during the pandemic

How has the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic created an environment favourable for the spread of Conspiracy Theories in democratic countries, and how have social media played the role of super-spreaders?

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Writing a Master dissertation in times of a global pandemic can be challenging.

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has been the first pandemic in the age of social media. Alongside the outbreak of the virus, another infection has spread with the same speed as the coronavirus: an infection targeting the information ecosystem. Conspiracy theories, often politically charged, concerning the birth of the disease or trying to find someone to blame for the health crisis have polluted the healthy flow of information in democratic countries. The effects of this information infection have serious deadly consequences because they hinder the endeavours of public authorities, and fuel the uncertainty caused by the pandemic.

Hence, this study investigates the relationship between epidemics and the spread of conspiracy theories, arguing that social media have been a determinant factor in super-spreading disinformation.

An interdisciplinary methodology has been used to evaluate the research question, using mainly studies coming from political science- to explain the main characteristics of conspiracy theories- data and computer science- to measure the impact of the conspiracy outbreak.

Qualitatively it has been demonstrated how conspiracy theories are structured, what brings people to believe in such theories and why it is difficult to draw a distinction between conspiracy and ideology. The social dynamics of conspiracy belief during the first year of the pandemic, have been measured through data-driven models extrapolated from mainstream social media platforms.

The dissertation showed a strong correlation between times of uncertainty, such as epidemics, and the rise in the dissemination of conspiracy theories. The fact that these theories have been posted on platforms with a global reach, has transformed conspiracies into a global phenomenon.

The conclusion is that despite the efforts of public authorities, the main solution to stop the phenomenon is to regulate social media platforms and check the truthfulness of the content posted. Without doing so, the process of recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic will be slow and painful.

[**Keywords**: *Conspiracy Theories, Covid-19 pandemic, social media, infodemic, conspiracy beliefs, COVID-19, disinformation, misinformation*]

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Introduction

In light of the recent events of the Covid-19 pandemic affecting the whole international community, it is becoming extremely difficult to ignore a phenomenon spreading as fast as the virus: Conspiracy theories.

The research question is the following: "Is the current world pandemic creating an environment favourable for conspiracy theories to spread in democratic countries? And how have social media contributed to the phenomenon?

With this thesis I intend to determine the extent to which conspiracy theories spread during this period, what kind of conspiracy movements emerged in democratic countries (with a focus on the European scenario and the United States), and whether pandemics are an ideal environment for this phenomenon to accelerate or not.

There are two primary aims of this dissertation:

1. To investigate conspiracy theories and how they affect the conscious approach of people towards democracy

2. The role of social media, and the internet on broader terms to lead people (or not) to believe in conspiracy theories.

The objective is to formulate some considerations to analyse this phenomenon. For this reason, different areas of study are covered to catch the full spectrum of explanations accounting for the topic studied. My argumentation is to suggest that there is a direct cause-effect relationship between the lacking unity of global communication adopted during the pandemic, the polarizing effect of social media on online communities, and the soaring spread of conspiracy theories online.

After having read and collected a certain amount of relevant literature, the research has been structured with five themed chapters, not counting the introduction and conclusion sections.

The thesis started with a question: "What is a conspiracy theory?

The answer to this question is naturally necessary for the reader to better comprehend this research topic

First, I gave an overview of conspiracy theories. Their role in the past, what are the common traits shared between different theories and the elements differentiating them. Another point of view presented in the dissertation has been the social epistemology of misinformation and beliefs shared by conspiracy believers. Furthermore, a summary of the main reasons that lead people towards the "conspiracy world" is relevant for the research. Considering the broad causes that influence the birth of conspiracy theories, it is reasonable to suggest that the factors involved touch multiple disciplines, from psychological, demographic, political and ideological aspects. During the pandemic, science-denial tendencies and their impact on the health-related choices of conspiracy believers are common features, therefore, it is undeniable that the need for expert-led discourse on the argument is urgently needed. As has been explained in the following pages, pandemics are historical periods where fear and

uncertainty are omnipresent feelings, thus favourable triggers for conspiracy theories to spread. The concern of scholars on the topic, as a consequence, increased during the current health crisis, but it is important to stress one aspect: conspiracy theories are a very old phenomenon. In times of uncertainty, when at the beginning even the experts are divided and not able to provide a clear answer, the human need to control something that is potentially destructive brings fuel to look for an answer in these kinds of explanations. Humans since the dawn of history, are looking for the "why" of events, if explanations are not easily pivoted, there is a tendency to look towards different directions to satisfy the need to know why. The first chapter ended with some considerations on the relationship between communication and conspiracy theories. I have argued that a lack of a unified political front during the pandemic has increased these conspiracy movements. Is the phenomenon a direct effect of the chaos caused by a lack of effective management of the crisis, especially during the first wave of the pandemic? The poor effectiveness of the global response in terms of communication has created a psychological vulnerability that was easily used as leverage by extremist movements that gathered thousands of followers online. With this dissertation, I suggest that there is a direct correlation between the way that the crisis was framed by world leaders and the speed of the online spread of conspiracy theories and chaotic information. As a result, distrust towards politicians and scientific bodies, brought individuals to resort to extreme-right channels and fill the void with conspiracy theories.

Building on the theoretical framework of conspiracy theories, in Chapter Two I began to lay out some theoretical considerations on the concepts of misinformation and disinformation. The terms are sometimes being wrongly used with the same meaning, but the borderline difference between them, generally speaking, is that misinformation can be accidental, while disinformation is some sort of fake news dressed up to look like true information. One form of disinformation is conspiracy theories. In disinformation and conspiracy theories there is a purpose about giving and promoting a false theory. The reason why someone would promote these false theories and the way they could be a threat to democracy is that often, manipulative disinformation has a clear political agenda. Conspiracy theories are, as a matter of fact, a form of propaganda. The motive behind them could be to promote a specific political agenda, so there is no reason to care about the truth.

My research question argues that social media have been pivotal in the phenomenon, consequently in the third chapter I am concerned with the investigation of the relationship between social media and conspiracy theories. A key issue was to explore how social media amplifies disinformation and favour the spread of conspiracy theories. A question to reflect upon while analysing this topic is, do algorithms significantly influence people's access to extremist groups? The answer to this question is not easy, as the problem we are facing is complex and multifaceted. Furthermore, blaming solely social media for the creation or amplification of conspiracy theories is ill-advised, it is also important to consider other factors. Most recently, literature has emerged that offers contradictory findings of the connection of conspiracy theories believers, originators and social media. Some suggest that the existence of social media does not affect the spread of conspiracy theories, as they existed long before, others propose that social media have a huge influence on the phenomenon we

are taking into consideration. Nevertheless, in this dissertation I have argued that the internet and social media have a polarizing effect on online platforms, they created restricted communities where communication flows only one-way. Conspiracy believers join private communities where the very nature of algorithms and social media's analytics fosters bad behaviour online and offers no space for different viewpoints. Moreover, the chapter goes on with a short synopsis of political communication in online spaces before and after the pandemic, and how it has changed (or not).

In Chapter Four I have explored the concept of the epidemic of information happening during the Coronavirus outbreak. This chapter can be considered as a follow up of the previous sections, as the phenomenon described contains all elements described before, and shows the concern of international and European organisations on the topic. In a nutshell, an infodemic is a period of time, during a pandemic or in times of uncertainty, in which there is an excess of information flowing. This flow can be helpful thanks to the usage of technology and social media, to keep people up-to-date and informed but it can also be harmful, as conspiracy theories and mis\disinformation circulate as well. Characterisation of infodemics is important for an increased understanding of these malicious effects and to see what are the response strategies of international organizations. Therefore, this study makes a contribution to the research by analysing how the WHO and the European Union are managing the situation and contributing to creating a healthy information ecosystem during the epidemic.

In the last chapter of the dissertation I focused on a case study: QAnon. Its birth in the United States has been considered, its spread and its rise to fame during the pandemic, culminating with the riot and assault on the Capitol on January 6, 2021. Using the characteristics of conspiracy movements presented in the first chapter, with my work I have revealed several factors contributing to the creation of QAnon. A short overview of the role of social media platforms like 4Chan, 8Chan, Gab and Parler, will also be given.

With this thesis I have decided to undertake the design of conspiracy movements in the setting of pandemics, and evaluate the influence of this historical moment on their spread and flourishment. The rising wave of conspiracy movements, misinformation and disinformation is a new phenomenon in the current context but not the first case throughout history.
What has changed is the idea of amplification surrounding conspiracy movements nowadays, these phenomena despite having been around for a long time, never had the sheer reach they have now. The age of the internet revolution and the creation of social media is an enormous factor to take into consideration. The power of amplification also concerns political messages, which have been shared and re-shared online, often twisted and feeding the mis\disinformation and conspiracy machine. Pandemics, which are considered moments of societal crisis, are the perfect fertile soil for these bad and dangerous trends to grow like parasitic plants. The absence of coordinated and coherent global response, especially in the initial phases of the health crisis, left a vacuum of fact-checked information without sufficient safeguards against conspiracies that threatened democracies around the globe. Social media provided the infrastructure to accelerate the trend, worsening the situation and even leading tech companies to take into account the situation and proceed with risk management

solutions. International organizations are publishing reports assessing the situation and response strategies are being created. The study could contribute to our understanding of the phenomenon, and push governments and private companies to commit to creating more vacancies for jobs aimed at containing and\or analysing these circumstances. In the context of technology companies, an example is roles for online content security, policy analysts in the field of fake news etc...

My main reason for choosing this topic is personal interest, but also indirect experience. Technology moves extremely fast, as a result despite my young age I can say that I observed many technological revolutions in a very short period of time. Growing up, I felt that the internet environment was like a community, users used to be active and the first social media available at that time were a place for the exchange of ideas and required netizens to directly participate in the interaction. The first example that comes to my mind are forums, where questions were posed and people answered, or discussions around a vast array of topics were published- from silly things like memes, or movies to more serious matters, like politics and so on…

No matter the content, the underlying motive was the direct interaction between users. Tech companies changed that, imposing a new role on their customers, who became passive users, scrolling and watching through news feeds, not interacting anymore. One major example is Facebook, which started as an online platform mirroring the printed brochures of Harvard classes. Initially, users to know what others were doing, had to physically click and search for the name or page of the person they were interested in. With the introduction of the news feed in 2006, Facebook changed everything: when users logged in, now they could see what other people were doing, without actually searching for it. Facebook advertised it as a way to create a network to "socialize" **(Chung, 2020)**[1] but this created a huge problem: users were now faced with an enormous amount of information, difficult to control. To manage the situation, Facebook started to rely more and more on algorithms to sort the information and personalise content according to users' preferences. The consequence was a polarised online environment, where bots could post continuously and normal users had no idea of what was happening outside their "personalised and targeted bubble". The malicious environment for conspiracy theories and fake news was thus created. Now, I saw the change happen and sometimes felt the alienation that social media created in our society. When the pandemics started, I started noticing how mis\disinformation was circulating at a fast pace, as people were confused and overwhelmed by the situation, this sparked my interest in the field that this dissertation deals with. I was wondering "what is the motive that allows people to actually believe in these conspiracy theories?" and "why would someone even create and spread such content online?", so I started to read more on the argument and I joined groups of people with the same interests as me, who wanted to receive feedback and fact-checked information from experts or academics.

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[1] CHUNG C "*Breaking News: The Evolution and Controversy of Facebook's News Feed*", Harvard Political Review, March 14, 2020, available at
https://harvardpolitics.com/breaking-news/

Research methodology

The methodological approach taken in this dissertation employs qualitative and quantitative methods of enquiry. My main purpose is to attempt to answer the following research question, stated also in the introductory section, "Is the current world pandemic creating an environment favourable for conspiracy theories to spread in democratic countries?".

The research question aims to describe the characteristics of conspiracy theories, their originators and believers and then moves on to examine the cause-effect relationship between pandemics and the proliferation of these theories. The qualitative data collected is secondary, based on previous research, and largely descriptive.

The approach is interdisciplinary because of the versatile nature of the debate about conspiracy theories, which touches multiple fields like history, psychology, philosophy, sociology, anthropology, political science etc… Since, the subject of study are conspiracy theories during the current pandemic, also the matter of psychological health issues caused by the situation is briefly touched.

With the scope of the research I could not go too far back in time, to not result too detached from the pandemic context, although while investigating conspiracy movements and the usage of social media, I have employed classic literature on the topic- prior pandemic.

With the study I concentrated on the psychological, demographic, political and ideological aspects associated with conspiracy convictions, adding to that the "pandemic factor". Furthermore, as the thesis involves the online world and social media, the issue had to be approached in conjunction with the perspective of data scientists, and use their research to scrutinize the large-scale communication effect of conspiracy theories. In particular, an interesting observation has been given on the employment of algorithms on social media and how they created a polarized online environment.

To elaborate on my case study selection, the Qanon conspiracy movement, I have adopted two perspectives and two time frames.

First of all, Qanon is put into context in relation to other classic conspiracy theories and movements, to observe similarities. Then, what are the differences of Qanon and how it differs from other conspiracy theories, especially given the huge influence of social media and the Presidential support it received. With time frames, I mean comparing the number and behaviour of Qanon supporters before and after the pandemic.

One major obstacle encountered while collecting data on the topic, was and still is, the fact that not much time has passed since the beginning of the pandemic. For this reason, it is still too early to analyse the impact of the Covid-19 crisis, nevertheless, some scholars have already started to express their views on the matter. The health crisis is a global threat, and interdependency in international systems is unavoidable, therefore all countries in the world are being affected. The logic deduction would be to affirm that the response was also unified. However, this was not the case, especially during the first wave of the pandemic. As the dissertation proceeds to consider a phenomenon that is influenced by the global pandemic, it

is important to see how different theories of international relations can be used to look at the pandemic.

In this thesis, I have adopted a vast array of literature, divided into the following way: books, research papers, statements, reports, articles, podcasts and online events. The reader will notice that the quantity of literature for each section is not exactly balanced: the main reason is, as stated before, the recent nature of the topic chosen. Consequently, most books have been published in 2020, answering the pressing need for research in the pandemic field, others prior to 2020, refer to classical analysis on conspiracy theories (Coady, Pigden, Keeley, Popper etc…) and social media.

The research papers regarding trends of the spread of Conspiracy Theories online, on the other hand, are mostly coming from the data science field, dealing with algorithms employed on social media and the number of keywords conspiracy-related popping up online.

In the dissertation I have furthermore considered all those statements and reports on the matter published by International Organizations (like World Health Organization) or by the European Union, and national governments.

Overall, the vast majority of literature comes from newspapers and articles published during the period 2020-2021 covering many fields of study and disciplines.

Interdisciplinarity in the literature used, mirrors the urgency and importance of this global event, calling for the participation of a diverse number of researchers and academics.

To conclude, a list of podcasts and online events to which I have participated are included in the bibliography, together with personal comments and quoted opinions from hosts.

The following subchapter aims to give an overview of the global pandemic, the landscape of this dissertation, and how International Relations Theories are interpreting it.

0.1 International Relations Theories and the Global Pandemic

Despite being a unique phenomenon, the policy responses that emerged during the pandemic are quite common. According to **Johnson (2020)**[2], nations challenged each logical IR supposition, resulting in <u>three different behaviours</u>. The <u>first</u> one concerns International Organisations who were blamed for their poor performance in dealing with the crisis. An example is an abrupt decision of the US under the Trump Presidency to withdraw from the World Health Organization in July 2020. The bureaucratic apparatus of IOs makes them an easy target to blame. <u>Second</u>, the human tendency to prioritize short-term solutions and responses to long-term ones is reflected in the way national governments acted when the pandemic started, closing borders and racing to win priority in the distribution of vaccines. To avoid this, the solutions could be to delegate powers to other authorities (like the WHO) or to push politicians to think more from a collective point of view. Both solutions failed during

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[2] JOHNSON B, *"COVID: An Extraordinary Crisis, but Ordinary Political Patterns"*, The Duck of Minerva, October 26, 2020, available at
https://www.duckofminerva.com/2020/10/covid-an-extraordinary-crisis-but-ordinary-political-patterns.html

the pandemic, as IOs were targeted and isolation and populism hampered efforts. <u>Third</u>, scientific experts could have taken the reins by guiding the endeavours to stop the crisis, given they could be more efficient and far from political interests. However, relying on governments or task forces composed entirely by technicians raises the question of whether they are democratically supported or not. Furthermore, polarization and populism led to a divided public opinion or anti-elitist tendencies.

As noted by **Walt (2020)**[3], nation-states will still remain the fundamental actors, with an increase of nationalism and therefore, competition between powers. The pandemic will not create new phenomena but it will exacerbate existing ones. Additionally, he notes the existence of a general trend towards a less free world, with more restrictions and control. The global power will shift from the Western world to Asia as a consequence. The nationalistic stances are not only to be found in Western democracies, like the United States but also in China where they respond to a need for internal cohesion, as Chinese citizens felt disrespected from the outside during the pandemic, they look internally for cohesion.

Ikenberry (2020)[4] argues that the immediate reaction of governments to the pandemic was negative, but looking at the long-term perspective we are on the road towards an open system with better capacities to manage interdependence and based on a more international point of view. In short, IOs are not destined to fail and not all crises end up with a failure in cooperation between countries.

Lake (2020)[5], during an online event hosted by the London School of Economics and Political Science suggests that the catastrophic nature of pandemics can be used as a "tabula rasa" moment when it is possible for activists to mobilize and encourage structural changes. There could be a possibility for transformative social change.

Fareedi (2020)[6] suggests that the pandemic was a wake-up call to show that most International Relations theories are either too limited or too anachronistic, for example concerning the realist perspective, which limits relations between countries as mere rivalry between superpowers, which pass the blame to one another. In the case of a global pandemic, where the problem is affecting everyone, the solutions must come from multiple actors working together, not single isolated powers.

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[3] WALT S, "*The world order after the Pandemic*", IIEA online talk, October 01, 2020, available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7WoOje_mDNQ

[4] IKENBERRY, "*Democracies will come out of their shell*", FP, March 20, 2020, available at https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/03/20/world-order-after-coroanvirus-pandemic/

[5] LAKE, Blakeley G, Day S A, Jarrett C, Mcbean S and Sheikh S (speakers), Lake M (chair), Naqvi N (moderator), "*The Pandemic as a Portal: activism and opportunities for structural change following moments of cris*", LSE online public event hosted by the department of International Relations, November 19, 2020, available at https://www.lse.ac.uk/Events/2020/11/202011191830/portal

[6] FAREEDI G, "*Opinion-Challenges to the Realist Perspective during the Coronavirus Pandemic*", E-International Relations, May 06, 2020, available at

https://www.e-ir.info/2020/05/06/opinion-challenges-to-the-realist-perspective-during-the-coronavirus-pandemic/

Zizek (2020)[7] points out that the pandemic is a great chance to empower a vision of the world orbiting around a global organization, as the main aim is to alleviate the pain and suffering of Covid-19 victims. In the severe lockdowns adopted by many countries, the emphasis was in fact put on saving as many people as possible. These countries show a positive, strong sense of community. **Zizek (2020)**[8], despite taking into account the spread of other viruses, ideological viruses like disinformation, fake news, conspiracy theories and so on, suggests that maybe also the virus of change could proliferate. A change for more solidarity globally.

Many methodologies can be consequently applied while analysing the pandemic, this dissertation took into account all the perspectives proposed by different scholars, but focused its attention on some more than others. In particular, the one suggesting that the pandemic showed a lack of global response but also a failure of leadership in terms of communication. To correctly describe events that can be considered as a public good, however different national leaders framed the problem differently. For example, Germany focused more on the measures to be taken, while on the other hand, France framed the Covid-19 virus-like an enemy to be defeated in war.[9]This had as a consequence the creation of a vacuum of effective political communication, which was filled by conspiracy theories. Online platforms also accelerated the phenomenon, even creating conspiracy ideas like the fact that governments created the virus on purpose to control citizens and to justify the strict lockdown measures.

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[7] ZIZEK S, "*Pandemic!: COVID-19 Shakes the World*", OR Books, pages 146, 2020

[8] Ibid, pp. 37-46, 2020

[9] Macron even framed the lockdown as a war "*nous sommes en guerre...*" and "*... mobilisation générale contre un ennemi invisible...*": Lemarié, Pietralunga, Le Monde, March 17, 2020

Literature review

The dataset on which the findings are based consists more or less of a sample of over 200 articles, policy briefs, and research reports.

I will now briefly- as I will analyse the specifics in the next chapters- present the existing research that relates to my research question

In the <u>first chapter</u> about the study of conspiracy theories, the main study started from one major characteristic that relates conspiracies and epidemics: **uncertainty**. For this reason, the study presented showed and measured how a rise in the feeling of uncertainty is strictly related to the rise of tendencies to believe in conspiracy beliefs.

Building on that, the second study found in the <u>second chapter</u>, takes a step further by measuring **interaction**. The analysis showed how the popularity of the originator of disinformation determines how much interaction a post will get. Even if the majority of disinformation is generated from normal users, famous accounts generate more interaction.

In <u>Chapter Three</u>, consisting mainly in the investigation of social media, I proceed to use the help of studies which assessed "how many people" started to actively use social media after the start of the pandemic. In fact, the migration to social media platforms during the pandemic has increased greatly determining more **flow of information**- and potentially disinformation.

If the flow of information increased, I proceeded on the basis of starting to consider how the owners of the platforms involved are tackling the pending critical situation. Consequently, <u>Chapter Four</u> used studies to 1) measure the counter-action taken by **tech companies** and 2) their effects. In particular, I have observed how **advertisements** can be used for positive no-profit and\or neutral profitable reasons.

To conclude, as stated before, my main case study has been on the QAnon conspiracy, presented in the <u>last Chapter</u>.

What I wanted to show by using the study of scientists expert in data and social media, is how many conspiracy followers **QAnon** had prior-and post pandemic. To answer my research question, I argue that there has been a growth in both the number of followers, interaction and actions taken by this conspiracy group.

The studies taken into consideration measured behaviour on both official, mainstream, regulated platforms and their more free, anarchic counterparts.

Needless to say that the COVID-19 pandemic is the historical background motif of all these studies. The results obtained are all in support of my research project, showing a stark correlation, in terms of numbers, between epidemics and conspiracy theor-ism.

Specific reference to the studies mentioned above can be found in each single Chapter.

Chapter 1 - Conspiracy Theories

In the context of a world pandemic, believing in lies can have deadly consequences. Hoaxes, fake news and conspiracies are not funny stories to laugh at, or a reason to mock whoever believes in such theories.

Indeed for some, the first reaction when confronted with conspiracy theories would be to dismiss them, or to label conspiracy believers as "lunatics", "outsiders" and"paranoids".

But what happens when these "lunatics" suddenly have access to a platform that connects them with a public as big as never seen before? Not only, what if that public suddenly starts to spend a lot of time on that platform?

Well, as one might expect, the outcome is clearly worrisome.

To clarify, the platform mentioned is social media and the trigger event is the Covid-19 pandemic. As the pandemic unfolded, it brought more and more people to spend more time on social media platforms for various reasons: entertainment or simple concern to search for answers and solutions. More online traffic, more information is shared and more likelihood that the information is false- intentionally or unintentionally so. Furthermore, the probability that more people vulnerable to conspiracy thinking got into contact with conspiracies increased. The coronavirus conspiracies shared online, most of the time have not been created ad hoc, but are the result of a re-shaping of pre-existing theories. This explains why some of them still linger on anti-semitic\racist and sinophobic content.

In addition, the reason why it has been argued that deceitful conspiracies have serious consequences on the health of citizens, is measurable and a result of studies.

For example, a study from the **University of Oxford (2020)**[10] shows that this increased distrust towards official sources caused by those who believe and disseminate conspiracy theories, makes people less likely to follow official guidelines concerning the safety measures to adopt during a pandemic. A small minority, compared to the total number of citizens, actually believes 100% in conspiracies, but a vast majority (sixty percent in the study) has still somehow been influenced by some fragments of conspiracy narratives. The result is that the guidelines adopted by governments to stop the epidemic are made useless or difficult to comply with if some people simply do not follow them because they are sceptical about the government's actions. Furthermore, as another study suggests[11] **(Allington 2020)**, there is clear evidence of the relationship between serial doubters (people who tendentially feel uncertain and not inclined to comply with governmental policies) and believing in conspiracies.

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[10] UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD, "*Conspiracy Beliefs Reduces the Following of Government Coronavirus Guidance"*, News Events, May 22, 2020, available at Conspiracy Beliefs Reduces the Following of Government Coronavirus Guidance | University of Oxford

[11] ALLINGTON D, "*COVID-19 conspiracy theories present 'substantial' health risk, new research finds*", King's College London News Centre, April 9, 2020, available at COVID-19 conspiracy theories present 'substantial' health risk, new research finds (kcl.ac.uk)

Having established the importance of analysing conspiracy theories in today's context, as they are deadly weapons risking to harm people's lives, let us move to a deep study on CTs[12].

1.1 An overview of the definition of Conspiracy Theories

In this chapter my aim is to give an overview of the different definitions of conspiracy theories, and how they relate to each other. Throughout time many interpretations of conspiracy theories have been given, depending on the perspective at which we look at the notion of conspiracy movements. Topic for the first chapter has been the help of Prof. **Quassam (2019)**[13] who has kindly accepted to give me access to his research concerning conspiracy theories.

First of all, to be more precise, it is recommended to make a distinction between the term "*conspiracy*" and "conspiracy *theory*". In this dissertation, the term conspiracy is almost always used in association with the theories supporting ideologies linked to conspiracy motives, in particular when talking about the political influence of this phenomenon. Conspiracy theories have always been around, from ancient times up to the present day, some examples are theories suggesting that the 9\11 terrorist attacks were organized by the President of the United States himself, tragic accidents of famous celebrities were just a way to make them disappear and they are still alive, the moon landing is fake and never happened...and so on. Conspiracy theories are all around us, there is no way to isolate ourselves from their influence. Even when we believe that we are immune to them, it might be that some kind of conspiracy rumour is still reaching us and without knowing it, we believe some part of it. They tend to be sometimes widely held ideas, no matter if they are founded or unfounded. If we think about the chaotic time after the terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers on September 11, 2001, all suppositions circulating at the time were in some way all conspiracy theories, and we all believed in one or the other. Not until they were founded by the claim of Al-Qaeda to have conducted the attack.

What comes into mind when we say the word conspiracy?

First of all, usually the term has a negative connotation. Conspiracies are associated with irrationality, shying away from fact-checked information etc.. Sometimes, believers of conspiracies can also be dangerous and operating with ill-intent, and this does not help their reputation at all. Second, conspiracies are not a one-man job, more than one person has to gather together in order to organize something. Lastly, a conspiracy makes no sense if done in public, in broad daylight. Conspiracies are done in secret, *in the dark*. For these reasons, broadly speaking, when more than two people gather and plot in secrecy to do something against the law with harmful intent, we can say that we are talking about a *conspiracy*.

When we talk about a conspiracy *theory*, the definition varies.

