Abilene Christian University

Digital Commons @ ACU

12-2019

Conspiracy Theories and the Quest for Truth

Rachel Runnels
rcr13a@acu.edu

Recommended Citation

ABSTRACT

Conspiracy theories are deeply embedded in American culture, especially in current American society. The popularity of conspiracy theories in general reveals that society is becoming increasingly skeptical of authoritative organizations. Because of "fake news" and the availability of information and connection on the internet, people feel as though they must question everything, even sources they previously viewed as unquestionable authorities.

My analysis looks at how online conspiracy organizations create and defend their arguments in an attempt to understand why conspiracy theories are so persuasive. I analyze the rhetoric of three online conspiracy theory organizations: the Flat Earth Society, the Mutual UFO Network (MUFON), and 911truth.org. I use the theoretical framework of framing to analyze how these organizations prove their own credibility and the credibility of their sources to their readers. I also examine how these conspiracy organizations follow the popular narrative structure of the hero's journey to persuade readers that truth is subjective. My analysis reveals that conspiracy organizations present themselves as credible mentors, providing readers with helpful information and resources to defend against traditional and foundational knowledge.

Conspiracy Theories and the Quest for Truth

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of Communication and Sociology

Abilene Christian University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts
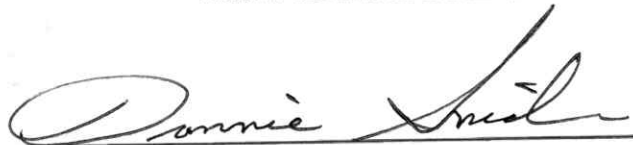
by

Rachel Runnels

December 2019

This thesis, directed and approved by the committee for the thesis candidate Rachel Runnels, has been accepted by the Office of Graduate Programs of Abilene Christian University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

Master of Arts in Communication

(signature)
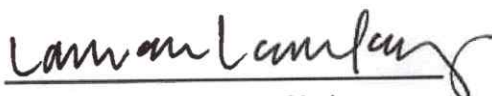
Assistant Provost for Graduate Programs

12-4-19

Date

31 October 2019

Thesis Committee

(signature)

Dr. Lauren Lemley, Chair

(signature)

Dr. Joe Cardot

(signature)

Dr. Cindy Roper

ACKNOWLEGMENTS

I would like to thank my committee for their support and encouragement throughout the duration of planning and writing my thesis. I would especially like to thank my thesis chair, Dr. Lauren Lemley, for the many pep talks and brainstorming sessions over the course of this year. Many thanks also to my family and friends for lifting me up when I needed it and supporting my dream to join multiple conspiracy communities in the name of research.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Aliens are real. The earth is flat. The Bush administration was behind 9/11. All of these statements are popular conspiracy theory ideas. People have been fascinated and intrigued by conspiracy theories for years. While often famous for logical inaccuracies, many conspiracy theories have gained wide public support. But what makes conspiracy theories so persuasive? Is their persuasive power a result of our society's obsession with "fake news?" Or are conspiracy theory arguments actually credible? Conspiracy theories are a powerful part of American culture, and in this digital age, the internet makes it easy to spread conspiracy views online.

Research confirms the power of media exposure in introducing and strengthening conspiracy beliefs. After studying anti-government conspiracy messages, communication scholars Minchul Kim and Xiaoxia Cao found that increased exposure to media (in this case, video messages) "indirectly increased distrust in the government through inducing conspiracy belief."[1] Communication scholars Benjamin Warner and Ryan Neville-Shephard also found that "media echo-chambers can increase belief in conspiracies."[2] The media is a powerful tool. When people are frequently exposed to conspiracy messages, they are more likely to adopt conspiracy worldviews. Therefore, to understand

---

1. Minchul Kim and Xiaoxia Cao, "The Impact of Exposure to Media Messages Promoting Government Conspiracy Theories on Distrust in the Government: Evidence from a Two-Stage Randomized Experiment," *International Journal of Communication* 10 (January 2016): 3820.

2. Benjamin Warner and Ryan Neville-Shepard, "Echoes of a Conspiracy: Birthers, Truthers, and the Cultivation of Extremism," *Communication Quarterly* 62, no. 1 (January 2014): 11.

the persuasive power conspiracy theories hold, it is important for rhetoricians to study how conspiracy theorists present their conspiracy ideas online. My analysis will focus on how three individual conspiracy organizations construct arguments online by examining the language their rhetors use in relation to the idea of truth.

In this chapter, I will define conspiracy theories and explain what existing literature has to say about them. Then I will provide an overview of three online conspiracy theory organizations whose websites will serve as the texts for my analysis. Finally, I will explain the methodology I will use for my analysis to answer my research questions in chapters two and three.

Overview of Conspiracy Theories

Psychologist Sander van der Linden defines a conspiracy theory as "an attempt to explain the ultimate cause of an important societal event as part of some sinister plot conjured up by a secret alliance of powerful individuals and organizations."[3] Although they can seem extreme, conspiracy theories are not only common, but deeply embedded in American culture. Anthropologists Mathijs Pelkmans and Rhys Machold explain that "the general public seems to be particularly enticed or amused by wacky theories, such as the one that barcodes are intended to control people or the one asserting that NASA faked the first moon landings."[4] While American society regards some of these conspiracy theories as silly or extreme, other theories have really gripped the public's attention. In 2009, *TIME Magazine* listed ten of the most popular conspiracy theories among the

---

3. Sander van der Linden, "Moon Landing Faked!!!—Why People Believe in Conspiracy Theories," *Scientific American*, April 30, 2013, https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/moon-landing-faked-why-people-believe-conspiracy-theories/.

4. Mathijs Pelkmans and Rhys Machold, "Conspiracy Theories and Their Truth Trajectories," *Focaal* no. 59 (March 30, 2011): 66, doi:10.3167/fcl.2011.590105.

general US public, some of which include: the faking of the moon landing, the possible

presence of a second shooter in JFK's assassination, the intentional spreading of AIDS

among minority populations by the CIA, and the existence of an actual alien spaceship in

Area 51.[5] As van der Linden's definition describes, all of these theories attempt to

explain a historical event through means of a cover-up attempt by the government or

related powerful organization.

Another defining characteristic of conspiracy theories is the theorist's

rationalization of evidence they use to support their claims. Communication scholars Ian

Reyes and Jason Smith explain that conspiracy theories "use a small amount of evidence

to configure epistemic lacunae through which the conspiracy is imagined."[6] The term

"epistemic lacunae" refers to a gap in knowledge, meaning that conspiracy theories often

make a jump in logic by assigning responsibility for an event when there is not enough

evidence to support it. Conspiracy theorists attempt to argue that certain events or ideas

are part of a larger plot or movement by powerful groups. But who believes in these

theories? Pop culture hardly paints conspiracy theorists in a good light. Psychologist

Michael J. Wood agrees, saying that conspiracy theorists and believers "do not often

enjoy a positive or romanticized portrayal in popular media."[7] Conspiracy believers are

ridiculed in the media as people who are crazed and possibly even disturbed, but is that

really true? What kind of people actually believe in conspiracy theories?

---

5. "Conspiracy Theories," *TIME*, 2009, http://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/completelist/0,29569,1860871,00.html.

6. Ian Reyes and Jason Smith, "What They Don't Want You to Know About Planet X: Surviving 2012 and the Aesthetics of Conspiracy Rhetoric," *Communication Quarterly* 62, no. 4 (September 2014): 404, doi:10.1080/01463373.2014.922483.

7. Michael J. Wood, "Some Dare Call It Conspiracy: Labeling Something a Conspiracy Theory Does Not Reduce Belief in It," *Political Psychology* 37, no. 5 (October 2016): 702, doi:10.1111/pops.12285.

Conspiracy Believer Characteristics

Research reveals that conspiracy believers generally crave individuality, lack social power, and have a negative or jaded view of the world. Psychologists Roland Imhoff and Pia Karoline Lamberty explain that some conspiracy theories "are more attractive to people high in need for uniqueness."[8] These people seek out ways to make themselves distinct from others, and believing in conspiracy theories grants them access to a small, exclusive community. Political scientist Matthew Hayes adds that conspiracy theories often resonate with people who do not occupy "great positions of authority," as conspiracy theories generally focus on "a government that they believe actively harbors secrets and cannot be trusted to serve and protect its own citizens."[9] Because conspiracy theories seek to reveal a secret plot by people in power, those who feel they have been treated unfairly by authorities are more likely to adopt conspiracy views. Additionally, psychologist Richard Moulding and his research team explain that conspiracy believers "tend to perceive people and the world as an essentially bad place that conspires against them as an individual."[10] Because of this, they are more likely to agree with conspiracy theories that frame an opposing group as the "bad guys."

Furthermore, people who already believe in conspiracy theories are more likely to believe in other conspiracies. Psychologists Patrick J. Leman and Marco Cinnirella's research revealed that "after reading [conspiracy theory] evidence, individuals with high

---

8. Roland Imhoff and Pia Karoline Lamberty, "Too Special to Be Duped: Need for Uniqueness Motivates Conspiracy Beliefs," *European Journal of Social Psychology* 47, no. 6 (October 2017): 726, doi:10.1002/ejsp.2265.

9. Matthew Hayes, "'Then the Saucers Do Exist?': UFOs, the Practice of Conspiracy, and the Case of Wilbert Smith," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 51, no. 3 (Fall 2017): 665, doi:10.3138/jcs.2017-0028.r1.

10. Richard Moulding, et al., "Better the Devil You Know than a World You Don't? Intolerance of Uncertainty and Worldview Explanations for Belief in Conspiracy Theories," *Personality and Individual Differences* 98 (August 1, 2016): 351, doi:10.1016/j.paid.2016.04.060.

levels of belief in conspiracy theories tended to rate a conspiracy explanation as more likely, whereas those with low levels of belief rated it as less likely."[11] Wood agrees with this, adding that "someone who believes in many different conspiracy theories might not be discouraged from adopting new beliefs which hold a 'conspiracy theory' label, as that same label has already been applied to their own beliefs in other domains, and they still hold those beliefs regardless."[12] Conspiracy believers are likely to already harbor a distrust of some authority organization, so they can easily adopt new ideas that contain some of those same elements.

Though these characteristics are common among conspiracy believers, there is also a reason why conspiracy theories are so popular among the general public. Political scientists J. Eric Oliver and Thomas J. Wood explain that conspiracy theories are powerful enough that "even highly engaged or ideological segments of the population can be swayed."[13] In fact, conspiracy theories have influenced society for centuries. Psychologists Jan-Willem van Prooijen and Karen M Douglas provide examples of centuries-old conspiracy theories, saying that "even back in the Roman era, there are prominent examples of conspiracy theories, and these are typically connected to major crisis situations."[14] Because conspiracy theories try to provide explanations for complex, emotional, or tragic events, these theories gain influence in times of crisis. Psychologists Neil Dagnall, Kenneth Drinkwater, Andrew Parker, Andrew Denovan and Megan Parton

11. Patrick J. Leman and Marco Cinnirella, "Beliefs in Conspiracy Theories and the Need for Cognitive Closure," *Frontiers in Psychology* 4 (June 2013): 1, doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2013.00378.

12. Wood, "Some Dare Call It Conspiracy," 698.

13. J. Eric Oliver and Thomas J. Wood, "Conspiracy Theories and the Paranoid Style(s) of Mass Opinion," *American Journal of Political Science* 58, no. 4 (2014): 964.

14. Jan-Willem van Prooijen and Karen M Douglas, "Conspiracy Theories as Part of History: The Role of Societal Crisis Situations," *Memory Studies* 10, no. 3 (July 2017): 326, doi:10.1177/1750698017701615.

add that "conspiracism is common within modern society and despite criticism, prevails within the modern society."[15] Modern American society is a perfect environment for conspiracism to thrive, due to several societal factors.

<div align="center">

Exigence

</div>

Conspiracy beliefs do not exist within a vacuum. Conspiracy views can only spread in societies that make space for them, and the current American society holds the door wide open. The way Americans view "truth" has changed in the past few decades. The internet and social media have exponentially increased the amount of information the average American is exposed to, without allowing time to develop proper tools to distinguish facts from misinformation. And it does not help that Americans are becoming more distrustful of authority institutions by the day, preferring to trust peers over the media. The base of this change lies with a cultural shift towards a postmodern worldview.

Postmodernism

Current American culture operates under a postmodern ideology. Counselor James T. Hansen explains that postmodernism "provides a general intellectual critique of the underlying concepts, categories, and assumptions that constitute our usual ways of thinking about the world."[16] Specifically, postmodernism defines the way people approach knowledge, truth, and reality. Political scholar Jonathan Joseph describes postmodernism as the view that "knowledge and reality are regarded as one and the same

---

15. Neil Dagnall, et al., "Conspiracy Theory and Cognitive Style: A Worldview," *Frontiers in Psychology* 6 (February 2015): 7, doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2015.00206.

16. James T. Hansen, "The Relevance of Postmodernism to Counselors and Counseling Practice," *Journal of Mental Health Counseling* 37, no. 4 (October 2015): 355, doi:10.17744/mehc.37.4.06.

thing, or at least reality outside of knowledge is declared meaningless."[17] Organizational scholars Martin Kilduff and Ajay Mehra add that from the postmodern perspective, "all interpretations of phenomena are equally valid, and the world is so complicated that concepts such as prediction and causality are irrelevant."[18] This ideology makes it impossible to define one single reality or even shared truth. If my reality is based on knowledge, that means my personal reality is different from everyone else's. If all interpretations are correct, then what is true? For postmodernists, truth is a fluid concept, and it changes from person to person without ever really being wrong. There is no objective truth, only subjective truth. This viewpoint is an open door for conspiracy views, especially in regard to views on scientific research.

If truth is relative, scientific research can never be entirely trusted. International relations scholar Colin Wight explains that from a postmodern view, "science can be understood to be a process that specifies differing levels of uncertainty without ever reaching the position of certainty."[19] Because there is no objective truth, anything is disputable. Sociologist Ben Agger adds that "postmodernism is profoundly mistrustful of social sciences that conceal their own investment in a particular view of the world."[20] Because the social sciences deal with understanding people, all people are going to have a different reality, even the researchers themselves. From this perspective, who is to say

17. Jonathan Joseph, "Foucault and Reality," *Capital & Class* 28, no. 82 (Spring 2004): 144, doi:10.1177/030981680408200108.

18. Martin Kilduff and Ajay Mehra, "Postmodernism and Organizational Research," *Academy of Management Review* 22, no. 2 (April 1997): 455, doi:10.5465/AMR.1997.9707154066.

19. Colin Wight, "Post-Truth, Postmodernism and Alternative Facts," *New Perspectives: Interdisciplinary Journal of Central & East European Politics & International Relations* 26, no. 3 (September 2018): 19.

20. Ben Agger, "Critical Theory, Poststructuralism, Postmodernism: Their Sociological Relevance," *Annual Review of Sociology* 17, no. 1 (1991): 9, http://www.uta.edu/huma/illuminations/agger2.htm

that any worldview is wrong? Conspiracy theories have risen in popularity because of

this idea. If there is no objective truth, authority organizations are not able to define it.

Social work scholars Richard Caputo, William Epstein, David Stoesz, and Bruce Thyer

add that postmodernism "offered the disenfranchised groups license to invent their own

versions of events to legitimize their experiences."[21] Conspiracy views can flourish under

this ideology. It is important to note that not all Americans subscribe to a postmodernism

ideology, but it is growing in influence. In addition to the relativity of truth, another

element also allows conspiracy ideas to spread: the prevalence of misinformation, most

commonly referred to today as "fake news."

Fake News

The term "fake news" has sharply risen in usage within the past five years. Fake

news as a concept can be traced back centuries, but the term itself exploded in popularity

during the 2016 US presidential election. Fake news now describes any kind of false

information spread by the media and became popular because of President Trump's

comments about his distrust of the American media. He made several statements about

how the media lied to tarnish his reputation, which began a globalized mindset shift

regarding the validity of reported news in America. In one tweet from 2017, Trump

wrote, "Wow, so many Fake News stories today. No matter what I do or say, they will

not write or speak truth. The Fake News Media is out of control!"[22] Attorney Ryan M.

Walters explains that the idea of fake news "will have permanent associations with the

---

21. Richard Caputo, et al., "Postmodernism: A Dead End in Social Work Epistemology," *Journal of Social Work Education* 51, no. 4 (October-December 2015): 640, doi:10.1080/10437797.2015.1076260.

22. Donald Trump, Twitter Post, October 17, 2017, 4:29am https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/915539424406114304?lang=en.

2016 election season and the resulting fallout from Russia's misconduct."[23] In 2019, the term "fake news" is used frequently and with abandon, with the accused parties most often being news organizations and social media. Social media is unique in its construction, easily accessible but almost impossible to effectively regulate, making it a perfect platform to spread fake news. Education scholars Lance E. Mason, Daniel G. Krutka, and Jeremy Stoddard add that "the emergence of the internet and social media have dramatically altered media coverage and perception and understanding contemporary concerns about fake news require considering the novel social dynamics introduced by new media technologies."[24] Social media makes the media environment more complicated than ever before.

Before discussing the impact of fake news on media interaction, the term itself needs to be properly defined. "Fake news" is used so commonly that the definition tends to get a little fuzzy. Walters proposes the following three-part definition, which seems to encompass the idea well: fake news is "content holding itself out as a news piece that makes objectively false assertions that given events have occurred in a materially false manner."[25] When Americans believe that any given news story could be misinformation, it changes the way they interact with media of all types. Educational scholars Deidre Clary and Michelle Bannister-Tyrrell found that "young people often use a friend as the

---

23. Ryan M. Walters, "How to Tell a Fake: Fighting Back against Fake News on the Front Lines of Social Media," *Texas Review of Law & Politics* 23, no. 1 (Fall 2018): 113.

24. Lance E. Mason, Daniel G. Krutka, and Jeremy Stoddard, "Media Literacy, Democracy, and the Challenge of Fake News," *Journal of Media Literacy Education* 10, no. 2 (May 2018): 4, doi:10.23860/JMLE-2018-10-2-1.

25. Walters, "How to Tell a Fake," 120.

closest source of news."[26] Additionally, economist Jonas Colliander found that "actions of other users in the comment section of fake news articles significantly influences people's attitudes towards disinformation."[27] This means that people are relying on each other, more than previously-trusted authorities, to provide correct information. A 2016 Pew Research Center study on fake news found that 64% of US adults say fake news stories "cause a great deal of confusion about the basic facts of current issues and events."[28] When people cannot trust the media, they turn to their peers. And the internet makes it incredibly easy to find others to validate their beliefs.

Online Communities

While in previous years it was difficult to find others with minority views, the internet provides a space for people to connect with others who hold similar opinions and worldviews. Online conspiracy theory communities have become more popular for this reason. Interdisciplinary scholars Brittany I. Davidson, Simon L. Jones, Adam N. Joinson, and Joanne Hinds describe online communities as having the power to "create a shared collective consciousness and to exchange information and ideas."[29] People are able to influence each other without being constrained by time or location. When it comes to conspiracy believers, forming online communities is a way to authenticate their beliefs. Being a part of an online community is a choice, which means that they usually

---

26. Deidre Clary and Michelle Bannister-Tyrrell, "Harnessing Research-Based Practices to Critique 'Truth,'" *Literacy Learning: The Middle Years* 26, no. 3 (October 2028): 29.

27. Jonas Colliander, "'This Is Fake News': Investigating the Role of Conformity to Other Users' Views When Commenting on and Spreading Disinformation in Social Media," *Computers in Human Behavior* 97 (August 1, 2019): 208, doi:10.1016/j.chb.2019.03.032.

28. "Many Americans Believe Fake News Is Sowing Confusion," Pew Research Center, December 15, 2016, https://www.journalism.org/2016/12/15/many-americans-believe-fake-news-is-sowing-confusion/.

29. Brittany I. Davidson, et al., "The Evolution of Online Ideological Communities," *PLoS ONE* 14, no. 5 (May 2019): 22, doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0216932.

are built around shared ideas or lifestyles. Sociologists Jeongsoo Han, Mina Jun, and

Miyea Kim explain that online community members have more collective efficacy than

offline communities because "members can easily change their membership to other

online communities."[30] Conspiracy communities are refuges for those who feel like they

are under- or misrepresented in "public" spaces. Being part of a group provides more

confidence in personal beliefs. For conspiracy communities, this changes the way they

respond to belief challenges. Communication scholars Jill A. Edy and Erin E. Risley-

Baird explain that these communities respond to threats by "publicly voicing

counterarguments," which "provides individual members resources to continue

psychologically and publicly resisting counter arguing debunking efforts."[31] This

behavior is especially common within conspiracy theory communities, due to the nature

of their fringe beliefs. The way conspiracy believers make and defend arguments has

gained significant scholarly attention, especially in the area of rhetoric.

Conspiracy Rhetoric

Historian Richard Hofstadter coined the term "paranoid style" to describe the type

of language often used in conspiracy theories. According the Hofstadter, paranoid style

centers on the idea that there exists a "confrontation of opposed interests which are (or

are felt to be) totally irreconcilable, and thus by nature not susceptible to the normal

political processes of bargain and compromise."[32] Paranoid style is dramatic, and it often

30. Jeongsoo Han, Mina Jun, and Miyea Kim, "Impact of Online Community Engagement on Community Loyalty and Social Well-Being," *Social Behavior & Personality: An International Journal* 47, no. 1 (January 2019): 6, doi:10.2224/sbp.7545.

31. Jill A. Edy and Erin E. Risley-Baird, "Rumor Communities: The Social Dimensions of Internet Political Misperceptions," *Social Science Quarterly* 97, no. 3 (September 2016): 594, doi:10.1111/ssqu.12309.

