

# Guiding interpretation towards deproblematization: A video interview with a Climate Change denier analysed as conspiracy theory

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**Abstract.** Climate Change disinformation is causing lasting damage to both sociopolitical spheres and our very own biosphere. The present article identifies the meaning-making mechanisms of Climate Change conspiratorial discourse on social media by analysing the YouTube video *Why I Said Global Warming is the Biggest Fraud in History*, which had reached more than 758,000 views (May 2023) before the channel was deleted (August 2023). A qualitative empirical semiotic analysis was carried out focusing on discourse in which Climate Change denial is understood as conspiracy theory, that is, a mode of interpretation. The analysed conspiracy discourse creates identities and shapes social relations in the form of dichotomic oppositions/conflicts between those who spread illegitimate information (the enemy) and those with access to the truth (a symbolic elite). In this context, the fragmentation of science into “real” and “fake” is as dangerous as the scientific community’s loss of authority. The analysis of this video shows how Climate Change is represented as a fraud and how possible policy responses to it are therefore represented as scams. The main effect of such discourse is deproblematization, for it provides people with reasons to reject proposals for actions that seek to mitigate the climate crisis.

**Keywords:** political semiotics; critical discourse analysis; social media; disinformation; strategic communication; anti-scientific conspiracy theories

## Introduction

In essence, Climate Change deniers argue that the well-publicized scientific consensus regarding the human impact on the atmospheric and meteorological conditions of Earth is “manufactured or illusory and that some nefarious force – be it the United Nations, liberals, communists, or authoritarians – want to use Climate

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Change as a cover for exerting massive new controls over the populace” (Uscinski *et al.* 2017: 1). Even though more than 97% of publishing climate scientists today agree that human activity impacts the planet, “there is a small, politically charged portion of the public that actively opposes” this consensus (Sherwin 2021: 556).

What may be one of the most famous cases is that of the economist Bjørn Lomborg, who published a book in which he suggests that problems of change in climate are undocumented assumptions, and that in every significant measurable field, human activity was shown to have only improved environmental and developmental conditions (Bergh 2010). Following Lomborg’s rise to fame, climate scientists have worked to dispute his claims by reviewing his work in scientific journals and showcasing how Lomborg has misinterpreted data and reached dishonest results (Bergh 2010). Despite these efforts and the overwhelming scientific evidence, others like Lomborg (see Keen 2021 for more examples) have still been casting doubt upon what is now a mainstream scientific opinion. This has contributed to the rise of conspiracy theories which make climate change “a unique case in that the scientific agreement has solidified, but public opinion at the same time has polarized” (Uscinski *et al.* 2017: 2).

Largely, Climate Change deniers come in four shapes: those who (1) deny that any significant rise in temperature is occurring; (2) contest its anthropogenic nature, stating that variations in climate are natural; (3) accept that human activity affects the climate, but argue that there are no noticeable negative impacts on the environment; and (4) cast doubt on the existence of scientific consensus (Björnberg *et al.* 2017: 235). Research has also shown that conservatism and free market endorsement are statistically correlated to rejection of climate science (Lewandowsky *et al.* 2013; Uscinski *et al.* 2017), and that “conservative think tanks with funding from vested interests and political action committees have played a primary role in sourcing misinformation” to cast doubt about Climate Change (Sherwin 2021: 556). Hence, the consequences of Climate Change denial – as arguably “the most coordinated and well-moneyed form of science denial” (Björnberg *et al.* 2017: 235) – mostly come in the form of a decrease in public support, steering policy away from addressing this issue (Sherwin 2021: 556; Uscinski *et al.* 2017: 11) heavily affecting the future of the planet.

Given the relevance of this issue, the present article investigates Climate Change denial discourse as conspiracy theory – here defined from the perspective of semiotics as a representation (a narrative) that explains Climate Change (an event) as resulting from the activities of a group of people with covert and malicious intentions (adapted from Leone *et al.* 2020: 44 and from Birchall 2006: 34). In this sense, “as a mode of interpretation [...], conspiracy theory might raise questions about cultural analysis, about interpretation and knowing *per se*” (Birchall 2006: 66).

Parallely, Butter and Knight (2020: 33) advise against treating conspiracy theory only as something destructive or harmful, arguing that it is often a creative response. Similarly, Thórisdóttir *et al.* (2020: 305) state that such theories can be “a constructive force in politics”, while Uscinski (2018: 234) goes so far as to argue that conspiracy theories are necessary for the healthy functioning of a democratic society, since they offer opposing political ideas, helping to “balance against concentrations of power”. Douglas *et al.* (2019: 20) suggest that “conspiracy theories may be associated with intentions to engage in political action against elites”, occasionally triggering “behaviours aimed at challenging the *status quo*” which may, in turn, lead to the exposure of inconsistencies in official accounts of events as well as pressuring governments to be more transparent (Thórisdóttir *et al.* 2020; Douglas *et al.* 2019).

Nevertheless, more often than not, they “have negative political and societal consequences” (Thórisdóttir *et al.* 2020: 305), since “conspiracy theories about the politically powerful may work differently than those involving [...] minorities” (Bergmann *et al.* 2020: 260). In other words, many conspiracy theories serve to strengthen existing power relations, further excluding certain groups from decision-making processes – which is mostly the case with Climate Change denial. Hence, a possible way to present “the difference between the political character of social struggles and conspiracy theories is that the latter are often tools in the hands of the political elite” (Puumeister 2020: 523).

Even if there are benefits to be found in the existence of conspiracy theories, it is important to distinguish between what Massimo Leone (2017) calls deconstructive and conspiracy hermeneutics. There is a crucial difference between criticism and conspiracy thinking which “cannot be made in terms of contents” but rather “must be made in terms of argumentative patterns” (Leone 2017: 229), that is, form. Despite many authors believing that conspiracy theories have beneficial effects, the way in which these effects may be achieved – that is, the specific rhetoric adopted by conspiracy theories based on the symbolical reproduction of segregation – is already prejudicial in itself.

According to Douglas *et al.* (2019: 22), “it has become increasingly clear that conspiracy theories are likely to affect important social and political outcomes”. Consequently, it is extremely relevant to study their communication process and its social and political implications. The authors further suggest that “future research could begin to examine the interplay between ideology and conspiracy belief” by questioning how ideological variables are shaped in conspiratorial discourse, conclusively affecting social and political behaviour (Douglas *et al.* 2019: 22).

From the point of view of semiotics, Leone (2016: 15) suggests that the main problem of conspiracy theories surrounding science matters “lies not in their supposed logical or scientific fallacy”, but in how they voice a social preoccupation, an “anguish toward the increasing deconstruction of scientific [...] knowledge in the new digital arenas”. Therefore, strategies such as increasing public cognitive skills, enhancing critical/analytical competences, and raising the levels of digital media literacy by themselves are not enough to stop anti-scientific discourse on social media. The problem runs deeper than just the matter of identifying logical fallacies in arguments or debunking false information; rather, it concerns the ways in which conspiracy narratives are semiotically constructed in terms of conflict.

For this reason, a better understanding of the formal conditions that allow conspiracy theories to shape interpretation may provide insights into the designing of more appropriate countermeasure programmes. By examining the semiotic mechanisms that may lead to influencing behaviour and generating action (including the construction of strongly polarized conflict, central to the logic of conspiracy theories), we may contribute to the development of new strategies to prevent and counter the spread of conspiracy theories. After all, without such understanding of the problem, uncovering solutions will lose viability.

