

Comparing British Covid-19 conspiracy theorists' discursive self-constructions to their constructions within mainstream fact checking discourse

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Abstract

Recent years have seen a persistent interest in the effects of false information (disinformation, infodemics, ‘fake news’, et cetera) on publics and the false beliefs they are thought to engender. The Covid pandemic is a global event where false beliefs about the disease and connected phenomena represent a problem for public health because they may lead to harmful health choices. However, often absent in discussions of Covid conspiracy theorists and misbelievers is the question of how they conceptualise *themselves*, rather than their perceptions by others.

This thesis presents an investigation into how Covid conspiracy theorists construct their self-concepts in comparison to their constructions within the Discourses of dominant institutions. Using a novel method of Foucauldian Discourse Analysis I call ‘Subject Position Analysis’, I compare the way that these Covid misbelievers construct their own subjectivity within UK conspiracy newspaper *The Light* to how it is constructed in three British fact checking organisations, *Full Fact*, *BBC Verify* and *Channel 4 Fact Check*. I find that there are substantial qualitative differences between how *The Light* and the fact checking organisations construct this subject. This matters because any policy aimed at improving health outcomes must understand those they seek to support.

This thesis should also be read as a critical study of the contemporary preoccupation with false information. The theoretical argument of this thesis is that perceptions of harmful beliefs being primarily caused by individuals uncritically consuming false information are misplaced; the spread of false information should not obfuscate the broader, structural origins of public mistrust in ‘mainstream’ information. This thesis therefore contributes to the field of critical disinformation studies.

I conclude with implications for future research and policy based on my findings, with a particular emphasis on focussing on the structural causes of mistrust in public health over (dis)information.

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Acronyms

Alpha Men Assemble – AMA

Berliner Zeitung – BZ

Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation – BMGF

British Broadcasting Corporation – BBC

British Medical Journal – BMJ

Cambridge Analytica – CA

Channel 4 Fact Check – C4FC

Covid conspiracy theorist – CCT

Covid misbeliever – CMB

Covid Vaccine Misbeliever – CVMB

Department for Health and Social Care – DHSC

Eat Out to Help Out [Scheme] – EOHO

Electromagnetic Field – EMF

Foucauldian Discourse Analysis – FDA

Full Fact – FF

Freedom Gibraltar – FG

General Medical Council – GMC

Information Disorder Paradigm – IDP

Member of Parliament – MP

Member of European Parliament – MEP

National Health Service – NHS

Office for National Statistics – ONS

Oxford English Dictionary – OED

Public Health Emergency of International Concern – PHEIC

Research Aim – RA

Research Question – RQ

Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies – SAGE

Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 1 – SARS-CoV-1

Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2 – SARS-nCoV-2

Subject Position Analysis – SPA

Sudden Adult Death Syndrome – SADS

The Great Reset – TGR

The Light – TL

United Kingdom [of Great Britain and Northern Ireland] – UK

United States [of America] – US

World Economic Forum – WEF

World Health Organization – WHO

Workers of England [Union] – WOE

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1: Covid-19 conspiracy theories: Recognising the problem versus understanding the problem.

By now, the actions of conspiracy theorists during Covid-19 are well known. Tales of burning 5G masts (Ahmed et al., 2020), pseudoscientific Covid remedies (Stokel-Walker, 2021) and anti-lockdown protests (Martin & Vanderslott, 2022) have become all but synonymous with the pandemic itself. Even now, the legacy of Covid conspiracy behaviour lingers like those ghosts of social distancing stickers still staining countless shop floors. There has been a measurable decline in trust in vaccination both in the UK and elsewhere (Finnegan, 2025; Lazarus et al., 2024; YouGov, n.d.), mainstream figures and outlets make equivocal claims about the pandemic (Kelly, 2025; Pearson, 2024) and at the time of writing, the US Covid advice webpage promotes a variety of falsehoods about the disease and virus, notably that the virus leaked from a laboratory and that this has been concealed (Taylor, 2025). It is therefore evident that Covid conspiracy theories represent a major problem for public health, and such beliefs are likely to be a problem not only in future public health emergencies but other social crises, too.

A great deal of valuable work has already been done to understand the problems presented by belief in Covid conspiracy theories (see Chapter 2). This thesis is focussed not on adding to this literature on the acts of Covid conspiracy theorists and what novelty they may represent, but of understanding *who they are* both in their own terms and in the terms of their mainstream conceptualisations. In other words, this thesis investigates both how some individuals are (or are not) transformed into the social category¹ of ‘Covid conspiracy theorists’ in mainstream Discourse as well as how those individuals who hold unconventional beliefs about Covid conceptualise themselves.

This may initially appear merely an interesting epistemological question which does little to deal with the material problem at hand. However, I argue that it is precisely the absence of efforts to compare mainstream perceptions of Covid conspiracy theorists with these individuals’ understanding and positioning of themselves which limit the

¹ I borrow the term ‘social category’ from McNamara (2019), see Chapter 3.

effectiveness of current policy. Covid is not unique; SARS-nCoV-2's spread is not the first public health crisis to experience concurrent conspiracy theory-based acts (Kisa & Kisa, 2025; Kou et al., 2017), and efforts to blame diseases on innocent parties stretch back to antiquity (Cohn, 2018). Yet while the problem remains consistent, I argue that the crucial change that has occurred through history is *how* public health conspiracy theories are understood.

1.2: The 'information disorder' paradigm of conspiracy theories.

I propose that many mainstream understandings of Covid conspiracy theories are shaped by its conceptualisation as a problem of (false) information spread and consumption. 'Information', like many of the concepts discussed in this thesis, is nebulous and variously defined (Floridi, 2010). While a simple definition is not forthcoming, the word as I use it here can be understood in the verbal sense of informing; information is that which communicates some kind of knowledge (Capurro & Hjørland, 2003). 'Knowledge', in turn, is a term which will carry specific connotations for this thesis, but that discussion can wait until Chapter 3. For now, I focus on the implications of information as it represents mainstream understandings of Covid, and false information as its apparent opposite.

Since the mid-2010s, there has been an increasing focus in both academic and popular writing on the consumption of false information (Adams et al., 2023; Broda & Strömbäck, 2024; Fox, 2020; Murphy et al., 2023). This, I argue, converged with the emergence of Covid conspiracy theories at the end of the decade to produce a specific interpretation of those who believe in pandemic falsehoods, rooted in loaded terms such as 'post-truth' (Parmet & Paul, 2020) and 'infodemic' (WHO, n.d.), which shape our understanding of those who hold non-mainstream views about the pandemic. The problem, I argue, is that while false information is certainly a problem in public health (as well as many other fields), it has become so central to understandings of harmful misbeliefs that few other approaches to explain the problem are given adequate attention. However effective or not counter-misinformation strategies such as fact checking and pre-bunking may be, it seems to me that we are missing the wood for the trees in understanding the broader problem.

The preoccupation with false information as an explanation for misbeliefs has been effectively transformed into a scholarly paradigm², that is, a generally accepted model through which a given field is conceptualised and studied until supplanted by a successful competing paradigm (Hedesan & Tendler, 2017; Kuhn, 2012), by Wardle and Derakshan's (2017) concept of "information disorder". This notion of information disorder groups mis-, dis-, and mal-information (see Chapter 2) along with its "phases" and "elements" together into a single field of study. Since then, voluminous references to disordered information can be found in literature concerning false beliefs³. Indeed, Hansson et al. (2021) argue that the rise of false information thematically linked to Covid in 2020 points to "pandemic-specific symptoms of 'information disorder'". I refer to this perspective of false information as a major cause of conspiracy theories as the 'Information Disorder Paradigm', since it seems to have become the dominant lens through which individuals who hold false beliefs are understood. This framing of Covid conspiracy theorists presents them as the consumers, or perhaps *victims*, of this 'disordered information'. In other words, this perspective presents Covid conspiracy theorists as those who believe falsehoods they have consumed. This, in turn, suggests that the Information Disorder Paradigm may have influenced the ways in which observers who accept mainstream narratives of Covid understand those with *non-mainstream* beliefs about Covid. If this is the case, it could imply an obfuscation of the more complete understanding of these individuals which alternative epistemological perspectives might allow.

This is not to argue that this Information Disorder Paradigm is necessarily a wholesale misunderstanding of information spread during the pandemic. My argument is instead that we need to recognise the role that such preexisting frameworks play in forming our 'outsider' understandings of Covid conspiracy theorists, as well as how it might influence our interpretations of false information itself. Understanding and remedying false information is certainly important, but it should not obscure other aspects of conspiracy

² Paradigms, in Kuhn's original definition, refer specifically to the hard sciences and how the establishment of a paradigm leads to an ephemeral period of 'normal science'. However, the term has since been used to refer to the establishment of such models in other disciplines (e.g., Hassard, 1993). This is how I use the term.

³ What constitutes a 'false belief' is, as we shall see, highly subjective. However, for the purposes of this introduction, I refer here to beliefs that are at odds with the predominant interpretations of phenomena.

theory research. Crucially, we must recognise that this paradigm is not value-neutral but represents a descriptive theory of society which places different individuals in different social positions and categories. As Cox (2017 pp. 128, emphasis original) famously argued,

“Theory is always *for* someone and *for* some purpose All theories have a perspective. Perspectives derive from a position in time and space, specifically social and political time and space”⁴

While this may not be a conscious choice on the theorist’s part, I argue that its effects are always present. Therefore, an examination of who and what the Information Disorder Paradigm is for is one of the tasks this thesis is concerned with. Chapter 2 discusses this problem in greater detail, but what I wish to propose in this thesis is that while this ‘information disorder’ does represent an issue associated with public health conspiracy theories and misbeliefs (along with those which are not related to public health), policies aimed at targeting this alone cannot solve the problem of harmful beliefs and behaviours. My reasons for this will become elucidated throughout this thesis, but for now, I wish to explain why I argue that our understanding of Covid conspiracy theorists is shaped by the Information Disorder Paradigm: language.

1.3: Language, information disorder and their connection to my research aims

I have already argued that certain terms which I identify as being connected to the Information Disorder Paradigm are often applied to the study of Covid conspiracy theories. The connotations of this vocabulary are broad and imply numerous embedded assumptions on the part of those who invoke them. A useful example of this can be found in the title of the studentship that engendered this thesis: “Fake news and misinformation during the Covid pandemic” (UEA, 2022 [via WayBack Machine]). While it does not mention conspiracy theories directly, this title frames the qualitative experience of information surrounding Covid in a specific context, which has

⁴ Cox refers to International Relations theory specifically, though I argue that this is true of all theories.

implications for how information related to the pandemic is understood. Specifically, this framing suggests, *inter alia*, that:

1. 'Fake news' and 'misinformation' represent distinct and important phenomena,
2. The 'Covid pandemic' represents a distinct period of time,
3. There is some distinct quality about the fake news and misinformation during that Covid period as opposed to other time periods; and,
4. Covid fake news and misinformation represent a matter worthy of scholarly study.

These may initially seem rather anodyne observations, but they raise questions about how we 'know' about this problem and how it is possible to create knowledge about it. For example, had the Covid-19 pandemic taken place in the early 2010s, rather than begun in late 2019, it is unlikely that this studentship would have referred to 'fake news', since there are far fewer references to this concept before 2016 (Miró-Llinares & Aguerri, 2023). Concepts such as 'fake news', which had become popularised by the time of the Covid outbreak, have implications for the construction of the problem in public consciousness. Indeed, it is notable that this title does not reference *what* the problem of false information is, with these implications seemingly embodied within the cultural connotations of *fake news* and *misinformation*. My purpose in stating this is to highlight that even before I applied to carry out this thesis, it was already being influenced by the Information Disorder Paradigm, as evidenced by the choice of language in the studentship title.

My purpose in opening this thesis with a discussion about the Information Disorder Paradigm is to foreground the fundamental problem that I am concerned with: whether mainstream policy, discussion and coverage intended to counter Covid misbeliefs is based on a misunderstanding of how those individuals who hold them perceive *themselves*. This is a serious problem since, as Knight argues, "if we fail to understand how and why conspiracy theories appeal to so many people, then any efforts to combat them are also likely to fail" (in: Gresham College, 2024). As noted, Covid conspiracy theories continue to be a problem, so it is reasonable to assume that current policy is missing something about this issue. Therefore, one of the guiding theories of this thesis is that the Information Disorder Paradigm constructs the Covid conspiracy theorist differently to how those who hold these beliefs construct their own sense of self.

With this considered, my research aims (RAs) of this thesis are as follows:

- RA1: Compare the mainstream, Information Disorder Paradigm construction of the Covid-19 conspiracy theorist with how these individuals construct their own identities.
- RA2: Analyse what (if any) differences are present between these two constructions; and
- RA3: Analyse what implications this has for future policy in public health emergencies.

The successful fulfilment of these aims requires a well-defined research design. While Chapters 3 and 4 cover my theoretical and methodological justifications in detail, I will briefly describe some aspects of this here to foreground my research questions and methodological choices. Firstly, to describe the Covid conspiracy theorist as a ‘subject’ or ‘subjectivity’ is not the same as referring to it as an ‘identity’ because it draws attention to the social factors which engender such categories into which individuals are placed (McNamara, 2019), these being the effects of *Discourse*. By ‘Discourse’ I am referring to what Locke (2004, emphasis removed, pp. 13) terms “Discourse as a countable noun”, not merely “language as a social practice” (Locke, 2004, pp. 13) but the myriad differing systems of knowing, categorising and ordering the world which is constituted by the same language practices which in turn constitute the Discourse itself (Fairclough, 1992; Foucault, 2013). Thus, the Covid conspiracy theorist subject is constituted in a mainstream scientific Discourse *and* within their own conspiracy theorist ‘counter-Discourse, for “when those usually spoken for and about by others begin to speak for themselves, they produce a “counter-Discourse.”” (Moussa & Scapp, 1996, pp. 89). In my reading of this, when discussing ‘speaking’ and being ‘spoken for’, this does not refer only to the literal act of speech, but the ways in which individuals present, or *perform*, their subjectivities through their actions. I therefore needed some means to ‘access’ both the mainstream Covid Discourse and its shadow, the Covid conspiracy theorist counter-Discourse.

I decided that the qualitative analysis of samples of written text representing either Discourse would be the ideal method to carry out this analysis. This led to the

subsequent question of which texts would be the most appropriate for this purpose. I decided upon texts from fact checking websites for the former and articles pertaining to Covid in the conspiracy newspaper *The Light* for the latter. Chapters 3 and 4 explain the reasoning and justifications for this, though it is important to note that due to the monographic nature of this work, I needed to focus on a smaller sample rather than the global context, so I chose to focus specifically on the United Kingdom (UK) as I am most familiar with this. Moreover, for the purposes of this study, I define the Covid period as lasting between the 2 February 2020, the first time WHO referred to a Covid ‘infodemic’ and 5 May 2023, when the WHO stated that Covid is “no longer a public health emergency of international concern” (WHO, 2020a, 2023). Justifications for these decisions can be found in Chapter 4. The analysis of these texts results in themes which in turn constitute their respective constructions of the Covid conspiracy theorist. These two constructions of the Covid conspiracy theorist were then compared in an unstructured fashion to understand their similarities and differences which are discussed in detail in Chapter 7.

I decided to include two empirical chapters in this thesis. The first, Chapter 5, will cover the construction of the Covid conspiracy theorist as a general subjectivity. The second, Chapter 6, considers how they are constructed/construct themselves specifically in relation to anti-Covid-vaccine beliefs. This second empirical chapter is included in part because anti-vaccine sentiment was among the more frequent themes in my initial sample, but also because anti-vaccine sentiment has a particularly long history (Nuwarda et al., 2022; Wolfe & Sharp, 2002) and as noted above, remains a significant problem. Indeed, Robert F. Kennedy jr., who is the US secretary of health at time of writing, has previously advocated rescinding Covid vaccines’ emergency approval by the American Food and Drug Administration (Jaffe, 2025). For my purposes, I define anti-Covid-vaccine sentiment as opposition to, or criticism of, Covid vaccines which cannot reasonably be described as scientific or robustly evidenced.

Thus, my research questions (RQs) are as follows:

- RQ1: How is the British⁵ Covid misbeliever⁶ subjectivity constituted within the textual practices of UK fact checkers?
- RQ2: How is the British Covid misbeliever subjectivity constituted within the textual practices of *The Light*?
- RQ3: How is the British anti-vaccine Covid misbeliever subjectivity constituted within the textual practices of Full Fact?
- RQ4: How is the British anti-vaccine Covid misbeliever subjectivity constituted within the textual practices of *The Light*?
- RQ5: What, if any, differences are there between these constructions of the Covid misbeliever subject in the dominant Covid Discourse and the Covid misbeliever Counter-Discourse?

The purpose of this study is to understand how dominant interpretations of Covid misbelievers may misunderstand these individuals' self-concepts. If this is the case, we may be advocating policies which, while well-intentioned, fail to adequately deal with this social problem. It furthermore represents a critique of the contemporary preoccupation with 'information disorder' as a major cause of public health (and other) misbeliefs. As such, it represents a contribution to the growing field of Critical Disinformation Studies, which is a "framing[which] disconnects disinformation from the broader politics of knowledge production and systems of power that undergird it; in other words, who benefits and why?" (Kuo & Marwick, 2021, pp. 1). This is a perspective which is "emerging only slowly" (Hutchings, 2024, pp. 548).

With this thesis, I hope to contribute to the evidence base for more effective policies to encourage individuals to make healthier choices for themselves and others. This is not about manipulating individuals or controlling speech, only seeking a stronger understanding of what might cause somebody to hold beliefs that can lead to behaviour that is harmful to themselves and others.

⁵ For the purposes of this thesis, the words 'British' and 'UK', when used as adjectives, include Great Britain, Northern Ireland and UK overseas territories.

⁶ I begin using the term 'Covid misbeliever' to describe this subjectivity after Chapter 3 for reasons explained therein, hence the use of this term in the RQs.

1.4: Note on researcher reflexivity and this project's background

Throughout this thesis, I will reference my own positionality as a researcher. This is an important aspect of the practice of *reflexivity*, a means for a researcher to “account for how subjectivity shapes their enquiry”, for, “their subjective perspective (or “bias”) is fundamentally intertwined with qualitative research processes” (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023, emphasis removed). There is no specific method for practicing and addressing reflexivity (Braund et al., 2024), though Davis (2020) shows that one effective way of addressing reflexivity in a thesis is to provide information about one’s “history and background – essentially...biography” in the introduction. For me, this means briefly discussing how I came to this project and which paradigms and discourses I find myself aligned with, which I do here.

It was and remains my view that Covid is a real threat and that policies intended to mitigate it (while potentially not the ones selected by governments) were necessary to prevent its spread. However, this does not mean that my approach to studying Covid conspiracy theorists, those who would disagree with my perspective, begins from a position of judgement or presumption. On the contrary, my central ambition for this work is to expose the assumptions that are made about Covid conspiracy theorists within mainstream institutions. In other words, I may be aligned with ‘mainstream’ Discursive views on Covid, but this does not mean that I recognise the portrayals of Covid conspiracy theorists and their motivations commonly presented to those of us who do not identify with such non-mainstream accounts of Covid.

My reason for approaching the problem of Covid misbelief in this way itself reflects the intellectual journey I took which led to writing this thesis. I have been interested in the concept of false information and the ways in which behaviour may be affected by public communications throughout my academic career. While studying my BSc in Politics and International Relations, the Cambridge Analytica (CA) scandal broke. Among various other issues, CA was posited to have brought about behavioural change through the data-based targeting of tailored political messages to specific audiences (Moore, 2018). Journalist Carole Cadwalladr’s original investigative account of this case framed Cambridge Analytica as enormously influential on democratic outcomes, perhaps

summarised by the company's whistleblower Christopher Wylie claiming that CA was "playing with...the psychology of an entire country without their consent or awareness" (in: The Guardian, 2018). Cadwalladr would also suggest similar in her phrase "Brexit was the petri dish for Trump" (in: Johnson, 2019), seemingly implying that both of these votes were influenced by CA. Even more pertinently, Cambridge Analytica's CEO Alexander Nix argued that "[w]e [CA] just put information into the bloodstream of the internet and then watch it grow, give it a little push every now and again over time to watch it take shape" (in: Graham-Harrison & Cadwalladr, 2018). Together, these claims suggested CA possessed a strong degree of influence over the democratic processes it was employed in.

At the same time, the popular and academic interest in false information was expanding. As Chapters 2 and 3 show, interest in 'fake news', misinformation and related phenomena was increasing at a great rate. My undergraduate dissertation, describing how poststructuralist theory could be used to understand online politics, included lengthy sections on what I perceived as the threat of disinformation on the internet. I was deeply concerned by the ways in which false information might shape perceptions of the world, and what implications this might have on human behaviour.

But early in the process of working on my PhD, I would happen upon an alternative perspective on CA. The popular podcast 'Qanon Anonymous'⁷, a comedy non-fiction podcast covering conspiracy theories, released a two-episode long discussion of CA entitled 'Rewriting Cambridge Analytica'. Across these episodes, among other points, the podcast hosts took a critical perspective towards many of the popular claims made about CA's power over public opinion. In my view, they convincingly show that it was improbable that CA had a major influence on behaviour, that there were major problems with the supposed 'science' CA's methods were based on and that Wylie's claims were likely exaggerated (Rockatansky et al., 2022, 2023).

At the same time, I was searching for a perspective with which to study Covid fake news and misinformation which was original and explored aspects of this issue which had been largely absent from the academic discussion. Listening to these podcast episodes,

⁷ Since rebranded as 'QAA Podcast'.

it occurred to me that, if I had been wrong to assume that CA had a major influence on public behaviour, perhaps I was also wrong in fearing that misinformation had a major impact on public behaviour, whether related to Covid or other phenomena. It was then that I found, as I discuss at greater length in Section 2.2, there has been extremely little academic attention given to the question of how far false information influences behaviour. I am not trained in Psychology and thus could not carry out a study directly addressing this question. However, I do possess the skills to carry out research into Discourse.

Capital-d ‘Discourse’ refers, as Chapter 3 will discuss in more detail, to the dominant conceptualisations and ‘rules’ of truth and reality. In other words, to the rules that delineate legitimate and illegitimate knowledges of the world and how power influences them. I am interested in the figure of the Covid conspiracy theorist as one such phenomenon and identifying how it is that some individuals come to be conceptualised as being part of this category (or ‘subject position’) and others are not. But I am also interested in how the *Counter-Discourse* of those who are categorised within the dominant Discourse as Covid conspiracy theorists conceptualise *themselves*. This was because it seemed probable that there would be great differences between these two constructions of the same category. Thus, I arrived at the task of this PhD: to compare the Covid conspiracy theorist as it is constructed as a social category within mainstream Discourse and the counter-Discourse of these Covid conspiracy theorists themselves.

1.5: Thesis structure

Having established the background and aims of this thesis, I now outline how it will proceed.

Chapter 2 presents a narrative review of the literature related to the Information Disorder Paradigm and the origins of the Covid conspiracy theorist as a subject. Specifically, it considers the meanings associated with the language of this paradigm and the social and historical context of its emergence.

Chapter 3 details the theoretical background of this thesis and foregrounds the subsequent methodology chapter. I explain how I use concepts such as Discourse,

power, knowledge and subjectivity, and how this benefits our understanding of Covid conspiracy theorists.

This theoretical background informs Chapter 4, which explains and justifies the methodology of this study. It introduces a novel form of Foucauldian-inspired Discourse analysis which I employ in this thesis, which I term ‘Subject Position Analysis’. It additionally details the sampling and analysis methods used on the texts taken from the fact checkers and *The Light*. It also introduces one of the major theoretical contributions of this work, the ‘paradox of fact checking’, which considers the ways in which the fact checkers produce and reproduce the Covid misbeliever subject.

Chapter 5 presents the findings of Study 1, an analysis and comparison of the construction of the Covid misbeliever through 30 texts from *The Light* and 22 texts from four UK fact checking organisations which discuss this concept as a major theme.

Chapter 6 presents the findings of Study 2. This applies the Study 1 to those texts which relate specifically to the Covid misbelievers who possess anti-vaccine beliefs based on the analysis of 21 texts from *The Light* and 21 from *Full Fact*, a fact checking service.

Chapter 7 presents the general conclusions of this thesis. These are framed as implications for future policy and research and a discussion of the major contributions this work makes.

Please note that within this thesis, double quotation marks (“like this”) are direct quotations from other materials. Single quotation marks (‘like this’) are not direct quotations (except when within a direct quotation) but are present where a term is being used as a paraphrase or is spurious, false, uncertain, et cetera.

Hereafter commences a work which I hope shall have positive consequences for the future of public health.

Chapter 2: Literature Review- Understanding the informational and intellectual context of Covid-19 conspiracy theories and theorists.

Chapter 2 Abstract

This chapter presents a narrative literature review of what I call the 'Information Disorder Paradigm' (IDP), which I argue is the dominant framework through which Covid conspiracy theorists are understood. It opens with a discussion of the historical situatedness of the IDP and its relationship to the contemporary social and political climate. It then reviews the literature surrounding relevant concepts which I argue embody the IDP, namely, dis/misinformation, 'fake news', 'post-truth' and 'infodemic' to analyse the implications and subtextual meanings of these terms. The Chapter concludes by proposing the existence of a 'counter-falsehood industrial complex' wherein alternative theories to the IDP which could explain conspiracy theories are sidelined due to financial and social interests

2.1: Introduction and methodological justifications

Chapter 1 discussed what I call the 'Information Disorder Paradigm' (IDP), the name I give to the frequently invoked lens through which policymakers, commentators and academics present the spread of false information as a major cause of misbeliefs and conspiracy theories. I now wish to explain how I conceptualise the IDP in greater detail through an investigation of the current literature pertaining to this theme.

I argue that the IDP constructs the mainstream, socially acceptable conceptualisation of the Covid conspiracy theorist (CCT) in the UK. To put it another way, my view is that the IDP *makes* the CCT: one cannot exist without the other. This is not to say that CCTs are not *real*: I have already detailed some of the material consequences of false beliefs about Covid-19 in the preceding chapter. Rather, my point is that the CCT as a social category (or 'subjectivity': see Chapter 3) into which some individuals can be placed cannot exist without the IDP; the IDP provides the conceptual framework which tells us who counts as a CCT and who does not, what beliefs count as conspiratorial and which do not, and crucially, how these individuals classified as such may be disciplined into possessing the 'correct' beliefs. It is for this reason that this literature review is

concerned with understanding the cultural, historical and social meanings of the IDP and its emergence as the hegemonic framework for understanding Covid-19 misbeliefs.

A narrative review method was selected for this chapter because it best suited the arguments I was seeking to appraise and synthesise. Specifically, it is a critical review, as it is based on a combination of my existing theoretical premise (the Covid conspiracy theorist is socially constructed) with existing perspectives in a non-exhaustive literature search (Sukhera, 2022). I also borrow partly from the concept of the hermeneutic review because I am concerned with how “understanding of a subject is formed, such as a body of literature relevant to a particular problem” (Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2014, pp. 273), in this case, how Covid information disorder literature forms an understanding of the Covid conspiracy theorist. The questions this review asks therefore are:

1. What effects have the convergence of Covid-19 and the IDP had on mainstream understandings of Covid conspiracy theorists?
2. What implications does this construction of the Covid-19 conspiracy theorist have for the policy response aimed to rectify it?

Additionally, this review also provides the foundations for the theoretical approach explained in Chapter 3 and aids the justification of the theory and methods used in this thesis. The conclusion section of this chapter offers answers to these questions.

It could be argued that a systematic reviewing approach could provide more valid and reliable results (Shaheen et al., 2023), however, I have selected the narrative review for several reasons. firstly Miró-Llinares and Aguerri (2023) have already carried out a systematic review with somewhat similar objectives, and I do not want to risk merely repeating their work with little new to add. Secondly, I wish to explore how the research on Covid-19 false information effects exist in conversation with one another, and what these intertextual connections, that is, relationships between texts, might tell us about the invisible foundational assumptions guiding the research so far. This is at odds with systematic reviews, which tend to be exhaustive searches for available research based on very specific criteria with a clearly explained methodology (Evans & Benefield, 2001). Put simply, systematic review methods are inappropriate for my purposes, as I aim to

offer an interpretative analysis of the background out of which the Covid conspiracy theorist was formed.

2.2: The long shadow of 2016: Understanding the increased interest in false information in the 2010s

Chapter 1 argued that the contemporary preoccupation with false information began in the mid-2010s. This section draws upon the literature to explain this argument and why this historical context is key to understanding the later context of how Covid falsehoods and pandemic conspiracy theories are conceptualised in the mainstream.

The graph below (figure 1) depicts the frequency of the use of certain phrases, which are investigated in greater detail below, relevant to the study of false information in the “English” Google Books corpus between 2010 and 2020 (Google Books Ngram Viewer, n.d.).

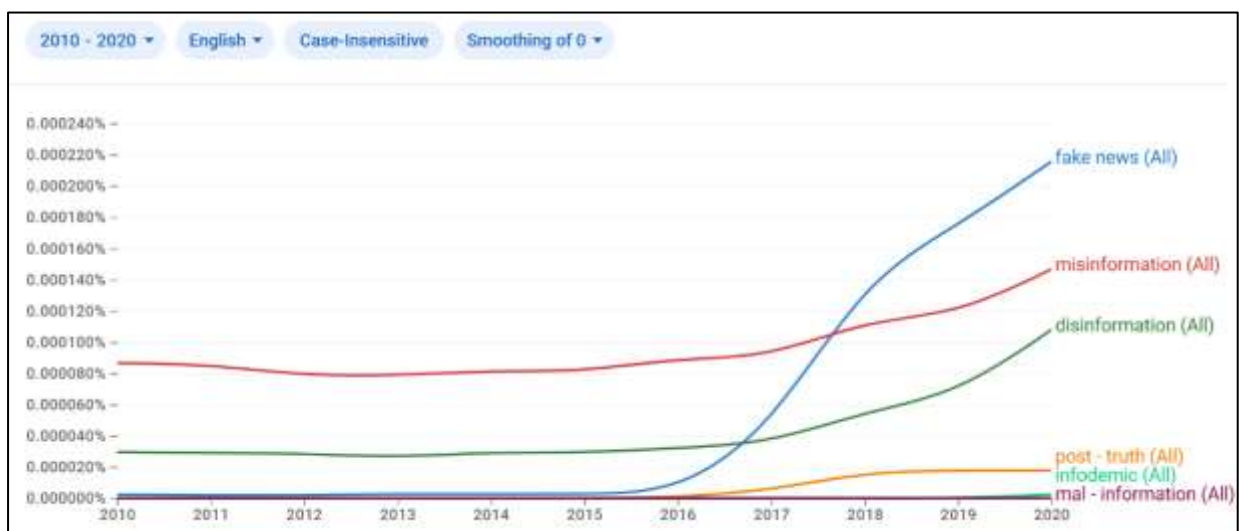


Figure 1: Frequency of selected terms I associate with the IDP in the ‘English’ Google Books corpus 2010-2020.

While the English Google Books corpus cannot account for all the uses of these terms, it nonetheless provides a useful illustration of the massive increase in the occurrences of ‘fake news’ after 2015 and the smaller, though still significant, increase in the use of ‘misinformation’ and ‘disinformation’ within their sample. By the time Covid-19 had been designated a pandemic by the WHO in March 2020 (Cucinotta & Vanelli, 2020), ‘fake news’ and ‘misinformation’ had seen a rapid increase in use, which I argue is crucial to understanding the use of these terms in relation to Covid.

To be sure, the public spreading of falsehoods is nothing new. However, arguments that retroactively describe historical falsehoods in these terms, thus applying the IDP to history, such as in Kaminska's (2017) argument that 'fake news' was present in Ancient Rome, may obscure the novelty of this paradigm and its effects on public understanding of these issues. This paradigm is, as we shall see, inconsistent: the literature variously describes the present as a unique 'post-truth era' yet simultaneously works to apply IDP frameworks to history. To try to find a way out of this labyrinth, I wish to start at the beginning: what occurred in the mid-2010s that led to this explosion of interest in false information?

I argue that it was primarily efforts from a confused liberal democratic institutional hegemony (one which had existed since the conclusion of the Cold War) to explain certain political upsets which took place in the Anglophone world in and around 2016 that gave rise to the IDP.

In the United States, the 2016 presidential election saw Donald Trump win US presidency, whose "decidedly unorthodox" campaign included "a number of colorful, often provocative, statements" (Rudolph, 2021, pp. 33) and whose victory over rival Hillary Clinton was described by journalists Goldmacher and Schreckinger (2016) as "the most stunning upset in American history"⁸. Given the global hegemony of US culture, this news was internationally significant, and this election campaign would quickly come to be associated with false information. In particular, the case of young people publishing pro-Trump and anti-Clinton fake news stories from websites based in Veles, Macedonia (Hughes & Waismel-Manor, 2021; Tynan, 2016; Wendling, 2018) seemed to capture journalistic attention. The election and its aftermath saw fake news experience a "quick ascendancy as a political tool and lightning rod during the 2016 U.S. election and into the Trump presidency" (Keener, 2017, pp. 138). Additionally, the use of the phrase "alternative facts" by US Counselor to the President, Kellyanne Conway, in 2017 to describe mistruths told by Trump (Cooke, 2018, pp. viii) similarly became a point of fixation for scholarly and journalistic writing, with Harrison and Lockett (2019, pp. 259)

⁸ This article was published eight years prior to Trump's 2024 return to the White House.

describing it as “cognate with Trump’s own term ‘fake news’, which he uses to dismiss inconvenient voices”, again implicating Trump in IDP-inspired thought.

But the US was not the only English-speaking country to experience a political shock with international implications in 2016. Five months prior to Trump’s presidential victory, the UK saw the largely unexpected victory of the Leave vote in the UK referendum on leaving the European Union. Like Trump’s election, so-called ‘Brexit’ has been similarly associated with disordered information. Notably, the argument by then-UK Secretary of state for justice, Michael Gove that “the people in this country [the UK] have had enough of experts” when arguing in favour of Britain leaving the EU came to be a preoccupation for commentators (Brown, 2016; Clarke & Newman, 2017). Indeed, an especially overt manifestation of Brexit as a signifier of ‘post-truth’ can be found in the conclusion of Marshall and Drieschova (2018, pp. 100):

“The technological changes resulting in widespread social media usage and consequently a significant change in the media environment, compounded by public distrust in traditional political and media elites, as well as expert knowledge, have formed the conditions of possibility for a post-truth politics to emerge. This post-truth politics has had a significant impact on the public debate leading up to the Brexit referendum, and the UK’s popular vote to exit the European Union. Technological developments have clearly played an important role in this, as social media remove the role of traditional media as gatekeepers of accuracy in the media environment.”

I include this lengthy quotation here because it demonstrates the assumptions which I argue are often embedded within the conventional, IDP-inspired approach to conspiracy theorists. This notion that declining trust in institutions coupled with technological change is creating unique conditions for a ‘post-truth’ epoch, I argue, is a misunderstanding of the broader structural forces which bring about phenomena such as Brexit, Trump and, of course, Covid conspiracy theories. It seems to me that it serves as a means of *explaining away* the complex historical, social and structural issues which might lead to such unexpected democratic outcomes. Those individuals who are presumed to have believed fake news and disinformation, I argue, became ‘folk devils’,

“visible reminders of what we should not be”, in Cohen’s (2002, pp. 1-2) conceptualisation of ‘moral panic’:

“[a] condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions; ways of coping are evolved or (more often) resorted to; the condition then disappears, submerges or deteriorates and becomes more visible”.

Indeed, he adds, “[s]ometimes the object of the panic is quite novel and at other times it is something that has been in existence long enough, but suddenly appears in the limelight” (Cohen, 2002, pp. 1), which is in line with my views of the present preoccupation with false information. For example, Losurdo’s (2014) revisionist historiography of liberalism suggests that conspiracy theory has been present in many liberal societies, yet the IDP, I argue, implies that it is something separate from, or an aberration of, our present, post-Cold War liberal democratic order. If Losurdo’s argument is accepted, then Cohen’s description of moral panic fits neatly onto the IDP.

However, one major difference in this instance of moral panic to Cohen’s formulation is that the folk devils of the IDP have not yet been defeated, it seems. Instead, we are stuck in the preceding phases he described of experts searching for and prescribing their solutions, hence the National Institute for Health Research possessing the desire to fund this thesis’ PhD studentship. In my view, there is a certain usefulness of the IDP to some parties which causes us to be stuck in this phase, the nature of which shall be elucidated in this chapter, especially in section 2.3. But for now, my argument is that the post-2016 preoccupation with false information laid the groundwork for its subsequent application to public health issues such as the Covid pandemic. Together, Trump and Brexit “have led to a wave of interest in the phenomenon of “fake news”, which is widely believed to have played a significant role in shaping the outcome of both political contests” (Gelfert, 2018, pp. 85). While the accuracy of this belief can (and as the remainder of this chapter implies, *should*) be called into question, my point is that it allowed for the seeding of the IDP which blossomed in the Covid pandemic.

Culturally speaking, I argue that these political upsets of 2016 have caused a significant increase in the interest in false information in the English-speaking world, especially that found online. I further argue that the implied fear is one of voters, or perhaps the population in general, being rational actors who are susceptible to media messaging, primarily factual messaging, hence the fear of ‘fake news’ in particular (see section 2.3.3). Anstead (2021, pp. 8), for example, suggests that what unites the varying conceptualisations of fake news is that “they represent distinct responses to an ongoing and evolving crisis in democratic and media legitimacy”. With the outbreak of SARS-nCoV-2, I argue that the concept of the manipulable voter became replaced by the manipulable subject of pandemic falsehoods. It is from this basis that this literature review begins.

2.3: Conceptualising conspiracy theories beyond the Information Disorder Paradigm: Note on materialist approaches

I have so far provided several arguments criticising the centralisation of false information in discussions around the causes of Covid conspiracy theories and theorists. However, only offering critique without suggesting a more robust alternative perspective is not enough. While providing a full descriptive and normative theory of the origin of conspiracy theorists is beyond the scope of this thesis, I wish to draw attention to a more *materialist* perspective of health conspiracy theories:

“[M]aterialism – frequently manifested in calls for reform or transformation of the economic system – directs attention to the structures and processes of society and how the material basis of production and distribution shape people’s lives”

(Ervin & Raphael, 2026)

In other words, the IDP conceptualises belief in conspiracy theories as a personal failure, emphasising agency, wherein an individual has ‘fallen for’ false information and needs to be educated and corrected in order to save them from themselves. A materialist theory of conspiracy theories, by contrast, provides a more holistic and less presumptive approach to the problem which considers the broader social origins of health misbeliefs, emphasising how the structures within social life might shape an individual’s perspectives on such issues. This is not to suggest that Covid conspiracy theorists have

no agency or responsibility over their beliefs and choices. Rather, it means understanding that any individual's perspectives are shaped by their experiences, and that these experiences in turn are shaped by the structures and processes that they are part of in their lives.

Throughout this thesis, this alternative, structural approach to Covid conspiracy theorists will be argued and evidenced and the concluding chapter offers a more detailed argument for this perspective based on the context of the empirical research presented in Chapters 5 and 6.

2.4: An old language for a supposedly new problem: The connotations of Covid-19 falsehood vocabulary

Chapter 1 noted the presence of a vocabulary which, I argue, signifies the presence of the IDP, such as the 'fake news and misinformation' referenced in the title of the studentship which led to this thesis. This vocabulary is vast and ever evolving, meaning it cannot be captured in its entirety in this review. Moreover, several glossaries providing basic definitions of terms already exist. Notably, the *EU Disinfo Lab* carries a glossary of "150+ terms to understand the information disorder" (Sessa, 2023) as well as similar indexes also being provided by both academic and journalistic output (e.g., Diaz Ruiz, 2025; Jack, 2017; The Economist, 2024). My purpose is not to create another dictionary of falsehood terminology, but to focus in on specific parts of this vocabulary to understand what this can tell us about how it was applied to Covid conspiracy theorists. My approach here is to present an analysis of the literature related to *misinformation* and *fake news* and follow the research trail that this led me on, analysing new terms in the IDP vocabulary as they emerged in the process of research.

The reasons for my focussing on the meanings attributed to these words (or *signifiers*) is twofold. Firstly, to understand the application of the IDP to Covid-19 conspiracy theories, which is essential to answer my research questions, it is necessary to first understand the connotations of the words that are used to describe it. This is because, as Machin and Mayr (2023, pp. 50) note, the connotations of words can "help to place...events into a particular frameworks of reference or discourses", which is key to understanding how these terms contextualise Covid conspiracy theories. Secondly, as befits conspiracy theory research, developing an understanding of these terms was a rabbit hole of its own,

and while it initially seemed a simple task, as we shall see, it expanded into a much larger analysis. The deeper connotations of quotidian words is a running theme in this thesis, and this section only the beginning. Thus, I now commence the review of this literature, beginning with ‘misinformation’ and its sister concept ‘disinformation’.

2.4.1: Misinformation and disinformation

Misinformation is often invoked as a major problem during Covid, including by the WHO (2021a, n.d.). Yet, as Vraga and Bode (2020, pp. 136) argue, defining the term “in a consistent and coherent way has been a challenge for the field”. Misinformation is often invoked alongside the related concept of disinformation, which is similarly assigned incompatible and insufficient definitions, even within powerful institutions (Nagasako, 2020). An additional challenge is that is commonplace to see these two terms used interchangeably (Alaphilippe et al., 2019; Baines & Elliott, 2020; Khan, 2021). Where a differentiation is made, the literature frequently provides definitions for these terms which present them as two sides of the same coin, where:

- **‘Misinformation’** refers to falsehoods which are not created/spread with the intention to deceive, where **‘disinformation’** is intended to deceive.

This approach is taken by the World Health Organization (WHO, n.d.), The United Nations (UN, n.d.) as well as in Wardle and Derekshan’s (2017) original report on ‘information disorder’ for the Council of Europe. In addition, many scholarly articles follow these definitions (see, e.g., Baines & Elliott, 2020; Carsten Stahl, 2006).

While these definitions are functional, it is initially unclear how mis- and disinformation differ from merely lying by accident or deliberately respectively. Lewandowsky et al. (2024, pp. 7) offer a partial solution, that lying is defined by “knowingly telling an untruth with intent to deceive”, thus precluding misinformation from synonymity with ‘lie’. But this definition only reinforces the interchangeability of ‘lie’ and ‘disinformation’- one seemingly accepted in their paper. For some writers, this synonymity is not a problem: O’Shaughnessy (2020) argues that disinformation is semantically related to propaganda, because it “means lying, but not always, and not necessarily”, for it “does not have to be a complete lie; it can be largely or partly true”. This would imply that a lie becomes disinformation by the way it is ‘packaged’, that disinformation is a subgenre of lie which

has been partly or largely combined with truth. Yet it has also been defined in the reverse: for Fallis (2014, pp. 137), “[t]he most notable type of disinformation is the lie”, and disinformation is “information that—just as the source of the information intended—is likely to cause people to hold false beliefs”. For Fallis (2014)⁹, this is because:

- Disinformation may be promoted knowingly, yet without an intention to mislead, such as to participants in research.
- Disinformation need not be false but can be misleading truths, such as truthful, yet deceptive vagueness.
- Lies are inherently a statement where disinformation can be other media, such as doctored photographs.

This only furthers our initial problem: if disinformation can be spread without the intention to mislead, its definition begins to overlap with that we settled upon for ‘misinformation’. Moreover, if misleading with the truth (i.e., *paltering*) constitutes disinformation, it implies a partial encroachment on the term ‘mal-information’ “when genuine information is shared to cause harm” (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017, pp. 5) Worse, it contradicts a hitherto core tenet of disinformation: that it inherently contains untruth(s).

It will be clear by now that attempting to find some definitive definition for misinformation and disinformation using contemporary literature is unlikely to result in any satisfactory conclusion, since so many inconsistent ones already exist. On this basis, I argue that understanding these terms (as well as the others explored below) might imply less a need to search for a convincing definition within the literature and more a need of understanding the cultural meanings associated with these words. It is for this reason that I now wish to turn to the discussion surrounding these words’ origins. This is not in an effort to uncover their meanings *in* their origins, for this would be *the etymological fallacy*, the erroneous notion that word origins are central to understanding their contemporary use (Durkin, 2009). Instead, I am interested in the stories that are told about how these terms came to be used in contemporary parlance. These stories, rather

⁹ Ironically, Fallis makes these points on the foundation of his accusation that Fetzer (2004) argues that ‘lie’ and ‘disinformation’ are synonymous, yet this appears to be a misrepresentation of Fetzer’s argument.

than the origins of the words themselves, are what I argue can tell us something about these words' meanings.

The case of 'disinformation' is particularly interesting in this respect. It is frequently claimed to have entered the English language as a Soviet-era Russian language neologism 'Дезинформация' (dezinformatsiya) (Mahairas & Dvilyanski, 2018). Several sources suggest this etymological origin, including the online versions of the Collins English Dictionary (n.d.-a), the Oxford English Dictionary (OED, 2023a) and the Oxford University Press-published guide to 20th Century words (Ayto, 1999) as well as many other academic texts on this topic (e.g., Tadjman & Mikelic, 2003). In fact, the term was in use in English from the 19th century in the UK and US by parliamentarians and news outlets respectively (Hutchings, 2024; Tolz & Hutchings, 2021), which Hutchings (2024) argues "indicates how Cold War subtexts still influence anglophone discourses around disinformation". Recall my argument in section 2.2 that information disorder appears to be constructed as an aberration in the post-Cold War liberal democratic order. This story of disinformation as something coming from 'outside' the 'free world' fits neatly into my argument.

Indeed, this Cold War subtext, I argue, is key to understanding how and why some falsehoods come to be called 'disinformation'. During the Cold War, "[m]uch of the world experienced the conflict in the realm of communication and culture", where "the contending powers sought to use ideas and persuasion to rally, sustain and extend their respective blocs" (Cull & Mazumdar, 2014, pp. 323). In this sense, the preoccupation with disinformation within the IDP might be understood as a continuation of the Cold War anxiety surrounding this propaganda, and a sense that there is a similar war of information taking place today. Also like the Cold War, there is the impression that today's disinformation is troubling because it is mysterious, or something foreign (literally or metaphorically) to the liberal psyche. Indeed, Moore (2018, pp. 76) draws a line between contemporary Russian disinformation and propaganda and the "remarkably similar" methods used by the Soviet Union. A more relevant case of such state-level information warfare for this thesis, however, might be the case of anti-Covid-vaccine disinformation being promoted in secret in a US military program in the developing world in response to Chinese information operations against the US (Bing &

Schechtman, 2024). Here, we can observe the exchange of Covid-19 disinformation in a manner strongly reminiscent of the Cold War, with powerful states interfering with the politics of the Global South to further their own ends. Overall, then, it appears that ‘disinformation’ is often (though not always) invoked to connote the use of false information by ‘foreign’ forces.

The falsely claimed recency of the entry of ‘disinformation’ into English is notable when compared to the ostensibly long history of ‘misinformation’. Oxford English Dictionary (OED, 2002, emphasis original), state that their “earliest evidence for *misinformation* [being used as a term] is from 1587, in the writing of Abraham Fleming”, which Brown and Cordova (2017) suggest was within *Holinshed’s Chronicles*. Indeed, the word does appear in a 1808 reproduction of this work within a discussion of the River Exe, “which the Britons called Isk ; Ptolomeus [Ptolmey] by misinformation nameth it Isaca” (Holinshed et al., 1808)¹⁰. The story told about this word’s origin is comparatively less romantic: it is a quotidian problem that has been an inconvenience for centuries. Overall, then, perhaps all that can really be said for misinformation and disinformation are that the former is a more formal term for the everyday experience of accidentally repeating a lie, while disinformation connotes some major act of subterfuge.

With these notions of misinformation and disinformation and their connotations, it is now necessary to turn to another term frequently invoked alongside them: *fake news*.

2.4.2: Fake News

As noted, ‘Fake news’ was especially popularised in the mid-2010s, with Collins Dictionary selecting it as word of the year in 2017 following “its unprecedented usage increase of 365% in the Collins Corpus” (Ibrahim et al., 2019, pp. 17), which journalist Flood (2017) argues gave “a certain legitimacy” to the term. The Collins definition is:

¹⁰ This version is an 1808 reproduction of volume III of *Chronicles*, the only version and volume which I could find containing the word ‘misinformation’ available publicly. It is difficult to discern the precise author and year of this quote given that publishing practices were vastly different in the 16th century, but it seems plausible that this is the usage to which the OED refers. However, I will be pleased for a historian to ‘fact check’ my own claim as I may be mistaken.

“false, often sensational, information disseminated under the guise of news reporting”

(Collins English Dictionary, n.d.-b)

While a useful starting point, there are problems with this definition. For example, it is unclear whether the false information is being reported knowingly or not, or whether satire mimicking the news format is included. Indeed, “the term’s meaning remains disputed and its use in everyday language is wildly heterogenous” (Anderau, 2021, pp. 197): more scholarly writings than can be cited here have investigated definitions of fake news, and in turn, there are already many existing literature reviews of these (e.g., Anderau, 2021; Baptista & Gradim, 2022; Tandoc Jr., 2019). Among the more substantial attempts at a definition can be found in Tandoc Jr. et al. (2018, pp. 147, emphasis original) who provide six definitions: “(1) news satire, (2) news parody, (3) fabrication, (4) manipulation, (5) advertising, and (6) propaganda”. Yet even this more expansive interpretation cannot account for the term’s use as a rhetorical device “to discredit and dismiss attitude dissonant information” (van der Linden et al., 2020, pp. 461-462). Indeed, Anstead (2021, pp. 4) has criticised these definitions for their overlap and emphasis on differences over what unifies the concept: “[i]f we can identify six types of fake news, do we really have a definition at all?”. With this considered, my intention here is not to add to the voluminous literature attempting to define ‘fake news’, but to consider what it means that ‘fake news’ was seemingly an important framework through which information surrounding Covid was understood. In other words, I want to understand the qualitative cultural meanings implied by ‘fake news’ as a category, so that I can understand its invocation in the context of the Covid information environment. To achieve this, I again consider etymology.

‘Fake news’ did not originate as a term in the 2010s. While a 1793 report from the French government makes reference to “les fausses nouvelles” (BBC Reel, 2021), the earliest known use of the term ‘fake news’ in the English language is thought to be from a 1925 Harper’s Magazine article, “Fake News and the Public” (Waldman, 2018; Wang et al., 2019). Here, McKernon (1925, pp. 536) describes “[t]he struggle between the honest editor...and the would-be exploiters of the press” wherein malicious actors, aided by the rapidity of then-novel communications technologies, attempt to have their untruths

given the authority of newsprint. Today, a similar implication that technological developments facilitate fake news is frequently made, albeit without the need to deceive the “honest editor”. There is a very strong focus on online social media as a tool of fake news (and other false information) spread in the literature. For example, the high-impact *Journal of Management Information Systems* has a special issue focussing on ‘Fake News on the Internet’, whose editorial claims that “[t]he widespread adoption and use of information and communication technologies, particularly social and digital media, play a key role in the current wave of fake news and false information sweeping the globe” (Dennis et al., 2021, pp. 893). Several books focussing on this theme have also been published since 2016, such as the edited volumes ‘Fake News: Understanding Media and Misinformation in the Digital Age’ (Zimdars & Mcleod, 2020) and ‘Fake News on the Internet’ (Dennis et al., 2023). Perhaps the most overt manifestation of these sentiments can be found in popular broadcasting, for example, in the BBC programme ‘Click’, where a 2018 episode opens with a presenter making the following statement:

“The news. We used to trust it. If it was on screen or in print, we believed it. But a few years ago, the lies online started to look really realistic. Phoney news websites with convincing-looking stories, shared by your friends on social media. The fake news era was born.”

(in: Clark, 2018)

Perhaps, then, the common denominator between Mckernon’s understanding of fake news and contemporary accounts is *technological determinism*, “the notion that technology shapes society and culture” (Héder, 2021, pp. 121), or perhaps where “a complex event is made to seem the inescapable yet strikingly plausible result of a technological innovation” (Smith & Marx, 1994, pp. xi). It has been widely noted that social media usage increased after the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic (Cho et al., 2023; Nguyen et al., 2020; Tsao et al., 2021), perhaps accounting for a particular concern for online fake news related to it. In 1925 as in 2020, it appears that there was anxiety that new, high-speed and globally interconnected communications media would allow for the rapid spread of falsehoods disguised as traditional news.

In any case, like misinformation and disinformation, fake news joins the nebulous collection of terms which indicate the presence of the IDP. Indeed, Habgood-Coote (2019, pp. 1034) goes as far as to argue that fake news lacks a clear definition, fails to add anything novel to existing language, and that it is “weaponised for political ends, and...closely connected to bad ideology”. But this is not the only term from the IDP vocabulary he takes issue with; Habgood-Coote (2019) also makes these claims against the term ‘post-truth’.

Disinformation, misinformation and fake news are often enveloped under an umbrella term: ‘post-truth’. Indeed, Parmet and Paul (2020, pp. 945) have argued that Covid may be “our first posttruth pandemic.” I now turn to the question of what this term might imply.

