

WHEN MISTRUST IS COMMON SENSE:  
CONSPIRACY THEORIES AS BOUNDARY OBJECTS.  
THE USE OF CHLORINE DIOXIDE IN THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN BOLIVIA.

M.A. Thesis

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## ABSTRACT

Bolivia was one of the worst-hit countries in the world by the COVID-19 pandemic. It is also known to be the only country in the world that has legalized the use of chlorine dioxide, a substance mainly used as bleach, to treat and prevent COVID-19. The use of chlorine dioxide as medicine has been often been linked with conspiracy theories about the pharmaceutical industry, the medical complex and, currently, the COVID-19 pandemic. In this document, I want to understand how conspiracy theories operate in the field of medicine and science; and particularly, I want to understand what led Bolivia to embrace chlorine dioxide as a possible treatment for COVID-19. My main argument is that in Bolivia, during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, chlorine dioxide acted as a boundary object that allowed for antagonistic groups to collaborate with each other. The differences among these groups were not just political or ideological, they were mainly communicational; and for this reason, I suggest that they can be understood as distinct communities of practice. In that context, chlorine dioxide worked as a boundary object that was flexible enough to be adapted to the needs and desires of these different communities of practice and created a space for collaboration and agreement; while at the same time, disrupting these groups' cohesion from within. As a conclusion, I propose that the theory of boundary objects can be helpful to understand the success of certain conspiracy theories in the sense that they may allow certain people to build communication channels that are often closed for stigmatized knowledge. I will argue that this could be the case when the stigmatized knowledge that constitutes the basis of the conspiracy theory is linked to notions of folk common sense, as it often happens in postcolonial societies.

Keywords: Conspiracy theories, boundary object, stigmatized knowledge, common sense, Bolivia, COVID-19, Chlorine Dioxide, Mineral Miracle Solution.

## DEDICATION

To Gaston and Lorenzo, my loyal and loving companions.

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## FIELDS OF STUDY

Major field: Comparative Studies

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

On April 23<sup>rd</sup> of 2020, amidst a global breakout of the coronavirus pandemic, the president of the United States, Donald Trump, pondered the idea to inject disinfectant into people's bodies to battle the COVID-19 pandemic. It immediately became a controversy, with many people criticizing the president's suggestion and accusing him of putting people's lives on danger by suggesting them to "inject bleach". After intense backlash, Trump explained himself arguing that he was being sarcastic. He said: *"I was asking a question sarcastically to reporters just like you, just to see what would happen"*<sup>1</sup>. Despite the fact that the 'bleach incident' was constantly used to mock the president, the issue ended there.

A couple of months later and thousands of miles south, Andreas Kalcker, an archbishop of a church called 'Genesis II' gave an interview on national TV in Bolivia. Kalcker argued that he had on his hands the cure for COVID-19 and that he was willing to give it for free. The cure is a chemical solution called Miracle Mineral Solution or MMS. Chemically, the MMS is known as chlorine dioxide, a chemical component that is mainly used as a disinfectant. Meanwhile, Bolivia was having a horrifying winter, after having to remove around 420 corpses from the streets, cars, houses and hospitals surroundings, just in July<sup>2</sup>. On August 2020, Bolivia's lower house of congress approved the use of chlorine dioxide to treat COVID-19 and on October the law that legalized MMS in Bolivia was finally passed and issued by both chambers of congress. For me, a Bolivian living in the United States while all these events unfolded, this was all just baffling. Somehow, Trump's suggestion had materialized in my home country; and even though I knew that the two events where not directly correlated, it felt like they were.

On one hand, the scientific community has strongly rejected any claim about chlorine dioxide's potential curative effects for COVID-19 or any other disease, and argue that if ingested in wrong doses, it could lead to poisoning<sup>3</sup>. On the other hand, MMS promoters have accumulated thousands of testimonies around the world of people who claim that MMS has saved their lives. Promoters of MMS often blame the "deep state"

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/donald-trump/trump-says-he-was-being-sarcastic-comments-about-injecting-disinfectants-n1191991>

<sup>2</sup> <https://abcnews.go.com/Health/wireStory/bolivia-police-recover-420-dead-covid-19-cases-71911255>

<sup>3</sup> <https://wayback.archive-it.org/7993/20170111070843/http://www.fda.gov/ForConsumers/ConsumerUpdates/ucm228052.htm>

or big pharmaceutical companies for the rejection of MMS by official institutions; something that has place them in the milieu of conspiracy theories<sup>4</sup>.

When I began working in this project, my main interest was to understand why and how was possible for MMS to have climbed up the political ladder so successfully in Bolivia, but not in the United States. I was drawn to the political role that conspiracy theories play and its links with political manipulation, political propaganda and radicalization, in other words, I was interested in understanding why people believe in such “crazy” theories and what do politics had to do with it? Once I began working in this project, I got in touch with different people in Bolivia who had encountered MMS during the first wave of the pandemic and asked them about their experiences: I did 13 interviews some were 2 hour-long interviews (9), some were text messages (4). I talked to doctors, indigenous healers, scientists, politicians and MMS sellers and consumers. I have also analyzed multiple primary sources that were produced during this time, mainly interviews and MMS publicity. After talking with all these people, I realized that I was making all the wrong questions. I comprehended that more important than understanding how politics was connected to these “crazy conspiracy theories” or why people were willing to consume a potentially dangerous substance; it was first fundamental to understand what was in there for them after taking MMS. In that sense, it was more important to understand the effects of MMS on their lives, rather than the motives behind the choice of taking MMS on the first place. The answer to the latter question was rather easy to find; people took MMS because, in a desperate situation such as a pandemic, it was one of the few choices they had. In the same way, people may feel attracted to conspiracy theories because they help people feel more ‘knowledgeable’, they provide a sense of security and safety and they may provide a ‘feel good’ sensation about one-self and one’s own group (Douglas, et al 2020). But answering the former question was more difficult; why was people willing to face the stigmatization that came with MMS? was it possible that MMS was doing anything else for them besides offering an alternative to deal with the pandemic? In the same venue, I argue that is not enough to understand why people feel drawn to conspiracy theories in the first place, but why do they remain increasingly engaged and loyal to them, despite all the stigmatization they often bring with them? Why are people willing to sacrifice their personal relationships or they own social prestige for them?

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<sup>4</sup> <https://mmstestimonials.co/>

Conspiracy theories, as is the case for other terms such as cult<sup>5</sup>, are often seen as a dangerous threat or an evil phenomenon that needs to be explained, fight against and eradicated. However, as Peter Knight affirms, much can change when we see conspiracy theories as yet another kind of *vernacular epistemology*, that is, as another “culturally significant way[s] of making sense of causality and connectedness, hierarchy and network”<sup>6</sup>. In that sense, there is also much value on understanding the particular historical moments, specific cultural contexts and unique media and political regimes that produced distinctive forms of conspiracy culture<sup>7</sup>. I believe that the way in which chlorine dioxide manifested simultaneously both in Bolivia and in the US, but also in more than 100 countries around the world, is a rich example to do such work. In that sense, the questions that will guide this work will be: what conditions allowed Bolivia to embrace MMS not just at a popular level, but also at an institutional level? How was MMS adopted by Bolivia’s conspiracy culture?

My main argument is that, in Bolivia, during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, chlorine dioxide acted as a boundary object (Star & Griesemer 2015) that allowed different groups in society to collaborate with each other; groups that otherwise wouldn’t have the necessary means, opportunities or intentions to do so. In 2020, Bolivia was just stepping out of an intense political crisis that resulted in the resignation of the then President, Evo Morales. The aftermath of such crisis left Bolivia with 25 dead and hundreds of injured people and an improvised transition government. The erosion of social cohesion and public trust became an enormous obstacle for the management of the COVID-19 pandemic that arrived just 4 months later.

Political polarization left many sectors of society disconnected and Bolivian society severely divided. As it can be expected, the COVID-19 pandemic made this situation even worse. The result was that politically polarized groups were reified by a lack of consensus on how to deal with the pandemic. Each group had a different understanding on what a “common sense” policy will look like. This polarization reflected an old understanding of folk common sense as what (Barkun, 2003) calls as stigmatized knowledge. As it is often the case for any postcolonial society, folk knowledge stigmatization also cuts along class, racial and ethnic lines, and in the case of Bolivia, it also cut along political lines. For this reason, the differences among these

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<sup>5</sup> For a discussion on the negative connotations of the word cult, see: Dawson, L. L. (2006). *Comprehending cults: The sociology of new religious movements* (Vol. 71). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>6</sup> [https://www.geschichte.hhu.de/fileadmin/redaktion/Oeffentliche\\_Medien/Fakultaeten/Philosophische\\_Fakultaet/Geschichtswissenschaften/Geschichte\\_und\\_Kulturen\\_Osteuropas/Dateien/Vortrag.Knight.03.07.2018.pdf](https://www.geschichte.hhu.de/fileadmin/redaktion/Oeffentliche_Medien/Fakultaeten/Philosophische_Fakultaet/Geschichtswissenschaften/Geschichte_und_Kulturen_Osteuropas/Dateien/Vortrag.Knight.03.07.2018.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7F4tJy2kevA&t=2682s>

groups were no longer just political or ideological, they were communicational; they could hear each other but couldn't understand nor collaborate with each other. For this reason, I suggest that these were not just different social groups, but different communities of practice.

In that context, chlorine dioxide or Mineral Miracle Solutions (MMS) worked as a boundary object that was flexible enough to be adapted to the needs and wants of each one of these different communities of practice and created a space for collaboration and agreement for them. It was powerful enough to cut across the pre-existing racial and class divides, Nevertheless, MMS also disrupted these group's cohesion from within; for example, while some doctors incorporated MMS in their practice and that allowed them to collaborate with indigenous and non-indigenous populations, as well as with politicians, other doctors strongly rejected it and condemned their colleagues creating two different groups: those who supported MMS and those who didn't. Similarly, while some politicians embrace MMS as a possible solution for the containment of the pandemic, other politicians disparaged it and it was quickly weaponized against them. As a result, MMS opened channels that were closed before and allowed for members of different communities of practice to effectively communicate with each other, while at the same time, disrupted the inner cohesion that such groups had.

I propose that the theory of boundary objects can be helpful to understand the success of certain conspiracy theories. In this sense, some conspiracy theories can create or be boundary objects that allow certain people to build communication channels that are often closed for stigmatized knowledge. In a context where different groups are having problems to communicate and collaborate among themselves, these boundary objects can provide novel opportunities to do so. I will argue that this could specially be the case when the common sense of one group is stigmatized by another as it is often the case in postcolonial societies.

I will structure this document as follows: First, I will provide some context to understand the particular milieu in which both the COVID-19 pandemic and MMS arrived in Bolivia. Second, I will describe the story behind the use of chlorine dioxide as an alternative medicine and how it has travelled the world and arrived at Latin America and specifically in Bolivia. Third, I will discuss the theoretical concepts that are central to my argument, namely, boundary objects, stigmatized knowledge and communities of practice and I will discuss why these concepts are important to understand the Bolivian experience with MMS. Fourth and final, I will provide a greater description of the way MMS acted as a boundary object under the already

mentioned circumstances. Using the data collected by in-depth interviews, I will describe the different communities of practice that played an important role during the pandemic and their experience and relationship with MMS.