32. Richard Hofstadter, "The Paranoid Style in American Politics," *Harper's Magazine*, November 1964, 86, https://harpers.org/archive/1964/11/the-paranoid-style-in-american-politics/.

frames the opposing viewpoint as morally wrong. Communication scholar Ryan Neville-

Shephard expands on this idea, saying that in the paranoid style, the "demonization of

one's opponents provides an easy solution out of the crisis, providing a scapegoat for

gridlock."[33] This is evident in many conspiracy theorists' views of authority

organizations, such as moon landing denialists' demonization of NASA. Hofstadter also

adds that in using paranoid style, the communicator "sees the fate of conspiracy in

apocalyptic terms."[34] Many conspiracy theories involve the idea that the end of

something (e.g., the world, knowledge, privacy, etc.) is near as a result of threat from

some powerful organization. The persuasiveness of this type of rhetoric comes from both

the cultural context in which it resides and the mediums conspiracy theorists use to

spread their ideas. The internet is one medium that is perfect for spreading conspiracy

ideas, as it can provide anyone with the ability to reach large audiences. For my analysis,

I chose to analyze the language of conspiracy organizations. These organizations function

as three singular rhetors, as their language and views each represent larger communities

of believers.

Flat Earth, Ufology, and 9/11 Truth

I have chosen three different conspiracy theories to analyze. The first is the flat

Earth theory, which is the belief that the Earth is not round, but flat. Second is ufology,

which is the study of UFOs (unidentified flying objects). Third is the 9/11 truth

conspiracy, which is the idea that the US government had a hand in the tragic attacks on

September 11, 2001. To gain a greater understanding of conspiracy theory rhetoric, my

---

33. Ryan Neville-Shepard, "Paranoid Style and Subtextual Form in Modern Conspiracy Rhetoric," *Southern Communication Journal* 83, no. 2 (April 2018): 121, doi:10.1080/1041794X.2017.1423106.

34. Hofstadter, "The Paranoid Style in American Politics," 82.

goal was to pick three theories that fall under three vastly different categories. One deals specifically with a historical event (9/11); one deals with science denialism (flat Earth theory); and one is supposedly based on scientific research (UFOs). This will be important in my analysis as I seek to determine if there is a significant difference in framing and narrative reasoning based on conspiracy theory type.

All of these conspiracy theories are well represented online, with multiple communities and organizations dedicated to each, and I will analyze the rhetoric of one conspiracy organization that represents each of the theories: Flat Earth Society, MUFON, and 911truth.org. I have chosen these organizations based on three factors: the social popularity of each conspiracy theory, the online success of each organization, and the resources provided by each organization (all of which I discuss later in this section). I have chosen these three organizations because they have the largest number of community members within their respective conspiracy communities. Each website also offers an extensive library of resources the organization considers supporting evidence, which provides a full, available text that I will analyze in chapters two and three.

The flat Earth theory has grown in popularity over the past decade, curiously gaining societal acceptance as space exploration advances. The Flat Earth Society is one of the most prominent organizations of flat Earth supporters, with over 5,000 registered members listed on its website as of May 2019.[35] The Society has existed in various forms since the 1800s, and today it operates as a central hub for Flat Earthers; their official

---

35. "Members List," Flat Earth Society, last updated 2019, https://www.theflatearthsociety.org/home/index.php/about-the-society/membership-register.

website includes an extensive library of flat Earth resources, an interactive forum for members to discuss various issues, and a regularly updated blog.

MUFON, or the Mutual UFO Network, is an organization dedicated to the scientific study of UFOs. While the question of alien existence has fascinated humans for centuries, the scientific study of UFOs is a fairly new area of research. MUFON was founded in 1969 and is the oldest and largest UFO organization in the world (according to their website).[36] The official website offers a place for members to report UFO sightings, prompting investigators to contact the witnesses and find out what they experienced. The organization enters all experiences into their online archive, and MUFON has over 100,000 cases on file.[37] However, most of these files are available only to members of MUFON, who pay a monthly or annual fee for membership. As of July 2019, MUFON has over 4,000 members.[38]

September 11, 2001, was one of the most devastating days in American history. Although the terrorist group al Qaeda claimed responsibility for this attack, some conspiracy theorists are not so sure they are to blame. In a 2008 Reuters poll of over 16,000 people across 17 nations, only 46 percent of those surveyed believe al Qaeda was behind the 9/11 attacks.[39] Fifteen percent place the blame solely on the US government. And this idea seems to be spreading among both Americans and people in other

36. "A Brief History of MUFON," MUFON, 2019, https://www.mufon.com/history.html.

37. "8 Practical Research Tools for the UFO Enthusiast," MUFON, 2017, https://www.mufon.com/mufon-news/8-practical-research-tools-for-the-ufo-enthusiast.

38. "Mufon Symposium Proceedings," MUFON, last updated 2019, https://www.mufon.com/proceedings.html.

39. "No Consensus on Who Was Behind Sept 11: Global Poll," Reuters, September 11, 2008, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-sept11-qaeda-poll/no-consensus-on-who-was-behind-sept-11-global-poll-idUSN1035876620080910.

countries. 911truth.org is one of the most prominent organizations where those who believe in this conspiracy congregate. Its official website offers extensive resources for readers who question the "official" story of this tragic event.

In the next section, I will provide a more in-depth overview of each conspiracy theory and organization. Each of the three organizations functions as a singular rhetor in my analysis. Although each organization operates under a conspiracist worldview, they all have different beliefs, structures, and tones. It is also worth noting that these organization's beliefs and arguments do not represent those of all conspiracy believers, only those who are members.

Flat Earth Overview

People have been debating the shape of the Earth for centuries. But where did the idea of a flat Earth originate? History books claim that most of the educated world thought the world was flat before Columbus' voyage in 1492. Although history credits Columbus with proving the Earth's roundness to medieval skeptics, historian Jeffery Russell disagrees: "In reality there were no skeptics, as educated people throughout medieval Europe knew the Earth's spherical shape and its approximate circumference."[40] Russel explains that this confusion comes from famed writer Washington Irving, whose 1828 historical fiction *History of the Life and Voyages of Christian Columbus* established "the idea of a medieval flat Earth," which was a dramatized narrative audiences treated as fact for centuries.[41] Mathematician Robert Osserman agrees, stating that "by Columbus'

---

40. Jeffrey Russell, "Inventing the Flat Earth," *History Today* 41 (August 1991): 13.

41. Russell, "Inventing the Flat Earth," 16.

day, the view that the Earth was spherical was clearly neither idiosyncratic nor controversial."[42] The flat Earth theory was never a majority view.

Although flat Earth believers have existed for centuries, the belief was never commonly held by the educated, even in Greco-Roman times.[43] Theoretical physicist Mano Singham adds that the reason flat Earth beliefs are prominent in history is also due to negative framing of the clergy by evolution supporters in the 1800s:

> it was necessary [for Darwinists] to portray the people of the Middle Ages as basically idiots willing to believe anything their priests told them, however nonsensical. And the idea of a flat Earth was as stupid an idea as one could think up.[44]

The clergy did not actually believe the Earth was flat, but science supporters claimed so to drum up public support for the theory of evolution. So the flat Earth conspiracy has existed for centuries, but not as prominently as one may believe.

The flat Earth conspiracy itself falls under the category of science denialism, which is a form of pseudoscience. Philosopher Sven Ove Hansson describes science denialists as people who "are driven by their enmity towards some specific scientific account or theory."[45] While specific beliefs differ, Flat Earthers, as the believers are colloquially discussed, reject the idea that the Earth is spherical. A flat Earth is usually shaped like a disc "with a relatively tiny Sun and Moon circling above it like lamps above

---

42. Robert Osserman, *Poetry of the Universe* (New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2011), 50.

43. Russell, "Inventing the Flat Earth," 15.

44. Mano Singham, "Columbus and the Flat Earth Myth," *The Phi Delta Kappan* 88, no. 8 (2007): 592.

45. Sven Ove Hansson, "Science Denial as a Form of Pseudoscience," *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science* 63 (June 2017): 40, doi:10.1016/j.shpsa.2017.05.002.

a table."[46] Psychiatrist and behavioral scientist Joe Pierre adds that the flat Earth

conspiracy is not only about the shape of the Earth, but

> believing that the Earth is flat requires the additional conviction that we're all being deliberately lied to, not only by NASA who, it's claimed, faked the moon landing, but by potentially every single government, scientific organization, and legitimate astrophysicist on the planet.[47]

Flat Earthers believe in the larger conspiracy that government authorities are lying to the

public about the nature of the world they live in. While different believers have slightly

different ideas and models of what the Earth looks like, most share a firm anti-

government mindset.

Today, Flat Earthers may be more common than they were in the past. A 2018

YouGov poll found that although most Americans believe the Earth is round, 5% of the

public have doubts.[48] The poll also found that flat Earth beliefs have more traction with

young millennials than any other age group. Additionally, the documentary *Behind the

Curve* has pushed the flat Earth theory further into the spotlight. Made available on

Netflix, this film explains multiple perspectives on the conspiracy, from avid flat Earth

believers to accomplished astrophysicists. Dana Schwartz writes that in an interview with

Entertainment Weekly, director Daniel J. Clark says that his goal in making the film was

not to poke fun at flat Earth believers but to encourage the audience to understand them

from a point of compassion: "it's so easy to demonize another group or another person

46. Daniel Loxton, "Is the Earth Flat? Flat Earthers Are Back--You Know the Earth Is Round, But How Do You Best Make the Argument?," *Skeptics Society & Skeptic Magazine* 23, no. 2 (Spring 2018): 9.

47. Joe Pierre, "Flat Earthers: Conspiracy Thinking on a Global Scale," *Psychology Today*, July 5, 2018, https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/psych-unseen/201807/flat-earthers-conspiracy-thinking-global-scale.

48. Hoang Nguyen, "Most Flat Earthers Consider Themselves Very Religious," *YouGov*, April 2, 2018, https://today.yougov.com/topics/philosophy/articles-reports/2018/04/02/most-flat-earthers-consider-themselves-religious.

for something they think but you're kind of just as guilty if you do that."[49] The film seems to have been created with kindness and consideration, and while there is no data to suggest that it had a hand in creating more flat Earth believers, it certainly has brought the conspiracy to America's attention. As the Flat Earther community grows, more and more people are looking for a centralized place to discuss their beliefs.

While there are several communities of Flat Earthers both online and off, the largest formal organization of flat Earth believers is the Flat Earth Society. The Society acts as a home base for Flat Earthers, a place for people to discuss flat Earth theory and connect with each other. Although different Flat Earthers hold different beliefs, the Society outlines several of the organization's beliefs on their website, including topics like gravity ("exists in a greatly diminished form compared to what is commonly taught"), space ("astronomy is a pseudoscience"), astronauts ("involved in a conspiracy faking space travel and exploration"), evidence of a round Earth ("too easily manipulated and altered"), and what a map should look like ("the form of a disk with the North Pole in the center and Antarctica as a wall around the edge.").[50] Following the success of *Behind the Curve*, the Flat Earth Society has received increased online traffic from curious viewers.[51] This prompted an entire re-construction of their website, expanding on their beliefs and flat Earth theory evidence for easy browsing.

---

49. Dana Schwartz, "Director of *Behind the Curve* Shares How to Argue With People Who Believe the Earth Is Flat," *Entertainment Weekly*, March 1, 2019, https://ew.com/movies/2019/03/01/behind-the-curve-netflix-interview/.

50. "Frequently Asked Questions," Flat Earth Wiki, last updated August 14 2019, https://wiki.tfes.org/Flat_Earth_-_Frequently_Asked_Questions.; "Astromony is a Pseudoscience," Flat Earth Wiki, last updated May 2019, https://wiki.tfes.org/Astronomy_is_a_Pseudoscience.

51. Tom Bishop, "On 'Behind the Curve'," *Flat Earth Society Forum*, March 1, 2019, https://forum.tfes.org/index.php?topic=13824.0.

It is worth noting the Flat Earth International Conference is an entirely separate organization that is fairly popular for spreading flat Earth conspiracy ideas. This annual event began in 2017, when a large conference was held in Raleigh, North Carolina, to bring together Flat Earthers in a centralized space.[52] The conference is held in a different American city every year, and it has gained attention (and criticism) from the media. However, this organization is in no way affiliated with and is not to be confused with the Flat Earth Society.

As with most conspiracies, flat Earth theory emphasizes the idea of individual agency, meaning that each person needs to find truth for him or herself instead of relying on authority institutions to form his or her worldview. At the core of all of the organizations' beliefs is the philosophy is finding "truth," which can only be found by the self. In an interview with *Paste Magazine*, President of the American Flat Earth Society (a local chapter), John David, explains this idea:

> It is easy to believe the Earth is round – you just have to accept what everybody else is saying. It is much harder to get to the roots of why you believe what you believe and make an informed and conscious decision, especially when this decision is in discord with popular opinion; then hopefully you can grow.[53]

The Flat Earth Society's official website offers resources for visitors to browse, including maps and forums for discussion and a very detailed Wiki page that answers frequently asked questions about flat Earth theory. The website also includes an extensive library

---

52. "Flat Earth International Conference," FEIC, http://fe2017.com/.

53. Brian Whitney, "Planar Conspiracy: A Conversation with a Flat Earth Believer," *Paste Magazine*, March 10, 2016, https://www.pastemagazine.com/articles/2016/03/a-conversation-with-a-flat-earth-believer.html.

that catalogs extensive flat Earth evidence, as well as a store with various branded goods for anyone to purchase.

MUFON Overview

Are humans alone in the universe? For centuries, people have theorized the existence of other beings in our galaxy or in others far away. The idea of extraterrestrials seems to be more popular in media and pop culture than with scientists, as the modern scientific community remains generally removed from UFO research. But the concept of extraterrestrial life is not a recent one. Historian Alexander C. T. Geppert explains that "the question of whether humans are unique in the universe did not originate in the twentieth century, but rather stretches back to Greek philosophers."[54] Both scholars and the general public have debated the existence of extraterrestrials for centuries, but the idea only became a hot topic for controversy within the past 70 years.[55] This controversy began with the government's involvement in UFO research.

Today, people who study UFOs or alien life tend to be regarded with raised eyebrows from both academics and the general public. However, historian Greg Eghigian clarifies that research into alien life was not always seen as a type of pseudoscience; "from the early-1950s through the 1970s, a number of academics took the study of UFOs seriously and regularly engaged with ufologists."[56] Under pressure by curious Americans, the US Air Force even opened Project Blue Book, a legitimate study in the 1950s to

54. Alexander C. T. Gepper, "Extraterrestrial Encounters: UFOs, Science and the Quest for Transcendence, 1947-1972," *History & Technology* 28, no. 3 (September 2012): 341, doi:10.1080/07341512.2012.723340.

55. Gepper, "Extraterrestrial Encounters," 341.

56. Greg Eghigian, "Making UFOs Make Sense: Ufology, Science, and the History of Their Mutual Mistrust," *Public Understanding of Science* 26, no. 5 (July 2017): 620.

gather evidence of alien life. However, the project was officially closed in 1969 when the

government dismissed the existence of UFOs.[57] Ufologists were naturally upset with this

decision, accusing the government of hiding the truth of extraterrestrial existence from

the general public.

Sociologist Joseph Blake defines ufology as "the study of unidentified flying

objects as elements in an independent theoretical-conceptual scheme."[58] Ufologists

consider their research to be legitimate, but most scientists view it as a form of

pseudoscience. Chemist Henry H. Baur explains that pseudoscience

> constitutes an implicit or explicit challenge to science: it presumes to have
> scientific grounds to questions the completeness or validity of prevailing
> science and even claims to command authentic knowledge that differs in
> some way from what is claimed by established or mainstream science.[59]

Although mainstream science has yet to identify an undisputable example of

extraterrestrial life, ufologists claim their research is based in scientific method.

Because ufologists built a distrust of government organizations and scientists,

they began to form independent organizations to continue research into UFO sightings

and alien life. Sociologists Ron Westrum, David Swift, and David Stupple explain that

the UFO investigation community "consists of a large number of interested amateurs, a

small number of scientists, and a handful of active critics. This community has developed

its own literature, its own folkways, its own jargon, and its own knowledge base."[60]

---

57. Hayes, "'Then the Saucers Do Exist?'" 670.

58. Joseph A. Blake, "Ufology: The Intellectual Development And Social Context of The Study of Unidentified Flying Objects," *Sociological Review* 27 (May 1979): 315, doi:10.1111/j.1467-954X.1979.tb00067.x.

59. Henry H. Bauer, "Anomalistics, Pseudo-Science, Junk Science, Denialism: Corollaries of the Role of Science in Society," *Journal of Scientific Exploration* 28, no. 1 (Spring 2014): 96.

60. Ron Westrum, David Swift, and David Stupple, "Little Green Men and All That," *Society* 21, no. 2 (January/February 1984): 41, doi:10.1007/BF02695024.

Ufology rests on a large bed of proclaimed evidence, but most literature is written by amateurs, not academics or scientists.[61] Greg Eghigian adds that "the UFO and alien contact phenomenon began with and has remained grounded in personal human experiences, specifically experiences deemed extraordinary by the witnesses themselves."[62] Due to the experience-based nature of UFO research, it is difficult to approach ufology with traditional scientific methods, making the validity of this research an easy target for skepticism. The media's portrayal of UFO believers as irrational, outlandish, and "a lunatic fringe from which ufology has been unable to disassociate itself"[63] has further tarnished the reputation of ufology. Even so, many independently funded research organizations focus their efforts on scientific study of UFOs.

One such organization is MUFON, or the Mutual UFO Network. MUFON is a membership-based, non-profit organization dedicated to the study of UFOs. As an organization, MUFON believes in the existence of UFOs as well as the idea that humans are not alone in the universe. They do not, however, definitively believe in aliens. The website states that the advanced technology of UFOs could come from any number of sources, including beings from other dimensions, species living underground or in the deep sea, time travelers, or angels and demons.[64] Because of this, MUFON's mission is to discover more about UFOs.

Although MUFON is a non-profit organization, it operates under a fairly formal organizational structure. MUFON has a Board of Directors, a Science Review Board, and

---

61. Hayes, "'Then the Saucers Do Exist?'" 666.

62. Eghigian, "Making UFOs Make Sense," 615.

63. Westrum, Swift, and Stupple, "Little Green Men and All That," 43.

64. "What Do We Know After 50 Years?" *MUFON,* https://www.mufon.com/what-mufon-knows.html.

an Experiencer Research Team. It also offers all members the option to become Field

Investigators. These individuals are responsible for following up on the thousands of

UFO reports filed online every year. To become a Field Investigator, one must contact a

local MUFON representative and complete a certification course through MUFON

University, their online training program. After passing the certification test, Field

Investigators then train with an experienced investigator until deemed certified by their

local representative.[65] Along with Field Investigators, MUFON offers many volunteer

positions for members hoping to get involved. The organization is completely funded by

membership and donations, and all members receive a monthly journal reviewing recent

experiences and UFO-related news. The organization presents itself as a distinguished

scientific organization dedicated to discovering the truth about UFOs and educating the

public.

9/11Truth.org Overview

September 11, 2001, was of the darkest days in United States history. Al Qaeda

terrorists hijacked four commercial airplanes, flying two into the World Trade Center,

one into the Pentagon, and one into the Pennsylvanian countryside. The crashes caused

the collapse of both north and south towers of the World Trade Center. America watched

in shock and terror as thousands of people lost their lives from the attack and subsequent

rescue operations, including the airline passengers, World Trade Center workers,

firefighters, and police officers. This became the deadliest terrorist attack in US history,

---

65. "Become A MUFON Field Investigator," *MUFON*, https://www.mufon.com/field-investigator.html.

with over 3,000 names of casualties listed on the memorial in New York City.[66] This

historic event changed so much about America, from airport security to cultural attitudes

about terrorism.[67] September 11th shaped the America to be what it is today. But what if

everything Americans know about the event is a lie?

The internet is home to a wide variety of conspiracy beliefs regarding the events

of 9/11. The most popular theories identify the US government as a key player in the

events, either as opportunists using the devastation as justification for going to war or

even as culprits themselves. Communication scholar Charles Soukup explains:

> Like all conspiracy theories, the various accounts of 9/11 circulating on the
> Web are quite diverse, ranging from conspiracy theories that are relatively
> widely accepted (e.g., the Bush administration deceptively linked the events
> of 9/11 to Saddam Hussein to justify the war in Iraq) to conspiracy theories
> that are generally considered preposterous by many Americans (e.g., the US
> government deliberately and pre-meditatively detonated explosives at the
> World Trade Center on 9/11).[68]

Conspiracy beliefs about 9/11 emerged only a few short years after the event. The US had

been at war for several years, and the fire of nationalism and revenge among the general

public had begun to burn out. People started to ask questions, about both the attack itself

and the government's motivation for the War on Terror. Jim O'Brien explains in *Radical*

History Review that some believe the attacks were used as a justification for entering into

war: "The president [Bush] clearly had his sights set on Iraq, but the 9/11 attacks were

now being used to provide an all-but-blank check for wars of choice anywhere that a US

---

66. "The Names on the Memorial," *9/11 Memorial and Museum*, 2018, https://www.911memorial.org/names-memorial-0.

67. "How 9/11 Changed How Americans View the World," NPR, September 10, 2012, https://www.npr.org/2012/09/10/160886676/how-9-11-changed-how-america-sees-the-world.

68. Charles Soukup, "9/11 Conspiracy Theories on the World Wide Web: Digital Rhetoric and Alternative Epistemology," *Journal of Literacy & Technology* 9, no. 3 (December 2008): 4.

administration might wish to unleash one."[69] Environmental studies scholar Matthew

Schneider-Mayerson adds that conspiracists believe "the inability of the occupation to

bring the promised peaceful democracy and stability to Iraq led to a growing suspicion

that the war had been concocted and sold to the public by a cabal of ideologues in pursuit

of goals that long predated 9/11."[70] In an era of growing government distrust, this

suspicion was easy for many to adopt.

