

Explaining the Prevalence of Conspiracy Narratives

Evidence from German Conspiracy Entrepreneurs

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Abstract: *To what extent does conspiracy output of conspiracy entrepreneurs (CEs) increase during crises (events)? Although the Covid-19 pandemic forcefully demonstrated the negative consequences of conspiracy narratives, no research investigates when and why CEs' conspiracy output varies. This paper aims to fill this gap and advance the literature twofold: Substantively, the author brings forth a novel theory arguing that focal events (FEs) increase people's conspiracy demand, which in turn increases CEs' conspiracy output. Methodologically, the author introduces a new data set with 12,502 observations of 23 German CEs' conspiracy output on Telegram during the pandemic. Using zero-inflated negative binomial regression with channel-fixed effects, the author finds robust evidence that CEs' conspiracy output increases during FEs.*

Keywords: *Conspiracy Narratives, Conspiracy Entrepreneurs, Conspiracy Demand, Conspiracy Output, Supervised Machine Learning*

1. Introduction

The negative consequences of conspiracy narratives were extensive during the Covid-19 pandemic: People who believe in conspiracy narratives practiced less social distancing (Biddlestone et al. 2020) and were less likely to be vaccinated (against Covid-19) (Bertin et al. 2020), both substantial health risks which can end in severe illness and death. Crucially, the fallout of conspiracy narratives does not spare societies either: Many participants who attacked the Bundestag in 2020 or the US Capitol in 2021 were conspiracy believers, demonstrating their willingness to attack democracy. Despite these urgent issues, the literature fails to explain the pivotal impact of crises (events) and conspiracy entrepreneurs (CEs) on conspiracy prevalence. Although the latter are re-

sponsible for the majority of conspiracy content on social media (Dow et al. 2021), no research has investigated so far when and why their conspiracy output varies. Thus, it remains unclear to what extent CEs' conspiracy output increases during crises (events). I aim to fill this gap and thus propose a novel theory explaining the variance in CEs' conspiracy output: I argue that focal events (FEs) increase people's conspiracy demand, whereupon CEs increase their conspiracy output accordingly.

To test my theory, I use 12,502 observations of conspiracy output from 23 German CEs' Telegram channels during the pandemic. My main explanatory variable is the occurrence of an FE, mostly events when (stricter) lockdowns were decided or implemented. I fit models using zero-inflated neg-

ative binomial regression with channel-fixed effects. The results provide robust evidence that conspiracy output increases during FEs. These findings should, though, be generalised with care since the hypothesis is only tested with German Telegram text messages and the classifier underestimates the true amount of conspiracy messages.

This paper emphasises the importance and utility of research on conspiracy output, demonstrating that CEs' output can be explained, monitored and predicted. Public actors can use this knowledge, e.g., to examine current conspiracy narratives and publish targeted counter information.

2. The Literature about Conspiracy Narratives

I employ the definition by Douglas et al. (2019), who define conspiracy narratives as “attempts to explain the ultimate causes of significant social and political events and circumstances with claims of secret plots by [...] powerful actors” (Douglas et al. 2019, 4). Conspiracy narratives are a stable (Uscinski and Parent 2014, 110) global phenomenon that exists for as long as human societies (Douglas et al. 2019). Regardless of time and location, key characteristics are the permanent assumption of agency, the absence of coincidence and powerful actors.

2.1 Why People Believe in Conspiracy Narratives

An abundant psychological literature explains which factors increase one's likelihood of believing in conspiracy narratives. Following Douglas et al. (2017), the literature can be categorised in three different

areas: epistemic, existential and social motives.

2.1.1 Epistemic Motives

Epistemic motives - i.e., the desire to understand one's environment and maintain a reasonable degree of certainty - are a basic human need explaining why some people are more prone to believe in conspiracy narratives. This desire is undermined by (complex) events (e.g., a financial crisis) that can question people's beliefs and create uncertainty, which increases the probability of people believing in conspiracy narratives (Van Prooijen and Jostmann 2013). This process is nowadays often augmented by a spillover of scientific debates into the public (for more details, see Aupers 2012). According to Laurin et al. (2008) and Douglas et al. (2016), people try to cope with this uncertainty twofold: First, they look more for patterns (and see these increasingly), second, they attribute more agency and blame. Both make people more susceptible to believing in conspiracy narratives because they provide simple solutions (Marchlewska et al. 2018), help to preserve their worldviews (Douglas et al. 2017) and make the future more predictable (Schlitz et al. 2006).

