

Conspiracy Theories and Merchants of Doubt: Exploration of an Implicit Link

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Abstract

A lot of industrial sectors whose activity is at the origin of public health problems have in the past been able to conduct very sophisticated strategies to manipulate the masses. By selling doubt, powerful companies have thus protected themselves from the implementation of coercive regulations that could harm their financial results. The merchants of doubt rely on different marketing and communication tools that are now widely known and studied. However, there is virtually no research linking them to conspiracy theories. The objective of this research note is to fill the gap by pointing to the presence of systemic conspiracies to better understand the link with manipulation strategies over several decades. Two illustrations are drawn from the French context: the 2018-2019 Yellow Vests crisis and Professor Didier Raoult's controversial medical protocol against COVID-19. In both cases, the protagonists evoke a systemic conspiracy driven by economic and political elites to smash initiatives challenging the established order. The merchants of doubt, who seek to spread relativism, are undoubtedly responsible for the development of conspiracy theories at the heart of democratic societies.

Keywords: Communication, Conspiracy theories, Didier Raoult, France, Manipulation, Merchants of doubt, Yellow Vests

1. Introduction

For decades, the tobacco industry succeeded in making inveterate smokers believe that cigarettes did not present a real risk of one day being struck by lung cancer because it was impossible to see a scientific consensus emerging on the topic (Brandt, 2012). For their part, the asbestos industry denied any proven link between exposure to the “killer fiber” and asbestosis and, worst of all, the terrible cancer of the pleura, also cultivating doubt among the public opinion. These two examples are the subject of numerous academic works relating to the communication strategies mobilized by companies to “sell suspicion” to pursue their activities with high health risks for the populations. Among the most famous contributions, that of Oreskes and Conway (2010) deserves particular attention. Although their work focuses specifically on the U.S. context, it nonetheless highlights communication strategies that, year after year, have contributed to undermining the credibility of science among the public opinion, just as the merchants of doubt simultaneously seek to undermine the credibility of those who try to highlight their ethically unacceptable behavior. This is even more serious as emotion/affect plays a major role in the perception of a phenomenon, for example climate change (Morton and Hannibal, 2018), and populations can be disturbed by controversies they find hard to understand.

According to Oreskes and Conway (2010), one of the key problems is that many social media have applied a double principle: on the one hand, equal coverage of different points of view on any scientific issue; on the other hand, a continuous repetition of ideas that generate the most discussion, in other words the famous “buzz,” rather than argued debates based on objective facts. Of course, with the rise of social media and the multiplication of conspiracy websites, nothing has really improved in the last decade, with an inflation of anti-scientific positions that are multiplying, provoking in individuals overwhelmed by a growing flow of information—which they are no longer able to transform into knowledge—a deep “information fatigue” (Gault and Medioni, 2022). This fatigue is conducive to an increased permeability to doubt, as soon as it is cleverly orchestrated by companies with the help of influence groups that know how to use proven marketing and communication tools, as the portraits of the greatest manipulators in history drawn up by Colon (2021) remind us. There are undoubtedly lessons to be learned for the marketing management and challenges the authorities in terms of policy implications.

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The emergence of merchants of doubt in France is linked to specific communication frameworks, including social media (Motameni and Nordstrom, 2014), who played an active role in the diffusion of a “conspiratorial mindset” whose importance was noted by Polynczuk-Alenius (2020) during the COVID-19 crisis. They have led authorities to accept for years that merchants of doubt question proven scientific facts. This first phase, which we will call the “triumph of relativism,” has opened the way to a second phase of “denial of scientific discourse,” largely amplified by the liberation of word on news TV channels and social media. The central hypothesis is therefore that the presence of these media should not be considered as the source of all evils, but as a simple marketing tool to express one’s beliefs and have them shared by the maximum number of followers. As Snyder (2021) points out in discussing the case of the United States, we are moving from a society of confidence to a society of faith. In a confidence society, individuals have access to the same information and can trust the people around them—even if they do not share their opinions—in the context of daily interactions necessary for the functioning of society. In a society of faith, on the contrary, others are only recognized, even admired, if they think like us, if they share the same vision of the world, which favors the polarization of attitudes.

