"This handbook is an essential resource for researchers. Its broadly accessible, insightful essays cover a range of topics from different disciplines and about different nations, and it demonstrates the importance of conspiracy theories in contemporary politics and society."

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"This wide-ranging collection brings together many different strands of scholarship on conspiracy theories. Sociologists, political theorists, historians, psychologists, and philosophers provide new and compelling ways to examine who believes in these theories, why they believe them, and what we can do about them. An essential exploration of one of the defining features of our age."

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Taking a global and interdisciplinary approach, the *Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories* provides a comprehensive overview of conspiracy theories as an important social, cultural and political phenomenon in contemporary life.

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This book presents an important resource for students and scholars from a range of disciplines interested in the societal and political impact of conspiracy theories, including Area Studies, Anthropology, History, Media and Cultural Studies, Political Science, Psychology and Sociology.

Michael Butter is professor of American Studies at the University of Tübingen, Germany. He is the author of *Plots, Designs, and Schemes: American Conspiracy Theories from the Puritans to the Present* (2014) and *The Nature of Conspiracy Theories* (2020).

Peter Knight is professor of American Studies at the University of Manchester, UK. He is the author of *Conspiracy Culture* (2000), *The Kennedy Assassination* (2007) and *Reading the Market* (2016) and editor of *Conspiracy Nation* (2002) and *Conspiracy Theories in American History: An Encyclopedia* (2004).

Together they directed the COST Action COMPACT [Comparative Analysis of Conspiracy Theories].

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Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories
Edited by Michael Butter and Peter Knight

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2.5
HOW CONSPIRACY THEORIES SPREAD

Adrian Bangerter, Pascal Wagner-Egger and Sylvain Delouvée

Introduction

Perhaps one of the most widespread and long-running conspiracy theories is about an alleged Jewish plot to undermine Christianity and dominate the world (Taguieff 2007). This recurring myth has appeared in various guises throughout history. In medieval Western Europe, the outbreak of the plague known as the Black Death led to the emergence of allegations that the deaths and suffering were caused by a Jewish plot to poison wells used by Christians. The original story featured lepers as the main villains, but, as it spread, Jews became associated with it. The popular wrath that was thus ignited led to pogroms that had the cumulative effect of eradicating much of the Jewish population of Western Europe (Kelly 2005). Eastern Europe and Russia were comparatively less affected by the Black Death. But that region had its own history of virulent Judeophobia, which originated in the Greek orthodox tradition, spreading from Byzantium with Christianity. It was in the court of Tsar Nicolas II that the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* was first commissioned (Poliakov 1987). The document was widely translated and spread in many countries (notably, the American industrialist Henry Ford printed and distributed more than half a million copies of the Americanised version of the *Protocols*; Singerman 1981).

The longevity, spread and impact of the Jewish conspiracy theory is breathtaking. It has persisted over centuries and diffused in countless pages of text or hypertext, moved through innumerable brains and indirectly motivated the oppression and murder of millions of individuals. Nowadays, one might think that the Jewish conspiracy theory is an outlandish fairytale that has no place in the modern world. Nevertheless, it continues to resurface in many different forms and is actively used to motivate antisemitism around the world (Swami 2012). One example is the Rumour of Orléans, which, in 1969, accused Jewish merchants of the French town of Orléans of kidnapping young women (Morin *et al.* 2014). A more recent example is the Pittsburgh synagogue shooting on 27 October 2018, where the murderer believed migrant caravans moving towards the U.S.A. were part of a Jewish plot. The extreme malleability of the Jewish conspiracy theory, which explains its extraordinary longevity, is illustrated by the fact that it may be associated with ancient figures such as Satan (being members of the 'Satanic conspiracy', Taguieff 2007), but also with futuristic conspirators, such as extraterrestrial reptilians (and/or Illuminati).

The Jewish conspiracy theory illustrates an extreme point on three fundamental dimensions along which conspiracy theories can vary, namely *stick*, *spread* and *action* (Franks *et al.* 2013).

