

The “Conspiracy Theory” Label: Powerful Tool of Media Disinformation and Political Discourse

Cognitive Infiltration for the Masses

By [James F. Tracy](#)

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On March 18, 2014 Cass Sunstein released his latest collection of essays, [Conspiracy Theories and Other Dangerous Ideas](#).^[1] Like his other works geared toward a mainstream readership, the prominent Harvard law professor, former Obama administration regulatory czar, and NSA advisor ^[2] points to numerous alleged dangers posed by even “rational people” who are susceptible to adopting “crippled epistemologies.” What Sunstein fails to explain throughout his most recent medley of gentle authoritarianism is how the “conspiracy theory” term has received vigorous promotion from the editorial practices of certain major corporate news media.

“Conspiracy theory” is not merely a flippant or off-handed water cooler term, but rather a powerful tool of political discourse. “Deployed as a pejorative putdown,” political scientist Lance deHaven-Smith observes,

the label is a verbal defense mechanism used by political elites to suppress mass suspicions that inevitably arise when shocking political crimes benefit top leaders or play into their agendas, especially when those same officials are in control of agencies responsible for preventing events in question or for investigating them after they have occurred.^[3]

Along these lines, “conspiracy theory” and its common variants, “assassination buff,” “crackpot,” “wacko,” and so on, were essentially interpolated into news reports and commentary in the late 1960s by CIA media assets as the agency maneuvered to bolster the Warren Commission’s “lone assassin” explanation of John F. Kennedy’s assassination.

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When confronted in 2012, Sunstein does not “remember very well” co-authoring a 2008 paper, [“Conspiracy Theories,”](#) the namesake of his most recent book.

Only in the past forty years or so has the label become an especially salient discursive technique for channeling political dialogue and inquiry. From the late 1800s through the first half of the 1900s the phrase can seldom be found in news discourse. A search of the *Historical New York Times* database finds that “conspiracy theory” is used 30 times between 1870 and 1960, often in accounts of criminal court proceedings. Yet from 1960 to 1969 alone there are 46 instances of the term’s usage in *Times* articles. Since 1970, it is invoked in over 1,700 pieces, with a peak between 2000 and 2009 (728).^[4]

Today the pejorative not only acts as a disciplinary measure—journalists and scholars alike fear such a trenchant smear—but also as a technique to shape information and analysis. It serves as a more-than-subtle way of saying, “Look here, not there,” thereby guiding readers and viewers to place their reasoning faculties in abeyance and adopt what are often uncritical and even misleading modes of substantiation and conclusion. While this phenomenon is clearly demonstrable in print news media, it is also widespread in US-based cable and broadcast news.

A LexisNexis search of news program transcripts for the dates March 1, 2011 to March 1, 2014 reveals 2,469 usages of the “conspiracy theory/theories” term. Probing the surveyed time span reveals CNN (586 transcripts) and MSNBC (382) as the foremost purveyors of the phrase, with Fox News (182) a distant third. The US government’s transcript service, US Federal News, comes in at fourth, suggesting persistent strategic usage of the label at federal government press conferences and similar functions to drive home official positions and dispel challenges to them. Programming on National Public Radio ranks fifth, with 115 instances.

The following is a breakdown of the cable or broadcast outlet/program referencing “conspiracy theory” or “conspiracy theories” in transcript text within the aforementioned three-year span.