## Chapter 2: The Bolivian context

Bolivia is a country right at the heart of South America. It has almost the same population of the state of Ohio (close to 12 million) but its territory is larger than Ohio, Indiana, Michigan and Kentucky combined. In other words, it is a big country with few people. It has more than 30 official languages and 41% of its population self-identify as indigenous, making it the country with the largest indigenous population, as population percentage, from Latin America; and during the past years, more and more people are self-identifying as indigenous. One of many possible reasons why more people are self-identifying as indigenous is that in 2006, after 181 years of independent life, Bolivia had its first indigenous president, Evo Morales. Evo Morales was president of Bolivia for 13 years. As it is often the case with postcolonial societies, race relations in Bolivia are tense and have been at the center of its political life. The stigma associated to indigenous identity began to subvert on the past years and Bolivia's indigenous legacy became more salient on Bolivian politics, which has also brought some pushback from certain groups who reject this process and argue for a more "mestizo" national identity.

For most its republican life, Bolivia has been a Catholic state, until 2009 when a constitutional reform turned it into a secular state. According to the World Value Survey done in Bolivia on the year 2017 (Ciudadanía, Comunidad de Estudios Sociales y Acción Pública, 2019) and despite this change, 6 out of 10 Bolivians self-identify as Catholic and 1 in 10 as protestant (mostly evangelic). Fifteen percent of the population doesn't identify with any major religion and only 1.3% identify as atheistic. Eighty five percent of the population say that religion is either important or very important for them. Therefore, in general terms, Bolivia can be categorized as highly religious, mostly Christian, country.

Bolivia's relationship with science and technology is another story. Bolivia is among one of the countries in the world with the lowest trust in science and technology, with 55% of its population thinking that the world is much worse because of science and technology (Ciudadanía, Comunidad de Estudios Sociales y Acción Pública, 2019) This lack of trust is greater among people with an indigenous mother tongue. This is also very connected with religion, given than 70% think that when science and religion are in conflict, religion always wins (Ciudadanía, Comunidad de Estudios Sociales y Acción Pública, 2019).

Gráfico 3.1 Percepción de que el mundo es mejor gracias a la ciencia y la tecnología, Bolivia en perspectiva comparada

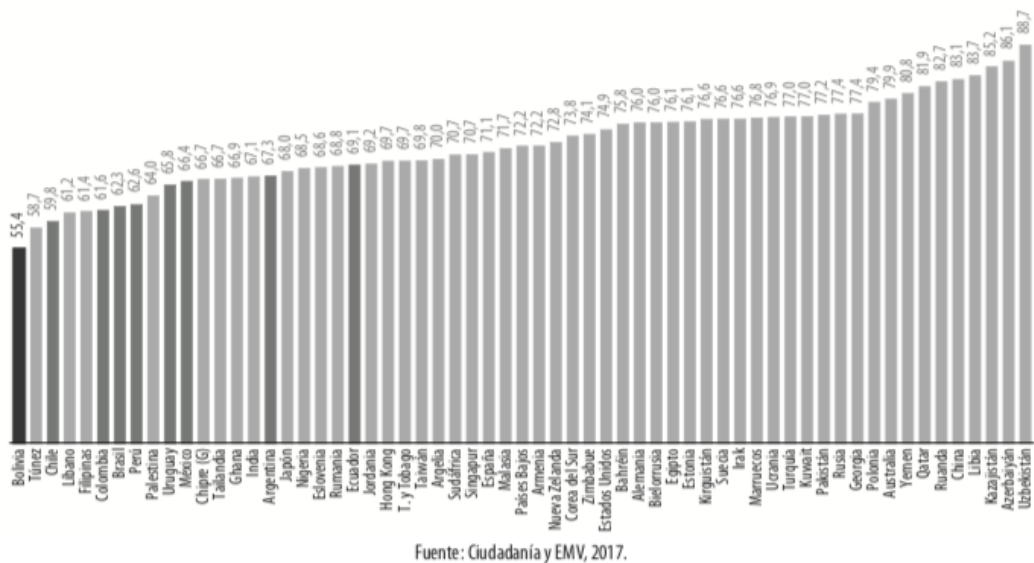


Figure 1 Perception that the world is better due to science and technology. Source: Ciudadanía.

Trust issues are not only big when it comes to science and technology. In Bolivia, only 8.5% believe that one can trust most people (Ciudadanía, Comunidad de Estudios Sociales y Acción Pública, 2019). Only other Latin-American countries like Brazil, Colombia or Mexico have lower trust levels, but it is important to bear in mind that those countries have much larger populations than Bolivia. Another interesting thing about Bolivia is that it is the country with the lowest in-group trust level in the world, which means that Bolivians are not only wary of outsiders, but also have a hard time trusting each other (Ciudadanía, Comunidad de Estudios Sociales y Acción Pública, 2019). Bolivia is also one of the countries with lowest levels of trust towards politicians, the police and international organizations.

Under this context, I will argue that Bolivia is characterized by a “fatalistic nationalism” or “pessimistic nationalism”. René Zavaleta, one of Bolivia’s most important intellectuals of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, is one of the top exhibitors of Bolivia’s ‘fatalistic nationalism’ when he says: “Bolivia doesn’t make history, it endures it” (Zavaleta, 2011: 135). This pessimism can also be found in folk songs about war that, instead of singing about victory and the nations glory, say something like this:

"You won't pay me, while I'm alive  
You owe me, for my death  
Abandoned by your love  
And far away from you, I will die  
I will sing about Bolivia and then I will die  
Bolivia will win, but then I will die  
I will die, I will die ""<sup>8</sup>

Guillermo Francovich (1980), a Bolivian philosopher, proposes that one of the most important myths in Bolivia is "adverse fate myth". This myth, says Francovich, indicates that Bolivia is inevitably destined to failure due to a sort of superhuman power that has condemned it and does not allow it to move forward. The author says:

"Bolivians have, in effect, the feeling of being condemned to an ineluctable misfortune. It is not just an awareness of the difficulties and problems of the country, as all the countries of the world with more or less intensity, have. Neither is it the expression of a moral faint or the exacerbation of a circumstantial pessimism. It is the belief that the Bolivian has, that a hostile force, a nefarious power condemns the country to a painful existence and that makes it his innocent victim preventing him from reaching the fullness of his being" (1980, p. 137 - 138).

Bolivian history seems so disastrous that it cannot find an explanation in mere chance, only a force greater than it, "a nefarious power" as Frankovich calls it, can explain its fate. Zavaleta Mercado endorses this view. He said the following:

"In any case, it is inevitable to identify Bolivia as a persecuted country, to an even greater degree than the other Latin American nations. As semi-colony itself, it is more miserable than the others. Facts, nations, interests besiege her so intensely that they would seem to be part of a conspiracy" (Zavaleta (2011) [1967], 149).

In Zavaleta's thought we can find the sort of conspiracist nature that Bolivian political mythology can have. As the matter of fact, conspiracy theories can be seen as essentially political as far as they are intended to explain the way power is distributed. This goes along with Barkun's (2003) understanding of conspiracy theories, when he says: *"Conspiracism is, first and foremost, an explanation of politics. It purports to locate and identify the true loci of power and thereby illuminate previously hidden decision making. The*

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<sup>8</sup> Musica de maestros, Boqueron, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bvAfwjCTS9E>  
All translations from Spanish are mine unless otherwise noted.

*conspirators, often referred to as a shadow government, operate a concealed political system behind the visible one, whose functionaries are either ciphers or puppets.” (p. 178)*

In his work about conspiracy theories, Barkun explains how conspiracy beliefs are often tied to millennialism, or the belief that the end of the world is near. Nevertheless, Barkun affirms that “one can believe in conspiracies without expecting the millennium” (p. 183) but that forces the believer to have a worldview dominated by the battles with evil, an eternal despair of the virtuous weak, who is condemned to fight. Taking the previous paragraphs as evidence, I will argue that this is precisely Bolivia’s case. In that sense, I claim that Bolivia’s nationalism is not only pessimistic or fatalistic; it is also, characteristically, conspiracist. As Barkun explains, conspiracy theories are an attempt to delineate and explain evil. They do so by affirming that history is controlled by evil forces that lie outside the community, in another actor that has been defined as the Other, an actor that always comes in a disguise of innocence and upright. In summary, conspiracy theories provide a worldview in which reality is inherently divided between good and evil (2003, p. 3).

In summary, Bolivia is a mostly indigenous, profoundly Christian country, with high levels of social and science distrust and with predominantly pessimistic and conspiracist nationalism.

## Evo Morales government

As mentioned before, Evo Morales was Bolivia’s president for 13 years<sup>9</sup>. He was elected in 2005 with 54% of the popular vote, in 2009 with 64% and in 2014 with 63%. Since his 2014 re-election was his last constitutional opportunity for re-election, on February 21<sup>st</sup> 2016, he called for a referendum to make a constitutional reform that will allow him to re-run for a third time. This time, Morales lost with 48.7% against 51,3% of Bolivians who voted against such change in the constitution.

Despite having lost this referendum, Morales kept on pursuing his re-election, but chose a different path. Congress men and women from his political party filled suit on Bolivia’s Constitutional Court arguing that

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<sup>9</sup> The reason why he was able to legally remain in power for such long time is that, amid his first term, Bolivia went through a constitutional reform that allowed for two consequent re-elections. Since the first election happened when the previous constitution was in place, his second term was considered his first under the new constitution. He got democratically re-elected twice under the new constitution.



the article that limited re-elections was a violation of Morales' human rights<sup>10</sup>. The Constitutional Court ended up agreeing with Morales' party in 2017, allowing him to be a candidate on the 2019 presidential elections.

Nevertheless, this legal move created a highly polarized political environment with half of the country disapproving Morales' disregard for the referendum results and the other half of the country supporting his candidacy. Throughout 2018 and 2019, some conflicts within the Electoral Tribunal damaged popular trust in this key institution just few months before the elections. Three high profile officials resigned along with 35 people who either resigned or were fired, some of them warning about an institutional crisis within the Electoral Tribunal. Also, international organizations such as the European Union expressed their concern about delayed schedules that didn't allow them to function properly as electoral observers. Finally, a few weeks before the elections, the Electoral Tribunal censored the only survey that showed that Morales and his main contender might go to a run-off second round vote due to a narrow margin between the two of them. This is the context under which Bolivia had its presidential election on October 19<sup>th</sup>, 2019.

## 2019 – 2020 electoral crisis

On election day, the vote count was done publicly through both an official account and a quick count process, both done by the Electoral Tribunal and broadcasted by the media. When 83% of the quick count was done, the results showed that a run-off second round will likely happen. At 7:40pm on election day the quick count process was abruptly interrupted and was resumed 20 hours later. When this happened, the vote trend changed, with results showing Morales as the winner in the first round. This created enormous public backlash and protests quickly erupted. The next day other two electoral officials resigned.

This situation led to street protests and violent clashes with the police. In some instances, Electoral Tribunal buildings were burned. On October 24<sup>th</sup> Morales declared himself as the winner of the election and downplayed the protests. The protests were mostly peaceful, although some of them were criticized for being openly racist. Also, many politicians and public figures close to Morales were being harassed and intimidated. Two days later, Morales threaten protesters saying that he will meet protests with a city besiege, saying: "let's see how much they will endure". He had also agreed on a full audit on the entire

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<sup>10</sup> For more information, see: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/dec/03/evo-morales-bolivia-president-election-limits>

electoral process in order to clear any doubts about his victory. In that sense, and by Morales' invitation, OAS begin an electoral audit.

On November 10<sup>th</sup> OAS published the preliminary results of its audit<sup>11</sup> affirming that they had found significant irregularities, data manipulation, including forged records. It also affirmed that the final results were statistically unlikely. OAS recommended the elections to be annulled. Hours later, Morales announced the annulment of the elections. Nevertheless, a number of social organizations and other institutions such as the military publicly asked Morales to step down. A few hours later Morales and his vice-president publicly resigned. Along with them, numerous public officials from Morales' party also resigned, together with two officials who were on the line of succession. On November 12<sup>th</sup>, Morales took a plane to Mexico accepting Lopez Obrador's offer of political asylum. After his departure, Jeanine Añez - who at the moment was the second vice-president of the senate, became the senate's president after all the massive resignations and called an extraordinary session of the congress and declare herself as president of the senate; and therefore, the next in line of succession for Bolivia's presidency. The session was boycotted by members of Morales' party who had majority in congress. Despite this, the Constitutional Tribunal supported this decision and Añez became Bolivia's transition president. Amid celebrations, Añez brought a Bible with her to the balcony of the government palace, declaring "the Bible has come back to the [government] Palace".