While many 9/11 conspiracists believe the government had ulterior motives when

entering the war, there are also communities who hold the government completely

responsible for the attacks, making al Qaeda a convenient scapegoat. These people point

to all kinds of supposed evidence: Osama Bin Laden's confession video, the flying

history of the hijackers, emergency response times, and the remains of the plane that

crashed in Pennsylvania.[71] The most popular argument by those who subscribe to this

theory is the way in which the World Trade Center towers fell. Conspiracy believers

claim the towers were destroyed by explosives placed inside the buildings because the

towers fell straight down instead of sideways, supposedly indicating the presence of

internal explosions.[72]

One online community where believers convene and discuss these theories is

911truth.org. Interestingly enough, this organization does not include an official

statement about what the organization as a whole believes happened on 9/11. Members

---

69. Jim O'Brien, "The Contested Meaning of 9/11," *Radical History Review* no. 111 (Fall 2011): 13, doi:10.1215/01636545-1268668.

70. Matthew Schneider-Mayerson, "The Dan Brown Phenomenon," *Radical History Review* no. 111 (Fall 2011): 197, doi:10.1215/01636545-1268803.

71. Matt Everett, "9/11: The Greatest Lie Ever Told," *Journal of Psychohistory* 38, no. 2 (Fall 2010): 133–67.

72. Everett, "9/11," 141.

hold different beliefs about what occurred and who is responsible, but they are united in their rejection of the "official" story. Their website reads: "Our mission is to expose the official lies and cover-up surrounding the events of September 11th, 2001, in a way that inspires people to overcome denial and understand the truth."[73] It also specifies that the US government "must have orchestrated or participated in the execution of the attacks for these to have happened in the way that they did."[74] Believers in the conspiracy seem to be spread far and wide, as the organization has grassroots organizers in cities across the US, as well as in almost 40 countries around the world.[75]

So who believes in these theories? In 2007, interdisciplinary scholars Carl Stempel, Thomas Hargrove, and Guido H. Stempel surveyed over 1,000 adults about media use and 9/11 conspiracy beliefs. They found positive associations among conspiracy beliefs and "consumption of non-mainstream media, membership in less powerful groups, and personal economic decline."[76] These results align with previous research on conspiracy believer characteristics. 911truth.org provides believers with a place where they can post and analyze video footage, articles, and various other types of media that expose "truths" about what happened. *Skeptic* writer Phil Molé, when attending a Chicago 911truth.org meeting, observed that "many at the conference do not seem to be looking for new information that might lead to accurate perspectives about the

---

73. "Our Mission," 911truth.org, accessed March 20, 2019, http://911truth.org/mission/.

74. "Our Mission," 911truth.org.

75. "Grassroots Contacts," 911truth.org, accessed March 20, 2019, http://911truth.org/grassroots-contacts/.

76. Carl Stempel, Thomas Hargrove, and Guido H. Stempel III, "Media Use, Social Structure, and Belief in 9/11 Conspiracy Theories," *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 84, no. 2 (Summer 2007): 366.

events of the 9/11."[77] Molé argues that the participants seemed to be more concerned

with confirming their current beliefs. Of course, this may not be true for every member of

the organization; there is an extensive collection of resources available on the website for

believers and non-believers alike to view.

In general, 911truth.org holds a strong mistrust for the US government, evident in

the extensive mission statement on their website ("our mission is to end, by way of

integrity and god-given creativity, the regime and illicit power structures responsible for

9/11"[78]). The organization's goal is centered on finding out what truly happened that day.

Kathryn S. Olmsted quotes Father Frank Morales, a leader of New York 9/11 Truth, who

describes his mission simply: "to me, this is about history. History and truth, the nature of

truth in a not particularly truthful age."[79] While this organization does not offer one

singular explanation of the tragic events, it does open the door for discussions that may

not be taken seriously elsewhere.

Methodology

In the next two chapters, I use two rhetorical theories as frameworks to analyze

how the Flat Earth Society, MUFON, and 911truth.org communicate their conspiracy

theories. In my analysis, I will examine each organization's website by conducting a

close textual analysis to discover the rhetorical similarities and differences among the

three organizations. Psychologists Linda Elder and Richard Paul describe close textual

analysis as "mindfully extracting and internalizing the important meanings implicit in a

---

77. Phil Mole, "9/11 Conspiracy Theories: The 9/11 Truth Movement in Perspective," *Skeptic* 12, no. 4 (Winter 2006): 30.

78. "Our Mission."

79. Kathryn S. Olmsted, "The Truth Is Out There: Citizen Sleuths from the Kennedy Assassination to the 9/11 Truth Movement," *Diplomatic History* 35, no. 4 (2011): 691.

text."[80] This type of analysis involves looking at the text on a micro level and breaking down the word usage to gain greater understanding. Education scholars Nancy Boyles and M. Scherer add that the goal is to "uncover layers of meaning that lead to deep comprehension."[81] Uncovering the meaning involves looking at a text by breaking it down and then looking at it contextually.

Literary scholar Magnus Ullén explains that the connection with the larger context "calls for the intervention of theory," meaning that the interpretation of the deeper meaning should be extracted using the structure of a conceptual framework.[82] Marketing scholar Barbara B. Stern explains that close textual analysis "exposes the cultural assumptions" that "sustain and subvert"[83] the deeper meaning of a text. This type of analysis not only breaks down the structure of a text, but also looks at its context and determines how that context influences the ways readers interpret it. This type of rhetorical analysis is extremely valuable because it provides insight into the way people think. Communication scholars Paul D'Angelo and Jim A. Kuypers describe close textual analysis as essentially humanistic because it "explores those qualities that make us human and does so in a manner that involves self-expression."[84] For this particular analysis, the

---

80. Linda Elder and Richard Paul, "Critical Thinking . . . and the Art of Close Reading, Part IV," *Journal of Developmental Education* 28, no. 2 (2004): 36.

81. Nancy Boyles and M. Scherer, "Closing In On Close Reading," *On Developing Readers: Readings from Educational Leadership, EL Essentials* (2012): 87.

82. Magnus Ullén, "Reading Literature Rhetorically in Education: Nathaniel Hawthorne's 'The Prison-Door' as an Exercise in Close Reading." *NJES: Nordic Journal of English Studies* 15, no. 2 (2016): 144.

83. Barbara B. Stern, "Textual Analysis in Advertising Research: Construction and Deconstruction of Meanings," *Journal of Advertising* 25, no. 3 (1996): 62, doi:10.1080/00913367.1996.10673507.

84. Paul D'Angelo and Jim A. Kuypers, *Doing News Framing Analysis: Empirical and Theoretical Perspectives* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), 290.

value comes from understanding how minority views, like conspiracy theories, are spread online and how the idea of truth is communicated within conspiracy communities.

Each of the three conspiracy websites provides an informational database of related conspiracy theory evidence, which I will analyze using both framing and narrative theoretical lenses. In my analysis, I aim to answer the following research question: How do conspiracy organizations persuade people to see conspiracy theories as truth? I will answer the question in chapters two and three.

Chapter two will include my analysis of each organization's argumentation. I use the theoretical lens of framing to explore how each organization constructs and defends its arguments online. I use a top-down framing method to investigate how the Flat Earth Society, MUFON, and 911truth.org each frame two ideas: their own reliability as an organization and the credibility of their sources. I call these frames the "reliability frame" and the "source credibility frame." I will do this by closely examining each organization's language, finding certain terms that are associated with truth, credibility, and fact, and seeing when and where each organization chooses to use this language.

In chapter three, I use a narrative lens to explore how each organization constructs a narrative based on the basic structure of the hero's journey. I will look at each organization's language choices in describing the roles of the reader, the organization, and the opposition in this narrative. I ultimately pull these narratives together to argue that all three organizations use language that constructs a metanarrative called "the quest for truth."

CHAPTER II

FRAMING CREDIBILITY

Before people can believe a conspiracy theory, they must first trust that the

information supporting that theory is reliable and credible. To stand up to the standards of

both believers and critics, conspiracy organizations use different methods to build

credibility. In this chapter, I will overview the rhetorical tool of framing, and then

analyze how the Flat Earth Society, MUFON, and 911truth.org frame themselves as

credible using the "reliability frame," as well as how they frame their sources as credible

using the "source credibility frame."

Media Framing Overview

Rhetorically, framing focuses on how the rhetor's presentation of an idea or an

event influences the way audiences understand it. Framing functions as an element of

argumentation, meaning it is a tool rhetors use to help build or defend arguments.

Ethnomusicologist David A. McDonald explains that Erving Goffman developed the

concept of framing in 1974, defining it as a "schemata" of understanding that allows

audiences to "locate, perceive, identify, and label" social experiences.[1] Sociologists

David A. Snow, E. Burke Rochford Jr., Steven K. Worden, and Robert D. Benford add

that frames "organize, experience, and guide action, whether individual or collective."[2]

---

1. David A. McDonald, "Framing the 'Arab Spring': Hip Hop, Social Media, and the American News Media," *Journal of Folklore Research* 56, no. 1 (January - April 2019): 110, doi:10.2979/jfolkrese.56.1.04.

2. David A. Snow, et al., "Frame Alignment Processes, Micromobilization, and Movement Participation," *American Sociological Review* 51, no. 4 (1986): 464.

Therefore, framing is all about influencing an audience's understanding of something. However, because framing involves influencing audience perceptions, communicators can use framing to create positive or negative perceptions. Health communication scholars Lorelei Jones and Mark Exworthy explain that studying frames "allows for the consideration of the operation of power both with and without intention."[3] Whether or not the communicator is attempting to frame a message in a particular way to achieve a certain goal, the communicator holds power over the audience by having the option to influence interpretation. Audiences' interpretation must, however, be consistent or connected with an existing worldview. McDonald explains that frames "must resonate, in some way, with previous discursive schema of interpretation, giving the frame a kind of prescriptive momentum or inertia: a compulsory valence pushing toward a given interpretation."[4] Framing, as a persuasive tool, is only effective when it is understood and accepted by the audience. Framing exists in many forms, such as the media and visual spaces, and framing analysis helps researchers understand the communicators' goals for using certain frames.

Anyone can use framing to construct a message, but a significant amount of framing research focuses on how the media, specifically the news media, frames messages. Communication scholars Dietram A. Scheufele and David Tewksbury explain that in media studies, framing is often "based on the assumption that how an issue is characterized in news reports can have an influence on how it is understood by

3. Lorelei Jones and Mark Exworthy, "Framing in Policy Processes: A Case Study From Hospital Planning in the National Health Service in England," *Social Science & Medicine* 124 (January 2014): 197, doi:10.1016/j.socscimed.2014.11.046.

4. McDonald, "Framing the 'Arab Spring,'" 110.

audiences."[5] Because the news media has the power to choose how it will present certain events, it also holds the power to shape reality for its audience. Sociologists Erik Neveu, Louis Quere, and Liz Libbrecht agree with this idea, saying that "the media do not so much describe an objective reality existing in itself, as they construct it."[6] Think of it this way: for people who have never visited the state of Texas, their perception of Texan people and culture is based entirely on how Texas is represented in news and in media. If all these people learn about Texas from these sources deals with cowboys and dust storms, that becomes the reality they understand. As a resident of Texas, I can attest to being asked many times if horses are the main mode of transportation here. Because framing influences perception, it also has the ability to influence attitudes, beliefs, and even actions. Media scholar Robert M. Entman explains that "when the media shape what people think about, they must logically influence what people think – i.e., their attitudes."[7] Framing research often focuses on the idea of gatekeeping, which refers to the media's power to decide what issues are highlighted, therefore giving it the ability to set an agenda. Although research generally focuses on the media, other sources can also use framing as a tool to influence.

Framing Analysis

Conspiracy theorists rely heavily on framing by drawing attention to certain elements of an event or issue that are not often publicly acknowledged. Hallmark

5. Dietram A. Scheufele and David Tewksbury, "Framing, Agenda Setting, and Priming: The Evolution of Three Media Effects Models," *Journal of Communication* 57, no. 1 (March 2007): 11, doi:10.1111/j.0021-9916.2007.00326.x.

6. Erik Neveu, Louis Quere, and Liz Libbrecht, "The Age of Events. The Spume of History - Or An Information Master-Frame?" *Reseaux* 5, no. 1 (1997): 13, doi:10.3406/reso.1997.3320.

7. Robert M. Entman, "Media Framing Biases and Political Power: Explaining Slant in News of Campaign 2008," *Journalism* 11, no. 4 (August 2010): 392, doi:10.1177/1464884910367587.

examples of conspiracy theory imagery exemplify this idea, (i.e., the waving flag in video footage of the moon landing or the trajectory of the falling towers on 9/11). Theorists present these as evidence that conspiracy theories are true (i.e., the US faked the moon landing or the twin towers fell because of internal explosions). When analyzing conspiracy rhetoric, it is important for researchers to consider the rhetor's goal in framing evidence this way.

Framing analysis involves looking at how framing is used persuasively. Political science scholars Alexandru Cârlan and Mălina Ciocea describe frame analysis as "the examination of frames in terms of the organization of experience."[8] Researchers use framing analysis to examine how people make sense of situations and ideas. Communication and computer science scholars Jessica Hullman and Nicholas Diakpoulos agree with this, explaining that framing analysis can "describe how an interpretation arises from the interaction of representational, individual, and social forces."[9] Framing analysis also focuses on the source, or communicator, of the message. Political scientist Frank Mols clarifies that framing analysis "focuses on opinion leaders and the persuasive techniques they use to garner support for their cause, thereby drawing on insights generated in sociology and social movement theory."[10] By using framing analysis, researchers can unearth the techniques opinion leaders use while also revealing how ethical (or not) these techniques are.

---

8. Alexandru Cârlan and Mălina Ciocea, "Media Deliberation on Intra-EU Migration. A Qualitative Approach to Framing Based on Rhetorical Analysis," *Romanian Journal of Communication and Public Relations* 16, no. 3 (December 2014): 76.

9. Jessica Hullman and Nicholas Diakopoulos, "Visualization Rhetoric: Framing Effects in Narrative Visualization," *IEEE Transaction of Visualization and Computer Graphics* 17, no. 12 (December 2011): 2232.

10. Frank Mols, "What Makes a Frame Persuasive? Lessons from Social Identity Theory," *Evidence & Policy* 8, no. 3 (January 2012): 329, doi:10.1332/174426412X654059.

The ethical implications of framing come into play with the communicator's selection of what information is included or excluded in a message. Entman explains that when framing is one-sided, meaning it does not allow for oppositional voice, it "emphasizes some elements and suppresses others in ways that encourage recipients to give attention and weight to the evaluative attributes that privilege the favored side's interpretation."[11] Frame analysis looks at how one-sided framing can be persuasive. Communication scholars Brian L. Ott and Eric Aoki explain the value of using framing analysis, concluding that:

> [framing analysis] highlights the inherent biases in all storytelling, namely selectivity (what is included and excluded in the story?), partiality (what is emphasized and downplayed in the story?), and structure (how does the story formally play out?).[12]

Frames can not only promote biases, but they can also encourage action. Marketing scholars Nenad Šimunović, Franziska Hesser, and Tobias Stern explain that frames "suggest solutions for the identified issues and prove motivation for the conduct of a proposed solution."[13] Scholars often criticize conspiracy rhetoric for being fragmented, meaning that it often lacks internal cohesion. Analyzing how conspiracy rhetoric emphasizes and excludes certain information can lead to understanding how it persuades different audiences.

---

11. Entman, "Media Framing Biases and Political Power," 392.

12. Brian L. Ott and Eric Aoki, "The Politics of Negotiating Public Tragedy: Media Framing of the Matthew Shepard Murder," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 5, no. 3 (2002): 485.

13. Nenad Šimunović, Franziska Hesser, and Tobias Stern, "Frame Analysis of ENGO Conceptualization of Sustainable Forest Management: Environmental Justice and Neoliberalism at the Core of Sustainability," *Sustainability* 10, no. 9 (2018): 3, doi:10.3390/su10093165.

Conspiracy Theory Frames

In this chapter, I will be analyzing the way the Flat Earth Society, MUFON, and 911truth.org use rhetorical framing regarding the subject of credibility. In the following section, I will examine the different ways each organization frames itself as a credible organization dedicated to revealing truth to the general public through what I call the "reliability frame." This frame looks at the language these organizations use to describe themselves and how they build credibility with their audience. I will focus on words and ideas associated with status, validity, and fame. Also, I will analyze the language they use to prove the credibility of their sources and supporting material. I call this frame the "source credibility" frame. In this part of my analysis, I will look specifically for terms associated with truth, credibility, and fact to see how each organization defines these terms and ideas.

Reliability Frame

All three organizations attempt to build their credibility in various ways. Given that each organization supports a very different conspiracy theory, their respective audiences may need to know different things about each organization to deem it credible. All of these organizations appeal to their size and reputation, but they all approach the idea from different angles. Each organization also appeals to a different characteristic of their identity that makes them seem more reliable, which I will discuss in the following sections.

Flat Earth Society as a Home for Free Thinkers

On the home page, the reader's first interaction with the website, the Flat Earth Society describes themselves this way: "This is the home of the world-famous Flat Earth

Society, a place for free thinkers and the intellectual exchange of ideas."[14] There are three significant parts of this introduction. First, they establish themselves as "world-famous," which is a way to instantly build credibility with their audience. Americans generally equivocate validity with fame or reputation. If something is famous, people are more likely to believe it. Arguably, the Flat Earth Society has not built a reputable image with the general public and the scientific community, so it is interesting that they reference their fame in this introduction, especially when the general public regards the Society with skepticism.

Secondly, the website refers to the Society as "a place for free thinkers." Believing the Earth is flat means actively refusing to believe what "traditional" authority organizations like the government or NASA confirm. Being a Flat Earther means one must be willing to think outside normal constraints, which is usually how people describe free thinkers. Their use of the word "free" here is especially significant. A free thinker is a generally positive term, one often used in American society to describe influential people like inventors, philosophical leaders, and creative artists. Describing the Flat Earth Society as "free thinkers" associates them with respected leaders. Also, freedom is a god term in American culture. The United States was founded on the concept of freedom, so although the Flat Earth Society is an international organization, the element of free thinking appeals especially to American website visitors. The concept of freedom appears often in the Society's language, which is a framing strategy to build credibility with their audience.

---

14. "About," Flat Earth Society, accessed October 17, 2019, https://www.tfes.org.

Finally, "the intellectual exchange of ideas" is important, if only because of what it leaves unspoken. One of the Flat Earth Society's main grievances with scientific evidence about the spherical Earth is that it is almost exclusively one-way; NASA and other research organizations tell the general public the shape of the Earth, and the general public is expected to believe them. Calling the Flat Earth Society a place for "the intellectual exchange of ideas" not only tells the reader that his or her opinions will be heard and valued, but that the Society is open to hearing multiple sides of an issue. It also negatively frames modern scientific communities, highlighting their supposedly one-way flow of information. By framing themselves as an organization who values the thoughts and opinions of their members, the Society attracts people who already dislike authoritative organizations.

The Society's positive framing of their own credibility is present even in their literature archive. The Flat Earth Society website offers free access to a large library full of Flat Earth literature that creates the foundation for the theory itself. In the most recent article listed on the foundational literature page, "In Defense of the Flat Earth" which was written in 2009, current Flat Earth Society president Daniel Shenton begins his essay with these words:

> The Earth is flat. This is a belief I hold as the beginning of an ongoing search for truth and certainty. It is a starting point - an intellectual foundation on which I feel further knowledge can soundly be built.[15]

Shenton describes flat Earth theory as "an intellectual foundation," which frames the theory as something with enough solid support to serve as a starting point for his

---

15. Daniel Shenton, "In Defense of the Flat Earth," Flat Earth Society Library, 2009, http://library.tfes.org/library/daniel_shenton_flat_earth_essay.pdf.

continuing search for truth. This phrase again refutes criticism that flat Earthers face about their beliefs being unscientific or ridiculous. Shenton sees his beliefs as not only logical, but also solid enough to serve as the core belief of other truths. Referring to the theory as a "starting point" supports the Society's claim that the organization is a place for free thinkers. Believing the Earth is flat is the basis for each person's individual truth journey, but "further knowledge" on the subject might be different from person to person. Also, his statement that finding truth is an "ongoing search" speaks to the Society's claims that the organization values the exchange of ideas. What Shenton knows now may be true, but his beliefs may change based on future research and future findings.

The Society goes beyond just building their own credibility; they also try to build the credibility of the conspiracy theory itself. On their Wiki page, a resource that extensively explains topics related to the flat Earth theory, they personify the theory, saying that "flat Earth theory has grown over the centuries like a wondering sojourner hungry for truth and eager for discovery."[16] The language they use here is strong and illustrative, making the theory seem more relatable and trustworthy. Labeling the theory as a "wandering sojourner" assigns a feeling of loneliness and independence. The Flat Earth Society knows that flat Earthers must go against the mass consensus about Earth and space to truly agree with the Society's beliefs, so they establish the theory as a personified character that resonates with their audience.

"Hungry for truth and eager for discovery" is a powerful phrase for two different reasons. First, the Society is again establishing a connection between the theory and the

---

16. "Homepage," Flat Earth Wiki, last updated August 14, 2019, https://wiki.tfes.org/
The_Flat_Earth_Wiki.

reader through personification. Because flat Earthers are people who are willing to go against popular belief and scientific evidence about the shape of the Earth, they must seek truth in places other than traditional education and the scientific community. They want to discover their true reality, and by setting up the theory as a figure that has already been through that process, readers are easily able to put themselves in the personified theory's shoes. Secondly, by using vivid language like "hungry" and "eager," the Society frames both truth and discovery as ideas worth pursuing. If one is hungry for something, that something is obviously worth seeking out in some way. Being eager for something suggests that the concept or event is positive and worth looking forward to. So, the Society sends their readers a message about how they should both value and be constantly searching for truth and discovery. And as they display throughout their website, the best place to find this truth is with the Flat Earth Society.

