TRAMES, 2026, **30(80/74)**, 2, 327–343

PUNITIVE FICTIONS: THE NARRATIVE LOGIC AND SOCIAL RESILIENCE OF HOSTILE CONSPIRACIES

Vladimir Vujošević

University of Donja Gorica

Abstract. Hostile conspiracies (from the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* to QAnon) are not merely false beliefs held by gullible or paranoid individuals. They are something stranger: publicly debunked narratives, structurally recognizable as fiction (even to many of those who spread them) that nonetheless retain devastating social force. This paper argues that the obvious fictional character of hostile conspiracies is not incidental to their destructive efficacy but constitutive of it. Their fiction-like quality enables four interconnected functions: it compresses diffuse political hostilities into vivid, portable stories; it turns the apparent absurdity of conspiratorial claims into a mechanism of viral spread; it amplifies affective outrage toward targeted groups; and it transforms narrative into an instrument of social punishment directed at perceived enemies. Together, these functions explain a genuine paradox: the more obviously fictional a hostile conspiracy is, the more socially resilient it tends to be.

Keywords: conspiracy theories, political hostility, narrative persuasion, misinformation, fictionality, QAnon

DOI: https://doi.org/10.3176/tr.2026.2.07

Received 11 May 2026, accepted 1 June 2026, available online 10 December 2026

1. Introduction

Danilo Kiš's literary investigation into the emergence and influence of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, "The Book of Kings and Fools" (1983), points to a disturbing paradox: how obviously fictional narratives can shape harmful political

© 2026 Author. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License CC BY 4.0 (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0).

beliefs and practices. Kiš's essay unfolds along two contradictory lines. On the one hand, it traces a series of successful efforts to expose the *Protocols* as fiction. Investigations ranging from the 1921 articles in *The Times* to Swiss court proceedings (1933–1935) forensically demonstrated that the *Protocols* are a mélange of explicitly fictional sources, drawing heavily on Joly's *Dialogue aux enfers entre Machiavel et Montesquieu* (1864) and directly plagiarizing material from popular fiction of the "dime-novel variety" (Brotherton 2015: 36), most notably Goedsche's novel *Biarritz* (1868). On the other hand, Kiš simultaneously traces the growing social influence of the *Protocols*, remarkably resistant to their demonstrated fictionality. The text continues to circulate, mobilizing nationalist sentiment and legitimizing persecutory forms of political action that contributed to the Shoah (see Burkhart 2020: 327).

As Umberto Eco pointed out a decade after Kiš, what marks the *Protocols* as fiction is not only their recoverable fictional sources but also their more obvious internal features: "fictional signals" (1994: 120) that, in ordinary interpretive practice, guide readers in distinguishing fictional from non-fictional discourse. Fictional works frequently rely on deliberate communicative anomalies: features that in factual discourse would immediately provoke incredulity. A fictional narrator may unproblematically report conversations to which he had no plausible access, or a near-illiterate figure may produce a stylistically coherent autobiography, as is the case with *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (see Kania 2005: 49). Readers recognize these signals and respond not with suspicion but with a tacit willingness to ignore such anomalies and cooperate with the fictional premise.

The *Protocols* are saturated with precisely such signals. The text presents itself as a found manuscript of obscure provenance (a recognizable Gothic convention). It purports to disclose the secret plans of a highly intelligent elite so carelessly committed to an explicit, easily transmissible form that exposure becomes inevitable. Successful conspirators rarely produce documents that so perfectly externalize their evil intentions. The direct articulation of motives – "We have unlimited ambition, an all-consuming greed, a merciless desire for revenge, and an intense hatred" (cited in Eco 1994: 136–137) – functions less as a credible testimony than as the hyperbolic voice of a stage villain, whose psychology is flattened into transparency so that the moral stakes of the narrative remain immediately intelligible. As Eco puts it, while such explicitness may be "believable in a novel, [...] it exceeds the bounds of credibility that anyone would do this so shamelessly in reality" (1994: 136).

Something puzzling emerges here. The *Protocols* are exposed as fiction from within (through internal fictional signals legible to any attentive reader) and from without (through rigorous scholarship available for over a century), yet neither layer of debunking decisively affects their circulation or capacity for harm. An explicitly fictional text persists as a recognizable instrument of antisemitic propaganda, invoked long after World War II by extremist movements and far-right political groups (see Burkhart 2020: 317). The question is not whether people who endorse the *Protocols* recognize them as fiction (as we will see, many of them tacitly do) but why that recognition fails to diminish their force or arrest their circulation. What kind of social persuasion operates independently of factual credibility?

2. Hostile conspiracies

The *Protocols* are the most notorious instance of a broader social phenomenon we might call *hostile conspiracies*. These are a particular type of conspiratorial narratives that usually share three crucial features.

First, they are *targeting*. Unlike general conspiracy theories, which posit impersonal hidden forces or offer alternative explanations of events, hostile conspiracies center on accusations against clearly identifiable groups or individuals, portraying them as intentional agents of harm. They do not merely invite skepticism toward institutions but generate hostility toward particular people.

Second, they are *evidentially invulnerable*. Unlike other empirical claims, hostile conspiracies carry no "extinction conditions" (Ichino forthcoming). That is, counter-evidence is usually reinterpreted as further confirmation of the conspiracy: adherents expect authorities to deny the conspiracy, and any counter-evidence is dismissed as precisely the denial they predicted (see Levy 2024a: 481).

Third, they are, to re-use Eco's phrase, *fiction-signaling*. Although presenting themselves as factual accounts, hostile conspiracies are explicitly "co-dependent with literary forms" (Carver 2021), sometimes directly plagiarizing fictional sources. They openly "contain tropes" familiar from "fictional narratives, such as their focus on epic battles between good and evil" (Munro 2023).

