



Genesis and Structure of the Alternative Field. Conspiracy Theories, Alternative Medicine, and the Fight against the Mainstream

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Published on 29/05/2024

Abstract

Conspiracy theories and their relation to religion are widely discussed. Drawing on Bourdieu's concept of social fields, this article proposes the concept of an alternative field where various actors with alternative views converge. By examining a conspiracy theory blog with links to alternative medicine and alternative religious views, the paper reconstructs how knowledge is legitimated and produced within this alternative field. The concept provides a distinct analytical approach to shed light on the intersection of religion and conspiracy theories by focusing on actors and their knowledge production, thus complementing existing research approaches.

1. Introduction

Conspiracy theories and their public contestation are ubiquitous (Anton/Schink 2021: 9–11). The rallies against Covid-19 containment policies have propelled debates on knowledge and reality from the margins to the centre of social consciousness (Holzer et al. 2021: 7). Religious semantics are prevalent in these discussions. The protesters are said to be close to esotericism (Nocun/Lamberty 2020: 201–218) and spiritual beliefs (Pöhlmann 2021: 23–28), while popular discussions make use of concepts such as “conspiracy myths” (Blume 2020: 19), “conspiracy belief” (Koos/Binder 2021: 307–311), and anti-Semitism (Balandat et al. 2021: 102).

This linkage is not surprising, given that the relationship between conspiracy theories and religion has been the focus of research since the earliest days of scholarship on conspiracy theories (Dyrendal 2016: 199). Karl Popper, an early scholar in the field (Butter 2018: 142), already identified a connection, as for him conspiracy theories assumed functions that religion had fulfilled prior to secularisation (Popper 1957: 89–99). Over time, the study of religion and conspiracy theories has evolved and diversified. Popper's suggestion of structural analogies between religion and conspiracy theories, or, more broadly, of conspiracy theories *as* religion (Dyrendal/Robertson/Asprem 2018: 3) has also been reflected in later research, namely in philosophical arguments on epistemology (Keeley 2007), in research on esotericism (Dyrendal 2013: 224), and in studies on conspiracy myths (Heep 2022: 364).

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To quote this article: Bawidamann, Loïc. 2024. “Genesis and Structure of the Alternative Field. Conspiracy Theories, Alternative Medicine, and the Fight against the Mainstream.” *ARGOS* (3) 1, 1–25. DOI: 10.26034/fr.argos.2024.5535.

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In recent years, there has been growing concern about conspiracy theories targeting religious communities (Dyrendal/Robertson/Aspreem 2018: 3). An exceedingly prominent instance is the narrative of the Jewish world conspiracy and the forgery known as *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (Hagmeister 2002). Other examples include the *Satanic panic* of the 1980s and 1990s (Robertson 2016: 86–89) and various conspiracy theories surrounding cases of abuse and “brainwashing” in new religious movements (Dyrendal 2016: 200–202).

A link between religion and conspiracy theories has also been identified regarding the groups of people who advocate and disseminate them. Conspiracy theories *in* religion are frequently studied in the context of millenarianism and religious communities (Dyrendal/Robertson/Aspreem 2018: 3, 6), though they are also prevalent outside of communal and institutionalised religion. For example, Charlotte Ward and David Voas (2011) demonstrate the significance of conspiracy theories in New Age circles, which they refer to as conspirituality. This concept captures the fusion of conspiracy theories and the awakening of a new consciousness as envisioned in alternative spiritual milieus (Ward/Voas 2011: 104).

To summarise, conspiracy theories are a central focus of research in the study of religion, as they can be seen as functional equivalents of religion, have religious communities as their object, or are represented by religious actors. While many studies have considered the intersection of religion and conspiracy theories by analysing consumers and their religious contexts (Beauchamp 2022: 9–12), discussing the religious references of well-known conspiracy theorists (Robertson 2013: 32–39), or examining how religious actors challenge the structuring of society (Bawidamann 2024), this article focuses on the composition and dynamics that underpin the production of conspiracy theories. It thus represents a novel approach to understanding the relationship between religion and conspiracy theories by focusing on the diverse actors that produce alternative media.

The religious studies perspective also proves valuable in gaining insights when conspiracy theories have no religious content. This is because the religious studies distances itself from the normative approaches of other disciplines that dismiss conspiracy theories as pathological or inherently false. For religious studies, conspiracy theories, like religious beliefs, are not analysed in terms of their rationality or validity but in terms of their inner logic (Robertson 2017: 7). Following Max Weber, assessing (ir)rationality cannot be the task of a discipline oriented towards cultural phenomena (Aupers 2012: 23). This article endorses this view by excluding “truth claims” (Robertson 2016: 38), regardless of whether they are religious or conspiratorial.

Consequently, caution must be exercised when using the term “conspiracy theory”. The term carries pejorative connotations and is frequently employed to disqualify knowledge (Harambam 2020: 11). However, despite its delegitimising function (Pelkmans/Machold 2011: 76), it is used here in the following sense:

“ A conspiracy theory is a proposed explanation of some historical event (or events) in terms of the significant causal agency of a relatively small group of persons – the conspirators – acting in secret. (Keeley 1999: 116)

Accordingly, this paper is agnostic to conspiracy theories because they cannot be falsified *per se* (Keeley 2007: 147).¹ Conspiracy theories require interpretation in their respective social contexts (Coady 2003: 199, 206), and the use of the term must always be seen in the light of the corresponding power relations (Robertson 2016: 38).²

Centring on an actor in conspiracy theory media and the religious field, the present paper argues that the relationship between religion and conspiracy theories can be understood by considering the position of these theories as an alternative to dominant perspectives. However, not only the actors' media content but also their epistemic strategies, their religious practices and beliefs, and their attitudes towards medical issues, are alternatives in this sense.

