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Can conspiracy theories ever be plausible? The role of narrative rationality in the assessment of online conspiracy theories

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Abstract

Conspiracy theories (CTs) represent a persistent challenge in evaluating major events, as they often employ fallacious forms of narrative reasoning and persuasion to posit conspiratorial agency and motives. While many CT narratives conflict with logic and reason, a minority may possess a degree of plausibility. But by what standards can plausibility of a CT be measured? This article introduces concepts from legal storytelling, rhetoric and cognitive linguistics to expand Walter Fisher's narrative paradigm framework, enabling auditors to critically engage with the rhetorical dynamics of CT narratives. Through an analysis of official and alternative narratives surrounding the death of a Russian spy, this article demonstrates how, in a similar way to the role of jurors in criminal trials, auditors may either join the rhetor in co-creating a coherent and plausible narrative, or end up challenging the rhetor by identifying problems and thus planting the potential seeds of rival accounts.

Keywords: communication, sociology, conspiracy theories (CTs), narrative paradigm, dramatistic pentad

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought to attention the issue of widespread adherence to conspiracy theories (CTs) and the reasons why otherwise rational people may choose to believe them. While many of these CTs are clearly irrational, it could be argued that a minority appear to have garnered some degree of cogency. The contention that I aim to examine in this article concerns whether certain types of CTs may require a particular methodological approach to assess their degree of plausibility relative to other accounts. Communication scholarship, however, has tended to problematize CTs as forms of discourse that are inherently deceptive, misleading as well as tending to promote irrational and ideologically biased thought (Bricker, 2013; Kim & Cao, 2016; Mahl et al., 2023; Theocharis et al., 2023). However, contrary to the claims of irrational or biased thinking, I argue that the narrative aspect of CTs can enable audiences to engage with them in a way that promotes critical, creative and evaluative thinking.

The main idea of this article is that CTs are a form of rhetoric that provide arguments and cases for a conspiracy, primarily via a narrative mode of communication. Walter Fisher's narrative paradigm argues that storytelling is the fundamental mode through which humans understand and engage with the world, via what Fisher terms as "narrative rationality." As narratives, however, CTs are typically found as unreasonable and riddled with logical fallacies as well as suffering from evidential weakness (Zarefsky, 1984). The analytical lens through which CTs are typically criticized and scrutinized is what Walter Fisher refers to as the "rational world paradigm" (Fisher, 1987, p. 59). My contention is not to press final judgement over such an evaluative approach, but rather to propose that some CTs may warrant a form of evaluation grounded in understanding how the CT narrative can be deemed reasonable and plausible according to the logic of how stories function as well as wider narratives that are external with respect to the CT narrative.

This article proposes an extension of Fisher's narrative rationality framework for the purpose of improving our understanding of how CTs use narrative to argue about the actions of certain agents and institutions and the ascription of conspiratorial motives and agency that gives meaning behind events. The narrative paradigm of communication provides a "coherence" and "fidelity" criterion that allows one to assess such narratives (Fisher, 1987, p. 68). This article is concerned with the issue of coherence, which is also referred to as narrative probability. I will argue that Fisher's framework appears to lack a clear approach for carrying out such an assessment. I thus incorporate Burkean Dramatism (Burke, 1969) as an analytical tool to help offer a more fine-grained assessment of the implicit persuasive elements within the structure of CT narratives that have implications for how motive and agency are communicated. Concepts derived from the field of legal storytelling and cognitive linguistics are also utilized as an extension of Fisher's material coherence criterion through which narratives are assessed through the comparative lens of other narratives.

Through the critical analysis of a news article that reflects the official story surrounding the unusual death of Russian dissident Alexander Litvinenko, along with an article that promotes an alternative narrative, I aim to show that both official and rival accounts can not only sometimes classify as competing CTs but that scrutiny of their internal narrative structure can unveil implicit arguments concerning motive and agency, as well as producing the potential seeds of rival accounts that may challenge the narrative. Thus, as recipients of a rhetorical message in the form of a CT narrative,

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auditors can take part in a process of critical, analytical engagement and narrative formation via an extension of Fisher's methodological framework.

Definitional and conceptual challenges

Though the dictionary definitions for the term "conspiracy theory" remain neutral and free from negative or positive judgements, communication scholars (along with social scientists in general) approach the term as inherently problematic. For example, Baden and Sharon (2021) have attempted to develop an "integrated definition" of CTs that divides conspiracy discourse into two distinct forms: "conspiracy theories proper" (CTP) and "theories about conspiracy." CTPs are deemed corrosive for democratic discourse because of three attributes. Firstly, their tendency to ascribe excessive causal agency to conspiratorial actors. Secondly, their framing of events within a binary Manichean moral framework. And thirdly, their resorting to an "elusive epistemology" that is dogmatic in nature (Baden & Sharon, 2021, p. 83). In contrast, "theories about conspiracy" comprise accounts that are more open to evidence, potential weaknesses in the account, and the willingness to view the motives as more nuanced than merely Manichean in nature (Baden & Sharon, 2021, p. 83).

Although the authors provide a useful guide for identifying fallacious discourse that is also corrosive to the norms of democracy, there are no reasons provided as to why a "proper" CT should warrant the definition of having such features. Notably, the examples that are analyzed in the article, which are derived from Internet comment threads, appear to be very short statements or claims about people and events (Baden & Sharon, 2021, p. 96). Are these long enough to be deemed as narratives or even theories that warrant scrutiny? If we are to assume that CTs are indeed a form of narrative communication, then a method for discerning what structurally qualifies as a persuasive CT narrative (both in form and content) should be given serious consideration.

A more recent study has brought to the fore the difficulty of actually identifying what kind of content can be termed a CT. The study by Carvalho et al. (2025) reported on attempts to identify and distinguish CTs from opinion articles using both AI tools and human discernment. Notably, both the AI tools and humans struggled to differentiate CTs from opinion articles, because of the way such "intricate narratives" allegedly "blur the line between fact and opinion" (Carvalho et al., 2025, p. 566). Yet one could ask why an opinion article couldn't contain a conspiracy narrative or theory and still be classified as a news opinion article? Though the study adheres to a broad and fairly neutral definition of a CT (Uscinski, 2017), it still reflects the general tendency to classify CTs as possessing problematic characteristics rather than as highly varied accounts that warrant evaluation on a case by case basis.

