

WHERE THERE'S SMOKE, THERE'S FIRE: DELUSION, IMMOBILITY AND HIPERINCLUSION IN CONSPIRATIONS ONLINE

ONDE HÁ FUMAÇA, HÁ FOGO: DELÍRIO, IMOVÊNCIA E HIPERINCLUSÃO EM
CONSPIRAÇÕES NA WEB

DONDE HAY HUMO, HAY FUEGO: DELIRIO, INMOVILIDAD E HIPER-INCLUSIÓN EN LAS
CONSPIRACIONES WEB

Israel Vieira Pereira*

Universidade do Sul de Santa Catarina

ABSTRACT: In this article, written under the perspective of pecheutian discourse analysis (Orlandi, 2013, 2017), we aim to analyze conspiracy theories as practiced by subjects in the virtual world. We mobilize the concept of “paranoid style” by Hofstadter (1964) to base our discussion about conspiracy theories. Afterwards, we establish a relationship between the paranoid conspiracy and the inner workings of delusion as debated by Freud (2020) and Remo Bodei (2003). Delusions and conspiracy are linked by the concept of hyperinclusion proposed by Bodei (2003), which is discursively interpreted in this work as a mark of a immovability of meaning. In other words, as an extreme level of meaning saturation, that foments the illusion of individuality, autonomy and literacy in the subject. We conclude, after an analysis of a *corpus* related to fires in 2019, that the *web* can foment conspiracy theories by incentivizing hyperinclusion, which is harmful for public debate.

KEYWORDS: Conspiracy Theories. Discourse. Delusion.

RESUMO: Neste artigo, escrito sob a perspectiva teórica da análise de discurso pecheutiana (Orlandi, 2013, 2017), buscamos analisar teorias da conspiração a partir de seu funcionamento *online* entre sujeitos. Mobilizamos o conceito de estilo paranoico de fazer política proposto por Hofstadter (1964) para embasar a discussão sobre teorias conspiratórias. Na sequência, estabelecemos uma relação entre a paranoia conspiracionista e o funcionamento do delírio como pensado por Freud (2020) e Remo Bodei (2003). Delírio, conspirações e *web* são então ligados pelo conceito de hiperinclusão proposto por Bodei (2003), interpretado discursivamente neste trabalho enquanto marca de uma imovência de sentidos. Trata-se de um nível extremo de saturação, que, por sua vez, intensifica no sujeito a ilusão de individualidade, de autonomia e de literalidade. Concluimos, após análise de *corpus* sobre incêndios em 2019, que a *web* pode fomentar teorias conspiratórias ao incentivar a hiperinclusão no sujeito, prejudicando o debate público de ideias.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Teorias da Conspiração. Discurso. Delírio.

* Mestre e Doutor em Texto e Discurso pela Universidade do Sul de Santa Catarina. Pesquisador independente. ORCID: <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5295-2503>. E-mail: israelvpereira@hotmail.com.

RESUMEN: En este artículo, escrito desde la perspectiva teórica del análisis del discurso de línea francesa (ORLANDI, 2013, 2017), buscamos analizar las teorías de la conspiración desde su funcionamiento online entre sujetos. Movilizamos el concepto de estilo paranoico propuesto por Hofstadter (1964) para apoyar la discusión sobre las teorías de la conspiración. Establecemos una relación entre la paranoia conspirativa y el funcionamiento del delirio tal como lo piensan Freud (2020) y Remo Bodei (2003). El delirio, la web y las conspiraciones están vinculados por el concepto de hiperinclusión propuesto por Bodei (2003), que se interpreta discursivamente en este trabajo como una marca de inmovilidad de significados. Es un nivel extremo de saturación, que a su vez intensifica la ilusión de individualidad, autonomía y literalidad. Concluimos que la web puede fomentar las teorías de la conspiración fomentando la hiperinclusión en el tema, perjudicando el debate público de ideas.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Teorías de conspiración. Discurso. Delirio.

1 INTRODUÇÃO

What a rumor shows, in social discourse, available to the public, is that “where there’s smoke, there’s fire”. We’re dealing, in the tenuous margin between what is and isn’t said, with what derives from tradition, the ancestral and proverbial knowledge: “in every rumor, there’s always an atom of truth”. (Orlandi, 2012b, p. 142)¹

In this article, we aim to situate the notion of delusional hyperinclusion, as thought by Italian philosopher Remo Bodei, in a French Discourse Analysis perspective to debate how conspiracy theories work between subjects on the internet. To define conspiracy theories, we discuss Hofstadter’s paranoid style as a political force, which allows us to make a connection between paranoid conspiracy, politics, language, and delusion. Freud classifies paranoia as chronicle delusion, a situation where the subject elaborates “the most extreme absurdities, ingeniously devised and well supported” (Freud, 2020, p. 93), tying together a plethora of unrelated meanings, in a phenomenon that will be interpreted as hyperinclusion.

Throughout this work, we will also debate how the internet can be a production condition for conspiracy theories, as it stimulates that hyper-inclusive delusional state. To do so, we mobilize concepts proposed by Evgeny Morozov (2021), who makes the connection between delusion, hyperinclusion, and the internet. We also bring the French Discourse Analysis perspective to this debate through the work of Eni Orlandi (2012a, 2012b, 2017). That work will help us to understand how meaning is formed and is taken as evident by the subject. French Discourse Analysis also debates how the internet saturates meaning, creating a false feeling of stability and completeness. At the end of our debate, we do a brief analysis of a *corpus* involving fires in 2019, which would resonate in the negationist and conspirative discourses about the fires in the Amazon rainforest years later.

Before anything, we would like to justify why we did this work and situate it in the continuous debate about *post-truth*.

Since its election as word of the year by the Oxford Dictionary in 2016, the term *post-truth* acts as a base for the discussion about different happenings and discursive genres. *Brexit*, Trump and Jair Bolsonaro elections, the advance of different populist movements, and, above all else, *Fake News* became central elements of intense debates about disinformation, extremism, and negationism. The word *post-truth* resonated in the center of those debates, giving meaning to a historical time highlighted by irony, institutional discredit, and the rejection of anything that contradicts populist feelings and beliefs of the subjects, especially on the internet (Siebert; Pereira, 2020a).

