

Conspiracy Theories, Rumours and Gossip at The Time of Crisis: COVID-19 Emergency in Eastern Europe and Africa

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In this special issue, we examine gossip, rumours and conspiracy theories in times of crisis. Most recently, interest in this topic has increased due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Sobo, Drażkiewicz, 2021). But this is not the first socio-medical crisis that has prompted alternative explanations. Rumours and conspiracy theories surrounded the HIV epidemic (Wilson, 2012; Niehaus, Jonsson, 2005; Farmer, 2006) and the outbreaks of Zika virus (Smallman, 2018; Carey, Chi, Flynn, Nyhan, Zeitzoff, 2020; Klofstad, Uscinski, Connolly, West, 2019) and SARS (Price-Smith, 2009; Fidler, 2004; Lee, 2014). Conspiracy theories have also been an integral part of large-scale political events – not only are they used to make sense of such events, but also frequently to influence their trajectories. This was the case with the French Revolution, both World Wars and the Cold War, as well as other more recent violent conflicts, such as the wars in Iraq (Gray, 2010, 2020) and Syria (Culloty, 2021), the annexation of Crimea (Mölder, Sazonov, 2019; Carey, 2017) and the current invasion of Ukraine (Yablokov, 2022). This has also been a case for political events which brought tremendous changes in the local and global political order, i.e. the end of communist and colonial regimes (Yablokov, 2018; Haluzík, Albert, 2015; Becker, Mwakalinga, 2021) and economic and climate crises (van Prooijen, Douglas, 2017; Douglas, Sutton, 2015; Wepfer, 2021).

Crisis always raises questions: ‘What is really going on?’ ‘What is the truth?’ ‘What is hidden?’ ‘Whose information can be trusted?’ At difficult times, when things do not go as planned, gossip, rumour and conspiracy theories offer an opportunity to fill gaps in knowledge and gain vital information for managing the emergency. When illness hits a family, when violence, insecurity and conflict enter communities, when planes crash, when natural or man-made disasters take place, when a pandemic hits the world, these speculative and investigative communication strategies might offer a chance to make sense of the crisis, to explain why bad things happen (Drażkiewicz, Rabo, 2020).

During disasters, those who are out of immediate danger extensively search for information. In this situation they tend to be less careful about their sources than in ‘normal’ times (Shibutani, 1966: 31). For those who do not have access to or control over information, gossiping or speculating allows them to create narratives about the systems which otherwise marginalise or disenfranchise them. It also offers a chance to contest officially sanctioned knowledge. This is particularly the case when authorities intentionally use misleading information strategies (ranging from withholding and manipulating information to propaganda) to achieve their own agenda in times of crisis (Czech, 2015, 2016; Panczová, Janeček, 2015).

Since the end of the 1990s, political scientists, historians, social psychologists and scholars specialising in media and cultural studies have intensified research efforts allowing them to understand the emergence and spread of conspiracy theories (Butter, Knight, *Eds.*, 2020). Increasingly they have moved from the pathologising approach – which sees rumours and conspiracy theories as an aberration – towards an approach which sees conspiracy theories as a cultural phenomenon resulting from distrust in official political, economic, medical, religious and other institutions (Fenster, 1999; Knight, 2002; Harambam, 2020a; Butter, Knight, 2016). These studies demonstrate that conspiracy theories are frequently used both as a form of political mobilisation and as social critique (Panczová, 2011, 2017). They not only ‘reveal the truth’ but also criticise the ways in which a particular crisis is handled, the social order that ‘allowed it’, and the ‘evil groups’ that supposedly intentionally orchestrated it for their own gain (Sobo, Drażkiewicz, 2021). Researchers have also shown that tendencies towards conspiratorial thinking are often associated with feelings of reduced control and perceived threat (Uscinski, Parent, 2014).

Questioning the status quo, conspiracy theories obviously provoke strong reactions, and in many cases are considered to be dangerous (Harambam, 2020b; Drażkiewicz, Harambam, 2021). They muddy the scientific waters, and when they merge with extremist and populist movements, they can generate conflicts and spread racism and prejudice. In addition to spreading group hatred, these messages undermine trust in official public institutions, and even in the system of liberal democracy as such. Conspiracy theorising as a component of populist rhetoric wielded by representatives who present themselves as spokespersons for the ‘will of the people’ is a tool for delegitimising existing political elites, the ‘establishment’ (Bergmann, 2018; Panczová, 2020).

Today, in the post-truth and mid-pandemic world, it is increasingly clear that conflicts over truth have become central not only to those people who spread gossip and endorse conspiracy theories, but also to those who fear their societal consequences and push back against the 'post-truth' era. For these reasons, seven years after its first special issue dedicated to conspiracy theories, *Slovak Ethnology* returns to the topic in order to further explore the role of gossip, rumours and conspiracy theories in instigating, managing and dealing with the crisis.

While there is a good body of literature examining the ways conspiracy theories function in the Western world, our understanding of the phenomenon in the Global East and Global South is much more limited (Rabo, 2020; Astapova, Colácel, Pintilescu, Scheibner, *Eds.*, 2020). That is why we found it important to create a space where we could expand regional horizons. Further, while recent years have seen an outpouring of studies concerning conspiracy theories, many of them take quite a narrow approach, failing to analyse conspiracy theories vis-à-vis other forms of knowledge production, such as gossip or rumours. We hope that this volume provides an opportunity to challenge this approach. Finally, to some extent, this special issue reflects our need to contribute to the important debates concerning COVID-related conspiracy theories. However, unlike many other scholars of the subject, we do not approach the current proliferation of conspiracy theories as an aberration or a reason for moral panic (Pertwee, Simas, Larson, 2022; Rovetta, Castaldo, 2022; Bratich, 2020; Tennent, Grattan, 2022); instead we recognise that conspiracy theories are nothing new and for a long time have been used by people around the world to make sense of emergencies and crises. That is why we wanted to create a collection of articles which would allow cross-cultural comparison and would examine the current COVID-related conspiratorial milieu within the larger context of conspiratorial thinking in times of crisis.