Drawing on Bourdieu's field theory, this article presents the emergence and structure of an *alternative field*, in which all actors are united by their conviction that it is desirable to oppose prevailing perspectives. Producers of alternative media channels perceive themselves as counterparts to dominant interpretive authorities they do not trust. Hence, the willingness of alternative media creators to talk to academics is limited, which impacted the sampling strategy. Given this restricted access, the case discussed was obtained through purposive sampling (Patton 2002: 230–247).³ Several types of data were collected from the blog *legitim.ch*. The primary data type for analysis is published media content. These freely available articles were collected using web scraping via a specially programmed scraper tool. The analysis includes all *legitim.ch* articles published before 1 May 2022 (a total of 791). In addition, problem-centred interviews (Lamnek 2005: 363–365) lasting several hours and informal conversations with the host of *legitim.ch* were incorporated as a second data type. To analyse the variety of data, this study made use of Grounded Theory (Glaser/Strauss 1967): The data was coded three times: first openly, then axially, and finally selectively (Böhm 2012: 477–485), with the assistance of *ATLAS.ti* software.

In the following, I present Bourdieu's field theory in detail and explore its dynamics of change. I then present the alternative news blog *legitim.ch*, which is associated with alternative religious and medical ideas, and trace how this medium and its operator position themselves as an alternative to mainstream offers. Finally, I use this case study to derive the alternative field as an analytical category.

¹ See Dentith (2014) for a detailed discussion.

² Sociologists of knowledge, drawing on the social constructivist approach of Berger and Luckmann, arrive at similar conclusions on how to approach conspiracy theories (Anton 2011: 25–31).

³ Other cases have been studied but are not discussed here due to lack of space (Bawidamann 2024: 8–10).

2. Bourdieu's theory of fields

In order to approach conspiracy theories as described above, the following section introduces Pierre Bourdieu's conceptualisation of the religious field and examines its dynamics of change. It then focuses on epistemic capital and emphasises how this concept can be instructive for the study of conspiracy theories.

The religious field

A crucial aspect of Bourdieu's praxeology is the notion of the social field. Bourdieu used a game analogy to develop this theoretical concept. However, for the social field, unlike the playing field in sports, no rules are consciously created; instead, regularities exist without being explicit. Power relations between the players constitute the structure of a field, whereby the relative strength of the players depends on their position within the power relations. The strategies of the players are determined by the total capital available and by the composition of the field at a given point in time. The players engage in the game to either increase or preserve capital. On the basis of the capital available to them, they can strategically change the regularities of the field in order to shift the balance of power in their favour (Bourdieu/Wacquant 1992: 97–100). There are constant struggles among the various actors; a field is thus not static, but historical. Social fields are therefore spaces of constant change with prevailing regularities that are constantly mutable (Bourdieu/Wacquant 1992: 102–109).

The formation of a "relatively autonomous religious field" (Bourdieu 1991: 5) rests on the division of material and mental labour – a distinction Bourdieu adopts from Karl Marx (Bourdieu 1991: 6) – which leads to the emergence of religious specialists solely focussed on mental labour. Following Weber, Bourdieu identifies three ideal types of such specialists:⁴ magicians, priests, and prophets, all of whom compete for the attention of the laity and its economic and symbolic capital. The priesthood derives its religious legitimacy from a constant rationalisation of religion. Instead of responding to immediate needs, as the magician does, the priest offers continuous services that form part of everyday life (Bourdieu 1987b: 119–129). In this context, ideological and material interests of the laity and priests are decisive, as they give rise to specific manifestations of religion, such as monotheism (Bourdieu 1991: 4–7). According to Schultheis (2008: 39–41), social classes have different religious interests. The wealthy upper class seeks to rationalise its position through priestly services, whereas the poor rural population, dependent on nature, are drawn to magical rituals that enable them to cope with their working conditions. Conversely, the emerging middle class, which seeks to oppose the existing order, is interested in

⁴ Max Weber includes a fourth ideal type, the mystagogue, which Bourdieu does not adopt. Mystagogues, who, like magicians, perform symbolic work for remuneration, but at the same time gather a community around them like prophets, receive little attention in Weber's *Economy & Society* (1978: 446–447; Dericquebourg 2001: 149–152), which may explain Bourdieu's neglect.

the religious work of prophets. According to Bourdieu's typology, different social configurations lead to different forms of religion, depending on the dynamics among social classes.

Bourdieu bases his theory on a distinct conception of the religious field, which has been criticised in many ways. It is disputed whether the religious field he describes ever existed. The concept of a monopolistic dominant church – which, for Bourdieu, corresponds to “the church [...] in Medieval Europe” (1991: 29) – is historically questionable, dispelled by the religious plurality that has always existed in Western Europe (Steckel 2019: 346–353). Furthermore, those categorised as prophets have not invariably rebelled against the dominant order and there are historical examples that call this typology into question (Berlinerblau 2001: 248). These controversies indicate the significant influence of French Roman Catholic society on Bourdieu's understanding of the religious field. Critics have claimed that this legacy means it is challenging to use Bourdieu's theory to analyse non-Catholic communities fruitfully (Thielmann 2013: 203–208). The notion of the field poses similar problems for the study of non-European contexts. The USA, for example, features a high degree of religious plurality (Dianteill 2003: 545–547), and in non-Christian societies, numerous alternative forms of religious experts can be identified (Broy 2017: 310–315). However, despite Bourdieu's historically questionable premises, the field concept remains prevalent in the study of religion. Its emphasis on dynamic field boundaries formed in the respective fields facilitates its application in various historical, geographical, and religious contexts (Rey 2014: 107–131; Karstein 2019: 497–499).

