

On September 11th 2006, the city of New York held a somber service to remember those killed, five years earlier, in the worst act of terror ever seen in the United States. Almost unnoticed during the memorial there was a second demonstration, much smaller and quite different. This shadow rally shared the same proximate cause, but there all similarity ended. Instead of an attempt to find closure, this gathering sought to reignite our memories while expressing paranoia and deep distrust in American institutions. While their concern was difficult to define, as no two among them appeared to share quite the same beliefs, it focused instead upon the Government, the military, news media both domestic and abroad, and prominent families in business and politics.

As the bells of remembrance slowly tolled at Ground Zero and the names of the fallen were read to a silent multitude, this group observed the anniversary with angry speeches, chants, and challenges shouted through bullhorns at imagined enemies, all with little apparent goal other than to proclaim the existence of their cause. They numbered in the hundreds, collected from all across the United States, most wearing matching garb of simple black T-shirts and white-lettered slogans common to disaffected youth. Those in the movement believed the rally was a breakthrough, a sign of growing popularity and acceptance, leading perhaps to eventual victory. Others watched and feared its growth, and waited nervously for other signs of a new and unwelcome popular trend in political and historical illiteracy. But these hopes and fears proved to be groundless. Instead, the day marked the conspiracy theory's zenith, and ever since it has slid steadily into ignominy and obscurity.

What they believed or why they believed it is not important. In terms of overall impact, novelty, or insight, this particular fringe group was unremarkable by any objective standard. It was small and undistinguished compared even to contemporary conspiracy movements, and utterly dwarfed by classic conspiracy memes such as those surrounding the Kennedy Assassination. In the years that followed, organizers and supporters failed to build on this limited success or even to match it no matter how hard they tried. As their support eroded, some members resorted to remarkable legal stunts and increasingly erratic attempts to influence public opinion and policy, although these efforts amounted to absolutely nothing of consequence.

But this group did have one peculiar advantage. The amount of attention, response, and rebuttal from the mainstream was nearly unprecedented. Their beliefs and unfounded claims were acknowledged and countered by newspapers, magazines, several major television networks, renowned scientists and engineers, and even the official investigative bodies of 9/11 themselves. Furthermore, while the group's presence and visibility in the real world were all but nonexistent, in the virtual world it was overwhelming and often inescapable.

This fringe group named itself "The 9/11 Truth Movement." Its many critics have suggested less ironic and less flattering names over the years, but none have stuck. Yet after careful examination, it becomes clear that it was not a distinct movement at all, nor even tightly coupled to September 11th. Instead it merely occupied a place in a larger continuum of conspiracy beliefs, shaped and driven to prominence by a unique convergence of events and technology. Instead of The 9/11 Truth Movement, we may one day refer to it, more accurately, as The Great Internet Conspiracy.

The Great Internet Conspiracy

The Role of Technology and Social Media in the 9/11 Truth Movement

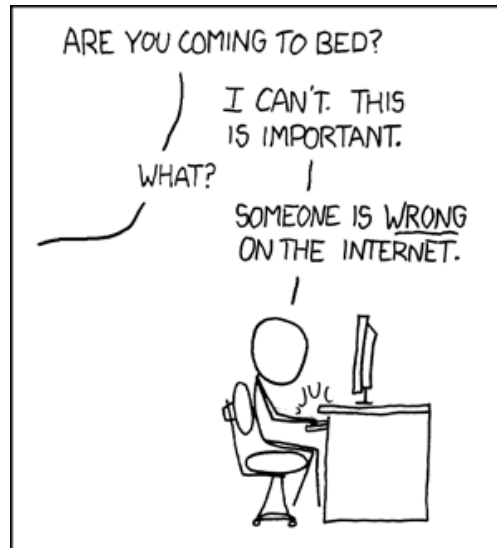
Ryan Mackey

mackey_ryan@att.net

Version 1.0, 2 November 2011

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 3.0 Unported License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, 444 Castro Street, Suite 900, Mountain View, California, 94041, USA.

How (But Not Why) I Got Involved



"Duty Calls," from <http://xkcd.com>. Reprinted in compliance with CC2.5 Open License.

One does not just decide to join or oppose a conspiracist movement. They are prickly, uninviting things, best left alone. In many ways they resemble religions or even religious cults – what the movement stands for, what the defining gospel actually is, varies widely depending on whom exactly you talk to. This is a sharp contrast to more objective schools of thought, such as science. For example, two different professors of physics may disagree on Dark Energy or the eventual fate of the Universe, yet they are all but guaranteed to agree completely on Newton's Laws, Maxwell's Equations, or Quantum Mechanics. A conspiracy theory on the other hand is a mutable thing. It may be based on "facts" that have no basis in reality, or on a bafflingly selective choice of contributing observations. It may be deeply influenced by the individual and her personal journey. One often needs to understand a conspiracy theorist's background before the conspiracy theory makes any sense at all. With that in mind, in the hopes of clarifying my perspective, let me tell you some background about myself.

My first brush with the Truth Movement, unsurprisingly, was over the Internet. It wasn't an argument I was looking for or even one that I knew existed. Instead, it struck without warning at a now-defunct scenario paintball discussion forum where I was fairly active, late in 2005. In the middle of a fairly pedestrian political discussion, one of the other posters (someone whom I had met in real life) began insisting that the Pentagon was actually hit by something other than an American Airlines Boeing 757. He didn't have any better idea of what had happened – perhaps it was hit by a cruise missile, an obsolete Navy attack plane, or whatever – but he was convinced that everyone else in the world was wrong, citing as his only inspiration a short Internet video called "In Plane Sight."

This conversation was somewhat uncomfortable. Imagine, if you will, striking up a discussion with an old acquaintance at a party, until an hour later your friend suddenly blurts out an earnest belief in reptilian shapeshifters living among us. What does one do in this situation?

My initial response was one of incredulity (“surely my friend doesn’t actually believe this tripe”) followed by bemused curiosity. I watched the video presentation, and it left me torn between laughter and concern for my friend’s mental well-being. There are simply no adequate words for how foolish, how shoddy, how ridiculous the presentation was. I would have been no more inclined to enter an argument about whether an integer or a rational number had more feathers. But rather than simply mock my friend, and hoping to avoid an endless and pointless discussion of minutiae that he clearly would not be able to follow, I tried to answer in a larger context. Why would anyone do such a thing, I asked? What was wrong with using a passenger aircraft? And if there is something wrong, why bother pretending? Why wouldn’t the perpetrators come up with a simpler scheme? What possible motive could someone have to do this? And who is that someone? How could this be done without more knowledgeable people (certainly more knowledgeable than a high school student on a paintball forum!) noticing it all over the world? None of these questions, then or now, have reasonable answers.

Predictably, none of my objections made the slightest impression. But in less than an hour, without answering any questions at all, my friend had veered away from the Pentagon and instead brought up his belief that Hurricane Katrina was a man-made phenomenon, in some way connected with HAARP, earthquakes, and the Yakuza. Yes, you read correctly, the Yakuza. Ian Fleming had it all wrong.

These conversations happen in life sometimes. Every one of us is prone to strange beliefs. We are not logical creatures. Our brains are complex, chemical, emotional organs, and their innermost workings remain mysterious to scientists, psychologists, and philosophers alike. We can never really be sure that our friends and family members don’t harbor some strange belief, something that is utterly risible and obviously wrong to the rest of us, yet something they will doggedly defend even in the face of overwhelming disagreement or clear experimental evidence. But these conversations have consequences. Once an unacceptable belief like this floats to the surface, our relationships can be damaged. Your neighbor Bob will no longer merely be a funny guy. Forevermore he will be your neighbor Bob who doesn’t believe dinosaurs are real. You may even learn a trusted family member is secretly racist, or a good friend harbors intense paranoia.

This is a problem because we cannot easily isolate such a belief from the person’s identity. For instance, suppose I learn that a good friend flatly rejects biological evolution. From that point on, whenever I talk with this friend, I need to make a careful decision: Either to avoid the sensitive topic entirely, or to try to reargue the point in hopes of reaching a compromise. The first tactic seems simple enough. After all, I am not a biologist, neither is my friend, so how often would the topic arise? Well, unfortunately, that means maybe I shouldn’t talk about going to see the new dinosaur exhibit last week. Or my vacation to the Galapagos. Talking about the movie *Master and Commander* could plausibly set him off. And besides, how do I know he wishes to avoid the topic? What if he brings up the subject? This isn’t a simple matter of preference, such as not liking peas or being uninterested in baseball. Unconnected to our lives or not, this isn’t a matter that leaves room for compromise.

In my experience, the alternative approach isn't much better, especially when it's a matter of "The Truth." I doubt I've ever made any headway in discussions on topics like universal health care or gun control, ones where there is room for opinion and rational disagreement. And suppose the situation was reversed. What interest do I have in being lectured by a creationist? How likely am I to be convinced that I've had it all wrong, and all the evidence and all the textbooks are an elaborate fraud? Well, if there's no point to lecturing me, why should I try to lecture him?

Many people in the Truth Movement preempt this calculus. They want to talk about it. Some go to extreme lengths to goad others into talking about it. If they didn't talk about it, we probably would never know about them at all. They leave us no easy way to avoid the subject.

As I soon found out, my experience wasn't at all unusual. A few months later I had begun posting on a more diverse Internet discussion forum, namely the one hosted by the James Randi Educational Foundation. There is perhaps no better place on the Internet to gain some perspective on the crazy things that some people accept and attempt to popularize. At any given moment, in different areas of the JREF Forum, one can find people who believe:

- In their own identity as supernatural beings or reincarnations of historical figures
- In their own supernatural powers
- In extraordinary, incomprehensible new laws of physics
- In regular personal contact with UFOs, ghosts, and/or spirits
- In the efficacy of homeopathic drugs, psychic healing, or other witchcraft
- In the existence of "cryptozoological" species, such as Bigfoot
- In conspiracy theories too numerous to list, including Holocaust denial, Moon Landing hoaxes, weather control, man-made earthquakes, suppression of free energy... and 9/11 conspiracies

Practically everyone has personally witnessed something like this at some point in her life. It may have been a lunatic rambling about mind controlling messages being broadcast through digital power meters, or maybe it was a relative planting his feet and insisting that extraterrestrials built the Pyramids because he saw it on TV. But at the JREF one can begin to appreciate just how common, and how diverse, these fringe beliefs actually are. It isn't one person in a thousand who believes crazy things, or even one in a hundred. The incidence is far, far greater. Some beliefs are so bizarre that you literally cannot come up with anything more impossible, no matter how hard you try.

An important feature of the JREF Forum is the "Million Dollar Challenge" section. The JREF famously hosts an open-ended challenge to those claiming to have paranormal powers – in brief, if you can demonstrate them under controlled conditions and in a scientifically verifiable way, you will win one million dollars. It goes without saying that the prize has never been awarded, but not for lack of contestants. With few exceptions, the individual applicants honestly believe they can do what they claim. They are sincere. But test after test reveals that they are severely deluded. The majority cling to their delusions even after failing the test. Nearly all have some sort of excuse.

It thus comes as no surprise that the JREF Forum soon attracted the Truth Movement. My first encounter with them there was in early 2006. This time, the conspiracy believer was focused on the World Trade Center, and argued that they should have been in no danger of collapse. (Naturally! Every time I'm in a structure hit by a jumbo jet at cruising speed, I just relax and watch the show, because I'm obviously perfectly safe!) This time instead of "In Plane Sight" the only support was from a longer Internet-based presentation called "Loose Change." But apart from those superficial differences, the conversation was exactly the same. The poster had no real information or relevant expertise and was not responsive to individuals who did. He was uninterested in exploring the consequences of such a belief. He had a simple if unconvincing explanation for why nobody else, particularly no expert, had been able to figure this out: He proposed that most experts must have been unaware of what happened, and the rest were too concerned about losing their cushy jobs. And, as before, he eventually rambled off the path of September 11th entirely to talk about worldwide cabals of bankers and how they had completely subverted the U.S. Government, to the point that any future election would be a sham.

There were, however, two differences from the previous incident. The first is that the above discussion was not a sporadic anomaly. Instead, the poster above was soon joined by several others, none of whom had any better command of the subject, none of whom entirely agreed with him, yet all determined to continue the argument. Almost overnight an "us versus them" mentality appeared – "Truther" versus "Debunker." Rarely would one Truther criticize another, even when their claims were mutually exclusive, even offensive to each other. Discussion amongst themselves, then as now, was not the point.

The other difference was that, for some reason I couldn't clearly identify, I found myself attracted to the argument. I was given the label of "debunker" in short order. This argument led to another, and another, even though none of them made much sense. Thus began a long association with the Truth Movement.

Over the following five years I made approximately 5,000 posts at least indirectly related to the conspiracy theory. Quite a few of these (most of the longer ones) were of a more generally educational nature, such as working through simple models and basic calculations of physics and aeronautics. I ran across a few arguers with interesting questions. I even helped convince a few of them to change their minds. But there is no denying that the bulk of my posts, and a significant amount of time, was spent directly challenging sheer foolishness. They had gotten to me, goaded me at some fundamental level.

I estimate the total amount of effort I spent at somewhere between one and two thousand hours, spread from 2006 through 2011. While this may seem like a great deal of trouble, no great amount of time was spent on any one particular project, nor was I ever confronted with a task that was intellectually difficult. By far my most complex undertaking was my lengthy review article in response to a particularly irksome Truther, namely Dr. David Ray Griffin, one of the few who transcended the digital barrier to produce actual books and appear at public speaking engagements. Another relatively large sink of time was in thoroughly reading and understanding the NIST technical reports on the World Trade Center collapses, a body of work that approaches 11,000 pages counting figures and supporting documents. The two public access television appearances I made in partnership with Ron Wieck – one

a live debate against Truther Tony Szamboti, the other a presentation of general interest on modeling and the nature of science – took some amount of time in preparation and execution. Almost all the rest was simply incidental communication, and usually required little more thought than criticizing a movie or complaining online about the weather. Nothing I did was the slightest bit heroic.

This is the great paradox of the Truth Movement. While the sheer volume of its sound and fury is daunting, none of it is particularly clever or interesting when taken individually. Out of the entire space of argument I entered, spanning topics as diverse as modeling the fireball size and plume motion following United 93's impact, to time analysis of RADAR returns over Manhattan, to estimating kinetic effects of American Airlines 77 impacting an industrial generator on its way to the Pentagon, I cannot recall even a single instance of being stumped or worrying that the Truth Movement might finally have found something incontrovertible. This is not to say I was always the best educated on the subject, or even that I was always correct. There were several instances where I was quite mistaken, as will happen to anyone now and then. But in every such case, we were able to work through the problem, and the point of contention simply did not lead to the conclusion, succinctly put, that "9/11 was an inside job." I learned many things from this exercise, but usually my opponents did not. The Truthers preferred to quibble over minute details, searching in vain for any means to continue the argument, using any distraction or excuse to avoid admitting problems with their beliefs. It grew rather tedious.

Does over two hundred hours per year sound like a lot of effort? It isn't to me. To put that figure in perspective, for the last two years I've worked as a volunteer with a non-profit group (one that has nothing to do with the Truth Movement), spending about three hundred hours per year – none of which took place in my home, or seated before a computer. The average American wastes nine times this amount watching television. But it was considerably more time than I've ever dedicated to any other conspiracy theory. In my profession it is normal to run across the occasional loud believer in the "Moon Landing Hoax," the "Face on Mars," or conspiracies to hide extraterrestrial contact, but I've never felt compelled to pay them any mind at all. I just dismiss them as uneducated cranks and move on.

I've been asked several times by Truther and debunker alike whether family members are aware of my efforts, and what they think about my conduct. They are, and their responses have been surprisingly uniform, best summarized thusly: "Why do you waste your time with crazy people?" There is no sympathy for Truthers to be found among them. Every one is well aware of the Truth Movement and its claims, every one immediately saw those claims as nonsense and unworthy of any further consideration. I am the only one who bothered to respond.

Was this a mistake? Is the time I spent in fact wasted?

Some small percentage was not, certainly. Analyzing the Truth Movement motivated me to read through the NIST Reports, the earlier FEMA report, the *9/11 Commission Report*, and dozens of technical papers in scientific literature that I probably would have skipped otherwise. I was sufficiently interested to run a score of my own calculations, dusting off knowledge in thermodynamics and mechanics that I rarely have occasion to use, and learning some facts of skyscraper construction and occupational safety

along the way. I was also motivated to read several useful books of a nonscientific nature, those concerned with the historical and judicial aspects of September 11th.

The majority however was clearly wasted, or more accurately of no value beyond simple entertainment. Like many others, I would often self-justify my involvement with the notion that other readers, those with a less technical background who might be swayed by the Truth Movement, would read my comments and learn from them. Over the years I have received messages and e-mails from a few people who were convinced by my efforts, but only a very few – around ten. Many more (in the hundreds) were those who wrote simply because they too were irritated by Truthers, or engaged in their own arguments against Truthers, and found my contributions useful or amusing. And, of course, there were the Truthers themselves, numbering about forty, who wished only to argue with me on a private channel in addition to the public debate. Some even wrote just to issue vague threats about what would happen to “traitors” and “collaborators” once they achieved their Utopia. There were also a few who were so incoherent that I wondered how they’d managed to operate a computer in the first place. But that’s all – a very small group indeed.

Thus, the practical value of debunking as a means to sway the “fence-sitters” was and is quite limited. This becomes obvious to even the most determined debunker after only a few fruitless, repetitive encounters. At the JREF Forum there have been many proposals to close the 9/11 conspiracy theory discussion area, with the apparent consensus being that it still serves a useful purpose as a quarantine zone for Truthers and their nutty ideas. The number of debunkers still posting has dropped precipitously. But for some, the argument continues to this day, with no progress.

So, then, why? What is it about September 11th conspiracy theories that drew so many of us in? Why focus our effort here, instead of on a hundred other equally foolish notions?

For years I had no good answer to this question. I could feel that there was something different about this particular conspiracy theory, something that made it seem much more impressive and menacing than it actually was, even frightening. But it was only a feeling.

The Conspiracy Theory in Us All

“As I’ve said for years, ‘I have an irrational belief in the power of rational argument.’ “ – Poster Horatius, JREF Forum

One beauty of the Internet is that it can be a great equalizer, at least where communication is concerned. Practically anyone now has the opportunity to speak and be heard before an audience of thousands or millions, vastly eclipsing the power of the Agora, the Forum, the Liberty Pole, the newspaper, or even radio and television. But this can be a double-edged sword. Such power brings with it a need for responsibility, and a need to reassess our own abilities and beliefs. As the saying goes, “it is better to be silent and thought a fool, than to speak and remove all doubt.”

Even though the evidence is all around us, it is difficult to grasp just how crazy and how fundamentally uneducated we are as a species. A recent study in Europe concluded that nearly 40% of the population experiences some sort of diagnosable mental disorder every year – 40%! A figure high enough to make one question whether the concept of “normal” is even tenable. In 2007, the Truth Movement commissioned and gleefully touted an opinion poll suggesting that up to 84% of people would be receptive to their ideas, and around 30% actually believed them. While this sounds impressive, there are plenty of other polls with similarly startling results. An estimated 60% of people in the United States believe in UFOs, according to various studies, and around half reject the notion that humans and the great apes share a common genetic ancestor out of sheer dogmatism. Only about 50% of American adults know how long it takes Earth to revolve around the Sun, and well over a third of Americans cannot guess the year that the United States of America declared its independence from Great Britain. This track record should leave us pessimistic about our collective ability to comprehend detailed, cross-disciplinary engineering studies and cutting-edge simulations without expert guidance. But that won’t stop us from trying.

None of this should be construed as gloating. The truth of the matter is that *all* people pay less attention than we should, and *all* people are susceptible to crazy beliefs. That goes for you and me as well. Perhaps this is why we so often discount the likelihood of irrationality or insanity in others, clinging to the notion that rational discussion will prevail, even when discussing such an insane topic as a conspiracy theory. We like to think that it cannot happen to us, that self-delusion only occurs far away from us. We like to think that crazy people are obvious, different from us in every way. It isn’t so. Unfortunately, the potential exists in us all.

Even without conducting a survey on human performance, almost all of us will have personally experienced an example of such behavior in our own lives. All of us have known someone who was just plain *wrong* and unable to accept reality. We may even have been the one to blame. It has happened to me. It’s a strange feeling.

When I was very young, I briefly believed that I had once seen a UFO in the mountains where I grew up. I recall a vivid scene of standing in our back yard, with a gardening implement in my hand, looking with my mother at a strange, silvery oblong box in the clear blue western sky, high above our old madrone

tree. I also recall my mother being alarmed at its appearance and ordering me to go inside, which I did. There the memory ends. Unfortunately (or fortunately), as I realized much later, the event never happened. The details are all wrong. In the time period when this supposedly took place it would have been physically impossible to stand there, face in that direction, and see what I still clearly “remember.” I also asked my mother many years ago if she recalled the event, at about the time I first “remembered,” and naturally she knew nothing about it. While neither of these faults would hinder someone already determined to believe in UFOs, and one could concoct some nonsense story about me being abducted or probed and my memories being erased and altered, the simple fact is that it didn’t happen. The memory is false. I have no more evidence for UFOs than anyone else.

This kind of mental mistake is not unusual. Another example was related by Dr. Carl Sagan, first in *Parade Magazine*, and later in his seminal book *The Demon Haunted World*, which explores the plastic nature of human belief and perception to motivate critical thought and the process of science. He described having conversations with his deceased parents, conversations that felt to him as real as any other, but which he knew existed only in his own mind. Rather than being evidence of ghosts or communication with the dead, this anecdote is nothing more than an appreciation for the mind’s ability to manufacture reality. It is also relevant to note that Dr. Sagan was neither troubled nor disturbed by these experiences. He merely accepted them, even finding therapeutic value in the illusion.

What happened in my case is not entirely clear. It is possible that I had a much older, disorganized memory of an aircraft or a Mylar balloon that was later embellished. It is possible that I dreamed the entire episode. What is clear, however, is that the memory did not fully exist until I was encouraged to believe in it by a teacher, one who bought wholeheartedly into extraterrestrials, psychic abilities, and other “new age” beliefs. Throughout elementary school I was a student at a small, experimental, private institution. The director held a doctorate in theology, and his many hobbies included Egyptian, Kabalistic, and Hindu mysticism, tantric yoga, hypnosis, and paranormal phenomena. These various interests filtered their way into our curriculum – we made short studies of Hebrew, Arabic, and even Sanskrit, along with a cursory reading of the *Ramayana* sandwiched between *Beowulf* and Chaucer. For one year in place of our usual physical education (typically baseball and soccer) we studied under a guest yoga instructor. He was even a fan of Uri Geller, a name well known to fans of James Randi, and we conducted our own “spoon bending” experiment as a class sometime around the fourth grade. I still have a badly mangled fork as a souvenir of that exercise, its handle twisted into a coil and tines bent every which-way by my unassisted, youthful hand. This result delighted our director, who saw it as evidence that his students had “the gift,” perhaps enabled by his teaching. As for myself, I too enjoyed the session, but for a different reason. It confirmed to me that “spoon bending” is nothing more than a theatrical trick, something that anyone can do with preparation and an understanding of technique. People only think it’s difficult because they’ve never tried it.

On balance, the education I received was a good one, and I was significantly advanced and well prepared for college, but is it any wonder that in such a permissive environment one might begin to believe in mystical things? As a group, we were encouraged to come forward with “unexplainable” experiences, providing the opportunity for a sufficiently enlightened adult to make sense of them. And so, driven by a desire to participate, I came up with a fragmentary remembered image in the hopes that

it would make me special. With a little editing, a blurry recollection becomes a UFO, something we'd all heard about and genuinely hoped to see someday. In this new form, my memory didn't hurt anyone. My teachers seemed to believe in it and I had been told to trust in them. Why not believe? Why not embrace it? Except for the small problem of being totally fabricated nonsense, it was a good thing.

Despite the fact that these avant-garde, pseudoscientific ideas were presented to us with heavy bias, in retrospect I believe we were better for the experience. We were taught the basics of the Scientific Method and we were versed in both philosophy and experiment – we were merely discouraged from applying these methods to the teacher's pet ideas during school hours. But over time, and with sufficient moderation by more firmly grounded, rational parents, we learned a much more valuable lesson: *Think for yourself*. A crazy idea can come from anyone, no matter how well trusted.

This lesson served me well when I started my college education. There I quickly encountered a strain of crazy that completely eclipsed everything I'd ever heard before, even the stuff about Ouija boards causing spiritual possession. With college came my first real exposure to the Internet, at that time dominated by Usenet. Almost immediately I ran across a series of long newsgroup posts by a failed mathematician in Wisconsin named Robert McElwaine, who was supposedly posting on behalf of a mentor with the improbable and autoerotically suggestive name of Dr. Peter Beter. His posts, like nothing I had ever seen, were utterly mad beyond any doubt. The one that sticks most firmly in my mind was his treatise about a Soviet fleet of fantastically capable space vehicles, known as "Jumbo Cosmospheres." As a consequence of this belief, he also made the claim that lunar colonies were not only possible, they had in fact existed for decades. These alleged devices were somehow connected to UFOs and actual aliens, though whether they were developed with the help of aliens or as a means to combat them I do not recall. Perhaps it was both!

Mr. McElwaine, a pioneer of Internet conspiracy activism, set numerous precedents that remain recognizable to this day. For starters, he shamelessly copied information and posted it wherever he could – few newsgroups were spared his attention, and I could never tell whether all or none of it was his own creation. He based his entire worldview on a dubious (in this case possibly imaginary) "authority," although exactly what sort of authority would be appropriate in this case remains an unanswered question. His postings were met with universal derision, and others responded with everything from detailed and patient explanations of reality to base insults (which I soon learned were called "flames") and threats to cause trouble for him with his Internet provider (the University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire; they apparently acceded to these demands in 1993). None of this response ever had the slightest impact and it is unclear if he ever even read the replies, but wherever he went, he was sure to elicit a raft of angry complaints.

