GENERAL INTRODUCTION

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In April 2005, 22-year-old American Dylan Avery released *Loose Change*, a film about the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001. He had put the documentary together on his laptop, drawing mainly on material available online. The film was distributed, often for free, on DVD and available for watching and downloading online, first via Google Video, later on YouTube. *Loose Change: Second Edition* was released as early as December 2005, then *Loose Change: Final Cut* about two years later, followed by *An American Coup*, a further update, in September 2009. The films were so successful that *Vanity Fair* called them the ‘first Internet blockbuster’ (Sales 2006). And while the original version cost only a couple of thousand dollars to make, the final one was professionally produced for more than a million. For each new film, Avery deleted some scenes and material, and added new ones in their stead (partly in reaction to copyright infringement lawsuits). The films’ argument thus changed considerably over time. They started from the premise that there were anomalies in the official account that needed explaining. At first, Avery suggested that the planes that had hit the World Trade Center had been remotely controlled, and later he suggested that the Twin Towers were brought down by controlled demolition. All versions, however, make the same central claim: the 9/11 attacks were not committed by Islamist terrorists led by Osama bin Laden, but were orchestrated in secret by the U.S. government in order to infringe on civil liberties at home and wage wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, seemingly with the aim of securing access to oil.

The *Loose Change* films articulate what is commonly called a conspiracy theory. According to historian Geoffrey Cubitt (1989: 13), conspiracy theories are a way of making sense of current events and the grand sweep of history that is characterised by intentionalism, dualism and occultism. They assume that everything has been planned and nothing happens by coincidence; they divide the world strictly into the evil conspirators and the innocent victims of their plot; and they claim that the conspiracy works in secret and does not reveal itself even after it has reached its goals. Political scientist Michael Barkun (2013: 3–4) highlights similar characteristics in his influential definition of conspiracy theories: nothing happens by accident; nothing is as it seems; and everything is connected.

Conspiracy theories are widespread. Recent polls, for example, show that a majority of people believe in at least one conspiracy theory. From Bond to Bourne, conspiracy narratives have been a prominent feature of Hollywood cinema. The imagination of secret plots has also been a significant concern of literary and popular fiction, from Shakespearean drama to the
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postmodern metafictions of Thomas Pynchon. President Trump’s path to the White House was kick-started by his promotion of the Birther conspiracy theory that alleged that President Obama was not born in the U.S.A., and he appeared on the Alex Jones show, an online conspiracy channel with a following in the millions. In May 2019, the F.B.I., for example, issued an internal intelligence bulletin warning that domestic terrorism (of the kind that led to the El Paso shooting in August 2019) was often underpinned by a particular form of white supremacist conspiracism. Conspiracy theories that circulate globally online such as the Great Replacement conspiracy theory, which claims that there is a plan to replace the Christian populations of Western countries with Muslim immigrants, seem to constitute a particularly ‘sticky’ form of fake news (Lewandowsky, van der Linden, Cook 2018), even if the evidence is not yet clear whether the Internet has in fact led to a proliferation of conspiracy theories, or merely made them more highly visible and easily available. In many countries, the leaders of populist parties and movements frequently draw on conspiracy tropes, and their followers appear to be particularly receptive to them. Conspiracism (a worldview in which conspiracies are seen as central to the unfolding of history; Mintz 1985) plays a significant role in many political contexts around the world, from the disinformation factories of Russia that churn out fake news stories, to the use of conspiracist narratives in the inter-ethnic conflict between the Dayaks and Madurese in Borneo, and from the pronouncements of President Chávez in Venezuela, to the popular rumour in the Middle East that the U.S.A. orchestrated the 2011 Arab uprisings.

However, conspiracy theories are not identical with fake news. For one thing, not all fake news claims that a sinister plot is afoot. Moreover, the producers of fake news know that they are spreading lies. They do so intentionally to create confusion, mobilise their audience or smear opponents. By contrast, the majority of those who articulate conspiracy theories genuinely believe in what they are saying (or, at the very least, in an era of relentless scepticism, they don’t fully disbelieve the theory, suspecting that it might be true or might as well be true: cf. Knight 2000: 47–8). They are convinced that they are helping to reveal the truth. But there also those who spread conspiracy theories that they do not necessarily believe in themselves to make money or to achieve certain political goals. U.S. radio host Alex Jones, who has built a multi-million-dollar business based on conspiracy theories, would be an example of the former; Viktor Orban, prime minister of Hungary since 2010, would be an example of the latter, as he regularly uses the Great Replacement conspiracy theory to mobilise Hungarians against refugees and the E.U.