A prominent contemporary example is QAnon, a movement that gained widespread public attention following January 6, 2021, when a crowd stormed the U.S. Capitol. QAnon was frequently identified as a significant ideological inspiration for the event (Moskalenko and McCauley 2021: 142). Like the *Protocols*, QAnon is grounded in purported revelations from an anonymous source who disseminated alleged classified information through online platforms. At its core is the claim that a cabal (consisting of directly named politicians and celebrities) secretly controls major institutions and engages in Satanic rituals of child abuse. This network is opposed by Donald Trump, cast as a protagonist "working behind the scenes to bring it down" (Moskalenko and McCauley 2021: 142). The narrative culminates in the anticipated "Storm," an event in which the covert elite is to be exposed.

The same features identified in the *Protocols* reappear in QAnon. The conspiracy is targeting: it centers on unsubstantiated accusations against identifiable individuals. It is evidentially invulnerable. Numerous QAnon predictions have failed to materialize without undermining the movement: that Hillary Clinton would be arrested in 2017 (O'Brien 2023: 106), that JFK Jr. would appear in Dallas in 2021 (Argentino 2026: 70), that Angela Merkel would be exposed as Hitler's granddaughter in 2020 (Young and Boucher 2022: 4). Each disconfirmation was absorbed as further evidence of the conspiracy's depth. Finally, QAnon is obviously fiction-signaling: it contains elements that would help us, in ordinary contexts, to identify the claims as pertaining to fictional discourse. Some claims have abandoned any pretense of factual plausibility altogether: for example, that elites harvest adrenochrome from victims of Satanic rituals and use it as an anti-aging drug (Vrzal 2020: 51), or that Joe Biden was replaced by a clone (Kanno-Youngs 2025). These claims read less

like factual assertions than elements of genre fiction, and QAnon has accordingly been described as a form of "fantasy fiction" that "emerged within a genre reading community" (Young and Boucher 2022: 10).

QAnon is only one instance of a proliferating class of conspiratorial narratives sharing these same features. The PizzaGate conspiracy alleged that John Podesta's hacked emails contained coded references to a child-trafficking ring (involving high-ranking politicians from the Democratic Party) operating out of a Washington, D.C. pizzeria (Bleakley 2023: 510, Tangherlini et al. 2020: 4). Its fictional signals are unmistakable: for instance, claims about underground dungeons beneath a pizzeria – that, in reality, has no basement (Grant 2026) – echo the Gothic convention of subterranean crypts. The portrayal of prominent figures as cartoonishly evil devil-worshipers is a classic horror motif familiar from films such as *Eyes Wide Shut*.

A further illustration may be provided by so-called "transvestigation" conspiracies (see Almomani and Jegić 2026), which claim that various prominent women were born male and that public life is controlled by a hidden transgender elite intent on subverting traditional values. Here too the fictional signals are obvious. The central motif recalls narrative patterns familiar from paranoia-driven science fiction and horror, in which respectable appearances mask malign, "alien" interiors. The transphobic sensationalism is coupled with a pseudo-forensic, "gamified" mode of detection (see Munro 2023), in which photographs of female celebrities are scrutinized by online communities for hidden clues of cross-dressing. The procedure imitates detective conventions familiar from Sherlock Holmes to the CSI franchise while inviting participants to play the role of heroic investigators uncovering what the mainstream refuses to see.

These conspiracies are not merely collections of false claims. What is puzzling is the flamboyant fictionality of their structure. They resemble "run-of-the-mill [fictional] narratives such as novels and TV shows" (Ganapini 2022: 35). In ordinary persuasive contexts, we suppress fictional signals and tone down narrative excess to make claims believable. Hostile conspiracies do precisely the opposite. Their fictional signals are so pervasive that they are difficult to regard as incidental. What distinguishes hostile conspiracies from ordinary propaganda is that they are untrue in an extravagant, genre-saturated way that should, by ordinary standards, undermine their credibility. And yet they persist and circulate.

3. The gullibility thesis and the pathologizing paradigm

Hostile conspiracies raise a genuine social puzzle. Large groups of people endorse and circulate claims that are, by every ordinary standard, unbelievable. They are not merely explicitly fiction-signaling but also evidentially groundless and accompanied by decisive counter-evidence. Yet none of this seems to function as an obstacle to their apparently sincere endorsement and the real social harm they produce.

Two intuitive explanations of this phenomenon are commonly invoked, which we may call the gullibility thesis and the "pathologizing paradigm" (Ichino and

Sullivan-Bissett 2024: 286). The gullibility thesis holds that some individuals, due to limited education or scientific illiteracy, are simply disposed to endorse implausible, evidentially groundless claims, regularly failing to distinguish factual from fictional discourse (see Bortolotti 2024: 753). Such people undoubtedly exist. For instance, there were individuals who wrote letters to Sherlock Holmes convinced he was a real detective (Eco 1994: 125). But gullibility cannot explain the large-scale proliferation of fiction-signaling claims across socially and educationally diverse populations. It is estimated that "36 million Americans, or 20% of the adult population" qualify as believers in QAnon (Young and Boucher 2022: 5). The *Protocols* also enjoyed mass circulation even among educated elites. The gullibility thesis may carry more explanatory force in contexts where access to counter-evidence was genuinely limited (e.g., in medieval blood libel accusations), but in contemporary environments, where access to information is "easy and widespread" (Napolitano 2021: 102), its explanatory power is negligible.