Some contemporary happenings, however, have also highlighted the words *conspiracy theory*. Conspiracy theories still do not get the amount of attention they deserve on an academic level. In mainstream media, the words *conspiracy theories* are constantly used to explain some serious moments of recent history, like the Capitol Building invasion in the United States by *QAnon* followers (MARS, 2021), the anti-vax movement (MADERO, 2020), the negationist theories about coronavirus (CALIL, 2021) and fake accusations about non-profit organizations allegedly provoking fires on the Amazon Rainforest (CUNHA, 2019).

¹ To make reading easier and avoid an excess of footnotes, the author opted to directly translate every quote that originally was in Portuguese or Spanish.

With those happenings in mind, we will use Cass Sunstein's definition of conspiracy theory as a basis for our discussion. According to Sunstein (2014, p. 28), a conspiracy theory is “an effort to explain some event or practice by referring to the secret machinations of powerful people who have also managed to conceal their role” The events that conspiracy theories try to explain are simultaneously meaningful, polemical and political because they necessarily involve a dispute for narrative control over historical happenings. We will debate later how that dispute happens, but it is important to make a distinction between conspiracy theories and other common narrative models: “The prototypical conspiracy theory is an unanswered question; it assumes nothing is as it seems; it portrays the conspirators as preternaturally competent; and as unusually evil; it is founded on anomaly hunting; and it is ultimately irrefutable” (Brotherton, 2015, p. 97) Both definitions bring the same idea: conspiracy theories seemingly try to reveal supposed secrets behind big events. In a conspiracy theorist setting, revealing such secrets could seriously disrupt current power structures.

The research group *COMPACT*, founded in 2016, corroborates that conspiracy theories are ever so present in contemporaneity — being used to justify terrorist acts, extreme nationalism, and other types of extremisms — and highlights the lack of academic works about them at an international level: “Conspiracy theories play an increasingly visible role in contemporary European culture and the public domain of politics. Notwithstanding moral debates about their effects on knowledge, democracy, and mental health, there has been little systematic research on where they come from, how they work, and what, if anything, should be done about them”. (Compact, 2017).

With that said, this work is justified by the necessity of promoting academic debate about conspiracy theories. We situate our discussion within the French Discourse Analysis field of study. French Discourse Analysis is a theory created by Michel Pêcheux in 1969. It brings together elements from social-historical-dialectic materialism, psychoanalysis, and linguistics. We chose French Discourse Analysis to conduct our research because such theory discusses how politics, ideology, and history — aspects that relate to conspiracy theories — constitute and are constituted by language. French Discourse analysts argue that language relations are “relations between subjects and meaning, and their effects are multiple and varied. Hence the definition of discourse: discourse is the effect of meaning between speakers” (Orlandi, 2013, p. 21). The analysis procedure aims to highlight and debate three aspects of meaning (ORLANDI, 2012b, p. 9):

1. Its constitution, tied to a discursive memory, which makes the historical-ideological context to intervene;
2. Its formulation, in specific production conditions and enunciation conditions, and;
3. Its circulation, which happens in a certain conjuncture and meets certain conditions.

The study of these characteristics does not reveal a supposedly *real* and *evident* meaning behind words. As we are going to see, meaning is an effect that originates from the imaginary construction of a named object by a subject situated in a certain social-historical situation. In our case, we will take conspiracy theories as a study object. We want to analyze the effects online conspiracy theories create as they saturate meanings through hyperinclusion on the internet. We will start our debate by deepening our definition of what a conspiracy theory is with the help of Richard Hofstadter's work (1964).

2 CONSPIRACY THEORIES

Contemporary conspiracy theories are deeply connected to the advent of post-truth. According to Dunker, the 9/11 Twin Towers attack in the United States is what gives way to post-truth as we know it. From 9/11 onwards “[...] the benevolent fluctuation of truth started to be tolerated, and its separation in relation to State politics and to economic determinations was solved “in practice” and in a selective manner”. (Dunker, 2017, p. 17)

According to conspiracy theory specialist Mark Fenster (2008), after 9/11, there was a significant change in how conspiracy theorists perceived themselves and their conjectures. Frustrated by mistakes and doubts about the 9/11 official investigation, some people would openly affirm that they create conspiracy theories, arguing that those theories are responsible for the origins of the United States. Also, conspiracy theorists assumed that if the United States “survived because of them [conspiracy theories], then the

collective actions of 9/11 conspiracy theorists are perfectly legitimate” (Fenster, 2008, p. 242). Since then, conspiracy theories started to acquire legitimacy to an audience increasingly frustrated with traditional politics. Such political frustration would resonate around the world and help to constitute new populist and authoritarian models of politics (Da Empoli, 2020). However, how should we see conspiracy theories? How should we see their political and ideological features? What do their discursive works tell us about how subjects interpret reality in a digitally connected contemporaneity? To discuss that, we will take a deeper look at Richard Hofstadter’s (1964) essay about the *paranoid style in American politics*, one of the first studies to treat conspiracy theories in an academic manner.

In 1964, there was a lot of political tension going on in the United States. John Kennedy had been assassinated the year before, in a happening that gave way to multiple conspiracy theories. Kennedy’s successor, Lyndon Johnson, a Democrat, ran for reelection against Barry Goldwater, a far-right Republican who opposed the *Civil Rights Act*, a mark for the criminalization of all forms of prejudice.

Trying to understand conspiracy theories going around at the time and the extremist rhetoric during the elections — which would make Goldwater a popular figure, nonetheless —, Hofstadter aimed to investigate a *paranoid style* of making and thinking politics in the United States. The word *paranoic* shouldn’t be taken here in a clinical or pathological sense. According to Hofstadter, this kind of *paranoia* represents a conspirational take on the world, which has to do with “exaggerations, mistrust, and conspirative fantasies”. Such conspiracy has a certain style, which “has more to do with the way in which ideas are believed than with the truth or falsity of their content.” (HOFSTADTER, 1964) Also, the paranoid style becomes increasingly more preoccupying when starts to permeate everyday rhetoric. When that happens, it means that extremism got a certain level of social acceptance.

Hofstadter presents some examples of discussions that represent a political paranoid style. Among them, there are the debates about Masonry and Illuminati power; supposed anticatholic groups infiltrated in government institutions, especially the police; mysterious criminal practices against the people; and speculations about Jesuits activities, in other words, catholic groups supposedly infiltrated in government institutions to make America bow down to the House of Habsburg. The idea of undercover agents and political corruption is a trend in the paranoid style.