In the literature, the narrative form that CTs take is typically seen as one of the signs of the weakness of their arguments and evidence. For example, narratives as a mode of communication have been found in some studies to make audiences less able to utilize the necessary "cognitive resources" for critically scrutinizing and assessing the credibility of the arguments in the narrative (Kim & Cao, 2016, p. 3811) According to other critics, CTs rely on a mode of persuasion characterized by "sign reasoning" and the "structural device of narrative positioning," aiming to compel audiences to attribute meaning to events in the absence of concrete evidence. Details that may only be vaguely relevant are said to be woven and connected together en masse into a highly persuasive, but factually and evidentially suspect narrative (Young et al., 1990, p. 93). New evidence is continually assimilated into these boundless narratives, rendering them "self-sealing" (Zarefsky, 1984, p. 72).

CTs exist as rival narratives to those compatible with the official story, and they operate by focusing on what scholars have termed "errant data," i.e., elements that the official story has either failed to mention or that actually contradict the account. The existence of data that the official story fails to account for is, in fact, to be expected because the best of all theories do not explain all data available (Keeley, 1999, p. 118). Errant data offered by CTs is generally deemed to be evidentially weak or irrelevant, though some scholars deem errant data as relevant if utilized persuasively in combination with other evidence to create a rival explanation (Dentith, 2019, p. 8; Hagen, 2022, p. 7).

Despite the problematic connotations that the term "conspiracy theory" carries, I will proceed to refer to it in the widest and most general of terms. Dentith (2014) refers to a CT as "any explanation of an event that cites a conspiracy as a salient cause" (Dentith, 2014, p. 3). To this definition I would like to append my own—namely that CTs are persuasive narratives that tend to speculate about the meaning of events, particularly the role of motive and agency, rather than focus on material evidence or facts.

A framework for CT assessment: "the narrative paradigm"

Given that there is a trend in the literature to problematize CTs and their narrative form as rationally problematic, I now propose a tentative framework for evaluating cases where a CT may possess (a degree of) plausibility by nature of its being a narrative. I will draw on Walter Fisher's "narrative paradigm" (Fisher, 1987), which offers a method of assessing communication according to the criteria of coherence and fidelity. I will then proceed to discuss the limitations and challenges of the narrative paradigm as an evaluative tool and proceed to extend and adapt the framework for analysis.

Perhaps one of the major attempts to achieve a rapprochement between narrative and argument can be found in Walter Fisher's "narrative paradigm." Fisher (1987) proposes the concept of "narrative rationality," where all human communication, including scientific discourse, falls under the category of "narrative." According to Fisher's narrative paradigm, all communication, regardless of its rigorous presentation, is rooted in historical and cultural contexts and influenced by human goals, values, and beliefs. Rather than separating logos (logical reasoning) and mythos (narrative storytelling), Fisher integrates them under the one paradigm (Fisher, 1987, p. 48). Fisher proposes two criteria for the evaluation of narratives—the first being *narrative probability* (otherwise known as *narrative coherence*), and the second *narrative fidelity*.

A narrative can past the test of coherence if the depicted events, characters and actions connect with each other in a logical and consistent way and without contradictions. Within the criteria of coherence lies also tests for the ethos, reliability and consistency of motive and agency of the characters (characterological coherence) as well as a test for how

well the narrative holds when compared with other narratives (material coherence). The fidelity criterion incorporates traditional, formal, and logical methods for testing the soundness and evidential strength of reasoning within the narrative, i.e., the extent of fidelity to formal reasoning. This is what Fisher terms "the logic of reasons" and is thus expected to play an evaluative part within his paradigm (Fisher, 1987, pp. 47–48). There is also a second aspect to the fidelity criterion that is termed "the logic of good reasons" (Fisher, 1987, pp. 108–109). Here, the narrative is evaluated in terms of the extent to which it corresponds with the beliefs, ideals, experiences and values of the audience.

Contrary to claims that regard narratives as suppressing counter-arguing or critical thinking (Deighton et al., 1989), Fisher's framework provides a normative set of tools for audiences to not only scrutinize internal coherence, but also to check the extent to which narratives possess fidelity with reason and factual reality as well as other elements external to the narrative. Persuasion is of course important, but the Fisherian perspective requires that audiences function as active recipients and be on-guard rather than mere passive consumers of a message (Fisher, 1987, p. 72).

Challenges and limitations of the narrative paradigm

An aspect of criticism that is particularly relevant to the thesis of this article is provided by Warnick (1987), who alleged that narrative probability is "inadequate for the judgement of narratives used rhetorically" (Warnick, 1987, p. 177). Warnick claims that narrative probability may be appropriate for fictional texts (such as aesthetic and poetic discourse) but not for narratives that are rhetorical in nature. This is because when two narratives share an equally coherent story, there is no criterion to distinguish which one is more plausible. Warnick then provides the example of how Fisher's criterion of internal coherence does not possibly allow one to distinguish between Darwin's *Origin of Species* and the Biblical story of creation. Rhetorical narratives require the relation of a text "to its audience and its context" that is external to the narrative, and thus lack the internal completeness of the closed-worlds of fictional narratives (Warnick, 1987, p. 178).

While at the outset this appears to be a valid criticism, it has to be stated that Fisher's criterion of internal coherence gains credibility only if compatible with other criteria such as material coherence. Additionally, an account may for example contain facts that accurately reflect what can occur in reality, but the way the narrative presents and utilizes those facts may potentially strain credulity. Furthermore, and as I aim to show later in this article, internal coherence seldom operates in isolation but can be judged according to criteria of narratives and knowledge that constitute external coherence. A refinement of the way internal coherence is evaluated along with a conceptual extension of Fisher's material coherence may allow for a more judicious distinction between competing narratives.