2.4.3: ‘Post-Truth’

Like the other terms discussed so far, there are instances of ‘post-truth’ being used before 2016 (See: OED, 2023b). Nevertheless, as indicated in the NGram data in figure 1, as well as being awarded the title of “word of the Year 2016” by the Oxford Dictionaries (Oxford Languages, 2016; Oxford University Press, n.d., n.d. [via Wayback Machine]), it seems to have been most heavily popularised after that year. Since then, at least five books entitled ‘Post-truth’ have been published, most of which appear to be aimed at a popular audience, and “differ concerning the origins and significance of a post-truth era” according to Martin (2019, pp. 163). Most of these were authored by journalists which perhaps reflects the specific anxieties felt by those within the media institutions responsible for ostensible ‘real news’. Nevertheless, it is difficult, to point to a consensus meaning of this term beyond the more direct implication that “[p]ost-truth’ is a self-consciously grand term of epochal shift (trading heavily on assumptions about an ‘era of truth’ we apparently once enjoyed)” (Corner, 2017, pp. 1100). According to Augustine (2021, pp. 2), “[b]roadly speaking, the concepts of misinformation, disinformation, and fake news falls under the canopy of post truth”, which may account for the sudden, post-2016 rise in popularity of these terms. Thus, the concurrent, post-2016 rise in popularity of ‘fake news’ and ‘post-truth’ as concepts both promote the notion of an epoch of truth collapsing and being replaced by an era of falsehood, and this

narrative seems, in my view, to be reproduced continuously within those institutions seen as arbiters of truth such as publishing and journalism.

This is important for understanding false information during Covid-19 because we can see that invoking ‘post-truth’ is something of a trojan horse for a ‘golden ageism’ of public communications. In other words, to speak of ‘post-truth’ is to necessarily imply that there was once a ‘truth’ era in public life and public health, yet this is ahistorical. Consider the widely discussed ‘Anti Mask League’ which emerged in San Francisco during the Spanish Flu pandemic in 1919. Like some contemporary Covid-19 conspiracy theorists, the organisation called for mask-related laws to be repealed, questioned the scientific evidence for masks as a means of disease control and saw public health laws as an assault on liberty (Lawrence, 2020). It is difficult to reconcile the notion that Covid-19 exists in an era that is uniquely disbelieving of medical authorities with the evidence that such similar behaviour was present in a previous pandemic over a century ago. Aside from the Anti-Mask League, there were also a variety of other false claims made about Spanish Flu. In an article for the Wellcome Collection in September 2019, two months prior to the first known case of Covid-19, Historian Hannah Mawdsley (2019) points to a variety of claims about the 1918 pandemic, including a Brazilian newspaper which claimed that the disease was a German bioweapon. She also claims that the artist Jordan Baseman’s research “encountered many examples of fake news and misinformation” (Mawdsley, 2019); he claims that he found that “the flu was blamed on foreigners...Jewish people, on dancing, on jazz music, on the bombing of the soil” (in: Mawdsley, 2019). In spite of this, the article confusingly ends with a discussion of false claims on social media leading to vaccine hesitancy, warning (in what we might now see as darkly comic dramatic irony), “[i]f we face another pandemic, this [online] spread of misinformation could have a potentially catastrophic effect on our ability to contain the outbreak” (Mawdsley, 2019). This seems to imply that the “modern digital world” (Mawdsley, 2019) presents a unique risk, despite the article itself demonstrating that misinformation existed and spread already.

Post-truth seems to therefore be a misnomer. Yet it is perhaps the most crucial aspect of the IDP, since it implies an epochal shift from some undefined and preceding ‘truth’ paradigm into the present ‘post-truth’ paradigm. It also inadvertently reveals the ‘golden

ageism’ of those who invoke it, since it suggests that there was once a time where some universal ‘truth’ guided pandemic responses. Yet as I shall note in Chapter 3, pandemic responses and conceptualisations of truth have differed vastly throughout history.

But there is one last phrase I wish to zoom in on before moving on to the theory chapter of this thesis, which I will give greater attention due to its sudden ascendancy during Covid: *infodemic*.

2.5: The birth of the ‘infodemic’ Discourse.

In a situation report which has been since heavily-cited in the pandemic misinformation literature, the WHO described a “2019-nCoV ‘infodemic’...an over-abundance of information – some accurate and some not – that makes it hard for people to find trustworthy sources and reliable guidance when the need it” (WHO, 2020a). Perhaps it symbolises the organisation’s preoccupation with public health information that the WHO would describe a Covid-19 infodemic thirty-eight days before the organisation’s Director General would state that Covid-19 “can be characterised as a pandemic” (WHO, 2020b). The word, seemingly a portmanteau of ‘information’ and ‘epidemic’, was first coined in an article by Rothkopf (2003), which “explicitly referred to the informational risks associated with an epidemic”, in this case focussing on SARS-CoV-1 in the early 2000s (Colombo, 2022, pp. 37). The relevance of this to the present study is that this appears to be an early precursor to the information-as-virus Discourse, which is now, I argue, commonplace in discussions around communications during public health emergencies as well as other events of international import.

It is out of this context, I argue, that the Covid conspiracy theorist as a specific kind of falsehood believer was born.

This was not the first time that information was likened to biological processes: notions of information virality and the gene/meme comparison predate SARS-CoV-1 (Valérie & Fred, 2024). But I argue that the word’s origin in SARS-CoV-1 and renaissance in SARS-nCoV-2 speaks to an increasing anxiety about the loss of control over information during public health emergencies (as well as other crises) within mainstream institutions which matured alongside digital and online media. Perhaps it is no coincidence that the enfeebling of mainstream institutions’ agenda-setting power within public conversation

by ever-encroaching online consumer technology would lead to the likening of information to an uncontained virus. By the time of Covid-19, these biological metaphors to describe information during public health crises would be far more common:

“Although this tendency predates the advent of the COVID-19 global pandemic, since 2020 we have reached a rhetorical fever pitch that relies on metaphor to characterize mis- and disinformation as harmful to the health of both the individual and to the body politic at large. The use of metaphorical language such as viral/virality, infodemic, infobesity, information hygiene, information dysfunction, and information pathology are ubiquitous in research literature, public health communications and throughout the media.”

(Eadon & Wood, 2024, pp. 506, emphasis removed)

What is notable about these characterisations of (mis)information is the lack of agency that is assumed to be possessed by the information-consuming public. Indeed, despite the interest in health metaphors, how unfortunate that there is little attention given to the resemblance of this characterisation of misinformation to the ‘hypodermic needle’ model of media effects. This model, which suggests that media users and audiences passively receive media messages directly, as though they were ‘injected’ with no audience autonomy (Mehrad et al., 2020), is rarely given scholarly attention¹¹ due to a lack of evidence in its favour, with greater evidence to suggest audiences are in fact resistant to media messages (Greenberg & Salwen, 2010). Indeed, such is its lack of credibility, “[s]ome media scholars argue that the hypodermic-needle “theory” never received serious scholarly attention; it was formulated years later for political and pedagogical reasons” (Greenberg & Salwen, 2010, pp. 7). It seems unwise, then, to follow approaches to false information that assume they frequently have a direct impact on both belief and behaviour.

Nevertheless, there is a pervasive, ‘common-sense’ approach to false information and ‘fake news’ during the Covid-19 pandemic which sees it as the cause of misinformed

¹¹ It should be noted that Ahmad et al. (2023) openly embrace the hypodermic needle approach in their study on Jordanians’ media attitudes during Covid-19.

beliefs, which in turn lead to harmful behaviours. However, there are many problems with this view. As Adams et al. (2023, pp. 1451) summarise:

“Sometimes a simple causal chain of the form misinformation → beliefs → aberrant behavior is presumed. This is despite (a) a weak empirical basis; (b) deep conceptual problems arising from neglecting the dynamics of belief generation...and (c) complex relations between beliefs and behavior.”

Additionally, there is too little existing empirical data to draw any conclusions about the relationship between false information consumption and behaviour. As far as I am aware, just six examples of empirical research into the relationship between exposure to false information and behaviour exist. Four of these suggest no significant link (Greene and Murphy (2021); Cantarella et al. (2019); Cantarella et al. (2023); De Saint Laurent et al. (2022)) and two suggest a possible link, (Islam et al. (2020) and Bastick (2021)).

To be sure, I am not arguing that the spread of false information *never* impacts the responses of its consumers, but it is important not to overstate the role that it may play as the origin of a person’s belief in falsehoods. This is because it could lead to a failure to understand the whole scope of the problem and designs of solutions to it. Indeed, some evidence suggests that in the context of Covid-19, the consumption of false information has only limited effects on behaviour. Of the studies mentioned above, two psychological studies carried out by several of the same researchers, De Saint Laurent et al. (2022) and Greene and Murphy (2021) found limited effects of exposure to Covid-19 fake news. The former found only minor effects on participants vaccine intentions caused by fake vaccine news items and the latter that “small but measurable” (pp. 10) changes to *some* behavioural intentions can be caused by exposure to it. Both studies used a between-subjects design, with participants self-selecting to take part, which may have caused some selection bias. However, overall, the conditions of the studies were both controlled such that I view these results as valid, although as the researchers themselves note, much more work needs to be carried out on this theme. Thus, while these studies show that Covid-19 fake news *can* cause behavioural changes, this effect is very limited.

Indeed, I argue that the results of these studies are supported, if only indirectly, by Yang and Tian (2021). This survey study found a high prevalence of the ‘Third-person effect’,

that is, “the perception that communications exert a stronger impact on others than on oneself” (Yang & Tian, 2021, pp. 2) and from the results of their survey on Covid-19 fake news conclude, *inter alia*, that “When conceiving fake news’ effect on others, they [the participants] adhere to a hypodermic needle model” (pp. 6). Thus, while much more research needs to be done in this area, I argue that it is important not to overstate the effect of false information on the beliefs and behaviours of their consumers during the pandemic. It is reasonable to assume that *some* individuals in *some* cases may be influenced by Covid falsehoods, but this should not lead researchers to view it as a major cause of this problem.

Based on the above literature, I argue that this Discourse of ‘infodemics’ is not a useful conceptualisation of the spread of (mis)information as it does not account for the agency of the individual who consumes the information in question, something that a literal virus would not be influenced by. But further to this evaluation, Simon and Camargo (2021, pp. 2230) offer additional convincing arguments for this, since in their view, “[d]escribing the complex communicative phenomena around a public health crisis as an ‘infodemic’ is merely giving a new name to something we have other names for, without any additional explanatory power”. I summarise their argument to justify this claim as follows:

- Information spread does not meaningfully resemble a viral spread.
- Information is always intentionally shared, unlike a virus.
- The metaphor does not account for audience autonomy; 'infodemic' implies uncritical information consumption and spread.
- A variety of social 'rules' online mean information may spread in different ways, unlike a virus.
- Information abundance is not unique to public health crises and evidence suggests that audiences may have strategies to deal with it.
- Evidence suggests that during the pandemic, people in many parts of the world had a good idea of where to find reliable Covid-19 information.

(Simon & Camargo, 2021)

This, coupled with the aforementioned literature, provides a convincing argument that the characterisation of the information environment surrounding Covid-19 as an 'infodemic' fails to meaningfully reflect it on both a conceptual and empirical level. Both the fallacious comparison of information spread to viral spread and the psychological research in this field suggesting a limited effect of false Covid information suggest that 'infodemic' is ultimately an ineffective term to describe pandemic information spread.

But the question remains as to why 'infodemic' seemed to be resurrected as a lens through which to understand public health information in 2020. Why is it that Rothkopf's (2003) original and strikingly similar invocation of the word to describe "[a] few facts, mixed with fear, speculation and rumor, amplified and relayed swiftly worldwide by modern information technologies" failed to capture the imagination of writers covering public health back then? A definitive answer is not forthcoming in the literature, though one may speculate that there was a much smaller interest in 'information disorder' in the early 2000s.

2.6: The Counter-falsehood industrial complex: Literature Review reflections and conclusions

One of relatively few journalists who have taken a more critical perspective to the current enthusiasm for discussing disinformation is Joseph Bernstein. In an article written, fittingly, for Harper's Magazine, he argues that,

"The Commission on Information Disorder is the latest (and most creepily named) addition to a new field of knowledge production that emerged during the Trump years at the juncture of media, academia, and policy research: Big Disinfo."

(Bernstein, 2021)

This 'Big Disinfo' seems to be the name he gives to what I have referred to here as the IDP:

"As an environmental cleanup project, it presumes a harm model of content consumption. Just as, say, smoking causes cancer, consuming bad information must cause changes in belief or behavior that are bad, by some standard. Otherwise, why care what people read and watch?"

(Bernstein, 2021)

Notably, he argues that, "Big Disinfo can barely contain its desire to hand the power of disseminating knowledge back to a set of "objective" gatekeepers" (Bernstein, 2021). Like Bernstein, I find myself somewhat uncomfortable about what I see as the unspoken implications of information disorder approaches to various social ills. Namely, it seems to me that such accounts of conspiracy theorising extend beyond merely trying to prevent the spread of false information, but the advocacy of a 'return' to some imagined ideal world wherein only 'trustworthy' journalists (and 'honest editors', perhaps?), academics and other powerful institutional forces were able or permitted to construct 'truth'. While we should, of course, work to prevent harmful misbeliefs, this should not necessitate the quite reasonable mistrust and scepticism towards information coming from dominant institutions, nor the dismissal of any dissenting opinion coming from sources outside them. To quote Bernstein once again, "when we talk about the problem

[of disinformation], we should understand who wants to address it and why” (in: Illing, 2021).

I wish at this point to propose the existence of a ‘counter-falsehood industrial complex’. What I mean by this is that counter-disinformation has become an industry and worldview maintained by the reproduction of anxieties surrounding that disinformation. For certain industrial interests (see figure 2), it is both economically and socially useful to emphasise the importance of the IDP to the detriment of other explanations for harmful behaviour and beliefs. Many institutions are part of this complex: the various companies and start-ups who profit from activities such as ‘fact checking’, the newspapers who profit both from being regarded as trustworthy while also generating clicks on articles exposing disinformation; the governments and International Non-Governmental Organisations who emphasise it as a simple explanation for undesirable behaviour and, of course, the academics and research groups who study these phenomena. After all, why else would the National Institute for Health Research and Norwich Medical School fund a PhD studentship called “Fake news and misinformation during the Covid pandemic” (UEA, 2022 [via WayBack Machine])? This thesis is also within the complex.

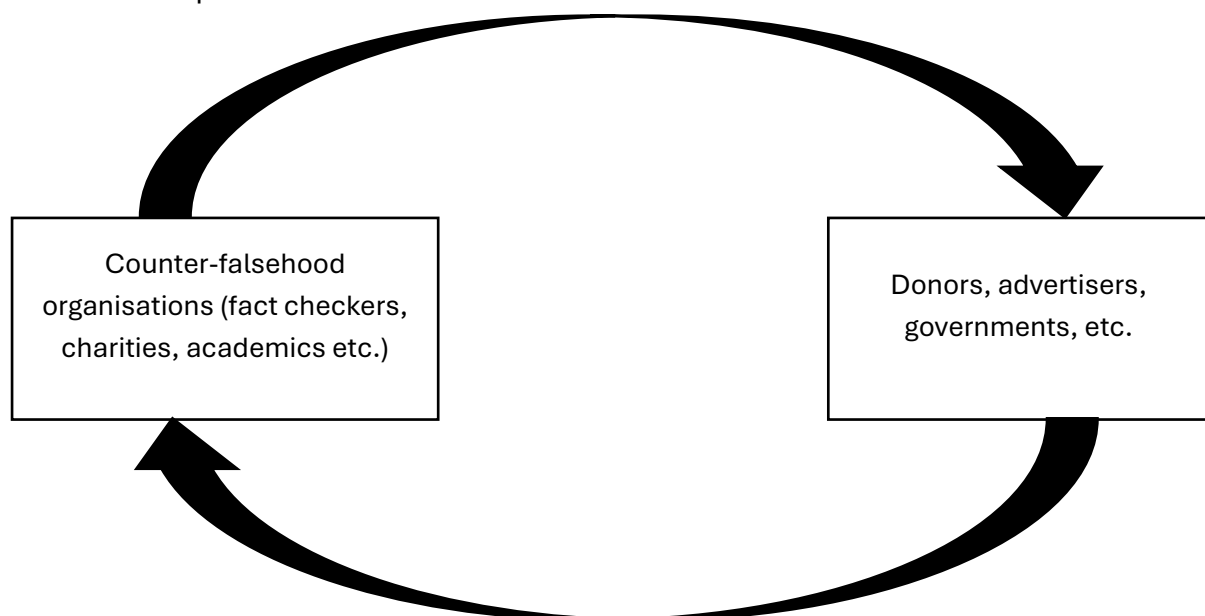


Figure 2: Visualisation of the counter-falsehood industrial complex

This is not to argue that there is some conspiracy to lie about false information and its effects to create profit- I have not become *that* engrossed in my research subject! However, that there are many organisations and groups who rely upon the IDP (the fact checkers, the disinformation reporters, the developers of counter-disinformation software, et cetera) who would not consider alternative causes for false beliefs because this is not what their occupation asks of them, they may be less likely to be profitable for their employers and their own livelihood depends upon it.

In addition, the motivation for supporting the IDP is not only profit. It is also a useful means of explaining away phenomena which would otherwise require rethinking the structure of society. If the structural causes of conspiracy theories were addressed as frequently as false information, it might lead to advocacy for policy changes which might be at odds with the ideological positions of current institutions and individuals. Thus, it is politically useful for those who value the present structure of a state's political economy to focus on false information to the detriment of possible structural origins. Again, I am not arguing that this is the product of a deliberate effort to distract from alternative explanations for conspiracy theories, only that I consider it reasonable to assume that the hegemonic institutions of contemporary societies are unable to conceive of alternative explanations for the problem of conspiracy theorising if it is at odds with their ideological positions.

I argue that this, in turn, results in a cyclical relationship between the IDP and counter-disinformation activities: the IDP suggests that there is a crisis of falsehoods causing major social problems, so institutions engage in counter-falsehood activities. These counter-falsehood activities in turn generate evidence that there is indeed a crisis of disordered information, thus perpetuating the cycle. This is the first of many circular relationships I will describe in this thesis, and it is an important one to bear in mind as you continue reading it.

The introduction to this literature review showed that I aimed to offer a review of the literature surrounding information disorder and its associated concepts in this chapter. I have shown that the literature surrounding misinformation, disinformation, fake news, post-truth and infodemics often have either inconsistent or ineffective definitions. However, they can, I argue, impart certain information about the cultures in which they

are used. These include, for example, the fear of novel technologies implied by ‘fake news’, the paranoia suggested by ‘disinformation’ and the false-golden ageism of ‘post-truth’. Yet taken together, the major argument that seems to emerge is that this contemporary fascination with the IDP and its related concepts is a relatively recent phenomenon. It emerges as a simplistic framework for explaining away the complex social phenomena which might lead to someone believing and acting in unexpected ways from the point of view of the dominant institutions of society. To put it another way, it is easier (and perhaps, more profitable) to blame, say, anti-vaccine beliefs on ‘fake news’, rather than to investigate the broader social contexts which might lead an individual to hold such beliefs.

The problem, therefore, is the lack of attention given to other possible causes of misbeliefs about the Covid-19 pandemic. Birchall and Knight (2023, pp. 184) have suggested several potential solutions to pandemic conspiracy thinking that “any proposed solution must pay adequate attention to”, including, *inter alia*, structural contexts that may draw misbelievers in, the kinds of Discourse, knowledge and interpretation that conspiracy theories provide and how the characteristics of conspiracy thinking have changed historically. This is an important argument, and this thesis is structured such that these largely ignored aspects of conspiracy culture may be given adequate attention.

All this forms the foundations of my investigation in this thesis of whether those institutions wedded to the IDP can offer a representation of the Covid conspiracy theorist that accounts for the ways in which these individuals understand themselves and their position in the world. It is for this reason that my research questions consider differing Discourses of the Covid misbeliever: it is time to begin comparing the ways in which those designated conspiracy theorists in mainstream institutional constructions are understood to the ways in which they understand themselves.

Overall, this chapter has laid the groundwork for the theoretical approach I take to my own research detailed in the subsequent chapter, as well as elucidating the premise introduced in Chapter 1.

Chapter 3: Theory- Discourse, Subjectivity and the Covid misbeliever

Chapter 3 Abstract

This Chapter explains the theoretical concepts that will be used in the remainder of this thesis. It explains my interpretation of the dominant perspective of Covid-19 as a 'Discourse' emerging from the connections of power and knowledge, and conspiratorial perspectives on Covid as a 'counter-Discourse'. Crucially, this chapter introduces the Covid conspiracy theorist (or 'misbeliever') as a subjectivity which emerges from these Discourses, a central object of study in this thesis, as well as the role of 'text' in identifying the construction of this subject.

3.1: Introduction

The previous chapter presented a narrative literature review which sought to explain one of the central theoretical concepts I created for this thesis: the Information Disorder Paradigm (IDP). This is the name that I give to the contemporary preoccupation with false information in public life which I argue was caused by a set of electoral shocks in the mid-2010s. Based on the relevant literature, I argued that Wardle and Derakhshan's (2017) concept of 'information disorder', an umbrella term for dis-, mis- and mal-information, represented a novel interpretative paradigm on false information. However, several problems were embedded within the linguistic terms used to describe these phenomena, notably a degree of unwarranted technological determinism and false novelty surrounding social media and false information. In addition, I argued that the promotion of the IDP, deliberately or otherwise, serves the interests of a counter-falsehood industrial complex and the ideological perspectives of powerful institutions.

The question I turn to in this chapter are the systems of thought – or *Discourses* – which I argue are the epistemological backgrounds out of which conceptual formulations which aim to explain conspiracy theorists, such as the IDP, emerge. Crucially, I focus on how Discourses produce and reproduce identities – or *subjectivities* – we assign to one another, such as conspiracy theorist. It draws heavily on the work of Michel Foucault, for whom,

“our ideas about people are different in different socio-historical periods, making the ideas that we think of as “truths” more a set of socially accepted ideas about the world within a particular cultural moment. Such ideas circulate between people, and people use them to think, shaping their innermost thoughts and feelings. From this standpoint, how we understand ourselves is produced through socially shared forms of sense-making. Such sense-making is often tied to institutional power.”

(Riley et al., 2022, pp. 285)

As we shall see, the question of “how we understand ourselves” is particularly important to answering my research questions, since self-concept also has implications for how we understand and interpret others. It can help us understand, for example, how those who consider themselves not to be Covid conspiracy theorists interpret the behaviour of those who they do categorise as such.

This chapter puts forward the Foucauldian-inspired theoretical perspective that this thesis uses as its ontological and epistemological basis. This approach is focussed on the role that power plays in the interpretation of the social problem of Covid misbeliefs. Crucially, this chapter demonstrates the value of understanding the Covid misbeliever as a subjectivity which is shaped by power, knowledge and perceptions of oneself and others.

To this end, this chapter proceeds as follows: The chapter opens with an aside on why I will use the term ‘Covid misbeliever’ instead of ‘conspiracy theorist’ moving forward. Next, I offer a detailed explanation of the Foucauldian notion of ‘Discourse’ and its relevance to the present study. This leads to a section explaining the relationship between power and knowledge in this epistemological perspective. The subsequent section explains how Discourses (re)produce subjectivities such as the ‘Covid misbeliever’ and how the concept of performativity can help to understand this process. Finally, I argue that texts are the vectors through which Discourses express power, and how texts that are in opposition to the Discourse can lead to the emergence of a counter-Discourse. I conclude with a commentary on how this perspective informs the subsequent methodology chapter.

3.2: Note on the Covid conspiracy theorist and the Covid misbeliever.

Hereafter, I will be using the term ‘Covid misbeliever’ rather than ‘Covid conspiracy theorist’ to refer to those individuals possessing or promoting non-mainstream ideas about SARS-nCoV-2 and its related policy responses. By ‘misbeliever’ I do not refer solely to those who do not believe that the virus or illness exists, but those who *misbelieve* substantial aspects of the dominant interpretation (or *Discourse*) of the Covid pandemic as a whole, including the policies, practices and virology surrounding it. Thus, ‘belief’ in this context refers to what an individual holds to be true, and a misbeliever is one who holds certain truths which are at odds with those dominant understandings. Granted, this potentially confusing term is not ideal, but I cannot identify an alternative which better embodies this concept. There are several reasons for choosing ‘misbeliever’ to refer to such individuals over ‘conspiracy theorist’. Firstly, as Chapters 5 and 6 will show, some of these unconventional beliefs, while harmful, do not necessarily imply the belief in conspirators pulling the strings. To call all of these individuals ‘conspiracy theorists’ would therefore be a misnomer, since in this understanding, all Covid conspiracy theorists are Covid misbelievers, but not all Covid misbelievers are Covid conspiracy theorists.

Moreover, I seek to avoid the cultural connotations which are often attached to the term ‘conspiracy theorist’. One of the major themes running through this thesis is the undoing of certain assumptions (or perhaps, stereotypes and tropes) of those individuals popularly called conspiracy theorists. To be sure, I am not attempting to exonerate or support them: I have already covered the harms that their beliefs have, and perhaps will yet, lead to. My point, as this chapter will show, is that while a researcher can never be fully dispassionate (especially in interpretative research), I want to try to avoid the popular assumptions that are made about those with unconventional Covid beliefs. It seems to me that one method to do this is the avoidance of loaded descriptive terms like ‘conspiracy theorist’. While Birchall and Knight (2023) make a case for why the term ‘conspiracy theorist’ may yet be useful, such as that the term is widely used and, in some contexts, can become a mainstream version of events, for my purposes (i.e. researching claims about Covid in the UK), the term is too rooted in culturally-embedded ..assumptions about what it means to be a conspiracy theorist to be a useful term.

Thirdly, I need some term to refer to the abstract ‘social category’ that denotes those individuals who hold non-mainstream views. Put simply, it is improbable that an individual whose beliefs would popularly be called conspiratorial would call *themselves* a conspiracy theorist. Given that my research aims seek to understand both mainstream constructions of these individuals *and* their self-construction, I need to use a more neutral term to describe this category which is seldom used in the mainstream or by the ‘Covid misbelievers’ themselves (at the time of writing, searching “covid misbeliever” in quotation marks returns one result on Google). ‘Misbeliever’ is a far from perfect term since it still implies an agentic choice to misbelieve, which is not necessarily present. Additionally, I had some concerns about my use of the word due to its potential mis-association with antisemitism upon noting its use in a monologue by Shylock in *Merchant of Venice*¹³. But in this context, I believe it is clear that by ‘Covid misbeliever’ I am referring to one who holds beliefs about Covid and its official responses that are at odds with its mainstream conceptualisation: those who *misbelieve* (consciously or not) the official accounts of the pandemic.

With this considered, I now turn to how we can use the concept of *Discourse* to understand these Covid misbelievers.

3.3: Discourse and Public Health

We can understand the IDP as the linguistic embodiment of contemporary preoccupations with false information and misbeliefs. That is, it is a tool, or, as we shall see, *dividing practice*, which categorises certain information as true or false, illegitimate or valid, fake or real and so on. But these categorisations of claims to knowledge did not emerge *ex nihilo*. Indeed, I have already argued that IDP emerged largely as a response to certain political upsets in the English-speaking world in the mid-2010s. If such moments of major uncertainty in the world can trigger the emergence of a paradigmatic shifts so vast their long shadows encroach far into future commentary (including this thesis), the researcher must account for the social processes that bring about these changes in how we think about and value knowledge. They must account for *Discourses*.

¹³ In Act 1 Scene 3, Shylock’s monologue includes the lines, “You call me misbeliever, cut-throat dog/And spit upon my Jewish gaberdine” (Shakespeare, 2018 [1600])

Chapter 1 briefly introduced the concept of Discourse in the Foucauldian sense that I describe it here. This sense of the word, as we shall see, is concerned with the relationship between power and claims to knowledge. As such, it provides a useful epistemological framework from which to approach my research questions, since it aids in understanding how some claims to knowledge about Covid are categorised as legitimate and others as illegitimate (or misbeliefs). A ‘Discourse’ in this sense refers to several concepts. On a basic level, it refers to a body of legitimised knowledge about a given topic or field which produces the categories of people and things it is about. For example, we might say that there is a ‘Covid public health Discourse’ which comprises of legitimised (i.e. ‘true’) knowledge about Covid, and that these claims to knowledge produce and reproduce our understanding of those objects. Yet Discourses are crucially also disciplinary, that is, they are not merely bodies of knowledge *per se*, but conceptualisations of truth and reality which determine who may act and how, the ways in which the world can be experienced and by whom and the norms and practices of a given era, among others.

For Foucault,

“systems of knowledge are governed by rules that determine the limits of thought and language within a given historical period. When referring to ‘discourse’, Foucault does not mean a particular instance of language use...but rules, divisions and systems of a particular body of knowledge”

(Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2017, pp. 114)

Jansen (2008, pp. 109) usefully adds,

“Discursive formation, in the sense of Foucault, has four indispensable characteristics; these are that statements refer to the same object, are enunciated in the same way, share a common system of conceptualisations and have similar subjects or theories.”

Yet the boundaries that limit what practices can be undertaken in a Discourse are subject to change over time (Howarth, 2002) and have the effect of producing and

reproducing the concepts which that field is concerned with while placing them within an ordered system (Foucault, 2002; Foucault, 2013). For example, the Covid public health discourse both (re)produces the legitimised methods of researching Covid and orders the value of those methods in terms of the quality of information they produce. As section 3.5 details, this process also engenders human subjectivities, that is, the social categories through which we interpret ourselves and each other. As Butler (2002, pp. 56)¹⁴ suggests, “we are all constituted within a broad range of subject positions, through which we move with more or less ease”. In other words, we occupy myriad positions (or ‘subjectivities’, as we shall see) in society which are the product of our relationships with the myriad Discourses we ‘move through’. For example, we may find ourselves the subjects of law, of education, of the family, et cetera, or some combination of various Discourses at once.

The reader will note that I have capitalised the word ‘Discourse’ throughout this thesis. The reason for this stylistic choice is primarily to signify that I am referring to Discourse in this Foucauldian sense, rather than the more everyday uses of the word ‘discourse’ or its other applications within philosophy. Indeed, the capitalisation is fitting since as we have seen, Discourse represents something much larger than lowercase-d discourse.

The *mainstream* Discourses in a given time or place produces the mainstream ontological and epistemological claim to the reality and truth of that time or place. This is because these emerge from mainstream institutions, such as the state, politics, Education, Law and so on. This is how, for example, even those who object to Covid vaccines recognise the sense that one is ‘supposed’ to have is to view vaccines positively and agree to take them (see Chapter 6), despite disagreeing with this view. Non-mainstream Discourses also exist, and these are crucial for the study at hand, but I shall wait until section 3.6 to discuss these as I must first establish what I mean when referring to mainstream (or ‘dominant’) Discourses. My use of the term ‘dominant Covid public health Discourse’ therefore denotes the mainstream Discourse emerging from the theory and practice of public health which existed during the time period that this thesis focusses on (2 February 2020- 5 May 2023). The period of this Discourse’s dominance

¹⁴ This reference is to Christopher Butler, not to be confused with the references to Judith Butler who is discussed later in this chapter.

may extend beyond this timeframe, but my argument is that it was consistent throughout this period.

The dominant Covid public health Discourse produces and maintains the boundaries of legitimate knowledge about the Covid pandemic: that only knowledge produced in specific ways by specific individuals is acceptable within the Discourse. For example, we may say that claims about the SARS-nCoV-2 virus that are the product of peer-reviewed, academic study are typically presented as acceptable knowledge within mainstream public health Discourse because this knowledge was produced by legitimate means. By contrast, a claim made about the virus by someone with, say, no scientific qualifications on a social media website does not count as valid knowledge because these claims were not produced by or for legitimate means. By producing this division between legitimate and illegitimate knowledge, it becomes possible to categorise individuals based on their beliefs, even if only in an abstract way. Individuals in this Discourse can be categorised in terms of their relationship to the mainstream dominant Covid public health Discourse: to reject or otherwise misbelieve it is to be transformed, or to transform oneself, into a Covid misbeliever.

Of course, public health is more complex than one unified and agreed-upon set of concepts and practices. Even within these legitimised sources of knowledge, there is considerable uncertainty and debate around various aspects of Covid and SARS-nCoV-2, including the virus' origin (van Helden et al., 2021), the effectiveness of mask-wearing for the prevention of its spread (Raymond, 2020) and disease modelling methodologies (Pearce, 2020). But these uncertainties are still legitimised within the Discourse of mainstream public health, since this Discourse produces and reproduces the boundaries of legitimate enquiry. In other words, the boundaries of dominant public health Discourses govern what questions it is possible to ask, how to research those questions and how the conclusions of that research can be presented. For example, Hunter and Brainard (2024), an academic study using empirical methods which argues that there was little efficacy of mask wearing to prevent the spread of the Omicron variant of SARS-nCoV-2 compared with its effectiveness for the Delta variant as a Covid prevention strategy, may be at odds with much of the Covid public health consensus. Nevertheless, its claims are still legitimate knowledge within this Discourse because this

knowledge was produced by Discursively legitimised individuals (academics) using legitimate methods (meta-regression of Covid test results) and presented in a legitimate format (peer-reviewed journal article). Therefore, even where there are uncertainties or disagreements within a given Discourse, so long as those disagreements fall within the epistemological boundaries of that Discourse, they are still legitimate. One can still be ‘inside’ the Discourse as a non-misbeliever even when presenting unpopular ideas, so long as those ideas are created and presented in ways rendered legitimate under the dominant Covid public health Discourse.

It could be argued that the above discussion of Discourse is very similar to my description of a ‘paradigm’ in Chapter 1. However, I argue that there are important differences between these concepts. The Kuhnian paradigm and Foucauldian Discourse are both characterised by representing a normal or legitimised means of engaging with a field which are liable to change and develop with time. As Wight (2018, pp. 22) argues, “[a]nyone with an awareness of the work of Thomas Kuhn...[and] Michel Foucault...will know that facts are always contestable”. The big difference, I argue, is the role of human agency in these theories. Paradigms are the product of the consensus choice of relevant individuals “especially in terms of scientific models” (James, 2005, pp. 16). A defining feature of the paradigm is that “its achievement was sufficiently unprecedented to attract an enduring group of adherents from competing modes of scientific activity” (Kuhn, 2012, pp. 10). Thus, a paradigm is the product of the choices of individuals to support it and abandon its alternatives; it is an epistemology based on consensus.

By contrast, Discourses, as we have already seen, are the product of a symbiotic relationship between power and knowledge, rather than a necessarily conscious choice to support them. Individuals are certainly part of Discourses as well as influenced by them, but where the paradigm is the product of the authority of an intellectual consensus, Discourses are the product of a more dispersed kind of power, for “power is everywhere...because it comes from everywhere” (Foucault, 2020, pp. 93). In other words, for Foucault, power is not an attribute one has (Mark, 2013), such as the power to embrace a paradigm. Instead, power comes from the Discourse through its capacity to legitimise or deligitimise claims to knowledge. By contrast, I argue that paradigms can only be formed by knowledge already classified as legitimate. A Discourse therefore

delimits what claims to knowledge can be made which count as legitimate, whereas a paradigm refers to more codified theories and methods of knowledge production *within* a Discourse. A Discourse and a paradigm can therefore coexist, but paradigms can only exist *within* Discourses, since alternative paradigms can also only be the product of already legitimised knowledge-producing practices. Additionally, I argue that paradigms can be shared between Discourses. For example, the Information Disorder Paradigm which I discussed at length in Chapter 2 can be seen as being shared across multiple mainstream Discourses such as Politics, International Affairs and crucially for this thesis, public health. Thus, I argue that the Information Disorder Paradigm exists *within* the dominant Covid Discourse and is therefore shaped by it.

To summarise, a Discourse is a body of knowledge about a given topic which exists within a certain context of time and place. The power of the Discourse is the binary delineation between legitimate and illegitimate knowledge claims about the topic in question. The effect of this division is the implicit categorisation of individuals based on whether their beliefs are legitimate or illegitimate- their *subjectivity*. Subjectivities are the binary social categories an individual is placed into based on whether their knowledge claims are legitimate according to the Discourse. By binary, I do not mean that there are only two subjectivities, but that an individual can only be categorised as *being* or *not being* a specific subjectivity. i.e. you either *are* a Covid misbeliever or *are not* and are therefore a Covid non-misbeliever. Thus, I argue that the Discourse on Covid public health delineates Covid misbelievers and non-misbelievers based on the beliefs that an individual holds.

This has only been a brief introductory outline to my broader theoretical argument. I now turn to a more detailed explanation of the process of Discursive formation and subjectivity, and why this conceptualisation enables me to reach my research aims. In the next section, I analyse the capacity of Discourse to change and evolve through history and location.

3.4: Power, Knowledge and Covid-19

The Covid misbeliever is not a neutral or agreed upon category, it is produced by the dominant Covid public health Discourse. McNamara (2019, pp. 9) summarises the effects of Discourse on subjectivity as follows:

“Discourses construct the terms in which each of us is seen, because discourses offer us ways of seeing each other as belonging or not belonging to the social categories which are the very subject of the discourse.”

As noted, one conceptualisation of Discourse might be “rules, divisions and systems of a particular body of knowledge” (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2017, pp. 114). These structures often allow us to identify what practices and knowledge claims are legitimate, and which are not. Thus, it is generally the case that a claim made outside of such a system can be categorised as a false claim, or perhaps, a misbelief.

Of course, this delineation is not always so clear cut. Consider, for example, the ‘Eat Out to Help Out’ Scheme (EOHO) in the UK, wherein Monday to Wednesday from 3-31 August 2020, certain food and drink costs were subsidised by 50% at participating restaurants to encourage demand during the pandemic (Fetzer, 2022). The UK government implemented the scheme despite not consulting scientists before its announcement (Triggle & Reed, 2023) with a scientist from the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) stating that had he been consulted, he would have argued that it was a “spectacularly stupid idea and an obscene way to spend public money” (Edmunds, in McKie & Helm, 2023). Indeed, Fetzer’s (2022, pp. 1216) analysis suggests that it “may have been responsible for between 8%–17% of all newly detected COVID-19 infections (and likely many more non-detected asymptomatic infections) in late summer [2020]”. Nevertheless, as far as I am aware, the political figures behind EOHO, despite acting at odds with dominant Covid Discourses, have not been treated as misbelievers *per se*. This, I argue, is because they were part of a mainstream institution, government and politics, therefore lending them a position of legitimacy within the Discourse, even if their actions were not the product of legitimised knowledge. Thus, while I argue that it is often the case that claims made outside of the Discourse become categorised as misbeliefs, this is not *always* the case.

Another complication is the previously noted historical contingency of the ontology represented by a Discourse (Oksala, 2010). In other words, the 'reality' presented by a Discourse is subject to change over time. This can be observed within the history of pandemic knowledge and practices. For example, although public health in the modern, institutionalised sense of the term did not exist in the Middle Ages, we can observe that during the 'Black Death' pandemics, responses were often rooted in religious explanations for the disease. During the Black Death, "[a]ll contemporary commentators were agreed that the plague was an act of God, sent to punish mankind" (Horrox, 2013, pp. 95). Some of the preventative practices were therefore centred around religion, such as how, "[i]n England, Edward III instructed the Archbishop of Canterbury to order prayers throughout his province" as a means of warding off the disease (Horrox, 2013, pp. 95). In an abstract sense, prayer might be described as having been a legitimised public health measure in the Middle Ages because disease as an act of God was a legitimised knowledge claim. Yet over the centuries, this religion-based public health Discourse and practice would evolve into one centred around the natural sciences. This is perhaps best emblemised by John Snow's *On the Mode of Communication of Cholera* during the pandemics of that disease in the 19th century, which demonstrated its waterborne transmission in London (Young, 2004). Here, we can see a vast transformation in what constituted legitimate public health beliefs and practices, as well as noticing the immense scale of the timeframe in which such evolutions occur (centuries). We can also observe how subjectivising practices of public health change who is classed as a misbeliever and who is not. If, for example, an individual in England today were to advocate prayer as a means of countering Covid, we can reasonably assume that they would be subjectivised as a misbeliever within the present public health Discourse of the UK.

Yet even within the short period that SARS-nCoV-2 has been with us, certain ideas have 'switched sides' between misbeliefs and valid knowledge about the disease. For example, there is a substantial controversy over whether the hypothesis that the virus leaked from a lab constitutes a conspiracy theory or a genuine possibility for the virus' origin (BBC News, 2023; Hiltzik, 2023; Yoo, 2025). This has meant that, depending on the contexts of time and place, one who believes that the virus leaked from a lab could either

be a misbeliever or a non-misbeliever. The example of the lab leak theory's changing legitimacy demonstrates another important point about subjectivity: an individual's subjective status is not located 'within' them but is the product of the external context of time and place. We may possess our conscious sense of a continuous 'self' or 'identity', but our subjectivities are contingent on time and place.

This becomes complicated further when events occur that might partially vindicate the unfounded arguments of misbelievers. As Chapter 6 will show, a common refrain among those objecting to the use of Covid vaccines is the (inadequately evidenced) claim that they are especially harmful to children and young people. In early 2021, the UK decided that under 30s previously offered the Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine, which was approved in December 2020 (Department of Health and Social Care, 2021), would be offered an alternative due to concerns surrounding a link between it and rare cases of blood clots in younger recipients (Boseley & Boffey, 2021; Patterson & Pertwee, 2021). Thus, the belief that Covid vaccines harm the young especially *did* come to receive *some* evidence within the dominant Discourse. Yet these original anti-vaccine beliefs around children coming to harm remain misbeliefs, I argue, because unlike the observations that led to changes in the administering of the AstraZeneca vaccine, the initial claim that the young are at risk from vaccines was reached by methods illegitimate within the dominant Covid Discourse. Once again, discursive legitimacy is not a case of merely making the same knowledge claims as are powerful in the mainstream Discourse: it is a broader epistemology which has implications for *how* knowledge is produced.

To understand how Discourses engender legitimacy we must return to Foucault. For Foucault (1991, pp. 27), knowledge and power are inextricably connected:

“power and knowledge directly imply one another...there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations”

Discourses are the product of this nexus of power and knowledge: the power of a discourse (re)produces the boundaries of what constitutes valid knowledge within a field of study, while this knowledge maintains the power of the Discourse. We can apply this to the earlier example by saying that Covid public health (“a field of knowledge”) governs

the boundaries of acceptable Covid beliefs (a form of “power”) which in turn reinforces the field of public health, et cetera.

This becomes easier to understand when we consider some of the nuances of meaning here that are lost in the translation of Foucault from French into English. In his original texts, that which is translated into English as “power” and “knowledge” are typically *pouvoir* and *savoir* respectively in the original French. There is a specificity in these terms that is lost in English. ‘Pouvoir’ refers to power the sense of possessing the capacity or ability to do something (Hegy, 1974), rather than power as domination or control. ‘Savoir’ similarly refers to a specific type of knowledge differentiated from *connaissance*. Sheridan-Smith states in his translation of Foucault’s *The Archaeology of Knowledge*,

“The English ‘knowledge’ translates the French ‘connaissance’ and ‘savoir’. Connaissance refers here to a particular corpus of knowledge, a particular discipline – biology or economics, for example. Savoir, which is usually defined as knowledge in general, the totality of connaissances, is used by Foucault in an underlying, rather than an overall, way”

(in: Foucault, 2013, pp. 16)

Now, we can see that the Covid public health Discourse is a kind of underlying knowledge (*savoir*) which governs the possibilities (*pouvoir*) of what it is possible to legitimately say about Covid. This is particularly pertinent to Foucault’s (2003, pp. 29) argument that “power is not something that is divided between those who have it and hold it exclusively, and those who do not have it and are subject to it...power passes through individuals. It is not applied to them”. Power is therefore an effect of discursive knowledge, rather than an act of force by one or more individuals against others.

It is important to add here that to say that the public health Discourse is a product of power-knowledge relations is not to say that it is not useful and effective or that it should be disregarded. I must clarify that applying Foucauldian concepts to public health is not an endorsement of abandoning science-led public health measures. This is important because Foucault is often labelled a ‘postmodernist’, despite ostensibly eschewing this label (Burrell, 1998). ‘Postmodernism’ is a somewhat ambiguous term, though perhaps most famously defined by Lyotard (1984, pp. xxiv) as “incredulity towards

metanarratives”, or, as Julian (2006, pp. 285) elucidates, “suspicion about any narrative purporting to explain or represent”. Postmodernism is also frequently blamed for the emergence of ‘post-truth’ (see Chapter 2). At least two of the numerous non-fiction books titled “post-truth” directly blame their eponymous concept on postmodernism (Martin, 2019) and a range of other outlets and public figures have suggested similar (Crimley & Chatterje-Doody, 2019; Hanlon, 2018). Indeed, Liz Truss, the then Equalities Minister and later Prime Minister of the UK, argued in 2020 that “postmodernist philosophy – pioneered by Foucault – put societal power structures and labels ahead of individuals and their endeavours. In this school of thought there is no space for evidence...truth and morality are all relative” (Centre for Policy Studies, 2020). Indeed, this is in addition to negative references to Foucault in countless other culture war issues (Malešević, 2022). My arguments have, I hope, demonstrated the misrepresentations (dare I say, ‘misinformation’?) within claims such as these. The Foucauldian concept of Discourse,

“is not some sort of mindless relativism nor a nihilistic advocacy that “anything goes.”... what is involved here is recognition that there is no neutral asocial, acultural, or apolitical vantage point from we can judge the validity of one position over another.”

(Bracken, 2002, pp. 187)

Therefore, when I discuss a mainstream public health Discourse, this is not an attack on its uses or its value as a means of dealing with the problem of Covid or its associated misbeliefs. Instead, I am drawing attention to the role that power plays in how we interpret this issue and the implications it has for studies aiming to develop an understanding of it, including those in this thesis.

Alongside the introduction of the concepts of Discourse and power in public health, my purpose here has also been, in an oblique way, to introduce my argument for the impossibility of true objectivity in research which I discuss further in Chapter 4. My position is that there is no space ‘outside’ Discourses from which a researcher can study, so it is better to reflexively acknowledge that we are all subjects of discursive power than attempt to claim some universal and incontrovertible truth about the world.

Having now established my argument for why the Covid misbeliever as a social category is the product of the dominant Covid public health Discourse, the next question I seek to answer is *how* Discourses transform individuals into subjects

3.5: Covid-19 and the ‘cycle of subjectivity’

Like ‘Discourse’, the concept of subjectification was also briefly introduced in Chapter 1. I noted that the words ‘subjectivity’ and ‘identity’, while referring to a similar concept, differ in their connotations. For Foucault, ‘subjectification’ relies on the *double-entendre* of the word ‘subject’: to be “subject to someone else by control and dependence, and tied to his own identity by conscience or self-knowledge” (Foucault, 2016, pp. 212). As May (2014, pp. 496) clarifies, Foucault refers on one hand to “the subject as a center of experience...[o]n the other hand, he refers to political subjugation as a mode of having power exercised over oneself”; that the “historical development of the subject of experience is at the same time the formation of someone who is politically subjected or subjugated”. Recalling that Foucault is referring to power in the sense of *pouvoir*, we can see that even where one has the agency to choose their subjectivity, the *ability to* navigate that subjectivity is constrained (or *subjugated*) by the boundaries of a Discourse.

To speak of the Covid misbeliever as a subject, then, is to refer to it both as a social category and as a product of the power of the dominant Covid public health Discourse. This is not a value judgement: subjugation in this context does not refer to being a victim of power, but to having one’s subjectivity shaped by it. The next question to address, then, is how the formation of subjects occurs. What are the processes by which an individual finds themselves either a Covid misbeliever or non-misbeliever?

Subjectification is a verb and not a noun: it is a continuous process rather than the product of that process. Now, I shall turn to the theories which I argue best explain it for my purposes. It is commonplace for theoretical texts discussing subjectivity to invoke Louis Althusser’s concept of *interpellation* (e.g., Locke (2004); McNamara (2019)). As a Marxist, Althusser was writing from an intellectual tradition which, unlike Foucault’s conceptualisation, views power as something concentrated in the hands of the ruling class, rather than dispersed through Discourses. It would, however, be remiss to omit

interpellation entirely from this discussion, since it sets the scene for how a Foucauldian understanding of subjectivity differs from it and why I have selected not to follow this perspective in this thesis.

Interpellation refers to a process of the ‘hailing’ into existence of a subject by an ideological practice which calls on them to accept a subjectivity (Althusser, 2001; Locke, 2004). Consider an individual who attended an anti-lockdown protest during a Covid lockdown. We might say that the protest was ‘hailing’ the individual to the subjectivity of Covid misbeliever, and that by attending it, they accepted the ‘call’, in so doing transforming themselves into a Covid misbeliever. To explain this even further, you, the individual reading this text, have transformed yourself into a subject by the mere act of reading these words. You have become the subject of the ideology within my writing even if you disagree with it, since by choosing to read these words, you have accepted that this thesis is worth engaging with for one reason or another, and that therefore the ideology embodied in my writing matters for you. You have accepted the call of the ideology embedded in this thesis to transform you into a subject of it.

The problem with inserting this notion into my prior theoretical arguments as-is is that this conceptualisation locates power within ideology, rather than Discourse. This would not fit well into a Foucauldian conceptualisation because, as Benwell and Stokoe (2006, pp. 30, emphasis original) suggest, “Foucault went further than Althusser in attempting to decentre or even erase the individual subject by focussing not so much upon the *process of identification*, as upon the actual discourses presumed to form the basis of subjectivity”. Moreover, as Butler (1997, pp. 95) notes, [t]he one who is hailed may fail to hear, misread the call, turn the other way, answer to another name, insist on not being addressed that way”. Interpellation conceives of subjectivity as being like a vampire: an ideological status only able to enter the threshold of an individual’s self-concept if invited in.

My view, however, is that an individual’s subjectivity is the response that is inevitably triggered in recognising their subject position within a Discourse. In other words, rather than the Discourse calling on an individual to accept a subjectivity, they are placed within a given subjectivity based on their knowledge claims about the topic of the Discourse, and their *performative* response to this positioning constitutes their subjectivity. For

example, upon becoming aware that their knowledge claims about Covid are delegitimised within dominant Covid public health Discourse, whatever response the individual has to that positioning constitutes their subjectivity in some way, whether this is merely sighing and ignoring it or partaking in Covid conspiracy protests. When I use ‘Performativity’¹⁵ in this sense, I am suggesting that subjectivity is a continuous performance within the constraints of a Discourse; it is the performance which produces that subjectivity, and thus a person’s subjectivity is not merely given, but the product of a negotiation between themselves and the Discourse, a view inspired by my readings of Butler (2006) and Loxley (2007). Crucially, this performance is not necessarily the product of conscious choice to ‘perform’ but refers more generally to the behaviours associated with a subjectivity.

My formulation of subjectivity here is that the mere consciousness of one’s positioning within a Discourse unavoidably triggers a performative response, which in turn shapes the broader constitution of that subjectivity. As Arribas-Ayllon and Walkerdine (2017, pp. 117) argue,

“In the first instance, subjects are constituted through technologies of domination by acts of ‘subjection’, but they are also constituted by working on the self through acts of ‘subjectification’”

For example, in individual discovering that their view that, say, Covid vaccinations do more harm than good places them within the subjugated position of ‘Covid misbeliever’ will inevitably cause some performative response. Some of these responses may be subtle: simply ignoring this positioning, becoming frustrated, or even reconsidering their perspective in an effort to ‘escape’ this subjectivity. Others will be more overt: publishing articles stating their point of view, protesting against vaccines in public, discouraging vaccine uptake among their peers, et cetera. Each of these are performative responses which constitute subjectivities, and some kind of performative response to the recognition of one’s discursive positioning are unavoidable. Simply being conscious of

¹⁵ Butler uses this formulation of performativity in relation to gender as a subjectivity, though I argue that this theory can be applied to all discursive subjectivities.

one's own positioning within a Discourse triggers an unavoidable performative response, engendering a subjectivity.

I have also begun to allude here to the importance of *spectacle* to my conceptualisation of subjectivity. This is spectacle as conceived by Guy Debord: "a social relation between people that is mediated by images" in which "[f]ragmented views of reality regroup themselves into a new unity as a separate pseudoworld" (Debord, 2021, pp. 1-2). Images, in this case, do not necessarily refer to literal pictorial representations, but an idea of what phenomena are 'like' which is not necessarily connected to a material observation of those phenomena. I argue that subjectivities are spectacles in this sense, in that they are an idea of what certain discursively constructed categories of people (i.e., subjectivities) are 'like', becoming a 'pseudo-world' in which a person's subjectivity is more real than their personal identity. In turn, the more 'spectacular' the performance of a subjectivity, the more its image becomes circulated within societies.

