

Likely and Unlikely Stories: Conspiracy Theories in an Age of Propaganda

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The relationships between dominant practices of mass communication and widely accepted “conspiracy theories” require closer attention. The tendency of conspiracy adherents to selectively employ alternative information and communication resources while rejecting the “good information” readily available to the public has frequently been cited. Largely overlooked has been the basic character of an overall media environment wherein most information accessible to citizens is structured in accordance with commercial and/or state interests. Some conspiracy theories may appear plausible due to ongoing public exposure to *integration propaganda* pervasive within the mainstream media and a corresponding receptiveness to compatible expressions of *agitation propaganda*. Other conspiracy theories may gain appeal as “credible alternatives” to mainstream accounts, once longstanding media frames and narratives have been subjected to critical scrutiny.

Keywords: conspiracy theories, agitation propaganda, integration propaganda, media narratives, alternative accounts

Introduction

The hidden activities of powerful elites and secret societies, and their hypothetical role in steering political events and historic developments have long been the subject of speculation and anxiety. It is now well established that conspiracy theories were widespread in early modern Europe, and research dealing with such phenomena as witchcraft beliefs and apocalyptic religions suggests that modern-day conspiracy theories have even broader historic and cross-cultural precedents. Nonetheless, the pervasiveness of conspiracy beliefs in contemporary democratic societies presents special challenges for the social scientist. How might we best account for the widespread acceptance of claims such as those put forward by the 9/11 Truth Movement or those concerning the alleged foreign birth and/or Muslim faith of President Obama? While comparably “ignorant” or “bizarre” beliefs might seem unremarkable in societies characterized by authoritarian rule, state-controlled (or largely undeveloped) mass media infrastructures, and low literacy levels, how does one hope to explain the persistence and apparent growth of conspiracy theories in America, a post-industrial “information society” boasting high levels of education, freedom of

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expression, political openness, and competitive, privatized mass media institutions? It is with this basic problem that this article is concerned.

Despite the increasing number of investigations into the causes, contexts, and social outcomes of conspiracy theories, there is one contributing factor to this phenomenon which has generally been overlooked, treated only in partial fashion, or simply misconstrued. This concerns the critical role played by the mass media in creating exactly the type of communicative backdrop against which conspiracy theories are likely to flourish. More specifically, I believe that closer attention to the largely unexamined link between top-down propaganda on the one hand and populist expressions of conspiracy theorizing on the other sheds some light on the relationships which are often discernible between dominant media narratives and news framing practices, and the receptiveness of much of the public to ideas or explanations of events which might otherwise be deemed unworthy of serious consideration. As discussed below, attention to this link has generally been lacking, either because the existing literature tends to focus on other aspects of conspiracy theories or because such attention is incompatible with the premises informing some research in this area. As is demonstrated, a key contribution of the present approach is that it sheds light on why some conspiracy theories may become both durable and widespread even as others remain marginal.

The present intent is not to suggest that all conspiracy theories have a single cause or origin. Nonetheless, I attempt to demonstrate that several recent cases of note may be understood as embodying one of two potential types of popular response to the systemic presence in the mainstream media of what Ellul (1965) terms "integration propaganda" and "agitation propaganda." However, before this argument may be clarified and pursued, it is first necessary to specify what is meant here by a conspiracy theory. As many writing on the topic have noted, the latter concept has often proven troublesome, particularly for the following reasons: It is frequently deployed as a term of disqualification by those attempting to foreclose debate on sensitive issues; many so-called conspiracy theories arguably do not represent true instances of conspiracy theorizing at all but rather institutional analyses which draw attention to the routine functioning of powerful organizations; many conspiracy theories have been substantiated (Bratich, 2008; Fenster, 2008; Sunstein, 2014).

For the sake of clarity, only those theories, claims, or explanations of politically significant realities which appear weak due to their highly speculative character and/or the fact that stronger evidence appears to support more conventional accounts hold interest here. While a thorough assessment of what might constitute a convincing or valid versus a weak or invalid explanation of a socially/politically significant phenomenon lies beyond the scope of this article, a good overview of relevant considerations is provided by Barkun (2006, pp. 1–15). With these qualifications in mind and for the limited purposes of this analysis, conspiracy theories are approached here as roughly corresponding to what Sunstein (2014) identifies as "an effort to explain some event or practice by referring to the secret machinations of powerful people who have also managed to conceal their role" (p. 3). Two general cases are considered. The first concerns claims to the effect that President Barak Obama is secretly a Muslim who is colluding with Islamic organizations attempting to impose Sharia (Islamic) law on the American people. The second pertains to allegations that the United States government played a role in either directly facilitating or deliberately allowing the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.

The article is divided into three main sections followed by a short discussion. The first section briefly considers the general character of mass communication and propaganda within liberal democracies such as the United States. This provides the necessary grounding for the remaining analysis. The second section considers cases where well-established conspiracy theories clearly had their origins in *agitation propaganda*. It will be argued here that relevant claims concerning alleged enemies of the people may appear plausible to many due to their commensurability with longstanding media themes and narratives broadly supportive of state power, what Ellul (1965) termed *integration propaganda*. By contrast, it is emphasized in the third section that propaganda's success is never guaranteed. While its core claims may readily be exposed as lacking empirical support, at least some negative attention will result, particularly from among the more politically oriented and/or disillusioned. Insofar as they provide alternatives to official accounts, conspiracy theories represent one form such reaction may take. The final discussion draws attention to the broader communication environment, underscoring the fact that while the two types of conspiracy theorizing examined may be opposed in key respects, there is value in viewing both as populist responses to systemic propaganda.

