

# Conspiracy theories and misconceptions

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# Structure of Today's Meeting(s)

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1. **Semiotic perspective** -meaning-making and CTs
2. **Typology of CTs** - event, systemic, and superconspiracy theories
3. **Climate obstructionism**- primary, secondary, and tertiary levels
4. **Buzz group** - collaborative reflection climate obstructionism
5. **Cognitive dynamics** - fast thinking, affective resonance, and social media logic
6. **Student presentations** on cognitive biases and fallacies

# Main Bottlenecks in Understanding Conspiracy Theories (CTs) and Disinformation

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## **I Solutionist framing & cognitive correction bias**

- Overfocus on debunking and fact-checking
- Relies on assumptions of technological determinism
- May reinforce distrust instead of fostering understanding (*Fabbro & Gabbi 2024*)

## **II Focus on radicalized minorities**

- Attention turned to extreme CT believers, overlooking broader, ambivalent audiences
- CTs also function as exploratory, ironic, or fragmented engagement (*Harambam 2020*)

## **III Neglecting participatory, affective, and playful uses**

- CTs offer collective storytelling, emotional resonance, and infotainment—not just belief or persuasion
- Engagement is driven by curiosity, aesthetics, and immersion (*De Wildt & Aupers 2024; Haiven 2024*)
- CT aesthetics are exploited by state/non-state actors to enhance manipulation through play, memes, and participation, e.g. QAnon (*Mozdeika 2024; de Zeeuw & Alexi 2023*)

# Cultural Semiotics at a Glance

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- **Exploring how meaning takes shape**
  - Meaning is not stable or universal; it is **relational, situated, and shaped by memory and communication**
  - Cultural semiotics highlights that our **experiences are not given, but interpreted**—we live in a world made meaningful through signs
  - *Meaning is never just “there”—it is made, shared, and contested*
  - Since **1992** - Semiotics Department at the University of Tartu
  - Since **2009** -English-language MA Programme in Semiotics (Tartu)
- See <https://ajalugu.haridusekraanil.ee/en/>



# How Can a Semiotic Perspective Help Overcome Key Bottlenecks?

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## 1. **Shifting focus from truth to meaning**

Instead of treating CTs as cognitive errors or false beliefs, semiotics analyses how they generate meaning through **storytelling, tropes, and intertextual codes**

## 2. **Contextualising the disinformation sphere culturally and relationally**

Highlights how disinformation operates differently across historical, political, and regional settings, and how people engage with it within specific interpretive communities

## 3. **Revealing affective and sociocultural functions**

Makes visible the emotional appeal, aesthetic forms, and social uses

# Interpretative Community

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- A group formed around shared meaning-making and memory
- Shares common interpretive strategies, values, and beliefs
- Develops its own communication norms and discursive code
- **Spokespersons** and **shared reference points and common tropes** emerge over time (*Madisson & Ventsel 2021*)



# Definitions CT and conspiracy

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- **CT**- narrative that attributes social events or phenomena to the malevolent secret actions of conspirators
- **Key features of CT:**
  1. Conspirators are believed to **deliberately inflict harm to gain control**
  2. Their actions are characterized by **secrecy**
  3. The alleged schemes **negatively impact the well-being of extensive populations**
- **Conspiracy** -Events orchestrated through secretive, malevolent plots (e.g., terrorist attacks, assassinations, public disinformation campaigns)
- Exists both as a fixation in conspiracy theorists' minds and as real occurrences (Ventsel et. al 2023)

# The Fossil Fuel Industry's Conspiracy

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- **Covert, coordinated efforts to systematically deceive the public and conceal environmental harm**
- Knowingly undermining climate science and damaging the planetary common good to protect corporate interests
- Coordinated disinformation over decades
- **Internal Shell (2018) & Exxon (2015) leaked documents:** early knowledge (1980s) of climate impact
- Strategies: sow doubt, discredit scientists, deny consensus
- Funded voices:
  - *Willie Soon* (solar cause claims)
  - *William Happer* (minimizes CO<sub>2</sub> impact)
- Amplified through online campaigns
- Example: paid influencers promoting gas stoves



# Meaning-Making Principles of CTs (Madisson 2016)

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- I CTs answer the question: **Why do bad things happen to good people?**
- Their logic does **not perceive events as a coincidence of tragic contingencies**, but rather as being motivated by one and the same ordinary cause – **the evil acts of conspirators**
- **II How a particular event happened?** *Under specific physical, social, historical, etc. conditions...*
- Conspirators are often depicted as **extremely organized group**, divided into intricate sub-systems
- Interpreters presume that conspirators have the **capacity to apply natural causality for serving their evil intentions**

