

Article

The “In-Between Land” of Suspicion and Ambiguity: Plotting the MS Estonia Shipwreck

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Abstract: The present article is multidisciplinary, drawing on and synthesizing narrative media theories, philosophy of epistemology, conspiracy theory research, and creativity studies. I will explore the following **central theoretical problem:** whether it is conceptually enriching to (i) further develop the notion of and hence advance the scholarship in “conspiracy theorizing” and (ii) in doing so, would it be productive to ponder the role of peoples’ affective state of suspicion in engaging with ambiguous representations, something that is thrown into especially sharp relief by the conspiracist discourse. Accordingly, my point of departure is the concept of ambiguity and the related semantic field (including its antithesis, closure). Hereby, the concept of suspicion is introduced and treated as a creativity-enhancing, productive affect rooted in narrative thinking and construction. In particular, a specific manifestation of ambiguity apparent in digital sense-making discourses is foregrounded—a *self-reproduced ambiguity*. These dynamics are explored in the context of, while aspiring to overcome the scholarly emphasis on its negative valence, the practice of “conspiracy theorizing.” This popular practice is hence reconceptualized as *contra-plotting*. It is understood as a form of sense-making undertaken by the *plotters of suspicion* in challenging official explanations found unsatisfying and straining one’s belief. Such activity emerges and becomes instrumental in the face of explanatory uncertainty, such as the unsolved nature (“the how”) of the shipwreck, and is posited to be an individual and collaborative creative construction characterized by “continual interpretation.” For, as I will argue, the functional outcome of contra-plotting is to self-reproduce—not to obtain closure for the—ambiguity. Motivated by the suspicious stance, it is a necessary operative mode of such interpretation itself. In attempting to overcome their suspicions about official explanations, plotters inadvertently also ‘plot’ suspicion. Consequently, such an interpretative process corresponding to *disambiguation plotting* always feeds back into its own ever-expanding (narrative) ‘middle,’ searching for yet immediately disregarding, as if by design, any final crystallized ‘truth.’ In this context, the perhaps more understated meaning of “to interpret”—namely, to creatively supplement “deficiencies” (suppletio)—may gain in conceptual relevance. In staking the proposed theoretical apparatus, I will draw on my preliminary findings from analytical work on ‘real-time’ digital discussions—observable as a chronological forum archive—on the 1994 shipwreck of the cruise ferry MS Estonia. In order to instrumentalize the outlined tentative theoretical vocabulary, an interpretative close reading of posts from different time periods from the conspiracist forum Para-Web will be provided. This analysis combines textual and narrative analyses. The article ends with some concluding thoughts and aims for further research.

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1. Introduction

“We project ourselves—a small, humble elect, perhaps—past the End, so as to see the structure whole, a thing we cannot do from our spot in the middle”

(Kermode 1966, p. 8)

The MS Estonia was a cruise ferry of the company Estline on the Tallinn–Stockholm route. It sank in September 1994 in the Baltic Sea during a highly stormy night, listing starboard and capsizing due to poor cargo distribution. Essentially, the findings of the final report of the multistate Joint Accident Investigation Commission (JAIC) argued that the sinking was caused by the storm, noting how strain from the waves caused the bow door locks to fail, with the bow visor (claimed to be under-designed) and ramp being torn off, ultimately leading to flooding. The report also criticized what it conceived as the crew's passivity at the crucial time.¹ Various theories on the causes of the sinking—invoked by dissatisfaction with the JAIC report—still continue almost thirty years later.²

However, why have I chosen the discussions involving this particular incident as a basis for theorizing and analysis? First of all, it is no exaggeration to say that it has had a significant impact on the Estonian national cognition (perhaps to the degree of 9/11 in U.S.). Even almost three decades after the event (itself occurring within the first years of state independence), new investigations still make national headlines, and nonfiction and fiction books are being published (similarly so in Finland and in Sweden). MS Estonia's sinking took 852 lives, and notwithstanding the fact that many of the victims were also of Scandinavian origin; for a small country with only a little over one million in population, such as Estonia, the tragic outcome of the shipwreck directly affected the lives of a considerable amount of the native population, with many losing close loved ones. In addition, more were no doubt affected indirectly (through friends, collateral relatives, etc.). Secondly, and no less importantly, the MS Estonia's sinking has been considered one of the worst maritime disasters of the 20th century and one of three deadliest in peacetime European waters, together with *Titanic* (1912) and *Empress of Ireland* (1914). These socially sensitive considerations, especially when taken together, certainly afford a strong impetus for studying the digital discourse surrounding this event.

The theoretical discussion throughout the present article makes its case as a multi-disciplinary venture. It synthesizes relevant literature from, among others, narrative media theories, philosophy of epistemology, conspiracy theory research, and creativity studies. It draws on a case study of a conspiracist sense-making community, distinctive in how its participants creatively confront ambiguities particular to their topic of engagement. The following **central theoretical problem** will be explored: whether it is conceptually enriching to (i) further develop the notion of and hence advance the scholarship in “conspiracy theorizing” (especially by integrating insight from narrative theory) and (ii) whether, in doing so, it would be productive to explicitly highlight the role of peoples' affective state of suspicion in engaging with what may be perceived as ambiguous representations, something that is thrown into especially sharp relief in conspiracist discourses. *Section 2* functions as a general introduction. I will maintain that the notion of “ambiguity” needs to be considered in a relationship of tension with its qualitative opposite: “closure.” To this end, some guiding inspiration is drawn from recent findings from social cognition and catastrophe studies.

First, cognition scholars, such as Bertram Malle, have observed that people tend to “wonder why” when they are (1) mentally preoccupied with a particular event, (2) which invokes a lack of understanding (“a state of nonunderstanding”), while (3) appearing relevant to their interests. As Malle explains, “[n]onunderstanding is subjective—for people to wonder why, they must *believe* they lack an explanation (even if they do have one) [...]” (Malle 2004, p. 73; emphasis in original, underlining added.)

This observation dovetails with a recent study by Karl Halvor Teigen et al. These scholars found that the question of how some past event *began*—i.e., what cemented it as an event of interest—might “loom larger” than its ending, at least in the inquiring minds of some people. Even in cases where the ending is clear-cut (e.g., a well-documented historical occurrence), the beginning is “judged as more important and interesting, warranting more explanation, and having more causal power” (Teigen et al. 2017, p. 26). Arguably, these event-beginnings can be conceived as peoples' cognitive representations, “tem-

porally extended” into the present, “structuring [...] the landscape of [their] collective history that is continually updated, changed, or reinforced by public narratives” (ibid.: 27). Indeed, cast in this light, the tragic shipwreck of the MS Estonia may certainly be appreciated as an exemplary case. With only its catastrophic ending known beyond any shadow of doubt in its tragic entirety, this 1994 event still begets pages upon pages of forum discussions—ever since the topical thread was initially posted in 2004—following new pieces of information published in the mass media.

Second, and building on previous insights, this continuous digital engagement with the MS Estonia shipwreck could hint at a contemporary manifestation and instrumentalization of the “shipwreck with spectator” metaphor, with its origin in the ancient Roman literature (Lucretius’s *De Rerum Natura*) (Vidauskytė 2017; Winter 2019). When transposed into the present day, though, the “theorists” in the forum—if to keep in mind the Greek word *theoría* being derived from *theoros*, i.e., “spectator”—fashion the MS Estonia catastrophe into a collaboratively approached “object” of (aesthetic) contemplation, one that is engaged with as if from a non-involved distance (Dürbeck 2012, pp. 2–3).

