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MATHIJS PELKMANS

Suspicion and Evidence

On the Complexities of Online Truth-Seeking in Times of Uncertainty

Abstract: How do people discern between truth and untruth? What characterises their engagements with evidence? Some progress in answering these huge questions can be made by exploring them in conditions of radical epistemic uncertainty, such as the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, when the virus's behaviour was largely unknown and the efficacy of interventions unknowable. This article focuses on the workings of suspicion and its relationship with evidence, doing so by analysing conversations collected in a Facebook discussion group devoted to 'Covid truth'. It argues that suspicion produces its own forms of falsification but has a contentious relationship with positive truth. By outlining the epistemic labour of self-avowed truth seekers, the article elucidates some of the mechanisms by which Covid conspiracy theories proliferated and explains why its partakers were convinced that they had a critical edge over the rest of us.

Keywords: conspiracy theories, COVID-19, digital ethnography, Facebook, knowledge, mistrust

Three weeks into the first lockdown in England, on the discussion page of a Facebook group I refer to as the F-CTG and that presents itself as a 'UK group that looks into all sorts of conspiracy theories', Liam T (a pseudonym) posts the following short statement:[1] 'Anyone else thinking that there's more behind this lockdown/virus malarkey? Starting to take the piss a bit right?' (14 April 2020). The post receives numerous responses, with group members suggesting a range of possible ulterior motives. Among them, Stuart M suggests that it could be the implementation of the 'agenda 21 depopulation of the world', thus invoking a theory that the 1992 UN sustainability agenda – officially referred to as Agenda 21 – has a hidden and macabre aim, which would involve the killing of billions of people. Alternatively, he suggests, it could be about the secret rollout of the 5G network with the aim to control us all. Yet he won't commit to any specific theory, adding: 'But on the other hand it could be all natural. ✌👍. Mother nature is she is a mean son [of a] bitch'.[2] Following from this, a fast-paced back and forth between Stuart M and Kimberly H unfolds:

> Kimberly H: my partner is by no way a conspiracist like me, but even he thinks this is bio warfare. I am 50/50 of a bio warfare or a natural culling
>
> Stuart M: could very well be. But please don't believe everything u read or hear. So much rubbish out there fake news etc its unreal. ✌👍

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Kimberly H: i agree. So much fake news, so many theories too. So for now, no one knows the truth. I just adhere to guid[e]lines and protect my family. Things can be sieved through at a later date when its all well and safe x

Stuart M: that's 😊👍✌️🙂😀 the most sensible thing I've read for [a] while. Yeah same here to[o]. Not worth the risk. 👽👍

This conversation offers a useful point of reference for our analysis of truth-seeking. It not only illustrates the intense uncertainties of the time, but also contradicts the usual image of 'conspiracists' as steadfast and dogmatic in their beliefs.[3] Instead of committing to one specific theory, many F-CTG members actively and affectively engaged with new information, pondering the merits of various ideas. Moreover, the tenor of the conversation (including the generous use of emojis) reflects that theorising can be a deeply social activity, as exemplified by Stuart M's empathetic identification with Kimberly H's conclusion about the preponderance of fake news. Finally, the conversation highlights the interlinking of uncertainty and certainty. Despite considerable uncertainty about the 'many theories', group members converged in their conviction of being lied to. Kimberly H's lamentation 'so many theories' went hand in hand with the certainty 'so much fake news'.

This last point – the combination of unwavering rejection and hesitant affirmation – goes to the heart of the analysis advanced in this article. Instead of being certain about specific truths, F-CTG members expressed certainty that they were the ones asking the relevant questions. Presenting themselves as truth seekers who are 'awake', they offer an interesting perspective on what it means to know, in a 'misinformation age'. Moreover, the features of suspicion and conspiracy theorising as revealed in F-CTG discussions resonate with academic practice, specifically its reliance on critique. Informative here is Rita Felski's sketch of critique's anatomy (2012), in which she settles on five key features. These include that critique is *intellectual* (it is based on epistemic labour), it comes *from below* (it aims to displace dominant truths) and is *unambiguous* (it does not tolerate rivals). This article shows that conspiracy theorising is animated by similar logics, and that the similarities extend also to the two features of critique deemed most fundamental: Critique, Felski says, is *negative* (characterised by 'againstness'), which therefore also means that it is *secondary* (it does not stand on its own). Overcoming this negativity and 'standing on its own' (becoming primary) is a challenge not just for academic critique, but for 'conspiracy theorising' as well.

In pointing out parallels between academic critique and conspiracy theorising, I am inspired by Bruno Latour's (2004) reflections on his own experience. In the wake of 9/11, this grand master of critique was identified in his home village as *naïve* because too educated (as in 'indoctrinated'), in contrast to his co-villagers who saw themselves as being able to detect what is real, precisely because they were *un*sophisticated (2004: 228). Based in part on this reflection, Latour asks 'Why has critique run out of steam?', and he provides answers along two lines. The first is that as critique has become an academic routine, it also has lost its edge. Routinised, it allows critics to think they 'are always right!' (2004: 239), using a 'rhetoric of self-praise' (Billig 2003: 37) that easily morphs into dismissive smugness. Second, critique struggles to find a positive or constructive destination. Latour's response is to revitalise critique, arguing that it

should move beyond deconstruction to explore how 'things' are assembled (2004: 246).[4] While sharing this perspective, it remains to be seen if this analytical move truly sets academic critics apart from conspiracists. In fact, I suggest that Covid truth seekers similarly endeavour to move beyond debunking dominant truths – they also partake in re-assembling reality. The likes of Kimberly H and Stuart M did not only reject 'fake news' but also aimed at figuring out what was actually happening and why, even if their efforts to get closer to the 'facts' were unsuccessful. Perhaps, and this will be reviewed in the conclusion, they run into problems akin to those experienced by academic critics?