The French case is interesting to explore because conspiracy unfold in a society where *distrust*, not trust, is a major principle of governance (Peeters, 2013). From the beginning of the 2010s, Taïeb (2010) thus highlighted a gradation going from questioning to distrust, then to systematic doubt, to adherence to and dissemination of conspiratorial statements on news TV channels and social media. What we call the passage from the “triumph of relativism” to the “denial of the scientific discourse” is in line with Taïeb’s (2010) gradation and deserves specific attention. This research note discusses two illustrative cases in the French context: the Yellow Vests crisis and the case of the hydroxychloroquine-based COVID-19 treatment proposed by Professor Didier Raoult. In both cases, it is possible to evoke a systemic conspiracy that has developed based on a challenge to official science by outsiders in Becker’s (1963/2018) sense, in other words individuals who deviate from the dominant norm. The merchants of doubt are largely responsible for this, as they have not ceased, for decades, to question the word of scientists. Whether it is the Yellow Vests challenging global warming, or Didier Raoult challenging messenger RNA (mRNA) vaccination, there seems to be a link between a culture of doubt and “conspiracy temptations.”

2. An overview on conspiracy theories

Conspiracy theories are based on attitudes consisting in explaining the world through a vast manipulation of the masses carried out by individuals—or groups of individuals—using multiple tools, including digital tools. Conspiracy postures rely on rigorously constructed discourses explaining social facts hidden from the public, and which are the work of a secret will on the part of an “organized minority” (Giry, 2017). Numerous examples in history testify to approaches that predate modern conspiracies, of which Cassam (2019) offers a synthesis. Thus, between July and August 1789, unprecedented peasant revolts were sparked in France by rumors of a conspiracy by aristocrats to flee the country with all the gold in the kingdom to hire bloodthirsty mercenaries and send them to raze villages, demolish crops and re-establish absolute monarchy (Lefebvre, 1932/2016). The phenomenal power of this rumor, which led to the looting and destruction of castles, abbeys and priories by frightened peasants armed with shovels and pitchforks, encourages us to reflect on elements that are all too often neglected in reflections on conspiracies:

- On the one hand, the rumors of conspiracy can hardly be explained by personality traits or internal cognitive determinants, in this case the archaic violence of the peasants. They manifest first and foremost a social relationship, that of political submission and economic exploitation of the “small” by the “big,” from whom the former expected respect, protection, and subsistence.
- On the other hand, rumors of conspiracy express emotions of fear, distrust, anger, and indignation. In a social and economic context marked by hunger, political tension, exasperation against the Lords and the brigandage of looters, the narrative figure of the conspiracy makes the chaotic course of events intelligible and transforms the fundamentally apolitical feeling of anxiety and impotence into collective action.

In other words, while the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine have brought conspiracy issues to the forefront of the social media, conspiracy postures and their theories are not new (Kreis, 2015). These feature religious or spiritual groups (Jews, Freemasons, etc.), political groups (fascists, Bolsheviks, etc.) or more recently, economic groups (the arms industry, the pharmaceutical industry [Big Pharma]), or social groups (the “elites,” the “oligarchy,” the “Davos network”). It is important to note, however, that the notion of conspiracy theory is controversial, and its definition does not enjoy consensus in the scientific community of social sciences. To clarify, a distinction should be made between “proven conspiracies,” i.e., actual projects that are secretly concerted, and “conspiracy theories,” i.e., narratives of conspiracies that either do not exist or distort those that do exist (Kreis, 2015). These narratives can be about various topics: the political field, science and technology, health and medicine, global warming, secret societies, stigmatized social categories, historical events, etc.

Barkun (2013) thus distinguishes three scales of conspiracy theories ranging from the scale that aims to explain an isolated event limited in time to the scale so large that it constitutes a worldview. He classifies the scales in increasing order of magnitude:

- Theories that denounce “event-based conspiracies.” These are conspiracies that are held responsible for a limited event or set of events, which can be described as discrete. For example, the supporters of a football team are systematically banned from travelling to matches by the ministry of sports because they are considered violent (while other supporters who are at least as violent can travel freely from a stadium to another).
- Theories that denounce “systemic conspiracies.” In these cases, the conspiracy would have economic or political objectives, generally to ensure control of the decisions taken over an entire country or region of the world, for example the European Union. If the project is ambitious, the machinery is simple: a single organization (a group of individuals) implements a plan to infiltrate and/or pervert existing institutions.
- Theories that denounce “super-conspiracies.” These are multiple conspiracies that are linked together in a hierarchical manner. At the top of the hierarchy is a distant but all-powerful and invisible force that manipulates individuals and institutions, operating in great secrecy. Cassam (2019) lists some of these super-conspiracies that are part of a vast global, even cosmic, plan for world domination.

