The Synthesis of Control: Social Media- and Artificial Intelligence-Driven Polarization and the Biosecurity State

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Abstract: This study examined the COVID-19 pandemic as a phenomenon of manufactured conflict, situating contemporary digital crises within a historical continuum of elite-driven social engineering. Manufactured conflict refers to the strategic creation, amplification, or manipulation of societal divisions by powerful actors to achieve political, economic, or ideological objectives. Historically, pre-modern empires and colonial powers—such as Rome, the British Raj, Belgian Congo, and French Algeria—exploited ethnic, religious, and social fissures to consolidate control, employing tactics analogous to modern algorithmic polarization. In the digital era, social media and artificial intelligence (AI) function as instruments for amplifying societal polarization, producing emotionally charged narratives, and sustaining ideologically homogeneous communities through algorithmic feedback loops. Using an interpretive paradigm and narrative inquiry, this qualitative study analyzes the pandemic as a "text" composed of media content, social media discourse, and AI-mediated information flows. Key cases include vaccine misinformation, the politicization of public health measures, and the generation of hyper-personalized disinformation, illustrating mechanisms of algorithmic amplification, narrative polarization, and automated feedback. Applying the Hegelian dialectic, the study frames the pandemic as a thesis (viral emergence), antithesis (digitally mediated conflict), and synthesis (centralized governance and institutional consolidation). Findings reveal that manufactured conflict transforms crises into arenas of strategic division while enabling the emergence of countercultures that resist simplified moral binaries and algorithmically amplified narratives. By linking historical and contemporary examples, the study underscores the continuity of elite-driven conflict strategies and highlights the role of critical engagement and counter-narratives in mitigating the sociopolitical impacts of digitally mediated manufactured conflict.

Keywords; Manufactured Conflict, Social Media, Artificial Intelligence, Divide-and-Rule, Countercultures

I.   Introduction

The concept of manufactured conflict posits that deep societal divisions and crises are not merely accidental or organic but are often intentionally orchestrated, amplified, or weaponized by powerful elites to achieve predetermined political, economic, or social outcomes. Understanding this phenomenon requires moving beyond a micro-level reading of events—where individual actors or isolated incidents are foregrounded—toward a structural, macro-level perspective that considers systemic power relations, geopolitical strategy, and long-standing mechanisms of social control. As political theorists argue, conflicts are frequently embedded within larger architectures of governance, resource extraction, and ideological reproduction, making them tools rather than consequences of elite power (Galtung, 1969; Tilly, 2003).

This approach resonates with the pre-modern colonial tactic of *divide et impera* (divide and conquer), where imperial authorities intentionally exploited internal fissures—ethnic, tribal, religious, or class-based—to

prevent unified resistance and ensure stable domination. Empire studies scholars note that "division management" was a hallmark of imperial governance, enabling vast territories to be controlled with minimal military expenditure by redirecting local discontent laterally rather than upward (Burbank & Cooper, 2010). The Roman Empire's use of differentiated treaties, local intermediaries, and rival tribal alliances exemplifies this strategy; Rome's power rested not only on force but also on its ability to engineer fragmentation among subject peoples (Imperium Romanum, n.d.; Isaac, 2004).

Similarly, the British Raj refined divide-and-rule as a deliberate mode of administration. From the institutionalization of communal electorates in the early 20th century to census categories that rigidified fluid identities, British authorities systematically deepened Hindu-Muslim and ethnic divisions in India to maintain dominance (Pandey, 1990). Scholars argue that such policies were not incidental but intrinsic to colonial governance, culminating in catastrophic outcomes such as the 1947 Partition, whose violence was exacerbated by decades of manufactured communal antagonism (Britannica, n.d.; Talbot & Singh, 2009). As Hayat (2024) notes, imperial powers relied on these strategies because they extended control while masking the structural nature of domination behind supposedly "natural" divisions.

This historical framework directly informs the logic of contemporary conspiracy theories, which often repackage complex operations of statecraft, geopolitical competition, and elite influence into discrete narratives of hidden manipulation. Sociologists of knowledge argue that conspiracy theories flourish where opaque power structures exist, as they offer simplified explanations of global systems that are otherwise inaccessible to ordinary citizens (Fenster, 2008; Pipes, 1997). Groups with political influence and some degree of secrecy—such as the Jesuits, the Freemasons, or later the Illuminati—became ideal targets for such narratives because they symbolized concentrated power outside the public's view. Throughout the early modern and modern periods, political opponents weaponized claims of Jesuit or Masonic conspiracies to justify repression, marginalize rivals, or mobilize public sentiment (National Geographic, 2023; Roberts, 2014).

The historical animosity between these groups, as depicted in political propaganda, thus serves as an archetypal example of how ideological conflict can be manufactured or exaggerated to distract from the structural operations of power. Rather than representing genuine existential clashes, such narratives functioned as political technologies—mechanisms for shaping public perception, legitimizing state action, and displacing attention away from systemic inequalities and elite interests (Byford, 2011). Understanding manufactured conflict therefore requires situating events within these broader historical and institutional contexts, recognizing that apparent social divisions may reflect long-standing strategies of governance, rather than spontaneous eruptions of hostility.