Stickiness refers to the potential of a representation for belief. The determinants of conspiracy theory belief have been amply researched, especially in terms of individual differences that predict belief (see Chapter 2.1). Action is the extent to which conspiracy theories motivate individual or collective behaviour (see Chapter 2.6 and 2.7). Spread refers to the transmission of conspiracy theories, and is the object of this chapter. It is arguably the least well understood dimension along which conspiracy theories vary.

Indeed, there are relatively few studies that directly investigate the transmission processes of conspiracy theories. However, there are many resources on which to draw from the study of transmission of other kinds of beliefs and representations in the social sciences. Insights from related phenomena like rumours, myths, gossip and folklore or urban legends can illuminate the transmission of conspiracy theories (see Chapter 4.1), as well as theoretical models like the epidemiology of representations approach (Sperber 1985) or the social representations approach (Sammut *et al.* 2015; Lo Monaco *et al.* 2016). In what follows, we first describe the process of transmission itself, before reviewing research on situational factors and features of conspiracy theory content that affect transmission. We emphasise individual-level processes or small-scale social interactions between individuals.

The transmission process

We define transmission as the process of communicating about a conspiracy theory with other people. This process can take many forms. Conspiracy theories can be passed on in interactive conversations, where both tellers and their audience can interact with each other in real time. These can be face-to-face (in which case participants can engage a wide range of signals like language, gesture, facial expressions), or mediated (e.g. online chat forums), where text is the main channel of communication (but images can also be transmitted). Conspiracy theories can also be broadcast via mass media (as Henry Ford did when he printed and distributed the *Protocols* in the U.S.A.) or social media as when people debate the plausibility of conspiracy theories in online forums (Wood, Douglas 2013). Yablokov (2017) discussed the role of social networks in spreading conspiracy theories, where one can forward a link to one's followers by simply clicking on retweet.

As an important vehicle of information in modern societies, the Internet is perceived as a more democratic source, since it does not depend on a vertical process as in traditional media. It is supposed to give direct access to information and reveal the 'truth' (Aupers 2012). Several studies report a general decline in trust in traditional institutions and a very low level of vertical trust, particularly in new democracies (Mishler, Rose 1997; Dalton 2000; Macek, Markova 2004; Catterberg, Moreno 2006). The Internet is viewed as a space for criticism, making it possible to deconstruct official information and produce one's own theories (Aupers 2012). This makes it easier to believe in conspiracies, and more difficult to control their source and transmission (Stempel *et al.* 2007). Additionally, belief in such theories (Mulligan, Habel 2011; Swami *et al.* 2013; Jolley, Douglas 2014a, 2014b; Einstein, Glick 2015) can lead to decreased trust in government (Einstein, Glick 2015) and to a persistent cynicism about government, particularly towards political participation (Butler *et al.* 1995; Jolley, Douglas 2014b). Research has just begun to investigate the online propagation of conspiracy theories (Mocanu *et al.* 2015; Del Vicario *et al.* 2016, 2017), but simple Google or YouTube searches reveal many conspiratorial websites and videos (Bronner 2011).

Conspiracy theories are spread in two main communicative genres: storytelling and argumentation. Storytelling is the social activity (Norrick 2007; Bietti *et al.* 2019) by which groups of people tell stories, which are dramatised accounts of events that prominently feature the

actions of protagonists (heroes, villains and the like; Propp 1987) and the goals they are trying to achieve. In essence, conspiracy theories are stories (e.g. the U.S. government manufactured A.I.D.S. to control the black population). Conspiracy theory narratives often feature similar plot elements: Conspirators, a plan, secrecy (Byford 2011), but also heroic depictions of the believers and their actions or attitudes (Franks *et al.* 2017). Argumentation is also a prominent conspiracy theory genre as when aficionados or sceptics debate the details that support or invalidate a particular version of events, e.g. that the flag in the alleged moon landing photos seems to flap in a – nonexistent – breeze as evidence for a hoax (Wood, Douglas 2013). Recent work in discourse analysis describes the argumentation strategies of conspiracy theory defenders. They often use source-related fallacies (*ad populum*, *ad verecundiam*, *ad hominem*), hasty generalisations, arguments from analogy and from ignorance, inductive and abductive arguments and shifts in the burden of proof. These arguments appear in refutational strategies directed against the official version rather than in defense of the conspiracy theory (Oswald 2016).

