Conspiracy Theories and the Epistemic Power of Narratives

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Penultimate draft; please cite version published in Philosophical Psychology

Abstract: We often turn to comforting stories to distract ourselves from emotionally painful truths. This paper explores a dark side of this tendency. I argue that the way false conspiracy theories are disseminated often involves packaging them as part of narratives that offer comforting alternatives to ugly truths. Furthermore, I argue that the way these narratives arouse and resolve our emotions can be part of what causes people to believe conspiracy theories. This account helps to bring out some general implications about the power of narratives for misleading people into believing misinformation: I argue that narratives can cause intuitive judgements of truth that are especially difficult to dispel through critical reflection. I also sketch some practical implications for how the media can better frame their reports about both conspiracy theories and factual narratives.

1. Introduction

Emotionally painful truths can be difficult to confront. Faced with the death of a loved one, the breakup of a relationship, or the stress of looming deadlines, you might look for ways to take your mind off things. We often do so by retreating to comforting stories. This could mean turning on your favorite season of a classic TV show, or a mindless romantic comedy that you know will follow a familiar kind of narrative arc. Comforting stories also needn't be fictional—you might ask your grandmother to repeat your favorite story about her childhood or put on one of many cookie-cutter true crime documentaries.

Stories can be comforting even when they involve some emotionally difficult events; often, what matters more is whether a story follows an arc that brings it to a satisfying resolution. Your grandmother might have grown up under an oppressive, violent regime, but her story can provide comforting escapism if it ends with a hopeful flight to a more peaceful place. A true crime documentary might describe a serial killer's horrific deeds, but it can provide comfort when he's brought to justice at the end.

Comforting stories can thus do us a lot of good. In this paper, though, I explore a darker side of our tendency to engage with comforting narratives instead of confronting difficult truths. I'll argue that false *conspiracy theories* are often packaged as part of narratives that provide comforting alternatives to emotionally painful truths, and that engaging with such narratives is one way people avoid confronting these truths.

This might seem to render false conspiracy theories less epistemically dangerous, suggesting people merely treat them as comforting fictional stories. However, this view is too optimistic. To see why, we'll have to dig into the details of how we psychologically process narratives, especially the way narratives arouse and resolve our emotions. This will reveal why packaging and disseminating conspiracy theories as part of narratives can actually be part of what causes people to believe them. Moreover, it will help to bring out some general implications about the power of narratives for misleading people into believing falsehoods: compared with other ways of presenting misinformation to make it more believable, narratives can generate illusions of grasping the truth that are especially difficult to dispel or overcome.

Here's the plan for the rest of the paper. I begin in §2 with a general philosophical exploration of the nature of narratives and storytelling, ultimately defending a particular account of what makes a text a narrative. §3 builds on this account to argue that people disseminating conspiracy theories often adopt a strategy that involves packaging them as part of narratives. In §4, I argue that this can give conspiracy narratives a greater ring of truth than factual accounts, and thus that it can be part of what causes people to believe conspiracy theories. §5 argues that such narrative-based illusions of grasping the truth can be especially difficult to dispel through critical reflection. Finally, §6 concludes with some takeaways about counteracting beliefs in conspiracy theories.

Before proceeding, a note about the term "conspiracy theory." Some philosophers have defended a definition on which it's always a pejorative label that implies epistemic defects in a theory (see, e.g., Cassam, 2019; Napolitano, 2021). However, for my purposes in this paper, I'll assume only a minimal understanding of conspiracy theories as explanations of events that cite a group of agents secretly conspiring (cf. Keeley, 1999, p. 116; Pigden, 1995, p. 5). Nevertheless, my focus will be restricted to *false* theories which *lack good evidential support*, because my aim is to better understand strategies for presenting such falsehoods to mislead others into believing them. This is consistent with thinking that some (beliefs in) conspiracy theories are true (see Dentith, 2023 for relevant discussion). However, I set aside those theories in what follows.

2. Narratives and emotional resolutions

This section explores a disagreement between two prominent philosophical views about the nature of narratives: the "causal" and "emotional resolution" accounts. While it has proven difficult to make clear progress on this debate, I'll argue for a more productive way of reframing it, ultimately defending a version of the emotional resolution account.

Philosophers discussing the nature of narratives generally agree that a narrative represents a series of (real or fictional) events. But what else is necessary for a text to count as a narrative? To answer this, it's common to start with examples of texts which describe events but intuitively don't seem like narratives, so that we can analyze exactly what they're missing. Consider this example from Carroll (2001):

> **DISCONNECTED LIST:** "The Tartar hordes swept over Russia; Socrates swallowed hemlock; Noël Carroll got his first computer; Jackie Chan made his most successful movie; and dinosaurs became extinct" (Carroll, 2001, p. 119).

Intuitively, this doesn't seem like a narrative. While it's a description of events, it sounds more like a mere list of random, unrelated events than a text that tells a coherent story. So, we should want our theory of narratives to explain what's missing from it.

Building on examples like this, philosophers of narrative have tended to frame their investigations using the following question: in order for a text to count as a narrative, what kind of *connections must hold between the events* described by that text?

The "causal account" is the most orthodox answer: it's prominent contemporary defender is Carroll (2001), but it traces back to Aristotle (2001). On this account, it's sufficient for a text to be a narrative that there are *causal connections* between the events it describes. A mere list of causally disconnected events, as in DISCONNECTED LIST, isn't a narrative. Instead, a narrative describes a series in which earlier events causally give rise to later ones, as in this example: "Creon had Antigone executed; consequently, his son committed suicide, which caused his wife to commit suicide, and, as a result, Creon felt anguish" (Carroll, 2001, p. 122).

Velleman (2003) instead defends the "emotional resolution account," building on work by literary theorists such as Kermode (1967). While Velleman acknowledges that narratives typically do describe causally connected events, he doesn't think this is necessary. Instead, he argues that what's missing from examples like DISCONNECTED LIST has to do with how the events *emotionally* fit together, rather than how they causally fit together. Specifically, he argues that the events of a narrative must be emotionally unified in that later events *resolve emotions* aroused in the audience by earlier events, with the *ending* of a story bringing an emotional sequence to its natural close.

