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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Conspiracy theory as counter-securitization: Contestation and resistance during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract
There is an emerging consensus that conspiracy theories are dangerous. They can fuel extremism, undermine democratic institutions, and be mobilized in the disinformation operations of adversary states. That framing fits comfortably within well-understood practices of elite securitization, which have recently framed conspiracy theories as a threat to national security. This article explores the securitization of conspiracy theory during the COVID-19 pandemic when misinformation proliferated, and elites identified the threat of an 'infodemic'. While conspiracy theories were securitized by elites alongside the virus, conspiracy theories identified those same elites as the real peril. We argue that this dynamic can be best understood through the concept of counter-securitization, which shows how an initial securitization process can be resisted by reframing its progenitors as the actual threat. We illustrate this argument through a case study on the United Kingdom, where there was palpable resistance to lockdowns and vaccine mandates. We suggest that the securitization dynamic identified here reflects a wider relationship between elite and popular securitization that has been under examined in the securitization literature, despite recent efforts to theorize the main characteristics of populist securitizations.

Keywords: conspiracy theory; COVID-19; populism; resistance; securitization; United Kingdom

Introduction

There is an emerging consensus that conspiracy theories are dangerous. Researchers and policymakers have highlighted the way conspiracy theories fuel violent extremism across the political spectrum.[1] Conspiracy theories are also understood as a threat to democracy because they fuel distrust in institutions, polarize political discourse, demonize opponents, and undermine important policies.[2] This emerging consensus fits comfortably within the well-understood process of securitization first identified by the Copenhagen School, which show how an issue is constructed as a security threat, presented to an audience as a pressing danger, and moved from the realm of

[1]Benjamin Lee, 'Radicalisation and conspiracy theories', in Michael Butter and Peter Knight (eds), *The Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories* (Routledge, 2020), pp. 344–356.

[2]Russel Muirhead and Nancy Rosenblum, *A lot of people are saying: the New Conspiracism and the Assault on Democracy* (Princeton University Press, 2019); Karen Douglas, Robbie Sutton, Aleksandra Cichocka, C. Ang, Farzin Deravi, Joseph Uscinski, and Turkay Nefes, 'Why do people adopt conspiracy theories, how are they communicated, and what are their risks? Perspectives from psychology, information engineering, political science, and sociology', *Centre for Research and Evidence on Security Threats*, April (2019).

ordinary political debates to the realm of exceptional measures if the audience is convinced.[3] It is now common for conspiracy theories to be framed as a threat to national security, a discourse that gained momentum during the COVID-19 pandemic when conspiracy theories proliferated.[4]

There has been insightful scholarship on the securitization of COVID-19, which shows how the pandemic was regulated through extraordinary security measures rather than normal political means.[5] For instance, Kirk and McDonald highlight the specificity of securitization responses across contexts[6]; Holland and Jarvis argue that the pandemic foregrounded challenges to traditional spatial and temporal assumptions that underpin securitization theory[7]; and Gellwitzki and Price explore securitization in relation to 'liquid fear' in the UK public.[8] Less attention has been given to the securitization of conspiracy theories about the pandemic, which proliferated as lockdowns took hold and often animated anti-vax activists. As early as May 2020, the UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres, amplifying the view of the World Health Organization, warned that the crisis had 'given rise to a second pandemic of misinformation, from harmful health advice to wild conspiracy theories'.[9] This second pandemic was coined an 'infodemic' by global health experts, drawing from a rich sociomedical discourse to characterize the incubation and transmission of misinformation, the significance of super spreaders, and the necessity of inoculating the population against dangerous ideas.[10] If the pandemic was a threat to national security, so too was viral misinformation, including conspiracy theories, a prominent and much maligned variety of misinformation that we delineate shortly.

We make the case that elite security discourses and populist conspiracy discourses should not be understood in isolation. While conspiracy theories were securitized by elites alongside the virus, conspiracy theories identified those same elites as the real peril.[11] In this sense, elites and conspiracy theorist positioned each other as existential threats and competed to convince the same public of the danger. We argue that this dynamic is best understood through the concept of counter-securitization, which shows how an initial securitization process can be resisted by reframing its progenitors as the actual threat.[12] Whereas counter-securitization has so far focused on the way elites resist securitization, we build on Vuori's distinction between 'top-dog' and 'underdog' security actors to characterize the counter-securitization underway in populists COVID-19 conspiracy theories.[13] We illustrate this argument through a case study on the United Kingdom, where there

[3]Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver, and Jaap de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework of Analysis* (Lynne Rienner, 1998).

[4]Genevieve Kotarska, 'Covid-19, Crime and the Anti-Vax threat', *RUSI*, 30 March 2022, available at: {https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/covid-19-crime-and-anti-vax-threat}.

[5]Jessica Kirk, 'The cure cannot be worse than the problem': securitising the securitisation of COVID-19 in the USA, *Contemporary Politics*, 29:2 (2023), pp. 141–160; Hai Yang, '"We are at war": securitisation, legitimation and COVID-19 pandemic politics in France', *Contemporary Politics*, 29:2 (2023), pp. 207–227.

[6]Jessica Kirk and Matt McDonald, 'The politics of exceptionalism: Securitization and COVID-19', *Global Studies Quarterly*, 1:3 (2021), pp. 1–12.

[7]Jack Holland and Lee Jarvis, 'COVID-19 and the Limits of Critical Security Theory: Securitization, Cosmopolitanism, and Pandemic Politics', *Journal of Global Security Studies*, 9:4 (2024), https://doi.org/10.1093/jogss/ogae031.

[8]Nicolai Gellwitzki and Charlie Price, 'Liquid Fear, Agency and the (Un)conscious in Securitisation Processes: The Case of the UK's Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic', *Millennium*, 53:1 (2024), pp. 31–58. Kirk and McDonald also highlight the public led character of securitization in the United Kingdom, while also showing how exceptional emergency measures were legitimized in New Zealand without resorting to the language of security.

[9]Antonio Guterres 'UN Secretary General's Video Message on World Press Freedom Day', 3 May 2020, available at: {https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2020-05-03/secretary-generals-video-message-world-press-freedom-day-2020-%E2%80%9Cjournalism-without-fear-or-favour%E2%80%9D}.

[10]Claire Birchall and Peter Knight, *Conspiracy Theories in the time of COVID-19* (Routledge, 2023), pp. 41–50. See also David Campbell, *Writing Security: United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity* (Manchester University Press, 1998), pp. 96–99.

[11]Michael Butter and Peter Knight, *Covid Conspiracy theories in global perspective* (Routledge, 2023).

[12]Holger Stritzel and Sean Chang, 'Securitization and Counter-Securitization in Afghanistan', *Security Dialogue*, 46:6 (2015), pp. 548–67.

[13]Juha Vuori, 'Contesting and Resisting Security in post-Mao China', in Thierry Balzacq (eds) *Contesting Security. Strategies and logics* (Routledge, 2015), pp. 29–43 (30).

was palpable resistance to lockdowns and vaccine mandates. We suggest that the securitization dynamic identified here reflects a wider relationship between elite and popular securitization, which has been under-examined in the securitization literature, despite recent efforts to theorize the main characteristics of populist securitizations.[14]

The article makes three contributions to knowledge. First, it adds to securitization research on non-state actors by showing that the security politics expressed through populist conspiracy theories and elite securitization are intertwined in relational dynamics. We open ground to better understand the relationship between governments, everyday people, and populist politicians via a novel adaptation of Vuori's resistance/contestation framework. While populist conspiracy theories securitized elite responses to COVID-19, they were in turn securitized as a threat to public health by an anti-conspiracist front that emerged in reaction. Second, it extends an emerging International Relations literature that explores the significance of conspiracy theories. Our study is the first to conceptualize conspiracy theory as counter-securitization, which repositions it not as an irrational practice on the margins of politics, but as an important site of security politics. This is particularly significant given the apparent acceleration of conspiracy thinking since the pandemic and its ongoing securitization by elites. Third, it contributes to recent scholarship on the securitization of COVID-19 in the United Kingdom by providing a novel account of the interaction between elite and popular actors.

Before we go any further, it is important to explain what we mean by conspiracy theory. There has been much debate about its best definition, not least because of a long history in political and academic discourse of the term being used colloquially and pejoratively.[15] Indeed, the blanket delegitimization often associated with conspiracy theory sits uneasily with an historical record flush with actual conspiracies, including many with a distinctly international political dimension.[16] We define conspiracy theories as narratives claiming that events are the result of secret plots undertaken by powerful elites for malign purposes.[17] Importantly, for our purposes, they advance an alternative to the official account and mainstream thinking.[18] Yet we also pay attention to the way conspiracy theories emerge as subjects of concern for elites and the associated boundary maintenance practices of the sciences, part of a wider defence of expert authority and liberal rationality.[19] For this reason we do not pathologize conspiracy theories but rather treat them as meaningful narratives through which people make sense of an increasingly opaque world. At the same time, we do not endorse the conspiracy theories we engage with, even when we position them discursively and foreground the identity politics entailed in their framing. Indeed, many conspiracy theories are deeply prejudiced, notably around racism, misogyny, and homophobia, and inseparable from

[14]On the relationship between elite and popular securitization see Mark Salter, 'Securitization and desecuritization: a dramaturgical analysis of the Canadian Air Transport Security Authority', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 11 (2008), pp. 321–349. On populism and securitization see Thorsten Wojczewski, '"Enemies of the people": Populism and the politics of (in)security', *European Journal of International Security*, 5:1 (2020), pp. 5–24 and Donatella Bonansinga, '"A threat to us": The interplay of insecurity and enmity narratives in left-wing populism', *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 24:3 (2023), pp. 511–25.