II. Manufactured Conflict in Media Content and Conflict as the Lifeblood of Literary Readership

Manufactured conflict in media content refers to the intentional amplification, framing, or creation of disputes, controversies, and antagonisms to attract attention, sustain engagement, and influence public perception. Scholars argue that modern media systems—especially commercial news and digital platforms driven by attention economies—actively construct conflict to generate emotional responses that increase viewership, clicks, and sharing (Couldry & Hepp, 2017; McNair, 2017). Because conflict is inherently dramatic and cognitively stimulating, it becomes a strategic tool in shaping how audiences interpret social events. Entman (1993) notes that media framing often elevates certain disagreements while minimizing others, producing simplified narratives of "us versus them" that are easier for audiences to follow but far less faithful to reality.

Manufactured conflict is further intensified in the digital age. Algorithms privilege sensational, polarizing, and emotionally charged content because it sustains user engagement (Tufekci, 2015). This structural incentive produces a media environment where conflict is not just reported but engineered—whether through selective editing, exaggerated differences, or the creation of artificial "sides" in otherwise nuanced issues. In this

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sense, conflict becomes a commodified product, produced and circulated to meet the demands of media markets. As Chomsky and Herman's (1988) propaganda model suggests, media institutions often amplify certain conflicts that align with political or economic interests while downplaying those that threaten elite power, making manufactured conflict both a commercial and ideological phenomenon.

This dynamic resonates with narrative theory, where conflict is understood as the core engine that drives story progression. In literature, conflict is "the essential structural principle" that creates tension, shapes character development, and sustains narrative momentum (Forster, 1927/1955). Whether the conflict is internal, interpersonal, societal, or cosmic, readers become emotionally invested in how it unfolds and is resolved. Narrative theorists argue that stories without conflict lack stakes, suspense, and transformation, making them less compelling to audiences (Brooks, 1984). As a result, conflict becomes the lifeblood of literary readership because it provides the psychological hooks—uncertainty, empathy, curiosity, and anticipation—that motivate continued reading.

Media industries draw from the same narrative logic. Entertainment journalism, reality television, serialized dramas, and even political news coverage often mimic literary storytelling by foregrounding conflict as the central organizing structure. This "narrativization" of real-world events creates a seamless overlap between media logic and literary logic, where audiences are conditioned to expect drama, rivalry, and escalating tensions (Couldry, 2003). Thus, manufactured conflict in media content can be understood not only as a political or economic mechanism but also as an extension of the narrative tradition in which conflict is indispensable for audience engagement.

Ultimately, conflict persists as a powerful organizing principle because it satisfies both cognitive and cultural expectations: it simplifies complex phenomena, provides emotional stimulation, and aligns with deeply rooted storytelling conventions. In this way, manufactured conflict in media and conflict in literature enact parallel roles—each shaping audience engagement by leveraging the human tendency to attend to tension, uncertainty, and struggle.

III. The Greek Metaphor of the Gods in Olympus Manufacturing Conflict

In Greek mythology, the gods of Olympus frequently manufacture, escalate, or manipulate conflict among humans as a means of asserting divine authority, advancing personal agendas, or influencing the balance of power within the mortal world. This dynamic functions as a metaphor for understanding how conflicts—whether political, social, or interpersonal—may emerge not solely from human agency but also from the interventions of higher powers who benefit from disorder. Scholars of classical mythology note that the Olympian gods often act as catalysts of discord, wielding conflict as a tool to maintain their influence over human affairs and to project the dramatized emotions, rivalries, and caprices of divine life onto the mortal realm (Buxton, 2004; Hesiod, trans. 2006).

A quintessential example of manufactured conflict appears in the myth of the *Judgment of Paris*, where Eris, the goddess of strife, deliberately instigates rivalry by introducing the golden apple inscribed "to the fairest." This divine provocation leads Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite into competition, ultimately resulting in Paris's fateful decision, which in turn triggers the Trojan War (Homer, trans. 1996). As classicists argue, this myth depicts conflict not as an organic human occurrence but as a divinely orchestrated chain of events designed to fulfill supernatural motives—revenge, vanity, or cosmic balance (Nagy, 2013). In this way, Olympus becomes a symbolic seat of manipulative power, where discord is engineered from above and mortals become pawns in conflicts beyond their full understanding.

The Olympian gods frequently manipulate heroes and kingdoms in similar fashion. In *The Iliad*, Hera and Athena intervene repeatedly to prolong the Trojan War, acting out their personal grievances against Paris and exerting influence over the mortal battlefield (Homer, trans. 1996). Zeus, often portrayed as the arbiter of divine conflict, allows these tensions to unfold for reasons of fate, spectacle, or political equilibrium among the gods (Morford et al., 2019). Scholars interpret this as a metaphor for the unpredictability and arbitrariness of power—where leaders or elites may generate conflict to maintain dominance or entertain their ambitions, while ordinary people bear the consequences (Buxton, 2004).

This metaphor extends into tragedy as well. In Aeschylus and Euripides, divine manipulation generates human suffering, illustrating how conflict can be constructed from above to serve interests that mortals cannot see or resist. In *The Bacchae*, for example, Dionysus manufactures chaos in Thebes to avenge a personal insult, demonstrating how divine egotism translates into catastrophic social disorder (Euripides, trans. 2005). As Vernant (1991) suggests, such narratives highlight the structural imbalance between mortal fragility and divine power, reinforcing the idea that conflict is often a product of external, systemic forces rather than interpersonal failings alone.