It is for this reason that the most 'spectacular' performative responses to being subjectivised as a Covid misbeliever, even if only performed by a minority, are those that form the popular public conceptualisation of the Covid misbeliever: as one who burns 5G masts, invades hospitals, takes ivermectin as a Covid treatment and so on. More subtle performances of the Covid misbeliever subjectivity are often excluded from this image. This, I argue, is the case for all subjectivities. On the other binary pole, consider how the image of the Covid non-misbeliever is one who supports NHS workers, is literally in media imagery queueing to be vaccinated against the virus and so on. Indeed, perhaps the lack of in-person communication during the height of the pandemic and dependence on mass media meant that, maybe in a more literal sense than Debord (2021, pp. 1) intended, "[e]verything that was directly lived has receded into a representation".

In this sense, a subjectivity in this formulation is 'hyperreal'. By this, I refer to Baudrillard's argument that "[o]ur virtual has definitively overtaken the actual...[w]e are no longer in a logic of a passage from the virtual to the actual, but in a hyperrealist logic of the deterrence of the real by the virtual" (Baudrillard, 1995, pp. 27). In other words, there need be no material 'actuality' to a given subjectivity, only an abstract sense of what a certain group of people are 'like' which proceeds from these 'virtual' conceptualisations. By understanding the Covid misbeliever as being at least in part a

hyperreal product of spectacular representations, we can understand how frameworks such as the Information Disorder Paradigm might misrepresent how those individuals who hold false Covid beliefs conceptualise themselves.

It is important to note here that this subjectivity is not *solely* hyperreal: the behaviour and actions of individuals subjectivised as such in dominant Discourses is also important for our understanding of this subjectivity. My purpose here is only to draw attention to the ways in which, in my view, aspects of a given subjectivity need not necessarily be based on materially observable behaviour. Thus, while my empirical research presented in Chapters 5 and 6 considers this more mediated angle on the Covid misbeliever subjectivity, there are also other important dimensions to the study of subjectivity.

In addition, it is also important to note the ways in which Foucault (1982) himself conceptualised subjectification. In *The Subject and Power*, Foucault refers to three processes by which subjectification occurs, which he confusingly terms “modes of objectification which transform human beings into subjects”:

- “[M]odes of inquiry which try to give themselves the status of sciences” (Foucault, 1982, pp. 777). For a body of knowledge to exist, it must identify the subjects about which it is concerned. In identifying these subjects, a Discourse *produces* them. For example, the institution of health generally identifies which treatments for Covid are legitimate and which are not within the dominant Covid Discourse. Those individuals who knowingly choose those deligitimised treatments are typically transformed into Covid misbelievers. Thus, in trying to give itself scientific status, a Discourse must necessarily (re)produce subjects, even if this is unintentional.
- “[W]hat I shall call “dividing practices.” The subject is either divided inside himself or divided from others” (Foucault, 1982, pp. 777-778). These are discursive practices which place someone in one or another binary category. For example, if we consider ‘fact checking’ to be a practice of the dominant Covid public health Discourse, by labelling a given piece of information about Covid as

false or true the individual who made this knowledge claim is divided into the subjectivity of Covid misbeliever or non-misbeliever respectively.

- “[T]he way a human being turns himself into a subject” by recognising themselves as such (Foucault, 1982, pp. 778). This seems to align with my earlier perspective wherein an individual’s subjectivity is a product of their recognition of their discursive positioning.

Foucault presents these three ideas as separate processes, though it seems to me that there is too much overlap for them to be fully distinct. Returning to an earlier example, we might argue that fact checking is simultaneously a discursive practice aimed at giving the Dominant Covid public health Discourse status as a field of knowledge yet is also a dividing practice which places someone within the category of either Covid misbeliever or non-believer. Indeed, it might even be understood as a call for the Covid misbeliever to turn themselves into a subject through the recognition of their own beliefs being the focus of the fact check. These three processes by which subjectification occur should therefore not be regarded as separate ‘paths’ to subjectification, but different aspects of a larger process. I find this description of subjectification convincing not because they offer three explanations for the subjectivising power of Discourse, but because they explain a broader process by which discursive power acts through individuals.

In addition, the concept of ‘dividing practices’ can be taken further with the assistance of one of Foucault’s contemporaries, Jacques Derrida. As noted, dividing practices, in my reading of Foucault at least, refer to the ways in which subjects constitute binaries, for example, the Covid misbeliever and the non-misbeliever. Of binaries, Derrida (1982, pp. 41, emphasis original) argues that “[i]n a classical philosophical opposition we are not dealing with the peaceful coexistence of a *vis-à-vis*, but rather with a violent hierarchy. One of the two terms governs the other (axiologically, logically, etc.), or has the upper hand”. Extrapolating this to the issue at hand, we could say that where a discourse produces a binary opposition such as Covid misbeliever/non-misbeliever, one is superior within that discourse. Thus, within the Dominant Covid public health Discourse, the non-misbeliever is a superior subject position to Covid misbeliever

because it is represented as superior within this discourse morally, intellectually, methodologically, and so on.

With all of this considered, I now present my model for how human beings are transformed into subjects which combines the thought of Foucault, Althusser, Butler and Derrida. This is a cyclical and self-reinforcing process, but for the purposes of simplifying its explanation, I present it as the following four-stage process which I term *the cycle of subjectivity*:

1. In establishing a legitimate body of knowledge about a given area, a Discourse produces various subjectivities. This is because to have a body of knowledge on a given topic, it is necessary to first establish which claims to knowledge are legitimate and which are not. For example, the Discourse of Covid public health comprises of legitimised knowledge, legitimised methods of producing (or ‘uncovering’) that knowledge, and legitimised (i.e., qualified) individuals who are permitted to produce knowledge about this topic. One who makes knowledge claims about public health during Covid that are not contained within this Discourse therefore is typically (though as we have established, not *inevitably*) transformed into a Covid misbeliever.
2. The practices that legitimise certain knowledge claims within a Discourse are *themselves* those dividing practices, which place the individual into one or another binary subjectivity. For example, fact checking as a discursive practice very directly states which knowledge claims about Covid are legitimate or illegitimate, thereby categorising individuals who believe in these claims as Covid misbelievers or non-misbelievers while simultaneously reinforcing the power of the Discourse (and, indeed, the ‘fact checker’ as a subjectivity).
3. This performative response is a negotiation of their subjectivity in response to their position within the Discourse, which itself constitutes their subjectivity. In a spectacle-focussed society, I argue that the most sensational performative responses come to engender the public consciousness of what it means to be one or another subject. For example, upon seeing that an online fact checking

article states that their Covid beliefs are illegitimate, the individual's reflexive response to this categorisation constitutes the meaning of 'Covid misbeliever' as a subjectivity. Some performances of 'Covid misbeliever' are subtle, such as sighing and clicking away from this article, but others will have more sensational responses, such as publicly arguing against the article on social media, the observation of which may come to represent the subjectivity of Covid misbeliever in public consciousness.

4. These sensational performances of subjectivity in turn shape the Discourse and its dividing practices, creating a feedback loop returning to stage 1. For example, observing the Covid misbeliever arguing against the categorisation of their knowledge claims as illegitimate might trigger non-misbelievers to perform their identities by calling for a further delegitimisation of these claims through new dividing practices. For example, demanding that the social media platform upon which the misbeliever is arguing censor those knowledge claims that have been delegitimised by the dominant Discourse.

This cyclical conceptualisation will be the premise upon which my arguments around subjectivity are based for the remainder of this thesis.

This section has presented my argument for how subjectivities are (re)produced by Discourses and mapped this onto the emergence of the Covid misbeliever as a subject of the Dominant Covid public health Discourse. The next section covers the final part of my model of subjectification: the vector through which subjectivities spread and the counter-Discourses of subjugated subjects.

3.6: Text and counter-Discourse

Texts, I argue, are the vector through which subjectivities are transmitted and negotiated. The word text typically suggests only the written word, but for our purposes, "[a] text is something that we make meaning from" (McKee, 2003, pp. 4). In other words, if something can be interpreted, it is a text. Indeed, this also means rethinking written text, since in this formulation, it is not merely the meaning of the words, but those words' presentation which has implications for how they might be interpreted. How texts are

delimited and separated from one another is not always clear (see discussion of intertextuality and context in Chapter 4), so to some extent, it is the researchers' responsibility to decide what constitutes a text, as I shall in later sections. For now, however, I wish to focus on the function of texts.

Texts are the vectors of subjectivities, I argue, because they allow Discourses to present a subject and for the individual to interpret their own subjectivity through it. A simple example of how a text might work in this way is in mass media. Without straying into the 'hypodermic needle' approach (see Chapter 2) media representations of certain social groups present a pre-made notion of what a certain subjectivity is 'like'. As noted, these representations are likely to be 'spectacular' and therefore might not reflect how an individual placed within that subjectivity sees themselves. For example, news coverage about Covid misbelievers who believe in a connection between 5G telecommunications and Covid may focus on the burning of 5G masts but omit discussion about, say, those misbelievers who purchase pseudoscientific 'anti-EMF' (Electromagnetic Field) products. Thus, an individual who believes in a connection between 5G and Covid enters a negotiation with the text to understand their own subjectivity through their performative response. The performance of an individual who agrees with the belief that 5G is linked to Covid but objects to mast-burning activities might be very different to one who supports this destruction, but both are different performances of the same subjectivity, since both are Covid misbelievers within the dominant Covid public health Discourse.

Of course, these performances of subjectivity are themselves something from which we can make meaning: they are *texts*. Fox (1997, pp. 32) offers the "subjective sense-of-self" as one example of a text, which I read as referring to that performance of subjectivity. We might argue that we can divide texts into two camps: discursive texts and performance texts. Discursive texts are those that are produced by the 'dividing practices' discussed in section 3.5, which place individuals into one or another subjectivity. Performance texts are the performances of those subjects from which meanings about that subjectivity can be drawn. Returning to the above example, the performative acts of burning 5G masts¹⁶

¹⁶ Bear in mind that 'performative' in this sense does not imply that those who burned telecommunications masts did not derive utility from it or believe that these masts were doing harm. Rather, any activity associated with one's subjectivities is a performance regardless of motivation.

were texts that made it possible to speak of Covid misbelievers as a category of people who might engage in such activities. Thus, the performance text feeds back into the Discourse's capacity to reproduce the subjectivity of Covid misbeliever. In this sense, I argue that there is a circular relationship between Discourse and subjectivity which is mediated by these two types of text, as noted in the below diagram (Figure 3:).

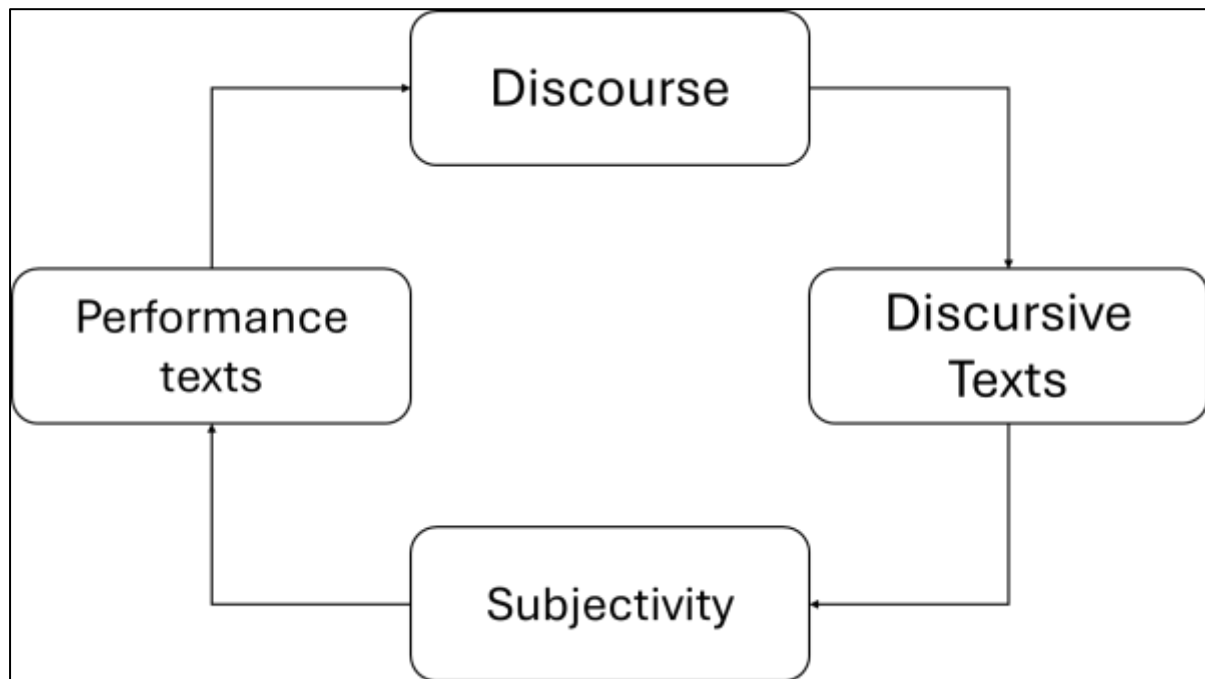


Figure 3: Visualisation of the circular relationship between Discourse and Subjectivity.

In this view, there really is no ‘outside-text’¹⁷ as Derrida famously argued (Derrida, 1976; Smith, 2005): all perceptions of one’s own identity (subjectivity) and those of others can only exist through the subjective and subjectivised interpretations of texts. Once again, we are reminded that there is no neutral position through which the analysis of social life can occur, and the task for the social researcher is to remain vigilant to their own positioning within Discourses. Moreover, it is important to highlight the role of *intertextuality* here. Intertextuality refers to “the process whereby one text plays upon

¹⁷ Derrida’s (1967, pp. 227, emphasis removed) phrase “il n’y a pas de hors-texte” is typically translated into English as “there is nothing outside of the text” including in Spivak’s English translation of *Of Grammatology*. See Smith (2005) for a compelling argument for why “no outside-text” better embodies Derrida’s original meaning.

other texts, in the endless referentiality of texts and other elements of cultural production” (Fox, 1997, pp. 32). Put simply, texts are not isolated from one another and as such, the meanings embodied within one never produce the ‘whole picture’ of a subjectivity that the interplay between them can. Thus, as Chapter 4 argues, some knowledge of both the cultural context in which a text is produced as well as the specific other texts being referenced within one text are necessary for an effective textual analysis.

My focus on performative texts here is because it is particularly useful for the study at hand. This is because, I argue, subjectivities that find themselves on the inferior end of the dividing practice, such as the Covid misbeliever, can, through their performative texts generate a *counter-Discourse*. Chapter 1 briefly introduced this concept. Counter-Discourse is “discourse against power” (Foucault & Deleuze, 1977, pp. 209) which I read as being the Discursive body of knowledge which those typically placed in inferior subject positions by mainstream Discourses form in opposition to those mainstream Discourses. This does not mean that counter-Discourses comprise merely of the negative space around a mainstream Discourse: they might even legitimise some of the same knowledge claims as the mainstream Discourse. Indeed, Foucault has argued that the very rules that appear to repress certain Discourses can instead *incite* them as the product of institutional Discourse (Foucault, 2020). Consider how, in a variety of different ways, the Covid misbeliever has become the subject of countless intersecting, opposing and amorphous Discourses of media, politics, law, education and many others. Thus, when I speak of a Discourse and an opposing counter-Discourse, I do not mean to suggest that they are monolithic. As Baaz and Lilja (2022, pp. 303) argue, “reversals must not be analysed as a strict binary concept between a cemented discourse and a counter-discourse.” Instead, ‘counter-Discourse’ denotes that this Discourse is formed *in* opposition to another Discourse, but not as *the* opposition. In the context of this thesis, what we are talking about here is the Discourse that emerges once the subjects on the inferior end of the binary produced by the Covid public health Discourse act for themselves, forming their own Discourse.

I argue that these counter-Discourses are brought about when the performative texts allow individuals classified within the inferior subjectivity to recognise one another and

their inferior subject position, which in turn permits the formation of their own body of knowledge whose legitimisation is subject to its own, separate rules. For example, Covid misbelievers have produced a variety of texts which allowed them to recognise each other through their performances of their subjectivity. Performative texts such as social media posts, public protest and the creation and distribution of offline leaflets (See below photographs, Figure 4 and Figure 5) and newspapers all allowed for the creation of what we might call a ‘deviant’ body of knowledge within which those categorised as Covid misbelievers within the mainstream dominant Covid public health Discourse would instead be the superior subjectivity. As with mainstream Discourses, there is not necessarily total agreement on what constitutes a legitimate knowledge claim within a counter-Discourse. As the findings in Chapters 5 and 6 will suggest, it is quite possible for two or more Covid misbelievers to even make contradictory knowledge claims within their counter-Discourse, since what matters is the mere presence of the performance of ‘Covid misbeliever’, rather than the content of that performance.



Figure 4: Photograph of a sticker in London (photograph my own).

This is a photograph of a sticker I saw in a public space in Central London, UK. It is also a useful demonstration of how text operates beyond mere words. The written text in this sticker is unrelated to Covid, and being mistrusting of the government is hardly an unusual perspective. However, the presentation of this image is an obvious parody of the signage used in then-Prime Minister Boris Johnson’s Covid briefings, seemingly implying that the ‘lies’ being alluded to relate to Covid in some way. What is odd is that I took this photograph in March 2025, at which time this sticker looked recently placed, yet by this time the Covid briefings were long since finished.



This photograph shows a gate vandalised in Chelmsford, Essex, UK to argue for a Covid misbelief. Note the implicit call for its reader to research 'Agenda 21'.

Figure 5: Photograph of a vandalised gate in Chelmsford (photograph my own).

To tie this all back to the ambitions of this thesis, what I am considering with this theoretical approach are two Discourses of the Covid pandemic. One, the dominant Covid Discourse produces texts through dividing practices which place individuals into either the subjectivity of Covid non-misbeliever or Covid misbeliever depending on their beliefs about the pandemic. In this Discourse, Covid non-misbelievers are superior (morally, intellectually, socially, et cetera) while misbelievers are inferior. Through certain performative texts, Covid misbelievers came to produce a counter-Discourse in opposition to the dominant Covid Discourse with its own claims to legitimate knowledge. In this Covid misbeliever counter-Discourse, it is the Covid misbeliever which is placed at the superior pole of the Covid misbeliever/non-misbeliever binary. This is the theoretical assumption of this thesis moving forward.

3.7: Chapter conclusion

I began this chapter by suggesting that the Information Disorder Paradigm was a product of mainstream Discourses. Based on the formulation of knowledge production I have described here, I argue that the IDP, in the context of Covid, is the product of the performative texts by non-misbelievers. Discourses “indicate the cultural DNA of our times and places; they provide the meanings that circulate in any society and furnish semantic content for the narratives we are told, the narratives we tell, and the narratives that tell us” (Fage-Butler, 2020, pp. 86). One such narrative, reproduced by the dominant Covid public health Discourse (as well as many other dominant Discourses) is the IDP: a

simple story which may partially explain some elements of the complex issue of Covid misbelief, but suppresses alternative possibilities to explain the problem. We can observe it being reproduced in the countless articles, papers and events centred around the dangers of false information, that sense that if we could but deal with this novel scourge of false information, humanity would be free from Covid misbelievers (and all other kinds of misbeliever, too).

Additionally, the notion that Covid misbelievers are the product of 'disordered' information can be read as a means by which those subjectivised as non-misbelievers maintain their position within the hierarchical Covid non-misbeliever/misbeliever binary through the implication that they are more knowledgeable or capable of assessing information than misbelievers. In brief, the IDP is a simplistic explanation of the complex issue of Covid misbelievers which serves to reinforce the superiority of the Covid non-misbeliever. Yet my view is that simple explanations for complex phenomena often hold back an effective understanding of social issues; Occam's razor may tempt us, but we must acknowledge that complex situations often have complex explanations.

This chapter has described the unwritten discursive rules which make models such as the IDP possible in Covid public health Discourses. It is the analysis of Discourse through its texts, however, which enables us to understand its operations. Cheek and Cheek (2008, pp. 356) suggest, quoting Philp (1990, pp. 69) we should ask "[w]hat rules allow for the construction of an explanatory map, model, or classificatory system for this text?". Thus, we must now ask what rules allow for the formation of Covid misbeliever?

This chapter has synthesised a range of theoretical arguments to explain my perspective on the issue of Covid misbelievers and to present the background to the approach that I take in the empirical study of this issue. By viewing the social category of 'Covid misbeliever' as a discursive subjectivity, it becomes possible to analyse the texts which reproduce this subject, and in turn, possible to answer my research questions. The next chapter covers the methodology of this thesis' original research and builds heavily on the theoretical foundations set by this chapter. I now turn to these methodological considerations, where the role of subjectivity, Discourse and text shall inform my novel approach to Foucauldian Discourse analysis.

Chapter 4: Methodology- Introducing Subject Position Analysis, a novel methodology

Chapter 4 Abstract

This Chapter builds on the theoretical perspectives introduced in its predecessor to explain the methodological choices which were taken for the two empirical studies in this thesis. I introduce 'Subject Position Analysis', a novel Discourse Analysis methodology which I created for this thesis, and its essential elements required for replication. Additionally, I explain all steps that I took in using this method, including the sampling strategy, justifications for texts sampled and the method for analysing the texts. This Chapter also contains introductions to these texts, namely, 'The Light', 'Full Fact', 'Channel 4 Fact Check' and 'BBC Verify'.

4.1: Chapter Introduction

So far, this thesis has achieved three things: it has introduced the problem of inadequate understanding of Covid misbelievers, offered a substantial review into what I have called the 'Information Disorder Paradigm' of Conspiracy Theory studies and explained the theoretical approach to the concept of the Covid misbeliever subjectivity which is the main focus of this work. My aim in this chapter is to build upon these foundations to explain how these ideas inform the methodological decisions I made in the empirical elements of this thesis.

At this point, it is useful to return to my research aims which I stated in Chapter 1. With the additional context of the theoretical considerations in Chapter 3, I can now rephrase them to better embody my ambitions for this thesis. To be sure, the research aims have not changed: I am merely clarifying them with the theoretical language of Chapter 3. They can therefore be read as follows:

- RA1: To compare the construction of the subjectivity of 'Covid misbeliever' in mainstream dominant UK Covid Discourse with its construction in the misbeliever counter-Discourse.
- RA2: To analyse what (if any) differences are present between these two constructions of the same subjectivity within a Discourse and its counter-

Discourse and what implications this has for future counter-conspiracy policy in public health Discourses.

Having rephrased these aims such, it is perhaps unsurprising that I will use Foucauldian-inspired methods to research and understand the Covid misbeliever within these two Discourses. It may displease the reader to learn that, within this ontological framework, misbeliefs about public health (or any concept emerging from mainstream Discourses) are inevitable. This is not a surrender to the problem, nor to claim that there is no purpose to pursuing solutions to harmful public health beliefs, only an acknowledgement that logically, every discursive knowledge claim will have opposite, deligitimised knowledge claims: one cannot exist without the others.

As such, I argue that conspiracy theory research should not seek a totalising solution to misbeliefs, since the potential to make a knowledge claim which is delegitimised within mainstream Discourses will always be present. Instead, the aim should be to understand misbelievers and the ways in which they conceptualise themselves, rather than their specific misbeliefs, to encourage healthier choices by these individuals. It seems to me that a misbelievers' conceptualisations of the world around them can become a part of their self-concept. Thus, to attack their beliefs might be perceived as an attack on *them*. What we need, however, is a way of communicating with these individuals in a manner which sees them as a whole person who, for one reason or another, has chosen to hold certain beliefs about Covid which are contrary to the mainstream. We need to consider the many different potential reasons someone may come to hold public health beliefs that may harm themselves and those around them. Yet for as long as 'information disorder' reigns as the most subscribed-to paradigm for explaining this phenomenon, I argue that we will only be able to manage a surface-level understanding of Covid misbelievers. After all, many of us will have encountered false information about Covid at some point, yet not everyone will come to accept it as truth.

With this considered, this chapter proceeds as follows: Firstly, I discuss how Foucault's theoretical ideas can, and have, been used in the analysis of Discourse in section 4.2. Secondly, in section 4.3 I introduce and explain my novel formulation of these methods in what I term 'Subject Position Analysis', with the specific details of this method discussed in subsections. In sections 4.4 and 4.5, I introduce the genres of text that I

apply this method to, with sections 4.6 and 4.7 introducing the specific sources of this secondary data. Section 4.8 and 4.9 discuss my sampling strategies for the two studies contained in this thesis, and section 4.10 shows the method of analysis applied to the texts sampled. Finally, section 4.11 states the ethical considerations for this research.

4.2: Foucault and the analysis of Discourse.

Chapter 3 laid this thesis' theoretical foundations, which are inspired primarily by Foucauldian theories of Discourse, counter-Discourse and how individuals negotiate their subjectivities within them. The centrality of discursive practices and social meanings to this study mean that the most appropriate methodological basis from which to build my own methodology would be those of *Discourse analysis*. Discourse analysis has been used to refer to a wide variety of research activities focussed on language which emerged out of the 'linguistic turn', which in turn emerged out of criticisms of positivist social science (Bhatia et al., 2008; Gill, 2000). Positivist Social Science studies social life with the empiricism of the natural sciences (Benton & Craib, 2001) and "seeks to build a tautological system that operates with exact definitions and logical deductions" (Von Mises, 1956, pp. 246). As Chapter 3 established, I consider this an implausibility in Social Science, since this type of empirical objectivity is impossible for the phenomena studied in the field¹⁸.

The 'linguistic turn' is associated with various 20th century philosophers (including Foucault) and refers to an increased emphasis on language in meaning-making in the Social Sciences and Humanities which emerged largely in the 1970s, distancing the fields from positivism (Chandler & Munday, 2011; Fynsk, 2001; Hutchinson, 2005). Out of this background, text and Discourse were no longer subject solely to quantitative analyses (Wodak, 2008) thus giving rise, *inter alia*, to Discourse analysis methodologies.

While Foucault's oeuvre does not involve the employment of Discourse analysis *per se*¹⁹ (Cheek & Cheek, 2008), his theoretical work has given rise to a range of specifically Foucauldian Discourse analysis (FDA) methodologies. These studies approach Discourse analysis from the perspectives offered by Foucault, though this is not a fixed

¹⁸ Indeed, 'Social Science' is a misnomer in my view; I use this term only so that it is clear to what I refer.

¹⁹ One may read aspects of Discourse analysis within Foucault's methods of 'archaeology' and 'genealogy', but this discussion is beyond the scope of this thesis.

methods protocol (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2017). Instead, as McLaren (2009) argues, researchers using FDA must draw upon his self-described ‘toolbox’ of works as it fits the themes and theory of the study at hand. Crucially for my purposes, the results of Foucauldian methods of Discourse analysis can allow the researcher to “describe the formation of subjectivity, or how people become the subjects of discourses, and how certain discursive practices shape people’s actions, thoughts, and behaviors” (Mohammed et al., 2021, pp. 3). This is because specific attention is paid to the role of discursive power and knowledge in the construction of often taken-for-granted aspects of social life (Cheek & Cheek, 2008; Paltridge, 2022). It allows the researcher to expose the processes at play in the creation and reproduction of subjectivities.

FDA conceptualises ‘Discourse’ in an exclusively Foucauldian sense: historically situated fields of knowledge and power which give meaning to the world by categorising and ordering it (see Chapter 3). Thus, as Graham (2011, pp. 671) argues, where non-Foucauldian Discourse analysis methods may focus on the “micro”²⁰ features of texts, such as language, grammar and structure, FDA focusses on “the macro...what is ‘made up’ by the text itself”. In other words, FDA is interested in the ways in which a discursive reality is constructed within a text, rather than just the construction of the text itself. Texts therefore form the main units of analysis within FDA, since they represent discursive meanings in a given time period as though captured in amber. It is therefore common for an FDA study to be based on the analysis of a “corpus of statements”²¹ (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2017, pp. 115) alternatively known as an “archive” which is “not an object which exists prior to analysis...[but] an epistemological object for analysis established with the help of a set criteria” (Karlsen, 2023, pp. 196). For my purposes, this means finding texts which represent the ‘Covid period’ and can explain strategies by which the Covid misbeliever comes into being (see section 4.3.1).

²⁰ This is not to suggest that the ‘micro’ features of texts are irrelevant to FDA, only that they are not the sole focus.

²¹ When scholars in the Foucauldian tradition use the term ‘statement’ this is, in my interpretation, the same as how I use the term ‘performance text’, that is, a performance of one’s subjectivity which functions to reproduce both the subjectivities themselves and the discourse they are part of (see, e.g., how Karlsen (2023) and Lynch, (2014) describe Foucauldian statements).

There is no fixed protocol by which these texts are analysed, which emphasises the need for the FDA researcher to be clear about their method of analysis. Consider how the three FDA studies relevant to Covid below demonstrate different analysis techniques:

- Mohammed et al. (2021) use reviewing, memoing and coding of news report texts in their FDA of nurse subjectivities during Covid. Their analysis methods for this data included inductive coding followed by deductive coding “to encourage creative thought about the data” (pp. 3).
- Skoss et al. (2024) focus on thematic analysis of newspaper texts in their FDA on older people and risk during Covid. Their analysis involved a focus on risk as it applied to certain subject positions within the data, with the aim to “discover recurring themes present within the representations of older people in relation to risk and COVID-19” (pp. 1585).
- Siena (2022) uses a six-stage analysis process devised by Willig (2008) to carry out an FDA to uncover the constructions of community quarantine in transcripts of speeches by then-Philippine president Rodrigo Roa-Duterte during Covid.

These examples show that there is a high degree of freedom in how texts are collected and analysed in FDA, so long as these processes remain rooted in Foucauldian concepts of Discourse and subjectivity²². As the later sections will show, this freedom can be both a blessing and a curse. I ultimately had to rethink my analysis strategy for this research early in the process as it became clear that my initial plan did not allow for adequate depth of analysis. Moreover, less standardised methods demand a more comprehensive explanation of findings to demonstrate study credibility (see discussion on ‘thick description’ below) where positivists might rely on calculations of statistical significance to do the same. However, such methodological freedom also allows for the methods to be tailored to the specific study, allowing for a greater comprehension of how meaning is made within specific genres and formats of texts, providing, I argue, more valuable results. As such, it remains the most appropriate methodological foundation for the present study.

²² Indeed, perhaps it makes sense to think of Foucauldian Discourse methodologies as a Discourse in itself.

Another feature often found in FDA is an interest in rethinking what we might otherwise see as ‘ordinary’ constructions of the world which stem from Discourses. As Boulton et al. (2022, pp. 2) suggest,

“The primary purposes of an FDA are to expose what is taken-for-granted...or that which is generally accepted to be true by a large proportion of society...to delineate how these norms are in fact the tools of those who are in power...and to offer an alternative to the dominant discourse”

To be sure, by using a methodology which might ‘offer an alternative’ to the dominant UK Covid Discourse, I am not suggesting embracing the Covid misbeliever Discourse. Instead, my purpose is to use FDA methods to expose the power that certain assumptions within that Discourse have in ‘making real’ a particular conceptualisation of the Covid misbeliever. For example, one of the major arguments of this thesis is that the Information Disorder Paradigm (IDP) has obscured our understanding of Covid misbelievers. Nevertheless, much of the theoretical presumptions within the IDP are ‘taken for granted’ in dominant Discourses, such as that false information is a major contributor to Covid misbeliefs. My aim is to make controversial the quotidian assumptions that we who may consider ourselves ‘non-misbelievers’ might make due to the dominant UK Covid Discourse of how and why some individuals become Covid misbelievers. This is so that we can better understand how to promote healthier choices, and not to lend the knowledge claims of misbelievers credence.

Finally, as discussed in Chapter 3, the study of Discourse is concerned with how discursive meanings change (Ussher & Perz, 2019), and how these changes influence the subjects and objects formed by them. This does not necessarily mean that the timeframe of the analysis needs to be large, but that within the selected timeframe which the study sample is selected, “the relationship between discourse, subjectivity, practice and the material conditions within which experience takes place” (Ussher & Perz, 2019, pp. 884, emphasis removed) is accounted for. For my purposes, this means recognising the specific formulation of the dominant UK Covid Discourse during the study timeframe. This is because this Discourse will have changed since then and as such the temporal context of this study, which aims to represent the ‘height’ of the pandemic (see section 4.3.1) needs to be accounted for in my study.

To summarise, while FDA does not have a codified *modus operandi*, it is a methodology carried out with a specific focus on understanding how Discourses produce meaning. By deploying theory as a “too[l]kit”²³ (Foucault, 1980, pp. 145), we can devise methods to understand the (re)production of subjects by discursive power. This is a process which involves selecting a corpus of texts for analysis with consideration given to the spatial and temporal context from which they are drawn and their influence on discursive meanings. FDA should, and in my view, *ought to prioritise*, disturbing the taken-for-granted knowledge claims that are made within a Discourse to expose the power operations that lie beneath.

Having now presented the basics of FDA, I turn to my own, novel, formulation of this methodology designed to answer my research questions which I call ‘Subject Position Analysis’.

4.3: Introducing Subject Position Analysis: My novel application of Foucauldian Discourse Analysis

Observant readers may have noticed a problem with applying FDA methods as they are described above to the present study: it tends to be used for the analysis of a single Discourse. However, to meet my second research aim, to compare the differences and similarities between the construction of the Covid misbeliever in the dominant Covid Discourse and the Covid misbeliever counter-Discourse, I will need to analyse two Discourses. This meant that I needed to develop a way of carrying out an FDA which could account for the differing ways in which two Discourses produce the same subject. This novel approach to FDA, which I tentatively name ‘Subject Position Analysis’ (SPA) is a two-part Discourse analysis method which firstly requires the identification of a dominant Discourse and a counter-Discourse opposing it. Crucially, the binary positioning of the subjectivity being studied is reversed between the two Discourses. For example, in the dominant UK Covid Discourse, the Covid misbeliever is inferior to the non-misbeliever, yet in the Covid misbeliever counter-Discourse, it is the Covid misbeliever subjectivity which is superior. This is because SPA should be used to analyse how a Discourse and its counter-Discourse empower and disempower the subject

²³ This is spelled “tookit” in the source. From context, it is reasonable to assume that this is a typographical error.

respectively. In doing so, it becomes possible to observe how the ubiquity of dominant Discourses may obscure our understanding of subjects in their own discursive formations. SPA is therefore a *phenomenological* method because it views our perceptions of reality, our ontological constructions of the world around us, as proceeding from human practices and not external and fixed (Overgaard & Zahavi, 2009). The aim of SPA is therefore to identify the phenomenological differences between these discursive perspectives.

The rationale behind this approach is that if those of us who consider ourselves non-misbelievers can both acknowledge what we get wrong in our assumptions about Covid misbelievers *and* understand how these misbelievers construct their own subjectivity (i.e. their sense of self) we will have a better chance of developing practices to encourage them to make healthier choices during public health crises.

This section details how I apply SPA to the present thesis. I break this into different elements to show my specific choices in this case; however, any future users of this methodology should not feel constrained by them. As noted above, FDA methods can and should be altered to best serve the research they are employed in. Although I lay this out chronologically as identifying context, then Discourses, then texts, it is not necessary to follow this order since all three of these features are dependent on one another. There is no text without Discourse, no Discourse without context and so on. This is what I term the ‘trinity of Subject Position Analysis’ (see figure 6) since all three concepts must be present to carry it out. My purpose here is merely to lay out a basic strategy for beginning an SPA.

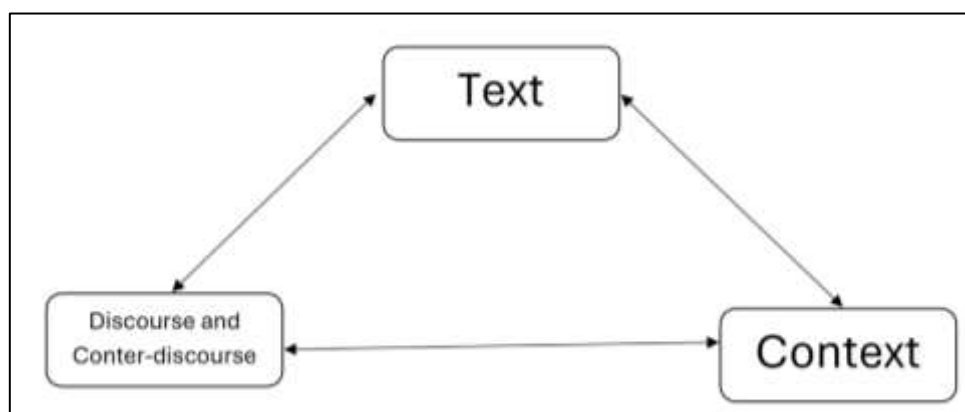


Figure 6: Visualisation of the trinity of Subject Position Analysis

4.3.1: Identifying the context of study for SPA: Time and place

Upon selecting the subject position of interest, the researcher must then situate that subjectivity within the context of time and place. As Chapter 3 discussed, Discourses are not static, but based on “the interplay of the rules that make possible the appearance of objects during a given period of time” (Foucault, 2013, pp. 36). It follows, therefore, that these rules differ between different societies within the same time periods. This, I argue, is why it is possible to observe vastly different dominant conceptualisations and practices of, for instance, Public Health, across different spatial and temporal contexts (see Chapter 3). The researcher using SPA must therefore have a clearly defined and justified time period and place from which they will draw their sample of texts.

In the present study, I have selected the ‘place’ to be the United Kingdom. There are several reasons for this. Firstly, it was one filter I could use to scale down the otherwise unmanageable potential size of the sample of texts in this study. Secondly, being from the UK, and living in the nation during the period (the height of the pandemic) I am studying, it follows that I would be able to best understand the nuances of cultural meaning within the British experience of Covid. Additionally, the UK context of Covid-19 is also an interesting case due to several unique features, including the differences in Covid responses between the UK’s central government and devolved national parliaments (Morphet, 2021). The UK experience of Covid also saw several cases of British political figures breaking government lockdown rules, perhaps most notably (in 2020, at least²⁴) the revelation that senior aide to the Prime Minister, Dominic Cummings travelled over 260 miles with his likely Covid-positive wife during a period of stringent lockdown rules for which he neither apologised nor resigned. This seemed to result in a decline in confidence in the UK government to handle the pandemic in England, though notably, not in the devolved governments of Wales and Scotland among those living in these nations (Fancourt et al., 2020). Thirdly, I argue that among the most valuable contributions of FDA is its capacity to make ‘normal’ perspectives that we become habituated to unfamiliar (Cheek & Cheek, 2008), to do the work of ‘making the familiar strange and the strange familiar’ (see Myers (2011) for a commentary on this phrase). At

²⁴ Revelations about Margaret Ferrier and so-called ‘Partygate’ arguably eclipsed the Cummings affair once revealed in following years.

the beginning of this research, I was (in the general sense of the word) ‘familiar’ with the experience and dominant knowledge claims of Covid in the UK, and the strangeness of Covid misbelievers, precisely because I had ‘lived through’ this context. I was myself subject to the major events of the pandemic in the UK and saw with my own eyes some of the ‘strange’ activities of Covid misbelievers. Methodologically speaking, this project has been a journey to making those experiences with which I am familiar strange and to upset the “silences of familiar things” (Charles, 2011, pp. 206) in order to reveal the operations of discursive power which lie beneath. At the same time, it has been a journey to demystify the strangeness of Covid misbelievers. Again, this does not mean sympathising with them but understanding the operations of power acting through them and the processes which led them to become misbelievers, which, as the subsequent chapters show, are perhaps not so strange after all. Thus, I focus on the UK context because I wanted to make the familiar strange, to benefit from the utility of this context as a sampling filter and because it is the spatial context I am most aware of.

Selecting the time period from which I would draw the texts for analysis was more challenging. I wanted to encompass the abstract period that is invoked by that now widely used subordinate clause ‘*during the pandemic...*’, but this is not a simple task since it is debatable when the pandemic began and when, if at all, it ended. Published timelines of Covid tend to begin in December 2019, often with the earliest known cases or reports thereof (e.g., Carvalho et al. (2021), Siddiqui et al. (2022)) though some note the possibility of cases occurring earlier (Allam, 2020). Yet since the true patient zero cannot be identified, and no definitive origin of SARS-nCoV-2 can be found, only explanations ranked by probability (see: WHO (2021b)), it is impossible to identify a universally acceptable start point of the pandemic. The problem is even more complicated when identifying its ‘end’. While at the time of writing, Covid-19 patients are still being recorded (e.g., GOV.UK (2025)) it is reasonable to argue that the experience of the pandemic is far less intense now in both qualitative, experiential terms as well as quantitative terms (e.g. case rates, death rates, et cetera). The pandemic may not have ended *per se*, but for most people in the UK (though it is important to note, not *all*²⁵), it is

²⁵ As of March 2025, “1.8 million immunocompromised patients and their families...continue to shield or remain socially isolated” (Association of Clinical Psychologists, 2025). The social positioning of these

no longer a quotidian concern. In the absence of any universally agreed upon beginning and end of the pandemic, I needed to select a start and end point from which the texts would be collected based on justifiable criteria.

I decided that the start date from which I would draw the study texts would be 2 February 2020. This is because it is the date that the World Health Organization (2020a) published its 13th Novel Coronavirus situation report, which would be the first time the organisation used the word “infodemic” (see Chapter 2). My reason for selecting it as the start point of my research is that this moment had a discursive significance which is particularly relevant to the study at hand. As I argue below, dominant Discourses tend to be associated with hegemonic institutions. Despite a number of events undermining its discursive legitimacy, notably the persistent ambition (an eventual success) of US President Donald Trump to withdraw his country from it (Foulkes & Mitchell, 2026; Yazdi-Feyzabadi et al., 2025), as the specialised agency for health of the United Nations (Lee, 2008), the WHO represents perhaps the highest authority on Public Health globally. Thus, for the WHO to publish a situation report (a performative textual practice) which considers an ‘infodemic’ a major concern in public health signifies one of the major moments which contributed to the production of the Covid misbeliever subjectivity.

I chose the end point for the texts I study to have been produced in to be 5 May 2023. This is the date that the WHO stated that Covid-19 is “no longer a public health emergency of international concern” (PHEIC) (WHO, 2023). Deciding upon a cutoff point was more challenging due to the changing norms around the pandemic in the UK context. For example, I could have chosen instead to use 24 February 2022, the date that the UK government ended several major policies intended to curtail the pandemic and “begin to treat Covid as other infectious diseases such as flu” (GOV.UK, 2022). However, alongside many policies of the UK’s devolved governments remaining in place after this date, data from the Office for National Statistics (ONS, 2022) suggests “the way people spent their time remained different when compared with 2014 and 2015” after March 2022, including less time spent on travelling and transport and more time spent working from home. This implies certain UK social norms which changed during the pandemic

individuals and the apparent ignorance they are shown in current mainstream discourses would make for valuable future research.

lingered despite legal changes no longer necessitating them. The WHO's ending of the pandemic's status as PHEIC therefore seemed a more appropriate end point since it both mirrored the start point being linked to a WHO text and suggested a broader change in the public's relationship with Covid.

Having identified the context within which the subjectivity is present, I now turn to the identification of Discourses themselves.

4.3.2: Identifying Discourses for SPA

SPA requires the identification of a dominant Discourse and a related counter-Discourse. It is not always easy to identify a Discourse, especially since they form our understandings of the world around us and can therefore become invisible to us. This is especially so for dominant Discourses which are “so ingrained in society that they become difficult to challenge or change” (Szedlak et al., 2025, pp. 471). Dominant Discourses are those that are “largely accepted and are employed to “shut down” the possibilities of writing, speaking and thinking in ways that challenge this authority” (Boulton et al., 2022, pp. 2). Therefore, the best we can do to identify a dominant Discourse, I argue, is to first acknowledge the dominant institutions within the society being studied. Institutions are, in Foucault's view, the product of numerous events “that overlap, cohere, intersect, and interfere with one another, eventually crystalizing into an institution” and can therefore be understood as a “concretion...of power relations” (Vallier, 2014, pp. 217-220). Additionally, they are “sites from which discourses are enunciated” (Lange, 2011, pp. 45, emphasis removed), or to put this in the terms I have been using, fields from which the texts of dominant Discourses are produced. Thus, institutions as objects of Discourse are both the product of text and producers of texts. Therefore, to speak of, say, a Public Health institution does not refer to the mere existence of laboratories, communications offices, policymaking and so on pertaining to the field, but the ways in which these practices and individual practitioners are shaped – or *disciplined* – by the broader Discourse of Public Health. Since it is possible to speak of UK Public Health institutions, it is reasonable to state that there is a UK Covid public health Discourse.

It should be noted that institutions are not *always* indicators of the presence of dominant Discourses, however, because different institutions within the same society can take

different discursive positions to one another. For example, at the time of writing, a dominant institution in the United States (its government) is promoting a range of ideas about Covid which are at odds with other national institutions (Honigsbaum, 2025; Ledford & Fieldhouse, 2025). In such cases, the researcher should use their discretion to note that where one dominant institution is at odds with many others, it is unlikely that it represents the typical dominant discursive constructions of mainstream knowledge.

Having identified the presence of a dominant Discourse, the process of identifying a counter-Discourse becomes simpler. As noted, counter Discourses are formed from textual responses to a dominant Discourse, they function “as opposition to their dominant antagonists” and “inhabit and struggle with the dominant which inhabits them” (Terdiman, 1989, pp. 17-18). They are, in other words, dependent on the very dominant Discourse they oppose. However, this does not mean that the mere presence of texts which express opposition to dominant discursive knowledge claims imply the existence of a counter-Discourse. Instead, I argue that a counter-Discourse can be identified when, like institutions in mainstream Discourses, a combination of textual practices, concepts and methods coalesce into organisations. For example, the presence of a Covid misbeliever counter-Discourse can be observed in the formation of UK Covid misbeliever social groups such as ‘the Great Reopening’ (Townsend, 2022), and media outlets consistently promoting Covid misbeliefs such as ‘The Light’ (Dacombe et al., 2021). Such organisations indicate the presence of a counter Discourse because their texts act as a crystallisation of that counter-discursive ontological view. They also, as we shall see, provide useful texts for analysing the operations of power within counter-Discourses. Therefore, in the present study, the dominant UK Covid Discourse is the dominant Discourse I focus on and the Covid misbeliever Discourse is the counter-Discourse I focus on.

In summary, identifying dominant Discourses can be challenging as their omnipresence in quotidian life can render their effects invisible. As such, I argue that the best way to identify them is to consider the dominant institutions in society, since their practices are regulated by dominant Discourses, and these practices can, in turn, reveal a dominant Discourse’s presence. Having located a dominant Discourse, we can identify a

connected counter-Discourse where organisations based on knowledge claims that are delegitimised within the dominant Discourse are present.

With the dominant and counter-Discourses identified, I now turn to perhaps the most important aspect of this methodology, identifying appropriate texts from which the sample can be drawn.

4.3.3: Identifying texts for SPA

Given that SPA involves the analysis of two Discourses, two bodies of texts are required so that the results of these analyses can be compared. In an ideal application of this method for my purposes, both bodies of texts would be large and drawn from a variety of sources and genres so that a range of possible perspectives can be accounted for. However, the present study is a monographic thesis, and as such, the scale of the sources needed to be pared back. This means that this may not represent perceptions of Covid misbelievers that might be represented in all text types, since it is drawing on a relatively small sample in either Discourse. Nevertheless, as I now detail, the researcher can choose the sources from which the study texts are taken from to prioritise the inclusion of valuable information, even if the study scope is limited. The remainder of this section will be written to refer to such small-scale applications of SPA, but the reader should bear in mind that, where possible, a broad and diverse sample which represents a variety of possible texts may be preferable depending upon the subjectivity being studied.

In the first instance, the researcher must locate the source which gives the best opportunity to answer their research questions. This means that the initial source selection should be *purposive*, that is, a non-random selection based on the potential of the texts to answer the research questions (Ahmad & Wilkins, 2024). While it has been argued that this style of sampling limits study generalisability (Andrade, 2021), I argue that for qualitative research should prioritise the richness of its texts, and purposive sampling maximises a study's capacity to achieve its aims by excluding less relevant materials. For example, in the present study, I chose to include only sources which produced articles as texts. This is because I wanted to find texts which contained a lot of data from which to analyse the construction of the Covid misbeliever subjectivity. In other words, I wanted to sample what Patton (2015, pp. 308, emphasis removed) calls,

“Information-rich cases...from which one can learn a great deal about the focus of inquiry and which therefore are worthy of in-depth study”. For example, figures 4 and 5 in Chapter 3, which are photographs of Covid misbeliever texts in the form of public vandalism, would not be appropriate for this study. This is because there are not enough data relevant to my research questions contained within them. This is not to argue that these texts have *no* value for other SPA studies (they would likely be useful in a study looking into Covid misbeliever vandal subjectivities, for example) but that researchers should seek sources which provide the most information-rich texts for the purpose of answering their specific research questions.

At this point, it is important to note that the utility of a text may not be immediately obvious: sometimes, the most useful texts about the subjectivity being researched may not directly focus on the subject at all. Riley et al. (2022, pp. 296) note that spoken texts can imply “rhetorical trouble through emphasis, repetition, disclaimers...emotional tone” among other examples, perhaps because, as Tracy (2025, pp. 295) suggests, “[s]ometimes the most important issues are unspeakable, while things that are easiest to talk about are relatively unimportant”. As Graham (2011, pp. 667. emphasis original) argues, “‘doing’ discourse analysis within a Foucauldian framework, one looks to statements not so much for what they say but what they *do*”. In other words, it is the discursive effects of text that make them useful as the object of study, rather than their explicit focus, as it is the effects of Discourse which produce subjectivities. For example, in the present study, the texts I analysed did not need to explicitly be ‘about’ the experience of being a Covid misbeliever to be useful to my analysis. Texts which are not necessarily explicit about the subjectivity being researched might even contain more valuable subtextual information about it than those that are.

I must address, at this point, the well-known quote from Foucault (2013, pp. 135) in which he argues that “there is no sub-text”. Out of context, it may sound as though Foucault is arguing against the analysis of implicit meanings in texts, but this is not the case. Instead, he refers to the ways that Discourse limits what it is possible for texts to communicate, and that what the Discourse renders incommunicable cannot be hidden (sub-textually) within the communicable. In other words, delegitimised knowledge cannot be hidden in legitimised knowledge claims and only legitimised knowledge can

be hidden in what we typically understand by the term ‘subtext’. Thus, in my interpretation, the content of a text from one Discourse cannot offer an insight into that of another, since the Discourse limits what is sayable both textually and subtextually.

It may seem ironic to argue that texts can be interpreted for implicit meanings since this is often viewed (rightly or wrongly) as the method of a conspiracy theorist. As Krippendorff’s (2019, pp. 148) commentary on Content Analysis, a related methodology to Discourse analysis, argues, ““reading between the lines,” “detecting latent meanings,” “hearing silences,” and “discovering hidden motivations.” Conspiracy theorists thrive on such metaphors”. But what differentiates this type of analysis from conspiratorial conjecture is an attention to qualitative research *credibility*. One means by which qualitative research can increase its credibility is through ‘thick description’. This involves analysing “contextual meanings specific to the cultural group at hand” (in this case, the authors of the text sources) as well as including richly detailed discussions of various aspects of the study (Tracy, 2025, pp. 235). Like FDA, there is no singular method to carry out a thick description, but key to its effectiveness is a description detailed enough that the context-specific meanings both to the population being studied and the researcher themselves are clear to readers of the study (Geertz, 2008; Thompson, 2001). For my purposes, thick description of my findings and how I reached them allow the reader to understand the reasoning behind the interpretations of texts that I present in this thesis. After all, Krippendorff (2019. pp. 148) ultimately argues that it is possible to credibly carry out content analyses which account for what is not directly said, so long as adequate “[f]amiliarity and specificity” is present in the recording of this information.

Having now covered the general considerations surrounding the trinity of Discourse identification, context and text, I now turn to how I selected the text sources for the present study.

4.4: Selections of texts for the present study I: the ‘paradox of fact checking’.

As noted above, it will not be possible in this study to take a sample that encompasses a wide range of texts due to constraints of time and practicality. As such, I will have to focus on specific and relevant discursive ‘sites’ where texts pertaining to the two Discourses

of interest are present. I argue that this can be achieved by selecting relevant genres of text to focus on. When I use the term genre, I am invoking two senses of the word. Firstly, the typical sense of the ‘type’ of text, and secondly, to types of language as it is used in certain socially accepted practices (Fairclough, 2010; Wodak, 2008). For example, to call a newspaper article a text genre is to state that it is both a kind of text that can be identified and that we will have certain expectations of this text before we engage with it. To speak of a newspaper article, for example, would generally be understood as a text with a headline introducing the topic, a main body of written text about this topic opening with a standfirst, and that it is possibly illustrated with associated images. In turn, we would not expect to see a newspaper article with, say, a headline about one topic to then discuss a different topic in its main body and be illustrated with an image with no relevance to either of these topics. A textual genre is therefore a widely recognised type of text which uses language²⁶ in a certain recognisable style. In the present study, I chose one textual genre for either Discourse. I shall begin by explaining the genre I selected for the dominant Covid Discourse: fact checking texts.

