

SCIENCE-RELATED POPULISM AND SOCIAL ACTORS IN MARTIN GEDDES' EARLY REPRESENTATIONS OF COVID-19

A Case Study

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Abstract – This article focuses on five blogs written by British conspiracy theorist Martin Geddes, available on his personal website. The blogs were written from March to December 2020 and represent an early testimony of COVID-19 scepticism. The article aims to analyse Geddes' conspirational counter-narrative of the coronavirus syndemic by focusing on four elements: the generic characteristics of the corpus, Geddes' construal of ethos, his texts' connection to the theoretical framework of science-related populism and, lastly, the representation of select social actors in the corpus and how such representation sustains Geddes' conspirational arguments. These elements provide insight into the idiom of conspiracy theorists and their construction of counter-information and counter-knowledge.

Keywords: COVID-19; science-related populism; ethos; social actor theory; critical discourse analysis.

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 syndemic¹ has been both the first event of historical magnitude to be “experienced by the entire world at the same time” (Milanović 2020) and “the first epidemic in history in which people around the world have been collectively expressing their thoughts and concerns on social media” (Aiello et al. 2021, p. 1). The syndemic has also facilitated a disinformation crisis (Vériter et al. 2020) and the prospering of conspiracy thinking, i.e. theories “ranging from the well-known ‘Big Pharma’ and the non-existence of the virus to claims of microchips in vaccines, the stealing of

¹ This article refers to COVID-19 as a syndemic, rather than a pandemic or an epidemic. A term originally coined by medical anthropologist Merrill Singer, a syndemic goes beyond “the notion of disease clustering in a location or population, and processes of biological synergism among co-dwelling pathogens” since it “points to the determinant importance of social conditions in the health of individuals and population.” (2003, p. 428) Singer also notes that the “sociopolitical context of sufferers' health is critical.” (2003, p. 428) Singer has also recently written on the interaction between the concept of syndemic and that of structural violence in the context of COVID-19 (2021).

personal information, and the implementation of 5G to decimate the population” (Carrion-Alvarez and Tijerina-Salina 2020). In order to counter the spread of disinformation and facilitate compliance with safety measures, it is of the utmost importance to analyze conspirational discourses.

This article focuses on five blogs from well-known British conspiracy theorist Martin Geddes’ personal website, www.martingeddes.com. According to the established anti-fascist campaigning organisation “HOPE not hate”, Geddes is “by far the most significant British figure in the world of orthodox QAnon.”² Geddes’ five blogs were chosen for two reasons: firstly, they were the only COVID-19-related blogs he wrote in 2020 and represent precious evidence of early COVID-19 scepticism; secondly, after several of his social media have been shut down, Geddes’ personal website has remained the only stable outlet for his conspirational views.³

The analysis presented here aims to describe a conspiracist’s ethos in the context of the COVID-19 syndemic, to read the corpus in the light of the science-related populism framework (Mede and Schäfer 2020), and to illustrate the representation of select social actors (van Leeuwen 2008) in the context of a conspirational narrative of COVID-19. In order to reach these aims, the analysis is articulated in four steps: firstly, an introduction to the corpus and its generic characteristics is provided; secondly, the construction of Geddes’ ethos in the corpus is investigated; thirdly, the epistemological paradigm of science-related populism is introduced and Geddes’ texts are shown to subscribe to its logic; lastly, Geddes’ counter-narrative of the syndemic is read as social action and his representation of select social actors is offered. For the purpose of the following analysis, a keyword in context analysis has been carried out using the #LancsBox⁴ software.

2. Genre: blogging and social media

The corpus consists of five texts (9880 tokens, 2937 types, and 2735 lemmas), which are contained in the “News and Updates” section of Geddes’ website:

² “UK QAnon Social Media Influencers”, available here: <https://hopenothate.org.uk/chapter/uk-qanon-social-media-influencers/> (last accessed on 10 February 2022). QAnon is a conspiracy theory that first appeared online in October 2017 and claimed that President Trump was fighting against a secret Democratic deep-state that trafficked children (Bloom and Moskalenko 2021). Since then it has grown exponentially and transformed into a cult-like movement.

³ Geddes’ Twitter account @martingeddes was suspended in January 2021. Patreon suspended Geddes in October 2020.

⁴ #LancsBox is the Lancaster University corpus toolbox, freely downloadable here: <http://corpora.lancs.ac.uk/lancsbox/download.php>

- “On pandemics, panics and propaganda” (17 March 2020)
- “COVID-1984: the medical cures with no media bite” (28 April 2020)
- “Coronagate: the scandal to end all scandals” (4 May 2020)
- “The wars of perception of heaven and hell” (8 August 2020)
- “GAME framework applied to face masks and brand communication” (11 December 2020)

These texts present several characteristics of blogs.

In their pioneering study, Miller and Shepherd claim blogs present three most common features: they are chronologically organized, contain links to sites of interest on the web, and provide commentary on the links (2004, p. 6). Geddes' texts reflect such a claim: they are arranged chronologically, they contain hypertextual links to content of interest (usually either as a background to Geddes' topic or as supporting evidence to his argument), such content is further referenced and commented upon. Moreover, chronology presents the conventional reverse order as well as timestamping, which contribute to fostering an expectation of updates (Miller and Shepherd 2004, p. 8).

