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## Uptake of a Conspiracy Theory Attribution

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Claiming that someone subscribes to a conspiracy theory can be a potent method of denigration. I observed this process up close. The thesis of one of my doctoral students was alleged to endorse a conspiracy theory, therefore discrediting it. Journalists, bloggers, petition signers, Wikipedia editors and scientists endorsed the allegations without assessing whether the thesis actually propounded a conspiracy, without assessing whether evidence was provided for the alleged conspiracy, and without providing any evidence that the allegation discredited the thesis. It seems that few people will question a claim that is endorsed by others, meshes with what they would like to believe, and requires effort to check.

### **On the Study of Conspiracy Theories**

In recent decades, there has been a huge increase in the study of conspiracy theories (Dentith 2018; Uscinski 2019). Some of the alleged conspiracies directly involve science, for example the claim that HIV was biologically engineered by the military. Others involve science indirectly, for example the claim that the US government organised the 9/11 terrorist attacks, which involves arguments about jet fuel and explosives as means to bring down the US Trade Towers. Examining these sorts of conspiracy theories provides a means of gaining insight into people's understanding and acceptance of scientific claims.

There are quite a few studies of people's beliefs in conspiracy theories, typically based on polls (Goertzel 1994; Oliver and Wood 2014). Some of these show high levels of belief in prominent theories, such as that a conspiracy was involved in the 1963 assassination of U.S. President John F. Kennedy. In many of these studies, the authors assume that belief in conspiracy theories represents a deficit in reasoning or understanding (Keeley 1999; Grimes 2016). Some authors have attempted to identify specific shortcomings in what is called conspiracist ideation—in simple terms, tending to believe in conspiracy theories, including implausible ones—that can be identified by the nature of the claims and logic involved in supporting them (Sunstein 2014; Sunstein and Vermeule 2009).

Challenging these approaches is what might be called a revisionist perspective on conspiracy theories (e.g., Bjerg and Presskorn-Thygesen 2017; Fenster 2008; Hagen 2011, 2018). One important observation is that conspiracies do exist, for example CIA plots to assassinate Fidel Castro. Authors questioning the dominant perspective on conspiracy theories question whether it is possible to identify fallacious reasoning independently of specific cases. They argue that to determine whether a conspiracy theory is right or wrong, it is necessary to examine the evidence and logic involved, just as with any other claim.

In this view, to label something a conspiracy theory is itself evidence of poor reasoning, because it has not been established that those beliefs labelled conspiracy theories are systematically different from other beliefs. Among philosophers, those supporting the revisionist perspective are called particularists: they call for conspiracy theories to be evaluated on their merits. This is in contrast to generalists, who argue that conspiracies are rare and that conspiracy theorising is inherently suspect (Dentith 2018).

Sociologist Jaron Harambam spent two years immersed in Dutch conspiracy-theory circles. His observations challenge many of the conventional assumptions about conspiracy theorists (Harambam and Aupers 2015, 2017; Harambaum 2017). One important finding is that the analyses involved in many beliefs called conspiracy theories have similarities with scholarly analyses of the same issues, for example concerning powerful groups (or social structures) influencing decision-making behind the scenes. Some scholarly treatments of the role of the Bilderberg group or the World Bank have affinities with accounts that are called conspiracy theories, and for good reason: one of the goals of scholars is to investigate groups and influences that may not be apparent in everyday discussions.

A number of commentators have noted that the label “conspiracy theory” is derogatory. For example, Husting and Orr (2007) call the conspiracy-theory label “a routinized strategy of exclusion.” Harambam and Aupers (2015, 467) comment that “... those who are labeled ‘conspiracy theorists’ are a priori dismissed by academics and excluded from public debate.” Coady (2018, 183) says “The expressions ‘conspiracy theory’ and ‘conspiracy theorist’ are the respectable modern equivalents of ‘heresy’ and ‘heretic’ respectively; these expressions serve to castigate and marginalize anyone who rejects or even questions orthodox or officially endorsed beliefs.”