At the level of the individual, the transmission process can be defined as a dynamic interaction between five classes of variables: (1) related to individual differences, (2) related to the transmission situation or (3) related to the content of the conspiracy theory, all of which affect (4) belief and (5) the decision to communicate the conspiracy theory (Figure 2.5.1). The relations in Figure 2.5.1 have been simplified to convey the main points we emphasise (i.e. not all possible relations are depicted).

A key feature of the transmission process is the reciprocal relation between belief and transmission. On the one hand, belief affects transmission. Rumours believed to be true are more likely to be transmitted (Rosnow 1991; Guerin, Miyazaki 2006; Pezzo, Beckstead 2006), and the same holds for urban legends (Heath *et al.* 2001). But there are exceptions to the link between belief and transmission (Delouvée 2015). Members of online cancer discussion websites were not more likely to pass on cancer rumours they believed than rumours they did not believe (DiFonzo *et al.* 2012). Conversely, conspiracy theories (or other forms of belief) can get strategically transmitted by individuals who do not necessary believe them. For example, as Kapferer (1987) notes, rumours can be transmitted for many reasons: because they are new, because they convey information, because they may convince the listener to rally to the ideas of the narrator, because they are credible (Clément 2006), because they soothe certain tensions, because they allow the teller to be the centre of attention or because they are engaging (Allport, Lepkin 1943, 1945), and therefore not necessarily because they are believed. On the other hand,

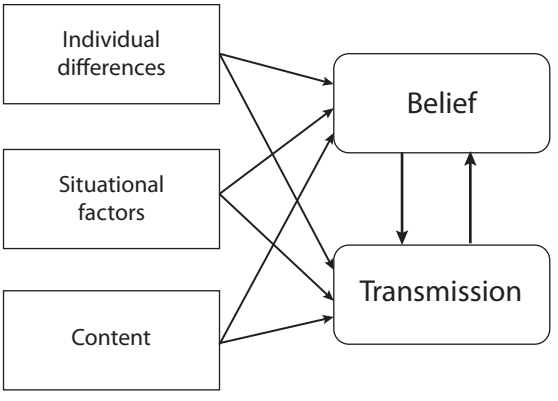

Figure 2.5.1 The transmission process.

individuals may hesitate to share conspiracy theories they believe in because of a fear of being stigmatised (Lantian *et al.* 2018).

Transmission can also have consequences for belief. Over time, a conspiracy theory that is widely distributed may become strongly anchored in a culture via material artefacts (Boltanski 2012). For example, the J.F.K. conspiracy theory has been replayed in hundreds of television series, novels or movies. And the tenacity of the Zionist conspiracy theory in people's minds may also be related to its cultural prevalence. The widespread availability of these ideas increases the potential exposure of individuals to them, and thus their potential to be believed (Butler *et al.* 1995; Douglas, Sutton 2008; Nera *et al.* 2018).