It is debatable to what extent Bourdieu understood the religious field as a reproduction of a particular religious landscape, given his acknowledgement of significant transformations during his lifetime. For example, in his text *La dissolution du religieux* (1987a),⁵ he observed the diversification of religious offerings that accompanies the deep crisis facing institutionalised religion. This observation is particularly interesting for the issues discussed here. According to Bourdieu (1987a: 117–123), with the increase in offerings for body and mind, religious laypeople began to consult non-priestly experts about their concerns. Consequently, the contested boundaries of the religious field have been softened, and the formerly clear demarcation from the medical field has become blurred. Bourdieu states that these offerings, which assert truths and values using the language of science, have no more and no less in common with science than those of the religious authorities of the past, but they have fundamentally changed the dynamics of the religious field.

The dissolution of the religious field

Bourdieu accurately assessed the dissolution of the religious field, but his approach to individualised religion was insufficient. Danièle Hervieu-Léger (2000: 109–112), for instance, stresses that Bourdieu's assumption of a laity without capital is an insurmountable problem of his

⁵ Dianteill notes that while English translations are available for other essays in *Choses Dites*, this text has not been translated into English (2003: 548).

field theory. According to Hervieu-Léger, religious specialists today stand in competition with the laity, the customers themselves, which fundamentally questions the dynamics of the field. Others share this criticism. Bradford Verter (2003: 157–165), for example, has attempted to adapt the concept of religious capital by introducing a new form of spiritual capital, over which actors in the extended religious field compete. He notes that the conventional distinction between religious specialists and laypeople is inadequate when dealing with de-institutionalised, eclectic, individualised, and networked forms of religiosity. In this context, Verter (2003: 170) also raises a second point of critique, namely that fields are not as autonomous as Bourdieu suggests. Rather, the boundaries of the religious field are shifting and blurring, which necessitates a recontextualisation of autonomous fields in light of recent developments (Reuter 2009: 2; McKinnon/Trzebiatowska/Brittain 2011: 362).

Consequently, to serve as a precise tool in contemporary sociological analyses, Bourdieu's highly regarded concept of the religious field needs to be adapted. To a degree, he already made just such an adjustment himself. His praxeology states that all fields rely on field-internal capital, logic, and belief (Bourdieu/Wacquant 1992: 104–108; Bourdieu 2017: 178). In this context, Bourdieu speaks of structural homology and transfers observations from one field to another. Thus, if one field dissolves, this has consequences for the others. Strictly speaking, this would mean that the end of one field would lead to the end of other fields. However, Bourdieu himself (1987a: 119) offers a different interpretation, according to which the boundaries of the religious field become blurred because the actors compete on a higher level, namely through symbolic manipulation. In this superordinate field, different actors compete to impose their interpretations of the world. In this competition, religion is only one of many possible interpretations.

From belief to epistemic capital

When considering the structural homology between the different fields, Pierre Bourdieu (2017: 178) concludes that belief is of central importance to each field:

“ [A]ny field raises the question of the belief there is in this field; and in any field, the heretic is not so much someone who questions belief in itself as someone who challenges those who uphold a particular form of belief, that is, those who claim to have a monopoly of belief as it exists today [...].

Consequently, in conflicts within the religious field, it is not belief in God that is at stake, but belief in the authority of those who defend a particular belief in God (Bourdieu 2017: 177–179).

However, the explicit emphasis on belief, as quoted above, is rarely found in Bourdieu's work, as he prefers to speak of the *doxa*. The *doxa* refers to a belief that acts as a condition of entry into a field, regulating admission. Compliance with the field's *doxa* is “undisputed, pre-reflexive, naive” (Bourdieu 1992: 68) and may appear absurd or illusory to outsiders, while field participants may

not necessarily be aware of its composition (Costey 2005: 20–21).⁶ So the prophets are challenging the monopoly of the priesthood, not religion itself. The heretics are precisely those competitors who abide by the rules of the game and who, therefore, cannot be removed from the field (Bourdieu 2017: 177–181).

In contemporary research, disputes involving actors from the religious field tend to arise at a superordinate level, such as in the field of cultural production (Verter 2003: 164–170) or symbolic manipulation (Bourdieu 1987a: 119), for which no clear *doxa* can be identified. Psychologists, for example, are not competitors in the religious field, but they do compete with religious specialists. For religious actors, however, attempting to convince laypeople that psychotherapists are not religious agents is not an effective strategy in the struggle for power, since the therapists in question – unlike ideal-typical magicians in the religious field – would not fight this exclusion and might even seek it themselves. Nevertheless, they remain competitors. Other strategies therefore come into play in superordinate fields, and the epistemic capital of the actors involved is called into question.

