CHAPTER 12

When the Post-Truth Devil Hides in the Details: A Digital Ethnography of Virtual Anti-Vaccination Groups in Lithuania

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12.1 INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, internet and social media were among the driving forces of social upheavals and opposition movements (Tufekci, 2017). Technological innovations do not simply change how we act but also how we understand surrounding reality. Information technology, particularly social media, has revolutionised almost all forms of information exchange: from interpersonal to mass communications. This rapid revolution in how we interact with each other has probably affected even how we communicate with ourselves. It also affects the structure of what we consider to be

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public debate. Technological progress brings opportunities for new independent public spaces empowering various voices, "positive" and "harmful", to coexist in contemporary general discussion. There is no consensus as to whether this is a problem to be solved or a feature of a healthy open democratic society. The comment sections and other spaces for user-generated content are the central attributes of the current new media shift (Secko, 2009). This new-found interactivity creates a constant dialogue between users, simplifying ways of reaching out to others and even starting up new communities and movements which (sometimes) play a political role.

Social media and its affordances provide new possibilities for forming public opinion and even creating opposition movements. The anti-vaccination movement is one of the latest examples to have gained prominence in recent years. Moreover, the anti-vaccination question is often rephrased from pandemic to infodemic (Germani & Biller-Andorno, 2021), the accent is moved from the more or less medical realm to one of communication and even to the question of reality perception.

At the beginning of our research, fear of the MMR vaccine was the main topic of discussion, and, as the pandemic hit, the discourse visibly shifted to Covid-19 being a hoax. Fearfulness towards future vaccines was accompanied by hatred of the government's actions to manage the pandemic. Fears, misinformation, and "alternative facts" continued to spread through the public sphere during the second quarantine. In social and news media, anti-vaccination proponents tended to present themselves as a social minority, which the government and the remaining part of the population constantly ignored and whose freedom of speech was restricted.

Similar global trends transferred to Lithuania as well. There were a couple of anti-face masks/no-to-quarantine-restrictions protests in the capital city of Vilnius, underlining the growing activity of these movements even beyond the realm of social media where they actually started. In 2021, the movement continued to gain momentum and broadened its spectrum of interests: Anti-LGBT+ and anti-Istanbul Convention content shared the same anti-vaccination circles. Later that year, the same organisers rallied 10 thousand people to protest against LGBTQ rights. Since then, two other massive anti-government, anti-Covid-19, anti-LGBTQ demonstrations have been organised, one of which (2021-09-10) ended in a riot outside the Lithuanian Parliament. In terms of the public sphere, it appears that these groups highly influence the process of forming opinions and interests, but they are challenging to research because the typical

models used to explain similar processes in Western countries often "banalise" and obscure the more nuanced logic and motivation behind such actions even in the Western contexts themselves. The research presented in this article aims to address this issue by emphasising the contextual peculiarities of different societies.

Vaccine hesitancy is growing with the help of the internet, social media, and an immense amount of various unreliable types of content that can be found there (Hussain et al., 2018, 2–3). The 2019 measles epidemic signalled a slow but steady decline in vaccination coverage. The WHO warns that this trend is one of the most significant dangers to global health (WHO, 2019). Not long ago, when looking for information about vaccination, there were more pages dealing with their harm than with their benefits (Bean, 2011). Nevertheless, more than half of internet users (in the United States and Canada) firmly believe that "all" or "almost all" information published on health websites is truthful (Kata, 2010, 1709).

The question of connections between the growth of the anti-vaccination notions and usage of social media raises concerns among scientists from the field of psychology to social movement research (Puri et al., 2020; Betsch, 2011; Blume, 2006; Burki, 2020). The latest research on vaccine hesitancy has been further developed during the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic (Miskulin et al., 2021). The approach and scope of research is changing rapidly along with the pandemic itself (Megget, 2020; Pullan & Dey, 2021). Opinions vary from seeing the anti-vaccination movement as an alternative to being suspicious (Curiel & Ramírez, 2021) to those seeing it as dominant in the future political agenda (Johnson et al., 2020). In the field where the researchers are interested in how health related beliefs occur, studies vary from more quantitative (Čavojová et al., 2020) to more qualitative approaches (Okuhara et al., 2018; DiRusso & Stansberry, 2022).

Overall, anti-vaccination notions are seen as dangerous, inevitable, worth fighting against (Hughes et al., 2021), worth to be handled by specific experts (Nguyen & Catalan, 2020), worth banning, and anti-governmental. The followers of such beliefs are seen as spreaders of misinformation, spectral lies or performative interpretations (Gaon, 2020). Different strategies how to handle the spread of these notions are suggested as well (Germani & Biller-Andorno, 2021; To et al., 2021). Researchers also analyse the content of various social media (Küçükali et al., 2022; Kim et al., 2020) not only to explore the attitudes or measure the trends but also to understand how the media promise to create a truthful perception of the social world in the digital sphere frames human

experience of the real. For example, how on Twitter, Russian trolls and bots propagated anti-vaccination content and promoted political discord (Broniatowski et al., 2018).

The more empathetic attitudes are not very frequent in academia. It can be stated that "these people" require deeper understanding, when their motifs are not reduced to irrational reactions reflecting ignorance or misinformation (Peretti-Watel et al., 2014). Also, there is still a lack of nuanced research about post-Soviet countries, where the vaccination rate is relatively low despite the countries having plenty of vaccines. The context of post-totalitarian society should be kept in mind too.

The main aim of this article is to understand how anti-vaccination communities on social media platforms can shape and rationalise their perception of truth and what contextual features frame the formulation of truth statements in connection to the vaccine issue. This is expected to provide more insight into the development of different truth regimes on social media in Lithuania and, potentially, in other post-Soviet countries. This study seeks to contribute to the already existing body of work within this research field, while at the same time critically reconsidering the often overtly Westernised application of this analytical lens to online communities.

In this article, we explore two anti-vaccination Facebook groups: "Skiepų žala" ("Harm Of Vaccine") and "Po-skiepo.lt" ("Post-vaccine.lt"). In order to get closer to the participants' worldview we approach data inspired by a methodology of digital ethnography. Afterwards we analyse the data with text-based methods. The analysis was conducted in two steps: First, we used qualitative content analysis to find the main themes and to merge them with wider analytic categories, thus allowing the ongoing process to be investigated in a wider theoretical context. Even though no predetermined categories are used in this article, they arise in the data analysis process; the theoretical base of post-truth and anti-public discourse hints at what to focus on. The data in this step was managed with MAXQDA 2020 software. Subsequently, we carried out discourse analysis because the overall course of the research, following discourses and pandemic itself, made us reevaluate the topic from multiple angles and question our methods of acquiring knowledge. Along the way, the shortcomings of existing approaches to post-truth studies are considered.

12.1.1 Theoretical Considerations: Alternative Epistemologies in Post-truth Publics

Questions of truth, and criteria for truth statements are arguable connected to the exponentially developing field of post-truth politics, touching on various aspects of the phenomenon in contemporary mediated environments (Hannan, 2018; Harsin, 2020; Barrera et al., 2019). A broad understanding of post-truth points towards emotions and personal beliefs becoming the main guideline for assessing truth claims in the real world. A fact-based or science-based correction may even have adverse, if not opposite, unintended effects on individuals' beliefs (Lewandowsky et al., 2017). This insight became especially pertinent during the Covid-19 pandemic, which not only brought about an exponential increase in the anti-vaccination movements by 7.8 million in 2020 alone (Burki, 2020), but also contributed to the overall resurgence of conspiracy-based movements, such as QAnon and beyond (Bodner et al., 2020).