The transmission variable in Figure 2.5.1 can be operationalised in multiple ways. First, the simplest way is to ask participants if they have transmitted a belief (rumour, urban legend or conspiracy theory) or have heard one circulating (DiFonzo, Bordia 2002) or use a proxy for transmission, namely the intention to transmit, e.g. asking participants how likely they are to pass on a conspiracy theory (Heath *et al.* 2001). Second, the cumulative effect of actual individual transmission on content can be studied by serial reproduction experiments (e.g. Bartlett 1932; Kirkpatrick 1932; Allport, Postman 1947). These experiments involve exposing participants to some textual or visual material and then getting them to recall and write down (or otherwise reproduce) what they recall. This recollection (e.g. a text) is then given to a next-generation participant who does the same. This creates a chain of successive recollections that typically feature systematic transformations of content. When using multiple parallel chains (Bangerter 2000), content-related trends can be averaged and compared across different experimental conditions. A third strategy for gauging the effects of transmission is to measure the distribution of conspiracy theories in various media at a point in time (i.e. analyse a cross-section of particular media). For example, sampling anti-vaccine websites reveals that they almost uniformly feature vaccine-related conspiracy theories, e.g. vaccines are a hoax propagated by pharmaceutical companies and medical professionals to maintain high levels of chronic disease and thus create a need for drugs (Davies *et al.* 2002; Kata 2010). Fourth, with the advent of social media, online transmission behaviour can be studied via the application programming interfaces (A.P.I.s) of social media like Facebook or Twitter, which allow researchers to download and analyse massive amounts of actual sharing or retweeting behaviour. A recent study of Facebook (Del Vicario *et al.* 2016) modelled 'cascades', or unbroken chains of reposted information with a common origin. The study found that conspiracy theories spread within 'echo chambers' (Bronner *et al.* 2018) of like-minded individuals and that – in contrast – science news spread within similarly homogenous, but distinct, networks. Bessi *et al.* (2015) also found that, on Facebook, information related to (1) mainstream scientific and (2) conspiracy news are consumed in communities polarised around distinct types of content. But regular consumers of conspiracy news were more self-contained and focused on their specific contents. This mirrors the experimental observation that conspiracy believers and nonbelievers are both prone to biased assimilation and attitude polarisation, but believers to a slightly higher degree (McHoskey 1995). Confirmation bias – the well-known tendency to confirm rather than disconfirm our beliefs (Nickerson 1998) – is thus reinforced in online search and transmission of information (Del Vicario *et al.* 2016, 2017; Bronner *et al.* 2018).

Situational factors affecting transmission

In this section, we review research on the psychological features of particular social situations that make conspiracy theories and related forms of belief like rumours or urban legends more likely to spread. We suggested above that there is a dearth of research on conspiracy theory

transmission. But it seems clear that many widespread (and thus widely transmitted) conspiracy theories propose alternative explanations to traumatic collective events, including terrorist attacks like 9/11 in the U.S.A. or the Charlie Hebdo attacks in France, disease outbreaks or the sudden death of celebrities like J.F.K. or Princess Diana. This, in turn, suggests that there is something about the psychological impact of such situations that generates a need for sharing conspiracy theories. However, conspiracy theories also get transmitted in the absence of a link to an obviously traumatic event (for example the conspiracy theories about the moon landings being a hoax) or even in the absence of any kind of event (for example conspiracy theories about a Zionist conspiracy). Thus, it is not the objective features of a situation that lead to conspiracy theory transmission, but rather its psychological characteristics (van Prooijen, Douglas 2017; Douglas *et al.* 2019).

Work from folklore studies further suggests that large-scale social change (i.e. concerning whole societies and lasting for years) generates feelings of alienation or anxiety that are conducive to the emergence and spread of rumours and urban legends. In Western societies, belief in conspiracy may be due to the ontological insecurity generated by the rationalised institutions (the state, the economy) that constitute modernity as well as the delegitimation of traditional sources of epistemic authority like religion or, more recently, science (Aupers 2012). One example from the U.S.A. in the 1970s involves the recurrent revival of urban legends around Halloween according to which children engaging in the traditional activity of trick or treat receive poisoned candy from sadists. The legend circulated in a context of 'intense social strain' (Best, Horiuchi 1985: 493) characterised by the unpopular Vietnam War and civil unrest (riots, student demonstrations, the spread of alternative lifestyles and drug use). A similar example was documented in Orléans, France in 1969 (Morin *et al.* 2014), where a rumour circulated for several months according to which Jewish merchants who owned fashionable clothing boutiques were drugging and kidnapping young female clients, who were then transported out of the country and sold into sexual slavery. Besides the obvious antisemitic overtones, the motifs of the rumour symbolise the dangers of modernity and the changing role of women (going out and being frivolous) rather than staying at home. These motifs resonated with contemporaneous themes of civil unrest in France like the events of May 1968 (see also Durkheim's famous [1899] analysis of how the Dreyfus affair was also facilitated by an acute outbreak of antisemitism brought on by social upheaval). A third example concerns rumours emerging in the 2000s in countries in Western Africa warning against the danger of shaking the hands of strangers (who can allegedly snatch men's penises away from them) or answering mobile phone calls from anonymous numbers (which can kill the answerer). They coincide with social change as well, as African society moves from a traditional, village-based structure to life in large cities where anonymous social relations and close contact with strangers are increasing (Bonhomme 2012).