MUFON as Worthy of the 'Science' Label

On their website homepage, MUFON describes themselves as an "all-volunteer, non-profit 501(c)3 charitable corporation and the world's oldest and largest civilian UFO investigation & research organization."[17] With this introduction, MUFON situates themselves as a scientific research organization by using terms generally associated with scientific fields. Criticism of UFO research comes from the argument that people cannot properly make conclusions about something they cannot experiment with. This calls into question the scientific method. On their website, they have a page dedicated to how MUFON adheres to the scientific method. On this page, they state, "our hypothesis is

---

17. "Homepage," MUFON, accessed September 25, 2019, https://www.mufon.com/.

'this event can be explained rationally,' and we set out to PROVE it."[18] The scientific

method guides the research process, and without the ability to conduct experiments,

MUFON says that they prove or disprove their hypotheses through the examination of

evidence. Highlighting the scientific method helps establish them as an organization

based on reliable research.

One of the most common adjectives MUFON uses to describe themselves is

"scientific." For example, on their missions and goals page, one of their main goals is to

"promote research on UFOs to discover the true nature of the phenomenon, with an eye

towards *scientific* breakthroughs, and improving life on our planet."[19] The homepage

states that "for more than 50-years MUFON has strived to provide the world with an

unbiased, *scientific*-based organization with which to investigate and promote research on

the UFO phenomenon."[20] Their research page states that "as a *scientific* research

organization, it is our job to research recent UFO sightings, investigate alien encounters,

and share our findings with the world."[21] By repeatedly emphasizing the scientific nature

of their research, MUFON frames their work as both reliable and worthy of attention. I

believe their repeated use of "scientific" is to combat claims from the general public and

the government that UFO research is all pseudoscience.

All three of these statements are also examples of another way MUFON frames

themselves as worthy of respect: by connecting their goals to a broader purpose. These

---

18. "The Scientific Method," MUFON, accessed September 25, 2019, https://www.mufon.com/scientific-method.html.

19. "Mission Statement and Goals," MUFON, accessed September 25, 2019, https://www.mufon.com/mission-and-goals.html, emphasis added.

20. "Homepage," MUFON, emphasis added.

21. "White Papers," MUFON, accessed September 25, 2019, https://www.mufon.com/white-papers.html, emphasis added.

statements help frame MUFON as not only an essential organization for the scientific

community, but an essential organization for mankind in general. This framing

encourages support from the public because when motivations are more general, they are

applicable to more people. On their donation page, MUFON asks members to "donate

what your heart tells you to" in order to help "uncover the truth about what is happening

in our skies and ultimately, about our place in the universe."[22] Again, MUFON constructs

a broader purpose for their organization, making it more important to both science and

life in general. Although some people may not be interested in discovering the existence

of UFOs, almost everyone is interested in learning about their place in the greater

universe.

MUFON makes a similar connection on another page of their website. On the

page summarizing their findings from the past 50 years, they make a more dramatic

statement:

> The important thing is: the UFO phenomenon is worthy of scientific study,
> because tremendous breakthroughs will result if we allow our scientists and
> engineers to do so without fear of ridicule. Breakthroughs in science,
> technology, and sociology to name a few. The future of humanity depends
> on it.[23]

Here they are both challenging the criticism that ufology is pseudoscience and

establishing a broader purpose for funding research. In this statement and the ones

mentioned previously, MUFON uses vivid words and phrases like "breakthrough,"

"tremendous," and "improving life" to bring attention to the organization's impact on

---

22. "Make A Donation," MUFON, accessed September 29, 2019,
https://www.mufon.com/donate.html.

23. "What Do We Know After 50 Years?," MUFON, accessed September 29, 2019,
https://www.mufon.com/what-mufon-knows.html.

society and research as a whole. By making these claims, MUFON is appealing to the

reader and encouraging him or her to support their missions. Essentially, they are making

the argument that if one wants to see breakthroughs in science, technology, and

sociology, as well as humanity in general, one should support MUFON and the study of

ufology.

The process and construction of the organization itself reflects that of other

research organizations. MUFON selects and trains field investigators who contact UFO

witnesses and record encounter information.[24] The Science Review Board, a collection of

eight to nine scientists with backgrounds in various hard science disciplines, then

analyzes the collected data.[25] The MUFON Board of Directors oversees the

organization's activities on a macro level, making financial and administrative decisions

for the organization.[26] By putting their collected data through credibility checks on

different levels, MUFON appears to function just like any other credible research

organization. The structure helps their credibility because organizations that are

organized with defined groups like MUFON are generally regarded to be more

successful.

However, one thing that makes MUFON different from other research

organizations is their interest in amateur input. Their homepage states that they are open

to all types of responses, saying that "whether you have UFO reports to share, armchair

---

24. "Become a MUFON Field Investigator," MUFON, accessed September 29, 2019, https://www.mufon.com/field-investigator.html.

25. "The Scientific Method," MUFON, accessed September 29, 2019, https://www.mufon.com/scientific-method.html.

26. "Board of Directors," MUFON, accessed September 29, 2019, https://www.mufon.com/board-of-directors.html.

UFO investigator aspirations, or want to train and join our investigation team, MUFON is here for you."[27] Although they define themselves as a scientific research organization, they are willing to hear from anyone. This is an important addition to their image because it keeps the organization from coming across as too uptight or unapproachable. Typical research organizations, especially ones based in the hard sciences, focus on input from educated experts, but MUFON opens themselves up to experts and amateurs alike. Using familiar and inclusive language (e.g., "here for you," "armchair UFO investigator aspirations") helps frame the organization as both reputable and friendly, focused on the facts while encouraging participation from everyone. So although MUFON repetitively reminds the reader that they are a valid scientific organization, they also want to appear open and accepting, presumably in order to gain more members. One crucial way to achieve both of these things is to present logical arguments based on credible source material.

911truth.org as a Friend of the Media

911truth.org describes themselves as "one of the best publications in its own right, coupling mass appeal with vetted research that aims for the jugular, upholding the highest standards of fact and logic."[28] Here they emphasize the importance of fact and logic, citing their own high standards as a way to prove their own credibility. They use similar language on the page stating their mission as an organization: "to promote, and in part to provide, the best in investigative reporting, scholarly research and public education regarding the suppressed realities of September 11th."[29] The repeated use of the word

---

27. "Homepage," MUFON.
28. "Achievements," 911truth.org, accessed September 29, 2019, http://911truth.org/achievements/.
29. "Our Mission," 911truth.org, accessed September 29, 2019, https://911truth.org/mission/.

"best" shows that the organization is attempting to place itself above both other conspiracy organizations and news sources. They also use academic terms like "scholarly" and "public education" to make their purpose seem neutral. Educational sources and academic writing are supposed to come from a fairly neutral standpoint, which helps make them more believable and trustworthy. Using this language to describe their own research is an attempt to transfer academic credibility to their own organization.

One way that 911truth.org stands out from the previous two organizations is by the frequent and passionate use of blunt language and strong descriptions. While the Flat Earth Society and MUFON both generally use impersonal and neutral language, 911truth.org's language is strong and passionate, as seen in their self-description ("aims for the jugular"). This conspiracy organization is also unique from the other two because this conspiracy theory focuses on a singular historical event instead of an idea or theory, like the flat Earth theory or ufology. The nature of their conspiracy theory possibly makes it more difficult to build organizational credibility; because there are actual witnesses and accounts from people who were there on 9/11 and can provide counter evidence to the theory. Unlike flat Earthers or UFO encounter witnesses, 9/11 was an event that affected many people and was shown, in part, live on television.

In light of this fact, 911truth.org attempts to build their credibility through associations and endorsements. The website features an entire page listing every media organization that has featured their message.[30] Although a few of the mentions link to the

---

30. "Getting the Message Out: 9/11 Truth," 911truth.org, accessed September 29, 2019, https://911truth.org/achievements/getting-the-message-out-911truth/.

feature, the sections for television, radio, print, and online only list the names of

organizations that have recognized 911truth.org (e.g., NBC, CNN, *New York Magazine*,

BBC News, The Wire, etc.).[31] These names do not link to the feature or explain what the

feature was about. The list is quite long, but it does not specify whether the features were

positively relaying the 911truth.org message, or if they were highlighting the

organization in a negative way. It is possible that the "any press is good press" mentality

might be applicable here, but to build their credibility, it is interesting that the

organization would choose to highlight potentially negative coverage as an achievement.

In Edu Montesanti's article on the importance of 9/11 today, he mentions that "it

is important for anyone who wants to investigate or study the 9/11 murders that they have

access to scholarly research and facts. Many of the articles we have posted over the years

come from mainstream media sources."[32] Besides the intense use of "murders" here,

911truth.org seems to equate scholarly research and facts with articles from mainstream

media sources. This is in direct contrast to a common belief among many contributors to

the website that the mainstream media is often misinformed and incorrect, and the 9/11

stories those groups feature are often wrong. Because 911truth.org promotes an alternate

interpretation than the norm, it is interesting that they try to build credibility by

highlighting associations with the mainstream media here. There is also a separate article

category titled "endorsements" that highlights celebrities and other public figures who

support the 911truth.org mission.[33] These articles feature everyone from professional

---

31. "Getting the Message Out: 9/11 Truth," 911truth.org.

32. Edu Montesanti, "9/11, 16 Years Later: No Memory, No Truth, No Justice," 911truth.org, September 11, 2017, http://911truth.org/9-11-16-years-later/.

33. "Endorsements," 911truth.org, accessed September 29, 2019, https://911truth.org/category/ activism/9-11_truth_movement/endorsements/.

athletes to political leaders. Keeping a record of these people is a strategy to transfer

credibility from the figure to the organization as a whole. None of these people are

historians or individuals who would be considered credible experts, but they hold

credibility as public figures, regardless.

In conclusion, 911truth.org frames truth as something that is not relative. There is

only one truth, and it is something that may be difficult or uncomfortable to grasp. They

highlight exposure, positive or negative, and endorsements by public figures as a way to

present themselves as a trustworthy and credible organization. The more something is

known, the more likely people are to believe in it.

Understanding Reliability Frames

Though each of these three conspiracy organizations is unique, they all employ

similar framing techniques in regard to building their credibility. All three highlight the

reputation of the organization and their position within the conspiracy community as a

whole. Each is the largest and most well-known organization dedicated to their cause, so

they appeal to their reputation to build credibility. The Flat Earth Society and MUFON

both highly value their reputations as organizations that are scientifically-rooted; as a

result, much of their framing revolves around proving their relevance and validity

through the terminology of and association with science and observation. 911truth.org

focuses on framing truth as objective to convince readers to accept their viewpoint. The

Flat Earth Society mainly focuses on building a connection between itself and its

audience, relying on the power of common ground to make their organization seem more

credible. MUFON uses distinctly academic language to make itself seem like an accepted

part of the scientific community, while 911truth.org builds credibility by association. By

using the reliability frame to analyze their arguments, conspiracy organizations can draw on various methods to prove their own credibility. Fame, reputation, and scientific validity are the primary characteristics they highlight in order to frame themselves as reliable.

Source Credibility Frame

When it comes to building credibility, proving one's own reliability is only half the battle. Credibility not only comes from the organization itself, but also from the sources they use. Especially for conspiracy organizations, using reliable sources is essential to supporting valid arguments. These three organizations use similar methods to frame their sources as credible, although the language they use is different. In the following sections, I will analyze how each organization attempts to present their resources as factual.

Passive Credibility of Flat Earth Sources

The Society's confidence in their own beliefs comes from their reliance on flat Earth literature and supposedly credible evidence. The Flat Earth Wiki spans many topics and addresses every possible question the common person may have about the scientific elements of a flat Earth -- from gravity to electromagnetic activity, and the solar system to ancient historial claims. The Society writes all the pages in recognizably scholarly language, using terms found often in scientific journals and academic research. However, when taking a closer look at the actual wording, it may not come as a surprise that they use very vague language to explain the credibility of their sources.

On several pages of their Wiki, the Society uses vague, passive language to address the credibility of their supporting sources. For example, on the page addressing

the Sinking Ship Effect (the phenomenon where ships over the horizon disappear gradually from bottom to top, which suggests Earth curvature), the page reads that "it has been determined that at times the Sinking Ship Effect is caused by bulges on the surface of the ocean."[34] There is no further explanation on the page itself, but the section links to a separate Wiki page displaying images demonstrating said ocean bulges. The images themselves were submitted to the Flat Earth Society by a Society member in one of the website's many forums.[35] Besides the fact that the images were provided by a biased source, the Society gives no information about who determined the real cause of the Sinking Ship Effect. The Society uses this passive language several other times on various Wiki pages. On the topic of viewing distance, addressing the criticism that people should be able to see farther if the Earth's surface is flat, the page reads: "Usually it is taught in art schools that the vanishing point is an infinite distance away from the observer."[36] This language is again passive and also presents the interesting argument that art school instructors are credible sources on the topic of the Earth's shape. Again, the page gives no additional information about where the Society received this statement.

The FAQ page of the Flat Earth Wiki answers possibly the most common question about flat Earth theory, which is "as a passenger on an aircraft, how is it I can see the curvature of the earth?"[37] The Society answers by stating that no one can see the

34. "Sinking Ship Effect," Flat Earth Wiki, last updated June 29, 2019, https://wiki.tfes.org/Sinking_Ship_Effect.

35. "Engineers in on Conspiracy Too?" Flat Earth Society Forum, last updated September 9, 2011, http://web.archive.org/web/20190415221702/https://www.theflatearthsociety.org/forum/index.php?topic=50529.0.

36. "Viewing Distance," Flat Earth Wiki, last updated June 29, 2019, https://wiki.tfes.org/Viewing_Distance.

37. "Frequently Asked Questions," Flat Earth Wiki, last updated August 14, 2019, https://wiki.tfes.org/Flat_Earth_-_Frequently_Asked_Questions.

curvature because "it is widely stated you would need to be at a height of at least 40,000 ft to get even a hint of curvature if the Earth were round. Commercial aircraft are not allowed to fly this high."[38] Again, the language is passive and vague, citing believed common knowledge as a credible source. These examples of passive language show that the Society frames their evidence by relying on supposed common knowledge and unnamed sources.

The Flat Earth Wiki is an interesting addition to the Flat Earth Society website because it appears to represent the oppositional voice by answering questions and concerns that critics might pose about flat Earth theory. In reality, very few of the pages answer the questions in a logical way. The use of academic and scientific language is misleading because many of the pages do not actually use logical reasoning or proven credible sources to support their claims. The website presents the Wiki page as an educational resource for curious website visitors and flat Earthers alike, but it fails to live it to its reputation. This puts into question the ethicality of the Society's argumentation.

As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, people often criticize conspiracy rhetoric as being fragmented and illogical. In an effort to combat this criticism, the Flat Earth Society actually does the opposite by proving it to be a correct assessment. Presenting this Wiki page as an educational resource deliberately misleads the reader. The Society claims they address common criticisms of flat Earth theory, but in reality, the vague nature of their arguments means that the Society does not properly address the criticisms at all. By choosing which issues to address and which to ignore, and by vaguely asserting the credibility of their sources, the Flat Earth Society constructs a warped sense of reality.

---

38. "Frequently Asked Questions," Flat Earth Wiki.

The Society's existence is based on their shared belief in the flat Earth theory, and they have assigned themselves the mission of spreading truth to the public. Their vague citations of credibility when presenting sources and passive language fail to uphold their mission, which is a hallmark example of how framing can be used unethically. As a leading organization of the flat Earth theory, they have a responsibility to present an unbiased look at flat Earth theory. The homepage of the Flat Earth Wiki states that the website is "dedicated to unravelling the true mysteries of the universe and demonstrating that the earth is flat and that Round Earth doctrine is little more than an elaborate hoax."[39] The Flat Earth Society's goal is to spread the belief that the Earth flat by revealing holes in the "Round Earth doctrine." However, the Society does a poor job proving their own credibility and in turn proving the Earth's roundness incorrect.

Although there are some obvious argumentation issues in the Flat Earth Society Wiki, there are thousands of people who believe in the flat Earth theory. My analysis shows that while the Flat Earth Society frames itself as a credible organization, its arguments are shaky at best. This may not be surprising to the common skeptic, but the growing belief in the flat Earth theory in modern day America shows that more and more people are willing to overlook credible evidence when accepting a proposed reality. The Flat Earth Society is not the only organization dedicated to spreading the flat Earth theory, but they are the largest and most influential. Rhetorical framing helps them present their beliefs in a way that seems credible without possessing actual credibility. The success of this surface-level argumentation, combined with the general increase in

39. "Homepage", Flat Earth Wiki.

conspiracy beliefs in America, suggests that Americans might not be exercising strong

critical thinking skills when it comes to accepting perceptions of reality.

Circular Credibility of MUFON Sources

Similar to the Flat Earth Society, MUFON often establishes the credibility of their

sources with vague language and the pretense of giving a voice to the opposition.

However, MUFON frames a source's credibility differently in two ways: circular

reasoning and emphasis on a person's professional or military background. With both

investigators and UFO witnesses, MUFON builds credibility based on the person's

professional life. The reader can see both types of framing throughout the website.

To prove the credibility of their sources, MUFON often states that their sources

are "credible" without explaining why. When analyzing their language, I noticed that

MUFON generally uses vague language regarding the credibility of a group of sources, as

opposed to individual sources. For example, on the page detailing famous UFO cases,

MUFON mentions that critics often point out that most UFO sightings happen in remote

areas. They refute this claim by mentioning a famous UFO case in Phoenix from 1997,

saying that "hundreds of credible witnesses reported lights flying in formation at

extraordinary speeds over the city one evening."[40] Merely saying a source is credible

does not build credibility, and there is no further explanation as to why the witnesses

were credible, or more importantly, how MUFON determines credibility. On the page

explaining the phenomenon of crop circles, they state that "in this section, MUFON

presents articles from credible paranormal sources regarding the growing number of

---

40. "Famous UFO Cases," MUFON, accessed September 29, 2019, https://www.mufon.com/
historical.html.

examples of the temporary 'earth art' more commonly known as crop circles."[41] Once again, MUFON does not explain how or why these paranormal sources are credible, only that MUFON considers them to be credible. On a page describing encounters with aliens, they say that "it is often stated by scientists that human-like, intelligent life on other planets is possible."[42] What scientists? How often is "often"? In an effort to make their claims seem more reliable, MUFON constructs this vague support that adds very little to their argument. In doing so, they instead create a circular argument: these sources are credible because they are credible. In all of these examples, MUFON makes a broad claim about credibility for a group, as opposed to individuals.

When explaining the credibility of individual sources, MUFON focuses on the person's professional or military background. For example, on a page describing alien technology, MUFON cites "award- winning physicist Dr. Eric W Davis, whose theories have been acknowledged by the *Huffington Post* and the American Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics" as a major contributor to the conversation on superior alien technology.[43] Although the presumed equivocation of *Huffington Post* and the American Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics is interesting, the ambiguity of "acknowledged" as opposed to "lauded" or even "supported" is definitely worth noting. Acknowledged implies attention, not agreement. On another page describing the Science Review Board, MUFON details the board members' work experience, which includes

41. "Crop Circles Explained," MUFON, last updated February 1, 2017, https://www.mufon.com/crop-circles/alien-crop-circles-explained.

42. "Accounts of Alien Beings," MUFON, last updated March 10, 2019, https://www.mufon.com/alien-beings/accounts-of-alien-beings.

43. "Alien Technology, MUFON," last updated November 20, 2016, https://www.mufon.com/alien-technology/alien-technology.

"NASA, Lockheed Martin, Northrop Grumman, Advanced Mico Devices, Lawrence

Livermore National Laboratory, and France's national space program, CNES."[44] Indeed,

all of these organizations are credible due to their reputation and contribution to science.

It makes sense that MUFON would want to highlight associations with these

organizations to transfer some of that credibility. Another example comes from the July

2019 edition of the MUFON monthly journal. Director Jan Harzan states that UFOs are

real and are not from Earth, and he supports this claim by saying that "this is not

MUFON saying this, this is former high-level government officials saying this."[45]

Although this is still quite vague, MUFON assigns credibility to past experience in the

United States government. In another section of the July monthly journal, the Texas

MUFON State Director describes a UFO witness as "very credible" due to the person's

experience "flying helicopters during the Vietnam War."[46] The Texas Director explained

that although the witness was familiar with aircraft, the individual could not identify the

aircraft he or she witnessed. By mentioning the person's military experience, the Director

builds credibility to make his or her claims seem more believable. As seen in all four of

these examples, MUFON sees professional or military experience as highly valuable

credible experience for UFO witnesses or researchers. Because MUFON's research rests

mainly on experiences and personal testimonies, building credibility of their sources is

absolutely essential to conducting sound investigations.

---

44. "Top MUFON UFO Cases," MUFON, accessed September 29, 2019, https://www.mufon.com/annual-report.html.

45. "The MUFON Journal," MUFON, last updated July 2019, https://mufon.z2systems.com/neon/resource/mufon/files/JULY%202019%20MUFON%20Journal%20WEB(1).pdf.

46. "The MUFON Journal," MUFON.

Throughout their website, MUFON uses scientific language (e.g., "research," "investigate," "breakthrough," etc.) to construct their image as a valid scientific research organization. Because their research is based on interviews and theories, they also must prove the credibility of their sources. Instead of building credibility, however, MUFON uses circular argumentation and vague acknowledgments of academic and military connections to prove reliability.

911truth.org Evidence as Truth

The website publishes an extensive array of book and journal articles, videos, and websites for the reader's use. I limited my search to articles published within the last five years.[47] That way, the information in my analysis is both current and representative of the views of the organization.