Application of the narrative paradigm when evaluating CTs

The cases in which the narrative paradigm has been used to evaluate CTs remain fairly scanty in the literature. For example, Pfau (2005) chooses to dismiss Fisher's criteria of narrative coherence by referencing one of Barbara Warnick's criticisms that it fails to prevent adherence to dangerous and false narratives. Instead, the criterion of fidelity and the adherence to competing values is deemed more useful in evaluating audience adherence to conspiracy narratives (Pfau, 2005, p. 62). Young et al. (1990) take a considerably harsher view concerning the role of narrative in CTs, asserting that "narrative structure alone" can be used to create a "self-sealing" argument that seems plausible with regard to the perceived nature of events (Young et al., 1990, p. 93). The role of narrative is alleged to be preventing a critical assessment of the reliability of the evidence and thus can easily be used as a tool of deception, regardless of the level of coherence.

Notably, criticisms of Fisher's model tend to ignore the critical role of the auditor in terms of evaluation and assessment of such narratives. A more useful application of Fisher's method would be to assess the narrative by testing it for material coherence. This would require critical assessment of factual details and evidence, along with a comparison with other narratives. In my view, such authors have wrongly assumed that internal coherence overrides the other criterial components of Fisher's framework.

Tools for assessing structural and external coherence

While Fisher offers a fairly comprehensive framework for evaluating narratives according to the way values are utilized to promote an argument (i.e., via "the logic of good reasons"), the same theoretical depth appears lacking with respect to narrative coherence. The method in which a narrative can be understood to have argumentative or structural coherence is largely ignored. Fisher does not provide any tools from rhetorical or narrative analysis that can identify implicit arguments for agency and motive within narratives which seem pertinent to assessing CTs. The paradigmatic approach of Fisher regards all discourse as essentially forms of narrative, but this has a shortcoming with respect to setting the boundaries between forms of communication that are distinct from narrative (Olmos, 2015, p. 155). The utilization and incorporation of features such as plot, character development, the role of the narrator, scene and setting (among others) are characteristics that pertain to narrative coherence but they do not receive any systematic treatment in Fisher's work.

I aim to introduce two methodological tools for strengthening Fisher's "narrative coherence" approach. I will first incorporate Burkean pentadic analysis (Burke, 1969) as a tool in order to support my claim that the structure of a CT narrative itself implicitly points towards some form of argumentative stance concerning motives and agency with respect to the story protagonists and antagonists. As a result, I believe that this has repercussions for characterological coherence. Secondly, I will briefly discuss how "narrative correspondence" and the role of Idealized Cognitive Models (ICMs) may assist the auditor of a CT narrative in determining its narrative probability and coherence relative to other narratives (Lakoff, 1990; Paskey, 2014; Rideout, 2008, p. 66).

Burke's pentad and implicit arguments concerning motive

The rhetorician and literary critic Burke (1969) introduced a theory known as Dramatism, which views language and

thought as representing symbolic action rather than as mere tools for sharing information. The core method of Dramatism is called "the pentad," which comprises five different elements for analyzing symbolic texts. The five elements of the pentad are termed as the *act*, *scene*, *agent*, *agency*, and *purpose* (Burke, 1969, p. xv). The function of the pentad is closely tied to the concept of "ratio." Burke defines a ratio as a determinant principle, emphasizing selection rather than causality, and as an analogical form inherently manifested in attributing motives (Kneupper, 1979, p. 132).

According to Fisher, characterological coherence requires that the agents in a narrative behave characteristically rather than in contradictory or inexplicable ways. The issue of character motivation is tied to the coherence of the "organized set of actional tendencies" of agents (Fisher, 1987, p. 47). What the pentad essentially offers is a rhetorical framework to facilitate a more detailed understanding of how the depiction of characters depends on their incorporation into a complex inter-related set of story elements. The interaction of each element may reveal implicit arguments, biases and assumptions with regard to character motive, levels of agency, responsibility, rhetorical intent, character consistency and more.

In each text or incident of discourse, there may be several ratio pairs present from each element of the pentad, with one pentadic element in each pair being more dominant than the other. For example, an Agency–Act ratio may be deciphered from a situation where the reason for and nature of certain actions in a narrative appear to be determined by the constraints of certain tools and institutions (i.e., the means/agency), rather than the individual nature of people. Thus, for example, according to this perspective, people who have guns are more likely to commit homicides than people who do not have easy access to this means or instrument. Thus here the agency element is dominant over the "act" element. Two ratios of the same kind can also be connected with each other, albeit in such cases these reflect instances of one thing leading to the next, rather than one element being dominant. For example, an Act–Act ratio can be discerned where an event or action is often implicitly connected directly with another (Kneupper, 1979; Overington, 1977).

In principle, the pentad may be used as a standalone tool for rhetorical analysis, particularly to determine the motives for behavior of characters in both fiction and non-fiction modes of discourse. However, I will later aim to show that the relationship between elements in the pentad have repercussions not only for internal coherence and character consistency but also for the external correspondence with wider narratives and cognitive structures.

Narrative correspondence

Fisher's criterion of material coherence requires auditors to critically compare a narrative with other relevant narratives in order to identify "factual errors, omission of important arguments, and other sorts of distortions." Fisher claims that stories are not merely self-contained units, but are in fact often "embedded in other stories" (1994, p. 24). This latter claim about story embeddedness, however, appears to have received a lack of theoretical elaboration by Fisher.

In order to extend the concept of material coherence and to illustrate what story embeddedness implies, some scholars from within the field of legal storytelling have proposed a formal property known as "narrative correspondence." Rideout (2008) has defined this as the way a story aligns with a judge or jury's understanding of "what typically happens in the world" (Rideout, 2008, p. 66). Rideout refers to these narrative models as "stock stories." Paskey (2014), another legal scholar, defines a "stock story" as a narrative presented in broad and generic terms, lacking specific details such as names, locations, or well-defined contextual events. They are the "skeleton" or template around which narratives are fleshed out and can act "as a model for similar stories that will be told with different events, entities, and details" (Paskey, 2014, p. 70). At first, this appears similar to "narrative fidelity," but the difference is that narrative correspondence is a formal property, and comprising only an evaluation of the structural relationship between the details of the narrative and the generalized story structure.