Miller and Shepherd further discuss the voyeurism afforded by blogs as a genre and the web as a medium (2004, pp. 2-6). They analyse the co-occurrence of voyeuristic and exhibitionist tendencies in Western culture, which are amplified by the technological affordances of the web and promoted by concurring social forces: firstly, the pursuit of un-mediated truth and authenticity in a media-driven world; secondly, a constant need for excitement; thirdly, the need for involvement (2004, p. 4). Web-based genres, such as blogs, meet these socially driven needs. Geddes' texts are in line with two of these needs: authenticity and community building. As for authenticity, Geddes, a telecoms consultant, writes blogs that not only claim to offer the truth, but also aim to debunk false information offered by the established media. In the corpus, Geddes states that “Decades of psychological warfare via the media have divided society.”⁵ He writes of “information warfare” and “strategic deception” (*Pandemics*) and claims that “the corporate media is involved in a full-on war against objectivity.”⁶

Geddes' authenticity agenda in his blogs is complemented by the increasing politicization of online discourse facilitated by the emergence of social media. KohsraviNik observes how social media have produced “the claim to empowerment of ordinary citizens, re-connection with politics, [and]

⁵ Martin Geddes, “On Pandemics, Panics, and Propaganda”, available at <https://www.martingeddes.com/on-pandemics-panics-and-propaganda/> (last accessed 10 February 2022). All further quotations are indicated in brackets in the text as *Pandemics*.

⁶ Martin Geddes, “The Wars of Perception of Heaven and Hell”, available at <https://www.martingeddes.com/the-wars-of-perception-of-heaven-and-hell/> (last accessed 10 February 2022). All further quotations are indicated in brackets in the text as *Wars*.

grassroots mobilisation” (KhosraviNik 2017, p. 62). Geddes’ blogs manifest a belief in grassroots mobilisation and a revolt against the traditional media’s “monopoly over discursive power” (KhosraviNik 2017, p. 63). Geddes writes of “a lockdown of the free flow of knowledge”⁷ and promotes his attempts at bypassing censorship⁸ through crowd-funding and self-publishing. Such behaviour embodies the discursive power of the participatory web, “fluid, changeable, and circular” (KhosraviNik 2017, p. 63), whereby users are consumers, producers, and distributors of content (prosumers). The web allows prosumers to fact check and carry out research independently bypassing the established channels for the gatekeeping and spreading of information. Geddes’ call for empowerment materializes in several claims regarding the public’s right to access information and carry out research independently (*COVID-1984*).

Community building is also a part of Geddes’ blogging: his consistent use of the pronoun “we” (61 occurrences in the corpus) conveys the existence of an in-group of likeminded people; this is complemented by the use of “you” (49 occurrences) to address an audience bound by similar values and reading him across multiple platforms. Online community building is further implemented by traffic boosting and content sharing strategies: Geddes blogs frequently and consistently; he proselytizes by offering email subscription to a newsletter and he adds social sharing buttons at the bottom of every blog (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, and Google+), he further employs a social sharing tool (sharethis.com) allowing users to share content simultaneously over Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn. In addition, Geddes shows awareness of his loyal audience by direct addresses. For example, he closes a blog on being banned by Twitter with the following: “I will soon make announcements here on where to find my ideas and shared content in future [*sic*].”⁹

Community building also happens through Geddes’ referencing of social media content written by others: this shows not only the tendency to build blogs as hypertexts (Miller and Shepherd 2004), but also Geddes’ subscription to what KhosraviNik calls “*regimes of popularity building*” (2017, p. 62). These are due to the technological affordances of new media such as liking, tagging, and sharing content. The hypertextual nature of Geddes’ texts further realizes what KhosraviNik (2017) calls echo chambers: in social media, echo chambers are the result of the algorithmic manipulation of newsfeeds so that users are presented with content which mirrors and

⁷ Martin Geddes, “COVID-1984: the medical cures with no media bite” at <https://www.martingeddes.com/covid-1984-the-medical-cures-with-no-media-bite/> (last accessed 10 February 2022). All further quotations are indicated in brackets in the text as *COVID-1984*.

⁸ See “Make Censorship History” at <https://www.martingeddes.com/make-censorship-history/> (last accessed 10 February 2022).

⁹ See “The end of an era: I have been banned by twitter” at <https://www.martingeddes.com/the-end-of-an-era-i-have-been-banned-by-twitter/> (last accessed on 5 October 2021).

reinforces their beliefs. “[L]ike-minded users would predominantly see each other’s reactions, news, links, commentaries” (KhosraviNik 2018, p. 10). This has brought about the predominance of beliefs, feelings, and likes over facts, arguments, and logic (KhosraviNik 2017, p. 63). Blogs and news websites also push for interaction and the sharing of content among like-minded prosumers: Geddes provides content that is shareable across multiple platforms and cites social media material that presents views similar to his own. He also has recourse to sources subscribing to political agendas that are in line with his, in a sort of circular motion.

Geddes writes blogs that draw both from traditional blogging and from the technological affordances of social media: the corpus is highly hypertextual and thereby echoes similar content, it facilitates content sharing, it is both personal and aimed at community building, it aims at debunking COVID-19 narratives pushed by traditional media and offering the “truth” about the virus and the syndemic.

3. The Construction of Ethos in the Corpus

In what follows, ethos is intended as “the character or emotions of a speaker or writer that are expressed in the attempt to persuade an audience.”¹⁰ In addition, ethos is here understood as increasingly bound to the credibility and personality of the speaker and, as such, realized through textual as well as non-textual strategies of self-representation and self-construal (Amossy 2001, pp. 3-5).