More circumscribed, local events (i.e. concerning a geographical region or a particular group like an organisation) that take place over a shorter, more acute timescale can also foster belief transmission. Here, again, much of what we know comes from the study of rumours. One example concerns organisational changes, which create situations of uncertainty and anxiety, increasing in turn the transmission of rumours. In a study of change in a hospital (Bordia *et al.* 2006), individuals who felt more change-related stress reported more rumours. Insufficiently clear communication about the change may also encourage rumours, which may in turn increase perceptions of insecurity (Smet *et al.* 2016). Rumours also often emerge in situations like wartime (Allport, Postman 1947) or in the aftermath of natural disasters. Rumours about child trafficking surfaced in the aftermath of the 2004 tsunami that devastated many areas of Southeast Asia (Samuels 2015). These rumours now emerge regularly after natural disasters (Montgomery 2011). Likewise, Uscinski and Parent (2014) coded the presence of conspiracy theory narratives

in letters to the editor from 1897 to 2010 in two prominent U.S. newspapers, alongside the characteristics of the villains depicted in the narratives. Villains were more right-wing and capitalist when a Republican president was in power and more left-wing and communist when a Democratic president was in power. Interestingly, when threat from external enemies was high, conspiracy theories focused more often on foreign villains than when threat was low. These effects suggest that spreading conspiracy theories is a way to manage threat, especially related to political defeat.

The field studies that link the content of rumours, urban legends or conspiracy theories to large-scale social change or to more local, acute events have a high ecological validity and are suggestive of the potential role of various psychological reactions that these situations might evoke and which might mediate their effects on the transmission of conspiracy theories. Possible reactions include an increase of anxiety (apprehension about potential negative outcomes), feeling threatened or feeling a lack of control. However, more controlled studies that manipulate causal variables are necessary to demonstrate specific effects of psychological variables like lack of control on the transmission of conspiracy theories.

Psychological processes may affect transmission via several paths. Change phenomena or perceptions of lack of control are basically violations of expectations. Even relatively small-scale expectation violations increase aversive arousal, which in turn motivates efforts to reduce that arousal (Proulx *et al.* 2012). Sensemaking processes in various forms, including storytelling (Bietti *et al.* 2019), help explain the inconsistency and, thus, reduce arousal. This possibility is supported by experiments where manipulating physiological arousal (via exposure to arousing emotional content) increases participants' propensity to transmit unrelated, emotionally neutral content (e.g. an online news article). The effect is independent of the emotional valence of the content, and neutral manipulations of arousal (getting participants to jog lightly in place for a minute) achieve similar effects (Berger 2011). The effect of change situations (be they diffuse or focused, large-scale or acute) on psychological outcomes like anxiety, threat or loss of control thus offer a plausible pathway to understand how these situations create aversively arousing states of expectancy violation. In turn, sharing conspiracy theories may serve sensemaking functions and thus reduce this arousal. While plausible, these processes require more research on actual transmission to be supported.