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<sup>11</sup> [https://www.oas.org/en/media\\_center/press\\_release.asp?sCodigo=E-099/19](https://www.oas.org/en/media_center/press_release.asp?sCodigo=E-099/19)



*Figure 2 Jeanine Añez holds a Bible the day she became Bolivia's president. Source: Agencia EFE*

Following Añez designation, pro-Morales protests erupted. Some protesters went to the streets yelling “Now it’s time! Civil war!”; also, in the night of Morales’ resignation the houses of two known Morales’ critics were burned down, as well as many houses, buildings, business and public transportation buses in the southern district of La Paz (an area believed to be mostly white and anti-Morales). Pro-Morales protests clashed with the police and the military and at least 30 people died during this protests. Under Morales’ narrative, he was the victim of a coup; but for anti-Morales forces, an electoral fraud scandal had forced Morales’ exit. The clash between these two narratives became the main issue of Bolivia’s political polarization until today

After the electoral tribunal was recomposed, a new election date was finally established: May the 5<sup>th</sup> 2020. By the end of January 2020, Jeanine Añez announced that she was running for presidency, despite having said otherwise.

## The COVID-19 Pandemic in Bolivia

Bolivia is among the worst-hit countries by the COVID-19 pandemic in the world. On September 30<sup>th</sup>, 2020 Bolivia was the third country with more per capita deaths for COVID-19 in the world, according to John Hopkins University<sup>12</sup>. The COVID-19 pandemic was received with skepticism and quickly politicized. On March 25<sup>th</sup>, two weeks after the first case of COVID-19 was reported, a poster was seen in El Alto city, one of the epicenters of the recent political crisis and known for being a mostly indigenous city. The poster says: *“There is no coronavirus. It doesn’t exist. Wake up Bolivia. Death to the ones who sold our homeland. The coronavirus is in the government palace [and] we have to fumigate them.”*



Figure 3 Poster found in El Alto city. Source: Facebook

With an impromptu non-electorally chosen government and amid political feuds between Morales’ party and the different opposition parties, Bolivia’s government was too weak to handle the health crisis. The arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic amidst the country’s highly polarized political environment and the long-term structural deficiencies of the health system, created an enormous challenge for the state and for the

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<sup>12</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-54358383>

public. The elections, originally planned for May 5<sup>th</sup>, had to be postponed twice, first to September 6<sup>th</sup> and then to October 20<sup>th</sup>. Of course, this only worsen the country's political crisis.

At mid-March a strict lockdown was ordered and enforced by the military. Soldiers began patrolling the streets. Bolivia has the largest informal economy of the world<sup>13</sup> – which means that most people are self-employed, consequently they don't have job security, no access to any kind of social security from the State or unemployment benefits. For these reasons, and even when the government offered modest economic stimulus packages, it was not possible to enforce the lockdown for a long time, even with the army patrolling the streets and specially after the role that the army played during the 2019 protests.

In mid-May, Jeanine Añez and some of her close aides were seen wearing a necklace with a blue card around her neck. This card was supposed to be a sort of virus-blocking card. This earned her a big backlash from people that were angry that she was protecting only herself. Añez never talk publicly about this card, nor clarify if she was actually using it and why, but a fact-checking outlet has confirmed that she used it<sup>14</sup>. Few days after this event, a major corruption scandal erupted related to a 170 respirators purchase. This scandal led to the imprisonment of Añez's Health Secretary. A month later, on June 16<sup>th</sup> Andreas Kalcker, a man who claimed having a cure for COVID-19 pandemic gave an interview<sup>15</sup> on Bolivian national television. This cure was chlorine dioxide. Building on an existing rumor about Añez' virus-blocking card, he said the following:

**“Andreas Kalcker:** I believe we shouldn't be discussing about this substance and we should take action because the president of your country, as I was told, is already taking it.

**John Arandia:** Oh! Our president is already consuming this?

**Andreas Kalcker:** As the matter of fact she is wearing a card, as I saw in a picture, and that is chlorine dioxide. All of them are wearing these cards.

**John Arandia:** These cards that they are wearing on their chest, Mr. Kalcker?

**Andreas Kalcker:** Yes, exactly. That is chlorine dioxide. Chlorine dioxide is a disinfectant.

**John Arandia:** And how does this card work?

**Andreas Kalcker:** It releases a gas that reduces the viral load in the zone, but you can also ingest it.

**John Arandia:** Oh wow! Go figure what we have just learned from your own mouth.

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<sup>13</sup> <https://financialtribune.com/articles/world-economy/81033/imf-bolivia-has-world-s-largest-informal-economy>

<sup>14</sup> <https://boliviaverifica.bo/jeanine-anez-usa-una-tarjeta-anti-virus/>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=702961193604683>



*Figure 4 Jeanine Añez wears a chlorine dioxide made necklace. Source: Correo del Sur.*

In mid-July the worst scenario became a reality. Hospitals reach their capacity quite fast and public assistance to those infected with the virus also collapsed rapidly. People began to die on Hospital's entrances, on the streets while looking for help or on their own houses while in quarantine. Cemeteries also collapsed; unable to follow the sanitary protocols fast enough to attend the high demand, they began to refuse attention. Despite the fact that ambulatory crematories tried to fill the gaps, many people had no choice but to abandon their dead loved ones on the street hoping that the authorities will eventually retrieve their bodies. Drugstores ran out of stock of things such as aspirins, ibuprofen or vitamins.

After Kalcker's interview in Bolivia, the MMS gain enormous popularity. Even when government officials followed scientific advice from recognized health institutions around the world and urged people not to take MMS, the popular outcry for its legalization and commercialization became a force too hard to tame. On June 28<sup>th</sup> Bolivia's Ministry of Health released a statement about Chlorine Dioxide in which prevented the population about its dangers and about the lack of scientific evidence that may back up its effectiveness. Despite this announcement, on August 6<sup>th</sup>, Bolivia's low chamber of Congress pass a law legalizing Chlorine Dioxide use and commercialization. In October the law was finally issued.



## Chapter 3: What is MMS? The history of chlorine dioxide as medicine

Chlorine dioxide is a chemical compound that has been widely used as a disinfectant agent, either for surfaces, water or food. In 1996, a man called Jim Humble claimed to have discovered the healing properties of chlorine dioxide. He claims that, while on a mining expedition in South America, he was able to cure two members of his team from malaria after giving them water with stabilized oxygen. In 2006, Humble wrote a book about his discovering entitled “The Mineral Miracle Solution of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century”, from then on, the use of chlorine dioxide for health purposes is called MMS (which stands for Mineral Miracle Solution). Jim Humble presents himself as a prolific person, claiming to have worked in a myriad of different areas such as the aerospace industry, alternative health industry and in the gold mining business. Here is an abstract of his bio in his webpage:

Jim first started his career in the Aerospace industry, where he quickly became a research engineer. He worked on the first intercontinental missile, wrote instruction manuals for the first vacuum tube computers, worked on secret radio control electronics, and dozens of other “state of the art” electronic projects at Hughes Aircraft Company, Northrop Aircraft, General Motors Research Defense Laboratories, and others.

After 20 years in the Aerospace Industry, Jim went into gold mining where he developed methods of gold recovery that replace the use of mercury to help overcome health issues for small miners. He wrote 5 books on the subject of recovering gold from its ores. In 1996, while prospecting for gold in South America, he discovered what has come to be known as MMS, a simple health formula that cured malaria.<sup>16</sup>

In several journalistic coverages done about Jim Humble and MMS, it is mentioned that Jim Humble had once claimed to be a billion-year-old god from the Andromeda Galaxy, who was put on a space navy and sent to earth to watch over it<sup>17</sup>. It is also mentioned that Jim Humble is a former scientologist; and in this regard, an organization called “Stand. Scientologist taking action against discrimination” sent a letter to Newsweek in 2018 explaining that Humble was actually expelled from the Church of Scientology in 1991 because “he was a scammer who refused to uphold the moral and ethical requirements of members”<sup>18</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup> <https://jimhumble.co/about>

<sup>17</sup> <https://abc7.com/church-of-bleach-genesis-ii-2-health-and-healing/1578279/>,  
<https://thehumanist.com/news/international/anything-humble-holy-mans-cure-found-toxic/>,  
<https://www.nbcchicago.com/news/local/former-chicagoan-touts-coronavirus-rescue-previously-barred-in-illinois/2262617/>, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GpkxfPkmbUU>,

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.standleague.org/news/media-watch/20180131-unwarranted-aspersion-against-church-of-scientology.html>

Jim Humble, as his followers, affirm that MMS can help people heal from diseases such as: cancer, diabetes, hepatitis A, B, C, Lyme disease, MRSA, multiple sclerosis, Parkinson's, Alzheimer's, HIV/AIDS, malaria, autism, infections of all kinds, arthritis, high cholesterol, acid reflux, kidney or liver diseases, aches and pains, allergies, urinary tract infections, digestive problems, high blood pressure, obesity, parasites, tumors and cysts, depression, among many others<sup>19</sup>. When it is commercialized, MMS usually comes in two separate bottles. One bottle contains sodium chlorite and the other contains an acid. Both bottles come with detailed instructions on how to mix both substances and make MMS and how to ingest it.



Figure 5 MMS bottles. Source: ABC News

In 2009, one of the first cases of presumed poisoning due to MMS became public<sup>20</sup>. A woman in Vanuatu took MMS as a prevention measure against malaria and died hours later. Even though it was not possible to link the woman's death to MMS<sup>21</sup>, this event put MMS on the radar of health authorities around the

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<sup>19</sup> <https://jimhumble.co/>

<sup>20</sup> <https://web.archive.org/web/20131214180619/http://www.smh.com.au/national/death-in-paradise-20100108-lyxv.html>

<sup>21</sup> <https://web.archive.org/web/20131202223420/http://www.dailypost.vu/content/prosecutor-decides-no-charges-can-be-laid-case-death-linked-mms>



world. In 2010 health authorities in Canada<sup>22</sup> the United Kingdom<sup>23</sup> and France<sup>24</sup> warned about possible risks of taking MMS, and the FDA informed that it may take legal action against those selling the product<sup>25</sup>.