Guided by these leitmotifs and building on the discussion in *Section 2*, I will next outline my proposed theoretical vocabulary (*Section 3*). I will distinguish a particular manifestation of ambiguity—a *self-reproduced ambiguity*. I will maintain that such reproduction characterizes the activity of *contra-plotting* by conspiracy theorists—a value-laden notion I will reconceptualize as *plotters of suspicion*. Moreover, it will be argued that suspicion, as a creativity-enhancing, productive affect can be considered as the ‘motive force’ for the activity of *contra-plotting*.

The theoretical discussion in *Sections 2* and *3* is thereafter augmented with an illustrative interpretative close reading combining textual and narrative analyses. The analysis aims to highlight a variety of narrative plottings conceived to develop chronologically across three intersecting but asynchronous time periods (*Section 4*). This analysis is intended to provide some empirical counterweight to the preceding abstract discussion. Finally, in *Section 5*, I will offer some concluding observations and suggest further lines of inquiry for the topics on hand.

2. Ambiguity, Closure, and Interpretation (*supplentio*)

It could be said that a more focused scholarly discussion on the meaning and function of ambiguity rose to a special prominence with literary and poetry criticism, notably with William Empson’s sensitive close readings of poems in his classic *Seven Types of Ambiguity*. As Anthony Ossa-Richardson remarks in his interdisciplinary study *A History of Ambiguity*, Empson’s 1930 work was shortly “canonized as the watershed in the history of thinking about ambiguity” (Ossa-Richardson 2019, p. 5). Ossa-Richardson introduces ambiguity by foregrounding two of its general themes: (1) “the subjective state of doubt” and (2) “its objective correlative in the world, or a text, a painting, a sonata” (ibid.: 1). Narratologist Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan specifies these themes in the context of narrative representations (e.g., novels), speaking of *narrative ambiguity* within the interplay of readerly hypotheses formulation and textual revelations (or lack thereof) (Rimmon-Kenan 1977).³ Hypotheses once considered “plausible” may become untenable in the long run, for the incoming narrative information necessitates constant re-evaluations of one’s interpretative designs. Conversely, a hitherto “incomplete” or even initially discarded hypothesis might re-emerge due to an increase in its coherence, consistency, and overall simplicity, ultimately leading to its formulation as the “finalized hypothesis.”

Moreover, this is where ambiguity enters, for “sometimes we close the book with more than one ‘finalized’ possibility in mind” (ibid.: 9–10, 51–52). However, it does not follow that ambiguity is present in all of such cases, Rimmon-Kenan argues. She differentiates narrative ambiguity from, say, multiple subjective interpretations attributed to a given work, for the former—and this is Rimmon-Kenan’s underlying argument—“is a fact in the text.” (Ibid.: 12; see, pp. 12–25 for an interesting discussion about a number of other differentiations.)

A narrative text obtains ambiguity when it is apparent that there is a “co-existence of mutually exclusive” (i) readings (“finalized hypotheses”) and (ii) “systems” or “linkages” of hermeneutic “gap-filling clues” that invoke these readings (ibid.: 27). These “clues,” as I understand Rimmon-Kenan’s argument, give content to and “confirm” the evidence for their respective hypothesis, while scaling according to the same logical relation (mutual exclusiveness) as the hypotheses they form, hence “repudiating” the other(s) in the nitty-gritty details. Accordingly, either on the level of the virtual whole or its parts, reader’s “choice [is rendered] impossible ... frustrat[ing] the reader’s expectations of a univocal, definitive meaning” by “restricting uncertainty to an insoluble oscillation” between emergent narrative potentialities.” In other words, Rimmon-Kenan maintains that these potentialities—in her treatment of ambiguity—are restricted by and contingent on the “subjectivity of creation,” i.e., “the work itself.” (Rimmon-Kenan 1980/1981, pp. 185–86.) Instead of being keyed wholesale to the imaginative or creative capacity of the reader, ambiguity is a “regulative textual norm for interpretation,” and in that sense, something objective, “preinterpretative” (Rimmon-Kenan 1977, p. 12; See also, Bahti 1986, p. 210ff).

While certainly sympathetic to and acknowledging the explanatory power Rimmon-Kenan’s structuralism-influenced perspective brings to the table, the present discussion does not see an urgent necessity in being as restrictive and narrow. Instead, in bringing the discussion on ambiguity into the present empirical context, it might be worthwhile exploring the potential middle ground cautiously, on the one hand, by keeping in mind the official explanation narrative of the MS Estonia shipwreck (the 1997 Final Report by The Joint Accident Investigation Commission of Estonia, Finland, and Sweden [JAIC]) and, on the other, the popular plottings which, to some extent, draw on it (the discussions in the Para-Web forum). I will return to and elaborate on this in Section 4.

To the latter end, though, it must first be outlined, in the most rudimentary terms sufficient for subsequent discussion, what is presently meant by “ambiguity.” Ambiguity may be a characteristic operating quality of some form of (not exclusively fictional) (narrative) representation, leading to a perplexing reception. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines ambiguity as something “uncertain, open to more than one interpretation, of doubtful position.” Etymologically, ambiguity originates from circa 1400s Old French *ambiguïté* (uncertainty, doubt, indecision, hesitation) and the Latin *ambiguitatem* (nom. *ambiguitas*) (double meaning, equivocalness, double sense). Reportedly, the early 15th century adds the meaning of “obscurity in [the] description.” Moreover, the prefix *ambi-* (*ambhi-*) means “around” and “about,” with the Latin root verb *ambigere* (< *ambi-* *agere*) indicating “to dispute about, contend, debate.” Perhaps most interestingly, the literal meaning of *ambigere* is “to wander, go about, go around”; thus, figuratively to “hesitate, waver, be in doubt.” (*Agere* further augments the latter with its root *ag-* carrying the meaning of “to drive, draw out or forth, move”) (Ossa-Richardson 2019, p. 18n62).⁴

Arguably, then, the making sense of something ambiguous denotes—if to speak metaphorically—a wandering within its confines, engaging with it through “work[ing] [one’s] way back” to the meaning (ibid.: 4). (Similarly to how, when you get lost in the woods, you need to start looking for a path that would lead you out.) In other words, confrontation with ambiguity leads to a ‘walk-about’—a kind of imaginative exploration—filled with hesitation, uncertainty, and suspicion. Its ultimate purpose is to “draw out” (make accessible, bring to plain sight)—through “relentless questioning” (Zuckerman 2019)—(the) meaning(s) that has (have) been so far shrouded by (or in) ambiguity. Moreover, the previous metaphorical observation could be reinforced and further augmented if, together with Baldo degli Ubaldi—a key legal commentator of the 14th century—we would consider that the very word interpretation (*interpretatio*) is ambiguous. For it indicates both “clarification” (or “exposition,” *declaratio*) or, more pertinent for the present discussion, *supplentio*, the supplying (satisfying) or “repairing” of, “deficiencies” (Ossa-Richardson 2019, p. 82n44).⁵

The above observations can be specified further and along more narrative theoretical lines. The seminal work of semiotician Umberto Eco on the reader’s role would be a

worthwhile resource. In his discussion of reader “hazard[ing] forecasts” about narrative omissions or gaps (or other ambiguous storytelling strategies), Eco highlights two particular sense-making operations in engaging with a narrative text. These are: (i) undergoing an “inferential walk” during which one might (ii) ‘write’ a “ghost chapter” (Eco 1984, pp. 214ff, 252–56). As Eco explains, in forecasting, the reader probes the still unfolding fabula by imaginatively anticipating, among others, also the probabilities of the unsaid. The non-explicit, yet presumed as virtually existent, narrative information (e.g., events from b to e leading to f in sequence a–f; cf. Gerald Prince’s narratological concept of the “disnarrated”). The latter necessitates the construal and emergence of as-if “world[s]” and “sub-worlds [of] *expectations*” (ibid.: 220, 254; emphasis added).