Post-truth does not equal to lying; it can be traced back to the broader issue of the criteria for truth. and on the mechanisms with which individuals and their groups subvert the truth, ranging from unconscious utterances to wilful ignorance, or to deliberate lying. As McIntyre puts it, "in its purest form, post-truth is when one thinks that the crowd's reaction does change the facts about a lie" (McIntyre, 2018, 7–9). Post-truth problematics are also related to the Foucauldian understanding of knowledge as power. Post-truth claims were often "weaponised" by politicians to shape their constituencies' perceptions, as happened before with 2016 elections in the US presidential election campaign, or the Brexit campaign in the United Kingdom. On a more theoretical level, post-truth also includes a "going meta", that is, of not playing by the rules of uttering truthful statements but changing the rules themselves (Fuller, 2018, 3). As important as it is to understand *what* post-truth is, this article is driven by the understanding of *why* and *how* it comes about.

The notion of post-truth has proven in recent years to be a productive, if somewhat imprecise, term to describe a field of research connected to truth claims and the perception of truth in a mediated environment. However, the emphasis on emotion when describing a post-truth discourse also needs to be critically reconsidered. One explanation for the lack of precision may be the fact that many contemporary studies often connect post-truth politics to conspiratorial thinking (Balta et al., 2021; Harambam et al., 2022; Cook et al., 2020). Although there is such a

connection, conspiratorial thinking (Moore, 2018) does not equal the issue of post-truth as such, since they can conflate questions of conspiracy theories as narratives with a more general distrust towards information from what may be called the "establishment".

This distinction becomes even more relevant when applying the post-truth concept to contexts outside the United States and Western European democracies as for example when approaching contexts with a totalitarian past. A case in point is Eastern Europe, including Lithuania, where entire societies were under the totalitarian regime of the Soviets for five decades. Media environment was no exception—it was rife with propaganda, that is "alternative facts". In this context, journalism was perceived as a tool of Soviet propaganda, "aimed at educating citizens to be loyal to the communist establishment and the Communist Party" (Volek & Urbániková, 2018). That, in addition to the overall culture of suspicion cultivated since the Stalinist era, contributed to substantial mistrust towards anything presented to the public (Vaiseta, 2015).

This general scepticism towards anything public and institutionalised has stayed with post-Soviet societies even after the fall of the Soviet Union, as "past political repression creates long-lasting mistrust" (Nikolova et al., 2022). Following Bufacchi, one can even argue that post-truth as a condition based on general mistrust towards anything resembling an establishment, had already existed before the rise of Trumpism, or the Brexit movement. It shares its roots with what we may call "truth" in the practice of consensus, since a lot of statements regarding sociopolitical reality may be subscribed to a consensual theory of truth (Bufacchi, 2020). That is, a lot of the truth statements related to our social reality cannot be compared to, for example, scientific truths. Social reality truth statements often involve an element of (for a lack of a better term) "values", related to moral, ethical, or cultural attitudes often based in subjective understanding of different phenomena. This prompts one not to dismiss the discourse in online anti-vaccination groups as mere conspiratorial statements, but rather consider them as truth statements, drawn from long-lasting practices of mistrust and questioning as a strategy of political opposition.

Dismissing such statements as mere conspiracy theories also betrays a certain bias, since the term "conspiracy theory" is already loaded with certain ethical and moral implications. When we explore the discussion within the post-truth paradigm, we advocate instead to consider these critical aspects as crucial in order to have a more nuanced look into the social dynamics of contexts differing from what have been categorised as

Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich and Democratic (WEIRD) countries and societies.

The process of passing from analogue to digital has had a tremendous impact on sociopolitical dynamics and leads to a form of virtualisation of public spaces. Various theoreticians point toward the affordances and practices found on social media platforms (filtering, moderation, length limitation, etc.) (Kreiss et al., 2017) as laying the foundations for filter bubbles, availability bias, and selective exposure, leading to increased ideological polarisation (Spohr, 2017). Adopting a broader perspective, some theoreticians suggest that post-truth societies, characterised by a changing culture of social debate and increasingly blending fact and emotion (Malcolm, 2021), are potentially leading to what may be termed as a new media-based "tragedy of the commons" (Friedman, 2019).

Another aspect of social media discourse, which informs this research ethically and theoretically, is the problem of distinguishing between public-private spheres. To this day there is a prevailing acceptance of Habermasian terms, where the public sphere is understood as a space, consisting of individuals and institutions, in which what may be called public opinion is formed. The private sphere is reserved for individual or other forms of autonomy separate from the state or public opinion (Habermas, 1989 [1962]). However, problems with Habermas' own concept notwithstanding,[1] recently many researchers have been problematising this classic distinction of the sociopolitical space, noting that the blurring of traditional private-public sphere boundaries can be traced back to the rise of photography (Ravn et al., 2019) and later to television bringing politics "into the living room". The rise of the internet and new media only accelerated and expanded this erosion (Gurevitch et al., 2009), giving rise to what may be distinguished as intimate publics, public sphericules (Gitlin, 1998), or even networked counterpublics (Renninger, 2014).

This blurring of traditional boundaries is especially relevant when it comes to online communities, and in particular those falling out of what is considered to be the upholding of mainstream/popular narratives and truth regimes. Unpopular content frequently remains unrecognised in the public sphere due to relatively fixed political standards. Alternative public

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[1] Hohendahl and Russian (1974) argue that Habermas himself described as public something that, for example, ancient Greeks considered to be private, that is the sphere of non-governmental opinion making, showcasing the already existing problematic blurs within the boundaries of public-private even within Habermasian thought.

spaces (internet forums, websites, Facebook groups) are used to disseminate misinformation and propaganda, sparking hatred and mobilising (Davis, 2019) forces. In such spaces, white supremacy discourses, climate change denial, and hatred against LGBTQ+, women, and racial minorities proliferate. Cammaerts and Davis call such internet spaces "the online anti-public sphere" where conventional norms of the public sphere lose their meaning (Davis, 2019). The concept of the public sphere (Dahlgren & Sparks, 1993), allows researchers to bring together the context, actors, and various factors forming a coherent theoretical scheme and utilise it as an analytical tool (Aurylaitė, 2019).

What are these developments of social media creating in terms of the common *Lebenswelt*? Digitised misinformation, often conditioned by the increasing use of social media and other virtual platforms, has been at the nexus of the proliferation of post-truth practices on a global level, creating conditions for the growth of what can be called alternative epistemologies, through which understanding of the world is being created (Fischer, 2019). According to Lewandowsky et al., it is a mistake to label all the issues around the post-truth phenomenon as almost exclusively questions of "misinformation" or, even more erroneously, "disinformation", as if the prevalence of emotional perception over factual/scientific perception is a "blemish on a mirror" (Lewandowsky et al., 2017). Instead, these questions should be viewed as "mirrors" into alternate realities. In other words, post-truth is related to differences in the perception of reality that have been amplified exponentially by social media affordances in recent years, even in societies considered to be relatively small and homogenous in terms of the common understanding of "non-political" questions like medicine. Lithuania is one such case demonstrating that the logic of "alternative realities" or epistemologies ought to be studied in more detail.

12.1.2   *Methodological Challenges and Decisions*

In this article, we try to get closer to the participants' worldview by gathering data in a digital ethnographic manner. We were exploring two anti-vaccination Facebook groups at the time of shifting (quite accidentally), when the discussion of MMR vaccines turned into conversations about the future and the then-current *corona vaccine*, including the more significant change in the level of politicisation of the vaccine which took place in society.

