

Journalism Research

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The rumor mill

On the relationship between journalism and conspiracy theories

By Tanjev Schultz

Abstract: The common consensus is that conspiracy theories have nothing in common with reputable media outlets. In an age of rumor, conspiracy theories, and fake news, professional journalists should and want to assume the role of paragons of credibility. Yet doing so also means having to reflect possible points of contact and parallels between journalistic accounts and conspiracy theories in a self-critical way. As this paper argues, journalists are undoubtedly susceptible to the same narrative patterns used by conspiracy theorists, albeit taken to extremes. These patterns fit in with a dualistic and intentionalist view of the world that leaves little space for gray areas, coincidence, or the complexity of social structures and systems.

No-one in their right mind would see themselves as a conspiracy theorist. Conspiracy theorists are always the others, telling stories that are untrue (Butter 2018: 44f.). That makes it easy to talk *about* them, but trickier to talk *to* them. What if – horror of horrors – you turn out to be one yourself? In their eagerness to uncover a story, journalists often take an approach that is not as far removed from that of conspiracy theorists as they would like to think. It is a fact that is difficult to admit. After all, the name alone de-legitimizes a position: this theory is useless. It leaves the solid ground of recognized ideas, evidence and arguments. A conspiracy theory is speculative and dubious, if not entirely crude and insane.

It is therefore no wonder that media and journalists who see themselves as reputable consider their own work “clean” – free from myths and legends. If they give any mention at all to wild stories going around, they claim, it is to provide critical commentary, to expose them, to warn against them or to laugh at them. There are plenty of examples of this kind of journalistic approach, from tongue-in-cheek reports on stars like Elvis or John Lennon being miraculously still alive, to concerned analyses of the fantastic fantasies of anti-Semites and other extremists. The 9/11 attacks were put on by the USA? Barack Obama is not a real American? Vapor trails in the sky are an attack by secret powers? The moon landings were faked? All popular stories, including in Germany (cf. Schultz et al. 2017: 255f.) – but ones that have no chance of being taken seriously by the established media who, in the view of many conspiracy theorists, are in cahoots with the evil powers. Journalists are faced with the question of how best to react to this kind of theory. Should it be ignored completely? Or should it be addressed and, if so, how?

Don't journalists have to be conspiracy theorists in a way?

Psychological research has shown that trying to take apart and disprove misconceptions rarely works. In fact, it can even make them more attractive. Despite this, there is a sense that rumors, fake news, and unsubstantiated theories need to be contradicted before they become firmly established, running the risk of even sensible people considering them acceptable or true. The 2016 presidential election in the United States was plagued by the infamous conspiracy theory that Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton and her aides ran a child pornography ring from their headquarters at a certain pizzeria in Washington (cf. Pörksen 2018: 36ff). Believing the story, a man stormed the restaurant, shooting. As a result, even reputable media could no longer avoid reporting on the background to the crime and thus on the conspiracy theory itself.

Today, rumors, fake news, and conspiracy theories that expand rumors and fake news into a narrative, spread like wildfire on the internet. In such a climate, traditional media, populated by professional journalists with the appropriate ethos, are rightly considered credible sources. But does the world of conspiracy theories really have nothing at all in common with the world of good old journalism? On the contrary - is it not the case that good old journalism itself has invited conspiracy theorists, and continues to do so? There are two reasons behind this subtle connection. Firstly, journalists are constantly faced with real conspiracies, and might even be the first to discover them. Secondly, reporting by journalists makes use of content frames and narrative patterns that provide a useful basis for the rhetoric of conspiracy theorists.

I will address the first point first. Many negative situations that are uncovered by the media are the result of conspiracies or at least deception. Certain people keep their actions secret because they know, or fear, that publicity would harm them and their objectives. Managers and engineers manipulate exhaust values (diesel scandal). Dictators and their henchmen manipulate the results of elections (an everyday occurrence in many countries). Agents blow a hole in a prison wall ("Celle Hole"). Politicians and generals deceive the public about the situation in a war (Vietnam). Governments spy on the opposition (Watergate) or on politicians and citizens of "allied" states (NSA scandal). Former spies are poisoned in the street (Skripal case). The list is endless, and every item on it is another argument in favor of a free press that takes on the role of monitoring those in power, alongside its many other duties.

