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Commentary

The climate lockdown conspiracy: You can't fact-check possibility

The climate lockdown conspiracies claim that a clandestine group of elites are planning to use climate change as a justification to enact widespread lockdowns and curtail freedoms. This conspiracy draws on a wide range of unconnected real-world events and suggests that their possibility of happening again is all the proof required. The focus on possibility instead of reality demonstrates the deep-seated philosophical differences between conspiracy theories and the fact-checking processes that counter them.

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Introduction

Climate lockdown conspiracies[2] are based on claims of possibility, not reality. They may reference real-world events in different contexts, but the connection to the actual climate lockdown conspiracy comes from an assertion based on possibility. This case study shows how conspiracy theories can be difficult to counter, as fact-check responses often do not speak about what is possible, but only what is real or not. I argue that one source of difficulty that counter-disinformation efforts encounter is that they do not share the same ontology (philosophy of reality) as the conspiracy theory that they target. As Muirhead and Rosenblum (2019) argued, and the climate lockdown conspiracy demonstrates, contemporary conspiracism is not built on a series of claims about how reality actually is, but instead grounds its conspiratorial claims in possibility that cannot be perfectly disproven.

The fact checkers and climate lockdown conspiracists have fundamentally different understandings of what is real, despite operating within the same information environment and discussing the same issues. If we want to understand the root cause of this disjuncture between fact-checking and conspiracy, we must first understand how these different philosophies of reality operate. After introducing the climate lockdown conspiracy, I discuss how the philosophy of Giorgio Agamben (2018) can help us to redirect counter-disinformation efforts towards a less conflictual discussion of plausibility rather than an unsuitable fact-checking approach. This commentary thereby demonstrates how engagement with

[1] *A publication of the Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy at Harvard University, John F. Kennedy School of Government.*
[2] These conspiracies assert that climate change will be used as a justification for widespread lockdowns.

philosophy can be generative for scholars and practitioners in misinformation studies seeking to better understand the ways of thinking occurring within conspiracy theory circles. As outlined in the conclusion, this philosophical account can help inform future empirical testing.

The climate lockdown conspiracy

In the early months of 2020, lockdowns related to COVID-19 began to spread around the world. The connection of the pandemic lockdowns to climate change discourse was sporadic in early months, consisting largely of comments that reduced human activity lessened pollution in certain areas (e.g., Clifford, 2020). In September of that year, economist and professor Mariana Mazzucato published a pair of opinion blogs arguing that climate change mitigation measures should be adopted to ensure that society could avoid emergency measures becoming necessary for climate change; online climate change deniers quickly misrepresented these pieces as calling *for* climate lockdowns (Maharasingam-Shah & Vaux, 2021). Uptake of the climate lockdown conspiracy through One America News Network, Fox News, Breitbart News, the Washington Times, and social media platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and Telegram saw a rapid dissemination of the conspiracy after this tipping point. The climate lockdown conspiracy grew sharply after a poorly crafted Guardian headline comparing global carbon targets to pandemic lockdown emissions was cited in conspiracy circles as calling for biennial climate lockdowns, and a since-deleted World Economic Forum tweet promoting analysis of carbon emissions during lockdown periods claimed that the lockdowns were improving cities (Maharasingam-Shah & Vaux, 2021). These missteps—and public corrections—became fodder for the promotion of the conspiracy.

With a chyron reading "The Impending Climate Lockdowns," Laura Ingraham summarized the core of the climate lockdown conspiracy for her viewers on May 19, 2021. Her claim is that global elites see climate change as an excuse to justify lockdowns and steal freedom; the existence of pandemic lockdowns is taken as proof that climate lockdowns are possible (Ingraham, 2021). Juxtaposing statements made by prominent political figures about the severity of climate change with comments comparing the pandemic lockdown emissions reductions to broader climate change targets was a common strategy to outline the possibility of climate lockdowns. Between September 2020 and April 2021, nearly half of all tweets including the words *climate lockdown* also referenced an *elite plot*, with a full 29% naming the World Economic Forum or its Great Reset report directly (Maharasingam-Shah & Vaux, 2021, p. 10). Specific events can also have a major influence: Figure 1 demonstrates the slow burn of climate lockdown conspiracy discourse online reaching a peak around a city council meeting in Oxford, UK that was subject to high degrees of misinformation (Terroille & Samson, 2023). The connection of a climate lockdown conspiracy to actors enmeshed in other conspiracy theories—for example, the New World Order, broader World Economic Forum conspiracies, or climate denialism—can be a helpful conspiracy enrolment technique, as those who believe in one conspiracy theory are more likely to believe in other conspiracy theories (Williams et al., 2022)—even if the conspiracy theories contradict one another (Wood et al 2012).

