

Who is the Manager of Climate Change?

A discourse analytical inquiry in how do people handle, and make sense of, what truth is on social media



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Chapter 1: Introduction: Truth and Lies

In the last couple of years statements of ‘they lie’ and ‘we have the truth’ seem to have arisen more frequently in public debates. An environment where these statements of ‘lies’ and ‘truths’ repeatedly appear is without any doubt: the internet. Within the spheres of online media, we see how hashtags like #fakenews and #truth take over the dialogues. Alternative claims about the reality of everyday life become popularized. These claims appear for a range of topics, from politics and science to celebrities and entertainment media. These statements not only seem to come from politicians or media outlets themselves, but also from individuals and groups who are questioning the truthfulness of information they see and often even claim to know the truth themselves in a varied range of debates.

What makes this an interesting phenomenon is that social media (and the internet) seems to make it possible to share those ideas, to share doubts and alternative truths and consequently, acts as a *space* where those often self-claimed ‘critical’ individuals distribute each other’s ideas. This, in turn, results in widely varied groups conspiring against certain ‘taken for granted’ truths and knowledge in society. And this phenomenon, of questioning ‘normalized’ truths or making truth something personal, is what many label with a signifier that has come to define part of this new era we find ourselves in: *post-truth*. An era in which conspiracy theories suddenly seem to flourish more and more and where realities and truths are no longer defined by facts and science only.

1.1 Denying climate change

A concrete example of this so-called ‘post-truth’ trend takes place in the debates around climate change, or global warming. The scientifically proven facts that tell us that climate change is something happening here and now are not taken for granted

as truthful. Even when the majority of climate scientists, 97%¹ to be precise, agree upon the claim that the earth is warming up and that it is a human-made problem, their expertise is being questioned. This happens within the same online discourses where hashtags such as for example #fakenews and #truth are put in use. So, why do people keep believing climate change is a hoax when the evidence for it is everywhere?

For one, it seems like urgent issues such as climate change have become a part of a political debate where facts themselves seem to not particularly do something; it has become a matter of believing and ideology, rather than an actual matter of fact. That, however, might be not too surprising, considering that with the rise of the internet more and more information becomes visible and accessible for more people. One might argue that social media play a large role in the phenomenon, due to the extent it allows more visibility to, and sharing of, different types of information and ideas. Hence, we could state that also theories that claim that climate change is no more than a hoax, reach a broader public with the use of online and social media. This misinformation about climate change, therefore, spreads quickly in public debates and is mixed with the already immense pile of information there is to be found online.

Does that mean that different kinds of (mis)information are more easily accessible for more people, or rather that knowledge and expertise truly don't matter anymore in this post-truth era? Are those conspiracy theories typical of our 'age', a signifier for the times we live in?

¹The Guardian. (2013). *Survey finds 97% of climate science papers agree warming is man-made* <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/climate-consensus-97-per-cent/2013/may/16/climate-change-scienceofclimatechange>

1.2 Credibility of Climate Change Denial

Earlier research done to the rise of conspiracy theories – such as the ones denying climate change - suggests that social media is indeed a major force in the formation, preservation, and radicalization of those ideas (Pin & Samantray, 2019). Paolo Pin and Abhishek Samantray analyzed in their article ‘Credibility of climate change denial in social media’ (2019), where and how misinformation about climate change is polarized and propagated on social media and how people come to trust certain information over other more ‘generally accepted knowledge’. Their research, done by analyzing over 10.000 tweets on Twitter using a programmed algorithm, states that for people to believe in certain misinformation about climate change, there has to be at least a slight *trust* – credibility - in the expertise of the new sources and individuals who give, or rather, propagate this information, or fake news.

Pin and Samantray’s analysis of empirical data shows us a baseline to work from because it indicates that on a large scale, the cause for the rise of alternative theories may indeed lie in the visibility and accessibility of those ideas for people on the internet, but there is also the a matter of *trust*, a sense of credibility given to *other* users (who may even be fictive or non-existing, e.g. bots) on the internet. They found that “among various information about climate change to which people are exposed to, they are more likely to be influenced by information that have higher credibility.” (Pin & Samantray, 2019: 1). Here I want to pay attention to the notion of ‘credibility’ Pin and Samantray introduce, and how it points out an important notion of how people *act* on platforms such as Twitter.

This makes clear that there is something that precedes how individual users *act* online, and to whom they attribute this credibility in terms of what is, and who speaks, the truth. Their *mode of reading* and/or making those statements, could thus be influenced by the fact that they imply a (like-minded) social other/group with the same ideas of what the truth is. This is an important factor because it hints to the importance of *sociality* online, which contrasts with the inclination of critics like

Michiko Kakutani (2018) and Bruno Latour ² who argue that post-truth goes hand in hand with 'post-social'. Both terms incline an assumption that we find ourselves in an era where truth doesn't matter anymore (see: post-truth) and in which individuals separately make up what truth means. The latter refers to how post-truth implies characteristics of a certain post-social era, where people seem to fail to come up to a *shared* truth or belief, we now construct them individually. As such, Pin and Samantray's inquiry could be the first indication that something else is going on.

However, I would argue that their quantitative way of doing research kept me wondering how one can understand what is going on in those debates about climate change denial on social media, when the major analytical tool is an algorithm that divides statements about climate change into a '+1', referring to a 'positive' post on Twitter about climate change, and a '-1', referring to 'negative' post about climate change. I believe that with the highly quantitative way of researching that Pin and Samantray apply we cannot truly understand how those individuals state and share their beliefs and ideologies about knowledge on those platforms, and how their arguments are built.

I argue that such an approach fully ignores the *multimodal* and *discursive* nature of those social media and the individual users themselves. Those statements people see, like, post and share online are far more complex than just the ones and zeros that Pin and Samantray approach them as in their research. Understanding how conspiracy theories like climate change denial find their way on platforms like Twitter and Facebook needs a deep semantic understanding of what the discourses suggest rather than a plain analysis with codes and algorithms that solely illustrates a generalized picture of these deeply complex phenomena.

² New York Times Magazine, (2018). *Bruno Latour, the Post-Truth Philosopher, Mounts a Defense of Science*: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/25/magazine/bruno-latour-post-truth-philosopher-science.html>

I also want to make a note on how those conspiracy theories are mostly seen and approached by academics as unimportant, or either the people who believe in them are seen as plain dumb or put aside as pathological. Those theories can be problematic indeed (for instance in the case of climate change denial), but simply dismissing them and not taking those ideas seriously, will not help us understand how those ideas come about and what they mean for people and thus, how we can interfere in the actual problems they might generate. We can see how the realness of online debates around climate change denial, as a matter of fact, impacts actual political discourses and thus, how life- and world-changing decisions regarding global warming are made. Such impactful worldwide problems like climate change should better not be ignored or dismissed before it is too late. But I must stress, that a different approach is needed.

1.3 Discourse Analysis and Truth-construction

The above leaves me with the necessity to take on some new perspectives and look at *how* people showcase this credibility or *sociality* in the actual online discourses. The main question I want to ask here is: What does the way people talk about truth online, tell us about the nature of social media, truth construction and conspiracy theories? I will look at how people handle and make sense of, what truth is in on social media, here specifically in the context of conspiracies about climate change. Moreover, I shall take into account what role social media plays in constructing certain conspiracy theories as ideology, or social reality.

First I will dive a bit further into general ideas of what a conspiracy theory is and how we should approach this phenomenon in this so-called 'post-truth' era. Then I will explore ideas of how social media and information intertwine and delve into enquiries of academics of José van Dijck (2013) and Eli Pariser (2011) who looked at what being 'social' still means in social media. In relation to that, I will also briefly delve into earlier ideologies of the democratic internet and the flip-side of the enthusiasm where it all began with. Then I shall look at claims of critics like Kakutani (2018) who argue

that this age is signified by 'post-truth'. Here I will, with the help of Berger and Luckmann's account on social construction or reality, take the first steps towards dismissing the notion of 'post-truth'. Finally, I shall examine actual discourses on Twitter where we will see how five different Twitter users emphatically state that climate change is a hoax. With Jan Blommaert's (2005) and Rodney Jones's (2015) formulations of Critical Discourse Analysis as a tool, I will look at *how* people talk about and formulate their ideas about 'the truth', to be able to determine what is 'actually going on' on Twitter.

A close reading of people's statements on social media about their everyday reality, allows us to understand the way these discourses take place. Doing so I do not look at if what they are saying is faulty or scientifically incorrect, nor will I be looking at specific motivations behind those truth statements. We will see is that indeed, the way people talk about denying climate change online, suggests that they imply a certain social group that sees reality along the same lines, they imply a specific truth discourse, one that is understood and shared by other users online. I wish to look further into the notion of sociality, which seems to go hand in hand with a sense of credibility and how people make statements with an expected and presumed audience in mind. What seems to be central in these online discussions is that it is about sharing truths on the level of agreeing within a specific truth discourse where specific versions of reality are supposed as factual.

Adding to that, I don't want to ignore that climate change denial has something to do with prior political orientation - which seems to be prominently right-wing - and wider ideologies of the place of humans on the planet. This, however, only reveals that ideology plays a role in these debates, but that there is also something more than that, especially online, holds these ideologies alive, which, as I will show later, is to be understood from a social discursive dimension. This way of seeking to understand and taking on different perspectives on truths and realities, is much in tune with the current paradigm of postmodernism we find ourselves in. But by acknowledging that, I can do no more than find out what this post-modernist view can show us, and what new perspectives it opens up.

Chapter 2: Conspiracies in a Post-Truth Era

As mentioned before, climate change denial, as a conspiracy theory, is one amongst many to be found on the internet today. Because of the popularity of the term 'conspiracy theory', it is important to first dive a bit deeper into what this idea of conspiracies actually entails. In this chapter, I will discuss different definitions and ideas regarding this popularized term and see how they can help us understand what is going on. We will then also find out why conspiracy theories seem to fit in so well with the concept of 'post-truth', but also why there is more to it than what this term attempts to point out.