What is it for an emotional sequence to come to its natural close? This has to do with the way high-arousal emotions are naturally resolved in our real-life experiences, via transitions to more stable emotional states: feelings of horror naturally resolve into elation or relief once the situation causing

the fear is alleviated; anger naturally resolves into feelings of satisfaction after one takes revenge; and hope naturally resolves into either gratification or disappointment, depending on whether the thing one hoped for was actualized. Narratives can lead audiences along natural sequences of emotions like these: romantic comedies first evoke hope that the lead couple gets together, followed by gratification when they do; a horror movie might first evoke intense fear, then relief when the hero triumphs against the villain. The chain of emotions can also be more complex: anger at one character wronging another might give way to resentment and disappointment, both of which are eventually resolved after the wrongdoing is forgiven. And the resolution needn't be positively valanced: anger over a character's murder might be resolved via transitioning to stable, long-term grief.

For Velleman, this way of arousing and resolving emotions is definitive of narratives. To defend this view over the causal account, he appeals to examples that, he argues, intuitively seem like narratives without involving causal connections. One, borrowed from Aristotle (2001), goes something like this (embellishing slightly):

> **DEATH-BY-STATUE:** A man named Mitys is unjustly murdered, and the murderer is never caught. Years later, the murderer happens to attend a public festival at a site where a statue of Mitys has been erected. The murderer meets his own end when the statue of Mitys accidentally falls on him, crushing him to death.

Velleman argues that this feels like a complete narrative even if we assume the murderer's death-by-statue was random, not causally connected to the earlier murder by some supernatural design. He argues that this stems from the story's emotional trajectory: Mitys' unjust murder arouses righteous anger, but the murderer's death by Mitys' statue brings satisfaction that justice was served.

Velleman thus argues that the emotional resolution account better fits our intuitions about cases like this, which he argues are not adequately described by the causal account. However, things aren't so simple. That's because it's not totally clear what's driving our intuitions about cases like DEATH-BY-STATUE.

Velleman notes that Aristotle interpreted the case differently: he claimed we can't help but *intuitively see the events as* causally connected, perhaps via supernatural design. Velleman is unconvinced by this, arguing we can simply stipulate there's no causal connection (Velleman, 2003, 6). However, as Currie (2010) points out, there are at least two reasons why it's difficult to tell whether we're nevertheless implicitly reading in a causal connection. First, our intuitive impression that justice was served in the story seems to assume there was some such connection: justice requires consequences

that are responsive to the particular crime committed, not merely randomly served up. Second, it's actually untrue that there are *no* causal connections between Mitys' murder and the murderer's death: the character of the murderer is present for both, presumably via an intermediate chain of causally connected events; it could be that we intuitively pick up on this implicit connection.

So, it's harder than it initially looks to pinpoint which features of a case are driving our intuitions about narrativity. That makes it difficult to adjudicate between the causal and emotional resolution accounts by relying on such intuitions. In the rest of this section, I'll therefore suggest a new way of approaching this debate which helps make some progress.

As I said above, this debate tends to be framed around the question of which *connections between events* make something a narrative. In other words, both sides are considering which properties the *contents* of a narrative must have—the events the narrative describes or represents. However, I think this is the wrong sort of framing.

To see why, we must first recognize that storytelling is a particular kind of *social practice*. Storytelling isn't done in isolation; we tell stories *to* others or *for* an audience. Specifically, storytelling involves a series of assertions about a set of real or fictional events. And, in general, we can't define the nature of communicative acts based purely on properties of the contents they assert or represent. To see this, we can consider examples of other speech acts.

What is an *assertion*? Suppose we observed that, when people make assertions, they typically convey true propositions, so we concluded that to assert something is to say something true; that would be mistaken, since it's also possible to assert falsehoods (either accidentally or by intentionally lying). What is it to *give advice*? We might observe that advice tends to involve assertions about how a listener should act; but that again seems insufficient for defining the nature of advice-giving, since various other speech acts can involve superficially similar statements (e.g., giving orders). What is it to *tell a joke*? Jokes can involve asserting so many different kinds of contents (through stories, one-liners, puns, etc.), that it's not even clear how to give an answer based just on observing the contents jokes tend to represent.

It's controversial how we *should* characterize speech acts of these sorts, and it would be beyond my scope to consider every possible view. However, I'll adopt a prominent approach that has recently grown in popularity. On this approach, we can individuate speech acts in terms of their *functions*, where this (at least in part) takes into account the effect the speech act functions to have on a listener or audience.

This approach has been particularly well-developed when it comes to assertion. Philosophers have argued that the function of assertions is to cause a listener to acquire true beliefs (Graham, 2010; Millikan, 1984) or knowledge (Kelp & Simion, 2022). Although it's possible to make assertions that fail to fulfill this function, they would thereby be defective instances of assertion (compare: what it is to be a heart is to have the function of pumping blood, even if defective hearts fail to do so). Similar analyses have been given for more complex speech acts—for example, characterizing advice as aiming to persuade a listener to do what the advice-giver recommends (Archard, 2021), or characterizing jokes as aiming to make an audience laugh in a manner that evokes a kind of shared intimacy (Cohen, 1999). The exact details of such accounts needn't concern us; what matters is their general flavor, i.e., that they individuate speech acts in terms of the effects they function to have on listeners.[1]

Likewise, since a narrative is something one *tells* people, an answer to the question, "What is a narrative?" shouldn't just look at properties of the events people describe when they tell stories. It should also look at the function of storytelling, in terms of the effect storytelling aims to have on listeners.

