

# Can the Progressive-“Conspiracy” Divide be Bridged?

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Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [History](#), [Media Disinformation](#)

*People from a variety of advocacy communities who tackle issues ranging from the assassinations of the 1960's to vaccine safety are rightly upset by a [recent NBC News.com op-ed](#) authored by Lynn Parramore, a progressive journalist known for her insightful pieces for Alternet and other outlets. In the article, Parramore argues that those who espouse “conspiracy theories” might be displaying “narcissistic personality traits,” suffer from “low self-esteem,” and share a “negative view of humanity.” Various studies are cited in support of this claim.*

As a filmmaker acquainted both with the author of the op-ed as well as a number of people from the communities under fire, I hope it's possible to dispel some of the misconceptions on all sides and even find some common ground.

At the outset, it should be acknowledged that Parramore's piece is an uncharacteristically harsh *ad hominem* smear, taking its place in a long line of similar attacks on people who have dared question—sometimes at great personal cost—a whole range of suspect official narratives over many years.

But Parramore and many journalists like her are neither [assets of an intelligence service](#) nor unthinking tools of big media; she is fully conscious of the ways in which power and wealth can be used collusively (one might even say conspiratorially) to deceive and abuse the public.

So what accounts for a piece like this one? Why does it rankle a progressive like Parramore so intensely when she hears someone mention that the U.S. military-industrial complex [had the most to gain](#) from the September 11th attacks, or that Big Pharma may be applying the same racketeering techniques to the ever-expanding [vaccination schedule](#) she discovered [at play in the opioid crisis](#)?

Those of us who have labored long to publicize [state crimes against democracy](#) have our own list of [the psychological, political, and economic factors](#) that may be preventing smart people from seeing evidence that we regard as overwhelming. The primary difficulty may lie in just how smart and thoroughly educated many of these writers are: no one who has spent a lifetime looking into the way the world works wants to think they might have missed something big.

And as [Noam Chomsky has pointed out](#), the more educated we are, the more we are a target for state-corporate propaganda. Even journalists outside the mainstream may internalize establishment values and prejudices.

Which brings us to Parramore's embrace of the term "conspiracy theory." Once a neutral and little-used phrase, "conspiracy theory" was infamously weaponized in [1967 by a memo](#) from the CIA to its station chiefs worldwide. Troubled by growing mass disbelief in the "lone nut" theory of President Kennedy's assassination, and concerned that "[c]onspiracy theories have frequently thrown suspicion on our organization," the agency directed its officers to "discuss the publicity problem with friendly and elite contacts (especially politicians and editors)" and to "employ propaganda assets to answer and refute the attacks of the critics. Book reviews and feature articles are particularly appropriate for this purpose."

As [Kevin Ryan writes](#), and [various analyses have shown](#),

"In the 45 years before the CIA memo came out, the phrase 'conspiracy theory' appeared in the Washington Post and New York Times only 50 times, or about once per year. In the 45 years after the CIA memo, the phrase appeared 2,630 times, or about once per week."

While it turns out that Parramore knows something about this hugely successful propaganda drive, she chose in her NBC piece to deploy the phrase as the government has come to define it, i.e., as "something that requires no consideration because it is obviously not true." This embeds a fallacy in her argument which only spreads as she goes on.

Likewise, the authors of the studies she cites, who attempt to connect belief in "conspiracy theories" to "narcissistic personality traits," are not immune to efforts to manipulate the wider culture. Studies are only as good as the assumptions from which they proceed; in this case the assumption was provided by an interested Federal agency.

And what of their suggested diagnosis? The DSM-5's criteria for narcissism include "a pervasive pattern of grandiosity...a need for admiration and lack of empathy." My experience in talking to writers and advocates who—to mention a few of the subjects Parramore cites—seek justice in the cases of the [political murders of the Sixties](#), have profound [concerns about vaccine safety](#), or [reject the official conspiracy theory of 9/11](#), does not align with that characterization.

On the contrary, most of the people I know who hold these varied (and not always shared) views are deeply empathic, courageously humble, and resigned to a life on the margins of official discourse, even as they doggedly seek to publicize what they have learned. A number of them have arrived at their views through painful, direct experience, like the [loss of a friend](#) or the illness of a child, but far from having a "negative view of humanity," as Parramore writes, most hold a deep and abiding faith in the power of regular people to see injustice and peacefully oppose it.

In that regard, they share a great deal in common with writers like Parramore: ultimately, we all want what's best for our children, and none of us want a world ruled by unaccountable political-economic interests.

If we want to achieve that world, then we should work together to promote speech that is free from personal attacks on all sides. Even more importantly, we should all be troubled by efforts to shut down content and discussions labeled "false and misleading" [on major social media platforms](#). Who will decide what is false and what is true? In the case of vaccines, [there is actually no scientific consensus that they are safe](#)—only a state-media consensus, emanating from groups like the CDC, which act as sales agents for Big Pharma. A terrible

precedent is being set, and both unfettered scientific inquiry and free speech are suffering greatly. Today it is vaccines and “conspiracy theories” that are being banned and labeled [“dangerous” by the FBI](#). What will we be prevented, scared, or shamed away from discussing tomorrow?

President Kennedy said: “a nation that is afraid to let its people judge the truth and falsehood in an open market is a nation that is afraid of its people.” Perhaps we should take a closer look at ideas that so frighten the powers-that-be. Far from inviting our ridicule, the people who insist that we look in these forbidden places may one day deserve our thanks.

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*This article was originally published on [OffGuardian](#).*

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