

Absorbed by the Flat Earth: Conspiracy Immersion on TikTok

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Abstract

This chapter will propose that immersion is centrally relevant to conspiratorial belief, through an analysis of 24 *TikTok* videos discussing two popular conspiracy theories: Flat Earth and ‘Birds Aren’t Real’. It will identify common stylistic patterns that enable differentiation between the consumption of conspiracy for entertainment, displays of conspiratorial thinking, and expressions of wholehearted conspiratorial belief. It will conclude with reflections on the ways in which analysing conspiratorial discourse can inform our understanding and conceptualisation of immersion. Where immersion is typically discussed as a readerly experience, this chapter examines the notion of authorial immersion.

Introduction

The commonly agreed definition of a conspiracy theory is, ‘a proposed plot by powerful people or organisations working together in secret to accomplish some (usually sinister) goal’ (Wood et al. 2012: 767). The phenomenon of becoming convinced by a conspiracist worldview is termed, both in popular discourse and academically, using two immersion metaphors: getting ‘sucked in’ and ‘falling down the rabbit hole’ (West 2020; Soba, 2016). This latter term, which originates from Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland* (1865) and is also frequently associated with the hugely popular 1999 film *The Matrix*, reflects our shared understanding that becoming embroiled in conspiracy belief involves the transgression of a boundary – the rabbit hole - from our reality to an alternate one. This concept has even shifted from popular culture to recognised academic credulity, in the coining of ‘Rabbit Hole Syndrome’ to describe the onset of a conspiracist worldview (Sutton and Douglas, 2022). Like Alice and Neo, once the rabbit hole has been traversed, conspiracy believers often appear to find a return journey difficult or impossible. The widespread use of these terms indicate an intuitive recognition that conspiracism involves immersion, and thus merits academic scrutiny.

Furthermore, there is a consensus in the research, particularly within psychology, that conspiracy belief extends beyond, and is more encompassing, than a preoccupation with individual theories. This has been variously described in the research as conspiracism as an ideology or worldview (Wood et al. 2012), a perspective arising from a ‘trust gap’ (Heller 2015), or best understood as a milieu (Bennett 2023). As such, I argue conspiracies therefore offer a rich and complex narrative world in which to potentially fall and become immersed, and belief in them appears to be akin to being absorbed into a different worldview.

Conspiracies problematise and blur the traditional boundaries typically sketched between reality and fiction, making the ontological status of this narrative world deeply ambiguous (Mason 2019). This offers an excellent opportunity to explore immersion in a novel context, where absorption in ‘stories’ can prompt a continued and ongoing mental immersion in another world, long after the bodily experience of reading or viewing has ceased. This chapter will hypothesise that intense mental preoccupation with stories that permeate the individual’s boundary between fact and fiction can lead to a sort of continued immersion, where the traveller is so affected by the narratives they have engaged with, that they do not fully return to reality. In other words, they remain ‘down the rabbit hole’.

It is beyond the scope of this chapter to philosophically engage with disputes surrounding the term, but it must be recognised that labelling something a ‘conspiracy theory’ is far from a neutral act (Bjerg and Presskorn-Thygesen 2017). It is also important to acknowledge several other contextual realities. First, whilst rare, real conspiracies do and have existed (for examples see West 2020), with discovery usually taking place retrospectively. As such, the notion of believing in something others do not, and the lure of potential vindication after the fact both have historical precedent. Second, there is money to be made from conspiracy belief, and where there is money bad actors are sure to follow. Alex Jones, for example, made millions of dollars selling survivalist paraphernalia and supplements by advertising these products on his shows *InfoWars* and *The Alex Jones Show*. Described as ‘QVC for conspiracy’ by a former employee (Warzel 2017) Jones loudly, proudly and repeatedly spewed conspiratorial falsehoods about events including the Sandy Hook Massacre and the Oklahoma City Bombing as well as claims including that chemicals were being pumped into the water supply to ‘turn people gay’. One team of investigative journalists found that around 25% of Jones’ show was dedicated to advertising his company’s products (Maurer, Oliver and Twiss, 2017). This same team ordered some of Jones’ products and were sent a free ‘9/11 Was An Inside Job’ bumper sticker with their purchase. In 2022 Alex Jones was successfully sued by families of the Sandy Hook victims. Jones was ordered to pay 965 million dollars to fifteen families for defamation, as well as the harassment and emotional suffering they experienced as a result of his actions. Third, conspiracy belief exists at the extreme ends of a positive pair of practices: asking questions and being sceptical of the powerful.

