
COVID-19 Conspiracy Theories: Comparative trends in Italy, France, and Spain

EU DisinfoLab

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As the pandemic turns into an [infodemic](#), old and new conspiracy theories find a way to take over the public debate. Thanks to our monitoring of independently fact-checked disinformation from France, Italy, and Spain, we have noticed that similar patterns are emerging regarding the types of conspiracy theories deliberately related to Covid-19. Firstly, we offer a theoretical review of the indicators and characteristics that define a conspiracy theory, and how the coronavirus fits into them. Secondly, the main content and narratives identified at the comparative level are explored through concrete examples in order to map the current conspiracy ecosystem.

DEFINITIONAL CRITERIA AND OPERATIONAL CHARACTERISTICS OF A CONSPIRACY THEORY

Conspiracy, from the Latin *conspirare* – to breathe together – suggests the coming together of individuals to obtain a shared outcome ([Byford, 2011](#)). The term implies a group of people who make secret arrangements to advance their personal interests, consequently causing harm to their community.

Conspiracies rely on the idea of a Manichean struggle between “‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’” ([Mudde, 2004](#): 543), whether the latter consists of a political, economic or cultural group. Therefore, a conspiracy theory is first of all a theory of power ([Fenster, 1999](#)) and conspiracy theorists wish to reverse the power dynamic that oppresses society by awakening or [red-pilling](#) their fellow citizens. Conspiracy theorists attribute the pejorative acceptance of the term to a form of “**stigmatised knowledge**” ([Barkun, 2016](#)), namely disapproved by mainstream institutions. Looking at the coronavirus epidemic, conspiracy theories range from entirely fabricated content to the instrumentalisation of tentative or speculative findings, to which absolute certainty is attributed, in what resembles a game of Chinese whispers (no pun intended).

Hence, conspiracy theories are based on a biased interpretation of reality, which rests on the cherry-picking of facts to fulfil a certain hypothesis. In some cases, **these theories are not falsifiable**, but the lack of empirical evidence is potentially justified in the eye of the believer, as secrecy is the main goal of the clandestine plots they try to unveil. As a result, followers have to take a leap of faith and ‘[trust the plan](#)’. While conspiracy theories have always been part of the debate, the prevalence of personal beliefs and emotions over hard facts and rational thinking that characterises the era of post-truth politics has certainly granted them unprecedented legitimacy, as well as the chance to reach a broader audience.

Overall, conspiracy theories stem from **a desire to make sense of a complex world in simplistic terms, by finding someone to blame for its problematic aspects**. A clear enemy provides cognitive comfort, whether this exists outside, within or above the targeted community ([Walker, 2013](#)).

Coronavirus conspiracies fit all three categories being the result of the evil plan designed by:

- A foreign power against other countries (*outside*),
- A malicious minority in the country (*within*),
- The government against its own people (*above*).

The next section explores the most recurrent coronavirus-related conspiracy narratives. As we recognise that customarily topics come back in a new guise, what [Muirhead and Rosenblum \(2020\)](#)

called a “**conspiracy without theory**” is also taking place. This consists of simply pointing out that something is off, while leaving implications to the receiver’s imagination. The screenshot below shows an image that went viral on social media platforms, representing a [train car with COVID-19 written on it](#). Viewers are left to wonder: why is it there? Were the US (where the photo is said to be from) involved, and if so, how?



CONSPIRACY NARRATIVES

This section now delves into the main narratives of coronavirus-related conspiracy theories recurrently encountered in our analysis of European disinformation ecosystems. As anticipated earlier, most of these arguments are old news (e.g. deepstate scares, anti-Semitism or anti-vaxxers), which are re-framed under the new Covid-19 guise.

The three major narratives we identified focus on:

- The origins of the virus
- The cures and medical treatments for the virus
- The instrumental use of the virus to push secret agendas

ORIGINS

A great amount of conspiracy theories builds on the idea that **the virus is not new**, a suspicion that has manifested transversely across countries. For instance, [disinfection products listing protection from the coronavirus](#) are presented as evidence, disregarding the existence of different CoV viral strains.

Origin-based theories defend the artificial nature of the virus, which **spread either accidentally or intentionally**. The accident-centred thread blames without evidence the virus’ spread on the carelessness of the actors involved, who conducted covert activities (e.g. [a bio-weapon program went wrong](#)). Exploitation of resource and consumerism are also pilloried, as some suggest a [relation](#)

[of causality between the epidemic and intensive breeding](#), once again without any scientific evidence. Similarly, [anti-vaxxers link the likelihood of contracting the virus to flu shots](#).

Multiple [Russian sources of disinformation](#), subsequently [echoed in other countries](#), emphasised the bacteriological war intent of the pandemic, whether it originated in the United States or China. Accordingly, the virus was created in a lab and released voluntarily in order to achieve geopolitical (e.g. [a made-up story circulated in Italy that an American veteran was paid to spread the virus to Europe](#)) or economic gains (e.g. [a French research centre was accused on creating the virus in 2004 in order to sell its patented vaccine](#)).

Finally, the **5G conspiracy** is almost becoming a narrative of its own, primed in [Europe](#) and [beyond](#). Popular theories are that [the coronavirus is transmitted through 5G antennas](#) or that the [5G technology has a negative health impact and thus makes individuals vulnerable to the virus](#).

