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Article

Accessing to a “Truer Truth”: Conspiracy and Figurative Reasoning From Covid-19 to the Russia–Ukraine War

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Abstract

This research hypothesizes that all conspiracy theories have dominating isotopies and images-symbols regardless of ideology or context. As a result, I hypothesized that the common denominator might be discovered in figurative reasoning, which means using the same representations to explain current events, in order to detect an ideal center of the semantic universe of conspiracy where the diverse conspiracist fringes converge. Social media invariant topicalizations of the Covid-19 epidemic and the Russia–Ukraine war are the ideal field to validate this hypothesis. The corpus on which the study was conducted consists of thousands of online items published between February 15, 2020, and October 15, 2022. Within the corpus were chosen posts by QAnon supporters designated as disinformation “superspreaders.”

Keywords

conspiracy; Covid-19; figurative reasoning; QAnon; Russia; semiotics; Telegram; Ukraine

Issue

This article is part of the issue “Fakespotting: (Dis)Information Literacy as Key Tool to Defend Democracy” edited by José Antonio Muñoz-Velázquez (Universidad Loyola Andalucía) and Claudio Paolucci (University of Bologna).

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1. Introduction

This article continues researching conspiracists’ social media representations of the Covid-19 pandemic (Pezzi & Terracciano, 2022). This study aims to chart the phenomenon of “selective negationism,” or the manipulation of events based on an exaggerated fear of change and a need to maintain the status quo. The research confirmed the initial hypothesis regarding dominant isotopies and images-symbols cross-cutting all conspiracy theories, independent from ideological or contextual specificity. In semiotics, isotopies correspond to redundant semantic categories that provide narrative coherence and consistency as the prevalence of the theme of secrecy in conspiracy theories. The term “conspiracy theory” refers to a set of mental and emotional attitudes aimed at discovering adequate explanations for the happenings in the world by concentrating on the reconstruction and revelation of the evil plots carried out by influential people (Douglas et al., 2019). Conspiracy theories exist semiotically in the form of actualization, whereas actual conspiracies, such as the Watergate scan-

dal, are their actualization (Uscinski, 2020, pp. 22–27). Conspiracy theories are “unproven stories told as truth” (Bergmann, 2018, p. 6), in which the activities of the wealthy and powerful have a negative connotation. These stories have a stable structure that makes them credible, containing recurrent figures of the conspiracy discursive configuration, such as the evil plan and secrecy (Byford, 2011, pp. 71–94). The category of secrecy underpins conspiracy narrative relations in which truth values are decided by refutational patterns (Oswald & Herman, 2016, p. 297) articulated with short, clean implicatures to lessen the intricacy of the events narrated based on post hoc fallacy (Prochazka & Blommaert, 2021). Using Marin’s words, the secret is the present effect of meaning of a past state with a negative connotation (Marin, 1984).

Secrecy equalizes differences and distinguishes similarities. Conspiracists spread stories to convince the public that conspirators such as Bill Gates use secrets as weapons and sources of power, but they also employ secrets as a source of credibility. Conspiracy theories imply a narrative rhetoric called by Marin (1984) “reality

that overdoes the fiction.” If, continuing with Marin, in every conspiracy story lies the uncovering of a secret, then what matters is the discourse structure, which causes individuals to believe through accurate descriptions of things. Secrecy is a way to communicate that gives the impression that the person receiving it has unique access to information. The possession of a secret confers power over others who disregard the truth. Thus, it is a form of tactical polemology arising from the manipulation of the signs viewed as reserved powers, which consists in continually displacing the center of the discourse itself, which equates to destroying it. To demolish rather than deceive. This is why conspiracism is essentially a method of perceiving the world, a paranoid attitude of individuals who believe they possess the truth and refuse to accept contradictions (Hofstadter, 1964; Uscinski, 2020, 27).

In this article, an attempt will be made to determine whether there is a general property in the similarities and associations that lend credence to conspiracy theories, as well as to construct a theoretical object that explains the phenomena investigated in image-symbols recurring in discourse. However, given the various perspectives that characterize semiotic theory, it is vital first to define what symbol means. According to Saussure (1916/1986), the symbol must be interpreted unambiguously in a specific socio-cultural context, but it does not constitute a system. Saussure contrasts the sign to the symbol because, in the latter, he detects a sensible dimension between signifier and signified that is not arbitrary because it is founded on a natural and social correlation (cf. Fabbri, 2019). Peirce (1903) states that the symbol represents an arbitrary social convention, as opposed to the icon, which defines a similarity between representamen and object. The Peircean icon is essentially the Saussurean symbol. Hjelmslev (1943/1961) refers to symbolic systems as diagrams and games and includes all interpretable but non-biplanar structures, like representations or emblems, such as the hammer and sickle symbol of communism and the scale as a symbol of justice. In the words of Eco, the symbolic of Saussure and Hjelmslev is guided by a procedure per *ratio difficilis*, modeled on the abstract type of content (Eco, 2019). Conspiracy theories are governed by *ratio difficilis* because they alter the plane of expression of events to generate hypotheses regarding their veracity, redefining the plane of content. Conspiracy theorists tend to over-signify or amplify the implied significance of a sign’s associations to support their ideas in a way that stretches beyond their literal meaning. In the context of conspiracy theories:

A symbol retains its invariant nature through time, yet on the other hand, a symbol correlates actively with its cultural context, is transformed by its influence, and transforms itself...Thus, symbols and texts important for the audience here fulfill the function of collective cultural memory. (Madisson & Ventsel, 2020)

Eco (2019) investigates the different concrete uses of the term “symbol,” concluding that no fixed nucleus of signified can be established. Eco prefers the semantic-pragmatic attitude that should be called “symbolic mode” over the symbol. This activity organizes the complexity of experience into content structures corresponding to systems of expression that make “incomprehensible” events thinkable and communicable (Eco, 2019, p. 45), just like those shown in conspiracy theories or those related to unjustified war killings or the persistence of Covid-19.