The pathologizing paradigm fails for similar reasons. On this view, holding narratively overelaborated "suspicion[s] of hostile groups who have malevolent intentions" is a pathological tendency close to paranoid and delusional thinking (Galbraith 2021). The view has initial plausibility: clinical conditions involving psychosis are indeed associated with difficulties in distinguishing fictional scenarios from reality (Sass 1994: 1). But as Duetz (2024: 2114) argues, this approach has been largely abandoned in contemporary social psychology. Conspiracy endorsement is no longer regarded as confined to clinically pathological groups. Richard Hofstadter already noted in the 1960s that "the paranoid style" in public life – including "the qualities of heated exaggeration […] and conspiratorial fantasy" – cannot be "applied only to people with [...] disturbed minds" but is often embraced by "more or less normal people" (1965: 3–4). Many conspiracists function competently in "most areas of life – they hold down jobs, have families, and the like" (Munro 2023). They do not fit the profile of psychotic or delusional individuals. The pathologizing paradigm thus overlooks the possibility that hostile conspiracies may fulfill "certain important social functions and psychological needs" for those who endorse them (Duetz 2024: 2115).

Stripped to its core, the puzzle is this. The hostile conspiracies described here are fiction-signaling in ways that are, by ordinary standards, easily recognizable. The general population (people who are neither delusional nor profoundly credulous) is typically capable of identifying fictional signals. When we encounter them alongside strong indications of evidential ungroundedness, this typically triggers what might be called *fictional context activation* (Strange 2002: 269): the recognition that we are dealing with fiction rather than fact. Yet in the case of hostile conspiracies, this capacity appears to fail, not in isolated individuals, but systematically, across large and otherwise cognitively competent social groups. Those who spread the *Protocols* were not, as a rule, incapable of distinguishing fiction from reality. Millions who claim that a Satan-worshiping cabal runs American politics are not clinically delusional or utterly gullible. They distinguish fiction from reality competently in other contexts. Nor are they merely pretending: it would be difficult to maintain

that those who approvingly cite the *Protocols* or endorse QAnon do not genuinely believe in a Jewish conspiracy or that prominent politicians are of the devil's party. Their endorsement appears, in some sense, sincere.

The puzzle is not one of individual cognitive failure but of systematic fictional "context activation failure" (Strange 2002: 269): the widespread suspension, in specific ideological conditions, of a capacity the same individuals exercise competently elsewhere. The question is what suspends fictional context activation in these specific cases, and why it fails so collectively and with such consequential effect.

4. Quasi-fictions

Complex ideological systems (religious traditions, certain forms of nationalism, and conspiracy theories) often exhibit a characteristic layered structure. Within such systems, we can distinguish two kinds of claims. At the center lie "core" claims (Levy 2024a: 483): sincerely held, relatively stable factual commitments about the world. Surrounding these, like a shell around a nucleus, are what Tanya Luhrmann calls "quasi-fictional narratives" (2020: 48). These are narrative constructions that resemble fiction and often conflict with our knowledge about the world, yet are not treated as fictional. Participants frequently recognize, at some level, that such narratives behave like fictions, but in specific ideological settings, fictional context activation is deliberately suspended, and adherents nevertheless profess such claims as true. What suspends it is not an inability to recognize the fiction-signaling but the social and psychological functions these quasi-fictions serve in "sustain[ing] core ideologies" (Ganapini 2022: 28).

An example from religious practice may illustrate the point. In Orthodox Christianity, the "core" consists of relatively stable doctrinal commitments: that saints intercede on behalf of the living, that such intercession is efficacious, and that souls persist after death. Surrounding this nucleus, one often finds quasi-fictional elaboration. For instance, around the cults of Saint Spyridon of Corfu and Saint Basil of Ostrog, there circulates a body of pious narratives according to which these saints periodically come to life: they walk among the faithful, their relics retain the warmth of living flesh, and their shoes (inspected by monks) are found worn from nocturnal journeys. Such narratives belong unmistakably to the genre of miracle legend. They are transparently fiction-signaling, rarely officially endorsed by religious institutions, and not accorded the same weight as central doctrinal commitments. Yet they are asserted, transmitted, and treated as more than fiction. As Luhrmann puts it, their purpose is "not to impart information about [sacred figures], the way [...] an encyclopedia imparts information" but to "train listeners to experience [the invisible others]" as if present, "by suspending the awareness" that these narratives are fiction-like (2020: 29). Fictional context activation is suspended here not by epistemic failure but by the devotional, affective, and group-signaling functions these narratives perform (see Van Leeuwen 2023: 148, Vujošević 2026: 10–11).

The parallel with religion should not, however, be pushed too far. Unlike the quasi-fictions of religious traditions, hostile conspiracies are malign, phobic, and

highly narrativized forms of slander directed at specific people. The point of the comparison is purely structural: the same abstract architecture – a nucleus of core ideological commitments surrounded by quasi-fictional elaborations – can be detected in hostile conspiracies, even though the ideological work such quasi-fictions perform is different from what they achieve in religious contexts.

Consider someone who engages with and spreads QAnon claims. Such a person may hold an ideologically coherent set of genuine commitments at the level of the nucleus: that political elites are corrupt, that certain institutions promote ideologies incompatible with traditional ways of life, that liberal political attitudes threaten Christian or national values (see Levy 2024a: 483), that particular minority groups or individuals are a source of threat, and an apocalyptic religious orientation that renders the world legible as a cosmic struggle between divine and demonic forces.

Such clusters of commitments are not, in themselves, particularly puzzling: large numbers of people harbor prejudices toward minority groups, embrace ethnonationalist ideologies, and hold apocalyptic religious beliefs. Core ideological orientations do not automatically generate quasi-fictional elaborations. The puzzle is why the quasi-fictional shell sometimes attaches to this nucleus and why, once attached, it proves so resistant to removal.

We will argue that hostile quasi-fictional elaborations perform distinctive ideological functions that core claims alone cannot perform. These functions may explain both why the shell emerges and why fictional context activation is suspended even among individuals who recognize the fiction-signaling of such claims. We can identify four such functions, or four ideological vectors, through which the quasi-fictional shell strengthens, spreads, and sustains the core commitments it surrounds.