At this point we can productively link the concept of 'critique' to 'suspicion', doing so with reference to Paul Ricoeur's 'hermeneutics of suspicion', a term he uses to characterise the demystifying efforts of Marx, Nietzsche and Freud (Ricoeur 1970: 32–36; see also Felski 2012; Josselson 2004).[5] While critique and suspicion share a commitment to displace dominant truths, the connotations of 'suspicion' are even more negative. Felski cites this as a reason for the unpopularity of 'hermeneutics of suspicion' in literary studies – it would risk confirming the conservative view of it being a 'hotbed of paranoia, kill-joy puritanism, petty-minded pique, and defensive scorn' (2012: np). Also, academic critics would not want to have 'their lines of argument reduced to their putative state of mind' (2012: np). Perhaps, though, this discomfort with 'suspicion' can clarify why I consider it a useful term. Contra the worry of academics that 'suspicion' reduces critique to a 'state of mind', I suggest that it usefully highlights the embodied nature of epistemic labour, thereby facilitating analysis of the affects that inform specific intellectual endeavours and colour their outcomes. Second, while I appreciate that 'Critique is interested in big pictures' (Felski 2012), suspicion usefully directs attention to the focused interrogations through which such big pictures can be revealed. And third, even though suspicion is even more obviously negative than critique, it also pushes *beyond* the negative. As Fedirko puts it: 'suspicion transcends doubt by constantly formulating positive hypotheses' (2021: 81). In this contribution, I aim to tease out the epistemic techniques involved in 'negative' as well as 'positive' suspicion.

Without ignoring the different semantics of 'critique' and 'suspicion', it is fair to say they both involve demystification. So how are practices of demystification embedded in broader social and logical fields? While critique and suspicion always explicate what they are directed against, they often obscure where they are coming from. Felski points out that for critique to preserve its independence, it needs to remain 'effectively without content' (2012: np). In other words, critique and also suspicion have 'commitment issues', which tends to create untenable situations. The problem, and here we can profitably turn to Wittgenstein, is that 'We just can't investigate everything' (1969: 343). This is so not just because it would be exhausting, but also logically. As he argues in *On Certainty*: 'If you tried to doubt everything you would not get as far as doubting anything. The game of doubting itself presupposes certainty' (1969: 114–115). Progress in quests for knowledge can only be made if 'some propositions are exempt from doubt, are as it were like hinges on which those turn' (1969: 341). These hinges, I should emphasise, do not provide absolute certainty. As Wittgenstein subtly points out: the 'language game is only possible if one trusts something (I did *not* say "*can* trust

something")' (1969: 509, emphasis added). If we deploy Wittgenstein's metaphor of doors that are hinged ('if I want the door to turn, the hinges must stay put'; 1969: 343), then those doors along with their frames may well be floating through space.[6]

In epistemically complex situations – and a pandemic that involves viruses, vaccines and lockdown measures is certainly complex – knowledge is necessarily interdependent; it relies on the expertise of, and information provided by, others. In such situations, Matthew Carey suggests in his book *Mistrust*, 'trust is all I have' (2017: 7). The point is that placing trust in something (or someone) involves the suspension of doubt, and precisely because this cannot be based on absolute epistemic certainty it requires making a 'leap of faith' or, as Breeman puts it, a 'leap to trust' (2012; see also Möllering 2001). For our purposes here, the question is therefore not so much 'what *can* be trusted?' but rather 'what *will* be trusted?'

The realisation that knowledge is interdependent and necessarily involves trust provides some direction to our exploration of truth-seeking. It also helps to avoid the problematic tendency in academic discussions to treat 'conspiracy theories' as a shorthand for 'false ideas based on paranoid reasoning', which thereby pathologises 'conspiracists'.[7] This article neither assumes conspiracy ideas to be coherent nor belief in them to be stable, but instead explores the ways by which people come to attribute epistemic value to such ideas. It does so by analysing conversations in Facebook discussion groups devoted to 'Covid truth'. For ethical reasons I refrained from collecting data from individual Profile pages or News Feeds and only documented conversations as they appeared on public and semi-public group pages.[8] This is methodologically congruent with my aim of studying the discursive workings of suspicion and the role of evidence in truth-seeking efforts. Moreover, by tracking how the nature of conversations changed over the first year of the pandemic, insight can also be gained into how epistemic polarisation occurs. Indeed, even within the open group page of the F-CTG, its diffuse epistemic engagements rapidly gained in contour and direction. But before delving into these issues, the conversations first need to be situated in the online environment and the extraordinary time in which they occurred.

Radical Uncertainty and Online Covid Truth-Seeking

It is difficult to overstate the level of uncertainty people experienced during the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic. As elsewhere, people in England were struggling to comprehend what was happening to their lives. Even those without first- or second-hand experience of the disease (still the majority) had to grapple with invasive changes to their lives and worried about what the future might bring. Much about the virus was still unknown, including its origin, how it was transmitted, what dangers it posed to human life and what kind of treatments and vaccines might be developed. The UK government, though acknowledging some of the unknowns, aimed to project confidence about its course of action. At regular televised coronavirus conferences, scientific health advisers provided updates on the virus and government ministers announced new guidelines and interventions, which included physical distancing regulations, travel restrictions and partial lockdowns. Even if most people accepted these

interventions as necessary, scepticism about their need and efficacy was also common, especially among male and young members of the public (Collignon et al 2021).