Mass Communication and Propaganda in Democratic Societies

In the course of assessing the growth, spread, and potentially harmful fallout of conspiracy theories, Sunstein and Vermeule (2009) contrast relevant scenarios in politically repressive versus democratic contexts. They argue that in authoritarian societies where the state has direct control over media institutions, is less accountable, and regularly withholds information from the public, conspiracy theorizing may often be justified. That is to say, it may be understood as one ostensibly rational behavior. However, these researchers also claim that this is less likely to be the case within democratic societies marked by political openness and competitive media. In the latter context, it would be far more difficult for state actors to keep something as significant as government involvement in a terrorist attack on its own citizens a secret for long. Such would require the maintenance of an implausible scenario wherein an ever-expanding circle of duplicitous or credulous individuals and institutions were somehow able to prevent information from being leaked directly to other members of the public or otherwise made accessible to highly inquisitive media organizations.

The same line of reasoning is repeated in Sunstein's (2014) recent book on the subject. However, while the arguments raised in each publication appear sensible as far as they go, both works fail to address the larger issue of why significant numbers of people living in "an open society with a well-functioning marketplace of ideas and free flow of information" should prove such fertile ground for the spread of conspiracy theories in the first place (Sunstein, 2014, p. 8). In fact, this issue is essentially ignored in favor of attention to the ways in which people may acquire information from other members of the public via the rumor mills and "conspiracy cascades" increasingly facilitated through the use of social networking technologies. In this light it should be emphasized that it is the mainstream rather than the alternative media that are habitually relied on by most people in their attempts to make sense of social/political realities. Consequently, if we are to better appreciate conspiracy theories as both a persistent and widespread feature of American culture, a more grounded understanding of the "free media" and its relationship to the larger political economy is necessary as a point of departure.

Today, most control over processes of mass communication is concentrated in a relative handful of media corporations sharing similar organizational structures, profit orientations, reliance on advertising revenue, and close relationships to state institutions (McChesney, 2008). The notable exceptions are the increasingly beleaguered public broadcast media such as the tax-funded BBC and CBC in Britain and Canada, respectively, or the donation-funded PBS in the United States. However, both the resources and viewership accruing to the latter are dwarfed by those of enterprises such as FOX, CNN, or NBC; themselves part of larger commercial conglomerates. Rather than facilitating the free flow of information, the present media environment is one in which the possibility of publishing and/or competing with dominant organizations is severely restricted, attention to public affairs has been drastically reduced in favor of entertainment, and the media's willingness or ability to act as a "watchdog" or check on the abuse of state or corporate power has been seriously compromised (Curran, 2005).

As has now been well established in the political economy literature, the news media operate at the intersection of numerous commercial and political drivers and constraints, which work collectively to determine the ultimate character of their products. This includes a close relationship between mass media enterprises and the state. As with other large-scale commercial concerns, media outlets such as NBC or ABC have both an interest in and the effective ability to lobby the state to implement or maintain policies favorable to big business. At the same time they depend on the state in its capacity as regulator of communications policies. In the case of news production, this dependency extends even further due to a heavy reliance on government sources for a steady supply of news feeds and information. Economically, both print and broadcast media gain most of their revenue from advertisers to whom they effectively sell audiences. These realities make the news media vulnerable to discipline by both state and (other) commercial interests if and when the news reporting direction or content is deemed unfriendly (Bagdikian, 2004; Pedro, 2011).

In addition to their interdependence with other powerful institutions, the basic profit orientation of major news outlets such as CNN, MSNBC, FOX, *The New York Times*, etc., further decreases the likelihood that they will present their audiences with points of view—at least on anything approaching a regular basis—which seriously challenge the status quo. Simply put, there is little or no reason to believe that these organizations will seek to facilitate the type of wide-ranging debate and critical discussion of economic or political issues which may be at odds with their own interests as large-scale commercial enterprises. This is not to say that the content of the mainstream news media is completely uniform in character or that it doesn't expose its readers to differences of opinion on myriad issues which may hold considerable importance to the public. What it does mean is that the reporting and commentary to which news audiences are regularly exposed normally fall within an ideologically narrow range of discourse and debate largely reflective of disagreements among powerful elites and institutions (Herman & Chomsky, 1988; Pedro, 2011).

It is the systemic character of what Ellul (1965) termed *integration propaganda*, namely, one-way communication serving to present as both necessary and normal the dominant institutions and practices associated with the prevailing social/political order, which ensures that it remains largely invisible. As suggested above, this results in good measure from the reality that in democratic societies propaganda is largely produced negatively; through indirect processes involving the "selecting out" of

unwelcome facts and points of view (McMurtry, 1998). At the same time, however, integration propaganda actively draws on, reinforces, and modifies structures of belief already firmly established among the general population. In other words, it both appeals to and elaborates on ideologies such as nationalism, capitalism, and related myths of progress, freedom, democracy, the work ethic, etc. (Ellul, 1965, p. 116). Over time, the positive connotations associated with such terms may become so deeply internalized and their utilization in dominant discourse so routine, that their ideological character is scarcely noticed and their original meaning rarely reflected upon (*ibid.*, p. 31).