How can this help us decide between the causal and emotional resolution accounts? On its face, only one of these accounts can easily be construed in terms of the effects of storytelling on an audience: namely, the emotional resolution account. Although Velleman originally framed this account in terms of the properties of narratives' contents—i.e., he claimed the events of a story must be emotionally connected in the right way—we can instead construe it as an account of the function of narratives. On this construal, narratives aim to bring the audience through a certain kind of emotional arc, where emotions are aroused then brought to their natural resolutions. The causal account isn't as easily reconstrued along similar lines, since it's more clearly focused on relations that hold between events themselves, not on how hearing about those events impacts the audience.

We *could* try to stretch the causal account into something more along these lines; the obvious way of doing so is to say that narratives aim at having the audience *grasp causal explanations* of events. However, this isn't sufficient to *individuate* storytelling as a speech act, given that there are other, non-narrative ways to give causal explanations (e.g., in the form of a scientific report). This isn't to deny that narratives often do furnish us with causal explanations, since they typically do describe causally

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[1] I'll remain neutral about the exact notion of "function" involved. As suggested by my above comparison with a heart pumping blood, accounts of assertion are typically framed in terms of *evolutionary* function (Graham, 2010; Kelp & Simion, 2022; Millikan, 1984). But we could also construe things in terms of the function for which a practice was intentionally *designed* (compare: hammers have the function of driving nails because humans design them to do so).

connected events. However, this wouldn't give us an account of the distinctive function of narratives. My functional construal of the emotional resolution account thus better fits the goal of specifying the function that individuates narratives.

3. Emotional resolution in conspiracy narratives

Conspiracy theories are explanations of events that cite secret conspiracies. So, at first glance, it's natural to analyze the speech act in which their proponents are engaged as *giving explanations*. This is undoubtedly part of the picture. However, it's insufficient for understanding the fundamentals of popular conspiracy theory dissemination strategies. We must also, moreover, examine how conspiracy theory proponents employ *storytelling*—i.e., how they describe events in a way that brings their audience through the kind of emotional arc characterized in the previous section.

Specifically, this section argues that the dissemination of conspiracy theories often follows a pattern involving two elements: (1) they're disseminated as alternatives to what I'll call *ugly truths*; and (2) they're packaged as part of broader narratives. I won't claim that *every* conspiracy theory fits this pattern—there's likely heterogeneity in how conspiracy theories are presented. However, I'll appeal to prominent examples to show that it's a pattern worth paying attention to, one that helps to explain why at least some people engage with conspiracy theories.

By "ugly truths," I mean truths about events with two properties: first, thinking about these events arouses intensely negative emotions; second, there's no clear narrative through subsequent events which is such that entertaining the entire narrative resolves the initial negative emotions. Consider the death of a family member in its immediate aftermath, before you've had the chance to get together with loved ones, hold a funeral, and work through the negative emotions; similarly, consider a devastating breakup of a romantic relationship, again in its initial aftermath before you've worked through the emotions. Thinking about such events arouses negative emotions without resolving them (they're unlike stories that *begin* with tragic events but then progress, through subsequent events, to an emotional resolution).

The function of narratives, as described in the previous section, makes them particularly good distractions from ugly truths, especially for narratives that strongly arouse and resolve emotions. Think of, for example, sitcoms with particularly good romantic arcs, such as *The Office* or *Schitt's Creek*—i.e., the kinds of stories people tend to use as comfort shows. It's easy to see why we'd feel motivated to turn to stories like these instead of dwelling on ugly truths: rather than merely building up negative

emotions without any kind of release, they allow you to feel the satisfaction of having your emotions aroused and then resolved.

Now, some ugly truths concern *public* events rather than private experiences. Consider the initial aftermath of the 2012 Sandy Hook school shooting, in which gunman Adam Lanza murdered twenty first-graders and six staff before dying by suicide (Williamson, 2022). The events of the shooting itself are, obviously, extremely unpleasant to imagine; thinking about the details is apt to arouse intense sadness, anger, and despair. Things feel especially hopeless given that Lanza's motives were mysterious—other than speculations about his intense loneliness, isolation, and mental illnesses, there's no clear explanation for the murders. Crucially, in the weeks and months following, there wasn't much of an emotional resolution to the story. The senseless murders simply threw the victims' families and community into despair, with no clear trajectory through subsequent events to a resolution. (In §6, I'll return to how things unfolded longer-term; for now, I have in mind how things felt during the shorter-term aftermath.)

It's natural, then, to expect people would prefer to focus on narratives with clearer emotional resolutions, just as we do with more personal experiences of ugly truths. As I'll now argue, conspiracy theories that emerged after Sandy Hook were packaged as part of such narratives.

Consider the theory that the shootings were a hoax staged by professional actors, who were hired by Democrats looking to push through stricter gun control measures. High-profile conspiracists like Alex Jones began circulating this theory soon after the tragedy. On its face, this might not sound like a narrative that comes to an emotional resolution—doesn't it simply evoke further despair that the government would go to such nefarious ends to push their anti-gun agenda? However, we should more closely examine the broader narrative in which this theory is embedded when it's disseminated by people like Jones.

To see what this narrative involves, imagine you're watching a movie about the events of Sandy Hook. It begins with reports of a horrible tragedy: twenty schoolchildren and six adults have been senselessly murdered. The public enters a period of mourning, struggling to come to terms with this tragedy. Soon, however, a twist is revealed. We flash back to several months earlier, to a meeting of top government officials plotting a scheme: stage a school shooting, then take advantage of the hoax to ram through anti-gun legislation. Fortunately, as the plot continues, a set of scrappy heroes emerges: journalists like Alex Jones who discover the truth and blow the whistle. In the end, these noble citizens use their platforms to hold government officials accountable.

This is the kind of story conspiracists like Jones like to tell: they describe alleged injustices, then paint themselves as the last bastion of integrity fighting to expose these injustices and hold perpetrators accountable. The emotional trajectory here is familiar: it starts by arousing righteous anger at corruption, then eventually moves to a feeling of satisfaction that the truth has been exposed and the perpetrators brought to justice. Just compare recent films like *The Post* or *Spotlight*, which depict true events involving similar tropes (see Buzzell & Rini, 2023 for related discussion).

