

Executive Summary Narratives about 'evil elites'

Insight into nature, development and understanding

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Executive Summary

Rationale for the study

In recent years, attention for conspiracy narratives has increased. Such narratives have become visible in a variety of contexts, including protests against corona measures, discussions about climate policy and migration, and international political developments. In the Dutch security context, the AIVD and the NCTV speak of an 'evil elite' narrative to indicate beliefs in which a small, international elite would work on a hidden plan to control, oppress or even decimate the world's population.

This 'evil elite' narrative touches on phenomena that have been receiving social and scientific attention for some time: distrust of power, questions about the legitimacy of institutions, anti-institutional-sentiments and so-called 'conspiracy theories'. With the rise of social media and the internet, globalization and recent societal crisis and geopolitical conflicts, the spread and visibility of such narratives seems to have increased.

Until now, there has been no structured overview of the large number and diversity of studies on conspiracy narratives focusing on elites or evil groups. The aim of this research is to fill this gap by systematically mapping existing knowledge, trends and blind spots in scientific and grey literature. The research was carried out by a research team from Erasmus University Rotterdam and Leiden University on behalf of the Research and Data Centre of the Dutch Ministry of Justice and Security.

Research questions and methods

The overarching research question that was central to this research is:

What is known from domestic and foreign scientific and grey literature about the content, the mutual relationships, the historical backgrounds, the scope, the growth potential and explanations for the popularity of the conspiracy narrative about an 'evil elite' and the underlying sub-narratives?

This question was answered on the basis of a *scoping review* in which a total of 221 articles, books, dissertations and reports were analyzed, on these narratives worldwide, from different disciplines, in five different languages and published between 1970 and March 2025.

By means of the *scoping review*, existing knowledge about different facets, characteristics and factors of the "evil elite narrative" and the various

sub-narratives could be mapped. Of course, this research has its limitations. For reasons of feasibility, only digitally available literature and a limited number of books were used. Also, the focus on literature in English, Dutch, German, French and Spanish has led to certain language areas, regions and countries, such as Asian countries, being relatively underrepresented. Furthermore, a scoping review implies that the literature is taken *at face value*, so that no judgment is made about the quality and outcomes of research.

Research findings

In this summary, the findings of this research will be shared by successively discussing what the scoping review has taught us about: 1) the content and form of conspiracy narratives about evil elites, 2) the subnarratives and their interrelationships, 3) time, place, origin and historical continuity of these narratives, 4) their scope, growth potential, 5) distribution and 6) factors that influence the popularity of these narratives.

1 | Content and form narrative

In most of the publications we analyzed, the authors do not speak in terms of an 'evil elite', but use alternative terms. Authors usually talk about conspiracy theories or conspiracy narratives. 'Evil elite' or 'evil group' narratives can be regarded as more concrete stories within the broader 'conspiracy narrative' where the emphasis is on the conspiring actors and their – in this case evil – agenda. The 'evil elite' historically took shape in the narratives in secret societies such as Freemasonry and the Illuminati and the supposed worldwide Jewish conspiracy. Whether the actors can actually be regarded as elites, in the sense of powerful groups, is not always clear on the basis of the literature; It can also be about 'evil groups' that are seen by others as powerful elites, even if there is no empirical support for that image.

This ambiguity is reflected in the distinction that can be made between conspiracy narratives from above and conspiracy narratives from below. The core of the 'top-down' conspiracy narrative – secret societies are responsible for chaos and revolution – could easily be fitted as a template into any situation in which elites knew their position was threatened or wanted to perpetuate or expand their power. Bottom-up conspiracy narratives are deployed by those who challenge the ruling power and try to convince the public of the machinations of the elite. An additional complication is that contemporary conspiracy narratives are directed against supposed elites, while those who produce and disseminate the conspiracy narratives can often be defined as elites themselves on the basis of political and economic position and power.

