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They're Watching Us: Conspiracy Theorists in Popular Media

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THEY'RE WATCHING US:
CONSPIRACY THEORISTS IN POPULAR MEDIA

A Capstone Experience/Thesis Project

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree of Bachelor of Arts in Popular Culture Studies

Honors College Graduate Distinction at Western Kentucky University

By

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2015

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ABSTRACT

The term “conspiracy theorist” is often used in discussions as a rhetorical device to discredit a speaker on the basis of their opinions. The effect of this has been to turn attention away from the speaker’s stated opinions towards the speaker himself and his character as a “conspiracy theorist.” These negative connotations are recognized and understood by many thanks to archetypes of the “conspiracy theorist” character found in popular media, making the accusation an effective tool for muting the “conspiracy theorist’s” opinion in mainstream public forums, whether that forum is the news, politics, or real life. This paper examines stereotypical depictions of “conspiracy theorists” in several forms of popular fictional media, especially the movie *Slacker* (1992) and the *X-Files* television franchise (1993-2002), and non-fictional media, such as news programs and internet forums, to reveal how these depictions reflect and construct various components of the “conspiracy theorist” label which make it such an effective rhetorical tool for muting certain ideas.

Keywords: Conspiracy theory, media studies, stereotype, debunker, *X-Files*, popular culture

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Conspiracy theorists are not to be taken seriously. Their conclusions are outlandish and based on immature and paranoid patterns of thinking. This describes the default position many take when confronted with a conspiracy theorist. In certain contexts, this makes sense; there are indeed individuals who have a tendency to see nefarious clandestine doings behind any sort of event or disaster in the absence of anything that could be considered evidence. Examples of such views are the belief that the Knights Templar have retained control of our centralized banking system since the 13th century, that the government is manufacturing natural disasters through chemtrails and a device called HAARP, that the Illuminati has infiltrated the hip-hop and popular music industry to brainwash young listeners with satanic symbolism, or that the seats of our highest political offices are actually occupied by an alien-lizard hybrid species.¹ A variety of logical and evidentiary fallacies are obviously at play in these instances, and it is reasonable to dismiss such notions as nonsense.

However, conspiracy theorists and their theories are not always so extreme and outlandish. In a world where actual conspiracies, by which I mean secretive and deceitful

¹ "List of conspiracy theories," *RationalWiki* < http://rationalwiki.org/wiki/List_of_conspiracy_theories > Accessed April 10, 2015.

maneuverings by political leaders to accomplish some sort of ends, have and still do indeed happen – Watergate, COINTELPRO, the Iran-Contra affair, intentionally false claims of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction, the distortion of the Gulf of Tonkin incident – it is wrong to categorically dismiss anyone’s ideas just because they are alleged to be a conspiracy theorist. Given the actual historical examples mentioned above, one should not dismiss out of hand those who are skeptical about the lone gunman theory of the JFK assassination, or who purport Saudi involvement in and U.S. government foreknowledge of 9/11, or government connections to UFOs based on well-documented, radar-confirmed evidence of unidentified flying objects flying over protected military air-space. These theories are even less outlandish if one notes the credentials of certain individuals who support or at least offer open-minded consideration of these aforementioned theories, including politicians, professional scientists, published scholars, high-ranking military personnel, esteemed public intellectuals, astronauts, award-winning journalists, lawyers and legal experts.

Further, it is likely the case that, if several years ago one had claimed the NSA was gathering personal information to the extent we now know it is thanks to the Edward Snowden leaks, that person could have been accused of being a conspiracy theorist and perhaps even have been seen as suffering from some sort of delusional Orwellian paranoia. In recent years, claims of the hidden actions of powerful corporate or political institutions like the Federal Reserve, Big Pharma, or Monsanto have earned these critics the derisive label of “conspiracy theorist,” even when a variety of investigations exist that suggest suspicious and questionable policies pursued in secret by these entities. Indeed, even our Founding Fathers can be framed as “conspiracy theorists” since they warned of

an unconfirmed but suspected pattern of actions tied to newly passed taxes and punitive trade laws, and fomented their revolution in the name of the idea that King George III was conspiring to bring the colonies under the direct rule of the monarchy. In this light, the term “conspiracy theorist” certainly does not equate only to paranoid, irrational, and uneducated individuals.

In this project, I take issue with the pejorative use of the term “conspiracy theorist” and seek to illuminate how it can be used to discredit legitimate dissent. While there are indeed those who should be considered crazy and looney conspiracy theorists, the term is not appropriate when employed against individuals who have established intellectual and professional credibility, for the term presupposes an intellectual deficiency. The term is often used as an insult or slander against the individual’s character, synonymous with pejorative expressions such as “quack,” “wingnuts,” “kooks,” “lunatics,” or the colorful “conspiratard,” which is not an adequate response to whatever argument someone may be advancing but instead a means of dismissing it. Representations of such characters in popular culture is one of the central influences on societal attitudes towards anyone who questions the “official” explanations for questionable policies and events. This project, therefore, examines stereotypical depictions of the imaginary “conspiracy theorist” character in popular film and television which reflect the treatment and posture held towards conspiracy theorists in reality. This in turn reveals the mechanisms which make the term such an effective tool for silencing unpopular opinions in public discourse and relegating challenging ideas to fringe culture.

This paper breaks from the majority body of literature surrounding the study of conspiracy theory belief. Most academic studies in this niche field seek to diagnose the

epidemic of “conspiracism” in the modern world by seeking to understand why and how so much of the public accept the nonsense presumably implicit in conspiracy theories. These scholars look for societal, political, and cognitive evidence to explain how this pervasive acceptance of misinformation occurs.² In contrast, my approach is to take an agnostic position on the subject, neither endorsing nor denying the theories mentioned. Further, I contend that an important truth-seeking tool – the kind of conspiracism that at one point was present in academia in such influential works as Charles Beard’s *An Economic Interpretation of the U.S. Constitution* (1913) or Carroll Quigley’s *Tragedy and Hope* (1966) – has been lost due to the stigma surrounding the “conspiracy theorist” character. Cultural studies scholar Clare Birchall explains the academic climate surrounding this brand of conspiricism as “a fear [among scholars] of being associated with conspiracism today [that] could be exacerbated by the proximity with commodified popular culture.”³ This “commodification” she refers to is the perceived affiliation of actual conspiracy theorizing with the newer kitsch meaning it has taken on in popular culture through trends like *The X-Files*, which is one of the primary focuses of this project. I seek to join, therefore, a new but growing body of scholarship which aims to rebrand and reimagine how we think about the idea of conspiracy theories. Only then can we recapture the tools needed to explore this topic seriously and without fear of ridicule.

Before outlining the structure of the paper, a further explanation of how this project treats the phrases “conspiracy theorist” and “conspiracy theory” is in order. Gina Husting and Martin Orr, two of the only communication scientists who have examined

² Lance deHaven-Smith, *Conspiracy Theory in America* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2013), 1-3.

³ Clare Birchall, *Knowledge Goes Pop: From Conspiracy Theory to Gossip* (Oxford: Berg, 2006), 67.

this term, have described these phrases as a form of “weaponized language.”⁴ It is weaponized, they argue, in the sense that often the term is used to exclude targeted people from certain contexts of communication by calling into question their motives, rationality, and their personal character rather than offering a direct response to the content of their ideas. In this way, if one were to make a claim that I do not agree with, and if I can reasonably accuse that person of being a conspiracy theorist, then, as Husting and Orr argue:

“I can turn the tables on you: instead of responding to a question, concern, or challenge, I twist the machinery of interaction so that you, not I, are now called to account. In fact, I have done even more. By labeling you, I strategically exclude you from the sphere where public speech, debate, and conflict occur.”⁵

This then results in the individual’s opinions being barred from the discussion; being a “conspiracy theorist” disqualifies your perspective on events because you are assumedly drawing conclusions from a mental schema and outlook on reality which is incompatible with the parameters of legitimate public debate. In this way, even if one’s opinion is objectively reasonable, logical, and does not deviate from the subject-matter, that person’s statements are excluded from the conversation at-hand and their right to participate is denied.⁶

The term “conspiracy theorist” can be used as more than just a tool to segregate certain statements and opinions. At its most damaging, according to Husting and Orr, the

⁴ Gina Husting and Martin Orr, “Dangerous Machinery: “Conspiracy Theorist” as a Transpersonal Strategy of Exclusion,” *Symbolic Interaction* 30.2 (Spring 2007), 127-150.

⁵ Husting, “Dangerous Machinery,” 127.

⁶ Throughout this paper, I will use the term conspiracy theorist with and without question marks. In general, I apply quotation marks when I refer specifically to the term as a label. When the term is found without quotation marks, it is meant to serve merely as a signifier of my subject for lack of a better word. It is not my intention to insinuate the negative connotations on the people of interest that I refer to as conspiracy theorists.

term can be used as a sort of ad hominem attack that extends beyond the frame of any particular statement:

“The label denigrates associated claims as it *calls into question the identities of those who believe and make them*. This challenge is bolstered by direct labeling—the label [such as] wingnuts directly impugns claimants’ competence as trustworthy, rational, intelligent interlocutors. Conspiracy theorists... [therefore are automatically presented as] fail[ing] to understand or perceive aspects of the world correctly.”⁷

This reveals that when one is called a “conspiracy theorist,” the term is loaded with certain connotations which transcend specific statements or beliefs and are designed to call into question one’s sanity, intellect, or socialization skills.

This project focuses on unpacking the negative connotations contained within the phrase “conspiracy theorist.” A central idea that frames this project is that the imaginary archetypal “conspiracy theorist” character is easily-recognized and understood. The origins of the pejorative connotations of the phrase are disputed, although many trace the origin to a 1967 CIA public information campaign which sought to silence critics of the Warren Commission by imploring agency partners, such as media and political outlets, to discredit the critics by misrepresenting and harming the reputation of the individuals through plotted rebuttals of evidence as well as character attack and accusations of misinformation,⁸ I will focus, however, less on the term’s precise origins and more on how these connotations are continually made apparent and reinforced in various and disparate popular media sources over the last 15 years.