4.1. Narrative de-metaphorization

Hostile conspiracies typically emerge from a broader culture of heated political rhetoric in which metaphorical language is deployed with great intensity. For instance, Vladimir Putin declared in 2015 that "the New World Order worships Satan" (Young and Boucher 2022: 13). Subsequently, similar pseudo-religious rhetoric was taken up by Russian officials who, after 2022, began to justify the war in Ukraine as "an existential crusade against Satanism" (Kivelson and Worobec 2023). Patriarch Kirill also repeated the trope of "the West [embracing] a Satanic religion" (Kivelson and Worobec 2023), framing Ukraine as the battleground of a cosmic spiritual struggle. Analogous language has been deployed by alt-right politicians in the United States and elsewhere (see Anishanslin 2022).

These claims are not typically made as literal assertions. They function as rhetorical intensifiers: "satanic" operates as a metaphor for the alleged abandonment of traditional Christian values, and "forces of darkness" is a familiar figure for geopolitical adversaries – invoked, for instance, by Harry Truman during the Cold War (Hamby and Friedman 2011: 264). The language is hyperbolic and affectively charged, designed not to disclose that Western leaders are literal devil-worshipers but to signal perceived moral opposition and mobilize hostility by casting the adversary in the metaphorical role of evil.

The quasi-fictional narratives of hostile conspiracies perform a specific operation on such metaphors. They literalize them. By abandoning the figurative quality of hostile rhetorical tropes and translating them into concrete narrative plots, they reverse the metaphorical operation. We may call this process *narrative de-metaphorization*. The rhetoric of the "satanic," morally bankrupt West becomes, in QAnon, a literal claim about a cabal of devil-worshiping politicians engaged in ritual sacrifice. The familiar trope of the dangerous, "cold-blooded" elite becomes, in the reptilian conspiracy theories promoted by David Icke, a biological claim: world leaders – "including among their ranks US presidents, British and Canadian prime ministers, and the House of Windsor" – are literal "reptilian shape-shifters" (Levy 2024b). The diffuse suspicion about "Jewish influence" becomes a narrative of the actual rabbinic congress puppeteering world governments. In each case, a rhetorical vehicle is reified into a fiction-signaling narrative plot that allows listeners to be "captured by the realness of the metaphor, without [completely] losing sight of its figurative nature" (Luhrmann 2020: 29).

De-metaphorization serves the specific ideological function of solidifying and strengthening core commitments by giving them narrative life. By translating diffuse, vague ideological orientations into "a gripping dramatic story" (Young and Boucher 2022: 9), quasi-fictions render them more cognitively accessible and socially transmissible. The "broad generalizations" (Ganapini 2022: 21) that constitute the conspiracist's genuine ideological commitments (that there is something "off" about particular public figures, that hidden forces influence political events) are difficult to share and remember precisely because they lack a unifying narrative shape. As "vivid and [narratively] complete" illustrations of vague underlying beliefs (Young and Boucher 2022: 1), quasi-fictions condense diffuse suspicions into a gripping plot. Concrete and vivid stories move through social contexts faster and further than abstract ideological suspicions ever could.

Crucially, quasi-fictions need not be literally believed to be sincerely asserted. People who engage with them are often tacitly aware of their illustrative rather than strictly factual character. Goebbels' repeated insistence on the *Protocols*' "inner truth" (cited in Bytwerk 2015: 213) is revealing. The very language of "inner truth" signals the absence of straightforward factual belief. Similarly, Young and Boucher have argued that large numbers of QAnon adherents do not take conspiracy claims to be true but rather "truthful" (2022: 1). They are felt to capture something factual even when their literal content is recognized as fiction-signaling. The *Protocols* are embraced not because they are evidentially convincing but because they feel like a gripping rendering of a general ideological orientation the believer senses to be true. The narrative is false at the level of literal fact but felt as true at the level of ideological revelation.

This is why debunking hostile conspiracies fails so consistently. Levy (2024a: 482) has compared their ideological dynamics to the moat-and-bailey maneuver: when the bailey (the exposed, fiction-signaling claim) is attacked, the conspiracist retreats to the more defensible moat of general ideological commitments that are too broad to be immediately disproven. When the *Protocols* are exposed as plagiarized

fiction, the antisemitic conspiracist retreats to the vaguer core orientation: "Jewish elites do have disproportionate influence." The quasi-fiction was illustrating and intensifying that commitment, not constituting it.

What this reveals is a distinctive epistemic elasticity in the structure of hostile conspiracies. De-metaphorization extends the rhetorical figure into a vivid, literal narrative, but the moment that narrative is challenged, it contracts back into metaphor, absorbing the blow and dissolving into the rhetorical form from which it came. The literal and the metaphorical are always both available to the conspiracist, who moves between them as the ideological situation demands.

4.2. Viral ludicrousness

Many hostile conspiracies intensify their fiction-signaling to caricatural extremes, generating claims so bizarre that they seem to subvert narrative persuasion. Consider some of the more extravagant QAnon assertions: that Joe Biden has been replaced by a robot, or that John F. Kennedy Jr. faked his own death. Or consider transvestigation conspiracies, alleging not merely that various prominent women in public life are men but generating obscene elaborations circulating widely across online platforms: that such figures are secretly the biological fathers of their own husbands, or variations of similar absurdities (see Swain 2026). These claims are not just implausible but parodically bizarre. They have the quality of the grotesque rather than the merely false.

One might assume such features are ideologically maladaptive. They are too ludicrous to be sincerely accepted, undermining the credibility of the broader conspiratorial narrative. But grotesque ludicrousness is not a defect in the structure of hostile conspiracies. It can be argued that it is an adaptive mechanism of social transmission, ensuring the spread of hostile narratives beyond communities already committed to their core ideological worldview and recruiting carriers who may not share the underlying ideological commitments at all.