It may be that, when the conspiracy theory is first disseminated, the evil government officials haven't *yet* been brought to justice. In that sense, the narrative is (putatively) still unfolding. But conspiracists tell stories in which this is the inevitable result for which they're actively fighting (they often claim, for example, that figures like Barack Obama will soon be arrested or even executed for their crimes). This makes it easy to imagine the overall narrative unfolding to a conclusion that brings emotional resolution.

Importantly, the emotional resolution of this false narrative starkly contrasts with the mere hopelessness aroused by thinking about the actual events at Sandy Hook, for which there was no clear resolution. In this sense, the conspiracy narrative can function as a source of escapism or comforting distraction from the truth.[2]

Similar patterns emerge with other ugly truths and their conspiratorial alternatives. Consider the COVID-19 pandemic during its height: the news was full of long-term care homes ravaged by illness and ICUs overwhelmed with people in critical condition; lockdown orders meant everyone else was stuck at home; and the situation felt out of control, with no obvious, forthcoming resolution. Various conspiracy theory promoters took advantage of this situation, including Romana Didulo, a QAnon-adjacent conspiracist who claims to be Queen of Canada and amassed a dedicated following during the pandemic. Didulo promoted the theory that COVID-19 vaccines were a government tool to restructure people's DNA and turn them into obedient, robotic followers (Sarteschi, 2022).

Again, this theory alone isn't an overarching narrative. But consider the broader narrative into which Didulo embedded it. Like other QAnon influencers, she claims to be part of a faction engaged in an ongoing fight against the Satanic, pedophilic deep state. Her appointment as Queen of Canada was one move in this fight to liberate Canadians from oppression, including forced vaccination. In

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[2] Someone like Jones may *intentionally* use this narrative tactic to better capture his audience's attention. However, I don't assume this is always intentional. It may be that some who to use narratives to present conspiracy theories simply happen to have more success, even if they aren't aware of exactly why they're successful.

fact, Didulo paints her side as winning: she claims they've already had certain leaders executed for their crimes against humanity, such as Joe Biden and Queen Elizabeth II (Lamoureux, 2023a; 2023b). Didulo thus paints an overarching narrative arc in which oppressors are exposed and overthrown, inevitably leading to their empire crumbling. This follows a familiar kind of arc in which we might feel trepidation about the evil forces who are in control at the beginning of a story, but where these emotions are resolved when good triumphs over evil. As with the Sandy Hook narrative, it might be that this triumph hasn't yet fully materialized, but Didulo invites us to imagine a narrative in which history unfolds to this conclusion.

Other cases fit this sort of pattern, too. Take those who claim the establishment is covering up the fact that the Earth is flat. For some, the orthodox scientific picture is an ugly truth in it that makes humans a tiny, insignificant part of a vast, meaningless universe—unlike, e.g., the Biblical picture on which humans are the centerpiece of God's creation (Ingold, 2018; Olshansky et al., 2020). This allows the conspiracy narrative to function as a more comforting alternative, wherein flat Earthers expose the deception and reclaim humanity's special place in the universe. Similarly, when faced with the seemingly unexplained death of an infant, parents sometimes turn to claims that the medical establishment is covering up the harms of vaccines (Shelby & Ernst, 2013). The unexplained death of a child is an ugly truth about which little can be done; it's more comforting to think the establishment's deception is being exposed and that one is warning future parents how to prevent something similar.

The ways people tend to engage with certain conspiracy theories might not fit this mold as well as the above examples—for instance, someone might engage with a 9/11 conspiracy theory purely through quasi-scientific, seemingly technical evidence about the physics of planes and building collapses, rather than by engaging with narratives. Still, in various prominent examples, conspiracy theories are incorporated into broader narratives in which emotions are aroused and resolved. They thus allow people to become absorbed in more comforting narratives instead of confronting truths which arouse intensely negative, unresolved emotions.

4. Belief in conspiracy narratives

If conspiracy narratives function as a form of escapism in a way that's similar to how we use comforting *fictional* stories, then it might seem people don't really believe them. However, this inference is too quick. The mere claim that a narrative provides a comforting emotional resolution is neutral about whether one treats it as fictional or nonfictional. Narratives we think are true, like

documentaries or stories about a grandmother's childhood, can also provide emotional resolution and thus comforting escapism.[3]

In fact, I'll now argue that the emotional resolution found in conspiracy narratives can help to explain why people believe them. I don't aim to offer a *sufficient* explanation for why people believe conspiracy narratives, as there are likely various psychological forces involved; instead, I aim to isolate one factor that can incline people towards believing, all else equal.[4]

I'll focus on subjects who encounter conspiracy narratives and are open to the possibility that they're true, rather than taking them to be fictions from the get-go (as many of us might before even hearing the full story). Specifically, I'll focus on subjects who have encountered both an ugly truth and a competing conspiracy narrative, so are at a point where they could now come to believe one or the other.[5] Empirical evidence suggests that people tend to believe conspiracy theories and other forms of misinformation as a result of intuitive judgments of truth, rather than based on more analytical or reflective thinking (Binnendyk & Pennycook, 2022; Pennycook & Rand, 2019; Swami et al., 2014). So, if we can pinpoint how conspiracy narratives cause stronger such intuitions than ugly truths, we can better understand why people believe them.

Various factors can cause information to intuitively strike us as true (metaphorically: can give it a greater "ring of truth"), where we're not consciously aware of these factors affecting our intuitive judgments. Among the most well-studied are various ways of presenting information so that it feels *familiar* and *cognitively easy* to process (Schwarz & Jalbert, 2021). As Nguyen (2021) argues, such feelings are often a good, rough-and-ready guide to whether we should accept some information: since greater

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[3] Several philosophers have given more nuanced reasons to think many who engage with conspiracy theories don't genuinely believe them, but instead merely imagine or pretend they're true (Ganapini, 2022; Ichino, 2022; Levy, 2022a; Munro, 2023b). I don't want to dispute these philosophers' arguments, which I find convincing. However, their accounts aren't meant to apply to *everyone* who engages with conspiracy theories: clearly, no single account could apply so widely, and it would be a stretch to think *no one* truly believes false conspiracy narratives (cf. Munro, 2023). So, it's still worth thinking about the psychological forces involved for those who do believe, setting aside disputes about exactly how widespread genuine belief is.

