4.2

CONSPIRACY THEORISING AND
THE HISTORY OF MEDIA IN THE
EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

Andrew McKenzie-McHarg and Claus Oberhauser

Introduction

In the first years of the nineteenth century, Johann August Starck, a cleric serving at the ducal court in Darmstadt, anonymously published Der Triumph der Philosophie im achtzehnten Jahrhunderte (‘The triumph of philosophy in the eighteenth century’, 1803). The title of this two-volume work effectively gave expression to its claim to have located the fulcrum around which so many events of the previous century had turned. Yet readers expecting a celebratory account of philosophy’s eighteenth-century achievements were quickly disabused of any such preconceptions upon opening the book. On its pages, Starck substituted the venerable term ‘philosophy’ with the distinctly derogatory ‘philosophism’. Although this movement celebrated its triumph by ‘bestowing on the eighteenth century the name of the enlightened, philosophical century’ (Starck 1803: I, 21), Starck’s sympathies lay with the traditional order secured by the prestige of religious and secular authorities. This prestige had been tragically and treacherously undermined by ‘philosophism’s’ intellectual assaults.

If Starck was at pains to document the ‘triumph of philosophy – or, rather, philosophism – in the eighteenth century’, our present perspective reveals this century to have also been a witness to the triumph of conspiracy theory. Such a characterisation is justified not least by the fact that, in portraying ‘philosophism’ as a grand conspiracy, Starck was in fact elaborating upon an interpretation of the origins of the French Revolution already fleshed out in considerable detail some years earlier by French (ex-)Jesuit Auguste Barruel in his Mémoires pour servir à l’histoire du Jacobinisme (1797–1798) and by Scottish scientist John Robison in his Proofs of a conspiracy (1797) (see Chapter 5.3 in this volume). Their conspiracy theorising was, however, more than just a response to the French Revolution, not least because it drew upon tropes and expanded upon arguments that had emerged in earlier decades of the eighteenth century. In fact, a frequent claim prevalent in the scholarship identifies the eighteenth century as the century that gave birth to conspiracy theory, or conspiracism, in a form that is recognisable to us today (Wood 1982; Pipes 1997; Butter 2014).

The present chapter submits this claim to closer scrutiny. It feels compelled to do so not least because historians have by no means reached a consensus on whether the eighteenth century genuinely merits this dubious distinction as the birthplace or incubator of conspiracy theory. The point of departure for the following analysis is provided by a stimulating thesis developed
by Clifford Siskin and William Warner, two American scholars of eighteenth-century English literature, in their jointly co-edited volume entitled *This is Enlightenment* (2010). The title suggests a reprise of the effort to answer a question that already in 1784 had engaged the mind of Prussian philosopher Immanuel Kant, namely: What is Enlightenment? If the quotation cited above from Starck alleged a (self-)description of the eighteenth century as the ‘enlightened … century’, Kant, who curiously enough was a neighbour of Starck’s during the latter’s tenure at the University of Königsberg in the early 1770s, would have demurred; according to his famous essay, the eighteenth century was not an ‘enlightened age’ but rather an ‘age of Enlightenment’. Siskin and Warner, for their part, advance another characterisation: Not a state of being, nor a process of becoming, but an event. More specifically: ‘Enlightenment is an event in the history of mediation’ (2010: 1).

The particular form of mediation that Siskin and Warner see as playing a decisive role in this story was made available by the printing press with moveable type. According to their argument, Enlightenment marks the moment when this invention of the fifteenth century finally assumed primacy in determining how European society communicated within itself and thereby reproduced itself; in other words, Enlightenment was the tipping point when the logic of print began to fully permeate and fundamentally restructure society. This view dovetails neatly with the manner in which historian Rudolf Schlögl (2008) has characterised the early modern period (as the period ending in the eighteenth century) as a transitional period in which European society endeavoured to maintain structures built upon face-to-face interaction. By the eighteenth century, print had ceased, however, to merely buttress face-to-face interaction as it played out between spatially proximate subjects and was channelled by convention, ceremony and ritual. Print ‘turbo-charged’ the possibilities of communication that integrates subjects absent from a specific place and time.

Can the emergence of conspiracy theory be regarded as a corollary of this event? In other words: Did conspiracy theory ‘triumph’ in the eighteenth century because print media triumphed then also? An affirmative answer would tend to characterise conspiracy theories as a ‘media effect’. We are familiar with other kinds of media effects or at least the speculative inferences that link, for example, increased levels of distraction with the Internet, school shootings with violent video games and anorexia with unrealistic ideals of body size and shape disseminated by advertising. If we shift focus to more historical phenomena, we can ask about public opinion (or at least its invocation). Other societies might have had vague intimations of this idea, but, given that its emergence depended upon a notion of the public that in turn ‘implied access to the printed word’ (Baker 1990: 172), it would seem possible to describe it at least in part as a media effect. How does it look for conspiracy theory?