I recall one poster's analysis of Usenet News traffic establishing that Mr. McElwaine was, by volume, the second ranking poster on the entire system, all of his posts consisting of the above monotonous and hallucinatory material. His only competition was an automatic mailer daemon responsible for sending encoded satellite imagery in bulk. (This was in 1989 or 1990.)

As for me, it never occurred to me to argue with him, or even to reply to him at all. I initially disbelieved, then was shocked by the notion that someone could be so deeply, functionally demented. I continued to read his threads but only for the snarky replies. As entertainment went, it was cheap and reliable.

Mr. McElwaine's legacy lives on. He is listed on *Wikipedia* in a sort of "hall of fame," under the entry of "Usenet Celebrity – Eccentric Believers." Apparently he did eventually stop posting his manifestos, ceasing abruptly after at least a decade of consistent bombardment, years after I lost all interest. He died in 2008.

When a conspiracy theorist is this far gone, it is relatively easy to ignore him. These beliefs clearly threaten no one, apart from their capacity to annoy and to consume bandwidth. Unfortunately, such extreme acts as McElwaine's are the exception.

My Conspiracy Theory Is Better Than Yours

“Many journalists have fallen for the conspiracy theory of government. I do assure you that they would produce more accurate work if they adhered to the cock-up theory.” – Sir Bernard Ingham

There have been many studies on the mechanics of conspiracy thinking, some concerned with the initial formulation of the conspiracy idea, others focusing on its transmittal to others, still more on the strange resilience that they exhibit in the face of superior facts or argumentation or even conclusive experiment. Mental illness is an omnipresent factor, as there are an estimated two million sufferers of schizophrenia in the United States today and many, many more with milder but significant challenges. But there are non-pathological causes as well. One popular recent paper on the subject (winner of an Ig Nobel Prize in 2000) defines the Dunning-Kruger Effect, which notes that for any given population, a certain percentage will underperform the rest so badly that they lack any way to critique their own achievement, being effectively illiterate in a certain behavior. This renders them impervious to any corrective efforts or education and leaves the door wide open for self-delusion. The Dunning-Kruger mechanism readily explains many of the so-called “experts” that stand behind (and often profit from) conspiracy theories in the wild, as well as their frustrating obstinacy when faced with reality.

However, none of these studies can be used to predict the relative success of any specific conspiracy theory. What is missing from these assessments is an understanding of relative popularity. I believe it is this measure, and only this measure, which depends on the actual *subject* of a conspiracy theory – up until this point, all conspiracy theories can be treated in the abstract. But, at least in the case of the 9/11 conspiracy theories, content does seem to make a difference. Something made this one stand out.

If there is some way to predict popularity, we should be able to approach the problem empirically using past conspiracy theories as a guide. What are the most popular conspiracy theories? What traits do they have in common? Can we establish any kind of pattern? But we cannot simply pick everything similar to 9/11 conspiracy theories, because this is hard to define. In order to do this comparison, we need some other way to group conspiracy theories. One idea is to group conspiracy theories according to how plausible they are. It seems reasonable to expect that, the crazier the idea, the less likely people will be to believe in it or to repeat it. This is something we should be able to check.

As I discovered, even constructing a list of popular conspiracy theories is problematic. *Wikipedia* maintains such a list as a starting point, but it has structural issues. In its list the September 11th conspiracy theories appear separately in multiple categories – September 11th is found under “New World Order,” “False Flag Operations” (where it is listed as “many 9/11 conspiracy theories”) and “Wars,” and it plausibly fits into several other groups besides. More generally, it fits the category of “Event Conspiracy Theories,” but also creeps into the larger milieu of “Systemic” or “Superconspiracy Theories,” to use the classification suggested by Michael Barkun.

Let’s try it anyway. To do the experiment I have in mind we need a list of about 30 conspiracy theories. I constructed such a set using the *Wikipedia* list, making a few adjustments to aid uniformity and to broaden the range of topics. For each, let us try to establish how popular, and how plausible, the

conspiracy theory is. To measure popularity we can try the naïve but time-honored “Google-Fight” method: Type the name of the entry exactly as listed below into an Internet search engine, being sure to end each entry with the words “conspiracy theory” (e.g., “9/11 conspiracy theory”) and see how many search results there are. Finding plausibility is much harder – in 2007 at the JREF Forum I developed a procedure to estimate plausibility, but for this discussion let us simply classify each according to “high,” “moderate,” or “low” plausibility. Naturally, this process is subject to bias, but in general the less physically possible a conspiracy theory is, or if it requires the conspiracy to be inordinately large, it will be less plausible. Using this approach, I came up with the following table:

Conspiracy Theory	Popularity (x 1000 Google Hits)	Plausibility (H, M, L)
New World Order	4,620	L
Reichstag Fire	138	H
Pearl Harbor	534	M
Columbine Shootings	327	M
1999 Russian Bombings	807	H
9/11	3,440	L
2004 Madrid Bombings	395	L
USS Maine Bombing	22	M
Falklands War	357	L
2002 Venezuelan Coup	296	H
Kennedy Assassination*	245*	M
Moon Landing	271	L
Peak Oil	588	L
Princess Diana	184	M
Paul Wellstone	88	M
Vince Foster	42	H
Ron Brown	170	M
Usama bin Laden Killed	4,080	L
Clinton Body Count	348	L
Barack Obama Birth Origin	2,050	M
Holocaust Conspiracy	1,370	L
Armenian International Conspiracy**	3**	L
Automobile Carburetor	195	L
HAARP	648	L
Free Energy	2,870	L
Philadelphia Experiment	92	L
Earthquakes	3,890	L
Chemtrails	529	L
AIDS	1,450	L
Water Fluoridation	105	L

Table 1: Raw Data on Popular Conspiracy Theories

There were two interesting anomalies found in the data above, indicated by the asterisks. The first is that the number associated with the Kennedy Assassination varied tremendously depending on the exact search terms used – and the number is vastly lower than expected. On review of the actual search results, I believe the Kennedy Assassination figure is so low because *the conspiracy theory is widely considered to be reality*, confounding the search for conspiracy theories (an estimated 75% of Americans believe in such a conspiracy today, as confirmed by two separate polls). If we were to leave off the tag and search only for “Kennedy Assassination,” we would find a much higher number, around 3.3 million, which would put it in fifth place. I’ve included the low number anyway. Real data have uncertainties.

Second, the search for “Armenian International Conspiracy” Theory was performed exactly as written in this sentence, with the first three words in quotes. Otherwise the search revealed an astonishing and clearly incorrect result of over 15 million. Also, substituting “Armenian Genocide Conspiracy Theory,” which may have been the intended meaning, returns a more typical 229,000 results. I have left the small number to avoid contaminating the sample and to illustrate the difficulty in assessing popularity.

Regarding my assessment of plausibility, this should not be construed as meaning that I personally believe any of these theories is true, or even likely (with the possible exception of the 1999 Russian Bombings – there I lack any reliable facts or experience and have no firm belief either way). Yet some are more plausible than others, for example White House Counsel Vince Foster’s apparent suicide. I have no belief that it was anything other than a suicide, and I certainly do not suspect anyone at all murdered him. But falsified suicides in general have happened before. Nothing about this particular conspiracy theory violates the laws of physics or requires a vast network to carry out or to cover up. Ergo, while I do not believe in it, I would score it as “highly plausible” relative to the others.

So with some admittedly poor data in hand, we can attempt a sanity check to answer a simple question: Does plausibility affect a conspiracy theory’s popularity? The results are shown in Figure 1 below.

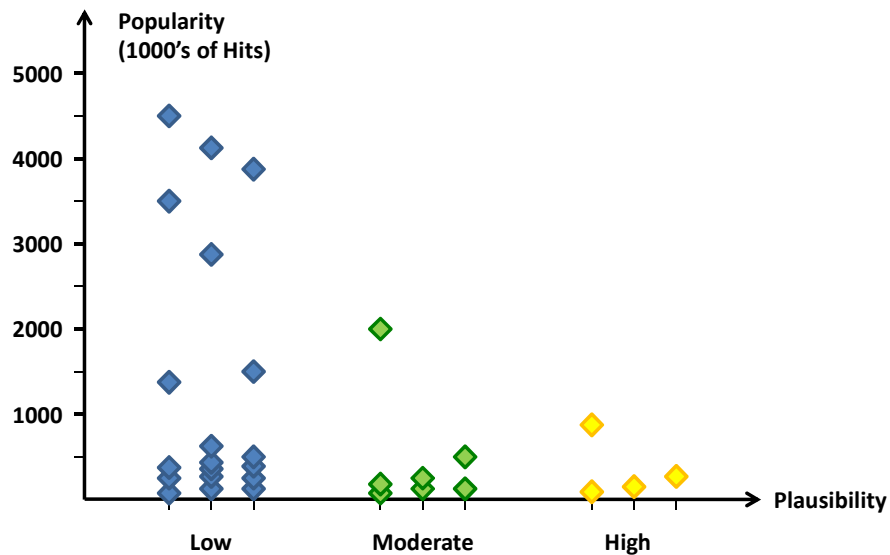


Figure 1: Plotting Conspiracy Theory Popularity against Plausibility

Do you see the correlation? I don't. If anything, there is a correlation between popularity and implausibility. However, note the huge cluster of low-scoring Low Plausibility entries, being offset by only five highly popular outliers. It would only take a couple of different measurements – say we put a more accurate value on the Kennedy Assassination conspiracy theory, and found a popular High Plausibility case – to dispel any hint of a correlation. Conversely, if we were to eliminate (or move) those five outliers at upper left, again there would be no correlation at all.

In fact, we can show statistically that there is no correlation. In the table below, I've computed the average and standard deviation for each of the three groups. The "Low Plausibility" group has by far the highest average, but it also has the highest variability – it is so variable that the scores for the other two groups are within a single standard deviation. Thus, these populations are statistically indistinct.

	Low Plausibility	Moderate Plausibility	High Plausibility
Average (1000's of Hits)	1402	453	320
Standard Deviation	1552	621	295

Table 2: Statistical Properties of Different Plausibility Groups

We might have predicted this result. Think about popular discussion of historical events and recent news. By definition, all of these things are highly plausible because all of them actually happened. But public interest varies enormously. More significant are considerations of how important, how startling, and how comprehensible the event is – not to mention how well it is advertized. In the case of conspiracy believers, they see no distinction between their conspiracy theories and events of history, so the comparison should be appropriate.

But what about those outliers? Something seems to be going on with them.

Since plausibility doesn't seem to be helping us, let's just think about popularity on its own. If, as it appears, popularity turns out to be purely random and not dependent on content at all, then the spread of conspiracy theories should behave like other random processes. And if this is so, then the distribution of popularity should follow well established natural rules. One likely model is the Half-Logistic distribution, a pattern which often arises in sociological situations where the rate of spread of a given quantity is a function of its magnitude. For a conspiracy theory, if we consider a story spreading by word of mouth or other individual efforts, then the rate of transmission would increase as its popularity increased, and we should see a similar distribution.

Figure 2 below shows a graph of our sample against the appropriate Half-Logistic distribution. Here I used the average popularity of our sample excluding the outliers (equal to roughly 450,000 hits) to select the width parameter of the Half-Logistic distribution, whose probability density function (PDF) is represented by the green curve. I have also plotted the estimated probability distribution based on a histogram of the conspiracy theories in our sample, displayed as a bar chart, where I have selected bins

of 250,000 hits in width. In order to compare these two directly, I divided the count of conspiracy theories in each bin by the total number (30), and then multiplied the result by the appropriate horizontal scaling factor (equal to the mean divided by the bin width, or 450,000 over 250,000 = 1.8) to make the vertical scales match.

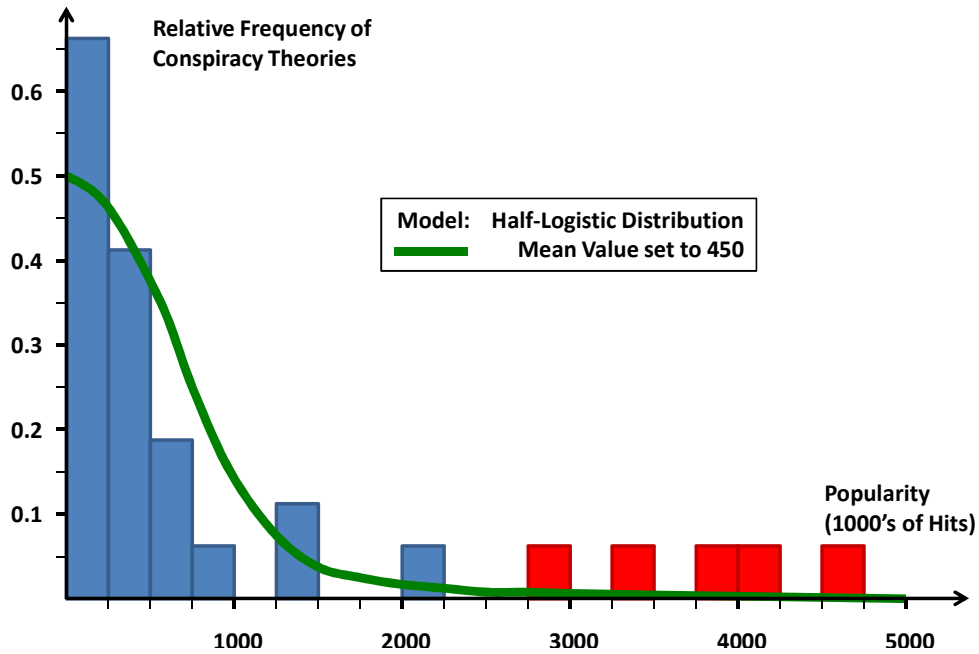


Figure 2: Histogram of Conspiracy Theories by Popularity

Figure 2 demonstrates that apart from those mysterious outliers, shown above in red, the Half-Logistic distribution is indeed a plausible fit to the rest (as are many other, similar distributions – it would take a great deal more data to select one random distribution over another). But those outliers are so numerous that *no* probability distribution can explain them. They are different. They belong to a totally separate population.

This distinction is borne out in the raw statistics. Let us compute the averages and standard deviations again, but in addition to the “Low,” “Medium,” and “High” plausibility groups, I now introduce a new group called the “Superconspiracies” containing only those five outliers. The table is as follows:

	Superconspiracies	Low Plausibility	Moderate Pl'ibility	High Plausibility
Average (1000's)	3780	488	453	320
Std Deviation	591	434	621	295

Table 3: Statistical Properties of Different Plausibility Groups, Separating the Superconspiracies

And there you have it. If we remove those five outliers, treating them separately as a fourth population, the picture clears at once. The three groups of ordinary conspiracy theories are now practically identical, further supporting the idea that plausibility simply doesn't matter. In contrast, the Superconspiracies are radically different, being about five standard deviations removed from all the rest. Furthermore, the variance among the Superconspiracies is surprisingly consistent with the others. We therefore appear to have a "bimodal" distribution, i.e. one group of measurements that behaves one way, mixed in with another group that behaves in a totally different way.

So what does this all mean?

What it means is that, however conspiracy theories grow, there are at least two different mechanisms at work. There are the "little" conspiracy theories, which are somewhat consistent with ordinary, natural laws of random behavior. But then there are the rare superstars that grow beyond the ordinary. These are unusual and may need to be treated individually, but they do happen. These do not appear to be random. Something drives them.

As it turns out, the 9/11 conspiracy theories are one of these unusual cases.

After doing this analysis, I am no closer to understanding why, but I have at least answered one question: The 9/11 conspiracy theories are indeed special. My instinct was correct. What we need to do now is find out how it happened.

Building a Bigger Conspiracy Theory

“This isn’t the Iowa caucus, OK? It’s not a debate. It’s a debate between us. You’re in the audience; audience comes from the Latin, ‘to listen.’ What’s going on here?” – Bill Maher addressing Truthers in his studio audience, “Real Time with Bill Maher,” 19 October 2007

During my graduate studies, I believe in February 1995, I accepted the invitation of a fellow student to attend an evening meeting of conspiracy theorists in Los Angeles. Like me, he was not a conspiracy theorist. He merely had a fascination with the bizarre and the counter-culture. Had I known of my future involvement with the Truth Movement I would have taken notes, but alas, I did not.

The meeting was a long, sedate affair in a dim and stuffy rented hall whose attendees numbered around a hundred in total. There was little advertising for the event – perhaps my friend had heard of it from a flyer or a “zine,” or a mention on late-night radio. We were the youngest in the room by a significant margin. We were clearly not the only tourists present, but none of the others seemed at all disturbed by us, nor did they try to convert us or pressure us in any way. The majority of them were middle-aged, most seemed to be by themselves, and nearly all were quiet and reserved if not timid. A sizable minority was dressed eccentrically, but most were simply average, shabby, middle-class Americans.

There were quite a few presentations, distinct but overlapping, and the majority of topics discussed still circulate today: Chemtrails. The New World Order. Project HAARP – although one speaker insisted its goal was weather control, while another attributed to it the much more insidious purpose of actual mind control, a proposition he supported with a comically inept understanding of constructive wave interference. The old saw of water fluoridation, so effectively mocked in the movie *Dr. Strangelove*, was mentioned more than once. Between speakers, a collection plate was passed a couple of times, soliciting donations for somebody-or-other’s election campaign for sheriff in another state.

I remember the star speaker most clearly. He was a conspiracist of the New World Order variety, and he outlined his evidence for a worldwide plot of unimaginable scope – not merely sinister but actually satanic in nature – to enslave and eventually exterminate 90% of the human race. To my surprise, the alleged architect of this enterprise was President George H. W. Bush, who by then had been out of office for some time. He along with a familiar set of associated politicians were not (we were told) actually Republicans, but in fact Satanists. This was not about political power, it was Armageddon itself.

One of the speaker’s transparencies showed a blurry black-and-white image of President Bush at some private function. With a little imagination and the help of a Sharpie, an indistinct emblem on his clothing was “revealed” to be an intricate pentacle, an image that the speaker had meticulously correlated to a specific mystic symbol of the Sathanas Goat in some grimoire that I’d never heard of. (Apparently the New World Order never got around to hiring an image consultant.) There was more, of course. In particular, the speaker had recognized patterns in seemingly innocuous details at the then-new Denver International Airport. He was somehow able to infer from counting tiles and sockets, incomprehensible words inlaid in the floor (actually Navajo in origin), and a pair of stark public murals that the terminals were designed to be rapidly converted into a grisly processing facility for captured

citizens. In his vision, iron cages and two great statues of the Furies stood by ready to be installed, perhaps along with an archway reminiscent of Dante's gate of Dis. And for the crowning touch, he had determined that the malfunctioning automated baggage system, recently in the news, wasn't working because it was actually designed to carry human beings.

What I witnessed that evening represented the "old school" of conspiracy movements. This style of gathering continues today, but it is as anachronistic and obsolete as the love-in. The conspiracy believers here had no particular desire to recruit others or to convince skeptics. Few questions were asked or encouraged. They were content to present their ideas, primarily to their own friends and small circles of supporters, and it was entirely up to you what to make of it. They made little if any profit on the evening, being satisfied to sell a few books and pamphlets and leave it at that. When the show was over, it broke up in near silence. At no time did I feel angered or threatened by these people, even the ones who were quite clearly unwell. None of them seemed to be spoiling for an argument or a fight.

This approach puts a hard limit on growth of the conspiracy movement, because this style of meeting is produced by and for the benefit of fellow conspiracy theorists. The non-believers like us who happen to wander in are few in number, and largely left alone. But growth was not a concern for activists at the meeting above. Nor was it for the first wave of Truthers.

Dr. David Ray Griffin, sometimes called the "high priest" of the Truth Movement (for his prominence, and his background in theology), is representative of this older style of conspiracy theorist. He has appeared at numerous offbeat conferences and speaking engagements – some of them not much different than the gathering I experienced – and written about a dozen books related to his conspiracy theories, but his attempts at recruitment and hucksterism go little further. There is an official website dedicated to him run by one of his associates, and it is hardly more than a portal to his public and radio appearances and a listing of his books.

Compare this to the entrepreneurial approach of Richard Gage, founder, employee, and spokesman of "Architects and Engineers for 9/11 Truth." Mr. Gage claims to have joined the Truth Movement rather abruptly in 2006 after hearing Dr. Griffin speak over the radio, but his style of conspiracy activism couldn't be more different. Mr. Gage has written no books, instead assembling a grueling 500+ page PowerPoint slide deck. His frequent public appearances are high energy, sales-like affairs, with a poll taken before and after to see if anyone has joined the ranks of the converted. He maintains and trades on an open-ended "membership list," actually a sort of on-line petition, and holds frequent recruitment drives and calls for donations. His organization's website is shiny and engaging but rather mercenary in nature, having five separate windows calling for donations or linking to the "AE911Truth Store" on the front page alone when I checked on 8 September 2011. The items in his store are clearly designed with recruitment and promotions in mind – large packs of DVDs, flyers and postcards sold by the hundred, and even large vinyl banners. Unlike Dr. Griffin's approach, Mr. Gage is clearly determined to reach out to the public or, failing that, to at least annoy as many people as he can.

Another obvious difference in attitude between the two men is the way they confront their critics. Mr. Gage is friendly but extremely adversarial – among others, he has debated against debunker Mark

Roberts, explosives expert Ron Craig, physicist Dave Thomas, journalist and reverend Chris Mohr, broadcast journalist Kim Hill, and legendary skeptic and author Michael Shermer. Mr. Gage was rematched against Dave Thomas and others in a Pacifica Radio debate on the tenth anniversary of 9/11. I have personally been invited to debate Mr. Gage directly and by proxy, in radio formats and face-to-face. He also attempted to produce a “National Debate” in 2010, trying to convince myself and several prominent scientists from NIST and elsewhere to attend as a panel, but upon being totally ignored, he simply webcast another dry and unregarded lecture.

Dr. Griffin on the other hand rarely organizes events or seeks debates, even though many encourage him to do so. Early in the Truth Movement (2004) he “debated” fellow theologian Ian Markham, or more correctly responded in writing to an article critical of his newfound conspiracy beliefs. Later, in 2008, he had a slow-motion e-mail debate with *Rolling Stone* writer Matt Taibbi. But to the best of my knowledge the only actual live debates he ever participated in were against journalist Chip Berlet in 2004, and another with the radical and politically active journalist George Monbiot in 2007. There was also a third planned live debate against my friend Ron Wieck, whose correspondence with me prompted my review article of Dr. Griffin’s work. But as soon as my review was complete, Dr. Griffin abruptly cancelled. Dr. Griffin has never responded to my critique, of course. In his public appearances since its release he has rarely taken questions, and those he does take are carefully screened.

What we see in this snapshot of two influential, closely connected Truthers is a shift in strategy over time. A different mechanism of communication emerges, one designed to create growth and increase popularity. This would explain the departure from the norm that the 9/11 Conspiracy Theories experienced. In other words, the Truth Movement seems to have started much as any other conspiracy theory. For a while it was merely another fringe idea, circulated and traded among a counter-culture more interested in marketing their ideas to fellow conspiracists than winning converts from the general public. But after a sufficient gestation period, a second stage began, and the conspiracy theory followed a much louder, more confrontational approach aimed at involving as many people as possible. This hypothesis would explain the radical jump in popularity – and we can test this hypothesis. If this is true, it requires that there are two types of Truthers: The introverted, serial conspiracy believers; and their complement, the extroverts, agitators, public activists. Indeed, there is some objective evidence that confirms this interpretation.

In 2007 I attempted a small, simple, poorly controlled experiment to either support or discredit the idea that the Truth Movement was largely composed of career conspiracy theorists, rather than otherwise rational people who concluded that Truther claims were worth looking into. My findings suggested that membership in the Truth Movement was strongly correlated to belief in other, equally stupid conspiracy theories, but even with my small and biased sample I found evidence of a second population, one with different beliefs, lumped in among the other Truthers. More importantly, after sharing my findings I was pointed to a much larger and more valuable 2006 study carried out at the popular alternative-thinking discussion forum Above Top Secret.

The organizers there had created a comparable opinion poll (online and subject to bias, but with some reasonable attempts to control the sample) and gathered similar information on some 40,000 site

visitors. The results of this survey were profoundly surprising. Even though by this time the Truth Movement had overrun every corner of the Internet, drowning out other conspiracy theories at the JREF and just about everywhere else, among traditional conspiracy theorists (the “old school,” perhaps) the Truth Movement just wasn’t that popular. In their poll it scored in distant sixth place behind such time-honored pursuits as extraterrestrials and government secrets. Furthermore, one of the Above Top Secret organizers noted that the Truth Movement was actually an annoyance to most of their membership. “Truthers are a minority,” he wrote. “A very loud and irritating minority. But they do not represent the mind-space of people who consider ‘conspiracy theories.’ **They are activists, not theorists.**”

So that is it in a nutshell – there we have the secret ingredient that distinguished the 9/11 conspiracy theories from others. It had somehow mutated from the traditional, imaginative, individual realm of personal fantasy into an aggressive strain of misguided activism. In so doing it had insulted the public and made itself look far more fearsome than it actually was. My Internet-based metric of “popularity” was detecting something different than I had expected. I was not measuring an increase in the number of conspiracy theorists or in their coherent mobilization behind a single cause. Instead, I was only finding the volume and rancor of the arguments between a few noisy Truthers and everyone else.

Above Top Secret revisited its poll in 2011 shortly before the tenth anniversary, focusing more closely on the 9/11 conspiracy theories. These results continue to surprise. While consistent with the results from 2006, the new poll reveals that the majority of those believing in some kind of 9/11 cover-up only reached this conclusion significantly after the event itself. It also reveals that the 9/11 conspiracy theory most plausible to its membership is nothing like the ideas pushed by the Truth Movement – instead of drone aircraft, voice-morphing, or controlled demolition, they prefer the theory that the U.S. Government merely permitted or subtly aided an actual terrorist attack (this is known as a “LIHOP Theory,” after the phrase “Let It Happen On Purpose,” to Truthers). Most interestingly, those surveyed were almost neutral on the question of effectiveness and value of the Truth Movement itself – and those responding as Guests were significantly more favorable to the Truth Movement than the registered membership of Above Top Secret.

