The conspiracy theory meme as a tool of cultural hegemony:
A critical discourse analysis

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Abstract

Those challenging the official accounts of significant events are often labeled *conspiracy theorists* and the alternative explanations they propose are often referred to as *conspiracy theories*. These labels are frequently intended to dismiss the beliefs of those questioning potential hegemonic control of what people believe. The conspiracy theory concept functions as an impediment to legitimate discursive examination of conspiracy suspicions. The effect of the label appears to constrain even the most respected thinkers. This impediment is particularly problematic in academia, where thorough, objective analysis of information is critical to uncovering truth, and where members of the academy are typically considered among the most important of epistemic authorities. This paper follows the development and use of such terms as pejoratives used to shut down critical thinking, analysis, and challenges to authority. Evidence exists suggesting government agents were instrumental in creating the pejorative meme *conspiracy theorist* and the use of this pejorative continues in contemporary media. How has the phrase conspiracy theorist developed as a powerful hegemonic tool against those who challenge authority and claims made by powerful people and institutions?

Keywords: conspiracy theory, conspiracy theorist, hegemony, propaganda, critical discourse analysis

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People who do not accept the official accounts for events like the assassination of U.S. President John F. Kennedy (JFK) or the attacks upon the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001 (9/11) are often called *conspiracy theorists*, and their theories *conspiracy theories* (Green, 2015). Being labeled a *conspiracy theorist* often implies one is delusional or otherwise unable to accurately perceive reality, among other things (Bale, 2007; Basham, 2001; Chomsky, 2004). Indeed, often conspiracy suspicions are not dismissed at the level of evidence, but simply by applying the label "conspiracy theory" (Bratich, 2008).

Those holding power have obvious motives to silence those who challenge their authority by questioning their official interpretations of policy and actions, such as justifications for going to war or rationalizations for new laws (Herman & Chomsky, 2002). Those who reject the official accounts for events like assassinations and terrorist attacks often compete with epistemic authorities (e.g., academics, government agencies, government-sponsored special commissions, etc.) who may support official government positions (Harambam & Aupers, 2015). As Harambam and Aupers (2015) stated, "conspiracy theorists compete with (social) scientists in complex battles for epistemic authority in a broader field of knowledge contestation" (p. 466).

The United States' Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), taking advantage of previous academic work equating those rejecting official accounts for significant political and social events with pathology (Popper, 1949; Hofstadter, 1964), intentionally set in motion a process leading to the creation of the terms *conspiracy theory* and *conspiracy theorist* as pejoratives (deHaven-Smith & Witt, 2013). These pejoratives were subsequently adopted as such by academics, the news media, and other authorities (Green, 2015). This conspiracy theory meme

has been used to shut down critical thinking and analysis to control public debate about actions of those in power. Stated simply, the terms have taken on such negative connotations that some people will repress their own conspiracy suspicions and accept the official account for fear of being stuck with the label (Chomsky, 2004, 2009). Perhaps best stated this way:

> When pundits and pluralists attack conspiracy thinking, they are not aiming for more political involvement or increased political activity. They want action within the parameters defined by elites, action that legitimizes the status quo, that confirms the party system, pays lobbyists, and provides daily sound bites. (Dean, 2000, p.299)

Those buying into a conspiracy are often characterized as either cognitively-impaired or suffering from paranoia (Hofstadter, 1958, 1963, 1964, 1966). Yet research suggests many people overtly reject conspiracy theories while privately accepting them as true (Douglas & Sutton, 2010). As Bratich (2008) stated, "Among the competing accounts for any event, the official version is not merely the winner in the game of truth—it determines who the players can be." (p. 7). Clearly, labeling someone a conspiracy theorist is a tactic employed as a *strategy of subjugation* (p.7) or a strategy "by which…disbelief is validated and…counterknowledge [sic] is discredited" (Fiske, 1994, p.192).

Bratich (2008) argued the "conspiracy theory" pejorative "functions as an intolerable line and an antagonism" (p. 11). Although often linked to specific groups the "panic" over conspiracy suspicions and suggestions is over a "particular form of thought (and its potential links to action)" (p. 11). The panic is over the deviance. The panics "help to define the normal modes of dissent" (p. 11) and to identify "the subversive and threatening 'them'" (p. 11). In any case, if the source of the pejorative use of the meme is indeed hegemonic, as it seems to be, many who use it accordingly, knowingly or not, are fulfilling the goal of hegemony: to make it a common-sense understanding.