In 2010, Jim Humble founded the Genesis II Church. Mark Grenon, the main figure behind MMS in the United States after Humble, explains that both him and Humble realized that the format of a church allowed them to keep promoting the use of MMS without having to comply with health regulations. Grenon says:

“Being a missionary pilot, and Jim came from Africa, and we started the seminars, really before we started the seminars, he had an idea to start a mission or a church or something and when he came to me, I was already doing that, so I said ‘Yeah! Let’s start a church.’ Because, a lot of people don’t understand this, the medical system is under these laws and statutes and codes that are all set up to protect them obviously, the medical group and the pharmaceuticals; but the church isn’t in that box, the church is in a ‘no law’. That’s why you can go to a church and get political asylum, a priest can give a kid alcohol in public and not get arrested. You don’t see priests in court. Because it’s different. There is the box that they own, and the church is totally different. The ecclesiastical law, natural law, whatever you want to call it, but we are completely out of that box, ok?”<sup>26</sup>

The Genesis II Church of Health and Healing was founded as a non-religious church. In that sense, they welcome people from all different faiths and religions, as well as atheists to join. As Grenon himself says: “it has nothing to do with religion. It’s the first church in the world that lets everybody come. No doctrine. It’s basically protocols, sacraments, that we take to take care of our temple which is our God-given right”<sup>27</sup>. Within the context of the church, they argue that MMS is given as a sacrament and not as a commercial product, so all revenue they make is in form of donations, instead of payments. Five years later, in 2015, Grenon affirmed that the church is present in more than 115 countries with approximately 180 churches around the world and 1800 ordained health ministers<sup>28</sup>. MMS and the Genesis II church are part of a diverse cultic milieu<sup>29</sup> – understood by Campbell (1972) as an environment composed by groups that oppose the

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<sup>22</sup> <https://www.healthycanadians.gc.ca/recall-alert-rappel-avis/hc-sc/2010/13510a-eng.php>

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/health-11404218>

<sup>24</sup> [http://www.centres-antipoison.net/CCTV/Rapport\\_CCTV\\_Solution\\_minerale\\_miracle\\_2010.pdf](http://www.centres-antipoison.net/CCTV/Rapport_CCTV_Solution_minerale_miracle_2010.pdf)

<sup>25</sup> <https://web.archive.org/web/20100803203556/https://www.fda.gov/NewsEvents/Newsroom/PressAnnouncements/ucm220747.htm>

<sup>26</sup> <http://quantumleap.is/> (minute 00:35:04)

<sup>27</sup> Idem (00:36:19)

<sup>28</sup> Idem (00:38:14)

<sup>29</sup> Given the already mentioned problematic nature of the term ‘cult’, the concept of ‘cultic milieu’ may carry along these same problems with it. To find a more detailed discussion on this term see: Kaplan, J. S., & Löw, H. (Eds.). (2002). *The cultic milieu: Oppositional subcultures in an age of globalization*. Rowman Altamira, as well as another article by Campbell himself such as: Campbell, C. (1977). Clarifying the cult. *British Journal of sociology*, 375-388. For an interesting account on the formations of such milieu and alternative labels for it see: Partridge, C.

dominant paradigms, and has circulated among alternative medicine circles, anti-vaccine groups and it has also been promoted among QAnon followers months before Trump mentioned disinfectant on one of his press conferences<sup>30</sup>. The spread of QAnon in Latin America has also been linked to groups that promote MMS and other alternative medicine groups.<sup>31</sup>

During the last few years, Humble took a more under-the-radar role and has not been seen in public for a long time. ABC News track Humble down to a small town in Guadalajara Mexico<sup>32</sup>. Nevertheless, other followers have faced legal issues; some had to signed legal documents that prohibited them promoting MMS, some had paid fines; and in 2015, a man named Louis Daniel Smith was sentenced to 4 years in federal prison. With major health authorities in developing countries around the world now alerted about the existence of MMS, many MMS entrepreneurs moved their work to developing countries. This is the case of Robert Baldwin, a US pastor, who created a Christian church in Uganda called “Global Healing” which was partly funded by Sam Little, a British clairvoyant, to promote MMS. Baldwin has explicitly said that he is working in Uganda to escape stronger regulations in developed countries<sup>33</sup>.

The day after President Donald Trump had publicly contemplated the idea of using disinfectant to treat COVID-19, The Guardian informed<sup>34</sup> that Mark Grenon had sent a letter to President Trump telling him about MMS just a few days before his coronavirus briefing. Grenon himself talks about this letter on a video podcast<sup>35</sup>. In July 2020, Grenon and his sons were charged of conspiracy and criminal contempt, two of his sons were arrested while their house was raided; and a month later, Mark Grenon was arrested on Colombia. Even though he claimed to be ready to stop promoting MMS, and just use the church to teach

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(2006). *The Re-Enchantment of the West, Vol 2: Alternative Spiritualities, Sacralization, Popular Culture and Occulture* (Vol. 2). A&C Black.

<sup>30</sup> <https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-news/qanon-conspiracy-theorists-coronavirus-mms-bleach-youtube-twitter-944878/> , <https://disinformationindex.org/2020/04/conspiracy-convergence-coronavirus-qanon-and-the-magical-miracle-solution/>

<sup>31</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-america-latina-53936695?fbclid=IwAR3LuFhFeUDclFC1ttKESBkwUG72Tb-MkZwlRwVGJf72FBB7li5l-9EPspQ>

<sup>32</sup> <https://abcnews.go.com/Health/fringe-church-founder-mms-cure/story?id=43158439>

<sup>33</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/may/18/bleach-miracle-cure-uganda-us-pastor-robert-baldwin-sam-little>

<sup>34</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/24/revealed-leader-group-peddling-bleach-cure-lobbied-trump-coronavirus>

<sup>35</sup> [https://www.brighteon.com/aedb4e1b-3a47-434f-8548-7efe585a1cf1?fbclid=IwAR3iLyvkChEDLLv1\\_6gwu6A9ky2Zc93lh0nBhiCPi5DoZQG2VjXarnlkmdw](https://www.brighteon.com/aedb4e1b-3a47-434f-8548-7efe585a1cf1?fbclid=IwAR3iLyvkChEDLLv1_6gwu6A9ky2Zc93lh0nBhiCPi5DoZQG2VjXarnlkmdw)

the Bible<sup>36</sup> he sent a message while in jail in Bogota saying *“I even had a dream that we’re going to be at the White House. We’re going to be proclaiming. It’s going to be legal, and the FDA is going to be taken down, and the Department of Justice is going to be cleaned up, and we’re all in this fight together.”*<sup>37</sup>

This has, however, not been the same case for MMS promoters in other parts of the world. Specially in Latin America, MMS has gained lot of popularity during the COVID-19 pandemic; and specifically in Bolivia, instead of facing legal problems, MMS was fully legalized by the Bolivian congress. Nevertheless, the Genesis II Church is not present in Bolivia nor has been used to promote MMS. However, as in Uganda’s case, some Christian churches did participate in its distribution<sup>38</sup> although its promotion went far beyond the religious milieu.

Andreas Kalcker is the main face of MMS in Latin America. He is also an ordained bishop of the Genesis II church and presents himself as a biophysics scientific researcher and as chief researcher at the Swiss Center for Scientific Research, Innovation and Development<sup>39</sup>. He has been promoting MMS since 2009 in Europe but had to move his business and change its name plenty of times because MMS commercialization was forbidden and heavily policed in many European countries. On 2012 he was imprisoned for selling MMS in Spain<sup>40</sup> but was released short after. He obtained his PhD diploma from the “Open University of Advanced Sciences” an institution that operates in Spain and gives diplomas issued in Florida. This institution has now included a note in its web page that states that they don’t have any relation with Genesis II Church, that they don’t promote MMS and that the diplomas issued on the time Kalcker got his only had a symbolic value<sup>41</sup>.

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<sup>36</sup> <https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/7048285-Grenon-s-Capitulation-Letter.html>

<sup>37</sup> <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/investigations/2020/09/04/church-leader-sons-jailed-defying-fda-touting-coronavirus-cure/5660825002/>

<sup>38</sup> [https://boliviaverifica.bo/iglesia-evangelica-reparte-dioxido-de-cloro-en-la-paz-y-el-alto/?fbclid=IwAR0mfBoEbMYTK9SKCqgtcCZqOvcHocaCCwOnxp1Unb79wUI8o6\\_vcl\\_x51E](https://boliviaverifica.bo/iglesia-evangelica-reparte-dioxido-de-cloro-en-la-paz-y-el-alto/?fbclid=IwAR0mfBoEbMYTK9SKCqgtcCZqOvcHocaCCwOnxp1Unb79wUI8o6_vcl_x51E)

<sup>39</sup> An organization whose webpage was taken down ([www.szwfie.com](http://www.szwfie.com)) and about which I couldn’t find any reliable information on the internet.

<sup>40</sup> <https://www.periodicodeibiza.es/sucesos/ultimas/2012/11/02/84665/detenciones-eivissa-son-primeras-registran-espana-por-vender-mms.html>

<sup>41</sup> <https://www.ouas.org/>

As mentioned before, on June the 16<sup>th</sup> 2020, Andreas Kalcker gave an interview<sup>42</sup> in Bolivian television with a well-known Bolivian journalist, John Arandia. In this interview, Kalcker used some well-known conspiracy theories to explain the COVID-19 pandemic.

“The WHO has a tremendous benefit in this because, if they get to vaccinate everyone, they will make billions [of dollars]. This substance [chlorine dioxide] is too cheap to be profitable. Therefore, this is not a pandemic, is a plandemic. It has been planned because the FDA itself has given 3,7 million [dollars] to Wuhan, something that is known, to release this virus that is now killing your people. And it is Fauci himself who did it. So, people here should wake up I believe. I mean, why did Trump told the WHO to fuck off? Well, with all the reason in the world, because it is precisely them who benefit and we have Bill Gates there, who is giving millions and millions [of dollars] to vaccinate people and even saying that, even with vaccines, 750 thousand people will die. Well, we have a solution that has not kill anybody and can solve everything, so what are we waiting for? (...) There are interests and who is behind this? Very powerful people with lots of money that right now want everybody to get vaccinated so they can put a chip on us like we are dogs and without that chip you wouldn’t be able to do anything, you wouldn’t be able to have a social life.”

As now, Andreas Kalcker is being investigated in Argentina after a 5-year-old boy and a 50-year-old man died after taking MMS<sup>43</sup>. Nevertheless, he remains a popular public figure in Bolivia where he just gave a tour, offering conferences supported by some Bolivian public universities<sup>44</sup>.

## Chapter 4: Discussion

### Conspiracy theories and common sense

It is undeniable that the interest in conspiracy theories has grown over the last years, especially since Donald Trump became president of the United States. Nevertheless, the public and academic attention they had drawn are often quite negative. For example, a recent work about conspiracy theories portrays them as a threat to democracy and as an insult or an assault on common sense (Rosenblum & Muirhead 2020)

On our understanding, common sense refers to our acceptance of the intractable facts about the world and our already existing shared experience and understanding about our social world. That is what conspiracism betrays. (...) True, the new conspiracists appeal to

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<sup>42</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=702961193604683>

<sup>43</sup> <https://www.businessinsider.com/mms-bleach-advocate-andres-kalcker-investigated-after-2-deaths-2021-2?fbclid=IwAR0nONozyUc9CZkKzofyMLsHdUUh3c1c5Q0Q0jWaB63OQqAPVxoCHDfL3hdU>

<sup>44</sup> [https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story\\_fbid=296884011792524&id=100044127819645](https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=296884011792524&id=100044127819645)

the assent of others—that is exactly the force of the Trumpian phrase “a lot of people are saying.” On its face, one might think that appeal to “a lot of people” is an appeal to what everyone can see and understand. That is its rhetorical power—it pretends to comply with exactly the thing it betrays, common sense. (Rosenblum & Muirhead 2020, p. 127)

Rosenblum & Muirhead (2020) understand conspiracy theories as opposing or challenging common sense. Therefore, it is important to define what common sense is. The renowned anthropologist Clifford Geertz has one of the most important works on common sense in which he understands it as an ‘organized body of considered thought’ (1975, p. 75) on its own right. This means common sense has epistemic authority of its own, which is based on lived experience. Even though it is presented to be as self-evident and gained without any need of formal instruction, according to Geertz, common sense should also be considered as transmitted knowledge that, although not systematized in any kind of formal doctrine, it is passed on along with proverbs, jokes, anecdotes and other similar vernacular sources. In contrast with other types of knowledge such as science, religion or law, common sense is supposed to be widely shared and doesn’t need any kind of expertise to acquire it. Geertz says the following:

Common sense, to put it another way, represents the world as a familiar world, one everyone can, and should, recognize, and within which everyone stands, or should, on his own feet. To live in the suburbs called physics, or Islam, or law, or music, or socialism, one must meet certain particular requirements, and the houses are not all of the same imposingness. To live in the semi-suburb called common sense, where all the houses are sans fagon, one need only be, as the old phrase has it, sound of mind and practical of conscience, however those worthy virtues be defined in the particular city of thought and language whose citizen he is. (Geertz 1975, p. 91)

For Rosenblum & Muirhead (2020), conspiracy theories betray this shared understanding that allows us all to see the world as a familiar world; a world we all, more or less, understand. Nevertheless, I found this kind of accounts about conspiracy theories especially useless for understanding their role on scenarios such as the Bolivian case with MMS. What Bolivia’s example shows is that instead of conspiracism betraying any shared understanding of the social world; it was reality itself - the tragedy of the pandemic mixed with all the political chaos, that challenged common sense; and conversely, it was conspiracy beliefs that actually helped some people to restore a sense of a shared lived experience; meaning, any feel of common sense. Being a new disease, and not knowing much about it, doctors and health authorities didn’t know exactly what to do or if what they were doing was going to be beneficial in the future or not. Not being able to do much in such complicated and tragic scenario, was perceived as the real treason against common sense by some. In one of the interviews I held, a doctor told me the following:

PABLO: So it was the peak and they cut off... they blocked the oxygen out. So...there were no oxygen tanks and we no longer had... I mean, I didn't even want to pick up the phone anymore because I had nothing to offer, we had no beds, no oxygen...