Therefore, an inferential walk (for Eco, a type of interpretative mental “move”) occurs when the reader “shifts from one hypothesis to another,” switches between different “intertextual frames,” utilizes broader, extratextual “encyclopedic” knowledge, and so on (ibid.: 214, 253). It is worth noting here that while for Eco these “walks” necessitate movements “outside the text,” were we to take the literal meaning of *ambigere* seriously, it could be posited that such inferential walks are also undertaken during one’s immersion in ambiguous information. For instance, by moving between and fitting together diverse elements of its content. Accordingly, such prospective ‘furniture’ of imagination might come to furnish what Eco terms the “ghost chapters” — “implicitly validate[d] [by the text], tentatively written by the reader.” In other words, where a considerable part of the fabula (or two or more mutually exclusive fabulas in ambiguous representation, to follow Rimmon-Kenan) may well be realizable on the level of the narrative discourse, some of its “actualization” remains virtual (ibid.: 214–15). Thus, in the liminal, porous space of one’s expectations, an effort—even if relatively far-fetched—for disambiguation will be undertaken.

Such displeasure due to a looming ambiguity, therefore, is “the antithesis [of] closure” (Carroll 2007, p. 7). It indicates an ‘openness’ with no pay-off for curiosity, stoked throughout by the (narrative) suspense. By being confronted with the inability to answer (or interpret away the narrative’s refusal to answer) the questions posed about a narrative (or those evoked by it), “[t]he reader is not offered easy satisfactions, but a challenge to creative co-operation” (Kermode 1966, p. 19). As philosopher Noël Carroll puts it, such “question formation” is not only our “ordinary critical response” to narratives—the nagging feeling of suspicion articulated by bemoaning what “has been left out,” not entirely agreeable, and so on. It is a natural feature of engaging with whatever type of obtained information. “If [our] storytelling mind cannot find *meaningful patterns* in the world, it will try to impose them” (Gotschall 2012, chp. 5, sub-chp. 4; emphasis added). For we tend to wonder why.⁶

Therefore, some narrative (a fictional plot arc or a real-life event explanation) has obtained “closure” when its perception has reached “*stable conclusiveness*” (Segal 2007; emphasis added). Arguably, while Carroll’s treatment of the concept first defines “closure” in general—augmenting it thereafter with a proposal for *narrative* closure—the two definitions largely coincide (cf. Feagin 2007). Hence, where generic closure suggests a “sense of [the phenomenological] feeling of] finality” for concluding “*just [at] the right point*,” with “nothing left to say [or] left unsaid” (Carroll 2007, pp. 2–3; emphasis added).⁸ Narrative closure is secured when “any question that arises from the causal nexus of the story will count as narrative question proper, whose answer may then be an ingredient in narrative closure. [...] [T]he very insufficiency of the stated causal connections in most narratives incites our curiosity. [...] Such questions are *narrative* questions because they arise from an internal feature of narrative” (Carroll 2007, pp. 12–13; emphasis in original).

In juxtaposing these two definitions above, I would like to highlight the strong sense of subjectivity or reception specificity they share, which might not necessarily be restricted to more or less explicit gaps in the narrative’s causality chains attributable wholly to authorial intent, as Carroll’s discussion, in parts, appears to indicate. Carroll might not strictly disagree on this point, either. For he readily acknowledges how the “estimation” of probable answers, and therefore the achievement of closure *tout court*, is in the purview

of the recipient: “[T]he impression of narrative closure occurs not simply when all the [questions] have been answered, *but only when* the informed audience member *realizes* they have been answered” (ibid.: 5, 8; second emphasis in original; Klauk et al. 2016, pp. 25–26n13).⁹

Hence, it might be justified to posit that while the distinction of narrative closure may be merited, it is worthwhile to drive such distinction deeper still. I would suggest that reciprocally speaking (the experientiality of) closure itself can manifest in narrative terms (say, in the digital discourse). Arguably, such a narratively-infused perspective could be conceived of as *disambiguation plotting*. For, to borrow a phrase from Don P. Fowler, no end-point is “hermetically sealed” (Fowler 1989, p. 80). Even the kinds that are supposed to afford closure might necessarily not be successful in achieving the *complete* erasure of doubt and suspicion. For example, in cases where some authority (e.g., a state government or a creator of a television series) provides specific explanations and assumes the matter is concluded.

Therefore, in engaging with various representations, the quest for closure may frequently remain active. It might pre-empt any ‘final words’ from having any considerable effect. Hence, closure can also be conceived as a purposeful *activity* (however obstinate) of “organizing and keeping track of the representations of events and the states of affairs” toward a kind of end explanation that ‘feels’ appropriate. Such a format of overt questioning, characterized and driven by suspicion, keeps “map[ping] a circumstantial space of possibilities” by “plot[ting] ... a line through that space” (Carroll 2007, p. 8; emphasis added). For, if we were to regard our world as “open,” it is our storytelling that (at least aims to) “close” it (Lawson 2013). Keeping the latter idea in mind, I will next conceptualize the creative activity of contra-plotting and discuss its wider implications, which I have tentatively termed *disambiguation plotting*.

3. Mistrust, Creative Suspicion, and Plotting

Recent scholarship on (social) trust, such as in fields like international politics, has suggested that at least ever since the financial crisis of 2008 and the preceding watershed of the 9/11 suspicion, uncertainty and insecurity permeate and are normalized in (liberal Western) society, officialdom and popular alike. It is noted that to a significant degree, this is exacerbated by “capitalism and anxiety revel[ing] in an intricate relationship which is neigh-on impossible to separate” (Eklundh et al. 2017, p. 2). Whereas some governmental actors (e.g., in the U.S. Transportation Security Administration) are explicitly trained and tasked to maintain “anxious alertness” as a default stance of supposed threat prevention, and law enforcement agencies consider suspicion as a type of a “logic of anticipation” for procuring ‘actionable’ intelligence” (Guittet and Brion 2017, pp. 80, 83), laypeople have grown increasingly distrustful of and prone to question authority and its policies (i.e., politicians and acclaimed experts, the “trustee[s] of the people,” according to the social contract theory [Gumpert and Drucker 2007, pp. 189–90]). For the latter are perceived—owing to the complex designs of governance—as decreasing transparency, complicating popular oversight, and thus driving ever deeper the wedge between governance (“the few”) and governed (“the many”) (Bakir and Barlow 2007, pp. 3–5).¹⁰ Foregrounded by such misgivings is peoples’ felt lack of “epistemic access,” their disadvantageous position vis-à-vis what is perceived as “opaque” power: “It is hierarchy that blocks the direct knowledge of the goals of reasoning of our leadership from those that are led” (Sanders and West 2003, pp. 2–3; see also, Basham 2012, p. 52).

As Guittet and Brion put it, such tendencies lead to a condition where “we are all watchers and suspects at the same time [and] what people say, do (or write) cannot be trusted as such” (Guittet and Brion 2017, p. 84).¹¹ Such an atmosphere can be exacerbated further by the contemporary overabundance of information due to the Internet. Some scholars have remarked that, comparatively, the volume of information acquired by one individual in the course of a lifetime in the 17th century equals the amount that can be read in a single newspaper issue of today (Kuosa 2013, p. 93).