Rather than being dismissed at the level of evidence, those questioning official accounts are frequently dismissed by being labeled "conspiracy theorists". Their views are dismissed because they are considered outside the "sphere of legitimate controversy" (Hallin, 1986). In other words, the conspiracy theorists are not engaging in the "game of truth" defined by those in power (Foucault, 1980a). They are not playing by the rules by which truth is produced. Put another way, conspiracy theories are "unofficial", "subjugated knowledges" (Foucault, 1980b). Subjugated knowledges are "blocs of historical knowledge which were present but disguised within the body of functionalist and systematic theory" (p.80). They "have been disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated: naïve knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity [sic]" (p.83). These theorists are not simply proposing false explanations, they are "not even wrong" (Hitchens, 2004). They do not reach a level of legitimacy to even be falsified (Bratich, 2008). "They are para (beyond or beside) the nous (mind). They are paranoid." (p.3).

Perhaps the most negative and frequently made attribution to conspiracy theorists is *paranoia*, and one of the most frequently cited authors on the subject, Richard Hofstadter (1958, 1963, 1964, 1966) is responsible for linking the two. As early as 1955, Hofstadter began linking conspiracy theorists with paranoia (p. 16) and "right wing extremists" (p. 45) with conspiratorial thinking. Beginning in 1964, he published a series of articles that chronicled the evolution of conditions giving rise to what he considered the extreme right in America. He called it "the paranoid style in American politics" (1964, p. 103). Hofstadter's impact on the public's attitude toward conspiracy theorists and the approach to the study of the concept by scholars is difficult to overstate. As Bratich (2008) stated,

Transposing a clinical psychology term onto the field of politics, Hofstadter not only

pathologized conspiracy theories, he gave them formal coherence, historical persistence,

and intelligibility as a genre of political knowledge. Hofstadter's essay also marks a

moment when conspiracy theories were articulated to political extremism. Most serious

contemporary analysts of conspiracy theories (on various points of the political spectrum)

cite Hofstadter. In so doing, they use conspiracy theories as paradigmatic instances of

"the paranoid style." (p. 4)

Hofstadter (1963, 1964, 1966) himself moved from an extreme liberal, leftist point of

view he held early in his career to a more centrist, consensus perspective of American history.

Hofstadter and other "consensus historians" believed economically-driven class struggles were

not the driving force in American history. Consensus history suggests that American *values* were

paramount, and that conflicts, if not trivial, were less significant than perhaps most would

believe (Fenster, 2009). From the perspective of the consensus historians, "extreme" political

views—whether right or left of center—might be considered pathological (Fenster, 2009).

Fenster (2009) stated, "Hofstadter (1964) implied a continuum between proper politics and

pathology" (p. 33). While Hofstadter maintained his use of the term *paranoid* in describing

conspiracists was intended only in an analogical sense; his writings, and the writings of those

who followed (Aaronovitch, 2009; Billig, 1979; Brotherton & Eser, 2014; Cohn, 1967; Goertzel,

1994; Horton, 2007; Miller, 2010; Oliver & Wood, 2014; Pipes, 1997; Pratt, 2003; Robins &

Post, 1997; Sommers, 2011; Sunstein, 2014; Uscinski & Parent, 2014; Wulff, 1987) contributed

to a larger societal view equating conspiracy theorizing with paranoia and other

psychopathologies (Darwin, Neave & Holmes, 2011; Douglas & Jolley, 2012, Douglas & Sutton,

2010, 2011, 2012; Drinkwater, Dagnall & Parker, 2012; Harrison & Thomas, 1997; Leman &

Cinnirella, 2007; Levy, 2007; Lewandowsky, Oberauer & Gignac, 2013; Monbiot, 2001; Shermer, 2010, 2011; Sunstein & Vermeule, 2008; Swami, Chamorro-Premuzic & Furnham, 2010; Van der Tempel & Alcock, 2015). Hofstadter admitted his use of the term paranoid style about conspiracy theorists was intentional. He said, "Of course this term is pejorative, and it is meant to be; the paranoid style has a greater affinity for bad causes than good." (p.77).

Like Popper (1945, 1994), Hofstadter (1964) posited that the suffering paranoid conspiracy theorist sees conspiracy in everything. Believing conspiracy theories to be largely a construction of the political far right (Hofstadter, 1966), Hofstadter attributed this conspiratorial thinking's roots to anti-Semitic and anti-Masonic movements (Pipes, 1997). Hofstadter (1966) theorized the American political far right conceived a "vast and sinister conspiracy, a gigantic and yet subtle machinery of influence set in motion to undermine and destroy a way of life" (p. 29). While acknowledging that real conspiracies exist, Hofstadter (1966) proposed that what differentiates the "paranoid style" in America is that the conspiracy theorists believe conspiracy is the "motive force" (p. 29), and that the political system itself is a conspiracy. Popper (1945/1994) and Sunstein and Vermeule (2009) maintained such a "grand conspiracy" is not possible in the United States, a democratic, *open society*, defined by Popper (1945/1994) as "a society that sets free the critical powers of man" (p. xxi) and "the society in which individuals are confronted with personal decisions" (p. 165).