After the popularization and technical evolution of media, the paranoid style became stronger. With mass-media becoming stronger, previously unknown public figures received a spotlight, giving the conspirator a plethora of new names to accuse of being responsible for tragedies and political problems.

For the vaguely delineated villains of the anti-Masons, for the obscure and disguised Jesuit agents, the little-known papal delegates of the anti-Catholics, for the shadowy international bankers of the monetary conspiracies, we may now substitute eminent public figures like Presidents Roosevelt, Truman, and Eisenhower, secretaries of State like Marshall, Acheson, and Dulles, Justices of the Supreme Court like Frankfurter and Warren, and the whole battery of lesser but still famous and vivid alleged conspirators headed by Alger Hiss. (Hofstadter, 1964)

Individuals, specific groups, and multiple happenings are connected, feeding political extremism with the creation of an endless string of “evil agents” that should be taken down. Such a string strengthens the idea that people should act immediately and strongly to eliminate the enemy pinpointed by the conspiracy theory, never giving those “enemies” any possibility of dialogue or of friendly interaction.

He [the paranoid] does not see social conflict as something to be mediated and compromised, in the manner of the working politician. Since what is at stake is always a conflict between absolute good and absolute evil, what is necessary is not compromise but the will to fight things out to a finish. Since the enemy is thought of as being totally evil and totally unappeasable, he must be totally eliminated—if not from the world, at least from the theatre of operations to which the paranoid directs his attention. This demand for total triumph leads to the formulation of hopelessly unrealistic goals, and since these goals are not even remotely attainable, failure constantly heightens the paranoid’s sense of frustration. (Hofstadter, 1964)

Since victory against the paranoid enemy will never be complete, the narrative never meets its ending. There is always a hidden enemy or an undercover agent that ruins the efforts of the “good” people, or a new happening that emerges and gives new life to the conspirative narrative. Everything becomes a great battle between an idealized good and an idealized evil. In our interpretation, conspiracy theories readers are an extreme version of that pragmatist subject described by Pêcheux. In other words, a subject that looks to the world in a dangerously Manichean manner, as if only two meanings were possible, the right one (the reader’s interpretation) and the wrong one (the other interpretations).

According to Pêcheux ([1983] 2015, p. 34): “[...] this universal need for a “semantically normal world”, a standardized world, begins with the relation between each subject with their own bodies and with their spaces (and, before everything, with the separation between good and bad objects, represented by the disjunction between food and feces)”.

Hofstadter finishes his essay by pointing out what conditions give strength and popularity to the paranoid style in political discourse. [...] certain religious traditions, certain social structures and national inheritances, certain historical catastrophes or frustrations may be conducive to the release of such psychic energies, and to situations in which they can more readily be built into mass movements or political parties. (Hofstadter, 1964)

In other words, the paranoid style resonates as an answer to moments of conflict and rupture, acting to consolidate certain meanings by associating them with a certain tradition or social structure. Regardless of the case, those newly established meanings give way to political actions and movements based on extremist views. One of the main characteristics of the paranoid style is the way it saturates meanings through the collection of supposed “evidence” by conspiracy theorists. Before discussing that, it is necessary to debate how language works to explain how it affects and is affected by those mechanisms Hofstadter discussed.

3 A DISCURSIVE INTERLUDE: SUBJECT, INDIVIDUATION AND RUPTURE

In our discussion, we mentioned that conspiracy theories readers are almost like an extreme version of the pragmatist subject mentioned by Pêcheux in *Estrutura ou acontecimento* ([1983] 2015). French Discourse Analysis has a specific take on the subject.

Aiming to go beyond the purely formal aspect of semantics, something that would not be sufficient to explain how meanings are formed, Pêcheux ([1969] (1997) creates the theoretical notion of discursive imaginary, bringing the discussion about the subject to French Discourse Analysis. The principle of subjectivity would be in the projection subjects make of themselves, of others, and of the position each subject is in when interpreting and enunciating.

Our hypothesis is that those positions [A and B’s] are represented in the discursive processes at stake. However, it would be ingenuous to think that the position as an amalgam of objective traces works as such in the insides of the discursive process; the position is there but represented. Or yet, presented, but transformed; in other words, what works in the discursive processes is a series of imaginary formations that designate the positions A and B attribute to themselves and to the others, the image that they do of their place and the other’s place. If that happens this way, then there are, in the mechanisms of any social formation, rules of projection that establish the relations between situations (that can be defined objectively) and the positions (representations of those situations) (Pêcheux, 1997 [1969], p. 82).

In other words, meanings (and subjects) are not directly tied to real objects, but to images that are constituted in the subjects through the positions they occupy in different production conditions — the immediate context (the places a subject occupies) and the historical context (the memories that are mobilized in and by discourse). As Orlandi highlights (2012b, p. 99), “the subject, in French Discourse Analysis, is a position among others, subjectifying itself as long as it projects itself from its situation (place) in the world to its position in discourse”. Meanings and subjectivity, therefore, construct themselves mutually; language and discourse act in between that construction, materializing it.

The pecheutian interpretation of Althusser, Freud, and Foucault's work adds new elements to the discussion of French Discourse Analysis. From that point, Pêcheux will understand that the subject is interpellated, in their unconscious, by discourses and by ideology, in a relation in which they find themselves “uncentered since it is affected by the reality of language and by the reality of history, not having control over the way those realities affect them (Orlandi, 2013, p. 20). Ideology and production conditions proportionate an evidence effect to meaning, creating the illusion that meanings are transparent, obvious, and unique. Such an illusion is seen as necessary since it gives some level of stability to a chaotic and irregular world.

Taking the necessity of that stability illusion into consideration, we could say that those who detain symbolic power have political power since the State acts as a “privileged pole of answer to the necessity or demand” (Pêcheux, 2015 [1983], p. 34) of a controlled and stable world of meanings, or yet, as a manager of values that are attributed to each subject-position in society. In capitalism, meanings and subjects are managed in a process called “individuation”.