A stock story, then, allows people to draw meaning from and interpret detailed narratives in a way that may assist the understanding of motives and agency. In legal trials, the interpretation of certain narratives by reference to stock stories has resulted in judgements (Rideout, 2008, p. 73). The details of events in a narrative exhibit various signs of correspondence to an overall generalized narrative that has sociological characteristics, since it reflects "socially normative versions of what happens in the world" (Rideout, 2008, p. 66). It may thus enable one to imbue coherence to many similar (but albeit different) situations that at first seem implausible, structurally incoherent, ambiguous or difficult to understand (Rideout, 2013, p. 76). Therefore, in a similar way to the role of the juror in criminal trials, the audience or auditors of CT narratives may utilize and convey their communal knowledge of stock scripts in order to make sense of contested, oft incoherent and ambiguous events and actions. An important caveat concerning stock stories, however, is that a society can be comprised of competing stories that may interpret and even create social reality. There is thus a "war between stories" concerning the interpretation of social reality (Delgado, 1989, p. 2418).

Idealized cognitive models

The building blocks from which stock stories derive are articulated by theorists within the field of cognitive linguistics. The concept of the ICM, which was developed by Lakoff (1990), views human knowledge as being constituted and organized by gestalt linguistic structures derived from a shared cultural experience of the world. Like the aforementioned stock stories, ICMs do not have a direct correspondence or "fidelity" with respect to real empirical situations. They are "idealized" in the sense that they offer generalized interpretations of language and communicative events. Since they do not have a direct 1:1 fit with reality one can expect exceptional cases or occasional deviations (Lakoff, 1990, p. 70).

Individual words or concepts, when brought together in association, become component parts of a mental model used to interpret situations and events within a highly generalized framework. For example, when words like "buy," "price," "goods," "seller," and so forth are communicated, they are ascribed meaning by an ICM of a commercial transaction that creates a structural relationship between each word as part of a scenario (Lakoff, 1990, p. 286). Even an individual word, such as "buy" cannot be fully understood without being able to understand all the related semantic concepts that it invokes or refers to. These forms of ICM have been termed as "semantic frames" and they constitute the cognitive

foundations of the previously discussed concept of stock stories. The term *frame* has been defined by Fillmore as "any system of concepts related in such a way that to understand any one of them you have to understand the whole structure in which it fits (…)" (Fillmore, 1982, p. 111).

Among other forms, ICMs also exist in the form of image-schemata, with common examples such as "part-whole," "center-periphery," "source-path-goal," and so on (Winter, 1989, p. 2232). Such schemata may not have direct objective fidelity to the real world, but they are indispensable components, derived from sensory experience, that allow us to give generalized structure to apparently complex and abstract phenomena.

ICMs are also part of the interpretive framework through which narratives are given meaning by auditors. For example, Winter examines how individual story elements such as characters, objects and concepts exist in the form of scripts that are "essential subparts unreflexively invoked to make sense of the story" (1989, p. 2235). The auditor brings these scripts with them and thus the meaning of the story is jointly constructed between the rhetor and the auditor. The process of interpretation, however, is regarded to be largely unconscious and thus more intuitive than processes based on rational-world reasoning processes.

Pentadic ratios as idealized cognitive models

Burke's pentadic ratios not only constitute ways in which structural coherence of a narrative can be discerned to impute conspiratorial motive and agency. In addition, I propose that these ratios are also forms of ICM and operate as the schematic building blocks that evoke the corresponding "stock story," i.e., the external interpretive lens through which the narrative is given meaning.

The relations between different elements of the pentad are a demonstration of idealized patterns of influence and causation. For example, the ratio Scene–Agent constitutes a set of relations in which the "Scene" element is dominant over the "Agent" element. From this, one can extrapolate a proposition such as "the environment can influence human character or behaviour." This operates as a generalized interpretive lens through which events and actions in the world can either be depicted or interpreted. Another example would be the difference between the Agent–Agency and Agency–Agent ratios. The former ratio may be summarized with the proposition "The agent has more influence over the means than the means has over them." The latter ratio constitutes the opposite influence, i.e., of the means or method being greater than the agent. Therefore pentadic ratios correspond to the genus of *propositional* ICMs which are defined by Lakoff as models that "specify elements, their properties, and the relations holding among them" (Lakoff, 1990, p. 113).

Building on an interpretive approach to narrative and ICMs as developed by Winter (1990), I will subsequently attempt to show that rather than being part of an unconscious process, ICMs and stock stories may become part of a conscious and deliberative critical engagement between rival conspiracy narratives. The result is the formation of competing stock stories derived from propositional ICMs that originate from competing pentadic ratios.

Analysis

In his work on the philosophy of CTs, Matthew Dentith briefly refers to the poisoning and murder of Russian dissident Alexander Litvinenko, which was officially blamed on Vladimir Putin, as an example of an event which can only be explained by conspiracy theorizing (Dentith, 2014, p. 156). While Dentith argues that ultimately an examination of evidence may help us decide which theory is warranted, he does not talk about the issue of plausibility of narrative explanations that are evaluated according to criteria that are outside the domain of the "rational world" paradigm. Rather than focusing on the case's details, my aim below is to briefly show how two contrasting narratives surrounding this event each suggest—either directly or indirectly—a conspiratorial plot. Each narrative relies on different, competing story frameworks that depict the events and motives in such a way as to make their respective interpretations appear plausible. As mentioned earlier in this article, the internal logic and meaning of the narrative can be evaluated according to a form of external narrative correspondence with stock stories held as ICMs within the collective knowledge of a certain society (Rideout, 2008, p. 58).

The reasoning for choosing the Litvinenko narratives as an example for study lies in the fact that they are an example of a type of CT that I have categorized as reflecting greater emphasis on the *why* of events rather than the *how*. Thus speculation concerning motive and agency are at the heart of the narrative.