Geddes’ ethos-building first manifests in the titles to his blogs and is inextricably connected with his conspirational stance: “On pandemics, panics and propaganda” shows awareness of two basics of rhetorical success, alliteration and trinomials. The repetition of word-initial sounds and the juxtaposition of these three nouns introduce Geddes’ sophistication and indicate the implied connection between pandemic, propaganda and panic. “COVID-1984: the medical cures with no media bite” provides a reference to George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, therefore expanding on the propaganda theme and insinuating the idea of covert citizen control, while introducing education and reading as part of Geddes’ ethos; the alliterating “medical” and “media” introduce the opposition between the media and the possibility of obtaining truthful information concerning COVID-19 through the media. “Coronagate: the scandal to end all scandals” cites Watergate and hyperbolizes the political scandal, introducing Geddes’ taste for wordplay. “The wars of perception of heaven and hell” has Blakean echoes (i.e. *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*) and thematizes perception as relevant to

¹⁰ See the entry for “ethos” at www.britannica.com (last accessed 10 February 2022).

interpreting the syndemic and questioning the “new normal”. This confirms Geddes’ sophistication and education. “GAME¹¹ framework applied to face masks and brand communication” offers the application of a management model to communicating face masks and the “new normal”, and reinforces Geddes’ credibility as a communications and business consultant. A remarkable first impression, these titles establish Geddes as sophisticated and well-read, a professional who is not afraid of dabbling in controversy and expressing extreme ideas.

Geddes’ ethos transpires in the texts thanks to the consistent use of the first person singular and plural. A key word in context search carried out using #Lancsbox shows 31 occurrences of the pronoun “I” and 61 occurrences of the pronoun “we”. First person narration serves to realize a strong authorial voice, personalise content, create a sense of familiarity and closeness, and give the impression of a unique perspective on events. In the corpus, “I” is generally used to identify Geddes as author, as provider of counter-information, and to convey intellectual honesty and disinterestedness. For instance, Geddes shares his status as author when writing: “I was going to title this essay ‘Hydroxychloroquine: does it cure CONS.’”¹² An example of counter-information is: “As I understand it, this total inversion of right and wrong, fact and fiction, is the essence of the Satanic doctrine” (*Wars*). Intellectual honesty is conveyed through the first-person pronoun “I” and the copular verb “am” followed by an adjective phrase: this is used to establish credentials and make remarks on COVID-19 credible; for example, in sentences such as “I am copiously qualified to comment...” (*COVID-1984*) or “I am, however, quite well versed in...” (*Pandemics*), as in the following:

It is not my competence to talk about viruses, plagues, or pandemics *per se* [*sic*]. I am, however, quite well versed in media manipulations and unpicking insanities. So let me offer you my best understanding of how to make sense of our situation. Consider this a framework for rational reasoning, not a final answer. (*Pandemics*)

Geddes begins by establishing intellectual honesty: he has no qualifications to discuss medical matters. The ironic use of “per se” anticipates the subsequent argument: medical matters can be discussed on multiple levels, and while one level is merely scientific and best left to experts, another level is the media representation of medical matters. Geddes self-represents as a

¹¹In the blog, Geddes explains that GAME stands for Goals, Audience, Medium, Expression (<https://www.martingeddes.com/game-framework-applied-to-face-masks-and-brand-communications/>).

¹²Martin Geddes, “Coronagate: the scandal to end all scandals”, available at <https://www.martingeddes.com/coronagate-the-scandal-to-end-all-scandals/> (last accessed 10 February 2022). All further quotations are indicated in brackets in the text as *Coronagate*.

telecommunications expert, “well versed in media manipulations”, and in so doing he reframes the syndemic as a representational issue. Moreover, Geddes’ media expertise can offer readers a rational framework to make sense of the situation. The implication is that his readers, too, can understand and discuss medical matters within a rational framework delineated by Geddes.

Another example is:

I have no qualifications in medicine whatsoever, so I have zero opinion to offer on plagues and cures. What I am copiously qualified to comment upon is the media reaction to COVID-19, and whether this is a reasonable reflection of reality. (*COVID-1984*)

Once again, the denial of medical qualifications gives way to a *de facto* separation of COVID-19 from medical considerations, and a reframing of the syndemic within the boundaries of media discourse and representation.

Geddes’ use of “we” is more insistent than his use of “I”: “we” disrupts the “I”-“you” binary and establishes commonality of experience. “We” tends to occur in sentences conveying either the tentative knowledge of the virus and its true origins or the drastic changes the syndemic has imposed. For instance:

we cannot know if we are dealing with a single medical phenomenon or multiple ones (e.g. pneumonia due to chronic pollution, biowarfare using multiple vectors, immune system harm due to medication). (*Panics*)

Geddes casts doubt on the virus and manifests scepticism at a collective level. Furthermore, Geddes protests against the curtailment of personal freedoms, once again speaking on behalf of a group: “we are experiencing a lockdown of the free flow of knowledge, as well as of people” (*COVID-1984*).

While Geddes’ expression of personal identity (“I”) serves him to establish credentials and create trust; his use of “we” is expressive of social identity (Steffens and Haslam 2013) and the construction of shared dissidence in the face of COVID-19 restrictions. This strategic use of we-referencing language (29 occurrences of “us”, 22 of “our”) also contributes to the building of Geddes’ ethos: his expertise as media consultant is combined with his sense of belonging to a group and his ability to represent that group’s scepticism and unwillingness to accept the media and academic elite narrative of the syndemic.