So the data hold up, and even four years ago I had an important clue to the puzzle. But there is still the question of WHY. What made this conspiracy theory, and only this conspiracy theory, turn activist and assault the mainstream?

Why hadn’t this happened before?

The Dress Rehearsal: Oklahoma City

"[I]t's certainly worth pointing out that the 9/11 Truth Movement is not only a cynical fiction, it's a recycled cynical fiction... This idea was rocketing around the conspiracy world in almost the exact same rhetorical format just six years before, after the Oklahoma City Federal building bombing." —Matt Taibbi, Rolling Stone Magazine, 24 October 2006

Conspiracy theories, like comedy, are all about timing.

On 19 April 1995, not long after the conspiracy theorist lecture I witnessed, domestic terrorist Timothy McVeigh detonated a large homemade bomb near the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, murdering 168 people and wounding almost 700 others. This event was deeply disturbing, being the worst terrorist attack ever in the United States prior to 9/11, and the worst I hoped to see in my lifetime. It was similar to the events of 9/11 in many other ways as well, if much smaller in scale. Like 9/11 it was both an act of terror and a symbolic attack on the United States Government. Like 9/11 it caused a large and deadly structural collapse, one that surprised many experts, and one that darkened the heart of a major American metropolis for many months afterward. Like 9/11 the probable terrorist responsible was identified almost immediately, without requiring a lengthy search to name a suspect. And like 9/11 the attack was used as political motivation for expansion of Federal investigative powers, intrusive monitoring of citizens and legal activities, and even a rewrite of the fundamental law of *habeas corpus* – in this case, through the Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act of 1996. Like 9/11 these political reactions prompted a swell of public activism, as people grew justifiably concerned about loss of privacy, loss of civil liberties, and excessive government oversight.

Furthermore, like 9/11, the Oklahoma City Bombing created its own conspiracy theories. But something different happened this time. Unlike 9/11, those theories never went anywhere. If I apply my popularity estimate to this topic, I find only 130,000 results, putting it somewhat ahead of crazy ideas about water fluoridation and well behind suspicions that Commerce Secretary Ron Brown was murdered. What happened? Why did this conspiracy theory fail to ignite?

It certainly is not due to the content. Many Truthers opine that Usama bin Laden was either a manufactured adversary or someone operating under total control of U.S. intelligence services, despite his great visibility in the Islamic world for many years before 2001. In the case of Oklahoma City, Timothy McVeigh was a nobody, a complete unknown without any visibility at all before his act of mass murder – somebody far easier to invent, if we were to assume the bombing was a “False Flag Operation” blamed on a patsy – and, being American, would provide better justification for the expansion of government powers. Regarding the method, a plurality of Truthers suspect some sort of explosive devices were used at both the Pentagon and the World Trade Center, even though there is no evidence to support this. Meanwhile at the Murrah Building, the attack actually took the form of a truck bomb, but this didn't stop some conspiracy theorists from insisting that *even more* explosives were at work. First they seized upon the fact that several bomb simulators in the Murrah Building, used to train FBI agents, were later found in the rubble and caused a brief scare. Then they relied upon the

speculative opinion of “experts,” principally retired Air Force General Benton Partin, who dismissed the conclusions of scientists and civil engineers to claim that the large homemade bomb alone could not have caused that much damage. In reality, no one thought otherwise – the investigation revealed that the explosion had only done limited damage to the structure, much more being caused by a progressive collapse that followed. But the conspiracy theorists rejected this notion out of hand, much as they scoffed at progressive collapse at the World Trade Center. The claims, the ideas, and the reasoning process of conspiracy theorists are all eerily similar to what we saw in the Truth Movement.

Growth of this conspiracy theory was not retarded by the people involved, either. Jim Hoffman and Kevin Ryan, both early and prominent activists in the Truth Movement, have specifically noted the similarities between the Murrah Building “cover-up” and what they believe happened at the World Trade Center. Richard Gage, while apparently not an active conspiracy theorist prior to 2006, has belatedly embraced the Oklahoma City Bombing conspiracy theories. Dr. Griffin has taken no definitive stance on the event, but stated in a 2009 interview that “what I have read thus far leads me to believe that the official story was a lie.” There is even a new organization called “OkcBombingTruth,” a knock-off of “9/11 Truth,” affiliated with if not indistinguishable from the Oklahoma branch of Truther group “We Are Change.” So all of these individuals stood ready to relay the message and to popularize the conspiracy theory, just as they did for 9/11. Yet they did not.

Could it be the scale of the event that limited its growth? This is a reasonable supposition, but I do not think so. It is certainly true that the Oklahoma City Bombing was a regional phenomenon, whereas 9/11 affected nearly everyone in some manner – it affected me, even though I was thousands of miles away. On 11 September 2001 I was in Seattle, driving to a research project meeting at Boeing when I first learned of the unfolding tragedy. Throughout the day we heard all sorts of panicky and inaccurate reports. First there were ten aircraft “known” to be missing (by this time all four jets were down), then we heard that Camp David had been hit (untrue; UA 93 hit nothing), then we heard the White House and Capitol had been hit (neither were – they were merely evacuated as a precaution, though nearby the Pentagon was seriously damaged). There was speculation of attacks in Philadelphia, Atlanta, and Chicago. The Space Needle in Seattle was evacuated based on a “credible threat.” We briefly wondered if the jetliner factory floor in Everett, one of the largest buildings in the world (and the location our meeting), could be a possible target. And for days afterward, we all struggled to get home in the face of total air transportation paralysis. I ultimately drove home to California, sharing a rental car with three other displaced scientists. Nothing of this scope happened after the Oklahoma City disaster. But if scale alone is the reason, it does not explain why the Truth Movement lay relatively dormant until mid-2005. The scale of 9/11 should have caused a different growth pattern to emerge immediately, or not at all. It would be nothing like any other conspiracy theory, since there are no other examples with such a huge and immediate impact, save only Pearl Harbor or the Kennedy Assassination which are indeed in classes of their own. Instead, as the Above Top Secret 2011 poll confirms, a majority of supporters grew interested in the 9/11 conspiracy theories years later, long after the shock had begun to fade.

The most obvious reason for the difference is in the political climate. Many, many journalists have blamed anti-war sentiment and backlash against President George W. Bush as the catalyst that took the Truth Movement into the mainstream. One of the most recent to suggest this is Jeremy Stahl in a well-

written series of articles for *Slate Magazine*, noting that the end of 2005 saw a precipitous drop in the President's approval rating, a nasty turn in the war in Iraq, and wider public realization that the case for war in Iraq had been greatly oversold. All of this helped create a left-leaning activist movement angry at the Bush Administration and evidently receptive to the anti-government suspicions of the Truth Movement.

But there are several problems with this hypothesis. I've never been comfortable with this idea because, if true, it suggests that the Truth Movement – and conspiracy theories in general – tend to be left-leaning, gathering much more support from political progressives than conservatives. Fundamentally this doesn't make sense. Conspiracy theories, being based on delusion, should have no political affiliation. Their proponents are so far from the political center that they are neither left nor right, but in the strange intersection of left and right in the paranoid realm of anarchy. In the time of the Oklahoma City Bombing conspiracy theories, there was a similar paranoid reaction to the Clinton Administration, except it was led by "militia" and other right-wing anti-government groups instead of the pacifist yet revolutionary left. So why didn't the Oklahoma City Bombing conspiracy theory become a darling of the right after 1995, if the Truth Movement was welcomed by the left in 2005?

Another problem with this idea is, as we have seen, even dyed-in-the-wool conspiracy theorists were not taking up the banner of the Truth Movement. Somebody else did. But there is no reason to suppose that normal, rational activists, people who march and protest and otherwise participate in politics but are *not* conspiracy theorists, should suddenly become conspiracy theorists. There is an enormous difference between being exposed to a paranoid anti-government message, or even resonating with it, and becoming a missionary for it. While it is true that many Truthers I encountered claimed they were motivated by a desire to end the "phony wars," no anti-war activist I spoke to became a Truther, not a single one. Most of the activists that I knew detested the Truthers, and for good reason. They did not want their philosophically sound and perfectly legitimate political views to be tainted by association with crazy people. Truthers, on the other hand, tried to attach themselves to mainstream protest marches on numerous occasions as a way to pad their numbers, but they were rarely welcome.

There is admittedly at least one high-profile case of an anti-war activist falling victim to the conspiracy lure, namely Cindy Sheehan. It certainly can happen, particularly following a crushing loss like the death of a son. However, her allegiance to the Truth Movement was not apparent until early 2007, as tracked by the weblog *Screw Loose Change*, and she did not explicitly embrace the Truth Movement until January 2010, well past the end of its glory days. She is not an example of the "Truther activist" we are looking for – hers is a coincidental acceptance of Trutherism. She is a follower rather than a leader.

A third problem with the notion of political climate fueling the Truth Movement is that the opposite effect was not observed. Had the rise actually been tightly coupled to President Bush's approval rating, the Truth Movement should have evaporated completely on November 4th, 2008. But it did not. It had begun to wane on its own much earlier, and after the 2008 vote, the majority of remaining Truthers carried on as though President Obama's election never happened or didn't matter. Many of us who had been observing the Truth Movement predicted this phenomenon. After all, if one is already convinced

that President Bush carried out a stupendously complex operation on 9/11 and got away with it, why would one think he couldn't rig an election? If he could invent a mythical mastermind like Usama bin Laden, why not throw in a Manchurian Candidate? And conversely, if one is a Truther but thinks Bush *didn't* do it – maybe he was only a puppet, while unseen powers behind the throne ran everything – why not assume that Barack Obama would be just another figurehead, or even in on the game? Quite a few Truthers said as much in plain language.

The underlying problem with ascribing a political motivation to the rise of the Truth Movement is that we have not adequately described this activist group of conspiracy theorists. We don't know who they are or what their politics might be. Because 9/11 was leveraged as an excuse for war in Iraq, were people angered at the U.S. Government? Absolutely yes. Because of the Bush Administration's erosion of civil liberties, were people more suspicious of greedy and overreaching government? Without a doubt. Because the claims of "WMD's" turned out to be overblown, were people distrustful of the government and its motives? Yes, and rightly so. One can make a strong case that political events made the public more willing to listen to the 9/11 conspiracy theories. But merely listening falls short of believing in them, and is only the first step towards adopting and spreading them. Accusing President Bush of manipulating 9/11 to suit his own agenda is fair game – all presidents do this. Political opportunism is part of the job. Accusing President Bush of participating in 9/11, however, is something very different, and something even the most committed liberal should never do without evidence in support. I am not willing to blame the rise of the Truth Movement on an overreaction by the left. I trust them to be smarter than that, and besides, I didn't see it happen. I was there, and I was looking. The people pushing the Truth Movement were cut from an entirely different cloth.

If we reject the notion of politics leading us to the tipping point, then we still do not know what differentiated the 9/11 conspiracy theories from the Oklahoma City Bombing conspiracy theories. At least one condition was missing in 1995 that didn't arrive until 2001 or even later. Even so, the Oklahoma City Bombing conspiracy theories proved to be a pathfinder for the next generation of conspiracy theorists. We saw an alliance emerge between anti-government crackpots and the pseudoscientists. We saw specific arguments tried, then shelved for later use in the 9/11 conspiracy theories – claims of additional explosives, demands for release of video surveillance, insistence on a "new investigation."

We also saw the conspiracy theorists reach into a new medium of electronic communication. The first significant conspiracist book on Oklahoma City did not arrive until March 1997, but General Partin's flawed "report" to Congress was made available for download over the Internet in early 1996. Information was now available at a speed unthinkable in the era of mimeographed handouts at quiet meetings and lectures to other conspiracy theory veterans. This was only the beginning. Times were about to change.

The Storm Begins, Unnoticed

“What am I saying? I’m saying, who stands to gain from this? Who has the motive? Who can bring you martial law, destroy your freedoms? The government! It’s not our government!”

“I’ll tell you the bottom line: 98 percent chance this was a government-orchestrated, controlled bombing; I’ve been telling you this was going to happen, just two weeks ago I put the call out again, for an ‘operation expose the government terrorists.’ We’re not anti-government, we’re anti-corrupt-New World Order-system, that is taking control of our government every day.” – Alex Jones, 11 September 2001

In order to break into the mainstream, a conspiracy theory needs evangelists who are willing to confront an unaware or unbelieving public. The archetype of this activist mindset is found in the Westboro Baptist Church. You have probably heard of this group, but you may not know that they only have about seventy members in total. These seventy-odd individuals have nonetheless managed to conduct over 40,000 protests, sustaining a current average of about six per day by their own reckoning, and have commanded national media attention for over twelve years, as well as being the focus of several documentaries from overseas. A volunteer organization called the Patriot Guard Riders, some 220,000 strong, has sprung into being specifically to counteract their protests through legal means. So obnoxious is this tiny protest group that the courts briefly entertained arguments that would strip them of protections under the First Amendment – arguably the most sacrosanct principle in all of American politics – just to shut them up. (This legal approach was wisely rejected at the Supreme Court, by an 8 to 1 decision, in 2007.)

All of this was achieved through the simple principle of being as irritating and persistent as humanly possible, and it works, as evinced by their infamy. After all, if you wish to argue with someone, you need to pick a subject that others will oppose. The Westboro Baptist bunch take this to the extreme by singling out the most inappropriate events imaginable – funerals for American servicemen and women, funerals for firefighters, the inauguration of Holocaust memorials – and using them to spread their message that, in their view, God hates nearly everyone who isn’t one of them. Such an unattractive mission understandably gains few converts, but you can’t say they didn’t get your attention.

If we are looking for similar “Truther activists” who shoved 9/11 conspiracy theories into the mainstream, one of the most obvious candidates is radio personality Alex Jones. It was he who led the 2006 Truth Movement rally in New York (though he seems to have usurped the original organizers), bullhoring mourners in the streets near Ground Zero, bullhoring allegations of a cover-up outside the office of then-New York Attorney General Eliot Spitzer, and then leading the crowd in mocking chants of “Pull It” within earshot of World Trade Center landlord Larry Silverstein. Alex Jones required no convincing at all. Before World Trade Center Seven had even fallen he was already broadcasting his conclusion that the Government, not bin Laden, was responsible for the attacks, and that the buildings were demolished by explosives rather than burning to the point of structural failure. It only took

moments for these enduring, defining pillars of the Truth Movement to form in his mind, opinions that still dominate the conspiracy-minded after ten years.

Note, however, that Alex Jones is not an ordinary Truther. He is in many ways closer to the old-fashioned and committed conspiracy theorists, those who ruminate on even more encompassing theories of paranoia. To him, 9/11 was only an example that supported his personal, massive, generations-long conspiracy theory. It is difficult to pinpoint exactly when Mr. Jones first formulated this grander theory, but one pivotal event in his timeline is the 1993 Branch Davidian disaster in Waco, Texas. He rapidly forged a larger conspiracy belief incorporating the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, the Oklahoma City bombing, and numerous Kennedy-era events both real and fantastic. 9/11 was just another phase to him.

In addition to his exorbitant and enthusiastic turns at his bullhorn (he even gave it a name, “Tyranny Crusher 1”), Mr. Jones broadcasts on dozens of radio stations where he draws a consistent audience of over a million listeners. Yet despite being literally first in line and despite his visibility, the evidence suggests Mr. Jones achieved little in terms of popularizing 9/11 conspiracy theories. Jeremy Stahl supports this in his piece, noting that after the event, a tiny fraction of the American public supported the conspiracy theory – about eight percent, a figure comparable to long-term disbelief in the Moon Landings, and a growth rate consistent with other unremarkable conspiracy theories. But, if Alex Jones was not a driving force bringing the Truth Movement to the mainstream, it wasn’t for lack of trying. He authored a book and produced two videos dedicated to his 9/11 ideas before the end of 2002, and another 9/11-themed video in 2005, as well as several other video presentations where 9/11 was a prominent ingredient. After this, his focus faded, and over time 9/11 became less important to his broadcast and his own conspiracy views. It simply wasn’t his core interest or his best seller. Most famously, he declined to participate in the most influential Truth Movement video of them all, *Loose Change* – although years later, *after* the Truth Movement became more popular, he took a controlling interest as executive producer of the 2007 revision *Loose Change: Final Cut*. It would probably be more correct to state that Alex Jones benefitted from the Truth Movement than the other way around.

Like the Westboro Baptist Church, Alex Jones was able to find an audience, but unable to sell his message beyond the typical circles of conspiracy theorists. While activists are necessary for growth, they alone are not enough. To convince the public, mere awareness of a cause is insufficient. You must engage the public in a conversation in order to persuade them. Naturally, the easiest form of conversation is the argument, simply because an argument only requires one of the parties to be invested in the topic beforehand. Nonetheless, the other party (the public) needs to remain engaged in the discussion. Insulting the other party or offending his sensibilities only goes so far before he simply tunes out and ends the conversation. Westboro Baptist Church pushes far too hard and will never amount to anything for this reason alone.

9/11 conspiracy theories already had some relevance to the public due to their built-in advantage of being related to a shared experience and a public menace. But in the early days of the Truth Movement, the conspiracy theories were not easy to comprehend. There needs to be a common frame of reference before there can be a lasting conversation, and this did not develop for several years. The fires at

Ground Zero were not even fully extinguished before Alex Jones began working on his second video. The cleanup phase didn't officially end until May 2002, six months after that. The first real public document on the tragedy came later still, from the *9/11 Commission*, which convened in November 2002 and issued its report in July 2004. This popular report was an important milestone – by this time, the public was clearly ready for information. Even though the report was available for free online, it quickly sold over a million hard copies, alongside an estimated eight million downloads in under a year. Its release also corresponds to the first significant leap in popularity of 9/11 conspiracy theories.

To understand the relationship, consider a typical and extremely common Truther argument: “The World Trade Center towers collapsed too fast,” and therefore it was some kind of planned demolition, which could only have been carried out by the government, ergo “inside job.” Prior to 2005, when the preliminary NIST reports were released, this argument would go nowhere – hardly anyone other than a few dedicated researchers knew how long the collapses took in the first place. How could we respond to such a *non sequitur*? This claim was a nonstarter before the major investigations began to trickle in, but afterward, it was a different matter. People who had read the *9/11 Commission Report* or other documents would naturally want to discuss what they had read, and might even entertain a screwball perspective coming from a known conspiracy theorist. Furthermore, many of the conspiracy theorists focus on the official reports themselves, claiming they are elements of a cover-up (being “clearly incorrect”), and state that they actually prove the existence of the conspiracy.

Some other major conspiracy theories also seem to exhibit this period of dormancy before transitioning to a different growth model. After the Kennedy Assassination, for instance, the first major investigation (the Warren Commission) completed relatively early, only ten months after the event. The event itself was also much simpler in nature, easier for the public to grasp, and less technical. But it was another two years before the conspiracy theories began to build up steam, in this case with the publication of *Rush to Judgment* in 1966. They then grew enormously in February 1967, according to ABC News, which correlates this phase to the sensational trial of Clay Shaw. It is also worth noting that the Warren Commission expressed a concern that the investigation itself would create fodder for conspiracy theories, just as we have proposed.

One can still take a core sample, as it were, of 9/11 conspiracy theories in the formative time period before 2005 in the archives of the JREF Forum. In this era there are a few early activists bringing up the subject, but in nearly every case the topic is simply dismissed. There are no endless discussions or fixations on increasingly fine-grained trivia, no cherry-picked references to previous investigations or reports, no kerfuffles over the validity of those reports or the motivations of their authors. Unlike similar discussions in later years, the topic simply falls flat, even though the Truther beliefs are much the same as they are today. There just isn't enough texture to sustain an argument.

By 2005, this situation had changed. For its March 2005 issue, the magazine *Popular Mechanics* chose as its cover story a comprehensive response to pseudoscientific claims made by the Truth Movement, under the combative title “Debunking 9/11 Lies.” This article was extremely well received, prompting publication of a full-length book on the same subject matter a year later. While this was intended to correct and possibly silence the misinformation being spread by the Truth Movement, it actually had the

opposite effect. It signaled interest on the part of the public, and a willingness of others to do battle with the Truther activists. This is exactly what they wanted to hear.

As a result, in mid-2005 conditions were perfect for the Truth Movement to enter the public consciousness, with nearly unlimited potential for growth. One possible analogy is to the “fire triangle” – a fire requires three ingredients, namely heat, a fuel source, and a point of ignition. The 9/11 conspiracy theories had long generated heat in the form of its activist members, and now there was a ready fuel source in a prepared and reactive public. By 2005 all that was missing was a single spark.

That spark arrived, in the form of Internet technology.

The Storm Breaks

“This conspiracy theory was a visceral thing. I think of Jesse Ventura, recklessly accusing Ted Olson of being complicit in his own wife’s death, and I can’t let that go unchallenged... Some beliefs are just not excusable.” – Ron Wieck

In early 2005 two development teams were working feverishly to bring a new and untapped source of information to the Internet. One team was backed by search-engine giant Google. The other was a startup led by Steve Chen, Chad Hurley, and Jawed Karim, veterans of Internet finance pioneer PayPal. Their products came to be known respectively as Google Video and YouTube.

Video on the Internet was not new. It could be encoded and transmitted as easily as any other file, given sufficient bandwidth and storage space, and given that users knew what to do with it afterward. But both teams sought to capitalize on the fact that there was no convenient mechanism for casual users to distribute video to large numbers of viewers, nor to access video in a content-searchable format. Spurred on by mutual competition, both teams released mostly-working, publicly usable versions in April and May of 2005 – just in time for Truth Movement phenomenon *Loose Change*.

This new amateur film from creators Dylan Avery, Jason Bermas, and Korey Rowe was completed after a development arc of about two years. It stepped into a growing cynicism prepared by the immensely popular, mainstream, conspiracy-leaning but much softer documentary *Fahrenheit 9/11*. But unlike this earlier film, *Loose Change* made no compromises or concessions to skeptics or reality, borrowing all of its content from claims spreading throughout the Truth Movement. While it differed only superficially from earlier presentations such as those from Alex Jones, it had the good fortune to appear at precisely the right moment. An estimated 50,000 copies of the first edition were sold on DVD – and there were over *ten million* viewings on Google Video. In just over a year it rose to #1 in the Google Video ratings, being viewed at a sustained rate that topped 20,000 per day. The video was hailed as “the first Internet blockbuster” of any kind, a novelty sufficient on its own to push *Loose Change* into the mainstream.

If we set aside any consideration of scholarship and accuracy, this video had everything. It was engaging, it was easily accessible, it was comprehensible, and it had clearly crossed into the public consciousness, becoming an event in its own right. It also generated its own controversy. Within a year it was studied and legitimized by the mainstream press (notably in a 2006 *Vanity Fair* article), it was singled out as a target by debunkers (for example, the enduring weblog “Screw Loose Change”), and it was both praised and reviled in the Truth Movement itself (many conspiracists considered it to be “CIA misinformation”). It was even the subject of a nasty lawsuit: The Naudet Brothers, legitimate independent filmmakers who happened to be working near the World Trade Center when it was struck, were dismayed to find some of their unique footage used without their permission and wanted nothing to do with the conspiracy theory. All of this helped propel *Loose Change*, and the Truth Movement entire, into the limelight.

This abruptly changed the nature of the conversation, as shown clearly in public opinion polls. Referring again to Jeremy Stahl’s chart of Truth Movement popularity, which I have reproduced in Figure 3 below,

pay close attention to mid-2005 through 2006. These points correspond *exactly* to the release of *Loose Change* and the film’s rise in popularity leading up to the fifth anniversary of the attacks.

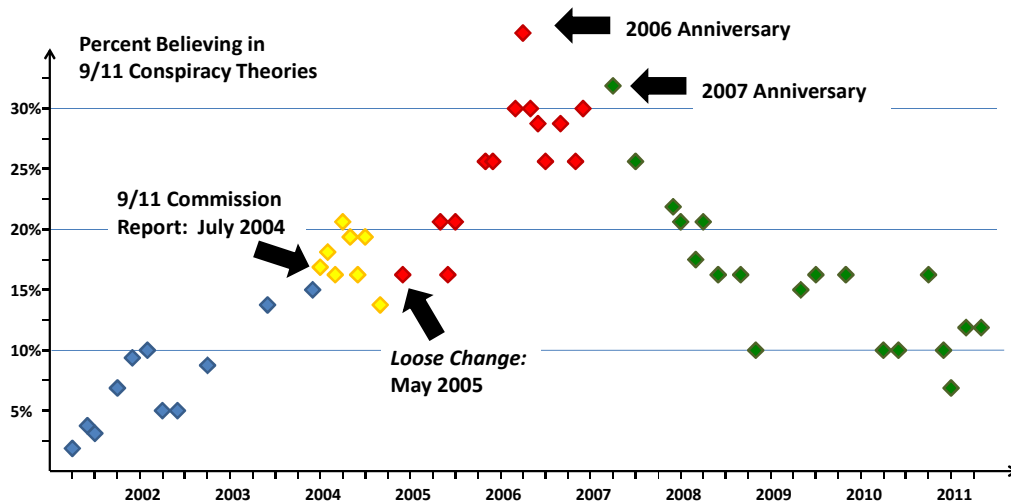


Figure 3: Timeline of 9/11 Conspiracy Popularity
Data Credits: Jeremy Stahl, Slate Magazine

In Stahl’s piece, as explored before, he accounts for this remarkable period as a consequence of political factors instead of events in the Truth Movement, noting it also roughly correlates to a precipitous drop in President Bush’s approval rating. But why here, and not before or after? And without the public changing its perception of the Truth Movement, how would political unrest and cynicism translate into belief in a totally unsupportable, already debunked conspiracy theory? It is tempting to blame President Bush for every bungle under the sun, but there is no clear connection here, only an influence. Furthermore, Scott Sommers in *Skeptical Magazine* provides evidence of a marked separation between the casual, “low commitment” Truthers and the “high commitment” believers – our activists. He also demonstrates that, for the few Truthers available for study, the activists are overwhelmingly right-leaning or extremist in nature. This is consistent with my own observations.

Whatever the cause, due to this “perfect storm” of favorable conditions, the Truth Movement’s climb into mainstream awareness was undeniable, and undeniably linked to its newfound presence on the Internet. By September 2006 *Time Magazine* recognized that the Truth Movement was “not a fringe phenomenon. It is a mainstream political reality.” And in this article, *Loose Change* is the *only* Truth Movement work cited.

