

Abstract

This thesis centers around the circulation of the conspiracy theory on Reddit that suggests a connection between COVID-19 and 5G radiation. Research on this phenomenon in the past, has often had a focus on either the technological factors or the social factors that influence the spread, but the two types of arguments have rarely been combined. Additionally, this thesis advocates for the use of Foucault's heterotopia over the use of Baudrillard's hyperreality when analyzing social media platforms, for it allows the researcher to take an individual's agency into account. Using the concept of heterotopia as a lens, with a combination of an affordance analysis and critical discourse analysis, this thesis concludes that the circulation of the 5G-COVID-19 conspiracy theory can be identified as an expression of agency through the spread of oppositional discourse in the form of the 5G-COVID-19 theory, by those inside the heterotopia of r/Conspiracy. Moreover, the method put forward in this thesis could prove helpful in analyzing other conspiracy theories on other social media platforms.

Keywords: conspiracy theories, Reddit, heterotopia, critical discourse analysis

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Introduction

On the Dutch television show *Zondag Met Lubach* (Sunday with Lubach) host Arjen Lubach discussed the rise of conspiracy theorists in the Netherlands (Human Factor TV, 2020). According to Lubach, individuals who believe conspiracy theories are the victims of what he refers to as the *fabeltjesfuik* (fable trap). This is a system designed to keep the viewer's attention as long as possible, by showing them online content with ever-increasing outrageous claims (Human Factor TV, 2020). Lubach shows how believers have "taken action" to combat the dangers claimed by the conspiracy theories and confront the supposed conspirators. He ends the episode by stating that "if violence occurs, this will be a direct consequence of the business model of these internet companies" (Human Factor TV, 2020, translated from Dutch by me). However, I would argue this statement is based on a too parochial view, and that more factors contribute to the spread of and belief in conspiracy theories than just the business model of social media platforms. While this episode was generally well-received (Aalderink, 2020), some claimed that Lubach's attitude towards conspiracy theorists was ill-advised because ridiculing these individuals will only strengthen their convictions and further alienate them from society (El Ouali, 2020). I agree with this claim and would argue there are social factors that also have a hand in this phenomenon. Unfortunately, these two kinds of argumentative perspectives towards conspiracy theories – socially and technologically driven – tend to not engage with one another, leaving a gap in the research on this phenomenon.

That leads me to the societal relevance of this thesis. The belief in and circulation of conspiracy theories is not without consequence (Douglas et al., 2019). The outcomes often linked to the belief in conspiracy theories are the spread of misinformation, growing distrust in authority and mainstream media, and radicalization (Douglas et al., 2019; Corner, 2017; Jolley & Paterson, 2020). Therefore, we ought to tread carefully in our discourse surrounding conspiracy theorists and try to avoid alienating them further through ridicule and mockery. In the past, conspiracy theorists have been labeled as delusional, paranoid, and extremist. This kind of labeling robs these individuals of their possible credibility and any legitimate concerns they might have (Husting & Orr, 2007). This is visible in Lubach's explanation of the phenomenon where he paints these individuals as the digitally illiterate who are now trapped

in the fable-fueled reality of social media. This observation has been made before with the help of Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality as a lens to explain the entrapment of social media (Morris, 2020; Happer et al., 2019). However, I take issue with the use of this concept and instead propose an alternative lens: Foucault's heterotopia. This concept allows me to capture the social factors that influence the belief in and spread of conspiracy theories and helps me tie it to the technological characteristics of social media, and all combined, forms the first aspect of the academic relevance of this thesis. The second aspect concerns the under-researched role of Web 2.0 and its media characteristics in the spread of these theories. In the age of social media platforms, there are new methods, and new reasons for spreading conspiracy theories, and these aspects deserve further scrutiny (Douglas et al., 2019, p. 22). So while the argument that Lubach made seems understandable, and has been important in providing societal awareness for the problem, I intend to find a balance in the two types of argumentation – technologically focused and socially focused – that explain the spread of conspiracy theories and identify the interplay of the social media characteristics and the social factors that contribute to the spread of conspiracy theories, while not casting it off as a hyperreal space where one is completely severed from the “real” world. The scope through which I will conduct my analysis is Reddit and the circulation of the theory on this platform that claims there is a connection between the placement of 5G telecommunication masts and the spread of the COVID-19 virus. I will explain the theory and reasons for choosing it in the Corpus section.

Platforms have begun to moderate content regarding conspiracy theories (Papakyriakopoulos et al., 2020). However, research regarding the spread of COVID-19 conspiracy theories shows that moderation only works when it takes place before the theory goes viral (Papakyriakopoulos et al., 2020), but where must a platform draw the line? Can skepticism about vaccination procedures also be considered as conspiracy theorizing? And what about platforms like Reddit, which prides itself on the allowance of free speech (Business Models Inc., 2020)? I would argue stricter moderation is not the answer. I agree the social media platforms play a significant role in the distribution of conspiracy theories, but their business model is not the only culprit. There are social factors that influence this phenomenon as well. Therefore, I have formulated the following research question: How can the

identification of the interrelation between the media characteristics of Reddit and the social characteristics of the spread of conspiracy theories through the lens of heterotopia shed new light on the online spread of the 5G-COVID-19 conspiracy theory? Below I will continue with the theoretical framework and method, along with a description of my corpus. The approach I conduct in this thesis can also serve as a framework for future research on the spread of other conspiracy theories on other platforms.

Conspiracies, Social Media, and the Hyperreal

This theoretical framework will consist of four sections. The first section focuses on the research done into the belief and distribution of conspiracy theories. The second section focuses on describing the business model and characteristics of social media platforms, and Reddit in particular. In the third section, I will outline how this could be and has been analyzed through Baudrillard's (1981/2011) concept of hyperreality. Lastly, in the fourth section, I explain where I find Baudrillard's concept falls short and introduce Foucault's concept of heterotopia to fill these gaps. This concept will serve as the primary lens through which I will approach my research question and help me bridge the gap between the types of arguments that explain the spread of conspiracy theories.

Conspiracy Theories: An Overview

I will begin with a definition of what this thesis characterizes as conspiracies and conspiracy theorists. A conspiracy theory is a "proposed explanation of some historical event (or events) in terms of the significant causal agency of a relatively small group of persons – the conspirators – acting in secret" (Keeley, 1999, p. 116). "Conspiracies typically attempt to usurp political or economic power, violate rights, infringe upon established agreements, withhold vital secrets, or alter bedrock institutions" (Douglas et al., 2019, p. 4). There are several reasons why it is difficult to disprove conspiracy theories (Keeley, 1999). Firstly, they are often more desirable to believe than the official explanation, for they tie together more (unexplained) phenomena. Secondly, evidence against the theory is often construed as evidence in favor of it. Thirdly, according to these theories, the phenomenon that is being investigated tries to actively disrupt the investigation. Finally, these theories are presented in a way that makes them unfalsifiable (Keeley, 1999, pp. 120–121). These reasons will be valuable in the analysis of Reddit's communities to examine rhetoric and discursive practices.

Someone who creates or believes in these theories is a conspiracy theorist and prefers to embrace the “hyperskepticism” that is needed to continue to assume the orderly evil agenda of our societal institutions over the unpredictability of our natural and social world (Keeley, 1999, p. 125). In this thesis, the focus will be less on the theories themselves and more on the theorizers, because the first would not exist without the latter.

This overarching desire for order can manifest itself in many reasons why people believe in conspiracy theories. Here, I will discuss the four main reasons that most conspiracy theories can be classified under, including the 5G-COVID-19 theory. The first reason is that believers do not want to succumb to a reality that disturbs their existing worldview. Secondly, people will turn to conspiracy theories to make their abstract fears seem more like concrete threats or dangers. Thirdly, conspiracy theories can be seen by some as a coping mechanism for collective trauma (Douglas et al., 2019, pp. 12-14). The final reason is scientific illiteracy. Some people will not accept scientific findings that go beyond their understanding or direct experience (Paolillo, 2018). However, reasons for believing in conspiracy theories can overlap. For example, Paolillo (2018) argues that the belief and spread of the Flat Earth conspiracy theory can be attributed to scientific illiteracy but it can also be seen as a form of political resistance. Identifying these reasons will prove helpful in the analysis because it will allow me to find possible connections with the belief in conspiracy theories and concurrent world events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Because a significant portion of the population has been confined to their homes due to pandemic guidelines, more people are turning to social media platforms to get their information (Tsao et al., 2021). People conduct searches based on their views and assumptions, and because social media platforms want to generate traffic they will provide them with information that corroborates these views and assumptions (Terranova, 2012). That is why it is unsurprising to see conspiracy theories surrounding COVID-19 surface on social media, and particularly on Reddit because the platform is known to be less regulatory than other platforms (Happer et al., 2019). Therefore, in the wake of this rapid migration to the online sphere, it is paramount to identify the relation between the role of social media platforms – and Reddit’s role in particular – and the social factors that have a hand in the turn to conspiracy theories.

Lastly, I want to outline why people distribute conspiracy theories. The reasons include a perceived loss of control, a distorted worldview, elevated social status, trolling, monetary gain (Marwick & Lewis, 2017, pp. 27–29), and the preference for a false reality (Douglas et al., 2019). Douglas et al. (2019) argue that the role the internet plays in the distribution of these theories might not be as significant as is often claimed. They state that online conspiracy theories tend to stay in the community of people who support them and that when an unaware individual comes into contact with conspiracy theories, it is usually in a negative sense (for example, debunking or ridicule of the theory) (Douglas et al., 2019, pp. 14–15). However, as I have outlined in the introduction, they also state that the role of Web 2.0 needs to be investigated further (p. 22), and Lubach and others in the mainstream media and Paolillo (2018), Papakyriakopoulos et al. (2020), and Marwick and Lewis (2017) in academia have made the first steps in doing so. Nonetheless, their research is either very data-driven (Paolillo, 2018; Papakyriakopoulos et al., 2020) – perhaps not allowing the social reasons for believing and spreading as influenced by the platform to shine through – or focuses on many different online communities, not exclusively conspiracy theorists (Marwick & Lewis, 2017). The interrelation between the social reasons for believing and spreading conspiracy theories and how this intertwines with the media characteristics of the platforms themselves is still under scrutinized, which is why that is the focus of this thesis. I will focus on Reddit exclusively, but the method I put forward here can be applied to other platforms as well. Now that I have established the belief and distribution of conspiracy theories in general, I will turn to the role of social media platforms, and Reddit in particular.

