

## **“I Am Not a Conspiracy Theorist, But . . .”: Communicative Norms in Conspiracy Theory Supporters’ Interactions With Other News Users in Germany, Israel, Sweden, and the United States**

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Belief in conspiracy theories (CTs) has gained considerable public visibility, raising concerns about supporters’ antidemocratic attitudes and resistance to evidence-based arguments. While there is ample research documenting such tendencies among dedicated CT communities, however, it is less clear how well these findings generalize toward other CT supporters closer to the societal mainstream. In this study, we analyze user commentary responding to German, Israeli, Swedish, and U.S. news coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic to examine how CT-related ideas are presented and contested within mainstream public discourse. Based on a pragma-dialectic analysis of CT-related controversies in user-generated commentary, we study which political and epistemic norms are invoked and practiced by CT supporters. We find that most individuals expressing support for CTs remain broadly committed to democratic pluralism and evidence-based argument, even if they frequently violate these norms in practice; instead, CT supporters’ rejection of institutional validation emerges as a key distinction.

*Keywords: conspiracy theories, contestation, public discourse, epistemic norms, democratic norms*

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Over the past decade, concerns have risen about a perceived encroachment of conspiracy theory (CT) belief into societal mainstream discourse. Given the public salience of CTs related to the recent COVID-19 pandemic and populist politics across and beyond the Western world, two threats stand central in the debate: on the one hand, CT belief has been linked to political extremism (Hofstadter, 2008; Imhoff et al., 2022; Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009). To the extent that CT believers assume hostile attitudes toward mainstream society and its institutions, intense political conflict arises that may threaten the fabric of democratic society (e.g., Brüggemann et al., 2020). On the other hand, CT supporters' rejection of conventional epistemic authorities and procedures (e.g., Levy, 2007; Pasek, 2019) has raised concern about the erosion of society's capacity to resolve epistemic conflict with evidence-based argument, establishing commonly accepted truths (e.g., Uscinski, 2019; van Prooijen et al., 2022). That said, most findings linking CT supporters to extremist attitudes and elusive argumentation practices remain contested (Enders et al., 2025) or pertain primarily to highly committed CT communities (e.g., Byford, 2011; Clarke, 2002; Oswald & Herman, 2016)—yet much of the public concern over CT belief is driven by its salient appearance outside such fringe communities (e.g., Douglas et al., 2019; Wood et al., 2012), among populations unsuspecting of ideological radicalism (Birchall & Knight, 2023; Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009).

This study contributes to better understanding of those challenges that CTs present for democratic society by investigating which democratic and epistemic norms underpin the presentation and defense of CT-related claims (Marwick & Partin, 2024) in a mainstream public forum, where such claims are exposed to frequent attacks (Wood & Douglas, 2013). We focus on CT-related claims presented in user commentary posted in response to German, Israeli, Swedish, and U.S. news coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as their contestation in interactions with believers in conventional knowledge. We deliberately focus on news user commentary as a form of discourse that attracts self-selected participation from motivated advocates, while the commented coverage endows user-generated contributions with public visibility and potential impact (Ksiazek & Springer, 2020). Employing an intentionally wide notion of CT supporters to denote individuals who publicly express support for CT-related claims, we investigate to what extent those who contribute to the perceived salience of CTs in public discourse match the familiar profile of dogmatic, antidemocratic CT advocates painted by the study of dedicated CT communities. We show that CT supporters posting user commentary on mainstream news sites do not differ radically from believers in conventional knowledge in their invocation of conventional epistemic and democratic norms, but are distinct in their rejection of institutional validation. To the extent that many CT supporters remain in principle accessible to constructive argumentation and persuasion, and are prepared to recognize legitimate pluralistic dissent, alleged threats to democratic politics may be overstated (Baden & Sharon, 2021).<sup>1</sup>

### **Conspiracy Theories as a Threat to Democratic Public Discourse**

In a democratic society, public discourse acts as a key venue for the negotiation of contested claims (Habermas, 1984). In public discourse, contested *truth claims* can be examined in light of available evidence and reasoning to determine what can be regarded as true (Goldman, 1999); moreover, societies publicly negotiate their support for competing *normative claims* to identify viable settlements or resolutions (Fishkin

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<sup>1</sup> This does not diminish valid concerns related to problematic ideological positions (e.g., racism, anti-Semitism) often expressed by CT believers.

& Laslett, 2006). Both negotiations rely on input from specialized public institutions tasked to support the identification of valid facts (e.g., science, courts; Goldman, 1999) and justified demands (e.g., parliaments, participatory politics; Fishkin & Laslett, 2006). To effectively process epistemic and normative controversy, following Habermas (1984), public discourse primarily requires participants' unrestricted capacity to participate, as well as their shared recognition of certain rules governing the debate.

While such negotiations can be sustained by any media, the rise of digital social media has massively expanded the range of participants, leveling hierarchies and enfranchising publics that had been underserved by traditional media (e.g., Chadwick, 2006). Especially at the intersection between journalistic and social media, user-generated commentary holds the potential to support vibrant public engagement with mass-mediated contents (Rowe, 2015; Springer et al., 2015), mobilizing the public's expertise and diversity for the collective validation of presented claims (Kligler-Vilenchik, 2021). However, social media platforms have also contributed to a fragmentation of publics, enabling the growth of alternative public discourses that resist societal consensus (Colleoni et al., 2014; van Aelst et al., 2017). In addition, participants' ability to circumvent institutional validation has broadened public access to diverse viewpoints, but it has also created new opportunities for mis- and disinformation to serve as "evidence" for maintaining incorrect beliefs (Southwell et al., 2018; Ylä-Anttila, 2018). Especially on the major, commercial platforms, fostering controversy and emotional engagement has emerged as a business strategy (Aral, 2020), prioritizing conflict over reasoned exchanges. The resulting cacophony undermines the adequate processing of epistemic and normative controversy in public discourse.