The concept of epistemic capital originates from the sociologist Karl Maton (2003: 57–58), who, with reference to Bourdieu, analyses an intellectual field that is superordinate to intellectual sub-fields such as science, literature, or journalism. In this field, the actors compete for the ability to explain the world; in doing so, they employ strategies to produce knowledge. David G. Robertson (2016: 29), who has taken up Maton’s original concept, formulates this as follows:

“ Epistemic capital, in this instance, does not map what you know but how you can know. In academia (theoretically, at least), epistemic capital is accrued through the appeals to science and reason, but in many other fields, appeals will be made to experience, tradition and supernatural agents such as gods or extra-terrestrials.

Epistemic strategies are integral to the fundamental beliefs and, thus, the *doxa* of any field. The religious field differs from other intellectual subfields in that certain epistemic strategies employed are not considered valid in other fields, and, therefore, the epistemic capital generated is not accepted universally. For example, Robertson (2016: 205) traces how channelling, or gaining knowledge through communication with supernatural beings, is valid as an epistemic strategy in the millenarian field, part of the religious field. While this strategy is disqualified in the scientific field, actors who rely on channelling in the religious field are endowed with epistemic capital, able to persuade laypeople of their credentials, and can thereby improve and maintain their position in the social world.

The particularity of epistemic strategies, however, raises the question of how far one can speak of capital in Bourdieu’s sense if it is not recognised in parts of society. This contravenes the

⁶ In addition to the *doxa*, Bourdieu employs the terms *illusio* and *nomos*, which share similar but not identical meanings. *Illusio* is a specific type of *doxa*, defined as the belief in the game of the respective field (Koller 2014: 80). *Nomos* encapsulates the fundamental moral attitudes prevailing in a field and defines how the social world should look from the point of view of the respective actors (Bourdieu 2000: 63).

principle of capital conversion and demonstrates its structural difference from economic capital, which retains its value irrespective of the field of acquisition. Since epistemic capital is a form of symbolic capital, it cannot be transformed without incurring a cost (Bourdieu 1986: 70–75). For example, the exchange rate of religious capital, which is also symbolic capital, to other forms of capital depends on the structures of the particular religious field. While in the US it is necessary to be endowed with religious capital to pursue a successful political career, in other contexts, such as in the UK, this would be an obstacle (McKinnon/Trzebiatowska/Brittain 2011: 359). This also applies to epistemic capital. Epistemic capital acquired through experience ensures influence in certain social contexts but may not be advantageous in others. Which epistemes are ultimately relevant in a field of study depends on the historical and social context and must be explored empirically (Robertson 2021: 27–30). Robertson introduces the concept of epistemic modes to elaborate on this. Accordingly, it is necessary to examine which epistemic modes are used in a field and how they are applied in order to be successful.

Religious epistemes

The religious field is particularly interesting in terms of epistemic modes, as it offers a specific approach to knowledge that is closely linked to the notion of religion. Bourdieu employs Durkheim's definition of religion to conceptualise the religious field (1991: 3–12). Religion is accordingly understood as “a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things” (Durkheim 1995: 44). The sacred, encompassing “things that are set apart and forbidden” (Durkheim 1995: 44) is distinct from the profane. However, religion can only be understood through the unity of the distinction between sacred and profane – it is not merely located on the side of the sacred (Walthert 2020: 22–24). For example, the justification of knowledge through communication with unfalsifiable sources (Robertson 2016: 52) is based on this distinction between the sacred and the profane. These unfalsifiable sources are considered distinct from other profane sources and can therefore be understood as religious epistemes in the tradition of Durkheim and Bourdieu.

Religious actors necessarily draw on the distinction between the sacred and the profane to legitimise knowledge claims. This differentiation is at the core of their identity as religious actors and endows them with religious capital. This symbolic capital, acquired through lay following, is attained, as Bourdieu posits, through the assertion of “legitimate manipulation (religion)” in contrast to the “profane and profanatory manipulation” (Bourdieu 1991: 12). This controls what is to be accepted as sacred and what is to be regarded as profane.

Actors in the religious field, equipped with religious capital, unsurprisingly refer to the distinction between the sacred and the profane to legitimise knowledge. David G. Robertson (2016), for example, in his research on millenarian conspiracism, illustrates a “cross-fertilization between the popular religious and conspiracist fields” (Robertson 2016: 14), highlighting the various epistemic strategies. He notes that in all cases studied, central figures were in contact with supernatural beings and legitimised their knowledge through these sacred sources.

Although Robertson scrutinises the category of religion in the context he explores, the cases discussed can be seen as alternative forms of popular religion (Robertson 2016: 44).

However, even when studying actors who are not inherently religious, the focus on religious epistemes can be fruitful. Using a sociology-of-knowledge approach to discourse, the author of this paper investigated alternative interpretations of the archaeological evidence from Avebury (UK) to identify the rules and principles employed by various actors to legitimise their knowledge claims about the site. The analysis also revealed the use of other legitimisation strategies (Bawidamann 2021: 8–11). In this case, religion was not intrinsic to the cases studied, as it was in Robertson’s research, but rather became involved through the strategies employed, as some referred to the unity of the distinction between the sacred and the profane.

The present paper combines two approaches. Like Robertson’s study, it examines an actor with a certain affinity to religion. The operator of *legitim.ch* is affiliated with alternative religious offerings and describes himself as spiritually inclined.⁷ As in the research on Avebury, it is not presupposed that the actor necessarily uses religious epistemic strategies such as channelling. Whether their epistemic strategies can be understood as religious is ultimately an empirical and definitional question.

