

RUMOR HAS IT

The COVID-19 Infodemic as the Repository of Conspiracy

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Abstract - Access to the right information, at the right time and through trustworthy sources, is not only critical but necessary, especially during health-related emergencies such as the current COVID-19 pandemic which has forced billions of people into isolation. During this worldwide phenomenon, digital access to information has been at its highest, but it has also posed new challenges such as the surge of an *infodemic* (Zarocostas 2020) or an overabundance of information generated by the practices of eliciting and disseminating half-truths and conspiracy theories especially via independent or alternative media outlets (Del Vicario *et al.* 2019). By focusing on the US media landscape, this study intends to explore the critical workings of such platforms, and provide evidence of how they support and intensify the infodemic phenomenon by acting as *seed sources* or primary online providers of (mis)information with direct access to secondary sources such as social media accounts and other knowledge-sharing platforms. In particular, the study argues that these *seed sources* appeal to the constitutional principle of freedom of expression to justify a conspiratorial representation of COVID-19 disseminated in its many variants, namely fake news, rumors, scams, stigma, magical cures, and alarming conspiracy claims. By drawing from critical discourse studies, and social semiotics theory (van Leeuwen 2005), and by adopting a multimodal discourse analysis approach (Kress, van Leeuwen 2020; Machin, Mayr 2012; Ledin, Machin 2018), the study investigates a corpus of linguistic and other semiotic resources collected from the *London Real* and its affiliated *Digital Freedom Platform*, both held responsible for the dissemination of the highly contested *Plandemic* video series containing conspiratorial content accused of influencing public opinion (Del Vicario *et al.* 2016; Kulshrestha *et al.* 2017).

Keywords: infodemic; seed source, alternative media; plandemic; conspiracy; COVID-19.

*I do not agree with everything you say
but I will defend to the death your right to say it.*
(Brian Rose, CEO of the London Real Platform. <https://londonreal.tv/>).

1. Introduction

In democratic societies, freedom of speech is universally acknowledged as a fundamental human right. At the same time, freedom to express one's opinion is not an absolute right and comprises a system of limitations.

Particularly in this age of digital communication, every democracy has such a system in place to identify, discern, and establish what counts as a robust exchange of ideas or a deliberate and defamatory diffusion of falsehoods.

Whether you are a citizen or an organization, protecting the right to have a voice and being able to exercise this right responsibly¹ is the notion underpinning the debate about the different dimensions of information disorder, including the conspiratorial dimension associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. By specifically focusing on media representations of COVID-19, this study argues that the principle of freedom of expression is overtly and regularly flouted by alternative media networks by contributing to the *infodemic* phenomenon. The term *infodemic*, coined by combining the terms *info* and *epidemic*, was introduced in 2003,² and refers to a surge-like proliferation or an “overabundance of information, some accurate and some not” (Zarocostas 2020, p. 676), of news reports, interviews, films, podcasts, and social media posts, elicited and disseminated in a relatively short amount of time via a plurality of channels³ (Zarocostas 2020; Del Vicario *et al.* 2016; Vosoughi *et al.* 2018; Alam *et al.* 2020).

Finding trustworthy sources that deal with COVID-19 developments is particularly challenging, especially considering the public’s widespread behavior of relying primarily on online news. Indeed, going online for this kind of information during a period of crisis often generates collective feelings of distrust and anxiety as people are immediately confronted with overwhelming and confusing reports. While this virtual process of collective sensemaking⁴ can be used by the general public as an effective coping strategy in dire times, it also exacerbates the challenge of distinguishing trustworthy health guidance from bogus information. Since the onset of the pandemic in the early months of 2020, mainstream media have regularly provided information-seeking audiences with daily COVID-related updates. Yet, alongside these more dependable sources, several unregulated media outlets have also played a powerful role as information contributors. Identified in this context as *seed sources*, these alternative outlets are primary suppliers of (mis)information with direct access to multiple and independent

¹ Introduction to the European Convention on Human Rights – Collected texts, Council of Europe Publishing, Strasbourg, 1994 by Jean-François Renucci. [https://www.echr.coe.int/LibraryDocs/DG2/HRFILES/DG2-EN-HRFILES-01\(2005\).pdf](https://www.echr.coe.int/LibraryDocs/DG2/HRFILES/DG2-EN-HRFILES-01(2005).pdf) (6.5.2021).

² www.washingtonpost.com. *When the Buzz Bites Back* by David J. Rothkopf Sunday, May 11, 2003; Page B01. https://moodle2.units.it/pluginfile.php/334512/mod_resource/content/1/Rothkopf%20%20When%20the%20Buzz%20Bites%20Back.pdf (6.9.2021).

³ World Health Organization, 2020. Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) Situation Report – 13. Geneva, Switzerland. <https://www.who.int/publications/m/item/situation-report---13> (6.9.2020).

⁴ How a Crisis Researcher Makes Sense of Covid-19 Misinformation by Kate Starbird, 9 March 2020. <https://onezero.medium.com/reflecting-on-the-covid-19-infodemic-as-a-crisis-informatics-researcher-ce0656fa4d0a> (17.5.2020).

online environments, mainly forged by a handful of conspiratorial theorists whose determination is to reframe the events of this global pandemic according to a conspiratorial agenda (Zollo 2019).

The alternative online media network investigated in this study comprises the *London Real* (LR) platform and its spin-off *Digital Freedom Platform* (DFP),⁵ both considered carriers of misinformation and conspiracy claims related to COVID-19.⁶ The study argues that the LR platform best represents how news from a single *seed source* spreading to other sources can become viral, and potentially influence public opinion by tapping into their general understanding of specific issues. Indeed, according to studies, acceptance of new information is conditional on the people's prior attitudes as they are more likely to accept information confirming what they already believe, and reject information contradicting it, especially when this regards health-related beliefs (Flynn *et al.* 2017; Jakesch *et al.* 2018). Based on this assumption, the study intends to provide evidence that the LR achieves this powerful infodemic-inducing goal by carefully packaging their dangerous information as news bites that contain familiar and often persuasive emotional language, storytelling features, and credible details accompanied by recognizable and relatable visual data.

As a *seed source* and early provider of COVID-19 news, the LR's mission is to "transform humanity into a fully empowered, conscious and cooperative species."⁷ The platform owns multiple accounts on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, and carries out activities consisting of hosting and disseminating highly controversial programming whose content is then copied and pasted onto other privately-owned social media accounts (Del Vicario *et al.* 2016; Kulshrestha *et al.* 2017). *Plandemic* and *Plandemic Indoctrination* (henceforth *Plandemic 1* and *Plandemic 2*) are just two of the many documentary interviews published on the LR, and are perhaps the manifesto of conspiracy and the repository of the main categories of infodemics, ranging from fake news and rumors to censorship claims to full-fledged conspiracy theories. Yet, it seems that these short films remain largely unknown to the general public due to the many bans placed by YouTube and other social media networks; a quick look at the content explains the reasoning behind this decision. What is exposed is a visual representation of conspiracy formulated as an about-face view of the official information regarding the origin of the pandemic. It is a view that spins a different narrative which eschews evidence supported by mainstream science,

⁵ <https://londonreal.tv/about/>. For all further references, the LR was last accessed on September 25, 2021.

⁶ <https://www.politifact.com/article/2020/aug/18/fact-checking-plandemic-2-video-recycles-inaccurat/> by Daniel Funke.

⁷ <https://londonreal.tv/about/>.

and is therefore capable of triggering an infodemic. The study intends to shed light on these aspects, with a special focus on the involvement of *Plandemic* conspiracy thinkers, antivaxxers, and COVID-19 deniers whose voices belong to researchers, doctors, humanitarian activists and other members of the general public. These voices are not only heard in the videos, but they also populate the pages of a large number of social media accounts which, in their function as repositories of *seed source* information, continue to spread COVID-related misinformation. Samples from these ancillary sources are not included in the study's corpus due to limitations of space, but their function as information spreaders can be easily assumed from the discussion regarding the responsibility of *seed sources* in the creation of a COVID-19 infodemic.

The methodological approach to the analysis of *Plandemic 1 and Plandemic 2* draws on the principles of critical discourse analysis (CDA) (Fairclough 2003; Wodak 2009), and applies the social semiotic tools afforded by multimodal critical discourse analysis (MCDA) (Kress and van Leeuwen 2020; Machin, Mayr 2012; Ledin, Machin 2018) to investigate a body of data consisting of video transcripts, correlated screenshot images and viewer comments. Regarding the comments, within this infodemic system of dissemination, they represent an authentic and base-level response as they provide insight into the general perception of COVID-19 news originating from alternative and independent media sources.