That the first months of the pandemic saw a boom of conspiracy theories is hardly surprising. Levels of suspicion tend to go up when there is a palpable discrepancy between official accounts and how social reality is experienced. And when such dissonance exists, claims of transparency (Sanders and West 2003) and efforts to educate the public (Lee et al 2021) may backfire in that they deepen suspicion about what is kept 'beyond the edges of the visible' (Comaroff and Comaroff 2003: 288). Moreover, suspicion and conspiracy-theorising perform navigating roles in times of societal distress, especially when the origins of this distress remain shrouded in obscurity (Marcus 1999; Pelkmans and Machold 2011; Silverstein 2002), such as was the case in early 2020. In short, the combination of an invisible virus with (still) unknown qualities and state interventions that uprooted people's lives offered ideal conditions for the flourishing of conspiracy theories among a sceptical public (see also Bruns et al 2020).[9] Indeed it was among groups with anti-government dispositions that suspicion of and resistance to lockdowns and other restrictive measures were most intense (Schradie 2020). The infrastructural features of online platforms are seen to intensify these biases (Gray et al 2020), potentially turning online groups into information bubbles or even echo chambers (for a nuanced assessment, see Barberá 2018).

Within this context of radical uncertainty and scepticism, my aim was to better understand the epistemic processes by which the truth and untruth of pandemic-related theories are produced in online environments. For this purpose, I joined ten English-language Facebook groups devoted to the hidden dimensions of power in early 2020. Eventually I zoomed in on the UK-centred group I refer to with the pseudonym the F-CTG, with F standing for Facebook, CT for either Covid Truth or Conspiracy Theory and G for Group. The reason for focusing on a single group was to capture in detail how truth and untruth are established in online interactions, and I selected the F-CTG because its features were particularly useful for this purpose. It was not just that the group generated a steady stream of posts about the pandemic, but that these were actively and elaborately discussed on its group page. Relevant here is that the F-CTG was geographically anchored in the UK (with a focus on England), which fostered a sense of shared experience, and that the group rapidly expanded in size in early 2020,[10] thereby adding to the diversity of opinions posted on the group page. A common feature of the conversations was their shared suspicion of information presented in government briefings and by the 'mainstream media'. But even though the F-CTG could be described as mistrustful of government and as politically right-leaning, it was not dominated by a single political agenda (which tended to be the case in similar US-based groups), and it featured conversations that initially were relatively open.

The ambivalent connotations of the term 'conspiracy theory' pressed themselves onto online groups devoted to hidden dimensions of power. Of the Facebook groups I followed, many featured 'conspiracy' in their name, though one was revealingly named *Real* Conspiracy Theories (emphasis added), and some avoided the term (such as Awake Like Me).[11] In the F-CTG, members were cognisant of the pejorative connotations of the 'conspiracy theory' label among mainstream publics. Some members adopted the term as a badge of honour, such as Kimberly H (mentioned above)

who referred to herself as a 'conspiracist', possibly doing so in jest. And when on the group page a post appeared with the addition 'this is not a conspiracy theory' (presumably to boost the post's truth claim), members were quick to point out the irony. This playful dimension also surfaced when members poked fun at conspiracy theories they rejected, with Flat Earth Theory being a popular target of ridicule. At times the posts appeared to be only half serious when pointing out suspicious happenings. For example, a post in October 2019 read: 'Anyone notice in the UK today that the sun was really bright and white yet it was really dull and grey all day, almost looked like a hole in the sky [. . .]'. The post received several LOL emojis, but also a (seemingly serious) comment that it might indicate a flaw in the matrix. Tellingly, this playful dimension largely disappeared from group conversations at the start of the pandemic.

Perhaps there is an irony in 'conspiracy theory' groups being located on Facebook. As a paragon of Big Tech, Facebook itself was in dubious standing among many members of these groups, drawing suspicions of surveillance that were confirmed as the platform stepped up its efforts to remove misinformation over the course of the pandemic. F-CTG members openly (and sometimes jokingly) pondered how soon their posts would be removed. This also clarifies that Facebook was not the kind of platform where (right-wing) activists would plot, or where Q-Anon members were likely to share intimate details (see Jasser 2020). Even so, Facebook's key features of reach and accessibility were attractive strengths. Its groups offered a space where positions could be staked, a following could be attracted and uncommitted individuals could present their suspicions about the pandemic to a receptive audience.

Discursive activity on the F-CTG group page had been relatively intermittent and unfocused until the early months of the pandemic, covering topics such as 9/11, the moon landings and the death of Princess Diana. The first mention of the new coronavirus was on 24 January 2020, when a post reported a 'Rumor from a source inside Wuhan that China plans to use airplanes to drop some sort of medicinal spray on the entire city. No one knows what's really going on.' At the time the F-CTG had only about 300 members, of which only a fraction actively contributed to discussions. This drastically changed when the virus became an inescapable presence in the UK, however. The group welcomed 800 newcomers from March to May, and grew to 1,400 members by the summer, many of whom were actively searching for answers about the virus, lockdown policies and COVID-19. For over half a year, conversations on the group page were fully dominated by topics related to the pandemic and were serious in tone. People were trying to comprehend what was happening to their lives, and the F-CTG offered a fertile environment for such truth-seeking efforts.

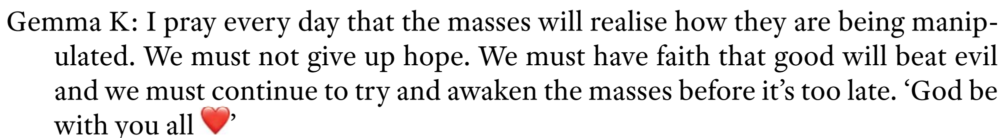
At times of radical uncertainty, the 'theory' aspect of 'conspiracy theories' is accentuated. During these first months of the pandemic, people were not yet fixed in their positions, but rather mobilised suspicion in truth-seeking efforts. As a relatively open group, the F-CTG provided a fertile setting for such efforts, which allows us to analyse the specific ways in which people engage with theories of conspiracy, and how their position towards them develops over time. This also helps to avoid the problematic tendency to see conspiracy ideas as 'integrated belief systems' (for a discussion, see Pelkmans and Machold 2011) and to assume the relationship between individuals and their theories to be a stable one. In fact, such a more fine-grained analysis will allow us

to understand how commitment to specific ideas develops, and how epistemic polarisation may occur.