2.1.2 Existential Motives

Existential motives, the human need to have a certain degree of control and security, also explain - oftentimes in interaction with epistemic motives - why people believe in conspiracy narratives. When people experience stress, feelings of powerlessness and lack of control, they want to soothe their existential needs by believing in (more) conspiracy narratives

(Douglas et al. 2017). Bruder et al. (2013) find that socio-political powerlessness has the same effect. Building on research about epistemic motives, Douglas et al. (2017) argue that people cannot exert control over their lives and feel insecure if they are not able to causally explain their world. This results in feelings of powerlessness and lack of control since they cannot act without sufficient information. These people are thus more susceptible to conspiracy narratives (Douglas et al. 2017), which provide the causal explanations necessary to act.

2.1.3 Social Motives

Social motives, the desire to create and preserve a positive image of oneself and one's group, are the last major arguments in psychology literature explaining why some people are more likely to believe in conspiracy narratives. When the human need to maintain a positive self-image is threatened, conspiracy narratives serve as a tool to redeem oneself by scapegoating others (Douglas et al. 2017). Cichocka et al. (2016) distinguish between threats to the self and to the group, both dangerous to humans as social beings. People, however, do not only use conspiracy narratives to scapegoat others when their positive image is threatened but also when they want to explain their (weak) position in society. Consequently, people who (or whose groups) have been victimised, excluded, discriminated against or are generally low-status are more prone to believe in conspiracy narratives (Douglas et al. 2017).

2.2 Conspiracy Narratives and Social Media

The internet, first acclaimed as a place where critical voices debunk and thus weaken conspiracy narratives (Clarke 2007), now has the contrary reputation of being the main channel by which conspiracy narratives are spread (Robertson and Amarasingam 2022): Multiple studies demonstrated that conspiracy narratives spread faster than other content on social media (e.g., Vosoughi et al. 2018). A new development are the so-called dark platforms (e.g., Telegram), which are - in contrast to mainstream platforms - not moderated and hence provide a safe harbour for CEs, who are otherwise often banned (Zeng and Schäfer 2021).

2.3 Conspiracy Entrepreneurs

I follow Hyzen and Van den Bulck (2021) and adapt North's (1981) concept of ideological entrepreneurs to describe central actors spreading conspiracy narratives as CEs. They can be distinguished from normal believers by the fact that they (in)directly - in material (e.g., money) or immaterial terms (e.g., power, attention) - benefit from spreading conspiracy narratives (Sunstein and Vermeule 2008). Despite their importance, we know little about CEs, and what we know stems mostly from qualitative case studies (e.g., Harambam and Aupers 2021). Nevertheless, network analysis demonstrated their pivotal role in crafting and picking up (old) conspiracy narratives (Leal 2020), facilitated by the rise of social media (Hyzen and Van den Bulck 2021).

2.4 Conspiracy Narratives and Crises

A common argument in the literature is that conspiracy narratives thrive in crises because they augment epistemic, existential and social motives (Van Prooijen and Douglas 2017). This argument builds on three factors: First, the human urge to understand events, especially negative ones (Bruckmüller et al. 2017). Second, a crisis' usually uncontrollable character (Van Prooijen and Douglas 2017) and third, the fact that people are more prone to believe in conspiracy narratives when an event has substantial consequences (Van Prooijen and Van Dijk 2014).

2.5 Summary and Gaps in the Literature

In summary, the current literature mainly examines which factors make people more vulnerable to believe in conspiracy narratives. All this research assumes that conspiracy narratives are a constant exogenous influence which meets individuals who have either a high or low demand for them, based on their socio-psychological characteristics. Little research, in contrast, is done on the supply side of conspiracy narratives, namely CEs. Apart from a few case studies, no empirical research exists examining their behaviour (to the best of my knowledge), despite their crucial role in disseminating conspiracy narratives (Leal 2020). I start closing these gaps, beginning with a theory explaining the conspiracy output of CEs with FEs.

