

***The Things People Believe:
Accuracy, Sufficiency, and Interpretation in Conspiracy Reporting***

Due: April 2
Length: 2200-2800 words

Assignment Goals: To learn how to design a research project; to find, analyze, and interpret a coherent set of primary sources, to learn how to synthesize primary sources to construct an object of study; to learn how to use primary research to develop researchable hypotheses; to begin to situate your research in the field of conspiracy theory studies; to develop familiarity with the research tools at Gelman Library

Readings: Everything you've read in the course so far; Peter Knight, "Conspiracy/Theory" in *Conspiracy Culture: From Kennedy to the X Files* (NY: Routledge, 2000); Michael Barkun, excerpts from *A Culture of Conspiracy* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: U California P, 2003); Jack Zipes, excerpts from *The Trials and Tribulations of Little Red Riding Hood* (NY: Routledge, 1993); Jeffrey S. Victor, excerpt from *Satanic Panic: The Creation of a Contemporary Legend* (Chicago: Open Court Press, 1993); Jodi Dean, "The Familiarity of Strangeness" in *Aliens in America: Conspiracy Cultures from Outerspace to Cyberspace* (NY: Cornell UP, 1997); Michael Shermer, excerpts from *Why People Believe Weird Things* (NY: Henry Holt, 2002)..

The Tasks: Design, find, analyze, and interpret a coherent, socially-situated, sufficient and varied set of primary sources; write a descriptive research report based on this research following the structure established on the next pages.

Grading Criteria: The report accurately and adequately synthesizes a collection of sufficient and varied primary sources into a productive object of study; it describes and interprets a set of conspiracy theory texts, the people and groups who circulate them, and relevant background information about the moment(s) in which the theory circulates; it offers a plausible and productive, if speculative, argument about what this conspiracy theory is explicitly and implicitly theorizing; it briefly situates your research in the field of conspiracy theory studies; it conveys the impression that the author has substantial knowledge of a significant range of expressions of this conspiracy theory; it reflects on the implications of this report for further research this semester.

In addition, the report demonstrates that its author has suspended judgment until s/he understood the conspiracy theory under study. A productive and contestable thesis is identifiable, original, interpretive, and productive (see box in WA, p. 164, see also p. 197); The working thesis is underlined. In support of the thesis, an analysis of conspiracy theory texts has been conducted: patterns of repetition and contrast have been noted and discussed; anomalies have been noted and discussed; indirectly suggested meanings have been made explicit (for more on each of the preceding criteria see WA Ch. 2). Specific well-described passages from conspiracy theory texts are analyzed as evidence testing the thesis; specific well-described information about the people who create and circulate these theories are used to develop and complicate your interpretation of the texts. Specific passages from secondary sources in the field of conspiracy theory studies are used to establish scholarly interlocutors of this project. The set up and conclusion function well (WA Ch. 8); the writer has developed a serious, engaging and authoritative voice; the essay is effectively organized (see WA Ch. 6 for more); the essay is free from grammatical and typographical errors; it properly uses in-text page/paragraph references and a works cited list. The report includes a bibliography of every primary and secondary source consulted for the project, separated into sections labeled "Primary Sources" and "Secondary Sources."

Report Structure

Insert these section titles into your report. All sections should be written in (multi-)paragraph form intended to be read by a reader and be organized using a sensible pattern of development. **Do not** simply “answer the questions” in list form and submit the results. Craft a report-article in the vein of Gary Alan Fine or Jeffrey Victor.

Project Title: “Research Report” is not an acceptable title; neither is a title like “Mind Control” or “The Moon Hoax”.

Set-up (250-300 words)

- What is your research project? Offer a brief telling example. .
- What are your research design and research parameters? Why did you make these choices? How do they impact your study?
- What are your essential research questions?
- What are the key findings of your study?
- What is the significance of your research?