A good recent example which draws attention to the pervasive but largely invisible character of integration propaganda concerns the Obama administration's decision to intervene militarily in Libya in 2010. Disagreements were certainly voiced among politicians and media pundits concerning the wisdom of getting involved in that conflict. However, commentary was largely restricted to tactical or pragmatic considerations such as the potential financial cost of intervention, whether U.S. forces were already stretched too thin, whether a ground war would ensue that might endanger American troops, whether other NATO members would pull their weight, etc. At the same time, it was simply assumed that the President's stated motivation of promoting democracy and defending civilians should be taken at face value. During this and a long list of similar military ventures, media attention to such matters as America's own well-established record of attacking civilian targets in conflict situations, violating or obstructing international law, or actively suppressing democratic reform in various parts of the world remained beyond limits of acceptable discourse (FAIR, 2011; Herman & Chomsky, 1988; Pedro, 2011; Said, 1997).

More commonly associated with the call to war than integration propaganda is "agitation propaganda," designed to instill fear or moral outrage toward a declared enemy. Although less insidious and arguably cruder in character than integration propaganda, the success with which it may be employed in democratic societies should not be underestimated. Significantly, common knowledge of foreign threats and conflicts tends to be derived primarily from information provided by institutionalized actors with a clear stake in the nature of related public opinion. The established pattern is that agitation propaganda is fed to the media by government spokespersons, experts closely tied to state and/or corporate-sponsored think tanks or by dissidents from relevant countries. Their pronouncements are then reported verbatim by the news media in the spirit of "objective reporting" (McChesney, 2008). If disputes about undertaking military action are apparent within the political establishment, these tend to be reflected in the media while keeping within the same general parameters of "acceptable debate." However, when bipartisan support for military action is strong, critical media commentary of any kind is virtually nonexistent (Herman & Chomsky, 1988; Pedro, 2011).

If and when agitation propaganda in the form of false or misleading information is finally revealed as such (e.g., the absence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq), it is usually only after military action is well under way and/or public attention has been diverted elsewhere. And while unsubstantiated assertions concerning such emotive issues as atrocities committed by enemies may be quickly forgotten, they need only circulate within a relatively short time to serve their intended purpose. In such instances, integration propaganda and agitation propaganda play a complementary role. It is the conceptual "commonsense" framework provided by the former which gives the more specific claims associated the

latter their aura of plausibility. More is said about both forms of propaganda and their potential relationship to the widespread adoption of conspiracy theories in later sections.

Conspiracy Theories as the Outcome of Successful Agitation Propaganda

According to Ellul (1965), integration propaganda represents the dominant and most significant type in modern societies, providing a central basis of social integration. However, it is agitation propaganda which has the longer track record, predating the modern state. As its name suggests, the latter has historically been associated with political agitators, including those attempting to galvanize the masses into overthrowing unpopular rulers. Today, and as suggested in the previous discussion, agitation propaganda is arguably most visible and also at its most effective when invoked by political leaders to rally public support for wars, or more commonly in the case of the United States, for foreign invasions or "humanitarian interventions." Nonetheless, it may also be employed by social actors originating from within virtually any social strata and of any political persuasion who hope to provoke public hostility toward an alleged internal or external enemy (Ellul, 1965).

Agitation propaganda may readily take the form of a conspiracy theory. The "Protocols of the Elders of Zion" provides a classic example. These were forged documents circulated by professional instigators in Russia in the late 1800s. They allegedly exposed a plot by world Jewry to control the world's governments and major financial institutions. Cohn's (1967) seminal work on the subject posits a central role for the Protocols in inciting pogroms against Russia's Jewish population from 1881–1920. According to Cohn (1967), these pogroms did not represent spontaneous outbreaks of popular fury, but were in fact the product of "long-term planning, careful organization and above all intensive agitation" (p. 118). Citing the previously good relations between the Christian peasantry and the Jewish minority in the province of Bessarabia, he describes the concerted campaign needed to instill suspicion and fear of Jews among the majority population. This task was undertaken by a collection of journalists, civil servants, and other professionals under the leadership of Moldavian publisher Pavolachi Krushevan, editor of the sole daily newspaper in the provincial capital of Kishinev.

It should be emphasized that neither the mere formulation of a conspiracy theory nor its appearance and growth within a particular community, subculture, or fringe movement is any guarantee that it will resonate with the general population. This point is often lost on those who fixate on the capacity of digital networking media to disperse novel ideas rapidly. It is worth noting, for example, that since the time of the Russian pogroms referred to above, the Protocols have continued to circulate widely. Once a cornerstone of Nazi propaganda, today they remain ubiquitous within the Web pages of the racist far right. However, there is little to suggest that the presence of the Protocols in cyberspace has contributed significantly to anti-Semitic feeling among contemporary Western publics, most of whose members have probably never heard of these documents. Nor do the Protocols appear likely to trigger incitement in the foreseeable future. This is because if conspiracy claims are to have an agitating effect, there must be a larger discursive backdrop, one maintained through dominant processes of mass communication, against which they will appear both meaningful and alarming.