The symbolic mode describes how texts are made or interpreted, and it requires an invention applied to recognition. For example, a sign-function is given to an event related to the Russia–Ukraine war, which is seen as a projection that realizes some properties of the content plane per *ratio difficilis*. The symbolic mode is an intentional way of interpreting how text and signs connect original approaches to stable expressions (e.g., Nazi signified attributed to the symbol of Ukraine). The symbolic mode of current conspiracy theories relies on figurative argumentation or figure-based reasoning that transforms beliefs into truth (Fabbri, 2003). Figurative argumentation is a component of the traces that enunciation leaves in the text as certain textual tactics of secret doing (Fabbri, 2020). The ultimate purpose of this research is to catalog the various sorts of figurative argumentation that link the Russia–Ukraine war to the evil plan underpinning Covid-19.

1.1. Methodology

This study focuses on the “presidential” conspiracy theory trend that emerged in 2016, the year of Donald Trump’s election as US president and the introduction of “post-truth” as the *Oxford English Dictionary’s* word of the year (Butter, 2022; Demata et al., 2022; Rosenblum & Muirhead, 2019). Based on the premise that “conspiracy theories are essentially social constructs” (Butter & Knight, 2015, p. 26), the research seeks to examine the associative and figurative mechanisms driving the connections between events of the economic, political, and social relevance of our day. Consequently, the analysis relies on a semiotic methodology that identifies the discursive invariants of persuasion deployed in the argumentation of conspiracy theories. In this context, discourses are meant to be understood in the same way that Foucault (1972) did, as generated by the historical conditions and practices of a given time.

I applied a proprietary methodology of analysis called “semioptics” (our neologism), which can be imagined as an infinite chain composed of adaptable links capable of networking and strengthening with other scientific disciplines. The starting point of the semioptics method is the generative trajectory of meaning theorized by Greimas (1966), chosen for its usefulness in selecting figures and topics through which values and semantic categories manifest themselves in discourse. The generative

trajectory of meaning is a vast translation procedure, from the simplest to the most complex, from the abstract to the most figurative. Greimasian semiotics offers tools to analyze the construction of emotion and effects of meaning in various types of text, verbal, visual, and syncretic; thus, it is well suited to the characteristics of post-truth discourses. Truth is an effect of meaning, the outcome of a series of text construction that constitute its relevance and credibility. In that case, it is, therefore, necessary to analyze the narrative mechanisms to trace its profound articulation. The semioptics method combines the semiotics of texts with other approaches like Eco's (1992) theories on overinterpretation and misinterpretation or semiotics of culture.

Hence, we can confirm an ideal core in the semantic universe of conspiracy where pockets of unique thought converge, a holistic vision of global events based on figurative reasoning that encompasses the precise norms of meaning generation articulating a particular discursive universe with representational clichés comprehensible only with a common background.

Conspiracy theorists twist any occurrence into a story by rewriting the chain of causality to support their claims. They do this by autonomously establishing a comprehensive and integrated layer that yields figurative reasoning to defend the beliefs (cf. Fabbri & Marrone, 2001, p. 144). Whether the primary focus is on real-world events or fabricated stories based on those events determines the level of figurative intensity in our corpus, which runs the representation of facts from medium (figurative) to high (iconic). The use of figurative thinking demonstrates that the proof of the hypothesis does not follow scientific methods like abduction, deduction, and induction. Instead, the demonstration of the hypothesis relies on analogy and the limit extension of the signified (catachresis), like the impromptu association of two different crosses and their symbolizations to accuse Zelensky of being Nazi.

After looking at how the same types of figurative reasoning were used over and over during Covid-19, we noticed that the same thing happened in the conspiracy discourse about the Russia–Ukraine war. The recurrence of figurative reasoning backs up the analysis structure and shows that conspiracists use the same categories to classify events, no matter the context or specific implications.

The main delegated enunciators of conspiracism, those who embody the value system and are in charge of spreading it and connecting the events scattered around the world, in every space and time, need to reach as many people as possible in order to spread the absolute truth, but they need a platform that guarantees anonymity and little chance of interference seen as censorship. The history of Twitter, both before and after Elon Musk, shows that social media is the ultimate playing field (see also Donald Trump and Kanye West), and ensuring “freedom of opinion” is vital to preserving the pursuit of agendas. Freedom of speech is why conspiracists favor

Telegram, and for this phase of the study, the choice was to focus on specific QAnon channels.

The screening of Telegram channels began with the search engine query “QAnon,” to which other pertinent channels were added over time after they were individualized through participant observation. Telegram channels were monitored from the start of the Russia–Ukraine war to October 2022. Channels were chosen in English and selected by the number of subscribers. First, the most subscribed Telegram channels were sorted out among those thematized by QAnon theories, then the most visualized posts regarding the Russia-Ukraine war characterized by redundancy across channels were picked. In fact, the same text is often reposted and forwarded to different channels. The Telegram channels selected in alphabetic order are: BioClandestine (113,469 subscribers), QAnon Warriors (65,684 subscribers), QAnon Fighters (62,100 subscribers), The Donald (54,100 subscribers)—Trump's secret Telegram channel, probably fake—and ULTRA Pepe Lives Matter (210,652 subscribers).

The QAnon movement is seen as a possible terrorist danger in the US and is also becoming a social stigma in Italy, where it has impacted those already vulnerable due to the epidemic. Furthermore, QAnon's statements are distinguished by attributing all global occurrences to deep state schemes.

1.2. When Freedom of Speech Falls Short, Go on Telegram

Telegram had a boom in subscribers during the pandemic and with the shutdown of US social media and TikTok in Russia in February 2022. In order to have a better understanding of the reasons for its late propagation, it is essential to summarize its history and main features, which bear in its construction the *seme* of politicization.