In the interest of tackling this issue, the present paper regards a case study of Climate Change denial discourse on YouTube, with the aim of pointing to the interpretative mechanisms and discursive conditions on the level of form that constitute and help spread such types of discourses, by describing how subjects and conflicts were constructed in the analysed text.

Overall, current research on conspiracy theories and their societal impact is vast, interdisciplinary, and its international scope traverses geographic boundaries (Madisson 2014: 274; Douglas *et al.* 2019: 21). Past works have treated Climate Change denial as a conspiracy theory and analysed it through several qualitative and quantitative means (especially through statistical analysis, linking belief in other conspiracy theories to Climate Change denial), in the fields of psychology, communication, political and social sciences, as well as the humanities (Lewandowsky *et al.* 2013; Uscinski *et al.* 2017; Björnberg *et al.* 2017; Weigmann 2018; Douglas *et al.* 2019; Giry, Tika 2020; Sherwin 2021). Climate Change denial has also been analysed semiotically by Paul Adams (2022), whose research draws from interviews with farmers to explore how people on the receiving end of conspiracy theories understand Climate Change.

In the present paper, this subject is explored by means of empirical semiotic analysis of a text in video format that can be understood as being a *product* of Climate Change denial conspiratorial discourse. The analysis follows a methodological framework that results from the blending of four methods (described in

the next section), thus configuring a novel approach to the subject. The YouTube video adopted as an object of study was selected due to its popularity and consequent capacity to impact large audiences, for both individuals featured in the video possess substantial social media following counts, having also appeared together in a previous video which has reached 2.5 million views. Besides its potential reach, this paper argues that this object is relevant since it presents a good example of how anti-scientific conspiracy theories are constructed, inasmuch as it fits the model (adapted from Leone *et al.* 2020 and Birchall 2006) defined at the beginning of the introduction, providing clear clues as to how this discourse follows anti-scientific conspiracy theory logic, and how other discourses pertaining to the same category may also be thus identified.

The present study seeks to contribute to the research on conspiracy theories by proposing an investigation into a popular product of Climate Change denial discourse, pointing to the formal conditions that allow this type of discourse to shape interpretation. As such, the analysis of this specific object may consequently be used to draw bigger and more holistic understandings of Climate Change conspiracy theories, not only as flawed argumentation strategies, but as modelling, that is, as a guide for interpretation that has harmful effects on the development of society.

To achieve these objectives, the following Research Questions (RQ) are posed:

- (RQ1) What are the primary meaning-making mechanisms and signifying practices instrumentalized in this text to shape ideological variables?
- (RQ2) What types of relations, social identities, and conflicts are constructed in this discourse with regards to the scientific community?
- (RQ3) What is the strategic aspect behind Climate Change denial discourse and its potential effect (how might belief feed into action)?

## **Materials and methods**

The material under analysis is a video lasting nine minutes and 52 seconds and entitled *Why I Said Global Warming is the Biggest Fraud in History – Dan Pena | London Real*, uploaded to the London Real YouTube channel in July 2018. It was among the five most popular videos of the channel, having been viewed more than 758,000 times as of May 2023. Around August 2023, however, the London Real channel was deleted; therefore, the video is no longer available for viewing.<sup>2</sup> For

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<sup>2</sup> Although the channel no longer exists, the video can still be retrieved from the Internet Archive Wayback Machine (last accessed in Nov. 2023), and it is also available upon request from the author.

an analysis to be possible, a transcription of relevant parts of the interview was carried out with references provided to the time (mm:ss) the quotations originally appeared in the video.

London Real was a weekly online talk show inaugurated over a decade ago, in 2011. Despite its longevity of more than a decade, the YouTube channel only came into popularity recently,<sup>3</sup> after its host and founder Brian Rose started producing videos with guests he considers “controversial” (Ondrak 2020). It is important to highlight that the YouTube videos were excerpts of content that is posted in full only on the London Real website (where one must subscribe and agree to be sent marketing communications to be conceded access).

It is also worth mentioning that the choice of this media product (a video) has methodological consequences, namely the fact that the text has an explicit author. A conspiracy theory does not have one single definite author, requiring the characterization of a Model Author for its analysis (Madisson, Ventsel 2020). In this sense, it may be possible to understand conspiracy theory as a type of ‘speech genre’ (Bakhtin 1986), whilst particular texts – as single meaningful units – often do have a specific author, which is the case of the material analysed here.

As for the methodology of analysis, the present research focuses on discourse, using semiotics as the foundation and employing mixed methods of qualitative analysis, namely Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough 1995); Political Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, Fairclough 2013); Relational Political Analysis (Selg, Ventsel 2020); and Semiotic Approach to Strategic Conspiracy Narratives (Madisson, Ventsel 2020).

As a methodological perspective, semiotics presents three interrelated levels of analysis (Leone *et al.* 2020), namely:

- (1) conspiracy theory analysed as modelling system (as mode of interpretation); allows for the identification of meaning-making mechanisms (RQ1);
- (2) conspiracy theory analysed as representation (as text); relates to instrumentalized discursive and signifying practices (RQ1);
- (3) analysis of the processes of identity construction and self-description in conspiracy theories (RQ2).

Since this paper focuses on the Climate Change conspiracy theory as a discursive event (as an instance of language use), it is possible to relate these three levels of semiotic analysis with the three dimensions of discourse (and the perspectives through which discourse can be analysed) as described by Fairclough:

<sup>3</sup> In May 2020, the London Real YouTube channel had 1.83 million subscribers (Ondrak, Joe 2020. London Real is falling down. Logically. Retrieved from: <https://www.logically.ai/articles/london-real-is-falling-down> on 11 January 2022). By December 2022, the number had jumped to 2.18 million, indicating a recent rise in popularity.

- (1) text – textual analysis consists of linguistic description, encompassing the “analysis of the texture of texts, their form and organization” (Fairclough 1995: 4); complementary to Level 2;
- (2) discourse practice – intertextual analysis is the interpretation of the relationship between text production, consumption, and distribution, as well as genre (language use associated with a social activity) and orders of discourse (relationships of complementarity, inclusion/exclusion, and opposition between discursive practices of a social domain). As such, “analysis of texts should not be artificially isolated from analysis of institutional and discursive practices within which texts are embedded” (Fairclough 1995: 9). Texts are situational, but the relation between text and context *may be* generalizing. Intertextual analysis thus links text to context,<sup>4</sup> relating to Level 1 above;
- (3) sociocultural practice – social analysis consists in the explanation of the discursive event as a whole, relating to society and culture, since social and cultural phenomena are realized in the textual properties of a text (Fairclough 1995: 4); relates to Level 3 and helps answer RQ3.