### **Conspiracy Theory Attribution**

In the minds of many people, the conspiracy theory label serves to put beliefs in the category of less credible or even apparently absurd claims such as that the moon landings were faked or that world leaders are actually alien lizards. The common assumption that conspiracies are necessarily vast and evil has itself been criticised as inaccurate. Hagen (2018) notes that many so-called “conspiracy theories” are small-scale, and some conspiracies are for the common good.

Because, in much discourse, “conspiracy theory” remains a discrediting attribution, applying the label can be a way to discredit research and researchers whose work is unwelcome. Calling a view a conspiracy theory relegates it to the realms of nonsense. According to the revisionist or particularist view, this is illegitimate on several grounds. First, applying a label does not make the label accurate; instead, a careful assessment of the work is required. Second, even if a researcher has claimed to have identified a conspiracy, this does not make the claim incorrect; again, a careful assessment is needed. Third, just because a researcher claims a conspiracy is involved should not automatically discredit all the researcher’s work; yet again, a careful assessment is required.

A claim or allegation that someone has espoused a conspiracy theory is called here a conspiracy-theory attribution (CTA). It can be asked, are science-related CTAs accepted uncritically or are they investigated and tested for validity? Without attempting to answer this general question, here a specific CTA is examined, as part of a natural experiment.

In the next section, the CTA used as a case study is presented and analysed. The following section describes this CTA’s uptake by various commentators in several types of media. In looking at the articulation and uptake of the CTA, attention is given to the presence or absence of careful assessments of whether a conspiracy is actually involved, of evidence for a conspiracy, and of explicit justification for assuming that identifying a conspiracy legitimately

discredits the researcher. In the discussion section, several possible explanations for the lack of scrutiny of the CTA are canvassed.

### **Conspiracy Theory Attribution Analysed**

The conspiracy theory attribution (CTA) analysed here refers to the PhD thesis of Judy Wilyman, for whom I was principal supervisor. Obviously I had, and have, a stake in the quality of her thesis. Supervisors have a responsibility to support students in developing research skills and producing theses that, in the Australian system, must pass the scrutiny of independent external examiners. Readers should judge my analysis in this context. On the other hand, because I know that my role in relation to this analysis may be criticised, I have made special attempts to make the analysis robust. All the documents referred to are publicly available, so my assessments can be checked.

Wilyman received her PhD from the University of Wollongong in December 2015 (Wilyman 2015). Most theses by research students are posted on the university's digital repository, Research Online (<https://ro.uow.edu.au>). Wilyman's thesis was posted on 11 January 2016. Two days later, a front-page story in the national daily newspaper *The Australian* claimed that the thesis subscribed to a conspiracy theory and, therefore by implication, lacked credibility.

This story triggered a huge outpouring of condemnation of the thesis, Wilyman, me as her supervisor and the university. This attack on a PhD thesis was remarkable in its high profile, duration and extent (Martin 2017). It therefore provides a useful tool for examining the uptake of a conspiracy theory attribution. Later I will look at commentary about the thesis. Here, to begin, it is worth looking at the thesis itself and at the passages associated with the CTA.

I correctly anticipated that posting of Wilyman's thesis would result in a surge of criticism, because she and her thesis had come under attack for years prior to her graduation. Therefore, on the day her thesis was posted online, I posted a commentary about attacks on theses, in which I provided a summary of the key ideas in her thesis.

It makes four main critical points in relation to Australian government vaccination policy.

☞ First, deaths from infectious diseases had dramatically declined in Australia before the mass introduction of most vaccines, suggesting that vaccination is not the only factor in controlling these diseases.

☞ Second, Australian vaccination policies were adopted from a one-size-fits-all set of international recommendations, without consideration of the special ecological conditions in Australia, for example the levels of sanitation and nutrition, and the incidence and severity of diseases.