This chapter characterises conspiracism as potentially deeply problematic, for the individual believer, their loved ones, and society more broadly. However, it also cautions against the haste and wholeheartedness with which many are ready to dismiss conspiracy believers as ridiculous, stupid or uneducated. This is profoundly unhelpful: it is also untrue (Architects and Engineers for 9/11 Truth, for instance, is largely comprised of highly educated people, see www.ae911truth.org/). Furthermore, this chapter asks the reader to consider the potential dangers of this unkind stereotyping. Do we really want to dismiss people as idiots for what is ultimately critical questioning and independent thinking gone awry? Do we want to perpetuate the myth that being intelligent will keep ourselves or our loved ones safe from tripping and ‘falling down the rabbit hole’? Instead, this chapter – which deals with two conspiracy theories that are demonstrably untrue – counsels compassion, and separation between the theories themselves and the individuals who become immersed in them.

This chapter will utilise two key concepts from cognitive investigations on immersion to offer an account as to why viewers may be unfortunately positioned to trip and fall down the rabbit hole when exposed to immersive conspiracy content on an immersive social media platform: figure-ground (Langacker 2009; Stockwell 2009) and the willing construction of disbelief (Gerrig and Rapp 2004; Gerrig and Egidi 2010).

Figure-Ground: Immersion as a matter of attention

This chapter will concentrate on immersion as a matter of attention and, as such, will follow Green and Brock’s (2000) description, though they prefer one of immersion’s synonyms, ‘transportation’:

[Immersion] is a convergent mental process, a focusing of attention, that may occur in response to either fiction or nonfiction. The components [...] include emotional reactions, mental imagery, and a loss of access to real-world information

(Green and Brock 2000: 703).

Immersion *is* an extreme focusing of attention: it is the mechanism by which the phenomenon is achieved, the state by which it can be characterised, and the cause of its other observable effects. As such, narratives that are rich in attentional attractors (Stockwell 2020) prime conditions for immersion because they demand our focus. Gestalt psychology offers a robust account of why this is the case because,

Attention is a zero-sum game. What this means is we all have a finite amount of capacity to pay attention to things; we cannot exponentially increase our ability to focus on as many things as we like. As a result, focusing on one thing always comes at the cost of drawing our attention away from something else

(Mason and Giovanelli 2021: 48).

In other words, the negative (in the psychological sense) effects of immersion – such as loss of sense of time, place, and access to real world knowledge (Green and Brock 2000) - result from neglect of attention to the physical environment because that attention is elsewhere, namely within the storyworld. Symbiotically, immersion's positive effects, such as rich mental imagery, strong emotional reactions and intense empathetic response, can be understood as deriving from a strong attentional focus. In this chapter, figure-ground analysis will be used to demonstrate that conspiracy belief narratives are rich in attentional attractors, and thus not only position individuals to become sucked into the worldviews they present but also reflect a level of immersion in the conspiracy storyworld on the part of the author.

Immersion, (dis)belief and critical thinking

The chapter will also draw closely on Richard Gerrig and colleagues' findings regarding the interaction between immersion, belief and critical thinking (Gerrig and Rapp 2004; Gerrig and Egidi 2010). This work contradicts the long-held romantic notion first proposed by Coleridge (1960 [1817]) that when we encounter fiction we willingly suspend our disbelief; that we simply press pause on our knowledge about the true state of reality in order to enjoy a good story with its dragons, ghosts and improbabilities. Gerrig and Rapp (2004) tested this empirically and found that not only is this inaccurate, but the opposite is true: disbelief is something we must willingly construct. In other words, disbelief is a faculty we turn on, not off. Building on this study, Gerrig and Egidi (2010) further found that we tend to use our intuitive processes when reading as a default, which positions us to simply accept what we are told. Reflective processes – turning on our potential disbelief – require us to pull out of the storyworld and critically assess: 'reflective processes require explicit planning; they are slow and effortful' (Gerrig and Egidi 2010: 191). As such, being immersed runs counter to critical thinking.

To examine (dis)belief linguistically, the chapter draws extensively on modality analysis. Epistemic modality is the linguistic category used to express our level of belief and (un)certainly about whether something is true: where 'might' reflects possibility, 'definitely' conveys certainty. Categorical assertions express information *as though* it is fact (for instance 'birds are not real'), regardless of whether it is accurate, representing the highest level of confidence in the truth of one's utterance. Modality analysis will be used to demonstrate that committed conspiracy belief can be robustly distinguished from conspiratorial thinking or simply exploring conspiracies for entertainment. The chapter will contend that by first assessing conspiratorial discourse through the lens of belief commitment, it is possible to then

discern other stylistic patterns, such as deictic attribution of beliefs and indications of apparent immersion.