Where would the Truth Movement be without *Loose Change*? This is a difficult question to answer. We know that a significant wedge of the public was completely unaware of the Truth Movement until the video appeared. The Loose Change Forum was at one time among the most active Truth Movement sites to be found on the Internet, even though today it has been all but abandoned. I find it even more significant that the success of *Loose Change* was the first definitive evidence that there was real money to be made as a 9/11 conspiracy theorist: If one could charge for such a presentation, there could be

profit far beyond the moderate success of books like Thierry Meyssan's *9/11: The Big Lie* or the steady living afforded Alex Jones through radio advertising. Not all activist conspiracy theorists are motivated by money, of course, and it is possible that some other video could have taken its place, but the fact remains that *Loose Change* is the lone undeniable breakout hit for the entire Truth Movement.

With *Loose Change* the Truth Movement had found a new source of inspiration. It began to take on a completely new demographic character as it spoke to a younger audience. Its three creators, then only 23 and 27 years old, were soon pictured with Hollywood loose cannon Charlie Sheen, cementing their new role as figureheads for the Movement. As reported by the 2007 Zogby survey commissioned by the Truth Movement, belief in 9/11 conspiracy theories (considering both "LIHOP" and "MIHOP" together) was three times as prevalent in the 18-29 year old demographic as in the rest of the sample. With this shift in membership came a shift in tactics. The 2006 rally was a raucous affair aimed at younger people, worlds removed from the quiet and restrained lecture I had seen a decade before. On paper, the public side of the event was to include only "peaceful vigils," but chanting and bullhorns spilled into the streets all the same, as they have every year since. In 2007, even bigger plans were set in motion for the sixth anniversary, including guest speakers, live music, and film festivals.

Whether or not you accept that *Loose Change* alone was the catalyst, the long-term significance of YouTube to the Truth Movement is not in question. On many debunking sites a new, technologically enabled form of logical fallacy has emerged (sometimes humorously referred to as "*Argumentum ad YouTubeum*") manifesting as a defective argument that makes no coherent case, instead only referring to linked videos. YouTube itself offers the ability to comment on its videos, and impassioned if semi-literate Truther arguments can appear in the comments on almost any subject. I recently searched YouTube for the word "explosives" and found that four of the top twenty video entries were explicit products of the Truth Movement.

Numerous other Truthers have also attempted to recreate the magic of *Loose Change* with their own videos, notably *9/11: Press for Truth* from fellow "twenty-something filmmakers" Ray Nowosielski and John Duffy, Anthony Lawson's short subject "This is an Orange," and Sophia Shafquat's "9/11 Mysteries." Too many to count are the copycat videos such as those from the "Pilots for 9/11 Truth" or Floyd Anderson's "The Ultimate Con" (released under the *nom de guerre* of "Lucus"). Richard Gage has a great many videos of his own, even though neither he nor any of his claimed 1,000+ architects and engineers has completed a single conference paper on the subject.

This time period, from mid-2005 through 2006, is also precisely the period when I began to get involved. It took a few months before I was sufficiently briefed to understand what the Truthers were trying to say, and a few months more before I was sufficiently angered to fight back. In those few months I saw the Truth Movement go from just another crazy idea to a potential crisis. I wasn't the only one.

And now, at last, I understand what made this conspiracy theory special. It wasn't the distasteful nature of its claims or how it affected me personally. It wasn't a factor of its sheer stupidity. It wasn't even the extremely ugly conduct of some activists. Instead, it was simply the first conspiracy theory to go viral.

The Storm Retreats to its Teapot

"There's no such thing as bad publicity." – Legendary, attributed to P. T. Barnum

"There's no such thing as bad publicity, except your own obituary." – Brendan Behan

Encouraged by the energy of the 2006 rally, for 2007 the Truth Movement planned a "Global Day of Action" with events in about fifty cities, led by a five-day festival of sorts in New York City. The NYC schedule of events included nineteen different speakers and the much anticipated premiere of *Loose Change: Final Cut*. Ticket prices for the event, under ticket code "Ready4Mainstream," started at twenty dollars per day. Optimistic organizers estimated that as many as 25,000 people might attend.

Instead, the sixth anniversary proved to be an unqualified catastrophe. Actual attendance in New York City was estimated at only five hundred, and results were no better at the other events nationwide. The original five-day programme was compressed to three days, but even so their venues were conspicuously empty. Within a week after the rally, Truth Movement group We Are Change issued an emergency call for donations, claiming a huge operational loss and a glut of unsold T-shirts.

Before the event, producer Korey Rowe had told *Hustler Magazine* that *Loose Change: Final Cut* would be released on 11 September 2007, would play on three thousand screens, and had a budget of over twenty million dollars, figures unheard of in documentary films. (The twenty million dollar figure was later clarified in a press release to include advertising, making it only slightly more credible.) Alex Jones bought his way in as executive producer, and David Ray Griffin served as "fact checker." But only a working draft was shown at the 2007 rally, to a half-filled theater. The film was finally released in November, appearing primarily as an Internet-based pay-per-view download. Within hours a pirated copy appeared on Google Video, and soon after that, an angry message at the Loose Change Forum requested that viewers actually pay to see the film, promising an official free version once they had recovered their investment (now claimed to be in the low hundreds of thousands of dollars). The real-world film premiere was on November 11th at the Riverview Theater in Minneapolis, accompanied by an interactive discussion with Korey Rowe; this event sold 430 out of 700 seats and was not rebooked. Later that week, there was a single matinee screening in Toronto, and another in London. A few other semi-private screenings were rumored in the months afterward, but generated little interest.

The party was over. The only positive note on 11 September 2007 came from Havana, Cuba, where ailing despot Fidel Castro issued a bizarre statement claiming that no trace had been found of American Airlines 77 passengers in the wreckage at the Pentagon. Castro's delirious support was immediately welcomed by the Truth Movement, while elsewhere, the world laughed.

Following this date, the evidence shows the Truth Movement returning to traditional behavior patterns common to every other typical conspiracy theory. Jeremy Stahl's data show a clear and unbroken trend line from the 2006-7 plateau to its current support level. At best, 15% of people now share some kind of suspicion that vaguely resembles Truth Movement beliefs, a percentage statistically indistinguishable from long-term belief in many other conspiracy theories. The once-plausible threat of the conspiracy

theory influencing the mainstream, or actually being believed by a politically significant fraction of the population, has passed.

Well, almost. There is some precedent for long-running, dormant conspiracy theories to suddenly explode again in the public consciousness. The Moon Landing Hoax conspiracy theory briefly enjoyed a spurt of popularity in early 2001, after 25 years of traditional growth patterns ever since its origins in approximately 1974. This jump was clearly related to a single irresponsible broadcast on network television. However, even in this case the increase in conspiracy theory popularity is debatable. Prior to the broadcast of "Conspiracy Theory: Did We Land on the Moon?" about 6 to 10% of those polled believed the Apollo landings were faked. Afterwards, a single poll from the Fox Network (the same network that produced the television special) claimed up to 20% were "skeptical" about the Moon Landings. However, this result was never duplicated. And in 2005, a poll by Mary Lynne-Dittmar showed that overall public acceptance of this theory had returned to the 5-6% level, if indeed it had ever risen past that figure.

While the possibility of a sudden new media event bringing the Truth Movement back into fashion cannot be totally ruled out, it seems unlikely. The Moon Landing denial presentation above seems to have resonated in part because of the great length of time (almost 32 years) since the event in question. Notably, in the 2005 poll referenced above, nearly all of those supporting the conspiracy theory were aged 18-24 – people who were not even born when the Apollo Landings took place, and may have never heard of the conspiracy theories before. This is another example of a "flash in the pan" conspiracy movement, one that goes nowhere and dissipates on its own.

So why did the Truth Movement stall so quickly? Its disintegration was so abrupt that many in the Movement failed to acknowledge or even believe that it had happened, even though warning signs were evident months in advance. This all came about because, in simplest terms, the Truth Movement had misunderstood the conversation with the public. There is a great difference between advertising a cause versus winning converts to it, and this is where the Truthers misplayed their hand. They had succeeded in getting attention from many people, and in raising a general sense of suspicion and cynicism, but these "supporters" weren't Truthers themselves. They needed more convincing.

At this point, a disconnect was inevitable. The Truth Movement did not know how to react, because they were unable to comprehend the need. After all, Truther activists had never needed much convincing themselves, and did not relate to those still questioning. To the Truthers, the conspiracy was obvious. With few exceptions, they had accepted the conspiracy theories without detailed examination, without mainstream scientific backing, without any consensus among activists, and without any coherent narrative of what else could have actually taken place. As a result they had no answers to give people who needed a more complete explanation. Their weak base of support among the receptive general public wasn't made into conspiracy theorists. Instead, the newcomers had only been tricked into believing a conspiracy might be possible.

There is a reason why traditional conspiracy theories grow slowly, and why their base of reliable support tends to cluster in older people. The average person needs a compelling and well-supported case to be

firmly convinced. Failing that, he needs to maintain focus on the conspiracy theory for an extended period of time, sufficiently long to make tenuous, individually meaningless connections until *in total* the conspiracy theory becomes a belief. Individuals in the Truth Movement refer to this style of “learning” as a “cumulative argument,” a process evident in the style of their presentations. The first Truth Movement document resembling a scientific paper is referred to as the “Fourteen Points” paper, which is little more than a long list of talking points and suspicions with no actual underlying hypothesis. Many Truthers over the years have constructed even longer lists of “Smoking Guns” with dozens or hundreds of entries, yet fail to state clearly what it all could mean. Richard Gage uses over 500 PowerPoint slides in his talks, but still concludes lamely that he cannot explain what happened either – his Internet petition merely states: *“We believe there is sufficient doubt about the official story to justify re-opening the 9/11 investigation. The new investigation must include a full inquiry into the possible use of explosives that might have been the actual cause of the destruction...”*

The “cumulative argument” is scientifically invalid. A million suspicions or opinions do not equal a single fact, and any alternate ideas about what happened need to fit *all* of the facts rather than just the few that attract Truthers. However, a cumulative argument can be persuasive, particularly when the argument is over an opinion instead of scientific inquiry. But such persuasion takes time. You cannot embed a conspiracy theory in the public consciousness quickly, not in a way that will survive a challenge when facts point against it. In the case of the Kennedy Assassination conspiracy theories, public acceptance may be permanent, but this took place over a period of decades. The Truth Movement didn’t have that much time. It lacked staying power. It also attempted to remain “pure,” focusing on the wild conjecture that started it all rather than evolving and trying to reach a compromise with attentive but skeptical newcomers.

We can see this effect manifest as an interesting anomaly in the 2007 Zogby poll paid for by the Truth Movement. Recall that support for 9/11 conspiracy theories was strongest by far among 18-29 year olds. But reading more closely, while they were the most likely to accept *some* conspiracy theory, they did not accept the specific theories pushed by Truthers, viz. the “MIHOP” theories (“Made It Happen on Purpose”). MIHOP belief was strongest among 30-49 year olds. In fact, the 18-29 group was actually three to eight times *less* likely to believe MIHOP than any other group!

The Truth Movement seems to have missed this, but looking back at it now, it makes sense. In my opinion the 30-49 year old MIHOP believers are our Truther activists. These are people with years of cynicism and long exposure to conspiracy theories in general, but still young enough to be active and confrontational. To them, the Truth Movement happened to fit with their own suspicions, or even with their own fully developed conspiracy beliefs, as in the case of Alex Jones. In contrast, those aged 18-29 were following a trend and a feeling rather than committing to deeply held beliefs. They were clearly influenced by *Loose Change* and its ilk, but they didn’t fully accept the claims. They were merely bombarded into thinking that something was amiss, and so they identified strongly with LIHOP theories instead. Rather than recognize this and attempt to persuade them any further, the Truth Movement maintained a hard focus on MIHOP concepts, until the younger generation lost interest entirely.

The behavior of the Truth Movement during its decline illustrates this disconnect. With few exceptions, remaining activists doubled down on their previous activities instead of reassessing their tactics or their own beliefs. Since 2007 David Ray Griffin has written six more books, recycling nearly all of his material, and in one case even recycling the title (2008's *New Pearl Harbor Revisited*). Dylan Avery created yet another version of *Loose Change*. Richard Gage celebrated as the 1,000th credentialed member signed on to his petition, then again when he reached 1,500, but still has no research papers from any of them. Truthers who saw conspirators everywhere began to see them even in their own ranks – Jeremy Stahl neatly illustrates the infighting and spurious accusations of sabotage between members after the movement peaked. We Are Change, learning little from the 2007 debacle in New York City, attempted to rekindle the spirit by planning a similar event in 2008, giving it the apt title of “9/11 Truth: Now or Never,” only to find that reality had called their bluff. Nothing new emerged. Support continued to erode.

Some within the Truth Movement saw the warning signs. In 2007, an active Truther by the screen name of “Citizen Pawn” left the Truth Movement completely, but before doing so also left a surprisingly lucid assessment of what the Movement had become, and why. Below are three excerpts from the open letter:

Back then, circa 2002-2003, the Truth Movement wasn't like it is today. Most of us were "Liberals" or "progressives". It was rare you found a "conservative" or "republican" Truther. If there were any, they listened to Alex Jones like crazy and usually stuck in that niche.

Then something happened. Different camps of thought started to spread in each direction. People started to form "cliques" and the "truth" became not so "truthy" anymore.

Then came the advent of YouTube and easily made websites. [...] I started seeing a trend develop with a few, a weird bandwagon enigma, as if they were joining us out of some fad, or to quench their rebellious natures. It wasn't about 9/11 so much, as it was a CULT.

This sentiment is only one person's experience, but it seems to confirm our interpretation: The emergence of activists out of a more traditional conspiracy theorist culture, the arrival of YouTube changing the Truth Movement's complexion, and the battleground shifting to the Internet. Also notice that in this person's view, the Truth Movement was primarily left-wing *before* 2005 and less so afterward, contrary to appearances, but consistent with Sommers's findings.

With its best days behind it, the Truth Movement is once again just another ordinary conspiracy theory. But there is no reason to assume it will totally disappear. Of the thirty popular conspiracy theories we examined earlier, almost all can still gather attention and spawn debate today, usually in strange corners of the internet such as the David Icke Forum or Above Top Secret. On rare occasions, they may even be seen in real life. I'm betting, however, you won't catch even a glimpse of the Truth Movement.

During my six years following the Truth Movement I saw physical evidence of its existence only four times, and only one actual Truther (behind the wheel of a heavily annotated pickup on the I-15 Freeway in Orange County, California). I only spoke to one committed Truther directly (a planned telephone

debate, against Tony Szamboti on *Hardfire*), and only one co-worker who expressed doubts after hearing Truther propaganda (specifically, he was shown a picture of the exit hole at the Pentagon and told it was the point of impact, a common Truther lie). I only saw Truthers on television once, when Willie Rodriguez found his way onto C-SPAN in 2007. In that same time period, I talked (face to face) to three people who sincerely believe in "FEMA Camps," two with deep convictions about extraterrestrials among us, two who brought up the subject of Chemtrails without prompting, one genuinely militant environmentalist, four who were either purveyors or recipients of faith healing, and at least a dozen with conspiracist views of the Federal Reserve Bank. And one relative became convinced that "orbs" visit her, because she kept seeing them turn up in her photographs. Compared to this, Truthers are unremarkable.

Had I known it would turn out like this, I never would have been terribly concerned about them, and I never would have let their insults or threats get to me. I probably would have been nicer to them. After all, it wasn't entirely their fault. Another agency helped start it, and I'm not talking about the CIA.

The Allure of the Internet Conspiracy

The mirror does not reflect evil, but creates it. – Mamoru Oshii, Ghost in the Shell 2: Innocence

Pessimistic columnists have claimed for years that the Internet would cause an uncontrollable spread of conspiracy theories. This concern, that crazies of the world will exploit electronic communication and efficient search algorithms to find each other and wreak unimaginable havoc, has been voiced so frequently that it may qualify as a cliché. Certainly the Internet enables cheap, efficient, rapid bulk communication, but this fear is too simplistic to be of any use. The Internet is only a technological leap compared to what came before. One could have said much the same about Guglielmo Marconi's new invention, or about the revolutionary Gutenberg device. (In fact, some people did!) This fear has also proven to be a bit naïve. Today we are not awash in runaway conspiracy theories. Only one seems to have made extraordinary use of this new medium, and the interaction between the Internet and the Truth Movement is so nuanced that many observers seem to have missed it entirely. Even though we've long expected it, the first Great Internet Conspiracy has come and gone without being recognized.

As the Truth Movement demonstrated, it wasn't merely the Internet that enabled conspiracy theories to become rampant, but a specific form of social medium on the Internet. Technology's role is much more subtle than merely providing amplification. To explain, let me bring a well-known parable up to date with modern information technology. Consider, if you will, The Boy Who Cried Wolf in the 21st century.

The Boy Who Cried Wolf is, in modern parlance, a simple "troll." He delights in posting inflammatory material in public spaces to cause unnecessary concern, and he then laughs at the angry reactions he provokes. In the fable, he only gets away with this once before his village brands him as a troublesome nut. The rest quickly ignore him, leaving him to experience poetic justice in short order. But on the Internet, this could not happen.

With social media at his fingertips, the Boy's alarm message would spread well beyond his village. Some people would find his initial posting at once, while others would find it much later. A few would accidentally revive it years after the fact. But to pick a time at random, say one week after he had his fun, both the initial "fake" alert and the later "real" warning would be available simultaneously, with no way to predict which would be more widespread and more likely to come up on a search engine. Both would also be mixed in with a bewildering array of angry posts, some by people who had been duped, others noting that he was actually right. Newcomers would stumble on the mess and get confused, then ask for clarification, at which point sullen townsfolk – those who hadn't yet given up in disgust – would relate their own version of events, followed by gruff reactions to additional questions when their answers don't all match perfectly. They may leave details out of their summaries, leading to speculation about what else was left out, and why.

After the bickering goes on for a while, a helpful soul might try to document what happened, along with his observations and recommendations for the future. However, while he is doing this, the original Boy has his own cover story ready, perhaps joined by support from fellow miscreants, or he could present it under a fake name. (Of course he's not going to let it go so easily – he's a troll, remember? This is fun

for him. He also now has an opportunity for “revenge.”) This new version tells a rather different tale... Maybe there really was a wolf the first time, only no one else saw it. It may provide a blurry or doctored image that casts doubt on his accusers, or simply dredge up a stock wolf photograph and claim it as genuine. Or the Boy may be content to carefully extract odious comments and snippets of arguments from his accusers, and then suggest that with so many people out to get him, it’s no wonder they tried to blame it all on him, covering up their failure to act later on. Throughout the whole process newcomers keep stumbling on the story, some attracted to the noise and insults, none knowing what to believe. After all, do *you* believe everything that the town leadership tells you? Are you a sheep? What motive would the Boy have to lie? Who stands to benefit the most? And ever-present are voices calling for a truce, arguing that we should all “agree to disagree,” and insisting that we can never know exactly what happened. Others will take this sentiment literally and insist that until we do know exactly what happened, enough doubt exists to justify re-opening an official investigation.

The hypothetical scenario above is not far-fetched. To pick a Truther example, I can point to a spontaneous Internet argument over a basic construction detail of the World Trade Center, a detail that is not in dispute and should be simply looked up. If needed it could be verified with the man who built the Towers in the first place. No discussion at all is warranted. Yet this debate ran for ten days, involved 37 individuals, totaled 170 posts including insults and factionalization, and still reached no clear resolution. It also appeared at about the same time as I wrote the previous paragraph. This kind of pointless bickering is still going on ten years after 9/11, on even the simplest subject.

What this shows is that the Internet, or any form of social medium in general, is not a mere megaphone. It enables a completely different form of communication. While the Internet can certainly perpetuate or magnify an argument, it can also *create* an argument, especially where its strengths and weaknesses conflict with our usual patterns of communication.

Besides the potential for mere mischief, there are other features about the Internet that attract the Truth Movement. In early 2007, George Monbiot wrote a pointed essay directed at the Truth Movement entitled “Bayoneting a Scarecrow,” including the following excerpt:

In fact it seems to me that the purpose of the “9/11 truth movement” is to be powerless. The omnipotence of the Bush regime is the coward’s fantasy, an excuse for inaction used by those who don’t have the stomach to engage in real political fights. [...] The great virtue of a fake conspiracy is that it calls on you to do nothing.

For a movement that aspires to revolutionary activism, yet is so helpless and lazy that it cannot even organize a proper meeting, the Internet and tools like YouTube are priceless gifts. Not so long ago, in order to promote a conspiracy theory one had to at least photocopy pamphlets, make signs, stand on a street corner and heckle, or wait in line for the microphone at an open hearing. The early Internet and e-mail simplified this process, as we saw with Robert McElwaine and an omnipresent rash of chain letter hoaxes (did anyone *really* wind up in a bathtub full of ice without any kidneys?). But even these shortcuts require you to at least read a portion of what you’re copying or come up with a slogan. In the present state of affairs, the would-be activist doesn’t have to get off the couch, and doesn’t even have

to know how to read. He can simply watch a video, and his activism may entail no more effort than copying its location. As the Internet is increasingly accessed from hand-held devices, reading is now actually being discouraged.

Internet-based communication also weakens our cultural resistance to conspiracy theories. While individually our minds and imagination are susceptible to conspiracist thinking, our participation in a community provides some protection. Our first reaction to a strange new idea will be to see what our friends have heard, and to compare our feelings to what they think. If there is no consensus, we then try to speak to experts or trusted authorities. Failing that we may even be forced to do actual research in a library, although if that seems like too much effort, we may simply drop the subject entirely and see if it goes away. But the online community is different. Our first reaction now is to rush off to a search engine or read what *Wikipedia* has to say. While Internet search in some ways outperforms the old method of group discussion, it is qualitatively different: On-line search is instant and efficient, but this comes at the cost of disregarding context. What information we ask for, we may find, but we may not have the means to properly interpret it or to evaluate it for accuracy. There is no longer any seasoned elder or any group of peers helping us to ask the right question. Even worse, the various search engines have begun to provide different results depending on one's personal site-visit history.

While information on the Internet is increasingly in pictorial or video format, for now the overwhelming majority of it is written. Interestingly, there is little support for verbal communication, save only things like archives of radio shows or mimicry of older technology (such as Skype). This subtle change in interaction has a potentially large impact. In the community model, we work through problems by means of conversation, allowing parties to interact and better understand the source of confusion. Experts consistently claim that 70% or more of face-to-face communication is not contained in the words themselves. Over the Internet, most communication is typed, and the written word seems inherently more formal. It also has an obvious flattening effect on discussion, by which I mean things like sarcasm, figures of speech, analogies, and simple mistakes are either lost or misinterpreted with distressing frequency. The closest typical Internet analogue to a group discussion is the discussion forum, but even here discussions often become lectures, and disagreements tend toward debates. We simply react to written communication differently.

This effect is compounded when we begin to merely parrot what we have read without absorbing the implications of new information, and without thinking critically about its content. It is bad enough that we have forsaken context when we type in a few keywords for search, but now we run the risk of attaching an entirely new context, one that doesn't even belong there. A great deal of Truth Movement claims begin in this way, and are then repeated *ad nauseam* until the actual fact upon which they are based is distorted beyond recognition.

For example, Dr. Griffin cites a large number of quotes from FDNY firefighters that he thinks are proof of "explosives," but as the actual record makes clear, the firefighters believed no such thing. Nearly all of them are still alive, and none of them support the Truth Movement, as typified by a video interview with former FDNY Lieutenant Torrillo on the ninth anniversary of 9/11. Another repeated claim is that noted structural engineer Dr. Astaneh of the University of California at Berkeley, one of the first examiners of

structural debris from the World Trade Center, saw structural steel that had “melted” or “vaporized,” allegedly only possible through extraordinary means that would support a conspiracy theory. In reality, both claims refer to much lower temperature processes consistent with ordinary burning, and Dr. Astaneh has gone on record stating that the Truth Movement claims are utter nonsense. Nonetheless, this claim resurfaces every few months, like clockwork. Only a specific word matters to the Truth Movement, not the actual meaning.

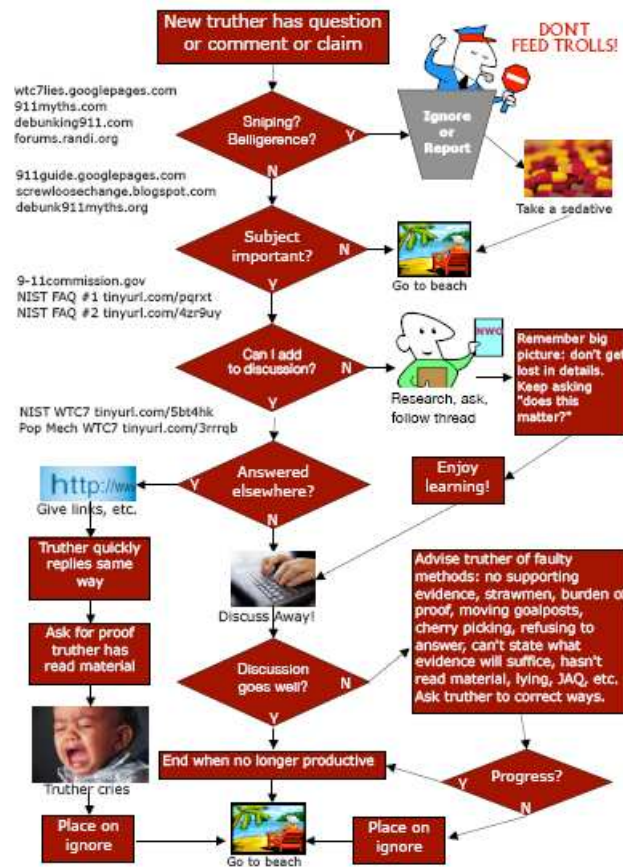
By ignoring context, the Truth Movement also entangles itself with competing conspiracy theories. An obvious and embarrassing example is its overlap with anti-Semitism. While the Truth Movement has always had a powerful anti-Semitic faction, as detailed by Stahl and abundantly evident at the JREF Forum, there are plenty of Truthers who have merely echoed such claims out of laziness or accident. For instance, *Loose Change* borrowed heavily from material in the “American Free Press,” a weekly on-line newspaper descended from neo-Nazi publication “The Spotlight,” as well as copying language from Carol A. Valentine, a committed and published Holocaust denier. David Ray Griffin frequently collaborated with Holocaust deniers Eric Hufschmid and Christopher Bollyn, basing his arguments on their unqualified opinions of everything from fire behavior to seismometry analysis. In one particularly damning example, a paper from Dr. Steven Jones and Kevin Ryan mistakenly attributes a key suspicious “fact” to a mainstream television network, but if one manages to untangle the many nested references, one finds that the network never made that claim at all. Rather, what they quoted was an uninformed opinion *about* video shot by the network, expressed by a conspiracy theorist, and printed in (again) the American Free Press. To be clear, I do not have evidence for anti-Semitic beliefs on the part of Dr. Griffin or Dr. Jones or the rest, nor do I think they have such beliefs. Instead, I think they were simply so eager to find any corroborating opinion that they let search engines run wild, and didn’t bother screening the results. In the case of Dylan Avery, I doubt he’d even heard of The American Free Press.