Social Media Platforms and Their Business Model

In this section, I will focus on the business model of most social media platforms, and that of Reddit. Following that, I will outline what drives this business model, the attention economy, and explain the argument made by Lubach regarding the fable trap (Human Factor TV, 2020) in more detail. Unlike traditional media such as television where the viewer is subjected to a constant flow of content, on social media platforms the viewer is in charge of clicking on the next post (Van Dijck, 2013). So in order for social media platforms to retain the same flow as on television, the viewer is enticed to click on posts that align with their viewpoints and interests for them to remain engaged on the platform (Van Dijck, 2013). This business model

is mostly based on the attention economy (Paolillo, 2018), which entails that the most valuable thing in today's society is "eyeballs" (Marwick & Lewis, 2017). Terranova (2012) argues that attention is now seen as a scarce resource. This resource is being consumed by the information that is available on the internet. Therefore, "the wealth of information creates poverty that in its turn produces the conditions for a new market to emerge. This new market requires specific techniques of evaluation and units of measurement (algorithms, clicks, impressions, tags, etc.)" (Terranova, 2012, p. 13). Reddit's preferred unit of measurement is its communities, also known as subreddits. When a user creates an account on Reddit, the platform will ask for their interests and suggest subreddits to join that align with those interests. Reddit's business model is also based on the goal to keep the user on the platform as long as possible and to show them advertisements in line with the topics of their communities (Business Models Inc., 2020). Next, I will explain how this connects to the belief in conspiracy theories.

Because of the value of clicks, likes, and shares, we will find ourselves surrounded by the outlandish information that intends to grab our attention. Papakyriakopoulos et al. (2020) confirmed this in their analysis of multiple platforms' content moderation regarding COVID-19 conspiracy theories, where they concluded that "stories reinforcing conspiracy theories became more viral than stories either debunking them or having a neutral stance" (p. 2). Douglas et al. (2019) have argued that, as I have stated before, the many new media characteristics associated with Web 2.0 - like memes, bots, trolling, and indeed subreddits (Marwick & Lewis, 2017) - need to be researched further. All these new features, whose drives and programming happens behind the scenes, can lead to the social media users thinking they are doing their own research when in reality, these conspiracies are being fed to them by an algorithm (Human Factor TV, 2020). Furthermore, the people most susceptible to this phenomenon are "those who feel disenfranchised in other areas of their life, especially those who already feel alienated from mainstream culture. It is this alienation and feeling of outsider-ness that radicalization strategically exploits" (Marwick & Lewis, 2017, p. 46). And this susceptibility is also applicable to conspiracy theorists considering they prefer a fictitious ordered world filled with nefarious individuals over the unpredictability of our real world (Keeley, 1999, p. 124). This thesis focuses on the space where the connection between the

aforementioned phenomena forms: a platform that provides its users with a community of others who also feel alienated from mainstream culture, as they prefer a fictitious, yet ordered world as well.

A Critique of the Hyperreal

Next, I will discuss the lens through which I will approach my analysis. A concept that could fulfill the purpose of such a lens is Baudrillard's hyperreality. Baudrillard (1983) argues that the connection to reality severs when the presented phenomenon (in this case, what is seen on social media) becomes the replacement for reality itself: "that is, an operation to deter every real process by its operational double" (Baudrillard, 1983, p. 4). As it happens, this concept has been used to describe the alternate reality of social media and has also been used in many works describing the "post-truth" era (Le, 2020; Morris, 2020; Happer et al., 2019). Although I do agree it can prove to be a helpful lens into further analyzing how the role of platforms is situated in the spread of these theories, I do not agree with every aspect of Baudrillard's concept, for I think that the link to reality cannot be fully severed. In the final section of this framework, I will explain what aspects of Baudrillard's concept can be better explained by the concept of heterotopia, as introduced by Foucault (1966/2002). Because I have only seen limited use of this concept in relation to social media platforms, I will elaborate on the applicability of the concept in the analysis and simultaneously explain why Baudrillard's concept is too narrow, in my opinion, to fully describe the phenomenon at hand.

As I have stated before, in the attention economy, the exchange is based on information as the product and attention as the currency. In line with Baudrillard's claim, I would argue our online attention is partly severed from our real attention. It is the simulated definition of attention – the clicks, likes, and shares, or in Reddit's case the upvotes – on which the value of the information we share is based (Morris, 2020). So then, in a time of hyperreal social media, the real truth is not desired (Baudrillard, 1981/2011, p. 77). A key requirement of hyperreality is that one cannot tell the difference between the real and the hyperreal. And perhaps a more important requirement, that they do not want to; they prefer the fake reality (Morris, 2020, p. 5). Regarding information in the attention economy, this means that one prefers information that is the most shocking, most provoking, and that gives them the most satisfying answer to their questions. This happens to be the blueprint on which most

conspiracy theories are based (Keeley, 1999). However, while the second requirement of Baudrillard's concept is very much applicable to social media platforms, the first one might not be. Happer et al. (2019) discuss the hyperreal of social media in relation to conspiracy theories that surrounded President Donald Trump, and they too discuss the social media user as if having no agency regarding the experience of their reality. I would argue that a key difference between the reality of social media and a hyperreality is that one can tell the difference, and still chooses to be a part of it. One moves away from their reality, but it remains visible in the rearview mirror. As I will show in my analysis of multiple subreddits, when an individual connects to their online communities, they know they step into a sphere where a different form of judgment is warranted. A judgment that accepts the hyperreal but that is nevertheless aware of it as such, making it a heterotopia instead.

Conspiracy Theorizing as an Act of Alternate Ordering

For this final section, I want to argue why one might spread conspiracy theories through the lens of Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality, but also outline why it might lead to an oversimplification of the phenomenon. As I have shown at the beginning of this theoretical framework, some of the reasons why people believe in conspiracy theories are that it serves as a coping mechanism for collective fear or to ensure the individual's worldview remains unchanged (Douglas et al., 2019, pp. 12-14). That means that this group of people is especially vulnerable to turn to the hyperreality of social media and gradually becoming unwilling - but not unable - to distinguish truth from "hypertruth." Morris (2020) argues that the emergence of fake news and conspiracy theories on social media platforms is not the emergence of a new phenomenon but a continuation of what Baudrillard already identified in the past (p. 2). He states that, like the commodities in the past, whose value was no longer determined by their usefulness but by their connotations, online news and information is no longer assessed based on truth and facts, but on emotional value (Morris, 2020, p. 5), with which I agree. However, I would argue this process does not occur as subconsciously as Baudrillard suggests. When Baudrillard (1981/2011) introduced his concept of simulacrum, which is made up of three stages, he stated that through these stages, the connection to reality becomes weaker and eventually completely severs (p. 29). With regards to conspiracy theorists one could argue believers post their theories on social media platforms, and as the

skeptical users leave, what remains are echo chambers of like-minded individuals with no exposure to different points of view (Marwick & Lewis, 2017, p. 18). But is that truly the case? Baudrillard (1981/2011) argues that every person has an intrinsic need to follow their own path, an urge to escape from reality, a need to deviate from the world around them (p. 162). This desire can also be seen in many of the reasons why people believe in conspiracy theories. However, in Baudrillard's explanation of a hyperreality lies a contradiction; if there is a need that drives one to an alternate reality, should we not argue that the acceptance of this reality is a choice and not a subconscious action, for how we could identify the hyperreal if all connection to the real has been lost? If the hyperreal is a "perfect descriptive machine which provides all the signs of the real and short-circuits all its vicissitudes" (Baudrillard, 1983, p. 4), how can we identify it to be so?

That is why I will introduce the more fitting concept of heterotopia. Foucault (1986) used heterotopia to describe places "which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites [...] that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted" (p. 24). Here, I will also make use of the work by Hetherington (1997), for he has criticized how the concept has been applied in the past in a too narrow fashion. He states that heterotopia has been used to describe places of resistance or transgression, but that they are about more than just that (p. 42). Instead, "it is how being, acting, thinking or writing differently comes to be seen as Other, and the use to which that Otherness is put as a mode of (dis)ordering that is the most significant aspect of heterotopia" (Hetherington, 1997, p. 51). Therefore, he argues that heterotopia should be seen as spaces of alternate ordering (p. 9). "Spaces of total freedom and spaces of total control are both spaces of a social ordering" (Hetherington, 1997, p. 42). And what makes a space a heterotopia is the Otherness of its ordering. In recent years, there has been more discussion of the concept outside the context of Foucault's initial application onto a physical space such as a place in a city or on a ship (Foucault, 1986). Haider and Sundin (2009) have made use of the concept to grasp the participatory shift in knowledge building on Wikipedia, calling it "a site of juxtaposition and simultaneity, a digital memory place in which people meet and create knowledge and knowledge structures, and most of all as a space which constantly changes [...]." They use heterotopia in Foucault's sense of its relationality of multiple incompatible

spaces within a single space, like the cinema (Foucault, 1986, p. 25). I, however, will focus more on how the ambivalence of a space marks the boundaries of society in terms of its “values, beliefs, and desires” (Hetherington, 1997, p. 49). More recently, Rymarczuk and Derksen (2014) used heterotopia to describe Facebook and the presentation of the online self. They conclude that “Facebook is ‘*un lieu sans lieu*’ that mirrors, transforms and merges space with great speed and to a high degree.” In their analysis, they state that they “are concerned here not primarily with what users do on Facebook, but with what Facebook, considered as a space, does to the user,” but since the act of conspiracy theorizing does require a fair amount of focus on what individuals share, I will concentrate on both the role of Reddit as a platform and the activities of the users. This concept allows me to more clearly explain how the social and technological characteristics of Reddit influence the discourse on the platform, and why identifying the space in which this discourse takes place as a hyperreality might do more harm than good, for it completely removes the agency from the individual. This might lead to further alienating the conspiracy theorists because it frames them as being out of reach. Heterotopia on the other hand “always presuppose a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable” (Foucault, 1986, p. 26). Instead, certain online spaces (and subspaces) like some communities on Reddit should be seen as heterotopia, which I will demonstrate in the analysis. This lens will also show why moderation is not the answer.

Critical Discourse Analysis

I will make use of critical discourse analysis (CDA). There are many versions of CDA, I will pick the proposed framework described by Carvalho (2008) that does not only focus on the texts at hand but also takes into account the temporary and historical context of the discourse. CDA, like any method, has a number of strengths and weaknesses. Firstly, it offers a great number of texts to look at: from actual texts to videos and audio, (Aydin–Düzgüt & Rumelili, 2019, p. 300), which makes it suitable to analyze the discourse on Reddit which embeds many types of media. The reason CDA works particularly well in this thesis is because it allows those engaging in the discourse to express their beliefs, rather than researchers choosing a set of conspiracy theories and subsequently asking respondents if they agree with them or not (Douglas et al., 2019, p. 6). Lastly, it provides ecological validity and the opportunity to research a large number of believers that you would not be able to reach via a survey (p. 22).

Nevertheless, it also has its weaknesses. CDA is often criticized for its methodological pluralism, with the researcher venturing out into fields with which they might not be familiar. However, it can also be seen as a point of strength because it leads to a less narrow view of the research object (Carvalho, 2008, p. 162), which is precisely the aim of this thesis.