Sensing Cracks in the Surface of Official Accounts

When new members introduced themselves on the F-CTG group page, it almost seemed as if they drew from a shared script. They described their trajectory as a process of awakening, of overcoming the cognitive dissonance they had experienced in their lives. This dissonance was particularly strongly felt in the early stages of the pandemic, when for many, 'things did not add up'. Consider, for example, Joyce B, who writes: 'covid-19 is awakening something that doesn't sit right with me . . . I'm probably a million miles off you guys but here's how i ended up in this group . . . ' (5 April 2020). She goes on to list the 2011 Hollywood blockbuster Contagion and a 2018 episode of the Korean romcom My Secret Terrius (which features a deadly coronavirus) as suspiciously foreshadowing the pandemic. She wants to know the group's opinions because: 'Aren't all these too accurate to be coincidences?' Group members respond positively to Joyce B's post, not necessarily because they agree with the specific popular culture markers she identified, but because 'awakening' is a central trope in right-wing truth-seeking groups. 'Being awake' refers to people who can see beyond the reports of the 'fake media', who are aware of the dangers of state control and will not be duped by the lies of the elite and their accomplices.[12]

This logic of awareness was similarly invoked when group members appropriated the conspiracy theory label, such as Michael D, who wrote: 'Conspiracy theorist: Someone who questions the statements of known liars'. Within this semantic field of reappropriation, the label 'conspiracy theorist' referred to critical awareness, and signalled a shared identity, of those joining in the collective purpose of uncovering lies. It implied being part of a select few who can see the truth, in contrast to the majority population, referred to in posts as 'sheep' or 'sheeple'. The following conversation on 7 April 2020 offers an example of how the sense of superiority is communicated between two F-CTG members:



Gemma K: I pray every day that the masses will realise how they are being manipulated. We must not give up hope. We must have faith that good will beat evil and we must continue to try and awaken the masses before it's too late. 'God be with you all ❤️'

Larissa P: thank you so much, I have 3 people in my life that can look outside the box and see what's going on in many situations. Sadly the rest can not [. . .] they think I am heartless, vile, crazy for thinking Boris [Johnson] is not ill.[13] If he is then I stand corrected. But I just see a fear tactic at work.

Even without systematically decoding this brief exchange, it is striking how many emotive words are being deployed: through 'hope' and 'faith', and with the support of 'God', it may be possible to 'awaken the masses'; this is contrasted with the 'fear tactics' of elites who practice 'evil' scheming to manipulate and subjugate the peo-

ple.[14] This affect-laden appeal to likeminded others produces a sense of belonging to an exclusive group, comprised of those who can 'look outside the box'. The knowledge of being lied to serves as a strong binding factor. Here, the veracity of alternative theories is less important than being part of a focused effort to reveal gaps in the matrix or cracks in the surface of official narratives.

The affective qualities of truth-seeking, evident in these discursive exchanges, served to prop up the boundary between those who are awake and those who are sheeple. Beyond identity, affect was also very much part of the workings of suspicion, in that suspicion was triggered by things not 'feeling' right. As such, suspicion 'tilts the world' to thereby encourage the truth seeker to mistrust that which is apparent. Relevant here is Felski's depiction of suspicion as 'a muted affective state – a curiously non-emotional emotion of morally inflected mistrust – that overlaps with, and builds upon, the stance of detachment that characterises the stance of the professional or expert' (2012: np). By drawing attention to intersections of the affective and the intellectual, this formulation also clarifies that suspicion is more than impetus. As Jonathan Mair puts it, 'Explaining post-truth in terms of a fragmentation of authority, cognitive biases, apathy and so on ignores the extent to which the acceptance of post-truth representations may depend on specific forms of knowledge, skills, values, reflection and effort' (2017: 3; see also Lee et al 2021).

These crossovers between affect and episteme shone through in F-CTG conversations. Suspicion did not just, affectively, push people to be sceptical about the apparent, but also informed the mobilisation of a range of epistemic techniques. Among them, three were especially common: identifying unlikely (that is, 'suspicious') coincidences; detecting discrepancies in official accounts; and tracing the hidden interests of main actors.[15] Each technique required detachment from the constant noise produced by the mainstream media, and to adopt points of view not usually attempted. Consider, for example, how two F-CTG members discuss a series of unlikely coincidences, on 27 March 2020:

> Jack D: And no one noticed how all the world problems have disappeared apart from this virus. Brexit – nothing mentioned. Syrian war – nothing mentioned
> Kevin M: yes and no terrorist attacks
> Jack D: Pardon
> Kevin M: think about it. Since the coronavirus we've had no terrorist attacks. Which just proves they're all false flags.
> Jack D: yh to scaremonger us into their solution

The back and forth highlighted their inkling that they were on to something: the detected negative correlations suggested incongruences in the surface of appearances, leading to their conclusion that news reports about terrorists and war had all been distractions.

A second common technique, operating along similar lines, was to identify discrepancies or faults in official accounts. For example, members would re-calculate death rates or point out discrepancies between hospitalisation numbers and their own observations of empty hospitals. Take Steve N, who writes on 27 March 2020: 'Yes the

coronavirus is scary and deadly but . . . the percentage [of deaths to overall population] is so small and yet the media and government have whipped it into a Lockdown'. Notably, Steve N does not deny the reality of the virus, but even so the numbers do not stack up for him. In other words, the unlikely coincidences and discrepancies in official accounts suggest that something else must be at play. This is where the third technique kicks in, which is about detecting the (hidden) interests of experts, elites and spokespersons of the government. Bill Gates and George Soros have been especially frequent targets of such suspicions that aim to establish links between vaccines, profiteering and global power.