1.1. Research Questions

The present study is driven by the assumption that by invoking freedom of expression, COVID-19 conspirators report information that often goes unchecked with the ultimate aim of producing a COVID-related infodemic. This hypothesis is at the core of the following research questions:

1. What is an infodemic and how does it originate?
2. What are some predominant infodemic categories of conspiracy?
3. What is a *seed source* and what role does it play in the infodemic dissemination system?
4. Why are the *Plandemic* videos considered *seed sources* of conspiracy?
5. How are linguistic and multimodal resources exploited in the *Plandemic* videos to construe conspiracy narratives?

2. Freedom of speech and freedom of the press vs. misinformation: an unresolved conundrum

While freedom of speech and freedom of the press are the cornerstones of democracy,⁸ they are also at the center of heated debates for the reason that establishing the limits and boundaries of what constitutes the notion of ‘freedom’ is often challenging. For example, determining how far these limits can be overextended to include a plurality of counter-hegemonic voices often entails going up against the danger of committing an act of censorship (Mouffe 1999; Cammaerts 2007). In other words, disputes are often sparked when measures designed to obstruct harmful information while safeguarding freedom of expression can result in discouraging legitimate and productive confrontational conversations. During this health emergency, for instance, protecting the people’s right to news updates seems to have triggered the need to control the rise of an *infodemic* with the justification of keeping the wrong kind of information from circulating. Indeed, news consumption has increased drastically in countries such as the US, bringing along the emergence of conspiracy narratives. Yet, freedom of speech and freedom of the press matter and must be guaranteed by experts who have been trained to report the truth on the life of a nation.⁹

2.1. Infodemics as the spreader of misinformation and conspiracy

Misinformation is false or inaccurate information that is spread with the clear intent of misleading the general public (Vosoughi *et al.* 2018). Inherently dangerous, this information can make its way into mainstream discourse¹⁰ and potentially lead to high-risk behavior, such as the attempt to self-administer COVID-19 treatments by drinking bleach (Figure 1)¹¹ or taking anti-malarials and anti-vermin medication.

⁸ https://www.law.cornell.edu/constitution/first_amendment (1.5.2021).

⁹ <https://ideas.ted.com/why-freedom-of-the-press-is-more-important-now-than-ever/> by Patrick D'Arcy (1.6.2021).

¹⁰ Ethical Journalism Network. (2020). https://ethicaljournalismnetwork.org/?s=fake+news&post_type=post (1.8.2021).

¹¹ https://www.euro.who.int/_data/assets/pdf_file/0010/437608/Alcohol-and-COVID-19-what-you-need-to-know.pdf (1.5.2021).



Figure 1

WHO Tweet <https://twitter.com/WHO/status/1246779780822859776>.

The abundance of misinformation has especially led to the construal of hard-to-eradicate conspiracy theories and secret plots regarding the origin of the virus and possible cures. Infodemics thrive on this kind of information during public emergencies, especially if mainstream media fail to appease the public's feelings of anxiety and uncertainty (Douglas *et al.* 2019). The increased polarization of American media,¹² even on matters that go beyond the current health emergency, such as presidential elections, anti-racism protests, and other devise events (Alam *et al.* 2021), is one of the reasons behind public distrust, but it is also one of the main arguments used by alternative media sources in their attempt to satisfy the public's curiosity, and restore a threatened sense of security and control over what they regard as the truth (Kruglanski *et al.* 2021). The LR, for example, vows to “provide access to the truth, celebrating different views, perspectives and insights as well as promoting financial freedom.”¹³

2.2. The role of alternative media outlets in the COVID-19 Infodemic.

The LR is an online platform providing on-demand programs running on the *londonreal.tv* website.¹⁴ Starting out as a podcast in 2011, the platform's aim has always been to offer an alternative and independent perspective on some controversial issues by conducting mainly one-on-one interviews with a diverse range of guests that includes business gurus, science experts and health officials. The LR covers topics as diverse as business, health and fitness, science, and technology, and adopts a style that is very similar to that of TED Talks,¹⁵ with a stage, dark settings, an audience, and a host-speaker (Figure 2), and a very similar mission statement that substitutes TED's *ideas worth sharing with people worth listening to*.¹⁶

¹² <https://news.gallup.com/poll/321116/americans-remain-distrustful-mass-media.aspx> (21.3.2021).

¹³ <https://londonreal.tv>.

¹⁴ <https://londonreal.tv/>. London Real - Transform Yourself.

¹⁵ <https://www.ted.com/> (29.3.2021).

¹⁶ <https://www.google.com/search?q=london+real+and+people+worth+listening+to&aq=lo&aqs=chrome.0.69i59l2j69i57j69i59j0i67l6.31223j0j15&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8> (29.3.2021).



Figure 2
Brian Rose in a LR TED-like assembly.

The founder and host of the LR is Brian Rose, a successful Wall Street and City of London banker who decided to leave his career to start the platform or what Rose calls an alternative to “the numbing effect of mainstream media”.¹⁷ Under his guidance, the LR turned into a new generation media business with half a billion views, two million subscribers, and 800 in-depth interviews. The network also has a YouTube channel with over ten thousand videos and multiple social media accounts.¹⁸

During the first crucial months of the pandemic, between March 2020 and October 2020, Brian Rose hosted a series of interviews on the network’s YouTube channel with some controversial guests that voiced their opinion regarding COVID-19. The most provocative ones are those presented in the two *Plandemic* short films which were blocked by YouTube and other media platforms almost immediately after their first online posting in May 2020. Both products were considered spreaders of conspiratorial infodemic content, but their livestream delivery, in the meantime, had reached 65,000 simultaneous views out of the expected 30 million in just 30 minutes after their launch, spreading to other major social media networks such as Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter.

2.3. *Plandemic and Plandemic Indoctrination*

Rose considered the ban on *Plandemic* and *Pandemic - Indoctrination* an act of censorship. As a response, he announced that these videos and other similar content would run on a new alternative and independent online environment within the LR network called the Digital Freedom Platform (DFP), claimed to be “*Of the People, By the People, For the People,*”¹⁹ echoing President Lincoln’s pledge in the Gettysburg Address.²⁰ Rose’s

¹⁷ <https://londonreal.tv/about/>.

¹⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/hashtag/londonreal> (3.9.2021).

¹⁹ <https://www.facebook.com/LondonReal/posts/digital-freedom-platform-of-the-people-by-the-people-for-the-people-london-real-a/2869690353078210/> (23.9.2021).

²⁰ <http://www.abrahamlincolnonline.org/lincoln/speeches/gettysburg.htm> (23.8.2021).

mission was to publish content that is unscripted, unedited and uncensored so as “to create a massive transformation of society into a fully cooperative species.”²¹

*Plandemic 1*²² is 26 minutes long and introduces the conspiracy theories sustained by Dr. Judy Mikovits, a discredited former scientist at the National Cancer Institute who was accused of stealing lab material.²³ Mikki Willis,²⁴ the provocative filmmaker and producer of what he considers socially-conscious media content, conducts the interview with Mikovits, and the viewer immediately becomes acquainted with many of the scientist’s claims, some of which have become known as predominant conspiracy theories. Such claims are not supported by reliable medical and scientific advice, and have been fact-checked and acknowledged as unproven evidence and falsehoods.²⁵

Plandemic 2 further elaborates on these conspiracy theories, and among the targets of this 75-minute sequel are Bill Gates and his foundation, along with Dr. Anthony Fauci, Big Pharma, and fact-checking journalism websites such as PolitiFact and Snopes.²⁶ The video begins with a simulation of a pandemic scenario, where leaders of international institutions debate possible solutions for an envisaged global health emergency, thus offering a far-reaching conspiratorial take on the pandemic itself, and insinuating doubt from the very start of the narrative. By cutting the videos into shorter clips (Table 1), Brian Rose frequently urges viewers to share them on their own social media accounts, thus facilitating this swarm-like spreading effect.

3. Corpus

Keeping online data safe for corpus construction was a major concern in this study as nearly all major social media sites, including YouTube, have embarked on a worldwide COVID-19 anti-misinformation endeavor thanks to which, in the first 12 months of the pandemic, more than 98 million posts, and 22,400 tweets containing conspiratorial material were completely removed, while another 11.7 million accounts with problematic content were questioned.²⁷

²¹ <https://londonreal.tv/about/>.

²² The full title is *Plandemic - The Hidden Agenda Behind Covid-19*.

²³ <https://www.npr.org/2020/05/08/852451652/seen-plandemic-we-take-a-close-look-at-the-viral-conspiracy-video-s-claims> by Scott Neuman (5.5.2021).

²⁴ <https://heavy.com/news/2020/05/mikki-willis/> (23.8.2021).

²⁵ <https://www.factcheck.org/2020/05/the-falsehoods-of-the-plandemic-video/> (8.6.2021).

²⁶ <https://www.politifact.com/>; <https://www.snopes.com/> (8.6.2021).

²⁷ <https://www.straitstimes.com/tech/facebook-twitter-remove-millions-of-pieces-of-fake-news-content-related-to-covid-19> (8.6.2021).