By now, we can state that conspiracy theories have become part of wider societal discourses (Varis, 2019). When you search for conspiracy theories "one can read about suppressed science, crop circles, and true tales of mystery airships." (Varis, 2019). These are just a few examples of conspiracies that roam around in the online world. In public online discourses, conspiracy theories appear amongst all kinds of people, and in a variety of media, from movies to blogs, forums and last but not least, social media like Twitter and Facebook. Those alternative theories have gained popularity to such an extent that idea of 'conspiracies' has attained a certain aura of 'moral panic' (Varis, 2019).

Next to the popularization by the public and in the media, those alternative theories are also purposely thrown around by politicians like Donald Trump who also has claimed that climate change is a hoax, tells lies about China propagating the hoax and blames them for their plans to take over the world. It is important to make a distinction between the politicians and media who 'use' those lies as political propaganda to achieve certain goals, and the people who 'simply' critically voice their opinions and doubts. In specific, because politicians can play in on those theories to certain political ends, which takes into different debates of truth and lies, and operates on forms of deceit and power.

For me, it is of no use to focus too much on figures like Donald Trump who purposely use lies and fake news as propaganda to their political advantage. What makes conspiracy theories so interesting is the popularized use of the term and almost normalized state of questioning knowledge claims in society, which happens by all kinds of people. And thus, it is important to take those debates seriously to understand the seriousness of what they claim, even when it indeed is based on misinformation, extreme ideologies and 'alternative facts'. However, also within those debates, we can never rule it out, or know if there are motives behind the things that people tell, or as Varis (2019) puts it: "Some conspiracy theories start as acts of trolling ('Let's see who'll buy my crazy theory!') and gain traction online regardless; others are constructed in all earnestness." (Varis, 2019). But, again, that is not be the main point of focus here. Because what is most important first, is to look at *how* those debates take place on online platforms and as such, find out what analyzing and understanding those discourses shows us.

2.1 A Danger to Democracy

If post-truth is the best way to describe this era, one might say that it is the perfect ground for conspiracy theories to flourish since feelings are more at stake than scientific knowledge. The transformation of the meaning of 'truth', might be the reason why many new conspiracy theories – such as denying climate change - appear in public debate and social media. Considering that, for many scholars those theories are perceived as "dangerous social dynamics of demonization and scapegoating — dynamics which are toxic to democracy" (Berlet, 2009: 7) . As such, conspiracy theories are most often regarded as disturbing the 'real truth', or reality of our society as we know it, and are thus, (seen as) a threat to social order.

We have to take into account first, however, that the idea of conspiracy theories is not something new. Back in 1945, philosopher Karl Popper already referred to conspiracies as being rather 'bad science' (Harambam, 2017: 305). Claiming that people who believe in conspiracy theories wrongly make use of evidence and

selectively look for approval of what they already believe in. Within those lines, scholars such as historian Richard Hofstadter (1996 [1964]) also argued that conspiracy theories are merely a form of paranoid politics, caused by psychological and societal unrest. Both of their attitudes add to the already existing debate in academics and politics where conspiracy theories are mostly seen as a 'danger to society' (Harambam, 2017: 11). A perspective that mostly dismisses, ignores and puts away those alternative truths (and theories) for 'the better'. This approach is still alive today amongst most scholars, but also overshadows what is actually taking place amongst people that take part in these debates.

Dutch scholar Jaron Harambam (2017) takes another approach on conspiracy theories and begins by acknowledging that indeed those debates about the truth on certain topics, specifically those supposedly identifying a 'hoax', take place in distinct discourses of knowledge and truth that have dominated online debates in recent years. In terms that seem to go along with the stance behind 'post-truth', Harambam states that: "conspiracy culture represents this broader societal conflict over knowledge and truth in contemporary societies in which questions of what counts as legitimate knowledge and why are frequently posed." (Harambam, 2017: 318). Conspiracies are on the rise, he argues, because of the *epistemically unstable* times we find ourselves in. Epistemic, the degree to which knowledge is validated in society, seems to overlap with the terminology the 'post-truth' approach relies upon, but epistemic instability is not about acknowledging that people (suddenly) value truth differently, but rather that this era is specific in terms of *questioning* certain normalized bodies of knowledge in society (Harambam, 2017).

This specific *questioning* of scientific and taken for granted knowledge comes from the idea that, as Harambam adds: "conspiracy theories signify the cultivation of a critical citizenry and the democratization of knowledge." (Harambam, 2017: 309). With that, he suggests that with the rise of fake news and (mis)information, people are taught to be more critical towards information they see, and consequently challenge the authority of the ones who claim to have knowledge. Harambam states that because we are confronted with so much information, from all different kinds of

sources, we are indirectly trained to be critical towards the truthfulness of all the knowledge we encounter.

Especially now that big multinational tech-companies like Google and Facebook get more and more power over what we see and how we perceive and receive information, for Harambam, conspiracies are a way for people to formulate and channel their worries about the power of the 'mighty few' (Harambam, 2017). For many, conspiracy theories have become normalized, as a critical stance to take and find out what 'really' happens in society. Adding to that, popular culture and social media allowed conspiracy theories to travel from the margins to the larger public in just a few years. These alternative theories are now easily shared, become more accessible for a greater number of people and thus, are more visible in public debates. And this, is generally understood as of being the danger of social media and conspiracy theories. Because with the emerging visibility of alternative theories, people can no longer make informed decisions, which is as such, is a danger to democracy. But what Harambam (2017) argues here, and this is crucial, is to not look at this phenomenon as solely being a 'danger'.

2.2 The Truth is Out There

Jaron Harambam, who devoted his PhD thesis "The Truth is Out There" (2017) to this topic, argues that we should take conspiracy theories and theorists seriously as "in a globalized world, where cultural relativism becomes increasingly sensible, conspiracy theories are just another way of understanding reality" (Harambam, 2017: 210). From his research, Harambam found that those conspiracy theorists see themselves as freethinkers and people who are not, like many others, abducted by the lies of society, and 'general' truths that everyone else seems to believe in.

In his thesis, Harambam investigates the popularity of specific theories, and, differently from what most scholars tend to do, analyzes the *social* aspects of how

the theories come about. With that, he focuses on how and why this tendency of 'truth'-telling is on the rise so much, and why it matters to people. As he states: "I explore it as a culture in its own right: conspiracy culture should be seen as a relatively autonomous constellation of categories of meaning that are shaped by (and direct) social behavior" (Harambam, 2017: 307). As such, his goal is to develop a rich sociological understanding of the phenomenon we call 'conspiracy theories'. While counterintuitive in comparison to the traditional approaches to conspiracy theories, this is a view that is important to take into account, because it sheds light on undiscovered sides of how to understand and research those, to us, alternative truths.

In spite of what we can learn from that perspective, the way in which Harambam approaches 'conspiracy theorists' as a specific group and culture in itself, can be problematic. He argues that by contributing to such (online) groups, following those theories, actively engaging and talking about them, disputing and sharing those worldviews, "people position themselves in the world as certain human beings, as conspiracy theorists." (Harambam, 2017: 210). When Harambam denotes 'them' as a specific 'milieu' or group in society, it is something that goes against his initial idea that conspiracy theories now are more accessible and taken seriously by a greater number of people, from all corners of society. This view adheres too closely to the idea that those people are a specific 'group' of people, what in turn, adheres to the moral panic about conspiracies.

Harambam, however, also argues that conspiracy theories have now become a more accepted and normalized phenomena, as we can now all be conspiracy theorists. But that means that we also have to approach those theories and discourses as such, and not too much want to define people on basis of those ideologies. Because if you claim a different truth, does that immediately define who you are? Harambam does seem to imply that that is not what conspiracy theories and conspiracists are anymore. Just as he himself explains, we all have to find new ways to 'handle' all this information we encounter online.

Chapter 3: Information Age and Social Media

According to Harambam (2017), the rise of conspiracy theories has mostly resulted from the information overload we encounter caused by all the content that is available on the internet. The epistemic instability that arises from this information-overload, the need for people to question authorities and the critical attitude they take on, results in more and more need for these alternative critical truths and views on reality. Arguing either that climate change does not exist or is exaggerated, as a conspiracy theory, seems to be a logical phenomenon that results from this. In this chapter, I will look a bit further into the role the internet, and specifically how social media have play(ed) in the emergence of such theories. We will see how idealizations of the 'democratization' of the web, have turned into fears of 'information overload' and filter bubbles over the years.

3.1 The Democratization of the Web

In the early stages of its existence, the notion of 'the internet', as Web 1.0, only became popular by the public around 1970's. Since that time, its image slowly started to shift from 'technologies of oppression' towards the idealistic stance of 'technologies of liberation' (Van Dijck, 2013: 9). While the Web 1.0 was rather still a one-way information stream, executed by a small number of people, the Web 2.0 arrived with totally new experiences of the internet. The Web 2.0 was seen as the interactive internet where people could together help building its content (Van Dijck, 2013: 4).

In the early 2000's this notion of 'Web 2.0' - which Tim O'Reilly popularized around 2005 - was mostly seen as a potential to make new connections, build communities and therefore, advance democracy and sociality (O'Reilly, 2005). O'Reilly's philosophy was mostly built on this idea of 'web democratization', which referred to a web where all information was available, while people themselves can limitlessly

contribute and alter information and content where needed, and we all had equal say in how that would happen (O'Reilly, 2005).

As such, the Web 2.0 contributed to a new phenomenon, 'Digital Natives' with which Gasser and Palfrey (2008) referred to young people who grew up in the digital era and include themselves in political discourse in totally new ways (Gasser & Palfrey, 2008: 194). There is broader participation of the public, "one aspect of this broader conception of participation is the making and remaking of narratives of a campaign or of other important public events." (2008: 266). This is referred to with the notion 'semiotic democracy', where more people can tell the story of their times and decide what it is. Since then, the internet was no longer a one-way medium of receiving news, but a broader act of interpreting and understanding, with a public that responds to the content online by not only sharing their opinions but also forming and stating opinions (Gasser & Palfrey, 2008: 266). Gasser and Palfrey state that "in a semiotic democracy, the story can be interpreted and reshaped by any citizen with the skills, time, and access to digital technologies to do so." (2008: 266). Digital Natives participate in the (online) public debates by themselves and with each other.