According to Orlandi (2017, p. 308, italics from the original version): “This way, State governs and organizes society by the individual; in other words, by what I have been treating as the *individuated subject*. In this process, which is political-social, the State divides subject, subjects, and meanings (art/vandalism). The State, sustaining itself on the juridic institutions, manages the social partition”.

One example of that individuation process is the creation of a Social Security Code, a unique numerical code that reinforces in the subject, along with other processes, the illusion that they are unique, autonomous, independent, responsible for their own actions. Regardless, the individuation process is not fail-proof. That is because ideology “is a flawed ritual and [...] language does not work by its own; it opens itself to misunderstanding” (Orlandi, 2012b, p. 103) No stability is longevous, because meaning and subject are built in a heterogeneous manner (Authier-Revuz, 1990). In other words, subjects are affected by different voices, positions, and texts in all their life. The subjects can find themselves centered in their individuation, “stuck to their illusion of an ideologically built autonomy” (Orlandi, 2012b, p. 104), but, in history, there are ruptures and happenings that undermine the individuation process and open a way to the irruption of other meanings, articulating the relationship between language's structure and the real historical happening. “Something from the world has to resonate in the subject's ‘conscience theatre’ to make sense” (Orlandi, 2012 b, p. 102). A social-historical rupture — like 9/11, JFK's murder, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the Amazon Rainforest fires, as we're seeing later — unsettles the individuation process, making certain meanings relevant again.

In the historic conjuncture of neocapitalism and under the mundialization ideology, the segregation as a form of relationship and the State's flaws in its function of symbolical-political manager have been generating specific production conditions that create, in ideology flaws, *forms of resistance* that have their materiality, their historicity. We cannot think about these forms without thinking about the conditions that create them. (Orlandi, 2012a, p. 233, italics from the original).

Resistance here is thought of as a form of facing the individuation process, allowing new meanings to emerge. Here, it is useful to remind ourselves that Hofstadter pointed to rupture, conflict, and the establishment of political groups and traditions as source materials for conspiracy theories. In other words, conspiracy theories try to separate absolute good from absolute evil, simplifying the world by creating imaginary enemies and apocalyptic predictions about any political and social changes (ruptures). Or yet, they aim to keep a certain individuation process alive, “protecting” the subject from the effects of any possible rupture.

Conspiracy theories involve a different type of resistance, so to speak. A resistance that is not the one we see, involving a subject against the transparent meanings proportioned by individuation. No, resistance derived from conspiracy theories involves a subject against the dispersion of meanings. To avoid any confusion between this and French Discourse Analysis' concept of resistance, we will call *immobility* this individual reaction to the heterogeneity of meaning. With immobility, there is a dispute to control or avoid the emergence of new meanings by saturating them or making forced connections between other meanings — in a characteristic movement from conspiracy theories, which, according to Hofstadter (1964), involves an addiction to collecting and connecting alleged evidence of conspiracy.

Still, according to Hofstadter, those who are stuck in the paranoid style of conspiracy theories cannot think adequately about politics and power. The paranoid style reader can only see consequences and react to them. In that sense, they are “a double sufferer, since he is afflicted not only by the real world, with the rest of us but by his fantasies as well” (Hofstadter, 1964). They cling to their own (subjective) illusions, so they do not have to face a world that, being in constant transformation, seems so chaotic. It is in that relation between the illusion of control, the psychic anguish caused by it, and the real-world happenings that delusion appears.

Delusion symptoms — from fantasies to acts — result from a commitment between two psychic currents [conscient and inconscient], and in a commitment, both sides' exigences are taken into consideration; each one of them, however, has to renounce a part of what desired to obtain. [...] Attack and resistance renovate themselves after each new commitment, which is not, so to speak, entirely satisfactory. (Freud, 2020, p. 70-71).

In the following section, we will debate delusion as a form of reaction to undesired things, explaining how delusion affects the subject and how it linguistically presents itself.

4 FROM DELUSION TO HYPERINCLUSION

As we saw at the beginning of this article, paranoia (in a clinical/psychoanalytic sense) and delusion are connected. According to Freud, paranoia is a pathological defense mechanism, and “people become paranoid because they do not tolerate certain things — as long as their psychism is predisposed to do so” (FREUD, 1895 *apud* ROUDINESCO; PLON, 1998, p. 573). We will not treat the paranoid style exclusively as a clinical or psychoanalytic problem. However, Freud's definition of paranoia reinforces some aspects of immobility. In some subjects and in certain production conditions, there may exist an intense will to create, maintain and feed an illusion of a world where everything is stable at all times. Further, we will see how that manifests itself textually and discursively.

In clinical terms, delusion also has to do with negating a reality that does not seem to satisfy the expectations of a subject that lives and interprets such reality. According to Lerner and Pardo (2001, online), from the clinical psychology perspective:

[...] the source of delusion is the anxiety that comes from certain stimuli that become objects of paranoid ideas. Over an intense pulsion, the generalization of those impulses becomes even stronger, generating a spiral of stimuli and anxiety that can disorganize perception. There are countless authors who think that, for the delusion to occur, certain concurrent and enabling conditions should be met.

In Lerner and Pardo's (2001) linguistic approach to delusion, the delusional discourse is monological², rigid, almost inscrutable and, even if it looks coherent (in a formal level, mostly), it does not have any meaning because its premises and conclusions are not assertable. Delusional discourse, therefore, “makes communication as we understand it impossible” (Lerner; Pardo, 2001, online).

In a certain way, we'll partly disagree with the notion that delusion makes communication impossible. In its extreme form, delusion is a discursive sign of certain communication models we can find on the *internet*. And, as we previously stated and as we will see soon, some level of illusion and delusion constitutes our language and our subjectivity, because we have a pragmatical need for stabilized meanings. The biggest problem advanced forms of delusion provoke is immobility, which saturates meanings to protect the subject against discomfort, ruptures, and dissatisfaction. Delusion as a post-truth element, in other words.

To set the connection between extreme delusion (post-truthful), immobility, discourse, conspiracy theories, and the *internet*, we will start with Freud's original work about delusion: *Delusion and Dreams in Jensen's Gradiva*, originally published in 1907. In this essay, Freud does a psychoanalytic analysis of a 1902 novel called *Gradiva*, from Wilhelm Jensen. Demonstrating that literature is a great object for discussions about the human psyche, Freud comments on the delusional adventures of archeologist Norbert Hanold, who is obsessed with a bas-relief of a woman called Gradiva. After dreaming about Gradiva countless times, Hanold believes to have seen her alive in Pompey and goes after the woman. He then starts to connect everything that happens around him to his desired Gradiva.