Far from being mere trivia, conspiracy theories have played a significant role in history and they continue to matter in the present, not least with the current rise of populism in many countries. At times they can have serious consequences, prompting some people to commit extremist violence (e.g. 28-year-old Australian Brenton Harrison Tarrant, who, motivated by the Great Replacement conspiracy theory, killed 50 people and injured as many at Al Noor Mosque and Linwood Islamic Centre in Christchurch, New Zealand, when he opened fire on the Muslim congregation gathered there for Friday prayers on 15 March 2019) and others to disengage from politics. Research has demonstrated, for example, that people are less likely to take active steps to reduce their carbon footprint if they become convinced that the notion of climate change is a hoax (Douglas, Jolley 2014). Conspiracy theories can also help bolster a sense of individual or group identity, for better or worse. Yet, they can also provide a harmless and vicarious pleasure to many who are attracted to their status as ‘alternative’ narratives known only to an enlightened few, while the ignorant ‘sheeple’ believe the orthodox version of events.

The Loose Change films, for example, consciously set themselves in opposition to the official version of events, a characteristic that some accounts consider to be another defining feature of conspiracy theories (e.g. Bratich 2008; Räikkä 2018). However, as a number of studies have
shown, conspiracy theories can also constitute the official version endorsed by the authorities. Outside the West, for example in Russia or parts of the Arab world, conspiracy theories are still regularly put forward by government officials and mainstream media (Gray 2010; Yablokov 2018). Instead of grassroots dissent against the status quo (a film school reject living in a small town in upstate New York, putting a film together for loose change on his laptop that accused his own government of lying), conspiracy theories can just as often be deployed by political elites to suppress opposition and to rally support for the regime. Moreover, even in Europe and the U.S.A., conspiracy theories in the past were likewise not confined to the fringes but were an accepted – and even sophisticated – form of knowledge articulated by ordinary people as well as elites (Roisman 2006; Campbell et al. 2007; Butter 2014). Consequently, conspiracy theories have not always targeted elites, as they currently tend to in the West. For most of the past, conspiracy theories on both sides of the Atlantic accused enemies from outside, from below or a combination of the two, of plotting against the state and those in power. Blaming those already in power only became the dominant mode of conspiracy theorising in the West during the twentieth century (Campion-Vincent 2005).

In the U.S.A. as well as in Europe, this shift occurred hand in hand with a transition from what Barkun calls ‘event’ and ‘systemic’ conspiracy theories to ‘superconspiracy’ theories (2013: 6). On this schema, the first versions of *Loose Change*, for example, constitute event conspiracy theories because they focus almost exclusively on the 9/11 attacks. The final version, *An American Coup*, counts as a systemic conspiracy theory because it integrates the attacks into the larger narrative of a plot by a specific group – in this case, the U.S. government. Since then, the 9/11 attacks have been inscribed into a number of superconspiracy theories, that is, theories that claim that several groups of powerful conspirators are secretly in cahoots. Some 9/11 conspiracy theories, for instance, claim that the attacks were part of a much larger plot to control the course of history by a superconspiracy involving not only the U.S. government, but also the Jews, the Illuminati and even alien lizard people, all part of a vast, secret plan called the New World Order.

Most commentators, both journalists and academics, tend to take a common-sense approach to defining conspiracy theory that follows Justice Potter Stewart’s much cited definition of pornography in the *Jacobellis v. Ohio* obscenity trial of 1964 (‘I know it when I see it’). However, conspiracy theories have a complex history, and they continue to evolve in unexpected ways in the present. Although the *Loose Change* films would seem to constitute an exemplary case study of a conspiracy theory, we need to consider to what extent the features they exhibit – the historical origins of the claims they make, the social and psychological background of their creator, the medium in which they are disseminated, their rhetorical and visual forms, the political role they play and the effects they have on their audiences – are universal, and to what extent they are specific to the particular context in which they were produced. In Avery’s case, that was a mixture of anti-Bush activism, coupled with a residual legacy of early-Internet-era cyber-libertarianism fuelled by the mantra that all information wants to be free, along with the emergence of a hacktivist aesthetic that found creative potential in recombining existing samples of film, music or facts. Although most conspiracy theories share certain psychological, structural and functional qualities, their particular combination and resonance can vary greatly according to context.