### ***The Threat of Conspiracy Theories***

CTs are widely believed to constitute a key threat not only to individual well-being (e.g., by fanning paranoia and encouraging unsafe behavior; Douglas et al., 2019) but also to the functioning of public discourse. Specifically, CTs' innate logic rejects the foundational epistemic and political norms underlying the discursive validation of contested claims (e.g., Baden & Sharon, 2021; Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009). CTs cast key social actors as structurally insincere and disinterested in truth or democratic politics. Large parts of the populace are claimed to be duped by the conspiracy and thus unable to recognize sound evidence or reasoning (Hofstadter, 2008). As public discourse is believed to be colonized by the conspirators, replete with disinformation (Byford, 2011), it cannot serve as a site for evaluating contested claims: Informed about conspirators' secret activities, CT believers see themselves as capable of discerning credible evidence from malicious misdirection (Clarke, 2002); however, discussions with outsiders, who are unable to make such distinctions, appear pointless. Inversely, CT believers' dogmatic approach to discounting dissent raises doubts about the public's capacity to productively engage with CT belief, motivating its exclusion from what counts as reasonable public debate (Baden & Sharon, 2021). Unlike other forms of contentious politics, which can be resolved by the application of shared epistemic and democratic norms, CTs repel their own processing in public discourse, raising concerns about their disruptive potential (Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009).

That said, CTs' distinctive logical structuring has been chiefly illuminated by philosophical investigations (e.g., Coady, 2007), which likely impose stricter standards than many believers would. Additional insights derive from studying the discourse of dedicated CT advocates, partly confirming their

distinctive argumentative style designed for repelling contestation (e.g., Oswald & Herman, 2016). Yet, scholars have also documented CT believers' own struggles with determining believable truths (e.g., Marwick & Partin, 2024), including attempts at epistemic validation and uses of quasiscientific rhetoric (Parker, 2001). In fact, most CT communities portray themselves as independent, critical thinkers (Latour, 2004), rhetorically upholding conventional scientific evidentiary processes (Parker, 2001) and democratic norms to challenge institutions believed to be corrupted (e.g., Birchall, 2006; Knight, 2000). Survey-based research suggests that popular support for CTs falls short of consistent (Wood et al., 2012), concrete, and confident belief (Dentith & Keeley, 2018; Miller et al., 2015). Following Byford (2011), individuals might support CTs to express distrust in official accounts without necessarily subscribing strongly to specific alternative truths (Strömbäck, 2022; Uscinski, 2019).

To our knowledge, no research has investigated to what extent supporters of CT-related ideas—from believers in specific CTs to adherents to broadly conspiracist worldviews—remain committed to democratic politics and amenable to conventional epistemic arguments. If supporters of CT-related ideas (henceforth "CT supporters") bring dogmatic epistemologies and antidemocratic norms into mainstream discourse, there may be reason to worry (Baden & Sharon, 2021). However, to the extent that many remain committed to conventional epistemic and democratic norms, the crisis of public discourse may be mitigated.

### ***Discursive Epistemic and Democratic Norms***

Observing the discursive behavior of CT supporters in interaction with believers in conventional knowledge should provide a valuable measure of the potential threat that emanates from CTs (Wood & Douglas, 2013). While scholars have identified numerous discursive norms that govern communicative interactions (e.g., Lewiński & Mohammed, 2015; Rowe, 2015), we focus on those concerned with the constructive negotiation of epistemic and normative disagreement within a pluralistic public sphere, which stand at the center of CTs' contestation of conventional knowledge (Habermas, 1984). Most fundamentally, H. P. Grice's (1989) *cooperative principle* holds that communications must be interpretable as part of a collaborative, topical interaction: Participants must be able to assume that contributions are overall sincere, warranted, relevant, concise, and clear (Graham & Witschge, 2003) and their interlocutors are interested in resolving disagreement (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1992). Where participants are believed to systematically violate those norms—employing misdirection (e.g., lying), applying evasive argument (e.g., unwarranted claims; Keeley, 1999), or lacking openness for cooperative communication (e.g., dogmatic convictions; Goertzel, 1994)—discourse is disabled. In democratic controversy, incorrigible noncooperative behavior constitutes the one condition that justifies excluding participants from the debate. Following Habermas (1984), deliberation must be inclusive and open-ended in view of the ever-tentative nature of epistemic validation. Likewise, democratic pluralism demands that normative dissent is generally legitimate—provided that it is sincere, justified and recognizes the legitimacy of dissent, while aiming for cooperative resolution (e.g., Cohen, 1989).