3.1.2 Filter Bubbles and Information-overload

There is, however, also a downside that came to light later in the 2000's. First, from the fact that everyone can add and share information on the web, another problem arises, one that Harambam also referred to: a so-called 'information overload' (Gasser & Palfrey, 2008: 203). This 'freedom' to add and/or alter the content on the internet, seems to only bring more chaos in that 'new public' sphere. How do people decide who to trust and what information to believe? As Gasser and Palfrey argue: "the networked public sphere is full of gems as well as less valuable content. The pressure of young people to sort the good from the bad is only going to continue to grow." (2008: 268).

Second, over the last couple of years, it came to the surface that platforms' algorithms play a big role in reinforcing beliefs people already have. People are mostly re-exposed to same opinions repeatedly by the online environment they find themselves in, either by the platforms' algorithms, or people they follow online. Internet activist Eli Pariser (2011) states that we keep seeing the same stuff over and over again, in a so-called me-loop. We live in digital 'filter bubbles' where "your computer monitor is a kind of a one-way mirror, reflecting your own interests while algorithmic observers watch what you click." (Pariser, 2011: 52). This also seals off our capacity of looking outside of this bubble, and seeking different perspectives, because we don't know what we don't know (Pariser, 2011: 91). Pariser argues that "the filter bubble encourages a more passive approach to acquiring information, which is at odds with the kind of exploration that leads to discovery" (Pariser, 2011: 94).

Pariser, in conclusion, argues that the notion of democratic internet is mostly misleading, and that people only get information from within that bubble that in turn, closes people off from the rest of the world. He admits that he in the first place also hoped and dreamed for a future where the internet allowed a more 'people powered' space where in a more civil and democratic way a public sphere could be formed. But, as he argues, "the future may be more machine-powered than people-powered" in the end (Pariser, 2011: 52).

3.2 Coded Sociality

Social media platforms also added other dimensions to this ideal picture of the 'democracy and information internet' namely: 'sharing' and 'connectivity'. In its early years, we saw how social media were mostly celebrated for its capacities of connecting people and allowing for new ways of being social with others. These huge changes in our media landscape widely affected how we understood sociality online (Van Dijck, 2013: 5). The idealistic view on social media and the internet was

enthusiastically adopted by the platforms themselves, they “embraced this rekindled spirit when they started to make the Web ‘more social’.” (Van Dijck, 2013: 4). Doing so, social media platforms simply started taking advantage of the human concepts and needs for connectivity and sociality.

As such, Dutch scholar José Van Dijck argues that social media’s idealist function as a ‘new public space’, has to a certain degree, failed. In her book ‘The Culture of Connectivity’, Van Dijck warns about the misconception and misuse of the word ‘social’ in ‘social media’. In line with Pariser’s ideas, we see how Van Dijck’s perspective also takes on the idea of ‘machine-powered’ internet. Just like Pariser, Van Dijck argues that peer created and shared content is mostly steered and machine driven. In reality, content on social media is only partially user owned, and limited interactive.

With that Van Dijck refers to how social media have infiltrated our everyday lives and have carefully shaped what being social and having friends means: “a platform is a mediator rather than an intermediary: it shaped the performance of social acts instead of merely facilitating them.” (Van Dijck, 2013: 23). Shaping social life in implicit ways, in ‘small’ things like how Twitter limits its user input to only 280 (first 140) characters for a tweet, or how the word ‘friends’ has gained such different meanings in the way Facebook has used it (think about e.g. ‘friend requests’).

Still, social media are seen as only user created and mostly facilitating human connections, simply because the word ‘social’ implies a tendency of it being user centered (Van Dijck, 2013: 11). What actually happens, is that platforms like Facebook code “relationships between people, things, and ideas into algorithms.” (Van Dijck, 2013: 12). Van Dijck points out how everything we do on social media becomes coded information: “casual speech acts have turned into formalized inscriptions” (Van Dijck, 2013: 7).

Van Dijck does not ignore that content on social media is partly peer produced, but mostly, social media platforms steer the users in the way they behave online, and what input they create (Van Dijck, 2013: 32). Users produce data that the platforms in turn use for building a stronger algorithm, or either sell access to that data to third parties for commercial ends (e.g. advertisers). The idea of *connectedness* is merely a disguise for the mining of users' data, as they have made 'sociality technical' to serve their own interest (2013: 12).

Essentially, what Van Dijck and Pariser both argue, is that the connectivity and sociality that takes place on social media is mostly 'automated connectivity', and there is not much left of the 'social' in social media (Van Dijck, 2013: 23). We see how it soon changed from an enthusiastic and optimistic approach to the Web 2.0's democratic potential, to a profound alarming sound of steered and technical sociality. But does that mean people are not able to connect, talk and share opinions without them being molded by those machines?

As Pariser put it, those online conspiracy theorists seem to be simply trapped in filter bubbles where sociality is technical and automated. Wherein those climate change discourses online, those conspiracy theories and truth questioning ideologies and beliefs, are fueled with (platform) steered conversations and opinions. In those lines, we could argue that Pariser (2011) is an early critic mentioning characteristics of this idea that we live in a 'post-truth' era. However, Pariser seems to go into the extremes and forgets that those users are still individual human beings, talking and sharing their ideas and lives. Pariser more or less takes on a 'post-social' account, where he argues that sociality on the internet doesn't exist (anymore) and that the individual is just steered by algorithms and user interfaces.

Van Dijck (2013), however, still acknowledges sociality, she approaches it as something technical, in a sense that human input is always shaped by algorithms, operating in networked systems. We can simply not ignore that factors of automated connectivity, like filter bubbles and algorithms, do play a large role in the use of social

media and construction of people's beliefs, and also conspiracy theories. People are indeed more and more confronted with same information that is reinforced by the structure of those platforms. But, in such, it also allows for different ways of connectivity and sociality.

In those terms, even though huge parts of the idealized Web 2.0 may have changed, or appear to be different than we all hoped for, I would, however, argue that both approaches don't help us fully clarify what actually happens on social media, *what* people say and *how* those discourses connect to a wider debate of conspiracy theories. So, following I shall look at other approaches to understand what opinions mean and truths mean, and how they are constructed on social media. And in turn, what the notion of 'post-truth', as mentioned earlier, tells us about how social media, conspiracy theories and truth intermingle.

Chapter 4: Post-Truth and the Death of Truth

In this chapter, I will begin by illustrating 'post-truth' to understand where the denotation comes from, and see how and why this concept is considered by academics in social sciences in the context of the public sphere and politics. We will also come to see why it is believed that this post-truth era, just as Van Dijck and Pariser argued, is infused with an air of that what happens online is 'post-social'. Then, taking into account the sociological field of the 'social construction of knowledge', we learn how to approach this truth-debate from the very basis of what it means to be human in a (socially constructed) world.

4.1 Post-truth, the Transition of the Meaning of Knowledge

In fields of social sciences and in a manifold of political debates scholars and critics also sense these emerging online debates around truth and lies and argue that we live in a time of transition regarding the meaning of *knowledge*. From eras of rationality, enlightenment and modernity, we are now shifting towards an age of belief and opinion, or a so-called 'post-truth' era. Cambridge Dictionary³ even honored it as the word of the year in 2016, defining it as "relating to a situation in which people are more likely to accept an argument based on their emotions and beliefs, rather than one based on facts."

This transition in the meaning of knowledge is by some argued as being a product of the postmodern information age we live in. A time wherein, due to the internet and social media, information is accessible for anyone, always and anywhere around the world. What has predominantly changed, according to this understanding of 'post-truth', is how we handle and perceive information (Kakutani, 2018).

³ Cambridge Dictionary: Post-truth

<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/post-truth>

It brings up an idea that individuals suddenly must decide what knowledge - out of this pile of information - is credible and individually create their perception of 'truth' and 'reality' out of it. What goes 'wrong' then, is that emotion and opinion are too much at stake. 'Truth' and 'knowledge' have now become something (too) personal and individual, depending on opinion and emotions rather than empirical evidence and rational factuality or science. Science is in decline, and truth no longer refers to rationality and facts in this post-truth era, and precisely that, is a danger for our societies. With all those lies and alternative truths this phenomenon does, as Paul Valadier argues, entail "a danger to democracy" (Valadier, 2017).

That is a problematic statement, as 'truth' on itself is already a very broad and difficult concept to clarify. Next to that, we should note, as Paul Valadier himself states, that "social and political life have rarely coexisted in harmony with the truth. History shows just how common approximations, half-truths, misleading propaganda, and brainwashing have all been." (Valadier, 2017: 144). So what makes this transition, from a supposedly 'truthful' society to a post-truth society, so noteworthy to name it as such?

4.2 The Death of Truth

One of those post-truth critics amongst Latour and (arguably) Pariser, who researched this emergence of the use of the notion of 'truth' in public debates, is the literary critic Michiko Kakutani, mostly known for her work at the New York Times. Kakutani devoted an entire book to describing the post-truth era, or as she calls it: "The Death of Truth" (Kakutani, 2018). Her book, carrying the same title, describes a society that values truth and truth-speaking in an entirely new way. She argues that objectivity, "the idea that people can aspire toward ascertaining the best available truth, is no longer in favor." (Kakutani, 2018: 17). In her book, she mainly discusses: "how did truth and reason become such endangered species, and what does their impending demise portend for our public discourse and the future of our politics and governance?" (Kakutani, 2018: 15).

Kakutani observed that due to filter bubbles, or ‘partisan silos’ as she calls them, people lose the ability to share and communicate with a heterogeneous social group, fueling homogenized realities in groups that carry fears of social change, nationalism and ‘hatred of outsiders on the rise against people’ (Kakutani, 2018: 12).

This taking place within online communities that are maintained by algorithms and the social technologies of the internet, as Kakutani argues, is a typical aspect of the post-modernist age we live in now (Kakutani, 2018: 18). Here Kakutani refers to climate change deniers, who “insist that their views be taught alongside ‘science-based’ theories.” (Kakutani, 2018: 18). With that, as Kakutani puts it, there is a decline in rational discourse, as we nowadays seem to agree that truths only exist from personal perspectives. She claims that in this post-modernist era, “momentous decisions that affect the entire world are not made through a rational policy-making process and the judicious weighing of information and expert analyses, but are instead fueled by ideological certainty and the cherry picking of intelligence to support preconceived ideas.” (Kakutani, 2018: 31).