Synthesis of the Object of Inquiry (250 words)

- Considering all 20-30 of your sources, what is the basic narrative of the conspiracy theory you’re studying? BE sure to indicate which sources you used to construct this synthesis.
- What are significant variants?
- Among what kinds of people do these stories circulate? Be as specific as you can.
- In what moment(s)?
- What is your working hypothesis about how these stories function for some real people who are trying to make some sense of something in the world in which they live?

Analytical Description/Interpretation of Sample Source Texts (750-1000 words)

- Your sources should be engaged in a discussion with one another about something important in their moment(s). You should be able to identify their complaint and their pitch. This section should extract and explicate that argument by means of close textual readings of well-chosen sources and start to think about what personal and societal imperatives it *could* be serving. You need to actually select and use quotes from the sources to make your case.
- This **should not** be in the form of source 1 analysis followed by source 2 analysis followed by source 3 analysis. Instead think of this as a small close analysis essay organized by idea and theme tested against evidence drawn from the content of these stories.
- Using no more than a few specific conspiracy texts, describe, explain and interpret the significant motifs in your conspiracy theory to test your working hypothesis. Be sure to draw examples, passages, and quotes from your primary source material
- At the end of this section readers need to have a good idea of the content, texture, and language of these stories, their key motifs, themes and ideas and what they might possibly mean.

Analytical Description of the People and Groups Circulating these Stories (250 words)

- Robert Alan Goldberg says that conspiracy theories do not thrive in isolation (239+). So, who are the people who produce, distribute, and consume these stories? Refer to them by name if possible. See if you can deduce categories of the kinds of people who use these texts.
- What are the personal and social imperatives of the people/groups circulating these texts? Draw and use specific evidence from the biographies, web-presence, reputation, and textual production of actual nameable people to support your claims.
- If more than one group is circulating your conspiracy theory (cf. Jeffrey Victor), what are the personal and social imperatives animating those different networks?

Important Background Information About the Moment(s) in which These Texts are Circulating (300 words)

- What do we need to know about the times and places these stories a) are about, b) circulate in to understand how they work for the people who produce, distribute and consume them?
- What information about the world (public/private: economic, political, cultural; historical) do we need to know to make sense of the significant motifs in the stories?

How does this information relate to the personal/social imperatives of the conspiracists?
How does this information relate to significant motifs in these stories
What real societal problems, puzzles, or anomalies (as perceived by conspiracists) seem to be being addressed in these stories?

Presentation and Discussion of Your Tentative Conclusions (300-500 words)

Think of this as a miniature multi-paragraph essay based on the information and analyses you've presented so far. What have you learned about how your particular CT works for particular conspiracists trying to understand something about their world? What have you learned about CT in general from conducting this research?

Discussion of Relevant Secondary Sources from the Field of Conspiracy Theory Studies (250 words)

Of the conspiracy theory scholars you've read so far, who would be most interested in your work? Why? What would they say about your work? Use specific passages from their work to answer these questions.
Of the conspiracy theory scholars you've read so far, who would be most challenged by your work? How? What would they say about your work? Use specific passages from their work to answer these questions.
How do you see your research contributing to the field of conspiracy theory studies?

Implications of this Report for Further Research (150 words)

What new but related research questions arise from this report? What richer more nuanced versions of your questions do you now have?
About what do you need to learn to make a better case for your conclusions? To nuance them further?
What are the limitations of the study at this time?

Research Bibliography

A properly formatted list of *all* of the primary and secondary sources consulted in your research so far, whether on-line, in print, a video, music, a cartoon—whatever. Separate the list into two sections: *Primary Sources* and *Secondary Sources*.

