

The Conspiracy Label as a Tool of Propaganda

Part I: Origins and Organizations Behind the Conspiracy Label

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Introduction

On the afternoon of March 9th, 2022, the current White House Press Secretary, Jen Psaki, used the United States government official Twitter account, @PressSec, to make the following claims (among several others):

“We took note of Russia’s false claims about alleged U.S. biological weapons labs and chemical weapons development in Ukraine. We’ve also seen Chinese officials echo these [conspiracy theories](#).”

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— Karine Jean-Pierre (@PressSec) [March 9, 2022](#)

“This is preposterous. It’s the kind of [disinformation operation](#) we’ve seen repeatedly from the Russians over the years in Ukraine and in other countries, which have been debunked, and an example of the types of false pretexts we have been warning the Russians would invent.”

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When it comes to allegations of preposterous conspiracy theories and disinformation about false flag operations involving chemical weapons, the privileges afforded to Ms. Psaki allow her to avoid being accused of spreading propaganda and conspiracy theories, roughly synonymous with false claims.

For example, many people questioned the veracity of reports that Assad had used chemical weapons on his own citizens, but these claims were allegedly [debunked by fact-checkers](#) as characteristic of far-right conspiracy theories.

For making such claims, the *Huffpost*, acting as fact-checker, labeled Piers Robinson, Professor of Journalism at the University of Sheffield, and other academics involved with The Working Group on Syria, Propaganda and Media ([WGSPM](#)), a “[useful idiot](#)” and “[pro-Russian propagandist](#)” along with calling for his dismissal from his teaching post for being a “[9/11 Truther](#).” I doubt the table that turned on Piers Robinson will turn, also, on Jen Psaki.

I have not studied in depth the empirical claims about Assad’s alleged chemical weapons attacks, nor am I currently learned on empirical claims about biological or chemical weapons labs in Ukraine – though recently, a sitting Republican U.S. Senator accused a former Democratic U.S. Representative of being “[a treasonous liar](#)” for asserting that U.S.-based bio labs in Ukraine were under threat by the invading Russian military forces.

This is a remarkable tacit admission oddly made public. What I *have* studied is the nature of [claims-making](#) and how empirical claims operate in terms of conspiracy discourse. This is the first in a series of essays on the topic of conspiracy discourse. Rather than elaborating on what I personally or professionally believe to be evidence of criminal conspiracies, I am interested in discussing the nature of how people talk about conspiracies. In order to better understand how and why some claims of concerted and surreptitious wrongdoing are taken

seriously (i.e. as credible) while others are not (i.e. as incredible), I have attended to labels *designed* to tarnish an individual's ethos should they make such claims.

Supporting [existing empirical research](#), what I have found is that the labels “conspiracy theorist” and “conspiracy theory” act as a tool of propaganda for those who attempt to defend official, authorized accounts of historically significant events from socially disturbing questions.

Those proffering and defending official, authorized accounts can use the same rhetoric as skeptics, yet only (or more often than not) the skeptics are scoffed at and scorned, sometimes with serious consequences. Take for instance James Tracey, a former communications professor [who has noted](#) that while credible allegations of “false flag” events have been quite common in non-U.S. news media, often times referring to them as legitimate tactics and strategies used in warfare, the use of “false flag” in U.S. news media associates the term with hoaxes related to conspiracy theories and propaganda. Now, take into consideration James Tracey's [public Wikipedia entry](#), which begins with the claims that he “is an American [conspiracy theorist](#) and former professor who has espoused the view that some American [mass shootings](#) did not occur, but are hoaxes.”

Compare this to the official statements issued by the current White House press secretary, and consider why it is that one person is labeled a “conspiracy theorist” and the other is not (nor likely will be). After all, it is now [considered to be the case](#) that Jen Psaki [spread misinformation](#) about the nature of Hunter Biden's [infamous laptop](#). Again, I cannot say what the truth of the situation is.

My interest in the nature of conspiracy discourse developed while I was taking a course on Social Movements during my final Ph.D. seminar at Oklahoma State University in the spring of 2012. My term paper, “‘[9/11 Was an Inside Job](#)’? Discursive Opportunities and Obstructions for the 9/11 Truth Movement,” developed into my 2014 doctoral dissertation, “[Discourse Among the Truthers and Deniers of 9/11](#): Movement-Counter-movement Dynamics and the Discursive Field of the 9/11 Truth Movement.”