☞ Third, nearly all research on vaccination is carried out or sponsored by pharmaceutical companies with a vested interest in selling vaccines; the

conflicts of interest involved in vaccine research can lead to bias in the research design and conclusions drawn.

✂ Fourth, there are important areas of research relevant to vaccination policy that have not been pursued, but should have been; a plausible reason for this “undone science” is that the findings might turn out to be unwelcome to vaccination promoters (Martin 2016a).

Kylar Loussikian, the journalist who wrote the 13 January 2016 story about Wilyman’s thesis, received a copy of my commentary, including this summary of key ideas, the day before. However, he did not use any of it.

The title of his article was “Uni accepts thesis on vaccine ‘conspiracy’.” The opening sentences of Loussikian’s article provide a succinct statement of the attribution that her thesis contains, or is based on, a conspiracy theory.

The University of Wollongong has accepted a PhD thesis from a prominent anti-vaccination activist that warns that global agencies such as the World Health Organisation are colluding with the pharmaceutical industry in a massive conspiracy to spruik immunisation.

Judy Wilyman, the convener of Vaccination Decisions and Vaccination Choice, submitted the thesis late last year, concluding Australia’s vaccination policy was not a result of independent assessment but the work of pharmaceutical industry pressure on the WHO.

The WHO convened a “secret emergency committee” funded by drug firms to “orchestrate” hysteria relating to a global swine flu pandemic in 2009, Ms Wilyman said in her thesis.

“The swine flu pandemic of 2009 was declared by a secret WHO committee that had ties to pharmaceutical companies that stood to make excessive profits from the pandemic,” she wrote (Loussikian, 2016).

Before turning to the question of whether Loussikian’s portrayal of the thesis is balanced and accurate, it is useful to look at the section of the thesis concerned with WHO and the 2009 swine flu pandemic.

Prior to 2009, a flu pandemic was defined by WHO as simultaneous worldwide epidemics from a new flu virus that caused enormous numbers of illnesses and deaths. In common understanding, a pandemic was thus particularly deadly, far more so than an epidemic. Then in 2009 the definition was changed to omit the reference to “enormous numbers,” though many members of the public would be unaware of this. Wilyman describes this change of definition on page 287 of her thesis. In the following pages she tells about WHO advisory boards and the mechanisms used by WHO to manage conflicts of interest, in particular the links of advisory board members to pharmaceutical companies.

Over several pages she describes the links and recounts the concerns raised by a number of commentators and organisations about conflicts of interest and lack of transparency. She notes concerns raised about WHO changing its definition of a pandemic and then, only a few weeks later, declaring the H1N1 virus—the swine flu virus—as a pandemic, thereby activating various government agreements that led to the sales of billions of dollars worth of vaccine, most of which was never used because the virus did not cause “enormous numbers” of illnesses.

In this exposition, Wilyman cites several sources. One of them, which presents the same sort of analysis, is a 2010 article published in *BMJ* (formerly the *British Medical Journal*), with this lead:

Key scientists advising the World Health Organization on planning for an influenza pandemic had done paid work for pharmaceutical firms that stood to gain from the guidance they were preparing. These conflicts of interest have never been publicly disclosed by WHO, and WHO has dismissed inquiries into its handling of the A/H1N1 pandemic as “conspiracy theories” (Cohen and Carter 2010).

After several pages presenting information about WHO and the swine flu pandemic, on page 290 of her thesis Wilyman summarises her assessment with several statements, one of which is “The swine flu pandemic of 2009 was declared by a secret WHO committee that had ties to pharmaceutical companies that stood to make excessive profits from the pandemic.” This sentence was quoted by Loussikian seemingly to justify labelling her views as a conspiracy theory. The word “secret” used by Wilyman has connotations of conspiracy; it is the same word used in the *BMJ* article in referring to a committee for which the identity of its members was not known outside WHO.