The common feature of the various conspiracy theories is a generalized distrust of established institutions (governments, international institutions) and the main official media. They are perceived as *accomplices in the conspiracy*, given their inability to identify it. The rhetoric of the fight against misleading media is a constant in conspiracy social networks, and the fact that an idea is marginal, not, or hardly accepted in society, automatically makes it worthy of interest for conspiracists. Barkun (2013) underlines that the systematic rejection of authority is, for conspiracists, a sign of the veracity of a belief, whatever the basis of the rejection. Thus, paradoxically, the same people can be heard rejecting information out of a “critical analysis” towards the mainstream media, and accepting as true, without scrupulous examination of the facts, elements contributed by an extra-institutional source. A conspiracist ultimately assumes the existence of an occult intention behind every event, and he/she is convinced that there are people so powerful that they can control all social relations. This means that he/she leaves no room for contingency or unforeseen consequences in an increasingly complex and turbulent world. This reasoning is obviously speculative, and generally unsupported by any scrupulous examination of the facts. Above all, it is based on a system of thought that considers that there can only be one cause for a single event.

3. Systemic conspiracy: two illustrations

We can quickly dispense with super-conspiracy, which presupposes the presence of a demiurge, by replacing the hand of God with the hands of flesh-and-blood puppeteers pulling the world’s strings behind the scenes (Taguieff, 2023). The Illuminati movement is probably the oldest and best-known super-conspiracy, since the *Illuminatenorden* was created in 1777 in Ingolsadt, Bavaria, by Adam Weishaupt, a Professor of Canon Law. His objective was to destroy the old world and put an end to obscurantism by building a new society based on rationalism (Bourseiller, 2021). For this purpose, Adam Weishaupt built a secret order that developed positions much more radical than those of the Masonic lodges, while remaining a member of Freemasonry. While many German intellectuals joined him, the *Illuminatenorden* ceased to be talked about after the French Revolution following the disaffection of a growing number of its members, some of whom were also guillotined during the Terror, and it officially disappeared in the 1790s. On the other hand, it remains very present in the conspiracy imaginary until today, including in blockbusters like *Angels and Demons* (2009) by Ron Howard.

The Illuminati are attributed demiurgic powers by assimilating them to “masters of the world” who pull all the strings while being invisible to the eyes of the masses; their offices and temples cannot be found, and there is no tangible proof of their existence. The door is thus open for all collective delusions by labeling as Illuminati personalities such as Joseph Biden, Emmanuel Macron, and even Madonna or Lady Gaga (Bourseiller, 2021). It is impossible to deny the existence of people convinced of the presence of super-conspiracies, even if their number remains limited. These theories are seductive because they respond perfectly to psychological needs and exploit cognitive biases (Bronner, 2013). They offer a simple explanation for a sometimes-painful reality, and they flatter the ego by making their followers believe they are smarter than the “sheep” blindly believing the official version. Systemic conspiracies are vastly more numerous, however, because they remain extremely credible to the masses, and as Lazer *et al.* (2018) point out, their appearance of credibility is high enough to facilitate extremely rapid dissemination in democratic societies. Two recent French examples, post 2018, provide an interesting double illustration of this reality.

3.1. Illustration A: Yellow Vests vs. radical environmentalists

Most of the super-conspiracies are so grotesque that their media effects are ultimately very limited.