It might be tempting to refute the above conspiratorial observations or offer different explanations for them, but doing so would be to miss the point. In fact, group members such as Jack D and Kevin M were well aware that some of their suspicions would turn out to be baseless. Nevertheless, because the voiced suspicions all pointed in the same direction – suspecting cover-up – each post contributed to a sense that a hidden reality lay behind a façade of appearances. The logic of falsification is at work here. F-CTG members might not agree that the Prime Minister was faking illness, that a Korean romcom betrayed foreknowledge or that news reports of terrorism were mere diversions. But because even a single valid claim would suffice to unravel the official narrative, what counted was consensus that at least some of the claims were bound to be true. Disagreement on specific claims, moreover, strengthened their self-image of truth seekers who probe beyond the façade of appearances.

Far from being indifferent to evidence and logical reasoning, F-CTG members actively aligned these with a sense that things were not right. They displayed pride in being among those who could detect gaps in the matrix, uncover the lies of elites and reveal how the mainstream media disguised reality. Members' emphasis on using one's critical faculties contrasts with the stereotype of conspiracists as steadfast and deluded in their beliefs, who fail to understand the 'obvious fallacy' of their ideas. Rather than stemming from ignorance, suspicion was based on 'knowing too much', that is, on knowledge that exceeds and contradicts the 'apparent reality' produced by dominant discourse. On this point, Mühlfried usefully suggests that suspicion is often triggered by a 'perceived mismatch between the surface of an object and its content' (2021: 3). As the different probes into the perceived mismatch converged in an online group, F-CTG members were strengthened in their conviction that they were being lied to. The frequent posts and comments in the group constantly affirmed that official accounts should be mistrusted. In that sense suspicion was almost equal to evidence.

Difficulties of Connecting the Dots in Conspiracy Theorising

The previous section showed that the sense of being lied to was constantly affirmed by posts that presented 'self-evident' cracks in the treacherous surface of the pandemic. But what *did* lie beneath the surface? The role of suspicion is not confined to raising doubt about dominant truths. Fedirko puts it cogently when writing that on one hand 'to suspect is to think that something might not be the case', and adding that on the other hand, 'by speculating about what might be the case, suspicion transcends doubt

by constantly formulating positive hypotheses' (2021: 81). As we shift from 'falsification' to 'verification', which is a shift from 'identifying cracks' to 'connecting the dots', different kinds of evidence need to be mobilised, in more tentative ways. When delving into the realm of the unknown, evidence performs a new, a *navigating*, role. The shift can be illustrated by Csordas' point about the double meaning of evidence: on the one hand evidence is 'that which is evident, even self-evident and hence immediately, unmediatedly certain', while in another sense evidence 'establishes fact in a situation of uncertainty' (2004: 478).

In April 2020, numerous hypotheses circulated as to what was behind the pandemic and the lockdown. This presented a problem in that these positive hypotheses were often incompatible with each other, which in the F-CTG translated into a lack of consensus on the truth value of these different hypotheses. The introduction already presented one type of response to this conundrum, with Kimberly H concluding that 'for now, no one knows the truth', and resigning herself to a later date at which 'things can be sieved through'. Such temporary resignation was not uncommon, but on the F-CTG this co-occurred with active discussion of the merits and demerits of various hypotheses. Such discussion required engagement with 'positive evidence', which was further complicated by a lack of clarity as to who, or which sources of information, could be trusted. The complications can be profitably illustrated with reference to 5G network theories, which triggered much discussion in the F-CTG and were subject to intense disagreement.

Suspicion about 5G networks did not come out of the blue; it was rooted in broader patterns of concern about the health consequences of radio waves, including those of mobile phone networks. In 2002, the rollout of 3G networks had already triggered protests in the UK. In 2019, worries about 5G technology were compounded by concerns in mainstream circles that the involvement of tech giant Huawei could leave the UK vulnerable to Chinese state interference. And so, when the rollout of the 5G network in early 2020 coincided with a rapidly spreading virus, theories that posited a causal link were quick to emerge, therein assisted by the fact that Wuhan, where the virus first surfaced, had been an early adopter of the 5G network (for a detailed analysis of how the theory spread and took on different forms in the process, see Bruns et al 2020).

Most versions of the '5G network theory' claimed that the new coronavirus was a fabrication, a made-up story to either conceal that people were dying from 5G radiation or legitimise the lockdown, so that 5G networks could be rolled out undetected and unopposed. An extreme version claimed that 5G was developed to kill off most of the global population, while others alleged it was about enabling mass surveillance. However interesting the content of these theories, my focus is on the conversations that unfolded around them, using as a centre point a post on 2 April 2020, when Jack D writes in big bold letters: 'I bet after this lockdown there's going to be 5g towers near you all'. This brief statement clearly resonated with members in the F-CTG as it received 54 comments. In one strand I read:

Alan B: I was talking about this exact same thing earlier. If I see any 5G transmitters near me I'm pulling them down and smashing them up.

Ian G: bet ya don't
Tracy S: the so called virus is the result of 5G radiation poisoning!

However, not everyone is convinced that 5G poses a threat:

Liam F: Personally, in my opinion, there is no way 5g signal can cause covid-19. 3g an[d] 4g are ok. Just a way to discredit china. [. . .] Like i said, just my personal opinion 🙂.