In the corpus, Geddes actively tries to craft a sense among followers that they are part of the same group (Steffens and Haslam 2013), he builds a sense of “us”, a shared predicament, and therefore acts as an entrepreneur of identity:

The virus is mutating and lacks a stable genetic base. We don't even have tests at this point with reliable false positive/negative rates, since we don't know the mutation rate and profile. (*Coronagate*)

The sense of a lack of reliable information concerning the virus is described as a collective experience. Geddes internalizes the collective as part of his sense of self (Steffen and Haslam 2013) and behaves as ambassador of common worries and a common counter-politics. In other instances, Geddes advocates the reconstruction of a sense of commonality and common purpose: “Decades of psychological warfare via the media have divided society, we need to get back on the same page” (*Pandemics*).

Geddes achieves the construction of ethos in the corpus by establishing credentials, developing strong authorship and representing both the self and the collective as part of his sense of self.

4. Science-related Populism and the Corpus

Geddes' ethos and his scepticism concerning COVID-19 are best read as a result of the epistemological rupture signified by science-related populism. Science-related populism builds on the scholarly interest in political populism and acknowledges the relevance of studying “the linkage between populism and the production and communication of knowledge” (Ylä-Anttila 2018, p. 357). But while populism stages a conflict between a corrupt establishment and a virtuous people, science-related populism is founded on the conflict between a common-sense-driven people (the “ordinary people”) and the corrupt representatives of established science (“the academic elite”).

Science-related populism concerns the production of scientific knowledge, that is why ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’ must be understood in epistemological terms, rather than political, economic, or cultural (Mede and Schäfer 2020, p. 480). According to science-related populism, the ordinary people are epistemologically homogenous; they rely on common sense and gut feeling to make sense of phenomena and events: “commonsensical reasoning is the most—or even only—legitimate mode of thinking because it rests on authentic everyday experience.” (Mede and Schäfer 2020, p. 481) The academic elite detain epistemological hegemony, the uncontested power to determine what is correct and incorrect behaviour in relation to science and health. However, the academic elite offer information that is perceived as “elusive, ephemeral, divided, [and] contested” (Waisbord 2018, p. 20) and, ultimately, ineffective, which is mostly due to established science often being hedged and conditional. Moreover, the academic elite is perceived to disregard the “simple, naturalistic, and reliable epistemology of ordinary

people” (Mede and Schäfer 2020, p. 481).

The conflict sketched above produces two fundamental epistemic claims: decision-making sovereignty and truth-speaking sovereignty (Mede and Schäfer 2020, pp. 481-483). Ordinary people contest the academic elite’s claim to the production of knowledge and the elite’s power to “shape research agendas, allocate funding, develop study designs or, in turn, curtail research in fields that are seen as problematic” (Mede and Schäfer 2020, pp. 482). The people further accuse the academic elite of pursuing research in fields that are deemed irrelevant, such as climate science and gender studies (Mede and Schäfer 2020, p. 482). The academic elite are also seen as eluding public control and ignoring the interests of ordinary people. Truth-speaking sovereignty concerns the academic elite’s right to make truth claims; they disregard the quotidian wisdom of ordinary people and ignore their common-sense epistemology. The people believe in everyday experience and common sense as the purveyors of knowledge and therefore oppose what they understand as obscure methodology.

Geddes’ texts showcase the fundamental opposition at the basis of science-related populism. There are several attacks on established science in the corpus, some of which are *ad hominem*. Geddes accuses Dr Anthony Fauci and Dr Deborah Birx – two well-known top coronavirus response coordinators in the US – of having a financial interest in the pandemic. He also reports the words of Fauci’s former employee who speaks of “bullying and scientific fraud” (*COVID-1984*). Accusations are supported by Twitter evidence.¹³ Geddes’ attack on Dr Birx reads: “Dr Deborah Birx stands on stage and says it is policy to count all deaths *with* COVID-19 positive tests as being *from* the virus, and yet there’s no media scandal in this inflation of the numbers.” (*COVID-1984*) This is a common accusation that science-related populists level at established science. Experts have often explained the reasoning behind the calculation of COVID-19 casualty numbers (e.g. Oliver 2021; Slater et al. 2020), but this continues to be addressed as “number inflation” (Boyle 2021).

Geddes also targets the WHO, the epitome of established science and the foremost official COVID-19 information provider:

The WHO has infamously changed its tune on issues like human-to-human transmissibility of this virus. What they also did recently was delete a tweet that says infection doesn’t guarantee future immunity, since the virus mutates. (*COVID-1984*)

¹³ Geddes refers to Dr. Judy A. Mikovitz’s Twitter account and a tweet in which she levels accusations at Dr. Fauci: <https://twitter.com/DrJudyAMikovits/status/1251660406021656577> (last accessed 15 February 2022).

Through such statements, Geddes questions the trustworthiness of the information provided by scientists and institutions, in line with science-related populists. The latter generally subscribe to alternative epistemologies that question the establishment's production of knowledge, its methods, and its authority to make decisions and claims about "true" knowledge. In addition, science-related populists deny "the disinterestedness and objectivity of organized science" (Mede and Schäfer 2020, p. 478).