[15]See, for instance, M.R.X. Dentith (eds) *The Philosophy of Conspiracy Theories: Concepts, Methods and Theory* (Routledge, 2024). For further discussion, see Jack Bratich, Mark Fenster and Lee Hye-Jin, 'When Theorists Conspire: An Inte(re)view Between Mark Fenster and Jack Bratich', *International Journal of Communications*, 3 (2009), pp. 961–972.

[16]Tim Aistrope and Roland Bleiker, 'Conspiracy and Foreign Policy', *Security Dialogue*, 49:3 (2018), pp. 165–182; Kathryn Olmsted, *Real Enemies: Conspiracy Theories and American Democracy, World War I to 9/11* (Oxford University Press, 2009).

[17]Diddier Fassin gives an especially nuanced account of conspiracy theory that considers the historical context of popular suspicion, the importance of power relations in the identification of conspiracy theories, and the difficulties of a consistent definition, but nevertheless positions it as a 'social fact' worth investigating. See Didier Fassin, 'Of plots and men: the heuristics of conspiracy theories', *Current Anthropology*, 62:2 (2021).

[18]Micheal Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America* (University of California Press, 2013).

[19]Jack Bratich, *Conspiracy Panics: Political Rationality and Popular Culture* (State University of New York Press, 2008); Jaron Harambam and Stef Aupers (2015), 'Contesting epistemic authority: Conspiracy theories on the boundaries of science', *Public Understanding of Science*, 24:4, pp. 466–480.

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retrograde ideologies.[20] Nor do we downplay their impact during the pandemic, not least in view of the many people who lost their lives because public health orders were not followed, and people remained unvaccinated. While there may be room for debate about the extent to which COVID-19 conspiracy theories give rise to a moral duty to securitize, that question is not the focus of this article.[21] Our aim is to understand the security politics underway in populist conspiracy theories and their relationship with elite securitization.

The article unfolds in three sections. The first section delineates populist conspiracy theories and situates them as a site of securitization, focusing on narrative structure, social context, and legitimacy dynamics. The second section engages with securitization theory to conceptualize populist conspiracy theories as a form of counter-securitization. The final section illustrates this account through a case study exploring the relationship between elite securitization and the counter-securitization enacted through populist conspiracy theories in the United Kingdom during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Conspiracy theory and security politics

The narrative character of conspiracy theory is what distinguishes it from other kinds of misinformation. Conspiracy narratives crystallize a distinct politics centred on the threat posed by elites and for this reason they have long been linked to populist critiques of power.[22] While not all populists are conspiracy theorists and not all conspiracy theorist are populists, conspiracy theories are frequently mobilized in populist discourse on the political left and right, building on widespread distrust of government.[23] Conspiracy theories allow opposition against 'the elite' to be articulated through emotionally charged plot lines that identifies a common enemy advancing objectives that are incompatible with the values of the majority.[24] They focus on elites or institutions or political orders, and in doing so often draw a contrast between a corrupt reality and a valorized ideal that is under threat or has been forsaken.[25] This can entail a dystopian vision of a world gone wrong that positions the populist movement and its leaders as heroic protagonists fighting on behalf of justice and fairness against the exploitation and inequity of the status quo.[26]

Yet the relationship between populist conspiracy theories and threatening elites has historical depth and political antecedents that go well beyond the claims of specific conspiracy theories. Fassin makes this point decisively when he asks, 'what are the felicity conditions of a conspiracy theory …?'.[27] His answer reflects the way individuals and groups are embedded in historical-sociological contexts that provide ample evidence of elite malfeasance. Fassin demonstrates this point via the case of conspiracy theories about the AIDS epidemic in South Africa. The conspiracy

[20] Sebastian Schindler, 'The task of critique in times of post-truth politics.' *Review of International Studies*, 46:3 (2020), pp. 376–394.

[21] On this see Rita Floyd, *The Duty to Secure: From Just to Mandatory Securitization* (Cambridge University Press, 2024).

[22] For an early and compelling account see Mark Fenster, *Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008). More recently, see Andrea Pirro and Paul Taggart, 'Populists in power and conspiracy theories', *Party Politics*, 29:3 (2022), pp. 413–423; Eirikur Bergmann, *Conspiracy & Populism. The Politics of Misinformation* (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan 2018); Bergmann and Michael Butter, 'Conspiracy theory and populism', in Butter and Knight (eds), *Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories*, pp. 330–343; Bruno Castanho Silva, Federico Vegetti, and Levante Littvay, 'The elite is up to something: Exploring the relation between populism and belief in conspiracy theories', *Swiss Political Science Review* 23:4 (2017), pp. 423–443.

[23] Bergmann and Butter argue that conspiracy theories are believed by a minority faction within populist groups, yet they are a non-negligible part of populist discourse. See Butter et al., *Populism and Conspiracy Theories*, p. 6.

[24] See Fenster, *Conspiracy Theories*, pp. 64–129.

[25] Ibid.

[26] Ibid. Wojczewski makes the connection between conspiracy theory and populist security politics and emphasizes many of the same characteristics, albeit from outside of securitization theory. Thorsten Wojczewski, 'Conspiracy theories, right-wing populism and foreign policy: the case of the Alternative for Germany', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 25:1 (2022), pp. 130–158.

[27] Fassin, 'Of Plots and Men', p. 132.

theories he studies resonate with a long history of apartheid governments' instrumentalizing public health to ostracize, demonize, segregate, and diminish the African population, including through abhorrent conspiracies either carried out or planned.[28] Similarly, writing in the context of the pandemic, Birchall and Knight point out that… conspiracy theories, including COVID-19 conspiracy theories, often reflect genuine and legitimate concerns, even if their factual claims are wide of the mark or draw on troubling registers'.[29] From this standpoint, the felicity conditions for conspiracy theory involve histories of insecurity, anxiety, and trauma. An extensive literature has also tied the proliferation of conspiracy theories to the rise of the national security state: here ever-expanding security apparatus, world-spanning clandestine networks, and an historical record full of coup d'états, false flags, special operations, and other covert activities have fostered suspicion about elites and their global activities.[30]

The important point here is that the impetus for conspiracy narratives is not just the immediate events that conspiracy theories take as their subject matter but also the surrounding context that people are situated in, which resonate with the menacing threats they identify. In this sense, state security policies are always already implicated in popular interpretations of international politics, including those alleging malign conspiracies of one sort or another.[31] They are both an unavoidable spectacle that demands interpretation, particularly around significant international events, and the locus of political power and control, where agency lies and consequential decisions are made, not just about international politics but also the lives and fortunes of everyday people.[32] Elite security discourse is often the starting point for conspiracy theories since they provoke alternative narratives and a counter-politics that contests the official account by foregrounding the real danger that must be confronted and overcome.

What is striking here is the extent to which populist conspiracy theories share common characteristics with securitization processes.[33] Both identify a dangerous enemy that poses a dire threat to the ontological and material security of the entire population. Both demand extraordinary measures in response. Both seek to convince an audience that a threat is existential – and in doing so craft narratives that resonate with audiences. Vuori notes similar parallels between the security narratives mobilized by authorities and protest movements, and argues that 'securitization provides a single framework for studying both sides of this struggle'.[34] This move reflects an emerging post-Copenhagen view that securitization is also the province of non-state actors, including civil society organizations, community groups, political movements, and even individuals, who are capable of making and unmaking security.[35] We build on this scholarship in the next section to position populist conspiracy theories as a site of securitization that is both under-examined and proliferating amidst growing mistrust of government, institutions, and elites.

[28]Ibid., pp. 134–137.

[29]Birchall and Knight, Conspiracy Theories in the time of COVID-19, p. 4.

[30]Robert Goldberg, 'Who Profited from the Crime: Intelligence Failure, Conspiracy Theory, and the Case of September 11', *Intelligence and National Security*, 19:2 (2004), pp. 249–261; Kathryn Olmsted), *Real Enemies: Conspiracy Theories and American Democracy, World War I to 9/11* (Oxford University Press, 2009).

[31]Peter Knight, *Conspiracy Culture: From Kennedy to the X-Files* (Duke University Press, 2001). Fluck makes the insightful observation that both conspiracy theory and calls for greater transparency reflect popular responses to the opacity of government and world politics more broadly, which share the same assumption that more information is the solution. Mathew Fluck, 'Theory, "truthers", and transparency: Reflecting on knowledge in the twenty-first century', *Review of International Studies*, 42:1 (2016), pp. 48–73.

[32]Guy Debord, *Comments of the Society of the Spectacle* (Verso, 2002). See also Bratich's interesting discussion of this theme in 'Public Secrecy and Immanent Security', *Cultural Studies*, 20:4–5 (2006), pp. 494–495.