² In bakhtinian point of view. We will not comment Bakhtin's perspective in this work, since our goal is to focus in French Discourse Analysis.

For Hanold, reality “adjusts to his delusion and makes him reveal delusion in all its amplitude, never contradicting it” (Freud, 2020, p. 33). Non-contradiction is a strong characteristic of delusion, and it creates a symbolic world where rupture and failure do not exist. Notice that this is not a cognitive or a pragmatical problem, but a subjective and deeply emotional matter.

According to Freud (2020, p. 92):

The most important exculpatory and explanatory element still is how easy it is for our intellect to accept something absurd when strong emotional impulses find satisfaction in this. It is astonishing to see how frequently people of active intelligence react as if they were, in some measure, feeble-minded when they are in a delusional state. Those who are not too presumptuous may observe this at will, especially when a part of the psychic processes in question is linked to unconscious or repressed motives.

It is worth noticing that, according to Freud (2020), delusion has some element of truth, big or small. From this element of truth, the subject creates webs of signification that tie random things to that initial element, creating a delusional whole. This can be connected to how rumors work. According to Orlandi (2012b, p.142), rumors show that “where there’s smoke there’s fire”. Such expression tells something about how we interpret certain things. There should be a happening or external element to justify delusion. Something should speak before as preconstructed to make sense.

We understand that no happening or object, from an empirical point of view, is without meaning. As Pêcheux ([1983] 2015) explains, when analyzing Mitterrand’s victory in a Presidential Run in France, a reference (*Bedeutung*, in Fregean terminology) can and will be signified (*Sinn*) in different ways. The way we interpret and tell something is as important as the thing we are interpreting and telling. That is why we interpret that ‘*element of truth*’ cited by Freud as an ‘*element of truth as perceived by the subject*’. Delusion and conspiratorialist paranoia end up crossing paths. Conspiracy, as Hofstadter mentioned (1964), has more to do with how an opinion is built than with the construct per se.

Moreover, because it happens linguistically, delusion always has an element of social-historical construction. It is not an individual problem: it is a collective issue that involves meanings that are socially spread and that affect the relationship between the subject, their exteriority, and the others. Resuming our discussion about the individuated subject — pragmatical, who enjoys non-contradiction and stable meanings —, we could say that every subject shows, at a certain level, some degree of delusion whenever they articulate memory, language, and history. With that said, we agree with Italian philosopher Remo Bodei when he says that, to analyze delusion, be individual or collective delusion, we should understand how we create meaning. According to the author:

The passage from passions and ideologies, which we could define as collective delusions, to individual delusions brings a sense of a kind of benefit to the way we live and think. Reason and irrationalism do not fight each other anymore, even when the irrational, the passions, the delusions are exalted. However, a certain type of rationality is denied. The rationality that is closed and that presumes itself as self-sufficient. The rationality that considers delusions, dreams, and other phenomena meaningless. I think, however, that delusions have a particular sense and that they act to increase and articulate our knowledge about the world.

Delusion, therefore, is not simply irrationality or a communication issue: it has its motives, and studying the logic behind them is a way to debate particular aspects of how subjects interpret the world. According to the Italian philosopher, delusion appears in critical moments. The delusional subject “has seen a world crumble around him and does not feel well about this. That is why he obligates himself to find an alternative, a surrogate world. When life becomes unlivable, a new one should be invented.” (Bodei, 2003, p. 11) It is a contradictory new life. A life that keeps the loved characteristics of a broken world. The subject is bound to an injunction to stabilization, where “instead of making a place to make sense, they are caught by already established places (words), in an imaginary in which memory does not reverberate. An imaginary where memory repeats itself, moving nowhere” (Orlandi, 2013, p. 54). Repetition, however, is not only paraphrastic, because It can rework happenings, texts, and distinct memories, in a discursive resonance where the different and the unique are entangled to the same meaning matrix. This has to do with what Bodei (2003) will call ‘*hyperinclusion*’, a characteristic of delusion. Hyperinclusion is a process where all meanings point to a single thing, in a contradictory process where heterogeneity and monology (as presented by Lerner and Pardo) get mixed up.

The delusional subject suffers from *'horror vacui'*, an intense fear of the lack of meaning. He needs to fulfill all blank spaces, tie everything together, wench interpretation. It is a hyperactivity of the subjective illusion that knowing things equals controlling things. According to Bodei (2003, p. 106):

The delusional subject 'hyper includes' when, while trying to understand, they call and reunite random elements in meaning constellations by which they can orientate themselves. Or — and it is the same thing, in a certain way — hyperinclusion happens when the subject's thinking process meets very stable criteria when certain special aspects appear more evident (acquiring, in the process, the function of indicators that act as gravitational fields which attract heterogeneous meanings).

In other words, we could define hyperinclusion as the creation of relations where those do not exist. The reunion of facts, happenings, objects, and random meanings forms a whole that creates in the subject the illusion of a complete interpretation, impervious to interaction with other meanings. There's where hyper-inclusive effects of delusion — having in mind our discursive discussions about individuation, the desire for stability, and a reactionary posture before rupture and progress — and conspirative paranoid style meet each other. According to Hofstadter (1964), conspiracy theorists are addicted to accumulating "evidence", and allege that every and any happening is tied to the main object of their theories. This reunion of evidence has the goal to protect the beliefs of conspiracy theorists about the world and reminds us of how delusion works as a tool to (re)stabilize fragilized meanings through hyperinclusion. In other words, immobility: a resistance to the resistance, to renovations, to the unexpected. What separates a "healthy" stability illusion and immobility is the hyperinclusion found in delusional subjects.

In modern times, hyperinclusion gets stronger on the *internet*. Who points that out is internet critic Evgeny Morozov (2020), as we will see in the following section.