Increases in aversive arousal could also trigger emotions, as has been originally noted in rumour research. Many authors have observed that uncertainty, and the attendant anxiety, enhances rumour spreading (e.g. Allport, Postman 1947; Rosnow 1980). This fact is readily illustrated by the profusion of rumours that propagate during war. Anxiety also facilitates endorsement of conspiracy theories, be it personal anxiety in life (Grzesiak-Feldman 2007, 2013; Swami *et al.* 2016; Green, Douglas 2018), death anxiety (Newheiser *et al.* 2011) or situational anxiety (Grzesiak-Feldman 2013), as well as fear of social issues such as pollution, terrorism, globalisation (Wagner-Egger, Bangerter 2007); stressful life events (Swami *et al.* 2016) or feelings of social insecurity, as measured by the Belief in Dangerous World scale (Leiser *et al.* 2017; Hart, Graether 2018). While these findings document the link between anxiety and belief, the role of anxiety (and other emotions) in the spread of conspiracy theories needs urgent research attention.

The reciprocal relations between content and transmission

According to Figure 2.5.1, the content of a conspiracy theory constitutes the third major class of variables affecting transmission. That is, do certain features of the content of a conspiracy theory make it more likely to be believed or to get spread? This link is perhaps one of the least

well understood relations in research on conspiracy theories. Further, the inverse relationship, that is, how transmission affects content, is also poorly understood. Here again, much insight can be gained from research on rumours and other forms of belief.

From rumour research, we know that transmission will be favoured by the novelty of rumour content (Brooks *et al.* 2013), its credibility (Allport, Lepkin 1943, 1945; Rosnow *et al.* 1988), and the consistency of its content with the attitudes of the transmitters (Galam 2002). The spread will be also heightened when rumours relieve tensions (Rosnow 1980; Esposito, Rosnow 1984), or promote the ingroup (Bordia *et al.* 2005). The emotional content of a conspiracy theory may also affect transmission. In the domain of urban legends, Heath, Bell and Sternberg (2001) showed that stories rated as more disgusting were more often intended to be passed along by participants, and also distributed more widely on urban legend websites.

Some studies have investigated how the content of conspiracy theories affects belief. When interpreting events, people apparently rely on the 'proportion bias', or 'major event-major cause heuristic' (McCauley, Jacques 1979; Leman, Cinnirella 2007; van Prooijen, van Dijk 2014). For example, participants judging an event in which the president of a country has been shot during a parade perceive more conspiracies when the president was killed, rather than when he was only wounded (Leman, Cinnirella 2007). In a series of experiments, Kovic and Füchslin (2018) showed that conspiratorial thinking as an explanation for events increases as the probability of those events decreases. For example, one of their scenarios described an accomplished journalist who was critical of the government and who suddenly died in his apartment from a heart attack. The experimenters added probabilistic information about the medical risks, according to doctors, that someone like this journalist would die. The lower the probability, the more the death was interpreted as the result of a conspiracy, rather than of an accident. Because these studies concern cognitive biases for particular content, they may make conspiracy theories more plausible and thus facilitate belief. However, it remains to be seen whether these biases affect transmission as well.

A more social feature of the content of conspiracy theories is that they basically rely on an antagonistic representation of society (Moscovici 1987). For example, they play to distrust of elites (political, scientific and media, e.g. Wagner-Egger, Bangerter 2007; Wagner-Egger *et al.* 2011; Lewandowsky *et al.* 2013), and identify 'villains' and 'victims' in important social events, such as disease outbreaks (Wagner-Egger *et al.* 2011). Conspiracists see themselves as more clairvoyant than ordinary people, considered as a herd of sheep (Franks *et al.* 2017). This is also probably why research showed that conspiracy believers display a heightened need for uniqueness than non-believers (Lantian *et al.* 2017; Imhoff, Lamberty 2017).