In this chapter, we wish to examine this question by surveying the different media in which conspiracy theories were generated and in which they circulated. The primary focus will fall on the eighteenth century, but episodes from other centuries will be referenced in order to examine its claim to an exalted status in the annals of conspiracy theory.

### The history of media(tion)

Systematic reflection upon the media and its effects holds a prominent place in much contemporary academic discourse in large part because of attempts to anticipate and assess the risks and rewards associated with the Internet and social media. This holds for the field of conspiracy theory studies, particularly because a popular view identifies digital media as a boon for conspiracy theorising. However, technologies predating the digital age stimulated much of the theorisation of media that continues to inform these discussions. In particular, the effects, both
Even if McLuhan often eschews linearity in his presentation of this story, essentially it amounts to a stadial model of human history. The stages are marked by the way in which the historical continuum is punctuated by a series of revolutions that refashioned the infrastructure of communication and that, in doing so, fundamentally re-‘wired’ human consciousness and culture. Thus, McLuhan identified a literate revolution achieved first by the invention of the phonetic alphabet. This revolution induced tribal societies to abandon the traditional forms of organisation now that communication within them was no longer purely oral. McLuhan’s sensitivity to the impact of this early revolution was sharpened by the electronic revolution that in his own time was in the process of (re-)valorising oral communication through the media of radio and television. This resurgence of oral and audio-visual communication was expected to return society to a state akin in many ways to tribal society, yet by nullifying the distancing effects of space, the new electronic media would achieve this return in the form of a ‘global village’ (McLuhan, Powers 1989). In between the literate and the electronic revolution came the printing press with moveable type – an invention that had ushered in the world of print denoted by McLuhan as *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (1962). The heightened awareness that the medium of communication is a historical factor in its own right has percolated down through the academy and merged, for example, with bibliographic studies to yield the ‘history of the book’, which no longer simply treats books as the material substratum bearing and preserving the imprint of history but, instead, acknowledges that they themselves have been ‘a force in history’ (Darnton 1979: 2).

A critical appraisal of the conventional conception of history formulated by media theorists might inquire into how deeply and abruptly the technological innovations of writing, printing and electronic transmission inscribe themselves into a culture. Their status as ‘revolutions’ is diluted when consideration is given to other innovations such as the early nineteenth-century invention of the automated, steam-powered press, which, by industrialising print production marks to some minds a more profound caesura in communicative culture than Gutenberg’s craft-based precursor (Johns 1998). As another example, the replacement of parchment by paper in the late medieval period was also fundamentally important. By providing a much more plentiful supply of writing material and by drastically augmenting the amount of information in circulation or available for ready retrieval, this ‘paper revolution’ enabled princes and their advisors to indulge a penchant for ‘data-driven’ activities. The endless combinatorics of realities and potentialities took the form of attempts to strategise on the basis of ever-shifting alliances, envision future outcomes, and contemplate hypothetical alternatives. Historian Cornel Zwierlein (2013) has argued that the intersection of this development with the volatile political rivalries existing between late-medieval Italian city states created the conditions under which conspiracy theorising first emerged as a distinct and recognisable activity.

Another objection that can be levelled at the stadial model of media history is that its effort to structure history around successive media technologies tends to attenuate the significance of the simple fact that people did not stop speaking as soon as they started writing, nor did they stop engaging in purely written forms of communication once print media had become available. Of course, McLuhan was alert to this fact, as was his student, the literary scholar Walter J. Ong, who noted how ‘in all the wonderful worlds that writing opens, the spoken word still resides and lives’ (Ong 1991: 8). Presumably people who have mastered the skill of writing will come to talk differently from those for whom language remains a purely oral phenomenon, but
even for the literate it is not clear whether orality is demoted to merely epiphenomenal status. When print is added to the mix, it would seem that layers of oral culture, scribal culture and print culture can become imbricated in myriad ways.

An example of a genre with affiliations to all three media is the sermon. Its potential to serve as a vehicle for the propagation of conspiracy theories is evident from the three sermons with which the New England clergyman Jedidiah Morse in 1798 and 1799 spread disquiet in New England about alleged Illuminati infiltration into the young American republic. Yet, in issuing these jeremiads about the threat to the republic, Morse was clearly reliant upon the print media that had disseminated Barruel’s and Robison’s conspiracy theories in a manner that not only crossed oceans but also penetrated into Alpine valleys, as is demonstrated by the sermons in which the Capuchin monk Albert Komploier, almost at the same time as Morse, railed against the forces of subversion from the pulpit in Tyrolian towns such as Brixen and Bolzano. Thus, a sermon entitled ‘The renewed fall of the angel at the end of the eighteenth century’ observed a standardised format: Beginning with a passage from Scripture (on this occasion extracted from the Book of Revelations), the sermon embarked on a tirade against anti-Christian forces that culminates in the denunciation of ‘the black fraternity of malicious Jacobins, Illuminati and freethinkers’ (Komploier 1802: 408).