The organization's emphasis on truth is evident in the name itself: 911truth.org. One of the organizational missions listed on their webpage is "to promote, and in part to provide, the best in investigative reporting, scholarly research and public education regarding the suppressed realities of September 11th."[48] The inclusion of the word "suppressed" implies not only that the official story of the events is wrong, but that it is a deliberate cover up created as an attempt to hide the truth. 911truth.org also highlights the importance of truth in the website organization with an entire sub-category of articles about activism dedicated to the "truth strategy."[49] The "truth strategy" is the effort to spread the conspiracy of government involvement in 9/11. The use of the word truth here

---

47. "Our Mission," 911truth.org.

48. "Our Mission," 911truth.org.

49. "Truth Strategy," 911truth.org, accessed September 29, 2019, https://911truth.org/category/activism/truth_strategy/.

is powerful because it explicitly associates the conspiracy with the historical truth. Another example of the emphasis on truth is the subheading of the website itself, which says "Investigation. Education. Accountability. Reform."[50] Although these words are vague, the reader can conclude that educating him or herself on the events of 9/11 will lead to finding the government guilty at some level, which will increase the reader's motivation to hold the government accountable for their actions. Although truth is not mentioned specifically, the subheading implies that education will lead to finding out what really happened, which is finding out the truth.

Framing evidence as truth is also evident within the articles posted on the website. In a 2019 article, Erik Larson states that "you will not find crazy 'conspiracy theorists' listed in the Table of Contents [on 911truth.org]. You will find credible voices, people who are concerned about truth and justice, about our country and our Constitution."[51] Larson is trying to achieve two things here. One, he attempts to distance the proposed 9/11 story from the "conspiracy theory" label. I assume he does this because he recognizes that conspiracy theories generally have a negative reputation, and readers may already be skeptical when visiting this website. Two, he builds the credibility of 911truth.org contributors by pinpointing characteristics that might encourage the reader to identify with them. Most Americans care about truth, justice, and their country, so describing contributors to the site in this way humanizes and makes them more relatable. Establishing common ground between the contributor and the readers makes them more likely to accept their arguments as true.

50. "Homepage," 911truth.org, accessed September 29, 2019, https://911truth.org/.

51. Erik Larson, "We Were Lied to About 9/11: The Interviews," 911truth.org, April 25, 2019, http://911truth.org/we-were-lied-to-about-9-11/.

In another 2019 article, Paul Craig Roberts claims that popular media refuse to entertain any different thoughts about 9/11 due to their inability to find logistical faults, saying that "the fact that the carefully presented evidence is NEVER ENGAGED EXCEPT WITH NAME-CALLING is a strong indication that the evidence is true and cannot be refuted."[52] Here Roberts is arguing that the reason why people mock 911truth.org's views is because they cannot find a way to legitimately criticize them. This frames truth as something that is absolute, something that cannot be interpreted differently or contested. The 911truth.org interpretation of the events on 9/11 is true because it cannot be contested.

Another way 911truth.org frames truth is by associating it with ideas that may be difficult or uncomfortable to grasp. The reader sees this type of language many times within recent articles. For example, an article by the 911truth.org staff in March 2019 says that "current theories fail to address the full range of evidence . . . and anchoring and confirmation bias make it hard to let go of initial impressions. The scientific method requires us to challenge our biases as we seek truth."[53] They argue here that to find truth, one must overcome personal biases. In an article published in September 2017, Edu Montesanti says that "life often is quite messy and complicated. As in life, understanding 9/11 requires the ability to accept the paradox and contradiction inherent to complex events."[54] In order to understand what really happened on 9/11, one must be able to understand difficult concepts. Later in the same article, Montesanti adds that "the greatest

52. Paul Craig Roberts, "A Majority of Americans Do Not Believe the Official 9/11 Story," 911truth.org, January 11, 2019, http://911truth.org/americans-do-not-believe-official-911-story/.

53. Staff, "Conference on the 9/11 Pentagon Evidence," 911truth.org, March 6, 2019, http://911truth.org/conference-9-11-pentagon-evidence/.

54. Montesanti, "9/11, 16 Years Later."

challenge to an investigation has as much to do with our ability to deny uncomfortable facts and inconvenient knowledge."[55] Using "uncomfortable" and "inconvenient" as descriptors of the truth furthers the idea that truth is often unpleasant. Finally, on the page detailing the organization's mission statements, 911truth.org aims to "expose the official lies and cover-up surrounding the events of September 11th, 2001 in a way that inspires the people to overcome denial and understand the truth."[56] Again, the usage of "overcoming" characterizes truth as something one must struggle to discover and understand. Framing truth as something that can be difficult to understand is a strategic and persuasive move. As with the previous conspiracy theories I discussed, believing 911truth.org's arguments about the events of 9/11 involves going against the general public's perception and understanding. The organization knows that accepting their views will be difficult, so they frame truth itself as difficult to make the reader feel like accepting their views is synonymous with accepting the truth. Also, the argument that there is only one truth could be a way to persuade their audience that their interpretation of events is the one and only correct interpretation.

911truth.org is unique in the way they build credibility by simply stating that their evidence is the truth. Given that this conspiracy is about a historical event, the nature of their evidence is different from the other two. They build the credibility of their sources not only by presenting them as the truth, but also by framing truth as something that takes effort to grasp. This is especially interesting because it almost excuses the difficulty readers may experience when trying to piece all the presented evidence together. If their

---

55. Montesanti, "9/11, 16 Years Later."
56. "Our Mission," 911truth.org

story of what happened on 9/11 does not quite fit, that means that the reader is not pushing him or herself enough to understand it and has not abandoned his or her biases and challenged the truth yet.

Understanding Source Credibility Frames

All three organizations attempt to frame their sources as credible. However, when examining their argumentation through the source credibility frame, all three fall short of creating strong arguments. By using passive language, circular reasoning, and simply presenting their evidence as truth, these conspiracy organizations do not successfully prove the credibility of their sources. Mentioning credibility as way to prove their arguments as believable instead does the opposite, highlighting the shortcomings of their sources. To identify the weaknesses of these arguments, readers must use critical thinking skills. To those with underdeveloped critical thinking skills, the organizations' arguments may seem credible.

These organizations frame different concepts and ideas in an effort to create a worldview that they wish to share with the public. The Earth is flat, ufology is a valid research area, and the United States government is responsible for 9/11. The way each organization presents their ideas and supporting evidence, as well as the way they do or do not address opposing viewpoints, shapes reality for the reader. All of these organizations have a common goal: spreading their reality. Because they all aim to be persuasive, rhetorical framing analysis is essential to understand how each organization attempts to persuade their readers.

It is beyond the scope of this project to conclude the success of each organization in persuading their audiences. All three of the organizations have existed for at least a

decade, and they are each the largest and most supported organization within their conspiracy community. It is safe to say that their arguments have convinced many people to adopt their worldview. My analysis suggests that while conspiracy theory organizations may be persuasive to some, the way they frame their arguments plays a huge part in how credible their claims are. My analysis suggests that while conspiracy theory organizations go to great lengths to make themselves seem credible, trustworthy, and truthful, they lack the ability to verify the legitimacy of their sources. Of course, my analysis is limited to these three organizations in particular, but similar findings across all three suggest that vague language and surface-level argumentation surrounding source credibility may be a common thread among several, if not all, conspiracy theory organizations.

So how do conspiracy organizations persuade people to see conspiracy theories as truth? Based on my analysis, conspiracy organizations attempt to build their own credibility so their resources and information seem reliable. Before someone believes a conspiracy theory, he or she must first trust the source of the information that supports that theory. These organizations appeal to their relatability, their value to scientific research, and their widespread influence in order to make people trust them. But proving their own credibility is not the only step they take to make their arguments seem believable. Each organization attempts to prove the credibility of their sources as well, but they are less successful in these arguments. Vague wording, passive language, and unsupported statements about credibility fall flat, exposing the shakiness of their information foundation. It seems as though conspiracy organizations have a lot to improve on before their arguments are taken seriously by critics.

CHAPTER III

THE NARRATIVE OF THE HERO'S JOURNEY

Building credibility is not the only way conspiracy organizations persuade readers

to believe their arguments. All three organizations discussed in this chapter construct a

narrative based on an age-old structure to make their positions seem more persuasive to

readers. In this chapter, I overview the rhetorical theory of narrative and then analyze

how the Flat Earth Society, MUFON, and 911truth.org construct an overarching narrative

that places the reader at the center.

Narrative Overview

Narrative theory centers on the idea that people are drawn to storytelling. In

literary and communication research, scholars refer to stories as narratives.

Interdisciplinary scholars W. Brady DeHart, Brent A. Kaplan, Derek A. Pope, Alexandra

M. Mellis, and Warren K. Bickel explain that narratives are "stories that present

information in a persuasive and meaningful way."[1] This information can be anything,

from personal information, to scientific research, or historical events. Psychologist

Jerome Bruner adds that narratives are about "people acting in a setting, and the

happenings that befall them must be relevant to their intentional states while so engaged-

to their beliefs, desires, theories, values, and so on."[2] While narratives involve people

---

1. W. Brady DeHart, et al., "The Experimental Tobacco Marketplace: Narrative Influence on
Electronic Cigarette Substitution," *Experimental and Clinical Psychopharmacology* 27, no. 2 (2019): 116,
doi:10.1037/pha0000233.supp.

2. Jerome Bruner, "The Narrative Construction of Reality," *Critical Inquiry* 18, no. 1 (1991): 7.

acting in settings, no definite structure constitutes a narrative, as long as they tell a story. And storytelling is a wide, wide concept.

Ecologists David Caldwell and Peter R. White explain that "there is no one single type of storytelling. In fact, narrative scholars establish that there are multiple types of storytelling across cultures and languages."[3] Storytelling is not even limited by medium. Literary scholar Marie-Laure Ryan describes narratives as "mental representations that can be evoked by many media and many types of signs."[4] Narratives exist as/in books, podcasts, magazines, movies, social movements, and thousands of different places. Communicators can use them to inform, describe, and even teach. Education scholars Stefanie Golke, Romina Hagen, and Jörg Wittwer describe the function of narratives in education as a "vehicle for an increased comprehension of the to-be-learned conceptual information."[5] Narratives are everywhere, thanks to their persuasive influence.

Narratives as Persuasion

As persuasive tools, narratives have a lot of persuasive power. Ryan explains that "as a cognitive structure, narrative has such a grip on the mind that the popular success of a genre or medium involving language is crucially dependent on its ability to tell stories."[6] If audiences are unable to understand or connect with a narrative, it has no persuasive power. Some of this persuasive narrative potential comes from its source.

---

3. David Caldwell and Peter R. White, "That's Not a Narrative; This Is a Narrative: NAPLAN and Pedagogies of Storytelling," *Australian Journal of Language & Literacy* 40, no. 1 (2017): 17.

4. Marie-Laure Ryan, "Beyond Myth and Metaphor: Narrative in Digital Media," *Poetics Today* 23, no. 4 (2002): 583.

5. Stefanie Golke, Romina Hagen, and Jörg Wittwer, "Lost in Narrative? The Effect of Informative Narratives on Text Comprehension and Metacomprehension Accuracy," *Learning and Instruction* 60 (April 1, 2019): 1, doi:10.1016/j.learninstruc.2018.11.003.

6. Ryan, "Beyond Myth and Metaphor," 582.

Communication scholars Robert Razzante and J.W. Smith explain that "the degree to which a story resonates with an audience depends on the source's credibility."[7] A cancer survivor's life story may be more powerful than survival statistics when encouraging current patients. When using narrative as a persuasive tool, the communicator has to consider his or her own credibility. This comes into play with the intended scope of persuasion as well. DeHart, Kaplan, Pope, Mellis, and Bickel expound on this, saying that that "narratives may be personalized to the individual, such as matching demographic characteristics between the narrative subject and the target of the narrative."[8] If the communicator's intention is to persuade a single person, he or she can mold a narrative to make the story as relatable as possible to that individual. While communicators can tailor narratives individually, they also exist within different cultural contexts.

Because of humans' attachment to stories, narratives have the power to shape cultures. Brumer explains that "the normativeness of narrative, in a word, is not historically or culturally terminal. Its form changes with the preoccupations of the age and the circumstances surrounding its product."[9] Narratives have the power to grow and change as culture does. Archaeologist Ian Hodder adds that "it is particularly in the expressive, rather than the technical, areas of cultures that narratives are told."[10] Narratives bind cultural traditions together, and people learn about history through

---

7. Robert Razzante and J.W. Smith, "Rhetorical Re-Framing and Counter Narratives: An Ideological Critique of the Christian Hip-Hop Artist Lecrae Moore," *Ohio Communication Journal* 56 (March 2018): 59.

8. DeHart, et al., "The Experimental Tobacco Marketplace," 116.

9. Bruner, "The Narrative Construction of Reality," 16.

10. Ian Hodder, "The Narrative and Rhetoric of Material Culture Sequences," *World Archaeology* 25, no. 2 (October 1993): 269, doi:10.1080/00438243.1993.9980243.

learning stories. Humans use these narratives to make sense of ideas and events. Literary

scholars Marina Grishakova and Slim Sorokin agree with this, adding that "in culture,

narrative structures perform the functions of shaping, (re)organizing, storing and

activating information (pre-conceptual knowledge), enabling both its transmission and

changeability."[11] Because narratives are able to shift with a culture, communicators can

also link them together, forming what literature deems a metanarrative.

Metanarrative

Metanarratives are collections of narratives that reflect the values and experiences

of a culture. Religion and communication scholars Jeffry Halverson and Steven R.

Corman describe metanarratives as "transhistorical narratives that are deeply embedded

in a particular culture."[12] A metanarrative is an overarching story or idea that combines

elements from smaller narratives together. Cultural scholar Tsiftsi Xanthi explains that

"'meta' is Greek for a comprehensive idea that is beyond, behind, and transcendent,

something that exceeds usual limits."[13] So, a metanarrative is a narrative that exceeds the

usual scope of a narrative. Metanarratives tend to be broader in scope and more general in

content and, therefore, more relevant across an entire culture. Literary scholars John

Stephens and Robyn McCallum describe metanarratives as "global or totalizing cultural

narrative schemas which order and explain knowledge and experience."[14] Sociologist

---

11. Marina Grishakova and Slim Sorokin, "Notes on Narrative, Cognition, and Cultural Evolution," *Sign Systems Studies* 44, no. 4 (2016): 550, doi:10.12697/SSS.2016.44.4.04.

12 Jeffry Halverson and Steven R. Corman, *Master Narratives of Islamist Extremism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 14.

13. Tsiftsi Xanthi, "Libeskind and the Holocaust Metanarrative; from Discourse to Architecture," *Open Cultural Studies* no. 1 (2017): 292, doi:10.1515/culture-2017-0026.

14. John Stephens and Robyn McCallum, *Retelling Stories, Framing Culture: Traditional Story and Metanarratives in Children's Literature* (Abingdon, Virginia: Routledge, 2013), 6.

Isaac Ariail Reed adds to this idea, saying that metanarratives seek to "connect the experience of temporality by actors to a specific way of cognizing that temporality."[15] The goal of metanarratives is to explain and understand existence through stories. One example of a metanarrative is the American Dream. In the United States, many people's goals and aspirations are based on the belief that hard work and passion will get them anywhere and that equal opportunity is available for everyone. This idea is constructed by a metanarrative, a collection of stories from people who "made it" by achieving their dreams. Consciously or not, this metanarrative influences many people's culture and lives. Metanarratives have existed as long as people have, but the idea was first articulated in 1972 by Jean-François Lyotard.

Literary scholar Ali Gunes explains that Lyotard describes metanarratives as concepts that "attempt to provide a comprehensively accurate explanation and understanding of the world through the interpretation of various historical, social and cultural events, human knowledge and experience."[16] He sees metanarratives as a method of learning about the world through a combination of stories rooted in history and culture. Humanities scholar Sarah Witcomb Laiola adds that metanarratives "totalize all other narratives from [a] position of self-reflexive abstraction."[17] Metanarratives tend to be abstract because they are a comprehensive collection of historical and social understandings of culture. Even though cultures change and evolve over time, certain

15. Isaac Ariail Reed, "Deep Culture in Action: Resignification, Synecdoche, and Metanarrative in the Moral Panic of the Salem Witch Trials," *Theory and Society* 44, no. 1 (2015): 71.

16. Ali Gunes, "The Deconstruction of 'Metanarrative' of Traditional Detective Fiction in Martin Amis's Night Train: A Postmodern Reading," *Journal of History, Culture & Art Research / Tarih Kültür ve Sanat Arastirmalari Dergisi* 7, no. 2 (2018): 217, doi:10.7596/taksad.v7i2.1228.

17. Sarah Whitcomb Laiola, "Markup as Behavior toward Risk: Reforming the Metanarratives of Metadata through Susan Howe's Metafictive Poetics," *American Quarterly* 70, no. 3 (September 2018): 566, doi:10.1353/aq.2018.0035.

narratives that appeal to basic human needs and motivations can remain persuasive across generations. One example of such is the age-old story of the hero's journey.

The Hero's Journey

Named by literary scholar Joseph Campbell in 1949, the hero's journey is a storytelling structure made up of basic archetypes that countless human cultural myths and stories employ.[18] Campbell argues that humans in general gravitate to and are persuaded by similar things. According to education scholars Carsten Busch, Florian Conrad, and Martin Steinicke, Campbell also argues that all myths and stories "share the same underlying pattern."[19] Regardless of culture or language, this particular type of story is immersive and persuasive. Legal scholar Ruth Anne Robbins explains that Campbell's view is mainly rooted in psychology, specifically in the works of Carl Jung.[20] The hero's journey format is so popular because of its relatability, as the heroes of the story are often flawed in a way that is familiar for most people. Music therapist Atsuko Nadata adds that in Campbell's eyes, "myths and fairy tales are treasure troves of models for our individual psychological development."[21] Anyone who hears a story that follows the hero's journey is able to place themselves in the shoes of the hero, giving the story an added element of personal investment. But the role of the hero themselves is only one element of this narrative structure.

---

18. Joseph Campbell, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1949), 17.

19. Carsten Busch, Florian Conrad, and Martin Steinicke, "Digital Games and the Hero's Journey in Management Workshops and Tertiary Education," *Electronic Journal of E-Learning* 11, no. 1 (2013): 3.

20. Ruth Anne Robbins, "Harry Potter, Ruby Slippers, and Merlin: Telling The Client's Story Using The Characters And Paradigm Of The Archetypal Hero's Journey," *Seattle University Law Review* 29, no. 4 (2006), 773, doi:10.7282/T3668GG4.

21. Atsuko Nadata, "The Depiction of a Hero's Journey in Bonny Method of Gim Sessions," *Journal of the Association for Music & Imagery* 14 (January 2014): 62.

Campbell identified 17 steps and several archetypes in the hero's journey, each

functioning as part of a cyclical structure where the hero returns to his or her original

location at the end of the story.[22] Education scholars Jason Thomas Duffy and Douglas A.

Guiffrida explain that the 17 step format of the hero's journey can be explained in three

simple parts, which include "leaving what is known and comfortable, experiencing – with

the assistance of others – novelty and challenge, and a personal transformation of the

individual based on the new experiences encountered and the obstacles overcome."[23]

Sound familiar? Without having to think too hard, anyone could give examples of

popular stories that follow this basic structure; some that immediately come to mind

include Homer's *Odyssey*, the *Harry Potter* series, *Star Wars*, Spiderman comics,

Finding Nemo, *The Wizard of Oz*, and *To Kill A Mockingbird*, although there are

thousands more. Within this narrative structure, nursing scholar M.C. Smith explains,

"along the journey the hero is transformed from naïveté and innocence to deep

experience and enlightenment."[24] The hero's journey is essentially about how a person

grows and changes as a result of his or her experiences. Campbell defines the hero as "a

man or woman who has been able to battle past his personal and local historical

limitations" and become someone new.[25] Robbins adds that because the heroes generally

begin the journey as someone with flaws that keep them from reaching their full

---

22. GyuChan Lim and Jae-Dong Lee, "Storytelling Design for Collaborative Learning Based on the Hero's Journey," *International Journal of Software Engineering and Its Applications* 8, no. 8 (2014): 107.

23. Jason Thomas Duffy and Douglas A. Guiffrida, "The Heroic Supervisor: Using the Hero's Journey to Facilitate Development in Supervisors-in-Training," *Clinical Supervisor* 33, no. 2 (2014): 145, doi:10.1080/07325223.2014.978587.

24. M.C. Smith, "Health, Healing, and the Myth of the Hero Journey," *Advances in Nursing Science* 24, no. 4 (2002): 4.

25. Campbell, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, 18.

potential, they "represent a search for identity and wholeness."[26] This is part of why this kind of narrative is so persuasive.

Smith explains that the journey itself begins with a "call to adventure."[27] This call can be internal, like the need to start a new life, or external, like a crisis that forces the hero to change their way of life. Psychologists Scott T. Allison, George R. Goethals, Allyson R. Marrinan, Owen M. Parker, Smaragda P. Spyrou, and Madison Stein add that the "departure from the hero's familiar world represents a transformation of one's normal, safe environment."[28] After the hero leaves his or her environment, he or she meets some sort of powerful guide or mentor who provides the hero with necessary knowledge or equipment needed to face future opposition. Smith explains that this guide "may gift the hero with a talisman; an object imbued with special powers that will help along the journey."[29] This talisman is instrumental in the next phase of the journey. In this phase, education scholars Sarah O'Shea and Cathy Stone explain that the hero "embarks on a journey of adventure where they encounter trials and tests."[30] The hero faces some form of opposition, often in the form of a villain or all-powerful evil force. This is also the phase where the hero experiences true defeat, which must occur before he or she can transform.[31] This defeat can be an actual death or a metaphorical death of old beliefs or values.