5 HYPERINCLUSION, INTERNET AND MEANING STABILIZATION

Along this work, we defended that the subject has a pragmatism will to stabilize the world. Although necessary, when it gets to an extreme state, such will can result in conspiracy theories that attack democracy and bring real damage to the life of people. Such theories appear in moments of rupture and in extremist and reactionary movements. We interpret that conspiracy theories' effects are related to the concept of delusion, a subjective defense mechanism against changes that happen in the world. Delusion materializes in the form of hyperinclusion, which immobilizes meanings by saturating them. In this section, we will see how the *internet* foments hyperinclusion by promoting a favorable space for the creation and divulgation of conspiracy theories.

According to Evgeny Morozov, the philosophy of Silicon Valley, the biggest technology pole of the world (where companies like *Google*, *Facebook*, *Twitter*, and *Uber* are, just to cite some examples), involves seeing the world as an algorithm. To the author (2020, p. 38), such philosophy can be characterized in the following way: "If we can't establish the connection between two sets of data, it is because we did not look enough — or, it is because we need a third set of data, which will be collected in the future, that will make everything make sense".

Such philosophy, which represents the production conditions of digital discourse, reminds Morozov of delusion. Delusion, after all, makes the subject see "coherence between deeply different phenomena" (Morozov, 2020, p. 38). To the non-delusional subject, the blank spaces, the lack of and misunderstanding are important. Han (2019) argues that the digital arithmetic way of thinking provokes the illusion that we are safe against any ruptures, happenings, or surprises. The price, though, is paralyzing fatigue with the world and with information.

In the words of Han (2019, p. 106):

Frequently, less information is more efficient. The negativity of forgetting and leaving aside is productive. More information and communication do not enlighten the world by itself. Transparency also does not make anything evident. The mass of information does not create any truth. It does not bring any light to the darkness. When more information is liberated, the world becomes more incomprehensible, phantasmagoric. After a

certain point, information is not informative anymore. It becomes deformative. Communication is not communicative anymore, but cumulative.

The digital subject is a subject who distances themselves from the discursive heterogeneity around them. They are deprived of narratives. Narratives are necessary, because their circulation and the discussion about them foment, through a specific dialectic, truth, and certain impressions that conditionate how we act over the world. In the context of digital capitalism, the *internet* reduces interpretation to calculation. In this calculation, the individuated subject believes the bigger the number of random variables reunited over the same establishing paradigm, the better. The digital individuated subject feels more autonomous, responsible, and safe than ever, without perceiving the violence being practiced against their conscience. After all, “[...] violence also is the excess of positivity that manifests as hyper-efficiency, hyper-communication, and hyperstimulation. The violence of positivity causes pain by overwhelming us. Algogenic are today, those physical tensions that are common in the society of neoliberal performance” (Han, 2021, p. 57).

Bringing such discussion to the perspective of French Discourse Analysis, Orlandi (2017, p. 240) says that: “[...] in a social imaginary in which knowledge is basically tied to technology, what circulates is the imaginary of the complete, of the established, of the precise, better yet, of the exact. Saturation and immobility, most of the time, walk together. Echoes, memories, made of resonance, repercussion. There we have, as we said, an immobility by excess, not by the lack of”.

Here, we reinforce that the problem goes beyond “non-communicative” communication. After all, the transformative production of knowledge involves more than an informational or communicative aspect of language. It involves “the knowledge, the experience, the memory, and the social reality, all of which demand certain forms of knowledge to transform our existence conditions.” (Orlandi, 2017, p. 241-242). In French Discourse Analysis, language and knowledge are produced by the heterogeneity of discourses and texts, by experiences and voices. The digital subject can deprive themselves of this heterogeneity by becoming hostage to “excess, to the visible ephemeral, [to the impatience], to the overload of content (information), to relationships (selfies, the making yourself another).” (Orlandi, 2017, p. 244). Therefore, by becoming hostage to hyperinclusion (the excess and the overflow of content), one feeds an individualistic imaginary of autonomy and total stability. An imaginary that, according to Hofstadter, creates ideal conditions to conspiratorialist paranoia, hyper-inclusive by itself, averse to the different and to the unexpected, Manichean, and, above all, perpetrating the illusion that we have control above everything else.

In the next section, we will see how this imaginary, those production conditions, and those digital discourses present themselves in a conspiracy theory. To do so, we will analyze the discursive work of a video about fires in Brazil that was published in 2019, seeing how memory, formulation, and circulation act over such conspiracy theory.

6 WHERE THERE'S SMOKE THERE'S FIRE

Bernardo Pires Küster is an essayist, translator, and Bolsonaroist *YouTuber* that, initially, got recognition on the internet by criticizing liberation theology, a Marxist approach to Catholicism. Adopting a conservative and religiously orthodox point of view, Bernardo opposes the anti-Capitalist position of liberation theology. Nowadays, Bernardo is being investigated by the Brazilian Supreme Court's *Fake News Inquiry*. He was already condemned for spreading *Fake News* against the TV channel Band (Gentile, 2020) and against theologian Leonardo Boff (Redação RBA, 2021).

Bernardo is also the director of *Brasil Sem Medo*, a website founded by Olavo de Carvalho, an ideologist of great influence inside the Bolsonaroist movement. Soon after the 2018 Brazilian elections, won by Bolsonaro, Bernardo and Olavo de Carvalho were recommended as “excellent sources of information” by the official social media channels of the newly elected president.

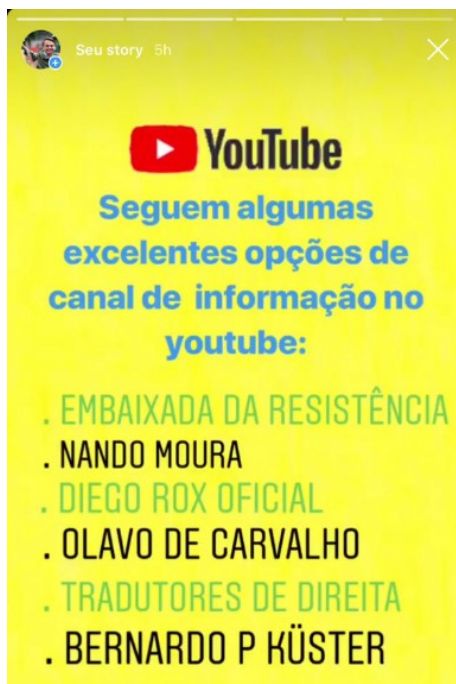


Image 1: Jair Bolsonaro sources of information

Source: Bolsonaro (2018)

The post establishes a production condition of mistrust against traditional media channels, taking a leftist enemy, something regularly seen in Bolsonarist discourse. By indicating his preferred media outlets, the President gives legitimacy to the respective channels, suggesting that Christian and Conservative editorial practices are better and more trustworthy and that they should be appreciated by all of society. To Charaudeau (2016, p. 18), “to exercise itself, power needs a legitimacy that is always attributed to an authority that builds itself to obtain credit and power as a means for an action”. In this case, the relationship between the president and the *YouTubers* is symbiotic: the presidential authority gives legitimacy to his supporters, which, in their turn, give him credit to firm his place as an authority, building meanings that justify certain actions. Taking this into consideration, we will analyze a video from Bernardo Kuster’s channel due to his relevancy as a producer of “alternative” content, his proximity to President Bolsonaro, and due to his involvement with *Fake News*.