Consensus on the Internet is also notoriously difficult to find. If I put “9/11” into a search engine, two of the top ten results are all about the conspiracy theories. If I put in “9/11 facts,” *seven* of the top ten support the conspiracy theories. In the real world, of course, conspiracy beliefs about 9/11 exist but are hardly so prevalent. As the data show, public consensus is rather strong. And in the scientific world consensus is **total** – there have been many hundreds of professional science and engineering articles about the attacks and their effects, and not a single one supports any conspiracy theory. As a result, in the actual world of science, the Truth Movement doesn’t exist at all. This matters because consensus works against conspiracy theorists. It is always to their advantage to keep the conversation going for as long as possible, and that means keeping alive any glimmer of doubt, however tenuous.

This is one reason why the Truth Movement almost always refuses to produce its own narrative of what it thinks happened, and why it resorts to cumulative argument. Actually resolving anything isn’t a priority, just as it wasn’t to conspiracy theorists of old. They prefer to have room for individual realities. Noted debunker Jay Windley made this observation about Moon Landing deniers, but it is equally applicable to Truthers: *“Remember that the goal of conspiracy rhetoric is to bog down the discussion, not to make progress toward a solution.”*

Unfortunately, over time, the rest of us grew more interested in bogging down the discussion too.

Investing in the Internet



– Mark Roberts, 2006. <http://sites.google.com/site/wtc7lies/>

There are many other features of the Internet that are attractive to or exploited by the Truth Movement. I'd like to focus on one important quality that goes unappreciated, namely the fact that our relationship to the Internet is also evolving. Over time it has become a greater part of our own identity. We are much more invested in it than we used to be.

This relationship is another feature that experienced a dramatic change in the critical 2005-2006 time period. For example, there is the advent of MySpace, which opened in August of 2003, rose to national prominence with its purchase by News Corporation in July 2005, and in June 2006 became the single most visited website in the United States. Competing technology Facebook incorporated in 2004 and became available to the general public in September 2006, and it is here that Truther organizations such as We Are Change exist today. The messaging service Twitter, bridging the awkward gap between personal communication and Internet broadcast, opened in March of 2006. These uncanny coincidences describe our growing attachment to our digital selves – a manifestation that is vulnerable to the Truth Movement.

Consider this: In 1995, at the time of the Oklahoma City Bombing, the Internet was a well known phenomenon but used by only about 16 million people. This number roughly doubled every year afterward until 2000, by which time most Americans used the Internet and half of Americans used it on a regular basis. More importantly, in 1995 we begin to see the first signs of public interest in the Internet lifestyle, as typified by then-popular hosting site Geocities. Here users followed a “homesteading” model, literally staking claims to little corners of the Web to make into their homes. For its time it was wildly popular, but it was neither structured nor pretentious. There were few examples to follow. Visitors would treat the Web like a sort of on-demand television show – it was a place to tune in, search for entertainment, and then turn off again, an activity called “surfing the Web” after the concept of television “channel-surfing.” Eventually more involving alternatives appeared, and Geocities fell into disuse and closed. The overwhelming majority of its sites were simply abandoned.

In contrast, today’s social networking sites are much more thorough and invasive. After 2000, specifically coinciding with the “dot com” stock market bust on 10 March 2000, use of the Internet could double no longer. Instead, it began increasing at a linear rather than geometric pace. This different, more conservative growth model is one reason why the “dot coms” collapsed, as many of them were built upon business plans with absurdly optimistic and unsustainable assumptions. Those who survived met the challenge by changing their approach: In place of simply attracting new users, they decided to build stronger relationships with each individual customer. In 1995, anyone could create a webpage about themselves saying anything, and many did, out of the sheer sense of novelty. Where the Internet advertised itself, as in the example of service provider AOL, it presented itself in the context of providing a service, providing unique content to users as an alternate media channel. Today this situation is reversed. Users now supply the content, and many contribute out of peer pressure. It has become abnormal *not* to participate.

Today, my various electronic mailboxes are frequently bombarded by Facebook, exhorting me to put up pictures of myself, to read things written on a “wall” and to write messages to others, to participate in imaginary games involving pets or plants or farms, to see what YouTube videos others are watching, and to meet friends of friends of friends – and I don’t even use Facebook. What was once voluntary and experimental, a multi-media version of open-mike night at a coffee shop, is now bordering on extortion. Many of these tools follow us in cyberspace, quietly gathering information, tailoring their messages in a way calculated to attract our participation. It isn’t any longer about what we create, what we want to share or present to others, but who we are. Our statistics matter now. Our mundane interactions are increasingly logged and analyzed and discussed. And small wonder, for therein lies market intelligence and business opportunity.

The less formal social networking tools illustrate this evolution as well. For instance, the Web-based Internet forum started in earnest in 1994, building upon earlier technologies dating to the 1970’s. (I first participated in a local forum, available only to users of a specific mainframe computer, in 1987.) Gradually users of these forums began to grow attached to their specific “user profiles,” which originally were nothing more than account names and histories of posts. Now the concept typically includes a count of posts, various ranking mechanisms, a small portrait known as an *avatar* (literally a manifestation of the self), and assorted ancillary communications and access to protected areas. There

is also the unquantified concept of *reputation*, for as users invest more and more time into specific forums and into their user profiles, they also accumulate respect and familiarity to others. One's presence at a forum now has a persistence to it, one that goes far beyond the mere posts themselves. For many people these esoteric, intangible things carry significant value, enough to provoke serious retaliation when they are threatened, occasionally spilling into real life. Forum "police" and assorted punitive actions are now commonplace. I have even seen real-world job advertisements for moderators at some of the more popular political forums.

With this shift in attitude, is it any surprise that the Truth Movement flourished in this new environment? As we saw before, a critical requirement for a conspiracy theory to grow is *argument*, and on-line arguments became vastly easier to find as the decade progressed. The Internet was famously termed a "marketplace of ideas" by many, implying that every opinion would be heard and judged in a neo-Capitalist fashion, but the modern interpretation is actually more insular. We now have numerous overlapping communities, large and small, dominated by personality rather than content. Yet a dissenter can still intrude into this quasi-controlled environment with ease. What has changed is that backlash is now inevitable. We now react to a Truther activist polluting "our" Internet spaces just as surely as we would if he brought a bullhorn into our favorite restaurant.

This psychology also explains the "high commitment" individuals opposing the conspiracy theory – the logical opposite of conspiracy theory activists, known as "debunkers." This label was rather carelessly applied to me at the JREF Forum, as it has been to many others. In modern terms, a debunker is apparently anyone who actually speaks out against the conspiracy theory rather than just ignoring it. However, it once meant a great deal more. The term has a colorful history.

According to historian David Hackett Fischer, the first "debunkers" were in early 20th century America, borrowing the name from a 1923 novel by William Woodward. These debunkers were activists who challenged American historical mythology, downplaying or even denying legendary acts of individuals in the American Revolution such as Paul Revere, Joseph Warren, or George Washington. You will probably wonder why such a movement would arise at all, let alone in that time period, until you consider political sentiment of the day – they were in fact historical revisionists, working not against any conspiracy theory or pseudoscience, but instead against entrenched American folklore in order to advance an isolationist agenda. By diminishing these cherished (and often admittedly exaggerated) historical anecdotes, and by calling into question the historical motivation for American independence, the debunkers sought to quell a rising spirit of American exceptionalism and promote withdrawal from Wilsonian principles. While reexamining the historical record is certainly reasonable, these debunkers went much too far, often automatically gainsaying admirable acts or opinions of early American leaders simply because they seemed "improbable." Their efforts were also largely successful, even after the Debunking Movement itself came to a sudden halt with the start of World War II. Dr. Fischer argues that the after-effects of this contrarian movement had a lasting impact on American politics and the American identity, contributing to cynicism in the 1960's and even to the present day. Indeed, the Debunker Movement may even share some of the blame for dogmatic anti-Government paranoia that guides so many modern conspiracy theorists. In response, Dr. Fischer and numerous other historians have worked to restore a more accurate and better documented view of American history for years.

In like fashion, the “debunkers” opposing the Truth Movement do not merely correct misinformation invented by Truthers, but go further, opposing the mindset and social mechanisms that gave the Truth Movement a place to form. The modern debunkers view the Truth Movement as a defective world view that somehow escaped summary judgment and gained acceptance on the Internet, defying the “system” of the Marketplace of Ideas and thereby requiring a systematic response. Unfortunately, a permanent solution is not actually achievable. There is no way to stamp out all Truthers, particularly not while preserving the spirit of open exchange the Internet supposedly represents.

As a result of this frustration, many debunkers have noticed a reactionary, obsessive behavior appearing in their ranks, one that occasionally manifests with fervor reminiscent of anti-Communism. And strangely, these incidents seem to be increasing, even though the Truth Movement is in full retreat. I uncovered signs of this myself in a small 2009 opinion poll on the JREF Forum, where a plurality of respondents indicated not just willingness, but actual desire, to continue arguing with Truthers to the bitter end. More recently, Scott Sommers and Dave Rogers at the JREF Forum remarked on the topic of “debunker cognitive dissonance,” a psychological artifact that until recently was more typical among Truthers. And in August 2011 the authors of weblog *Screw Loose Change* reluctantly changed their open comment policy, despite five years of precedent, due to bickering and problems caused by *debunkers*. But while this kind of determined retaliation is counter-productive, it is understandable. After all, if the free market of ideas seems to be failing, many will rush to shore it up. A Utopian Internet that only educates, never misleads, is certainly a worthy goal. It just isn’t realistic.

Whether our personal attachment to the Internet has led us into the “high commitment” category of debunker, or merely into the “low commitment” bin of the great unimpressed majority, it is clear that none of this happened in 1995. We were not so invested in our virtual spaces. Internet users took on personae and shed them again with no more effort than changing clothes. I can scarcely recall all of the various user identities I had from 1987 to 2005, what sites they were registered on, or what personal information (if any) I associated with them. After 2005 is another story.

Somewhere along the line, gradually, encouraged by innovations on the Web, the messages and information content became intertwined and confused with identity. Once this begins, once we are more concerned with the identities of involved parties than the content of arguments, we begin to think like conspiracy theorists. And any attack on our opinions becomes an attack on our persons.

Worse, while the Internet has changed enormously in the last ten years, changing our relationship to it along the way, it hasn’t stopped there. It has also fueled a change in ourselves.

How the Net Redefines Memory

“With such massive proliferation of information it became possible to write an article citing wholly false sources, also based on false sources.”^[citation needed] – Wikipedia, article on “Digital Revolution,” retrieved 23 September 2011

In Summer 2011 I met Dr. Vint Cerf, one of a handful of individuals who can legitimately claim to have helped invent the Internet. We were at a technology conference on adaptable space systems where he was a featured speaker, appropriate because the Internet has proven to be a remarkably adaptable system. From its humble beginnings as the ARPAnet in the late 1960’s, when it linked only four computers, it has grown to connect over four *billion*, making it one of the most scalable systems in the entire universe. But in order to do this, the Internet needed special qualities, one of them being an inherent and misleading simplicity. As Dr. Cerf explained, lightweight specification and simple requirements were important factors in its success. However, this design choice has consequences. For instance, is all content on the Internet supposed to be archived indefinitely? Deliberately, there is no provision to do so. After all, how would we maintain this information? Who owns it? How would future search engines relate to it? Who is responsible for it?

The obvious and correct answer, of course, is that the Internet is not an archive. It was never intended for that purpose. Information placed there is meant to change. But what works well for the Internet doesn’t always work well for us. We like to think of Internet content as permanent, just like words written in a book, and when supposedly reliable information goes and changes on us anyway it can cause tremendous headaches – just ask any fan of the *Star Wars* movie franchise.

I bring this up for the following reason: Suppose for sake of argument that one wished to clinically diagnose the Truth Movement. Such a thing is not really possible; conspiratorial thinking is common, even normal. Even were it not the case one cannot effectively diagnose an entire group of people, particularly one as fractious and bewildering as the Truthers. However, throwing caution to the winds, we note one interesting trait arising with alarming frequency. Many Truthers appear to have problems with memory.

In 2008 I wrote a whitepaper on “Irreducible Delusion,” noting that at the heart of virtually every individual Truther’s confusion is a simple and often solitary factual error. No matter how complicated the claim, no matter how elaborate the conspiracy theory, the majority of it is nothing more than a consequence of a central mistaken belief. These core mistakes are easy to find, but they are remarkably difficult to correct. This memory defect seems to manifest in both directions: Not only are the Truthers resistant to or forgetful of more accurate information in a manner consistent with the Dunning-Kruger Effect, their memory of their own claims is singularly lucid, allowing them to remember fine details and elaborate arguments with ease when it suits them.

A startling example comes from Dr. David Ray Griffin, who has for years insisted that telephone calls made by passengers of the doomed airliners to relatives and co-workers were somehow faked. One can see why this would be attractive to the Truth Movement – after all, if we admit the calls were real, then

we must accept that whoever masterminded the attacks did in fact employ suicide pilots, a fact that challenges a wide variety of Truth Movement claims. Dr. Griffin has made this claim repeatedly since 2004 and has been openly criticized by many other Truthers for putting so much emphasis on a belief that, even to them, seems incredible. But no matter what objection is raised, he simply cannot let it go. In 2007 he briefly reconsidered, after finally accepting that the hijacked jets did in fact have Airfones on board, contrary to his previous belief that they had been deactivated or never installed (an idea he got from another Truther, and didn't bother to check). Yet shortly thereafter he went right back to the same old belief, only with a different and elaborate excuse. He remains fixed on this idea, unable to clear it, devoting an entire chapter of his latest book *9/11: Ten Years Later* just to reaffirm his belief and reiterate all of his rationalizations.

Dr. Griffin's example is representative of the Truth Movement as a whole. Virtually any high-profile Truther can be associated with a unique set of beliefs, some of which conflict with those of other Truthers. Dr. Griffin remains adamantly convinced that some kind of "voice-morphing" technology was used to simulate calls from the hijacked aircraft. Dr. Steven Jones remains wedded to his idea that thermite (or thermate, or super-thermite, or nanothermite) was used to destroy the World Trade Center. Richard Gage insists that explosives were used at the World Trade Center. The reason we can match beliefs to individual names is because *these beliefs never change*. Forget for the moment that rational argument has had no effect – *no* argument has any effect, including argument from other Truthers. They cannot even convince each other of their individual beliefs with any reliability. Over the years this has led to several organizational breakups, Truthers accusing each other of being "shills" and "paid disinfo," and vicious reprisals on the rare occasion that a Truther does change his mind as illustrated by Jeremy Stahl in his "Apostasy" chapter. We can only conclude that their belief systems, emanating from core assertions that are immutable to new information from friend or foe, are based entirely on what each individually remembers.

In almost any argument with a Truther one can observe several forms of memory-related reasoning error. An obvious one is reliance on "quote mining," which is a type of dissociative learning – rather than absorb the context, the conspiracy theorist instead fixes on a sound bite, a given semantic interpretation, or an isolated keyword, ultimately learning and remembering the wrong conclusion. We see something similar where physical evidence is considered, especially that of a visual nature. For instance, nearly the entire Truth Movement will be quick to assert that World Trade Center Seven collapsed at "free-fall speed," yet will ignore or even deny that this observation only applies to the perimeter, and that even the perimeter fell at a much lower rate both before and after the few seconds that interest them. Their memory of what happened, concentrated on a single artifact within the larger event, is simply not accurate, much like my mistaken recollection of a UFO fixated on a shiny object and transformed into something totally foolish. But unlike my faulty memory, they can easily replay video of the event (and many of them do, frequently), yet it makes no difference. They continue to get it wrong. Repeated viewings only seem to strengthen their misconception.

Part of the problem lies in behavior. Nearly any conspiracy theorist, Truthers included, will not discuss their ideas in a structured fashion or (as Jay Windley observed) in a way intended to make progress towards a solution. Instead, their commentary leaps from one subject to another with remarkable

speed – a phenomenon known as the “Gish gallop,” coined in 1994 to describe the debating style of evolution denier Duane Gish. There is hardly a Truther conversation that doesn’t follow this pattern. Debunkers and skeptics have long held that the Gish gallop is a tactic designed to frustrate opposition and create the illusion of controversy, which it certainly does. However, the behavior may also be a cause rather than a symptom. The rapid change of topics also allows a conspiracy theorist to avoid an undesirable topic or uncomfortable fact before it leaves any lasting impression, moving on instead to ground that feels safer until that too is abandoned, and so on.

If this is one’s response to any and all criticism, we have every reason to expect some holes and inconsistencies in one’s recollection. Short-term memory fades. We sometimes need to apply special practices to remember things. The Gish gallop is the exact opposite, a technique *not* to remember, a means to permanently avoid or repress something we wish to forget. Hence we may argue with a conspiracy theorist endlessly, finding ourselves retracing old ground with nauseating consistency. But nothing in the Gish gallop is unique to the Truth Movement. It also does not explain where Truthers get their strange ideas in the first place. This suggests another mechanism is at work, strengthening their personal interpretations, reinforcing their mistakes. The Internet provides this too.

I recently read the book *Moonwalking with Einstein*, recording the personal journey of author Joshua Foer as he attempted to evaluate the validity of purported memory-enhancing schemes, and later, to join the ranks of competitive mnemonicists. He had no prior training in the subject and a professed mediocrity in his own mental abilities, yet eventually succeeded in an impressively short period of time. His experience argues that enhanced memory is a function of *technique*, particularly where remembering obscure trivia is concerned. The overwhelming majority of techniques used by the mental athletes he encountered appear in texts that are hundreds of years old, some reaching back into antiquity. Memory techniques were once popular among educated people, but over the centuries, they have been rendered progressively irrelevant by technology from pen and paper to smartphones.

The techniques that experts apply are fundamental tricks of association. One establishes a vocabulary that redefines the mundane (i.e., items of a shopping list) in terms of imagery that is deliberately bizarre (such as famous individuals performing incongruous acts with unlikely objects). Effective use of these techniques is thereby limited by one’s imagination. But they can also be enabled by personal experience. An intriguing topic described in Foer’s book is a Renaissance-era contraption known as “The Memory Theater,” designed by Giulio Camillo around 1530 but never constructed due to practical concerns (including the disapproval of Catholicism, who felt Camillo was treading close to witchcraft). As envisioned, this structure was a literal living kaleidoscope, amphitheater-sized, where the student would be exposed to ever-shifting combinations of images both striking and distinctive. The intent was to provide a large combinatorial space of unique visual experiences that could then be associated with distinct items one wished to remember. Its designer had the misfortune of being born five centuries too early. While such a device remains impractical today, it would be a trivial matter to perform this digitally.

There is an important corollary to Foer’s thesis: If memory can be trained, then it also can be *mistrained*. If we happen to use powerful, unique imagery to remember something that is actually

wrong, we are going to have a much harder time correcting this memory than if we had merely read it or heard it in passing. Now suppose instead of deliberately memorizing a list of words and imagining some unique combination of things to go with it, we are listening to a list of items while watching a series of distinctive images. The effect on our memory is similar; the combination of words and images will help us remember what we were told, whether we want to or not. The stronger the image, the stronger the memory. This is exactly what happens with a film like *Loose Change*.

In all of history there are few images as shocking, disturbing, unique, and indelible as those of September 11th. The multiple catastrophes at the World Trade Center are as visually captivating and horrifying as films of Auschwitz, Hiroshima, the Kennedy Assassination, or the Space Shuttle *Challenger* disaster. In some ways the video record of 9/11 is even more engaging, being in full color and high resolution, and focused on modern subjects and locations that all of us knew and many saw or visited in person. So shocking are these scenes that Truthers, almost to a one, denounce them as “unbelievable” and insist there must be something wrong with what they see. Yet following 2005, with the proliferation of Internet video options, the Truth Movement began to unearth and copy and enhance and spread video of these events. They used this video in their presentations, in their movies, and even in their postings on Internet forums.

On the day of September 11th I was nowhere near a television screen. As the day unfolded, a strange and selfish thought formed among the confusion in my head, namely a hope that the television networks would replay their footage later in the week when I might see it. This was simply because I had never seen an aircraft smash through a skyscraper before and I wondered how it compared to simulations and special effects work. I was ashamed of this rather morbid thought, but of course I need not have worried. The many horrible videos were played over and over again, until after only a day or two I could watch no longer. Five years after the fact, I still had no desire to see those scenes ever again. But the Truth Movement left me no choice. Through my dealings with them, I have seen every film, every clip, every angle, every detail of the impacts and fires and collapses simply because they keep throwing the videos in our faces. I have seen versions edited by Truthers that are stabilized, zoomed in as far as possible, looped to play the exact moments of collision or collapse over and over again, and overlaid with arrows and words and annotations marking their favorite “anomalies.” I have even seen full-blown hoaxes with false sounds edited into the audio. I have seen these images literally thousands of times, and all because of the Truth Movement’s obsession with them. Some are particularly grim, such as videos of people leaping from the Towers, or collapses dubbed with emergency telephone operators speaking to trapped victims at the moment of their death – things I rather wish I hadn’t seen and heard. These images have stayed with me like few others, and not just because of the tragedy they represent.

More than once, a Truther has informed me that all I need to do to share his belief is to “watch the collapse. Watch it over and over and over again, until you understand.” A recent example comes from Mike Adams, self-styled “The Health Ranger,” who writes:

To watch the WTC 7 building fall into its own footprint, demolition style, and somehow fail to grasp that this was a carefully-planned demolition job [sic] is just as idiotic as not being able to

count how many times you jump rope. IQ-impaired people may grow up and look like adults, it seems, but they are no more intelligent at understanding events in the world around them.

The webpage on which the above appears includes fifteen links to what he considers supporting evidence, of which eleven are YouTube videos.

Prior to 2005, it took some effort to find these images, more effort than a casual conspiracy theorist was willing to exert. Only people already interested in conspiracy theories would be drawn to the Truth Movement. But afterward, with the ability to share these videos effortlessly, a much wider audience appeared – and in a significant fraction of them, Truther ideas worked their way deeply into their conscious memories, fueled by association with powerful imagery. Perhaps that alone wasn't enough to convince them, but still the memory would linger, commanding enough attention for the viewer to seek out more material on-line. People would wonder why they still had this nagging doubt, strong enough that mere correction by more rational people failed to dispel it. This sets the stage for a “cumulative argument,” a kind of Google-bombing for the brain, eventually convincing them to become full-blown Truthers.

James Burke, in the classic educational series *Connections* from 1978, motivated his study of technology as being “about the things that surround you in the modern world, and just because they're there, shape the way you think and behave.” Among such formational technologies, the Internet has no equal. Likewise, this wouldn't have happened for conspiracy theories of the past. It just wasn't possible to bring such an effective message to the general public.

The Internet, for a while at least, had handed the Truth Movement a silver bullet. Suddenly we had a hundred video excerpts at our fingertips, each as profoundly disturbing as the Zapruder film. Suddenly anyone could be Frank Capra, even a 23-year-old dropout from upstate New York. I think even Dylan Avery was staggered by how quickly his message spread.

The Conspiracy Hangover

“Dude, I said that in 2005. I said that in 2005, you guys on the Internet are still bickering over things I said six years ago! ... You have no life. You have no life. You have no life.” – Dylan Avery, 11 September 2011

Naturally, there is a downside to the mnemonic appeal used by the Truth Movement. Now that the conspiracy theory has peaked, many Truthers find it incredibly difficult to walk away, or even to change their beliefs. Their behavior in these final stages of the conspiracy theory provides additional evidence of mental fixation brought about and encouraged by the Internet. This fixation can go far beyond the usual limits of stubbornness or even obsessive-compulsive behavior. If anything, it more closely resembles an addiction.

Dylan Avery gives us a particularly crisp example. After the debacle of *Loose Change: Final Cut*, he announced his departure from the Truth Movement, intending to move on to more ordinary film projects. At the time, there were those who doubted he had ever been a Truther to begin with, instead suspecting he had merely exploited the Movement to make a name for himself. Likewise, there were skeptics who argued he had only been in it for the money, and was now departing after his gamble had failed. But whatever his true motivation, it was called *The Final Cut* long before it flopped – come success or failure, it was time to move on.

Except he returned soon afterward. In September 2009 he created yet another version, called *Loose Change: An American Coup*, which was no more successful than its predecessor. And in September 2011 he recanted again, telling Jeremy Stahl that he was now merely focused on why the Government hadn't prevented the (presumably legitimate) terrorist attack, a position completely incompatible with tales of missing jetliners, explosives, and international media complicity featured in his movies. He remarks that he had been “sucked in” much more than he should have been. Later, when asked in person to clarify his new ideas at the tenth anniversary memorial, he merely stated that he believed in a cover-up, and beyond that, “what I believe doesn't matter... I don't use ‘inside job.’” The conclusion we draw from this portrait is that he still hasn't escaped, even though he seems to know he should.