These sermons were, like all spoken sermons, events in orality amplified in their impact by their subsequent conversion into print. Yet, print and scribal communication were spliced into their genesis and their reception in other ways. As Michael Warner has noted in his reflections upon the public sphere created by preaching in eighteenth-century America:

[The] idea of the preacher as a lively speaker is entirely enabled by script. Sermonizing practice … enfolds many layers of script mediation: it required clergy specially qualified by the learning needed to navigate scriptures, theological literature, note-books, manuscripts, and the self-inscription of memory.

(Warner 2010: 374)

Such remarks serve as a reminder that oral, scribal and print culture do not inhabit parallel worlds that never intersect, but that rather their synchronic presence engenders numerous subtle forms of entanglement and hybridisation. This will become obvious by looking at conspiracy theories as they were sustained, first within a number of strands of pre-print culture (namely: rumour, anecdote, correspondence and manuscript) and then by considering the changes they experienced in the wake of print’s ascendancy.

**Pre-print culture**

(i) *Rumour*: Does a primacy of orality correspond to a media ecology amenable or even conducive to the production and circulation of conspiracy theories? Of course, historians are only in a position to answer such a question if these conspiracy theories, hypothetically disseminated by word of mouth, somehow left a trace in the written record. Early modern efforts at state surveillance, although clearly rudimentary when compared to the comprehensive systems of observation and control installed by later regimes, were, however, sufficient to register and record the rumours whose content was often conspiratorial and even conspiracist in nature.

Inquiries into the relationship between rumours and conspiracy theory have thus far largely been undertaken from perspectives grounded in psychology or political science. The status of rumours in terms of their media profile awaits fuller investigation, yet the current research would seem to justify the presumption of a primary affiliation to oral communication; according
to social psychologist Nicholas DiFonzo, ‘Conspiracy theories are heard and told’, and this in turn underpins his assertion that ‘conspiracy theories are really a type of rumor’ (DiFonzo 2018: 257–8; see also Chapter 4.1 in this volume). The status of a rumour as an unverified and possibly unverifiable claim would seem to reflect properties of oral communication, whose content is by its very nature more evanescent and, as such, not amenable to the same standards of evidence as written communication. The fact that many forms of contemporary social media are characterised by a similar evanescence would help to explain why rumours figure so largely in the contemporary media environment.

Turning our attention to historical contexts, American historian Steven Kaplan has examined what he called the ‘Famine plot persuasion in eighteenth-century France’ (1982), namely the often rampant suspicion that shortages in flour were artificially and nefariously engineered. This suspicion, which in part was symptomatic of the transition from a subsistence economy to a market one, was generated within a culture in which ‘[e]veryone depended on rumors and hearsay’ (Kaplan 1982: 66). Rumours also fuelled la Grande Peur (‘The Great Fear’) that seized many people throughout France in the summer of 1789. This panic, memorably described by George Lefebvre (1973) in a virtuoso exercise in social history, built upon a long-standing, deeply ingrained wariness of vagrants and brigands by imagining them now as agents of an aggrieved aristocracy seeking vengeance for the humiliations it had suffered in the Revolution. Lefebvre charted how the panic spread like a contagion from town to town, carried both by written missives and word-of-mouth and travelling at an average speed of four kilometres an hour (1973: 155). Even minor details convey a vivid sense of its highly contagious nature. Thus, in the small town of Charlieu, the intense hunger for news led to the demand that an itinerant jeweller by the name of Girolamo Nozeda be fetched from his room at the local inn and forced to give account of what he had heard on his travels:

He said that he had come from Luzy by way of Toulon-sur-Arrous, Charolles and La Clayette; that all the people there were ‘in arms’; that in Charolles they had arrested a brigand carrying seven hundred and forty louis, which was perfectly true; that he knew from hearsay that in Bourbon-Lancy eighty other brigands had come and forced the population to pay them money, which was false; ‘that everywhere people talk of nothing but brigands’. At this point, everyone burst out talking.

(Lefebvre 1973: 73 [our italics])

The rumour reverberated and was then amplified by its absorption into print media. As Lefebvre notes: ‘In due course [it] would reach the ears of a journalist who would imbue it with new strength by putting it into print’. (Lefebvre 1973: 74).