Method and procedure

The analysis will be comprised of the following critical questions derived from my extension of Fisher's narrative communication model:

1) How does the narrator's positioning of story elements and the internal structure of the story reflect implicit arguments for motives and agency? (Internal and Characterological Coherence/Pentadic Analysis)
2) How do the respective narratives compare with respect to their levels of material coherence? What facts, counter-arguments or issues are omitted?
3) To what extent does the structure of the story resemble or correspond to a wider and more generalized narrative external to it (i.e., to a stock story)? How does this hold with respect to rival stock stories? (Narrative correspondence/External Coherence)

Figure 1 illustrates the proposed process through which auditors can evaluate rival accounts. This framework provides further incentive for communication scholars to conduct more detailed analyses of CTs in terms of the structure and rhetorical character of their narrative elements. Additionally, the model may have utility not only for CTs but also for any communicative situation in which there are disputed accounts about plausible motives.

The poisoning of Alexander Litvinenko

One of the official narratives surrounding the event can be found in a BBC News article titled "Litvinenko: A deadly trail of Polonium" (Watson, 2015). Before providing an analysis of certain key excerpts from this article, I shall proceed below with a brief summary of the narrative that the article presents:

On November 1, 2006, Alexander Litvinenko met with Andrei Lugovoi and Dmitry Kovtun in a London hotel, where he was unknowingly poisoned with Polonium-210 in his tea,

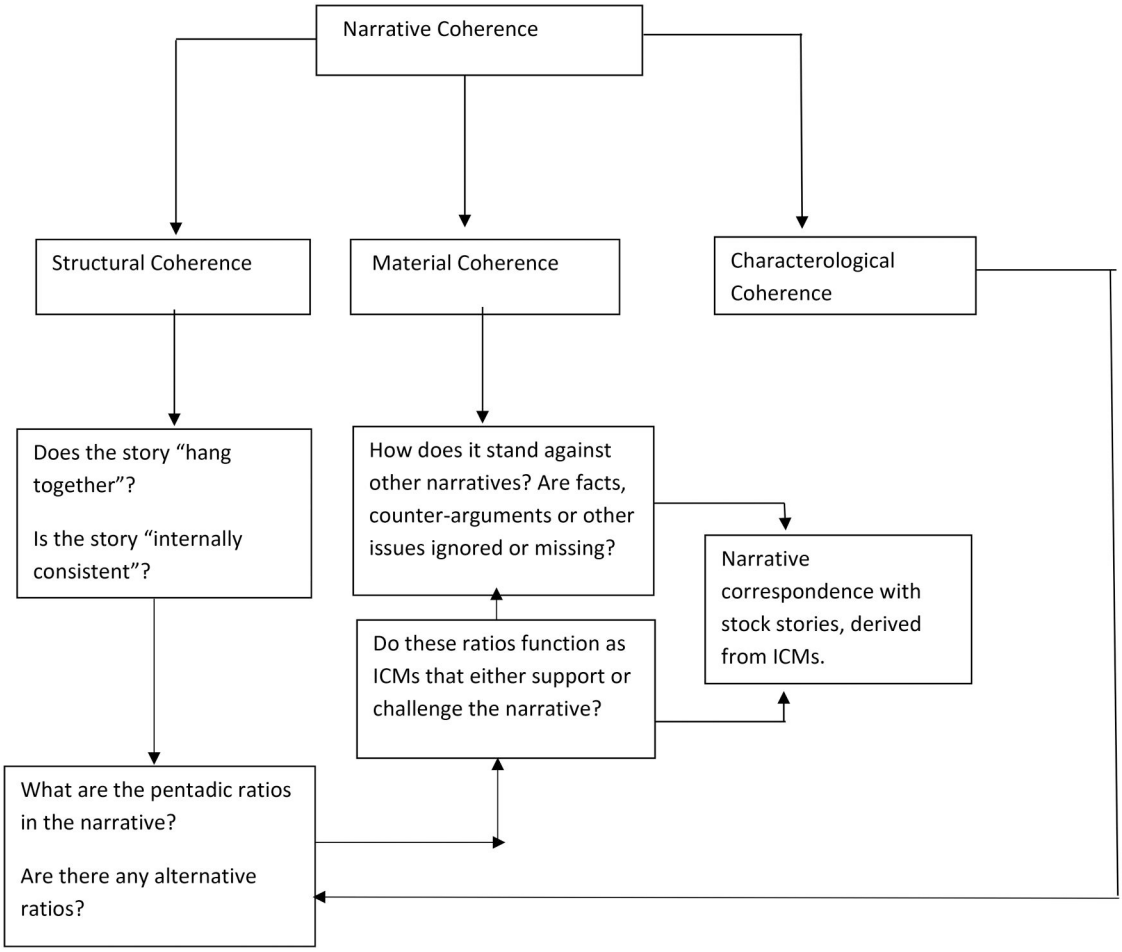

Figure 1. Proposed extension of Fisher's (1987) narrative analytical framework.

dying 22 days later. Suspicions of Russian state involvement arose due to Litvinenko's allegations against Vladimir Putin, though the Kremlin denied any connection. Initially, doctors couldn't detect radiation, but later blood tests confirmed Polonium-210 poisoning, with traces found across 40 London locations. The radioactive element was claimed by UK experts to have come from a Russian military reactor, rather than from anywhere else. Investigators were also able to make a connection between Lugovoi and Kovtun's movements and the poisoning. Litvinenko, a former FSB officer and critic of Putin, had accused the Russian state of serious crimes, potentially providing motive for his killing. Russia denied extradition for the suspects, with Lugovoi receiving state honors and immunity and Kovtun withdrawing from the UK inquiry, which continued without their presence.

Article analysis and discussion

The article's progression illustrates how Litvinenko's condition stumps doctors and engages intelligence personnel. At the outset, the article depicts a hospital scene that not only has doctors but also men with suits and those apparently from the "security services." The scene of heightened security measures and the presence of the intelligence services suggests a larger geopolitically calculated act with wide-reaching effects. The author describes it as "in effect a radiological attack on the capital." Though the words "in effect" seem not to suggest an intended attack on the public, the sense of scale of the radiation gives the impression of some kind of intent to cause fear and terror:

> The government's civil contingencies committee, Cobra, met four times in the week after the attack. They were concerned about causing alarm by closing contaminated hotels.
>
> A source told Newsnight that they even tested the London Underground—both trains and stations—and found traces of polonium. This remained secret at the time to avoid public panic.
>
> "We were finding polonium in aircraft on which people involved in this inquiry had flown, in a football stadium, in restaurants, in hotels. And of course the public were very understandably very concerned," says Peter Clarke. More than 40 sites were contaminated. (Watson, 2015)

A ratio of Purpose–Scene may indicate, in narrative structure terms, that the scale of radiation implies a motive to attack and cause chaos in the capital. As an ICM, this ratio proposes that motive and intent can be discerned from a mere observation of the visual or physical environment or circumstances.