When (historical) subnarratives merge into so-called super conspiracies, a narrative emerges that most closely reflects the idea of "evil elite narrative".

Super conspiracies are described in the literature as conspiracy narratives in which new events and elements from various other conspiracies are integrated into an overarching conspiracy narrative. Examples of this are the New World Order narratives, such as The Great Reset, but also QAnon and the narrative of David Icke.

2 | Subnarratives and mutual relationship

The various subnarratives in the literature can be arranged according to the threats they pose in the eyes of the spreaders and supporters of such a narrative. These threats can first of all be directed against human autonomy. All conspiracy narratives mentioned in the literature presuppose the pursuit of certain power or the restriction of the freedoms of the groups in society which the evil conspirators turn against. In the sovereign citizen narrative, this threat is at the core.

Secondly, the literature offers insight into religious threats. Two types can be discerned: on the one hand, narratives that assume a threat *from* certain religious beliefs (e.g. the Jewish faith) and, on the other hand, narratives that point to a threat *to* religions (e.g. against Islam). Depending on time and place, different religions are alternately designated as the threatened party or the threatening party.

A third category of threats that can be recognized in the descriptions of most conspiracy narratives concerns political and economic threats. In the literature, the economic threats are invariably framed in a political context. Sometimes the political context dominates; think of the assassination of President Kennedy. Often, economic interests mix with political interests in the struggle for world power, for example, conglomerates of Big Pharma, the World Economic Forum, and media moguls.

A fourth category of threats that emerges from the conspiracy narratives in the analysed literature concerns cultural threats. The current narratives that focus on such threats are characterized in the literature as far-right and conservative. On the one hand, it concerns migration-related threats and on the other hand, threats from progressive or left-wing voices that are dismissed as 'woke'. The evil elites in these narratives are the actors who are supposed to stimulate migration, such as the left-wing 'elite' who are killing Western civilization by opening the door to mass migration and thus deliberately betraying their own people.

Threats to health and the environment form the fifth category. In the field of health, the literature revealed narratives about the coronavirus, AIDS, 5G, chemtrails, the role of the pharmaceutical industry and influential people and health organizations. According to the literature, threats in the field of the environment are actually debunked in conspiracy narratives. In particular, the climate crisis and nitrogen problem are said to be the inventions of an evil elite to control the population.

A final category is formed by technological or extraterrestrial threats. For technological threats, the analyzed literature refers to transhumanism. Transhumanism is an existing movement that strives to improve the human species and combat mortality through science and technology. In conspiracy narratives about transhumanism, these technological means would be used to subjugate the population. Extraterrestrial threats recurred in literature about the alien 'reptiles' mentioned by David Icke who would form the evil elite as a shadow government. Other narratives, however, present extraterrestrials and contact with them as positive, in line with an esoteric focus on "spiritual awakening" that these beings would help promote.

In the literature on the subnarratives, several threats regularly emerge at the same time. There is therefore mutual overlap and overlap with the narrative about the evil elite. This overlap applies first and foremost to which actors make up the evil elite, who is the victim and what the agenda is. Among the evil elite, there are some 'usual suspects' who recur in various conspiracy narratives: the Jews, the illuminati, the Freemasons, the Rockefellers, the Rothschilds, the pharmaceutical industry, government leaders, royal houses and influential persons such as George Soros and Bill Gates, including references to often one or more of these parties as 'the Cabal', cultural Marxists, Muslims, and refugees. Depending on time and place, the elite can also be formed by imperialist and colonial Western powers. According to the literature, many subnarratives are characterized by esoteric elements, spirituality and religion. Incidentally, it follows from the literature that various narratives distinguish the elite or '*the real puppetmaster*' and the accomplices. Education and mainstream media are counted among those accomplices.