The previous observations on our era of suspicion and anxiety—what conspiracy theory scholar Peter Knight has termed the “unmanageable reality”—lead us directly to the role of ambiguity in the contemporary (Western) volatile sociocultural context. An atmosphere where embedded doubts persist within multiple layers of the power hierarchy throws what I have called disambiguation plotting into exceptionally sharp relief. This “world anxiety,” maintain creativity scholars Bonetto and Arciszewski, “seems to be the main cause for creating new narratives that frame the world” (Bonetto and Arciszewski 2021, p. 918).

To counteract a persistent lack of closure, “invariabl[e] ‘sieving’ [of] the dominant authorial storytelling [for] ostensible inconsistencies[, potential transgressions] and perceived disruptions” (Sorokin 2018, p. 34)—especially prevalent in digital discussions spaces and platforms—may cut across the very ontological boundaries ordinarily differentiating truth and falsehood and fact and fiction. Accordingly, suspicion breeds an acute ubiquity, power, and persuasion of narrative and storytelling identifiable in various areas of our contemporary public life (Salmon 2017). For people aspire to rewrite in their terms any matter of interest perceived as *incoherent*. Conceivably, these alternative, counter-hegemonic plottings include sense-making activities coalescing around a wide variety of topics, most timely of those the suspicion-driven “citizen sleuths” of conspiracy theorizing.

Taking stock of the previous discussion, this section develops an initial understanding of and proposes theoretical vocabulary for the umbrella concept of disambiguation plotting. To that end, I will posit that the narrative activity of *contra-plotting* by *plotters of suspicion* feeds on and breeds *self-reproduced ambiguity*. This terminology will then be drawn upon in the Analysis in Section 4. It will focus on the discussion of the 1994 MS Estonia shipwreck on the conspiracist forum Para-Web.

Recent years have offered several pertinent scholarly works that seek a more balanced and scientifically objective understanding of conspiracy theorizing. These scholars challenge the leading evaluative academic and social trend of the blanket stigmatization, pathologization, and irrationalization of all varieties of such practice.¹² In my modest narrative theoretical contribution toward the former tradition, broadly construed, I have been inspired by the “particularist” stances from epistemological philosophy, anthropology, and communication studies and by some cultural critiques disputing the received view of such theorizing being antagonistic to the Enlightenment rationality underwriting contemporary (post)modernity (E.g., Hagen 2022; Thalmann 2019; Dentith 2018; Rankin 2017; Barkun 2016; DeHaven-Smith 2013; Basham 2012; Aupers 2012; Coady 2006).¹³

Influenced by my overall microanalytical focus on the digital discourse dynamics, I have previously noted the importance of the collaborative dimension contained in the verb “to conspire.” Namely, its respective Latin roots—*con* (‘with’) and *spirare* (‘to breathe’)—indicate conspiratorial plotting as an “act of ‘breathing together’ [...] a coordinated effort of plotting for some particular purpose” by some “set of agents with a plan” acting (or having acted) in secret (at least for a time) (Sorokin 2019, p. 72; Sorokin 2021, p. 58). This literal meaning—the “breathing together”—already suggests the second, concomitant meaning evident in the common language. For where “to plot” indicates something undertaken by some real-life conspirators (a plan, an executed chain of events); it similarly imparts the quality of storytelling. That is, there is “another set of people”—“epistemically vigilant agents” (Sperber et al. (2010, p. 361)—who *plot a story* (in a similarly “coordinated effort” though not in secret) about how and why these former supposed conspirators plot. In the process, they challenge some official explanation, if one exists. Therefore, these plotters can be viewed, in some cases, as being part of an “atypical for[m] of resistance against what is seen as official truth” (Fassin 2021, p. 133). In short, they “plot (about) [those first order] plotters—and that is fundamentally a narrative act” (Sorokin 2019, p. 76). Accordingly, for the notion of “conspiracy theorizing” is a value-laden term with plentiful (even if in many cases justifiably) negative baggage, it might be best to be

reconceived as narrative Contra-plotting. For “[f]aced with information perceived as unreliable, incomplete, or contradictory, [plotters] plot arrangements of fact claims that “run contrary to accepted or authorized beliefs” (Felski 2011, p. 16) [...] [into] *alt-narrative[s]* [that are] sanctioned by their peers (but which may become contested internally)” (Sorkin 2019, p. 78).

Contra-plotting, then, as I envision it, is a creative exercise in interpretative discovery. In the case of ‘conspiracist’ explanations,¹⁴ peoples’ contra-plotting aspires—by utilizing the “raw materials of history” (Olmsted) and various other material or mental resources—to piece together a potential outcome (to ‘close a case’) that would at least appear to make (the most) sense (at a given time). Therefore, authors, such as Matthew Hayes and David Lafferty, have recently rightly maintained that the plotters’ “imaginative speculation” in “making sense of a world in which everything is connected” crucially hinges on their *creativity*. By blurring “fact and fiction [within] narrative structures that are developed and redeveloped many times,” they set themselves on a quest to overcome ambiguity (Hayles 2017, pp. 665, 667; Lafferty 2014, pp. 805, 807).¹⁵

However, it remains open, what could be understood as the driving force behind this phenomenon of contra-plotting? If to cash in on the variety of multidisciplinary insights discussed thus far, I would posit the core ‘motor’ being *suspicion*. In particular, suspicion conceived as a creative and impellent affective force. However, what kind of implications does the proposed adage for plotters, the “*of suspicion*,” tease out?

As I see it, “*of suspicion*” indicates two perspectives. (1) By contra-plotting one is rigorously engaged in attempting to pursue ‘truth’ about some “event conspiracy” (Barkun 2003, p. 6) deemed “suspicious” by their peers (owing to the perceived status of the official explanation narratives). As some authors in the field of conspiracism research have noted, pursuant to such aims, contra-plotters’ interpretations are always already “continual” (Fenster 2008, p. 94). In practice, therefore, (2) contra-plotting forecloses “the end” (i.e., “closure”) in any measure, type, or form.

Consequently, contra-plotting is characterized by a “mistrustful,” suspecting manner of interpretation and investigation (Gambino and Pulvirenti 2019, p. 389; Carey 2017, p. 100ff). As a digital articulation of “shrewd incredulity,” it perpetuates ambiguity by its very nature (Barnwell 2016, p. 15). For the *self-reproduction of ambiguity is its operative mode*. Imaginatively reasoned patterns of in-development, virtual knowledge with ever-expanding Aristotelian ‘middles’ (“the space of suspense” [Brooks 1992, p. 18] of deferred endings) are construed and fitted together. A final, crystallized ‘truth’ is indeed sought, but as if by design, immediately discarded upon (perhaps) at last grasping its contours. Insofar as the plotters of suspicion endeavor to obliterate any suspicion and reach peer-agreed, concrete, and straightforward event explanation, their very activity paradoxically creates—and is scaffolded on the eternal existence of—suspicion. Nevertheless, how to explain “suspicion” itself, as a concept, for present purposes? Moreover, how do the conceptual designs of creativity and affect intersect here?

Though drawing from a somewhat different context, Ashley Barnwell’s (Barnwell 2016) arguments might outline some possible answers.¹⁶ Barnwell envisions suspicion as a “living, dynamic form of [social] attention,” entrenched in a “pervasive hypervigilance.” It carries a particular kind of creative potential and provides communal, shared significance by attuning (giving “rhythm” for) peoples’ lives. (Ibid.: 12–14, 16). For Barnwell, suspicion is something of a ‘motor’ of, or a motive force for, everyday knowledge—an affective capacity for its structuration (ibid.: 17). Suspicion, “reasoned [and] increasingly informe[d],” may come to enrich one’s knowledge reserves (Dalsgaard 2022, pp. 84–85). Therefore, according to Barnwell, in uncovering an “explanatory logic,” suspicion both “knits” together and becomes “the knitting together of seemingly disparate events and utterances” (Barnwell 2016, p. 13). By simultaneously indexing and making sense of the “ever-evolving patterns of causality,” suspicion embodies a lived tapestry that may translate, or perhaps instead weave itself into, popular knowledge. Although it “never seems to reach the closure it desires, but continues to desire it nonetheless” (ibid.: 15).