These negative connotations are visible throughout the media landscape including news accounts and talk show interviews, but the most important site for shaping public

⁷ Husting, “Dangerous Machinery,” 134, Italics mine.

⁸ deHaven-Smith, *Conspiracy Theory in America*, 106-108, 197-202.

attitudes is in fictional narratives in films and television. These popular depictions of the “conspiracy theorist,” I argue, reflect and reinforce our attitude towards the conspiracy theorists in reality. With enough exposure to these characters, the audience’s recognition of stereotypes becomes internalized which allows the term to be employed in real life towards real people, much in the same way that racial and gender depictions in popular media can have adverse effects on identity in the real world. This is why depictions of the “conspiracy theorist” in fictional film and television is an important starting point for understanding the character and how we have come to imagine him in reality.

Most films involving conspiracy pertain to conspiracy *theory* and feature plots in which the primary villain(s) is an outwardly good guy or group but discovers something that is secret, dangerous and subversive. Such films include *All the President’s Men* (1976), *The Matrix* (1999), *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977), *The Da Vinci Code* (2006), and *JFK* (1991). In these, the main characters are normal, mainstream people who stumble onto knowledge which challenges them to reorient some aspect of the worldview that they had previously held. However, what I am examining are conspiracy *theorists*. Not every conspiracy theory film features a conspiracy theorist, and not every conspiracy theorist is in a conspiracy film. Unlike the heroes of conspiracy films, conspiracy theorists are characters who we typically first encounter in the midst of their conspiracism. We do not witness the conspiracy theorists’ transformation from normal person to conspiracy theorist and their transformation is not important for our understanding of them or the film (however, an exception to this rule is found in *The Conspiracy*). It is enough to know that they are presently conspiracy theorist and probably always have been and always will be.

Conspiracy themes in popular media have been present for a significant part of film and television history. Perhaps the first archetypal conspiracy theorist character to find its way into popular consciousness was Stanley Kubrick's Jack D. Ripper from *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964) with his paranoid theories about Communist of fluoridating America's water supply to harm our "precious bodily fluids." In the time after this, conspiracy themes would remain occasional plot devices, but it was not until the 1990's that "conspiracy theory entertainment... went mainstream in a much bigger way than ever before."⁹ With this rise in conspiracy themes came a causal rise in conspiracy theorist characters. For this reason, and for the reason of historical contemporaneous, I will limit my study to films, shows, and characters from the 1990's onward. My analysis of each of my three case studies illuminates how certain conspiracy theorist stereotypes and contexts involve the exclusionary force Husting and Orr argue for that in turn shape our real-life perceptions of them. Each text will serve as a window through which we can see the distinct qualities in the "conspiracy theorist" character which lead to this exclusionary force.

The first text I dissect in Chapter 1 is Richard Linklater's debut film *Slacker* (1991), a cultural collage of characters that represent the late-1980's/early 1990's disillusioned "Generation X." This film features two characters who can be clearly identified as conspiracy theorists and who each embody what I recognize as different competing archetypal conceptions of the "conspiracy theorist" character. My analysis here focuses on the use of the conspiracy theory character as a "ranter," a feature which renders the spoken content of the character irrelevant and allows, or even forces, anyone

⁹ Barna William Donovan, *Conspiracy Films: A Tour of Dark Places in the American Conscious* (North Carolina: McFarland & Co. Inc, 2011), 160.

confronted by the conspiracy theorist to disregard him and his ideas. The interactions the film depicts demonstrate how audiences develop a conditioned response to ignore those alleged to be a conspiracy theorist.

Chapter 2 examines Chris Carter's *The X-Files* (1993-2002) franchise, with specific attention given to the relationship between the two hero characters, Special Agents Fox Mulder and Dana Scully. The characters' relationship dynamic demonstrates the capacity for the "conspiracy theorist" label to reorient discussion and conversation about conspiracies to a separate and isolated frame of discussion, namely the "conspiracy theorist vs. debunker" frame. I will show how this encourages segregating discussion about conspiracies further away from mainstream public forums which leaves it stuck in an inherently unwinnable argumentative structure.

Chapter 3 focuses on a newer film, Christopher MacBride's *The Conspiracy* (2012), which reveals a new conception of the character which minimizes the more obvious pejorative features. Through interpreting *The Conspiracy*, I show a representation of how a normal person can descend "down the rabbit hole" to become a conspiracy theorist because of the seductive, pseudo-logical qualities of conspiracy theories. This understanding of the conspiracy theorist, which places emphasis on *theories* and how people come to adopt them, illuminates how it is emulated in our present-day rationalization of actual conspiracy theorists, while also demonstrating how this quality still resists inclusion of the conspiracy theorist's ideas.

Further, I acknowledge the negative effects that the "conspiracy theorist" label and its insulting connotations have on the lay individual who believes in certain

conspiracy theories. The label at its most pejorative threatens self-respect and dignity, and the reputation the “conspiracy label” invites onto an individual can harm interpersonal social relations by creating rifts in social standing between family and friends. However, for this project I am mostly concerned with the effects the label has on professional standing and the trained and qualified individuals who continually find their subjects of study barred from discussion amongst their professional peers. While both concerns have their merits, I believe my focus is more fundamental for the question of how to ensure an open intellectual space where ideas can be shared, interpreted, and critiqued fairly, which is my priority as a scholar.

Overall, the project is both an inventory of the various stereotypes and connotations which surround the phrase “conspiracy theorist” and a demonstration of how these stereotypes may affect people in the real world. Each chapter offers real world evidence to bolster the claims of specific stereotype effects. Beyond the ramifications of effects on conspiracy theorists, this exercise in analysis will help one remain vigilant against attempts at persuasion by ad hominem logical fallacies. Such rhetorical strategies are at play in public forums all the time, in terms like “fundamentalist,” “libertarian,” “hippie,” “urban,” “elite,” “feminist,” and the unquestioned use of such labels negatively affect the terms of discussion when individuals are identified and imagined as such identities. By being aware of the effects of the “conspiracy theorist” label, a term typically less polarizing than these others despite its subversive capacity, we can become more aware of the ways other loaded terms and labels appeal directly to our subliminal ideologies. This, in turn, may lead us to not ignore or misrepresent an individual’s

contribution to a discussion based solely on a imagined construction of their character-type.

CHAPTER 2

DON'T IGNORE ME, BRO: CONSPIRACY THEORISTS AS “RANTERS”

I begin my analysis into the conspiracy theorist character with Richard Linklater's first film, *Slacker* (1991). It opened as an instant cult classic but has since become recognized as an important cultural film (it was recently inducted into the Library of Congress' National Film Registry as a work of “enduring importance to American culture”)¹⁰ that captures a unique moment in American history. The film is essentially plotless, featuring a collection of vignettes meant to depict a day in the life of about a dozen Austin locals. These locals, who we take to be the slackers in question, portray a disillusioned but not unhappy lifestyle. These young and middle-aged individuals we encounter in the film can be considered part of Generation X, the post-baby-boom generation born between the early 1960s and early 1980s. They are often defined by their apathy, cynicism, estrangement and disillusionment, a presumed symptom of the promises for the future the previous generation failed to deliver. The personalities these characters offered were so compelling that “the term ‘slacker’ was almost immediately co-opted as a media buzzword, one interchangeable with the similarly over-used

¹⁰ Susan King, “National Film Registry selects 25 films for preservation,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 19, 2012.

‘Generation X,’¹¹ so that now the movie is seen as an accurate portrayal of the Gen-X disposition.

It is indeed telling that not one but two of the characters who appear in the film are obvious examples of conspiracy theorists, with no apparent connection to each other in the film, yet individually distinct in their idiosyncrasies. Director Richard Linklater, who actually counts himself as a friend of famous conspiracy theorist Alex Jones (host of conspiracy theory radio talk-show *The Alex Jones Show* and owner of conspiracy websites Prisonplanet.com and Infowars.com), says about his interest in conspiracy theories: “I’ve always been interested in the conspiracist. Not that I think it’s true. But it says a lot about a culture. When you hide things, what pops out?”¹² *Slacker* does convey to us the sense that conspiracy theories, and those who believe them, had become an increasingly prevalent part of our cultural fabric at the beginning of the end of the 20th century, and it has been identified, along with *JFK* (1991) and *The X-Files* (1993-2002), as being “a major contribution in bringing conspiracy theory to the attention of the wider public.”¹³

The depictions of two conspiracy theorists with differing personalities are useful for this project because they allow for a more accurate and distinct identification of the tropes associated with this character. Lance deHaven-Smith, a scholar immersed in conspiracy theories studies, offers a brief but comprehensive list of associations which should be somewhat familiar to the reader:

¹¹ Slacker Synopsis, <<http://www.movies.com/slacker/details/m60908>> Accessed March 24, 2015.

¹² “Linklater’s Conspiracy,” *The Washington Times*, November 21, 2006, <<http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2006/nov/21/20061121-084749-3367r/?page=all>> Accessed March 2, 2015.

¹³ Clare Birchall, “Conspiracy Theories and Academic Discourses: the necessary possibility of popular (over)interpretation,” *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* 15.1 (2001), 69.

Conspiracy beliefs are associated with mental illness, including paranoia, obsession, psychosis, insanity, craziness, and being unhinged; with being outside the mainstream, including radical, left-wing, right-wing, fringe, and extreme; with being implausible as in far-fetched with being antisocial, including crackpots and despicable and bigoted people; and with being fanatical, as in cults, birthers, and truthers.¹⁴

Aside from such personality stereotypes associated with the term, we also instantly recognize commonly-used visual cues, some of which appear in the film in question. Tropes such as the tin-foil hat shtick are typical items that clearly imply crazy and paranoid thoughts in a fictional character. So too is the bedroom or office walls lined with newspapers with cryptic markings “connecting the dots” between seemingly unrelated events. Beyond these common visual tropes, conspiracy theorists can often be presented as unkempt with crazy hair and scruffy chins, eccentric in their wardrobe, and twitchy or manic in their posture denoting a struggle with paranoia or schizophrenia. The two conspiracy theorists in *Slacker* exhibit some of these traits in different ways from one another and so offer a dichotomy of character archetypes which helps us organize and recognize more consistent patterns in the construction of this character.