Loussikian did not contest any of the elements of Wilyman’s argument, namely that the definition of a pandemic was changed, that a committee whose members were not publicly known was involved, that some committee members had conflicts of interest with pharmaceutical companies, and that the companies stood to make billions of dollars from declaration of a pandemic. Rather, he quoted a sentence from her thesis as if it lacked any backing, suggesting it was absurd.

Wilyman did not use the word “conspiracy” or “collude” in her thesis, as a word search will confirm. It was Loussikian who applied this label. Wilyman did not use the word “spruik”; that, again, was Loussikian’s choice.

In summary, in several pages of her thesis, Wilyman presented an account of the WHO and the swine flu pandemic drawing on mainstream sources. This account was not central to the argument of her thesis.

Loussikian misrepresented and stigmatised the thesis, by:

- not discussing or mentioning the central arguments in the thesis;

- using quotes from the thesis taken out of context, thereby giving the impression that Wilyman was making unsupported assertions;
- not mentioning that sources in mainstream journals presented the same analysis;
- applying the label “conspiracy theory.”

Loussikian, following journalistic practice, found an apparently legitimate source to back up his treatment.

Senior immunology academic John Dwyer, spokesman for the Friends of Science in Medicine, said he would write to the university and express his concerns. “The candidate (Ms Wilyman) has endorsed a conspiracy theory where all sorts of organisations with claimed vested interests are putting pressure on WHO to hoodwink the world into believing that vaccines provide more benefits than they cause harm,” Professor Dwyer said (Loussikian 2016).

In the quote, Dwyer appears to attribute a broader conspiracy theory to the thesis than Loussikian did. Loussikian quoted from the thesis in relation to the swine flu pandemic, whereas Dwyer, in the quote, implies the thesis endorses a more sweeping conspiracy, “to hoodwink the world into believing that vaccines provide more benefits than they cause harm.”

Note also that Dwyer, whose field is immunology, assumes the authority to criticise a thesis dealing with health policy, even though he has no credentials or refereed publications in policy studies. Furthermore, he made his judgement within 24 hours of the thesis appearing online.

For a detailed sociological analysis of how WHO conceptualised “pandemic” and the infectious agent H1N1, and how critics, notably the Council of Europe, contested WHO’s conceptualisations, see Abeysinghe (2015a, 2015b). Abeysinghe’s studies were published during the period when Wilyman was completing her thesis.

This is a brief outline of the conspiracy theory attribution, made by an immunologist and a journalist. For them, the attribution was assumed to be true, to discredit the entire thesis and to discredit Wilyman, me as her supervisor, and the University of Wollongong for having allowed her to graduate.

## **The Uptake**

Loussikian’s article, aided by efforts by pro-vaccination campaigners, triggered an enormous response. The online version of his article attracted hundreds of comments. A few bloggers wrote hostile commentaries about the thesis. There was an online petition against the thesis, signed by over 2000 people. The university’s Twitter account was overwhelmed by hostile comments. Sixty-five academics in science and medicine at the university issued a statement endorsing vaccination. A Wikipedia entry about the controversy was set up, and changes were made to the university’s Wikipedia entry and to mine.

The controversy generated intense interest in the thesis itself. In the first month it was

downloaded more than 5,000 times, an exceptional number compared to other theses.

The issue here is the reception of a CTA. People offering an opinion about the thesis, and in particular about the CTA, could look for themselves at the thesis and make a judgement about the CTA and about the topics the thesis addressed.

In examining the response to the CTA, several criteria will be used to assess uptake. If some or all of the following criteria are satisfied, it is plausible to say that the CTA has been accepted without scrutiny.

- The alleged conspiracy theory is not examined, but rather assumed to be absurd.
- The CTA is assumed to discredit the entire thesis (and possibly also the supervisors, examiners and university).
- There is no mention of the content of the thesis or its arguments.