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[12] CTs = Conspiracy Theory(ies)

[13] CASSAM Q, "*Conspiracy Theories*", Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019

Dentith (2019) offers us two basic definitions, one suggesting that a conspiracy theory is simply put a "*theory applied to a conspiracy*"[14] and adding to that, a conspiracy theory is some sort of narrative trying to explain an occurrence by using a conspiratorial belief as a major factor influencing the unfolding of such event **(Dentith, 2019)**[15]. This is a vast definition, which can be applied to many famous conspiracy theories, such as the 9\11 attacks, and as we can see it just states that conspiracies are often supported by a narrative. The problem with this definition is that it is too superficial, and it does not investigate the matter of checking if a conspiracy is founded, or not, linked to true and real events, or not. Nevertheless, it is a useful start for the investigation of the way we can define a conspiracy theory. Given this definition of a conspiracy theory, we can then ask ourselves now: who is a conspiracy theorist? Or to put it differently, who is the originator of a conspiracy theory?

Pigden (2007) builds on the previous definition suggesting that a conspiracy theorist is generally speaking someone who endorses such theories[16], and if we have previously said that a conspiracy theory is a conspiracy supported by a given theory, the logical consequence would be to say that "then every politically and historically literate person is a big-time conspiracy theorist"[17]. From this point of view, it is quite impossible to say that someone is immune to being a believer and an originator of a conspiracy theory. Only someone who would hypothetically live completely isolated from society and uneducated could be a non-conspiracy theorist. By drawing on the concept of this definition, Pigden has been able to show some examples to justify his definition, by diving into the world of politics. It was previously stated that a group of people meeting in secrecy to organize an action with malicious intent is a conspiracy, consequently a coup d'état could be an example of a conspiracy. As we all know some examples of coup d'états and we believe in them, according to this definition, we are all conspiracy theorists up to a certain extent. Pigden also states that in normal functioning democracies, conspiracies are ordinary phenomena. Before an election, or a change among the highest representative of a State, there is some amount of sketchy scheming going on behind the scenes. Trying to build consensus between Ministers to challenge your opposition is often a maneuver to be done in secretiveness, and to follow the line of thought of this definition, it is again possible to say that those involved in this process, are conspiracy theorists.

In the same vein, **David Coady (2006)** in his book "*Conspiracy Theories: the Philosophical Debate*"[18] defines conspiracy theories. He follows the same pattern presented above, defining what a conspiracy is, then what a theory is, and lastly how a conspiracy theory can be

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[14] DENTITH M R X, "*Conspiracy Theories and Philosophy: Bringing the Epistemology of a Freighted Term into the Social Sciences*", in USCINSKI J (ed.), "*Conspiracy Theories & the People Who Believe Them*", Oxford: Oxford University Press, page 94, 2019

[15] DENTITH M R X, "*Conspiracy Theories and Philosophy: Bringing the Epistemology of a Freighted Term into the Social Sciences*", in USCINSKI J(ed.), "*Conspiracy Theories & the People Who Believe Them*", Oxford: Oxford University Press, page 102, 2019

[16] PIGDEN C, "*Conspiracy theories and the conventional wisdom*", Episteme: A Journal of Social Epistemology 4, page 222, 2007

[17] Ibid.

[18] COADY D, "*Conspiracy Theories: The philosophical Debate*", Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2006

characterized. He states that one line of thought to follow could be to say that the main feature of a conspiracy is that it is always opposed to an official explanation of an event (**Coady, page 3, 2006**)[19]. In layman's terms, when a theory fostered in clandestineness by a minority is antithetical to an official account, we are confronted with a conspiracy theory. In such cases, the definition does not dig into the matter of whether the official explanation is true or not. Nevertheless, Coady also questions the fact that sometimes even the official stance is conspiratorial. Even if it is not purposely conspiratorial, it might be that it is trying to obfuscate some kind of error that officials do not want to transpire.

Surely, both definitions can be true at the same time, believing in one does not devalue the righteousness of the first.

Those who advocate for this kind of definition of conspiracy theories, consider the link between conspiracy, conspiracy theories and conspiracy theorists presented so far, as a logical consequence. **Cassam (2019)**, in his book "Conspiracy Theories" classified the various definitions of conspiracy theories, the one presented so far has been defined by the scholar as a "*neutral*"[20] definition.

I believe that one of the limitations with this explanation is that it does not take into account all the other factors that are involved with the interpretation of conspiracy theories, such as epistemological, political and psychological aspects. It is too broad and too limited, and for the purpose of this dissertation not helpful enough to investigate what brings people to believe and join conspiracy theories. Nonetheless, academics like Pigden, Dentith and Coady have the merit to have started a debate on this topic trying to question the negative fame usually associated with conspiracy theories. Their aim was to present conspiracy theories\theorists as something not purely irrational and distant from academia, but to try to suggest that we can all be conspirators (willingly or not willingly).

1.2 Defining a Conspiracy Theory in a critical way

On the other spectrum of the vast array of literature defining conspiracy theories, we can find a more *critical* (**Cassam, 2019**)[21] approach to the investigation. A significant analysis and discussion on the subject was presented by **Brian L. Keeley (2006)[22]**. Taking into account the previous definitions, the logical deduction would be that everyone is vulnerable to the influence of conspiracy theories and might possibly be a conspiracy theorist. However, there are other features to define a conspiracy theory that might suggest that for example, educated

[19] COADY D, "*Conspiracy Theories: The philosophical Debate*", Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Limited, page 3, 2006
[20] CASSAM Q., "*Conspiracy Theories*", Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019
[21] Ibid.
[22] KEELEY B, "*Of Conspiracy Theories*", in COADY D (ed.), "*Conspiracy Theories: The Philosophical Debate*" (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Limited): 45-60, 2006

people are less prone to believe in conspiracies. It is unlikely for a literate person to choose to trust humorous or malicious deceptions instead of the official sources of information. With the term educated, I refer to someone who has some knowledge of politics, follows the news, studied history in her\his education cycle, and according to that, knows more or less how to distinguish between a fake and a real news. For these individuals, it is less probable to believe in groundless conspiracy theories. The critical definition differs from the previous account mainly because it brings something new to the table. If the first definition is certainly useful as a starting point for the analysis of this dissertation, Keeley goes deeper with his investigation.What Keeley suggests is that there we can make a distinction between a conspiracy with some kind of truth backing up its content and a conspiracy with no truthful ground. He calls the second group "**unwarranted conspiracy theories**" (UCTs)[23].

What are the characteristics of UCTs?
1. First of all, a conspiracy theory always needs to build a counter-story to an official narrative. A conspiracy theorist tends to believe that what official sources are delivering as an explanation to some kind of event, is just an excuse to cover, hide the "real truth". Consequently, the first characteristic of an UCT is the dichotomy: official story-real truth\real story (aka conspiracy theory).
2. Second, the narrative built by a conspiracy theory has never a positive goal, what is being organised during a scheme has not a beneficial effect on society, a group of people, an individual etc… To make myself more clear, no secret group of conspirators wants to create a plot to "solve the world's hunger, mitigate climate change etc….". The intent is always malicious.
3. Conspiracy theories are able to find links between events that are not related at all. In their minds, everything (bad) is part of a grand scheme orchestrated to harm someone. For example, conspiracy theorists might believe that the coronavirus was created by the Chinese government as a response to the trade war between the Asian country and the United States, linking geopolitical unrelated events to justify a crisis situation.
4. The "real truth" is concealed and protected by classified information. The only way to prevent the plot of the conspirators, is to undisclose the information and make it available to the public.
5. The classified information can be either antagonistic to the official account, or simply it fell through the cracks of the official statements- and the believers of conspiracies are able to catch it.

The next step in our reasoning is to ask ourselves what makes this type of conspiracy theories so appealing to the public. What makes conspiracy theorists desert official narratives and choose to believe in such theories?
To start, there is a beauty in having a unified narrative that can decipher multiple events, even not related to each other. As said above, conspiracies are always linked to other conspiracies, or tragic events, creating a network of theories self-explaining each other. Not only this, but

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[23] KEELEY B, "*Of Conspiracy Theories*", in COADY D (ed.), "*Conspiracy Theories: The Philosophical Debate*" (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Limited): 45-60, 2006

UCTs are passepartouts to resolve even more mysteries and problems of the official theories, they go "above and beyond". In a way, they are like slogans, too simple and easy to use to describe the complexity of events.

Furthermore, another strength of conspiracies is the fact that the more you gather proof to discredit them, the more they use it to their advantage. When for example a government commits with great effort to tackle conspiracy theories, a conspiracy theorist sees that as a fishy move to hide more the reality of what happened. A conspiracy theorist is after all a critic, a cynic who does not trust institutions and science. Nonetheless, the very core of the scientific method is filled with uncertainty, a theory remains a theory until when enough reviewed evidence is collected. Interestingly enough, there seems to be more faith required from a science-person to believe in a theory than for a conspiracy theorist.

1.3 Defining a Conspiracy Theory from an Epistemic point of view

Circling back to the first definition of conspiracy theory given in the overview section of this dissertation, we can look at another approach of definition, the epistemic one.

So far, we have seen that the study of conspiracy theories is a highly multidisciplinary issue, and different researchers expressed their sometimes opposite opinions.

In the case of the epistemic definition, the discipline of philosophy comes into the scene.

As it was argued before that a conspiracy theory is after all just a theory like any other, then from an epistemological point of view, to assess if a theory is a conspiracy, we must look at each particular case. From an epistemic point of view, conspiracies are evaluated in case studies.

The previous definitions either argued that conspiracy theories have originally a negative connotation, or they are open to doubt. We may call these "loose definitions".

What the epistemic definition introduces is a more circumstantial explanation.

Furthermore, according to **Dentith (2019)[24]**, it is possible to take a less derogative approach towards conspiracy theories. No matter the type of branding attributed to a conspiracy, the author suggests focusing on virtues instead of flaws.

Dentith highlights the virtues of conspiracies, arguing that they could for example raise awareness towards the wrongdoings of politics, ask for more transparency and so on. It should also be said that in his interesting analysis he acknowledges the drawbacks of conspiracies. If these theories shape the public opinion to think more critically of governmental policies, at the same time the target of questioning could shift from the State's policy making to the institutional framework.

Unquestionably, distrust towards institutions is a dangerous attitude for a healthy democracy. However, what Dentith is arguing is that even the flaws attributed to conspiracy theories, considered to outweigh virtues, have been historically attributed notwithstanding.

In short, as most researchers define conspiracies in negative terms, we risk being used to considering them in those terms, not realizing the positive effects they have on society.

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[24] DENTITH M R X, "*Conspiracy Theories and Philosophy: Bringing the Epistemology of a Freighted Term into the Social Sciences*", in USCINSKI J (ed.), "*Conspiracy Theories & the People Who Believe Them*", Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019

It has conclusively been shown that the epistemic definition debated that there is no reason to consider conspiracy theories in a negative way, it can even be argued that the faith in conspiracies can be rational. Subsequently, it is more wise to look at conspiracies case-by-case.

This philosophical approach has certainly positive aspects, yet for the research question of this dissertation we must highlight some disadvantages.

To begin with, a weakness with this argument is that the vast majority of conspiracy theories have a political agenda standing behind them[25]. Considering only the philosophical aspect, might be too "naive" and forget that conspiracies tend to be heavily politicized. Given recent events, like the Covid-19 pandemic and the flourishing theories suggesting a political motive to the spread of the virus, we can thereby see how it is difficult to decouple politics and conspiracies.

Moreover, researchers who "support" conspiracy theories suggest that by studying the different case studies we might find a rationale. Yet, what if there is no rationale at all? Even more, what if there is not even a theory to a conspiracy?

A significant analysis and discussion on this subject was presented by **Muirhead and Rosenblum (2019)**. The studies previously considered suggested that conspiracies are accompanied by a *theory*.

However, **Muirhead and Rosenblum (2019)** argue that there is a "*new conspiracism without the theory*"[26].

The main characteristic of the new conspiracism is that it is based on no proof, no data. It simply appears out of nowhere. There is no attempt to gather information to discover a secret plot or to link different theories. One of the distinguished features is that new conspiracism is based on blank allegations, without an effort to look up for evidence supporting the conspiracy claims. What we can call classic conspiracism used to gather proof (even if the proof was groundless), look for a reason to justify the theory of the conspiracy. Especially in times of uncertainty, conspiracy theories were born to justify the need of "knowing why" of humans, or simply to find a deeper meaning behind tragic events that were the result of unforeseen coincidences. With new conspiracism things are different. Let's consider the Trump presidency, where even the highest office of State was actively involved in the spread of conspiracies. Blank allegations are said, repeated over and over, but never an explanation is given to justify these allegations. Repeating that "the media is corrupted", only capable of producing "fake news", or that the results of elections are not fair, but were created by some kind of conspiracy from an external threat trying to mess with State affairs (the Chinese, the Russian government ecc..) is an example of the tendency registered in this new form of conspiracy. Furthermore, there is no political agenda supporting new conspiracism. In the past, conspiracism could be associated with the left or right spectrum of politics, with different characteristics or motives yes, but always political affiliation. In addition, depending on the political side, the main goal was to change the establishment somehow. With the

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[25] CASSAM Q., "*Conspiracy Theories*", Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019
[26] MUIRHEAD R. & Rosenblum, N, "*A Lot of People Are Saying: The New Conspiracism and the Assault on Democracy*", Princeton: Princeton University Press, page 2, 2019

"nouvelle conspiracies" instead of the wish to produce change, there is something that is very common in the age of new media: reiteration. Social media, and the internet more in general are both the perfect habitat but also the cause for new conspiracies to spread. Given the medium, which does not allow for long explanations and the production of theories, conspiracies are created, spread with bleak claims, reposted, retweeted etc…. There is nor the time, nor the will of conspirators to work to collect data to support their theories. In addition, there are no gatekeepers in the communication between public and private individuals, no one to oversee the proper functioning media. The success of a conspiracy is given by the number of interactions with the posts, which tend to be very high thanks to bots producing and permeating the online environment, and by the fact that online communities are polarized. Moreover, if sometimes classic conspiracies were useful for democracies because they raised problems and tried to expose the wrongdoings of politicians, it is not the same case with new conspiracism.

It is even more dangerous, because the targets are institutions, not the actions of people working inside them. This is a serious danger for democracies, because what is put under scrutiny are the very bones of democracy. Not trusting institutions is a critical problem for democracies, because it curbs the foundation and values on which a State is based on. What the new conspiracy is doing, is to make authorities seem not valid or acceptable. An example is the reaction of ex President Trump's supporters after his defeat during the past elections. New conspirators started to claim that the elections were unlawful, that the institutions involved were corrupted, and the results of the votes were the result of falsification.

In short, was Muirhead and Rosenblum are implying is that new conspiracism has these fundamental characteristics: it "*sheds political theory and collective action*" **(Muirhead and Rosenblum, 2019)**[27]. Moreover, the development of this type of conspiracism has not appeared in our lives out of nowhere, on the contrary, it is the result of a process started years ago. A process started first with the technological revolution. The achievements of technology in recent years and the role of new media in the world, shape our understanding of participatory democracy in a new environment where citizens have opportunities that were unconceivable years ago. The main difference that social media brings to the debate is that it provides opportunity to users to partly replace the role of journalists for example. There are no more gatekeepers in the flow of information. No scientific authority is in charge of fact-checking what is posted online, allowing conspiracies to spread easily. Furthermore, the polarization of social media and politics, created a hostile habitat for healthy political debate.

It is clear now how the phenomenon of new conspiracism introduced by Muirhead and Rosenblum clashes with the virtues of conspiracies praised by the epistemic definition.

For the research question of this thesis, it is also advisable to investigate the motives and ethos of conspirators.

Are, for example, some people more prone to believe in conspiracies?

To answer this query we shall look at the psychological definition of conspiracy theories.

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[27] Ibid. page 28-31

1.4 The psychology of Conspiracy Theories

There is a large volume of published studies describing the relationship between psychological dispositions and conspiracy theories.

Generally speaking, only a minority of people believes in all conspiracies he\she encounters or rejects a priori all of them. The vast majority of us are hesitant to trust conspiracies while being at the same time mildly attracted to them. The way we look at what happens around us on a daily basis is not always a result of rational analysis, it is quite possible that our preferences, our political affiliations and ideology shape our judgments. As said before, in times of uncertainty we tend to look for answers, it is a natural human disposition to search for an explanation for unpredictable events taking place. Conspiracy theories can be to some people the reading key to solve unpredictability. It is on average, difficult for humans to accept that not everything happens for a reason. Not all events, especially when tragic, need to have an explanation, or someone pulling the strings in secret.

Sometimes things...just happen.

Some scholars suggest that there is a relationship between those people believing in conspiracy theories and their psychological traits, they possess what is called a "conspiratorial attitude". By claiming this, it is therefore logical to understand how easy it can be for conspiracy theories to spread even faster than official accounts. In this case, the internet revolution made the life of conspiracy theorists less difficult. As news is published at an extraordinarily faster pace than in the past, it is also easier to have conflicting stories being broadcasted at the same time and this creates a fertile soil for conspiracies. On the other hand, thanks to the internet it is also very easy to demystify conspiracies and their spread.

Furthermore, there is also a tendency for people who endorse one conspiracy, to endorse others, even if totally unrelated. Besides, conspiracy believers can embrace theories which are antithetical.

These considerations are not helpful though to understand why some people have a "conspiratorial attitude" and others do not.

To begin with, a question to be asked: <u>are conspiracy believers affected by paranoia?</u>

A first important study on the matter was done by **Richard Hofstadter (1964)** who published an essay called "*The Paranoid Style in American Politics*"[28] in . This was the first important study to investigate the role of conspiracy theories throughout American history. If on one hand this essay had the great virtue to initiate a whole vast array of literature on the topic, on the other hand it also contributed to create a distinctly negative impression of conspiracy believers, defining them "paranoids".

To summarize Hofstadter's thesis the "paranoid style" is characterized by delusional attitudes, an impulse to exaggerate facts, and a lot of imagination.

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[28] HOFSTADTER R, "*The Paranoid style in American Politics*", Harper's magazine, 1964

The historical context is also important to understand the analysis of Hofstadter, given that the essay was published after the end of the WWII, in the postwar United States (with the looming threat of atomic bombs). Moreover with the unfolding of the Cold War, it is understandable that Hofstadter's reasoning is heavily influenced by the atmosphere of that time. His essay is couched in terms of negativity towards conspiracy believers and originators.

In addition, according to the scholar, paranoids represent only a small minority of the population, and they live on the margins of society.

As **Hofstadter (1964)** points out, the paranoid "*...is always manning the barricades of civilization. He constantly lives at a turning point: it is now or never in organizing resistance to conspiracy. Time is forever just running out*"[29].

According to this quote taken from his essay, Hofstadter is implying that conspiracy believers are individuals who belong to small minorities of society, living at the edge of human compounds. The thesis of Hofstadter has been tested by many scholars, among them: **Ted Goertzel (1994)**[30]. The purpose of Goerztel's research was to see if the characteristics of paranoid people are to be found more in those who are susceptible to conspiracy theories. He and a team of researchers conducted a number of surveys to evaluate some of these characteristics, in particular suspicion and scepticism. They found out that the more people are wary of authorities, the "establishment", colleagues, family members etc… the more likely they were to believe in sentences containing conspiracy theories. Furthermore, it was not difficult for researchers like Goertzel and Hofstadter to find examples of conspiracy-aficionados living marginalized in society, belonging to ethnic minorities or racially discriminated against.

However, conspiracy theories thrive and receive high popularity among the masses too. The same research conducted by Goerztel and his team showed that each interviewee believed in or considered to be truthful at least one conspiracy theory. Therefore, Hofstadter's account must be approached with some caution because yes, conspiracies and their believers flourish in the outskirts of society, however they are also a major phenomenon.

The Covid-19 information epidemic is in fact, the perfect example to show how susceptible we are to conspiracies.

To go back to the initial question related to paranoia, researchers suggest excluding people affected by pathologies when counting believers of conspiracies. They represent de facto only a small portion of society.

Instead, let's focus on one key word: **control**.

We already talked about the need for people to know what is happening, especially in times of uncertainty, and the constant research for security. In short, people want to have control of their lives and of the events happening around them. It is not always easy to do so. According to Brotherton, paranoia often springs from the deep inner need of control. When we cannot have control, we get anxious, we are desperate to look for solutions and explanations and eventually, we become a little bit paranoid. This psychological need is called "*compensatory*

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[29] Ibid.

[30] GOERTZEL T, "*Belief in Conspiracy Theories*", Political Psychology, Vo. 15, n4, pp 731-742, December, 1994, available at https://doi.org/10.2307/3791630

control"[31] **(Brotherton, 2015)**. To achieve this kind of control, our brain resorts to either finding a strong supporter, or authoritative figure, or to find a common antagonist. In the first case, many people may place their hopes in governments, public authorities, or if they are religious, to the divine. In the second case, identifying a threat makes people more united and leads them to believe that they can actually defeat the menace. These two options unconsciously reassure our brains, they are more preferable than randomness, even if it is a totally natural phenomenon. Let's take for example what happened during the pandemic. For some people, trusting their government completely, welcoming restrictions and lockdowns was a way to feel secure. It is likely that these individuals have a higher trust towards institutions and their work. On the other hand, people with a tendency to be sceptical are presumably more inclined towards finding a common antagonist. These people, since their governments do not provide them with the above said enemy, resort to believe in conspiracies. Thinking that a group of scientists in a secret lab in China created a deadly virus to undermine Western countries, seems paradoxically more comforting than acknowledging that epidemics can happen, and that it is more likely that climate change is involved.

Furthermore, Brotherthon also lists other cognitive characteristics involved in the creation and adhesion to conspiracy theories.

Said characteristics are: *intentionality*, *confirmation* and *proportionality* **(Brotherton, 2015)**[32].

- *Intentionality* refers to the need of finding intention everywhere. Conspiracy believers\originators always look for a form of intentionalism
- *Confirmation* is the tendency to overlook facts debunking conspiracy beliefs and blindly believe only in information supporting the cause of the conspirator.
- *Proportionality* is the tendency to match events and their motivation. For example, if a random deranged person kills a thousand people in a terrorist attack, it cannot be only the work of one person. "There must be something more, something bigger involved"

The belief structure in which conspirationist subscribe to is one sided. They feed themselves only with evidence which supports their point of view.

Moreover, the evidence can sometimes even run counter to the initial one, with no logic involved. It was also demonstrated that the higher the number to which a conspiracy believer "believes to", the higher the probability for the believer to accept whatever conspiracy proposed to him\her.

This is a general rule that applies more or less to every conspiracy adherent, no matter the extent of the faith in conspiracies.

What if we wanted to make a further distinction and see what drives conspiracy followers? Psychology accounts for many reasons, but researchers suggested looking at more aspects.

In particular, those aspects connected to the ideology or political affiliation of people.

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[31] BROTHERTON R., "*Suspicious Minds: Why We Believe Conspiracy Theories*", London: Bloomsbury Sigma, page 103, 2015
[32] Ibid. page 17

If we consider for example, extremists and their adherence to conspiracies, even if being susceptible to extremism might be a psychological factor, it would be unwise to forget the political ideology.

Historically, conspiracy theories are furthermore frequently intertwined with political extremism. It might be that a conspiracy theorist is not an extremist, but on the contrary, almost all extremists believe in conspiracies, or are creators of one.

1.5 The politics of Conspiracy Theories

The road so far has led this research through various steps on how to define a conspiracy theory. Theoretically no definition can be considered better than the other, it is more a question of how to tailor one, or more of these definitions to our research purpose.

The political definition of CTs (Conspiracy Theories) stresses the importance of all those elements normally related to the world of politics, like politizing, political propaganda and different ideologies supporting left-wing or right-wing supporters.

To draw the strands of the discussion together, I shall lay emphasis again on one fundamental characteristic of all conspiracies: their allure which strikes directly to the hearts of listeners.

A conspiracy theory targets an audience that is prone to be emotionally involved, clouding rational judgment and leading to fast unreflective decisions.

Generally speaking, it is noticeable that conspiracies, like all good stories, use two different "techniques" to lure people and make them feel sympathetic to their content.

First of all, and as it has been clarified before in the dissertation, CTs are amazing tools to provide a meaning to people who feel lost during a global pandemic. Conspiracies create purpose, give directions (even if they lead to a dead end road) when even experts fail to do so. In the vacuum of the lack of safety produced during difficult times, conspiracies can be enticing to some individuals indeed.

Second, tendentially each conspiracy in its narrative identifies an enemy, a nemesis who is trying to undermine the good intentions of its "heroes".

But the believers of the conspiracy, although outnumbered, are ready to "fight the fight" in a somehow David vs Goliath kind of way of looking at reality.

The Goliath of a typical conspiracy could be the Big Pharma, big tech companies like Google, Microsoft, Amazon etc…, well-known public officials or politicians, or a group of super rich trying to control the world (not counting the already known super rich billionaires…).

David consequently become the followers of the conspiracy, who are willing to take greater risks to uncover the ill-intentions of their "enemy". The battle to be fought is always portrayed as almost impossible, difficult to achieve but it can be done by the joint effort of "the people" by unraveling the dark secrets of the conspiracy, raising awareness.

An example could be the way the followers of the Qanon conspiracy theory portray themselves and shape their narrative. They adopt the epithet of patriots who are fighting for

their country, protecting it by following the lead of "Q" who-which gives them directions towards the path to take. In this case, both characteristics are present: the way members of Qanon find purpose in their work and how they operate in small numbers (debatable after the events of the Assault to the Capitol in January 6, 2021) against an undefeatable enemy.

On the question of "narrative", the work of **Jovan Byford (2011)** is highly important.

In his book "*Conspiracy theories: a critical introduction*" (**2011**), **Byford** extensively talks about one historical feature that unites conspiracies since the dawn of time: antisemitism and conspiracy narrative.

Regarding the particular kind of narrative used in CTs, Byford stresses the fact that all conspiracies have an "*explanatory logic*" (**Byford, 2011**)[33] in their discourse. Furthermore, the central themes and concepts are recurring, and adapted to the historical time and needs of conspiracy creators but without losing their core characteristics. One example of this homogeneousness is the fact that the same kind of explanations given by conspirators are appearing in different times and places. The justifications to the fact that the American government allowed the terrorist attack on the Twin Towers in 9\11, in order to bring the US to war, are the same that were used in the 1940s when the attack on Pearl Harbour happened.

Moreover, conspiracy believers have a tendency to simply not consider the discrepancies between different theories, but they try to find a unifying and enveloping "story", the narrative of all narratives. Another key feature is that conspiracies do not consider unpredictability as something to account for in life, there is no such thing as "c'est la vie". For someone who believes in conspiracies, he\she does not think that some conspiracies might happen and be real once in a while, on the contrary he\she believes that everything bad that happens is due to a conspiracy. Then, the more far-fetched the theory, the more believable it is in the conspirator's mind.

The self-explanatory narrative of which Byford refers to, is the fact that whatever evidence an official source can bring as explanation to a CT supporter, it can be twisted and used as evidence. The abundance of evidence is seen as an attempt of the government to hide the real truth, the lack of evidence is an encouragement to dig more deeper.

The logical consequence in the analysis of conspiracies is that a conspiracy theory for a conspiracy theorist can simply never be wrong. There is no Socratic questioning, no evidence-counter evidence pattern. Conspirators are foreign, alien to the very basic scientific method.

The next step in reasoning in Byford's book is that the shared thematics of conspiracies all have underlying racist, or extremist motives. The most age-old is anti-semitism. According to Byford, it is not possible to describe conspiracy theories without defining them politically and without highlighting their connection to anti-semitism.