The content of the two *Plandemic* videos published in May 2020 on YouTube became the object of discussion on an overwhelming number of mainstream and alternative media outlets before the videos were taken down, only to be republished on the LR platform in August 2020 (Table 1).²⁸ According to US-based social media researcher Erin Gallagher,²⁹ the *Plandemic* video clips spread from YouTube to Facebook also with the help of *QAnon* (Figure 3), the extremist right-wing conspiracy group with tens of thousands of social media members. *CrowdTangle*,³⁰ a source used by The New York Times, reveals that by May 15th 2020 there were 2.5 million recorded interactions (likes, reactions, comments and shares) regarding *Plandemic* on public groups and Facebook pages (Figure 4).

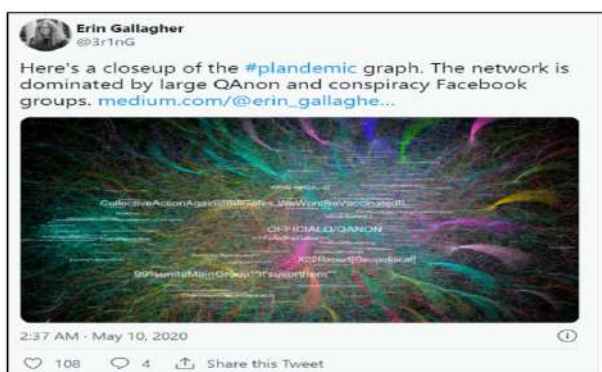


Figure 3
QAnon infodemic influence on other conspiracy groups on Facebook.

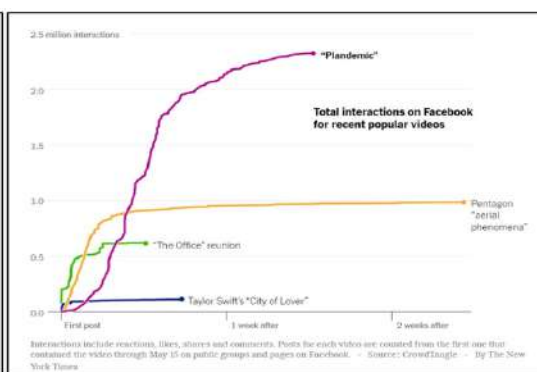


Figure 4
CrowdTangle data by *The New York Times*. May 15th 2020.

As aforementioned, for obvious limitations of space, this study’s focus is primarily on the *Plandemic* short films, but it is necessary to specify that other conspiratorial interviews were published on the LR during the same 6-month time range. These interviews are not included in the analysis but some information about them is provided in Table 1.

²⁸ <https://www.theverge.com/2020/5/12/21254184/how-plandemic-went-viral-facebook-youtube> by Casey Newton (8.6.2021).

²⁹ <https://onezero.medium.com/facebook-groups-and-youtube-enabled-viral-spread-of-plandemic-misinformation-fla279335e8c> by Erin Gallagher (8.6.2021).

³⁰ <https://www.crowdtangle.com/> (8.8.2021).

The <i>London Real</i> video documentaries and interviews on the <i>Digital Freedom Platform</i>	Number of clips	Date uploaded online	Views	Shares	Viewer Comments
The Truth Behind The Coronavirus Pandemic, Covid-19 Lockdown & The Economic Crash. David Icke https://freedomplatform.tv/the-truth-behind-the-coronavirus-pandemic-covid-19-lockdown-the-economic-crash-david-icke/	1	March 18, 2020	1,458,273	6.9k	2050
The Coronavirus Conspiracy: How Covid-19 Will Seize Your Rights & Destroy Our Economy David Icke https://freedomplatform.tv/the-coronavirus-conspiracy-how-covid-19-will-seize-your-rights-destroy-our-economy-david-icke/	3	April 6, 2020	3,786,864	10.5k	8878
The Coronavirus Agenda: what the mainstream media don't want you to know. Dr. Rashid Buttar https://freedomplatform.tv/digital-freedom-platform-interview-1-dr-rashid-buttar/	19	April 27, 2020	1,468,556	2.1k	6835
Rose/Mikovits 1: (ft. Dr. Judy Mikovits and Brian Rose) https://freedomplatform.tv/is-coronavirus-a-plandemic-exposing-the-truth-behind-america-covid-19-strategy-dr-judy-mikovits/	18	May 8, 2020	578,348	1.3k	2742
How The Coronavirus Pandemic Is The Biggest Scam Ever Perpetrated On The Human Race. The Doctor Who Speaks Out Against Vaccines (1) Dr. Sherry Tenpenny https://freedomplatform.tv/how-the-coronavirus-pandemic-is-the-biggest-scam-ever-perpetrated-on-the-human-race-dr-sherry-tenpenny/	15	May 15, 2020	264,956	2.9k	1351
Rose/Mikovits 2: Responding to criticism of my documentary (ft. Dr. Judy Mikovits) https://freedomplatform.tv/responding-to-criticism-surrounding-my-viral-documentary-the-plandemic-dr-judy-mikovits/	18	May 20, 2020	226,872	3.8k	1170
Face Masks Are Not Effective Against Covid-19: How Masks Are Being Used To Control The Population Dr. Sherry Tenpenny https://freedomplatform.tv/dr-sherry-tenpenny-face-masks-are-not-effective-against-covid-19-how-masks-are-being-used-to-control-the-population/	15	July 28, 2020	228,035	35.5k	290
Plandemic I. Plandemic: The Hidden Agenda Behind Covid-19 (ft. Mikovits and Willis) https://freedomplatform.tv/plandemic-original-segment/	1	August 13, 2020	160,082 52,992	13.9 k	124
Plandemic II. Indoctrination (ft. WHO, Bill Gates, Tedros Adhanom, Anthony Fauci) https://freedomplatform.tv/plandemic-indoctrination-world-premiere/	16	August 18 2020	6,612,221	552 K	5,438
Exposing Moderna; The Star Of Plandemic: Indoctrination Reveals The Truth (ft. Dr. David E. Martin) https://freedomplatform.tv/david-e-martin-exposing-moderna-the-star-of-plandemic-indoctrination-reveals-the-truth/	16	September 7, 2020	821,767	40.6k	362
The Real Battle Is Not The Virus: How The Coronavirus Agenda Is Eroding Our Civil Liberties. Dr. Rashid Buttar https://freedomplatform.tv/dr-rashid-buttar-the-real-battle-is-not-the-virus-how-the-coronavirus-agenda-is-eroding-our-civil-liberties/	11	October 30 2020	74,591	10.1 k	146

Table 1
Details about *Plandemic 1* and *2* and other videos.

The *Plandemic I* and *Plandemic II* corpus comprises 30 extracts selected from the video transcripts, 30 screenshots of the related activity described in the extract's narrative account, and 30 viewer comments posted in response to that video content.

Details of running time and total number of words per video are as

follows: *Plandemic I* - 25:56/4,395w; *Plandemic II* - 1:15:00/11,475w. The selection procedure consisted in:

- transcribing the video content;
- selecting extracts containing conspiracy claims;
- associating selection with the relative screenshots captured directly from the video sequences;
- identifying COVID19-related infodemic categories;
- clustering the extracts and screenshots under the categories;
- arranging the data in analysis tables.

With reference to the identification and formulation of the COVID19 infodemic-triggering categories, this entailed looking at factors that contribute to the massive spreading of information, namely content frequency, content similarity, comparability of details, transmedia content distribution and topic consistency. According to these factors, the most frequently recurring and comprehensive categories are: *Fake news and rumors*, *Censorship*, *Conspiracy theories* (Table 2). From these, a coding framework was developed with the indication of linguistic and multimodal tools for the analytical process.

The *Fake news and rumors* category and subcategories describe instrumental information used to establish credibility in order to trigger public indignation against mainstream science accused of delegitimizing dissenting voices and opinions. The *Censorship* category mainly focuses on the practices that, according to conspirators, are used to ban information from sources other than those approved and maintained by mainstream media, and to discredit people who search for COVID-19 content on these sources. The *Conspiracy Theories* category and subcategories more closely describe instances of conspiracy narratives fabricated against mainstream science and accredited media sources regarding the origin of the virus, the hidden agenda of private and public institutions, and the role of Big Pharma in the production of vaccines.

Coding Categories of infodemics	Definitions
1. Fake news and rumors	<p>Unsupported or false but instrumentally plausible claims and discussions regarding COVID-19 (treatments and magical cures, outbreak management and control measures, mortality rates).</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. establishing legitimation as expert <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. construing profile credibility b. discrediting mainstream science 2. corroborating fake news and rumor <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. fabricating credible details b. debunking media fearmongering
2. Censorship	<p>Phenomena characterizing people involved in spreading information about health-seeking practices.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. rejecting censorship of COVID 19-related information, and spreading new truths.
3. Conspiracy theories	<p>Theories related to the origin of COVID-19, and to its political, social, economic, and religious goals.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. setting the narrative <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. making the claim of conspiracy b. fueling skepticism and uncertainty 2. moving from claim to blame <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. addressing conspiracy in reverse

Table 2
Coding Categories of infodemics: description and subcategories.