As Barnwell's discussion implies, suspicion, therefore, certainly holds affective, if not altogether 'reasonable' merit¹⁷, especially in light of diminishing popular trust owing to increasingly complex social designs and relationships in entrenched capitalism. In attempting to understand events whose beginnings, say, are subjectively and collaboratively perceived as concealed, suspicion—as Timothy Melley suggested—obtains a narrative quality.

Accordingly, the presently proposed compound notion of plotters of suspicion endeavors to capture how suspicion—as a productive, creativity-enhanced affect in joint cognitive activity—operates as a narrative filter in popular imagination's confrontation with uncertainty. Hence, suspicious thinking and plotting, for those involved, at the very least afford the potential to eke out a "much more real" reality—a latent "substratum hidden under the layer of appearance." (Melley 2021, pp. 65, 66n10; Beckmann 2022; Boltanski 2014, p. xv; Gambino and Pulvirenti 2019, p. 148; cf. Felski 2011). Subsequently, I will offer an illustrative close reading of some forum posts on Para-Web (from the periods 2004–2008 and 2020–2021) discussing the MS Estonia catastrophe. This is meant to suggest how the 'real-time' occurrences of contra-plotting of suspicion could be rendered in analytical terms.

4. Analysis

"If to compile all of the new knowledge with the old, then[...]"¹⁸

The limited analysis presented in this section aims to illustrate how "self-reproducing ambiguity" underlies the activity of contra-plotting by the plotters of suspicion. My data stem from the lively discourse around the catastrophic 1994 shipwreck of the cruise ferry MS Estonia on Para-Web. The analysis is preceded by (1) a short overview of the necessary contextual information about most recent, contested findings about the MS Estonia shipwreck and the Para-Web forum and (2) a short methodological note on how the data were collected and the overall analysis conducted.

A Few Words on Immediate Context and the Para-Web Forum

For present purposes, two recent real-world developments hold most significance: (1) The re-emergence of the MS Estonia catastrophe into the public eye due to the supposedly revelatory Swedish docuseries *Estonia—fyndet som ändrar allt*. This five-part series aired on Sweden's Discovery Channel in September 2020, touching upon some of the most well-known theories about the MS Estonia's sinking. It depicted diving onto the Baltic seafloor near the wreck. Specifically, the documentary's key revelatory turn made it evident that there indeed is a huge hole (or crevasse) in the ship's hull—as had been long speculated vis-a-vis the official narrative. (2) The two ongoing explorations on and about the MS Estonia's wreck, one of which discovered even more holes in the hull of the ship.

Para-Web is a bilingual (Estonian and English) conspiracist forum accommodating diverse 'alternative' interest topics. My focus has been on its long-running thread (in Estonian) on the MS Estonia shipwreck, titled "The Catastrophe of Estonia—accident? Conspiracy?"¹⁹ that can be found under a section titled "Secret Societies and Conspiracies" (itself a subsection of "Alternative History"). The thread was originally posted in 2004 and contains to date (28 April 2022) over 2600 posts with almost 450,000 total views.²⁰ These statistics highlight it as one of the most popular threads in this particular forum environment.

Data Collection, Ethical Concerns, and Analysis Methodology²¹

For the present analysis, posts from (i) the outset of the Para-Web thread (2004–2008); (ii) more recent (end of 2020); and (iii) recent (from September 2021) period were collected.²² The process of complete data collection is still ongoing and contingent on the inflow of user posts. Related ethical concerns were carefully weighed, and it was found that due to the forum content existing in the public domain (user account to browse the

forum threads is not necessary), the anonymity of the user base (nicknames and avatars), and user postings not containing what could be conceived as ethically sensitive information, peoples' privacy in the analyzed dataset has been respected and preserved (see, e.g., Creswell 2009, pp. 89–91). The guiding objective of the analysis for these data was to pinpoint narratively significant developments in real-time, that is, to detect continuities, contrasts, and similarities in peoples' plotting between these different time periods. The analysis followed a Mixed Methods approach. (1) After a long-term observation of the discourse—itsself a manifestation of “Big Data” (see, e.g., Vogt et al. 2014, pp. 158–65)—a humanly manageable data sample for qualitative analysis was gathered from the Para-Web thread and inserted into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet in two columns (user/date—post) via copy and paste. This spreadsheet was, in turn, inserted into GATE Developer, a Digital Humanities tool for computer-assisted coding. Data gathering and extraction processes were followed by a preliminary surface reading and subsequent coding of the overall sample via GATE and by hand. The coding process was inspired by a mixture of “motif” and “narrative” coding practices, concentrating predominantly on the instances of and plotting patterns featuring the motif of “hole” [*auk*] (or holes) in the ship's hull, related motifs and themes (e.g., revolving around ship's visor, the theory of the bomb, potential collision with a submarine, etc.), and their narrative interrelationships (for more on motif and narrative coding, see, e.g., Saldaña 2009, pp. 105–12). (2) The computer-mediated data analysis was followed by the utilization of qualitative methodology, namely, an interpretative close reading of the emerging discourse considered across three time periods. This stage of the analysis combined textual and narrative analyses and is presented below (see, e.g., Vanderstoep and Johnson 2009, pp. 210–15). In addition to outlining the dynamics of digital storytelling, such a format of analysis, too, “produces stories (e.g., [...] case studies) [and] call[s] attention to the use of emplotment and narrative configuration as its primary analytic tool” (Polkinghorne 1995, p. 6).

Analysis

In the early years of the Para-Web thread, the emergence of some clear overarching premises can already be easily identified.²³ Ever since the initial posts, the overall common understanding amongst the plotters is two-fold: the “real,” “actual truth” about MS Estonia will not be known, and the state governments (and related institutions) involved (primarily those of Estonia and Sweden) must have been (and are) “lying,” for why else would they “fear new investigation[s],” “keep silent,” or attempt to cover the wreck with concrete.²⁴ Accordingly, ‘the real story’ will remain partial and ambiguous, at best, and unknown, at worst, because of “all the evidence having been eliminated” and presumably also because of the enforcement of the gravesite sanctity law. Only one point, indeed, appears as the most probable and agreed upon: that the MS Estonia catastrophe “cannot any longer be sold as an accident.”²⁵ User *Kaabolott*, writing in 2006, explicitly references the breaking news from two years earlier when a former Swedish customs officer claimed on Swedish television that in September 1994 (the month of the shipwreck) MS Estonia had been used to transport military equipment.²⁶ For *Kaabolott*, this revelation had been ground zero for growing suspicious: “I got to say that I have never been much of an advocate of conspiracy theories. [...] But after it came to light that the transport of weaponry indeed occurred, everything changed. For if the governments already hid something of such magnitude, they might hide something else, too.”²⁷

Indeed, a number of posters from this early period (2004–2008) foreground the “bomb version” (at least partially influenced by German freelance journalist Jutta Rabbe's diving expedition leading to earliest claims of holes in the ship's hull, i.e., “the theory of the hole”²⁸): “What is clear is that the visor discharged by a bomb.” At the same time, though, some remain skeptical of Rabbe, for apparently she neither “glimpsed nor photographed [any] hole”, i.e., it may well just be idle talk, unsubstantiated by evidence.²⁹ There are also suggestions that Rabbe herself might have been an agent of subterfuge, as it were:

her “story could have also been only for deception [...] Maybe she was paid for her story to calm people down or something.”³⁰

