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RESEARCH ARTICLE



Fear of the Future: Causal Layered Analysis and Narrative Foresight Versus Conspiracy Theories

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ABSTRACT

This essay addresses conspiracism using an interdisciplinary futures studies approach. Conspiracy theories can be reframed, rather than dismissed, via Causal Layered Analysis (CLA) and narrative foresight. After the historical roots of conspiracy theory are traced, narratives that support conspiracies are discussed, and cognitive biases like the conjunction fallacy are examined. The effectiveness of CLA is demonstrated through case studies such as QAnon and The Protocols of the Elders of Zion. A survey of research on digital disinformation shows how futures literacy, as opposed to media literacy and critical thinking, can counter conspiracism and enable planning for inclusive, affirmative alternative futures.

KEYWORDS

Causal layered analysis;
cognitive bias; conspiracy
theory; futures literacy;
narrative foresight

Introduction

Conspiracy theory is the triumph of the liminal over the literal. It is a curious embrace binding those who feel marginalized by an illusory “Illuminati.” The misleading complexity of conspiracy plots can be deconstructed using narrative foresight (Milojević & Inayatullah, 2015). Futures literacy may deliminalize those who obsess over the spider webs of international intrigue. By understanding the psychology and sociology of conspiracy theories, we can better resist their allure and promote a more informed and rational discourse. This paper will review the historical genesis of conspiracy theory, detail the persistence of the conjunction fallacy and how new technologies enable conspiracy theory, and finally, offer how causal layered analysis and narrative foresight might counter conspiracy theories. The current tech-induced anxiety about the future amplifies how narrative foresight is needed to mitigate socio-political paranoia. The approach offered here integrates historical and psychological study of conspiracy theories with methodologies from futures studies, specifically narrative foresight and Causal Layered Analysis (CLA). Previous commentary has reviewed the genealogy of conspiratorial thought or examined its cognitive underpinnings; this paper reconsiders conspiracy theory as an aspiring future-oriented narrative with compelling mythic and metaphorical allure. In doing so, it protracts the fact-finding model, enabling a “storylistening” approach (Schwarz, 2015) that contends with conspiratorial discourse at its narrative core, warranting inclusive and affirming alternative futures. Through

historical analysis, cognitive theory, and foresight methodology, the paper offers a novel interdisciplinary framework for both comprehending and countering the socio-political traction of conspiracy narratives. To examine these dynamics, the following analysis draws on established work in both conspiracy theory studies, narrative, and futures theory, using historical, cognitive, and narratological perspectives.

This paper also addresses a research gap: while historians, cognitive scientists, and media scholars have diagnosed the spread and psychology of conspiratorial beliefs, few have applied futures methodologies to reframe these narratives. Causal Layered Analysis (Inayatullah, 1998) and narrative foresight (Milojević & Inayatullah, 2015) are applied here not only to deconstruct conspiracist discourse, but to design plausible, inclusive counter-narratives that speak to the same mythic and affective needs. This futures literacy approach, differing from critical thinking's focus on logical fallacies or media literacy's emphasis on source evaluation, equips individuals to interrogate the future worlds presumed by conspiracy theories and to consider alternatives. It responds to Marwick and Partin's (2024) call to address the "affective infrastructures" of networked disinformation, moving beyond fact-checking toward narrative transformation. It demonstrates how CLA and narrative foresight can front emotionally powerful counter-narratives able to flourish in the in the same digital universe.

Theoretical Framework

This analysis surveys an intersection between conspiracy theory studies and narrative/futures theory (Hofstadter, 1965). Within conspiracy theory scholarship, it builds on Hofstadter's (1965) account of the "paranoid style," Barkun's (2013) dissection of apocalyptic and esoteric traditions, and Byford's (2011) examination of their rhetorical logic, situating contemporary phenomena like QAnon within a lineage stretching from Barruel's 18th-century Illuminati narrative to the present. From narrative and futures theory, it draws on Bruner's (1990) view of communities bound by shared interpretive traditions and Inayatullah's (1998) Causal Layered Analysis.