Telegram is an instant messaging service with freemium, cross-platform functionalities that was created on August 14, 2013, by Russian brothers Nikolai and Pavel Durov. Nikolai, a mathematics prodigy, created the MTProto Protocol, open source from the start, while Pavel, a philologist, oversaw the app's strategic and financial aspects. The Durov brothers are the founders of Russia's first social network, VKontakte, or VK, which has been online since 2006 and has similar functionality to Facebook. Unfortunately, it became an object of interest to the Russian government, which claimed control over it. After eight years and relentless abuse, the Durovs decided to leave VK and Russia in 2014. One of the factors that caused Durov to leave Russia seemed to be the request to send personal data of Ukrainian dissidents to Russia's security agencies and to block Alexei Navalny's page on VK, which was flatly refused. As a result, Pavel Durov is known as one of Putin's biggest adversaries. After leaving Russia, Telegram wanders the globe, stopping in St. Kitts and Nevis (where the Durovs first became citizens), Berlin, and, most recently, Dubai.

Telegram is currently used by the Russian government, Ukrainian supporters, and conspiracists.

The distinctive characteristics of Telegram include Secret Chats with self-destruct timers, which make the privacy of communication the main attraction for users. Secrecy makes Telegram the app of choice for conspiracy organizations, paradoxically conservative and Putinist, because it is more difficult to block accounts than Twitter and Facebook. Despite Telegram's efforts, which actively deletes terrorist and Nazi content, it is relatively easy to get into conspiracy channels.

On the technical side, secrecy is assured through an auto-delete timer set to wipe messages 24 hours or seven days after they are sent. As a result, group administrators can remain anonymous, making them tough to track down and their posting activity. Because anonymity and secrecy increase the risk of fake news, Telegram offers a simplified verification process based on having verified accounts on other social media platforms. It is obvious that conspiracy groups are not verified.

The broadcast mode was added in 2014, but it was replaced in 2015 by channels, increased accounts with limitless followers, view counters for each post, and the possibility for just administrators to post. Given the one-way nature of the conversation, it can be classified as broadcast. The emphasis is on continuous updates, with the debate in the comments. According to Telegram's website, "channels were swiftly accepted in regions where freedom of speech falls short." So, the *raison d'être* of the channels is to report a state of affairs that gives access to the reality of the facts.

Forwarding posts from one channel to another is a tactic for gaining a following. Shared posts have a recurring pattern because they are created not only for exclusive sharing on the Telegram channel but also to be forwarded to other channels, so they have a formula such as "Join" plus the emoji of the finger pointing to the channel link placed on the line below, added to visual and verbal text about an event, news, or opinion. Disseminating posts in other channels is a form of enunciative concatenation, which is an assemblage of voices linked by a common cause and intertwined by repeated and serialized quotations and references (see Paolucci, 2020, p. 244). In fact, upon closer inspection, channels labeled with words that everyone knows are the gateway to those where the most confidential information is circulating, which are named in a more complex way and thus cannot be accessed by a simple query in Telegram's search engine, so they are restricted to insiders.

The Anons, QAnon's followers, use digital tools and social media to expose the deep state's plans to the world. In order to counteract the widespread censorship of online platforms, groups have resorted to strategies like significant content diffusion. For instance, after its Twitter accounts were repeatedly shut down for spreading false information, the BioClandestine channel was launched on February 24, 2022, when the Russia-Ukraine war began. Switching to Telegram is essential to

avoid being "censored," with sporadic forays onto Twitter to snag new users. In practice, Anons switch back and forth between drumbeat dissemination on Twitter, which is a platform that indexes conversations through the use of hashtags and subjects that are currently trending, and continual updates on Telegram, which is described as "a good tool to gather and spread information" (BioClandestine, October 18, 2022). Therefore, the forms of expression are structured to be shared via the instant messaging application and social media. The ethical dilemma, however, is more acute now than ever before because of the paradox that indestructible bubbles often engulf inexperienced, impressionable followers. There is a renewed focus on the issue of free expression online because of the advent of social media platforms like Parler. Which limits, if any, can be placed on the right to free speech under the constitution? The topic is brought up once more concerning Musk's Twitter and the "content control council." Parler has existed since 2018, but it was not widely known until 2020, when its popularity skyrocketed to 20 million users attributed to the pandemic and the forthcoming US presidential election in November 2021. Parler markets itself as the "premier global free speech app," where only illegal activities, child pornography, and illegal narcotics are blocked.

Nevertheless, precisely what qualifies as an illegal activity? Is it not illegal to plot a violent uprising, a sort of coup d'état? The act of promoting violence and taking advantage of people whose minds have been impaired by Covid-19?

Parler was accused of being actively involved in the attack on the US Congress on January 6, 2021, as the place where such activities were coordinated and organized. Twitter itself had the evidence left by one of the victims, Ashli Babbitt, but demonstrated limitations of social media monitoring, especially regarding regular people. With Trump's account suspension and the concomitant dissociation from tweets about the event, Twitter attempted to make amends.

On Telegram, whoever desiring to "speak directly to the 'ordinary' people without having their words twisted by...corrupt bureaucrats or journalists serving the elite" plays "on simplification and emotionality" (Bergmann & Butter, 2020). In this scenario, Telegram seems to be the platform for proselytizing outside bubbles and pursuing free speech.

2. A Typology of Conspiracy Figurative Reasoning

The corpus was analyzed using a custom grid to be applied to all posts, independent of genre and channel. The first item of interest in the grid concerns the definition of context, namely the external causalities that led to the publication of the content. External causalities are ideologies, alternative information strategies, or counter-information, paired with internal causalities related to the specific semiotic system of representation and the code characterizing the text.

External causalities involve a social right mobilization effort against Joe Biden and the Democrats as members of a deep state whose ultimate purpose is to impose the new order. The deep state is a fragmented group of persons led by Bill Gates and supported by Rothschild bankers, the Vatican, and Hollywood celebrities (the latter two accused of pedophilia), as well as numerous personalities classified as antagonists in line with the top of the media agenda of the time. In terms of global mobilization, every far-right conspiracist theory has a common discourse topicalization; for instance, QAnon, which began as a small US-based conspiracy fringe, now has significant international dissemination. QAnon's influence in Italy increased during the March 2020 lockdown, which, and several journalistic investigations have reported its spread not only in English-speaking countries such as the UK and Australia but also in Brazil, France, Germany, or even Japan, where sects historically root quite well (Pezzini & Terracciano, 2022).