In addition, 'elites' and 'groups' would alternate in the narratives. It seems that 'evil elites' characterize conspiracy narratives more than before, but even today narratives often target minorities who do not form an elite. However, according to the literature, especially in right-wing populist variants, there is a mixture of elites and minorities: the left-wing elite is evil, among other things, because they give minorities priority over their own population. Because of its intertwining with populism, which at its core postulates a strict division between an evil elite and the innocent people, everything that is associated with the 'elite' – institutions in the broad sense of the word – is also contaminated.

Elites are also constructed: groups that can be seen as elites on the basis of factual data about political and economic power, present themselves as victims of a constructed elite whose power would be culturally Marxist determined and would lie in the cultural sector, or in international institutions or the Deep State. By conjuring up an image of an all-powerful enemy that is out to destroy society, the de facto elite tries to further expand its own position of power. This observation is not new for our time: historical texts also point to how elites have tried to protect their own power in the course of history by pointing to others as the danger in conspiracy narratives.

3 | *Time, place, origin and historical continuity*

In the historical analyses within the literature, various images of conspiracies emerge from Roman times, the Middle Ages and later centuries. According to various authors, the groups accused of conspiracies fall under the category of minorities and outsiders, although a lot of power is often attributed to them in the narratives. The conspiracy narratives we know today would only have emerged from the late Middle Ages and were clearly recognizable in the Renaissance.

Conspirators who recurred in the historical studies are religious and political competitors, secret societies and outsiders and migrants. The religious groups that were discussed are: pagans, heretics, crusaders, Jews, Protestants, Catholics, Jesuits. Examples of political opponents who were cast suspicion are the Jacobins and, in more recent history, communists (or Bolsheviks) who can be recognized today in the fear of 'cultural Marxism'. The secret societies are the most influential groups that, according to the analyzed texts, have continued to play a role in contemporary conspiracy narratives: Freemasonry and the Illuminati. Furthermore – similar to the current The Great Replacement narrative – outsiders and migrants have been made suspicious over the centuries, based on the cultural threat that would emanate from the migrants, thereby in some cases aided by political opponents of those who felt threatened.

In the literature, the emergence of conspiracy narratives is sometimes discussed in the context of time and place. This context influences who is seen as conspirators and what their agenda is. Both international distribution and local colouring or cross-linking often take place.

The literature also points out that the internet has made it impossible to think geographically in terms of origin and subsequent dissemination of conspiracy narratives alone. Contemporary conspiracy narratives arise on social media platforms and thus spread around the world. With the rise of social media, conspiracy theorists can now deliver their messages directly to their audience, unfiltered by the gatekeeper function of traditional media. In addition, new media make the 'enemy' visible and recognizable, so that the attention in conspiracy narratives shifted from vaguely defined groups such as the Freemasons, to concrete public figures as protagonists in the conspiracy. New media outlets would also have contributed to a shift from an external to an internal enemy. However, it should be noted that so-called 'fifth columns' were never far away in conspiracy narratives and that 'older' forms of conspiracy narratives, in which the arrows are mainly aimed at minorities, have certainly not disappeared, according to the literature.

The rise of social media platforms also occupies an important place in literature. This rise would have made conspiracy narratives more visible through increased spread of global proportions. In addition, new players have emerged, such as influencers. Conspiracy narratives would also have become an attractive revenue model. Mixed with humour, irony and game elements,

conspiracy narratives have become part of modern culture in several ways, according to literature.

4 and 5 | Scope, growth potential and distribution

The scope and growth potential of conspiracy narratives about an evil elite are difficult to determine in a valid way. In general, it is not clear in the literature what can be understood by 'growth potential'. Moreover, research indicates that conspiracy narratives do not have to be hermetic and 'monological' and that the spillover to regular criticism, cultural interests or game experience is porous.

Valid data on the scope and growth potential of conspiracy narratives about an evil elite are lacking, because there is still little methodological and conceptual clarity, let alone agreement, on how scope and growth potential should be measured. The current boom in digitally-driven research on social media platforms provides a rich picture of information, but not necessarily an answer to the question of scope and growth potential. However, there is a fair amount of agreement in the literature, based on qualitative analyses, about the fact that belief in conspiracy narratives has become part of the cultural mainstream and has become the language of influential actors with political and economic power. This conclusion is sometimes disputed: there would be a long tradition of conspiracy thinking by people with power and influence and the current conspiracy narratives may be more visible, but that does not make them more influential than before.