ANA: Sure.

PABLO: we had nothing, I mean, I could have sent my friend to people's houses but then we couldn't even do that because we had no oxygen. People wasn't even be able to get hospitalized because there were no meds (laughs)

ANA: Sure! There was nothing you can do!

PABLO: Nothing! Nothing!

Pablo - Doctor

This frustration was capitalized by entrepreneurs like Kalcker, who often quotes the article 37 in the Helsinki Declaration<sup>45</sup> that allows doctors to provide medicines that are not yet approved if there is no other medicine available. This treaty is based on a "common sense" idea that every possible solution must be exhausted in order to save someone else's life. Kalcker goes as far as saying that to not provide MMS to people on a pandemic could be considered as genocide. In his interview with John Arandia, he said the following:

**"Andreas Kalcker:** So, if your colleague is dying, will you give [MMS] to him or not?

**John Arandia:** Well, I guess, sure, I would do everything I can to save his life.

**Andreas Kalcker:** Exactly. So we must, and we are forced to, skip [regulations] if they don't do anything. (...) The main thing is to save lives; the main thing is not to discuss what could we do or what must we do. We have to do something. I mean, we have to take action (...) in case it doesn't get authorization, they will be responsible of genocide."

In this example we can see how conspiracy beliefs can be useful to restore common sense under chaotic and extreme scenarios. Under these scenarios, the "a lot of people are saying" kind of arguments, are common sense arguments, because they help to construct an idea of a shared common experience that can help people regain agency and take some kind of action that will help them reduce their anxieties and uncertainties. This is not just rhetorical power in Bolivia, and after the attack on the Capitol on January 2021, I will argue that it was not just rhetorical in the US either.

Beyond common sense, it is important also to define what conspiracy theories are. A lot has been written about them; however, I find Barkun's definition of conspiracy beliefs very useful for the phenomena I'm studying here. Barkun (2003) states:

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<sup>45</sup> The Helsinki Declaration is a document done in 1964 by the World Medical Association (WMA) that lays the ethical principles regarding human experimentation in the medical practice. It can be found here: <https://www.wma.net/policies-post/wma-declaration-of-helsinki-ethical-principles-for-medical-research-involving-human-subjects/>

“The essence of conspiracy beliefs lies in attempts to delineate and explain evil. (...) For our purposes, a conspiracy belief is the belief that an organization made up of individuals or groups was or is acting covertly to achieve some malevolent end. (...) A conspiracist worldview implies a universe governed by design rather than by randomness” (Barkun 2003, p. 3)

In other words, conspiracy beliefs can be understood as a meaning-making force that attempts to explain how the world works, and as Aupers & Harambam (2019, p. 50) explain, this is a very well accepted definition in the field. In that sense, conspiracy beliefs are not that different from any other type of knowledge claims that also attempts to give meaning or to explain worldly events, such as religion or science. The difference lies though, in their source of epistemic authority. As Robertson (2019) explains, the epistemic capital that can often be found in a conspiracist milieu relies on certain epistemic strategies that produces a sort of synthetic knowledge. In other words, conspiracy authority figures maximize epistemic profits by drawing strategically from a myriad of different sources. They are not necessarily anti-scientific, rather they invoke scientific authority when it suits them and criticize it also when it is convenient for them. They can do the same with other kinds of knowledge such as metaphysics or ideology. For them, all sources of knowledge are considered equally important, or what Robertson calls, a sort of ‘epistemocracy’ (2019, p. 252). This strategy allows them to build a charismatic figure whose “acts are seen by their audience as commonplace, yet represented” (2019, p. 250).

I will argue that their charismatic figure and the way in which they achieve this sort of epistemocracy is by appealing to common sense. Their epistemic capital is common sense. As it has been stated before, common sense presents itself as the most immediate and ‘obvious’ kind of knowledge. Clifford Gertz explains that: *“Religion rests its case on revelation, science on method, ideology on moral passion; but common-sense rests it on the assertion that it is not a case at all, just life in a nutshell. The world is its authority”* (Geertz 1975 p. 75). This is important because common sense seems to be the only kind of knowledge that can survive when all the other kinds of epistemic authorities have ‘failed’. Conspiracist appeal to common sense when they argue that, in a world in which science, politicians, journalists are all being controlled by a powerful elite, the only thing we have left is our own criteria, our own reason. This is why very common ‘mottos’ in conspiracist belief are: ‘think for yourself’, ‘make up your own mind’, ‘do your own research’, etc. Geertz affirms: *“Common sense seems to us what is left over when all these more articulated sorts of symbol systems have exhausted their tasks, what remains of reason when its more sophisticated achievements are all set aside”* (1975, p. 92). Therefore, it is possible to affirm that far from going against common sense, conspiracy theories rest their case on common sense.

As an example, in Kalcker formerly quoted interview he argues the following:

**“John Arandia:** Medical advice is needed, and authorities’ authorization is also needed. That is a very important thing to say, Mr. Kalcker.

**Andreas Kalcker:** I refuse to ask for the authorities’ authorization, because the authorities have missed and failed all over. So, article 37 [of the Helsinki Declaration] is above them because they won’t be responsible after your colleague has died, am I right?”

The same seems to be understood by MMS consumers. One of my interviewees said the following:

Because this disease has been so unknown that anything that could heal you is worth trying. It is worth the money, it is worth the X,Y, Z drug, why? because conventional or modern medicine is not working.

Enrique – consumer

In here, Kalcker and Enrique base MMS’ authority in common sense. Whereas other authorities, such as health authorities, base their authority in science, they point out that science has failed and, therefore, have lost their claim to authority. This is a very powerful statement in a place in which a political crisis and a health crisis is simultaneously ravaging the country. Kalcker is urging people to take the matter into their own hands.

In this sense, it is important to note that Bolivia, in terms of health habits, is a country characterized by self-medication often based on folk medicine<sup>46</sup>. In that venue, in Bolivia, folk medicine is common sense. People don’t usually go to the doctor unless they are very sick and have a wide repertoire of alternatives to fight diseases on their own. These habits were at the center of the controversy during the pandemic in Bolivia, which turned common sense into what Barkun (2003) calls stigmatized knowledge. The most paradigmatic example of the stigmatization against folk medicine during the pandemic can be found when Bolivia’s secretary of government harshly criticized and insulted people who used folk medicine on the peak of the pandemic:

“We have a lot of irresponsible people on the streets who don’t obey the instructions that are given to them; but specially, we have irresponsible politicians who with lies and stories,

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<sup>46</sup> Although self-medication and/or use of natural medicines is known to be a widespread practice in Bolivia, it has not been deeply studied. There is one research that found that 76% of the population self-medicates. The research was carried on among college students. Moraga, C., & Linares, G. (2013). Factores asociados a la Prevalencia de la Automedicación en los estudiantes USFX de Chuquisaca en la ciudad de Sucre Gestión 2013. *Arch. Boliv. Med.[revista en la Internet]*, 20(88), 19-25.



went out on the streets and told people that this damn disease is a lie, is an invention and it can be healed with wira wira. It is not like that. This is a virus that is killing a lot of people around the world and it can be cured with intelligence, it can be cured by going to the doctor at time, it can be cured by taking all the necessary precautions, it doesn't cure with bullshit."

Arturo Murillo – Secretary of Government

## Common sense as stigmatized knowledge

Barkun (2003) defines stigmatized knowledge as "knowledge claims that have not been validated by mainstream institutions" (2003, p. 12). There are five varieties of stigmatized knowledge: a) Forgotten knowledge (lost knowledge due to some kind of interruption); b) superseded knowledge (knowledge that became outdated due to technological improvements like astrology or alchemy); c) ignored knowledge (claims that persist in low-prestige groups like folk medicine); d) rejected knowledge (claims that are explicitly rejected like UFO abductions); e) suppressed knowledge (knowledge that is available but is purportedly being hidden). Suppressed knowledge tends to absorb the others and attributes the stigmatization to a conspiracy. Being victims of a conspiracy that is trying to erase their knowledge can be often their strongest defense. In this sense, and as Barkun affirms, stigmatization itself is often taken as evidence of truth. Stigmatization increases credibility: "the belief must be true *because* it is stigmatized" (2003, p. 28).

People like Jim Humble, Mark Grenon or Andreas Kalcker explicitly label MMS as suppressed knowledge. They affirm that mainstream health institutions discredit MMS because they are protecting the economic interests of the pharmaceutical industry. With this argument, they discredit any kind of criticism that is directed at MMS. This logic, though, connects deeply with the lived experience of Bolivians who rely on folk medicine on regular basis, but face the rejection of western biomedicine. The words of the former Secretary of Government quoted above are just an example of the tense relationship between western biomedicine and folk medicine in Bolivia and in Latin America in general. The research of Tapia, Royder & Cruz (2006) done in miner neighborhoods in western Bolivia, discuss in depth the difficulties found by both patients and doctors dealing with health issues. On one hand, patients feel discriminated against, mistreated and as not being listened by doctors and other health professionals; while doctors feel that the local traditions produce bad health habits which has a negative impact on people's health, an impact that then they are blamed for.

**ORGANIZA:**

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**I TALLER NACIONAL VIRTUAL**  
**"USO Y APLICACIÓN DE MEDICINA ANCESTRAL TRADICIONAL Y DIOXIDO DE CLORO, CDS, PARA PREVENIR Y CONTRARRESTAR EL COVID - 19."**

**EXPOSITORES**

<b>DR. ANDREAS KALCKER</b> <b>(ALEMANIA)</b> Biofisico e Investigador Alemán, creador de la fórmula CDS.	<b>DR. GEOVANNY SANTACRUZ</b> Medicina Ancestral Tradicional.
<b>DRA. PATRICIA CALLISPERI (BOLIVIA)</b> Usos y aplicación del dióxido de cloro CDS, en Bolivia.	<b>DRA. CARMEN SARMIENTO</b> Investigación científica sobre CDS en Ecuador.