In addition to sociopolitical localization compatible with the constraints of each country, the Anons' utterances are transnational and similarly topicalized. Recurring themes are resentment toward wealthy elites, anxiety for safety paired with the perceived need for self-preservation, and concern over losing fundamental civil rights. Themes like 9/11, 5G, Covid-19, and the war between Russia and Ukraine are the four modern triggers that set off the chain of events. The events of 9/11 fuel xenophobia and sovereignism while reigniting curiosity about government secrets. Survival is jeopardized by the unpredictability created by alterity, which is also an issue with 5G and Covid-19, but here the attack is on health, and it has as a counterpart the restriction of civil liberties with mandatory masks and vaccines (cf. Demuru, 2022).

The present phase of "plandemic"—namely the deep state's strategy of world domination directed by Bill Gates, which started with Covid-19—is the war between Russia and Ukraine, which is about economic and energy deprivation. So, first, there is mental deterioration (terrorism), then physical disease (pathogens), and finally, monetary loss (consumption and inflation). The issue is that people are compelled to infer a relationship between these events, a universal Deus ex machina. On June 14, 2022, ULTRA Pepe Lives Matter channel claimed that the war between Russia and Ukraine is the second part of the "plandemic" organized by Bill Gates (implied reference) and Putin helped avert a bacteriological catastrophe (Figure 1). The post also envisions an alliance between Trump, Putin, and Xi, who go from planetary opponents to silent heroes. The source of the information from which this reflection arose is the Bioclandestine channel, part of the research corpus.

The systemic perspective of conspiracists acts like a form of reverse prophecy by looking to the past for explanations of the present. Eco (1992) describes this phenomenon as the "secrecy syndrome," the false idea that revealing confidential information grants an advantage. The Anons use the Streisand effect, which corre-

sponds to individuals' automatic reaction when something is forcibly hidden or restricted, causing them to become more aware of the information in question, typically through the web and social media. The name is credited to star Barbra Streisand because her attempts to remove a photograph of her Malibu cliff-top property from the California Coastal Records Project in 2003 aroused attention to coastal erosion, resulting in a public case.

As Paolucci (2017) points out, for Eco, no key can give access to comprehensive knowledge because it is composed of a patchwork of local expertise acquired through labor and conjecture. However, a conspiracy develops by assigning a single meaning to unrelated occurrences. Therefore, one must be cautious of one-size-fits-all explanations, which are always wrong, and emphasize enunciation rather than utterance, which affects how things are described and their communicative construction. The ability to appear objective is a rhetorical trick that may be executed with the help of specific language and aesthetic tools applied to the art of storytelling.

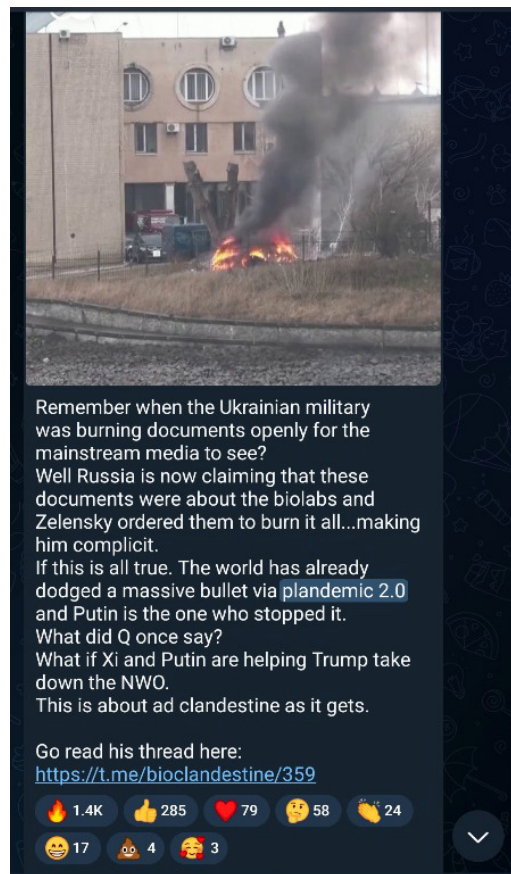


Figure 1. ULTRA Pepe Lives Matter: Ukrainian documents are burning.

By demonstrating the connection between narrating and showing, Paolucci demonstrates that enunciation—whose etymological origin, *ex-nuncius*, means “to send a messenger”—is defined by the subject with the creative

obligation of transmuting subjectivity with objectivity. Then showing “the truth” of facts takes on different tones if it is Q speaking rather than Trump or other actual “prophets.” The search for a single global and “glocal” meaning has its emotional roots in the passion of mistrust, which bears a seme of skepticism, particularly regarding the sincerity of politicians. When the governors’ reasons are vague and inconsistent, common sense looks elsewhere to the “signs” that confirm a malicious plot. After all, even if the premises are wrong, the sign is still connected to the structure of the real object, and it is observable in the same way as Obama’s photographs taken in Ukraine or the symbols printed on Zelensky’s t-shirts are.

Several times, Zelensky has been spotted in uniform, a military green t-shirt bearing the Ukrainian trident or armed forces cross, which has been “mixed” by haters with the iron one, a Nazi military insignia, and presented as proof in favor of the Putinian thesis of the denazification of Ukraine (cf. Pezzini, 2023). Officially, the Ukrainian trident is the symbol of a modern nation that looks back to its heroic history, as described on the website *ukraine.ua*. In the 10th century, Prince of Kyiv Volodymyr the Great popularized the usage of the trident as a sign of authority: *Nomen omen*. The trident, considered excessively nationalistic by the Soviets, became the de facto coat of arms of independent Ukraine, and now it appears in the Ukrainian ministry of defense logo, an equilateral cross with crimson divergent sides. Ukrainian trident was the subject of an ex-post parallelism that had QAnon supporters deciphering one of the hints disseminated by Trump while he was in office. When asked at a press conference about the origin of Covid-19, Trump held up three swabs and answered, “Chy-na.” Considering recent events in Russia and Ukraine and the exposure of US-funded biolabs, Anonymous members deduced that “Shpyl’chyna” was not a mispronunciation but rather the name of a town in Ukraine close to Lviv and that this was likely where the deep state developed the virus.