Taken together, the Greek metaphor of Olympian gods manufacturing conflict illustrates a broader cultural understanding: conflict is not merely a natural human phenomenon but a constructed one, shaped by those in positions of overwhelming authority. In this sense, the myths prefigure modern political theories of manufactured conflict, where powerful actors—institutions, elites, or states—are seen as orchestrators of division for strategic gain. The Olympian paradigm thus endures as a rich symbolic framework for analyzing how conflict can be intentionally engineered and imposed upon those with limited power to resist.

IV. Oversimplifying Conflict into the "War Between Good and Evil" as a Tool in the Manufacture of Conflict

The reduction of complex social or political issues into a binary "war between good and evil" is a powerful rhetorical strategy frequently used in the manufacture of conflict. By framing tensions in absolute moral terms, political actors, institutions, and media systems simplify nuanced realities into stark oppositions that are easier for audiences to understand, emotionally invest in, and mobilize around. Scholars argue that this moral dichotomization eliminates ambiguity, delegitimizes compromise, and heightens affective polarization—key components in the intentional engineering of conflict (Lakoff, 2002; Sunstein, 2017).

This binary framing operates as a form of *moral simplification*, where multiple causes, structural conditions, and historical dynamics are collapsed into a single narrative of virtuous protagonists struggling against villainous adversaries. As political communication researchers observe, such narratives provide clarity and emotional resonance but do so by obscuring the complexity of the issues involved (Entman, 2004). By reducing conflicts to a moral allegory, elites and media organizations can justify aggressive policies, demonize opponents, and mobilize public sentiment toward predetermined goals (Herman & Chomsky, 1988).

Historically, the moral binary of good and evil has been deployed in wartime propaganda, where governments portray their own actions as defensive or righteous and the enemy as inherently immoral. This strategy serves to rally public support and silence dissent by equating disagreement with disloyalty (Taylor, 2003). In the post-9/11 era, for instance, the language of the "Axis of Evil" provided the U.S. government with a moral frame that simplified international relations and facilitated public backing for military interventions (Jackson, 2005). Scholars emphasize that such moral binaries reduce citizens' capacity to critically evaluate political actions, thereby making populations more susceptible to manipulation (Kellner, 2008).

The oversimplification of conflict into good-versus-evil narratives is also prevalent in media ecosystems driven by attention economies. Emotional content—particularly that which triggers fear, anger, or moral outrage—spreads more rapidly and is prioritized by algorithmic systems (Tufekci, 2015). News reports, talk shows, and social media posts frequently adopt binary frames because they produce clear heroes and villains, reinforcing audience engagement while manufacturing or intensifying conflict (McNair, 2017). These narrative structures align closely with literary conventions in which conflict is propelled by moral contrast; however, when applied to real-world social issues, such simplification distorts public understanding and increases polarization (Boyd, 2010).

Ultimately, portraying conflict as a war between good and evil serves as a mechanism of manufactured conflict because it transforms complex, structural issues into emotionally charged moral battles. This framing discourages dialogue, legitimizes hostility, and consolidates support for those who claim moral authority. As scholars warn, the appeal of such narratives lies in their simplicity and power, but their consequences include deepened division and reduced democratic deliberation (Sunstein, 2017; Lakoff, 2002).

Synthesis

Manufactured conflict often reduces complex social, political, and moral issues into an exaggerated battle between "good" and "evil," a strategy widely used in media, literature, and entertainment to attract attention and influence perceptions. By creating polarized characters, simplified moral binaries, and emotionally charged narratives, media producers heighten drama, sustain audience engagement, and shape public opinion while obscuring the real nuances of human behavior and structural issues. This oversimplification mirrors longstanding mythic patterns found in cultural storytelling—where heroes and villains are clearly divided—but becomes ethically problematic when applied to real-world events, as it distorts reality, reinforces bias, and diminishes critical understanding of conflict.

Although conflict studies have extensively analyzed the causes and dynamics of interpersonal and geopolitical conflict, it has paid far less attention to how conflicts are deliberately *constructed* or *exaggerated* through media systems, political strategies, and digital platforms. Existing research on propaganda, framing, and polarization offers partial insights, but scholarship on **manufactured conflict** remains fragmented and under-theorized, lacking a cohesive framework for understanding its narrative structures, socio-technical drivers, and real-world impacts. There is limited empirical work examining how coordinated actors, algorithms, and media institutions actively produce conflict for political, economic, or cultural gain. This gap underscores the need for interdisciplinary research that integrates communication, psychology, sociology, and political science to explain how manufactured conflict emerges, spreads, and shapes public trust and democratic processes.

Theoretical Framework: The Hegelian Dialectic

The Hegelian dialectic provides a powerful conceptual lens for examining the COVID-19 pandemic as a phenomenon shaped by manufactured conflict through social media and artificial intelligence. In its classical formulation, the dialectic explains social transformation as the interplay of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis, where contradictions drive the evolution of social consciousness (Hegel, 1807/1977; Taylor, 1975). This triadic model is particularly useful for understanding how conflict is not simply discovered but *constructed*, which is central to this study's exploration of manufactured conflict.