Texts produced by fact checkers within the spatiotemporal context of this study are ideal for answering my first and third research questions because they provide a qualitatively rich explanation for how certain Covid claims become legitimised or deligitimised. As should be clear by now, an important aspect of any methodology inspired by Foucault is an understanding of the processes by which certain knowledge claims come to be seen as true (Boulton et al., 2022; Khan & MacEachen, 2021). It seems to me that there is no more overt manifestation of this discursive practice than fact checking. ‘Fact checking’ can refer to a variety of practices (Graves & Amazeen, 2019), but it is generally understood as a practice wherein a claim that has been made, often by a public figure, is assessed for its truthfulness (Vlachos & Riedel, 2014) which tends to involve “re-reporting” based on researching the claim (Elizabeth, 2014). It is thought to have developed out of similar practices used by media outlets, with independent fact checking organisations rising in prominence in the 21st century (Graves & Amazeen, 2019; Graves & Cherubini, 2016). Fact checking organisations often promote the notion that they are neutral or non-partisan (see, e.g. Full Fact (n.d.-a); Hutchings (2024)), which

²⁶ By ‘language’ I refer not only to written text, but also visual languages such as layout or composition.

is notable given that, as I argued in Chapter 3, I do not believe textual neutrality is possible. This is not to fault fact checking organisations, who no doubt put a lot of effort into their aim of impartiality. However, my view is that fact checking is an institutionalised practice of dominant Discourses and therefore, is itself shaped by dominant Discourses. Indeed, even the mere act of selecting a claim to fact check cannot be impartial, since it implies certain specific claims, rather than any others, deserve such scrutiny. Fact checking should, therefore, be understood as perhaps the most overt institution of the dominant UK Covid Discourse in classifying knowledge as legitimate or illegitimate, and therefore a ‘dividing practice’ which places individuals who hold certain beliefs on one or another side of the misbeliever/non-misbeliever binary.

It should be noted that fact checking is not always a simple, binary process of declaring the claim true or false. For example, as the following chapters will show, *Full Fact*, arguably the UK’s premier independent fact checker (see section 4.6.1) will sometimes qualitatively ‘rate’ claims on their accuracy, including less clear-cut ratings such as “partly false” (Full Fact Team, 2021b). However, I argue that these are still dividing practices because, for example, they do the work of presenting the non-misbeliever as fair and accounting for aspects of deligitimised claims that are acceptable within dominant Discourses, a positive attribute for the subjectivity of non-misbeliever. It is possible, therefore, for dividing practices to operate in oblique ways, even where a specific binary is not identified.

Above all, fact checks are the ideal text format for my purposes because their existence depends on continuously reproducing the misbeliever subjectivity. This is what I call the *paradox of fact checking*: fact checkers *produce* misbelievers because fact checking practices designate information as true or false (even if this is qualified by ‘partly’) and in so doing render those believe a given knowledge claim as either misbelievers or non-misbelievers. Fact checkers continuously expand the boundaries of these subjectivities by seeking out new claims to check, in attempting to produce an ever-sharper boundary between them. Fact checking cannot destroy misbelievers since it depends upon them for its very existence. As noted in Chapter 2, Bernstein (2021) refers to a “Big Disinfo”, which Hutchings (2024, pp. 547) summarises as “an entire industry reliant on maintaining the sense of a democratic polity infected by a mutating contaminant

requiring ever more sophisticated antidotes”. In my view, nowhere is the presence of Big Disinfo (or perhaps, the counter-falsehood industrial complex) more apparent than in the practice of fact checking, which is paradoxically dependent on the problem it seeks to solve. Indeed, fact checkers demonstrably *are* seeking the “ever more sophisticated antidotes” Hutchings refers to: returning to the example of Full Fact, the organisation’s website suggests that they do not merely produce fact check articles, but are “developing world-leading technology and new research”, carrying out campaigns and follow-ups on their fact checks (Full Fact, n.d.-d), describing its activities (along with *Africa Check* and *Chequeado*) as “second generation fact checking” and already pushing for a “third generation” (Africa Check et al., 2019). Put simply, fact checking practices seem to continuously expand into new frontiers to keep producing the subjectivities upon which they depend for their continued existence.

All of this is not to attack fact checkers or argue that they are necessarily ‘wrong’ to produce misbelievers through their practices. After all, this very thesis is bound by a similar paradox: by identifying ‘covid misbeliever texts’ I am bringing these misbelievers into existence, at least within the text you are reading right now. However, while (hopefully) well intentioned, I argue that fact checking services should not be seen as a solution to misbeliefs, nor should they be considered beyond reproach. As Knight (in: Gresham College, 2024) argues, “[f]act-checking is a necessary, thankless, and heroic task, but on its own is unlikely to be sufficient”.

Overall, I selected the textual genre of ‘fact checking’ as representing the dominant Covid Discourse in this study. Now, I address the texts which I selected for the Covid misbeliever Discourse, which I term ‘counter-news’.

4.5: Selections of texts for the present study II: ‘Counter-news’.

I selected Covid misbeliever media outlets as the source to represent the Covid misbeliever counter-Discourse. I call this ‘counter-news’ because it mimics the generic features of news outlets within mainstream Discourses while presenting information that is deligitimised within them. As I argue in Chapter 2, the term ‘fake news’ lacks an effective definition, and this is in part why I created the term ‘counter-news’: it allows us to more effectively refer to news sources deligitimised in dominant Discourses. Of

course, mainstream news outlets also publish and broadcast mistruths, but unlike mainstream news outlets, they are not subject to press regulators such as Ofcom in the UK. However limited the power of such regulators to prevent or punish press improprieties may be in practice, they serve the purpose of legitimising the news outlets they select to scrutinise. This, I argue, is because scrutiny from a press regulator is itself a Discursive dividing practice because it implies that the outlet being scrutinised is a legitimate disseminator of information and therefore must be held accountable for its content. However, this does not in turn mean that any outlet not scrutinised by a regulator is 'counter-news', my point is merely that mainstream outlets can maintain their legitimacy despite publishing claims contrary to dominant Discourses or perhaps use their institutional power to aid the evolution of dominant Discourses.

Counter-news which pertains to Covid is the text format I selected for the analysis of Covid counter-discursive constructions of the Covid misbeliever in this study. This is in part in response to the cultural preoccupation with 'fake news' at the present, but also because counter-news appears to be, among many other functions, intended to 'recruit' individuals into the Covid misbeliever counter-Discourse (even if it may not succeed in this ambition). As such, it is the textual mirror of fact checking because both are trying to alter the performed subjectivity of their consumers: fact checking to recruit misbelievers into non-misbeliever subjectivities and counter-news to achieve *vice versa*. I use the word 'recruit' deliberately because, as the subsequent chapters will show, there are an abundance of warlike metaphors in these texts and a tendency to conceptualise the misbeliever/non-misbeliever binary as a conflict.

Perhaps it was to this type of relationship which Foucault (2003, pp. 51) referred when he argued that "In the smallest of its cogs, peace is waging a secret war...we have to interpret the war that is going on beneath peace...a battlefield runs through the whole of society, continuously and permanently, and it is this battlefield that puts us all on one side or another. There is no such thing as a neutral subject." Perhaps this war Foucault saw between subjects was one of attrition, where recruiting new subjects from alternative Discourses is the objective. This is in line with a later argument from the same lecture:

“being on one side and not the other means that you are in a better position to speak the truth...makes it possible to interpret the truth, to denounce the illusions and errors that are being used – by your adversaries – to make you believe we are living in a world in which order and peace have been restored.”

(Foucault, 2003, pp. 53)

Those recruited into the ‘side’ of non-misbeliever in the dominant UK Covid Discourse are indeed in a better position to speak the truth, since they become ‘soldiers’ of the very truth that the Discourse produces. The opposite is simultaneously true of the Covid misbeliever Discourse, where the Covid misbeliever becomes the truth-teller dispelling the ‘lies’ of dominant Covid Discourses. This, I argue, is that ‘secret war’, a conflict between two ontological camps – two discursive constructions of reality – to emerge as the victorious consensus reality. While Vinhas and Bastos (2022) have previously argued that misinformation has supplanted a pre-existing consensus reality, this is not the argument I now make. Instead, my view is that dominant Discourses of a culture represent what might otherwise be called consensus reality, and counter Discourses are alternative perspectives which vie with them for victory over public consciousness. Unlike ideologies, whose perspectives are in similar conflicts, these Discourses are not merely a set of values, but a person’s whole conceptualisation of the world and their position (and that of others) within it.

Having now elucidated the choices for the format of text I chose to use; I now explain which specific sources I chose for the present study.

4.6: Fact checkers: Full Fact, Channel 4 Fact Check and BBC Verify

The fact checking texts needed to be sourced from organisations connected with mainstream institutions in the UK to represent the Dominant UK Covid Discourse. There are three major fact checking organisations in the UK: Full Fact, Channel 4 Fact Check and BBC Verify, the former being independent and the latter two being attached to their eponymous media organisations (Edgington, 2024). It followed, therefore, that these should be the three major sources from which I drew the texts which I studied. Below is a brief introduction to these organisations:

4.6.1: Overview of Full Fact:

- Launched in 2010 by “a cross-party group of trustees” (Full Fact, n.d.-a), Full Fact is a UK-based registered charity describing itself as “a team of independent fact checkers and campaigners who find, expose and counter the harm it does” (Full Fact, n.d.-d).
- Full Fact states that it fact checks items “that are of national interest in areas where we have expertise” but not those specific to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland (Full Fact, n.d.-a). However, this is at odds with Full Fact’s website section solely devoted to Scottish matters, where “[f]act checks of direct relevance and specifically about matters of national importance in Scotland” (Full Fact, n.d.-b) are compiled.
- Full Fact carry out a larger range of services than many other counter-falsehood organisations and therefore offer services to a larger number of stakeholders. Based on the information on the Full Fact website, the following appear to be some of their target audiences:
 - The public in general (fact checks, petitions, online tools)
 - Social media platforms (fact checks)
 - Social media users (fact checks)
 - Various organisations and institutions (training, fact checks)
 - “[S]tudents, teachers and the general public” (Full Fact, n.d.-a) (educational tools)
 - Other fact checking organisations (Artificial Intelligence tools)
 - Researchers and research communicators (research)
 - Various charities and organisations they work with on specific projects (Research, communication, fact checking)
 - Media outlets (press enquiries)
- Full Fact state that “as fact checkers, we’ve seen first hand how bad information promotes hate, damages people’s health, and hurts democracy” (Full Fact, n.d.-

d) and regularly uses the phrase ‘bad information ruins lives’ suggesting that the organisation is motivated by concerns surrounding the consequences of false information.

4.6.2: Overview of BBC Verify

- BBC Verify was launched in 2023 as a subsection of BBC News. It functions as “a brand and also a physical area in the BBC newsroom” which “will work across a range of stories, from breaking news to analysis and visual journalism all the way to original investigations” (BBC Media Centre, 2023).
- BBC Verify aims “to address the growing threat of disinformation and build trust with audiences by transparently showing how BBC journalists know the information they are reporting”. They aim to do this by displaying “the advanced editorial tools and techniques BBC news journalists are using to investigate, source and verify information, video, and images” (BBC Media Centre, 2023).
- BBC Verify’s activities include “fact-checking, verifying video, countering disinformation, analysing data and explaining complex stories in the pursuit of truth” (Turness, in BBC Media Centre, 2023) as well as Open Source Intelligence and “forensic” methods (BBC Media Centre, 2023).
- The online content produced by the BBC Verify team, (which I will focus on), functions as a subsection of the BBC News website, itself a section of the BBC website. BBC Verify content is denoted by its header image including the team’s logo or inclusion within the BBC Verify section of the BBC News website. In 2024, some online content also added a “transparency tool”, which includes information about the item’s verification and origins (BBC News, 2024).
- The reasons for the BBC pursuing this project appears to be the promotion of transparency and trust in reporting at the BBC. In an article about the launch of *Verify*, Maher (2023) points out that BBC News “tends to rank highly for trust among news audiences, but has nonetheless suffered falls in recent years in

common with other news organisations”, perhaps implying that *Verify* is the BBC response to this.

4.6.3: Overview of Channel 4 Factcheck

- The Channel 4 FactCheck blog (C4FC) is notable for being the longest-running source that I sample in this thesis. Launched in 2005 by Channel 4 News, *FactCheck* was originally founded to “provide the most reliable analysis of what the political parties and their leaders are saying” (Channel 4 FactCheck, 2005 [via WayBack Machine]) during the UK General Election campaigns that year. In 2010, as another UK General Election approached, *FactCheck* was “reborn as a blog” (Newman, 2010) and appears to have remained as such ever since.
- Today, C4FC takes a similar form to BBC Verify: It is a subsection of the Channel 4 News website, which is itself part of the Channel 4 Website. Within this subsection, articles answering contentious questions or presenting independent analysis are published. It is important to note that many of its articles are not fact checks in the sense that Full Fact proves or debunks a given claim, rather, they tend to be explainer-style articles which clarify various aspects of a current event.
- According to the Channel 4 News ‘About’ page, “FactCheck seeks the truth behind claims made by those in public office. The blog has been commended for its statistical integrity and is frequently cited in the House of Commons” (Channel 4 News, n.d.).
- It is unclear how C4FC chooses which topics to publish articles on. At one time, the blog gave users the opportunity to suggest items to fact check, though this appears to no longer be the case (Newman, 2010).
- C4FC likely has a similar target audience to BBC Verify: users of its website who are sceptical or concerned about current affairs information they have consumed.

With this considered, I now introduce the source that I will use to represent the Covid misbeliever counter-Discourse: *The Light*.

4.7: Counter-news: 'The Light'

I chose to focus on offline counter-news, specifically the conspiracy newspaper *The Light*, to represent the Covid misbeliever counter-Discourse for several reasons. Firstly, as I alluded to in Chapter 2, anxieties about false information are often subject to a certain technological determinism, with contemporary manifestations focussing on the internet as the tool used to spread it. As such, much of the academic work focussing on contemporary false information spread has focussed on its online manifestations at the detriment to its offline equivalents, thereby not accounting for those who do not or cannot engage with this information online (Dacombe et al., 2021). Secondly, even internet research on a less contentious theme is subject to a range of practical and ethical challenges (Harriman & Patel, 2014; Im & Chee, 2003) which are less likely to be present in work published offline, making the process of using *TL* as a source easier. Thirdly, while it is possible to observe specific 'crystallisations' of Covid misbelief on the internet, such as in social media spaces like Facebook groups (Halska-Pionka & Cheba, 2024) the scale, ephemerality and decentralisation of much online content renders it more difficult to interpret for my purposes in comparison to a physical paper, which is limited to its beginning and end pages and the (literal, rather than Foucauldian) archive of its editions.

It is undoubtedly the case that many Covid misbeliever voices go unheard in *The Light*. For example, the specific beliefs of ethnic minority Covid misbelievers, such as those discussed in Vandrevalla et al. (2023) did not appear in the samples taken. As such, I warn the reader that the findings of this study are not representative of *all* UK misbelievers and should not be generalised to the whole population. Nevertheless, *The Light* does provide a useful meeting point of a wide range of Covid misbeliefs and associated activities.

The Following is a brief introduction to *The Light*:

4.7.1: Overview of *The Light*

- *The Light* (TL) is a physical paper printed on tabloid-sized newsprint, which publishes articles, advertisements, letters, cartoons and occasionally pen-and-

paper games which are almost exclusively based on false, unevidenced, spurious or pseudoscientific information (at least, from a dominant Discursive perspective).

The first edition of *TL* was published on 27 September 2020, and it has published editions monthly since then, continuing to the time of writing in 2025. While it cannot be stated definitively whether Covid was the impetus behind the paper's founding, that its foundation coincides with the pandemic and the editions of the paper being heavily focussed on Covid suggest a possible connection.

- *TL* was founded by Darren Smith (sometimes known as 'Darren Nesbitt') (Waterson, 2020), who has continuously edited the paper to date at time of writing. Little information is available about Smith's pre-*Light* life, though a 2023 BBC interview suggests he owns a guitar string company and held conspiratorial beliefs years prior to the pandemic (Spring, 2023a).
- *TL* has regular writers, though it is not always clear how they came to hold their opinions. Additionally, *TL* also welcomes up to 1000-word contributions from anyone on the condition that, "your news article is of national or international interest, verifiable, and never capitalises the word 'covid'" (The Light, 2021b)²⁷.
- *TL* is distributed, typically for free, in various parts of the UK via 30 hubs coordinated through a channel on the Telegram messaging application and it claims to be funded by advertising and subscriptions (Dacombe et al., 2021; Spring, 2023c).

4.7.2: Detailed introduction to *The Light*

Due to the limited information available regarding *The Light*, I include the following detailed introduction. This serves both to introduce the paper to the reader of this thesis, and as a description of aspects of it which may not be recorded elsewhere.

²⁷ As we shall see, the verifiability of these contributions is not as important as this quotation suggests.

I first encountered *TL* when I found a copy of what I would later know as its April 2022 edition laying on the floor near one of the entrances to St. Nicholas Market in Bristol. Printed on tabloid newsprint and bearing a strong stylistic resemblance to existing British newspapers such as *The Times* (Bartholomew, 2023), its front-page headline declared that “Pfizer knew their vaccine would kill”. It quickly became obvious that this paper was dedicated to conspiratorial or otherwise unconventional arguments and beliefs, often those associated with Covid-19. It was not clear how this isolated copy had got there, nor whether it was intended to be found. Since that discovery in Bristol, I have seen a copy through the window of a hairdresser in Brighton and seen a volunteer loudly distribute copies to passers-by in Norwich city centre. Indeed, the primary supervisor of this very thesis received a copy through his letterbox, presumably the result of *TL*’s “Wake Up Your Neighbours” scheme, where one can pay to have a specified number of editions delivered to certain areas in the UK (The Light, n.d.-b).

TL published its first edition on 27 September 2020 and has continued to release monthly ever since (at time of writing). Reports suggest that the paper has been distributed in many parts of Great Britain, with various strategies employed to circulate the “at least 100,000 copies a month” (Spring, 2023b) that are being printed. Alongside ‘Wake up your neighbours’, there are reports of copies being left in supermarkets without permission (Gourlay, 2022; Hanspal, 2023), volunteers handing copies out (Bartholomew, 2023) as well as simply ordering from the website or accessing its PDF archive online. I am unable to find any information about how *TL* is printed or which print company they work with, only that once printed, *TL* is distributed to “around 30 self-appointed hubs across the UK” (Spring, 2023c).

Dacombe et al. (2021, pp. 2) note that *TL* is “produced and delivered free of charge by activists across the U.K., activities coordinated through a closed Facebook group of over 8,000 members”. It is likely that other coordination tools are used as well. For example, *TL* has a Telegram chat group ‘@TheLightPaperDistribution’ presumably for the same purpose (see: TheLightPaperDistribution (n.d.)). It should also be noted that although most *TL* editions have been free of charge, the paper appeared to briefly experiment with charging 50p per copy between June and September 2022, before returning to free distribution. According to interviews and analysis from the BBC, *TL* likely costs “around

£240,000 per year” to produce, which its editor claims is funded by subscribers and advertising (Spring, 2023c) and an article in the January 2022 edition claims that “[p]eople pay to get hundreds of thousands of copies [of *TL*] to distribute” (Smith, 2022b). Each edition of *TL* has around five back-pages of advertisements as well as a smaller number of advertisements embedded in its main sections. These advertisements are often (though not always) for unorthodox products and services which likely would not be advertised in mainstream publications, such as pseudoscientific alternative health remedies²⁸. Certain products, services and organisations advertise in numerous editions of the paper, suggesting a consistent support for *TL* from them.

There is no definitive explanation for why the expense and effort of producing and distributing a physical paper rather than making it exclusively online is taken, though a handful of suggestions can be found. For example, a document uploaded to *TL*’s website includes the line, “[a]s a print copy, *The Light* has averted much of the censorship exerted on independent media”, later adding, “[i]n a digital world, paper itself is resistance” (McCrae, 2023, italicisation original). Indeed, while this is outside the scope of this research, when sampling for these studies, I encountered several articles implying a scepticism towards digital technologies such as its frequent advocacy of using cash over digital bank transfers to avoid the monitoring and control of spending behaviour (see, e.g., D. Smith (2024)). However, to my knowledge, no direct explanation for *TL*’s physical production is ever given besides McCrae (2023), and it is unclear whether this view is also held by other *Light* writers and distributors.

The majority of *TL* is comprised of articles divided into several sections, such as ‘NEWS’, ‘HEALTH’ and ‘SOLUTIONS’, which can differ between editions. Writers for the paper are varied, with seemingly few being professional journalists. Much of what is published is personal opinion, and many are under obvious pseudonyms, such as ‘Tyler Durden’ a character in the novel and film *Fight Club* (See: Fincher, 2009; Palahniuk, 2003). Alongside articles, it always includes a centrespread, often includes cartoons, and occasionally includes puzzles, all of which tend to focus on conspiracy themes, such as

²⁸ The relationship between ‘alternative medicine’ and conspiracy theories is mostly beyond the scope of this thesis, but some evidence has been found for a correlation between the two, e.g. Fournier and Varet (2024)

a crossword whose solutions mostly relate to various conspiratorial ideas (e.g., Dykes (2020)). Dacombe et al. (2021) carried out a content analysis of the first ten editions of *TL* (every edition available at the time of their study) and argue that its content fell into five categories:

- Covid-19 conspiracy theory (21%)
- Other conspiracy content (4%)
- Non-conspiracist Covid-19 content (28%)²⁹
- Other news item (20%)
- Advertising (28%)

However, although these results lead them to argue that “almost half...[were] focussed on issues related to the pandemic” (pp. 4), I argue that much of the advertising in these editions also obliquely pertains to the pandemic, e.g. through products aiming to counter ‘harm’ caused by electromagnetic frequencies perhaps implied to be related to Covid, potentially bringing the proportion even higher.

A *TL* editorial claims that “[those] who still think in terms of left and right miss the whole charade of two-party politics” and bemoans that “ ‘conspiracy theories’ are now further automatically labelled ‘far-right conspiracy theories’ or ‘right-wing extremist’” (Smith, 2022b). It should indeed be noted that many of the articles in *TL* do not overtly advocate for a specific ideology beyond whichever argument a given article is making, so to some extent this claim is accurate. However, while its editor may not perceive it as such, the paper has a history of publishing figures popularly understood to have far-right and extremist views, such as then-leader of ‘For Britain’, Anne Marie Waters (2021), Holocaust denier John Hamer³⁰ and pseudonymous neo-Nazi ‘Lasha Darkmoon’ (Lawrence, 2022). At various points, it has also implicitly endorsed the ‘For Britain’ party (Smith, 2021b) and the Heritage Party (Aeyn, 2021). Elsewhere, several articles in *TL* have taken a variety of traditionally right-wing positions, such as that “nearly every major

²⁹ The researchers state that, while this content was not conspiracy-focussed, it nonetheless “frequently includes inaccurate or misleading information...[and] is overwhelmingly both sceptical and negative in tone” (Dacombe et al., 2021, pp. 4) and is therefore relevant to this thesis.

³⁰ Holocaust denial does not appear to be an editorial position in *TL*, for as Chapter 5 shows, writers for the paper sometimes liken themselves to those persecuted by the Nazis, which while itself antisemitic, would nonetheless imply that such authors believe that the Holocaust happened.

corporation has...been relentless in their mission to make far-left extremism the dominant ideology in the western world” (B. Smith, 2024). Various socially conservative positions are also heavily represented, such as anti-LGBTQ+ and anti-abortion sentiment, as well as the advocacy of traditional gender roles and family structures among others. Therefore, aside from rare exceptions, such as the apparent endorsement of left-wing challenger for Kier Starmer’s parliamentary seat, Andrew Feinstein (Wylde, 2024), I argue that it is reasonable to claim that, deliberately or otherwise, *TL* tends towards right-wing and sometimes extremist positions.

However, it is important to add, having spent as much time analysing this paper as I have, that these right wing and extremist sentiments tend to be subtle and disparate, rather than a specific ideology being pushed by the paper. Moreover, it is not the sole content found in *TL* but usually emerges in a small proportion of content in the paper per edition. This is not to diminish the harm that these views do, but to emphasise that, when engaging with a given edition of *TL*, one should not assume that its main ambition is whipping up hatred toward minority groups or carrying out extremist acts. Instead, it should be understood as being on the broader continuum of *TL*’s socially conservative subtext.

Even aside from the falsehoods within, the quality of *TL*’s output is rather poor in comparison to established media outlets. Articles contained within the ‘news’ sections of the paper will often be more akin to opinion columns, with emotionally and rhetorically charged phraseology throughout. Moreover, despite listing proofreaders among its staff at the beginning of every issue, spelling and grammar errors are frequent³¹, and there is little consistency among the writing styles of the authors. Perhaps most striking of all is that the paper’s content is frequently self-contradictory and inconsistent. For example, as I show in Chapter 6, some articles in *TL* argue that SARS-nCoV-2 does not exist, so the ‘vaccines’ must therefore be something else, while others seem to accept that the virus is real, but claim that the vaccines are, *inter alia*, experimental gene therapy and therefore unsafe. A particularly odd inconsistency can be found in the July 2021 edition, in which page 2 includes QR codes to donate blockchain-based cryptocurrencies Bitcoin

³¹ Observant readers will notice the grammatical inconsistencies even within *TL*’s headlines by looking at my Bibliography.

and Monero to the paper, while an article on page 6 is headlined “Beware ‘Big Brother’ Blockchain”, and argues against using this technology.

Overall, a given edition of *The Light* is a vast melange of texts, genres and perspectives which is difficult to completely pin down. That there is still relatively little known about its strategies and operating practices is a problem, though perhaps this thesis may (dare I say it) shine a light on some aspects of this paper.

While it could be argued that using only one source to represent the Covid misbeliever Discourse and three for the Dominant UK Covid Discourse is unbalanced, the number and diversity of claims about Covid contained within *TL* is such that it is perhaps a broader source than the fact checkers. Moreover, to my knowledge, there is no other physical conspiracy paper in the UK, so this is the only option for this format.

With this considered I now turn to the sampling strategy used for these sources.

4.8: Sampling online and offline; separating anti-vaccine texts from the main body.

The empirical chapters of this thesis are split into two studies. The first, whose findings are written up in Chapter 5, seeks to answer research questions 1 and 2, regarding how the Covid misbeliever as a general subjectivity is constructed within the two Discourses being researched. The second study, whose findings are written up in Chapter 6, is identical except that it is concerned with how the Covid misbeliever subjectivity is constructed in relation to anti-Covid-vaccine subjectivities and thus answer research questions 3 and 4. The reason for splitting the study in this way is because part of the sampling process was to assign each of the texts sampled a theme (see below). Thus, while the Covid misbeliever as a general subjectivity is the main thematic focus, it quickly became clear that the anti-vaccination sentiment was a large enough sub-theme to require its own study. Moreover, general anti-vaccine sentiment is an old³² and persistent problem for Public Health (Gallegos et al., 2023; YouGov, n.d.). Much work has been

³² It should be borne in mind that the context of historical anti-vaccine sentiment can be very different to that seen today. For example, Durbach (2005) suggests that some 19th century anti-vaccine arguments may come from more rational foundations, such as higher risks of harm from vaccinations due to unsanitary medical practices and the poorer nutrition of urban working-class children, as well as opposition to vaccination in the British Raj due to its imperialistic replacement of the culturally significant indigenous practice of variolation.

done on understanding this theme, but I wish to contribute further to this by applying my methodological approach to understanding this problem. As such, it seemed that this specific preoccupation within Covid misbelief required its own investigation (Study 2) which is covered in Chapter 6. Indeed, as I discuss below, there were so many viable vaccine-related texts that certain modifications had to be made to the sampling strategy for Study 2 to make it manageable. Therefore, the two studies use slightly different sampling methods, though both aim to understand the Covid misbeliever. Moreover, since I am dealing with two text formats, online and offline, this also necessitated slightly differing approaches. As such, I proceed in this section by first discussing the universal aspects of the sampling strategy, then discussing the sampling method by format.

4.8.1: Phase 1 sampling

Alongside my previously discussed timeframe of 2 February 2020 and 5 May 2023, I also added the following two requirements to my sample:

- The text must be in the format of an article (e.g. news report, fact check, blog update, discussion piece, et cetera)
- These articles contained the use of at least one of the following keywords: “covid”; “pandemic”; “coronavirus”.
- Does not exclusively concern a country other than the UK³³

The article format was selected because it tends to be information-rich and its presentation, formatting and associated imagery and symbolism also allowed for a deeper interpretation than, say, 1/8th page advertisement in *TL* or website homepage of *FF*. I had initially intended to include shorter texts such as these because they also include valuable information about the construction of the Covid misbeliever, but ultimately, I lacked the time and resources to include these as well and needed to select those that were most useful for this study: article texts.

³³ This does not necessarily mean that texts discussing non-UK events were discarded. For example, one text in the Study 1 fact checker sample, while framed around an event which occurred in the US, is more concerned with the broader issue of online abuse related to Covid, rather than American misbelievers *per se*.

When I use the term ‘article’, I am not referring solely to its written aspects, but what I term the ‘whole text’, including imagery, formatting, fonts, page layout and designs, et cetera. This is because an important aspect of analysing texts, in my view, is the broader context and symbolic presentation in which the information is being conveyed. A text is comprised of numerous potentially polysemic signifiers, and I therefore take some inspiration from the tradition of semiotics (the study of signs and signification) to inform how I interpret these texts (Daniel, 2025).

The decision to use the three keywords was to ensure that the articles being selected were relevant to Covid specifically, and these words represent three synecdoches used to refer to both the virus and the broader experiences associated with it. ‘Coronavirus’ was often used to refer to the virus, e.g. as ‘the novel coronavirus’, ‘the coronavirus’ et cetera. Similarly, the broader experience is often summed up as ‘the pandemic’, ‘pandemic-era’, ‘the covid period’ et cetera. While it could be argued that other key terms such as ‘SARS-nCoV-2’ might have also been relevant, I argue that it is reasonable to assume that these three words were more common in the non-specialist texts that are being studied here as they are not specialist terms.

I will now turn to how this sampling strategy was applied to the initial gathering of all relevant texts for each study and source in turn.

4.8.2: Phase 1: Sampling from Full Fact, C4FC and BBC Verify

The first phase of Study 1 was the collection of fact checking texts from *FF*, *C4FC* and *BBC Verify*. The former two sources had their own web addresses. This meant that the collection of the texts from them could be streamlined by employing specific search strategies. Firstly, it was possible to use Google search operators to gather all texts from these websites containing the study keywords. To ensure that the search was not influenced by my browsing history, I used a Google Chrome Incognito window, whose search results are not based on usage history and does not save the searches made on it, but does allow the use of extensions (Chrome Enterprise and Education Help, n.d.). Google search operators, such as speech marks and site domains allow the user to narrow their results to fit specific criteria, such as only including specific websites and pages that contain specific words (Google Search Help, n.d.). Thus, to retrieve all relevant study texts for phase 1, I needed only search in the following format,

‘Site:[WEBSITE DOMAIN]: “[KEYWORD]’’. For example, to find all *Full Fact* webpages containing the word “coronavirus” that the Google search engine has the capacity to through this method, I searched, *site:https://fullfact.org "coronavirus"*. To ensure that the results were within the study timeframe, I used the Google advanced search settings to set the dates of the results to this period. I then scrolled to the bottom of the page to ensure that all results were on screen, then used the Chrome extension ‘Save Search Results’ which saves the URLs of every search result on screen (see: Chrome Web Store (n.d.)). These saved results could then be directly copied into an Excel spreadsheet for processing.

However, *BBC Verify*, as a subsection of the *BBC News* website, could not be collected in this way because it does not have a web domain independent of *BBC News*. Instead, it was necessary to manually select each article from the *Verify* section of the *BBC News* website that had been published during the study period. The presence of the keywords in these articles was checked, and those that fit the criteria were added to the spreadsheet.

Both methods are liable to miss some relevant articles, and as my subsequent data cleaning showed, include some irrelevant ones. Nevertheless, I argue that this was the best method for collecting this data because it was practical for gathering a large quantity of sources and avoided my own selection biases by minimising the ‘hands-on’ aspects of source collection.

These articles were then sorted into strata based on their main theme. This was not a standardised procedure and has the potential to be the product of my own biases, but I attempted to be as dispassionate as possible in this process. The later phase of sorting the data sources involved taking these initial thematic tags and placing them within larger strata. For example, those articles which had been initially tagged as “vaccination/effects thereof”, “destruction of expired vaccines” and “vaccine passports” (among others) would be grouped together under the stratum “Vaccines, vaccination against Covid-19, state-level ‘rollouts’ and ‘nanochips’ claimed to be contained within”.

4.8.3: Phase 2: Sampling from 'The Light'

Although *TL* is a physical paper, a complete archive of PDF back issues can be found on their website (The Light, n.d.-a). It could be argued that some indeterminate aspect of the qualitative experience of reading *TL* is lost when accessing it via a computer screen. The methods by which *TL* is spread and the materials that are sometimes included with it also represent valuable qualitative information. However, since my focus is on the articles within *TL* itself, and that in my view, a researcher is invariably somewhat alienated from the 'normal' experience of reading media content by virtue of being a researcher, this does not represent a significant problem. Using this PDF archive is far more practical than sourcing physical copies of the paper. Moreover, purchasing physical editions of *TL* may represent an ethical issue since it means funding an organisation which has possible extremist links (Hanspal, 2023; Hope Not Hate, 2023). Therefore, I used this archive to access the editions of *TL* published within the study period. Aside from including clickable links from the front page to relevant articles, these PDF editions are, to the best of my knowledge, identical to the physical versions, based on the few physical copies that have come into my possession.

Drawing texts from *TL* was a much longer process than phase 1 as it required the manual examination of each edition published in the study period to draw out texts which contained the relevant keywords and an appropriate focus on Covid. A total of 33 editions of *TL* were published within the timeframe of the study. Each article within them was assessed for its relevance to Covid and the presence of the keywords. Using the major theme strata from phase 1 of the sampling, I placed each relevant article into each of these categories.

While 29 thematic strata were identified, ultimately, in both sampling phases, only those articles included within the following two strata were eligible to be included:

- '*Misbeliever as an in-group identity or associated practices and non-misbelievers as an out-group identity or practice or vice versa*'. These texts were eligible for inclusion in Study 1.
- '*Vaccines, vaccination against Covid-19, state-level 'rollouts' and 'nanochips' claimed to be contained within*'. These texts eligible for inclusion in Study 2.

While I had originally intended to include the most prolific strata, these two were the most relevant to my research aims and constraints of time and practicality meant that the other strata were discarded for these studies.

4.9: Stratified random sampling of texts

I decided that I would have a text sample size of circa 60 for Study 1 and circa 40 for Study 2³⁴ with these being split evenly between the fact checkers and *TL*. This was so that an appropriate amount of focus could be given to each of the texts while also allowing time to complete the research within the timeframe of my PhD studentship. Reaching these numbers meant needing a final sampling strategy which was both proportionate to the themes of the texts and selected without undue bias. As such, I used a *stratified random sample* of the sample I had at this point.

At this point of sampling, I had four sets of samples: two for each study comprising the fact checker texts and texts from *The Light*. For each of these four samples, I broke the sample down by sub-themes that I identified within them, with those sub-themes appearing fewer than 3 times being discarded as insignificant for this study. For example, the sample representing *TL* in Study 2, some sub themes were far more prevalent than others, such as ‘Vaccine discussion, debates and censorship thereof’ (n=20) and ‘vaccine passports and segregation’ (n=5). By contrast many other themes appeared only once or twice, such as ‘vaccine exemptions’ (n=1) and ‘vaccine incentives’ (n=2). Thus, this stratification was in part to bring down the sample size to a manageable level, but also to ensure that proportional attention was being paid to the most significant themes. This is because in stratified sampling, “the probability of selection for any unit is the sampling fraction for the stratum in which the unit is placed” (Henry, 1990, pp. 53). In other words, it is a random selection from the sample which is weighted by the frequency with which certain characteristics are present. This allowed me to ‘scale down’ the sample while maintaining the same proportion of texts as in the original sample.

I calculated this by taking the percentage of the original sample which was represented by each stratum and dividing the target sample size by this, then randomly selecting that

³⁴ This was ultimately 50 for Study 1 and 42 for Study 2.

number of texts from the stratum. For example, in Study 2, to reach 20 texts from *TL*, I calculated the proportion of each remaining stratum out of 20. For example, “vaccine discussions, debates and censorship” was 20% of the overall sample, and 20% of 20 is 2, so 2 articles were selected from this stratum³⁵, resulting in the final sample of 21 texts. This selection was carried out by assigning each text a number within its stratum and using a random number generator to select the appropriate number of texts.

This sampling methodology has the additional advantage of providing statistics on what the major themes in these studies are and the extent to which the fact checkers and *TL* overlap. While this is, of course, not a quantitative study, this is nonetheless a useful background to have in understanding what these texts chose to focus on. As such, the Appendix of this thesis includes pie charts illustrating the frequencies of different themes within the samples.

Finally, I must note some slight differences in the samples for practical purposes. Firstly, in Study 1, the number of texts included is unbalanced: 20 texts are taken from fact checkers while 30 are from *TL*. This is because there were too few articles within the *Misbeliever as an in-group identity or associated practices and non-misbelievers as an out-group identity or practice or vice versa* stratum which met the conditions for inclusion in the sample. As such, stratification was not necessary in this case, since the sample did not meet the target of 30. In Study 2, by contrast, I faced the opposite problem: there were so many texts pertaining to anti-vaccine sentiment that I needed to introduce additional limits to make the sample size manageable. As such, in Study 2, I used only *Full Fact* texts to represent the fact checker genre. This is because as an independent fact checker, as well as one which was by far the most represented in the fact checker sample for Study 2, it was best representative of the fact checker perspective as it was unburdened by its attachment to a larger media organisation. This had not been my original intention for the studies but ultimately became necessary.

Now, I turn to the process used to analyse the texts.

³⁵ Where this calculation returned decimalised numbers, they were rounded to the nearest whole.

4.10: Analysis: Textual devices and themes

Foucauldian Discourse analysis methodologies, as I have argued, are interested in what texts are ‘doing’ in a broader sense than merely what is contained within the written or image-based text. This is not to suggest that these smaller-scale elements of the text are unworthy of attention, but that they need to be seen as elements of a larger system of meaning which makes up the text. Since these studies are focussed on articles, this means that its manifest content – what it says, what images are included, et cetera – can be interpreted alongside the broader contextualising details around the article. For example, the positioning of an article in a newspaper or website, the use of colours and fonts in its presentation, its generic features and time of publication can, whether by author/publisher’s intention or not, influence how the article is interpreted by the reader. As such, my aim with my analysis method was to create a strategy for understanding how meaning is communicated through the interplay of overtly communicated meanings and the implications of indirect communication. In this sense, as I note above, I conceptualise these texts as ‘whole texts’, not merely their overt communicative capacities.

Moreover, the same meanings can manifest within texts through different means. For example, if I wished to write an article portraying anti-vaccine Covid misbelievers as childish, there are several different textual devices I might use. I could use metaphors and phrases semantically linked to children (e.g. ‘threw all their toys out of the pram’), I could illustrate my article with a photograph of a sulking child and a hypodermic needle, I could write the article with a patronising tone, and so on. I wanted this analysis method to be able to capture the ways in which the same conceptualisations of a subjectivity can be expressed through different textual devices and thus emerge as themes.

This meant using a coding system, that is, classification and retention of relevant parts of the data (Richards, 2015) which allowed me to account for different textual devices and dimensions within a single unit from the sample, which could be brought together to be plausibly described as clusters, patterns or themes (Miles et al., 2020). Given that these studies are concerned with the interpretation and analysis of qualitative datasets to generate codes and themes, it is a type of *thematic analysis* (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Braun and Clarke (2022) refer to ‘manifest’ and ‘latent’ codes within texts, meaning a

spectrum of codes between explicit and implicit meanings respectively. A text will contain meanings which range from overtly stated to wholly implicit, and in my view, the more latent a code, the more the researcher must justify their interpretation. I needed my analysis to provide adequate data to support the more latent themes as well as how different codes work together to generate themes.

Crucially, this thematic analysis strategy needed to account for how these texts produce Discursive realities about Covid misbelievers. It is about understanding how the creators of these subjects empower their subject position within their respective Discourses through knowledge claims (see: Howarth (2015)). I decided, therefore, on a coding strategy that included both a schedule of textual and subtextual devices and allowed for the interpretations of codes as they emerged from my analysis of the text.

A coding schedule generally denotes a form into which pre-determined codes are entered (Saunders, 2008), but for my purposes, I wanted a schedule of textual devices into which could be placed what Richards (2015) terms ‘analytical’ codes, which are based on interpretations from the text. This method involves analysing texts to uncover the purpose of the “page” (for my purposes, I read ‘page’ as ‘text’), followed by, the ideational meanings, interpersonal meanings, textual meanings and social context and meaning (Djonov & Knox, 2014). However, I also wanted to look for more specific, ‘micro’ textual devices as well, such as metaphor. On this basis, the schedule used was the following:

4.10.1: A schedule of linguistic devices

TEXT:

URL:

What is the relevance of the subject invoked in relation to this theme?

- -

Who are the misbelievers in this case?

-

Macro

1-positioning (where is this text found?)

- -

2-form/genre (e.g. is it an explainer article? News item? How is the 'story' told?)

- -

3-style and presentation (Are there any notable stylistic choices, e.g. fonts, colour schemes, structure)

- -

4- interactivity (can the reader interact with the text directly, e.g. with hyperlinks or puzzles?)

- -

5-intertextuality (except that noted elsewhere) (does the text make any allusions to others, including fiction?)

- -

6-Errors

- -

Micro

1-tone(s) (e.g., didactic, frustrated, celebratory etc.)

- -

2-Metaphor, simile, allusion [except for those addressed elsewhere]

- -

3-complexity (does the text use simple language? Jargon?)

- -

4-Other linguistic devices (relevant observations not covered by the above)

- -

5-quotations and their framing (e.g. whose voice do we hear directly?)

- -

6- Other relevant observations (observations not covered in any of the above discussion)

- -

Objectification findings

Embodiment of the subject

The purpose of this schedule is to allow for the freedom to analyse the text without constraint while simultaneously reminding the researcher to be alert to specific meaning making devices. For example, the use of metaphors (linguistic, or in the case of images, visual) is of particular use given that, as Semino (2008) argues, choices of metaphor affect the representation of the concept being described by it. Yet at the same time, the more open-ended aspects, such as '[o]ther relevant observations' allow for the recording of aspects relevant to the research questions which are not accounted for by the other devices.

In addition, this method also emphasises the importance of familiarity with the data, since it necessitates re-reading the data to search for specific devices. Such repeated readings allow for immersion in the data (Nowell et al., 2017), but also allow for a better chance of recognising distinct meanings which might be applied to signifiers within a specific Discourse, which an outsider might not be familiar with. To take a now relatively well-known example from conspiracy theory research (which is briefly discussed in Chapter 5), consider the term 'red pill'. The term originates in a scene in science fiction film *The Matrix* (Wachowski & Wachowski, 2001) in which the protagonist is offered a choice between a red pill which allows him to break out of his illusory world and into reality, or a blue pill, which leaves him in the illusion³⁶. However, within some far-right, misogynist and conspiratorial contexts, the term is used as a metaphor for "the epistemological awakening at the heart of conspiracist belief itself" (Hannah, 2025, pp. 1), an interpretation which the film's directors object to (Niessen, 2022). Such appropriations of popular culture, turns of phrase and language do not usually see the same amount of attention as 'red pilling', but there may well be many others hiding in plain sight. Using this analysis method to spend time familiarising myself with the data in these studies, I argue, improves my chances of noting the non-standard uses of certain phrases.

The process of qualitative analysis can never be truly complete, since there is always more to be read into text. Indeed, I found that even as I came to write up my results, yet

³⁶ For a discussion around the issue of having to repeatedly explain the background of the 'red pill' despite its relative detachment from its cinematic origins by now, see Rockatansky et al. (2025).

more themes emerged and altered my focus in this section. The researcher must, therefore, decide from themselves how much analysis is enough.

4.11: Ethical considerations

As a study centred wholly on secondary data, it may not initially seem that there are significant ethical challenges to this research. However, one concern I initially held was that since *The Light* is not an officially regulated publication and its writers are, barring a small number of exceptions, not professional journalists, I am therefore, in effect, dealing with the output of members of the public who might not have foreseen that their writing would be the subject of academic study. Moreover, some of the content in the fact checking articles included in this study include the input of members of the public (e.g. quotations) who similarly might not have expected scrutiny of their output.

To resolve this, I have attempted to attribute the perspectives within the texts to the texts themselves, rather than any individuals. Moreover, I have avoided including any potentially sensitive inputs from the public in the subsequent results write-up chapters. For example, an earlier version of Chapter 5 included discussions of the language of survivors of abuse. It was decided between myself and my supervisors that including this within the write up was neither appropriate nor added to the overall argument. It was therefore removed.

As noted in section 4.8.3, I did not have to fund *The Light* in order to access it and avoided giving the paper any money. Additionally, I had all relevant editions of the paper saved as PDFs, thereby avoiding giving their website additional views when accessing the study data.

Finally, as noted in the frontmatter of this thesis, this research has received ethical approval from the Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences Research Ethics Subcommittee at the University of East Anglia. The subcommittee raised no issues with my research proposal.

Chapter 5: Study 1- Findings

Chapter 5 Abstract

This Chapter presents the findings of Study 1, which investigated the constructions of the Covid misbeliever as a general subjectivity within texts sampled from three fact checking services and texts sampled from ‘The Light’. I argue that the fact checkers construct the Covid misbeliever subject as irrational and uncritical, as threatening and dangerous and as disconnected from powerful institutions. I argue that ‘The Light’ constructs this subject as uniquely aware of an authoritarian regime under which they believe themselves to live, as victims of repression, isolated and as the possessors of what I term a ‘fortress ontology’.

5.1: Chapter introduction

This chapter presents the findings of Study 1, in which I analyse the construction of the Covid misbeliever as a general subjectivity in 20 texts drawn from three fact checkers and 30 texts from *The Light* (TL). Great consideration was given to the style of write up, for “simply presenting the themes accompanied by illustrative quotations is insufficient” (Bryman, 2016, pp. 587). My writing up style is therefore partly inspired by the “tactics” for meaning-making offered by Miles et al. (2020, pp. 274), such as noticing themes, plausibility and clustering. Additionally, to make clear what meanings are associated with which textual devices, the device is written in **bold**. In this chapter, any reference which is not taken from the study sample (e.g. references that are included to provide context) are signified with the letters “NS” at the end of the citation, meaning ‘non-sample’.

5.2: Dominant discursive constructions of the Covid misbeliever subjectivity

5.2.1: Finding 1: Fact checking texts can construct Covid misbelievers as individuals who do not recognise the dangers of Information and these texts suggest that the technology used to share it should be controlled to prevent its misuse.

Before explaining the discursive construction of the Covid misbeliever (CMB) itself in these texts, it is necessary to first provide the context of how these texts construct information and its transmission, since, as we shall see, it is essential to form an understanding of one to understand the other.

In this sample, information is presented as something that operates almost autonomously. There is a theme of Covid information needing to be controlled or contained before it can reach a potential CMB. This is most obvious in the environmental **metaphors** used in the sample to describe the spread of information. For example, false information is likened to “wildfire” (Full Fact Team, 2020b) as well as to plants, for it “sows distrust and confusion” (Full Fact Team, 2023) especially on social media, which is “fertile ground for unfounded rumours about Covid-19” (Coleman, 2020). Such analogies give the impression of information as something that spreads naturally, and thus when “bad information”³⁷ emerges within this ecosystem, it can only be controlled, rather than fully removed, for it is invasive, yet it occurs seemingly without human interaction.

The sense that information has to be controlled is reinforced by the invocation of the **semantic field** of *force majeure* in relation to Covid (and other) falsehoods. For example, the “framework for information incidents” presented in Arnold and Aitken (2020b) and the “model for collaborating to combat misinformation crises” in Arnold and Aitken (2020a) suggest that false information is a persistent risk which can only be mitigated through its strategic containment akin to emergency plans for some other public health disaster. Relatedly, I infer a notable concern within these articles that even *reproducing* the false information under discussion is a risk, with the imagery of material containing false claims very conspicuously **framed** as false in Goodman (2021), Full Fact (n.d.-c) and Benedictus (2021) through bold annotations. I interpret an implicit concern that even the mere reproduction of those items classified as illegitimate Covid knowledge claims represents a danger and must therefore be shown to be illegitimate as clearly as possible. I argue that these are cases of false information being controlled: the contextualisation of these claims as false renders them safe for human observation. Information is presented in this sample as though it is itself a dangerous pathogen: it can be safely observed in secure and controlled conditions, but, as we shall see, harmful or even deadly if not contained in this manner.

³⁷ The term “bad information” appears in all Full Fact texts in this sample, usually in a banner at the bottom of the page reading, “Full Fact fights bad information”. See also section 6.1.1.

This has the effect of constructing the fact checker subjectivity as empowered to determine which units of this ostensibly autonomous information are legitimate in the dominant Covid Discourse and which are illegitimate and therefore need to be quarantined in this way. In other words, fact checkers have the *power* to classify certain Covid *knowledge* as legitimate or illegitimate, which in turn reinforces their *power*. Here, we see the cyclical, Foucauldian construction of power discussed in Chapter 3: power makes subjectivities and operates through their textual outputs. In classifying certain knowledge claims about Covid as illegitimate, it becomes possible to classify those who make or believe such claims to be CMBs while reinforcing their own subject position as Covid non-misbeliever.

It is also important to note the constructions of digital social media and the transmission of seemingly illegitimate Covid knowledge claims in this sample, since this is central to many of my subsequent findings. Along with being the aforementioned “fertile ground” (Coleman, 2020) for falsehoods, it is elsewhere argued that the internet has also “increased the rate at which harmful health misinformation spreads” (Full Fact Team, 2023), echoing Mckernon’s (1925, NS) technological determinism in discussing ‘fake news’ in the early 20th century (see Chapter 2). Moreover, anxieties surrounding the loss of clear signifiers of authentic (i.e. discursively legitimate) information due to the interactivity of the internet is a frequent theme. For example, I argue that the header **image** in Krishna (2020b), which according to its caption, shows “[a] selection of posts, both accurate and inaccurate” layered on top of one another serves as a **visual metaphor** for an ‘infodemic’ (see Chapter 2). The effect, I argue, is to imply that the internet, especially social media, allows for information to be spread without the oversight that traditional media entailed and with an ill-defined boundary between legitimate and illegitimate knowledge claims. Consider the following extract:

“What's new this time is the main account spreading the film [Died Suddenly] on Twitter has bought verification - the blue tick which is supposed to be a mark of credibility, something experts have warned could help misinformation spread..."Since Elon Musk took over he's just, you know, let it be the Wild West again," Victoria believes.”

(Schraer, 2022)

There are a lot of subtextual implications embedded in these two sentences which I argue can tell us a lot about the relationship between social media and authenticity in the dominant Covid Discourse. There is the implication that Twitter's³⁸ 'blue tick' was, prior to Musk's acquisition of the website, a signifier of authenticity and therefore who could be classified as trustworthy. While this view is at odds with Edgerly and Vraga (2019, pp. 286, NS), who found that "the presence of a verification mark did not alter credibility" on Twitter, it implies that such symbols could once be relied upon to classify certain social media accounts as producers of legitimate knowledge claims. By invoking the **metaphor** of "the Wild West" to describe Twitter after Musk's acquisition, there is an implication that without symbols to denote authenticity, social media becomes a lawless land with no control, such as the popular understanding of the American frontier³⁹. It is notable, too, that it is suggested that social media would become the Wild West "again": the implication seems to be that social media has progressed towards better methods for delineating legitimate and illegitimate subjects, but now this boundary has *returned* to being unclear. It seems to associate a stronger division of legitimate and illegitimate knowledge claims with progress, implying that this should be the ambition of social media companies.

However, social media companies are presented with suspicion in this sample. For example, Full Fact Team (2023) criticises the lack of government oversight of social media content by suggesting that "tech companies" have been left to "mark their own homework". This **metaphor** likens these companies to mischievous children who are being knowingly dishonest, since they are aware of the problem of false Covid information, yet fail to act against it. Continuing this metaphor, this text seems to imply that the Government must become stricter, must become the teacher who *does* check whether their pupils are honest. However, it seems that there are still some online sources that can be recognised as authentic in the dominant Discourse: Full Fact (n.d.-c) **advises** readers to "try searching to see what trusted news sites or fact checkers are saying" when no source is given for a piece of information. This suggestion, while ambiguous (what constitutes a "trusted news site"?), suggests that some signifiers of

³⁸ 'X' was still known as 'Twitter' at this time.