These post-modernist phenomena are strengthened by the kind of anti-enlightenment principles Trump promotes in his politics. Politics where rationalism, tolerance, empiricism and science are ‘tossed out of the window’, as Kakutani argues (Kakutani, 2018: 27). By referring to ‘anti-enlightenment’ Kakutani then states that science is under attack, “and so is expertise of every sort – be it expertise in foreign policy, national security, economics, or education.” (Kakutani, 2018: 23).

And indeed, it seems that politics is one of the core institutions in which people twist and turn the truths, shaping realities and facts so that they fit their ideologies and policies. But just as Valadier argued, this is not new to politics. When Kakutani argues that nowadays “facts are fungible and socially constructed” (Kakutani, 2018: 44), we may ask ourselves: aren’t truths always fueled and handled with ideologies in one way or the other, and therefore, socially constructed? And, does speaking about truth as ‘endangered species’ help us to understand what is happening in this

debate? Is there even such a thing as a one and only 'truth'? Especially, when we consider how we as human beings handle it, how we construct what truth is, what we do with it, how adhere meaning and value to the concept of truth itself.

As we mentioned before, Kakutani is not the only one in this debate talking about post-truth as such. Apart from Kakutani there are many other theorists that label contemporary truth discourses as 'post-truth' and particularly 'specific to our era', in order to denote what is happening in public and political (online) debates. I would argue here however, that what might help us better understand and illuminate the complexity of the rise of these 'truth discourses' online, is to look at the social meaning and construction of truth first. Because, there seems to be something more to the idea of 'truth' that isn't that specific to our times as many suggest.

4.3 Social Construction of Knowledge and Truth

The quest towards finding the one and only truth is older than the concepts of science, and seems to be one that will not be resolved soon. It is an ever-lasting crusade of the human species in need for explaining and understanding of the world around us.

In resolving questions regarding the truth, philosophers often take concepts such as correspondence theory and pragmatism into account, or guide their quest to the truth with ontological and epistemological questions and methodologies. In turn, mathematics provides us with numerical systems and formulas as tools to help us explain what reality is like, religions refer to God(s) who tells us the one and only truth and ancient teachers like Buddha gave us the Four Noble Truths that will show us the reality. But none of them seem to give a definite answer to solve it all. No definition of truth is one we can all agree upon. Neither the most promising scientific advances, the most ravishing spiritual pathways nor simply nature itself seem to satisfy us all with their answers to the everlasting quest for truth. This is because how

we come to understand reality - how we make sense of it through our own bodies and environments, and as such attach different meanings to it - makes it inherently impossible to come to a universal belief or experience of what truth means for each of us.

With the specific social constructionist perspective I take here, I do not want to reject any possibilities of an objective reality or truth. (most) Scientific research provides us with the most rational and objective explanations about reality as possible. It gives us frameworks, instruments and models as tools through which we can understand, or at least try to explain the reality of the world. However, even here you could argue that also scientific research seems to be relative, or at least is and can sometimes certainly be conducted based on already pre-given beliefs and ideologies.

What undoubtedly matters (from this perspective) is how we socially handle knowledge and reality, how we value certain knowledge in societies, how we attach meanings to it, what passes for knowledge and what does not. This varies from understanding truth as such as something to be explained through empirical evidence, as based on feelings, or experiences (Berger & Luckmann, 1991 [1966]: 83). As sociologists Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann state: “theoretical knowledge is only a small and by no means the most important parts of what passes for knowledge in a society.” (Berger & Luckmann, 1991 [1966]: 83). They point out an important difference between the ‘given facts’ of a reality out there, and the process of how those facts are made sense of by society and social groups themselves.

In their book ‘The Social Construction of Reality’ (1991 [1966]) Berger and Luckmann look at truth and reality from the very basis of understanding of how we as humans apprehend it and what we do with it, and how we build conceptualizations of truth and reality in relation to the our environment and social others; how reality and truth are socially constructed. Berger and Luckmann elaborate on the idea of a ‘social world’, referring to how our everyday reality is a socially constructed world. We live in a world of humanmade systems, institutions, norms, values and truths. From the very

moment we are born we are put into this socially constructed world and learn to understand it through our interactions with it and the social others that guide us through it. Creating a reality that is shaped throughout the history of humankind, lived in and constructed by, and for humans. We shape it by living in it, as an “ongoing human production”, (Luckmann & Berger, 1991 [1966]: 69),

Analyzing the world through this kind of social constructivist theory is crucial in recognizing and comprehending how people socially understand reality and truth. Berger and Luckmann mostly talk about a ‘human constructed’ world, distinct from the world of ‘nature’, wherewith they refer to the human-made cultural aspects that shape our world. This is a world that is made up out of social arrangements that are mediated through interaction with the natural world, but also, with other social beings. And this social interaction with other human beings is made up out of a social order held together by social arrangements “that are mediated through the being of other social others” (Luckmann & Berger, 1991 [1966]). This interplay between the world of ‘nature’ and the ‘human constructed’ world comes out of human interaction with that world and social others, and as such meaning giving to that ‘natural’ word, that is always understood by and through human sociality.

Within this social constructivist view, it is argued that, as such, scientific knowledge needs to be socially ‘objectified’ and theoretically integrated into people’s everyday reality and the society they live in. Facts need to fit into the reality of an already known and ‘accepted’ systematically organized body of knowledge and truths. As Berger and Luckman conclude: “it is the sum total of ‘what everybody knows’ about a social world, an assemblage of maxims, morals, proverbial nuggets of wisdom, values and beliefs, myths, and so forth, the theoretical integration of which requires considerable intellectual fortitude in itself.” (Berger & Luckmann, 1991 [1966]: 83).

Institutions that arise out of these social understandings, which hold and reinforce this body of knowledge, shape that social world to a certain extent. It follows from this that language, for instance, is one of the ‘tools’ wherewith experiences and (new)

knowledge are objectified and made sense of by society. This allows institutions to use the same language to objectify and institutionalize new knowledge within the existing idea(l) of reality and truth in a specific society. In short, using the same language to describe experiences and (new) findings, “allows its incorporation into a larger body of tradition by way of moral instruction, inspirational poetry, religious allegory and whatnot.” Berger & Luckmann, (1991 [1966]: 86). Here we can see how for example, the trustworthy and far-reaching connotation the words ‘truth’ and ‘science’ have, is reinforced by their purpose (as a tool) and put forward by their utility in the given society.

With this, Berger and Luckmann (1991 [1966]) do not solely take on a relativistic standpoint but rather, their perspective allows us to understand how we, as social beings, make sense of our surroundings and how knowledge comes to be understood as such in (and shapes how we understand it) societies. Even words such as ‘truth’ and ‘reality’ are abstract linguistic conceptualizations that carry a socially constructed meaning that is thus, in turn, highly context and culturally dependent. From the ‘accepted body of knowledge’ in a certain society or social group, discourses around what is reality, truth and knowledge, come into being with their own specific utility and meaning. Through such an approach we can for instance understand how science, religion and philosophical theories all define reality in tremendously different ways, with totally different understandings of what truth means and how such concepts (like truth or science) are useful for them.

This approach then, explains how and why truth and reality are defined in different ways by different people from different social environments, with different experiences. They are believed or not believed in, taken for granted, or dismissed. When we start defining truths and realities there are simply so many norms, values and (histories, institutions..) ideas at stake, that their meaning can never add up to a single reality or world that everyone agrees upon.

4.4 Dismissing Post-Truth

Given the above, I argue that the idea of post-truth, in the sense that Kakutani (2018) amongst others defines it, makes a dangerous claim in saying that facts are suddenly, and only now, 'fungible and socially constructed' and that science is the only way to explain the 'truth'. Her arguments overlook and ignore one obvious aspect that shapes our understanding of the world around us: *sociality*. Kakutani makes a bold statement, but denies that conceptions of 'truth' or 'reality' are largely fueled by how they are perceived through social interaction, interpreting and valuing of different kinds. Her perspective appears to be a largely generalizing one, which ignores the complexity of the reality we live in and how we experience it.

Another shortcoming of the notion of 'post-truth' lies in the very name of the theory: *post-truth*. *Post* refers to 'after' or 'behind' and thus implies that we now live in a period where there is no 'real' truth anymore. That is a statement that in turn, presupposes that there actually was a time where there was a unified understanding and view of what is true in the world. However, as Berger and Luckman (1991 [1966]) helped us explain: such a world never existed, and can never exist. Because, as they argue, a large part of understanding knowledge, is that it is always made sense of through *interaction* with environments and social others, that is; truth and reality are by definition, fundamentally, socially constructed.

This fluidity of truth in these terms, is exactly the most compelling character of its value in societies. How the word is used - how people attempt to define reality, what it means to people and how people talk about it - reveals something about what their world looks like. As Paul Valadier eventually acknowledges, it is 'useless and impossible' to try to reach a certain universal truth, as it solely becomes an impossible quest that can never be answered (Valadier, 2017: 5). And as far as truth, in this sense, is a social construction, the concept of 'post-truth' cannot cover what is actually happening in (online) public debates nowadays.

Thus, from here on, we can look at conspiracy theorizing online from the perspective of social construction of knowledge, and understand it through how people handle with knowledge in those specific environments. I should take in account *how* this construction of truth actually takes place and find out where those discourses are about.

Chapter 5: Discourse Analysis

We have seen two major ways in which sociality is mostly dismissed or reconsidered regarding how truths are constructed in contemporary online discourses. This goes for the idea of the 'post-truth' era, where we all individually seem to produce and uphold our own (may it be dangerous) beliefs, which goes hand in hand with the notion of 'post-social, that signifies this 'individuality'. This is followed by the idea that how we act online is partly steered and automated, where our social behavior online has taken forms of a 'technical sociality' (Van Dijck, 2013) or rather where sociality no exists (Pariser, 2011).

In this chapter, I will describe a method of analysis that allows to show that there is something else going on. That is, sociality is not irrelevant or has simply disappeared, but as matter of fact, has taken on different forms we have not acknowledged just yet. To understand how the constructing of truth works online, and how sociality arguably plays into this, I will examine how the debate around climate change manifests itself on Twitter. I will analyze five different tweets that all strongly connect to a discourse where there seems to be a shared belief that climate change is all either exaggerated, fake or propaganda.