UW20 : CONSPIRACY THEORIES

The George Washington University: Spring 2007

Dr. Eric Drown

“The Things People Believe” (Research Report) Assessment Form

Name:

Setup:

Quality Pts. Earned: []

- Establishes the topic and project of the report: Yes
- Describes the research design and parameters of the project: Yes
- Proposes initial research questions: Yes
- Outlines key findings: Yes
- Establishes the significance of the research: Yes
- Meets/challenges readers' needs and expectations: Yes

- Somewhat No
- Somewhat No
- Somewhat No
- Somewhat No
- Somewhat No
- Somewhat No

Object of Inquiry:

Quality Pts. Earned: []

- Synthesizes an object of inquiry from 15-20 primary sources: Yes
- Identifies significant variants Yes
- Identifies the social networks: Yes
- Identifies the moment(s): Yes

- Somewhat No
- Somewhat No
- Somewhat No
- Somewhat No

The working hypothesis is identifiable, original, interpretive, and productive:

Quality Pts. Earned: []

- Identifiable: Yes Somewhat No
- Original: Yes Somewhat No
- Interpretive: Yes Somewhat No
- Productive: Yes Somewhat No

Analytical Description/Interpretation of Sample Source Texts

In order to test, support, and complicate/enrich your thesis, your report noted and discussed the meaning or effects of significant patterns of repeated and contrasting elements (ideas, images, terms, binaries, uses of evidence, or rhetorical strategies) found in your CT set. Implicit meanings found in your CT set have been made explicit and discussed in order to test, support, and complicate/enrich your thesis.

Quality Pts. Earned: []

- Noted: Yes Somewhat No
- Discussed: Yes Somewhat NoS
- Made explicit: Yes Somewhat No
- Discussed: Yes Somewhat No

Specific, well-chosen, well-described examples are analyzed as evidence relevant to the thesis. They are set up and paid off.

Quality Pts. Earned: []

- Well-chosen: Yes Somewhat No
- Set up: Yes Somewhat No
- Described: Yes Somewhat No
- Analyzed: Yes Somewhat No
- Paid off: Yes Somewhat No

The evidence you offered persuasively tests, supports and complicates/enriches your thesis.

Quality Pts. Earned: []

- Tests thesis: Yes Somewhat No
- Supports thesis: Yes Somewhat No
- Complicates/enriches: Yes Somewhat No

Analytical Description of the People/Groups

Quality Pts. Earned: []

Identifies the people and groups that produce, distribute and consume these stories:

Yes Somewhat No

Discusses the personal and social imperatives of these people and groups:

Yes Somewhat No

The evidence you offered persuasively tests, supports and complicates/enriches your thesis.

Quality Pts. Earned: []

Tests thesis: Yes Somewhat No
Supports thesis: Yes Somewhat No
Complicates/enriches: Yes Somewhat No

Background Information about Relevant Moment(s)

Presents and discusses important background information:

Quality Pts. Earned: []

Yes Somewhat No

Relates the background information to personal/social imperatives of conspiracists:

Quality Pts. Earned: []

Yes Somewhat No

Relates background information to significant motifs in the stories:

Yes Somewhat No

Identifies the real societal problems, puzzles, anomalies perceived by conspiracists being addressed in the stories:

Yes Somewhat No

The evidence you offered persuasively tests, supports and complicates/enriches your thesis.

Quality Pts. Earned: []

Tests thesis: Yes Somewhat No
Supports thesis: Yes Somewhat No
Complicates/enriches: Yes Somewhat No

Conclusions

The report offers a plausible and productive argument about what this CT is explicitly and implicitly theorizing.*

Quality Pts. Earned: []

Plausible: Yes Somewhat A little Not at All
Productive: Yes Somewhat A little Not at All

* By theorizing I mean revealing (and perhaps challenging) the enabling assumptions of a societal system and the organizations, institutions, and groups that constitute (or are excluded by it), or of a system of belief, thought, knowledge, or communications and the organizations, institutions, and groups that use (or marginalized) by it. I also mean revealing (and maybe challenging) the blind spots of those systems, ways of knowing, and institutions.

The conclusion functions well.