3. A Theory of Conspiracy Demand and Output

I argue that FEs augment the epistemic, ex-

istential and social motives of people, boosting their demand for conspiracy narratives (henceforth: conspiracy demand). Building on that, I reason that CEs increase their conspiracy output following this boosted demand twofold: First, CEs react to their own enhanced demand by crafting and searching (more) for new conspiracy narratives. Second, CEs depend financially on their followers, which is why they have to match their followers' (increased) conspiracy demand. I thereby assume that CEs are rational actors (Downs 1957). I define FEs as short temporary happenings (e.g., one day), which are part of a nationwide crisis (e.g., a lockdown during a pandemic) and have nationwide implications (like a major bank crash) which could increase epistemic, existential or social motives. For instance, a pandemic is not an FE because it is not a short temporary happening. In contrast, a lockdown or a nationwide catastrophe would be considered as FEs due to their exceptional character and nationwide implications which could increase the aforementioned motives. More examples can be found in the Appendix.

3.1 Focal Events and Conspiracy Demand

I argue that FEs increase people's conspiracy demand because they enhance epistemic, existential and social motives.

3.1.1 Epistemic Motives

Starting with epistemic motives, I argue that they are augmented by FEs. FEs (e.g., the first occurrence of Covid-19 in a country) are by definition abnormal, which means that people do not know what (con-

sequences) to expect from them, which creates uncertainty. This process is often augmented by today's public scientific debates looking for the "right" answer, which can be especially confusing in the (short) time after an FE when no scientific consensus has yet emerged (Aupers 2012). FEs thus create uncertainty and complicate predicting the future - which increases people's demand for conspiracy narratives because these can soothe their epistemic needs (Douglas et al. 2017). For instance, instead of having to comprehend the complex reality of a pandemic, it is far easier to believe that everything is part of Bill Gates' plan to reduce the world population.

3.1.2 Existential Motives

I further reason that FEs stimulate existential motives, namely the desire to have a certain level of control over one's life. FEs, as described above, can often not be explained causally immediately, which is a prerequisite to acting and exerting control over one's life (Douglas et al. 2017). They hence create feelings of powerlessness and lack of control. Think, for example, of the financial crisis in 2008: Lehman Brothers went bankrupt and eventually, jobs in other

countries were endangered. I argue that in a scenario like this, feelings of lack of control and powerlessness increase for two reasons: First, when people do not understand the problem, they cannot (attempt to) solve it, which results in the aforementioned feelings. Second, even if people had understood what happened, they would have had marginal influence in resolving it - feeling, again, powerless. Additionally, FEs (e.g., a curfew) can create these feelings directly.

3.1.3 Social Motives

In addition to epistemic and existential motives, I also argue that FEs strengthen social motives and thus increase conspiracy demand. More specifically, I contend that FEs create losers and (in)directly threaten the positive image of people's groups. First, I reason that FEs, which by definition have nationwide implications, create losers: Each crisis, be it a war, a pandemic or a catastrophe, requires a state's response, which is (in the end) usually of financial nature. Since a state cannot give money to everybody, winners (receivers) and losers (non-receivers) are created. Second, I argue that FEs often (in)directly

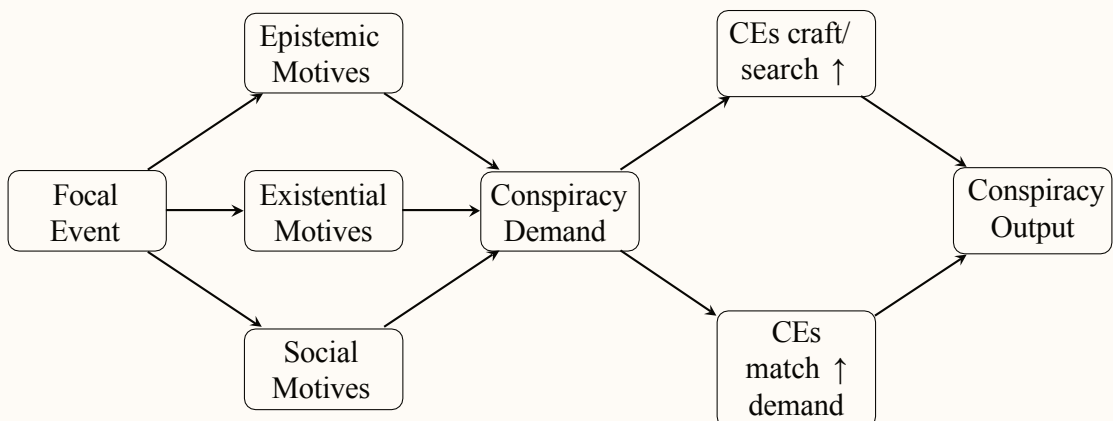


Figure 1: Argument Summary. Arrows indicate a positive effect.