³⁹ I am referring to the popular understanding of this phrase; I acknowledge the potential racist undertones of suggesting native American lands pre-white settlement were 'wild'.

authenticity remain on the internet, namely, a website classified as being engaged in practices of fact checking or ‘trustworthy’ (presumably, linked to traditional media outlets) news websites. Thus, the fact checker is again presented as an arbiter of truth, or a place where the truth resides, and commands our suspicion towards some indeterminate threat to this truth.

Moreover, there is an impression given that social media may be trustworthy in situations where a user can signify their authenticity through their occupation. Krishna (2020b) includes a lengthy **quotation** from a dentist detailing an anecdote about a doctor friend who posted an Instagram story with advice about the experience of having Covid based on her own experiences of suffering from it. Note that when the internet is being used by individuals who can be signified by their jobs as trustworthy, such as doctors and dentists, it “can benefit non-medically trained users with accessible advice” (Krishna, 2020b). Overall, there is a sense that the internet, especially social media, can only be trusted where a connection to the dominant institutions of society can be established. Most other content online should in turn be viewed with suspicion.

The major exception to this focus on social media and the internet is Goodman (2021), an article concerning “[h]ow pandemic disinformation went offline”, a human interest story about people who received leaflets, DVDs and notably, *The Light*, through their letterbox. However, the **tone** of the article implies that this is unusual and surprising, for it has “proliferated online over the past year, but it’s also now become a familiar sight on doormats across the country” (Goodman, 2020). Moreover, even this article heavily relies on concerns surrounding social media. For example, its discussion of *TL* notes that it is managed through Facebook, and discusses how a photograph of a *TL* article was “shared 64,000 times” on Facebook, as well as using the **metaphor** that falsehood leaflets “serve as a way of drawing people into the mire of online disinformation” (Goodman, 2021), implying offline Covid falsehoods can be a gateway into the ostensibly worse online falsehoods. Thus, the internet and social media remain central to explanations of CMBs and false information even in discussions explicitly concerning offline falsehoods. Indeed, Dudfield (2020) goes as far as to **describe** “true web scale” fact checking as the “one big challenge” for the field, as though all other such ‘challenges’ were of lesser importance. I argue, therefore, that these texts construct the

internet as a threatening and untrustworthy place from which those lacking critical and media literacy skills must be protected. This is key to my next argument about the construction of the Covid misbeliever subjectivity in this sample: they are uncritical or irrational thinkers.

5.2.2: Finding 2: Fact checking texts may construct the Covid misbeliever as an uncritical or irrational thinker

Having now established the construction of information and social media in these texts, it becomes possible to make my first argument about how this affects the construction of the CMB. In this sample of texts, the CMB subject is understood as one who lacks critical thinking skills and rationality and therefore the capacity to assess the authenticity of the information they consume.

Chapter 2 briefly discussed the ‘Third person effect’ (TPP), which “predicts that people will tend to overestimate the influence that mass communications have on the attitudes and behavior of others” (Davison, 1983, pp. 3, NS). A frequent theme in this sample was the implication that some unknown other person or group are at greater risk if exposed to false information about Covid. Consider these **quotations** from members of the public (of which one, notably, is a former journalist) within Goodman (2021):

- “Many of my neighbours are in their 80s, and could easily be discouraged from taking the vaccine if they saw this off-the-wall material” (Crane, in Goodman, 2020).
- "My worry is there are other people who haven't been paying attention to the news and then this lands on the doorstep" (Langford, in Goodman, 2020).
- "I would find these claims of a worldwide conspiracy involving every health worker, immunologist, epidemiologist, virologist, and journalist funny if they weren't so widely believed, and so dangerous" (Andrews, in Goodman, 2020)

Together, these attitudes are indicative of a sentiment that CMBs are some mass of individuals (or ‘third persons’) who are popularly assumed to lack critical and rational thinking skills and have thus succumbed to the consequences of being exposed to false

Covid information. The first two quotations both identify human subjectivities which ostensibly place one at risk of developing into a CMB subjectivity, namely, those categorised as elderly or ignorant of current affairs. While in the latter case, we can conjecture that those who do not consume news media are assumed to have no frame of reference by which to judge Covid falsehoods, it is unclear why over-80s would be at specific risk beyond some ageist assumption of a correlation between old age and psychological vulnerability. In any case, I argue that the identification of these apparently at-risk subjectivities ties back in with the theme of losing control over information discussed in section 6.4.2: there is a sense that false information must be controlled before it reaches social groups (subjectivities) that are at risk of being transformed into CMBs by it.

The result of at-risk individuals being exposed to false Covid information is perhaps best demonstrated in two invocations of avian **metaphors** in the sample. Krishna (2020a) suggests that “UK-based [social media] users began almost unconsciously parroting Q[Anon] phrases and slogans”⁴⁰, while Schraer (2022) suggests that, following reports of a non-misbeliever’s death from cardiac arrest, “hundreds” of CMBs “flocked” to a memorial thread to write “how long’s it been since she got the jab?”. Parroting and flocking both suggest unthinking and deindividuated (or perhaps, ‘bird-brained’) group behaviour by a mass of actors who lack the critical capacity to recognise the meanings of their own arguments. Indeed, that Krishna (2020a) overtly **describes** them as “almost unconsciously” making their arguments implies a near total absence of internal thought, as though CMBs have little or no inner life at all and merely consume and regurgitate falsehoods. I therefore argue that CMBs are constructed as largely irrational and uncritical, since they may be implied within the dominant Covid Discourse to uncritically consume and repeat Covid falsehoods, a construction resembling the ‘hypodermic needle’ model of media consumption (see Chapter 2).

⁴⁰ While this claim is related to QAnon, I argue that the text as a whole seems to heavily imply that QAnon followers and CMBs are one and the same, making this quotation relevant here. See subsequent discussion of monologicalism.

This lack of thought and criticality is further emphasised by the written **prosody**⁴¹ in some of these texts which I argue stress aspects of the sentence to emphasise the absurdity of CMB beliefs. For example, consider the sentences “[w]e slid from health passports to Bill Gates pretty quickly there” and “[t]here is simply no evidence that Bill Gates has any plans to implant microchips into human beings” in Worrall (2020). Stressors such as “simply” and “pretty quickly” are not necessary in these sentences yet alter their **tone** to suggest an absurdity of CMB arguments. A similar case can be found in Benedictus (2021): the word “clearly” in “[t]he fake version is clearly not authentic”, discussing a doctored image from BBC News, seems, in my view, to stress that only one with poor critical thinking skills could be fooled, yet the **format** of this text, a fact check, would imply that some people are fooled by it. This has the additional effect of reinforcing the power of the fact checker by demonstrating the clarity of their perspective.

I also argue that the **format** of Full Fact (n.d.-c), an interactive quiz, creates a similar effect. At the risk of doing precisely what I just critiqued, I feel it relevant to argue that several images in this quiz, which the user is asked to assess the authenticity of, are rather obviously fake. For example, one depicts a news report suggesting lions had been let out into the streets of Russia to keep the public indoors during Covid and another suggests that Sony and Microsoft disabled their online gaming features during school hours⁴². These edited images are especially crude and the stories they depict especially absurd. As such, I argue that their function is less related to educating users on spotting falsehoods, and more on emphasising the positional superiority of the non-misbeliever subject in the dominant Covid Discourse. I argue that it is a way of suggesting that CMBs are lacking in critical thought to the extent that even poorly made dis/misinformation would fool them. Relatedly, a similar textual practice is employed in Panjwani (2021) to disprove the notion that one million people could have attended an anti-lockdown march by demonstrating the claim’s absurdity. The text calculates that for this claim to be true, the crowd would need to be extremely long: likely “equivalent to the distance from Waterloo Bridge to the outskirts of Luton” (Panjwani, 2021). Exposing this absurdity while

⁴¹ While prosody generally refers to the paralinguistic features of speech such as intonation and pitch (Mitchell & Ross, 2013), it is also relevant to written texts, since, as Locke (2004) argues, we can “read it with our ears” to find “certain print equivalents of the devices of an orator”.

⁴² UK Schools were closed due to the lockdown policy of central government at the time.

implying that CMBs believe this again suggests a foolishness and irrationality on their part. Indeed, throughout the sample, there is an unspoken sense that the **target audience** of these texts are not CMBs themselves, but other non-misbelievers, perhaps to implicitly reinforce the non-misbeliever subject position's hierarchical supremacy in the dominant Covid Discourse.

This lack of criticality assumed by fact checkers sometimes also presents as a presumption of monologicalism, that is, “displaying the tendency for belief in one conspiracy theory to be correlated with belief in (many) others” (Franks et al., 2017, pp. 1, NS) within these texts. This is most notable through the **intertextual** connections between Covid misbeliefs and QAnon in several texts. QAnon is a now relatively well-known collection of conspiratorial beliefs originating from anonymous 8Kun posts written by someone claiming to possess high-level US intelligence clearance, which are usually centred around the belief that Satan-worshipping elites covertly control the world, using this power to sexually abuse children, though has since expanded to contain a variety of other theories (Marc-André, 2025; Miller, 2023). Given the outlandishness of much of QAnon, I argue that associating a claim with it has become a shorthand for delegitimising it in mainstream Discourses (and perhaps even in some non-mainstream ones). As already noted, the Krishna (2020a) text strongly associates CMBs with QAnon suggesting it has “expanded to encompass a litany of pre-existing conspiratorial and anti-authority beliefs: anti-5G, anti-vaccine, and in the midst of the pandemic, anti-mask”. In addition, Goodman (2020) introduces a CMB YouTuber by adding that he “promotes the pro-Trump QAnon conspiracy”⁴³ despite this having no direct relevance to the article, suggesting that invoking monologicalism is a way of delegitimising CMB figures by associating them with more well-known conspiracy theories. QAnon might therefore be understood as a synecdoche or metonym for conspiracy theorist in some contexts: a journalistic shorthand for the contemporary misbeliever. Similarly, in the Goodman (2021) article concerning the spread of offline falsehoods, under the **heading** “Beyond Covid Conspiracies”, it is suggested that other leaflets can concern QAnon. It is not explained whether these are connected to the leaflets about Covid, though in Worrall (2020) it is suggested that QAnon banners were seen at an anti-lockdown protest

⁴³ Referring to Donald Trump, US president.

suggesting at least some link. While QAnon beliefs and CMB beliefs did have *some* cross-pollination (see, e.g., Chapter 8 of Rothschild (2021, NS)), besides Krishna (2020a), its invocations in the sample seem, in my view, to be a way of constructing CMBs as monological due to their lack of critical thought about the information they consume. Thus, this monologicalism ties into the overall construction of CMBs as uncritical and irrational thinkers as they merely accept any claim they consume, regardless of whether it pertains to Covid.

It could be argued that CMBs are not *always* portrayed as unthinking and uncritical in this sample. Notably, the policy texts from Full Fact such as Arnold and Aitken (2020a) using militaristic **phraseology** such as “special units to combat disinformation” and “misinformation tactics”, or the conceptualisation of a need to “fight bad information” in Full Fact Team (2020a) and linking to a television programme called “Vaccines: The Disinformation War” in Goodman (2021) might imply that CMBs are cunning and strategic. However, my view is that it is the information *itself* which is the enemy in this conflict, not the individuals spreading it. After all, as the banner at the bottom of every Full Fact web page reads, “bad information ruins lives”, not, it seems, those who create it. Indeed, it is notable that throughout the sample, little attention is given to the origins of false Covid information, again emphasising the sense that information acts autonomously.

There are three exceptions to this, however. Firstly some attention is given to swindlers who use the pandemic to con others “to get clicks” (Allen-Kinross, 2021a), for “[s]ocial media also helps scammers to take advantage of the pandemic” (Coleman, 2020) and “sellable products” are “a little-credited incentive for these groups” (Krishna, 2020a). However, even in this case, it is unclear whether the swindlers are necessarily the origin of the false information or merely using pre-existing falsehoods to their own ends. Secondly, Full Fact Team (2020a), which explicitly references “[f]ighting the causes...of bad information”, seems to imply that a lack of transparency and accuracy within UK politics may be an origin point of falsehoods, though this is unclear. Additionally, in this instance, it is not clear whether the inaccuracies in question pertain to the pandemic or not, and it may still be the case that the specific origin of Covid falsehoods is unaddressed. The only instance of a CMB being specifically cited as the origin of Covid

falsehoods is Goodman (2020), wherein the origin of falsehoods about the Pirbright Institute are attributed to a single YouTuber's Tweets in which he misunderstands a patent. In this case, the implication seems to be that social media allows anyone to post their misunderstandings online and thus cause a snowball effect of CMBs making use of it. Even here, I argue, it is social media that are identified as the problem, rather than the original CMB himself, since it was this which allowed him to reach a wide audience in the first instance. As such, I argue that this sample suggests that false information, which seems to act autonomously, causes some third party (or *third* person) to become CMBs due to their lack of critical and rational appraisal of it. This lack of rationality and criticality leads to the next major finding: that CMBs are dangerous and threatening.

5.2.3: Finding 3: Fact checkers can construct CMBs as threatening and dangerous in this sample

My prior arguments have already hinted at the next major finding; this sample presents CMBs as threatening and dangerous. If the CMB is uncritical and irrational, as these texts seem to suggest, then it follows that their behaviour would be similarly thoughtless. It is unsurprising, then, that we see a threat represented by the CMB which takes two forms: firstly, that they are a threat to their own safety and those close to them because they fail to follow public health guidance, and secondly, that they harass and distress non-misbelievers because they view non-misbelievers as harmful.

CMBs are presented as a threat to themselves because, I argue, the function of several texts in this sample is to warn the reader of the danger to themselves and those close to them that they would become if they were to succumb to the allure of false Covid information. An especially emotive **tone** is achieved in Spring (2020), which presents the **narrative** of a repentant former CMB who was hospitalised along with his wife after believing Covid falsehoods and failing to follow Covid public health advice, with his wife not surviving the virus. This true story of human tragedy seems to function as a warning to the reader of the consequences of becoming a CMB, namely, that the same fate might await others who “read claims online that the virus was fabricated, linked to 5G or similar to the flu” (Spring, 2020), as this couple did.

Similarly, Coleman (2020) suggests a direct correlation between believing Covid falsehoods and large-scale death (n=800) and hospitalisation. Ironically, it was later

found that the academic paper that this text bases its headline claim that there are “‘Hundreds dead’ because of Covid-19 misinformation” on is being misrepresented. This is because the paper, namely, Islam et al. (2020, NS) did not aim to place a specific figure on the number of deaths by misinformation, nor would it be possible for a study of this small scale (Geraghty, 2020, NS). Indeed, fittingly, Full Fact have produced a fact check criticising the Coleman (2020) article, among others who made the claim that 800 deaths and over 5,800 hospitalisations *as a result of* misinformation (see: Benedictus (2020, via WayBack Machine, NS)). Nevertheless, at the time of writing this in mid-2025, that this article is still available on the BBC website without any corrections is notable. Without straying into conspiracy theory myself, it is striking that an article from a fact checking organisation can be shown to be misleading, yet not removed or corrected, since this would imply that not *all* false information is a problem in their view, perhaps only that which threatens the Information Disorder Paradigm (see Chapter 2). Perhaps we can argue, then, that the need to present the CMB as a threat to human life outweighs the need to pursue ‘true’ accounts, at least for BBC Verify. Thus, such is the need for some fact checkers to characterise CMBs as a threat, they are prepared to allow uncontained false information to continue existing so long as it protects the dominant Covid Discourse.

The second dangerously threatening aspect of the CMB construction in this sample is the aggression of CMBs towards non-misbelievers. This may already be apparent from the prior discussion of the cruelty of certain CMBs, for example, that people “flocked” to a memorial post as recounted in Schraer (2022), but CMBs are often presented in this sample as aggressive and abusive. A notable case of this is Goodman (2020) which discusses the abuse received by employees of the Pirbright Institute which it reports was subject to false claims from CMBs. This text uses the **juxtaposition of imagery** of smiling, unthreatening, female Pirbright employees with the reports of violent, sexually abusive and emotionally overwrought attacks from often male CMBs to demonstrate their aggressiveness and cruelty. Again, the irrationality and lack of criticality from CMBs are emphasised: they are suggested to have uncritically followed claims, originating from a single YouTuber’s misunderstanding, to make “all manner of accusations”, emphasising the threat they represent.

There is also an impression that the CMBs giving the abuse are cowardly, since their attacks are mediated by digital technology and therefore avoid the risks of face-to-face interaction. In one case, it is reported that a repeat caller to the Institute called himself “Mrs Doubtfire” and was “putting on a voice”, an apparent allusion to the titular character in Columbus’ (1993) film. At first glance, such cases might suggest that sometimes, CMBs are too absurd to be taken seriously, similar to the aforementioned comedic **tone** visible in parts of the Worrall (2020) text, or the presentation of **quotations** which suggest they view all of their opponents as paedophiles (Coleman & Sardarizadeh, 2022; Krishna, 2020a). Yet in context, such instances appear sinister rather than laughable: the ‘Mrs Doubtfire’ caller is reported to have repeatedly called and, in this case, made sexually abusive remarks to the employee who answered. Thus, despite the absurdity of CMB behaviours, the impression that they are a threat both psychologically and physically to non-misbelievers remains present.

The theme of CMBs as physically threatening is also strong in Coleman and Sardarizadeh (2022). Like Goodman (2020), this text also uses the juxtaposition of imagery and quotations to present the CMB as irrational. In this case, a significant portion of the article describes “Alpha Men Assemble”, a group which “combines anti-vaccine and sovereign citizen beliefs” and “has been holding training sessions...where volunteers prepare for “direct action”” (Coleman & Sardarizadeh, 2022). In a **quotation** from the group, they describe their training sessions as “non-combative and are in no way to be linked to any militia or extremism”, yet this is at odds with the **imagery** of the group in the article, which depicts the group using boxing equipment and engaged in pushing resembling a rugby scrum. We also hear the **voice** of the *Daily Mail*, a mainstream newspaper seemingly invoked as a reliable source here, whose description of the group is similarly at odds with the groups self-description: “[a]ccording to the Daily Mail, at a recent training session...activists were urged to “hit vaccine centres, schools, head teachers, colleges, councillors and directors of public health in every area”” (Coleman & Sardarizadeh, 2022). Thus, we can interpret an obvious **contradiction** between how the articles use **quotations** from Alpha Men Assemble (AMA) to demonstrate how they perceive themselves (non-violent, non-extremist) and the **framing** of this article demonstrating that their activities are violent, extremist or dangerous. This presentation

of AMA has two possible interpretations: the group fails to recognise its own threatening activities, or that they are lying about the threat they pose. In either case, the CMB is here rendered as an aggressive, unthinking and dangerous subjectivity.

Overall, this sample presents CMBs as dangerous and threatening *because of*, rather than despite, their lack of critical and rational thinking. This is because CMBs are a threat to themselves by exposing themselves to the virus through behaviour resulting from their beliefs or because they are irrationally aggressive towards non-misbelievers. CMBs are therefore usually presented as external to mainstream institutions, and, as I now discuss, unable to produce authentic knowledge.

5.2.4: Finding 4: The CMB cannot be associated with institutions in fact checking texts.

I have already discussed fact checkers' apparent anxieties surrounding the loss of markers of authenticity, and therefore perceptions of legitimacy, in information dispersal. Subjectivities who possess the power to make legitimate Covid claims within the dominant Covid Discourse are, I argue, associated with mainstream institutions such as medicine. This is because these institutions are understood as the sites where legitimate knowledge claims about Covid can be made.

To begin my explanation for this argument, consider the following three excerpts:

- “In one case a viral voice message from someone who claimed to work for the South East Coast Ambulance Service NHS Foundation Trust, made a number of claims about the “peak” of the new coronavirus outbreak, how ambulances will respond and what further lockdown measures the government plans to introduce” (Full Fact Team, 2020b).
- “Mr Langford confronted the woman who had delivered it. She told him she was a nurse, that the pandemic was a hoax and that no-one had died from coronavirus. He said he didn't believe a nurse would say that but didn't challenge her credentials at the time” (Goodman, 2021).

- “Throughout the pandemic, there have been numerous posts that attribute their claims to doctors, nurses, and medical professionals which have often turned out to be either false, needing vital context, or highly exaggerated” (Krishna, 2020b).

These three excerpts have in common a doubtful **tone** towards the possibility that a medical professional could be a CMB. In each, individuals claiming to either be, or to base their views upon, medical professionals make a claim outside the boundaries of legitimacy in the dominant Covid Discourse. Seemingly as a result, they have doubt cast upon whether they are actually medically informed or connected to the institution of medicine. It seems to imply a logical fallacy on the part of fact checkers wherein medical professionals can only offer legitimate Covid information, and therefore any who provides delegitimised information must therefore be lying about their profession.

In the former two excerpts, this is achieved by **qualifying** these claims by calling into question a CMB’s self-description as a medical professional. They “claimed to” work for an ambulance service in the first, and “didn’t believe a nurse would say that” in the second. The implication seems to be that these individuals are lying about their profession in the pursuit of spreading false Covid information by appropriating medical professionalism as a signifier of authenticity. Based on the information within these articles, it is impossible to definitively conclude whether this is the case, yet its apparent intended effect on the reader is crucial: CMBs who claim to be associated with the institution of medicine should have their professional identity called into question and be semantically excluded from that institution. In the third excerpt, the effort to disconnect CMBs from medicine is even clearer. Medical professionals would not agree with CMBs, this text seems to suggest, so it follows that citations of them by CMBs would often be “false, needing vital context, or highly exaggerated” (Krishna, 2020b). I argue, therefore, that these texts suggest that it is impossible for an individual to both be associated with the institution of medicine *and* a CMB because the dominant Covid Discourse is dependent on medicine as one of its sources of legitimate knowledge claims about the pandemic.

This theme of dominant social institutions as the spaces out of which legitimate knowledge about Covid is created continues elsewhere in the sample. For example, in

advising readers how to fact check for themselves, Allen-Kinross (2021a) suggests “[a] trusted source is your safest option” and suggests the following as examples:

- “For medical information about the coronavirus”:
 - NHS website
 - WHO
 - European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control
 - Centers for Disease Control (US)
- “if you want to know what the current advice from the UK government is”:
 - Gov.uk website
- “Information about vaccination can be found on the NHS website.”
- “The International Fact Checking Network (IFCN) has created a database of fact checks”
- “Johns Hopkins University in the US has a good page of coronavirus resources”

By designating these sources as trustworthy, I argue that this article is in turn designating the information emerging from these institutions of medicine, government and academia as legitimate knowledge claims. Now, it becomes clearer why the CMB must be conceptually separated from the medical professional: if medical institutions are trustworthy, this means that they produce authentic knowledge within the dominant Covid Discourse. Therefore, if an illegitimate knowledge claim about Covid is made by an individual within medicine (or other institution constructed as ‘trustworthy’ within the dominant Covid Discourse) it becomes an aberration within this system of knowledge production and thus must be Discursively excluded from it in order for the Discourse to make sense.

It could be counter-argued that dominant institutions can contain CMBs because they also make exaggerated claims, according to this sample. For example, Hill (2021) suggests that,

“Early on in the pandemic, there seemed to be a systematic positive exaggeration of [Covid-19] test performance by officials, and some targets seemed to have been designed in retrospect to ensure that they were hit.”

However, this argument would not account for the responsible parties for this exaggeration advocating knowledge claims of the dominant Covid Discourse (i.e. that Covid exists, and can and should be tested for), only that they were dishonest in their application of it. Indeed, Hill (2021) continues, “[i]f the government is seen to be moving the goalposts, it cannot hope to earn the trust of the public”. In other words, those who exaggerate test results are not CMBs within this argument, they are merely a malfunctioning institution within the dominant Covid Discourse. Thus, the CMB subjectivity remains excluded from mainstream institutions even where it might be argued that it does take place within them.

It should be noted, however, that there is a significant problem with the formulation I am arguing exists in the dominant Covid Discourse here: news outlets are only *sometimes* constructed as trustworthy sources, yet it is unclear what constitutes a trustworthy or untrustworthy one. A notable example of this can be found in Full Fact (n.d.-c), which uses the **format** of an interactive quiz. One question asks the reader to assess whether a claim from “[c]olumnist Allison Pearson” (Full Fact, n.d.-c) on Twitter, wherein she (falsely) suggests that “Corona doesn’t infect children. Flu Does. Puzzling.” (Pearson, in Full Fact, n.d.-c) is true or false. Regardless of response, the article offers a “[h]andy tip” to the reader, to “try searching to see what trusted news sites or fact checkers are saying” (Full Fact, n.d.-c). There is a contradiction here: Pearson writes for a well-established newspaper, *The Telegraph*, yet the reader is advised to use “trusted news sites” to avoid Covid falsehoods. While Pearson’s claims here were not made *within* an established news outlet, her association with one nevertheless renders this advice confusing because it suggests that established news outlets may still publish CMB columnists. If we read this as Full Fact implying that columnists from established news outlets are not necessarily trustworthy, then it is difficult to discern which outlets it is suggesting *should* be trusted. Indeed, the problem of journalists spreading falsehoods emerges elsewhere in the sample, such as Full Fact Team (2020a) reporting the **statistic** that “in 2019, less than half of the papers and politicians we asked for a correction responded to us” and that journalists are included as an example of individuals who receive Full Fact fact checks in Dudfield (2020). It seems, therefore, that it may be possible for the CMB subjectivity to include professional journalists, but perhaps only those specifically

classified as untrustworthy. The delineation of trustworthy and untrustworthy news sources implied in this sample therefore remains unclear.

In summary, I argue that this sample of fact checking texts promote the notion that figures associated with the dominant institutions in the UK typically cannot be CMBs, even where an association between the two may be apparent. However, an exception to this is the recognition of instances wherein figures within dominant UK media outlets *can sometimes* promote CMB perspectives, leaving it unclear which media outlets the dominant Covid Discourse promotes as trustworthy.

5.3: The construction of the Covid misbeliever subjectivity in *The Light*

5.3.1: *Finding 1: CMB subjects construct their own subjectivity as the uniquely aware of an authoritarian and censorious, yet nebulously defined regime*

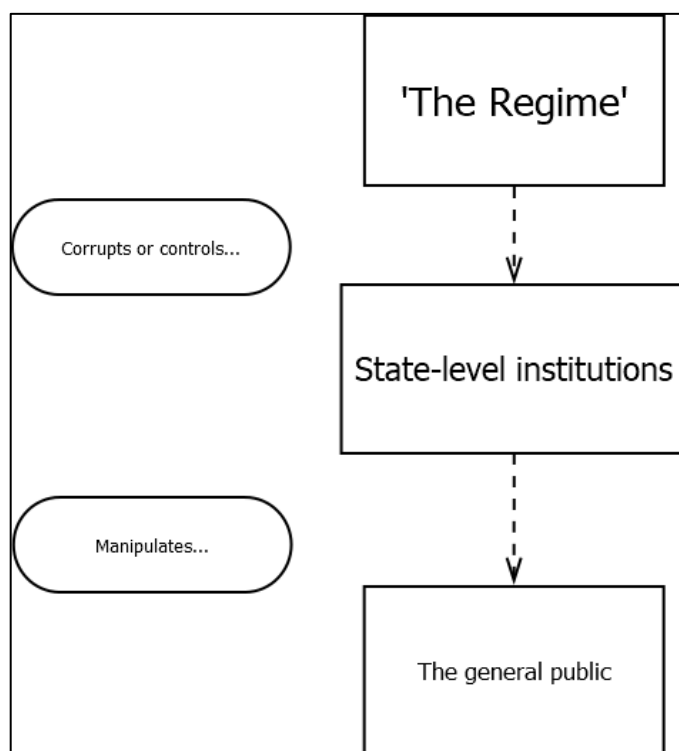


Figure 7: Visualisation of my interpretation of the structure of global power, according to many of the texts within the Study 1 sample.

A substantial proportion of the performance of CMB subjectivities in this sample manifested as performances of victimhood. This victimhood takes several forms and results from a variety of perceived social threats caused or exacerbated by social phenomena surrounding the Covid pandemic.

While disparate and inconsistent conceptualisations of the world are present, observing trends across the whole sample, it is possible to interpret a perceived power structure in the world. This structure

presents a nebulously defined minority of powerful individuals who desire authoritarian control. This minority use their influence to corrupt state institutions so that their activities manipulate or control the public (see figure 7). For the purposes of this write up, I will refer to this powerful group as *the regime* though it is not always referred to as

such in this sample. For example, **euphemisms** such as “the system”, “these people in charge” (Hunt, 2022), and “the powers that call the tune” (Moneycircus, 2021) are used. In addition, other terms which might represent **intertextual** dog whistles are also present, phrases such as “oppressive system of unelected global governance – often referred to as One World Government or New World Order, etc.” (Meredith, 2022) and the potentially anti-Semitic “globalists and communists and all their helpers” (Edwards, 2021) both of which **allude** to pre-existing conspiracy theories. The characteristics of this regime are unclear and vary by text. In some instances, it may merely be a synonym for the UK government, though elsewhere, it appears as some unknowable transnational force. What each conceptualisation of the regime has in common, however, is their tyrannical desire for power over the general public which pandemic policy ostensibly represents in action. In this section, I will explain my argument that *CMBs construct themselves as victims of this social structure through control, censorship and violence* by demonstrating the strategies these texts employ to imply the existence of this system.

In the absence of detail about the form and structure of the regime itself, it becomes, for the most part, only possible to speak of it through its activities as described in this sample. The first of these activities is the corruption of state institutions in the UK (and likely elsewhere) in order to manipulate public behaviour during the pandemic. Coleman (2021a) suggests that “the British Government, like governments all over the world, has been advised by a team of psychologists and brain-washing specialists”. It is unclear who the experts in question are, and the **ambiguity** of this sentence leaves it unclear whether one group of specialists is advising numerous governments or each government has its own pool of experts to draw upon, perhaps allowing the reader to insert their own perspective. Moreover, the implication that brainwashing exists as a praxis is notable, since it implies that mind control is possible and *CMBs construct their subjectivity as free from this manipulation due to their critical thinking skills which the rest of the population by implication do not possess*.

It is possible that the Moneycircus (2021) text offers an insight into who the government advisers Coleman (2021a) refers to are. This text takes the **format** of an exposé article covering Professor Susan Michie and the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) of which she was a member, seemingly revealing their ulterior motives.

Moneycircus (2021) posits that a report authored by Michie suggests that “[p]sychologists are working out how to ‘embed’ population control measures over the long term”, referring to Covid public health policy, for, “[g]overnments are planning for Never Normal” (Moneycircus, 2021). “Never Normal” appears to be an **intertextual** allusion to the phrase ‘new normal’ which was popularly in use at this time to refer to the changed norms at the height of the pandemic. This reflects a recurring anxiety in this sample that Covid is a Trojan Horse for the introduction of permanent authoritarian control over the population by a powerful elite, in this case, from groups such as SAGE. Indeed, this text continues to **heavily imply** that Covid case finding is akin to a medieval witch hunt: “[t]he resonance of the phrase ‘case finding’ is clearly lost on the authors. Perhaps they would not smart at the appointment of a ‘Case Finder General’” (Moneycircus, 2021). Additionally, this text **repeatedly** references Michie’s Communist Party membership, seemingly to invoke authoritarian regimes. We can therefore read a **tone** of fear and urgency within this construction of society, that *for CMBs, the capacity to see the government’s corruption by authoritarian forces places a heavy responsibility on them to fight back.*

Returning to Coleman (2021a), we can find an example of how government policy is ostensibly a form of mind control. Isolation, the text suggests, is “a vital part of this brain-washing process” and mask wearing, which he refers to with the violent **metaphor** “[f]orced gagging”, “helps to enforce the sense of isolation...when masks are worn we are mentally and spiritually weakened”. Here, the rather simple policy of promoting mask wearing to reduce viral spread is transformed into a violent tool of physical and psychological repression intended to manipulate and isolate the public. Similarly, Platt (2021) attributes being “pushed and shouted at by 2 different individuals” to the mask she wore “to help others feel better” making her “faceless”. Again, the notion that masks isolate and deindividualise members of the public, thereby enfeebling them, is suggested. In these examples, then, *refusing to wear a mask is constructed as a performance of defiance against authoritarian control and thus a performance of the CMB subjectivity.* It might also be a visible signifier of CMB in-group membership. For example, Hopkins (2022) suggests that the expansion of the CMB group ‘Stand in the Park’ was in part possible because “[w]e have employees in shops and supermarkets

who are awake to any possible sceptics, i.e. non-mask wearers”. Perhaps, then, we can argue that *CMB subjectivities are performed through visible signifiers such as mask refusal*.

The Government is not the only institution of British society which is untrustworthy in the CMB worldview: mass media are also implicated as a tool for this claimed control of the public. Hunt (2022) suggests that individuals from various dominant sites of knowledge production “must keep us looking towards the glowing box to know what we should think”, seemingly a **metaphorical** construction of television which implies that it is both a powerful, almost fetishistic object or tool of thought control, yet simultaneously nothing more than a “box” and can perhaps therefore be disregarded. In the broader **context** of the article, it might also be interpreted that this has always been the role of television, or mass media as a whole, perhaps suggesting that Covid is merely the climax of a much larger mind control operation. Lamb (2020) similarly argues that “the mainstream media deliberately try to mislead the public” about science, for “the science is never ‘settled’”. This approach to interpreting science communication is notable because not inherently at odds with the dominant Covid Discourse: repeated tests are an important part of the legitimised scientific process and, as paragraph 2 of section 6.4.4 of this very chapter shows, media outlets can and do misrepresent academic research, even if not deliberately. However, the arguments made in Lamb (2020) appear to suggest that any media reporting of scientific research can be dismissed as illegitimate on the fallacious grounds that future findings might disprove it, for, “Newton thought he had motion all worked out until quantum mechanics came along” (Lamb, 2020). This **personification** of quantum mechanics seems to imply science as something which simply reveals itself over time, displacing prior false certainties. This offers Covid misbelievers a way of simultaneously valuing empirical science while also rejecting research which is at odds with their views. Thus, like government policy, *the rejection of mainstream media messaging also appears to be a key performance of the CMB subjectivity*. Indeed, this might explain why *TL* is produced in the first instance: if mass media cannot be trusted then alternative media becomes a key channel of communication for misbelievers of all kinds.

It should be noted, however, that CMBs often demonstrate a familiarity with mainstream Covid communications. For example, Coleman (2021a) concludes with the slogan, “Distrust the Government, Avoid mass media, Fight the lies”. This phrase is a **parody** of an official slogan from the UK Department for Health and Social Care, *stay home, protect the NHS, save lives* (see, e.g., DHSC, 2021, NS). If CMBs can produce **intertextual** parodies of mainstream Covid messaging, this would ironically suggest that, at least in this case, some attention has been paid to mass media during the pandemic. Additionally, it is not the only UK public messaging which is subject to **ironic** imitation as a means of discrediting mass media. The Crawford (2022) article, **headlined** “[w]hat did you do, Daddy?” uses a detail from iconic British First World War propaganda poster *Daddy, What Did You Do in the Great War?* to **illustrate** an article perhaps best described as creative writing, taking a script **format**. The script tells the fictional **narrative** of a conversation set in a future where the perceived lies of the dominant Covid narrative have been proven, and “Annie” accusatorially questions her journalist father (“Dad”) on how he could have believed the mainstream narrative of Covid. The choice to imitate this poster is notable because, as Dyer (1982, pp. 43, NS) suggests, it used “psychological methods” to engender guilt and anxiety which would be assuaged by joining the army while simultaneously implying that the War was to defend the family values portrayed. Perhaps the selection of this poster reflects a concern that psychological manipulation has long been a tool used by the British government. In any case, the implication of Crawford (2022) appears to be that mainstream journalists are failing in their duty to question the Covid narrative due to their lack of criticality, *an attribute that the CMB seemingly possesses in this worldview*, and thus are part of the system that perpetuated the Covid narrative. The creative **format** of this text allows the CMB to present “Annie” as almost an anthropomorphism of the CMB mindset while “Dad”, by contrast, is a submissive and uncritical coward:

“Annie: ‘Didn’t you think it was strange that they were calling it a pandemic all that time and you weren’t seeing anybody die of it?’

‘Didn’t you know that those who were dying were mostly over the age of 80 and already very unwell with other diseases?’

‘Didn’t you know that 99.9% of the healthy under the age of 75 weren’t dying?’

Dad: ‘Well, I don’t think I really knew all that then. The information might have been out there, but they were constantly telling us every day on the television, on the radio and in the papers how bad things were, how we were all in danger, and how we had to be really, really careful.’”

(Crawford, 2022)

Annie’s rhetorical questions continue throughout the piece, touching on a wide variety of CMB talking points, including politicians who “constantly change their stories” (Crawford, 2022), the supposed uselessness of facemasks and vaccine refusal. In this text, it seems there is great optimism for a future where various CMB beliefs are proven right. But perhaps the key reveal in the plot comes in the final paragraph:

“Annie:...And you a journalist as well. Were journalists not always supposed to investigate and ask awkward questions and stand up for people?”

‘Why did you not say anything Dad? Why didn’t you? Why?’”

This seems to imply that journalists are failing in their duty to question the Covid narrative out of both submissiveness and a general lack of criticality. Again, this suggests that CMBs are doing the critical thinking that ought to be the role of journalists, perhaps explaining why *TL* was created. It is notable, too that “Dad” is both a believer in media messaging and a journalist himself: perhaps the author is implying that mainstream journalism is a cycle of regurgitated falsehoods about Covid, since in such a worldview, it would seem rational to reject media messaging about Covid. Overall, it may be more accurate to view the CMB as *performatively rejecting mainstream Covid messaging*, rather than ignoring it, for, as Meredith (2022) argues elsewhere in the sample, “we don’t have to accept the dismal narrative of fear and hysteria that the media and government are feeding us”. I argue, therefore, that *a significant performance of the CMB subjectivity is the rejection of Covid media messaging*.

Yet where mass media is constructed as a conduit of Covid falsehoods as a result of servile journalists, other institutions are suggested to have been corrupted by money. Fact checkers, for example, are suggested to be merely obeying the desires of their funders in Burns (2021), who discusses the (presumably, publicly available) sources of

funding of several fact checkers, including Full Fact. Burns (2021) asks the reader to “imagine if a restaurant critic was paid by the restaurant to leave a review. Would you trust it?”. This **analogy** seems to suggest that, while some fact checkers may be officially independent, they ultimately serve to reproduce the knowledge claims of those who fund them and should therefore not be trusted. Medicine is also subject to such financial incentives according to Kendrick (2021), who argues that scientific and medical research have long been corrupted by money, with Covid representing “the final nail in the coffin”. This **metaphor**, coupled with the **image** of a plastic gloved hand holding a facemask filled with cash, invite the reader to distrust information emerging from scientific and medical fields during the pandemic because this process has now seemingly reached its apotheosis. Notably, the cash in the **image** is clearly in Euros: this could merely be because it was the only image of this style available, but it is possible that there is an implication of the international scope of the proposed conspiracy, alluding to the supranational interpretation of the regime and *TL*’s position outside of this corruption. Once again, the CMB constructs their self-concept as possessing the critical thinking skills to see this corruption which they seem to believe most people cannot. They are *constructed as intellectually superior to most people and as possessing good reasons for rejecting mainstream accounts of Covid*.

It could be argued that medical institutions are not always presented as corrupt in this sample, as one text is the (presumably unauthorised) **reproduction** of an open letter by the British Medical Journal (BMJ) to Meta/Facebook owner Mark Zuckerberg. The written text of the original letter, BMJ (2021, NS), is unedited and presented as though it had been written for publication in *TL*. The letter in question criticises Facebook contractor ‘Lead Stories’, whose fact check of a BMJ article concerning issues at the Ventavia Pfizer Covid vaccine trials is, they argue, “inaccurate, incompetent and irresponsible” (British Medical Journal, 2022). The only information inserted by *TL* is the headline, “BMJ exposes ‘fact-checkers’” (British Medical Journal, 2022) which perhaps indicates the intended **purpose** of reproducing the letter, namely, a belief that it undermines the credibility of fact checkers. As such, my interpretation of this letter being reproduced is not to demonstrate solidarity or imply trust of the BMJ, but to attack fact checkers. Thus, my

view is that there is still little trust towards medical institutions, but they are useful to exploit when perceived as an *enemy of the enemy*.

5.3.2: Finding 2: A major performative feature of the CMB subjectivity is that of victimhood through their censorship and repression by a Covid regime

In this sample, the CMB is effectively presented as an oppressed group. This is perhaps most clear through the **appropriation** of the signifiers of liberation movements. For example, the Edwards (2021) text is illustrated with the **image** of an unseen figure holding a placard reading “MY BODY MY CHOICE”. In contemporary politics, this phrase is typically associated with abortion rights and signifies the belief that the choice to terminate a pregnancy lies with the pregnant individual. In Edwards (2021), it is seemingly a call to refuse public health activities associated with the body, as suggested by the main body of text, e.g.:

“Do not wear a mask
Do not let them vax you. Or vax you again.”

(Edwards, 2021)

Blom (2024, pp. 1089, NS) has previously written of how *My Body, My Choice* “migrated from feminist movements to anti-vaccine, anti-facemask, and anti-lockdown protesters” in the US, but here we can observe the emergence of this phenomenon in the UK, where abortion rights are less central to debates within high politics. It is also notable that the Platt (2021) text, which is authored by a nurse, also appropriates an abortion-related phrase: “I feel very strongly about pro choice, informed voluntary consent”. ‘pro-choice’ is a phrase similarly associated with abortion rights, again referring to the belief that the right to choose to terminate a pregnancy lies with the pregnant individual. It is less clear in the case of Platt (2021) what is being referred to, though from the article’s context, it is likely that the phrase is being appropriated to a similar end to Edwards (2021). It appears, therefore, that *CMBs perform their subjectivity as part of a liberation struggle; they may perceive themselves as an oppressed minority who are fighting for their freedom*.

Similarly, Heaton (2022) suggests that those who refuse to speak out against “transhumanist DNA-altering injections...bury their heads in the sand like the ostriches

they are in that song by Steppenwolf”. This seems to be an **intertextual** allusion to *The Ostrich* (Kay, 1968, NS), a song whose lyrics appear to bemoan the ignorance towards harm done to both the working class and the environment by those in power. Thus, in this formulation, the CMB is transformed into this position of oppression, isolated from those who do not speak out against Covid vaccines. This appropriation of liberation struggles seems to simultaneously present CMBs as an oppressed class and demonstrates their motivation for countering the dominant Covid Discourse. Another musical appropriation to this end can be found in McLaughlin (2021), who uses **irony** and **intertextuality** to describe his arrest during a musical performance: “[m]idway through singing ‘I Want to Break Free’ I was arrested”. This iconic Queen song’s (Deacon, 1984, NS) lyrics, seemingly about leaving an unsatisfactory relationship, appearing to be **recontextualised** to criticise Covid policy here, may suggest that CMBs should ‘free’ themselves from Covid policy lest they remain trapped by it.

Additionally, the notion of CMBs facing violent repression at the hands of the police is a recurring theme in these texts. Khoo (2021) suggests that London’s “Met police became agents of the covid dictatorship” wherein “[s]ome commanders employed semi-militarised tactics with disastrous results”. Once again, we can see **allusions** to warfare between CMBs and the institutions enforcing Covid policy through the invocation of militarisation. Indeed, in several texts, police officers are **framed** as making violent, unprovoked attacks on CMBs. The **first-hand account** of what Atkinson (2022) **hyperbolically** (from my perspective, at least) calls “The Hillingdon Siege”, tells the **narrative** of a coach transporting protesters to an anti-lockdown protest in London being held by the police on the charge of breaching the Coronavirus Act. The **narrative** maintains a heightened emotional **tone** throughout, especially in describing police violence. For example:

“The young woman having the panic attack, in her distress attempted to get off the coach, but because the aisle was full of police she could not avoid pushing past them. One officer then arrested her for assault, and her treatment was brutal. She was bent double over a seat and her hands wrenched up behind her to be cuffed...On her release, her body bore multiple bruises...The charges against her

were eventually dropped when her lawyer told the police they would have their day in court with their photographic evidence”

As an aside, a notable feature of this excerpt is the apparent trust in aspects of the institution of law by CMBs. Throughout the sample, as we shall see, the law, at least as it manifests in courts, is held up as a tool for defeating the Covid regime, with the narrative here showing one of its seeming successes. Thus, unlike most other institutions *CMBs trust and believe in some aspects of UK law.*

Police officers are presented as similarly brutish in McLaughlin (2021) where they “recklessly marched in and damaged our equipment. Luckily no crowd members were hurt”, an **implication** that the police indiscriminately attacked people and property in this case. Likewise, the **cartoon** embedded in the Smith (2020) text, depicting riot police punching, clubbing and strangling CMB protesters (seemingly an **exaggeration** of the incident described in the article) while **ironically** saying that it is “to protect your health” is one of many suggestions that the police are hypocrites. Another example of this may be the photograph **illustrating** the Wright (2021) text, which shows a police officer in the foreground speaking with an individual who, from context, is likely a CMB, neither of whom are wearing masks, while two other police officers in the background are. In my view, this image could be read as suggesting that the police are hypocritical for failing to wear a mask when accosting CMBs. For CMBs, then, the Police exist as the violent enforcers of the Covid regime, perhaps a violent failsafe employed by the regime against those CMBs who manage to make their voices heard.

But police repression is apparently not always necessary: much of the time, the regime can simply censor CMB voices, according to this sample. A useful starting point to understanding this is the number of texts in this article **attributed** to individuals claiming to be qualified in relevant fields or possess expertise. These include a former teacher and research scientist (Lamb, 2020), a **regular column** from a doctor with an MBChB and DSc (Coleman, 2021a, 2021b, 2022a), another doctor (Kendrick, 2021), a nurse (Platt, 2021), an author with the title “DR” (Khoo, 2021) and a PhD student (C. Thompson, 2022). That the CMB subjectivity can include such qualified individuals suggests *that education does not equate to immunity to the Covid misbeliever counter-Discourse.*

In C. Thompson (2022), the article written by a PhD student, which takes a more detached, academic **tone** of discussion around what he terms “the freedom movement” emphasises “the unveiling of greater truths which is so central within the movement”. This **metaphor** of “unveiling” suggests that there are many “truths” (note the plural) which are being hidden to curtail freedom. Other texts in the sample also suggest a similar hiding of ‘truths’ and replacement with untruths. Coleman (2021b) suggests that “the Covid-19 myth is based on fraudulent fake science”. While it is not explained how this alleged ‘fraud’ operates, there is a recurring theme of science, especially medicine, being censored in order to maintain the dominant Covid narrative.

Indeed, a frequent theme in this sample is that medical professionals who are CMBs are being censored. Notably, Smith (2020) uses the **hyperbolic headline** “Doctor arrested for speaking after riot police break up peaceful assembly in Trafalgar Square”. This **exaggeration** coupled with the incredulous **tone** of the article – “[y]ou read that right” (Smith, 2020) – implies a repressive state which physically quashes CMBs who speak publicly. But this repression is not solely physical. Then-London mayoral candidate David Kurten claims that the intubation of Covid-19 sufferers is “bursting their lungs with ventilators, as many doctors who have been silenced have actually confirmed has happened” in Aeyn (2021). The implication that such extreme harm is being done to Covid patients, yet being silenced, suggests a major censorship operation preventing medical professionals from telling the truth.

Indeed, this is the major topic of the Small (2022) text, which describes the legal victory of a doctor who was given an eighteen-month social media ban from the General Medical Council (GMC) following his posting of a video questioning vaccine safety. Specifically, Small (2022) reports that the doctor in question “asks how the public could truly give informed consent to vaccination when the dangers and lack of effectiveness were hidden from them and there are no medium- to long-term data available” in the video. There appear, therefore, to be two acts of attempted science censorship **implied** in this article: crucial information about the vaccines *and* the GMC’s attempted silencing of the social media output of the doctor, who is described in the piece as an “NHS whistleblower”. The whistleblower **metaphor** is notable here, since it is typically understood as “the disclosure by organization members (former or current) of illegal, immoral or illegitimate

practices under the control of their employers, to persons or organizations that may be able to affect action” (Near & Miceli, 1985, pp. 4, NS). I therefore argue that this text implies that vaccine programmes are criminal or immoral, and thus the NHS is obfuscating the truth about them for this reason. This ties in with the **pun** in the **headline** of Hopkins (2022), “Shedding The Light on the crime of the century”, perhaps explaining why the paper is so-named.

Platt (2021), a text authored by a nurse, goes further to describe the fate of the CMB medical professional thus:

“If you asked questions, you became tarred with the brush of being selfish, uncaring and ‘how dare you, don’t you know people are dying? Don’t you know nurses are working really hard?!’

The questions were not acknowledged or considered and people were being shamed and then silenced.”

This recalls the aforementioned psychological control of the public claimed to be taking place during the pandemic. The **metaphor** “tarred” suggests permanence, that once labelled as uncaring, it would be impossible to escape this description, indicating the use of labelling and shaming as a tool of repression. Given that the author of this article is a nurse, the question attributed to an unknown third-party in the above excerpt seem **ironic**: the implication seems to be that this nurse *does* care enough to risk tarring by asking questions. By emphasising the threats that are faced by them both legally and in their careers, *these texts suggest that CMB medical professionals are courageous.*

Medicine, when it is not corrupted, therefore seems a force for good in the CMB worldview. Indeed, medicine is frequently invoked in this sample in the form of Covid laws being **implied** to be a form of psychological abuse. Of his arrest after performing music at a “pro-freedom rally” McLaughlin (2021) states, “I ended up spending a night in the cell and now have to attend a court date...to defend my ‘crime’ of helping mental health and protecting the sacred art of live music”. The **framing** of his activities as beneficial for mental health is notable, since it implies that CMB activities are fulfilling a need to maintain psychological health which has been lost because of Covid policy. This ties in with my prior observation that this sample often presents Covid policy as an

attempt to psychologically control the public, while simultaneously implying a faith in medicine on the part of CMBs. A similar **narrative** is told in Wright (2021): “[a]ctivists in Totnes have set up new support groups to help people cope with the stress of lockdown”. One such group, the article later states, is called “PASS, which stands for Psychological Abuse Survivors’ Support” (Wright, 2021) with the doctor who runs it suggesting “[w]e have been extremely traumatised by what has happened and we need each other to heal” (Hopwood, in Wright, 2021). This **emotive** language suggests that genuine harm has come to the public at the hands of the regime’s cruelty. In associating lockdown policies with psychological abuse, CMBs are once again constructed as victims of a Covid regime which seeks to demoralise the public yet isolated in their recognition of it as such.

Ultimately, this censorship, physical repression and promotion of the dominant Covid narrative come together to transform life during Covid into a *dystopia*. Smith (2021a) uses two **intertextual** allusions to fictional dystopias to describe the ostensible censorship of the Covid regime. Alongside being **illustrated** with an image recalling visuals from *The Matrix*, which might be intended to invoke the ‘red pill’ metaphor (see Chapter 5), its **headline** suggests that “Censorship [is] now at Orwellian levels”. ‘Orwellian’ here refers to how Smith (2021a) describes the contemporary moment of that article’s writing as “the most dystopian, totalitarian nightmare for all free-thinking individuals everywhere”,

“This is Orwell’s ‘1984’ for real, complete with 24/7, 360 [sic] surveillance, the memory-holing of all unauthorised information, two minutes’ hate, and thousands of millennials whose job is to make sure no future generations ever know who George Orwell was.”

We can interpret here a sense that the Covid experience, for the CMB, is one of such extreme surveillance, censorship and mind control that it can only be compared to fiction. In other words, there is no precedent for the perceived authoritarianism now taking place. Notable, too, is the assumption of complicity among “thousands of millennials” (Smith, 2021a) with this regime. This speaks to both a sense of paranoia towards, and isolation from, non-misbelievers which emerges throughout the sample as well as a fear of corrupted morals among younger generations.

Elsewhere, Coleman (2021a) compares the UK government's use of "the triple three word phrase" to the Party slogan in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, "War is peace, freedom is slavery, ignorance is strength". Coleman (2021a) also suggests that this is part of "Newspeak", which Orwell "invented", which within the text of the novel is a language which has, "[e]very year fewer and fewer words and the range of consciousness always a little smaller" (Orwell, 1989, pp. 55, NS). Here, it is therefore seemingly implied that the language employed in government messaging has the capacity to control the thoughts of the population, thus rendering them subject to their control. CMBs therefore are *constructed as superior to non-misbelievers, for the government's attempts to control them have failed where they were effective against non-misbelievers*.

There are, however, comparisons of life under Covid to real authoritarian regimes in this sample. The most **tonally** arresting example of this, I argue, is the **illustration** of Heaton (2022), a drawing created by this text's author of the Auschwitz gatehouse with the camp's gate in the foreground reading, "VACCINES ARE SAFE PATH TO FREEDOM" in the place of *arbeit macht frei* and syringe-shaped chimneys in the background. This is perhaps the most extreme imagery in the sample, though despite "[a]ccusations of antisemitism and hate crimes", the author does not see it as offensive. "What was never acknowledged in the mainstream was the intention of my drawing, being a warning from history to never allow again the horrors of medical experimentation which took place during the second world war in concentration camps upon specific ethnic and religious groups" (Heaton, 2022). While it is impossible to determine how honest this remark is, it is notable because it suggests that what might be understood as racist or discriminatory within mainstream Discourses may not be considered such within the Covid misbeliever counter-Discourse. The author is careful not to present himself as antisemitic or racist, later suggesting that NHS advertising aimed at Black and Asian people "amounts to the real hate crime being committed by the government and NHS", though elsewhere uses dog whistles such as "wealthy globalist [art] collectors" and "Cultural Marxists" (Heaton, 2022), though again, it is unclear whether he is familiar with the antisemitic implications of these terms. It is important to note, while not excusing the content of other texts, that Heaton (2022) is somewhat of an outlier in the sample, since most are more subtle in

their language and imagery; the Heaton text is atypical for its overt use of right-wing buzzwords and antisemitic content.