Cassam (2019) to introduce the topic, uses the example of Hitler and Nazi propaganda. Nazism was a period where conspiracies were thriving and even became the official account. Hitler and his paranoia fueled anti-semitism, and talks about conspiracies of the secret Jewish plot trying to control the world flourished. The prime example is the "*Protocols of the Elders*

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[33] BYFORD J, "*Conspiracy Theories: A Critical Introduction*", Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, pp 4, 32, 2011

of Zion". The Protocols are a fabricated hoax suggesting that Jews were plotting to achieve global world domination.

What both Cassam and Byford are drawing our attention to is that conspiracies always adhere to one particular ideology. What Hitler was promoting was a clear extremist, right-wing ideology, heavily and dangerously anti-semitic. Conspiracy believers might declare themselves apolitical but truth be said, it is difficult to remove conspiracy narrative from the ideology it stems from.

Furthermore, conspiracies might sound very similar to each other because of the descriptive argumentations they use, while sharing on the same time a strong adhesion to anti-semitism.

This aversion to Jews in conspiracy theories not only can extensively be found in almost all conspiracies, but it is also used on the whole political spectrum. Right-wing conspirators focus on promoting ideas on the likes of saying that Jews are part of a world elite trying to destroy countries, overthrowing the sovereignty of nations. Left-wing conspirators on the flip side, consider this elite as part of a Zionist movement with the same motives: obtaining control of democracies and holding them over.

Having defined what is meant by descriptive argumentation, rationale of conspiracy theories and their link to anti-semitism, I will now move on to discuss why it is so important to talk about political extremism when addressing the topic of this dissertation.

Racial discrimination, populism, bigotry, fear are the core ingredients of conspiracy theories. Moreover, CTs are the favourite instrument of authoritarian regimes, used extensively for example in Hungary with Orbàn, or in Belarus with Lukaschenko. The case of Hungary perfectly fits the bill of what has been previously said. Conspiracies about George Soros have been daily bread and butter in Hungary, at least since the refugee crisis started. Coincidentally, billionaire Soros is Jewish, adding to the documented anti-semitic trope of conspiracies. Why are CTs so appealing for authoritarian leaders and regimes? To answer this question, let's return briefly to the concept of control. Conspiracies are tools to achieve control, or at least to give a false sense of "being in control". For an authoritarian leader this is certainly attractive, and it is based on the assumption that people are weak, receptive and gullible to whatever theory is being fed to them. Consequently, the need for a strong leader arises[34] (**Cassam, 2019**). Conspiracies are definitely toxic for political discourse, and during the pandemic we have seen how dangerous they can be when they jeopardise medical expertise, instilling suspicion towards authorities, slowing down the effort to stop the pandemic.

The danger of conspiracies has even increased due to a change of mindset in the approach of the general public towards conspiracies. While for traditional conspiracism, the Protocols of the Elders of Zion are the main example, a full publication with a serious approach (even if flawed and false), nowadays the attitude is different. When thinking about conspiracy believers, the first image that comes to mind might be a playful and silly one: people running inside Area 51 in Nevada dressed up as aliens or tinfoil hat wearers. Pop culture played a role in shrouding conspiracies with a new light, an example could be either tv series like the X-files, or even popular mainstream books like the Da Vinci Code of Dan Brown. The

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[34] Ibid, page 144

menace lies in the possibility of not considering conspiracies worthy enough to be frightened of, treating them as silly stories, endorsed only by people living at the margins of society. Furthermore, the assumption that conspiracism nowadays is not politicized or far from being associated with right-wing or left-wing ideology is inaccurate. According to **Muirhead and Rosenblum (2019)** the main purpose of conspiracies nowadays is to deny democracies' right to be. Politics is considered unworthy, incapable of providing what is needed for citizens. However, even if new conspiracism tries in every way to deviate from politics, it still has a philosophy supporting it: a non-democratic one. Additionally, **Cassam(2019)** argues that this kind of conspiracism is not purely against democracy, but it is just criticizing the current democratic order and pushes for a radical change which will align citizens' interest with government's interests.

It is now necessary to take a step back and consider the question this subchapter deals with, how can conspiracy theories be defined from a political point of view. How can we wrap up the political characteristics of conspiracies and what is the most logical way to chart them? Drawing on an extensive range of sources, **Cassam's (2019)** work provides in-depth analysis on the matter and is highly useful for this dissertation. He makes three distinctions to the way of looking at conspiracies, based on:
1) ideology
2) agenda
3) propaganda

The difference between ideology and agenda, is that ideology is related to subconsciousness, it is the set of values and morals to which subconsciously subscribe to, mirroring our political stances. Referring to agenda in politics means describing a mindful set of decisions taken by a government, political party, or private groups to delineate a political direction. In the case of conspiracies, political ideology and agenda are complementary, the mind-set and attitude of a conspiracy believer make him\her close to a certain ideology which is reflected by a conspiratorial agenda. To use again the example of Hitler and Nazism, Hitler's attitude was akin to an extremist ideology, which led him to create a political agenda filled with anti-semitic conspiracies. Overall, conspiracy theories can have as objective the promotion of a political agenda, a political ideology supporting it. On the other hand, authoritarian governments employ conspiracies to advocate for their political decisions and exercise control. We can look at the agenda perspective of conspiracy from a business, marketing point of view. Each customer makes his\her own choice when choosing a product, according to personal preferences. It is then the job of a company to design their product to target as many people as possible, creating a personalized "agenda". CTs from a political point of view work with the same logic.

Conspiracies can be therefore a form of propaganda, championed by "*conspiracy entrepreneurs*" (**Sunstein, Vermeule, 2009**)[35] who intentionally create and take advantage by spreading them. However, propaganda for conspiracies can also be genuine, with no

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[35] SUNSTEIN C. & Vermeule, A, "*Conspiracy Theories: Causes and Cures*", Journal of Political Philosophy 17: 202-27, 2009

double-meaning hiding behind the scenes. Conspiracy originators fully believe in the conspiracy they are sponsoring, propagandizing for them is a way to raise awareness.

After having introduced the necessary definitions to understand conspiracy theories in a suitable manner, from a critical, epistemic, psychological and political point of view, it is time to shift our attention to the historical context of this dissertation: the global pandemic.
In the next section, I will present the principal findings of this first chapter and how they can be adapted to the current historical situation.

1.6 Conspiracy Theories and the Global Pandemic

Why do conspiracy theories achieve so much success?
How is it possible that people love so much talking about conspiracies, and how can books about conspiracies keep being best-sellers every year?
Where does this ageless historical phenomenon come from?
This chapter began by describing the definitions of Conspiracy Theories and arguing that they can be studied from an interdisciplinary point of view. Consequently, these questions have already been answered directly or indirectly in the previous subsections of this first chapter.
The relevant literature used so far has identified the political, epistemic, psychological etc.. determinants that help to raise the chances of a person to be susceptible to conspiracy theories.
Before moving on with the discourse, I suggest returning (briefly) to the issue of assessing the appeal of conspiracy theories.
The purpose of this dissertation is to show how the Covid-19 pandemic has intensified an already existing problem, leading to serious damage and pushing governments and private actors to take action to prevent the phenomenon from worsening. There are several possible explanations for why conspiracies are still thriving, the first chapter dealt with classical analysis. The next chapter describes misinformation and disinformation, two phenomenons strictly related to conspiracy theories. In next sections, I will present the principal findings of the current investigation of the role of social media and the internet in favouring conspiratorial narratives.
According to traditional literature, CTs are an attractive and mainstream phenomenon for the following reasons:

1) **The pursuit of achieving control and security in life**.
   Frailty and a strong sense of impotence in people can be strong motivators to start supporting and disseminating conspiracy theories. If people feel under threat, they are more susceptible to conspiracies. The reason why is that we have a subconscious need to be in charge of our life, and we even resort to false narratives to obtain a vague feeling of safety.
2) **Sinister events, sinister conspiracies**.

Dangerous events, like terrorist attacks, assassinations of public\famous figures, and (of course) pandemics can be a reason for stress for many people. Knowing that something horrifying like a terrorist attack could happen to everyone is not an easy pill to swallow. Uncertainty and randomness are not welcome feelings, hence the need of finding a scapegoat. Conspiracy theories offer the perfect scapegoats, addressing them by name and with plenty of details. Paradoxically, more comfort can be offered by associating a sinister conspiracy to a sinister event, than just accepting the fact that sometimes things happen randomly.

3) **To swim against the tide**.

When feeling discontent with the political situation of a country, it can be appealing for conspiracy believers to declare themselves part of a minority group. Instead of focusing on finding solutions, conspirators target the establishment by proposing conspiracy theories to undermine governments.

Lewandowski and Cook (2020)[36] published a "*Conspiracy Theory Handbook*" when the pandemic started, warning about the dangers of CTs and how they would most probably become a threat to the correct management of the pandemic. In their work, not only they classified the reasons why conspiracies are so appealing but they also created the acronym: **CONSPIR**[37] (**2020**).

This acronym names the core attributes related to someone who has a plotting mind, also explaining why he\she could fit perfectly in the conspiracy theorist role.

The acronym is the following:

C	O	N	S	P	I	R
Contradictory	Overriding suspicion	Nefarious Intent	Something Must Be Wrong	Persecuted Victim	Immune to Evidence	Re-interpreting Randomness

[**Figure 1- The seven traits of conspiracy thinking**

Source: Lewandowsky, J. & Cook, S., "*The Conspiracy Theory Handbook*", 2020]

C

As stated above, the important thing for a CT believer is to swim against the tide, to oppose mainstream opinions and narratives. This leads even to believe and support theories which contradicts each other

O

Whatever and whoever does not support or believe in what the conspiracy theory is proposing, is to be questioned and to be looked upon with distrust.

N

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[36] LEWANDOWSKY S, Cook J, Oberauer K, Brophy S, Lloyd E A, & Marriott M, "*Recurrent fury: Conspiratorial discourse in the blogosphere triggered by research on the role of conspiracist ideation in climate denial*", Journal of Social and Political Psychology, 3, 142-178, 2015 and Lewandowsky J. & Cook S., "*The Conspiracy Theory Handbook*", 2020

[37] Ibid.

A conspiracy theory always assumes the worst about the intentions of the conspirators- the government, Big Pharma, tech super companies…- there is no such thing as a conspiracy which aims to a beneficial effect on people.

S

No matter the level of scientific inquiry applied to a conspiracy theory to debunk it and prove what is right and what is wrong; a conspiracy believer would never consider him\herself satisfied.

P

If the reader remembers the analogy of David vs Goliath, this is where it might come useful again for our understanding. The conspiracy promoter enjoys stressing the fact that his\her work is hard and against big undefeatable powers. Funny enough, while reading conspiracy's publications the narrative promoted gives an idea of the conspirator as both a victim as well as a fighter.

I

The more literature, data used to debunk a conspiracy, the more the CT believer claims that what he\she believes in, is real. The more effort from official sources to provide facts, the more shady is the content of the conspiracy they are trying to hide.

R

There is no such thing as random events for conspirators, our world is connected by a broad network of people operating with malicious intent in the shadows.

A recent quantitative study conducted by **Joanne M. Miller (2020)[38]** used the work of Lewandowski and Cook to create an online survey to evaluate CTs related to the Covid-19 pandemic. Her result is extremely important because not only it demonstrates that conspiracy affiliations have risen during the pandemic, but also shows that the main characteristics to define conspiracies are working together during the pandemic.

To make myself more clear, as shown in the previous paragraphs, the classic approach towards the analysis of conspiracies is disconnected from one another.

One approach refutes the previous one, and so on. Scholars can either be promoter for example, of the psychological definition of CT by dismissing the epistemic definition.

The online survey conducted by Miller demonstrates for the first time ever, that the global pandemic changed the rules of the game. Now the vast majority of factors involved in conspiracies are present at the same time, creating a worrying sinister situation. The survey was conducted in the United States on more than three thousand adults.

Her three major findings are that

1) During the pandemic, a high number of conspiracies started to spread and most of them were Covid-19 related.
   The numbers are striking: more than half of the people (52%) think that the Chinese government mismanaged the situation on purpose, and almost half (49%) is of the opinion that the virus was deliberately created inside a lab (**Miller, 2020**)[39].

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[38] MILLER J.M, "*Psychological, Political, and Situational Factors Combine to Boost COVID-19 Conspiracy Theory Beliefs*", Canadian Journal of Political Science as part of the Cambridge Coronavirus Collection, 2020
[39]Ibid.

2) The second finding is that people who have been already more susceptible to conspiracies pre-pandemic still appear to be vulnerable, while sceptics remain sceptical. Furthermore, the more a tester was afraid of uncertainty in general terms, the more likely he\she reacted positively (as in believing) to CT statements.

3) In the United States, Republicans appear to be more conspiracy-friendly than Democrats. Republicans are more likely to believe in conspiracies because they are also more uncertain about their future. Perhaps because of the pandemic management of a Republican President.
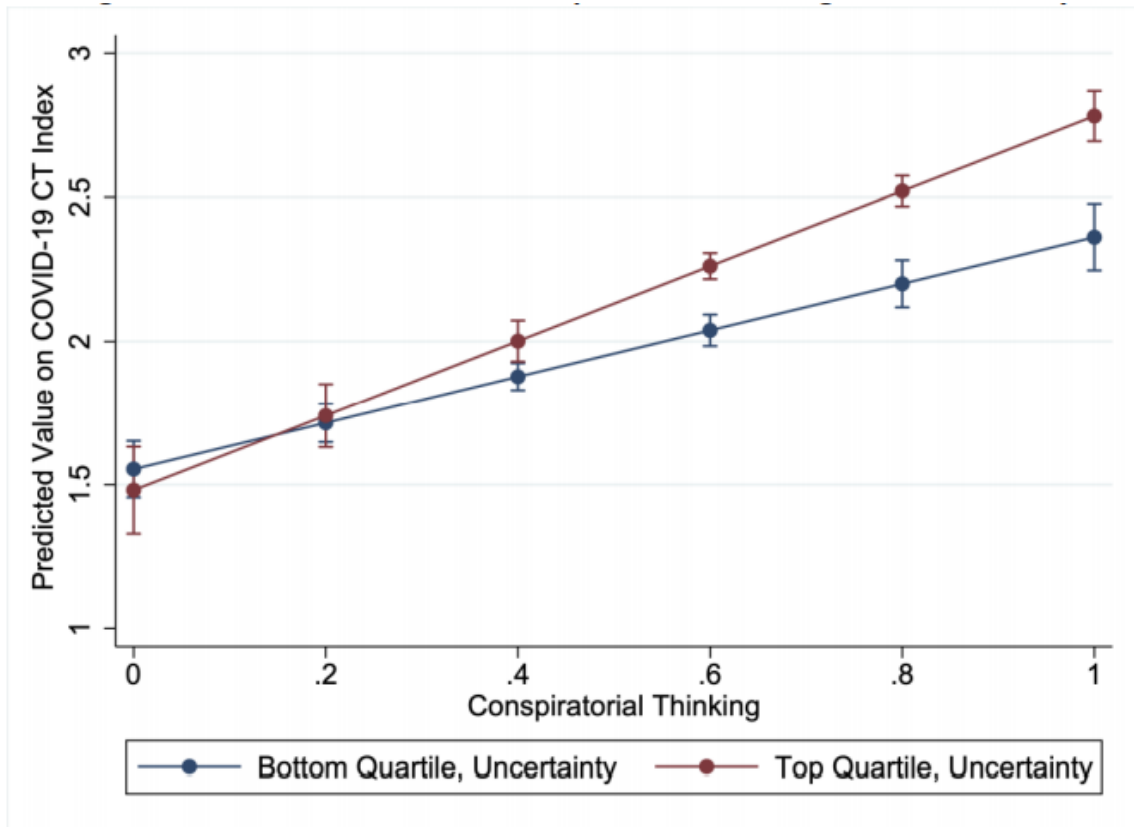
[**Figure 2- Conspiratorial thinking and uncertainty**

Source: MILLER J M, "*Psychological, Political, and Situational Factors Combine to Boost COVID-19 Conspiracy Theory Beliefs*", Canadian Journal of Political Science as part of the Cambridge Coronavirus Collection, 2020]

The graph is the result of the survey conducted by Miller and it clearly shows the strong relationship between feelings of anxiety about the future and conspiracies.

Therefore, it is encouraging for this dissertation to display these results, which are consistent with the research question proposed.

Further research done by the "*HOPE not hate Charitable Trust*" has investigated the motives of belief in Conspiracy Theories. The investigation conducted by **Hermansson Patrik (2020)[40]** dwelt upon the British population and its reactivity to conspiracy narratives. It has

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[40] HERMANSSON P, "*Trust no one- understanding the drivers of conspiracy theory belief*", HOPE not hate Charitable Trust, April 2020

been made thanks to the usage of polls organized in the period February-April 2020. Also this research highlighted how the level of uncertainty is a key factor in influencing people's minds and making them get closer to CTs. Moreover, it showed that another important element is to see how high is the level of suspicion towards the government of individuals. According to the report, among those who can be defined as true conspiracy believers, a very high amount of 86%**(Hermansson, 2020)**[41] does not trust its governments and\or politicians.

The study divided its population sample into five groups:

1) **The true conspiracy believers**- characterised by a low level of income, only mandatory education completed and relatively young.
2) **Those attracted to conspiracies** (but not unconditional believers)- characterised by a low level of income, only mandatory education and very young.
3) **The classic conspiracy believers**- characterised by the fact that they tendentially dismiss the most extreme CTs and believe the mainstream ones (like those conspiracies regarding the death of Princess Diana), are retired and older than the previous two groups.
4) **Those unlikely to believe in conspiracies**- characterised by the fact that they hold at least a Bachelor degree, are mostly women and likely to be Conservatives
5) **The true opponents of conspiracy theories**- characterised by the fact that they have a high level of income and a high level of education

The study of Hernansson reported that the Coronavirus pandemic has been the perfect breeding ground for conspiracies, as it described that almost half of the population sample (45%) believed that the virus has been artificially created in a lab. This is due to an unprecedented vulnerability to corona-related conspiracies (37%)[42] (**Hermansson, 2020**).

A final consideration on the research conducted by HOPE not hate is that the extraordinary exposure to conspiracy theories that the pandemic has brought, led people who were already engaging with "less harmful" conspiracies to be more in touch with extremist fringes of conspiracy-thinking.

Given that conspiracies created serious health related side effects damages during the pandemic, i.e by ensuring that people do not trust doctors or do not want to take the vaccines, it is worrying to think that they can even draw people closer to extremist ideas.

The methodological approaches and the results obtained from this first chapter have served as a starting point to support the statement that the Covid-19 pandemic has enhanced the spread and danger of Conspiracy Theories.

The next chapter will focus on another two crucial determinants that have contributed to the phenomenon analysed: misinformation and disinformation.

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[41] Ibid.

[42] Ibid.

Chapter 2 - Conspiracy Theories and Mis\Disinformation

In this second chapter I describe two phenomenons defined as "**Misinformation**" and "**Disinformation**".

Both phenomenons will be described from a theoretical point of view by laying down some key definitions.

The concept of fake news will be additionally briefly introduced, mainly to pave the way to the third chapter concerning internet and social media.

Having defined what is meant by misinformation and disinformation, I will then move on to discuss the relationship with conspiracy theories and how these three dangerous trends are interwoven.

In fact, one sub-chapter will be entirely dedicated to explain the influence caused on democratic countries and how mis\disinformation is having a harmful effect on their healthy functioning. The chapter will not by all means lose sight of the research purpose, and for these reasons we will see how mis-and disinformation is performing during the world pandemic.

In the previous section, it has been explained what leads people to believe in conspiracy theories and how we can make a distinction between consumers and producers of conspiracies.

In sum, many aspects have a weight on the scale that balances the likeliness of an individual to fall for the narrative and attractiveness of conspiracy theories.

To make a guess about the probability of this to happen, it is advisable to navigate the social environment, to try to predict what people are going to do. Let's not forget the strong need for humans to satisfy their need to know "why" something happens. In normal circumstances, cold and rational explanations can be given easily but in times of uncertainty, this need to control the "why" can be potentially dangerous. Humans tendentially prefer theories that can find a culprit, a comforting truth for the reason why things happen. Subconsciously people try to find intention everywhere. Random events are not accepted without question, the comfort relies on wanting the event to be caused by someone or something. We need someone to blame to explain complicated events.

Uncertainty consequently brings fuel to alternative explanations, like conspiracy theories.

Furthermore, when facing conspiracies, we are looking at different forms of rationality or irrationality.

In the case of pure irrationality, psychological aspects are involved, even extreme ones like symptoms of psychiatric disorders, delusions, mental health problems such as schizophrenia.

In the case of rational choices, among the motives for whoever believes in CTs there could be an ideological motive (Democrats vs Republicans in the States), or a political one.

The producers of conspiracies in particular, do have a strong ideological and political motive behind their crafingt of conspiracy theories.

The reader might also ask him\herself what is the difference then between someone who just comments and posts about conspiracies and someone who is deeply convinced by CTs rhetoric.

The difference stands in the engagement between these two categories. Someone who simply shares, comments, tweets about conspiracies does not have to necessarily be a believer, he\she is just passively being engaged. An actual believer's engagement is way much stronger and meditated.

What is the borderline, the difference between misinformation, disinformation and conspiracy theories? Why are we even talking about mis\disinformation when discussing conspiracies?

Simply put, disinformation can also be expressed through the form of conspiracy theories, where there is a purpose (ideological, political, psychological) to spread false information.

If on one hand, misinformation can be accidental, disinformation on the other hand is purposeful and with a clear intent to be disseminated.

Moreover, disinformation is manipulative in nature and often supported by a clear political agenda.

If disinformation has these characteristics, and conspiracies are a form of disinformation, we can also assume that CTs are a form of propaganda.

The solutions to the problem are extremely challenging. Conspiracy theorists when spreading conspiracies with a clear political agenda rely on the fact that for people it is easier to think "who cares about the truth", instead of actually trying to check if the content of the information received is fact-checked or peer-reviewed.

Another reason why it is hard to contrast the wave of disinformation fueling conspiracies, is that conspiracy believers do not endorse official sources, they find without difficulty reasons to mistrust the establishment. Furthermore, complicated events like climate change or the pandemic in order to be explained need evidence coming from scientific experts, who are not trusted by the conspiracy-prone people.

In recent years the debate about misinformation and disinformation has become a hot topic and this is evidenced by the fact that much attention from the legislative and policy field has been received. The European Union in particular, has taken several steps in studying the phenomena and legislating on how to deal with it. The Commission has published a "**Communication on Tackling Online Disinformation" (2018)**[43] and has produced a number of policies on the subject. Among them we can find the "**Action Plan against Disinformation" (2020)**[44] (to assess how to repel it), the "**Code of Practice on Disinformation**"[45] (to guide industry actors about EU standards) and the "**European Democracy Action Plan**"[46] (to set guidelines for online platforms).

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[43] COMMUNICATION from the Commission on "*Tackling Online Disinformation: A European Approach*", COM (2018) 236 final, 26 April 2018
[44] European Commission, Shaping Europe's Digital Future-"*tackling online disinformation*", available at https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/online-disinformation
[45] Ibid.
[46] Ibid.

European leaders who already signed the Code of Practice re-confirmed their concern on the topic of disinformation in March and June 2020 with a "**Joint Communication**" (**2020**)[47]. The Communication stressed the need to intensify the effort due to the Covid-19 pandemic which worsened the situation and has potentially deadly consequences thanks to health-related disinformation. The situation was a test trial for Europe to see how the disinformation pandemic can actually affect democratic countries, and to which extent these countries are ready to fight back.

Although extensive research has been carried out, the way misinformation and disinformation have been theoretically framed by scholars has been chaotic. The approach is highly interdisciplinary and many definitions from an array of fields have been given. Political scientists, lawyers, philosophers, behavioural experts, media and communication professors, data scientists etc… have all contributed. Sometimes definitions overlap, other times they accentuate some characteristics and dismiss others.

Let us now consider some of these key concepts on a deeper level.

2.1 An overview of key concepts

There is an urgent need to address the challenge caused by disinformation, misinformation and conspiracy theories, especially given that they contaminate healthy democratic processes on online spaces and offline communication platforms.

As highlighted precedently, these are not new phenomena but the heavy usage of online platforms requires the issue to be handled with even more urgency than before.

One crucial aspect that is not highlighted as often as it should be, is that there is a tendency to consider users as passive receivers of mis\disinformation, while they are actually actively participating in disseminating the content online. They serve as communication channels. User participation is in fact the whole foundation of technology platforms. More active users are connected and willingly to share information on social media, more data can be collected by the providers. The data is then sold to advertisers who rely abundantly on it to make targeted campaigns. This suggests that there might be a link between creators of disinformation online and technology platforms providers, in the sense that they both rely on having active users who can serve as vehicles of information. Therefore, advertisers tend to not care about what kind and the quality of information shared, as long as they can draw from a big pool of users, and disinformation makers just need to catch as much spotlight as possible.

However, misinformation and disinformation have not appeared with the creation and then development of social media, they have been around since a long time.

It probably started with traditional media, and in particular with the first printed copies of newspapers sharing news. Back in the day, as it is today, the main objective was to attract as

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[47] JOINT Communication to the European Parliament, the European Council, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, "*Tackling COVID-19 disinformation - Getting the facts right*", JOIN/2020/8 final

much audience as possible, thus the idea to artificially create some news which captured the attention of people to a greater extent. One important thing, is that this first kind of artificially fabricated pieces of information just had the scope of entertaining readers, and the authors of these manufactured articles were not trying to hide the fact that the information included was not real. This changed when people discovered the commercial and political opportunities of using counterfeit news for their own advantage and to wield the public's interest. For this reason, the fact that the news was not real was hidden and not explicitly reported on articles.

It is common knowledge how much propaganda is valuable during conflicts, and obviously these techniques to steer the public opinion were used during the two World Wars. Eventually, this led to the creation of the complicated and well-designed propaganda machine of Nazi Germany. This also applied to other totalitarian regimes, like the Soviet Union.

The Cold War was a flourishing period for propaganda and the spread of false news, each side used them to discredit the other but also to keep their citizens and allies under control, feeding them crafted pieces of information.

Moving fast forward to two crucial and more recent events: the Trump Presidency in the United States and Brexit in the United Kingdom. The importance of Brexit in this context is that it is the perfect example of how carefully lying to citizens by hiding pieces of information, politically speaking, is still an efficient technique. Both Boris Johnson and Nigel Farage used the story claiming that the UK was paying huge amounts of money (350 million pounds according to them) to the EU, money which could be used to improve the NHS (National Health Service) to win votes for the Brexit referendum. Sadly, just after he managed to win the referendum, Farage declared that it was a lie, even the amount of money was wrong. It was simply a scheme to fool citizens and bring them to vote to leave.

Brexit is still an open wound for the European Union and was shocking for many policy makers in the EU bubble, but the worst discovery was to see the extent of exploitation of disinformation during the campaign. There is even mounting evidence of meddling from foreign countries to influence the outcome of the vote (**Dearden, 2017**)[48] and the use of new technologies to maneuver social media preferences[49].

The campaign that brought Trump to the White House, and the following Presidency have been the greatest example not only of disinformation and fake news, but of "**informational manipulation**" (**Jeangene et al, 2018**)[50].