[33]Hjermann and Wilhelmsen draw similarities between conspiracy theory and what they call metapolitics, which they position as a key site for securitization with reference to Russian political culture. Annie Roth Hjermann, Julie Wilhelmsen, 'Topos of threat and metapolitics in Russia's securitisation of NATO post-Crimea', *Review of International Studies*, (2025), pp. 11–14.

[34]Juha Vuori, 'Religious Bites. Falungong, securitization/desecuritization in the People's Republic of China', in Balzacq (eds) *Securitization theory. How Security Problems Emerge and Dissolve* (Routledge, 2011), pp. 186–211 (p. 189).

[35]Neal, *Security as Politics*.

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Yet, as we have suggested already, the securitization underway in conspiracy theories cannot be understood in isolation from elite security discourse, not least because conspiracy theories have themselves been securitized by elites, including during the COVID-19 pandemic where they were identified as a key strain of an infodemic spreading alongside the virus. While much has been said about the threat posed by conspiracy theories to national security, exploring the securitization of conspiracy theories *by* elites accentuates the relational dynamics through which popular and elite security narratives emerge.[36] An important starting point is to recognize that conspiracy theory, like security, can be understood as a discursive position that emerges in and through discourse, and in relation to wider contours of identity and difference. Indeed, *the term* conspiracy theory (and a closely associated discourse on paranoia) has historically functioned in western security discourse to support the characterization of threatening others.[37] Here leaders of 'rogue states' are psychologically fraught, while foreign publics are upbraided for their paranoid perception of western power, said to be rooted in dysfunctional political cultures that fuel antagonism and lead to political violence.[38] Such accounts emerge in the context of deeper orientalist discourses that situate non-western peoples as backward, superstitious, unscientific, and emotional.[39] The term 'conspiracy theory' resonates with these long-running tropes, which have regularly characterized threatening others in a western geopolitical imagination.[40]

Another point of connection is the way 'conspiracy theory' and 'security', understood as discursive positions, both entail powerful normative dynamics. Take, for instance, the rhetorical work done by the term 'conspiracy theory' and an associated battery of synonyms, connotations, and intimations that work interchangeably to convey the same meaning. According to Hustings and Orr, when this language is deployed it invites us to 'go meta'.[41] It points beyond the specifics of a particular claim and asks the audience to assess the credibility of the person making it. It points towards motives, psychology, social competence, and moral standing. It allows one interlocutor to dominate another and shut them out of reasonable discourse.[42] In this account, 'conspiracy theory' is a label that stigmatizes those issues and people to which it is applied. The potential for this sort of labelling is increased by the often-amorphous boundaries delineating conspiracy theories from other sorts of claims.[43] All this points towards what Keith Goshorn has referred to as 'anti-conspiracy discourse', where the stigma associated with being called a conspiracy theorist acts to contain critical engagements with elite power and deter future investigations.[44]

[36]The security politics of conspiracy theory during the War on Terror has been addressed in Tim Aistrope, *Conspiracy Theory and American Foreign Policy* (Manchester University Press, 2016); Aistrope, 'The Muslim paranoia narrative in counter-radicalisation policy', *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 9:2 (2016), pp. 182–204; Tim Aistrope and Roland Bleiker, 'Conspiracy and foreign policy', *Security Dialogue* 49:3 (2018), pp. 165–182.

[37]Aistrope, *Conspiracy theory and American foreign policy*, pp. 15–39. For academic examples of this see Daniel Pipes, *The hidden hand: Middle East fears of conspiracy.* (St Martin's Press, 1996), and Robert Robins and Jerrold Post, *Political paranoia: The psychopolitics of hatred* (Yale University Press, 1997). For examples in the context of the War on Terror see Fareed Zakaria, 'The politics of rage', *Newsweek Magazine* (October 2001) and Bernard Lewis, 'What went wrong?' *The Atlantic* (January 2002).

[38]David Campbell's field defining treatise on identity politics long ago identified just this sort of self/other dynamic as a key aspect of national security discourse (David Campbell, *Writing Security: United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity* (Manchester University Press, 1998).

[39]Edward Said, *Orientalism* (Routledge, 1978), pp. 39–57. It is worth noting that Said identifies suspiciousness as a recurring feature of orientalism.

[40]Aistrope, *Conspiracy Theory and American Foreign Policy*.

[41]Gina Husting and Martin Orr, 'Dangerous machinery: "Conspiracy theorist" as a transpersonal strategy of exclusion', *Symbolic interaction*, 30:2 (2007), pp. 127–150; 'Media marginalization of racial minorities: 'Conspiracy theorists' in US ghettos and on the 'Arab Street', in Joseph Uscinski (eds), *Conspiracy Theories and the People Who Believe in Them* (Oxford University Press, 2019), pp. 82–93.

[42]Matthew Shields, 'Rethinking conspiracy theories', *Syntheses* 200:4 (2022).

[43]Husting and Orr, 'Dangerous machinery', p. 143.

[44]Keith Goshorn, 'Strategies of Deterrence and Frames of Containment: On Critical Paranoia and Anti-Conspiracy Discourse', *Theory & Event*, 4:3 (2000).

This discursive account of conspiracy theory is reminiscent of the way threats are positioned in critical approaches to security, including post-Copenhagen securitization frameworks where threatening others are delegitimized as the antithesis of the identity they threaten.[45] Indeed, conspiracy theory can be read in much the same way, a point Jack Bratich develops through the concept of 'conspiracy panics', what he identifies as periodic public hand-wringing about the proliferation of conspiracy theories in the United States.[46] Here the emergence of conspiracy theory as a subject of concern is closely related to the anxious reproduction of a particular liberal identity centred on the right-minded behaviour of individuals.[47] Conspiracy theory can be understood as a form of intellectual deviance against which a standard of rationality can be defined. In this sense, it is both delegitimizing and productive: delegitimizing a certain set of views that fall outside an acceptable range, and productive of certain identities, which populate the orthodoxy and its others. But legitimacy and identity are not separate. Right knowledge exists on the inside and is synonymous with normal identity, and it is from this standpoint that problematic thought is identified, and the scope of legitimate engagement defined.[48]

Having set conspiracy theory alongside security as discursive positions constituted in and through discourse, it should be clear that there are powerful overlapping dynamics at play when conspiracy theories are securitized by elites. The dynamics around conspiracy theories are amplified and imbricated through the discourse of national security, which has power and reach well beyond the usual vectors of media commentary where conspiracy theories are more commonly identified and disciplined. All the gravitas and authority of the national security state, underwritten by expert knowledge and high technology, stands behind the classification of these views as problematic thought beyond consideration. At the same time, 'conspiracy theory', along with its associated terms and connotations, connects with a broader set of identity markers through which self/other are articulated in national security discourse, including rational/irrational, inside/outside, order/anarchy, and centre/periphery.

Of course, this discourse also impacts the individuals and groups that hold views identified as threatening conspiracy theories, not least by excluding them from legitimate political discourse as problematic thought beyond consideration. People advancing such views readily acknowledge the pejorative connotations of conspiracy theory and actively resist classification in these terms.[49] Indeed, there is an emerging awareness that many debunking efforts undertaken by government and civil society against conspiracy theorists are counterproductive and that confrontation is not effective.[50] Sometimes understood in terms of epistemic immunity, this can also be situated as an ordinary instance of in-group dynamics, where group cohesion is strengthened by a threat from outside the group.[51] This parallels the way other groups subject to securitization have reacted. According to Vuori, the securitization of protest movements can invigorate 'identity talk' within those movements, who are encouraged to reflect on who they are and refute the claims against them to external audiences, including through what Vuori terms 'reverse securitization and counter-securitization'.[52] Likewise, writing in the context of deportees to the Pacific Islands, McNeill highlights the way communities form in

[45] Stuart Croft, *Securitising Islam: Identity and the Search for Security* (Cambridge University Press, 2012).

[46] Bratich, *Conspiracy Panics*.

[47] Ibid.

[48] Ibid. For an insightful account of the boundary work underway around conspiracy theory see also Harambam and Aupers, 'Contesting epistemic authority', and Claire Birchall, *Knowledge Goes Pop: From Conspiracy Theory to Gossip* (Berg Publishers, 2006).

[49] Harambam and Aupers, 'Contesting epistemic authority'.

[50] Jaron Harambam, 'Against modernist illusions: why we need more democratic and constructivist alternatives to debunking conspiracy theories', *Journal for Cultural Research*, 25:1 (2021), pp. 104–122.

[51] Alexsandra Cichocka, Marta Marchlewska, Golec de Zavala and Mateusz Olechowski, 'They will not control us': Ingroup positivity and belief in intergroup conspiracies. *British Journal of Psychology*, 107:3 (2015), pp. 556–576.

[52] Vuori, 'Religious Bites', p. 189.

response to securitization by the state and then securitize the state through a process of reciprocal securitization.[53]

However, it is important to recognize that conspiracy theories exist before they are ever securitized and that they are very often securitizing what they perceive as threatening elites when those elites do not consider them a threat or even know about them. In the next section we engage with an emerging literature on counter-securitization to develop an account of the security politics underway in conspiracy theories, which incorporates this broader view, while also emphasising the delegitimizing discourse surrounding conspiracy theory, especially when it is securitized.