I chose to analyze these specific statements about climate change because they all represent a certain climate change denial discourse, specifically one that presents climate change as a 'hoax'. The views are put forward by individuals who seem to disagree with the statements of scientists on global warming, as they do not believe in, or deny the 'hard facts' of climate change. Yet, for categorical utility, I will call them 'climate change deniers'. With this qualitative way of conducting research, I undertake an in-depth approach to the phenomenon of denying climate change and the sociality of constructing or maintaining a truth on social media.

Selecting five specific statements on Twitter, where individuals imply that climate change is a hoax, allows me to dive into the deeply layered and inherently referential and socially constructed meaning giving of these self-claimed truths. With this attempt I will identify how such truth discourses are constructed and relate them to the bigger picture of the earlier mentioned post-truth debates, ideas of the social constructing of knowledge and conspiracy theories.

A relevant method to analyze these truth discourses is what Jan Blommaert recommends in his book 'Discourse' (2005) as 'Critical Discourse Analysis', or CDA. With this type of discourse analysis, I aim to first describe what happens, *how* and *what* is communicated and then dissect the tweets into different referential layers out of which the discourse is built. Next, I will analyze the function of these layers as elements, how semiotization of these elements takes place within this specific discourse. This allows me then to understand how and what is said, what truth and knowledge is taken for granted, what is seen as knowledge, how it is shared and what it means to people.

5.1 Critical Discourse Analysis

Jan Blommaert (2005), along with Rodney H. Jones (2015), suggest a few tools that help us to recognize, and give structure to, what is happening in the climate denial discourse on Twitter. In order to even understand or 'agree' with that what is said in this discourse, one needs to have some pre-assumed knowledge about what is going on and who tells the 'truth' about climate change.

On this idea of a certain presupposed knowledge, Blommaert refers to the work of Gumperz who "observed that people pick up quite a few 'unsaid' meanings in interaction." (Blommaert, 2005: 41). When something is communicated within a specific context, certain *indexical meanings* are generated, either by the way the signs are given meaning to or are used but it's users, or the context that shaped

them (Blommaert, 2005: 14). Utterances are made coherent by people in a certain context because they are built upon a (shared) presupposed knowledge. So, to understand 'how language matters to people' (Blommaert, 2005: 14), we need to understand and see how language (texts, signs, images etc.) operates in certain contexts: to whom it is directed, what is it used for, how it is used and what the goals of its use are.

Doing this allows me to understand and see the process of what those symbols mean to their users. We shall see how language operates 'at higher levels than the single sentence.' (Halliday and Hasan 1976; Tannen 1984 [in Blommaert, 2005]). This simply means that there is more behind utterances than what is literally said; (online) statements are not just a random combination of signs and texts, but rely on a certain indexical, contextual history of meaning giving and, cultural and social patterns of communication. The way in which, and with what intentions people use language, or any other sign system, can say a lot about an individual's background, their 'social group', identity and the organization they belong to (Blommaert, 2005: 12). Thus, 'Discourse' can be seen as a way through and in which people explicitly or implicitly show what their view on what reality is, what can and cannot be validated as true for them. Within this (social) 'meaning giving' ideologies are produced and reproduced (Blommaert, 2005: 26).

5.1.1 Multimodality

Earlier methods of discourse analyses were mainly focused on (spoken) language and text, but now we see that a lot of 'meaning giving' is created within a diverse scale of instruments of meaning making and communicating. New technologies allow us to communicate and share meaning making processes in vast and various ways, and thus discourses are becoming even more *multimodal* (Jones, Chik & Hafner, 2015). We particularly see that with the rise of new media technologies like computers and smartphones. Specifically, in many online utterances discourses are layered with numerous texts and images, references, with each deriving from

different historical contexts of meaning-giving (Jones et al., 2015). Or as Jones et al. state: “The most important thing about multimodality is that, because of the inherent dynamism of digital texts, meanings are rarely expressed in stable configurations of modes, but rather travel across modes and combinations of modes in ways that alter them, sometimes subtly, sometimes dramatically” (Jones, et al., 2015: 8).

5.1.2 Text and Context

Likewise, we are also past the traditional notions of context. As a result of this multimodality, strict boundaries between certain (institutional) domains become more or less blurry (Jones, et al., 2015: 42). This creates many opportunities for communication, it allows a more layered and complex way of meaning giving, but also establishes a never-ending perplexity of meanings and references, especially with the ease with which information is decontextualized and recontextualised. Multimodality “compounds and complicates the meaning potential of texts” (Jones, et al., 2015: 42), creating a space of rapid shifts of ‘contextual frames’ wherein utterances are taking place. An example of different contextual frames is for instance the word ‘truth’, and what it means in a scientific discourse versus when the word is used in a discourse of personal relationships. The meaning of the word changes when put into this new discursive space.

5.1.3 Intertextuality and Interdiscursivity

This interplay between discourses and signs, contextualization and re-contextualization of signs and meaning giving can be understood with the notions of *intertextuality* and *interdiscursivity*. These notions help us identify where what is said comes from, and helps us understand the function of certain signs in a context. As Blommaert states: “In its simplest form, intertextuality refers to the fact that whenever we speak we produce the words of others, we constantly cite and re-cite expressions, and recycle meanings that are already available.” (Blommaert, 2005:

46.). Using intertextuality as a tool, thus allows us to look beyond the literal use of the language. It seeks to understand and investigate where expressions used actually come from, whom they speak for and how they relate to historical usage and change over time. Here is where Gumperz's idea of 'unsaid' meaning becomes important again, since intertextuality can sometimes work through allusion, where it is left to the audience to make sense of that what is said, or implicitly referred to.

When *discourses* are taken out of their context and are placed into new contexts of communication, in other words de-contextualized and re-contextualized, we refer to 'interdiscursivity'. Here we see how discourses can become new discourses associated with a new context, and therefore their meaning changes. But also in the new context they are accompanied by a "meta-discourse which provides a sort of 'preferred reading' for the discourse" (Blommaert, 2005: 47). Interdiscursivity therefore is about the mixing of different genres, referring to different discursive elements within a specific discourse, relying on or relating to another discourse to establish a specific statement.

5.2 Data Gathering

The data for this inquiry is collected from multiple 'feeds', conversation streams, on Twitter that have used the hashtag #ClimateChangeHoax. The tweets are posted by individuals that contributed to this specific 'climate denial' discourse where climate change is presented as a 'hoax'. These tweets were chosen to retrieve valuable information about semiotization and the function of certain signs in this discourse of climate denial. The purpose is to understand how the construction of their 'truth' on what climate change is, or is not, takes place.

The first two tweets, as we will see later, are focused on a certain discourse around climate change associated with the young climate activist Greta Thunberg. The third

tweet analyzed, portrays a more general debate on climate change denial and the last two tweets are focused on how 'facts' and 'data' are used and misused by individuals on Twitter and put into a new context. I have specifically chosen for Twitter because firstly, focusing on one platform will create a consistency in the data analysis, within the affordances of the specific platform. Secondly, Twitter is still used by people within different age ranges and not only depends on images specifically like for example Instagram. It allows me to gather multimodal data, a mixture of textual and visual elements. I must note however, that the data has been selected to opt for as wide a variety and mix as possible but within the expectations and borders of the specific 'climate change denial' discourse. I specifically searched for people who contributed to this discourse by using the hashtag '#ClimatechangeHoax'. As expected, the data gathered takes place in a discourse where the implication is, that the ultimate truth is that climate change is a hoax, or either exaggerated.

1. The Manager of Climate Change



(Fig. 1: Tweet 1, The Manager of Climate Change)

This first Tweet is a good example of how the debate around climate change denial is built upon the assumptions held by a specific group that shares a certain view on climate change. In order to even understand or agree with that what is said in this kind of climate change discourse, one needs to have some pre-assumed knowledge about what is going on and who tells the 'truth' about climate change.

This piece of data perfectly illustrates multimodality as defined by Jones (2015) and Blommaert (2005) above.

From here, we can dissect the whole (fg.1) into different layers which all make up a complex 'truth' discourse that operates on higher levels than one might notice at a first glance. Each way in which a sign is used, reveals what and why it is important for its users, and says something about their reality. We can find a lot of intertextual and interdiscursive links in this tweet. The first and most outstanding links we can see appear in the picture used in the tweet. The picture is an internet meme – a cultural virally transmitted multimodal image (or video) – of the 16-year-old Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg. The picture was taken when she was giving a speech to the world leaders of the UN to bring awareness about climate change. Her speech was both celebrated as 'very emotional and grounded in science'⁴ but also fully disregarded and dismissed as 'cultish and over-exaggerated'⁵.

When we look closer, we may notice that the picture of Thunberg's speech is mixed with some elements of a famous meme known as the 'I want to talk to the manager', or 'can I speak to the manager'⁶ – meme. Those elements are clearly de-

⁴ The Guardian, (2019). *Greta Thunberg condemns world leaders in emotional speech at UN* <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/sep/23/greta-thunberg-speech-un-2019-address>

⁵ WUWT, (2019). *The cult of Greta Thunberg* <https://wattsupwiththat.com/2019/04/22/the-cult-of-greta-thunberg/>

⁶ Know your Meme, *I want to speak to the manager hair-cut* <https://knowyourmeme.com/search?context=images&sort=relevance&q=speak+to+the+manager>

contextualized from another meme, and re-contextualized into this specific statement on Twitter. The specific text in the picture, and the hair photoshopped on Thunberg's head, refers to a meme where a 'typical' 45-year-old American housewife with short hair called Karen, dramatically overreacts in a supermarket and wants to 'speak to the manager'. She is 'the kind of person' who always complains about everything and heavily overreacts and thinks that she knows how things should work. The short blond and a bit over-the-top hair, plays a huge part in forming the typical character of that 'complaining housewife' in the 'I want to speak to the manager' meme.