Defining what counts as a conspiracy theory is thus not as straightforward as the definitions by Cubitt and Barkun we drew on above might imply. After all, the term ‘conspiracy theory’ is anything but neutral in everyday discourse. Often, the label is used in a pejorative sense; it seems to provide a diagnosis of a flawed and delegitimised way of thinking, the aim of which is often simply to end discussion. The term can serve as an insult, implying that one does not need to
take seriously the claims made by an interlocutor, because they are outlandish and absurd, perhaps even wrong by definition (cf. Pipes 1997). Some of the early research on conspiracy theories (and still much journalistic commentary) tends to treat conspiracy theories as merely a curiosity at best, and a sign of fringe, delusional thinking at worst. However, as this handbook makes clear, more recently, scholars have moved away from associating those who believe in conspiracy theories simply with paranoia or other mental problems. This is partly in the light of the scholarship that has shown the prominence of conspiracy thinking among the intellectual and political elites both in previous centuries and in particular regimes in the present; partly as a result of research in social psychology and political science that has gathered evidence that belief in conspiracy theories is widespread among the general population (in the West, at least); but also as a consequence of studies that have shown the close affiliation between conspiracy theories and other more ‘respectable’ ways of making sense of historical causality – the idea that, akin to conspiracy theories, critical research in the humanities and social sciences is often motivated by a ‘hermeneutic of suspicion’ (Ricoeur 1970 [1965]), a desire to reveal the underlying causal factors hidden beneath the deceptive surface appearance (cf. Boltanski 2014).

The second reason that conspiracy theories are hard to define is that conspiracies do actually happen. We are thus not dealing with a way of thinking that is inherently flawed, even if many examples seem far-fetched and unwarranted. Given the long history of secret machinations, both by and against the established order, it is therefore not prima facie unreasonable in particular circumstances for people to develop a theory that current events might be the result of a conspiracy behind the scenes. However, most commentators want to make a distinction between believing in an individual conspiracy and believing that conspiracy provides the ultimate explanation for ‘what is really going on’. (To complicate matters further, what counts as a ‘conspiracy’ itself has a long and fraught history, part philosophical and part legal: where do you draw the boundary between complicity, collusion and conspiracy?) An important question, then, is the relationship between the imagination and the reality of conspiracy. For example, are conspiracy theories about the U.S. government more prominent in the twentieth century precisely because we have learnt more about its clandestine and illegal activities (Olmsted 2009)?

The third reason determining what counts as a conspiracy theory is far from straightforward and is that the very term ‘conspiracy theory’ is a comparatively recent coinage that only entered popular usage to any significant degree in the 1970s. Given that what we now recognise and call ‘conspiracy theory’ is evident in the historical record as far back as classical antiquity (and some scholars, drawing on evolutionary psychology, have even posited that the phenomenon is evident in all human societies: cf. van Prooijen and van Vugt 2018), we need to consider why it has only recently become a recognisable and useful concept. Scholarly engagement with what later became known as conspiracy theories began in the middle decades of the twentieth century, largely motivated by a desire to understand and to challenge what they theorised as the ‘mass hysteria’ of totalitarian movements (cf. Thalmann 2019). ‘Conspiracy theory’ as both an object of knowledge and matter for public concern thus has a complex history, meaning that we can never simply take the phenomenon for granted as a natural and immutable category.

Research into conspiracy theories has only really started to gain momentum in the past two decades. After the first wave of studies from the middle decades of the twentieth century that were rooted in the psycho-historical analysis of mass movements, cultural studies scholars revisited the topic in the 1990s and 2000s. They investigated the varied cultural manifestations of conspiracy theories (primarily in the U.S.A.), and analysed the political uses to which they are put – sometimes surprising and creative, but often reactionary. Since then, social psychologists and political scientists have turned their gaze on conspiracism, conducting experiments and surveys in order to learn more about the underpinning mental dispositions and demographic
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traits of conspiracy theorists. It is clear, then, that conspiracy theories are a complex phenomenon, requiring a multi-perspectival approach to fully understand them. The bibliography of research on conspiracy theories is by now extensive, and includes studies of an increasing number of regions, historical periods and political traditions, some of which draw on scholarship in a variety of languages. Given the rapid development of this field of enquiry and the current proliferation of studies in a wide range of disciplines, it has become quite difficult for scholars to gain an overview of what different approaches have found out about conspiracy theories, where they disagree and where research is currently heading.