Causal Layered Analysis probes litany, systemic, worldview, and myth/metaphor levels to uncover the cultural and symbolic foundations of belief. The "myth/metaphor layer" is the deepest storyline, the equivalent of a cautionary myth or fable whose "moral" makes the conspiracy feel true to believers. The "litany level" corresponds to the headline or the sound bite from news stories, or sloganeering of politicians or organizations. The "systemic level" identifies the structures that maintain the narrative, such as political hegemony, economic frameworks, or media systems. The "worldview level" examines the ideologies and assumptions that shape how events and systems are construed, such as the conviction that power is always covert and voracious. Causal Layered Analysis elucidates the difference between "here is what happened" and "here is why people find it believable."

Cognitive psychology, drawing on the conjunction fallacy (Brotherton & French, 2014; Tversky and Kahneman, 1983) discloses that representational biases and overestimation errors generate plausibility from outrageousness. Milojević and Inayatullah (2015) narrative foresight and CLA offer methods to rebut conspiratorial claims and reframe them as inclusive, affirmative alternatives, treating conspiracy theories not as mere falsehoods but as culturally resonant futures narratives to be critically

“storylistened” to Schwarz (2015) and strategically redirected toward constructive ends. “Storylistening” is paying close attention to the person telling the story, realizing their need to be recognized, and using that information to understand the teller’s identity rather than just following along with their narrative’s details.

The Historical Genesis of Conspiracy Theory

Conspiracy theories have been among us since humanity learned to whisper. Byford asserts that they establish their legitimacy through “irrefutable logic” and presentation of “facts” (p.71). Barkun (2013) defines them as primarily revealing the truth about politics and revealing the hidden agendas of shadowy elites, configuring the system behind the system (p. 227). However, these notions have recently surpassed absurdity; the “QAnon” canard, which believes a cannibal pedophile elite rules the world, is a recent, extreme example (Zihiri et al., 2022). For QAnon, in particular, Hofstadter’s (1965) definition from over half a century ago still rings true, “The enemy is clearly delineated: he is a perfect model of malice, a kind of amoral superman—sinister, ubiquitous, powerful, cruel, sensual, luxury-loving” (pp. 31–32). This attitude empowers Qanon crusaders with a sense of moral rectitude. To understand how futures literacy and CLA might thwart such empowerment, it is best to review how conspiracism has developed through the modern era and been rejiggered through political shifts and technological developments.

While rapid advances in artificial intelligence may seem to be “justification” for heightened paranoia, the “anti-tech” phenomenon has been present since the invention of the printing press; if not since marine, navigation was made possible by the advent of the compass, astrolabe, and Portolan charts. For it is a pattern throughout conspiracy theory history that technological advances prompt both utopian and paranoid narratives. The modern concept of grand conspiracy theory dates from the 18th century, inspired by the First Estate’s fear of the spread of the French Revolution. The seed is a single source that has proliferated the Illuminati notion since 1798. Barruel’s (1797) *Mémoires pour servir à l’histoire du Jacobinisme* is the playbook for all subsequent conspiracy theories. Circular reasoning is their methodology. Barruel’s ideas quickly reached the New World; mutating from fear of secret societies to French subversion, the rise in immigration kindled the fires of xenophobia in the 1850s when the Know-Nothing party of nativists mobilized against the Papist Legions. This paranoia morphed into the America First movement of the early 20th century and degenerated into the QAnon conspiracy, The beliefs of the latter are Barruel’s catastrophic legacy.

The horrific *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* a hoax created by the Czarist secret police in 1908 is the modern era’s primer for the “international Jewish conspiracy,” a foundation of Nazi ideology and a justification for the Holocaust (Cohn, 1966). In 1924, Nesta Webster, a British fascist wove together the strands of Barruel and the *Protocols* to create the consummate conspiracy theory. Rejecting empirical evidence, she defended her use of the *Protocols*: “I have never affirmed my belief in the authenticity of the *Protocols*, but have always treated it as an entirely open question” (*Secret Societies*, 408). This is the core of the conspiracy theorist’s creed: abjure plausible deniability and assert doubtability, which is impossible to disprove—the plausible doubt bedrock of conspiracy rhetoric. A brutal irony of our time is that conspiracy theories

have log-jammed the mainstream, and we have seen the “Information Age” devolve into an era of disinformation (Connolly, 2022). The expert agents of disinformation methodically and generate masses of conflicting information to convince the public that the true narrative is buried under a rubble of factoids (Wardle & Derakshan, 2017).