The article then proceeds to detail how radiation was found at locations that the prime suspects, Lugovoi and Kovtun, had visited around the city (along with radiation

found in their hotel rooms). From the perspective of narrative coherence, there is a significant problem. One may ask the question pertaining to characterological coherence—namely why Putin and his spies would resort to such a risky, abnormal and difficult means, when a more conventional and much more discrete form of murder would be more practical?

Now, a critical auditor may engage with the narrative through the adoption of different forms of pentadic ratio that involve thinking about the nature of the means (the unusual radioactive material), the nature of the agents (the characters involved) as well as the scenic elements:

Firstly, either the nature of the attackers meant that they were very negligent and clumsy in handling the radioactive material (Agent–Agency), or that the very dangerous nature of the material (as a means of killing, i.e., an "agency") resulted in a high risk of the spread of contamination regardless of character competence (an Agency–Agent ratio). However, if the agent who ordered the attack intentionally wanted to create fear and terror, then willingly ensuring that traces appeared in many locations would make sense. It would show a control of the agent over the agency used (Agent–Agency), despite its being difficult and impractical to handle as a means of assassination.

Here we see how two different propositional ICMs concerning the influence of instrumental means on human agents (and vice versa) can potentially be utilized to support a few different interpretations of events. For example, the influence of the material over the agents may imply that the nature of the material made it difficult to efficiently assassinate Litvinenko and that the risk of an accident or radiation leak was high. But this would lead to a very easy forensic trail, thus raising the potential that they were framed by someone. Thus an auditor can invoke a "frame-up" stock story through a process of matching the story elements with the propositional ICM that characterizes some known signs of a frame-up, i.e., existence of anomalous forensic evidence that is very convenient for those who are enemies of the suspects.

While the article relies on the claim of a professor to identify the Russian state as the source of the radioactive material for the attack, the narrative itself builds evidence to support the claim that Litvinenko was killed by Putin. According to MI6, the story tells us that he was actually killed for "direct and highly controversial allegations against President Putin." These were the claims that Putin was involved in an inside-job style terrorist attack in Moscow in 1999 that was blamed on Chechens to justify a war, as well as the allegation that he is a pedophile. The article states that "these were dangerous allegations to make." The important point that needs to be stated here is that the article does not provide actual evidence that Putin was responsible. However, the structure and logical progression of the narrative builds a plausible case for motive:

> He spent almost a year in prison. On his release his friend, Yuri Felshtinsky, visited a Russian general to see if Litvinenko would be safe.
>
> "He told me that Litvinenko committed treason and that in his organisation that is punishable by death,' says Felshtinsky. "If he met him in a dark corner he would kill him with his own hands."

In 2000, Litvinenko fled to the UK with his family. He set himself up as a security consultant in London, advising businesses on investing in Russia. He did paid security work for the millionaire Boris Berezovsky, who was also a fierce critic of Vladimir Putin (Watson, 2015).

We are not provided with much background on Putin or conclusive evidence in terms of why he would kill Litvinenko, besides the allegations made by Litvinenko and the circumstantial evidence of the radiation trail. Nor is there any Purpose–Agent or Purpose–Act ratio evident in the narrative concerning potential reasons for Putin's motives.

We are told in the narrative that Russia is a "mafia state." Here the auditor may discern an ICM that may be invoked from the word "mafia." According to narrative correspondence with typical stories of how mafia leaders operate, violent revenge for perceived personal betrayal is to be expected as part of the logical sequence of the narrative events. This could take the form of an Act–Act ratio where the actions carried out by Litvinenko necessarily lead to his assassination. However, material coherence may suggest to auditors that mafias do not typically dispose of enemies in such an extraordinary manner and with such risky and dangerous materials. Auditors may resort to socio-cultural sources of knowledge to fill in the gaps:

Earlier in the article, the medics at Litvinenko's bedside were told some stories by the security services that give the suggestion that this poisoning was committed by a state actor:

> The medics were told about some bizarre-sounding poisoning cases from the intelligence archives, allegedly involving the KGB. One story seemed to come straight from the pages of a spy thriller—an assassination target was killed by radiation after part of his desk was secretly replaced with a radioactive source. It was all very James Bond. (Watson, 2015)

In a rhetorical move, the rhetor uses the spy thriller stock story as a way of creating correspondence with the actual events impacting Litvinenko. The narrative suggests that the use of exotic and highly novel methods is something that would have to be from the KGB or some other sinister foreign government, and not organized criminals or "rogue agents." The connection of actual events with those depicted in fictional stories may actually strengthen the credibility of spy thrillers as stories that could have relevance when assessing what is plausible in the real world, despite their fictional nature. A society regularly exposed to Cold War storylines may come to expect nuclear radiation to be weaponized by a familiar enemy to not only assassinate but also display its power. Thus in ICM terms, if one sees highly radioactive materials used in a murder, then, through correspondence with such socially normalized narratives, it becomes generalized and idealized as strongly indicative of the nature of the agent behind it (Agency–Agent).

Material evidence, however, is provided in the article to support the claim that Russia was involved in the killing. A professor with "deep knowledge of Russian nuclear sites" states that the quantities used in the murder could only originate from a Russian nuclear site "at the Avangard plant in the closed city of Sarov" (Watson, 2015).