In recent years, a set of conspiracy claims not unlike the Protocols have come to be directed against American Muslims. They concern allegations to the effect that Muslim cultural organizations and political advocacy groups such as the Council on American-Islamic Relations and the Islamic Society of North America are being actively backed by the Middle Eastern-based social movement known as the Muslim Brotherhood and are working with moles at various governmental levels with the intent of bringing about the imposition of Islamic or Sharia law in the United States. These alleged efforts are now commonly referred to by Muslim conspiracy proponents as "stealth Jihad"; a phenomenon they warn is far more dangerous than the less insidious threat posed by Islamic-inspired terrorism. Allegations of stealth Jihad are now commonly paired with the charge that President Barak Hussein Obama is foreign born, is secretly a Muslim, and/or is colluding with the Islamic organizations in question.

The idea that Sharia law could be imposed on an unwitting and overwhelmingly non-Muslim American public, with or without the aid of the President, may sound farfetched to most. However, unlike similar conspiracy theories about Jews, which have largely outlived their usefulness to powerful interests—at least in Western countries—this more recent strain of agitation propaganda is being perpetuated within a social/political context highly conducive to its main lines of rhetorical appeal. More specifically, the relative success of Muslim conspiracy theories in America is attributable to two complementary factors. First, the agitators who have done the most to promote it have powerful allies within both the mainstream political and media establishments. Second, and at least as important, the claims in question resonate with media discourse which has long served to justify American policies in the Middle East.

According to *The Washington Post* (Mosk, 2008), rumors to the effect that Obama is secretly Muslim were heard as early as his campaign for Senate in 2004 and had expanded considerably through viral emails by 2006. Eventually the idea would merge with the claims of "Birthers" who insist the President was born outside the United States, most likely in Kenya. The latter idea apparently took shape during the Democratic Party's 2008 presidential primaries when anonymous emails sent by Hillary Clinton supporters suggested that Obama might not be native-born (Smith, 2011). The exact origins of fears about stealth Jihad, with which Birther claims have become conflated, are more difficult to hold to an exact timeline, although the term itself appears to have been coined by Robert Spencer (discussed below), author of *Stealth Jihad: How Radical Islam Is Subverting America without Guns or Bombs* (2008).

The conspiracy beliefs outlined above cannot be dismissed as a mere fringe phenomenon. A Pew Research Center poll conducted in August 2010 found that 18% of Americans believe Obama is Muslim, up from 11% in March 2009. Another Pew poll conducted in July 2012 put the number at 17%. The greatest growth in this belief over time has been among Republicans: 30% in 2012 vs. 16% in 2008. The degree to which members of the public accept the more radical charge that the President has been colluding with Muslim groups seeking to impose Sharia law on Americans is less clear, although it is likely much lower. However, a poll conducted by the Public Religion Research Institute in February 2011 found that 22% of the general public does believe that American Muslims "want to establish Shari'a law as the law of the land in the United States," including 31% of Republicans and 15% of Democrats. Interestingly, the same poll also found that this includes 41% of those Republicans who most trust FOX News as a source of information, compared to 23% of Republicans who most trust other news sources. More is said about FOX News shortly.

In recent years, Birther and stealth Jihad lines of agitation propaganda have been combined and aggressively promoted by social/political movements such as the Tea Party and the far-right Patriot Movement. However, the most visible proponents of stealth Jihad conspiracy theories have not been the leaders of broadly based grassroots organizations, but rather two political bloggers whose notoriety is entirely attributable to their agitation efforts: Pamela Geller, host of the Atlas Shrugs website, and Robert Spencer, host of JihadWatch.com. Jihad Watch is a program of the Horowitz Freedom Institute, whose founder, David Horowitz, is a major funder of anti-Islamic and anti-left publications and activism. Spencer, who has given seminars on Islam to the U.S. military, is the author of numerous books about the supposed threat posed by Islam. Together, Geller and Spencer coauthored *The Post-American Presidency: The Obama Administration's War on America* (2010), which deals with Obama's alleged enablement of stealth Jihad activity.

In 2010, Geller and Spencer founded Stop Islamization of America (SIOA) as a counterpart to the organization, Stop the Islamization of Europe. SIOA was a leading force behind the campaign to prevent the construction of the so-called "Ground Zero mosque." The reference is to a Muslim community center slated to be built two city blocks from the location where the World Trade Center buildings were destroyed. The structure's intended name was Cordoba House, chosen because Muslims, Jews, and Christians created a common center of learning in 8th–11th century Cordoba, Spain. Its original backer, Feisal Abdul Rauf, was a major advocate of interfaith dialogue (Lexington, 2010). The site in question already housed Muslim places of worship, and there was little initial protest when plans to build the center were first announced in 2009. However, the agitation efforts of SIOA helped spark large-scale protests and national controversy (Elliot, 2010). While prominent figures such President Barak Obama and New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg defended the center's construction, Spencer and Geller argued that it was intended as a symbol of Muslim conquest and triumphalism. This charge was echoed by Republicans Newt Gingrich and Sara Palin, among others.