With something between 900 mil subscribers, Bernardo’s *YouTube* channel, albeit its initial emphasis on Catholicism matters — like abortion, liberation theology, and polemical issues with the National Conference of Brazilian Bishops — also discusses political topics, usually against the left and in favor of Jair Bolsonaro. In addition to his *YouTube* channel and the *Brasil Sem Medo* website, Bernardo was supported by his users through a crowdfunding website called *apoia.se*. The *apoia.se* account was deactivated for disobeying the platform rules. Between the 50 most accessed videos from Bernardo is *URGENTE — A NOVA ESTRATÉGIA DO PT* (URGENT — PT’S NEW STRATEGY).

Having more than 300 thousand views and 8 thousand commentaries, the description of the video says this: “*Since 2016, the left promises: ‘If Lula is jailed, we will set Brazil on fire.’ Are they fulfilling their promises literally?*” (Bernardo P., 2019). The description opens with the generic term “*the left*”, which encompasses a group identity, a *we* that, albeit heterogeneous, is turned homogeneous by Bolsonarist discourse and vilified by it. This process resonates in the question that comes after the phrase that Bernardo attributes to that amorphous projected image: “*If Lula is jailed, we will set Brazil on fire.’ Are they fulfilling their promises literally?*”. Who are “*they*”? The Labour Party (PT – Partido dos Trabalhadores), as specified in the title, and the barely defined *left*, which creates a feeling of vagueness that solves itself through the inner works of ideology over the subject, who should “connect the dots”. Bernardo questions if “set on fire” is a metaphor or if it is evidence of a series of crimes against Brazilians and Bolsonaro partisans.

The video is filmed in an office. In a close-up shot, Bernardo appears surrounded by books, some on stands, some over a chair, building an image of intellectuality through the excess: there are more books to be read than space to store them.



Image 2: Bernardo Küster office

Source: YouTube (Urgente – A nova estratégia do PT)

Occasionally, other videos and news are edited in the video. More than simple illustration, image is very important in French Discourse Analysis. To Souza (2013, p. 292), “to analyze image as a discourse is to try to understand the textualization of politics in nonverbal matters”. Videos and static images are resignified when they are shown during Bernardo’s narrative, strengthening his point of view, as we are going to see further.

Notice that the video was published in February 2019, months before the news about fires in the Amazon Rainforest and a bit after the fire that hit the Training Center of Brazilian soccer team Flamengo, which was caused by a short circuit (Lucchese, 2019). Other fires that got reported by mainstream media at the time were the one that affected Usina de Belo Monte and the Museu Nacional, from Rio de Janeiro. Months after those fires, conspiracy theories about Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs, classified as *leftists* by those theorists) would emerge among bolsonarist influencers. According to those theories, the NGOs were responsible for the fires in the Amazon Rainforest, resonating with the accusations and discourses we saw in the video we analyzed. In other words, there are happenings and ruptures that could have created the delusional need to re-establish control over meaning: the tragical fires and an ever-rising number of news about fires and illegal exploration of the Amazon Rainforest. Beyond that, the video also reinforces a group identity through a conflict between *them* (PT and *left*, seen as criminal agents) and a *we* (smart people who discover criminal actions from the others).

The *YouTuber* starts his video by declaring that it will be “one of the most delicate I ever posted in my channel” (Bernardo P., 2019), but that the video had to be published anyway, since truth should always be said, regardless of the consequences (like violence or lawsuits). From the beginning, the author establishes some principles for his narrative and for his own image. First, he presupposes that the target of his speculation — in other words, the *left* — can sue him due to his compromise with the truth or even kill him. The political opposition to Bolsonaro, represented in the tension between the general, “*left*”, and the specific, “*PT*”, is narratively built as bad enough to silence enemies through a corrupt justice system and murderers. This reminds us of some traces of the paranoid style (Hofstadter, 1964): the extreme dichotomization between good and evil and the contextual element of political dispute intensified by ruptures that occurred in Brazil since the beginning of the Car-Wash Operation.

Bernardo also projects his image as a possible victim of this vilified *left*, aiming to conquer the sympathy of his followers. He gives himself qualities such as courage and fearlessness. This creates legitimation to what is said further in the video but also serves as a commercial strategy. Since the risk is “real”, the viewer is incentivized to share the video, subscribe to the channel, buy books in Bernardo’s personal library and in the clothing store “Vista Direita”, which has the following motto: “Here, Commies don’t have space”. Everything reinforces the nature of the ideological conflict going on. By doing all of this, the viewer becomes an active part of the political conflict. He is incited to assume certain positions: a watcher, protecting Bernardo through the divulgation of his image; a financial supporter, who spreads truth by investing in content approved by the President; an intellectual supporter, who

can leave comments referring to the video content. At the same time, there's an incentive for hyperinclusion (Bodei, 2003) and hyper-performance (Han, 2021), keeping the reader-viewer engaged 24/7.