Another way to look at scope and potential is from the perspective of the conditions mentioned in the literature for the emergence and spread of narratives about evil elites. Conducive conditions, such as social crises and far-reaching transformations, low trust in institutions, an alternative media ecology, (corruption) scandals, a strong international right-wing populist and right-wing radical movement that partly incorporates and propagates the narrative about evil elites and an ontologically unsafe future perspective, are abundant and form an indicator for the expectation that conspiracy narratives about evil elites may grow in the future. Stimulating conditions are also the fluidity and eclectic character of conspiracy narratives: they easily incorporate new events into the same core story.

There is still a relatively large amount of uncertainty in the literature about the influence of conspiracy narratives on democratic institutions. Is the declining trust in politics due to the spread of conspiracy narratives, for example, or is the problem more with politics? And how essential are the conspiracy narratives for those who value them?

6 | Factors related to popularity

The overarching picture from the analysed literature is that a multitude of factors play a role in the emergence, spread and popularity of conspiracy

narratives. These factors vary from the level of the individual to the immediate social environment and the broader societal context. Looking at the societal level, it is possible to divide it into factors around the historical context, the existence of complexity and crises, the political and economic context, including the role of populism, postmodernity and late capitalism and cultural factors. Several texts retrace how drastic societal changes feed conspiracy narratives through the complexity and experiences of crisis that accompany those changes.

In addition, the authors of the analyzed texts point out other political and economic developments that play a role in conspiracy narratives. These factors include in particular the role of abuse of power and repression, low gross national product, job insecurity and the actions of elites in the form of corruption or by spreading conspiracy narratives as a strategy to maintain power. This is also related to distrust of power.

In the texts analysed, the symbolic function of conspiracy narratives is one of the most frequently mentioned cultural factors in various historical and geographical contexts. This function is characterized by the moral motives that are embedded in the conspiracy narratives and the dualistic ideas anchored in religion and culture. In moments of social crisis, conspiracy narratives would offer a clear, dualistic distinction between good and bad that demands a struggle based on moral principles.

At the level of the group, various factors are reflected in the analyzed texts. These fall apart into perceptions of marginalization and (relative) deprivation on the one hand, and ingroup and outgroup mechanisms that feed conspiracy narratives, including social identity and belonging, on the other. In the literature, different experiences emerge at the group level about the connection between the threat, marginalization and deprivation of one's own group and the belief in conspiracy narratives in which other groups in society are identified as the problematic scapegoat. These feelings of threat and marginalization can be linked to Douglas and Sutton's observation that underneath many conspiracy narratives there are historical traumas and a collective fear that translate into a social identity as a victim. The identification of a scapegoat makes it possible not only to attribute setbacks to an external other, but also to improve the image and feeling about one's own ingroup. In this way, this mechanism can contribute to a positive group identity and to a sense of belonging.

In research into conspiracy narratives, factors at the level of the individual have been studied the most. These factors range from personal characteristics, emotions, cognitive factors and existential, epistemic or social motives. Part of the literature examines the relationship between conspiracy thinking and psychopathology, which turns out to be inconclusive. In cognitive explanations, the assumption is that those who believe in conspiracy narratives commit logical fallacies, such as attribution errors or *confirmation bias*. Personality traits that show a connection with the belief in conspiracy narratives looked at the role of sensation seeking and the so-called 'dark triad'

personality traits, namely narcissism, Machiavellianism and psychopathy. However, meta-evaluations did not find any significant results.

The results are also contradictory concerning the link between belief in conspiracy narratives and demographic factors. On the one hand, there is research that points to great heterogeneity within groups that believe in conspiracy narratives. On the other hand, there is research that sees a link with gender, education level, social position and political orientation.

