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## Human responsibility in the digital sphere: A Christian ethical analysis of virtual conspiracy narratives

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### Abstract

This article offers a conceptual analysis of virtual conspiracy narratives concerning allegedly ‘bad’ world-governance practices and examines their ethical implications for social perception, moral responsibility, and the formation of civic attitudes. Drawing on the anthropological and ethical implications of Genesis 1:26, it interprets human responsibility as a form of stewardship that necessarily encompasses conduct in digital environments. Conspiracy narratives concerning globalisation, democracy, transnational institutions, artificial intelligence, and ecclesial authority circulate widely on social media and frequently distort moral understandings of governance and communal life. Informed by Christian ethics, the analysis treats these narratives as phenomena that raise significant questions about trust, social cohesion, and responsible public engagement. It further identifies key tasks for religious and educational institutions: cultivating critical thinking, epistemic responsibility, and truthful communication in order to strengthen communal resilience to digital misinformation and safeguard human dignity.

### Keywords

responsibility, stewardship, conspiracy narratives, digital communication, social cohesion, Christian ethics

From a Christian perspective, the world is a wounded yet fundamentally good creation entrusted to humanity for habitation, development, and responsible care. God commissions human beings to govern creation; within this horizon, stewardship acquires its meaning. Beem observes that the expressions ‘to be like us’ (Gen 1:26) and ‘in His own image’ (Gen 1:27) indicate God’s intention to impart qualities that enable responsible governance. Although the fall impaired humanity’s original condition, human beings retained essential attributes—such as intellect, creativity, and the capacity to love—that make responsible stewardship possible (Beem 2007, 13).

Guardini links the Biblical mandate to ‘rule and administer the earth’ (Gen 1:26) with the ethical dimension of human responsibility, emphasising that this mandate extends to every sphere in which human life unfolds (Guardini 2001, 21). In the contemporary context, this necessarily includes the digital environment. As Rabenda-Nowak and Wylęgły (2022, 171) observe, Christian engagement with the postmodern world must attend to ‘all its changing cultural and social circumstances.’ The digital sphere, therefore, cannot remain ‘foreign’; it has become a domain requiring participation, discernment, and ethical vigilance as part of Christian stewardship. In this article, ‘stewardship’ denotes responsibility for the world-governance practices that shape contemporary social and technological realities.

Stewardship, however, must be considered alongside the contrasting phenomenon of conspiracism, which is central to this study.<sup>1</sup> At the lexical level, The-saurus.com associates ‘conspiracy’ with such terms as plot, scheme, intrigue, and machination (Thesaurus.com n.d.). Lexical associations alone do not define conspiracism, but they help explain the term’s predominantly negative connotations. Ritenbaugh likewise emphasises its orientation towards suspicion and distortion. Conspiracism introduces mistrust into the created world and may undermine cooperative action directed towards the common good (Ritenbaugh 2014).

Moreover, the apocalyptic orientation of many conspiracy narratives can generate fear, paralysis, and extreme responses. This orientation conflicts with stewardship by fostering negativity and passivity and by legitimising forms

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<sup>1</sup> The expression ‘conspiracy theory of society’, rather than the noun ‘conspiracism’, was influentially formulated by Karl Popper in *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (1945) as part of his critique of historicism. Hannah Arendt’s *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) likewise contributed to post-war analysis of conspiratorial worldviews (Arendt 1951; Butter and Knight 2015; Popper 1945).

of social disruption that threaten cohesion. Rather than encouraging constructive engagement, conspiratorial worldviews may prompt withdrawal or hostility, thereby weakening responsible public participation.

This study offers a conceptual analysis of virtual conspiracy narratives—particularly those portraying ‘bad’ world-governance practices—as a significant challenge to ethical responsibility in the digital sphere. It aims to clarify how such narratives shape contemporary perceptions of authority, truth, and communal life and to identify the challenges they pose to Christian communities and wider society. Methodologically, the article adopts a conceptual analysis grounded in theological anthropology and social-ethical reflection rather than an empirical research design.

## 1. Responsible stewardship in the digital space

As indicated above, the Church documents discussed by Paľa and Petro recognise that, despite its risks, the internet is a valuable means of communication and can serve the Church; it may also complement and support religious life. The teaching of St John Paul II makes clear that the means of mass communication must remain *means* rather than ends: tools, not goals (Paľa and Petro 2010, 53). Online risks, however, cannot be ignored. Human responsibility extends fully to digital space, in which harmful phenomena have accompanied the medium’s development.<sup>2</sup> Misinformation and media manipulation are particularly significant because they threaten both individual discernment and social cohesion. As John Paul II (1997) observed, the media can promote the good only when grounded in ethical principles and truth.