In this tweet, we can see how this particular 'Karen haircut' meme is fused with the picture of Greta Thunberg's speech, combined with the text: "I want to talk to the manager of climate change now!" (fig.1). These elements, specifically the photoshopped haircut and the phrase, are taken out of their original context (the 'I want to speak to the manager', or Karen meme). Its meanings and functions are adapted to the specific discourse where climate change is understood as a hoax or lie. Already this meme itself works on this presupposed knowledge, that the audience understands the references made. One should know about the Karen meme, know about Greta Thunberg and agree upon or understand that climate change is hugely exaggerated. Both the haircut and the text within this discourse refer to Greta Thunberg as being like Karen. Greta is 'just' overreacting about climate change and is only making drama out of nothing, she is wasting our time with her nonsense.



(Fig. 2 & 3, Karen: "I want to speak to the manager" - meme⁷)

⁷ Know Your Meme: *The "Can I Speak to the Manager" Haircut* <https://i.kym-cdn.com/photos/images/original/001/453/672/d36.jpg>

The user does this by undermining and neglecting the actual views of Greta Thunberg, as a strategy to disregard climate science. This meme thus, presents as 'truth' that the climate change debate is all simply about overreacting and that we shouldn't take it so seriously.

There are also some further details that we should not ignore in this tweet. There are some clear links to other discourses established with three hashtags: first, an interdiscursive link to #FakeNews, implying that climate change is part of all the 'fake news' to be found online. Further the Tweeter used #ClimateChangeHoax to connect this tweet with other tweets that elaborate on this topic, that share a certain 'knowledge universe' where the agreement is that climate change is no more than a hoax. Finally, the use of the hashtag #Globalwarming links the tweet to a discourse where climate change is seen as something urgent, a real thing happening. Therefore, it looks like the user is amplifying the message to different audiences. By connecting the tweet to other discourses, s/he makes use of the accessible web of discourses created on Twitter, as it being an important affordance of the platform itself.

As such, it can be seen as a strategy to infiltrate another 'knowledge universe', or a space where those discourses about climate change clash or mix up, offering new perspectives for the ones in doubt, as the hashtag #Globalwarming can bring this tweet also to the attention of those who do not view climate change as a hoax. It can also tell us something about how this 'truth' about climate change is perceived by the user, #Globalwarming as something that is inherently fake, something people (should) already know.

Further in this tweet, there is also a link made to a sentence that is often used in specific internet memes: 'I want my money back'⁸. This suggests that the taxes we

⁸Know Your Meme, *I want my money back!*

<https://knowyourmeme.com/search?context=images&q=I+want+my+money+back>

pay are spent on 'fake science', and refers to a certain assumption that people's trust is misused as we are simply lied to by the government. Adding to that, the word 'they', that is used in this statement, implies that you, as a reader of the tweet, know who 'they' are, and that you are different from 'them'. Remarkably, we don't see any explanation of who this 'they' exactly is, it is assumed that you know who 'they' are, and therefore the audience of this meme is already implied by the tweeter. It most likely refers to a group of people or organizations who claim that climate change does exist (e.g. scientists). The intertextual assumption is that you, different from them, know that 'climate change is a hoax'.

Furthermore, I want to point out how the tweeter says: 'I am not feeling this current climate' and mentions the '30 degrees Fahrenheit'. With this, s/he seems to touch upon questioning who can decide what facts really are, who is able to do science. Personal and first-hand knowledge is more valued here, and the importance and trustworthiness of scientists is doubted as it implies attitudes of: 'the answer is right in front of our eyes', 'it is so obvious that climate change is fake', and 'here are the real facts'. This says something about how s/he values science as less trustworthy than his/her own empirical arguments.

2. Nazi Propaganda



(Fig. 4: Tweet 2, Nazi Propaganda)

In the second tweet I selected, we also see a reference to Greta Thunberg, but this time it is less obvious. There is no picture of Thunberg herself used and her name isn't mentioned either. Still it is assumed that the people who see this tweet immediately understand what is meant.

What we can see at first in the picture, is a German girl who is giving a speech in front of a specific audience. This innocent-looking girl is the daughter of Heinrich Himmler. Himmler is known as one of the leaders of the SS, co-responsible for the Holocaust in Nazi Germany. His daughter, Gudrun Himmler, was known as the Nazi-princess⁹. The sweet-looking girl was known as the perfect representation of the Aryan race and had to speak to the public and present about the Nazis ideals, her innocence deployed as propaganda for the Nazis during the second world war. Nowadays people look back on Gudrun as an example of how authoritarian political

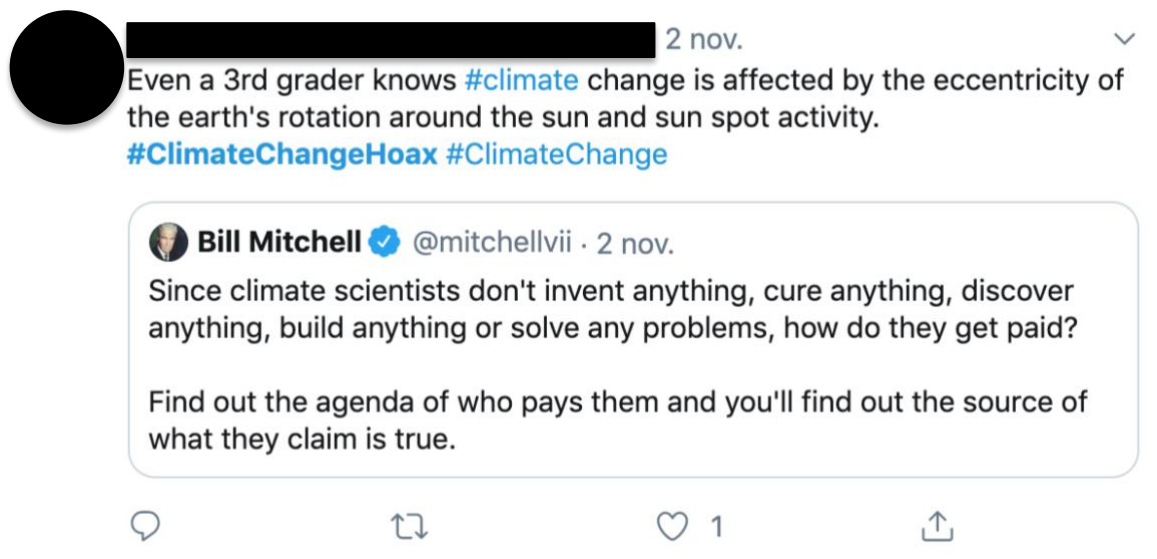
⁹Welt. (2014). *Himmlers Nachwuchs*
https://www.welt.de/print/die_welt/politik/article124437648/Himmlers-Nachwuchs.html

powers use propaganda to deceive the public, by using a picture of an oh-so-innocent-looking girl, without the public knowing what is 'really' going on.

What is notable is that the girl on the picture, shares major physical features with Greta Thunberg. Just like the German girl, Thunberg is often seen with two braids, appearing cute and innocent. The implication is that again, a young girl, who doesn't know what she is saying, is used for propaganda and the world is not seeing it. The discourse suggests Thunberg is used for propaganda, and that we have to look behind her childlike and soft appearance, that find out that climate change is just a hoax. What happens here then, is that climate change is portrayed as something inherently political, dominated or either invented by extremist parties, who just like the Nazis, want to take over the world. Greta, is compared with Gudrun, implying that what she is telling is not her own story but she is merely controlled by militant leaders, just like a puppet, hiding the reality.

Here, the claim that climate change is happening is also boldly compared and weighted against the horrors of the second world war. Climate scientists are boldly compared with Nazis, a comparison that may hold a lot of emotional rhetorical power. Even the Nazi symbol is promptly visible in this picture. Then, by using the word 'agenda' the Tweeter implies that Greta Thunberg, or either the scientists or government, 'use' global warming to accomplish another goal, a secretive plan of some sort. Again, the implication is that the ones who read the post, already understand, or know what is referred to. Also, here the hashtag #ClimateChangeHoax is used, connecting the tweet to the overarching truth discourse where climate change is perceived as something close to an untruth, or even a dangerous lie.

3. Climate Change is a Hoax - duh



(Fig. 5: Tweet 3, Climate Change is a Hoax)

This tweet is complex and multimodal in a very distinctive way, different from the ones we saw above. It also links to discourses of climate change denial, but it seems that there is a small clash between the statements in the two tweets.

We can divide the tweet in two different layers of intertextuality. First, we see the tweet by Bill Mitchell, who arguably states climate change is pseudoscience and that it only costs us money. Just like in the second tweet (Fig. 4), Mitchell specifically doubts the truthfulness of the claims scientists make, and refers to a sense of corruption and 'agenda', using phrases like: 'find out the agenda of who pays them' and 'climate scientists don't invent anything'.

Bill Mitchell is best known for being a huge Trump supporter, or better "Twitter's most absurd Trump supporter"¹⁰. His image is that of being so absurd that people in general seem to not take him seriously at all. However, in a way Twitter has given him certain credibility by verifying him as 'authentic' and 'real' user with the blue

¹⁰ Vox, (2016). *Why liberals love Bill Mitchell, Twitter's most absurd Trump supporter* <https://www.vox.com/2016/10/24/13361482/liberals-bill-mitchell>

'badge' next to his name¹¹, as Twitter states: "The blue verified badge on Twitter lets people know that an account of public interest is authentic.". This may help Mitchell's tweet being perceived as a seemingly trustworthy source and therefore validates the argument both Mitchell and the other user in the image make. In turn, the other user also validates the truthfulness of Mitchell's tweet by retweeting it, giving it certain credibility. Here, it is interesting to see how the Tweeter does take Bill Mitchell seriously, presenting Mitchell as credible to an audience whom he expects to share the same opinion about Bill Mitchell.

Next, it is notable that the user retweets Bill Mitchell's tweet but what he states in his own words, seems to not immediately match Mitchell's claim. The comment that this person adds when retweeting Mitchell's post, is one that more or less assumes that climate change is happening, but that we all understand that it is a natural thing. The argument is that it is something 'easy' to understand, obvious even: saying 'even a 3rd grader knows' that climate change is not caused by humans, if it already exists. His 'truth' thus does not quite appear within the same discourse as Mitchell's arguments. Mitchell seems to disregard the existence of any climate crisis, whereas the other user states that climate change does exist, but that it is obvious that it is not caused by humans, just 'affected by the eccentricity of the earth's rotation around the sun and sunspot activity' (fig. 5).