**TAITA FRANKLIN COLUMBA.**  
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Figure 6 Workshop on traditional ancestral medicine and chlorine dioxide for COVID-19. Source: FENOCIN

In Bolivia, during the COVID-19 pandemic, folk medicine accepted and welcomed MMS on the basis of being both victims of stigmatized knowledge. Dr. Patricia Callisperis, an orthopedic and traumatologist specialist, and the most vocal physician who supported and advocated for MMS in Bolivia affirmed that chlorine dioxide is “a natural cure that taps the ancestral roots of Bolivians”<sup>47</sup>. In the following flyer we can see how MMS was being promoted along with ancestral traditional medicine at the peak of the pandemic in 2020, where Kalcker and Callisperis shared the same space with experts in traditional medicine.

<sup>47</sup> <https://www.businessinsider.com/bolivia-bleach-coronavirus-embraced-misinformation-2020-9>

Among Andean folk medicine experts, COVID-19 has been interpreted as the “kari-kari disease”<sup>48</sup>. A kari kari is a sort of evil being, modelled after the figure of a catholic priest<sup>49</sup>, who preys on his victims to steal their body fat to make candles to worship a demon or the devil. Those who have been victims of the kari kari are called ‘karisidos’ and can present a range of different symptoms that range from nightmares, depression, high fevers with hallucinations, among others. The kari kari disease, as all other diseases according to Andean folk medicine, is a disease of the soul. For them, the body and the soul are inseparable and when the body sickens is because the soul is also sick. Indigenous healers can help people heal from this disease by summoning the karisido’s soul back. For this purpose, they have created a medicine made out of traditional herbs and other ingredients which are a well-kept secret<sup>50</sup>. Indigenous healers have claimed that, when the ingredients of the kari kari medicine become scarce, they resorted to chlorine dioxide with positive results<sup>51</sup>, so they endorsed the use of MMS as a possible replacement for traditional medicine, if one was not able to find the original kari kari medicine. My interviewee told me that healers are using chlorine dioxide as an emergency:

“CLARA: I mean they use it to make the body toxic for the virus. It is not healthy for the body, but if you get rid of the virus, then you can treat the body, in other words, chlorine dioxide is just less poisonous than the virus. In here the healers know about chlorine dioxide as a recommendation of a north American indigenous healer. Besides, they consulted with the inalmama (coca leaves) if they can use it and how.

ANA: So, Kalcker has nothing to do with the fact that our healers are using chlorine dioxide?

CLARA: Not at all. They don’t even know who that gentleman is.”.

Clara – Doctor and healer

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<sup>48</sup> <https://www.periodicobolivia.com.bo/las-chifleras-ofertan-remedios-para-combatir-el-coronavirus/#>

<sup>49</sup> <https://institutoanura.com/el-kari-kari/>

<sup>50</sup> <https://www.periodicobolivia.com.bo/las-chifleras-ofertan-remedios-para-combatir-el-coronavirus/#>

<sup>51</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/groups/230606841719366/permalink/432862864827095>



Figure 7 Vendors of traditional medicine of Kari Kari for COVID-19. Source: Periodico Bolivia.

## Improvisational entrepreneurs

Both Barkun's (2003) concept of 'improvisational entrepreneurs' and Robertson's (2019) concept of 'epistemic capital' talk to the characteristic of many conspiracy beliefs of being highly diverse on regard to their sources of knowledge. Improvisational entrepreneurship is characterized for not being linked to a single ideological tradition, but for its "relentless and seemingly indiscriminate borrowing" (Barkun 2003, p. 18) Such belief system is created by "idiosyncratic combinations" that can be considered a "bricolage", they contain elements of "more than one religious tradition, together with ideas from the New Age, occultism, science, and radical politics (...)" The variety of their elements implies that the belief system can explain a comparably wide range of phenomena, from the spiritual to the scientific and the political" (2003, p. 19), says Barkun. In this same venue, Robertson (2019) talks about how these strategies help maximize epistemic profits where all these different sources are considered to be equally important.

Two conditions must be met in order for improvisational entrepreneurship to flourish: a wide range of potential material that might be incorporated into the belief system and that the existing authority structures be weakened enough for novel ideas to be attractive (Barkun 2003, p. 21). These conditions describe the Bolivian milieu quite accurately. Bolivia is a postcolonial society with a large indigenous

population who, although conserve health custom beliefs, are nonetheless also well inserted in globalization. This complex cultural context subsists in a rather weak institutional context, where access to health care is insufficient and political crisis preys on Bolivian society by keeping it polarized along racial lines. On my research, I have stumble upon on people who have embraced MMS from a myriad of different religious or secular positions. In one interview, a man tells me about how his mother, a Buddhist, has seen in Kalcker a new Buddha:

My friend is a Buddhist and, according to my friend's Buddhism, we can all be Buddhas. 'Bodhisattvas of the earth' they say. When you are a Bodhisattva of the earth you can do good; in other words, we can all be Gods. For my friend, Kalcker is a Bodhisattva of the earth, he is a Buddha because with this medicine he is saving people's lives. He is saving us all, massively, so he is a Buddha. He is indeed a Bodhisattva of the earth. So, she thinks this and I can imagine that other people, with other analogies, also see this guy as some kind of savior, right?

Enrique – MMS consumer

I also had a conversation with a Rastafarian who was taking MMS to cure himself from COVID-19. I asked him if his religious beliefs had an influence in his decision of taking MMS and he said the following:

The Christian King of whom almost nobody speaks about, changed the history of humankind by complaining about Mussolini and other things to the League of Nations, who didn't listen and allow for World War II to happen. Then, your majesty (Haile Selassie first of his name) spoke before the UN and gave them an ultimatum, being the only head of a State to talk to both world organizations. So yes, it [my religion] makes me trust in objective things like science, while being aware that there is also corruption and other things. It encourages me to be critical about everything so I can keep the good and reject the bad because, according to the Bible, everything that is involved with the high powers of this world is fornicating with the great whore that mounts the beast.

Pedro – MMS consumer

These are two examples that confirm what Robertson (2019) says about maximizing epistemic profits. The 'bricolage' nature of conspiracy entrepreneurship allows people from a myriad of different backgrounds to find something that can validate MMS claims for them. In this same venue, Barkun affirms: "In the act of ignoring boundaries, improvisational millenarians implicitly challenge orthodox conceptions of beliefs, improvisationalists convey the message that no single belief system, whether religious or secular, is authoritative. By implication, only the idiosyncratic combination associated with a particular leader or group is deemed to be valid." (2003, p. 21). Given this great variety of epistemic authoritative sources, is hard to track them to a single doctrine; nevertheless, what they all claim to have in common is the fact that

they are all “in opposition to a known orthodoxy” (2003, p. 22). Finally, I believe that is precisely this bricolage nature of improvisational entrepreneurship that allowed MMS to perform as a boundary object.

## Boundary objects

Barkun discusses (2003, p. 181 – 182) some strategies that allow for stigmatized knowledge to enter accepted forms of political expression which he calls “bridging mechanisms”. Among them he recognizes: the cultivation of crossover audiences, the development of alternative communication systems and the indivisibility of the stigmatized knowledge domain. However, I argue that for these mechanisms to work, improvisational entrepreneurs must build something that acts as a boundary object first. I found the concept of boundary object more useful than such bridging mechanisms because it focuses on cooperation, rather than in improvisational entrepreneurship alone.

Often, conspiracy theories’ believers are portrayed as merely irrational or their belief gets pathologized (Aupers & Harambam 2019), or sometimes as victims, neglecting their own agency and motives, which seems to be a matter of little interest for most scholarship in the topic. For my work, the concept of boundary object has the benefit of positioning all actors on a more or less equal basis in terms of agency. It recognizes that many different actors, with different motivations can found a way to collaborate with each other, no matter how different them may seem.

Susan Leigh Star & James Griesemer coined this concept in 1989 in the context of science and technology studies. “This concept captures the possibility of cooperative scientific work in the absence of consensus” (Timmermans 2015, p. 4). Consensus is often conveyed as a pre-requisite for cooperation, but the concept of boundary object show alternatives under which cooperation can be achieved when no consensus can be reached between different communities of practice. “A boundary object is something that has different and quite specific meaning in intersecting communities but also has a common meaning to facilitate cooperation across communities” (Timmermans 2015, p. 4). The authors define boundary objects as “objects which are both plastic enough to adapt to local needs and the constraints of several parties employing them, yet robust enough to maintain a common identity across sites” (Star & Griesemer 2015, p. 393).

In this sense, it is important to note that the concept of boundary object doesn't privilege the scientific arena nor puts science at the center of the translations; instead, it highlights "collaboration that preserves the uniqueness of each group" (Timmermans 2015, p. 5). In this sense, I'm proposing that boundary objects can also be used by groups who are not considered as members of the scientific community, namely: conspiracy theorist, pseudoscience or alternative science proponents and/or improvisational entrepreneurs.

Star & Griesemer (2015) affirm that scientific work is done by many diverse actors; and therefore, it requires high levels of cooperation. This tension can be sometimes resolved through boundary objects. She points to the myth that states that the scientific world is governed by consensus and shows how actors need to translate, negotiate and debate their ideas and needs, in order to produce scientific work. In here, I want to point out to the myth that such translations are impossible between the scientific world and the world of conspiracy theories. As Robertson (2019) claims, it is not the case that conspiracy theorist reject science altogether, and it is quite common to see them appealing to scientific authority to back up their arguments (p. 251).

To create scientific authority, scientific entrepreneurs need to get allies from different social locations and must translate other group's needs and concerns into ones, so as to establish themselves as "gatekeepers" of knowledge. In other words, scientific entrepreneurs need to reach to non-scientific groups and show them that an "x" scientific entrepreneurship is also on their interest. If scientific entrepreneurs are successful in the translation work, they get to be the gatekeepers of scientific authority. Star & Griesemer quote Latour's and Callon's concept of "interessement" to indicate the translation of the concerns of the non-scientist into those of the scientist (2015, p. 173) The authors criticize this framework and point to the fact that such translations don't happen just on a one-way direction, from nonscientist to scientists, but also the other way around and in as much directions as allies exist. They state: "unless they use coercion, each translator must maintain the integrity of the interests of the other audiences in order to retain them as allies. Yet this must be done in such a way as to increase the centrality and importance of the entrepreneur's work." (2015, p. 173) They call this the 'n-way nature' of the interessement. In that sense, boundary objects do not perform just one translation, nor they constitute themselves as the only passage point for scientific authority. The authors recognized that such translation work happens in a "many-to-many mapping".

In such mapping, the coherence of all sets of translations are hard to keep and depend on “the extent to which entrepreneurial efforts from multiple worlds can coexist” (Star & Griesemer 2015, p. 174) This is a complex process that I believe improvisational entrepreneurs have mastered. Under this model, every group may become a point of passage or a gatekeeper for their own work; and in that sense, there is “an indeterminate number of coherent sets of translations.” (Star & Griesemer 2015, p. 174). This is quite a juggling act and it doesn’t come without risks for entrepreneurs who, while performing as translators, may lose cooperation from other allies or may increase uncertainties within their group.

This happened to one of my interviewees. At the moment of the interview, he was a candidate for a local office, and he was also a highly vocal MMS advocate. He said the following:

This has cost me a lot of my own credibility because that is part of what the media does, and the people, and my adversaries. They all rejected the possibility [of MMS working] and thought we were advocating for everyone to take chlorine dioxide, and this is a personal choice, but I was just promoting the possibility. My credibility was buried down. Uff! They fucked me off! And now I’m running [for office] because this pandemic changed me. I realized how political decisions can take people’s lives in a minute. And I’ve experienced it on my own skin and people died on my hands because of the decisions these guys made. I’m still working with chlorine dioxide now, but I haven’t made it very public, not for political gain, but because all that shit that people throw on me, all those who want to dig some dirt on me, they can turn my wheel in a minute.

Jorge – MMS consumer and promoter.