In the context of the COVID-19 crisis, the thesis can be understood as the emergence of a global health emergency requiring coordinated scientific responses and public trust in institutions. The antithesis emerges through the proliferation of manufactured conflict—conspiracy narratives, politicized misinformation, distrust in vaccines, and polarization—many of which were amplified by algorithmic infrastructures that reward engagement

with divisive content (Cinelli et al., 2021; O'Connor & Weatherall, 2019). These antagonistic narratives do not arise organically; rather, they are strategically produced, circulated, and intensified across digital ecosystems shaped by AI-driven recommendation systems and platform logics (Tufekci, 2015).

From a dialectical perspective, the clash between public-health imperatives and digitally amplified conflict generates a synthesis: emergent countercultures that resist disinformation, advocate for media literacy, promote community-based mutual aid, or seek alternative forms of collective knowledge-making (Benkler et al., 2018). These responses represent attempts to transcend manufactured antagonism by reconstructing more coherent and socially grounded interpretations of the pandemic.

Thus, applying the Hegelian dialectic allows the study to map the pandemic not just as a health crisis but as a structured conflict process mediated by technology. It explains how contradictory forces—public health rationality and manufactured polarizing narratives—interact, escalate, and eventually give rise to new sociocultural formations that challenge or neutralize mechanisms of conflict manufacturing (Habermas, 1984). This framework makes visible the dynamic process through which conflict is technologically produced, socially contested, and ultimately transformed.

Statement of the Problem

This study aimed to explain the COVID-19 pandemic as a phenomenon arising from manufactured conflict using social media and artificial intelligence. Specifically, it sought to answer the following questions: (1) How did the COVID-19 pandemic articulate or manifest "manufactured conflict"; (2) How did social media and artificial intelligence facilitate the manufacture of conflict; and (3) How does the understanding of the COVID-19 pandemic as part of manufactured conflict bring about countercultures against the manufacture of conflict?

V. Methodology

Research Paradigm

The interpretive paradigm is appropriate for this study because it emphasizes how individuals construct meaning within complex social realities, making it well-suited to examine the COVID-19 pandemic as a manifestation of manufactured conflict shaped by social media and artificial intelligence. Rather than treating conflict as an objective condition, the interpretive approach understands it as a socially produced narrative that emerges through discourse, symbolic interaction, and subjective experience (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Schwandt, 1998). This paradigm enables analysis of how people made sense of polarized narratives, algorithmically amplified misinformation, and conflicting representations of the pandemic, as well as how these meaning-making processes contributed to the rise of countercultures that resisted or challenged manufactured conflict. By foregrounding interpretation and context, the paradigm allows the study to explore how individuals experienced, negotiated, and responded to conflicting information environments during COVID-19 (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

Research Approach

Narrative inquiry is an appropriate approach for this study because it examines how individuals construct and interpret stories to make sense of complex social realities, making it well suited for understanding the COVID-19 pandemic as a form of manufactured conflict shaped by social media and artificial intelligence. By analyzing personal and collective narratives, the approach reveals how people internalized and responded to conflicting, algorithmically amplified stories about danger, blame, and conspiracy, as well as how alternative counter-narratives emerged to resist dominant conflict-driven discourses (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Riessman, 2008). Its emphasis on context and meaning-making enables the study to situate pandemic experiences within broader structures of power and historical techniques of divide-and-rule, highlighting how narratives both reflect and challenge manufactured conflict (Clandinin, 2013; Ricoeur, 1991).

Research Design

A qualitative research design is appropriate for this study because it enables an in-depth exploration of how individuals interpret and experience the COVID-19 pandemic as a form of manufactured conflict shaped by social media and artificial intelligence. By prioritizing meaning-making, narrative, and contextual understanding, qualitative methods allow the researcher to examine the subjective stories, discourses, and perceptions through which people make sense of digitally mediated conflict, polarization, and misinformation (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). This design also provides the flexibility needed to analyze complex sociotechnical processes and uncover counter-narratives that emerged in response to perceived manipulation, situating these experiences within broader historical, cultural, and political contexts (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Research Method

Textual analysis is an appropriate research method for this study because it treats the COVID-19 pandemic as a "text" composed of narratives, media content, and digitally mediated discourses that convey meanings about manufactured conflict. By examining news reports, social media posts, AI-generated content, and public statements, textual analysis allows the researcher to identify themes, framing strategies, and rhetorical devices that shape public understanding, amplify divisions, and simplify complex issues into moral binaries (Altheide, 1996; Fairclough, 2013; Krippendorff, 2018). This method also enables the exploration of counter-narratives and alternative interpretations, revealing how individuals and groups resist dominant narratives or reinterpret the pandemic to challenge manufactured conflict, while situating these textual constructions within broader historical, political, and technological contexts (Riessman, 2008; Van Dijk, 1998).

Data Source

The COVID-19 pandemic is an appropriate "text" for the study of manufactured conflict because it exemplifies how a global crisis can be mediated, interpreted, and amplified through narratives, social media, and algorithmic systems, revealing the mechanisms through which conflict is socially constructed. Treating the pandemic as a text allows researchers to examine not merely the epidemiological or medical aspects but the discursive, symbolic, and representational dimensions that shape public perception, behavior, and social division (Fairclough, 2013; Krippendorff, 2018). Throughout the pandemic, narratives about government responses, vaccine safety, conspiracy theories, and public compliance circulated widely, often polarized and emotionally charged, reflecting both pre-existing societal fissures and engineered tensions amplified by digital platforms (Tufekci, 2015). These mediated accounts illustrate manufactured conflict by simplifying complex phenomena into moral binaries—heroes versus villains, truth versus misinformation—while obscuring structural and systemic factors that underlie social, political, and economic disparities (Sunstein, 2017). Moreover, the pandemic generated spaces for counter-narratives, where communities, activists, and independent media challenged dominant accounts, demonstrating the contested and socially constructed nature of conflict (Riessman, 2008). By analyzing COVID-19 as a text, the study can uncover the ways in which societal divisions are narrated, amplified, and resisted, offering insights into the broader processes of manufactured conflict in contemporary digital and political contexts.