Research Design and Methods

“In the twenty-first century the most common first step in the journey down the conspiracy theory rabbit hole is watching a video”

(West 2020: 37).

Research is contested regarding whether conspiracy belief has become more common in recent years. Many point to the longstanding existence of conspiracism throughout history as evidence that anecdotal reports of a rise in prevalence is impressionistic (see, for example, van Prooijen and Douglas 2017, Mousaw 2022). However, it seems uncontroversial to say that conspiratorial discourse has enjoyed, if not an increase, then certainly a greater embrace by mainstream discourse spaces. Regardless of whether what was once kept private is now simply more acceptable to share publicly, or an actual increase in conspiracism is taking place, the fact remains that discussion of conspiracy theories has moved from the fringes into the collective spotlight, especially online. It is also inarguable that social media platforms have given conspiracism a helping hand in its shift from private to public discourse (Fiadotava et al. 2023).

This chapter reports the findings of an exploratory investigation of conspiracy discourse on *TikTok*; a social media platform known for its short-form video content akin to *Facebook* and *Instagram* ‘Reels’. The study focuses on two specific conspiracy theories: ‘Flat Earth’ and ‘Birds Aren’t Real’. There is strong consensus that the platform itself is highly absorbing, with users frequently reporting struggling to pull themselves away from the platform and experiencing classic immersion phenomena such as losing sense of the passage of time. These experiential accounts are strongly supported by the data, which shows that, despite its relatively recent launch in 2018, *TikTok* now boasts over a billion users a month. Users can ‘follow’ other accounts, but the app’s primary function is its ‘For You’ page, which infinitely supplies video after video to the viewer who can then choose to watch, like, comment, share or scroll past. As with all major social media platforms, details of *TikTok*’s algorithms are not publicly available, but it is apparent that the app is uncannily good at tailoring ‘For You’ content to users’ interests. These core characteristics alongside its undeniable current global relevance makes *TikTok* of particular interest for data collection for conspiracy discourse.

Data for this study was generated with the aim of mimicking a typical user experience on *TikTok*. A new account was created so that the ‘For You’ feed was not influenced by the researcher’s past interactions with the platform. The account was then supplied with exclusively conspiracy-related searches, both generic – for example ‘conspiracy’ and ‘conspiracy theory’ – and specific – such as ‘flat earth’ and ‘birdsarentreal’. Videos suggested by the searches were then played in full. This was interspersed with visiting the ‘For You’ page, which increasingly then began to offer conspiracy-related content as the algorithm picked up on the searches. The researcher then allowed all conspiracy-related videos presented on the ‘For You’ page to play in full, also often clicking on the comments section, which the algorithm interprets as positive engagement. ‘Flat Earth’ and ‘Birds Aren’t Real’ focused videos were additionally ‘liked’ so that they would be stored on the account and so that this would indicate specific interest to the algorithm. Videos that were not conspiracy-related were scrolled past as soon as this became apparent. After approximately two hours

virtually all the videos offered on the ‘For You’ page were conspiracy related. Videos were then selected into the dataset if they met the following criteria:

- Includes written or spoken language;
- Is in English;
- Primarily concerns either ‘Flat Earth’ or ‘Birds Aren’t Real’;
- Distinct creator (i.e. no two videos are by the same author);
- Could be downloaded (for accurate transcription and data security).

The dataset comprises 24 video transcripts: 12 focusing on ‘Flat Earth’ and 12 on ‘Birds Aren’t Real’. Both theories are relatively self-evident from their names, however I will pause to offer a brief overview of each.

Flat Earth

Flat Earth theory posits that the earth is flat, rather than a globe. This conspiracy has reared its head on more than one occasion throughout history, with a notable resurgence of interest from 2015 (West, 2020). As with all conspiracies, how many people genuinely believe this theory is impossible to determine: as will be discussed below (see ‘Conspiracy as Entertainment’) conspiratorial voyeurism is a popular pastime and the boundaries between exploring beliefs for fun and actual subscription are often shifting and difficult to distinguish. West – a professional debunker - explains, ‘much of this is obviously a fad on the part of non-believers – just fascination with the “crazy Flat Earthers”’. But there are also many people who seem genuinely convinced that the Earth is actually flat and most of them got sucked in via *YouTube*’ (2020: 199). Videos in the dataset range from forty to 6.1 million views; some have in excess of 500,000 ‘likes’. However, any claim to interpretation of these figures would be purely speculative.