Conspiracy theories persistently adapt to new media technology; they succeeded with printed pamphlets and now with online memes. Yet the narrative remains unchanged, only the delivery system differs. However, their deep narrative structures are well-suited to deconstruction via CLA. It can expose the ongoing tropes and figures that sustain conspiracism.

The Persistence of the Conjunction Fallacy

Permutations of the grand conspiracy theory transmogrify continually, yet they always rely on a grain of truth. Tversky and Kahneman (1983) seem to offer an explanation for the existence of conspiracy theories, which they term the conjunction fallacy. Their most famous demonstration is “The Linda Problem.” They stress “representativeness” as the flawed heuristic most people use (Tversky and Kahneman 1983, p. 295). Brotherton and French (2014) build an argument about this and conspiracy theories, which they see as “a prominent feature of contemporary culture” (p. 238). Overestimation is at the heart of the conspiracy belief system. They tally a conjunction error rate of 76.9% among the believers (p. 242). A more recent study (Stall & Petrocelli, 2023) uses conspiracy theory belief to amplify the conjunction fallacy. Nevertheless, Gould (1992) expresses his frustration at the certainty with which Tversky and Kahneman touted the odds of Linda being a feminist activist at 0.045. Gould further laments that he could not stop thinking about the details of Linda’s background (pp. 468–469). (Hertwig and Gigerenzer, 1999) have written several papers criticizing Tversky and Kahneman’s wording choices, their neglect of polysemy, their interpretation of probability, and the Linda example, “It is pointless to compare participants’ judgments with a norm from mathematical probability theory because the inferred meanings have nothing to do with mathematical probability” (p. 277). These cognitive biases combined with the tenacity of myth-making readily breed more conspiracy narratives. Challenging them impels more than fact-checking, one must deal with the profoundly symbolic and emotional layers of belief that catalyze conspiracism, precisely the areas where CLA and narrative foresight perform best.

Liminal conspiracists cross the threshold by arguing through the negative so that one cannot prove their theory is not so—narrative foresight studies are an exemplary counter to the conspiracy theory’s single-sourced circular reasoning. Consider the theory of probabalism which denies certainty and argues that probability adequately determines actions or beliefs. Janasik (2021) offers the “process of probabilistically assessing or predicting ‘what is likely going to happen next’” and defines “plausibility as occurrability” (p. 3). Janasik’s notions of probability and plausibility are inextricably linked in conspiracy theorizing.

The onslaught of conspiracy theories in the digital age has been studied ever since Karl Popper’s (1972) brief discussion. Popper dismisses what he calls “the conspiracy theory of society.” He asserts that this is “fundamentally flawed and a mistaken understanding of social phenomena. A given social phenomenon cannot be explained with

the knowledge acquired when we learn that a group of people has strategized in secret to cause the phenomenon.” He insists though, “*nothing ever comes off exactly as intended*” [Popper’s emphasis] (pp. 123–124). While Popper is given credit for initiating the philosophical discussion, it was decades before his commentary received any significant response.

Sunstein and Vermeule (2008) offer skepticism if not contempt for conspiracy theories. Within a few years of their study though, they were subjected to a rigorous critique themselves. Their argument, even if one rejects conspiracy theories out of hand, seems a trifle ingenuous. A historian of secret societies (Roberts, 1972) argues that historians have possibly “gone too far” in rejecting outright any suggestion of the possibility of conspiracy because an exclusively rational and positivist historiography is unable to grapple with irrational topics such as the persistence of the belief in the international Jewish conspiracy (pp. 10–11). As Coady (2018) demonstrates, from 2009 to 2012 Sunstein was the head of the United States government’s Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs, directly under the control of the President, “where his responsibilities included overseeing policies related to information quality” (p. 292). Sunstein and Vermeule assert that open societies with a free press would undoubtedly uncover genuine conspiracies, moreover, open societies have governments that render conspiracies unjustified thus these theories must be implicitly false (Sunstein and Vermeule (pp. 208–210). This article has become notorious for its extraordinary “solution” for governmental suppression of conspiracy theories through “cognitive infiltration.” This would entail total Internet surveillance and infiltration of “real-space groups” (p. 22).