During our research, we acted in the mode of, as Walstrom calls it, participant-experiencer (Garcia et al., 2009), trying to understand the group dynamics by analysing texts and not meeting people in person. Because of this decision to not participate fully, we adapted both the content and discourse analysis methods to the exact period of the research (for 22 days of the 2-year observation). The decision to adopt the ethnographic perspective was a more accurate expression of our attitude: The will to understand these groups better.

Throughout our research we discussed ethical problems at great length. We considered the Facebook groups as public spaces even when they may have been titled private. Obviously, such groups are not fully *public* per se, since they involve a certain level of *gatekeeping*, or control of those entering and participating in such spaces. However, such spaces are also not entirely private, as they for the most part allow anyone to join, as long as they fulfil certain criteria, which in the cases we chose involved a short questionnaire and terms of agreement. Thus, we were able to enter them as public spaces with our identities, but did not interact in any way.

We considered doing ethnographic research in their social habitat, as it would have been done by joining some other activities, so we did not seek the consent of all the group members or moderators. To act ethically, we did not collect any personal data or images; we analysed only the content of posts and comments, not going into the detail of who these persons are to protect their private space. We translated all posts and comments from Lithuanian into English, so it is almost impossible to trace the original posts and related data on the internet. We left only two blocks of information: the group and the date, to compare and understand the dynamics. The date is essential for understanding the discourse change from MMR vaccines to Covid-19 as well as the discursive shift in the discussions of these particular groups to distrusting not only the medical elite but also the whole political, scientific, and media levels, or in other words, the state itself. We can freely state that, after this shift, alternative epistemology became evident in the action of merging medical, political, and geopolitical stories into one narrative, which afterwards bled out beyond mere presence on social media.

We therefore chose a qualitative research strategy, which would hopefully help us understand the meaning of the phenomenon, formulate claims, and raise theoretical questions. When all the data had been gathered, it was evident that the amount was far beyond our possibility of

using thick description to provide grounds for our findings. In addition, we felt that the topic was very sensitive for society and we needed approaches that deal better with the reliability and validity of the research. We needed to find tools to refine our data so that it would be possible to understand what was actually happening in the groups, so we decided to blend digital ethnography with the text-based methods.

We employed a two-step text analysis: First, we performed a content analysis to determine what main topics are discussed in the groups, what relations exist between those topics and what categories could be outlined. Content analysis is often used in understanding social reality. However, little attention is paid to the context because meanings are understood to be stable, representing objective and independent reality, which, unlike in discourse analysis, does not provide a strong enough basis for the critique of the social problem being analysed.

At the second integral step we returned to the posts, comments, and notes for each category and implemented discourse analysis to deepen our understanding of how different meanings and truth claims are constructed and stated. This methodological approach allows us to examine social reality, comprising spheres of knowledge, social interactions, and institutions—discourse constructs and controls these areas. In other words, it is a principle of governing reality, which should be deconstructed (by analysing communicative acts) to reveal how it is constructed (Hardy et al., 2004, 19). In some cases, during analysis, the term "discourse" is used to describe speaking practices, such as a public discussion.

In addition, the Facebook groups are very temporal (i.e. both groups are now almost inactive); people gather for a period of time until their emotions and passions lead them to some other groupings,[2] e.g. the Facebook group "Trotilo Fabrikas" was recreated, and even new political party "Second Lithuania" was created inspired by the discourse of these groups. In this, we followed Clifford Geertz' idea that ethnographers collect a "picture" of the past to tell the story to the future, and the original data is very important for understanding the story (Geertz, 2000).

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[2] For more about thinking of this action as swarming see Dementaviciene, 2019; new groups ("Trotilo Fabrikas"), and even new political parties ("Second Lithuania");

12.2 Mechanics of the Research: Data Gathering

The starting point for the study was 2019-10-14 when we managed to join a Facebook group "Harm of Vaccines" ("Skiepų žala") and on 2019-11-21 a group "Post-vaccine.lt" ("Po-skiepo.lt") and began documenting the content as well as getting acquainted with the members' communications. We carried out a purely ethnographic study at that time but understood that, to provide better evidence for our findings and blend them with text-based methods of data analysis, we needed stricter and more structured data gathering. Taking these aspects into consideration, it was decided to hand collect the data sample over 22 days: From 2020-04-03 until 2020-04-26; the last sampling date was chosen because the first anti-quarantine protest took place on 2020-04-21 in front of the Lithuanian Parliament, where group members were either participants or organisers. The dynamics in the groups were observed for a couple more days after the protest had taken place until code saturation was achieved, after which no new discussion topics were identified.[3]

The groups are deemed to be semi-public, so members must become acquainted with the internal rules, acceptance conditions and answer posed questions. The description of "Skiepų žala" starts with the statement "VACCINES AGAINST [diseases—sic!] DO NOT EXIST", followed by statements regarding what the group does and does not support, which implies that the candidates must share the same perception of truthfulness. The internal rules are quite strict: Discussions about pills and supplements are forbidden (only alternative medicine is allowed), and contravening members will be excluded. It is also mentioned that members will be excluded and blocked for speaking about the benefits of vaccines (if no "facts and arguments" are provided), as well as for encouraging "ALLOPATHIC MISTREATMENT[4]"—in other words, for motivation to use a medicine or visit a doctor. Overall, the group's rules and content allow us to conclude that the administration of "Skiepų žala" appears to apply strict control mechanisms, employing the existing restrictive affordances of the social media platform.

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[3] After some time, we understood that we collected our sample when these questions were at the peak: it can be clearly seen that this period is the peak of searching information about the future Covid-19 vaccine: Pullan, Samuel, and Mrinalini Dey. 2021. Vaccine hesitancy and anti-vaccination in the time of COVID-19: A Google Trends analysis. *Vaccine* 39.14: 1877–1881.

[4] Capitalised in original comment.

However, the description of "Po-skiepo.lt" is not as intimidating; its purpose is stated as being to share real stories of people who suffered from vaccination. However, there are few such stories in the group. Even though the group "Po-skiepo.lt" is officially listed as private, there are no strict internal rules, and no questions were asked before joining the group. The group was created later than the other group, yet has been consistently growing, and the discussions there have been much more active than in the previous group. In general, the groups are similar: The most active members of "Skiepų žala" actively participated in "Po-skiepo.lt" discussions and there were cases where content in the two groups was identical (Table 12.1).

The selected data consists of posts shared by the group members or their comments. All the group members' posts and comments (published within the outlined period) were included in the data to achieve the highest level of transparency and avoid bias. It is important to note that the data related to these two groups were gathered separately but are presented together since the results are similar.

Altogether, 129 posts and 1270 comments from both groups were gathered and analysed. Examples of comments illustrating corresponding topics were chosen based on their level of discursive practices, affective/emotive aspects, self-sufficiency, (meaning that no additional context is required to make sense of the fragment), and also, how well they reveal the underlying narratives. Moreover, the comments are those that appear repeatedly and could hardly be associated with one person.

In addition to the data formed by the comments and posts, we constructed a diary in which we entered information about the group

Table 12.1 Key characteristics of the Facebook groups analysed (numbers change every day, so are not entirely accurate)

	Creation date	Number of members	Avg. no of posts/ day	Avg. no of posts/ last 30 days	Most reactions/10 posts	Most comments/10 posts	Privacy listing
"Skiepų žala"	2014 01 19	10,178	11	243	42	78	Private
"Po-skiepo. lt"	2019 03 20	8708	5	472	52	225	Private

Table is made by authors

dynamics and the atmosphere of the discussions, which is harder to grasp only from the text itself. The diary was used in the interpretations and CDA to help to fulfil the idea of trying to understand group members more empathetically.