Personal opinion or not, Liam F is immediately challenged. This includes Jack D, who wants to know why Liam F appears to dismiss 5G theories out of hand, and Jayden S who reminds Liam F that 'The g stands for generation [and] can have completely different radiation' compared to 3G or 4G. Soon after Liam F bows out, saying he needs to work the following day.

Back on the main thread there is a spat about what counts as doing research in this context. Ian G had added an image of 5G technicians in yellow Hazmat suits, sourced from snopes.com (a mainstream fact-checking website), and is being chided by Jack D for not doing *proper* research, to which Ian G then responds:

Ian G: Where's yours? I don't want anonymous YouTube videos. I want reliable sources. Not bro science or pseudoscience.
George A (echoing Ian G): 'please can you provide credible sources' and complaining 'Do some research' is all I hear from these clowns if they can't continue to discuss/debate things . . .
Ian G adds: or try and discredit your source of info.

But Jack D responds:

Jack D: I dont think you understand what do your own research means. it doesn't mean find a credible source it actually means do all the work [He continues:] a microwave uses millimetre wavelengths at 300mhz 5g uses 600mhz to 6ghz at the same wave length
George A: I [have] spoken with a radiation physicist who thinks this is absolute lunacy!!! [. . .] But let me guess . . . you have done more research and learning than this qualified experienced radiation physicist 👏

Jack D asks why it would be lunacy to point out that 5G and microwaves use the same wavelength and points out that several countries have banned 5G. He appears even more agitated when George A asks him about his profession:

Jack D: What's that got to do with anything[?] is your knowledge only limited to what you do for a living[?] do u not know anything outside of that[?].

Conversations like these rarely came to a productive end; they tended to peter out after the involved had had their say. This tendency is linked to the difficult relation-

ship between suspicion and positive truth, in that suspicion cannot easily commit. The issue of trust is crucial here. In Wittgenstein's words, 'If I don't trust *this* evidence why should I trust *any* evidence?' (1969: 672, emphases added). Ready solutions to this conundrum were unavailable in these online conversations. Relying on oneself – doing one's own research – might be a logical response, but this was unlikely to produce truths that would be accepted by others in the group. Moreover, self-reliance does not travel far when it comes to viruses and vaccines, where we are inadvertently dependent on the specialised knowledge of others. Hence, the open character of the F-CTG enabled discussion of competing theories, but it did not allow for closure. Why indeed would George A trust Jack D's research, and why would Jack D place any trust in the quoted 'radiation physicist', who might not even be a radiation physicist – might not even actually exist? In short, these mistrustful conversations could not move beyond their starting point.

5G network theories dwindled when death rates in countries *without* 5G started to also go up and the initial correlations fell apart. But instead of concluding from this that the truth-seeking efforts were merely misguided, it is vital to recognise that these frustrated efforts had kept alive a sense of independence and critique. Through their disagreements, F-CTG members could imagine the importance of their own epistemic labour.

It is often assumed that while a dose of suspicion or mistrust is healthy, it becomes corrosive when generalised. Certainly, people who are systematically suspicious of hidden intentions and agendas are not easily governed. In valuing their antagonistic inclinations, these 'difficult subjects' tend to be the opposite of 'docile citizens'. Seen through a positive lens, we once again detect similarities between 'conspiracists' and 'critics', possibly to conclude with Nguyen (2020: 154) that both behave 'epistemically virtuously'. But as we also saw, this generalised suspicion – directed towards all sources of information, research activities and intellectual capabilities – came at a significant cost. It implied that suspicion turned inwards and eroded group cohesion, thereby stalling progress in collective projects of truth.

Anchoring Suspicion

When suspicion is generalised, one is unavoidably thrown back onto oneself, which in the case of vaccines and viruses is hardly helpful, especially in conditions of radical uncertainty, when clear answers are desired. People need ground to stand on – hinges are needed – to move forward in life. In practice, this means that even if nothing can be known with absolute certainty, people still selectively suspend their mistrust and make 'leaps to trust'. Making such shortcuts implies that mistrust in one direction is compensated by either investing trust in another direction or at least suspending mistrust in that other direction. Social and affective mechanisms play a key role in the creation of relevant hinges – in making shortcuts – as illustrated by F-CTG conversations. Indeed, the conversation between Kimberly H and Stuart M in the introduction demonstrated how expressions of empathy placed some claims – such as 'being lied to' – beyond the reaches of doubt. Possible doubts were also sidelined by steering con-

versations towards possible collective action, such as in a conversation between Jack D and David V (2 April 2020):

> Jack D: Posting on here isn't enough what can we do[?]
> Chris V: The only thing we can do Anthony at the moment is help spread awareness. By doing this, consciousness levels will rise even more. People are now waking up rapidly [. . .]
> Jack D: been doing it for years trying to wake people[.] just get the stare half of the time
> Chris V: Stay woke, stay blessed.

This emphasis on a collective project narrowed debate, while also preparing the ground for rejecting views that deviated too far from the consensus. On this last point, a telling example is John W's complaint (22 May 2020) about posts falsely claiming a link between vaccines and autism.

> John W: it annoys me that people would actively deceive those who are here looking for truth
> Anthony D: You need to go back to school Son . . . vaccines are poison . . . end of!
> John W: I need to go back to school because you think vaccines cause inherited disorders and road traffic accidents? Stupidity is poison, end of!

Relevant here is that Anthony D's interjection immediately received laughs and likes, whereas John W appeared to stand alone in his position. Blunt dismissal – with group support – of dissenting views served not only to marginalise certain group members, but also to channel truth-seeking efforts by conveying which topics were out of bounds.