Carvalho (2008) argues that CDA requires more attention on three aspects: the time plane, the discursive strategies of actors, and the effects of discourse (p. 163). She bases her framework on the idea of improving these aspects. The first aspect, the time plane, refers to the importance of the historical context of the discursive text and encompasses other discourses or different texts discussing the same topic (p. 163). This aspect is relevant for my analysis because unfounded fears of 5G, for example, were present long before the COVID-19 pandemic (Duffy, 2020). The second aspect of Carvalho's (2008) framework covers the strategies used by the actors in the text (p. 164). Here, the particular interest lies in how they construct reality (p. 165). This is also what I intend to analyze regarding why spreading these theories is so appealing using the reasons outlined in the theoretical framework. The final aspect concerns the effects of discourse. Carvalho (2008) argues that the effects are almost always materialized beyond the original text (pp. 165-166) which is why it is important to identify this. I will relate this to the possible outcomes of the beliefs in conspiracy theories (Douglas et al., 2019; Marwick & Lewis, 2017; Jolley & Paterson, 2020).

This framework was created to analyze news articles and similar media texts (Carvalho, 2008, p. 162), but I would argue that it is also very suitable for analyzing the spread of conspiracy theories on Reddit. To alter the framework to fit my needs for this research, I will make use of Marwick and Lewis' (2017) discussion of conspiracy theorists' techniques and strategies. These include elevating social status, trolling, monetary gain, the use of the internet's participatory nature, the creation of networks, memes, and the implementation of bots (Marwick & Lewis, 2017). I chose this framework because it allows me to establish a timeline and identify possible reasons outside of Reddit that contributed to the spread of the 5G-COVID-19 theory. I have included the framework Carvalho (2008) proposes below (see Figure 1).

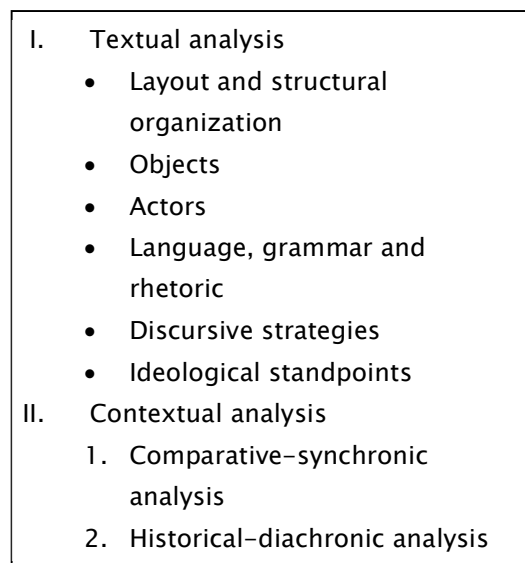
- 
- I. Textual analysis
 - Layout and structural organization
 - Objects
 - Actors
 - Language, grammar and rhetoric
 - Discursive strategies
 - Ideological standpoints
 - II. Contextual analysis
 - 1. Comparative-synchronic analysis
 - 2. Historical-diachronic analysis

Figure 1: Framework for CDA (Carvalho, 2008, p. 167).

Next, I will outline how I intend to alter the framework. Firstly, I will change the requirements for the layout and structural organization to no longer focus on news headers but the affordances of Reddit. Affordances are functional and relational aspects of an object or text, that shape, but do not completely define what the possibilities are for actions in relation to the object (Hutchby, 2001). Identifying the affordances of Reddit will aid in “acknowledging the role of social and material influences on how users perceive actions they can take in relation to a technology” (Light et al., 2018). The objects of the text will remain the same as they refer to themes or topics, in this case, posts and comments discussing the

5G-COVID-19 conspiracy theory. Secondly, I will change the role of the actor. Carvalho (2008) identifies the actor as the journalist (p. 168), but I would identify them as the poster (or redditor). Thirdly, the language, grammar, and rhetoric section will also include the strategies identified by Marwick and Lewis (2017). The step of identifying discursive strategies, referring to “forms of discursive manipulation of reality by social actors [...] in order to achieve a certain effect or goal” (Carvalho, 2008, p. 169), will also remain the same, and it is here where the lens of heterotopia will prove most helpful. The final step concerning ideological standpoints refers to identifying the standpoints of the poster. To do this, all the other aspects mentioned above have to be identified first (p. 170). In the second part of the framework, the researcher can choose between a comparative-synchronic analysis or a historical-diachronic analysis (pp. 171-172). The first option focuses on comparing multiple texts discussing the same discourse, the second option is a historical analysis of the discourse and identifying the social, and cultural factors that might have attributed to the spread of a discourse. I intend to use a combination of both types because as Carvalho (2008) states: “The scope of analysis in [this] approach is both synchronic and diachronic” (p. 172). Both approaches have vital aspects for this analysis in terms of what contemporary discourses and past discourses and events could have influenced the spread of this conspiracy theory on Reddit.

5G and COVID-19

As I have stated in the introduction, I will follow the 5G-COVID-19 conspiracy theory around Reddit, and analyze the discourse used on different subreddits to see if and how Reddit’s media characteristics influence this discourse. I have chosen this theory for several reasons. Firstly, because the overall theme of this theory seemed more removed from other violent, dangerous, harmful theories, like pizzagate or QAnon. However, here, the danger comes in a different form. The theme of the 5G-COVID-19 theory can be categorized as stemming from scientific illiteracy (Paolillo, 2018; Papakyriakopoulos et al., 2020). Nevertheless, the themes in most conspiracy theories tend to overlap (Douglas et al., 2019). Secondly, the possible dangerous outcomes of believing this conspiracy theory have been on full display in the form of telecommunication masts being destroyed (Jolley & Paterson, 2020; Nakashima, 2020). Thirdly, because Basile et al. (2021) found that overall skepticism rose on Reddit in the wake of the pandemic. And finally, because social media platforms have

stepped in and are now censoring content surrounding this topic (Human Factor TV, 2020; Harwell et al., 2021; Papakyriakopoulos et al., 2020), which signals acknowledgment from these platforms about the danger of the spread of this conspiracy theory.

Let us now turn to the theory in more detail. It states that the spread of the COVID-19 virus is linked to the placement of 5G telecommunication masts. The theory appears to have two points of origin. The first one is a post on a French website (ConscienceU12, 2020) which speculated that “the millimeter wave spectrum used by 5G technology and COVID-19, could be related, pointing to reports about Wuhan installing 5G towers before the outbreak” (Heilweil, 2020). However, another possible origin of the theory is an interview with a general practitioner that was conducted by a Belgian newspaper. The GP planted the seed of a possible correlation between the placement of 5G telecommunication masts in Wuhan and the outbreak of the virus (Temperton, 2020). The claim was quickly debunked but this did not stop believers from setting telecommunication masts on fire and harassing those who were installing them (Jolley & Paterson, 2020; Nakashima, 2020). This theory is not exclusively about the direct connection between COVID-19 and 5G telecommunication, it also encompasses the belief that the vaccine for COVID-19 will have a microchip hidden in it, which can be controlled by 5G telecommunication, hence the (seemingly) rapid placement of the masts (Carmichael & Goodman, 2020).

Data Gathering and Analyzing

In the following section, I will outline where I will gather posts for my analysis. The main focus will be on three subreddits. I have chosen Reddit because it is less regulatory than platforms like YouTube and Facebook (Papakyriakopoulos et al., 2020) and the appropriate subreddit does allow theories regarding any relation between COVID-19 and 5G to spread. Reddit’s CEO Steve Huffman has stated that “[Reddit is] a place for open and honest conversations—‘open and honest’ meaning authentic, meaning messy, meaning the best and worst and realest and weirdest parts of humanity” (Business Models Inc., 2020). Additionally, Reddit was one of the platforms where this theory gained traction before it spread further to bigger platforms with less closed-off communities like Facebook (Papakyriakopoulos et al., 2020), allowing more people to be exposed to the theory (Bruns et al., 2020). And Reddit has been identified before as a space where misinformation is often shared (Zannettou et al., 2017). The platform offers

different affordances that could aid in the spread of conspiracy theories, such as assigning rewards to posts, upvoting and cross-reposting. Reddit is made up of communities known as subreddits. Users can choose to become members of these subreddits to see posts made there show up on their personal feed. This means that the amount of interaction on the subreddit depends on the amount of members. I will analyze posts primarily on the following subreddits: r/Conspiracy, r/Technology, and r/Coronavirus, with the biggest focus on r/Conspiracy, because the member count of this subreddit often increases after dramatic world events (Samory & Mitra, 2018, p. 349). Should any posts be found in different subreddits, they will also be included. I have chosen these three because they all encompass the topics associated with the conspiracy theory: COVID-19, 5G telecommunication, and conspiracies. I will analyze posts starting on March 1st 2020 and end on July 31st 2020, because this was when the conspiracy theory garnered the most traffic (Google Trends, 2020). I have included a description of all three subreddits in the Appendix. I have also set up different criteria for which posts on each of the subreddits will be included in my analysis based on their member count (see Table 1). For example, because r/Technology has over ten million members (see Appendix, Table 1), the post must have at least a thousand upvotes, and five hundred comments, to ensure the post has received a significant amount of interaction with the community.

Table 1

Requirements for the posts that will be included in the analysis on all three subreddits

Subreddit	Number of upvotes	Number of comments
r/Conspiracy	100	100
r/Technology	1000	500
r/Coronavirus	300	100

For posts relating to the conspiracy theory outside of these subreddits, I will conduct searches across the whole platform using the keywords: “5G,” “COVID,” and “coronavirus.” Reddit will then show the posts that have the most interaction across the whole platform, not just a single subreddit. Hence, for these posts, I have set up the criteria of a minimum of 4000 upvotes and 400 comments. To gather the posts for my analysis I will use the website titled “redditsearch.io” which makes use of Reddit’s API to provide specific search results based on different parameters. This website does not alter the data, it simply shows the Reddit posts

from a certain time frame, which cannot be specified in Reddit's own search bar. When one clicks on a search result, it will take them directly to the original post on Reddit. In my analysis, I will not include posts that have been deleted by the poster, but I will still include the comments that were made in response to that post.

Finally, I will connect the three points of Carvalho's (2008) framework to my corpus. The first aspect concerns the creations of a timeline and identifying possible reasons outside of Reddit that contributed to the spread of the theory. Because the origin point of the 5G-COVID-19 theory has been identified, this will allow me to trace its journey and identify the role of Reddit's media characteristics as I go. The second aspect concerns looking at the techniques, perceived reasons, and strategies individuals use to spread these theories. Hereby identifying specifically the role of Web 2.0, and referring to the strategies and practices described by Marwick and Lewis (2017). The final aspect concerns the possibly related outcomes of the discourse surrounding conspiracy theories, for which I will use the articles by Jolley and Paterson (2020), and Bruns et al. (2020) because their articles show evidence of a correlation between the belief in the 5G-COVID-19 conspiracy theory and the use of violence.