To carry out analysis on the second and third levels more thoroughly (and better answer RQ2), I am also drawing from the methodology proposed by Peeter Selg and Andreas Ventsel (2020), where the focus is on form (as a network of relations) rather than content (as in ‘substance’), which is a preoccupation that already appeared in what has been described above as ‘textual analysis’ (Fairclough 1995). In this view, components of a discursive event cannot exist apart from it, which also means that such aspects do not precede the event in time (as the components spring into existence, so does the event itself). Comparable to the relational nature of the sign in semiotics (not intelligible in isolation), political communication and its elements as well as social context are to be analysed “separately, but *not as being separate*” (Selg, Ventsel 2020: 215). From this perspective, sign systems, meaning-making, communication, and social identities are conceptualized “in terms of power relations” (Selg, Ventsel 2020: 7).

In a complementary manner, I further draw from the methodology proposed by Mari-Liis Madisson and Ventsel, who describe conflict construction as the core of conspiracy theories, “characterised by strongly polarised identity creation”

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<sup>4</sup> Intertextuality (Kristeva 1980) and interdiscursivity (Fairclough 1995) call for the characterization of text and discourse as paradoxical phenomena, where there is a unity (a whole with boundaries) but at the same time this whole “emerges from an open, uncountable plurality of heterogeneous and multidimensional components” (Selg, Ventsel 2020: 127). In other words, even though “text is usually understood as a monologue”, it is actually a dialogue (especially when it is in cyberspace – a place of interchange) and therefore, “it cannot have closure in any strict sense” (Sonesson 1998: 18).

(Madisson, Ventsel 2020: 37). Relating to the first level of semiotic analysis (conspiracy theory as a modelling system), conspiracy narratives model the world “as two sides in a permanent conflict situation”, and the symbolic function of such narratives is strategic, as they “offer an organising and meaningful narrative” to existence (Madisson, Ventsel 2020: 38).

To understand matters of strategy and the potential effects of messages (RQ3), the analysed text is taken as ‘political discourse’, which is, according to Isabela Fairclough and Norman Fairclough (2013), a form of practical argumentation that can ground decision. In other words, political discourse is premised on the capacity of actors to drive change, which in turn implies strategy – that is, actors can develop strategies (plans of action) to change the state of affairs in particular directions (Fairclough, Fairclough 2013: 24–26). From this perspective, even though strategies have a discursive dimension, since they are developed and formulated in discourse, “argumentation cannot be viewed as a ‘discursive’ strategy in itself”, because strategies “involve goals which are outside and beyond discourse, i.e. they involve desired changes in the world, not in discourse” (Fairclough, Fairclough 2013: 24–25). Therefore, the focus of analysis is on how the “ways of representing the world enter as premises into reasoning about what we should do” (Fairclough, Fairclough 2013: 86), or how beliefs feed into action (RQ3). In other words, discourse as representation (Level 2 – conspiracy theory as text) comprises premises of practical arguments and serves as reasons for action, “not only describe[ing] what social reality is” (Level 1 – conspiracy theory as modelling), “but also what it should be” (Fairclough, Fairclough 2013: 103).

At last, it is relevant to point out that the interests of “micro” social analysis can be understood as forms of social action, existing in a dialectical relationship with “macro” social concerns (Fairclough 1995). This paper works with an instance of a discourse, seeking to identify practices instrumentalized in it that are believed to be operative also in other texts belonging to the same discursive context, following Geertz’s (1973) hermeneutic notion that cultural analysis is meant to discern critical structures and established codes from specific instances that can later be applied to new understandings of the system and its rules that govern these instances. Despite the limitations of this study – working within the limits of discourse analysis – the investigation of something particular (a video) can still be revealing of superstructures.



## 1. Transcript analysis

Ideologies cannot be disassociated from the understanding of discourse (Fairclough 1995: 71); however, to say that a discourse works ideologically is not the same thing as to say that it is false. In fact, it has little to do with judgements of truth or falsity<sup>5</sup> *per se*, relating instead to whether statements are well-grounded and how discourse “contributes to the reproduction of relations of power” (Fairclough 1995: 18). Additionally, power – in the sense of a semiotics of power – is also textual, which is to say it is constitutional of signification and meaning (Selg, Ventsel 2020: 108). Arising out of this foundation, the present section seeks to provide an analysis of the ideological aspects of the video based on rhetorical practice, grounding strategies, and power relations.

### 1.1. Rhetorical practice

From the video transcription excerpt found below (where BR stands for Brian Rose and DP for Dan Peña), ideological elements – implicit content or, in Gramscian terms, ‘common sense’ – can be identified as taking part in meaning-making.

00:03 BR: We were on stage and a woman got up and asked you a question about Global Warming. And you went on to explain why you don’t believe in it. Uh, you said you changed your – no, you said you’ve got some new evidence recently

00:12 DP: Yep

00:14 BR: What happened that night?

00:15 DP: Ok

00:16 BR: Why did that clip go viral?

00:17 DP: The lady, uh, said “I’ve children and you’ve got a few bucks, and don’t you want – I wanna leave the world a better place for my kids”, essentially what she was saying

00:26 BR: Right. Which is a good question

00:27 DP: [shrugs] Yeah, it’s fine

00:28 BR: Do you?

00:29 DP: Yeah, I – I’d like my children – I want my children very much, but I realize it’s up to them, it’s not up to me. You see? I put responsibility –

00:37 BR: You are one of the biggest force-multipliers in the world

00:39 DP: Yeah, but I

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<sup>5</sup> Even if ideology does not equal falsity, it is still in the domain of critical discourse analysis to question truth, through exclusion (omission), distortion, or falsification of content (Fairclough 1995: 18).

00:40 BR: They don't have a

00:41 DP: It's up to the individual. I can give you all the information, but if you don't pull the trigger and take action...

That which is excluded from a text is often overlooked in textual analysis (Fairclough 1995: 210) and yet the choice of what *not* to say is as relevant as the choice of what to say. Peña or Rose could have described the occasion that they are talking about (first mentioned by Rose at 00:03) in a more explicit and detailed manner, but they chose not to. All the viewer knows going into this video is that Peña was on stage (Where? Why? What was the subject he was talking about that prompted the question from the lady? Was she in the audience or was she part of some panel together with Peña?).<sup>6</sup> Since the viewer has virtually no contextual information regarding this occasion and is presented with an unclear account of what precisely was questioned during that event in the first place, the focus falls inadvertently on Peña's answer instead of the question that preceded it.

When Peña says "don't you want-" (00:17), he cuts himself off, choosing to change the subject of the phrase from 'you' to 'I'. "Don't you want" previously referred to the lady asking something of Peña. By shifting it to "I wanna", the subject falls back to the lady, who is being quoted. Hence, wanting a better world is now a desire from the part of the lady. Based on "I've children and you've got a few bucks" and "I wanna leave the world a better place for my kids", one can assume the lady was referring to the idea that people with financial resource have a responsibility towards the world. What is said at 00:29 can be understood as something along the lines of "I also want my children to have a better world", which is quickly followed up by "but I realize it's up to them, it's not up to me". Here, we see Peña redirecting the responsibility to the next generation, concomitantly freeing his own from being held accountable.

At 00:37, Rose recalls the fact that Peña is "one of the biggest force-multipliers in the world". Peña's response at 00:41 is, again, the redirection of responsibility: "It's up to the individual. I can give you all the information, but if you don't pull the trigger and take action..." (00:41). Recalling the change of subject occurring at 00:17 (from "don't *you* want" to "*I* wanna"), it is interesting to see how the meaning shifts with this switch: *if you want a better world, it is your responsibility*.