harm (self) images of social groups: For instance, the violent attack on the US Capitol by Trump supporters - an FE in the US context - damaged their image. Since such a threat to the group image increases people's conspiracy demand (Cichocka et al. 2016), these people should have, according to my argument, increasingly looked for conspiracy narratives that can redeem them.²⁸

3.2 Focal Events and Conspiracy Output

Building on my previous arguments, I reason that FEs increase CEs' conspiracy output twofold: First, CEs yield to their own elevated conspiracy demand by looking for and crafting (more) conspiracy narratives. Second, they are financially dependent on their followers and thus need to match their followers enhanced conspiracy demand to maintain their financial support.

3.2.1 Enhanced Conspiracy Demand of Conspiracy Entrepreneurs

I argue that FEs increase CEs' conspiracy output because of two processes: In the first place, I contend that CEs' own conspiracy demand also increases because of FEs since they are subject to the same psychological processes as everybody else. They, too, search harder for (more) conspiracy narratives to explain FEs. In the second place, I argue that FEs increase CEs' creativity in the sense that they craft more conspiracy narratives because of an increased sensitivity for patterns and

agency due to enhanced epistemic and existential motives.

3.2.2 Conspiracy Demand and Supply

I also reason that FEs increase CEs' conspiracy output because they need to match their followers' boosted conspiracy demand. CEs are usually ostracised by society, which means they lose their jobs, get de-platformed and/or blocked by payment providers like PayPal (e.g., Landesamt für Verfassungsschutz Baden Württemberg 2021). They thus have to extract revenue from their followers (merchandise, food supplements, affiliate links, etc.). Crucially, I also assume that CEs are aware of their followers' enhanced conspiracy demand, either because of messages demanding explanations of (focal) events, patterns of financial support and/or because they generalise their own conspiracy demand. Based on these assumptions, I argue that CEs' optimal strategy is to always match their followers' current conspiracy demand. When conspiracy demand increases due to FEs, CEs should increase their conspiracy output accordingly. I hereby contend that (potential) followers, who can choose easily whom to give money and attention to due to the variety of CEs (on social media), decide based on how well they satisfy their current conspiracy demand. This situation forces CEs, who are financially dependent on their followers, to permanently adapt their conspiracy output to their followers' demand, acting thus (unconsciously) rational. The whole argument is summarised in Figure 1,

²⁸ Indeed, nearly half of Republicans believed that left-wing activists were responsible for the violence (Reuters 2021)

from which I derive the following hypothesis:

H1: Conspiracy output of conspiracy entrepreneurs increases during focal events.

4. Research Design

I test my hypothesis with 12,502 observations from 23 German CEs' Telegram channels from 01.03.2020 to 31.01.2022. Each observation equals the number of conspiracy messages per day per channel, which are classified using the regularised regression classifier (RRC). My independent variable is the occurrence of an FE, in addition, several control variables are included. I use zero-inflated negative binomial regression (ZINBR) with channel-fixed effects and clustered standard errors for analysis.

