

# Media Disinformation and the Conspiracy Panic Phenomenon

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*To posit that one's government may be partially composed of unaccountable criminal elements is cause for serious censure in polite circles. Labeled "conspiracy theories" by a corporate media that prompt and channel emotionally-laden mass consent, such perspectives are quickly dispatched to the memory hole lest they prompt meaningful discussion of the political prerogatives and designs held by a global power elite coordinating governments and broader geopolitical configurations.*

Cultural historian Jack Bratich terms such phenomena "conspiracy panics." Potentially fostered by the coordinated actions of government officials or agencies and major news organs to generate public suspicion and uncertainty, a conspiracy panic is a demonstrable immediate or long-term reactive thrust against rational queries toward unusual and poorly understood events. To be sure, they are also intertwined with how the given society acknowledges and preserves its own identity—through "the management and expulsion of deviance." [1]

In the American mass mind, government intelligence and military operations are largely seen as being directed almost solely toward manipulation or coercion of unfortunate souls in foreign lands. To suggest otherwise, as independent researchers and commentators have done with the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, the CIA-Contra-crack cocaine connection, and 9/11, has been cause for sustained conspiracy panics that act to suppress inquiry into such events by professional and credentialed opinion leaders, particularly journalists and academics.

At the same time a conspiracy panic serves a subtle yet important doctrinal function of manifesting and reproducing the apt ideational status quo of the post-Cold War, "War on Terror" era. "The scapegoating of conspiracy theories provides the conditions for social integration and political rationality," Bratich observes. "Conspiracy panics help to define the normal modes of dissent. Politically it is predicated on a consensus of 'us' over against a subversive and threatening 'them.'" [2] These days especially the suggestion that an official narrative may be amiss almost invariably puts one in the enemy camp.

## Popular Credence in Government Conspiracy Narratives

The time for a conspiracy panic to develop has decreased commensurately with the heightened spread and availability of information and communication technology that allows for the dissemination of news and research formerly suppressed by the perpetual data overload of corporate media. Before the wide access to information technology and the internet, independent investigations into events including the JFK assassination took place over the course of many years, materializing in book-length treatments that could be

dismissed by intelligence assets in news media and academe as the collective activity of “conspiracy buffs”—amateurish researchers who lack a government or privately-funded sinecure to overlook or obscure inquiry into deep events.

Not until Oliver Stone’s 1991 blockbuster film *JFK*, essentially an adoption of works by author Jim Marrs, Colonel L. Fletcher Prouty, and New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison, did a substantial conspiracy panic take shape as a response to such analysis thrust upon the public in popular narrative form. This panic arose from and centered around Hollywood’s apt challenge to traditional journalism’s turf alongside commercial news outlets’ typically deceptive interpretation of the event and almost wholly uncritical treatment of the Warren Commission Report.

Shortly thereafter investigative journalist Gary Webb’s “Dark Alliance” series for the *San Jose Mercury News* demonstrated the internet’s capacity to explain and document a government conspiracy. With Webb’s painstaking examination of the CIA’s role in the illicit drug trade hyperlinked to a bevy of documentation and freely distributed online, the professional journalistic community and its intelligence penumbra fell silent for months.

In the interim the story picked up steam in the non-traditional outlets of talk radio and tabloid television, with African Americans especially intrigued by the potential government role in the crack cocaine epidemic. Then suddenly major news outlets spewed forth a vitriolic attack on Webb and the *Mercury News* that amazingly resulted in the *Mercury’s* retraction of the story and Webb’s eventual departure from the paper and probable murder by the US government.[3]

Criticism of Webb’s work predictably focused on petty misgivings toward his alleged poor judgment—specifically his intimation that the CIA intentionally caused the crack epidemic in African American communities, an observation that many blacks found logical and compelling. So not only did Webb find himself at the center of a conspiracy panic because of his assessment of the CIA’s role in the drug trade; he was also causing mass “paranoia” within African American communities allegedly predisposed toward such thinking.

Since the mid-1990s conspiracy panics have increasingly revolved around an effort by mainstream news media to link unorthodox political ideas and inquiry with violent acts. This dynamic was crystallized in Timothy McVeigh, the principal suspect in the April 19, 1995 Oklahoma City Murrah Federal Building bombing, who through the propaganda-like efforts of government and major news media was constructed to symbolize the dangers of “extremist” conspiratorial thought (his purported fascination with white supremacism and *The Turner Diaries*) and violent terrorist action (the bombing itself). Conveniently overlooked is the fact that McVeigh was trained as a black ops technician and still in US Army employ at the time of his 2001 execution.[4]

Through a broad array of media coverage and subsequent book-length treatments by the left intelligentsia on the “radical right,” the alleged lone wolf McVeigh and the Oklahoma City bombing became forever coupled in the national memory. The image and event seemingly attested to how certain modes of thought can bring about violence—even though McVeigh’s role in what took place on April 19 was without question one part of an intricate web painstakingly examined by the Oklahoma Bombing Investigation Committee [5] and in the 2011 documentary *A Noble Lie: Oklahoma City 1995*.

The Quickening Pace of Conspiracy Panics

Independent researchers and alternative media utilizing the internet have necessitated the rapid deployment of conspiracy panic-like reactions that appear far less natural and spontaneous to neutralize inquiry and bolster the official narratives of momentous and unusual events. For example, wide-scale skepticism surrounding the May 1, 2011 assault on Osama bin Laden's alleged lair in Pakistan was met with efforts to cultivate a conspiracy panic evident in editorials appearing across mainstream print, broadcast, and online news platforms. The untenable event supported only by President Obama's pronouncement of the operation was unquestioningly accepted by corporate media that shouted down calls for further evidence and alternative explanations of bin Laden's demise as "conspiracy theories."