Below the constitutive principle of cooperation, we focus on basic epistemic argumentation norms governing the negotiation and validation of contested truth claims, relying on presented evidence, sound reasoning, and institutional validation (e.g., scientific analysis, journalistic reporting, judicial investigation; Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Del Valle et al., 2020; Goldman, 1999). In addition, we consider democratic

norms governing the legitimacy of normative claims, depending on deliberative argument, popular support, and institutional procedures to process pluralistic controversy (e.g., consensus mobilization, majoritarian decision making, constitutional guardrails; Gerbaudo, 2012; Miller, 1992).<sup>2</sup> Participants' invocation and demonstrated commitment to these norms obliges them to credit well-founded contestation, potentially rendering them amenable to constructive debate (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1992). At this level, norm violations (e.g., improper warrants, constriction of legitimate dissent) can usually be called out and processed within the ongoing debate without disabling it (Billig, 1996; van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1992). Still, consistent or demonstrative norm violations may indicate participants' reliance on deviant epistemic and normative validation strategies and nurture doubt about participants' commitment to cooperative discussion (Grice, 1989; Habermas, 1984).

### **Studying CT Supporters' Discursive Norms in Interaction**

Our study unites social-psychological research's emphasis on CT belief across society (e.g., Wood et al., 2012) with a discourse-analytic approach to studying CT supporters' argumentative strategies (e.g., Oswald & Herman, 2016). Observing how CT supporters assert and defend their beliefs in interactions with outsiders (Wood & Douglas, 2013), we investigate how their discursive behavior reflects their adherence to conventional epistemic and democratic norms (Marwick & Partin, 2024). We focus on mainstream sites of online public discourse used by both supporters and nonsupporters of CTs, asking to what extent those elusive and dogmatic argumentation styles documented among dedicated communities of CT believers extend also to CT supporters closer to the societal mainstream. While we acknowledge that expressed support for CT-related ideas may not reflect commenters' sincere belief in specific CTs or CT worldviews, it contributes to concern about the perceived public salience of CTs.

We follow van Eemeren and Grootendorst's (1992) pragma-dialectic approach to studying argumentation in interaction. This approach distinguishes between a semantic level, whereupon epistemic and normative claims are made, justified, challenged, or discarded, and a pragmatic level, whereupon participants position themselves and their interlocutors and negotiate their legitimacy in the debate. For our analysis, we exploit that the copresence of dissenting others challenges participants to justify their claims, either by presenting arguments grounded in conventional epistemic and democratic norms (e.g., verifiable observations, institutional sources, pluralistic tolerance; Del Valle et al., 2020; Meyers & Brashers, 2010; Wood & Douglas, 2013) or by invoking conventionally inadmissible reasons (e.g., fallacious arguments, unverifiable assertions, delegitimizing dissent; Baden et al., 2025; Ferree, 2004).

While participants occasionally explicate these norms—typically, to mark their violation (e.g., “Stop spreading disinformation”) or demand their fulfilment (e.g., “What’s your evidence?”)—most invocations take the form of indirect allusions that require further interpretation (Wilson & Sperber, 2012; e.g., criticizing sources as nonscientific implies a call for institutional validation; calling dissenters “sheeple” accuses them of not thinking independently). Discursive norms may be actualized by demonstrative practice (e.g., offering

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<sup>2</sup> In practice, epistemic and political negotiations frequently blur into one another, as factual claims raise normative implications, and normative claims presume factual knowledge (e.g., advocating vaccination presumes that vaccines work).

evidence and legitimizing dissent) or invoked without being followed (e.g., closed-minded participants demanding open-mindedness), and not all applications of raised norms are sound (e.g., sources may be flawed). Accordingly, the ways in which CT supporters present and defend their claims and challenge those of others offer rich evidence of their adherence (or lack thereof) to conventional discursive norms (Graham & Witschge, 2003). Recognizing that CT-unrelated discourse also regularly falls short of normative standards, we juxtapose CT supporters' discursive behavior against that of believers in conventional knowledge within the same interactions. Specifically, we ask the following:

*RQ1: Do CT supporters mobilize (a) (non)conventional epistemic norms and (b) (non)democratic argumentation norms differently from believers in conventional knowledge?*

*RQ2: Do CT supporters violate foundational cooperative norms of communication more pervasively than believers in conventional knowledge?*

*RQ3: When and how do discursive interactions between CT supporters and believers in conventional knowledge result in constructive negotiations or descend into noncooperative exchanges?*

## **Method**

### **Case**

For our investigation, the recent COVID-19 pandemic offers unique opportunities. Over its course, both scientific knowledge and official policies underwent frequent revision (Rauchfleisch et al., 2021). Soaring infection rates lent urgency to the public debate. Scrutinized by intense public attention, perceived inconsistencies fueled doubt, contestation, and the production of alternative narratives, including numerous CTs (e.g., Birchall & Knight, 2023; Jabkowski et al., 2023). Controversies unfolded simultaneously across different countries, facilitating comparison.