There is division between vocal members of the Flat Earth Community on issues such as the shape of the flat earth and whether gravity really exists (for a full overview see Clark, 2018). However, there is consensus on core elements of this conspiracy, including:

- NASA is the architect of, or is complicit in, propagation of the ‘globe model’;
- the true flat shape of the Earth is being deliberately concealed, by bad actors, for sinister reasons;
- curvature is unobservable (because it doesn’t exist);
- ‘Antarctica’ is really an ice wall surrounding the edges of the Earth, or at least houses one of the edges.

Birds Aren’t Real

Like Flat Earth, the core tenet of the ‘Birds Aren’t Real’ conspiracy is eponymously self-evident: it is the theory that some or all birds are not real. According to the lore of the theory, birds have been replaced by drones, typically in the 1980s by either Ronald Reagan or Margaret Thatcher. ‘Birds Aren’t Real’ is a US-centric version of the conspiracy (see www.birdsarentreal.com): ‘Pigeons Aren’t Real’ is a UK equivalent (see www.pigeonsarentreal.co.uk). These drone birds are being used to spy on the public. Common elements of the theory in both iterations include:

- birds’ eyes are cameras;
- that they charge their batteries by sitting on power cables through induction coils in their feet;
- that bird faeces contains tracking devices;
- ‘bird meat’ is synthetically produced.

The genesis and ontology of ‘Birds Aren’t Real’ is atypical: it was initially created as a conspiracy satire. Its origin is attributed to Peter McIndoe holding up a satirical ‘Birds Aren’t Real’ sign at a counterprotest to the Women’s Marches in 2017. When asked about his sign by “fellow” counter-protesters he improvised his response, which was recorded and went viral (Williams, 2022). McIndoe explained, ‘It’s not like I sat down and thought I’m going to make a satire. I just thought: “I should write a sign that has nothing to do with what is going on.” An absurdist statement to bring to the equation’ (McIndoe quoted in *The Guardian*, April 2022). Comments like this from McIndoe and others discussing the satirical status of the Birds Aren’t Real movement are scarce. This is because a core principle of the satire is to never admit one is being satirical, but rather to vehemently claim this is your truly held belief. Indeed, the FAQs on the Birds Aren’t Real website includes:

Q: Is this movement serious?

A: Yes. The Birds Aren’t Real movement has been active since 1976. Once a preventative cause, our initial goal was to stop the genocide of real birds. Unfortunately this was unsuccessful, and the government has since replaced every living bird with robotic replicas. Now our movement's prerogative is to make everyone aware of this fact.

(Official ‘Birds Aren’t Real’ website, 2024)

A byproduct of this has been that others then encountered online content generated by the Birds Aren’t Real group and its followers online and, unaware of its origins, embraced it as a real conspiracy, which it then became.

This in and of itself suggests not only that there *are* common linguistic markers that characterise conspiracy belief discourse, but that this style is intuitively recognisable. McIndoe, his colleagues and the followers of his satire were able to convincingly mimic this conspiratorial style such that others were not able to distinguish it from ‘true’ conspiracy discourse. Reinforcing this, throughout the generation of the present dataset it was almost always impossible to determine if videos were satirical or heartfelt. Where this was possible this was only through the use of hashtags such as #joke on the video descriptions, not the rhetorical style. As with Flat Earth, it is impossible to establish the number of people who believe this conspiracy. In both cases videos on *TikTok* focusing on these conspiracies were many and easy to find.

Modality as a Metric

Mason (2022) found that high certainty epistemic modality and categorical assertions were characteristic of conspiracy discourse in *YouTube* videos offering false flag accounts of the Sandy Hook massacre. As such, modality was the first stylistic feature examined in the present dataset, anticipating that the same patterns would likely be present. This was not the case: epistemic modality and categorical assertions are rife, but the level of certainty being expressed was substantially much more varied. This led me to pause and reflect on the similarities and distinctions between the dataset in Mason’s (2022) study and the present one.