Following the *divide and impera* strategy but applied to the real force at play—the dominant narrative—QAnon and its prophets dissect information to awaken the population. Stories convert, so much so that the deep state’s dominant narrative crumbles with the addition of each jigsaw piece to the Great Awakening Map, the system of spatio-temporal links that determines the condition of the entire globe. The dominant narratives are the same for all media outlets, conspiracist or not; the signifieds attributed and the meaning conveyed vary. Conspiracy theories are like a prism that selectively filters data. In particular, the Great Awakening Map summarizes Q and the Anons’ philosophy of the world, providing meaning to things (an *encyclopedia*, the shared knowledge of a group, as Eco would put it) by showing that all facets of human history are interconnected.

The structure of the posts is fixed and comprises visual or audiovisual text and verbal commentary. The images or videos should validate the claims or acti-

vate the emotional and sensible dimensions of the enunciatees. The statements are made to seem more credible and truer, thanks to the visuals that accompany them. It is essential to distinguish between the alethic (modes of true and false possibilities) and epistemic (certainty) categories while trying to understand the enunciatee’s act of believing. Because they are often seen as an unvarnished depiction of reality, images lend credibility to the information they carry by reducing any “degrees of ambiguity” associated with the messengers. By employing figurative logic, they make connections and inferences that stimulate critical thinking (Bertrand, 2002).

The visual text, whether a comic strip or an out-of-context illustration, helps to emphasize the point by encouraging a simplistic interpretation of online content. As part of a strategy to grab the attention of potential enunciatees, the use of visual or audiovisual content, or even just emoji, distinguishes a social media post from the majority of the feed. Video and pictures recall contextual, cultural, rhetorical-argumentative, and dictionary meanings along with ambiguous, conflicting formulations so that they can enhance persuasiveness (cf. Pezzini, 2008). In the realm of conspiracy theories, it can be identified four distinct forms of visual and audiovisual representations (Pezzini & Terracciano, 2022): (a) image-articles, (b) image-symbols (figures, cartoons, emoji, thematic roles), (c) visual tropes, and (d) image-frames.

The first type is the image-article, which consists of screenshots of articles or social media posts that are turned into a meta-news narrative for remark. As a strategy to capitalize on users’ laziness and lack of desire to verify information, it is common practice to avoid providing a clear connection to the source of the statement in question. It should be specified, however, that to be perceived as influential, Anons on Telegram “conceal” links much less than other kinds of conspiracists on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter.

This strategy diverts attention to facts supporting conspiracy theses while ignoring countervailing elements, which may or may not be a deliberate choice on the part of the deep state-controlled media. In the same way, statements attributed to writers and philosophers (Nietzsche, Popper) are frequently ripped from their original context and repurposed to fit the enunciators’ arguments. Recent years have seen Anons supplement the snapshot with video clips from TV shows, YouTube publications, and even content from the increasingly popular video-sharing platform TikTok. Telegram’s features and the increased engagement ability of short videos, as evidenced by TikTok’s popularity, fuel the preference for video. In addition, they are viewed as evidence that triggers the veridictory effect of meaning.

Visuals add credibility to QAnon’s story, but with Eco’s help, we can see through some semiotic issues, notably with the credibility of the audiovisual evidence. Eco (2017) argued that the proliferation of visual culture enabled by social media has significantly impacted

what he called “the knowledge attitude of spectators toward reality.” The “fact” is given more weight by the visual’s immediate indication and communication of the fact, which strengthens the statement’s relationship to reality and proves what is being told.

Consider employing the deepfake technique to create credible hypotheses, papers, or testimonials to validate *parrhesia*. It is not necessary to create the proof with a picture editing program; it is sufficient to correlate the “right” image with the news or choose the subject’s body language, the most effective mood to emphasize the situation, regardless of the coincidence of space and time. Politicians of the other party can be easily scapegoated if a photo of them exists in which they are giving off a glare or conveying a confused attitude. Eco argues that if a depiction of a fact is displayed near an image of a person, it can imply that he or she is responsible. With this in mind, Eco seeks out the “semiotic core” of potential deception, which he locates in the images’ ability to convey not just one but two meanings: the first refers to the relation with the represented thing, and the second, because of the similarity, unrelated to the object, but with its class.

In this case, the enunciatees can interpret the misleading image as a sign alluding to a fact they do not know, or they can match it to the information already in their possession and form opinions from it. The verbal text might guide the image’s meaning according to the enunciators’ intentions to convince people to conform to their beliefs. As Eco (2017) says, we should not disbelieve visuals but read them attentively. Reasoning in terms of intermediality can constitute a strategy of active intervention intended at fact and theory checking, that is, a way of comparing the discourses of the many media with the same topicalization and rearranging the relative regimes of truth to suggest new forms of documentality and witnessing. In this regard, Montani (2020) asserts that reasoning in terms of intermediality might have these implications.

For example, on March 8, 2022, conspiracists got the proof they have been waiting for since the beginning of the Russia–Ukraine conflict, or rather, they fabricated it, using the following statement by Victoria Nuland, Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs took out of context of her speech during US Senate hearings (Figure 2):

Ukraine has biological research facilities with which in fact we are now quite concerned Russian troops...Russian forces may be seeking to gain control of, so we are working with the Ukrainians on how they prevent any of those research materials from falling into the hands of Russian forces should they approach. (Reuters, 2022)

Telegram channels such as Bioclandestine, QAnon Warriors, and ULTRA Pepe Lives Matter hail the open admission and quickness of the Anons to grasp “what is really going on.” The rhetorical tactic here is decontextu-

alization because Nuland said those words in response to Senator Marco Rubio’s question about Ukraine’s possession of biological weapons during US Senate hearings. Nuland expressed concern about what might happen to the bio-laboratories once in Russian hands, the only ones capable of using bacteriological or chemical weapons. The bio-laboratories mentioned above are Ukrainian and were established with American support through the Biological Threat Reduction Program and then used to track the spread of the Covid-19 epidemic. Nuland also states that spreading misinformation about a bacteriological menace endorsed by Americans is a “classic Russian technique to blame on the other guy what they’re planning to do themselves” (Reuters, 2022). Here the actantial role of the Addresser is made more than explicit.