Since 2011, I have conducted dozens upon dozens of face-to-face interviews with street activists when they gather for their annual demonstrations at “ground zero” during the memorial events for “9/11.” I have also spent countless hours conducting an online ethnography via Facebook, and I have spoken with hundreds of individuals about their concept of “9/11.” If you care to read my doctoral work, you will see that I discuss the difference between discursive devices such as “9/11,” which I often place within quotation marks, as compared to references to actual historical events, such as those of September 11, 2001.

Lastly, in that work, I devoted an entire chapter to discussing what the counter-movement of anti-conspiracists asserts is one among many hallmarks of conspiracy theorists, the tactic of “[just asking questions](#).” Are we not allowed to ask questions, lest we be labeled a “conspiracy theorist?” Are there certain types of questions we are and are not allowed to ask, and who decides what are considered conspiracy theories and thereby who are the conspiracy theorists?

In this first installment, I discuss some of the discourse surrounding the alleged origins of the terms “conspiracy theorist” and “conspiracy theory,” which I refer to as the conspiracy label.

No, the CIA did not invent the conspiracy label, but the agency might have helped promote and popularize it as a pejorative. Whether or not operatives did is a matter of an empirical investigation into the rise of the label's use. The fact of the matter is that there exists a network of functioning and well-funded organizations in operation today that carry out the mission of de-legitimizing what are regarded as "conspiracy theories."

Origins of the Conspiracy Label

If you say, "The CIA invented the term 'conspiracy theorist'," you open yourself to being labeled a conspiracy theorist.

Like many aspects of conspiracy discourse, the expression itself immediately smacks of some type of logical fallacy, in this case, [circular reasoning](#). If we were to say that a conspiracy theorist is a person who espouses conspiracy theories, we would need to take the next step, identifying what a conspiracy theory is and is not. In this case, simply alleging that the Central Intelligence Agency invented a disparaging label designed to dissuade people from making such claims is reasoning enough for many people to use the conspiracy label. Many online fact-checkers can be located in a search for "[CIA invented conspiracy theorist](#)" that illustrate my point, which is that it is not at all clear what exactly is meant by "conspiracy theorist" because it is not at all clear what is meant by "conspiracy theory." These are crucial facts that many people, especially those who reflexively follow and obey power, tend to miss. To complicate matters further, it is not clear what the truth of the situation is, which is the entirety of the problem called into question when conspiracy theories are raised. Dismissing them on their face would again be circular reasoning, i.e. "you're wrong because you're wrong." So, we need to investigate the matter.

One fact-checking site that has investigated the matter is [AAP FactCheck](#), which "is accredited by the Poynter Institute's International Fact Checking Network and adheres to its rigorous protocols," and bills itself as "Trusted Accurate Impartial" [*sic*]. The purported impartiality of AAP FactCheck comes into question with the derogatory title of their fact-checking piece, "[Tinfoil hats not needed](#) to repel CIA 'conspiracy theorist' creation claim [*sic*]." Whether or not the "tinfoil" hat reference is derogatory depends on who takes offense, and [at least some people](#) do consider it an insult. Here is the AAP FactCheck analysis of the CIA-conspiracy label connection:

"[Adjunct Professor Stephen Andrews](#) from the History Department at Indiana University Bloomington, told AAP FactCheck: 'There is overwhelming evidence the term 'conspiracy theory' was used long before the creation of the CIA in the 1940s.'"

"While the CIA was ^{**}[established in 1947]([https://www.cia.gov/legacy/cia-history/#::~text=The National Security Act of, disseminating intelligence affecting national security.](https://www.cia.gov/legacy/cia-history/#::~text=The%20National%20Security%20Act%20of%20disseminating%20intelligence%20affecting%20national%20security.))^{**}, an online search of the [Library of Congress](#) for the phrase 'conspiracy theory' in newspapers prior to that year returns [294 results](#), with the earliest dated [April 9, 1868](#)." [*sic*]

So, case closed, right? If the phrase "conspiracy theory" was used before the CIA was created, then the CIA could not have created the phrase. Notice here, though, that the title of the piece uses the phrase "conspiracy theorist" whereas the passages use "conspiracy theory." Does the difference matter? Maybe, but let's not split hairs (yet). I would rather quibble over the terms "invented" and "created." Many results, for example, in a search for

“CIA invented conspiracy theorist” claim that the CIA [helped to popularize](#) the phrase rather than claiming they had invented or created it. The distinctions are noteworthy.