[4] My arguments in this section are again inspired in part by Velleman (2003), who claims emotional resolution in historical narratives can be *mistaken for* understanding what actually occurred. Velleman's arguments for this are somewhat sketchy and suggestive, so mine can be read partly as further fleshing them out and providing more empirical backing.

[5] It could be that they've encountered both and are consciously weighing them against one another. However, the process of deciding which to believe needn't be so explicit. Suppose someone initially believes an ugly truth, then stumbles onto a conspiracy narrative online; their belief revision in the face of this new information needn't occur as part of an explicit, conscious weighing of two options but could be more automatic.

experience with a domain of knowledge typically correlates with greater cognitive ease, it makes sense to interpret ease as signaling that we've gained enough skill with some domain to properly evaluate ideas arising from it. Ease of processing is thus one sign that we've devoted enough cognitive resources to critically evaluating a piece of information and can turn our attention elsewhere.

However, this makes us vulnerable to believing falsehoods which are presented in ways that feel familiar, intuitive, or easy to grasp. This can be achieved simply by presenting information in a more legible font (Song & Schwarz, 2008) or a voice that's easy to listen to and understand (Lev-Ari & Keysar, 2010; Newman & Schwarz, 2018). It could involve ensuring that an audience hears the information repeated multiple times, thus making it feel more familiar (Begg et al., 1992; Pennycook et al., 2018). Or, it could involve couching falsehoods in cliched expressions or other familiar rhetorical devices. Such ways of presenting information can bias an audience towards accepting it as true even if they lack the relevant skills or expertise that, in optimal cases, are associated with ease of processing (for more in-depth discussion, see Levy, 2017; Nguyen, 2021).

Now, empirical evidence shows that narratives, specifically, are easier to process than information presented in expository formats (Clinton et al., 2020; Dahlstrom, 2014; Graesser et al., 2002; Mar et al., 2021). It's common to explain this by appealing to the predictable, familiar format of narratives compared with expository texts. Specifically, as Mar et al. (2021) note, much of this familiarity and ease of processing stems from the emotional trajectories typically found in narratives. There are several aspects to this.

One of these, also discussed by Velleman (2003), is the way narratives tap into sequences of emotions that are familiar from our own life experiences. Again, emotions naturally tend to resolve over time in certain ways (horror to relief; intense sadness to long-term grief; hope to disappointment), and narratives come to resolutions by arousing such sequences of emotions in an audience. In doing so, they tap into our background understanding of these natural progressions of emotions, which are familiar from our own experiences. To clarify: it's not that the *events themselves* described by a narrative are familiar from real life; clearly, many narratives involve unrealistic or unfamiliar events. Instead, even when the events are unrealistic, they're arranged into an overall emotional progression that realistically tracks how emotions progress over time.

Furthermore, as Mar et al. (2021) point out, most of us encounter narratives from an early age, before ever encountering other kinds of texts; we're therefore very familiar with standard narrative structures and tropes, including their emotional structures. More emotional experiences and narratives are also more likely to stick in long-term memory than less emotionally valanced information, giving

emotionally engaging narratives a greater ring of familiarity, on average (Lee et al., 2020; Mar et al., 2021). When we enjoy narratives, we also tend to imaginatively replay them in our minds afterwards, especially when the narratives evoke strong emotions (Bellana et al., 2022) and come to emotionally satisfying endings (Ulusoy et al., 2022); future narratives we encounter will feel more familiar when their emotional structures resemble those we've previously spent some time dwelling upon and imaginatively replaying.

So, a narrative's emotional trajectory can make it feel more familiar and easier to process, in virtue of the way it taps into background knowledge of how emotions tend to progress and resolve—both in our own life experiences and in other narratives we've consumed in the past. This suggests that, when narratives lead to satisfying emotional resolutions, this can cause one to *feel like* one has grasped the truth of what actually happened (given the well-established empirical finding that familiarity and ease of processing can cause stronger intuitive judgments of truth).

Now suppose again that you're comparing an ugly truth and a conspiracy narrative. Again, ugly truths arouse intensely negative, unresolved emotions. This makes it feel cognitively *difficult* to entertain them, in that it requires cognitive effort. A narrative can be easy to engage with even when it starts off with emotionally painful or sad truths, as long as it comes to an emotional resolution—think again about true crime stories that begin with descriptions of horrific murders but proceed to satisfying endings. But entertaining ugly truths involves arousing negative emotions that don't get resolved in this way. We naturally don't want to think about purely unpleasant, painful truths—our impulse is to turn our attention elsewhere and find ways to take our minds off them. In order to think about the tragedies of Sandy Hook or the COVID-19 pandemic, we have to put in cognitive effort to turn our attention to them.

So, ugly truths are cognitively difficult to entertain. This creates an opportunity to turn an audience's attention towards false narratives that come to emotional resolutions, as do the conspiracy narratives I described in §3. These narratives will feel *more* familiar and *easier* to process than the ugly truths they replace. They feel more familiar because, as I argued above, their emotional trajectories are familiar from our experiences and other narratives we've encountered. And they'll be cognitively easier to engage with because, as per §3, we naturally prefer to engage with narratives that come to satisfying resolutions. In the immediate aftermath of the Sandy Hook shooting, for example, the conspiracy narrative will be cognitively easier to engage with than the painful truth that has no clear emotional resolution.