My focus on public online conversations excludes, by definition, those F-CTG members who remained silent and it offers no insight into those who left the site. Despite these limitations, observable changes in the membership and activity on the F-CTG pages were suggestive of the temporal dynamics of suspicion. As mentioned, it was during the turbulent and uncertain early months of the pandemic that the F-CTG quickly grew in membership (from 300 to 1,100 between April and May 2020) and saw its height of discursive activity with an average of five unique posts a day (each of which drew reactions and comments). From June onwards, however, discursive activity on the group page dwindled, and it failed to pick up again during the second Covid wave starting in October 2020. It was not just that the pandemic had lost its novelty but presumably also that group members had become more established in their views, and hence less desiring of engaging in online discussions. What we see in this period is not just a decrease in activity, but also a change in content. If in spring 2020 group page posts tended to welcome debate, from June onwards they tended to merely assert specific truth claims, still receiving likes but only rarely triggering discussion.

The broader point is that while the uncertainties of the early pandemic intensified truth-seeking efforts, progress in those efforts required making shortcuts. A process of polarisation unfolded in which more generalised suspicion split into 'dismissive mistrust' in one direction, and 'wilfully blind trust' in another – amounting to a hardening

of positions.[16] It changed the F-CTG from a space of discovery and debate to a site where positions were staked. Its once vibrant conversations dried up and the site ultimately became irrelevant.

Suspicion, Evidence, Critique

This article explored Covid suspicions at 'eye level' by analysing the conversations that unfolded between members of a UK-based conspiracy theory discussion group. Instead of pathologising those who voiced suspicions or essentialising the conspiracy ideas involved, I endeavoured to show how suspicion gained substance through ordinary online epistemic interactions. These interactions revealed why and how mistrust about aspects of the pandemic could spread so quickly, while allowing those involved to retain the sense that they belonged to a group of critically minded people who had freed themselves from the lies propounded by the elites and their lackeys.

The conversations illustrated that the act of suspicion produces a duplication of the world (see Mühlfried 2019: 41–43), in which that which is apparent and visible is rejected in favour of a postulated deeper hidden actuality. Suspicion's dual performance contained a 'negative' mode that provided epistemic clarity and direction (by dismissing official narratives), while its 'positive' mode hypothesised hidden realities. As shown, these dimensions were fuelled by different affective epistemic logics and had different social effects. In online discussions about Covid, suspicion was easily mobilised to reject official accounts, while it ran into serious difficulties when evaluating alternative explanations.

F-CTG members employed a range of epistemic techniques in challenging official accounts, identifying discrepancies that challenged these accounts' validity, correlations that undermined their veracity, and interests that undercut their reliability. Within the presented online environment, these suspicions gained traction as a 'practice of dissensus' with discernible aesthetic qualities (Parmigiani 2021: 523). Moreover, because this 'negative' mode of suspicion works through falsification, there was no requirement to agree on specific claims. As such, it contributed to a sense of belonging, while retaining the self-image of being critical. Similar to Vine's (2020) discussion of cynicism among anti-highway activists, negative suspicion operated as an 'affective boundary object'. It smoothed over differences between members, roping them into a project scaffolded by a common ethic. The features of social media – the speed and quantity of posts and reactions – enhanced these tendencies. Each expression of suspicion thereby became a piece of evidence that contributed to the conviction that official accounts were false. To group members, this logic conveyed not only that their suspicions were warranted, but that they had a critical edge over most people.

Suspicion played a different role in quests for positive knowledge. These hypothesising suspicions still offered direction, but only tentatively so, and were unable to act as substitutes for evidence. Given the complexity of the subject matter – viruses, vaccinations and 5G radio waves – any positive knowledge was undeniably interdependent. And here suspicion's potential to 'bind' started to falter. Generalised suspicion threw the involved back onto themselves, while any resort to shortcuts fed into a polarisation

of opinions. Hence, the stereotypical view of 'conspiracists' is not entirely incorrect, but it is very incomplete. While born out of an inquisitive impulse, the mobilisation of suspicion, coupled with a desire for certainty, ultimately had the effect of locking 'obstinate subjects' into ossified positions, where engagement with the world increasingly followed pre-written scripts.

This article has argued that the intertwined role of suspicion and evidence in truth-seeking projects partly explains why 'conspiracists' see themselves as having a critical edge, so it will be useful to end with a reflection on critique itself. In fact, by deploying a 'hermeneutics of suspicion' (cf. Ricoeur 1970), Covid truth-seekers ('conspiracists') draw on similar potentials and run into similar problems as critics. In acting on their suspicions, both categories behave epistemically virtuously, but they also feel the (social and political) pull of giving in to 'trust' – of making shortcuts to thereby produce a discourse that 'combines relativisation and naturalisation' (Schindler 2020: 376).

Even if there is no clear-cut distinction between critics and 'conspiracists', there is plenty of room for developing critique in productive directions. This requires acknowledging the value of critique's (and suspicion's) commitment issues (cf. Felski 2012) as a form of productive dissidence that enables us to imagine alternatives to the status quo (Shah 2022). It also requires acknowledging the unavoidability of 'hingeing' our investigations, but simultaneously emphasising the provisional nature (cf. Wittgenstein 1969) or temporary quality (Hastrup 2004) of such hinges as a way to retain some critical autonomy. Such an approach also highlights that 'facts' are always complex 'gatherings' with their own social and political dynamics (Latour 2004). Reflection on these issues will not bring the political agendas of 'critics' and 'conspiracists' any closer. But, by resisting closure and accepting that absolute certainty will remain out of reach, any voicing of suspicion retains the potential to challenge vested interests and illuminate the hidden realms of power in our complex world.