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<sup>6</sup> The "clip that went viral" mentioned by Rose (00:16), containing the information about the event being discussed at the beginning of this interview, was another video of the London Real channel entitled *Is Global Warming The Biggest Fraud In History?* which had more than 2.5 million views (as of June 2023). By watching this other video, one may find inconsistencies between what has been recorded and Peña's retelling of the situation. Although the channel no longer exists, this video can still be retrieved from the Internet Archive Wayback Machine (last accessed in October 2023), and it is also available upon request from the author.

It is important to highlight that nowhere in his answer did Peña acknowledge his financial status. The choice of expressions such as “you’ve got a few bucks” and “force multiplier”, instead of “rich” or “in possession of a great amount of money” is interesting to note. In his answer (00:41), Peña mentions “giving information”,<sup>7</sup> yet he completely ignores the financial aspect of the question. One can interpret this omission along the same lines: *it does not matter that I am in possession of great financial resources, it is not up to me to fix the world, it is up to you, the one who is asking*. Clearly, such an explicit statement would not be received well by any audience. However, the way Peña puts it – by avoiding touching on the financial subject and giving answers that are hard to follow – his discourse ends up as quite appealing, especially to neoliberals inclined towards meritocracy and individualism (“It’s up to the individual” – 00:41). This way, Peña’s discourse has an inspiring effect: *change is in your power, you need to pull the trigger and take action*.

Furthermore, it is possible to recognize that so far the only instances when Global Warming was explicitly mentioned were at the very start of the interview, when Rose says “let’s talk about Global Warming” (00:01) and “asked you a question about Global Warming” (00:03). After that, Peña mentions “leave the world a better place” as a supposed quotation of what the lady was saying, and from that point on, both Peña and Rose only refer vaguely to a so-called “responsibility” – at least until 01:53 when the words “Global Warming” are explicitly said once again. Until then, it is not clear what this responsibility or “make the world better” precisely means.

## 1.2. Grounding strategies

Another excerpt of the interview provides more examples of other such “common” processes, relations, and structures that are often taken for granted in discourse:

07:35 DP: Now, since then, since the thing went viral because of your movie premiere, I had my crack-staff do some research, and then I double-checked the research, only found one error, and the, uh... you know how many people have been to the North and South Pole? Both? Since the beginning of motherfucking time? Recorded time

08:03 BR: Couple of hundred?

<sup>7</sup> This phrase gains another layer of meaning when one is aware of contextual information regarding Peña’s main occupation nowadays, which is selling coaching courses on public speaking, motivation, administration, and how to become as financially successful as himself (Sahagún, Louis 2021. How a scrappy Chicano from L.A. Came to own a Scottish castle. *Los Angeles Times*. Retrieved from: <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2021-04-19/how-a-scrappy-chicano-from-la-came-to-own-a-scottish-castle>, 11 January 2022). 2021). Quite literally, Peña has made a business out of “giving information”.

- 08:04 DP: [gesticulates down]  
 08:05 BR: Just you and Sally?  
 08:06 DP: No, no, no. [...] Not counting the teams, but the lead people?  
 08:12 BR: Yeah?  
 08:13 DP: Ten people, plus Sally and I. Twelve! Since the beginning of fucking time  
 08:20 BR: [nods]  
 08:22 DP: You know how many of these other ten are bitching about Global Warming? [pause] Zero!

In this excerpt, Peña is presenting information that he knows for a fact. As far-fetched as it may seem that only twelve “lead people” have ever been to the North and South Poles since the beginning of recorded time, the question here is not whether Peña is providing a “faithful” representation of reality, but rather, which signifying practices he is using to ground his affirmation, to convince people that he is conveying reliable information. The way this is done is by presenting a deductively valid argument that is constructed onto false premises:

*Premise 1:* Twelve people have ever been to the North and South Poles.

*Premise 2:* None of these people are complaining about Global Warming.

*Argument:* Global Warming is a hoax.

Surely, there is one premise that is missing from that argument for it to be deductively valid, which would be:

*Premise 3:* Only people who have been to the North and South poles are able to assess the veracity of Global Warming.

For the sake of discussion, let us assume that Premise 3 is subjectively included in Peña’s argumentation. Therefore, his argument

[...] is deductively valid, because it is not possible both for its premises to be true and the conclusion to be false. If, for some reason, the premises were true, then the conclusion would have to be true. However, the argument is not sound (because the premises are actually false). Unlike soundness, validity has nothing to do with the actual truth of the premises. (Fairclough, Fairclough 2013: 37)

The example below also displays how the deductive validity of Peña’s arguments are not dependent upon empirical evidence, but “solely on the meanings of the terms” (Fairclough, Fairclough 2013: 37).

00:51 Sally and I were in the South Pole, 2011, and we’re there and there’s a big half-a-million-dollar scientific station there, that’s mostly funded by the US

government, and uh, the scientists came over and gave us these presentations. They had at that time- they'd drilled five, or six, or seven thousand cores uh, in the South Pole. [...] And so he's going through these cores and he says: fifteen thousand years ago it was two- uh, one point nine six degrees warmer Celsius than today and- STOP STOP STOP! Let's go back to that, how do you know that? And then all these MIT, CalTech, all these guys- oh, because this equals that bullshit, bullshit. We know for- absolutely within a millionth of a percent, it was warmer.

As Fairclough (1995: 139) puts it, one can see here the “instrumentalization of discursive practices, involving the subordination of meaning to, and the manipulation of meaning for, instrumental effect”. In the quote above, Peña mentions people from the MIT and CalTech who allegedly told him that the South Pole was warmer in the past than it is in the present (“because this equals that”). Supposedly, these scientists came to this conclusion by drilling a non-specific number of (“five, or six, or seven thousand”) cores in the South Pole. Moreover, CalTech and the MIT are world-famous institutions known by most people to be trustworthy sources of information (highly naturalized ideology). Therefore, quoting these institutions is a way to ground a statement. The same can be applied to the use of the word ‘scientists’, which represents actors that, given their role in society and our ideological preconceptions, are also imbued with the notion of legitimacy and reliability.

To a similar effect, Peña quotes the journal *Scientific American*:

02:12 DP: They say it has nothing to do with the hairspray, the ozone, nothing, zero. In fact, if you read *Scientific American*, [...] you would've known three months ago they said for the first time in forty years the ozone- what do you call- is uh, thickened up again.

In summary, by referencing institutions and social actors which, due to our background knowledge, are considered reliable information sources, Peña grounds his premises to convince the viewer of the soundness of his argument.

Furthermore, there are also strategies that Peña uses to characterize himself as reliable. At 07:35, he states: “I had my crack-staff do some research and then I double-checked the research, only found one error.” The fact that he was able to find one error in his crack-staff’s research seems to point to how capable and knowledgeable he is regarding the subject (even though viewers cannot be sure what this subject precisely *is*). Similarly, Peña mentions that he was supposed to be on a panel in George Mason University (08:34), once again attesting to his status as an academically respected person in possession of valid information to be shared.

Interestingly, Rose seems to pick up on Peña's strategies, since he subsequently poses the following question, getting the following reply:

08:49 BR: And so you're saying because you were at the South, you were at the North, I mean, it doesn't make you an expert, are you saying-

08:53 DP: No, no, but I talked to the experts. Who-

08:55 BR: Ok. And none of them buy it?