Geddes propounds an alternative epistemology that "attempts to replace established knowledge with seemingly better (but still scientific) "counterknowledge." (Mede and Schäfer 2020, p. 478). For instance, he lists several "potential treatments and cures for COVID-19" (*COVID-1984*): "hydroxychloroquine (HCQ), azithromycin, and zinc in combination (for early stage); ivermectin (for late stage); chlorine dioxide; ethanol vapour inhalation; UV light (from within the body as well as outside); nicotine; stem cell therapy; high dose vitamin C; vitamin D; famotidine". About these options, he writes: "It's no secret that there are multiple potential treatments and cures for COVID-19. Plausible ones I have noted in my online research" (*COVID-1984*). The implication of this is twofold: on the one hand, the availability of well-known and cheap remedies while the "fear-mongering" media push "ventilators, veils, and vaccines" (*COVID-1984*), on the other hand, a belief in independent online research as a credible method for shortlisting treatments for a previously unknown pathogen. This, too, is in line with science-related populism, as it both celebrates and legitimises common-sense and freedom from established knowledge authorities.

Geddes advocates the use of hydroxychloroquine which has "decades of safe use with well-known and modest risks like nausea and heart rhythm changes" (*COVID-1984*). However, he mistakenly classes arrhythmia as a modest risk. His focus is on a study showing that the use of hydroxychloroquine to treat COVID-19 patients is ineffective and lethal, and which he claims is an example of trial rigging. By advocating the use of hydroxychloroquine and claiming that its widespread use is being sabotaged by the scientific establishment and the media, Geddes indicts mainstream science.

One more element to Geddes' questioning of established scientific paradigms is his use of sources. He supports his arguments and claims by setting up a composite referencing system. His references and his sources are unconventional and non-academic. In some instances, Geddes has recourse to figures and data, two of the tenets of established scientific authoritativeness: "under 4% of deaths in Italy are due to COVID-19 alone" (*COVID-1984*). This claim's hypertextual source is an article from the independent pro-Trump news website www.thegatewaypundit.com, titled "Latest Numbers from Italy Prove Dr. Fauci and Dr. Birx Are Needlessly Destroying US

Economy.”¹⁴ The article reports statements and figures from Ned Nikolov’s Twitter account (@NikolovScience). The account has now been suspended. Both sources – a partisan news website and a Twitter account – are non-establishment and offer data that counter official media information. A second set of references in the corpus follows this pattern: “One researcher estimates a loss of 10 years of productive life for each COVID-19 death” (*COVID-1984*), and again, “I listened to a BBC Radio 4 broadcast where the news journalist said he had investigated whether any therapies existed behind [President Trump’s] words” (*COVID-1984*). On the one hand, both statements lack hyperlinks with actual sources, on the other, their vagueness (“one researcher”, “a BBC Radio 4 broadcast”, “the news journalist”) expresses an increasing banalization of sources, whereby personal narratives or hearsay replace institutional, reliable scientific data. A third referencing option sees Geddes advancing claims that lack references altogether, for example: “...this information was public and known to Dr. Fauci and his colleagues...” (*Coronagate*).

This reinforces Geddes’ publicly stated contempt for the *modus operandi* of the traditional media and established science, while it also advances his subscription to science-related populist stances.

5. Social Actor Theory and the Corpus: assimilation, association, and nomination in Geddes’s texts

Social actor theory methodologically complements critical discourse analysis. Its foremost representative is Theo van Leeuwen, whose *Discourse and Practice* aims at drawing “a socio-semantic inventory of the ways social actors can be represented” (2008, p. 23). Social actor theory has been used to analyse a plethora of phenomena such as the discourse of immigration (van Leeuwen 2008; Martínez Lirola 2016), corporate social responsibility (Bernard 2018), the analysis of collective identity (Koller 2009), and the production of ELT textbooks (Rashidi and Ghaedsharafi 2015). The theory has not been previously used in discussing the syndemic and the texts produced by COVID-19 sceptics.

Geddes’s arguments in the corpus identify a binary opposition between two main actors, the ordinary people and the academic elite, but his counter-narrative of the syndemic contains the representation of several different social actors. The following is a sample analysis of social actor representation in Geddes’ texts and is not intended to be exhaustive. The aim is to present three of the most relevant representational techniques in the corpus:

¹⁴ See <https://www.thegatewaypundit.com/2020/04/latest-numbers-italy-prove-dr-fauci-dr-birxneedlessly-destroying-us-economy/> (last accessed 3 October 2021).

nomination, assimilation, and association (2008). These prove crucial because they inform the representation of the academic elite, of the media, and of COVID-19 casualties, all three social actors are instrumental in Geddes’ conspirational construal of the syndemic.

Van Leeuwen classifies nomination as formal and semi-formal (2008, p. 41): formal nomination occurs when people are nominated by surname alone; semi-formal nomination occurs when people are nominated by name and surname. Moreover, since nomination is a powerful tool for identification, the agenda behind nominating some social actors and collectivizing others always needs questioning and investigating (van Leeuwen 2008, p. 40). Geddes’ instances of nomination are both formal and semi-formal, and sometimes titulated through the addition of standard titles, for instance “Dr. Fauci” and “Dr. Deborah Birx”. Further examples of nomination include the semi-formal “Bill Gates”. Geddes generally uses nomination to indict the academic elite, as is the case with Fauci and Birx, or the elite *tout court*, as with Bill Gates who, Geddes writes, “stands to make handsome profits from vaccines.” (COVID-1984) Further nominations concern the World Health Organisation, accused of censorship and of advocating a COVID-19 vaccine narrative that disregards risks (COVID-1984). Geddes also nominates Trump (figure 1), but in this case nomination has a celebratory function: in occurrences 1 and 2, Trump is nominated as an authoritative source of scientific information, occurrence 2 in particular is a reference to Trump’s notorious “disinfectant” *faux pas*, which Geddes interprets as a reference to chlorine dioxide, whose effectiveness as a treatment for COVID-19 he believes to have been censored by the media. (COVID-1984) In occurrences 3 and 4, Trump is nominated as a victim of media misrepresentation and political scheming.