Indeed, a LexisNexis search for "bin Laden" and "conspiracy theories" yields over five hundred such stories and opinion pieces appearing across Western print and broadcast media outlets for the week of May 2, 2011.[6]

"While much of America celebrated the dramatic killing of Osama bin Laden," the Washington Post opined, "the Sept. 11 conspiracy theorists still had questions. For them and a growing number of skeptics, the plot only thickened." [7]

Along these lines retired General Mark Kimmitt remarked on CNN, "Well, I'm sure the conspiracy theorists will have a field day with this, about why it was done? Was it done? Is he still alive?" [8]

"The conspiracy theorists are not going to be satisfied," Glenn Beck asserted. "Next thing you know, Trump is going to ask for the death certificate, and is it the real death certificate? And then all hell breaks loose." [9]

Like 9/11 or the Gulf of Tonkin, the narrative has since become a part of official history, disingenuously repeated in subsequent news accounts and elementary school history books—a history handed down from on high and accepted by compromised, unintelligent, or simply lazy journalists perpetuating nightmare fictions to a poorly informed and intellectually idle public.

This psycho-symbolic template is simultaneously evident in the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting and Boston Marathon bombing (BMB) events and their aftermaths. Indeed, the brief yet intense Sandy Hook conspiracy panic, and to a lesser degree that of the BMB, revolved at least partially around the "conspiracy theory professor," who, as a credentialed member of the intellectual class, overstepped his bounds by suggesting how there are many unanswered questions related to the tragedies that might lead one to conclude—as social theorist Jean Baudrillard observed concerning the 1991 Gulf War—that the events did not take place, at least in the way official pronouncements and major media have represented them. It is perhaps telling that critical assessments of domestic events and their relatedness to a corrupt media and governing apparatus are so vigorously assailed.

Yet to suggest that the news and information Americans accept as sound and factual on a routine basis is in fact a central means for manipulating their worldviews is not a matter for debate. Rather, it is an empirically verifiable assertion substantiated in a century of public relations and psychological warfare research and practice. Such propaganda efforts once

reserved for foreign locales are now freely practiced in the US to keep the population increasingly on edge.

Still, a significant portion of the population cannot believe their government would lie to or mislead them, especially about a traumatic and emotional event involving young children or running enthusiasts. To suggest this to be the case is not unlike informing a devoted sports fan that her team lost a decisive game after she's been convinced of an overwhelming win. Such an allegation goes against not only what they often unconsciously accept to be true, but also challenges their substantial emotional investment in the given mediated event.

In a revealing yet characteristic move the reaction by corporate media outlets such as the *New York Times*, FoxNews, CNN, and in the case of the BMB the *New York Times*-owned *Boston Globe*, has been not to revisit and critique their own slipshod coverage of the Newtown massacre or BMB that often bordered on blatant disinformation, but rather to divert attention from any responsible self-evaluation by vilifying the messenger in what have been acute conspiracy panics of unusual proportion.

As a disciplinary mechanism against unsettling observations and questions directed toward political leaders and the status quo, conspiracy panics serve to reinforce ideas and thought processes sustained by the fleeting yet pervasive stimuli of infotainment, government pronouncements, and, yes, the staged events that have been part and parcel of US news media and government collaboration dating at least to the Spanish-American war. Despite (or perhaps because of) the immense technological sophistication at the dawn of the twenty-first century a majority of the population remains bound and shackled in the bowels of the cave, forever doomed to watch the shadows projected before them.

#### Notes

[1] Jack Z. Bratich, *Conspiracy Panics: Political Rationality and Popular Culture*, Albany NY: State University of New York Press, 2008.

[2] Bratich, *Conspiracy Panics*, 11.

[3] Alex Jones and Paul Joseph Watson, "[Evidence Begins to Indicate Gary Webb Was Murdered](#)," prisonplanet.com, December 15, 2004; Charlene Fassa, "[Gary Webb: More Pieces in the Suicided Puzzle, Pt. 1](#)," Rense.com, December 11, 2005.

[4] Death Certificate of Timothy James McVeigh, June 11, 2001, <http://www.autopsyfiles.org/reports/deathcert/mcveigh,%20timothy.pdf>

[5] Oklahoma Bombing Investigation Committee, *Final Report on the Bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building, April 19, 1995*, 2001. See also [Oklahoma City: What Really Happened?](#) Chuck Allen, dir., 1995.

[6] See James F. Tracy, "[State Propaganda, Historical Revisionism, and Perpetuation of the 911 Myth](#)," memoryholeblog.com and GlobalResearch.ca, May 6, 2012.

[7] Emily Wax, "[Report of bin Laden's Death Spurs Questions From Conspiracy Theorists](#)," *Washington Post*, May 2, 2011.

[8] Gen. Mark Kimmitt on CNN Breaking News, "Osama bin Laden is Dead," CNN, May 2, 2011.

[9] Glenn Beck, "Beck for May 2, 2011," Fox News Network, May 2, 2011.

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### About the author:

James F. Tracy was a tenured Associate Professor of Journalism and Media Studies at Florida Atlantic University from 2002 to 2016. He was fired by FAU ostensibly for violating the university's policies imposed on the free speech rights of faculty. Tracy has filed a federal civil rights lawsuit against the university, with trial set to begin November 27, 2017. Tracy received his PhD from University of Iowa. His work on media history, politics and culture has appeared in a wide variety of academic journals, edited volumes, and alternative news and opinion outlets. Additional information is available at MemoryHoleBlog.com, TracyLegalDefense.org, and [jamesftracy.wordpress.com](https://jamesftracy.wordpress.com).

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