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[48] DEARDEN L,"*Pro-Brexit Twitter Account with 100,000 Followers Could Be Part of Russian 'Disinformation Campaign.*'" The Independent, August 2017
available at
http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/homenews/david-jones-pro-brexit-ukip-twitter-account-russia-fake-bot-troll-trump-disinformation-followersa7920181.html

[49] On the usage of Twitter for disinformation campaigns during Brexit, see:
HOWARD P. and Kollanyi B, "*Bots, #StrongerIn, and #Brexit: Computational Propaganda during the UK-EU Referendum*", COMPROP Research note 2016.1: Oxford University, p. 5, 2016, available at https://arxiv.org/ ftp/arxiv/papers/1606/1606.06356.pdf

[50] JEANGENE Vilmer B., Escorcia A., Guillaume M., Herrera J., "*Information Manipulation: A Challenge for Our Democracies*", report by the Policy Planning Staff (CAPS) of the Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs and the Institute for Strategic Research (IRSEM) of the Ministry for the Armed Forces, Paris, August 2018.

Informational manipulation is a phenomenon as well influenced by the opportunities offered by social media to spread fast as ever information online, and the crisis that our democratic systems are facing in terms of trust and faith in governments from their citizens. What the Trump Presidency has shown is that disinformation has devastating effects, such as the danger of creating informational flows which connect people with violent intents (see the Capitol attack in January 2021). Trump is (or was since his permanent suspension) an addicted user of social media platforms, like Twitter. In his tweets he shares disinformation and harmful content to target political opposers, other nations, international organizations like the WHO, and even minorities. Despite this deeply wrong usage, he achieved a gigantic scope of communication and harmed the work of journalists (**Leonhardt, 2017**)[51]. Terms like "fake news" and "fake media" have become daily business in Trump's vocabulary.

Another worrisome trend highlighted by Trump's Presidency is that when communicating, saying the truth and speaking facts appears to be less important than sharing personal opinions. In short, emotions are more important than facts.

Social media has the great virtue of having democratised the usage of media, something that was unthinkable with traditional media and its gatekeepers. However, the discontent of people was used politically to manipulate and influence citizens, paving the way to the rampant populist movements.

We have now entered a phased defined as "**post-truth era**[52]" (**Keyes, 2014**).

Why "post-truth"?

First of all, truth is being seen as something uncomfortable, not anymore the foundation of democratic communication and the aim of the media, but something to avoid. If the objective is to attract as many users as possible, "who cares about the truth" as long as they are interested in the content and boost views.

Second, the traditional archetype of "*cogito, ergo sum*", in the post-truth era has been replaced by a more emotional charged one: "I believe, so I am right"[53] (**Turcilo et al, 2020**).

Emotional reactions are preferred over more rational choices, all in the name of online views and political influence.

Conspiracy theories play a role in this unhealthy information ecosystem, as they are rarey verified by their believers or originators. Facts do not matter for a conspiracy theory's follower, even if lying at his\her feet, the important thing is to spread the conspiracy as much as possible to "inform" a large number of users. Conspiracies, being a type of disinformation, do have a harmful intent and mislead people, and in the case of an ongoing pandemic can even cause deaths.

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[51] LEONHARDT D., Thompson S.A., "*Trump's Lies*", The New York Times, 2017

[52] The term was first used by **Ralph Keyes** in the book "*The Post-Truth Era*" (2004). In 2016 it was even awarded as "word of the year"

[53] TURCILO L and Buljubašić B, "*Alternative Facts and Post-Truth in Bosnia-Herzegovina, "Who (Really) Sets the Agenda?*", Academia.edu, 2018 and Turčilo L. and Obrenovic M., "*Misinformation, Disinformation, Malinformation: Causes, Trends, and Their Influence on Democracy*", Heinrich Böll Foundation E-paper series " A companion to democracy" n3, 2020

The post truth-era looks like this:
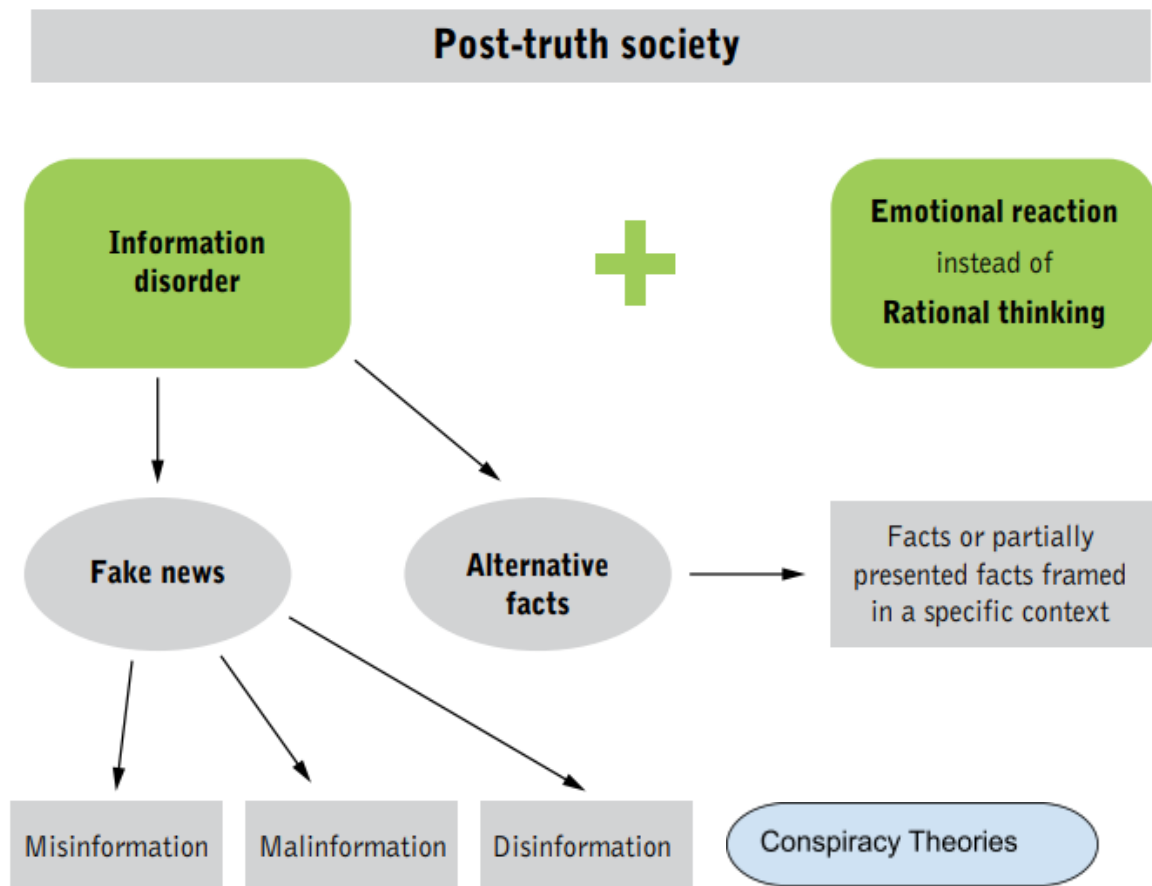
[**Figure 3 Types of information disorders**
Source: Post-Truth society, Turcilo & Obrenovic, 2020 + modification of author]

Let us now turn to briefly define some of the definitions illustrated by the graph.

2.2 Fake News

The term "Fake News" has been extensively used in recent years and many scholars have embarked on the task of analysing the phenomenon and trying to define it.

In 2017, Collins Dictionary declared "fake news" the term of the year, along with another topical word for this dissertation: "**eco-chambers**".

Since the Presidential election of 2016 in the United States, according to search trends on Google, the number of people typing into their mobile phones or computers to look for this

word has multiplied greatly[54] (**Bayer et al, 2019**), therefore it is noticeable how relevant the topic is.

"Fake news" is an umbrella term containing multiple characteristics and summarizing other phenomena, for this reason its usefulness is helpful only when talking in general terms.

The first definition proposed was made by a philosopher, **Rini (2017)** who gave a lengthy explanation.

According to him, fake news are:

"*A fake news story is one that purports to describe events in the real world, typically by mimicking the conventions of traditional media reportage, yet is known by its creators to be significantly false, and is transmitted with the two goals of being widely re-transmitted and of deceiving at least some of its audience[55]*" (**Rini, 2018**)

This definition recalls what said above when describing key concepts. Creators of fake news are well aware that what they are writing is false, but despite this, fake news are mainstreamed to trick the audience for a given purpose.

Other analysts have attempted to define fake news.

For example, **Hunt Allcott and Matthew Gentzkow (2017)**, from an economical point of view, simply define fake news as information that is clearly false and has the intent to deceive the receiver[56]. They also point out that conspiracy theories are to be considered related to fake news, as they contain false statements that have the purpose to convince the listener to believe their narrative (**Allcott, Gentzkow, 2017:5**).

In the same vein, **Vian Bakir and Andrew McStay (2017)**, researchers in the sphere of Media studies, advance the idea to define fake news by making a distinction between news that are entirely false and those who incorporate only some pieces of fake content to misinform the audience[57].

The study by **Tandoc et al (2018)** offers most probably the most comprehensive empirical analysis of fake news, as the subject of research were peer-reviewed articles published in a time span of more or less fifteen years. The result showed that academics use the term "fake news" quite freely, referring also to disinformation, misinformation or propaganda. Furthermore, Tandoc observes that the phenomenon of fake news is difficult to grasp with one single definition but it usually assumes six forms:

1) "*News satire*

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[54] "The Real Story of 'Fake News'", available at
https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/the-real-story-of-fake-news
and BAYER J, Bitiukova N, Bàrd P, Szakàcs J, Alemanno A, Uszkiewicz E, "*Disinformation and propaganda – impact on the functioning of the rule of law in the EU and its Member States*", study requested by the LIBE committee-European Parliament, February, 2019
[55] RINI R., "*Fake news and partisan epistemology*". Kennedy Institute of Ethics Journal 27(2): 43-64, 2017
[56] ALLCOTT H and Gentzkow M, "*Social media and fake news in the 2016 election*", Stanford University, Journal of Economic Perspectives 31(2): 211-236, 2017
[57]VIAN B. and McStay A., "*Fake news and the economy of emotions: problems, causes, solutions*". Digital Journalism 6(2): 154- 175, 2018.

2) *News parody*
3) *Fabrication*
4) *Manipulation*
5) *Advertising*
6) *Propaganda*[58]" (**Tandoc, 2018**)

The main problem with fake news, like conspiracy theories, is delegitimizing public authorities, scientific experts and traditional media gatekeepers: the voice of experts. It does not matter if whoever shares fake news is supporting a particular ideology, he\she is doing it for profit purposes, or simply because of unawareness, the result is the same. That is undermining the voice of experts, who share news based upon rational considerations, in favour of malicious actors who rely on the emotional appeal of this kind of news.

Similarly to Tandoc, The **EJN (Ethical Journalism Network)**, proposes that fake news are a kind of information which is being fabricated with the intent of manipulation of the receivers, in order to make them believe false narratives (like conspiracies)[59](**2020**).

According to the study conducted by the European Parliament's LIBE committee, the confusion around the definition of fake news also applies to the legislative domain and to international organisations. During the same year (**2018**), the **PACE** (Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe) used the term fake news in two Resolutions, but with different meanings. "**Resolution 2212**"[60] dwells upon the definition of fake news as a form of manipulation, whereas "**Resolution 2217**" lingers on the definition of fake news as disinformation methods used in "**hybrid wars**"[61] (**Resolution 2212, 2018**).

In view of all that has been mentioned so far, one may suppose that there is no easy way to define fake news, each definition appears to be not satisfactory enough.

As such, **Martens et al (2018)** assert that there is no way to give a single definition of fake news, the only two points in common among all these definitions is that they either concentrate on the extent of falsehood of the information, or to define what are the motives of the authors of fake news.[62]

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[58] TANDOC E. et al., "*Defining "fake news" a typology of scholarly definitions*", Digital Journalism 6(2): 137-153, p. 137, 2018

[59] TURCILO L. and Obrenovic M., "*Misinformation, Disinformation, Malinformation: Causes, Trends, and Their Influence on Democracy*", Heinrich Böll Foundation E-paper series " A companion to democracy" n3, page 8, 2020

[60] RESOLUTION 2212 of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe on the Protection of editorial integrity, paras. 8.7 and 9.5, 2018

[61] RESOLUTION 2217 of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe on the Legal challenges related to hybrid war and human rights obligations, para. 3, 2018

[62] MARTENS B. et al., "*The digital transformation of news media and the rise of disinformation and fake news*". JRC Digital Economy Working Paper 2018-02, p. 5, 2018, avaialable at https://ec.europa.eu/jrc/sites/jrcsh/files/jrc111529.pdf

2.3 Misinformation, Disinformation and other forms of Information Disorders

It is clear now that the definition of "fake news" is too general in nature, to properly understand what kind of phenomenon is polluting online platforms and is rampaging during the pandemic. Therefore, to describe this complex phenomenon it is advisable to narrow down the scope of research and focus on Mis\Disinformation.

The European Commission already in 2018, pre-pandemic, recognising the importance and dangerousness of these information disorders, has created a **High-Level Expert Group on Fake News and Online Disinformation (HLEG)**. Work that has intensified greatly during the pandemic.

The Group also emphasized that the usage of the term "disinformation" is more correct than the word "fake news". The reason why is that the adjective fake does not encompass the whole range of malicious information, not considering that it is not only false news that is being shared. but also fabricated and constructed content[63] (**2018**).

The definition of disinformation illustrated by the HLEG, notes:

Disinformation is "*all forms of false, inaccurate, or misleading information designed, presented and promoted to intentionally cause public harm or for profit*"[64] (**2018**).

This definition is definitely being preferred in all European official institution's bodies.

Wardle (2017) complements this definition by adding that the motivation behind disinformation is tendentially caused by the need to make profit, to achieve political power or to cause trouble[65].

Disinformation is often used alongside another term, **misinformation** and erroneously considered interchangeable. However, the borderline between these terms lies in the intent behind who shares or creates these types of information. Misinformation can be accidental, while disinformation is one kind of misinformation "dressed up" to look like genuine information, the intent is malicious. Therefore, conspiracy theories fall into the disinformation group division, because the false information they promote is disseminated on purpose.

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[63] HIGH level Group on fake news and online disinformation, "*A multi-dimensional approach to disinformation*", p. 10, 2018, available at
http://ec.europa.eu/newsroom/dae/document.cfm?doc_id=50271 and
UK House of Commons Digital, Culture, Media and Sport
Committee, "*Disinformation and 'fake news': Interim Report*", p. 8, July 24, 2018, available at
https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmcumeds/363/363.pdf
[64] HIGH level Group on fake news and online disinformation, "*A multi-dimensional approach to disinformation*", p. 3, 2018, available at
http://ec.europa.eu/newsroom/dae/document.cfm?doc_id=50271
[65] WARDLE C. and Derakhshan H., "*Information disorder: Toward an interdisciplinary framework*", Council of Europe Report, September 27, 2017

Misinformation on the other hand, when distributed through social media platforms can be a mistake in bona fide. Hence, the **Interactive Terminology for Europe (IATE)** reports that there should be a clear distinction between them, because misinformation is not deliberate[66] (**2015**).

In the case of misinformation, what is the individual variability that makes people more prone to be misinformation-vehicles?

The answer draws upon the extensive considerations already done in Chapter 1 when considering individuals and their tendency to believe or not to conspiracy theories.

First of all, there is a subconscious mechanism inside all of us, which attributes evil intentions to people that we already mistrust. Even scientists, and all people supposedly experts in their area of knowledge, expertise can make this kind of mistake. There is no such thing as a particular personality type more prone to this but people who have psychological problems, who are delusional are more prone. In these cases, since there is no fixed pattern, looking at the context is the most important thing.

As **Wardle (2017)** reminds us, individuals who spread misinformation are more likely to be those people who want to feel more "connected to their tribe[67]", whether it is religious, racial, ethnic, political etc….

As far as "**Malinformation**" is concerned, the difference lies in the fact that the intent, like for disinformation, is malicious, but the content of the information shared is genuine, not fabricated at all. An example could be a leak of sensitive information about a politician during an electoral campaign, or some forms of hate speech and online harassment towards an individual or a group. The information is real but cleverly disseminated during an inconvenient time for the target of malinformation.

The following scheme provides an overview of the notions studied in this sub-chapter, and it draws attention to the fact that the distinction between the three types of information disorders is, at the end of the day, relative to the subject who publicizes the content.

	Definition
Misinformation	When **false information** is shared, but **no harm** is meant
Disinformation	When **false information** is knowingly shared **to cause harm**
Mal-information	When **genuine information** is shared to **cause harm**

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[66] EUROPEAN Parliament, "*Understanding propaganda and disinformation*", November 2015

[67] WARDLE C. and Derakhshan H., "*Information disorder: Toward an interdisciplinary framework*", Council of Europe Report, September 27, 2017 and TURCILO L. and Obrenovic M., "*Misinformation, Disinformation, Malinformation: Causes, Trends, and Their Influence on Democracy*", Heinrich Böll Foundation E-paper series " A companion to democracy" n3, page 9, 2020

2.4 Fighting mis\disinformation during a global pandemic

This paragraph considers the implications of the misinformation and disinformation phenomenon in the context of the current Covid-19 global pandemic.

This dissertation aims to contribute to this growing area of research by exploring how mis\disinformation impacted the management of efforts to stop the pandemic, and to question if the phenomenon is a fruit of the current situation or if Covid-19 just exacerbated an already existing circumstance.

The answer, as usual, lies in the middle.

Misinformation and disinformation exist since the dawn of time, and these phenomena thrive in moments where uncertainty is at an all time high level. The pandemic reshaped the already existing content of mis\disinformation and redirected it towards themes related to the virus, its cure and organizations involved with the efforts to stop the virus. Furthermore, the engagement of people rose as the pandemic concerns the whole world. Everyone is confused and clearly wants to know more, and as a consequence the chance for fake content to be produced and shared is way higher than before.

There is a tale narrated by Aesop, an ancient Greek storyteller, in his Fables which I believe gives a nice picture of the feeling of fighting disinformation during times like this.

The tale narrates the story of a boy who has to take care of a flock of sheep in the outskirts of his town. Hearing rumours of a wolf roaming the area, the boy decides to have fun pretending that the wolf is attacking his flock. He cries for help, causing a big stir and making sure that the town villagers come to his rescue. When the towns' folk come, they realise that the boy was just pretending to be attacked by the wolf, and angrily return to the safety of their homes. The shepherd boy does this trick multiple times, causing confusion among the villagers and making them tired of his games. The game of the boy goes on and on, until one day the wolf appears for real and starts threatening the young boy. He then starts to cry out loud for help, screaming with fear but not one of the villagers comes to his rescue, thinking that it is only another fake calling of the boy. He is therefore left alone, at the mercy of the wolf, who attacks him and his flock of sheeps.

This small tale could be a metaphor of the Covid-19 pandemic and the threat of disinformation. The boy is in fact, sharing disinformation, he willingly tells a fake story to cause harm to the other villagers, who have to come running to save him. The villagers on the other hand, are exchanging misinformation between each other, telling the fake story of the wolf attack with the intent of saving the boy. This situation creates an atmosphere saturated with mistrust, where confusion reigns over truth and communication channels are disrupted.

The crisis created by the looming wolf attacks leads the villagers, the people to be extremely tired and fatigued. The disruption of communication caused by the fake cries for help (fake news) of the boy has consequently two effects: the liar is isolated and left alone, and the whole community loses a young shepherd.

The moral of the story, in this case, is that the community as a whole is the one losing when disinformation prevails!

It is this plethora of information exchanged, in the Fable exemplified by the numerous calls for help of the shepherd boy, that pollutes the healthy communication channels and makes the handling of a crisis situation extremely hard. The spread of myths, false news and conspiracy theories concerning the Covid-19 pandemic, is a serious concern recognised by European and International Organisations, such as the European Commission and World Health Organization[68].

Furthermore, the European Commission has created in March 2020 a whole EU-funded research network of more than a hundred scholars with the specific task to study the origins and explain how to prevent conspiracy theories[69] (**2020**). In addition, an Eurobarometer report conducted during the period October-November 2020 has produced staggering results, showing that in Europe more than of half (51%) of netizens (internet citizens, aka users) have encountered or have been in contact with disinformation while surfing the web, a stark increase from the previous research done in 2018[70](**2021**). These frightening statistics show a deterioration of an already existing situation, heightened by the pandemic and its special circumstances.

Disinformation and Misinformation, as well as Conspiracy Theories are not new things in the scene, they have been an impending threat for a long time.

This has been seen in recent years in the case of the "*flat Earth*" conspiracy theory, suggesting that the Earth is flat, a narrative gathering thousands and thousands of followers online[71](**Picheta, 2019**).

However, the story of fake news and disinformation is even more ancient, dating back even to the Roman Empire. What is argued here, is that the grasp and power of disinformation has reached nowadays an unparalleled extent. And the pandemic has overwhelmingly brought the problem up to the surface.

Furthermore, the harms produced by the spread of disinformation during the pandemic are very much real and tangible. In a crisis situation like this, even a rumour which transforms into fake news, can set off a chain-reaction with huge detrimental effects.

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[68] The Commission has recognised the fight against disinformation as a vital part of the Coronavirus response (https://ec.europa.eu/info/live-work-travel-eu/coronavirus-response/fighting-disinformation_en), as well as the WHO, which created a web page dedicated to identify and debunk CTs and fake news concerning Covid-19 (https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/advice-for-public/myth-busters).

[69] COMPACT [Comparative Analysis of Conspiracy Theories], "*Guide to Conspiracy Theories*", European Cooperation in Science and Technology, March 2020

[70] Special Eurobarometer 507, "*Democracy in the EU*", survey requested by the European Commission,Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers and co-ordinated by the Directorate-General for Communication, March 2021

[71] PICHETA R., "*The flat-Earth conspiracy is spreading around the globe. Does it hide a darker core?*", CNN, November 18, 2019, available at The flat-Earth conspiracy is spreading around the globe. Does it hide a darker core? - CNN

Among them, we can find examples of people deciding to not follow medical treatments because they do not trust doctors, or even to resort to treatments and medications of questionable origins.

Second, in some countries, especially those with governments with a majority of populist Parties, disinformation and conspiracy thinking (targeting the "Deep State" or whatever secret world organization working in the shadows) can have the dangerous effect of polarizing the political landscape. The polarization increases the distrust towards the government and policy experts. This also applies to online forms of disinformation on the topic of Covid-19 which polarize the online communities. The outcome is that minorities (linguistic, based on sex, religion etc…) are the first to be targeted[72].

Another dangerous effect of disinformation concerns the freedom of speech of the media, which can be under a lot of pressure. As the flow of information is being polluted by malicious content, it is more difficult for media professionals to work efficiently and in some cases, it can even put them in danger. This also goes for health workers who might come under the fire of violent conspiracy believers.

What could be the motivations of those actors who spread disinformation?

They are more or less similar to what drives conspiracy theorists.

It can be the need to regain confidence by attacking other's confidence, find someone to blame, gain a political edge, or make a profit. Some people are driven by honest motives to be helpful (misinformation), others simply because of lack of knowledge and ignorance.

So far this section has focused on how to measure and classify the accelerated effect of conspiracies and disinformation spreading during the pandemic.

The following section will return to the subject of **misinformation**, i.e content that is entirely or partly false but was not created or shared to intentionally cause harm.

A key preliminary study was promoted by the Reuters Institute. The research conducted by **Brennen et al. (2020)**[73] during the very first month of the pandemic (January to March 2020) measured quantitatively the growth in shares of misinformation across different media platforms.

The results were clear and conclusive:

1) By counting the number of operative fact-checking private and public institutions analysing misinformation content (in English) during the time frame considered, Brennen and colleagues reported a stark increase.

In fact, there was a surge of 900%[74] (**Brennen et al, 2020**) of fact-checking tools, which is probably mirrored by the same rise in terms of misinformation.

The topic analysed by the fact-checkers concerned mainly the Coronavirus.

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[72] Concerning minorities' attacks caused by Covid-19 disinformation, an example could be the rumour spreading in India about a "Muslim Conspiracy Theory" responsible for the spread of the virus.
For more info see: Ellis-Petersen H. and Azizur Rahman S. in "*Coronavirus conspiracy theories targeting Muslims spread in India*", The Guardian, April 2020
[73] Brennen J. S., Simon M.F., Howard N.P. and Nielsen Kleis R., "*Types, Sources, and Claims of COVID-19 Misinformation*", Reuters Institute, April 7, 2020
[74] Ibid.

2) Instinctively one would be tempted to say that the misinformation content was created ad hoc during the pandemic, but the researchers have been proven otherwise.
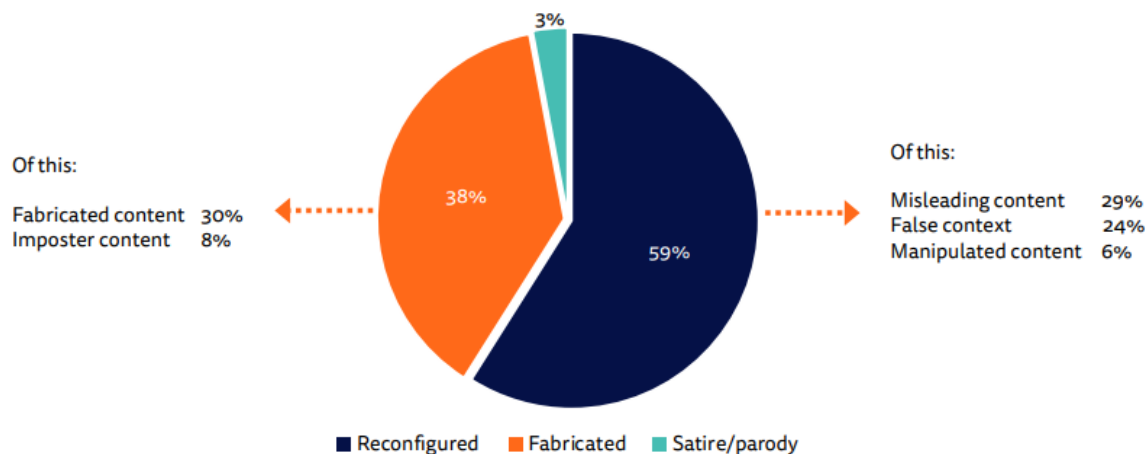As such, the majority of media was already existing truthful, genuine content that was either taken out of context or altered in some way.

To better discern this type of genuine content and how it was re-used during the pandemic, let me give some examples.

Let us say that someone is posting online about the medical experience that a relative had while being hospitalized with Covid. The suggestions given might be correct, but they do not represent at all official medical guidelines and they could be misrepresented and re-posted by third-parties. Another example of misinformation of this type could be using pictures or videos showing events which happened in the past, or in different countries but now decontextualized and used to be linked with Corona virus-related fake news. A video showing an open market with alive and dead exotic animals mixed together, with scarce health conditions labelled as a "Wuhan fish market" was used online to denounce the lack of sanitation in China and blame the population for the creation of the virus. However, a fact-checking organization debunked the video and showed that the video was shot in Indonesia in 2019[75].