3. *Legitim.ch*: A case of conspiratoriality

An alternative platform

The website *legitim.ch* is the project of a single author who identifies as a blogger. He refrains from calling himself a journalist, as he considers the term to have negative connotations. Throughout the blog and in interviews, the author consistently emphasises his libertarian views (*legitim.ch*: Redaktion), criticising government agencies and advocating the complete dissolution of state structures and an unrestricted free market economy. These political convictions also have a significant influence on his self-image and lifestyle. The website operator “emancipates” himself from the state by regularly changing his place of residence to avoid any state obligations such as the payment of taxes.

Since 2017, *legitim.ch* has regularly published news articles, often with embedded videos and images, which are supported by directly linked sources. The blog covers a wide range of topics, from analyses of current political and media events (*legitim.ch*: Krieg) to health issues (*legitim.ch*: Naturmedizin) and discussions of technological innovation (*legitim.ch*: Mit 8 Gramm). Interviews conducted by the blogger with various individuals are also featured. Furthermore, there are links to commercial offers.

⁷ All interviews were conducted in the local German dialect, the blogger’s mother tongue, and translated by the author. Reference numbers indicate sections in the interview transcript.

From both an emic and an etic perspective, the blog under discussion is an alternative medium. From the operator's point of view, his channel serves as an alternative to the dominant opinion, doing work that he believes established media outlets are failing to do: "[...] Actually, the mainstream media should be doing this, not me, who has no training at all for this [...]". (Interview 11 December 2021: 77)

In this statement, he shows his conviction that it is important to distinguish oneself from the socially accepted media. His contributions aim to create a counter-position that offers content not provided by the dominant publications.

In addition to self-identification, academic concepts can also be used to classify *legitim.ch* as alternative media. Traditionally, scholars distinguish between alternative and mainstream media (Atton 2002: 9–31). Alternative media exert only a limited influence on society, rely on public reports, and are linked to social movements. By contrast, mainstream media wield social power, espouse socially dominant ideologies, and are produced by professional journalists who rely primarily on official sources (Kenix 2011: 3). In line with such criteria, the medium under study is alternative because it is not led by trained journalists, it can be attributed to a social movement, namely the truther-movement,⁸ and it has a limited impact.

However, the dichotomy between mainstream and alternative media is not clear-cut. The economic models are comparable (Kenix 2011: 2), with only slight variations in their methods of operation. What is striking, however, is that alternative platforms try to include experts whose knowledge of a particular topic is not recognised by the mainstream media. This reference to a *counter-elite* (Robertson 2016: 205–210) is a crucial feature of alternative media, which are nevertheless heterogeneous, as different topics, political dispositions, and working methods coalesce (Anderson 2015: 180–188).

With the emergence of the internet, the proliferation of alternative media has increased as production costs have dropped significantly and the obstacles to publishing one's own content have diminished. Consequently, many small platforms have reached a global audience despite their small size (Kenix 2011: 74, 168–169). The internet has also revolutionised forms of communication. Blogs, for example, which combine reflection on personal experiences with news, offer a web-based alternative to mainstream news (Wall 2005: 164–168). Such alternative communication formats allow for the dissemination of alternative ideas (Hamilton 2000: 262). In this respect, alternative media differ from mainstream media not only in terms of news content, but also in the forms they present. The amplifying impact of the internet and the increase in the number and variety of offerings it enables must be emphasised, especially in the case of conspiracy theories (Aupers/de Wildt 2021).

⁸ The term "truther" is a self-designation describing people who believe official accounts of big events are designed to conceal the truth from the public.

Conspirituality, an alternative religious phenomenon

Alongside a libertarian stance, spirituality also shapes the content of the blog. The blogger sees himself as spiritual, but not religious: “I believe in God, but I’m not religious, really not at all”. (Interview 10 December 2021: 45)

The blogger thus enacts a distinction between religion and spirituality that is widespread in the spiritual milieu (Fuller 2001: 5–7). According to his narrative, however, he was not always spiritual. As a child and adolescent, he always countered his mother’s spiritual inclinations with rationality. It was only while working as a teacher that he found access to spirituality, when several unsettling incidents prompted him to become involved with alternative media. In this alternative environment, he met many people who offered him access to their spiritual beliefs. In the interviews, he repeatedly referred to this process as an “awakening”. On the one hand, he characterises the “awakening” as a realisation that evil is unfolding, that the media is not divulging the truth, and that something must be done about it. On the other hand, he uses it to explicate his awareness of the interconnectedness of everything, the inevitability of all events, and the necessity for fundamental social change. In this sense, the “awakening” serves as a pivotal moment that significantly changed his view of the world.

The blogger’s emphasis on his “awakening” resonates with the widely discussed notion of conspirituality (Beres/Remski/Walker 2023). This concept captures two core beliefs: first, that a clandestine group covertly dominates or attempts to dominate the political and social structure, and second, that “humanity is undergoing a ‘paradigm shift’ in consciousness” (Ward/Voas 2011: 104). Such ideas were prevalent in protest movements against restrictions during the Covid-19 pandemic (Schäfer/Frei 2021: 408) and are found in wellness culture (Baker 2022b: 130–141) and among spiritual individuals generally (Crockford 2021: 174–178). On *legitim.ch*, for example, it is argued that one must learn to feel ubiquitous vibrations and energies, resonate with nature, and adjust one’s attitude to life accordingly in order to become aware of one’s surroundings and awaken to ongoing conspiracies (*legitim.ch*: Wissenschaftlich).