The history of governmental subterfuge renders Sunstein and Vermeule’s confidence risible. Nevertheless, the reticence to readily accept the dismissal of conspiracy theories is one of the symptoms of conspiratorial fever spread by the ever-diminishing trust in institutions (Uscinski & Parent, 2014). Vigorous skepticism is good for open societies, but relentless rejection of all authority leads to nihilism at best and anarchy at worst. Causal layered analysis and narrative foresight could restore judicious recognition of expertise and proper authority.

Conspiracy theories, as the historical cases above demonstrate, attract because they are compelling stories. They are the stuff of melodrama with villains, hidden plots, and inevitable endings. Causal Layered Analysis (CLA) takes such a story apart and considers it from four angles: the surface events (litany), the systems and structures behind them, the worldview shaping those structures, and the deep myths and metaphors at the story’s core. In this sense, CLA is less about replacing history with theory and more about looking beneath the surface of the stories we tell.

Narrative Foresight, Causal Layering, and Conspiracy Theories: From Diagnosis to Action: CLA Countering Conspiracism

Barkun’s (2013) example of “improvisational millennialism” details the adaptation modes of the hermetic and cataclysmic characteristic of conspiratorial belief, and Douglas et al.’s (2017) concept of epistemic anxiety details the disturbed psychology underlying it, yet both are predominantly descriptive. They reveal the conspiratorial thinker’s habits of mind, but offer scant opportunities for transformation.

This paper argues that while such descriptions are useful for understanding, they must be augmented by active reframing of the narrative. The methods of Causal Layered Analysis (Inayatullah, 1998) and narrative foresight (Milojević & Inayatullah, 2015) go beyond diagnosis toward action. Deploying across litany, systemic, worldview, and myth/metaphor levels, CLA enables practitioners to “storylisten” (Schwarz, 2015) for embedded metaphors and reframe them into futures that retain narrative coherence while remedying pernicious content. Narrative foresight complements this by offering plausible, desirable alternative futures that address the same identification and aspirational needs salved by conspiracy theories without resorting to exclusion or paranoia. These methods allow practitioners to provide emotionally compelling alternatives to conspiracist narratives that deconstruct that worldview and satisfy the yearning for meaning and agency. Positioning CLA and narrative foresight along with, and ultimately as an alternative to, Barkun’s and Douglas’s frameworks underscores their usefulness: CLA and narrative foresight not only interpret conspiratorial narratives but actively reframe them.

Applying CLA to Historical Conspiracism

A causal layered analysis of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* follows. The litany layer is the sensational charge that a Jewish cabal manipulates media, finance, and politics to clandestinely achieve world domination. The social causes layer reveals that continual upheaval in late 19th-century Russia spawned the narrative, and political instability, revolutionary threats, and endemic anti-Semitism, demanded a scapegoat. The worldview layer is founded upon the Orthodox dread of satanic legions corroding the existing social order, regarding Jews as the destroyers of righteous stability. The metaphor layer is expressed through the lurid imagery of a shadowy entity, a “tentacled octopus” or a “spider in the center of its web,” symbolizing the malignant forces poisoning every portion of society. Sifting through these layers provides a narrative for its root causes. Therefore, rather than dismissing conspiracy claims as “crackpot theories” one can establish alternatives. The responses must be measured to counter the instability that originally provoked the conspiracy theory. Applying CLA to a historical example demonstrates how it may expose the persistence of conspiracist narratives by stimulating psychological and cultural resonances. To proceed one could develop these insights into a framework for participatory action that might forestall the malignant narratives.

Anxiety is the greatest threat to foresight. It may seem counterintuitive that Dentith, Pfeiffer, and Stokes examine the epistemology of conspiracy theories in a special issue of *Social Epistemology* (Dentith, 2023) dedicated to conspiracy theory. The special issue looked into philosophical concerns.

Integrating Digital Disinformation Insights

Previously, Marwick and Partin (2024) have questioned limiting the discussion of conspiracy theories as social phenomena. They argue that the key component to the construction of the conspiracy community is communication. They particularly indicate the viral aspects of recent conspiracism. They emphasize “affective infrastructures,” the

emotional flashpoints that trigger the lack of meaning and agency in the conspiracist consciousness. QAnon has been particularly successful in enabling this. Again, CLA can be employed to shatter this infrastructure. At the litany level, alternative slogans can stifle panic-inducing memes; at the systemic level, participatory governance and open sourcing of data can herald transparency; at the worldview level, redirecting obsessions about unseen authorities to embracing mutual agency can assuage paranoia; finally at the myth/metaphor level, rejuvenating imagery can salve troubled spirits without inciting discord. Aligning narrative foresight with these dislocations can confront conspiracism's pathos and propaganda.