Conspiracy theory as counter-securitization

While the first generation of securitization scholarship focused on state security practices, later generations have shown that securitization is not limited to governmental speech acts.[54] Securitization also emerges in the routine practices and policies of security bureaucracies, and involves a broader range of actors (such as political parties and protest movements) that participate in making and unmaking security.[55] We endorse the Copenhagen School's distinction between 'normal politics' and 'extraordinary security policies', the boundaries of which were quite evident during the pandemic, yet we follow post-Copenhagen approaches that pay attention to the relational dynamics established between securitizing agents and audiences.[56] This account of securitization helps us analyse the security politics expressed through conspiracy theories, which, as we explained above, are often a product of popular episteme directed against official knowledge promoted by elite actors.

We explore the securitization underway in conspiracy theories by looking at the dynamics of popular rejection and opposition to elite securitization and by framing these as a form of counter-securitization. Stritzel and Chang's pioneering article defines counter-securitization as 'a move of resistance against a securitizing move'.[57] As counter-securitization relies on the same grammar of securitization, it has been explored in relation to other elite actors who challenge the initial securitizing move triggered by another actor: for instance, the US army and NATO vs the Taliban in Afghanistan, for Stritzel and Chang; political parties and religious elites, in Paterson and Karyotis[58]; former Pakistani President Imran Khan vs Pakistani security forces, in Kaunert and Khan.[59]

[53]Henrietta McNeill, *Offshore currents: Examining the securitisation and de-securitisation of criminal deportations to Tonga, Samoa and Cook Islands* (Doctoral Thesis, Australian National University, 2024), p. 35. See Corey Robinson and Scott Watson, 'Conspiracy theory, anti-globalism, and the Freedom Convoy: The Great Reset and conspiracist delegitimation', *Review of International Studies* (2025), pp. 1–26. Robinson and Watson do not mobilize securitization theory, but we find their account very suggestive. Wojczewski also develops a Lacanian account of the way right-wing populist conspiracy theories express a desire for ontological security. We do not emphasize the psychoanalytic aspects of conspiracy belief, but we acknowledge its relationship with populist security and the centrality of identity politics for populist security actors. See Wojczewski, 'Conspiracy theories'.

[54]Holger Stritzel, 'Security as translation: threats, discourse, and the politics of localisation', *Review of International Studies*, 37:5 (2011), pp. 491–517; Croft, *Securitising Islam*; Clara Eroukhmanoff, *The securitisation of Islam. Covert Racism and affect in the United States* (Manchester University Press, 2019), pp. 28–30.

[55]For bureaucratic securitization see Thierry Balzacq, 'The three faces of securitization: Political agency, audience and context', *European Journal of International Relations*, 11:2 (2005), pp. 171–20. For the broader range of actors see Jonas Hagmann, Hendrik Hegemann, and Andrew Neal, 'The Politicisation of Security: Controversy, Mobilisation, Arena Shifting', *European Review of International Studies*, 5:3 (2019), pp. 3–29 and Gaudino, 'A populist desecuritisation? Mélenchon, left-wing populism, and the fight against Islamophobia in France', *European Journal of International Security*, 10:2 (2025), pp. 211–230.

[56]In doing so, we avoid the complaint that some approaches 'reduce the audience to the role of bystanders'. See Croft, *Securitising Islam*, p. 83.

[57]Stritzel and Chang, 'Securitization and counter-securitization in Afghanistan', p. 551.

[58]Ian Paterson and Georgios Karyotis, 'We are, by nature, a tolerant people': Securitisation and counter-securitisation in UK migration politics, *International Relations*, 36:1 (2022), pp. 104–126.

[59]Christian Kaunert and Alamgir Khan, 'When securitisation meets resistance: a counter-securitisation analysis of Pakistan's May 09 incident'. *Critical Studies on Security*, 2025, pp. 1–13, https://doi.org/10.1080/21624887.2025.2484054.

While these studies deepen the understanding of counter-securitization, our approach is different.[60] We follow Vuori's distinction between two key modalities to oppose securitization: contestation and resistance, whose difference lies in the socio-political capital that each actor possesses – a framework influenced by the works of Pierre Bourdieu.[61] Our case study uses the category of contestation in relation to 'political actors which potentially have the capacity to affect securitization processes as "top-dogs" or actors with sufficient social capital or a position of power in matters of security', whereas resistance is 'reserved for political positions that do not have such resources, i.e., for "underdogs" or positions which are usually subjected to security rather than wield it'.[62] Some of the counter-securitizing actors we focus on (anti-vaxxers and coronasceptics) lack enough social capital, resources and legitimacy to concretely challenge securitization.[63] Their status condemns them to a subaltern position: while they are able to deploy the grammar of securitization to spread different discursive frames about COVID-19, they cannot abolish security policies. On the other hand, actors who have the power to affect securitization through contestation might potentially succeed in bringing back an issue to the sphere of politics, and thereby de-securitize.[64] Any potential de-securitization is thus reserved for top-dogs, such as members of political, economic, media, health, and security elites, while underdogs can only resist it.

It is worth highlighting at this point that securitization underway in conspiracy theory usually begins by rejecting elite security discourse, for instance, by alleging that it is merely a cover for some other set of objectives or that it is part of a wider unseen plan.[65] This connects with contestation within the 'top-dogs' and resistance by the 'underdogs'. A 'top-dog' like a populist leader might cite a conspiracy theory or perhaps refer to one obliquely in order to contest the grounds of elite securitization and unseat an associated policy, whereas an 'underdog' like an anti-vax group might be motivated by a conspiracy theory to resist elite securitization, including through protest and civil disobedience. However, in contesting and resisting the power of the elite securitization, populists simultaneously counter-securitize by replacing the threat and referent objects because, from the standpoint of conspiracy theories, behind the façade of the false security narrative lies the nefarious conspiracy that poses the real existential threat.

The success of any securitization move rests on the extent to which the threat identified is accepted as legitimate and existential by the targeted audiences and if emergency powers are granted to the authorities.[66] In this context, Vuori frames 'processes of securitization as a type of political game constituted by moves and counter-moves' and explains, in relation to protest movements, that 'securitization/de-securitization moves are a specific set of tactics in the suppressor or resistor's playbook'.[67] Taking this forward, we can position elite and populist securitization processes in competition for the same audience, with each claiming the other is not to be believed and that they pose the real threat. Of course, while elite securitization tends to be relatively coherent and bounded, with authority and modes of communication well established, there are many conspiracy theories, and they are often incompatible even within the same issue area. The credibility

[60] Likewise, our perspective differs from authors who identify resilience, emancipation, resistance, and de-securitization as forms of contestation (see Balzacq, *Contesting Security*, 8–9) and from those who argue that counter-securitization represents only one form of contestation (see Kirk 'The cure', 145). While these schemes are insightful, there is some ambiguity about the character of contestation across actors and contexts that needs clarification for our study of conspiracy theories.

[61] Juha Vuori, 'Contesting and Resisting Security in post-Mao China', in Balzacq (eds) *Contesting Security*, (30) pp. 29–43.

[62] Vuori, 'Contesting and Resisting Security', p. 30.

[63] Paterson and Karyotis, 'We are, by nature, a tolerant people', p. 109.

[64] De-securitization can be undertaken either for instrumental and managerial reasons (when security measures are deemed counterproductive) or for emancipatory purposes (when the securitized issue is transformed and friend–enemy distinctions are disrupted). Thierry Balzacq, Sarah Depauw, and Sarah Léonard, 'The political limits of desecuritization: security, arms trade, and the EU's economic targets', in T. Balzacq (eds) *Contesting Security*, p. 109.

[65] Robinson and Watson, 'Conspiracy theory'.

[66] Mark Salter, 'When securitization fails: the hard case of counter-terrorism programs', in Balzacq (eds) *Securitization Theory*, pp. 116–131 (p. 123).

[67] Vuori, 'Religious Bites', p. 189.

of conspiracy theorists is often in question, and their modes of communication are often organic, diffuse and embedded in online ecosystems.

Yet it may well be the case that conspiracy theories do not need to be believed for them to have a counter-securitizing effect on elite security discourses. As Bircahll suggests, conspiracy theories open room for scepticism or even ambivalence about a discourse that has been taken for granted or presented as undisputable, regardless of whether their alternative narrative is embraced.[68] This resonates with the way some populist politicians reference themes drawn from conspiracy theories circulating among their followers, without necessarily endorsing them, in order to simultaneously attack elite policies and activate their electoral base – a point we explore in the final part of our case study. 'Top-dogs' certainly do have a platform and an audience through which to contest securitization and promote their own security narratives. Meanwhile, 'underdogs' still have the power to resist securitization by connecting with audiences around shared antagonism and through their own concrete action. Robinson and Watson show persuasively that conspiracy theories worked at a range of levels to undermine and delegitimize public health policies when mobilized by the Freedom Convoy, who connected suspicion of international organizations and global elites with the Canadian government's pandemic response, including via blockades of major highways.[69]

This key point here then, is that conspiracy theories can be understood as a form of counter-securitization that plays out differently depending on social capital and access to power. 'Top-dogs' can use conspiracy theories to contest elite securitization narratives and 'underdogs' use conspiracy theories to resist them. We suggest counter-securitization is inherent in conspiracy theories that focus on national security issues since they advance claims that run counter to official narratives and reframe securitizing elites as the real source of danger. This counter-securitization takes on particular salience in two further circumstances. First, when the security policies of the state directly impact people advancing conspiracy theories, they may be motivated to actively resist those policies – think here of anti-vax protests and non-compliance to public health orders. Second, when conspiracy theories are securitized by elites, individuals and groups identified as a threat are drawn into the dynamic of move and counter-move that Vuori described in the relationship between protest movements and authorities. In the case study to follow, these circumstances overlapped: conspiracy theorists were impacted directly by lockdown measures and vaccination regimes, while being securitized alongside the virus as a threat to public health. Indeed, an anti-conspiracy front emerged, assembling politicians, media, and experts who defended the forces of reason and evidence against dangerous thinking.