Hofstadter's (1963, 1964, 1966) work has exerted great influence over conspiracy theory thought and research. During the administration of President George W Bush (2001-2009), the media frequently used the term *paranoid style* in reference to the President, members of his administration, the Republican and Democratic Parties, and conservatives and liberals alike (Fenster, 2009, p. 25). In recent writings, prominent figures like Daniel Patrick Moynihan

(1985), David Greenberg (1998, 2006, 2009), and Paul Krugman (2006, 2009, 2012)) discussed

Hofstadter's ideas extensively. Hofstadter's work is cited in practically every article and book

published about conspiracy theory. Scott Horton (2007) wrote "The Paranoid Style in American

Politics" was "one of the most important and most influential articles published in the 155 year

[*sic*] history of the magazine". Laura Miller (2010) wrote that "'The Paranoid Style in American

Politics' reads like a playbook for the career of [a well-known conservative media figure], right

down to the paranoid's 'quality of pedantry' and heroic strivings for 'evidence' embodied in [his]

chalkboard and piles of books" (para.5). It seems the most significant social construction of the

pejorative began with Hofstadter (Fenster, 2009; Hofstadter, 1958; Horton, 2007).

There is evidence that the term *conspiracy theory* acquired much of its negative

connotation because of a Central Intelligence Agency (CIA, 1967a, 1967b) program to

counteract questioning the findings of The President's Commission on the Assassination of

President Kennedy, referred to as the Warren Commission. (Warren Commission, 1964) about

the JFK assassination (deHaven-Smith, 2013). Within two years after the publication of its

findings, newspaper articles and books challenging the Commission's report began to appear.

The term "conspiracy theory" appeared in five separate stories published in the New York Times

in 1964 (deHaven-Smith, 2013). In January 1967, the CIA sent *Dispatch 1035-960* to its local

offices around the world. The document outlined a set of activities designed to influence the

media to support the acceptance of the report, and instructed CIA personnel to implement them.

The document contained recommended explicit arguments and counterarguments (deHaven-

Smith, 2013). Its directives instructed agents:

> To employ propaganda assets to [negate] and refute the attacks of the critics. Book
> reviews and feature articles are particularly appropriate for this purpose. The unclassified
> attachments to this guidance should provide useful background material for passing to
> assets…Our ploy should point out, as applicable, that the critics are (I) wedded to

theories adopted before the evidence as in, (II) politically interested, (III) financially interested, (IV) hasty and inaccurate in their research, or (V) infatuated with their own theories. (CIA, 1967, para.3)

An example of the success of CIA's program was the publication of a letter authored by John P. Roche, a political scientist and special assistant to JFK's successor, President Lyndon Johnson. The letter, first published in a "letters to the editor" section of the *London Times Literary Supplement* (Roche, 1968) and discussed in *Time* (1968) magazine later that year, supported the Warren Commission's (1964) report. In the letter, Roche stated, "Those who can conspire haven't got the time; those who do conspire, haven't got the talent" a view like Popper's (1994). Roche referred to a "priesthood of marginal paranoids" (as cited in *Time*, 1968, para. 1), linking paranoia, marginality, and religiosity to the conspiracy theory label.

The conspiracy theory meme has become solidly entrenched in the language as a pejorative label. As a leading philosopher of science, Popper's (1994) influence over the adoption of the meme among academics seems obvious. Hofstadter's (1958, 1963, 1964, 1966) influence academia and the publics adoption of the meme is also evident. Through the CIA, it seems clear the United States government also played a major role in influencing the media to continue to develop the pejorative.

Method

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) was used as the primary data analysis method. Discourse analysis is used for analyzing language use and its effect on communication and knowledge creation (Wood & Kroger, 2000). Using the specific example of the pejorative use of "conspiracy theory" this research examined how discourses and words themselves can cause individuals to create realities that may unwittingly support harmful hegemony by stifling critical

thinking and the speaking of truth to power. This is how Fairclough (1995a, 1995b) linked

linguistic analysis to social analysis. Drawing on Foucault, Fairclough (1995a) stated that

> The aim is to map three separate forms of analysis onto one another: analysis of (spoken
> or written) language texts, analysis of discourse practice (processes of text production,
> distribution and consumption) and analysis of discursive events as instances of
> sociocultural practice. (p. 2)

The first of these forms, extended linguistic analysis, focuses on the structure and organization of

text, the second focuses on how texts are produced and interpreted. In the third, hegemony,

ideology, power and systems of power relations are considered.