The first conspiracy theorist to make an appearance in *Slacker* is unnamed and has been colloquially referred to as the “paranoid paper reader” character. We first see this character interloping on a light-hearted conversation between young adults about the whereabouts of their friend. As one of the young adults leaves, the paranoid paper reader follows him and inquires further about this friend’s absence, which he instantly sees as suspicious. He immediately starts to suggest that perhaps some element of the government “disappeared” him for some nefarious purpose, and from here continues to jump wildly from accusations of a secret space program started by the Nazis that made it

¹⁴ deHaven-Smith, 129.

to Mars in the 60s, to a Greenhouse Effect cover-up, to a CIA program funded by drug cartels, and then back to secret amnesia-inducing drugs which were probably used on this missing friend. Of course, there is no real missing friend and there is nothing logical in the paranoid paper reader's rant, as the viewing audience is perfectly aware. His one-man audience walks with him silently, likely compelled by a sense of polite etiquette, until he makes it to his home.

In the paranoid paper reader, we have what we can consider the paranoid conspiracy theorist archetype. This is one of the more common conceptions of the conspiracy theorist and certainly the most disparaging. The paranoid paper reader jumps wildly between all different kinds of conspiracy theories with seemingly no grounds in evidence; he is twitchy and manic in his dialogue, prone to rants, and speaks with a sense of urgency and ascending doom; he is eccentric in his dress and likely not very successful in any sort of professional career or family capacity. He may even be homeless. This kind of conspiracy theorist stereotype emphasizes the idea of the irrationality of conspiracy theorists and the mental problems associated with them. The paranoid paper reader comes to his conclusions probably more from his deep-seated paranoia rather than any form of research, and the young adult walking with him clearly recognizes this and ignores the content of what the paranoid paper reader is saying.

The second conspiracy theorist to make an appearance in *Slacker* can be referred to as the Conspiracy A-Go-Go character, on account of a book titled *Conspiracy A-Go-Go* he is apparently writing. We are first introduced to him when a young woman, looking to get away from her boyfriend for awhile, ventures innocently into a bookstore, where she browses the Mysteries/Crime aisle until she is accosted by Conspiracy A-Go-

Go when he notices she is perusing a book on the JFK assassination. Although the girl picked up the book absent-mindedly, Conspiracy A-Go-Go immediately assumes she is interested in the JFK conspiracy theories, and starts delving into the varieties of material offered on the JFK assassination. The girl stays and listens politely but cannot carry on a real conversation because Conspiracy A-Go-Go continues to ramble about several specific focuses of JFK conspiracy research. These focuses are in depth, however, and would be known only to others very involved with JFK conspiracy theory literature, so when Conspiracy A-Go-Go continually punctuates his esoteric ramblings with a rhetorical “you know?” the answer would be a resounding “no.”

What Conspiracy A-Go-Go embodies is the nerdy conspiracy theorist archetype. This character differs from the paranoid conspiracy theorist in several ways. For one, this character attains his outsider status by virtue of being primarily a nerd, as opposed to the paranoid who is an outcast as a result of his unstable mentality. The nerdy conspiracy theorist is innocent and kind, whereas the paranoid conspiracy theorist seems foreboding. What makes balanced communication with the nerdy conspiracy theorist impossible is his in-depth knowledge about a certain conspiracy theory, in this case the JFK conspiracy theory, which he approaches with the apparent detail of a forensic scientist. He knows everything about the assassination from the bullet trajectory, to the Warren Commission’s witness testimony, to Oswald’s and Ruby’s family history. He is clearly not irrational and appears to be quite smart, however the details of the theory seem like cryptic ramblings to anyone not immersed in it. This type of nerdy conspiracy theorist is ignored not because they are crazy like the paranoid, but because we cannot and do not wish to communicate with the overly-passionate expertise of the nerdy conspiracy theorist.

These two models of conspiracy theorist, the nerdy “expert” and the paranoid “kook,” form the boundaries of most conspiracy theorist characters in the media. A conspiracy theorist character will usually appear as one or the other, or occasionally somewhere in between. Other examples of paranoid conspiracy theorist in popular media are Mel Gibson’s eccentric and rambling conspiracy theorist cab driver Jerry Fletcher in *Conspiracy Theory* (1997) and the tin-foil-hat-donning homeless conspiracy theorist Hutch of Matt Groening’s *Futurama* television series (1999-2013). The nerdy conspiracy theorist canon include the likes of John Munch in *Law & Order: SVU* (1999-2014) and a couple of supporting characters in the *X-Files* series who will be discussed in the next chapter. The dichotomy of conspiracy theorist archetypes provided by *Slacker* really does help to demarcate the differences between the individual instances of conspiracy theorists we find in popular media and place them along this spectrum to better understand their construction.

Despite the differences in temperaments and demeanor of the two conspiracy theorist archetypes, they are aligned by a common feature, which is their inability to communicate normally. The paranoid conspiracy theorist is too all over the place with his/her theories and seems quite mentally unbalanced, while the nerdy conspiracy theorist’s hyper-focused detail, makes him/her unable to look beyond what they suppose is evidence or talk about anything else other than their passion for a particular conspiracy theory. This has the effect of reducing the contents of what both kinds of conspiracy theorist say into an incomprehensible rant. In popular media, when we find conspiracy theorist ranting, we see that their audience generally lets them say what they want to say,

but ignores the content whole-heartedly. The tendency to rant, and the identification of the spoken content as a rant, is the core unifying stereotype defining the two archetypes.

The “soap-box pontificator” stereotype requires us to be aware of the context a conspiracy theorist appears in. Conspiracy theorist, whether nerdy or paranoid, rarely appear alone in popular media depictions. They are often contextualized by their interactions with other characters, and so these reactions become important for understanding how we are taught to treat conspiracy theorists. For instance, though *Slacker* thrives on the one-sided conversational vignettes we find the two conspiracy theorists participating in, the conspiracy theorists’ scenes are differentiated from the others in that the conspiracy speakers are framed as interlopers. Other vignettes in the film, even those featuring other “slackers,” involve more active listening on the part of the passive character(s) being spoken to, and the content of the dialogue is of more concern to the listener. In contrast, the conspiracy theorists characters are portrayed as if their spoken content and presence is uncalled for, and their conversational partners appear mostly uncomfortable and have difficulty escaping the conversation. This rambling is an important component in other conspiracy theorist characters too. We see taxi-cab driver conspiracy theorist Jerry Fletcher in *Conspiracy Theory*’s opening credits ranting to a series of different passengers, until he turns around and finds he has been talking to himself for some amount of time. Fox Mulder of *The X-Files* is also sometimes portrayed as being too brash and alienates local operatives he works with when he insists too stridently about extraterrestrial and supernatural interference.

The tendency for conspiracy theorists to rant as best seen in *Slacker* has been emphasized in real-world instances as well. Occasionally, high-profile conspiracy

theorists or celebrities endorsing conspiracy theories are mocked for their ranting on daytime talk shows. In one instance, Alex Jones, mentioned above, indulges in what can only be considered a rant on a BBC One program *BBC Sunday Politics*. Alex Jones interrupts the host and the guest perpetually, even throwing in plugs for his websites during his rant, prompting the host, Andrew Neil, to cut him off, claiming “you [Alex Jones] are the worst person I’ve ever interviewed.”¹⁵ The event is contentious, however, because of Alex Jones’ public image. He is regarded as a high-profile public face of various conspiracy theory causes, and is much more of a disseminator of ideas rather than a researcher, which prompts some to wonder if his living up to expectations of being a professional “conspiracy theorist” is some sort of publicity stunt.

Other types of public and celebrity figures are also called out for their conspiratorial rants. Jesse Ventura, former professional wrestler and governor of Minnesota, has been garnering attention with his endeavors into conspiracy theory popularizing and is often called on to news programs as a conspiracy theory pundit. Eccentric in his character, he too is also prone to what could be considered ranting, which in one live interview prompted a commentator to exit the stage out of frustration in the middle of an argument.¹⁶ Attention has also been given to other celebrities’ conspiracy theories, such as Charlie Sheen, Randy Quaid, and Dan Aykroyd. In one article, Mary Elizabeth Williams from *Salon* equates celebrity Rosanne Barr’s identification with the 9/11 Truth Movement to being a troll, internet slang for one who unnecessarily provokes

¹⁵ Mark Duell, “We have an idiot on the show’: Ranting conspiracy theorist is ridiculed by Andrew Neil after outburst on BBC Sunday Politics,” *Daily Mail*, June 9, 2013, <<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2338363/Andrew-Neil-mocks-conspiracy-theorist-Alex-Jones-astonishing-rant-Sunday-Politics.html>> Accessed March 20, 2015.

¹⁶ “Jesse Ventura vs. Fox & Friends, Smacks Down Brian Kilmeade’s Torture & 9/11 Propaganda,” *Youtube* video, 10:50, May 19, 2009, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v2h8imURMFk>> Accessed March 22, 2015.

forums with offensive and inflammatory content.¹⁷ As the proper guiding principle often offered for dealing with trolls is “the best response to a troll is no response,” the same idea can be turned towards conspiracy theorists.¹⁸

There are also plenty of videos which show non-celebrity conspiracy theorists interrupting public events without warrant. Sometimes these events involve an individual shouting about conspiracy theories from the audience at public speaking events. One high-profile incident involved an audience member at a filming of comedian Bill Maher’s *Real Time with Bill Maher* interrupting a roundtable discussion by shouting “investigate 9/11, nothing else matters!” Bill Maher proceeds to have security throw out the instigator to a round of applause.¹⁹ Other instances may involve programming which offers on-air call-ins from viewers at home in which the host receives calls from a frantic conspiracy theorist espousing their theories and ends with the host either hanging up on them or mocking them. Ranting then seems to apply not only to high-profile conspiracy theorist, but also everyday citizen conspiracy theorists, similar to the two in *Slacker*.