4. Methodology

The methodological framework draws on the theoretical perspectives of CDA (Fairclough 2003; Wodak 2009), and on multimodal studies applied to the exploration of linguistic and other semiotic materials to explore the construal of both covert and overt values and ideologies. Within this context, where the epistemology and public understanding of science are challenged, the critical exploration of media representation of conspiracy theories employing a combination of verbal and non-verbal resources is not only crucial but instrumental in determining how an infodemic becomes a powerful force undermining the capacity to critically assess the social world.

As a fundamental component of the study's methodological interdisciplinary approach, multimodal analysis draws on Halliday's (1994) Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), and specifically on the ideational, interpersonal and textual metafunctions which Kress and van Leeuwen (2020) align to their own representational, interactional and compositional model that studies not only language but other semiotic modes, such as images, photographs, diagrams and graphics. The representational metafunction identifies two kinds of structures, the narrative and the conceptual; the former makes use of vector lines and are realized by reactional, speech and mental processes; the latter triggers classificational, analytical and symbolic processes. The interactional metafunction can be examined from three aspects: contact (demand or offer achieved through gaze), social distance (intimate, social, or impersonal size of frame), attitude

(involvement, detachment, viewer power, equality and representation of power perspectives), and modality (perceived truth-value of images according to eight modality scales that deal with degrees of the articulation of detail and color). The compositional metafunction deals with the layout of the aspects on a page, and discerns whether these create or represent a coherent and cohesive whole. It is realized through three interrelated systems: information value (given or new, ideal, or real), salience (achieved through size, color, tone, focus, perspective, overlap, and repetition) and framing.

Multimodal studies adhere to CDA's sense of being critical, which means showing how semiotic choices assume context-specific meanings, explain the nature of the social relations involved, and contribute to a shared ideology (Fairclough, Wodak 1997). In the case in point, this shared ideology is revealed by analyzing how alternative media platforms in general, and the LR in particular, leverage the semiotic construction of conspiracy to intensify skepticism, polarization and conflictive behavior, conceivably giving vent to tensions that underpin certain social groups that fail to find other communication channels to express their opinion.

The combination of multimodal and critical studies is the substructure of MCDA approaches (van Leeuwen 2005; Machin, Mayr 2012; Ledin, Machin 2018) from which analytical tools are drawn to investigate COVID-19 infodemic-inducing information in terms of 1) how it is constructed, 2) how its core ideas are amplified through verbal modes of expression, and 3) how these are supported by the corresponding visual representations of activities injected with emotional valence (Caumanns 2016).

In more detail, the analysis of the extracts selected from the video transcripts focuses particularly on the use of lexical and syntactic strategies, such as the recurrence of nomination, predication, overlexicalization, intensification, mitigation, transitivity verb processes (material, relational, mental, existential, behavioral, verbal), and other linguistic choices that indicate levels of authority, polarization, and legitimation. The visual analysis of the extracts' corresponding video screenshots is conducted by identifying some of the most salient multimodal functions that are comparable to those performed by the linguistic resources, with specific reference to the representation of social actors, the interactional nature of their relation, the compositional configuration of the settings and activities they are involved in, and the credibility levels of visual modality that are established.

5. Findings and Discussion

This section presents the study's findings arranged in tables according to the three infodemic categories and subcategories described in Table 1. It is important to note that coding language phenomena according to specific

categories is a methodological expedient, which means that this does not reflect what occurs naturally in real-life communication, and it is therefore quite likely for these categories to overlap. The analyzed items are indicated in the left column by using bold font along with minute indications; the screenshots related to each extract are placed in the right column. The 30 viewer comments posted in response to these videos are also clustered under the same three infodemic categories and analyzed in subsection 5.2.

5.1. Analysis of Infodemic Categories

- Category 1 - Fake news and rumors
- 1. Establishing legitimation as expert
- 1a. *construing profile credibility*


<p>Plandemic 1</p> <p>Extract 1 - min. 00.26 Mikki Willis voiceover : <i>Dr. Judy Mikovits has been called one of the most accomplished scientists of her generation...</i></p> <p>Extract 2 - min. 9.56 Mikki Willis: <i>So, I have to ask you, are you antivaccine?</i> Mikovits: <i>Oh, absolutely not [...]. I'm not antivaccine. My job is to develop immune therapies. That's what vaccines are.</i></p>		
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Table 3
 Profile legitimation.

In the attempt to explain the causes of the COVID-19 pandemic according to their vision of the world, conspirators need to establish legitimation as experts, even if this legitimation is often self-proclaimed. Construing profile credibility is the first category of infodemics represented in Table 3, extract 1 of *Plandemic 1*. The honorific title of *Dr.* and the nomination of *accomplished scientist* introduce Judy Mikovits, the protagonist of the short film who, in extract 2, through an attributive relational verb process, states the following: *I'm not anti-vaccine; My job is to develop immune therapies; That's what vaccines are.* This is probably her attempt to mitigate any conspiratorial affiliation by affirming that she believes in science and scientific treatment. The screenshot image showing Mikovits and Willis passing by a *vegetarian* store window conveys the idea that Mikovits is pro-nature, further reinforced by the moderate level of modality of the image set in natural surroundings.

1b. *discrediting government intervention, mainstream science, and global enterprises.*

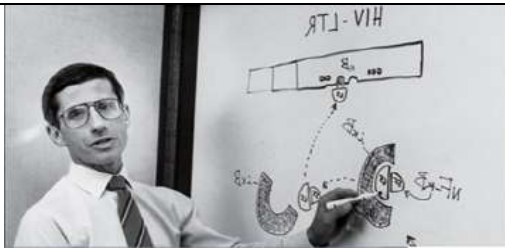

<p>Plandemic 1</p> <p>Extract 3 – min. 3.38 Mikki Willis: [...] <i>how do you sit here with confidence to call out these great forces, and not fear for your life as you leave this building?</i> Mikovits: <i>because if we don't stop this now [...] we can forget humanity as we will be killed by this agenda.</i></p> <p>Extract 4 – min. 04.12 Mikovits: <i>He [Anthony Fauci] directed the cover up; in fact, everybody else was paid off, and paid off big time. Millions of dollars from AF and AF's organization, the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Disease (NIAID).</i> min 4.22 Mikovits: <i>What he's saying is absolute propaganda, the same kind of propaganda that's he's perpetrated to kill millions since 1984.</i></p>	
<p>Plandemic 2</p> <p>Extract 5 – min. 5.30 Presenter: <i>The Event 201 scenario is fictional. Today's scenario is going to simulate meetings of a multistakeholder group called the pandemic emergency board.</i> Tom Inglesby: <i>We're at the start of what's looking like a severe pandemic, and there are problems that can only be solved by global business and governments working together.</i></p> <p>Extract 6 – min. 1:16:13 Dr. Martin: <i>They lost touch with their fellow humanity [...] but that's an invitation to each one of us to examine the way we are living [...] this is our moment to reclaim our humanity.</i></p>	

Table 4

Discrediting government intervention, mainstream science, and global enterprises.

In *Plandemic 1*, a nomination strategy is used to overlexicalize the term *Plandemic* which is a wordplay that stands for *Pandemic*. Indeed, in extracts 3 and 4, the pandemic health emergency is actually a planned one, organized by great forces, and it is therefore referenced as *agenda*, *cover up*, and *propaganda*. Through this strategy, it is highly probable that Willis and Mikovits are preparing the ground to accuse mainstream science, and private and public institutions of misguiding the public about the pandemic and its origins. They do so by discrediting the Whitehouse infectious diseases spokesperson, Dr. Fauci, who supposedly *paid off*, and *paid off big time* third parties to conceal essential information. Intensifiers are used to alarm people, telling them that *humanity* itself *will be killed*, and that this practice, far from being new, has been going on *since 1984*, as evidenced by Dr. Fauci's black and white image used to convey that the activity of *kill[ing] millions* began a long time ago with the HIV crisis. In *Plandemic 2*, there is another wordplay with the title *Indoctrination* (top image), instead of the more common term *Indoctrination*, as a direct reference to the 'doctored' COVID-related

information. In extract 5, the video reports a simulated scenario of a *multistakeholder group*, similar to the Global Preparedness Monitoring Board organized in 2019 by the World Health Organization (WHO), discussing *emergency* activities to put in place in case of a future *pandemic* or *Plandemic*. In extract 6, Dr. Martin,³¹ medical scientist and supporter of many COVID-19 conspiracy theories, not only names the people and institutions responsible for this scenario by pinning them on a bulletin board (see screenshot image) but also generates the *us vs. them* polarization of positions by specifically stating that since *they lost touch with their fellow humanity* [...], we need to [...] to reclaim *our humanity* back.