To better understand the impact of the terms used as pejoratives, it is necessary to

understand not only the frequency of their use but the context in which they are used. One must

not only consider what is said, but how it is said. One of the basic assumptions about discourse

made here is that language is action. What are people doing "in and with their talk and text"

(Fairclough, 1995a, p. 7). All utterances, including those occurring in text, are treated as actions.

In the effort to expose the hegemonic aspects of the "conspiracy" concept, it is important to

remember that ideological hegemony refers to the conscious or unconscious domination of the

beliefs and actionable assumptions behind language.

It is important to understand that discourse analysis is not content analysis. While content

analysis is a rather mechanical process of categorization, CDA is interested in semantic content,

not categorization. There are multiple perspectives on discourse therefore multiple definitions of

discourse and what constitutes it. Common perspectives include spoken language, written

language and language use above the level of the sentence (Wood & Kroger, 2000). Similarly,

there are different perspectives on CDA. However, it is generally held that CDA adopts a critical

stance towards both the products of research and to the issues under study. To add the word

"critical" to "discourse analysis" suggests a lifting of restraint on the evaluation of media and the

context within which it is used. It implies an attempt to unify theory and practice (Hammersley, 1997).

Fairclough's (1995) model for CDA, which considers three dimensions of a discursive event, was the model chosen for this work. These dimensions, viewed simultaneously are text, discursive practice (the production and interpretation of text) and social practice. CDA textual analysis is an analysis of the way propositions are structured, combined and sequenced.

Fairclough argues that to fully understand discourse, the "analysis needs to draw out the form and function of the text, the way the text relates to the way it is produced and consumed, and the relation of this to the wider society in which it takes place" (Richardson, 2007, p.37). Richardson (2007) breaks down textual analysis using CDA into three components: Representations (ideation function), Identities and Social Relations (interpersonal function) and Cohesion and Coherence (textual function) (p.38).

The relationship between the consumption of media and social practices is dialectical. The people's worldviews determine how they make meaning of media messages while these messages continually shape their knowledge and beliefs. Power is central to this process. Power influences what messages are produced and what mediums are used. The power of media shapes the individual's understanding and the power of the individual determines how well they resist such shaping and how they reproduce or transform their world. While these transformations frequently benefit those in power who are producing the messages, it is not necessarily so. One of the potential benefits of CDA is the exposure of power inequalities and manipulation.

This research approached CDA as an analysis of the social construction of reality through discourse. It involved analyzing language in relation to the social context and the consequence of that use. This research examined "the relationship(s) between discourse and its social conditions,

ideologies and power relations" (Richardson, 2007, p.45) by analyzing the power relationships among those appearing to propagate the use of the pejorative terms.

Discourses are not simply talk. They are processes which create social realities. They shape "socioeconomic, institutional, and cultural conditions and processes" (Greckhamer & Cilesiz, 2014, p. 424) and conducting an empirical discourse analysis, like much qualitative research, presents significant challenges. Four of these challenges are: (a) conducting an analysis that goes beyond description of what is stated in the text; (b) providing transparency to the analysis while performing an interpretation; (c) providing sufficient evidence of rigor in the analysis and knowledge claims; and (d) representing all this succinctly (Greckhamer & Cilesiz, 2014).

Gee (2005, 2011) suggested seven aspects of reality are always and simultaneously constructed through discourse. These are: significance (how meanings are reproduced, transformed or integrated through discourse), activities (how discourses build certain kinds of activities), identities (how meanings of identities are accomplished), relationships (how discourse impacts relationships), politics (how power is built, connections (how individuals, themes, institutions are portrayed as relevant to one another), sign systems and knowledge (how discourse values forms of written and spoken language). While all seven are important, the most relevant aspects to this research were significance, identities, relationships, politics and connections. This research followed "…an analytic commitment to studying discourse as texts and talk in social practices. That is, the focus is not on language as a medium for interaction; analysis of discourse becomes, then, analysis of what people do" (Potter 1997, p. 146).

There are some good examples of CDA applied to media in the literature. Graham, Kenan & Dowd (2004) could find common themes in George W. Bush's creation of the "war on terror"

in "call to arms" speeches made by leaders over a one-thousand-year period. From 120 texts created over the past millennium, the researchers selected four speeches exemplary of "call to arms" rhetoric. These were (a) an address made by Pope Urban II in 1095 launching the first crusade; (b) a 1588 speech by Queen Elizabeth I declaring war on Spain; (c) Adolf Hitler's 1938 address at the Reichstag prior to Germany's annexation of Austria; and (d) Bush's 2001 White House declaration of the 'war on terror'. In each of these four texts, the researchers found the four generic elements of (a) appeals to legitimating power source(s) external to the orator; (b) appeals to history; (c) constructing the evil other; (d) uniting behind the greater good (pp.6-16).