Although printed media amplified the rumours feeding the Great Fear and intensified the anxieties, the basic dynamic would seem to not differ fundamentally from the dispersion of excited rumours about well-poisoning long before the eighteenth century. Cultural historian Carlo Ginzburg has examined the episode in which, in 1321, such a fear gripped the population of southwest France. According to one anonymous chronicler, it ‘was rumoured that Jews were accomplices of the lepers in this crime’ (Ginzburg 1991: 35), and on this basis a repression originally targeting lepers soon spilled over into mob violence against Jews. The league of malcontents was completed by references to the ‘King of Granada’ and the ‘Sultan of Babylon’. These figures were assigned roles as masterminds of the plot, though here scribal communication made its presence dimly felt in the postulate of letters through which these representatives of Muslim hostility to Christendom were imagined to instruct the lepers and Jews about the implementation of the nefarious plan.
(ii) **Anecdote:** As a short mini-narrative of dubious veracity and uncertain verifiability, the anecdote has an undeniable proximity to the rumour. And yet the etymology alone hints at contact and contamination with scribal culture. The term originally referred to unpublished writings (and, in a manuscript culture, ‘unpublished’ meant text that had not been circulated or made available for copying). The example that both defined and spawned the genre had been left behind by Procopius, the sixth-century historian who had dutifully documented the military achievements and architectural splendours of the reign of Emperor Justinian I (527–565), while covertly working on another history, the *Anecdota*, whose lurid contents would inform posterity about the debauchery of the Byzantine court. In writing both the public and the secret history of Justinian’s reign, Procopius rehearsed a division of historical accounts that would later assume cardinal significance for conspiracy theory, namely the division between the official version and the behind-the-scenes, unofficial counter-history. Admittedly, the effect of Procopius’s dual representation was akin to a delayed detonation; the explosion came over a millennium later with the genre of ‘secret histories’. The genre’s resonance derived in large part from what might be called a *contrast effect*; the anecdote with its affinity to rumours and, by extension, to oral culture, is imbued with a suggestion of secrecy because of the contrast implied by the general accessibility of printed information. As literary historian Rebecca Bullard has written in her study of the ‘secret history’ genre in late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century England:

> Against the clandestine world of backstairs and closet, secret history pits the populist medium of print. While secrets are created in private, passed on through whispers or manuscripts that can be destroyed at a moment’s notice, secret historians expose secrets in a printed and therefore highly public form. The medium in which their texts appear is thus central to their iconoclastic political aims.

*(Bullard 2009: 6–7)*

But do such anecdotes condense in the aggregate into conspiracy theories? The main obstacle would seem to lie in the tendency for anecdotes to remain fragmentary and episodic. With an eye for the telling detail and the colourful character, historian Robert Darnton has shed much light on this literature, which titillates with its claims to peek behind the scenes and thereby reveal politics as ‘a scramble for power and a contest of personalities’ (Darnton 1996: 154). This view of politics is, however, some way off from the co-ordinated and covert campaigns that a quarter of a century later Barruel, Robison and Starck imagine as animating the actions of the *philosophes* and secret societies. This sense of a planned operation bestows upon their works a narrative coherence that no collection of anecdotes comes close to achieving.

(iii) **Correspondence:** One of the vital functions of written correspondence lies in its ability to traverse distance and thereby convey news and instructions. Historian Andrew Pettegree has argued that human messengers were long preferred as a more trustworthy source of information: ‘Our medieval ancestors had a profound suspicion of information that came to them in written form’ (Pettegree 2014: 2). And yet such suspicions do not seem to have condensed into the more generalised mistrust characteristic of conspiracy theories. Likewise, the infrastructure that emerged in the early modern period for the long-distance, regular exchange of information and that was public in the sense that its use was no longer restricted to an exclusive elite (Behringer 2003) was also not a source of conspiracy theories – unless one counts Trystero, the shadowy postal system that was reputedly driven underground by the historical Thurn and Taxis system sometime in the eighteenth century, as imagined by Pynchon in *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966).

The post did, however, facilitate the creation of supra-regional networks. Such an epistolary network is imagined and parodied in the *Epistolæ Obscurorum Vironum* (1515–1519), or the
Dunkelmännerbriefe as they are known in German. As a satire penned by German humanists with the aim of ridiculing those Dominican clerics who zealously advocated the confiscation of Jewish religious texts, the work represented one episode in the conflict between humanism and scholasticism. The ‘network’ of ‘obscure men’ is, however, bound less by conspiratorial aims and more by uncouth ignorance and the crudities of their rude Latin.