12.3   Mechanics of the Method: Data Analysis

The content analysis method and its codification process (primarily due to their precision and structure) enabled us to manage the vast amount of data (129 posts and 1270 comments). The data gathered from the groups were collected and analysed with the help of the MAXQDA 2020 software. We followed the suggested idea of Hardy et al., "how to use content analysis within a discourse analytic approach" (2004, 21) in order to adapt their different ontological backgrounds, seven aspects had to be reflected upon:

When dealing with *categories* we had inductive logic of thematic analyses, when no predetermined categories are used, they mainly arise from the data research (Boyatzis, 1998). The frequently used *technique* was to always move back and forth from the categories, topics, and codes to the data. And we always kept in mind that previous research and different theoretical approaches guided how and where to look, and the research question already provided a simple frame to begin with. The most problematic aspect is how to deal with the *meaning* while using both methods. We had to avoid the usual understanding used in content analyses, that the meaning is fixed and merely reflects reality and to switch to a more discursive understanding of meaning in constant change in order to reconstruct reality. In our research the meaning is inseparable from its context and is generated in between the exchange of the content producer, reader, and the researcher. We used discourse analysis as a tool to examine the social reality that ties together agents, ideas, and *context*. Context helped to understand how people in these groups position themselves in relation to the official state discourse and are at the same time influenced by other discourses and the conditions of post-truth. In this way, we seek to reveal the motives underlying the discourse, the constructed meanings, and the social and political actions provoked.

According to Hardy et al., the qualitative research is *valid*, when the interpretations of the meanings are constitutive of the real world. In order to validate our interpretation, we try to show the context of post-Soviet societies, also, when possible, we try to add some additional verification

from other research. That helps to show that our interpretation is rational in the particular context. Qualitative research is *reliable* to the degree that the reader would understand the logics applied during the process of codification and interpretation. We tried to be transparent in showing links between different codes, topics, and categories: Doing this we were as near to the texts as it was possible. The advantage of having three authors is that it is possible to compare different interpretations during the process. The last but not least aspect is *reflexivity* when the authors are required to understand that they also play a role in meaning making (Hardy et al., 2004). As a result, our research strategy was aimed at reflecting and avoiding clichés and value-loaded interpretations.

12.4   RESEARCH RESULTS: DOMINANT NARRATIVES AND TOPICS IN THE GROUPS "SKIEPŲ ŽALA" AND "PO-SKIEPO.LT"

During the content analysis of 129 posts and 1270 comments from both groups, 54 thematic codes were identified that were used to form 10 topic groups making up 4 analytical categories, which formed the basis for structuring the subsequent parts of the article. With the help of the combined method, as well as the outlined theoretical basis, the following topic groups were formulated: (1) conspiracy discourse, (2) attempts to influence, (3) pseudoscience, (4) stigmatisation of experts, (5) social division, (6) antagonism, (7) libertarian discourse, (8) subversion, (9) specificities of the discussion, (10) community. As seen from the coding tree, some codes appear to overlap but are grouped under different topics because the contexts in which these codes appeared were different. While analysing people's utterances, we noticed many ambiguities, attempts to "kill two birds with one stone". Those instances are especially prominent in the subsequent sections, where the features of post-truth, populism, and the contemporary postmodern public sphere are considered.

The following sections are structured in the same way: First the results obtained from the content analyses are set out—the codes are merged into themes and then broadened into theoretical categories—the crisis of trust, competing against science, populism, and anti-public discourse. After stating the main themes and the relationships between them, we re-analyse the comments and posts from the particular category using critical discourse analysis tools, where the emphasis is on the metaphors, context, and how the meaning and truth claims are presented (Fig. 12.1).
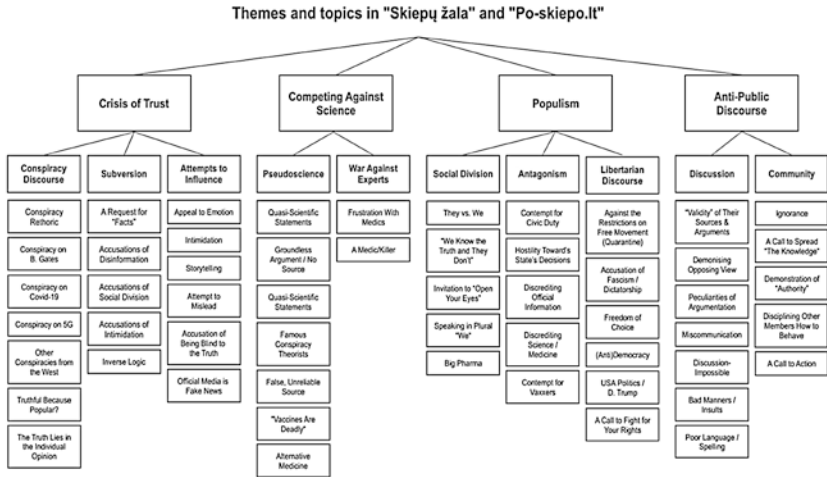
Themes and topics in "Skiepų žala" and "Po-skiepo.lt"

Crisis of Trust
- Conspiracy Discourse
  - Conspiracy Rethoric
  - Conspiracy on B. Gates
  - Conspiracy on Covid-19
  - Conspiracy on 5G
  - Other Conspiracies from the West
  - Truthful Because Popular?
  - The Truth Lies in the Individual Opinion
- Subversion
  - A Request for "Facts"
  - Accusations of Disinformation
  - Accusations of Social Division
  - Accusations of Intimidation
  - Inverse Logic
- Attempts to Influence
  - Appeal to Emotion
  - Intimidation
  - Storytelling
  - Attempt to Mislead
  - Accusation of Being Blind to the Truth
  - Official Media is Fake News

Competing Against Science
- Pseudoscience
  - Quasi-Scientific Statements
  - Groundless Argument / No Source
  - Quasi-Scientific Statements
  - Famous Conspiracy Theorists
  - False, Unreliable Source
  - "Vaccines Are Deadly"
  - Alternative Medicine
- War Against Experts
  - Frustration With Medics
  - A Medic/Killer

Populism
- Social Division
  - They vs. We
  - "We Know the Truth and They Don't"
  - Invitation to "Open Your Eyes"
  - Speaking in Plural "We"
  - Big Pharma
- Antagonism
  - Contempt for Civic Duty
  - Hostility Toward's State's Decisions
  - Discrediting Official Information
  - Discrediting Science / Medicine
  - Contempt for Vaxxers
- Libertarian Discourse
  - Against the Restrictions on Free Movement (Quarantine)
  - Accusation of Fascism / Dictatorship
  - Freedom of Choice
  - (Anti)Democracy
  - USA Politics / D. Trump
  - A Call to Fight for Your Rights

Anti-Public Discourse
- Discussion
  - "Validity" of Their Sources & Arguments
  - Demonising Opposing View
  - Peculiarities of Argumentation
  - Miscommunication
  - Discussion-Impossible
  - Bad Manners / Insults
  - Poor Language / Spelling
- Community
  - Ignorance
  - A Call to Spread "The Knowledge"
  - Demonstration of "Authority"
  - Disciplining Other Members How to Behave
  - A Call to Action

Fig. 12.1 Themes and topics that emerged from "Skiepų žala" and "Po-skiepo. lt" groups

12.4.1 Crisis of Trust

"Crisis of Trust" is one of the major themes that emerged during the analysis which represents how various disinformation tactics were being employed in the discussions to challenge truth and trustfulness among the group members. By "Crisis of Trust" we imply the growth of scepticism and overall negative assessment of already-existing criteria of truth, i.e. denial of peer-reviewed analysis of research data, distrust of announcements from specialised institutions, and reluctance to employ established standards of fact-checking, etc. This is by no means an exhaustive list of possible examples/occurrences of such a crisis but implies the reluctance to accept the criteria for truth established in "the mainstream" as it is often described by anti-vaccination and similar movements.