# Addictive hunt for missing links

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- **Search for secret motives, or “missing links”** behind all kinds of events and phenomena & sharing those results with their peers
- As an interpretive practice, conspiracy theorizing is driven by **powerful mechanism of analogy**
- Almost unstoppable (Eco 1990)
- **E.g. QAnon invites followers to solve a “great puzzle” through cryptic posts, codes, and hidden references**
- Phrases like *“Do your own research”* activate personal involvement and epistemic urgency
- Content is deliberately fragmented, collective decoding
- Everyday events (e.g. Trump drinking water) were interpreted as clues
- Coded messages: acronyms, numbers, CAPITALS + suggestive questions



# Event CT

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- Claims a specific event was *staged* or *manipulated* by a hidden group for concealed purposes
- Frames events as intentional rather than accidental or natural (*Barkun 2003*)
- **Example: Hurricane Helene CTs (2024)**
  - Conspiracy claims: **storm was intensified or steered using weather technologies**
  - Alleged aims: **suppress pro-Trump voter turnout & to fuel public fear that would justify stricter climate policies**
  - Circulated via 4chan, Telegram, fringe subreddits

See: <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2024/oct/04/hurricane-helene-conspiracy-theories-election-misinformation>

# Systemic CT

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- Interprets **entire systems (government, science, media, finance) as being covertly controlled**
- Suggests deep, ongoing, institutional manipulation by hidden actors (*Barkun 2003*)

- **Example: 15-Minute Cities CTs**

Urban planning model (services within 15 minutes) seen not as sustainability, but means of covert control

Interpreted as part of a hidden agenda to reshape daily life

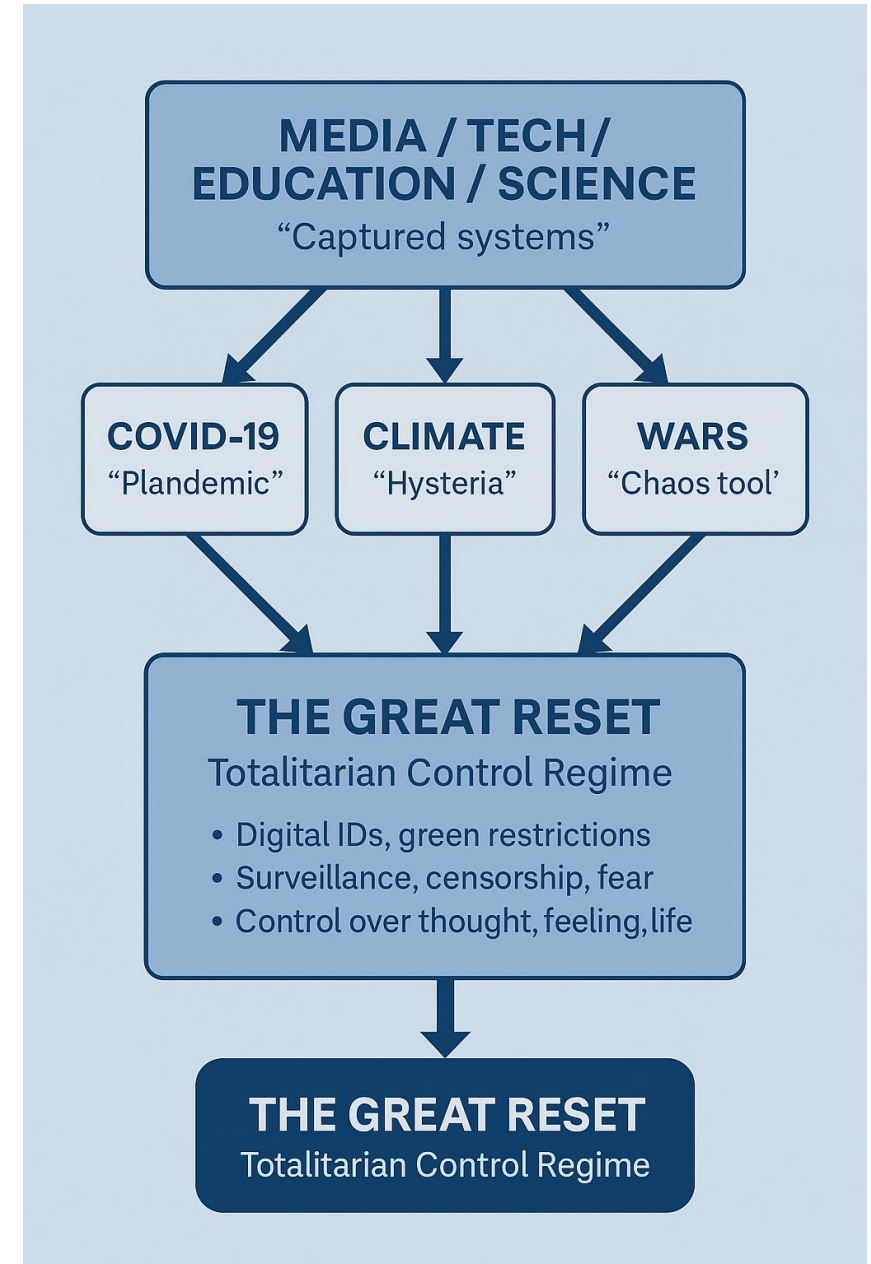
Alleged conspiracy: mainstream media, scientists, planners, local & national governments