"[A]bsurdly fake stories" (Ganapini 2022: 22) are more "attention-getting" (Guerin 2024: 509) and memorable than plausible ones. A claim that is spectacularly bizarre, yet delivered with apparent seriousness, is cognitively arresting in ways that compel engagement even from those who do not believe it. This dynamic is visible in contemporary digital culture in the phenomena of "engagement farming" and "rage-baiting" (Swalve and DeFoster 2025: 161). These describe the deliberate posting of absurd content designed to generate reactions. Users repost in disbelief or mockery, attempt to debunk, or circulate content "alongside jokes, memes, and playful trolling" (Munro 2023). In each case, they extend the content's reach. The algorithm registers interaction rather than endorsement. "[E]mpirical evidence suggests that the conspiracy theories which spread most efficiently online are especially juicy [and] titillating" (Munro 2023). Ludicrousness, in the digital environment, is a virality mechanism.

This phenomenon, however, predates social media. Grotesque rumors have likely always traveled faster than plausible ones, not because they are believed but because their strangeness compels sharing. The claim that Marilyn Manson had ribs surgically

removed (Osborne 2017: 56) circulated widely in the 1990s precisely because its obscenity generated engagement. People shared it as a form of transgressive entertainment, without necessarily endorsing it.

Hostile conspiracies spread through the same mechanism. Someone who would never endorse antisemitic propaganda may nonetheless share a bizarre conspiracy claim – about Rothschild family space lasers producing wildfires (Lee 2021) – as a joke, inadvertently extending hostile ideology into new social territory. The grotesque narrative functions as a Trojan horse: the hostile ideological content travels inside a container of ludicrousness, bypassing the ordinary epistemic defenses people deploy against explicit hate speech. It looks like a joke and spreads as a "cultural meme" (Pierre 2023: 549). In that guise, hostile ideological content deposits itself in new social contexts, gradually normalizing the core commitments it carries ("The story is obviously ludicrous, but there may be something to it...").

The ludicrousness also provides deniability for those who spread such claims deliberately. Because the narrative is obviously bizarre, the person sharing it can always retreat to irony ("I'm not saying I believe these crazy stories, but..."). One can gauge reactions and spread ideological content without fully committing to it. The ludicrous claims make hostile ideology culturally familiar and provide cover for those who circulate it.

4.3. Outrage amplification

Quasi-fictional elaborations provide "more exciting" narrative content (Ichino forthcoming) than the underlying ideological commitments they surround. These narratively thick stories are easier to disseminate than the diffuse, inert generalizations from which they emerge. But social transmissibility is not their only function. Quasi-fictions are also affectively more powerful than the core commitments they elaborate. By deploying the dramatic resources of fiction (heightened moral stakes, absolute villains, innocent victims), they do not merely illustrate ideological commitments but actively intensify the emotional attitudes that surround them. A vague prejudice toward a minority group becomes, through narrative concretization, intense hatred of an "evil" enemy. Hostile quasi-fictions function as affective intensifiers, heightening negative emotional reactions toward targeted groups and providing core ideological orientations with the emotional charge that sustains their social resilience.

It is well established that imaginative engagement with narratives "can influence our real-world attitudes in significant ways" (Ichino 2022), even when we are aware we are dealing with fiction. Being imaginatively engaged with a story in which a young girl is stabbed by a psychiatric patient may influence general attitudes toward mental health policy (see Ichino 2022). A TV show portraying corrupt politicians (like *House of Cards*) may deepen distrust of institutions not because the audience believes the events on screen but because imaginative immersion activates negative affective responses toward real politicians that persist beyond the fictional frame. Rob Brotherton cites a case study finding that viewers leaving the screening of Stone's *JFK* reported being less likely to vote: "Merely watching the movie eroded, at least temporarily, [...] the viewers' sense of civic engagement" (Brotherton 2015: 58).

This affective dynamic is especially pronounced in what Burkhart, drawing on Iser, calls "fictive" narratives (2020: 317). They are distinct from both purely imaginary narratives (like *The Lord of the Rings*, with no real-world referents) and factual narratives (which claim genuine veracity). Fictive narratives are fictional in their details but anchored in the extratextual world. Hostile conspiracies are *fictive* in this sense: not purely imaginary (their targets are real people) nor genuinely factual (their claims are fiction-signaling and tacitly recognized as such). This hybrid status makes them affectively potent: the emotional responses they activate are directed at real targets.

Now, hostile conspiracies perform two related affective operations. First, by rendering the target as absolutely evil, they deepen pre-existing hostility. For someone already harboring antisemitic prejudice, the *Protocols* perform a psychologically satisfying function: they imaginatively elaborate and emotionally intensify what the believer already vaguely suspects, providing a gripping story that says "You were right all along." This shields the believer from "cognitive dissonance" and deepens the affective sense of ideological certainty (see Ganapini 2022: 29). Even if the narrative is not literally believed, imaginative immersion in it is emotionally rewarding for someone already disposed toward hostility.

Second, hostile conspiracies provide what might be called *affective license*: the imaginative permission to feel and express hostility that might otherwise remain diffuse. By casting the target as a child-abusing Satanist, hostile quasi-fictions make hostility feel narratively obligatory. The quasi-fiction does not create the prejudice but imaginatively licenses and amplifies it, giving it narrative shape, heightened emotional expression, and a sense of righteous legitimacy.[1]

This reveals something psychologically interesting. One can hold sincere emotions in the absence of literal belief. An antisemitic conspiracist may lack epistemic sincerity toward the explicit content of the *Protocols* (recognizing, like Goebbels, their fictional character) while sincerely maintaining the hatred they activate. The primary function of the quasi-fiction is not to produce a new factual belief but to emotionally intensify and give narrative shape to a prejudice already present. That emotion is sincere in its own register even when the elaborated quasi-fictional content that amplifies it is not literally believed. This is why the endorsement of hostile conspiracies occupies a third position between straightforward belief and full pretense: full epistemic sincerity may be suspended while affective sincerity remains