Conspiracy did, however, bind the network of correspondents that figures in the grand narratives penned by Barruel and Starck. Moreover, just as the subject matter of anecdotes had taken on an aura of secrecy in a world of print, under certain circumstances a similar contrast effect between media could imbue written correspondence with a covert character: It was not that it was per se secret, but that it now appeared so in comparison to print. This effect endured even after the correspondence was subsequently published, as, for example, had occurred with the inclusion of Voltaire’s correspondence in the edition of his works produced by Beaumarchais. Thus, Barruel assured his readers that ‘proofs shall be drawn from what we may properly term the records of the conspiracy, I mean from their most intimate correspondence, long time secret …’ (Barruel 1797: I, 26 [our italics]), while Starck was adamant that ‘the great culpability of the so-called philosophers cannot be denied by anyone who has looked into their writings and their secret correspondence’ (Starck 1803: I, 88 [our italics]).

(iv) Manuscript: Even if Umberto Eco transformed the scriptorium of a medieval monastery into the setting for a well-known piece of fiction full of allusions to conspiracist themes and constructs (Eco 1984), it does not seem to have been a site of production for texts that might later be assimilated to the category of conspiracy theories. And yet Eco’s novel in its allusions to the monastery’s labyrinthine library as a place preserving a copy of an otherwise missing book of Aristotle’s Poetics also underscores a subversive quality of written communication that could generate conspiracist scenarios even before the arrival of print: Written communication not only possessed the capacity to traverse distances extending far beyond the earshot to which oral communication is limited; it could do so because it had been ‘transubstantiated’ into a material form that enabled its preservation. Text thus memorialises knowledge and can even suspend it in a latent state, only to then reactivate it when it might no longer be entirely compatible with the prevailing ideologies and legitimations of the civil and religious authorities. This subversive potential was most famously fictionalised in Ray Bradbury’s Fahrenheit 451 (1953).

Long before Bradbury’s dystopia novel, the threat posed by text (and not just printed text) had come to full expression in the Comparatio philosophon Aristotelis et Platonis (1458), a manuscript that paints a picture of subversive infiltration in a manner that would justify its characterisation as a conspiracy theory. Its author, George of Trebizond, was born in Crete, yet received his sobriquet because his ancestors hailed from the Trapuzentine Empire (i.e. the Empire of Trebizond), which existed on coastal tracts of land around the Black Sea for a period stretching roughly from the sack of Constantinople by crusading knights in 1204 to the subsequent conquest of the city by the Ottomans in 1456. The westward flight of Greek scholars infused into Western European intellectual discourse a high dose of Platonic philosophy. The Comparatio represented an impassioned intervention in the Plato-Aristotle controversy in which fifteenth-century scholars argued about the relative value of these philosophers and the relative degrees to which their philosophies were amenable to Christian doctrine. Trebizond, who championed Aristotle, became convinced that Platonism was a source of pagan heresy, that it had been carried into the inner sanctum of Latin Christianity by the Byzantine neo-paganist George Gemistus Pletho, and that his student, Cardinal Bessarion, aided by a coterie of Platonici, were continuing the corrosive work from within (Monfasani 1976: 156–62).

As an example of a conspiracy theory existing only in manuscript form before its conversion into print in a single edition published in Venice in 1523, half a century after Trebizond’s death,
the *Comparatio* prompts us to ask about eighteenth-century equivalents: Did this century also produce conspiracy theories that only circulated in manuscript form? A positive answer of sorts might be adduced by pointing to a memoire written by Johann Georg Zimmermann and submitted to the Austrian Emperor, Leopold II. Zimmermann, a physician of Swiss origins, had formerly been a respected man of letters with ties to Enlightenment figures. However, his sentiments underwent a profound change in the 1780s so that, by the time news began to arrive of the turmoil engulfing France, Zimmermann could count as one of the most impassioned opponents of Enlightenment and the Revolution that he saw as its issue. His *Memoire* seeks to reveal this connection.

While a written document, the *Memoire* is clearly also an artefact from a society steeped in the effects of print culture. Zimmermann is indignant about the pro-Enlightenment journals and recommends the promotion of opposing journals whose proto-conservative agenda will offset the corrosive effects of the former and steer public opinion in a direction supportive of traditional authority. In fact, an instructive parallel can be drawn by considering the printed pamphlet *Ueber die Gefahr, die den Thronen, den Staaten und dem Christenthume den gänzlichen Verfall drohet, durch das falsche Sistem der heutigen Aufklärer, und die kecken Anmassungen sogenannter Philosophen* (‘Concerning the danger that threatens the thrones, the states and Christendom with their complete demise as a result of the false system of today’s enlighteners and the impudent presumptions of so-called philosophers’, 1791). In this pamphlet, Bavarian theosophist Karl von Eckartshausen advocated a similar policy and, as a ‘friend of the princes’, adopted a similarly obsequious posture toward the authorities. And yet Eckarthausen published his hortatory petition to the ‘dignitaries of the world’. Zimmermann’s *Memoire* was, by contrast, not anonymous as Leopold II was informed about his authorship (and even rewarded him for his efforts with a jewelled tobacco case). Yet Zimmermann insisted that the *Memoire* not be published and instead remain as a confidential, hand-written manuscript discreetly reserved for the exclusive instruction and singular edification of the Emperor. The diverging, yet complementary, strategies pursued by Eckartshausen and Zimmermann—anonymity of the author corresponding to the anonymity of print-media readership in the one case; named authorship of a manuscript corresponding to the individual readership of a known patron in the other—are indicative of broader issues that we will return to in the final section devoted to the presence of conspiracy theories in eighteenth-century print culture.