The depiction of Litvinenko's background as a dissident spy, the death threats he allegedly received, the material

evidence, as well as the portrayal of Russia as a "mafia state" all act as plot elements in the story that may lead the auditor to perceive a stock story of personal revenge in combination with an ICM of state terror. State terrorism often involves forms of killing that impact and occur in the scene of public spaces and is often intended to send a threatening message. The theatrical, prolonged and painful way in which Litvinenko was killed as well as the spread of radiation around London also seems to correspond with the extraordinary methods used by rogue states in spy thrillers. If the auditor then critically assesses this sense of narrative correspondence to check for its material coherence with other narratives, then in fact it is apparent that the Russian state has previously employed "theatrical murder as a peculiar element of state power" (Gioe et al., 2019). Thus it is possible in this case that the Russian state acted to show its power and intended to send a very public message to other prominent dissident spies that Russia can exact revenge for perceived traitors, wherever they are.

An alternative narrative

In a 2008 article published in The New York Sun that was titled "The Specter That Haunts the Death of Litvinenko," journalist Edward Jay Epstein offers an alternative story that challenges the material coherence of the official story (Epstein, 2008). Given the considerable length of the article, I would like to focus on two main points. The first is that we are told that the official story omits an initial claim from Litvinenko that he got ill after meeting an Italian associate, Mario Scaramella at a restaurant. In terms of material coherence, this problematizes the official explanation for the radiation trail that seemed to fit with the movements of the two Russians that allegedly poisoned him:

> Litvinenko's day of reckoning came on November 1, 2006. First he had lunch at Itsu, a trendy sushi restaurant in Piccadilly, with an Italian associate, Mario Scaramella. Mr Scaramella, who had flown in from Naples the night before, had been involved with Litvinenko in, among other things, a Byzantine plot to penetrate the operations of a suspected trafficker in prostitutes, arms, and enriched uranium. At that lunch, Mr Scaramella gave Litvinenko some documents.
>
> (…) Litvinenko, who was probably the best witness to that day's events, initially said he believed that he had been poisoned at his lunch with Mr Scaramella at the Itsu restaurant. Even one week after he had been in the hospital, he gave a bedside BBC radio interview in which he still pointed to that meeting, saying Mr Scaramella "gave me some papers (…) after several hours I felt sick with symptoms of poisoning." At no time did he even mention his later meeting at the Pine Bar with Mr Lugovoi." (Epstein, 2008)

The report of Litvinenko feeling sick after meeting with Mr Scaramella operates as a form of errant data, i.e., as a piece of evidence that is given significance and left unexplained by the official story, thus potentially calling into question the entire narrative (Keeley, 1999). Also implied here in the narrative is that Litvinenko and Scaramella are involved in a plot in which the elements are not clearly depicting a familiar Cold War enemy. The words "byzantine plot," "penetrate," "trafficker," and "prostitutes, arms and enriched uranium" consist of signs that may cumulatively invoke an alternative ICM as a potential competitor with the betrayal-revenge and Cold War spy thriller stock-story reflected in the BBC account (Epstein, 2008). In this rival narrative, Litvinenko is depicted as the sort of individual that ultimately embroils himself in murky, reckless and dangerous operations which most likely led to the scene of his demise (Agent–Scene). In propositional terms, this is an ICM which states that the nature of such an agent brings about certain inevitable circumstances upon himself, or more specifically in this case we can state that "people who recklessly flirt with danger may die prematurely."

Thus, his death has characterological coherence and the sequence of events coherently follow each other, given the back story we are provided with about Litvinenko and his associates. This back story is lacking in the previous narrative, and thus impacts the level of material coherence. Hence, somebody opposed to the official theory (OT) may simply argue that from such reckless characters we can expect these kind of untimely deaths:

> His murky operations, whatever their purpose, involved his seeking contacts in one of the most lawless areas in the former Soviet Union, the Pankisi Gorge, which had become a center for arms smuggling. He had also dealt with people accused of everything from money laundering to trafficking in nuclear components. These activities may have brought him, or his associates, in contact with a sample of Polonium-210, which then, either by accident or by design, contaminated and killed him. (Epstein, 2008)

This is hence in contrast to the Scene–Act and Purpose–Scene ratio implied in the official story—where the scene of the radiation trail reflects an overall intention to both kill and spread fear among the enemies of Putin. Even if the assassins were not fully competent in handling the materials, the choice of this instrumental means reflects a certain purpose (Agency–Purpose). In this rival narrative however, the meaning of the radiation trail (in scenic terms) is derived from what we learn about the previous high risk-taking and dangerous activities of Litvinenko and those associated with him.

The scenes of radiation in several locations around London that matched the movements of the suspects may thus indicate excessive risk taking and neglect by Litvinenko and the other agents, rather than an intention to create fear and terror. The scene indicates that something went wrong and not according to plan (Scene–Act).

But what about the BBC narrative and the evidence it uses to support the claim that the Russian state was behind this killing? The author challenges the claim made in the BBC article that the Polonium-210 definitely came from a Russian state-controlled site:

> According to the IAEA's Illicit Trafficking Data Base, there had been 14 incidents of missing industrial Polonium-210 since 2004. The minute amount found in London—possibly no more than one-millionth of an ounce—could have come from many sources, ranging from the American industrial supply and stockpiles in Russia to the remnants of the A.Q. Khan network in Pakistan and the North Korean surplus. (Epstein, 2008)

This thus again appears to constitute a form of data that is "errant" to the official narrative, and which broadens the range of possible scenarios. However, it does not eliminate the possibility or likelihood that the Polonium-210 came from Russia. Additionally, the story shared to the medics about "James Bond" style radioactive poisonings may still be persuasive given that the odd or unusual ways of killing political targets appear to have significant culturally-ingrained narrative correspondence with the numerous spy thriller stock stories about the behavior of intelligence agencies. In terms of a socio-cultural ICM, spy agencies as forms of institution, i.e., as a pentadic Agency are expected to resort to exotic and unusual forms of killings (Agency–Act).