Based on these premises, we selected articles that offer insights into the Global South and Global East and examine the social life of conspiracy theories, rumours and gossip in both post-colonial and post-socialist contexts. The collection brings together five authors researching Eastern Europe and Africa, who provide inspiring contributions revealing the social life of COVID-related conspiracy theories, rumours and gossip and how they are influenced by political, economic and religious contexts.

Several articles in the issue focus on new media and the ways in which digital technologies contribute to the spread of rumours and conspiracy theories. The article by **Angelina Ilieva** titled *Angels in White Coats or Angels of Death? Rumours and Conspiracy Narratives about Medical Specialists in Bulgaria during the COVID-19 Pandemic* analyses the ways in which Facebook contributes to the spread of conspiracy theories and rumours in Bulgaria. Her work counters studies which typically blame the spread of rumours and misinformation on uneducated laypeople. Her work shows clearly how, increasingly, experts are involved in conspiratorial theorising or in creating an environment which does not generate trust in officially sanctioned knowledge. She shows how digital media in Bulgaria provided a space for

generating and vocalising conspiratorial theories about monstrous corruption, fabrications of data, deliberate contaminations during COVID-19 testing procedures, and even killings through hospital treatment protocols. But importantly, Ilieva does not simply blame the spread of conspiracy theories on social media. Instead, her study demonstrates that a central role in fostering conspiratorial thinking is played by the socio-political context which generates mistrust towards the ineffective healthcare system in Bulgaria.

Another author who deals with digital space is **Marie Heřmanová**, but her focus is on Instagram and Czechia. In the article “*We Are in Control*”: *Instagram Influencers and Proliferation of Conspiracy Narratives in Digital Space* she analyses how female spiritual influencers on Instagram engage with conspiracy content and how they bridge the gap between mainstream and fringe online spaces via the metaphor of control, over (women’s) bodies as well as over the whole society. Most studies of conspiracy theories focus on men (Thiem, 2020). Heřmanová breaks with this approach by applying a gender perspective to her study and by providing an important insight into the ways in which women engage with the conspiratorial milieu. Her work also counters dominant approaches which focus on scientific knowledge (Drażkiewicz, 2021; Song, 2010). Instead, she analyses COVID-related theories within the context of spirituality (Ward, Voas, 2011) and demonstrates how Czech influencers are moving from spiritual to conspiratorial content within their everyday online performances.

Another article that explores the link between conspiracy theories, spirituality and religion is by **Aneliya Manova**. In the paper *Between the COVID-19 Pandemic and Saving the World: Practices and Narratives by the Falun Dafa Community in Bulgaria*, she explores the ways in which Bulgarian members of the Falun Dafa movement link their religious doctrines with the COVID-19 pandemic. Using ethnographic research, her work shows the conflicting functions of conspiracy narratives. Manova shows how, in times of crisis, conspiracy theories provide some reassurance as they help to make sense of the dramatic events. At the same time, they reaffirm and strengthen the apocalyptic visions of the impending destruction of humanity which are an important part of Falun Dafa teaching.

Susan Rasmussen’s article *The Knowable and the Unknowable in Ethnographic Encounters: A Case of Sorcery, Rumor, and Gossip among Tuareg in Northern Niger*, also analyses rumour and gossip within the broader context of religiosity. However, her article also brings important socio-political contexts into the discussion. Rasmussen considers rumour, gossip, and sorcery to be epistemologically complementary. Her work, based on long-term ethnographic research in Niger and Mali, shows how alternative knowledge offers an important role in dealing with crises. She points out that, although there are many instances where gossip, rumours, and conspiracy theories are untrue (e.g., conspiracy theories about COVID-19 vaccinations), they may nevertheless express valid critique, as they often derive from unquestionable and traumatic experiences such as instances of past medical abuses. Consequently, their primary goal is to reveal a ‘larger truth’ about social organisation and hierarchies.

In the article *Doubling the Malagasy Remedy: Rumours and Suspicion during COVID-19 in Madagascar*, Patrick Desplat argues that, in the region, conspiracy theories “are not about an epistemic void that needs to be filled but instead about knowing too much about an ongoing drama in order to take a single, even hopeful political act at face value” (Desplat, 2022: 414). By contextualising the pandemic within the longer history of Madagascar and by providing important socio-political context, his work counters studies that see non-normative forms of knowledge production as an aberration and instead shows that rumours and conspiracy theories often constitute an important and everyday part of the Malagasy political milieu and sociality.

All studies in this volume contribute to our better understanding of the conspiratorial milieu triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic. But without a doubt, their conclusions can be relevant to wider studies of crisis and conspiracy theories. Increasingly, conspiracy theories and people propagating them are defined as a social enemy, a threat to democracy and social cohesion. But we hope that our volume will help us to better understand this complex social phenomenon and move beyond the simplistic perspective which tends to essentialise non-normative forms of knowledge as a problem of uneducated groups, divided societies, or even a cultural trait of specific societies – a sign of non-Western, non-civilised status. While we share concerns about the impact that conspiratorial theorising might have on democracy, we recognise that in order to tackle the issue, we must understand its root causes and the mechanisms that govern them (Drażkiewicz, 2022). We hope that this special issue will play an important role in this process.

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