Be that as it may, in 2006, a photograph circulated in the Para-Web thread depicting the hole. Due to broken hyperlinks, however, it remains impossible to confirm whether the plotters engaged with a modeled, speculative simulation or, indeed, an actual footage capture of some sort.³¹ Nevertheless, the dissemination of such imagery leads to further elaborations on the bomb theory. Hence, user *madman07*, who posted the image, opines that in the depiction “the edges of the hole are torn from the inside to outside,” such as “in case of an explosion.”³² Whereas *zepak* supposes the reverse: the hole was inflicted from inside-out due to “some object breaking out of that side at some point.”³³

Two years later still, *Paavo*’s plotting could be, perhaps, seen as covering the more realistic ground. Drawing on insight from resources, such as computer simulations sinking the model MS Estonia and survivor testimonies, *Paavo* downplays the potentiality of a bomb explosion in favor of the “fact” of the visor breaking off (“at around 1:30 a.m.”) being the direct result of prior “large-scale” negligence surrounding the ship’s construction. Something supposedly keenly hushed (and covered) up, even by resorting to the “murder [of] star witnesses.” Hence, it is maintained that “an explanation [for the loss of visor] does not necessarily presuppose a bomb. For Estonia was not the first ship whose handle of the visor lock had been broken up.” While key Estonian personnel (e.g., Avo Pihl) were supposedly knowledgeable of and “anxious about ship’s condition,” *Paavo* writes, their Swedish counterparts “did not want to keep the ship in repairs even for a single day”, and to top everything off, the eligibility documents for sea voyage of MS Estonia had also been “forged.”

However, the subsequent reply by *Thorondor* appears to contest this particularly time-coded reading of the “fact” of the visor breaking off.³⁴ *Paavo* elaborates further in the next post, explicitly instrumentalizing survivor testimonies: some escaped by supposedly “hanging on [ship’s] ramp,” but “[f]rom the outside of the ship the access to the ramp became possible only after the visor had separated.” *Paavo* also notes computer simulations “which put the time of the accident earlier.” This latter insight especially is of foundational importance for *Paavo*, paving the way to the final presupposition “that the visor separated around 1:00 (this time fits the simulations the best), not fifteen minutes later, as the report claims.” Consequently, any theories of the visor breaking off gradually become effectively disqualified (e.g., the official version in the report). By foreclosing any ‘straight-forward’ or most ‘obvious’ explanations, ambiguity is necessarily insisted upon: “Something critical occurred, visor separated momentarily, that is a few minutes at maximum, and soon Estonia had sunk.”³⁵

Now, while a great number of earlier plotting examples can be highlighted that, similarly to *Paavo*’s, feature mining insight from various (intermedial) resources (e.g., user *mart46*, writing a few months later, who integrates a document of an official VINNOVA flooding test conducted in Sweden³⁶, also see below). I will next focus on more contemporary data (2020–2021) for the remainder of this section, noting developmental correlations of these vis-a-vis the 2004–2008 plottings where appropriate.

Many Para-Web discussions from 2020 are illuminated by coming to terms with the at the time just established ‘fact’ about the existence of one gaping hole in the ship’s hull (due to the Swedish documentary noted at the outset of this section). Several subthreads emerge with mutual back-and-forth replies highlighting particular facets of this finding and linking it, albeit indirectly, to discussions almost two decades ago. One of such is initiated by a post featuring a schematic image of what might be a construction blueprint of the MS Estonia. The image appears to foreground one of the flanks of the cruise ferry, with the below the deck area especially zoomed in on, indicated by a circle drawn in red.³⁷ In the accompanying commentary, it is reasoned (though the closing winking eye emoji leaves the post somewhat ambiguous) that due to hole’s position—above the ship’s carcass—maybe the “welded seam,” due to being “delicate,” was “torn asunder.” Hence

there might not even have been any “big bang,” for a “tiny nudge” from the visor would have sufficed.³⁸

It is notable here how the discussion and theories revolving around the “bomb version” from the 2004–2008 period begin to be updated with novel, contemporary assemblages of virtual knowledge applied to it. The initial suggestion of the “welded seam” beckons further refinement from subsequent plotters. Hence, in developing further the hypothesis (or its incorrectness) about the “welded seam,” the potential significance of the visor, and the possible explosion, the replies draw further insight from sources as diverse as the aforementioned Swedish documentary (Mauno: “[T]he force of the impact was calculated [there] based on the indented dint not [based on the hole itself]”); elementary knowledge of (or lack thereof of) ship building (Gargirl: “[W]ouldn’t it be easier to weld the hull together from rectangular metal plates? This hole, however, is askew, isn’t it?”); a profession-related visit to a Swedish pipe factory (Aadu66: “[T]he welded seam was stronger than any other part of the pipe ... it never was torn asunder”); or the well-known fact of a strong storm on the night of the shipwreck (Vasamasa: “[T]he wave banged [on it], the weight of the visor + the mass of the water pushing it = damage to ship’s hull”).³⁹

However, in what ways will any of these plottings from 2004 to 2020 so far considered develop in the face of the most up-to-date and revelatory information, i.e., the finding of *more than* one hole in the hull? Around the end of September 2021, a number of news items were published (in the widely popular web portal Delfi), overviewing and detailing the most recent findings by two investigation crews, with one of those discovering even more holes in the ship’s hull. Given the central focus of the motifs of “hole” and “visor,” as well as the “theory of the bomb,” in the Para-Web discourse across decades, I would find it helpful, if only briefly, to zoom in on the posts written around the matching period.

On September 29, *Mauno* posts a YouTube video uploaded by a self-professed independent Swedish research group Fokus Estonia.⁴⁰ User engagement with this particular contributed resource led to an almost identical discussion from 2006 as if seamlessly picking up where the latter had left off. For here, we have user *I’ll be back* inquiring: “Interesting, how could have the explosion caused deformation on the visor from outside-in?”⁴¹ In replies, more hypotheses are entertained, such as “[p]erhaps the explosives were already planted beforehand[?]”⁴²

Yet, just as there are users, such as *kr1s* (in the previous quote), who are still on board with the bomb suspicion (or explanation), some others discard the bomb theory entirely, responding to *I’ll be back*’s inquiry by suggesting that the “[b]ig dent on the nose of the visor is due to a collision with the bulbous bow after the former had broken off from the ship.”⁴³ While *Sturm* appears to treat the latter proposal as a definite, almost everything else is left ambiguous, however, from the supposed time of the visor’s separation (“did it precipitate the accident, or was the ship already listing by the time of the visor’s separation, with people escaping”) to the plausibility of JAIC’s official theory (“[f]or [it] to be tenable, the visor had to already have been broken off and the ramp wide ajar on the moment the listing started”). Nevertheless, if the official theory is found to be untenable, “there’s a strong probability for the water to get in from somewhere else”, that is, from any of the holes so far discovered.⁴⁴

Meanwhile, *Zaqzaq* has explored the Swedish YouTube clip in closer detail. The latter leads them to the observation that, given Fokus Estonia’s apparent suggestion that the explosion was “executed later, under the water,” the question arises: “[U]nder water, later why?”⁴⁵ Yet, a possible explosion (to get rid of the visor for a yet unknown reason) notwithstanding, *Zaqzaq* does allow that the “later removal of the visor” would “fit with everything” but only “if there wouldn’t be such a confident testimony by Ain-Alar Juhanson [one of the survivors] about climbing along the ramp.”⁴⁶

Now, perhaps no other post more aptly exemplifies what this illustrative close reading analysis in the present section has attempted to achieve than *TTT*’s remark used as an epigraph: “If to compile all of the new knowledge with the old, then...” For *TTT*, this

means an increasing appreciation toward “the bomb theory,” or, as they specify, “the theory of 2–3 bombs, to be precise.”⁴⁷ According to *TTT*’s plotting, one significant ‘clue’ has to be “for starters, this time of day, [the] 1 am sharp,” as if knowingly recalling *Paavo*’s 2006 computer simulation-derived hypothesis on when the visor was supposed to have separated. For “until now the several bangs” around the time past 1am “had been taken as the visor thumping, but probably needlessly so.” (The latter point seems to implicitly take into account the official JAIC report of the visor separating gradually, thumping as it did).