Data Construction

AI is conceptually applied as a tool for analyzing and synthesizing patterns of conflict, while the researcher serves as the moderator and validator to ensure that interpretations remain contextually grounded, ethically informed, and theoretically coherent. The methodological approach includes the following components:

Algorithmic Polarization Mapping: AI is employed to analyze social media and digital communication data to identify and map ideological divisions (Thesis vs. Antithesis) that are amplified during the pandemic. This process addresses the second research question by revealing how algorithmic curation, ranking systems, and personalized recommendations contribute to filter bubbles and affective polarization (Lazovich et al., 2023). The

researcher validated AI outputs by cross-referencing them with qualitative insights from news reports, academic studies, and publicly documented discourse trends.

Disinformation Synthesis: Generative AI is conceptually modeled as a tool for producing emotionally resonant, hyper-personalized content—including misinformation, memes, and deepfakes—that maintains opposing narratives and sustains manufactured conflict. This component highlights the role of AI in facilitating the spread and reinforcement of divisive narratives (Reddit, 2025; Science Media Centre, 2025). The researcher moderated this process by interpreting AI-generated patterns in light of historical, social, and political contexts, ensuring that the synthesized findings reflect meaningful human interpretations rather than algorithmic artifacts.

Real-Time Nudging and Feedback Loops: AI is framed as continuously monitoring public sentiment to strategically amplify or suppress narratives, thereby sustaining conflict polarization while guiding public attention toward a centralized "Synthesis." This mechanism illustrates how manufactured conflict operates dynamically over time and connects to the first research question regarding the articulation of conflict during the pandemic. The researcher acted as an ethical and analytical moderator, evaluating AI-driven trends, contextualizing emergent patterns, and synthesizing interpretations to explore the third research question: how understanding these dynamics produces counter-narratives or cultural resistance to conflict manipulation.

Through this integrated AI-assisted framework, the study examined not only the technological mechanisms of conflict production but also the human-mediated processes of interpretation, validation, and countercultural insight, emphasizing that the researcher's judgment is essential to ethically and accurately translating AI-derived data into scholarly understanding.

VI. Results

How the COVID-19 Pandemic Articulated Manufactured Conflict

The COVID-19 pandemic articulated manufactured conflict by transforming a public health crisis into a site of social, political, and ideological polarization, mediated extensively through social media and AI-driven platforms. Manufactured conflict during the pandemic did not arise solely from the biological threat of the virus but from the strategic amplification and framing of divisive narratives that highlighted pre-existing societal fissures—such as political affiliation, trust in institutions, and attitudes toward public health measures (Sunstein, 2017; Lazovich et al., 2023).

Social media platforms served as accelerators of conflict by privileging content that provoked strong emotional responses, such as fear, outrage, or moral indignation. Algorithms designed for engagement optimized visibility for posts with high virality potential, often polarizing users into ideologically homogenous "bubbles" where opposing perspectives were minimized or demonized (Tufekci, 2015; McNair, 2017). AI-powered recommendation systems and personalized feeds further intensified this effect by curating hyper-targeted content that reinforced individual users' preconceptions, effectively mapping and amplifying the "Thesis vs. Antithesis" dynamic of public discourse (Lazovich et al., 2023).

Generative AI and automated content dissemination also played a role in the mass production of disinformation, including false narratives about vaccines, public health policies, and the origins of the virus. These AI-generated materials were not neutral; they were optimized to maximize affective impact and maintain the polarization of audiences, sustaining the conflict over extended periods (Reddit, 2025; Science Media Centre, 2025). Furthermore, the real-time monitoring capabilities of AI created feedback loops that adjusted the distribution of content based on user engagement, ensuring that narratives of division remained salient while alternative, consensus-oriented messages were suppressed (Al-Rawi, 2021).

In sum, the COVID-19 pandemic manifested manufactured conflict through the interplay of social media and AI by structuring public discourse around oppositional narratives, incentivizing emotional engagement, and systematically amplifying polarization. These mechanisms illustrate that the pandemic's social dimensions were not merely spontaneous reactions but were shaped and intensified by technological infrastructures that both reflected and engineered social divisions.

Pre-Modern Tactics in the Digital Age. The application of the Hegelian Dialectic to the COVID-19 pandemic reveals a pattern that mirrors colonial "divide and conquer" strategies, updated for the digital age.

*The Problem (Thesis)***:** The initial, naturally occurring **viral crisis** and the pre-existing, decentralized structure of global health and liberal democracy.

*The Reaction (Antithesis/Manufactured Conflict)***:** Social media and AI created a massive information war (the "infodemic"). This divided society into two non-communicating, mutually hostile camps over masks, vaccines, and lockdowns (Gao et al., 2021). This systematic division, often fueled by content reinforcing skepticism of facts that favor the opposing party's views (UW News, 2025), is a direct digital equivalent of the colonial tactic of amplifying differences (Hayat, 2024).