This is not the case with systemic conspiracies, whose effects are, on the contrary, significant in many countries in Europe, even a systemic conspiracy can become a super-conspiracy for very few radicalized individuals who construct a parallel knowledge by feeding on biased information. The Yellow Vests crisis in France, which began in November 2018 following a government decision to increase the tax on fossil energies, is a perfect case of protesters constructing a systemic conspiracy (President Macron in the service of the financial elites and environmentalist lobbies). Throughout the winter of 2018-2019, before being affected in 2020 by the COVID-19 pandemic, France was hit by a major social crisis. This crisis owes its singularity to the fact that it is based on emotions, immediacy, the refusal of authority, disobedience, and the concern to maintain personal autonomy in collective action, rather than on participation in a way of life guided by an ideology as is the case in militancy. The social crisis of the Yellow Vests resulted in a series of public demonstrations as well in urban centers as in suburbs, with the massive occupation of traffic roundabouts. One of the consequences is that supply chains have been completely destabilized, with a new model emerging, based on multiple local micro-disruptions (traffic roundabouts blocking), which complements the old model, based on a reduced number of macro-disruptions (hubs blocking) (Fulconis and Paché, 2020).

In an excellent book, Mansuy (2022) offers the result of his year-long immersion in the French conspiracy universe, which has been particularly dynamic since the Yellow Vests crisis. If this movement has been seen in many countries through demonstrations of extreme violence for several weeks, it also highlights the importance of conspiracy in a new popular protest. Clifton and de la Broise (2020) also underline the central role played by news TV channels in the propagation of this popular protest movement, by giving voice to individuals without any expertise but who have “theorized” from there a conspiracy discourse that has infused the French society. For the Yellow Vests, the increase in diesel fuel taxes is the direct result of a systemic conspiracy orchestrated by radical environmentalists who have infiltrated institutions to force a sharp reduction in people’s mobility. The link with the merchants of doubt is indisputable, as shown by the 2010 interview with a renowned French scientist in a far-right magazine: Claude Allègre (Paché, 2023). For him, radical ecology replaces communism as a dictatorial system of thought. Claude Allègre took advantage of his scientific notoriety for 20 years to cultivate doubt about the reality of global warming, a doubt that certain conspiracy networks associated with the Yellow Vests movement skillfully used.

3.2. Illustration B: Didier Raoult vs. Big Pharma

If the example of the Yellow Vests movement is instructive, it would be interesting to cross-reference it with another emblematic situation, that of Didier Raoult, director of the IHU-Méditerranée Infection in Marseille, a world-renowned infectious disease specialist, but also a true “academic outsider,” to identify possible organizational invariants. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Didier Raoult personified the shift from the space of controversy between peers to the field of polemics, and then to conspiracy theories. In the spring of 2020, against Big Pharma dominant position (Mucchielli, 2021), he decided to promote a specific treatment protocol in opposition to the current validation protocols, and to take public opinion directly to task via social networks (Lukasik and Bassoni, 2022). The specific treatment is derived from the antimalarial drug chloroquine, hydroxychloroquine, which is usually used to treat lupus or rheumatoid arthritis. According to Didier Raoult, based on two studies conducted at the IHU-Méditerranée Infection, this molecule represents a formidable and inexpensive weapon against COVID-19. Some scientists and politicians were quick to call for its massive use, despite serious doubts about the rigor of the sampling and the absence of a placebo group. Doubts outweighed pseudo-certainties, and the scientific community ended up contesting the use of hydroxychloroquine, pointing to the treatment’s numerous side effects and lack of strong results.

Clear-cut opinions then crystallize around Didier Raoult’s personality, and not around his protocol, with the emergence of communities of fans, but also of detractors, who violently inveigh against each other. As Smyrnaioi *et al.* (2021) indicate, based on a lexicometric analysis of 1.2 million tweets, it appears that the groups of supporters of Presidents Donald Trump and Jair Bolsonaro have connected with the French-speaking pro-Didier Raoult in a common desire to identify a systemic conspiracy orchestrated by large pharmaceutical laboratories. If the case of Didier Raoult testifies to a kind of “French madness” (Chemin and Etchegoin, 2021), it would therefore be clumsy to ignore the conspiratorial dimension in which communication strategies are central to the game. The debate is not about to end, as shown by the investigations of the French daily newspaper *France Soir* with the help of the *Collectif Citoyen* for the past two years, two unconditional fans of Didier Raoult and of the opponents of the anti-COVID-19 vaccination, whose obsession is to identify the “harassment sphere” of which Didier Raoult is the target. In response, conspiracists will gather in March 2022, during an international conference at the IHU-Méditerranée Infection, to defend heterodox positions on the management of the COVID-19 pandemic, both medically and politically.