08:56 DP: These journalists! These fucking journalists that are writing about it, they haven't talked to dick! They haven't talked to anybody. Nobody has asked me what I saw there. Nobody has asked me, the scientists that I met with.

The word 'experts' serves a similar function to that of 'scientists', referring to people whose role in society serves to characterize them as reliable information sources. Having "talked to the experts" (08:53), while his critics ("these journalists" – 08:56) have supposedly not, Peña establishes that only he is in possession of the truthful, legitimate information regarding Global Warming.

## 2. Form/content

So far, it seems clear how ideology permeates the conversation on the textual level (such as using the subject 'you' instead of 'I' to redirect responsibility), interpretation level (using deductively valid arguments based on false premises), and socio-cultural level (referencing reliable institutions and societal actors to ground statements). Besides, the very fact that Rose and Peña are taking turns while speaking is also dependent on ideology (what Fairclough calls 'orderliness').

Additionally, background knowledge of what the situation (an interview) requires is what defines the social relationship between Rose and Peña (as 'host' and 'guest'), as well as the roles that this relationship entails (the guest respectfully answers the questions from the host). Further preconceptions of the situation (a YouTube interview) allow Peña to swear and cuss throughout the conversation, which he probably would not do, for instance, on television – a simple example of how contents are realized in forms, and different forms entail different contents (Fairclough 1995: 188).

The relational analysis framework (Selg, Ventsel 2020) mentioned in the methods section consists of general labels or categories referring to ideal types where one may identify certain prevailing logics of political articulation (not ideological content). Since a "pure" form of communication exists nowhere but in theory, I am highlighting only the most predominant form that can be identified in the

discourse of this video, which is ‘phatic communication’ linked to authoritarian populism (de-democratization).

The term ‘phatic communication’ was borrowed from Jakobson’s language functions to determine exchanges carried out on the basis of habitualized standards or ritualized formulas (reification), as well as affective attitudes, appealing to stereotypes, myths, bias mobilization, and tacit knowledge (Selg, Ventsel 2020). The notion of habits, in this sense, can be connected to the rules described by Fairclough (1995) that are entailed in a particular kind of social activity (i.e. the roles of ‘host’ and ‘guest’, orderliness, and other rules imposed by the interview genre).

As a deeply affective form, phatic communication is virtually empty from the informational perspective (Selg, Ventsel 2020: 138–184). To illustrate this, I present the following transcription excerpt:

02:12 DP: They say it has nothing to do with the hairspray, the ozone, nothing, zero. In fact, if you read *Scientific American*, like the good MIT guy you are, you would’ve known three months ago they said for the first time in forty years the ozone- what do you call- is uh, thickened up again

02:27 BR: Yeah, the ozone has, but that’s a little different than carbon dioxide emissions, all that stuff

02:31 DP: They also said that we’ve known for at least fifty, sixty, seventy years that every square meter on the ground of the planet has between ten and fifteen thousand times more energy from the sun than it’s needed. Ten to fifteen thousand. How does it vary? You’re closer to the sun, it’s fifteen thousand, farther from the sun, ten thousand.

02:53 BR: Ok, what does that mean? There’s tons of energy

02:55 DP: Tons! Tons and tons. Ok, the first electric car was in 1846 I believe. I don’t believe, I know. 1846. Do you think, if we really wanted fucking electric cars, we couldn’t have them? It was 35 or 40 years before gasoline cars. But now, since then, and then the question is- Sally and I went to the North Pole

03:17 BR: Ok. But the electric car thing is because the oil business and all that, right?

03:20 DP: Correct. I’ll get back to that

03:21 BR: We’ll get back to that

03:22 DP: So, then we go to the North Pole and now there’s Russian scientists. Hardly anybody spoke English. Ok? And we got re-married at the North Pole and we talked to the scientists and, same questions, same answers as we got from the South Pole, Global Warming, they all laughed drinking vodka [mimicking]. Everybody is drinking in the North Pole, cause the

Russians, and Russians do like to drink vodka, as they say. And they say yeah, it's just a load of shit, everybody knows it's a load of shit and we've known it for years. When I was in the energy business, and forever more I'll be an oil man, ok?

03:53 BR: You are an oil man

03:54 DP: Well, an oil man. Everybody laugh- everybody knew that when people will take more seriously Global Warming is when Aramco, Saudi, the Kingdom, runs out of oil. Now, two years ago, Aramco, which is uh, the petroleum company of the Saudi government, and how they're gonna go public. This was when oil was twenty-eight dollars a barrel. Now why would smart guys, MIT kinda guys, say they're gonna go public at the lowest oil price in the last thirty, forty years? Why?

04:32 BR: Why?

04:33 DP: Because when you go public, [...] they're gonna have to tell what the reserves are, and you know what the price of oil is gonna do when they say that there's forty-two kazillion-jillion barrels of oil?

06:07 BR: Gonna drop

06:08 DP: Like a fucking stone!

06:10 BR: So what does this have to do with Global Warming?

06:11 DP: Nah, because Global Warming is an anomaly, based on, hyped-up by this generation, for something to bitch about. We've had it. We've had it fifty thousand years ago, had it three hundred thousand years ago, but to blame it on us is bullshit

06:33 BR: Isn't it not accelerated by human's carbon emissions?

06:35 DP: Uh, one hundredth million of a percent, who cares

06:37 BR: Ok, so this is just a scam and a sham and all this-

06:40 DP: I'm jealous of vice-president what's-his-face

06:42 BR: Gore

06:43 DP: Gore! I'm jealous. And Sally and I were in a plane with him. A few years ago, he got in trouble because of the footprint, you know, the big G3 he flies around, G5 I guess it is, and so he was flying commercial, we were coming back from Peru, Lima. And Sally and I were doing some Safari, and I noticed why all these guys with fucking suits in here- business, cause they had no first class, and so it's vice-president Gore, he stands up and the- uh, and he's not as tall- you know all these people that say they're six-three, I mean, Jesus Christ, I mean he's about your height. And you know

07:16 BR: Everyone says that I'm

07:17 DP: Only six-one, he's only six one! He's about

07:19 BR: Everyone says I'm as tall as you!



07:20 DP: Yeah

07:21 BR: How tall are you?

07:22 DP: I'm six-one

07:23 BR: Ok. I'm not six-one

07:24 DP: No, no

07:25 BR: Ok

07:26 DP: And, uh, so

07:27 BR: Does Gore believe in Climate Change or is it all made-up?

07:30 DP: I don't know, I can't speak for the former vice-president, but he's gotta know the same stats I know.

The simplest aspect of phatic communication that can be identified in this excerpt of the video is the appeal to stereotypes, starting with the non-English-speaking Vodka-drinking Russian scientists (03:22), all the way up to "MIT kinda guys" (03:54). However, the most overwhelming aspect that characterizes this as phatic communication is the fact that Peña does not finish one single line of thought. He starts by saying that *Scientific American* published results pointing to the thickening of the ozone layer (02:12). Rose, then, points to how this does not necessarily mean that Global Warming is a fraud, seeing how the ozone layer thickening is a different matter than carbon dioxide emissions (02:27). Peña never acknowledges that nor tries to explain how the ozone layer thickening is connected to his argument that Global Warming is fake. Instead, he moves on to how, for the last seventy years, we have known that the surface of the Earth receives a lot of energy from the sun (02:31), and how we could've had electric cars since the 1800's (02:55) if not for the matter of oil sovereignty (03:17–03:20). It is not in any way explained how this is related to Global Warming being a hoax.