Turning from the participatory perspective, let us consider the “probabilistic” approach and “normative turn” Dentith, Pfeiffer, and Stokes identify in their conspiracy theorizing that pertain to education about futures studies. Foresight education equips individuals with critical thinking skills, a capacity for discernment, and an ability to navigate uncertainty (Slaughter, 2020). It also impels heightened awareness of the fallacy of “overinflated agency” (Milojević, 2021). There are educational options to counter the onrush of misinformation that feeds conspiracy theories, and one, in particular, obtains here: narrative foresight. Milojević and Inayatullah (2015) argue, “Narrative foresight straddles the boundary between the empirical, interpretive, critical, and action learning modes of futures studies.” The warning that they quote, “Stories are dangerous!” (p. 153) immediately conjures conspiracy theory. They offer a table with which to analyze dysfunctional narratives using these categories: “Issue, assumption, old metaphor, new metaphor, and alternative future” (p. 155). Consider the issue of a conspiracy theory, its assumption that the Illuminati controls history; the old metaphor is “the hidden hand” (not Adam Smith’s “market”); the new metaphor could be a voice raised against inequity; the alternative future might be a new social contract.

Later Milojević and Inayatullah offer a series of questions (p. 158), which for our purposes, may be asked of QAnon.

1. What is the history of the issue?
From Adam Weishaupt's Bavarian Illuminati, founded in 1776, to the pedophile-cannibal elite controlling the world, QAnon's reported first in 2017.
2. What is your forecast if current trends continue?
More Qanon zealots will arm themselves and possibly kill.
3. What are the critical assumptions you used in your forecast?
The persistence of QAnon despite its major locus being debunked.
4. What are some alternative futures based on different assumptions?
The reestablishment of a responsible government. Corporations separated from the government.
5. Out of these alternative futures what is your preferred one?
One depends upon the other.
6. Which strategies can be used in order to realize your preferred future?
Reform campaign funding to prevent corporate interference.
7. What is a new narrative or metaphor that would support your preferred future?
Corporations would no longer be legally regarded as individuals that are without individual responsibility. They would be primarily responsible to society, not shareholders.

This is relevant here because Milojević and Inayatullah (2015) offer, in the larger context of their argument, connections between the realms of individual and social experience—the universal and the particular—that inform our awareness of futures narratology. This enables deep probing into the past to provide for the possibility of a close reading of the future. Thus, we may better tell ourselves what might or may happen because we are prepared for a critical reading of the narrative we have established for ourselves.

The poststructuralist method that Inayatullah (1998) argues for is well suited to unraveling conspiracy theories. The “fact basis” of causal layered analysis (Inayatullah, 1998, p. 825) is precisely what a conspiracy theory presumes but in fact abuses. Building on Inayatullah, Jarva (2014) posits layering of narrative. The primary and secondary narration that he discusses (p. 7) offer another way of figuring out the conspiracy theory plot-line. The narrator is the discoverer of the conspiracy, such as the Abbé Barruel or Nesta Webster; the story within the story is the spread of the conspiracy from its root to its flowering. The “narrative progression in time” (p. 12) would be the emergence of the Illuminati (beginning) creating the Federal Reserve Bank in the United States and later the World Bank (middle), and finally the New World Order of Illuminati and slaves (end). The power of the conspiracy theory is its profound narrativity and easeful tellability (p. 14). The conspiracy theory offers an illusion of “concrete particulars” that the teller is convinced of (p. 15). The conspiracy theory satisfies both the paradigmatic and narrative presentation and elements Jarva outlines (p. 16). It explains, argues, describes, and tells the story itself. As discussed earlier, care must be taken in dissecting conspiracy narratives. Jarva cautions against a lack of awareness of the “multiple continuities” of futures narrative. Conversely, the ongoing conspiracy narrative requires narratological due diligence so that a counter-narrative may be provided.