In another study, Wilson, Nairn, Coverdale and Panapa (2000) examined the portrayal of mental illness in children's television in New Zealand. From their analysis of 128 episodes of children's programming, they discovered 46.1% contained predominantly negative references to mental illness. The most common terms used to describe mental illness were "crazy", "mad" and "losing your mind". Other terms were "nuts", "driven bananas", "twisted", "deranged", "disturbed", "wacko", "cuckoo", "loony", "lunatic", "loon", "insane" and "freak". These are terms commonly applied to "conspiracy theorists" (Green, 2015). The researchers also evaluated character facial expressions such as head motions and rolling eyes.

The subtle "othering" or marginalization of individuals and groups can be found in texts and speech. In a study of major Finnish newspaper representations of indigenous Sami people, Pietikainen (2003) analyzed how journalistic practices impact choice of subject representation, journalist's use of texts and other resources and how these choices impacted representations. Results suggest journalistic practices contributed to polarizing ethnic representation and the marginalizing of the Sami population. Reinforcing the importance of CDA, others have identified commonly occurring indirect sexism in language use by studying utterances in context

(Mills, 2008). Johnson (2005) identified language use to further a political agenda though an analysis of metaphors used by opponents and supporters of bilingual education. He discovered the debate between opponents and proponents was characterized as a *war*, bilingual education was portrayed as a *failure* and bilingual students were characterized as *victims* while the English language was positioned as the "American Dream" by the media.

From their study of discriminatory discursive practices in a leading Hong Kong newspaper, Flowerdew, Li, and Tran (2002) found significant *othering* can occur in media even within groups of people who share the same ethnicity, race and language. The researchers developed a composite taxonomy of discriminatory discursive practices from a review of the literature. An adaptation of their taxonomy, displayed in Table 1, was utilized for this research.

Procedure

In this study, common research tools like Google Ngram Viewer and Google News were used to assist with the chronicling of the change in the use of the terms in common language. These Google tools were used to explore how the terms *conspiracy theorist, conspiracy theorists, conspiracy theory*, and *conspiracy theories* are used in conjunction with terms like *paranoid, kook, crackpot, dingbat, fruitcake, nut,* and *lunatic* in books and the news media. These tools allow the researcher to search thousands of books, newspapers, periodicals and news services for entries containing specific terms. When terms are entered into Google Books Ngram Viewer, a graph is displayed showing how those terms occurred in books during a time period specified by the researcher.

Table 1

Composite taxonomy of discriminatory discourse strategies found in the CDA literature

Discourse strategy	Source and type	Description
Negative other presentation	Van Dijk (1991): Negative other presentation	Focuses attention on the negative social differences, deviance or threats attributed to *them*; effective in sustaining existing attitudes or forming new negative attitudes.
	Teo (2000): Negative-them presentation or othering	Accentuates positive *us* presentation versus negative *them* presentation in news headlines and leads; uses overlexicalization to stigmatize the minority group.
	Graumann and Wintermantel (1989): Fixating (labeling & stereotyping)	Assigns negative traits by labeling others with adjectives; assigns types by stereotyping others with nouns.
	Bar-Tal (1989): Trait characterization	Attributes extremely negative and unacceptable personality traits to the minority group.
Scare tactics	Van Dijk (1991): Scare tactics	Uses exaggerated figures and extensive attention to alleged threat to the interests and privileges of the dominant group to create panic and discredit the powerless group.
	Horvat et al. (1997): Abnormalization and criminalization of the other	Uses exaggeration and scare tactics by means of manipulation of the number of refugees; exaggerates threats to the public order.
Blaming the victim	Van Dijk (1991): Blaming the victim, positive discrimination, self-justification	Accuses the outgroup of creating a burden on social resources to justify the majority group's discriminatory attitude.
	Gruber (1997): Blaming the victim	The most extreme form of *scapegoating* is to blame the victim rather than the offender for the course of events.
	Wodak (1997): Justification	Justifies a *societal status quo ante* by emphasizing the legitimacy of past acts and attitudes of the majority group (the *own* national *we*-group).
Delegitimation	Wodak (1997): Delegitimation	Discredits and disempowers the outgoup group.
	Bar-Tal (1989): Outcasting	Categorizes a delegitimized group as violators of pivotal social norms.
	Van Dijk (1991): Problematization	Problematizes issues concerning the outgroup (e.g., immigration, residence, cultural conflicts, etc.).