The conspiracy content under examination in Mason (2022) were fifteen long-form videos – many with run times exceeding two hours: by contrast, the videos in the present study are short-form, typically ranging from between 45 seconds to four minutes. Additionally, the Sandy Hook massacre was a truly horrific event, which claimed the lives of twenty young children and six adults. As such, it seems reasonable to conclude that

individuals are unlikely to spend hours creating, editing and uploading content arguing that the event was staged or fictional unless in their own minds they feel sure of their claims: it is not an ‘entry level’ conspiracy. Flat Earth, too, is sometimes characterised as sitting at the extreme end of conspiracies (see for example West, 2020), but this is largely due to the scale and audacious nature of its core claims. Flat Earth and Birds Aren’t Real are thus more frivolous conspiracies that typically do not include specific victims. Therefore, it seems logical to conclude that all the videos in the Mason (2022) study, due both to subject matter and the time-investment required to produce them, can reasonably be taken to have been narrated from a point of wholesale conspiracy belief. This is consistent with patterns of high-certainty modality and categorical assertion (stating things as though they are facts).

These reflections were then used to revisit the present dataset through a different lens. Rather than viewing high certainty epistemic modality and categorical assertion as a stylistic feature of conspiracy discourse per se, these patterns were instead used as a metric by which to differentiate videos within the present sample. Once this was done, a new and more nuanced dimension to conspiratorial discourse emerged: all of the videos with these patterns do appear to express conspiratorial belief, and do have other patterns consistent with both one another and the Mason (2022) study. The remaining videos instead appear to be either engaging in conspiratorial thinking, without the authors necessarily expressing that they believe the theory themselves, or seem to be discussing these conspiracies from a step further removed, as a topic of interest and entertainment. As such, this study, building on Mason (2022) suggests conspiratorial discourse in fact exists along a cline with three distinct categorisations:

- 1) Conspiracy as Entertainment
- 2) Conspiratorial Thinking
- 3) Conspiratorial Belief

The first two of these categories do not contain markers indicating former or ongoing immersion in a conspiratorial worldview, but the third – ‘conspiratorial belief’ – does. This chapter will now explore each category in detail.

Conspiracy as Entertainment

The videos in the dataset characterised by low certainty epistemic modality appear to fall into one of two thematic categories, the first being speculative exploration of conspiracy as a form of entertainment. Here is a representative example of this category:

The earth *could be* much bigger than we *thought*. Over the past few years *there has been ongoing debate* regarding the Earth's shape, with some *questioning* whether it is round or flat. Although *some speculate* about the existence of conspiracy theories, *imagine if there were* more than just seven continents. Some *propose* that Antarctica *might actually be* an enormous ice wall, concealing the existence of additional continents beyond it. *Hypothetically*, once someone manages to traverse this icy barrier, they *might* discover the presence of twenty hidden continents that have been shielded from our knowledge. These mysterious lands have *sparked various theories*, *suggesting they could* contain prehistoric creatures, extra-terrestrial beings, and advanced civilizations.

(FlatEarth-Video5)

Two notable stylistic patterns characterise this type of conspiracy discourse: low certainty epistemic modality, and deictic distancing between the theory and the narrator. In this 112-word excerpt there are twelve expressions of uncertainty about the veracity of the ideas being

outlined, indicated in italics. The narrator is careful at every point to explicitly present possibility rather than certainty: idea or theory, not fact.

Alongside this, there is consistent and careful attenuation between the speaker and the ideas being outlined (see also Zunshine 2006). This is achieved mainly through subject attribution of epistemically hedged verb processes to other people – ‘some speculate’, ‘some propose’, ‘they might discover’ – or even inanimate entities: ‘these mysterious lands have sparked’. On one occasion the same effect is achieved through agent deletion: ‘there has been ongoing debate’. Here, the use of the passive construction makes it unclear who has been debating the shape of the Earth, but the narrator is careful not to implicate either themselves or the listener. In fact, the only two occasions on which the speaker deictically positions themselves within the narrative at all is in the collective ‘we’ pronoun in the first line, ‘the Earth could be much bigger than we thought’ and a later reference to ‘our knowledge’. These both align the speaker with the listeners, implicitly positioning them as adherents to the ‘globe model’ perspective.

These stylistic features work together to locate both the narrator and the narratees in a voyeuristic role, observing and exploring the theory but from a distance. In this way, the conspiracy is implicitly presented as an object of entertainment, rather than a notion that is particularly plausible.