This study examines the public contestation of conventional COVID-19-related knowledge by CT supporters among mainstream news audiences in Germany, Israel, Sweden, and the United States. These four countries were selected to capture important variation in public communication cultures and pandemic responses: Comparatively high public trust in institutions in Sweden and Germany contrasts against diminished trust in the United States (both among the populist right and left-wingers distrusting the Trump administration) and Israel (especially among ethnic minorities and ultraorthodox communities; Global Change Data Lab, n.d.). Israeli CT supporters rallied against drastic government restrictions (stringency index maximum: 94.4 for the observed period; mean for selected dates: 67.4; Hale et al., 2021), which were more measured in Germany (76.9/63.3) and comparatively lenient in Sweden (64.8/60.7), while conflicting policies coexisted in the United States (72.7/70.5).<sup>3</sup> In Sweden, Germany, and the United States, CTs were primarily promoted by populist right-wing groups but also left-wing alternative communities in the latter two, where uneasy alliances between libertarian and anarchist

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<sup>3</sup> The high mean in the United States reflects that unlike elsewhere, the first wave barely ebbed (Global Change Data Lab, n.d.).

groups resisted state-enforced pandemic restrictions; anti-Semitic CTs cross-fertilized with left-wing critiques of big pharma; and antivaccine activism, esotericism, and natural medicine connected with nativist purity ideologies rejecting vaccination on the far right. German and Swedish CT supporters remained confined to opposition movements, suffering public stigmatization, while those in the United States enjoyed overt backing by the administration. In Israel, CT supporters belonged to competing social groups, emphasizing distrust of the government on the left, international conflict on the right, and antistate sentiments among both ultraorthodox and Palestinian communities. Overall, COVID-related CTs gained broad public attention in the United States and Germany, less so in Israel, and little in Sweden (Jabkowski et al., 2023).

### **Sites of Investigation**

We focus on CT-related claims expressed within user comments on mainstream online news. As these outlets cater to diverse audiences across political leanings and social strata, the reliable copresence of dissenters incentivizes participants to actively advocate and defend their divergent beliefs (Springer et al., 2015). Characteristically, user commentary generates numerous threaded conversations, mostly spanning only a few turns, while conversations' subordination to COVID-19 news coverage maintains a predictable thematic focus, facilitating comparative analysis.

For each country, we selected one opinion-leading online news outlet to access interactions among advocates seeking a national stage and one community-oriented news outlet to investigate more human-centered interactions. Our first group of outlets, selected by online reach, includes Germany's *Der Spiegel* (spiegel.de), Israel's *Ynet* (ynet.co.il), the Swedish *Aftonbladet* (aftonbladet.se), and *USA Today* (usatoday.com) in the United States. All outlets lean left of center, with high (*Spiegel*, *Ynet*) to intermediate (*Aftonbladet*) accuracy ratings (Media Bias Fact Check, n.d.). For our second group, we selected broadly pluralistic, regionally dominant local media, including the Dresden-based *Sächsische Zeitung* (saechsische.de) in Germany, the Stockholm edition of *Mitt-i* (mitti.se) in Sweden, and the *Des Moines Register* (desmoinesregister.com) in the United States. Since Israel lacks comparable local media, we selected *Walla!* (walla.co.il) as a national news outlet featuring a similar style of community orientation. For additional details on the sample construction process, refer to our methodological online appendix.<sup>4</sup>

### **Data Collection**

We defined an artificial week spanning the initial seven months of the COVID-19 pandemic in Western countries (February 23–September 14, 2020, at an interval of 34 days). This artificial week was arranged to include major global news events—the first major outbreak in a Western country (Italy, February 23), Russia's Sputnik vaccine (August 11)—alongside diverse national news events and routine news days.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://osf.io/qw5rn/>.

For each day, we identified outlets' COVID-19 news coverage using a broad keyword search on the sites' native archives, followed by manual screening. Data collection took place between January 27 and February 19, 2021,<sup>5</sup> yielding a vastly diverse corpus (from nine articles on *mitti.se* to 272 articles on *usatoday.com*). We manually retrieved articles' full text including all user comments from sites' native interfaces (*spiegel.de*, *saechsische.de*, *ynet.co.il*, *walla.co.il*, *mitti.se*); for some sites that used an embedded Facebook applet placed underneath the news article (*usatoday.com*, *desmoinesregister.com*, *ynet.co.il*) or otherwise directed readers to use Facebook to comment (*aftonbladet.se*, *mitti.se*), we downloaded any comments posted under the corresponding articles on the platform (for details, see our online appendix).<sup>6</sup> This yielded between below 1,000 comments posted on *saechsische.de* or *mitti.se* and more than 90,000 comments on *spiegel.de*, spread highly unevenly across articles. We disregarded all threads whose initial ("parent") posts were unconcerned with contestable facts (e.g., emotional expressions). Subsequently, we identified any comments that expressed direct or indirect references to a CT or CT-related claim, applying a generous approach to also capture ambiguous references: on the one hand, we adapted Baden and Sharon's (2021; see also Strömbäck, 2022) criteria, marking any comments that (a) blamed events on secret plans and deliberate interventions by powerful groups and individuals within these groups; (b) cast harmful events and available information as deliberately manipulated and controlled; (c) attributed events to conspirators' evil and subversive intentions; or (d) characterized available information as deceptive and misleading, hinting at hidden truths. On the other hand, we included comments when they were branded by others' responses as potential CTs (e.g., references to tinfoil hats). For all 298 CT-related comments thus identified, finally, we included any responses and ensuing related interactions (using reply-to functions, @ mentions, or textual references), as well as responded-to preceding posts, in our analysis (see online appendix for details).