Case selection and methodology

We advance our argument through an illustrative case study on the United Kingdom during the COVID-19 pandemic. We focus on the United Kingdom because it reveals significant processes of securitization, contestation, and resistance between elite and popular agents. The United Kingdom was the first Western state to licence a vaccine against COVID-19, was the site of anti-vaccine advocacy and protest, and also experienced a marked increase in conspiracy theory beliefs during the pandemic.[70] It could be argued that Britain represents an outlier compared to other countries for three reasons: first, Britain was a latecomer in imposing lockdown policies[71]; second, in 2021, Britain was among the Western countries with lowest levels of belief in popular conspiracy

[68]Claire Birchall, 'Conspiracy Theories and Academic Discourses: The Necessary Possibility of Popular (Over)Interpretation', *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies*, 15:1 (2001), pp. 67–76; see also Muirhead and Rosenblum, 'A lot of people are saying', p. 2.

[69]Robinson, Watson, 'Conspiracy theory', pp. 18–24.

[70]YouGov, 'Do Brits think vaccines have harmful effects which are not being disclosed?' available at: {https://yougov.co.uk/topics/health/trackers/do-brits-think-vaccines-have-harmful-effects-which-are-not-being-disclosed}.

[71]Holland, Jarvis, 'COVID-19', 3. Francesco Bromo, Paolo Gambacciani, and Marco Improta, 'Governments and parliaments in a state of emergency: what can we learn from the COVID-19 pandemic?' *The Journal of Legislative Studies* (2024), pp. 1–29, DOI: 10.1080/13572334.2024.2313310.

theories[72]; and, third, the number of protest events was the lowest among other major European economies such as Spain, Germany, France, and Italy.[73] Yet this also positions the United Kingdom as a hard case. If the elite and popular securitization dynamics we identify resonate here, then the door is opened for potential generalization of our argument to other national contexts in which COVID-19 security policies were contested and resisted. These dynamics were visible in France, where far-right politicians like Marine Le Pen, Florien Philippot, and Éric Zemmour 'pushed the conspiracy theories in the public sphere'[74]; in Italy, where the North League contested tight anti-lockdown measures even after joining the Mario Draghi-led government in February 2021[75]; and in the United States, where President Donald Trump and high-profile politicians like Ted Cruz and Robert F. Kennedy Jr stoked conspiracy views about COVID-19.[76]

We look at the period from 31 January 2020 (when the first positive case was announced) to 31 March 2022 (when restrictions were terminated in Wales and Scotland). Our source on containment policies is Cabinet documents, while the views of politicians and civil society are gathered from the official website of the UK government, secondary literature, and the online archives of two British newspapers, *The Times* and *The Independent*.[77] It is important to stress that we are not seeking to understand how the British media framed the COVID-19 pandemic, a task that would require the consultation of many more outlets. Instead, we select two high-circulation newspapers for their broad coverage of the main events surrounding the pandemic and the way conspiracy theories were understood in that context. Our search was made through a list of keyword strings (pandemic OR COVID OR vaccine AND misinformation OR disinformation OR fake news OR conspiracy). In total, 84 articles from *The Times* and 55 from *The Independent*, as well as nine official governmental communications, were selected and scrutinized through a discourse analysis.[78]

COVID-19 pandemic in the United Kingdom

This section begins by highlighting the simultaneous securitization of COVID-19 and conspiracy theories about it. Of course, not all anti-vaxxers and coronasceptics were conspiracy theorists.[79] But this made very little difference. The definitional distinctions we drew earlier between conspiracy theory and other forms of misinformation had no bearing on the way language was actually mobilized to securitize views that challenged the elite consensus about COVID-19. Instead, a range of terms and a surrounding discourse operated interchangeably to delegitimize an 'infodemic' said to pose an existential threat to national security. In the second part of the case, we explore how conspiracy theories acted as a vehicle for populist security politics in the face of elite securitization: while some Conservatives' backbenchers (top-dogs) contested the securitization enacted by the Johnson-led Cabinet, coronasceptics and anti-vaxxers (underdogs) resisted through counter-securitization moves against elite security actors, along with COVID-19 public health and security policies. They did this by replacing official threats with threats judged more urgent, like malevolent elites who were said to have lied about the origins of the virus and the purpose of vaccines. Yet, as they were deprived of enough social capital, their counter-securitizing moves never translated

[72]Connor Ibbetson, 'Where do people believe in conspiracy theories?', *YouGov*, available at: {https://yougov.co.uk/international/articles/33746-global-where-believe-conspiracy-theories-true?utm=}.

[73]282 between March 2020 and August 2021 (Eric Neumayer, Katahrine Pfaff, and Thomas Plümper, 'Protest against Covid-19 containment policies in European countries', *Journal of Peace Research*, 61:3 (2024), pp. 398–412 (p. 412).

[74]Giry, 'COVID-19 Conspiracy Theories in France', p. 205.

[75]*The Independent* 16-4-2021 and 6-1-2022b; *The Times*, pp. 29-4-2020.

[76]Roland Imhoff, 'The psychology of pandemic conspiracy theories', in Butter, Knight (eds), *Covid conspiracy theories*, 17. On Kennedy Jr., see Stephanie Baker, Eugene McLaughlin, and Chris Rojek, 'Simple solutions to wicked problems: Cultivating true believers of anti-vaccine conspiracies during the COVID-19 pandemic' *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 27:4 (2024), pp. 577–596 (p. 579).

[77]We retrieved newspaper articles via LexisNexis.

[78]For the appropriateness of discourse analysis, see Buzan et al., 176, in Paterson, Karyotis, 2022. p. 106.

[79]Butter (2020), p. 26, in Cecilia Vergnano, 'Italian uprising from Covid scepticism to societal polarization', in Butter and Knight (eds), *Covid Conspiracy Theories in Global Perspective*, pp. 243.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S026021052610182X

into concrete acts. Read alongside elite security discourse, here we see relational securitization processes, with subject positions mutually constituted, and elite and populist security actors emerging as threats in each other's narratives. We also highlight the entry of conspiratorial views into the mainstream, spreading doubts and generating contestation of securitization among members of the parliamentary majority.

Elite securitization

Despite an initial reticence to securitize the virus, the Johnson-led Cabinet established an extended period of lockdown on 23 March 2020, accepting that COVID-19 represented an existential threat to British public health and that extreme security measures were needed.[80] What has received less attention in the literature are the calls to securitize conspiracy theories about the pandemic. Securitization took different shapes: it was sometimes visible only discursively, when Cabinet Ministers and MPs alerted the public about pernicious conspiracy theorists; in other circumstances, specific securitizing acts were either demanded of social media platforms or directly taken by state security apparatuses to arrest anti-vax protesters and crackdown on online conspiracy material.

Preliminary signs of concern appeared on 27 February 2020, when Health Minister Matt Hancock 'challenged social media to remove misinformation', three weeks after the WHO had warned that online 'troll and conspiracy theories' undermined effective response to the pandemic. An active response came with the announcement of the national lockdown. On 30 March 2020, a Rapid Response Unit working out of the Cabinet Office was set up to counter harmful narratives online, including 'purported experts issuing dangerous misinformation'.[81] However, as the British death toll became the worst in Europe in May 2020, and after several weeks of arson attacks and vandalism against 5G towers, a more muscular approach was taken. The government deployed the army's information warfare unit – the 77th Brigade – which was previously used against Islamic State terrorists and other extremist groups. Their new target was 'a coalition ranging from anti-vaccine and anti-5G activists to hard-right libertarians, who have been claiming that the pandemic threat is bogus and organising protests against lockdowns'.[82]

The use of the information warfare unit shows clearly that the security register was not reserved for the virus. It also extended to coronasceptics and anti-vaxxers who were positioned alongside the virus as a threat to the body politic that rendered it vulnerable to infection. On more than one occasion, Hancock stated that anti-vaxxers were 'threatening lives'[83] and 'a deadly threat'.[84] His fellow Conservative MP Damian Collins argued that 'schools are the frontline of this information war. Anti-vaccination conspiracies are the latest battleground where falsehoods fight to undermine public trust in our institutions'.[85] In a similar vein, Labour MP Chris Elmore called on Ministers to 'take whatever firm and decisive action is necessary to halt the anti-vax virus from further spreading in our country' because, if they fail to act, the vaccines might be futile.[86] This narrative ran across the pandemic, despite the vaccination campaign's relative success. In June 2021, Nahim Zahawi (Vaccine Minister) claimed that 'vaccine hesitancy is infectious; it spreads like a virus, rapidly and invisibly (…) Factual inaccuracies, scepticism, lies and full-blown conspiracy theories all undermine the trust necessary to step up and take the jab', echoing the argument from respected voices among academics and medical practitioners, who often put falsehoods about COVID-19 on the same plane as the virus itself.[87]

[80] Gellwitzki and Price, 'Liquid Fear, pp. 16–17.