Procedure

The analysis of the Reddit posts and comments will be done similarly to how Li et al. (2018) used Carvalho's (2008) framework in their analysis of media representation of digital-free tourism. They divided the analysis process into three steps: text description, process interpretation, and social explanation (Li et al., 2018, p. 320). The text description encompasses layout, structural organization, objects, actors, language, grammar, and rhetoric. The process interpretation encompasses the discursive strategies, and finally, the social explanation encompasses the ideological standpoints of the actors (Li et al., 2018, p. 320). In my analysis, I have made use of the concepts hyperreality and heterotopia as part of the social explanation, thereby identifying the actors' ideological standpoints. Similar to Li et al. (2018) these steps were not carried out chronologically, for "analytic comments for each kind of analysis can inform subsequent moves and assist with other levels of the analysis" (p. 320). I began with a general read-through of all the selected posts and comments, followed by a close-reading. In this stage, the text description elements of Carvalho's (2008)

framework were identified, and like Li et al. (2018), I proceeded to divide my findings into overarching themes, separated by theorists and non-theorists. The themes for non-theorists were “ridicule,” “evidence,” “jargon,” “affordances,” “tone,” “comparisons,” and “opinions.” The themes for theorists were “jargon,” “ridicule,” “affordances,” “claims,” “questioning,” “action,” “syntax,” “tone,” and “evidence.” Some of the themes have similar or identical names, this was done on purpose to help with the juxtaposition between spaces that is required to be able to identify a heterotopia. The second step, the process interpretation and identification of discursive strategies was divided, again between theorists and non-theorists, and separated into two categories: technologically focused, aided by the identification and use of Reddit’s affordances, and socially, harkening back to the reasons for believing, spreading and creating conspiracy theories as outlined in the theoretical framework. This divide also forms the structure of the analysis below. Finally, this allowed me to establish the social explanation, and the identification of the actors’ ideology, in which I have made use of the concept of heterotopia.

Analysis

This analysis will be split up into three sections. The first section will focus on the technological aspects of the spread of the conspiracy theory, hereby identifying Reddit’s affordances and analyzing how the conspiracy theorists make use of these affordances. The second section will focus on the language and rhetoric that both theorists and non-theorists use when conversing with each other, to establish the discursive strategies of the individuals, and if and how Reddit plays a role in the type of communication they choose and how discourse is changed. In the final section, I will focus on the outcome of the discourse (Carvalho, 2008), as identified through the posts and comments that I have included in my analysis. Throughout the whole analysis, I will establish why certain spaces within Reddit can be identified as a heterotopia and not necessarily a hyperreality.

The Role of Reddit

The Clue Is In the Name

In this section, I will discuss how Reddit’s media characteristics or affordances work together with social factors to influence the shaping of discourse on the platform. In this first section, I will explain through the rules of the subreddit and content of the posts what I have defined

as the main drive of the heterotopia. Firstly, I will turn to the communities of Reddit, the subreddits, and particularly r/Conspiracy, r/Coronavirus, and r/Technology. Reddit started as an internet forum and still presents itself as such (Singer et al., 2014), hence it continues to utilize many of the features that were common on older internet fora. An example of this is the subreddits, which are communities dedicated to specific topics where users can discuss and share information (Singer et al., 2014). Below I will outline the rules of the three subreddits that I have analyzed, to showcase how – when one enters the space of conspiracy theorizing – this can be seen as a paradoxical space that allows a complete free-flow of unchecked information in an otherwise tightly ordered space, and how this paradox only becomes visible when compared to other spaces, for it is this juxtaposition with the spaces around them – like other subreddits – that allows one to identify a heterotopia (Hetherington, 1997, p. 46).

Starting with r/Conspiracy, when comparing the rules of this subreddit (see Figure 2) with the other subreddits, what stood out was the heavy focus on the regulation of formatting and language-related rules, such as the explicit banning of exaggerated punctuation, threats, or slurs. Comparatively, r/Coronavirus and r/Technology adhere to Reddit’s general rules regarding use of language, outlined in the Reddiquette (Reddit, 2020–b), the rule book for the platform. This suggests that members of these subreddits all have an understanding of these rules. By extension, one might assume that the redditors on r/Conspiracy do not, or

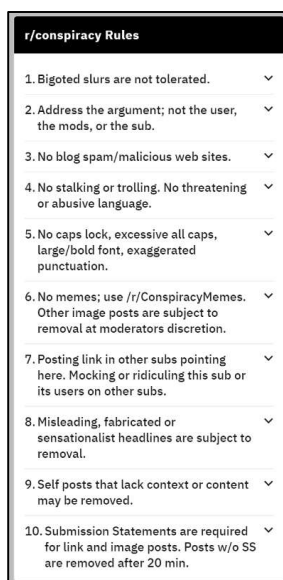


Figure 2: Screenshot of the rules of r/Conspiracy (Reddit, 2020–d).

choose not to. I would argue this has to do with the name and connotations of the nature of the subreddit which I will elaborate on below. Additionally, both r/Coronavirus and r/Technology require the information that redditors share to be truthful; unfounded claims get removed (Reddit, n. d.-b; Reddit, 2021). This is not the case on r/Conspiracy. A possible reason can be found in the main characteristics of conspiracy theories (Keeley, 1999; Douglas et al., 2019); the content of the theory is not the focus of moderation, because there is no limit on the amount of speculative claims one can make. Believers might actually view the removal of their theories as the moderators being part of the conspiracy (Keeley, 1999). The result is that conspiracy theories, no matter how outlandish, keep circulating without being checked (Papakyriakopoulos et al., 2020).

At first glance, this work-around of the platform's rules on r/Conspiracy seems to break with Reddit's intention of hosting "intelligent discourse" (Reddit, 2020-b), which would lead to the deletion of the subreddit. This has happened before with subreddits like r/Coronahoax (Reddit, n. d.-a). However, when r/Conspiracy is viewed as a heterotopia, we see that the solution is not that straightforward. The purpose of a heterotopia is "to create a space that is other, another real space, as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill constructed, and jumbled" (Foucault, 1986, p. 27). To an outsider, the lack of rules regarding the content of conspiracy theories might seem strange but to those inside the heterotopia, the all-encompassing explanations of the conspiracy theories can be seen as a response to the messiness of the world around them (Keeley, 1999; Marwick & Lewis, 2017). R/Conspiracy facilitates the circulation of theories whose content ties together unexplained phenomena, like the rapid placement of 5G masts and the spread of COVID-19, while focusing not on the truthfulness of these theories but the ordered reality that they provide. While on other subreddits that I have analyzed, the misinformation that habitually makes up conspiracy theories is often displayed in the language and rhetoric that is forbidden on r/Conspiracy. I would argue the reason it is required to make these rules explicit on r/Conspiracy is due to the connotations and discourse in society towards conspiracy theorists. Because r/Coronavirus and r/Technology generally do not host information that particularly breaks with hegemonic discourse (the latest news about the virus or articles discussing new technology), there are few negative connotations associated with this type of posting and

therefore I would argue rules against stating these connotations do not need to be explicitly mentioned. However, as Husting and Orr (2007) pointed out, the very label of “conspiracy theorist” has the possibility to “deflect attention from the claims at hand and shift discourse to the nature of the claimants” (p. 130). And because conspiracy theorists have historically been painted as paranoid extremists (Harambam & Aupers, 2017, p. 114), the practice of casting these individuals aside through ridicule or mockery might seem all but natural. I will elaborate on this in relation to the content of the posts.

Now that I have established the role of the subreddits, let us turn more directly to the content of the posts that circulate within them. In the posts I have analyzed, individuals who seemingly do not believe in conspiracy theories mostly shared existing articles or images that discuss conspiracy theories to ridicule or to express disgust towards those that do believe them (see Figure 3). The comments underneath these posts include words like “lunatics,” “nutters,” and “schizo-posting.” Husting and Orr (2007) showcase a similar phenomenon in

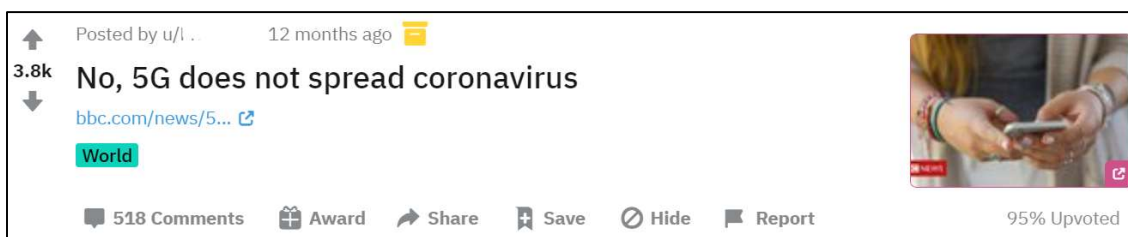


Figure 3: Example of post which shares an article in which the conspiracy is debunked on r/Coronavirus (from Appendix, Table 2, Post 8).

their analysis of the label of conspiracy theorist in popular and academic texts (p. 127). They state that “conspiracy theorist” is often used in conjunction with pejorative terms to devalue an individual. It allows “a respondent to shift concern from the truth or falsehood of a claim onto the character, quality, or competence of the claim or claimant” (Husting & Orr, 2007, p. 134). It is through the discursive meaning of the term that anyone who receives the label will be excluded from public debate (Husting & Orr, 2007, p. 127). In relation to these Reddit posts, this indicates a possible desire to be seen as separate from that group, to further establish a divide between theorists and non-theorists; perhaps even an unconscious attempt to identify the boundary of the heterotopia. This is evident in the example of Figure 3. The title of the article that is shared is already quite contemptuous. This perpetuates the condescending societal attitude towards those that have doubts regarding 5G or the virus.

Husting and Orr (2007) point out that the 9/11 conspiracy theory overshadowed those who had, in their opinion, legitimate concerns about the actions of the Bush administration (p. 135), and a similar argument could be made for those who have concerns about the possible dangers of 5G telecommunication.