### **Analysis**

Using pragma-dialectic analysis (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1992), we examined the interdependent construction of semantic meaning (claims asserting, warranting, or contesting specific interpretations) and relationships between participants (speech acts positioning, supporting, or challenging speakers). Distinguishing rebuttals, challenges, and validations of contested claims (Graham & Witschge, 2003), we identified which epistemic and democratic argumentation norms were mobilized, cued, or performed in the negotiation: We scrutinized how contested claims were positioned as epistemically (un)warranted, appraising presented evidence and sources, reasoning, and fit with institutional validation and common knowledge (for details, consult our online appendix). Likewise, we examined how participants evaluated the (im)morality and (il)legitimacy of claims and claimants (e.g., critiquing their informedness, sanity, sincerity, or morality) and how they evaluated present interaction (e.g., pointless). Finally, we reconstructed common interaction sequences of rebuttals, challenges, and validations to study how the observed discursive practices enabled or disrupted cooperative communication. All analyses were initially conducted separately per country and subsequently subjected to systematic comparative validation across outlets, countries, and dates.

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<sup>5</sup> For several articles from February/March, full texts were already removed at the time of data collection.

<sup>6</sup> Our analysis relies entirely on publicly accessible comments posted on pages of obvious public-facing character. All stored and reported data were fully anonymized.

### **Findings**

We commence with a brief overview of the identified controversies. We then discuss which epistemic norms and which democratic norms served as reference points in CT supporters' presentation and others' contestation of CT claims, before examining which interaction patterns enabled cooperative exchanges and which degraded into noncooperative controversies.

Overall, CT-related comments constituted only a small minority of contributions (we identified 298 in more than 161,000 posts, less than 0.2%), and fully explicit CT references were even rarer (for no outlet did we find more than 10 such posts). CT-related comments were found mostly in response to coverage of COVID-related political action and foreign affairs (notably, news mentioning former U.S. chief medical advisor Anthony Fauci). CT-related claims were typically found in parent posts opening a new thread or in immediate response to a non-CT-related parent comment. On all sites, CT-related claims (but not fully explicated CT references; see below) were routinely challenged by (typically multiple) commenters, while supportive responses were rare and found mostly on U.S. sites. Among the wide range of referenced CTs, three themes dominated: Especially in Germany, Sweden, and the United States, comments regularly conceptualized governmental pandemic policies as dictatorial violations of civil liberties; especially in the United States and Israel, many portrayed the pandemic as an invented threat intended to distract from other failures; and especially in Israel, commenters suspected COVID-19 to be a weaponized biological agent released intentionally. Overall, controversies appeared to be slightly more civil on community-oriented news sites. Otherwise, we did not identify major systematic differences between the two groups of outlets.

CT-related claims were mostly introduced by pointing at believed inconsistencies in the news or official claims or by attributing reported events to the acts of conspirators, mentioning prominent individuals (e.g., George Soros, Bill Gates, and Anthony Fauci), the government and political institutions, or foreign countries (notably, China and Iran). Occasionally, posts referred to preestablished CTs (e.g., about the Bilderberg group, the "New World Order," or "the Kaba!"). Only very rarely did commenters further develop their CT-related claims to specify alleged plans, means, and ends.

### ***Negotiations of Epistemic Norms***

Users contested almost every presented CT-related claim, except for the most explicit CT references, which were essentially ignored. Both CT supporters and believers in conventional knowledge either invoked conventional epistemic norms or challenged claims without explicated normative grounds (i.e., asserting what is true or false, branding claims as deliberate misdirection). Both sides regularly presented sources and recounted personal experiences to validate contested claims, or they provided such warrants when challenged. Likewise, the reliability of sources was a common point of contestation on both sides. While supporters of conventional beliefs occasionally challenged CT claims by demanding the provision of adequate evidence and sources, the reverse occurrence was rare—which may, however, be because many claims contested by CT supporters originated from the adjacent article or mainstream public discourse.

Accusations of defective reasoning were commonplace among rebuttals on both sides. In response, both CT supporters and their opponents occasionally walked challengers step by step through their

arguments, demonstratively exposing their reasoning. Especially among the defenders of conventional knowledge, such demonstrations also occurred unprompted, in direct response to presented CT-related claims. In most cases, and on both sides, rationality was only demanded, not asserted. Designating claims as illogical or unreasonable typically served to delegitimize their authors as deluded, unfit to participate in the discussion. Likewise, both CT supporters and believers in conventional knowledge routinely disqualified one another by declaring significant parts of their opponents' knowledge—both explicit claims and implied or attributed beliefs—to be self-evidently ill-informed and absurd (usually without further argument). The following exchange, found on *Der Spiegel* (2020), includes competing demands for, a demonstrative practice of, and an institutional legitimation of sound reasoning norms, as well as a summative dismissal of presented arguments as unsound (all translations are our own, all emphasis added):

*User1*: "The actual scandal is that [RKI, the German government's public health institute] manipulates and allows itself to be manipulated. *Anyone who knows basic arithmetic should have noticed right away* what cons are being used here. Cui Bono???"

*User2*: "What do the masks have to do with basic arithmetic? *Enlighten us.*"

*User1*: "[detailed chain of claims, referring broadly to news knowledge] [Masks] are still scarce, but things are apparently slowly improving . . . Thereby it only now became possible to recommend a mask mandate. And that is what the RKI then did."

*User2*: "When *scientists* change their opinion, *there is usually a good reason*, e.g., *changed reality* or new insights. *Regrettably, you lean toward the easier explanations: conspiracy theories.*"

The primary difference in epistemic norms referenced by CT supporters and believers in conventional knowledge concerns institutional validation: If the latter regularly invoked institutional validation to warrant their claims—most saliently, by discriminating between journalistic and nonjournalistic sources and pointing to accumulating scientific evidence—such uses were almost entirely absent among CT supporters. While CT supporters also often cited selected journalistic, scientific, and official sources, these were presented as personally trusted, individual voices capable of relating important truths by withstanding the institutional mainstream: "This is not an opinion, that is information that *I received* amongst others from the Security Service, *from people who are involved in this* etc." (posted on *Mitt-i-Stockholm*, 2020).