There is also some evidence that suggests that the public, beyond the television-mediated public, also regards conspiracy theorists as little more than ranters but it is limited due to a lack of scholarly attention. One such example is found in the “don’t ignore me, bro” meme on the internet, which sarcastically mocks conspiracy theorists’

¹⁷ Mary Elizabeth Williams, “Roseanne Barr: From comic icon to truther and troll,” *Salon*, November 19, 2013, <http://www.salon.com/2013/11/19/roseanne_barr_from_comic_icon_to_truther_and_troll/> Accessed April 2, 2015.

¹⁸ “What is a troll?” Indiana University, <<https://kb.iu.edu/d/afhc>> Accessed March 21, 2015.

¹⁹ “Bill Maher Throws Out 9/11 Conspiracy Theorists On Live TV,” *Youtube* video, 4:44, October 20, 2007, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p80hXaM4QgU>> Accessed March, 22, 2015.

attempts at persuading people of the validity of their theories.²⁰ Other examples can be found in the content of online feedback of articles that deal with conspiracy theories. One 2004 *Washington Post* article by Carol Morello about 9/11 conspiracy theories demonstrates this well. To one scholar, the article was noteworthy at the time for its “surprisingly neutral [tone]” in its fair consideration of theories and its lack of “framing and distancing devices” which typically use disparaging commentary to separate the publication from any perceived endorsements of a conspiracy theory.²¹ Despite this relatively fair-minded presentation and the absence of provoking rhetoric, the reactions of some internet commenters hint at the idea that the best way to treat a conspiracy theorist is by ignoring them:

-“The internet just gives every NUT a larger voice. Ordinarily you would never hear from these nutjobs....”

- “The Post isn’t under any obligation to investigate every fruitcake’s conspiracy theory.”

- (and most revealing of the idea of conspiracy theorists as ranters) “Back in pre-history before the Dawn of the Internet, these Ten Percenters were scattered and dispersed. Forced to wear tall pointy caps, objects of village ridicule, wandering the streets muttering to themselves in self-deluded mania, we all knew them for what they were – KOOKS!”²²

This tentative evidence suggests that the idea seen in media portraits such as *Slacker* that all CTs are mere ranters and the proper response to them is to ignore them is widely believed by many in the public. Nonetheless, more research is needed to deduce the extent to which anti-conspiracy theory members of the public intentionally treat conspiracy theories with ignorance.

²⁰ “9/11 Conspiracy Theorists: Don’t ignore me, bro,” <<http://www.debunking911.com/tactic.htm>> Accessed March 22, 2015.

²¹ Birchall, *Knowledge Goes Pop*, 57.

²² Internet comments from Carla Morello article “Conspiracy Theories Flourish on the Internet,” *The Washington Post*, October 7, 2004, found in Birchall, *Knowledge Goes Pop*, 57-58, parentheses mine.

It is worth noting that the instances of ranting and subsequent ignoring that occurs on non-fictional television programs mentioned above concerns those kinds of conspiracy theorists who are in no way qualified to speak with authority about their subject. Though Alex Jones and Jesse Ventura have spent years investigating conspiracy theories, they have no credibility in established fields of journalism or scholarship which would authenticate their research methods. This is especially the case for celebrities who espouse conspiracy theory ideas, who are often guilty of getting their information from sources such as Alex Jones' infowars.com or other dubious alternative news sites. Indeed, it is likely the case that the media seeks these individuals out and places them on television because they so accurately fit into the archetypal role of the conspiracy theorist. In these cases, it is more excusable to define and treat these conspiracy theorists' behavior as ranting.

There are, however, many professional and specialized conspiracy theorists who do not get a chance to appear on television, even though they may be more equipped to speak intelligently about their theories. A recent exception featured Richard Gage, founder of *Architects & Engineers for 9/11 Truth*, appearing on C-SPAN in a 2014 interview with host Peter Slen. Richard Gage's organization, which advocates for an independent re-investigation into the collapse of the Twin Towers and specifically World Trade Center 7, is renowned among some for the amount of professional and licensed construction scientists affiliated with his group and the level-headed approach they take to research. Youtube user comments express the relief that a credible conspiracy theorists finally had a chance to share his opinions on a mainstream platform: user "074August" says "It's great to see Richard Gage finally on CSPAN;" user "Scott Breon"

says “unlike a lot of truthers (mostly Alex Jones fanboys) Richard approaches 9/11 Truth with intellect and common sense, unlike con-artists like Alex Jones and David Icke who use nothing but paranoia, half-truths and propaganda to sell their opinions;” and user “Thomas J. Ryan” says “Congrats to Cspan for airing something that obviously makes them uncomfortable.”²³ Though Gage is an exception, many others do not get a chance like he has had, and instead are left in the fringe where they risk being affiliated with the public faces of conspiracy theorists like Alex Jones or Jesse Ventura.

This chapter suggests that inherent in the fictionalized depiction of the “conspiracy theorist” character type is the proclivity to rant. Despite the various ways a conspiracy theorist character may be depicted, whether as the nerdy trope or the paranoid trope, the content of their spoken language is presented as little more than pontification. It also appears that this character trait is what is highlighted in portrayals of real-life conspiracy theorists. The danger, though, is that when the “conspiracy theorist” label is equated to ranting and associated only with eccentrics like Alex Jones or celebrities like Rosanne Barr, it also serves to discredit individuals who are accredited professionals in their fields and who have also demonstrated a capacity for restrained and organized public speaking and presentation and for advancing highly technical and rigorous explanations. This effect would likely hinder the professional’s scope of influence, essentially excluding them from certain modes of communication in the manner Husting and Orr argue it does.

²³ “MediaOne Services - Richard Gage: Architects and Engineers for 9/11 Truth,” *Youtube* video, 39:56, August 1, 2014, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2zY9HfwzGPg>> Accessed April 11, 2015.

CHAPTER 3

BELIEVERS AND DEBUNKERS: A MULDER-SCULLY FRAME OF DEBATE

Whereas *Slacker* could be said to have predicted the large presence of conspiracy theory in the cultural fabric of the 1990s, Chris Carter's *The X-Files* franchise (Fox Network, 1993-2002) was a full-fledged participant in it. By the time the *X-Files* was on the air, the internet was fast becoming a safe house and community for a myriad of different people to share and corroborate their beliefs in New Age spirituality, the supernatural, and conspiracy theories of all kinds. Individuals who had otherwise been isolated in their alternative beliefs were now able to connect with like-minded others through the internet, which led to these ideas being spread more than ever before. The internet also allowed for some of these seemingly disparate ideas to combine and meld into all new forms of supernatural and conspiracy beliefs in what has been called "fusion paranoia."²⁴ At the same time, alien abduction stories were more popularized in the mainstream thanks to the work of Harvard psychiatrist John E. Mack.²⁵ Though Mack distanced his brand of alien abduction research from conspiracy theory, considering the phenomena he researched only within the realms of therapeutic psychology, the internet allowed for these alleged close encounter stories to enter into

²⁴ Jesse Walker, *United States of Paranoia: A Conspiracy Theory* (New York: HarperCollins, 2013), 276.

²⁵ Jodi Dean, *Aliens in America: Conspiracy Cultures from Outerspace to Cyberspace* (New York: Cornell, 1998), 57.

certain conspiracy narratives, an idea which would become an integral facet of *The X-Files*' plot.

The X-Files flourished in tandem with this online environment, which provided source material for the show and fostered a captivated audience. The show enjoyed enormous success, netting millions of viewers per episode at the height of its run and securing itself a special place in popular television history. To briefly summarize, *The X-Files* follows the stories of conspiracy theorist extraordinaire FBI Special Agent Fox Mulder and his skeptical partner Agent Dana Scully as they investigate mysteries which may or may not have supernatural or conspiratorial causes. The show can be divided into two categories: there are the "mythology" episodes, which track the continuous personal stories of Mulder and Scully as they unravel an alien-government conspiracy that goes deeper and deeper and threatens not only themselves but their friends and family; and there are the "monster-of-the-week" episodes which follow a procedural drama format in which every episode is a self-contained story. The "monster-of-the-week" episodes allowed the show an opportunity to draw from the seemingly bottomless well of various supernatural and conspiratorial ideas saturating the internet, including those involving ghosts, Bigfoot, new age crystals, psychic powers, satanic cults, monsters, artificial intelligent robots, and, of course, aliens.

In keeping with the online overflow of information from dubious sources, *The X-Files* also changed the approach fictional conspiracy programs took, leaving each episode's conclusion uncertain about whether the case at hand had secular or more supernatural causes. Popular adages from *The X-Files* that became part of the conspiracy theory lexicon such as "the truth is out there," "I want to believe," and "just

because you're paranoid doesn't mean they're not out to get you" reinforced the idea of a lack of certainty when dealing with not only supernatural concepts but also with conspiracy theories and their advocates. While the show's ambiguous solutions typically tilted in favor of Fox Mulder's supernatural explanations, clear answers to the show's mysteries rarely materialized, suggesting that conspiracy theories and supernatural phenomena are neither untrue nor provable.

As a show about conspiracy theories, *The X-Files* featured its share of conspiracy theorist characters and often presented them in a far more positive light than most such representations that preceded it. For instance, although Fox Mulder is the obvious central conspiracy theorist in the show, he is primarily framed as a hero. While he does exhibit several of the typical conspiracy theorist tropes, such as an office lined with newspaper clippings of UFO sightings and a quickness to suggest "extraterrestrial interference" to his skeptical partners, he does not at all fit the archetype *Slacker* offered. Instead, some saw him more matching the Special Agent archetype harkening all the way back to the G-Man character of the film *The G-Man* (1935) and most recently portrayed by FBI Agent Dale Cooper of *Twin Peaks* (1990-1991) fame.²⁶ Furthermore, his conspiratorial tendencies owed more to the show's subject matter than any peculiarities in his character's construction. For this reason, Mulder does not fall into the "conspiracy theorist" trope and so does not contribute to our understanding of the standard "conspiracy theorist" label.