Some politicians, including Republicans Newt Gingrich and Ted Cruz take stealth Jihad claims seriously and speak of them openly. Frank Gaffney, founder of the neoconservative Center for Security Policy, offers a video course on his website entitled "The Muslim Brotherhood in America: A Course in 10 Parts." Drawing on his work, Republican Congresswoman Michele Bachmann recently launched a McCarthy-style campaign to ferret out an alleged Muslim Brotherhood plot to penetrate the U.S. government. With the backing of four other Republican congressmen, Bachmann accused Huma Abedin, a Muslim-American woman and deputy chief of staff to former Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, of being a Muslim Brotherhood infiltrator. Bachman further claimed that the State Department had been subjected to "influence operations" by the same organization. While Bachmann's attempts to finger specific individuals as part of a Muslim Brotherhood cabal were condemned by numerous prominent Republicans as well as Democrats, the episode highlights the fact that stealth Jihad beliefs have entered into the mainstream of American political discourse and debate (Grenier, 2012).

The language and beliefs promoted by stealth Jihad conspiracy advocates are often difficult to distinguish, if at all, from more conventional expressions of neoconservative ideology. As noted by Harvey (2005), the rise of neoliberalism within the framework of the global economy has been marked by the decline of models of government based on conceptions of collective citizenship and public welfare. One

result is that the state has been weakened as a potential source of collective identity. Neoconservatives attempt to address this problem within the context of the security state by emphasizing alleged internal and external threats as an alternative source of national unity (Harvey, 2005). In the case of stealth Jihad conspiracy theories, this strategy has simply been adapted for more narrow partisan ends. Regardless of how many establishment Republicans actually believe Obama is Muslim or that the Muslim Brotherhood is infiltrating government, those who promote such beliefs clearly provide them with a useful service. They help sow public doubts about the President's commitment to America's core interests and values while providing a further rationale for the increasing militarization of society.

In light of the above, it is perhaps unsurprising that an openness to stealth Jihad and Birther conspiracy beliefs is now commonplace on the FOX network's various news and talk show programs. FOX is widely recognized as standing at the vanguard of mainstream media outlets promoting a neoconservative outlook. Geller, Spencer, and Gaffney have all been repeated guests on FOX, where their views have received a sympathetic reception from hosts like Glen Beck and Sean Hannity. Daniel Pipes, head of the think tank Middle East Forum, is another frequent guest. His website includes a lengthy discussion of Obama's Muslim upbringing and its influence on the President's allegedly pro-Islamist sympathies and world view. Mark Levin, syndicated radio host and a former contributor to FOX's Sean Hannity show, also backs stealth Jihad claims and, like Frank Gaffney, has accused Obama of being a Muslim Brotherhood sympathizer (Levin, 2013). Such illustrations are far from exhaustive.

While its importance as a major news outlet should not be underestimated, too much emphasis on FOX risks drawing attention away from the pervasiveness of anti-Muslim discourse in the mainstream media more generally. For example, similar references to the threat posed by Islam regularly appear in Gaffney's columns in *The Washington Post* and in the commentary of MSNBC's self-styled terrorism expert Steven Emerson (who initially blamed Islamists for the Oklahoma City bombing). As their websites boast, Gaffney and Spencer frequently appear on numerous mainstream news programs besides FOX. And propaganda compatible with their views is regularly put forward in the newsletters and press releases of influential think tanks on which the mainstream media rely for expert opinion such as Middle East Forum, the Heritage Foundation, and the American Enterprise Institute (Bagdikian, 2004; Dolny, 2012). Moreover, the demonization of Muslims in the mainstream media, and particularly Arab Muslims, extends well beyond the case of news reporting and has long been deeply entrenched in American popular culture.

As Shaheen (2009) has meticulously documented, negative portrayals of "reel Arabs" stretch back to the early years of Hollywood, a trend which became fully consolidated in the late 1940s. Not coincidentally, this is when the United States became the dominant power in the Middle East and shortly after Israel was established in what was formerly Palestine. America quickly adopted and extended the divide-and-rule policies it inherited from Britain and France as a means of consolidating its hegemony over the oil-rich region. A colonial enterprise itself, Israel soon became America's primary regional military ally and foreign aid recipient. The lack of critical news media attention to these realities has been well documented (e.g., Karim, 2003; Philo & Berry, 2011; Said, 1997) and is not reviewed here. The essential point is that U.S. policies in the region—including repeated military invasions, support for unpopular dictatorships, successful and unsuccessful attempts to overthrow democratically elected governments, and diplomatic cover and material support for Israel's illegal occupation practices—have required a sustained

propaganda effort to present such actions as moral and necessary either to obscure their character or to hide their existence.

The American public has long been encouraged to believe that Arab Muslims are predisposed to resent and even hate the modern West. This hatred is not to be understood as a predictable response to the divide-and-rule practices referred to above—which, as far as the U.S. media are concerned, don't exist as such—but rather due to the backwardness and irrationality of Islam. Likewise, America's massive military involvement in the region is to be understood not in terms of strategic efforts to maintain control over coveted oil resources, but rather as evidence of America's unshakeable commitment to regional stability and democracy. It is against this general backdrop that stealth Jihad claims take on their life. As argued throughout this section, they are best appreciated as an extreme case, one exploited for partisan ends, of a more general propaganda trend. Significantly, however, while mainstream media discourse has provided the framework necessary for the claims of agitators like Pamela Geller and Robert Spencer to be taken seriously, it has also provoked conspiracy theorizing of a rather different sort, a topic to which we now turn.