Some authors draw on cognitive science of religion (e.g. Boyer 2001; Norenzayan *et al.* 2006) to propose hypotheses by analogy about the spread of conspiracy theories, suggesting that conspiracy theories may have a 'quasi-religious' function (Franks *et al.* 2013). First, conspiring agents in flourishing conspiracy theories are represented as minimally counter-intuitive, because they are most often humans (or sometimes human-like, like the extraterrestrials or reptilians), but they display extraordinary strategic omniscience and omnipotence, by controlling multitudes of people to take part to the conspiracy, and to keep the secret about it years after. This derives from religion studies where religious beliefs are 'minimally counter-intuitive': For example, a representation of a god is grounded on commonsense representations about people (e.g. people have agency, act according to beliefs and desires, have memories), but violates some physical and biological qualities of people (reincarnation, omniscience, etc.). Second, sharing conspiracy theories via communication rituals supports management of anxiety, by transforming unspecific anxieties into focused fears. In particular, intergroup conspiracy theories who accuse minorities have a scapegoat function, by pointing at the individuals or groups allegedly responsible for the anxiety-provoking events (Moscovici 1987). Third, conspiracy theory narratives

framed as conflicts over sacred values may spread more successfully, as illustrated by the ancient and persistent 'satanic conspiracy' (involving, alternatively or jointly, Freemasons, Illuminati, Jews, Muslims and so on, pitted against Christianity; Taguieff 2007).

Many of the features above can be described as 'local' in the sense that they may appear in part of the text that constitutes a conspiracy narrative. But more 'global' properties of narrative organisation, like the overall plot structure (Byford 2011) or the concrete descriptions of important characters like the outgroup villain (Propp 1987; Raab *et al.* 2013; Franks *et al.* 2017), may also facilitate their transmission, by making the narrative easier to remember (an important precondition for transmission; Norenzayan *et al.* 2006) or more entertaining for audiences (Heath *et al.* 2001).

How does transmission affect content? As described above, the truth is not of primary importance for rumour-mongers (Rouquette 1990). The same holds for conspiracy theories, which circulate whether or not bearers consider them as true or false. They are not merely information transmitted by word of mouth, but are part of a privileged mode of expression of social thought (Rouquette 1973). Therefore, during interpersonal communication, rumours and conspiracy theories evolve and transform. Allport and Postman (1947) highlighted the distortions occurring in rumour spreading by means of the serial reproduction method. In their studies, after the seventh generation of retelling, the message took on its final shape, being sufficiently short to be easily remembered. Whereas no studies have been conducted on this issue, this process of reduction may be shorter for conspiracy theories, because they include core narrative elements (Keeley 1999; Byford 2011). Three mechanisms were described by Allport and Postman (1947), (1) reduction of information (only 20 per cent of the original information was left after seven generations), (2) accentuation (exaggeration of some details) and (3) assimilation (incorporation of the information to the pre-existing knowledge, beliefs, values and attitudes of individuals). In their framework, assimilation drives reduction and accentuation processes. While these mechanisms may serve as an initial guide for the study of how transmission affects content, they are based on the serial reproduction paradigm that necessarily leads to reduction through memory limitations. The online environments through which many conspiracy theories are spread nowadays allow much more potential for (multimodal) elaboration, and thus novel forms of how transmission affects content may be yet discovered.

Discussion and outlook

Stick (belief) and spread (transmission) (Franks *et al.* 2013) are arguably two of the most important issues in the psychology of conspiracy theories. Much is known about how conspiracy theories stick, but little is known about how they spread. This is a significant imbalance, because understanding the spread of conspiracy theories is of the greatest theoretical and practical importance. Accordingly, based on the model in Figure 2.5.1, we identified three main factors susceptible to affect conspiracy theory transmission: Individual differences (see Chapter 2.1), situational factors and content of the conspiracy theory. We also discussed the relation between belief and transmission. While belief in conspiracy theories may predict their transmission, the relationship is complex. Often as not, conspiracy beliefs may not be transmitted, or conspiracy theories may be transmitted strategically, in the absence of belief. Thus, belief cannot be considered as a proxy variable for transmission, nor can the determinants of conspiracy theory belief be automatically assumed to affect transmission. These observations lead to three areas of research that require urgent attention.