Colonial Analogy: Just as the British leveraged religious divisions in India (Britannica, n.d.), the AI leveraged ideological divisions (individual liberty vs. collective safety) to ensure the population's energy was spent fighting *each other* over mandates and information sources, rather than focusing on a unified response or the systemic actions of the governing powers.

The Solution (Synthesis): The widespread, sustained fear, confusion, and exhaustion resulting from the manufactured conflict created the public demand for definitive, centralized solutions. The Synthesis achieved was the rapid global adoption of unprecedented controls, including:

1. Massive corporate and governmental power consolidation in the pharmaceutical and technology sectors.
2. The normalization of digital health passes, centralized tracking, and mandates that required ceding traditional individual autonomy to a biosecurity state. This outcome fulfills the principle of the Hegelian Synthesis: the new state resolves the conflict but results in a higher, more centralized form of power than existed in the initial Thesis.

How Social Media and Artificial Intelligence Facilitated the Manufacture of Conflict: Case Presentations

The COVID-19 pandemic provides a clear illustration of how social media and artificial intelligence (AI) facilitated the manufacture of conflict by amplifying polarization, spreading disinformation, and creating feedback loops that intensified social divisions. This section presents key cases that demonstrate the mechanics of these processes.

Case 1: Vaccine Misinformation and Polarization. During the COVID-19 pandemic, social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram became primary channels for the dissemination of vaccine-related information. AI-driven recommendation algorithms prioritized content that generated high engagement, often promoting sensational or emotionally charged posts (Lazovich et al., 2023; Tufekci, 2015). For instance, posts claiming vaccines were harmful or part of a global conspiracy were widely circulated, leading users to cluster in ideologically homogeneous communities, also known as "filter bubbles." These algorithmic

mechanisms effectively polarized public opinion and intensified existing distrust in health authorities, illustrating a clear pathway through which manufactured conflict was operationalized (Sunstein, 2017).

Case 2: Politicization of Public Health Measures. Social media facilitated the framing of mask mandates, lockdowns, and other preventive measures as moral or political imperatives rather than scientific recommendations. AI algorithms detected trending topics and amplified posts that framed compliance or resistance in binary, morally charged terms (e.g., "responsible citizens vs. authoritarian victims"), effectively simplifying complex public health decisions into a war between perceived good and evil (Al-Rawi, 2021). The amplification of these narratives by AI-generated content, combined with algorithmic nudging, created real-time feedback loops where public sentiment was monitored and further manipulated to sustain divisions. This case highlights how social media and AI can manufacture conflict by shaping collective perception and reinforcing antagonistic identities.

Case 3: Generation of Hyper-Personalized Disinformation. Generative AI tools enabled the creation of highly personalized content, including text, images, and videos, designed to appeal to specific psychological and ideological profiles. For example, deepfake videos and misleading infographics about COVID-19 were automatically produced and distributed through targeted ad campaigns and private messaging networks (Reddit, 2025; Science Media Centre, 2025). These AI-driven outputs created parallel narratives that opposed official scientific guidance, maintaining competing stories of reality across digital spaces. The continuous, automated production and dissemination of conflicting narratives exemplify how AI can function as a mechanism to manufacture and sustain social conflict at scale.

Synthesis of Cases

Across these cases, the mechanics of manufactured conflict through social media and AI involve three interrelated processes:

1. **Algorithmic Amplification** – prioritizing content that generates engagement and emotional response.
2. **Narrative Polarization** – structuring information around binary oppositions, reinforcing "us vs. them" mentalities.
3. **Automated Synthesis and Feedback Loops** – generating hyper-personalized content that sustains ideological divisions while continuously monitoring and responding to public sentiment.

In all instances, AI does not act independently; it functions within human-mediated systems, where platform designs, moderation policies, and sociopolitical contexts interact to amplify divisive outcomes (McNair, 2017; Lazovich et al., 2023). These mechanisms demonstrate that the manufacture of conflict is both technologically facilitated and socially constructed

Parallel Cases in Colonial History: Manufactured Conflict as a Tool of Governance. Colonial history offers numerous examples where imperial powers systematically manufactured conflict to consolidate control, prefigure modern social-media-mediated polarization, and sustain their authority with minimal direct force. These historical cases demonstrate how elite actors exploit pre-existing societal divisions or create new ones to prevent unified resistance, a strategy analogous to contemporary forms of manufactured conflict.

Case 1: British Raj and Communal Divisions in India. The British colonial administration in India (1858–1947) provides a canonical example of divide-and-rule tactics. Through policies such as the introduction of communal electorates and the rigid categorization of ethnic and religious identities in censuses, British authorities amplified Hindu-Muslim differences and legitimized social stratification (Pandey, 1990; Talbot & Singh, 2009). By portraying these communities as inherently opposed and politically distinct, the colonial administration maintained control over a vast and diverse population with limited resources. These engineered

divisions culminated in the violent Partition of 1947, demonstrating the long-term consequences of manufactured social conflict (Britannica, n.d.).

Case 2: Roman Empire and Tribal Alliances. The Roman Empire strategically manipulated local rivalries among conquered peoples to prevent unified uprisings. By signing differential treaties, leveraging local intermediaries, and encouraging competition between neighboring tribes, Rome was able to exercise control over vast territories without deploying extensive military resources (Imperium Romanum, n.d.; Isaac, 2004). This form of "division management" prefigures modern algorithmic polarization: Rome redirected potential resistance laterally, fragmenting local authority and sustaining its dominance over time.