So, if journalists want to be the guardians of democracy, do they need to be conspiracy theorists themselves, in a sense? They certainly need to take the existence of genuine conspiracies into account and have the drive to uncover them. No institution or person deserves the unconditional trust of journalists. Without succumbing to paranoia, journalists need to cultivate doubt, skepticism and mistrust. They need to be able to imagine the apparently unimaginable and be open to unusual questions and hypotheses that contradict official reports and dominant opinions. Journalism that is too tame, sluggish, or naïve is not fit for purpose.

Conspiracy theories explain events and incidents by claiming that they are caused by a group of conspirators pursuing a secret plan with negative effects for the general public (cf. Uscinski & Parent 2014: 32f.; Butter 2018: 21ff.). Conspirators like this have popped up again and again throughout history - a fact that can, unfortunately, also be used by those who want to sell their crude stories as the truth.

Researchers as the heroes of the hour

Conspiracy theories usually construct their version of events as an alternative to a “dominant”, “official” narrative. Uncontroversial and contentious facts are combined to form an alternative story and explanation, thus revealing a secret plot (cf. Renner & Schultz 2017). The same pattern works both for dubious, bizarre, and dogmatic conspiracy theories and for reputable, justified conspiracy hypotheses that pursue a methodical doubt. Of course, in each case, there are eager, even zealous, arguments about where exactly the line between dubious and reputable is and when a seemingly bold theory becomes a watertight theoretical construct.

Some theories can be quickly dismissed as baseless from a scientific and journalistic point of view (the Chancellor is an alien, the water fountains are poisoned etc.). For others, it is not as simple. Was the attacker who planted a bomb at Munich’s Oktoberfest in 1980 a lone wolf, as the investigators claimed, or were there co-conspirators, perhaps even including the state’s own informers? Did Oury Jalloh burn to death in his cell in a Dessau police station in 2005 as a result of a series of unfortunate events, or did the police who failed to prevent his death act negligently - or even set fire to him themselves? If the facts are not clear, journalists cannot simply accept the information and claims of the authorities. In some cases, even a court ruling is no reason to stop doubting and researching. Just like journalists, judges can be wrong. Only conspiracy theorists are never wrong - they know the truth.

Admittedly, journalists, too, run the constant risk of getting carried away and becoming too fixated on a specific version of the facts. Many conspiracy narratives have something rebellious and heroic about them and, as they get caught up in their investigations, researchers and reporters can sometimes be tempted to want to embody these properties; just like in books and films in which brave heroes face down evil conspirators.

To avoid this pitfall, journalists need to turn their doubts on themselves and their own assumptions and findings. When they are pursuing a lead because they think that something is not right about the official narrative, they need to constantly check this lead critically, too. Although this goes without saying as part of open, intensive research, these principles are often under threat in practice: by limited resources, pressure, competition, vanity, or blind spots - and by the conventions and temptations of journalistic storytelling.

Journalists should be able to differentiate between different levels and make clear the status of the statements they make or quote. What is undisputed or disputed fact? What is just conjecture? Which

different explanations and interpretations are there? The only problem is something that also affects the second reason for an (unwanted) link between journalism and conspiracy theories: The media, journalists included, like to tell stories.

Example: NSU complex

There is no doubt that “factual storytelling” (cf. Renner & Schupp 2017) is very different from fictional storytelling, as it retains links to real events. But the narrative structures are often similar. In contrast to the legal profession, for example, the media are less fixated on proceedings and have less of a strict focus on collecting and checking facts systematically and ordering and weighting them analytically. Journalists like to tell exciting stories, like in a crime novel. This applies even, or indeed especially, when the story is potentially scandalous. They do not necessarily explain comprehensively and completely, but instead summarize, streamline and dramatize.

This is associated with the well-known journalistic propensity to personalize issues. People – and their intentions and actions – take center stage, while structures, systems, coincidences, and unintended consequences are lost from view. Just like conspiracy theorists, journalists look for someone to blame and a chain of causes – and are driven by the idea (or illusion) that the world can be planned and controlled (Butter 2018: 28). Journalists already begin to struggle if the staff and positions relevant to a topic are not clear. They react by reducing the issue to aspects that are (allegedly) typical, exemplary, or extreme.