This theme is underpinned by the following sub-themes which indicate applied strategies: "Conspiracy Talk", "Subversion", and "Attempt to Influence". This section will cover these themes and how they demonstrate the evident similarities between "Skiepų žala", "Po-skiepo.lt", and the anti-public discourse which, as described by Davis, lacks interest in adhering to the basic democratic principles of argumentation, evidence, and truthfulness (Davis, 2021).

The first sub-theme—"Conspiracy Discourse"—contains such codes as "Conspiracy Rhetoric", "Conspiracy on B. Gates/5G/Covid-19", and "Other Conspiracies from the West"; these codes mostly refer to the general group content like external links or stories that were shared as posts and comments. One of such examples is a group post of a YouTube video titled "The Coronavirus Conspiracy: How Covid-19 Will Seize Your Rights & Destroy Our Economy - David Icke - London Real". The codes "Truthful Because Popular?" and "The Truth Lies in Individual Opinion" refer more to the characteristics of argumentation in conversations between participants. In the groups analysed, the conspiracy rhetoric was prominent and in order to work, it needed to be used in a twofold way: dispute a generally accepted fact by making an alternative truth claim.

The second sub-theme, "Subversion", was a very apparent communication tactic where one would subvert the opponent's argument or accuse another of his own "crime". For instance, they would "Request *Facts*" but when presented with a scientific fact, group member would throw "Accusations of Disinformation/Social Division/Intimidation", therefore this "Inverse Logic" would instantly end any possibility of conversation. The sub-theme number three, "Attempt to Influence" and associated codes are a cluster of communication styles and tactics. "Appeal to Emotion", "Intimidation", "Storytelling", and "Attempt to Mislead" were more commonly used by content creators and group moderators via a range of highly emotive media. An article titled "Coronavirus Hoax, satanic ritual released in the Opening London 2012 Olympics "that was posted in one of the groups is a precise example of these affective practices combined together. Codes like "Accusation of Being Blind to the Truth" and "Official Media Is Fake News" also underpin the majority of activities in the groups but were especially dominant topics in the comment sections.

Affective expressions and opposing views in passion-driven discussions should not be considered as risks for democracy per se, on the contrary, they are integral to the healthy public discourse of a plural society (Mouffe, 2013). They, however, become problematic when personal opinions and "gut instincts" take a stand against scientific knowledge in debates on climate change, immigration, LGBTQ or women's rights (Davis, 2021), and in our case—vaccines.

To show how the public disbelieves verified facts and general truths, we used the discourse analysis to look more deeply into the posts and the comments. Conspiracy theories are commonplace, yet in the current conditions, they are not just mere imaginary narratives but a tool used to

construct a perception of reality and trust in it. Perhaps the most prominent feature revealed in the research was a constant effort to diminish trust in legacy media, governmental institutions, and expert opinion, which allows us to imagine the volume and variety of this content in the groups analysed. Distrust creates favourable conditions for the creation and dissemination of conspiracy theories. Great attention is paid to general discussions about what truth is and how the truth is concealed from the general public. This signifies growing challenges that the responsible institutions have to face in order to withstand the powerful multimodality of social media interactions that potentially contaminate societal experience. Both prove the rationality sceptics otherwise (Temmerman et al., 2019, 1–2).

> "Those who claim that the VIRUS exists must provide indisputable evidence."
> Ex. 42, "Skiepų žala," 2020-04-20

> "I'm asking about a proof of the existence of a virus (corona), not about the symptoms of the disease."
> "I don't know where to get one"
> "Well, that's where you should have started, thank you:) why do people associate their experiences with proof of a virus?"
> Ex. 42.1, "Skiepų žala," 2020-04-21

In the first quote, it is presumed that the Covid-19 pandemic is a mass conspiracy, a scam, without presenting (or having) any valid reasons to question the reality of this global situation. The statement reveals the attitude that everybody must doubt everything they face in life. Subversion is used as a means of influence: The author asks for "indisputable evidence" of the existence of the virus, this could be regarded as one of the features of post-truth when science is challenged (McIntyre, 2018, 41–42). The inversion of logic attempts to make others doubt the obvious and in so doing lose trust in everybody who states otherwise. Maybe not by chance the above-mentioned quotes are from the admin and one of the most active members of "Skiepų žala"; the more people doubt something, the more "real" this doubt becomes. The statement's validity depends on its effects—the more people believe it, the stronger the perception of reality becomes (Kalpokas, 2019, 13; Solomon Asch conformity experiments). One of the features of anti-vaccination discourse is that it is created by

people who generally adhere to the idea of post-truth, according to which there are multiple ways of framing truth claims in relation to the social reality. The production of Covid-19 vaccines and clinical trials inspired the most active group members to combine narratives into conspiracy theories on a larger scale.

Finally, this theme showcases the general mechanism of the politically asymmetric credulity discussed by Lewandowsky et al. (2017, 358), referring to increased susceptibility to misinformation being asymmetrically distributed across a political divide. Lewandowsky et al. use the term in the context of liberals and conservatives in the United States, concluding that individuals identifying themselves as "conservative" are more prone to see "profoundness" in vacuous statements. However, we contend that such a divide cannot be freely applied to the Lithuanian case, since none of the groups researched subscribe to any specific political ideology, which contrasts with the American case. In other words, Lithuanian anti-vaccination group members, do not defend any clearly ideological positions, let alone any of the major parties in the country. Overall distrust is based not on political views but rather social and political distrust of society and the government as such.

> "What is a nanovaccine? Why is 5G internet needed for them? What kind of chips will be used for future vaccines? Why are nanovaccines Bill Gates' specialty,… How will the world population be reduced to 1 billion people? How will AI regulate human health and cure their diseases?"

> "… Nanoparticles will be controlled via 5G internet and powered by…. They will function like antennas transmitters, move through human or animal bodies, and perform needed actions…. [They] will be able not only to spy on enemies but also to harm their health affect their psycho-emotional state…. Vaccines, as they are, will become a eugenic tool; that is why to get vaccinated and let your children get vaccinated is irresponsible, irrational behaviour. In the future, you will suffer from vaccines more than you would suffer from infections."
> Ex. 41, "Po-skiepo.lt," 2020-04-14

The author of the fragment starts by provoking rhetorical questions with the aim of triggering the reader's emotions. Although the author uses natural elements, different contexts are invoked to make the scenario more believable. Verified facts are followed by unverified conclusions, as long as they fit into a particular frame of worldview. Nanotechnology has

indeed become an integral part of today's medicine and other industries, highlighting the need for scientists and society to discuss the ethical challenges posed by biotechnology (Kuzma & Besley, 2008). The author uses the future tense, creating the impression of inescapable fate, which, in its turn, is an attempt to make the reader resist the outlined future threats now. That is why the author warns that "let[ting] your children get vaccinated is an irresponsible, irrational behaviour" and threatens that "you will suffer from vaccines more than you would suffer from infections". Furthermore, this reflects the overall tendency to decrease trust in science (Lewandowsky et al., 2017, 358) which is discussed below. However, it is notable that this divide is politically driven in the post-soviet countries, not in the sense of the typical liberal-conservative divide, but by an overall high level of distrust in political institutions, opening the door for questioning across a wide specter of political leanings.