One time while teaching Introductory Sociology, I was lecturing about myth-making processes, and I used the examples from the discourse surrounding [flat Earth myths](#) and [the myth that Coca Cola](#) (and Norman Rockwell) had created the modern depictions of [Santa Claus](#). The notion that “At one point, everyone thought the Earth was flat,” as stated in an advertisement for [Windows Vista](#), is itself a myth.

In the ad is pictured a Christopher Columbus-era sailing vessel, indicating the reference is to some storybook version of Columbus convincing kings and queens that he would not sail off the edge of the Earth if he ventured West.

Aside from the thousands of years of history of studying the shape of the Earth that even [a child could understand](#), which is often simplified as just being round, ask yourself how on Earth could everybody everywhere hold the same exact belief about the Earth’s shape before there existed anything resembling a global information network? (Even with the Internet, there remains an [annoying subculture](#) of misinformed – or misguided – people keeping the myth of the [flat Earth](#) alive.)

So, people who believe that what the ad says is true are themselves succumbing to a myth about people believing in that myth – this *is not* circular reasoning, yet it is *reifying*, a concept I will pick up in a follow-up essay. But, did Coca Cola invent Santa?

After that particular lesson, I recall that I had a student approach me and adamantly assert that “Coca Cola *did not* invent Santa Claus.” “No,” I said, “and I didn’t say they did. I said they helped to *popularize* the modern image of Santa Claus. Big difference.” (One wonders if that young person still believed in the [Santa Claus conspiracy](#), but more on that in the next essay.)

Now, take for instance the description of [a YouTube video](#) that currently has 945,000+ views on a channel, *Vice*, that has 15.4 million subscribers: “For as long as they’ve existed, conspiracy theories have been laughed off by the mainstream for being too ‘far-fetched’.” What does this even mean? How could this be?

Does *all* of the so-called “mainstream” (whatever that means) share the same opinions and background assumptions? How and why could that be? What social institutions and organizations could produce such an outcome, or is it a spontaneous coincidence that multitudes would share the same attitudes and, thus, form an emergent norm from the ground up?

And, for how long have conspiracy theories existed? Were the Founding Fathers of the USA [conspiracy theorists](#) when they wrote and signed the Declaration of Independence? As an example of what can be laughed off by the mainstream, the author of a [webpage titled](#), “In 1967, the CIA Created the Label ‘Conspiracy Theorists’,” makes the following claims (complete with the same image included in the blog post):

“The [Magna Carta, the Constitution and Declaration of Independence](#) and other founding Western documents were based on conspiracy theories. [Greek democracy and free market capitalism](#) were also based on conspiracy theories.

But those were the bad old days ...Things have now changed.

The CIA Coined the Term Conspiracy Theorist in 1967

That all changed in the 1960s.

Specifically, in April 1967, the CIA [wrote](#) a dispatch which coined the term ‘conspiracy theories’ ... and recommended methods for discrediting such theories. The dispatch was marked ‘psych’ – short for ‘psychological operations’ or disinformation – and ‘CS’ for the CIA’s ‘Clandestine Services’ unit.” [sic]

It is somewhat true to say “the CIA wrote [the] dispatch,” though an organization cannot do such a thing, only individuals operating within organizations can perform such actions as authoring memorandums. It is false to say the CIA or individuals operating within “coined the term ‘conspiracy theories’.”

After all, the term existed before the CIA was created, right? In any case, “the mainstream” can reflexively laugh off the notion that an organization, [like the CIA](#) – or rogue agents within, plotted to weaponize the conspiracy label to function as a tool of propaganda and cultural hegemony.