Another common assumption contradicted by this study, is that in the dissemination of misinformation uses advanced AI-technologies to create false contents, using instruments like the so-called "**deep fakes**[76]". But the results showed that it is way more common to use traditional ways of altering images, such as cropping pictures or blurring.

The pie chart below synthesizes the results:

Of this:
Fabricated content   30%
Imposter content   8%

Of this:
Misleading content   29%
False context   24%
Manipulated content   6%

59%   38%   3%

■ Reconfigured   ■ Fabricated   ■ Satire/parody

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[75] Pagella Politica, "*Coronavirus: NO, questo video non mostra un mercato in Cina*", January 28, 2020, available at
https://pagellapolitica.it/bufale/show/916/coronavirus-no-questo-video-non-mostra-un-mercato-in-cina
[76] Deepfakes are fake videos,images or audio generated thanks to "deep learning", an artificial intelligence technique. The majority of deepfakes are used for pornograhical purposes, for more info:
https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2020/jan/13/what-are-deepfakes-and-how-can-you-spot-them

[**Figure 5- Types of Misinformation**

Source: Brennen J. S. et al., "*Types, Sources, and Claims of COVID-19 Misinformation*, 2020]

Concerning the way misinformation flows across media channels, according to Brennen et al. (2020) if we consider both traditional and new media, the flow goes mainly from the bottom-up. Things change considerably if we only focus on social media, where high popularity determines the highest engagement.

Posts coming from popular public figures (actors, influencers, owners of big companies etc…) or from politicians receive much more attention on social media and are shared much more (69% of the total sample of the survey[77]) (**Brennen et al, 2020**).

Furthermore, not counting the allegations targeting politicians, public authorities or wondering to what extent the virus is contaging people, information on conspiracy theories is one of the most shared. This highlights again the charm that they have for the public.

Collectively, these studies outline that tracking and fighting mis\disinformation regarding Covid-19 is a demanding task, made more difficult by the chaos and ongoing debate concerning the definitions of misinformation, disinformation, malinformation and fake news. Labelling correctly the different phenomena is essential to acquire correct and specific data, and the continuous evolution of the pandemic makes the job of scientific and health experts even harder. As the information landscape appears vast and diverse, mis\disinformation is consequently diverse too and there is no way to offer a single silver bullet solution. It would be too optimistic to say that for example, only the will and action of governments can stop the phenomenon. Private actors need to be involved too, the tech companies owning the online platform where the information is shared, and the think-tanks and organizations individually dealing with the solutions.

Scientific research and academic considerations need time and it is always dangerous to make assumptions when an event is too "fresh" to be analysed, nevertheless the studies presented so far can help to make some reflections and to draw temporary conclusions.

Citizens have been in contact with much more disinformation content than the years previous 2020, this led to more interest from governments and international organizations on the matter. The effects are harmful because they hurt the health of citizens, they instill doubt and distrust towards official sources and even undermine the credibility of the media.

At the same time, only a small percentage of mis\disinformation is created ad hoc, the vast majority is more or less unknowingly distributed. Moreover, the cases where complex technologies, perhaps with the involvement of governments, are used with harmful intent, despite the big fuss they produce in the media, are lower compared to the rest of the cases.

What about the most common motifs of mis\disinformation we are fighting during the pandemic? What kind of content are we facing?

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[77] Brennen J. S., Simon M.F., Howard N.P. and Nielsen Kleis R., "*Types, Sources, and Claims of COVID-19 Misinformation*", Reuters Institute, April 7, 2020

First of all, as it may seem obvious, the majority of the content concerns how the virus started to spread and what are the reasons. Some rumours or even conspiracies that were much heard during the start of the pandemic, echoed that the virus was a bio-weapon created in a Chinese lab, or even that the blame should be given to the 5G network[78]. These pieces of mis\disinformation all try to answer the need of people to know more and be reassured in a difficult time.

Another kind of recurring false content reports wrong data or statistics on the number of cases, or deaths of people due to Covid. Speaking of wrong data, a common motif also concerns the quantifying of the financial loss that countries or businesses incurred during the pandemic. This kind of information may be used to campaign against quarantine, curfews or general limitations of freedom to avoid social contacts.

Furthermore, mis\disinformation can be used as a political tool, both to promote Parties or to discredit opponents. It can also be used against the media when they are investigating or writing negatively about a political figure.

A great example of misinformation motif is the one regarding the positive environmental impacts of the pandemic. While it is true that Covid had small positive effects on the environment, such as reducing traffic and people's movement, some stories and news were simply fake. The objective might have been benign albeit the news were false. The picture of the canals in Venice being repopulated with fishes and even videos of dolphins swimming, even if they were giving people hope, were fake[79].

Living near Venice and visiting the city very often, I can confirm that yes, the canals were surprisingly more clean during the lockdown, hence the reason why it was possible to see more fishes swimming (less boats navigating) but the video of dolphins was shot in Sardinia, not Veneto region.

Moreover, a large proportion of information regards all sorts of medical advice, ways to not catch the virus, reduce symptoms etc… It is clear how dangerous it is to spread false medical guidance during a health crisis, and the World Health Organization even collected rumours like "if you hold your breath you do not catch Covid" to show what is false and what is truthful.

Thus far, this thesis has shown how diverse the definitions and perspectives regarding conspiracy theories are, how conspiracies are being disseminated during the global pandemic, and then moved on to discern how conspiracies fall under the disinformation umbrella.

We saw some data and figures on the increase of mis\disinformation and one thing that emerged was the importance of the internet and social media in the dissemination of content.

I am stressing the word "dissemination" because it would be unwise to suggest that conspiracy theories have more actual believers thanks to new technologies. However, the scope of reach of conspiracies has broadened on social media, and more people can come in

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[78]For more info on the debunking of this claim, see: False claim: 5G networks are making people sick, not Coronavirus | Reuters

[79] Daly N., "Fake animal news abounds on social media as coronavirus upends life", National Geographic, March 22, 2020, available at Fake animal news abounds on social media as coronavirus upends life | National Geographic

contact with CTs narratives. As the pandemic started and unfolded, and social media interaction on the topic increased, so did conspiracies.

Therefore, in the chapter that follows, I will cover the relationship between conspiracies and the internet, in particular social media.

Chapter 3 - Conspiracy Theories, Internet and Social Media

Chapter Three talks about the Internet and Social Media, and how they weaponized conspiracy theories, and phenomenons of mis\disinformation taking them to the next level. The Covid-19 pandemic opened up Pandora's box of this contaminated, infectious information ecosystem. Experts have tried to warn us for quite some time now, but the Coronavirus epidemic has brought the problem under new spotlight.

Conspiracy theories, fake and manipulated news have always been around but never actually had the sheer reach that they have now. The amplification power that the internet and social media gifted us, despite being wonderful technological advancements, have negative (and sometimes even violent) repercussions, risking to threaten the way we socialize and behave politically.

The purpose of this investigation is to measure conspiracies during the Covid-19 epidemic, arguing that social media are of paramount importance in being a determinant influencing factor in how people are behaving to cope with the effects of the pandemic. Therefore, studies about the online traffic related to misinformation, disinformation and conspiracy theories on different social media platforms prior to and throughout the pandemic will be displayed as examples.

But first, the section below describes briefly the changes produced in terms of communication from the traditional media to the shift to the new media, with the advent of the internet first and then more recently, social media.

3.1 Traditional media and the advent of the Internet

Nowadays, it is often repeated how the internet fundamentally changed the way people access and make use of media. The achievements of technology are shaping our understanding of the world, but also changing participatory democracies thanks to the fact that we are currently living in a new environment where citizens are equipped with opportunities that were unconceivable years ago.

The main argument backing up the way media producers were working and promoted by scholars was the "**agenda setting theory**[80]" (**Mccombs, 1972**). The theory, developed during the Cold War, influenced the opinion of scholars in a period where the only source of information originated from newspapers, radio, tv… what we now call traditional media. The importance of media was the capacity to influence the public opinion and policy makers and sway them towards a specific issue, line of thought which the media itself put on its agenda.

In other words, the media pushed the audience towards a specific direction in order to start discussion around a particular topic. As far as the point of view of the public is taken into consideration, the recipients of the news content could and would agree or disagree, independently of what the traditional media were promoting. In fact, access to different agendas of different media was accessible to everyone. The power of persuasion of the media to promote an opinion was quite limited.

Nevertheless, the media still had the ability to send strong messages to their audiences, especially when foreign policy was concerned, in cases like being in favour or not for the military intervention promoted by for example, an American President. Another school of thought stated that the media was not necessarily acting independently but it was reiterating the message of political elites. In other words, regarding foreign policy issues, the role of media was interwoven with the role of political elites in advocating for a certain political action.

Different points of views of different scholars can be summarised in dividing the role of media as guardian of democracy for its ability to criticise governments, or the contrary, stating that the media promotes agendas in line with the political narrative of the main powers.

As usual, it is not wise to choose one line of thought or the other a prior, but it is advisable to place the role of traditional media into the historical context.

With the advent of the internet, everything started to inevitably change.

The first main innovation was the fact that articles started to be published on websites, pushing media providers to choose how and if to transition into these new platforms. Websites were surely competitive compared to traditional newspapers but they posed the problem of making the audience pay for the content given or to make articles accessible for free.

From the audience perspective, the interaction with the media transformed, the gatekeepers of the pre-internet era disappeared.

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[80] MCCOMBS ME, Shaw DL , "*The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media*", The Public Opinion Quarterly 36: 176–187, 1972

Prior to the advent of the internet, the opportunities for the audience to share their views was limited to, for example, calling the producers of a radio programme to ask for your opinion to be featured or by sending letters to the editors of newspapers.

Afterwards, the audience started to have a stake in how the public opinion reacted to a piece of news. Allowing fast and direct replies to articles published online gave the space that the audience did not have in the past. Another fundamental aspect is that the space that the internet provides is unlimited, there is no maximum number of characters allowed or publication costs.

The impact on the participation of citizens has been theoretically strengthened and empowered with the technological revolution. It is now possible for citizens to criticise more openly political moves which they do not condone, or raising awareness on certain topics.

Clearly, the discussion around the matter of whether the internet has truly or not, brought a positive development for democracy is still on-going.

As said many times before in this dissertation, in such complex matters, where many factors are playing a role the answer lies in the middle and only time will give us a better and more overarching answer.

The impact on different societies needs to be contextualised and differentiated between democratic and non-democratic cases.

The Internet has surely questioned the power that traditional media holds, yet provided many opportunities.

Another example of how the revolution of technological means in the field of media influenced the way traditional broadcasters were working was in the 90s with the introduction of the usage of satellites. This allowed the broadcast of news live, highly important in the case of international conflict coverage. The media company that first started to broadcast live was CNN who had the sole power of informing the public opinion of what was happening abroad. This was called the "**CNN Effect**"[81] (**Robison, 1999**) and allowed CNN to report live about the First Gulf War[82] (**Gilboa, 2005**). The impact of this event made it possible for the press to heavily influence public opinion and eventually to lead governments to intervene[83](**Smith, 1991**).

Still, even if the CNN could notify its spectators in contemporary to what was happening in a foreign country, it was still functioning as a gatekeeper of information. This changed when social media started to be mainstream. The main difference is that they allow users to replace the role of journalists and share live information about what was happening in their respective countries. Netizens become as a consequence, key players in the information age and shape the flow and content of information.

Technically, citizens can also be involved more in politics, but they can also ask for more in democratic and non-democratic countries.

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[81] ROBINSON P, "*The CNN EFFECT: Can the News Media Drive Foreign Policy?*", Review of International Studies, VOl.25, n2, pp 301-309, Cambridge University Press, April 1999

[82] GILBOA E, "*Global Television News and Foreign Policy: Debating the CNN Effect*", International Studies Perspectives 6, 325–341, 2005

[83] SMITH P., " *How CNN Fought the War: A View from the Inside*" New York: Birch Lane Press, 1991

Thus far, a number of studies have indicated that the first time that social media could be analysed in terms of its impact to contribute to democratisation processes was the "Arab Spring" at the end of 2010 in North African countries[84] (**Comunello et al, 2012**). The protesters in fact, used social media (Facebook in particular) to organize their protests and coordinate their efforts. Social media, Facebook, were a tool to send a message to the foreign public, and at the same time to protest against the government. In the literature of political communication, this event signaled that the power of information did not belong anymore exclusively to media organizations, but to citizens themselves who shaped political processes and communicated directly about internal conflicts happening in their countries.

Great enthusiasm about the democratic opportunities of social media emerged, but also concerns over the potential use of non-democratic actors.

The latter case is the one of Syria, where the government managed to acquire control of social media to spy on the flow of information and discovering dissidents, and ultimately suppressing demonstrators and their protests.

This is an example of how social media can also be used by governments to keep their effort of remaining in power.

It is important to bear in mind some limitations and problems caused by the advent of the internet, topics that will be discussed extensively and with more detail in the next sub-chapters. For instance, it is way easier to measure the impact of communication and technologies by outlining the existing tendencies, than quantifying the results, as communication on social media moves extremely fast. Furthermore, the interconnectedness created by social media led people to question to what extent they could raise their demands in democratic and non-democratic countries, without fearing the retaliation of governments controlling social media.

This interconnectedness led people even to discuss up to what extent they could raise their demands in democratic and non-democratic states, governments taking actions against this kind of participatory democracy.

Moreover, social media have seen their role change drastically throughout the years, both because of the decisions of big tech companies and also because of the usage of the platforms by citizens. They can now also shape the way information is absorbed by the public, as numerous people tend to get information solely or up to a large extent from social media, and not from other forms of media.

What about conspiracy theories and fake news[85]?
How are they "flowing" through social media channels?
The technological revolution has brought recent developments in the field of political communication concerning the role of conspiracies and mis\disinformation.

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[84] COMUNELLO F and & Anzera G, "*Will the revolution be tweeted? A conceptual framework for understanding the social media and the Arab Spring*", Islam and Christian–Muslim Relations, 23:4, 453-470, 2012

[85] Throughout this dissertation, I use the term fake news to refer to both misinformation (providing false information by accident, not deliberately) and disinformation (providing false information with malicious motivations from the perpetrators side). Let us consider it as an umbrella term when wanting to speak on a general level.

However, historically these concepts are not new. Misinformation and disinformation have been analysed by academics for many, many decades, and as stated before, even prior to the advent of the internet there were plenty of cases of the spread of conspiracies and malicious information on communication channels.

What is then the difference in the era of social media and Internet compared to the era of traditional media? What has changed? Do we have a distinguished problem now or has it been around for a long time?

Yes, conspiracy theories and fake news have been around since the dawn of communication but we also have a distinguished problem now. As long as people are communicating, good information can flow, but also bad information and that has always happened throughout history.

There have also been changes to the structure of communication, changes in traditional media (like the invention of the written language, then the invention of the written press, the radio, the television etc…), however the invention of the Internet created a new form of communication. A form which keeps emerging all the time, all the year (from SMS to Whatsapp, from Instagram to Tik Tok, from MSN to Facebook etc…). Social media platforms tend to be vehicles where media content is being shared and disseminated faster than ever, these are fast changes where it is difficult to react and control mis\disinformation.

In a nutshell, what changed compared to previous technological revolutions, is the speed of communication and social contacts. Social media has transformed the situation, and it moves too quickly to be properly regulated and to check the passage of bad and harmful content[86].

As the reader can well imagine, here we are faced with a serious threat to democracy. For democracy to function in a healthy manner, people need to be able to make good and rational choices for themselves. To do so, they need to receive and to have within reach accurate information about the surrounding world. If the information environment is so polluted that people are fishing for information in seriously murky water, how can we say with absolute certainty that people are voting consciously? If you do not know what is true in the world, it is difficult to act responsibly. Mis\disinformation gives a false picture to people of what is in their interest, while conspiracy theories offer a distorted picture suitable only to a certain narrative.

In this situation, it is favourable for fake news to spread. Through these platforms, it is easy to spread content that is not necessarily truthful, mis\disinformation can flourish smoothly.

It is important to trust the information environment for people, nobody makes good choices if they are constantly being bombarded by bad information, hence the need to weed out disinformation.

Having defined briefly the historical transition from traditional media to social media, I will now move on to discuss the presence of conspiracy theories on social media platforms.

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[86] Nevertheless, this author believes and still hopes that regulation on social media will happen somehow in the future, to prevent this from happening.

3. 2 Conspiracy theories on social media platforms

The following part of this third chapter moves on to describe in better detail the relationship between social media platforms and conspiracy theories.

As stated so far, the nature of social media makes them the perfect platform for conspiracy theories to thrive.

If in the past, conspiracy and conspiracy believers were most likely to live in the fringe of traditional media platforms, due to the filter provided by media companies, nowadays the "democratisation of communication" has changed things.

Social media consequently, amplifies the reach of conspiracy theories and it is likely to capture in the conspiratorial orbit people who maybe could have avoided this to happen if they limited their receipt of information to traditional media.

This contributes to worsening the problem of polluting information channels with unreliable news and theories.

As was pointed out in the introductory part of this dissertation, in Chapter 1 we discussed what are the characteristics of a person who is likely to believe in conspiracies. Among the main features, a conspiracy-minded person has a strong sense of distrust and suspicion towards authorities, i.e the government or scientists, or scholars. For this reason, it is probable that this person would not trust the entire traditional media as a source of information but would resort to finding information on his\her own.

Social media are open to everyone and allow anybody to post almost whatever they want (subject to limitations but the content's amount is huge and difficult to control). This allows conspiracy theories to get a lot of attention, given their attractiveness (discussed in Chapter 1 as well), and eventually a portal to more sinister and dangerous content.

When the traditional gatekeepers vanish, anyone can establish its presence by producing content which looks reliable and authoritative but in reality has not been reviewed at all. Conspiracies can become, in short, a mainstream phenomenon[87] (**Barkun, 2017**). The outsiders suddenly become very popular. The whole world is connected through social media, thus it is also easier to find like-minded people and build online communities composed of members supporting each other and endorsing equivalent content.

Scarce supervision makes these communities grow in enormous size and post a gigantic amount of posts, difficult to manage.

The fact that social media are less regulated than traditional platforms and therefore allow dangerous people to obtain a stage they would have not in normal circumstances got, is shown by a research done by the "*HOPE not Hate Charitable Trust*" in April 2020. They focused on the British conspiratorial scene and noticed that people do not usually tend to go directly to look for conspiracy content on social media, but still somehow get in touch with it[88] (**2020**).

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[87] BARKUN M, "*Conspiracy Theories as Stigmatized Knowledge*", SAGE Journals, 2016

[88] In particular, they found out that surprisingly 51% of the participants in the survey heard on social media about David Icke, a notorious conspiracy theorist.

Source: HERMANSSON P., "*Trust no one- understanding the drivers of conspiracy theory belief*", HOPE not hate Charitable Trust, April 2020

Why are all CTs such a fitting phenomenon in these kinds of platforms?

Well, the narrative of conspiracies is catchy, mainly composed of short captivating statements or images and easy to transmit. Conspiracies in the era of the digital revolution are not anymore in the shape of intricate plots, with twisted and complicated theories and long explanations, They are more "conspiracies on the go", to be consumed fast and in small sizes.

It is also important to say that not necessarily people who share conspiracy content are endorsing it, sometimes they are amused by it and use social media to mock this kind of content, especially by using memes.

➔ A meme can be a video, a text or a picture which is slightly altered to turn it into something funny. They are very popular on the internet and can also be used to criticise politicians, or to raise awareness on social issues in a humorous way.

There is a vast array of literature on the topic of memes, conspiracy theories and social media. Some even say that memes are the new form of conspiracy theories online (**Akkermans, 2020**) and bring the example of memes connected to 5G technology. This conspiracy theory is not new, dating back to 2016 (**Know Your Meme, 2020**) , and as it happens with other conspiracies it has been slightly changed and adapted to fit the narratives connected to the Coronavirus. This conspiracy states that the new technology is somehow responsible for the outbreak of the pandemic. The important point here is that memes were heavily used on social media in two ways, from believers and originators of the conspiracy as "proof" of what was happening, and from sceptics to make fun of the first group. The phrases used by the first group are always constructed referring to the "others[89]", to distinguish themselves from people who are influenced by public authorities and follow blindly.

The following image is the perfect example to sum up what has been said so far.

WAKE UP SHEEPLE!
The truth is just so damn obvious....

5G CELL TOWER

WEAPONISED 5G BAT

VACCINE BASED 5G CHEMTRAIL BEAM

COVID-19 MIND CONTROL BEAM

NEW WORLD ORDER
5G ACTIVATED NANO
SURVEILLANCE ROLL

https://www.instagram.com/p/B-N9qWJpySs/

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[89] For example, saying "5G users be like" in memes, there is always a contraposition between I, We vs them.

Source: AKKERMANS M, "*5G users be like: (in)visibility as evidence in 5G conspiracy memes*", diggit magazine, September 9, 2020

Source: AKKERMANS M, "*5G users be like: (in)visibility as evidence in 5G conspiracy memes*", diggit magazine, September 9, 2020]

Observing the meme, the main characteristics of a conspiracy theory and a conspiracy believer are to be found, let us break it down.

First of all, the reference to a truth which needs to be discovered and brought to the surface. Second, the fact that the conspiracy believer is aware of what is happening and urges others to "wake up" and take action to uncover the conspiracy and help people. Then, the elements related to the 5G network (cell towers, nano surveillance) and then Covid-19 (bats, vaccines).

From the point of view of someone with the "conspir" mentality (see Chapter 1) this meme might be considered as an explanation of something real, while on the other hand for whom does not believe in conspiracies, it is a source of amusement and something to make fun of 5G conspirators online.

Nevertheless, even if mocking it, sharing conspiracies on social media still contributes to their diffusion and may reach people who are interested in it. We must never let our guard down in these cases.

Furthermore, the main purpose of social media platforms is to catch the attention of its users as much as possible to bloat the time of active usage. Social media are owned by for-profit companies which offer their services for free. The users are not only making use of a product, but are at the same time a product themselves. A product on which these companies profit greatly by collecting data and surveil users[90] (**Zuboff, 2019**). Therefore, social media companies find it useful to keep as many users as possible connected, and if conspiratorial content does the job… all the better.

According to Ellen Pao, former Head of Reddit, social media platforms like Facebook "*reward bad behaviour*[91](**Dreifus, 2020**)" because unfortunately, a lot of times conspiracy theories, misinformation and disinformation related content attracts more attention, and attention brings more followers, more data, and ultimately more profit.

Moreover, as **Hermansson (2020)** notes, even the most extreme and dangerous conspiracy theorists have a space on social media platforms, and they keep spreading malicious content related to anti-semitism, hate towards the Muslim and LGBTQ community. The number of followers of dangerous people, like for example Watson, a far-right conspirationist who gathered 1.1 million of followers on Twitter and 1.8 million subscribers on YouTube[92]

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[90] An amazing book to learn more on the subject is: ZUBOFF S, "*The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: the Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*", PublicAffairs, 2019

[91] DREIFUS C., "*Social Media Reward Bad Behavior: An Interview with Ellen Pao*", *The New York Review of Books*, October 26, 2020, available at https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2020/10/26/social-media-reward-bad-behavior-an-interview-with-ellen-pao/

[92] HERMANSSON P., "*Trust no one- understanding the drivers of conspiracy theory belief*", HOPE not hate Charitable Trust, April 2020

(**Hermansson, 2020**), shows clearly how the work to stop this phenomenon from the point of view of social media companies is far from over.

Furthermore often on social media, conspiracy theories use the emotional appeal technique to spark anger and indignation towards a topic or minority group. Groups are created to share information, which sometimes can be flagged by the companies if they break the community guidelines. However, in the case of social media messaging apps, like Whatsapp, which are "closed" (meaning that they need a phone number, or another person to give the access to an outsider) the tracking might be challenging[93](**Johnson, 2019**).

Another thing to take into consideration, is that not always online communities are a bad environment. Sometimes they are positive spaces of confrontation, where constructive debates happen. All of that brings up to the "golden age of the Internet" where the initial enthusiasm was still present and users felt like citizens of the internet, netizens. Unfortunately, as the years unfolded, big tech companies realised how they could make huge billionaire profits from their creation and started slowly changing the online environment, allowing (supposedly not on purpose) malicious actors who polluted and disrupted these first communities.

It is risky to say that social media augmented the numbers of believers of conspiracy theories, there are way too many limitations to make a measurement to check this statement. What is argued here is that social media offers an open platform for conspiracies, to make them more visible and known to the broader public. In addition, this account must be approached with some caution because a higher grade of visibility to conspiracies, does not mean that more people are endorsing conspiracy theories.

However, it is undeniable to draw two conclusions. One, conspiracy theories have changed thanks to social media, assuming a more "brief" narrative fit for the space provided by social media. Second, the absence of gatekeepers in social media leads to a higher pollution of the information environment and calls out for further regulation.

3.3 Covid-19 vs Social media platforms

Restrictive measures to contain the spread of the Coronavirus have changed our lifestyle completely. The withdrawal of a large part of the population inside the safety of our homes, has had the consequence of shifting most of our life online (for those who have the luck of having the technological means to do so). We started working, studying and even conducting our personal life (relaxing, entertainment) behind the screens of a personal computer.

This sudden change was shocking for many, and brought discomfort and stress, augmented by the constant bombardment of bad news coming from our TVs, radios etc…

In times of uncertainty and fear, and without the traditional meeting spaces of socialization, people resorted to seeking company and comfort online. The unprecedented flow of interaction on social media platforms caused a lot of disruptions and needed a lot of work from tech companies to keep everything properly functioning.

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[93] JOHNSON R, "*Lessons learned from fact-checking the Brazilian presidential election*", International Journalists' Network, January 16, 2019

As a consequence, all the queries and doubts of people concerning the health effects of the virus, the safety measures and governments' decisions were transported to social media platforms. The time spent on social media platforms skyrocketed when the first lockdowns started to be put into place, burdening these platforms with a gargantuan amount of data and interactions.

The graph below shows the difference between the first month of the pandemic (January 2020) and the month (April 2020) where state-wide lockdowns started to be effective in the United States, according to the use of mobile applications.
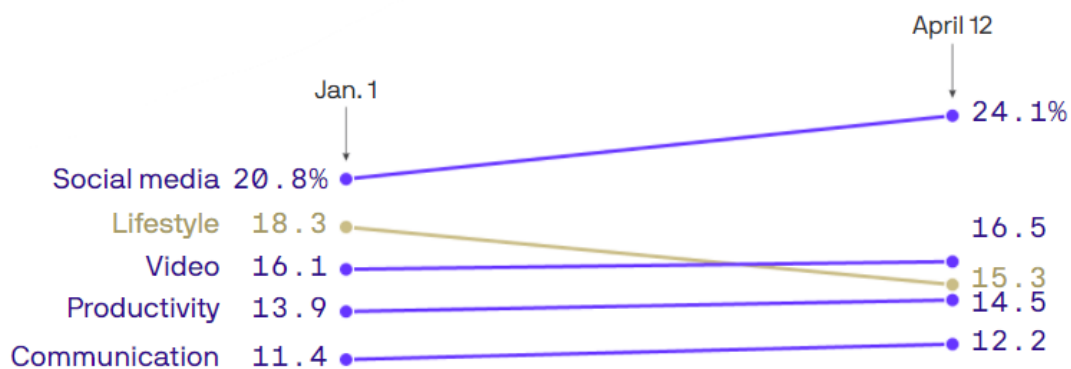
[**Figure 7**- **Android mobile applications' use in the first months on 2020**
Source: FISCHER S, "Social media use spikes during the pandemic", Axios, April 24, 2020]

What is striking in this chart, is the growth of social medias' consumption compared to other apps, signaling the transition from traditional physical spaces to the cyber world caused by the outbreak of the Coronavirus.