Comparatively, in the posts I have analyzed, conspiracy theorists will create content using their own formatting and language, hereby creating their own narrative and frequently going against the hegemonic discourse. They quote sources in their posts to seemingly give their claims more credibility. However, throughout the conversations in the comments under these posts, when non-theorists would claim to have read these sources themselves, they stated that the original poster had misinterpreted the findings or claims. When non-theorists refuted the claims, they often relied on scientific terms and explanations, or on opinions and assumptions in line with the societal discourse, which is exactly what conspiracy theorists tend to question (Douglas et al., 2019) as this is a form of oppositional reading of the dominant discourse (Hall, 1989). For example, one exchange discussed the potential dangers of 5G telecommunication on the basis of a scientific study. When a commenter explained how the original poster had misinterpreted the findings of the study, they were asked if they were a “5G sympathizer” or worked for a company that installed 5G masts. This relates to one of the key features of a conspiracy that Keeley (1999) suggests: if one does not agree with the theory, they are a part of the conspiracy. It also supports the argument that identifying this space as a hyperreality is too shortsighted. This exchange is not indicative of someone who cannot distinguish real from hyperreal, it is indicative of someone who actively chooses not to. It is a discursive strategy that works similarly to how the labeling of “conspiracy theorist” robs an individual of their credibility (Husting & Orr, 2007). When non-theorists rely on assumptions of facts that are in line with the hegemonic discourse that a conspiracy theory opposes, this is often discarded by conspiracy theorists because it is exactly this which they are opposing (Hall, 1989). Heterotopia are spaces where individuals can express agency and use their freedom within the ordering of the space to control a dominant narrative or discourse (Hetherington, 1997, p. 40), which is visible in this interaction. The posts I have analyzed from non-theorists indicate the public discourse is to accept 5G. Therefore, an explanation involving endorsement of 5G would be opposed by conspiracy theorists. It is this rationale of

using the hegemonic discursive strategy that casts these individuals aside through mockery and dismissal (Husting & Orr, 2007) that is being used to strengthen the ordering of the heterotopia.

Awards and Upvotes

In this section I will discuss the difference between Reddit's intended use of certain media characteristics, compared to how redditors actually use it, for this showcases how the redditors on r/Conspiracy alter the ordering as set by the intention of the platform to suit their own community. One of the places where this alternate ordering becomes visible is Reddit's "Awards" characteristic, which allows the user to issue awards to posts. A post with one or more awards is referred to as a gilded post (Reddit, 2020-c). With awards, users can express their gratitude towards the poster. Some awards can be given to posts in all communities. These include platinum, gold, and silver. However, subreddits can also create their own awards (Reddit, 2020-c). Awards do not have to be positive like Reddit suggests (Reddit, 2020-c). Some community-specific awards can be used to ridicule the post or poster. Other times awards can be used to indicate that users learned new information from the post, with awards such as "Today I learned," or "Mind Blown," which were frequent on r/Conspiracy (see Figure 4). A post's awards can give a user an indication of how the post was received by the subreddit. For example, one prominent post on the r/Conspiracy subreddit had

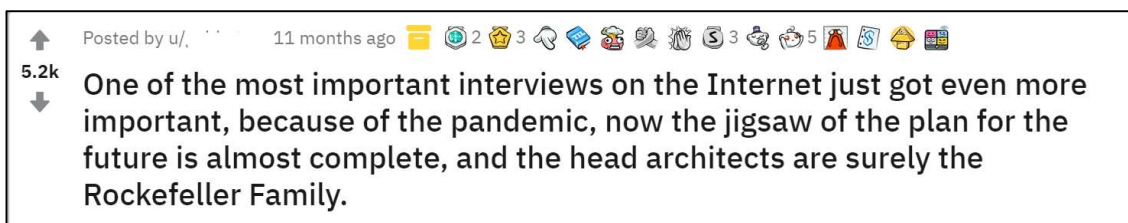


Figure 4: Screenshot of a prominent post on r/Conspiracy which received multiple awards, both specific to the community and regular awards. From left to right: Platinum Award (2), Gold Award (3), This Award, Today I Learned Award, Mind Blown Award, Helpful Award, Bless Up Award, Silver Award (3), Bravo Grande! Award, Take My Energy Award (5), Flatten the Curve Award, Cool S Award, All-Seeing Upvote Award, Safe & Social Award (from Appendix, Table 2, Post 1).

accumulated multiple gold and even platinum awards, which signals the post was possibly appreciated in the subreddit (see Figure 4). Even though the information was unfounded. It is speculated that gilded posts show up higher in the subreddit (Reddit, 2020-a). This speculation is fueled by the assumption that a gilded post most likely contributes to the conversations on the subreddit, so more redditors are exposed to it, if it gets pushed up by

the platform's algorithm (Reddit, 2020-a). This would keep users on the platform longer (Terranova, 2012). However, on r/Conspiracy one could argue the esteem of the post is not based on Reddit's concept of informative value but on how many phenomena the theory ties together and how difficult it is to disprove it. As becomes clear from the title of the post as shown in Figure 4, we can see this theory hits numerous points: claims made in an interview are explained, the origin of the pandemic is known, the future is set in stone and the people responsible are the Rockefellers. Disproving any of the claims made in this post is nearly impossible (Keeley, 1999) and so this theory can be classified as a "good" conspiracy theory, as shown by the awards. Because awards possibly make posts show up higher, this creates echo chambers (Marwick & Lewis, 2017).

These awards are indicative of the desires for why individuals turn to conspiracy theories (Douglas et al., 2019). Heterotopia exist on the tipping-point of these desires. The people inside the heterotopia insist on a "compulsion to order," and that "ordering derives from a utopian view of the world," which comes in both "freedom and control" (Hetherington, 1997, p. 40). "No matter how much we wish to be free, we will always create conditions of ordering if not order itself" (Hetherington, 1997, pp. 52-53). Conspiracy theorists' utopian view of the world is one of complete knowledge (Keeley, 1999), and this belief becomes visible through the community's awards (see Figure 4). With awards such as "Today I learned," and "All Seeing Upvote," it indicates that the information shared in the post is valuable knowledge. Keeley (1999) argues that conspiracy theorists still believe in an ordered universe. "By supposing that current events are under the control of nefarious agents, conspiracy theories entail that such events are *capable of being controlled*" (Keeley, 1999, p. 123, original italics). The view that is adhered in the heterotopia of r/Conspiracy is also one of an ordered universe. And I would argue that the poster that gets the closest to providing an explanation of how this universe is ordered, will receive the most awards.

The second characteristic where the act of alternate ordering becomes clear is in Reddit's voting system. Generally there are three uses for an upvote or downvote. There is the use intended by Reddit itself, the use intended by the subreddits, and individual use. According to Reddit, if the user thinks something contributes to the conversation, they can upvote it. If not, they can downvote it (Reddit, 2020-b). Secondly, comparable to the Awards

characteristic, subreddits have their own rules for voting that are often different from Reddit's intended use. And finally, on the individual level upvotes on posts can often be interpreted as an endorsement for a post or opinion, and downvotes as the opposite.

On r/Conspiracy, I have identified the intended use of the upvote button to be to upvote well-argued conspiracy theories and for the poster to inform the rest of the community on their findings. This is evident from the titles of these posts such as "I've learned," "Let's go down the rabbit hole," and "Does anyone else find it weird that...," which are all forms of inclusive language, thereby involving the community in the discourse. However, the individual use seems to lean more to upvoting theories that are all-encompassing. Additionally, individuals say that disproving conspiracies is out of place in this subreddit, because that is not the point of the community, but this inadvertently silences critique of the theory, which once again creates echo chambers (Marwick & Lewis, 2017). This again points towards the paradox of the freedom and order inside the community. The freedom to tie together information to achieve the utopian view of the world, and the altered ordering of the use of the voting system. This once again, becomes more evident when we compare its use to the other subreddits. On r/Coronavirus the purpose of the voting system is to upvote information that can be seen as informative or helpful regarding the COVID-19 pandemic (Reddit, 2021). When users hint towards the belief in conspiracy theories or even comment on the substance of the theory, they show up higher in the "controversial" sorting of the comments. Controversial comments are comments that have gotten many upvotes and downvotes (Reddit, 2014) (see Figure 5), which indicates that conspiracy theories do not belong on this subreddit, which is in line with the intended use of Reddit (Reddit, 2020-b). Secondly, the r/Technology subreddit is "dedicated to the news and discussions about the creation and use of technology and its surrounding issues" (Reddit, n. d.-b). The intended use of the voting system is related to the novelty of the technology-related information in the post. Once again, conspiracy theories or individuals that question the dangers of 5G telecommunication get significantly more downvotes or even removed by the moderators, which is also in line with Reddit's intended use (Reddit, 2020-b). On r/Conspiracy the goal is to upvote posts with all-encompassing conspiracy theories, or what Harambam and Aupers (2017) have classified as "super conspiracy theories." "The actions one performs inside the heterotopia are an

expression of one's agency, a means for the coming-into-being of actors through their capacity to make use of their freedom to control others" (Hetherington, 1997, p. 40). This is what happens with the use of the upvote button. The members of r/Conspiracy define their own actions by giving more weight and praise to those in their community that contribute to the ordered universe. This again illustrates why I would argue hyperreality would not provide a thorough enough explanation, because the individual's agency is not accounted for.

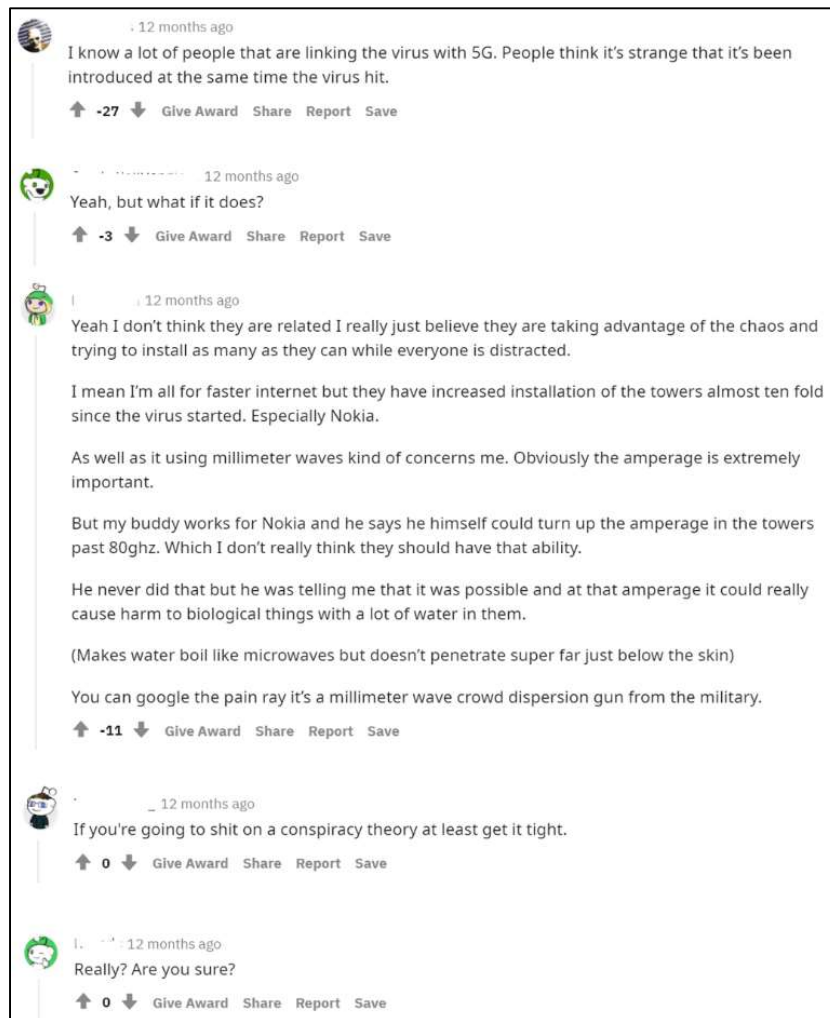


Figure 5: Sample of five comments out of the top ten controversial comments underneath a post on r/Coronavirus (from Appendix, Table 2, Post 8).