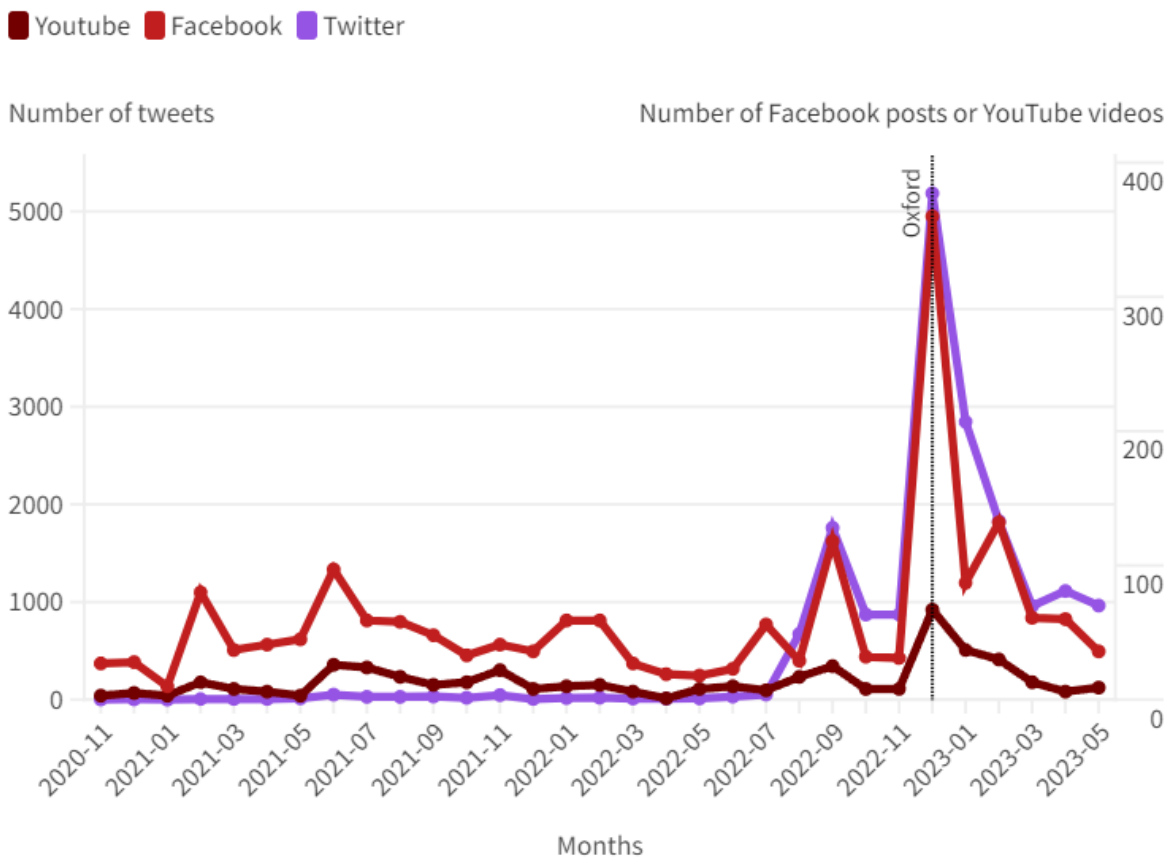

Figure 1. Discussion of climate lockdown conspiracy on social media.

Responding to the climate lockdown conspiracy is a difficult task, as the specific threat of a climate lockdown is that it is possible (perhaps in the near future). The conspiracy relies on data points not directly connected to the main theory, such as the existence of pandemic lockdowns and often leverages the believers' own previously-held beliefs to entice believers to join. Because "correcting the record" is of little use in this circumstance, the main call to action emerging from the Institute for Strategic Dialogue's report on the climate lockdown conspiracy was to prevent future harm by encouraging climate campaigners and other visible actors to be aware of potential narrative reframing when choosing words for titles (Maharasingam-Shah & Vaux, 2021). This is not an opponent who relies on actual facts that may be checked, but instead on a threat that exists entirely in the realm of the possible.

Philosophy can inform our response

In a short book on the philosophy of quantum mechanics, Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben (2018) suggests that the major rupture that quantum mechanics introduced into science was that it replaced a worldview focusing on measuring what exists with one of probabilistic models. Whereas science from Aristotle to Newton assumed that reality consists of what actually exists (ontology of the actual), quantum mechanics introduced a new worldview that considers possibility to be real. Because knowledge focuses on what is possible rather than only on what exists presently, new forms of reasoning specific to quantum mechanics (the statistical modeling of uncertainty) must be developed. Agamben argues that this replacement of actualist physics with probabilistic models has far-reaching philosophical implications: "as soon as we assume that the real state of a system is in itself unknowable, statistical models become

essential and cannot but replace reality" (Agamben, 2018, p. 42). Despite the efforts of generations of physicists, no bridge exists between the actualist ontology of macroscopic physics and the ontology of the possible in quantum mechanics.