It is the intention of this handbook to offer just such an orientation. This volume is the major outcome of the COST (European Cooperation in Science and Technology) Action ‘Comparative Analysis of Conspiracy Theories’ [COMPACT], which ran from 2016 to 2020. By the time the handbook went into print, the network comprised more than 150 scholars from more than 40 countries and more than a dozen disciplines. The goal of the project was to synthesise research done on conspiracy theories across disciplines and language boundaries, and to open up new research venues for interdisciplinary work. The handbook provides this synthesis; it is by far the most comprehensive account of conspiracy theory research currently available with regard to both the topics that it covers and the disciplines that have contributed to it. Many of the individual chapters were co-written by scholars from different disciplines and/or different countries, precisely in order to promote a comparative analysis. They address the central questions that are raised by the phenomenon of conspiracy theories: What is a conspiracy theory? Who believes in conspiracy theories and why? Have there always been conspiracy theories? How do conspiracy theories spread? Are conspiracy theories dangerous and, if so, what should we do about them?

The handbook is arranged in five sections: ‘Definitions and approaches’, ‘Psychological factors’, ‘Society and politics’, ‘Media and transmission’ and ‘Histories and regions’. The first section opens with a chapter on the history of the term ‘conspiracy theory’ because the phenomenon it describes is old, but the term itself is fairly young and anything but neutral, no matter how hard scholars try to shed the derision and ridicule that characterises the term’s use in everyday discourse. The other contributions to the section survey the research done in a variety of disciplines. They discuss how and from what premises different disciplines define and approach conspiracy theories, what questions they ask and which methods they employ to answer them. With regard to the *Loose Change* films, for instance, philosophers might investigate if the arguments the films put forward are epistemologically plausible or not, if, in other words, the films articulate a warranted conspiracy theory, which could turn out to be true, or an unwarranted one, which is logically impossible. Semioticians, by contrast, usually do not concern themselves with questions of truth. They would be interested, however, in the filmic transmission of the conspiracist ideas, in how different systems of signs – animations, footage of the attacks, interviews, voice-over narration, etc. – are combined to get a specific meaning across. Scholars of cultural studies might also be interested in this question, but they might also focus on those among the film’s audience who believe its claims and the effects of their interpellation as conspiracy theorists for identity. A sociologist – to give one final example – might investigate how the success of the *Loose Change* films as counternarratives that challenge the official version of events is related to a deep-seated crisis of traditional epistemic authorities in the U.S.A. in particular and the Western world in general.

The second section, ‘Psychological factors’, presents the research done in social psychology, currently the most vibrant of the disciplines that contribute to conspiracy theory studies. Social psychologists employ quantitative methods to find out why some people believe in conspiracy theories and others do not, and what effects this might have. For example, a social psychologist
might use a questionnaire to investigate what sets those who find the claims of the *Loose Change* films convincing emotionally and/or cognitively apart from those who do not. But social psychology is also interested in the relation between environmental factors such as social status or education and the belief in specific conspiracy theories or what is often referred to as conspiracy mentality more generally. Moreover, social psychology is also concerned with the consequences of belief in conspiracy theories. In the case of 9/11 conspiracy theories, the distrust of elites might lead to a refusal to participate in elections or a turn to populists who exploit the distrust. But psychologists have also shown that belief in conspiracy theories about vaccines or global warming leads to a refusal to vaccinate oneself or one’s children, or an unwillingness to reduce one’s carbon dioxide footprint. Finally, since social psychology tends to highlight the dangers of belief in conspiracy theories more than other disciplines, it has also most thoroughly investigated the questions whether and how such theories should and can be debunked.