Note. CDA is critical discourse analysis. Adapted from "Discriminatory News Discourse: Some Hong Kong Data," by J. Flowerdew, D. Li, and S. Tran (2002), *Discourse & Society, 13*(3), pp. 329-330. Copyright 2002 by Sage. Adapted with permission.

In addition to establishing the clear pejorative usage, which appears obvious, the contexts of the communication and the disposition, politics, motivation and intention of the users of the meme was reviewed. From this research, and the analysis of it, the potential influence of hegemony was revealed. This analysis is important to answer the research question and to assess its use as a hegemonic tool.

In the documentary film, *A Conspiracy Theory Conspiracy* filmmaker Adam Green (Green, 2015) chronicles various media uses of conspiracy theory as a pejorative. The movie provides an excellent chronicling of current mass media use of the terms and compelling evidence of the media's complicity in creating and supporting the continued suppression of legitimate conspiracy suspicions. Following the evolution of the pejorative from Popper (1949, 1994) to Green (2015) completed the analysis.

Wood and Kroger (2000) discussed specific techniques for analyzing and interpreting texts. They recommended to "give yourself permission to be an analyst, that is, to do the sort of interpretive work that is involved in analysis, in generating 'results' (vs. more conventional approaches, in which interpretation is allegedly suspended until the results are in)" (p. 95).

The assumptions underlying this investigation evolved as discoveries were made about the evolution of the memes under study. Rather than following a more traditional approach of gathering data, tabulating it and then conducting an analysis, employing the CDA technique means the data was analyzed as it was presented and allowed those discoveries to steer the investigation. This analysis produced the results of the research.

CIA Talking Points and Counter Arguments

CIA-Dispatch 1035-960 (CIA, 1967) was a psychological operations program with the clear intent of discrediting those questioning the Warren Commission's (1964) findings about the JFK assassination. The agency stated in the memo, "The aim of this dispatch is to provide material for countering and discrediting the claims of the *conspiracy theorists* [critics of the Warren Commission's Report] to inhibit the circulation of such claims in countries" (CIA, 1967a, p. 1). Points, counterpoints and instructions in the memo included:

- Claim that it "would be impossible to conceal" such a large-scale conspiracy (CIAa, p. 2).
- Claim that "A group of wealthy conspirators could have arranged much more secure conditions" (p. 2).
- Claim that "no significant new evidence has emerged" (p. 2).
- Claim that conspiracy theorists are "wedded to theories adopted before the evidence was in" (p. 2).
- Claim that conspiracy theorists "light on some theory and fall in love with it" (p. 2).
- Accusation that conspiracy theorists are "politically interested" (p. 2).
- Accusation that conspiracy theorists are "financially interested" (p. 2).
- Claim that conspiracy theorists are "hasty and inaccurate in their research" (p. 2).
- Claim that "the attacks on the Warren Commission have produced no new evidence" (p. 2)
- Claim that "no new culprits have been convincingly identified" (p. 2).
- Claim that "there is no agreement among the critics" (p. 2).
- Claim that the charges of the critiques are without serious foundation and based on unreliable eyewitness testimony (p. 2).
- Claim that vague accusations such as that "more than ten people have died mysteriously" can always be explained in some more natural way (p. 3).
- Instruct agents to "counter speculation by encouraging reference to the official explanation or report. Commission's Report itself" (p. 3).
- Linking critics to groups holding "anti-American, far-left, or Communist sympathies" (CIAb, p.1).
- Claim that further speculative discussion only plays into the hands of the opposition (p.1).
- Suggestion that "conspiracy theorists" are "burning to give the world their theory" (p.2)
- Suggestion that conspiracy theorists "raise as many questions as possible" (p. 2).
-

Some of these claims such as "wedded to theories adopted before the evidence was in" (p. 2),

"light on some theory and fall in love with it" (p. 2), claim that the charges of the critiques are

without serious foundation and based on unreliable eyewitness testimony (p. 2) and conspiracy

theorists are "burning to give the world their theory" (p.2) imply those questioning the Warren

Commission's report exhibit irrational or irresponsible thinking. This appears consistent with

Hofstadter's association of conspiracy theorizing with psychopathology.

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Results

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Evidence of Pejorative Use in Contemporary Media

Green's (2015) documentary provides evidence of the effectiveness of the CIA's program

influencing language in contemporary news media. The film samples several major news media

broadcasts. Several of the CIA's talking points were identified in the film. These talking points

are intended to either delegitimize (Van Dijk, 1991; Table 1) or create a negative other (Van

Dijk, 1991; Table 1). Some of these claims found in the documentary are

Claim that it "would be impossible to conceal" such a large-scale conspiracy. This

claim serves to delegitimize conspiracy suspicions (Wodak, 1997).