**Print culture**

If the written word has a spatial reach and a temporal permanence that sets it apart from the spoken word, the most salient feature of the printed word would seem to be its capacity for replication and, on this basis, broad dissemination. Yet the printing press was not limited to text in the exploitation of this capacity. Working in the wake of the ‘visual turn’, scholars have become far more attuned to the image as a medium of communication. This alertness to visual communication is evident in recent work that reflects on how conspiracy theories were disseminated via printed images. Thus, in his analysis of the discourse on plots and conspiracies in seventeenth-century England, historian André Krischer has drawn attention to the printed illustrations that often depict conspirators sitting around a table as they deliberate and methodically plan their subversion (Krischer 2012: 119–20). Although Machiavelli gave budding conspirators the advice to never write anything down, lest such material be used as evidence against them if the conspiracy fails (Machiavelli 2003: 409), the presence of paper and writing implements on the table suggests that the advice was not always heeded—and, more generally, hints at the connection to the ‘paper revolution’ whose importance for both conspiring and conspiracy
theorising Zwierlein has emphasised. Historian Christiane Vogel has exhibited a similar sensibility to the visual record in her analysis of the publicity campaign directed against the Jesuit order and culminating in its suppression in 1773 as a pan-European ‘media event’ (or series of events). Her examination of the ‘visualisation of conspiracy theorising’ – thus the heading of a sub-chapter in her book – details how visual motifs such as the mask suggesting Jesuit duplicity formed part of a recurring symbolic language (Vogel 2006: 191–8; see also Chapter 4.5 in this volume). Clearly, the propaganda effect aimed at by such images was premised on the mass replication and dissemination made possible by the medium of print.

Moving back to the printed text, a survey of different genres uncovers conspiracy theories lurking in surprising locations. Travel literature could accommodate them, as demonstrated by the accounts in which Berlin publicist Friedrich Nicolai between 1783 and 1796 described his journeys into the Catholic territories of the German-speaking lands and which stoked Protestant fears of Catholic, (ex-)Jesuit subversion. Likewise, the lemma of encyclopaedias might give conspiracist interpretations the imprimatur of semi-official, authorised knowledge, as the Encyclopædia Britannica effectively did by enriching the supplementary volumes (1802–1803) to the third edition with an entry on the Illuminati that drew substantially upon the works of Barruel and Robison.

In the final section of the article, attention will, however, be limited to three points prompted by a reading of Zimmermann’s Memoire, a text which, although existing for a long time only as a manuscript, exemplifies in its own way the capacity of print to promote conspiracy theorising.

(i) Fictionality: In attempting to understand the secret societies and their corrosive effect upon the old order, Zimmermann seeks guidance from a ‘spirited German novel rich in deeply founded truth’ (Zimmermann 1995: 21). The talk is of the Enthüllung des Systems der Weltbürger-Republik (1786) by Ernst August Anton von Göchhausen, a councillor in Eisenach in the employ of the Duke of Saxe-Weimar. This novel consists of a series of letters, exchanged between members and associates of a military family, which unveil a highly contrived, even if ingenious scenario: The secret societies that devote themselves to propagating Enlightenment are themselves instruments that unknowingly and unwittingly serve the Jesuits in preparing to return Protestant Europe into the fold of the Catholic Church. Göchhausen is adamant in his preface that he is not interested in delivering anecdotes; instead, he wishes to ‘lay down history’ (‘Gechichte werd’ ich hinlegen’, Göchhausen 1786: viii). And yet it is important to not lose sight of the fact that Göchhausen has chosen a work of fiction, namely an epistolary novel, as the vehicle with which to achieve his (pseudo-)historiographical aim.