26. Robbins, "Harry Potter, Ruby Slippers, and Merlin," 776.

27. Smith, "Health, Healing, and the Myth of the Hero Journey," 4.

28. Scott T. Allison, et al.,"The Metamorphosis of the Hero: Principles, Processes, and Purpose," *Frontiers in Psychology* 10 (2019): 2, doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2019.00606.

29. Smith, "Health, Healing, and the Myth of the Hero Journey," 5.

30. Sarah O'Shea and Cathy Stone, "The Hero's Journey: Stories of Women Returning to Education," *International Journal of the First Year in Higher Education* 5, no. 1 (2014): 83, doi:10.5204/intjfyhe.v5i1.186.

31. Lim and Lee, "Storytelling Design for Collaborative Learning Based on the Hero's Journey," 108.

After the transformation, Busch, Conrad, and Steinicke explain that through "learning by failing and mastering tests [the hero] finally gains an invaluable item or recovers lost knowledge."[32] This reward is what the journey ultimately leads up to. O'Shea and Stone describe the journey in terms of light and dark, saying that "as the hero travels there is a movement from dark to light, perhaps relative to a new enlightened state."[33] Once the hero gains the reward, he or she then returns to his or her original environment as a changed person. This final step brings the story full circle.

The power of the hero's journey comes from its popularity and cultural significance. Because the basic structure is present in many popular myths and stories, the format feels familiar, even if readers or viewers are not conscious of it. People are drawn to familiarity, which inherently makes a story based on the format more persuasive. Even using basic elements of the hero's journey will create a story that is bound to resonate with a wide audience. Campbell identified 17 steps and different archetypes that are part of the hero's journey, but these elements are descriptive, not prescriptive. Persuasive storytelling that uses the hero's journey format does not have to include all the elements to resonate with readers or viewers. Other scholars have adapted Campbell's format, adding or condensing steps and archetypes while still following the same general story arc.[34] Overall, stories and myths do not have to include all 17 steps in order to follow the hero's journey. Depending on the characteristics or format of the

---

32. Busch, Conrad, and Steinicke, "Digital Games and the Hero's Journey in Management Workshops and Tertiary Education," 3.

33. O'Shea and Stone, "The Hero's Journey," 83.

34. Christopher Vogler, *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers* (Studio City, CA: Michael Wiese Productions, 1996); and Carol Pearson, *The Hero Within: The Six Archetypes We Live By* (San Francisco, CA: Harper, 1993).

story, certain elements may be left out. In general, stories that follow this general metanarrative story arc – departure, challenge, and transformation – can still be just as persuasive due to the comforting familiarity of the storytelling structure.

<div align="center">**Conspiracy Narrative**</div>

In this chapter, I will analyze how the Flat Earth Society, MUFON, and 911truth.org use certain phases and archetypes from the hero's journey to construct a persuasive narrative. Specifically, I will dissect the language each organization uses to describe the reader as the hero, the organization itself as the mentor, and traditional beliefs as the challenge. All three organizations follow a similar structure, which I argue constructs a metanarrative under which all conspiracy organizations operate.

Becoming the Hero

The goal of each organization is to assign agency to the reader. The reader is the only one who can embark on his or her journey, and to start the journey, he or she must first accept his or her destiny. The Flat Earth Society states that on their website, the reader should "expect to find the skepticism and understanding needed to break free from the constraints of conventional dogmatic thinking and brave the pioneering waters of true science and learning."[35] They make several claims here. First, which I will discuss later in this chapter, they name traditional knowledge is the villain. Most importantly, they use vivid language like brave the pioneering waters to motive the reader to embark on a journey to discover truth. This puts responsibility on the reader to prepare him or herself with knowledge and find his or her truth. They continue on to state that "we, editors of

---

35. "Homepage," Flat Earth Wiki, accessed October 21, 2019, https://wiki.tfes.org/The_Flat_Earth_Wiki.

the FEW [Flat Earth Wiki], hope that you find the truth and erudition of these works, as so many before you have."[36] Again, the responsibility is put on the reader to find the truth in his or her resources. This gives the reader agency, creating the narrative that it is his or her responsibility to find the truth.

MUFON also assigns responsibility to the reader, stating that the organization's goal is to "make the general population aware of reports regarding alien visits and encounters. It is for you to decide if you believe."[37] Their role is to provide information, but the reader is the one who has decision-making power. On the page detailing famous past UFO sightings, they use similar language: "we invite believers as well as skeptics to review MUFON's case histories of these famous UFO cases and decide for themselves."[38] Again, the reader is expected to fill the role of the main decision-maker, not the organization. They define truth as something that is not objective, and it may look different from person to person. But, it is each person's responsibility to discover what his or her truth is. The homepage states that "you can help solve the UFO mystery,"[39] which speaks directly to the reader and convinces them of their role in the narrative. They also urge the reader to "join MUFON and help make the future happen today."[40] Again, this encourages the reader to become an active participant in the quest for truth.

36. "Homepage," Flat Earth Wiki.

37. "Accounts of Alien Beings," MUFON, accessed October 17, 2019, https://www.mufon.com/alien-beings/accounts-of-alien-beings.

38. "Famous UFO Cases," MUFON, accessed October 17, 2019, https://www.mufon.com/historical.html.

39. "Homepage," MUFON, accessed October 21, 2019, https://www.mufon.com

40. "What Do We Know After 50 Years?" MUFON, accessed October 21, 2019, https://www.mufon.com/what-mufon-knows.html

911truth.org encourages their readers to become heroes by emphasizing their role in spreading truth to society. 911 Truth grassroots coordinator James Hufferd very clearly states that once you believe that the United States government was behind 9/11 "you need to involve yourself actively and tirelessly in the work of informing everyone of that evidence in order to help to turn around the conventional wisdom on that vital subject."[41] Of the three organizations, 911truth.org is the most straightforward in their call to action. The same page tells readers "if, however, you want to do your share in compelling justice to prevail, we, the world, need you."[42] Finding the truth is not only necessary for the reader as an individual, it is important for the world as a whole. When thanking their readers for donating to the cause, 911truth.org asks that the readers "please accept our sincere appreciation for your courage, and your generosity, in the struggle for 9/11 Truth!"[43] The use of "courage" is especially interesting here because the adjective is often used to describe people who have faced challenges and found success. Referring to their cause as a "struggle" also creates the image of an ongoing battle between truth and lies.

All three organizations attempt to get the reader to take on the persona of the hero, the one who ultimately has the power to separate truth from lies. The organizations themselves are not claiming to be the heroes in their own narratives. Each one obviously advocates for a certain reality (i.e., the Earth is flat, aliens are real, the US government is behind 9/11), but they define their own roles as mentors instead of champions. In the

---

41. "Grassroots Contacts," 911truth.org, accessed October 17, 2019, https://911truth.org/grassroots-contacts/.

42. "Grassroots Contacts," 911truth.org.

43. "Donate," 911truth.org, accessed October 17, 2019, https://911truth.org/donate/.

hero's journey, mentors provide the hero with the skills and information needed to embark on a journey, but they do not have the decision-making power. By taking on the mentor role, these conspiracy organizations play a passive role in their own narratives.

Taking on the Mentor Role

All three organizations position themselves as conveyors of knowledge with the goal of equipping the reader to face opposition. The Flat Earth Society plainly states on the main page of their Wiki that they hope "the various flat Earth evidence and flat Earth maps guide your journeys to places wonderful and to ideas formerly unfathomable."[44] The editors even use storytelling language to explain the usefulness of their resources with words like "guide," "journeys," and "places." This language conjures the mental image of an actual adventure or journey on which the reader will embark. They continue on to add that the reader "must, at the very least, know exactly how conclusions were made about the world, and the strengths and weaknesses behind those deductions. Our society emphasizes the demonstration and explanation of knowledge."[45] Again, the Society places significance on the resources they provide, telling the reader to equip him or herself with knowledge before he or she can understand the way the world works. This makes the flat Earth sources seem like necessary knowledge that the reader has to understand before he or she can grow as a person.

The Flat Earth Society not only describes itself as a mentor; it also uses similar language to describe the conspiracy theory itself. On the first page of the Flat Earth Society Wiki, the website's extensive evidence archive, they personify the flat Earth

---

44. "Homepage," Flat Earth Wiki.

45. "Homepage," Flat Earth Wiki.

theory itself in an interesting way: "As people walked through the ages collecting data and knowledge, the Flat Earth Theory walked with them, growing wise and robust in kind."[46] This is a very vivid description of a mentor figure, using adjectives like "wise" and "robust" which are most commonly used to describe people worth emulating or admiring. Wisdom is traditionally associated with someone with experience or knowledge, and robust implies the strength to withstand attacks. Knowledge and strength are great gifts to give to a hero about to embark on a life-changing journey. Also the image of the theory "walking" with society conveys the feeling of familiarity and steadfastness, traditionally associated with trusted mentor figures.

MUFON's mentorship narrative focuses on the concept of togetherness. Their homepage invites all readers in, saying "Whether you have UFO reports to share, armchair UFO investigator aspirations, or want to train and join our investigation team, MUFON is here for you."[47] They present themselves as a friendly and accepting companion who is willing to offer help at any point in the reader's journey. They continue on to state that their goal is to "be the inquisitive minds' refuge seeking answers to that most ancient question, 'Are we alone in the universe?'"[48] The specific choice of "refuge" creates the image of the organization as a safehouse, a place where the reader can feel accepted and cared for. Like the Flat Earth Society, MUFON presents the search for knowledge as a journey, but they emphasize their involvement in the journey as well. They state that "MUFON is already leading the charge to solve the UFO mystery once and for all. and you are invited to join us on this great journey as both a member and

---

46. "Homepage," Flat Earth Wiki.
47. "Homepage," MUFON.
48. "Homepage," MUFON.

active participant."[49] The "great journey" is once again the search for knowledge and truth, and the formal invitation creates their image as a guide. The organization's homepage very plainly states, "won't you please join us in our quest to discover the truth?"[50] Again, they emphasize that the reader and the organization are in this together, while also creating the narrative that the reader must go on a journey to understand truth.

MUFON also refers to their resources and tools as knowledge the readers can equip themselves with. On their website research page, MUFON "invites you to explore our website to increase your knowledge of as well as your interest in UFOs and ETs."[51] MUFON again presents knowledge as something that is valuable and necessary when the reader is trying to discover the truth. They also present their training sessions in the same manner, saying that by exploring the organization's resources, the reader will "soon be able to recognize what is contrived and what is genuine."[52] The reader needs this skill in order to embark on his or her journey and discover what is truth. MUFON offers the reader the resources that he or she will need to face challenges later on in the journey.

911truth.org also presents their resources as essential knowledge. One of their mission statements is "to advance the insight" that power is being abused in the United States.[53] Their goal as an organization is to guide the reader to the truth, giving him or her the knowledge needed to see the truth of what really happened. They also state, "knowledge, as differentiated from merely having a hunch or an opinion, is an invaluable

49. "A Brief History of MUFON," MUFON, accessed October 17, 2019, https://www.mufon.com/history.html.

50. "Homepage," MUFON.

51. "MUFON's UFO, ET Research Tracing Tools," MUFON, accessed October 17, 2019, https://www.mufon.com/research.html.

52. "MUFON's UFO, ET Research Tracing Tools," MUFON.

53. "Our Mission," 911truth.org, accessed October 21, 2019, https://911truth.org/mission/

commodity in this tormented age, to be wholeheartedly invested and shared with everyone in sight."[54] Here, they describe knowledge, specifically the knowledge provided on their website, as something that is rare but essential to succeeding in the quest for truth. 911truth.org also sets themselves apart from other information sources, describing themselves as "a small group of committed truth advocates" who have "worked tirelessly over the years to compile this historical record, not found in either establishment history books or mainstream media."[55] Similar to the previous organizations, this emphasis of their history creates the image of a mentor who has extensive experience, making them seem more trustworthy and knowledgeable. 911truth.org describes themselves as "extraordinarily effective in reaching the public, sparking involvement and raising awareness of deception, cover-up and the need for investigation and action."[56] Besides establishing themselves as an effective organization, the emphasis on "sparking involvement" speaks to their success in inciting action. People measure the success of mentors by the success of their mentees, and 911truth.org argues that they are a successful mentor because they have spread their message to so many people. On the donation page, they state that they believe "truth always wins, and that light always overcomes darkness . . . always. Thank you for your part in shining that light."[57] Not only are they setting up a narrative centered around a fight between good and evil, they are bringing in the reader as an active participant. Saying that the reader plays a "part" also

54. "Grassroots Contacts," 911truth.org.

55. "Donate," 911truth.org.

56. "About Us," 911truth.org, accessed October 21, 2019, https://911truth.org/about-us/

57. "Donate," 911truth.org.

implies that he or she is helping as well, which establishes the reader's role as another active participant in the quest for truth.

All three organizations establish themselves as a mentor to the reader, a guide who will train him or her to face opposition once he or she begins his or her journey. Once the mentor role is filled, the organizations aim to equip the reader with the knowledge needed to face upcoming challenges. This knowledge acts as the talisman in the hero's journey narrative, the object or knowledge needed to overcome whatever the hero will face in the future. In the narrative all three organizations construct, the upcoming challenges come from traditional scientific and historical beliefs. This narrative positions traditions as the villain, focused on keeping the hero from achieving his or her goal.

Challenging Tradition

For conspiracy beliefs to be accepted, the reader must reject traditional beliefs and knowledge. To believe the Earth is flat, one must actively discount thousands of years of scientific research. To believe in the existence of UFOs, one has to refuse the official statements of the CIA. And to believe that the US government is behind 9/11, one must not believe actual witnesses, government officials, and media reports. Asking someone to turn his or her back on years of research is a big ask. To convince the reader that his or her previous beliefs are wrong, the Flat Earth Society, MUFON, and 911truth.org consistently work to discredit traditional beliefs. Rejecting these beliefs becomes easier if one no longer sees authoritative sources as credible.

The Flat Earth Society focuses on discrediting foundational science by claiming that it is not "real science" and is founded on biased research. In fact, the Society's

rejection of traditional or historical evidence of a round Earth is mostly based on the fact

that it cannot be verified "scientifically." The page renouncing astronomy as a legitimate

form of science states that "the astronomer can only observe and interpret – a scientific

fallacy which hinders truth and progress."[58] They continue on to argue that "without

experimentation, the steps of the Scientific Method are unable to be fulfilled. The

researcher of the science is left in the dark to build one hypothesis upon the next: a

'house of cards' model of nature without solid empirical foundations."[59] This refers to the

astronomers' inability to physically test in their area of study, as they cannot experiment

on the stars or the planets. To argue the validity of the Coriolis Effect, the Society

similarly states that "all articles and documents presented in favor of the 'Coriolis Effect'

are without reference to, or demonstration of, the critical and necessary experimental

evidence to directly prove the matter."[60] They claim that science is based in

experimentation, so if there is no physical evidence, a claim cannot be true. These claims

call the reader to question the scientific validity of foundational science, based on the

Society's proposed definition of valid research.

One of the biggest hurdles the Flat Earth Society has to overcome is convincing

the reader to discredit space exploration. NASA is the greatest challenge to the Society

because it is considered the authority on scientific research, not to mention the possession

of photographic evidence of a round Earth. To remove NASA's credibility, the Flat Earth

Society presents space travel as a conspiracy. Ironic, is it not? There is an entire page on

---

58. "Astronomy is a Pseudoscience," Flat Earth Wiki, last updated October 3, 2019, https://wiki.tfes.org/Astronomy_is_a_Pseudoscience.

59. "Astronomy is a Pseudoscience," Flat Earth Wiki.

60. "The Coriolis Effect," Flat Earth Wiki, last updated September 5, 2019, https://wiki.tfes.org/Coriolis_Effect.

the Wiki dedicated to "The Conspiracy," which is "the blanket term most commonly used by proponents of Zeteticism to refer to the active faking of space travel."[61] The Society attempts to discredit the entire organization by claiming its mission inaccurate. If there is no space travel, NASA does not have a purpose as an organization. Just using the term "conspiracy" convinces the reader to adopt a negative view of the organization itself, as the label is generally used to discredit a belief.

On the topic of NASA, the Society also attempts to remove its credibility by claiming biased research, saying that "the earth is portrayed as round in NASA media because NASA thinks it's round. They are not running a real space program, so they wouldn't know what shape the earth truly takes."[62] The condescending tone removes credibility as well. The Society does not consider NASA to be credible because they are an organization that needs funding to operate. Based on their logic, a corporation like that cannot be credible because "corporations are driven by profit, not the pursuit of knowledge or truth."[63] Villainizing corporations as a whole is an attempt to make the reader challenge his or her previous beliefs and biases. In terms of the photographic evidence of a round earth, the Flat Earth Society flat out rejects the credibility of photos in general. The FAQ page states that the Society "does not lend much credibility to photographic evidence. It is too easily manipulated and altered . . . the sources are so inaccurate it's difficult to build an argument on them in either case."[64] It must be

61. "The Conspiracy," Flat Earth Wiki, last updated December 26, 2015, https://wiki.tfes.org/Zeteticism

62. The Conspiracy," Flat Earth Wiki.

63. "Homepage," Flat Earth Society.

64. "Frequently Asked Questions," Flat Earth Wiki, last updated August 14, 2019, https://wiki.tfes.org/Flat_Earth_-_Frequently_Asked_Questions

mentioned here that other pages on the website use photos to prove the Society's

arguments, so it seems as though they only employ this view when convenient.

MUFON assigns the United States government the position of the villain.

MUFON was founded after closure of Project Blue Book, so the organization does not

view the investigation in a positive light. A message from MUFON director Jan Harzan

states that "the official summary 'finding' of Project Blue Book's 12,618 reports left a

staggering 701 reported sightings unexplained as the program was shuttered."[65] The

quotations around "finding" are especially powerful here, as they trivialize the official

statement from the investigation while also conveying the lack of respect MUFON has

for the decision. On the page detailing MUFON's history, they report that the

government funded a UFO research study and closed Project Blue Book after the study

was inconclusive. They write that "the press didn't bother to look at the details of the

study and reacted only to Condon's [research head] summary of the study by using the

media to declare that the UFO mystery was solved."[66] This statement removes credibility

from the government by stating that they did not fulfill their jobs, failing to look into

research and relying only on media statements.

MUFON also removes credibility from the government by describing them as an

unresponsive authority figure. On a page detailing a prominent UFO sighting case,

MUFON states that the witnesses "felt that they had been stonewalled in some of their

FOIA [Freedom of Information Act] requests by some government agencies."[67] Reliable

65. "Director's Message," MUFON, last updated January 8, 2019, https://www.mufon.com/directors-message.

66. "A Brief History of MUFON," MUFON.

67. "Stephenville, TX – 2008," MUFON, accessed October 17, 2019, https://www.mufon.com/stephenvilletx---2008.html.

organizations are responsive and understanding, so including the government's lack of response is an attempt to discredit them. When commenting on another sighting case, MUFON states that "the FAA [Federal Aviation Administration] stance concludes that the sighting was caused by a weather phenomenon and that the agency would not be investigating the incident . . . many witnesses interviewed by the *Tribune* were apparently 'upset' that federal officials declined to further investigate the matter."[68] Including the witnesses' dissatisfaction with the decision furthers MUFON's argument that the government cannot be trusted when it comes to exposing the truth about UFOs.

MUFON also villainizes critics of ufology as a whole. MUFON refers to those who criticize the field of study as "armchair-researching, done chiefly via the daily newspapers that enjoy feature-writing the antics of the more extreme of such subgroups."[69] Belittling the critics causes the reader to be less likely to take the opposition seriously. The page on ufology even states very clearly that "the critics [of UFO reports] knew little about the sightings and should thus not be taken seriously."[70] As far as academic criticism goes, MUFON takes little offense, describing the general academic view of ufology as "arrogant and dismissive, or bound to a rigid world view that disallows any evidence contrary to previously held notions."[71] This vilifies academics as well, which causes the reader to rethink what he or she believes to be true.

911truth.org sets up the official story of 9/11 as the challenge the hero must overcome. One of the organization's missions is to "to expose the official lies and cover-

---

68. "Chicago O'Hare UFO – 2006," MUFON, accessed October 17, 2019, https://www.mufon.com/chicago-ohare-ufo---2006.html.

69. "What is Ufology?," MUFON, accessed October 21, 2019, https://www.mufon.com/ufology.html

70. "What is Ufology?" MUFON.

71. "What is Ufology?" MUFON.

up surrounding the events of September 11th, 2001."[72] They state very plainly that the government and media are deliberately lying to the public. Montesanti argues that "the story put forward by the government of how the attacks unfolded without a response from our trillion-dollar defense establishment contains hundreds of contradictions and outright lies."[73] It cannot be stated more simply than that. 911truth.org accuses the government of deception, so the reader is called to look back on the official story of the event with this new perspective. An article by Roberts states that "the success that the CIA has had in stigmatizing skepticism of government explanations has made it difficult to investigate State Crimes Against Democracy (SCAD) such as 9/11."[74] They describe the CIA as protecting the government image instead of protecting the public or the truth. Larkson's article on post-9/11 interviews furthers this idea, stating that "the investigation and final report ignored or spun important evidence and witnesses, as well as the vast majority of the questions posed by the Family Steering Committee."[75] Describing the government as untrustworthy presents the idea that the reader, or the hero, will undoubtedly be faced with the decision to believe or not believe official government statements in the future.

However, challenges also come from not only the government, but news media as well. Montesanti states that "many mainstream newspapers, reporters and news agencies reported some facts accurately. However, that being said, others misrepresented and intentionally manipulated their reporting and the facts to promote the government's

72. "Our Mission," 911truth.org, accessed October 21, 2019, https://911truth.org/mission/

73. Edu Montesanti, "9/11, 16 Years Later: No Memory, No Truth, No Justice," 911truth.org, September 11, 2017, http://911truth.org/9-11-16-years-later/.