[1] The phenomenon of affective license has deep roots. Njegoš's *The Mountain Wreath*, the foundational text of Montenegrin literature, provides a striking illustration. In scenes depicting the preparation of Montenegrins for conflict, warriors are exposed to epic poetry that narrativizes the struggle with the Ottomans in terms of absolute moral opposition. The poetry is fictive rather than factual. It shapes historical events through epic convention rather than strict historical accuracy. But its affective function is to license, intensify, and mobilize hostility toward a real, identifiable group, preparing warriors emotionally for real-world violence. Imaginative immersion in a fictive narrative about real enemies activates affective states that persist beyond the fictional frame and bleed into action. Fictional narratives can do affective work that factual claims cannot precisely because their hyperbolic, morally absolute structure bypasses ordinary epistemic caution and speaks directly to emotion.

genuine. The prejudiced orientation is real ("These groups deserve hostility"), while the quasi-fictional story functions as a prop that intensifies and focuses the emotional reaction.

4.4. Punitive attitudes

Imagine a colleague telling you gossip about a coworker: that he is a secret alcoholic who has allegedly made scenes at past departmental events. According to William Flesch, "[g]ossiping, destructive though we often take it to be, is like road rage in bespeaking an essentially prosocial attitude" (2007: 128). Gossip, on his account, serves the purpose of "regulat[ing] social norms" (Flesch 2007: 81). By condemning a colleague's alleged failures, the gossiper signals dedication to the norms being violated and creates a tacit bond of shared values with the listener ("unlike him, we share the same professional standards"). Additionally, the gossiper engages in what Flesch calls "altruistic punishment" (2007: 70): the target is punished through the social damage the circulating narrative produces, and the gossiper derives satisfaction from the sense of having done something socially justified.

Now, hostile conspiracies are not gossip. They are highly narrativized, fiction-signaling forms of slander that circulate even when recognized as implausible by those who spread them. Despite this disanalogy, something structurally similar to Flesch's account can be detected in their circulation.

Like the gossiper, the person who endorses a hostile conspiracy signals ideological affiliations to "like-minded people" (Raab et al. 2013: 8). But hostile conspiracies, precisely through their hyperbolicity, perform this signaling function more aggressively than gossip. Spreading such claims is not primarily an act of literal belief but an act of affective positioning: a charged declaration of where one stands in the ideological landscape, of what one finds threatening, and of whom one identifies as the enemy. To share QAnon accusations or circulate the *Protocols* is not necessarily to assert their literal truth but to perform unambiguous hostility toward their targets. Like ordinary hyperbolic expressions of antipathy ("You are the worst person imaginable"), such claims convey the intensity and non-negotiable character of an underlying attitude (see Vujošević 2026: 8) rather than aiming at literal accuracy. Unlike standard gossip, hostile conspiracies need not be literally believed to signal ideological loyalty and consolidate coalitions around shared hostilities.

The most important function hostile conspiracies share with gossip, however, is punishment. Unlike altruistic punishment in standard gossip (which typically requires the gossiper to believe the gossip is true), this form of punishment operates independently of literal belief. It functions even when the narrative is tacitly recognized as fiction-signaling and fabricated.

The conspiracist who spreads hostile quasi-fictions typically maintains a genuine negative disposition toward the target: a conviction that certain politicians are corrupt, that particular celebrities promote destructive values, or generalized suspicions about the malevolent social influence of specific groups. These attitudes are part of the ideological nucleus. They are real beliefs that predate quasi-fictional elaboration. The quasi-fictional claims (human sacrifice, ritual abuse, perversion)

are chosen not because they are always literally believed but because they are maximally damaging to people the conspiracist already takes to be harmful social agents. Spreading a claim that someone is a child abuser attaches to that person's reputation regardless of whether anyone believes it. It circulates, surfaces in online searches, and produces negative social consequences independently of its truth value. Such claims are not primarily assertoric statements but performative instruments: weapons of reputational damage that are devastatingly effective precisely because their effectiveness is decoupled from their credibility.

Levy provides a striking illustration. When conspiracy-minded individuals are presented with a fabricated claim (that Hillary Clinton secretly gifted uranium to Russia), many immediately assign it high probability, despite encountering it for the first time (Levy 2024a: 473). The claim was invented on the spot, yet it is accepted because it fits the pre-existing hostile profile already attributed to the target: it depicts Clinton as disposed to acting against national interests. The acceptance is not an epistemic judgment but a punitive *reflex*. It does not matter whether the claim is literally true. What matters is that it damages a target already perceived as deserving reputational damage, if for less dramatic or narratively interesting reasons. Conspiracists are not assessing evidence. They are recognizing narrative features that fit their hostile orientation and can be deployed as instruments of reputational damage. Hostile conspiracies are often better understood as performative acts of ideological violence (experienced by those who deploy them as justified punishment) than as straightforward factual assertions.

5. Conclusion

Why do fiction-like, publicly debunked narratives retain social force and appear to be sincerely endorsed by large groups of people? The standard answers explain this either through the psychology of those who uphold such claims (the pathologizing paradigm) or through their epistemic shortcomings (gullibility and susceptibility to misinformation). These approaches are not without merit: some people do literally believe hostile conspiracies, and gullibility and paranoid ideation are real phenomena among conspiracists. But they cannot account for the large-scale endorsement of narratives that are parodically fiction-signaling and often tacitly recognized as such by those who spread them. The puzzle is why such narratives retain social force even among those who do not fully believe them.

Rather than asking what is wrong with the people who believe these narratives, we have asked what these narratives ideologically do that would explain their social resilience. Drawing on Levy, Ganapini, and Luhrmann, we have argued that complex ideological systems characteristically exhibit a layered architecture: a nucleus of core ideological commitments surrounded by quasi-fictional elaborations that perform specific ideological work. In the case of hostile conspiracies, we have identified four interconnected "vectors" through which the quasi-fictional shell strengthens and spreads the ideological nucleus.