The second category consists of the images-symbols that amplify the impact of the effect of meaning of the “news clipping” and are responsible for triggering the reactions of the enunciatees. Empirical authors-enunciators developing conspiracy narratives assume the interpretive cooperation of *model readers* who match their perspective by basing their thesis on anticipating the interpretive process of the enunciatees. The model reader is a construct by Eco (1979) that describes the ideal audience of those who produce a text, with whom they share a background and knowledge that facilitate its correct interpretation.



Figure 2. Victoria Nuland at US Senate hearings.

Cartoons and emojis are examples of image-symbols; they have a robust argumentative-polemic force because they clarify the interpretative agenda of the enunciator through sarcasm and satire. In the QAnon supporters’ channels are used some recurrent emojis like flags to signify the nation, the police car light, the frog, and popcorn. The police car light emoji indicates an urgent situation or focuses on a crucial issue. There is a consistent

trend in the ULTRA Pepe Lives Matter and The Donald channels, where posts announcing potentially disruptive news always end with emojis for popcorn, a frog, and the American flag. To put it another way, the Anons, the chosen ones who stand up for the whole planet, the true patriots, are watching with amusement as the opponent's narrative crumbles. The red and white popcorn box gives the impression of being on the outside looking in but also on the very edge of one's seat, highlighting the central nature of the event. The frog is not just a signifier for an amphibian but for Pepe the Frog (associated with trolling and the alt-right), a fictional character developed by Matt Furie who unintentionally became an ambiguous doppelgänger of Donald Trump and a flag of the alt-right (Marino & Thibault, 2016, p. 19). All kinds of image-symbols increase intimacy with the audience due to the hyper-simplification of conversation themes (Lorusso & Violi, 2004). In the same way that a book aimed at children might tone down the effect of upsetting events and make the meaning of the text clear, image-symbols serve a similar purpose in a context intended for adults.

In contrast to the scientific community, which cannot break free from metalanguage, hypersimplification bolsters the veridictory authority of the enunciator, who adopts the unique capacity to explain the most complex matters. Asserting that explaining an event is the simplest one is a common arguing strategy used across all channels (Figure 3).

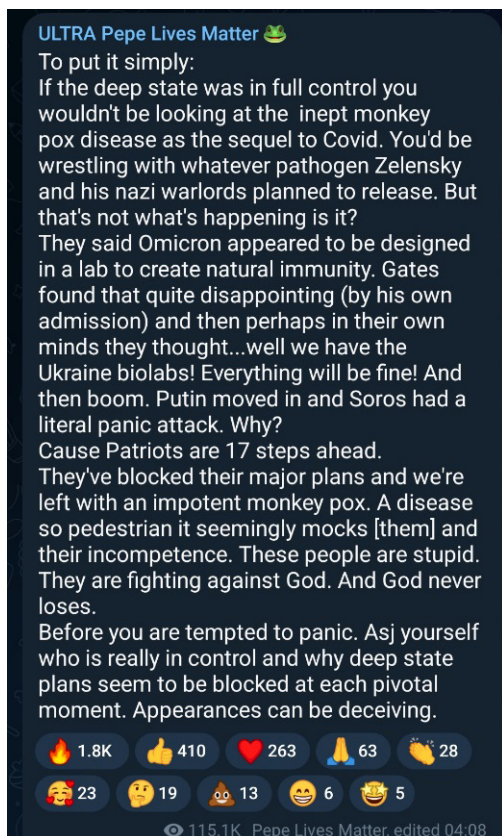


Figure 3. ULTRA Pepe Lives Matter: Put it simply.

This strategy involves repeatedly using the adjectival and adverbial form of the word “simple” or “simply” in conjunction with concepts such as “truth,” “solution,” “minded,” “question,” and “red pill,” which are all figures in the discursive configuration of Anons. The simplicity resides in the words that are used to argue, which are distinct from the complicated metalanguage employed by the scientific community, in the minds of wise citizens, in the questions to incompetent politicians, and in the system of quotations, to which anyone with intermediate pop culture can relate.

The third kind of recurrent image is visual tropes, the effect of which is decided by the disorientation brought about by the insertion of an unexpected seme into discourse. Putting a signified out of context or the acknowledged paradigm of thought generates a breach corresponding to its rhetoric degree. The more remarkable similarity to reality, i.e., iconism, the more likely the visual text would go unnoticed and be useless. Rhetoric indeed has a higher level of incompatibility, but in the case of propagandistic material, we must also consider the link between the verbal text and the visual text, which provides new semantic meanings (Sedda, 2021, p. 26). Then, the shock that results from the combination of a fact and a visual text that is not a direct reference boosts the emotional intensity of the information. Figures of speech such as synecdoche, metaphor, and metonym are all stylistic devices that have the same impact as the association implied by parallelism. Conspiracists use a twisted and whimsical version of the world as the foundation for persuasive communication, implying tropes (cf. Fabbri & Latour, 1977).

The fact that image-symbols and visual tropes dominate the corpus is evidence that it is tough to provide proof for conspiracy theories. If the enunciatees fail to distinguish between fiction and reality, the narration's emotional dimension may be more convincing than the alethic one. Anons read events using analogy on the category of good against evil, where omicron and the Russian invasion are seen as ways to destroy the “plandemic.”

Conspiracy theories use other fields of study, such as science, journalism, statistics, literature, and the arts, as parasite anchors. The last constant of conspiratorial figurative reasoning is the use of an image frame, which may range from diagrams and infographics to demonstrate the significance and thoroughness of the information being delivered to the use of references to other kinds of narration, often fictional.

The enunciatees' behaviors, emotions, and judgments are shaped by frames of experience to create a typical scenario through which people rely on conceptual systems based on predefined uses and meanings. So, the frame is a mental structure that includes all the ways people think molded by languages (Lakoff, 2004).