For both, the 'science' is framed as something inherently questionable, but the meanings in the tweets slightly differ. There seems to be a certain misinterpretation from the re-tweeter's side, either intentionally using Bill Mitchell's argument, and/or already assuming an audience within his 'knowledge universe'. This tweet is again intended for a specific audience who already understands, and therefore shares, the knowledge that the climate crisis is not caused by humans, or even doesn't exist at all. For that audience, it is, as implied, 'obvious' enough. Finally, we see the hashtag #climatechangehoax appear again to (intertextually) connect to the specific denial of

¹¹ Twitter, *About verified accounts* <https://help.twitter.com/en/managing-your-account/about-twitter-verified-accounts>

climate change discourse, but also '#climatechange', to contribute to the surrounding debates about climate change.

4. Misusing Facts – Recontextualization of Facts



(Fig. 6. Tweet 4, Recontextualizing NASA)

This post is an example of recontextualization of a certain scientific argument, that is now put into another context, either misinterpreted or misused to fit in a new story. The user is using the message from Nasa stating that the ozone hole is the smallest on record to 'prove' that climate change therefore is a hoax, that it's not all as bad as we thought, and proof that once again, the 'left' lied.

If we look at how the article by Nasa is reposted by the user, is it notable how the contextual frame in which the article is portrayed changes the whole function the message Nasa in the first place wanted to convey. Thereby, the 'scientific' discourse and 'factuality' that NASA as a research center employs is also enthusiastically adopted. Here its function is to serve as an argument to disregard climate change, as a 'see, it was all just nonsensical complaining', the left is now 'exposed'. Again, in this tweet we thus see a tendency of exposing a certain hidden agenda. ICYMI¹², an acronym that stands for 'In Case You Missed It', here implies that the ones who see the tweet already agree upon the idea that climate change is exaggerated. The implication is that it is almost weird if you didn't know about it yet, that climate change is actually not happening.

The idea here is that 'the left' is using climate change as a plan to do something or hide something disastrous. This agenda seems to be connected with some other noticeable elements, namely: the hashtag #WWG1WGA that is used, which stands for '*Where We Go One, We Go All*'¹³. The in 2019 popular hashtag refers to a combination of different conspiracy theories that are all based upon the idea that Donald Trump has become president so that he can unmask a large-scale pedophile network in the elitist left. Within this so called QAnon conspiracy-cluster, it is believed that the American president Trump is stopped by the 'deep state' to keep him from doing the 'unmasking'.

This conspiracy against the elite left started on 4chan where a user, who identified as 'Q', posted coded messages that would reveal secrets about the White House. Q claimed to be a "government insider"¹⁴ and was there to reveal the truth. This then

¹² New Republic. (2014). *ICYMI: The Internet Has Ruined Our Conception of Time*
<https://newrepublic.com/article/117886/icymi-internet-acronym-destroying-our-conception-time>

¹³ What Nonsense. (2019). *What does WWG1WGA mean and what is it associated with?*
<https://www.thatnonsense.com/what-does-wwg1wga-mean-and-what-is-it-associated-with/>

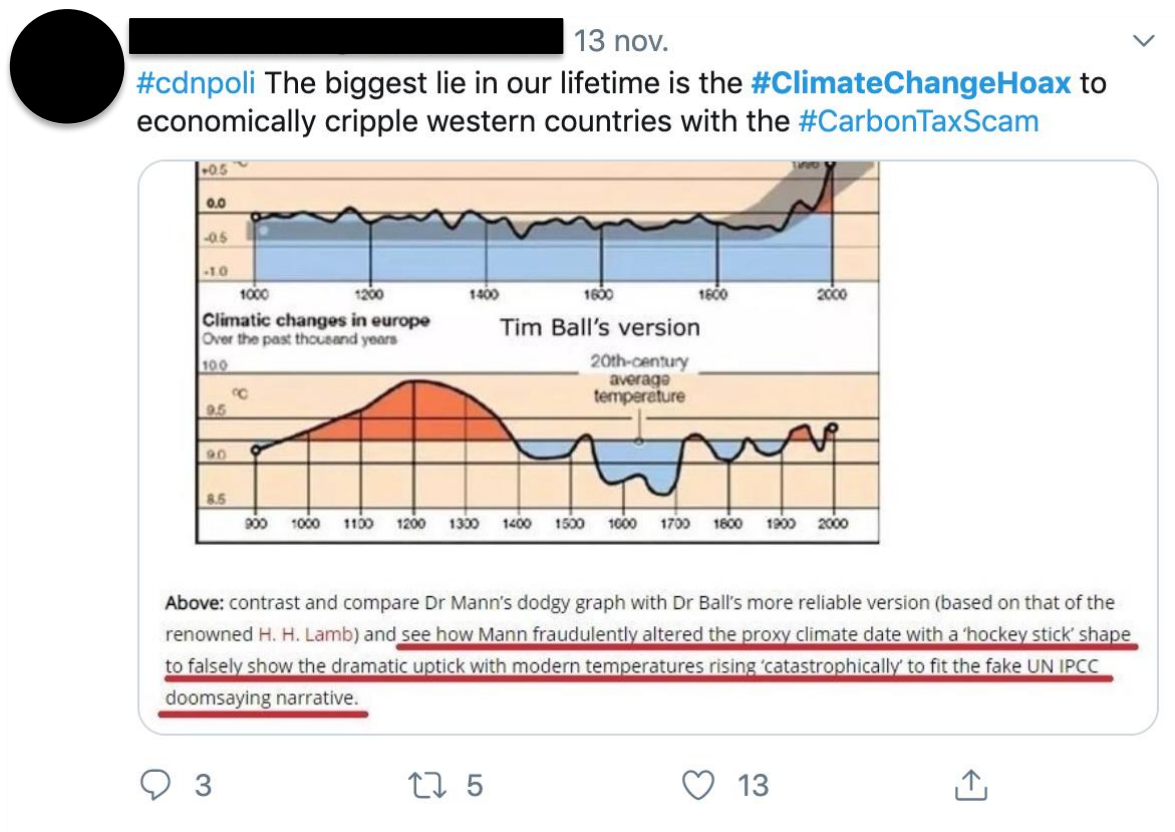
¹⁴ The Daily Best. (2019). *What Is QAnon? The Craziest Theory of the Trump Era, Explained*
<https://www.thedailybeast.com/what-is-qanon-the-craziest-theory-of-the-trump-era-explained>

grew into the networked conspiracy movement known as QAnon. By now, QAnon as a movement already has had quite some offline consequences. During political gatherings¹⁵ people are now seen carrying big 'Q' signs or wearing t-shirts printed with a big 'Q'. It has turned into a system of very serious political conspiracies. With QAnon we see how interdiscursive links can develop into massive networks of ideas, references and theories. But what is remarkable here, is that the person tweeting this post, doesn't explain any of those references and links, which suggests that he assumes an audience with a shared knowledge about 'what is really going on'.

Further, we see how the #WWG1WGA hashtag is followed by four small hands (emojis), remarkably all in a different 'skin-tone'. This seems to represent a certain togetherness, ideas of antiracism and/or referring to the 'We Go All'. This is slightly odd considering that at the same time we see an emoji of an American flag that implies a more American nationalistic right-wing discourse, which perfectly fits what #WWG1WGA is associated with, that is with right-wing ideologies. Finally, the hashtag #ClimateChangeHoax connects the whole to the shared discourse wherein climate change is seen as a hoax.

¹⁵ Telegraph. (2019). *Online conspiracy theories like QAnon and Pizzagate are 'domestic terrorism threats', says FBI* <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/2019/08/02/online-conspiracy-theories-like-qanon-pizzagate-domestic-terrorism>

5. Alternative Facts



(Fig. 7. Tweet 5, Alternative Facts)

On the picture posted in the above tweet, we see two 'scientific'-looking graphs. The first graph, originally from the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), is based on the research of well-known climatologist and geophysicist Dr. Michael Mann¹⁶. His extensive research showed how the temperature of the earth's climate has fluctuated through history, and as we see in the end, since the 1900's, rises dramatically. And with that, he signifies the immense impact humans seem to have in climate change. With this famous IPCC 'Hockey stick'¹⁷ graph, Mann's research was visualized and popularized to show the actual emergence of climate change.

¹⁶ Michael E. Mann. N.d. *Earth Systems Science Centre*
<https://michaelmann.net/content/about>

¹⁷ The Atlantic, 2013. *The Hockey Stick: The Most Controversial Chart in Science, Explained*
<https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2013/05/the-hockey-stick-the-most-controversial-chart-in-science-explained/275753>

However, over the years, as the graph became a celebrated model to prove climate change, it became also fueled with controversy in political debates, and discussed among climate change denialists. We see this controversy around the graph and its adoption into political debates appear in the second graph that was created by a well-known climate denialist and public speaker named Dr. Tim Ball. Ball, like many other climate denialists, has used all his scientific gear and fear to go particularly against that hockey stick graph, to dismiss and negate it.

Tim Ball, just like the person who posted this Tweet, seems to disprove the IPCC graph, by dismissing it with new or alternative data. The whole climate change debate seems to be thrown off the discussion by dismantling the hockey stick graph. It is as if the hockey stick graph is the one and only pride of the climate scientist, and by dismissing or denying it, we can prove that it was all a hoax in the end.

Further, what is noticeable at first sight, are the graphs and numbers, that represent a certain scientific accuracy. Both graphs have this aura of a scientific discourse, as do referring to the scientists with 'Dr.' and underscoring the importance and scientific way of putting it. In that respect, it is noticeable how both the graphs are framed with the use of the same color scheme and rhetoric. The second graph, Tim Ball's version, makes use of the same red colors as the first graph. However, this is done to make Mann's research seem overexaggerated as it is no more than a 'doomsday narrative'. The red color in the graph is used to indicate peaking global warming in Dr. Mann's version, but made to signify something else in Tim Ball's version, indicating that we don't need to worry because ages ago global warming was a lot worse. With that the Tim Ball's graph also discharges the dangerous or urgent-factor of climate change by pointing out that history was worse, also suggesting that it 'happened before'. This makes it seem just a natural occurrence and thus not something we as humans can do anything about.