The result is that, when one encounters both an ugly truth and a competing conspiracy narrative, the latter will give rise to stronger intuitions of truth. So, the fact that a conspiracy theory is couched within an emotionally resolving narrative can be part of what misleads one to believe it.[6]

Now, as stated earlier, this section aims to isolate just one among various possible psychological factors that might cause people to believe conspiracy theories; it's therefore consistent with existing accounts in the literature of why people believe. However, I'll conclude this section by sketching how my account can also complement and help to round out some other proposals from recent literature.

First, various philosophers have recently observed that conspiracy theorists—even those who believe more far-fetched theories—often spend a lot of time "doing their own research" and actively seeking evidence (Buzzell & Rini, 2023; Dentith, 2018; Harris, 2018; Levy, 2022b). Of course, the "evidence" for more far-fetched theories is often quite weak (cf. Cassam, 2019; Rosenblum & Muirhead, 2019). Still, there are various explanations for why people form beliefs in response to it: for example, they could be influenced by a cognitive bias like motivated reasoning (Harris, 2018) or an epistemic vice like close-mindedness (Cassam, 2016). My account didn't give much of a psychological role to the evidence on which conspiracy theorists base their beliefs, since I merely focused on how it feels to cognitively process conspiracy narratives in comparison with ugly truths.

However, my account can help us better understand influences on conspiracy theory beliefs that enter the picture even *before* the process of gathering and considering evidence begins. For many of us, conspiracy theories about Sandy Hook or COVID-19 vaccines strike us as absurd and

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[6] I've focused on cases where conspiracy narratives replace emotionally painful truths. However, this section's arguments may extend to other cases, in two ways. First: emotionally resolving conspiracy narratives may feel more believable than *any* truths which are cognitively difficult to process, even when this doesn't stem from emotional painfulness (it could, e.g., instead be because the truth involves highly complex facts about policy, economics, or science). I've focused on emotionally painful truths because they involve an especially clear, unified connection between (a) the reasons people feel motivated to turn towards conspiracy narratives as distractions from the truth, and (b) the reasons people end up believing those narratives: both trace to the same stark differential in emotional resolution between ugly truths and conspiracy narratives. But similar belief-forming processes may be involved when emotionally resolving narratives are compared with other sorts of difficult-to-entertain truths.

Second: my arguments should extend to other kinds of misinformation besides conspiracy theories—i.e., packaging *any* misinformation as part of an emotionally resolving narrative should help encourage people to believe it. I focus on conspiracy theories because it's especially clear that their proponents employ this strategy, but it's worth investigating in future work how much it's used in other domains.

implausible upon first hearing about them. As a result, we'd be unlikely to even feel the need to seek out and evaluate evidence. Conspiracy theories are therefore more likely to be believed if they're initially presented in a way that makes an audience more likely to take them seriously, thus motivating them to continue seeking evidence. My account explains one way people disseminating conspiracy theories accomplish this: by packaging conspiracy theories as part of narratives that are more likely to elicit intuitive judgments of truth, they ensure the audience is more likely to take them seriously. In other words, the narrative-based processes I described might help kickstart and influence a subsequent evidence-collection process.

Philosophers have also argued that beliefs in false conspiracy theories boil down primarily to which sources of information conspiracy theorists *trust*: whether they trust reliable, epistemically authoritative sources versus unreliable sources that peddle falsehoods. There are various ways to further cash out this idea (see, e.g., Cassam, 2016; Keeley, 1999; Levy, 2007; Nguyen, 2020). But it's difficult to deny the general idea that those putting their trust in sources like Alex Jones and Romana Didulo are making some kind of mistake.

My account again complements and helps to flesh out this sort of view. Typically, trust isn't unconditional in the sense that we accept everything a trusted source says, even when it strikes us as false or absurd (cf. Munro, 2023a, sec. 2.2). I might place a high degree of trust in my spouse, especially when it comes to her descriptions of mundane, everyday events; still, if I ask her why she didn't take out the garbage today and she responds with a far-fetched conspiracy theory about Obama spying on us through our trash, I likely won't believe everything she says. Sources of information that put forward far-fetched conspiracy theories risk their audience reacting in a similar way: even if the audience previously trusted them, they might not go along with it if the theory sounds too absurd. This again puts pressure on those disseminating conspiracy theories to present them in ways that make the audience initially find them believable and worth taking seriously.

5. The epistemic power of narratives

As per the previous section, there are various ways false conspiracy theories *could* be packaged to make them feel more familiar and easier to process than ugly truths which are cognitively difficult to entertain. This includes font legibility, listenability of a voice asserting the falsehood, or whether the falsehood is presented using familiar rhetorical flourishes. Someone looking to spread conspiracy theories could take advantage of any such tactics to spread falsehoods.

However, in this section, I'll argue that narrative-based illusions of grasping the truth are especially difficult to overcome, more so than for many other ways of presenting conspiracy theories. This has to do with how narratives make it especially difficult to critically reflect on falsehoods.

5.1. Overcoming illusions of grasping the truth: separating content from vehicle

Various methods for eliciting stronger intuitions of truth depend solely on properties of the representational vehicle through which information is conveyed. This is true for properties of the font or voice through which information is delivered, as well as things like cliches and familiar rhetorical flourishes. These methods don't depend on properties of the content conveyed, but merely on facts about its vehicle.

As such, it should be possible to overcome these illusions by cognitively separating content from vehicle. For example, after listening to a speech that sounds quite convincing, one can entertain its contents oneself in a way that's divorced from the qualities of the voice making the speech and from the particular rhetorical flourishes used. One can then consider whether these contents seem intuitively true in the way they did when presented in the original speech. If not, this is evidence that one has experienced a mere illusion of grasping the truth.

However, in the case of narratives that come to emotional resolutions, merely separating contents from vehicle won't have the same effect.