This statement also relates to alternative religiosity. Although there is no clear definition of this concept, it serves as an umbrella for various phenomena, including New Age beliefs (Sutcliffe 2014: 41–45), the holistic milieu (Höllinger/Tripold 2012: 26–29), spirituality (Heelas/Woodhead 2005: 5–7), and new religious movements (Clarke 2006: 9–16). The definition I use to provide guidance exclusively for the context under consideration here understands alternative religion “as a relative concept referring to a pool of practices and concepts that are not commonly seen as part of the traditional canon of Christianity in its institutionalized forms” (Lüddeckens 2018: 172). Accordingly, the focus is on separation from the Christian church, which is the dominant tradition in Western Europe. However, this does not preclude the significance of church-approved practices in alternative religious currents. The crucial point is that they are not embedded in the continuity of a tradition and are therefore perceived as alternatives to the majority religion (Mezger 2018: 37).

Alternative medicine and commercialisation

The blog is the blogger's source of income and shapes his self-image as an entrepreneur. Although the blog posts are freely accessible, there are regular links to external offers by affiliate marketers. If readers visit a commercial website via the link provided in the blog and purchase a product or service, the operator of *legitim.ch* is remunerated accordingly. For a relatively small platform, this commission model assumes particular importance as it enables small companies to advertise products and only pay the costs after sales have been made.

Before engaging in affiliate marketing, the blogger relied on social media advertising. Although he had agreed to advertise, he had no control over the specific offers, as they were always tailored to the consumer. YouTube was particularly lucrative, while other platforms, such as Facebook, were valuable because of the attention they generated. However, the potential of utilising social media marketing as a revenue stream was severely curbed during the Covid-19 pandemic, as many alternative websites were blocked and demonetised (Mahl/Zeng/Schäfer 2023: 7). The blogger therefore sought to collaborate with alternative entrepreneurs. The products promoted through affiliate marketing include numerous alternative medical products such as healing crystal mats (*legitim.ch*: Die Medizin), radiation-neutralising technologies (*legitim.ch*: Vita-System), and online seminars on self-awareness (*legitim.ch*: Dr. Raik). Thus, *legitim.ch* features numerous articles on alternative or complementary medicine that deviate from a standardised biomedical explanatory strategy and highlight alternative healing systems. These approaches claim a divergent understanding of health and illness that opposes the current international hegemony of biomedicine and pursue different epistemic strategies (Frank 2004: 28–30). While biomedicine asserts its interpretive sovereignty based on evidence-based studies, alternative methods explicitly seek to distance themselves from academic medicine. They rely on semantics that are widespread in alternative religious circles, such as holism, self-healing, and personal experience (Lüddeckens 2012: 285–287). These religious interpretations simultaneously endorse alternative medical ideas and represent a tradition of criticism of biomedicine (Klassen 2016: 404).

The main criticism is often directed at “Big Pharma”. According to a popular conspiracy narrative, greedy pharmaceutical corporations deliberately create market shortages to maintain the high prices of their products. They are also accused of promoting excessive drug consumption by fabricating new clinical conditions or artificially inducing diseases (Singler 2015: 20). Pharmaceutical substances such as vaccinations are considered harmful (*legitim.ch*: Masernausbrüche). Scientific studies are presented only to be questioned (*legitim.ch*: Bezahlte) and diseases are described as having been invented so as to maximise profits (*legitim.ch*: Brisante). Furthermore, a network of companies is seen as actively opposing alternative healing methods and preventing their success, justifying continuous coverage by the alternative media, encompassing both criticism and the presentation of natural remedies (*legitim.ch*: Hirntumor) as an alternative to pharmaceutical products.

Arguments: alternative epistemic strategies

Conscious of the alternativity of his point of view, the blogger seeks to justify the selection of topics and statements presented on *legitim.ch*. It is, therefore, valuable to examine the epistemic modes employed for this purpose. These modes encompass specific strategies of knowledge production that lead to the establishment of knowledge and the acquisition of epistemic capital. Robertson and Amarasingam (2022) distinguish five epistemic modes that can be used to understand how these diverse strategies are applied. They are explained below and used to analyse the case studied.

Scientific mode

The scientific mode typically involves referencing scientific studies and the reputations of the researchers involved, as well as drawing on scientific methodology. References to science and rationality are the main strategy used to legitimise knowledge within secular, Western European modernity, where the examined media is situated (Robertson 2016: 48–49). This is also the mode from which the predominant epistemic capital on *legitim.ch* is derived from. The blogger consistently cites scientific literature (*legitim.ch*: Na endlich!) and the scientific capital of individual researchers, whose education and academic titles are emphasised to systematically substantiate their claims (*legitim.ch*: Renommierter). In addition, a standard scientific or academic method is used by directly linking to sources in the articles, with the blogger emphasising the importance of adhering to a proper journalistic style.

The scientific mode aligns with socially dominant interpretive institutions. The well-established acceptance of science generates copious epistemic capital and fosters its use even by alternative media creators who are critical of academia.

Traditional mode

In the traditional mode, knowledge is justified by reference to institutions or the norms of a group, without specifying the reason for following these norms. As Robertson and Amarasingam (2022) explain: “Tradition is essentially ‘people like us do things like this’ [...]” (3). The blogger (*legitim.ch*: ZENSURWELLE) relies on this mode to refer to exponents of the truther movement:

“ What veterans of the truther movement like Alex Jones and David Icke have been warning about for decades has now officially arrived in Europe. This week, freedom of expression in Europe has definitely reached its lowest point since 1933.