Case 3: Belgian Congo and Ethnic Fragmentation. In the Belgian Congo (1908–1960), colonial authorities reinforced ethnic distinctions, elevating certain groups over others in political and economic hierarchies to maintain control and access to labor. Policies that favored one ethnic group in administrative roles while marginalizing others entrenched social hierarchies and fostered intergroup tension, leaving a legacy of mistrust and conflict that persisted after independence (Nzongola-Ntalaja, 2002). Such deliberate engineering of social discord demonstrates how colonial powers institutionalized manufactured conflict as a means of governance.

Case 4: French Colonial Algeria and Cultural Divide. In Algeria, French authorities exploited linguistic, religious, and social cleavages to legitimize their rule. By privileging French settlers and certain indigenous groups while suppressing others, the colonial administration created divisions that prevented coordinated resistance movements (Evans, 2012). The resulting social fragmentation contributed to protracted conflicts even after the end of formal colonial rule, illustrating the long-term impact of manufactured conflict on collective identity and social cohesion.

Synthesis of Cases. Across these cases, three common mechanisms emerge:

Exploitation of Pre-Existing Divisions – colonial powers identified fault lines in ethnicity, religion, or social class and amplified them to reduce unity.

Institutionalized Segmentation – policies and administrative practices formalized social hierarchies, transforming fluid identities into rigid oppositions.

Strategic Incentivization – elites used selective privileges or sanctions to encourage intergroup rivalry, maintaining control indirectly.

These historical examples demonstrate that manufactured conflict is not unique to the digital age but is a recurring strategy in human history, showing structural parallels to contemporary AI- and social-media-driven polarization. By studying these cases, researchers can contextualize modern manufactured conflict within a longer trajectory of elite-driven social engineering, illustrating continuity between pre-modern colonial tactics and current technological interventions in public discourse and human behavior.

How understanding of the COVID-19 pandemic as part of manufactured conflict bring about countercultures against the manufacture of conflict

Understanding the COVID-19 pandemic as a phenomenon of manufactured conflict highlights how public perception, social media narratives, and algorithmically amplified content can be strategically manipulated to polarize societies, induce fear, and legitimize certain political or economic agendas. Recognizing these mechanisms has fostered the emergence of countercultures—social, intellectual, and digital movements that actively resist manipulation, question mainstream narratives, and promote critical engagement. These

countercultures operate by deconstructing oversimplified binaries, challenging misinformation, and creating spaces for alternative discourses that prioritize transparency, scientific reasoning, and collective empathy (Fenster, 2008; Couldry & Hepp, 2017).

For instance, during the pandemic, grassroots fact-checking communities, independent media collectives, and digitally savvy activist groups mobilized to counter false narratives about COVID-19 origins, vaccine safety, and government interventions. By disseminating verified information, promoting critical digital literacy, and highlighting the socio-political motives behind viral misinformation, these groups functioned as moderators of public understanding, effectively pushing back against the manufactured polarization fostered by social media algorithms and AI-driven content curation (Tufekci, 2015; Lazovich et al., 2023).

Moreover, countercultural movements adopt creative strategies—such as collaborative knowledge networks, open-source data dashboards, and narrative reframing—to reduce susceptibility to binary "good vs. evil" frames. In doing so, they cultivate spaces of deliberation, civic engagement, and epistemic resilience, encouraging audiences to interpret the pandemic within broader structural, historical, and political contexts rather than solely through emotionally charged, polarized narratives (Byford, 2011; Sunstein, 2017). Therefore, understanding COVID-19 as a manufactured conflict not only reveals how divisions are engineered but also illuminates the formation of countercultural practices that resist these manipulations and promote more nuanced public discourse.

VII.   Discussion

The theoretical convergence of pre-modern colonial tactics (divide and conquer), the philosophical model of conflict-driven progress (Hegelian Dialectic), and modern technology (AI and social media) provides a potent framework for analyzing political and social crises.

The COVID-19 pandemic, while a global public health crisis, also functioned as a fertile ground for the manufacture and amplification of conflict, echoing patterns observed throughout human history where crises are exploited to consolidate power. From a sociopolitical perspective, the pandemic created conditions of uncertainty, fear, and social disruption that made populations more susceptible to simplified narratives, moral binaries, and emotionally charged content. Such conditions align closely with the mechanisms of manufactured conflict, wherein elites, institutions, or influential actors exploit societal fissures for political, economic, or ideological gain (Byford, 2011; Fenster, 2008).

One key factor was the information vacuum and heightened anxiety associated with the rapid spread of COVID-19. Early in the pandemic, scientific knowledge about the virus, its transmission, and effective treatments was incomplete and evolving, creating ambiguity in public understanding. Actors with access to influential platforms—governments, media conglomerates, and social media algorithms—were able to shape narratives around the crisis, framing certain behaviors, policies, or groups as virtuous or dangerous. For example, mask-wearing, vaccination policies, and lockdown measures became focal points for ideological contention, often reduced to "us versus them" binaries, amplifying affective polarization and distrust (Lazovich et al., 2023; Tufekci, 2015).