Aside from the comparisons to Nazi Germany, Heaton (2022) also refers to a “Coviet Regime”, presumably a **portmanteau word** combining ‘Covid’ and ‘Soviet’, ostensibly likening Covid restrictions to life in the authoritarian Soviet Union. This ties in with the **repeated** references to Susan Michie’s former Communist Party membership in Moneycircus (2021), though it seems that here, communism is understood as a synonym for authoritarian, rather than an economic system, for the government “feels not a flicker of unease about communist affiliation when that person is working towards the same goals of total control of the people”. However, the article paradoxically also refers to elements of Michie’s report as “state-corporatism, aka fascism” (Moneycircus, 2021), meaning that this text simultaneously likens the perceived Covid regime to communism, fascism and, as noted earlier, medieval witch hunting, perhaps suggesting the this CMB merely views these terms as synonyms for authoritarian.

Elsewhere in the sample, the Covid ‘regime’ is likened to a wide variety of totalitarian systems, including in the **metaphor** of not allowing “the fascist steamroller [to] roll right over me” (Atkinson, 2022) the **hyperbolic** suggestion that “[i]f you dissent too much- there would be gulags” (Kurten, in Aeyn, 2021) and the **references** to Stalin, fascism and tyranny in Coleman (2021b). Thus, alongside comparisons to fictional authoritarian regimes, *CMBs also believe that under Covid rules, the UK, and possibly the world, is heading towards a regime akin to historical authoritarian governments.*

The other freedom besides speech that CMBs see as being taken away by the ‘Covid regime’ according to this sample seems to be that of free enterprise as understood on their own terms. There is a recurring theme of anxiety surrounding the closure of small businesses and the victimisation of the self-employed. There are several passing references to this throughout the sample:

- “I took a live haircut whilst performing to show solidarity with the self-employed” (McLaughlin, 2021)
- “Two [activists] are small business owners who are at risk of losing their livelihoods” (McGarry-Gribbin, 2021)

- (The fictional ‘Annie’ addressing her father in the post-Covid future): “[w]hy were so many small businesses allowed to be shut for good and so many jobs lost?” (Crawford, 2022)
- “I helped with a campaign called ‘Forgotten Ltd’ to gain assistance for two million freelancers who weren’t receiving any support” (Rampling, in Smith, 2023b)

However, the most notable case of this phenomenon, I argue, is found in the **narrative** presented in Girardi (2021), which covers the **first-hand account** of the author’s Airbnb business becoming seemingly unviable due to a guests being refunded after the lockdown policy was put in place:

“It was hard to reconcile why there was no negotiation or compromise with struggling hosts and why the full burden of the economic fallout of the ‘health crisis’ measures was [sic] carried by small businesses alone.”

Even in this short excerpt, a lot of implications are made about Covid policy and its effects on the self-employed. The placement of speech marks around “health crisis” implies through **punctuation** that it is not real or that it is an exaggeration, perhaps designed to victimise small business owners. Yet the resounding suggestion in my view, is the presentation of the self-employed as ‘carrying’ the “economic fallout” on their own, two **metaphors** which indicate a small minority (the self-employed) taking the long-term consequences of Covid policy because of larger, faceless organisations.

This is part of a larger theme of the control of individuals’ personal finances to control the population and perhaps the importance of money to the concept of freedom within much of this sample. Notably, Smith (2021a) uses the **metaphor** of “the pinch of economic exclusion” to describe the “(removal of google ads), inability to receive donations (paypal freezes) and outright censorship (removal of Facebook, Twitter and Youtube accounts)” ostensibly faced by those wishing to express views contrary to the mainstream Covid narrative. McLaughlin (2021) similarly emphasises the importance of money by describing how it aided his otherwise seemingly curtailed illegal public concert tour: “Eric [Clapton] proceeded to donate £1000 to us, which brought us from broke to bouncing with glee!”⁴⁴. Moreover, former footballer Matt Le Tissier (in: Smith, 2023a)

⁴⁴Eric Clapton, the iconic British guitarist, who engaged in CMB beliefs during the pandemic.

states, “I knew the risks of speaking out [against the mainstream Covid narrative], and I lost my job at Sky. That was a scary time, because I didn’t know where the money was going to come from”. Coupled with the previous discussion of corruption within medicine and media, it appears that according to the CMB counter-Discourse, money is withdrawn from those who speak out against the mainstream Covid narrative but spent on ensuring that dominant institutions keep reproducing it.

Returning to Girardi (2021), the **narrative** of the text subsequently states that low-profit, small business owners “(like us) were not entitled to furlough or government support”, suggesting being abandoned by both the legitimate free market and the government. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that in the climax of the **narrative**, this article’s protagonists found the way out of their problems through *TL*:

“we advertised in The Light Paper in March this year. The phenomenal response found us fully booked for the whole summer by April, and loving the company of like-minded souls!”

This is an example of another theme which emerges in this sample: the sense that *CMBs are isolated from typical social structures*. In this case, this CMB was isolated from mainstream business and financial support structures during the pandemic and so turned to those offered by other CMBs, namely, advertising in *TL* and receiving patronage from other CMBs. Yet elsewhere, we can also observe a sense of isolation from other structures. I have already discussed the fate of the CMB medical professional according to this sample, for example, but I now wish to focus more specifically on a broader sense of isolation among CMBs in the next section.

5.3.3: CMBs are constructed as isolated from the rest of the civilian population by their advocacy of their concept of freedom and therefore unite to develop strategies to maintain CMB numbers and encourage new converts.

The result of the mind control and censorship through institutions discussed in the previous sections is the isolation of the CMB from those who, as Hopkins (2022) puts it, “are so hypnotised for want of a better word”, that is, members of the public who are not Covid misbelievers. In this worldview, there are three factions who accept the mainstream Covid narrative: the regime which acts as its origin point, the institutions

who are either too corrupt or too uncritical to question their obedience to the regime, and those members of the public who accept the mainstream Covid narrative. The construction of these individuals within this sample varies vastly. At one extreme, Coleman (2022a) calls them “[t]he collaborators, the virtue signalling zombies who have been trained to jump at every command”. This **tone** of anger, coupled with **metaphors** which imply that non-misbelievers are unthinking like zombies or trained animals suggest a contempt with the perceived lack of criticality from most of the public and apparent ‘virtue signalling’ by following public health advice. The Light (2023) similarly chastises the “many people who surrendered their individual freedom and bodily sovereignty to the authoritarian demands of the state during the so-called covid pandemic”, implying a moral cowardice on their part. A similar impression is given in Girardi (2021) who uses the **euphemism** “‘organic’ folk” to describe the unvaccinated. This seems to imply that vaccinated non-misbelievers are not fully human, thereby inviting the reader to hold them in contempt.

At the other extreme, De Carle (2021) describes them as “confused and misguided”, advocating that CMBs should communicate with them using “the language of love”, a decidedly less confrontational **tone**. Here, the reader is **advised** to use more gradual strategies to encourage non-misbelievers to become CMBs. This is because, “[w]hen confronted by an idea that disagrees with their currently-held conviction, people can easily respond with aggression; it’s like a heavy blow hits their mind, which puts them straight on the defence” (De Carle, 2021). Hunt (2022) similarly suggests that an ambiguous “they” “need us to fight against each other” and calls for unity, for “‘a house divided against itself cannot stand’”. This **intertextual** Biblical **metaphor** perhaps imbues human connection with a divine sentiment, as if division is against the correct order of things. Thus, while there is still a small degree of suspicion towards non-misbelievers, in this case, they are not seen as an enemy, but as someone who can be *woken up* from belief in the mainstream Covid narrative.

By contrast, ‘awake’ is a recurring **metaphor** used in these texts for those who do not or no longer believe in the mainstream Covid narrative (i.e., Covid misbelievers). Examples from the sample include:

- “[The freedom movement’s] members are united...by what seems a shared experience of ‘waking up’ to the perceivably false nature of myths presented to us by those in power” (C. Thompson, 2022)
- “[P]eople are waking up but we need more to wake up as it is taking a long time!” (Kurten, in Aeyn, 2021)
- “if you don’t comply, they then have to resort to illegal measures, and that’s when we win, because that wakes everyone up” (Le Tissier, in Smith, 2023a)

The implication that civilian non-misbelievers are ‘asleep’ is notable because it ties in to both the frustrations of CMBs that others are not ‘awake’ to the threat ostensibly facing humanity and their motivation to ‘wake up’ others by exposing them to their perceived truth. Yet it also suggests a sense of *isolation* from the sleeping masses, that a need for social connection is not being met by others through their being excluded from society by their beliefs meaning that they can only turn to other CMBs.

Allusions to the existence of groups which exist to counter Covid policy emerge throughout the sample, though they are usually vague. Much of the McGarry-Gribbin (2021) text discusses a mysterious “tight-knit group of activists in the Merseyside area who come from all walks of life”, a **metaphor** which emphasises the diversity of the CMBs, and is borne out by the descriptions of the different backgrounds of these “activists” in the text. There is a sense that typical divisions between individuals are being broken down by the urgency to counter the ‘regime’ of Covid. Indeed, there are several examples of emphasising the diversity of individuals involved in CMB activities in the texts, such as McLaughlin (2021) noting that his musical group’s drummer is “a migrant from Brazil who moved to the UK for its culture of freedom and live music”, Hopkins’ (2022) discussion of an Iraqi hairdresser who “takes copies [of *TL*] for his salon”, C. Thompson (2022) noting the “myriad political orientations of the [freedom] movement’s members” and the **imagery** throughout the sample depicting a range of ages, as well as men and women, although most are Caucasian, with the exception of Aeyn (2021) which includes an image of David Kurten, who the article is promoting.

Returning to McGarry-Gribbin (2021) we are told that this CMB group, “have undertaken the mammoth task of serving notices of liability on all care homes in the area” and “plan

to serve more...to people in positions of authority in local councils, hospitals and GP practices”. Once again, we can observe some trust being placed in the institution of Law by CMBs, though it is improbable that the reported notices of liability were legally binding. Moreover, we can observe here an example of the activities that CMBs engage in within the conflict they perceive themselves as being part of. Coleman (2021b) uses especially blunt militaristic **metaphors** in his description of “this war” in how sending emails is described:

“We need an army of people prepared to do these things. Send out five emails a day and you can consider yourself a Major in the Resistance Army. Ten emails a day and you’re a Colonel. Fifteen emails a day makes you a Brigadier. And if you send out twenty emails a day then you can call yourself General.”

The use of **second-person pronouns** in this text gives it a feeling of being an almost-literal call-to-arms to the reader, which, like the reappropriated propaganda poster in Crawford (2022), uses British institutional concepts to encourage dissidence against the state in the context of Covid. Using British military rank titles as rewards for pro-Covid misbeliever counter-Discourse activities once again emphasises the conceptualisation of Covid as a war.

Other CMB activities which act both as performances of their subjectivity and as efforts to promote their views include the attendance (or attempts thereof) of:

- Mass protests or demonstrations against Covid policy, typically in London (Atkinson, 2022; Smith, 2020)
- Individual demonstrations of protest (Platt, 2021)
- Artistic shows or performances as protest (Heaton, 2022; McLaughlin, 2021)
- Support groups (Wright, 2021)
- Standing for election (Aeyn, 2021; Meredith, 2022)
- Involvement in campaigns to change Covid policy (Smith, 2023b)

CMBs are therefore proactive in their activities which aim to recruit more into their fold or connect with others who might already share their views. There is the repeated construction of a metaphorical war between CMBs and non-misbelievers and a **tone** of fear and urgency in calls to action, perhaps best summed up in McGarry-Gribbin (2021):

“You only have yourselves and cannot rely on others. You can only trust yourselves to do what is needed to be done. Foot soldiers unite for freedom and protect the vulnerable ones in your community”

But CMB activities are not only limited to recruiting new individuals into their subjectivity: the matter of maintaining their numbers is also considered, to which I now turn.

5.3.4: CMBs maintain their beliefs through the formation of a ‘fortress ontology’

CMBs in this sample are generally aware of the counterarguments to their beliefs about the pandemic. As noted, the victimhood associated with the CMB position seems to originate from a sense of repression by the ‘Covid regime’, which uses a variety of social and political forces to oppose CMB positions and to physically and psychologically repress them where this fails. Notably, I have argued already that CMBs do not trust institutions such as fact checkers and governmental scientific organisations because they are seemingly corrupt (and *corruptible*). Yet a crucial observation I made in my analysis of this sample was the presence of what might be called defence mechanisms against the arguments against their beliefs about Covid. I call this a *fortress ontology* since it represents a construction of reality which is defended against attacks on itself. This may represent a mechanism by which the CMB is able to simultaneously possess seemingly contradictory beliefs and values, such as belief and trust in science *and* that the science of Covid is untrustworthy.

One way in which the Covid misbeliever fortress epistemology manifests in this sample is through the **advisory** tone of those texts that provide opportunities for the reader to become sceptical of forms of knowledge emerging from dominant institutions. In other words, the fortress ontology is built on the foundation of an epistemology rooted in scepticism towards dominant institutional knowledge formation practices. A strong example of this is the “top five tips to become a more critical consumer of science” in Lamb (2020). Here, the five tips are mental strategies which allow the reader to object to the mainstream media reporting of science while still retaining faith in the scientific method. These are: “[f]unding and conflicts of interest”, “[p]ublication bias”⁴⁵, “[i]nert

⁴⁵ A similar argument regarding publishing is made in Kendrick (2021) in this sample.

placebo”, “[m]eta analysis” and that the reporting of academic studies in media does not reflect the study itself (Lamb, 2020). These five practices are all legitimate forms of critique which can be applied to academic work, and it is reasonable to have *some* scepticism of media reporting of research given their capacity to misrepresent studies (see paragraph 2 of section 6.4.4 of this chapter for a case in point), yet we can observe here how these devices can be misused against the scientific consensus surrounding Covid. Indeed, tip 5 issues the **imperative** “[r]ead the study yourself below” to apply the advice given to a real study. Here, the author provides **evidence** to the reader through the opportunity to practice what this text has taught them, perhaps to convince them of the legitimacy of this epistemological outlook. In this instance, the advisory list **format** invites the reader to use these strategies to fortify the CMB counter-Discourse against epistemological assault by implying that *any* reporting of scientific findings about Covid are potentially unreliable.

This style of **advisory** text which offers the reader strategies to reject mainstream knowledge claims appears several times throughout the sample. Another notable example is Hunt (2022), who provides an epistemological and ontological approach which overtly objects to the truth as understood in dominant Discourses. In this text, “[w]e don’t know The Truth [sic]” for, “in reality, Truth [sic] is not a destination, it is a journey”. This **metaphor** indicates that truth cannot be reached but can be worked towards. Notably, Hunt (2022) argues,

“they cannot allow this to become common knowledge, which is why they will continue to insist that only the academics, the think tanks, the politicians, and the mainstream media have the right to tell us what is real.”

This appears to imply that mainstream institutions present reality as the derivation of a singular, fixed, truth seemingly dictated by “these people in charge” (Hunt, 2022) in a manner that serves their interests. Hunt (2022) implies that this is a “divide and conquer strategy” which keeps us “busy with our separate factions”. Like Lamb (2020), Hunt (2022) therefore represents a perversion of an otherwise reasonable approach to knowledge. As I have argued in this very thesis, it *is* important to consider the role of power in the construction of knowledge and the historical contingency of knowledge claims. The problem here, however, is that Hunt (2022) seems to suggest that *any* claim

to knowledge is axiologically worthless and can therefore be dismissed on the basis of being a claim to truth one chooses to reject. Thus, rather than open the reader's mind to a legitimate critique of power-knowledge relations, this text serves the formation of the CMB fortress ontology by providing a mental tactic for rejecting any undesirable argument as a falsehood of the powerful to be stepped over on the endless journey of truth.

This mindset does not begin and end with Covid, however, and it is for this reason that there appears to be some monologicalism represented within these texts. Consider, for example, how in Smith (2023a), an **interview** with former footballer Matt Le Tissier, which is initially about Covid suddenly asks him, "Terrain theory or germ theory?". 'Terrain theory' presumably refers here to a form of germ theory denialism based on concepts from 19th century Chemist Antoine Béchamp which sees illness as originating in the body's 'terrain' rather than pathogens (Gainty, 2021, NS; Pontin, 2018, NS). In response, Le Tissier's replies that Terrain Theory is "[s]omething I hadn't heard of until about a year ago" (i.e., 2022) and that he had "asked that question to a couple of doctors who I've had on the podcast"⁴⁶, for, "[y]ou have to question everything you've been taught, and re-evaluate it with a different set of eyes" (in: Smith, 2023a). This **metaphor** seems to suggest that Covid misbeliefs can lead to other misbeliefs. However, it should be noted that when asked if it was "the covid scam that woke [him] up" he also suggests that he was doubtful of the official narrative of the 9/11 terror attacks, so may have held unconventional beliefs before Covid.

There are other hints at monologicalism littered throughout the sample. Both Heaton (2022) and Kurten (in: Aeyn, 2021) reference the 'Cultural Marxism' conspiracy theory, Burns (2021) invokes conspiracies surrounding Blackrock, Vanguard and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and concerns around the loss of cash payments appear in Coleman (2022a), Smith (2023a) and Meredith (2022). Once again, however, it is difficult to discern the direction of cause and effect; it is equally possible that these individuals already held conspiratorial beliefs and became CMBs, or belief in Covid falsehoods led them to hold other conspiratorial beliefs. Moreover, most of the texts in this sample did

⁴⁶ It is not explained what this podcast is, though presumably one hosted by Le Tissier. Note that medical professionals were ostensibly appearing on it.

not imply that their author necessarily held other conspiracy beliefs. In any case, *it is possible that CMBs may hold other conspiratorial beliefs, though there is not necessarily a correlation between the two.*

Along with taking existing cultural products and recontextualising them to their own ends, this sample also suggests that *TL* values those figures from culture, sport and politics who are also CMBs. Both De Carle (2021) and McLaughlin (2021) **allude** to Eric Clapton's CMB beliefs, and Smith (2023b) takes the **format** of an **interview** with influential DJ Danny Rampling. As noted, Smith (2023a) is also an **interview**, here with former footballer Matt Le Tissier who discusses various CMB views. In politics, Three of the texts, Heaton (2022), Smith (2023b) and McLaughlin (2021), reference noted British conspiracy theorist figure Piers Corbyn. If the CMBs are aiming to recruit more into their fold, it seems that one rhetorical strategy is to promote those who have achieved at least some status as cultural icons. It is notable that these celebrity CMBs tend to be of an older generation, and therefore more relevant to older readers. Indeed, De Carle (2021) notes that using Eric Clapton's claims of having been harmed by vaccines as a rhetorical strategy is more likely to be a "wake-up call for the over thirties". This correlates prior narratives about younger artists ostensibly being less willing to speak out against Covid restrictions in Heaton (2022) and the aforementioned claims that less financially secure figures being less able to speak out. It seems, therefore, that *celebrity CMBs serve the fortress ontology by offering figureheads to point to when making their arguments.*

Chapter 6: Study 2- Findings

Chapter 6 Abstract

This Chapter presents the findings of Study 2, which investigated the constructions of the Covid misbeliever who specifically objects to Covid vaccination and related policies within texts sampled from 'Full Fact' and 'The Light'. I argue that the 'Full Fact' sample constructs Covid vaccine misbelievers as the product of consuming 'bad information' who may also unthinkingly spread it, as unintelligent and unanalytical and often dependent on the internet to spread their beliefs. I argue that the sample from 'The Light' constructs Covid vaccine misbelievers as independent thinkers in a world of rising tyranny, as victims of the censorship of science, as socially conservative and as an oppressed, yet altruistic, minority group.

Note on the use of square brackets in Chapter 6

Part of this chapter is concerned with how square brackets are used within representations of quotations within the texts analysed. As a result, in this chapter only, where the square brackets refer to information which I have added to a quotation, I will use *two square brackets* [[like this]]. Where only one square bracket is present, this represents how the quotation was presented in the original text.

6.1: Full Fact's construction of the anti-vaccine Covid misbeliever.

6.1.1: Finding 1: Full Fact constructs Covid vaccine misbelievers as being often the product of consuming 'bad information' and/or unthinkingly spreading it.

To understand the construction of the Covid vaccine misbeliever subjectivity (hereafter, CVMB) in this sample, it is first necessary to understand the apparent epistemological perspective of Full Fact (hereafter, *FF*). Every text in this sample, and presumably most pages on the *FF* website include a banner near the bottom of the page whose heading reads, "Full Fact fights bad information"⁴⁷. It is not immediately clear which pieces of information count as 'bad', and within this sample no definition for 'bad information' is offered. However, the remainder of the text box offer some insights into how the term can be understood:

⁴⁷ See any of the texts in this sample for source.

“Bad information ruins lives. It promotes hate, damages people’s health, and hurts democracy. You deserve better.”

This would imply that bad information can be understood retroactively as the information which causes these negative phenomena. If, for example, a piece of information causes damage to health, *then* it can be classified as bad information. Perhaps this choice of phraseology reflects the ‘information disorder’ approaches associated with Wardle and Derakhshan (2017, NS), where it is not only mis- and dis-information which represents a problem to the public, but mal-information too (see Chapter 2). Based on my analysis of these texts, this seems to be a likely interpretation for what *FF* refer to when discussing ‘bad information’, though the lack of a definition for this unusual term does leave some ambiguity. In addition, this excerpt also implies a universality to the threat of ‘bad information’. By referring to the reader through the **second-person pronoun** “you”, *FF* appear to imply that bad information represents a threat to everyone, while simultaneously empowering themselves, or perhaps their subjectivity as fact checkers, to declare which information is ‘bad’. Therefore, within this short banner, I argue that *FF* set out their epistemological approach: that there is a major threat presented to the public by bad information which has the potential to harm anyone, and it is therefore necessary for *FF* to be trusted with the power to provide guidance on which information is bad.

With this considered, I argue that the **target audience** of the texts I analyse here is not misbelievers themselves. This is because, while *FF* do actively work with other platforms outside their website to interact with CVMBs directly, such as in their work with Facebook discussed below, the content of the *FF* website is often **framed** in a manner which suggests that the intended reader is one who already follows the tenets of the dominant Covid Discourse. This is evidenced by the rhetorical strategies employed in these articles. For example, in assessing claims, the only voice heard aside from that of the claim and the author are those from other institutions associated with the dominant Covid Discourse, such as university academics (Rahman, 2023a), the Office for National Statistics (ONS) (T. Thompson, 2022) and the NHS (Brown, 2023). It is notable, too, that none of the fact checks in this sample assess claims which are ultimately classified as wholly true. While some are found to be, e.g., “partly false” (Rahman, 2022b), no claim

assessed within this sample of primarily fact check articles finds a claim to be accurate. This might imply that fact checking, as it is practiced by *FF*, is less about a neutral process of assessing any claim and more about bolstering its position of power by issuing corrections, and *correctives*, to reproduce the CVMB subjectivity as inferior to the non-misbeliever. I argue, therefore, that the texts in this sample are not intended to ‘save’ CVMBs, but for a presumed non-misbeliever who is at risk of being ‘taken in’ by false claims about Covid vaccines.

The CVMB is therefore seldom discussed *as such* within these texts, but more understood as the figure behind some unit of bad information about vaccines. This is because *FF* seem to focus mostly on information as a vector for Covid vaccine misbeliefs, and therefore the motivations of those making these claims are somewhat ambiguous. However, the claims being assessed in this sample are typically framed as resulting from the misuse or misunderstanding of legitimised information within the dominant Covid Discourse, where this is explained. The implied reasons for CVMBs making false claims about Covid vaccines generally fall into one of five categories:

1. CVMBs are individuals who misinterpret legitimised information about Covid vaccines. For example, Rahman (2023b) suggests that a CVMB who claims that Office for National Statistics (ONS) data shows a higher rate of dying with Covid among the vaccinated to suggest Covid vaccines cause death is “not true”. This is because this is based on raw data reflecting “the fact that many more people have been vaccinated than haven’t”. indeed, the same text suggests, “Selective or misleading use of official information about vaccines can damage public trust and contribute to the spread of health misinformation”.
2. CVMBs incorrectly identify faults in legitimised data. For example, de Block Golding (2021a) concerns a Facebook post falsely claiming, *inter alia*, that Covid vaccine trials are neither complete nor peer-reviewed, neither of which is true.
3. CVMBs repeat information from legitimised institutions which contain accidental errors on the part of the institution itself. For example, Benedictus (2023) suggests that a miscalculation of data by the NHS which “roughly doubled” the reported number of miscarriages in Lanarkshire contained in a freedom of information request was “shared on social media by some people who appeared to suggest

that the supposed rise might be associated with the Covid-19 vaccines”. This can overlap with category 4:

4. CVMBs draw false correlations between Covid vaccination and unrelated phenomena. For example, Thompson (2023) **quotes** a CVMB who appears to argue that the instillation of defibrillators in UK schools implies that Covid vaccines are causing heart conditions.
5. CVMB arguments are simply baseless and without connection to existing information, i.e., they are their own ‘bad information’. For example, Rahman (2023a) discusses a Facebook post suggesting that the government mobile phone emergency alert test in 2023 was “AN ACTIVATION SIGNAL TO ACTIVATE THE PATHOGEN IN THE SHOT [sic]”, yet the article does not identify why this poster believed this to be the case (if, indeed, this was a sincere belief at all), seemingly implying that it is not based on any information, bad or otherwise.

To be sure, this does not necessarily mean that this *is* how these individuals came to have anti-Covid-vaccine beliefs, only that this is how these claims are **framed** for the most part, within this sample. Indeed, perhaps it is unsurprising that *FF* would focus only on information as a cause of CVMBs given that its primary *modus operandi* is fact checking: if all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail; if all you have is fact checking, everything looks like (mis)information.

As a result, there are subtle allusions to a sense that CVMBs, who are seemingly presented here as those who create or spread false information, are unthinking about the effects of their actions. Returning to a section of the quote in the banner discussed above, consider the sentence “[y]ou deserve better”. By **framing** bad information as something ‘you’ do not deserve, *FF* gives the impression that CVMBs are cruelly depriving *everyone* of something they ostensibly have a universal right to: good information. A similar tone can be found elsewhere in the sample, for example,

“We all deserve information we can trust, especially when making important decisions about our health.

For pregnant women and their families, this has been an especially worrying time. Vaccine uptake among pregnant women has been lower than other groups and

the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists highlight that there has recently been a rise in the number of pregnant women hospitalised with Covid-19.”

(Team Full Fact, 2021)

Again, the concept of desert is invoked, this time with the plural pronoun “we”. This is notable since it places *FF* on the same power level as the reader, where in this instance the target audience appears to be pregnant women. Representations of gendered subjectivities add to the sense that CVMBs are thoughtless. Pregnant women are portrayed as especially victimised by the virus, and thus to add vaccine falsehoods to the existing burdens of both pregnancy and this Covid victimisation implies that CVMBs who promote covid vaccine misinformation pertaining to pregnancy are particularly cruel.

Another way in which it is possible to interpret *FF*’s construction of the CVMB is through the selection of **quotations** within this sample, which often hint at a broader structure of conspiratorial beliefs out of which the specific claim being fact checked emerged. Consider the following excerpt Rahman (2022c) which covers actor Sean Ward’s claims that Pfizer vaccines harm semen quality:

“The image in his post is a screenshot of a tweet that says “NEW - Pfizer's primary mRNA injections ‘temporarily’ impair semen concentration and total motile count among donors. The scope of the study did not include the effects of additional ‘booster’ injections.”

Mr Ward’s caption adds: “MUST MEAN ITS WORKING! Depopulation season. Be wary. These men / big pharma do NOT have you back. They do NOT want to save you & never will ☹️ First it was issues with women’s menstrual cycles. Now mens [sic] sperms.””

The article focusses primarily on explaining that the study referenced in the original Tweet, namely, Gat et al. (2022, NS). Rahman (2022c) shows that this study, while technically accurate in reporting lower sperm concentration and motile count, this effect really was temporary, based on a small sample of semen donors and at odds with other studies which “found no reduction in semen quality after vaccination with the Pfizer

Covid-19 vaccine”. A small subsection at the end of the article also addresses the **rhetorical question** “[w]hat about the vaccines’ effect on periods?” similarly demonstrating a lack of evidence for Covid vaccines affecting the menstrual cycle due to limited and unreliable claims that such effects occur. We see therefore that *FF* presents Ward’s claim as a misbelief of the category 1 variety I identify above: misinterpretation of legitimised data from the dominant Covid Discourse.

However, the **quotations** from Ward presented in this text suggest a broader set of conspiratorial beliefs beyond merely that vaccines affect human fertility. For example, the article does not address Ward’s claim that “[t]hese men / big pharma” are ostensibly behind “[d]epopulation season”. There is no attempt to understand who “[t]hese men” might be, what “[b]ig pharma” is and why they would desire human depopulation. Nevertheless, the article’s headline, “Study on male fertility doesn’t show depopulation plan” appears to suggest that Ward’s beliefs are rooted solely in his misinterpretation of Gat et al. (2022, NS), despite seeming to have pre-existing beliefs about “women’s menstrual cycles” being harmed by Covid vaccines. My interpretation of this is that Ward’s claim, and perhaps those of other CVMBs, may be part of a larger structure of beliefs, yet the epistemology and methodology of *FF* does not allow them to understand these beliefs, since their ‘bad information’ framework cannot account for this. This process of abstracting specific claims about Covid vaccines from their contexts and conceptual origins recurs throughout the sample, and results in the presentation of anti-Covid-vaccine sentiment as solely the product of ‘bad information’.

The result of this, I argue, is that there is a circular relationship between *FF*’s methodology and epistemology. *FF*’s fact checks seem to frequently find that Covid vaccine misbeliefs are the product of bad information. Thus, if bad information causes vaccine misbeliefs, *FF* has evidence that fact checking is the correct means to rectify this problem. A major argument I derive from this is that this cycle, illustrated in figure 8, is an intellectual fallacy which harms the validity of *FF*’s presentation of itself as a solution to the problem of false beliefs.

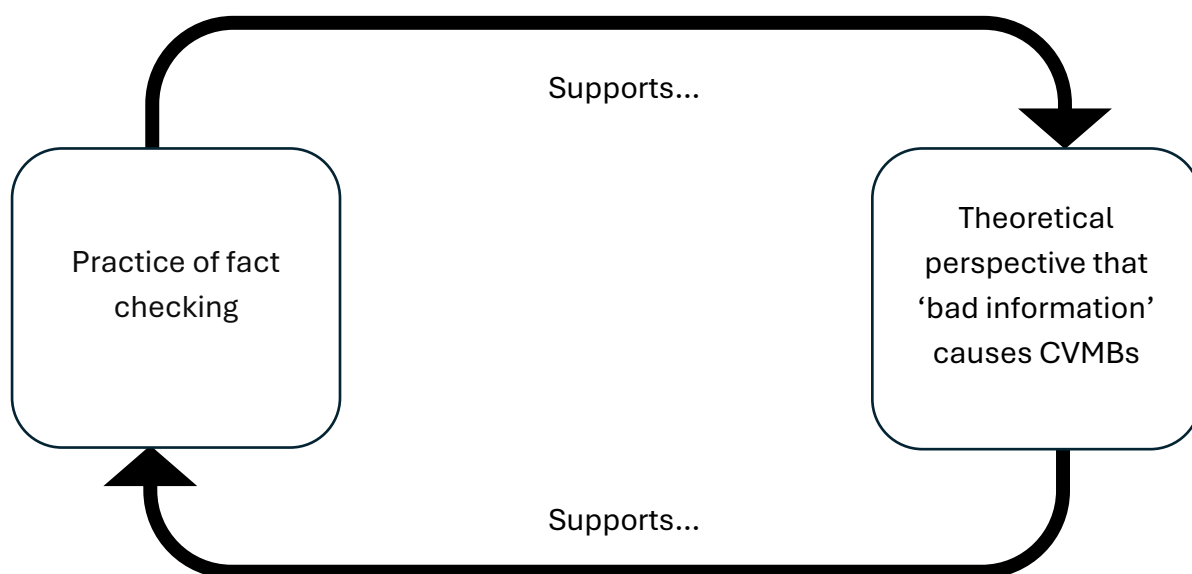


Figure 8: Visualisation of my interpretation of the relationship between Full Fact's methods and theoretical perspective.

The selection and presentation of quotations within these texts reveals more than just this, however. I further argue that the ways in which quotations are presented present CVMBs as unintelligent, an argument to which I now turn.

6.1.2: Finding 2: Full Fact constructs Covid vaccine misbelievers as unintelligent and lacking analytical skills.

I argue that throughout this sample, there are frequent subtle implications that CVMBs are unintelligent, i.e., lack criticality, clarity of thought and the capacity to make strong arguments⁴⁸. As noted, the CVMB is rarely addressed directly in this sample, so the selection and presentation of what limited information the reader can glean about them is crucial. My interpretation of this data is that there is an effect achieved within these texts whereby CVMBs are implied to possess characteristics typically associated with vacuity in English-speaking culture. The previous section discussed the ways in which CVMB beliefs are often abstracted from their contexts to imply misunderstandings of official information about Covid vaccines or that CVMBs have unthinkingly believed false information about them. This already presents them as lacking the analytical and critical

⁴⁸ I do not personally consider 'intelligence' to be a measurable, natural or fixed concept. My use of the term 'unintelligent' here refers to the notion of 'being intelligent' or 'unintelligent' as these terms are popularly used and does not reflect my opinion on human cognition.

capacities of *FF*, but presentations of unintelligence go beyond this. To begin, consider the below excerpts:

“An Instagram post claims: “[The Covid-19] Vax is still killing people! Conspiracy PROVED! They wanted to kill us! No healthy kids died of [Covid], but 1000s have died from their poison! [sic]””

(Brown, 2023)

“A post on Facebook claims: “MAKE SURE THAT YOUR EMERGENCY CALL ON YOUR M0BILE IS OFF - ITS AN ACTIVATION SIGNAL TO ACTIVATE THE PATH0GEN IN THE SH0T [sic]”.”

(Rahman, 2023a)

Many **quotations** from CVMBs are included in this sample, allowing us to hear the voice of the subject being fact checked. On several occasions, the style of quotation presentation visible in the above excerpts, as well as that from Sean Ward discussed in the previous section, is used: they quote the CVMB verbatim with ‘[sic]’ to signify that the errors in grammar, spelling and syntax were present in the original. Indeed, in the case of the (Rahman, 2023a) text, it might be the case that the unusual spellings of “path0gen” and “sh0t” are a form of deliberate self-censorship, though this is not addressed. I argue that choosing to present quotations in this way presents the CVMB as unintelligent. This is because numerous studies have found that writing errors “have a negative impact on the assessment of text quality...Some studies even found a negative effect of writing errors on author characteristics unrelated to writing ability such as general intelligence” (Surkyn et al., 2024, pp. 6, NS). Moreover, this, and many of the other selected quotations from CVMBs in the sample have a similar short, frantic **prosody** and informal **register** along with **capitalisation** to signify emphasis. When juxtaposed with the comparatively calm and formal **tone** of the other written text within the fact check, as well as its use of standard English grammatical conventions, I argue that it gives the reader the impression of the CVMB as irrational and frenzied.

It could be argued that this is merely a standard way of presenting quotations for *FF*, but this would not account for the wholesale omission of quotations elsewhere in the

sample. For example, the de Block Golding (2021a) text presents fact checks of several aspects of a social media post, yet does not provide any direct quotations from it. If quotations are not necessary in *FF*'s fact checks, as this would imply, then it follows that any article which *does* include them has likely made an active choice to do so. In addition, there are some CVMB quotations with poor grammar in this sample which do not include the 'sic', e.g., "[[a]]nother post with a picture of a woman receiving an injection in her arm, says "Relax There's a good chance you can't get pregnant anymore anyways" (Rahman, 2022a). This might suggest that *FF*'s writers have a lot of freedom in how they choose to present the voice of the CVMB, further emphasising that presenting them as foolish is a choice. After all, spelling *does* seem to be important to *FF*. For example, Rahman and Turnidge (2022) includes a correction note dated one day after its original publication reading, "[[t]]his article was updated to correct a misspelling of Andrew Bridgen's name". *FF*, therefore, have the opportunity to correct their poor communication, but this opportunity is not extended to the CVMB.

An additional textual practice which, likely unintentionally, encodes a sense that the CVMB is unintelligent is the use of **honorifics** to refer to the CVMBs being fact checked. *FF* seem to have a writing style wherein after a named individual is introduced in the text, they are referred to by their title and surname. We have already seen, for example, Sean Ward referred to as "Mr Ward" (Rahman, 2022c). It is likely unintentional, but this style of writing has the effect of creating a sense of **irony** in how CVMBs are discussed. For example, referring to Ward as "Mr Ward" in Rahman (2022c) before including a quote with a frantic writing style and outlandish claims seems ironic because referring to someone by their title typically denotes respect. It also reinforces the stylistic differences in the writing of CVMBs and *FF*, where the latter's formal **register**, signified by the use of these honorifics, juxtaposes strongly with that of the former. It should also be noted that, where an individual can be known by more than one title, this honorific convention is not always consistent. In Rahman and Turnidge (2022) Member of Parliament (MP) Sir Christopher Chope is referred to as "Sir Christopher", yet in Turnidge (2021) and Turnidge (2022a), he is referred to as "Mr Chope". This may be incidental, but it suggests that *FF* does not have a fixed style guide for referring to public figures, once again empowering the fact checker subjectivity with the power to select how a CVMB is

presented- by first or surname, by awarded title or birth title, et cetera. Thus, deliberately or otherwise, the power to present CVMBs from certain perspectives is embodied in *FF*'s use of honorifics. As a result, the CVMB often comes across as perhaps amusingly immature in comparison to the language used by *FF*'s authors.

Related to being unintelligent and irrational is the impression given in most of the texts in this sample that CVMBs are childishly persistent. On the topic of Christopher Chope, he appears as a repeat offender in this sample, having been found to have made false claims about Covid vaccines in Rahman and Turnidge (2022), Turnidge (2021) and Turnidge (2022a). Indeed, Turnidge (2022a) explicitly states, "We have fact checked other claims made by Mr Chope on Covid-19 vaccines previously." Yet what gives the impression of petulance and childishness is the **prosody** of the language with which Chope is described within these articles. As part of its self-construction as a 'second generation fact checker' (see Chapter 4), *FF* will sometimes ask individuals found to have made false claims to issue corrections. Each of these three texts do so for Chope, as well as then-fellow Conservative Party MPs, Danny Kruger⁴⁹ and Andrew Bridgen⁵⁰ plus British right-wing broadcast channel *GB News*:

- "We contacted Mr Chope to ask him for evidence to back up his claims. He has not replied." (Turnidge, 2021)
- "After we published this fact check, we contacted Sir Christopher Chope and GB News to request a correction regarding this claim.

Sir Christopher disputed our fact check and did not issue a correction.

GB News did not respond." (Turnidge, 2022a)

⁴⁹ Kruger defected to the Reform Party as of 15 September 2025 (Bush, 2025).

⁵⁰ Bridgen was suspended from the Conservative Party in 2023 after likening Covid vaccination side effects to the Holocaust and subsequently lost his seat when running as an independent candidate in the 2024 General Election (Schraer, 2023; BBC News, n.d.).

- “After we published this fact check, we contacted [[MPs]] Danny Kruger, Andrew Bridgen and Sir Christopher Chope to request corrections regarding some these claims.

Danny Kruger will not be taking any action.

Andrew Bridgen and Sir Christopher Chope did not respond.” (Rahman & Turnidge, 2022)

I argue that the **prosody** of their descriptions of his responses emphasise the petulance of these individuals. In each of these examples, the **short, blunt sentences**, some of which are given a **paragraph** to themselves, which introduce the action taken and response (or lack thereof) of the CVMB suggest a childlike stubbornness or refusal to accept that they have been shown to be wrong. Additionally, the **phraseology** of sentences such as “[[h]]e has not replied” may imply a sense of disappointment or frustration where a longer or more florid sentence may imply a more forgiving **tone**. There is also a possibly comic **tone** to “Sir Christopher disputed our fact check”: the notion of disputing something factual perhaps again alludes to the theme of CVMBs as frantic and unintelligent, since they might even carry out acts so absurd as to question fact. Indeed, presentations of Chope might also be read as presenting him as foolish. Consider this excerpt from Turnidge (2021), for context, the “Yellow Card reports” refer to the UK system by which side effects to medications can be reported by any individual who has used them:

“Following this, Mr Chope also said: “There is a lot more damage being done to our citizens as a result of Covid-19 vaccinations than in any other vaccination programme in history.”

It’s unclear exactly what Mr Chope was referring to here, but as we have already said, the Yellow Card reports are not a reliable indicator of a causal link between vaccines and “vaccine damage”. Either way, there is no evidence to prove this claim.”

Chope comes across as particularly inane here. The choice to include the **modifier** “exactly” in “[i]t’s unclear exactly what...” stresses the vagueness and strangeness of his claim, and the word “unclear”, I argue, conveys a **tone** of bemusement at it. Similarly, given that with or without Yellow Card data Chope is wrong “[e]ither way” he is presented as especially foolish, since even his inadequate data ostensibly does not prove his point. It is notable, too, that the Turnidge (2021) text highlights that “Full Fact contacted Mr Chope’s office several times for more information about his sources, but did not receive a response”. The implication, I argue, is that Chope is simply ignoring those who ask for evidence for his claims about the vaccines, in turn suggesting that Chope is immaturely hiding from the consequences of his actions.

Chope is not the only CVMB in this sample presented as persistent and frustrating. The **tone** taken in numerous texts in this sample imply the same about CVMBs in general. One feature which **repeatedly** appears throughout the sample, or even repeatedly within one text in the case of de Block Golding (2021b), is the argument that *FF* have already covered the issue being fact checked. Examples include:

- “We have seen many examples of misinformation about the Covid and other vaccines, often suggesting that they could harm people’s reproductive health” (Benedictus, 2023)
- “As we have said a number of times, vaccines do not interfere with your DNA” (Norton, 2021).
- “As we have written many, many times before, Yellow Card reports can be submitted by anyone and no proof of causation is required.” (Turnidge, 2023).

One or more words in such sentences are usually **hyperlinked** to other *FF* articles which demonstrate that they have indeed covered similar claims before, an **auto-intertextuality** which seems to signify the repetitiveness of CVMBs. But of particular note is the written **prosody** of sentences such as these. For example, suggesting that the erroneous use of Yellow Card data has been written about “many, many times” emphasises a **tone** of frustration and irritation in dealing with CVMBs, that they are

childish and unchanging. This frustration is also reflected with the **tone** and **short, largely monosyllabic sentences** used to counter some of the claims in this sample, such as “[t]here is no evidence this is the case.” (Rahman, 2022a), “[t]his is not true.” (Rahman, 2023b) and “[t]his is completely wrong” (Allen-Kinross, 2021b). We can also observe once again the use of **modifiers** such as “completely” to emphasise frustration through **prosody**. While it might be argued that these sentences are phrased as such simply for the utility of more words allowing for the inclusion of more hyperlinks, I argue that even if this is the case, it would only emphasise *FF*’s apparent frustration with constantly dealing with the same claims. I argue, therefore, that *the CVMB is therefore constructed as frustratingly persistent to the point of petulance in this sample*.

There is, however, an inconsistency here: if *FF* is continuously having to check the same claims, this would imply that its ambition to defeat bad information, at least in the context of Covid vaccines, has failed. If this is the case, it might be argued that *FF* has self-destructively demonstrated its own ineffectuality. I argue that *FF* solves this contradiction by focussing heavily on social media as a vector for Covid vaccine misbeliefs. This is because the greater level of indeterminacy in information afforded by the internet means that claims making similar arguments emerge constantly, and *FF*’s only option is to continue its game of whack-a-mole with CVMBs. I turn to this phenomenon now.

6.1.3: Finding 3: Full Fact implies that Covid vaccine misbelievers rely on the indeterminacy and uncertainty of the internet to promote their arguments.

Most texts in this sample make at least a minor reference to social media, even those which are not dealing with a claim about Covid vaccines which occurred online. This may in part be due to a scheme wherein *FF* worked in collaboration with Facebook to fact check its content which was active during the period which accounts for many of the fact check texts in this sample concerning posts on Meta⁵¹ platforms, though this consistent focus on social media seems to hint at a more generalised negative perspective on social media held by *FF*.

⁵¹ Parent company of Facebook and Instagram, among other social media websites and applications.

Indeed, in the process of carrying out this analysis, it initially seemed strange that such detailed and well-researched fact checks were carried out on often insignificant social media posts. Given the limited reach and general facelessness of many of the social media accounts subject to *FF*'s scrutiny, producing lengthy, detailed articles assessing them seemed a somewhat disproportionate response to false claims that would likely have little impact. Indeed, these articles may even have contributed to a 'Streisand effect' wherein *FF*'s criticism of anti-vaccine social media content may have exposed them to a much larger audience than they would otherwise have received. However, I argue that this ties in with my earlier argument that the content on *FF*'s website is not intended for CVMBs (or any misbelievers, for that matter) but instead should be understood as a 'show of force' which reinforces the empowered position of the fact checker and non-misbeliever subjectivities within the dominant Covid Discourse. Moreover, the internet, especially social media, is constructed in this sample as existing outside of the influence of the dominant Covid Discourse. This is not to argue that dominant Discourses are not present on social media, only that they exist in a weakened state there. Thus, the centrality of social media to this sample might in part be explained by the impression given that it is a space where anonymity and indistinct communication are commonplace, and wherein CVMBs are able to promote their ideas to encourage others to hold them too. Social media is presented within many of these texts, therefore, as a valuable tool for CVMBs, given that there are few restrictions on posting online, perhaps explaining the preoccupation with it in this sample.

Perhaps the clearest manifestation of this conceptualisation of the internet can be found in the recurring theme of CVMB claims being attributed to the posts themselves. In other words, the claims being assessed by *FF* are often not attributed to any individual, but to a personification of the post itself, except where the poster is a notable figure. Examples include:

- "A video on Facebook with thousands of views makes a number of claims about children and the Covid-19 Pfizer vaccine" (Rahman, 2021).
- "A number of posts on Facebook claim that shingles (herpes zoster) has been "re-named" as monkeypox and that a "confidential released document" published

by Pfizer “listed 11 different forms of Herpes Zoster as adverse diseases” people could get from the Covid-19 vaccine.” (Turnidge, 2022b).

- “An Instagram post falsely suggests that a scheme to install defibrillators in all UK schools is evidence that Covid-19 vaccinations are not safe” (Thompson, 2023).

I call this phenomenon ‘postsonification’, the personification of social media posts as the ‘person’ making the claim. While *FF* always **hyperlinks** the original post, by the time of writing, many of these are now dead links (as is always a possibility when linking ephemeral internet content), leaving only the content of the text itself to **frame** the CVMB post. While it is understandable that *FF* would not name the creators of these posts, who may be members of the public without other platforms to defend themselves, the effect of postsonification, in my view, is to remove the presence of the human input that goes into the production of these posts. As a result, there is a sense that these claims are not the opinions of real people, but seem to have emerged *ex nihilo*, and thus lack the authenticity of human interaction. This contributes to a broader feeling that social media is an uncertain place where no claim by a source not connected to dominant institutions should be trusted, since the institutions of the dominant Discourse (such as fact checkers) are not immediately present to deligitimise them. In other words, unlike traditional structures of knowledge production which regulate themselves through institutional power, the structure of social media allows the production of knowledge claims unmoored from such discursive boundaries.

This construction of the internet as mysterious and rhizomatic is further emphasised by descriptions in these texts of what I call ‘recursive’ social media posts. By this, I refer to claims taken from social media that are based on *other* claims from social media or personal websites. Examples include:

- “The image in his [[Instagram]] post is a screenshot of a tweet that says “NEW - Pfizer's primary mRNA injections ‘temporarily’ impair semen concentration and total motile count among donors.” (Rahman, 2022c).

- “The [[Instagram]] post presents a graph, taken from Twitter, that appears to show in raw numbers that far more vaccinated than unvaccinated people have died with Covid-19” (Rahman, 2023b)
- “Facebook users are sharing links to misinformation posted on the website of conspiracy theorist David Icke.” (Allen-Kinross, 2021b)

I argue that the implication of this is that social media, and to a lesser extent, the internet in general, represents a type of decentralised knowledge production wherein no claim about Covid vaccines can be trusted as it may simply represent an infinite regression of untrustworthy claims based on other untrustworthy claims. This would imply that *online CVMB arguments are based on inadequate evidence*.

It is ironic, however, that some online processes are imbued with a perhaps undue degree of concern, such as the video “with thousands of views” in the above excerpts. From context, this seems to imply that thousands of people have viewed the video and perhaps believed its content. Yet we cannot know whether this *is* the reason for the view count, or whether this high number is the product of, say, artificial viewings to inflate its popularity. Moreover, it is impossible to know whether a view counter constitutes meaningful engagement with the video, especially since on Facebook, a video playing for just three seconds counts as a ‘view’ (Edelson et al., 2021, NS). It is notable, therefore, that *FF* seem to abstract and render mysterious the human input in the production of anti-Covid-vaccination posts, yet insert human input into more mysterious online processes such as view counts. This may reflect the epistemological effects of *FF*’s ‘bad information thesis’ on the construction of the CVMB: a willingness to emphasise their impact through social media but minimise their presence.

Indeed, even the fact check **format** articles within this sample which do concern named individuals (politicians, an actor, a well-known conspiracy theorist) tend to link their impact to social media, even where this does not appear to be relevant to the fact check at hand. For example, Turnidge (2021), an article fact-checking a claim by Christopher Chope MP in the house of commons, includes the sentence “Some of Mr Chope’s words have been picked up by social media accounts opposed to the Covid-19 vaccine and are being used to spread misinformation”. While this sentence is not necessarily

superfluous (perhaps the intended reader of this text is one who has encountered Chope's claims via social media), the decision to include this reference in an article otherwise wholly unconnected with social media emphasises *FF*'s apparent anxiety about its use by CVMBs, or individuals who they fear may become CVMBs.

With this considered, I argue that these texts represent a belief that the CVMB is powerful and influential because they have been empowered by social media to develop and present a misbeliever counter Discourse on Covid vaccination which is insulated from mainstream institutional power. Organisations such as *FF* represent an effort to insert the presence of dominant Covid Discourses into social media through texts such as these. It is notable, for example, that besides CVMBs themselves, the only other voices who are **quoted** in these texts are from mainstream organisations or experts within them, such as university academics (Rahman, 2023a), the ONS (T. Thompson, 2022) and the NHS (Brown, 2023). As I argued previously, the **target audience** of these articles does not seem to be the CVMBs themselves, and with this section's findings in mind, I argue that the main function of these texts is to bolster the power of the dominant Covid Discourse through performative practices of non-misbelief, rather than change the minds of CVMBs.

6.2: *The Light*'s construction of the anti-vaccine Covid misbeliever.

6.2.1: Finding 1: Covid vaccine misbelievers view themselves as independent thinkers in a world of deceit and rising tyranny, though their arguments may suggest that belief in vaccine harms precedes arguments made against them.

The CVMB is constructed in *TL* as knowledgeable and trustworthy. Much of this sample presents different facets of an overarching belief system wherein Covid vaccines are part of a depopulation plan being pushed by international organisations in collaboration with national governments. Using various textual practices, CVMBs present a variety of narratives, some incompatible with one another, to explain their beliefs that Covid vaccines are harmful physically, psychologically and for society at large. Overall, The CVMB, who appears to value science and health, argues that the Covid vaccines, and possibly the whole pandemic, are not what mainstream accounts claim them to be.

Before commencing a discussion of the CVMB subjectivity in depth, it is important to first introduce the worldview and conceptualisations of vaccines they hold, which I reconstructed out of the information within these texts. It can be difficult to tell whether all the writers represented here hold the same belief structure as each other, as well as how sincere each of these accounts are. As such, the narrative I present here is based on my construction of the evidence provided by the sample, and the reader should bear in mind that this does not necessarily represent a unified and universally accepted worldview or metanarrative among CVMBs or within the Covid misbeliever counter-Discourse.

The narrative presented in this sample suggests the Covid vaccines do not benefit public health but are secretly the tools of a depopulation programme. The word “depopulation” appears just once in the whole sample, where Smith (2021c) argues that various institutions “have stated their plans of depopulation and total control many times”, yet allusions to the vaccines killing and sterilising within the context of a health conspiracy are recurrent enough that I argue this is a major theme.