Furthermore, the World Economic Forum has been warning us for a long time about the dangers connected to the structure of the information ecosystem.

Already in 2017 with the Global Risk Report it was shown how technological, societal, economic, geopolitical and environmental risks are all interconnected[94] (**WEF, 2017**). In particular, this report already highlighted how the progressive shift to new media and the advent of the internet changed how information is being held by gatekeepers.

The progressive polarization of societies, accompanied by a loss of trust towards established authority caused by the behaviour of governments in the last 20 years (populism, financial crisis) caused an overall huge decline of trust towards governments. People are more prompt to believe in news where truth is not at the centre of importance but the emotional reaction caused by the receival of this news. As our information ecosystem is related to the health of our democracy, one of the possible solutions is to limit the flow of malicious information. Currently the regulation of governments in the matter of social media are less powerful than

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[94] WORLD ECONOMIC FORUM, "*The Global Risks Report 2017*", January 11, 2017

the decisional power of tech companies, as a consequence social media companies can decide their line of action, by deleting fake news or flagging users.

Another important point is that in the past few traditional media outlets were situated at the top of the information ecosystem, creating and regulating news. Nowadays, the openness of social media platforms is mainly regulated by algorithms which fragment the online debate and create what is known as "**echo chamber effect**[95]" (**WEF, 2019**), which aims to show contents that are tailored to users' interests and based on previously shown news. In other words, social media's algorithms sort users in bubbles where information is being polarized, and users only see content they like. Tech companies chose to create the structure of their platforms in this way to ensure that the attention of users never declines, to maximize the time spent on their platforms. In terms of political engagement, the communities that emerge are heavily hostile to each other and composed by people with similar political ideas. If someone is conspiracy-minded, he\she will tend to dismiss information and evidence averse to his\her political view, and social media tend to dismiss opposing information as well. This "**confirmation bias**[96]" (**Del Vicario, 2016**) stemming from the nature of humans, i.e choosing to support views similar to our ideology, way of thinking, makes it very difficult to get someone out from conspiracy theories if they are truly committed.

If a user is not following on purpose a page, a profile, but simply clicks on the content posted by said page, the automatic process determined by algorithms assumes that you might like that content and will keep proposing similar content. Subsequently, the material generated on the search sections will be created according to the users' preferences.

The most recent Report of the World Economic Forum, fresh from the experience of the Covid-19 crisis, puts among the top risks the polarization of online communities and misinformation on social media platforms. The 2021 Report[97] (**WEF, 2021**) brings as example conspiracy theories that are targeting the fabric of democracies, especially in times of crisis, by creating distrust and chaos of information. The health risks related to disinformation, misinformation and CTs are real and disrupting efforts to stop the pandemic. For example, an online theory concerning a cure for the Coronavirus in Iran, that suggested drinking concentrated alcohol, killed almost a thousand people[98].

It is true that citizens are free to choose to access information either through social media or using other sources. Information can be received through more reliable sources, but studies[99] showed that social media have a tendency to not differentiate between unreliable and reliable

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[95] ibid.

[96] DEL VICARIO M. et al, "*Echo Chambers: Emotional Contagion and Group Polarization on Facebook*", Sci. Rep. 6, 2016. and QUATTROCIOCCHI W , Scala A., and C. R. Sunstein, "*Echo chambers on Facebook*". 13 June 2016

[97] WORLD ECONOMIC FORUM, "*The Global Risks Report 2017*", January 13, 2021

[98] Al Jazeera, "*Iran: Over 700 dead after drinking alcohol to cure coronavirus*". Al Jazeera Media Network, April 27, 2020, available at
https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/04/27/iran-over-700-dead-after-drinking-alcohol-to-cu
recoronavirus/

[99] CINELLI M, Quattrociocchi W, Galeazzi A, Valensise C, Brugnoli M, Schmidt A. L, Zola P, Zollo F & Scala A, "*The COVID-19 Social Media Infodemic*", 2020,
http://arxiv.org/abs/2003.05004

content, as long as it makes social media platforms keep generating profits. The mission of big tech companies is to increase their profits, by looking at every possibility offered by the digital economy. Social media platforms increase their revenues by putting ads to promote their products, and are finding a gigantic network of netizens who are at the same time a product and possible clients of products of external companies.

This for-profit mentality which allows the circulation of fake news and conspiracy, leads to a chaotic situation on social media.

Scholars already committed to studying online communities and how they are affected by conspiracy theories, political fragmentation, especially in the fields of data science, computer science and sociology, produced a vast array of literature on the topic .

Before briefly explaining what are the findings of such studies, this author has to suggest that one source of weakness in these studies, which could have affected the correct measurements of the phenomenon, was the fact that there is no clear distinction between misinformation, disinformation, malinformation and conspiracy theories. The cause might be the fact that it is already difficult to measure the phenomena, but nevertheless it would be advisable to make a distinction to provide better insights from scholars of different educational backgrounds. Among the more significant findings to emerge from these studies we find:

- (**Gallotti et al. 2020**[100]), the pollution of the information environment by disinformation, misinformation and conspiracy theories already preceded the Covid-19 pandemic. The scarce quality of information paved the way to serious threats to democracy, and damaged the work of scientists in preventing damaging health effects. Nevertheless, the Coronavirus epidemic can be considered as a social experiment to measure for the first time, thanks to the huge amount of data, the response of online users to the situation. On a positive note, mainstream social media platforms like Twitter dedicated more attention and efforts to limit the spread of bad information, in favour of reliable news.
- (**Pennycook et al. 2019**[101]), reports that if people are confronted with news in an orderly environment, they are able to rationally discern what is true and what is not. The chaotic information flow leads to confusion and inattentive, passive users are not able to discern fake news from real news. According to this study, it seems that ideology matters, but for a vast majority of netizens it is more a matter of not putting enough care in looking if what they are reading is true or not.
- (**Alshaabi et al., 2020**[102]), in a study on Twitter data sets found out that what happens online reflects what happens in the "real world". Therefore, the highest attention span

[100] GALLOTTI R, Valle F, Castaldo N, Sacco P, De Domenico M, "*Assessing the risks of infodemics in response to COVID-19 epidemics*", In: Nature Human Behaviour 2020, Vol. 4, No. 12, 2020

[101] PENNYCOOK G. & Rand D G, "*Lazy, not biased: Susceptibility to partisan fake news is better explained by lack of reasoning than by motivated reasoning*". Cognition, 188, 39–50, 2019, available at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cognition.2018.06.011

[102] AL SHAABI T, Minot J. R, Arnold M. V, Adams J. L, Dewhurst D. R., Reagan A. J, Muhamad R, Danforth C. M, & Dodds P. S, "*How the world's collective attention is being paid to a pandemic: COVID-19 related 1-gram time series for 24 languages on Twitter*", 2020, available at http://arxiv.org/abs/2003.12614

of users in 2020 concerning the epidemic, are to be found in correspondence with the most important moments of the pandemic, like when the city of Wuhan, China was put into lockdown, when first big pandemic clusters in Europe were found (Italy, Spain) and when the United States started the lockdown (January 2020 and March, April 2020).

- (**Schild et al, 2020**[103]), presented a significant analysis of Twitter's and 4Chan[104]'s posts related to anti-Chinese sentiment pre-and post pandemic. The study has shown that the Covid-19 pandemic has indeed increased the anti-Chinese content on both platforms, but with some differences. On Twitter the Sinophobic content is targeting the Chinese government for its handling of the pandemic, while on 4Chan the content contains racial discrimination and hate speech to the Chinese native and immigrant citizens.

Collectively, these studies outline the first attempts from scholars already committed to study how phenomena like conspiracy theories and disinformation behave online, applied to the Covid-19 pandemic. Given the fact that not enough time has passed to have definitive data and the pandemic is not yet over, these studies and the present dissertation can only study the period January 2020-December 2020. In fact, the main studies on social media have been conducted in the first three-four months of the epidemic.

## 3.4 Conspiracy theories and polarization tendencies prior the pandemic

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Conspiracy Theories represent a way to make reality less complex, to provide answers in times of uncertainty. People with a tendency to believe in CTs will be more prone to dismiss facts even when presented in front of them. Not only, if truly believers, the more effort dedicated to debunk conspiracy narratives, the more conspiracy theorists will fight to oppose public authorities, scholars, scientists. Bearing in mind these characteristics, on social media conspiracy believers will naturally try to find communities of like minded people, to reinforce their ideas and ideologies, and to stick to conspiracy narratives. This can result in the creation of polarized communities. Communities of this kind create users who are trapped in bubbles, where the same opinions are shared and an instinctual hatred for outsiders is created. People who are inside this social media bubble tendentially only like content affiliated to conspiracies, and will seldom read and follow scientific content. Remains to be seen if building counter-narratives on social media platforms in order for specific ideological groups

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[103] SCHILD L, Ling C, Blackburn J, Stringhini G, Zhang Y, & Zannettou S, "*Go eat a bat, Chang!": An Early Look on the Emergence of Sinophobic Behavior on Web Communities in the Face of COVID19*", 2020, available at http://arxiv.org/abs/2004.04046

[104] 4Chan is an online forum, image board with little to none supervision by moderators, it has become (in)famous for its "politically incorrect" content and it is often linked to far-right content.

to hear a voice that could be theoretically perceived as correct in an environment of fake news, could be proven effective.

(**Bessi et al, 2015**) examined data on Facebook of communities considered polarized. According to their research (**Bessi et al, 2015**)[105]Someone interacting in online groups of social media platforms is polarized when the number of likes compared to the total amount of activity in a determined section (fact-checked information or unwarranted) is higher than ninety percent. Their findings show that the number of polarized users who are believers of conspiracy theories is way higher than users who do not follow\believe in conspiracies. Furthermore, if "normal" users consume information just by liking it, the interaction of conspirationist is way more active. De facto, they not only like but comment and express their opinions in a more outspoken way. This finding reconfirms what said in the first chapter, that conspiracy theorists are actively committed to spread narratives to "uncover hidden truths" to help other people unaware of what is happening. Furthermore, people who follow more scientific content, have a higher chance of bursting the bubble and come into contact with information coming from the other side of social media platforms. What about the interaction between the two groups? Conspiracy theorists do not really interact with the other group, they are more focused on building conspiracy narratives inside their communities. "Scientific users", as they cross the trenches and explore conspiracy pages with more frequency, when interacting with the other group, they do it to try to share reliable content and stop the spread of disinformation.
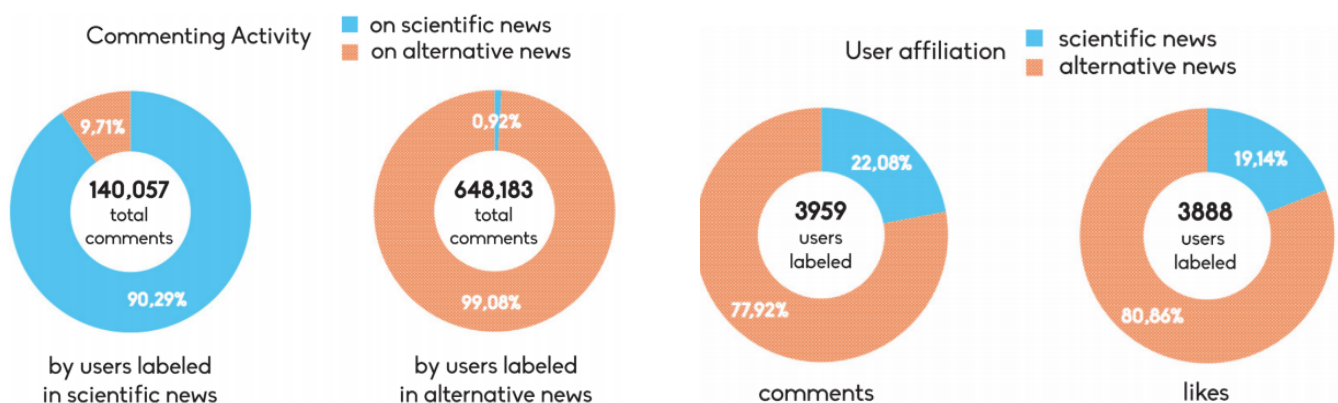
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[105] BESSI A., Coletto M., Davidescu GA., Scala A., Caldarelli G., Quattrociocchi W., "*Science vs Conspiracy: Collective Narratives in the Age of Misinformation*", PLOS ONE, Vol.10, No.2, February 23,2015

This view is supported by **Vicario (et al, 2016**[106]), who similarly conducted a study on Facebook's groups and compared conspiracy-related pages to fact-checking ones. The results more or less mirror the ones reported above, with the exception of one finding. When a group presents plenty of engaged users, it should be considered as a negative aspect, on account of the fact that polarized users are more prone to like and comment content produced by other polarized users, sympathetic to conspiracy theories.

We will turn now to explore similar studies conducted on social media platforms with the difference that they have been all conducted during the pandemic. It is a great opportunity to actually measure the accelerated effect of conspiracies on social networks, and what consequences it has brought to the management of the pandemic. This paragraph served the purpose of creating an academic bridge between the studies realized before the infamous year of 2020 and what has been done after. The reader will be able to make comparisons and observations at first reading.

3.5 Twitter, Facebook and other social media platforms: measuring conspiracies

In the pages that follow, it will be argued how the Covid-19 epidemic has shaken the, already weak, foundation of the online ecosystem.
Existing Conspiracy Theories have been repurposed to fit narratives using myths, propaganda and fake news on the Coronavirus and users' interaction of already conspiracy-friendly people has spiked, while new followers have been charmed by CTs.
In a nutshell, the sudden stop of our daily activities, moved a significant part of our life online where we have been faced by a grim view: an online environment not up to the challenge, where malicious narratives have tampered the effort of public authorities and officials.

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[106] DEL VICARIO M. et al, "*Echo Chambers: Emotional Contagion and Group Polarization on Facebook*", Sci. Rep. 6, 2016

Before starting, I believe it is necessary to provide a brief explanation of the main terms used in the following pages, as the studies mostly come from computer and data science fields. The social media platforms under scrutiny are:

- Twitter: a social network where the content is posted in the shape of "tweets" of maximum 140 characters.
  Twitter is mainly composed of short messages, organized in "threads" to follow, with the possibility of adding images and videos. The format of this social network, with short and brief messages, contributes to spreading news that are only limited to a short title and a catchy phrase, sometimes creating misunderstandings and disinformation.
- Facebook: the most famous social network among the ones cited here, where users can create a personal profile to connect with friends and join groups, comment on pages, share information.
  This social network has been under numerous controversies regarding the maintenance of the privacy of its users[107], allegations with political parties and the spread of disinformation. Despite some efforts to block malicious content, it is still quite easy to create fake profiles and pages to comment with unwarranted news.
- Gab: this social network is similar to Twitter and Facebook, with the big difference that is heavily unregulated and for this reason, often linked to far-right extremist movements, conspiracy theorists (among them QAnon followers) and white supremacists. The content of this social network is filled with hate speech, anti-semitism, racism and sinophobia.
- Reddit: social network that for its structure reminds of the first online forums as it is divided in sections according to the topic. Each section allows users to discuss a theme, one of the most famous communities is the "Ask Reddit" or "Ask Me Anything" (r/IAmA) format. Here users can ask questions to one person being interviewed. Among the famous AMA formats, people such as Bill Gates, Barack Obama, Edward Snowden, Margaret Atwood, Priyanka Chopra etc… were interviewed.

Other recurring terms are:

- Bots: "bot" is short for robot which operates on social media to generate and spread content online. These bots bombard the cyberspace of social media platforms with automated messages. They create an environment where the flow of information can not be controlled anymore, because bots keep posting relentlessly, unlike normal users who can post a limited amount.
- API: "Application Programming Interface", an API is like a "plug for the web". It is an endpoint, if you send a request to an API, it will return a result. In the context of this research, it is useful to analyse data coming from social media. Some big social media platforms, like Twitter keep their APIs open so general developers can use

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[107] See the Cambridge Analitica scandal.

them to make queries. For example, using only 1% of the data coming from Twitter through its open API, delivers millions of posts.

The objective of this paragraph is to present some studies done on social media during the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic, in order to measure the spread of conspiracy theories and mis\disinformation online.

The first study (**Cinelli et al, 2020**) compared the following social media: Twitter, Facebook, Youtube, Reddit and Gab during the first two months of the pandemic (January-February) by checking keywords linked to the Coronavirus.

Overall, the findings suggest that:

● The criteria on which Covid-19 related content is consumed by users is not different from other content, what is different is the attention given to epidemic posts. The attention spiked as the pandemic worsened, and it reached the highest level of attention in concomitance of the first report on the Covid situation from the World Health Organization[108] (**WHO, 2020**). Therefore, the epidemic has increased the attention given to news on social media concerning the virus with an exponential growth, but it has not changed at first the way people interacted with this novel news.

This view is supported by **Chen (et al, 2020**) who traced how the communication concerning the Coronavirus has performed throughout the year, to see if the attention has been constant or if it has fluctuated. The finding has been in the same vein (see image below), meaning that "important" news have made the online interaction spike. Furthermore, another consideration is that accounts belonging to influential people, in times of crisis and uncertainty, are the most active ones[109].
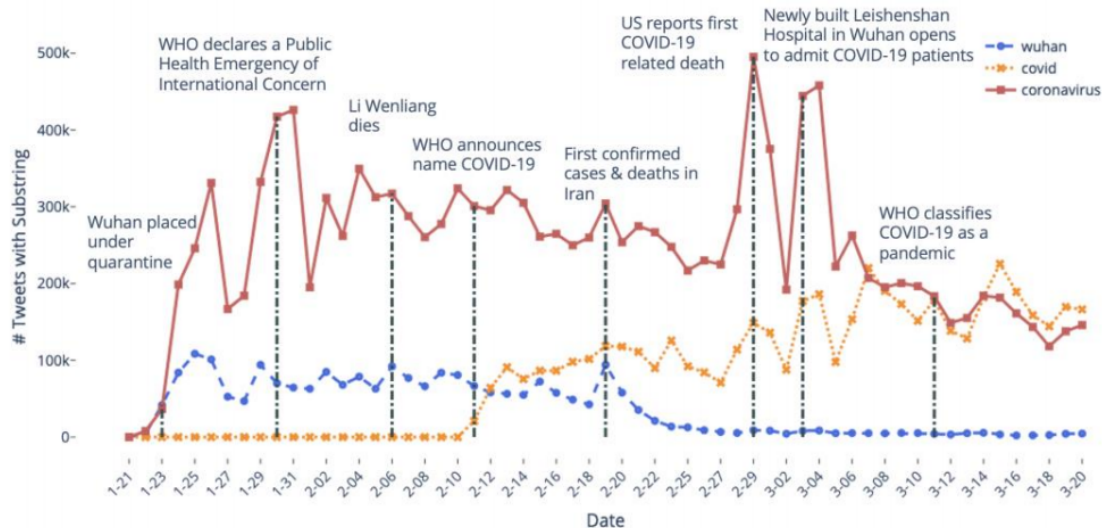
[Figure 9- **Number of hashtags containing wuhan-covid-coronavirus keywords**

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108 WORLD Health Organization, "Situation Report on the Novel Coronavirus", January 21, 2020

109 CHEN E, Lerman K, Ferrara E., "*Tracking Social Media Discourse About the COVID-19 Pandemic: Development of a Public Coronavirus Twitter Data Set*", JMIR Public Health Surveil, 2020

Source: CHEN E, Lerman K, Ferrara E., "*Tracking Social Media Discourse About the COVID-19 Pandemic: Development of a Public Coronavirus Twitter Data Set*", JMIR Public Health Surveil, 2020]

- Second, the research compared official and unofficial (fake news, conspiracies etc..) content to see how it spreads online. The result showed that broadly speaking, there is no difference in the way official and unofficial posts are disseminated. At first glance, this may lead to the conclusion that there is no difference between a scientific piece of content and a conspiracy theory in the way they are being circulated on social media. Nonetheless, the scholars noticed an important detail. If we stop comparing only the news being propagated themselves but we compare the news inside their platform compared to the same news inside another platform, the result is staggering:

  "*In Gab (least regulated social media) while the volume of unreliable posts is just 70% of the volume of reliable ones, the volume of reactions for unreliable posts is 270% bigger than the volume for reliable ones*"[110]. (**Cinelli, 2020**)

Among the other platforms, Youtube seems to be the most filtered one by deleting and blocking the highest amount of unreliable news, while Twitter appears to be quite impartial.

The more the pandemic keeps spreading and until the end of it is not officially declared, the more data will keep coming to support, or contradict the results of this investigation.

Therefore, these findings will doubtless be much scrutinised, but there are some immediately dependable conclusions to be made.

The first one, topical for this dissertation, is that indeed, the pandemic has created a favourable environment for conspiracy theories to spread. The reason is that, a moment of crisis like the one we are living in right now, accelerated the attention of online users dedicated to content unknown before to the mainstream public.

The second conclusion is that the chance of encountering malicious information online is much dependable on the kind of platform we are using. Some platforms can be considered super-spreaders of disinformation.

The final conclusion is that one solution to the problem must come from the side of social media platforms, as they are directly responsible for the way their algorithms are structured. The challenge to battle conspiracy theories and misinformation has become a responsibility of tech companies, and they need to address it. Among the solutions, the advice to check the reliability of the content posted by hiring fact-checking organizations to do the job, or helping users to better distinguish what is real and what is not.

The difficulty is that the material posted every day is huge, a lot of work is needed to check everything (and it might not even be possible to do it).

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[110] CINELLI M, Quattrociocchi W, Galeazzi A, Valensise C, Brugnoli M, Schmidt A. L, Zola P, Zollo F & Scala A, "*The COVID-19 Social Media Infodemic*", 2020, http://arxiv.org/abs/2003.05004

Furthermore, what is the line between misinformation, disinformation and freedom of speech? And who draws it? In short, how can we reduce mis\disinformation on social media platforms while also ensuring that platforms promote the free exchange of ideas?

The answer is not straight-forward and not easy to give, but it seems that tech companies must perform self-regulation as soon as possible in a thorough way to stop the pollution of the information ecosystem.

Another significant analysis and discussion on the subject has been presented by **Ferrara (2020)** who tracked the behaviour of social media bots on Twitter during the Covid-19 pandemic. Before reporting the finding a remark: to effectively track bots online is hard, the technologies creating bots are continuously up-to-date, while the effort and funding in research and researchers dedicated to identify and stop bots is scarce and lagging behind. For this reason **Ferrara**[111], decided to report the findings of bots patently false and created with malicious intent, and of bots with the most simplistic nature, simply reposting a determined content. The researcher demonstrated something crucial for this thesis: the most malicious bots have been created with the purpose of spreading conspiracy theories with a clear political footprint, using the chaos caused by the Coronavirus pandemic. Not only, but the greatest part of the bots are posting content affiliated to the QAnon Conspiracy Theory.

The image below shows the number of tweets generated by these conspiracy bots and their content:
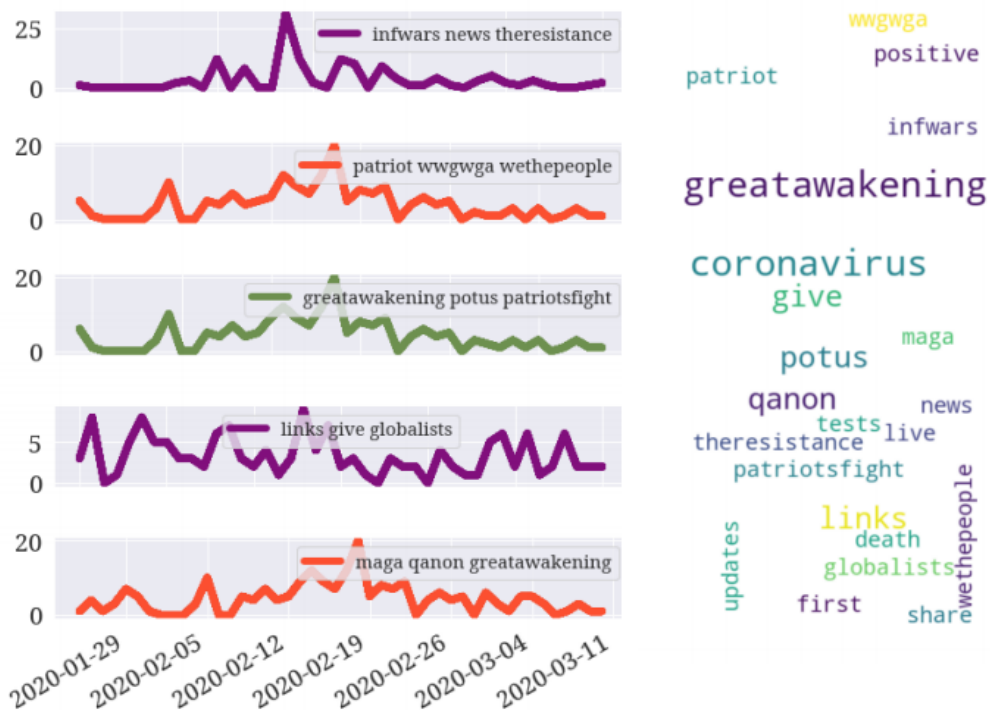
[Figure 10- **Conspiracy social media bots on Twitter**

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[111] FERRARA E, "*#COVID-19 on Twitter: bots, conspiracies, and social media activism*", pre-print of University of South California, 2020

Source: FERRARA E, "*#COVID-19 on Twitter: bots, conspiracies, and social media activism*", pre-print of University of South California, 2020]

This combination of findings provides some support for the conceptual premise that the dissertation has set. Namely, that the first year of the epidemic created an unsuitable information ecosystem, allowing conspiracy theories to spread freely. Second, the epidemic has not created new conspiracies but exacerbated an already existing situation, as documented throughout these chapters with quantitative methods. Existing conspiracy narratives have been slightly changed to incorporate content related to disinformation concerning the virus. Furthermore, times of big crisis and uncertainty like epidemics, have the ability to massively shift the attention of people to topics concerning the virus. In the age of the digital revolution, this implies that people will resort to looking for information on social media platforms and use them as discussion forums. Higher attention, higher flow of information and no traditional gatekeepers to check if the content is reliable means that there is a higher chance for "bad information" to pass through and contaminate social media and the public discourse.

The consequences should not be underestimated because people will be more prone to make bad decisions concerning their safety during an epidemic: not follow containment measures, resort to alternative cures, refuse medical treatment and more recently, decide to not get vaccinated. These decisions have serious harmful health effects.

Not only, the distrust towards policy makers and politics more in general rises and also affects political decisions. In some countries, it is even the ruling political class that contributes to inculcating doubt and fear, promoting dangerous conspiracies and disinformation (see Brazil and Bolsonaro). Conspiracy thinking becomes a worrying phenomenon when it acquires a political dimension, when "it becomes political". The last chapter dedicated to the QAnon conspiracy will therefore explore how dangerous conspiracies can be when they get promoted by extremist alt-right movements and when they become an international phenomenon thanks to the aid of social media.