Using this concept, I will argue that the official or institutional entrepreneurs in charge of doing such translations during the COVID-19 pandemic were mostly absent in Bolivia, in part due to the immediate political and overall institutional crisis, but also for the larger institutional context of the country. In this context, when such translations are not only desirable but extremely needed, improvisational entrepreneurs simply took their place. In Bolivia, MMS was not defended only by Kalcker and his followers; doctors, universities, politicians and lay people have embraced MMS and performed their own translations. I will argue that the success behind such a diversity of translations being able to hold up together was due to the “bricolage” nature of MMS belief itself.

This bricolage nature allows to do what Robertson calls “maximizing epistemic profits” (2019, p. 250); in other words, is flexible enough so each actor can take what it may be valuable for them and discard the rest without any major consequence for the original entrepreneur. MMS promoters want people to



consume MMS, they achieve their purpose by appealing to conspiracy theories, to traditional folk medicine, to religion or to science and the reason why MMS is able to do this, is because is flexible enough to acquire different meanings for different people without losing its coherence. Star & Griesemer (2015) say boundary objects “have different meanings in different social worlds but their structure is common enough to more than one world to make them recognizable, a means of translation. The creation and management of boundary objects is a key process in developing and maintaining coherence across intersecting social worlds.” (2015, p. 176 – 177). MMS was flexible enough for some people to believe in it without even having to formally engage with its conspiracy nature. On my interview with the above quoted political activist, he wanted to set the record straight right from the beginning of the interview and clarify that he “didn’t subscribe to any conspiracy theories”. In this sense, I asked him what he did, then, think of people like Jim Humble or Andreas Kalcker and their conspirational claims. This is his answer:

I think is just the human condition. That’s what I think. The human condition and what anybody can make with scientific findings. I believe that, in essence, what Jim Humble achieved was to allow the use of MMS to treat diseases. From there on, if the guy goes on a wild trip and makes it a religion, for me personally, that is just a separate thing. The same thing with Kalcker.

Jorge – MMS consumer and promoter.

## Communities of practice

As defined by the linguist Penelope Eckert “A community of practice is a collection of people who engage on an ongoing basis in some common endeavor. Communities of practice emerge in response to common interest or position and play an important role in forming their members’ participation in, and orientation to, the world around them.” (2006, 1). In that sense, a community of practice can be any social group that share any kind of common endeavor, it could be a soccer team, a firm of lawyers, a family or a group of classmates. The term stresses the fact that what brings and keeps the group together is the activity that the members perform rather any other kind of identity marker such as gender, race, nationality, etc. It is around the activity they perform together that a whole universe of social phenomena arise; for example, they create a way of doing things, their own set of norms, their own routines, and what interests me the most in this work, their own way of talking. In this sense, the specific linguistic style found in any community of practice usually plays a key role in the identity construction of its members.

The notion of communities of practice is very close related to the notion of common sense. As Eckert explains: “Two conditions of a community of practice are crucial in the conventionalization of meaning:

shared experience over time, and a commitment to shared understanding. A community of practice engages people in mutual sense-making – about the enterprise they’re engaged in, about their respective forms of participation in the enterprise, about their orientation to other communities of practice and to the world around them more generally. (...) It provides opportunities for joint sense-making, and it deepens participants’ shared knowledge and sense of predictability.” (2006, 1).

In this sense, I find important to say that although common sense is supposed to be more or less shared by a larger part of the society in order to be considered “common”; common sense-making usually happens within communities of practice, which is probably why common sense is less common than it actually claims. This becomes particularly salient on moments of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, in which each community of practice related to health had very different understandings of the disease itself, of what should we all do about it and what will constitute “good practices” under those circumstances.

An interesting example of how different communities of practice existed in Bolivia can be seen in the difference between doctors and folk healers. One of my interviewees, a doctor who happens to also be a practitioner of Andean folk medicine, explained to me the main reason why folk healers’ distrust western biomedicine:

[In folk medicine] the person who makes the medicine, must know how to heal and must understand the soul of his patient and the soul of the medicine, so they can know for sure if the medicine will work or not. FOR THAT REASON, THE HEALER MUST TAKE THE MEDICINE THAT HE PREPARED FOR HIS PATIENT, HIMSELF. A good healer will never prescribe something without him taking it first. And he won’t be able to heal anybody if he hasn’t healed himself first. This is why you can’t “study” to heal. You must learn to be a healer through your own life. That is why indigenous people don’t trust doctors. For them, doctors are sick, they are always sick because they carry on their shoulders all the diseases of the people they work for. Moreover, they have no compassion, they are cold, and they don’t prepare the medicines they prescribe, so they say “how come they will heal us if they are not healthy themselves? If they are sick, they will sicken us even more”  
Clara – Doctor and folk healer

This is an example of how doctors and folk healers, in the Bolivian context, can constitute two different communities of practice. Both groups have very different understandings of what a disease is or how a healer should behave. Even when they might both be talking about the same thing, COVID-19, their messages scape each other.

## Chapter 5: Conclusions. How MMS acted as a boundary object.

I have recognized five important communities of practice who played a major role during the first wave of the covid-19 pandemic in Bolivia. I have defined them as different communities of practice because they have different linguistic styles that are intimately related with their identity, which became relevant and salient during the pandemic. They are all close and interact to each other and are able to comprehend each other; but on certain stances, their linguistic differences obstructed their relationship and hurt their chances to cooperate with each other during a major health crisis such as the one that the COVID-19 pandemic brought.

One of this stances can be seen in the way the word “evidence” is understood by members of all these different communities. In this sense, when a person who belongs to the scientific community of practice observes that an out-group person uses the word “evidence” as an equivalent of personal testimonies they quickly identify this person as a quack. Conversely, when a scientist dismisses evidence “just for being anecdotal”, he is quickly identified by improvisational entrepreneurs as an agent of the powerful elites that control the world. Knowing the rules that the word “evidence” has for each of these different communities of practice is what may make someone competent or incompetent to communicate, and therefore to translate, within and across those communities.

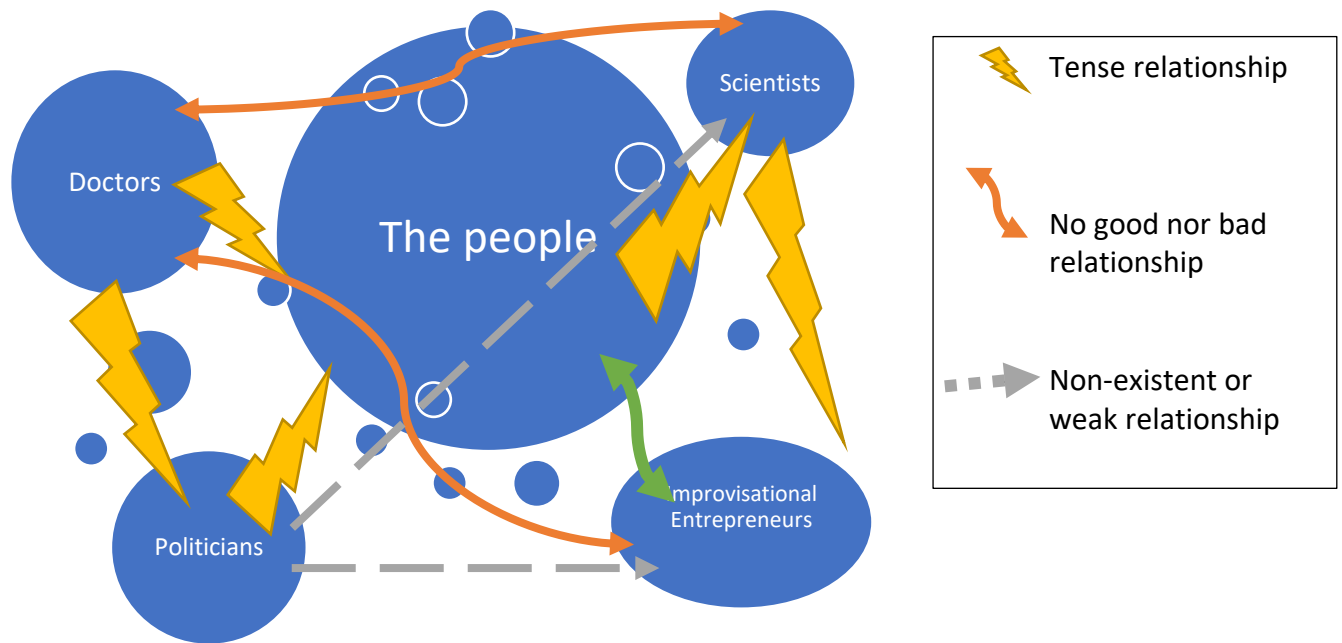


Figure 8 Relevant COVID-19 actors map Source: Self-made.

Chlorine Dioxide was able to work as a boundary object because it made the necessary translations that facilitated the collaboration of at least some members of each group. As one can see in the previous graphic, on a very fragmented society such as the Bolivian, improvisational entrepreneurs are the ones who have less antagonistic relationship with all other groups. Therefore, they had better chances to work as translators and to use chlorine dioxide as a boundary object. MMS was even able to cut across old racial and political lines in Bolivia, as one of my interviewees told me:

I remember my aunt, who is 'pitita'<sup>52</sup>, felt the contradiction and said "What is happening?" and my uncle said "MAS is taking advantage of this" So my aunt was living this contradiction because I remember that when she told me about last November, my aunt is kind of classist and racist, and she said "these peasants wanted to do their stuff here, blah blah blah" and when they began advocating for MMS she said "the indigenous movements are finally empowered. They will save us." And I asked her "What if Evo says that we should all take chlorine dioxide?" My aunt hates Evo "I don't know what I will do!" she said. So, my aunt lived that contradiction and said, "I cannot believe that those MAS supporters are the ones who do recognize that this is the right medicine". They had to be the ignorant ones, and it turned out that the scientific committee were now the 'savages' who wanted for people to die.

Enrique – Consumer

<sup>52</sup> A popular name given to Morales and his political party's (MAS) adversaries.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that chlorine dioxide was not a perfect boundary object. Although it disentangled a very strained social fabric on a critical moment, it also destabilized those same groups from within. In that sense, while some members of the doctor's community incorporated chlorine dioxide in their treatment, other doctors strongly rejected it, creating divisions among doctors. The same dynamic happened in all other groups, except for the improvisational entrepreneurs, who despite their diversity - from alternative medicine entrepreneurs, to evangelical churches, to folk medicine authorities, seemed to have had no major problems embracing MMS. For those in-group members (whether they were doctors, politicians or scientists) who rejected chlorine dioxide as a possible treatment for COVID-19, MMS as a boundary object clashed with their notions of common sense. Conversely, for those in-group members who accepted chlorine dioxide as a possible treatment for COVID-19, it restored their notions of common sense. For a moment, then, some in-group members became out-group members and out-group member became in-group members, all because the boundaries between common sense and stigmatized knowledge became blurry for a while.