Moreover, the person who posted the picture with the comparison of the two graphs, seems to also have suspicion about a hidden agenda. S/he highlights that climate science is 'fraudulently altered', or 'to falsely show the dramatic uptick with modern temperatures rising'. Climate change is the biggest lie in 'our' lifetime. Who here is referred to as 'our'? The writer seems to imply that the reader already shared this idea that climate change is a lie, a #carbontaxscam and #climatechangehoax. A general misconception that I want to note here is that as 'climate change' suggests only that there is a change in a way the denialists are right with the argument that 'the climate' has always been changing. What is most urgent here is the actuality of global *warming*.

What is further notable in this tweet, is the use of the hashtag #cndpoli, which stands for 'Canadian political discussions concerning federal government politics'. S/he makes an interdiscursive link to Canadian politics, politicizing the debate around climate change immediately as if it is something simply ideological instead of 'factual'.

Chapter 6: Results and Discussion

There are a few noteworthy findings that resulted from the discourse analytical inquiry in the previous chapter (chapter 5), wherein I dissected the construction of alternative truth statements made about climate change. In this chapter I will look further into what this qualitative way of analysis has brought us.

6.1 Overall Argument of ‘the Climate Deniers’

The central argument made in the selected tweets about the truth of climate change is that climate change is either over-exaggerated or a hoax. This is combined with, as reoccurring in most cases, pointing out an ‘other’ group (‘scientists’, ‘elites’, ‘the left’) that lies or misleads people to believe in climate change, to execute a certain hidden agenda. But what this agenda might be, remains a mystery. We find these ideas, for instance, in the ways how Greta Thunberg is framed in the first two posts, (fig.1 & fig. 3) as someone who purposefully lies, overexaggerates or is used by authoritarian figures who hold this ‘agenda’.

As such, Thunberg, as a person, is ‘used’ as a symbol of the exaggeration of the scientists and/or ‘leftists’, who unreasonable ‘complain’ and ‘wail’ (fig. 1) about climate change. Her speeches, and Thunberg as a public figure, are also framed as being propaganda (fig. 4) that supports or hides the lies about climate change. Just because she appears so young and unknowing, she easily becomes the main symbol that represents, the ‘joke’ that is called climate change. Thunberg’s appearance, is as such, used as ‘proof’ against the validity of all claims scientist made about climate change. Thunberg’s overexaggerating then becomes an argument on itself for dismissing all scientific knowledge that supports global warming.

What on the level of (inter)discursivity stands out is the rhetoric used. Concepts like *science* and *truth* have a certain rhetorical and discursive connotation of trust and credibility. In the tweets, the terms are still used but are taken out of their 'original' scientific (academic) context and framed into a discourse where climate change is perceived as fake or over-exaggerated (fig.7). This is decontextualization and recontextualization of words with a deep-rooted meaning, as they are reshaped for different discursive purposes. Consequently these words can have a strong rhetorical effect of introducing trustworthiness in this specific discourse. Twitter in this case, allows for a multimodal way of designing different elements into one statement. Creating space for not only text but also images, emoticons, colors, and using retweeting (re-posting) allows shifting to a more multilayered discourse. This also happened with images and references made in the tweets to other debates like the #WWG1WGA, memes of Greta Thunberg, and the colored emoticons that all contribute to a wider discourse where climate change is approached as either overexaggerated, or a plain lie.

As such, the tweets are interconnected with political references and other conspiracies about distrusting 'the elite' using hashtags and other signs to refer to, and imply a diverse scale of debates (fig. 5). The interdiscursive and multimodal character of the statements made, reveals itself in how for instance, in figure 7 normative scientific research seems to be put forward as something almost inherently political and false by referring to other discourses and examples about climate change and politics (see fig. 2 & 7). There we also see how the value of scientific research is questioned, along with who to give credibility or who to trust. The climate deniers seem to trust personal verification rather than science, or give credibility to someone who at least 'dares to question'.

This questioning of authority and normalized knowledge, a characteristic of this era of *epistemic instability*, where Harambam (2017) referred to, seems to indeed arise here in a certain fashion. However, there is a stronger sense of distrust and skepticism against scientists and science within those discourses, rather than that the climate denialists are just thoughtfully and critically questioning knowledge. There

is a thin line here, between the kind of questioning Harambam (2017) referred to, and some kind of airy suspicion of ‘the other’, or the ‘left’ when the climate deniers repeatedly state to ‘exposing the left’ (fig. 6).

6.2 Presupposed Knowledge

Here we then come back to the social part of this discourse analysis, the very fact that in all tweets the tweeters, assume an audience that ‘knows’ and ‘shares’ a certain knowledge, or: presupposed knowledge. The tweets are accompanied by a “meta-discourse which provides a sort of ‘preferred reading’ for the discourse” (Blommaert, 2005: 47). Especially as we saw in the first two tweets, where in both memes are used (fig. 1 & 4), one has to know and understand those pictures to see their function in the statement that is made. But even more, in order to understand or ‘agree’ with that what is said, one needs to have some pre-assumed knowledge about what is going on and who tells, and what is, the ‘truth’ about climate change.

6.2.1 Discursive Sociality Online: a New Dimension

What is an important part of this last point made is that the presupposed knowledge reveals a pre-assumed audience that, other than what Van Dijck (2013) or Pariser argue (2011), suggest that discourses of truth on social media take place in a social dimension of a different kind. Nonetheless, we should not ignore that indeed platforms like Facebook and Twitter, even as (their) algorithms, have shaped to a certain extent what sociality looks like online (and offline).

Fundamentally, we saw that Twitter allows posting statements in a manifold of new ways. Hashtags work with the visibility and connectivity of those tweets, and do play into the algorithmic sorting of information. And as Pariser showed us, we also see

that those filter bubbles, enhanced by algorithms, do have an influence on what people see, but as such also allows users to reach new audiences they would've otherwise never reached or even known about. As Van Dijck argued, human social behavior and technical advances undoubtedly have become intertwined. But that does not mean those statements people make about climate change online are either so much technical, or can be simplified to numbers and graphs like Pin and Samantray (2019) did in their research (see introduction).

What makes this for an important note here, is that with the in-depth analysis in this thesis, I showed how sociality plays on a different scope on a discursive level. One that is a very important factor for understanding how statements of truths and knowledge are made online. Precisely this discursive sociality, allows us to see and understand how pre-supposed knowledge, intertextuality, and social construction of knowledge play a huge role in certain truth claims made on social media.

Chapter 7: Conclusion: Sociality, Conspiracies and Post-Truth

Throughout the process, I took in account three major topics: Post-truth, conspiracy theories and social media. Terms that come back to the initially posed question: What does the way people talk about truth online, tell us about the nature of social media, truth construction and conspiracy theories? In this chapter I will focus on those essential points, and see how they correlate with my earlier posed proposition regarding the nature of truth, conspiracy theories and social media in the literature discussed in the previous chapters.

7.1 A Qualitative Approach

Other than Pin and Samantray's quantitative effort to identify the rise of conspiracy theories online, the qualitative and in-depth approach in this thesis allowed for a fruitful understanding of how conspiracy theories are manifested and take place on social media. Pin and Samantray's approach by far couldn't reach or map the multi-layered and complex construction of the truth statements about climate change on Twitter. Within the tradition of 'big-data' and science of numbers, their approach highly generalizes and simplifies that what de facto takes place in those debates. For one, because it takes away the potential to understand what is going on in the considered online debates, it is a superficial way of framing such profoundly complex human phenomena. I argue that, just as the notion 'post-truth', such perspectives take on a huge misconception of what is happening in contemporary online debates. They bring about damaging prejudicial assumptions of how people come to construct and share their opinions.

Regardless of how much information there is to be found online, no matter what empirical and scientific evidence there is, its importance lies in how society

understands and handles this information. By looking at how those truth discourses about climate change manifest itself in the actual discourses of politics and culture on social media, we see how it is understood and used by individuals themselves, rather than looking for a one and only clear-cut answer. Just as Berger and Luckmann showed us, we see how truth appears to be a more complex concept once you start defining it, read about it and try to understand its social workings.

It is exactly in those new online environments, where we see new ways of intertextuality and multimodality arise, that allow for those complex discursive statements to thrive. Its affordances and technical advances, allow for visual construction of the arguments, wherewith referential links to other debates and also visual multi responsive interactional arguments can be made and shared. And thus, I argue that this social dimension shouldn't, and cannot be ignored when we want to understand what is going on in the #ClimateChangeHoax-debates on Twitter.

7.2 Post-Truth: a Misconception, a Danger to Democracy

The qualitative approach I took, also allowed for a different and more understanding account whereby conspiracy theorists are not seen as merely pathological, or someone, or something that should be dismissed and ignored for its 'danger to democracy'. I would even argue that, in those terms the notion 'post-truth' is more of a danger than those conspiracy theories and alternative truths all together. Post-truth as such, does not come up to the actual debates, even more; it is a misleading term in itself.

Indeed, with the introduction of social media amongst the general public, things have changed but also largely have stayed the same. Unlike the conception of post-truth argues, with the rise of social media and the internet, sociality did not disappear. Algorithms and technical structures may have shaped and influenced how people act

on social media, but I have shown, that on a different level, sociality plays in and manifests itself discursively on social media. I argue that our inherent human tendency to sociality actually plays even a greater part in the maintenance of conspiracy theories and alternative truths in online debates than one might have thought. While 'post-truth' suggests that denying climate change relies on isolated individual opinions and beliefs, I believe that it's 'realness' lives and thrives upon the actual social factor that appears and reappears in truth discourses that take place in online environments.

What is even more important, is that this approach doesn't ignore the reality and seriousness of climate change. Those alternative theories do have influence on how political decisions are made, which in the end will affect us all. But, as we saw, the role of social media in these debates is significant and makes this phenomenon one that is indeed specific for our times, at least in the ways it manifests itself through different forms of online communication. We need to invest time and effort in understanding the complex interrelation between human beings, technologies, information and ideologies, online and offline. Not only to look at the statistics and methods to prove *that* people construct and share ideas on social media, but look into *how* it happens, what those discourses look like and what they mean to people.

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