Conspiratorial thinking

Other videos in the dataset close the deictic gap between the conspiracy theory and the video’s narrator, but maintain a position of scepticism and uncertainty about the ideas they explore. As such, they move beyond observation for pure entertainment, and shift into conspiratorial thinking. A representative example of this is Video 12, which focuses on ‘Birds Aren’t Real’:

Okay, so, I've been looking into these videos about fake birds, and birds, really being like, you know government, spy drones or robots or whatever. Now I'm over halfway believing that, because, it would probably explain, why the birds are like, drawn to these power lines and somebody said that the power lines charged them up. So, that kind of like took me over like, wait a minute now, they might have a point here, because when I look at the eyes of birds, they just, seem weird to me like a lot of birds, the eyes just seem like they're recording you. But how do you explain like, bird faeces? Now we saying all the birds are drones and robots or just some of them? Because when I see birds, like excreting like, doody or faeces, you know that's the one, problematic thing. Or, when I'm throwing out bird food, or crackers or bread, they eat it. Would a robot bird do that?

(FakeBirds-Video12)

The pattern of epistemic modality in this video largely mirrors the previous example in that it is characterised by low levels of certainty. Having said this, whilst the creator is not expressing being convinced by the conspiracy theory, they do seem a step closer to being persuaded than the author of Video 5. The theory ‘would probably’ explain their observations of bird behaviour. It does ‘seem like’ something is weird, or the birds are recording you. They are ‘over halfway believing’ it. This slightly higher level of epistemic possibility is moderated, however, by the posing of sincere questions: ‘How do you, like, explain bird faeces?’; ‘Would a robot bird do that?’ The narrator stops short of expressing disbelief, but does label the issue of bird faeces ‘problematic’ and follows this with a categorical assertion of their observation of other bird

behaviours (eating food). They are not sure whether a robot bird would do this, but they do express that birds eating food is an action they have witnessed as a matter of fact. As such, the narrator of this video moves from simply outlining the theory from a distance to personally engaging with its contents. Both the questions and the critical engagement with specific components of the theory indicate reflective processes (Gerrig and Egidi, 2004): the author has stepped back and assessed the narrative's claims against their real-world knowledge. Video 12 thus expresses conspiratorial thinking because it moves from observation to participation but stops short of expressing confident belief. The creator appears to be inviting conversation, offering their thoughts and the reasoning behind them, and posing questions that do not seem entirely rhetorical.

This more direct engagement with 'Birds Aren't Real' is also reflected in the deixis which, unlike the distanced position adopted in Video 5, is narrated from the speaker's own deictic centre, with five uses of the first-person pronoun 'I' throughout the video. This chapter does not have the space or scope to deal with the multimodal aspects of the videos in any detail, but it is salient to note here that Video 12's creator is in a full-face shot speaking directly to the camera throughout. Video 5, discussed in the previous section, by contrast visually comprises a series of images with the narrator never revealing themselves (in fact the voice even sounds like it may be AI-generated or have a filter overlaid). In other words, multimodally both videos reflect deictic involvement or distance parallel to the author's linguistic choices.

A final stylistic feature within this extract is particularly interesting and noteworthy, namely the report of temporary immersion in the 'Birds Aren't Real' worldview using the metaphor 'so that kind of like took me over'. Similarly, the phrase 'now I'm over halfway believing' draws on a transportation metaphor (Green and Brock, 2000). This uncertainty and confusion could be framed as a conflict between the creator's intuitive processes and reflective ones (Gerrig and Egidi, 2010): whilst immersed and 'taken over' by the conspiracy content they have viewed, their intuitive processes align with belief, but pulling back out of the storyworld and engaging their reflective processes calls these feelings into question.

This chapter will now turn to the final category of conspiratorial discourse: conspiracy belief. It will argue that this final category bears the linguistic hallmarks of immersion in a parallel reality: the conspiracy lens that becomes the viewing point from down the rabbit hole. It is salient, therefore, to see a report of immersion cropping up alongside uncertainty and consideration of the possibility that a conspiracy may be true in this example of conspiratorial thinking. It is notable too, that the creator also discloses that this process of questioning and conspiratorial thinking stemmed from 'looking into these videos', lending weight to West's (2020) claim.

Conspiratorial Belief

The videos in this dataset that express conspiratorial belief have several stylistic patterns consistent with one another but noticeably distinct from the videos exploring conspiracy as entertainment or expressing conspiratorial thinking. These videos share the same patterns as Mason (2022). Here are two examples from the dataset

We all felt like, yeah, okay your whole life you being watched. But if you, we've been watched all around the board on. So. Many. Different. Levels. Right? So we thinking like, they're not just using your microwave like in get out he, they showed he was using the microwave. It was a toaster or something, everything. But it's, it, they do do that, but it's in your phones. It's certain birds, certain insects. It gets deeper. Not just

birds. Insects. It gets deeper. I'm finna name off the 13 bird species that are actually recording your ass. Okay? The brown thrasher. Pigeons. Crows. Blue jays. Robins. Ring neck parakeets. Goldfinches. The sparrows. Swallows. The owls. Chickens.