[81] UK Government, *Government cracks down on spread of false coronavirus information online*, 30 March 2020, at https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-cracks-down-on-spread-of-false-coronavirus-information-online.

[82] *The Independent*, 30-5-2020.

[83] *The Independent*, 26-7-2020.

[84] *The Independent*, 2-6-2021.

[85] *The Times*, 15-12-2020.

[86] *The Independent*, 26-7-2020.

[87] Farkas, Schou, *Post-Truth*, p. 96.

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While the government did not prevent the publication or preaching of antivax conspiracy theories – a form of censorship (according to *The Times*, at odds with the libertarian attitude shown by many Conservatives, starting with Johnson) the securitization of the 'infodemic' occurred in concert with social media giants, as demonstrated by the agreement with platforms to reduce and limit vaccine misinformation reached in November 2020.[88] In effect, there was a bipartisan consensus across Labour and Conservatives that this was an existential threat for the British populace who faced what a House of Lords Parliamentary Committee labelled an 'online pandemic of misinformation'.[89] According to Baroness Barran,[90] 'We [the government] are responding directly to false narratives, working closely with social media platforms to help them remove dangerous, incorrect claims about the virus, and are promoting the steps that everyone can take to reduce the spread of misinformation'. Labour Peer Baroness Kennedy agreed that 'disinformation and conspiracy theories flooding the internet seriously undermine the efforts of those working hard to keep us safe', while her colleague Lord Faulkner asked if the government should condemn public figures who 'cast doubt on the causes of COVID-19 and [promote] the link between 5G masts and the spreading of the disease …' along with the 'activities of the anti-vaxxers, who are also propagating fake news'. Likewise, the Department of Health and Social Care reiterated the government's commitment to tackling dangerous misinformation and working with social media platforms to remove incorrect claims.[91]

The Labour opposition went further. The shadow culture secretary, Jo Stevens, and the shadow health secretary, Jonathan Ashworth, called for emergency social media legislation against anti-vaccine misinformation, buttressed by financial and criminal penalties for tech companies refusing to shut down conspiracist groups.[92] They accused the government of a pitiful track record on acting against online platforms that were facilitating its spread and argued that removing anti-vax content was a 'matter of life and death'. This was not the first time that Labour advocated for stronger security measures. In December 2021, Labour called for emergency legislation to criminalize companies that do not act to stamp out anti-vaccination content. Shadow culture secretary, Lucy Powell, said: 'The continuing spread of vaccine misinformation online is hitting vaccine uptake, and tackling this is critical to getting the unvaccinated vaccinated'. Similarly, in January 2022, Scottish National Party MP Stewart McDonald highlighted the need 'to follow the urgency shown by countries such as Sweden, Finland and Latvia in building up national information resilience programmes'[93] against online disinformation, since 'failure to invest in this now will cost us dear in the future – not least when the next pandemic comes'.[94]

Security practitioners (who the securitization literature considers part of the elite) also raised concerns about conspiracy theorists from the early days of the pandemic. On 25 April 2020, the national coordinator of the Prevent program (usually focused on other sources of extremism, such as jihadist and extreme right) declared that false claims linking 5G technology to the spread of COVID-19 were being monitored very closely.[95] Months later, the Commission for Countering Extremism called the government to 'urgently publish a new counter-extremism strategy, which should address a proposed new definition of "hateful extremism", and develop interventions'.[96] Furthering the parallel between anti-vaxxers and other extremist groups, the Commission also

[88] *The Times* 6-1-2021; UK Government, *Social media giants agree package of measures with UK Government to tackle vaccine disinformation*, 8 November 2020, available at: {https://www.gov.uk/government/news/social-media-giants-agree-package-of-measures-with-uk-government-to-tackle-vaccine-disinformation}.

[89] House of Lords, 'Social Media: Fake News', 29 April 2020, p. 803, available at: {https://hansard.parliament.uk/lords/2020-04-29/debates/48C8302C-6B49-446F-A735-A408EDBB84A3/SocialMediaFakeNews}.

[90] Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for the Department of Digital, Culture, Media and Sport.

[91] *The Times*, 11-9-2020c.

[92] *The Independent*, 14-11-2020b.

[93] *The Independent*, 29-12-2021.

[94] *The Times*, 10-1-2022.

[95] *The Independent*, 25-4-2020.

[96] *The Independent*, 9-7-2020.

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warned about the conspiratorial propaganda by neo-Nazi and Islamist groups, both interested in 'breeding hate'. After the rollout of the vaccine program, the head of UK counterterrorism police, Neil Basu, told *The Independent* that vaccination centres would need to be subjected to all counter-error measures, implying that the actions envisioned by anti-vaxxers could be treated as an issue beyond the governance of ordinary protests.[97]

Lawmakers and public figures dismissed popular concerns in terms familiar to the conspiracy panics and anti-conspiracy discourses of the past. People expressing doubts and concerns about compulsory sanitary measures were frequently labelled as deluded and dangerous. Two weeks after the lockdown began, Dowden urged Ofcom to crack down on TV and radio stations peddling 'lunatic conspiracy theories' about COVID-19.[98] Although his initial approach to COVID-19 restrictions was rather libertarian, Johnson defined anti-vax content as 'nonsense' and called people who refused vaccinations 'nuts'.[99] Likewise, Education Secretary Gavin Williamson dismissed conspiracy theories as 'extraordinary nonsense'.[100] While the rallies against compulsory health measures proliferated throughout 2021, the securitization of COVID-related conspiracy theories targeted *all* coronasceptics, thriving on binary narratives pitching responsible vaccinated citizens against crowds of 'blinkered, dangerous, miserable anti-scientific gloomsters', as Hancock defined opponents to vaccines.[101] In another illustrative statement, Tony Blair (often perceived by right-wing populists as an emblem of liberal, cosmopolitan and elitist mindset) defined people who refused to be vaccinated when eligible to do so as 'irresponsible idiots'.[102]

Associated terms like fake news, misinformation, and conspiracy theory along with a battery of intimating words – irrational, fantasist, delusional, etc. – worked together as an indiscriminate delegitimizing discourse. In so doing, a pro-vax front was constituted with powerful in-group dynamics coalescing politicians and experts in opposition to COVID-sceptics, who were put at odds with this right-minded consensus. The delegitimization of anti-vax ideas went hand in hand with moral outrage and condemnation. The conspiracy theory subject position seemed to entail irredeemable intellectual and moral failure in the eyes of the pro-vax, who were regularly strident in their opposition.[103]

Counter-securitization: underdog resistance

While elite securitization often did not distinguish between types of misinformation about COVID-19, we focus on conspiracy theories here because they are prominent vehicles for counter-securitization. Reactions against the anti-COVID-19 measures have received some scholarly attention, but the security politics of conspiracy theories remain under-examined.[104] One starting point is to focus on the practice of reframing, which is at the heart of the counter-securitization process. This happens by replacing the security threat (the virus, defined as a hoax) and referent objects (public health) with other threats (e.g. global elites – including politicians, the United Nations, and media – population control and replacement) and other referent objects (e.g. freedom over

[97] Beyond security practitioners, other instances of elite securitization came from the head of NHS England, Sir Simon Stevens (7-1-2021), and the Archbishop of Canterbury (22-12-2021).

[98] *The Times*, 9-4-2020.

[99] *The Independent*, 24-7-2020.

[100] *The Times*, 3-12-2020.

[101] *The Independent*, 19-9-2021.

[102] *The Times*, 22–12-2021. On this point, it is also worth looking at Holland, Jarvis, 'COVID-19', pp. 11.

[103] As Venizelos and Trimithiotis argue, the 'pro-vax' discourse reveals an epistemological elitism and an 'anti-populist' message that is no less problematic than the populist slogans used by their adversaries. They suggest that this strategy fuels further distrust towards political authorities and scientific expertise, and that the pro-vax camp had put all the burden of preventing the spread of the pandemic on individual citizens. Anti-vaxxers were ultimately dismissed through an elite discourse that deemed them irresponsible and guilty. See Giorgos Venizelos and Dimitris Trimithiotis, 'Analyzing pro-vax discourse during the pandemic: techno-scientism, elitism, anti-populism', *The Communication Review* (2024), pp. 18, DOI: 10.1080/10714421.2024.2378576.