Within the context of conspiracism,<sup>3</sup> every participant in the digital sphere bears responsibility for the accuracy and reliability of the information they

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<sup>2</sup> Launched in 1969, ARPANET provided a foundational packet-switching network for academic and governmental communication. Tim Berners-Lee proposed the World Wide Web in 1989 and released it publicly in 1991; electronic mail, developed on ARPANET in the early 1970s, became widespread during the 1990s. In the mid-2000s, platforms such as Facebook (2004), YouTube (2005), and Twitter (2006) helped transform the web into an interactive environment structured around user-generated content (Abbate 1999; Berners-Lee 1999).

<sup>3</sup> Butter and Knight (2015) caution against treating the ‘conspiracy theory’ as a self-evident or uniformly pejorative category. From the least to the most elaborate forms, they distinguish

share. This responsibility extends beyond personal online conduct to the protection of potentially vulnerable groups, including children, adolescents, and older adults. It becomes more urgent given the ambiguity of some conspiracy-related content, the frequently deceptive purposes of its producers, and the need to distinguish between verified conspiracies, hypotheses, rumours, and comprehensive conspiracist worldviews.

In increasingly secularised contexts, belief in God may persist while exerting limited influence on everyday life and moral orientation. Such conditions can create space for simplified interpretative narratives to circulate in digital environments (Maturkanič et al. 2023).

This responsibility deepens when one considers that conspiracy theories rarely disappear from public consciousness. As Panczová notes, they tend to re-emerge, particularly in relation to events that carry strong religious or political symbolism and align with ideologies expressing pessimistic or apocalyptic visions of the world's future (Panczová 2017b). In this sense, conspiracy theories may become effective tools for legitimising radical anti-system ideologies. They frequently 'try to name the frustrations shared by the general public and offer a suitable image of the enemy' (Panczová 2017a, 283), often by positing an alleged agenda of domination, exploitation, or destruction (Butter and Knight 2015).

The global character of conspiracy narratives becomes especially visible online, where communication transcends many constraints of physical time and space. In this environment, virtual and viral conspiracy narratives acquire distinctive features. According to Pocheptsov (2019), their impact is intensified by rapid dissemination, broad reach, targeted emotional influence, and manipulative communication strategies. Conspiracism typically favours conflict-driven narratives that increase engagement and accelerate circulation. These narratives may subsequently migrate from online settings into offline life, contributing to social tension and instability.

## 2. Conspiracy theories and the character of digital media

The tendency of online narratives to spill over into offline social reality draws attention to two key concepts: 'virtual' and 'viral'. The term '*virtual*' refers to events

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*conspiracy rumour, conspiracy hypothesis, conspiracy imagination, conspiracy ideology, and conspiracy myth or mythology.*

or interactions within a digital or simulated environment (Rheingold 1991; Lévy 1998). By contrast, '*viral*' denotes the rapid and extensive dissemination of content across digital platforms when images, videos, or messages gain visibility through large-scale sharing (Berger 2013; Nahon and Hemsley 2013).

Digital platforms and social media play a decisive role in circulating virtual and often simultaneously viral conspiracy narratives. As noted above, the structural features of social media facilitate the acceptance and dissemination of such narratives. By altering traditional communication patterns and encouraging continuous participation, digital platforms provide broad access to conspiracy content, which users create, share, and modify (Levy 2017). This dynamic creates substantial challenges for the early detection and containment of false information (Khan, Michalas, and Akhunzada 2021).

The technological architecture of digital media enables rapid, often unfiltered access to information and may expose users to few balancing or contradictory viewpoints. Repeated exposure to congenial views can reinforce attitudinal biases, intensify emotional responses, and deepen affective polarisation (Serrano-Puche 2021).

The spread of conspiracy narratives is driven not only by technology but also by cognitive and psychological tendencies. Human curiosity and the desire to explain complex events can be exploited by oversimplified or emotionally charged narratives (Willing 2021). Although such narratives offer the appearance of insight, they often function as epistemic shortcuts that bypass the rigorous processes required to acquire reliable knowledge. Sustained exposure to persuasive online content cannot substitute for systematic inquiry; instead, it may generate misplaced confidence and an illusion of understanding.