These vectors form a cumulative chain. (i) *De-metaphorization* compresses the diffuse hostilities of political rhetoric into concrete stories, making ideological commitments "tellable" in ways that abstract suspicion cannot be. Such stories generate overtly fiction-signaling, bizarre claims that people spread as memes and jokes, inadvertently carrying ideological content into contexts that explicit propaganda could not easily reach. This is (ii) *viral ludicrousness*. The vivid, moralizing narratives that ensure virality also intensify affective responses toward real targets. This is (iii) *outrage amplification*. Finally, (iv) *punitive signaling* converts this emotional charge into social action. The narrative becomes an instrument of punishment, deployed against targets already perceived as deserving it.

Fiction-signaling is not the obstacle to hostile conspiracies' social efficacy but its crucial mechanism. This is why factual debunking fails so consistently. These narratives are not primarily asserting literal truth. They are compressing, transmitting, charging, and punishing. Refuting their factual content often leaves all four vectors intact.

There may be no silver bullet against hostile conspiracies. However, as the de-metaphorization vector demonstrates, hostile conspiracies do not emerge from nowhere. They parasitize on the hyperbolic, pseudo-religious, and dehumanizing language that circulates in mainstream political discourse. When prominent political figures describe their opponents as satanic, predatory, or cold-blooded, they supply the thematic repertoire and affective intensity that hostile quasi-fictions then literalize and narrativize. Refusing to normalize the most virulent forms of this rhetoric would probably not eliminate hostile conspiracies, but it would deprive them of some of their most potent raw material. The metaphors that become petrified into plots have to come from somewhere.

The social conditions that make individuals susceptible to hostile ideological commitments (economic anxiety, the sense of corruption, and institutional betrayal) also deserve to be taken seriously. These conditions are not excuses for the malign ideologies that elaborate them, and taking them seriously does not mean conceding any truth to hostile ideologies. But as long as they remain unaddressed, hostile quasi-fictions will reemerge. This problem requires slow social and political work that no single paper can prescribe. What we have tried to do here is more modest: to understand what hostile conspiracies are, what functions their fiction-signaling structure performs, and why their social circulation proves so difficult to arrest.

Data availability statement

All materials supporting this study are contained and referenced within the article. This research did not involve the creation of new datasets.

Acknowledgment

The publication costs of this article were partially covered by the Estonian Academy of Sciences.

Address:
Vladimir Vujošević
Faculty of Philology
University of Donja Gorica
Oktoih 1, ME-81000 Podgorica
Montenegro
Email: vlvujosevic@gmail.com

References

Almomani, Abdallah and Denijal Jegić (2026) "An intersectional approach to harassment on social media". *Communication, Culture and Critique*, tcag005. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1093/ccc/tcag005

Anishanslin, Zara (2022) "The revolutionary roots of satanic panic still invoked in American politics". *The Washington Post*. Available online at https://www.washingtonpost.com/made-by-history/2022/08/05/revolutionary-roots-satanic-panic-still-invoked-american-politics/. Accessed on 16.04.2026.

Argentino, Marc-André (2026) *QAnon: from conspiracy theory to new religious movement*. New York: Routledge.

Bleakley, Paul (2023) "Panic, pizza and mainstreaming the alt-right: a social media analysis of Pizzagate and the rise of the QAnon conspiracy". *Current Sociology* 71, 3, 509–525. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1177/00113921211034896

Bortolotti, Lisa (2024) "Is it pathological to believe conspiracy theories?". *Transcultural Psychiatry* 61, 5, 749–755. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1177/13634615231187243

Brotherton, Rob (2015) *Suspicious minds: why we believe conspiracy theories*. London: Bloomsbury.

Burkhart, Dagmar (2020) "The conspiracy, or the roots of the disintegration of European society. Danilo Kiš's fictionalization of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*". In Peter Deutschmann, Jens Herlth, and Alois Woldan, eds. *"Truth" and fiction: conspiracy theories in Eastern European culture and literature,* 313–332. Bielefeld: transcript Verlag. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1515/9783839446508-018

Bytwerk, Randall L. (2015) "Believing in 'inner truth': *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* in Nazi propaganda, 1933–1945". *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 29, 2, 212–229. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1093/hgs/dcv024

Carver, Ben (2021) "Turning points: plots in conspiracy and literature". In Ben Carver, Dana Craciun, and Todor Hristov, eds. *Plots: literary form and conspiracy culture,* 17–33. London and New York: Routledge.

Duetz, Julia C. M. (2024) "Conspiracy theories are not beliefs". *Erkenntnis* 89, 2105–2119. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1007/s10670-022-00620-z

Eco, Umberto (1994) *Six walks in the fictional woods*. Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press.

Flesch, William (2007) *Comeuppance: costly signaling, altruistic punishment, and other biological components of fiction*. Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press.

Galbraith, Niall (2021) “Delusions and pathologies of belief: making sense of conspiracy beliefs via the psychosis continuum”. In Valentina Cardella and Amelia Gangemi, eds. *Psychopathology and philosophy of mind*, 117–144. London and New York: Routledge. DOI: https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003009856-8

Ganapini, Marianna (2022) “Absurd stories, ideologies, and motivated cognition”. *Philosophical Topics* 50, 2, 21–40.

Grant, Tracy (2026) “Pizzagate”. *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Available online at https://www.britannica.com/topic/Pizzagate. Accessed on 14.04.2026.

Guerin, Bernard (2024) “Delusions as storytelling gone wrong in bad life situations: exploring a discursive contextual analysis of delusions with clinical implications”. *The Psychological Record* 74, 507–520. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1007/s40732-023-00549-x

Hamby, Alonzo and Michael Jay Friedman, eds. (2011) *Outline of US history*. Washington, DC: Bureau of International Information Programs, U.S. Department of State.