> Greg Gutfeld [Fox News television talk show host]: I don't believe in conspiracies because nobody keeps anything secret. Nobody keeps anything secret.

> Unidentified Speaker: That's…

> Unidentified Speaker: Yeah, that's right.

> Unidentified Speaker: That is the best defense against conspiracy theories.

> Michael Shermer [author appearing on C-SPAN]: The biggest problem with conspiracies, particularly government conspiracies, is government bureaucrats are not very competent and they can't keep their mouths shut. There is no conspiracy because people can't keep their mouths shut.

> Glen Beck [television talk show host appearing on CNN]: Can you actually imagine that our government was capable [of organizing a conspiracy] and then keeping it off of the front page of *The New York Times*? No.

John Stossel [Fox Business television talk show host]: It would be a conspiracy of thousands of people all over the world. Wouldn't it leak? Wouldn't some of those people be eager to talk about it? Wouldn't we in the media love to put it in the front page? Wouldn't it be a big headline? Don't you think that the fact that it's not on the front page means it's probably not true? And they look at me and they just don't believe. I don't convince them.

Kurt Eichenwald [*Newsweek* Senior Writer appearing on C-SPAN]: If something like this was going on, I promise you someone would be blowing the whistle.

Note the primary speakers identified here are influential hosts and pundits and these appearances

are all in the "mainstream media."

Claim that further speculative discussion only plays into the hands of the opposition.

This claim serves to create a "negative other" (Van Dijk, 1991).

Bill O'Reilly [Fox News talk show host]: Billionaire businessman Mark Cuban, the owner of the Dallas Mavericks basketball team, is putting up money to distribute a 9/11 conspiracy film and it's awful. You know that. The film is going to be used by American haters all over the world, and decent people should be outraged. It's not a free speech argument. It's basically you give the enemies of America all over the world who play to uninformed bigotry . . . you give them another tool in which to hurt America.

Michael Reagan [radio talk show host appearing on Fox News]: What bothers me more is that jihadists and those in the other parts of the world are going to use it and also point to Mark Cuban and say, "Look and see what happened. The Americans did it to themselves. We're innocent. We didn't do anything. Blame the Jews. Blame America."

Sean Hannity [Fox News talk show host]: . . . But I've got to tell you something; this will be used by America's enemies as propaganda.

Bill O'Reilly [Fox News talk show host]: This is dangerous propaganda. It would not have happened in World War II. Mark Cuban .. . . This is going to get Americans killed. If Mark Cuban had done this in World War II, Franklin Delano Roosevelt would have thrown his butt in jail.

Unidentified Speaker [Hannity & Colmes Fox News talk show]: People who support that also are giving aid and comfort to the enemy who want to kill Americans.

Alan Colmes [Hannity & Colmes Fox News talk show host]: Yeah. Stop with the aid and comfort to the enemy

These statements serve to demonize "conspiracy theorists" by creating fear that they are

encouraging people who might want to do harm to Americans. They incorporate words like

danger and *awful* and phrases like "uniformed bigotry," "decent people should be outraged," and

"this is going to get Americans killed."

Claim that "no significant new evidence has emerged." This claim serves to

delegitimize conspiracy suspicions (Wodak, 1997).

> Unidentified Panelist 1 [Skeptics Guide to the Universe Conference]: It's the same old stuff, the same old points, nothing new.

> Unidentified Panelist 2 [Skeptics Guide to the Universe Conference]: If you've got evidence show us, but there's been no new evidence in . . . .

> Unidentified Panelist 3 [Skeptics Guide to the Universe Conference]: Right.

> Unidentified Panelist 2: . . . 8 years. Go away. Sorry.

These panelists at a gathering of "skeptics" (Skeptics Guide to the Universe Conference) were

discussing the 9/11 conspiracy. "9/11 Truthers" (Architects and Engineers for 9/11 Truth, 2016)

would likely argue that new evidence had emerged in the preceding 8 years.

Accusation that theorists fall in love with their theories. This claim serves to

delegitimize conspiracy suspicions (Wodak, 1997) and create a "negative other" (Van Dijk,

1991).

> Rachel Maddow [MSNBC television talk show host on RT]: They [conspiracy theorists] are too ideologically and, I think, emotionally satisfying to the people who espouse them.

This statement suggests "conspiracy theorists" are too ideological and their suspicions are

irrational and emotionally driven.