The appeal of conspiracy narratives lies partly in their narrative structure. Conspiracy and debunking videos can mobilise emotions such as fear and trust to engage audiences (Kim and Chen 2024), while conspiracy narratives themselves offer seemingly clear explanations for complex phenomena. Their plots are often presented as straightforward accounts that identify specific individuals or groups as responsible for major events (Sieg 2020). These stories rely heavily on intuitive cognitive processing, allowing rapid judgements without deeper analytical reflection (Brashier and Schacter 2020). By appealing to prior commitments and presenting partial interpretations as comprehensive accounts, conspiracy narratives circumvent the contextual and evidential work required for reliable understanding.

These dynamics are fully visible in contemporary digital media, where users interact, circulate content, and form networks or communities in technologically mediated settings (Tuten and Solomon 2015). Analyses of Twitter data illustrate how such platforms support information dissemination, sentiment expression, and networked communication (Shankar and Tewari 2021). Together, these technological and psychological mechanisms contribute significantly to the spread of cyber conspiracy narratives concerning ‘bad’ forms of stewardship in contemporary society.

### **3. Illustrative clusters of virtual and viral conspiracy narratives concerning ‘bad’ stewardship**

As indicated above, ‘conspiracism’ commonly carries negative connotations (Ritenbaugh 2014). In the context of ‘bad’ world-governance practices, such narratives function as distorted interpretations of stewardship, framing global, political, technological, and religious developments as deliberately harmful or hostile.

To structure these patterns analytically, six illustrative clusters of virtual and viral conspiracy narratives are identified below. These clusters represent recurring thematic configurations rather than an exhaustive typology.

#### **3.1. Globalisation as concealed domination**

Conspiracy narratives about globalisation combine motifs drawn from anti-Masonry, antisemitism, radical ‘anti-Zionism’, anti-Americanism, and anti-capitalism. They portray globalisation as a destructive, concealed process orchestrated by malign actors. In some versions, the United States and Israel appear as ‘absolute enemies’ within a supposed ‘dark alliance’ associated with secularisation and pluralist democracy (Butter and Knight 2015).

*Core function:* These narratives reinterpret global interdependence as a plot of domination, *thereby* undermining solidarity and ethical cooperation.

#### **3.2. Democracy as a façade for global oppression**

This cluster depicts democracy not as a framework of shared responsibility but as a mechanism manipulated by ‘new rulers of the world’. Conspiratorial

narratives emphasise an antagonistic division between dominant elites and oppressed populations, with manipulation, secrecy, and deceit as central motifs (Butter and Knight 2015).

*Core function:* These narratives delegitimise democratic institutions and erode civic responsibility.

### 3.3. The American ‘hidden government’ (deep state)

Conspiracist accounts posit an invisible network operating behind U.S. institutions and directing global politics, finance, and crises. Some narratives attribute the emergence or spread of HIV/AIDS and SARS-CoV-2 to U.S. state actors or laboratories.<sup>4</sup> Related narratives portray the United States as covertly intervening in other states’ domestic politics.

*Core function:* These narratives erode trust in public authority and weaken responsible discernment.

### 3.4. Transnational institutions as instruments of control

Institutions such as the EU, UN, and NATO are depicted as hostile actors working against citizens’ interests. The UN is associated with the ‘New World Order’.<sup>5</sup> In a nationally representative 2021 survey, 61 per cent of respondents in Montenegro agreed that a secret group of powerful people controls developments in the world; the same source reported substantial cross-national variation in endorsement of this belief (UNICEF Montenegro 2021).

*Core function:* These narratives distort international cooperation and portray peacebuilding structures as tools of oppression.

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<sup>4</sup> Conspiracy narratives surrounding HIV/AIDS have included allegations that the virus was engineered to target racial minorities; COVID-19 narratives have likewise attributed SARS-CoV-2 to deliberate laboratory manufacture or release. These claims are analytically distinct and should not be conflated with evidence-based inquiry into pathogen origins (Bogart and Thorburn 2005; Douglas 2021).

<sup>5</sup> The ‘New World Order’ conspiracy alleges that a small transnational elite controls governments, industry, civil society, and the media in pursuit of a single world government, often through manufactured crises. Although its motifs have older roots, the narrative became especially prominent in U.S. far-right and anti-globalist discourse during the late twentieth century and has since been applied to events including the COVID-19 pandemic (Institute for Strategic Dialogue 2022).

3.5. Artificial intelligence as an existential threat

Conspiracy narratives portray AI as a technology destined to control or destroy humanity. In these accounts, AI represents the culmination of irresponsible governance and technological hubris.

*Core function:* These narratives amplify fear of technological progress and reinterpret responsibility as inevitable loss of control.