Take the NSU complex. The search for Uwe Mundlos, Uwe Böhnhardt and Beate Zschäpe – a trio of neo-Nazis who had gone into hiding – and later the investigation into the serial murders, armed robberies, and bomb attacks, employed hundreds of police and dozens of government offices. Often, the left hand had no idea what the right was doing (cf. Schultz 2018). For the public, it was easy to believe that *the* intelligence service (which in Germany actually consists of 17 independent offices) had acted as a single entity and perhaps even the driving force behind the criminal activity. The inglorious role of the police is easily overlooked, including the fact that some police forces keep their own confidential informants, who are often no less dubious than the intelligence services.

There is no doubt that there are many questions in the NSU complex that have not been satisfactorily answered to this day, despite – or perhaps because of – the years-long court case, numerous investigation committees, and journalistic research. This is typical of complex cases, as not everything can be reconstructed and explained down to the very last detail. Yet it increases the danger that the gaps that remain are filled with speculation and suspicion, until public opinion issues a judgement that can be described as a mixture of substantiated facts and conspiracy theory clichés. Interested parties, not least those from the far-right scene, have been encouraging myths about the NSU as an alleged invention of the state for many years. Pseudo-documentaries like the three-part ARD drama television “Mitten in Deutschland: NSU” (2016) play into their hands by serving up the conspiracy theory as a thriller while claiming to be helping to resolve the issue

(Renner & Schultz, 2017).

X was in A on the same day as Y - coincidence...?

Journalists are also very susceptible to fallacies that occur in fictional material and conspiracy theories. One example is the 'false dilemma' fallacy, in which the world is divided into two sides. Everything is either black or white, good or evil, A or B. But reality actually very often consists of shades of gray, and events can be explained not only by A or B, but also by C, D, E or even a mixture of all of them. Another example is the 'divine' fallacy - the idea that a situation is so incredible that it can only be explained by the presence of a higher power (taken to the extreme, God). Reputable journalists do not go so far as to blame the usual suspects to whom conspiracy fans apportion responsibility (extra-terrestrials, the CIA, Mossad or even the Jewish world conspiracy) - but it is enough for their stories to imply that there must be powerful men behind the scenes who are yet to be uncovered.

When reporting on scandals, and especially on the security and secret services, journalists like to raise questions to which they do not know the answers. A lot remains unclear. Details are unknown. Normally, one would expect journalists to provide their audience with answers, not trouble them with questions. But if explosive research hits a wall and cannot get any further, the journalist sometimes has no choice but to document this. In this case, raising questions is a method that enables the audience to take a peek over this wall. The direction in which they look can then be steered by the rest of the report, such as by the way experts react and speak as "opportune witnesses" (Hagen 1992).

'We are not claiming anything.' 'We are just asking questions.' But the questions are not neutral - they insinuate one thing or the other. They pave the way for assumptions and suspicions, and as such can be similar to the questions asked by conspiracy theorists. They, too, claim that they are merely asking. How can it be that...? Is it not strange if...? X was in A on the same day as Y - coincidence...?

Journalists from reputable media do not want anything to do with conspiracy theorists. But those who try to expose something using journalistic methods often end up treading the same path - albeit in a different position, at a different speed, and hopefully aware that they are able to leave this path and take another direction at any time. Journalists need to reflect on their own ideas and assumptions, in order to prevent themselves from drifting off on the wrong path. This is by no means the case only in investigative projects - it also applies to journalists' bread and butter: political reporting. Journalists have got into the habit of focusing strongly on the psychology behind politicians' actions, examining them for intentions and secret plans. This is not plucked out of thin air, as power games are undoubtedly part of politics. But they are not the only part. Other factors, and sometimes even boring old coincidence, can be more important than journalists think.

The situation is made even more complex by the fact that, driven by disappointment and scorn, some people make journalists themselves part of the conspiracy narrative. The rallying call of “lying press” and the suspicion that the media collaborate with those in power are just two examples (cf. Jakob, Quiring & Schemer 2017). According to a survey conducted in late 2017 by the author in cooperation with the Department of Communication in Mainz, around one in five Germans agree with the statement that “the media and politicians work hand in hand to manipulate the opinion of the population” (a year later, the figure was one in four; Schultz et al. 2017: 253).

Convincing these people otherwise will not be easy. It is true that the media need to maintain a critical distance from those in power and fulfil their role as a critical monitor. But it would be wrong to take this role to mean that journalists themselves should encourage conspiracy theories.

About the author

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