[104] Rogers Brubaker, 'Paradoxes of Populism during the Pandemic', *Thesis Eleven*, 164:1 (2021), pp. 73–97.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S026021052610182X

own bodies, protecting children).[105] Widely regarded as sharing populist and anti-establishment traits,[106] large portions of British anti-vaxxers resisted securitization by spreading conspiracy theories and misinformation about COVID-19 and protesting government measures (lockdowns and vaccine rollout), which were often labelled as acts of resistance by the very same participants.[107] This counter-securitization found receptive audiences in the context of uncertain communication about the virus by governments and the scientific community[108]; the long history of anti-vaccine hesitancy in many countries, not least the United Kingdom; the concomitant historical and ongoing circulation of anti-science and pseudo-science discourses, including conspiracy theories; and the crisis of established parties.[109]

Scholars examining the COVID-19 conspiracist discourse have demonstrated that the virus itself is theorized as an instrument of global elites and foreign powers to secretly subjugate – if not reduce – the population and impose authoritarianism.[110] Among the long list of culprits that appear are International Organizations like the World Health Organization, heads of state, billionaires, health officials, the 'deep state', and biotech and pharmaceutical companies, which are often bundled together into an imagined malevolent elite. These markers resonated with the narratives of British anti-vaxxers. During a London rally on 16 May 2020, Piers Corbyn (a notorious conspiracy theorist) claimed that COVID-19 is a 'false flag operation to control the population'.[111] In other gatherings (such as in Leeds[112] and Brighton[113]), Bill Gates is named as one of the main conspirators behind the pandemic outbreak. Similarly, the 'Great Reset Initiative' promoted by Klaus Schwab of the World Economic Forum was not an economic recovery plan to weather the pandemic, but rather a globalist agenda to curb national sovereignty, provoke depopulation and reduce people's freedoms. This conspiracy theory first gained momentum among the Canadian Freedom Convoy protests and then took a foothold among British protesters, too.[114]

Aside from the evident anti-elitism, anti-vaxxers resisted COVID-19 by mixing conspiratorial views with xenophobic and antisemitic narratives,[115] following a mechanism of racial and national othering which is a common feature in times of pandemic.[116] Jews were believed to be in cahoots with a global cabal of conspirators responsible for the pandemic. As early as April 2020, some British neo-Nazi groups were encouraged to infect them.[117] Kate Shemirani, a former nurse who was suspended for claiming that the coronavirus is a fraud, often trivialized the legacy of the genocide of Jews during World War Two, comparing public health restrictions in Britain to the Holocaust and the National Health Service (NHS) to Auschwitz.[118] In the Trafalgar Square rally in July 2021, she even threatened NHS doctors and nurses of new Nuremberg Trials that would await

[105]'Replacement' has also been theorized as one possible modality of de-securitization. See Lene Hansen, 'Reconstructing desecuritisation: The normative-political in the Copenhagen School and directions for how to apply it', *Review of International Studies*, 38 (2012), pp. 525–46, and Gaudino, 'A populist desecuritisation?'.

[106]Luca Raffini, Clemente Penalva-Verdù, 'The Problematic Relationship Between Science, Politics and Public Opinion in Late Modernity: The Case of the Anti-Vax Movement in Spain and Italy', in Hande Eslen-Ziya and Alberta Giorgi, *Populism and Science in Europe* (Palgrave, 2022), pp. 143–162.

[107]*The Times*, 20-9-2020.

[108]Baker et al., 'Simple solutions to wicked problems', pp. 578.

[109]Eslen-Ziya and Giorgi, *Populism and Science*, p. 4.

[110]Butter and Knight (eds), *Covid Conspiracy Theories in Global Perspective*.

[111]*The Independent*, 20-6-2020.

[112]*The Independent*, 26-9-2020.

[113]*The Times*, 21-3-2021.

[114]On the Canadian Freedom Convoy see Robinson, Watson, 'Conspiracy theory'. For the UK context, see *The Times*, 14-2-2022.

[115]*The Times*, 25–10-2021.

[116]Julien Giry, 'COVID-19 Conspiracy Theories in France', in Butter and Knight (eds), *Covid Conspiracy Theories in Global Perspective*, pp. 202.

[117]*The Independent*, 9-7-2020.

[118]For the holocaust example, see *The Times*, 11-9-2020c. For the NHS comparison, see *The Times*, 20-6-2021.

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them if they did not 'get off that bus'.[119] In another bleak comparison to the legacy of Nazi Germany, some anti-vaxxers "falsely claimed that COVID-19 vaccines violate the Nuremberg Code because they are 'experimental' and, as those who receive the vaccines are not told about this, they are unable to give their informed consent.[120]

As far-right narratives intertwined with conspiracy theories throughout the pandemic, white supremacist groups framed COVID-19 as the vehicle for the ethnic substitution of white majorities by non-white immigrants, often treated as contagious carriers of the virus by mainstream and non-mainstream voices alike.[121] Indeed, the Freedom Convoy protests linked the Great Reset to the Great Replacement conspiracy theory, indulging in the idea that Western elites enforced vaccines to sterilize the white population and ultimately allow its gradual disappearance.[122] Narratives about elites being in cahoots with non-white people are part of far-right and right-wing populist playbook, whose counter-securitization increases the level of enmity, othering and scapegoating of the adversary, while buying into a simplistic reasoning that prefers to put the blame on out-groups rather than investigating the complex causes of phenomena like pandemics.[123]

Attempts to counter-securitize COVID-19 were premised on epistemic counterclaims that spread scepticism about experts (e.g. the NHS). Here, security threats are concealed by malevolent elites but brought to the surface by unofficial sources outside of mainstream media, which were framed as revelatory and reliable. Such knowledge, often produced by conspiracy entrepreneurs who see themselves as a unique and restricted circle of truth-owners, fuelled scepticism against public authorities, including around issues of national security. Claims that COVID-19 was a hoax were amplified by viral film-documentaries such as *Plandemic, Hold-Up* and *Planet Lockdown*, shared millions of times on social media before being banned. *Plandemic* "builds apocalyptically into a tale of terror, waged by the very same forces of science, truth, and evidence, to create a 'plague of corruption' that 'will kill millions',[124] highlighting the sense of urgency and exceptionality of the threat that we commonly find in populist securitization.[125] Restrictive measures are portrayed in these films as evidence of an incoming New World Order.[126] This conspiracy vocabulary circulated within British anti-vaxxers, such as activist Michael Chaves, who defined COVID-19 as an 'absolute plandemic hoax',[127] and gained new momentum after the discovery of the Omicron variant.[128] The virulent distrust of mainstream media was not only a discursive threat: it involved concrete physical actions, such as when hundreds of activists 'flooded through the glass doors of ITN Productions, home to ITV, Channel 4 and 5 news programmes', occupying 'the foyer for hours, using megaphones to call journalists "terrorists" and liars'.[129]

Such narratives contributed to significant episodes of violent and non-violent protest against compulsory health policies, underscoring the perception of an urgent existential threat posed by national and international institutions. Protests were not only driven by opposition to compulsory vaccinations but also to lockdown policies, mask-wearing requirements, and closures of

[119] *The Times*, 26-7-2021.

[120] *The Independent*, 21–10-2021. It is important to stress that at the outset of the pandemic right-wing personalities did not hesitate to blame China for engineering the virus as a biochemical weapon, and Chinese immigrants for allegedly carrying the virus, which provoked instances of Sinophobia in some Western countries. Yet, the articles we analysed do not point to Sinophobic slogans and accusations during the anti-vax rallies. See Agnese Pacciardi, 'Viral bodies: racialised and gendered logics in the securitisation of migration during COVID-19 in Italy', *Critical Studies on Security*, 11:3 (2023), pp. 176–193 (p. 183).

[121] Pacciardi, 'Viral bodies'.

[122] Robinson, Watson, 'Conspiracy theory', p. 24.

[123] Baker et al., 'Simple solutions to wicked problems', pp. 578–579.

[124] Bernadette Jaworsky, 'Everything's going according to Plan(demic): a cultural sociological approach to conspiracy theorizing', *Am J Cult Sociol* 11 (2023), pp. 26–49 (p. 26).

[125] Wojczewski, 'Enemies of the people'.

[126] Giry, 'COVID-19 Conspiracy Theories in France', p. 204.

[127] *The Independent*, 21–10-2021.

[128] *The Times*, 14–12-2021.

[129] *The Times*, 28-8-2021.