1	CORPUS Ged	its spread has been wildly counter-profitable. President Trump	mentioned that light therapy might be a
2	CORPUS Ged	so their priorities seem rather twisted. Likewise President Trump	mentioned “disinfectant”, which is an allusion to
3	CORPUS Ged	his leadership team spied on the incoming Trump	administration, and launched a coup attempt via
4	CORPUS Ged	News” and “Fake Science”— over issues like Trump	and COVID— are fully explicable within the QAnon cosmology,

Figure 1
#LancsBox KWIC search results for “Trump”.

In line with science-related populism’s propounding of an “us VS them” dichotomous worldview, Geddes’ insistence on nomination alternates with the use of deictics, specifically, the third person plural personal pronoun “they”, which tends to refer to the establishment, either the scientific establishment or the media.

Geddes generally uses “they” in anaphoric referencing (figure 2). Some occurrences refer to established health institutions, for example occurrence 15, which refers to the American Food and Drug Administration. Occurrences 6 and 12 both refer to the World Health Organisation whose

“credibility is open to question” (*COVID-1984*), but which is understood as “the sole global authority and any dissent from their official line will have [...] content censored.” (*COVID-1984*) Many other references concern the mainstream social and traditional media, a key element in the corpus: occurrence 4 refers to “social media”, accused of engaging in “(unlawful) editorialising and censorship” (*COVID-1984*). Occurrence 9 refers to Twitter, accused of deleting every mention of Jordan Sather, an advocate of chlorine dioxide, and the *New York Times* and *Business Insider*, accused of “discrediting [Sather] and this treatment as ‘bleach’” (*COVID-1984*).

1	CORPUS Ged	any media reports at face value, for	they	are never terrain, and at best misleading
2	CORPUS Ged	to counter such a foreseen act? Well,	they	would take measures to infiltrate their enemy,
3	CORPUS Ged	senior members of the criminal cabal surrender,	they	Quarantine themselves to a military prison. This
4	CORPUS Ged	includes the major social media platforms, since	they	also frequently engage in (unlawful) editorialising and
5	CORPUS Ged	without any serious inquiry as to why	they	are suffering COVID-19 death notifications (not the
6	CORPUS Ged	like human-to-human transmissibility of this virus. What	they	also did recently was delete a tweet that says
7	CORPUS Ged	the US Surgeon General has specifically said	they	are neither necessary nor effective. So why
8	CORPUS Ged	small sample of people with co-morbidities (so	they	could all be about to die of
9	CORPUS Ged	him and this treatment as bleach. Methinks	they	do protest too much! Yet putting oxygen
10	CORPUS Ged	if these treatments work for COVID-19, but	they	do objectively exist. Vitamin D deficiency seems
11	CORPUS Ged	from Bakersfield, CA who went on record to say	they	felt the data didn't support the lockdown
12	CORPUS Ged	is open to question, yet YouTube insists	they	are the sole global authority and any
13	CORPUS Ged	like SARS from replicating in the body.	They	have withheld this important information from the
14	CORPUS Ged	emotionally comfortable and avoids awkward dilemmas. But	they	don't actually believe it. We went to
15	CORPUS Ged	FDA issue restrictions on a drug like	they	have with hydroxychloroquine. We've been told we're
16	CORPUS Ged	being left to rot and die, since	they	lack family as advocates due to isolation
17	CORPUS Ged	other causes, including old age? Where did	they	go? Where's the public outcry at the
18	CORPUS Ged	Those in the cave complex may understand	they	even have a choice of shadow plays
19	CORPUS Ged	choice of shadow plays to watch, but	they	are never given enough understanding to exit
20	CORPUS Ged	the Satanic doctrine. Each cave dweller thinks	they	live in The Truth, clinging on to
21	CORPUS Ged	who talks of exiting the cave complex:	they	are probably violent extremists and part of
22	CORPUS Ged	full-on war against objectivity at present, and	they	are not in the least bit ashamed
23	CORPUS Ged	subjection of the public to false narratives	they	perceive is genuine is smashed by the
24	CORPUS Ged	faked reality. No matter how deeply	they	are buried. There's a heavenly irony to
25	CORPUS Ged	neutral announcement of a sad necessity (which	they	have been coerced into performing), and towards
26	CORPUS Ged	wrongly) being positioned as a safety issue:	they	are not a feature of the service
27	CORPUS Ged	presenting masks as good news, as if	they	are now offering free drinks onboard. But
28	CORPUS Ged	of several brands, like Nike and NFL	They	have aligned themselves to extreme left-wing causes
29	CORPUS Ged	situation. Is this really the brand image	they	want? Badly implemented safety feature treated with
30	CORPUS Ged	been a sign to awake customers that	they	aren't keen on masks, without having to

Figure 2
#LancsBox KWIC search results for “they”.

“Media” is the most frequent lexical word in the corpus with 59 occurrences (figures 3 and 4). Its quantitative relevance is expressive of Geddes' belief in the media's role in the syndemic.