### ***Negotiations of Democratic Norms***

Superficially, interactions suggest a strong, shared commitment to democratic discursive norms among both CT supporters and believers in conventional knowledge. Not only were democratic norms hardly ever challenged but both sides also frequently demanded sincerity, informedness, civility, and tolerance in the debate or even referred to majority rules and constitutional procedures. CT supporters placed even stronger emphasis on lamenting their interlocutor's (as well as the media's and political actors') perceived failure to uphold democratic norms, often expressly branding these as undemocratic. CT supporters were also more likely to invoke tolerance norms (which is unsurprising, given their minority status): "You have

your opinion I have mine . . . I only find it shocking when people who doubt the official 'truth' are marginalized, *is this the so-called freedom of opinion?*" (posted on *Der Spiegel*, 2020).

This salient flagging of democratic norms is undermined by their frequent violation in discursive practice. Commenters on both sides were quite ready to delegitimize and exclude dissenting voices from the debate. Exclusionary practices were least developed in Sweden, where ironic dismissals constituted a common form of delegitimization. There were even some instances of expressly<sup>7</sup> legitimized pluralism: "I am sorry that you have this view, *but I respect it*" (posted on *Mitt-i-Stockholm*, 2020). While believers in conventional knowledge may have had defensible grounds for attacking some of the more ludicrous and extreme CT-related claims, participants were routinely branded as CT supporters (e.g., "Are you also wearing your silver hat?"; posted on *Der Spiegel*, 2020) based on fairly licit claims or disclosed political leanings and subsequently shunned (inversely, CT supporters branded their opponents as "sheeple" blindly following government propaganda). Especially in the German, Israeli, and U.S. debates, expressing opposition to mask mandates or raising critical questions about official policy could already trigger various exclusion strategies, from ridicule, to accusations of insanity, to explicit calls for silencing the author. While believers in conventional knowledge usually stopped at delegitimizing believed-deluded interlocutors, CT supporters occasionally called for more extreme measures, such as criminal sanctions against believed propaganda media. While neither side practiced the inclusive debate they preached, CT supporters' readiness to tolerate dissenting voices appeared markedly diminished.

### ***Interaction Sequences of (Non)Collaborative Contestation***

Our analysis identifies four broad antagonistic interaction patterns, each of which revolves around a different set of contested discursive norms. Except for the first one, all patterns were documented challenging not only CT supporters (although this was the most common situation by far, owing in part to these constituting a small minority) but also believers in conventional knowledge.

The first pattern consists of the sanctioning of non-normative contents by refusing engagement (*dismissal*): Users simply disregarded the most explicit CT references and extremist claims. Consider this post found on the Swedish *Mitt-i-Stockholm's* (2020) Facebook page, which was left unanswered:

As Adolfo [likely: Adolf Hitler] said, they are of no use as multi-sick . . . In Sweden, a mass murder of older, multi-sick people is underway. Hell, like the Nazis, just blaming one another. Like the Nuremberg trials, nobody knows anything and nobody is responsible.

Another comment, found on the *USA Today* (2020) Facebook account, solely drew "haha" emotes: "This years election will be amazing. AMERICANS VS THE Rothschilds/Soras [George Soros] /Wexler AKA: The ELIETS, CABAL, CEO's of the GLOBALIST."

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<sup>7</sup> One may also interpret commentators' choice to not challenge discrepant views as tacit tolerance for encountered dissent.

Likewise, previously ongoing interactions simply terminated once explicit CT references were introduced. While we cannot know the specific reasoning underlying the dismissal, the pattern marks most of the more flagrant deviations from conventional knowledge, excluding these as unworthy of debate.

The second pattern, which was typically initiated by a relatively specific contested claim, focuses on epistemic validity. In one variant, employed mostly by believers in conventional knowledge, rebuttals focused on questioning the information and sources marked in (or attributed to) a claim (*challenge of information*). CT supporters only rarely addressed this challenge (e.g., by presenting additional warrants); rather, they doubled down, asserting another, more extreme heterodox claim, as here on the Israeli site *Walla!* (2020):

*User3*: "It's strange that the doctors and nurses haven't yet been infected and died?"

*User4*: "In China, they died."

*User3*: "Doctors and nurses and everyone who works with clients has been immunized."

Despite the apparent potential for cooperative interaction, very few such exchanges resulted in mutual efforts to negotiate contested claims.

In the other variant, common on both sides, rebuttals attacked authors' soundness of reasoning (*challenge of reason*), exemplified by this exchange on the Israeli site *Ynet* (2020):

*User5*: "The greatest conspiracy theory in humanity, this is a deliberate operation of the government in Israel and in other places in the world to spread the virus."

*User6*: "There is wifi in the hospital for mental patients . . ."

Focusing less on the claim itself than its author, this challenge was usually interpreted as an attempt at delegitimization, not an epistemic challenge. Such interactions almost invariably descended into mutual name-calling and *ad hominem* attacks,<sup>8</sup> regardless of which side attacked whom, stalling cooperative communication.