The next issue is where to look for evidence of CTA uptake or resistance to the CTA. There are many sources of publicly available information, among them:

- subsequent articles by Kylar Loussikian
- people quoted in Loussikian's articles
- mass media stories by other journalists
- comments by bloggers
- the petition against the thesis
- new and altered Wikipedia entries
- articles in scholarly journals

I examined each of these sources of evidence. However, I did not analyse online comments on Loussikian's articles because they are behind a paywall. Although the volume of material is large, the findings are consistent, so it is possible to make judgements without difficulty. In the following sub-sections, exemplary or representative examples are provided from several of these sources.

### ***Articles by Kylar Loussikian***

Loussikian's initial article, published in *The Australian* on 13 January 2016, triggered the cascade of the CTA. Loussikian wrote numerous subsequent articles and comments about Wilyman's thesis published in *The Australian*. Despite being aware of my summary of the thesis (Martin, 2016a) posted on 11 January and my critical examination of his initial article (Martin, 2016b) posted on 3 March 2016, Loussikian in half a dozen articles in *The Australian* (20 January, 27 January, 23 March, 11 May, 23 June and 27 July) repeated the same angle on the CTA.

The following year, he worked for Sydney's *Daily Telegraph* newspaper and wrote a story mentioning the CTA in passing: "Dr Brooks was supervised at Wollongong by Brian Martin, who gained notoriety after overseeing another thesis which claimed the World Health

Organisation was colluding with pharmaceutical companies to spruik vaccines.” (Loussikian 2017).

In 2018, Loussikian, writing for Sydney’s *Sun-Herald* newspaper, wrote a story about Wilyman with the same CTA: “Dr Wilyman, who was controversially awarded a humanities PhD by the University of Wollongong for a thesis which argued the World Health Organisation colluded with pharmaceutical companies in a conspiracy to spruik unneeded vaccinations, has no academic qualifications in medicine.” (Loussikian, 2018). Note that in these latter two articles there is no mention of the swine flu pandemic: the CTA is presented as apparently referring to all vaccines.

### ***Authority Figures Quoted in Loussikian’s articles***

In Loussikian’s original article, he quoted Professor John Dwyer saying, “The candidate has endorsed a conspiracy theory ....” Dwyer did not at the time or subsequently publish any assessment of the thesis with evidence to back up his quoted claim.

### ***Mass Media Stories by other Journalists***

Loussikian was the primary promulgator of the CTA. No other journalist wrote a story based on an independent investigation of the CTA. In 2017, Julie Hare wrote an article in *The Australian* about Wilyman, saying her PhD thesis “warned that global agencies including the World Health Organisation were colluding with the pharmaceuticals industry to inappropriately push vaccination” (Hare, 2017). In 2018, Jane Hansen wrote an article published in the *Sunday Telegraph* stating, “Her thesis argued vaccination was a conspiracy” (Hansen, 2018), a much more sweeping misrepresentation.

### ***A Blog Post***

David Gorski writes a blog under the name Orac. On 13 January 2016—the same day as Loussikian’s initial article—he published a long post attacking the thesis, Wilyman, me and the university. He said, among other things, that the thesis is “a collection of antivaccine talking points and conspiracy theories, tied together with pseudoscience and borderline, if not outright, germ theory denial” (Gorski 2016).

### ***The Petition***

A few days after Loussikian’s 13 January 2016 article, an online petition was launched (Fein 2016). It contained a long preamble, including quotes from a story on SBS (Special Broadcasting Service), which in turn referred to Loussikian’s article: “Judy Wilyman submitted a PhD thesis under the UOW Faculty of Law, Humanities and the Arts that argued Australia’s vaccination policy was taking its cue from WHO and the pharmaceutical industry that are conspiring to promote vaccinations, The Australian reported.” The petition called on the Australian government’s “Department of Education and Training to take immediate disciplinary action against the University of Wollongong” and for the “Department of Health to issue unequivocal condemnation of this travesty.” The petition gave numerous links to further reading, including to the thesis, Wilyman’s website and some of my writings, thereby enabling readers to follow up a diversity of views.