I am typically careful to even say that the CIA *helped popularize* the conspiracy label. After all, it could easily be misinterpreted as me claiming the CIA created, coined, or invented the term. One person who takes the distinction, as well as conspiracy theories, seriously is Michael Butter, author of [numerous scholarly texts](#) on conspiracy theories as well as a [blog post titled](#), “There’s a conspiracy theory that the CIA invented the term ‘conspiracy theory’ – here’s why.” If you are the nitpicking type, compare this passage with that from AAP FactCheckers above:

“There are even [two versions](#) of this conspiracy theory. The more extreme version claims that the CIA literally invented the term in the sense that the words ‘conspiracy’ and ‘theory’ had never been used before in combination. A more moderate version acknowledges that the term existed before, but claims that the CIA intentionally created its negative connotations and so turned the label into a tool of political propaganda.”

“The more moderate version has been particularly popular in recent years for two reasons. First, it is very easy to disprove the more extreme claim that the CIA actually invented the term. As a search [on Google Books](#) quickly reveals, the term ‘conspiracy theory’ emerged around 1870 and began to be more frequently used during the 1950s. Even die-hard conspiracy theorists have a hard time trying to ignore this. Second, the more moderate version received a big boost in popularity a few years ago when American political scientist Lance DeHaven-Smith propagated it in [a book published](#) by a renowned university press.”

[According to the publisher](#) of Lance deHaven-Smith’s book, *Conspiracy Theory in America* (pictured above), it “raises crucial questions about the consequences of Americans’ unwillingness to suspect high government officials of criminal wrongdoing.” And, as noted above, for raising such questions, deHaven-Smith opens himself to the conspiracy label, i.e. being labeled a “conspiracy theorist.”

I will return to deHaven-Smith’s book in a follow-up essay, but here is how one self-styled conspiracy theory debunker, journalist David Aaronovitch, [**states the matter**](#) about raising socially disturbing questions about historically significant events, i.e. posing

“conspiracy theories”:

“Since 2001, a primary technique employed by more respectable conspiracists has been the advocacy of the ‘It’s not a theory’ theory. The theorist is just asking certain disturbing questions because of a desire to seek out truth, and the reader is supposedly left to make up his or her mind. The questions asked, of course, only make sense if the questioner really believes that there is indeed a secret conspiracy.”

Presumably, I and any other credentialed scholar would be considered “respectable conspiracists” if we raise socially disturbing questions about the official accounts of historically significant events. One might wonder if we indeed *must* believe in a *secret* conspiracy, for if a conspiracy weren’t a secret, would it be a conspiracy? Moreover, what does it mean to say that the questions “only make sense if the questioner really believes...?” Am I not allowed to ask such questions as to why it is, for example, that a third skyscraper collapsed in Manhattan on the afternoon of September 11, 2001, without automatically being thought of as a conspiracy theorist, respectable or not? Doubt has been cast on the official explanation of that particular aspect of “9/11” in full-length [book form](#) as well as part of [a major university study](#). Why can I not ask questions about why and how that particular event occurred and why the official explanation of it seems to be so severely undermined by competing narratives without retribution by those who would wield the conspiracy label? Who gets to decide what questions are permissible and what gives them such power and authority to decide?

Organizations Behind the Conspiracy Label

So, did the CIA help to popularize the conspiracy label? Who knows? If you [ask Snopes](#), which bills itself as “the internet’s go-to source for discerning what is true and what is total nonsense,” they refer you back to [Michael Butter’s essay](#), which is published by [The Conversation](#): **

“The Conversation is a nonprofit, independent news organization dedicated to unlocking the knowledge of experts for the public good. We publish trustworthy and informative articles written by academic experts for the general public...”

The publishers, editors, and contributors of the publication in which this essay appears might say much of the same thing, but since we, for various reasons and capacities, open ourselves to be targets of the conspiracy label, the veracity of our claims can more easily be called into question and by those very same sources allegedly debunking claims about the CIA’s role in promoting the conspiracy label. Why is this the case? Is it just coincidence that the very label used to discredit those who question its origins and uses *is* in fact a label that serves by its use the interests of powerful, secretive, legitimating institutions and interest groups otherwise entrenched in maintaining the status quo?

In line with this question, [James Rankin](#) authored [his doctoral study](#) in pursuit of the origins of the conspiracy label’s pejorative connotations, thus acting as a hegemonic tool of cultural control. He identified three root sources, [Karl Popper’s 1945 book](#), *Open Society and Its Enemies*, [Richard Hofstadter’s 1964 essay](#), “The Paranoid Style in American Politics,” and a CIA memo from 1967, [Dispatch 1035-960](#), “Countering Criticism of the Warren Report.”