The Internet is also flush with obsessed Truth Movement personalities, the modern-day equivalents of Robert McElwaine. For example, at the JREF Forum, a Truther named Paul Doherty in England has been banned an astonishing nineteen times under various aliases, spanning 2006 through 2011 – over twenty percent of all so-called “sockpuppets” in JREF Forum history, which spans eight years and includes almost 28,000 members. His example is extreme but not isolated. There are at least two similar examples of JREF repeat offenders in the Truth Movement, one of them being “Pilots for 9/11 Truth” founder Robert Balsamo. Mr. Balsamo in particular has repeated this behavior at other sites, notably Above Top Secret, where in October 2009 one of his many sockpuppets was an impersonation of me.

There are actually two distinct and interesting processes at work here. The first, of course, is the level of compulsion and monomania required to keep doggedly reappearing, particularly when it has no effect other than to annoy a very small group of people for a brief period of time. But it is also striking that

they seem unable to change their approach. Mr. Doherty resurfacing nineteen times (an average of once every four months) is less impressive than the fact that he was caught nineteen times. The latter effect highlights a core problem for the Truth Movement, which is that they are rarely able to accurately mimic behavior that they see elsewhere. This, too, may be exacerbated by overreliance on Internet search, giving them only a superficial grounding in the topics they wish to keep bringing up. As a result, their attempts to simulate undecided parties or new Truthers, let alone actual scientists or well-known “debunkers” such as myself, are quickly discovered.

This capability gap manifests throughout the Truth Movement as a phenomenon known as “cargo cult behavior.” This term refers to any subculture that mimics the activities of a more advanced group, hoping to achieve the same effects as the others, but without any comprehension of how things actually work. It was first observed in South Pacific islanders who, after encountering seafarers, would set up mock camps, wear objects in an imitation of Western dress, and perform rituals patterned after roll call and military formation and unloading operations in the belief that their acts would somehow magically produce Western trade goods (the “cargo”). The Truth Movement is rife with examples, from simple impersonations and ham-handed attempts at mathematical derivations to mimicry of professional organizations and governmental bodies.

One specific example is the “Citizens’ Grand Jury” convened in San Diego in May of 2007, which concluded with an “indictment” of sixteen people, demanding more information from public figures including President Bush, Mayor Giuliani, Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld, and a handful of other politicians and businessmen. Naturally, this event had all the *gravitas* and impact of a children’s tea party – according to Truth Movement site 911blogger.com, there was no further action of the “Citizens’ Grand Jury” apart from an attempt to do it all again a month later, as a “9/11 War Crimes Tribunal,” in Vancouver. I am unable to find out if this second round of adult role-play actually occurred, not that it makes any difference. But this sort of make-believe is still going on. In September 2011, learning nothing from these past examples, the Truth Movement held a gathering called “The International Hearings on the Events of September 11, 2001,” which appears to have produced nothing apart from a webcast, another call for donations, and plans for a DVD and a final report.

Another example, particularly amusing from the scientific perspective, is the Truth Movement’s uncomprehending fascination with the concept of scientific peer review. This was no doubt a reaction to the overwhelming weight of scientific publication opposing the Truth Movement, and a desire to participate in kind. However, rather than attempt actual research and submit their own papers, the Truth Movement instead convened its own reviewing bodies and bestowed its own simulated certification. Most notorious is the *Journal of 9/11 Studies*, in which a small group of conspiracists took on the mantle of “reviewers” and “editors,” all for the purpose of claiming that each other’s papers were “peer reviewed.” Naturally, the scientific establishment has taken no notice whatsoever of these papers. But what is more startling is that at least some of the participants know perfectly well what real peer review is. This includes Dr. Steven Jones, a physicist and former professor with several legitimate publications, who initiated the group in the first place as a half-hearted attempt to satisfy demands of his former department at Brigham Young University. Ultimately he refused to submit his claims to actual peer review, and resigned instead.

The *Journal for 9/11 Studies* also presents another example of the Truth Movement proving unable to break free of self-destructive beliefs and behaviors. In June 2008 the *Journal* gave notice that it was suspending future “publication,” giving the excuse that the case for a 9/11 cover-up was “so well established... that there is little to be gained from accepting more papers here.” This attempt to close a shameful chapter in their academic careers lasted a mere four months before it opened again, as apparently the “editors” just could not leave it alone. Curiously, a note at the *Journal* currently states: “We will also be happy to receive sound, substantial work which has nevertheless been rejected by others. However, due to the volume of work, there may be substantial delays in publication here in the future.” This alleged “volume” must be great indeed, as there have been no new releases in the past eight months, and only four articles in all of 2010 and 2011.

What we learn from this is that compulsive, even addictive behavior is present in the Truth Movement from its most unsophisticated activists to its most intellectual and respected leaders. The Truth Movement therefore appears to be self-selecting for these traits, behaviors that are consistent with the learning disabilities and errors of memory that we expect. But there is still another feature of their behavior that provides additional support for our hypothesis: In recent months it has become clear that many Truthers are actually aware of their mistakes, but *still* cannot stop arguing.

Once we know what to look for, we find the evidence has been there all along. For instance, in August 2006, *Loose Change* producer Korey Rowe told interviewer Michael Slenske the following:

What I encourage people to do is go out and research it themselves. We don't ever come out and say that everything we say is 100 percent. We know there are errors in the documentary, and we've actually left them in there so that people discredit us and do the research for themselves...

At the time, skeptics (myself included) dismissed this as either an admission of laziness, or evidence that they were knowingly sensationalizing their presentation in pursuit of greater fame and fortune. But in retrospect, I now believe this to be an artifact of their own obsessive approach to 9/11, namely the *idée fixe* that the conspiracy theory was real, and a frustration that individual facts and claims didn't always support their conclusion. To many Truthers, the ends would justify the means, and if that meant using dodgy facts to gain support for the conspiracy theory that they “know” to be real, so be it. Dr. Griffin and Mr. Gage have expressed similar sentiments as a justification for their “cumulative arguments.” Other Truthers follow this reasoning implicitly as part of elaborate arguments to probability. As we are now discovering, this behavior is quite common.

Poster Myriad at the JREF Forum recently noted a particularly strong form of this behavior, calling it “The Masochistic Lie.” The Masochistic Lie is an obviously erroneous statement, one that the speaker both knows is false and knows his opponent will recognize as false. Incredibly, Truthers make such statements frequently, even though they serve no apparent purpose other than to distinguish themselves from their opposition. Once we recognize that many Truthers' nonsense claims are in fact deliberate, this behavior has enormous implications. Such explicit antagonism can be generalized to actions as well, such as Mr. Rowe's “deliberate errors,” Mr. Balsamo insinuating that his posts are

actually mine, or Dr. Jones claiming that approval of his fellow conspiracy nuts constitutes academic peer review. From the beginning I have wondered whether conspiracists had any idea just how disorganized, incredible, and insane they sound; and as it turns out, sometimes they do.

Myriad proposes that the Masochistic Lie is motivated by a desire to demonize the opposition, and thereby win converts to one's own side, provided watching third parties are too unsophisticated to detect the lie or too polarized to care. Indeed, this seems a good model for hyper-partisan politics. But there are problems with applying this interpretation to the Truth Movement. Over time some of the worst enemies of Truthers have been *other Truthers*, seen in the stark divisions between "Scholars for 9/11 Truth" and "Scholars for 9/11 Truth and Justice," the great fuss over "Pilots for 9/11 Truth," Jon Gold scolding the "Controlled Demolition Truth Movement," and so on. The watching third parties are these different factions of the Truth Movement, not the general public. So junior charlatans and newcomers may certainly apply the Masochistic Lie as a calculated maneuver, but it is surely not the preferred approach of conspiracy theory veterans, because it only creates new divisions among the conspiracy theorists. Richard Gage, for now leading the pack in terms of profitability, certainly makes claims that he must know are wrong, but he instead favors the time-honored "Big Tent" approach and stops short of tying his fortunes to any one set of ideas.

There is another explanation for the Masochistic Lie, however. Myriad correctly notes that the above assumes a rational purpose for the Lie, which would not be necessary in case of diminished mental capacity – or of memory loss. I now believe the latter is closer to the truth. Many Truthers, including their foremost spokesmen, harbor deep suspicions but really cannot articulate why. We have discussed how they seem unable to stop themselves from repeating their behavior, even in the face of overwhelming evidence of its futility, and even after stating their intent to move on. It should come as no surprise that they are unable to keep from repeating certain claims and statements, even things they suspect might be wrong, remember being told are wrong, or actually know to be wrong. Again, this can be explained by a problem with memory. They may continue to "lie" simply because they lack the correct vocabulary to express their misunderstanding, particularly where it involves engineering concepts and physical phenomena. Richard Gage surely knows that his persistent claims of "collapses at Free-Fall Speed" or "pyroclastic flows" are inaccurate, but he may know of no other way to say what he means. These errors could be useful to them as descriptors of their own unfathomable confusion. Thus, the Masochistic Lie may be symptomatic of Truthers attempting to reconcile internal conflicts between facts and beliefs.

It should also be pointed out that many Truthers persist in their actions despite great personal costs in doing so. Dr. Jones was forced to retire from his position at BYU. Richard Gage became divorced as a result of his transformation into a conspiracist leader. Kevin Ryan was fired for his use of company letterhead to spread his beliefs, a result that he fought in court, only to have his case dismissed. Judy Wood and Morgan Reynolds subsequently sued Mr. Ryan's old employer among others, alleging complicity in the cover-up, and their case was dismissed as well. April Gallop, a survivor of the Pentagon fire, filed (and lost, badly) what must be among the most poorly considered lawsuits in modern history, suing Vice President Cheney and others under the theory that no aircraft hit the Pentagon at all. Ms. Gallop's attorneys were sanctioned for a considerable sum of money due to their conduct.

At this point it might be appropriate to review Hanlon's Razor: "Never ascribe to malice that which is adequately explained by stupidity." Members of the Truth Movement on the whole are not stupid. However, they are working with several serious disadvantages of reasoning. While some of their decisions may have selfish or ulterior motives (e.g., stirring up trouble on the Internet or trying to turn a dollar in a civil suit), the career arcs of Truthers simply cannot be matched to any rational purpose, unless we allow for a fundamental mistake at the heart of their belief – an Irreducible Delusion. While quite a few of them make a significant amount of money trading on rumors and fantasy, and many more try, I believe that every one of them is to some degree sincere.

These intense fixations, common to the Truth Movement, both motivate activists and frustrate debunkers. But they also may have speeded the Truth Movement's destruction. As we noted above, the conspiracy theory went into rapid decline because it could not or would not adapt to the needs of new participants, ones who were not saddled by the same delusions. The ideas of the Truth Movement were so heavily ingrained in its activists that they were too inflexible to recruit from the mainstream. They remain captive to these ideas today.

But fortunately, as Joshua Foer explains, memory can be reset and retrained. Consequently, many Truthers, even some of the most committed, do eventually let it go. Others may back away more slowly, gradually incorporating their beliefs into a larger, more encompassing conspiracy mindset. But it may take an entirely new conspiracy theory to distract them from 9/11 Truth. Those are easy to come by.

The Next Great Conspiracy Theory

"I've personally spent as much time publicly promoting the truth as I have countering fallacy within the movement. There have been a few salient victories. But overall, one of the main reasons for my feeling burned out at times has been my feeling that it's not possible to change the behavior or thinking of people with very different and sometimes invalid views." – Julian Ware, "9/11 Truth Burnout," 28 July 2009

The next great conspiracy theory has already happened. Two of them have, actually, one being the "Birther" conspiracy theory about President Obama's citizenship, and the second being the "Deather" conspiracy theory about Usama bin Laden. As I write this, we may be seeing the origins of a third emerge from the "99% Movement" associated with the Occupy Wall Street protests, a series of poorly defined mass demonstrations in financial centers.

These conspiracy theories borrowed heavily from the playbook of the Truth Movement, even to the point of being named in a similar fashion by mainstream observers. But their evolution has been quite different. We should have expected this. Technology continues to change.

The "Birther" conspiracy theory appears to have originated in 2008, in the form of anonymous e-mails circulated within Hillary Clinton's primary election campaign, but it rapidly grew with the help of the Truth Movement. Chief among them is Philip L. Berg, an early Truther. He is notable for his comical 2004 lawsuit on behalf of World Trade Center survivor Willie Rodriguez, accusing President Bush and 155 others of engineering 9/11, which referenced practically every Truther meme at once (except for thermite) even at this early date. Many sources consider Mr. Berg's Birther lawsuit in August 2008 as the first salvo in what became a national eyesore, lasting for three years before abruptly disintegrating. Another Truther-turned-Birther is Orly Taitz, viewed by many as the public face of the Birthers, who rose to prominence after introducing an obviously forged birth certificate in the *Keyes v. Bowen* lawsuit. However, she also espouses several other conspiracy theories in no discernible pattern.

Many other remaining proponents of the Truth Movement have gone along with this new conspiracy theory, although some consider it a moot issue compared to their own, more dramatic conspiracy beliefs. Alex Jones, for instance, released a new video called "The Obama Deception" in April 2009, but it hardly touches on the Birther conspiracy theories in favor of a much grander "New World Order" presentation.

More recently, we have the "Deather" conspiracy theories. The term has already been recycled. It originally referred to skeptics of President Obama's health care reforms, believing they would lead to the creation of "death panels" applying Malthusian principles to patients, but it has since been repurposed to describe conspiracy theorists who refuse to believe that Usama bin Laden was recently killed by American Special Forces. This latter conspiracy theory is obviously coupled to the Truth Movement, as nearly all Truther beliefs presume the nonauthenticity, non-participation, or nonexistence of Usama bin Laden.

The origin of these terms – “Birther” and “Deather” – seems to be a mocking echo of the term Truther, as noted by Leslie Savan in the *New York Times*. She does note one interesting change, however, namely that the term Truther was self-chosen by the Truth Movement and therefore was intended to be positive in nature, whereas the latter terms appear to have come from opponents of the conspiracy theories, and are meant as a pejorative. This tiny change in tactics illuminates a profound shift in public awareness. Truthers frequently tell us that the general public still hasn’t learned about them, or secretly supports them, and prior to 2005 it could be argued that this was at least partially true. Now, this new behavior implies that the public is well aware of the Truth Movement and finds it ridiculous.

Both of these conspiracy theories emerged well after the modern Internet and social media had taken hold. Both are also “Superconspiracies” according to my Google-based metric, with the Birthers commanding about 60% of the attention of 9/11 Truth, and the Deathers actually exceeding its popularity by about 15% (though we must allow for some overlap). However, their growth and decline follow much different patterns than the Truth Movement.

The Birther conspiracy theory seems to have started in a similar fashion, circulating quietly among traditional conspiracy theorists like Philip Berg, but it made the jump into the mainstream very quickly. Unlike the Truth Movement, it seems to have begun its runaway growth phase in only a matter of months, steeply increasing in popularity from mid-2009 through April 2011. It peaked with something like 30% of Americans believing the conspiracy theory (there is a lot of scatter in the polls), but then rapidly slipped to a stable support level of about 10%. Overall, this trajectory is comparable to the Truth Movement’s popularity, except for the greatly accelerated leap into public view.

This behavior is consistent with our theory of Internet-fueled growth: Unlike the Truth Movement, the Birther conspiracy already had activists and an argumentative public, courtesy of an unusually contentious period in politics, and already had social media to spread its message. However, the type of information being discussed was much less engaging – one might spend hours poring over a .GIF image of an old birth certificate, or page through countless legal opinions of citizenship requirements, but there just wasn’t anything as shocking as 9/11 to be found this time. It thus comes as no surprise that it would enter the mainstream more quickly, attract a significant number of low-commitment supporters as before, and then dissipate once the conspiracists had exhausted their argument. Note however that this particular conspiracy theory was made a bit more exciting by two unusual catalyzing events, the first being endorsement of the conspiracy theory by world-renowned attention seeker Donald Trump, and the other being a decisive response from the White House.

We see a similar pattern in the Deather conspiracy theory, except here the timeline is compressed even further. This conspiracy theory exploded into the mainstream at the same speed as the news story it challenged, reaching the media almost instantly. One amusing note comes from David Wiegel of *Slate*, who referred to “Osama bin Trutherism” in an opinion piece on the very day bin Laden’s death was announced. A few polls showed a sudden spike of believers, as high as 20% to 30% in various hastily-conducted media surveys, but after only a week it was clear that the conspiracy theory was already in decline. As Tom Jensen of *Public Policy Polling* described it on 10 May 2011, only half-joking, “we’ve got more voters who think the President is the Anti-Christ than think Osama bin Laden is still alive.”

The Deather theory, therefore, is a radically different phenomenon. It also was the first conspiracy theory to be transmitted primarily via Twitter. As several news agencies reported, the first public knowledge of bin Laden's death came as a "tweet" approximately one hour before President Obama's announcement, and it was also determined later that two citizens in Pakistan, Mr. Sohaib Athar and Mr. Mohsin Shah, had unwittingly "tweeted" their observations of the raid in progress, not knowing what it was. It also set a record for sustained volume of message traffic, reaching an average of 3,440 tweets per second ("tps") over a 105 minute period, along with a reported 24% spike in Internet traffic as a whole. And right there among them were new Twitter tags "#deather" and "#deathers," within mere minutes of the actual event.

This theory had exciting content to sustain the public's attention, but little actual imagery. What little there was concentrated on photographs of a destroyed helicopter. There was also a hoaxed photograph of bin Laden's corpse distributed on many channels (I first saw it on a firearms enthusiast forum, within days of the event), but it was quickly discarded as an obvious if gruesome fraud. President Obama ultimately decided not to release photographs of bin Laden's body, and so we are unlikely ever to have the kind of shocking imagery that propels so many conspiracy theories.

So what happened? In this case, the conspiracy theory still exhibited distinct phases of initial growth among conspiracy theorists, rapid growth as it assaulted the mainstream, and then a decline back to its conspiracist base, but here it all happened in a matter of hours. It is no coincidence that Twitter played such a significant role this time. As our relationship to the Internet continues to evolve, we now receive news and new information faster than ever, albeit without any sort of context at all. Much of this conversation now takes place on personal devices instead of workstations, which both enables and constrains this new, terse, burst-mode form of communication. As a result, the public experienced the conspiracy theory almost at the moment of its origin, discarded it as nonsense, and moved on.

Another noteworthy feature is how authorities – in both cases, the Obama Administration – responded to the conspiracy theories. Both times, demands from the lunatic fringe were simply rebuffed. In the case of the Birthers, President Obama eventually responded by releasing his long-form birth certificate, but only years afterward, and only upon being pressured to do so by people other than committed conspiracy theorists. Regarding photographs of Usama bin Laden's body, it was decided not to release anything at all. I am torn about the latter because, in general, I feel that keeping secrets should not be the default position of government. But in terms of handling unreasonable demands from conspiracists, the White House acted correctly by ignoring them, as the results bear out.

Just imagine what would have become of the Truth Movement if it had followed this model, instead of marinating in obscurity, undergoing refinement by professional conspiracy theorists, and only appearing in public long afterward whereupon the press gleefully attacked it and thus legitimized it. Suppose the public heard of the conspiracy theory at once and was able to see it for sheer reactionary paranoia. Rather than being ambushed years later with tales of "Over 1,000 Architects and Engineers believe" whatever, they would be able to watch the conspiracists individually make up their stories as they went along, and draw the appropriate conclusion. Instead of being faced with stunning imagery and attempts to persuade them that it all "didn't look right," they would still have the original event fresh in their

minds, along with an unclouded memory of their own reasoning. And these early encounters would have an inoculating effect when inevitably the Truthers appeared again. The public would be prepared for more deliberate, more sober investigations, and would clearly see the difference in quality. If it had happened like this, there probably never would have been a Truth Movement at all.

These recent conspiracy theories illustrate that, contrary to expectations, better communications technology can also have a moderating effect. Social networking tools like Twitter result in much more immediate involvement from “low commitment” individuals, both supporting and opposing the conspiracy theory. This has the effect of diluting, and thereby actually damping, the influence of conspiracy peddlers. Twitter also creates a far more casual discussion environment, having more in common with normal interpersonal conversations, and this too works against the conspiracists. As we increasingly participate in spur-of-the-moment exchanges, we may be moving closer to the traditional community model of interaction after all, and recovering some natural resistance to conspiracy thinking that we have lost.

Based on the performance of later conspiracy theories, I predict that the 9/11 Truth Movement will prove to be a unique event. Future conspiracy theories will simply move too fast and blow themselves out, leaving no lasting impression in our long-term memories before competing information arrives. We also are growing increasingly comfortable with the Internet-enabled fire hose of information. The next generation of users will be better able to shrug off concerted assaults of pseudoscience and video presentation, having been exposed to them on a regular basis.

This is not to say, of course, that a new means of spreading conspiracy theories cannot appear. Neither the “Birther” nor “Deather” theory was ideal. Neither of them involved dramatic and frightening images, and neither of them led to complex, detailed official investigations. Neither one had an immediate effect on our lives. Sooner or later, there will be an event that meets these criteria, and it will spawn its own conspiracy theories. But any future lasting conspiracy idea will also have to adapt to changing technology and social behavior.

I can think of two likely avenues for this to occur.

The first is that with such an explosion of raw information, all presented in ever expanding forms of media, there is greater potential for a clever hoax to be accepted by the public. We witnessed this potential on 8 November 2010 when a fairly pedestrian video of an aircraft contrail over the ocean was briefly accepted as a “missile,” presumably an SLBM poised to overfly American airspace. Nothing about this video resembled any phase of rocket flight in my (not entirely amateur) opinion, but nonetheless a huge number of people were fooled by it, and it is unclear if the public ever accepted the rational explanation or simply forgot about it. But, fortunately, career conspiracy theorists seem uninterested in generating hoaxes. In the Truth Movement we have seen many examples of small hoaxes, from spurious claims of finding missing flight data recorders or overhearing demolitions countdowns, to modifying videos and forging aircraft maintenance records, but all of these were rather limited in scope and cleverness.

A second possibility is for a devious conspiracy theorist to engage large numbers of people through “crowdsourcing” techniques, thereby involving them and gaining a much more receptive audience outside the usual circles of believers. I can easily envision something of this nature emerging from a project like Wiki Leaks. For example, a dedicated, well-organized conspiracist could enlist the help of thousands in poring over huge volumes of official data or communications looking for “patterns,” followed by an interactive discussion of what those patterns could mean, thus luring participants gradually into a paranoid mindset. To date I have seen no conspiracy theorist with sufficient interpersonal skills and subtlety to do this. It would also be quite difficult to carry out this experiment without losing control of the conclusion, and the conspiracy theorist might find himself ostracized by his own support network. It remains to be seen if any conspiracist is willing to go along with whatever anomalies are found, or if any has the patience for this approach to develop. This would be a marked departure from their usual behavior.

Regardless of what form future conspiracy theories take, we can mitigate them with a few simple preparations. Our own behavior during the Truth Movement contributed to the problem. One of the most important fixes is for us to simply accept that crazy ideas are going to happen. Once we reach this understanding, we can look for ways to avoid alienating the conspiracy-minded.

Rehabilitation

"I think that there is a disease, a mental disease, which I am very happy to speak out against, because I used to suffer from this disease. And luckily now, through virtue of, I guess, going and actually exploring the issues at stake myself, I managed to wake up out of this. But if I can give any warning to people who are looking at conspiracy theories, and thinking that they are right or they're part of some secret network of people who understand, who are awake – please stay away from it." – Charlie Veitch, September 2011

I began this essay in search of what made the Truth Movement different with the realization that not all conspiracy theorists bothered me in the same way. Some of them are quite affable people, others are even admirable. Some conspiracy theories come across as amusing or at worst infantile. On the other hand, there are conspiracy theories that are repulsive, such as Holocaust denial. I refuse to have any contact at all with them. But in ranking conspiracy theories according to bad taste, one has to grapple with the issue of *intent*. Someone who parrots a conspiracy theory out of hatred is certainly not worth anyone's time, yet this doesn't seem to be the case for most of the Truth Movement. A great number of Truthers appear to have been tricked into their beliefs, and many more show obvious signs of being trapped by them. Many don't even want to be Truthers. They just don't know how to stop.

As I've noted, many Truthers appear to be genuinely motivated by laudable goals. Some only desire to end conflicts in west Asia, others focus on justice for the victims, still more are concerned with the welfare of rescuers and cleanup workers. Certainly some use these causes as cover for their own agendas, but not all of them. There have been remarkable acts of sacrifice from Truthers, which makes their mistaken beliefs even more unfortunate. Moreover, quite a few individuals have successfully left the Truth Movement. None of these reformed individuals appear to have gone through any radical transformation or reevaluation of priorities, and none seems to adopt a new political identity or abandon their other causes. Instead the only change is recognition of fact, leading them to outgrow the conspiracy theory. Although, it is interesting to note that many who leave the Truth Movement describe conspiracy thinking as a "sickness," and vow to oppose conspiracists in general afterward.

On several occasions I've found Truthers likening themselves to Mohandas Gandhi, specifically through the iconic phrase: "First they ignore you, then they laugh at you, then they fight you, then you win." In the final analysis, this aphorism remains valid, but not in the way they had intended. In the beginning, the committed conspiracy theorists ignored the public entirely, content to talk among themselves. Then there was the second wave of activists, typified by harassment and mocking of the "sheeple" who didn't share their beliefs. And finally they took to the streets, brought their grievances to court, bought a few television commercials, and in a few instances clamored for revolution. And then it was over.

The Truthers would have done better to follow another of Gandhi's principles, namely "truth never damages a cause that is just." Rather than exhaust themselves into irrelevance, it would have been much more effective for them to simply take a break, and try to assimilate new information as it became available. But this would have been possible only if the endless arguments had died down for a while.

We have numerous personal accounts of reformed Truthers for analysis. Common to almost all of them is a personal denouement following a period of argumentative behavior – many turned to other Truthers for answers, and found none; others attempted to research by themselves, and discovered they were unable to support their beliefs. But in almost all cases this is a gradual process. I could also find no example of a “high commitment” Truther who was convinced directly by argument with skeptics, although *information* provided by skeptics seems to have slowly made a significant impact.