Literary theorist Hayden White has noted that ‘[t]here are many histories that could pass for novels, and many novels that could pass for histories, considered in purely formal … terms’ (White 1978: 121–2). As provocative as White’s position is in light of its relativist implications, his work has sensitised its readership to the elements of literary fiction informing and discreetly guiding historiographical prose. And yet attention should also be given to the traffic flowing in the opposite direction: Works of fiction can be ‘true’ not just in an aesthetic sense but also because they clearly contain factual observations and elements of historical truth. In praising Göchhausen’s work for the ‘deeply-founded truth’ it allegedly contains, Zimmermann exemplifies a relationship to fiction in general and conspiracy fiction in particular that still holds true today. It is only necessary to consider how the popular novels of a contemporary writer such as Dan Brown are consumed by readers not as pure fantasy but rather as novels that tantalise with glimpses of truths about secret history, even if transmitted in the mode of fiction (Önnerfors 2017: 118–19).

Such observations suggest a need to problematise the relationship between conspiracy theory and conspiracy fiction (Zwierlein 2013). In its application to the eighteenth century, this
approach would register, for example, how Barruel had rehearsed some of the conspiracist charges levelled at the philosophes in the context of an epistolary novel titled *Les Helviennes* (1781–1788). In these same years, Starck was also employing the form of an epistolary novel to describe the false leads and dead ends that awaited those who were lured into the smoke-and-mirrors world of eighteenth-century German Freemasonry. Although *Saint Nicaise* (1785), as it was titled, did not unfold a narrative of conspiracy, its exposé of the competing Masonic systems provoked heated responses, in large part because readers attributed to the novel the intention and the pretence to reveal bona fide truths about this world. When French Romantic novelist George Sand immersed herself in this world over a half a century later, her sense of purpose was impelled by the conviction that ‘the history of these mysteries, I believe, can never be carried out except in the form of a novel’ (quoted in Ziolkowski 2013: 105).

(ii) *Secrecy*: In a public sphere whose norms were primarily derived from the medium of print, a contrast effect arose that enveloped the communication taking place in other media in an aura of secrecy. This also applied to the conversations or correspondence, either between like-minded authors or between authors and publishers, that preceded and prepared the way for any particular publication. For Zimmermann, this ‘invisible’ inner side to the medium of print condensed into his fixation upon an alleged secret society called the ‘Club de Propaganda’.

The name encapsulates a more general quality of media: While the launch of a new medium might generate an enthusiasm about what it makes accessible and visible, this enthusiasm gives way over the longer or shorter term to an awareness – and even a suspicion – of the invisible, inaccessible rules determining exactly what does become accessible or visible. Such apprehensions are familiar to us at our present juncture in the context of our relationship to the Internet and social media: The effusive talk of connectivity has come to be overshadowed by concerns about the unseen or impenetrable algorithms that prescribe in any specific situation what the next connection will be. The contrast between the visible outer side and the invisible inner side manifested itself in Zimmermann’s time in (proto-)conservative anxieties about both the public sphere and the secret societies, which, of course, were conscious in their own way of the contrast effect and which then cultivated the mystique suggested by their secrecy. The strangely interlocked development of the public sphere and the secret societies runs like a leitmotif through the (proto-)conservative, conspiracist commentary of the late eighteenth century and even attains a historiographical dignity in the twentieth century with Koselleck’s *Critique and crisis*, which submits its own variation upon this theme by asserting that ‘Enlightenment and mystery emerged as historical twins’ (Koselleck 1988: 62).

(iii) *Anonymity*: Print enables a dissociation between communication and communicator in a manner that can only be achieved with a considerable investment of effort and a cunning deployment of artifice in the context of oral and scribal culture. As a result, the denizens of eighteenth-century print culture were moved by diverse motivations and constrained by multiple norms in avowing or disavowing authorship. Clearly one of the most powerful incentives for anonymity among the partisans of Enlightenment was the wish to express criticism about state and religious authorities and yet avoid detection and punishment. When Zimmermann, in his *Memoire*, describes ‘anonymity as the great shield of the Enlightenment’, he alludes to its use as a protective measure. And yet the hope of penetrating the ‘shield’ and identifying the offender yields to an awareness in the next sentence that there are legions of offenders participating in a culture of anonymity: ‘using anonymity, the whole German mob of reviewers perpetrates its premedicated murders publicly yet with equanimity’ (Zimmermann 1995: 43). This suggests that the issue for Zimmermann revolved less around pamphlets pitting republican principles against monarchical traditions or confronting orthodox doctrines with heterodox alternatives. The bone of contention was to be found in the role of judge that the reviewers in literary
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Journals were thought to have usurped. They had been emboldened to do so because the anonymity made available by print media opened up options both for honest criticism and for dishonest misrepresentation.