4.1 Case Selection

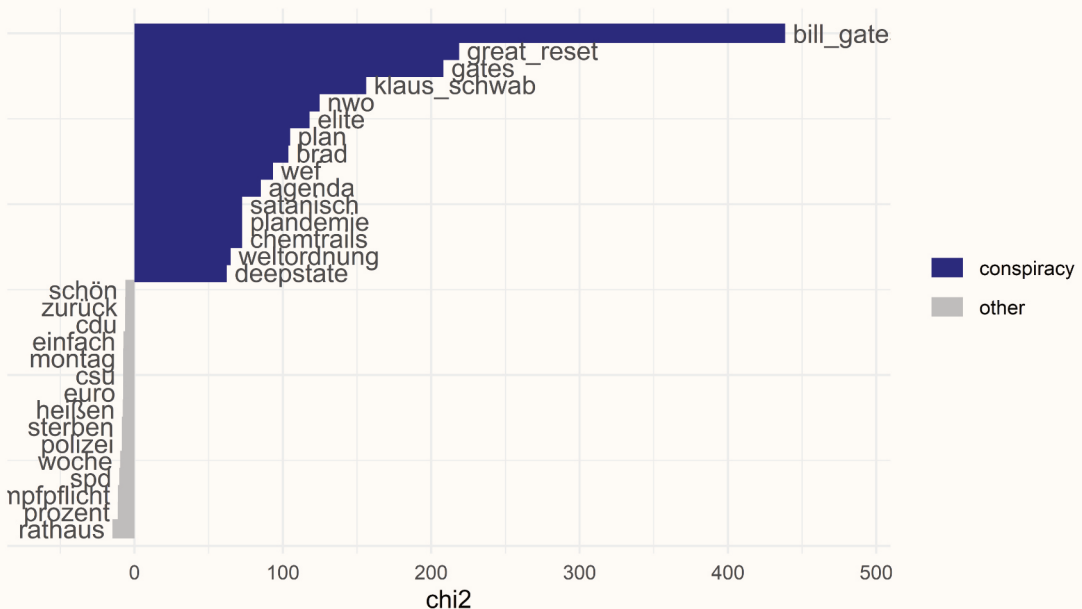
I choose Germany as my case because almost all of its CEs, who are usually scattered across different (dark) platforms, are concentrated on Telegram (Institut für Demokratie und Zivilgesellschaft 2020). Telegram is encrypted, not moderated and did not delete illegal content such as Shoa denial while I collected my data. It is thus the optimal platform to observe and analyse raw CE activity, irrespective of any strategic considerations due to fear of deletion.

4.2 Dependent Variable: Conspiracy Output

To operationalise conspiracy output, I measure the number of Telegram messages containing conspiracy narratives (henceforth: conspiracy messages) per day

Keyness Analysis

Word frequencies across categories



Note: The underscore means that the words were coalesced via entity recognition.

Figure 2: Keyness Analysis of coded messages: Word frequency across both categories

per channel using the RRC. I select 23 Telegram channels²⁹ containing conspiracy narratives by snowball sampling with in total 2,187,902 followers. My sample ultimately includes 310,014 text messages from 03.01.2020 to 01.31.2022. After heavy pre-processing (lemmatisation, link removal etc.), I sample and classify 5000 from the remaining 244,582 messages to train three classifiers. However, few messages contain all elements of my conspiracy narrative definition: Many substantive messages are split into multiple messages due to the messenger character of Telegram, which results in short messages that contain only part of the overarching message. Taking this into account, I devise the following coding rules, according to which messages are coded as a conspiracy message if:

- They attempt to “explain the ultimate causes of significant social and political events and circumstances with claims of secret plots by [...] powerful actors” (Douglas et al. 2019, 4)
- They mention unambiguous conspiracy themes (e.g., Great Reset, Deep State etc.).
- They mention people or groups that are typical victims of conspiracy narratives (e.g., Rothschilds, Klaus Schwab)

The last condition sets the coding threshold rather low, however, I argue this is justified because of two reasons: First, my sample consists of conspiracy channels, they won't mention the Rothschild family to discuss their family history. Second, my sampling process splits messages up that possibly build on each other and media are excluded - thus, the potential (conspiracy)

context might be missing while coding. The intra-coder variance is quite good (.84, $n = 500$, one other coder) and keyness analysis in Figure 2 demonstrates that conspiracy messages are characterised by expectable words. I use the RRC because it trumps support vector machines and a naive Bayes classifier and performs quite well with a balanced accuracy of 0.98 and a perfect specificity of 1.00, which prevents overestimating the real number of conspiracy messages. Substantively, however, the RRC only classifies one-third of the actual conspiracy messages - which can be explained by the abundance of different and ever-changing conspiracy narratives. Finally, the number of conspiracy messages per day per channel is calculated.