To see why, it's worth first understanding more concretely how we cognitively grasp the contents of narratives. Different areas of philosophical and empirical research have converged on the idea that processing narratives centrally involves sensory imagination. This is especially prominent in philosophical discussions of fiction. Intuitively, we grasp what's occurring in a fictional narrative (e.g., while reading a novel) by imagining the events it describes (Van Leeuwen, 2016). As Friend (2008) observes, this also seems true for nonfictional narratives: as we read a book that vividly describes a past event or historical occurrence, it also prompts us to construct mental imagery. Philosophers have also argued that we process testimony narrating sequences of past events by imagining its contents (Munro, 2022; Werning, 2020). All of these philosophical accounts cohere well with accounts from psychology, according to which processing both fictional and nonfictional narratives involves constructing mental imagery of the events described (Quinlan & Mar, 2020; Van Mulukom, 2020; Zacks et al., 2018). On such accounts, mental imagery allows us to grasp the narrative's contents: as the narrative describes some scene or event, we grasp what it's describing by constructing an imagistic mental model of that scene or event.

So, suppose you want to cognitively separate the contents of a narrative from the vehicle representing it. This would mean thinking about the events of a story in a way that's divorced from the properties of the medium through which the story was conveyed, such as the particular utterances, text, or video. You would do this by imagining the events the narrative described, since that's how we construct mental models of a narrative's events.

However, this wouldn't be sufficient to eliminate the illusion of grasping the truth caused by initially consuming a narrative with a satisfying emotional trajectory. That's because it isn't properties of the vehicle that arouse our emotions when we engage with narratives—it's the *contents* of the narratives that do. In other words, it's thinking about the events of a story, arranged in the trajectory that the narrative presents them, which leads to our emotional responses, which in turn cause our intuitive judgments of truth. When thinking about the Sandy Hook conspiracy narrative, for example, what arouses our emotions is imagining *politicians conspiring*, *a staged mass shooting*, and *Alex Jones bringing the perpetrators to justice*. Imagining the earlier events arouses negative emotions, and imagining the later events causes those emotions to be resolved.[7]

So, when one mentally separates a narrative's contents from the vehicle conveying them, one would just be re-imagining the very same trajectory of events.[8] This will evoke the same emotions and intuitions of truth that came from grasping the contents of the narrative in the first place. So, cognitively separating content from vehicle isn't sufficient to dispel these intuitions.

Of course, this doesn't make it *impossible* to continue reflecting on whether one's intuitive feeling of grasping the truth is illusory. However, this would be more difficult than for other ways of evoking such intuitions. When they result solely from properties of a representational vehicle, merely considering some content in a way that's divorced from that vehicle should be sufficient to dispel these intuitions. However, in the case of narratives that come to emotional resolutions, it's thinking about the content itself that generates the intuitions.

So, instead of merely divorcing content from vehicle, one would need to engage in more complex processes of critically reflecting on a narrative's contents. There are various ways this might

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[7] Strictly speaking, properties of the vehicle *can* contribute to our emotional responses. For example, Alex Jones delivering a speech about Sandy Hook in a passionate tone might arouse stronger anger than merely reading a text. However, such properties of narrative vehicles typically serve to *strengthen* emotional responses already aroused by imagined events. Stripping away the vehicle doesn't eliminate our emotional response, though it might dampen it.

[8] There's thus a sense in which, in narratives, the line between representational vehicle and content becomes blurred. For related discussion, see Fraser (2021), Gibson (2011), and Smuts (2009).

look. For example, one might mentally pull apart the events described by a narrative and think about them in isolation from one another, rather than imagining them as part of the overall, emotionally satisfying trajectory the narrative originally described. One might reflect on whether one really has good evidence that a narrative is true. Or, one might reflect on whether the contents of a narrative are realistic, in the sense that they cohere with one's background knowledge about the world. These methods require extra, more complex steps beyond just separating contents from vehicle.

Again, it's possible to perform such steps. And empirical evidence suggests engaging in more critical or reflective thinking does, to some extent, help people overcome intuitive judgments about conspiracy theories and misinformation (Bago et al., 2022; Pennycook & Rand, 2019; Swami et al., 2014). So, it's not as if presenting a conspiracy theory as part of an emotionally resolving narrative makes it *impossible* to overcome illusions of grasping the truth.

However, the next subsection argues that, with conspiracy narratives, it's also especially difficult to perform the extra, critical processes necessary to dispel intuitions of truth.

5.2. Critical reflection and imaginative absorption

Empirical evidence suggests that, the more *imaginatively absorbed* we become in a narrative, the less we subject its contents to critical scrutiny (Green & Brock, 2000; Hamby et al., 2018; Van Laer et al., 2014). One's degree of imaginative absorption depends on both the vividness of the imagery one constructs and the strength of one's emotional response to a narrative. Achieving such absorption requires one to attend closely to the contents one is imagining, which creates a kind of subjective distancing from reality and from one's background knowledge about the world—these drop out of one's conscious awareness, in the sense that one is actively attending only to the imagined story (for philosophical elaborations, see Chasid, 2021; Kampa, 2018).

This focused attention on the contents of a narrative explains why deep absorption is incompatible with critically scrutinizing a narrative's contents. Above, I described some ways such critical scrutiny might go. One could mentally pull apart the events described by a narrative and think about them in isolation; however, this would require pulling one's attention away from the story itself, devoting cognitive resources to carving up the story into individual events. Similarly, one could reflect on whether one has good evidence for the contents of the narrative, as well as whether the narrative coheres with one's background knowledge about the world; however, these processes would again require pulling one's attention away from the contents of the narrative, turning it instead to one's

evidence or background knowledge. So, these ways of critically reflecting on the contents of a narrative are incompatible with being deeply absorbed in that narrative.

Of course, if a narrative fails to cause one to become deeply absorbed in its contents, then there will be less of an obstacle to critically reflecting on these contents. This would occur if one's attention wasn't as strongly focused on the story. However, we should expect *conspiracy* narratives, specifically, to be very absorbing, due to how *attention-grabbing* their contents are.