By drawing on the tradition of the truther movement, the blogger garners epistemic capital. Although this tradition is not institutionalised, it holds considerable weight within the alternative scene and is symbolically supported by its famous representatives. It is thus superfluous to spell out their specific traditional views, as supporters of the movement already know them.

Experiential mode

The appeal to personal experience defines the experiential mode. Here knowledge acquires validity because it reflects one’s own experience or the experiences of others to which authenticity is attributed (Robertson 2016: 49–51). Consequently, the reference to eyewitnesses,

which is widespread in alternative media, emerges as crucial (Kenix 2011: 22). The criterion of the “emotional response of ‘truthiness’ – one feels it is true” (Robertson/Amarasingam 2022: 4) is also significant. Both aspects, eyewitness accounts on the one hand (*legitim.ch*: STOPPT) and the need for resonance on the other, are emphasised on *legitim.ch*. This strategy is particularly prevalent among alternative actors with little symbolic capital (Dyrendal 2017: 171), such as the journalistically untrained blogger in the case discussed, who lacks journalistic qualifications or experience.

Channelling

The justification of knowledge through communication with unfalsifiable sources, known as channelling, is a widespread practice in religious contexts, and the mode of channelling is therefore of particular interest to religious studies. Whether it concerns supreme beings, extra-terrestrials or other nameless transcendent entities, the mechanism remains the same (Robertson 2016: 52).

The blogger does not report any personal channelling experiences, but cites David Icke (*legitim.ch*: Dies ist), who relies on channelling to corroborate his narrative on reptiloids (Robertson 2016: 133). The same strategy is apparent in conversations with his guest Sironjas, a spiritual internet channel host. When queried about the source of his information, he responded: “My information comes to ninety-nine comma period nine per cent from ethereal regions [...]”. (*legitim.ch*: Sironjas; linked video 5: 15).

These conversations on *legitim.ch* do not focus exclusively on spiritual issues; political events are also framed with reference to this mode. The blogger thus lets people have their say who justify their knowledge through channelling. This is a conscious decision, as he emphasises that his lack of knowledge in these areas means that he seeks to talk to people who have access to it.

Assemblagé

The mode *assemblagé* describes an uneven assembling of disconnected partial elements into suggestive narratives:

“ Finally, *Assemblagé* links numerous smaller pieces of data across time, space and context by “dot-connecting” to create highly suggestive narratives, while blurring the specific details and the mystification of the selection process (Robertson/Amarasingam 2022: 4).

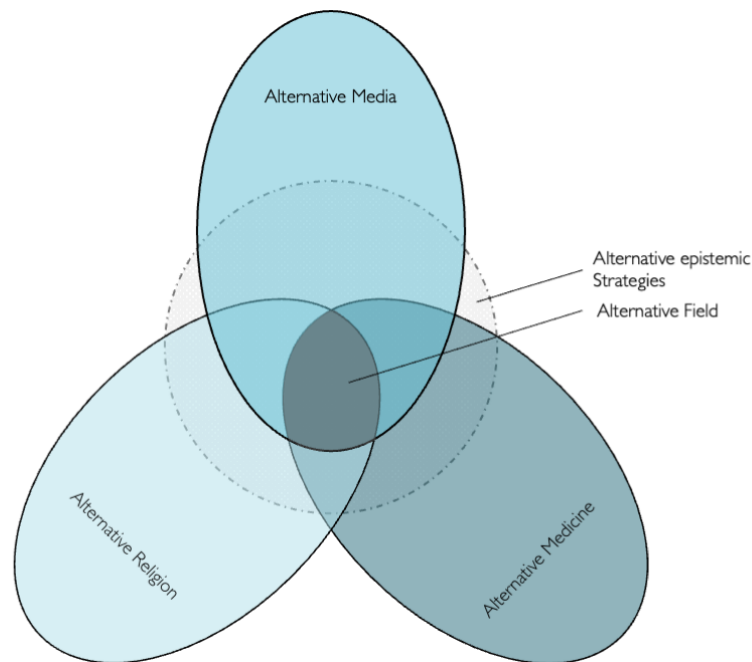
According to this definition, the legitimacy of knowledge in the *assemblagé* mode depends on the suggestive quality of its content, which technically pertains to all conspiracy narratives. This broad applicability, however, elevates conspiracy narratives to a categorically different form of knowledge, transferring its problematic premises to a new term. This mode can nevertheless be used as an analytical tool, as can be demonstrated with reference to several blog contributions, for example, reports on the New World Order (NWO) (*legitim.ch*: Wissenschaftlich), Vatican conspiracies (*legitim.ch*: Wie der) or vaccine criticism (*legitim.ch*: Masernausrüche), all of which use “dot-connecting” to form far-reaching claims of conspiratorial wrongdoings.

This discussion of *legitim.ch's* approach to knowledge indicates a combination of different modes. While the blog conforms to societal norms in utilising recognised modes of knowledge legitimisation, it also integrates alternative perspectives by reference to *counter-elites* (Robertson 2016: 205–208). At the same time, epistemic capital derived from experience or channelling is a distinctive feature of alternative media and a *counter-epistemic strategy* disavowed by epistemic authorities (Robertson 2016: 47).