- Claimed goals:
  - **Digital surveillance**
  - **Restricted movement**
  - **Behavioural control of urban populations**
- See: <https://apnews.com/article/fact-check-15-minute-city-conspiracy-162fd388f0c435a8289cc9ea213f92ee>

# Super CT

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- Frames multiple sub-conspiracies as parts of a **single, overarching global plot**
- Claims that a hidden elite **orchestrates world events** to establish long-term, total control (*Barkun 2003*)
- - Narrative blending and **cross-pollination** across interpretative communities (anti-vaxx, far-right, pro-Kremlin) during pandemic
  - **Shared tropes and explanatory templates** increase perceived coherence (*Birchall, Knight 2022*)
- → In open societies, such large-scale conspiracies harming many are **extremely unlikely** (*Ventsel et.al 2023*)



# The Great Reset as a Super Conspiracy Theory

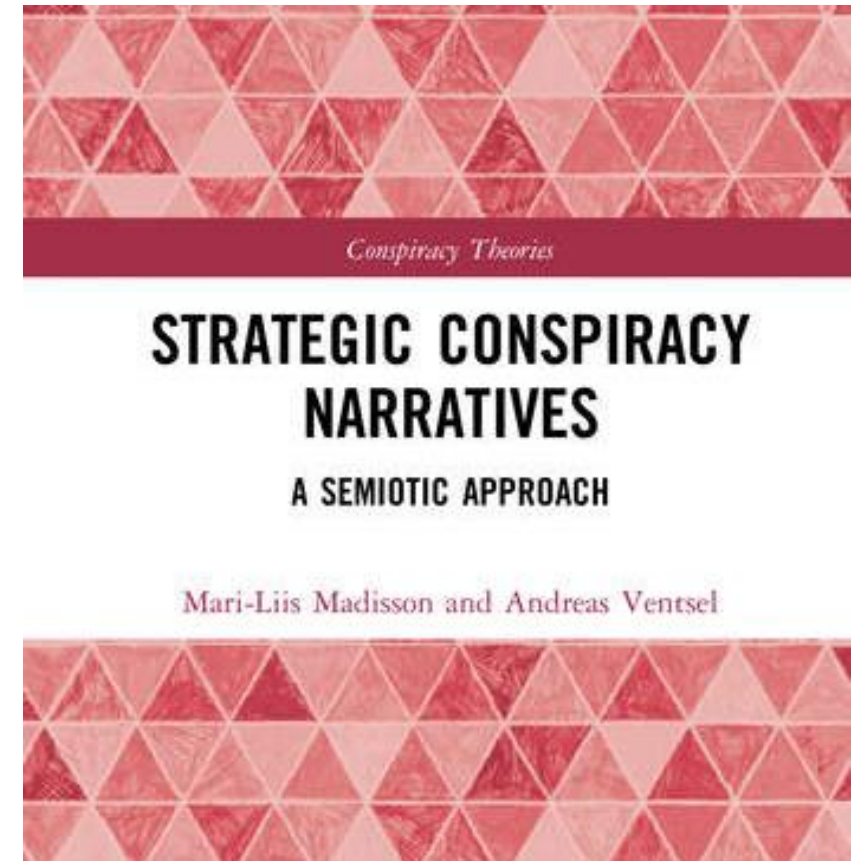
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- Global elites (WEF, UN, governments, MSM, tech giants) allegedly using crises to impose total control
- Crises viewed as engineered, not accidental or natural
- **Key claims include:**
  - *COVID-19*: staged to justify surveillance and loss of liberties
  - *Climate change*: exaggerated to enforce green restrictions (e.g. digital IDs, carbon quotas, 15-minute cities)
  - *Wars (Ukraine, Gaza)*: framed as tools to expand censorship and emergency powers
  - *Mainstream institutions*: seen as co-opted to misinform and pacify the public
  - “*The Great Reset*”: portrayed as a master plan to reshape society into a totalitarian system
  - Control imagined as total—extending into thoughts, emotions, and everyday behaviours