1	CORPUS Ged	I am, however, quite well versed in	media	manipulations and unpicking insanities. So let me
2	CORPUS Ged	centred on narrative supremacy via the mass	media.	On one side we have factions that
3	CORPUS Ged	system harm due to medications). OCoronavirusO	media	label isnOt the same as the OcoronavirusO
4	CORPUS Ged	should be VERY reluctant to take any	media	reports at face value, for they are
5	CORPUS Ged	in play, with an enlarged map: * The	media	has been hyping this virus, when the
6	CORPUS Ged	has covertly ruled over us. The maBa	media	has been used as a tool to
7	CORPUS Ged	homes. You seize covert control over the	media	to signal a toilet paper shortage (something
8	CORPUS Ged	reality. Decades of psychological warfare via the	media	have divided society, and we need to
9	CORPUS Ged	way. ? COVID-1984: The medical cures with no	media	bite I have no qualifications in medicine
10	CORPUS Ged	copiously qualified to comment upon is the	media	reaction to COVID-19, and whether this is
11	CORPUS Ged	or overreach? In particular, is the mass	media	performing its function of holding power (to
12	CORPUS Ged	only is the answer OnoO, but the	media	is actively promoting agendas that go against
13	CORPUS Ged	article, Othe mediaO includes the major social	media	platforms, since they also frequently engage in
14	CORPUS Ged	a rational scientific basis, and whether the	media	is doing its job in questioning them
15	CORPUS Ged	pursuing alternatives. When we look at the	media	coverage, both in the UK and US,
16	CORPUS Ged	India, are not mentioned. His foundation funds	media	companies like the BBC, creating a conflict
17	CORPUS Ged	as beingEfromEthe virus, and yet thereOs no	media	scandal in this inflation of the numbers.
18	CORPUS Ged	but this is not seen by the	media	as being problematic or newsworthy. The WHO
19	CORPUS Ged	was no need for anyone in the	media	to remind you of that). The public
20	CORPUS Ged	ironically the traditionalEcovering of slavesN by this	media	fear-mongering. Yet there is scant evidence of
21	CORPUS Ged	are the public not told by the	media	their effort is likely wasted, and to
22	CORPUS Ged	are concerned with here is whether the	media	is giving the public an accurate picture
23	CORPUS Ged	completely effectiveO. How does the US corporate	media	cover this promising news? It waits until
24	CORPUS Ged	by omission, and deeply unethical. Furthermore, extra	media	articles suddenly appeared trying toEcast doubt on
25	CORPUS Ged	pretty low! The collective effect of these	media	articles meant that search engines were flooded
26	CORPUS Ged	and a trial at Cedars-Sinai hospital. The	media	reaction? Their explanatory video was immediately deleted
27	CORPUS Ged	failure to disclose this information discredits these	media	institutions as commentators on this subject. In
28	CORPUS Ged	is subtly pointing to the work the	media	hasnOt brought into your attention. I donOt
29	CORPUS Ged	isnOt this censorship of lockdown debate a	media	scandal? The WHOOs credibility is open to
30	CORPUS Ged	So many questions, and yet so few	media	answers. You donOt need to be a
31	CORPUS Ged	mediaOs list of priorities! In particular, the	media	isnOt answering the call for cheap and
32	CORPUS Ged	the money to understand why the mass	media	is in lockstep with Big Pharma N

Figure 3
#LancsBox KWIC search results for “media”.

33	CORPUS Ged	biggest source of income. The US corporate	media	will never bite the hand the feeds
34	CORPUS Ged	reality. Time to end this Medical Mafia	Media	Party. Coronagate: the scandal to end all
35	CORPUS Ged	many in the pharma business, the corporate	media.	and in government. The size of the
36	CORPUS Ged	particular. * Tens of millions of dollars to	media	companies like NPR, EThe Guardian, and the BBC,
37	CORPUS Ged	Guardian, and the BBC, to ensure the	media	was bought off. It is OdonatedO in
38	CORPUS Ged	Clinton Foundation. Remdesivir: a false hope The	media	has been hyping this drug from Gilead,
39	CORPUS Ged	starker than in this case. The US	media	knows who pays the piper and thus
40	CORPUS Ged	exposure of massive medical fraud enabled by	media	collusion will likely follow from it, for
41	CORPUS Ged	the public needs to end immediately so	media	companies are no longer conflicted by their
42	CORPUS Ged	ObamaOs FBI and DoJ holdovers. A corrupt	media	has covered up for a corrupt government,
43	CORPUS Ged	their actions in court. Those in the	media	who have knowingly connived to hype the
44	CORPUS Ged	will trigger a deep reform our medical,	media,	and government institutions. If those reforms are
45	CORPUS Ged	society and its power base N banking,	media,	academia, and IT. On the surface of
46	CORPUS Ged	establishment in their creation of the modern	media	industry. We are endlessly marketed OscientificO schemes
47	CORPUS Ged	individual belief. In the world of social	media	and artificial intelligence algorithms, we can deliberately
48	CORPUS Ged	To sustain the conflict agenda the mass	media	needs division, and frequently manufactures it where
49	CORPUS Ged	harmonious, cannot be honestly communicated. The corporate	media	is involved in a full-on war against
50	CORPUS Ged	a failure of OobjectivityO by the mainstream	media;	thatOs a willful departure from reality by
51	CORPUS Ged	failure to successfully champion the truth. The	media	mogul owners of PlatoOs Cave Complex define
52	CORPUS Ged	which involve the complicity of the mass	media.	Specifically, we know that President Obama and
53	CORPUS Ged	through a fearmongering and corrupt medics and	media.	Yet Ivermectin, Budesonide, and Hydroxychloroquine have all
54	CORPUS Ged	Heaven is not a cavern in the	media	complex at all; it is the objective
55	CORPUS Ged	casual glance to see how the mass	media	refuses to deal with the actual merits
56	CORPUS Ged	surrounding hard evidence of widespread criminality and	media	collusion and cover-up. The QAnon phenomenon is
57	CORPUS Ged	QAnon phenomenon is positioned by the criminal	media	as an insane alternative sub-realityEwithinEtheir OUniverse Of
58	CORPUS Ged	is a very specific taboo: there cannotEeverEbe	media	discussion of the identity of Q. For
59	CORPUS Ged	Even within the OordinaryO print and online	media,	I have noticed many brands unnecessarily updating