2. corroborating fake news and rumor
2a. *fabricating credible details*



<p>Plandemic 1</p>	
<p>Extract 7 - min. 15.01 Mikki Willis: <i>Let me ask you about Italy</i> [...] Mikovits: <i>Italy has a very old population. They're very sick with inflammatory disorders.</i></p> <p>Extract 8 - min. 17.48 Mikovits: The game is to prevent the therapies until everyone is infected, and then push the vaccines.</p> <p>Extract 9 - 15.30 Narrator voiceover: <i>One question remains: what happened to all the hydroxychloroquine?</i> min. 15.57 Narrator voiceover: <i>In a survey polling 23,000 doctors in 23 countries hydroxychloroquine was ranked as the most effective medication to treat the virus [...]</i> Mikovits: <i>the AMA were saying that Doctors would lose their license if they used hydroxychloroquine, a drug that has been on the list of essential medicine worldwide for over 70 years. Dr. Fauci calls that anecdotal data [...]</i></p>	
<p>Plandemic 2</p>	
<p>Extract 10 - min. 7.28 Narrator: <i>There are large-scale protesters and in some places riots. This led to violent crackdown in some countries, and even martial law [...]. The societal impacts, the loss of faith in government, the mistrust of news, and the breakdown of social cohesion could last even longer. We have to ask: did this need to be so bad?</i> [the film begins].</p>	

Table 5
Fabricating credible details.

In extracts 7 and 8 of *Plandemic 1*, three plausible conspiratorial claims are made regarding the pandemic in other countries, accompanied by what

³¹Dr. David E. Martin is the founder of M·CAM, the international leader in innovation finance, trade, and intangible asset finance. <https://login.londonreal.tv/index.php?action=social&chash=07cdfd23373b17c6b337251c22b7ea57.288>. (8.6.2021).

should be considered as credible details. The first case is about Italy, a country that has recorded a high COVID death toll due to its *very old population*. Indeed, the screenshot image of an elderly person’s hand and hospital wristband is a metonymic representation of old age. Emotional images such as these are a staple communication strategy of the conspirators used to produce a stronger impact on the viewers. In extract 8, the second claim addresses mainstream science and authorities who are accused of playing a *vaccine game*. As a typical conspiratorial demonization strategy, it is backed by claims of secret plotting which consists in waiting until *everyone gets sick* before institutions and Big Pharma *push the vaccines*, clearly implying that all-around economic benefits are involved. The third claim in extract 9 involves pre-existing but unused remedies, such as the drug *hydroxychloroquine* (see screenshot image) which has been listed as an *essential medicine for over 70 years*. The claim’s credibility level is intensified by mentioning an authoritarian voice, the American Medical Association (AMA), accused of blocking the drug, despite the 23,000 worldwide doctors who agree on its validity. In this same extract, Dr. Fauci is again under fire as he calls this *anecdotal data*. In extract 10 of *Plandemic 2*, the conspiracy claim that government intervention has made things worse (*protests, crackdown, the loss of faith in government, the mistrust of news, and the breakdown of social cohesion*), is sustained by images of events extracted from other media sources. This sequence ends with a rhetorical question which is, once again, an effective strategy of asking questions instead of providing answers; a behavior that is set to trigger greater skepticism.

2b. instrumentalizing the Media: fearmongering

Plandemic 1	
<p>Extract 11 - min. 19.15</p> <p>Mikovits: <i>It's behind comprehension how society can be so fooled that the types of propaganda continue to where they're just driving to hate each other.</i></p>	

Plandemic 2	
<p>Extract 12 - min. 6:39 Participant: <i>Absolutely, we need to save lives, but we absolutely cannot afford a heavy-handed response that suffocates our economy.</i></p> <p>Extract 13 - min. 1:12:13 WHO member: <i>now we need to go and look in families to find those people who may be sick, and remove them and isolate them.</i></p> <p>Extract 14 - min. 1:14:53 Dr. Martin: <i>we are being conditioned for unbelievable acts of tyranny [...] and your loved ones [...] are being used as cannon fire.</i></p>	

Table 6
Instrumentalizing the Media: fearmongering.

According to this infodemic category, mainstream channels, such as CNN and MSNBC, are responsible for fearmongering. In *Plandemic 1*, extract 11, reports of death tolls and food shortages seem to pit citizens against each other, resulting in violent street protests and sidewalk bickering (see screenshot image of man with flag). In extract 10 of *Plandemic 2*, the government's effort in fighting COVID-19 is qualified as a *heavy-handed response* by conspirators who probably believe that unnecessary acts that *suffocate our economy* are happening, such as emptying supermarket aisles and crowding health care centers (top screenshot images). The most distressing images are perhaps the last two that correspond to extracts 13 and 14, in which people are reportedly being hounded by the *Police*, and *isolated from families*. Originally intended to be a standard procedure to protect people from themselves, as stated by the WHO member (*to find those people who may be sick*), this activity in the screenshot images, along with many others of the same kind, turns out to be a fear-inducing strategy in the hands of the *Plandemic* people. Dr. Martin, a *Plandemic* interviewee, contributes with his share of fearmongering accusations on the part of mainstream media by using a simile when he reports that *loved ones are being used as cannon fire* (extract 14). It seems that any existing plausible evidence is used by the *Plandemic* producers to fit conspiracy theories, counting on the idea that an ordinary citizen is likely to accept the claim's validity, and this is one of the reasons why visually-represented conspiracy is easier to manipulate according to a specific intent.

Category 2. Censorship

1. rejecting censorship of COVID-19-related information, and spreading new truths.

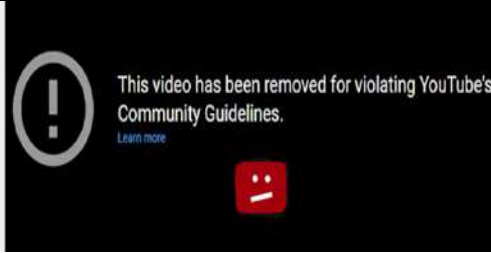

<p>Plandemic 1</p> <p>Extract 15 – min. 00.57 Mikki Willis: <i>so you [Mikovits] made a discovery that conflicted with the agreed-upon narrative? [...] you were put under a gag order.</i></p> <p>Extract 16 - min. 18.21 Mikki Willis: [...] <i>they've done such a great job at manipulating the masses [...] there is no dissenting voices allowed anymore in this free country, something that I never thought I would live to see.</i></p>	
<p>Plandemic 2</p> <p>Extract 17 - min. 0.08 David Rose: [...] <i>this censorship was unacceptable [...] so we fought back and created the Digital Freedom Platform, a censorship-free, independent broadcasting system that is of the people, by the people and for the people [...].</i></p> <p>min. 3.33 David Rose: <i>to anyone watching, please share this link now via the sidebar to any and all of your social media channels [...].</i></p> <p>Extract 18 - min. 8.08 Mikki Willis Voiceover: <i>When we see identical headlines across seemingly unrelated platforms, the logical mind concludes, well then it must be true.</i></p> <p>min. 8.57 Mikki Willis voiceover: [...] <i>make sure you dive down the rabbit hole where you'll find additional videos, documents, and scientific studies that support the claims and perspectives put forth in the Plandemic series.</i></p>	

Table 7

Rejecting censorship of COVID-19-related information, and spreading new truths.

At the heart of COVID-19 conspiratorial thinking are those theories that feed the infodemic system the most, and perhaps the predominant one is the censorship theory. Extract 15 of *Plandemic 1* accuses mainstream institutions of putting those who have a different positioning regarding the origins and treatment of the pandemic *under a gag order*. According to Mikki Willis, in *this free country* (extract 16), a deictic expression conveying emphasis, freedom of speech is suppressed by the total absence of *dissenting voices*. In *Plandemic 2*, extract 17, the accusation is coupled by David Rose's deictic expression *this censorship was unacceptable*, referring to the ban on the *Plandemic* videos. Rose's response was the creation of an alternative platform that is *of the people, by the people, and for the people*, on which he posted all of the LR videos previously disseminated and then banned by YouTube. The *seed source* activity on this platform is therefore set in motion as he asks people to *share this link*, along with all the others. Extract 18 is quite puzzling as it presents a contradictory claim. Willis clearly explains that the more *we see identical headlines across seemingly unrelated platforms, the logical mind concludes, well then it must be true*. Although in this case, he is referring to the lies spread about the *Plandemic* videos, this is exactly the same misinformation-spreading activity that alternative media *seed sources* perpetrate in an infodemic dynamic, so much so that Willis invites

people to *dive down the rabbit hole where you'll find additional videos, documents, and scientific studies* (extract 18). This is rather an unfortunate association as it is widely known that the Carrollian expression ‘*rabbit hole*’, does not simply refer to a boundless source of information, but indicates entering a bizarre and disorienting alternate universe (Dean, Forray 2017), much like the screenshot image of the random collectivization (van Leeuwen 1996) of media channels (extract 18). This representational strategy is quite often used by the *Plandemic* producers not only to suggest a community membership of some sort but also to avoid the direct naming of individual agents as perpetrators of an action.