Anonymity, meanwhile, was a characteristic often imputed to public opinion as the hallmark of the critical public sphere that had begun to unfold throughout the eighteenth century. In a recent article, one of the authors of this chapter has illustrated how eighteenth-century discourse tended to imagine public opinion either on the basis of a juridical or a conspiracist model (McKenzie-McHarg 2019). Those subscribing to the juridical model imagined a ‘court of public opinion’ issuing its infallible judgments. In this situation, anonymity could be made to align with impartiality and impersonality. Yet anonymity also awoke associations with secrecy and the absence of accountability. Characterising anonymity in these terms induced a resort to the alternative, conspiracist model in which public opinion devolved into a product of covert manipulation. In the minds of figures like Barruel and Starck, public opinion had become the Archimedean point at which the conspirators lodged the lever of their new ideas and were thus able to topple the old order (for Barruel, see Hofman 1993). At the same time, their anti-revolutionary conspiracy theories were themselves clearly attempts to influence public opinion.

Conclusion

The triumph of philosophy – or Enlightenment – that many discerned in the eighteenth century was, according to Starck, a triumph of ‘philosophism’ achieved by distinctly underhand means. His interpretation has induced us to ask to what degree the eighteenth century was witness also to a triumph of conspiracy theory. We have explored this question on the basis of considerations of media theory and media history: Was the triumph of conspiracy theorising linked to the ‘triumph of print’ that some scholars have located in this period?

It would have been gratifying to arrive at a finding that declares conspiracy theory in the true sense of the word to only emerge in the wake of print technology, but our survey of sources attests to some kind of presence of conspiracy theories in purely oral or scribal contexts. Of course, one might consider whether rumours insinuating some form of subversion are better treated separately as ‘conspiracy rumours’; Katharina Thalmann (2019), for example, dissents from DiFonzo’s posited equivalence of conspiracy theory and rumour on the grounds that the former are highly complex, presumably in a manner only feasible on a textual basis. Rather than luring us into the nominalist futilities about what is and what is not a conspiracy theory, such differences should encourage more nuanced descriptions. It is noteworthy that recent German scholarship (Krause et al. 2011) that examines the media profile of conspiracy theory resists the temptation of reducing conspiracy theory to a mere ‘media effect’ of print culture.

The result is that conspiracy theory often seems a peculiarly amorphous object of study. One could more specifically characterise the reason for this amorphousness in terms of media promiscuity; as this chapter has demonstrated, conspiracy theories can arise in diverse media. Furthermore, within any one such medium, conspiracy theory exhibits genre promiscuity; multiple genres can serve as the vehicle for its dissemination. The unease felt by researchers because of this amorphousness might be best assuaged by a detailed investigation of the difference between preprint, print and digital conspiracy theories, as attempted recently by Seidler (2016).

This chapter has, however, identified a number of aspects of print culture that add potency to conspiracy theorising within this medial context. Reviewing them in the reverse order to which they were presented, print culture offers scope for anonymous communication. This anonymity has in turn a proximity to both public opinion (as the opinion not of a specific,
identifiable person, but rather of a collective) and secrecy, and this melange can suggest an occult control over how and what is communicated in society and ultimately an occult control over society itself. If heightened scope for anonymity is a quality inherent to print, the contrast effects discussed in this chapter arise as a result of its difference to older media. Such differences can bestow upon both face-to-face, oral interaction and written correspondence elements of secrecy. Finally, given Zwierlein’s characterisation of conspiracy theories as occupying a no-man’s land between fact and fiction, a fuller exploration of how this distinction is modulated and modified within print culture could be expected to yield highly relevant insights.

One final point deserves acknowledgment. The early pages of Starck’s *Triumph der Philosophie* (1803) reference the paper revolution, the printing press and the westward migration of ancient but forgotten learning, carried in the trunks of Byzantine scholars seeking refuge after the fall of Constantinople. Starck shows himself here to be an astute observer of media phenomena. More fundamentally, the acknowledgment of these phenomena betrays his awareness that the maligned conspiracy had historical preconditions; in other words, the conspirators did not operate outside of history and, in this manner, steer and guide its course. Although a committed conspiracy theorist, Starck does not simply equate all of history with the progressive implementation of a conspiratorial plan. Such an ‘absolutist’ conspiracy theory has an affinity to the technological determinism that befalls media theory when it imagines technology as a force operating from outside of history. Furthermore, technological determinism mirrors the economic determinism thought to blight Marxist accounts of the rise of capitalism. Critics have elaborated upon these objections by questioning any simplistic dichotomy of technology and culture. As they point out, technologies might influence culture, yet they do so without transcending it; in other words, the distinction between technology and culture is undercut by the way in which technology is itself a part of culture. Such re-assessments have informed recent dissent from Elizabeth Eisenstein’s ground-breaking *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change* (1979), a work that discreetly took its cues from McLuhan (see, for example, Johns 1998). In conclusion, we simply note that, regardless of whether we are talking about conspiracy, capital or communication technology, no entity can claim the status of an externality that, by standing outside history and acting inwards, is capable of steering and directing it.

Note

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