(FakeBirds-Video11)

Water, when unmanipulated, is to find its level. So whether you look at a cup of water, a bathtub, a swimming pool, a lake, or the ocean, it's flat. Of course natural motion is not considered, and doesn't equal a curve. We have zero authentic pictures of the Earth and they're all composites and NASA even admits that they photoshop Earth images. [They say] "It is photoshopped because it has to be." On numerous occasions, NASA admits that we can't go beyond low Earth orbit which is between 99 miles and 1200 miles away. The interesting thing is that the moon is said to be 238,000 miles away, which is a difference of 236,800 miles. No matter if you're on the ground, on top of a building, a mountain, a hot air balloon, an airplane, or looking at high altitude amateur balloon footage, the horizon never fails to rise, right to your eyes. Whether you are looking at Toronto's skyline from Niagara on the lake, 31 miles away, Chicago's skyline from Union Pier, 43 miles away, or even Oahu from Kauai, which is up to 108 miles away from centre to centre or 73 miles away from the closest points, you will not see any curvature where it's supposed to be.

(FlatEarth-Video24)

I propose that conspiratorial belief occurs at a tipping point of immersion into a conspiratorial worldview. This is manifest in conspiracy belief discourse, and observable in both of these examples. We call it falling down the rabbit hole in intuitive recognition of this transition.

First, both of these videos narrate an almost overwhelming barrage of attentional attractors, in particular drawing on the qualities of newness and definiteness (Stockwell, 2009). In the first extract, which comprises just 118 words, the narrator maintains one overarching topic – the notion that we are being watched - but introduces sixteen different objects or entities that are spying on us, some of which are repeated more than once: 'microwaves', 'phones', 'toasters', '(certain) insects', 'certain birds' and then eleven specific species of birds. The narrator additionally appears to be merging multiple distinct conspiracy theories in pointing to objects such as phones, microwaves and birds. The suggestion that insects are drones may even be a novel conspiracy belief, or is not one that I have come across previously or since. In the second 210-word extract, four topics are jumped between: that curvature is unobservable (this is discussed twice both opening and closing the extract); that images from NASA are not authentic; and, the distance of the moon. It introduces 25 new objects including five different containers for water, six potential observation points, six different specific locations, four scientific concepts ('natural motion', 'curvature', 'orbit' and 'horizon'), an organisation (NASA) and images and photographs. It also includes eight different specific numbers ranging from zero to 238,000.

In both cases, I argue, the video creators narrate from a point of immersion in a conspiratorial worldview, and this is evidenced by the rapid and often chaotic flitting of attention between figures within the conspiratorial storyworld in a manner that is all-encompassing. Both narrators are surrounded by evidence of the conspiracy; it is wherever they look, as it would be if they were immersed. The accepting of the veracity of this evidence and the coherent relationship between these often highly disparate entities is intuitive and unquestioning. There are no linguistic markers suggesting a stepping back and

pausing for reflection. The belief in each respective theory is absolute, unquestioned, and not critically justified or interrogated. All of these patterns indicate immersion on the part of the author. Authorial immersion is an overlooked area within the field, which overwhelmingly tends to focus on experiences of reception. This chapter demonstrates that exploration of immersion in production is both highly salient, and possible to undertake. It follows logically from the analysis undertaken in this chapter to suggest that commitment to any set of beliefs could constitute a worldview, and thus stem from a narrative world in which the author is immersed. As this holds for conspiracism, the same may be true for political ideology and religious belief: belief discourse may have much to gain from considering immersion. It further seems reasonable to speculate that authors of fiction may write from a position of immersion in the worlds they have created.

This rapid shifting between attentionally attractive figures. was also observed in Mason (2019) and Mason (2022). In those instances as here the impression created is one of a huge pile of evidence in support of the theory, when in fact the demands on attention as it shifts from figure-to-figure and across topics inhibits and reflects a lack of critical thinking. Simply put, there is no time to pause and consider the veracity of these claims, the reliability of the evidence or even the relationship between the topics, objects and the theory being put forward. This, too, indicates immersion: there is an absence of reflection (Gerrig and Egidi, 2010) and no time for disbelief to be constructed (Gerrig and Rapp, 2004).