4.3 Independent Variable: Focal Events

I identify 27 FEs, which are always related to a crisis, which, in this case, is the Covid-19 pandemic, a global health crisis that has killed around 15 million people in 2020 and 2021 (World Health Organisation 2022). 18 of all FEs are “Ministerpräsidentenkonferenzen” (MPKs), meetings where German minister-presidents decided to implement or tighten lockdown measures with the chancellor. Each of them created substantial uncertainty due to potentially new restrictions (or ease of old ones) and, hence, could entail increased epistemic motives. For a similar reason, the suspension of the AstraZeneca vaccine in Germany is coded as FE due to the massive confusion around the decision. I also identify seven events when a lockdown or stricter measures were implemented as FEs, because they restric-

²⁹ Telegram channels are public, however, only one person (sometimes more) can send messages.

ted the people's freedom and could thus increase existential motives. Finally, a Covid-19-rules-related murder (*Tankstellenmord*) is classified as FE, because this event might have sparked social motives of conspiracy believers, whose potential danger was publicly discussed in the aftermath of the murder.

4.4 Control Variables

I also control for important events such as political happenings (e.g., federal election), Covid-19 vaccine approvals, catastrophes (e.g., Ahrtal flood), street protests against Covid-19 measures and other important policy decisions (e.g., EU Recovery Fund). In addition, I include the number of messages, type of day (weekday/weekend), year- and channel-fixed effects and the stringency of anti-Covid measures (Hale et

al. 2021). To measure a Covid-19-related habituation effect, I include an ordinal variable capturing each day's respective Covid-19 wave based on Schilling et. al (2022).

The 7-day rolling average share of conspiracy messages across all five Covid waves including focal and control events is presented in Figure 3. Apart from a peak in spring 2020, the share of conspiracy messages is relatively stable.

4.5 Zero-inflated Negative Binomial Regression Model

Due to the count structure of my data, overdispersion and zero-inflation, I employ an interrupted time-series model using ZINBR with channel-fixed effects and clustered standard errors. The ZINBR model estimates the probability of each count