Before that, it is necessary to deepen a topic that has been touched repeatedly in the dissertation: the concept of "infodemic[112]" (**WHO, 2020**) and what kind of response strategies European and International Organisations have created to fight the conspiracy and disinformation outbreak.

Another problem that emerged in these pages is the "**bubbliness**" of social media, a problem that should be definitely avoided.

If it weren't for these social bubbles, these platforms could even help us to get in the shoes of people with completely different political ideas. The beauty of social media, of its interconnectedness, is that it connects people coming from different backgrounds. It is important to highlight not only negative, but also positive aspects.

Because of this, the next chapter will analyse how social media platforms are reacting to the problem and what actions they are taking to tackle the issue. Bubbles can and should be burst, to avoid polarisation and dangerous information to spread.

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[112] WHO Situation Report 13, 2020

Chapter 4- Infodemic and response strategies

In Chapter Four I describe how European and International organisations as the pandemic progressed, tackled one parallel problem to the spreading of the virus: the malicious excess of information spreading on traditional and new media. We will see what are the main key policy priorities that these organizations have planned for the short and long-term care of the information problem.

Sometimes, like in the case of the epidemic, uncertainty is inevitable. However, we can control our own behaviour on how we react to events. For instance, in the case of Covid-19 at first not even experts could tell us exactly what to do, as new data to develop solutions was gathered on a daily basis. Therefore, sometimes when the efforts to stop the spread of hoaxes and conspiracies concerning the virus seem too big, the fight appears unwinnable, it is better to focus on prevention. To assume a critical perspective on the events surrounding us. What these European and International organisations are trying to do is to create an environment that is hostile to conspiracy theories. Academia is an example of an environment adverse to conspiracies.

At the levels of society how do we escape from the conspiracy loophole? Do we ban completely social media for instance?

For example, the attack on the United States Capitol by QAnon followers was organized thanks to social media. The action taken by tech companies was to ban disinformation content, related to conspiracy theories, extremist movements etc… This move from social media owners actually made a difference, it sent an important message.

The reason behind this decision was to sort out the "bad roots" of social media but one question stands.

Are we really saving democracy if the CEOs of social media tech companies are banning content? Or should we consider these actions as threatening to democracy?

Furthermore, who should be held accountable for the harmful content present on these platforms, is it the fault of users or of the companies owning the medium?

One thing is certain, social media platforms when they have been created, did not have at all the purpose that they acquired today. Thus, there is no "ethical contract" that tells users how to use them. Democracies should maybe adapt themselves with new regulations to find better solutions. The issue of free speech is topical, even in a democracy sometimes restrictions on free speech are applied. And the case of social media is the prime example.

The importance of this Chapter resides on the fact that it describes that following the decisions of international public authorities like the World Health Organisation, on matters like the transmission of conspiracies and false content, online platforms made major steps forward on content management.

Which means that there is hope. Rapid and continuous steps are being made and the pandemic has finally shifted the attention of tech companies to a problem that was long overdue to be addressed. On a negative note, future considerations on the monopoly exercised by social media on deciding arbitrarily how to divide harmful and harmless content, should be made.

4.1 Public authorities vs Infodemic

The Covid-19 pandemic has profoundly changed our lives, there is no objection to it.

The tremendous number of deaths it caused, the sudden dramatic stop that it imposed on our daily activities are only one part of the harmful effects. Mental health implications, job losses, impacts on gender equality and women's rights, education systems failing to properly deliver quality education to all students are some examples of the problems that emerged during the first year of the pandemic. More recently, the issue of vaccination programs, the inequalities in the distribution of the vaccine and the danger of anti-vax hoaxes are among the problems that are adding up to the list of complications public authorities have to face.

The first cases of the Coronavirus have been registered in the city of Wuhan, China at the end of December 2019, where the Covid-19 cases were considered as pneumonia. One month later, the city of Wuhan was forced to impose a severe lockdown to try to stop the spread of the virus.

The World Health Organization (WHO) declared at the end of January the COVID-19 virus as a **dangerous global threat**[113] (**WHO, 2020**), in order to ring the alarm for other countries and encourage international cooperation in sending scientific experts to develop solutions. Towards the end of Februaryit was clear that Covid was not a simple virus, as the pandemic escalated and cases\deaths in many, many countries started to be notified. Governments have consequently been forced to impose travel restrictions and lockdowns to stop the contagion. Europe was particularly hit, countries like Italy have suffered from a great number of casualties. For this reason the EU implemented extra-funding to help member states to fight the virus. In April 2020, shocking news came when ex President Trump declared his decision to stop the funding to the World Health Organization. This decision pushed private actors to donate money to contribute to the efforts of the World Health Organization[114].

In the meantime, another kind of threat was spreading as fast as the virus, the unattended flow of information on traditional and new media platforms.

People, alarmed by the evolving situation, started to gather on online platforms and sipping content to receive some kind of relief from the fear and uncertainty surrounding them. The situation escalated thanks to the fact that slowly but surely, every government started to implement quarantine measures, close down public spaces of aggregations (cafés, cinemas, bars, discos etc…) and oblige workplaces to find alternatives to on-site jobs. The

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[113] WHO Director-General's statement on IHR Emergency Committee on Novel Coronavirus (2019-nCoV), January 30, 2020
[114] Initiatives to fight the pandemic: GAVI – The Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunizations and the Pandemic Emergency Financing Facility (PEF)

consequence has been that a huge number of people saw their lives change completely, and spent a lot of time online: to study, to work, to meet and get in contact with family members.

Public authorities started to notice soon enough that this strong need of resolving uncertainty by looking for advice and solutions online, brought a huge wave of information, unfiltered and containing false-or partially false news.

The WHO at the beginning of February 2020 warned that the pandemic was posing threats to communication and on community engagements. On the main social media, like Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn and Weibo (China), a page dedicated to debunk myths and conspiracies concerning the virus was created. The organisation defined this new phenomenon, an:

"**INFODEMIC**: *overabundance of information- some accurate and some not- that occurs during an epidemic. It can lead to confusion and ultimately mistrust in governments and public health response[115]*" (**WHO, 2020**)

The WHO stated that even though the spread of mis\disinformation during pandemics is something that has happened in ancient history too[116], what changed now is the speed of how information is shared, and the far reach that false theories have, thanks to social media. For this reason, one of the first steps from the WHO was to create the **WHO Information Network for Epidemics** (EPI-WIN). The role of this information platform has been that of working together with social media platforms to boost the views and probability to see fact-checked news coming from reliable sources. For example, Google while working with the WHO made sure that users when typing keywords related to the virus, received information from the WHO and Health Agencies first.

Another step was to expand the page dedicated to myths and create a whole section with the aim of debunking unhealthy myths.

Furthermore, twice a week the WHO's page dedicated to the infodemic publishes the latest news concerning the efforts of stopping the dangerous dissemination of false content. Moreover, in November 2020 an online training of four weeks for professionals (consultants, health experts at the United Nations etc..) was launched, to create a portfolio committed to the management of the Infodemic.

Overall, the main purpose of the World Health Organization, concerning the coronavirus response in terms of online community engagement, was to act as a filter between the vast sea of unchecked information and what should be correctly delivered to the public. The advice, guidance of national health experts therefore becomes fundamental to inform the

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[115] World Health Organization, Novel Coronavirus(2019-nCoV) Situation Report - 13, February 02, 2020 and WHO DirectorGeneral Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus at the Munich Security Conference, February 15, 2020

[116] The first example that comes to my mind comes from "I Promessi Sposi" by Alessandro Manzoni. The novel narrates an episode set in Milan, during the 1630 Black Plague where hoax theories about people spreading the virus on purpose were circulating and led Milanese citizens to capture and kill innocents who were accused of being "untori", spreaders of the virus.

general public, those working in the health sector, employers and employees, event organizers, the tourist sector etc....

In June 2020, during a Conference[117] organized by the WHO, an important conclusion has been reached. The infodemic will be definitely over when people will be educated enough to make a distinction by themselves between false and truthful information, strengthening the online community as a whole.

With regards to European Institutions, the European Parliament and the European Commission have both promptly moved to develop solutions to stop the disinformation contagion and conspiracy outbreak. Policy-makers recognised how the psychological strain caused by the pandemic, together with less social contact and increased use of the internet during the quarantine, has given a strong push to conspiracy theorists to produce malicious narratives. Users who unintentionally are in a situation of chaos, not able to discern what is false and what is real, amplify these narratives, making the problem worse.

Not only that, the European Union has recognised that some of these conspiracy narratives, clearly have a political foundation, are used to undermine the EU and are created by authoritarian governments.

For example, the authoritarian surveillance imposed by the Chinese Communist Party on its citizens had the consequence of also concealing key information concerning the virus at the beginning of the pandemic, slowing down possible preventive measures from other States. Another worry of the Chinese government was to avoid negative foreign public opinion and to silence criticism. Russia too had the same interest of the CCP, i.e to defend its government model, authoritative and controlling. Consequently, both China and Russia started a "**battle of narratives**[118]" (**Bentzen, 2020**) to highlight the "failure" of the European Union in stopping the Coronavirus crises, proposing to their citizens a model based on choosing between security (restrictions, surveillance) and freedom (European Union). Clearly, it is a biased interpretation because functioning democracies with little to none surveillance and restrictions compared to China and Russia, like South Korea, still managed to have the pandemic under control.

The frightening thing is that official sources, coming from the Chinese government or Chinese Embassies, created and posted conspiracy theories on their social media accounts to deflect foreign attention and blame other countries for the origin of the virus. Some blamed the United States, others even Italy for creating the virus in a laboratory and then hiding the first cases.

Furthermore, **UNESCO** worried by the danger posed by conspiracy theories decided to launch an hashtag "**#ThinkBeforeSharing - Stop the spread of conspiracy theories**"[119] (**UNESCO, 2020**).

With a series of infographics, UNESCO is doing an excellent job in explaining what conspiracies are, political and ideological affiliations, how to approach a conspiracy theorist,

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[117] 1st WHO Infodemiology Conference

[118] BENTZEN N, "*COVID-19 foreign influence campaigns Europe and the global battle of narratives*", European Parliament, April 2020

[119] UNESCO, "Stop the spread of conspiracy theories", August 2020, available at https://en.unesco.org/themes/gced/thinkbeforesharing

how they are using Covid-19 to shape their narratives and what concrete actions to follow to stop them.

Returning to the response strategies of the EU, The Council of Europe already in 2017 in a **Report** was warning about the dangers of the "**information disorder**". The report made a distinction between fake news, misinformation, disinformation and conspiracy theories promoted by foreign actors.

Furthermore, the **European External Action Service**, in 2015 created a task force against disinformation, due to concerns of Russian influence and propaganda spread through conspiracies.

The same task force, "**EUvsDisinfo**" has proven to be extremely useful to collect data on disinformation about the Covid-19 virus.

Up to now, the European Union decided to fight disinformation mainly to preserve the right of freedom of expression, of important significance for the rights of European citizens. For this reason, one policy action deemed necessary was to reinforce the network of professionals working to produce healthy information: journalists, think-tanks, fact-checking organizations etc… The purpose was to offer a valid alternative to counter disinformation.

The main achievement, following the European Commission's call for action, has been the "**Code of Practice on Disinformation**[120]"(**2018**)

The main characteristics of this code are:

- Definition of disinformation as constructed information with a purpose (to profit, to cause political disruption), and which causes damage to democracies (affecting communication, public health safety).
- Declaring that the threat of disinformation may lead to damage to European values, such as free speech and the right to access truthful information.
- Recognising the challenges of wanting to keep social media and the internet free and open to everyone, while restricting dangerous content.
- It has been signed by leading tech companies and social media platforms, such as: Google, Facebook, Tik Tok, Youtube, Twitter and Microsoft.

The Code aims to obtain:

- Stopping spreaders of disinformation to earn from ads thanks to the views they receive online.
- Ensuring that users are able to discern truth from unwarranted information, by flagging content deemed unreliable.
- Spot and limit social media bots creating false profiles.
- Limit the use of algorithms that polarize communities, by making the internet more open and letting users to come into contact with news opposite from their personal preferences

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[120] European Commission, *"Code of Practice against Disinformation"*, 2018, available at Code of Practice on Disinformation | Shaping Europe's digital future (europa.eu)

In June 2020, the European Commission, the European Parliament, the European Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of Regions released a " *Joint Communication tackling COVID-19 disinformation*[121]"(**2020**)

Here, resilience against polarization online was promoted, while unregulamented usage of social networks with no content management was strongly discouraged and condemned.

Not only, the Communication explicitly addressed the danger of <u>Conspiracy Theories.</u> Conspiracies have been classified as extremely dangerous because they promote and advocate for societal tensions, a prime example being the 5G Conspiracy Theory which targeted the efforts of the Union to improve broadband connectivity by damaging internet poles. Or more recently, as vaccination campaigns are rolling, anti-vax communities are growing and virologists keep receiving death threats by people affiliated with conspiracy groups. For example Italian virologist Roberto Burioni who received death threats following strong declarations urging Italians to get vaccinated.

To foster cooperation within EU member states, the Joint Communication urges MS to make use of the "**Rapid Alert System**[122]" established already in 2018 to connect specialists in mis\disinformation and cybercrime (a section dedicated to Covid-19 online has also been added in the System). To foster cooperation with States outside the EU, the Communication again stated its openness to work closely with the World Health Organization, OSCE, the G7 and NATO to put under control the infodemic obstructing the work to end the pandemic.

Lastly, the European Commission, in the frame of the fight against Covid-19, launched a campaign dedicated to supervise disinformation in the European Union, which has been extended until August 2021.

In May 2021, given the lesson learned from Covid-19 and the education it gave to experts of the disinformation field, the European Commission decided to re-evaluated its Code on Disinformation and enhance it.

The main limitations of the Code were:

- Not all Member States register their disinformation trends correctly, or maintaining the same level of detail
- Nebulous definitions given to the phenomena, i.e not making correct distinctions between misinformation, disinformation, conspiracy theories, malinformation etc… which make data collection harder
- The monetisation through advertisement online of conspiracy-themed pages, users is still widespread
- Need to use nonpartisan actors to surveil disinformation, with no political affiliation

These are the reasons why the Code needs to be updated. One critical observation is that despite the efforts of European Institutions, much of the work to be done needs the full cooperation of tech companies, or results will not be reached.

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[121] JOINT COMMUNICATION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE EUROPEAN COUNCIL, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS, "*Tackling COVID-19 disinformation - Getting the facts right*", June 10, 2020, available at https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/communication-tackling-covid-19-disinformation-getting-facts-right_en.pdf
[122] Ibid.

Thereby there is also a need to take a look at how these tech companies are working to create response strategies to practically help public authorities.

For example, the social media messaging app WhatsApp[123] (**Waterson, 2020**) has made a collaboration with the British Government to help the NHS (National Health Service) to reduce some pressure from the constant messages asking for help or clarification on Covid-19 related problems. The proposed idea was to create a bot which automatically answers questions from users, using official scientifical medical content.

But, let us take a deep look at how online platforms performed after receiving so much pressure to commit to do something to stop the phenomenon of mis\disinformation.

4.2 "Pop the disinformation bubble": what are social media companies doing?

It is clear that the recommendations and obligations set up by international (World Health Organization in primis) and European institutions have no effect if online platforms do not decide to cooperate.

I decided to start this paragraph by first taking a look at the main problems connected with the stop of disinformation by online platforms and criticism related to the work done so far.

There are three main problems linked to the way online platforms are dealing with the enormous amount of dangerous information on social media:

1. **Algorithms reward "bad" content** because it attracts more users, and more users means more data to be used for profit. Therefore, social media platforms need to change their algorithms and promote official sources, making the online ecosystem more transparent for users.

2. Actors who disseminate **propaganda** are largely making use of **social media** to spread conspiracies with a clear political intent to destabilize governments. In particular apps like Telegram, Facebook Messenger, WhatsApp, Signal are encrypted[124] (**Woolley, 2020**). This means that the content shared is not open to the public, but it is protected by lines of code. They are the perfect instruments for ideological propaganda, as the content cannot be tracked easily from governments. A surge in the spread of conspiracies through these apps, caused violent reactions in many countries (Myanmar, Brazil for example). Despite the technical difficulty, it is imperative to create new tools to control these kinds of apps and report to public institutions the data gathered.

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[123] WATERSON J, "*WhatsApp in talks with NHS to set up coronavirus chatbot: News comes as app seeks to shed image as hub for fake news about pandemic*", TheGuardian, March 20, 2020

[124] WOOLLEY S, "*Encrypted messaging apps are the future of propaganda*", Brookings, May 01, 2020

3. Stop **profiting** from **ads** using conspiracies, hate speech to gain easy followers because it contributes to the contamination of the online ecosystem. In the case of Covid-19 easy profit it is not justifiable because it is a mortal danger.

The Global Disinformation Index (GDI) has made a report on how tech companies are profiting from ads related to conspiracies. The grim discovery is that companies are earning tons of money by hosting the vast majority of conspiracy content to generate ads. Furthermore, despite the policy recommendations of the European Union and WHO, these companies are not implementing all the measures on which they agreed on:

	BAN ADS MENTIONING COVID-19	RESTRICT ADS FOR PPE	RESTRICT ADS THAT MAKE FALSE COVID-19 CLAIMS	RUN PSAs ON COVID-19	COMMIT TO BLOCKING COVID-19 DIS-INFORMATION WEBSITES
criteo	❌	❌	❌	✅	❌
facebook	❌	✅	✅	✅	❌
Google	❌	✅	✅	✅	❌
revcontent	❌	❌	❌	❌	❌
Taboola	❌	✅	✅	❌	❌
twitter	❌	✅	❌	✅	❌
xandr	❌	❌	❌	✅	❌

[Figure 11 - "**Social media platforms and following ad policies**"
Source: GLOBAL Disinformation Index, "*Why is tech not defunding COVID-19 disinfo sites?*", May 04, 2020]

The main finding is that owners of social media companies are proceeding to stop disinformation with a foot on the brake, publicly showing their efforts to gain popularity but at the same time, not taking definite actions. The reason is purely economic.

On the other hand, some performance reviews done by the European Commission are showing that the work of tech companies to monitor the flow of information on their platforms has been quite successful.

Reminder, the companies under scrutiny have all signed the Code of Practice on Disinformation of the European Commission, and have agreed to publish reports during two periods: January 2020- July 2020 and August 2020- December 2020 (fitting with the time frame taken into consideration by this dissertation).

I will be using the excellent article and study published by **Trisha Meyer and Alexandre Alaphilippe**[125] (**2021**) to review the performance of social media.

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[125] MEYER T and Alaphilippe A, "*One year onward: Platform responses to COVID-19 and US Elections disinformation in review*", EU Disinfo Lab, February 24, 2021, available at

Generally speaking, platforms committed to stop disinformation in the following ways:

1. By prioritizing messages and posts produced by public authorities and scientific sources. To do so, they gave free advertisement spaces to such authorities to promote their content. Another method was to link to every post, hashtag, image containing keywords related to Covid-19, a link to access educational content produced by the World Health Organization. Banners and short messages explaining the procedures to follow during the pandemic, how to spot fake news or simply how to wash our hands correctly have been incorporated in the main social media. Furthermore, many tech companies donated resources and technology to be used by official authorities. We can define these as "**soft methods**", with mainly educational purposes and with the intent of "obscuring" unreliable content in favour of official sources.

2. The second method was to indicate content deemed as inaccurate by writing that the sharing of the aforementioned might be deceptive for users. This is a way to **classify** suspicious content to warn users of its fallacious reliability.

3. The third method is more invasive and direct, because it makes sure that clearly inaccurate and dangerous content gets **deleted** and the owners of the account that produced it, **restricted** from the use of social media.

Clearly these three methods have been used according to the level of danger involved by letting information remain on the platforms.

Furthermore, also the way procedures have been implemented throughout the year can be divided into three:

1. The first phase of the pandemic where the objective was to inform citizens on the safety precautions and to properly inform about the nature of the virus.

2. A second phase in concurrence with the United States' 2020 elections to check on political content.

3. The current third phase to help the vaccination programme by promoting educational messages on how the vaccines work and the importance of getting vaccinated.

Turning now to see how each social media has decided to deal with the issue differently.

Twitter tried to introduce a new feature that allowed users not only to share tweets but also to quote them. The idea behind that was to induce users to think more when posting a tweet, consequently adding more personalized ideas and increase meaningful content.Unfortunately it did not work out as planned, as users got confused and used the feature as a simple sharing system, with "*45% of additional Quote Tweets included just a single word and 70% contained less than 25 characters[126]*". (**Gadde et al, 2020**)

Moreover, Twitter decided to label all disinformation related to the coronavirus as harmful and during the US election strengthened efforts to stop and label manipulated political news.

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https://www.disinfo.eu/publications/one-year-onward-platform-responses-to-covid-19-and-us-elections-disinformation-in-review

[126] GADDE V and Beykpour K, "An update on our work around the 2020 US Elections", Twitter Blog, November 12, 2020

Lastly, as other platforms did, whenever we type on search bar words like "vaccine", "covid-19", "coronavirus" etc… a banner appears suggesting to be redirected to official websites:

[Figure 12- "**Twitter search bar**"
Source: personal Twitter account of the author]

Facebook's activities, in addition to the Covid-19 safety measures, have been hectic concerning the election in the United States. In fact, the platform thanks to the help of fact-checking professionals removed or flagged content which was preventing the vote from being carried out correctly.

Concerning the danger of conspiracies, the company in August 2020 decided to include **QAnon** in their list of actors linked to extremism. In October of the same year, a step further was made by deciding to completely remove everything related to this Conspiracy Theory and divert users to visit the Global Network on Extremism and Technology (GNET).

The total number of accounts and users linked to the QAnon conspiracy, which have been removed, is close to twenty-thousand!

Google on the other side, concentrated more on the advertisement sphere by deciding to promote ads produced by health officials and giving advertisement space for free.

The most drastic solution adopted by online social media platforms happened after the Assault on the Capitol in the United States on January 6, 2021. Twitter and Facebook deemed that the influence of ex President Donald Trump in the spread of disinformation, and support

for the QAnon Conspiracy Theory was too strong, and decided to ban him from all of his accounts on the platforms.

This point takes us to some considerations regarding the work of online platforms to "pop the disinformation bubble", are they really changing the infrastructure that causes polarization, mis\disinformation? In addition, what is the line between free speech and disinformation? Are tech companies now drawing the line?

Some may say that tech companies are too powerful and should not monopolise the decision on how to decide if something is right or wrong. Others say that since these companies created the platforms they are responsible for them and should self-regulate them.

It also depends on the perspective of each country, in the United States all kinds of government intervention and regulation is considered threatening, and the public opinion will likely not support it. While in Europe, there is more trust regarding the decisions of the government to intervene, and people feel more comfortable.

Furthermore, these solutions are not enough to stop conspiracies and fake news to spread in the long term, the only way would be to drastically change how algorithms are built and how social media have been transformed to earn profit.

Another take is that the decisions of the companies have been biased, as they decided to prioritize some countries more than others, to stop the infodemic.

These countries are: Germany, France, Spain, Ireland and Italy[127](**Meyer, 2021**). Here the efforts against Covid-19 disinformation have been fierce, and companies have invested greatly to buy ads, or save advertisement space and to educate users.

Countries from Eastern Europe have been largely forgotten and did not receive funding to tackle the dis\misinformation contagion during the pandemic.

What can be done then?

Personally, I believe that some reasonable approaches and points for reflection to tackle this issue could be to:

1. Clearly identify and distinguish between misinformation, disinformation, conspiracy theories and malinformation online.
2. Having done that, adopt a unified method to gather data and report on the performance of social media companies in finding and classifying malicious content.
3. Change the biased algorithms that keep creating polarized communities and make the job of scientists, academic, and public officials very hard.
4. Do not prioritise profit over the health of citizens and their right to have a healthy information ecosystem.

Let us conclude this paragraph by doing a recap of what we have been discussing up to now. First of all, let us highlight the positive actions undertaken by social media companies.

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[127] MEYER T, Alaphilippe A and Pershan C, " *The good, the bad and the ugly: how platforms are prioritising some EU Member States in their COVID-19 disinformation response*", EU Disinfo Lab, April 28, 2021

All companies have largely been using pop-ups and banners to steer users to useful websites, such as the Ministries of Health or the World Health Organization. These banners have also been used in association with content deemed suspicious or misleading, to provide access to fact-checking websites. In extreme cases, such as explicit hate speech, violent extremism, conspiracy theories, posts have been removed from the platforms.

Furthermore, social media companies rushed to include techniques and observations gathered from the information epidemic and include the results in their Policies of Conduct.

Some companies decided to focus on specific issues, like Twitter and Facebook. These two platforms are the ones which saw the highest amount of conspiracies and political extremism. My guess is that the structure of these two social media is favourable for written interaction and "easy" reposting (posts, share and retweet features, limited amount of space to write-> short messages), which makes news circulate even faster. Not only that, the short messages do not have the material capacity to explain issues deeply.

Another point is that tech companies moved faster than governments in predicting

1) the scrutiny they would have received because of their role in the infodemic and

2) that they would have acted as "super-spreaders" of disinformation.

It seems that governments struggle to follow the speed of reaction that these private companies have, and consequently lag behind.

The graph below shows how fast these companies have in fact reacted:
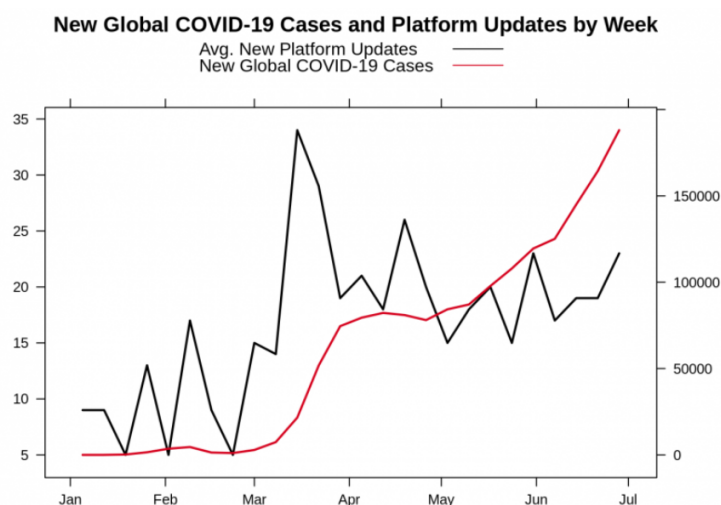
[Figure 13- "**updates of social media platforms in the first wave of the Pandemic**"
Source: BAILEY M, Bernstein O and Ismail H, "*The first wave: six months of social media platforms responding to Covid-19*", PenAmerica, 2020]

A criticism that can be given on these updates is that they have been done only to save private companies' image and not with genuine interest. If it weren't the case of the pandemic, it might be that such updates would have come much later.

Furthermore, tech companies are operating quite selfishly when it comes to advertisement. It is true that much free space for ads has been donated to governments, European and International institutions, but the actual deleting of disinformation content (especially when it comes to conspiracy videos) has not been so thorough.

Why? The bitter truth: it generates quite a revenue as it attracts many users (conspiracy believers but also curious).