²⁶ Michele Malach "I Want to Believe... in the FBI," in "Deny All Knowledge: Reading the X-Files" ed. David Lavery et al. (New York: Syracuse University, 1996), 63-65.

However, the show did offer other conspiracy theorists more reminiscent of the archetypes presented in *Slacker*. For instance, Mulder's friends and occasional consultants, the editors of the conspiracy theory magazine *The Lone Gunmen* (a play on the JFK "lone gunman" official assassination theory), fit into the nerdy conspiracy theorist vein. These characters have many classic conspiracy theorist quirks. They are usually seen in a dark room with their faces illuminated only by the light of a computer screen, they are aesthetically "nerdy" (unkempt, unattractive, awkward), they are detailed and thorough to the point of excess in their research, and they are stubborn in their own beliefs.

In general, *The X-Files*' subject-matter lent itself to conspiracy theorist characters being presented in a favorable frame. However, this does not mean that *The X-Files* did not exemplify the exclusionary capabilities of the "conspiracy theorist" label claimed by Husting and Orr. The dynamic between the two heroes of the show, Mulder and Scully, reflects the juxtaposition that actual conspiracy theorists are defined by in reality, which subversively operates in our thinking about conspiracy theorists and their place in society. Specifically, this juxtaposition refers to the trial of conspiracy theorists' claims against rigorous and trained skeptics of the claims. Mulder's imagination and tendency to believe the outrageous outright was repeatedly paired with Scully's cold, detached appeals to science which leads her to usually disagree with anything Mulder suggests. This dual-foil relationship was repeated in several other fictional depictions of conspiracy theorists beyond *The-X Files*, including the relationships between conspiracy theorist Jerry Fletcher and skeptic Alice Sutton in the 1997 film *Conspiracy Theory*, the conspiracy theorist Major Ben Marco and Jocelyn

Jordan in the 2004 re-adaptation of *The Manchurian Candidate*, and Aaron and Jim in the 2012 film *The Conspiracy* (that will be discussed in the next chapter). In each of these films, the believer/skeptic pairing, is a central plot point, as the skeptic being proven wrong always serves as a particular plot device. However, this credibility offered to conspiracy theorists in fictional media does not reinforce their credibility in reality. The overt fantasy/sci-fi nature of these programs requires a suspension of disbelief by the viewer, which allows for the conspiracist to be framed as the unlikely hero, which does not extend back into reality. As Media scientist Barna Donovan sees it, “a movie cannot turn a Republican into a Democrat. A conspiracy thriller will not send its audiences into paroxysms of fear and suspicion.”²⁷

Despite this wide gap in ideology between Mulder and Scully, their difference in perspective is presented as a positive quality in their relationship. According to communication scientist Stephanie Kelley-Romana, despite “a constant struggle between the two characters and their perspectives, the symbiotic nature of the two-part hero suggests a balance that, although often not reached, presented the possibility of harmony/success.”²⁸ The ideological difference between the two characters is what makes them so effective, and keeps both of their ideologically-rooted tendencies in check. Mulder’s brashness and willingness to believe often gets him into trouble, and Scully’s caution often gets him out of it. In a multiple episode plot in season 2, “Duane Barry,” Mulder is called to assist in a hostage negotiation situation. A dangerous psychiatric patient who believes he has been abducted by aliens named Duane Barry has

²⁷ Donovan, *Conspiracy Films*, 247.

²⁸ Stephanie Kelley-Romano, “Trust No One: The Conspiracy Genre on American Television,” *Southern Communication Journal*, 73.2 (Spring, 2008), 111.

taken a travel agency hostage in the hopes that they will help him get to an abduction site in return for their lives. Mulder is called in because the higher-ups assume he will understand the pathological mentality of one who believes he has been abducted, but Mulder is rather inclined to believe that Barry is a legitimate abductee. Mulder's strategy to understand Barry's abduction upsets his superiors and puts him face-to-face with the dangerous Barry. All the while, Mulder is communicating with Scully, who insists he is not an abductee but a pathological liar due to a brain injury in Barry's past.

Mulder, in a very dangerous situation, is eventually convinced by Scully that, even if Barry is an abductee, he is too dangerous to communicate empathetically with and he is eventually apprehended, likely saving Mulder's life. Mulder finds a metal implant in Barry's teeth, which he strongly suspects is strong evidence for extraterrestrial abduction. Scully, ever skeptical, has it examined by a ballistics expert to see if there is a better explanation. However, Barry breaks out of the hospital where he is kept and kidnaps Scully, presumably compelled by his implant she acquired. Eventually, Mulder catches up with Barry but Scully is nowhere to be found. A few episodes later, Scully turns up in a coma and barely recovers, and the show presents a strong case that she was abducted by aliens but still does not offer conclusive evidence. Despite the high strangeness surrounding Scully's whole ordeal, she still steadfastly maintains that she was not abducted aliens but rather kidnapped by humans and drugged somehow. After this event, she continues to experience strange after-effects throughout the season, including mysterious cancers and a father-less pregnancy, yet she continues to reaffirm her skepticism by dismissing connections with this and her kidnapping

experience. All told, Scully's skepticism saves Mulder from Barry's violent impulses, and Mulder's belief spurs him to search for and save Scully through unlikely means.

This ideal "balance" the contrary characters' differing perspectives strive toward represents the idea that the best way to discover the truth about a conspiracy theory (or supernatural claim) is to pit the Mulder-esque believer against the Scully-esque skeptic. In reality, this idea expresses itself in the debate structure that professional conspiracy theorists often find themselves: the believer vs. the "debunker". "Debunkers" are individuals, often professional scientists, whose goal is to disprove conspiracy theories and paranormal claims. They typically claim to use science, as opposed to what they often refer to as "pseudo-science," to provide "scientific" explanations for issues that have come under scrutiny by conspiracy theorists and paranormal investigators such as UFO sightings or haunted houses. Indeed, a robust "debunker" industry has developed in tandem with the growth of alternative belief systems (i.e. conspiracy theories, the paranormal.), exemplified by organizations such as the *Committee for Skeptical Inquiry* (founded in 1976) or *The Skeptics Society* (founded in 1992) and individuals such as magician James Randi or television personality Bill Nye who respectively use their knowledge of stage magic and science to disprove paranormal claims.

The idea of the debunker certainly did not originate with Scully, but Scully certainly epitomized the model conception of the unwavering debunker. A forerunner of modern debunkers was Harry Houdini, who would sometimes seek to expose spiritual charlatans, such as self-professed mediums or psychics. Since Houdini, most efforts into debunking have revolved around challenging paranormal and supernatural claims, and it has only been relatively recently that some debunkers have turned their

sights towards questioning conspiracy theorists. If claims that *The X-Files* reinforced belief in conspiracy theories were widely believed, as suggested by the likes of public intellectual and debunker Richard Dawkins,²⁹ then the series certainly had some role in refocusing debunkers' efforts.

In the real world, the balance that is struck between Mulder and Scully has proven elusive, and the debates between conspiracy theorists and debunkers are much less fruitful and much more antagonistic than on the show. Whereas the ideological differences in Scully and Mulder appear so beneficial in the *X-Files* due to their mutual respect and friendship, there is no such friendly acquaintance between believers and debunkers in reality. Skeptics and conspiracy theorists alike rarely abandon their initial hypothesis and work together like Mulder and Scully, which leads to an unresolved interchange of competing ideas. An example of this can be seen in a book released by the publication *Popular Mechanics* called *Debunking 9/11 Myths: Why Conspiracy Theories Can't Stand Up to the Facts* (2006), which has become popular among debunkers and has served as the skeptical response to many of the 9/11 Truth conspiracy theories. The success of this book led to a leading scholar in the 9/11 Truth movement, Dr. David Ray Griffin, to publish the somewhat ironically titled *Debunking 9/11 Debunking: An Answer to Popular Mechanics and Other Defenders of the Official Conspiracy Theorists* (2007). The ironic title captures the limited scope of the debate structure and the perpetual back-and-forth it lends itself to.

²⁹ Dean A. Kowalski, "Introduction: Mulder, Scully, Plato, Aristotle, and Dawkins," in *The Philosophy of The X-Files* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2007), 5-6.

A further problem with the typical debate structure is that the debate often boils down to a disagreement over what qualifies as proper science. This results in conspiracy theorists remaining trapped in a forum where they convey their ideas to those who will not consider them legitimate science. The structure necessarily portrays conspiracy theorists as making the more outlandish claim, by virtue of the opposing side's assumed position as being more scientific, thus placing an enormous burden of proof on the so-called "conspiracy theorists." Because the debunkers occupy the decidedly more positive rational and scientific frame, it gives them a strong rhetorical advantage and the opportunity to define what counts as proof. Debunkers emphatically claim they appeal stringently to the principles of the scientific method, but so do many conspiracy theorists. This "differing constructions of science" leads to what social scientist David Hess refers to as capturing theory, which he explains "has to do with rhetorical attempts to capture the authority of neutrality and scientificity."³⁰ In this way, conspiracy theory claims often get ignored at the expense of establishing the specificities of the scientific method. Jodi Dean, an early researcher into cultural interest in aliens and conspiracies, offers an example of how this capturing theory plays out in a debate about UFOs:

Official explanations for UFO sightings focused on witnesses' unreliability, either on their moral failings (dishonest or drunk) or on their failures of judgment (lapses in sanity or perception). UFO researchers responded by working to establish the witnesses' credibility. Using scientific and juridical languages, they sought to provide reasons to trust the words of even someone who claims to have seen a flying saucer. This had the effect of shaping the UFO discourse as a whole around questions of trust and credibility as much as around empirical evidence. Ufologists resisted the view that the judgments of significant numbers of Americans are unreliable. They rejected the presumption that citizens should be reduced to "crazies" and excluded from serious discussions important to America's

³⁰ David Hess, *response to Herbert Corben*, "Book Review: David J. Hess. *Science in the New Age: The Paranormal, Its Defenders and Debunkers, and American Culture*," *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences* 33.2 (Spring, 1997), 189-190.

security. To this extent, ufology challenged official notions of what counts as true, of whose words are credible.³¹

One can watch this play out in the 2009 *Larry King Live*-curated discussions about UFO's wherein he invited a number of prominent researchers in the UFO field, including nuclear physicists Stanton Friedman, and founder of *The Skeptics Society* Michael Shermer, who begin to argue about the legitimacy of eye-witness reports of UFOs.³² Discussions of what counts as evidence mutate into a shouting match between opposing sides, as both sides have different rigid definitions of evidence. This believer vs. debunker debate structure precludes actual discussion and consideration of the conspiracy theorist's claims and instead delves into a meta-analysis of scientific authority and validity. Because these ideas are removed from an agreed-upon formula for the scientific method and revolve around more epistemically-grounded questions regarding the root of all science, this debate structure further limits the audience these claims receive by turning attention away from the actual claims. Also, in the absence of complex discussion about scientific legitimacy in a debate, the unclear terms of engagement often lead to confusion and name-calling among the participants.