With such a patchwork of imaginary narratives, the author aims to attract the attention of other group members to satisfy their inner motifs and desires (Kalpokas, 2019, 18). At the same time, this "sci-fi scenario" is so effective that it makes others question what they already know and how valid this knowledge is. Since the function of such apocalyptic scenarios is to frighten and engage the reader simultaneously, a narrative targeting the recipient's emotions is a visionary strategic move.

Facebook multimodal design serves such instances perfectly—the author can provoke emotions by (1) the text; (2) the image; (3) the sound (4) adding an external, additional link, a source supporting the main message; and finally, (5) inviting others to continue the "discussion" in the comments section thus keeping it going and making it more visible, as Facebook's algorithms favour "popular" content. It seems that such arrangements could benefit multiple parties: Social media affordances tolerate and even encourage divisive, controversial online content because it helps attract user attention, whereas political actors can exploit such technical design aspects to promote sociopolitical controversies. For example, comparing any new sociopolitical development to the dawn of a new type of totalitarianism, comparable to that of the Soviets. Generation of controversy along these lines is beneficial, since on social media all kind of user engagement—whether one reacts with likes, love, surprise, or anger—is encouraged, bringing in more visibility despite the veracity of the statements provided. So, it seems that both the curators and the audience are thirsty for content that raises emotions and creates interaction. The question, whether it remains truthful to acknowledged facts appears less important.

12.4.2   *Competing Against Science*

In the analysed anti-vaccination groups, the crisis of trust can be seen as directly linked to the continuous stream of misleading, unconfirmed truth-claims that are presented as a legitimate scientific viewpoint. The theme "Competing Against Science" includes science misuse and expert discreditation in "Skiepų žala" and "Po-skiepo.lt". The "Pseudo-Science" sub-theme consists of codes like "Quasi-Scientific Statements", "Groundless Argument / No Source", "Famous Conspiracy Theorists", "False, Unreliable Source", "Vaccines Are Deadly", and "Alternative Medicine", all of which refer to attempts made by group members to undermine scientific facts or expert knowledge by providing the "truth", as in YouTube video that was shared in the group with title "M.D. Dr. Andrew Kaufman Explains How Viruses Do Not Spread Person To Person - Corona Theatre". A question such as "How many dead children will make you question what's going on?" (*note:* from vaccines or medical mistreatment) well presents the second sub-theme "War Against Experts". We observed a great deal of "Frustration with Medics": from distrust towards any institutionalised medical care to defamation of field specialists. The code "A Medic/Killer" refers to truth claims as such—"Medical errors kill 5 people every minute" and usually third-person accounts of medical "horror stories". False scientific claims, pseudo-medical jargon, and information on traditional alternative medicine were used to create "counter-knowledge" against the official scientific discourse. Anti-public discourse does not simply oppose the dominant systems of knowledge and offer an alternative (Davis, 2019), but uses an extreme counter-hegemonic communication to go against the "basic values of democratic culture" and disturb (Cammaerts, 2007), with the intent not of informing, but of shocking.

"Pseudo-Science" could be regarded as both instrumental and a more complex strategy to counter scientific discourse. Ugnius Kiguolis, one of the anti-vaccination leaders in Lithuania, is a prolific producer of counter knowledge, he uses his personal Facebook page and external website of his association on "health information"/ex non-traditional "medical practice—"Firmus Medicus" to propagate alternative medicine and homeopathy. By pushing a homeopathic (and usually conspiratorial) agenda, he openly opposes scientific medicine. Likewise, in the analysed groups' pseudo research, that is, an assemblage of non-scientific statements, conspiracy-based claims about the world, is posing as science. The

information is often spread via YouTube in a video format (content in English or Russian was being swiftly translated into Lithuanian), or presented in a form of "scientific" articles. The *pseudoscientific* here can be recognised from the effort to imitate the scientific method, most often by employing a double-talk which is a mixture of factual information and incomprehensible, sometimes fake scientific jargon. Pseudo-scientific articles analysed were never peer-reviewed (found in academic databases) or used disproved scientific facts to make truth-claims. The creation and spread of such information is an inseparable part of the anti-vaccination discourse which focuses more on convincing than on informing. Everything is presented as learning material to enlighten those who are ready to "witness the truth", as a "hidden" part of ongoing history, which has to be heard by anyone willing to have an "objective" opinion. This discourse of "revealing the truth" can be considered as a distinguishing characteristic of pseudo-science.

Because the scientific authority of medical professionals is questioned/not accepted, their arguments do not have a place in the reality bubble created by anti-vaxxers; actual scientific opinion is instantly rejected without any discussion. Indeed, according to Lewandowsky et al., well-established scientific research is framed as (leftist) anti-science. However, many producers of anti-vaccination discourse, and sometimes even its followers, draw on the truth claim of medical training to support their arguments, which provides additional wrinkles to the often-simplified theoretical view as it relates to the politicisation of science.

> "Every tenth patient that visits a hospital experiences harm…. Negative consequences of inefficient care are one out of 10 most common causes of death or disability in the world…. The unsafe practice of prescribing medications… make millions of patients suffer."
> Ex. 26, "Po-skiepo.lt," 2020-04-20

Claims of this nature perturb the followers, encouraging them to share hateful comments and their thoughts on that natural treatment. The motif of natural medicine and homeopathy is also prominent in the groups examined. For example, a potential member may not have lost trust in vaccines and doctors but wishes to be healthy "naturally". Such individuals are easy prey for competing against the producers of scientific discourse. Especially because the health care system in the Soviet Union was highly corrupt and even used against the dissidents (and included denial of care,

medical malpractice, or the use of psychiatric hospitals as prisons, more: (Van Voren, 2011). Nowadays the corruption levels in the health care system of Lithuania are still very high (according to the latest data from the Special Investigation Service).

> "WHOOPING COUGH. / Does anyone know how to get rid of that damned cough? My daughter is 14, been coughing for more than two months. Our GP says there is no treatment at this stage of the disease. We need to wait for up to 12 months, but I can't torture my child anymore. Not vaccinated. The disease has been identified through testing."
> Ex. 24, "Skiepų žala," 2020-04-11

The members recommend natural or completely alternative treatment methods in the comments section. Denying the efficiency of the propagated treatment or bringing it into question is forbidden; conventionally accepted treatments are not even discussed, even if the individuals are lacking necessary medical knowledge and qualifications.

This explicates a crucial point regarding the structure of reasoning within anti-vaccination movements. It is essential to note that the way our brain interprets information (McIntyre, 2018) has a significant impact on the emergence of post-truth. For instance, the Dunning-Kruger effect is a cognitive bias whereby an individual lacking knowledge overestimates their own capabilities. This bias is evident while observing group discussions about diseases and their treatment and, also, was proved by more quantitative methods (Huynh & Senger, 2021). The Lithuanian case shows that this tendency is prevalent in the post-Soviet societies, likely aggravated by the already existing experience from the past where often home remedies needed to be used instead of the services of corrupt and often stalling doctors. It can be seen that there is an inverse correlation between group members' self-confidence and their trust in medical workers, which still prevails and is amplified by the situation of uncertainty in the present.