Surely, the matters of fossil fuel and solar energy are intrinsically tied to the subject of Climate Change as, respectively, one of the main causes of it and one possible way to mitigate it. But the way through which Peña presents the case fails to add to his argumentation. Global Warming can be a real thing and we can still live in a world where we could, allegedly, have had electric cars for the last two hundred years if not for the influence of oil companies (which is, in itself, a whole other conspiracy theory). Here, Peña says something that is easy to believe, but that essentially means nothing, or at least it does not serve to justify his argument, so we are still dealing with informational net zero.

This gets even more pronounced as the conversation goes on. Peña jumps from the electric cars to another story where he is in the North Pole with his wife. This story, apart from the colourful depiction of the Russian scientists, is very similar to the story about his visit to the South Pole. After this repetition, he comes back

to the matter of oil. Between 04:33 and 06:07, Peña says 253 words (which were shortened above due to their semantic irrelevance) about the workings of oil businesses when they are “going public” or selling part of their oil stock. Most of it is vague and provides for no concrete information (such as “forty-two kazillion-jillion barrels”). When Rose enquires again “what does this have to do with the Global Warming?” (06:10), Peña answers: “it’s made up”. There is simply no connection between Global Warming being a hoax and the very long talk about the fluctuations of oil price. Even though the audience knows that the workings of the oil business are deeply connected to the matter of Climate Change, Peña utterly fails to explain how that could be used to argue that there is no Climate Change.

In the end, after saying that Global Warming was invented “by this generation”, Peña skips to another story about the former American vice-president Albert Gore which never gets to its conclusion, because Peña stops in the middle to talk about how tall Gore is. Rose tries to recall the story by asking if Gore agreed with Peña regarding Global Warming, but we have no way of knowing if this is where the story was initially going, seeing how Peña never finishes it. Nevertheless, it is still interesting to note that Peña starts talking about Gore by stating that he is, in fact, much shorter than what he claims (06:43). This seemingly innocent accusation serves a very serious purpose of painting Gore (an environmentalist, founder of The Climate Reality Project, a non-profit organization that deals with potential solutions for the climate crisis) as a man who *lies*, or at least distorts the truth. Besides, for those who are not aware of who Gore is, the story serves nothing more than to confuse and frustrate them.

Hopefully, it has become clear how the communication in this video is phatic, meaning that it serves no other function than to just “say things”, in other words, *communication for communication’s sake*. This form can also be associated with an influencing strategy called ‘information fog’, in which the speaker presents “pieces of information, contradictions, fabrications, misleading information and downright lies” up to a point where the interpreter becomes incapable of differentiating between truth and falsity, right and wrong, fact and fabrication (Madisson, Ventsel 2020: 20).

The way Peña talks about the amount of energy coming from the sun (02:31), the story of the electric car (02:55), the lengthy description of oil businesses (04:33), and both stories about the South and North Poles (00:51 and 03:22) also showcase how semantic gaps allow the interpreter to “be led towards desired associations” and to the unification of what are actually “irreconcilable levels of meaning” (Madisson, Ventsel 2020: 5). Some of these stories contradict one another, while others offer repetition. Peña tells “open-ended (and sometimes even controversial) sets of stories”, while the interpreter is left to “navigate through various

plot fragments and draw his/her own conclusions about causalities” (Madisson, Ventsel 2020: 94). At the same time, given the discrete nature of conspiracy theories, “an important role in achieving cohesion between different entries is played by the consistent repetition of invariant elements of the narrative” (Madisson, Ventsel 2020: 99). So, even though there is nothing that connects the explanation of the oil business, solar energy, and the electric car to Climate Change being false, the repetitions provided by the South and North Pole stories grant some coherence to the discourse.

Another concept that is associated with the phatic form of communication is the notion of ‘myth’ (Barthes 1973). By revoking complexity in favour of turning everything into simple essence, things are reduced to only those parts that are immediately visible, without contradictions (Selg, Ventsel 2020: 138). This can be seen in the video, mainly, in two instances: first, at the beginning, where Peña states that if you want to leave the world a better place, it is up to you, as an individual, and no one else; and then, again, when he says that Global Warming was invented by this generation as something to complain about.

Another of the features of phatic communication, as described by Selg and Ventsel (2020: 185), that can also be seen in this video is the characterization of an enemy that is public, “passive, ‘official,’ and addressed indirectly and abstractly”. At 08:56, Peña talks about “journalists” in a very emotive way (his voice picks up and his face gets redder). He describes them as just “these journalists” that “haven’t talked to anybody”, thus referencing to such opponents in an indirect and abstract manner. Because they have not talked to anybody, this enemy is also passive, for they have not been seeking the truth like Peña has. Further, since ‘journalists’ is a word that refers to a social role (in the same way that the word ‘scientists’ does), it is also based on the common-sense stereotypical characteristic of phatic communication.

Lastly, it is interesting to point to the use of curse and swear words (as well as heightened voice and a generally impolite and emotive speech) that are features of populist discourse. The link between populist discourse and conspiracy theory has also been pointed out in the literature (Bergmann, Butter 2020; Van Prooijen *et al.* 2022; Pirro, Taggart 2023).

Overall, Selg and Ventsel (2020: 185–186) state that the phatic form of communication can include “various strategies of deproblematization of policy issues”, one of which is “deproblematization through stoicism”, that is, appealing to the “naturalness” of things. In general terms, “phatic communication is oriented to presenting given social reality as fixed, unproblematic, and uncontested” (Selg, Ventsel 2020: 185–186). The ultimate example can be found at 06:11, where Peña argues that we have always had a Global Warming (“We’ve had it fifty thousand

years ago”). This is the most prominent example of deproblematization through stoicism: *we should not worry about Global Warming, we should not pressure our governments to take action to mitigate it or to punish companies who are refusing to comply with regulations for GHG emissions, because Global Warming is a natural thing, and natural things should stay as they are.*

### 3. Identities and conflict construction

People make discourse at the same time as “discourse makes people” (Fairclough 1995: 39). In other words, subjects are constructed in discourse according to ideological processes and semiotic choices (contingencies) in a way that textual construction of identities is a constantly developing and transforming process of meaning-making (Madisson, Ventsel 2020: 12). This process is relational, meaning that identities are as they are only in relation to other identities (Selg, Ventsel 2020: 18). In the case of conspiracy theories – since identity creation is strongly polarized by the antagonistic opposition of ‘us’ vs ‘them’ (Madisson, Ventsel 2020) – ‘us’ can only be understood as ‘us’ when in opposition to ‘them’. Therefore, the strategic core of this type of discourse is the construction of conflict, where the identities of the subjects are constituted by an antagonistic relation.

The first type of conflict that can be recognized in the analysed text is the one surrounding legitimacy. In this case, Peña argues that the journalists (‘them’), having not talked to the experts (08:56), are disseminating false information, whilst Peña is the one in possession of the real facts, which he obtained first hand from the real scientists at the North and South Poles (‘us’). In this sense, the identities of ‘us’ and ‘them’ are being constructed on the grounds of ‘those who have the legitimate facts’ and ‘those who are spreading lies’.