Category 3. Conspiracy Theories

1. Setting the narrative

1a. *making the conspiracy claim*



<p>Plandemic 1</p> <p>Extract 19 - min. 4:58 Mikovits: <i>It started really when I was 25 years old, [...] from France where [virologist Luc] Montagnier had originally isolated the virus. This was a confirmatory study but Tony Fauci and Robert Gallo were working together to spin the story in a different way.</i></p> <p>Extract 20 - min. 10.16 Mikki Willis: <i>Do you believe that this virus [SARS-CoV-2] was created in the laboratory?</i> Mikovits: <i>I wouldn't use the word created. But you can't say naturally occurring if it was by way of the laboratory. So it's very clear this virus was manipulated [...] Somebody didn't go to a market, get a bat, the virus didn't jump directly to humans. That's not how it works. That's accelerated viral evolution. If it was a natural occurrence, it would take up to 800 years to occur.</i></p> <p>Extract 21 - min. 10.56 Mikki Willis: <i>And do you have any ideas of where this occurred?</i> Mikovits: <i>Oh yeah, I'm sure it occurred between the North Carolina laboratories, Fort Detrick, the U.S. Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases, and the Wuhan laboratory.</i></p>	 <p>REVEALED: U.S. government gave \$3.7million grant to Wuhan lab at center of coronavirus leak scrutiny that was performing experiments on bats from the caves where the disease is believed to have originated</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The US National Institutes of Health, a government agency, awarded a \$3.7-million research grant to the Wuhan Institute of Virology • The lab is the center of several conspiracy theories that suggest it is the original source of the coronavirus outbreak • The institute experimented on bats from the source of the coronavirus • They were captured more than 1,000 miles away in Yunnan • Sequencing of the Covid-19 genome has traced it to bats in Yunnan's caves • The U.S. government funded research on coronavirus transmission in the lab over the past decade • Learn more about how to help people impacted by COVID
<p>Plandemic 2</p> <p>Extract 22 - min. 58.15 Mikki Willis: <i>After a decade of lawsuits related to injuries and deaths, vaccine makers were going bankrupt [...].</i> min 1:01:52 Melinda Gates: [...] <i>it looks like it's going to be Black people who should get it [the vaccine first], and indigenous people [...].</i> State Legislator: <i>It's very scary and I want the African American people to open up their eyes.</i></p> <p>Extract 23 - min. 1:03:12 Raymond De Souza (Human Life International): <i>There is a concerted effort of foreign powers to control the population of Africa.</i></p>	

Table 8
Making the conspiracy claim.

In *Plandemic 1*, the master COVID-19 conspiracy theory is that the virus was a laboratory manipulation, regardless of the evidence presented by mainstream science against this hypothesis.³² To back this claim, in extract 19, Mikovits goes back to when she *was 25 years old*, and worked with the Nobel Prize recipient and co-discoverer of the HIV virus and vaccine, Luc Montagnier (see screenshot images). In doing so, she re-establishes her self-proclaimed credentials as a renowned scientist, then, in extract 20, she insinuates with caution that the virus is not a *naturally occurring* phenomenon and that it *was manipulated*. By showing images of the Wuhan Lab, the sarcastic remarks made by Mikovits become more salient. A low-pitched voice is used to convey a rather patronizing acceptance that people would actually believe in the market theory. She confidently says *NO* [emphasis], *somebody DIDN'T GO* [emphasis] *to a market, get a bat, the virus DIDN'T JUMP* [emphasis] *directly to humans*. She intensifies her tone of voice to state that it *would take up to 800 years for this to occur*. Unfortunately, validating her theory through the association with Montagnier was not exactly a wise thing to do as the virologist is considered by the scientific community as one of the promoters of COVID-related conspiracy theories.³³ Indeed, conspiracy theories start with a suspicion that takes root and grows quickly (Douglas *et al.* 2019). This is what happens in extract 21 in which Mikovits explains that she has enough evidence to name institutions (*North Carolina laboratories, Fort Detrick, the U.S. Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases, and the Wuhan laboratory*) that colluded with the US government to fund the Wuhan Lab, as suggested by the TV credits stating that the virus was man-made, followed by the screenshot of the article with the price tag well in sight. In this same article headline, the idea that something went wrong is insinuated by the word *leak*, which can mean that there could have been a *leak* of information or a *leak* of the virus itself. In *Plandemic 2*, another master narrative is a combination of two major claims: COVID-19 vaccination is a profit-making deal for Big Pharma; COVID-19 is a population control strategy for governments. The narrative begins with the assumption that as *vaccine makers were going bankrupt* (extract 22), they needed to find *guinea pigs* (see screenshot image) to restart vaccine production. According to *The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation* (extract 22), the recipients of the first COVID-19 vaccine should be *Black people and*

³² <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/06/15/lab-leak-theory-doesnt-hold-up-covid-china/> by Justin Ling. <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/science/article/coronavirus-origins-misinformation-yan-report-fact-check-cvd> (8.9.2021).

³³ <https://www.livemint.com/news/world/nobel-winning-scientist-claims-covid-19-virus-was-man-made-in-wuhan-lab-11587303649821.html> (4.5.2020); <https://theprint.in/science/nobel-laureate-who-found-hiv-now-backs-homoeopathy-anti-vaxxers-calls-covid-a-lab-accident/665710/> by Taran Deol (4.5.2020).

indigenous people. In extract 23, a state legislator's T-shirt, referring to the concern that his community would be used as *guinea pigs* (extract 22), exhorts *African-Americans* to #flattenthefear, taking up the highly emotional *flatten the curve* COVID-19 mantra. The legislator asks *his people* to *open up their eyes* to the government's hidden agenda which, according to *Plandemic* (extract 23), aims to use the vaccines as a way of *controlling the population growth of Africa*. The image of a finger used as a vector pointing to demographic data (see screenshot image of graph) is, once again, the conspiratorial representation of evidence that fits the intent (Douglas *et al.* 2019).

1b. fueling skepticism and uncertainty


<p>Extract 24 – min. 1:11:53 Dr. Martin: <i>This isn't a vaccine story. This is a population management story [...]. Populations that get in the way are a problem, parasites, a cancer a virus.</i></p> <p>Extract 25 – min. 1:17:11 Mikki Willis: <i>Our lives are shaped and guided by stories [...] the more we hear them, the more we believe in them [...] it is a myth that permeates the media and our minds. As they say, repeat a lie often enough, it becomes truth. [...] fear shuts down the ability to the part of our brain designed to solve problems [...].</i></p>	
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Table 9
 Fueling skepticism and uncertainty.

Heightening the level of uncertainty during critical periods is the general aim of *Plandemic 2*. In extract 24 of this second video, Dr. Martin reiterates the aim behind mass vaccination or that of controlling population growth. These populations *get in the way* because they are against governing authorities, such as in the case of Hong Kong (screenshot image of extract 24), and are therefore: *a problem, parasites, cancer, and a virus*. Nearly all media channels, as shown in screenshot image of extract 25, another example of collectivization of social actors, are accused of placing too much emphasis on stories such as the population management plot. Willis adds that these *myths permeate the media and our minds*; they are *lies* and, if repeated long enough, they become *truth*. *Plandemic*, once again, not only triggers high levels of skepticism, distrust, and uncertainties but is accusing the government of conspiracy; this is an inexplicable accusation as the same behavior is attributable to the *Plandemic* conspirators as argued in the next category.

2. moving from claim to blame
 2a. addressing conspiracy in reverse


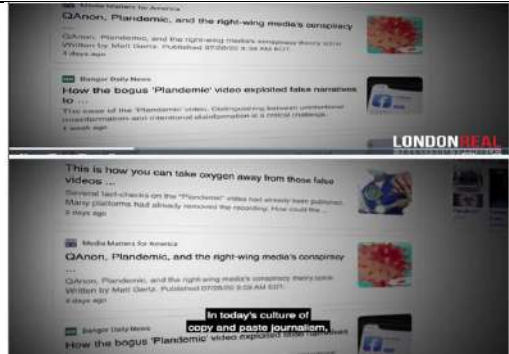
<p>Plandemic 1</p> <p>Extract 26 - min. 03.59 Mikovits: <i>Anthony Fauci and Robert Gallo were working together to spin the story in a different way... the Virus didn't have to wait until 84 to be confirmed, think of how many lives we could have saved in the entire continent of Africa [...] as that virus spread through because of the arrogance of a group of people...and it includes ... Anthony Fauci.</i></p> <p>Extract 27 - min. 08.50 Mikovits: <i>[the Bayh-Dole Act] in the early 80s, it destroyed Science, and has allowed [...] somebody like Bill Gates, with billions of dollars, nobody elected him, he has no medical background, no expertise, but we let people like that to have a voice in this country while we destroy the lives of millions of people.</i></p> <p>Extract 28 - min. 22.13 Fauci: <i>[...] pandemic preparedness. And if there is one message that I want to leave with you today is that there will be a surprise outbreak...we are going to see an outbreak in the next few years.</i></p>	
<p>Plandemic 2</p> <p>Extract 29 – min. 3:36 Mikki Willis voiceover: <i>Why then were the most powerful forces of Big Techs, politics, media and medicine go to such extreme measures to silence her [Mikovits] voice all over the world?</i></p> <p>Extract 30 - min. 21.11 Mikki Willis Voiceover: <i>the pace of our modern world makes it nearly impossible for working people to research the events and policies that shape their lives. When seeking answers to life's most pressing questions, where do we go first? Google. [...]. In today's culture of copy and paste journalism, it's common for hundreds of unrelated outlets to feature the exact same report. It's not the result of laziness, this is by design.</i></p>	

Table 10
 Addressing conspiracy in reverse.