The third pattern typically followed a call for action (or inaction), which was challenged for violating key democratic and social norms (e.g., disrespecting others' freedoms, endangering others; *challenge of appropriateness*). While this pattern also sometimes degraded into name-calling, it regularly prompted participants to formulate broader ethical principles to justify their positions, typically invoking liberal democratic norms (with different emphasis: CT supporters commonly referred to freedom of choice and tolerance; believers in conventional knowledge tended to invoke informedness, solidarity, or due process). Consider this part of an exchange on the site of the U.S.-based *Des Moines Register* (2020):

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<sup>8</sup> Least so in Sweden, possibly because of using Facebook as discussion infrastructure.

*User7*: "my freedom [to forego masks] is worth every breath I take if your freedom comes with a cost and you're not willing to pay that cost move somewhere that has less freedom . . ."

*User8*: "Love your awesome use of grammar and punctuation. Keep on showing off your ignorance and defiance of common sense and keeping your fellow man safe from harm."

Despite these appeals to arguably shared norms, however, antagonists' unwillingness to credit one another's justifications usually prevented further negotiation:

*User7*: ". . . if you're so worried about getting sick stay home hide in your home for the rest of your life"

The final pattern arose from overt efforts at delegitimizing dissenting voices (*challenge of legitimacy*) by interpreting presented claims as evidence of authors' wholly misguided worldview, branding them as CT supporters or naive "sheeple." While also here, mutual name-calling sometimes ensued, the dismissive branding regularly prompted attacked authors to justify themselves by disavowing the attributed worldview, affirming the validity of shared discursive norms, and clarifying as well as warranting the contested claims. Consider, for instance, this exchange from the German *Sächsische Zeitung* (2020) that breaks a path for further, less antagonistic discourse:

*User9*: "Go on continue believing that wearing masks prevents the spread! But then please don't cross the street either, could be that you get run over."

*User10*: "Why do you tinfoil hats always have such weird arguments."

*User9*: "I am no tinfoil hat, I have been using my common sense for years."

[. . .]

Ironically, the most aggressive challenge thus constitutes the only pattern with a pronounced tendency toward de-escalation and (limited) cooperative exchanges.

### Discussion

Our findings paint a differentiated image of the normative foundations of CT-related discourse. With very few exceptions, CT supporters recognized the legitimacy of sourcing, empirical warrants, and logical critique to validate claims (Marwick & Partin, 2024) and invoked liberal democratic norms (see Miller et al., 2015, for a related point). We find few challenges to conventional norms and little evidence of the dogmatic, elusive epistemologies and antidemocratic attitudes associated with dedicated CT communities (e.g., Baden & Sharon, 2021; Goertzel, 1994), casting doubt on their generalizability.

Nonetheless, most norms were frequently violated in practice, and few exchanges developed in a cooperative fashion (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1992): Requests for warrants were met by aggressive restatements, challenges to reasoning involved and evoked *ad hominem* attacks, and participants were quick to dismiss or exclude proponents of discrepant views from the debate. Even if we credit that believers in conventional knowledge also engaged in similar practices, CT supporters' collaborativeness was notably impoverished. Constructive negotiations remained rare, arising mostly where attacked authors could distance themselves from presented challenges (e.g., disavowing attributed worldviews, forwarding the burden of proof to sources).

While CT supporters violated norms of cooperative discourse more persistently and aggressively than believers in conventional knowledge, observed differences were gradual, not categorical (similarly, Wood & Douglas, 2013). On both sides, commenters regularly presented their views as self-evident, displaying little readiness to engage in open-ended discussion, yet both sides could occasionally be challenged to present additional warranting and detailed argumentation (Birchall, 2006). Both sides were quick to delegitimize and exclude dissenters while simultaneously demanding respect for democratic values. Contrary to recurrent observations from the study of dedicated CT discourses (Baden & Sharon, 2021; Byford, 2011; Oswald & Herman, 2016), we observed hardly any wholesale dismissals of publicly available evidence, self-sealing argumentation, or antidemocratic sentiment. While many CT supporters were evidently enraged (Fine & Ellis, 2010) and distrustful of political institutions and media (Douglas et al., 2019), most controversies revolved around CT-related claims that were specific enough to permit constructive controversy. In fact, much hostility derived from commenters' readiness to treat minor heterodox claims as evidence of fully developed CT worldviews (Wood & Douglas, 2013; likewise, CT supporters equating orthodox positions with blind credulity).

However, CT supporters did categorically differ about their rejection of institutional validation as a source of superior knowledge. While others regularly discriminated journalistic from less trustworthy sources or pointed to accumulating scientific evidence, the institutional embedding of journalists, scientists, and others only rendered them suspect in CT supporters' eyes (Mari et al., 2022; Nera et al., 2024). To them, credibility was attributed personally and relationally (Pasitselska, 2022), placing trust in individuals seen as bravely withstanding the institutional mainstream. Given the centrality of epistemic and democratic institutions in public discourse, we may thus better comprehend parts of public support for CTs through the prism of institutional distrust: Following Mari and coauthors (2022), receptivity for alternative knowledges might not entail the rejection of epistemic and democratic norms *per se*, but rather express concern that said norms are not adequately followed by existing epistemic and democratic institutions (see also van Prooijen et al., 2022). CT supporters occasionally cited institutions' alleged or documented failures and norm violations<sup>9</sup> to dismiss their accounts as trustworthy standards (Levy, 2007). Attributing perceived malperformance to conspiratorial intervention, CT supporters viewed institutional outputs as irredeemably tainted, debasing the assumed validity of institutional knowledge. Moreover, lacking institutional standards, individuals might mistake heterodox claims for fair objections, especially when presented by personally

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<sup>9</sup> Such failures are amply documented in popular and scientific debates; see, for instance, Akin's (2019) discussion of scandals in science, Davies' (2009) collection of failures of the press, or Ferree et al.'s (2002) account of exclusionary biases in public discourse.

trusted sources (Pasitselska, 2022). Seeing such claims ignored or attacked in public discourse, we can understand how people come to perceive institutions and elites as biased and deceitful (Bennett & Pfetsch, 2018; Ylä-Anttila, 2018), raising their willingness to consider alternative accounts.