Hofstadter, Richard (1965) *The paranoid style in American politics and other essays*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Ichino, Anna (2022) “Conspiracy theories as Walt-fiction”. In Patrik Engisch and Julia Langkau, eds. *The philosophy of fiction*, 240–261. London and New York: Routledge.

Ichino, Anna (forthcoming) “Is religious belief a kind of imagination”. In Neil Van Leeuwen and Tania Lombrozo, eds. *The Oxford handbook of the cognitive science of belief*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Ichino, Anna and Ema Sullivan-Bissett (2024) “Conspiracy beliefs and monothematic delusions: a case for de-pathologizing”. *Erkenntnis* 91, 285–310. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1007/s10670-024-00881-w

Kania, Andrew (2005) “Against the ubiquity of fictional narrators”. *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 63, 1, 47–54. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0021-8529.2005.00180.x

Kanno-Youngs, Zolan (2025) “Trump amplifies another outlandish conspiracy theory”. *The New York Times*. Available online at https://www.nytimes.com/2025/06/01/us/politics/trump-biden-conspiracy-theory.html. Accessed on 04.04.2026.

Kiš, Danilo (1983 [2017]) “Knjiga kraljeva i budala” [The Book of Kings and Fools]. In *Enciklopedija mrtvih* [*The Encyclopedia of the Dead*], 103–136. Podgorica: Nova knjiga.

Kivelson, Valerie and Christine Worobec (2023) “Satanism, de-satanization, and exorcism in contemporary Russian rhetoric: historical reflections”. *Cornell University Press* [Blog]. Available online at https://www.cornellpress.cornell.edu/satanism-exorcism-contemporary-russian-rhetoric-kivelson-worobec-02-2023/. Accessed on 16.04.2026.

Lee, Bruce Y. (2021) “Did Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene blame a space laser for wildfires?”. *Forbes*. Available online at https://www.forbes.com/sites/brucelee/2021/01/30/did-rep-marjorie-taylor-greene-blame-a-space-laser-for-wildfires-heres-the-response/. Accessed on 09.05.2026.

Levy, Neil (2024a) “Believing in shmeliefs”. *Ergo* 11, 18, 466–488. DOI: https://doi.org/10.3998/ergo.6158

Levy, Neil (2024b) “Believing in shmeliefs”. *Ergo Blog*. Available online at https://ergoblog.org/neil-levy-believing-in-shmeliefs/. Accessed on 10.05.2026.

Luhrmann, Tanya M. (2020) *How God becomes real: kindling the presence of invisible others*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Moskalenko, Sophia and Clark McCauley (2021) “QAnon: radical opinion versus radical action”. *Perspectives on Terrorism* 15, 2, 142–146.

Munro, Daniel (2023) "Capturing the conspiracist's imagination". *Philosophical Studies* 180. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1007/s11098-023-02038-x

Napolitano, M. Giulia (2021) "Conspiracy theories and evidential self-insulation". In Sven Bernecker, Amy Flowerree, and Thomas Grundmann, eds. *The epistemology of fake news*, 82–106. Oxford: OUP. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198863977.003.0005

O'Brien, Mark (2023) "The coming of the storm: moral panics, social media and regulation in the QAnon era". *Information & Communications Technology Law* 32, 1, 102–121. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/13600834.2022.2088064

Osborne, Patrick W. (2017) "Constructing the antichrist as superstar: Marilyn Manson and the mechanics of eschatological narrative". *Persona Studies* 3, 1, 43–59. DOI: https://doi.org/10.21153/ps2017vol3no1art651

Pierre, Joseph M. (2023) "Delusion and conspiracy theories". In Ema Sullivan-Bissett, ed. *The Routledge handbook of philosophy of delusion*, 544–556. London and New York: Routledge.

Raab, Marius H., Stefan A. Ortlieb, Nikolas Auer, Klara Guthmann, and Claus-Christian Carbon (2013) "Thirty shades of truth: conspiracy theories as stories of individuation, not of pathological delusion". *Frontiers in Psychology* 4, 406. DOI: https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2013.00406

Sass, Louis Arnorsson (1994) *The paradoxes of delusion: Wittgenstein, Schreber, and the schizophrenic mind*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.

Strange, Jeffrey J. (2002) "How fictional tales wag real-world beliefs: models and mechanisms of narrative influence". In Melanie C. Green, Jeffrey J. Strange, and Timothy C. Brock, eds. *Narrative impact: social and cognitive foundations*, 263–286. New York: Psychology Press.

Swain, Marianka (2026) "The absurd Brigitte Macron conspiracy theory sweeping America". *The Telegraph*. Available online at https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2025/03/19/brigitte-macron-candace-owens-tucker-carlson-transgender/. Accessed on 05.05.2026.

Swalve, Natashia and Ruth DeFoster (2025) *The fear knot: how science, history, and culture shape our fears – and how to get unstuck*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Tangherlini, Timothy R., Shadi Shahsavari, Behnam Shahbazi, Ehsan Ebrahimzadeh, and Vwani Roychowdhury (2020) "An automated pipeline for the discovery of conspiracy and conspiracy theory narrative frameworks: Bridgegate, Pizzagate and storytelling on the web". *PLoS ONE* 15, 6, e0233879. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0233879

Van Leeuwen, Neil (2023) *Religion as make-believe: a theory of belief, imagination, and group identity*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Vrzal, Miroslav (2020) "QAnon as a variation of a Satanic conspiracy theory: an overview". *Theory and Practice in English Studies* 9, 1–2, 45–66.

Vujošević, Vladimir (2026) "The depth and limits of imaginative immersion in religious cognition". *Filosofia Unisinos* 27, 1, 1–14. DOI: https://doi.org/10.4013/fsu.2026.271.09

Young, Helen and Geoff M. Boucher (2022) "Authoritarian politics and conspiracy fictions: the case of QAnon". *Humanities* 11, 3, 61. DOI: https://doi.org/10.3390/h11030061