Conspiracy Theories as a Rejection of Integration Propaganda

Unlike agitation propaganda, which is designed to provoke a visceral response from the general masses, including the illiterate, Ellul (1965) argues that in the case of integration propaganda "the more comfortable, cultivated and informed the milieu to which it is addressed the better it works" (p. 76). In other words, integration propaganda is most effective among those educated enough to fully appreciate the ideals it attempts to foster and who also enjoy a position of relative advantage under the political system it is designed to uphold. With respect to propaganda aimed at both defining and promoting the American way of life, this has meant a particular emphasis on encouraging uncritical acceptance of the (allegedly) free market as providing the most appropriate means for addressing virtually all of society's needs and challenges (Pedro, 2011). As previously noted, this line of dogma has increasingly been used to justify dispensing with the supposedly wasteful public expenditures of the welfare state while consolidating the apparatuses of the security state.

Such propaganda is arguably being put to the test at a time of costly and seemingly unending military interventions abroad, intrusive and unconstitutional domestic surveillance practices at home, bailouts for banks and industries at taxpayer expense, and the rapid decline of a once-prosperous middle class. While the enormous popularity of FOX News suggests that neoconservative doctrine continues to hold mass appeal, there are signs of growing anger toward both the mainstream political and media establishments as a whole, not only from within the traditional left but also from many elements on the populist right. These points should be kept in mind when considering the conspiracy claims of "Truthers," those who believe either that the U.S. government directly aided the 9/11 terrorists or that it deliberately allowed the attacks to occur. Clearly, these are citizens for whom dominant rationales concerning the state's foreign and domestic security policies do not appear credible.

As with the conspiracy theories considered in the previous section, the exact percentage of Americans who hold Truther beliefs is difficult to assess accurately. According to Fenster (2008), the

cumulative polling evidence suggests that while a large minority if not a majority of the public continues to hold doubts about official accounts concerning 9/11, a considerably smaller number believe in direct government complicity in the attacks. A Scripps Howard poll conducted in 2006 appears fairly typical in terms of its findings concerning the approximate number of Americans who accept either the “let it happen on purpose” or “made it happen on purpose” versions of Truther conspiracy beliefs. According to the poll, 36% of Americans said it was “somewhat likely” or “very likely” that U.S. officials either participated in the attacks or took no action to stop them “because they wanted the United States to go to war in the Middle East” (Hargrove & Stempel, 2006, para. 6).

Significantly, the ideas promoted by what has come to be known as the 9/11 Truth Movement did *not initially take shape within traditionally marginalized or disadvantaged communities*. That much is made evident in an op-ed piece in *The New York Times* entitled “Truth and Conspiracy in the Catskills,” written by the well-known literary and legal scholar Stanley Fish. Here, Fish reflects on his experiences while attending a Truther meeting in Livingston Manor, a small Catskill town about 20 miles from his home. His description of those present is worth quoting as it squares well with profiles of the Truth Movement’s core membership—particularly during its early phase—provided by researchers such as Fenster (2008) and Bratich (2008) who have studied the movement in some depth:

A small gathering of 50 or 60 people; roughly 95 percent white, 90 percent male, a few blond-haired kids, average age 45, all nodding in assent as a series of speakers explains that our government is conspiring against us and fabricating massive lies in order to hide its own crimes and frighten us into giving up our constitutional rights and liberties.

The Tea Party? Minutemen? Birthers? No, “Truthers,” left-wing conspiracy theorists who believe (among other things) that 9/11 was an inside job ... about the same percentage that believes President Obama is a Muslim who was born in Kenya. (Fish, 2010, para. 2–3)

Fish goes on to comment that “the thing about people who hold beliefs you find unbelievable (in two senses) is that they are in most other respects just like you and your friends.” Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that the Truthers in question were much like the author and his friends: well-educated, socially aware Americans traditionally more inclined to read the thoughtful “commentary” of publications like *The New York Times* than avail themselves of the crass “propaganda” of FOX News.

Of particular concern here is the posited motivation for the U.S. government’s alleged act of treachery against its own citizens. This is understood by Truthers as twofold: to provide a rationale for an unending Global War on Terror and to consolidate the security state apparatuses at home. In this light, it is worth noting that while Truther conspiracy claims may be reckless and inaccurate, the analyses of the state’s foreign and domestic security policies offered by intellectuals and writers who helped lead or inspire the movement such as emeritus theologian David Ray Griffin, French author Thierry Mayssan, and Canadian professor of economics Michel Chossudovsky have much in common with the political critique of more traditional leftist intellectuals and organizations. For example, like many of the latter, Truthers typically maintain that the state’s ongoing military interventions are primarily intended to subsidize

powerful interests tied to the military-industrial complex at home, while realizing imperialist ambitions globally.