What is even more harmful about the believer vs. debunker debate structure is that the format may not be conducive to the debunker's cause either. Debunkers Stephan Lewandowsky and John Cook have identified in their manual *The Debunking Handbook* a trend which they refer to as the "backfire effect." The backfire effect happens when an audience's belief in conspiracy or paranormal ideas is reinforced not because of a debunker's opponent's argument, but because of the act of debunking

³¹ Dean, *Aliens in America*, 39.

³² "Shermer on Larry King Live with the UFOlogists," *Youtube* video, 59:57, June 30, 2009, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6udgzzCQP0M>> Accessed April 4 2015.

itself.³³ This is not an uncommon problem for debunkers in this debate structure. However, it is not beneficial for the conspiracy theorist cause either, as far as their desire is to have more open and fair discussions. Those individuals in the audience who result in a backfire effect often already have proclivities towards conspiracy theories, which only further emphasizes the bias inherent in both sides of the debate which limits argumentative progress.

As many conspiracy theorists have recognized, the debate structure between believer vs. debunker is not an efficient model for reasonably addressing claims made by credible conspiracy theorists. Beyond the features just mentioned, it is likely the case that conspiracy theory literature and debunker literature is often aimed at those who already hold a belief one way or the other. Those who believe conspiracy theories seek out the conspiracy theory literature, while those who consider themselves skeptics seek out the debunker literature. Claims of conspiracy theory are then only learned about and dissected by those who have an either positive or regressive interest in conspiracy theories. This limits the attention the claims advocated by credible conspiracy theorists receive among their peers and those who are less biased towards a particular frame of belief.

To counter the unfair and inefficient position the believer vs. debunker structure entails and to achieve wider visibility in mainstream intellectual culture, several conspiracy theorists and organizations they are affiliated with have made various attempts to find a different forum to share their theories. In general, peer-reviewed

³³ Stephan Lewandowsky and John Cook, *The Debunking Handbook*, Online PDF, January 23, 2012, accessed March 30, 2015, http://www.skepticalscience.com/docs/Debunking_Handbook.pdf

journals and academia at large have not been a very inviting medium, presumably because the claims of conspiracy theorist are considered so extraordinary that a journal or academy risks its reputation in publishing it. One oft-cited case involved former Brigham Young University physics professor Steven Jones. Dr. Jones came under scrutiny for a conspiracy theory-tinged paper he published on his university website titled “Why Indeed Did the World Trade Center Buildings Collapse?” which proposed the hypothesis that the towers were brought down by explosives. He could not find a journal to publish it even though he asserted that it was peer-reviewed.³⁴ BYU became so concerned about its affiliation with Dr. Jones and his increasing extracurricular involvement with the 9/11 Truth Movement that it placed him on paid-leave for a time and forced him to quietly retire from the university. Jones would go on to co-found *Scholars for 9/11 Truth* which hosts many alternative views to the official version of 9/11. This is a popular story among those interested in 9/11 conspiracy theories, and a likely deterrent for any professionals who may consider sharing their research through academic venues.

Due to the professional risk associated with university-affiliated endeavors, others attempting to share conspiracy theories have sought out different knowledge-producing venues. 9/11 conspiracy theorist Richard Gage and his organization *Architects & Engineers for 9/11 Truth* have recently managed to have the largest architectural organization in the nation, *American Institute of Architects* (AIA), agree to hold a vote on a resolution to reinvestigate the collapse of World Trade Center Tower 7,

³⁴ Tad Walch, “BYU places ‘9/11 Truth’ professor on paid leave,” *Deseret News*, September 8, 2006, <<http://www.deseretnews.com/article/645199800/BYU-places-911-truth-professor-on-paid-leave.html>> Accessed April 1, 2015.

the third high-rise building which collapsed on 9/11 but was not struck by airplanes and thus has fueled a majority of the 9/11 conspiracy theories.³⁵ Another case involving an academic was Danish conspiracy theorist Dr. Neils Harrit, advocate for Dr. Jones' evidence, who sued journalist Søren Villemoes for libel for calling him a "crackpot" because of his conspiracy theories. Though Dr. Harrit is not likely to win the case, his intention was more to simply have an opportunity to present evidence of explosives in WTC 7 in an impartial court of law.³⁶ This demonstrates that professional conspiracy theorists have had to be creative in their search for a forum that differs from the usual built-in debunker format.

The successful supernatural crime-fighting duo of Mulder and Scully who disagree but mutually respect one another remains only a fiction. In the real world, the intellectual dynamic that directly pits two opposing ideologues against one another renders futile any attempt at truly considering conspiracy theories or theorists and instead simply reaffirms existing biases of crazy conspiracy theorists. The debate structure is not conducive to either professional scientists and scholars accused of holding conspiracy theories or the debunkers who seek to clarify proper scientific thinking. In this way, the believer vs. debunker frame exemplifies Husting and Orr's claim of the exclusionary capacity of the term itself in that it shifts claims and their proponents away from the mainstream. In some cases, the structure further turns away from the claims through a meta-analysis of differing conceptions of the scientific

³⁵ "55 Architects Submit Resolution to be Voted on at the AIA National Convention," March 28, 2015, <[http://us1.campaign-archive1.com/?u=d03bf3ffcac549c7dc7888ef5&id=ea294ce385&e=\[UNIQID\]](http://us1.campaign-archive1.com/?u=d03bf3ffcac549c7dc7888ef5&id=ea294ce385&e=[UNIQID])> Accessed April 2, 2015.

³⁶ Josef Hanji, "WTC 7 & NANO-THERMITE EVIDENCE ADMITTED," *Architects & Engineers for 9/11 Truth*, March 22, 2015, <<http://www.ae911truth.org/news/207-news-media-events-danish-high-court-harrit.html>> Accessed April 2, 2015.

method. This feature of the “conspiracy theorist” label operates on a more subversive level than the explicit negative depictions of the “ranter,” and we will see similarly subtle qualities in the label in *The Conspiracy*.

CHAPTER 4

FROM “KOOKS” TO “DUPES”: NORMAL PEOPLE AND CONSPIRACY THEORIES

Conspiracy theory continued to play an important role in popular culture throughout the 1990s thanks to the rapid growth and proliferation of conspiracy theories on the internet, *The X-Files*, and other television series and films which sought to capitalize on the interest *The X-Files* tapped into. However, the events of 9/11 put an abrupt end to the popularity of conspiracism in the popular media and ushered in a temporary period of nation-wide patriotism. As communication scientist Barna William Donovan sees it, “after the morning of September 11, 2001... conspiracy theorizing not only looked to be dated and unoriginal, but suddenly felt uncomfortable. To some it felt outright unpatriotic.”³⁷ Not only did 9/11 lead the entertainment industry to “become skittish about directly adapting any more of the tenets of the conspiracy theory community,” but it has also been attributed by writer-producer Frank Spotnitz with bringing the final blow to the *X-Files* franchise, which was discontinued after its 2001 season.³⁸ For a time, it seemed like the fascination with conspiracies had finally receded.

However, the internet proved to still be a vital and growing forum for conspiracy theory dissemination. After the disillusionment with the Bush administration’s mishandling of Iraq and Afghanistan started to settle in, the setting was ripe for new

³⁷ Donovan, *Conspiracy Films*, 184.

³⁸ Donovan, *Conspiracy Films*, 184-185.

conspiracy theories to take root especially those which took a direct aim at the events of 9/11 that were loosely affiliated together as the “9/11 Truth” movement. Though the 9/11 Truth movement, sometimes referred to as the “truthers,” is really a group of separate organizations such as Scholars for 9/11 Truth and Architects & Engineers for 9/11 Truth, they are all united in their belief that some individuals and/or agencies of the U.S. government either allowed the attacks to happen or were directly responsible for them.

The early 21st century marked a transition from movies to the Internet as the primary space through which the public perception of conspiracy theorists were shaped. The entertainment industry was somewhat reluctant to readopt conspiracy themes in films and televisions (particularly those involving 9/11), but some Hollywood films by the mid-2000’s, such as *The Da Vinci Code* (2006) or the second *Star Wars* trilogy (years) did hint at secret histories in their plots. These fictional films, however, did not turn the finger of accusation towards the government as overtly as the *X-Files* had. The new online platforms such as Youtube, however, became increasingly important in spreading ideas and themes of conspiracy theory throughout the culture and in seeing the government as one of the key culprits. The most telling instance of this was the independent documentary *Loose Change* by aspiring filmmaker Dylan Avery which presented a collection of theories proposed by the 9/11 Truth movement, ultimately suggesting that the Bush administration was responsible for the attacks. It was released on Youtube for free in 2005, with no official release, and quickly went viral, spreading beyond the scope of conspiracy theory circles and into mainstream awareness. Since *Loose Change*, many other conspiracy theorists have created similar independent (and

often amateur) documentaries for Youtube, creating a large corner of the internet where conspiracy theories flourish. In the process, because of its increasing popularity and accessibility, conspiracy theory was no longer relegated to individuals deemed to be fringe or counter-cultural. It was becoming apparent that normal and smart everyday people were adopting conspiracy theories, contrary to what the conspiracy theorist stereotype represents. As journalist Jonathan Kay noted, “these [truthers], I learned, aren’t the loners of *X-Files* stereotype,” but rather “outwardly “normal,” articulate people who kept up with the news and held down office jobs...”³⁹ suggesting that the idea of the conspiracy theorist as a mere “kook” did not apply to this new branding of the conspiracy theorist.