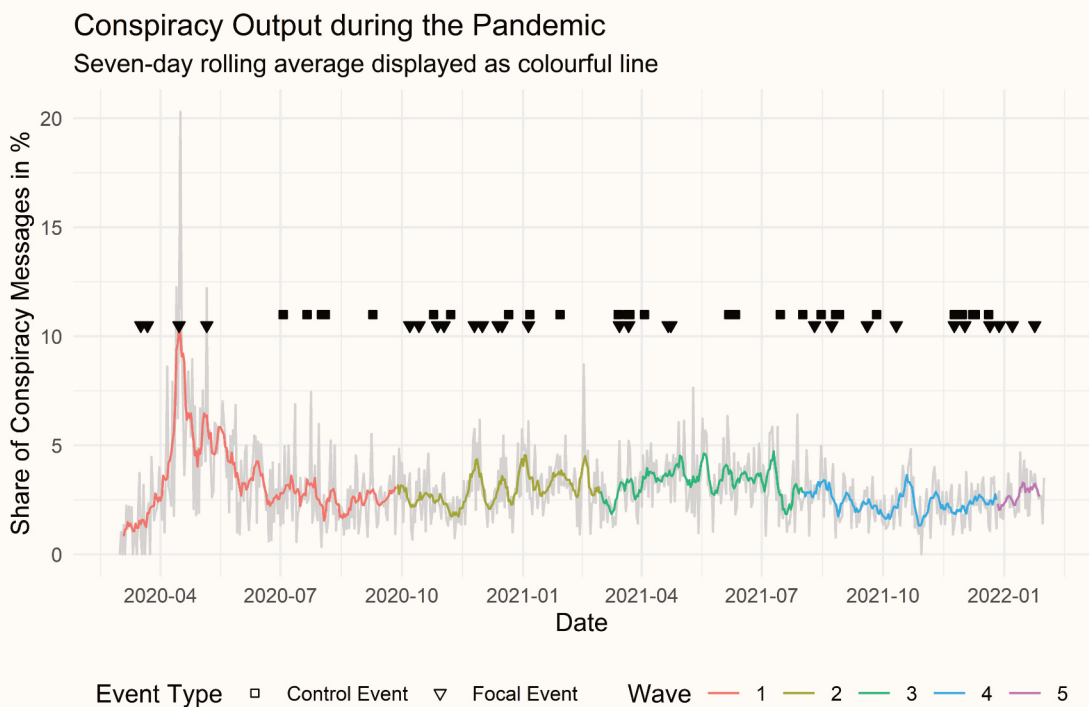


Figure 3: Share of conspiracy messages over time

as a combination of both a negative binomial regression model - to estimate the counts - and a logistic regression model - to estimate the occurrence of zeroes. Since it is highly probable that the observations are more correlated within than between channels, I cluster the standard errors by channel.

5. Results and Discussion

The ZINBR model, whose results are presented in Figure 4 (Tables in Appendix), provide robust evidence in favour of my hypothesis: The effect of FEs on conspiracy output is, crucially, statistically and substantively significant. Conspiracy output is, ceteris paribus, on average 24% higher during FEs compared to other days. CEs also spread 13 % more conspiracy narratives on weekdays, indicating another (probably rational) pattern which requires further investigation. In addition, a one

unit increase in the Lockdown Stringency Index and number of messages increases conspiracy output on average by 1%, everything else being equal. In contrast conspiracy output decreases substantially and statistically significantly during Wave 4 and 5, indicating some form of habituation effect. All other control variables have no significant effect.

6. Limitations and Robustness Checks

Although my findings are substantively and statistically strong, they only provide evidence for FEs' impact on conspiracy output and not for the mechanisms in between. That said, the findings are robust to a wider event window (3 days), different model specifications (autocorrelation, outlier, multicollinearity and leverage checks) and different standard errors (classic, bootstrapped). Regardless of any modification,