The Sheep and the Red Pill

For this analysis I have divided the actors of Carvalho's (2008) framework into two parties: theorists and non-theorists; those who are a part of the heterotopia and those who are not. This was done to analyze how use of language or rhetoric could be indicative of the existence

of a heterotopia as Foucault (1986) stated that one can only be identified through juxtaposition with the spaces that surround it. This applies to the use of language as well (Hetherington, 1997, p. 8). I would argue this is also the case for online spaces in which people can share conspiracy theories because the term itself is already tainted with negative connotations (Husting & Orr, 2007). It is my observation that the conspiracy theorists in r/Conspiracy have taken these negative connotations – of unfounded claims, of the lack of critical thinking, of stupidity, and madness (Harambam & Aupers, 2017; Pelkmans & Machold, 2011) – to be the bedrock of the relation between freedom and order inside their utopia. This ordering comes from certain desires. As I have stated in the theoretical framework, heterotopia exist on the edge of desire (Hetherington, 1997, p. 40). Desire is made up of the connection with feelings, emotions, and the experience of the human body and mind (Hetherington, 1997, p. 45). Therefore, I have divided the perceived desires of conspiracy theorists into three types. I will elaborate on my argument below, using the language and rhetoric found in interactions between conspiracy theorists and non-theorists in r/Conspiracy and the other subreddits, and focus on how the hegemonic discourse is altered inside and enforced outside of the heterotopia.

The Desire of Mind

I will begin with what I have decided to call the desire of mind. The theorist longs for a kind of perceived authority in the form of all-encompassing explanations (Douglas et al., 2019; Marwick & Lewis, 2017), and therefore the creation of conspiracy theories can be viewed as a manifestation of agency of those inside the heterotopia. I have chosen four examples that all touch on different levels of manifestation of this agency: celebrities, taking action, memes, and labeling. The first category, absorbing celebrities in the theories, can be seen as an oppositional reading of the discourse that positively acknowledges that celebrities are in places of power. Melley (2000) explains a similar thought pattern by using the example of the conspiracy theory surrounding Lee Harvey Oswald when he states:

It suggests that when individuals see the mass media as a powerful agent and themselves as "zeros in the system" [...] they may resolve their dilemma by killing someone, thus

"recovering" the scarce commodity of their agency and seeing the confirmation of that recovery when they appear on the nightly news. (p. 154)

This can be seen to a much smaller extent when theorists "take aim" against celebrities by including them in conspiracy theories as a means to regain agency when the theory spreads. The example I have chosen to illustrate this is the sub-theory of the 5G-COVID-19 theory which focuses on Bill Gates' evil agenda (see Figure 6). The theory suggests a motive for Gates' donation to the WHO in the wake of the pandemic (Suzman, 2020): due to his experience with technology, Gates intends to implant microchips that track a person's location in the vaccines which will be controlled using 5G telecommunication. This theory can be seen as a desire to know the motive of someone as powerful as Gates, where the explanation of philanthropy is not satisfying enough. To tie together as many of the events of that time - March through July 2020 - these kinds of theories are created, under the veil of finding the information that no one else has as an attempt to gain back control (Marwick & Lewis, 2017), and sharing it with others in the community that follow the same alternate ordering. I would argue this signals a desire to do away with the difference in power, because those in power are those with knowledge and vice versa (Foucault, 1986). That leads me to the second example of taking

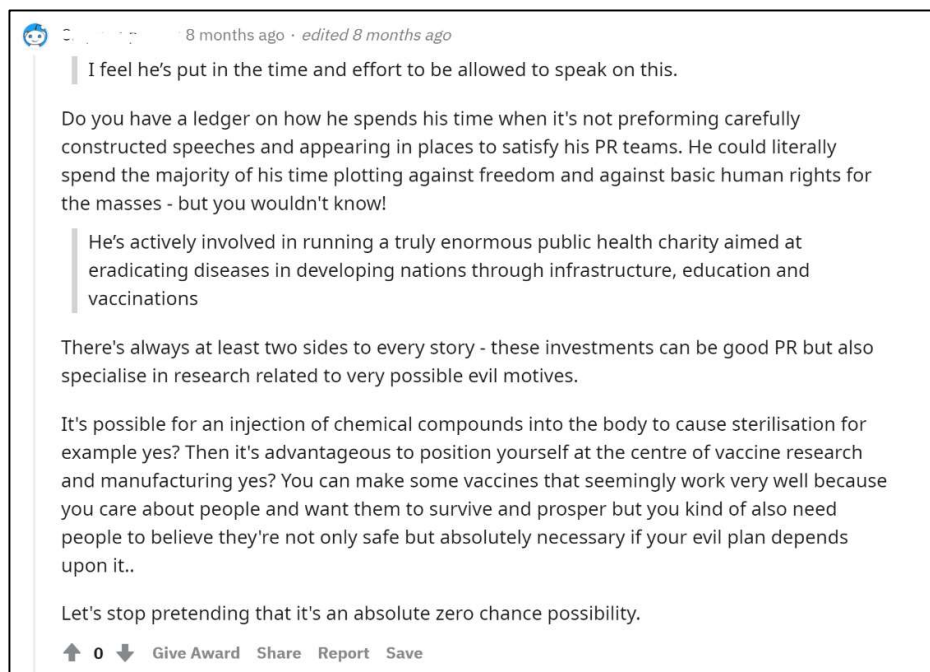


Figure 6: Example of a redditor who suggests in a comment underneath a post made on r/Technology that nefarious purposes for vaccination against COVID-19 are to be expected (from Appendix, Table 2, Post 19).

action in the form of “doing your own research,” which is a phrase that often appears in the theorists’ posts that I have analyzed. Ostensibly, it is an action they can take to gain back control by jumping “into the rabbit hole” themselves and encouraging others to do the same (see Figure 7). This once again shows the act of agency which is crucial in a heterotopia (Hetherington, 1997, p. 40). Thirdly, there is the example of sharing memes. In the posts I have analyzed, theorists often state that non-theorists have to “take the red pill” (see Figure 7) which is a reference to the Matrix where taking the red pill will reveal an uncomfortable truth or revelation. The use of this type of language is often done to draw more individuals to

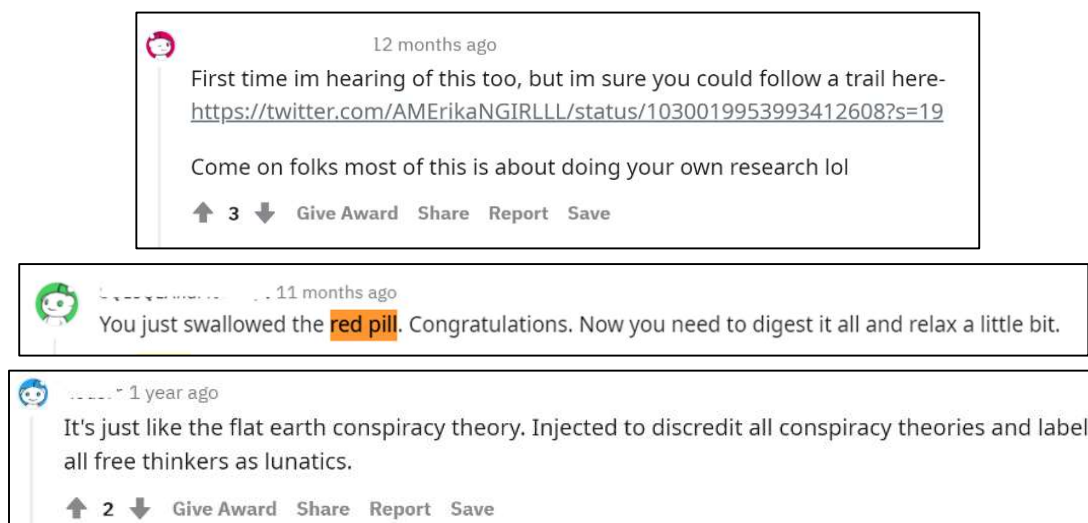


Figure 7: Example of a redditor who seemingly encourages others to do their own research (from Appendix, Table 2, Post 3); example of a redditor who uses the meme “take the red pill” (from Appendix, Table 2, Post 3); example of a redditor who refers to conspiracy theorists as “free thinkers” (from Appendix, Table 2, Post 2) (All posts found in r/Conspiracy).

the community because the reference to popular media provides an accessible and relatable entry point (Marwick & Lewis, 2017). This phrase again seemingly points to the desire to be the one with the all-encompassing explanation (Douglas et al., 2019, p. 7); the knowledge that others do not have. Incidentally, to be just like Neo from the Matrix, the individual that has the strength to face the uncomfortable truth. The final example of the expression of agency which I will outline here is that of labeling. In the posts I have analyzed, theorists often call themselves “free thinkers” (see Figure 7). This label implies that anybody that “blindly” follows the government or the media is not a free thinker. It can be seen as a response to disempowerment (Douglas et al., 2019). As I have now shown across these four examples how

the desire of mind becomes evident through how theorists express agency inside the heterotopia of r/Conspiracy, I will continue with the second type of desire below.

The Desire of Experience

The second type of desire that I have identified is that of experience, which I will again explain with the help of some examples, which all come from the posts I have analyzed. Firstly, I would like to focus on the examples that can be seen as forms of skepticism or aversion towards something the individual has not personally experienced. The first example has been identified through the rhetoric of non-theorists. I have found that non-theorists often suggested that theorists do not understand the science of wireless communication because they cannot physically see it, which is comparable to Paolillo's (2018) findings as to why individuals believe in the Flat Earth conspiracy. This once again can be seen as an expression of agency of those inside the heterotopia. This time, "to undermine the authority of established science" (Paolillo, 2018, p. 6). A second example of this can be found in theorists' rhetoric: some place certain words like "pandemic" in quotation marks (see Figure 8), which implies a certain degree of sarcasm; it suggests they do not agree with the term, perhaps because they find they do not "experience" a pandemic. Again, I would classify this as a the acting out of agency by someone inside the heterotopia. "[Conspiracy theorizing] stems, that is, from a sense of diminished human agency, a feeling that individuals cannot effect meaningful social action and, in extreme cases, may not be able to control their own behavior" (Melley, 2000, p. 11).