It was possible for signers to add “reasons for signing.” Most of these followed the cues in the preamble and condemned the thesis, Wilyman, her supervisors and the university, some with strong language: “pseudoscience” was one of the milder epithets. Only 30 signers, a small minority of those who gave reasons, mentioned the CTA, and they were uniformly negative.

Maureen Butterworth: “I hate conspiracy theories.”

James Ridgeway: “I am concerned that an educational institution is allowing a PhD candidate to publish a thesis that is essentially based on conspiracy theories.”

James Fuller: “The ‘theory’ behind it says it is a depopulation (Agenda 21) conspiracy . . .”

Dawn Lindsay: “Terms like ‘conspiracy’ have no place in a PhD thesis.”

Cheree Skinner: “It terrifies me that an individual can publish a thesis based on conspiracy theories with absolutely no basis in fact!”

Joce J: “I don’t understand how a PhD on a conspiracy theory can be good scientific practice.”

Allyson Lees: “I’m horrified that anyone could accept this thesis as well researched and evidenced. How could it possibly be when the whole thing is based solely on conspiracy theories that have been debunked time and again?”

Jay Kanta: “The student uses conspiracy theories and invalid sources to back up her claims.”

Ken Dally: “This thesis totally ignores overwhelming scientific evidence and ventures into extreme conspiracy theory fantasy.”

Ri Scarborough: “This collection of conspiracy theories is not a PhD thesis, it is an insult to academia.”

These comments indicate that these signers assume CTAs are inherently discrediting. Furthermore, some commenters assume that the entire thesis was based on conspiracy theories.

### ***Wikipedia Entries***

A day after Loussikian’s 13 January 2016 article appeared, a new Wikipedia entry was created, “Judith Wilyman PhD controversy.” (In February 2019 it was renamed “Judith Wilyman.”) The entry contains restatements of the claim that Wilyman’s thesis contains a conspiracy theory. Early in the entry is this sentence: “The thesis came under heavy criticism from multiple directions, including medical professionals, due to claims within the thesis, including advancing a conspiracy theory whereby the World Health Organization (WHO) and the pharmaceutical industry supposedly conspire to promote vaccinations in the absence of evidence of safety and efficacy” (Wikipedia 2019, 15 March 2019 version, reference notes omitted). Note that this statement does not restrict the CTA to the swine flu pandemic, instead referring to a broader conspiracy, applying to vaccinations in general.

Wikipedia is governed by a complex set of rules. One of them is “No original research”: entries are supposed to rely on secondary sources. Therefore, for “Judith Wilyman,” Wikipedia editors are not supposed to assess the CTA by examination of Wilyman’s thesis.

Another Wikipedia rule concerns reliable sources. In general, media stories and blogs are considered less reliable sources than peer reviewed books and articles. However, most of the sources for the entry “Judith Wilyman” are media stories and blog posts. Elsewhere (Martin 2018a), I have analysed the rewriting of my own Wikipedia entry shortly after Loussikian’s first article appeared.

### ***Articles in a Scientific Journal***

Two highly published and well-established scientists, David Durrheim and Alison Jones, wrote a commentary for the scientific journal *Vaccine* entitled “Public health and the necessary limits to academic freedom?” In it, they called for a reconsideration of academic freedom when public health is implicated, based on two cases, one of them being Wilyman’s thesis. Elsewhere I have analysed their article in some detail (Martin, 2016c); here I look only at their reference to conspiracy theories. They write:

A central tenet of this work [Wilyman PhD thesis] was an unsubstantiated claim that the World Health Organisation and the pharmaceutical industry were conspiring to promote vaccinations in the absence of evidence of safety and efficacy [7]. She alleged that these parties had “orchestrated hysteria” relating to a global swine influenza pandemic in 2009 (Durrheim and Jones, 2016, p. 2467).