The interest in environmental factors connects research in social psychology with the third section, which focuses on ‘Society and politics’. In this section, the interdisciplinary nature of conspiracy theory research comes to the fore particularly clearly, as the section is concerned with topics that are studied in a broad variety of disciplines. The chapters in this section discuss the social, cultural and political factors that fuel conspiracy theorising and the effects of conspiracy theories on society and politics. For example, why is it usually men who produce conspiracy videos like the *Loose Change* films and occupy the leading positions in communities such as the 9/11 Truth Movement? Are conspiracy theories a remedy for an experienced crisis of masculinity and is that the reason why mostly men put their conspiracist narratives out there, or are there patriarchal structures of oppression at work in conspiracist counter-publics as well so that men automatically gather more attention and are taken more seriously? These are questions that are asked by gender studies and cultural studies as much as by political science, the discipline represented in this section that has most in common with social psychology because it also employs quantitative methods. But questions about demographic and ideological factors that drive belief in 9/11 conspiracy theories in particular and conspiracy theories more generally might also be asked by sociologists or anthropologists who might employ qualitative methods. And, while the *Loose Change* films do not resort to antisemitic tropes, other 9/11 conspiracy narratives do and are therefore of interest to scholars working on that issue. Closely related is the question after the connection between conspiracy theories and radicalisation and what such radicalisation can lead to.

The fourth section, ‘Media and transmission’, shifts the focus from content to form and from causes and consequences to circulation and distribution. The success of the *Loose Change* films, for example, would have been impossible before the advent of the digital age and the Internet in particular. The possibilities of digital filmmaking allowed Dylan Avery to put his film together at such low costs, and the Internet provided him with the material he sampled. It also enabled him, as an at-that-point completely unknown filmmaker, to reach a global audience. Obviously, then, the Internet has greatly accelerated the circulation of conspiracy theories, but how exactly has it influenced the rhetoric and structure of such theories? How do conspiracy theories circulate as rumours, and how have other media revolutions – for example, the advent of print in the fifteenth century or the emergence of magazine cultures in the eighteenth centuries – shaped conspiracy theorising? And what is the relationship between the allegedly factual accusations that we find in sermons, pamphlets and documentaries and openly fictional renderings of conspiracy scenarios in novels or movies? The chapters in section four, mostly written by scholars from media and literary studies, address these and related questions.

The final section, ‘Histories and regions’, adopts a more explicitly comparative approach, to consider how conspiracy theories fulfil different functions in variety of historical moments and
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regional contexts. Whereas research in psychology and political science often aims to reach gener-
alisable conclusions from specific data, the chapters in this section are concerned with mapping out
in detail the political role that conspiracism plays in particular histories and regimes, and the
varying cultural forms that these conspiracy theories take. What are the similarities and differences
between the conspiracy theories developed in the Loose Change films about the plane crashes of
9/11 and, for example, conspiracy theories in Indonesia about the disappearance of flight MH370?
What functional role do pro-government, anti-Western conspiracy theories play in deflecting
attention away from home-made political and economic failings in Muslim-majority societies in
Southeast Asia, and how do they compare to the anti-government conspiracy theories that circu-
late in the West? How do these forms of conspiracism draw on existing historical accounts of
victimisation by the West, and to what extent do these kinds of story defend or challenge the status
quo? To what extent are conspiracy theories employed by political elites to justify authoritarian
rule and the suppression of dissent? While the underlying psychological mechanisms and rhetorical
forms of conspiracy theories might be universal, the historical traditions they draw on and the
specific uses to which they are put in local contexts can vary widely. The case studies in this section
can thus shed light back on some of the generalised conclusions summarised in the earlier sections
of the handbook. Although the chapters in this section map out what we know so far about the
complex genealogy of conspiracy culture and some of its contemporary manifestations, it is clear
that there is still much research needed, especially in non-Western contexts.

The 48 chapters in this handbook present the current state of the art on each topic, providing
a guide to current scholarship along with original research findings. Although much of the
research converges on some broad conclusions, there is also still considerable debate between
the positions set out in the individual chapters (Butter, Knight 2019). The first section, in par-
ticular, is therefore designed to make clear what is at stake in taking different methodological
approaches, and where the residual points of tension lie. Although this volume represents a
comprehensive overview of current research, these chapters also map out what we still don’t
know and suggest avenues for future research.

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