One early and visible Truth Movement survivor was Michael Metzger, who founded the first campus-recognized University Truther group. He was, however, able to extricate himself in 2007, at a time roughly coincident with the Truth Movement’s steep decline. He later wrote a series of weblog posts, explaining his decision and warning others away from the Truth Movement, including the following:

9/11 Mysteries [another Truther video presentation] ends very tragically with a phone call from one of the victims inside the WTC. You may have seen it, it’s the guy who’s frantically describing the situation to a loved one, but suddenly, the building starts to collapse and all you hear are his last words, agonizing screams. The creators of this propaganda movie did this intentionally, to play on your emotions right after feeding you all their bullshit theories.

Mr. Metzger was one of those who recognized how he had been tricked, although it was only apparent to him after the fact. It simply takes time and a stress-free environment to start resetting our memories, and once we begin, we find the whole artificial fantasy collapses quickly. This is consistent with the process of “cleaning memory palaces” Joshua Foer describes in his book, after the work of Russian neuropsychologist Alexander Luria. Dr. Luria defined the “art of forgetting” in simple terms – he only had to convince himself that the information he wanted to forget was meaningless. After that, it all vanished. Similarly, once Mr. Metzger recognized that Truth Movement presentations were little more than propaganda, they had no sway over him any longer, and he swiftly returned to normal. But until that point he was in their thrall.

Convincing the Truth Movement that their concerns are meaningless is no easy feat, and it certainly cannot be done by telling them it’s all meaningless. The best we can hope to do is react as though their claims are meaningless – probably best achieved by ignoring them entirely. And if we wish to help other Truthers, we should attempt to create a favorable environment for rehabilitation.

To those still interested in the Truth Movement, I make only one suggestion: Take a break. Give yourself a full month away from the Truth Movement. Don’t argue on-line, don’t watch videos. For that matter, don’t read responses from skeptics, either. I don’t want you to be concerned about being “brainwashed” by debunkers – stay away from them as well. After this time has passed, feel free to get involved again and see if your perspective has changed. However, if you cannot set it aside for a month, and I do mean to set it aside completely, this should be a warning sign to you. After all, September 11th was over ten years ago. Nothing bad will happen if you leave it alone for a month. Give it a try.

To the debunkers, I have a similar set of recommendations. Now that I have a clearer understanding of the Truth Movement, I can state with confidence that we have unwittingly worsened the problem. But it takes little effort to correct this situation. My advice is as follows:

- *Do not argue with the Truth Movement.* Most if not all remaining Truthers have no tangible goal other than to start an argument. Don't play along. Argument, to them, is a sign of weakness or uncertainty in your own position. It also stimulates and renews logical misconnections as they repeat their own arguments. Make your point if you must, make it once, and call it a day.
- *Do not ridicule.* Truthers also interpret mocking behavior as a sign of weakness. It gives them a ready-made distraction from actual arguments, one they will proudly show to other Truthers and distract them too. It perpetuates an adversarial relationship that stimulates their paranoia. In the five years I spent with Truthers, I cannot name a single example of one being persuaded by taunting or shamed into changing his mind. I can, however, name several who were impressed by sober, polite, mature, self-controlled opposition.
- *Be confident of your facts.* Truthers may not remember or even understand your arguments, but they will remember that you disagree. It is important that your disagreement is as firm as possible; otherwise they will remember that as well. There is such a wide range of 9/11 topics that no one can cover them all. If you are unsure of a topic, ignore it and let someone else handle it. Learn from them. Stick to what you know.
- *Provide information, but do so on your own terms.* It is also important to make correct information accessible, but you must avoid presenting it in a competitive or adversarial way. Let them read it when they are ready to do so. Make use of existing resources like *911myths.com* whenever possible. Above all, do not be tricked into catering to Truther demands – this will be read as being “forced” to respond. They must not drive the conversation or it will reaffirm their beliefs whether they read what you have to say or not.
- *Remember that you too are capable of falling for conspiracy theories.* With few exceptions, Truthers are just regular people, scared to death by truly frightening ideas that they cannot fully reconcile. There is no risk of them ever fomenting a revolution or rewriting the history books. There is nothing in the Truth Movement so urgent that it cannot be responded to tomorrow, next week, or never. So relax! Try to picture each Truther as someone just like yourself, but who just can't shake a crazy idea. Try to help the ones that sound like you might enjoy talking to otherwise. As for the rest, leave them alone.

The Internet gives us a strange and misplaced sense of power to influence others. We like to think that, just because we can directly address anyone and debate any challenger, we can work on each in turn until our own opinion finally prevails. But this never works. Instead, think of the Internet as a busy freeway. There are a million distractions that command our attention. Everyone has their own goal, and while most are similar, they are nonetheless competing with each other. There are also going to be others who inconvenience us or deliberately antagonize us, but we had best not respond – “road rage” will not get anyone to her destination any faster. Let it go. Keep your own emotions in check.

These recommendations also help us cope with the never-ending nature of conspiracy theories. After all, as it turns out, the Truth Movement is one of those situations where the urge to help can actually make things worse for everyone.

Letting Go of the Truth

“Perhaps the greatest benefit of so-called debunkers is that they prod, goad, ridicule, and agitate. ... I believe – and I may be wrong – that behind most 9-11 deniers, most debunkers are good and decent people. Should half of them ever become convinced 9-11 was an inside job, they would become as forceful as Paul. A more powerful force for change than most of us have been.” – Douglas Herman, www.rense.com, 11 October 2006

I’d like to close this essay with a critical look at our own behavior and state of mind. The Truthers have frequently jeered that their opposition is a “debunker movement,” and while there is of course no organization of this type, they are not entirely wrong. Many debunkers have inadvertently acquired an activist mindset and gotten just as carried away as the Truthers. As pointed out by Dr. Fischer, this happened to the original debunkers in the 1920’s. There is also another relevant anecdote, even older, illustrating what can happen when activism becomes coupled with obsession. I am referring to what became known as “Comstockery” in the late 19th century, after the actions of Anthony Comstock.

Anthony Comstock was a staunch Victorian idealist and opposed to the spread of trends that he found morally repugnant. Among these were various frauds and confidence scams, false lotteries and appeals for charity, quackery and patent medicine, and even astrology. Much like today’s debunkers, he found it impossible to keep up with the sheer number of hoaxers, and instead focused on a weak point that he could influence: The media. At the time, this mostly meant cracking down on booksellers, and later monitoring the United States Postal Service, being at the time the closest analogue to today’s Internet.

In 1873 after championing successful legislation against indecency, Comstock was appointed a Special Inspector of the Postal Service. This granted him the ability to examine and censor mail traffic, and to arrest those responsible for violating legal standards of acceptable moral conduct. He detailed these exploits in the 1880 book *Frauds Exposed; or, How the People are Deceived and Robbed, and Youth Corrupted*. However, this seemingly altruistic crusade had another side. Comstock also opposed obscenity and blasphemy and was legally empowered to arrest and prosecute on this basis as well, with few limits on his power to decide just what that meant. Alongside his quashing of bank frauds and medical scams, he similarly disrupted the spread of medical knowledge, blocking everything from anatomy textbooks to anything whatsoever related to birth control. He relentlessly pursued artists that didn’t meet his standards, and by his own estimate seized and destroyed 160 tons of “lewd” books and printing plates – a lifetime total comparable to the 1933 Nazi book-burning demonstration in Berlin. He gleefully ruined careers and drove over a dozen people to commit suicide.

Some legal repercussions of Comstock’s activism remain in place even today. The legal status of birth control was not finally settled until the 1965 *Griswold v. Connecticut* decision, which itself remains controversial. We see descendants of his legislation in current postal regulations, in purges of school libraries, and in the 1996 Telecommunications Act. The latter is of particular interest to this essay because, for the first time, the Internet was specifically affected in its language. This concern has not been resolved, as the legal battle for network neutrality remains in the balance.

While there are few examples of debunkers calling for censorship, punishment, or even violence towards the Truth Movement, it is important to learn from this example. We need to be sure to follow the right model. While Comstock rightly opposed pseudoscientific scams and legal frauds alike, he was driven by a religious obsession of his own, and wound up doing far more harm than good. This stands in sharp contrast to the actions of successful modern debunkers.

James Randi, to pick one example, has almost nothing to say to or about the Truth Movement. His own commentary in the SWIFT Newsletter hardly ever mentioned it, and when he did, it was to dismiss it as just another example of excessive credulity. To him, it is merely a symptom of poor critical thinking.

Christopher Hitchens gives us a sterling example of proper retort, from a 4 June 2007 discussion with Tim Rutten on religion and atheism at the Los Angeles Public Library. In this talk, a Truther harangued him about the “civic myth and religion” of 9/11. His response was simple, blunt, and effective:

CH: You’re wasting your time. I’m not going to answer.

Truther: Why won’t you answer? So here’s the question. Being that you are an intellectual –

CH: You can speak; I’m not bothering with you. I have no time to waste on people like you.

Truther: (continues)

CH: I can’t make you stop, I can’t make you stop, but when you stop it’s all over. No sir, I am not, I am not going to buy a pencil from your cup. No I’m not. ... (crowd laughs) That was a big wow for a small mind. Forget it; I have no time to waste on people like you.

Truther: (continues, angrily fussing with a uniformed Los Angeles County Deputy Sheriff, complaining about being insulted)

CH: No, no, leave him alone. As long as he stays quiet. He’s had his turn, you heard his question. I’m not wasting my time on it. Next, next!

Jonathan Kay, in his recent book *Among the Truthers: A Journey Through America’s Growing Underground* also seems to reach this conclusion:

Whenever I’ve tried to debate Truthers on the facts of 9/11, for instance, all of my accumulated knowledge about the subject has proven entirely useless – because in every exchange, the conspiracy theorist inevitably would ignore the most obvious evidence and instead focus the discussion on the handful of obscure, allegedly incriminating oddities that he had memorized.

[...] The experience also has convinced me that any effort to engage committed conspiracy theorists in reasoned debate is a waste of time. Once someone has bitten down on the red pill, it’s too late. As with any incurable disease, the best course isn’t treatment, it’s prevention.

Mr. Kay, Mr. Hitchens, and Mr. Randi concur that the most effective response to the Truth Movement, rather than taking them on, is simply to promote critical thinking. This, unfortunately, is a rather difficult if worthy task. I would also argue with Mr. Kay’s belief that the conspiracist disease is “incurable” – we have plenty of examples of people who have left it behind, although in just about every case they have insisted on curing themselves. In fact, I will argue that escaping the clutches of a conspiracy theory may be one of the best ways to become a critical thinker. Once one knows what it is

like to harbor an impossible belief, really accepting the imperfections of the human brain, one can begin to recognize foolish beliefs for what they are and begin working towards lasting self improvement.

Perhaps, then, the idea that conspiracy theorists are incurable is itself a conspiracy theory. Maybe the notion that they are all hopelessly addled, filled with hatred, only out to make a buck, or dangerous is an unsupportable belief shared by many debunkers. Maybe this is what drives some of us over the edge.

If this describes your belief, all I can say is that it isn't so. And yes, I understand how you feel. I have had a moment or two when I would physically shake with rage before the keyboard, consumed with a desire to squash the paranoid nonsense pumping from my screen. I have caught myself checking and re-checking for replies after a particularly satisfying counterargument, eagerly waiting for my next opportunity to strike back at the forces of madness. I have taken up the banner of rationality on behalf of individuals in the real world whose livelihoods were threatened by Truthers, miscreants who couldn't even add two numbers together yet had anointed themselves as judge, jury, and tormentor of whomever their lunacy led them to suspect. But I don't feel that way anymore. I haven't for years. I was provoked, to be sure, but it was still my choice, my fear and my anger that made me feel that way.

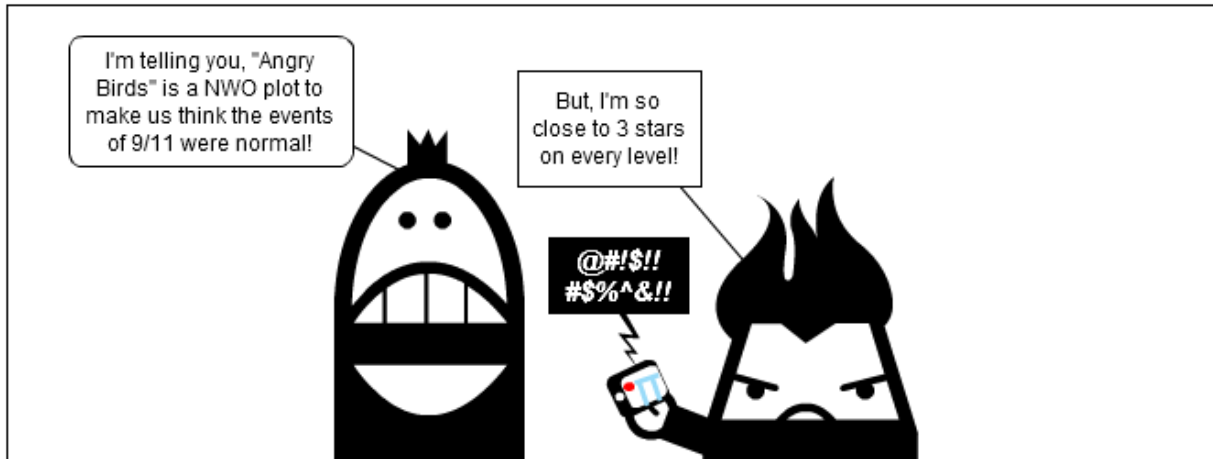
There is also another outlet for Internet-enabled-argument frustration. Preventative education and preemptive teaching may not be able to prevent conspiracism, but there are preemptive steps one can take to mitigate its effects. The most serious threat from conspiracy theories is the risk of a nutty idea bringing about unwanted social change through politics. We can prevent this, guaranteed, by becoming more involved ourselves. Debunking alone is not enough. We see similar behavior in politics, where instead of debunkers, we have "iceberg spotters" – people who scan for threats and expend their energies making others aware but do little else for their cause. Iceberg-spotting is a displacement activity, a means to avoid the tedious and unexciting work of strengthening the community. It's a bit like the difference between honest science and conspiracy theories. Hard work just isn't as much fun.

Participation in the community pays dividends beyond countering the influence of conspiracy theories. It's another means of self improvement, just like critical thinking. It is certainly a better use of your time than bickering online. It also produces better results. Working for change impresses the conspiracy minded, who will no longer see you as a "shill" or as just another one of the "sheeple." It may even attract them to join in, and encourage them to participate again in a healthy environment.

The Internet is only the latest technology that enables withdrawal from the community – and it does so for Truthers and debunkers alike. We all know the jokes about blogging from our mother's basement. But it doesn't have to be that way. The Internet can also be used to find kinship in the real world, or to find some excuse to step out into the sunlight again, where we belong, and where we can reconnect with reality. Sometimes we all need a break from the computer. This is how the conspiracy theories can be defeated: Not by destroying them, and not by further marginalizing their victims, but by putting them in perspective.

Get out there and enjoy the day. It's easy.

End Notes



– Horatius, JREF Forum; hosted at <http://stripgenerator.com>

Chapter 1: How (But Not Why) I Got Involved

Dave von Kleist and Daniel Lewis, “911: In Plane Sight,” 2004. Updated in 2006. Available through <http://www.911inplanesite.com/>.

James Randi Educational Foundation: <http://www.randi.org>.

Dylan Avery, Jason Bermas, and Korey Rowe, “Loose Change.” Original version 2005; subsequently re-released as “Loose Change: Second Edition” (2006), “Loose Change: Second Edition Recut” (2006), “Loose Change: Final Cut” (2007), and “Loose Change 9/11: An American Coup” (2009) (Avery, Rowe, and Matthew Brown). Available through <http://lc911finalcut.com/> (*Final Cut*) and <http://www.loosechange911.com/> (*An American Coup*).

David Ray Griffin, *Debunking 9/11 Debunking: An Answer to Popular Mechanics and Other Defenders of the Official Conspiracy Theory*, Olive Branch Press, March 2007.

Ryan Mackey, “On Debunking 9/11 Debunking,” 31 August 2007. Revision 2.1, 24 May 2008. Available at http://www.911myths.com/drg_nist_review_2_1.pdf.

National Institute of Standards and Technology: World Trade Center Disaster Study, September 2005 (World Trade Center 1 and 2) and November 2008 (World Trade Center Seven). Available at <http://www.nist.gov/el/disasterstudies/wtc/>.

Ronald Wieck and Ryan Mackey, “Hardfire: The Physics of 9/11,” 26 February 2009. Available at <http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=2542809949154243077#> (Part 1), <http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=8184528465256118271#> (Part 2), and

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZsDn6es7mtk> (Part 3).

Ronald Wieck, Ryan Mackey, and Tony Szamboti, "Hardfire: 9/11 Debate," 27 September 2009.

Available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n1u3KO9kUdE> (Part 1),

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Guz04iFYxXY> (Part 2), and

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kDvDND9zNUk> (Part 3).

"Plume in Flight 93 Photo is Different," discussion hosted at the Randi Educational Foundation Internet Forum, 13 August 2006 to 19 October 2006. Available at

<http://forums.randi.org/showthread.php?t=61633>.

"Seismic Evidence Proves Inside Job?," discussion hosted at JREF Forum, 31 January 2008 to 8 May 2008.

Available at <http://forums.randi.org/showthread.php?t=63740&page=12>.

"No-Planers Use the Generator as 'Evidence,'" discussion hosted at JREF Forum, 11 April 2007 to 17 May 2007. Available at

<http://forums.randi.org/showthread.php?postid=2520479#post2520479>.

Brian Stelter, "TV Viewing Continues to Edge Up," *The New York Times*, 2 January 2011. Available at

<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/03/business/media/03ratings.html>.

Federal Emergency Management Administration (FEMA), "World Trade Center Building Performance Study," September 2002. Available at

<http://www.fema.gov/library/viewRecord.do?id=1728>.

National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States (9/11 Commission) Report, 22 July 2004. Available at

<http://www.9-11commission.gov/>.

Chapter 2: The Conspiracy Theory in Us All

Poster Horatius, JREF Forum, <http://forums.randi.org/showthread.php?postid=7565575#post7565575>

H. Wittchen *et al.*, "The Size and Burden of Mental Disorders and Other Disorders of the Brain in Europe 2010," *European Neuropsychopharmacology*, v. 21, no. 9, September 2011, pp. 655-679. Available at

<http://www.ecnp.eu/~media/Files/ecnp/communication/reports/ECNP%20EBC%20Report.ashx>.

Zogby International, 6 September 2007. Full poll results available at

<http://www.911truth.org/images/ZogbyPoll2007.pdf>.

Jeff Peckman, "'Initiative 300' – UFOs and Opinion Polls," Examiner.com, 1 September 2010. Available at

<http://www.examiner.com/ufo-in-denver/part-8-initiative-300-ufos-and-opinion-polls>.

"Origin of Human Life," survey of opinion polls on genetics and human origins, PollingReport.com.

Available at <http://www.pollingreport.com/science.htm>.

“American Adults Flunk Basic Science,” *Science Daily*, 12 March 2009. Based on polling from Harris Interactive and California Academy of Science, December 2008. Results available at <http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2009/03/090312115133.htm>.

“Independence Day – Seventeen Seventy When?,” Marist College Institute for Public Opinion, July 2011. Available at <http://maristpoll.marist.edu/71-independence-day-dummy-seventeen-seventy-when/>.

Carl Sagan, “What’s Going On?,” *Parade Magazine*, 7 March 1993, pp. 4-7.

Carl Sagan and Ann Druyan, *The Demon Haunted World: Science as a Candle in the Dark*, Ballantine Books, 1997. Excerpt from page 99, see also pp. 179-180.

James Randi, *The Truth About Uri Geller*, Prometheus Books, January 1982.

Robert McElwaine Archive, available at <http://www.popmartian.com/mcelwaine/>.

Wikipedia, “Usenet Celebrity,” http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Usenet_celebrity.

Chapter 3: My Conspiracy Theory Is Better Than Yours

Michael Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America*, University of California Press, 2006.

Timothy Melley, *Empire of Conspiracy: The Culture of Paranoia in Postwar America*, Cornell University Press, 2000.

Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays*, Vintage Books, 1967.

Joshua Foster and Ilan Shrira, “Paranoia, 9/11, and the Roots of Conspiracy Theories,” *Psychology Today*, The Narcissus in All of Us weblog, 11 September 2008. Available at <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-narcissus-in-all-us/200809/paranoia-911-and-the-roots-conspiracy-theories>.

National Alliance on Mental Issues, “Schizophrenia: Public Attitudes, Personal Needs,” June 2008. Available at http://www.nami.org/Content/NavigationMenu/SchizophreniaSurvey/Download_Report.htm.

Justin Kruger and David Dunning, “Unskilled and Unaware of it: How Difficulties in Recognizing One’s Own Incompetence Lead to Inflated Self-Assessments,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, vol. 77, no. 6, pp. 1121-1134, 1999.

Daniel Hawes, “When Ignorance Begets Confidence: The Classic Dunning-Kruger Effect,” *Psychology Today*, Quilted Science weblog, 6 June 2010. Available at <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/evolved-primate/201006/when-ignorance-begets-confidence-the-classic-dunning-kruger-effect>.

Ig Nobel Prize, Improbable Research, <http://improbable.com/ig/>.

Wikipedia, "List of Conspiracy Theories," available at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_conspiracy_theories.

Ryan Mackey, "Testing for Absurdity, or the Gravy Line," JREF Forum, 12 June 2007. Available at <http://forums.randi.org/showthread.php?t=84621>.

Gary Langer, "Legacy of Suspicion: Decades After, Few Accept the Official Explanation for JFK Assassination," ABC News, 16 November 2004. Available at http://abcnews.go.com/sections/wnt/US/JFK_poll_031116.html.

Chapter 4: Building a Bigger Conspiracy Theory

Brian Dunning, "The Denver Airport Conspiracy," podcast 194, 23 February 2010. Available at <http://skeptoid.com/episodes/4194>.

"David Ray Griffin: High Priest," Screw Loose Change weblog, 14 May 2007. Available at <http://screwloosechange.blogspot.com/2007/05/david-ray-griffin-high-priest.html>.

David Ray Griffin official website, <http://davidraygriffin.com/>.

Architects and Engineers for 9/11 Truth official website, <http://www.ae911truth.org/>.

Mark Roberts and Richard Gage, "Hardfire – 9/11 Debate," 18 June 2008. Available at <http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=-3685846057748316809#> (Part 1), <http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=-459844559898426929#> (Part 2).

Richard Gage and Ron Craig, "The Conspiracy Show" with Richard Syrett, 10 January 2010. Available at http://www2.ae911truth.org/media/100110-Richard_Gage_v_Ron_Craig-2of2.mp3.

Richard Gage and Dave Thomas, "Coast to Coast AM," 22 August 2010. Debate available on YouTube (11 parts), links summarized at <http://911blogger.com/news/2010-08-22/coast-coast-am-911-debate-richard-gage-and-dave-thomas>.

Richard Gage and Chris Mohr, public debate, University of Colorado at Boulder, 11 March 2011. Full debate available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4KKc5vqGHDA>. Supplemental material, Chris Mohr, available at <http://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL92DAE5DE3C22CF4F&feature=viewall>.

Kim Hill and Richard Gage, Radio New Zealand, 21 November 2009. Available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N7dxF6aYC54> (Part 1), <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LsufLROqy88> (Part 2), http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WQGzmMB0P_c (Part 3), <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wRCam2d2sYg> (Part 4).

Richard Gage and Michael Shermer, KKG Radio, 18 September 2008. Available at <http://noliesradio.org/archives/307>.

Architects and Engineers for 9/11 Truth press conference, 9 September 2010. Available at <http://www.ae911truth.org/news/41-articles/386-ae911truth-delivers-the-evidence-to-the-media-press-conference-national-press-club-wash-dc.html>. Discussion on original debate proposal at JREF Forum, 21 August 2010, available at <http://forums.randi.org/showthread.php?t=183483>.

“Two Theologians Debate 9/11: David Ray Griffin and Ian Markham,” *Conversations in Religion and Theology*, vol. 3, pp. 217-236, Blackwell Publishing, November 2005. Reproduced at <http://www.anthonypflood.com/griffinmarkhamdebate911.htm>.

“The Ultimate 9/11 ‘Truth’ Showdown: David Ray Griffin vs. Matt Taibbi,” *Alternet.Org*, Civil Liberties weblog, 6 October 2008. Available at <http://www.alternet.org/rights/100688/?page=entire>.

David Ray Griffin and Chip Berlet, “The New Pearl Harbor: A Debate on a New Book that Alleges the Bush Administration Was Behind the 9/11 Attacks,” *Democracy Now!*, 26 May 2004. Available at http://www.democracynow.org/2004/5/26/the_new_pearl_harbor_a_debate.

David Ray Griffin and George Monbiot, *The James Whale Show*, 29 November 2007. Available at <http://911blogger.com/node/12743>.

Excerpt from “Nobel Peace Prize Nomination for David Ray Griffin? Give Me a Break,” discussion hosted at JREF Forum, 14 September 2007. Available at <http://forums.randi.org/showthread.php?postid=2964357#post2964357>.

“David Ray Griffin in Japan (Appearing with Anti-Semites and UFO Believers),” discussion hosted at JREF Forum, 30 September 2008. Available at <http://forums.randi.org/showthread.php?t=125315>.

Ryan Mackey, “On the Nature and Scope of the Truth Movement,” JREF Forum, 17 February 2007. Available at <http://forums.randi.org/showthread.php?t=75056>.

“Results of the 2006 Above Top Secret Visitor Survey,” Above Top Secret Forum, 25 July 2006. Available at <http://www.abovetopsecret.com/forum/thread218325/pg1>.

“Survey Results: The 9/11 Attacks & Conspiracies,” Above Top Secret Forum, 6 September 2011. Available at <http://www.abovetopsecret.com/forum/thread749524/pg1>.