Alternatively, it may be also possible for audiences to interpret the radiation trail as being a scene that indicates a "frame-up" stock script. The radiation trail may have been placed in such a way so as to make it look like Putin's henchmen were responsible, so as to frame the Russian state. The fact that Lugovoi's hotel had high levels of radiation is seemingly *too* convenient, as is the way the radiation trail fits all their movements around London. According to scholarship on the way CTs work, this constitutes a form of "fortuitous data." This is defined as evidence that is used by the official story but which ultimately undermines it. Buenting & Taylor (2010) define fortuitous data as evidence that:

> 1) supports the official story; but
> 2) fits the official story *too well*; is "too good to be true." Finally,
> 3) the "lucky" nature of the data is left unexplained by the official story. (Buenting & Taylor, 2010, p. 572)

Questions may emerge concerning the characterological coherence of alleged professional spies like Lugovoi and Kovtun. Were they really that careless in handling the Polonium-210? If they had intended to create fear by spreading it around London, why not avoid incriminating themselves? Or perhaps Putin wanted it to be publicly known that Russia was behind this attack? Is such a move really consistent with his character generally? The lack of a convincing explanation in the official narrative invites the reader to critically engage with the narrative as well as rival narratives. This can then lead to exploring potential alternative forms of agency and motive (via pentadic ICMs) and the formation of alternative stock scripts that can be used as an interpretive framework that gives coherence to events.

At this juncture then, can we make an assessment about which narrative is the most plausible? We have actually seen that the process of scrutinizing the internal narrative structure and correspondence with elements external to the narrative has led to more questions than answers. Both narratives appear to possess equal degrees of internal coherence but they also share weaknesses as well as arguing from different perspectives.

If both narratives are internally coherent and both have equally plausible correspondence with differing stock stories or ICMs, then how can they be distinguished in terms of plausibility? The answer appears to come from insights in the field of legal storytelling and the way narrative is utilized by juries in trial settings. According to Rideout (2008), internal coherence is insufficient; a story should have all of its expected parts connected and without any sense that something relevant or important is missing (Rideout, 2008, p. 65).

It turns out that Fisher's material coherence criterion also requires that stories must not have significant missing elements or omitted issues, and thus the most complete accounting carries the greatest weight. The extension of material coherence to incorporate correspondence means that even if both narratives correspond to rival stock stories, the narrative with the greatest degree of completeness will be deemed the most plausible.

In the case of the two narratives, it appears that the rival narrative to the BBC offers a more detailed account of events as well as explaining data that is errant to the official story. However, although the account in the New York Sun may convince auditors that Litvinenko was a spy who would inevitably be killed as a result of habitual high-risk operations involving dangerous people and radioactive materials, the ICM that it invokes is arguably less convincing than the official narrative. If it was murder, then what level of narrative correspondence do we actually see in the case of non-state affiliated criminals using such a dangerous and risky method of assassination? Such a question, in fact, concerns socially normative interpretations of reality and, though strongly supported by historical experience, can still be open to contestation. It is still possible for other audiences to remain unconvinced by these stock stories, and instead correspond the events with rival interpretations.

The most plausible narrative, however, may likely be that Russia and other authoritarian states are much more likely to utilize extraordinary and costly methods that demonstrate state power and the desire to send a clear message to traitors. All of which are elements that correspond with the plots of both spy-thrillers, historical experience as well as the social knowledge concerning state terrorism.

Conclusion and discussion

In this article, a broad definition of CTs was used to identify implicit conspiracy claims in two online opinion articles. While the BBC article argues that the Russian government conspired to assassinate Alexander Litvinenko using a controlled radioactive substance, the New York Sun article implicitly argues for the existence of a cover-up and frame-up by the British authorities as well as claiming that Litvinenko died by accident or at the hands of rival smugglers. Though conclusive evidence is lacking, it is possible for auditors to reasonably argue for the varying plausibility of either account. Thus my approach in this article differs from general approaches within communication scholarship, which is to problematize CTs as evidentially-weak forms of misinformation, distinct from other, more credible forms of discourse.

Contrary to the generally perceived role of narratives as restricting the critical discernment of an audience, I have tried to show that Fisher's framework actually requires critical engagement with narratives and that this involves a check not only for structural coherence but also material coherence. Yet, Fisher's approach for assessing the structural and formal level of coherence of a narrative is vague and lacks a clear methodological approach.

To try to remedy this I have proposed an extension of Fisher's model to provide a structural conception of what the assessment of internal coherence could entail. Furthermore, in some cases, CTs are narratives that are less about proof and evidence (the "how") and more about ascribing motive and agency to conspirators (i.e., the "why"). I have employed Kenneth Burke's dramatistic pentad as a tool which an

auditor of a CT narrative can employ to discern implicit arguments for conspiratorial motive and agency as well as to potentially identify alternate pentadic ratios that may challenge the coherence of the narrative. However, the level of internal structural coherence is not enough to assess the potential plausibility of a CT narrative.

Though dramatistic pentadic relations may be a universal feature of all discourse and communication, my framework has attempted to connect this internal structure with an external process of interpretation that has importance for determining what could have happened in terms of plausible conformity with how auditors experience and understand social reality. Thus according to my model, a narrative may implicitly argue a case through the adoption of certain pentadic ratios, and in turn, these ratios operate as ICMs through which different elements come together to form propositions that act as the ingredients for potential stock stories that are external to the text.

This extended Fisherian framework may enable communication scholars to re-examine the role of narrative persuasion in CTs, and thus facilitate analyses of more substantial narratives in terms of content and story complexity, with a particular focus on internal and external coherence and the role of conspiratorial motive and agency. Given the criteria of the research questions in this article, it appears that many CTs will fail to meet the criteria of narrative rationality due to incoherence and inconsistency with factual reality. However, if a broad and neutral definition of CTs is assumed, then such a model may potentially be used by auditors to not only discover conspiracy narratives implicit in both mainstream and alternative media, but also creatively and critically engage with the mechanisms of how they persuasively make their case.

Given the link forged between pentadic ratios and propositional ICMs, further research could involve the development of tools to better understand how the internal narrative elements of CTs correspond with processes of human cognition and message interpretation. The sociological nature of stock stories as a form of culturally-specific interpretation of events is also significant in terms of how differing groups may interpret events. Further work could explore the differing ways in which social groups utilize or even create competing stock stories and ICMs to interpret disputed events either as conspiracies or as alternative accounts. In terms of limitations, this article is restricted to the analysis of CT narratives in textual form; thus excluding studies that have examined the impact of CTs in other media modes such as videos. Communication scholars could perhaps develop and amend the tentative framework to incorporate the persuasive role of visual rhetoric and imagery within a CT narrative.

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