Moving from claim to blame is a *return-to-sender* conspiracy or a *conspiracy-in-reverse*. Indeed, as the exact definition of *conspiracy theory* is open to debate, the term can be weaponized and used to deflect criticism because it hands the conversation back to the accuser as shown in extract 25 (Coady 2006). In this category, conspirators accuse mainstream science and affiliated media outlets of exhibiting very similar conspiratorial behavior, thus turning the tables on who should take the blame. In *Plandemic 1*, extract 26, the historical reference to the HIV virus, which was not confirmed *until [19]84*, puts Dr. Fauci and his associates on the spot as it accuses them of *spinning the story in a different way*. The exchanges containing *they vs. we* references are not, in this case, used as a polarization strategy, but are exploited as a *mea culpa*, one in which the conspirators strategically admit

their own involvement, such as *we could have saved lives in the entire continent of Africa, because of the arrogance of a group of people, we let people like that to have a voice, and we destroy the lives of millions of people*. The accompanying screenshot image, by exploiting the collectivization strategy of social actor representation (van Leeuwen 1996), features Elton John who lauded Fauci on his role in the global HIV/AIDS crisis,³⁴ but suggests that people outside the scientific field are often complicit in perpetuating a lie. This polarization of positions is also present in extract 27. Once again, *we (the entire nation) were fooled enough to allow somebody like Bill Gates (he, him), who has no medical background and is not an expert, to vaccinate children*. *Plandemic 1* ends with Dr. Fauci pictured against a black background (extract 28) as he advises governments back in 2017 on future health emergencies, and the need for *pandemic preparedness*, thus exploited by the conspirators as a doubt-inducing narrative. *Plandemic 2*, extract 29, insists on propagating the claim that mainstream media are involved in censorship activities against dissenting voices. For example, the headlines in the screenshots accuse the *most powerful forces of Big Techs, politics, and medicine* of silencing the voices of Dr. Mikovits and of the LR *Plandemic* producers. Ending the short film is yet another conspiracy theory that is directly connected to this study: the infodemic phenomenon. The argument in extract 30 is that a certain kind of *copy and paste journalism* (see screenshot subtitles) has become popular among *working people* as they are forced to use Google as their main source of information because *the pace of our modern world makes it impossible to research the events and policies that shape their lives* elsewhere. This facilitates, according to the conspirators, the dissemination of misinformation onto *hundreds of unrelated channels*, turning lies and myths into truths (*Plandemic 2*, extract 25). It so happens that *Plandemic* conspirators encourage the same exact search patterns in their transmedia posting behaviors, advising their loyal audiences to *design* and disseminate their own conspiratorial infodemic content.

5.2. Viewer Comments

In recent years, online knowledge-sharing platforms, such as YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, as well as independent sources such as the LR, have upgraded their digital applications so as to enable user content to be shared via diverse information systems (Kaplan, Haenlein 2010). No longer passive recipients of information, these users now interact with others and make contributions of their own, whether in real-time by using multiple media forms or in more conventional asynchronous posts (Shneiderman *et al.*

³⁴ <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/12/01/politics/fauci-elton-john-usglc-world-aids-day/index.html> by Jennifer Hansler (8.9.2021).

2011). Viewer-generated content on these platforms, formulated as a response to a debated issue, is a critical component of an information dissemination dynamic as these users carefully select what and how to communicate the object of their interaction, and reveal unknown and often unpredictable elements of stance and perspective. This behavior reflects Grice's theory of conversation whereby the relevance of interaction within a group may depend on who starts the conversation (Grice 1975); in this case, the role is played by the conspiracy support network and affiliated websites.

The 30 viewer-generated comments from *Plandemic 1* and *2* were collected from the LR platform and clustered under the same three broad infodemic categories used for the extracts and screenshot analysis, resulting in 10 comments per category. This subcorpus, amounting to a total of 42,240 words, dates back to the time of release of the two short films with the exception of a more recent cluster collected until mid-September 2021. The aim of comment analysis, in this context, is to reveal how conspiratorial thinking is imprinted in the minds of the general public by leveraging features of a two-way interaction consisting in a stimulus-response pattern, whereby the video material is the stimulus, and the viewer comments are the response.

The comments mainly feature text with only a few images related to user profiles. They are, however, interspersed with some basic emoticons (smileys, thumbs up or down), and several typographical features, such as punctuation marks, uppercase letters, bold font, and irregular spacing. Grammatical and lexical errors, spelling mistakes, and wrongful punctuation have not been altered for the twofold purpose of preserving authenticity and highlighting the discourse behaviors they stand for, such as shouting, opposing, emphasizing, doubting, affirming, repudiating, and ridiculing. Indeed, these multimodal components of language structure are salient features of visual communication as they contribute to the representation of the public's experience regarding a specific topic (Ledin, Machin 2018).

The dates shown next to each comment indicate the approximate posting date from the last viewing time (i.e. a month ago, 6 months ago, a year ago, etc.) which, in this case, corresponds to September 2021. Also, as the original comments do not contain any viewer-generated underlined expressions, for ease of reference, this formatting feature is used to indicate the analyzed utterances.

Fake news and rumors	<p>(Plandemic 1)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. If you want to <u>create fear and don't want to people get well</u>, then it makes sense that you shut down as many natural resources as possible (a month ago) 2. Vaccines are not needed. We need healthy bodies. <u>Germ theory is over 100 year old science</u> (4 months ago) 3. <u>We've had SARS, MERS and Ebola, and those did not cause a worldwide shutdown, nor did it spread worldwide and kill entire towns</u> (a year ago) 4. <u>Masks are not needed!</u> [...] some of which aren't even medical masks that
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	<p>would actually block virus particles 😊 (a year ago)</p> <p>5. It's our <u>hard work and taxes that fund the government</u>, they are using your own <u>hard earned labor</u> against you. Tell me that's not <u>something out of "1984"</u> or those <u>science fiction novels</u> (a year ago)</p> <p>(Plandemic 2)</p> <p>6. <u>Those fake fact checkers</u> even tried To fact this documentary or they added the fact check label thinking it was the previous documentary. People are saying they even fact checked this (7 days ago)</p> <p>7. <u>mRNA vaccine</u> used people as fucking <u>guinea pigs</u> disgusting evil mfers (7 months ago)</p> <p>8. I strongly believe the <u>Influenza injections</u> that she [sister] I in September caused her to spiral to a <u>down ward heath hazard</u>. [...] My U*ncl e also died 2 weeks after I Flu shots (10 months ago)</p> <p>9. <u>C O V I D is 5 G signals</u>. [...] Why is the word v a c c I n e s erased? They <u>want v a c c I n e s sold don't they?</u></p> <p>10. the symptoms of the covid-19 virus are definitely real but the pandemic and everything that came along with it is 100% a hoax and is a great deception against mankind. They're using COVID-19 as a distraction (2 months ago)</p>
<p>Censorship</p>	<p>(Plandemic 1)</p> <p>11. Everyone stay alert! Never before has such evil and <u>complete violation of human rights</u> bee forced apon mankind, ever, period. The bible says 'Be alert' so be alert" (2 months 2021)</p> <p>12. <grin> If I weren't so sure that all of this sickness and madness is coming to an end, due to the <u>mass awakening happening worldwide</u> (7 months ago)</p> <p>13. We should ALL have these videos, so when it's taken down one place it pops up in a million (or 74.4 million) other places.... <u>We have now seen how opposition to the globalists is silenced</u> (8 months ago)</p> <p>14. It is <u>not We the Sheeple, but We the People</u>, are awake and ready, UNITED WE STAND, Thank you! (a year ago)</p> <p>15. <u>Every ones scared</u>, theyre doing a good job. We <u>have people hidden</u> in there fields inside the people who control the world, its time to go. Face book <u>is allowing me</u> to post this. (a year ago)</p> <p>(Plandemic 2)</p> <p>16. This is just <u>liberal propaganda framing Trump as the blame</u>. Everything in this film is now well-known by the thinking public (those who don't spend their lives glued to their cell phones).</p> <p>17. I can't believe it has taken me this long "to find" and watch this. I've had many people to send different links to watch, but by the time I would go to view, it had already been <u>taken down...."BANNED"</u> (8 months ago)</p> <p>18. GAWD are you an ignorant MORON!! I bet you vote Democrat: THE PARTY OF LUCIFER!! You know, <u>the party of baby killing and limited Liberties!!</u> (10 months ago)</p> <p>19. <u>David E Martin doesn't need further credits</u>. He is a walking, talking library on the subject. I firmly believe no one can 'get him' on any fact mentioned in the film (a year ago)</p> <p>20. There are sources presented throughout the film that they can follow up on. <u>Much of the information has been censored</u>. There were many documents that were public knowledge in January are now deemed "dangerous" (a year ago)</p>