Instead, *TTT* surmises, “it appears that one blasting charge was by the visor.” Drawing on the communal knowledge reserves, *TTT* finds it appropriate to conclude the latter being the case for “that is why the investigator threw away the cap screw of the lock ... recognizing the signs of an explosion by eye.” Due to the explosions, therefore, the visor is “in essence hidden away,” has its “hinges [cut off]” (for those would “betray” an explosion), and new details have been welded onto the wreck as replacements after the ship had gone under (an observation also shared by *Zaqzaq*⁴⁸).

5. Concluding Remarks

The tragic shipwreck of the MS Estonia, with only its ending fully known and ‘complete,’ begets pages upon pages of forum posts to this day, especially when some new piece of information is publicized. Even in the wake of a controversial Swedish television exposé featuring the first ‘hard proof’ of a gaping hole in the ship’s hull—something that had been long speculated as existent and presumably responsible for the quick sinking—the plotters in the analyzed Para-Web thread did not sit idly by but kept “wondering why.” They insisted on revisiting the topic of the “hole,” by ever so slightly shifting attention to the concomitant minutiae. The central inquiry into the possibilities that once reinforced the potentiality of such a hole were diverted to instead target as well as reuse potentialities of the “how?” (was the hole inflicted) and (by) “what?” (e.g., a strong wave, visor’s impact, or submarine collision). Obviously, any of these inquiries are complicated even further due the most recent publicized findings by investigation crews. Whereas the apparent confirmation of the existence of not one, but many holes is taken at least to some degree as vindicating some of plotters’ key assumptions going back almost two decades, this very acknowledgment comes with further inquiries attached, yet to be ‘solved.’ Therefore, although the most wholesome “closure” is naturally preferred, partial closures, if to call them that (e.g., the confirmation about the holes), may rather act as discursive reconfigurators.

The **central aim** of this article was to provide the means for the advancement of knowledge with regard to the very timely issue of digital conspiracism by way of a multidisciplinary synthesis. To this end, the article made its case primarily as a theoretical exploration. It sought to develop less value-laden vocabulary for and critical apparatus cognizant of and bring to bear various insights from several scholarly disciplines interested in conspiracism discourses, while enriching these individual scholarly fields in the process. Therefore, on the top of reconceptualizing “conspiracy theorizing” as *contra-plotting*, other foundational notions in its field of meaning, such as “ambiguity” and “suspicion” were developed accordingly.

In *Section 2*, the conceptual discussion on the notion of “ambiguity” expanded also to include the latter’s antithesis—“closure.” This strained ambiguity–closure binary was further built upon by recruiting it as a conceptual lens to theorize about suspicion as a productive, creativity-enhancing affect within the conspiracist sense-making practice. Moreover, it was argued that conspiracist discourse, at least in the case of MS Estonia, allows distinguishing a particular manifestation of ambiguity: a *self-reproduced ambiguity*. In the activity of *contra-plotting* by the *plotters of suspicion*, ambiguity thus becomes an operative mode of the interpretation itself, with suspicion operating as the underlying motive force (*Section 3*).

The theoretical discussion was ultimately augmented by qualitative data analysis via Mixed Methods approach (Section 4). A chronologically ordered (archived) digital sample—prepared through computer-mediated means—was analyzed using interpretative close reading. For it can be argued to be the most appropriate means to, in Clifford Geertz' words, “descend into detail” (Geertz 1966, p. 8), to tease out the “thick descriptions” in the temporal evolution of the data and, by extension, in peoples' narrative thinking and production of knowledge. Moreover, the preliminary motif and narrative coding paved the way for a kind of analytical modeling highlighting how key narrative motifs (or communication artifacts) governing the discourse—such as “the hole”—may function in peoples' (collaborative) cognition as ‘attention drivers’ for creating shared stories. This showcased how peoples' event-specific real-life uncertainties (lack of knowledge or the struggle to accept the ambiguities related to the MS Estonia catastrophe) can be, in the digital space, negotiated and mitigated “in storied ways” (Clandinin and Connelly 2000, p. 141; qtd. in Saldaña 2009, p. 111; see also, e.g., Gubrium and Holstein 2009; Mello 2002).

Future research would entail further refinement of the proposed theoretical vocabulary and the continuation of the empirical study. Similarly, it may prove helpful to identify potential comparative digital environments (e.g., commentary sections accompanying topical news stories (Sorokin n.d.) as well as other forums with topical content) and topics (e.g., COVID denialism, antivaxxers, 9/11 ‘truth’ movement) within both the local and international corpora.

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Notes

1. For more details, see: <https://onse.fi/estonia/summary.html> and *passim* (accessed on 19 April 2022).
2. For more on the ferry and the sinking, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/MS_Estonia; and https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sinking_of_the_MS_Estonia (accessed on 11 November 2021).
3. While the use of a relatively old study might at first glance appear surprising, the up-to-date online resource *The Living Handbook of Narratology* does not list the notion of “ambiguity” at all. For this reason, the usage of *Concept of Ambiguity* seemed appropriate.
4. “Ambiguity,” Etymonline, accessed on 18 May 2021, < <https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=ambiguity>>; emphases added. Bahti notes that the root *ambo* also holds the meaning of “both, two together, doubled.” For him, this suggests ambiguity as indicating “the doubled or duplicitous character of signification. A sign represents one thing or meaning, *and* another (and another)” (Bahti 1986: 210n3, 211; emphasis in original).
5. Cognitive linguist Thijs Pollmann observes that although “zooming in and out of” a text may lead to “a coherent interpretation,” the “logic of coherence” itself is such that it never coheres as “objectively true.” Rather, what may be maximally attained is “a conclusion that makes the favored interpretation more probable than others” (Pollmann 2000, p. 173). This observation correlates directly with the concept of “closure,” discussed below.
6. See also, Abbott (2005, p. 66); Kermode (1966, p. 127ff); and real-life events employed as “raw materials of history,” Olmsted (2009: 7).
7. Klauk, et al. take Carroll’s usage of “phenomenological” to denote closure as a “phenomenon that is as yet unexplained” (Tobias Klauk et al. (2016, p. 25n11). While Carroll indeed is not explicit about this usage, I am inclined to take this term in its conventional meaning, i.e., indicating a certain experiential quality undergone by the reader/viewer.
8. Cf. Rabinowitz’s “inertial” [conforming to one’s expectations] and “non-inertial” [non-conformative] endings—“neither necessarily yielding or failing to yield closure”; Abbott (2005, p. 66). Don J. Fowler suggests that Barbara Herrnstein Smith, in her classic *Poetic Closure*, adapted the concept from Gestalt psychology (see, Fowler 1989, p. 78n11; Herrnstein Smith 1968, p. 33n29). For a recent development on Smith’s ideas, see, Segal (2007). Klauk et al. note that while (i) no consensus in

contemporary scholarship about the definition of closure exists (Klauck et al. 2016, p. 23); (ii) earliest narratological accounts of the notion, without explicitly using the term, may have started with Gerald Prince's discussion of narrativity and "feeling of wholeness" (ibid.: 26n14). For an earlier account, see Fowler's typology; as well as his concise historiography on the treatments of closure esp. in 20th-century classicist literary criticism (Fowler 1989, pp. 75–78; Cf. Klauck et al. 2016, p. 22n1).