CURES AND MEDICAL TREATMENTS

A number of conspiracy theories confuses the long-standing existence of CoV respiratory viruses with the new Covid-19, therefore claiming that **the cure already exists**, and in line with the abovementioned theory of power, the elite does not want to share it with the whole population. To illustrate this, Facebook users in France met the news of [Prince Charles' speedy recovery despite his old age](#) with suspicion. In Italy (see below), a WhatsApp message listed surviving politicians and football players, suggesting that they might have received a special treatment or immediate cures.

Pur comprendendo che questo è un virus aggressivo e mutante, pur non essendo uno scienziato mi faccio delle domande :
Zingaretti guarito
Il principe Carlo guarito
Fontana guarito
Boris Jonshon guarito
Porro guarito
Lotti guarito
Ascani guarita
Sileri guarito
Dibala e fidanzata guariti
Rugani guarito
Matuidi guarito
Gabbadini guarito
Sportiello guarito
Maldini padre e figlio guariti
Sono felice per la loro guarigione, ma non è che a loro sono state fatte cure IMMEDIATE che hanno avuto effetto e per tanti altri si è atteso che la malattia facesse danni irreversibili, magari lasciandoli a casa per poi intervenire quando era troppo tardi?
SPERO CHE NON SIA COSÌ. MA UN DUBBIO MI È VENUTO.

Other dishonest reasons to hide the cure from the masses allegedly include the **economic interests** involved in selling an overpriced antidote. In France, where the debate on the use of chloroquine is quite relevant, destabilising transmitters accused the government of [refusing patients the](#)

[successful cure because the invention of a vaccine would be more profitable, receiving pressure from pharmaceutical companies to do so.](#)



In addition, coronavirus sceptics refute the mortality of the virus per se. For instance, an Italian pathologist (who has now lost his medical licence) [condemned the use of masks and hand sanitisers for allegedly preventing our body's natural defences from naturally defeating the virus.](#)

In this category we also include **Covid-19 deniers**, who reject the very existence of the virus, maintaining that [all victims died of previous pathologies](#). Recently, the 'film your hospital' hashtag unveiled a worldwide denialist trend. From the [United States](#), to [France](#), [Italy](#) and [Spain](#), social media users are filming empty hospitals to demonstrate that the virus is a scam. The videos ignore the fact that suspected Covid-19 patients are asked to stay away from hospitals and that emergency rooms have reduced all non-indispensable contact with the public.

POLITICAL MANIPULATION OR HOW TO PUSH A SECRET AGENDA

Conspiracy theories systematically advocate the existence of secret plots, which the powerful wish to hide from the public eye, as they entail forms of political manipulation. In the context of the pandemic, we encounter two opposite conspiracies rooted in distrust towards official authorities. On the one hand, conspiracy theories denounce that the government is understating the death toll to keep the population quiet and avoid taking responsibility for the mismanagement. This approach

received particular attention in Italy, through the diffusion of WhatsApp voice messages from pretend insiders: [doctors](#), [nurses](#) and [doctors' relatives](#).

On the other hand, [national authorities are accused of exaggerating the gravity of the situation](#) to divert public attention from other problems the country is facing.

A further step in the narrative proposes conspiracy explanations for the government's reluctance to communicate the 'real' situation. Accordingly, the goal is to push an undemocratic and unethical agenda that would cause public upheavals if known. **Population cleansing** is a widespread theory that emerged in different terms. For instance, [China created the virus to solve the overpopulation problem](#), but apparently so did [European countries to get rid of the elderly](#).

Conspiracy theorists also fear that the pandemic will be used as an excuse to impose needless mass vaccinations, whose real purpose is to implement Orwellian mechanisms of **social control**. To illustrate this, [former tennis player Marat Safin has vocally advocated that the vaccine allegedly contains a microchip to subjugate receivers](#). The theory is not new: almost a decade ago, [Taïeb \(2010\)](#) wrote about the conspiracy surrounding the national vaccination against the H1N1 virus as part of a political means of achieving '[biopower](#)'.

In addition, conspiracy theorists warn that the lockdown is an excuse to force people in their homes, while **authoritarian measures** are being implemented, such as [the militarisation of Italian cities](#) corroborated by decontextualized photos of military tanks, or [the execution of NATO exercises in Europe](#).

A common goal is to show the collusion of political and economic powers for evil intent. The screenshot below, taken from an Italian Telegram group, links the Prime Minister's choice to appoint Vodafone CEO (Vittorio Colao) as leader of the task force for the reconstruction phase to their involvement in the 5G conspiracy.



EVERGREEN CONSPIRACIES STEP INTO THE SHOES OF COVID-19

Besides the extensively explored deep-state allegations, other conspiracy theories that do not entirely fit the previous narratives include:

- The **prophetic** origin of the coronavirus, foreseen by [Nostradamus](#), [Bill Gates](#) or [The Simpsons](#).
- A **revival of anti-Semitism**, [accusing Jewish communities of spreading the virus](#) for the purpose of poisoning the gentiles and sacrificing them as part of religious rituals.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Conspiracy theories are based on the idea that a powerful minority is keeping relevant information from the majority of the population.

These theories aim to make sense of the complexity of reality by finding someone to blame. They are manufactured through the biased connection of unrelated events, whose validity is unprovable.

As the pandemic is a transnational event, so is the driving infodemic, that is to say the same coronavirus-related conspiracy theories are diffusing across different countries.

Focusing on current events, we identified three major conspiracy narratives:

- o The man-made origin of the virus, either accidental or intentional.
- o The existence of a cure detained by a small group.
- o The exploitation of the pandemic as a distraction to forward a secret agenda.

Last but not least, the encountered conspiracy theories do not constitute a novelty, ageless assumptions are simply retrieved and adapted to suit current events.