Leftist intellectuals such as Noam Chomsky and Alexander Cockburn, along with activist organizations such as the antiwar movement, have generally gone out of their way to distance themselves from the Truth Movement (Bratich, 2008; Fenster, 2008). More frequently than not, they deride Truthers as conspiracy theorists whose ideas only serve to divide the left and distract their adherents from real and pressing problems of social injustice stemming from the country's major political and economic institutions and policies. However, there is at least some sympathy for Truthers on the left. Recently, for example, the well-known leftwing newsletter *Counterpunch* strayed from traditional policy by allowing one of its most popular contributors, Paul Craig Roberts, to air his Truther arguments on their website (see Roberts, 2012). Roberts, who was Assistant Secretary of the U.S. Treasury under Reagan, has appealed to readers who reject Truther beliefs by pointing to more vital common ground. In one article he states simply that "whether a person believes the official story of 9/11 or not, the result is the same: 9/11 was used to create an open-ended 'war on terror' and a police state" (Roberts, 2013).

The appeal of Truther beliefs reaches beyond the anti-establishment left. This is readily apparent within the website of talk radio host Alex Jones, perhaps the best known purveyor of 9/11 Truth Movement claims in the United States. Jones combines such conservative and/or rightwing causes as the right to bear firearms and the alleged threat of an emerging world government with a traditional leftwing emphasis on the need to end American empire building with its costly wars abroad. Particular attention is given on Jones's website, *Infowars.com*, to the dangers posed by the consolidation of a Big Brother-style police state in the shadow of 9/11, a message that carries well with libertarians and elements of the Tea Party and Patriot movements. Like those belonging to leftwing social movements such as Occupy, many on the populist right fear that the Patriot Act, which was passed with near-unanimous bipartisan support, had more to do with the state's desire to outlaw legitimate political dissent than to combat the nebulous and ill-defined threat posed by terrorism.

Jones and other Truthers frequently express the need for Americans to move beyond the traditional dichotomy of left vs. right political positions. While this is in part intended as a call for more "open-minded" interpretations of historic and contemporary political realities, it also represents a clear condemnation of the existing two-party political system. Like many leftist critics, leading Truthers frequently argue that the differences between the Democratic and Republican parties are largely superficial and stress the policy continuity between administrations. For example, Roberts, who is a regular contributor to *infowars.com* as well as *Counterpunch* states that "the Bush regime's response to 9/11 and the Obama regime's validation of this response have destroyed accountable, democratic government in the United States" (Roberts, 2013, February 8-10, para. 1). Similarly, in his book *DemoCRIPS and ReBLOODlicans: No More Gangs in Government*, Truther and former Minnesota Governor Jesse Ventura (2012) calls for dismantling the two-party system and replacing it with one of independent candidates.

Related to the above, and as implied by the name *Infowars.com*—accompanied on its homepage by the subheading "because there is a war on for your mind"—Truthers like Jones clearly view themselves

as engaged in a highly uneven propaganda battle with the mainstream news media. It should be kept in mind, however, that the proponents of virtually all conspiracy theories, including those considered in the previous section, claim not to trust mainstream information sources. In fact, a Gallup poll (Gallup, 2012) suggests that this holds true for roughly 60% of Americans, a point which is revisited shortly. For now it is simply worth observing that unlike Birther and stealth Jihad proponents, Truthers like Jones, Ventura, and Roberts identify the problem of mainstream news bias as stemming directly from the media's commercial character and the strong ties of news media organizations to other powerful institutions. Hence, in contrast to the conspiracy theorists considered in the previous section, they are unlikely to view a major news outlet like FOX as offering a "straight talk" alternative to the allegedly liberal or left-wing media complained of by the former, and more likely to rely on their own stock of books, videos, and other media.

In light of the issues raised above, it is worth acknowledging an important reality. Whether one is dealing with news, deliberate propaganda, conspiracy theories, or some combination of the above, "the facts," no matter how firmly established, never speak for themselves. This is because there is nothing inherently objective or value-neutral with respect to their presentation. Facts must necessarily be selected and then arranged thematically from a virtually limitless amount of potentially relevant information. In the case of news reporting, adherence to facts in the form of accurate quotes from officials, verifiable timelines, statistics, details of policy initiatives, etc., enhances credibility. However, such information is never simply presented "raw." Instead, it is made accessible in the form of news *stories*, themselves made meaningful within larger, ideologically grounded narratives which give coherence to facts and help to determine those considered newsworthy in the first place. And yet these same fact-based accounts may be highly misleading or in some cases demonstrably false, if and when the implicit assumptions from which they operate are exposed to critical scrutiny.

Relevant examples are not difficult to produce, and help account for the counterhegemonic stance adopted by Truthers. One need only consider America's involvement in the ongoing conflict in Syria. How is an attentive observer to interpret the fact that America and its closest allies are actively assisting an insurgent campaign overwhelmingly dominated by Al Qaeda-affiliated Jihadist groups; one which a recent NATO assessment estimates has the support of only 10% of the Syrian people (*World Tribune*, 2013)?

It is notable that American support for the Syrian rebels gets considerable attention on *Infowars.com*, where it is frequently linked to earlier U.S. support for Jihadist elements operating in pre-9/11 Afghanistan and elsewhere. Irrespective of what alternative/conspiracy accounts such observations may ultimately provoke, it is difficult to imagine one less convincing than the notion that the American policies in question reflect a desire to fight terrorism, protect civilians, and promote democracy. And yet, these are the premises which guide virtually all relevant media commentary, even when not explicitly stated.