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| <u>CNN Transcripts</u> | - 586 |
| <u>Global Broadcast Database (local broadcast transcripts)</u> | - 416 |
| <u>MSNBC</u> | - 382 |
| <u>Fox News</u> | - 182 |
| <u>US Federal News</u> | - 144 |
| <u>National Public Radio</u> | - 116 |
| <u>Australian Broadcasting Corporation</u> | - 71 |
| <u>NBC News</u> | - 67 |
| <u>Congressional Quarterly Transcripts</u> | - 57 |
| <u>ABC News</u> | - 55 |
| <u>CTV TV (Canada)</u> | - 55 |
| <u>CBS News</u> | - 54 |
| <u>CNN International</u> | - 48 |
| <u>Imus Simulcast</u> | - 39 |
| <u>Financial Market Regulatory Wire</u> | - 31 |
| <u>PBS News Hour</u> | - 21 |
| <u>Bloomberg: Surveillance Show</u> | - 17 |
| <u>Congressional Quarterly Testimony</u> | - 16 |
| <u>The Charlie Rose Show</u> | - 15 |
| <u>Follow the Money</u> | - 14 |
| <u>Euro News</u> | - 13 |
| <u>Lou Dobbs Tonight</u> | - 12 |
| <u>Cavuto</u> | - 8 |

To be more conclusive, the specific contexts in which the term is mobilized might be more fully examined and delineated. An argument may also be waged that this metric is not exactly proper given the dissimilar breadth of content produced by each outlet. After all, a 24-hour cable news channel such as CNN simply has far more “news hole” to fill than a daily one-hour broadcast like *PBS News Hour* or *Charlie Rose*.



Yet even here the variances are telling. For example, when comparing domestic CNN transcripts to those of the channel's counterpart, CNN International, the former uses the term *over twelve times as frequently*. Such findings suggest the execution of a clear-cut editorial policy to fulfill certain propaganda-related ends—indeed, not unlike the Central Intelligence Agency's usage of the term to combat alternative interpretations of President Kennedy's assassination.

Along these lines, further examination of the data sample distinguishes how even news personalities' bylines are correlated with frequent employment of the "conspiracy theory" label. Searching within the same data set, transcripts with CNN Anderson Cooper's byline possess the highest incidence of the expression (81), with MSNBC's Rachel Maddow and Al Sharpton tied for second place (77), and Piers Morgan (38) ranking third. CNN's Erin Burnett and MSNBC's Chris Hayes tie for fourth. Ostensibly conservative Fox News personalities Bill O'Reilly and Sean Hannity use the expression less frequently.

- Anderson Cooper (CNN) - 81
- Rachel Maddow (MSNBC) - 77
- Al Sharpton (MSNBC) - 77
- Piers Morgan (CNN) - 38
- Erin Burnett (CNN) - 31
- Chris Hayes (MSNBC) - 31
- Sean Hannity (Fox News) - 29
- Bill O'Reilly (Fox News) - 19

 Image: CNN's Anderson Cooper (Wiki Commons)

With the exception of ABC (Australia) and CTV (Canada), all of the outlets are US-based, suggesting how the American population, well known for its limited historical comprehension and political sophistication, is expressly targeted with repeated usage of the "conspiracy theory" phrase. A population relying on sensation, caricature, and hearsay to understand national and world affairs has already forsaken its freedom. It is perhaps ironic that CNN and MSNBC in particular cater to audiences that see themselves as open-minded and "liberal"—indeed, the opposite of cunning technocrats such as Sunstein. At the same time, if these two networks' continually depressed ratings are any indication, the public is becoming more and more skeptical of how it is being patronized.[5]

A most profound political act any individual can undertake may involve adopting a basic regimen of intellectual self-defense that would include an increased awareness of the "conspiracy theory" label itself and a resolve to assess the term's utilization *vis-à-vis* the context in which it is employed, in an effort to better determine what it seeks to obscure, legitimate, and redirect attention to.

Notes

[1] Cass Sunstein, *Conspiracy Theories and Other Dangerous Ideas*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 2014.

[2] "[America's Joseph Goebbels to Serve on NSA Oversight Panel](#)," *Liberty Blitzkrieg*, August 25, 2013.

[3] Lance deHaven-Smith, *Conspiracy Theory in America*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 2013, 9.

[4] See also deHaven-Smith, 126-131.

[5] "[Key Indicators in Media & News](#)," Pew Research Journalism Project, March 26, 2014.

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<https://jamesftracy.wordpress.com/>

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](#).

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