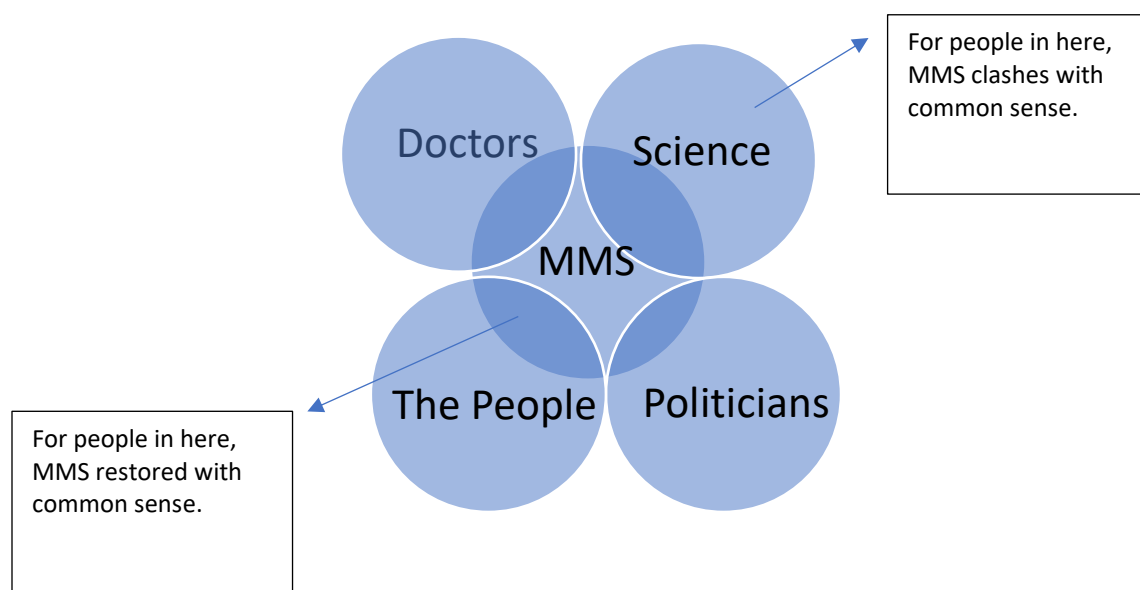


Figure 9 How MMS acted as a boundary object. Source: Self-made

What is evidence for each group?

*Scientists:* Scientific method defines evidence for them. Evidence must be backed up with data. An anecdote or a bunch of anecdotes do not count as evidence. For scientists, we can be easily deceived by

our senses, that's why we need the scientific method to avoid any biases and mistakes. Clinical trials, the authority of expertise, scientific journals, international institutions are all guaranties for strong evidence.

People don't understand what high quality scientific evidence is and because it was not possible to find the right medicine, people got angry (...) They think evidence is generated in a minute and it's not like that, right? It has its own schedule that must be complied. (...) So, there is no scientific evidence that chlorine dioxide could be used to treat or prevent COVID-19; there is not even evidence que it can cure or prevent other pathologies. (...) What we do is to look for high quality references because we cannot use a pre-clinic trial, for example, or research done in animals. We also can't take the experience of one doctor in one case (...) we look randomized clinical trials.  
Silvia – Biochemical professional

*Doctors:* Scientists and doctors can be perceived as belonging to the same group, but this is not always right. Doctors, unlike scientists, are "in the field". They are in direct contact with patients and are the ones who see how things work or don't work outside the lab and with real people. They are, in a way, in the middle between a scientific approach of evidence and the vernacular understanding of it. Doctors also follow the authority of prestigious institutions of the science world (scientific journals, the FDA, etc.); but at the same time, because they are in direct contact with patients, they are the ones who bare the main responsibility when something goes wrong. This makes them more prone to dare to try new things in desperate situations.

PABLO: So, it has been quite complicated. But...eh... that is when ... I have seen the need to (laugh) let's say... there was people who told me... at the peak, right? July, August... people that had begun taking chlorine dioxide (laugh) But, I couldn't tell them "don't do it", let's say.

ANA: Sure.

PABLO: It was like... "Well... Agh! Is better than nothing! (laughs) "Let's try it. Go ahead Sir" Like, what are we going to do?

ANA: Like, control your doses

PABLO: Yeah, I mean, (laughs) I too have chlorine dioxide here, right?

BOTH LAUGH

PABLO: I mean, sure, I'm aware of cases, that I have spoken with them, that... let say, it was a patient with high chances of dying because of... of all the things we learned in that short time span. So, they tell me "No. I will take my dad out of there. I don't want him to be here because he is going to die, and no one will be with him. "OK!" And I've been told that he was given them chlorine dioxide and I tell them "Well, go ahead" (laughs) "BUT, maybe... a Levofloxacin" (laughs)

ANA: (laughs) "it won't hurt him"

PABLO: Like...to have a bit more control.

ANA: Sure

Pablo - Doctor

*Politicians:* For politicians, evidence can simply be “what people want”. This can be seen from a populist sense, in the sense that they might be able to do whatever it takes to gain popularity, but it can also be seen from the point of view of political accountability. In many ways, politicians are seen as mere representatives of their constituents. In Bolivia, a common understanding of what a “good politician” should be, is one that “listens to the people”. Evo Morales often used the slogan “to rule by obeying to the people”.

DANIELA: There were some moments, like those with chlorine dioxide, that my boss used to say: “But, the PEOPLE is asking for it!” But, no! it is not like that! We have to stick with the science, right? And this is what science says. “Let them take it!” is what he used to say. But as the government you can’t do that, right?  
Daniela – scientific political adviser

*The people:* a vernacular understanding of “evidence” is linked to what one can see, what one has “experienced in their own skin”. This kind of knowledge doesn’t have the same gatekeepers or authority figures and institutions such as is the case in the scientific or medical community. It doesn’t need any kind of mediator. You don’t need a college degree, or to know how to read, or have access to books or foreign languages to know about your own experiences. You don’t need anyone but yourself to understand your own experience. The experience itself is its own authority. For this reason, when an authority figure dismisses someone else’s experience with chlorine dioxide as “merely anecdotal” what is being dismissed is not chlorine dioxide itself, but their own life, the life of those who they love. This is where communication channels between science and non-science people fall down and translations are almost impossible. For people without scientific training, their experiences matter, and they cannot be, or should not be, easily dismissed.

No one knows that this thing does. We don’t have a manual that tells us, right? But we do have testimonies, right? and my testimony is like that:” I had a fever, I took chlorine dioxide and the next day I no longer had a fever”. But I can’t explain to you, I can’t say “Look, chlorine dioxide got into my organism, and fill my cells with oxygen allowing for my fever to go down”. No one can explain that to you.  
Enrique – consumer

Also, experience under these extreme circumstances can be quite powerful, as the experience of one of my interviewees treating sick people in one of the country’s most over-populated jail:

Corpses began to pile up. They only had two doctors for 5000 people, that’s all I’ll say. So, I went with my cloth face mask and my friend comes with me with his cloth face mask. What was happening inside was terrifying. We went down to a chapel with 25 people with

COVID, all of them asphyxiating together. So, we went into the chapel and the viral load was so intense! I can't even tell you! because you had all the dead corpses by your side while people were dying in front of your eyes. It was one of the most fucked up scenarios that I had to witness, but I couldn't even take a moment to think about it because they used to bring me one patient after the other. And I was touching them! That was so crazy because we gain their respect just by touching them, they were about to make a riot just because two guys got there and dare to touch the sick. Me and my friend began to touch them and treat them, and they couldn't believe it. One of the worst cases was when they brought me a man with 35 of oxygen saturation, for the doctors he was dead basically, so I gave him a strong dose of chlorine dioxide, with the help of a doctor who was helping us over the phone. Can you believe that the man with 35 of oxygen saturation went up to 72? From 35 to 72! I have on tape the tears of the doctor whose job was to stand there and watch people die because they had only one IV for 5000 people, they had an oximeter that didn't work. The man who went from 35 to 72 had a chance to thank us, say their goodbyes and die. He died on my hands. I wanted to cry or freak out but then bum! other two patients came. It was horrific. An experience for a lifetime!

Juan – MMS consumer and promoter.

*Improvisational entrepreneurs:* Improvisational entrepreneurs are able to perform the necessary translations between groups because of the strategies they use to accumulate epistemic capital. In that sense, they take anecdotal evidence seriously and use it as self-evident; and by also invoking scientific authority, they give scientific validity to personal experience; which I'll argue, is a very powerful move in a pos-colonial society whose folk knowledge has been often dismissed as stigmatized knowledge. In that sense, Kalcker made a clever reference in one of his talks to one of the most important elements of Bolivia's folk medicine: the coca leaf. I believe that references like this must have had a big impact on people that saw how Kalcker was validating Bolivia's folk knowledge and was recognizing Bolivian's struggles in their defense of their traditions:

"I'm just a biophysicist that has discovered a thing, but I'm proud of the Bolivian people because you are the first ones to have spot the light at the end of the dark tunnel that was coming towards us. And you know how to fight for the good. I'm happy because now the world has its eyes on Bolivia. (...) In Colombia and elsewhere is very prohibited, but in Bolivia you can eat the coca leaf, right? In Switzerland of course not. So, it is the same thing, how come is it forbidden when everyone [in Bolivia] is eating it and when you go to Bolivia, they make a tea out of it for you in the hotel, but elsewhere they get horrified like it is the worst thing in the world, what is that? Come one! We must make up!"<sup>53</sup>

Andreas Kalcker

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<sup>53</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/100044127819645/videos/691125951502331>



We can also see how these strategies to maximize epistemic profits work in the way Karla Revollo talks about Andreas Kalcker in this video:

When Andreas Kalcker was told this was a miracle substance... beware! You can't say that something is a miracle to a scientist, a scientist has to prove it in a lab. Obviously, Andreas Kalcker was scared when he was told that this was a miracle substance. As the matter of fact, when he began studying it, he mentioned it to one of his most beloved friends, a friend who had overcome a mercury poisoning with chlorine dioxide. So, his friend said: "Well Andreas you do your research. Give me a scientific explanation why this works" and Andreas Kalcker said "I don't know if I'm capable of knowing exactly why does chlorine dioxide works". And then his friend said something very important, something that encouraged his 13-year-long research, and it was the following: "Andreas, you try. Who cares about the scientific explanation when it is obvious that it worked in so many people?" and what is most important "without killing anybody"<sup>54</sup>.

Karla Revollo – improvisational entrepreneur

This is an interesting example because in here, Karla Revollo portrays Kalcker as a thorough researcher who doesn't believe in miracles. But, at the same time, she shows how Kalcker was ultimately encouraged by his friend to put common sense first, before scientific evidence. When she recalls this conversation, she shows that common sense – or what "obviously works", should be more important.

In conclusion, each group's understanding of what "evidence" is, of the different kinds of evidence that there might be and how they can be hierarchically understood, has created enormous communicational boundaries for them. In that context, and given its improvisational nature or epistemic diversity, MMS worked as a boundary object that was flexible enough for each group to use and adapt to their own interests and needs, but coherent enough to not to lose its meaning while it undergoes multiple translations.

As a final word, I believe that the negative connotation that the term 'conspiracy theory' carries along with it, may be creating an obstacle to understand why people believe in them and defend them. If one dares to look beyond the understanding of these theories as merely irrational thinking or as senseless belief, one can find that their success can be found in the kind of personal, social and political work that they can do, and that such work may be as powerful as other cultural phenomenon such as like ideology or religion. I proposed that conspiracy theories can work as, or create, boundary objects which may allow certain people

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<sup>54</sup> [https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story\\_fbid=786756815190910&id=1885494385103473](https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=786756815190910&id=1885494385103473)

to open communication channels that are often closed for stigmatized knowledge, creating new social alliances that may play a key role in politics as it was the case in Bolivia, and as I believe is the case currently in the US. I argued that this could specially be the case when the stigmatized knowledge that constitutes the basis of the conspiracy theory is linked with notions of folk common sense, as it is often the case in postcolonial societies.

I believe that a less stigmatized look into conspiracy theories can help science to improve its leadership style. Ultimately, improvisational entrepreneurs copy scientists' authority claiming performances. They are mimicking a style of leadership that has work since the 17th century, and which is also working for them on the 21st century. Conspiracy theories are a mirror in which scholars can see the way in which knowledge has been given authority through all these years; and hopefully, a deeper study into conspiracy theories may inspire a new kind of scientific leadership that is able to get over the same strategies that are now been weaponized against science itself.

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