Within this sample, there are two modes by which the vaccine is suggested to cause depopulation: killing or fatally disabling *some* of its recipients, and damaging or disabling the female reproductive system. Turning firstly to arguments that the vaccine is killing and disabling its recipients, the evidence provided is typically either decontextualised (or misrepresented) official statistics coupled with anecdotal cases whereby real deaths and disablement are attributed to Covid vaccines. For example, the **headline** of Atkinson (2021) argues that there are “40,000 dead from vaccines in UK, USA and EU”⁵², though the main body of the text suggests that these are “deaths reported following the shot”, i.e., not necessarily indicating a correlative relationship. This text furthermore misrepresents Covid case rates by “[t]aking cases announced on the same day one week apart (for fair comparison)” (Atkinson, 2021), i.e. presenting them in non-chronological order, causing them to appear as though Covid case rates were declining in line with declining vaccination rates. The Atkinson (2021) text also uses several **anecdotal cases** in which deaths and illness occurred following vaccines, seemingly to

⁵² ‘EU’ refers to the European Union.

illustrate these statistics. Examples include, “a brain haemorrhage”, “cardiomyopathy”, “a stroke”, a “serious thyroid problem” and a story about a man who was “FULL of blood clots” and that “the vaccine had killed his immune system and he died of a heart attack” (Atkinson, 2021). Again, while it cannot be ruled out that these deaths and illnesses were connected to vaccination, the **framing** of these stories seems to rule out the possibility of false correlations.

One of these anecdotes stands out as a **didactic** story to non-misbelievers:

“Perhaps the most tragic death was of the American [[name redacted]] who had swallowed the government propaganda, called the unvaccinated “idiots and morons” and told others that “I hope none of your family or friends suffer from your complete failings as a functional member of society”. He received his second injection on 24th March and died on July 6th following a heart attack and strokes at the age of 33.”⁵³

(Atkinson, 2021)

This passage seems to summarise the CVMB perspective on many non-misbelievers in this sample: they unquestioningly “swallow” vaccine “propaganda” and ostensibly die as a result in many cases. The question of where this ‘propaganda’ comes from is discussed in the subsequent section, but it is notable that this case is described **emotively** as “tragic” in this paragraph’s **tone**-shifting final sentence. There is an implication that those who are claimed to have died from the Covid vaccines are the pitiable victims of the regime that is pushing them, a theme which I will discuss in a later section.

The flimsiness and dishonesty of these arguments raise questions as to what direction the route of cause and effect is. Does the author believe that vaccines are harmful *because* of the evidence presented here, or are these arguments being made to fortify pre-existing beliefs? If it is the latter, then the question of how one becomes a CVMB remains. Indeed, aside from false correlations, other methods of presenting arguments I found in this sample include what appears to be a (mis)calculation of the number of

⁵³ I have redacted the name of the individual as it is irrelevant to my discussion and concerns a member of the public who has died.

vaccinated individuals in England in Smith (2022c) and the occasional use of citations, e.g. in Kendrick (2020) and Freedom Gibraltar (2021), and the (mis)use of Yellow Card data (Ennos, 2023).

In any case, there is an inconsistency in this account of vaccine harms: it does not consider those vaccinated individuals who have not died. One explanation for this can be found in Chapman (2022), which argues that “[information] leaked from Big Pharma combined with independent analysis of actual vials of ‘vaccine’ have discovered four - Pfizer, Moderna, AstraZeneca and Johnson & Johnson - containing graphene oxide”⁵⁴. The article argues that while most people have “a certain amount of sludge in their blood vessels; hard fat, calcium soap and cholesterol” which allows for the removal of the graphene oxide “offending ‘razor blades’”, however,

“there are people who do not have much in the way of fatty deposits in their pipes... for example, athletes. These fitter than average folk are at greater risk post-jab - acutely if they get a shot into the vein”⁵⁵

(Chapman, 2022)

The argument, here is that physically fit individuals are more likely to die from these vaccines than others. This argument is seemingly supported by the Walsh and Goodsciencing.com (2021) text, which reproduces a very long **list** of “footballers”⁵⁶ who “had heart problems or collapsed on the field, in some cases leading to death” from German newspaper *Berliner Zeitung* (BZ). Apparently unlike BZ, this article directly suggests that these deaths are the result of Covid vaccinations, despite few of the sportspeople listed even being shown to have had the vaccine. It is notable that the more obvious correlative factor, that all these individuals who died or became ill were sportspeople, is ignored in favour of the vaccine being the culprit for their harm.

⁵⁴ There is no evidence for this, and the “leaks” and “independent analysis” in question are not explained or described.

⁵⁵ Ellipse present in original text; this is not a truncated quote.

⁵⁶ While described in the article’s main body as a list of footballers, the list also includes individuals who compete or play in other sports or athletics.

The Chapman (2022) text also claims that some vaccines⁵⁷ are deliberately mislabelled “salt water (placebo)”, and may merely be “to prepare, or train the population, to roll up their sleeve and comply on demand”. This presents a secondary explanatory narrative for ‘vaccine deaths’: a conspiracy to only use the ‘harmful’ vaccines on some, while psychologically training the surviving, placebo-taking population to accept future vaccination programmes. This, the text continues, is because “it is not yet an attempt at wholesale genocide” and “if they were to kill too many people too quickly, the game would be up” (Chapman, 2022). Yet conspicuously absent in this text is an explanation for what the purpose of this “genocide”, mass killing and control of the public is. This lack of clarity about who exactly the individuals trying to cause mass death by Covid vaccination are and why this is their ambition is a theme running through much of the sample, though as we shall see, some names and organisations are implicated elsewhere.

Nevertheless, killing their recipients is just one of the effects of Covid vaccines, according to this sample. Now, I turn to the second way that the vaccines are presented as depopulation tools. A frequently occurring theme is the implication that Covid vaccines do harm to the female reproductive system. Examples include:

- Based on Yellow Card data, it is argued that the vaccines cause “disruption to the menstrual cycle, and excessive menstrual bleeding” (Ennos, 2023).
- According to Piers Corbyn, “the mRNA shot is not really a vaccine but an instrument of genetic modification and control, potentially making women infertile” (McCrae, 2021b)
- The Atkinson (2021) text argues “nursing babies whose mothers had been injected were at risk of getting Covid spike proteins from her breast milk”, and quotes a “researcher and viral immunologist Byram Bridle” who states “we have found evidence of suckling infants experiencing bleeding disorders in the gastrointestinal tract” (Bridle, in Atkinson, 2021)
- Ennos (2022a) suggests that Public Health Scotland statistics found “a spike in September in the number of newborn deaths in Scotland”.

⁵⁷ It is unclear in this instance whether this refers to vaccines in general or only those created to combat Covid.

- In an **opinion column framed** around claims that Covid vaccines harm children, Coleman (2021c) argues both that “[b]reast milk is affected by this toxic jab - and the antibodies in breast milk can cause bleeding in infants” and “[s]pike proteins in the mRNA vaccines could trigger an immune reaction against syncytin-1, a protein which is responsible for the development of a placenta in mammals and humans. How will this affect young girls? No one knows”.
- The **headline** of Ennos (2022b) reads, “Study finds higher miscarriage rate in vaccinated - but pretends it doesn’t”, and presents a lengthy critique of the study in question.

While a discussion of the gender politics of this sample is beyond the scope of the present study, it is notable that the effects of the vaccines so frequently present women as victims⁵⁸ of vaccination, or perhaps as failing in their duty to their children by being vaccinated. Many of these articles appear to have been written by men, and this construction of women’s bodies as fragile and especially susceptible to harm may reflect a more traditional conceptualisation of gender being held by CVMBs. In any case, the arguments made suggest that vaccines harm the menstrual cycle, female development, breastmilk, and pregnancy viability, indicating that Covid vaccines are not merely a threat to living people, but the unborn and yet-to-be conceived, too.

Who, then, is behind this push for a vaccine massacre according to CVMBs? As noted, the answer is often left ambiguous in these texts, perhaps to suggest that the reader already knows. Yet a few texts in this sample do offer a more overt description of their enemy. Taking the **format** of a review of ‘Uninformed Consent’, apparently an amateur documentary film presenting a conspiracy theory narrative to explain Covid vaccines, Fryer (2022) links vaccines, state governments and international organisations. The film covers “what has been inflicted on innocent men, women and children, most particularly from the vaccine mandates issued in so many countries we had previously viewed as democracies, such as America, Canada, Australia and New Zealand” (Fryer, 2022), but

⁵⁸ The sample does not account for intersex and transgender individuals despite such health issues presumably also being a possibility for them, according to the logic of these articles. Whether this reflects upon their author’s values is unclear.

of particular note for my purposes is what this text says about the World Economic Forum (WEF):

“As the story unfolds, we begin to see who is steering the ship. [[Justin]] Trudeau tells us that “this pandemic has provided an opportunity for a reset”, presumably the Great Reset that his mentor Klaus Schwab talks about at the World Economic Forum. So many world leaders singing from the same song sheet, all using the phrase ‘build back better’.”

(Fryer, 2022)

Here we find perhaps the clearest explanation of a CVMB belief system that this sample has to offer. Klaus Schwab and the WEF, with the cooperation of state-level governments, are encouraging (or forcing) the public to take Covid vaccines as part of ‘The Great Reset’ (TGR). The TGR phrase was popularised by Schwab, then Chairman of the WEF, in Summer 2020 and was subsequently subject to an unusual, conspiratorial interpretation by Covid (and other) misbelievers (Birchall & Knight, 2023, p. 122, NS). Christensen and Au (2023, pp. 2349, NS) summarise TGR’s conspiratorial interpretation as “[w]hile not the most coherent...in the broadest terms, it supposes that liberal world leaders and corporate elites are using the pretext of the pandemic to establish an authoritarian world government”. While it is not necessarily the case that all of the texts in this sample are written by believers in TGR, this narrative fits neatly into most of the discussions of vaccines within the sample: that where CVMBs refer ambiguously to some powerful group who wish for vaccines to be used, they could be referring to this theory of international conspiracy to establish authoritarian rule.

Indeed, Smith (2021c), refers to Schwab as “the real-life Bond villain, Klaus Schwab-Rothschild, founder and spokesman for the World Economic Forum”. The **intertextual** reference to James Bond suggests that Schwab is a caricature of villainy, while the “Rothschild” reference, for no clear reason, seems to link him to the antisemitic conspiracy theories concerning the Rothschild banking dynasty, to whom Schwab has no familial relation. The notion of an international elite conspiring against the public is reinforced by the **image** which illustrates The Light (2021a), depicting the then-leaders of several G7 countries and members of the British royal family neither socially distanced

nor wearing masks, which the caption tells us shows that “they know the virus threat is not quite what it is made out to be”, seeming to suggest that SARS-nCoV-2 is less of a threat than widely believed, or perhaps that it does not exist at all.

Yet the question of *why* depopulating the world with vaccines is a step in this plan for world domination is never clearly answered in this sample. One possible explanation is that CVMBs believe that the vaccine is merely an experiment being carried out on the public, which would account for the Covid vaccines very frequently being described as “experimental” throughout the sample, where they are variously declared,

- “unlicensed, experimental gene therapy” (Atkinson, 2021)
- “new experimental genetic drugs” (The Light, 2021a)
- “The experimental and notably toxic covid-19 jabs” (Coleman, 2022b)
- “experimental shots” (Walsh & Goodsciencing.com, 2021)
- “the mass unethical medical experiments being trialled across the world known as ‘covid-19 vaccines’” (Smith, 2021c)
- “experimental ‘vaccines’” (Freedom Gibraltar, 2021).

Yet what this ‘experiment’ seeks to achieve is also unexplained, though given the above, it may pertain to genetics, perhaps aligning it with claims that it is being used for ‘eugenics’ and ‘genocide’ which appear throughout the sample. The ‘experiment’ might also refer to a belief that the vaccines have not been subject to adequate scientific testing, and that the pharmaceutical companies behind them are not trustworthy. The Small (2020) text discusses Pfizer’s genuine history of unethical and illegal activities, such as the actions of Pfizer in Kano⁵⁹, and combines them with claims their Covid vaccine is “a biotechnological drug in its infancy”, asking the **rhetorical question**,

“Isn’t it wise to be cautious or seriously concerned, given Pfizer’s track record?”

Perhaps, then, the ‘experiment’ is presented in this text as the latest in Pfizer’s history of unethical human experimentation. In any case, this text suggests that CVMBs can, at

⁵⁹ During a meningitis outbreak in northern Nigeria in 1996, Pfizer used experimental drug Trovafloxacin and intentionally low doses of established treatment Ceftriaxone on children suffering with the disease as part of an experiment at a hospital in Kano. Eleven children died and many others were debilitated by the experiment (see: Patterson, 2010; Suru and Ugwu, 2025).

least in part, base their opposition to the Covid vaccines on historical records. It also raises the important point that genuine historical abuses by pharmaceutical companies can be invoked as arguments against vaccinations created by the same companies in times of public health crisis.

But the belief that the vaccine is based on incomplete scientific data is not the only reason given for opposing it: some question whether SARS-CoV-2 exists at all. The question of the virus and its attendant illness' existence is also key in these texts. Some deny its existence outright, seeming to view it as an excuse to encourage vaccine uptake, for example, Smith (2022c) suggests that people are "lining up outside covid shot centres...to get protected from what they have been trained to believe is a deadly disease, and which seems to the rest of us very much like the flu". Coleman (2021c) similarly calls the virus "nothing more than the rebranded flu", here invoking a marketing **metaphor**, suggesting that the virus is like a product. Others use textual strategies to produce more polysemic statements, for example, Atkinson (2021) suggests that "[[t]]here are several cheap and well-cited prophylactics and cures for 'covid-19'", the **speech marks** around "covid-19" allowing the reader to deny the existence of the disease, or not if they so choose. By contrast, in order to make his argument that a study paper found that Covid vaccines are harmful during pregnancy, the author of Ennos (2022b) claims that "there is no evidence [[in this study]] that SARS-CoV-2 infection poses a risk to early pregnancy outcomes, but that...the AstraZeneca vaccine increases the risk of early miscarriage". Granted, this text *could* be read as implying that the virus is not real, yet its **repeated** reference to the virus seems to imply an acknowledgement of its existence. As such, we can again see that there is not a singular CVMB narrative presented here, but *several different explanations for the Covid pandemic which may be given by CVMBs*.

It is similarly difficult to determine to what extent opposition to vaccines is universal or focussed only on the Covid injections. Most texts do not discuss this topic, though some do present a clear opposition to all vaccinations. The most notable example of this is Coleman (2022b), a text **headlined**, "vaccines have never been safe or effective". This text, while supporting anti-Covid-vaccine sentiment, expresses a concern that this sentiment could also have the consequence of pushing "the wider issue of traditional

vaccination into the background” (Coleman, 2022b). Indeed, this text only uses Covid vaccines as a **frame** from which to discuss claims that many other vaccines are harmful or ineffective, and that the censorship of vaccine opposition is not new. Elsewhere, there are more subtle references to other vaccines being harmful, such as the claim that Bill Gates “uses his riches to dictate world health policy, centred around mass vaccination programmes” (McCrae, 2021b) which, in context, may be read as suggesting that Gates-supported vaccines are the product of some agenda.

Bill Gates and his namesake philanthropic organisation, the *Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation* (BMGF) also appears in the discussion of ‘Uninformed Consent’ in Fryer (2022). Here, it is heavily **implied** that BMGF uses bribery to corrupt medical research and policy, describing a scientist who worked on ivermectin as a Covid treatment whose “enthusiasm dimmed and the conclusions of his review suddenly changed course” following the university receiving 40 million dollars from BMGF. Moreover, BMGF are described as WHO’s “biggest donor”, which in turn “is attempting to take unelected control of decision-making within its ‘Pandemic Preparedness Treaty’” (Fryer, 2022), implying that the power of BMGF is global in scope. Perhaps, then, BMGF, the WEF and the WHO are acting together to push vaccines on global populations in this narrative.

Indeed, the McCrae (2023) text also suggests Gates advocates eugenics:

“Although Gates claims that the remedy for overpopulation is better health, a troubling theme of eugenics is discernible.”

I argue that the implication of this passage is that vaccination programmes are *often* used for the purposes of depopulation. By elsewhere **trivialising** Gates as a “computer salesman”, it additionally appears that this text implicitly questions his expertise in public health, in turn questioning why vaccinations he promotes should be trusted. The references to “eugenics” and “overpopulation” seems to also hint at the use of vaccines to control the population without saying so outright. It therefore appears that vaccines with connections to the BMGF are often constructed as untrustworthy in this sample.

But there are also hints elsewhere that CVMB opposition to vaccines is not universal. For example, several texts object to the phrase ‘anti-vaxxer’ in this sample. Notably, the Kendrick (2020) text calls it a “stupid, deliberately demeaning term” without a clear

meaning. Objection to an umbrella term such as this might imply that some who oppose Covid vaccines do not necessarily object to all vaccines. Thus, based on this sample, it is difficult to determine whether opposition to Covid vaccines necessarily implies opposition to vaccines in general, though there are instances of this unambiguously being the case.

The final point on this worldview to note are the methods proposed in these texts by which governments try to force the public to take vaccines. These texts imply that vaccine uptake may be the product of “relentless and ubiquitous propaganda” (Smith, 2022c), “bullying” from peers (Crawford, 2023), censorship (see subsequent section), and “numerous perception management techniques employed...by the UK government and its agents” (Smith, 2021c). However, several texts in this sample discuss ‘vaccine mandates’ within the UK and other states. This claim is not always based on a literal mandate, but on the belief that coercive systems which are vaccine mandates *in effect* exist. For example, Smith (2021c) discusses so-called vaccine passports “to freedoms you previously had anyway, such as pubs, clubs, holidays and concerts/cinema etc”, though no such passports meaningfully existed in the UK. The McCrae (2021a) text discusses the so-called ‘no jab, no job’ policy for care home workers (one of few literal vaccine mandates), while the Waters (2021) article appears to suggest that children will be manipulated into being vaccinated by their schools without parental consent. CVMBs therefore view the vaccine as something mandated even if this is not necessarily the case.

As this findings section continues, keep this CVMB worldview in mind, since it will fill out the blank spaces that may appear in the reporting of findings to follow.

6.2.2: Finding 2: CVMBs are presented in The Light as valuing science because they believe that scientific arguments against vaccines have been censored

The previous section included the discussion of several objections to Covid vaccinations based on spurious scientific concerns and claims of censorship and bribery of scientific and medical professionals. In this section, I look in greater detail at the ways in which science is discussed in relation to Covid vaccine opposition.

Firstly, CVMBs in this sample tend to respect and value science but perceive vaccines as a perversion of it. In other words, these texts are often arguing not against science *itself*, but present arguments rooted in scientific concepts to criticise mainstream presentations of Covid vaccines. A useful starting point is the Leader (2021) text, where the notion that “the covid-19 vaccine will use our immune systems to attack proteins that our cells make and that’s it”, *inter alia*, is described as “pseudo-science”, indicating that this CVMB values science. This text offers a **complex** and **jargon**-filled argument for how Covid vaccines “[[damage]] our healthy cells”. Consider this excerpt:

“Our immune systems will consider those cells as damaged or genetically corrupted cells and initiate a cytokine storm. The damaged cells are seen as a poison, stimulating an attack to destroy the spike protein.

The vaccine is using genetically engineered exosomal membrane coated with polyethylene glycol (PEG) for extra protection to transfer artificially sequenced RNA into our cells for reverse transcriptase”

Much of this text is written in this style, with no definitions given for the various esoteric terms and processes described. As a result, it is difficult for someone with no expertise in Biological Sciences to dispute the claims being made in this piece. Given that *TL* appears to be written for a mass audience, I argue that the function of this article is to present the signifiers of scientific soundness without empirically evidencing its claims. In other words, this article is not based on original research, but it merely needs to ‘look the part’ as a scientific justification for opposing Covid vaccines without actually providing evidence to this end.

Yet it appears that for CVMBs, it is not merely that the scientific case against the Covid vaccine exists, but that it is being actively censored. Consider this **rhetorical question** to the reader in the Smith (2022a) text, **headlined**, “Following the science?”:

“Ask yourself why you never see debates between pro- and anti-mass vaccination doctors. Is the science really settled?”

The **framing** of this question seems to imply that there is a legitimate, scientific debate to be had regarding Covid vaccines, yet it is being censored. Indeed, the **definite article**

in the **headline** of Kendrick (2020) seems to imply that such a debate exists: “Censoring The Vaccine Debate Will Backfire”. This censorship is often connected to mass media. Indeed, several texts in this sample allude to media censorship of arguments against vaccines, such as McCrae (2021b), an article about a protest against newspaper *The Guardian*:

“‘Why are we doing your job?’, asked a placard outside a national newspaper headquarters at King’s Cross, London. ‘Shame on you’, it continued, ‘Guardian now bankrolled by corrupt, drug-pusher billionaires’.”

The implication of this placard, then, is that the paper is failing in its purpose by not asking important questions due to being bribed. Meanwhile, Coleman (2022b) claims “we all know that the establishment and the mainstream media refuse to debate the mRNA jabs”, adding that there has long been a “blackout” on “any discussion of the more traditional vaccines”. We see, then, a belief among some CVMBs that *their perspective on vaccines is not permitted in mainstream media*.

Returning to Smith (2022a), it is notable, too, is the belief in a singular and objective ‘science’ which apparently exists independently of human interpretation, implied by the notion that science can be ‘settled’. Coupled with the aforementioned headline, **which parodies** a UK government slogan at the time, *following the science*, it appears that CVMBs take an ontological view of science wherein there is an empirical truth of the world which exists independently of human interpretation to be discovered through scientific enquiry. In such a worldview, scientific truth can be objectively proven, yet the concern expressed in this text is that “only some of the science is being followed, and only some of the scientists are being listened to” (Smith, 2022a). This argument alludes to the main framing of this text: three scientists who oppose the Covid vaccines who are “[c]ensored from all broadcast media and Big Tech social media, with very little coverage in the press”. The scientists are treated with a **tone** of reverence, introduced as “Nobel prize winner” (Dr. Luc Montagnier), “Retired chief scientist” (Dr. Michael Yeadon) and “Father of mRNA tech” (Dr. Robert Malone). They are **contrasted** with three “sports stars and celebrities [[needed]] to push the [[vaccine]] programme” and are “[a]llowed to speak out across all major media”, who are presented in **comedically** belittling terms:

- “Racing car driver” Lewis Hamilton, who is “[n]ot a doctor or a scientist, we believe”
- “TV presenter” Piers Morgan, who has “[n]o experience in virology, immunology or medicine, as far as we know”
- “Country singer” Dolly Parton, “whose medical, clinical and biological research experience is zero, according to our best knowledge”

The framing here is important since it implies that the author of this text values science, perhaps viewing it as a prerequisite for expressing views on the vaccines. However, this is dishonest: by ignoring the countless medical and scientific professionals who *do* support the Covid vaccines and taking three, presumably cherry-picked, scientists who ostensibly do not, the author’s point is self-defeating. Yet that this author felt it important to suggest that there is opposition among scientists to vaccines implies that *CVMBs’ opposition to vaccines is not necessarily anti-science from their perspective*.

It should be noted, too, that these texts do imply some scientific expertise and familiarity with research processes among at least some CVMBs. A strong example of this is Ennos (2022b) an article written by “a retired professor of evolutionary biology at Edinburgh University” who has “throughout [[his]] career...been involved in the peer-review process”. This text largely takes the **format** of an informal peer-review of a study which found that Covid vaccines did not increase the risk of miscarriage or ectopic pregnancy. He argues that the paper’s findings are based on inadequate data, poor recording of the miscarriage rate and a failure to account for confounding factors: “[m]y verdict is that if I were a reviewer of this paper, I would unequivocally reject it” (Ennos, 2022b). The academic background, association with the well-regarded University of Edinburgh and familiarity with peer reviewing all act as signifiers of scientific authority. The implication here is that *CVMBs do value science and the scientific process and can even have a high level of expertise in the field*.

It is also notable that the Ennos (2022b) text, unlike Leader (2021) defines the terms used and contains far less jargon, suggesting that less **complex** scientific-style anti-Covid-vaccine writing is also possible within *TL*. However, the text uses a rather patronising **tone** towards Dr. Viki Male, a scientist featured in an NHS video promoting Covid

vaccinations during pregnancy who drew upon the study Ennos discusses to counter criticism to the video. She is described here with **metaphors** such as “cocooned in a white coat” with “a science PhD in pathology, rather than a medical degree”, who “did seem very sure of herself, despite her exposed position” (Ennos, 2023). He further argues that “the only honourable thing for you [[Dr. Male]] to do is forthwith withdraw from further promotions of the covid-19 vaccine for pregnant women”. Deliberately or otherwise, such efforts to undermine Male’s expertise appear in my view a sexist effort to delegitimise the position of an expert with whom Ennos disagrees. This may imply that, where a scenario resembling the “debates between pro- and anti-mass vaccination doctors” advocated by Smith (2022a) occur, there can be a lack of respect for those advocating vaccines by those who oppose them, perhaps indicating a degree of hypocrisy among some CVMBs.

It is also worth briefly noting that several of the texts in this sample (though not all) include citations for their arguments. This is somewhat at odds with the newspaper **format** which *TL* otherwise mimics, but suggests that in these instances, the CVMBs saw the inclusion of supporting evidence for their claims as important. Indeed, some of these citations are to sources elsewhere considered to be untrustworthy, such as the Freedom Gibraltar (2021) text including a reference to BBC News to evidence one of its arguments. Thus, throughout the sample, we can observe mixed attitudes towards the institution of mass media. I now turn to this theme in greater detail.

6.2.3: Finding 3: CVMBs may be socially conservative, viewing the current structure of social institutions in the UK as positive, but having been corrupted.

I have so far discussed some of the social institutions which are seen as untrustworthy by CVMBs during the pandemic. These include claims that scientists are being bribed, that governments act on behalf of the WEF’s ‘Great Reset’ and that news media is failing to ask appropriate questions about the vaccines. But this does not necessarily imply that CVMBs were always sceptical of social institutions. While there is a strong sentiment that social institutions are not, or can no longer be trusted, there is also little desire expressed for a broader change in the structure of society. Indeed, as we shall see, some aspects of Law as an institution seem to be trusted by CVMBs.

A good starting point for understanding some of the sentiments surrounding social institutions during the pandemic is Crawford (2023), who writes of the public's "utter betrayal by governments, scientists, Big Pharma, doctors, and all the other establishment institutions – not least of all the complicit corporate and national media". This text is notable for the author directly **listing** and criticising numerous social institutions in the UK for his perception of their role in the pandemic. These include ones which I had by now come to expect, such as "governments", "the BBC and the rest of the mainstream media" and "doctors or nurses" (Crawford, 2023). But Crawford (2023) goes even further:

"...police who turned so easily from community-supporting crime fighters to unthinking, ruthless, masked-up, tooled-up government enforcers, breaking up peaceful protests and political meetings.

Or hysterical teachers and their unions who gave away their great lie that 'the children must come first'.

Or most churches, temples and mosques for their complicit silence and hate-inspiring statements, such as 'Jesus would want everyone to be vaccinated and to do otherwise is an act of selfishness'.

And then there are the neighbours, friends, family members and strangers who displayed a total lack of critical thinking; who put me, and my like, at risk with their compliance. They still do. What jeopardies do they hold for us in the future with their weak, blind and unnecessary obedience?

They were complicit in the theft of more than two years of my life.

My worldview has changed forever."

I include this lengthy excerpt because it shows a range of perspectives on social institutions which in my view reflect a generally socially conservative perspective on the structure of UK society. For example, it presents an idealised view of the police as trustworthy and supportive members of the community, who were valued by this author until their transformation into apparently untrustworthy villains during the pandemic. At the same time, by referring to teachers and teaching unions support of children as a pre-

existing “great lie”, Crawford (2023) may be invoking existing conspiracy theories popular among the political right about teachers indoctrinating their students into certain beliefs (see, e.g., Tebaldi (2026, NS). However, there is also a degree of inclusiveness here, in the apparent value both of community and of three types of religious place of worship. Indeed, McCrae (2021a) similarly describes individuals who opposed mandatory vaccination in the care sector thus: “mostly female and of all ages and ethnicities”, “[s]ome took strength from God, others from a humanistic commitment to freedom and choice”. The CVMB is therefore represented as diverse in this sample, suggesting that while CVMBs may be somewhat socially conservative, they can also be, at least to some extent, inclusive.

Indeed, the McCrae (2021a) text also suggests that CVMBs do not oppose all forms of unionisation, since the author is part of the “Workers of England, the trade union defending workers against the callous covid regime”, in this instance, “‘no jab no job’ law”. It is important to note that ‘Workers of England’ (WOE) is not a member of the Trades Union Congress and “is not a real trade union and is more like an association without any obvious benefit to its paying members” (Hope Not Hate, 2022, NS). The author claims to be using the Equality Act to fight on behalf of these workers against some managers, who “[a]fter years of spouting politically correct messages of equality and diversity for their own promotion, they showed themselves to be woefully unaware of the equality act” (McCrae, 2023). This is a notable contradiction: the author’s contempt for ‘political correctness’, a typically socially conservative position, coupled with his own apparent support for diversity and the Equality Act suggests that the two are not mutually supportive in his mind. In addition, the author states with “regret” that “some senior managers appeared to relish their role in dumping employees who they viewed as misinformed or selfish”, perhaps implying that these managers of care institutions are out of touch and cruel. In addition, the construction of vaccine refusal as an issue of equality to be settled by law seems to imply that CVMBs are akin to an oppressed minority, one which in this case “stood their ground” against mandatory care worker vaccination, a warlike **metaphor** which seems to emphasise the conceptualisation of vaccines as a battleground. Thus, CVMBs may be socially conservative, yet also see their position during the pandemic as one where they are an

oppressed minority engaged in a culture war with the powerful. I now turn to this theme in greater detail.

6.2.4: Finding 4: CVMBs present the unvaccinated as an isolated, oppressed minority who are altruistically fighting back against vaccine harms

In this sample, I argue that there is a strong implication that the unvaccinated are an oppressed minority whose rights are not respected by dominant social institutions. As noted, the McCrae (2021a) text tells a heroic **narrative** of vaccine opposition among care workers: “[w]hen the government picked on this sector for the first occupational vaccine mandate, they thought that these women would take an offer they could not refuse” yet the author speaks of WOE victories against “hubristic” and “arrogant bosses” who “hated being taken down a peg or two”. But this is not the only story told in this sample wherein CVMBs are cast as oppressed underdogs fighting back against the powerful. It is also suggested that there is a segregation or apartheid being enforced against those who are unvaccinated.

The Freedom Gibraltar (2021) text, **headlined** “Gibraltar Stands Up Against Apartheid”, is a strong example of this. The article is **framed** around a protest against requirements for individuals attending a football World Cup qualifier to prove “having had a double-dose of the covid-19 ‘vaccine’”. The word ‘apartheid’ seems to liken the treatment of the unvaccinated to that of Black victims of the South African Apartheid policy in the 20th century, implying that they are being unjustly denied their rights. This comparison, while insensitive to historical racial injustices, indicates **tones** of indignation and injustice being held by the CVMBs in response to such policies, as though it were the equivalent of racism. It is notable, too, that a spokesperson from the campaign group ‘Freedom Gibraltar’ (FG) includes “those unable to have the injection for medical reasons” alongside those who are unvaccinated for “reasons of conscience or ethical considerations” (Freedom Gibraltar, 2021). It appears FG do not only see CVMBs as victims, but those who potentially hold positive views about vaccines but are unable to be vaccinated. This allows this text to promote a sense of injustice without necessarily invoking anti-vaccine views.

But the specific phraseology of individuals refusing vaccines for “reasons of conscience” seems notable. When coupled with the article’s image, depicting the protest’s banner hanging from a car park reading “NO DISCRIMINATING AGAINST THE UNVACCINATED” with a war memorial clearly visible to the left of the frame, there may be a subtext of culture war being hinted at. Like the bosses and managers in the care sector according to the McCrae (2021a) text, Gibraltar also faces a distant and powerful foe who threatens the unvaccinated. Indeed, in this case, it is literally distant:

“The puppet master behind the removal of civil rights (under the thinly-veiled guise of public safety) is non-local, non-elected Director of Public Health Dr. Sohail Bhatti, who has ‘form’ on mandating vaccines: in 2010 he called for refusal of entry for unvaccinated schoolchildren in Lancashire; a move which was called “totalitarian” by local doctors and rejected by the local authority as it would necessitate a change in the law.”

(Freedom Gibraltar, 2021)

Thus, we again see those opposing vaccine mandates, many of whom we can reasonably assume are CVMBs, organising against a figure perceived as distant and authoritarian. The “puppet master” **metaphor** seems to position Bhatti as a powerful and villainous mastermind, obsessed with vaccine mandates. Within this narrative, Gibraltar “is being used as a ‘test-bed’ both in terms of experimental ‘vaccines’ and control of the population through removal of rights”. Waging war against Bhatti through FG’s “call for Dr. Bhatti to be removed from his position” is **framed** both as an oppressed minority reclaiming their rights and as a moral obligation: if the experiment on this ‘test-bed’ succeeds, then the same attack on ‘rights’ will occur elsewhere.

Indeed, this notion of vaccine mandates being a precursor for authoritarianism also occurs in other articles expressing similar fears. Smith (2021c) uses another extreme analogy invoking historical atrocities for vaccine mandates, which he describes as “[i]n effect, a genuine fascist segregation”, where we are “being railroaded into digital concentration camps where we will be geo-fenced and highly restricted in what we can do – those who are not sent to the gulag, that is”. By implying that vaccine mandates are the precursor to an authoritarianism seemingly comparable to both Nazi Germany and

the Soviet Union, there is a **tone** of urgency added to the piece, implying that if vaccine mandates are not stopped, wholesale authoritarianism will follow.

Yet I glean from this sample that the victimisation of CVMBs leads to feelings of isolation from the rest of the public. Returning to the excerpt from Crawford (2023) on page 191, it is not merely the major social institutions which have become untrustworthy, but friends, family and strangers. The **metaphor** of “theft” being used to describe the losses of the two years at the height of the pandemic being blamed on them suggests that they themselves took part of his life away, that this responsibility should be placed on them, as well as policymakers. There is therefore a sense of alienation from the rest of the public and that only other CVMBs can be trusted. This may explain the inclusion of **hyperlinks** in many of the texts in this sample, often to websites or blogs of the authors (though some appear to be to unrelated conspiracy websites). Given the scepticism towards mainstream media and the isolation from other members of the public, this might represent an alternative media landscape for CVMBs and others. This feeling also seems to be embodied in the “wary dog”/“abusive master” **analogy** that concludes Crawford (2023): “now I know that no-one is my master – or ever will be. And do you know what else? I am one of a huge pack”. This mentality seems to reach its apotheosis in Coleman (2021c, emphasis original) which concludes with the **ambiguous** statement,

“They [[sic]] enemy want to do it. They need to do it. And unless we stop them, they will do it.”

From the context of the article, “it” might refer to vaccinating children, for according to its **headline**, “[o]nly murderers and lunatics support covid jabs for children” (Coleman, 2021c). Yet there is little in the article to explain who precisely this “enemy” is or why they both “want” and “need” “it”. As such, this statement seems to allow the reader to insert any perceived CVMB enemy into this statement, contributing to the frustrated, paranoid **tone** that intermittently appears throughout the sample.

Returning again to the excerpt from Crawford (2023) on page 191, it is also important to consider what is meant by declaring that others who ‘complied’ did not exercise critical thinking. The implication seems to be that “me, and my like” (Crawford, 2023) *did*; here, CVMBs are presented as a separate camp to those who do comply with Covid

regulations, divided by their capacity to think critically. Such constructions also appear elsewhere in the sample. For example, Smith (2022c) uses the **metaphor** “sheep factoring” to describe the ostensible marketing technique whereby a sense is invoked that ““everyone else is doing it so you should too”, implying that those who accept the Covid vaccine do so at least in part to follow social norms. The animal **metaphors** used to describe those who take the vaccine continue in this text: Smith (2022c) suggests that “there is still a majority who are Pavlovian-trained to go into a helpless state of compliance and shock though fear, evidenced by the queues of people lining up outside covid shot centres”. “Pavlovian-trained” appears to invoke Ivan Pavlov’s well-known psychological study on classical conditioning wherein dogs would come to salivate at stimuli which indicated that they would be fed (see, e.g., Gross (2010, pp. 160, NS)). Again, non-misbelievers are presented as Pavlov’s dogs: unthinking and uncritical, seemingly the antithesis of the CVMB according to these texts.

Yet it is not only frustration and isolation which emerges as the **emotive** response in these texts. There is also a sense of grief and melancholy achieved through the **semantic association** of Covid vaccines and death. I argue that the Crawford (2023) text uses several textual techniques to semantically link Covid vaccinations to death and misery.

Firstly, the **headline**, “[t]he needle and the damage done” seems to **intertextually** reference the Niel Young song of the same title (Young, 1972, NS). This song, a mournful acoustic track about heroin addiction and death (Farroni, 2015, NS) is here appropriated to be about the Covid vaccine. In this instance, “the damage done” seems to be the author’s seemingly permanent loss of trust in social institutions and communities.

Secondly, the article opens with an extended discussion of unreferenced research claiming 95% of those determined to commit suicide by jumping from the Golden Gate Bridge who survived were “glad when they failed” (Crawford, 2023). The author links this to an online comment expressing regret at taking the Covid vaccination: “[f]or that person, the irreversible leap into the unknown had been made, and there was no going back” (Crawford, 2023). Finally, the author states that he attended a “memorial for those killed and severely injured by the covid injection” (Crawford, 2023). The implication that CVMBs are so sincere in their beliefs that the vaccinated have been wronged that they would memorialise them suggests a degree of pity towards non-misbelievers.

I have argued thus far that these texts present the unvaccinated as an oppressed minority and victims of authoritarians using vaccine mandates as a means to exercise control over the population. Yet there is another subjectivity which is constructed as a victim in these texts, who unlike the CVMB, cannot stand up for themselves: children.

In this sample, CVMBs frequently present themselves as the protectors of children, who are constructed as especially harmed by Covid vaccines. Indeed, even the texts in this sample which were not grouped under the stratum “vaccines may be/are unsuitable for children” often alluded to them. I have already covered some of these, such as the babies claimed to have been harmed by their mothers’ breastmilk in Atkinson (2021), the supposed stillbirths that the AstraZeneca vaccine causes in Ennos (2022b) and the implication in Ennos (2022a) that vaccines led to a “spike” in newborn deaths in Scotland. But now, I wish to turn to the deeper meanings associated with children in these texts, and how the subjectivity of *child* emerges. As we have already seen, children are generally constructed as especially vulnerable to Covid vaccines across this sample. It is difficult to determine from this data how far this represents a genuine concern about vaccines specific to children and how far it is merely a rhetorical device deployed to promote an emotional reaction (see, e.g., Meany and Shuster (2002, pp. 65, NS) on “APPEAL TO EMOTIONS”). Nevertheless, the construction of ‘the child’ as a subjectivity within the Covid misbeliever Discourse can inform us about how CVMBs construct their own position in response.

I argue that some of the CVMBs in this sample construct anti-Covid-vaccine sentiment as a responsibility to protect children from abuse. Consider this excerpt from Coleman (2021c):

“Any parent who allows their child to be vaccinated against covid 19 should be arrested for child abuse. Any doctor or nurse who jabs a child with one of the experimental covid jabs should be arrested for assault and child abuse and imprisoned.”

Associating the Covid vaccines with child abuse is **tonally** very strong, and perhaps intended to elicit an emotional response from the reader, which, coupled with the **active voice** used to describe the actions of parents, doctors and nurses implies a wholesale

responsibility over the child. Note also the word “allow”: this **phraseology** seems to suggest that Covid vaccination is something that parents must protect children from, rather than a decision that is made by or for children. Thus, the parent of a vaccinated child is constructed as neglectful of their wellbeing and failing in their parental responsibility to protect children from abusers, who are here said to be doctors and nurses. In turn, the child appears as the helpless victim in this scenario, lacking the autonomy or faculty to make their own decisions regarding Covid vaccination. We can also once again observe the theme of formerly functional institutions failing from CVMB perspectives in this excerpt: both the family and medicine can no longer be trusted to protect children. CVMB parents are therefore positioned as the only parents who are not abusers or otherwise unfit guardians of helpless children, who seemingly passively accept whatever medical treatment their parents give them. Indeed, this ties into the article’s **headline**, “[o]nly murderers and lunatics support covid jabs for children”: only those motivated by evil or insanity could tolerate children being vaccinated.

The Coleman (2021c) text emphasises this positioning of children as the possessions of their parents in a **bold and central pull quote**, presumably intended to draw the reader’s attention: “[p]arents who want grandchildren should not allow their children to be given these jabs”. The specific **phraseology** of this argument seems to position the child as one who provides grandchildren to its parents. Not having grandchildren is therefore presented as the problem in this instance, not that their children will supposedly be rendered infertile. While the main body of the article does consider the harms claimed to be done to children by Covid vaccines, it is notable that it is the potential loss of becoming a grandparent which is made to stand out on this page, since it once again transforms the child into the possession of the parent.

This construction of children as the possessions of their parents becomes even stronger in the Waters (2021) text. It should firstly be noted that the author attributed to this text, Anne Marie Waters, was leader of the now-defunct, far-right political party ‘For Britain’ whose website is **hyperlinked** at the end of this article, which may account for some of the more extreme views expressed, since this text might have a secondary function as a political **advertisement**.

This text presents a **narrative** wherein schoolchildren are “told relentlessly” about the dangers of Covid, and led to believe that, if their parents oppose the “magic potion” that is vaccination, they are “selfish, irresponsible, dangerous” (Waters, 2021). After **quoting** NHS England’s explanation that for 12-15-year-olds, vaccines require either parental consent or consent from the child if deemed Gillick competent, the text states:

“A child can consent for themselves. A 12 year old, who has been brainwashed to believe covid will kill those they love, is able to allow a new and potentially dangerous substance to be injected into their bodies. Their parents need know nothing about it.

(Waters, 2021)

We can observe here the notion that children possess no capacity to think for themselves, for they can be literally “brainwashed”, and are therefore understood here as the property of their parents. This might also hint at the previously discussed belief that schools are ideologically controlling children, a well-known right-wing trope. Yet it seems to me that there is more being implied beneath the surface of this excerpt. Consider the blunt **prosody** of “[a] child can consent for themselves”, a short sentence which seems to convey a **tone** of horror. Coupled with the claim that “parents need know nothing about it”, I argue that the subtext of this argument is that Covid vaccination is akin to the institutional abuse of children or may be a precursor to it. I argue that preoccupation with children being able to consent to vaccination is subtly making a **semantic link** between this and child sexual abuse, since 12–15-year-olds are below the age of sexual consent, and “parents need know nothing about it”. Once again, therefore, the CVMB constructs Covid vaccination as a child protection issue, or perhaps a precursor to worse child abuse, which must be acted upon now:

“We are witnessing a total and complete transformation. The state owns your children, not you. The state will decide their medication, not you. The state will tell your child to distrust you if you do not comply.”

(Waters, 2021)

Here, the position of the child in the author's mind is stated explicitly: parents 'own' their children and have sole discretion over their medical choices, and the child should never mistrust their parents. It is a position which seems to discount the possibility that parents may not act in their children's best interests in all circumstances, even beyond Covid vaccinations. Indeed, the article suggests that by allowing children to consent to be vaccinated, the state is "placing significant decisions on to shoulders too young to bear them" (Waters, 2021), a **metaphor** reinforcing the idea that children lack the faculty to consent to vaccination.

Overall, CVMBs in this sample seem to present themselves as protectors of children from vaccines and the social institutions which provide and (they claim) promote them. However, it is only a specific conceptualisation of the child which appears present in the non-misbeliever Discourse that needs to be protected. This child is invariably without the faculties to make decisions for itself and wholly dependent on the parents to whom it (literally) belongs.

Chapter 7: Discussion, conclusions and implications-

The misbeliever's melancholy

Chapter 7 Abstract

This chapter concludes this thesis by discussing the implications for policy and future research of the findings of my studies. Additionally, I address the contributions of this thesis to the theoretical and methodological arguments surrounding conspiracy theory research and the potential limitations of this thesis. I conclude with a call for future research and policy to move away from the 'Information Disorder Paradigm' which I argue that my study results suggest is obfuscating more important causes of public health misbeliefs and conspiracy theories.

7.1: Chapter introduction

If the reader takes nothing else from this thesis, then let it be this: it is time for the Information Disorder Paradigm (IDP), which I have argued is the predominant perspective of academic and journalistic work on public health misbelief (along with many other kinds of misbelief), to be displaced as the central theory for explaining this social problem. As I hope I have made clear, I am not suggesting that false information does not present a problem in public health, only that the focus on this theme has been so excessive as to almost exclude other potential causes of harmful beliefs about Covid from the discussion.

The major problem with the IDP in my view, which I believe to be borne out in the findings presented in Chapters 5 and 6, is that it locates the problem of public health misbelief within individuals. I argue that according to the IDP, to possess false beliefs about Covid is seemingly a personal intellectual failure wherein someone lacks the skills, knowledge or capacity to interpret false information, whose spread is seemingly inevitable, as false. This, in turn, allows those of 'us' who are not Covid misbelievers to feel content in our ostensible intellectual superiority over those who would believe these falsehoods. The problem with this perspective, as this chapter will cover in greater detail, is that this would imply that public health misbeliefs are solely a problem of individual agency, when, as I believe this thesis demonstrates, it is also a problem of social structure. This excessive focus on false information obfuscates the deeper social problems which may better explain how and why people become interested in Covid misbeliefs and promotes

a more stereotypical perspective of these individuals which obfuscates solutions to this public health problem. It seems to me that in studying social phenomena, the simplest explanation is usually the wrong one, for as we have seen, the epistemological processes employed by Covid misbelievers may not be so different to those of non-misbelievers: after all, my findings suggest that at times, both seem to perceive the other as the victim of a ‘hypodermic needle’ model of media consumption. The implicit notion that Covid misbelievers are different in some substantial way to non-misbelievers is, I argue, false. Acknowledging this does not mean sympathising or siding with Covid misbelievers, rather, it means recognising that they are human beings who have, for myriad complex potential reasons, chosen to hold harmful beliefs.

This thesis has made the argument that the Information Disorder Paradigm originated as a means for liberal democratic societies to explain away the upsets to the post-Cold War liberal democratic order (successes of the populist right, civil unrest, unexpected democratic outcomes, et cetera) without having to address the deeper systemic issues which may have caused them. As Covid gripped the world, the IDP became transposed into the Discourse of public health as a way of explaining away those individuals who do not have faith in the dominant Covid Discourse, rather than addressing the structural and perhaps even *rational* mistrust of institutions these individuals hold. This led to a ‘counter-falsehood industrial complex’, whose existence I propose in Chapter 2, to work to promote the notion that Covid misbelievers are a problem of information alone, thereby sidestepping any difficult questions around why an individual within an information-rich liberal democratic society might come to believe falsehoods about Covid. This thesis provides evidence for why, in my view, this narrative must be abandoned if future public health policies in emergency situations are to be successful.

This concluding chapter proceeds as follows. Firstly, I offer a summary of the findings in Chapters 5 and 6 to assist in understanding the arguments made in the subsequent two sections, covering the policy implications (7.3) and suggested future research based on this thesis (7.4). Section 7.5 discusses some limitations I acknowledge to be present in this thesis. Finally, Section 7.6 offers some concluding remarks for the reader to consider.

7.2: Summary of empirical study findings

This thesis sought to answer five research questions:

- RQ1: How is the British Covid misbeliever subjectivity constituted within the textual practices of UK fact checkers?
- RQ2: How is the British Covid misbeliever subjectivity constituted within the textual practices of *The Light*?
- RQ3: How is the British anti-vaccine Covid misbeliever subjectivity constituted within the textual practices of Full Fact?
- RQ4: How is the British anti-vaccine Covid misbeliever subjectivity constituted within the textual practices of *The Light*?
- RQ5: What, if any, differences are there between these constructions of the Covid misbeliever subject in the dominant Covid Discourse and the Covid misbeliever Counter-Discourse?

The answers to questions 1-4 have, I argue, been comprehensively answered (insofar as the resources I accessed allow) in Chapters 4 and 5. Consider the tables below which summarise these findings:

Table 1: Study 1 summary

Summary of constructions of Covid misbeliever (Study 1)	
The construction of the Covid misbeliever by texts within the dominant Covid Discourse (<i>Full Fact</i> , <i>Channel 4 Fact Check</i> , <i>BBC Verify</i>).	The construction of the Covid misbeliever by texts within the Covid misbeliever counter-Discourse (<i>The Light</i>).
I argue that this sample of texts constructs the Covid misbeliever (CMB) as a possibly real, or possibly exaggerated, large mass of uncritical thinkers who, aside from those who knowingly use false information to profit from misbelief-related scams, lack the capacity to understand the danger that ‘bad’ information represents. This is because	I argue that this sample of texts constructs the Covid misbeliever (CMB) subjectivity as a critical thinker , whose capacity to see the truth being concealed from the public isolates them from the ‘masses’ who accept the dominant Covid narrative. The truth that the CMBs see is being concealed by a dystopian and authoritarian regime who can

information is constructed both as powerful enough to kill and as operating independently of human control, especially on social media. It therefore must be halted before it reaches those who lack the criticality to understand that it is false, that is, potential misbelievers. CMBs are suggested to operate primarily (though not exclusively) online, since information flows freely there, especially since, it seems, social media companies are disinterested in the prevention of false information's spread. Additionally, this 'bad information' results in CMBs becoming cruel and irrationally aggressive in promoting their views, as well as potentially a danger to themselves and others by failing to follow Covid precautions. Additionally, CMBs are presented as being mostly disconnected from mainstream institutions (though some CMBs are excepted) seemingly because it is assumed figures working in dominant institutions cannot hold false views about Covid.	both censor their perspectives and violently repress them. Perhaps as a result of this, the CMB is isolated and alienated from the rest of the public. To counter the power of this regime, CMBs suggest strategies to share and promote their perspectives in order to encourage others to their point of view, while also fortifying their own worldviews in what I have termed a 'fortress ontology'.
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Table 2: Study 2 Summary

Summary of Covid vaccine misbeliever constructions (Study 2)	
The construction of the Covid vaccine misbeliever by texts within the dominant Covid Discourse (<i>Full Fact</i>).	The construction of the Covid vaccine misbeliever by texts within the Covid misbeliever counter-Discourse (<i>The Light</i>).
I argue that the Covid vaccine misbelievers (CVMBs) in this sample are constructed in these texts as the product of bad information, ostensibly information which has the capacity to cause an individual to oppose dominant Discourses. These CVMBs are unintelligent and lack analytical skills yet hold their beliefs with a childish persistence. Moreover, the CVMB is often (though not always) presented as mysterious and dependent on the anonymity and indeterminacy of the internet, especially social media, to reproduce their beliefs.	I argue that CVMBs in this sample present themselves as possessing insights into the role that vaccines play in a plot, likely stemming from international organisations, to take authoritarian control over the world. Part of this control involves the corruption of academic science, which CVMBs value, as well as numerous other social institutions through censorship, bribery and policy. Indeed, these CVMBs appear to be generally socially conservative, valuing the structure of society before the pandemic and bemoaning its apparent loss. They seem to view vaccine mandates as an attack on the rights of the unvaccinated and that children are particularly victimised by this regime, presenting CVMBs as an oppressed group bravely fighting back against their oppressors.

Reflecting on these summaries, we can see that, although there are some minor overlaps between these two constructions of the Covid misbeliever and Covid vaccine misbeliever, there are far more substantial differences, thus answering RQ5. What these findings could mean for future policy and research is discussed subsequently.

7.3: Potential policy implications of this thesis

I now offer four Policy recommendations based upon the findings of this thesis. These are not exhaustive, though I believe they reflect the value of this thesis as a contribution to the political and social world.

1. Organisations and institutions responsible for public health policy and medicine must do more to encourage trust among those who benefit from their activities.

My analysis in both studies suggests Covid misbelievers within *The Light*'s construction do not, or at least, have lost, trust in various organisations and social institutions responsible for different aspects of policy and medicine during the Covid pandemic in the UK. To name a few, the British government, professional scientists and Pfizer are all suggested to be dishonest or corrupt in the texts sampled from *The Light*, though it is difficult to establish the origin of this mistrust based on this data alone, as well as whether it is a cause or effect of their Covid misbeliefs. In either case, however, it would suggest that trust is a theme to consider if the problem of public health misbelief is to be addressed. This is especially notable considering, for example, those fact checker texts in both studies which encouraged their readers to seek 'trustworthy' sources, often seeming to imply that those sources associated with mainstream institutions are inherently trustworthy. Such a perspective is ignorant both of the reasons Covid misbelievers may have for mistrusting these organisations and of the respect that some appeared to have for empiricism and science.