Popper argued that while conspiracies do sometimes happen, they are not typically carried successfully to fruition, which is an argument [Michael Shermer uses](#) to surmise why

conspiracy theories are dismissable *prima facie*. One [criticism of Popper](#) contends with the fact that conspiracies abound throughout history, and while any given conspiracy theory *can be* wrong, dismissing a conspiracy theory offhand because it is a proposition that a conspiracy has occurred is illogical and disingenuous with respect to scientific practice.

Hofstadter's essay is a mixture of selective attention to some alleged conspiracies throughout history, such as those about Freemasons and the Illuminati, and armchair psychological theories about how and why the "paranoid style" of "contemporary right-wing thought" led people to believe communists had infiltrated key social institutions in the 1940s and '50s. Hofstadter's essay continues to be influential among academicians who study conspiracy theorists.

As recently as 2021, [a group of academics](#) used his essay as the basis for their hypotheses, which they used to reach the conclusion that "paranoid ideation" and "distrust of officialdom" couple with conservatism to facilitate the "conspiratorial mindset." (Never mind that their results explain only half of the variance.) As noted in [a philosopher's article](#) published by *The Conversation*, consider that the conspiracy label's discursive function is:

"similar to that served by the term "heresy" in medieval Europe. In both cases these are terms of propaganda, used to stigmatise and marginalise people who have beliefs that conflict with officially sanctioned or orthodox beliefs of the time and place in question."

"If, as I believe, the treatment of those labelled as "conspiracy theorists" in our culture is analogous to the treatment of those labelled as "heretics" in medieval Europe, then the role of psychologists and social scientists in this treatment is analogous to that of the Inquisition." [sic]

But was the term originally meant to be pejorative?

"Of course the term is pejorative," notes Hofstadter at the outset of his 1964 essay, a reference to the "paranoid style" of conspiratorial thinking. As evidenced in [a scholarly source](#) from 2007 and [a book](#) published in the popular press in 2018, the use of the conspiracy label, both in the form of "conspiracy theorist" and "conspiracy theory," increased in usage in newspapers, books, and academic articles starting in the mid-1960s.

Now, was this in any way connected to the CIA memo, Dispatch 1035-960? How can one say for sure? If the CIA did not meet its goal of providing "material for countering and discrediting the claims of the conspiracy theorists, so as to inhibit the circulation of such claims in other countries," a clause included in self-recognition that the CIA was authorized to operate only outside of the USA, then we might suspect their general efficacy.

As Rankin pointed out in his doctoral thesis, one popular rebuttal to claims about large-scale conspiracies involving government is that it is too large of a bureaucracy to be able to carry out such conspiracies as the JFK assassination or events of September 11, 2001. This squares with Popper's and Shermer's reasoning, which is that most conspiracies fail. So, did the CIA fail in its mission to "employ propaganda assets to answer and refute the attacks of the critics [of the Warren Commission report]?" We cannot say for certain, and the reason is twofold.

First, if we implicate the CIA in a secretive mission to undermine the work of [citizen](#)

[sleuths](#) in investigating historically significant events in ways not sanctioned by officialdom, then we automatically run the risk of being targeted with the conspiracy label. Once issued, its target is immediately suspect of harboring a “paranoid style” of thought that need not be taken seriously (and that might even be harmful). Why run the risk? There exists no scientific study that tracks the rise of counteracting narratives to “JFK conspiracy theories” from the late ’60s on. I suspect that even if that were to happen, the study would be ignored or treated as an outgrowth of the “paranoid style.” Second, consider that there are today several large-scale efforts to combat the rise of conspiracy theories and other types of mis-, dis-, and malinformation, or what the Cybersecurity & Infrastructure Security Agency ([CISA](#)) simply refers to as MDM. CISA and its MDM team help disseminate propaganda and counter-propaganda in the form of Toolkits, such as is revealed in the following statement:

“These Toolkit resources are designed to help State, local, tribal and territorial (SLTT) officials bring awareness to misinformation, disinformation, and conspiracy theories appearing online related to COVID-19’s origin, scale, government response, prevention and treatment. Each product was designed to be tailored with local government websites and logos.”