12.4.3   Populism

The "Social Fragmentation" sub-theme refers both to the group activities and the general atmosphere in these communities, indicating how the participants were actually feeling, how they saw their relationship with one another and others outside the group (or movement). The "Us vs. Them"

sentiment was almost always present with "them" being anyone from the state or healthcare, or anyone that didn't agree with or didn't support the group's worldview. The following codes show the type of messages used routinely to perform or stress the social division: "We Know the Truth and They Don't", "Invitation to Open Your Eyes", "Speaking in Plural *We*", and "Big Pharma". The second sub-theme in this section, "Antagonism" refers to the active display of hostility observed in the group, such as "Contempt of Civic Duty", "Hostility Towards State Decisions", "Discrediting Official Information", "Discrediting Science/Medicine", and "Contempt for Vaxxers". The third sub-theme "Libertarian Rhetoric" mostly refers to the emotional, sometimes even hateful, speech targeted against society, democratic processes and / or the state itself. Sentiments such as "Against the Restrictions of Free Movement", "Accusation of Fascism/Dictatorship", "(Anti)Democracy", "USA Politics/D. Trump", and "A Call to Fight for Your Rights" were almost always present when discussing vaccines. According to Davis (2021), antagonistic and divisive communications, often in conjunction with undertones of rage towards the elite, experts, and the state, can be considered as one of the thematic continuities of the anti-public discourse.

It would not be wrong to say that the efficiency of the practices discussed above was heavily based on populist rhetoric promoting the idea of "returning power to people". Furthermore, antagonism: "they" rich politicians, together with experts—the elite—are trying to exploit "us", ordinary citizens, so we must not give in. Ultimately, proclamations result in action because people start believing in the constantly repeated narrative.

This kind of discourse attempts to undermine trust in governmental institutions, official media, and politicians in general. Anti-vaccination discourse could be genuinely regarded as the discourse that is anti- to anything that is officially decided, a characteristic which was especially prominent in the Covid-19 situation. A common accusation related to the quarantine, which, according to the group members, is "illegal" and infringes upon human rights is that those who are in favour of it are "a flock of sheep". We can observe a constant attack directed toward media channels: The news is regarded as misinformation and propaganda whose aim is to shift the public focus of attention from vaccines and 5G towers.

One of the most peculiar features of such discourse is the fact that its proponents ideologically resist and trample on democratic values and processes such as citizenship or reciprocity (Davis, 2019), but at the same time speak in favour of, or passionately fight for, such democratic rights as

freedom of speech and freedom of movement (more on freedom in Gaon, 2020). The image of reality is constructed in such a way that it corresponds with this interest of anti-public discourse: Governmental policies are equated with "total control" or "fascism".

Donald Trump's announcement that he planned to stop funding the WHO excited the group members; one of the commentators even wrote that when he read this news, his eyes "were filled with tears of joy". WHO is equated with Bill Gates, whom they particularly hate because of the "organised genocide". Tears are caused by the futuristic vision of an imaginary world where corrupted elites and "phar-mafia" will no longer exploit ordinary people. This discourse encourages people to create possible versions of reality and the future for themselves. Finally, they give people the opportunity to find something new, something not yet experienced and therefore desirable.

12.4.4   *Anti-public Discourse*

The last theme, "Anti-public Discourse", is perhaps the most general and abstract, as it was constructed from and addresses the overall characteristics of "Skiepų žala" and "Po-skiepo.lt" communities and their discussions. This code was used to mark those places where there were doubts during the discussion concerning logic, sources, or dissatisfaction with and refusal of the opposite opinion. When group members clashed over opinions, they often required their opponents to prove the "*Validity* of Their Sources & Arguments"; in reality, this is a type of communication behaviour adopted from group moderators, content creators, or most active group members, when they were avoiding answering a question while attempting to defend alternative truth claims or expressing suspicion towards any, mostly official, information. "Demonising Opposing View" is another communication feature that was seen in similar instances, and "Peculiarities of Argumentation" refers to any other (intentional or not) logical fallacy observed in member discussions. More often than not, these participant communication styles led to an unsuccessful ending, that is to "Miscommunication" and "Discussion Impossible". All of this shows that this kind of discourse "selectively lacks rationality or resource to evidence" regarding the matters central to the discussion, meaning that "irrationality in play is not general but is ideologically programmatic" (Davis, 2021). White supremacy, anti-immigration, anti-LGBTQ+, alt-right, and other anti-public discourses all share and exploit this motif of unreason to

construct and spread counter-messages not only inside the anti-public discourses but also further up in the general public sphere (Cammaerts, 2007; Davis, 2021). "Bad Manners / Insults" and "Poor Language / Spelling" are just some additional characteristics regarding the group communications; quite regularly, participants would just pick on each other's grammar or reasoning to start an argument and "fight" each other trying to prove whose alternative truth claims were more "correct" (Cammaerts, 2009).

To get a better understanding of how such anti-public communities operate and grasp how the moments of clash were addressed, we need to understand their use of language. Group members, objects, shared dreams, and fears are all connected by social ties; the members have similar opinions partly because of the swift and invisible elimination (carried out by the group moderators) of alternative views. Despite "ignorance", a common character undertone for members of both groups, all of the following traits were active by default, for example: a "Call to Spread *The Knowledge*", "Demonstration of *Authority*", "Disciplining Other Members How to Behave", and finally "A Call to Action" (to resist/fight), became more and more prominent when mask and quarantine regulations came into force in 2020.

However, it would be incorrect to say that there was no evidence of diverse opinions during the research. Diverse opinions occur: (1) When the accepted group opinion is challenged, when a doubter or an infiltrated vaxxer demands evidence for the accepted opinion; (2) when anti-vaxxers cannot agree among themselves to what extent a certain truth-claim proposed by the discourse is true. The collision of opinions did not result in any constructive conclusions or consensus in either case, with the result that the discussion terminated where it started—at the point of personal opinion.

The most dedicated members of the groups, although constantly insisting on providing factual basis to any of their claims, were not open for a more open discussion employing a wider range of facts related to the question(s) at hand. The human brain partly conditions this vital feature: Due to confirmation bias, people tend to be more willing to accept information that confirms their initial opinion (Spencer & Heneghan, 2018).

The administrators of both groups were the most active members, shared content across both groups, and never failed to demonstrate their superior status to other group members. The main administrator of "Skiepų žala" eliminated members from the group for "stupid questions"

or "spreading false information". The role of the imaginary "gatekeeper of the discourse" is not coincidental, since in the past the group was often "attacked" by vaxxers. The administrator does not tend to communicate with members who did not acquaint themselves with certain "information". The "Po-skiepo.lt" community is more minor, freer, and members actively express themselves. We did not observe any attempt to discipline group members until the very last days of the research when the administrator decided to terminate rights to post or share other posts freely.

> "Some people started to share fake videos and articles in the groups, which shows their lack of maturity. From now on, the uploaded content will be approved by administrators…. I appreciate your understanding."
>   Ex. 7, "Po-skiepo.lt," 2020-04-21

To sum up, emphasis is placed on sharing symbolic meanings and the shared perception of truthfulness rather than on a constructive discussion. Both groups could be characterised by having "ideological circuit breakers", which means that debate can continue only up to a specific limit and is then blocked by an ideological wall.

12.5   Contextual Considerations in Post-truth Research: The Devil Always Hides in the Details?

The analysis presented in the article aims to counter two major problems related to the field of post-truth studies, oversimplifying social phenomena. First, the prevailing interpretation inadvertently puts alternative truth statements as merely variations of globally popularised conspiratorial narratives, which makes one question the efficacy and productivity of research aimed at post-truth communities (what is the point of the research if all of them are conspiratorial anyway?). Second, this reading also dismisses the contextual peculiarities which must be considered when analysing the occurrences of communities founded on "alternative epistemologies", especially in societies whose past differs from that of Western democracies.