4. The alternative field

Bourdieu's field theory proves useful for understanding the position of the *counter-elite*, such as the blogger under discussion. According to his ideal-typical typology of religious specialists, prophets and priests compete for authority within the religious field, with the former not questioning the *doxa* of the religious field (Bourdieu 2017: 178). The same dynamic can also be applied to alternative media. Alternative media actors do not reject the *doxa* of the journalistic field but challenge the position of the dominant media. The latter, in turn, responds by categorising the alternative actors as conspiracy theorists and thus implying a fundamental deviation from the social norm. This portrayal as *counter-elites* who are reliant on alternative epistemes enables their exclusion from the journalistic field. As a result, the alternative media are not seen as competitors but are banned from the field as heretics.

The isolation of alternative actors by established authorities fosters alternative networks. Since it is essential for alternative media operators to maintain their self-conception as an alternative, they do not consider their exclusion from the journalistic field as a problem but rather as an ideal to strive towards. Consequently, they see the mainstream media as beneficial contributors rather than competitors, as they produce content for the alternative media to discuss and, above all, criticise, a key means by which the latter can advance their popularity (Campion-Vincent 2015: 99–106). In this respect, being excluded by the dominant authorities catalyses alternative convictions. The more the alternative media are shut out, the more they identify with their exclusion. The censorship of exponents of alternative media and the restriction of their commercial opportunities in social media reinforce this alternative positioning, worn as a "badge of honour" (Innes/Innes 2023: 1273) and draws different alternative providers closer together, as the blog's alternative affiliate marketing shows. The self-imposed demarcation as a distinguishing feature, which is reinforced by the explicit exclusion from various social fields, leads to an alternative consolidation. Consequently, alternative media advertise alternative medicine, alternative medicine refers to alternative religion, and alternative religious agents in turn operate alternative media.



The alternative field as an intersection of alternative medicine, religion, and media. Alternative epistemic strategies are present in all the sub-sectors, but, as shown above, are not the only strategies employed, so that the boundaries in the illustration are blurred.⁹

This article proposes an alternative field with a *doxa* characterised by an ostentatious distinction. This field is open to diverse religious, journalistic, scientific, medical, economic, and political actors who, although quipped with different forms of capital, are united by their exclusion from their respective fields. In this way, they acquire alternative capital. As the premise of alternative capital is the demarcation from the priests or the dominant actors of the respective field, it enables the transformation of other capital at a low cost, attracting diverse experts who compete for dominance in the alternative field.¹⁰

5. Conclusion

Contemporary laypeople are questioning the authorities in various fields, demanding an alternative approach to knowledge (Gerhards 2001: 167). This shift has an impact on academia, which is increasingly facing criticism and rejection (Houtman/Aupers/Laermans 2021: 3–5). Moreover, the democratisation (Harambam/Aupers 2015: 473) and popularisation (Knoblauch 2018: 150–158) of knowledge have eroded the sharp dichotomy between orthodoxy and heterodoxy. However, as is argued in this article, challenging this division does not equate to its

⁹ Stephanie Alice Baker presents a similar diagram but focuses on the intersection between wellness culture, conspiracy theories, and New Age spirituality (2022b: 133). The Alternative Health Influencers studied by Baker (2022a) can certainly be seen as actors in the alternative field presented here.

¹⁰ In a field-theoretical examination of conspiracy theories, Florian Buchmayr (2019: 376, 379) underscores the rejection of orthodox knowledge bases as a pivotal characteristic in the development of a collective identity, suggesting that this reconciliation can mitigate heterogeneity within the field.

dissolution, because the emergence of the outlined alternative field relies precisely on an explicit and permanent demarcation from orthodoxy, represented in this case study by the mainstream.

In the realm of religious studies, the alternative field aligns with concepts such as the cultic milieu, where “all deviant belief systems” meet, bound by the opposition to orthodoxy (Campbell 2002: 14), or esoteric knowledge practices, which see themselves as “stigmatised knowledge” (Ward/Voas 2011: 116) and as such are dependent on an orthodoxy that stigmatises them. There are also parallels with conspiracy theory approaches, such as the conspiracy milieu conceptualised by Harambam (2020: 34) as “characterised by a heterogeneity of people, beliefs, practices, and ideological orientations, yet united by an opposition to the cultural mainstream”.

The conceptualisation of the alternative field contributes by enabling the analysis of entry and exit dynamics. The alternative field attracts a variety of actors who are equipped with capital that they have acquired in the economic, religious, journalistic, or scientific fields. They hold diverse heterogeneous field positions and, like all participants in the same field, enter into competition with each other. Nevertheless, they are united in their *doxa* and open to alternative epistemic strategies. As the example of the blog under discussion shows, the actors cannot be categorised within a single field. The blogger is not only religious or journalistic but takes on both roles. Therefore, examining “epistemological omnivores” (Harambam/Aupers 2021: 1006) and thus applying the epistemological turn (Robertson 2021: 31) offers ample possibilities to reconsider categories and analyse the boundaries of social fields.

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Acknowledgements

The data presented above was collected as part of my master thesis at the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Zurich and has greatly benefited from conversations with several scholars within the department. I thank Mara Griesehop, Dorothea Lüddeckens, Laura Peter, and Rafael Walthert for their valuable comments and advice. My sincere thanks also extend to the ARGOS reviewers and editors for their helpful suggestions.