The myth/metaphor layer of Inayatullah’s (1998) Causal Layered Analysis is pertinent here. MacGill’s (2015) focus on this layer identifies that those “excluded from power” are subject to the distortion of metaphor (p. 56). Believers in conspiracy theories see themselves as dwellers on the fringe. I would take MacGill’s point about distorted metaphor and identify the idea of the Illuminati as the believers’ reified metaphor for unseen forces that control the world (p. 58). Here is Inayatullah’s (2007) “gut-level capture of complexity” (p. 125). However, because the conspiracy believer’s metaphorical vision is distorted they capture only simplicity. Perhaps it is better to read conspiracy as mythological rather than metaphorical, taking MacGill’s cue from Joseph Campbell (p. 56). The certainty that conspiracy theory adherents possess should not be dismissed as obtuseness; Bruner’s (1990) argument about cultural communities who are bound by “stored narrative resources” and interpretive techniques” (p. 68) pertains to the conspiracy community. In the wake of Inayatullah’s development of CLA, community psychologists have applied it and their usage addresses the conspiratorial mindset. They emphasize going beyond events and even their social context and rather analyze the worldview of the community and its cultural foundation (Bishop et al., 2013). This is directly relevant to the conspiracy community. Ramos (2020) has further explored CLA’s efficacy in this regard taking an approach by focusing on individually deconstructing the self, a further delimitation of CLA. This departure from community allows breaking away from foundational conspiratorial constraints.

Performing CLA with Contemporary Cases

To further illustrate the narrative crisis and myth-making potential in contemporary media, the following CLA examines the QAnon phenomenon as an example of reactive futures construction. Applying CLA to a QAnon meme such as “The Storm is Coming” (Rothschild, 2021), uncovers the levels of apocalyptic imagery and moral binaries nurtured by distrust in institutions and emboldened by the allure of hidden knowledge. At the litany level, fear-based slogans are exchanged for messages encouraging civic renewal (e.g., “The Awakening is Spreading”); at the systemic level, secretive elite narratives make way for transparent, participatory governance models (Inayatullah, 2015). The Manichean worldview of the conspiracy is refocused to inspire collective definitions and epistemic deference (Milojević & Inayatullah, 2015). At the mythic layer, divine retribution tropes are replaced with rejuvenating motifs such as “The Garden After the Storm.” Restoration, confluence, and earthly stewardship create a counter-conspiratorial narrative that can reconfigure the public imagination from paranoia to shared agency. Additionally, futures thinking may advance resilience, critical inquiry, and inclusive transformation (Slaughter, 2004).

Consider a hypothetical pilot intervention in which CLA and narrative foresight are taken from theory to practice. QAnon slogans and memes are appearing throughout an American town; teachers, school administrators, and municipal leaders mobilize to confront this by organizing a two-week workshop “From the Storm to the Garden.” Individuals gather from the community and learn how to recognize the litany and systemic layers in the memes. They follow up on this by identifying the worldviews focusing on power and corruption and then having passed that hurdle; supplant nihilistic visions by affirming inclusive, participatory futures narratives. New metaphors, “Many Hands on the Wheel” (collective governance) and “The Garden After the Storm” (regeneration and stewardship) would be placed strategically to counter the QAnon memes and posters. Participants in the workshop and action program would be surveyed later to ensure that meliorism had overtaken fatalism and eagerness to authenticate sources upended acquiescence. Such piloting could substantiate that narrative foresight and CLA are capable of rechanneling conspiracist frenzy toward community cooperation.

The conspiracy narrative’s reliance on circular reasoning and insistence that absence of hard evidence proves the conspiracy’s successful concealment can be oppugned using Causal Layered Analysis. A related approach, a narrative strategy is suggested by the sophisticated discussion of “Toward Narrative Strategy” (Ogilvy et al., 2014). Conspiracy theories tell a “great story” and their putative reliance on “evidence”—no matter how selective and subjective—is a subversion of the rational strategy argued for by Ogilvy et al. The philosophical background of narratology, from Aristotle to Wittgenstein (Ogilvy et al., pp. 7–8) presages the difficulties in combatting conspiracy narratives. “The conflict between desire and the law” that Ogilvy et al. refer to as the “reality” that impels narrative is the impetus behind conspiracy theory as well. Conspiracy theorists desire an overarching “plot” that explains the evil they perceive as controlling the world. For those who would confront conspiracy theorists and unravel their narrative, Causal Layered Analysis would be an effective strategy.