3.6. The ‘hidden Church’ and secret Christian knowledge

These narratives assert that the Church conceals esoteric truths, ancient teachings, or spiritual knowledge and thereby manipulates believers. Radical versions deny the historicity of Jesus, despite ancient non-Christian testimony, including Tacitus’s *Annals* 15.44 (Van Voorst 2000, 39–53).

*Core function:* These narratives undermine ecclesial authority, portraying stewardship as deliberate concealment rather than pastoral responsibility.

Table 1. Illustrative clusters of virtual and viral conspiracy narratives concerning ‘bad’ stewardship

| Cluster                    | Central idea                                                        | Core function (ethical/social impact)                              |
|----------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Globalisation              | Global processes allegedly controlled by hidden hostile actors      | Undermines global solidarity; reframes cooperation as domination   |
| Democracy                  | Democratic governance interpreted as manipulation by elites         | Delegitimises institutions; weakens civic responsibility           |
| Deep state (USA)           | Hidden networks directing global events from within U.S. structures | Erodes trust in authority; fuels suspicion and resentment          |
| Transnational institutions | EU, UN, and NATO presented as oppressive global forces              | Distorts understanding of cooperation and peacebuilding            |
| Artificial intelligence    | AI seen as future dominator of humanity                             | Amplifies fear; portrays technological stewardship as failure      |
| Hidden Church              | Church accused of concealing true Christian teachings               | Weakens ecclesial trust; reframes spiritual stewardship as secrecy |

Source: Author’s own elaboration

Although these clusters differ in thematic content, they share a common ethical dynamic: they simplify complex realities, construct hostile ‘hidden enemies’, erode trust in legitimate authorities, and displace responsibility from

individuals onto imagined conspiratorial forces. In this way, they challenge responsible stewardship by fostering fear, passivity, and social fragmentation. These mechanisms illustrate the broader ethical and social implications of virtual conspiracy narratives in the digital sphere.

#### **4. Ethical and social implications of virtual conspiracy narratives for responsible stewardship**

The preceding sections have argued that conspiracy narratives concerning ‘bad’ world-governance practices, interpreted here as distortions of stewardship, are shaped by digital-media structures, users’ cognitive tendencies, and the narrative logic of conspiratorial clusters. The six illustrative clusters show how virtual and viral conspiracies simplify complex realities, construct symbolic enemies, and undermine ethical responsibility. Such dynamics conflict with John Paul II’s account of global communication as a medium that should serve truth, proclamation, and communion (John Paul II 2001).

These mechanisms are especially potent in digital environments that reward speed, emotional intensity, and repetition. As shown above, digital-media structures can reinforce intuitive judgements, amplify existing beliefs, and encourage engagement with content that resonates with fear, anxiety, or ideological predispositions (Levy 2017; Serrano-Puche 2021). As Pocheptsov (2019) emphasises, the virtual sphere enables rapid dissemination and targeted influence and permits online conflict narratives to migrate repeatedly into offline tensions.

From the perspective of Christian anthropology, these developments pose serious ethical and pastoral challenges. Stewardship, grounded in Gen 1:26 and interpreted by Beem (2007, 13) and Guardini (2001, 21), requires responsibility, discernment, and fidelity to truth. Conspiracism counters this vocation by nurturing distrust and redirecting attention away from constructive engagement in communal and moral life. In doing so, it disrupts the orientation towards truth that is essential to Christian responsibility.

Conspiracy narratives also have significant implications for social cohesion. They construct antagonistic divisions between ‘oppressors’ and ‘victims’, recast democratic processes as deception, and depict global or ecclesial actors as hostile forces operating in secret. Such portrayals erode the common good—a central principle of Catholic social teaching—by weakening the interpersonal trust and mutual responsibility required for cooperative social life. These dynamics

may be especially consequential for younger users, whose developmental stage, identity formation, and intensive participation in digital environments can increase exposure to manipulative content (Tóthová and Šlosár 2018).

Moreover, conspiracy narratives challenge core elements of Christian moral life. By generating apocalyptic visions that obscure hope, fostering resentment that disrupts love of neighbour, and undermining the trust that sustains faith, they distort the theological virtues and weaken the moral fabric of communities. They also threaten human dignity by instrumentalising fear, exploiting cognitive vulnerabilities, and reducing individuals to passive recipients of external manipulation. Such tendencies contradict the Christian understanding of the person as a seeker of truth, endowed with intellect and conscience and capable of responsible discernment.