# Why Do Disinformation Actors Gravitate Toward CTs?

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- CTs are effective attention-grabbers
- CTs serve as interpretative anchors, guiding audiences to view actual events through a lens of heightened skepticism
- System and super CTs work as extremely adaptive and all-encompassing explanatory framework
- **Evoke strong affective resonance**
- Offer somewhat **positive self-identity**
- (Madisson, Ventsel 2021)



# Climate Obstructionism & Climate Action

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## Climate Obstructionism

- Strategic/systemic efforts that hinder effective climate responses
  - Includes **denial, disinformation, delay, rejection, and delegitimation of climate actions**
  - Can be intentional or embedded in everyday practices and cultural norms
  - Operates across political, economic, and social levels
- (Forchtner et al. 2024)*

## • Climate Action

- Deliberate efforts to mitigate or adapt to climate change
  - Involves **systemic, political, and cultural transformation**
  - **Challenges fossil-fuel dependency, carbon privileges, and ideological resistance**
  - Addresses social norms and vested interests
- (Forchtner et al. 2024; Vowles & Hultman 2021)*

# Primary & Secondary Climate Obstruction

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## Primary Obstruction

- **Deliberate disinformation and denial of anthropogenic climate change**
  - Driven by fossil fuel lobbies & affiliated think tanks
  - Involves event and system CTs: climate science as fabrication
- E.g. *Global Climate Coalition* – “*Climate change is natural*”

## Secondary Obstruction

- **Rejects or delays climate action without denying climate change**
  - Justifies inaction via economic/populist rhetoric
  - Frames green policies as tools of elite control over “ordinary people”
- E.g. *Far-right actors depict climate policy as globalist conspiracy, system and super CTs*

# Tertiary Climate Obstruction

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- Embedded in **everyday lifestyles** and **cultural norms**
- Sustains unsustainable systems *without denying* climate change
- Often operates **unintentionally**, through values and habits

## Examples:

- *Industrial/breadwinner masculinities* reinforce fossil-fuel-based lifestyles
- Manosphere influencers promote excessive meat-eating, travel, fast cars
- CTs claim plant-based diets are part of a “woke” or “globalist” plot to emasculate men
- Insect-based protein framed as related to elite conspiracy to control populations

# Fast Thinking in Social Media: A Fertile Ground for CTs

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## ***Fast Thinking***

- Intuitive, automatic, effortless
- Operates unconsciously and instantly
- Dominates under stress, fatigue, and information overload

## ***Slow Thinking***

- Reflective, analytical, effortful
- Activated in complex or unfamiliar situations  
*(Kahneman 2011)*

*Social media environments favour **fast thinking**—which amplifies **cognitive biases and fallacies** (Pennycook & Rand 2018)*

- CTs **feel newsworthy and urgent**
- CTs **trigger emotions and repeat familiar patterns**
- CTs leave **interpretive gaps** that invite users to “do their own research” *(Madisson, Ventsel 2021)*

# How to Meaningfully Engage with People Involved in Disinformation and CTs ?

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- Focus on explaining **influence tactics** and **cognitive vulnerabilities**, rather than just debunking core beliefs (*Lewandowsky & Cook 2020*)
- Avoid confrontation—**empathy and respect matter** (*Yeomans et al. 2020*)
- Tailor interventions to the **meet group's values and identity** (*Poon et al. 2020; Cook et al. 2015*)
- Support **agency and critical reflection**, not passivity (*Douglas et al. 2024*)
- **Humour can help** reduce resistance and build distance (*Ventsel et al. 2023*)

# Key Takeaways

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- **CTs and climate obstructionist attitudes do not exist in a vacuum**, but operate within broader sociocultural spheres
- Debunking a single false claim has limited impact
- Rather than focusing on converting committed opponents, it is often more effective to reach those who are unaware of their complicity in obstructionist dynamics
- **Effective responses to mis- and disinformation must appeal to audiences emotionally and allow for personal engagement**
- Long lectures or formal logical arguments rarely resonate with large audiences—participatory, affect-driven strategies are more impactful

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