Several properties of conspiracy narratives make them especially attention-grabbing. One is simply the way they replace ugly truths with emotionally satisfying narratives: as I argued above, it's cognitively difficult to pay attention to ugly truths, and the emotional arcs of conspiracy narratives naturally draw our attention instead. Conspiracy narratives also contain a lot of twists and thrilling plot points, claiming things in the world aren't as they appear on the surface; that makes them attention-grabbing the way any thrilling story is (much as, when an episode of a TV series ends on a twist, you just can't help but watch the next one). Moreover, conspiracy narratives typically concern heated topics like politics, corruption, medical freedom, and the like; when you hear someone talking about such topics, it can be difficult to resist paying attention (compare: being unable to resist reading the comments on a politically heated social media post or YouTube video). There's also the fact that conspiracy narratives essentially *make the audience characters in a story*, by claiming the establishment is trying to fool *them* and inviting them to join the resistance; it's natural to have your attention drawn more strongly by a narrative that concerns you, personally, compared with narratives that concern only distant third parties.

So, we should expect conspiracy narratives to be especially effective for generating imaginative absorption. This makes them especially powerful for generating persistent, difficult-to-overcome illusions of grasping the truth. As I argued in the previous subsection, dispelling these illusions requires more than just divorcing content from representational vehicle; it, furthermore, requires some extra critical reflection. However, such critical reflection is incompatible with becoming deeply absorbed in a narrative.[9]

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[9] This section's arguments fit well with the empirical finding that the most emotionally arousing conspiracy theories also tend to be the most believable and/or spread most quickly online (Bakir & McStay, 2018; Taylor-Jackson & Matthews, 2020; van Prooijen et al., 2022).

6. Conclusion

I've argued that people are more likely to believe conspiracy theories presented as part of emotionally resolving narratives. In virtue of their emotional trajectories, these narratives feel familiar and easy to grasp. When they're presented in place of ugly truths that feel cognitively difficult to entertain, this can give the conspiracy narrative a greater ring of truth. Furthermore, these narrative-based illusions of grasping the truth are especially pernicious, since they're harder to dispel than those generated by other ways of presenting misinformation.

I'll conclude with two, related takeaways about counteracting the spread of conspiracy theories: one about how the media can frame conspiracy theories to make them seem less believable, the other about presenting factual narratives to make them seem more believable.[10]

Inevitably, media coverage repeats conspiracy narratives when trying to expose and debunk them. The danger, however, is that people witnessing this coverage might be imaginatively swept up in these narratives, giving them a ring of truth. One way to mitigate this is to avoid presenting conspiracy theories in the narratively resolving ways their proponents do; instead, where possible, coverage of conspiracy theories should emphasize *failures* to come to emotional resolutions.

As Alex Jones might tell it, the Sandy Hook narrative ends with him heroically bringing the truth to light. However, even from the perspective of those buying into Jones' narrative, the facts haven't played out to such a satisfying resolution. His efforts led to families of murdered children being relentlessly harassed by conspiracy theorists, with no tangible results for Jones' cause (it's not as if it ever caught on widely with the public). Something similar goes for "Queen" Romana Didulo. Didulo paints grand narratives about her own power and authority; however, things haven't gone so well for her or her followers. Some were arrested after she directed them to arrest police officers, while others had their utilities shut off after she told them to stop paying bills. Didulo herself hasn't done much beyond traveling across Canada in an RV to attend parking lot meetups with fans (you'd expect the real Queen of Canada to use a private jet).

So, rather than presenting conspiracy theories in the ways proponents do, media coverage can emphasize how factual events have failed to unfold to emotional resolutions. This makes it less likely

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[10] These strategies aren't intended to be foolproof. Someone who already has a highly conspiratorial mindset may deeply distrust the media, meaning how the media presents conspiracy theories won't affect their beliefs either way. My proposals may be more effective for someone who is newly stumbling upon conspiracy theories.

someone will encounter emotionally satisfying conspiracy narratives and end up believing them because they generate intuitive judgments of truth.

This suggests another takeaway about the importance of, where possible, presenting the truth in a narratively compelling way. Often, this isn't possible while newsworthy events initially unfold—as stressed above, unfolding tragedies often don't have clear emotional resolutions. However, we shouldn't merely cover a tragic event then quickly move on to the next newsworthy item, giving the audience a sense that there's no emotional resolution to come. Instead, we can at least look for compelling narratives that unfold in the medium to long term.

For example, as Williamson (2022) chronicles, more emotionally satisfying narratives emerged from the Sandy Hook tragedy as time went on. Some victims' families found healing through advocacy that allowed good to come of their children's deaths. One parent, Scarlett Lewis, founded the "Jesse Lewis Choose Love Movement," a nonprofit (named after her son) that aims to prevent children from feeling hopeless and isolated like the killer did. Sandy Hook's community in Newtown, Connecticut also underwent a healing process: they eventually demolished and rebuilt the school, while erecting a permanent monument to the victims.

If people only see reports about tragic events themselves, the truth will continue to feel much more difficult to engage with than conspiracy narratives that have clear emotional resolutions. So, we should continue to look for factual stories that play out in more complete emotional arcs, thus counteracting the emotional upper hand initially held by conspiracy narratives.

There are limitations on how effectively these strategies can be implemented. I claimed the media should present information in emotionally compelling narrative form *when that information is true*, while emphasizing lack of narrative resolution for conspiracy theories *which are false*. However, various factors can lead journalists and media outlets to *think* they're publishing the truth when they aren't. This includes various sources of bias that lead to inaccuracies, for example: individual journalists' political biases; financial incentives for publishing what will most please one's audience; and pressure from the political establishment (for relevant discussion, see Gibbons, 2023; Williams, 2023). When one inadvertently publishes falsehoods, attempting to use the strategies I outlined may lead one to inadvertently behave like a conspiracy theorist, accidentally using emotionally compelling narratives to frame falsehoods.

So, whether trying to adopt these strategies results in a net epistemic benefit for one's audience depends on one's overall reliability. For those who tend to accurately classify truths and falsehoods, trying to adopt these strategies should be overall beneficial; the opposite is true for unreliable sources.

Still, the strategies described can function as an ideal at which we might try to aim, even while recognizing difficulties for achieving perfect implementation.

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