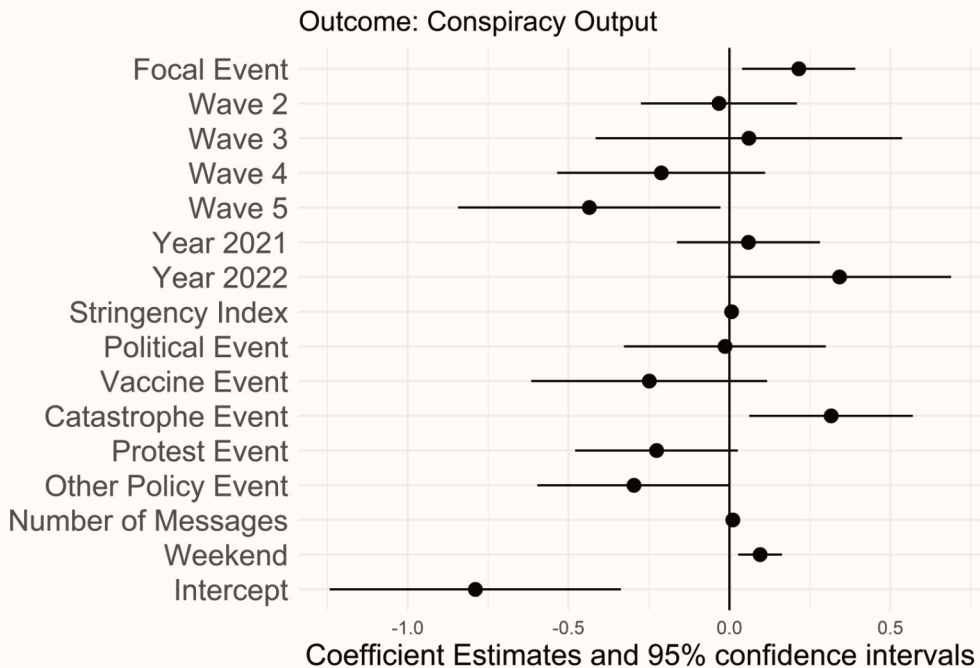


Figure 4: Regression Results

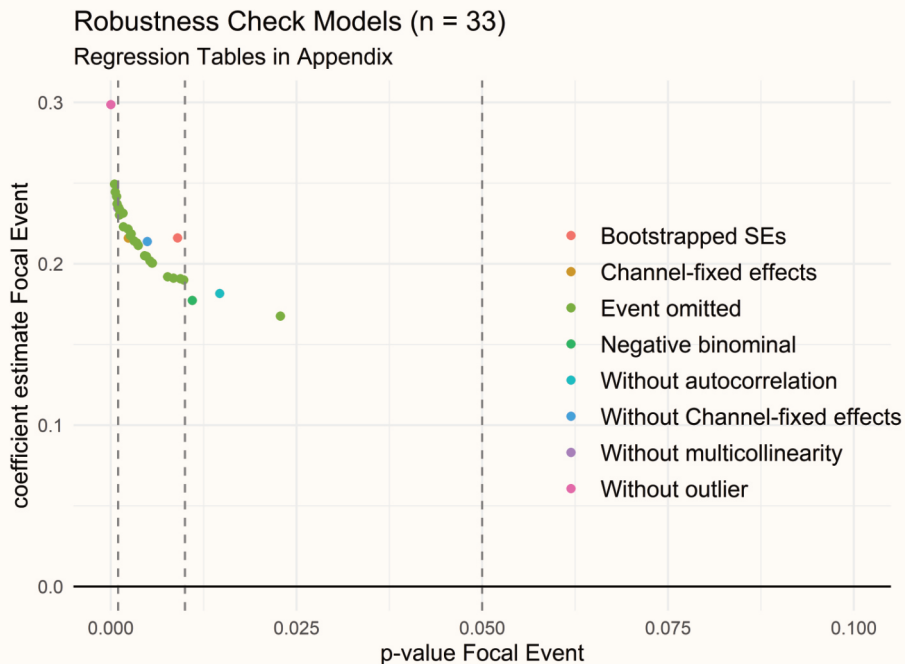


Figure 5: Robustness Checks. Dotted lines show different significance levels.

the effect of FEs is always substantively unchanged, as can be seen in Figure 5 and the Appendix. Nevertheless, my inferences are clearly limited: Since I test my hypothesis only with German Telegram text messages from larger channels, the findings should be generalised with care. The most important limitation, though, is that the RRC only detects one-third of all actual conspiracy messages. Crucially, I do not know whether this bias is random or systematic. However, I argue this does not undermine my results critically: I expect that the RRC is better at detecting general conspiracy narratives than FE specific ones. The classifier would thus underestimate conspiracy output during FEs - making my hypothesis test harder.

7. Conclusion

The negative consequences of conspiracy narratives were abundant during the pandemic, facilitating the spread and severity of Covid-19 due to less social distancing and vaccine refusals. Despite all this fallout, the literature has failed to provide sufficient explanations about the pivotal role of crises, FEs and CEs. The contribution of this paper is to start filling this gap: Substantively, I provide a novel theory arguing that FEs increase people's conspiracy demand, which in turn increases CEs' conspiracy output. Methodologically, I advance the literature by creating and analysing a new data set containing 12,502 observations of 23 German CEs' conspiracy output on Telegram over two years during the pandemic. My models provide robust evidence that CEs' conspiracy output increases substantively and statistically sig-

nificantly during FEs.

I understand this study with its limitations mostly as a stimulus for other researchers, demonstrating that conspiracy output can be measured and analysed, which opens the door for countless research opportunities: For example, I did not distinguish between the abundance of existing conspiracy narratives, however, different narratives might thrive in different times.

This paper bears important implications for security agencies and policymakers as a robust model explaining and predicting conspiracy output is introduced. Knowing the current or predicting the future amount of conspiracy output can be used for various purposes: For instance, health agencies can monitor and examine conspiracy output to broadcast targeted counter information. Timing is particularly important in this case since Jolley and Douglas (2017) show that anti-conspiracy arguments are only effective when received in advance of conspiracy narrative contact. For instance, anti-vaccine conspiracy narratives can thus be debunked before they even reach people, protecting them (and their children) from dangerous health decisions. Moreover, security agencies can monitor conspiracy output and use it as a cue to assess the risk originating from conspiracy groups. Their danger should not be underestimated: From individuals who murder rule-enforcing citizens to groups who want to overthrow the government (e.g., in Germany or the US), conspiracy groups pose a real danger to citizens, public figures and democracy. Understanding how (digital) conspiracy dynamics work is therefore crucial to protect human lives and democratic institutions, especially in times of crisis.

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