Christopher MacBride sets his film *The Conspiracy* (2012) in this new cultural environment. Though *The Conspiracy* was not a blockbuster hit, it was received mostly favorably by critics and the film directly addresses this more overt, rather than subtle, trend of conspiracy in American culture today.⁴⁰ *The Conspiracy* actually provides a telling example of the new kind of conspiracy theorist that Jonathan Kay acknowledged: the seemingly “normal,” and how they come to adopt, and thus be tainted by, conspiracy theories. Through this new conception, a more recent strategy to rationalize away conspiracy theorists is exemplified.

The Conspiracy adopts a style of low-budget cinematography popularized by films such as *The Blair-Witch Project* (1999) and *Paranormal Activity* (2007), which

³⁹ Jonathan Kay, *Among the Truthers: A Journey Through America’s Growing Conspiracist Underground* (New York: HarperCollins, 2011), 6.

⁴⁰ “The Conspiracy,” *Rotten Tomatoes* < http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/the_conspiracy_2013> accessed April 7, 2015.

frames the movie as an aesthetically real (but still fictional) amateur documentary. Not only does this faux-documentary style lend to a more intimately realistic experience for the audience, it also mimics the abundance of amateur conspiracy theory documentaries found on websites like Youtube. The film features two documentary makers, Aaron and Jim, who set out to make a documentary about a local conspiracy theorist named Terrance. Jim describes the approach of the project as focused on the individual rather than the ideas they hold: “it wasn’t so much conspiracy theories themselves,” he says, “as it was the people who believe in them that attracted me,” which sets the film up as a prescient study of the conspiracy theorist character.

As presented in the film, Terrance is very much a stereotypical paranoid conspiracy theorist character. He is unhealthy and disheveled in his appearance, his apartment walls are lined with newspaper marked with lines mapping out esoteric connections between different stories, he believes unmarked black vans are following him, and he pontificates about the New World Order on street corners to passer-bys and through a megaphone up towards government buildings. Typical of the cold-shoulder responses paranoid conspiracy theorists are wont to get, no one pays attention to Terrance and Jim and Aaron only humor his conspiratorial “rants” to understand his character and personality for their project.

Eventually, though, Terrance vanishes and Jim and Aaron find his now empty apartment has been wrecked. Curious about this abrupt disappearance, Aaron collects what bits of newspaper he can find and starts to become obsessed with the pieces of conspiracy theory Terrance left behind. Jim visits Aaron one day to find Aaron has reassembled the collage of newspaper onto his wall mapping out his own conspiracy

theory. This scene symbolically represents his transformation from “normal” to “conspiracy theorist.” Despite Jim’s reluctance, Aaron persuades him to refocus the film project from documenting a conspiracy theorist to investigating a conspiracy theory. As the film continues, Aaron starts to believe the same black vans that Terrance reported are now following him and he descends further into paranoia, distancing himself from Jim and the objectivity of the project. The film concludes with the two infiltrating a Tarsus Club meeting, a secret group at the center of the conspiracy theory, that mimics the infamous (among conspiracy theorists) Bohemian Grove.⁴¹ Ambiguous events occur at the meeting and, in *X-Files* style, it is never revealed whether or not an actual conspiracy was afoot. However, by the end of the film Aaron is missing too, and an uneasy and visibly disturbed Jim explains he just left without warning after the project was finished.

What Aaron comes to represent is a new depiction of the conspiracy theorist. This depiction, set against Terrance’s more archetypal qualities, allows the conspiracy theorist to retain aspects of normalcy while adopting the presumably outrageous conspiracy theories. Unlike in other depictions, where conspiracy theorists are introduced *de facto* as such, Aaron’s case demonstrates how this transformation into conspiracy theorist can occur. This framing of the character places the faults of the conspiracy theorist not so much on their implicit character and their personality, but on the seductive and pseudo-logical qualities of conspiracy theories themselves. Though Aaron was at first a normal character, he, unlike Jim, actually looked into the

⁴¹ “RT: Alex Jones on Bohemian Grove,” *Infowars*, July 15, 2011, < <http://www.infowars.com/alex-jones-on-bohemian-grove/>>, accessed April 10, 2015.

conspiracy theories and was “brainwashed” by how much the conspiracy theories seemed to make sense.

In this view of the conspiracy theorist character, the attention given to conspiracy theories is not about their content, but rather about the cognitive functioning behind an individual’s tendencies towards conspiracy theories. This perspective can be traced back to Karl Popper and his notion of the “conspiracy theory of society.” Popper argues that the conspiracy theory world view has filled a certain psychological and cultural void left by the triumph of science over religion. In the absence of unquestioned faith in religion, Popper argues, people resort to other means, such as conspiracy theorizing, to place the seemingly random events of the world into some sort of pre-designed sense of order:

In its modern forms [conspiracy theory] is... a typical result of the secularization of a religious superstition. The belief in the Homeric gods whose conspiracies explain the history of the Trojan War is gone. The gods are abandoned. But their place is filled by powerful men or groups – sinister pressure groups whose wickedness is responsible for all the evils we suffer from – such as the Learned Elders of Zion, or the monopolists, or the capitalists, or the imperialists.⁴²

This perspective, reaffirmed many times in academia,⁴³ frames the conspiracy theorist as a victim of a cult-like indoctrination. The perspective portrays the conspiracy theorist not as a “kook” or a “nerd,” but rather as someone who is psychologically uncomfortable with the ambiguities of a complex world and who uses conspiracy theories to compensate. This construction of conspiracy theories as an effort to make sense of the world is often overlaid with individual prejudices and bias, such as anti-authoritarianism or anti-Semitism, and selective choices and denial of pieces of

⁴² Karl Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies: Volume II* (New Jersey: Princeton, 1963), 95.

⁴³ Birchall, *Knowledge Goes Pop*, 66-72.

evidence which coalesce to form any individual's particular brand of conspiracy theory. Viewed in this light, the conspiracy theory forms a representation of negative hierarchy and causality of suspected powers, but is objectively inaccurate by its design.

In *The Conspiracy*, Aaron represents this idea in his linking of seemingly disparate events to the Tarsus Club meetings that the perpetrators in his conspiracy theory supposedly attend. Spurred on by his curiosity about Terrance's disappearance, Aaron keeps finding evidence that reaffirms his suspicion that a conspiracy "vanished" Terrance because he was on to something important and this then leads him to further conspiracy theories. In contrast, Jim regards Terrence's disappearance as just something that paranoids are wont to do. Aaron maintains many facets of a normal person, but his pattern-creating cognition of events compels him to adopt conspiracy theories to make sense of the world. This conception of the conspiracy theorist, therefore, denies accessibility to a conspiracy theorist's claims by assuming the conspiracy theories are a product of a faulty psyche which simply seeks out conspiracy theories by selective patterning. In the film, Jim tries to maintain a cold indifference to Aaron's newly adopted conspiracy theories, because he suspects Aaron's partiality to conspiracy theories are a result of these psychological reasons. The films' representation of Jim's lack of consideration of Aaron's theories demonstrates once again the ostracizing capacity of the conspiracy theorist label, now attached to Aaron, that Husting and Orr argue for. The "conspiracy theory of society" that Aaron adopts invalidates conspiracy theories because their suspected origin is in the conspiracy theorist's flawed cognitive behavior rather than in the conspiracy theory itself.

The Conspiracy borrows this conceptualization of the conspiracy theorist from an increasing mass of literature which supports Popper's argument. Beyond academia, this view of conspiracy theories has been applied to making sense of conspiracy theorists in the popular press. Indeed, several books in the past decade aimed at popular and mainstream audiences endorse this view of the conspiracy theorist as a normal person rather than the oft-depicted "kook." In *Them: Adventures with Extremists*, Journalist Jon Ronson explains this trend as a conspiracy theorist's cognitive-tic to attribute misfortunes on an ambiguous and inexact group, usually epitomized in conspiracy rhetoric as simply "them." The core idea of *Them* is that conspiracy theorists try to accuse shadowy and imprecise characters and groups – such as the New World Order or Jewish bankers or the Freemasons – of shaping global events through a way in which the claims are so inexact that they can neither be proven nor disproven.⁴⁴ This allows them to make sense of the world in a way similar to how religious people can frame events as seemingly clear and patterned products of either "the devil" or "god" by evidence of faith alone. Author Jesse Walker explains in his book *The United States of Paranoia* the conspiracy theorist's tendency of having "a knack not just for finding patterns in chaos but for constructing stories to make sense of events, especially events that scare us" because "a conspiracy story imagines an intelligence behind the pattern."⁴⁵ Other works, such as journalist Jonathan Kay's *Among the Truthers* (2011) or David Aaronovitch's *Voodoo Histories* (2010) endorse similar views which find the conspiracy theorist falling victim to their own pattern-seeking habits which leads them to endorse theories that reaffirm their biases.

⁴⁴ Jon Ronson, *Them: Adventures with Extremists* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002).

⁴⁵ Walker, *United States of Paranoia*, 337.

This increase in popular books addressing conspiracy theorists suggests that more people are encountering conspiracy theorists in their lives, and that the “conspiracy theory of society” proves a useful tool for rationalizing the influx of normal conspiracy theorists which may consist of their friends, family, or colleagues. There is likely much truth to this conception of the conspiracy theorist and how they come to adopt their theories as it regards this group of everyday people. Studies have indicated that the typical individual who believes in conspiracy theories is likely to adopt different theories which logically conflict with each other.⁴⁶ This seems to demonstrate the trend for individuals to accept the meaning and consequence of conspiracy theories before the logic of conspiracy theories. Further, it would be unlikely that so many scholars have misinterpreted this tendency for conspiracy theorists in popular society to seek out patterns.