Conspiracy theorists explain the world by constantly alluding to movies like *The Matrix* (1999–2021), whose recurrent figures are deployed as image-symbols to explain phenomena from the perspective of the

enunciator and enunciatee of that narration. The movie’s central narrative arc—the search for the real world—has resonated with the conspiracists because it represents their basic narrative program. The seduction of enlightened figures, such as the glocalized prophets of the QAnon movement, has grown as people adapt to a new reality and wonder about the possibility of unrevealed secrets of wholly submerged worlds accessible via them. The openness to learn the truth is englobed in the red and blue pill metaphor, well explained in a line from the first movie of the Matrix saga where Morpheus (portrayed by Laurence Fishburne) invites Neo (Keanu Reeves) to the “real world”:

You take the blue pill, the story ends. You wake up in your bed and believe whatever you want to believe. You take the red pill, you stay in Wonderland, and I show you how deep the rabbit hole goes. Remember that I am just delivering the truth. (Silver et al., 1999)

Red pill, blue pill, rabbit hole, and Wonderland are intertextual quotes from Lewis Carroll’s 1865 book *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, where they function as intermediates in discovering a new world. The white rabbit is a symbol of QAnon’s commitment to helping people see the world as it is, and the letter Q not only stands for the name of the movement’s most prominent leader but also for the highest level of clearance required to see classified material held by the US government. Given the letter’s position in the American alphabet and the movement’s founding year (2017), the Q also connects to the number 17.

As has already been anticipated, the basic narrative program of conspiracists is known as the “Great Awakening,” which is the connection with the truth as the object of value that brings about consciousness about the inadequacies of the dominant powers (Figure 4). Here we can observe a semantic framework advocating for a reticular relationship between events that may be traced back to the 1776 United States of America formation. US and USA are both abbreviations for the United States of America, but conspiracy theorists believe the former refers to a corporation established in Delaware in 1871 that has the authority to turn its population into employees and its governors into corporate leaders who serve self-interest solely. This might make sense as an explanation for politicians’ persistent “betrayals” of the public. The initials of Ulysses S. Grant, who was serving as President of the US at the time, provide evidence supporting this notion. It is a shame that the letter “G” in the surname does not play any role in the acronym.

Capitol Hill in Washington, DC, the emblem of the political power of the US, is often referred to as “the new Rome” because of its symbolic location at the center of the world. The similarities between the St. Peter’s Basilica and the Capitol Building are emphasized by the presence of Egyptian Obelisks in a post on the QAnon

Fighters channel from October 1, 2022, that has received over 22.4 k views. Moreover, the QAnon Fighters’ admin explains that:

Washington, D.C. is a foreign corporation, and it is not a State. It is not a part of America and has nothing to do with the 50 states at all. It is where the foreign U.S. Corporation is headquartered with its own laws.

At this point, we understand the enunciator’s goals, namely, to link the fictitious US Inc. to the passage of The District of Columbia Organic Act of 1871, generally known as the Act of Congress that dissolved the individual charters of the cities of Washington and Georgetown and formed a new territorial authority for the whole District of Columbia. Despite Congress’ 1874 dissolution of the territory government, this act was the first to establish a unified municipal government for the federal

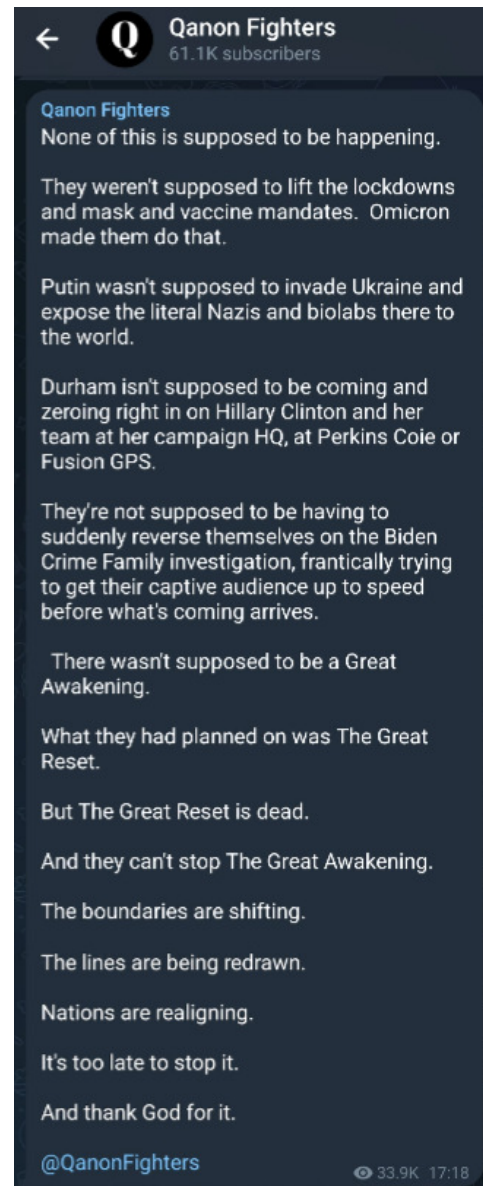


Figure 4. QanonFighters: Great reset is dead.

district. During Grant’s presidency the same year, the UK and the US signed the Treaty of Washington to end their dispute. The obligations of a neutral government throughout the war and the regulations governing firms and businesses are also codified in this treaty (“District of Columbia Organic Act of 1871,” 2023). In the post, it is said that “assault on our sovereignty happened in 1871. You just don’t know that’s when the Matrix we live in started.” The evil powers officially launched their new world on that day: the Matrix. The Anons speculate that in 1871, the “Constitution for the United States for America” was renamed “Constitution of the United States of America” by replacing the word “for” with “of.” Probably, the Anons are anchoring to the shifting from the meaning of “having the purpose of” to the one used to show possession, belonging, or origin (For, n.d.). The problem is that the constitution was only amended twice in the 19th century, in 1804 and 1868; in 1871, only the Treaty of Washington and the Act of Congress happened. The American economic and cultural shift toward materialism is interpreted as a pact with the devil represented by international bankers (namely the Rothschilds of London) to solve the country’s financial woes. It would appear that the treaty signed between the US and the UK, which shifts the focus of the connection between the government and its inhabitants from one of purpose to one of possession, is the underlying cause of the problems that have arisen in this scenario, even though the constitution is being questioned.