Research has also focused on the motives of conspiracy narrative proponents, distinguishing three types of motives: epistemic, existential and social motives. Epistemic motives refer to the need for clear and unambiguous explanations for undesirable and far-reaching events and developments. Existential motives are about people's need to feel safe and secure and to experience control in situations that are perceived as threatening. Social motives are about striving for a positive image of one's own group and a positive self-image for the individual level.

Finally, properties of conspiracy narratives have been mentioned in the literature that help understand their survival from the perspective of the emotional resonance they offer with existing grievances. This also shows a connection with literature from which various functions of conspiracy narratives can be deduced. Together, these functions indicate that conspiracy narratives represent underlying grievances, grievances that can have a real basis. This applies, for example, to the criticism of those in power contained in these narratives, which addresses real forms of injustice and shortcomings of those in power.

Conclusion

In answer to the research question, it can be said that the literature points to both historical continuity and change in the evil elite narrative. Anti-Semitic conspiracy narratives live on to this day and are sometimes given a new look, such as the 'new' QAnon conspiracy that refers, among other things, to the ancient blood libel. Pandemics and diseases also guarantee a historical continuity of conspiracy narratives about evil elites or groups. In general, crises or far-reaching social transformations are a good breeding ground for the emergence of new conspiracy narratives, or a revival of existing conspiracy narratives.

But there are also differences. According to the literature, contemporary conspiracy narratives are more ambiguous and fluid, and focus more than in the past on internal enemies. In the West, the interpretation of the 'evil elite' changed partly under the influence of globalization, postmodern culture and social media: the 'system' is the evil force that deliberately harms the interests of the people. The 'system' is sometimes given a name and number. International institutions such as the United Nations, the World Economic Forum or the EU. Sometimes it is personal: families like the Rothschilds, George Soros, or Bill Gates. In countries that in the past were burdened by

colonial powers, the evil system is often the former colonizer with an imperialist agenda. At the same time, there are still remnants of 'old' narratives about minorities; the Jews are never far away, refugees are destroying the culture and are out to take power, the LGBTQ+ community and feminism are destroying the family. In the populist-right discourse, these flavors are connected. The elite is left-wing, and evil because they betray the interests of the white population. Currently, a conservative and sometimes reactionary movement is emerging worldwide against the ideas and articles of faith of the Enlightenment; the movement harks back to romantic nationalism, in which communists and socialists, freethinkers, Jews and foreigners have always been the enemies of blood, soil and nation.

In literature, the theme of 'power' is mainly addressed in historical studies. It pays attention to the actors who use conspiracy narratives for political, economic or religious goals and interests and much less attention to all kinds of individual characteristics of those who go along with the narratives. The explanation may be that such data are missing from historical material. It may also indicate a dominance of political and scientific paradigms in which psychological, individual explanations oppose research into power structures and effects. This raises questions about the position of science in relation to power. The paradox is that conspiracy narratives fill that gap: they point to the role of power in explaining social problems. But the relative absence of research into power can also be a reflection of a changing social reality in which 'power' is more difficult to locate. Questions about the role of power could provide welcome guidance for follow-up research.

Finally, what is often assumed in the literature, but not yet empirically researched and not included in the research questions of this study, is the idea of the harmfulness of the belief in narratives about an evil elite, but also the harmfulness of societal responses to these narratives. These are issues that require further investigation. On the other hand, distrust of politics does not necessarily mean that the democratic legal order is under pressure, according to the advisory committee on Strengthening the Resilience of the Democratic Legal Order in 2023. Blind trust is just as problematic as blind distrust. Healthy skepticism is a democratic virtue. Critical citizens with little political trust can, under certain conditions, give a new impulse to the democratic process. It is precisely the democratic legal order that is based on a certain degree of distrust, on the insight that power corrupts and must therefore always be forced to account and challenged by countervailing power.