It seems that Durrheim and Jones had not read the thesis carefully, otherwise they would not refer to a claim about a WHO-industry connection as a “central tenet” of the thesis, nor that this claim was “unsubstantiated” given several pages of discussion. The citation [7] refers to Wilyman’s thesis, however with an incorrect URL. They do not give a page reference to “orchestrated hysteria,” a phrase that does not appear in the thesis. Durrheim and Jones do give an accurate citation to Loussikian’s 13 January 2016 article in *The Australian*, suggesting that they adopted the allegations in Loussikian’s article without making an independent assessment.

In 2019, a very different critical treatment of Wilyman’s thesis was published, also in *Vaccine* (Wiley et al., 2019). This paper summarised the themes in the thesis, gave reasons why the thesis is wrong, and enumerated and illustrated several alleged methodological flaws. This scholarly analysis, the first to subject the thesis to careful systematic scrutiny, nowhere mentions a conspiracy theory. Yet some commentators, in reporting on the Wiley et al. critique in *Vaccine*, repeated the CTA, illustrating a continued lack of examination of the claims involved (Campbell, 2019; Hare, 2019). Wilyman (2019), on her website (<https://vaccinationdecisions.net>), responded to Wiley et al.’s critique.

### **A Transparent Case of CTA**

The CTA about Wilyman’s thesis provides a remarkably transparent case study. Its initial articulation is clear: Loussikian’s 13 January 2016 article in *The Australian*. The uptake of the

CTA can be traced through a variety of outlets, several of which have been examined here: Loussikian's further articles, a quoted scientist, other mass media stories, a blog post, comments on a petition, Wikipedia entries, and articles in a scientific journal.

Among these responses, not a single individual assessed the CTA by inspecting the thesis and making a judgement about whether it endorsed a conspiracy theory. Nor did anyone attempt to judge whether the arguments in the thesis about the 2009 swine flu pandemic were well supported. Instead, the CTA propagated without scrutiny. No one commented that conspiracies do exist, but that calling of the pandemic was not a conspiracy. No one noted that an article in the *BMJ* had presented the same argument about pandemics, or that the WHO had dismissed this argument by calling it a conspiracy theory. The CTA was treated as a package whose contents were either accepted or rejected but never inspected.

The treatment of this CTA conforms with several observations by scholars who analyse conspiracy theories. Hagen (2018) notes that conspiracy theories are commonly assumed to be sweeping—large in extent—and involve evildoers, and argues against these presumptions. These presumptions are apparent in a number of the CTAs concerning Wilyman's thesis, including that it endorsed a conspiracy between the WHO and pharmaceutical companies involving vaccination in general (not just the 2009 swine flu pandemic) and that the entire thesis was premised on a conspiracy, as in Hansen's (2018) statement that "Her thesis argued vaccination was a conspiracy."

Harambam (2017) noted the parallels between academic analyses and conspiracy theories, for example that both involve powerful groups operating out of the public eye. This helps to explain how an academic analysis of vaccination policy-making can so easily be labelled a conspiracy theory. In this labelling, though, the stereotypes associated with "conspiracy theory" come into play, so the attribution becomes derogatory, indeed potentially discrediting.

There are several ways to understand the lack of scrutiny of this particular CTA, including information cascades, confirmation bias, Google-knowing and polarisation of the vaccination controversy.

An information cascade involves individuals accepting a claim just because others have accepted it: the more who join the bandwagon, the more popular it becomes (Sunstein 2014). Those caught in the cascade make their judgement based on what others have said and the fact that many others have made the same judgement. Several elements of the CTA uptake are compatible with an information cascade, including the petition signers, online comments on newspaper articles (not analysed here), and statements by other journalists.

Confirmation bias is the tendency of people to seek information that supports their existing views and to discount contrary information (Nickerson 1998). Given that most Australians support vaccination, this may make them receptive to a claim that discredits a vaccine critic.