The **Center for Countering Digital Hate (2020)**[128] has conducted a study on the issue and discovered that only a small fraction of dangerous content has been dealt with.

Among the total number of posts considered, only 10% was managed by the content policy teams of social media, the rest was left unnoticed.

Besides, Facebook compared to Twitter, even if performing poorly, it performed better than the tweeting company.

What is then left at the mercy of users?

Dangerous conspiracies suggesting that the virus is not spreading airway, Coronavirus is an excuse of governments to establish dictatorships, vaccines are inoculating the virus to make us more sick, suggestions to adopt alternative cures etc…

In short, a total chaos. I have done a quick research on Twitter by typing a keyword usually used by conspiracy theorists: "#plandemic". The results were mainly linked to conspiracy accounts and dated even one,two weeks back. This means that they are lying untouched and potentially spreading more and more mis\disinformation as I write. An example below:
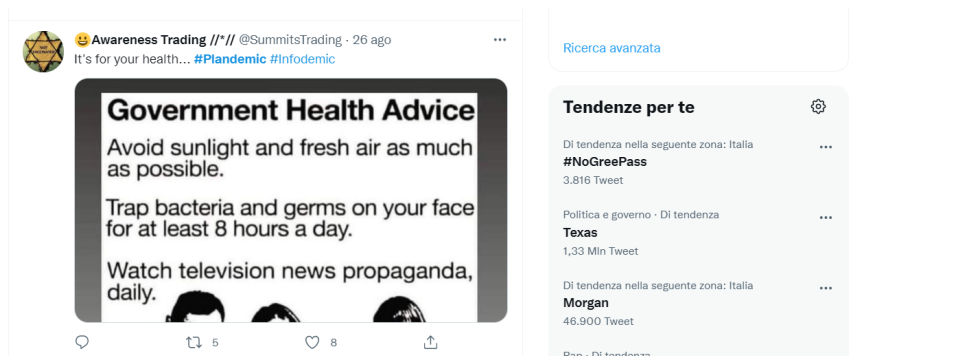
[Figure 14- "**plandemic**"
Source: Twitter feed of the author]

This image gives a good head start to start talking about the case study presented in the last chapter. The results, considerations and analytical procedures obtained throughout the previous four chapters, will be now useful to try to understand a Conspiracy Theory that has been at the center of the attention during the pandemic: QAnon.

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[128] CCDH-CENTER FOR COUNTERING DIGITAL HATE, "*How social media giants have failed to live up to their claims on the Coronavirus 'infodemic'*", 2020

Chapter 5- QAnon

For the purpose of this dissertation, I do not think that there is a better example than the QAnon Conspiracy Theory (and it deserves the capital CT) to explain how the pandemic has launched conspiracies into stardom.

This case study retraces what has been discussed throughout the thesis and serves as a good final picture.

In Chapter 1 conspiracies have been defined from multiple perspectives, some with a positive attitude- defending the function of conspiracies of criticising the work of governments and sometimes even unearthing real conspiracies. Others with a more negative approach- stating that conspiracies, no matter the content of their narrative, are dangerous and often and however, politically charged with anti-semitism and racial discrimination. QAnon is an example of right-wing conspiracism and fitting with the negative perspective.

Chapter 2 helped to define disinformation and its many facets, in the case of QAnon it can be said that it is a clear example of conspiracy which uses mis\disinformative content. Furthermore, given the relationship between QAnon and ex President Donald Trump, it is useful to have defined the term "fake news", used so many times during the speeches and rallies of Trump.

The pandemic alone could not have been able to give QAnon so much push to ascend, social media platforms definitely had an important role. As it will be explained later, QAnon even originated from a specific fringe social media platform linked to right extremism, but still managed to pour and pollute mainstream social media.

Ultimately, Chapter 4 proved that maybe the effort of social media companies has not been enough to stop the spread of conspiracies, even though the QAnon conspiracy has been the main foe of important platforms like Facebook and Twitter.

But from where does QAnon originate from, and are QAnon followers still active? The answer to these, and other questions will be given in the next sub-chapters.

5.1 The "QAnon menace": origins

The origins of QAnon, although nebulous, date back around 2016 and are from the United States. Like other conspiracies, QAnon did not come out of nowhere but it is a previous conspiracy theory which evolved, re-shaped into the QAnon we know today. The earliest records which are quite similar with the main ideas on which QAnon is built nowadays, are from the so-called "*Pizzagate[129]*" (**Kang, 2016**) conspiracy theory. This conspiracy promoted the idea that a pizza chain in the US was hiding a child sex trafficking illegal movement. According to Pizzagate theorists, the former Chair of the 2016 Hillary Clinton run for the White House, was hacked and his computer was hiding information about this conspiracy. A man, lured by this narrative, even broke inside of a pizza restaurant to try to discover the

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[129] KANG C, "*Fake News Onslaught Targets Pizzeria as Nest of Child-Trafficking,*" New York Times, November 21, 2016

secret plot of the influential elite which was abusing children. Needless to say, no children were found in the pizza place, and the man was arrested. At the time already, a whole set of conspiracies targeting Hillary Clinton was being fuelled by Donald Trump's slogans during the run for the White House ("lock her up!") and created a sort of internet frenzy which has taken root in some fringe communities and extremist groups.

Nevertheless, this episode was enough of a push to build a whole narrative around a so-called political elite ("Deepstate") hiding information from citizens. A classic conspiracy idea.

The difference in the evolution of QAnon has been made thanks to social media, in particular a platform named "4Chan".

What is 4Chan?

4Chan is a social network based on boards where users can post trends, it was at early stages associated with internet subcultures, funny and random trends. The key feature of 4Chan is that it is not moderated at all and this created a chaotic environment where eventually extremist, alt-right movements flourished.

Following the "Pizzagate" events, the remaining narratives associated with it, sort of converged on 4Chan. Here, one year later, in 2017 QAnon was born.

To be more specific, the birth of QAnon was on October 28, 2017 in one of the abovementioned boards: **/pol/**= politically incorrect, following a thread called ""*Calm before the Storm*[130]" (**Amarsingam, 2020**) where an user with the nickname Q stated that

"Hillary Clinton will be arrested between 7:45 AM – 8:30 AM EST on Monday – the morning on Oct 30, 2017[131]". (**Amarsingam, 2020**)

The common motifs of all the posts from this anonymous user were orbiting about the fact that he\she had access to secret files from the United States government and had proof about a secret conspiracy organized by a group of powerful people who were hiding an illicit business of child trafficking. For this reason, Clinton had to be arrested for her crimes.

QAnon, like other conspiracies, urges its followers to be investigators and look for the hidden truth that the political elite is hiding from normal citizens.

The unknown leader "Q" leads the "anons" believers by posting short messages and asking to gather evidence. The result is that the QAnon board is an intricate picture of conspiracies, all somehow linked to each other and a deep well of disinformation. The archives of this social media contain a vast array of conspiracies, bizarre and with no rationality, examples are: the danger of vaccines, the government implanting microchips in our bodies to control us, terrorist attacks are all staged etc….

What QAnon followers want to achieve, among the lawlessness and disorder, is to wake people ("The Great Awakening") before a catastrophic event ("The Storm ``) which changes shape as time-and the deadlines for the event to happen- pass.

The situation is slightly reminiscent of a Biblical apocalypse, or the end of the world predicted by a Maya calendar.

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[130] AMARASINGAM A and Argentino M A, " *The QAnon Conspiracy Theory: a security threat in the making?*", CTC Sentinel, Volume 13, Issue 7, July 2020
[131] Ibid.

However, QAnon followers have somehow managed to be extremely organized and divided their archives according to thematics and source of information. Moreover, a whole network supporting the spread and dissemination of QAnon content emerged from this platform. Not only that, 4Chan's content is supported by similar platforms, like 8Chan (now known as 8Kun) working with the same techniques (creating narratives based on the leads of Q) and then reposted on other platforms like Gab and Parler.

The thread? Violent and extremist content, linked to far-right ideologists who have been kicked out of mainstream (and more regulated) social media platforms and have no other option than using cryptic and arcane platforms. It should be emphasized, to be clear, that when I use the word "cryptic" I am not saying that the access to these platforms is only for those who can access the dark web. On the contrary, the appeal of these fringe platforms is that they are open for everyone who surfs the web.

Another key feature of these communities is that their narratives are gathering all sorts of people and thanks to the reach of the internet, spreading all-over the world. For instance, QAnon uses content linked to Trump's followers, but also to the French Gilet Jaune protests and the British Brexit.

The result is a global spread of the QAnon community long before the pandemic started.

Nevertheless, the most active users of QAnon have been tendentially banned from mainstream social media, and were active on these lesser known platforms. So, how has QAnon been able to gain popularity among the broader public?

The answer is: YouTube.

A vlogger on Youtube (Tracy Diaz) was contacted by two well-known QAnon followers who asked her to use her large following to make one of the QAnon threads public. According to an NBC article (2018)[132] (**Zadrozny, 2018)** this was the moment that started the rise to "stardom" of QAnon. That same blogger has even recently won a seat in public office in South Carolina, United States, sparking an alarm about QAnon followers winning seats in the US government.

How do people outside of the orbit of these platforms get into contact with conspiracy theorists? Most of the time, with online interactions between right wing accounts (not necessarily QAnons users) or when a right-wing account\users comments on the post of a person with completely different ideas, attracting other right-wing supporters who come to give a hand and reinforce QAnon content. This, plus the internet YouTube fame have slowly brought out QAnon from the dark corners of the internet and exposed it to be seen on other platforms.

Concerning the political spectrum of QAnon, it is definitely far-right and it is composed of neo-nazis, nationalists, white nationalists and more in general people with little to zero trust in governments.

QAnon is not a harmless conspiracy, it clearly pushes its followers to be active, and in extreme cases to be violent. As said before, for a believer of this conspiracy there is not a lot of time before this apocalyptic event will happen and for this reason, quick reactions are

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[132] ZADROZNY B and Collins B, "*How three conspiracy theorists took 'Q' and sparked Qanon,*" NBC News, August 14, 2018 and LYTTLETON J, "*How did an anonymous post launch the conspiracy movement, QAnon?*" Millennial Source, April 12, 2020

needed. There is no sign in QAnon online contents to stop or limit violent tendencies, suggesting an implicit willingness to let the conspiracy followers become radicalized. In addition, given the fact that Anons are politically-ideologically motivated people, the probability of violent radicalization is extremely high. As mentioned above, the United States is showing a worrying trend where QAnon supporters are joining the ranks of public officials and entering the world of politics.

According to **Alex Kaplan (2020)**[133] During the 2020 elections for the Congress, a scary number of almost a hundred candidates were more or less explicitly supporters of the QAnon conspiracy theory, and two managed to win. After the events of the Capitol Hill riot, for the 2022 elections the number of candidates close to QAnon has been reduced, however it still remains concerningly high.

This is evidence of how real and actual the danger of conspiracy theories is nowadays. Thanks to the situation of the information landscape, polluted with misinformation and disinformation, conspiracy theories have an easy time attracting vulnerable people and their danger should not be underestimated.

In fact, in 2019 the Federal Bureau of Investigation warned suggested caution regarding conspiracy theories, stating that their popularity on social media platforms should not be minimized and that they could be a new kind of domestic terrorism, threatening the safety of the United States[134](**Winter, 2019**).

I would add that another danger related to the spread of these conspiracies, is that when actions taken by social media are not enough, the risk is that conspiracy followers will simply open new accounts on less regulated platforms, re-starting the vicious circle.

Let us conclude by summing up the findings of this paragraph:

1. QAnon is a conspiracy theory composed by people following the lead of the anonymous "Q" who posts messages with the intent to push its followers to start a sort of investigative research concerning the actions of a so-called "Deepstate" which is promoting trafficking of minors.

2. QAnon stems from the "Pizzagate" conspiracy theory, but it is still somehow related to various conspiracies, adopting their narratives and styles.

3. QAnon was born on the unregulated platform 4Chan and has first spread throughout similar platforms (8Chan, Gab) and then to mainstream ones (Youtube, Twitter, Facebook etc…).

4. The reach of QAnon, thanks to the promotion of ex President Donald Trump allowed the conspiracy theory to take root in politics, with a number of candidates close to QAnon deciding to run for Congress.

5. The conspiracy theory does not try to limit violent motives among its followers, and silently incites Anons to take part in violent actions. Prime example is the Capitol Hill Attack in January 2021.

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[133] KAPLAN A, "*Here are the QAnon Supporters Running for Congress in 2020,*" Media Matters for America, July 15, 2020.
[134] WINTER J, "*Exclusive: FBI document warns conspiracy theories are a new domestic terrorism threat,*" Yahoo News, August 1, 2019

6. Despite the actions taken by social media platforms, the risk of QAnon followers simply moving to other platforms and influencing new people is high.

Moving on now to consider how the QAnon conspiracy theory has performed during the Covid-19 pandemic.

5.2 Measuring the rise and popularity of QAnon during the pandemic

The Global Health Crisis caused by the spread of the Coronavirus has been the straw that broke out the huge problem of the status of the information ecosystem, mainly offline.

Dangerous conspiracy theories, like QAnon have largely profited from this situation, helped also by populist trends across the world and a widespread loss of confidence and trust of citizens towards their governments.

On the surface, it may seem that QAnon is a silly conspiracy that wants to uncover a secret plot of child trafficking promoted by political elites, or why not Satanic worshippers. In reality, it is just the symptom of a widespread societal discomfort. Anger towards the ruling class, especially after economic crises, populism and low-quality political debate, estrangement from democratic processes and lastly, deterioration of information processes are just examples of the motives making people more susceptible to conspiracy narratives.

The pandemic has just been a trigger to the whole situation.

As the reader might know, the QAnon increasing influence started in 2017, and culminated with the Assault on the Capitol on January 6, 2021.

This tragic and worrisome event has shown how bad the political performance of ex President Donald Trump has been and how he put gasoline on a problem that should have been tackled way sooner.

However, I do not want to dwell on this particular event as I prefer to wait further to make considerations on how the United States can live with the aftermath of a similar attack, on its own soil and promoted by its own President.

The purpose of this last paragraph is to show how the pandemic has led to an increased growth of the interaction of QAnon posts, until the decisive ban of social media platforms of all QAnon related content.

QAnon, when the pandemic hit, reacted as other conspiracy theories did. It reshaped some parts of its narratives to fit the new epidemic environment and found itself at ease with anti-mask holders, sceptics regarding the nature of the pandemic, racist groups, anti-vaxxers etc…

The old narrative regarding the child sex trafficking transformed into an attempt to protect the children from the dangers of the "Chinese virus" or from "mind control inoculated through vaccines and promoted by governments and Deepstate aficionados".

To measure the rise of QAnon related content on social media during the first year of the pandemic, and before the major decision of tech platforms to ban it, I will use two main sources.

The first one, a report from the **Institute for Strategic Dialogue**[135] (**O'Connor, 2020**)on QAnon and Facebook, and second, the work of the researcher **Marc-André Argentino**[136](**2020**).

Millions of users have joined the QAnon ranks since the start of the pandemic, and the graph below is a tangible example:
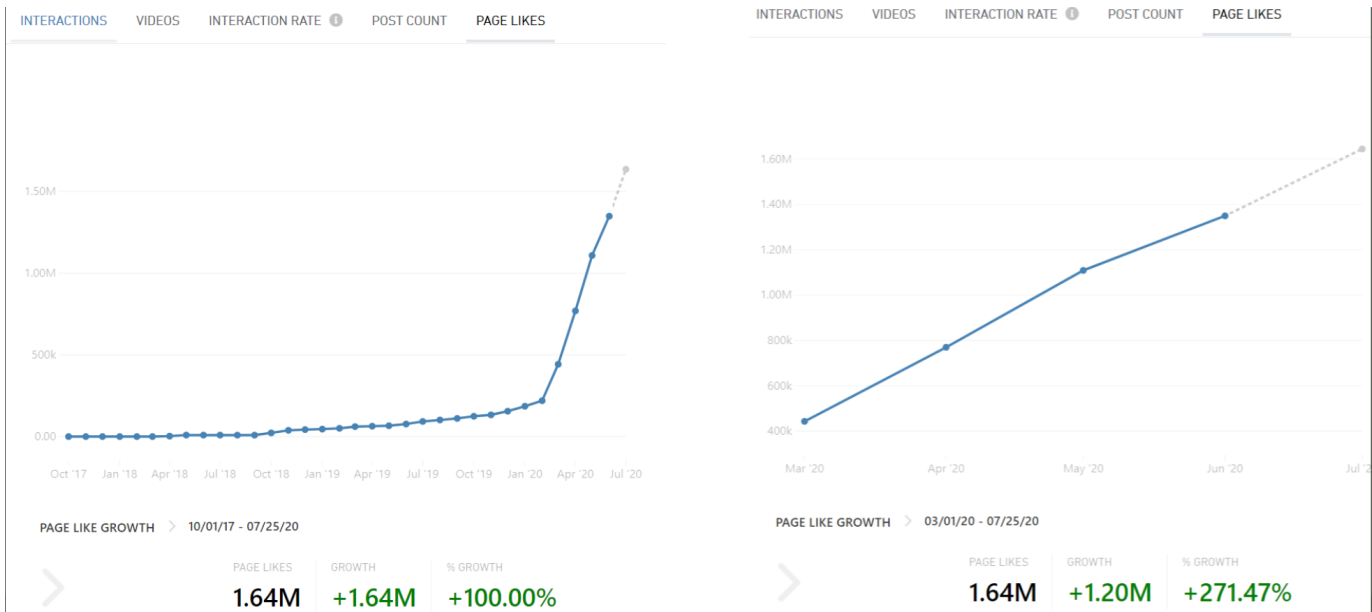
[Figure 15- **growth of QAnon followers 2017-2020**
Source: Marc-André Argentino, Twitter, July 26, 2020]

The number of new followers is indeed astounding. The platform taken under scrutiny is Facebook, where the QAnon conspiracy theory has managed to gain a lot of attention.

Furthermore, on the same platform, concerning the total number of interactions between users, from 2017 to 2020, more than 50% has been concentrated only in the first five months of the pandemic. The same thing (more than half since 2017) applies to the number of content (images, text, videos) posted on Facebook.

The months where the highest number of QAnon's actions have been registered are March 2020 and Summer 2020.

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[135]O'CONNOR C, Gatewood C, McDonald K and Brandt S, "*The boom before the ban: QAnon and Facebook*", ISD-Institute for Strategic Dialogue, December 18, 2020
[136] Marc-André Argentino, Twitter, July 26, 2020

The uncertainty provided by the pandemic, in addition to the elections happening during Autumn 2020- and the influence of ex President Donal Trump in lightning up QAnon linked messages- have been major factors to account for this escalation.

Another thing to take into consideration, is the fact that a vicious circle has been created. New followers and interaction of the conspiracy theory have attracted the attention of curious users, and along them journalists or fact-checkers. Even if the intent of these actors is harmless and only dictated by curiosity, it has contributed to feeding the algorithm with reasons to promote such content. This promotion, as the pandemic was raging and conspiracy vulnerable people were scared, has attracted even more followers. And the circle started again.

The **report from ISD** has underlined similar trends on Facebook, and added comments explaining some sudden surges in QAnon interaction.

Another graph below, showing the trend:
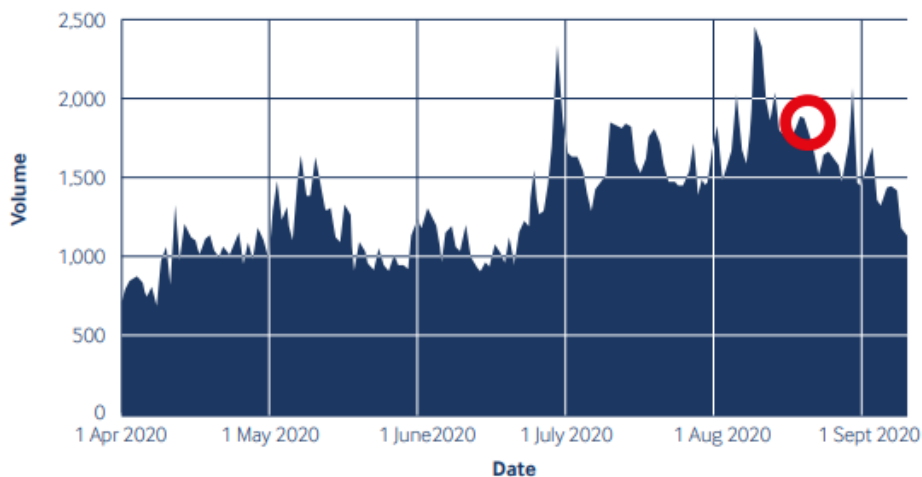
[Figure 16- **Increase concerning posts about QAnon**

Source: O'CONNOR C, Gatewood C, McDonald K and Brandt S, "*The boom before the ban: QAnon and Facebook*", ISD-Institute for Strategic Dialogue, page 15, December 18, 2020]

The graph shows on the horizontal axis the time frame considered, April 2020- September 2020, and the volume of posts with QAnon keywords.

The red circle indicates the first time ex President Donald Trump made explicit comments about the QAnon Conspiracy and expressed his pleasure in knowing that he had so many followers among the ranks of QAnon.

Other surges have been linked to anti-vax, anti-Covid protests organized by QAnon and related movements, and the strategy of using the health of childrens as pretext in organising these protests.
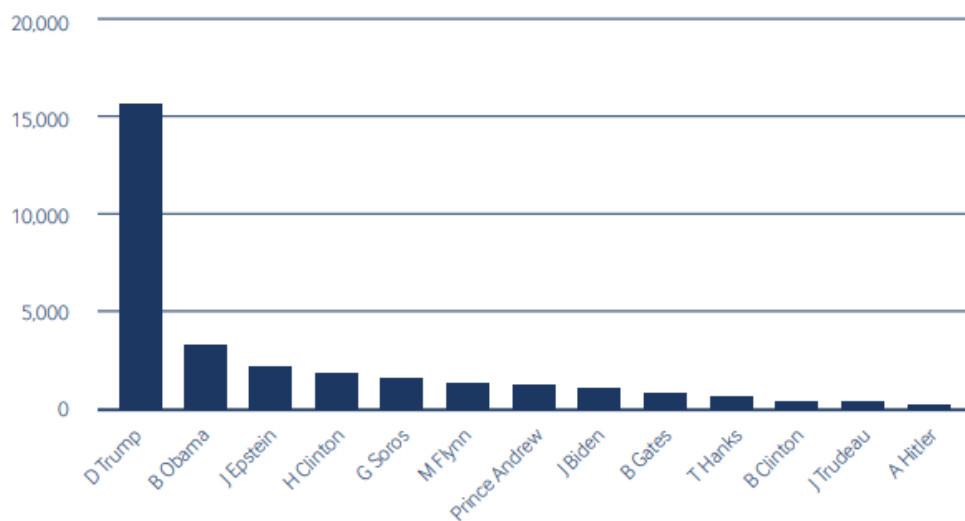
[Figure 17- **public figures mentioned by QAnon supporters on Facebook**
Source: O'CONNOR C, Gatewood C, McDonald K and Brandt S, "*The boom before the ban: QAnon and Facebook*", ISD-Institute for Strategic Dialogue, page 27, December 18, 2020]

As we can see from this second graph, Donal Trump has been nominated the most by QAnon supporters, followed by names usually associated with other conspiracy movements, such as Bill Gates, Soros, Epstein etc... Moreover, the number of content related to political opponents (Obama, Biden, Clinton) has also increased interaction.

Furthermore, some famous profiles on social media, Facebook to be precise, have acted as main disseminators of content about QAnon and helped its cause to gain huge popularity and following.

To conclude, the decision of Facebook in October to finally ban all posts, users and pages regarding QAnon has been perhaps too late, as the disinformation machine was already set in motion and too huge to stop.

Another worrying effect of this QAnon stardom has been for sure the international fame that it acquired, especially in the United Kingdom and Germany.

One reason concerns ideology, alt-right ideology which attracted people close to neo-Nazi movements, Brexiters and white supreamacists. The second reason is that QAnon, strong of what it has learned during the 4chan period, was supported by very organized followers who have catalogued and translated the conspiracy theories in many languages and helped to make it internationally famous.

The present case study on the QAnon conspiracy was designed to determine the effect of two factors, social media and the SARS-COVID-19 pandemic, on politically charged conspiracy theories.

The results are clear, social media when polluted with lies, and disinformation act as superspreaders of dangerous narratives and as long as tech companies do not intervene on changing the algorithms and policy governing them, change will be difficult. Second, world

crises such as the health crisis we are facing now, increase instability everywhere in the world, including democratic countries. Politicians and public authorities, as a result, find themselves struggling with the management of the situation, and are not certainly helped by the loss of trust from citizens.

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Conclusion

The year 2020, the year of the COVID-19 pandemic has shaken our lives.

The uncertainty created by the fight against an invisible enemy had not only economic consequences but societal ones as well.

The "Conspiracy outbreak" caused by the mis\disinformation contagion on social media platforms has slowed down the efforts of public authorities to tackle the crisis. The danger of this parallel pandemia lies in the threat of conspiracy theories to gain political weight and potentially threaten the fabric of Western democracies.

The QAnon Conspiracy Theory has been the perfect example of how dangerous this phenomenon is, and why it must not be underestimated. In extreme cases, conspiracy theories can even become cases of domestic terrorism.

The main purpose of the current study was to show how epidemics are the perfect environment for threatening conspiracies to spread, along with huge waves of disinformation. The second aim of the study was to investigate the influence of social media on conspiracies, and how they served as super-spreading platforms for conspiracies.

Despite the fact that epidemics, conspiracies and fake news are not new phenomena at all, it is undeniable that this has been the first pandemic in the age of social media.

One of the more significant findings to emerge from this study is that the Coronavirus crisis has not constructed new conspiracies, existing conspiracy theories have changed shape and like the virus adapted to the new environment. This study has found out that generally, the main change has been in the interaction of online users towards conspiracies.

As the pandemic moved our lives on online platforms, more people have merged into the online information channels, boosting the probability of bad information being shared.

As the shock caused by the extent of the pandemic left public authorities and scientists struggling at the beginning of the pandemic to deliver fast and reliable answers, the vacuum of information created has been filled with conspiracies and disinformation.

Despite some efforts of tech companies to weed out disinformation, the conspiracy machine was already set into motion.

The study was limited to analyse only the first year of the pandemic, as for academic research, not enough time to make further considerations has passed.

As an ancient Chinese philosopher said "*those who have knowledge do not predict and those who predict do not have knowledge*", far from me therefore to make assumptions and hypotheses on the long-lasting effects of the conspiracy outbreak during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Nevertheless, a piece of advice would be to suggest further work to establish what qualifies as misinformation, disinformation, fake news online and to spread the findings in order to quantify more precisely these phenomenons on social media. In fact, even if many studies classified them correctly, there is still a bit of confusion when reporting about them and this makes the analysis of trends harder.

Chapter Four has taken into consideration how public authorities have dealt with the infodemic, and introduced some criticism in consideration of what tech companies could have done to manage the situation in a better way.

Taken together, these findings support strong recommendations to change the ethical and policy choices of social media platforms regarding the management of the data they collect, and urge public authorities to take into serious consideration the danger of conspiracy theories.

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