The second type of example can be described as wanting to be able to trust one's own instincts. I have found many posts that imply a desire to believe that correlation must imply causation. This feeling is often shown through the use of proverbs like "where there is smoke, there is fire," which also relates to the desire that everything must have order and purpose (Keeley, 1999). Another example is finding similar patterns throughout history, like the suggestion that the Spanish flu was caused by the introduction of FM and AM radio towers (see Figure 8), which is similar to the implied connection between 5G and COVID-19. Both of

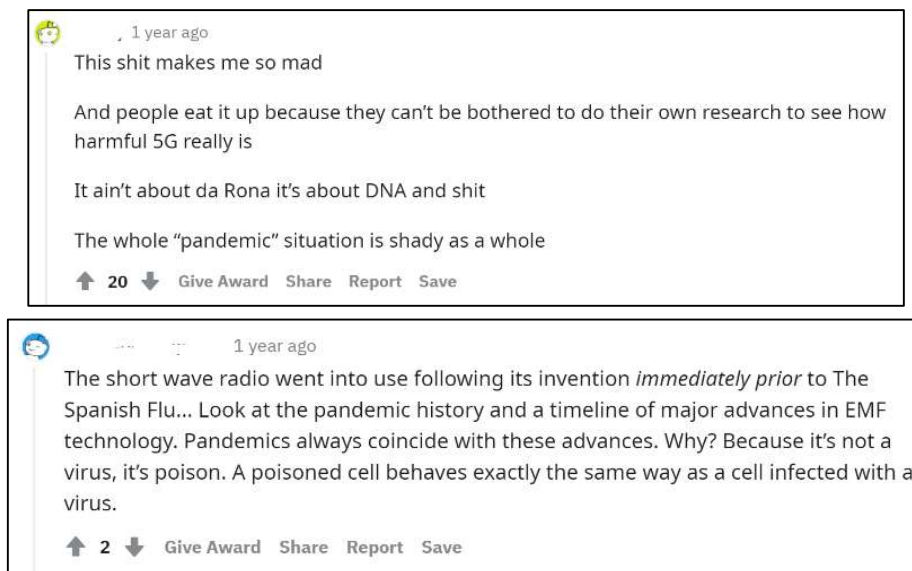


Figure 8: Example of placing "pandemic" in quotation marks (from Appendix, Table 2, Post 2); example of a redditor who relates the connection between COVID-19 and 5G to the Spanish flu and radio towers (from Appendix, Table 2, Post 2) (both posted in r/Conspiracy).

these can also be seen as an expression of agency. Particularly one with an epistemic motive (Douglas et al., 2019, p. 7). Stemming from the overestimation of one's ability to assess complex causal phenomena resulting in the conjunction fallacy, "which is an error of probabilistic reasoning whereby people overestimate the likelihood of co-occurring events" (Douglas et al., 2019, p. 7).

The Desire to Be Wrong

Next, I will discuss the final type of desire that I identified in the rhetoric, which I will call the desire to be wrong. The purpose of conspiracy theorists is to explain the world in a more coherent matter; there is no chance, there is only order and purpose. Unfortunately, the nature of this order is often negative (Keeley, 1999). Hence why it seems logical many theorists

actually do not want their theories to be true. The reality of a virus that has the potential to take the lives of many is frightening, but so is the concept of it being a hoax to inject microchips into civilians via vaccines in order to control them using the technology that society depends upon. The difference between these notions is that the conspiracy theory provides order (Douglas et al., 2019). The explanation of a group of individuals having an evil agenda might be simpler to understand, and a securer feeling than a potentially uncontrollable virus. So while the content of the explanation is often just as dreadful as the actual phenomenon or even worse, the ordering of the explanation may well be more desired (Keeley, 1999). And due to the ordering of the community of r/Conspiracy and the inherent nature of conspiracy theories, non-theorists and skeptics cannot disprove the 5G-COVID-19 theory in the eyes of the believers. Because proving it wrong would have to be done by adhering to the ordering outside of the heterotopia: facts, statistics, scientific evidence, relying on the opinions of experts, etc. However, I would argue, this longing for the theory to be wrong, does indicate a yearning to connect to those outside of the heterotopia. This becomes evident when we look at how theorists ask for their claims to be proven wrong. In the posts I have analyzed, these individuals often follow the rules of the Reddiquette in terms of language and asking for sources from the non-theorists to back up their claims (see Figure 9). Unfortunately, this means relying on the discourse and discursive strategies that they

oppose. That leaves us with the following paradox: they want their claims to be refuted but that is often not plausible due to the alternate ordering of their heterotopic community.

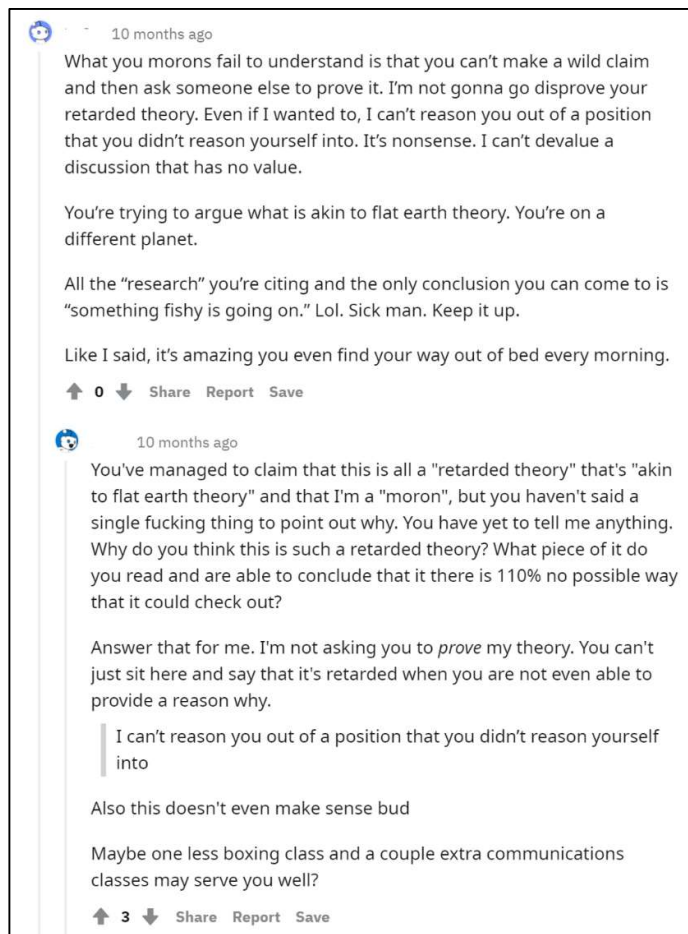


Figure 9: A conversation between two redditors; one does not believe the conspiracy theory, the other one does and wants their claim to be disproven (from Appendix, Table 2, Post 1) (from r/Conspiracy).

Leaving the Heterotopia

In this final section I will focus on the outcome of the discourse (Carvalho, 2008). Because analyzing news articles that discuss 5G masts being set on fire goes beyond the scope of this thesis, I will instead turn to the posts and comments from my analysis in which redditors discussed this phenomenon occurring. I have identified this to be one of the outcomes of the spread of the 5G-COVID-19 theory as Jolley and Paterson (2020), and Bruns et al. (2020) show evidence of a correlation between the belief in this theory and 5G masts being destroyed. In relation to the heterotopic nature of r/Conspiracy I have classified this as an example of what might happen when the alternate ordering of the community finds its way into the world that

surrounds it. I would like to illustrate this argument with the following interaction (see Figure 10). This thread of comments was made underneath a post that pleaded for the vegan community of Reddit to steer clear of the 5G–COVID–19 theory because supposedly the vegan community is duped by enough stigma already. The first redditor states that they find that individuals can believe whatever they want, and that if one does not agree with someone’s

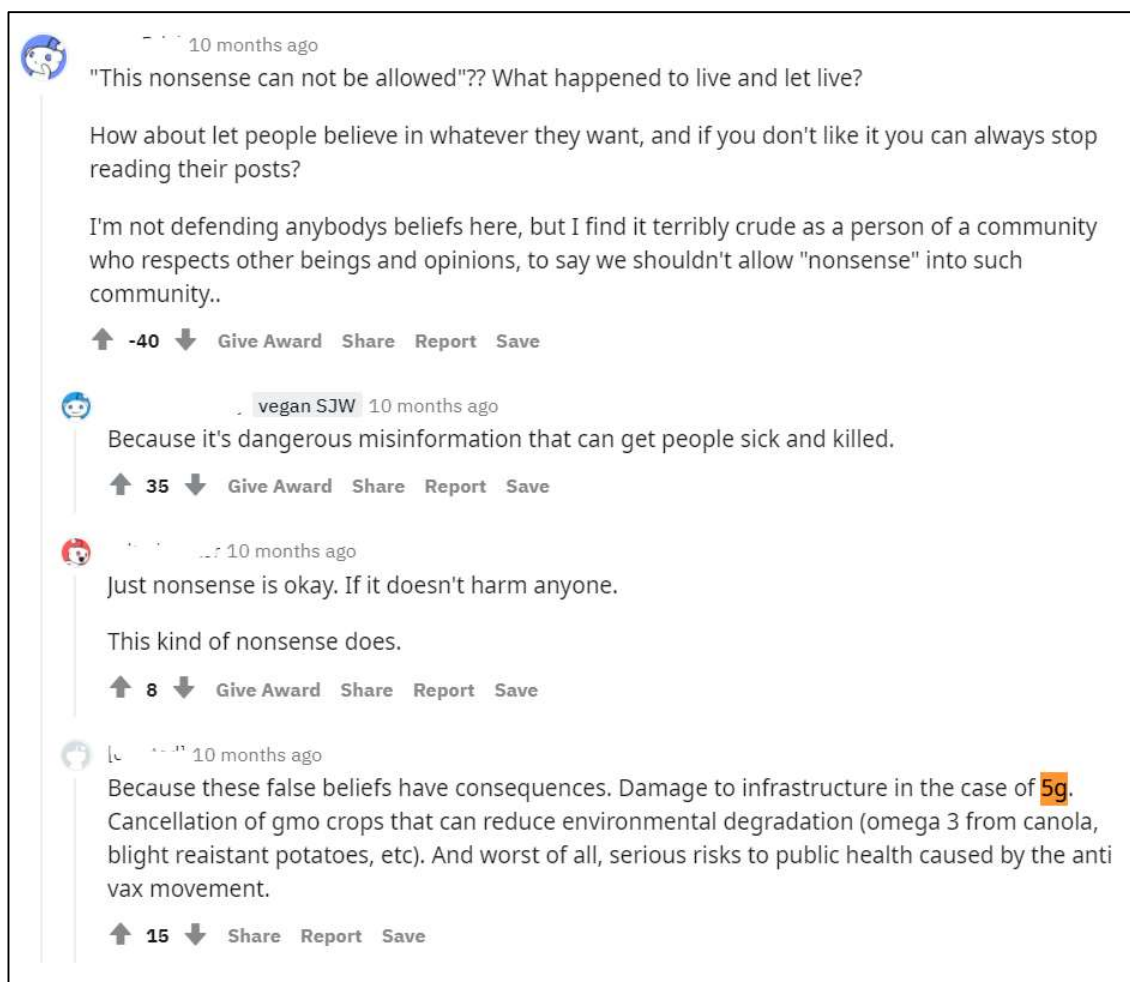


Figure 10: Interaction in r/vegan surrounding the 5G–COVID–19 theory (from Appendix, Table 2, Post 21).

belief they should “stop reading their posts.” However, the three redditors below argue that false beliefs like the 5G–COVID–19 connection do have consequences outside of their own community. Both views are valid. In the first case, the argument is in line with Reddit’s own values, because as Steve Hoffman stated the platform wants “the best and worst and realest and weirdest parts of humanity” (as quoted in Business Models Inc., 2020). In the second case, “belief in 5G COVID–19 conspiracy theories is associated with violent responses to the alleged

link between 5G mobile technology and COVID-19” (Jolley & Patterson, 2020, p. 637). So if “letting people believe in whatever they want” is not the answer, and neither is stricter moderation or censorship (Human Factor TV, 2020), what can we do?