While this conception introduces more complexity to the conspiracy theorist character and also abandons some of the more pejorative and demeaning qualities presented in past stereotypes, it is still generally presented as the sole way to imagine this category labeled “conspiracy theorist.” Although it may indeed accurately apply to a great many people, it nonetheless precludes those who may not demonstrate this faulty pattern-seeking form of cognition by instantly assuming the presence of the “conspiracy theory of society” tendency in every conspiracy theorists which instantly denies the legitimacy of their professed theories. The problems this raises can be seen in an argument hosted by the journal *Conversations in Religion and Theology* between Ian Markham and David Ray Griffin, respectively a theologian skeptical of 9/11 conspiracy

⁴⁶ Michael Wood and Karen Douglas, “‘What about building 7?’ A social psychological study of online discussion of 9/11 conspiracy theories,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 4 (2013): 1-9.

theories and a leading proponent of such views who is also a theologian. Presented in a point-counterpoint format, Ian Markham began by adopting the typical academic standpoint and accusing David Ray Griffin's theories as the product of a faulty cognitive patterning and arguing that "a significant factor in all conspiracy theories is a deep bias or antagonism." He further suggested that an anti-American bias in Griffin led him to pattern his evidence to support his conspiracy theory.⁴⁷ Markham assumed that Griffin's entire argument can be dismissed based on this idea reminiscent of the "conspiracy theory of society." In this way, he dismissed Griffin's actual argument and focuses all his attention on Griffin's ideology and mentality.

As a result of the nature of Markham's critique, Griffin was then forced into a position to defend his character rather than to advance his argument. Griffin responded:

Markham is suggesting, therefore, that he need not even look at the evidence-based arguments in my book because my "[anti-American] bias has so distorted [my] worldview that there is little point in disentangling the good arguments from the prejudice." This is his first argument for dismissing my book as irresponsible on a purely a priori basis.

This argument is, however, problematic in several ways. First, Markham presents no evidence whatsoever of my alleged anti-Americanism except the fact that I have presented evidence to support the charge that the Bush administration was complicit in the 9/11 attacks. The argument is, hence, perfectly circular: Why does Griffin support this charge? Because he has an anti-American bias. How do we know that he has an anti-American bias? Because he supports this charge.

Markham implies, to be sure, that I was already anti-American before I supported this charge, suggesting that my "prejudice assert[ed] itself by searching for a narrative (an interpretation) [regarding 9/11] that connects certain events in an anti-American way." This kind of charge is, of course, one of the most serious charges one

⁴⁷ "Two Theologians Debate 9/11," < <http://www.anthoniflood.com/griffinmarkhamdebate911.htm> > accessed April 11, 2015.

intellectual can make against another. And yet Markham makes this charge casually, providing absolutely no evidence for it.⁴⁸

The “conspiracy theory of society,” as Markham presented it and with which he accused Griffin, is not a tenable argument and he therefore dismissed out-of-hand all of Griffin’s evidence regarding his theory. Griffin is quite aware of this and calls Markham out for it in his rebuttal. Yet in doing so, Griffin, was bound to defend his character and research methods simply because of an affiliation with his ideas and the “conspiracy theorist” character.

The “conspiracy theory of society,” as exemplified in the character of Aaron in *The Conspiracy* and in Markham’s argument, is perhaps one of the most subversive means of isolating conspiracy theorists. The conception allows for viewing conspiracy theorists as outwardly normal, rather than irrational “ranters” or “believers” and even admits that conspiracy theories do articulate a kind of pseudo-logic which creates the appearance of rationality which fulfills deep-seated cognitive yearnings for order and patterns. However, such a view still denies the validity of all conspiracy theories by assuming the theories as products of over-simplification and selective evidence, and therefore portrays the conspiracy theorist as a “dupe” rather than a “kook.” Conspiracy theorists can now be imagined as normal and functional people, but this still does not allow them to be correct, which proves troublesome for the careful scholar and professionals seeking to demonstrate evidence for certain conspiracy theories.

⁴⁸ “Two Theologians Debate 9/11,” < <http://www.anthoniflood.com/griffinmarkhamdebate911.htm>> accessed April 11, 2015.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

The power of the “conspiracy theorist” label as used in popular culture texts from *Slacker* to *The X-Files* to *The Conspiracy* to redefine and reorient terms of public communication and discussion is apparent. Each work captures a facet of the conspiracy theorists as they exist in our imagination, which allows us to understand with more precision the attributes in the imaginary character which affects real people. The pejorative connotations of the conspiracy theorist character found on television and film reappear in denunciations of individuals as “kooks” and people who “wear tin-foil hats” in reality. The steady stream of such representations makes it difficult to see beyond the conspiracy theorist’s unflattering characteristics and so they have come to be represented and perceived as perpetual outsiders. Any effort to consider what they actually have to say bears the risk of being affiliated with the conspiracy theorists. Even in media that does not dismiss conspiracism and its advocates out-of-hand, such as *The X-Files*, we still find portrayals that limit how we think about conspiracy theorists and where their proper place should be. As a whole, these media representations have fostered a hostile intellectual environment that rarely, if ever, considers, what we as a society may be losing in this discreditization of alternative views.

There is no indication that the popularity of conspiracy theories will dissipate any time soon. It is likely that it is even gaining in popularity, which makes this project's focus all the more significant. The internet continues to grow into one of the most important communication tools in our history. Through it a preponderance of conspiracy theories continue to be created with every new event or tragedy that are both discussed in small circles and ridiculed in the mainstream. Mainstream publications have taken to discrediting certain conspiracies to stymie the tide of what they see as an epidemic of irrationality. One such example (of many) is the online magazine *Salon*'s attempt to put to rest the conspiracy theories claiming the 2012 Sandy Hook school shootings were staged, which became a bit of a viral sensation in the months afterwards and was deemed offensive by many of the families of victims.⁴⁹ The threat of conspiracism, as these establishment forces see it, is on the verge of competing with the mainstream conception of rationality. However, in their public debunking of conspiracy theories, they are also sharing them with a wider audience, creating a broader awareness of the presence of conspiracy theory in contemporary American culture.

It is indeed the case that many and probably most conspiracy theorists espouse ideas that are not true. There are certainly ridiculous conspiracy theories, and gullible and naïve people who will believe them. However, the label "conspiracy theorist" casts too wide of a net and risks dragging down individuals whose opinions we would otherwise value. It is not even wholly clear what constitutes a "conspiracy theorist."

⁴⁹ Alex Seitz-Wald, "Your comprehensive answer to every Sandy Hook conspiracy," *Salon*, January 18, 2013, <http://www.salon.com/2013/01/18/your_comprehensive_answer_to_every_sandy_hook_conspiracy_theory/> Accessed April 10, 2015.

Must one believe multiple conspiracy theories or is it enough that one finds the collapse of World Trade Center tower 7 suspicious to be considered a “conspiracy theorist?”

Does a “conspiracy theorist” have to have published work on conspiracy theories, either in books or blogs or the other venues where one can find such ideas, or is it enough that an individual simply believes in a particular theory? What’s the difference between a loud-mouthed celebrity “conspiracy theorist” like Alex Jones and a quiet academic “conspiracy theorist” like David Ray Griffin or Richard Gage?

The most important suggestion I aim to make with this project is that the “conspiracy theorist” label is dated and inapplicable in our new intellectual environment. Though we readily employ the label in many different circumstances, its malleability makes it an imprecise term, and its pejorative and exclusionary capacities make it a dangerous one. There needs to be some mechanism and language for separating the clearly irrational and uneducated whose irrationality sometimes expresses itself through conspiracy theories from educated professionals who posit well-reasoned and researched ideas which would be conducive to larger, peer-reviewed discussions.

Such efforts are underway. Lately, there has been a concerted effort by some unfortunate enough to be labeled as “conspiracy theorists” to distance themselves from the label by seeking to rebrand their area of concern. On one front, those interested in UFOs, whether they be scientists, politicians, or pilots, have tried to encapsulate the object of their interest as “Unidentified Aerial Phenomenon” (UAP) rather than UFOs, to distance themselves from the instant recollection of *The X-Files* and space aliens the

word “UFO” invites.⁵⁰ In another case, Lance deHaven-Smith, a political scientist involved in researching conspiracy theories, has introduced the term “State Crimes Against Democracy,” or SCAD, to be able to study potential conspiracies with a more minimal risk of being lumped in with all the crazier kinds of conspiracy theories.⁵¹ An organization seeking to introduce an electoral initiative to the New York City ballot in 2014 which, if approved, would have called for a new investigation into the collapse of WTC 7 from structural damage and fires, called their proposal the “High-Rise Safety Initiative” to avoid connotations with conspiracy theory and frame the issue instead as a public safety incentive.⁵²

I do not here offer any alternatives to the label in this project, but it is my hope that it casts doubt on how the label is used and the questionable connotations it entails. This exercise in broadening the understanding of the negative consequences of “conspiracy theorist” characters depicted in popular media is my contribution to the larger effort to foster a more open intellectual climate that does not instantly scoff at ideas which may at first brush seem ridiculous and out of place. Rhetorical symbols such as the “conspiracy theorist” label that isolate and dismiss ideas to fringe culture, is likely operating similarly with other labels in other fields of research. If we are to understand the complexities and the multiple layers of causality in the world, it is important that we remain vigilantly critical and open to all ideas, even those held by people identified in dismissive ways. If this can be achieved, the whole world may be surprised at what is uncovered.

⁵⁰ Leslie Kean, *UFOs: Generals, Pilots, and Government Officials Go on the Record* (New York: Harmony Books, 2010), 10-14.

⁵¹ deHaven-Smith, *Conspiracy Theory in America*, 132-162.

⁵² “About the High-Rise Safety Initiative,” <<http://highrisesafetynyc.org/about/> accessed April 12, 2015.

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