The year 1871 also finds connections in Italy with the promulgation of the Law of Guarantees, which addresses the Holy See’s legal status at the time. Finally, since there is a concern with the coexistence of religion and state, the Anons connected it to the formation of US Inc., which implies not only the connection between the US and Europe but also the problem with the manipulation of religious authority by satanic forces.

An unanticipated hole in the deep state’s plan eventually causes the Matrix to be disrupted, setting the events of the Great Awakening in motion. In a post on the QAnon Fighters channel dated April 18, 2022, the author enunciator uses the rhetorical device of repetition “isn’t supposed” to list the unexpected events that caused dominant narratives to crumble and thereby set in motion the Great Awakening, which has the potential to put an end to the Great Reset, namely the “evil” new order of the world.

3. Conclusions

The Russia–Ukraine conflict is a “war for signs,” fought with semiotic weapons such as threats, challenges, revenge, and disinformation; it extensively invests the pathemic-cognitive dimension in various ways, seeking to produce negative passions (fear, horror, terror...) in the populations involved as well as undermining “troop morale” or conversely exalting it by producing enthusiasm and courage).

Conflict, like secrecy, has a binary structure peculiar to the structuralist linguistic model and from which semiotics started. So, for semiotics, *polémos* is really at the origin of all things, as a constitutive way of observing the world. In this way, the basis of signification is conceived in a profoundly dynamic-conflictual sense.

Further, conflicting tension is often established here between different semiospheres, semiotics spaces where semiosis occurs, corresponding to a universe of meaning where every sign act becomes a reality (Lotman, 1985). This tensive dynamic describes subjects, collectivities, and texts that enter into relations in the more general semiosphere experience a double need: that of being able to communicate, share their information, and ensure that their communication is of the most value, that it leads to the generation of new information.

Leaders posing as “double agents” are infiltrating and fighting the deep state (Figure 5). Tulsi Gabbard, a politician from Hawaii, is a noteworthy double agent for Anons. She defected from the Democratic Party in October 2022, claiming that the party supported policies that were undemocratic, elitist, and in favor of war (Figure 6).

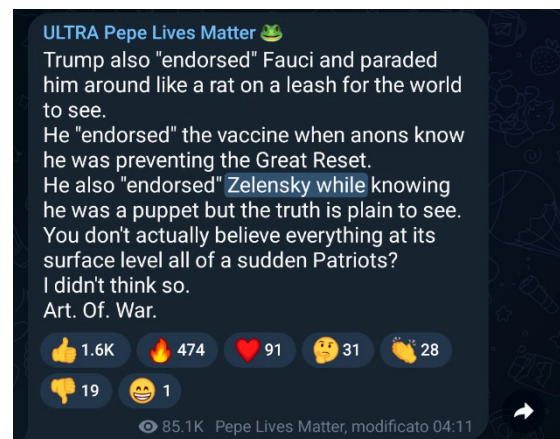


Figure 5. ULTRA Pepe Lives Matter: Double agents.

Fabbri (1990) explains that employing the same secrecy tactic in a reciprocal circumstance makes the stakes null and void, compromising the secret. Fabbri presents a dynamic tactical secret that becomes almost ludicrous because it is known and easily obtained. The fact that the secret is not openly disclosed is the reason for its status as a secret; it is not because the information is concealed or unknown. Masters of the manifest secret, double agents employ allusion, which Fabbri defines as a rhetorical figure aimed to generate complicity by activating recurrent verbal and visual elements, such as those discussed in the typology proposed in this article. What Derrida (2005) refers to as the *shibboleth*—from Hebrew, which means to distinguish and be part of a group—is a distinctive element that attracts people who possess the portion that completes it. This is how Anons recognize themselves.

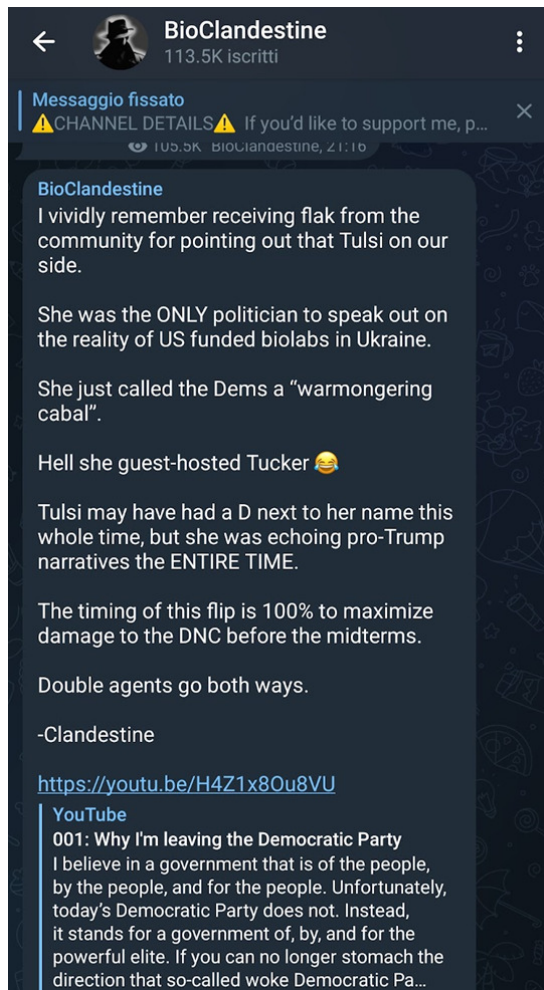


Figure 6. Bioclandestine: Double agents.

Access to a truer truth is determined not by the knowledge itself but by how the secret is disseminated, which appears more authentic precisely because it takes the form of an enigma.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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