Consequently, negotiations of CT-related claims are shaped by cross-national differences in institutional setup and trust (Jabkowski et al., 2023): Expansive free speech norms were most saliently invoked in the United States, as were accusations of political bias and polarization (Hofstadter, 2008). Cohesive social norms and heightened institutional trust were likely responsible for the lesser prominence of CTs and the diminished hostility of exchanges in Sweden (Strömbäck, 2022). In Germany, the alleged corruption of public institutions took center stage, while in Israel, controversies focused more on personalized politics and international conflict. Still, Swedish commenters also actively delegitimized dissent, only relying on “softer” exclusion strategies such as ridicule in place of aggressive name-calling (Ferree, 2004); likewise, German CT supporters rejected validity claims derived from institutional journalism or science, relying instead on personally trusted sources, alternative media, and selected scientific studies. In all countries, proponents of CT-related claims rejected accusations of dogmatism, insisting their conclusions derived from conventional epistemic reasoning and were compatible with democratic political norms. Beyond both sides’ conviction of the correctness of their respective beliefs and their readiness to attribute dissent to defective reasoning, CT supporters’ rejection of institutional validation may constitute an additional impediment to constructive controversy; however, it falls short of the extremism and elusive epistemics commonly attributed to dedicated CT communities.

### **Limitations**

Our findings are inevitably co-shaped by variations in outlets’ distinctive communication styles and user populations. *Walla!*’s national audience differs from the other community-focused outlets’ regional context; *Aftonbladet*’s tabloid-adjacent style likely influenced discussions; pandemic experiences differed between the Stockholm metropolitan area and the Dresden or Des Moines hinterland. Likewise, U.S. and Swedish outlets’ use of Facebook diminished anonymity and enabled nonreaders of the outlets to comment in ways otherwise unavailable, even if the primary populations of commenters were likely comparable (for additional discussion, see our online appendix). As news user commentary is authored by a self-selected subset of the public, observed contributions are nonrepresentative of CT supporters in society (Reimer et al., 2021). Sites’ largely undisclosed moderation practices likely resulted in the removal of additional CT references, limiting the visibility of extremist practices. While participants’ discursive behavior is instructive, it permits only limited inferences about authors’ normative beliefs and motives. Our findings are best understood against the backdrop of studies into the discursive behavior of more extreme, dedicated CT communities (e.g., Oswald & Herman, 2016), as well as research on CT belief among mainstream news users (e.g., Adam et al., 2025; Strömbäck, 2022). Despite our comparative corpus of thousands of posts, only a few hundred contained CT-related claims, distributed unevenly throughout countries and outlets. Many posts were underspecified or polysemic (Baden & Sharon, 2021), requiring active interpretation. While our pragma-dialectic approach handles such cases well, their often deliberate ambiguity imposes important limitations. We ascertained that patterns hold across media types and national contexts. However, additional patterns likely exist.

### Conclusion

This article offers three main contributions to the study of CT beliefs and their salient intrusion into mainstream public discourse. First, we have argued that support for CT-related ideas among users of mainstream news does not necessarily follow the same deviant logic commonly documented among dedicated CT communities (e.g., Byford, 2011; Clarke, 2002; Oswald & Herman, 2016). Current moderation policies designed with extremist challenges in mind may have played a role in reducing such communities' presence on mainstream news sites, while for those CT supporters who remain, moderation may not be necessary. Future research will do well to delineate different ways in which people's CT-related beliefs shape their engagement with epistemic and pluralistic contestation (e.g., Dentith & Keeley, 2018; Fine & Ellis, 2010), with differentiated implications for democratic societies. Second, our findings suggest that many proponents of CT-related claims remain in principle committed to conventional epistemic and democratic discursive norms (Birchall, 2006), even if this commitment is not always redeemed in their discursive behavior. Accordingly, worries about the disintegration of cooperative public discourse because of the salient presence of CT supporters (Oliver & Wood, 2014; Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009) require further qualification: While our findings corroborate concerns about eroding institutional trust, and some extremist views propagated in CTs warrant alarm, not all CT supporters are lost to constructive controversy. User communities' capacity to engage misinformed or otherwise problematic contributors may thus play an effective role in mitigating the threat of public CT support (Kligler-Vilenchik, 2021). Third, our discourse-based investigation underscores the rejection of institutional validation (Mari et al., 2022; Nera et al., 2024; van Prooijen et al., 2022) as a key factor separating CT supporters from other participants in public discourse. To advance our understanding of CT belief in contemporary society, we must investigate the ongoing erosion of public trust in epistemic and democratic institutions and devise strategies for rebuilding confidence in institutional procedures' capacity to productively process valid contestation.

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