Claim conspiracy theorists commit to their theories prior to evidence. This claim

serves to delegitimize conspiracy suspicions (Wodak, 1997).

> Kurt Eichenwald [*Newsweek* Senior Writer appearing on C-SPAN]: Conspiracy theorists take those facts and unwind them on the basis of an original belief. Conspiracy theories work backwards.

This statement suggests "conspiracy theorists" form their beliefs then look for evidence to support them. Eichenwald suggests they are victims of confirmation bias (Shermer, 2011).

Accusation that theorists are politically motivated. This claim serves to delegitimize conspiracy suspicions (Wodak, 1997) and create a negative other (Van Dijk, 1991).

Bill O'Reilly [Fox News talk show host]: The far left fringe has embraced the conspiracy theory that elements of the U.S. government carried out the attacks on 9/11. It's unbelievable, but that's what they're saying. Why is the far left putting military and all Americans in danger?

Michael Reagan [radio talk show host appearing on Fox News]: The left's going to go nuts over it like they did with Michael Moore.

Sean Hannity [Fox News talk show host]: All right, Mr. Liberal, why don't you get to your point instead of being a little snotty, you know, left-wing radical? Go ahead.

Unidentified guest [Fox News talk show Hannity & Colmes]: Rather than just . . . .

Sean Hannity [*Hannity & Colmes* Fox News talk show host]: This is also not a left—right issue.

Unidentified Guest: Let's sit down and talk.

Unidentified Guest: Right, right, right. This is this is an issue on . . .

Alan Colmes [*Hannity & Colmes* Fox News talk show host]: Alex Jones is behind this movie as a . . .

Unidentified Guest: . . . what are . . . what are the . . .

Alan Colmes [*Hannity & Colmes* Fox News talk show host]: . . . as a right winger by the way. It's not left, right.

Unidentified Guest: What . . . what . . .

Alex Jones [Radio talk show host on *The Big Picture with Thom Hartman* television show]: You're trying to create a partisan wedge to keep people in the partisan left—right paradigm.

In these exchanges, note the term "far left fringe" used by conservative talk show host O'Reilly and "left wing radical" used by the conservative Hannity. Conservative host Colmes claims Alex Jones, an alternative media talk show host who is often critical of both conservative

and liberal mainstream media, is connected to the conspiracy film. Jones, suggests Hartman, is

attempting to "create a partisan wedge" to "keep people in the partisan left—right paradigm."

Accuse theorists of being financially motivated.

This claim serves to create a negative other (Van Dijk, 1991).

Rachel Maddow [MSNBC television talk show host]: I get that the guys who sell this stuff for a living have a reason to sell this stuff. There's always going to be a very, very, very exciting market for these things. There is money to be made in feeling the ragged edge of America's longstanding conspiratorial mindset. And, you know, I'm sure it's good for business. These guys have a good racket going. It's always the end of the world, but not quite yet. "Subscribe for 1 more month, because then it will be the end of the world. Only $19.95," and, yes, you can pay in gold."

Here Maddow quite directly accuses "conspiracy theorists" of profiting from promoting their

suspicions.

In each of the examples provided above, negative othering (Van Dijk, 1991) and/or delegitimization (Wodak (1997) is evident. Clearly, the CIA's talking points are evident in the sample.

Discussion

The sample studied contains significant evidence of the dissemination of the talking

points, arguments, and counterarguments proposed by the CIA (1967a, 1967b) across a wide

spectrum of media. A significant extension of the evidence presented by deHaven-Smith (2013),

this study suggests the CIA's influence was substantial, pervasive and remains so today. What

remains uncertain is the validity of attributing the adoption of these CIA recommendations by the

media to the CIA. The findings, at least in part, answer the research question, "How has the

phrase conspiracy theory developed as a powerful hegemonic tool against those who question

authority and claims made by those in power? by identifying the individuals (Popper and

Hofstadter) and organizations (CIA) most responsible for positioning the terms as pejoratives in

common language. The evidence suggests the intent of Hofstadter (1964) to cast conspiracy

theorists in a psychopathological manner, and of the CIA to delegitimize and to create a negative

other presentation of conspiracy theorists was successful (Van Dijk, 1991). The evidence affirms

the power of language (Foucault, 1980a, 1980b; Habermas, 1984, 1989) and of the influence and

contribution of media and propaganda (Bernays, 1928/2005; Chomsky, 2003; Herman &

Chomsky, 2002) to the creation of language and its impact on belief formation (Allport &

Postman; Arbib & Hesse, 1986; Ariely, 2008; Berger & Luckman, 1967; Potter, 1996). The

ability of powerful institutions and people to influence and control populations by creating and

manipulating language and public discourse is further evident in the research presented here.

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