The more transparently facile propaganda becomes, the greater the probability that some will feel compelled to seek alternative explanations and/or interpretive frameworks to better account for otherwise inexplicable policies or events. The conspiracy claims of the Truth Movement are a case in point. They were formulated not because their adherents don't pay adequate attention to the more sensible

explanations of events regularly heard in the mainstream media, but largely because such explanations provoke incredulity and a corresponding sense of suspicion and hostility toward conventional sources of information. It is in precisely this sense that, for a segment of the population at least, conspiracy theorizing may be understood as a predictable response to systemic propaganda. Nonetheless, it must be also recognized that when offered as viable alternatives to mainstream accounts of relevant policies or events, the claims of Truthers and other conspiracy theorists are clearly problematic; a point which draws attention back to the general character of the larger media environment.

Discussion: The General Phenomenon vs. Specific Instances of Conspiracy Theorizing

Despite clear differences, the two types of conspiracy theory considered in the previous sections do hold something important in common, something which helps account not only for their pervasiveness, but also for the related tendency of many conspiracy theories to carry a populist appeal which transcends the traditional right/left political divide. As Jodi Dean (2000) has argued, conspiracy theory in the general sense “challenges the presumption that what we see on the screens, what is made visible in traditional networks and by traditional authorities, is not itself invested in specific lines of authorization and subjection” (p. 38). Viewed in this way, conspiracy theorizing arguably reflects a growing awareness among the citizenry that the mainstream media do not represent the public sphere of open deliberation and rational debate promoted in democratic theory.

If the challenge facing citizens/consumers seeking greater transparency on the part of powerful actors were restricted to the tactical matter of extracting the necessary facts from an excess of information, the phenomenon of conspiracy theorizing might be far less pervasive. The larger problem is that in the face of a communication environment characterized by advertising, public relations, and propaganda, any effort to locate truth may come to be viewed as futile. Drawing on Žižek’s (1999) notion of “semiotic failure,” Andrejevic (2013) argues that the result may be a type of radicalized suspicion toward all forms of representation, but particularly those traditionally viewed as authoritative. Hence, even as Truthers and other conspiracy theorists accuse conventional activist/intellectuals like Chomsky of naïveté, we encounter the increasingly familiar scenario of “instant revisionism” in which “the smoke of the event has not yet finished settling before dozens of conspiracy theories begin revising the official account, adding even more ruins to ruins, even more smoke to smoke” (see Latour, 2004, p. 227).

When “the facts” no longer inspire trust, the default position is to go with one’s preexisting beliefs and sentiments (Andrejevic, 2013; Harsin, 2006). As Andrejevic observes, sticking with one’s “gut instincts” provides a means for cutting through the clutter of existing information while remaining both skeptical of facts which don’t *feel* right, yet credulous in the face of those “theories” that do. Stealth Jihad and Birther conspiracy agitators appeal directly to such predispositions—as opposed to hard evidence — which is precisely what makes their efforts so effective. It must be reiterated, however, that the gut instincts in question have been cultivated in an environment long saturated with propaganda aimed at normalizing ongoing U.S. military interventions in the Middle East and elsewhere. And while Truthers may be more attuned to this reality than Birthers, they share with the latter an exaggerated distrust of established (read *establishment*) bodies of fact and official sources of authority. For Truthers, the very fact

that the government claims Al Qaeda was behind 9/11 is enough to dismiss it as disinformation, just as repeated presentations of Obama's birth certificate serve only to confirm the President's foreign/Muslim agenda in the minds of Birthers.

The two case studies presented here highlight the limitations of analyses, such as those provided by Sunstein (2014) and Sunstein and Vermeule (2009), which proceed from the premise that conspiracy adherents spread and/or adopt their beliefs within an environment characterized by free and open media. Taking stock of the crisis of representation referred to by Žižek and others provides an important corrective, while helping to account for the prominence of conspiracy theorizing more generally. However, the question remains as to why some conspiracy theories are able to gain widespread acceptance even as others go largely ignored. Attention to the relationship between top-down propaganda on the one hand and conspiracy theorizing on the other sheds greater light on precisely this issue.

The broader interests of state and corporate power reflected in mainstream media discourse transcend traditional political lines, a fact which helps account both for the relative invisibility of integration propaganda and its related ability to shape public perceptions. This reality provides some conspiracy theory agitators with a distinct advantage, allowing them to present ideas which might otherwise appear outlandish be seen as plausible due to their compatibility with existing sensibilities. In other instances, however, incredulity toward dominant media narratives and news-frames, combined with a more critical awareness of the media's role as a legitimating institution, may provoke the production of counterhegemonic alternative accounts. While such responses to top-down propaganda may not be the only factors contributing to the widespread prevalence of conspiracy theorizing, they are clearly important ones. Above all, they indicate that the origins, character, and fate of conspiracy theories may only be adequately assessed in light of their relationship to a larger communicative environment; one wherein monopoly control of media content, common sense understandings of reality, and grassroots expressions of ideological dissent are inevitably linked.

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