Conspiracy Theories	<p>(Plandemic 1)</p> <p>21. It is not a vax at all, but an <u>experimental mRNA therapy</u> which re-writes your DNA (4 months ago).</p> <p>22. The reports of cases is a <u>ploy to scare people</u>. Most people who have the virus NEVER get sick and should never be considered a ‘case’!!! (6 months ago)</p> <p>23. The <u>most terrifying words in the English language</u> are: I’m from the <u>government</u> and I’m here to help. Ronald Reagan (a year ago 2020).</p> <p>24. <u>Fauci knew back in 2005</u> that HCQ worked on this virus... yet he sat by silently. Why? Prestige and money (a year ago)</p> <p>25. You must listen closer she explains very well the <u>method of “cover-up”</u> that they use and one of their most effective weapons are to accuse their enemies of what they are hiding (a year ago)</p> <p>(Plandemic 2)</p> <p>26. <u>This goes way back to the ‘Black Nobility’</u> and the ‘Round Table’ members ordered through ‘<u>The Last Will of Cecil Rhodes</u>’ and the families of the ‘<u>Rothschilds</u>’, ‘<u>Rockefellers</u>’ et al! These guys are evil by nature!!! (2 months ago)</p> <p>27. <u>OPERATION CRIMSON CONTAGION</u> 😊 just like CladeX <u>EVENT 201</u>. <u>The whole damn government</u> knew (3 months ago)</p> <p>28. These days, all about <u>Tony Fauci and the Wuhan lab is being “revealed”</u>. Also, the clips from <u>Event 201</u> has all more or less come true. WHY is it so difficult to get stuff like this to the proper authorities at an earlier stage? (4 months ago)</p> <p>29. Pointing fingers at each other (<u>people from other political parties</u>) is exactly what the <u>powers-at-be</u> want us to do to each other (9 months ago)</p> <p>30. I noticed the 2019 report by the <u>GLOBAL PREPAREDNESS MONITORING BOARD</u> has been altered...Could it be they tried to dodge the crimes against humanity lawsuit? (a year ago)</p>
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Table 11
Viewer Comments from *Plandemic 1* and *Plandemic 2*.

In both videos, the comments in the first category of Fake news and rumors represent COVID-19 as a disease *created* to dismiss natural *100-year old science* (1, 2). Despite the experience of past pandemics (SARS, MERS, EBOLA), COVID is said to be treated with *worldwide shutdowns* (3), and *useless masks* (4). The public seems to be expressing feelings of *fear* (1), of not being treated appropriately as *they are shutting down as many natural resources as possible* (1). By referring to the use of the exclusive pronouns strategy, the pronoun *They* most likely refers to the *government* and institutions (5) who are also exploiting *our hard work, labor, and tax money* (5). These practices are considered as freighting as those described in Orwell’s *1984 science fiction novel* (5). In *Plandemic 2*, fake news revolves around *fake fact checkers* (6), and the much-feared *mRNA vaccines* (7, 9) that use people as *guinea pigs* (7), along with the more commonly heard rumors about *5G signals* and COVID as a ***100% hoax*** [bold emphasis] (9). The influenza shot is also demonized as a *downward health hazard* (8).

The arguments underlying the *Censorship* category in *Plandemic 1* are based on the comments that suggest a *complete violation of human rights* (11). The viewers respond to the video by saying that even the Bible warns to ‘*be alert*’ (11), and now, thanks to *Plandemic*, people are experiencing a

mass awakening happening worldwide (12). The reasoning is that ordinary people, or ***we the people*** and ***not we the sheeple*** [bold emphasis] (14), have been stigmatized as they have been *silenced* (13), *scared*, *hidden*, and *disallowed* to talk (15). Indeed, *Plandemic 2* comments insist on the belief that information is totally ***BANNED*** [bold emphasis] (17), and people like Trump are victims of *liberal propaganda* (16) in the controlling hands of the *party of baby killing and limited Liberties* (18). According to most viewers, *much of the information has been censored* (20), but there is one person who is *a walking, talking library on the subject* of COVID-19, namely Dr. Martin, who *doesn't need further credits*; he also happens to be one of the supporters of many conspiracy theories (19).

In *Plandemic 1*, reactions to the *Conspiracy theories* regard a general distrust: in the vaccine as it is experimental and *rewrites DNA* (21); in the number of reported *cases* as they are used as *a ploy to scare people* (22); in the *terrifying* government (23); in Dr. Fauci who knew about everything back in 2005 (24, 28), and contributed to *the cover-up* (25). In *Plandemic 2*, the reference to ***OPERATION CRIMSON CONTAGION*** [bold emphasis] and *Event 201*³⁵ (27) not only insinuates that this plandemic was being plotted all along but also blames famous foundations of being the perpetrators (27). Indeed, there is a lot of blaming and naming in these comments, emphasizing that the benefits of a health emergency have been exploited by *the Rothschilds, the Rockefellers et al, the Black Nobility* etc. (26). In comment 30, the suspicion is that in 2019, just before the pandemic became global news, the report of the *Global Preparedness Monitoring Board*³⁶ of the WHO had been altered, thus *pointing fingers* at government *powers* and *political parties* (29).

6. Conclusion

For many people around the world there has never been a disease that is so little understood and so greatly feared as COVID-19, compelling the WHO to warn citizens of a possible *infodemic* or upsurge of excessive information across traditional and social media networks attempting to explain origins, causes and cures (Zarocostas 2020). Motivated by the freedom of expression principle, alternative media networks, identified in this study as *seed sources*,

³⁵Event 201 was a pandemic tabletop exercise hosted in 2019 by Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security in partnership with the World Economic Forum and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. The event simulated a series of dramatic, scenario-based facilitated discussions, confronting difficult, true-to-life dilemmas associated with response to a hypothetical, but scientifically plausible, pandemic. <https://www.centerforhealthsecurity.org/event201/about> (8.9.2021).

³⁶https://www.gpmb.org/#tab=tab_1 (8.9.2021).

are particularly responsible for this unchecked transmedia dissemination of information. As argued, whether formulated as theories, beliefs, or claims (Douglas *et al.* 2019), the frequency and duplication of similar information published across diverse media channels will quite likely generate a conspiracy infodemic. In particular, the study presents evidence that conspirators follow a specific pattern to disseminate their claims, starting by establishing their legitimate position among the scientific community; setting up a narrative of an alleged secret plot; presenting supporting evidence to claim that plot-related events are all connected; advocating logical and even historically-grounded explanations behind their suspicions. In doing so, these self-proclaimed experts have been able to amass their own fan bases who significantly contribute to the COVID-related infodemic by posting comments and sharing the *Plandemic* videos (see Figures 3 and 4). These comments contain the *seeds* of three main conspiracy theories sustaining that 1) the virus is artificial and released from a laboratory environment; 2) vaccines are a vast Big Pharma deception; 3) the pandemic is a cover-up of a management plan to exert control over certain populations of the world.

In the *Plandemic* videos, the abovementioned pattern can be detected in the carefully packaged infodemic material or the persuasive combination of verbal and visual representations of conspiracy from which it becomes difficult, even for experienced and informed readers, to filter evidence and data-driven facts, and discard fiction. As evidenced in all the images, the verbal narration is craftily matched with visual multimodal resources. For example, modality resources of color saturation, and the representation of attributes and settings are never exaggerated in order to maintain an acceptable level of authenticity. These resources are substantiated by other visual semiotic choices, such as gestures, the collectivization of social actors, visual tropes, close-ups and long-shots to include or exclude protagonists.

A closing remark regards conspiracy theories and the danger they pose today, more than ever, and not only because they are infodemic confluents. Misinformation, conspiratorial thinking, beliefs, or claims, all intimations of deep-rooted conspiracy theories, have a very good chance of decreasing normative forms of collective well-being provided by official science and medicine, while increasing disruptive health-related behavior as in the case of self-medication or the street riots against mask mandates and vaccine protocols (Douglas *et al.* 2019). This consideration is perhaps the central node of the study as it joins the various strands of the discussion, such as the pervasiveness of independent media products, the role played by infodemics in conspiracy communication, the controversial interpretations of the principle of freedom of expression, and the people's perception and beliefs in conspiracy theories.

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