Narrative Foresight as Transformative Process

Milojević and Inayatullah (2015) define narrative foresight as a combination of interpretive, critical, and action-learning modes. It actively directs the co-creation of alternative futures and analyzes dysfunctional narratives. Through structured questioning about history, forecasting, assumptions, alternative futures, and preferred futures, communities can systematically foil metaphors that exclude while advancing inclusive ones. By recognizing the powerful emotional appeal of the conspiracist “plot” this appeal can be configured toward positive engagement. Future literacy methods can counter conspiracism using similar narrative and emotional approaches.

Discussion

This paper considers historical, psychological, and futures studies approaches to conspiracy theories. Amplifying the genealogy of conspiratorial narratives (Cohn, 1966; Roberts, 1972) and cognitive explanations such as the conjunction fallacy (Brotherton & French, 2014; Tversky and Kahneman 1983), it argues that conspiracy theories function as competing “futures stories.” In doing so, it extends the futures literacy insights of Milojević and Inayatullah (2015) and Jarva (2014) by applying narrative foresight and Causal Layered Analysis (CLA) as tools for both diagnosing and countering conspiratorial narratives. Through reframing conspiracy theories not merely as delusions to dismantle, but as narratives with mythic and metaphorical allure, this paper argues that “storylistening” (Schwarz, 2015) may contend with and counter them with plausible alternatives.

What is more, by going beyond discourse and targeting conspiracism with a pilot intervention such as “From the Storm to the Garden,” one sees how real-world contexts can be infused with futures literacy and CLA to resist conspiracism behaviorally. Here also is an opportunity for interactive approaches among digital literacy programs, journalism, and civics learning to foster a manifold strategy that responds to conspiracism’s symbolic depth and viral vigor. Future research could analyze such interventions weighing their ability to transform individual beliefs but the affective infrastructures that incubate conspiracy theories.

This application also clarifies a gap in existing scholarship; while conspiracy theory research has examined historical continuities (Barkun, 2013; Hofstadter, 1965), rhetorical strategies (Byford, 2011), cognitive biases (Brotherton & French, 2014), and the online disinformation universe (Marwick & Partin, 2024), it has seldom employed futures methodologies for direct intervention. CLA and narrative foresight uniquely address the temporal imagination at the heart of conspiracism: the projection of a feared or desired future as if it were inevitable. Reframing the narrative of this imagined future can rupture the perfervid and mythic grip of conspiracist narratives, offering alternatives that retain narrative appeal without the exclusionary or paranoid elements.

This approach shifts the focus from fact-finding to fostering possible responses through narrative engagement. Some limitations should be acknowledged. As the framework is conceptual, to reduce conspiratorial beliefs empirical validation of narrative foresight interventions is necessary. Also, the analysis takes up predominantly

Western contexts, which may limit application to non-Western milieux. Diverse cultural and media environments should be the proving ground for future research to empirically test narrative foresight strategies, explore integration with digital literacy programs, and examine institutional applications in education, journalism, and policy. By bridging historical analysis, cognitive psychology, and foresight methodologies, this paper provides a pathway for addressing conspiracy theories in an age of technological acceleration and socio-political uncertainty.

Conclusion: Foresight May Block the Backstory

One should attend to the conspiracy theory narrative rather than dismiss it. This is crucial for correcting its distortions. A conspiracy theory is essentially a backstory for a futures narrative; it has convolutions but no legitimate conclusions. Conspiracy theories are blinded by hindsight. What is more, the present age is assailed by tech-induced paranoia; social media fosters and foments conspiracy theories. Foresight education, inspired by amplified perception, heightened cultural sensitivity and awareness, and grounded in critical thinking can be a counterforce to the elevated ignorance of conspiratorial obsession. This discussion has reviewed how the rise of conspiracy theories is symptomatic of a greater problem and how futures literacy, more specifically narrative foresight, may provide the necessary awareness to slow the spread of socio-political paranoia. Foresight education used with narrative foresight and CLA can reconfigure insidious backstories into benign and inclusive futures. Finally, the pilot intervention signals that the transition from hostility and exclusion to cooperation and inclusion enables a community to resist the conspiracy magnet with a counterforce to protect it from future surges of disinformation.

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