Surprisingly enough, this shows how anti-scientific discourse often establishes relations to science that are not necessarily those of opposition. Peña is not against scientists, nor does he understand himself as a producer/propagator of anti-scientific discourse. On the contrary, he establishes his side (‘us’) as the one who is in line with the real experts, in possession of the actual scientific knowledge. This complicates the situation, for it seems that what is at stake is no longer the credibility of Science as a practice and body of knowledge, but rather the issue seems to be *which science* we are talking about. The fragmentation of science into ‘real’ vs ‘fake science’ can be even more dangerous than the ample question of the loss of authority of the scientific community.

Another opposition that can be identified in the construction of identities in this video is the generational conflict between baby boomers and millennials/

gen-Z or, as Peña refers to them in the video, “this generation” (06:11). Besides that, the video starts with Rose saying: “Let’s talk about Global Warming, then I wanna get to the snowflakes” (00:01). The word ‘snowflakes’ refers to a slang expression that emerged around 2015 “as a means of criticising the hypersensitivity of a younger generation” (Nicholson 2016: 1). Embedded in political meaning, the use of the word ‘snowflakes’ also serves to characterize Peña and Rose, seeing that this slang is “mostly lobbed from the right to the left” (Nicholson 2016: 1), with the aim of invalidating arguments coming from younger people on the basis that they are supposedly too easily offended and cannot take criticism. By employing this term, Peña and Rose are also constructing their own identities as people who agree that younger generations are hypersensitive, which is consistent with the rest of the video’s discourse.

The generational conflict is most explicit at 06:11, when Peña states: “Global Warming is an anomaly, based on- hyped up by this generation, for something to bitch about”. I would also like to highlight the use of the word ‘us’ at the end of this sentence (“but to blame it on us is bullshit”), which may be referring not only to Peña’s generation, but also to his social status, economic profile, or even the fact that he is a self-proclaimed “oil man” (03:22). It is unclear whether this statement is meant to absolve older generations of the responsibility for Climate Change, or the companies and businesspeople from richer layers of society (including the oil business), or most likely both. All in all, the identity construction of ‘us’ and ‘them’ is quite fuzzy, allowing for a certain extent of malleability of this discourse, in a way that it may be made to fit different situations, appealing to different people.

#### 4. Potential effects and social impact

Since the climate crisis is an issue rooted in the functioning of late-capitalist society, possible solutions that are often proposed to deal with it entail drastic societal transformation, which would inadvertently affect mostly the layers of society to which Peña and Rose belong. For Peña and his supporters, the idea that Global Warming was invented by newer generations and journalists as something to complain about entails that it is being used as an excuse to ask for a change – one that is necessary to solve the climate crisis and that threatens Peña’s very way of life.

Hence, the Global Warming conspiracy theory, as represented by this video, can be described as follows: *Global Warming* (an event) *has been invented by newer generations* (is the result of a group of people) *with the help of worldwide acts of scientific and journalistic misconduct* (acting in secret), *for the purpose of undermining the status quo* (to an evil end).

As mentioned in the Introduction, conspiracy theories possess a counterhegemonic potential (Birchall 2006; Leone 2016; Uscinski 2018; Thórisdóttir *et al.* 2020; Madisson, Ventsel 2020), that is, they recognize most forms of authority as undesirable. Nevertheless, conspiratorial discourse can be both against mainstream knowledge and concomitantly serve as a strategic tool in the hands of the dominant regime (Madisson, Ventsel 2020: 42; Puumeister 2020: 523). This is especially true when it comes to Climate Change denial and the discourse being constructed in this video. Peña is pro-establishment insofar as he advocates that things should be left as they are, since this is the way they have always been. Therefore, the discourse of this video – as both a product and a component of Climate Change conspiracy theories – supports the conservation of ongoing power relations and the current state of affairs.

Moreover, research has demonstrated that “Climate Change conspiracy theories not only influenced intentions to engage in efforts to reduce one’s carbon footprint, but also reduced intentions to engage in politics” (Jolley, Douglas 2012: 17). Along the same lines, it is understood that “conspiracy theories can be seen as the product of taking political positions, and their description of the world is often constructed in an attempt to mobilise people in a specific political struggle” (Bergmann *et al.* 2020: 259). In fact, Douglas *et al.* (2019: 13) argue that the primary function of conspiracy theories as means of interpretation is to “communicate information to generate collective action in the face of threat”.

It may also be relevant to point out the matter of conspiracy entrepreneurship, that is, conspiracy theorizing as a business. The notion of conspiracy theories as being lucrative enterprises for many actors is being widely discussed in recent literature (see Harambam 2020; Hyzen, Bulck 2021 and Turza 2023 for related case studies). The so-called “conspiracy entrepreneurs” are those who economically thrive (Harambam 2020) from generating and spreading of discourse “expressed as alternative histories, science, political views, interpretations, amongst others, to affect public opinion” (Hyzen, Bulck 2021: 182). According to Hyzen and Bulck (2021: 182), these actors operate as propagandists, that is, “[t]heir end goal is to challenge and displace prevailing ideologies and manipulate/manage public opinion towards conspiracy indoctrination”. Due to their “multiple online and offline platforms and revenue streams” (Turza 2023: 232), deplatforming conspiracy influencers becomes quite the challenge. Besides, since they are moved by financial incentives, there is no way of knowing whether such actors indeed believe the ideas they sell. In this sense, both Peña and Rose, as producers of content, may be included in this category of actors.

It is nevertheless important to distinguish the matter of effect from the notion of ‘intentionality’. I cannot know for sure what the intentions of Peña or Rose are

with regard to the production and distribution of this video. I can, however, point to the possible social impacts of this discourse. What I aimed to do throughout this paper was to indicate the mechanisms through which meanings surrounding Climate Change were shaped by this video, and how they may lead to influencing the Model Reader's behaviour (generate action) in a certain way.

As it was shown, such influencing happens through diverse ideologically invested discursive practices that contribute to, in this case, sustaining power relations. Of course, power relations can be influenced in different ways (sustained or undermined) by any kind of discourse, including scientific discourse. It is not something restricted to anti-scientific conspiracy theories. However, that "does not mean that all types of discourse are ideologically invested to the same degree" (Fairclough 1995: 82). I believe it is reasonable to affirm that this video was produced and distributed in a way that it contributes to sustaining power relations between: (a) the rich-and-powerful, who are generally seen as possessing resources to tackle the climate issue, but refuse to take any action, and (b) the people who care about Climate Change and feel powerless to stop it in any direct way.

What can arguably be considered as the most obvious effect of the video is how it serves to influence the viewer's perception of Climate Change as fictitious. Yet determining perceptions or imposing narratives are not ends in themselves – at least they are not what semioticians should be worried about – but rather ways in which "getting people to accept a particular narrative of the crisis [...] gives people a reason for favouring or accepting certain lines of action and policies rather than others" (Fairclough, Fairclough 2013: 4). The dangerous effect is thus not merely getting people to believe something, but getting them to act according to such belief.