Quality Pts. Earned: []

- Connects specific conclusions to more abstract or general concerns relevant to our study of CT and/or the world Yes Somewhat No
- Pays off readers' effort with a significant, productive, and insightful walk-away point Yes Somewhat No

Discussion of Relevant Sources from the Field of Conspiracy theory Studies

Quality Pts. Earned: []

- Identifies scholars who would be interested in this research: Yes Somewhat No
- Uses specific passages from their work: Yes Somewhat No
- Identifies scholars who would be challenged by this research: Yes Somewhat No
- Uses specific passages from their work: Yes Somewhat No
- Explains how this research contributes to the field of conspiracy theory studies: Yes Somewhat No

Implications of this Report for the Future of the Project

Quality Pts. Earned: []

Identifies new but related research question or develops richer more nuanced versions of existing research questions:

- Yes Somewhat No

Identifies what the author needs to learn to make a better more nuanced case:

- Yes Somewhat No

Identifies the limitations of the study:

- Yes Somewhat No

Research and Analysis:

The report accurately and sufficiently synthesizes a coherent collection of varied and sufficient primary sources into a productive object of study.

Your collection of primary sources appears to be

- Varied: Yes Somewhat A little Not at All
- Coherent: Yes Somewhat A little No
- Sufficient: Yes No

Quality Pts. Earned: []

Individually, your primary sources are handled

- Accurately: Yes Somewhat A little Not at All
- Sufficiently: Yes Somewhat A little Not at All
- Productively: Yes Somewhat A little Not at All

Quality Pts. Earned: []

Overall

The body of the report is effectively organized.

Quality Pts. Earned: []

- Yes Mostly Somewhat Not at All

The report conveys the impression that the author has substantial knowledge of a significant range of expressions of this CT and the lived contexts in which they appear.

Quality Pts. Earned: []

The CT: Yes Somewhat A little Not at All
Lived Context: Yes Somewhat A little Not at All

The report demonstrates that you have suspended judgment about the conspiracy theories about which you're writing until you understood them in a lived context.

Quality Pts. Earned: []

Yes Somewhat A little Not at All

The writer has developed a serious, engaging, and authoritative voice.

Quality Pts. Earned: []

Serious: Yes Somewhat No
Engaging: Yes Somewhat No
Authoritative: Yes Somewhat No

The report is free from grammatical and typographical errors.

Quality Pts. Earned: []

Yes Mostly Somewhat Not at All

The report properly uses an academic citation system.

Quality Pts. Earned: []

In-text page references: Yes No
Works cited: Yes No

Total Quality Points: /92 **Percentage:** **Grade:**

Defining Initial Research Parameters

Due:

Bring to Library Session and Post in the Discussion Forum called “Research Parameters

In preparation for our first library research session, it's important to begin to define some initial research parameters in order to guide our search for information, insight, and perspective. Surprisingly, you need already to have thought in a pretty abstract way about the nature of conspiracy theories in order to define your research parameters. So bear with me as I explain why I think conspiracy theories are best thought of as a subset of contemporary (often called “urban” legends) and what implications that has for your project. According to sociologist Gary Alan Fine, contemporary legends “depict topics of public concern” (*Manufacturing Tales 2*). They hold up a “mirror—a distorted one—to the social and economic conditions of modern, Western, industrial society” (2). Thomas McLaughlin would take Fine's work one step further and argue that contemporary legends are enable their tellers and listeners to engage in a bit of vernacular theorizing (*Street Smarts and Critical Theory*). By vernacular theorizing, McLaughlin means that people use the cultural resources (contemporary legends, popular narratives, or even conspiracy theories) they find around them to reveal and explain the societal conditions under which they live. As many scholars and social critics have claimed (both recently, and for nearly a hundred years), the conditions of modern, Western, industrial society are constantly in flux.¹ Cultural, economic, and political imperatives are often contradictory. Individuals' sense of self, as well as their sense of connection to family, group, and place, is tentative. Synthesizing this account with Fine's ideas, we can say that conspiracy theories are mediated expressions of people's collective anxieties about structural contradictions of a society. McLaughlin would take it further, arguing that conspiracy theorists and conspiracy enthusiasts are engaged in the theoretical work of revealing and explaining the dynamic, often contradictory, workings of a society where “official explanations” of those workings are no longer persuasive.