9. I would also affix this with "...and agrees with the answers." Carroll's argument for specifically narrative closure, though, coalesces around what he calls "erotetic narrative": a "network of questions and answers" (Carroll 2007, p. 5). The implication here is that there ought to be something question-like evoked *by a narrative*, thereupon earmarked by the audience ("who is the murderer?", "will the murderer be caught?" being the most prominent examples). However, what of cases where specific event explanations and, in particular, their underlying minute details—both in fiction and in real life—elicit questions in their own right, well beyond any authorial intent (broadly construed)?
10. Amongst USA, UK and Australia, Bakir and Barlow also note trust in government being low in "many post-socialist countries" (ibid.: 5).
11. As Ossa-Richardson puts it: "Every action, every decision, every law, every televised utterance has seemed parsable in two ways or more. [...] Uncertainty appears all-encompassing" (Ossa-Richardson 2019, p. 2).
12. A series of empirical studies conducted by philosophers Napolitano and Reuter showed that "the predominant sense of *conspiracy theory* is evaluative." In the first study, 150 respondents were tasked to denote three conditions for something to be a "conspiracy theory," with only a single respondent "stat[ing] that a conspiracy theory is [something that is] claimed to be false by officials." This result was further reinforced by a vignette study with 101 respondents. Finally, a corpus analysis of posts in *Reddit* featuring evaluative adjectives and term "conspiracy theory" corroborated the findings further still, with out of 50 most frequent adjectives 25 being negative (for comparison: same study for "theory" resulted in 6 out of 50 being negative evaluations) (for more details, see, Napolitano and Reuter 2021). See also, (Fassin 2021, pp. 129–30, 132–33), for a critical discussion on Popperian and Hofstadterian legacies in conspiracy theory research.
13. For a working definition of "conspiracy theory" as such, I have found history scholar Cornel Zwierlein's broad definition most productive for it underscores both the tricky ambiguity instrumental to any such 'theory,' and its dimension of narrativized (and counterfactualized) past. Observes Zwierlein: in "mix[ing] fact and fiction ... [a] *conspiracy theory* is typically a narrative of a possible past constructed with a material of a large amount of facts that have really happened and that are commonly accepted as 'real' and other fictions, or at least not proven and not commonly accepted elements which are supposed to have happened" (Zwierlein 2013, p. 70; emphasis added).
14. In this article, I am exploring the notion of contra-plotting through conspiracy theorizing discourse (*viz.*, by plotters of suspicion). And while it is not the present objective, I would argue that the activity of contra-plotting also applies, with necessary modifications, for digital fan discussions on, say, widely popular television serials (e.g., *Breaking Bad*). I am exploring these connections in my most recent work, (Sorokin n.d.).
15. Creativity researchers Eric Bonetto and Thomas Arciszewski have very recently argued that a conspiracy theory, as "an original explanation of a specific event" satisfies the "standard definition of creativity" (i.e., an idea/object is both original and meaningful) (Bonetto and Arciszewski 2021, pp. 917–18). I would tentatively specify this further, however. For notwithstanding how "creative" one or another narrative itself is, the ground level activity of plotting—the productive 'walk-about' within and beyond one particular "event conspiracy"—might ultimately prove even more so.
16. The discussion in Barnwell (2016) is grounded in a critical reading of Kathleen Stewart's *Ordinary Affects*. Briefly put, Barnwell maintains that although Stewart announces to observe the workings of everyday "paranoia" from the perspective of affect, hence signifying a turn away from the "hermeneutics of suspicion" of conventional cultural and critical theory, she ends up reinforcing it (ibid.: 14). Incidentally, Barnwell's observation that a scholar may share, or ultimately come to mimic, the "vigilant, interpretative attention" under scrutiny calls to mind an argument from conspiracy theory literature on the similar "logics" of scientific theorizing and experimentation, and conspiracy theorizing, respectively (Roniger and Senkman 2019; see also, Barnwell 2016, p. 17). Finally, whilst Barnwell appears to employ "paranoia" and "suspicion" synonymously, I have opted for the latter to avoid yet another value-laden term.
17. As George E Marcus has put it about conspiracy theories, they may be "a 'reasonable' component of rational and commonsensical thought and experience in certain contexts".
18. From the post by TTT (29 September 2021) from the Para-Web thread on MS Estonia.
19. Here and subsequently, all translations from Estonian to English are mine.
20. It is worth to note that most recently also a new thread ("Part II") has been posted to apparently prevent data loss. So far it has 105 posts and 18,000 total views (visited: 28 April 2022): <https://para-web.org/showthread.php?tid=10239>.
21. The analysis and data preparation methodology described are adapted from my previous work (see, Sorokin 2019, pp. 74–78; Sorokin 2021, pp. 64–68).
22. The whole thread can be found here: <https://para-web.org/showthread.php?tid=569> (accessed on 3 July 2022).
23. Parts of the present analysis of the Para-Web dataset also appear in my other recent work (see, Sorokin 2021). In this article, however, some of it is elaborated on by yet unpublished insight, however.
24. e.g., posters rha (9 October 2004), Kaabulott (2 April 2006), undikoer (1 October 2007), HidoTozi (4 June 2009).
25. Rha ibid.
26. Marguus (28 August 2006).
27. https://web.archive.org/web/20110613015500/http://svt.se/2.13038/1.293822/translation_in_english (visited: 12 November 2021).

28. Kaabulott (2 April 2006).
29. Ibid.
30. Rha, *ibid.*
31. Gulja (30 March 2006).
32. Non-functioning hyperlinks in conspiracist discourses have, in fact, also received recent scholarly attention; see, e.g., Easterbrook (2022).
33. Madman07 (29 August 2006).
34. zepac (29 August 2006).
35. Paavo (29 February 2008, 19:59); Thorondor (29 February 2008, 20:44).
36. Paavo (29 February 2008, 21:45). Mart46 (25 July 2008) specifies even further, observing that “Estonia is the first ‘eligible for sea voyage’ ship in the history of sea voyage which wrecked faster than for instance the German ship Wilhelm Gustloff which received a three-time torpedo hit. It is a true miracle which seems to be last plentiful time and money to be proved.”
37. mart46 (25 July 2008). See <https://archive.md/rJ6Uo> (visited: 13 November 2021).
38. For the image (already inaccessible through the forum), see <https://ibb.co/RyJshHJ> [uploaded 15 March 2021]. At least for me it proved impossible to find its origin. It could also be sketched by this user themselves.
39. Vasamasa (16 November 2020 18:09).
40. (Mauno 16 November 2020); (Gargirl. (16 November 2020); (Aadu66, 17 November 2020); (Vasamasa, 17 November 2020).
41. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zup7OxqMyoo> [<https://web.archive.org/web/20211114182206/https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zup7OxqMyoo>] (visited and archived: 14 November 2021).
42. I’ll be back (29 September 2021).
43. kris (29 September 2021).
44. Sturm (29 September 2021).
45. ZaqZaq (29 September 2021).
46. Ibid.
47. TTT (29 September 2021).
48. Ibid. TTT argues the “second” and “third” charge to have been placed on the car deck, possibly to account for the quick flooding and hence, sinking of the ship.

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