Figure 4
#LancsBox KWIC search results for “media”.

Geddes’s main contention is that the media are misrepresenting COVID-19 in order to serve a secret political-ideological agenda (e.g. occurrences 1, 4, 5 in figure 3; occurrences 37, 38, 40 in figure 4). He represents the “media” through nomination, by addressing specific news outlets for instance, and through assimilation. Assimilation is the sociosemantic category whereby social actors are represented as groups rather than as individuals (van Leeuwen 2008, 36-38). Geddes represents the media through a subcategory of assimilation, collectivization, realized through the use of the definite article and the collective noun “media”. Collectivization implies that

mentions of specific news or social media outlets are less recurrent in the corpus; the collective “media” signal agreement (van Leeuwen 2008, p. 38) and appear as a homogenous category, disinformation in its shared practice.

The other form of assimilation in connection with the media is aggregation. Aggregation places emphasis on numbers and statistics and is realised through “definite or indefinite quantifiers which either function as a numerative or as the head of the nominal group” (van Leeuwen 2008, p. 38). Aggregation is highly effective because “[...] the majority rules [...] through mechanisms such as opinion polls, surveys, marketing research, etc.”; therefore, facts and figures tend to be unquestioned. Geddes uses aggregation to counter the COVID-19 death toll spread by the media which, he believes, is meant to manufacture panic. Aggregation is thus not employed to designate the “media” per se, but in order to offer a numerical counter-narrative regarding COVID-19 casualties. An example of aggregation is as follows: “there are an estimated 18,000 excess dead from cancer in the UK (due to delayed diagnosis and treatment) – 150,000 dead in UK [*sic*] from lockdown.” (*Coronagate*) These numbers are introduced by the following statement: “The death toll from COVID-19 increasingly looks small compared to those from lockdown.” (*Coronagate*) The by-products of COVID-19 appear worse than the virus by virtue of aggregation; moreover, the enormity of the numbers serves to hide the lack of a source for the data. Representing non-COVID-19 casualties as staggering numbers supports Geddes’ argument against restrictions.

Another example of aggregation concerns the use of hydroxychloroquine (HCQ): “65,000 patients using [HCQ] long-term for other conditions resulted in 20 COVID-19 infections and zero deaths.” (*Coronagate*) A staunch supporter of HCQ, Geddes offers data to support two statements: that HCQ works as a treatment for COVID-19, and that both science and the media wish to hide this fact. His source is the aforementioned www.gatewaypundit.com website, which redirects to a now-unavailable article from the Italian newspaper *Il Tempo*.¹⁵

One last noteworthy representational device is association, which “refers to social actors or groups of social actors [...] which are never labelled in the text [...] [Rather] than being represented as stable and institutionalized, the group is represented as an alliance which exists only in relation to a specific activity or set of activities” (van Leeuwen 2008, p. 38). This is the case of the following example: lying about the syndemic and the virus “is a crime against humanity, and encompasses many in the pharma business, the corporate media, and in government.” (*Coronagate*) Geddes successfully employs parataxis to draw the connection between Big pharma, the media,

¹⁵ <https://www.thegatewaypundit.com/2020/04/media-lied-people-died-italian-study-finds-incredible-prophylaxis-results-patients-hydroxychloroquine/> (last accessed 8 December 2021).

and politics: the trinomial signals association, whereby the three elements listed appear as naturally belonging to the same group. A further example is: “If we bring people to justice, and truly learn the lessons from it, it will trigger a deep reform of our medical, media, and government institutions.” (*Coronagate*) Using another trinomial, Geddes associates science, the media, and the government to form a group of institutions in need of reform, the subtext being that they are seriously flawed.

6. Conclusion

This article reads Geddes’ texts in the light of an epistemological paradigm shift towards a way of obtaining and disseminating knowledge that is growingly independent of experts. Geddes is a telecoms expert and a conspiracy theorist, whose views of the syndemic are highly controversial. Geddes’ texts have been shown to draw from the generic features of blogs and social media; in particular, Geddes’ community building strategies have been proven to rely on the logic of “regimes of popularity building” (KhosraviNik 2017, p. 62) and to be expressive of a reconnection with politics and the belief in citizen empowerment (KhosraviNik 2017, p. 62). Geddes’ construction of ethos in the corpus has been seen as expressive of sophistication, education, and rhetorical savvy. The corpus has also been shown to reflect science-related populism in its sharp critique of the academic elite and scientific epistemology, as well as in Geddes’ belief in independent research and alternative sources of knowledge. Lastly, the article has discussed the representation of social actors in the corpus: a focus on assimilation, association, and nomination, has shown how Geddes succeeds in using language to further his own ideological agenda.

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