Among the delegates, many observers will note the embarrassing presence of Robert Wallace Malone, a U.S. biologist known for spreading fake news about the efficacy and safety of vaccines. Giry's (2023) conclusion is unambiguous: Didier Raoult is a typical case of what we might call "medical populism."

4. Conclusions

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, scientists have never had so much influence in economic, political, and societal debates. They have guided the actions of various governments, appeared on TV networks, and given countless interviews to popularize their work, but also to take sometimes questionable positions. Some scientists have sunk into conspiratorial fantasies or, at the very least, they have not hesitated to contribute to the communication strategies of merchants of doubt. The case of Laurent Mucchielli, a sociologist at the French National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS) is emblematic since he is at the origin of the repeated diffusion of false information on his blog hosted by *Mediapart* and on the conspiracy blog of *France Soir*. Thus, on July 30, 2021, he did not hesitate to question the safety of the anti-COVID-19 vaccines, responsible for nearly 1,000 deaths in France, by confusing deaths that occurred during a period following a vaccination with deaths caused by the vaccination. As underlined by several researchers in an article published by *Le Monde* on August 4, 2021, Laurent Mucchielli has committed the classic confusion between correlation and causation (causality), an error in reasoning that would make students who have just started university smile. The seriousness of this confusion needs to be emphasized, as the low level of scientific literacy among the population, as pointed out by Bronner (2013), facilitates their manipulation by the merchants of doubt, who will easily be able to present biased data to their advantage, which is one of the cornerstones of an effective public relations policy (Ukaj, 2016).

Of course, it is out of the question to accuse tobacco, asbestos, or chemical companies of intentionally (cynically) fueling conspiracy theories. Their objective is more prosaic: to use marketing and communication tools to curb political action that could harm their profitability and shareholder remuneration. On the other hand, by playing on doubt, they have for decades built an environment that fosters widespread suspicion. The convergence with conspiratorial approaches is troubling here. Indeed, as Danblon and Nicolas (2012) point out, the very essence of conspiracism is to subject any event or piece of data, including those rigorously validated by a scientific approach, to the sift of criticism. It is even possible to speak of the importance of a *hypercritical posture* in the face of "official" knowledge whose purpose is to conceal a hidden reality. According to Taguieff (2023), this is one of the five founding principles of all conspiracism: *everything officially held to be true must be subjected to ruthless critical scrutiny*. In other words, there is no such thing as absolute truth, only relative (and alternative) truths, which a rigorous approach must uncover. Implicitly, the merchants of doubt take up this idea, rejecting—like the conspiracists—any dogmatic belief to justify the relevance of relativism.

More than ever, people have the impression of living in an age of relativism, where everyone expresses his/her own truth, but where no truth, even dressed in the clothes of a serious scientific approach, is accepted as absolute. In other words, in a society obsessed with self-esteem, an erroneous statement is now considered a legitimate opinion that must be recognized as such. The "You're wrong, I'll prove it to you" is transformed into "You've expressed your own truth, I must respect it," while the objective reality of the facts is systematically undermined by a subjective worldview. This is the key idea of Feyerabend's (1975/2010) "everything goes," the famous anarchist of science, who implies that any hypothesis, any conjecture, or any methodology, in the face of a world that remains essentially unknown, can allow knowledge to progress. The merchants of doubt thus manage to dominate the scientific consensus because they take advantage of this socio-cultural evolution, and the ignorance of the masses allows them to invent, distort or ignore multiple proofs with impunity. From this point of view, top corporate managers must not underestimate the fact that their organizational behavior, particularly in the deviant use of marketing and communication tools, has a real impact on the rapid spread of conspiracy theories, whose effects are sometimes disastrous on democratic societies.

Author's biography

Gilles Paché is a Professor of Marketing and Supply Chain Management at Aix-Marseille University, France. He has more than 650 publications in the forms of journal papers, books, edited books, edited proceedings, edited special issues, book chapters, conference papers and reports. A member of the CERGAM Lab in Aix-en-Provence and past director of the Aix-Marseille University Press, his major interests are network organizations, supply chain management, and retail operations management.

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