Conclusion & Discussion

The aim of this thesis was to answer the research question: How can the identification of the interrelation between the media characteristics of Reddit and the social characteristics of the spread of conspiracy theories through the lens of heterotopia shed new light on the online spread of the 5G-COVID-19 conspiracy theory? As I have shown in this thesis through identifying the social and technological factors that attribute to the spread of this theory, I conclude that this phenomenon can be explained by the need for the expression of agency in the form of oppositional discursive readings by those inside the heterotopia of r/Conspiracy.

Douglas et al. (2019) argued that the new features of Web 2.0 deserved further scrutiny, which I have given them in this analysis. I have shown how Reddit’s media characteristics and affordances in combination with social factors influence the shaping of discourse on the platform through the subreddits. R/Conspiracy is shaped by the connotations and discursive strategies that cast these individuals aside (Husting & Orr, 2007). These same connotations are (subconsciously) being used to strengthen and form the alternate ordering of their heterotopia (Hetherington, 1997). It is this expression of agency that one cannot identify through the lens of hyperreality, but that does become evident through heterotopia. Subconsciously, this sentiment is echoed in the conversations I have analyzed and illustrated in the analysis. Where skeptical individuals made efforts to separate themselves from the conspiracy theorists through specific language and the use of Reddit’s affordances, conspiracy theorists buckled down in their alternate ordering. I have shown how the analysis of the rules, content, awards, and upvotes of r/Conspiracy can illustrate that this subreddit can be seen as paradoxical by allowing for unchecked information to spread in an ordered space based on the nature of the discourse that is usually used against conspiracy theorists. In relation to the awards and upvotes characteristics of Reddit I have also demonstrated how this creates echo chambers (Marwick & Lewis, 2017), again through using what places them inside the heterotopia to strengthen the boundaries of their community.

Secondly, I have shown through the identification of the different types of desires that I believe are the driving force of the heterotopia of r/Conspiracy what the social explanations for conspiracy theorizing are and how they come into fruition as the manifestation of agency inside the heterotopia. These desires included (1) the desire of mind, referring to the knowledge aspect of conspiracy theories, (2) the desire of experience, both in the form of one's own experience and skepticism towards the experience of others, and (3) the desire to be wrong, referring to when the ordering of the heterotopia clashes with the ordering of the world around it. Because, as I have demonstrated, the ordering of the heterotopia is built on the connotations associated with conspiracy theorists, seeking an explanation from those outside of the heterotopia seems all but impossible.

Finally, I have showcased the outcome of the discourse (Carvalho, 2008) by showing how both letting individuals believe whatever they want and how moderation are not the answers. Instead, during the research on conspiracy theorists, one should not resort to ridicule or mockery, but to interaction, no matter how difficult it might seem, for it is up to them on the outside, to identify the heterotopia in the first place, and how can one achieve this if they choose to view these individuals as being part of a separate hyperreality? I trust I have demonstrated in this thesis why the lens of heterotopia proves to be more useful than the lens of hyperreality, for it takes into account the person's agency in the perception of their reality, and allows one to identify valuable insights that would otherwise remain hidden.

In relation to future research, I would like to discuss the applicability of the method to the research of other conspiracy theories on other platforms. The altered framework (Carvalho, 2008) I have laid out in this thesis can be used to look into other social media platforms, where one can take into account the specific actions and affordances that are unique to that platform to make sure both technological aspects and social aspects are taken into account (Light et al., 2018).

While this thesis shows many valuable insights, there are some factors that deserve further attention in future research. This analysis was done by a manual close-reading of the comments and posts, in future research perhaps one could make use of a combination of data-driven research and a manual close-reading as done by Li et al. (2018) in their application of Carvalho's (2008) framework, to be able to analyze a bigger set of comments.

Secondly, as I have stated before, looking at discourse outside of the comments and posts I have analyzed goes beyond the scope of this thesis but taking news coverage into account could also prove to be helpful in identifying the factors that contributed to the spread of the conspiracy theory (Carvalho, 2008).

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Appendix

Table 1

Information about the subreddits

Name	Created	Members	About the page
r/Conspiracy	Friday, January 25, 2008	1,500,000	<p>“**The conspiracy subreddit is a thinking ground. Above all else, we respect everyone's opinions and ALL religious beliefs and creeds. We hope to challenge issues which have captured the public's imagination, from JFK and UFOs to 9/11. This is a forum for free thinking, not hate speech. Respect other views and opinions, and keep an open mind.**</p> <p>**Our intentions are aimed towards a fairer, more transparent world and a better future for everyone.**”</p>

r/Technology	Friday, January 25, 2008	10,400,000	“Subreddit dedicated to the news and discussions about the creation and use of technology and its surrounding issues.
r/Coronavirus	Friday, May 3, 2013	2,400,000	“In December 2019, a novel coronavirus strain (SARS-CoV-2) emerged in the city of Wuhan, China. This subreddit seeks to monitor the spread of the disease COVID-19, declared a pandemic by the WHO. Please be civil and empathetic. This subreddit is for high-quality posts and discussion.”

From Reddit (2020-d), Reddit (n. d.-b), and Reddit (2021).

Table 2

Posts analyzed for this thesis

Number	URL	Subreddit	Date	Upvotes	Comments
1	https://www.reddit.com/r/conspiracy/comments/fs4sxj/one_of_the_most_important_interviews_on_the/	r/Conspiracy	Tuesday, March 31, 2020	5200	1314
2	https://www.reddit.com/r/conspiracy/comments/fvzh2v/5g_causes_coronavirus_is_just_a_way_for_them_to/	r/Conspiracy	Monday, April 6, 2020	484	139
3	https://www.reddit.com/r/conspiracy/comments/g6aypg/due_to_covid_ive_learned_abo	r/Conspiracy	Thursday, April 23, 2020	7100	1570

4	ut_the_cia_if_k_911/ https://www.reddit.com/r/conspiracy/comments/gqb792/public_areas_around_toronto_on_have_high_levels/ https://www.reddit.com/r/conspiracy/comments/gqb792/public_areas_around_toronto_on_have_high_levels/	r/Conspiracy	Saturday, May 9, 2020	467	155
5	https://www.reddit.com/r/conspiracy/comments/gh6v7q/lets_go_down_the_rabbit_hole/	r/Conspiracy	Sunday, May 10, 2020	133	103
6	https://www.reddit.com/r/conspiracy/comments/gxn7m1/does_anyone_else_find_it_weird_that_global/	r/Conspiracy	Saturday, June 6, 2020	1200	216
7	https://www.reddit.com/r/Coronavirus/comments/fuwqc1/5g_coronavirus_conspiracy_theory_is_dangerous/	r/Coronavirus	Saturday, April 4, 2020	2400	230
8	https://www.reddit.com/r/Coronavirus/comments/q3n9zq/no_5g_does_not_spread_coronavirus/	r/Coronavirus	Saturday, April 18, 2020	3800	526

9	https://www.reddit.com/r/Coronaviruses/comments/gfvkxu/5g_coronavirus_conspiracy_theory_leads_to_77/	r/Coronavirus	Friday, May 8, 2020	747	145
10	https://www.reddit.com/r/Coronaviruses/comments/gm7bdx/celltower_attacks_by_idiots_who_claim_5g_spreads/	r/Coronavirus	Monday, May 18, 2020	418	112
11	https://www.reddit.com/r/Coronaviruses/comments/gssnv6/a_fool_and_his_money_are_soon_parted_350_usb/	r/Coronavirus	Friday, May 29, 2020	2900	263
12	https://www.reddit.com/r/Coronaviruses/comments/gz1u1v/three_years_in_prison_for_man_who_set_fire_to/	r/Coronavirus	Wednesday, July 8, 2020	1500	166
13	https://www.reddit.com/r/Coronaviruses/comments/hy7zn9/paper_blaming_covid19_on_5g_technol	r/Coronavirus	Sunday, July 26, 2020	798	105

14	oggy_withdrawn/ https://www.reddit.com/r/insaneparents/comments/htjwft/friends_mum_asked_him_about_a_connection_between/	r/insaneparents	Saturday, July 18, 2020	16900	468
15	https://www.reddit.com/r/insaneparents/comments/hwgxjd/5g_is_deadlier_than_covid_according_to_my_mom/	r/insaneparents	Thursday, July 23, 2020	22800	659
16	https://www.reddit.com/r/technology/comments/hvvsbm/qanon_conspiracy_kicked_off_twitter_as_platform/fyxkz9h/	r/Technology	Wednesday, July 22, 2020	40300	3600
17	https://www.reddit.com/r/technology/comments/hw4bb2/elon_musk_said_people_who_dont_think_ai_could_be/fyy7b23/	r/Technology	Thursday, July 23, 2020	36600	3000
18	https://www.reddit.com/r/technology/comments/	r/Technology	Friday, July 24, 2020	55600	2300

19	hx02wu/amazon_reportedly_invested_in_startups_and_gained_fz53yp4/https://www.reddit.com/r/technology/comments/hzmwcy/bill_gates_on_elon_musks_controversial_fz53yp4/https://www.reddit.com/r/technology	r/Technology	Tuesday, July 28, 2020	2000	517
20	0rpcc/study_us_adults_who_mostly_rely_on_social_media_fzto8bp/https://www.reddit.com/r/technology	r/Technology	Friday, July 31, 2020	30400	1400
21	gnrkif/vegans_and_5g_conspiracy_beliefs/	r/vegan	Thursday, May 21, 2020	4200	972