In this context, Christianity faces the task of showing how conspiracy narratives distort not only social reality but also moral and spiritual judgement. Digital misinformation can contribute to a malformed conscience by encouraging rapid, emotionally charged interpretations at the expense of patient and truthful discernment. As noted above, virtual and viral conspiracy narratives can lead to ideological rigidity, polarisation, and, in some cases, religious or political extremism (Stacy 2023). To counter these tendencies, religious communities can cultivate spaces in which truth is sought collaboratively, questions are welcomed, and shared discernment supports both individual and collective moral resilience.

Digital media actors also bear responsibility in this landscape. Their task extends beyond disseminating accurate information to supporting users' critical competence. Educational formats, analytical commentary, and moderated discussion can strengthen epistemic responsibility by helping individuals evaluate sources and distinguish verified facts from speculative narratives. By fostering digital discernment, media actors can contribute to resilient and cohesive communities capable of resisting virtual manipulation.

In summary, resisting the intellectual and spiritual appeal of conspiracy narratives requires coordinated action by individuals, religious communities, digital media actors, and society as a whole. Responsible stewardship in the digital sphere entails truthfulness, vigilance, and ethical engagement rooted in respect for human dignity, the common good, and the pursuit of truth. These considerations frame the conclusion, which synthesises the ethical and social implications discussed above and identifies future directions for cultivating epistemic responsibility and social cohesion in an era shaped by digital misinformation.

The analysis presented in this article highlights the need for responsible stewardship through truthful and critical engagement with digital environments. Ethical formation today requires digital discernment: Christians are called to cultivate epistemic responsibility and resist reductive or manipulative narratives that undermine communal life. Strengthening information literacy is essential because virtual conspiracy narratives erode trust, fracture communities, and fuel polarisation. Religious, educational, and civic institutions therefore play a key role in fostering environments grounded in truth, transparency, and solidarity and in promoting a more resilient and ethically formed public sphere.

This study is conceptual and does not involve empirical research; its conclusions rest on conceptual and theological analysis. The six clusters presented here are illustrative analytical categories rather than an exhaustive typology, and culturally specific variations may reveal other dynamics. Furthermore, because digital platforms evolve rapidly, the mechanisms described may change over time. Despite these limitations, the study offers a conceptual framework for understanding virtual conspiracism and its ethical, social, and theological implications.

## Conclusions

This article has examined virtual conspiracy narratives depicting 'bad' world-governance practices and analysed their ethical implications through the lenses of Christian anthropology and digital stewardship. By outlining six clusters, it has shown how virtual and viral conspiracism can reshape public perception, distort trust, and challenge responsible civic and ecclesial engagement. Digital media intensify these effects by amplifying emotional content, reinforcing cognitive biases, and circulating reductive explanations of complex realities.

From a Christian perspective, these developments touch the core of human responsibility. According to the mandate in Gen 1:26, stewardship is constitutive of human identity. As Beem (2007, 13) and Guardini (2001, 21) argue, intellect, creativity, moral agency, and the capacity to love enable human beings to act as responsible stewards within the digital sphere, where truth is communicated and social narratives are formed. Conspiratorial thinking can undermine this vocation by substituting suspicion for truth, fragmentation for unity, and imagined hidden forces for responsible governance.

Digital stewardship therefore entails more than technical literacy; it also requires epistemic responsibility, moral discernment, and commitment to the common good. Conspiracy narratives weaken these virtues by eroding institutional trust, dividing communities, and encouraging fatalistic worldviews. They exploit human vulnerabilities, including those of young people navigating identity in digital environments. In response, truthful communication, critical reflection, and community-oriented responsibility are essential elements of Christian engagement with digital culture.

Responsible participation in the digital sphere is therefore inseparable from the broader Christian call to justice, peace, and solidarity. Stewardship, understood as the ethical governance of physical and virtual environments, must remain grounded in human dignity and oriented towards the common good. In an age marked by digital misinformation, the call to truthfulness is especially urgent. Embracing this responsibility can contribute to resilient, discerning, and ethically grounded societies capable of responding to digital challenges with wisdom and hope.

As digital culture evolves, stewardship must be understood as a dynamic responsibility requiring vigilance and interior discernment. Conspiracy narratives can distort public understanding and affect spiritual life by replacing contemplation with suspicion and diminishing hope. Christian anthropology offers a stable foundation for navigating this landscape by affirming that truth, dignity, and solidarity are indispensable to every culture, physical or digital. The long-term task is not only to resist misinformation but also to cultivate digital spaces and personal dispositions in which truthful communication and moral clarity can flourish.

## **Conflict of interest**

The author declares that no commercial, financial, or other relationships could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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