Several organizations align with the organizational goals of CISA as related to its anti-MDM efforts. The [Alliance for Science](#), for instance, covers several conspiracy theories about COVID-19, noting that the “virus escaped from a Chinese lab” claim “has the benefit of at least being plausible.” As reported [by the BBC](#), “the controversial claim that the pandemic might have leaked from a Chinese laboratory – once dismissed by many as a fringe conspiracy theory – has been gaining traction.” [The New York Post](#) has documented the history of censoring the [hotly contested](#) “lab leak theory” by powerful and influential people and organizations, noting that the director of the “National Institutes of Health, immediately decreed this view to be a conspiracy theory that will do ‘great potential harm to science and international harmony’.”

The Alliance for Science is active in the fight against MDM. At the end of its page on COVID-19 conspiracy theories is this passage:

“How to recognize and debunk conspiracy theories

It is important to speak out and combat online misinformation and conspiracist narratives, whether on COVID or climate change or anything else. [This handbook](#) (PDF) by John Cook and Stephan Lewandowsky, both of whom have extensive experience in combating climate denialism, is an essential tool.

Note: As in previous coverage, it is our policy to avoid linking directly to websites and social media feeds that promote misinformation and conspiracy theories, so as not to drive traffic to them and give them higher visibility.”

Understandably, rather than sending readers to the sources of the conspiracy theories they address, they want you to refer to their own sources, such as [The Conspiracy Theory Handbook](#). That handbook is similar in structure to the Toolkits provided by CISA, but it is not of the scholarly caliber of [The Handbook of Conspiracy Theories](#), edited by Michael Butter and Peter Knight – this is the same Michael Butter whom I cited above with reference to the CIA’s role in popularizing the conspiracy label as a pejorative. In the Acknowledgements section, Butter and Knight state the following with regard to the origins of their handbook:

“This project results from the C.O.S.T. Action (European Cooperation in Science and Technology) project C.O.M.P.A.C.T. (Comparative Analysis of Conspiracy Theories), whose generous funding enabled us to establish a network of scholars in Europe and beyond working on this interdisciplinary topic (www.conspiracytheories.eu).”

Following their link, you can find COMPACT’s [Guide to Conspiracy Theories](#), which has two main sections, “Understanding Conspiracy Theories” and “Recommendations for Dealing with Conspiracy Theories.” Mind you, they do not suggest engaging in an honest investigation into the empirical claims of “conspiracy theorists.” Rather, they suggest techniques for rebutting conspiracy theories in ways intended to set conspiracy theorists on course to conventional, mainstream ways of understanding the world. Regardless of whether or not the CIA helped popularize the conspiracy label as a pejorative to be used to de-legitimate those who pose socially disturbing questions about historically significant events, there exists a consortium of groups and organizations in mutual support of that cause.

Conclusion

One might wonder if any of the anti-conspiracist toolkits, handbooks, or guides will be applied to those in power and positions of authority. After all, Press Secretary Jen Psaki has alleged that other countries will use “[false flag](#)” operations – this term is [a keyword](#) cited as a sign of a conspiracy theory; she denied conjectures of compromised political officials as being merely “[**Russian disinformation,**](#)” postulations [now considered factual](#); and has recently claimed that the Russians “[hacked our election](#)” in 2016, a statement that might easily be interpreted as a conspiracy theory [by any number of academics](#) who study the topic. [Existing research](#) suggests that Psaki will get a pass while those of us who dare to raise disturbing questions contrary to officialdom will face the [inquisition](#).

When the Bush W. administration’s framing of the events of September 11, 2001 took root in corporate media explanations of the event, it became a Sisyphean task to try and offer counter-explanations or even pose questions to the officialdom of “9/11.” The official accounts were [activated by a cascade](#) of voices echoing through a network of organizations and institutions with interests in amplifying the drumbeats that marched the U.S. and allied military forces to wars extending throughout the Middle East and through the succeeding Obama administration. Now that the drum beats seem to be signaling a change in the venue of the war theater, and considering [corporate media is acting as](#) the DOD’s megaphone, what will happen to those voices raising socially disturbing questions directed toward the current administration?

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