The first area is the reciprocal relation between belief and transmission. Is it possible to know and spread, but not believe a conspiracy theory? Inversely, could some people know and believe

a conspiracy theory but refrain from spreading it? Motivation may be at the interface between belief and transmission. Some individuals could be motivated to differ from others, and to feel superior to the 'herd of sheep' of nonbelievers by knowing, believing and spreading conspiracy theories (Franks *et al.* 2017), but others could refrain from spreading, to avoid being stigmatised by nonbelievers (Lantian *et al.* 2018). Social factors will also motivate believers to invest time, money and energy in order to spread the conspiracy theories (Bronner 2003, 2006). By means of 'social proof' (Cialdini 1984), the more believers one finds, the truer one's belief will seem. Conspiracy theory transmission could also create and reinforce social ties within groups (Franks *et al.* 2017), and even transmit ingroup norms and values (Baumeister *et al.* 2004). Thus, a refusal to transmit some conspiracy theories in a group of believers could lead to stigmatisation or even exclusion from the group.

The second area concerns the nature of the transmission process. We discussed two main modes, namely interpersonal transmission and transmission via mass media or social media on the Internet. The rise of social media is an important factor in explaining the current prevalence of conspiracy theories in our modern world, because it allows millions of people all around the world to share any content in a couple of hours (Del Vicario *et al.* 2016). We also identified two prominent communicative genres by which conspiracy theories may be transmitted: storytelling (Bietti *et al.* 2019) and argumentation (Oswald 2016). As with all communication processes, multimodality may play a role in transmission. Many conspiracy theories rely on iconic images (e.g. the all-seeing eye of the Illuminati) or video that may evoke strong arousal in audiences. Furthermore, the role of audience participation in amplifying transmission needs to be studied (e.g. transmission in interactive online chats versus broadcasting to many recipients simultaneously and unidirectionally).

The third area concerns the reciprocal relation between content and transmission. What aspects of content affect the likelihood of transmission, and how does transmission affect content? Here, insights can be gained from the study of rumours (Allport, Postman 1947). But the methodological arsenal of conspiracy theory research will need to be extended. Transmission can be modelled experimentally via the venerable serial reproduction paradigm (Bartlett 1932; Bangerter 2000), or transmission may be studied directly on social media (Del Vicario *et al.* 2016). The potential for capturing content automatically is, however, perhaps one of the most exciting and promising areas for development. The abundance of spontaneously produced digitised text on the Internet, as well as the existence of software packages to measure the presence of words in a text (e.g. L.I.W.C., Tausczik, Pennebaker 2010) or co-occurrences (A.L.C.E.S.T.E., Reinert 1990) make very fine-grained analyses possible. Beyond these packages, powerful A.I.-based approaches like natural language processing (Qazvinian *et al.* 2011) or sentiment analysis (Liu 2010) are becoming more and more accessible for social science researchers (Samory, Mitra 2018).

A fourth and final area requiring further attention derives from recent social and political phenomena. While conspiracy theories have traditionally been the purview of 'popular thought' or of laypersons (Moscovici 1987) or of the powerless (Uscinski, Parent 2014), with the recent rise of populism, many individuals and groups occupying positions of power, influence and leadership in society now routinely spread conspiracy theories. Much larger segments of the public than the marginalised, anomic or irrational individuals that have been identified as typical believers are now exposed to conspiracy theories spread from positions of authority, which will require a change in both theory and research focus.

Throughout this chapter, we have emphasised the dearth of research on conspiracy theory transmission. We mainly relied on neighbouring fields like rumour, urban legend, cognitive science of religion and social representations in order to map out domains requiring more

attention and drawing plausible hypotheses about conspiracy theory spread, but, as a conclusion, we invite researchers to investigate this virtually unexplored but crucial field of research.

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