Chapter 5: The Dress Rehearsal: Oklahoma City

“Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building Bombing, April 19 1995: Final Report,” City of Oklahoma City, 1996. Available online at https://www.mipt.org/DesktopModules/MIPT_eDocuments/handlers/GetDocBinary.ashx?d=6378.

“Oklahoma City Bombing Conspiracy Theories,” *Wikipedia*, available at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oklahoma_City_bombing_conspiracy_theories.

Benton Partin, “Oklahoma City Bombing Report,” 30 July 1995. Available at <http://whatreallyhappened.com/RANCHO/POLITICS/OK/PARTIN/okm.htm>.

Mete Sozen, Charles Thornton, Paul Mlakar, Sr., and Gene Corley, “The Oklahoma City Bombing: Structure and Mechanisms of the Murray Building,” *Journal of Performance of Constructed Facilities*, vol. 12, no. 3, August 1993, pp. 120-136.

Jim Hoffman, “Oklahoma City Bombing,” at <http://911research.wtc7.net/non911/oklahoma/index.html>.

Kevin Ryan, “A New Standard for Deception,” October 2006. Available at <http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=718236659434732032#>.

“AE911Truth Speakers Warmly Received in Oklahoma City,” 911Blogger weblog, 11 November 2011. Available at <http://911blogger.com/news/2010-11-11/ae911truth-speakers-warmly-received-oklahoma-city>.

David Ray Griffin, interview with Mike Palacek, June 2009. Available at <http://mpalacek.blogspot.com/2009/06/david-ray-griffin-911-was-inside-job.html>.

Jeremy Stahl, “The Rise and Fall of the 9/11 Conspiracy Theory,” *Slate Magazine*, September 2011. Available at http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/trutherism/2011/09/where_were_you_when_you_first_heard.html (Part 1).

Thomas Korosec, “Oklahoma Bombing Was Beginning of End for Militias,” *Houston Chronicle*, 20 April 2005. Available at <http://www.chron.com/news/nation-world/article/Oklahoma-bombing-was-beginning-of-end-for-militias-1502125.php>.

Barrie Zwicker, “The Peace Movement versus the 9/11 Truth Movement,” February 2010. Available at <http://911blogger.com/node/22525>.

“Truthers Gate Crashing Other Demonstrations,” discussion at JREF Forum, 21 October 2011. Available at <http://forums.randi.org/showthread.php?t=222181>.

Stephanie Mencimer, “Truthers Crash 9/11 Tea Party,” *Mother Jones Magazine*, 13 September 2010. Available at <http://motherjones.com/mojo/2010/09/truthers-crash-911-tea-party-mall>.

“Cindy Sheehan Coddles 9-11 Deniers,” Screw Loose Change weblog, 12 May 2007. Available at <http://screwloosechange.blogspot.com/2007/05/cindy-sheehan-coddles-9-11-deniers.html>.

“Confirmed: Cindy Sheehan is a 9-11 Truther,” Screw Loose Change weblog, 9 January 2010. Available at <http://screwloosechange.blogspot.com/2010/01/confirmed-cindy-sheehan-is-9-11-truther.html>.

“Is Obama Serious About Protecting Our Liberty?”, 911Blogger weblog, 5 November 2008. Available at <http://911blogger.com/news/2008-11-05/obama-serious-about-protecting-our-liberty>.

Rady Ananda, “Obama’s 9/11 – Coming to a Theater Near You January 22,” OpEdNews.com, 30 October 2008. Available at <http://www.opednews.com/maxwrite/diarypage.php?did=10493>.

Chapter 6: The Storm Begins, Unnoticed

Alex Jones Radio Broadcast, 11 September 2001. Available at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jioN_6nimg8.

Southern Poverty Law Center, “Intelligence Files: Westboro Baptist Church,” available at <http://www.splcenter.org/get-informed/intelligence-files/groups/westboro-baptist-church>.

Patriot Guard Riders, “Lineage of the Patriot Guard Riders,” available at <http://www.patriotguard.org/Home/OurHistory/tabid/145/Default.aspx>.

Ian Saleh and Washington Post Staff, “Westboro Baptist Church Wins Supreme Court Case For Right to Protest Military Funerals,” *Washington Post*, 3 March 2011. Available at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2011/03/03/AR2011030304124.html>.

Alex Jones at Ground Zero, 11 September 2006. Available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rTxeIUYzWV8>.

Anti-Defamation League, “Alex Jones, the Conspiracy King,” available at http://www.adl.org/special_reports/rage-grows-in-America/alex-jones.asp.

Nate Blakeslee, “Alex Jones is About to Explode,” *Texas Monthly*, March 2010. Available at <http://www.texasmonthly.com/2010-03-01/feature2.php>.

Alex Jones, “911 The Road to Tyranny: Special Emergency Release,” December 2001.

Alex Jones, “911 The Road to Tyranny,” 2002. Available at <http://www.infowars.com/tyranny.htm>.

Alex Jones, “The Masters of Terror: Exposed,” 2002.

Daniel Aaron, Leslie Dunton-Downer, and Harvey Silverglate, “Poetic License: Is *The 9/11 Commission Report* the First American Epic?”, *Phoenix Newspaper Group*, 9 September 2005. Available at http://www.bostonphoenix.com/boston/news_features/other_stories/multi_3/documents/04955462.asp.

Report of the President’s Commission on the Assassination of President Kennedy, 1964. Available at <http://www.archives.gov/research/jfk/warren-commission-report/>. In particular, Appendix 12, “Speculations and Rumors,” available at <http://www.archives.gov/research/jfk/warren-commission-report/appendix-12.html>.

Mark Lane, *Rush To Judgment*, Holt, Rinehard, and Winston, 1966.

"9/11 Conspiracy Theories – Debunking the Myths," *Popular Mechanics*, 3 February 2005. Available at <http://www.popularmechanics.com/technology/military/news/1227842>.

Chapter 7: The Storm Breaks

Alex Chitu, "A Brief History of Google Video," Google Operating System weblog, 17 August 2006. Available at <http://googlesystem.blogspot.com/2006/08/brief-history-of-google-video.html>.

Wikipedia, "History of YouTube," available at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_YouTube.

Mark McGuire, "Web Movie Takes Flight," timesunion.com, Albany, New York, 6 August 2006. Archived at <http://web.archive.org/web/20080605062612/http://timesunion.com/AspStories/storyprint.asp?StoryID=506008>.

Nancy Jo Sales, "Click Here for Conspiracy," *Vanity Fair*, August 2006. Available at <http://www.vanityfair.com/ontheweb/features/2006/08/loosechange200608>.

"COINTELPRO – Has 9/11 Truth Been Infiltrated?," 911Blogger weblog, 1 December 2006. Available at <http://911blogger.com/node/4765>.

Jim Hoffman *et al.*, "Hoax-Promoting Videos," 9-11 Review weblog. Available at <http://911review.com/disinfo/videos.html>.

Jan Libbenga, "9/11 Conspiracy Movie Taken Off the Web," *The Register* (UK), 5 June 2006. Available at http://www.theregister.co.uk/2006/06/05/911_documentary_removed/.

Scott Sommers, "Who Still Believes in 9/11 Conspiracies?," *Skeptic Magazine*, vol. 16, no. 2, pp. 13-16, January 2011.

Lev Grossman, "Why the 9/11 Conspiracy Theories Won't Go Away," *TIME Magazine*, 3 September 2006. Available at <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1531304,00.html>.

Thierry Meyssan, *11 Septembre: L'Effroyable Imposture* (English title: *9/11: The Big Lie*), Editions Carnot, Paris, 2002.

"Hollywood's 9/11 Idiot Brigade," *New York Post*, 22 March 2007. Available at http://www.nypost.com/p/pagesix/item_YIXNB1p6gXCY7Jzldwd7jJ.

Chapter 8: The Storm Retreats to its Teapot

911Truth.org, "9/11/07 Global Day of Action Events Listing," available at <http://www.911truth.org/pages/91107Events.html>.

"Huge Demonstrations?," hosted at JREF Forum, 11 September 2007. Available at <http://forums.randi.org/showthread.php?t=93032>.

"Quite Possibly the Greatest Day of My Life!," hosted at Loose Change Forum (2.0), 11 September 2007. Available at http://z10.invisionfree.com/Loose_Change_Forum/index.php?showtopic=15467&st=0.

"911 Truth March and Power to the Peaceful Festival," Zombietime weblog, September 8, 2007. Available at http://zombietime.com/9-11_truth_march_power_to_peaceful/.

We Are Change, "The Fundraiser Is Not Over Yet," 14 September 2007. Archived at http://web.archive.org/web/20071226134131/http://www.wearechange.org/2007/09/fundraiser-is-not-over-yet_14.html.

Mark Johnson, "Was 9/11 An Inside Job?," *Hustler Magazine*, March 2007. Archived at <http://911blogger.com/node/5437>.

Dylan Avery, Loose Change weblog, 10 January 2007. Quoted at JREF Forum, <http://forums.randi.org/showthread.php?postid=2245111#post2245111>.

"Loose Change FC Theatrical Premiere," JREF Forum, 8-13 November 2007. Available at <http://forums.randi.org/showthread.php?t=98293>.

"LCFC – Free Download!, Not Fair, But Reality...," discussion at Loose Change Forum (2.0), 11 November 2007. Available at http://z10.invisionfree.com/Loose_Change_Forum/index.php?showtopic=19074.

Reuters, "Fidel Castro Says U.S. Fooled World Over 9/11," 11 September 2007. Available at <http://www.reuters.com/article/2007/09/12/us-sept11-castro-idUSN1146186220070912?feedType=RSS&feedName=topNews>.

Bill Kaysing, *We Never Went to the Moon: America's Thirty Billion Dollar Swindle*, self-published, 1974. Reprinted, Desert Publications, 1981.

Bart Sibrel, "A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Moon," 18 January 2001. Broadcast on Fox Television 15 February 2001.

Phil Plait, "Fox TV and the Apollo Moon Hoax," The Bad Astronomer weblog, 13 February 2001. Available at <http://www.badastronomy.com/bad/tv/foxapollo.html>.

John Schwartz, "The Vocal Minority – Moon Landing Was a Hoax," *New York Times*, 13 July 2009. Available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/07/14/science/space/14hoax.html>.

Brendon Griggs, "Could Moon Landings Have Been Faked? Some Still Think So," CNN, 17 July 2009. Available at <http://edition.cnn.com/2009/TECH/space/07/17/moon.landing.hoax/>.

Steven Jones, Frank Legge, Kevin Ryan, Anthony Szamboti, and James Gourley, "Fourteen Points of Agreement with the Official Government Reports on the World Trade Center Destruction," *Bentham Open Civil Engineering Journal*, vol. 2, pp. 35-40, 2008. Available at <http://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=jones%2Bfourteen%2Bpoints%2Bagreement&source=web&cd=2&ved=0CCIQFjAB&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.benthamscience.com%2Fopen%2Ftociej%2Farticles%2FV002%2F35TOCIEJ.pdf&ei=soavTsKIK6qxiQL47XxDw&usg=AFQjCNF1zxCbLzVwMDdD1ARzlaEV0BKtIlg>.

"250+ 9/11 'Smoking Guns' Found in the Mainstream Media," Killtown weblog, updated 23 August 2011. Available at <http://killtown.911review.org/911smokingguns.html>.

"2008 Now or Never – NYC," schedule of events archived at 911Blogger weblog, <http://911blogger.com/news/2008-09-01/2008-now-or-never-nyc>.

"Truth Movement and its Cultists," Let's Roll Forum, 11 September 2007. Available at <http://letsrollforums.com/truth-movement-and-its-t15545.html>.

Citizen Pawn, "Wishing a Prosperous Journey," July 2007. Archived at <http://www.thephora.net/forum/showthread.php?t=27305>.

Chapter 9: The Allure of the Internet Conspiracy

Robert Wright, "Overhearing the Internet," *The New Republic Magazine*, 13 September 1993. Archived at <http://cyber.eserver.org/wright.txt>.

Paul Hiltin, "False Reporting on the Internet and the Spread of Rumors: Three Case Studies," *gnovis Journal*, Georgetown University, Fall 2003. Available at <http://gnovisjournal.org/files/Paul-Hitlin-False-Reporting-on-the-Internet.pdf>.

Jacob Weisberg, "Bubble Trouble: Is Web Personalization Turning Us Into Solipsistic Twits?," *Slate Magazine*, available at http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/the_big_idea/2011/06/bubble_trouble.html.

George Johnson, "Pierre, Is That a Masonic Flag on the Moon?," *New York Times*, 24 November 1996. Archived at <http://sciwrite.org/glj/articles.conspiracy.html>.

Jonathan Vankin and John Whalen, "How a Quack Becomes a Canard," *New York Times Magazine*, 16 November 1996. Archived at <http://www.jonathanvankin.com/twa.html>.

Lauren Cox, "What's Behind Internet Conspiracy Empires?," ABC News, 12 December 2008. Available at <http://abcnews.go.com/Health/MindMoodNews/story?id=6443988&page=1>.

"Concrete Encasement of Core Beams WTC 1 & 2," hosted at JREF Forum, 12 September 2011. Available at <http://forums.randi.org/showthread.php?t=219128>.

George Monbiot, "Bayoneting a Scarecrow," *The Guardian*, 20 February 2007. Available at <http://www.monbiot.com/2007/02/20/bayoneting-a-scarecrow/>.

Albert Mehrabian, *Nonverbal Communication*, Aldine Transaction, 2007.

Oral Histories from September 11 Compiled by the New York Fire Department, 1 October 2001 to 1 February 2002. Available at http://graphics8.nytimes.com/packages/html/nyregion/20050812_WTC_GRAPHIC/met_WTC_histories_full_01.html.

"Fire LT Joe Torrillo Discusses 911 with KAT of KAT TALES TV," interview with Joseph Torrillo (FDNY retired), 11 September 2010. Available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YBGVv-l0dDk>.

Dr. Abolhassan Astaneh-asl, personal communication, 20 January 2010. Reprinted at JREF Forum, <http://forums.randi.org/showthread.php?postid=5538611#post5538611>.

"A Short Analysis of 9/11 TM History," 2 November 2009. Hosted at JREF Forum, <http://forums.randi.org/showthread.php?t=158122>.

Kevin Ryan, James Gourley, and Steven Jones, "Environmental Anomalies at the World Trade Center: Evidence for Energetic Materials," *Environmentalist*, no. 29, pp. 56-63, 2009. Available at <http://www.springerlink.com/content/f67q6272583h86n4/fulltext.pdf>.

Analysis of references in "Environmental Anomalies," 6 August 2008. Hosted at JREF Forum, <http://forums.randi.org/showthread.php?postid=3924247#post3924247>.

Chapter 10: Investing in the Internet

"A Place For Friends: A History of MySpace," 14 August 2008. Available at http://www.randomhistory.com/2008/08/14_myspace.html.

Caroline McCarthy, "Facebook's Follies: A Brief History," *The Social weblog*, CNET News, 13 May 2010. Available at http://news.cnet.com/8301-13577_3-20004853-36.html.

Andre Picard, "The History of Twitter, 140 Characters at a Time," *The Globe and Mail*, 20 March 2011. Available at <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/technology/tech-news/the-history-of-twitter-140-characters-at-a-time/article1949299/>.

"Internet Growth Statistics," *Global Village Online*, updated 25 July 2011. Available at <http://www.internetworldstats.com/emarketing.htm>.

Dan Fletcher, "Internet Atrocity! GeoCities' Demise Erases Internet History," *TIME Magazine*, 9 November 2009. Available at <http://www.time.com/time/business/article/0,8599,1936645,00.html>.

Emil Protalinski, "Facebook Denies Cookie Tracking Allegations," Friending Facebook weblog, ZDnet, CBS Interactive, 25 September 2011. Available at <http://www.zdnet.com/blog/facebook/facebook-denies-cookie-tracking-allegations/4044>.

"Forum Software Timeline 1994-2011," Forum Software Reviews Forum, 10 August 2011. Available at <http://www.forum-software.org/forum-software-timeline-from-1994-to-today>.

Albert Gore Jr., *The Assault on Reason*, Penguin Press, 22 May 2007.

David Hackett Fischer, *Paul Revere's Ride*, Oxford University Press, 19 April 1995. Key excerpts pp. 336-344.

Ryan Mackey, "Call for Opinions – Future Responses to the Truth Movement," hosted at JREF Forum, 17 February 2009. Available at <http://forums.randi.org/showthread.php?t=135759>.

"Debunkers and Cognitive Dissonance," hosted at JREF Forum, 12 September 2011. Available at <http://forums.randi.org/showthread.php?t=219075>.

"Commenting Closed for Now," Screw Loose Change weblog, 20 August 2011. Available at <http://screwloosechange.blogspot.com/2011/08/commenting-closed-for-now.html>.

Chapter 11: How the Net Redefines Memory

"Internet History," Computer History Museum. Available at http://www.computerhistory.org/internet_history/.

Ryan Mackey, "On the Truth Movement and Irreducible Delusion," hosted at JREF Forum, 12 July 2008. Available at <http://forums.randi.org/showthread.php?t=118389>.

"David Ray Griffin – Barbara Olson's Alleged Call from AA 77: A Correction about Onboard Phones," 911Blogger weblog, 7 May 2007. Available at <http://911blogger.com/node/8408>.

"David Ray Griffin's Response to Cell Phone Criticism," 911Blogger weblog, 10 October 2007. Available at <http://911blogger.com/node/11930>.

"David Ray Griffin on the 9/11 Cell Phone Calls: Exclusive CBC Interview," 911Blogger weblog, 19 December 2009. Available at <http://911blogger.com/node/22192>.

Erik Larson, "Critique of David Ray Griffin's 9/11 Fake Calls Theory," 11 February 2011. Available at <http://911reports.wordpress.com/2011/02/11/critique-of-david-ray-griffin-911-fake-calls-theory/>.

Eugenie Scott, "Debates and the Globetrotters," 7 July 1994. Available at <http://www.talkorigins.org/faqs/debating/globetrotters.html>.

Joshua Foer, *Moonwalking with Einstein: The Art and Science of Remembering Everything*, Penguin Press, 3 March 2011.

Guiseppe Zito, "Giulio Camillo e il Teatro della Memoria," 8 June 2009. Available at <http://www.ba.infn.it/~zito/camillo.html>.

Mike Adams, "Jumping Rope and 9/11 Truth – How the Sheeple Have Been Trained to Avoid Unpopular Truth about WTC 7," NaturalNews.com, 25 September 2011. Available at http://www.naturalnews.com/033684_911_truth_WTC_7.html.

Chapter 12: The Conspiracy Hangover

"So Dylan Is No Longer Leading, After Loose Change 3rd Edition," Loose Change Forum (2.0), 13 September 2007. Available at http://z10.invisionfree.com/Loose_Change_Forum/index.php?showtopic=15685.

"New FDR Decode," Above Top Secret Forum, 11 October 2009. Available at <http://www.abovetopsecret.com/forum/thread512723/pg16>. Excerpts of interest on pages 16, 46, 53, and 63. Discretion strongly advised.

Paul Raffaele, "In John They Trust," *Smithsonian Magazine*, February 2006. Available at <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/people-places/john.html>.

Richard Feynman, "Cargo Cult Science," June 1974. Archived at <http://calteches.library.caltech.edu/51/2/CargoCult.pdf>.

"Historic Result from San Diego Citizens' Grand Jury on the Crimes of September 11th in New York City," 14 April 2007. Available at http://stj911.org/paul/SDCGJ_HistoricResults.html.

"The International Hearings on the Events of September 11th, 2001," available at <http://torontohearings.org/>.

Greg Szymanski, "BYU Discredits Prof Jones for 911 Paper!," 29 November 2005. Available at <http://www.rense.com/general69/discred.htm>.

Will Sullivan, "BYU Takes On a 9/11 Conspiracy Professor," *US News and World Report*, 11 September 2006. Available at <http://www.usnews.com/usnews/news/articles/060911/11conspiracy.htm>.

"The Journal of 9/11 Studies is Publishing Again," discussion at JREF Forum, 22 October 2008. Available at <http://forums.randi.org/showthread.php?t=127011>.

Michael Slenske, "Korey Rowe – The Loose Cannon of 9/11," *SMITH Magazine*, 10 August 2006. Available at <http://www.smithmag.net/2006/08/10/korey-rowe-the-loose-cannon-of-911/>.

“9/11, Truth, and the Masochistic Lie,” discussion at JREF Forum, 14 March 2011. Available at <http://forums.randi.org/showthread.php?t=203495>.

“Richard Gage on Alex Jones,” commentary at Screw Loose Change weblog, 29 May 2008. Available at <http://screwloosechange.blogspot.com/2008/05/richard-gage-on-alex-jones.html>.

“Kevin Ryan’s Lawsuit – Update and Court Documents Here,” discussion at JREF Forum, 6 May 2007. Available at <http://forums.randi.org/showthread.php?t=81508>.

“Judy Wood and Morgan Reynolds: Complaints Dismissed With Prejudice,” discussion at JREF Forum, 27 June 2008. Available at <http://forums.randi.org/showthread.php?t=117032>.

Debra Cassens Weiss, “‘Fantastical’ 9/11 Lawsuit Could Lead to Sanctions for Lawyer, 2nd Circuit Says,” Legal Ethics weblog, *ABA Journal*, 28 April 2011. Available at http://www.abajournal.com/news/article/fantastical_9-11_lawsuit_could_lead_to_sanctions_for_lawyer_2nd_circuit_say/.

“April Gallop / Gallop Lawsuit Thrown Out / Appeal Denied,” discussion at JREF Forum, 19 April 2007 to 20 October 2011. Available at <http://forums.randi.org/showthread.php?t=79912>.

Chapter 13: The Next Great Conspiracy Theory

Ben Smith and Byron Tau, “Birtherism: Where it All Began,” *Politico*, 24 April 2011. Available at <http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0411/53563.html>.

Philip Berg, “William Rodriguez v. George H. W. Bush *et al.*,” complaint before United States District Court for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania, October 2004. Available at <http://sites.google.com/site/rodriguezlawsuit/RodriguezComplaint.pdf?attredirects=0>.

United States District Court for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania, “Berg v. Obama *et al.*, Memorandum and Order Granting Defendant’s Motion to Dismiss,” 24 October 2008. Available at <http://www.paed.uscourts.gov/documents/opinions/08D1256P.pdf>.

Rachel Morris and Daniel Schulman, “Meet the Birthers: Who Are These People, Really?,” *Mother Jones Magazine*, 9 August 2009. Available at <http://motherjones.com/politics/2009/08/meet-birthers>.

Alex Jones, “The Obama Deception: The Mask Comes Off,” 12 March 2009.

Leslie Savan, “On Language – From Simple Noun to Handy Put-Down,” *New York Times Magazine*, 18 November 2009. Available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/11/22/magazine/22FOB-onlanguage-t.html>.

Frank Newport, “America’s Beliefs About Obama’s Birth,” Polling Matters weblog, Gallup, 27 April 2011. Available at <http://pollingmatters.gallup.com/2011/04/americans-beliefs-about-obamas-birth.html>.

David Weigel, "Osama bin Trutherism is Born," *Slate Magazine*, 2 May 2011. Available at http://www.slate.com/content/slate/blogs/weigel/2011/05/02/osama_bin_trutherism_is_born.html.

Tom Jensen, "Breaking Down the 'Deathers,'" Public Policy Polling weblog, 10 May 2011. Available at <http://publicpolicypolling.blogspot.com/2011/05/breaking-down-deathers.html>.

Nathan Olivarez-Giles, "Twitter and Osama bin Laden raid: Two Pakistanis Provided Twitter Followers First Accounts of bin Laden Raid," *Los Angeles Times*, 3 May 2011. Available at <http://articles.latimes.com/2011/may/03/business/la-fi-bin-laden-tweets-20110503>.

David Goldman, "Bin Laden Death Sends Internet Traffic Soaring," CNN, 2 May 2011. Available at http://money.cnn.com/2011/05/02/technology/osama_bin_laden_internet_traffic/index.htm.

John Matson, "Out to Launch?: 'Mystery Missile' off California Coast Probably Just an Airliner, Pentagon Says," *Scientific American*, 10 November 2010. Available at <http://www.scientificamerican.com/article.cfm?id=mystery-missile>.

Chapter 14: Rehabilitation

"9/11 Truth: First They Ignore You, Then They Ridicule You, Then They Fight You, Then You Win – Gandhi," discussion at Above Top Secret Forum, 29 July 2009. Available at <http://www.abovetopsecret.com/forum/thread486506/pg1>.

Michael Metzger, "Confessions of an Ex-Truther," weblog at <http://extruther.blogspot.com/>.

"All of You, Who Once Believed in 9/11 Truth, Share Your Experiences," discussion at JREF Forum, 15 December 2008 to 8 October 2011. Available at <http://forums.randi.org/showthread.php?t=130827>.

Chapter 15: Letting Go of the Truth

Margaret Sanger, "Comstockery in America," July 1915. Archived at http://www.nyu.edu/projects/sanger/secure/documents/speech_comstockery_in_america.html.

Anthony Comstock, *Frauds Exposed, or, How the People Are Deceived and Robbed, and Youth Corrupted*, J. H. Brown, 1880.

Christopher Hitchens, speaking engagement at Central Library, Los Angeles, California, 4 June 2007. Announcement at <http://www.lfla.org/event-detail/377/Christopher-Hitchens>. Relevant video excerpt at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wNAaDKZ-SuE>.

Jonathan Kay, *Among the Truthers: A Journey Through America's Growing Conspiracist Underground*, Harper, 17 May 2011.





[Attribution-ShareAlike 3.0 Unported](#)

You are free:

-  to Share - to copy, distribute and transmit the work
-  to Remix - to adapt the work

Under the following conditions:

-  Attribution. You must attribute the work in the manner specified by the author or licensor (but not in any way that suggests that they endorse you or your use of the work).
-  Share Alike. If you alter, transform, or build upon this work, you may distribute the resulting work only under the same or similar license to this one.
 - For any reuse or distribution, you must make clear to others the license terms of this work. The best way to do this is with a link to this web page.
 - Any of the above conditions can be waived if you get permission from the copyright holder.
 - Nothing in this license impairs or restricts the author's moral rights.