In summary, explanatory narratives such as the ones supplied by conspiracy theories always encapsulate practical arguments, influencing processes of decision-making that have very real impacts on sociopolitical spheres (and, in case of Climate Change, on our biosphere as well). Thus, the significance of this discourse is in how Climate Change, as a crisis, is represented, explained, narrated, and interpreted as being a fraud, and how possible policy responses to it are, consequently, seen as scams. Throughout the video, many reasons are provided as to why people should not care about Climate Change, most of which can be assembled into the following list:

- The argument from individualism (Section 1.1): Holding other (powerful) people accountable is not adequate; the responsibility towards the world belongs to each individual alone.

- The argument from expertise (Section 1.2): Reliable information sources (scientists from the South/North Poles, MIT, CalTech, *Scientific American*, etc.) say that Climate Change is not real.
- The argument from nature (Section 2): We have had Climate Change for fifty, thirty thousand years; it is a natural occurrence.
- The argument from illegitimacy (Section 3): Journalists who spread false information about Climate Change have not talked to any real experts.
- The snowflake argument (Section 3): Global Warming was invented by overly-sensitive newer generations as something to complain about.

Accordingly, it is possible to state that, besides the obvious (getting people to believe Climate Change is a hoax), the underlying and most dangerous impact of this discourse is deproblematization, for it provides people with reasons to reject and abandon policies or plans for action that seek to mitigate the climate crisis in favour of other interests.

## Conclusions

This paper has investigated a YouTube video interview with a Climate Change denier, with the aim of identifying the interpretative mechanisms of the discourse to which this text belongs (that is, the formal conditions that allow discourse to shape interpretation). For that, a qualitative empirical semiotic analysis was carried out. Accordingly, this work has sought to examine the interplay between ideas and action, as well as belief and behaviour, pointing to the potential social effects of discourse.

Discourse is generated according to given perspectives and interests. In this sense, ideology – not just as a set of values/beliefs or encoded knowledge, but as a manipulation resource – can be understood as one of the primary meaning-making mechanisms of anti-scientific discourse, being strategically applied to shape interpretation. Additionally, several discursive and signifying practices were identified as being instrumentalized in this text, namely: drawing from the viewer's lack of contextual information, the focus falls on the answer being given instead of on the question; redirection of responsibility through a simple subject change; avoiding complete sentences and constructing a chaotic speech pattern (use of information fog), while repeating key elements to provide coherence; presentation of deductively valid arguments constructed from false premises; referencing institutions, societal actors, and organizations which are reliable information sources (background knowledge); revoking complexity (turning everything into simple essence without contradictions); and de-problematizing by appealing to nature.



As is typical of conspiracy theories, identity creation in the analysed discourse was shown to be strongly polarized, specifically based on two antagonistic relations of opposition: (1) a generational conflict, where ‘the newer generations’ are characterized as the enemy, and (2) a conflict surrounding legitimacy, where the journalists take the enemy role. In this second conflict, the identities of ‘us’ and ‘them’ are constructed on the grounds of those who have the legitimate knowledge (“the real scientists”) and those who are spreading false information (the journalists and the implied “fake scientists”). This discourse, thus, establishes an attitude with regards to science that is not of opposition, as one would expect. In this context, the fragmentation of Science (as a superstructure of society) into “real” vs “fake” science is pointed at here as being just as dangerous as the question of the loss of authority of the scientific community.

Overall, the code-text of the Climate Change conspiracy theory, as represented by the analysed video, can be translated as follows: *Global Warming is a hoax that has been invented by newer generations, through worldwide acts of scientific and journalistic misconduct, to undermine the status quo.* Even though this discourse seeks to delegitimize authority and mainstream knowledge, it is still pro-establishment – it still serves to strengthen the power relations of the dominant regime – since it clearly advocates that things should be left as they are. Hence, the significance of this discourse lies in how Climate Change is represented as a fraud and, consequently, how possible policy responses to it are interpreted as scams. In conclusion, the underlying and most dangerous potential effect of this discourse is deproblematization.

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## **Interpretação Orientada Para Desproblematização: uma entrevista em vídeo com um negacionista climático analisada como teoria da conspiração**

Desinformação sobre mudanças climáticas causa danos duradouros tanto às esferas socio-políticas quanto à nossa própria biosfera. Assim, o presente artigo visa identificar os mecanismos de construção de sentido do discurso conspiratório acerca de mudanças climáticas em redes sociais, por meio da análise do vídeo do YouTube “Why I Said Global Warming is the Biggest Fraud in History”, que atingiu mais de 758 mil visualizações (maio 2023) antes do canal ser apagado (agosto 2023). Realizou-se uma análise semiótica empírica qualitativa com foco no discurso. Fundamentalmente, a negação das mudanças climáticas é entendida como teoria da conspiração, ou seja, um modo de interpretação. A narrativa conspiratória analisada cria identidades e molda as relações sociais na forma de oposições/conflitos dicotômicos entre os que espalham informações ilegítimas (o inimigo) e os que têm acesso à verdade (uma elite simbólica). Nesse contexto, a fragmentação da ciência em “real” e “falsa” é tão perigosa quanto a perda de autoridade da comunidade científica. Em conclusão, a importância deste vídeo está em como a mudança climática é representada como uma fraude e em como possíveis respostas políticas a ela são, portanto, representadas como golpes. O principal efeito desse discurso é a desproblematização, pois ele fornece motivos para que as pessoas rejeitem propostas de ações que buscam mitigar a crise climática.

## **Tõlgendamise suunamine probleemi eitamise poole. Konspiratsiooniteooriana analüüsitud videointervjuu kliimamuutuse eitajaga**

Kliimamuutust puudutav desinformatsioon kahjustab püsivalt nii ühiskondlik-poliitilist sfääri kui ka meie eneste biosfääri. Käesolevas artiklis tuvastatakse kliimamuutust puudutavate konspiratiivdiskursuste tähendusloomelisi mehhanisme sotsiaalmeedias, analüüsid YouTube'i videot “Miks ma ütlesin, et globaalne soojenemine on kogu ajaloo suurim pettus” (*Why I Said Global Warming is the Biggest Fraud in History*), mis enne kanali sulgemist 2023. aasta augustis oli kogunud üle 758 tuhande vaatamise (mai 2023). Viidi läbi kvalitatiivne empiiriline semiootiline analüüs, mis keskendab diskursusele, milles kliimamuutuse eitamist mõistetakse konspiratsiooniteooriana, see tähendab, tõlgenduslaadina. Analüüsitav konspiratsioonidiskursus loob identiteete ning kujundab sotsiaalseid suhteid illegitiimse informatsiooni jagajate (vaenlaste) ning tõele ligipääsu omajate (sümboolse eliidi) vaheliste dihhotoomsete opositsioonide/konfliktide näol. Selles kontekstis on teaduse killustumine “tõeliseks” ning “võltsituks” sama ohtlik kui teaduskogukonna autoriteedi kadu. Antud video analüüsist nähtub, kuidas kliimamuutust kujutatakse pettusena ning kuidas võimalikke poliitilisi reaktsioone sellele kujutatakse seetõttu samuti pettusena. Sellise diskursuse peamine mõju on probleemi eitamine, sest see pakub inimestele põhjusi lükata tagasi ettepanekuid tegutsemiseks, mille eesmärgiks on kliimakriisi leevendamine.