The first hyperinclusion moment comes moments after Bernardo reminds the viewer that PT completed 39 years of existence on February 10th, 2019. According to Bernardo, the Party used the country as a candle to celebrate its birthday, putting into practice a sinister plan to violently reclaim the power. To give his theory a base, Bernardo reunites random phrases said by political leaders from the left. See the examples below:

“This country will be set on fire by strikes, mobilizations, crashes. If things are taken to the last consequences, there won't be a peaceful day in Brazil.” – Guilherme Boulos

“Stédile: if Lula is jailed, Brazil is set on fire” – João Pedro Stédile

“In this fake process, Brazil should be set on fire” – Lindembergh Farias

“Trying to jail Lula will set the Country on fire” – Eduardo Guimarães

Afterward, Bernardo comments that Brazilians have “short memory” and that they forget how many people said something like “if Lula is jailed, Brazil will be set on fire”. Memory, here, is considered in a numerical and algorithmic perspective: wise are those who remember more things and tie more things together, resonating with how digital capitalism discourse works. To Bernardo, the ultimate proof for the theory of conspirative terrorist fires going on in Brazil is a conversation between Lula and Vagner Freitas, president of CUT (the main syndical organization in Brazil). The conversation was intercepted by the Federal Police:

That's it, my dear... that's it... and today I told to the SENATORS: I don't want to set the country on fire! I'm the only person who could set this country on fire... and I don't want to do like NERO did, y'know? I don't want to! (Carvalho, 2016)

At the base of any conspiracy theory, there's a mix of hyperinclusion, literality, and the essentialization of evil. The main evil in the conspiracy theory is Lula. Still, the whole *left* is vilified, creating the figure of an “undetermined aggressor that could be, at the same time, everywhere and nowhere. The paranoid effect is assured, because this essentialization nourishes the idea of a criminal plot or of an occult intelligence, both responsible for the chaos in the world” (Charaudeau, 2013, p. 248-249) When evil is essentialized, it is easier to associate random and distant happenings to a same origin, feeding conspiracist paranoia and making way to extremism and hate speech.

Eco (2021, p. 12) also says that “[...] having an enemy is important to define our identity and to discover the obstacle that should be used to measure our value system, showing, through confrontation, our own value. Therefore, when the enemy doesn't exist, creating one becomes necessary”.

Therefore, one of the characteristics of conspiratorialist delusion is the creation of imaginary villains that serve to explain the origins of a certain rupture and to make people fight together for the same specific cause — in this case, the combat against absolute evil, which, since it is absolute, should be fought in an equally absolute way.

Conspiratorialist hyperinclusion also denies the possibility of metaphor in expressions like “setting the country on fire” and “Brazil will be set on fire”. More than the lack of context of these phrases, the illusion of literality here is built due to excessive information and due to the work of an ideology that features extremist views against the left. It is known that the speaker “does not operate with literality as something fix and irreducible, since there is no unique and previous meaning, but a meaning that is instituted historically” (Orlandi, 2013, p. 52), but in the delusion provoked by conspiracy theories, there's an effort to achieve immobility. The meanings are fixed and immovable, in an interpretation that, being individuated, imagines itself free from any alterity.

Hyperinclusion manifests itself through discursive resonances — recurrent forms of enunciation in the discourse (like the determination or indetermination of the subject, processes, or states as expressed by verbs, etc.). (Serrani, 2002, p. 277). Both the base of his argument (the different phrases that use expressions like “burn”, “set on fire”) and his conclusion are built over repetition

of the same meaning for different references. After exposing so many phrases involving “setting something on fire” as told by leftist politicians, Bernardo starts to cite which places were affected by fires at the time. He starts with Belo Monte and repeats the conjunctive “also” to tie together happenings, creating an effect of a connection between each fact. Occasionally, his exposition is cut by Lula saying “I’m the only person who could set this country on fire”.

[...] not only Belo Monte was affected by a fire. Madre Pelletier prison also was set on fire, hurting more than 90 prisoners. A refinery in Espírito Santo was also set on fire. A store in Goiânia was also set on fire. A Hospital in Campo Grande, Mato Grosso, was also set on fire. A still stand in Ourinhos was also set on fire. Plano Inclinado Gonçalves, in Salvador, was also set on fire (Bernardo P., 2019)

That’s the difference between conspiracy theories and *rumors* or *Fake News*. Conspiracy theories do not need to invent a false happening to thrive. They can be built with factual news connected by the same conspiratorialist delusion, saturating meanings and erasing any divergent interpretation. Also, conspiracy theories presume the existence of an occult and powerful enemy that is responsible for each tragedy connected to the narrative. The reader is then given the mission to identify this enemy and look for evidence of this enemy’s criminal actions.

Bernardo finishes his video with questions. “*Are they really responsible for all of that? I really can’t prove that they were responsible for this. But given the current circumstances, I can’t, I really can’t think that all of this is just a coincidence.*” (BERNARDO P., 2019) The conspiratorialist paranoia will never have an end. It opens itself to new possibilities and allows the hyperinclusive connection of new happenings and meanings, like the ones that appeared in the future, when the Amazon Rainforest fires got in the news. In the conspiratorialist delusion, there is no proof, only a conviction forged in an excess that, in production conditions established by the neoliberal digital discourse, shows itself as evidence.

7 FINAL THOUGHTS

In this article, we pointed out that conspiracy theories can be seen as a manifestation of a paranoid style of political discussion, a notion that was debated by Richard Hofstadter in 1964. Such a definition is useful to discuss conspiracy theories, but it is not the only one or even the most adequate. However, the definition was useful to debate the effects of delusion, hyperinclusion, and the internet in conspiratorialist discourse.

Delusion, hyperinclusion, and immobility work together. Orlandi (2013) reminds us that facts are, so to speak, meant to be meant in some way and that, as subjects, we are condemned to interpret. In a world saturated with contradictory information online, everything should make sense and be interpreted all the time. Such excess can be detrimental to our mental and emotional health — before infinite diversity, the saturated meaning is more attractive to the pragmatic subject than the informational chaos. This damages, as we saw in the introduction and along this work, the health of democracy by motivating Manichean interpretations of the world and views that motivate segregation, violent reactions to certain happenings, and lethargy before civil duties, such as vaccination.

We do not want to look paranoid ourselves with the internet. The internet is and will always be an excellent way to popularize and democratize science, knowledge, entertainment, communication, among other things. That said, it is necessary to keep evaluating and studying its negative effects to develop public and educational policies that can help us to better use such a tool. Maybe, all of this is a call to remind us, in Human Sciences and society as a whole, that incompleteness — the opposite of the hyper-inclusive delusion, that makes all meanings appear as complete — is important. We should remind ourselves that incompleteness “is not a lack of something; it is a necessity” (Orlandi, 2017, p. 259).

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