74. Paul Craig Roberts, "Are You a Mind Controlled CIA Stooge?" 911truth.org, September 6, 2019, https://911truth.org/are-you-a-mind-controlled-cia-stooge/.

75. Larson, "We Were Lied to About 9/11: The Interviews."

conspiracy theory."[76] Again, readers see the use of the term conspiracy theory as a negative descriptor. Similar to the Flat Earth Society, 911truth.org uses the term to assign doubt and disbelief regarding the authority organization in the reader's minds. Roberts uses even stronger language to describe news organizations, saying that "TruePublica, a British website that has avoided the 9/11 issue, has had its fill of ignorant journalists at the BBC, *Huffington Post* and other propagandists for the military/security complex."[77] If the journalists are ignorant, then their reports are not factual or believable. In perhaps the most colorfully stated opinion, a staff-penned article about including 9/11 truth resources in public libraries states that "libraries still have the advantage of operating under the radar of society at large, including the massive propaganda machine that distracts us and kills our interest in being thoughtful, active citizens."[78] Again, this presents the media and government as negative organizations actively working against truth and justice, which is what 911truth.org calls their readers to seek.

The Quest for Truth

All three of these conspiracy organizations construct narratives that include elements of the hero's journey. Although it seems to be unintentional, constructing their narratives based on a historically popular and persuasive narrative structure makes the conspiracy theories themselves seem more plausible, which speaks not only to the persuasive power of narrative but also to why conspiracy theory beliefs are on the rise. Humans are drawn to storytelling, so using narrative elements in argumentation may be a

---

76. Montesanti, "9/11, 16 Years Later."

77. Paul Craig Roberts, "A Majority of Americans Do Not Believe the Official 9/11 Story," 911truth.org, January 11, 2019, http://911truth.org/americans-do-not-believe-official-911-story/.

78. Staff, "9/11 Truth and Public Libraries," 911truth.org, September 18, 2017, https://911truth.org/9-11-truth-movement-public-libraries/.

reason why more people subscribe to marginalized beliefs. It is also fascinating that all three organizations construct very similar narratives, despite operating in entirely different conspiracy sectors. By using similar archetypes from the hero's journey, these organizations work together to create a metanarrative I have named "the quest for truth."

This metanarrative reveals interesting views about American culture as a whole. Assigning the reader or viewer the role of the hero highlights the prevalence of postmodernism in today's society. The idea that truth is something each person must individually discover for him or herself is a central belief in the postmodern worldview. The call to adventure phase of the constructed narrative is the organizations' plea to the reader to discover what truth means to him or her. The journey would be meaningless if the organizations viewed truth as objective. Additionally, every organization regards truth as the hero's reward, the goal that is worth braving opposition for. The definition of truth differs for each organization, but the general idea is that once the hero discovers the truth, he or she will undergo a transformation into a conspiracy believer. In the constructed narrative, the cyclical story will lead the reader back to his or her original position after researching about the Earth, aliens, or 9/11, but he or she will return with a completely different worldview. Hence, the "quest for truth" implies that finding truth will be a battle that involves struggling against criticism and oppositions.

The constructed metanarrative also suggests a growing mistrust in authority organizations across American culture. Whether it is NASA, the CIA, or the news media, conspiracy organizations argue that authoritative organizations actively prevent the spread of truth to the public. Pitting the hero against all traditional knowledge and authority organizations places the hero at the center of his or her own story, with no other

figure above them. These organizations argue that a person can only trust him or herself and the conspiracy organization.

Restructuring society views in this authority-defying way has the potential to turn entire worldviews on their heads; if the government is lying about aliens and 9/11, who knows what else they are lying about? If the Earth really is flat, how many other beliefs about the world might be incorrect? How does one know where the questioning should end? The organizations do not offer further explanations for what the reader should and should not believe outside of the conspiracy beliefs, so this shift could lead the reader down a very long and confusing path. If the reader does not have the critical thinking skills necessary to distinguish trustworthy sources from untrustworthy sources, finding truth will be especially difficult.

Based on my analysis, the use of the hero's journey as a narrative structure helps these conspiracy organizations present their views and arguments in a way that is persuasive and familiar to the reader. Because humans are attracted to storytelling, employing narrative elements allows these organizations to present their views in an easily understandable way. So how do conspiracy organizations persuade people to see conspiracy theories as truth? By applying my findings to a broader scale, conspiracy organizations use storytelling elements to present truth as something worth fighting for. Truth is something that is individual, and the quest for truth will involve pushback from authority organizations. This rationalizes the experiences readers might encounter when they subscribe to conspiracy beliefs. By rejecting foundational knowledge about their world and authority organizations, readers will be faced with opposition and criticism. But the presented narrative prepares the reader for this experience and validates his or her

concerns, convincing him or her that truth can only be achieved by embarking on a challenging journey.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

Conspiracy theories are deeply embedded in American culture, especially in our

current society. The general public has become more fascinated with conspiracy theories

over time, as is reflected in the growing membership of the three organizations I have

discussed in this thesis. Research has shown that conspiracy believers often belong to

fringe societal groups that lack social power and see their beliefs as a reach for

uniqueness.[1] Those who already feel ignored or mistreated by people in power are more

likely to adopt conspiracy theories, especially because most conspiracy theories attempt

to explain an event or idea as part of a sinister plot by powerful organizations.[2] This is

evident in Flat Earth Society's mistrust of NASA, MUFON's criticisms of the CIA, and

911truth.org's rejection of the American government's official 9/11 story. Conspiracy

theories in general tend to gain popularity during times of crisis by offering explanations

and answers, however farfetched. And, with the rise of the internet and social media,

these explanations have never been more readily available.

The digital age has benefitted society in many ways, including worldwide cultural

connections, increased knowledge, and incredible technological advancement. However,

the growth of the internet and social media has tremendously increased the amount of

---

1. Roland Imhoff and Pia Karoline Lamberty, "Too Special to Be Duped: Need for Uniqueness Motivates Conspiracy Beliefs," *European Journal of Social Psychology* 47, no. 6 (October 2017): 726, doi:10.1002/ejsp.2265.

2. Patrick J. Leman and Marco Cinnirella, "Beliefs in Conspiracy Theories and the Need for Cognitive Closure," *Frontiers in Psychology* 4 (June 2013): 1, doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2013.00378.

information the average American is exposed to. While this has many advantages, the availability has grown so fast that our society has not been able to develop the proper tools to distinguish facts from misinformation. Especially with the recent epidemic of "fake news," people no longer know who they can trust. President Trump's frequent use of the term "fake news" adds a new layer of connotation to the term, and it is now widely used to describe misinformation spread by news or social media. When people no longer feel as though they can trust authority organizations, they turn to other information sources. While it was once difficult to find others who share one's more marginalized views, it is now easier than ever due to the internet. Online communities, specifically conspiracy theory communities, have the power to create a shared consciousness, influencing each other's views without the need for physical proximity. Being part of a community offers belief validation and belonging, which can change the way a person responds to challenges. If you know you have support for your belief, you are more likely to speak up in its defense.

My analysis examined how these online conspiracy communities create and defend their arguments in an attempt to understand why conspiracy theories are so persuasive. I chose to analyze the rhetoric of the Flat Earth Society, MUFON, and 911truth.org because they are the largest and most influential conspiracy organizations within their separate conspiracy theory communities. I chose these three specifically because they represent three different categories of conspiracies (i.e., historical events, science denialism, scientific research). In my analysis, I found no significant difference in the way these organizations make and defend their arguments, even though they operate under different worldviews. From this, we can assume that most, if not all, conspiracy

organizations choose to frame themselves and their sources as credible and follow the

general narrative format of the hero's journey in an attempt to be persuasive to their

website readers. I doubt that these organizations made the conscious choice to use these

types of argumentation so consistently, but it is interesting that each organization makes

similar arguments. This might be because they are all targeting the same audience:

members of fringe society groups with an already present distrust of authority. The

organizations may know what type of argumentation is most persuasive to their audience,

so they all use that type of argumentation to appeal to them.

Framing

All three organizations use different types of language to frame themselves as

credible in what I call the "reliability frame." The Flat Earth Society uses words

associated with intelligence and freedom to do two things. First, they attempt to combat

criticisms by establishing themselves as a place for intellectual discussion. Conspiracy

believers often view authority organizations as too one-sided, telling people what to

believe without offering feedback. The Society highlights their willingness to hear

criticisms as a way to make themselves more credible in the eyes of their audience.

MUFON repeatedly uses words associated with scientific validity to prove their worth as

a credible member of the scientific community. With a page dedicated to the scientific

method and a detailed research process, MUFON mimics the language and presentation

of other scientific communities to argue they should receive the same credibility. Similar

to the Flat Earth Society, they open themselves to discussion from experts and amateurs

alike, presumably to also differentiate themselves from "oppressive" authority

organizations. 911truth.org highlights their media exposure to build credibility. Without

specifying whether the coverage was positive or negative, they mention every news organization that has covered the 9/11 truth message. They also have an entire page on their website dedicated to celebrity endorsements. Their argument is based on their level of exposure, leaning on the belief that well-known ideas are more likely to be true. Their exposure also proves 911truth.org's relevance because if major news organizations and celebrities are talking about them, 911truth.org has some level of influence.

However, personal credibility is only half the battle. Each organization uses similar language to present their own resources and supporting material as credible in what I call the "source credibility frame." The Flat Earth Society provides a huge collection of resources discussing every imaginable criticism of the flat Earth theory, but the credibility of their sources is weakly constructed. They primarily use passive language to argue validity, citing common knowledge without pinpointing the actual source. Very few of their resources actually address criticisms about their weak argumentation, so the website relies on pretense alone to be convincing. MUFON proves their source credibility in a comparably vague way. They use circular reasoning to establish credibility, repeatedly calling sources "credible" without explaining how or what factors determine credibility in their eyes. MUFON also uses supposed common knowledge as supporting material without pinpointing the source, just like the Flat Earth Society. They also reference the military or government backgrounds of sources or UFO witnesses to make the readers see them as more credible. Given the general attitude of conspiracy theory believers toward authority organizations, it is interesting that they choose to emphasize this to build credibility. 911truth.org does not build credibility so much as claim their resources are the truth. Their repeated use of the word "truth" to

define their sources shows that they attempt to build credibility without making a credibility argument. Saying a message is the truth is making another claim instead of supporting one. 911truth.org also presents truth as something that is difficult to understand and grasp, which also aligns with the narrative element of their argumentation.

<div align="center">**Narratives**</div>

The Flat Earth Society, MUFON, and 911truth.org all incorporate narrative elements of the hero's journey to persuade readers to accept the organizations' beliefs. The readers take on the position of the hero, the chosen ones who must embark on a journey to discover truth. Each organization assigns the reader decision-making power. Because truth is something each person has to discover for him or herself, finding truth is an individual journey. But the readers do not brave their adventures alone. The organizations take on a mentorship role. By arguing their own credibility, they position themselves as the wide guides who can help. Readers must first view the organization as trustworthy before they can consider it as a mentor, so it is necessary for the organizations to present themselves as wise and knowledgeable. Each organization also emphasizes the usefulness of their resources. In this narrative structure, the websites function as the talisman, or the gift from a mentor that helps the heroes defend against challenges. Building the credibility of their sources allows the organizations to persuade readers of their knowledge's value. Said knowledge will help the readers defend themselves against challenges to their beliefs, which comes in the form of tradition and foundational beliefs.

In the hero's journey, the hero must fight against challenges to gain the reward he or she is searching for. The Flat Earth Society, MUFON, and 911truth.org name authority organizations as the villains in their narratives. NASA, the CIA, the United States government, and major news organizations have the power to shape reality for most people due to their societal influence. These conspiracy organizations attempt to remove credibility from those in power by arguing their active role in deception. The Flat Earth Society argues that NASA operates on a false mission. MUFON argues that the CIA is unresponsive to credible inquiries, and 911truth.org accuses the United States government of covering up the true story of what happened on 9/11. Not only does each conspiracy organization attempt to destroy these powerful groups' authority, but they also try to convince the readers of the challenges they will face from said people in power.

The reader's goal, according to this narrative, is to ultimately find truth. Although the organizations do not state it outright, the assumption is that the "truth" the readers find comes from accepting the belief of each conspiracy theory. Once the readers become believers, they return to their original position with a whole new perspective. Because the Flat Earth Society, MUFON, and 911truth.org constructed surprisingly similar narratives, I argue that together they create "the quest for truth." This is a metanarrative that argues everyone should desire to discover truth and that finding that truth will involve a struggle against established tradition. So what does this mean for American society?

Implications

The popularity of conspiracy theories in general reveals that society is becoming increasingly skeptical of authority organizations. Because of "fake news" and the availability of information and connection on the internet, people feel as though they

must question everything, even sources they previously viewed as unquestionable authorities. The conspiracy organizations examined in this thesis take steps to build their own credibility to fill that authority role for the reader. Regardless of the strength of their arguments, positioning themselves as a mentor or authority allows them to have influence over their readers. An overwhelming amount of information is available at the click of a button, and if people do not have the critical thinking skills necessary to filter this information, it is easy to become confused and misinformed. From my analysis, it seems as though some people are being persuaded by weak constructions of credibility and circular arguments that masquerade as strong argumentation. Postmodern views only add to this issue.

Postmodernism does not define an objective truth. Because reality is subjective in this worldview, it can be even more difficult to determine fact from fiction. Therefore, one can reject a view or explanation based on the fact that it does not fit his or her reality. Postmodern views do not lend definite credibility to scientific research because no finding can be defended as 100 percent true for each person. This worldview takes away credibility from authority organizations and traditional beliefs, which attracts conspiracy viewpoints. In postmodernism, each person's experiences shape his or her own reality. This is perhaps why the narrative structure of the hero's journey is so persuasive. When conspiracy organizations assign readers the role of heroes, they are asking them to seek truth, which will in turn shape the readers' perceptions of their own realities.

Without the ability to trust tradition or authority organizations, we become our own benchmark of what is true. By taking postmodernism to the extreme, I can determine for myself what is true or not, and if I decide that the Earth is flat, then the Earth is flat. If

my reality is based on my experiences (resources provided by conspiracy organizations), then who can tell me my reality is wrong? Postmodernism creates the perfect environment for conspiracy views to thrive, and the social epidemic of fake news and unreliability offers no help.

The Future of Critical Thinking

Although conspiracy theories are becoming more popular, they are still generally viewed as extremist or marginalized viewpoints. Conspiracies still have a negative reputation among the general public, and conspiracy beliefs are not praised or respected in most social circles. However, there could be a change in the future if they continue to gain attention. From my analysis, I found that conspiracy organizations are not able to prove why their sources are credible using strong argumentation. All organizations have a library of resources that the readers can browse, which gives the pretense of a well-researched idea. But when a reader analyzes the sources, none of the organizations are able to actually prove why the sources are credible.

This speaks to the importance of developing critical thinking skills. With social media and the internet, people have become more likely to take things at face value without double-checking the source or validating the information. Social media is a particularly open platform, so anyone can post almost anything without regulation. Misinformation has never been more readily available. Without the skills to identify weaknesses in an argument or credibility standards, it becomes impossible to separate the truth from the lies. Conspiracy theories have a reputation for being illogical and fragmented, but this reputation might change as people are willing to overlook more and more logical gaps.

It is important to understand the way conspiracy organizations present their arguments because their methods reveal how fringe groups, and maybe even society in general, can be persuaded to believe something that is not well-supported. Even by using vague, passive language to claim source credibility, organizations are able to convince thousands of people of the legitimacy of their resources. The persuasive power of the hero's journey is well-represented across all aspects of culture, even in ideologies. The fact that people can be persuaded to believe the Earth is flat because of this constructed narrative shows that storytelling can be more powerful and influential than strong, credible arguments.

To defend against weak argumentation, critical thinking skills must be more developed within the context of the digital age. Conspiracy theories are not the only worldviews with logical flaws, so learning how to identify persuasive narrative elements and framing methods can help build resistance toward misinformation. Especially with the abundance of online resources at our fingertips, critical thinking skills are essential to building strong decision-making skills and judgements about credibility. Understanding what sources are credible allows people to know who or what they can trust, which can positively influence their future decisions. To put it in the context of the hero's journey, every person needs to understand what makes a good mentor, so he or she can head down a bright and safe path to adventure.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Agger, Ben. "Critical Theory, Poststructuralism, Postmodernism: Their Sociological Relevance." *Annual Review of Sociology* 17, no. 1 (1991): 105-131. http://www.uta.edu/huma/illuminations/agger2.htm.

Allison, Scott T, George R. Goethals, Allyson R. Marrinan, Owen M. Parker, Smaragda P. Spyrou, and Madison Stein. "The Metamorphosis of the Hero: Principles, Processes, and Purpose." *Frontiers in Psychology* 10 (2019): 1-14. doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2019.00606.

Bauer, Henry H. "Anomalistics, Pseudo-Science, Junk Science, Denialism: Corollaries of the Role of Science in Society." *Journal of Scientific Exploration* 28, no. 1 (Spring 2014): 95-111.

Bishop, Tom. "On 'Behind the Curve'." Flat Earth Society Forum. March 1, 2019. https://forum.tfes.org/index.php?topic=13824.0.

Blake, Joseph A. "Ufology: The Intellectual Development And Social Context of The Study of Unidentified Flying Objects." *Sociological Review* 27 (May 1979): 315-37. doi:10.1111/j.1467-954X.1979.tb00067.x.

Boyles, Nancy, and M. Scherer. "Closing In On Close Reading." *On Developing Readers: Readings from Educational Leadership, EL Essentials* (2012): 89-99.

Bruner, Jerome. "The Narrative Construction of Reality." *Critical Inquiry* 18, no. 1 (1991): 1-21.

Busch, Carsten, Florian Conrad, and Martin Steinicke. "Digital Games and the Hero's Journey in Management Workshops and Tertiary Education." *Electronic Journal of E-Learning* 11, no. 1 (2013): 3-15.

Caldwell, David, and Peter R. White. "That's Not a Narrative; This Is a Narrative: NAPLAN and Pedagogies of Storytelling." *Australian Journal of Language & Literacy* 40, no. 1 (2017): 16-27.

Campbell, Joseph. *The Hero With a Thousand Faces.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1949. 1-497.

Caputo, Richard, William Epstein, David Stoesz, and Bruce Thyer. "Postmodernism: A Dead End in Social Work Epistemology." *Journal of Social Work Education* 51, no. 4 (October-December 2015): 638-47. doi:10.1080/10437797.2015.1076260.

Cârlan, Alexandru, and Mălina Ciocea. "Media Deliberation on Intra-EU Migration. A Qualitative Approach to Framing Based on Rhetorical Analysis." *Romanian Journal of Communication and Public Relations* 16, no. 3 (December 2014): 73-87.

Clary, Deidre, and Michelle Bannister-Tyrrell. "Harnessing Research-Based Practices to Critique 'Truth.'" *Literacy Learning: The Middle Years* 26, no. 3 (October 2028): 26-36.

Colliander, Jonas. "'This Is Fake News': Investigating the Role of Conformity to Other Users' Views When Commenting on and Spreading Disinformation in Social Media. *Computers in Human Behavior* 97 (August 1, 2019): 202-15. doi:10.1016/j.chb.2019.03.032.

D'Angelo, Paul, and Jim A. Kuypers. *Doing News Framing Analysis: Empirical and Theoretical Perspectives.* Abingdon: Routledge, 2009. 1-392.

Dagnall, Neil, Kenneth Drinkwater, Andrew Parker, Andrew Denovan and Megan Parton. "Conspiracy Theory and Cognitive Style: A Worldview." *Frontiers in Psychology* 6 (February 2015): 1-9. doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2015.00206.

Davidson, Brittany I., Simon L. Jones, Adam N. Joinson, and Joanne Hinds. "The Evolution of Online Ideological Communities." *PLoS ONE* 14, no. 5 (May 2019): 1-25. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0216932.

DeHart, W. Brady, Brent A. Kaplan, Derek A. Pope, Alexandra M. Mellis, and Warren K. Bickel. "The Experimental Tobacco Marketplace: Narrative Influence on Electronic Cigarette Substitution." *Experimental and Clinical Psychopharmacology* 27, no. 2 (2019): 115-24. doi:10.1037/pha0000233.supp.

Duffy, Jason Thomas, and Douglas A. Guiffrida. "The Heroic Supervisor: Using the Hero's Journey to Facilitate Development in Supervisors-in-Training." *Clinical Supervisor* 33, no. 2 (2014): 144-62. doi:10.1080/07325223.2014.978587.

Edy, Jill A., and Erin E. Risley-Baird. "Rumor Communities: The Social Dimensions of Internet Political Misperceptions." *Social Science Quarterly* 97, no. 3 (September 2016): 588-602. doi:10.1111/ssqu.12309.

Eghigian, Greg. "Making UFOs Make Sense: Ufology, Science, and the History of Their Mutual Mistrust." *Public Understanding of Science* 26, no. 5 (July 2017): 612-26.

Elder, Linda, and Richard Paul, "Critical Thinking . . . and the Art of Close Reading, Part IV." *Journal of Developmental Education* 28, no. 2 (2004): 36-37.

Entman, Robert M. "Media Framing Biases and Political Power: Explaining Slant in News of Campaign 2008." *Journalism* 11, no. 4 (August 2010): 389-408. doi:10.1177/1464884910367587.

Everett, Matt. "9/11: The Greatest Lie Ever Told." *Journal of Psychohistory* 38, no. 2 (Fall 2010): 133–67.

FEIC. "Flat Earth International Conference." Accessed September 29, 2019. http://fe2017.com/.