Our data analysis shows that any analysis related to truth statements, alternative epistemologies, and even post-truth itself, must consider the contextual aspects of communities and discourses under investigation. While the general codes for topics point towards the more or less recognisable narratives of populism, anti-scientism, and general opposition to institutionalised truth regimes, one common thread running through the

data is contextual references to the past and to historical experience. In our opinion, this proves that one needs to take a more nuanced look at communities based on alternative truth statements to truly understand the rationale and motivation behind their positions, which may often, at first glance, replicate, in a modified fashion, the traditional anti-vaccination narratives, coming from Western countries (the United States especially). However, contextual realities often provide the starting point for the proliferation of these narratives and strongly influence them.

One of the attributes of anti-vaccination group rhetoric is references (not always direct) to life under the total control of the Soviet regime:

> "All the divisions in society and the fear of each other, where everyone is made a suspect, leads to one thing: civil war. We have already been at this point in history. Someone will retreat into the forests, someone will fight in blood for their own and their children's freedoms and rights, someone will hunt down those fighters, and someone will voluntarily surrender all their rights to the new fascist system. The time has come to choose which group you belong to. Make sure you have something to say to your children, when later, they will ask what you did when fascist psychopathy took over the world?"
> Ex.10.1; 10.2., "Skiepų žala," 2020-04-18

In this example, attentive readers can see that all different figures of the Soviet occupation in 1940 are tackled: from the partisan fighter to the conformist and traitor. It is very important to state that these historical issues are now under very heated discussion.

Comparing Western standards and norms of the European Union to those of the Soviet Union has become a popular strategy for opposition-minded internet activists, populist politicians, and even ex-dissidents who joined the anti-EU and anti-vaccination movements in Lithuania motivated by the desire not to let the reality of the Soviet Union repeat itself. The rhetoric in anti-vaccination communities online is no exception—references to going back to Soviet totalitarianism directly or indirectly make their way into these communities on a frequent basis.

As a result, contrary to the Westernised perception, it could be argued that relating this to political or party identities (as described by Lewandowsky) would oversimplify the picture of social reality, misleading the research. Anti-vaccination movements in Lithuania (and other Eastern European countries) often unite people with different and contradicting political views, precisely for the contextual reason of "fighting against the

rise of totalitarianism". Under such thinking, even the theory of "Big Pharma", while having conspiratorial leanings, can be seen by a post-Soviet individual as just another face of a late Soviet/early post-Soviet doctor who would not cure a patient without a bribe, or until he is told by a contact he knows and respects that this person needs good treatment. Whether such a siege mentality is politically motivated and manipulated is a different question, but the logic itself provides food for thought in terms of whether certain truth statements should be treated outright as "non-sensical conspiracies", or as alternative truth claims with roots in a painful historical experience that still affects coping and rationalisation strategies considering contemporary political and social developments.

In a way, the point made above may also be illustrated by the prevailing ambiguities in arguments and rationalisation tactics found in researched communities. When researching these communities, finding utterances expressing "ideal types" of codes is complicated, since ambiguities in argumentation point toward a general lack of clarity when it comes to building coherent narratives deemed "conspiratorial". No matter how contradictory, conspiracy theories usually imply at least a semblance of a narrative explaining the existing situation. In the case of Lithuanian anti-vaccination communities, such a narrative is not formed. Rather, it is framed as a reaction towards allegedly "regressive" and "authoritarian" tendencies of the state and media, which, like the Soviets in the past, disguise the destruction of democracy by loudly promoting that society has decision-making power in public matters. All this only strengthens the case for a more nuanced look into communities and discourses placed under the broad umbrella of post-truth.

12.6   Conclusion

This article was partially inspired by the need to find theoretical concepts allowing us to understand the analysed anti-public discourse phenomena. Our opinion changed throughout the research as the problem revealed itself from different angles. It was evident that it is crucial not to settle for an ideological assessment. This appears to still be one of the most challenging issues about researching anti-vaxxers and similar movements: We still do not know the best methods to analyse their discourse without over-relying on value-based simplifications. Usually in our attempt to do good research, we usually find ourselves (morally) assessing rather than analysing: We tend to forget the transformation of the public sphere and the

consequences and repercussions of this transformation for our society. The public sphere of post-truth reveals itself from angles that are yet to be analysed by future researchers. However, a strategy of melding different methodological approaches (digital ethnography, content analysis, and textually-oriented discourse analysis) seems to provide a satisfactory instrument for avoiding and reflecting upon this challenge.

The findings presented in this research show that discourses produced by the anti-vaccination movement in Lithuania showcase most of the traits related to the rise of post-truth politics in the contemporary world, as they express the decrease of social capital, a decline of trust in science, as well as a particular form of politically asymmetric credulity. However, it is worth noting that, whether or not because of its totalitarian past, Lithuania as a post-soviet case also enable one to touch upon more subtle variations of the factors mentioned above. This is most evident in the case of politically asymmetric doubt, where the divide in trusting or "reading into" ungrounded statements is not expressed along the lines of the liberal-conservative divide. Quite the contrary, most of the members of the movements are fierce critics of the ruling liberal and conservative governments as a whole. This characteristic reflects a much broader distrust of the political system, which has its origins in the Soviet regime where lack of transparency created the conspiratorial narratives of "those up above" who are manipulating everyone. More conscious citizens were thus obliged to read into everything they do, because signs of government corruption are always there, especially in the face of crises such as a pandemic.

The second point to note is the rejection of established scientific findings. This does not fall neatly along political lines either, but also points to the fact that the scientific establishment is not rejected in itself. Instead, in a proper (unconsciously) postmodern fashion of scientific paradigms, individuals are looking for ways to confirm their worldviews using the tools of the same scientific establishment they criticise. Research articles and licensed doctors (even from a different field) are still widely cited as evidence. Essentially, this points to the need to study the politicisation of science by using it pragmatically to provide "proof" for different positions. There is no straight denial of scientific practices, but rather an understanding or belief in "correct" and "unpoliticised" forms of science. This distinction has still not been analysed by theorists working with post-truth problematics, who, for the most part, still subscribe to the typical thesis of the rejection of all modern science as the main crux of the argument,

allegedly guiding the antivaccination groups or any other movements based on alternative epistemologies.

However, it is even more crucial to understand the mechanics and dynamics of such thinking, especially in a world driven by emotionally-charged politics. We may state that led by fear, anger, disappointment, or curiosity, people join such social media groups where they get a sense of "belonging" and find "answers". This type of content becomes an alternative to official news sources and encourages distrust of the state, society, and humanity. Most of these actions are done by specific members, and they employ emotionally-charged narrative tools that may involve symbols from collective memory and emotional manipulation techniques to present their desired perspective. The group is a space for discussion and togetherness for the members, where they search for relevant information and share their thoughts and personal experiences. Meanwhile, the administrators rarely join in the discussions with other members in the comments sections unless they need to discipline or educate members not complying with the internal rules. The primary goal of the leaders of these two groups is to guarantee a constant flow of content.

Lastly, even though the overall level of the distrust in these groups is exceptionally high, the trust of social media platforms itself is almost not reflected upon. During the research we could not find any expressed doubts directed to social media affordance, privacy, or other issues discussed in the academic circles. This points us towards a paradox which demands closer study, i.e. that groups of individuals gathered around the idea of radical mistrust towards everything in the public sphere, do not reflect upon the problematic nature of their own sources and their interpretation. Exploring the dynamics and reasons behind this paradox provides an important direction for future research.

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