Chapter 2
Communication Strategies Behind the Expressions of Dissent During the COVID–19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

The chapter presents some of the key communication strategies that can be observed in the expressions of dissent that increased considerably during the pandemic. The dissenting narratives—that is, the texts that speak against dominant institutions and the socio-political consensus by combining elements of conspiracy theories and populism—thrive for two major reasons. First, the narratives voice political sentiments that a significant portion of the population can identify with; they speak against injustices in a way that many would endorse and, simultaneously, include some of the rhetoric of new populist movements on the right. Second, the way dissent is expressed is consistent with the new ways of knowledge acquisition, as the claims are made with the appeal to the individual perspective, fear, and enjoyment. Such conclusions are based on the analysis of the vehement opposition to the World Economic Forum's "The Great Reset" agenda and the pandemic-related conspiracy theories of David Icke.

DISSENT IN CONTEXT

As the pandemic caused by the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus was reaching its height, the expressions of distrust became a growing concern for those who were trying to provide guidance to citizens and govern through the crisis. Various narratives about the hidden interests, evil intentions, and collusions of elite groups started to spread on the margins of the public sphere—that is, on an unregulated space that is the online media sphere. While some effort has been made to curb their reach, such narratives still continue to exert influence on its highly devoted audience. For the purpose of the current text, the set of claims of such kind will be denominated as "dissenting narratives." This term is used here since it

encompasses the ambiguous field that exists at the intersection of conspiracy theories and daily politics (in particular, that of the populist kind). As it will be seen in the later part of the chapter, the dissensus today is not only communicated with references to secret evil plots, and talking about it exclusively through the lens of conspiracy theory misses some of its other key features. In other words, the dissenting narratives, such as those popularized during the pandemic, rely on a pastiche of messages: including accusations of conspiracies, claims from daily politics, references from popular culture, and so on.

For decades, the claims akin to conspiracy theories were becoming integrated into the culture at large. We can observe this in the transition from previous epochs when conspiracy theory had been the tool of extremist groups at the fringes of society to the contemporary highly mediatized society where conspiratorial thinking becomes more widespread. For instance, the document fabricated in 1903 in Russia with the title *Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion* was reprinted and distributed to advance anti-Semitic causes and incite violence across the West (Bronner, 2003, p. 1). In that context, the conspiracy theory functioned as an elaborate narrative reliant on printing technology that presented a group (the ethnic or religious Other) as an evil force that, in secret, works to aggravate societal ills. However, with the ascendance of the highly mediatized society of late modernity, the conspiracy theory changed in two key ways. First, it moved from extremist fringes into the mainstream culture; conspiracy became the subject of the entertainment industry, the notable examples being the TV series *The X Files* (Carter, 1993) and the bestselling novel *The Da Vinci Code* (Brown, 2003). With that, many started to see a conspiratorial narrative as a useful tool for assigning meaning to complex socio-economic developments through a "cognitive mapping" of a sort (Jameson, 1988). Second, the conspiracy theories now focus largely on internal enemies, instead of primarily depicting the evil Other. This is evident in the popularity of conspiracy theories in the United States that accuse their own government, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), or the "Deep State" of controlling society from the shadows and through undemocratic means (e.g., Horwitz, 2021; Webb, 2014; Williams, 2013). In short, as the narratives that detail a conspiracy became ubiquitous in public life—denoting a rise of the "conspiracy culture"(Knight, 2000)—, their field of action became more dispersed, representing the generalized anxiety over the present and future developments in society, politics, and economy.

Simultaneously, the media through which public communication happens has changed as well. The replacement of print as the dominant means of communication by television—which comes out of advances made in photography and telegraphy—has changed the way people evaluate the truthfulness of claims, as Neil Postman (1985) explains. The author points out that the new form of cognition shuns exposition and favors knowledge based on information that is brief, devoid of context, amusing, visual, gratifying, and fragmented in tone. By exposition, the author refers to "a sophisticated ability to think conceptually, deductively and sequentially; a high valuation of reason and order; an abhorrence of contradiction; a large capacity for detachment and objectivity; and a tolerance for delayed response" (Postman, 1985, p. 63). Furthermore, the development of digital media has brought to the fore affect as an important factor. The algorithms structured in a way that maximizes user engagement—and with it, profit—put at the forefront the content that incites strong emotional responses, such as outrage and indignation. As a result, regardless of what is actually happening in reality, online platforms are likely to show the user the most extreme and uncompromising attitudes, claims, and behavior of the perceived adversary (Tufekci, 2017, p. 271). In the context of public communication that is centered on affect and immediate emotional response, it is ever more common for judgments to be formed about the complex socio-political reality by recurring to the "gut instinct, affective response, and 'thin-slicing' (making a snap decision based on a tiny fraction of the evidence)" (Andrejevic, 2013, p. 17). With the pandemic,

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