The texts sampled from *The Light* show that Covid misbelievers may be aware of historical, and in some cases, contemporaneous, incidents which could engender a rational mistrust of these institutions. They are therefore able to deploy these incidents as part of a 'fortress ontology' which allows for the continued belief in Covid falsehoods in spite of evidence to the contrary of them. However, it is difficult to advocate for trusting these organisations when, ultimately, it is quite rational to mistrust institutions and companies with a demonstrable history of dishonest or harmful activities. I should note at this point

that I am not arguing that mistrusting these organisations *necessarily* correlates with being a Covid misbeliever, but we must acknowledge the rhetorical utility of historical abuses to the Covid misbeliever.

A specific issue I identify here is that merely providing ‘correct’ or ‘fact checked’ information is not enough. I argue that education and media literacy, while useful, may not ‘immunise’ someone against believing public health falsehoods if they have no reason to trust that information or the institutions providing it in the first place. As my findings show, it is quite possible for highly educated individuals to be Covid misbelievers. Merely telling the public that some news is ‘real’ and other news is ‘fake’, for example, does not provide them with a reason to trust the former over the latter.

If then, the institutions responsible for public health emergencies wish to be trusted, they must make a meaningful effort to demonstrate that they are worthy of that trust. The precise policies that could achieve this aim are a topic for another PhD researcher, but the findings of this thesis point toward some basic suggestions:

Firstly, greater transparency within these organisations might make trust easier among the public. Both studies suggested that Covid misbelievers may perceive social institutions as corrupt or otherwise motivated by mendacity. Perhaps, then, a greater openness about finances, information dissemination and organisational structures within institutions may allow for this kind of trust or even root out actual instances of corruption within them. Of course, this may not necessarily prevent this kind of suspicion. As I argue in Chapter 5, one of the *Light* texts analysed for Study 1 (namely, Burns (2021)) appears to use several fact checkers’ own transparency about their funding against them to suggest that these organisations merely follow their funders’ wishes. Perhaps the lesson here is that, when being transparent about funding, it is also important to effectively communicate the relationship between the organisation and the funder so that such allegations can be avoided.

Secondly, increasing public trust in institutions means that those within them behave in ways that promote trust. Consider, for example, the text from *The Light* discussed in Chapter 6 which used an image from the 2011 G7 meeting to imply that world leaders did not follow the Covid advice given to the public. While this particular instance was technically not a breach of the Covid rules in place in the UK at the time (see: Sadeghi (n.d.)), it might have benefitted the political figures in question to consider how such photographs might be interpreted by the public and to have acted accordingly.

On this theme, however, it was notable that none of the texts analysed in the studies discussed the more high-profile instances of lockdown breaching by officials. There were no mentions, for example, of Dominic Cummings' activities during UK lockdowns (see Chapter 4). This could be a limitation of my sampling method (see section 7.6) but might also suggest that such issues are banal to Covid misbelievers. In any case, as McKee et al. (2024, pp. 3) argue, measuring trust in public health policymaking necessitates, *inter alia*, "those in authority to behave in ways that maintain trust and that they remain trustworthy". In other words, we cannot even consider methods for measuring public health in institutions until those empowered within/by them behave appropriately. As such, we must reflect on those instances where the institutions responsible for Britain's public health practices and policy during the pandemic *did* show themselves to be less-than-trustworthy. It is difficult to advocate for following government advice (which Covid misbelievers might interpret as 'propaganda', as we have seen) when the British government and its associated institutions are demonstrably failing to follow it themselves.

The Cummings affair discussed in Chapter 4, the lockdown-breaching parties in Downing Street (Gerrard, 2022) and then-MP Margaret Ferrier travelling from Glasgow to London despite having Covid symptoms (Gorton et al., 2022) all imply political institutions which cared little for their own rules and norms. Additionally, various scandals surrounding government procurement of Personal Protective Equipment are ongoing (Watson, 2025). Notably, the case of PPE Medpro, wherein the company was placed on a 'VIP lane', a system wherein businesses with

connections to certain politicians were given greater credibility than more established ones to supply the equipment, and in October 2025 was ordered to repay £122m of public money they were awarded in exchange for medical gowns found to be unusable⁶⁰. At time of writing, this has not been paid. In addition, as I note in Chapter 6, it is difficult to argue against those misbelievers who may argue that the media misrepresents science when, as one of my sources from BBC Verify shows, they do indeed do this and at time of writing, still have not edited or removed the article in question. I also briefly noted in Chapter 1 that mainstream newspapers are apparently willing to give column space to those who might be called Covid conspiracy theorists. I argue that institutional reform necessitating transparency about such activities, ideally audited by a third party, would make such failures less likely in future, though it is important that this does not encroach on free expression in the press.

The issue of trust is also relevant to vaccine manufacturers. It is difficult to argue against a vaccine misbeliever when they can cite recent real-world abuses by the Covid vaccines' manufacturers, as one of the texts analysed for Study 2 does. Indeed, as recently as 2020, Pfizer has been involved in legal action over its products (Corporate Watch, 2021). In an ideal world, I argue that pharmaceutical production would not operate as a private industry at all, since this would remove the profit motive for such abuses. However, for as long as pharmaceutical production is the responsibility of private enterprises and they therefore remain responsible for pharmaceutical products during public health emergencies, the public should be able to trust the organisations responsible for such necessary medicines.

Perhaps an appropriate measure to be taken by Pfizer and other companies with similarly sordid histories upon whom the public are made to rely for life-saving medicines would be the acknowledgement of, and apology for, historical abuses. Goldacre (2013, pp. 353-354) has previously argued that "If the [pharmaceutical] industry wishes to make amends for past crimes, then it needs to take serious

⁶⁰ There are many other crucial aspects to this scandal, but these are the major details.

action, today, to reverse the ongoing harm that still results from their previous behaviour”, and that “[a] vague admission that this has happened is no more than a weak gesture: it’s the very beginning of a journey back to being an ethical industry”. Nevertheless, I argue that it would be a beginning from which broader reforms within the pharmaceutical industry could emerge which reduce public mistrust, and more importantly, could result in greater ethical conduct within such organisations.

It could be argued that acknowledging these injustices would only give misbelievers more reason to mistrust these companies by drawing attention to their real abuses. Yet if Covid vaccine misbelievers do not trust vaccine manufacturers anyway, these disclosures would at least allow these companies to avoid accusations of a cover-up.

This also leads to my related argument that conspiracy theorists and misbelievers should not (as some of the fact checking texts discussed seem to) assume that Covid misbelievers are irrational or unintelligent. Some may well follow unorthodox patterns of thinking, draw false correlations or base their arguments on false or incomplete evidence et cetera. But others may produce more logically sound arguments to support their claims, and public health institutions being shown to be untrustworthy lends credence to misbelievers’ positions.

My overall argument here is that the mainstream organisations and institutions who are empowered by the dominant Discourses of public health seem to demand trust from the public while giving them little reason to give it. For fact checkers, it often appeared that established institutions were automatically classified as trustworthy, perhaps simply because they were older and more established within British culture. Yet I argue that until institutions such as the government, the media and academia are more transparent about their activities and funding, little reason is given to the public to trust them, and thus they should not be surprised when that trust is not given.

2. Policies aimed at reducing isolation, suspicion and alienation among members of the public might lead to fewer public health (and other) misbelievers.

As noted in the introduction to this chapter, I argue that we need to begin seeing public health conspiracy theories and misbeliefs (as well as other misbeliefs) as a structural problem, rather than one located primarily in individual agency. Both samples taken from *The Light* showed a notable theme of isolation and paranoia among Covid misbelievers which appeared to be alleviated by taking part in social activities associated with their Covid misbeliefs (however, future research is needed to provide stronger evidence of whether this is the case, see section 4.4 of this chapter). Indeed, some of these articles seemed to directly describe feelings of mistrust not only for powerful institutions, yet also of their non-misbeliever peers, promoting a sense that only other misbelievers can be trusted. However, there is a problem of cause and effect here: if this alienation is connected to Covid misbeliefs, the studies do not always make clear whether it is a cause, effect, or some combination of the two. Nevertheless, the paranoia associated with Covid misbelief could be understood as a public health problem in its own right: one of the most striking features of texts from *The Light* was just how unhappy Covid misbelievers seemed to be; many of the texts from *The Light* so often seemed to carry a tone of anger, fear or melancholy. Regardless of whether they were already socially isolated, their unorthodox beliefs about Covid seemed to alienate them from their peers, perhaps leading them to yet more paranoid positions. In the rare cases that a more joyous tone was taken in these texts, it tended to be when discussing encounters with likeminded individuals and taking part in public displays of defiance to Covid public health policy.

Perhaps, therefore, a preventative measure against conspiratorial thinking could be policies which aim to prevent this isolation and provide more healthy social connections. Social isolation is already recognised as an area of concern for public health, perhaps especially so since the pandemic (Lim et al., 2023), so perhaps policies to alleviate this problem could also have the additional advantage of reducing the risk of public health misbeliefs. Implementing such

policies where lockdown and social distancing are also employed represents a substantial (though surmountable) challenge, however. As such, policies designed to reduce social isolation or alienation may be viewed as a preventative measure: one aiming to give individuals opportunities to connect with others in a healthy way *before* the stresses of a public health emergency render such connections difficult to obtain, so that they have a support network prior to it. Moreover, Spadaro et al. (2020, pp. 3) suggest “existing empirical evidence shows that, compared to institutional quality indicators, perceptions of institutions are similarly associated to interpersonal trust”. If this represents a real association between these phenomena, then increasing interpersonal trust could also have the secondary effect of decreasing mistrust in institutions, as discussed in point 1 of this section, providing an additional benefit.

In cases where individuals already hold public health misbeliefs, the important implication of the studies is that they should not be dismissed as unintelligent or uncritical thinkers. The Covid misbeliever frequently constructed within the fact checking texts – one who uncritically consumes and believes false information and is disconnected from mainstream institutions – was seldom represented in *The Light*. This, I argue, suggests that new methods of communicating with those who possess public health misbeliefs need to be developed which do not assume a lack of knowledge or intelligence on the part of the misbeliever. Again, the question of what form this communication would take could be the subject of another thesis. Nevertheless, I argue that part of this means a major reassessment of current strategies of public health communication, including by fact checkers, which leads to my next policy implication:

3. Fact checking organisations need to reassess what their purpose is.

Throughout this thesis, I have been keen to emphasise that my ambition is not to attack fact checkers or to suggest that they are without purpose. At the same time, I argue that the results of my studies have shown the frequency with which unfounded assumptions about Covid misbelievers and their beliefs, which are at odds with how misbelievers perceive themselves, are presented. Fact checking is

a somewhat blunt tool which can only offer a surface-level understanding of misbeliefs and why some individuals hold them. Moreover, given the psychological and rhetorical strategies I observed being employed by misbelievers themselves, it is important to note that it is unlikely that fact checks would be accepted or believed by misbelievers anyway. Indeed, Full Fact seemed to acknowledge this in some of the texts discussed in Study 2. Thus, I argue that this method of simply trying to stem the flow of false information by ‘plugging’ it⁶¹ with accurate information (i.e., that produced by dominant discursive institutions) is unlikely to result in healthier choices by misbelievers, since they may already be primed to disregard such data as untrustworthy.

The question I most frequently found myself asking when analysing fact checker texts was *who is this text for?* Full Fact in particular made clear that its mission was to stop the harms of ‘bad information’, yet given the tone of condemnation towards certain misbelievers, it seemed to me that it was not written with those who hold these beliefs in mind. Overall, my assessment is that these articles seemed to be written for other non-misbelievers to reinforce their sense of superiority over the misbeliever for not having ‘fallen for’ the false information which others supposedly had.

Fact checking matters: it is important to have a record of reliably sourced corrections to false claims insofar as this can be carried out effectively. Yet I argue that this is *all* fact checkers should be: an archive of counterpoints to false claims, rather than the solution to the problem of misbelief. As I have argued, fact checking is not and should not claim to be a value-free process. The choices of which claims to check, how, and why, are invariably the product of specific interests, however dispassionate the fact checker may try to be. Moreover, I argue that fact checking is too wedded to the IDP to provide a meaningful counterforce against the types of complex misbelief structures I observed from *The Light*, and the epistemology of fact checking seems to exclude the structural causes of Covid (and other) misbelief which I have argued for here. Therefore, as admirable

⁶¹ I borrow this metaphor from one of this thesis’ supervisors, Harry Dyer.

as the work of fact checkers is, it should not be seen as a solution to the problem of misbelief.

In any case, fact checkers must provide more valid and specific evidence of the real-world impact of fact checking as a solution for harmful behaviours, whether related to public health or otherwise. This is because the counter-falsehood industrial complex allows fact checkers to deprioritise evidencing the value of fact checking as a means of promoting positive public behaviours. It could be argued some fact checkers already provide empirical evidence for their effectiveness. For example, Full Fact have previously argued that “fact checking works” because “[o]n average, fact checks reduced belief in misinformation...across different countries, cultures and political environments” based on the results of a study they participated in (Full Fact Team, 2021a). However, it is important to note that the study in question, namely, Porter and Wood (2021), is based on an experimental study in which “participants were exposed to between zero and seven misinformation items and between zero and seven fact checks”⁶². As such, it is not necessarily the case that their findings would be replicated in a study with a less artificial context. Thus, while Full Fact should be commended for their willingness to participate in a study in which “there was every chance the results would show that fact checking wasn’t having the impact on bad information that we’d hoped” (Full Fact Team, 2021a), more research focussing on real public interactions with fact checkers is needed. This could, for example, take the form of a survey given to users of a fact checking website immediately after they access a fact check to determine whether it changed their thoughts or behaviours about the topic of concern. Granted, this would also be subject to many potential biases but is nevertheless a far less artificial approach to researching this issue than that discussed above.

⁶² It is difficult to determine the specific design of this study based on the information in this paper and its supplementary information document. As such, I may be missing some context related to study validity here.

4. Mainstream outlets should make fewer assumptions about public health misbelievers and their motivations.

My studies have shown that Covid misbelievers can be from diverse backgrounds. Some have a strong formal education, some work in medical fields, several were small business owners who saw pandemic restrictions as a personal attack. Also crucial was my observation that a diverse range of Covid misbeliefs, some of which were even incompatible with one another, were present within *The Light*. Yet by contrast, the fact checking texts often relied upon certain tropes in their representations of these individuals, such as that they are unintelligent, easily fooled, reckless, cruel and so on.

As I have repeatedly stated, I am not attempting to show these individuals in a positive light, but we need to acknowledge that, like the rest of us, they are human beings whose beliefs and motivations are complex, however unsavoury or upsetting they may be. It seems to me that we have probably all come across Covid falsehoods at some point, yet we did not all unthinkingly follow them. Why should we assume the same about these individuals? It is for this reason I argue that mainstream outlets (and other institutions, too) need to focus on the possible structural causes of public health misbeliefs: *why do* some individuals come to hold harmful misbeliefs about public health where others do not? The efforts of these outlets would be better spent in identifying *why* some hold these beliefs where others do not, rather than assuming the reasons for this.

7.4: Suggested future research directions based on my findings

Below are some future directions for research I suggest based upon the findings in my studies.

1. Continued observation of offline public health misbelievers to determine whether interest in the themes discussed in this thesis continued after the height of Covid.

At time of submitting this thesis, *The Light* still publishes a new edition each month. A detailed analysis of its content following the end of Covid restrictions,

which are beyond the scope of this thesis, would offer valuable insights into the contemporary conspiracy and misbeliever cultures in the UK. Useful questions to ask would include whether, post-Covid, those writers who wrote prolifically on Covid still do, or perhaps whether their beliefs have been displaced onto other issues, or they simply abandoned the paper. Other offline texts, such as the images of public vandalism shown in Chapter 3, can also provide useful insights into offline Covid misbeliefs.

As my studies showed, the dominant Covid Discourse often conceptualises Covid misbeliefs as a largely online phenomenon, to the extent that some texts even linked offline activities to social media. Yet the mere existence of *The Light*, let alone the other methods of misbelief spread discussed in this thesis (and, indeed, those I did not discuss) suggest that there is a substantial offline component to Covid misbeliefs, along with many other conspiratorial and falsehood-related topics. Some work has been done in this area, such as Dacombe et al. (2021) and Wischerath et al. (2025) who have carried out their own research into *The Light*, but much more is needed. Indeed, as noted in Chapter 4, I still cannot say why the expense and logistical effort of producing offline materials is taken when it would presumably be far easier and less expensive to use the internet to these ends.

2. More research into the linguistic and epistemological strategies of misbeliever media.

I argue that Studies 1 and 2 show that there are great insights to be found by studying how language shapes Discourse and Counter-Discourse for the purposes of understanding conspiracy theories and theorists and their phenomenological constructions. Moreover, I have shown that such methodologies can also elucidate the epistemological strategies used within these Discourses to support certain modes of thinking, such as the ‘fortress ontology’ discussed in Study 1. As such, I believe that much would be gained by taking a similar approach not just to other texts associated with Covid misbeliefs, but with various other conspiracy media as well.

Moreover, the rhetorical aspects of misbeliever media which I identified should also be researched further. The apparent preoccupation with protecting women and children from supposed harms from vaccines identified in Study 2, for example, raises many questions. Why is women's fertility suggested to be under greater threat than men's? Do Covid misbelievers genuinely see children as being at greater risk, or is this merely an appeal to emotion? Why is there such a strong fear of depopulation among Covid misbelievers? Future analysis of misbeliever language and Discourse may be able to answer these questions and therefore provide invaluable information for understanding public health misbeliefs.

3. More research into vaccine scepticism should consider what the vaccines *signify* to those who refuse them.

A striking feature of the findings from Study 2 was what Covid vaccines signified to Covid misbelievers beyond merely the physical harm they claimed that they would cause. It seemed that for many of them, these vaccines represented a loss of human liberty and a means of controlling the public psychologically by coercion and regulation of the body in public life. In other words, the claimed physical harms of the Covid vaccines were only half of its function, the other half was the supposed removal of the human capacity to make decisions about one's own body. Perhaps this accounts for the uses of untested or inappropriate 'medications' for Covid taken by some Covid misbelievers and the apparent opposition to the label 'anti-vaxxer' noted in Study 2: these individuals may not oppose vaccines *per se* but oppose what they represent from their perspective, in this case, the loss of freedoms. Future research should investigate how these meanings come to be attached to vaccines in public health emergencies

4. Political scholars should research the relationships between public health conspiracy theories and concepts of freedom and liberty.

Related to the above argument, one of the strongest themes emerging from both samples taken from *The Light* indicated that much Covid misbeliever sentiment was centred around feelings of losing personal freedoms. Of course, this is not wholly unreasonable: the Covid restrictions introduced in 2020 in the UK were

precisely that: restrictions on personal freedoms that were (eventually) deemed necessary by the British government. But what was notable was the impression that Covid was the precursor to some future global authoritarianism, possibly connected to pre-existing ‘Great Reset’ conspiracy theories. The fear was often focussed on an uncertainty about whether such a future could be averted. Moreover, there was a small but significant theme in Study 1’s sample from *The Light* of self-employed small business owners being constructed as major victims of Covid restrictions. This may present a more capitalistic conceptualisation of liberty, one of self-determination through the accumulation of capital. Overall, this fear of lost liberty and control among individuals represents a crucial area for future work on public health conspiracy theorists to consider as it could provide solutions to the problem of anti-vaccine sentiment.

In addition, research into public awareness and understanding of the philosophical and ethical processes behind public health practice could be beneficial. For example, researching how the public understands concepts such as informed choice and freedom in public health emergencies, as well as how decisions about these issues are understood by medical institutions, might provide valuable insights for future policy. However, at time of writing, many humanities departments in the UK are at risk. If this were to be pursued, it would require expertise in these fields and therefore for these departments to be protected from closure.

5. Future qualitative research should further investigate the relationship between isolation/alienation and misbeliefs

As discussed, there were themes of isolation and alienation as aspects of the Covid misbeliever subjectivity within both Studies’ samples from *The Light*. However, it was difficult to identify whether this was a cause, effect, both or neither of possessing Covid misbeliefs. Future research, perhaps employing survey methods, could investigate this issue further. If isolation or alienation are predictors of becoming a public health misbeliever, this could represent an opportunity for early interventions to reduce the probability of an individual

coming to hold harmful public health beliefs. As such, research on this theme could provide an evidence base for a new approach to tackling public health misbeliefs.

7.5: The major theoretical and methodological contributions of this thesis

1. Identifying and describing the Information Disorder Paradigm and the counter-falsehood industrial complex.

Wardle and Derakshan's (2017) Concept of information disorder offered a name for what I consider to be the post-2016 preoccupation with false and misleading information I discussed in Chapter 2. This term was subsequently taken and used by academic and journalistic writers concerned with this phenomenon. Yet what I have argued is that describing an information disorder is not a naïve observation of a reality of information flow in the contemporary world. Instead, I have argued that it represents the dominant *paradigm* through which false information and individuals who create or repeat it are interpreted. By conceptualising notions of an 'information disorder paradigm' as such, we can begin to observe its historicity as a largely (though not entirely) post-2016 preoccupation of academia, which I consider to be rooted in upsets to the liberal democratic order hegemonic in the English-speaking world.

The empirical chapters of this thesis have, I argue, shown the issues with this paradigm and why alternative approaches to researching conspiracy theory and misbelief may be more valuable. Fact checking, for example, can be understood as a methodology which has a symbiotic relationship with the Information Disorder Paradigm wherein fact checks provide evidence for information disorder, which in turn provides an epistemological justification for fact checks. This creates an industrial complex wherein fact checking organisations (among other industries) must maintain the image of information disorder to justify their own continued existence (and therefore, funding), perhaps disallowing alternative perspectives on misbeliefs and misbelievers to an extent. What is needed, however, is a disruption to this cycle which allows for the possibility of accounting for the broader potential causes of Covid misbelief that neither this

epistemology nor methodology can account for. This thesis provides evidence from which such a case could be made.

2. Identifying and describing the ‘paradox of fact checking’

I consider what I term the ‘paradox of fact checking’, described in Chapter 4, to be an important contribution to our understanding of both fact checking as a practice and the operations of the Information Disorder Paradigm in mainstream Discourses. I argue that if we understand fact checking as a practice which *makes* misbelievers (or non-misbelievers, should a fact checked claim be found to be true), we can then analyse the ways in which power operates through this practice. Understanding this power can in turn allow us to understand the unconscious biases which may lead the decisions and policies of fact checking organisations.

3. Identifying and describing the ‘cycle of subjectivity’

Aside from understanding Covid misbelievers and non-misbelievers, the four-stage cycle of subjectivity I describe in chapter three represents a valuable contribution to the study of identity and subjectivity. This conceptualisation of subjectivity formulation accounts for both the origins of a person’s ideology on both a conscious and unconscious level, as well as how identities as social categories are developed and spread through communities through performative responses to acts of subjectification within Discourse.

4. Identifying and describing the misbeliever ‘fortress ontology’

It is by now relatively well-known that many conspiracy theorists and misbelievers (and even those who are not subjectivised as such in dominant discourses) may reject evidence which is at odds with their interpretation of the world so that they can continue holding a specific ontological outlook. These studies, especially Study 1, identified some of the strategies that could be employed in order to defend this perspective (hence my ‘fortress’ metaphor). Put simply, the fortress ontology is the term I use to describe the various strategies employed by misbelievers to reject evidence to the contrary of their worldview, even where

these challenges may seem to disprove their beliefs. Where epistemological strategies such as these are employed, we can argue that simply providing evidence contrary to their views (which appears to be the major methodology of the fact checkers in these studies) is unlikely to convince them to abandon these perspectives. What is needed, I argue, is a new strategy of communication which could encourage such individuals to take a healthier course of action, rather than merely countering their beliefs with evidence.

4. Presenting a novel method of Foucauldian Discourse Analysis, ‘Subject Position Analysis’, and demonstrating its use

I argue that the methodology of Subject Position Analysis, which I created and used in this thesis, has myriad applications, including those extending beyond understanding public health misbelievers. Firstly, it can be applied to other misbeliever subjectivities. Examples from the contemporary preoccupations of journalism and academia include climate sceptics and the consumers of far right and misogynist media. Yet it can also be applied to any subjectivity which is so often spoken *for* rather than *to* in mainstream Discourses, notably subjugated groups whose own perspectives may be absent from dominant institutional discussions. Overall, being able to compare the dominant construction of a subjectivity to how those who identify with that subjectivity construct it has innumerable applications and can be practical given that the study texts can be (though need not be) secondary data which is easily accessed.

5. So-called ‘fake news’ can be used as a window into the self-concepts of misbelievers.

I argue that this thesis has demonstrated the value of using texts popularly called ‘fake news’ as a resource for studying the beliefs and self-concepts of those who produce them. Much can be interpreted through the analysis of the language, imagery and style of these texts, which in turn can be used as a way of developing a preliminary understanding of misbelievers before engaging in other research methods.

7.6: Limitations of this thesis

1. The samples taken for my studies do not represent the whole of the dominant Covid Discourse and Covid misbeliever Counter-Discourse

The texts produced within the three fact checking organisations and *The Light* do not represent the totality of the Discourse/Counter-Discourse of Covid. As noted in Chapter 4, while an ideal exploration of my research questions would have taken texts from a wider range of sources, I had to limit my sample to these due to this study being time-limited and monographic. However, it is my hope that the methodology I used in this thesis will be employed in future studies so that eventually, a fuller picture of the perspectives on the Covid misbeliever may be uncovered.

2. My sampling method for the studies was unnecessarily complex and time consuming

The sampling methods I used, as described in Chapter 4, could have been streamlined substantially. Manually sorting the texts into themes was perhaps the most time-consuming aspect of carrying out this research, and it could be argued that stratification of the style which I employed in my sample was unnecessary due to my focus on textual practices over the manifest content of the text. Indeed, I may have found more valuable qualitative data had I simply used a random sample of all UK-centred, Covid-relevant texts from the sources. Nevertheless, a positive aspect of this sampling method was that I became more familiar with the styles used by the sources whose texts I was analysing by reading a larger number of them than I would have otherwise.

7.7: Concluding remarks

During the period I have been working on this thesis, the BBC has been running an advertisement which opens with various spectacular visuals and videos related to conspiracy theory and false information. “Disinformation.”, a voiceover states, “[y]ou think you’re winning. Fooling people in the most sophisticated ways” (BBC, 2024). The advertisement continues with similar visuals and the voiceover going on to discuss various harms they propose disinformation causes (those with which the reader may by

now be familiar: hate, democratic subversion, spreading conspiracy theories), while the visuals, including some seemingly from Covid misbelievers, continue in the background. After affirming a commitment to fact verification, the advertisement ends with the voiceover, now shown to be the voice of BBC Newsreader Clive Myrie, stating that “the fight for truth is on”, followed by an otherwise black screen containing the words “TRUST IS EARNED” (BBC, 2024).

This advertisement emblemises all the fundamental problems with the Information Disorder Paradigm which working on this thesis has caused me to notice. Specifically, the ways in which conspiracy theory, hate and public unrest are so often and so easily scapegoated as a simple problem of disinformation, allowing for the ignorance of the broader social contexts of these issues. The ways in which dominant Discourses may construct a world in which ‘disinformation’ is anthropomorphised and transformed into a folk devil causing various social ills. The notion that ‘truth’ is something that can be fought for in some battle between good and evil. Media institutions promoting themselves on undefined notions of ‘trust’.

As I believe I have made clear, my problem with the Information Disorder Paradigm is that it allows the complex structural origins of harmful and dangerous behaviours to be concealed, all the while allowing *the rest of us* to feel good about ourselves for not falling for falsehoods, like *those people* did. It is easier to blame Covid misbeliefs on false information than to consider the question, perhaps uncomfortable for some, of whether the structure of British society made this level of self-destructive mistrust of institutions inevitable. In my view, conspiracy theories and hatred have always been present just beneath the surface of our liberal democratic order; the present conditions of fear, hate and mistrust are not an aberration, but the emergence of these sometimes hidden or disguised cruelties from out of the shadows. It is easier to blame the social problems of the present on *other people* believing in falsehoods than to consider the historical, social, economic and political origins that have been hiding in plain sight all along.

But to some extent, I feel the Information Disorder Paradigm reflects a form of wishful thinking. Wouldn’t it be nice if Covid misbelievers really had just seen some ‘bad information’ that needed to be corrected? In such circumstances, the solution to this problem would be simple. But alas, ‘fake news and misinformation during the Covid

pandemic', as the studentship that engendered this thesis was titled, is only a small fraction of a much broader issue.

Mainstream institutions seem quite content in viewing themselves as the authorities tasked with saving misbelievers from themselves. But who will save the dominant institutions of our society from their own misbeliefs?

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Appendices

Appendix A: Contextualising data for Study 1

Table A1: Sources and theme distribution for Study 1 (fact checkers)

Sub-theme stratum	Article headline	Citation
Harm caused by conspiracy theorists	Coronavirus: How a false rumour led to hate online	(Goodman, 2020)
	Man who believed virus was hoax loses wife to Covid-19	(Spring, 2020)
	'Hundreds dead' because of Covid-19 misinformation	(Coleman, 2020)

Qanon and Covid overlap	2020, the year QAnon aligned with the UK's fears	(Krishna, 2020a)
behaviour of Covid misbeliever groups or individuals	Covid-19 leaflets: How pandemic disinformation went offline	(Goodman, 2021)
	They died suddenly - then the anti-vax trolling started	(Schraer, 2022)
	Anti-vax protests: 'Sovereign citizens' fight UK Covid vaccine rollout	(Coleman & Sardarizadeh, 2022)
Lockdown protests	The BBC did not claim 350 people attended anti-lockdown protests	(Benedictus, 2021)
	There were nowhere near one million people at the anti-lockdown march	(Panjwani, 2021)
	FactCheck: what do the coronavirus protesters want?	(Worrall, 2020)
Fighting falsehoods	Building a model for collaborating to combat misinformation crises	(Arnold & Aitken, 2020a)
	Full Fact launches a WhatsApp fact checking service in the UK	(Full Fact Team, 2020b)
Tools and policy developments at Full Fact	A framework for information incidents: five levels of severity	(Arnold & Aitken, 2020b)
	How we're using AI to scale up global fact checking	(Dudfield, 2020)
Why misinformation should be a government concern	Online Safety Bill - Government has removed vital health misinformation protections	(Full Fact Team, 2022)
	The Government needs to take health misinformation seriously	(Full Fact Team, 2023)
Report Summary	Fighting the causes and consequences of bad information: the Full Fact Report 2020	(Full Fact Team, 2020a)

	Fix information failures or risk lives: the Full Fact Report 2021	(Hill, 2021)
Individuals unwillingly brought into information wars	How medical staff found themselves at the centre of an information battle during the pandemic	(Krishna, 2020b)
Individual counter-falsehood work	How you can fact check claims about Covid-19	(Allen-Kinross, 2021a)
	Take the quiz: Coronavirus and misinformation	(Full Fact, n.d.-c)

This sample initially included another text, Menon (2020), however, it was removed due to its content being too specific to the Covid experiences of India and Indian people to be relevant to my research aims, which focus on the UK experience.

Fact checker sample, Study 1

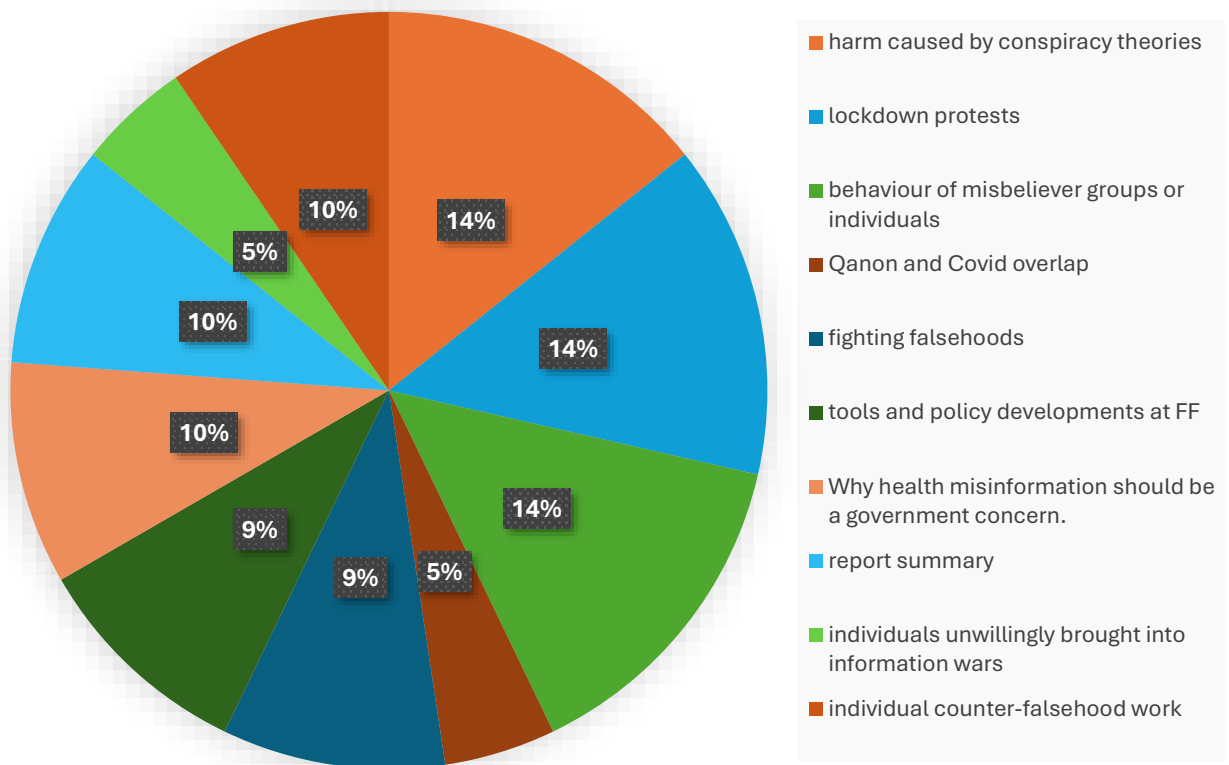


Figure A1: Fact checker sample, Study 1

Table A2: Sources and theme distribution for Study 1 (The Light)

Sub-theme stratum	Article headline	Citation
Advice to misbelievers	Top five questions to ask yourself when you read about Science in the mainstream media	(Lamb, 2020)
	How to be understood by the confused and misguided	(De Carle, 2021)
Believers in the mainstream Covid consensus, their acceptance and compliance	Distrust the government, avoid mass media, fight the lies	(Coleman, 2021a) ⁶³
	Sadiq Khan Serves Billionaires, Not Londoners	(Khoo, 2021)
State authoritarianism	Doctor arrested for speaking after riot police break up peaceful assembly in Trafalgar Square	(Smith, 2020)
	Alleged police brutality against peaceful protesters	(Atkinson, 2022)
	Government plans for control through a 'Never Normal' policy	(Moneycircus, 2021)
criticism of mainstream covid consensus/figures behind it	Medical research thoroughly corrupted	(Kendrick, 2021)
	What did you do, Daddy?	(Crawford, 2022)
Criticism of mainstream media (including internet media) or fact checkers	Who checks the fact checkers, and who pays them actually?	(Burns, 2021)
	BMJ exposes 'fact-checkers'	(British Medical Journal, 2022) ⁶⁴
	Censorship now at Orwellian levels	(Smith, 2021a)
medically trained misbelievers/experiences and opinions thereof	That Nurse Who Does Ask Questions	(Platt, 2021)
	Doctor wins massive victory for free speech	(Small, 2022)
Misbeliever activities	Is There Any Point In Protesting?	(Mcgarry-Gribbin, 2021)
	Shedding The Light on the crime of the century	(Hopkins, 2022)
	Jam For Freedom	(McLaughlin, 2021)
	Be brave, calm, polite.. and free	(Edwards, 2021)
	Totnes Truth Attacked	(Wright, 2021)

⁶³ Vernon Coleman, not to be confused with Alistair Coleman in sample 1.

⁶⁴ This is a reproduction of a letter produced by the BMJ and presented as an article attributed to the journal in The Light, presumably without their consent.

Miscellaneous Covid misbeliever worldviews and ideas	David Kurten - A New Hope?	(Aeyn, 2021)
	The sovereign party - for freedom and rights	(Meredith, 2022)
	Truth is not a destination, it is a continuous journey	(Hunt, 2022)
	Ignore the freedom movement at your peril	(C. Thompson, 2022)
	A new era of tyranny	(The Light, 2023) ⁶⁵
Multiple themes	Join My Army To Win This War	(Coleman, 2021b)
	They are planning to control everything we do	(Coleman, 2022a)
	'Footballers are no longer being asked to have vaccines'	(Smith, 2023a)
	'The silence is deafening'	(Smith, 2023b)
Personal or reported experiences of Covid misbelievers	Faith and courage will see you through the toughest times	(Girardi, 2021)
	Silence of our artists is deafening	(Heaton, 2022)

⁶⁵ While this article is not an editorial, it is not attributed to an author, so is recorded here as 'The Light'.

The Light sample, Study 1

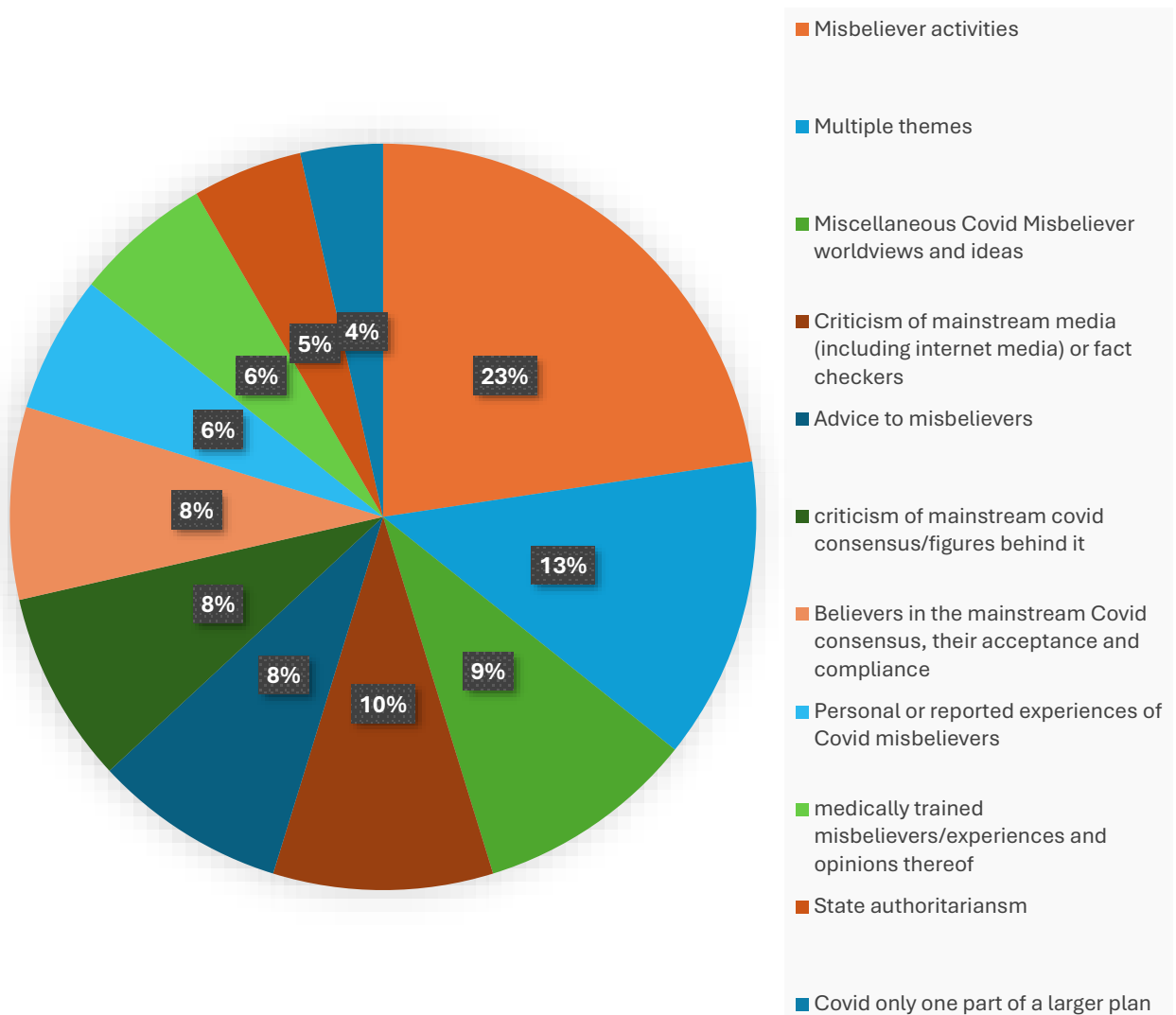


Figure A2: The Light sample, Study 1

Appendix B: Contextualising data for Study 2

Table B1: Sources and theme distribution for Study 2 (Full Fact)

Sub-theme stratum	Article headline	Citation
Vaccines part of a deliberate plot	Study on male fertility doesn't show depopulation plan	(Rahman, 2022c)
	Emergency alert test is not an 'activation signal' for a vaccine 'pathogen'	(Rahman, 2023a)
Vaccines are deadly	No evidence deaths from Sudden Adult Death Syndrome are really caused by Covid-19 vaccines	(T. Thompson, 2022)
	No evidence the media is covering up vaccine deaths with stories about heart issues	(Rahman, 2022b)
	No evidence Covid-19 vaccines have killed thousands of children	(Brown, 2023)
	Claim about vaccine deaths wasn't 'discussed in House of Commons'	(Turnidge, 2023)
	ONS release doesn't show vaccines 'killing in huge numbers'	(Rahman, 2023b)
Multiple themes	MPs' vaccine debate fact checked	(Rahman & Turnidge, 2022)
	The Pfizer vaccine, teenagers and myocarditis	(Rahman, 2021)
	There is no graphene oxide in the Covid-19 vaccines	(de Block Golding, 2021b)
	Godfrey Bloom video makes false claims about vaccines	(Norton, 2021)
	There's no AI in vaccines creating fertility problems in unvaccinated people	(Allen-Kinross, 2021b)
	Results of Covid-19 vaccine trials have been published and peer-reviewed	(de Block Golding, 2021a)
vaccine can cause Mpox	No evidence shingles 'renamed' as monkeypox is a Pfizer vaccine side effect	(Turnidge, 2022b)
	Covid vaccines and pregnancy: fact checked	(Team Full Fact, 2021)

vaccine can cause Fertility, maternity or nursing problems	Miscarriages in Lanarkshire did not double in 2022	(Benedictus, 2023)
	Covid vaccines won't stop people getting pregnant	(Rahman, 2022a)
vaccines can alter genes/DNA	RNA Covid-19 vaccines will not change your DNA	(Rahman, 2020)
various or non-specific harms caused by vaccine on large scale	MP makes unevidenced claims about vaccine damage	(Turnidge, 2021)
	No evidence for MP's claims 'tens of thousands of people' have 'suffered severe damage' from vaccines	(Turnidge, 2022a)
vaccine causing heart conditions	Installing defibrillators in schools is not proof that Covid-19 vaccines are unsafe	(Thompson, 2023)

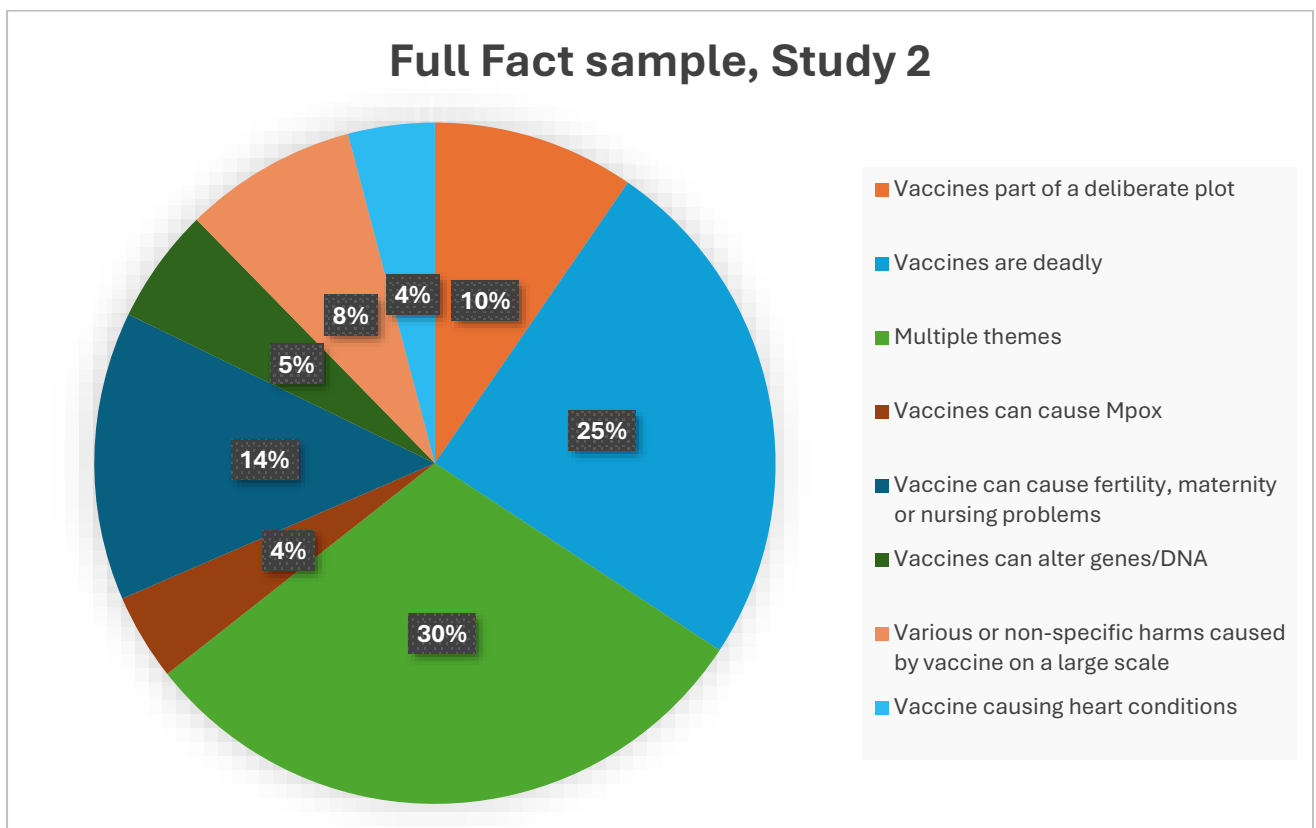


Figure B1: Full Fact sample, Study 2

Table B2: Sources and theme distribution for Study 2 (The Light)

Sub-theme stratum	Article headline	In-text citation
<i>Anti-vaccine protest</i>	“Gibraltar Stands Up Against Apartheid”	(Freedom Gibraltar, 2021)
<i>Multiple themes</i>	“What is an mRNA vaccine?”	(Leader, 2021)
	“Serious heart problems and DEATHS among sports players following shots”	(Walsh & Goodsciencing.com, 2021)
	“Vaccines have never been safe or effective”	(Coleman, 2022b)
	“Uninformed Consent”	(Fryer, 2022)
<i>Pharmaceutical companies untrustworthy</i>	“Pfizer – A Name You Can Trust?”	(Small, 2020)
<i>Vaccine can cause fertility, maternity, or nursing problems</i>	“Study finds higher miscarriage rate in vaccinated - but pretends it doesn’t”	(Ennos, 2022b)
<i>Vaccine contains harmful ingredients</i>	“The truth about the ‘vaccine’ cannot be stopped”	(Chapman, 2022)
<i>Vaccine debates and censorship</i>	“Censoring The Vaccine Debate Will Backfire”	(Kendrick, 2020)
	“‘Publishing Propaganda’: Piers Corbyn Challenges Guardian Editor To Debate”	(McCrae, 2021b)
	“Following the science?”	(Smith, 2022a)
	“One in three in England remain jab free”	(Smith, 2022c)
	“Lies, statistics and government agencies”	(Ennos, 2022a)
	“The needle and the damage done”	(Crawford, 2023)
<i>Vaccine passports and ‘segregation’</i>	“Government primes businesses to enforce medical apartheid”	(Smith, 2021c)
	“Human face of ‘no jab no job’ in care homes”	(McCrae, 2021a)
<i>Vaccines are deadly</i>	“40,000 dead from vaccines in UK, USA and EU”	(Atkinson, 2021)
<i>Vaccines may be unsuitable for children</i>	“Only murderers and lunatics support covid jabs for children”	(Coleman, 2021c)

	“This attempted seizure of our children MUST be the last straw”	(Waters, 2021)
<i>Various or non-specific harms caused by vaccine on a large scale</i>	“1400 DEATHS, One million injured from covid injections”	(The Light, 2021a)
	“Alarming vaccine safety signals revealed by Yellow Card data”	(Ennos, 2023)

Note: Headlines are reproduced directly from original, including errors or inconsistencies in grammar and punctuation. At time of submission, the papers containing these articles are all available for download from the webpage link in the citation ‘The Light (n.d.-a)’. Furthermore, TL promotes spelling ‘covid’ uncapitalised (see: The Light, 2021b) so this typography is likely deliberate.

The Light sample, Study 2

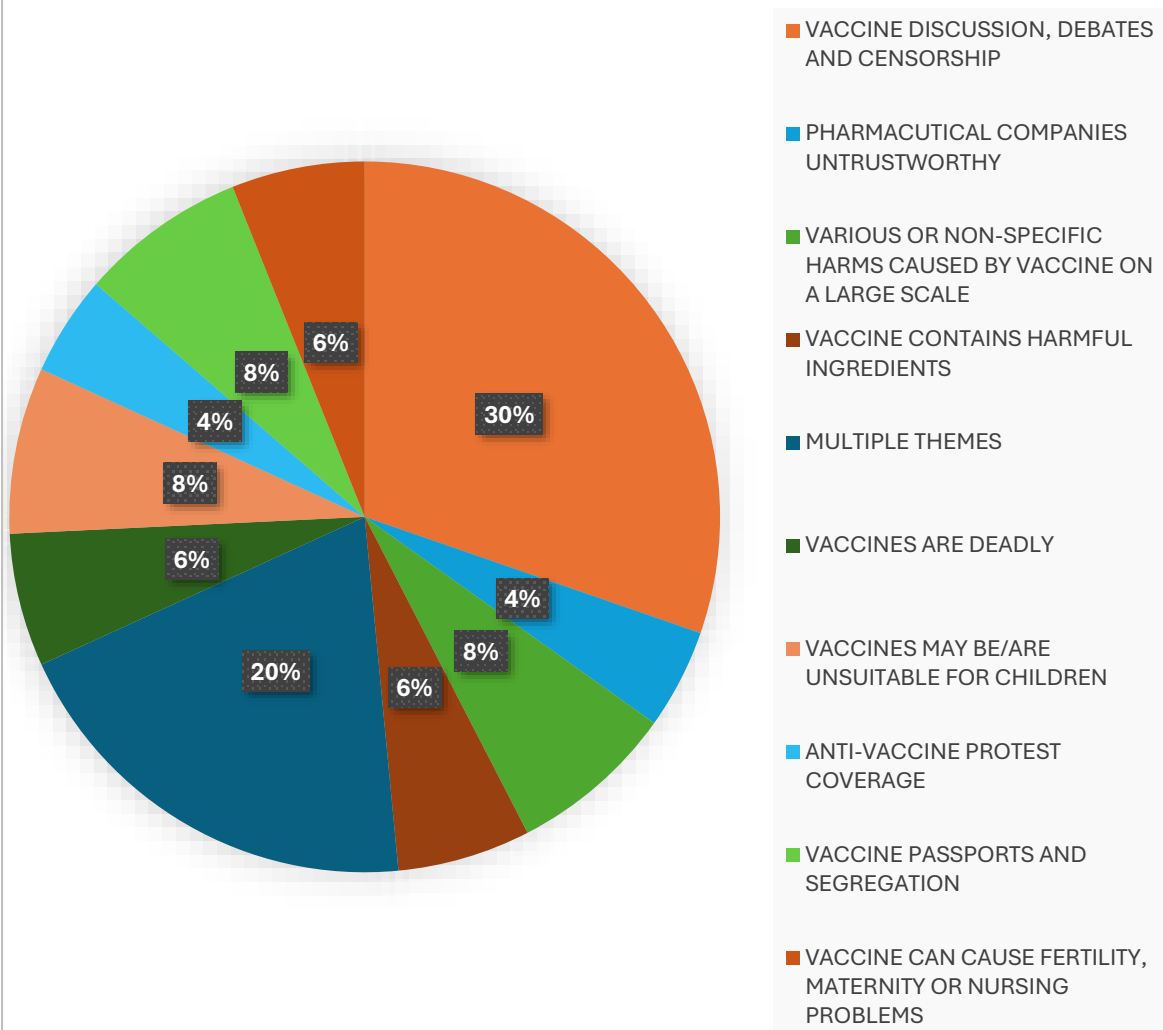


Figure B2: The Light sample, Study 2