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MATHIJS PELKMANS is Professor of Anthropology at the London School of Economics and Political Science. Based on fieldwork in Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, and online platforms, his research in the past decade and a half has focused on the shadowy sides of knowledge and belief, such as in his monograph *Fragile Conviction* (2017, Cornell UP) and his (co-)edited volumes *Ethnographies of Doubt* (2013, IB Tauris), 'Wilful Blindness' (2020, *Critique of Anthropology*), and *How People Compare* (2022, Routledge). Email: m.e.pelkmans@lse.ac.uk; ORCID: 0000-0001-5188-3470.

Notes

1. Because I rely on quoted materials, anonymity could only be guaranteed by concealing the name of the group (in addition to using pseudonyms). This is so because if the name of the F-CTG was provided, text-searching tools could be used to reveal the (virtual) identity of individuals even if their names were obscured.
2. Practising editorial minimalism, I have only intervened when intelligibility required this. Such interventions are visible through my use of square brackets.
3. The available vocabulary is charged. 'Conspiracy theory' and 'conspiracist' carry negative value among mainstream publics (for a discussion, see Pelkmans and Machold 2011), but not necessarily among the members of the F-CTG. To draw attention to the ambivalent connotations I placed both terms in inverted commas, but did not do so for the term 'truth seeker' because that could come across as condescending.
4. Latour uses Heidegger's term '*gathering*' to conceptualise how 'things' are produced out of connections, attention to which should bring us closer to, not further removed from, the facts (2004: 232–235, 246).
5. Ricoeur speaks in this regard of a 'school of suspicion', which doubts not just things but also consciousness, as in 'false consciousness' (1970: 33). Similar ideas surface in groups such as the F-CTG under the term 'awakening'.
6. In a recent article in *Social Anthropology*, Palmié (2022) ponders the possibility of 'unhinged anthropology'. Attractive as this may sound, it is based on a misreading of Wittgenstein (1969), which seems to confuse 'hinges' with, for example, the kind of certainty that Descartes thought he had found when declaring '*cogito ergo sum*'.
7. The tendency to pathologise 'conspiracists' and essentialise 'conspiracy theories' has been particularly strong in social psychology and political science, as noted by Franks et al (2017) and Radnitz and Underwood (2017) respectively. Recent contributions have challenged the assumed monologicality of 'conspiracist worldviews' (Franks et al 2017) and supposed underlying 'paranoid personality' (Imhoff and Lamberty 2018).
8. My reasons for classifying the F-CTG group page as (semi-)public space is based on the group's size (no fewer than 300 members in the period under consideration) and the liberal admission practice of its administrators. Based on the above, I follow Willis (2019) in her argument that informed consent in online settings can be waived if the data are either public or textual. In my case I have abstained from seeking informed consent because I consider my research to meet *both* conditions (where one would suffice). I should add that acquiring meaningful informed consent is virtually impossible in large online groups of this kind.
9. A relevant contributing factor is proportionality bias, according to which people assume large events to be caused by large causes (Leman and Cinnirella 2007) – analogously, a pandemic would be more likely caused by intentional actors than by a randomly mutating virus (see, for example, van Prooijen 2020). Confirmation bias, moreover, ensured that blame for the origin and spread of the virus was projected onto disliked and mistrusted others, which depending on position included Asians, Muslims, Jews and so forth (Elias et al 2021).
10. The F-CTG had approximately 300 members in February 2020 and added 800 members in the three months thereafter. Membership plateaued at 1,400 members that summer and slowly decreased in the years after.
11. While most Facebook conspiracy theory groups genuinely explored the secretive workings of power, some were set up to ridicule conspiracism, such as one linked to my home town, the Kent University Flat Earth Society.
12. The right-wing notion 'awake' resonates with its left-wing counterpoint 'woke'. Both indicate sensitivity to issues that are ignored or denied in dominant discourse. However, while the right-wing version is fuelled by suspicion, the left-wing one is powered by hope, and they obviously point in different political directions.

13. This refers to the hospitalisation of UK's Prime Minister Boris Johnson on 5 April 2020.
14. The use of spiritual references is notable here, and underscores Parmigiani's point (2021) about the confluence of magic and politics in what he refers to as 'conspiracy belief' and 'conspirituality'.
15. In their study of online anti-mask networks, Lee et al (2021) list the identification of bias and politics in data, and the critical assessment of data sources and representations, as key epistemic techniques for disproving official accounts. Though these techniques were equally employed in the F-CTG, my own categorisation considers how epistemic techniques are affectively inflected and fostered by a 'sense' of suspicion.
16. As Drazkiewicz (2023) usefully points out, these processes of ossification unfolded not only on the side of 'conspiracists', but also just as much among audiences embracing COVID-19 protection measures.

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La suspicion et la preuve : sur les complexités de la recherche de vérité en ligne en période d'incertitude

Résumé : Comment les gens discernent-ils entre vérités et non-vérité ? Qu'est-ce qui caractérise leur recherche de la preuve ? Certains progrès dans la réponse à ces grandes questions ont pu être

faites par leur exploration en contexte d'incertitude épistémique radicale, tel que celui des premiers mois de la pandémie, alors que le comportement du virus était encore largement inconnu et l'efficacité des interventions mise en œuvre encore largement inconnues. Cet article se concentre sur le travail de la suspicion et sa relation à la preuve, à travers l'analyse de conversations collectées sur un groupe de discussion Facebook consacré à « la vérité du Covid ». Il défend l'idée que la suspicion produit ses propres formes de falsification, mais a une relation passionnée avec la vérité positive. En dessinant les contours du travail épistémique des chercheurs auto-proclamés de vérité, cet article met au jour certains des mécanismes par lesquels les théories conspirationnistes du Covid ont proliféré et explique pourquoi ceux qui les ont en partage sont si persuadés d'avoir la lucidité critique qui fait défaut au reste d'entre nous.

Mots-clés : savoir, défiance, ethnographie digitale, théories conspirationnistes, Covid-19, Facebook