The questionable nature of the claims being made in both videos is linguistically evident in neither, however. Video 24 presents all its evidence for a Flat Earth in the form of categorical assertions - water in the ocean 'is flat', 'NASA admits' (twice), 'there are zero authentic images' – or high certainty epistemic modality – 'of course', 'you will not see'. The only instance of lower certainty modality in Video 24 is casting aspersions on the distance of the moon from Earth, which is 'said to be' 238,000 miles away. Video 11 exhibits the same confidence that birds (and many other objects) are spy drones, mainly using the categorical construction 'it is' as well as claims such as 'we've all been watched' and high certainty expressions such as, 'that are actually recording your ass'. Interestingly, there are two phrases used in Video 11 that one would typically associate with lower certainty - 'we all felt that' and 'we thinking like' – however the use of the 'we' pronoun reframes these expressions to assert knowledge of what the audience, not just the speaker, thinks and feels.

As in the example of conspiratorial thinking, there is no deictic distancing between the conspiracy and the narrator. However, both authors in these videos narrating conspiratorial belief frequently co-opt the listener's deictic viewpoint into their own through a preference for 'we' over 'I' and even sometimes 'you', the latter of which in particular lays claim to not only confident belief in the theory but also what the audience do or should think too. Again, this chimes with the findings of Mason (2022) which noted that conspiracy advocates often adopt an identity of expertise and authority.

Conclusions

Conspiracy discourse exists along a cline, with its most extreme category – conspiracy belief - bearing the stylistic hallmarks of immersion. These hallmarks, indicated in this study, are:

- high certainty epistemic modality communicating confidence from the author that their worldview is correct;
- categorical assertions that present the author's perspective as a matter of fact;

- deictic markers taking ownership of the beliefs expressed, sometimes additionally co-opting the reader, listener or viewer into the author's positioning;
- evidence that the author's attention is consumed by their worldview; and,
- an absence of evidence for reflective processes, indicating that the author is not, or is not able to, step out of their worldview and consider it critically.

These linguistic pattern and the related claim that belief discourse indicates prolonged and ongoing immersion in a conspiratorial storyworld aligns with other recent investigations of conspiracists' communication. Mousaw found that friends and family often reported frustration at their loved one's 'conversational fanaticism' which he defined as a seeming 'inability to refrain from talking' about their conspiratorial beliefs' (2022: 31). This would make robust sense if the person is bodily present in reality but mentally immersed. Mastroni and Mooney's (2024) participants similarly reported their loved one was incapable of respecting boundaries in conversational topics with even inane subjects leading quickly back to QAnon, and all requests not to discuss theories disrespected and disregarded. This too makes sense through a lens of continued immersion: the conspiracist's attention remains largely within the storyworld, and this is manifest in the repeated intrusions of that narrative world into their real-world discourse. Mousaw (2022), Mastroni and Mooney (2024) and Jordan and Whitmer (2023) all found that relatives and friends grieved the loss of the conspiracist as one would a bereavement because they felt the old person had vanished and an imposter had taken their place. This study suggests that these people are not so much lost, but trapped in another world; immersed down the rabbit hole.

The chapter has identified three brands of conspiracy discourse a user may encounter on *TikTok*, and has proposed that those creators expressing conspiratorial belief appear to be narrating from a position of ongoing immersion within the conspiracy world they have constructed. This study has not focused on reception, and therefore cannot make claims as to the potential effects of viewing this content. However, the prospect of users encountering video after video proliferating conspiracy narratives which may range from exploring theories for fun to committed expressions of belief, ad infinitum (or at least until your phone battery dies) is troubling. In the case of conspiracy belief videos, in particular, these contain features that do not only indicate the immersion of their creators but seem well positioned to prompt the immersion of their viewers too. This last category of videos are rich in attentional attractors, styled as presenting piece after piece of evidence, and are simultaneously devoid of reflective discussion or critical analysis. The platform on which these videos are being encountered is also not conducive to pause or respite. Once a video finishes playing it will simply repeat until the user scrolls to the next one or closes the app. In other words, this is potentially an immersive app feeding you immersive content indefinitely. It may be that the co-existence of videos treating conspiracy as a form of entertainment or demonstrating conspiratorial thinking may maintain enough of a diversity of perspectives to protect viewers from becoming sucked in themselves. Given the overwhelming current success of *TikTok* and the consistent identification of online videos as a main gateway to conspiracism, however, this is in need of urgent further investigation. In a global context where worldviews appear to be becoming increasingly polarised and entrenched, it also seems productive to consider whether our seeming inability to agree has a psychological basis. Namely, that whilst we bodily share the same planet, we are invisibly, but firmly, mentally immersed in different realities. Linguistics may be mechanism by which these multiple narrative worlds can be made visible.

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