

Conspiracy speakers' criticality: too little or too much? A Rhetorical Reflexion on Conspiracy Theories

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If the well-studied phenomenon of conspiracy theories still catches our attention, it is among other reasons because it crystallizes many aspects of our society. For example, our relationship with the media, the notion of transparency, the phenomenon of fake news, but also our ability to live together and make society. In this post, we will focus on the relationship that conspiracy speakers build within their discourses with the notion of “truth” as a value. Our hypothesis is that conspiracy speakers are too confident about this notion; instead of being critical and doubtful about events – as they seem to appear at first – they are instead too sure of being right. In this perspective we will argue that within conspiracy discourses, truth as a value is paradoxically based mostly on the character of the speaker and not on the reasoning they expose.

To build our reflexion, we will refer to the theoretical and methodological framework of Aristotelian rhetoric and exemplify our hypothesis with fragments of conspiracy theory discourses. Looking at this phenomenon from the rhetorical perspective, we will try to understand how conspiracy discourses can be persuasive among various audiences.

Those who have an interest in conspiracy theories can only notice that these discourses present a peculiar discursive relationship with the notion of “truth”. Much of the literature on conspiracy theories underlines the fact that conspiracy discourses are built on the idea of claiming to re-establish the truth about various events (Dominicy 2010; Taguieff 2013). Those discourses embody a very strong relationship with the lexical register of truth and falsity, and usually present their reasoning as being evidence-based (Danblon & Nicolas 2010). Take for example [the presentation banner of the Italian website “100 giorni da leoni”](#) – which promotes conspiracy theories about the Covid-19 pandemic, but also other events related to Italian news – that states “*la battaglia per la verità*” (*the battle for the truth*).



Presentation banner of the website “100 giorni da leoni”, consulted on February 7th, 2023.

Or look at [the reasoning of Tal Schaller](#) (a Swiss speaker who promoted, among others, conspiracy theories about the Covid-19 pandemic¹) who claims his explanation of the Russian

¹ See this excerpt from the video “IFQ90 émission du 3 mars 2022 avec Philippe Jaulent”, March 3rd, 2022, consulted on February 7th, 2023: “I say to them, but listen, read these studies before taking sides. Let's take the example of face masks, there are dozens and dozens of studies which prove that they are useless, that they are toxic, and there are no studies which prove that these masks are of any use. So, I tell people: ‘You have to inform

invasion of Ukraine to be based on official documents from the Russian forces. According to this double aspect of conspiracy theories – promoting the lexical register of truth and presenting it as evidence-based argumentation – this phenomenon has been, so far, mostly considered a problem of misunderstanding, lacking, or misusing of information circulating within the public sphere. Hence, most pedagogical and counter-argumentative approaches to conspiracy theories tend to approach and tackle this problem on the level of reasoning and scientific knowledge (e.g. [the recent report under the direction of Gerald Bronner: “Les Lumières à l’ère numérique”](#), January 2022). In terms of rhetoric, looking at these discourses as using evidence-based reasoning, would signify qualifying them on the level of *logos* (the reasoning exposed by the speaker). According to Aristotle, persuasion, from and within a discourse, can be achieved thanks to the mobilisation of three means of persuasion (i.e. three rhetorical proofs): thus, the *logos*, but also the *ethos* (the qualities and character of the speaker) and the *pathos* (the emotional disposition of the audience) (*Rhet.*, I, 1365a 1-3). As stated previously, here we will argue that within conspiracy discourses, truth as a value is paradoxically based on *ethos* and not on *logos*. We argue that conspiracy speakers build such a strong *ethos* that it allows them to then present themselves as legitimate and credible speakers, two necessary qualities for persuasion (Woerther 2007). Conspiracy speakers can appear as both legitimate because, among other features, they are “regular” citizen and embody a very contemporary attitude towards authority that is both rejected and researched in alternative figure (for further readings see [Danblon 2006](#)); and credible because, among other characteristics, they recall the very context of valorisation of the science-reasoning society we live in ([Nicolas 2014](#); Mazzeo 2022). Presenting themselves as people always doubting and critical towards information and knowledge can also have a downward effect: we could consider them as people reducing doubt to a social and discursive posture ([Nicolas 2014](#): 6), and by doing so, falling into what Perelman regards as a new believe and nihilistic attitude (Perelman 2009: 146). This is, we believe, exemplified with [the case of Jean-Jacques Crèvecoeur who claims to be neutral and objective about the Russia and Ukraine’s conflict](#)².

But still, presenting themselves as valid interlocutors allow conspiracy speakers to “simply” present a version of the events that do not suffer from the critics. As stated by Aristotle, the character of the speaker is often the strongest means of persuasion, especially when facing phenomena for which we rely on contingency and not certitude (*Rhet.*, 1365a 4-10).

In summary, we argue that persuasion from conspiracy discourses comes mainly from the character of the speaker (*ethos*), supported by a specific discourse (*logos*) that helps the speaker to build credibility and legitimacy; and maybe, even though these specific aspects are not necessarily exclusive to conspiracy discourses, looking at them from that angle might help us better understand why their reasonings do not need to be critically-proved and can simply be an expression of truth, a presentation of what they consider to be true. This observation, if confirmed, might open a new space for rhetoric to enter the field of pedagogical education and reflexion about how to handle conspiracy theories in the public sphere.

yourself’. This is an absolute proof that you are being lied to all along the line, because when you are told that it protects you, it’s all just hot air. It’s propaganda, and our job is to wake people up and present them with information.” (Excerpt from 00 :21 :30 ; our translation).

² See this excerpt from the video “IFQ90 émission du 3 mars 2022 avec Philippe Jaulent”, March 3rd, 2022, consulted on February 7th, 2023 : “When we are going to talk about the subject of Ukraine, it doesn’t necessarily mean that we are suddenly for Putin and against the Ukrainians. I think that our job is simply to try to establish the facts. And to look at how the facts, possibly, possibly, this is a working hypothesis that I am presenting to you today, are possibly manipulated by our governments, manipulated by the media.” (Excerpt from 00 :19 :47 ; our translation).

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