The implications of this theory for the way you gather and handle data in your research are significant. According to Fine, these ideas mean that the best way to produce persuasive explanations of the “work” done by contemporary legends for the people who disseminate and receive them is to examine the relationships among four variables: a) the text of the legend (here conspiracy theory) itself with its characters, plots, themes, settings and other significant elements (I'm going to call this variable TEXT below; b) the social structure of the place(s) and time(s) in which these texts are circulating (PLACE and TIME); and the mediating factors of c) the personal imperatives of the individuals and groups which circulate them (PEOPLE), and d) the dynamics of the interaction between narrator and audience (COMMUNICATION DYNAMICS).² These categories can make clear the kinds of data you need to gather in order to produce a credible interpretation of your conspiracy theory. Given the magnitude of such a project and the relatively short span of time we have, it is necessary to designate some of these factors as dominant variables, and others as subordinate variables. The first dominant variable will provide you with a field of inquiry. Adding a second dominant variable will significantly focus your research, reduce the scope of things you need to look at in depth, and give you some sense of what kinds of questions your data set will be able answer. By the way, essential questions can be asked about each of these four variables.

¹ Just a small sample of the range of the scholarship and criticism of the crisis of social change, limited here only to Americans, could include the work of historical critic Henry Adams, sociologist W. E. B. du Bois, sociologists Robert and Helen Lynd, critic William Whyte, sociologist David Riesman, cultural critic Betty Friedan, media theorist Marshall McLuhan, economist John Kenneth Galbraith, and cultural theorists Fredric Jameson and David Harvey.

² For more on these categories see Fine, “Toward a Framework for Contemporary Legends” in the Supplemental Reading folder on the class website. McLaughlin's “Theory Outside the Academy” is where he lays out his argument for vernacular theory.

Here's an example: Say you're interested in John F. Kennedy assassination conspiracy theories (TEXT). That's your first dominant variable (marked with a *). After that you could go in a number of different directions, each of which would produce different hypotheses, different research results, and ultimately different conclusions.

***TEXT:** John F. Kennedy Assassination CTs (gather multiple examples)

PLACE and TIME of your research: [could do] a) versions of CTs that emerge just after Robert Kennedy was killed; b) versions of CTs that emerge after Pres. Ronald Reagan was shot; c) versions that emerged after Oliver Stone's *JFK*; d) versions that originated just after the original shooting and have persisted until today....

PEOPLE: a) versions of CTs circulated by people with advanced degrees; b) versions circulated by people not born when JFK was shot; c) versions circulated by members of the "patriot movement"; d) versions that prompted angry responses by prominent Kennedy affiliates....

COMMUNICATION DYNAMICS: a) versions exchanged face-to-face; b) fictionalized versions in novels; c) versions in foreign films; d) versions that circulate in online newsgroups; e) versions heard on AM talk radio; f) versions heard in Oakland, CA in discussions among conspiracy theorists attending screenings of the film "The Great Conspiracy: The 911 News You Never Heard" on nights the filmmaker attended....

Any one of these four variables could be designated as dominant. You could focus on all the conspiracy theories generated by one person (say David Icke, Terry Melanson, or Barbara Hartwell), on ones prominent in one kind of media, or at a particular time and/or place. There are logical consequences of your choice. If you choose to focus on one conspiracy theorist, you may no longer have a choice about the kind of CT that person is producing. He or she may produce only one kind (so your choice is made for you), or produce a wide range (in which case that itself is a significant feature of your research, even if later you choose to focus on just a part of his or her production).

Do your best on a separate sheet to define all four parameters of your study. First generate a lot of ideas (like my example above), and then narrow your parameters as best you can. Be sure to designate one or two variables as dominant by marking them with a *. And be aware that these parameters will surely change somewhat as you gather more data and try to understand it.

UW20 : CONSPIRACY THEORIES

The George Washington University: Spring 2007

Dr. Eric Drown

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Questions toward initial conspiracy theory research project design: (add space as necessary)

Due:

Post in the discussion forum called “Initial Research Project Design” and Bring to the Library Session”

What is the topic of your research project? Write your answer in this form: I am studying _____, in order to learn _____, which contributes to the field of conspiracy theory studies by _____.