My argument is that a similar ontology of the possible exists in the case of the climate lockdown conspiracy.[3] Although the difference in style between quantum mechanics and conspiratorial thinking—we might say a scientific style versus a paranoid style (Hofstadter, 1996)—may make this distinction difficult to grasp, I argue that the distinction between reality defined in terms of actual versus possible offers us a useful heuristic to inform less confrontational and more effective methods for countering misinformation and conspiratorial thinking. The climate lockdown conspiracy does not require that climate lockdowns actually exist for their conspiracy claim to be real. Indeed, the urgency of their message comes precisely from their potential to exist. To respond to the climate lockdown conspiracy as a fact checker might, by highlighting the non-existence of climate lockdowns, does nothing to refute the conspiracist's core belief. Such an attempt to fact-check fails because it attempts to counter possibility with actuality. In doing so, the fact check reinforces the status of the lockdown as being potential. Within the ontology of the possible held by the climate lockdown conspiracist, this reinforcement of the status of the lockdown as possible simultaneously reinforces its reality within the conspiracist's worldview.

The lesson from this turn to philosophy is that counter-misinformation efforts must pay attention to the ontological assumptions of the conspiracy at hand. When a conspiracy belief assumes an ontology of the possible, a response that assumes an ontology of the actual emphasizes the conspiracist's ontological rationale for belief. To avoid reinforcing the conspiracy belief, an alternative strategy is to ground counter-misinformation efforts in terms of plausibility and probability rather than actuality. Instead of telling the climate lockdown conspiracist that there are no actual plans for an imminent climate lockdown, the first step can instead be arguing that the climate lockdown is not an inevitable occurrence. Indeed, given the widespread pushback even to pandemic lockdowns, it would hardly be a stretch to say that future lockdowns of any sort would be difficult to enforce, and that generalized climate change lockdowns would be difficult to justify based on the non-imminence of the threat. Another key step in this logic is to distinguish evacuations from extreme weather events from climate lockdowns. Placing events such as the evacuation of a hurricane landfall zone clearly in the realm of the actual drives a wedge between extreme weather event lockdowns (actual) and climate lockdowns (potential). This distance can then be used to emphasize the implausibility and improbability of the latter. Crucially, this meets the conspiracists where they are, ontologically speaking, rather than confronting them with a different worldview.

An objection to this focus on plausibility may emerge from the broader concerns that fact-checking efforts expressing scientific findings in terms of probability have in the past reinforced conspiracist beliefs rather than countering them.[4] As Muirhead and Rosenblum (2019) argue, because conspiracy theorists tend to hold "not entirely false" as the barrier for believability—rather than an evidentiary basis for truth—one might reasonably object that a fact check that accepts the ontology of possibility would risk leaving the door open. However, by shifting the terms of debate from absolute terms (truth/not truth) to relative terms (more or less plausible), counter-misinformation efforts asking the conspiracy theory believer to reweight the certainty of beliefs rather than radically switch them entirely have a lower cognitive demand.

As the previous section outlined, the claims of the climate lockdown conspiracy rely on possibilities from situations that are ripped from their context and read as if inevitable. By building the argument within an ontology of the possible, the truth or falsity is measured against their possibility to exist rather

[3] Muirhead and Rosenblum (2019) have suggested that the threshold of "not entirely false" as "true enough" defines the new conspiracism.

[4] The consideration of alternative perspectives is, of course, a hallmark of rigorous philosophical analysis. Given the space constraints, the present article focuses on one evidence-based perspective.

than their actual existence. Responses coming from an ontology of the actual are ineffective because they are open to an alternative conclusion if mere possibility is sufficient to define reality (e.g., "Yes, I agree that there is no climate lockdown right now, but they are coming"). Responses that are constructed in terms of probability and plausibility have less of a cognitive load because they do not deny the possibility, but instead highlight the remoteness of the possibility (e.g., "The event is so implausible that it is not likely to happen"). Recognizing the philosophical distinction between these worldviews helps us to identify the ontological mechanism that stands in the way of conventional fact-checking.

Conclusion

Climate lockdown conspiracies emerged in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic and grew in stature based on arguments grounded in terms of possibility. Responding to possibility-based conspiracies is a difficult task because traditional fact-checking approaches to countering misinformation are grounded in what I have called above an "ontology of the actual." By paying close attention to the philosophical assumptions at the heart of a conspiracy theory, we can better understand how they operate and how to respond to them. This particular engagement between the specific philosophy of Giorgio Agamben and climate lockdown conspiracies has opened further research opportunities in empirical and methodological terms. Empirically, the philosophically informed case for plausibility-based responses can now be tested in the field and evaluated in qualitative or quantitative terms. Methodologically, the paper provides a model for how future philosophical engagement can take place[5] to foster generative dialogue between misinformation studies and diverse philosophical perspectives.

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[5] Longer-form engagements may further permit the consideration of multiple, dissenting, and divergent philosophical frameworks. The constraints of the Commentary format imposed a necessary limit on the present article.

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