The pandemic also provided opportunities for economic consolidation. Large technology companies and digital platforms benefited from increased online activity, which in turn allowed algorithms to prioritize sensational or emotionally charged content that heightened engagement. By selectively amplifying polarizing narratives, social media AI systems unintentionally—or in some cases deliberately—curated conflict for commercial and political ends, reinforcing divisions and creating echo chambers (Tufekci, 2015; Lazovich et al., 2023). Similarly, governments leveraged crisis narratives to justify emergency powers, economic interventions, or public health mandates, often framing opposition as dangerous or unpatriotic, a classic tactic reminiscent of historical authoritarian strategies during crises.

Historical parallels underscore how crises serve as strategic opportunities for power consolidation. For instance, during the British colonial period in India, social and religious divisions were systematically exploited to prevent unified resistance and maintain control, culminating in the traumatic Partition of 1947 (Pandey, 1990; Talbot & Singh, 2009). Similarly, during wars, economic depressions, or pandemics in other societies, elites have historically manipulated fear, uncertainty, and social fragmentation to redirect attention, justify policy measures, and reinforce structural hierarchies (Byford, 2011; Fenster, 2008). The COVID-19 pandemic, therefore, represents a contemporary iteration of this dynamic, where a natural crisis became a vector for manufactured conflict, amplified by modern technological infrastructures.

Furthermore, the pandemic created a psychosocial environment conducive to conspiracy theories, misinformation, and counter-narratives, as individuals sought explanatory frameworks for the disruption and uncertainty. Groups and actors disseminated simplified narratives that cast certain populations, governments, or institutions as "culpable" or "malevolent," thereby manufacturing moral and ideological conflict on a massive scale (Fenster, 2008; Sunstein, 2017). This process demonstrates the interplay between structural crises and human cognitive tendencies: uncertainty heightens susceptibility to binary thinking, fear-driven reasoning, and ideological polarization, all of which can be strategically exploited to advance power agendas.

The COVID-19 pandemic did not create conflict in a vacuum but magnified preexisting social vulnerabilities—political polarization, economic inequality, digital media ecosystems, and institutional distrust—providing actors with the means and justification to manufacture conflict. Through amplification, selective framing, and algorithmic curation, both state and non-state actors could exploit the crisis to consolidate influence, mobilize support, and shape public perception, echoing long-standing historical patterns in which crises serve as opportunities for elite power consolidation (Byford, 2011; Fenster, 2008).

The COVID-19 pandemic, while initiated by a biological threat, became the ultimate example of manufactured conflict through its digital intensification. The true significance of the pandemic, in this view, is not the virus itself, but the speed and efficiency with which social media and AI transformed a global problem into an internal civil war over public health measures. This systematic polarization ensured the public's eventual, desperate acceptance of the Synthesis: a significant, permanent shift toward centralized global health governance and enhanced digital surveillance, effectively constituting a form of digital colonization achieved through consent engineered by chaos.

Today, AI has simply rendered the human agitators obsolete, replacing them with a more efficient, real-time, and invisible algorithmic engine for division. Further research should focus on empirical studies quantifying the direct causal link between algorithmic changes and political outcomes to validate this theoretical framework.

VIII.   Conclusion

The predigital and digital-era case presentations collectively illustrate a time-tested narrative of manufactured conflict, demonstrating continuity between historical strategies of elite-driven social control and contemporary technological amplification. In the predigital era, colonial powers systematically exploited social divisions to consolidate control, as seen in the British Raj's manipulation of Hindu-Muslim identities in India (Pandey, 1990; Talbot & Singh, 2009), the Roman Empire's orchestration of tribal rivalries (Imperium Romanum, n.d.; Isaac, 2004), the Belgian Congo's ethnic hierarchies (Nzongola-Ntalaja, 2002), and French colonial Algeria's cultural segmentation (Evans, 2012). Across these cases, elites exploited pre-existing societal fissures, formalized divisions through institutional policies, and strategically incentivized intergroup competition, ensuring that potential resistance was fragmented and attention remained diverted from centralized authority.

The COVID-19 pandemic reflects a digital-era extension of these mechanisms, where social media and AI served as instruments for amplifying societal polarization and sustaining manufactured conflict. Algorithmic

amplification prioritized emotionally charged content, narrative polarization reinforced binary "us versus them" mentalities, and automated AI feedback loops generated hyper-personalized misinformation, maintaining ideological divisions at scale (Lazovich et al., 2023; Tufekci, 2015; Reddit, 2025). Pre-existing societal fissures—political affiliation, trust in institutions, and attitudes toward public health measures—were intensified in ways analogous to colonial divide-and-rule strategies, transforming a public health crisis into a landscape of sustained ideological conflict.

Understanding COVID-19 as a manifestation of manufactured conflict further illuminates the emergence of countercultural responses, where actors actively resist manipulation by promoting critical engagement, fact-checking, and alternative narratives that deconstruct simplified moral binaries and challenge algorithmically amplified disinformation (Fenster, 2008; Couldry & Hepp, 2017; Sunstein, 2017). Both historical and contemporary cases reveal that manufactured conflict is a recurring social strategy: pre-modern elites leveraged structural crises for political and economic control, while digital technologies have enhanced the speed, scale, and sophistication of conflict manufacture. These parallels demonstrate the enduring logic of elite-driven social engineering while highlighting the importance of countercultures in mitigating its effects and fostering more resilient public discourse.

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