Flat Earth Society. "About." Accessed October 17, 2019. https://www.tfes.org.

-----. "Members List." Last updated 2019. https://www.theflatearthsociety.org/ home/index.php/about-the-society/membership-register.

Flat Earth Society Forum. "Engineers in on Conspiracy Too?" Last updated September 9, 2011. http://web.archive.org/web/20190415221702/https://www. theflatearthsociety.org/forum/index.php?topic=50529.0.

Flat Earth Wiki. "Astromony is a Pseudoscience." Last updated May 2019. https://wiki.tfes.org/Astronomy_is_a_Pseudoscience.

-----. "Frequently Asked Questions." Last updated August 14, 2019. https://wiki.tfes.org/Flat_Earth_-_Frequently_Asked_Questions.

-----. "Homepage." Last updated August 14, 2019. https://wiki.tfes.org/ The_Flat_Earth_Wiki.

-----. "Sinking Ship Effect." Last updated June 29, 2019. https://wiki.tfes.org/ Sinking_Ship_Effect.

-----. "The Conspiracy." Last updated December 26, 2015. https://wiki.tfes.org/ Zeteticism.

-----. "The Coriolis Effect." Last updated September 5, 2019. https://wiki.tfes.org/ Coriolis_Effect.

-----. "Viewing Distance." Last updated June 29, 2019. https://wiki.tfes.org/ Viewing_Distance.

Gepper, Alexander C. T. "Extraterrestrial Encounters: UFOs, Science and the Quest for Transcendence, 1947-1972." *History & Technology* 28, no. 3 (September 2012): 335-62. doi:10.1080/07341512.2012.723340.

Golke, Stefanie, Romina Hagen, and Jörg Wittwer. "Lost in Narrative? The Effect of Informative Narratives on Text Comprehension and Metacomprehension Accuracy." *Learning and Instruction* 60 (April 1, 2019): 1-19. doi:10.1016/j.learninstruc.2018.11.003.

Grishakova, Marina, and Slim Sorokin. "Notes on Narrative, Cognition, and Cultural Evolution." *Sign Systems Studies* 44, no. 4 (2016): 542-61. doi:10.12697/SSS.2016.44.4.04.

Gunes, Ali. "The Deconstruction of 'Metanarrative' of Traditional Detective Fiction in Martin Amis's Night Train: A Postmodern Reading." *Journal of History, Culture & Art Research / Tarih Kültür ve Sanat Arastirmalari Dergisi* 7, no. 2 (2018): 216-29. doi:10.7596/taksad.v7i2.1228.

Halverson, Jeffry, and Steven R. Corman. *Master Narratives of Islamist Extremism*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. 1-243.

Jeongsoo, Han, Mina Jun, and Miyea Kim. "Impact of Online Community Engagement on Community Loyalty and Social Well-Being." *Social Behavior & Personality: An International Journal* 47, no. 1 (January 2019): 1-8. doi:10.2224/sbp.7545.

Hansen, James T. "The Relevance of Postmodernism to Counselors and Counseling Practice." *Journal of Mental Health Counseling* 37, no. 4 (October 2015): 355-63. doi:10.17744/mehc.37.4.06.

Hansson, Sven Ove. "Science Denial as a Form of Pseudoscience." *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science* 63 (June 2017): 39-47. doi:10.1016/j.shpsa.2017.05.002.

Hayes, Matthew. "'Then the Saucers Do Exist?': UFOs, the Practice of Conspiracy, and the Case of Wilbert Smith." *Journal of Canadian Studies* 51, no. 3 (Fall 2017): 665–96. doi:10.3138/jcs.2017-0028.r1.

Hodder, Ian. "The Narrative and Rhetoric of Material Culture Sequences." *World Archaeology* 25, no. 2 (October 1993): 268-82. doi:10.1080/00438243.1993.9980243.

Hofstadter, Richard. "The Paranoid Style in American Politics." *Harper's Magazine*, November 1964. 77-86. https://harpers.org/archive/1964/11/the-paranoid-style-in-american-politics/.

Hullman, Jessica, and Nicholas Diakopoulos. "Visualization Rhetoric: Framing Effects in Narrative Visualization." *IEEE Transaction of Visualization and Computer Graphics* 17, no. 12 (December 2011): 2231-2240.

Imhoff, Roland, and Pia Karoline Lamberty. "Too Special to Be Duped: Need for Uniqueness Motivates Conspiracy Beliefs." *European Journal of Social Psychology* 47, no. 6 (October 2017): 724-34. doi:10.1002/ejsp.2265.

Jones, Lorelei, and Mark Exworthy. "Framing in Policy Processes: A Case Study From Hospital Planning in the National Health Service in England." *Social Science & Medicine* 124 (January 2014): 196-204. doi:10.1016/j.socscimed.2014.11.046.

Joseph, Jonathan. "Foucault and Reality." *Capital & Class* 28, no. 82 (Spring 2004): 143-65. doi:10.1177/030981680408200108.

Kilduff, Martin, and Ajay Mehra. "Postmodernism and Organizational Research," *Academy of Management Review* 22, no. 2 (April 1997): 453-81. doi:10.5465/AMR.1997.9707154066.

Kim, Minchul, and Xiaoxia Cao. "The Impact of Exposure to Media Messages Promoting Government Conspiracy Theories on Distrust in the Government: Evidence from a Two-Stage Randomized Experiment." *International Journal of Communication* 10 (January 2016): 3808-27.

Laiola, Sarah Whitcomb. "Markup as Behavior toward Risk: Reforming the Metanarratives of Metadata through Susan Howe's Metafictive Poetics." *American Quarterly* 70, no. 3 (September 2018): 561-87. doi:10.1353/aq.2018.0035.

Larson, Erik. "We Were Lied to About 9/11: The Interviews." 911truth.org. April 25, 2019. http://911truth.org/we-were-lied-to-about-9-11/.

Leman, Patrick J., and Marco Cinnirella. "Beliefs in Conspiracy Theories and the Need for Cognitive Closure." *Frontiers in Psychology* 4 (June 2013): 1-10. doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2013.00378.

GyuChan, Lim, and Jae-Dong Lee. "Storytelling Design for Collaborative Learning Based on the Hero's Journey." *International Journal of Software Engineering and Its Applications* 8, no. 8 (2014): 105-118.

Loxton, Daniel. "Is the Earth Flat? Flat Earthers Are Back--You Know the Earth Is Round, But How Do You Best Make the Argument?" *Skeptics Society & Skeptic Magazine* 23, no. 2 (Spring 2018): 8-13.

Mason, Lance E., Daniel G. Krutka, and Jeremy Stoddard. "Media Literacy, Democracy, and the Challenge of Fake News." *Journal of Media Literacy Education* 10, no. 2 (May 2018): 1-10. doi:10.23860/JMLE-2018-10-2-1.

McDonald, David A. "Framing the 'Arab Spring': Hip Hop, Social Media, and the American News Media." *Journal of Folklore Research* 56, no. 1 (January - April 2019): 105-30. doi:10.2979/jfolkrese.56.1.04.

Mole, Phil. "9/11 Conspiracy Theories: The 9/11 Truth Movement in Perspective." *Skeptic* 12, no. 4 (Winter 2006): 30-42.

Mols, Frank. "What Makes a Frame Persuasive? Lessons from Social Identity Theory." *Evidence & Policy* 8, no. 3 (January 2012): 329-45. doi:10.1332/174426412X654059.

Montesanti, Edu. "9/11, 16 Years Later: No Memory, No Truth, No Justice." 911truth.org. September 11, 2017. http://911truth.org/9-11-16-years-later/.

Moulding, Richard, Simon Nix-Carnell, Alexandra Schnabel, Maja Nedeljkovic, Emma E. Burnside, Aaron F. Lentini, and Nazia Mehzabin. "Better the Devil You Know than a World You Don't? Intolerance of Uncertainty and Worldview Explanations

for Belief in Conspiracy Theories." *Personality and Individual Differences* 98 (August 1, 2016): 345-54. doi:10.1016/j.paid.2016.04.060.

MUFON. "A Brief History of MUFON." 2019. https://www.mufon.com/history.html.

-----. "Accounts of Alien Beings." Last updated March 10, 2019. https://www.mufon.com/alien-beings/accounts-of-alien-beings.

-----. "Alien Technology." Last updated November 20, 2016. https://www.mufon.com/alien-technology/alien-technology.

-----. "Become A MUFON Field Investigator." Accessed September 29, 2019. https://www.mufon.com/field-investigator.html.

-----. "Board of Directors." Accessed September 29, 2019. https://www.mufon.com/board-of-directors.html.

-----. "Chicago O'Hare UFO – 2006." Accessed October 17, 2019. https://www.mufon.com/chicago-ohare-ufo---2006.html.

-----. "Crop Circles Explained." Last updated February 1, 2017. https://www.mufon.com/crop-circles/alien-crop-circles-explained.

-----. "Director's Message." Last updated January 8, 2019. https://www.mufon.com/directors-message.

-----. "8 Practical Research Tools for the UFO Enthusiast." 2017. https://www.mufon.com/mufon-news/8-practical-research-tools-for-the-ufo-enthusiast.

-----. "Famous UFO Cases." Accessed September 29, 2019. https://www.mufon.com/historical.html.

-----. "Homepage." Accessed September 25, 2019. https://www.mufon.com/.

-----. "Make A Donation." Accessed September 29, 2019. https://www.mufon.com/donate.html.

-----. "Mission Statement and Goals." Accessed September 25, 2019. https://www.mufon.com/mission-and-goals.html.

-----. "Mufon Symposium Proceedings." Last updated 2019. https://www.mufon.com/proceedings.html.

-----. "MUFON's UFO, ET Research Tracing Tools." Accessed October 17, 2019. https://www.mufon.com/research.html.

-----. "Stephenville, TX – 2008." Accessed October 17, 2019. https://www.mufon.com/stephenvilletx---2008.html.

-----. "The MUFON Journal." Last updated July 2019. https://mufon.z2systems.com/neon/.

-----. "The Scientific Method." Accessed September 25, 2019. https://www.mufon.com/scientific-method.html.

-----. "Top MUFON UFO Cases." Accessed September 29, 2019. https://www.mufon.com/annual-report.html.

-----. "What Do We Know After 50 Years?." Accessed September 29, 2019. https://www.mufon.com/what-mufon-knows.html.

-----. "What is Ufology?." Accessed October 21, 2019. https://www.mufon.com/ufology.html.

-----. "White Papers." Accessed September 25, 2019. https://www.mufon.com/white-papers.html.

Nadata, Atsuko. "The Depiction of a Hero's Journey in Bonny Method of Gim Sessions." *Journal of the Association for Music & Imagery* 14 (January 2014): 621-73.

Neveu, Erik, Louis Quere, and Liz Libbrecht. "The Age of Events. The Spume of History - Or An Information Master-Frame?." *Reseaux* 5, no. 1 (1997): 9-25. doi:10.3406/reso.1997.3320.

Neville-Shepard, Ryan. "Paranoid Style and Subtextual Form in Modern Conspiracy Rhetoric." *Southern Communication Journal* 83, no. 2 (April 2018): 119-32. doi:10.1080/1041794X.2017.1423106.

Nguyen, Hoang. "Most Flat Earthers Consider Themselves Very Religious." *YouGov*. April 2, 2018. https://today.yougov.com/topics/philosophy/articles-reports/2018/04/02/most-flat-earthers-consider-themselves-religious.

911truth.org. "About Us." Accessed October 21, 2019. https://911truth.org/about-us/.

-----. "Achievements." Accessed September 29, 2019. http://911truth.org/achievements/.

-----. "Donate." Accessed October 17, 2019. https://911truth.org/donate/.

-----. "Endorsements." Accessed September 29, 2019. https://911truth.org/category/activism/9-11_truth_movement/endorsements/.

-----. "Getting the Message Out: 9/11 Truth." Accessed September 29, 2019. https://911truth.org/achievements/getting-the-message-out-911truth/.

-----. "Grassroots Contacts." Accessed March 20, 2019. http://911truth.org/grassroots-contacts/.

-----. "Homepage." Accessed September 29, 2019. https://911truth.org/.

-----. "Our Mission." Accessed March 20, 2019. http://911truth.org/mission/.

-----. "Truth Strategy." Accessed September 29, 2019. https://911truth.org/category/activism/truth_strategy/.

9/11 Memorial and Museum. "The Names on the Memorial." 2018. https://www.911memorial.org/ names-memorial-0.

NPR. "How 9/11 Changed How Americans View the World." September 10, 2012. https://www.npr.org/2012/09/10/160886676/how-9-11-changed-how-america-sees-the-world.

O'Brien, Jim. "The Contested Meaning of 9/11." *Radical History Review* no. 111 (Fall 2011): 5-27. doi:10.1215/01636545-1268668.

Oliver, J. Eric, and Thomas J. Wood. "Conspiracy Theories and the Paranoid Style(s) of Mass Opinion." *American Journal of Political Science* 58, no. 4 (2014): 952-66.

Olmsted, Kathryn S. "The Truth Is Out There: Citizen Sleuths from the Kennedy Assassination to the 9/11 Truth Movement." *Diplomatic History* 35, no. 4 (2011): 671-93.

O'Shea, Sarah, and Cathy Stone. "The Hero's Journey: Stories of Women Returning to Education." *International Journal of the First Year in Higher Education* 5, no. 1 (2014): 79-91. doi:10.5204/intjfyhe.v5i1.186.

Osserman, Robert. *Poetry of the Universe*. New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2011. 1-210.

Ott, Brian L., and Eric Aoki. "The Politics of Negotiating Public Tragedy: Media Framing of the Matthew Shepard Murder." *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 5, no. 3 (2002): 482-505.

Pearson, Carol. *The Hero Within: The Six Archetypes We Live By.* San Francisco, CA: Harper, 1993. 1-368.

Pelkmans, Mathijs, and Rhys Machold. "Conspiracy Theories and Their Truth
        Trajectories." *Focaal* no. 59 (March 30, 2011): 66-80.
        doi:10.3167/fcl.2011.590105.

Pew Research Center. "Many Americans Believe Fake News Is Sowing Confusion."
        December 15, 2016. https://www.journalism.org/2016/12/15/many-americans-
        believe-fake-news-is-sowing-confusion/.

Pierre, Joe. "Flat Earthers: Conspiracy Thinking on a Global Scale." *Psychology Today*.
        July 5, 2018. https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/psych-
        unseen/201807/flat-earthers-conspiracy-thinking-global-scale.

Razzante, Robert, and JW Smith. "Rhetorical Re-Framing and Counter Narratives: An
        Ideological Critique of the Christian Hip-Hop Artist Lecrae Moore." *Ohio
        Communication Journal* 56 (March 2018): 59-68.

Reed, Isaac Ariail. "Deep Culture in Action: Resignification, Synecdoche, and
        Metanarrative in the Moral Panic of the Salem Witch Trials." *Theory and Society*
        44, no. 1 (2015): 65-94.

Reuters. "No Consensus on Who Was Behind Sept 11: Global Poll." September 11, 2008.
        https://www.reuters.com/article/us-sept11-qaeda-poll/no-consensus-on-who-was-
        behind-sept-11-global-poll-idUSN1035876620080910.

Reyes, Ian, and Jason Smith. "What They Don't Want You to Know About Planet X:
        Surviving 2012 and the Aesthetics of Conspiracy Rhetoric." *Communication
        Quarterly* 62, no. 4 (September 2014): 399-415.
        doi:10.1080/01463373.2014.922483.

Robbins, Ruth Anne. "Harry Potter, Ruby Slippers, and Merlin: Telling The Client's
        Story Using The Characters And Paradigm Of The Archetypal Hero's Journey."
        Seattle University Law Review 29, no. 4 (2006): 767-803.
        doi:10.7282/T3668GG4.

Roberts, Paul Craig. "A Majority of Americans Do Not Believe the Official 9/11 Story."
        911truth.org. January 11, 2019. http://911truth.org/americans-do-not-believe-
        official-911-story/.

-----. "Are You a Mind Controlled CIA Stooge?" 911truth.org. September 6, 2019.
        https://911truth.org/are-you-a-mind-controlled-cia-stooge/.

Russell, Jeffrey. "Inventing the Flat Earth." *History Today* 41 (August 1991): 13-19.

Ryan, Marie-Laure. "Beyond Myth and Metaphor: Narrative in Digital Media." *Poetics
        Today* 23, no. 4 (2002): 581-609.

Scheufele, Dietram A., and David Tewksbury. "Framing, Agenda Setting, and Priming:
        The Evolution of Three Media Effects Models." *Journal of Communication* 57,
        no. 1 (March 2007): 9-20. doi:10.1111/j.0021-9916.2007.00326.x.

Schneider-Mayerson, Matthew. "The Dan Brown Phenomenon." *Radical History Review*
        no. 111 (Fall 2011): 194-201. doi:10.1215/01636545-1268803.

Schwartz, Dana. "Director of *Behind the Curve* Shares How to Argue With People Who
        Believe the Earth Is Flat." *Entertainment Weekly*. March 1, 2019.
        https://ew.com/movies/2019/03/01/behind-the-curve-netflix-interview/.

Shenton, Daniel. "In Defense of the Flat Earth." Flat Earth Society Library. 2009.
        http://library.tfes.org/library/daniel_shenton_flat_earth_essay.pdf.

Šimunović, Nenad, Franziska Hesser, and Tobias Stern. "Frame Analysis of ENGO
        Conceptualization of Sustainable Forest Management: Environmental Justice and

Neoliberalism at the Core of Sustainability." *Sustainability* 10, no. 9 (2018): 1-22. doi:10.3390/su10093165.

Singham, Mano. "Columbus and the Flat Earth Myth." *The Phi Delta Kappan* 88, no. 8 (2007): 590-592.

Smith, M.C. "Health, Healing, and the Myth of the Hero Journey." *Advances in Nursing Science* 24, no. 4 (2002): 1-13.

Snow, David A., E. Burke Rochford Jr., Steven K. Worden, and Robert D. Benford. "Frame Alignment Processes, Micromobilization, and Movement Participation." *American Sociological Review* 51, no. 4 (1986): 464-81.

Soukup, Charles. "9/11 Conspiracy Theories on the World Wide Web: Digital Rhetoric and Alternative Epistemology." *Journal of Literacy & Technology* 9, no. 3 (December 2008): 2-25.

Staff. "Conference on the 9/11 Pentagon Evidence." 911truth.org. March 6, 2019. http://911truth.org/conference-9-11-pentagon-evidence/.

-----. "9/11 Truth and Public Libraries." 911truth.org. September 18, 2017. https://911truth.org/9-11-truth-movement-public-libraries/.

Stempel, Carl, Thomas Hargrove, and Guido H. Stempel III. "Media Use, Social Structure, and Belief in 9/11 Conspiracy Theories." *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 84, no. 2 (Summer 2007): 353-72.

Stephens, John, and Robyn McCallum. *Retelling Stories, Framing Culture: Traditional Story and Metanarratives in Children's Literature*. Abingdon, Virginia: Routledge, 2013. 1-23.

Stern, Barbara B. "Textual Analysis in Advertising Research: Construction and Deconstruction of Meanings." *Journal of Advertising* 25, no. 3 (1996): 61-73. doi:10.1080/00913367.1996.10673507.

TIME. "Conspiracy Theories." 2009. http://content.time.com/time/specials/ packages/completelist/0,29569,1860871,00.html.

Trump, Donald. Twitter Post. October 17, 2017, 4:29am. https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/915539424406114304?lang=en.

Ullén, Magnus. "Reading Literature Rhetorically in Education: Nathaniel Hawthorne's 'The Prison-Door' as an Exercise in Close Reading." *NJES: Nordic Journal of English Studies* 15, no. 2 (2016): 142-58.

Van der Linden, Sander. "Moon Landing Faked!!!—Why People Believe in Conspiracy Theories." *Scientific American*. April 30, 2013. https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/moon-landing-faked-why-people-believe-conspiracy-theories/.

Van Prooijen, Jan-Willem and Karen M Douglas. "Conspiracy Theories as Part of History: The Role of Societal Crisis Situations." *Memory Studies* 10, no. 3 (July 2017): 323-33. doi:10.1177/1750698017701615.

Vogler, Christopher. *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers*. Studio City, CA: Michael Wiese Productions, 1996. 1-406.

Walters, Ryan M. "How to Tell a Fake: Fighting Back against Fake News on the Front Lines of Social Media." *Texas Review of Law & Politics* 23, no. 1 (Fall 2018): 111-79.

Warner, Benjamin, and Ryan Neville-Shepard. "Echoes of a Conspiracy: Birthers, Truthers, and the Cultivation of Extremism." *Communication Quarterly* 62, no. 1 (January 2014): 1-17.

Whitney, Brian. "Planar Conspiracy: A Conversation with a Flat Earth Believer," *Paste Magazine*. March 10, 2016. https://www.pastemagazine.com/articles/2016/03/a-conversation-with-a-flat-earth-believer.html.

Westrum, Ron, David Swift, and David Stupple. "Little Green Men and All That." *Society* 21, no. 2 (January/February 1984): 37-44. doi:10.1007/BF02695024.

Wight, Colin. "Post-Truth, Postmodernism and Alternative Facts." *New Perspectives: Interdisciplinary Journal of Central & East European Politics & International Relations* 26, no. 3 (September 2018): 17-29.

Wood, Michael J. "Some Dare Call It Conspiracy: Labeling Something a Conspiracy Theory Does Not Reduce Belief in It." *Political Psychology* 37, no. 5 (October 2016): 695-705. doi:10.1111/pops.12285.

Xanthi, Tsiftsi. "Libeskind and the Holocaust Metanarrative; From Discourse to Architecture." *Open Cultural Studies* no. 1 (2017): 291-303. doi:10.1515/culture-2017-0026.