Lynch (2016) argues that the pervasiveness of the Internet means that people are increasingly likely to respond to new items of information without critical examination, something he

calls Google-knowing. This way of processing information draws on what Kahneman (2011) calls System 1, the fast and intuitive component of the mind, rather than System 2, the slow and rational component.

One bias in System 1 is overconfidence based on limited information, a heuristic called WYSIATI (what you see is all there is) that militates against spending the time and energy required to investigate a statement. Palmer (2018, 8), in a study of ordinary people who appeared in the newspaper stories with sizeable audiences, found that, “Subjects imagined that those large audiences not only saw the coverage but also believed it. Based on their subsequent interactions with people who had seen them in the news, this usually proved to be true.” This is compatible with Lynch’s idea of Google-knowing.

The spread of the CTA about Wilyman’s thesis was undoubtedly aided by the polarisation of the Australian vaccination debate. In polarised controversies, there are incentives on each side to adopt a coherent package of evidence and arguments, and to admit to no reservations or concerns, because these might be used by opponents (Martin 1991, 37–55). Hence, when derogatory statements are made about opponents in such a debate, there is little incentive to examine them closely, much less to admit any mistake. Supporters of vaccination who had doubts about the CTA would have been reluctant to speak in public because they would have been seen as aiding Wilyman.

Finally, for years members of the group Stop the Australian (Anti)Vaccination Network had been trying to silence any public criticism of vaccination (Martin 2018b). As part of this censorship campaign, they had been attacking Wilyman and her thesis for several years (Martin 2017). Plausibly, their efforts laid the groundwork for Loussikian’s articles and added impetus in spreading the CTA.

There is an intriguing irony that emerges from some of the comments about Wilyman’s thesis. Many of those subscribing to the CTA say or imply, in addition, that her supervisors, her thesis examiners and/or university officials intentionally supported a sub-standard thesis. In this allegation, they are essentially endorsing a conspiracy theory—but with no evidence to back it up aside from the granting of a PhD to Wilyman.

### **Conspiracy Theories as a Layperson’s Lens on Science**

Conspiracy theories provide a useful means of seeing how laypeople assess certain types of claims about science. Here, a closely related and understudied issue is addressed: the uptake of claims that a particular work involves a conspiracy theory. This is, in other words, a conspiracy theory attribution (CTA). If, as argued by some scholars, a conspiracy theory needs to be assessed before being rejected, so likewise does a CTA. The question then is whether this actually occurs.

A natural experiment occurred with a CTA newly launched on 13 January 2016 concerning the PhD thesis by Judy Wilyman, for whom I was principal supervisor. This CTA obtained wide currency among commenters on newspaper articles, signers of a petition, and various others. Significantly, not a single person commenting publicly about the CTA showed any evidence of having examined whether the thesis subscribed to a conspiracy theory, if so whether there was any merit in the claims about conspiracy, or whether the attributed

conspiracy theory was central to the thesis. This example shows how a CTA can propagate in the absence of careful assessment of the evidence.

Possible factors in the uncritical uptake of the CTA are information cascades, confirmation bias, Google-knowing, the polarisation of the Australian vaccination debate, and pro-vaccination campaigners seeking to discredit Wilyman. Plausibly, the campaigners set the stage for and aided the dissemination of the CTA, which then spread without scrutiny with the help of an information cascade, confirmation bias and Google-knowing, while the polarisation of the vaccination debate discouraged examination of the CTA.

Further studies would be needed to determine whether other CTAs receive scrutiny or are accepted uncritically. An initial hypothesis could be that CTAs that support the dominant viewpoint are less likely to be scrutinised than those that challenge it.

From a practical perspective, the challenge is how to encourage people to critically examine claims, especially when all the needed information is available in the public domain. For this, it might be better to jettison the label “conspiracy theory,” which is more often applied as a discrediting judgement than a neutral description.

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