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schools and businesses. Although there is evidence that far-right groups hijacked protests since the Autumn of 2022, the demonstrations gathered a wide range of people from different ideological backgrounds, including QAnon sympathizers, anti-government activists, and new age groups, all resisting the same security threat, sometimes even in the name of the same referent objects.[130] For instance, the protection of children from vaccinations – a typical leitmotif of vaccine-sceptics parents, often justified by genuine concerns rather than long-running immersion in conspiracy theories – was flagged by multiple groups ranging from QAnon followers to male supremacist groups, who either infiltrated anti-vax groups or were joined by anti-vaxxers in their own communities.[131]

Further, protesters turned their bodies into a significant site of non-violent resistance to COVID-19 policies, most prominently through their refusal to comply with mandatory vaccinations. Freedom of choice about one's own body was a key theme here, and this concern was especially common among anti-vaxxers who believed in unorthodox interpretations of COVID-19. The hashtag 'wedonotconsent' circulated on Twitter as an emblematic motto of the largest anti-vax groups. COVID-sceptic journalist and Twitter personality Neil Clark (more than 103k followers at the time of writing) stated that 'If enough people simply refuse to comply, the restrictions are unenforceable. The power is with us – the people – and not with those who seek to control us', a view that gained the endorsement of Gareth Icke, son of notorious conspiracy theorist David.[132] Thus, governments were cast as 'totalitarian' and 'new fascists' stripping basic rights away from people.[133]

Many conspiracists positioned freedom of movement as a referent object. Vaccination would insert a microchip into the body so that the population could be tracked and controlled. Meanwhile, 5G signals were alleged to spread coronavirus and later to make our bodies magnetic when combined with vaccines. This conspiracy theory certainly informed the many attacks on 5G phone masts, which were set on fire and vandalized at least 90 times in Britain (and dozens of times in other countries).[134] Many acts of arson and vandalism against 5G towers were recorded as early as April 2020, shortly after the lockdown started.[135] Significantly, anti-5G rhetoric was ignited by both Shemirani and Corbyn, who claimed that '5G enhances anyone who's got an illness from COVID, so they work together'.[136] Other acts of protest included the creation of an anti-lockdown camp at Shepherd's Bush Green in London (broken up by riot police and bailiffs)[137] dozens of no-masks gatherings, and the storming of public spaces such as a Westfield shopping centre in West London.[138]

Of course, protesters were not exclusively animated by conspiracy views and many emphasized the threat these policies posed to their economic security, a motive that no doubt existed alongside or was incorporated into conspiracy theories too.[139] The view that compulsory vaccinations and lockdowns could threaten economic security was shared by many lawmakers hesitant to give their full throated support to public health measures. Indeed, some top-dog actors contested elite

[130] Donatella Della Porta, *Regressive Movements in Times of Emergency: The Protests Against Anti-Contagion Measures and Vaccination During the Covid-19 Pandemic* (Oxford University Press, 2023), pp. 42–43.

[131] *The Times*, 20-6-2021; *The Times*, 1-1-2022.

[132] *The Times*, 9-9-2020.

[133] *The Independent*, 25-4-2021; see also Julia Ebner, *Going Mainstream. How Extremists are Taking Over* (Ithaka Press, 2023), p. 194.

[134] The Conversation, 'Four experts investigate how the 5G coronavirus conspiracy theory began', 11 June 2020, available at: {https://theconversation.com/four-experts-investigate-how-the-5g-coronavirus-conspiracy-theory-began-139137}; Alexander Martin, 'Coronavirus 90 attacks on phone masts reported during UK's lockdown', *Sky News*, 25 May 2020, available at: {https://news.sky.com/story/coronavirus-90-attacks-on-phone-masts-reported-during-uks-lockdown-11994401}.

[135] *The Times*, 30-4-2020.

[136] On Shemirani, see *The Times*, 11-9-2020c. On Corbyn, see *The Independent*, 16-5-2020.

[137] *The Independent*, 17-6-2021.

[138] *The Independent*, 30-5-2021.

[139] Neumayer et al., 'Protest against Covid-19', pp. 400–401.

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securitization of the pandemic and tried to shift the issue back to the realm of normal political deliberation.

Counter-securitization: top-dog contestation

Conspiracy theories have spread scepticism about COVID-19 in the wider public and gained some traction, especially among populist parties and politicians, sparking tensions between the knowledge provided by health experts (delegitimized as part of an elite-driven plan to subjugate populations) and ordinary people. Alongside the forms of resistance mentioned above, there were also explicit contestations of COVID-19 containment policies by actors that fit Vuori's definition of a 'top-dog', namely prominent party representatives and government officials who hesitated to endorse mandatory vaccinations and lockdown policies.

In the first months of 2020, several prominent lawmakers from Europe and the United States, mostly associated with populist politics, contested official public health measures. Beyond the UK case, intense contestation by 'top dogs' was a common practice among Western European and North American far-right politicians and parties, both when sitting in the opposition (e.g. France and Germany) and when holding governmental responsibilities (e.g. Italy and the United States). The threat was exaggerated, they said, and shops needed to stay open to protect the economy. In this context, the pandemic was positioned as 'a hoax', a view famously promoted by US President Trump, who has been described as a 'super-spreader of misinformation'.[140] When parties and politicians contested aspects of the expert consensus on the pandemic, they often mobilized many of the same elements we have highlighted around urgency, scapegoating, and simplification, as well as themes from far-right populism.

In the United Kingdom, we find isolated cases of conspiracy theories about COVID-19 surfacing in the speeches of 'top-dog' politicians, who contested, albeit mildly the official narrative about the pandemic and some aspects of the emergency measures on lockdowns, COVID-secure spaces, and vaccinations. Tory MP Desmond Swayne is a prominent example. During an interview with an anti-lockdown group (Save Our Rights UK) in November 2020, he explained that 'it seems to be a manageable risk, particularly as figures have been manipulated … we're told there is a deathly, deadly pandemic proceeding at the moment. That is difficult to reconcile with intensive care units actually operating at typical occupation levels for the time of year and us bouncing round at the typical level of deaths for the time of year'.[141] Swayne also gave an interview to the US anti-vaxxer Del Bigtree, who has repeatedly spread conspiracy theories about COVID-19 on his webcast and produced a documentary film with the anti-vaccination activist Andrew Wakefield. Swayne was not the only MP to meet coronasceptics. Conservative MP Graham Brady "a vocal critic of lockdowns and face masks, claimed the purpose of the latter was 'social control',[142] also met with anti-vaxxers. Although he denied the meetings, he had previously endorsed a report by Hart, a separate organization with links to anti-vaxxers, which included claims that vaccines have killed tens of thousands of Britons.[143] And finally, there is Conservative MP Andrew Bridgen who was expelled from the party after comparing the vaccine to the Holocaust, repeating the comparison made by Kate Shemirani and other anti-vaxxers.[144]

These findings show that during the pandemic, some Conservative PMs propelled into the mainstream conspiracy narratives more commonly associated with anti-establishment and populist right-wing movements. Indeed, Conservative parliamentary membership often reflected a wider strain of right-wing populism more vociferously in their attitude to pandemic policies than

[140] Birchall, and Knight, *Conspiracy Theories in the Time of COVID-19*, p. 13. Butter and Knight (eds), *Covid Conspiracy Theories in Global Perspective*, p. 9.

[141] *The Independent*, 29-1-2021.

[142] *The Independent*, 30-9-2021.

[143] *The Times*, 30-9-2021.

[144] *The Independent*, 26-4-2023. Brigden's comments and expulsion occurred after our case study timeline, but we include it here because of its continuity and significance.

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either Johnson or his Ministers of State, who were ultimately responsible for vaccine mandates and their mass rollout, and, as we have seen, disputed anti-vax narratives as part of their commitment to those policies. Overall, while some Conservative MPs bought into conspiracy theories and contested orthodox security measures, there was only one attempt to block legislation to contain COVID-19 contagion. In December 2021, almost half of Conservative backbenchers 'voted against new curbs requiring people to show proof of vaccination or a negative test at large indoor venues in England'. On that occasion, MP Marcus Fysh stated he was 'against COVID-19 passports because "this is not Nazi Germany"', echoing the anti-totalitarian trope vocalized by anti-vaxxers[145] This points to the different contexts and motivations of 'top-dogs', who have the credibility and platform to contest elite securitization but must also contend with public opinion and the constraints of government, and 'underdogs', who may have little credibility or platform, but can resist elite securitization through personal conviction, populist mobilization, and counter-securitization.

Conclusion

This article has made the case that elite security discourses and conspiracy discourses should not be understood in isolation. While conspiracy theories were securitized by elites alongside the virus, conspiracy theories identified those same elites as the real peril, a dynamic we illustrated through our case study on the United Kingdom. We have argued that this is best understood as a counter-securitization practice through which 'underdogs' resist and 'top-dogs' contest elite securitization by reframing elites as the actual threat. Indeed, while anti-vax groups and protesters attacked critical infrastructure, politicians, and scientists, 'top-dogs' addressed the aims and scope of the Pandemic response. Of course, while 'top dog' contestation in the UK case was relatively mild, it was much more intense in other countries, especially among far-right actors. This is a potentially rich seam for future research and a focus on the way themes and motifs from the conspiracy theory milieu are taken up and cited should be central to any such endeavour. The dynamic of counter-securitization identified here also speaks to the broader relationship between elite and populist securitization. Indeed, conspiracy theories circulate through transnational networks, for instance, on the far right, where narratives of demographic replacement and global elites are shared and adapted.[146] Our analysis suggests that populism, right wing or otherwise, may become the focus of elite securitization precisely because of the way populists contest and resist elite security narratives, which they identify as a source of insecurity in the first instance. If this is case, then populist counter-securitization exists before populism can ever be securitized by elites. At minimum, we have shown that conspiracy theories, now proliferating in an era of surging populism, geopolitical volatility, and technological revolution, are a key site of security politics with the potential make and unmake security.

Video Abstract. To view the online video abstract, please visit: https://doi.org/10.1017/S026021052610182X.

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[145] *The Times*, 18–12-2021a.

[146] Priya Chacko, 'Conspiracy theories and India's transnational authoritarian populism: NGOs, Khalistanis and Soros', *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* (2025), pp. 1–31, DOI: 10.1177/13691481251393570.

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