What is the basic story of the conspiracy theory or theorist you want to study?

From what aspect of the current debate in conspiracy theory studies does your interest in your research topic arise? Which of the conspiracy theory scholars whom we have read would be most interested in reading your research? Why? Which would be most critical of your work? Why?

What essential and supporting questions do you want or need to answer? (Remember “essential” questions are those that can generate multiple plausible answers, go beyond facts, and require analysis, interpretation, synthesis and judgment to answer; “supporting” questions are those that can be answered more or less definitively with information and which equip you to figure out how to answer your essential questions. See the handout under “Handouts and Advice” on the course website).

What kind of primary source material will you gather to answer those questions? What is the logic behind these choices? How do these materials represent/document the beliefs of a particular group of people?

What complementary topics will you need to learn about in order answer and contextualize these questions?

What theoretical concepts (borrowed or invented, about the intersections of culture, politics, economics, psychology, group, identity) do you think you will need to frame initial hypotheses for your research? (In scholarship, theories are not untested speculations, they are the product of scholars’ broad and deep encounter with a) the thing being studied, and b) the methods and insights of the field(s) which study it. So, for us, “theoretical” concepts are those that illuminate and explain the often-unspoken assumptions about the nature of self, society, language, media [add your own terms here] that warrant our claims about the object under study. You’ve already encountered examples of such concepts: “moral panic,” “agency panic” “totalization,” “liberal/possessive individualism,” “nationalism,” and “cultic milieu” to name just a few).

What do you think your initial hypothesis is? What serious questions do you think people are thinking by means of conspiracy theory? What personal and social imperatives are these narratives meeting or challenging?

Step-by-Step Analysis Process for the Research Report and Beyond

Once you've gathered a well-designed, coherent set of primary sources:

0. Create an object of study by combining elements from multiple primary sources into a representative conspiracy theory (cf. Jeffrey Victor's and Gary Alan Fine's paragraphs). Identify the main variants and interesting outliers/anomalies.

1. Do close analysis of several of your primary sources to identify key themes, characters, plots, settings, interesting uses of language or imagery. Use notice-focus-significance, analysis of repeated elements and binaries, strands, and anomalies, paraphrase x 3, rhetorical analysis, anything from *Writing Analytically* that will help you crack open the texts. For this project, a good source will have an argument. What would you say is its "complaint," "pitch," and "moment"? How does this source help us understand the person's/persons' personal and social imperatives?

2. Identify the people/types of people as best you can. Describe them. What are their personal and social imperatives? What concerns about the world do they have? How are those imperatives/concerns being used/served in these stories?

3. Do basic background research (at the level of encyclopedia research, consulting general histories, news publications, specialized encyclopedias) about the moment of your sources. What economic, political and cultural concerns are important? How is the societal structure defined in political, economic, and cultural terms? How do these factors produce/influence the personal and social imperatives of the people who believe (or otherwise use) the conspiracy theory that is the object of your study? The background information should make a bridge between the psychological response of people confronting some sociological observation.

4. Write (or reformulate) your hypothesis in a form something like this: These stories [describe them] help these people or these types of people [describe them: A, B, C, D] who have these personal and social imperatives [A, B, C, D] do this kind of work [name the different kinds of work stories can do for people] as they respond to these aspects [A, B, C, D] of their moment/societal structure. Generate as many reasonable hypothetical versions of the hypothesis as you can and test them against your evidence to find the one(s) that are most compelling, that seem to be able to account for most elements of the story and seem most responsive to the people's personal and social imperatives in reference to their moment. Re-read *Writing Analytically* Chs. 5-6 for help developing and refining your thesis. Read Ch. 5 for help linking evidence to claims.

5. On the basis of the results of your preliminary work, write a new project description: I am studying xxxxxxxxxx, in order to learn yyyyyyyy, which is significant because zzzzzzzzzz.

6. Go back to step 1 and look at the conspiracy theories again. Continue through these steps until you're ready to write the report.